Chapter 37 - Trotterim by Day

Her mouth agape and her eyes wide, Twilight looked around the city of Trotterim in complete awe. It was a similar fascination to her visit to Orzamule, only now she felt more connected to the ponies walking the streets than she had to the then unfamiliar donkeys. Tall buildings of brick, wood, and stone rose high into the sky, with a grand structure Twilight assumed was the royal palace sitting on the eastern edge of the city. Near the palace was a much larger fortress that dwarfed the city.

“That’s Fort Drakon,” Applejack said. “The largest garrison in all of Equestria. That’s where the soldiers of Trotterim and Loghoof’s soldiers from Glenwell are stayin’, while everypony else has to camp out around the city walls. Fort Drakon isn’t just a garrison, but also a prison. Be a damned fool to try and escape when the bulk of the army is standin’ guard.”

That brought up the issue of the guards. Once the party had sneaked off into an alley, Twilight began to think. Twilight and Applejack were wanted criminals in the eyes of Loghoof, and they could only go so far without being noticed. For Twilight, hiding meant merely conjuring a fitting hood. Rarity started in surprise at Twilight’s magic. “Darling, how did you make such a garment so quickly?”

“Just another spell I learned from the phylactery,” Twilight explained, “Conjuration has always been a finicky magic to learn. It is difficult to make something appear and stay in existence. My hood is a part of my armour, so it lasts as long as I need it.”

She turned to Applejack. “My hood is quick and easy, and I can conjure you a helmet, though it won’t last too long. Maybe a couple of hours at most. Our armour covers our cutie marks already, so we should be fine in that regard.”

Applejack sat on her haunches and held her hat in her hooves. Twilight bit her lip, knowing that she was asking Applejack to put away the one thing that seemed to give her strength. It was a simple hat, but one full of memories. Even Twilight found the sight of the hat comforting, as it meant her friend would be nearby. Applejack was the rock of the group on which Twilight relied.

“Just for a little bit,” Applejack frowned, tucking her hat into her saddlebags. “Don’t feel right without my pappy’s hat. Well, what’re ya’ll waitin’ for?”

Twilight’s horn came alive with magic, the pommel of her sword glowing in unison as the thought of a proper helm for her friend appeared in her mind’s eye. A rounded shape began to form, the shine of metal coming through the glowing magic. Once the magic was done, a simple helm with a visor floated before Applejack. Another flick of magic, and Twilight was helping tie Applejack’s blonde mane into a bun before gently lowering the helm onto her head. It was a

good fit, and Applejack appeared nothing more than a heavily armoured mare.

“Alright then, now we’re *mostly* inconspicuous.” Twilight looked over to Shale and Spike. A golem and a baby dragon would attract attention, but hopefully ponies wouldn’t be too drawn to them. Conversely, Twilight did not want to make a scene either with ponies running away in fear at the unfamiliar sights.

“I have an idea for you two,” she said, a mischievous smile forming on her lips. “Spike, get on Shale’s back and stay low.”

“What do you intend to do?” Shale asked, her stone brows narrowing. Twilight tittered as she ignited her magic. Just as quickly as she created the helmet, so too did she conjure a large colourful robe that covered both Spike and Shale completely. Spike’s muffled cries of indignation were ignored in favour of focusing on Shale’s glare that promised bloody, brutal murder.

Spike was quite vocal. “I can’t see a darn thing!”

“I look like a pigeon that rolled around in every colour of paint imaginable,” Shale muttered.

Fluttershy looked over Shale. “Like a peacock?”

“The taxonomy of the winged pests is not in question. My appearance is! I look ridiculous!”

“You look like a pony,” Twilight replied. “A bit oversized and with a hunched back, but good enough. We can’t have you walking around like a servant in Trotterim, Shale. Nopony has ever seen a golem before, and we are lucky we managed to make it this far without raising alarms.”

If Shale wanted to voice any more concerns, she did not do so. Only a single stomp of a hoof was her response, the form of Spike under the robe crossing his arms in disgust. Twilight did feel bad for putting both into such a situation, but pragmatism won the day. They could not afford fighting Loghoof’s forces in the streets.

Once their disguises were set, Twilight and the others headed towards the center of Trotterim. Ponies from all walks of life, from the rich to the poor, workers and soldiers, children and elderly took to the streets of Trotterim for whatever business called to them. Open stalls with various goods such as fruit and clothing to weapons and potions lined the streets. To Twilight, things looked normal, as far as she knew about normal city life.

In fact, they seemed *too* normal. Considering that there was a ponyspawn invasion imminent, the idea that the townsponies were not panicking or hiding away from the oncoming war confused Twilight. Ponies milled about in the streets, buying goods and gossiping. There were a few soldiers running drills, but there seemed to be a false sense of calm. There was a losing war

going on outside of the city walls, and as far as Twilight was concerned, the ponies of Trotterim were either ignoring that fact, or honestly did not know.

In this case, ignorance was not bliss. “Loghoof must have told everypony that things are fine outside the city.” Twilight shook her head in disbelief. “How can he continue to live a lie? After Ostequus, you would think he would get his army fighting off the ponyspawn. The people here should be far away, as far as Amarethine.”

“You’re right, Twilight,” Pinkie said. She giggled. “Hey, that rhymes! A little bit like Zecora… anyways, Amarethine would be the farthest and safest place for all these ponies. They could take boats to the Free Plains or to Pura Raza if things get really, really bad. But Arl Rendon Maim is known to be a really nasty guy. He’s mean, a bully, greedy—“

“And the arl of the biggest arling in the land, only rivaled by the terynirs,” Applejack put in. “Amarethine has control of a section of the Bannorn as well, so Maim not only has one of the largest armies under his banner, but also plenty of farmland and the only port in all of Equestria. Something so big is hard to manage though, and what Maim ain’t is a good governor. He probably didn’t want to deal with a whole lot of refugees and told Loghoof some sorta lie to make sure they didn’t come to Amarethine.”

“Then what does Loghoof see in Maim if he’s so incompetent?” Twilight wondered.

“Maim’s service to the old king… my dad… was as a sort of dirty deeds doer.” Applejack slid a hoof across her neck for emphasis. “He’s a roguish type, which makes him all the more dangerous for us to deal with. Loghoof must have paid him pretty good to have him on his side.”

“I remember Maim,” Rainbow said. “He’s the one who contacted Reinhardt back in Pura Raza to set up that hit on you girls. He’s set up a lot like an assassin. Poisons, daggers, smoke bombs, all sorts of stuff. I thought he sounded eager when he met the Wonderbolts, even though we were just hopefuls. The guy must also have contacts.”

Twilight nodded as she digested all this information. If they were going to face off with Loghoof, there was no doubt that they would have to contend with Arl Maim eventually as well. While she hoped the Arl could be reasoned with, the pony that her friends described sounded cruel and unforgiving. Who would turn away refugees when the land was in its darkest hour, simply to avoid more work?

There wasn’t time to ponder the ethics or politics of it all with the Blight so near. Now was a time for action. “We have contacts of our own,” Twilight said. “Arl Macintosh should be here, right? Let’s find him and find out what we need to do to remove Loghoof from the throne.”

They walked through the busy crowds of ponies making their afternoon rounds in the market

when Shale stopped in front of a shop. She turned her head towards the windows, looking on at the finest suits of armour Twilight had ever seen. Each suit shimmered in the noontide sun, the plates polished to such a fine degree that Twilight could see her reflection in them. High above them was a wooden sign that read:

Hoity Toity's Best of the Best Armour Apparel: Form and Function for the Superior Soldier.

"Quite the place," Twilight said aloud as Shale moved to the door, opening it. "What are you doing, Shale?"

"Recall what I collected from the dragon," Shale replied. "Well, I'm taking my loot and making something of it. This seems like a reputable blacksmith. I want nothing but the best after all."

"Wait, where are we going?" Spike asked under the robes. Twilight pressed a hoof to her face as Shale squeezed through the door, her stone body grinding against the passage. Rarity laid a hoof on Twilight's shoulder, showing a brilliant smile.

"Don't worry about those two, my dear," Rarity said. "I'll stay with them as Shale goes about with her shopping. I must admit, I am curious about this shop myself, after that brief stint as a smithy in Red Apple. If Hoity Toity can make such marvels out of metal, I would love to see how it is done with dragon scales."

"Thank you, Rarity," Twilight replied. "Keep Spike safe. Being so close to an agitated Shale, I worry."

Rarity winked before turning into Hoity's Toity's shop, leaving the others to resume their walk in the city. It was enjoyable to take a city stroll with friends, though there were instances where Twilight had to hide under her hood. Every time a patrol walked by, Twilight felt her heart thud faster, wondering if one of them had caught a glimpse of hers or Applejack's faces.

Thankfully, there were no incidents with the guards, giving them a moment to regard the various stalls around them. Unlike Orzamule's marketplace, this was more attuned for a pony's tastes. Pinkie already bounded over to an herbalist and her stall, pointing a hoof at anything and everything she could.

"Oooh! Oooh! Elderberries! Rhubarb! Sulphur! All in the same place! I'll take a dozen of those, a whole head of lettuce, and that daisy sandwhich! Oh, that's your lunch. Sorry! Let me make it up to you by buying up all your silverleaf!"

Twilight chuckled at the scene. It was always nice to see Pinkie so full of energy, especially when it came to her alchemy. Her mind went back to the battle against Boreas and the windigos, the image of Pinkie's breathless body sinking into clouds. If she had died…

Twilight shook her head vigorously. It would not do to dwell on such thoughts. Pinkie was alive and well, her boundless energy coursing through her veins. Nothing else mattered. Once Pinkie's stores were resupplied, Applejack pointed to a rather clean road leading from the marketplace to some posh, larger buildings.

"Over there are the manors used by visiting nobility," she explained. "Every Arl and Teryn gets one for their own, while the Bannorn share another. Macintosh should be waiting for us in the Red Apple Manor. We should be able to get all cleaned up and get some grub before we have to make a move against Loghoof."

"Grub. Now there's something I could look forward to." Oghren laughed, then gave his belly a rub. Twilight cringed at the sight. She simply was not used to someone as crass as Oghren in the group. He seemed to catch on to her body language though. "C'mon, Warden. I'm sure a bit of food would be appreciated by everydonkey. Pony. Whatever. And this jackass has a cankering for some surface snacks!"

Even though he was rude and crude, Twilight still considered Oghren a friend. Twilight was grateful that he had become so close to Spike back in the Everfree and for looking over him when they were fighting Flemeth. The two were thick as thieves for the most part, which gladdened. Spike found it hard to make friends in the Tower due to him being a dragon, but to Oghren that didn't seem to matter as much. They were two stallions in a party of mares, and despite Oghren's insistence that he was only in it to be so close to so many eligible bachelorettes, Twilight figured the two would gravitate towards each other as "brothers."

"Well, no point standin' around," Applejack grunted. "Let's go see what Big Mactintosh needs."

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Spike grumbled as quietly as he could, for his own comfort and being sullen than anything. He was not enjoying being the hump on the back of Shale, especially when he could hear the muffled voice of Rarity nearby. Carefully, he extended one of his claws towards the cloth of Shale's robe, opening a tiny hole he could look out at.

Standing in front of Shale was Rarity speaking with another pony, one with a brown coat and blond mane. Probably a clerk of some kind, Spike didn't care. What they talked about, Spike gave little heed. He rather enjoyed watching the graceful form of Rarity stand tall like a statue of a goddess.

"Welcome to Hoity Toity's Best of the Best Armour Apparel," greeted a small pony with an eager eye. "My name is Herren, assistant and financial advisor to Hoity Toity. Is there anything I can do for you? We have a lovely and very strong suit of silverite plate that I believe you will

look quite dashing in sir…"

His thoughts on his client's desires became interrupted as Shale stepped forward and dumped a bag onto the clerk's desk. "I am here to speak to a one 'Hoity Toity'," Shale said. "I would like to conduct business with him so that he can craft a suit of armour."

"I'm afraid that will not be possible," Herren replied. "For you see, Hoity Toity is in a bit of a backlog with commissions, and is… predisposed at the moment."

"Oh, hellish muse! Why do you forsake me in my hour of need?" Spike heard the loud whine of somepony even through Shale's robe. "Why must you let my hooves fall dull and useless among metals? Can my hammer not sing? Can I not create another masterpiece?"

Herren let out a long drawn out sigh. "He's been like that all day. Says he's bored of working on plain metals and wants a challenge. I can respect him for being an artist of skill, but art does not put food on the table, as it were."

"Oh that poor darling." Spike's heart leapt into his throat as he heard Rarity speak. "To have such a fine artiste struggling with his muse. Perhaps I can speak with him, get him to take up the forge again. I have experience in this sort of thing."

Herren motioned with a hoof to the back room where the forge awaited, leaving Shale and Spike with the storeclerk as they waited for news of some sort of change. The bells on the door chimed, signaling another customer entering the shop. Shale turned to face the newcomer, giving Spike a clear look.

An earth pony with a bright golden mane dressed in chain mail stood before them. Slung on her back was a massive sword that seemed to radiate light. She passed by Shale wordlessly, heading to the desk where Herren sat. "I'm here to pick up Teryn Loghoof's armour," she said flatly. Herren's sullen disposition disappeared and was quickly replaced by a greedy smile.

"Of course, Ser Sunsword, we have it all shined up and ready. I'll get one of the apprentices to load it into a cart for you." Herren stomped his hoof twice when a spindly young colt galloped into the room. "Featherweight, do load the Teryn's armour into Ser Sunsword's cart. That's a good lad."

Once the youngling was off, Herren leaned in close towards Ser Sunsword. "Does the regent plan for hostilities to increase soon?"

Sunsword sighed, rubbing the bridge of her snout with a hoof. "There are no threats to Trotterim," she said without emotion, as if this was a well-practiced speech. "The ponyspawn's advance has been halted, and the forces of Equestria will beat back both the monsters and the Filesians. No need to worry, citizen. Teryn Loghoof and his armies will protect us. Thank you for

your service. Celestia bless."

None of her words sounded sincere, that much Spike could guess. There was something fishy about this Ser Sunsword, and the best pony to tell would be Twilight. It could be vital information that would help them stop Loghoof.

Once Spike caught sight of Rarity coming back from the forge room with a grey earth pony with a white mane, thoughts of reporting Loghoof's subordinate were put in the back of his mind. Purple goggles covered his eyes, either as some sort of protection from the forge or a fashion accessory. This must have been Hoity Toity.

"While it is nice to meet another designer, I simply must express doubt on how you can help me." He turned his nose up at the dirty bag Shale used for her loot. "I certainly hope what you have to show me isn't in *this* ratty old thing."

"Indeed it is," Shale answered. "I bring you a material you likely never ran your grubby hooves over. Now will you accept the commission or not?"

Rarity glared at Shale, and if she was going to glare at the golem, so would Spike. Despite this, Shale stood tall and proud as Hoity took a dainty hoof and lifted the sack open. He let out a squeak in surprise. Tossing off his goggles, Hoity dove into the sack, ignoring the dirty and grime, making Rarity cringe.

"By Celestia's flank! Are these what I think they are? Are they real? Have I died and found true bliss?" Spike rolled his eyes at Hoity's enthusiasm. What was so great about whatever metal Shale had found for a suit of armour?

"That is correct, sir," Shale replied smugly. "I bring to you one-hundred percent authentic dragon scales, straight off the hide of a high dragon. Killed it myself. My compatriots helped, somewhat."

Spike could feel his cheeks flush with fire as he raised his voice. "WHAT?!"

If there was anything that could have been said that would drain the colour from Spike's face, it was this. Shale actually took the time to harvest scales from a dragon. Something just like he was. Sure it had tried to kill them, but that was no excuse for skinning the thing and planning to wear it like a hat!

Rarity coughed for a moment to cover the sudden outburst from under Shale's robes. "WHAT... an oppurtunity! Excuse me... I am just so excited! What my colleague is wondering is if you can make a suit of armour from these… scales. That my friend took. That our other friends had no part in taking in the slightest. At all."

“Can I? Can I?!” Hoity threw his head back in maniacal laughter, clutching the scales in a tight embrace. He sounded as if he was… weeping? “You have no idea how long I have waited for these to come through my door. I can begin my magnum opus! Oh how I’ve dreamed of such armour that would rival those made for kings!”

“Indeed! Indeed!” Herren was quite agreeable, golden coins seemingly replacing his eyes. “Now, let us discuss payment. Hoity Toity is one of the best armour designers in the world after all, so I say about… two hundred bits should suffice?”

“Free of charge to these kind ponies who brought me something worth more than gold! Inspiration!”

Herren’s jaw dropped. “F-free? But… but…”

“Put all my other orders on hold, Herren!” Hoity declared as he took up the sack and left for his forge. “This is the opportunity of a lifetime, and one I do not wish to squander!”

“I would request that prissy Rarity here go with you,” Shale continued. “She is a skilled artificer of articles of clothing, and has experience with the forge. She also knows the dimensions of the pony who shall be wearing the armour.”

Rarity raised an eyebrow. “I do?”

“Of course you do. All you ponies look about the same size and height, I figured it was easy. It needs to be fit for a king, or a queen. It matters not, but I believe you can make sense of such. Now get to it, hop along. No time like the present. Daylight’s burning. Hurry up. Now.”

Rarity followed Hoity Toity to the forge, Herren chasing after them both to at least charge *some* gold for such an endeavor. Alone save for the sound of Herren’s complaints and the ringing of hammers on metal, Spike climbed down off of Shale, staring the golem in the eye.

“Dragon scales? Really, Shale? Bad enough that we had to kill the dragon, but you took its *skin* as well? To make into a suit?” Spike blinked tears away as he admonished Shale. The first true dragon he had ever met and it forced his friends to slay it. Now Shale was just using its scales like metal links. “It’s for you, isn’t it? You were always the selfish one, always wanting to squish and stomp anything! What next, Shale? Are you going to make *me* into a hat?”

Shale remained silent for a moment, looking over towards the forge. Sounds of intense flames and hammering drowned out the sounds of three ponies arguing about one thing or another. Seemingly satisfied, Shale stomped her hoof on the ground enough to shake Spike off his feet and onto his tail. She brought her head low, her glowing blue eyes staring deep into Spike’s.

Spike gulped, realizing his newfound bravado was all but gone.

“I may just consider it, whelp,” Shale rumbled, her words seething with indignant fury. “If not for the fact that magical Twilight is fond of you. Firstly, I harvested the scales of the dragon because I had heard they could make the most powerful armour conceived. Secondly, it is not for me. I am invincible enough as is, having dragon armour would make combat less sporting. The last thing I need to do is become bored of battle. What would I have left? Pottery? Poetry? Wonderful.”

“Finally, I have my reasons for doing what I please, how I please, and you, whelp, are in no position to make demands of me. Take comfort that I did not squish you for your affront to my character, and that I plan to put the dragon scales to good use. If that does not satisfy you, then you can make an appointment with the stompy portion of my hoof.”

Admitting defeat, Spike sulked as he walked out of the shop while Shale focused her attention towards the sounds of expert smithing being applied to her provided scales. The door closed behind him, leaving Spike to wander the streets alone.

When he looked up to take note of a sign post to find his way back to Twilight, his eyes were immediately greeted by darkness as his head was covered by a thick sack. He gave a shout, only to have the sound muffled by the burlap. A sharp strike from a blunt object smacked the side of his head, causing an immense amount of pain.

“You must think I’m stupid,” snarled the familiar voice of Ser Sunsword. “Just some foal under Loghoof’s employ that you can dupe with a shoddy disguise? I’m not Loghoof’s second because of my shiny gold sword. Now if you don’t want to meet the business end of my blade, I’d suggest shutting your muzzle of both words and flames.”

“Twilight will rescue me!” Spike said, only to receive another sharp blow to the head.

“I’m counting on that.” With a great tug, Spike felt his feet leave the ground as he crashed into a cart. The sack banged against metal. “We were lucky, actually. We knew of the golem and the unicorn, but a confrontation would have lead to collateral damage in the streets. If you hadn’t left, we would have caused quite a scuffle. Providence is on our side this time. My lord cares not for anypony but the Warden. If that means taking a page out of Maim’s book and taking a hostage, then I will.”

Spike could neither say nor do anything as he felt the shift in the wagon as its wheels trudged along the dirt roads. He could try to run or fight, but Sunsword, being an earth pony knight, would beat him on both counts. Instead of resisting, Spike resigned himself to his fate, only one thought echoing in his head as the cart continued on to Celestia knows where.

I’m sorry Twilight. Again.

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Twilight knew the Apple family who governed the arling of Red Apple were rustic, hard working ponies who thrived in the dirt of their farms. Their orchards were plentiful, their castle strong but not gaudy, and their tastes in life simple. Applejack and her elder brother Arl Macintosh provided two of the best examples she knew.

The Red Apple manor in Trotterim appeared to take that notion of simplicity and twisted it completely backwards. The manor was shining from floor to ceiling as attendants and servants worked diligently. Pristine statues of Celestia and Luna stood in the main foyer, while fanciful paintings of bored-looking members of the Apple family ancestry welcomed the guests of the manor.

Rainbow whistled as she looked around. “Nice digs,” she said. “Could get used to a place like this.”

“Yeah, bit spiffier than Ah would like. Granted, don’t think Macintosh ever used the manor till now. Preferred to be on the land working and building a good sweat, just like any of the Apple family. This just seems more Rarity’s way of doing things.”

They entered the main living space to see even more shining surfaces of polished wood and metal, along with Macintosh waiting for them. He looked bigger than Twilight remembered, dressed in his thick plated armour with a great sword slung on his back. He looked the very image of a knightly warrior, one who could become the scourge of any battlefield his unfortunate foe found him in.

“Hey there, lil’ sis. Grey Wardens. Miss Pie. Miss Fluttershy. Miss Trixie.” Macintosh looked down on Oghren, who returned the gaze. “Who’s this?”

“Name’s Oghren, buddy.” Oghren shifted on his hooves, attempting to make himself appear bigger and more prominent. “I only got one question for ya. Where can a blighter like me get a sodding drink around here? And I don’t mean water or some weak milk for foals. I want something hard. Something to wet my whistle.”

Macintosh raised an eyebrow before looking over Oghren’s head to Applejack. She simply shook her head bemusedly in reply. Looking back down, Macintosh pointed a hoof to an adjacent room.

“Got us supper all ready for ya’ll,” Macintosh said. “Plenty of apples o’ course. Good for ya. Other food too. If you’re that thirsty, plenty of barrels of cider as well. Ah think ya’ll like those, unless you wanted to wait for your friends.”

With no way of knowing how long Shale, Spike and Rarity were going to be at the blacksmith’s, Twilight and her grumbling stomach agreed that now was as good a time as any for dinner.

Walking into the dining hall, Twilight rubbed her eyes to make sure it was not an illusion caused by a demon of hunger.

Long tables awaited them and were lined with plates upon plates of food. Apples and every baked good that could possibly be conceived with apples seemed to beckon to the party as mountains of food piled high into the sky. Apple fritters, apple pies, apple muffins, anything imagined was waiting for hungry hooves. Barrels of cider lined one of the walls with plenty of mugs for a hundred ponies. Twilight's stomach roared in anticipation as she smelled the mixed aromas of all the delicious food.

Pinkie, Rainbow, Trixie and Oghren each looked at the feast displayed to them with wild hunger in their eyes. Without another word they rushed to the table, digging into any hapless dish that could be caught by their hooves.

"Trixie has been starving!" Trixie moaned as she gripped a half dozen muffins with her magic. "Her appetite is as large as her title!"

"So many sweets! Goodies! Eeee!" Pinkie slammed her face into a bowl of apple tarts, noisily munching away while Rainbow joined in with a plate of fritters. While Twilight could appreciate their gusto for real food rather than rations or hastily made soup, their complete devouring nature resembled that of ponyspawn. There was really only one word to describe such a scene.

It was kind of gross.

Oghren approached the cider barrels with a careful eye, being much more silent than the rest of the hungry ponies. Picking up a mug for himself, he carefully poured himself a full draught of cider with plenty of foam for the head. Hey eyeballed the drink for a moment, swishing around the cider, listening to the way it moved within the confines of the mug. As Twilight sat down, she was beginning to wonder if Oghren was some sort of liquor connoisseur, this idea being the reason he was drunk often.

Taking a whiff of the cider, Oghren took an almost reverent sip of the drink. He put down the mug, Twilight watching closely as she could have sworn he gave out the smallest of sobs. A single tear dripped from his eyes as he stared into his mug.

"I'm never going back to dirt beer ever again." With that declaration, Oghren greedily consumed his drink before pouring himself mug after mug of cider, downing every drink he could while also pouring mugs and tossing them towards the rest of the party with uncanny precision. Twilight couldn't help but smile as a mug landed gracefully near her place at the table after being tossed by a lewd berserker.

While three starving savages devoured their food and cider, Twilight sat with Applejack,

Fluttershy, and Macintosh in relative silence. They ate quietly, until Macintosh looked towards Twilight and spoke.

“We have a few problems,” he said. “Things that could really bring us and the Landsmeet down. Ah don’t know how, but while ya’ll were doing Warden business, Loghoof’s been outmaneuvering everypony who stands against him. For starters, there was another Grey Warden, Riordan, who came from Filais. He went to meet with Loghoof, but after that nopony has seen heads or tails of him. Some say that he was last seen with Arl Maim heading towards the Arl of Trotterim estate. As much as Ah’d hate to say it, Ah think Maim did something to that Warden. Only way to find out would be to get into his estate.”

Twilight nibbled on a muffin as her thoughts moved in rapid motion. There was another Warden in Equestria, a Filesian no less, and he was here to help against the Blight. If he was half the Warden Duncan was, he would have been an excellent addition to the group. Perhaps he had strategies or other wisdom that could be used against the ponyspawn and, more importantly, the Archdemon.

Yet as quickly as the welcome news came, it was quickly dashed before Twilight could wrap her hooves around it. “Sounds like we may have to infiltrate Maim’s estate,” Twilight said. “Though if what I’m hearing about Maim is right, he will be ready for such.”

“He was the old king’s shadowmaster,” explained Macintosh. “Real nasty business whenever he got involved. Backstabbing, extortion, kidnapping, he did it all. In the name of the king.” His eyes turned sad as he looked towards Applejack. Twilight understood Applejack’s concer; after all, it was that same throne that employed a shadowmaster that she would soon occupy.

“That just leads to our second problem though,” Macintosh continued. “Queen Armeria is missin’. She’s been under Maim’s care since Loghoof took the regency, and even Loghoof has been losing patience with Maim because of this. Don’t rightly know what each of those ponies is planning on doing to the other, but it won’t be pleasant. Also, if we’re gonna put Applejack as queen, Armeria is gonna have to peacefully abdicate, otherwise we’ll just be changin’ one civil strife for another.”

Applejack snorted. “Never figured you to be all stuck into politics, brother. And how come we can’t just let Armeria be queen?” Macintosh snorted back in response.

“Never expected to be arl of Red Apple. And ya’ll know we need one of the royal bloodline to sit on the throne. The old king fought long and hard to free Equestria from Filais, and many of the old noble families, including our pappy, fought to restore legitimacy to the crown. No more pretenders, no more foreigners. Somepony with the blood of the first high king. That somepony is you now.”

Macintosh coughed into his hoof as Applejack focused her thoughts on an untouched mug of cider. “It won’t be too bad. Once Loghoof loses his regency, you can give his terynir to Armeria. Either way, we need to get Loghoof off the throne.”

“What about the army?” Twilight asked, bringing a new subject up to light. “We’ve gone across Equestria, recruiting the unicorns, donkeys, and pegasi to join earth pony forces here in Trotterim.”

“That’s mighty appreciated, especially after the disaster of Ostequus,” Macintosh said in gratitude. “There’s another force we can make use of: the Filesians. They have a bunch of their knights not even a day’s gallop from Red Apple hunting down ponyspawn. Loghoof only allowed a small group in to help against the ponyspawn. A real shame too.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “How many chevaliers?”

Macintosh sighed. “They were going to bring a force of one thousand. Now there are fifty.”

Pressing a hoof against the bridge of her snout, Twilight took a deep breath as she felt a sudden and powerful migraine coming on. One thousand of Filais’ best soldiers, and Loghoof turned them back, leaving Equestria only fifty to *maybe* count towards her defenses. Did his paranoia of a Filesian invasion blind him so completely to the true threat of the ponyspawn?

Apparently the answer was a resounding yes.

“Sugarcube, things aren’t lookin’ good right now.” Twilight lifted her head to see Applejack laying a comforting hoof on her shoulder. “We're gonna need a plan and quick-like. Ah have faith you can figure this out, Twilight.”

Twilight hunched over her meal, horn glowing bright as she began to move pastries about as if they were pieces on a chess board. They relied on Twilight’s knowledge and wisdom to formulate the best plans she could. She had taken leadership of their group since Ostequus. It was her duty to her friends to take the reins once again.

“We’ll need to split up again so we can have a chance at covering all the objectives,” Twilight explained as she moved two apple fritters to the left. “Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy will fly out towards Red Apple and find the Filesian chevaliers. Even if there are just fifty of them, that’s another fifty skilled warriors to help us against the Blight.”

Rainbow stuck her head up at the sound of her name, swallowing the last of her cider. “You’ve gotta be kidding me, Twilight!” Rainbow exclaimed. “I can make it to Red Apple and back in the span of a day, but if I have to fly with Fluttershy, it’s going to take a long time! Even if we were to leave now!”

“I’m sorry…” Fluttershy hid under her mane, Angel jumping onto the table and giving Rainbow a cross look with his beady little eyes.

“You two are going to have to work together,” Twilight explained. “You need to coach Fluttershy to fly as fast as she can, because she’s the only one of us that can speak fluent Filesian. You also need to help protect Fluttershy; the road is dangerous, and I already feel awful for sending just the two of you. We don’t have the time or the ponypower to send a large group for support.”

Despite her hesitation, Rainbow looked down on her food, batting around a danish with her hooves as she mumbled her thoughts. Twilight watched with grim satisfaction; Rainbow’s eyebrows were not furrowed in annoyance. She was considering her flight plan.

“If we leave tonight, we can reach the Red Apple arling by morning, and then make it back to the Landsmeet just in the nick of time with the Filesians.” Rainbow kept her gaze distant, internally mapping the course she and Fluttershy could take. If there was anyone Twilight could trust an aerial mission with, it was Rainbow Dash.

“I know I can count on both you,” Twilight said, smiling. She then lifted four apples, only to have them get tossed aside in favour of a pie. She looked up to be staring into the baby blue eyes of Pinkie Pie.

“I want to be a pie! Just like my name!” Twilight shook her head in disbelief as she noted the conviction on Pinkie’s face. There was simply no use arguing when Pinkie was focused on wanting to be a slice of pie.

“Okay…” Lifting a knife, she cut the pie into quarters and set them into the right hand corner in front of her. “Pinkie Pie, Trixie, Oghren and myself will infiltrate the Arl of Trotterim’s estate. There, we’ll save Riordan and Armeria, and confront Maim.”

Twilight paused as she thought over what she had just said. The over-energetic Pinkie Pie who wouldn’t know the word “subtle” unless written on a cake. The ever so high and mighty Trixie who would complain incessantly or make some attempt to show off her magic. The loud and boorish Oghren whose idea of infiltration likely involved ramming the front gate with his head.

Surely an infiltration squad for the ages, Twilight thought with a moan.

“He’s got a lot to answer for, Ah tell you what,” Applejack muttered. “Because of him, Macintosh and Apple Bloom were hurt. Take me with you, Twilight. Ah want to introduce him to Kicks McGillicutty and Bucks McGee personally.”

Twilight shook her head before lifting several apples with her magic and placing them in front of her. “I’m sorry, Applejack, but as much as I’d love your help against Arl Maim, you are the best chance the nation has, and you need to be protected. It’s best to keep you protected here in the

estate until the Landsmeet. Rarity, Spike, and Shale will be with you to make sure Loghoof doesn't send assassins against you like he did before."

She would never have believed it otherwise, but Twilight was now watching Applejack sulk as she looked down on her food and pushed it away, no longer hungry. Twilight looked away in shame, having denied her friend from exacting justice on Maim for his attacks on the Apple family. For a strong pony like Applejack, it simply wasn't done to leave somepony like her, a soldier, behind the walls of a fortress.

Yet it was to be this way. Applejack was no longer a common soldier, a templar, or even a Grey Warden. She was royalty, and their best bet in keeping the realm strong and united once they removed Loghoof from his regency. Applejack appeared to understand as well, ending her sulk and looking Twilight in the eye with fierce determination.

"Tall order you got there, but if Ah have to, Ah will stay here and get ready for the Landsmeet." Big Macintosh nodded approvingly as he looked to his sister. Twilight followed suit, before turning to her newly formed "spy" party.

"We'll leave tonight," Twilight said once she had their attention. "We'll have an easier time getting into Maim's estate then. Everypony has their orders. Let's do this."