

## Chapter 13: Preparations for the Coming Storm

“All right, lemme see if I got this as straight as lines on a well plowed field,” Applejack said while pacing around the Chantry, “Yer having problems with zombies, as in, the walking dead. Braeburn, if you weren’t kin I’d swear that was the single darn foalish thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s true though,” Twilight interjected between the two earth ponies, “Even though I’ve never seen zombies myself, I have read that lesser demons will often possess the bodies of the dead, because they are easy to take a hold of. If this is all really happening, that means the Veil is broken here just like at the Unicorn Tower. Powerful Dark Arts are at work here somehow.”

If it wasn’t a battle against the ponyspawn, it was fighting off the denizens of the Fade. Twilight closed her eyes, focusing her senses to find the ebb and flow of magic in the area. She could see the blue strands of arcane power coalesce towards her own horn and her staff as well as similar strands twisting their way to Rarity and Trixie. She turned her head further in hopes of finding the pathways to the breach acting as a gateway to the real world from that of dreams.

*There*, Twilight thought as she saw several magical rivers converge on one spot. Unlike the tear at the Tower, this one was small in comparison, but large enough to allow lesser weaker demons through. The violet unicorn raised a hoof towards the point of the breach before opening her eyes, seeing that she was pointing at a wall.

“Oh dear Celestia,” Applejack’s worry marred her words, “Yer pointing towards the castle, Twi. What the hay is going on? Is that were all the zombies are coming from? Braeburn?”

“Maybe I should start from the beginning,” Braeburn said, motioning for everypony to get closer and listen, “Now see, I don’t know the details, but from I’ve heard from the ponyfolk around these parts, things went from bad to worse lickity-split. Before the calamity at Ostequus there was this unicorn feller who came into town and offered his services to Arl Mac. A couple weeks later and Mac is sick and can’t wake up. The unicorn tells all of the knights that the only cure is something called the ‘Mane of Stars’, so a bunch leave the castle to go look for the thing, while the rest go out to find out what happened at Ostequus and to protect the arling. Then Applebloom goes missing, the unicorn disappears and Red Apple is being attacked by zombies.”

Twilight shook her head over what Braeburn had told them. It was too coincidental for a unicorn to appear and then have trouble follow. Had this strange unicorn caused the troubles facing Red Apple simply due to negligence of the power in his horn? Or was this another Hubred in the making, desiring to command the power of the Dark Arts for himself?

It was sobering now to think that she had learned how to appreciate the intrinsic might inside her horn, and how Wise Eyes had said Twilight had learned to understand the costs of having such power at her beck and call. She thought of apostates such as Rarity and Dinky who had no formal training with magic but still used their gifts wisely, while wondering how sanctioned unicorns like Hubred could fall after so many lessons on responsibility.

“Oh!” Fluttershy suddenly gasped, shocking everypony around her for such an outburst, “I remember a story about the Mane of Stars. It’s an old pony tale about the remains of Luna before she ascended.”

“The legend goes that before Luna was burned at the stake in the Imperium, her executioner cut off her indigo mane to keep as a trophy. It was the Exarch presiding over the execution who converted right when he saw Luna in such pain that he killed her out of mercy, and placed the mane into a silver coffin. They say the mane then became like the night sky, and the stars shone like diamonds. The coffin was moved to Equestria, birthplace of Luna, but the location of her resting place was forgotten forever.”

“A legend,” Applejack said, the anger in her eyes making it seem like her blood was boiling, “A tall tale. That is where all of Arl Mac’s best knights went and got themselves looking fer somethin’ that might not even exist while zombies pour out of the castle like applesauce!”

“Fraid so, cousin,” the Bann of Appleoosa said, “They mostly attack at night. Mostly. From what we’ve seen, they’re castle staff and a few guards, though a lot more come from the cemetery. We’ve been holdin’ them off here, and then every night they attack with greater numbers, and even with a few critters I’ve never seen before like them blobs of fire with eyes, and walking shadows. The last time we sent soldiers, they came back as more deaders. And nopony has even left the castle, at least not another zombie. We don’t even know if Arl Macintosh is...”

“That does it!” shouted the former templar, stamping her hoof down in frustration, “We’re gonna gallop right into the castle, stop this crazy demon malarkey, and save Arl Macintosh and Applebloom!”

Twilight had never seen her fellow Warden as tense as she was now. Of course she was though, Applejack was worried about the only family she had left and the uncertainty of their fates was likely eating her up on the inside. Gently, she laid a hoof on Applejack’s shoulder, giving a simple show of support. Twilight could feel the blonde earth pony relax slightly at her touch.

“I know you’re worried about Macintosh and Applebloom,” Twilight said, keeping Applejack steady just as the templar pony had done for her in the Tower, “But charging into the castle won’t help them.”

“Charging in sounds like my kind of plan,” Rainbow Dash said. A quick stern look from Twilight had the rainbow assassin silent in a moment.

“We need a plan,” Twilight continued, “A plan to get inside the castle and seal the breach in the Veil. Let’s take stock of exactly what is going on and have a strategy ready. Then we can head into the castle. Don’t worry Applejack; we’ll do whatever we have to save Arl Macintosh and Applebloom.”

Applejack closed her eyes for a moment in contemplation, her chest heaving as she breathed in deep to calm herself. A slight smile from her lips sent Twilight’s worries away as Applejack looked up at her fellow Warden. “All right Twilight. We’ll come up with a plan first.”

Taking up a scroll and quill with her magic to make an organized list of what had transpired in Red Apple, Twilight and the others went around the Chantry and began to talk to the ponies. What they did learn proved the situation was dire. Every night, more and more zombies flooded from the castle down the western pass into the township. There were no real soldiers to defend Red Apple, instead simply a ragtag militia formed at the last minute. They were also poorly equipped as the town’s blacksmith sealed himself in his smithy and refused to open it for anypony.

Morale was lacking as well, with fear becoming like a permeable cloud hanging over the heads of militia and villager alike. Many stood in huddled groups, making prayers to Celestia or trying to convince themselves that everything was going to be all right. What really broke Twilight’s heart were the little fillies and colts scared and crying out for lost mothers and fathers who would never come back home.

“What happened to Macintosh’s soldiers?” Twilight asked Braeburn, “They never arrived at Ostequus, so why aren’t they helping defend Red Apple from the zombies?”

“ ‘Cause they’re out in the field with my colts from Appleoosa fighting off them varmints who follow Loghoof and Maim,” Braeburn answered, “I came here to make sure everything was all right, and to find out why Macintosh wasn’t makin’ a right racket against Loghoof. Turns out things were worse than fungus on apple tree in the dead of summer.”

While Twilight was glad Loghoof did not have complete control over Equestria, she was appalled at the thought that ponies were fighting ponies while the ponyspawn threat loomed over them all. It was true what Flemeth had told her; that nopony could truly see what lay beyond the shadows in the heart or make sense of a pony’s actions at any time, even in one of dire crisis.

Taking her list and a map of the Red Apple area, Twilight looked over the lay of the land to see if there was some way to muster a capable defense. Her mind began to race with all sorts of possibilities as she regarded the map and her checklist. Red Apple Castle was a

well defended vantage point, as there was only one direct path leading to the main gates of the castle; the surrounding cliff faces made any other approach impossible. If the zombies were using the only path, they could easily form a defense at one point, and the party had the ability to do so.

“I got it,” Twilight exclaimed, looking around at her friends while levitating the map and quill for them to see, “We need to create a defensive perimeter here, at the entrance from the ridge leading into the village.”

“We tried that,” Braeburn said, “But there are just too many zombies barreling down the path.”

“Then we’ll soften their numbers up by setting traps before nightfall,” continued Twilight, “Pinkie, we’re going to need you to make special grenades, something that will act like a trap for the invading zombies. Go to Ditzzy’s ship to make sure you have all the materials you need to make the explosives. And wake up Spike while you’re at it, please.”

“Okie dokie, making smokies!” Pinkie rang out with her usual cheer. Amazingly, she was already pulling out all the materials needed for several bombs, and quickly got to work assembling her weapons of choice.

Twilight looked to Rainbow Dash next. “Dash, I need you to scout the area to find any movement from the castle. We’ll also need you to fly around the shore and see if you can spot Shale. We could use all the help we can get.”

The rogue pegasus delivered her signature salute before zooming off out of one of the open windows in the Chantry. Taking a deep breath, Twilight looked over at Fluttershy, knowing this task was going to prove difficult with the introverted bard. “Fluttershy, the militia is frightened of the next attack,” she said while Fluttershy avoided eye contact with Twilight, “I know you’re not comfortable with crowds or even small gatherings of strange ponies, but you’re a Chantry Sister whose kind heart can pull them out of their depression. They need to hear the words that will make them brave in the coming battle.”

“But Twilight,” Fluttershy said, barely above a whisper, “I’m scared too. I’ve never seen a zombie before. They sound really mean, what can I do?”

“I know it’s a scary thought, but look at what we’ve defeated so far,” Twilight tried to catch Fluttershy’s hidden gaze, and when the pair of cyan eyes finally met the unicorn’s violets, she offered a warm smile to ease Fluttershy into a proper sense of security. “We’ve gone up against the ponyspawn and powerful demons of the Fade. You’ve shown under a meek exterior there is bravery and strength. Show these ponies the strength inside you and that Celestia and Luna are with them. I know you can do it.”

Fluttershy smile was small, but it was enough for Twilight to know that the words had

gotten through to her. “I’ll...try,” was the response as the yellow pegasus fluttered over to some of the soldiers.

“Rarity,” Twilight continued, needing everypony to know their roles quickly, “I’d like you to talk to the town’s blacksmith. Try to get him to come out and equip the militia properly. Use your...um...charm?”

“I’ll have that blacksmith wrapped around my hoof by day’s end, darling,” Rarity said. Twilight nodded, and then turned to Trixie.

“Say no more, Sparkle,” Trixie said haughtily before Twilight could get a word in edgewise, “The Great and Powerful Trixie will show all these ponies the true power of her amazing chants and dazzling spellworks!”

*At least we are on the same page,* Twilight thought as she smiled, watching the boastful magician head out on her own to prepare incantations. That just left Applejack and herself to plan on how to actually get inside the castle.

“If’n we’re gonna get in the castle, night might be the best time to get in,” Applejack suggested, “That way the castle will be mostly empty of zombies and we can really give whoever is pullin’ the strings a real buckin’.”

“I agree,” Twilight said, “Although that means we’re going to have to split the group up. A small group to enter the castle and another to stay and help defend the town once the attack begins. Applejack, you know the castle better than anypony, so it will be you and me to start. I think we should also bring Spike and Rainbow Dash with us. He’s proven very capable with that fiery sword and it would do my nerves good to have him nearby. Dash’s skills as an assassin might prove handy inside a fortress like Red Apple Castle.”

The problem was finding a way inside the castle. The battle at night would surely take up the narrow path leading to the castle, and Pinkie would be setting traps along the path for the zombies to rush into. Rubbing her chin with her hoof, Applejack’s ears perked up as she looked at the map, an idea sparked in her eyes.

“If I remember rightly, there’s a secret hidey-hole passage leadin’ from the castle to the cider brewery in town.” As Applejack spoke, she trailed a hoof from the castle towards a building marked as “brewery”.

Before any preparation to the plan could be carried out, another knock at the door brought the guards to full alert. Everypony stood around as the same scared guard who had thought Twilight and the party were zombies opened the door enough to peek through. A slightly ajar door was just enough for a small pegasus filly to rush her way inside.

“A pegasus?” Braeburn wondered aloud as they looked down on the orange pegasus with violet eyes, “Are ya one of the castle servants?”

The winged filly glared at the Bann before her. "I'm Scootaloo," she said in a raised voice, "And I'm Applebloom's friend! Not some servant! And right now Applebloom needs help!"

Worry returned with its marking features to Applejack's face at the mention of Applebloom. "What's goin' on Scootaloo," Applejack said staring down at the filly in front of her, "What's wrong with Applebloom. Is she okay? Is she safe?"

Whatever bravery allowed Scootaloo to make her way from the castle to the Chantry temple quickly diminished under the hard gaze of a concerned older sister. "All I can really say is she's changed since Arl Macintosh fell sick," was her answer, "She became all mean, and now she wants Braeburn to go to her in the castle, since she saw him fighting off the zombies from the top of the castle."

Applejack didn't hesitate. "I'm goin' with Braeburn then! Applebloom needs her big sister right now more than ever!" Twilight wanted to interject, that Applejack was going to put the plan in jeopardy and throw herself into a trap if she went with Braeburn. Scootaloo was faster to respond.

"No!" Scootaloo looked up at the earth pony Warden with pleading eyes, "You can't go! She said just Braeburn; no guards, no soldiers, or she would start killing the prisoners, including Arl Macintosh!"

That gave everypony pause, including Applejack who stood slack jawed as if somepony bucked her square in the face. She began muttering to herself, shaking her head furiously while trying to understand the implications of the filly's words. Twilight knew all too well that Applejack was losing control of herself again as she saw the doubt in her fellow Warden's eyes.

"Can't be...just can't...Applebloom's a sweetheart, never hurt another pony even if she were mad enough...never even consider hurtin' Big Mac...sweet Celestia's sunrays, what the hay is going on..."

It was then that Twilight could feel the familiar pull of templar anti-magic at work, but unlike when Applejack used it to help calm her over-abundance of magic, it was now used wildly and draining the magic from her horn with reckless abandon. The former templar's eyes had gone black from her templar abilities as she wretched herself in despair. The nearby tear in the Veil leaking magic and the misery held by Applejack were having an effect on her templar abilities, amplifying them to incredible levels.

"Applejack!" Twilight shouted, feeling her energy forced out of her horn, "Stop! You're losing control again!" The ponies around them yelped and moved out of the way, yet the anti-magic was making quick work of not only Twilight's magic, but Trixie's and Rarity's as well.

“Please! Calm down!” Twilight said as she fell to one knee while the magic continued to drain from her horn into emptiness. Braeburn and the less magically inclined ponies stared in confusion as to what was happening. Despite her legs buckling under the influx of the templar’s ability, Twilight stepped forward to the blonde Warden.

Twilight noticed that during the unseen magical struggle, Braeburn and Scootaloo left the Chantry alone as the pegasus said they would have to. With a grunt, Twilight moved closer until she was nose to nose with the lost earth pony. She had to end this now and get her friend to see reason, even if it did take drastic measures.

Even the smallest amount of lyrium would be enough to calm down a stressed templar, especially one who was not as indoctrinated as Applejack. Yet there was still the risk that her friend would constantly need the essence of magic to maintain her templar abilities and become addicted like the templars under hoof of the Chantry. There was no way to tell what would happen until the lyrium passed through Applejack’s system.

She could not do it, Twilight realized. She would not make Applejack a lyrium addict just because her friend was losing control of her emotions during such a harrowing revelation. There had to be another way, another way of getting through to the earth pony.

An idea sparked then, something that connected both Twilight and Applejack together. “Listen AJ,” Twilight said gently, “Remember who you are. You’re a Grey Warden! Remember Ostequus, remember Duncan! The oath, Applejack. Help me recite the oath.”

“In Peace...” Twilight spoke, hoping that if nothing else, the order Applejack was so devoted to would get make her snap out of her melancholy.

“Vigilance,” replied the templar, her darkened eyes meeting Twilight’s. The lavender mage took a deep breath before continuing.

“In War...”

“Victory.” Applejack’s eyes were resuming their usual green hue. This was working; she just needed to remember one more line.

“In Death...”

“Sacrifice.” With that word, the black eyes of Applejack returned to normal, and Twilight could feel the anti-magic simply cease around her. She felt weak from such a prolonged drain, but was glad that no drastic measures were taken.

Applejack looked up at Twilight with weary eyes, offering only a small smile. “Yer awfully strong, fer such a little pony,” she said before collapsing onto her side with a loud thud. The other ponies reacted in concern, but quickly discovered that their friend was

merely exhausted and now fast asleep on the floor of the Chantry.

Twilight followed suit, falling to her side as the adrenaline rush ended and the drain of magic taking a toll on her stamina. She looked to Rarity and Trixie who seemed no worse for wear, before speaking again. “Don’t worry about us,” the violet unicorn said to her friends, “Applejack and I just need some rest. We still need everypony to do their part in the plan.”

As fatigue rushed over her and made her eyelids feel heavy, Twilight could still see her friends helping Applejack to her hooves before dragging the earth pony to someplace more comfortable to rest. Before she knew it, helpful hooves hefted her off the ground as they slowly made their way to some makeshift bedding. With a yawn, Twilight closed her eyes, hoping everything would be ready by tonight.

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Rarity approached the blacksmith’s home, nose already crinkling from the revolting smell emanating from the workshop. *Why I ever agreed to this I will never know*, she thought as she approached the door, *I’m just going to get all dirty and icky. Not even my spell against dirt is going to save me.*

The door, like many others in and around the town under Red Apple Castle was marked by scratches caused by heavy hooves. The windows were boarded up as well, which likely caused whatever undead to attack to leave this place alone. The thought of having to face rotting ponies sent shivers down Rarity’s spine. So *disgusting!*

Although Rarity did have to admit, this was likely to be no different than fighting the ponyspawn or abominations. This was going to be another battle with blood and muck to ruin all her hard work on her mane and coat. Yes, she was raised in a swamp by Flemeth who had no care for personal hygiene, but that should have made all of Rarity’s efforts that much more impressive.

The thought of Flemeth sent icy chills throughout the white unicorn’s body. As Rarity had spoken to Twilight about life in the Wilds, as she had listened to the stories of her friends and how they ended up with their group, as she read Flemeth’s grimoire, she had begun to realize just how lonely life had been when it was just simply her and the witch. Perhaps she was feeling a bit jealous at her friends.

Twilight had never known her parents, but at least knew the support of other unicorns. Fluttershy knew her mother and could even remember the flowers her mother wore in her hair. Rainbow Dash’s mother gave up everything for her daughter. Pinkie Pie still had a family out there, waiting for her to find them. Applejack also knew her mother, and had two fathers to help her grow, with one of them being the king of the realm no less! They all seemed to have a sense of family, even if it were taken away from them; Rarity could not say the same for Flemeth.



Flemeth had never held Rarity close, never looked at her supposed daughter with warmth or affection. The old mare's eyes always spoke of expectations and more often than not disappointment when those expectations were not met. Try as she might, Rarity could never even remember a single moment where Flemeth had said "I love you."

"Now Rarity," she said to herself, "No need to get all distressed over this. You said you will get the blacksmith wrapped around your hoof, and this is exactly what you are going to do." With a breath, she brought her staff to the door and struck it with solid raps three times. There was no immediate response.

"Hello?" Rarity said, knocking the door with firmer strikes, "Is anypony home? The militia could use some armour, and I bet if we worked together, we could make them shine and dazzle!"

"Leave," was the curt answer to the unicorn outside the door. Rarity narrowed her eyes at the response, indignant that somepony would deny her entry. She knocked on the door once more, the door shaking as the staff hit its mark with force.

"I shaid leave!" The pony behind the door yelled, "I'm no good forsh anypony exshept wallowing in whatever ponies are shapped to wallow in. Right now I'm wallowing in ale."

Rarity sighed. "Wonderful, a drunkard," she muttered as the staff continued to pound away at the door to the smithy, "Listen you! This quaint little acre commune is going to be under attack again and the ponies need supplies! Now open the door this instant! I'm trying to be reasonable!"

The boarded up window burst into splinters as a large hammer smashed its way through the wood and right by Rarity's head. She yelped as the heavy metal object sailed by, before turning her horn towards the door. With a spark of arcane energy, the white unicorn launched a bolt of lightning right into the lock of the door, blasting it to pieces. With a nod of satisfaction, her staff opened the door wide allowing Rarity to simply walk into the smithy.

Looking around the smithy made Rarity gag from the smoke from the furnace and the smell of stale ale permeating from the drunken pony sitting on his haunches. "Ya borked my door!" he shouted, hooves probing for something else to toss; "Now I'm doomed. Doomed!"

Bolstering her spell to protect against dirt, Rarity stepped towards the blacksmith with disdain in her eyes over such slovenly behavior. "Do tell why you're finding comfort drowning your sorrows, as it were. Before I consider returning that...lovely...gift you sent through the window."

“Zombiesh runnin’ around,” the smashed stallion supplied, “No army. Castle gone. My daughter is in that cashle! I try to ask somepony to find her, but they won’t go in! They shay it’s too dangerous! She’s just a dainty pony, little legs and a happy shmile. Like her mother. Oh shweet Shelestia, she’s all alone in that cashle with them monstersh!”

The blacksmith then began to sob, tossing his drinking bowl into the furnace while his dirty hooves made black smudges over his face. “There there?” Rarity said to give some comfort, gingerly patting the dirty blacksmith’s back, “I’m sure your daughter is fine, just trapped in the castle. A little filly came down from the castle today, saying that the...occupiers have prisoner.” She didn’t mention that it was the Arl’s sister Applebloom that seemed to be the one in command. Who knows what frenzy that would have wrought?

Remembering Twilight’s plan to infiltrate the castle at night, Rarity searched for the words to get the blacksmith back to work. Perhaps she could also kill two birds with one stone. “Now listen dear,” she said, putting a bit more warmth in her voice over the situation, “My friends and I are going to do everything we can to help. Tonight when the zombies attack, we are going to sneak into the castle. But for the plan to work, the defense of the town needs to be paramount, and for that the militia needs excellent gear. We will find your daughter, I swear it.”

The blacksmith looked up at Rarity with a drunken yet stable eye. “Ya swear?” he said, before looking back at his forge. He sighed, the slowly got back to his hooves. “Awright. I’ll make things for the militia. Just do what you can to find my daughter.”

He stumbled a bit, still too sloshed to be working with such tools as a blacksmith would, and was likely a bigger danger to himself than anypony else. “Perhaps you could use some help?” Rarity offered. The smith gave her a confused look.

“Yer a dainty pony too,” he mumbled as he looked Rarity over, “Smithin’ is hard work. You’ll get dirty.”

It was going to get her filthy, Rarity realized, but then again she felt dirty just reading from Flemeth’s tome of inane ramblings. No matter what, since the start of this journey, the unicorn of such impeccable tastes was going to be stained. Whether by dirt, blood, or knowledge, it was likely going to be a good long time until Rarity could ever feel clean again.

*I will get dirty to help my friends, she thought, levitating a hammer and a pair of tongs with her magic, they believe in me in ways Flemeth never did. I’ll show the old crone that I do have friends, a family of my own, that care.*

“Let’s do this,” Rarity said, determination in her eyes matching the fires of the forge.

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The Great and Powerful Trixie was digging about her various spellbooks, looking for whatever impressive incantations she could use in the upcoming battle against the undead that would leave the ponies of Red Apple in awe at her magical aptitude.

For her first feat, Trixie was going to improve her magical shield. After seeing it shattered so easily by the minotaur, Trixie had never felt so many emotions from one simple act of her magic failing. It was as infuriating as it was humbling, but above all frightening. She had barely held herself together during the demonic invasion of the Unicorn Tower, relying on Sparkle and her group for help when she could no longer stand up to the demons. Facing the ponyspawn for the first time unnerved her, especially when the great horned monstrosity attacked the blue unicorn first and foremost, dispatching her barrier with ease.

These were the monsters Sparkle and her roughshod friend and every other Grey Warden fought for the rest of their lives and now Trixie had joined them in the same long journey to assemble an army to stop the ponyspawn. *What was I thinking?* Trixie asked to herself as she concentrated on her barrier spell, *what am I trying to prove by leaving the relative safety of the Tower to go out in this barbarous world?*

Trixie closed her eyes, concentrating on her protective channeling long enough for a blue dome of shimmering energy to erupt from her staff and surrounding the area she was standing in. Then she began to focus on the actual ley-work of the shield, seeing every strand of magic at work as they coexisted and reinforced each other.

*That I am her equal... that I am not a coward... that I deserve my power...* So many thoughts flooded Trixie's mind that it was breaking her concentration on her spellwork. The barrier shimmered a moment, requiring further power to strengthen it. *Don't get distracted, Trixie, she chided, just focus on the spell at hoof, make it glow like diamonds, but stronger than steel. Show everypony in this little apple farm community just how Great and Powerful you really-*

“Enchantment!”

Trixie leaped at the loud squeak of a filly behind her, caught completely off guard during her spell. As she spun around to see who dared interrupt such impressive arcane ability, her expression of shock was replaced by flat disbelief. Once again, that little grey unicorn was standing in front Trixie with a smile on her face, joined by another reminder of Sparkle's greater magical power, Spike.

“Hey there, Trixie,” Spike said, holding his burning blade in one clawed hand as he stood with Dinky, “What are you up to?”

“She's trying to find the flaws in her shield,” Dinky explained before Trixie could get a word in edgewise, “I can see the strands in the spell just like she can, and how she's trying to move them about to make the magic stronger. It's why I'm such a good

enchanter!”

“That is certainly impressive, but right now the Great and Powerful Trixie needs to focus to make her barrier the most impressive display of defensive magic this side of Equestria!” Trixie was honestly impressed by the knowledge and skill Dinky had with enchantment at such a young age, but was just as easily angered by it. Just like Sparkle, another filly was simply born with immense raw magical talent, while she who called herself Great and Powerful had to work for just a fraction of it all.

Trixie slumped to the ground, feeling defeated before the first zombie started to groan. How could she compete when every unicorn she knew was just that much more powerful, and that reminders of her own weakness were travelling with them made it all seem hopeless. She was a Senior Enchanter of the Tower only because there were so few of them left, not because of her ability.

Suddenly she could feel the shift in the magical lines around her, where her shield had been. Trixie looked to see Dinky’s horn glowing, trying to rearrange the remnants of the spell. Spike had taken a few steps back, leaving both unicorns together.

“I’m going to see how Twilight’s doing,” Spike said as he made his way towards the center of town, “Dinky will stay and help you. See you later Trixie!”

Looking down at those eager eyes, Trixie raised a single eyebrow towards the grey filly. “I’m trying to fix my spells for the upcoming battle,” she said, turning back to her floating staff, “I don’t know how much help you can bring.”

“I was gonna ask, if you don’t mind…” Dinky scraped the ground nervously, trying to find the words to speak to the magical mare before her. “Miss Twilight is really good at magic, but she’s a Grey Warden which means she is busy and stuff.”

“I’m helping the Warden, which makes me no less busy than she is.”

Dinky looked down at the ground in contemplation, before turning her head back up again. “I wanna be your apprentice!” This unexpected request left Trixie completely taken aback. She had taught the young unicorns in the Tower for a very short time, but many just slept or ignored all her perfectly sage lessons. Could she be a proper mentor to another unicorn who was eager to learn the proper use of magic, or was she going to be like how Hubred was to her, cold and caring only for results? Not just any unicorn, but an apostate. Was she even ready to take on an apprentice?

The fact that she was considering it rather than outright saying no made Trixie more confused than anything. Yet as she looked on at those bright amber eyes, a part of her wanted to say “yes” and take on Dinky as her pupil. But for whose benefit? She had to make a decision if not for her, at least for filly before her.

“Very well!” Trixie said with a flourish of her cape, “The Great and Powerful Trixie has considered your request, and has deemed you...worthy of her expert tutelage! From this day forth, you shall be known the Small yet Eager Dinky, first apprentice to the Great and Powerful Trixie! You shall learn everything your little heart desires about all things arcane!”

Dinky jumped up and down, cheering for herself and celebrating her new given title. Trixie smiled with actual warmth at the sight, rather pleased with the events that had transpired to now. Her eyes turned stern, focusing now on the first lesson to be had.

“Lesson one!” She shouted stomping her hoof, “No more sneaking up on the Great and Powerful Trixie. Lesson two! Let’s find out how to make a magical barrier greater than steel.”

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Pinkie backed away slowly from the bomb she had set on the dirt path that lead up to Red Apple Castle. It had taken some work to make the special casings out of her usual grenade material, but thanks to some leftover metal and the extra stores of lyrium in Ditzzy’s cargo hold, Pinkie was able to construct a couple dozen landmines.

Her hair was flat as she worked on trapping the path for the upcoming battle against the zombies. The pony of parties hated making mines, even though she knew they would likely save lives if the battle went according to Twilight’s plan. They just seemed so destructive and random; what if a little colt or filly stepped on one? The results would be too much for Pinkie to bear, already imagining a filly like Dinky or that Scootaloo stumbling across one of her traps meant for the monsters.

With every mine she laid on the ground, Pinkie marked the location on a map of the path. When the battle was over, she was going to do the right thing and remove all the mines. She wanted to use her alchemy to make ponies happy, not hurt them. The memories of what her explosives had done to ponies in the past were almost too much to bear.

Out of the corner of her eye, Pinkie could see a small speck in the sky, circling around the top of the castle parapets before diving down towards the earth pony alchemist. Rainbow Dash hovered above Pinkie as she worked on setting another mine, looking up once to see her pegasus assassin friend flapping her wings to stay in place.

“Hey there Pinkie Pie,” Rainbow Dash said as started floating in circles around Pinkie, “Whatcha up to here? And what’s wrong with your mane?”

“Mines,” Pinkie replied flatly, looking over her work with grim satisfaction before moving to another spot, “Like lyrium grenades, but set as traps. When a zombie steps on one, it will explode, hopefully getting the other zombies around it too.”

“How do they work?”

“Pretty good. Don’t worry about my mane, I’m fine.”

The look on Dash’s eyes saw past Pinkie’s feeble lie. Setting her hooves on the ground, Dash followed close to Pinkie as she continued to work with her bombs. “Your mane gets that way whenever your upset or angry,” she pointed out, “You can tell me what’s going on.”

“I’m tired,” Pinkie said after laying the last lyrium mine ready, “I’m tired of fighting. Ever since I joined the guard, that’s all I’ve been doing. I’m not making anypony happy as long as I keep fighting, as long as I keep hurting others. And I will keep hurting ponies as long as my know-how of mixing things is needed.”

“These landmines are something incredibly dangerous and I made them. They are indiscriminate; all it takes is one hoof and KABLOOEY! Not just monsters or zombies, but innocent ponies too. I told Twilight after...after you attacked that it gets easier to fight ponies. It is, and I’m scared of that. I don’t want to be good at hurting others. I want to make them happy. So after the battle, I’m going to clean up the mines. Every last one of them.”

Dash looked over at the now very lethal path leading from the castle, to the assorted landmines dotting the way, then back to Pinkie. “I could help you out,” the cyan pegasus offered, “Cleaning up the mines. As a way of saying thanks.”

“Thanks?” Pinkie asked in puzzlement, “What did I do?”

“Remember back when we first met...er...clashed?” Rainbow answered, “Twilight wanted me to leave, but I wanted to join her to make up for it. You and Fluttershy stood up for me. I gotta do something to say thanks. Cleaning up these things, that’s not such a big deal.”

Since starting her work on laying the deadly traps, Pinkie could feel her spirits become lighter and her hair curling back to its usual poofy form. She smiled at Dash before the dynamic duo turned to return to the Chantry building. “Thanks so much Dashie!” the pink earth pony chimed, “I’m sure to get all the landmines cleaned up in...”

“Ten seconds flat, I know,” Rainbow Dash replied with a smirk, “You know I really need to come up with new material.”

They walked in silence together as they made their way through the town when Dash turned to Pinkie. “You still don’t remember where your family has gone off to, have you?”

Pinkie shook her head. “I took a bonkin’ on my noggin!” she said, “But after this

adventure I'm sure I'll remember and head on right over, whether I have to hoof it or sail."

Rainbow was quiet for a while before she spoke up. "Maybe I could go with you, help you find your mother and sisters."

If anything could stretch Pinkie's smile wide, it was knowing that her friend wanted to go with her no matter where to help her find her family. She leapt onto Dash, holding the pegasus in a tight embrace. "Oh that would be super duper special amazing! I was going to be so lonely travelling by myself, but if you're there Dashie, I know we'll find my mom and my sisters! Oh thank you so much! But why?"

"I realized I have nothing here in Equestria," Dash said, "And I don't want to go back to Pura Raza. If I travel with you to find your family, I'll be doing something good with the stuff I've learned. It would also be nice to travel with a friend."

Dash returned the hug with affection, happiness in her eyes as to actually finding friendship in the least likely of ponies. She felt stronger and more confident with Pinkie and Twilight and all of the party than she ever did in Pura Raza under Reinhardt and his Wonderbolts.

"Come on Pinkie Pie," Dash said at last, "We need to get back into the Chantry. The action is gonna start real soon and we have front row seats."

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Twilight and Applejack prepared for the coming battle in relative silence, not speaking a word to each other as they readied their gear. The sun was setting, and everypony inside the Chantry were huddling in fear of the next zombie attack. Twilight steeled her resolve as she saw the fear the eyes of the yearlings; no more ponies would be taken by lesser demons this night.

A moment of rest had done wonders for both Grey Wardens; Applejack no longer seemed distracted by her worries and Twilight felt better even after being under the drain of the templar's anti-magic.

The rest of the parties had reported success in their individual tasks. Pinkie had her minefield ready to soften the numbers of the undead menace when they made their descent from the castle. Rainbow Dash mentioned that there was no movement from the outside of the castle, although she could have sworn that she saw something moving within. There was also no sign of Shale thanks to the murky depths of Lake Blackwater. Trixie also said with pride that her spellwork would rival anything Twilight could pull out of the Fade, able to bring about shields and barriers strong enough to hold off a minotaur, perhaps even two. As boastful as the claim was, Twilight could tell that her white maned colleague was brimming with a brand new confidence that she couldn't help but be happy for.

Fluttershy's report was interesting to say the least. The out of breath pegasus sounded like she was galloping all day from her new admirers in the militia, who decided for themselves that such a cute Sister of the Chantry was surely a sign that Celestia favoured them this day. Despite her best efforts to correct them, Fluttershy soon found herself surrounded by eager admirers until she was able to escape to the sanctuary of the Chantry. The officers were able to assume order then, taking the militia into formation and reassembling ranks. Fluttershy was still hiding amidst a pile of rags, wary of any other leering eyes.

Nothing was heard from Rarity, causing Twilight to assume she was still trying to convince the blacksmith to open up and give the much-needed armour and weapons. They would have to find the white unicorn before the battle to make sure everypony was in proper position.

There was no word from Braeburn of the pegasus filly Scootaloo, but those who did catch a glimpse of the two noted that they took the front entrance of the castle, the only time the main gate opened during the day for the longest time. Yet another of Applejack's relatives in danger of the corruption that seemed to have overtaking Red Apple Castle.

Twilight looked over to her fellow Warden after she clasped her cloak around her neck. "You ready Applejack?" she asked, levitating her staff to her side.

"Ready as ah'll ever be, sugarcube," Applejack responded, "Let's git 'er done."

The two wardens led the way out of the Chantry, followed closely by Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Trixie and Pinkie Pie. To their sides the wounded, young, and infirm wished them luck against the undead.

"Thank you Warden!" "You'll win Warden! We know it!" "Celestia and Luna bless you, Warden!" All the praise was making Twilight blush, but she hid her discomfort behind a stern face as the doors opened. All their hopes relied on victory both outside of the castle and within, and Twilight did not plan to fail anypony.

Outside of the small place of worship, the party was met with a surprising sight. The militia was surrounding a small cart loaded with weapons and armour, each shining and gleaming in the setting sun. Handing out the equipment was a large earth pony and a very dirty unicorn covered in soot and ash.

"Rarity?!"

They all gaped as the prissy pony before them looked like she took a roll in the dirtiest pits ever conceived. The fact that it was Rarity of all ponies who could now be considered the avatar of messy was something Twilight could not get over.



“Heh heh...hello dears,” Rarity said, leaping down from the cart towards her friends, “I offered to help the blacksmith finish all his work, so the soldiers should be outfitted properly. Now... be honest. I’m absolutely filthy, aren’t I?”

Everypony, Twilight included, seemed to be at a loss for words, struggling to find the right thing to say as to not hurt Rarity’s feelings. The truth of the matter was, she was filthy, covered in the grime that was the mix of sweat and soot. Applejack was the one to step forward and look the unicorn of the Wilds dead in the eye.

“Rarity,” began Applejack as she eyed the apostate, taking in every split end on the mane and every speck of dirt, “You look... like the hardest working pony ah ever met. It takes a lot to break away from yer prissy habits and get down to the nitty gritty, but you did it. Ah’m proud of you.”

Rarity beamed at the praise from the former templar. “Thank you Applejack,” she said before channeling a spell into her horn. With a bright flash of white, Rarity stood before the party as clean as a whistle, as if the messy pony they had seen mere seconds ago was just a figment of their collective imaginations.

“What? I wasn’t going to stay dirty if I can help it.” Rarity then levitated something else from the cart, a small suit of armour with a matching helm. It was too small and the wrong shape for a pony, but Twilight smiled knowing who it would no doubt protect.

“Spike darling,” Rarity called, ignoring the hearts the little baby dragon seemed to shine towards the unicorn sorceress, “I made this dashing little ensemble just for you. You’ll really look like a proper knight with this.”

Stabbing his burning blade into the ground, Spike outstretched his arms as Rarity maneuvered the armour to fit his body. Twilight was incredibly impressed that her friend was able to get the dimensions just right, even including spaces in the helmet for his spines to go through. Once the armour was fitted properly, Spike stood proudly with his enchanted sword, appearing every bit like heroes from the old stories, if they were dragons.

“I’m a dragon with a flaming sword and my own suit of armour!” Spike called out, looking at everyone with unsurpassed happiness in his eyes. Applejack rubbed her hoof on her chin in thought before her eyes lit up with an idea.

“There’s one thing missing, Spike,” she said, “Ya look like a knight, but ya need to be given the right title. As the daughter of a king, ah reckon I can do that for ya, if you’d like.”

“Would I!” Twilight had never felt so proud of Spike as she was now, bowing on one knee to Applejack as she took the fiery weapon in her mouth, piercing it against the ground so that she could speak. The rest of the ponies stood together in silence for the

occasion.

“Well, er, how would this go,” Applejack muttered before clearing her throat, “Spike! Ah do declare that you have been found worthy and all to become a knight of Equestria. But first ya gotta take an oath first, ya hear? So, uh, do ya solemnly swear to stand with yer friends come hay or bad apples?”

“I swear!” Spike responded with great enthusiasm.

“Well that’s good ta hear. Wouldn’t right know what to do if ya said no.” The blonde earth pony coughed again before continuing, “Er...I can see yer a dragon with a good heart, loyal and true to his friends of years or of days. With that in mind, ah’m hereby callin’ ya Ser Spike, knight of Equestria.”

Taking the magical method by the hilt in her mouth, Applejack tapped Spike’s shoulders twice and then laid the weapon for the dragon knight to reclaim. As Spike picked up the sword, Applejack reared upwards, a smile of cheer on her face.

“Let’s hear it for Ser Spike of Equestria!”

The party erupted in thunderous applause, stomping their hooves for Spike who blushed at all the attention he was receiving. Twilight was so happy for her dragon charge, but the celebrations had to cease for now. Night would soon fall, and with night would come the attacking swarms of zombies.

They split into the two groups Twilight had mentioned before, with Pinkie leading the defense of Red Apple Acres. Twilight’s group made their way to the cider brewery like Applejack had referenced only to be overcome by the smell of fermenting apple juices.

“Let’s hurry and find the passageway,” Twilight said, splitting the group up to search the brewery. It was a compact building, lined with dozens of barrels and equipment used to make the favoured Equestrian export. They all searched the floor of the brewery, looking for any sign of disturbance that belied a hidden tunnel to the castle.

Rainbow Dash stopped in front of a rather large barrel, squinting at the writing on the side. “Hey Applejack!” she called, pointing a hoof at the barrel, “Why is there a barrel of oranges here?”

“Them’s fightin’ words Rainbow,” Applejack said with a scowl, until she read the words on the barrel. “Landsakes, this barrel does say oranges. Wait a minute...Stand back Dash.”

Twilight turned to see Dash leapt out of the way as the earth pony Warden turned around, readying her hind legs for a powerful buck. As the hooves struck, the barrel splintered easily into pieces, revealing a trap door underneath.

“This is it,” Applejack said, either at the trapdoor or that they would soon infiltrate Red Apple Castle. With a nod, Twilight raised the door open with her magic, allowing Applejack to step through the passageway first. They descended one by one into the black corridor under the earth, knowing all too well of the dangers the darkness held in store for them on the other side.