

Chapter 17 - A Dog and Dragon Chapter

Twilight examined the eggs closely while the rest of the party wandered about the rookery, warily watching the eggs or the pathways for any signs of disturbance or intrusion. It was still unknown who, or what else was dwelling in the mountain, but the evidence of such dangerous and bizarre tools around the eggs, as well as weapon racks nearby, indicated that the denizens were well armed and very interested in the eggs of dragons.

As the eggs sat on their jewel-encrusted pedestals, Twilight focused her senses to become more sensitive to magic, seeing that the eggs were almost literally wrapped in lyrium. She could not find rhyme or reason for this, but so little was known about dragons; even Spike was considered an enigma. He would have been studied if not for his own demeanor and Twilight's insistence that she was doing her utmost to "research" him, if only to keep Spike away from the poking and prodding of scholars from other Towers and the Chantry.

That was the only research Twilight was proud not to turn in a paper for.

What was known about dragons in the modern age was that it was that sightings were being reported on with greater frequency. They had long since been considered near extinct after being hunted down by skilled groups of warriors after the Imperium converted the once mighty empire away from dragon worship and towards the Chantry. Dragons were very large and terrible beasts that could spew flames from their gullets and wreck havoc throughout the world with little effort. Several towns and villages in the Yokalach and northern Filais were wiped out by a single rampaging dragon before it was felled.

Rumours of the intelligence of dragons went to both ends of the spectrum. Several scholars noted instances where dragons acted as simple-minded predators, using their vast size and power to steal cattle and attack ponies for a meal, while others reported dragons that created cunning plans to throw off pursuers and hunters. The presence of Spike indicated some dragons were capable of speech, though if anypony had conversed with a dragon, they did not live long to tell the tale. Shockingly the rarest sighting indicated that the largest and most powerful of all dragonkin were capable of using magic to a degree that even a trained elder unicorn would envy. Twilight simply concluded that Spike was incredibly intelligent due to his upbringing around other intelligent ponies, and that any dragon could share his wit and sharp tongue if they were raised in that sort of environment. She had no basis that this was true of course, but it was nice to believe she had some sort of influence on the baby dragon's intellectual aptitude, no matter what range he was capable of.

The rookery they were in now was filled with eggs of all sizes, with several dozen eggs seated in

beds of hot coals. They were all red with black spots, and were almost as tall as Spike. Twilight levitated a small rod made of glass from the table before tapping one of the eggs on the coals very gently, careful not to disturb the lines of lyrium around the eggs, lest they cause damage to the creature inside. Sure enough the shells were soft, and still needed the heat of their mother or, as the caretakers of the eggs had decided to use, hot coals.

Twilight brought the rod towards an egg being held aloft in a pedestal. She gently tapped the egg, listening intently for the sound of glass against the shell. Just as she expected, the shells of the suspended eggs were much harder, the glass instrument harmlessly bouncing off the protective layer. These eggs were ready to hatch soon.

It was becoming clear that whoever was inside the mountain and maintaining the eggs were taking them from a dragon to use for a purpose Twilight could only guess. What was more distressing was that somewhere close was a high dragon, the largest, oldest and most powerful variety of dragon, and that it would be out there, hungry for prey or angry that its eggs were being taken from it.

Spike was staring at the eggs, moving between each one and pressing his head against the shells he could reach, listening for the infant dragon within them. "Twilight," Spike asked, looking up from the eggs, "Is this where dragons come from? Is there where the Tower got my egg?"

"I don't think so, Spike," Twilight answered, "Your egg was purple and green, just like you are. These are much different from the egg you were hatched from." In truth, Twilight did not know where Spike's egg had come from, only that Wise Eyes had met a strange merchant selling the egg and purchased it out of simple curiosity.

"Do you think they could be like me?" Spike asked. It was a fair question; he had only known ponies all his life and would likely jump at the prospect of meeting another dragon. Twilight did not know enough about dragons to answer what would happen if he were to meet another.

"I can't say," she said with a sad look, "You were raised in a different environment, Spike. I don't know what would hatch from the eggs." *I'd rather not find out*, Twilight thought guiltily. Without knowing who was taking care of the eggs, there was always a chance these dragons would become hostile and attack. If they did, she would be forced to slay them in front of her young ward.

The party eventually left the rookery alone, leaving all the tools and eggs where they found them as they left the great chamber into a long hallway lined with light crystals. As they walked, Twilight noticed that the walls were adorned with intricate carvings of both ponies and dragons

in various scenes, those of them working together, of ponies enslaved by dragons, and dragons being hunted down by ponies. As rudimentary as they were, the scenes displayed by the carvings were very graphic, making Twilight's stomach lurch.

Fluttershy gasped as she looked below the artwork in the stone, pointing a hoof at the writing that was left embedded in the mountain. "It reads just like the Chant of Sun and Moon," Fluttershy said, "I had to study the Chant when I was in the cloister, but nothing sounds like this!"

Applejack leaned in close to the markings, squinting at the words and nodding her head in agreement. "They right drilled the Chant in our heads back in templar training," Applejack added, "So ah know it like the back of my hoof, and ain't none of *this* on that."

Twilight also read the markings closely, reading the words of the Chant off in her head as she compared the writing on the wall to the original religious work. She had studied the Chant herself if only to get the sisters and templars off her back, but still took the lessons within to heart.

What she was reading seemed more like a history lesson from another time, completely at odds with what the Chantry was teaching. A thought sprang to mind as Twilight read the wordings; what if the temple was not lost but merely forgotten due to conflicting lore?

Twilight took a breath, as she moved to the edge of the hall, reading the words aloud for all to hear. "Let it be known for all who venture into these halls, those who read our words, and those and listen with both ears and souls know the truth of the final days of the Imperial Age. Know that these are the halls of Luna, the halls of the stars themselves, and the halls of Nightmare Moon."

"Nightmare Moon?" Applejack asked, but Twilight ignored her, focusing on the name alone. No history books or even religious text Twilight had read ever had the name "Nightmare Moon". The name sent chills down her spine, however, similar to the power she felt around Flemeth. Twilight continued reading.

"After the Time of Chaos, a time lost to history, the Unicorn Imperium rose up and conquered the land with spell, sword, and dragonfire. The powerful sorcerer Exarchs ruled the ponies of the world with iron hooves and the strength of demons."

The diorama of stone above the words showed an image of the land, where small ponies bowed to tall unicorns dressed in fanciful robes and powerful armour. All paled in comparison to the

next scene, where these mighty sorcerers bowed their knees to carvings of dragons.

“Yet it was the Old Ones, the six dragon gods who existed since the Time of Chaos, who truly ruled the Imperium. Their power was vast and potent, and their wrath swift and terrible. While they wore masks of benevolence, their cruelty was felt across the world without end. These are their names:”

Twilight shivered as she turned to the carvings of the names of the dragon gods. There was a cold bite against her ears, then the passive brushing of the air, making it feel like lips pressing against the flesh. Fear replaced the intimacy of such an act. She looked around at the others who also appeared cold and shaking. They were also appeared uncomfortable as if they had felt the same spectral lips across their skin.

“Palakash, Dragon of Virtue.”

Deception...

Twilight jumped, as did the others. They looked around wide eyed, sharing the same look of terror as the unseen voice had spoken to them through icy lips so close to their ears. They said nothing, only looking at Twilight who turned a shaking head back to the edifice. She could not hide the fear in her voice as she continued.

“Galonomei, Dragon of Charity.”

Avarice...

This is insane, Twilight thought as her breathing stopped for a moment, what kind of temple is this? Why am I so frightened by these names? How is everypony feeling the same fear I am? Are these the protective spells of the temple left behind? Are they trying to frighten us so that we turn tail and flee?

Twilight tried to turn away, but now there was a compulsion to continue, to read the names of the Old Ones aloud for all to hear. Whether it was the magic or her own need to know, Twilight continued to read the names of gods long dead.

“Mezzerak, Dragon of Zeal.”

Betrayal...

“Lianari, Dragon of Grace.”

Destruction...

“Uthemiel, Dragon of Mirth.”

Despair...

“Asha’Bellanar, Dragon of Victory.”

Instead of the voice whispering another word, Twilight’s heart stopped as a cold, cruel laugh echoed from within her. The others looked either in shock or in horror, with Fluttershy trembling in a corner and Pinkie and Dash holding each other in fright. Only Applejack seemed to shake off her fear to stand defiant against the fear they had all felt.

“Ah don’t know about ya’ll,” Applejack said, “But ah’m bettin’ my bottom bits that this is some kind of trap to keep ponies away from the Mane. Maybe a test to see if they are worthy, ah don’t know. Keep readin’, Twilight. We’ll be okay. Just gotta stay strong.”

Twilight nodded and then turned her attention back to the wall. Now the pictures showed carvings of Celestia and Luna from beyond the Veil and even beyond the Fade, looking down on the dragon-ruled world with sadness in their eyes.

“The Regents of the Sun and Moon influenced the world and the ponies from the Fade who heard the Chant with a subtle hoof in an effort to show them to live life in harmony with the world and each other. They watched as the world was ruled in the oppressive shadow of the Old Ones and how the ponies suffered under them. The Sisters could not interfere directly, as the Old Ones were great and powerful, using their own blood to act as a seal against Celestia and Luna. With powerful dark arts fueled by dragon blood, the Sisters could not aid the world, only offering words of wisdom through dreams of the Fade.”

“With an act of desperation to free themselves from the yokes of the Imperium and its dragon masters, the followers of the Chant spilled their own blood to counter the wards used by the Old Ones. Celestia recoiled from such use of blood magic, but Luna vowed to make ponies free from servitude and pain. With the seals temporarily weakened, She descended from on high and became mortal.”

Fluttershy shook her head as Twilight finished reading another panel of stone. “This can’t be right,” the yellow pegasus said, her voice quaking with fear, “The Chant says that Celestia was

able to open a door between the Fade and real world, and only Luna could descend. There was nothing said about Old Ones, only that the Imperium worshipped dragons. There was also definitely nothing about using blood magic to open the way.”

Somepony isn't telling the truth, Twilight decided as she moved to the next panel, *whether it is this temple or the Chantry. I don't know which is worse*. The next stone carving showed the image of Luna doing battle against the dragons to a stalemate, neither side ever gaining ground. It was then that Luna transformed into something more fitting for war and battle, something much larger with great power, and much more sinister.

“Luna did battle against the Old Ones, yet could not vanquish them, as they were still creatures belonging to the world. She offered them clemency many times if only to give the ponies mercy, but they refused and took their fury onto the mortals. Unable to reason with Old Ones, Luna felt she had no choice but to become the very power she had sought to defeat to match the might of the dragons combined. Channeling the magic of the dark side of the moon, she became the dreaded Nightmare Moon and, in quick succession, defeated the Old Ones in battle.”

“Despite victory, Nightmare Moon could not slay the Old Ones permanently. Instead, she destroyed their bodies and sent their souls into the blackest pits of the Dark Tunnels, sealing them with powerful magic so that they could no longer be a threat, all except for Asha’Bellanar, who fled from battle and hid her essence from Nightmare Moon. The Imperium was Nightmare Moon’s to command and control as she saw fit. A dictator had toppled the tyrants.”

As the ponies moved on to the next panel of carvings, the looks on the faces of Applejack and Fluttershy showed great concern over what they were hearing. Many of them had grown up knowing only the Chant of Sun and Moon, thinking that Luna had sacrificed herself to stop the Imperium. Now there was doubt where there was none, trying to decipher for themselves which version they were hearing was true.

Twilight contemplated the implications of such a temple and the works within if it were ever truly found by other ponies and the discoveries brought to light. Knowledge of this type was dangerous and could prove schismatic to the Chantry and ponies everywhere. There were enough wars in the world including those against the ponyspawn; they did not need to add more.

The panels continued, this time depicting Nightmare Moon being struck by six rays of energy from six magical stones, each being held by a different pony, with Celestia watching over the act in sadness while a dragon watched from afar. The edifice next to it connected what they discovered in the temple to the common readings of the Chant: the execution of Luna at the hooves of the Imperium.

“Because peace and harmony were not brought to the world by Nightmare Moon’s victory over the Old Ones, Celestia sent her most powerful magic, the Elements of Harmony, to be held by bearers worthy of the artifacts. These bearers did battle against Nightmare Moon, banishing the darkness within from Luna and restoring her. Weakened, Luna was easily overwhelmed by Asha’Bellanar and those in the Imperium still loyal and devout to the Old Ones. Luna, as well as the Elements of Harmony, was sentenced to burn by shadowflame at the stake.”

“The executioner took the mane of Luna as a trophy, giving the hair as an offering to the Dragon of Victory. As the flames consumed Luna, the last Magister Exarch of the Imperium, Lexicon, took pity on her suffering, converted to her cause, and slew her with his own blade. This act allowed Celestia to use her power to raise Luna to her Seat, destroy Asha’Bellanar, and bring about the end of the Imperial Age.”

When Twilight stopped reading the text, she noticed that they were now on the other of the lengthy hallway facing a large pair of oak doors. The text and the artwork ended, leaving only the room beyond to continue the tale made by the sculptors of old.

Before she could open the door, Rainbow rushed in front of her, holding Twilight’s hoof in place while looking at the door with cautious eyes. The assassin shook her head at Twilight before pointing a hoof at Shale to come closer.

“What’s going on Rainbow?” Twilight asked only to be silenced by the cyan pegasus’ hoof. All the ponies remained silenced with only the sound of Shale’s grumbling being heard. When the golem was standing in front of the doors, Rainbow Dash motioned for the rest of the party to fall back.

“I can hear something from behind the door,” she whispered, only to be met with Twilight’s incredulous gaze.

“It could just be the descendants of the temple’s guardians.”

“They are not ponies. I don’t hear hooves.” Rainbow then drew her dagger, while the rest of the party followed suit and readied their weapons. Twilight swallowed hard as she brought her staff to bear as they watched Shale stand in front of the door.

The golem looked backed at Rainbow who nodded slowly. Shale gave a sigh before rearing upwards, slamming both stone hooves into the door, knocking it clean off its rusted hinges and onto the ground with a powerful slam. From the dust came several arrows and spears which

struck at Shale, only to bounce off the golem's mountainous body harmlessly.

"I hate the speedy one," Shale muttered before dust settled, revealing the attackers not to be ponies, but no sort of equine at all. Instead they appeared canine, similar to the wardogs used by the Equestrian military except much larger and standing upright. They were all armoured with plate mail, the emblem of the moon blazoned on their hauberks, and carrying varying heavy weapons such as war hammers and axes. They wore thick helms that completely covered the upper portion on their heads.

"The intruders brought a stone walker with them," shouted one of the guard dogs, raising his hammer high, "they are allies with the underkings! Stop the heretics! Crush the unbelievers! Protect Luna!"

Twilight tried to argue that they were not an enemy, but the dogs barking and howling drowned out any other noise. Shale promptly charged out to meet their challenge, followed closely by Rainbow and Applejack. Despite not being an overly religious pony, Twilight still disliked that they would be fighting in what was one of the most pertinent holy grounds for the entire Chantry.

Fight they did though, as the dogs did not let up their attack despite Twilight's protests. While not as nimble as the ponies, they proved to be quite strong, cracking the stone walls and floors with each powerful swing of their weapons. Their jaws moved about, snapping at any limb that moved too close, giving an additional powerful weapon with their heads.

The advantage they did have over the dogs was that they outnumbered them and had a varied group against a troop of soldiers. Wanting no further bloodshed, Twilight brought up her shield, just as she had against the possessed Applebloom, separating the party from the angered guard dogs who struck at her shield with heavy blows.

"Stop!" Twilight looked at both sides with eyes filled with frustration. "We came here to help ponies, not start a fight with... with... whatever you are! This is supposed to be a temple, isn't it? Not a battleground!"

"These creatures are called Diamond Dogs," Shale said, looking incredibly annoyed that it was being blocked off from potential squishing, "They are a subterranean race just as the donkeys and ponyspawn are. I remember something about them, mostly fighting them in the Dark Tunnels. Now I am remembering the incessant barking. I do wish to crush them into a fine paste before they can yap again."

Well, Shale is recovering its memory, that's always nice, Twilight thought, noting her thoughts

were becoming as sarcastic as her words. All this warfare was making her cynical. The Diamond Dogs continued to snarl and growl, baring large teeth, but at least their barking stopped and they were listening. At least, that was the hope.

“Nothing in Brother Biblio’s notes or the poem said anything about Diamond Dogs as guardians of the temple,” Twilight said, keeping a careful eye on both the guards and Shale who seemed to seethe with anger towards the canines, “You said you wanted to stop us? That we were heretics and you were protecting Luna? Do you mean the Mane of Stars?”

The diamond dogs glanced at each other with blank expressions before huddling together, speaking amongst themselves in hushed tones. Twilight watched and waited, looking over at the golem who was so eager to take the fight to the temple guardians.

“I’m going to lower the shield,” Twilight said, making sure her voice was loud enough so that everypony, as well as the dogs, could hear her, “We will defend ourselves if provoked, but we mean no harm. That means no squishing, Shale. At all.”

Shale huffed, stomping a hoof in defeat before turning around and lumbering to the back ranks of the party. One of the diamond dogs took a moment to sniff the air around Twilight as soon as the shield was lowered, but otherwise making no further action besides a few growls and muttered words. The guards then put away their weapons, motioning with a paw to follow close.

“We will bring you to the Alpha,” one of them explained, “He will decide how much further up the mountain you will go. Stay close. You may ask questions, but we choose if we answer. No complaining. No whining.”

“Who would do such a thing?” Rarity said nonchalantly as she examined a hoof for dirt, keeping well away from the dogs by taking a place near Shale. They walked in silence through the halls of the temple. Twilight noted that it seemed more in line with a soldier’s barracks than a place of worship. Weapon racks and armour stands lined the halls, as well as tools scattered on the ground. Bones of animals littered the floor, making Fluttershy gasp at every skull they passed.

Considering how the dogs had sharp teeth suited for the tearing of meat, it was no surprise that they hunted and trapped meat for their own diets. It was distasteful and made Twilight’s stomach lurch, but even creatures such as these dogs needed to eat somehow. Several guard dogs were sitting on the floor simply gnawing at the bones, trying to get some sort of meal from the leftovers of their hunts.

What Twilight did find both interesting and disconcerting was that while they were travelling

further into the mountain temple, the scenes etched into the walls did not change. They were all about the time of the Imperial Age, of the Old Ones, and of Nightmare Moon's victory over the dragons. She was expecting the tale to continue the deeper they went, but instead was met by the same iconography. The lavender mage tried to reason as to why the builders and artisans chose to do this, but simply could not fathom what ponies of old were thinking when they designed the place.

The group had one altercation as they made their way higher up inside the mountain. The walls were strewn with several containers holding countless precious and semi-precious gemstones. In baskets and buckets, chests and trunks were filled with every type of gem imaginable. From rubies to sapphires, garnets, beryl, and of course rare diamond, the diamond dogs had unearthed a king's ransom worth of precious jewels.

Rarity and Spike both began to enviously eye the gems that were being pushed around by several smaller dogs, some sort of worker class Twilight guessed. A small dribble of drool leaked from the sides of Spike's mouth as he eyed a particularly large opal.

"That looks delicious," the little dragon said, reaching out towards the gem. One of the guard dogs snarled, snatching the opal away before the dragon could take a bite. Rarity also backed off from the jewels as the canine warriors blocked their way.

"These are for the whelps and as an offering to our protector Luna!" The dogs quickly resumed the escort to the center of the mountain, but their growls were understood perfectly. Spike fled back to the safety of Twilight's shadow while Rarity huffed that she was being denied precious gemstones.

While she understood that the dragon whelps they were incubating would need the gems for sustenance, Twilight wondered why they would offer gems to an alicorn of godlike power. Was it a simple ritual, or more? Her inquisitive mind had to know.

"You mentioned that Luna protects you," she commented, causing one of the guards to look back at her, "What do you mean by that? The Chantry have said Luna ascended a thousand years ago. Even the walls of this temple state she was burned at the stake by the Imperium."

"Luna protects us in the mountain," the dog replied flatly as they came up to two large wooden doors, "She covers us in her wings and strengthens us for the coming trials. No more questions. We are close."

While it sounded like something from a religious text, there was something else inside the voice of the guard dog that gave Twilight pause. Nothing in the Chant of Sun and Moon said anything about Luna's protection alone. What of Celestia, and the two sisters working in tandem to protect all life in the world?

They soon entered a massive circular room, with a higher level branching off to several sections of the mountain and one stairway continuing upwards towards the summit. Unlike other areas of the temple, the construction was shoddy and the quality could not compare to the expert stonework seen throughout. Whoever built this had done so in a hurry, and Twilight suspected the craftsmanship belonged to the diamond dogs.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Rainbow muttered as she looked up at the edges to the massive chamber, "A big round room like this feels like the arena in Pura Raza. Bad things happen in arenas when you're not in the stands."

Before Twilight could comment further, one of the guard dogs howled, the noise echoing throughout the makeshift area. Several doors opened above them as the guards left, the sounds of barking dogs rushing throughout the temple. More and more of the diamond dogs poured onto the edge of the arena, barking and shouting curses. Twilight looked to see where their escort went, only to find they were now alone and surrounded.

"I... I don't like this..." Fluttershy squeaked as the dogs' barking became louder. Twilight cursed herself for believing they could avoid conflict. Perhaps they could still remedy the situation once the alpha showed up, but for now she had led the ponies into a trap.

From the top of the arena came the thunder of heavy pawsteps shaking the arena. The dogs stopped barking at once as the largest dog amongst them stepped forward into view. Twice as large as the biggest guard, the alpha male was massive compared to most creatures, smaller than a minotaur but nearly as wide, with his height and muscles being emphasized by spiked armour. In his hands was a giant hammer which was as long as he was tall, with a large head perfect for crushing stone.

What was most striking about the dog were his eyes. They were pure red with little black irises, similar to that of a reptile. They looked down on the party of ponies with contempt and hunger, a long slobbering tongue slipping out between his jaws, licking his lips with sickening anticipation.

"We seem to be having a lot of guests lately," the alpha male remarked, picking up a hunk of meat from a platter offered by one of the lesser dogs, "All of them ponies, all of them looking for

a false relic. All of them claimed by the mountain. Speak pony, and be quick.”

“False relic?” Applejack asked, eyes already blazing with anger at the words of the alpha dog, “We didn’t come all the way up this mountain just to find a false relic! My kin needs that Mane of Stars, and we need it now!”

“You will be silent when Alpha Lockjaw speaks!” The leader of the diamond dogs hefted his hammer high above his head, appearing menacing and powerful. Twilight’s eyes narrowed in defiance; while they were not going to start conflict, she was not about to have her group pushed around by anypony or anyone.

“A false relic sought after by heretics who do not believe in Luna’s glorious return!” began Lockjaw, motioning a paw at the assembled mass of dogs around him, “This temple was long abandoned when the diamond dogs first arrived, having fled from the donkeys in the Dark Tunnels. Hunted by the donkeys who were jealous of our riches on one front, slaughtered by the ponyspawn on another. The Dark Tunnels were no longer safe for my kind. Our ancestors came here to this mountain, and here we found gems to rebuild our glory. It was not enough. We could do nothing but watch as dogs perished in the harsh shadow of the mountain.”

“We were suffering here on this mountain. We hunted for game, but there was barely enough for so many dogs, thus we suffered and died from starvation and sickness. We tried to find repose in the words etched in these walls as our gods had abandoned us, but no divine comfort could be given to our fallen. First the elders began to die and then the pups, in pain and agony the likes of which we did not encounter since the war. Slowly but surely, our numbers dwindled.”

“The true light that turned our fortune was finding Luna and her gift to us. We found the dragon eggs. With the lyrium we unearthed, we could bend the drakes to obey us, to bring about new meat for the young and create a new army to retake the Dark Tunnels! To conquer and kill the donkeys just as they slew us!”

Large heavy doors opened all around the party, with the ponies falling flank-to-flank as the hiss of serpents echoed in the dark halls leading into the arena. From the shadows came three large drakes, powerful male dragons with long slender bodies, sharp talons and razor fangs. Though they lacked wings and the sheer size of full grown dragons, drakes were just as dangerous to any pony as their stronger sisters.

Each drake was leashed by three dogs holding thick nooses, struggling to control the writhing creatures. Spike’s eyes widened as he looked on at his massive cousins, unable to fathom just how large they were compared to him. Twilight was more concerned as to why they were being

brought out. A show of force, or was this truly a trap?

At the sight of Spike, the drakes hissed and growled, snapping their jaws towards the party and tossing their heads about with force. Dragons were known to be very territorial creatures, especially amongst their own species, with most nesting and feeding grounds belonging to much larger females and the drakes getting scraps. Spike, no matter how small and completely different he was to them, would have been seen as a challenge.

“These drakes are the first to successfully mature and grow large. They will be given to Luna, and then we will have more eggs, more drakes, and soon, real dragons.” Lockjaw looked up at the mural in the ceiling of the arena, smiling with delight at the thought of ravaging the underground with an army of dragons and dogs.

“The greatest gift Luna has given us is not this temple, nor the dragons,” Lockjaw continued, pointing a claw at his crimson eyes, “It is blood all of the blessed chosen drink. The blood of the ascended. The blood of Luna.”

“What?” “Impossible!” “No!” The responses were varied but the feelings behind them were the same. Confusion and disbelief ran rampant on the faces of the ponies, none more clearly than on the Chantry sister Fluttershy. She looked at Twilight for an answer or simple guidance, fear of the dog’s words marring her features.

Twilight looked at Lockjaw and his eyes, piecing together the words of the alpha dog as well as the sights within the mountain temple. They were raising the dragonkin within the mountain for an army, supposedly given to them by Luna. They offered Luna gemstones as tribute, and supposedly drank her blood to obtain her blessing.

“The high dragon that lays all the eggs,” Twilight said, looking Lockjaw dead in the eyes, “You think the dragon that lives on this mountain is Luna!”

“We do not ‘think’, heretic!” Lockjaw bellowed as he pounded his hammer on the stone floor, “We know it to be true! Luna has been reborn in the skin of the enemy she has vanquished and returned to her final resting place to find her believers! The ponies were not here, so she showed her favour to the diamond dogs!”

Lockjaw wiped the spittle from his mouth, before turning to one his soldiers. He barked some orders in a tongue Twilight did not recognize, and watched as the soldier yelped and dashed into a hallway. Several moments later the guard returned, carefully carrying a small crystal phial holding dark blood within.

The alpha dog lifted the phial to its nose, lifting the glass stopper for a moment and wafting the smell of the blood, clearly desiring the contents while barely resisting the urge from devouring the blood himself. He held the phial in one open paw, as if offering it to the ponies below.

“Perhaps we can make believers of you yet,” he said, “You seek the Mane of Stars, the false relic at the summit of the mountain. There you will find a smaller temple, and within that a spirit known as the Guardian. No dog has been able to enter the temple and return because of this guardian who protects the Mane. Any we send is either returned to us, or does not return at all. The Guardian does not know of you and will let you enter. Once you are inside, take the strands of the Mane that you need, and then pour the blood of Luna onto the Mane. Without the power of the demonic artifact, Luna can take her place on the summit of the mountain, where the lyrium is richest. There the eggs will grow to become those of true dragons.”

“You did not want violence between us,” Lockjaw threatened with a sneer, “This will cement our cooperation and you will still have the strands of the Mane you seek. Unite the blood of the present with the mane of the past, and not only will our victory over the donkeys be assured, but we will also pledge our dragons to help you! Think of the destruction you could wreak upon your enemies with our combined might!”

Twilight held up a hoof, a motion to request to speak. “I’ll need to confer with the rest of my group,” she said. Lockjaw nodded, turning to speak with his own people as Twilight gathered the rest of the group around her.

Twilight herself felt at odds, which she explained in detail. The dogs were offering great power in the form of drakes and even dragons under their command which would surely tip the battle in their favour against the ponyspawn and their archdemon master. It also meant possibly defiling the remains of a goddess. Never had the Wardens saying of “do what we must” felt so vile.

“Having dragons on our side would be pretty awesome,” Dash suggested, keeping a wary, yet thoughtful eye on one of the drakes, “I just don’t like the idea of doing that to a pony’s body, even if it’s just a mane.”

“We need to cure Applebloom and Macintosh,” reminded Applejack, who also looked conflicted, “Ah never thought we would pay this sort of price. Ah may have hated bein’ raised by the Chantry to be one of their templar, but ah have nothin’ against the Chant or Celestia and Luna. This seems wrong Twilight. Mighty wrong.”

“We can’t do what Lockjaw says,” Fluttershy stated in a much more raised voice than usual,

much to the surprise of the party and the anger of the dogs within earshot, “I know a lot of this seems strange and awful, but we can’t defile the Mane. Think about what it would do to the world if it were ever found like that, or never found at all! It was a symbol of hope!”

A symbol of hope that has already claimed the lives of countless knights and a poet scholar, Twilight thought to herself. Still, Fluttershy was right. They did not know enough about the Mane of Stars to judge whether it was real or not, and definitely not enough about the diamond dogs to believe their word was worth anything.

“It is too similar to blood magic for the Great and Powerful Trixie’s liking,” the boastful magician added, eying the phial of dragonblood critically, “Anything related to the Dark Arts gets her personal seal of disapproval.”

“They may be big and smelly,” Pinkie chimed in, “But there is something about their eyes that makes me think they are big meanie mcmeanerpants, and they are not wearing any pants!”

“I do not know much of the Chant,” Rarity said, deciding to add her two bits in the discussion, “But I must agree with Trixie, for once. Not about the Dark Arts, but something around here feels too similar to the workings of Flemeth. It was not until I felt the magic at work around the drakes and the dogs that I felt the same malevolent energy as I have sensed around her.”

“Never trust a dog,” Shale growled, never once taking its eyes off Lockjaw, “The large one may sound intelligent, but underneath the false brain is a savage ready to gnaw on your bones.” The party was therefore in agreement; they would not defile the Mane of Stars with dragonblood. The question was what would the diamond dogs do, and seeing the aggressive actions of the alpha and his soldiers, there was no doubt in Twilight’s mind that battle was sure to come.

As the mage Warden began to silently weave a spell of protection around the party, she looked at the drakes and their dog masters. Lockjaw was awaiting their answer, and had both paws gripped tight in warning around his war hammer. Twilight took a deep breath, spell ready to be launched at a moment’s notice.

“We have to decline the task you want us to perform,” the lavender unicorn announced, keeping her protective spell prepared, “We don’t want to fight you, but we cannot perform something so close to blood magic on a relic that may or may not be real. There is a chance the relic is real, and it would be an act of sacrilege the likes no pony has ever committed to defile the mane with blood. We came here to find the relic and heal two very sick ponies, not to fight a people we didn’t even know existed. With all due respect, we refuse.”

Lockjaw regarded the purple pony and the group for a moment, before nodding to the dogs who were handling the drakes. “Just as the heretics before you, then,” he said, surprisingly calm until Twilight noticed he foamed from the mouth.

“Heretics make good eating. KILL THEM! CRUSH THEM! I want their blood in my bowl before the day is through!”

A new chorus of barking and growling dogs rang out throughout the arena as the drake handlers released their charges, shouting orders to attack the party. The drakes obeyed, hissing with anticipation as they advanced, their claws digging into the ground beneath them. The guard dogs attacked as well, launching a volley of spears and arrows at the group.

Twilight reacted quickly, erecting her shield in time to catch the first projectile assault. Trixie’s horn and staff began to glow as well, forming another barrier to overlap the one Twilight had cast. They were now protected from attack, but could not counter their enemies as long as they were in the shield.

I tried to avoid fighting, Twilight thought as both her and Trixie’s intertwined shields were being pelted by all sorts of crude weapons, I don’t know these dogs. I didn’t even know their kind of species existed. Are they all like this? Is this why the donkeys warred with them? They are not ponyspawn or demons, I shouldn’t be fighting them.

“Are you going to just sit there and contemplate your hooves all day?” Dash asked with a voice filled with annoyance, “We have to fight now! Chastise yourself later, after we avoid being eaten by dragons!”

The assassin pegasus was right. It was them or the dogs, and too many ponies in Equestria needed them to succeed in their quest. She began to channel the shield to act as a concussive force, just as she did against the Desire Demon in Red Apple. It would knock the dogs off their paws and give the party a chance to counter attack.

Twilight began to shift the spell into the force needed, wordlessly merging strands of magic that made up her shield and Trixie’s together. The white-maned mage realized this and began to help, twisting the arcane bands properly while Twilight fed them power. It was interesting that the two who had gone on as unknown rivals back in the Tower would work so harmoniously together; Twilight brought the raw magical power of her special talents, and Trixie crafted the power with technique.

The others were preparing to fight as well. Applejack and Rainbow had their blades out and

ready, while Pinkie primed a large grenade, twisting the arming mechanism to detonate in a few moments. Fluttershy shook with fright as the drakes drew ever closer, but the presence of Shale standing in front of her seemed to calm her somewhat.

“As the meek one stood for me against the demons, so too shall I stand in front of it,” Shale said, looking over at Fluttershy, “I do not wish to be in anypony’s debt. Ready your arrows, pegasus.”

Rarity’s horn glowed bright with magical power as the staff moved in between the group, marking the ground in a white light until it took the form of a powerful glyph. While she had not personally seen the white unicorn’s glyph in action, Twilight did learn that it was another facet of Flemeth’s magic at work. As per Rarity, however, the glyph was highly intricate as the staff swept across the floor like pen on parchment.

Before Twilight could give the word, Spike tugged on her robes to get her attention. The dragon knight did not have his sword out and blazing, and the look on his eyes spoke of grave concerns. “Twilight,” he said, looking at the drakes that clawed at the shield, “Those are dragons just like me. I don’t want to fight them. I can’t fight them. Isn’t there anything we can do to help them?”

Her fears were confirmed as she looked at Spike with sad eyes. More powerful than seeing the eggs in the rookery was the sight of mature drakes, giving a good example of what sort of dragon Spike would one day grow up to be. Now they were forced to fight and likely slay them, or be devoured themselves. Even if they could remove the influence of the diamond dogs, they would become little more than wild beasts hungering for flesh as well as gems, just as it seemed the dogs had trained them to act.

“I’m sorry Spike,” Twilight said, turning her gaze back to the oncoming battle, “It’s us or them. I didn’t want to come to this, but this is how Lockjaw forced it. I’m so sorry.”

The infant dragon shook his head, standing away from the drakes as they lurched forward. His eyes were filled with doubt and worry, his loyalty to his friends in conflict with some deep seated fear of bringing harm to the only fellow dragons he ever knew. With the party ready to fight, the Warden nodded to Trixie. Both horns and staves pulsed with magic, forcing the barrier to expand and push outward, slamming into dog and drake alike.

The diamond dogs were unprepared for such an attack with several of their numbers being knocked onto their behinds, losing or even breaking their bows and spears from the shockwave. The drakes on the other hoof were largely unaffected, whether it was because of some immunity to magic or simply their sheer size. They hissed before lunging forward, long necks craning their heads towards the ponies as their sharp teeth were eager to tear into flesh.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash sprang forward, narrowly dodging the biting head of one drake while cutting its soft underbelly with their blades. Shale charged into another drake, bashing its skull right into the belly of the beast while Fluttershy fired arrows. The third drake was being distracted and warded off by Pinkie's grenades, as well as growling in pain the moment it stepped into Rarity's glyph.

The fighting quickly turned to the party's favour as Trixie began to channel one of her signature chants. As the magic from the chant swirled around them, Twilight could feel her body become lighter and stronger, and also felt warmer as her body took on a shining glow. Everyone in the group took the benefit of Trixie's chanted spell, attacking the drakes with greater fervor. The twin bladed attacks of templar Warden and assassin in tandem with the debilitating glyph by Rarity had worked; one of the drakes fell with a loud quake.

At the sight of one of their precious drakes having fallen, chaos erupted amongst the dogs. Rage that one of 'Luna's' brood had been killed and disbelief that their mightiest weapon was taken down by ponies. The diamond dogs were split as to what to do, with several taking up arms and barking curses, while others fled from the battlefield. They did not act in hostility however as they watched the battle unfold; fear for their lives held them back. If the ponies could take down one drake, what hope did a dog have against them?

Lockjaw howled his answer as he leaped into the arena with his hammer held tight within his paws as he spat the foam from his mouth. "Heretics! Unbelievers! You will all pay for your sacrilege! I will suck the marrow from your bones and bathe in your blood! Your skulls will be used to bring our offerings to Luna!"

"Wow," Pinkie said as she bounced towards Lockjaw, "You really are a meany mcmeanerpants. And really hammy too, but I guess being evil means you're allowed to be hammy!"

The alpha dog growled as he swung his war hammer, but even the mightiest blow from the hammer proved futile against the elusive Pinkie Pie, who deftly dodged the blow, leaving a short-fused lyrium grenade where she once stood. The grenade exploded, engulfing Lockjaw in bright blue flame.

The giant dog growled as the explosion burned his fur and flesh as well as melting the armour Lockjaw was wearing into his body. Despite the damage dealt, Lockjaw continued to swing his hammer at Pinkie, the attacks progressively getting closer and closer. He was moving his body quicker, and though he missed, the hammer was leaving larger craters in the floor.

“Twilight!”

The shout made Twilight spin on her hooves towards Trixie. The chanted glow was gone as the blue magician was being attacked by a drake, one of her hind legs bitten by the male dragon’s sharp teeth. A look of sheer terror was painted on her face as she screamed for help.

Twilight dashed towards the drake, jumping onto the creature’s back before wrapping her hooves around the thick neck. Staff floating near, she began to pummel the drake with simple arcane blasts, trying to distract the giant wyrm enough to release Trixie.

The plan worked. The drake let go of Trixie’s leg, now focusing its attention on the annoying magical mare hanging off its scales. The monster swung its head to and fro, trying to dislodge Twilight. All she could do was curse futilely as she was being swung, chiding herself over not coming up with a better plan.

Pain struck Twilight as the dragon’s claws scratched deep into her flank, tearing at her robes and flesh. Her cutie mark was in bloody tatters as she let go of the neck, falling to her side on the ground below. The drake roared triumphantly over the wounded body of Twilight, then thrust its jaws forward for a bite of unicorn skin.

“No!” cried Spike as he moved to block the path between the waiting eager fangs and his unicorn caregiver. With a deep breath, he breathed a stream of green flames into the face of the drake, scorching the eyes of the large predator. The drake reeled back in pain, clutching its face in its talons, warding off further fiery forays. Spike took advantage of the drake’s temporary blindness, chomping down on the hilt of the flame sword while climbing across the scales of the larger dragon. His claws made climbing the monstrosity easy, and the young knight quickly made it to the top of the drake’s skull.

Twilight could only watch as she laboriously pulled herself up from her injuries. Pinkie had dropped her bag of alchemical materials in the midst of battle, leaving the poultices alone. Twilight levitated a pair of the healing medicine, one for her injuries and another for Trixie before turning back to the downed unicorn. As she poured the contents of the phial onto her flank, the lavender unicorn looked on in disbelief as Spike struck the male dragon’s head with stiff strikes from his enchanted blade. Pure fury was etched on his face as he scorched the drake over and over again, until he finally rammed the blade into the creature’s eye.

The drake could only give a weak growl as it collapsed; the flames from the enchantment more than enough to wreak havoc to the inside of its skull. Despite his victory, the baby dragon could barely stand after felling the monster that threatened Twilight. Spike soon collapsed under the

fatigue, the burning sword clattering on the ground with its flame snuffed.

Exerting enough power to levitate Spike and bring him closer, Twilight looked on as the combined efforts of Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity and Fluttershy defeated the last of the drakes while Shale moved to assist Pinkie against Lockjaw. With the defeat of their drakes, many of the dogs were fleeing from the arena, not wanting anything to do with the ponies, baby dragon, and golem that slew their prized weapons.

As Twilight limped over to the downed Trixie, she winced as she looked over the wound. Trixie's rear leg was completely mangled; blood flowed freely and bone was exposed by the light made from the crystals of the chamber. Twilight's mage compatriot sobbed as she looked away from her ruined leg, even though Twilight was doing her best to apply the healing poultice to the limb. The red liquid worked slowly, twisting flesh together, but even a full phial was not enough to repair the damage done.

"I-it hurts..." Trixie moaned, tears streaming from her face, "I don't want to lose my leg! I don't want to die! Please..."

Twilight held Trixie's hoof, only to have her own foreleg gripped by the blue unicorn's limbs like a vice. She needed Pinkie's expertise on alchemical medicines to help Trixie, but the pink earth pony was still engaged with the alpha dog.

Lockjaw was moving faster and stronger now, even though he had suffered grievous injuries. Whatever mirth held by Pinkie was soon lost as the alpha dog's hammer inched ever closer. Even Shale had to be careful, knowing all too well that while blades and arrows were not a threat to its rocky hide, a good hammer blow could cause Shale to crumble.

"I can do this all day and all night, ponies," Lockjaw said, as those still capable of fighting surrounded him, "The blood of Luna makes me strong! I am a reaver of heretics!"

Pinkie reached for her belt with her tail, clicking a grenade ready and tossing it into the air. Before Twilight or anypony could say she missed, the grenade detonated, shaking the rocks and stalagmites free. Gravity took over as the stone fell, one after another crushing Lockjaw under their weight. One stalagmite pierced the arm of the massive dog, forcing him to drop his hammer and cover his head.

The cave-in worked to smother Lockjaw, but it was also working to crush the ponies. They could go to the doors of the arena, but they would likely be sealed to prevent their escape. Twilight looked up to a large upwards staircase that Lockjaw had pointed to; that passage would lead to

the summit of the mountain.

“The stairs!” Twilight shouted, “We need to get up those stairs! Rarity! Help lift Trixie!” Twilight tried to move quickly up the rocks, but the wound to her flank had not healed, and the extra weight from Spike made climbing the rocky side of the arena difficult.

Suddenly the magical Warden felt her body lifted from the ground, hooves dangling as she was carried away from the ground. To her left was Rainbow Dash while to her right was Fluttershy, both pegasi holding the unicorn aloft as they made their way to the staircase.

“Don’t worry Twilight,” Fluttershy said with a smile, even though her eyes were darting from Twilight to the falling rocks around them.

“We got you!” Rainbow added as they carried Twilight and Spike to safety. Rarity had already leapt up the rocks to higher level followed by Applejack and Pinkie. Shale was last as the white unicorn used her magic to levitate the wounded Trixie out of harm’s way.

Before Pinkie could join her friends, the massive paw of Lockjaw sprang from the rubble, grasping her hind leg as the alpha dog leered from beyond the rocks. “Heretics!” he growled, “I won’t let you bring harm to Luna! I won’t let you take away our destiny!”

“Do shut up.” Shale reared upwards before slamming both hooves into the face of Lockjaw, pressing the giant dog deeper into the rubble. Unceremoniously bumping Pinkie onto its back, Shale made their way to the top of the mound, with the entire party finally escaping the cave-in.

The party looked haggard and weary from the battle, but worse was the cave-in had sealed the way down the mountain. They were trapped, with the only way out to the summit. Twilight couldn’t help but smile however, as that meant they were finally on their way to the true tomb of Luna where the Mane of Stars awaited them.

However, the damage from the battle was dealt. Twilight’s flank still felt tender, but at least her wound was easily healed. Pinkie began trying to apply generous helpings of healing poultice to Trixie’s leg, but the damage was irreparable, and she was likely to be lame permanently. The worst case would be to remove the leg entirely should infection set in.

The blue unicorn did not want to say anything, refusing all attempts of condolence and conversations with a sharp word and a dirty look. The pain in her face spoke volumes of what the injury had done, not only physically but mentally as well. She spoke not a word as she was being carried by Shale through the tunnel.

“Twilight,” Rarity said as they walked slowly through the upwards cavern, “Look ahead.”

Twilight did, seeing that they were almost at the exit. She could see the stars and crescent of the moon high in the sky. They were close to the outside world since Shale forced their way into the mountain.

“Twilight, dear, look again,” Rarity pointed a hoof, “Was there not those awful storms when we were climbing this simply ghastly mountain?”

“Maybe the storms passed,” Twilight replied, though she was unable to believe her own words. The storms were made by the pegasi skylords of ages lost, charged by magic to storm forever. They could not see the clear sky on their way up the mountain, and there was no sign that the storm was simply going to lull itself over. As the party left the cavern and back into the open air, Twilight could see the effects of the storms; they were still raging strong, but against the outside of the mountain. Instead where they stood was perfectly calm, where even the air was comfortable.

They all stopped and gasped at the sight on the top of the mountain. Laying in wait on the summit was the most regal, most majestic, most powerful appearance any of them had ever seen. Something so large and so grand had to belong to something great, and there it was, waiting for the ponies to gaze upon the might of centuries.

“That temple is real pretty!” Pinkie chimed in as the ponies stood slack-jawed. “But get a load of that!”

There, sleeping on a ridge of the mountain near the tomb of Luna, final resting place of the Mane of Stars and long sought after treasure of pilgrims and believers everywhere, was the most powerful destructive force the natural world had ever seen. The high dragon.