

Maledictum Insania 2: The BloodClaw Cult

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Chapter 18: The Apple and The Knife

Another barely restful night had passed for the keepers of harmony. They all woke up with aching necks and backs. Still sleepy, Twilight took her medication, then looked through the windows to scan the area around them. As expected, the train had stopped in the depot. The only creature that could be seen outside was a single reaper, hiding in the shadows and waiting for the group to reveal itself. Twilight had asked in her letter for one to be sent to them in order to escort Babs Seed to the Crystal Empire safely. So, judging that it was safe around them, Twilight removed the spell she put on the carriage.

The reaper immediately spotted them and approached the train. After stepping inside, he bowed down to the group.

"It is an honor to serve you, keepers of harmony," he spoke.

"It's always impressing to see how good at finding things your kind is. Thanks for making it here so quickly. We really are in a hurry," Twilight replied with a tired smile.

"Is your friend ready to travel?" the reaper wondered.

The purple mare turned around to see that Babs was still sleeping in the corner. She hated to wake her up, especially after what Babs had just been through. But they had no time to waste.

"Give me a moment, please," Twilight requested, then went over to the teenage filly and gently placed her right front hoof on her back. "Babs. Hey. Sorry to wake you up, but your transport is ready."

Babs did not respond. Instead, she just slowly pushed herself up and mutely went over to the reaper. She was still pretty much sleepwalking and not thinking, just like most of the group. The reaper and Babs already left the carriage when Twilight suddenly noticed something.

"Hey, AJ. Don't you want to say goodbye to your cousin?" Twilight asked into the room.

It took a second for the purple mare to realize that she got no answer. Slowly, her eyes wandered across the carriage.

"Applejack? Where are you?" she wondered, looking around.

The rest of her friends now as well began to look for the orange mare all over the train. The longer it took them, the more they came to their senses as they slowly began to realize that their friend had vanished.

After a while, the group realized that this search was useless. Applejack was not on the train or anywhere nearby.

"What happened to her? Did anypony see something?" Rarity asked in worry.

"I saw her walking into another carriage last night, but I wouldn't have thought she would actually run away," Fluttershy responded.

"She ran away?! *Now*, of all times?!" Twilight shouted in disbelief.

"Her condition kept on getting worse and worse. Yesterday's mass murder seemed to hit her in particular. I suppose she reached the point where she just stopped thinking logically and acted out of emotion," Crystal analyzed.

"I think I already have an idea where she might have gone to," the purple mare spoke with a sigh. "Girls, forget about Canterlot for the moment. We need to find Applejack and make sure she's okay. Knowing her, I am pretty sure she went back to Ponyville."

"That would make sense, seeing how much she worries about her big brother. But still! I just can not believe she did this now that we are *this* close to find the roots of the cult!" Rarity spoke in frustration.

"Rarity... if she goes that far, we have every reason to be worried. I can understand why she did this. I think I would have acted just the same way," Twilight figured.

"What do you plan to do with her once we find her again, Twilight?" Fluttershy wondered.

"It would be pretty arrogant from any of us to force her to keep going with us. If she reached her limit, we should just make sure that she stays out of danger," the purple mare explained.

"Very reasonable. I think she badly needs some time to recover as well," Crystal agreed.

"Well then. Let's go," Twilight announced, lifting her saddlebag on her back by magic and opened the door out of the train.

The journey back to Ponyville took more than five days. It was late afternoon already when they finally spotted their village over the next hill.

"Feels good to see home again," Twilight commented with a happy sigh.

"While we are here, we should get some supplies. With the way of how things are going lately, I'm sure we will need at least a few more days to reach Canterlot," Rarity suggested.

"Alright. You go and get the supplies then while the rest of us go to Sweet Apple Acres," the purple mare agreed.

"See you in half an hour!" Rarity spoke and went on her way.

When Twilight, Fluttershy and Crystal arrived in the village, they instantly were surprised to see how silent and deserted the village seemed. Next to nopony was outside and it was so quiet, they could have heard a pin drop.

As they went on, they only came across two ponies walking by. Twilight lifted a hoof to greet them, but as soon as they spotted her, they began to run away and hide.

"Something is going on here," Twilight figured with a suspicion filled expression. "I do remember that Ponyville always had a low population and was pretty still, but not *that* much."

"Yes. This is really odd. Nopony even seems to have missed us," Fluttershy commented.

"Not only that, but we are being observed. Do not turn your head, but look over to the window to your right," Crystal stated.

"I see it. Well, let's hurry to the farm. After that, we will see if we can find out what's going on here," Twilight suggested.

Just minutes later, Rarity arrived at the local grocery. She opened the door by magic and trotted in light-hooved, humming a song.

"Hello, Matilda! It is so nice to see-" she spoke.

Rarity stopped as she realized it was not the jenny who stood behind the counter. It was a pony stallion who she had never seen before. The stallion as well seemed to be very surprised to see Rarity.

"Um... Isn't this Matilda's grocery store?" the fashion diva wondered.

“Well, not anymore. She sold it and moved away,” the stallion replied, now smiling. “Excuse me for asking, but aren’t you Miss Rarity?”

“Oh, why yes! You have heard of me?” Rarity replied, throwing a pose and stroking through her mane.

“How can I not! You are famous! I really like your designs! I only started up a store here in Ponyville in hope I could meet you!” he explained.

“Oh, that’s so charming. Sorry for changing the topic here, but do you have any idea why Matilda left Ponyville?” the fashion diva wanted to know.

“Actually, now that you mention it, she left something behind for you. I put it somewhere back in the storage. Would you like to help me looking for it?” the stallion offered.

“Thanks, but I would rather like to stay here,” Rarity replied.

“Are you sure? It can take a while. You must be terribly busy,” the stallion spoke, now opening the counter door and making a gesture to invite Rarity to come.

“Eh, yes. I am pretty sure. And don’t worry. I’ll just wait,” she responded, now starting to feel a little inconvenient.

Suddenly, the stallion let out a sigh and hung his head. Then, he stooped down to pick something up from behind the counter.

“I think you don’t quite understand, Miss Rarity. I insist,” he spoke.

As his head came into Rarity’s sight again, she realized with a shock that he held a dagger in his mouth. She instantly turned around and wanted to run away, but a pony mare was already behind her, closing the door and locking it.

Ten minutes later, Twilight arrived at the entrance gate to Sweet Apple Acres. The more she walked, the more an expression of worry and suspicion grew on her face.

“Did you two see Derpy anywhere?” Twilight asked to Fluttershy and Crystal.

“No,” the elder reaper mare responded.

“This is not a good sign. She should be patrolling around here. We should have seen her

somewhere by now,” Fluttershy commented.

Now, Twilight decided to strike up a faster pace across the orchard, aiming straight for the home of the Apple family. The feeling of worry only grew stronger and stronger as the purple mare came to realize that the farm was entirely deserted. Not a single fruit picker was around, even though several apples were ready to be harvested and some had already started to rot.

Finally, as the three mares were getting close to the house, Twilight began to hear a faint sniffing and sobbing. This caused Twilight, Crystal and Fluttershy to start running. They came rushing to the front door, swiftly opened it and ran inside. All they could see so far was the family dog Winona, shaking heavily and hiding under a table in the living room.

“Applejack! Are you here? Applejack!” Twilight started calling.

She did not get any response, but could still hear the sobbing from above. The purple mare ran ahead and up the stairs. Down a small corridor, they could track the sound to Big Macintosh’s bedroom. As soon as she opened the door, the sight shocked Twilight deeply.

Applejack was sitting on the floor, turned away from them and staring at the bed. The sheets were colored in the dark red of dried blood. It also partially stained the floor, though some still seemed to be fresh and liquid. On the bed lay the dead body of Applejack’s brother. His eyes were wide open and dull with an expression of shock. The deep cut in his throat seems to have been the reason for his death.

“Oh my gosh...” was all Twilight could say at this moment.

Applejack didn’t even seem to realize her friends were there. She just kept on crying endlessly. Even Twilight was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of desperation Applejack was going through right now and couldn’t hold back her own tears.

“He is already reaped,” Fluttershy whispered to her mentor.

“I do not think that this is a reaper’s work. The cut is too sloppy, as if the wielder did not know how to use a scythe properly. Also, no reaper would aim for the throat first when using a reaper scythe for assassination instead of open combat. This would also explain why apprentice Derpy Hooves has gone missing,” Crystal whispered back.

Neither Applejack nor Twilight noticed any of the conversation. They did not care about it anyway. Applejack was just too lost in the sight before her to discern anything else around her and Twilight was still trying to figure out what to say now.

Suddenly, they could hear the front door slam open and a set of hooves rushing inside and upstairs. Fluttershy and Crystal Blossom instantly jumped into battle stance. Though they left it

again immediately as they realized it was Rarity running towards them. She had a black eye, bleeding nose and several bleeding cuts on her body.

“Cultists! There are cultists in-” Rarity shouted, but then stopped, covered her mouth with her right front leg and gained a shocked expression as she saw what the others were seeing. “Oh my stars...”

Again, a moment of silence passed. But finally, Twilight began to approach Applejack.

“AJ... I’m... I’m so sorry...” she started.

“Ya should be, Twilight. Ya’re the reason for this after all,” Applejack responded, still crying.

Twilight stopped her approach, shocked from this statement.

“W... what?” she spoke.

“If ya wouldn’t have started yer stupid crusade against the cult, all this wouldn’t have happened. My family... Big Mac... they all could still be alive if you wouldn’t have provoked them,” Applejack kept blaming in a mix of complete desperation and underlying fury.

“That’s... That’s not true, Applejack! I know you are heartbroken right now, but this is just cold of you to say!” Rarity responded in protest.

Now, the orange mare did something she had never done before. Slowly, she removed the hat from her head. Then, she just dropped it to the floor, as if it had no value to her anymore.

“Whatever... It doesn’t matter anymore... It happened... Everything... Everypony in mah family... is gone... They are all gone... Ah’m the last Apple alive...” Applejack spoke.

“That’s also not true. What about Babs Seed? Have you forgotten about her?” Fluttershy wondered.

“By now, Ah’m pretty sure she’s dead, too. This is just how things are... Everypony keeps dying...” the orange mare kept going.

“Now... come on, Applejack,” Twilight spoke, starting to approach her friend again. “I know this is hard, but torturing yourself by looking at all this won’t help you. Maybe you should just-”

Suddenly, Applejack turned around and swung a knife at Twilight. Even though she narrowly missed, Twilight jumped backwards in surprise and shock.

“Don’t ya... tell me... what to do...” the orange mare responded, still aiming the blood covered

blade at her friends with her front leg.

Rarity gasped in shock, but not just because of what just happened. Twilight as well gained an expression of horror as they now could see Applejack's face. Her eyes were bloodshot and sore from the crying. Her pupils had shrunk to tiny black beads. Just looking at her made them realize that she was stressed beyond comprehension, which was only confirmed by the fact that she was shaking heavily.

"Applejack... Please... You have to keep it together. You are letting Maledictum Insania get to you," Twilight tried to reason.

"Just shut up, Twi... It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing matters anymore. *Ah* don't matter anymore..." the orange mare replied, now crying even heavier.

It was now that the group realized where the fresh blood was coming from and why Applejack had that bloody knife. She had several deep cuts on her left front leg, bleeding heavily. She must have tried to cut her own arteries by holding the blade in her mouth.

"Applejack. Please. Drop that knife," Twilight requested, trying her best to speak calmly and keeping herself together, even though she was just about to fall into desperation and panic.

"No!" the orange mare shouted, now aiming the blade at her own neck while still crying.

"Shall I try to stop her, Twilight?" Crystal asked, slowly getting ready to jump.

"No, better not. We may just set her off right now," Twilight responded, her voice getting hoarse because she couldn't keep playing calm.

Another moment of silence passed. It was perfectly clear that Applejack was serious right now. She was just inches away from committing suicide. None of her friends could handle this situation or knew what to do. The only thing which was clear to them was that they somehow needed to prevent the worst from happening.

"Darling... Please... Don't do it," Rarity spoke with tears in her eyes as well.

"Why not...? What's the point? Ah am good for nothin'. Ah can't do anythin'," Applejack wondered with increasing desperation in her voice.

"We need you, Applejack... Don't do this to us..." Fluttershy tried to reason, as well slowly getting black tears in her eyes.

"See? It's always only about ya! What would ya need a useless cripple like me for? Ya'll are just lyin' to me! Ya don't even care what Ah'm goin' through! Just leave me alone. Let me die

already..." Applejack shouted, bringing the blade closer to her throat.

"We are your friends, AJ! Of course we want you to live!" Twilight stated loudly and started crying heavily herself.

"And what about me? Ah don't want to anymore! *But! Of course!* Ya don't care the least bit about that! Ah had enough! Can't take this anymore! Ah just want to go where Mom, Dad, Applebloom, Granny, Big Mac and all the others are!" Applejack shouted back.

"Just drop the knife, darling! Please!" Rarity begged.

"Get lost already! Leave me alone! Why can't ya see that Ah had enough of this darn world and sufferin' so much? Ya just hate me anyway, so get lost!" Applejack shouted, the blade now touching the skin.

"Listen to yourself, Applejack! You are not making sense anymore! We care a lot about you and I promise, I will somehow find a way through all of this! But first, you need to let go of that knife! I beg you, Applejack! Just let go! Please!" Twilight shouted, not knowing what to do anymore.

Once again, silence filled the room. Then, Applejack began to hyperventilate and her whole body trembled heavily.

"No... NO... NO!... NO!" the orange mare shouted with all her strength.

Applejack's hoof pushed the knife against her throat and sliced it through with the full length of the blade. Within seconds, a vast amount of blood spilled over her orange belly and to the floor.

Twilight's eyes instantly turned white and she aimed an arcane beam at her friend in attempt to seal the wound again. But while Applejack floated in the air through the magic's influence, she kept on stabbing herself in the chest repeatedly. Crystal Blossom saw the signs and tried to prevent this with her own magic, but she couldn't remove the knife out of Applejack's grip fast enough.

Twilight quickly had to realize that she did not know enough about healing spells to treat the injuries. Applejack's blood rapidly washed over her body and splashed to the floor, to the point where she finally lost consciousness.

"Oh gosh no! By Celestia, no! Not Applejack! Please no!" Twilight shouted in panic while the tears kept running down her face.

"Hurry! We need to bring her to the local hospital!" Crystal shouted.

She tried to use a spell to make Applejack float on her back so she could carry her, but Twilight

would not let go of her. Instead, she levitated Applejack on her own back, insisting to be the one carrying her.

Without having any time to argue, the group started running, Twilight constantly using her arcane magic in desperate attempt to stop the bleeding.