

Maledictum Insania 3: Rebellion Years

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Chapter 15: Third Year

Once more, the seasons changed. Once more, a year has gone by since the rebellion began. With this new year, the fear of the upcoming onslaught has become a very present topic to the circle members. At some point next year, a whole army of demons and cultists will come in attempt to wipe them out. The rebellion made a lot of progress within its first two years, but it still was not enough yet. If they wanted to survive such an attack, they needed much more of everything. Much more support, much more supplies, many more soldiers and much more progress on their project with the elements and the Crystal Heart.

At this point, Rarity was no longer herself. She had become very weak and her fever would no longer go down, no matter what the doctors attempted. Every movement was straining to her and although she tried to contain herself, it was clear to all that she was in pain. Her clones were doing no better. Many had become too sick to leave their homes and a few had already succumbed to this mysterious disease.

No matter where they looked, they knew that time was running short. So it was no surprise that they started their journey to the Zebra Tribal Lands as soon as it was possible. Although they needed a whole week longer than expected, since Rarity was unable to walk on her own for most of the time.

Eventually, Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy, Rarity, Derpy Hooves, Celestia, Luna, Cadence and Shining Armor found themselves in a massive savanna. Most of the landscape was rather even and covered with tall, light brown tinted dry grass. Occasional acacia trees were dotting this seemingly infinite realm, providing some sparse protection from the intense sunlight. In the far distance, the group could see mountains, thickly covered in dark green jungle. These mountains were also the only place where clouds could be seen, as they mostly just disappeared as soon as they came close to the savanna.

The air flickered with heat, which was particularly hard for Rarity to take. She remembered all too well what happened the last time she exposed herself to such high temperatures for so long. But this time, she was better prepared. Laying motionlessly in the cart, she tried her best to hide herself from the sun using a large parasol and occasionally used her magic to spray herself with a fine mist of water. Still, it helped only so much, considering she already had high fever. She just kept laying there, only half conscious and panting heavily as the sweat ran down her body.

"Just hang in there. It can't be too long now until we find someone," Twilight reassured while giving the fashion diva a concerned look.

The purple mare and her other friends were very worried. Rarity could hardly speak for the last few days and was constantly making noises of pain. They badly needed to find some intelligent creature around here soon. But the tribal lands were a place filled with dangers. Many poisonous creatures were living here and the predators were exceptionally large and plentiful, but so were the herbivores. Hyenas, lions, scorpions, snakes, spiders, rhinos and elephants were just a few of the threats they came across. Once more, Fluttershy could prove her usefulness and her deep knowledge when it came to animals. She exactly knew how to behave around all of them. The only thing she was worried about were the mythological beasts and monsters of the tribal lands. She heard stories of creatures that only come out at night and would sneak up on sleeping prey, drink their blood and ultimately turn it into one of them. A thought that at first seemed scary, but soon reminded them of the demons in Equestria. They had been dealing with worse, they figured.

Not much later, they had to put these myths to test. Having not found any zebras on the first day after their arrival, they had no option but to set up a camp as soon as it started getting dark. The sounds of the savanna at night were foreign and eerie to the ponies. Sometimes, they could hear a creature walk nearby. But whatever was stalking in the night, it constantly remained in the dark. Even the reapers could not clearly make out what was happening around them. Still, due to them guarding the camp all night long and the fact that they had a large campfire, the creatures did not dare to come any closer.

The next morning, most of the ponies woke up having barely slept at all. They were all tired and drained from the journey, but they had no option. They needed to keep walking, keep looking for any sign of civilization. After hours of aimless wandering, their prayers were finally answered.

“Guys! Over there! I see three zebras, digging in the ground!” Derpy announced.

“Finally! Good job, Ditzzy!” Twilight responded.

The group was still too far away for the zebras to have heard them, but they quickly noticed the group approaching and stopped with their work to stare at the ponies. As they came closer, it almost seemed like the zebras were frightened. Had they never seen ponies before?

When they noticed that the zebras were backing away, the group stopped. Having come this far, the last thing they wanted was to scare away exactly those they had been searching for.

“Habari yako?” the zebra stallion called.

“Um... hello?” Twilight replied.

"Sielewi," the stallion spoke again.

"Shoot," Twilight mumbled and looked back to the group. "I was hoping they would understand our language. I don't know how to speak zebra."

"Let me give it a try. I know a few phrases," Celestia offered, stepped forward and began to call. "Hamjambo. Jina langu ni Celestia. Natoka Crystal Empire. Nimefurahi kukutana nawe."

It seemed like the zebras understood. They started to get more curious and slowly approached.

"Cris-hal... Im-pae?" one of the two zebra mares tried to say.

"Ndiyo. Unatoka wapi?" Celestia replied.

A moment of quietness followed. The three zebras seemed to whisper to each other, unsure what to do. But when Rarity lifted her head out of the cart, they instantly realized they were transporting one of them who was very sick and so deemed the group as no threat. Eventually, they gave a foreign gesture and turned around.

"They are going to bring us to their tribe," Celestia explained.

"Great! That was pretty impressive, Celestia!" Twilight commented, causing the white fallen alicorn to chuckle shortly.

"When you spend several hundred years trying to build connections all around the world and thus have to learn some basic means of communication in various languages, it is no big thing," she replied.

"We have... found some?" Rarity spoke weakly, seemingly not having been able to understand what just happened.

"Yes, Rarity. Don't worry. We will bring you to a herbalist soon," Fluttershy replied, placing a hoof on the white mare's shoulder.

Smiling weakly in response, she slowly sank back down in the cart. Rarity really wasn't doing well. It was high time she would get some treatment. Twilight could only hope that the zebras knew a cure for her condition.

Wandering around for ages in the burning sunlight in search of food and ingredients seemed to be normal to zebras. They needed three more hours before the group eventually arrived at a small hamlet consisting of only a few houses. At first, it was difficult for the group to even spot

them, since the houses were made of the same orange-brown soil the rest of the savanna consisted of. But it seemed like the zebras mixed in some resin to give the walls some solidity. The roofs were made of dried reeds, tied together in a circular pattern. As soon as the zebras saw the group approach, they became very excited, though the ponies were not able to tell if it was in a good or bad way.

The first zebra to welcome both their tribe members and the group was a mare wielding a staff and wearing a costume made of colored leaves adorned with golden rings. The group quickly figured out that this had to be the shaman. Again, the ponies could not make out what they were talking about, but it seemed like the three gatherers were explaining the situation. The shaman seemed very unsure, but eventually approached each pony individually to place her left front hoof on their shoulders.

"It means that we are welcome," Celestia explained.

"Phew. That is good to know," Twilight replied in relief. "Alright, everypony. Let's try to get acquainted with the zebras. We need to figure out how to communicate with them."

"As you command, my mistress," Fluttershy spoke and kneeled down.

At this sight, Twilight couldn't hold back a sigh. She immediately walked over to her friend and placed her back on her four legs.

"Don't even start with that, Fluttershy. True, I may be your mistress now, but we are still friends. I don't want this to develop a gap between us. When it comes to you and Derpy, I want you both to drop the title entirely and just act around me as you always have," the purple mare requested.

"Sorry, Twilight. It is kind of instinctive," Fluttershy apologized.

"It's okay. Just please keep in mind that our friendship is more important than my title. Both of you," Twilight spoke while wandering her eyes from Fluttershy to Derpy.

"Will do!" the gray mare replied.

Now, Twilight began to smile again. She was still not too sure about the idea of being in charge of the reapers now, but it was just another thing she just needed to get used to, she figured. While the two reaper mares joined with the others, Twilight remained by Rarity's side. Not much later, she spotted a zebra stallion showing clear interest in the sick mare. He was wearing several golden rings around his neck, in his ears and on his left front leg. A dressing choice that strongly reminded her of Zecora and caused her to approach the stallion.

"Excuse me, are you a herbalist?" she wanted to know.

Again, the zebra turned out to not be able to understand her. Instead of replying, he just tried to communicate via gestures. So he chose to approach and point at Rarity.

"Yes, she is sick. Can you help her?" the purple mare tried again.

Although the zebra stallion clearly did not understand a word, his worried expression gave away that he seemingly understood what she was trying to say. With a little gesture, he asked for help in carrying the white mare into his hut. After Rarity had been laid down on a bed made of leaves, the stallion started gathering ingredients. Twilight seemed to have guessed right. He really was a herbalist.

"Don't worry. I'm sure he will be able to cure you," the purple mare spoke.

Rarity did not respond. She was very tired and just fell asleep moments later. Now, it was up to Twilight to show that they trusted the zebras by leaving the herbalist to his work and going outside again.

The next day, the first thing Twilight did was checking on Rarity. She was actually quite confident that the white mare would be doing much better now, having seen the healing abilities of zebra herbalists herself. But to her disappointment, Rarity was still just as sick as yesterday. Even the stallion seemed to be puzzled as for why his potions were not working.

"Well... Please keep trying," the purple mare pleaded.

Once more, the words failed at bringing the message across, but Twilight's countenance succeeded in return. The stallion seemed to feel sorry, as he let his ears hanging and frowned before he immediately turned around and tried another mixture.

"Twilight? Is that you?" Rarity mumbled.

"Yes, it's me," the purple mare replied. "How do you feel?"

"Awful... Just awful... I can feel my heartbeat stretch my chest and veins and it hurts..." the white mare explained.

"I'm so sorry for you, Rarity. Is there anything I can do for you?" Twilight asked.

"Could you... maybe bring me my water flask?" Rarity requested.

"Of course. I will be right back," the purple mare assured and was about to turn around.

“No need for that,” Shining Armor spoke as he entered the hut, the flask levitating next to him.

“You are such a dear, Shining. Cadence must feel so lucky to have you,” Rarity commented with a tired smile on her face.

“I sure do,” Cadence spoke as she entered, followed by the others moments later.

The herbalist did not seem to mind having so many visitors in his hut and just remained focused on his work. But Twilight could observe that he kept one ear turned towards them, apparently trying to understand what they were saying.

“So, how is the communication doing?” Twilight asked while focusing Celestia.

“I’m sorry to say, but my knowledge of their language is not enough to tell them what we want,” the white fallen alicorn responded.

“But there must be a way we can talk to them,” Luna figured.

“Maybe we should try it through signs and pictures,” Derpy suggested.

“Worth a shot, but be careful what you draw. We don’t want to accidentally insult them,” Cadence worried.

“Well, our main goal for the next few days needs to be helping the tribe with their tasks and trying to tell them why we are here,” Twilight concluded.

“I would like to stay by Rarity’s side, if that’s okay,” Fluttershy requested.

“Sure thing,” the purple mare agreed. “Everypony else, time is slipping away. Let’s get to it.”

The Circle remained with the zebra tribe for six days, but eventually decided to move on. Communication with these zebras proved unsuccessful and the herbalist just couldn’t manage to help Rarity in any way. All that was left for them to do was to ask for the direction to the next tribe and keep wandering.

What started out as a journey that was only planned to be about one month long quickly turned out to become nearly double the length. For weeks, the group kept wandering from tribe to tribe, unable to find even one zebra with the ability to speak their language. At least they now found out that the rumors of zebras being very peaceful and welcoming turned out to be true. Although they were very puzzled to see something as exotic as a group of ponies in their land each time, they quickly accepted the group, shared their meals with them and provided them a place to

sleep. Twilight tried her best to communicate with the zebras, even going so far as to use Djin's spell on a few books the zebras had written in attempt to learn their language, but it was no use. It just wasn't enough information for her to get it. She tried to secretly study the zebras and their behavior in attempt to understand them better, but with this method as well, many mysteries popped up. The purple mare could observe them gathering up several times a day to chant themselves into trances, burning dried herbs and creating figurines out of wood and clay. Sometimes, she could even see a shaman leaving the tribe, only to return a few hours later. Twilight once tried to follow a shaman, but he and the other zebras seemed displeased with that, so she quickly abandoned her intention.

For a pony from Equestria, such behavior was puzzling. The only form of religion Twilight had ever seen was the twisted one of the BloodClaw Cult. But this one was much more peaceful. It actually had something appealing to it, she thought. But Twilight just couldn't figure out what they were actually worshipping. Each tribe was creating different figurines and had its own variation of ceremonial acts.

With each unsuccessful encounter with a tribe, the hopes of the group kept dropping. It seemed like not a single zebra was able to speak their language. Twilight started to think that she had been hoping for too much. With all the success in the past, she expected this to go just as well as all the times before. But the language barrier turned out too big of an obstacle to conquer. The only things the group could achieve while visiting a tribe was to restock on food and water, get some treatment for Rarity and leaving behind a positive impression, as they helped the tribes wherever possible.

After what felt like an eternity of peregrination, the group arrived at another zebra settlement. This one was larger than some of the previous they had seen, most likely because it was closer to the jungle so the tribe was provided with more resources. In fact, most buildings consisted of wood instead of soil and they had a large fire burning in the center. After introducing themselves and placing down their things, Twilight was getting ready to go through her usual routine of searching for any zebra able to speak their language. But to her surprise, she was being approached first this time. A nearly adult young mare with a golden ring holding together the end of her long striped mane and tail came straight towards her, although with an expression of insecurity on her face.

"Forgive me for the truth I seek... But is this the language that you do speak?" she wondered.

Twilight was stunned at first. She could hardly believe it. For weeks, they had been trying to communicate with the zebras. Now, all the sudden, this filly comes up to them out of nowhere.

"Oh! Oh, yes! Yes indeed! Thank goodness... You don't know how hard it is to find a zebra who understands us," she eventually responded.

"For zebras, if old or young, it is uncommon to speak more than the native tongue," the young mare spoke.

"We have noticed. Anyway, my name is Twilight Sparkle. What's yours?" the purple mare wanted to know.

"From the day of my birth, to me given was the name Maarith," the zebra mare replied.

"Nice to meet you. Where did you learn to speak our language so well?" Twilight wondered.

"From my mother second-hand, who lived for years in the pony land. But her time there fell sadly short, because of a terrible reign-shift of sort," Maarith explained.

Something clicked in the purple mare's head. This seemed oddly familiar. There was no way this was a coincidence.

"Your mother... Excuse me, but can my friends and I maybe meet her?" she requested.

"She is out to find a tome, but if you follow me, we can meet at home," the young mare offered.

"Alright. I will tell the others. Give me a moment," Twilight stated.

Maarith nodded in understanding and waited while the purple mare quickly ran back to her friends with a smile on her face.

"Guys, I think we might have found a lost friend!" she announced.

Minutes later, the group arrived at a rather large wooden hut. Maarith opened the door, presenting the richly decorated interior. Many traditional items could be seen on the walls, but there also were countless shelves full of potion ingredients as well as a fire pit with a large terra cotta cauldron on top in the middle of the room. Several additional beds stood ready, as if they were used to frequently have visitors that remained with them for a while. While Maarith's mother was not home yet, her father was. As so often before, he first seemed confused about what was going on. But luckily, Maarith could act as a translator between him and the ponies, so he quickly came to understand the situation and welcome them. Twilight and her friends were rather excited and couldn't wait for Maarith's mother to come home. The purple mare had a strong suspicion about who she might be. One hour later, the door opened again and finally confirmed her suspicions.

With an expression of both surprise and happiness, Zecora came walking in, only to be embraced by Twilight and Fluttershy immediately.

"I can't believe it's really you! I thought we would never see you again!" Twilight cheered happily.

"I am overjoyed too, for I thought the same about you!" Zecora greeted back.

"We were worried the demons or cult might have gotten you," Fluttershy commented.

"As the forest became haunted by the cult, I feared it would lead to a bad result. Sadly, I predicted it would come to this day, so I made sure to get away," the zebra herbalist explained.

"You never told us that you had a husband and daughter. Sorry if this is a bit tactless, but it makes me wonder why you left the tribal lands in the first place," Twilight spoke.

"Do not worry about your tact. This is not considered a rude act. You have to see, in our culture, it is expected to journey with the vulture. At one point in a zebra's life, we experience this urgent strife. One to find enlightenment and who we really are, so we must venture very far. The vultures called me to cursed woods where I would find ingredients and goods to prove myself as a herbalist... but then came the cult's unfortunate twist. After living with you for many years, my eyes being filled with truest tears, I had no choice but to go back, although a farewell I would lack..." Zecora explained with a sad expression.

"It's okay. I'm just glad nothing happened to you," Twilight responded.

"I have heard of your revolution. Are you here to bring it to a conclusion?" Zecora wondered.

"Sadly, we are still far away from actually attacking Blueblood and the cult. But we have already gathered a lot of allies and we hoped to get the support of zebras, too," the purple mare stated.

"Wise, for our abilities are not to underestimate. With our help, a victory you will soon celebrate. But to achieve this you must be guided, because unlike ponies, zebra tribes are not united," Zecora commented.

"We will get to that. But for now, we need to recover. This has been a very, very long journey for us. Also, we badly need your help," Cadence started.

"In that case, just give me the gist, to make sure that I can assist," Zecora replied.

The group turned around to Rarity, who was barely even conscious. She smiled lightly to see Zecora again, but could not do anything beyond that. Instantly Zecora showed a shocked expression.

"She is very sick, Zecora. We have brought her to every doctor and herbalist we could find, but nopony can even figure out what is wrong with her," Twilight summarized.

"It does make me truly sad to see her condition is so bad. I will do my very best, but all of you should get some rest. If anyone can find a cure, it will be me, that I assure," Zecora promised.

"Thank you so much. Also, I guess you are right. I badly need some sleep," Twilight replied.

"Not just you, Twilight," Cadence commented. "Let's find a place to rest for tonight."

"Mother's friends shall not be dismissed! You may stay with us, I insist!" Maarith announced.

"A kind young zebra is what you are, clearly the apple did not fall very far," Zecora commented to her daughter with a chuckle. "I indeed also must say, I would prefer it if you stay."

"Thank you very much for your invitation, Miss Zecora," Shining Armor responded.

After everything had been said, Rarity was placed down on a bed made of bamboo canes and large leaves, followed by the others laying down on beds as well. Zecora began to analyze the sick mare and after just a few moments of rubbing her chin in thought, she started gathering various ingredients from her shelves. But before she could even start her first brew, Twilight had already fallen asleep.