

## Chapter 18 - Riddles and Regrets

Twilight watched the sleeping form of the high dragon carefully as the ponies made their way towards the temple. The great beast was dozing off somewhat peacefully, its tail waving against the wind while dark smog rose from its nostrils. The dragon's deep breaths could be heard across the small valley that was between the true temple of Luna and the tunnel from where the party had just arrived. Underneath the dragon was a hoard of treasures, an assortment of gold and jewels as well as several artifacts and shining weapons. The high dragon clawed at its bounty while in deep slumber, tossing several coins off the edge of the ridge the mighty wyrm used as its nest.

They all gaped at the gigantic red dragon sleeping soundly until Applejack stepped forwards towards the temple. "Come on, y'all," she said as she trudged through the snow on the mountain summit, "Ain't no use starin' and gawkin'. Let sleeping dragons lie and all that. We're real close to the Mane."

Twilight agreed, and the party continued on their way towards the true tomb. It was hard not to stare at the high dragon though, especially for Spike who could not wrest his eyes away from his much larger brethren.

"Is that what my mom looks like Twilight?" Spike asked as he sat on the mage's back. Twilight looked at Spike and then back to the high dragon, trying to picture a beast with large spines across its back and a horned crest on its head, only green and purple like her favoured assistant.

"I think so Spike," she answered, trying to decide how best to answer the question. Would Spike want to go and seek out the high dragon that laid his egg? Maybe find the merchant that had sold his egg to the Tower to find his dragon matriarch? Find other dragon eggs and whelps similar to him?

Twilight couldn't bear the thought of losing Spike, but unlike battle against the ponyspawn, it would be something she could not stop if Spike truly wanted to search. He had every right to find his own family, though Twilight did not think most high dragons were too broken up about their eggs being taken. The fact that the diamond dogs had rookeries full of them seemed to indicate this particular high dragon had no love lost for her brood.

All around them the storms continued to surge, yet the calm on the actual summit spoke volumes about the powers held by the pegasi skylords of old. That their storm was still protecting the tomb of Luna after hundreds of years was a testament to incredible knowledge, but also a reminder of what the pegasi had lost. Twilight felt saddened that such knowledge was apparently lost to the mists of time, though her two pegasi friends did not seem so broken up about it.

Twilight rolled her eyes. They were too busy focusing on the dragon of course.

“For something so big and awesome looking, it sure has the right idea,” Rainbow said, “I could use with a power nap right about now.”

“A dragon is not awesome, Rainbow Dash,” Fluttershy replied, hiding behind Shale, only taking peeking glimpses of the dragon, “High dragons are scary and mean and...”

“And so are ponyspawn and demons.” Rainbow sighed in exasperation. “What’s a dragon compared to the whole Blight or the Fade? We’ve gone up against things no pony in their right minds would stand against. You helped fight!”

Fluttershy gave an audible gulp. “Yes. Those were small, and mostly pony sized. This is different. That dragon can eat one of us in one bite, or could breathe fire and roast us, or roar and toss us off the mountain, or use its big scary claws, or...”

“That’s enough now, ya hear?” Applejack called to the back, “Yes, that dragon there is real big and real scary. But it’s also asleep, so if we mosey into the temple, find the Mane and leave right quick, we won’t have to worry about it wakin’ up and wantin’ a snack.”

They continued in much-needed silence until at last arriving on the steps of the great temple. Despite the storms and the considerable passage of time, the temple still looked pristine and shining in the dark of night, a beacon unparalleled in today’s age of battered buildings. Every marking and word was clear and readable, even though Twilight could not translate the ancient text.

“This is it,” Twilight breathed as they gazed upon the massive doors of the temple, “This is the final resting place of Luna. The home of the Mane of Stars.”

“Welcome, pilgrim ponies.” A voice, calm yet powerful, echoed through the doors. Unlike the voice that spoke to Twilight and the others in the temple when she read the names of the Old Ones, this voice filled the lavender unicorn with warmth, hope and courage. The doors opened wide, revealing the dark halls of the tomb until they were illuminated in a faint blue glow from crystal orbs hanging from the ceiling.

A visage of an earth pony formed from the darkness, with the shape of a strong armoured warrior comprised of a constellation. The pony of stars bowed to the party, almost in reverence before returning his gaze upwards. Twilight caught her breath at the sight of the starry equine; this was one of the wonders she had hoped to see on her journeys.

The pony of stars pulsed with magic, but each wave felt welcoming rather than warning. This was likely the Guardian that Lockjaw had mentioned, yet despite his title, Twilight felt no threat from him. She looked to her friends, who all seemed to bask in the warmth from the Guardian. Fluttershy did not look afraid or shy in the least, and even Shale seemed pleased to meet the sentinel of the tomb.

“For the first time in my long vigil, pilgrims have met the challenges of the mountain, of the storm, and of the temple. In life I was Hauberk, Element of Loyalty and follower of Luna against the Old Ones. Now I am Judicator of the Gauntlet and Guardian of the Mane of Stars.” Hauberk bowed again, this time with the party reciprocating in acknowledgement.

“I have watched many a power climb this mountain, only to be felled by the storm,” the Guardian continued, “I have seen my children and their descendants dwindle until there was no more. I could do nothing as the dogs arrived and in their foolishness saw the dragon as Luna reborn and cut down other pilgrims before they could reach this place. To you, Applejack, I am sorry for the loss of the knights of Red Apple. And you, Fluttershy, I am sorry for the loss of Brother Biblio of the Chantry. They were good ponies, who wanted to help their lord and bring light and hope to the world.”

“Wait a minute,” Applejack said calmly, “How do you know all this? We just met!”

“The stars in the sky speak, young one,” Hauberk answered, “I know of you all from what the stars have told me. I know you and Twilight Sparkle are Walkers of the Grey, or Grey Wardens as the order is now known. I also know Twilight Sparkle holds doubt in her heart that this quest to defeat the Blight will end in failure, and that she will be at fault. I know you, Applejack, fear the weight of the legacy thrust upon you, and that you feel you cannot bear the burden of your father’s crown. I know of your friend Pinkie Pie, the guard who lost her family but seeks them out. I know of Rainbow Dash the assassin, who lives with internal conflict as a result of her actions. I know of Rarity the unicorn who follows in the steps of the Mare of the Mire, even though she refuses to admit it. I know of Fluttershy the bard, who still holds fear of every creeping shadow.”

“I know of Trixie the magician, who still doubts her talents and abilities and fears their dark nature. I know of Shale the golem, who struggles between wanting to recover its memories and wishing to forget completely and enjoy ignorance. I know of Spike the dragon, who bears the burden of guilt with him and will not let it go.”

The words of the Guardian struck the listeners hard. Twilight looked around, watching as her friends looked away while taking in the words of Hauberk. She knew the journey would bring new weights to their shoulders, but she never realized how their old burdens still dragged them down.

What Hauberk said about her was true, when Twilight stopped to think about it. As much as she hated to admit it, she did fear that their quest was doomed. There were so many places to go, so many ponies to meet and convince. There were also many challenges to face and many battles to fight. All that they needed was to lose one, and all of Equestria would be covered by the evil tide that was the ponyspawn.

“You have come to this place on a noble quest,” continued Hauberk, “To save the lives of Arl Macintosh and Applebloom. Know that you will be able to enter the temple and face

its trials.”

“Please wait,” Rarity interjected, “We climbed this horrible mountain, suffered the storm, and did battle against those *atrocious* dogs, and now we have to face more trials? Haven’t we done enough?”

“By the will of Celestia and Luna, the trials must be completed.” On this Hauberk would not budge, punctuating his statement with a stomp of a hoof.. Twilight groaned inwardly as Rainbow made her complaints known. There always seemed to be more challenges to overcome.

Twilight stepped forward onto the steps of the tomb, feeling the cold alabaster stone under her hooves. She took each step with respect, fully knowing that she was the first pony in years to ascend the steps, not including the dogs that had tried to enter and defile the relic within. Every hoofstep made her heart skip a beat, not about the upcoming trials, but rather about the wonders they were all about to encounter. Everything about the temple was a mystery, and Twilight wanted to plumb its secrets and study every stone.

When she finally made her way to Hauberk, Twilight was amazed at what formed the Guardian’s body upon closer inspection. The stars that made up his constellation were brilliant orbs of light, as if she was staring into the depths of night sky closer than she ever thought possible. Swirls of gas, dust and energy could be seen around the clusters, while blue lines linked the stars together like a simple skeleton.

Hauberk chuckled, catching Twilight off-guard. “The curiosity of youth,” he said, “How I miss that. Today is truly a wonderful day for us all. Come. The tomb and the trials await you.”

The rest of the ponies made their way up the steps except for Shale, who still had Trixie on its back. When Twilight turned a puzzled eye towards the golem, Shale could only sit on the snow, casting a careful glance at the sleeping magician mare, though not resting soundly.

“The loud one’s wound is great,” Shale said, “Admirable if I had been the one to cause it, but no good for traversing a tomb of tricks and traps. I have no need for such religious nonsense. I will stay here with it and keep it safe, relatively.”

Before Twilight could give thanks, Pinkie bounced over to Shale, dropping off several bottles of poultice as well as other concoctions at the golem’s feet. While Pinkie rattled off the exact usage of the medicines, Twilight looked down to Spike, noticing that he also did not take foot on the steps. His gaze was still fiercely locked on the high dragon nestled away on the rocky ridge.

“Aren’t you coming Spike?” Twilight asked, “We’re here. Don’t you want to explore the temple with us?”

“I can’t, Twilight,” Spike replied with a shrug, “I just... can’t.”

“As young as the dragon is, he is still a dragon,” said Hauberk, “All dragons carry the blood of the Old Ones, from the smallest eggs to the mighty high dragons. In the time of Luna, the Imperium used Reavers, those who drank dragon blood, to take on their power as their most feared assailants. They cannot enter, for the spells within will keep them out to protect the Mane of Stars. It is this that prevented the corrupted Diamond Dogs from entering the sanctuary. I am sorry.”

Twilight did not want to leave Spike alone, and especially from such a discovery as the tomb of Luna, but they did not have much of a choice. As long as Shale was with Spike and Trixie, and as long as the high dragon remained asleep, there was no threat to them. She hoped.

She nodded to Shale, who responded with a smug nod of its own, seeming to remember all too well the words Twilight had spoken the last time she left her ward with the golem. Twilight embraced Spike one last time, holding him tight before letting go and returning to the steps that the magic would not let him climb.

Once they were all on the stairs, Hauberk turned into the temple proper, closely followed by the six ponies. As they made their way into the antechamber, the heavy stone doors magically closed behind them, causing Fluttershy to squeak and Dash to go for her dagger. Twilight’s heart beat thudded louder, but she did not feel afraid of a trap. The soft blue glow of the crystals hanging overhead gave a sense of calm as Hauberk turned towards them once again.

“Before you all continue further, know that this is the first trial within the tomb of Luna,” Hauberk began, looking over the ponies assembled before him, “I will ask you all a question and all you must do is answer with clarity and honesty. I ask for nothing more, nothing less.”

“That’s it?” said Rainbow in disbelief, “That’s the dangerous first trial? Just asking a question? I thought temple trials were gonna be hard. If that’s all, then come on! Lay it on me!”

The Guardian regarded the cyan pegasus with a critical eye. “Rainbow Dash of Equestria, of Pura Raza. Assassin of the Wonderbolts. You journeyed from afar to return to your homeland to escape the ravages of life in Pura Raza. Here you hoped to escape from the memories of the day your mother died, which you saw in every house and every building belonging to the Council of Six. I ask you this: do you hold regret in your heart of what you have become?”

“What I’ve become? I’m awesome! I’m great! I’m better than ever!” Despite the confidence she portrayed, Rainbow’s ears flicked backwards as Hauberk continued to

stare her down, clearly unsatisfied with her answer. Twilight bit her lip as she watched the question; if the cyan pegasus didn't answer the question truthfully, all their journey up the Frosttop Mountains would be for nothing.

Dash trailed off her tirade as every ounce of bravado fell from her lips into nothing, looking away from the constellation guardian. Rainbow Dash closed her eyes as both her ears and wings drooped low. Hauberk simply stared at her, saying nothing as Dash mulled over what he had asked.

"I'm what my mom never wanted me to be," Rainbow said at last, looking up into the starry depths of the Guardian's eyes, "Mom was a killer, an assassin for a group no better than the Shadowbolts, especially under Reinhardt. He made the Shadowbolts look like charity workers once he took Despiadado's spot on the Council, and I helped him get there. I became just like my mom, taking bits and killing ponies. Maybe I was angry at her, for not telling me the truth. For dying. Maybe I'm angry at myself."

Dash took a deep breath before continuing. "I do regret what I've become. I'm everything my mom never wanted me to be. I can't take back the lost years though, and what I don't regret is finding all these great gals. Sure we met kind of bumpy, but I know they have my back with anything, in a fight, or in the Fade, or anywhere. I'll *never* leave any of them hanging."

The Guardian simply nodded his head as he smiled, showing no sign that Dash had either completed or failed the trial. What Twilight did notice that Rainbow Dash seemed brighter, as if a great weight was lifted off her shoulders. That must have been the purpose of the trial; to clear the mind of pilgrims of any doubt and have them face their regrets before continuing. Twilight couldn't help but shudder at what question Hauberk would ask her.

"Pinkie Pie of Equestria," Hauberk said to the pink earth pony, "Guard of Ponyring, bringer of merriment to those around you. You lived life to the fullest with your family, bringing joy to all you could. You also did your best to avoid conflict, fearing the unhappiness it would bring onto others. To that end, you encouraged a compromise between your sisters to stay in Ponyring, but found it was too late when the ponyspawn attacked. Do you regret your decision, or lack thereof, leaving your choice to fate alone?"

Pinkie's mane and tail deflated, much like they did during battle or when she was depressed or angry. She looked up at Hauberk with sad eyes, tears already forming. "Yes," she replied, though her voice cracked she still held back sorrow, "I do regret not making a decision sooner. I thought the danger wasn't big enough to worry about. I thought everything was going to be fine and that the army was going to win and we could hold a big party with balloons and cakes and ribbons and everything. One decision made me lose track of my family, and who knows where they are now? I don't!"

Her mane and tail then bounced back into curly proportions. "What I don't regret is the

same thing Dashie doesn't regret!" Pinkie continued as she stretched her forelegs to grab everypony and bring them in for an impromptu hug, "I made lots of super nice friends, and they are the best friends anypony could have. I know they're going to help me find my family, even if it takes us from party to party! I believe in them, and they believe in Pinkie!"

Hauberk chuckled at Pinkie, who also appeared brighter than usual. "Such joy. I have not seen such for centuries." He then turned to Rarity, who seemed to be more interested in admiring a hoof than paying attention to the questions asked by the Guardian, "Rarity of Equestria, of the Potpourri Wilds. Mare of the Mire..."

"I'm sorry, dear, but that title is already owned by an unscrupulous and rather dingy pony," Rarity interrupted, reinforcing her spell to protect her from dirt, "She may be dirty, but Flemeth is my adoptive mother, and the true Mare of the Mire. I may have been raised by her, but I still have standards."

"Is that true?" questioned the spirit pony with a raised eyebrow, "You know of Flemeth's magic of shapeshifting. You know of her glyphs, of her runes. You have finished reading the grimoire of Flemeth. Do you regret the knowledge you have learned, and the danger that knowledge will pose to you and your friends?"

Rarity shut her eyes and closed her ears, trying to block out the words and even the presence of Hauberk. When she finally opened her eyes, she sighed heavily, looking at the ground as if it was the most depressing thing she ever laid her eyes on.

"You were right, spirit," Rarity began, "I am following in the hoofsteps of Flemeth, though not in any way I could recognize. I have learned powerful magic and simple spells, and wanted to bring a new level of beauty to ponies in a way Flemeth never understood. I wanted to live like the Filesians did, while still maintaining what made me different from her. Giving to ponies, not just taking. When she sent me on this journey, I thought she wanted me to learn and grow, as she did. After reading her book..."

The white unicorn turned to the rest of the party, levitating the thick black grimoire and placing it on the floor. "This book is a puzzle, and the result frightens me. I wish I never knew what was inside. It is a ritual Flemeth uses every time her mortal body is ready to die. She raises a unicorn filly and then takes that body for her own. The more powerful the filly, the better for Flemeth. I'm that filly."

"What I truly regret is that I know what Flemeth will do if I try to escape her. She is vengeful, and she will hurt all of you to get to me. I could not bear the thought of her hurting my friends. I'm scared."

This answer appeared to have been enough for Hauberk, but it certainly was nothing compared to the shock felt by Twilight and the rest of the party. Knowing what Flemeth had planned for Rarity was frightening to say the least. Unlike Dash and Pinkie, Rarity

did not seem more uplifted from expressing her regrets. If anything, she seemed darkened, huddled away to wallow in her own despair. Twilight wanted to ask Rarity for more information, maybe using her special talent with magic to help combat the Mare of the Mire's strange and twisted ritual, but Hauberk had already moved on to Fluttershy.

The yellow pegasus shrunk under the gaze of the tomb's sentry, holding her amulet of sun and moon in her hooves as Hauberk loomed over her. "Fluttershy of Filais," he said, ignoring Fluttershy's squeaks of fright, "Sister of the Chantry. You have supposedly been visited by Celestia herself through dreams and prophecies. Such is a bold claim when Celestia has been silent since the time of Luna. Do you regret not showing courage in Filais as you have when you interpreted your dreams to match your own conclusions?"

Fluttershy hid behind her pink hair, shivering as she mewed her response. Hauberk simply kept his gaze until the Chantry sister rose from her seated position, looking around at her friends for support before matching eyes with the spirit guard.

"Yes," she answered like the others, "I should have stood up to Artistic Finish earlier. I should have stopped being a bard when I knew I was happy living with the General, with Lady Elegant, with Glorieux and Magnifique. I should have shown courage during my escape from Filais. I caused so much trouble, so much pain, all because I couldn't stand up for myself."

"Twilight said I was brave, but I didn't believe her at first. I was terrified by the monsters she was supposed to fight, and I hated fighting anything at all. But when I saw a friend in trouble, I knew I had to make a stand or lose them forever. I made my choice, just like I did when I had the dream, and when I saw the firebird. I don't regret that choice."

"Such bravery does you credit, Fluttershy of Filais," Hauberk said and then turned to Applejack who stood tall, waiting for her turn to be questioned. "Applejack, heir to the Throne of Equestria. You, who bear the burden to defeat the Blight, restore your siblings to good health, and soon to face a succession crisis against the widow of the King. Do you—"

"Ah regret alotta things." Applejack was quick on the draw, narrowing her eyes towards Hauberk who was taken aback by such brashness. "Yeah, I regret not telling Macintosh and the advisers where to stick their plan to send me to the templars. Ah regret getting all wound up and breaking my mama's amulet just to prove a point. Ah regret not being with Duncan to the end, if ah could help him or even save him."

"What ah do know is that regrettin' don't solve nothin'. You start lookin' back; you ain't lookin' forward where yer eyes should be and where yer hooves should go. It may have taken me a while to learn all that, but if there is anything that I've learned on this mess of a journey is that. Learn from yer mistakes; don't stay with em like a stick in mud."

Hauberk seemed to smile at Applejack's quick response. "You will make a fine queen for



your ponies,” he said, “Should you accept your crown.” Twilight gulped as Hauberk turned to her, feeling herself grow cold in anticipation of the question he was bound to ask.

He looked Twilight over for a moment, from horn to hoof with a cocked eyebrow. “You seem hesitant, Twilight Sparkle of Equestria,” the Guardian said, “You have seen what I asked your friends. You should be well prepared with a response to my question.”

Twilight tried to speak, only to fall into silence with Hauberk’s raised hoof. Waiting for Hauberk to ask was nerve wracking, leaving Twilight to jumble all the possible responses in her head at once. There was of course the chance he would ask something she would not have an answer to.

Sucking in another breath of air, Twilight tried to remain calm as she waited for the question. All the Guardian of the Gauntlet had asked was a truthful answer to a question. That was it, just the plain and simple truth. It sounded easy, but Twilight wondered if it was something Hauberk cared for, or if the answer was something she was supposed to face on her own.

“Like Applejack, you bear the burden to defeat the Blight,” Hauberk said at last, “Unlike her, this destiny was thrust upon you by Duncan. Regret is born from choice, Twilight Sparkle, or choosing not to at all. To act or to be indifferent is a choice we all face. All of your friends made a choice, which lead to their regrets. So I ask you this now; what do you regret?”

Twilight’s ears folded back against her head, expecting this question but not having a direct answer for it. “I regret a lot of things,” she replied softly, as images of her journey flashed before her eyes. Every pain she could have avoided and every hurt she made with her magic against others. Just as the Guardian said, everything she had done in the quest to defeat the ponyspawn was her choice.

That was it. That was the truth of the question. “I regret a lot of things,” Twilight spoke much more clearly, lifting her head up and shaking the melancholy from her thoughts, “Sometimes I made the wrong decision. Would I want to go back and make the better choice? Of course I would. But I won’t regret the fact that everything up to now was decided by me. I made the choice. I will make the choice again.”

From the center of Hauberk’s body erupted a blinding white light, engulfing the room completely. The party averted their eyes from the flash, Twilight wondering if she failed the trial. She had answered the question truthfully; what if Hauberk was not satisfied with the answer?

When they could open their eyes again, Hauberk was gone and they were still in the antechamber. The only difference was that the door leading deeper into the tomb was now opened wide with the blue glow of hanging crystals giving only enough light to allow

them safe crossing.

“You have passed the first trial,” came the disembodied voice of the Guardian of the Gauntlet, “Proceed to the Hall of the Elements, where those who followed the will of Celestia and Luna will give you the second trial. Sun and Moon protect you all.”

Without another word, Twilight stepped forward down the antechamber towards the next hall with the rest of the party in tow. As much as she wanted to confirm that they were all right from the questions posed by Hauberk, especially Rarity, forward was the only way to go, for now, until they found the Mane of Stars.

The Hall of the Elements was breathtaking.

The entire room was expertly carved from stone, just as the rest of the tomb was, but adorned in marvelous statues crafted from the finest crystal. All appeared to be polished to a mirror sheen, and they bore scenes of happiness and joy compared to the imagery of war and death in the lower temple. The hall was decorated with six statues of ponies, each carved from unique crystal: two earth ponies, two pegasi, and two unicorns. Each stood in a different pose, but all held a small stone orb near them with a different marking on it. They also had stone plaques with carved markings, though they were not written in any language Twilight understood.

Like the antechamber, the door on the other side of the hall was closed and likely not to open until the second trial was complete. Without the guidance of Hauberk, it was up to them to find the trial and complete it.

As the rest of the party split up to search the hall, Twilight was able to bring Rarity to a corner. The white unicorn still looked deeply upset from the ordeal of answering the question of regret. Rarity gave a look that plainly showed she did not wish to talk, but she was quickly pushed aside, leaving the two unicorns to talk in private.

“Everything I said was true,” Rarity began, “I am scared of what I learned from that black book. Flemeth is going to take my carefully perfected body. I mean, did you *see* her? She’ll make it all wrinkly and baggy and *old*.”

“This isn’t about just the looks though, isn’t it?” Twilight wanted to skip past the superficial aspect that Rarity always seemed so focused on and delve into the truth of the matter. Rarity sighed, looking away from her fellow unicorn.

“Flemeth is powerful and malicious, Twilight dear,” she said, “If she takes over my body, what if she goes after you and the others? I don’t care what happens to me, though I will admit I am frightened as to what happens to ‘me’ once she completes her spell. It’s the thought of harming any of you that pains me the most.”

“Don’t worry Rarity. We’re all here for you. We’ll figure something out to stop Flemeth and her magic.”

“I wish it were so simple,” Rarity sighed softly, “No use worrying about it in here. Let us help the others search. I must admit the décor of the tomb is rather appealing ...”

They convened a short while later, noting that there was nothing in the hall except for the statues and words of text on the plaques beneath them. Twilight studied the plaques carefully, noting how similar they were to the scrap of parchment found with the old Warden treatise. Twilight grumbled in frustration; she couldn’t read the text on the parchment and now she couldn’t make heads or tails of the same ancient writings on the statues.

Pinkie leaned a hoof against one statue, tapping her chin with another hoof in deep thought. The idea that Pinkie’s gears were turning in contemplation made Twilight simultaneously appreciative of the effort and afraid of what those efforts would bring about. Knowing Pinkie, she would solve the problem with a muffin, a grenade or both: a party, in other words.

“I know!” Pinkie shouted in triumph, “What if we ask them nicely? Think about it, if Hauberk has been here for so long, maybe the temple itself just wants a friend to speak to! Those dogs were all ‘grr!’ so it wouldn’t do anything for them!”

Before Twilight could argue about talking to solid crystal statues, Pinkie was already bouncing about and talking to the motionless ponies. “Hi there! We were wondering if you could show us the second trial, please. It would be super great if you could!”

In what seemed like a response to Pinkie’s request, the stone orbs held by the statues began to glow, along with the writing on the stone pedestals which bore the statues. They watched in awe as the words shifted into readable Equestrian, the statues themselves becoming illuminated with powerful magic.

“Incredible,” Twilight breathed, looking at the stone edifices with awe, “Wait...” The unicorn opened her bag and pulled the small parchment with the strange ritual. Holding it up, she counted the six points on the page then looked up at the statues, realization dawning on her as she excitedly waved the ritual about.

“This! These ponies! This is what the Wardens wanted us to find!” Twilight’s eyes were lit up as she explained her discovery to the others in earnest, “Look, six points, six heroes, six Elements of Harmony! Now we just need to find out how they used them.”

“Maybe this will help,” suggested Pinkie, pointing at the writing underneath the statue of a strong-looking earth pony warrior who looked very much like Hauberk. They all huddled in front of the statue, watching in wonder as the old writings from ancient times glowed bright, shifting until they formed words in readable Equestrian. After the words

were done changing, Twilight was able to read them clearly:

*“The bonds we forge are true as steel,  
Never bending under our zeal,  
Never falter in your conviction  
To your friends give all devotion.  
What am I?”*

They all stood silent for a moment as they considered the riddle posed by the statue of Hauberk. Even Pinkie Pie had found pause. It was odd to be posed with a riddle in the middle of the temple, though it made sense that this was the second trial by how it was being delivered. It also meant that failure would mean ejection from the temple and failure to collect the Mane of Stars. *It seems Luna favoured the clever*, Twilight mused as she concentrated on the enigma. Showing her impatience and frustration, Rainbow Dash glared at the statue, stomping her hoof.

“How many trials do we have to go through?” she demanded, pointing a hoof at the statue of the crystalline equine, “We can’t spend our time answering riddles! Give us the dragon! At least then we can get some action and finish this quick! I thought we were supposed to save Equestria from the ponyspawn, not play guessing games.”

“The trials are to test the worthiness of all those who enter,” said Fluttershy, “Not just anypony can come in here and take a strand from the Mane. We have to show that we are both ready and worthy to receive the Mane.”

“Ugh, fine. The answer is loyalty.” Twilight wanted to shout out a warning or deny that this was the answer, seeing as how Rainbow had responded to the riddle too quickly. It was only when the orb by the statue of Hauberk began to glow, as well as the smile on the starry earth pony’s face, did Twilight realize that the cyan Pegasus had given the correct answer. The words on the pedestal also shifted from forming the riddle into something new.

“Loyalty,” read Twilight, “The ties that bind us, as we choose them. When the First Blight took the land by storm, it was our loyalty to Luna’s memory that we were able to stay true to being Elements of Harmony. Most importantly, it was what allowed us to stay true to each other.”

*I’ll never leave my friends hanging.* Twilight looked at Rainbow Dash, wondering if the pegasus had just pulled the answer from the air or if she knew the response to the riddle from the beginning. It was the right answer, to which Twilight was grateful that her friend knew what she was doing, even if her delivery left something to be desired.

There was something about the Elements of Harmony that seemed oddly familiar, though what it was, Twilight could not make heads or tails. They were a powerful form of magic that had defeated the dark side of Luna in the form of Nightmare Moon and were

somehow linked with defeating the First Blight. Perhaps they were a weapon to be used against the ponyspawn or other such evils.

“Look, another riddle,” Rarity pointed out, who approached the statue of a rather bulky earth pony, although Twilight could not tell the gender. Rarity waited as the words shifted with magic, before reading the next riddle aloud:

*“Great the bounty at our hooves,  
An act of virtue this does proves  
To give to those who lack the way,  
Offer them the light of day.  
What am I?”*

“Generosity, darlings,” Rarity answered with a smile, as if she knew the answer before Twilight could even consider the conundrum, “Some of us do lead blessed lives. It simply is not enough to have or want, but we should do what we can to give as well, no matter what form that giving takes.”

The statue of the earth pony seemed to have accepted the answer, the orb under its left hoof shining with a magical aura just as the one with the statue of Hauberk. The name of the earth pony was revealed to be “Keystone,” and the riddle changed into information on the Element.

“Generosity,” Twilight announced, “After the fall of the Imperium, we gave everything to the ponies affected by the war against the Old Ones. Money, food, time; all was freely passed to those unfortunate. When the First Blight raged, we saw that generosity return to us tenfold in the form of a great alliance to fight back against the Archdemon.”

Answering questions and conundrums was all well and good, but these were not the kind of trials Twilight was expecting. There did not seem to be an element of danger in giving the correct response, unlike climbing the mountain and weathering the storms. The only threat was failure and being sent back the way they came, rather than a grisly demise Twilight envisioned and an ancient temple employing a great variety of traps to keep undesirables from the relic. Of course, being sent back in shame at failing the trials would also be devastating beyond repair. This was something the lavender unicorn would do her best to prevent.

“Here’s another,” Applejack said, looking up at a rather dainty looking pegasus mare statue, “Looks like a confusin’ one. Here goes.”

*“Like perfect crystal, neat and sleek  
The answers sought are nothing meek  
Never bring out lies and slander,  
Only truth of utmost candour.  
What am I?”*

“Well that’s easy,” Applejack chimed, “The answer is the best policy: honesty. Ain’t no fancy words like slander and candour gonna confuse me.”

Another impressive light show of magic revealed the name of the pegasus to be “Crystal Clear”. The orb of stone she held in her right hoof glowed the same as the others. As with the others, the riddle turned into a lesson from the past.

“After the Ascension, we thought our time as Elements of Harmony were done. The Old Ones were defeated and the Imperium no longer had the power to hurt the world. Then the ponyspawn attacked, which only thrust us into battle once again. We were weary of war and fighting, and only wanted peace. We had to be honest with ourselves first and foremost however, and we all knew our place was against the ponyspawn and staying true to each other.”

With three stone orbs glowing bright with energy, all that remained was to answer three more riddles. Two statues of unicorns and a second pegasus were left amongst the ancient elements, their riddles forming as the party moved on to a unicorn wearing an ornate robe and a highly detailed staff, with the stone orb being used as the focus on the magical implement.

There was something about the air of the Hall of the Elements that caught Twilight’s attention, a feeling of being watched. It was not a vile or paranoid feeling, but rather like the feeling that the spirits of the past were showing pride at how much progress Twilight and the party were making inside the temple.

Without another word, Fluttershy stepped forward to the next riddle, her features becoming more solemn as she spoke:

*“To those hurt and in great pain,  
Life can seem like such a bane,  
All it takes to do your part,  
Is a warm smile and a gentle heart.  
What am I?”*

“Those words sound a lot like the Chant,” Fluttershy realized, looking over to her friends. “The part where we are told to be kind to one another, even in the darkest of times. It must be kindness.”

Just as soon as Fluttershy answered the riddle did the orb on the staff emit the familiar bright light, with the name “Exarch Lexicon” forming on the pedestal. Many stood agape as they read the name, the lessons of the Chantry echoing as the title of the unicorn before them rang bells.

“The unicorn who slew Luna out of mercy,” Applejack recalled, “How did he become an

element of kindness? Maybe there's a clue where that riddle was."

"Kindness," Twilight read aloud, "It was considered a kindness to slay Luna while she suffered, to end her misery as she burned in the shadowflame of Asha'Bellanar, Dragon of Victory. The most stalwart of the Old One's servitors, the disciple who had given everything by the dragons and was the most powerful Magister in all the Imperium, stopped the executioner's pyre and slew a goddess. Instead of being punished for this act, he was granted the Element of Kindness, not just for what he did, but for the kindness shown to him by the other Elements who did accept him, though it took some time. Lexicon did then show kindness by offering to repair the world with his magic, and heal the wounds caused by centuries of rule by the Old Ones."

Twilight stopped reading the passage on the stone, taking time to consider the implications of the words. Lexicon was often called the redeemed villain by the Chantry, a unicorn heretic that led the entirety of the unicorn race into heresy, only to redeem himself through a single act of mercy, not of kindness but out of fear for his soul. What would the Chantry say when they discovered the statue here, showing them the truth of his actions?

It was no use pondering the actions of a unicorn who was not here to defend himself properly. They turned to the next statue, that of a pegasus balancing herself on the stone orb on one hoof while looking up at the sky with a smile on her face. Pinkie bounded over to the statue, jumping up and down as the words became readable.

"Ooh, ooh! Can I read this one next?" Pinkie asked, but before Twilight could give the go-ahead, the pink earth pony was already reading the riddle with some added mirth:

*"All it takes is a little giggle,  
That sets my mood all a wiggle,  
A simple sound of joyful mirth,  
That we know straight from birth.  
What am I?"*

Pinkie burst into a fit of giggles as she rolled on the stone temple floor, apparently enjoying the wording of the riddle. Despite her lack of answer, or because of it, the orb the statue pony was standing on ignited its light, joining in with the other four stone spheres. On the pedestal came the name of the Pegasus pony, "Surprise", as well as the words of wisdom that took the place of the enigma.

"Laughter," said Twilight as she read from the magical etchings in the stonework, "This simple light that can overcome any darkness, banish any despair. Through her smile, they learned to laugh again, to live life again. Not even the mighty forces of the Archdemon could crush their spirits."

Five riddles answered, with five lights shining from the carved stone. With one riddle

left, Twilight approached the final statue of a unicorn mare in a simple robe, and waited for the old runes to become readable Equestrian. As she did, she felt a sort of kinship with the unicorn being held aloft by stone, or at least some sort of familiarity. Wonders of what the stone unicorn had lived through wandered through her head, but as the words of the last riddle shone through with clarity; Twilight turned her attention to the task at hoof. The magic spoke to her, and she wondered if this was the same feeling the others had when posed with the other challenging plays on words.

*“From the mountains to the Everfree,  
This spark unites all harmony,  
Holding true this one ideal,  
The gentle spark we all feel,  
From the Fade our gift aligns,  
But with your friends this truly shines.  
What am I?”*

Twilight paused for a moment as she considered the riddle, mulling over the words. The last five spoke of the virtues loyalty, generosity, honesty, kindness and laughter. What was this riddle trying to say? Something that brought all the virtues together? The only clue seemed to be mentioning the Fade but...

*Wait... From the Fade, our gift aligns... does the riddle mean magic?* As Twilight wondered, she looked at the words closer, trying to find some sort of meaning. As she considered what purpose her friends had in making the “answer” to the riddle shine, she also began to remember how much she had learned about magic since the journey began. She had learned the true nature of the power she harnessed through her horn, as well as how it could twist a pony into a monstrous abomination. She also learned of the wonders she could accomplish, like bringing motion to a golem or protecting her friends with new and amazing spells.

“Magic.” Twilight answered at last, looking up at the statue of the unicorn with determination. The answer was accepted, as the stone orb near the unicorn glowed with arcane power, with the name “Dewdrop Dazzle” forming at the pedestal upon which the ancient hero stood. The riddle twisted its markings, allowing Twilight to read the contents.

“Magic. That which unites the dream world with the physical. That which allowed the Imperium to rule as masters of the world through the gifts of the terrible Old Ones. That which called to Luna and brought her to our world. That which allowed the Elements of Harmony to awaken and defeat evil. A Walker of the Grey who held the gift of magic brought ponies together and ended the tyranny of Nightmare Moon. A Walker of the Grey who brought the Elements together once again to expose the heart of the Archdemon of Destruction and ensured its end. Know of the sacrifices made in the name of harmony, and remember them. Know that the Elements will return when a force of darkness dares threaten them that no mortal pony can overcome on their own. Know that only ponies



united in Loyalty, Generosity, Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, and Magic can awaken the magic and bring peace to a shadowed land.”

*The Elements were used to defeat the Archdemons, and Dewdrop Dazzle was one of the Walkers, one of the first Wardens!* Twilight had to calm herself after this revelation, her heart beating fast as new hope swelled within her heart.

Before she could express her elation, the six glowing stone orbs rose up from their statues, and a beam of light fired from their centers. Each beam struck the door on the other end of the hall with powerful arcane energy the likes Twilight had never felt before. Charged by the magic from the orbs, the door opened, revealing the next chamber which was shrouded in complete darkness.

Twilight put her thoughts on the Elements of Harmony as the door to the next hall, and therefore the next trial, was made open to the group. The darkness proved intimidating, and one of her bolts of light was quickly consumed by the shadows.

“I guess there is only one way to find out.” Taking a cautious step, the lavender unicorn stepped through the doorway and into the darkness as her friends followed her, until the sound the door closing and the utter loss of light elicited a sharp squeak from Fluttershy.

Then the ground vanished beneath them, the ponies screaming as they fell into oblivion.