

Chapter 33 – Hooves and Talons

Twilight could scarcely believe that a forest could darken as much as the Everfree did as the party traversed ever deeper towards the forest's heart. Whatever small rays of the sun did manage to peek through the foliage only managed to somehow aid the creepy ambiance the dense foliage provided, and the mage light from the staves of Rarity and Trixie did not help matters either. Still they pressed on, and Twilight hoped they would be able to catch the trail of the hippogryphs sooner rather than later.

Their quarry was elusive, however, as they left neither tracks nor feathers in their wake. What markings they *did* find were more of a threat to the Dalish than simple talon scratches, and they all bothered Blitzer to no end. Their guide flexed his wings with every warning left behind by the hippogryphs, his head like a swivel aimed towards the tree tops above.

Twilight felt disconcerted to have to watch the treeline for swooping enemies, but the party was used to such tactics from the ponyspawn screamers. Twilight's main concern was the Thunder Roc Notus, the storm spirit that had somehow organized the beasts to fight against the Dalish. Her naturally inquisitive mind wanted to know how such a spirit came into being, yet her Warden instincts demanded a way to defeat the creature to get the promised aid of the Dalish.

Instead of a disturbed focus on the Thunder Roc, Twilight decided that now was a good time to learn about Blitzer's culture from a real Dalish. "So, Blitzer. Not a typical Dalish name, is it?"

"I was from the Yokalach before I escaped that life and the winds brought me to the Everfree clan," Blitzer said. "I was happy with the clan, learning their ways. Before the hippogryph attacks, of course." He did not meet Twilight's gaze as he answered, still focused on the tree tops.

"Umm... Some Dalish clans allow city pegasi to join them," Fluttershy said as she walked up to Twilight's side. "The Dalish pegasus I traveled with in Filais said it was not very common, but many clans are dwindling. I thought you might like to know."

"Oh." While she was grateful for Fluttershy's answer, Twilight had hoped for Blitzer to open up. They had a good record of turning most ponies into friends and allies after all. Perhaps she needed to ask a more practical question. "What other sorts of creatures live in the Everfree Forest besides hippogryphs? We need to be prepared and all."

Twilight heard Blitzer give a loud gulp as his wide eyes turned to ground level. "Sometimes we find manticores in the forest," he replied, "Big ones. Small ones. Tainted ones. We call those Manitskarns. When we find one, we spend a week looking for the corpse of the ponyspawn that the mantiskarn fed from. Then we spend another week trying to find the larger force. We then

have to contend with cockatrices, river serpents, and other creatures out of our nightmares.”

“This forest is evil, and the hippogryphs are just the ones that are actively fighting against us. Boreas says we can’t leave though. He says that the forest is a trial and we’ll become strong for passing through it. I don’t care about being strong; I just want the hippogryphs to stop killing us!”

Twilight laid a gentle hoof on Blitzter’s shoulder, only to wince as he shrugged it off. He resumed his careful watch of the treetops. The group resumed their march through the Everfree as Blitzter fell silent. New fears of ponyspawn and monsters filled their heads as they traveled. Twilight steeled her resolve, and took the lead once more, pushing their pace ever closer to the center of the Everfree.

It was only after a few leagues of walking that Rarity let loose a chilling shriek. Alarmed, they brought their weapons to bear as they waited for the attack. Twilight drew her sword, clenching it tight in her teeth as she readied herself for battle. When they looked to where Rarity pointed, Twilight opened her mouth in shock.

It was a slaughter. For every eight pegasi corpses there was perhaps one hippogryph. Blood and feathers littered the clearing where the battle had taken place, with mangled and deformed bodies of the Dalish strewn about. Weapons lay broken and ruined around the field as they investigated the bloody scene. They all looked on at the ruins with anger and sorrow over the butchered bodies caused by the hippogryphs. Only the ponyspawn had them beat in terms of pure savagery.

Not a single Dalish had survived. All of them bore fatal wounds with their throats torn out either by talons or powerful beaks. Twilight could barely look at the desecration of the corpses, yet her mind could not stop imagining the sheer brutality from the hippogryphs. Applejack shook her head sadly as she looked over the battlefield.

“This just ain’t right. Look at ‘em all. Don’t need to be a genius to see that this was a proper bushwhackin’.” Twilight couldn’t help but agree with her fellow Warden. It took real malice and hatred to conduct an attack like this. As she thought of the reasons for the war between the Dalish and the hippogryphs, Twilight shivered as a cold wind rushed over her. The cold air haunted Twilight, and they reminded her of the frigid winds that had washed over the Dalish camp.

Twilight took a moment to look over the body of one of the hippogryphs. It was larger than a pony by about a head, with the upper body resembling that of a crow or a raven while the hind quarters belonged to those of a grey earth pony. Its forelegs ended in long talons, bloodied from battle. Several arrows jutted from its side as its beak lay open, almost in disbelief that it was felled. The creature even had a cutie mark much to Twilight’s surprise, though it resembled a

talon scratch rather than a symbol of its special talent.

Unless the tearing and ripping of flesh *was* its special talent. Twilight shuddered at the thought.

“Those hippogriffs are going to pay!” Rainbow shouted in fury as she took to the sky. “For every one pegasus killed, two – no, three of them should die!”

“Don’t say that, Dashie!” Pinkie fired back as her voice trembled in anguish. “Remember what Twilight said. We need to stop the bloodshed, not make more of it!”

Another cold wind rushed through the forest, with everypony instantly bundling up against winter-like wind. There was strangeness in the cold, a sort of maliciousness Twilight could not identify. Whatever it was, it made her uneasy as she shifted about, ears perked high and attentive.

A loud crack echoed through the silence of the forest as a branch snapped in two. “It wasn’t me this time!” Trixie said in defense of herself, though Twilight had turned her attention eastward towards the source of the sound. Something or somepony lurked in the woods, yet she was unable to pierce the shroud that the forest provided. Whoever was out there had the advantage.

“Everypony stay close,” Twilight warned. “Keep an eye on the tree tops and on our surroundings. We don’t know if it’s a hippogriff or something else.”

Pinkie giggled. “If Ditzie were here, she’d be able to keep one eye on both! I’m sure it’s nothing though. Maybe a wild animal, or a friendly hippogriff, or maybe something else! Like those scary-looking trees over there!”

Twilight looked to where Pinkie pointed, only to recoil in fright. The pale light and the shadows gave several gnarled trees monstrous appearances. Several appeared to have long faces filled with jagged teeth. These trees began to surround them, each more horrible than the last.

Oghren gripped his battleaxe tight in his teeth and looked at the twisted trees with eyes wide in fear. “What kind of surface monsters are these! Giants! Really tall things! Come on you sodding blighters, we have to chop them down!”

“Oh Oghren, just relax,” Pinkie replied, patting Oghren’s head. “These silly trees are funny! Can’t you see? OH! This calls for a song!”

Oghren’s ears drooped as Pinkie burst into song. “I’m gonna need a sodding drink.”

“Even when the darkness hides the light

Listen to your heart, it will guide the way,

When with your friends just feel their might,

Together you'll find a brand new day!"

Rarity rolled her eyes at the song and dance number. "Pinkie, dear, this really isn't the best time."

Rainbow's eyes darted up to the tree line as several leaves fell from the branches. Twilight followed suit, keeping an eye on the foliage yet unable to see what disturbed the canopy of the forest. She kept her horn charged with magic, a simple yet effective arcane shield ready to be unleashed in the event of an ambush. Pinkie didn't seem to notice, singing away in some sort of attempt to keep morale high.

As Pinkie continued to sing, the screech of a bird echoed in the forest. The party looked up, their attention drawn to the source. Eyes wide with alarm, Twilight was only barely able to call upon the shield as a hippogryph marauder dove down to attack. Pinkie's song stopped and she opened her eyes to see that several hippogryphs had descended around them. They screeched their fury and clawed with powerful strikes at Twilight's shield, each blow a punishment for Twilight's attempt at pacifism.

Grinding her teeth in pain, Twilight felt every blow against her shield as if they were made against her own hide. Another wince of pain and she started to feel the pain of strikes against her shield through her horn alone. Her magic screamed in her bones to release the tension that built within as each talon strike by the hippogryphs made the shield falter.

Each blow struck hard against her shield as if it were her body. The others stood around her, unable to help; the shield kept them in as much as it kept the hippogryphs out. She didn't want to fight, but what other options did they have?

"Sparkle! Let the Great and Powerful Trixie take up the shield!" Relenting from fatigue, Twilight let her magical grasp slip from her as Trixie took up the barrier. Violet energy flared into blue as the hippogryphs continued their assault. Trixie grimaced as her shield was struck, but kept strong in the face of their new foe.

Twilight allowed herself a sharp gasp of air as she looked up at the angry hippogryphs attacking them. They outnumbered the party two to one, and each held a savage fury in their eyes. Blitzer looked on at the beasts with fright in his eyes, and his knees shook as he hid behind Rainbow and Oghren. Shale pressed herself against the shield and stared down a particularly large hippogryph with several scars and marks on his face and beak.

"Let me out so that I may go and crush these featherheads." Shale growled the last word, pacing the edge of the magical dome. "They remind me too much of pigeons. They'll crap on me soon enough, mark my words. How I desire vengeance on that feathered menace. Against *all* feathered menaces!"

Instead of allowing Shale to go on one of her rampages, Twilight approached the edge of the arcane dome and looked one of the hippogryphs straight in the eye. They were eerily similar to pony eyes if a pony was lost in a berserk frenzy, something Twilight found herself disturbed by the longer she looked. Still, there was intelligence behind those eyes in the way they darted about, yet whether it was animal instinct or sentience, she could only guess.

Only one way to find out...

“Please stop,” Twilight said as she stared down the hippogryph, “We did not come here to fight you.”

“Says you.” Oghren became silent when Applejack shot him a sharp glance. Twilight continued unabated.

“We just want to know why you are attacking the Dalish pegasi. We are trying to get help to stop the Blight, but if the hippogryphs continue to hurt the Dalish, we won’t be able to get the support we need to stop the ponyspawn from destroying us all!”

The hippogryph with the scars screeched again and scraped his hooves against the ground in angry kicks. “Lies!” the creature snarled, answering Twilight’s question on intelligence. “We know you serve the Dalish! We saw you leave their camp! You were sent to kill us! But we... we will kill you!”

The flock of hippogryphs cried out with the proclamation of their leader with a frenzy. They continued their attack on Trixie’s shield in earnest. Her body shook as the barrier shimmered with each attack, while beads of sweat dripped down her face. Twilight cursed at the display of violence and the fact that she was unable to prevent or help against it.

The lead hippogryph reared on his hind hooves, his talons raised high to the sky as if in victory. “Hear me, brothers and sisters! I am Quick Kill, flock leader! These intruders would have your heads! How will we respond?”

“With the fury of the storm!” A new rage overtook the hippogryphs as they assaulted the shield, the magic fading with every attack. With a gasp, Trixie fell, now with the party exposed to attack. The hippogryphs were met head on by Applejack, Rainbow, Oghren and Shale, who took to the fight with earnest. Blades sliced the air against razor claws; Twilight drew her sword and took up position beside Spike. Rarity, Pinkie and Fluttershy took up the rear.

Her eyes wide and alert for attackers, Twilight kept herself away from the melee while Spike ward off two hippogryphs with his flaming sword. She regretted placing Spike placed in such a position, but the hippogryphs kept themselves at bay thanks to his fiery blade.

The hippogryphs were incredibly quick, and they proved to be ferocious in their attacks. With

talons and beaks, they aimed to tear at flesh and to rip throats apart. Twilight gave a shout, and her friends immediately took advantage of their variety and their experience in fighting brutal monstrosities. Shale, with her near-impervious stone hide, was able to fight off the hippogryphs with wicked efficiency. They swarmed Shale, only to be blasted off her with a powerful buck from her hind legs. One hippogryph was unfortunate enough to take the brunt of the attack, sailing overhead until it collided with a tree. A sick crack sounded through the battlefield; the hippogryph soon lay prone and broken on the forest floor.

Applejack and Rainbow moved together in tandem, a stark contrast to how the two would often bicker and compete against one another on the road. Despite their own agility, the hippogryphs could not match the speed of Rainbow making effective slashes against their hides with the greatest of ease. Applejack used the phantom slashes from Silverbite to hold the great beasts back, the hippogryphs unable to answer the magical sword.

The hippogryphs struck back hard, and used their gift of mobility to great effect. Oghren swung his axe at the air, unable to hit them. A long stream of donkey curses, the likes of which that made Twilight's ears feel dirty, erupted from Oghren's mouth while circled by a hippogryph. His frustrated curses grew louder as his armour took on a relentless attack of talon-scratches, blood from some of the wounds seeping through.

With a shout of anger, Oghren charged at the hippogryph, axe still in his mouth but mostly forgotten as the berserker simply rammed into his enemy. The hippogryph squawked as he felt the strength behind the battering ram that was Oghren, until he looked up to see the donkey with a mad look in his eyes. With little more than a grunt, Oghren raised his axe and dropped it onto the weakened hippogryph's neck. Blood splashed on Oghren's face as the hippogryph was still, and he gave a shout of victory.

Blitzer's contribution to the fight was minute. His hooves shook with nervousness as he tried to join in the battle, yet fear held him back. One hippogryph turned towards him, leering at Blitzer as he advanced towards the frightened Dalish. Blitzer shakily drew his sword, only to drop it as the hippogryph let loose another loud screech. Blitzer fell on his rump as he tried to scramble away, and the hippogryph smiled with vile intent as it reared back and jumped—

into the powerful mace of Pinkie Pie. The hippogryph clutched its broken beak as it reeled away, a defiant Pinkie standing over the crumpled form of Blitzer. "And don't come back you big meanie!" Pinkie nodded with satisfaction before moving to Oghren with a healing poultice bouncing on her tail.

The leader, Quick Kill, snarled as he took to the skies before he dove towards Twilight, talons ready and eager for flesh. Sword raised, Twilight braced herself for the sudden and very painful impact of the much larger assailant. Instead of crashing against her, however, Twilight watched

as a single arrow became lodged in the hind leg of Quick Kill. The wound sent him careening towards the ground in pain. Twilight looked at Fluttershy, who had shot the arrow, in shock as she glared down Quick Kill, causing Twilight to back away slowly. She never knew Fluttershy could act so aggressively and with such fury.

“How *dare* you!” Fluttershy’s shout resounded throughout the forest, forcing pony and hippogryph alike to stop their battle and simply watch. “We came into the forest not wanting to continue the war between the Dalish and the hippogryphs, but to end it! We made our intentions clear during our first meeting that we wanted peace, but you attacked anyways! You attacked my friends!”

As Fluttershy stared at Quick Kill, the flock leader reached one talon towards the arrow. He snapped it in two before he tossed the rest of the shaft aside. Hippogryph and pegasus stared each other down. Fluttershy’s eyes filled with an uncanny determination while Quick Kill only wanted to live up to his name. Yet as the stare down continued, Quick Kill took a few cautious steps away from Fluttershy.

“You attacked!” Quick Kill growled, “Three of my brothers are dead, many more wounded!”

“We. Were. *Defending*. Ourselves.” Fluttershy kept her stare focused on Quick Kill. “We are trying to do what is best for everyone, from the Dalish to the hippogryphs. The Blight is bigger than both of you, but you are just so consumed by... by hate to see it!”

Twilight watched the exchange between Fluttershy and Quick Kill with keen interest. Never had she seen Fluttershy act so assertive, and against such savage creatures as the hippogryphs. Fluttershy never wavered as she stood tall and waited for the hippogryphs to make the next move. The others stood around, locked in silence. Even Shale did not move to take advantage of hippogryphs’ sudden immobility.

“Perhaps now we can have a true parlay,” Twilight ventured. She shook her head as her words instantly brought Pinkie next to her with a wide grin, having misunderstood what was said. After she put away her sword, Twilight turned her head upward to see if any more hippogryphs lurked above them. Now was her best chance to negotiate with the hippogryphs despite their anger.

Yet as she made her way towards Quick Kill, the crack of a branch alerted Twilight to another presence. High above them all was a lone hippogryph unaffected by Fluttershy’s stare. The amalgamation of pony and bird-of-prey dove from the treetops, talons ready to rend pony flesh as it dove towards Fluttershy.

Her hooves pushed off the ground in a mad gallop, as Twilight rushed to Fluttershy’s side before the hippogryph could get to her. She gave a silent apology as she rammed into her, knocking Fluttershy off her hooves and sent her crashing to the ground. The hippogryph’s talons sunk deep

into Twilight and tore into her leather armour and flesh in equal measure. Twilight cried out in pain as she felt the talons of the hippogryph dig into her hide.

Twilight gasped in horror as the enemy's momentum did not shift. Instead, the hippogryph lifted her into the air, his claws boring deeper into her as he ascended away from the ground. Twilight struggled against the grip and kicked her hooves in the air helplessly.

"Twilight!" Rarity glared at Twilight's captor, while her horn and staff crackled with electricity. A bolt of lightning flew from the magical focus towards the hippogryph. Twilight watched as the attack sailed towards her, her eyes shut tight in preparation for the blast. Rarity's accuracy with needle work and glyph-craft could not be compared, but Twilight still prayed to the Sisters that the bolt would not strike her.

Instead of electrocuting the hippogryph, however, the bolt of lightning dissipated in the air, to the shock of both unicorns. A roar of thunder echoed throughout the forest, shaking leaves off of trees and silencing everyone except for the cry from Quick Kill.

"The Thunder Roc! Flee my brothers! Lest we incur his wrath! Return to the temple! Fly! Fly!"

Twilight could only watch as the hippogryphs darted off in all directions, disappearing into the foliage. Her friends turned to her direction as her captor made his way through the branches flawlessly until they were blocked by what appeared to be a massive storm cloud.

A storm cloud in the form of a great bird.

Notus the Thunder Roc was face to face with Twilight's friends, the sound of powerful thunder reverberating throughout the forest as it crowed. Blitzter shouted in fright, his fear now in command at the sight of Notus. Twilight struggled against the hippogryph, her sight of the battle between her friends and Notus lost as she was dragged away. *I can't abandon them!* She screamed inwardly, *I need to get free!*

Twilight's horn glowed with desperate magic as she pulled her sword free and held it in a tight magical grip. The hippogryph still flew at a rapid pace and made it difficult to keep her sword with her as she tried to maneuver it to fight off her captor. With a shout, she thrust the sword, yet did naught but miss the wing of the hippogryph.

"Stop struggling, meat!" he called in frustration, tightening his grip on Twilight's flesh. "Give your death some dignity!"

Twilight only responded by another thrust attempt, still unable to hit the hippogryph, but managed to clip some of his feathers. Emboldened, she struck again, this time slicing into some of the hippogryph's tendons. He squawked in pain, desperate to stay airborne. The hippogryph

let go of Twilight, her fall broken by a few branches and a loud thud.

Her vision blurred as the impact of the fall reverberated throughout her body. Thankfully, all her limbs were still whole and unbroken, though the aches would linger for a while. She looked up to see that her attacker had crashed into a tree, one of his wings limp against his side. He was still able to move, and as he turned to face Twilight, she could only see rage in his eyes.

The hippogryph leaped towards her, talons ready to strike again. In desperation, Twilight levitated her sword grip into her mouth, her stance ready to receive the blow and counter. Her horn fizzled; her magic faded and she needed rest. All that would protect her from the hippogryph now was her sword. Twilight grimaced as talons sunk into her body once again, both pony and hippogryph locked in a violent struggle against one another on the cold forest floor.

The hippogryph cawed, his stance one of battle as he snapped at Twilight's neck and broke her skin. Eyes wide in horror, she recalled what was said by Zharia in the Dalish camp, how the bite of a hippogryph would turn a pony into one. With sudden terror and anger, Twilight brought her sword towards the hippogryph's neck, and the blade plunged deep within flesh.

Hot blood flowed from the fatal wound as the hippogryph gave a struggled squawk, desperate to remove the sword only to fall over onto his side. Haggard gasps escaped his beak as he looked up with intense hatred at Twilight before his eyes rolled into the back of his head. The body stilled, leaving an exhausted and terrified Twilight alone in the Everfree.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the corpse. "I tried. I swear I tried. I didn't want to do this."

If she expected an answer from the dead, all that could reply was the sound of forest as the wind whispered around her. Tired from the loss of blood, Twilight dragged herself a few steps away from the body back in the direction of her friends. They needed to know what had happened, that she was bitten by a hippogryph. Yet as she staggered away, she didn't know which way to go as the dark woods extended as far as the eye could see, and every direction looked the same.

Twilight fell to her side, and she felt her eyelids grow heavier from the fatigue of battle. She was bleeding out, the wounds caused by the hippogryphs talons severe. Despite her wounds, Twilight felt no pain as her body became numb. Fresh tears streamed down her face as the cold realization crept over her; she had killed again, and now she was cursed to become a hippogryph.

"I'm sorry..." she muttered as sleep over took her, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... all..."

Twilight opened her eyes to find that she was in the surreal landscape of the Fade. She groaned as she rose to her hooves, and felt a powerful migraine pound her skull like a steel-capped ram against the walls of a fortress. Her knees buckled for a moment while she tried to take in her

surroundings. She stood on firm ground, for all that “firm” meant when in the dreamscape, but it was a strong base for her to stand. She was in the Fade, which meant that she was at least asleep. Of course, it could also mean she was dead, though the alternative was to be cursed into the form of a hippogryph.

There was little else to this small floating island though, even in most Fade dreams; no rocks or other ornamentation from her past conjured by demons. It was strangely barren, and Twilight was unsure whether to take comfort in the lack of demonic presence or to be more concerned instead.

Then she looked up. Eyes wide as saucers, Twilight stepped away in a frantic struggle to flee. Her heart thudded against her chest as the sight of the dread city loomed over her. Black Canter stood tall and horrible, built into the side of the tallest mountain within the Fade as great demons flew around the abandoned spires. What was once the seat of Celestia was little more than a hell made real and now in perfect view for Twilight.

All her life, she was taught by the Chantry that Black Canter was the result of the hubris of the Unicorn Imperium, who had thought themselves superior to Celestia and attempted to invade her city of Canterlot. Their hatred and greed corrupted Canterlot so completely that Celestia had to abandon her own city to demons, but not before she cursed those invaders into becoming the first ponyspawn. It was for this reason that unicorns were shunned by the Chantry and by religious ponies; they were the ones who ruined paradise.

“I SEE YOU, WALKER OF THE GREY.”

Twilight felt her heart lodge into her throat as the voice of the Archdemon resounded in her skull. The black dragon circled the small Fade island until it landed mere inches from Twilight. Caught between hell and a dragon, the intense feeling of dread crept into her. What was she to do? She didn't even know the Archdemon had a Fade presence like demons and unicorns!

The Archdemon's nostrils filled the air with smoke as it stared at Twilight, and great red eyes bored into her spirit. Twilight could feel the heat of the shadowflame burn within the Archdemon's throat, yet she still stood her ground against it. There was nowhere else for her to go, and like the cornered rat is forced to fight, if it came down to facing the Archdemon in battle alone, she would fight. It was her duty to fight the ponyspawn and their dread master.

If only the situation wasn't so hopeless.

As she dug herself into the ground, head lowered and horn fueled with magic, she waited for the Archdemon to finish the battle with one breath of shadowfire. Rather than reduce Twilight to ash, however, the Archdemon leaned back on its haunches, and brought its grand height to bear

before its body erupted into black flames.

Twilight stood agape as the impossible fire consumed the Archdemon. The lord of the Blight stood before her, its form shrinking smaller and smaller until the flame was the same size as she was. Curiosity battled caution as she watched the fires dance closer and closer to her, Black Canter behind her forgotten as she watched. Twilight was left speechless.

The flames dissipated quickly, and they left behind a unicorn much like Twilight in its wake. Dressed in robes and armour that were as black as the Archdemon's scales, a unicorn with an immaculately cut white mane stepped towards Twilight in slow movements. The left side of her face was covered in a metal plate, bolted onto her skull as her good red dragon eye regarded Twilight as a cat does a mouse for its meal.

"How... curious, I find you." The Archdemon's new form was more worrisome to Twilight than that of a dragon. She appeared to be just another unicorn, though much more immaculately dressed and with a much larger horn.

"You are curious to me, mortal," the Archdemon said, its voice rigid and deep, like an older mare. "You have been touched by divinity itself. The smell of the accursed moon holds close to your spirit. I see the torments you have endured. The battles. The pain. The death. Yet you do not submit to the despair that is life. You hold steadfast to your beliefs that you will emerge victorious."

"Why?"

Was she... actually having a dialogue with the Archdemon? Twilight could not wrap her head around this. The Archdemon, a long dead Old One who had once ruled the world with five siblings and could only be defeated by a goddess' dark side, wanted to simply chat with her. Taking a great breath of air, Twilight met the Archdemon face to face.

"I fight because it is my duty to fight you," she answered. "I have sworn myself to this duty. You and the ponyspawn destroy everything out of some hatred of life. I fight because you threaten those who cannot hope to defend themselves. I fight because all I love and care for will perish if I don't. I ask you why? Why do you hate us so much that killing is all the ponyspawn can do?"

The Archdemon considered Twilight's question for a moment by cocking her head. "Strange. Do you not fear who or what I am? You ask me a question, implying you expect an answer. You ask your better why I destroy all I lay my eye upon. To see the weak and pitiful command the world as we did is an insult. To be cursed in these forms with no hope of escape, we let our rage wash upon the land like a tidal wave. If I cannot rule it as I did, I will end it all. We who were the masters of the world will be the ones to end it. That is our duty. I will not allow them to have

what is mine by right."

"What are you talking about?" Twilight could not believe the callousness of the Archdemon's words. How could anyone simply want to exist to destroy? "Who are you trying to stand up to? To Celestia and Luna? To ponies?"

"To all those who live while we do not. To those who stood against their betters and demanded what should never have been. Only those who share the power of gods could understand, yet they used that power to protect all of your kind. You are curious to me, mortal. You do not fear me. We will meet again, in battle, soon. Then you will know fear. Pain. Death. But for now... For now know..."

"Despair."

Under the shadow of the Archdemon and of Black Canter, Twilight felt her horn erupt into unparalleled pain. She fell to her knees and felt her body seize from weakness, but not before she gave one last look of defiance to the Archdemon. Twilight would give the Archdemon the satisfaction. Not in the Fade, not in the material plane, nowhere. She had come too far to let the Archdemon break her will.

"I do not... fear you... Uthemiel."

Being called by its old name caused the Archdemon to roar in fury, the might of a dragon's voice projected by a small pony's mouth. With a slight smirk, Twilight fell into unconsciousness, satisfied that she had stared into the face of death itself.

And spat in it.

Twilight opened her eyes and felt refreshed, rejuvenated, and completely healthy as the aromas from various herbs and spices filled the air around her. Faint lights from small candles were the only sources of light, and she found she was in a very dark room as strange shadows blanketed the walls. She was not alone, as she heard the sound of loud snores from her right and the noise of a bubbling cauldron.

She looked down at herself to see she was covered in a light woolen blanket of many assorted colours. The bed Twilight was in was incredibly comfortable, the soft crunch of hay belying the fact that she had never felt so rested in a long while. Her sides still stung thanks to the wounds caused by the hippogryphs, but she could feel that her torso was wrapped expertly in tight bandages soaked in what she assumed was poultice. She rubbed a hoof against her sides, wincing at the still tender flesh underneath the bandages—

Wait... Twilight held her forehooves up to her face, a grin of intense relief plastered across her face. *I still have hooves! Not talons! I didn't change!*

Twilight double-checked her body for any sign of change. She pressed her hooves against her snout to check if she had grown a beak, then rubbed her back in search of wings. She laughed in spite of herself as she fell back on the bed. Her body wasn't cursed with the form of a hippogryph. The madness and the fury of the hippogryphs had not taken hold of her.

Twilight smile quickly faded as she looked around the dark room. She now sat in a strange hut and not a single one of her friends was with her. Somepony snored very loudly near her, yet she couldn't see a soul.

Right, Twilight thought as she cast a simple magelight spell from the tip of her horn, *we may as well solve one problem*. With magical illumination to brighten the hut, Twilight squeaked in surprise as several strange and foreign items were in full display. Bizarre masks hung on the walls and appeared to watch her, while a large black cauldron filled with blue goop bubbled over a large fire. The shelves were packed with containers filled with reagents both known and unknown to her.

To her right was a large cage made of wood, and inside was the most unkempt unicorn stallion Twilight had ever seen. Dressed in mismatched rags with a pair of wings made from leaves and twigs strapped to his body, the old unicorn awoke with a start. The odd fellow stared at Twilight with erratic eyes.

“Huh, wha? Who dares awaken a magical *god* from his nap? Is that you, old witch? Come back to grovel at my hooves? Well, make with the groveling already!”

Twilight stepped towards the eccentric unicorn, cautiously watching him before she found a lyrium band wrapped around his horn. The Templar Order and the Tower used such a band sparingly, as it had the effect of preventing a unicorn to draw on the Fade and use their spellwork. Why this unicorn was bound was a mystery, but as she stepped closer to the cage, the unicorn slammed against the wood, causing Twilight to jump away.

“Who are you? Why do you get a comfy bed? I'm the god around here! I am the Fifth—“

“This pony here is my guest, and for her I give my best. You are nothing but a crook, as well as one who is quite the kook.”

Twilight spun on her hooves to see the door of the hut wide open and a strange equine that stood before her. She was slightly taller than Twilight and shrouded by a brown burlap cloak. Her coat was white with black stripes, a colouration Twilight had never seen before. The feeling of creepiness from the hut and the owner never abated.

The trapped unicorn crossed its forelegs and pouted. “This is not how somepony should treat *divinity*, witch!”

“You entered my home in search of loot; perhaps I should turn you into a newt.” The stranger looked away from the wretch and held up a consoling hoof towards Twilight. “Please, I am not one to fear. While you rested, I have been near. Your wounds were deep and fever high, if I was not close, death would be nigh.”

Twilight allowed herself to calm down as the stranger spoke, her lyrical words somehow soothing in the faint candle light. Twilight cancelled her magical light and returned the hut to its original dark ambiance. She raised a hoof tentatively before pressing it against the stranger’s.

“Thank you for helping me,” Twilight said, “My name is Twilight Sparkle, Grey Warden. I’m in your debt.”

The stranger threw her head back, the hood tossed aside from her cloak to reveal her face. She was not a pony at all, though she still had the form of an equine. Eyes of blue met Twilight’s gaze, and they held many years of wisdom and experience behind them. The stranger smiled at Twilight as she made her way to the caged crazy pony. Twilight looked at the unicorn, then to the striped equine with a puzzled look.

“My name is Zecora, who lives here alone; though there are times I let my presence known.” Zecora bowed low to Twilight before she turned towards the thief. “This mad thief thought me easy prey, and crept into my hut while asleep I lay. Then he got caught into a trap, but inhaled some dust to take a nap. Once you are healed and well, this thief I will take out of the place that I dwell.”

Before the unicorn inflicted with insanity could speak again, Zecora gripped a bottle of dust in her teeth and turned it over on his head. Light pink powder poured from the bottle onto his snout, leaving the thief to mutter incoherently for a while before his descent back into sleep. Once she was sure that the thief was in deep slumber, Zecora turned her complete attention to Twilight.

“Wounds made by a hippogryph are grave, able to kill the strongest knave. You are quite strong to live—“

“Only thanks to the healing you give. Gave.” Zecora chuckled as Twilight finished her rhyme. She headed over to the doorway of Zecora’s home. “I am very grateful, but I really should get back to my friends. We have to make our way to where the Thunder Roc lives and defeat him if we are going to be able to save the Dalish pegasi.”

When Twilight finished, Zecora shook her head, her smile gone and her eyes downcast. “A

difficult task for you to take, it will not be, as some ponies say, ‘a piece of cake’. The truth of the matter needs to be known, or else death and despair will be shown. We will wait for your friends here, as I left a trail of torches to bring them near.”

Twilight and Zecora conversed through the night as they waited for the party to arrive. Zecora was a zebra from a land “far away to the south, where the river kisses the mountain’s mouth,” and had come to Equestria to learn more about the world. She lived alone in the Everfree Forest, studying the flora and fauna while also practicing her medicinal alchemy on the new substances she found. Because of her strange appearance, speech, and use of herbs in strange concoctions, most ponies declared her a witch and avoided her, with even the templars making attempts to apprehend her.

The Dalish and the hippogriffs wanted nothing to do with Zecora either, as both sides blamed her for supporting their enemy. Unable to reason with either of them, she lived alone as a hermit, and wanted little more than to work in peace until she could go back home.

They talked about other things, such as the impending Blight on the land. Zecora mentioned she could help Twilight against the ponyspawn, but she would explain everything better once Twilight’s friends arrived.

Twilight wondered if Zecora held any more knowledge about the hippogriffs. She asked, “I was bitten by a hippogriff, but I don’t appear to carry the curse like the poor Dalish back in the camp. Do you know why that is?”

“As the curse runs like a flood, I believe the protection was in your blood.” Twilight raised an eyebrow as Zecora gave a sly wink. “In my homeland, we once had a Blight. Thanks to the Wardens, we once again saw light. From them we learned much, and your blood is quite potent, and can resist the cursed touch.”

Despite her injuries in countless battles by creatures that were less than sanitary, she never felt ill or otherwise weakened by sicknesses. Of course, the ponyspawn blood that flowed through her body was just as much a curse as well as a blessing, but it made sense that the bite of a hippogriff would not affect her. Twilight gave a sigh of relief and a quick thanks to the Sisters.

Zecora smiled as she approached the door, looking through the small hole before she opened the way. “Your friends have arrived, and not a moment too soon, I will be sure they see my aid as a boon.” Instead of happy greetings, however, the door was knocked off its rope hinges and onto the floor with a confused Zecora sprawled next to it. One stone hoof retracted from the door way as Twilight’s friends poured into the hut weapons ready to fight.

“Twilight! Darling, we found you!” Rarity burst forward and embraced Twilight in a vice-like hug, which Twilight could barely return before she could stop her friends as they loomed over

Zecora with blades ready.

“The witch of the woods,” Applejack growled. “Heard a few tales about you. Reckon you’d make off with our Twilight, huh?”

“Look! She already has dessert sleeping in a cage! Gonna make a big tasty stew out of Twilight, weren’t you!” Pinkie hovered over Zecora, who frowned. “That’s not how you make stew! Ponies are not a good ingredient for anything except as the key component to a party!”

Zecora stood up with surreal grace and speed, backing up towards a wall where a long spear stood as decoration. Or for intruders. “Through my door you breach, minds clouded with rage? Your friend is who I gave aid, not sealed in a cage. It is your anger you must quell, if you wish to be welcome in the home I dwell. By my lights you find your way, so become calm and hear what I must say.”

Gone was the amiable Zecora and in her place was a zebra shaman who brandished a spear against Twilight’s friends. She cursed, then covered the doorway with a shield so Shale would not be able to damage the property further. Twilight focused another spell, one that created a loud *bang* to bring all attention to her.

“I’m fine! The hippogryph hurt me, yes, but thanks to Zecora, I’m better now.” She winced as she felt her ribs sting against her chest. Pinkie abandoned her “war face” and bounded over to Twilight. She checked the bandages that Zecora had applied before a quick nod of approval.

“These were really well done. But if you went out of your way to heal Twilight...”

Zecora placed her spear back on its rack. “As you said yourself, pink one, eating your friends is not very fun.” With a motion of her hoof, she pointed towards her cauldron filled with stew. “Please, let us forgive and forget. A calming meal will leave no one upset.”

Applejack looked leery for a moment before she turned towards the cauldron where Oghren was already helped himself, face first into the hot stew. The berserker pulled his face out of the massive pot and licked the remnants off his long beard braids.

“Can’t taste any poison as far as I know.” He licked his lips for a moment before snickering. “Tastes pretty good, actually. Could use more salt, but then I say that about everything. Of course, could use some exotic flank later, if ya catch my drift.” He winked at Zecora, with lechery which brought a chorus of groans as the zebra raised a single eyebrow in confusion, or perhaps subtle discomfort.

Once everyone was calm and seated with a bowl of fresh stew, Twilight told her friends how she had defeated her hippogryph assailant before awakening in Zecora’s hut. Zecora then introduced herself properly, and one by one everypony else did the same, save Shale who was forced to sit

outside.

“You ponies are going to have to learn to build bigger doors,” she said, “I should call this discrimination against tall golems.”

Ignoring Shale, Twilight looked to her friends. “I remember you were all about to face off against the Thunder Roc. What happened? No pony looks hurt, for which I am grateful, but something so large and fierce would have been a hard fight.”

“That’s the weirdest thing, Twi,” Rainbow said. “One moment we were fighting hippogriffs and about to chase after you, next this gigantic storm cloud in the shape of a bird shows up. It boomed like thunder, and its eyes looked like balls of lightning, but when it came down to it, that Thunder Roc never attacked us! I bet it was scared, maybe it had heard of our track record including ponyspawn, demons, and dragons.”

Fluttershy shook her head. “It turned its head to where that hippogriff was carrying you off and more thunder happened. I was so scared, but then Notus flew off to that big scary cloud hanging above the Everfree Forest. After that, we searched the Everfree looking for you. We think Blitzer returned to the camp, but we’re not sure.”

There was a lull in the air as they sat in silence before Zecora stood up and headed over to her wooden racks filled with various potions and mixtures. “Now that you all are here indeed, there is a tale you must all heed.” Twilight listened intently as Zecora spoke. She tossed many ingredients into her cauldron and mixed them in what appeared to be a random fashion. All Twilight could do was have faith that Zecora knew what she was doing.

“Boreas told you half the truth, but now his guilt you will find proof. The war between hippogriff and Dalish is long overdue, and it pains me to see the forest painted in a crimson hue. The Dalish keeper did not say that to cloud temple he makes his way. There is a hall for rituals old, where he casts one that is quite bold.”

“You mean that massive cloud is actually a temple?” Rainbow had disbelief in her eyes, but the way she spoke belied something akin to hope. “Like in the old stories my mom used to tell me?”

“In tales both tall and true, there is a speck of truth just for you.” Zecora stirred the contents of the cauldron, a bright blue liquid bubbling within. “A temple high above the sky, with a fog to protect and to lie. Any who wander without this potion, will be confused without notion. I have a boon to request, if you will accept my quest.

Long have I watched the Dalish fight, and the hippogriffs believe they are in the right. It is my desire to see this conflict end. Can you do this, my friend? Bring peace to the two sides for me, and against the Blight I will give you a supernatural army.”

“Supernatural army?” Twilight raised an eyebrow in puzzlement. “You’ll have to explain this a bit more.”

“What I ask is for a bit of trust. You have little reason, but I fear you must.” Zecora turned her gaze to everypony as they looked back in confusion. As nice as Zecora was to keep the party in her home, feed them, and take care of Twilight’s wounds, it was still difficult to find a reason to trust someone who just a little while ago was an enigmatic stranger. Still, she offered to help with the Blight, and all Twilight had to do was end the bloodshed that cursed the Everfree Forest.

Still, she had to think practical. Could she keep such a promise? The hippogryphs were just as savage as Twilight had been told they were, and if Boreas lied to her, what if the rest of the Dalish were in on this con, and what exactly was this bold ritual that Zecora said Boreas had performed? He was not a unicorn, and to have access to magic was supposed to be impossible for him.

Then again, stranger things than the impossible have happened before.

“We can’t make any promises,” Twilight said. “I want to say we can end this without bloodshed. I want to say we can bring peace to the Dalish and the hippogryphs. But if there is one thing I’ve learned about this world, it’s that no matter how hard we try, someone will not accept peace. They’ll fight us, and we’ll have to...”

Redwing, the pegasus assassin. The maleficar. The drakes, the diamond dogs, the high dragon. Ruck. Now a hippogryph. Every time Twilight closed her eyes, she could recall their final moments with such clarity that she felt she relived them every day. When would the killing stop? When would the blood stop flowing?

When I say so. When I want to stop spilling blood that doesn’t flow in ponyspawn veins. Twilight had to make a stand against the violence. As she stood up and looked over her friends and Zecora, Twilight lifted her sword with her magic.

“No more blood. Zecora, I swear we will find a peaceful solution to the conflict between the Dalish and the hippogryphs. We’ll take whatever help we can get, but I swear to you and to Celestia and to whoever listens to my oath. No more pony blood will be spilled. No more donkeys, or dogs, or hippogryphs as well. The only creatures that will feel our blades are the monsters who care nothing for life.”

Zecora smiled at Twilight’s declaration as she filled several bottles with the blue liquid. “I see your heart is filled with fire, a determination that will not tire. With you and your friends on the task, I see great hope for that which I ask. Take these potions blue, they will give wings to you. Not in a literal sense, but in a way that makes clouds dense. Under your hooves on clouds you will walk, the very sight will make the hippogryphs balk. Once you are in the temple in the sky,

seek out Notus and his thunderous cry. The Thunder Roc knows Boreas and his lies, just ensure that neither leader dies.”

“This is gonna be a tough one, Twilight,” Applejack said as Zecora passed the blue potions to each pony. “Not fighting?”

“Not fighting anything that isn’t ponyspawn.” Twilight looked at the edge of the blade for a moment before she levitated the weapon back into the sheath. “We need to show that our friendship is stronger than swords. Ponies and other creatures have been fighting each other while the Archdemon and its hordes have been running amok. We have to show that we are better. We have to stop the bloodshed.”

Fluttershy smiled as she hovered over to Twilight’s side. “I think this is the best plan yet,” she said. “No more swords. No more weapons. We can bring peace to the two sides if we really try.”

One by one, each member of the party left Zecora’s hut with a word of thanks, and some words of apology for the rough introduction. Shale stuck her head back into the hut, indignant that she had not been given a potion. Zecora merely shook her head.

“I am sorry, pony of stone, but the potion is only for those of flesh and bone.”

“What? Does that mean I have to miss out on squishing hippogryphs in the sky?” If Shale could, Twilight would have sworn she bristled with anger. “What will I do then? Sit and wait on the ground? How droll. I am a golem of action, and I demand a place in battle.”

“That looks like the plan. Don’t worry Shale, we won’t take long.” As much as she trusted Shale as a friend, the golem proved to be incredibly violent with even the slightest provocation. Against the ponyspawn, Shale was invaluable. In a mission of peace, Shale was the greatest liability.

Zecora stepped into the doorway of her hut, raising her voice so all could hear. “Beware when you enter the temple high above, on a mission of peace and love. The hippogryphs are not the only danger there, for lethal monsters and traps lurk everywhere. Find the Thunder Roc and make him see, that peace is the best possibility.”

“We will, Zecora,” Twilight thanked her. “Peace is always worth the risk.”

Boreas watched from behind the trees high above the hut of the old witch. He had arrived shortly after the Warden and her allies had and watched as the witch and the ponies conversed about the temple in the clouds. About how he made regular trips there.

He glowered for a moment before he withdrew in silence. The striped witch had told them about

his forays into the temple but did not know the nature of his business there. How every time he went was to calm the spirit of the Thunder Roc, to preserve his people for another decade. They could not leave the Everfree, not without him, and so he kept them in the forest as every ten years he would go and face Notus alone. Those were the days when the hippogryphs feared him.

Now they were bold, uncaring for their own lives as they struck against the Dalish, and incited his fury. He could not act against Notus directly, not without his ritual, so he would use the Wardens to weaken his age-old foe. Boreas knew better than to trust strangers, as they were selfish and would ultimately harm him and his clan. Still, strangers could be used, and if they could make their way into the ritual halls of the temple and keep it safe for him, the better.

A spear flew from the direction of the witch, and Boreas was forced to duck and fly under the shadow of the weapon. He looked down to see that the accursed zebra glared at him, with a couple of spears strapped to her back.

“Be gone, you hateful fool,” she said, her anger plain across her face. “Go back to your camp and let your fury cool. These ponies will not have their quest under threat. Depart now, or you’ll soon feel regret.”

“I speak with the authority of the winds, witch,” Boreas replied, “They cursed the hippogryphs. I was merely their arbiter. Peace with those savages is impossible. Peace with their master is impossible. You should know that better than anypony. How often they would attack you on sight.”

“The same courtesy the Dalish have shown me often, with sword and arrows when they refuse to listen.” Zecora bit down on another spear and readied herself to throw it. “You say you speak for the wind? It has abandoned you, for you have sinned. If you fail to heed my words, then follow the Warden to the realm of birds. Perhaps you can learn something there, if you pause and give a care.”

Boreas narrowed his eyes as the cold winds blew all around him, his robes billowing while he took flight once again towards the temple. Accursed zebra. She did not know the pain he was under, the task of protecting his Dalish clan. The Warden and her friends did not know either. Hatred was not a curse, but a source of strength. He found solace in his hatred, and he used it to fuel his mastery of the winds. They roared in agreement as he returned to the skies above, where he would wait.

Then strike.