

Chapter 27 – Tempered Bodies and Souls

Pulling both Rarity and Rainbow away from the shadow of the broodmare corpse, Twilight looked down at the two as they breathed heavily from their poisoning. Rarity's wounds were severe; the black infestation crept along her cuts and bruises, her left hind leg mangled and broken as well. Pinkie shook her head sadly as she went through her alchemical kit; there were no simple antidotes that could eliminate the poison.

Like Rarity, Rainbow was already taking on the severe symptoms of ponyspawn blood poisoning. The Taint was moving quickly throughout her body, causing sickly black splotches to form wherever the disease touched. Her eyes were bloodshot, tarnished with dark streaks and black bags formed under her eyes. Twilight gasped as she noticed a shocking resemblance between the madness-stricken Ruck and her longtime friend and ally.

Twilight bit her lip as she looked to Applejack for guidance. Applejack's suggestion for making Rainbow a Warden had its merits, but could she take the role of Duncan and possibly watch her friend die? They could use Rainbow's or her own Star Strand, but that would leave them with none left, save for Pinkie's special grenade, since one would be needed to cure Rarity.

She opened the flap of Rainbow's bags with her magic and searched for her friend's Star Strand until she procured the phial containing the mystical mane. Twilight still marveled at the fact that she was staring so closely to the stars, but quickly shook those thoughts away as she undid the cork. There was no better reason for the Mane of Stars to exist than to heal the ailments of friends.

Lifting the single strand in her magic, Twilight was ready to place the strand onto Rainbow's chest. "I'm sorry, Rainbow," she whispered. "I hope you can hear me, but we need to use your Star Strand to heal you. You don't want to be a Warden. Trust me." Rainbow was there when Applejack mentioned shortened life spans and she knew what the eventual fate of the Grey Wardens was; to fight ponyspawn until the Taint overtook them, or die fighting in the depths of the Dark Tunnels as they were doing now.

As she was about to lower the strand onto Rainbow, her friend lifted a hoof and held Twilight back. "Save it," Rainbow muttered through darkened eyes. "Use mine to help Rarity. Me... I want to be a Warden, Twilight. I want to be an honest-to-Celestia hero, like you and Applejack."

"No you don't!" Twilight shouted back, surprising the party around her. "You heard what Applejack said! Do you want your life to be cut short so soon?"

"I'm a pony of action, Twilight," Rainbow replied. "I always have to keep moving and for once I'm fighting the good fight. I want to be something more than an assassin. I want to be a Warden."

I want to be that pony who helps others against the ponyspawn and the Blights. You know something? I sometimes think growing old would be the worst thing that could happen to me. I wouldn't be able to help fight or anything because I would be old or weak. This is for the best, Twilight. Let me be a Warden, and use my Strand to save Rartiy. Keep yours; you'll need it."

Twilight looked to the others, who all simply stared at the scene wordlessly. Pinkie was holding Rainbow's hooves in her own, looking up at Twilight with straightened hair and pleading eyes. Twilight swallowed hard as she turned to let Trixie grip Rainbow's Star Strand in her magic as she levitated the phial with a small amount of archdemon's blood in it. Rainbow Dash had already ingested more than her share of ponyspawn blood. With a quick word to Pinkie, Twilight began pouring a small amount of lyrium into the phial.

"You know the words?" Applejack asked as Twilight waited for the concoction to be ready. Twilight nodded in reply. She would always remember the words spoken by Duncan when she was brought into the order of the Grey Wardens. Just as she would remember the deaths of her fellow Warden hopefuls, Digger and Ser Magni, and she prayed Rainbow would not join them as well.

"No more secrets, Applejack," Twilight muttered. "Maybe, just maybe, it was the secrecy of the Wardens that caused the ponies of the world to look at them like rogues, like strangers who could not be trusted. Perhaps it was the secrecy that made Loghoof take matters into his own hooves. But these ponies are our friends. They deserve to know how we came to be. No more secrets. No more hiding. The truth will set us free."

She looked to Trixie, who lowered the Star Strand onto Rarity's chest. Like Trixie, Applebloom, and Big Macintosh before her, Rarity's body shone with the pale light of the moon, her wounds healing rapidly and the marks of poisonous infestation leaving her body. Rarity opened her eyes wide as she took a huge gasp of air, her body suddenly looking pristine and healthy. Once she was back on her hooves, she looked to each of her friends wordlessly, embracing all of them until finally reaching Rainbow.

"Rainbow, your strand..." Rainbow waved Rarity off, only to find herself in the tightest hug Rarity could give. Once she let go, the sorceress looked over at the corpse of the hulking broodmare before shaking.

"Thank you. Thank you all," she said. "It was... terrible. Worse than anything anypony could ever imagine, and that was just after a short time being captured. What that creature did to me... what it had done to countless donkeys before. Is he...?"

"Gone," Twilight answered quickly, and not without a hint of satisfaction. "The Jailer won't be

capturing any more mares. I'm just happy we found you, and saved you."

"I will never forget this. Any of this. The pain of the tortures, and more importantly, that my friends came for me." While Rarity sobbed, Twilight held her friend close, almost cradling Rarity as she wept bitter tears. She then took a look at the mixture of Archdemon blood and lyrium. It was ready.

"Everyone," Twilight announced as her friends gathered around her. "What Applejack and I are about to do for Rainbow is something the Wardens have guarded with fierce secrecy since the days when they were known as the Walkers of the Grey. We are going to commit the ritual known the 'The Joining,' where a pony takes in the blood of the ponyspawn, the archdemon, and the essence of magic."

Twilight gulped as she turned towards Rainbow, who was propped up against Pinkie for support. "Not... not everypony who takes in the Joining survives. This is why this is our secret. The secret we share with all of you. Our friends. You all deserve to know the truth."

Duncan... Am I doing all right, Duncan? Am I honouring your memory, and the memories of all the Grey Wardens who died at Ostequus? "Since the first Joining, these words have been spoken during the ceremony." Twilight took a deep breath before looking to her fellow Warden.

"Applejack, if you please."

Applejack bowed her head and spoke in the same reverence as she did when it was Twilight's time to join the Wardens. She shook as her friend spoke the words once again. Even after all this time, Twilight still knew them by heart, for how would she ever forget them? They were the words that changed her life. "Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we remain vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten. And that one day we shall join you."

The duty that cannot be forsworn. Twilight prayed to Celestia and Luna and any other deities who would listen to her pleas to spare Rainbow certain death as she levitated the phial to Rainbow's waiting hooves. Rainbow looked down into the contents, clearly disturbed that she was going to be drinking the blood of a massive black dragon before looking at Twilight. Unlike Duncan to Ser Magni, she was not going to gut Rainbow if she refused at the last second. She had made her choice, secrets be damned.

Rainbow lifted the phial to her lips, downing the contents in one quick gulp before throwing the phial towards the cavern wall. As the glass shattered, Rainbow began to cough up a storm as she gripped her head with her hooves. Twilight could not watch as Pinkie tried to keep Rainbow steady as she moaned from the pain of a strange brew working its way through her body.

“She’s hurting!” Pinkie cried, though Twilight made no motion to help. This was all part of the Joining as she remembered it. The pain, the agony. None of that mattered, only surviving this ordeal. With a shout, Rainbow’s head twisted upwards to look towards the ceiling, her eyes rolling back as her mouth wrenched itself wide open in a silent scream.

It was with great relief to Twilight that she was able to see Rainbow’s cutie mark change before her eyes. It was the sign she was hoping to see, unlike the memory of Digger choking and dying from the lethal cocktail. Grey splotches formed on Rainbow’s flank until they joined together around her familiar cloud-and-lightning-bolt cutie mark. Once the shift was complete, there was now a shield with a lightning emblem on the front, the same as Twilight and Applejack’s changed marks.

The others watched Rainbow convert into a full Grey Warden with looks of revulsion, horror, and in the case of Shale, genuine interest. Once Rainbow’s coughing had subsiding, the others began to speak at what they had just seen. “Just drink a cocktail?” Oghren said rather nonchalantly. “Doesn’t seem too hard.”

“It’s like blood magic,” Trixie realized. “This is too unreal. No wonder the Wardens kept such a thing secret. I no longer envy you, Sparkle. I pity you, having to drink that. Having to become like them.”

It was Spike’s reaction that Twilight was worried about the most. The dragon knight simply stood there and stared at Rainbow, then up to Twilight. “You drank their blood?” Spike asked, though he obviously knew the answer, “Twilight, I’m...”

“Spike, none of this was your fault.” *He still feels guilty over me being a Warden*, Twilight thought as she wrapped a foreleg around Spike. *Is there anything I can do to ease his mind? To make him understand that he could never have known what life as a Warden would entail, what she would have to do to become one.*

“Please stop blaming yourself,” she whispered. “Being a Warden was the best thing that has ever happened to me. I’m using my magic to help ponies survive against a threat never seen in Equestria before. I’ve met so many wonderful friends in my travels, as have you. We have saved lives, Spike, when they would have been doomed if we hadn’t been there. Being a Warden means we can bring good to the world.”

“But look at all we’ve suffered since then!” Spike retorted. “All the fighting, the blood, the death! This... this isn’t what was supposed to happen. We were supposed to go on adventures to stop the ponyspawn. We’ve seen monsters tear ponies apart, we’ve seen evil everywhere! Rarity almost *became* one of those things!”

Spike was angry, confused, but most all he was acting his age. He was still a very young dragon, and all of the protective walls Twilight had built to shield him from the harshness of this world had been breaking apart since they left the safety of the Unicorn Tower. Now the Dark Tunnels had finished the job, showing just how brutal this world truly was.

His shoulders slumped, Spike looked away from Twilight. "Can we still win?" he asked. It was the question that was on everypony's mind. Twilight responded by standing as tall and as dominant as she could, to give an air of leadership and determination they could follow. They needed all the inspiration they could get.

"We can win. We *will* win." Twilight moved to the side of the broodmare's carcass, giving it one last disgusted look before turning her attention to the party. "This has been our toughest quest yet. We are in the very belly of the beast. But we won't give up. We're too close to the Storm Forge and to Branka now to just turn around. We move forward. Always forward."

With Rainbow resting on the back of Shale, they left the broodmare's chambers to find the halls of Four Point Chasm completely deserted. There was no sign of ponyspawn reinforcements to bring about retribution; indeed, there was no sign of ponyspawn at all. It was as if they had all left turned tail and fled. Even the heartbeats of the ponyspawn seemed to abate, their echoes being near silent. Either they were moving away from concentrated ponyspawn forces, or the monsters were all heading to the surface.

Regardless, Twilight found herself feeling both glad they were finally making progress in the Dark Tunnels, but hesitant for her rapidly approaching meeting with Branka. If the Paragon of Orzamule was still alive, Twilight debated how she was going to deal with her. After what Branka had done to her entire house, including tormenting Ruck and sacrificing females like Hespith to become Broodmares, Twilight wondered if a stiff buck to the face was too lenient.

There was still the question of Oghren and what he was thinking about all of this. He had proven himself a stalwart fighter capable of holding his own against the throngs of spawn that tried to maul the party, even if his choice of drinks and constant imbibing of alcohol wasn't exactly endearing. Twilight had to know if Oghren was going to side with his wife when they eventually confronted her.

"Oghren, may I speak with you for a moment?" The berserker sighed before nodding, both falling back to the end of the line. He appeared haunted, yet still attempted to put on a tough face. Underneath his mask though, Twilight could tell that Oghren was hurting from discovering just what kind of mare his wife had become.

“This is about Branka isn’t it,” Oghren muttered. “Yeah, I know she did a lot of bad things...”

“She forced her house to fight a losing battle, tormented one of her faithful followers to seek suicide and sentenced her helpers to become horrors!”

“I know! I know.” Oghren stopped, looking Twilight dead in the eye. “I need to talk to her, Warden. She’s my wife. I need to know what she’s been thinking all this time, if at all. You gotta understand, I love her. I just don’t love the Paragon she became. Day in, day out, all she ever talked about was the Storm Forge, about Cairidan’s Thaig and about finding the sodding place.”

“Fine,” Twilight relented. “I’ll let you talk to her.” Twilight stopped to meet Oghren with her own pointed glare. “But if she threatens *any* of our friends, I won’t hold back. She’s dangerous, Oghren, and she committed terrible acts I would only have expected from the ponyspawn. Maybe the search for the Storm Forge drove her insane, I don’t know. But I do want answers.”

“You’ll get them, Warden. I want ‘em too.” Oghren’s distress was hidden under a veneer of churlishness and disgusting habits, but that disguise was thin and revealed a husband who truly wanted to find out the true fate of his wife. It was touching, in a strange way, though Twilight could not hold back her distaste over Oghren’s ways or of Branka’s atrocities to her fellow donkeys.

They moved in silence afterwards in the halls of the abandoned fortress, listening only to their own breathing and the occasional banter between Shale and Trixie. It was when Shale suddenly stopped in the middle of a long and narrow corridor did Twilight raise her staff in preparation. Shale never left an argument half-way through; that would have been conceding defeat.

“*Karach no Cairadin, tolag megran thaig*,” Shale said, causing Oghren’s ears to perk up. “I do not believe it. Quickly, take the speedy one off my back. I know where Cairidan is!” Applejack stood next to Shale as it unceremoniously dumped the unconscious body of Rainbow Dash onto her, before galloping off through the halls of Four Point Chasm. Twilight gave chase as the rest of the party followed close behind, not wanting to lose sight of the running golem for a moment.

“What’s going on?” Twilight asked Oghren as they galloped. “You looked like you recognized what Shale was saying.”

“It’s from the old donkey tongue, before common took over,” he replied. “It’s the same thing Branka used to say as well, before she set off on her expedition. ‘*Karach no Caridian*’. ‘The Smith Cairidan.’ ‘*Tolag megran thaig*.’ ‘The thaig is what I seek.’ If that old rockhound is on the right trail, it will lead us right to Branka!”

Oghren spurred himself faster, moving ahead of the group in his effort to keep up with Shale. As

the golem's pounding hooves echoed in the caverns, Twilight's mind raced at what they would find. Being so deep in ponyspawn territory, there was the likely possibility that another hive of the creatures made their home in the long sought after thaig. There could also be rogue golems similar to Shale, though Twilight hoped they were at least half as talkative and half as confrontational as the stone soldier.

Then there was Branka and, if Ruck's word held true, she had golems of her own to make for a new "house". How she was able to command her own force of stone ponies was beyond Twilight, but that just made Branka all the more dangerous to deal with. Shale was formidable on its own, but what if Branka had two golems similar to Shale? Three? What if they were even stronger or made of metal compared to Shale's stone?

We'll cross that bridge when we get there, Twilight reprimanded herself as she continued to charge out of the fortress and into a long stretch of road. Shale was visible as dim light from century old light crystals illuminated the way, just as they did to the entrance of the large structure built out of the stone before them. It had a massive stone gate, similar to many buildings of donkey make, though this gate had a very large breach stretching from the cavern floor to the very top of the building. Like Orzamule, this building was adorned with statues of paragons from days long gone. Unlike the city of donkeys, however, the effigies were all defaced and ruined. Several runes were written into their stone bodies and, from the amused snorts from Oghren, none of them transcribed into anything friendly.

"Whoever did this really hated the paragons," Oghren commented as he studied the rune-work. "Many would call this heretical. But hey, I've seen a paragon fall first hoof after all."

Shale stood in front of the massive stone gate of the building, simply staring at the damages caused by whoever vandalized the statues. "Is this Cairidan's thaig?" Twilight asked, receiving a shake of the golem's head in return.

"This is merely a passageway informing visitors that they are close to the thaig," Shale replied. "It is a welcome mat, warning and garrison all in one. There would be a force of soldiers, or in Cairidan's case, golems protecting this gateway from intruders. Now there is no one guarding this old place. Still, I know this place. I've walked this road many times. We are on the right track."

They rested on the other side of the lonely gateway, Shale never leaving its spot and keeping its vigil over the road ahead. While the others slept, Twilight walked over to Rainbow Dash's side as Pinkie and Applejack watched over her. The newly inducted Warden was tossing and turning in her sleep, moaning and uttering oaths of fright and terror. Pinkie looked up as Twilight sat with them, her eyes filled with tears and worry.

There was no doubt in Twilight's mind that Rainbow was experiencing the worst that could come from her newly acquired Warden senses. Being so close to the heart of the ponyspawn, Twilight could only shudder, thinking about the nightmares Rainbow was living in now. Visions of the archdemon suddenly invaded Twilight's mind as she thought back on seeing the master of monsters for the first time in the flesh. It caused incredible pain until she felt a firm yet gentle hoof hold her back.

"Easy there, sugarcube," Applejack said. "Can't have two Wardens down for the count. Besides, we'll need to be here for Rainbow when she gets better. Help me get some food out for her. You remember bein' mighty hungry after your Joining, right?"

Twilight nodded as her horn glowed with her violet aura, levitating some apples, potatoes, and mushrooms for Rainbow to eat when she woke up. She did remember her ravenous hunger after the Joining, devouring apple after apple that was set in front of her and eating with the same table manners often displayed by Spike.

"She's going to be all right, isn't she?" Pinkie asked. "Dashie said she was going to come with me to Geldwall once we helped save Equestria. Don't forget about the big super fun party I'm going to have once this is all done! She could still do that even if she is a Warden, right?"

"Of course she will." Twilight smiled, though it was a pale reflection of Pinkie's wide grin. There was something about Pinkie's never ending optimism that was simply infectious. Even in the deepest pits, Pinkie still beamed with her unique type of radiance. It was a calming thought.

Rainbow then started to stir, slowly at first and with great labour, until she was sitting upright and coughing up a storm. Pinkie moved to her side immediately, patting Rainbow on the back while trying to coax her friend into drinking stamina draughts. Rainbow obliged, chugging down the orange liquid until she was done, panting heavily as she looked about.

"I'm hungry," she said weakly, only to have her magenta eyes open wide at the bounty of food laid out before her. Without so much as a thank you Rainbow dove headfirst into her meal, gobbling up whatever hapless foodstuff was in her path. She ate with messy abandon, causing Applejack to laugh as she jabbed Twilight in the ribs.

"Ah seem to remember a certain unicorn pony being a lot more conflicted about joining the Wardens," she said. "Granted that seems like ages ago, but still she is taking to being a Warden kinda well, isn't she?"

Twilight winced. All things considered, she didn't know if Rainbow had had it easy by having her Joining in the Dark Tunnels and see no other hopefuls die. "I think she's just solely focused

on eating every bite of food we have.”

Rainbow let out a loud burp as she patted her stomach, finally full after her session of consumption. Once she was satisfied and resting against the cave wall, she looked at her flank and smiled proudly at the new grey shield that marked her. “I guess I’m a Grey Warden now, huh?” she said smugly. “Rainbow ‘Warden’ Dash. Kinda has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Now Rainbow, being a Warden is a big responsibility for anypony,” Applejack warned. “It means standing up to the ponyspawn and the Blight. It means making the tough choices. We do what we must, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Rainbow replied. “But it sure is a heck of a whole lot better than being an assassin. Folks don’t respect or hail assassins as heroes. They fear them. Being a Warden? I was meant to be this.”

It was somewhat uplifting to hear Rainbow take the role of a Grey Warden with open forelegs. She really was fearless when it came to fighting or the ponyspawn. It was a shame Duncan hadn’t found Rainbow Dash as a potential recruit for the Wardens earlier. How would the battle of Ostequus have gone if they had just another set of hooves on their side? With Rainbow’s skill in flight, could she have warned Duncan and the King that Loghoof would quit the field?

For want of a nail. It was an old proverb, often repeated to young unicorns that even the smallest actions, or lack of, could lead to heavy consequences. It still rang true today, all things considered. Easy enough to look back on the past and say *things could have been different*, but Twilight knew that was only wishful thinking. They still had a job to do, and they were ever closer to completing it. Saying her good nights, she laid her head on her saddle bags for another night of uneasy sleep.

“Sparkle! Sparkle! Get up now!”

Slowly standing up, Twilight yawned as quaking hooves and a frantic voice shook her from her slumber. Standing over her was Trixie, looking completely disheveled with a large bump protruding from the side of her head. Her worried expression only alerted Twilight more and she quickly found herself wide awake with her staff levitating by her side.

“It’s Shale!” Trixie exclaimed. “It’s gone! Shale told me to follow it deeper into the tunnel as it talked about its time in the Dark Tunnels. Then it said ‘I’m sorry.’ Trixie was surprised, to say the least that Shale was actually apologizing, and Trixie believed that Shale was finally going to admit her superiority!”

“Next thing I know, it hits me over the head! When I came to, Shale was gone!” Twilight looked ahead into the darkness of the cave that led towards Cairidan’s Thaig, but could see nothing. Why would Shale go off on its own? What was in Cairidan’s Thaig that it had to leave the party, and even resort to smacking Trixie?

Immediately rousing the slowly awakening party, Twilight led them through the long stone road towards the thaig as they gave chase to the vagabond golem. While Shale was not always the easiest thing to get along with, Shale had proven itself time and time again to be not only capable as a fighter, but also loyal to the group in its own unique way. They owed it to Shale to at least look for it, and Shale owed it to them to explain why it would feel the need to wander off.

They had been travelling for hours until the party finally came across another massive stone gate, this time illuminated by much larger and much more brilliant light crystals. Like the waygate before it, the statues of donkeys long gone were all defaced and damaged. Unlike the waygate, however, the stone gate remained untouched, and there was no sign of Shale anywhere.

“Spread out,” Twilight instructed. “Shale has to be around somewhere. This *has* to be Cairidan’s Thaig.”

“Of that it is,” confirmed an unfamiliar voice. Twilight’s ears perked up as she looked around, only to turn her gaze upwards to a cliff face that lead into a cave. Looking down on them all was a donkey mare in a full suit of spectacular golden armour, being flanked by four golems, which Twilight estimated were all approximately three feet taller than Shale. She was brown-coated like Oghren, with a short-cut mane and appeared rather clean for a donkey who had been trapped in the Dark Tunnels. There were also three control rods hanging from her side as well as a large and ornate hammer.

“I know that sweet voice anywhere!” Oghren shouted, elated at the discovery. “Branka! It’s you! By the Stone, I finally found you!”

“Wonderful,” Branka said with no lack of sarcasm. “After how long, Oghren, did you finally muster the stones to come after me? Are you going to drunkenly stumble about as you always do and ruin years of preparation and hard work? You come with ponies as well, yes? That must mean they want something from *me* if they had come all this way, and not the Storm Forge itself.”

“We came here to find you, Branka,” Twilight spoke up, though she did not hide her spite. “The donkeys of Orzamule are having a succession crisis and we were told a living Paragon would be able to choose the rightful king. There is a Blight on the surface and we need the support of Orzamule, of you.”

“So, old king Endrin is finally dead,” Branka replied sardonically. “Tell me, did he choke on his own fat after being fed lies upon lies by Harrowmount? Or did his son Bhelen finally slit his throat out of impatience? No matter. Politics mean little to me now, pony, not when I am so close to Cairidan’s thaig and the Storm Forge.”

“Your arrival is most fortuitous. Perhaps we can help each other ” As Branka continued speaking, she paced the length of the cliff while her golem guards stood watch. “I was beginning to wonder if the ponyspawn were ever going to make it past Cairidan’s rather impressive array of traps he laid out in his thaig, but if you were able to crawl through the Pits and kill my broodmares, then you are also equally capable of advancing where hordes of ponyspawn could not.”

There was no pony who did not look up at Branka with newfound shock and horror. Twilight’s mouth hung wide open as she looked at the donkey paragon with revulsion; Hespith’s message was right, Branka was the one who delivered her own people to the ponyspawn to be devoured and turned into broodmares.

Twilight’s blood began to boil as she glared up at Branka. All this time as a Warden, she thought the worst monsters she’d face would be ponyspawn and demons. They held vicious visages, were savage and could not be comprehended like a regular pony could. Enemies like Hubred were possessed ponies under influence of demons, or like Lockjaw who were corrupted by the blood of a high dragon.

Branka, though, showed no outward sign of corruption, just an insatiable desire for the Storm Forge. A desire so fierce that it led her to sacrifice her entire house in the mad quest to recover it. *She left jennies like Hespith to die or worse, become broodmares.* This was unforgivable. Branka had to meet justice for her crimes.

The smith paragon still had the upper hoof, though. The party still needed her support to shift support to either Harrowmount or Bhelen so they could have the donkey’s army against the Blight. As much as it pained Twilight to admit it, Branka would get away with her atrocities. For now. *We do what we must.*

Oghren looked pained as well, his braided beard swaying as he shook his head furiously in disbelief. “Branka, can you even hear yourself?!” His anger echoed in the caverns, though Branka seemed unaffected. “Hespith was your favourite hoofmaiden! You tortured that blighter Ruck! All for what? The blasted Storm Forge!”

“The Storm Forge is the greatest relic of all of donkeykind,” Branka shouted back, her cool visage failing almost immediately. “It was thanks to Cairidan and his Forge that golems even exist to begin with! When his soldiers of stone marched through the Dark Tunnels, that was a

golden age for all donkeys! Armies of golems walking shoulder by shoulder, diamond dog and ponyspawn alike being crushed underhoof with nary a care.”

“But something happened. The production of golems ceased, the Storm Forge and Cairidan’s Thaig were lost. Golems went rogue or simply stopped working and the ponyspawn took the place of the diamond dogs as our most dangerous enemies. I will find the Storm Forge and return donkey dominance to the Dark Tunnels, and I will do whatever it takes to achieve this. I have no need of weaklings like Ruck, and lovers like Hespith must be used in any way possible. You want my support in choosing a new petty king of Orzamule? You will have that and more. Go into Cairidan’s Thaig, solve his traps, and clear the way for me to get to the Storm Forge. Then not only will I support a new king, but I will also craft for you an army of golems to bring to the surface to fight against the Blight. That is my deal.”

As Branka turned away, Oghren shouted at her one last time. “Branka! What happened to the filly that became my wife? She was never this obsessed with a piece of work like the Forge.”

“She’s still here,” answered Branka, never turning to face him. “And she is your Paragon.”

Once Branka and her golem guards left through their tunnel, the party turned to each other with looks of disgust and confusion. Now Branka was offering them a very ideal offer of having an army of golems like Shale fight by their side against the ponyspawn. Shale on its own was impressive against the flesh and blood monstrosities; Twilight could only begin to imagine what havoc ten or twenty golems could wreak upon a battlefield.

On the other hoof, Twilight grimaced at the thought of leaving Ruck and Hespith and countless donkey deaths unanswered for. The way Branka so flippantly dismissed her house was callous to the extreme, and for the first time, the mage found herself desperately wanting to blast the paragon’s face off with a full force of magic.

“We have to find Shale,” Trixie said, breaking the cold silence at last. “That pile of pebbles couldn’t have gone far. The Great and Powerful Trixie believes Shale must have entered the thaig, and we will go after it.”

Good plan, Twilight thought as she approached the stone gates of the thaig. Focus on finding Shale instead of worrying about Branka or the Storm Forge. Twilight studied the entrance for a moment as she considered Branka’s words and how Shale would have gotten in. Being a golem, it would have been strong enough to open the doors, Twilight surmised. If golems came out of here, maybe they are immune or are allowed through the thaig without triggering the traps, or maybe Shale’s memories allowed it to bypass them completely.

“Everypony, help me push the gates open.” Twilight stretched for a moment before pressing her

entire body against the stone door, her horn glowing bright with brute magic in an effort to wedge the door open. Soon Rarity and Trixie were adding their magic to her own, while Applejack, Oghren and Spike added their muscle to the task. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash flew above the rest of the party, pushing their hooves against the gate with all their might.

The stone door refused to budge, even with all their exertions. “Everypony, push again at the count of three!” Applejack called, “It’s no different than timing your bucks right during harvest! One! Two!”

“THREE!”

Magic and physical strength worked in tandem as the stone slab moved ever so slowly across the stone floor. Once the gate way was open a small crack, the rush of the foulest stench anypony had ever had misfortune of smelling overtook them all in a fit of coughing and gagging. Twilight could feel her eyes water from the rank odours as she looked back at the slightly open gate.

“It smells worse than Red Apple Castle did during the zombie attack,” Rarity coughed. “Ugh, I can’t believe we have to go in there. It’s probably foul and disgusting and all sorts of... of... *blech!*”

“Shale’s counting on us,” Fluttershy replied. “We can’t let a bad smell stop us from helping it!”

“On the count of three!” Applejack said, backing up until she was well enough away from the gate. “Follow me and buck as hard as you can!”

“Rarity, Trixie,” Twilight called, “focus your magic on the door. We’ll let them push with their hooves while we push with our horns. Follow Applejack’s lead.”

The party ready, Applejack made her count again, charging towards the gate to Cairidan’s Thaig with malicious intent. As the other ponies charged forward, Twilight led her fellow unicorns into applying as much pressure to the door as possible, the stone glowing with the united auras of violet, white and blue.

Applejack and her retinue of door-buckers turned on a dime, slamming their hind hooves into the door with as much strength as they could muster. The attack did the trick and the gateway to the thaig was now wide enough to admit a single-file line of pony and donkey adventurers. Instead of advancing forward however, they all backed well away from the entrance to the thaig and more importantly away from the wretched smell.

Only Oghren was unbothered by the smell, squeezing between the gap in the entranceway and moving on ahead. Sucking in a huge breath of air, Twilight followed the berserker with the rest

of the party staying close behind her.

“It’s dark,” Fluttershy whispered, choking on the stale air as she looked around. With only the faint light from the entrance giving any sense of direction, Twilight’s horn came alight with magelight before she took a few cautious steps forward until she stepped on something squishy.

“I got this.” Spike drew his flaming blade, the fire from the enchanted weapon illuminating the room. Shrieks and gasps of fright echoed in the hall of the thaig as the fiery sword revealed a den of horrors. Corpses of donkeys and ponyspawn lay strewn across the corridor, impaled on spikes or sawed in half by partially-hidden and long rusted blades. Twilight looked down to see she was hoof deep in a black blood puddle. She recoiled for a moment before shaking the ponyspawn blood off her hoof, and resumed looking around the halls of the thaig.

At first glance, Twilight thought she saw more defaced and ruined statues, but as she investigated further, she realized that they bore a striking resemblance to Shale. *Corpses of golems*, Twilight realized as she looked about, *no wonder Branka never came in here herself and used ponyspawn in an effort to clear the way. Cairidan made this a death trap to protect the Storm Forge.*

“Come on!” Trixie called as she moved forward. “Trixie would have words with that overrated boulder, and she will not be able to claim her victory if we keep staring at dead bodies!”

“Trixie, why are ya so gung-ho on gettin’ Shale back?” Applejack asked. “You two snipped and spat at each other more than two snakes in the grass. Ah’d imagine ya would be happy for once that Shale ain’t around to bicker with.”

“Trixie does not care for Shale!” the magician quickly stammered. “I... I mean, Trixie is simply wanting to make sure that her debt to Shale is done and over with. For its defense when Trixie was unable to protect herself on the mountain.”

As Trixie lead the way, she stepped on a small panel in the floor, causing a clicking noise from somewhere in the room. Pinkie’s tail twitched at the sound, and without warning she tackled Trixie, just as another impaling spike rushed out of the wall, piercing its way right through Trixie’s hat. Trixie looked up at her hat with wide eyes and shaking knees.

“Sweet Celestia!” Trixie gaped. “What... how... pointy spikes!”

Pinkie looked at the spot where Trixie had stepped, tapping the stone with her hoof. The stone seemed to have been hollowed, the tapping echoing from within. “Seems like a simple pressure plate trap mechanism,” Pinkie explained. “You step on it, something happens! Hey, that sounds like a great idea for a party! Step on a plate and suddenly confetti!”

“We have to be careful,” Twilight warned. “Branka must have been sending through whatever

ponyspawn or golems she could find to get to the Storm Forge for years. Whatever traps remain stopped her advance. Follow me, and walk where I walk.”

Those words were easier said than done as Twilight made her way through the first hall. With Spike on her back and his blazing blade shining the way, she kept her eyes open for any strange or irregular patterns. There were a few obvious traps, thankfully, like protruding stones and those marked by runes. It was with morbid thanks that the donkeys and ponyspawn Branka had sent into the thaig had triggered most of the traps.

A click echoed from behind Twilight, causing her to snap her head back as two saw blades rushed outward towards Fluttershy, the razor-sharp edges grinding against the stone, causing sparks to fly. With a shout, Twilight cast a barrier around Fluttershy, catching the saw blades before they could slice the Chantry sister open. They spun wildly against her barrier until Applejack and Rainbow kicked the mechanisms of the blades out of alignment.

“Th-thanks.” Fluttershy hyperventilated as she stared at the implements of death. “This place is like a twisted, evil version of Luna’s temple!”

Twilight couldn’t help but agree, noting the similarity between the two. The donkeys must have quite the penchant for protecting what was important to them with very lethal traps. While Twilight understood the need to protect one’s valuables against thieves, this was simply too excessive. Unless the Storm Forge was worth it, of course.

Branka certainly believes so.

As they made their way through the massive hallway of the thaig, they came across another door with donkey runes overhead. Oghren squinted as he looked over the runes, reading them aloud.

“Trespassers who have come to steal my life’s work, I give but one warning. Turn back now, and forget this place. If the blades do not claim you, the air of death will.” Oghren snorted. “Now he gives the warning? Looks like Cairidan wanted to keep his precious Storm Forge to himself.”

They entered the next room with trepidation and awe, as it was much larger than the entryway and surrounded by statues. As before, they were all horribly vandalized save for one very tall statue in the center of the room, an expressionless donkey of stone who simply stared ahead at the newcomers of the room. Surrounding the statue were four levers of unknown purpose.

There were also piles of corpses, both of donkey and ponyspawn, inside the room, arranged terrifyingly high in the corners of the great chamber. Many of them were a sickly colour of green, while some also had crushed bodies or heads.

“I wonder what Cairidan meant by ‘the air of death’,” Rarity pondered aloud. “We should be

cautious darlings. This place is utterly dreadful.”

The door behind them slammed shut in response. Shouts of worry echoed as Applejack moved to kick the stone door to no effect. Twilight kept her focus on her surroundings as she looked around at the stonework. There was something strange about this room, about how there were holes in the walls and the floors that did not seem to serve a purpose. *Part of the trap*, Twilight concluded, *but what kind of trap?*

Her query was answered by a low yet resonating hiss as green gas flooded the room. The gas was rancid to smell and worse to taste and everyone began coughing heavily from the toxins. Twilight’s eyes started to water as she tried to raise a magical shell, only for it to falter and fade from the debilitating effects of the gas.

“The levers!” Applejack shouted before coughing up a sickening amount of green bile. The poison in the gas was working quickly, and as more gas leaked into the room, Twilight looked over to the piles of corpses. She did not want to be added to that particularly gruesome collection.

Her horn glowed with arcane power as she gripped the lever, forcing it to move with a tilt of her head and a twitch of her magic. There were several clicks in the room as many of the holes were covered up by stone, but still the toxic gas filled the room. Just as she was able to grip the second lever with magic, a loud groan echoed throughout the room, a cacophony similar to rocks upon rocks.

The statue in the center of the room began to hum with the power of lyrium. Runes glowed bright with arcane power across its stone body until an all too familiar mark of a hoof formed on its forehead. The lines were red, however, instead of the blue that were characteristic of Shale, and the newly awakened golem looked down on Twilight with murderous intent.

“Intruders Will Be Neutralized.” The golem charged at Twilight, breaking her grip on the second lever as she dived out of the way. The chaos of battle erupted amidst the party, along with the plague winds that were blowing from the vents. Twilight could not stop coughing, and turned to see that Rainbow was vomiting, still sick from her Joining. The poison gas was now a green haze as the golem ignored all others, focusing its attention on Twilight.

“It’s after me!” Twilight called out. “Somepony get to the levers, quickly!”

Rainbow Dash responded to Twilight’s call, flying over to the switch and wrapping her hooves around the device. As she pulled, Oghren tried to attack the golem with his axe only to watch the blade of his weapon bounce harmlessly off.

“What are you trying to do?” Applejack asked confusedly. Oghren shrugged.

“I thought I could hack away at its knees until it fell over.” Another resounding echo of mechanisms clicking into place alerted the golem that the levers were undefended, turning its attention solely to Rainbow. While Rainbow was difficult for the golem to attack from the ground, the newly inducted Grey Warden would not be able to keep her flight for much longer while the toxic gas was leaking into the room.

Rarity approached the third lever as the golem continued its hunt for Rainbow, all attacks made against it dealing nothing in the effect of damage or even slowing it down. As Rarity pulled the third lever, the golem changed its target, focusing solely on the sorceress as Rarity tried to shriek.

“Twilight!” Pinkie shouted as she pulled a grenade from her satchel. “Maybe this will work! High explosive!”

Twilight let loose another torrent of coughs as she tried to see what Pinkie was holding. Her vision was blurred while her magic attempted to grip the offered grenade, looking up at the golem as it cornered Rarity. If weapons could not stop the stone warrior and their magic was being choked away by the gas, perhaps a detonation would do the trick.

“Oghren, go for the last lever!” Oghren immediately complied, galloping towards the lever and clenching the rod in his teeth. As he pulled, Twilight readied the timed charge until she heard the last of the poison gas trap’s workings click shut. The door leading out of the thaig opened as well, allowing the gas to spread itself outward.

As expected, the golem changed its focus onto Oghren, crushing stones underneath it as the berserker stood his ground and snarled. With every ounce of her strength, Twilight threw the grenade at the golem, pressing it against its neck with the aid of magic. Her concentration was tested though, with the toxic gas still twisting her lungs and interrupting her breathing.

It was then that she saw a blue aura surround her violet one, keeping the grenade pressed tight against the attack. Twilight turned to see Trixie’s horn and staff glowing with her own potent magic, giving her a quick nod as the grenade counted down.

The bomb exploded in a brilliant fireball that everyone had to avert their eyes from as the light and heat of the attack washed over them. All that could be heard was a loud ringing in their ears as they were tossed about from the concussive force of the grenade. Twilight looked up to see the golem covered by a black cloud of smoke. Once the smoke cleared the golem still remained, only now without a head. It teetered for a moment before falling on its side, kicking up another storm of dust.

Twilight felt nauseous as she slumped to the ground, the last of the gas dissipating. It was No wonder the ponyspawn or the donkeys never made it past this trap, being assailed by both toxic fumes and a violent golem defender. Pinkie moved about, giving healing antidotes to everyone as they all took a moment to catch their breath.

“By the Stone,” Oghren muttered as he wiped the sweat from his brow. “Warden, if we make it through this alive, all the drinks will be on me.”

“Ah hope ya’ll make due on that promise,” Applejack coughed. “That Cairidan really didn’t want anyone taking his Forge.”

“No sitting or waiting!” Trixie shouted, somehow able to stand up and move ahead. “Shale is waiting for us, and Trixie will be damned if we waste any more time!”

Standing on weak knees, Twilight and the rest of the party followed Trixie as she made her way through the thaig. Looking back on the golem, Twilight came to appreciate the strength of those creatures of stone, and thought back on Branka’s offer to make the Wardens an army.

I have to do what is best for Equestria, Twilight reminded herself, but can I ally myself with a monster to fight the ponyspawn?

They followed Trixie through another pathway, leading them into a large cavern that made Twilight’s horn itch with anticipation. She could feel the familiar tingle of refined lyrium being processed, magical energy scratching at her head in a pleasant manner.

Gasps were let loose as they stepped inside a massive golden apparatus. Hundreds of shining pipes filled the ceiling, carrying raw, molten lyrium to be processed. Several implements of blacksmithing were strewn about, including a forge and a great anvil, as well as hammers and tongs. The mass of pipes all lead to a narrow one and below this central exhaust was a large mold made of stone in the shape of an equine.

“This must be it!” Twilight exclaimed excitedly. “This is the Storm Forge.”

“Indeed it is, interlopers.” A thundering voice echoed through the Forge’s great hall until a golem that dwarfed Shale by several feet approached them. “Whoever you are, you should not have come here. I will crush you to protect the sin that is the Storm Forge! No one will reproduce the tragedies brought into this world by Cairidan!”

Weapons were drawn as the party looked up at the great golem before them. Twilight looked to her friends, hoping one of them had a plan to deal with this one. Unlike the Shale and the guardian in the room of poison gas, this golem shined in the burning light of the Storm Forge,

indicating it was made of metal. Such a golem would prove monumental to overcome.

“Cairidan, wait!”

Twilight’s eyes lit up as a familiar voice called out to the metal golem. Shale approached the party before standing next to the golem it had called Cairidan. That raised many questions alone, but before Twilight could ask them, Trixie burst through the group and pointed a hoof dangerously close to Shale’s face.

“You!” she screeched. “How *dare* you strike Trixie in the back of the head like some commoner! I demand an explanation for your actions! Why did you hit me? Why did you run off like that!”

“Did you not hear what I said?” Shale replied, “I sought Cairidan, and I found him. Welcome, squishy mortals, to the Storm Forge, and I would like to introduce you to my creator. This is true paragon of Orzamule, Cairidan the Smith.”