

Chapter 12: The Apple Doesn't Fall Far

Loghoof looked up at the bleak gray sky that had rolled in from the west and frowned. Everything about this day was going to go wrong, and it all started with the lack of good weather. The teryn made his way through the streets of Trotterim to meet with Arl Maim, flanked by his personal guard Ser Sunsword as well as a few soldiers. The streets of the city were bustling with activity, as if the populace did not know that there was a civil war going on or the attacks by the ponyspawn.

Or perhaps they were just being ignorant, and wanted nothing to do with the suffering that was going on outside of the city's walls. Loghoof could not blame the ponies who had not fought in bloody war from the moment they were foals like he did. Many did not know of the Filesian occupation, or conversely, they did not want to fight another war again.

Spotting Arl Maim and his retinue, Loghoof called for a halt with a single raised hoof. He steeled his gaze at the Arl of Amarethine, who was approaching the interim regent of Equestria with a slight grin. Seeing Maim smile at any situation certainly confirmed to Loghoof that Maim had done something distasteful, immoral, likely illegal, and completely necessary for the greater good.

At least, that is what the teryn was telling himself after every meeting with Rendon Maim.

"I have done what you asked, your grace," Maim said, bowing low to Loghoof, "Many of the Bannorn will no longer worry your forces. I have made sure they are...open to negotiation. Of the Banns I could not change are Bann Meyer of Ponyring, and Bann Braeburn of Appleloosa. I could not locate them."

"Bann Meyer is likely assisting her refugees fleeing from the ponyspawn," Loghoof explained, "It was the closest region to Ostequus. Should they arrive, I want the ponies of Ponyring to be well treated."

Maim nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Trot with me," Loghoof said before walking towards the Chantry of Trotterim, not meeting Maim's eyes once, "What have you heard from the guests you invited?" Speaking in such cloak and dagger terms made Loghoof sick to his stomach. Where was the honour in such actions? Why was he using them against his own ponies?

"I have not heard back from our 'guests' since they left to find the Wardens," Maim answered, "I fear they may have failed."

"No matter," muttered Loghoof before approaching the door of the church, "I want them found, dead or alive. They are not strong enough to challenge me directly, but I will not have loose ends wandering the kingdom and becoming a threat in the future, likely when

it will be critical. Now go, I wish to pray in peace.”

The roguish noble bowed to Loghoof before turning towards the road to the Arl of Trotterim’s estate. The estate and title of arl he had given Maim after he had completed all of the tasks he had given him. Tasks of murder, of poison, of other nefarious deeds that Loghoof wanted to wash his hooves of. As of now he could not until he was sure the land was safe from harm.

Ser Sunsword stood at her usual place near the doors of the Chantry as Loghoof made his way inside. His presence alerted the Chantry sisters, who quickly made their way to find something else to do, leaving the Teryn alone in front of the statues of Celestia and Luna. He and the Grand Cleric had an understanding that he would not send soldiers to the converts to investigate repented fugitives they often harboured if only they would leave him be for a moment or two of private worship. There were benefits to being a regent, after all, and Loghoof would make full use of them.

All Chantries were the same, Loghoof noted as he laid himself on the ground in front of the statues. The temple had no curtains, to better allow the sun’s rays and the light of the moon to brighten the place of worship naturally, even though today only the dull light that could break through the clouds gave the room a feeling of bleak depression. The statues of the goddess sisters were immaculate, Celestia portrayed in shining alabaster while Luna’s was crafted from dark granite. Candles were on hoof for any pony to use, to bring their own light for the alicorn sisters to see in the darkness of the world and perhaps aid the troubled mind of the pony who knelt before them.

As with every other day he came to the Chantry, Loghoof placed candles for all of the loved ones and friends he outlived, whether from battle, disease, or simply old age. A candle for his darling wife, who had died during the influenza outbreak, who Loghoof wished he could have one more moment to share with her every day. How closely Armeria resembled her, and how much pain he had caused when he shut his flower from his life after Ostequus. Yet he could not blame her; he was the cause of her husband Blueblood’s death after all. It would likely take a lifetime before he would ever know forgiveness for such an act.

A candle for Blueblood then, Loghoof decided as he lit another pillar of wax. He did not deserve his fate, but Loghoof would do anything to protect Equestria. Blueblood was a fool, too focused on glory and his own legacy rather than the legacy of his crown and the good of the nation. Armeria was the true administrator of the kingdom, and by Loghoof’s high standards, she was doing an admirable job. Still, no pony deserved to be left to the fate of the ponyspawn’s jaws.

Loghoof took up another candle, this one for the his friend the old king, his most trusted friend during the Filesian occupation and after who the teryn had served with loyalty and conviction, not because of the crown but because they were sworn brothers. They had fought and bled and suffered together under the Filesians, until the day they had seen the

last of the occupying force leave Equestria seemingly forever. Loghoof had shared victories, defeats, tears of joy and anguish with his sworn brother, who he had now betrayed even in death.

“A king I betrayed by abandoning his son,” Loghoof sputtered, looking up at the two goddesses before him, “I betrayed the crown of the kingdom I was sworn to defend. I watched as countless brave ponies died. My own daughter rejects me. I use that snake Maim and his shadowy tactics. For what?”

“I do it all for Equestria! I do what I must to protect Equestria! Ponies fight ponies across the land because they claim I am a usurper and a traitor, when everything I do is to protect this land I love! I watched as my friend’s son died because because I left him to die because he would have sold Equestria to the Filesians! Now the ponyspawn run unchecked throughout the realm, the Bannorn wage civil war against me and now I must suffer all the slings and arrows of the regency I need to keep this land in check! If this is not a challenge to my faith, I do not know what is!”

Finding that he was up on his hooves, brimming with anger at the still visages of the sisters, Loghoof breathed deep in an effort to calm down. He was yelling at statues, as silent as the stone they were carved from. Or perhaps he was shouting at the heavens themselves, hoping that one of the alicorns would hear his cry and give him the guidance he sought.

However, statues could not speak for goddesses, no matter how much one ranted and raved. Loghoof looked on at the sculptures before standing tall and proud as usual. “I have chosen my path,” he said at last, “And I will walk it with thieves, cowards, and killers if I must. I do it all to protect this land and its ponies, even if those same ponies turn against me.”

He needed conviction if he was going to hold this kingdom together and beat back the Filesians and the ponyspawn. If the goddesses would not aid him, then the iron of sheer grit and determination would have to flow in his veins. Loghoof would not be deterred from his course by anypony. Not the Grey Wardens, not Arl Macintosh, not even his own daughter.

“For Equestria,” he said aloud to the stone representations of the goddesses, raising a hoof in salute. With a quick turn on his hoof, the teryn of Glenwall left the Chantry, his mind more focused than ever on his duty to his nation. As he left the house of reverence, the clouds grew darker and denser as a storm brewed overhead. No light entered the Chantry windows and the statues of Celestia and Luna were covered in shadows.

“Hey Shale! Hey Shale! Hey listen!” Pinkie Pie bounced backwards in front of the golem as they walked back to the docks were Ditzzy’s boat was waiting. Twilight couldn’t help

by smile as Pinkie made a pony of solid rock seem uncomfortable.

“What does the pink one want with me?” Shale asked, clearly bothered that it could not solve this problem with squishing. Pinkie giggled as she made circles around Shale, her bright smile unwavering to the annoyance in Shale’s voice.

“I am pretty pink aren’t I? You can call me Pinkie! Ooh, Shale, I was wondering what golems like to eat. After all, at the end of our journey I’m going to have the biggest party ever and everyone is going to be invited and when you joined I was all GASP because I never met a golem before and I want to make sure everypony is happy and having fun at the party!”

Shale looked exasperated at having to deal with a pony with near limitless energy. “I have no need for food. I just need the control rod charged, apparently every thirty years or so.”

“What about dancing?” Pinkie stood in the golem’s path, “Do golems dance? Oh I bet you rock the dance floor Shale!”

“Did it take the pink one all day to think of that?” If a rock could sigh, Shale was certainly trying. “I have no interest in parties, only squishing as many meatsacks as possible. If I recover my memories along the way, I’ll consider that an added bonus.”

“All of our friends should be at the party when we stop the ponyspawn,” Pinkie said, “And you are our friend, and friends should stick together, good times and bad.”

“I do not know what a ‘friend’ is,” Shale said rather bluntly as it lowered its head towards Pinkie, looking into her blue eyes, “I have only known my former master, the ponies of Stablesire who thought I was a quaint statue, the pigeons who defecated on me, and now a travelling group of ponies who will direct me to more creatures to squish. Believe me when I say I do not need friends. I am a golem after all. The only golem in all of the land of which I am quite certain, or else I would have been found by another golem.”

Pinkie’s eyes began to well up in tears. Twilight felt sorry for the earth pony, wondering how often Pinkie’s invitations to parties were denied. “I even made you an invitation,” she said, digging into her saddle bag and pulling out a detailed card. The lavender unicorn wondered where Pinkie found the time to make invitations as well as her grenades on their journey.

“It...made something? For me?” The shock in Shale’s voice was genuine, which surprised Twilight further. Shale peered at the invitation, reading the contents out loud.

“You are cordially invited as a special guest to the ‘We managed to beat the Blight and not get eaten by ponyspawn, isn’t that simply terrifically super awesome!’ party to be held at a location currently undecided by party organizer Pinkie Pie. There will be delicious treats, dancing and games such as the ever popular ‘pin the tail on the pony’.

Please R.S.V.P. as soon as possible. We can't wait to see you there."

Shale looked up from the invitation back at Pinkie Pie. "This party...I can choose to go if I want to, yes?" Pinkie nodded sadly as the golem looked down at the invitation. "Well then, it would be unbecoming of the finest, and perhaps only, golem in all of Equestria to miss such a grand event. I do want to be the guest of honour of course, and a big banner that says 'Greatest Golem Ever'."

Never had Twilight seen Pinkie smile brighter than now. With a bounding leap towards Shale, she wrapped her forelegs around the golem in a big hug. As Shale sputtered for some kind of response, Twilight smiled as she and the others began to make their way on the boat. Even though they took a detour, the party could still make it to Red Apple before dusk, granted no other navigational errors from the captain blew them off course.

Spike was sleeping on Twilight's back as she headed down into cargo hold, looking for something to put the baby dragon in. The fight against the ponyspawn likely tuckered him right out, and the least she could do for her little warrior was find a nice place for Spike to rest in. Spotting a small empty basket, she lifted the basket with her magic before placing Spike inside while covering his small form with a spare cloth, careful not to disturb his much needed slumber.

Little warrior, Twilight thought as she headed back up the stairs, how did this even happen? I'm supposed to keep Spike safe, not encourage him to get into danger. What was done was done though, and Spike had shown aptitude with a blade in his claws, a skill with a sword that he had never held before, at least to the best of Twilight's knowledge. Not only did he fight, but she actually encouraged the dragon to hop on her back and charged towards the ponyspawn. There was no doubt that battle would call them all to fight again likely very soon; was she ready to allow Spike to throw himself into danger for his sake again?

The young dragon would certainly protest, of that Twilight was sure. Yet as she watched over the sleeping form of her draconic ward, Twilight knew she had to do something to help Spike if even just a little. Perhaps she could speak with Ditzy to see if there was any armour she could use, and Rarity to see if her spells with cloth could also be used with metal. As she emerged from the cargo hold, she saw that all her friends were crowding around the edge of the dock. All of them except Shale, that is.

Realization hit as she looked at Shale, then back to the boat already filled with all assortment of goods as well as a full contingent of passengers. Shale was a pony made of stone, so there was no doubt it would be too heavy to add to the boat without causing it to sink. "What are we going to do?" Fluttershy asked, looking at Twilight for some sort of solution.

Before she could say anything, Shale began to enter the water on its own. As the rock pony lowered itself into the murky depths that gave Lake Blackwater its name, Shale

looked up to Twilight Sparkle, face blank of any expression.

“I will go south, yes?” Shale said, “And I will meet the party on the other side. Besides, I need a bath to remove the years of bird excrement buildup. It should expect me there, either before or after it arrives.” With that Shale continued on into the dark waters, until all that remained was a ripple in the surface.

“All aboard!” called Ditzzy as she made her way to the helm, “Next stop, Red Apple Acres and Castle, no detours!”

With the sail down, the boat began to drift across the lake, slowly being turned away from the Stableshire pier. Twilight, not leaving anything to chance like before, called upon the arcane to provide a small breeze to fill the sails and help bring the ship into the right direction. Once the ponies were all settled, Twilight could see that they were all feeling tired after two consecutive battles against the ponyspawn. Trixie and Fluttershy were still huddled in a corner, clearly afraid out of their wits by what they had encountered and Twilight could not blame them at all. There were few ponies, and likely fewer unicorns from the Tower, that could have stood up to the horrors of the ponyspawn. Especially when one of those ponyspawn was a minotaur who had easily smashed a unicorn’s shield.

They sat around the deck as the boat continued to sail, with nary a word spoken. Eyes were filled with fatigue and weariness of battle that Twilight hoped Red Apple Acres would provide some sort of safe haven.

It was Applejack that spoke up first, with a new-found confidence in her voice. “Listen y’all,” she said, “I’m sorry for running off and bein’ all rude like back at the inn. None of you deserved that after y’all opened yer hearts to the group. I suppose what I saw in the Fade just really put a lot of bad apples in my head. All I ever wanted was a family to be with, and for a time I had it before I was taken to the templars. But I also didn’t really know my folks; my ma died when I was just a little foal, and my pappy, well...”

Her fellow Warden was hesitating, but Twilight hoped she wouldn’t falter when it was obvious Applejack needed to get this off her chest. Sitting next to the blonde maned earth pony, Twilight laid a comforting foreleg over her friend’s shoulders. Applejack smiled at the violet unicorn, thankful for the support without speaking a word. With another deep breath, Applejack looked ready to continue.

“All right,” Applejack said, “Here goes. Now I don’t blame any of you if ya don’t believe this. Why, some days I rightfully don’t believe it myself. But it’s the honest to Betsy truth. My pappy was the old king.”

This new information caught Twilight completely off guard, and as she looked at the party, everypony was just as surprised as she was. No pony spoke out against Applejack’s claim however, though Twilight did not know if it was simply a stunned silence or that

they believed the story.

“It was a secret to everypony,” Applejack continued, “Only Arl Macintosh knew, as well as some officials. They all didn’t like the idea of some misbegotten filly trying to take Blueblood’s crown, not that I ever wanted the thing. All I ever wanted was to stay with my big brother and little sister, but things just weren’t meant to be. Not fer me, and not for a lot of folks at Red Apple Castle...”

“Get him inside quickly,” called one of the guards as they dragged a large red colt through the castle courtyard, “We don’t need to create a panic.” They made their way to the east side of grounds towards the kitchens which would lead them closer to the infirmary. Following the wounded Macintosh and the guards carrying him were several more soldiers, each armed and ready for battle. They flanked a much larger earth pony, adorned in shining plated armour and a golden crown atop his head, a symbol of his absolute authority over the land.

Little Applejack watched from her hiding spot under a wooden staircase. She had just finished her usual chores around the fortress when the main gates opened and ponies poured in with the wounded and the battered. When she saw Macintosh being pulled towards the castle with arrows in his thick hide, the small earth pony wanted to cry out, to give some words of comfort. As more soldiers filled the courtyard with the injured, Applejack instead remained quiet, holding her mama’s amulet of Celestia’s Sun close to her heart.

The king looked around with harsh eyes before motioning for a pegasus messenger to his side. “Bring this message to Loghoof with all the speed your wings can grant,” he said, his voice stern, “I want the attackers found. I want them found and shown no mercy. Now go.”

In the shadows of the stairs leading up to the main hall of Red Apple Castle, Applejack watched as the king delivered orders to his soldiers, who obeyed without question. What happened, she wondered to warrant a surprise visit from the king of Equestria? Arlessa Smith would have said something to Macintosh and Applejack, but there was no sign of the castle’s ruler making her way to greet the king. Who were the attackers the king had wanted to be found? More importantly, were these attackers the one that hurt her big brother?

The king turned around then and noticed the filly hiding in the darkness, his keen green eyes matching Applejack’s own. They stared in silence for a moment, with Applejack feeling calm despite the ruckus going on in the castle. The king’s eyes were weary but still held warmth in the very centre of his pupils. The king then began to walk towards Applejack, who stepped out from her hiding place and stooped herself into a bow.

“Yer majesty,” she said, averting her eyes from the monarch of the realm. The king said

nothing as he lowered himself down onto his hooves, meeting the filly face-to-face.

“What good was all the fighting against the Filesians when our own ponies cause so much harm to the young?” he mumbled, still looking into Applejack’s eyes, “I’m sorry. You must be Applejack yes?”

Applejack nodded, which only made the king let out an exasperated sigh. He just looked so tired of everything around him. “I want you to pay close attention, Applejack,” he said with an authoritative tone, only to quickly adjust his speaking when Applejack stood up straight for the king. “This is not a command from your king but rather a request from a concerned friend. Something terrible has happened, Applejack, yet I am not going to sugar coat it. This may be cruel to say to one so young, although as much as it pains me I cannot lie about it. Honesty has always been my best policy.”

“Bandits ambushed and killed Arlessa Granny Smith. I was leading a contingent of soldiers in basic drills when I received news, far too late. Macintosh was injured but he will recover. I am sorry for your loss. I am truly sorry I could do nothing to save them.”

Her legs buckled under this new weight as she fell to her knees. Applejack could feel her eyes water at the news; she wanted to cry, but her throat was dry. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing, even from the lips of the king. The Arlessa was so kind to everypony of the Red Apple region, the ponies loved her for being fair and just. Her hollering of ‘Soup’s on!’ could have been heard from as far as the farthest tree to the bottom of the castle’s cellars, a sign of a good harvest from the fields. And now she was gone, cut down by bandits as quickly as the apples were brought down from the trees.

She could not remember the last thing she said to Arlessa Smith or Big Macintosh before they ventured away from the castle. Was it something about dinner at a certain time? To bring back fresh apples? To tell off the blacksmith who had likely had too much cider to drink yet again? Or where the forgotten words ‘Love ya Granny!’ that could never be said again?

Applejack didnt cry, despite the salty tears forming around her eyes. She was a big pony, a tough pony, and big tough ponies didn’t cry. Yet when she looked up and saw streaming tears fall from the eyes of the king’s stoic face, it was enough to break her dam and let the tears flow. If the king could cry, then it was all right for her, even though she did not know why the king was doing such. He wrapped a foreleg around the filly, who somehow felt safe and secure against his strong limb.

“I am a damned foal,” he said, his voice wavering, “And it took tragedy to make me see it all. Please forgive me, Applejack.” She looked up at the king’s face, confused at what he had said. Why would a king ask a simple filly for forgiveness?

Before Applejack could get her answer, the king stood up tall and straight, his eyes drying as quickly as a puddle on a hot day, though now filled with a new determination. Or

perhaps anger. "I have much to do, Applejack," his voice back to one full of strength, "I have much to repair, even if I have to do it with all four hooves. Will you do me a service, Applejack? A favour for the king?"

"I reckon I can yer majesty!" she answered, standing straight just like the regal sovereign in front of her.

"I want you to be by Macintosh's and Applebloom's side," the king said, "I want you to be the pillar of support they can lean on in the rough times all of Red Apple will have coming, for he will soon take over as Arl of Red Apple with all the responsibilities that incurs, and Applebloom will need a guardian to protect her in this cruel world. They will need you, Applejack. Will you accept this quest?"

"Ah can do that yer Majesty!" Applejack said with a smile on her face, "I can help Macintosh out. He's gonna need all the help he can get! And I'll always be around to protect Applebloom!"

The king returned the smile with a proud one of his own before turning away to his soldiers. Without a second to lose, Applejack scurried off towards the infirmary, where Healer Redheart was tending to Macintosh's wounds. The great red earth pony was bandaged up all along his limbs and the smell of healing poultice hung in the air like bad eggs. Propping herself up against the bed, Applejack nudged against her big brother's sides, hoping to see Macintosh's eyes open.

"Excuse me," said Healer Redheart, "But you really should let him rest."

"Ah'm sorry," Applejack looked over the red earth pony, "Ah just wanted to make sure Big Macintosh could see a smiling face the moment he woke up. He's gonna need me by his side! The king said so!"

Before Healer Redheart could say another word, the blonde filly let out a sharp audible gasp. "Applebloom! I need to go see her right away! You'll take care of Big Macintosh won't you?" Redheart shook her head as Applejack rushed out of the infirmary, not even waiting for an answer as the young filly made her way up the castle stairs to the Arlessa's personal chambers.

There, next to the large bed in the room was a small cradle made of oak and blazoned with the imagery of apples. Nestled in the small cradle was Applebloom, still sleeping in her swaddling blankets and completely unaware of the havoc outside of the castle. The tiny foal was still very young, not even old enough to speak, and the sight of her made Applejack's heart break. They had first lost their mother when Applebloom was born, then their father to the influenza, and Granny Smith took the role of their caretaker for as long as Applejack could remember.

Now all they had known changed in an instant, but at least they were going to have each

other for support. The king commanded it after all, and a pony did not disobey or fail an order from the king. Applejack rocked the cradle gently with a slight push of her hoof as she looked down on her little sister.

“Everything’s gonna be all right, Applebloom,” Applejack whispered to the sleeping foal, “The king sent me to help you and Macintosh, and that’s what I’m gonna do. I’ll be here no matter what.”

Hours had passed and Applejack was sleeping on the floor next to the cradle when the door creaked open. The king entered the Arlessa’s chamber followed closely by Healer Redheart who picked up the awakening Applebloom and stepped out of the bedroom. The king lowered himself just as he did in the courtyard, meeting Applejack’s green eyes with his own.

He focused much of his attention on the Celestial amulet Applejack was wearing before speaking. “That amulet,” he said, holding it in one hoof, “I remember it. I gave it to somepony special. Did you know that? I cared for your mother, and was sad to hear her passing.”

Applejack looked at her mama’s amulet as it shone in the candle light that filled the room. The king had given her mama the amulet? That made the gift even more special if such an important pony gave it.

“Applejack, I’m going to tell you something important,” the king continued, “And it will be difficult to believe. I would not likely believe it myself if I were in your horseshoes. I don’t know the right words to say, I usually have Loghoof prepare whatever speeches I need. Or shout loud to make the soldiers follow my lead. I’ll just say it right and true then.”

“I am your father.”

Staring at the king with her jaw open, Applejack’s began to feel dizzy with this revelation. What was the king talking about, she wondered? She knew her pappy, he was a good pony who was going to be Arl before the sickness took him. Why would the king say something like this?

“You said honesty is your best policy,” the filly said, scratching the ground with her hoof as her nerves felt shot. The king nodded slowly.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, especially on a day like today. I realized when I saw you, I could not hide the truth from you anymore. That everything changes in an instant, and then the moment is lost. I was stupid, Applejack. I hid you away with one of my best friends because I didn’t want to deal with the repercussions of my actions. I see that now I was wrong. I beg your forgiveness.”

Never had Applejack felt as confused as she was now. The pappy she knew wasn't her real father, but instead was the king of Equestria, a hero who had kicked the Filesians out with their tails between their legs. And now the king was asking her forgiveness. No, begging for it.

"Well, uh..." Applejack tried to speak up, but was at a loss for words. What does one say to the king of Equestria when he just revealed he was your real father?"

"Wait," he said, before digging into his saddlebag. Applejack watched as the king...her father, as she had to remind herself pulled out a wide brimmed hat, just like pappy used to wear. "Your pappy and I were close, Applejack. We were like brothers, and we grew up together, along with Loghoof, moving from Red Apple to Trotterim and back again. We all had hats like these, and there is many a day I'd trade wearing this crown for such a simple hat."

"Now I want you to have it. I'm going to make things right between us, if you'd let me. I won't be around much, but when I am here to help Macintosh become Arl, I'd like to get to know you. Please."

Applejack felt the hat being placed on her head, with the king being gentle as he positioned the hat properly. The old hat felt good on her head, like it belonged there all along. She looked up at the king, beaming as the monarch returned the smile to the small filly before him.

Yet the smile would soon reverse as she thought back to her mama, and to her pappy. "I still miss my pappy, yer Majesty," she said, "If your my really daddy, what do I call you? I still love my pappy, I don't want to stop callin' him that."

The king thought long and hard for a moment, a hoof to his chin as he apparently consulted the ceiling for advice. "'Daddy'," he said to himself before grinning at Applejack, "I'd like that, if you don't mind."

"Well, there it is," Applejack concluded, "Not as exciting as Rainbow Dash, or as recent as Pinkie Pie, but that's my story." Twilight and the others looked at Applejack for a moment, letting the tale sink in.

Their friend was the heir apparent to the throne now that Blueblood was dead, which made Twilight realize just how much pressure her fellow Warden was under. Not only to fight against the Blight and to bring the treaties to the different ponies across Equestria, but they were now faced with what was likely a succession crisis that Applejack wanted no part in.

“Did you ever meet your brother Blueblood?” Fluttershy asked. Applejack smirked then nodded her head.

“We met once before Ostequus, a long time ago,” she answered, “I still remember like it was yesterday...”

“Applejack, this is your half-brother Blueblood.”

“Howdy there, Blueblood! Care fer some apples? I bucked them myself!”

“Oooh! Look at the size of that mirror!”

“We didn’t exactly hit it off. Very sad.” Applejack sighed, her head lowered and her ears drooped low. Then she looked up and chuckled, “You asked if Blueblood was my brother. That means ya’ll believe me?”

One by one, the ponies stood up around Applejack as the boat rocked gently on the waves. Twilight looked around to see all her friends offering the blonde earth pony caring smiles, with her own matching them. “Of course we believe you Applejack,” Twilight said, “You’re our friend, and we’ll always put our trust in you.”

Applejack wiped away a single tear as she looked around at all the ponies. “Well shucks,” she chuckled, “All this time I thought about how I was too lucky to die with the rest of the Wardens. But now I know how lucky I am, lucky to have met all of you.”

The party shared a laugh, enjoying the company of one another as they sat on the deck while Dinky brought up a basket of apples to share. Each pony looked at the fruit with ravenous hunger after such a long day of battles and revelations; they quickly dug into their meals with gusto.

“You looked like you had it a good life going,” Rainbow Dash said to Applejack, breaking the silence, “Your dad’s the king, you were living in Red Apple Castle safe as can be. How’d you get stuck with the templar? That has to be the biggest dive from awesome to lame.”

“I was sent to the Chantry soon after the old king died,” Applejack answered, “Some of the nobles who knew said it was to keep me safe if any of them nobles found out and thought I was a threat to Blueblood. I didn’t want to go, and I made sure I was louder than a rooster about it. Macintosh agreed with them though, said I couldn’t stay hidden in Red Apple forever, said the Chantry was safe.”

“I didn’t want safe, I wanted to stay with Macintosh and Applebloom. I went and accepted a quest from the King to be by their sides, and what would being the most dependable of ponies be if I was off in some Chantry and not there. I was mighty upset, so much so I broke my mama’s pendant. I guess I just want to go back to Red Apple,

make sure the ponyspawn haven't bucked all the ponies there... maybe make amends to Macintosh while I'm at it."

Silence descended on the ponies as they sat on the deck, simply waiting for the ship to finally arrive at the Red Apple docks. They kept themselves busy with small tasks, such as Pinkie making more grenades, Rarity reading from the dark grimoire that belonged to Flemeth, to Rainbow Dash flying laps around the ship. Twilight found herself descending into the cramped cargo hold, checking on Spike who was still snoozing soundly in his basket, little Dinky also asleep in makeshift bedding nearby.

It was for little fillies and colts that they were fighting the ponyspawn, Twilight told herself as she sparked an orb of warm orange light from her horn. She smiled while she lowered the sphere of heat next to the two sleeping younglings as they adjusted themselves in their beds, enjoying the comforting heat from the ball of energy.

Twilight took a moment to gingerly stroke the spines on Spike's head as she looked around the cargo for something that would help protect him. It was likely to be near impossible for anypony to find armour fit for a baby dragon, but with a careful observant eye, the lavender unicorn was able to spot a smaller fitting chest guard of chainmail. It wasn't the plated armour that she saw knights and chevalier wear, yet it was a good start. Lifting the armour with her magic, Twilight was surprised at just how heavy the metal protection weighed, even though it did not look particularly heavy.

With the armour hovering behind her, Twilight stepped out onto the deck and made her way to Rarity, who was still studying Flemeth's grimoire with intense concentration. Twilight wondered if she could help with Rarity's studies as the sorceress with the white coat saw Twilight approach, flashing one of her immaculate smiles. "Is there something I can help you with, dear?" Rarity asked, regarding both Twilight and the floating chainmail.

"Yes..." Twilight floated the piece of pony protection to Rarity, "I was wondering if you could do something with this to make some armour for Spike."

Rarity closed the grimoire shut before taking the armour with her own magic. She too almost dropped the metal after being surprised at how heavy it was, but managed to keep it in the air. With a critical eye, she looked over every link in the chain and how it meshed together to form the chestguard.

"I am not a blacksmith, Twilight," she said, not looking up while continuing to examine the chainmail.

"I know," Twilight responded, "But when I saw Spike fight against the ponyspawn, I knew that he wouldn't take no for an answer the next time we're in battle. I just want him protected as best I can."

“When you put it that way,” Rarity said, putting down the chainmail, “Of course I will do what I can, though it may take some time. Metal is certainly less giving than cloth and leather, but it would do some good to expand my repertoire. Don’t worry Twilight. I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you, Rarity,” Twilight said sincerely. She then looked at the dark book before continuing, “How goes your study of Flemeth’s book?”

Rarity gave an exhausted sigh. “Tis a most confusing read, darling,” she explained, “Most of the words and symbols just translate into complete gibberish. Then one page of gibberish connects with another to make some sense and then just makes more confusing pages that I simply cannot make heads or tails of.”

“What about going back to the Wilds and asking your mother for help?”

“No,” Rarity said sternly, her eyes focused on the book, “I can’t do that. What pages I could connect, what I have discovered...makes me afraid, Twilight. Afraid of what my mother can really do with her magic.”

Twilight felt a cold shiver run up and down her spine, as if ice was being pressed against her back with force. She still remembered the aura of sheer power Flemeth held around her, how her aged yellow eyes looked down on everypony with contempt. If Loghoof made Twilight feel small under his gaze, Flemeth had made Twilight feel completely powerless.

It was the first time Twilight had heard Rarity mention Flemeth in a tone denoting fear rather than indifference or distaste in her mother’s lack of fashion sense. Not that Twilight could blame her, having such a magical dynamo for a mother would be great pressure for any unicorn. Fear of the magical unknown made Twilight wonder if she wanted to know exactly what feats of spellwork Flemeth was capable of.

“Don’t worry, Twilight,” Rarity said, snapping Twilights attention back to the present, “I’ll get right to work on Spike’s armour right away. Oh he’ll look simply dashing, oh I can just see the possibilities and they are endless!”

“Thanks again for all this,” said Twilight before realizing she just took the armour from the hold without saying anything to Ditzzy. “Oh my gosh,” Twilight said, chiding herself in private for almost becoming a thief to the pony that was giving them safe passage, “I need to go pay for that.” Without another word, Twilight sped off up to the helm, where Ditzzy kept her eyes on the horizon, or as close as her mismatched vision would allow.

Ditzzy kept her smile bright as she held her hooves steady on the helm of the ship while Twilight offered to pay for the chainmail she had brought up deck. The grey pegasus shook her head, claiming that for all Twilight had done to protect Dinky from the ponyspawn, a forgotten piece of chainmail was just the tip of a “thank you muffin”.

Twilight wasn't sure what to make of all of that, but was grateful all the same.

The shore on the southern edge of Lake Blackwater was finally coming into view, with the buildings of the Red Apple Acres community coming into complete view. The party bunched together at the bow of the ship, looking with anticipation as they sailed ever closer to the docks.

While Twilight was glad that they were soon going to reach their destination, the look on Applejack's face was the complete opposite. "Somethin' ain't right," she said, narrowing her eyes as she looked on at the agricultural community, "I don't see any ponies millin' and meanderin' about. That just ain't right, there should be somepony at the docks. We need to get to the acres pronto."

Ditzy did her best to slow down the boat as it approached the old docks of Red Apple Acres, showing surprising skill with ropes and knots as she flew about. Twilight looked upwards to the tall plateau overlooking the farmland, taking in the sight of the great fortress that stood proudly on the peak. Red Apple Castle appeared mighty atop its grand hill, like a sentry overlooking his post and watching over all the miles around him with careful eyes. Standards bearing the namesake of the Red Apple region hung from the parapets and flapped softly in the breeze. However, there were no signs of soldiers patrolling the parapets, which made Twilight wonder if Applejack was right and something was considerably wrong.

Applejack was the first to leap off the boat and onto the docks, her senses sharp as she looked around the quiet township. Twilight followed, also perking her ears forward as she looked about for anything suspicious. Perhaps they were both listening for the same tell-tale sign of a ponyspawn attack. Taking a deep breath, the violet mare listened closely for the beating of ponyspawn hearts, listening for the signs that black blood was being pumped in savaged bodies.

Only a chilling silence answered her curiosity. "I don't sense any ponyspawn," Twilight said to Applejack as the rest of the party descended from the boat, Spike following the ponies while letting out a big yawn.

"Neither can I, Twilight," responded Applejack, "Let's header on into town. Maybe we can find somepony to tell us why everything is so spooky."

Everything around them did seem stranger by the minute. Windows and doors were shut tight, and not a single soul travelled through the streets. Red bloodstains littered the area around the village, signifying a battle had occurred here similar to what had happened in Stablesire. What was especially jarring was the complete lack of bodies. If there had been a battle, there would have at least been some sign of corpses littering the ground, at the very least discarded weaponry.

Fluttershy whimpered as the sound of the wind bellowed through abandoned buildings.

Tensions were high with the fear of uncertainty clouding the air around them. They needed to get somewhere safe and find out exactly what was going on in the little village by the lake. "Applejack, you know this town and the area better than anypony," Twilight said, "Where would the townspies go in the event of an emergency, like an attack?"

"They'd all scamper to the Chantry," Applejack answered, "Biggest building in town. Honest to Bessie, they ponyfolk likely went there! Let's go!"

The Chantry appeared to have been heavily assaulted for some time, with scratch and burn marks marring the already aged doors. With a strong hoof, Applejack knocked the door, but there was no response from inside. Applejack knocked again to no avail.

"Open this door right this second!" Applejack hollered, frustration marked clearly on her face.

"No!" Came a scared voice, "I don't know if yer zombies coming to eat our brains!"

"Zombies don't sound like angry mares," said a much calmer voice, with a similar way of speech to Applejack's. "I'm Bann Braeburn of Aaaaaappleosa! Er... Who goes there?"

"Braeburn!" Applejack shouted, "It's yer kin, Applejack! Let us in this applebuckin' minute!"

There was murmuring on the other side of the door before the pathway finally opened for the party. They entered to see the Chantry filled with soldiers and townspies nursing wounds. They all looked up to the open door, scared and worried of what was to come.

"What the hay is going on Braeburn?" Applejack asked with a bit more force than was usual, "What's going on with Red Apple? My home? What about the castle? And Arl Macintosh, and little Applebloom!"

"Whoa nelly, slow right down there a spell," Braeburn said, trying to keep Applejack calm, "A lot is going and none of it good. Would ya'll believe me if I said we had a bit of a problem with zombies?"