

## Chapter 23 - The City of Orzamule

Despite the gruesome welcoming they had encountered with the supporters of Harrowmount and Bhelen, Twilight still felt the urge to explore Orzamule as she watched the city unfold before her. She had never seen a city before. She had only heard stories from other unicorns and templars who had been to places like Trotterim or the Filesian capitol. Tales of the cities of Pura Raza from Rainbow Dash did not help her eager curiosity, and her appetite for knowledge was whetted to insatiability by Applejack and the books Twilight read on Orzamule.

Actually being part of the city itself was wonderful. Many donkeys milled about the large roads linking the city together, and a marketplace bustled before them at the foot of the lift. She could hear the echoes of donkeys shouting for customers, all of them hawking the wares produced by the local industry. Hammers striking on metal resounded from a smoky sector of the city while the grinding of chains and gears echoed in the background.

“I can’t wait to learn about all about this place!” Twilight exclaimed, giddiness rising in her voice. She approached a nearby donkey who was laden in armor and had a bored look on his face. “Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me a little about Orzamule while we make our way down to the Senate?”

The bearded donkey guard rolled his eyes as he looked over Twilight’s bright grin. “What’s with you adventurer types?” he grumbled. “Always asking the same damn questions. ‘Can you tell me about this place?’ ‘Who’s the king of Orzamule? What’s his story?’ ‘I’m looking for the Bridle of Swank Iron, have you seen it?’”

“Orzamule has little need for outsiders. You want some history? Fine, here’s some. Orzamule was founded by a mule named Orza well over a thousand years ago. Now because he was a mule, he didn’t have any heirs. No heirs means succession crisis. Succession crisis means bloody civil war.”

“You didn’t have to be rude about it,” Twilight muttered as she resumed staring at the city bathed in the light of mighty sun crystals hanging from the stone walls of the mountain. She wondered if all donkeys spoke as curtly as the soldier, then quickly assumed it was just stress from the job and from the situation of having a leadership crisis of their own.

Once they were settled, Twilight looked up to see a trio of guards approach them from the city proper. The guards stood back, standing at full attention as their commanding officer stepped forward, looking at the bearded donkey who had controlled the lift with a critical eye.

“The Senate ruled that no surfacers be allowed to the city, grunt.” The officer frowned, looking past Twilight and the others. “Explain yourself and these… ponies.”

“Sir!” The guard stomped both hooves down as some sort of salute. “The purple and

orange pony are Grey Wardens, and they bring the treaties ratified by King Rumblerock. Warden, please show the officer the documents.”

Twilight’s horn glowed with magic as she levitated the Grey Warden treaty with the kingdom of Orzamule towards the officer donkey. He quickly looked over the parchments before nodding towards the guard.

“Very well. These documents appear legitimate. You may return to your post. I will take care of things from here.”

“Yes sir!” The bearded donkey took his place near the switch, activating the mechanism and causing the lift to clank back up towards the surface. Twilight watched the lift ascend with trepidation; they were now, for better or for worse, trapped in Orzamule at the mercy of the donkeys. Thankfully they were proving an amicable people thus far, if a bit rude.

“Ponies, welcome to Orzamule,” the officer greeted, “We do not get many visitors these days since King Endrin Hammerfall’s unfortunate death. His son Bhelen and chief advisor Lord Harrowmount have scrambled for the throne, causing all kinds of disorder. Senate will be called to session in three hours. At that time I will bring you before the nobles if they are not too preoccupied killing each other. For the remainder of your time, I would encourage you to explore our humble city. If you would be so kind as to follow me, I would be honoured to give you a quick tour.”

Twilight smiled as she accepted the officer’s offer. For the first time in their journey, they had finally arrived in a place where their lives were not threatened the moment they crossed through a threshold. It felt good to finally go somewhere where the Wardens were respected.

“You may have noticed the many statues of donkeys surrounding our fair city,” he continued as they walked towards Orzamule, “They are our Paragons, heroes and champions that all exemplify everything a donkey of their caste should become. For example, Paragons like Korgan the Warrior, who defeated legions of diamond dogs and ponyspawn alike to liberate Khalok Thaig. The most recent Paragon was Branka the Smith, who invented smokeless coal. Thanks to her, the black lung disease was almost eliminated and production increased five-fold. She was lost in an expedition into the Dark Tunnels, but her memory lives on in the Stone.”

Twilight looked up at the statue of the Paragon Branka, who was carved with a smithing hammer in her mouth and was surrounded by large piles of coal. The eyes on the sculpture were fierce, as if they stared ahead at some sort of monster, and gave off an air of incredible determination.

“This is the Golden Sector,” the officer explained as they travelled through the busy roads. “Named after the exchange of gold coins for services rendered. While nobles and kings may call the Diamond Sector the heart of Orzamule, there would in fact *be* no

Orzamule without the businesses and industry that bring this city its prosperity.”

“It is also the crossroads of the city, leading to the Diamond Sector, the Iron Sector, and the Proving Stadium. Orzamule is a very tidy city, with everything running like clockwork, and we plan to keep it that way. But I digress; please take a moment to explore the Golden Sector. Peruse the shops, perhaps there is something you will like. I will be on hoof should you need anything.”

Giving thanks, Twilight turned towards the marketplace with eagerness in her eyes. Her friends seemed to mimic her look as they walked around the heart of donkey commerce. “Well, what are we waiting for?” Twilight asked as she turned to the others. “Let’s have some fun while we wait for the Senate.”

As if on cue, the party galloped to different directions, violently spinning Twilight around with Spike holding onto her neck for dear life, save for Shale who stood next to Twilight and continued acting the part of the silent bodyguard. After the whole of Orzamule stopped spinning for a minute, Twilight shook her head clear and looked back to the different stalls, trying to see if there was something that caught her eye.

Many of the stalls held typical fare: food, weapons, and armour, all fit for donkeys. There was very little that caught her attention as she browsed the offered goods, her magical senses trying to find something unique about donkeys. Disappointment marred her face as her senses revealed nothing; donkeys could not use magic after all due to their lack of presence in the Fade. For a unicorn scholar of all things arcane, the market held little interest for her.

Heading over to a stall where an armourer was shilling his steel, Twilight noticed that all of the smith’s wares were perfectly symmetrical. She held up a steel helmet with her magic to examine closer and assuage her own disbelief at the craftsmanship; both sides were perfectly even. Such things were generally impossible under normal circumstances, as perfect symmetry by ponies’ hooves was usually the result of magic.

“Greetings, pony,” said the soot-stained smith as he smiled towards Twilight, “I see you’re marveling at one of my finest works. That helm alone took me two weeks to complete. Let me tell you, I had to work my hooves to the core to get the symmetry just right.”

“Is symmetry important?” Twilight asked as she looked over a chest plate. Like the helm, the two sides mirrored each other perfectly. The violet unicorn looked up to see the smith staring at her as if she had just bucked an innocent bystander’s head clean off.

“Of course symmetry is important!” he huffed, “I don’t know what they teach you on the surface, but we donkeys must always act in an orderly way to stave off discord and chaos. It is the Will of the Stone, as has been told by the Shaperate for centuries.”

Now *this* was something Twilight was intrigued about. Thanking the smith for his time, she left to ponder what she had learned about the donkey's belief system. It echoed what the officer had told her, of having "Orzamule running like clockwork." They believed in order as well as their Paragons, but was this something all donkeys believed in? Twilight made a mental note on her checklist to talk to this "Shaperate" if she could, and find out more of the donkeys' faith system if time allowed.

"Hey Twilight, look over there!" Spike pointed a claw over to a larger stall. "That donkey is selling gemstones, Twilight. Can we go over and see if he has something tasty? I'm getting a little hungry."

"Sure thing, Spike," Twilight replied. "I don't think a little amethyst or garnet would hurt." (especially not with all the bank we're going to make after this part of the main quest)

"How about a great big ruby?" Twilight rolled her eyes as they walked over to the jeweler's stall, shaking her head at her little dragon's voracious appetite. When they arrived, Spike immediately began to lick his lips as Twilight browsed the rest of the wares offered.

Amongst gemstones, both cut and uncut, were a wide selection of jewelry, mostly necklaces and hoof bracelets. However, Twilight noted that, unlike the blacksmith and his goods, this jewelry was asymmetrical, and no two pieces were identical. One pendant ended in a curved fang carved from emerald, while another showed two donkeys in combat, with one clearly in a position of power.

"Beautiful baubles, amazing apparel, and generous gemstones for the pretty pony," recited the merchant as she waved a hoof towards her shining treasures, "My husband crafted each piece here with his artistic eye. Don't worry about the lack of symmetry, not all of us are hardlined followers of the Order of the Stone. Stone itself is not orderly unless hooves work it. If there is anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask. It's been so long since we've had pony customers. Usually it's just Wardens, may the Stone rest their souls."

"Actually, I'm a Warden," Twilight informed her with a smile. "I am interested in that ruby though. Spike here would love it."

The jenny merchant pushed the hoof-sized ruby across the table with a look of delight on her face. "That will be five gold bits, friend." As Twilight levitated the coins to the shopkeeper, Spike held the ruby in front of his eyes, marveling over the gemstone before taking a big bite out of the side. The donkey gasped in surprise as it watched the dragon consume the precious stone, looming over her stall in disbelief.

"By the Stone, in all my years I have never seen anything like that." The donkey was clearly flabbergasted by Spike's display of hunger, until a thought occurred. "Are

creatures like this ‘Spike’ common on the surface? Perhaps I can expand my business.”

“Oh no,” Twilight quickly replied, remembering all too well what a customer a high dragon would make. “He’s very special for a dragon.”

Once the subject had been changed away from Spike and dragons, Twilight resumed looking over the wares of baubles and luxury jewels. Each were beautiful in their own right, if impractical. *I wonder if Dinky could enchant these like she did Spike’s sword,* Twilight thought as her eyes swept past the pendants and bracelets until she spotted something that appeared familiar.

Sitting on the far right of the stall was a golden mirror, stylized with two ponies on the rim seemingly chasing after each other in some kind of joyful game. It reminded Twilight of the mirror Rarity had mentioned during one of the first few nights the party had camped together, and as Twilight held it up with her magic, her thoughts quickly turned to her fellow unicorn.

She moved the mirror around a bit, looking her face over for the first time in a long while. After weeks of travel, danger, and battle, the effects were as plain as day on her features. Her purple eyes were slightly bloodshot, while dark bags were under her eyes after nights of fitful, nightmare-fueled sleep. A few scars had also left their permanent mark from the few times her face was attacked by beast or iron.

*This is the face of hardship,* Twilight thought, waxing poetic once again. *This is a face chiseled by fate, battle, and suffering. A month ago I would not have recognized myself. I can scarcely believe the mare looking back at me is me.*

“Spike, look,” Twilight said, “This is just like the mirror Rarity told me about, the one Flemeth smashed.” As she mentioned Flemeth, Spike stopped collecting more gemstones to purchase and looked up to Twilight and the mirror. She lowered the mirror to Spike, who looked at it once before beginning to pose.

“Hey there, good looking,” he cooed as he smoothed out his scales. “Who is that little dragon hero? What’s that Rarity? Of course I’ll save you from that evil hag, Flemeth. I am, after all, a knight of the realm.”

Once Spike was finished boasting, he looked over the mirror once more, sadness forming on his face as he held the object in his claws. “Can we get this for Rarity?” he asked. “She seemed so sad and scared after we left the temple. I bet she’d be really happy! I’ll even use my share of the treasure!”

*It is a good idea,* Twilight considered as she lifted the mirror towards the merchant. *Rarity hasn’t been herself since we left the temple. This mirror would be the perfect gift. I hope she accepts it.*

After trading a hefty amount of bits for the mirror, Spike held the precious object in his grasp, looking around for the white unicorn. Sure enough, Rarity was near a tailor's market stall, and much to Twilight's chagrin, she was berating the donkey on nearly every aspect of the clothes. The poor donkey mare looked like she was about to cry.

"These robes you have are just *utterly* drab," Rarity complained as she held up a robe with her magic, "Have the donkeys never heard of colours? Everything is grey, brown, or another shade of brown. Have you even attempted embroidery? Here let me show you. I believe I have some thread and such for just an occasion..."

Twilight shook her head in bemusement as Rarity levitated needle and thread with her magic, humming along as she made the needle work its way across the donkey's cloth. The tailor could only stare agape as the display before her continued, and the unicorn sorceress finished her work in no time. She winked as she returned the now much-more-dazzling piece of attire to its owner, showing off several colours of red and gold inlaid into the robe.

"Now doesn't that appear much more regal? A robe fit for a king, if not a noble. The next time a surface trader comes by, see if he has some colour thread or dye. I guarantee business will increase tenfold and you will take pride in bringing a new level of fabulousity to all of Orzamule."

Rarity smiled as the donkey continued to stare agape. Without another word, Rarity turned to see Twilight and Spike waiting for her, both shaking their heads at their friend's insistence.

"Now, darling, I know what you're thinking," Rarity said as they left the confounded donkey and her new robe. "'Oh, Rarity, your generosity knows no bounds, helping that poor dear bring some life and vibrancy to her work and to all donkeys everywhere.' Truly the work of a fashion master never rests."

Twilight rolled her eyes as Rarity went on while they walked to a small corner in the market place. Once he was sure they had a moment of privacy, Spike approached Rarity holding up the golden mirror. Rarity looked down on the offered gift in surprise before wrapping the mirror in her magic.

"This mirror," she whispered, looking at Twilight, "It's almost like the one Flemeth smashed. Did you get this for me?"

"Of course," Spike replied, "You just seemed so sad. I thought this would make you happy."

Rarity looked at her reflection in the mirror with trepid eyes, looking down on the waiting Spike before returning to gaze at herself. "It's beautiful," she said, barely above a whisper, "It's the first time anypony... anyone has given me anything like this. Thank

you, Spike. Thank you so much for this kind gift.”

The mirror still in a magical grip, the white unicorn lowered her head and gave Spike a kiss on the cheek, much to the dragon knight’s joy. Twilight turned away to let the two have a moment of privacy, looking out towards the Orzamule market as Rarity lowered the mirror so Spike could see.

“You are a true gentlecolt, Spike,” Rarity continued, choking on the words through tears, “I hope that you’ll one day find that special dragon for you.”

“Rarity...” Spike was about to say more, only to be gently silenced by Rarity’s hoof pressed against his lips. Levitating a small kerchief to her eyes, Rarity turned towards Twilight, a smile on her face the like of which she had not seen since before their journey to the mountain.

“Spike, why don’t you go have some lunch while I talk to Rarity.” She didn’t want to simply dismiss Spike after his display of affection, but she needed to talk to Rarity alone. Twilight had to confront Rarity about this depression and her refusal to face Flemeth. As old and powerful as the witch was, she could be defeated. The “how” could be left until later. What was certain that Twilight would do everything in her power to prevent Rarity from being taken by Flemeth.

Twilight walked with Rarity for some distance away from the market until she was sure they were alone, or at least away from listening ears. Once they were isolated, Twilight held Rarity’s gaze as she spoke.

“Rarity, I know things are looking bad now, especially between you and Flemeth, but enough is enough! Ever since you encountered Flemeth in the mountain, you’ve been distant. This is not only hurting our friendship, but it is clearly hurting you! I just wish you would open up and let your friends in so we can help you.”

Rarity looked away for a moment before returning Twilight’s gaze. “As long as I’ve been alive, I have only known Flemeth to be my mother. A cruel and punishing mother, yes, but she did provide for me. And if I hadn’t read that book, I’d still be calling her Mother.”

She took a deep breath. “I touched horns with Sweetie Belle while we were at Red Apple, Twilight. I wanted to protect her from the templars, so I showed her my shapeshifting magic by merging our magic together. We also shared memories. She’s... my sister.”

Twilight gasped at the information being shared with her. The similarities were there, certainly, and while she was upset with Rarity for using a very dangerous method to share knowledge and experience with such a little filly, she could not fault her. Protecting Sweetie Belle was noble of Rarity, so after discovering that they were sisters, Twilight could only assume Rarity felt obligated to do what she could to save her only sibling from the templars.

Rarity continued, explaining everything that she saw when her mind was melded with Sweetie Belle's. Everything from the heat of the fire, to the sight of her true parents dying, to the transformed Flemeth, to the declaration by Flemeth that she would return for Sweetie Belle. Tears flowed freely from Rarity's eyes as she recounted her tale.

"I never knew my real parents," Rarity continued, "I can only imagine what Flemeth could have said or did to force them to give me to her. But they would not let Sweetie Belle be taken without a fight. I will not fault them for defending their child, though I do wonder why they gave me up to that witch. Flemeth... I still fear her, Twilight. She is incredibly powerful, and very, very monstrous when she wishes to be. I don't fear her for my sake though, but for Sweetie Belle's, and for all your sakes."

With her handkerchief, Rarity wiped away the last of the tears. Twilight saw in her eyes that Rarity appeared much better, her breathing clearer and more concise while her eyes held fierce determination. "Thank you, Twilight. I needed to get that off my chest, as it were. Come dear, let's find the others. I'm sure they are having wonderful experiences here in Orzamule, and I'd like to see if they found anything interesting."

(Rarity and Spike segment seems weak, needs revision)

Once they returned to the marketplace, Twilight spotted Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash talking to a donkey vendor, who was surrounded by dozens of cages. As they drew nearer, Twilight crinkled her nose while Rarity covered hers with a cloth as a strange and unpleasant smell emanated from the cages. It was something akin to old cheese, leather, and dung, yet for whatever reason, Fluttershy would not leave, much to Rainbow's consternation.

"Fluttershy, these things stink!" Rainbow complained as she held a hoof to her nose, "Can't you pick one and get on with it?"

Twilight looked into the cages for herself to see what the fuss was about. Inside were strange little creatures barely reaching her knees in height, resembling a cross between a pig and a rat, with pink mottled skin and long whiskers. They also had long ears like a rabbit as well as grasping "hands", much like the hands of a rage demon. Many of the creatures were sniffing about inside their cages as Fluttershy swooned at the sight of them.

"The donkey told me they're called nugs," Fluttershy explained. "I wish I could take home all of them. Oh Twilight, can I bring one of these nugs with me? They're just so cute; I need to give at least one of them a good home."

"I don't see why not," Twilight said as she looked away from the cages. "I just hope you give whichever... nug... you choose a bath."



“Oh, I will,” Fluttershy promised as she resumed looking at the arranged nuggets, “I’ll clean it and feed and call it Mister Schmoopies.”

“Mister Schmoopies” Dash let out an exasperated sigh. “Really? Of *all* the names you could choose, you pick the most uncool of them all.”

“Hmm, you’re right Rainbow.” Fluttershy bent down towards one of the lower cages. She gave a small smile at a much smaller nugget with white skin and black, beady little eyes staring back at her. The nugget sniffed the yellow pegasus’ face curiously as she neared the cage, the tiny creature’s twitching whiskers moving much more rapidly after the meeting.

“This one please,” Fluttershy squealed with delight. “He looks so precious. Like a little angel. I know! I’ll call him Angel.”

The nugget keeper was all too happy to accept Fluttershy’s gold bits, taking the key in his mouth and releasing the nugget back to freedom. Angel Nuggie bounded out of his cage towards Fluttershy, nuzzling her leg. She giggled as the whiskers brushed against her coat, before allowing the nugget to climb up and sit upon her back.

“Ugh, I hope we don’t wait too much longer,” Dash complained as she hovered above the party’s head, “Orzamule is so cramped. I don’t know how the donkeys get through the day without any open sky. How do they even know when day or night is?”

“Doing fine so far, considering how long they survived under a mountain,” Twilight mused as she looked around for Applejack and Pinkie Pie. Losing track of her friends was not something she wanted to happen, yet as she looked around, all she could see were the browns and greys of donkey coats. Instead of trying to spot them visually, Twilight perked her ears upward, listening intently for any sound of a high-pitched laugh or a southern accent that would give her friends away.

Sure enough, the sounds of Pinkie’s laughter resounded in the air over the sound of hawking merchants. It came from a large building with two heavy barrels connected outside that was roughly twice the size of the average pony. A sign hung outside the building that read “The Nug and Whistle”, though what the sign could mean, Twilight had no idea. The sound of laughter besides Pinkie’s soon ranged out, enticing Twilight’s curiosity.

Inside the building, the party found Pinkie standing on top one of the tables surrounded by laughing donkeys, with Applejack waving a hoof towards Twilight and the others. It appeared that Pinkie was entertaining the donkeys, as Applejack was gasping for breath after another fit of laughter.

“And then I said, ‘You’ve gotta be crazy to add oatmeal to a grenade!’ Next thing I know, KABOOM! Oatmeal everywhere. In my mane, in my tale, on my snout, and every linky-link in my chain. I was a real Pinkie Oatmeal Pie, let me tell you.” The donkeys

roared again in amusement, stomping their hooves in applause. When the pink earth pony spotted the rest of the party, she bowed to her guests before jumping off the table.

“Thank you so much for letting me tell you all my jokes, we’ll be here all week!” Her smile was bright and cheery and rather infectious if the faces of all the donkeys within earshot were any indication. Pinkie bounded over to Twilight’s side, bouncing up and down as she pointed a hoof excitedly at the table she and Applejack were using.

“Oh, I’m super happy you all made it!” Pinkie exclaimed, “Now we can eat! Me and Applejack wanted to find out what’s the very bestest best to eat in Orzamule, so we ordered a bit of everything off the menu! Now that you’re here, we can really start chowing down! Come on!”

The rumble of stomachs concurred with Pinkie’s plan, and one by one they sat around the table just as they had in the tavern on the edge of Lake Blackwater. Soon enough, a donkey jenny approached with a tray of mugs balanced on her head, one for everypony and Spike, laying the tray with precious liquid, before heading back into the kitchens.

“What’s this stuff?” Dash asked as she looked at the mugs, taking a careful sniff of the contents.

“Donkey beer,” Applejack replied as several ponies, Twilight included, tipped back their mugs to drink. “Ah didn’t believe it at first, but apparently they make it out of lichens and dirt.”

Whether it was the mention of the ingredients used to make the drink or the actual taste itself, Twilight spat out the contents of her mug, gagging while her friends did the same. Only Spike and Applejack could stomach the drink as the little dragon chugged his flagon, quickly moving on to other mugs passed to him.

After replacing their beer with much more drinkable water, Twilight looked around the table to her friends. When the barmaid returned with a much larger tray filled with hot food, Twilight licked her lips as she helped the jenny lower various plates of food onto the table.

What made its way onto their table was something less than appetizing. For the most part, the meals consisted of mushrooms and soups made from various roots, though a few tubers and other vegetables Twilight could not recognize were laid out before them. Still, she would not complain; the food smelled appetizing, at least compared to the lichen-dirt beer, and the sight of Pinkie munching away without a care lessened Twilight’s hesitations.

The mushrooms were interesting to eat; they had a leathery texture and an earthy taste, both of which were foreign to Twilight’s palate. They were enjoyable, though something felt missing. As she was not a cook in the slightest, Twilight shrugged away the thought

before turning to the root soup. The soup that was offered had a salty taste, though she found the soup was plain and uninteresting.

The tubers proved to be the best of the donkeys' choice of meals, as many of their choice meals were made from various different types of potatoes in even more forms. Boiled potatoes, mashed potatoes, baked potatoes, and potatoes in stew made their rounds to the ponies at the table. Whether the potatoes were brown, red, or sweet, any meal made from the earthy root was delectable.

"Guess it's true that 'taters are called 'apples of the earth'," Applejack remarked after another helping of mashed potatoes. "Still, donkeys could go for some real flavours. Could be some real trade opportunity if we could get Orzamule open again."

"Let's focus on getting the donkeys to adhere to the treaty first," Twilight reminded. "Then we can look to business opportunities."

The doors to the tavern quickly burst open, with a wide-eyed Trixie looking about. Spotting Twilight and the others, the blue magician quickly galloped under the table, hiding from something. Twilight looked to the door to see a thick donkey soldier covered in heavy plate mail lumber in.

"Don't tell him I'm here, please!" Trixie looked up from her hiding spot, begging to Twilight as the magical mare continued to watch the newcomer carefully. "The Great and Powerful Trixie was just showing these deprived donkeys her skill in magic with a few choice displays when that oaf smacked my rump! Do you have any idea how humiliated Trixie feels just for admitting that?"

He was built much like the other warrior donkeys they had seen, and his thick forelegs labeled him as strong and capable in a fight. His mane was a dark red and cut short, though still an unruly mess of spikes. He had a long beard tied into two braids that hung from either side of his mouth.

From his swagger to the reeking stench from his mouth even at a distance, Twilight cringed as she knew all too well that this donkey was drunk out of his mind. With the biggest smile she could produce, she watched as the donkey walked over to the table, bloodshot eyes looking each pony over until he turned his gaze down to one of the refused mugs of beer.

"Don't mind if I do," he slurred, greedily snatching the mug in his teeth and chugging the contents with one gulp. Spitting out the mug onto the table, the donkey leered at the collection of mares in front of him.

"I was looking for that pretty blue pony earlier, but the Stone saw fit to give old Oghren multiple choices." He laughed as he slid towards Fluttershy, who turned her head away in nervousness, holding Angel Nuggy close in her forelegs. "Hey! Somedonkey get us

another round of beer. Oghren is feeling lucky, and just wants to know one thing: is he taking back one pony to his kip or six?"

"Oghren!" shouted the familiar voice of the officer. "By the stone, get away from the Wardens and their friends! We don't need somedonkey like you giving all of Orzamule a bad name!" Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as the officer distracted Oghren.

"Need I remind you that you are one offense away from exile?" the officer continued as he stared down Oghren, "The Senate decided that sending you to the surface was too good for you, remember? One more mistake and you go down to the Dark Tunnels!"

"Well maybe I wouldn't make so many mistakes if I wasn't figuratively castrated!" Oghren roared back. "First you take my axe and strip me of what it means to be a warrior. What else do I have?"

"Your axe was taken because you are a chaotic menace, Oghren! All you do is get drunk and get into fights!"

"Maybe I wouldn't get drunk and brawl if those useless rutters for nobles would give me the help I need to go into the Dark Tunnels and bring back Branka!"

Twilight looked back and forth at the exchange, trying to piece together what was going on. Whoever this Oghren was seemed to want to go into the ponyspawn-infested Dark Tunnels to find the Paragon Branka. For reasons likely linked to safety and security, they hadn't sent further expeditions to recover their most recent Paragon.

Oghren soon gave up his tirades as a pair of masked guards appeared at the entrance of the tavern, shaking his head as he turned to leave. His face drooped as sadness took hold, giving one last look at Twilight before leaving The Nug and Whistle. The officer *harrumphed* before turning back towards the party, with Trixie finally leaving from under the table.

"Sorry about the disturbance, Warden," the officer explained. "Oghren has been like that since Branka disappeared. They were married you see, but Branka left for her expedition into the Dark Tunnels without him after he got drunk at a party. Took their entire clan with her, but left her husband. Tells you what kind of jack... er... male Oghren was to her, huh?"

"In any event, the Senate will receive you soon. We had better get there quickly before they explode into another squabble. Please, follow me."

Leaving the tavern and offering a fair amount of gold for the food, Twilight and the rest of the party left towards the Diamond Sector. Together, with Shale still playing the part of dutifully silent servant, they followed the officer into a new sector of the city which more than lived up to its name.

Unlike the Golden Sector, the Diamond Sector was filled with luxurious buildings carved from marble and alabaster. Imported cloth from the surface hung as banners of many noble clans, while art work derived from runes lined the homes of nobles. The air was cleaner thanks to the sector being located so far from the industrial core of Orzamule.

“It is here in the Diamond Sector that the nobility and their houses make their homes,” the officer informed them as they toured the home of the aristocracy, “It is also where one can find the Shaperate where we keep all our records and the Palace of the King. Of course, the most important building is the Senate, where nobles and the king dictate our laws.”

The Senate was massive compared to other donkey buildings, with statues of Paragons acting as silent stone sentinels to any who walked under their gaze. Twilight could feel a sense of disrupted order as she and the others entered the hall of government, as a low murmur could be heard from the stone doors leading to the building’s center. The rumble of arguing donkeys grew louder as they approached, only for the noise to explode as they entered a large amphitheatre.

Laid out in a semicircle, many donkeys stood up as they bickered amongst one another, some with more vitriol than others. In the center of the room stood a dark-maned donkey who looked tired and ancient as he tried to bring order to the assembly.

“Senators, we will have order!” he called, pounding his hooves on the stone dais upon which he stood. “You will address everything to the Speaker, as is tradition!”

“Tradition is what is killing our people, Speaker Cranky Doodle,” rebuked a youthful donkey with a brown coat and orange mane, dressed in shining bronze armour. “As I have stated time and time again, tradition stops our progress as a people, as a nation. Listen to me, all of you! As king, I would bring change to Orzamule that will see us prosper again! We would fill the ranks of our armies with flesh blood, move into the Dark Tunnels and take back our thaigs! Our cities lost for centuries! The ponyspawn have pushed us back for too long! Choose me as king, and I swear to you, the line will be drawn and we will push back!”

Donkeys who agreed with the noble in the bronze armour stomped their hooves enthusiastically, cheering for Prince Bhelen Hammerfall to take his rightful place as king. Twilight watched the Senate assembly fall into silence as an older, far more grizzled donkey with a long grey beard approached from his side of the theatre. Pure rage filled his eyes as he spat his words.

“Your father made me swear upon his deathbed that you would never have the crown of Orzamule laid upon your brow,” he growled, “You are Kinslayer! You represent everything we donkeys have struggled against since the Time of Chaos! You killed your brothers, your sisters, your own *father*, Bhelen, just to have the throne! You would bring

down our society and have those wretches, those *casteless*, join honoured castes like our warriors in battle, like our tradesmen in the forge! If we donkeys forget who we are, forget what makes us strong in the eyes of the Stone, then we do not deserve to have a place in this world!”

Another chorus of approval and stomping hooves echoed in the theatre. Cries for Lord Harrowmount rang out for both long life and blessings from the Stone. Twilight looked to her friends, who simply watched the display of governance in stunned silence. Bhelen laughed as Harrowmount finished before making a retort of his own.

“You have no proof of your claims, old jack,” Bhelen jeered, “My father died of sickness, my sister murdered my brother, and the law demanded she be sent to the Dark Tunnels to live out her days. You are just so blinded by petty *jealousy* of my right to the throne that you will do everything you can to stop me. I bring change to Orzamule, something an old jack like you can never understand. That which you do not understand, you fear, like a cowardly dog with its tail between its legs!”

Lord Harrowmount did not take kindly to the insult, immediately barking back with his own counter while his supporters drew weapons. Soon Bhelen’s supporters did the same, shouting and rattling their weapons. Twilight watched the display of anger with trepidation; the donkeys of the city seemed so peaceful and orderly. She found it rather ironic that their leadership devolved into utter chaos like this. However, it was these donkeys that she needed to persuade to follow through with the treatise. With a house divided, that prospect became much more distant.

“There will be order!” Gripping a large maul in his teeth, Cranky Doodle hefted the hammer with astounding strength before swinging the blunt head towards a gong. Everyone, from the ponies to the donkeys, quickly found themselves silent as their ears rang and their heads shook as if an earthquake had struck the halls of Orzamule.

“You both should be ashamed!” scolded Doodle. “You both act like suckling foals braying over spilt ale! If the common donkey were to see what was going on in their Senate house where the laws that affect them are made, they would surely see that chaos rules in here and there would be fear in the streets! Why do you think so many of our people have fled to the surface? Because they believe that there is more order up there than there is down here! And you act in ways unbecoming of nobles in front of honoured guests! What are the ponies supposed to think when they see us at our worst?”

*That every donkey in this hall is crazy.* Twilight opted not to say that particular thought out loud, but could not deny that was exactly what the Senate hall appeared to be. The Speaker then turned to her and the rest of the party, pointing a hoof in her direction.

“I will give the floor to our guests now,” he announced, “Perhaps they will show you jackasses what real courtesy and poise looks like. Grey Wardens, you have voice in the Senate.”

Twilight gulped nervously as all eyes turned to her. Shaking off the nerves and stepping forward to the centre of the amphitheatre, Twilight bowed her head to the assembled nobles before speaking. “Lords and Ladies of Orzamule,” Twilight began, hoping she had not offended anyone with her opening remark, “Thank you for the privilege of standing before you in your Senate. I bring dire news from the surface that affects us all, and of old treaties signed by your ancient king Rumblerock to request your aid.”

“The surface land above you known as Equestria is currently under attack by the ponyspawn in a Blight. Our war against the monsters does not go well and we, as Grey Wardens, are travelling about the land with the ancient treaties to request aid from our allies of old. We have already obtained the support of the unicorn mages and members of the Equestrian nobility. We now seek to humbly request the aid of Orzamule and her armies to combat the Blight. What affects the surface will surely affect this city, and we must stand united against the evil tide.”

A soft murmur rose above the nobles of Orzamule as they spoke amongst themselves.

“A Blight on the surface? How is that our problem?”

“Let the ponies have the ponyspawn for a change. See how we survive and thrive with their threat over our heads.”

“Orzamule is under threat if the ponyspawn get a hoof hold on the surface. Remember what the Shaperate said happened to Onagon in the First Blight. Completely wiped out in a matter of days.”

“We must honour our treaties with the surface, lest they think we are nothing but cowardly dogs.”

While dissent and support made their rounds throughout the nobles, Prince Bhelen and Lord Harrowmount remained silent, speaking only in hushed whispers to their aides. Speaker Doodle shook his head before addressing Twilight.

“What you ask for is impossible at the moment,” he started with some hesitation. “Only a king can command the full armies of Orzamule to go to the surface. We have no king, just two sodding fools who spend the majority of our Senate meetings arguing and rattling their axes. Until a king is decided by unanimous vote by the Senate, we cannot send troops to the surface to combat the Blight. I am deeply sorry.”

Twilight’s ears folded back as the donkeys began another heated debate, unsure if she had said anything wrong. Only Bhelen and Harrowmount stayed out, still speaking only to their aides before the Speaker called for attention once again.

“Due to the troubling nature of the news from the surface, as well as to have a moment to

cool our tempers, I am hereby calling a recess to the Senate to be continued tomorrow.” He nodded at Twilight before turning back to the assembly. “The Grey Wardens and their friends will be treated as honoured guests until such a time as a king is decided upon, or until their departure. Strength of the Stone be with you all.”

Twilight grimaced as she watched the nobles disperse with Bhelen and Harrowmount leading their own respective factions. They didn’t have the time to wait for considerations and debate. The Blight was happening right now, and the ponyspawn would not be patient for the Wardens to wait out politics.

It wasn’t until she felt a slight tap of a hoof on her shoulder that Twilight looked slightly down to find a donkey with a short beard. He was the aide who was advising Prince Bhelen earlier. Out of the corner of her eye, the help to Lord Harrowmount was talking to Applejack as well. Both ponies’ eyes met, with a small nod conveying the only message. They would hear what the two had to say.

“Excuse me, Warden,” said Bhelen’s aide as Twilight left the group to speak to him alone. “Prince Bhelen Hammerfall saw an urgency in your eyes when the Speaker declared Orzamule could not be of help against your Blight. If Prince Bhelen were king, he would surely give you all the troops you would need to defeat the ponyspawn.”

*Why does it feel like I’d rather stare down the muzzle of a minotaur?* Of all of Twilight’s experiences against ponyspawn, demons, and other ponies, politics seemed to be a worse mire than the Potpourri Wilds. It left a bad taste in her mouth just speaking to Bhelen’s aide in such a cloak and dagger way. Still, she had to hear what the donkey had to offer. She just needed to play it safe and offer the donkey little tells.

“I would believe Lord Harrowmount would give the Wardens a similar offer,” Twilight reminded him, careful not to name anypony, especially if loopholes were involved. “I am listening to what you have to say, however.”

“I’m sure we can make an agreement between my lord and the Grey Wardens.” The aide smiled, offering his hoof to shake. “Come see me near the Proving Grounds. We can speak more there amongst the crowds.”

Nodding his head, the aide left to return with Prince Bhelen. Twilight walked over to Applejack, who had finished speaking with Harrowmount’s assistant, who breathed a sigh of relief after the donkey was long out of earshot.

“This is what everypony wants me to get into,” she grimaced, “Darned politics. Now Ah feel all dirty, and not in a good ‘hard work builds character’ way. Bhelen’s boy talk to you?”

“Mmmhmm,” mumbled Twilight. “I don’t like it, but we may have to pick a side in this conflict. It’s the only way to get the donkeys to come together, choose a king, and get us



the army we need. Now I've been thinking we can go see Bhelen's assistant in the morning and..."

"Now hold on just a minute there, missy." Applejack raised an eyebrow as she looked at Twilight incredulously. "You heard what that Harrowmount said. Bhelen is a kin slayer, and no killer of kin is gonna get my support. That Harrowmount looks like a more upstandin' citizen. We should at least give him a chance over Bhelen."

By now, Twilight noticed the rest of the party had circled around them. Rainbow Dash hovered above Applejack's head, a glare in her eyes. "You don't know Bhelen did that! For all you know, Harrowmount is just lying!"

"I don't know about that, Dashie," Pinkie interjected, "Bhelen seems like a real Meany McMeanerpants. I can tell by the way he talks, the way he speaks. They all point to bad things."

"Bhelen at least has vision," Rarity added. "If what we heard is true, Harrowmount is stuck in the old ways, and that is killing the donkeys."

"Tradition and guidance is important, not that an apostate like you would know," Trixie retorted. Twilight watched in horror as the ponies began to squabble exactly as the donkeys had.

Spike, Fluttershy, and Shale took a few steps away from the chaos that was bubbling over the group. "We can't just let a big meanypants sit on a throne!" Pinkie's eyes were unusually fierce. "That Bhelen is a right piece of work, I can just tell. He makes my nose twitch, and my ears twitch, and not in any fun way! He probably holds parties where there only donkey who has fun is him!"

"Pinkie, we don't know any of that!" Rainbow stepped forward. "Look at all the junk Loghoof's been spewing about the Wardens, about them being traitors and responsible for King Blueblood's death. We know that's not true, so why should we believe Harrowmount is telling the truth as well!"

The two sides continued to argue until Applejack whistled over the din, bringing everypony to silence. "Now listen here, all of ya," she frowned, "We can't be disagreein' on donkey issues, but we have to face facts. We need the donkeys to have a king if we're ever gonna get anywhere. They also know the lay of the land better than we do. We have to play nice with the donkeys."

"So ah got a plan. Twilight and those who think Bhelen should be king will go and meet with Bhelen's guy. Those who like Harrowmount better will come with me. Once we figure out and agree who we should support, we all decide who gets to be king, help them get the crown, and move on."

“Agreed,” Twilight said. “Let’s just make a promise here and now. No matter what happens, we remain friends in the end. Politics won’t tear us apart.”

Taking a deep breath and watching Applejack and her group head off, she saw Fluttershy following. “Fluttershy, you’re going with Applejack too?” she asked, surprised.

“Oh, um...” Fluttershy hid her face behind her pink mane, before turning around. “I’m sorry, Twilight. They need somepony to watch out for them. I really don’t have an opinion on either donkey. You have Rainbow Dash and Rarity though. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

As Fluttershy left, Twilight turned to see Shale simply standing behind her, gazing out into the distance. “Don’t you have an opinion too?”

“I Go Where You Go, Master.”

Twilight did not feel better.