

Chapter 11: Between Shale and a Hard Place

A dull grey overcast sky made a still-sleepy magical mare not want to get up from bed, even though the journey to Red Apple Acres called out to her. Not even bothering to stifle a yawn, Twilight looked up to be face to face with two bright, baby-blue eyes.

“Hi Twilight!” Came a high pitched cheer of morning greetings. Twilight gave a yelp of surprise as she fell out of bed. Pinkie Pie giggled while helping Twilight to her hooves, “Silly filly, it’s only breakfast! No need to get as excited as I do. Look, I made breakfast muffins!”

Balanced perfectly on Pinkie’s hoof was a small platter with two delectable muffins covered in blueberries. Twilight couldn’t help but feel her mouth water as warm steam floated from the tips of the baked goods. With a smile, the pink earth pony placed the platter on the bed before moving downstairs to get more.

The muffins were delicious, with the perfect balance of heat and moistness. The blueberries were especially good, many still holding their juice, just waiting to explode their flavour with every bite. As Twilight happily munched away on the muffin, there came a knocking sound from nearby. The door was wide open and nopony was standing outside. The knocking wasn’t coming from the floor either, but it still persisted.

“Um... Twilight?” Fluttershy said with her soft voice, pointing at the window. Twilight turned to be face to face with a pegasus, whose bright yellow eyes were completely off, going in two different directions. Twilight yelped again in shock at the sight, falling over backwards.

The pegasus had a grey coat and a blonde mane, though the colour was brighter than Applejack’s. She was dressed in a white linen shirt and a jacket covered in pockets, as well as two large saddle bags on her sides. On her flank was a cutie mark of rising bubbles, appearing to be floating upwards from a soapy bath. The wall-eyed pegasus pointed at the window, as if asking to be let in. Twilight opened the window wide and allowing the grey flyer into the inn.

“Hi there!” she chimed, not unlike Pinkie Pie, “I smelled some of Pinkie’s delicious muffins, and had to come see for myself. I haven’t seen her in Ponyring for a while, but I can smell her baking a furlong away. Can I have a muffin, please?”

Rarity stepped forward, smiling as she levitated one of the muffins Pinkie made for her towards the pegasus. “You can have one of mine, dear,” she said, “I’m watching my figure.”

Never had Twilight seen a pony so happy to receive a muffin. The grey mare held the muffin close in her hooves before taking a small bite, savouring every moment.

“Mmm...blueberry. May not be oatmeal, but still yummy in my tummy!”

Twilight couldn't help but smile as she watched such simple bliss. The rest of the party was just finishing up their own muffins, with Fluttershy offering one of hers to their guest. Pinkie Pie bounded her way up the stairs, and at the sight of the visitor squealed in the delight.

“Ditzy!” she called, before rushing forward and embracing the pegasus, “Your nose knows, all the time! If you wanted a muffin, I could have made you some.”

“That's okay! Your friends were nice enough to share theirs!” Ditzzy's eyes straightened for a moment, as if she realized something before sticking her head into one of her saddle bags. She pulled out three small pouches before depositing them into Pinkie's own saddlebags.

“Oh my gosh!” Pinkie exclaimed, “Are these what I think they are?”

“Yup!” Ditzzy smiled, her eyes back to their unusual positions, “The ingredients for your healie grenade! It took me a while, but I found them!”

Pinkie cheered before opening the small bags, babbling endlessly about how the sarsaparilla leaves worked in unison with the rhubarb and the pinwheel roots. Alchemy was not Twilight's forte, so she decided it was best to leave the two giddy ponies to their discussions.

Rarity was in a corner, fussing over Fluttershy's Chantry robes with Fluttershy still in them. Twilight noticed that the white unicorn had perfectly altered the robe so that Fluttershy's wings could be free and comfortable. The pegasus looked happy that she could freely have her wings out without ridicule, even if her cheeks turned a few shades of orange.

Rainbow Dash and Spike made their way over to Pinkie and Ditzzy's little area, apparently either interested in what Pinkie had to say about alchemy, or were simply more interested in her supplies of muffins.

Applejack, however, looked to be in no mood for any conversation. She was adjusting her favourite hat when Twilight walked over to her side. “We need to git over to Red Apple Acres lickitysplit,” she said without looking to her fellow Warden, “We gotta get help from Arl Macintosh, then mosey over to the donkeys and pegasi. Blight isn't just gonna end itself, so let's hit the trail already.”

Without another word, Applejack left the room, heading down the stairs to the main floor. The other ponies said nothing as they watched their friend leave with new focus. Not new focus, Twilight corrected herself, trying to stay on course. The Sloth demon's illusions and the loss of Ostequus had taken a toll on Applejack, but she was not letting anypony

help her lift the burden.

Twilight turned to speak to the rest of the group when she came face to face with Ditzzy again. “You really have to stop doing that,” she said after flinching from being so close with such awkward eyes.

“You’re going to Red Apple Acres? I can take you there on our boat,” Ditzzy said, pointing a hoof towards the window. Twilight looked outside to see a much larger vessel docked at the pier, dwarfing the little ferry they used to get to the Unicorn Tower.

“Are you sure?” Pinkie asked, “We wouldn’t want you to miss your rounds around the lake.”

“No problem at all,” Ditzzy reassured, “I’ll even do it for some more muffins, for Dinky too!”

At the mention of this new name, Twilight could have sworn Ditzzy’s eyes grew even brighter, and her smile even wider. “She’s my little muffin,” explained Ditzzy, “Smart as a whip, just you wait and see!” With that, Ditzzy flew off out of the window towards the boat.

Once everypony was ready to go, they made their way down the stairs, giving thanks to both the innkeeper and barmaid before heading outside. Despite the slight chill in the air, the weather was fine enough for travel, and Twilight especially looked forward to her first trip on an actual boat with a sail.

As they approached the dock, Twilight spotted an all too familiar pointed hat and starry cape with a senior enchanter’s staff floating proudly at her side. Twilight shook her head in disbelief. What was Trixie doing outside of the Unicorn Tower?

They walked closer to Trixie, noticing that she was not alone, but also having a conversation with a little filly unicorn, although from the volume in the blue mage’s voice, it was an argument she was losing badly. The filly was grey, like Ditzzy, but of a slightly darker shade, thought they shared the same coloured eyes and mane. She had the same bright smile as the pegasus, and seemed to be enjoying herself at Trixie’s expense.

“The Great and Powerful Trixie demands that you tell her who owns this boat!”

“Enchantment?”

“You’ve said nothing but ‘enchantment’ since Trixie made the mistake of conversing with you, and Trixie does not make mistakes!”

“Enchantment!”

Twilight couldn't help but laugh, seeing Trixie getting flustered by a little filly. Still, she grew concerned that a unicorn so young was outside of the influence of the Unicorn Circle. She would have been declared an apostate and hunted by the templar, but she seemed not to have a care that she was so close to the Tower, or the templars inside.

The grey filly laughed as Ditzzy landed next to her. "Hee, you should see the look on your face. Look, Mom! I got another one!" Both grey ponies giggled at what apparently was a prank they played many times. Trixie huffed in indignation as she turned to Twilight.

"Sparkle," being her best greeting to date, "It should be known that The Great and Powerful and Senior Enchanter Trixie will be accompanying you on your journey. She has convinced the First Enchanter that if your mission to defeat the ponyspawn fails, then there will be no point in rebuilding the Tower, as the Blight will no doubt consume all of Equestria. Trixie has thus come to ensure your success."

Twilight raised an eyebrow before breaking into a smile. All she did in response was raise a hoof to Trixie, a gesture of goodwill. The blue unicorn would surely be a great help against the ponyspawn, and she had already proven her bravery and arcane skill against the demons and Maleficar.

Trixie looked at the offered hoof before smirking at Twilight. Blue hoof met violet as they shook on their newfound and rather unlikely partnership. "Welcome aboard Trixie," Twilight said, "We'll do much better on the journey with you in our party."

"As if there was ever any doubt." A sharp whistle from the boat broke the challenging stare the two unicorns were sharing. Rainbow Dash flew over from the boat, where Twilight could see the rest of the party waiting for them.

"Hey, Twixie," Dash joked, "We're waiting on you." Both magical mares made their way onto the boat, Twilight slightly blushing at such a silly nickname. The ship was much more impressive than the ferry, though the sail was patched with several different colours of cloth, and boards creaked with every hoofstep.

Ditzzy was dashing about in the sky, adjusting ropes and the sail, checking instruments for measurements before finally untying the boat from the docks. They appeared to be in luck, as the wind was flowing southward towards Red Apple Acres.

The boat ride was much smoother than the ferry to the Tower, and the wind felt nice on Twilight's face. As she and Spike stared out towards the south, she felt a small tug on her robes. Looking down, she spotted the little grey unicorn looking up at Twilight with her large yellow eyes.

"Hi! I'm Dinky!" she said, her smile almost as infectious as Pinkie's, "You're a unicorn too, just like the pretty one and the loud one. Follow me, I'll show you something magic!"

Twilight looked at Spike and shrugged as Dinky made her way to the cargo hold. They both followed her leaving the rest of the party topside. The cargo hold was impressive, if cramped. Chests, barrels and crates were packed inside the hold, making it easy for a little filly to maneuver, but giving Twilight a bit more trouble due to her size. Spike hopped off, snout in the air before opening a chest full of precious gemstones.

“Mmm...” drooled Spike as he held up a rather impressive looking ruby, “Hey Dinky, how much for the ruby? I’m starved!”

“Two bits!” the young filly called. Spike’s shined with excitement as he reached into Twilight’s saddle bags and pulled out two shining coins. The violet unicorn gave Spike a look, who returned it with his own begging gaze. “Spike, that’s the same price as a shave and manecut.”

“Come on Twilight, I’m tired of pony food. I need something real!” Spike pleaded. It was enough to make her relent, as she turned to see Dinky returning with a large gemmed rod tight in her mouth. After Spike deposited the coins into Dinky’s bag, Twilight looked down on the instrument Dinky had found. She could feel the flow of lyrium in the rod, faint, yet still holding power.

“It’s a golem control rod,” Dinky explained, “We got it from a pony in Stablesire. The golem was even in the middle of town! But the golem wouldn’t move, so we kept the rod because it’s pretty.”

Twilight levitated the rod, looking the device over. Nothing about it seemed extraordinary besides the story of its origin. She had never even heard of a creature called a ‘golem’ before. “What is a golem?” Twilight asked.

“It’s supposed to be a pony made completely out of stone,” said Dinky, “And it really is! Although maybe it was just a statue. Like I said, the golem didn’t move when we tried to use the rod. Maybe you can fix it?”

She wasn’t sure, but seeing the little filly so curious about magical devices made Twilight smile. They sat together in the cargo hold as Spike continued to devour his ruby, talking about the rod, then magic in general. Dinky had a good grasp on spellwork at such a young age. Such magical aptitude was apparent at a young age, after all, Twilight herself had shown talent when she was a filly much like Dinky.

It was interesting; for some reason Dinky would not cast spells. Perhaps it was due to being raised by pegasus mother and having little exposure to other unicorns, but Dinky did not levitate objects, and was likely not able to fire a magic missile or even spark a simple light. When asked what sort of magic she could do, the grey unicorn smiled and ran deep into the cargo hold.

When she returned, it was with a small stone slab with a strange symbol on it. A rune, if Twilight was not mistaken. Dinky then dashed off to find something else, making a loud grunt as she returned dragging a heavy sword with her tail. Once again she darted away, this time bringing back a small closed bowl. She nudged the lid open to reveal the essence of magic: lyrium.

“Enchantment!” The Warden and her dragon companion watched as Dinky closed her eyes, horn glowing bright. The lyrium slowly began to flow from the bowl, wrapping blue tendrils around the sword and the rune. Both lyrium encased objects began to glow, until the stone was flush against the blade’s side. The rune then appeared to melt into the metal, until all that was left was the symbol.

Once Dinky’s horn stopped glowing, both Twilight and Spike peered closely at the weapon. The blade suddenly erupted into flames. Surprisingly, the fire did not burn the wooded hull of the ship, or even singe Twilight’s mane, but rather danced harmlessly on the sword.

“No kidding about the enchantment,” Twilight gaped, still not believing what one so young had just accomplished, “How come it’s not burning the boat?”

“It won’t burn unless it’s used, silly,” Dinky was bouncing up and down, proud of her enchantment, “That’s the rule about runes! You can have it! On the house, er, boat!”

Twilight watched as Spike tried to lift the flaming sword, only to turn her attention towards the rest of the boat’s cargo. Dinky had retrieved lyrium from the hold, and as Twilight focused her senses, she found where she had taken the rare material. Every crate and box was filled with the same bowls, all stuffed with the material of magic. Such cargo would have been considered lethal if not for the precise care in storage and transport of lyrium, though accidents were sure to happen. One such accident likely explained the case of Ditzzy’s eyes.

“That is very impressive, Dinky,” said Twilight as Spike waved the sword around, “How did you learn to manipulate lyrium like that? It takes years of training of training to do that sort of enchantment. Did your father teach you?”

At the mention of her father, Dinky’s eyes became downcast. “I never met my daddy,” Dinky explained, “Mom said he was very smart, but one day disappeared. Not before saying he loved me and wanted me to grow up happy. Mom also said that I have his gift with lyrium, so every time I enchant things I think about my daddy.”

The lavender unicorn gave Dinky a sad smile as the filly turned her attention to Spike and the sword. As she left the cargo hold, Twilight was once again face to face with Ditzzy. The grey mare was no longer smiling, instead sitting on her haunches, blocking Twilight’s way. It was almost surreal, seeing the normally cheery pegasus have a sorrowful expression on her face.

“She showed you the lyrium,” Ditzzy said. Not a question, but a statement. Twilight nodded.

“You’re a lyrium smuggler.” Another statement, but there was no malice or judgement in Twilight’s voice. Just concern over having such a dangerous material on the ship as well as an apostate for a child.

“Just to keep the templars away! To stop them from taking my little muffin!” With Ditzzy pleading before her, Twilight was reminded of Rainbow Dash’s story of her mother, how she did whatever it took to protect Dash. Though the situations were different, the core of the matter was the same: a mother trying to protect her filly.

“I won’t tell the templars,” Twilight promised, “But I am concerned that she is very gifted magically. The templars won’t be bribed and ignorant forever, especially after what happened in the Tower with the Maleficar.”

“Oh thank you, thank you!” Ditzzy stood up, her smile genuine and grateful, “Don’t worry about us. Once we have enough bits, I was planning to move us to the Free Plains across the sea. We’ll be fine once we get there.”

Before Ditzzy could fly back to the helm of the ship, Twilight put a hoof forward to gently hold the pegasus back. “Her father,” she said to Ditzzy, whose eyes drooped lower at that mention, “He was taken away, wasn’t he? He was an apostate too.”

Ditzzy’s eyes focused properly on Twilight who glared with gritted teeth. “They took her father away. But they will never take Dinky. Never take away my little muffin.” With that she turned away and flew to the helm, hooves planted firmly on the wheel.

Twilight wanted to hope for the best, but as long as the memory of the attack at the Tower was fresh, apostates such as Dinky would only be met with harsh treatment, if not outright hostility and violence.. She wondered what she would do if she had a filly of her own, if she ever had a foal to call her ‘mother’.

First deal with the ponyspawn, Twilight reminded herself, and then you can think about families and what you are going to do after. Both mares resumed their place on the top of the deck. They sailed in silence as the wind picked up, filling the small boat’s sails with air.

The chill of the wind as well as the spray from the lake made Twilight shiver. She focused some magic into her staff to produce some measure of heat. It was a comfort, seeing the soft light and the warmth emanating from her staff. Pinkie joined Twilight on the deck, keeping close as the wind blew even stronger. The perky pink pony sniffled in the cold, but kept close to Twilight and her magical heating element.

Soon the rest of the party were huddling together for communal warmth, as Rarity and even the detached Trixie used their staves to match the spell Twilight had cast. A triangle formed with all three floating arcane instruments, providing heat to all the ponies packed together as the howling cold grew greater.

Ditzy was struggling to hold on to the wheel of the boat as she flipped the hood of her jacket over her head. Twilight was thankful that Spike and Dinky were safe in the hold. Looking up, the violet pegasus could see that they were approaching land quickly.

Too quickly. The ship was being pushed by the strong winds and it would slam into the docks on the other side. "Prepare for impact!" Ditzy shouted, her hooves holding on to the helm for dear life. The boat slid onto the sandy beach, the hull scraping against the pier as it snapped wooden boards of their posts. The ponies all slid across the deck until they piled atop each other on the other end.

"Ugh," was the unanimous opinion of everypony on the boat. Dinky and Spike had left the hold, with the little unicorn heading towards her mother as Spike tugged on Twilight's tail, still holding the burning sword. "You alright Twilight?"

"Just fine Spike," Twilight said flatly as she struggled to get out of the pony mess. As she looked around, she was expecting to see apple trees everywhere, farmland, anything resembling a agricultural community. There wasn't even the sight of Red Apple Castle.

"Horsefeathers!" Applejack cursed as her hooves hit the rough shore of the lake, "This isn't Red Apple Acres at all! Where the hay are we?" Never had the ponies seen Applejack so riled. Ditzy looked around and tried to give a reassuring smile.

"I may have sailed west when I should have sailed south," she said, "But don't worry! Once we get the boat ship-shape, I'll bring you right to Red Apple Castle. Promise!"

Twilight sighed, stepping off the boat and looking around her surroundings. The trees and shrubs were withered, with red and black bloodstains marking the dirt road. She stopped suddenly with Applejack doing the same; she could 'hear' the slow beating of hearts, pumping the bile that was ponyspawn blood, and Applejack was likely hearing the same. It was grotesque, sensing the ponyspawn, hearing their heart beat as if it were her own, just as it was in the vision during the Joining. When she had first heard the ponyspawn, there was at least the chaos of battle acted as ambience to distract her thoughts. Now there was nothing to pull her mind away, only the sound of sludgelike blood.

"I hear it too," Applejack focused her attention northward, "Not a lot of them, but even a small group can really buck a pony's day. I can feel them further west down this path."

"Let's go," Twilight and Applejack took the lead as the others scrambled out of the boat. Looking at the members of the party, Twilight noticed that Fluttershy and Trixie looked hesitant. They had likely never encountered the ponyspawn before, and would not know

what to do. They needed direction, leadership.

“Everypony!” Twilight called as they galloped, “Stay close, and attack with everything you’ve got! The ponyspawn are monsters, but they can be killed. Fight them like demons, like...ponies. Keep your distance, and don’t let their blood get inside you. It’s poison.”

They arrived at a small town that appeared to have been painted red. Blood slathered the ground and the walls of homes, while half-eaten corpses of ponies littered the ground. In the centre of town was a large stone statue of a sturdy pony rearing upwards. Sure enough, the town was crawling with ponyspawn, thelocks and donlocks snarling at each other as they approached a large building near the statue. Two screamers patrolled the sky, their large singular eyes watching for prey. A thelock much larger than the others and adorned in rusted metal for armour shouted at the others in a gargle-like speech.

“They have a basic organization hierarchy,” Twilight muttered to herself, “The biggest seem to lead when an Ornlock Emissary is not around, though I wonder where the minotaurs come into the command structure...”

“Are ya really analyzing the critters that look at us like a bushel of apples on a silver platter Twi?” Applejack asked as if Twilight was more concerned with studying the monsters rather than killing them, “They’ll spot us in a moment. We can sense them, they can sense us.”

True enough, one of the screamers looked in their direction and cried an echoing shriek. The two flying monstrosities descended on the ponies as their ground-based brethren roared and charged, some holding rusted blades in their mouths, while others simply gnashed their teeth.

With a shout, Applejack drew her own sword and charged forward, quickly being followed by Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. They clashed with the ponyspawn as Rarity launched spells of lightning from her staff, staying in the back. Fluttershy followed suit by aiming her arrows towards the screamers.

Twilight and Trixie channeled their spells in unison, creating a spiral of blue and violet arcane power towards the lead thelock. Grateful that Trixie was getting the hang of a simple yet potent offensive spell, Twilight focused the stream to hit the thelock.

She did not expect one of the screamers to slam into her. The spell was broken, igniting a burst of light in the air as it sent Twilight, Trixie, and the screamer flying. Spike fell off her back as the screamer clawed at the unicorn, slashing her hide with long claws. Twilight struggled against the ponyspawn, but it was much stronger than the smaller pony. She was not much of a fighter in hoof-to-hoof combat.

The screamer craned its long neck, biting Twilight’s neck. She couldn’t help but scream as the creature twisted its neck, making the wound worse as its teeth shredded skin.

“Twilight!” came a small cry. Spike jumped on top of the screamer, brandishing his new magic sword, swinging the blade at one of its wings. Like Dinky had said, the flames grew intense as the sword was used, easily severing the wing from the ponyspawn’s shoulder. The screamer belted out its namesake, clawing at baby dragon on its back. It turned its head, glaring with its large eye and snapping its jaws at Spike as the dragon waved his sword towards the monster.

Twilight struggled to get to her hooves, but the burning pain from the bite made her clumsy and weak. *I won't let them take you*, Twilight thought as she fell to one knee. With clear focus, she began to fuel another spell with anger just as she was with magic. A large icicle began to take shape above her as her horn glowed bright. With a shout, Twilight launched the frozen missile at the screamer, taking satisfaction as the sharp edge impaled the crane-like neck.

Mustering her strength, Twilight hobbled over to Spike’s side, concern for her oldest friend the only thing on her mind. Not even the battle with the remaining ponyspawn mattered. “Spike! Are you all right?” Twilight said, holding Spike close, “I should never have let you so close to a battle. Did any of the ponyspawn blood get into you?”

“Don’t worry about me, Twilight!” Spike raised his voice, pointing the sword towards the still ongoing fight, “I have thick scales and now a great flaming sword. Our friends need our help most of all!”

Twilight looked aghast as Spike quickly ran off to join the fray. That was the first time Spike had ever raised his voice to her, the first time he had ever been openly defiant. And now Spike, her little dragon who she hatched when he was just an egg, was rushing off into battle where he could be hurt or worse.

She fell, though whether it was due to the wound or the feeling of helplessness as she watched her friends fight the thelock leader, Twilight did not know. The other ponyspawn were dead around them, with arrows, gashes, and scorch marks across their bodies. The party surrounded the massive ponyspawn, who swung its heavy rusted blade at the ponies, missing completely. Applejack twisted her body around, slamming both hooves into the skull of the thelock. The head was bucked sharply, with the body following its path upward. As Applejack turned to see her hoofwork, the thelock leader landed with a loud thud onto its side.

As the dust around the thelock settled, the disgusting black tongue of the thelock rolled out from its fanged mouth as the neck sprawled at an unnatural angle. Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as she could hear the ponyspawn’s heart stop beating, even though she was still very much unnerved that she could hear the beats at all. Rousing herself to her hooves, she hobbled over to her friends, who immediately rushed to her side. Their concern was always touching, and Twilight managed a weak smile, though she winced as the wound still burned.

“Oh my gosh, Twilight!” Pinkie yelped as she fussed over the wound, “We have to treat this really quickly! I have some poultices, just wait!” With that, Pinkie dug into her saddlebag and lifted a small red bottle of red liquid. Twilight closed her eyes as her friend applied the poultice to the bite wound. Healing the bite was almost as painful as the actual bite itself, as her flesh regenerated with the aid of the poultice at a rapid rate. She didn’t exactly like the smell of the concoction either. Why couldn’t it smell like cherries?

“Are you going to be all right Twilight?” Fluttershy asked, watching the wound heal, “You said to watch for their poison blood. What about infections?”

“She’ll be doin’ dandy,” Applejack said, making her way back to the pier, “She’s a Grey Warden, and that means immune to the Taint. We beat the ponyspawn, now let’s make sure Ditzzy has the boat all ready to git goin’.”

Applejack’s reactions didn’t seem right, and Twilight wanted to know why. Maybe it was something to do with what they were all talking about last night. “Listen Applejack,” Twilight said, confident that the damage to her shoulder had properly healed, “We should look around the village, see if we can’t find any survivors. They’ve been hit by the ponyspawn pretty hard, we should do what we can to help them, at least tell them the danger has past.”

Twilight then turned her attention to the pony of stone in front of her. She had seen many statues before, always those of Celestia and Luna, but never of a plain pony. This one was also incredibly rough, unlike the pristine condition the Chantry demanded in works of the alicorn sisters, and covered in what appeared to be bird excrement. The statue had no cutie mark painted or chiseled on its flank, but rather a large rune in the shape of a hoof shining on the forehead. The rune was still glowing bright blue.

Could this be...? Channeling her senses, Twilight could begin to feel the flow of lyrium throughout the form of the statue. “Rainbow Dash,” Twilight called, looking at the statue more intently, “Could you go get Dinky from the ship? And ask her to bring the control rod.”

Dash gave a salute before flying off towards the dock. Applejack did not look pleased, which Twilight was all the more prepared for. “Applejack, can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked, wanting to get to the bottom of her fellow Warden’s rushed behavior.

Applejack grumbled but made her way to Twilight’s side as Trixie and Rarity studied the statue. Maybe they could discern something Twilight couldn’t. In the mean time, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy and Spike moved from house to house, looking for survivors.

“Applejack, I need to know what’s wrong with you,” Twilight said, perhaps bluntly but it was needed to be said, “You haven’t been the same since the inn, and I’m worried for you.”

“It ain’t nothin’ worth workin’ yerselves over,” Applejack responded, attempting to move past Twilight, but the violet unicorn stood her ground. They locked stern gazes at each other, both not budging an inch. Twilight was not going to let Applejack simply walk away from this. Not if it was going to affect her judgment.

“Ah, horseapples,” Applejack cursed, casting her eyes downward, “Listen Twi, after last night, and hearing how much our friends lost not just to ponyspawn, but also other ponies, I just felt like my problems were seeds compared to their full apples.”

“When I was sent to the Chantry to become a templar, I was right angry at Arl Macintosh for letting me go. Said it was for my best interests and such. I guess I just wanted to see him, get the help, and get going as soon as possible. We have a big quest to git done, and maybe...”

“Maybe I wonder if we can do it at all.” Applejack looked ashamed, as if she had said unspeakable words. “The Fade was where it all started, Twilight. I wanted that family. I wanted that feeling of simplicity. Then the dream broke, and we’re fightin’ demons and Maleficar, not including what happened in Ostequus. I just wish Duncan were here. He’d know what to do. What to say, and how to say it.”

Twilight didn’t know what to say to reassure Applejack. Yes, they had defeated ponyspawn and demons, but there was still so much to complete, so many enemies to encounter and defeat. Danger lurked around every corner, from the claws and teeth of the wretched creatures to the blades of Loghoof’s army. Despite their victory in Unicorn Tower, the task set before them was still daunting. Doubt would certainly nestle into the minds of everypony. Twilight felt it was her responsibility to keep morale up, to keep everypony focused on the mission.

But why did she feel the need to lead? That was something she had never considered before now. Perhaps somewhere down in the Potpourri Wilds, when Applejack had appointed Twilight leader of the group of Warden hopefuls, did Twilight take the reins of leadership but never seen an opportunity to hand them back. Now, seeing Applejack in the throes of self-doubt, she realized that being a leader was more than standing up against the monsters of the world, or the challenges brought on by ponies, but by being there for her friends to help them out of any situation.

“Applejack,” Twilight began, “No matter what happens, we will push against the Blight with every step. We will stop them, and we will make Duncan proud. But I’m going to need your help. If there is anypony here I can rely on to be a foundation for the rest of the group, it’s you. When the journey gets rough and no matter what, I know it will, I know there is one pony I can lean on when I falter. You can do the same with me, Applejack. I’ll be here with you until the end. You are not alone; we can all share our burdens.”

The blonde earth pony turned away, leaving Twilight feeling as if her words did not reach

Applejack. But when her fellow Warden turned, a new gleam in her green eyes and a smile on her lips, Twilight couldn't help returning the expression. "You might not be Duncan, sugarcube, but I think you could've given him a run for his bits. We can do this Twilight. As long as we stick together. We can beat the Blight."

With Applejack's spirit restored and Twilight's own morale lifted, they both returned to see all their friends surrounding the statue of the pony. Rarity and Trixie were casting spell after spell on both statue and the control rod, but the statue would not move. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy also returned, being followed by a older earth pony stallion.

"Tis the strangest thing I have ever seen, darling," Rarity said, "There is a lot of potent magic in both the statue and the control rod, but no spell I or Trixie can cast will wake it up."

Twilight looked the statue over herself, rubbing her chin with a hoof as she lost herself in thought. *I wonder if they tried a simple animation spell*, she considered, but then retracted her thoughts. *No, if it were simple, the statue would have started moving. I wonder if Dark Arts are involved at all. If so, we'll just have to leave it behind.* It was a disheartening thought that they may not be able to restore the golem. A look at Dinky still bouncing around the statue made her heart twist; the little filly seemed eager to see the golem move again.

"You must be our saviors," the old earth pony said, snapping Twilight's attention away from the golem, "I am the elder of Stablesire, and am mighty grateful the Grey Wardens arrived when you did. Celestia smiled on us, of that I am quite sure."

"Actually, we got blown off course trying to sail across Lake Blackwater," Twilight admitted to the elder, "But we are glad we came when we did. I'm sorry we couldn't save everyone." She turned to see more survivors leave their homes only to rush towards the desecrated bodies of loved ones, partly consumed by the offending ponyspawn. Fluttershy immediately flew off to help ease the minds of the villagers, and once again Twilight was gladdened by the sight of the bard-turned-priestess displaying such kindness.

"We will survive," the elder said, "As we always have. I noticed you and your friends have taken a keen interest in Shale."

"Is that the name of the statue?" Twilight asked. The elder nodded, but his eyes became flush with anger.

"So it is, and not just a statue. Shale truly is a golem, and has been in the village since I was just a young colt. The thing used to be the servant and guardian to a rather eccentric unicorn wizard, before Shale went berserk. Shale killed the old wizard, and then was frozen like this for well over thirty years."

“Then a few months ago, that grey pegasus with the strange yellow eyes wanted to trade for the control rod,” the elder continued, “Said it was ‘very pretty’. Don’t know why we kept it for so long, but we had forgotten about the rod and Shale did serve as a rather impressive statue for our town. Unicorns from all around came to study it, trying to get Shale to move for them, but none have succeeded. Not that I’d like them too. Thirty years, and I still remember the crushed head.”

Twilight swallowed hard as she looked up at Shale’s eyes. They were a dull grey, but she wondered if they would turn red and the golem would go into another rage if awoken. She had never felt so uncomfortable performing magic, and trying to wake the golem seemed a great risk.

“Maybe Shale isn’t angry anymore,” Dinky said, “Maybe Shale just wants to say he’s sorry? Thirty years is a long time.”

A long time for a pony, perhaps, but not a long time for stone and magic come to life. Twilight levitated the control rod, looking the device over before coming up with a plan. It was a long shot, but perhaps it would work.

“I’m going to charge the rod with some energy,” she said to everypony present, “Maybe then we can command Shale to awaken.” With that, Twilight’s horn began to glow, as she focused her arcane power into the rod. The ponies stepped back, giving Twilight a wide berth as she shut her eyes, putting all of her focus and power into the rod.

She did not expect the rod to oblige, the rod not only consuming the offered magic, but draining more than Twilight wanted to give. The violet unicorn pulled back with all her might, severing the link. Gasping for air, Twilight looked on as the now glowing rod fell with a *thunk* onto the ground. She just couldn’t believe the kind of “hunger” she felt from the magical instrument.

“Try now! Try now!” Dinky chimed, bouncing up and down in front of the rod. Twilight stood up, levitating the rod in front of Shale, wondering what sort of words one used to wake up a pony of stone and lyrium.

“Golem...awaken!” Twilight said in her most authoritative voice. Everypony leaned in, watching closely to see any sign of life, or as close as life could be with a golem.

Nothing. Not even a twitch. Twilight grinned at the others before puffing herself up to appear bigger, more commanding.

“Golem, I command you to rise!” But that was still met with silence. Trixie pushed Twilight out of the way, her eyes in a confident blaze.

“Step aside and watch how the Great and Powerful Trixie brings a golem to life!” She announced. Twilight huffed, but did not argue against the blue unicorn. With a flourish

from her hooves, Trixie's voice resonated throughout the town.

"I, the Great and Powerful Trixie, hereby command this golem to awaken and serve Trixie as its one true master!" But the stone remained silent and unresponsive.

"Oh dear, neither of you have any idea how to coax such a creature, do you?" Rarity nudged Trixie away with a dainty yet surprisingly forceful hoof. "You must cater what a pony wants, even if they are made up of rocks."

Rarity *ahemed* before fluttering her eyelashes at Shale. "Oh Mister Golem, you do look so big and strong, I would love nothing more than to see such a handsome pony such as yourself flex your mountainous muscles. Oh we could clean yourself up perfectly, maybe attach some precious gemstones to you. I'd wager we can make you look exceptionally striking with some rubies, some sapphires, hmm?"

Shale said nothing to the flattery spoken by Rarity. The white unicorn harrumphed, turning away from the golem with her nose upward as she walked off. "If that couldn't get a pony going, I don't know what will." Twilight giggled as she watched Rarity walk away from Shale. No doubt that the fashionista was not used to being turned down, even by a bunch of rocks.

Dinky lowered her head, the excitement of trying to make Shale move now deflated as the grey unicorn looked up at the mighty statue. Twilight patted Dinky's shoulder gently, knowing all too well the disappointment felt when magic simply failed. When three powerful and talented unicorns could not discover how to make the earthen pony move, not including all the arcane academicians who had poked and prodded Shale over the years, it was likely that the golem would not be able to move ever again.

The town elder shook his head before returning to speak with the ponies of Stablesire. Twilight gave a silent apology to everypony as the group turned to return to Ditzzy's boat. As they cantered down the road, Twilight's and Applejack's ears perked up as they listened for a new sound. Twilight's heart stopped as a new heart beat thundered on.

THA-THUMP. THA-THUMP. THA-THUMP. THA-THUMP.

"More ponyspawn," Applejack said taking a few steps back, "But I can only hear a mighty big one."

"A minotaur." Even if there were smaller ponyspawn with the gigantic creature, Twilight could not hear their heartbeats over the sound of the minotaur's heart pumping the black blood throughout its massive body. "Everypony! We need to form a line here to stop the ponyspawn's advance on the town!"

The villagers shouted and screamed as they ran into their homes, fearful of another ponyspawn onslaught. The party dug itself in, waiting for the attack to come. Trixie

already raised a barrier, but Twilight wondered how much good it would do against the sheer physical power of the minotaur.

It was only thanks to Flemeth that she and Applejack escaped their first encounter with a minotaur, and even now with the support of all her friends, Twilight wondered exactly how they were going to defeat one and the ponyspawn it would attack with.

Twilight turned to see if all the villagers were safe until she saw that Dinky was still in front of the unmoving statue. “Dinky! Get to safety!” Twilight shouted, but the little filly was not listening.

“Please, Mister Shale,” Dinky looked up at the golem with eyes holding both fear and hope, “We need your help. Please.”

“They’re here!” Dash shouted from the sky, pointing a hoof. Sure enough, everything shook as a walking siege weapon of a monster barreled down the path, mouth foaming in rage as its hooves thundered on the ground. Flanking the minotaur were several thelocks and donlocks, with another pair of screamers taking the skies.

The minotaur roared, the vibrations shaking the trees and homes violently as it pounded its chest with both arms. Trixie looked up at the giant as it loomed closer, hyperventilating as black bile was dripping from its disgusting mouth. With a snort, the minotaur leaned in close, sniffing the blue barrier Trixie had created. The other ponyspawn growled and hissed, but maintained a distance away from their larger brethren.

With a shout of primal fury, the minotaur lifted both of its huge fists into the air. Twilight called to her friends to attack with arrows, grenades and spells. Fluttershy’s arrows embedded themselves into the tough hide, but did nothing to slow the minotaur. Pinkie’s grenades exploded around the minotaur just as Twilight’s arcane barrage and Rarity’s lightning struck the beast in the chest.

This only made the minotaur more angry. Both fists raised high, the monster brought slammed into the shield like hammers on nail. The shield shattered and dissipated, unable to hold off the attack. Trixie wobbled as the shock of the attack shook her, until she fainted, her starry hat rolling away from her collapsed body. Twilight gritted her teeth as she watched the ponyspawn rush their location. Without another thought, she raised a barrier of her own, but she knew that if Trixie’s barrier could fall easily, her shield would not last the same assault.

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight watched as a grey figure made their way to them. At first she thought it was Dinky, making some sort of attempt to aid them, or maybe Ditzzy who had arrived on the scene to protect her daughter. It was not until the figure came into full view and revealed its true size.

Shale walked up to edge of the barrier before looking up at the snarling minotaur. Twilight could not believe what she was seeing. The golem was moved closer, standing up to a monster twice its height and staring the colossal beast down with glowing white eyes. All of their spells and commands did nothing to awake the golem, but somehow it was moving and challenging a minotaur. Was it something to do with Dinky and her skills with enchantment?

“You’re big,” Shale said, further surprising Twilight that a golem could speak at all. The pony of stone looked the minotaur over once more before standing taller in front of such an substantial foe. “That means you’ll make a big squish.”

Pony and ponyspawn alike stared, dumbfounded as Shale charged the minotaur, a battering ram into the giant’s stomach. As the golem started to trample its foe under large stone hooves, Twilight saw the ponyspawn fall back, unable to comprehend how their largest weapon was felled with ease. This was the moment to strike!

Shouting a battle cry, Applejack rushed forward, sword in her mouth as she attacked a thelock head on. Twilight followed suit, blasting one of the screamers with a spell of ice, watching as the screamer fell against the ground with a loud *thud*. Satisfied that she had taken out one of the infuriating ponyspawn that had caused her so much trouble earlier, Twilight turned her attention to Spike.

The violet unicorn was surprised that Spike was fighting so well and with so much bravery against the ponyspawn. He was working in tandem with Pinkie’s own movements, both fighters surrounding a frustrated donlock and attacking him with sharp strikes. While Twilight still did not want her young charge in battle, this was what her life was now, and Spike was not going to stay cooped up in whatever haven she wanted him to stay in while charging off against all manner of fanged and clawed monstrosities.

Galloping at full speed, Twilight ducked her head low and bounced Spike off the ground and onto her back. “Twilight? What gives?” he said in objection, as Pinkie brought down her mace onto the donlock.

“I’m riding you in closer,” Twilight answered, a glint in her eye, “So you can hit them with your sword.” Spike’s response was a loud cheer as he readied his burning blade to attack. Moving her hooves as fast as she could, they ran past a thelock archer, with Twilight blasting the ponyspawn with ice followed by a scorching slash by Spike.

Not to be outdone, Rainbow Dash had flown right into the remaining screamer, shredding the beast’s wings with her dagger and letting it fall. As the screamer struggled to get back to its claws, Spike jumped off Twilight’s back, thrusting the fiery weapon into its large eye. He did not notice the donlock galloping towards him, tusks ready to pierce through the dragon’s scales.

“Spike! Behind you!” Twilight shouted, attempting to fire a quick bolt of energy from her

staff to distract the donlock, but a shockwave knocked her concentration and balance off. The minotaur had tossed Shale away, and was making another powerful attack against the golem.

Thwunk! A sickening suction sounded over by Spike. Twilight watched as the donlock rocked, never losing its eerie fanged grin as it fell over, an arrow embedded in its skull. Fluttershy shrunk back, as she readied another arrow; it was still hard to believe that the shy pegasus had such skill with a bow.

All that remained was the minotaur, who limped on one of its hooves as it struggled to get a hold of the golem. Shale moved with surprising finesse, but the injuries incurred to the minotaur were also causing it to become clumsy and slow. The pony of stone bucked the damaged leg of the gargantuan, watching as it roared in pain before falling over.

Twilight could have sworn that Shale was smiling as it reared upwards, then dropped its heavy forehooves onto the minotaur's head. Sure enough, a loud *squish* echoed throughout the area, reverberating in Twilight's ears. All of the ponies winced and turned away from the scene, with "Ewww..." being foremost on Twilight's mind and lips. She had no doubt that the sentiment was being reflected by the others.

Leaving the fresh and messy kill behind, Shale turned and approached Twilight. The battle was over and her friends were safe, but now it seemed they would have to contend with a battle-hungry golem. As Shale stood before her, Twilight finally realized just how *big* it was. So large was the mountainous Shale that it dwarfed the image of Arl Macintosh she had seen in the Fade.

"Oh goody," Shale said, voice dripping with contempt as it looked at the party, "A union of unique unicorns, and a veritable posse of pegasi and ponies. If this were not the first day of mobility in the years since I was frozen, I would truly call this the apex of my existence."

"You, purple one." Twilight stood up straighter as Shale addressed her. She did not want to be the next one to go *squish*. "It was it that charged the control rod, wasn't it? I suppose I should thank it."

"As for the other unicorns... The blue one is too loud, and thinks it can command me? It's voice was grating, like hooves on a chalkboard. And as for the white one, flattery will get it everywhere, but please. Rubies? Sapphires? A golem of my stature needs diamonds at *least*."

While Rarity looked stricken by Shale's doubt in her talents of style, Twilight decided it was time to step forward or else Shale would berate them all. "My name is Twilight Sparkle," she began, "And it is a pleasure to meet you, Shale. Though I have to ask, how is it that you are moving around? We tried many spells and commands, but nothing helped. Was it something Dinky said?"

Shale looked down on the small grey unicorn, who was dancing around the golem and going on about how happy she was seeing Shale awake and moving again. “Once the control rod was filled with magic, I discovered I could move again, but only if a specific phrase was spoken. The little one used an ancient command, one that can drive even a golem so mighty as myself to awaken from torpor.”

“She said *please*,” Shale said, “Even after thirty years, I would expect manners to still be in effect. I discovered after the control rod worked again that I was not under its thrall, so decided a different test was needed for my own purposes, one of simple politeness. Not that my old master ever said any of the niceties. ‘Golem, do this.’ ‘Golem, carry my apples.’ ‘Golem, squish this bandit.’ ‘Golem, I am tired. Carry me.’ What made it think calling me ‘golem’ would make me respond?”

Hearing Shale talk and actually portray feelings made Twilight double back on her thoughts. Shale wasn’t just a walking and very hard hitting statue, but also a pony with thoughts and obviously a personality.

“If it means anything, I apologize, Shale,” Twilight said, “It was wrong to assume you were simply stone and ignorance is not an excuse.”

“An... apology? To me?” Now it was Shale’s turn to sound surprised, “Not, ‘Listen here, golem, I make the rules.’ I...am impressed by it. I suppose I will accept it’s apology.”

“The elder of this village said you killed your last master,” Twilight remembered, still wary about the golem before her, “And by the sounds of it, you weren’t very fond of him.”

“The elder of this village is a squishy prat,” Shale said, “Just as every villager is a prat, just as my unicorn ‘master’ was the biggest prat of all. Odd though...I do not remember what happened that night, all those years ago. It was rainy, I think, and I was rearing over top the body of my old master, and then the control rod lost all its magic. Likely I had just about enough of the prat and gave him the squishing he deserved. Or perhaps it was all those accursed experiments he performed on me. I’ve been sitting here ever since, watching the ponies go about their tedious lives, and those dreadful pigeons desecrating me every day. How I hate pigeons.”

Ignoring Shale’s non-sequitor about pigeons, Twilight realized the implications of Shale’s words. The golem had been frozen in the same spot for thirty years, and not only, but was completely self-aware the whole time. “That’s horrible Shale,” Twilight said, meaning every word. She’d have likely gone insane if she was frozen on the spot for decades.

“It wasn’t so bad at first,” Shale mused, “More like an extended holiday. Granted, if I had known about the pigeons, I would have froze myself under a roof. But then I saw it fighting these creatures, and I simply *had* to join in on the fun.”

The flapping of pegasi wings caught everypony's attention. Up above, Ditzzy swooped down to the ground before taking Dinky in her hooves, showering the filly with kisses and tears of relief. "My little muffin, you're all right!" Ditzzy said, holding Dinky close. She looked up at the party with gratitude in her wall-eyed gaze, "Thank you so much! She's all that matters to me!"

"Shale helped too, Mom!" Dinky said, pointing a hoof at the golem, "I knew they would wake Shale up. Say hi to Shale, Mom!"

Shale seemed to be soaking in Ditzzy's gratitude, which made Twilight smile. The golem may have a hard heart, literally, but it seemed genuine emotion cracked the shell of Shale. Whether it was fate, coincidence, or Ditzzy's lack of a sense of direction, Twilight was thankful they arrived in Stablesire, not only to save the town from a ponyspawn attack, but to free the golem from eternal stasis.

"What will you do now, Shale?" Twilight asked, curious as to what a golem, and likely the only golem in all of Equestria was going to do.

"What will I...do?" Shale seemed completely off guard from the question, "I'm not sure. The control rod no longer commands me. I suppose I could do whatever I want. Squish some pigeons. Whatever I do, I do so with my own choosing. It feels good."

"It fights these creatures voluntarily, yes?" Shale asked, pointing a hoof at the gory remains of the minotaur. Twilight nodded, and noticed the same joy in Shale's eyes as when the mountainous pony had crushed its foe. "Then I have decided. I will travel with it and its companions and lend my considerable talent of squishing undesirable creatures out of their painful existence. First ponyspawn, then pigeons. Truly a crusade worthy of a golem of my standing."

While she was certain Fluttershy would object to the painful punishment on pigeons, Twilight was more than certain Shale would be of great help in their campaign against the ponyspawn. She extended a hoof for Shale to shake, "Welcome to the group Shale," she said. Shale looked down on the offered hoof before lifting one of its massive appendages, and gave Twilight a firm yet powerful shake.

"We have an accord then." Something about the glint in Shale's eyes made Twilight uneasy, especially how Shale was looking forward to the battles. Still, better to have a trotting mountain on your side than against you.

"This is going to be fun."