

Maledictum Insania 2: The BloodClaw Cult

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Chapter 3: Begin of a Journey

The body and all traces of the incident in Twilight's library were already removed when the purple mare returned. Applejack and Rarity immediately turned to the front door, their worry visibly written in their faces. But just a moment later, their expressions became replaced with surprise and curiosity when they saw their friend. All the sudden, Twilight had this very determined expression on her face. She almost looked angry. They immediately knew that something was going on.

"Twilight? What's the matter?" Rarity wondered.

The purple mare did not reply immediately. She knew that, as soon as she revealed her decision, it would lead into a big discussion. So, she first took her time to walk over to the table and sat down. Fluttershy as well realized something was about to happen, so she joined in. Only Crystal Blossom stood in the background, observing the four friends.

Twilight felt the eyes on her. They knew her so well by now, they could already tell that she was about to say something that would shock them all. This was only more confirmed by the fact that she even took a deep breath in and out, precisely thinking through how she was going to present this and what she was going to say.

"Girls... I have been thinking. After all that happened, none of us can live the same life as before anymore. We have all lost a lot: Friends, beloved ones, family members... And not a single one of us is unscarred either," the purple mare started.

"What are ya goin' on about, Twi?" Applejack wondered.

"There is no way we can ever return to the way things used to be, Applejack. Not now that we know all this. But going back isn't the right thing to do anyway. I have come to think that we should use our knowledge to prevent others from going through the same horrors we had been through," Twilight explained.

"You know we can't tell anypony about Maledictum Insania or the demons, Twilight. We are all under the curse of secrets and even if we could, you know that this is not supposed to be public," Fluttershy disagreed.

"I am not talking about spreading knowledge. I have decided that I want to play a role in the war against the demons once again. Just this time, I want to be involved much more," the purple

mare stated.

"What?!" Rarity shouted in disbelief. "Darling, are you out of your mind?! After all this... After all we have been through and after all we have lost, you haven't had enough?!"

"Rarity... I can't go on like this anymore. Pretending everything is fine when it's not. My eyes have been opened to what is truly going on and now, I can't shut them anymore. I see the signs of the war all around me. Just looking at this assault is evidence enough that things are far, far from being over. How am I supposed to ever find rest when I precisely know I can do something to help and all I do is sit here and go through the same routines everyday?" Twilight asked.

"It is dangerous out there, Twilight. The deeper you dive into the plans of the demons, the more likely it is you will get killed. You are not a reaper, so what you are planning to do is suicide if you do it all on your own. Especially in your condition," Fluttershy tried to reason.

"And that is why I'm talking to all of you about this. Ponyville doesn't really need any of us to survive. But with our talents and our knowledge, we can do so much to help others. Maybe, if we all work together, we can make a significant change in this demon war," the purple mare spoke.

"Are you... Sugarcube... are you asking us to join in with you?!" Applejack asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Please. You know I need you guys. Without all of you, I'm nothing. I won't be able to do this on my own. I might be smart and my arcane magic might make me quite powerful, but when you are not around it's like a large part of me is missing," Twilight answered.

"Oh my stars... I really, really don't like this idea... I mean... for you, I would run through Tartarus and out a second time any day. It's not impossible to arrange either, since I am making so much money by selling my designs that I could help finance Sweet Apple Acres for at least a whole year, even when being absent. But if there is one thing we have been taught, then it is that meddling in demon affairs will cause a lot of trouble," Rarity worried.

"I'm not aiming to go directly for the demons. I'm much more concerned about this assassin. She knew things she shouldn't have been able to know... And if there is one pony knowing this much, we can be pretty sure there are more," Twilight responded.

"This is concerning indeed," Crystal started speaking, slowly approaching the group. "I have been dealing with demons and insane ponies for a long time now and even I have never heard of such a case before. We reapers have been successfully keeping this secret for more than a thousand years. Now, all the sudden, it is leaking. That has never happened before, so we can not possibly grasp the consequences. Whatever it takes, something must be done to prevent the forbidden knowledge from spreading any further."

“Exactly. How can we all just sit here and pretend we don’t see or hear anything when we know something is going on that must be stopped at any cost? I know all of you for long enough by now to know that you as well never stopped thinking about the past. It will never let go. So instead of trying to go backwards, we need to go forward,” Twilight commented.

She had them there. Rarity was about to give a countering argument, but found herself unable to say anything. A moment of silence passed by before Applejack closed her eyes and let out a semi-annoyed sigh.

“As so often, ya’re right, Twi. It just never stops hauntin’ you. Ah can’t stand up a single mornin’ without looking at mah leg stump and thinkin’ about it all. Sometimes, ah wished I had known of what was goin’ on sooner. Maybe ah could have stopped it all,” she commented.

“And that is exactly how I am feeling. I can’t live with that anymore. I need to help. I need to be involved again. Please... I know I’m asking for a lot here, but only if we stick together, we will have a chance,” Twilight pleaded.

“You know what, darling? You got me convinced. The more I think about it, the more I can only agree with you. I simply can’t tolerate an Equestria in which you can not even open your door anymore without fearing for your life! Whatever it is that’s behind the mystery of this unstylish assassin, I will help you to find it out!” Rarity finally announced.

“Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me,” Twilight spoke in relief, followed by a shrug from Applejack.

“Well, can’t argue with that now, can I? Ah praise mahself as the most dependable of ponies and I’m not gonna let any doubts about that come up! Ya got me for yer plan, Twi. But go easy on me, will ya? Ah already know it’ll be hard for me to be away from Big Mac... He’s the only family I have left at home...” she spoke.

“Of course. Thank you. Thank you so much,” Twilight replied with a warm smile.

Only Fluttershy hesitated with her answer. She had her right front hoof placed over her mouth and her black eyes focusing a very meaningful gemstone she was wearing on her cloak all the time.

It was the heart pin she had gifted to Obsidian while he was still alive. From the day on she turned into a reaper, she never removed it and made sure nothing would happen to it, no matter what she had to do. It was her most precious memento, since it symbolized everything Obsidian and she ever had.

Nearly another minute passed until Fluttershy finally started speaking.

"You know I would join in, Twilight. There is nothing in the world I wish for more than to be with all of you again. But even though Mistress Celestia is going very easy on me, I still am sworn to her. I'm not sure if she would agree to your plan either," she explained.

"I suppose there is only one way to find that out, apprentice. Miss Twilight Sparkle needs to contact and inform her about this plan. If you do so, I would very much appreciate if you would consider me as your guardian for the duration of your journey," Crystal Blossom suggested.

"You actually think this is a good idea? And you even want to help us?" Fluttershy wondered.

"Seeing what all of you have been able to achieve within just one year of being minimally involved in the war, I have absolute confidence in your abilities, keepers of harmony. There is no reason for me to doubt that Miss Sparkle is correct in her assumption that, if you all work together, you can make a big change in the war and effectively help stopping the forbidden knowledge from spreading. Therefore, I would be honored if you would allow me to support and guard you," the elder reaper mare replied.

"The more help we can get, the better. Seeing how you are Fluttershy's mentor, I think having you with us would be a huge advantage. I will suggest you as our guardian, but only under one condition," Twilight stated.

"Let me hear it," Crystal spoke.

"Just drop the titles and call us by our names," the purple mare requested with a little smile.

"As you wish, Twilight," the elder reaper mare agreed with a nod.

Nearly ten minutes passed until the purple mare finally came back downstairs. Judging from the typical noises caused by sending and receiving letters that could be heard the whole time, she and Princess Celestia had been exchanging many scrolls in an at least equally big discussion. Now, she had a final answer from the Princess of the Sun, which she brought down, unrolled and started reading out to her friends.

"Twilight Sparkle. My dear, faithful student. I really wished you would not have put me in this situation. What you are asking me for right now is literally my permission to let you risk your life and those of your friends in a war I hoped to keep you all out of. Yet, I can hardly stop you from doing what you think is right. All I ask for in return is that you will be careful and stay in contact with me. I will try to help you wherever I can, starting right away. Please read out the following two orders to Crystal Blossom and Fluttershy.

"Elder Crystal Blossom. I hereby assign you as the personal bodyguard of the keepers of

harmony. Your task will be to support them in every way you can and protect them with your life. I expect of you to do your very best.

“Apprentice Fluttershy. I hereby assign you to Twilight’s investigation team. Elder Crystal Blossom will continue training you during the journey. I wish you and your friends the best of luck. Please, stay safe, my beloved subjects,” Twilight read out loudly.

“Well that’s good news then, ah suppose. But where do we begin?” Applejack wondered.

“First of all, we need to know where this mare came from,” Twilight commented while disposing of the letter.

“While removing the body, a train ticket fell out of her robe. Judging from the stamp, she traveled all the way from Baltimore to here. I would suggest we start gathering information there,” Crystal Blossom spoke.

“This is a pretty good start. We already have a trace. I think we all should prepare for this journey and meet up at the train station tomorrow. Is that okay with all of you?” Twilight asked.

“Yes. I need at least a day to pack and make arrangements,” Rarity agreed.

“I don’t need to prepare anything, so this won’t be a problem for me,” Fluttershy confirmed.

“Well... Ah think a day’ll be enough for me to convince Big Mac,” Applejack agreed as well.

“I will be ready when you are,” Crystal confirmed.

“Alright then. So tomorrow it is. Thank you all so much for joining in with me. I honestly don’t know what I would do without you,” Twilight commented with a smile.

The next morning, the pegasi of Ponyville were still occupied with busting the remaining clouds above the village. The sunbeams were bright and warm, quickly breaking through the gaps between the clouds. Everything pointed out for this to become a beautiful day. Applejack brought herself to believe that this was an indicator telling her she was doing the right thing.

As the orange mare turned around, she saw the tear filled eyes of her brother. To him, this parting was just as difficult as it was for her. After all that had happened, their bonds grew a lot stronger, as they could only see past their losses by comforting each other.

“Oh please keep it together, big brother... This is already hard enough as it is... I’ll write to ya whenever I can, okay?” Applejack asked, trying not to break out in tears herself.

“Eyup...” Big Macintosh replied.

Applejack did some last check-ups on the finances and the schedules of the farm workers. She really didn't want to go, but she had to. Her friends needed her and being needed was the best thing that could happen to her currently. As long as she could just provide minimal support, this whole investigation would be worth it, she kept telling herself.

“AJ...” her brother started suddenly.

“Yes, Big Mac?” the orange mare asked.

“Please be careful...” he requested.

“Ah'll do mah best. Don't cha worry. Ah promise I'll come back in one piece... Well, at least as much as I still am...” Applejack assured.

The siblings embraced each other one final time. Then, the orange mare placed several large bags on her back and started walking.

About an hour later, the keepers of harmony and Crystal Blossom found themselves sitting together inside a train to Baltimore. Their journey had just begun and it was impossible to tell how long they would be gone. As time passed by, the uncertainty of the group kept them silent and thoughtful. Rarity tried to distract herself by polishing her front hooves. Applejack kept wandering up and down the wagon. Fluttershy sat in a corner, trying to meditate. Twilight kept looking out of her window with an expression of determination and worry. Only Crystal Blossom seemed to remain in the present with her thoughts and observed the group. After a while, she decided to walk over to Twilight and sit next to her.

“You are doing the right thing,” she started.

“I know... I know... I'm just feeling a little guilty forcing my friends into all this. They may have agreed, but I just know they all actually had enough... I'm wondering about my own motivation... Do I really want to help? Or am I just doing this because I want to compensate for all the deaths I couldn't prevent...” the purple mare wondered.

“Why can it not be both? What is wrong about trying to help others because of personal motives?” Crystal asked back.

“I'm honestly not sure...” Twilight stated.

"Listen to the words of a mare that had lived through centuries: It does not matter why you want to save the world. The only thing that counts is your effort in just trying to do that. I have seen so many reapers come and go. All of them had different motivations, but they all had the same elementary attitude of trying the best they could to protect pony-kind from demons and insanity. Ever since we started serving Mistress Celestia, it had been just like this and the results speak for themselves," the reaper mare spoke.

After letting these words sink in for a moment, Twilight began to smile.

"Heh... You are pretty good at motivating, you know that? I can see why Princess Celestia wanted you to be Fluttershy's mentor," she commented.

"Perhaps. But there are a few things I can not help her with," Crystal commented, then turned her head over to the yellow mare who was deeply sunken into meditation by now.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Twilight wondered, as well focusing Fluttershy.

"Well, I suppose you did notice a drastic change in her behaviour, since you knew her when she was still a pony. But seeing it from the perspective of an elder reaper, this change is not drastic enough. Of course, she is a miracle in every way. By far the most talented reaper I have ever encountered. She learns incredibly fast and her skills are just stunning. Within just the first three years, she already consumed enough demons to turn her eyes black. This is something that takes an average apprentice at least fifty years," Crystal started.

"Wow... now that you mention it, that is pretty stunning. But she is acting like it is no big deal," the purple mare commented.

"Yes. She is very modest. That is a big plus for a reaper, just like her strong affinity to darkness. Since she also has an affinity to nature, she is one of the only reapers wild animals actually trust and help. It just amazes what she is capable of, and I am by far not the only one who thinks so. Most of us are deeply impressed with the way she handles her tasks. When she has to reap a pony, she is very gentle about it. What at first looked like she was disregarding our rules turned out to be a complete redefinition of our methods. She reveals herself to her victim, explains her motives and still, she somehow is capable of gaining her victims trust and agreement. So far, next to every single pony she killed agreed to it and died peacefully. It is a real joy to watch," the reaper mare explained.

"That sounds beautiful... Obsidian really judged her right. I would have never thought she had this much in her... But if she is so good at everything, why do you think she has problems?" Twilight wondered.

"Her problems are not within her tasks, but within her personality. As I said before, the change in her behaviour is not drastic enough for what she is capable of. Three years had passed since

the death of her beloved one and she is still mourning. She just can not let go of the past and as long as she is busy with her sorrow, she will not be able to advance,” Crystal stated.

“I... I feel so sorry for her... Even though we all got hit pretty badly in every thinkable aspect, she got hurt the most. Obsidian meant so much to her... Is there any way we can help?” Twilight wanted to know.

“No. The only one who can help her is herself. She must deal with this on her own and none of our efforts will accelerate the progress. Only if she can change her way of thinking and overcome her depression, she will be able to grow,” the light blue mare replied.

“I wish her the best... I know we won’t be around for her forever. She will eventually outlive all of us, but I really hope her future will be happier again,” Twilight spoke.

“So do I. She would deserve it,” Crystal agreed.

The rest of the travel took only a few more minutes until they finally arrived in Baltimore. As soon as they left the train station, they began searching for a hotel to stay. Despite the long trip, they all wanted to get started as soon as possible.