

Maledictum Insania 2: The BloodClaw Cult

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Chapter 22: Catching The Spider

Once again, Twilight and her friends had to take big detours to avoid getting seen by potential cultists. But compared to the normally very exhausting ways the group had to travel, being hidden in the storage of an airship was a pleasant change. This way, they could prevent being spotted climbing up the mountain to Equestria's capital and avoid the by now very well observed train system. The only reason for anypony to even go to the airship's storage was to either store luggage bags or take them out again upon landing. But this security and comfort came with a price. The airship first had to wander all across Equestria before it would dock in Canterlot. This would once again delay the downfall of the BloodClaw Cult for several more critical days.

The storage room was dark. The only light sources were either the unicorns' horns or the door leading upstairs whenever a staff member entered and the group had to hide. The keepers of harmony had been doing this for what felt like an eternity with no indication how much time had passed or where they currently were. All they could rely on was the airship's time schedule, a map of Equestria and Twilight's wits to put that shallow information to use.

"Okay. If I got this right, we just departed from Cloudsdale. Which means we are finally heading to Canterlot," the purple mare analyzed.

"Finally," Rarity commented in an annoyed tone. "All this hiding and constantly being quiet is starting to stress me out. I tell you, Twilight. Once this all is over, I will lay down in a queen-size bed and not get up for days anymore. My back is killing me for sleeping on the ground for months."

"I hope this will all be over soon," Fluttershy started. "But our biggest challenge is still ahead of us. If Canterlot is truly the home of the BloodClaw Cult and if Black Widow is really there, we can expect the place to be crawling with cultists. We won't be able to take even a single step without constantly fearing to be attacked."

"True, and we can't just fight our way to their church, since we yet have to find it. If only we had a way to contact Crystal Blossom. We really could use her help to get started in Canterlot," Twilight commented.

"Has she still not responded to your letters?" Rarity wondered.

"No, but that doesn't surprise me. If she is still chasing after Despair, it might be that this demon is preventing the letters from reaching her. We can't contact the princesses to ask for more

reaper support either, or we risk that the cultists find out we are there. Right now, we are on our own,” the purple mare explained.

After she finished, the group did not have anything to talk about anymore. For a while, they tried to come up with a plan on how to tackle this situation ahead. But even for Twilight, it seemed next to impossible. They could not allow themselves to make a single mistake. In order to succeed, they would have to hide in Canterlot, find the BloodClaw church there, infiltrate it, assassinate Black Widow and escape, all without getting seen once. This was a task even an elder reaper would find very difficult. How were they supposed to manage all this on their own with such limited time left on top?

In the dim light of Rarity’s horn, Twilight used her magic to take a few notes on things they had to keep in mind. They tried to gather as many ideas as possible, but only the fewest actually were useful. Suddenly, the door opened again. Rarity, Fluttershy and Twilight instantly hid themselves again. This time, it felt a lot shorter than before. Had the airship already docked in Canterlot?

Two sets of hooves were heard coming down the stairs. Then, as the sounds came to the middle of the storage room, the clattering stopped. It seemed like they were searching for something.

“Are you sure they are here?” a young female voice wondered.

“Yes. I have seen them coming. They are just hiding from us,” a surprisingly familiar voice responded.

Twilight, Rarity and Fluttershy peeked out of their covers. In this next to total darkness, it was hard to make out anything. But it seemed like Fluttershy could see much better than her other two friends, causing her to be the first to leave her cover and calmly walk over to the two figures.

“You were the last one I would have expected to see here, Lady Truesight,” the yellow mare started.

As soon as Twilight heard that name, she cast a light spell to illuminate the storage. It really was the reaper clairvoyant.

“Definitely have to agree with that,” Twilight commented while leaving her cover along with Rarity. “What are you doing here?”

“Do not misunderstand, keepers of harmony. My opinion about you still stays the same. It was not my idea to search for you. This was Amber’s wish,” Truesight explained coldly, then gave the group an indicating glance down between her front legs.

Right below the red mare was another set of small orange-brown hooves, hiding beneath the cloak. Through the gap, a yellow eye could be seen, focusing Twilight in unease.

“Hey there,” the purple mare started in a soft tone, lowering herself to the filly’s level of height. “I remember you. How are-”

“Don’t get too close, Twilight Sparkle,” Truesight interrupted in a sharp tone. “I made a promise to guard this filly with my life. This also includes that I have to attack every pony who tries to approach her.”

“Wow! Calm down, darling! It is not like we would hurt her!” Rarity tried to reason.

“Your intentions don’t matter. She is afraid of all ponies,” Truesight insisted.

“Wait a moment,” Fluttershy requested. “You are raising her now? You promised to keep her safe? Is this the reason why you rescued her?”

“No, apprentice. I made this promise to *her*, not another pony,” Truesight replied.

Now, the reaper mare carefully opened the cloak, just enough to present more of the filly. Instantly, Twilight’s and Rarity’s mouths fell open. Amber’s mane and tail had regrown by now. They were short and rainbow-colored.

“She is a spectralist!” Twilight spoke in fascination. “That explains so much now! I guess this is also the reason why you saved her.”

The moment Twilight’s and Rarity’s expressions changed, Amber retreated further beneath the cloak. Then, as Twilight had raised her voice, fear began to overwhelm the little filly. It was clearly written in her face, filling her eyes with tears and causing her to shake heavily. As soon as the group came to realize that, they started feeling guilty over their own reactions.

“I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten-” the purple mare tried to apologize.

“It doesn’t matter, Twilight Sparkle. What my intentions are for saving her and taking care of her are also none of your concerns. The sole reason I am here at all is only because she wanted to tell you something,” Truesight interrupted.

“Well, that still doesn’t mean you have to be so-” Rarity started.

“Just let it be as it is, Rarity,” Fluttershy interrupted, trying to calm her friend and settle the conflict. “There is no point in arguing over something like that. In fact, I think if they went through the trouble to come here and tell us something, we should listen to them.”

“Well, yes,” Twilight agreed. “Let’s just put all this to the side and get to the core: What is it you want to tell us, Amber?”

It took the filly a moment to gather her courage again. But eventually, she took a step forth anew and glanced through the gap of the cloak with her good eye again.

“I... have seen pictures,” she whispered insecurely.

“Well, I guess that’s something Truesight can help you more with than I. She is a spectralist herself after all,” Twilight explained.

“N-no... I mean... literally, pictures. Many of them in a big hall. But one isn’t real. A big mansion with no windows,” Amber corrected meekly.

Suddenly, Rarity twitched. Her eyes went wide open, as if she exactly knew what the filly was talking about.

“You... you don’t mean... *that* picture?!” she asked insecurely.

“Does this ring a bell?” Fluttershy wondered.

“Well... before you came to visit us, Fluttershy, I went to see my Canterlot friends. One of them is running an art gallery and had gained a few new pieces for her collection. The picture Amber just described was one of them... Oh my stars... Does that mean...” the fashion diva wondered.

“That is up to you to find out now,” Truesight started. “While I do not support you actively, keepers of harmony, you also mustn’t think that I stand in your way. I explained to Amber that you are trying to stop the very same ponies who murdered her family and tortured her. She may just have about as much trust in you as I do, but she still wished to support your cause.”

“Well. In that case, I have to thank you, Lady Truesight. I know, the situation between us is pretty uneasy. But I really appreciate this,” Twilight replied, then went down to the filly’s height again. “Also: Thanks to you too, Amber! This is a really big help! I hope we can be friends one day.”

It seemed like Amber did not know how to react to that statement. She just lowered her glance and retreated further beneath Truesight again.

“I would say that this is enough. We still have a lot to do, so we will be leaving now,” Truesight stated, then turned over to Fluttershy. “Purity and sacrifice for Equestria.”

“Purity and sacrifice,” Fluttershy replied.

After that, the reaper clairvoyant and the little filly turned back around and went upstairs again.

Several hours later, it was finally time. The airship docked at its final destination. Using a wooden crate, barrel and large luggage bag, the three mares managed to get out of the airship unseen and were brought straight to a warehouse. There, they waited until they could not hear any noises around them anymore.

Rarity was the first to leave her cover. It was night by now and the warehouse had been closed. Only two guards were still patrolling around. After she found the hideout of her other two friends and they all reunited, they swiftly escaped through the roof by unlocking a window with a spell while none of the guards were watching.

As they landed on the roof, all three gazed into the city ahead of them. There it was. Canterlot. The capital city of Equestria and base of the BloodClaw Cult. Never would they have guessed that their investigation would end here. From now on, it was all or nothing. One slip-up and they would either die or be unable to ever catch the high priestess of the cult. Both Twilight and Rarity were well aware of that fact and felt the tension accordingly.

"A fake picture of a windowless mansion... Truesight seemed to be sure that this vision was correct. But even so, what does it mean?" Rarity wondered.

"I guess the only way to find out is by going there. I doubt either one of them would give us such an information, knowing how dangerous it could turn out for us, if they weren't convinced it is exactly what we are looking for. What can you tell me about the art gallery?" Twilight requested.

"It is quite popular, darling. If we wait for it to open, we won't have a chance to get through without being seen. The security is also pretty high," the fashion diva explained.

"Phew... Breaking into an art gallery. That sounds difficult. We will have to expect a lot of guards there," Twilight worried.

"Maybe we can use the employee entrance and disguise ourselves as guards, too. It will most likely be locked, but if you can open a locked window or metal door, I don't think that this will be a problem for you, Twilight," Fluttershy suggested.

"I doubt they would fall for it, but if we can find uniforms there, it will at least increase our chances. Let's go for it," the purple mare agreed.

Both Rarity and Fluttershy nodded in response. Then, the yellow mare picked up her friends again and jumped off the building.

After nearly two hours of carefully maneuvering through the streets of Canterlot, avoiding well lit streets and contact with any pony possible, they finally were able to locate the art gallery Rarity had described. Just as expected, there were several guards on the main entrance and one on the back. Using a small illusion, Twilight created a shadow that closely rushed past the guard, causing just enough distraction for the group to slip through the employee entrance and lock the door behind them again by magic. After getting dressed and Fluttershy finished hiding her cloak, they walked through the corridor into the main hall.

Hundreds of art pieces were on display. Some taking up a huge part of the wall, some just as big as their heads. Every once in a while, the three mares heard a guard approach. In these moments, they tried to find a balance between being difficult to find and not obviously hiding from the guards in case they would be spotted. This game worked out twice in a row, but Twilight knew that their luck was bound to run out sooner or later.

"Twilight! Fluttershy! I think I found it!" Rarity called in a whispering tone.

Immediately, her friends came over. The white mare was standing in front of a large picture of an abstractly drawn mansion, standing on a hill in the sunlight. Like described in the vision, it lacked any windows and only had one door.

"So... what do we do now?" Rarity wondered.

"Give me a moment," Twilight spoke and started to analyze the picture.

It took a while, but the purple mare ultimately realized that this picture was better secured than the other ones. The standard security measures aside, Twilight also noticed a few chalk lines behind the frame. It seemed like somepony drew a magic rune on the wall to trigger some sort of trap if the picture would be touched.

"Hm... Rune magic... I'm still not too familiar with that topic, but if I interpret this correctly, it has something to do with time manipulation. Perhaps to immobilize the pony touching it or making the picture decay much faster. I can't be certain," Twilight analyzed.

"Oh, if only we had Derpy with us right now," Rarity commented.

"Well, all we can do is try to break it on our own..." the purple mare stated, then opened her saddlebag and made a quill fly out of it.

Using the soft, feathery end, she carefully brushed away the chalk on one of the lines. Tension filled her being, as if she was trying to defuse a bomb. Finally, she could no longer see the line.

Nothing happened.

“Let’s just hope this does the trick,” Twilight commented and started analyzing the picture again.

After judging that there would be no alarm by simply touching the picture itself, the purple mare carefully lifted her right front leg. But surprisingly, as she tried to put it on the picture, the hoof went right through it.

“Oh my gosh... Okay, I have to admit this is absolutely ingenious,” Twilight commented.

“Why? What is it?” Fluttershy wondered.

“This is not a picture. It is a portal. Setting it up like that and making the scenery look so bright and abstract even during night is some highly advanced magic. I also have no idea where in Equestria this place on the other side is, if it is even a real place,” the purple mare explained.

“Oh my stars... I simply can not believe it! Even the Canterlot Elite, my own friends, are working for the cult! Hiding a portal in plain sight like that... I’m pretty sure we would have never figured that one out,” Rarity commented.

“Don’t worry, Rarity. They will get what they deserve,” Twilight assured.

Suddenly, Fluttershy heard a door opening. One of the guards must have entered the building and be on his way here. She quickly tapped both of her friends on their shoulders and pointed in the direction of the sound. This was already enough for them to understand, causing them to become nervous.

“Let’s get going, girls!” Twilight whispered and went ahead.

As soon as she went through, Fluttershy followed up. But when Rarity attempted to enter the picture, she encountered a problem and started to panic a bit.

“My saddlebags are too big! They won’t fit through!” she announced quietly.

“Do you see some place where you could hide them until we return?” Twilight wondered.

“No. I can not leave them behind anyway! All my gems are in them!” Rarity explained.

“Then try taking them off and step through first, then use your magic to lift them through afterwards! Please, hurry!” the purple mare suggested.

Rarity quickly undid the strap which held the bags on her back and stepped through the painting. Then she lifted up the bags by magic and tried to get them through. But in the rush of

the situation, she let the strap hit the frame. The rune reacted, though due to being malfunctioning now, it just gave off a short screech. Still, this noise was enough to alarm the approaching guard, making him run towards the main hall, as heard from the hoof clattering.

“Shoot! Quick, hide!” Twilight commanded quietly.

All three mares rapidly ran into the next best hideout. Then, the guard reached the picture. Twilight decided to position herself just next to the portal and could see the guard eyeing it up. It took mere moments for him to realize that somepony had manipulated the rune behind the frame, causing him to get even more suspicious. Then he stared into it, as if he knew it was not real and searched inside the picture. Finally, the guard decided to step through the portal. As he entered, his guard outfit changed into a BloodClaw robe. That confirmed it. They found the cult's church in Canterlot.

After letting the cultist take a few steps forward, Twilight conjured a magical sword and sliced it through the stallion's neck. He instantly collapsed dead.

“My goodness, darling...” Rarity commented quietly.

“He was a cultist, so no regrets and no mercy. This won't be the last one we will have to kill tonight in order to get to Black Widow,” Twilight explained. “Fluttershy, could you take care of him, please?”

With a nod, the yellow mare stepped out of her cover, summoned her scythe and rammed it into the dead body. Then, after the soul escaped from it, she pulled it behind a bush to hide it for the moment while Twilight used a spell to remove the blood trail it left behind.

“Alright... So far, so good,” the purple mare commented, then turned around.

The mansion was huge. Just by looking at it, she could figure that they would encounter several hundred cultists in there.

Twilight went ahead, sneaking around the building once. There really was no door or window other than the front door. While this made the mansion pretty much a fortress, there also were a few advantages for the group. The mere design of this church meant that there was just one way to escape: The way they came from. In case their assault would get noticed, all they needed to do then would be to block off the front door and kill as many cultists as possible. But then again, it would be foolish to expect that there would be no form of emergency exit inside the church.

“Alright. I guess we really have no other choice. We need to stay undetected until we find Black Widow. Everything else is sure to fail and get us killed. I need both of you to pay absolute attention now. There is no turning back anymore,” Twilight explained as soon as she returned.

Rarity gulped hard. Just the three of them. No backup plan, no support from outside. Only an assault on a demon stronghold would be even more dangerous than this.

Twilight once again went ahead and very carefully turned the door knob by magic. Using another spell, she made sure the door would open without any noise and peeked inside. Two cultists at once were guarding the door, but luckily not looking at it right now.

There was no other way. Twilight carefully closed the door again. Then, she closed her eyes and started building up an arcane aura around her body. Slowly, she made it seep through the gap beneath the door and gathered it up behind the cultists. At once, she immobilized both cultists and used her arcane magic to forcefully squeeze their throats. Like this, she held them for nearly a minute, making absolutely sure she successfully strangled them to death. After that, she opened the door again and carefully snuck inside.

The inside of the building looked normal again. Dark wooden walls and a black carpet themed the whole mansion's internal design. The entrance hall was clear. For now at least. Twilight could hear cultists patrolling all over the place. So, like before, she used one of the robes as a disguise, stored the other robe to hand to one of her friends later and carefully placed the bodies to make them look like the guards where just sitting on the ground and leaning against the walls. After she was done, she waved Fluttershy and Rarity inside.

Before they could even consider to advance, the group could hear a cultist approaching from the hall to the left. Twilight and Rarity instantly sought cover. Fluttershy, though, hid herself next to the doorway and held her scythe ready to use. A few moments later, the cultist stepped through and instantly spotted the two dead guards.

"Hey! No sleeping on du-" was all she could say before Fluttershy rammed her scythe through her chest.

Now, an advantage of the design of the cultist's robes became clear. Due to them mostly being blood red, actual blood could hardly be seen on them. As the cultist collapsed dead, Fluttershy swiftly reaped the other two. Then, they all put on the robes, tried to hide the bodies as well as possible and started sneaking through the church.

Twilight sought for shallowly guarded paths. The less cultists they had to kill on their way to Black Widow, the better were their chances to get through unseen. Still, one after another had to be eliminated, forcing even Rarity to start killing a few in order to protect her friends. She clearly had huge difficulties and felt immense regret after each kill, but she understood perfectly well that there was no alternative.

Finally, organ music filled the air. It seemed like they infiltrated the church while it was in the middle of a ceremony. That would explain why there were relatively few guards on patrol. But it also meant that they would face some serious problems once the celebration was over. Unless...

By following the music and chanting of the cultists, the group finally managed to find the ceremonial hall. Acting as if they were guards, they positioned themselves next to the doors and waited for the meeting to end. Finally, the door opened and countless cultists just walked past them. Twilight intended to use the crowd as her disguise. She gave a swift signal to her friends, then just walked past the cultists inside the hall.

Unlike other BloodClaw churches Twilight had seen, this one was rather minimalistic. A huge hall with lots of space. No pictures on the walls. Just praising lines, written on the light brown wallpaper in blood. Crystal chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling, giving the hall a weird, nearly holy contrast. The black floor was surprisingly clean and had a long red carpet in the middle, leading to a huge statue of Nightmare Moon. It was clearly made out of expensive black marble and crafted with a lot of skill and detail. But what was most interesting in this room was right in front of said effigy. A mare in a red and black ceremonial dress and a black scarf with red spider symbols on each end, wearing a red and black cloth mask. High priestess Black Widow was here. Just on the other end of this hall. Just in line of sight.

The cultists were walking in every direction. Some even remained in the hall to talk to each other. But a few of them remained in guarding position closely to Black Widow. Perhaps one of them would be a skin-walker, or even Despair.

Twilight couldn't risk an attack over distance. It might end up being blocked before impact. So far, everything was going surprisingly well. She could not allow herself to start getting impatient... If they pulled this off right, it would end now. Just a few skilled sneak maneuvers. Just a few unsuspecting looking steps towards her, and they would finally be able to cut off the head of the snake.

Fluttershy, Rarity and Twilight began to mingle with the cultists, trying their best to get closer and closer to the high priestess. She was distracted right now, talking to one of the cultists herself.

The situation could hardly be any better, Twilight thought. Just a bit closer... Just a little bit.

Suddenly, one of the cultists grabbed Fluttershy's robe. The blood had started to dry, making the stain more visible now. The yellow mare tried to avoid eye contact, but ultimately, the cultist came to realize that her eyes were black and instantly drew a knife.

"Reaper among us!" he shouted.

Fluttershy had no choice anymore. She summoned her scythe and killed the cultist before he

could stab her. Instantly, the whole church turned against her.

Twilight just stood there, waiting for a moment. Her eyes jumped between Black Widow, Fluttershy and Rarity. Then, she saw that the high priestess was intending to run again.

“Rarity! Chase after Black Widow!” Twilight shouted.

The fashion diva instantly started running. A few cultists were chasing after her, but most still focused on Fluttershy. Within moments, the ceremonial hall was filled with cultists again. This was exactly what Twilight was waiting for.

All this only took a few seconds, in which just a couple of cultists came to realize what was going on and also aimed for Twilight. But it was already too late. She knew what she was capable of. For these few seconds, the cultists were all still alive. But then, Twilight’s eyes turned white again.

Another loud arcane explosion filled the mansion. Blood and shredded ponies flew through the air. Twilight and Fluttershy were the only ones present in the ceremonial hall spared. At least, that is what she had hoped. A good dozen of cultists still stood there, unaffected by the explosion. It was more than obvious to both that these were no actual ponies, so the skin-walkers gave up their disguises and assaulted both mares as abstract masses of limbs, blades, claws and teeth.

Through Twilight’s actions, the demons had more than enough flesh and souls to feed on for a prolonged battle. The fight against them was hectic. Twilight couldn’t even analyze what she was doing and just reacted. Minutes passed. Precious minutes which might end up to Black Widow's advantage.

Twilight had already exhausted herself with the arcane explosion. Her nose started bleeding again, but she could not allow herself to slow down now. These demons needed to be slain as quickly as possible.

The purple mare went all out, casting arcane spells in all directions around her. Every once in a while, Fluttershy successfully pinned down a skin-walker and consumed it. When the last one was finally defeated, Twilight could hardly stand anymore. She felt dizzy, sick, incredibly tired. Shakily, she dropped her saddlebags next to her and tried to open them. But her front legs were trembling so much, she could hardly keep them under control. A few moments later, she started throwing up blood. Twilight was close to fainting when she suddenly came to realize that Fluttershy was holding her pill bottle, lid already opened and offered it to her.

Twilight instantly grabbed the bottle and tossed a few pills in her mouth. With no water available, she just chewed them up and tried to swallow the dry, sandy medicine. It was a bit of a struggle, but she finally succeeded. The medication Twilight needed was very strong, so in a matter of

minutes, she started feeling better, was able to breathe again and her sickness slowly vanished.

Still, she was extremely strained and could hardly stand anymore, let alone walk. So Fluttershy just picked up the purple mare's saddlebags and helped her get moving. After all, they still had to chase after Black Widow.

It took a while to track down where she went. But as they finally spotted Rarity, a feeling of enormous relief overwhelmed Twilight. The fashion diva had managed to drive Black Widow in a corner. She was stuck in a small room, not much bigger than a broom closet, stuffed with shelves full of potions and bottled substances. The only way in or out was covered in a thick layer of ice. They had her. They finally, finally had Black Widow.

"Good job, Rarity," Twilight congratulated weakly.

"Thank you, dar- Oh my stars! Are you okay?" Rarity wondered in shock as she saw how pale, weak and blood-coated her friend was.

"I just took my medication. I will be okay. Let's not get distracted now. We can't let anything get between us and Black Widow," the purple mare stated.

All eyes returned to the high priestess of the BloodClaw Cult. She was clearly panicking, punching and kicking the walls and ice in desperate attempt to escape.

"Guardian! Guardian! Where are you! Save me, Despair!" Black Widow shouted.

"She is not here. Its over, Black Widow. You won't escape your punishment this time. Justice will finally be served," Twilight spoke.

Slowly, the trapped mare started to calm down. After a while she just sat down and stared at the group.

"Justice... What do *you* know about justice? Is it just to be lied to your whole life long? Is it just to get your life crushed for the sakes of others? Look at yourselves, keepers of *harmony*. Blood-sodden, murderous and destiny-driven. Are you any different from us at all?" Black Widow wondered.

"You can just be quiet. No matter what you say, your words will fall on deaf ears. The only reason why you are not dead yet is because I'm too exhausted to cast a spell past that thick ice," Twilight stated.

"I guess I still have a bit of time then. Don't you want to know who that pony is you intent to

murder? Are you not interested in her story at all?" the high priestess offered.

"Whatever, darling. You won't get out of this alive. We just need to wait for the ice to melt, then you are finished. What you do in the meantime is up to you," Rarity replied, then placed a front hoof on her chin. "Though, I have to say I would be very much interested in finding out why your voice sounds so familiar to me."

"Well, I can't blame you for not remembering me all that well," Black Widow stated, then grabbed the bottom end of her mask and removed it. "We have only met once after all."

As soon as the mask came off, Rarity's expression changed to shock. Now, she finally realized whom they were dealing with all this time. She was a white coated, pink maned unicorn mare with purple eyes. Everypony who had witnessed her beauty even once would never forget her, which must have been the main reason she wore this mask and dress. She was famous. Very famous, in fact, among the top models of Equestria.

"You are... Fleur De Lis?!" Rarity shouted in disbelief.

Fleur just grinned sinisterly in response. Her eyes fell upon Rarity's open saddlebag, revealing the dozens of gems inside.

"Hmm, a pony with expensive tastes, I see!" she stated mockingly.