

Chapter 15: Uncertain Paths

Applejack let out a loud yawn as she walked through the halls away from Applebloom's chambers, having spent the majority of the day there just watching over her kin who slept soundly in her bed, though the false horn had still not gone away. Adjusting her favourite hat, Applejack tried her best to appear calm and collected before all her friends, but knew it was simply not meant to be. The bags under her eyes were enough to tell the story that the earth pony did not rest.

Only because she wouldn't sleep, not when there was still a threat to the lives of her loved ones. Even though Applebloom was asleep, it was only thanks to the combined spells of Trixie and Rarity, who used an incantation and a charm respectively to keep the little filly calm, as well as to hold the Desire demon within at bay.

A great mercy was that her friends and Braeburn were really doing their best to bring Red Apple Acres under control. The Bann of Appleloosa returned to the front where his soldiers were fighting the combined might of Loghoof and Maim, only to return shortly after discovering that many soldiers had switched sides during the conflict or even outright deserted, enough to cause the opposing force to retreat. Many of the soldiers held distaste with Maim's actions, while many more were simply disgruntled that the two nobles had not paid them their stipend.

Fluttershy had joined the town's Chantry in helping with the healing process, serving the wounded and helping the lost in finding their loved ones, while later on presiding over countless final rites. So many proud ponies gone, all slain by a plan cooked up by Arl Maim and executed by sending a troublesome rogue unicorn to Red Apple with Loghoof's approval. Their plan had worked, in its own way; Red Apple suffered greatly from the plot by Maim. Applejack gritted her teeth in anger; both would answer for their crimes.

Macintosh was still sick, his forehead incredibly hot with fever, but otherwise silent and unmoving except for the continuous rise and fall of his chest. His eyes were closed and his face was as serene as ever. Whatever sickness gripped the Arl of Red Apple would not let go without a fight.

Applejack had brought in Rainbow Dash to investigate what could have brought on the illness, only to discover that the Arl's favourite chewing grass was laced with something called "deathweed", and apparently there was enough on the grass to take down a buffalo. Macintosh was no buffalo, yet the fact that he was alive and still fighting the sickness was more than enough to show that the Warden's older brother was more than match for any weed, deadly or otherwise.

Still, he was going to need a miracle to ever wake up. As far as the healers were concerned the deathweed poisoning was incurable, thus many had already given up hope on Macintosh's recovery. There were already whispers that Loghoof would use his power

as regent to install a new Arl of Red Apple, one that was loyal to him once Macintosh died or was deemed unfit to defend his arling.

The burden of everything that had occurred in such a short time weighed heavily on the farm pony's shoulders. Applejack and Twilight were, as far as they knew, the only two Grey Wardens in Equestria to stand against the Blight. They had no official government support, instead being branded as traitors by a traitor sitting on the throne. They were able to recruit the unicorns to the cause to fight the ponyspawn, but there was still uniting the donkeys of Orzamule and the Pegasi of the Eastern Dales to the grey banner.

Applejack was also the king's daughter, which would lead into conflict with Blueblood's wife Queen Armeria. Red Apple also needed a member of the Apple family watching over the recovery process after the undead attack.

"What tree did ah buck to get all these bad apples," Applejack said in a quiet mutter as she traversed the halls of the castle. Up ahead in the hall she could see Rarity approach her, a look of concern on her face as the witch's daughter cringed at the sight of the earth pony's fatigued face.

"Applejack, dear, you look simply awful!" *Rarity was never once to mince words*, Applejack thought as she walked with Rarity, *but how is that really supposed to help me feel better?* "You simply must get some sleep. A bath too while you're at it, and I'm sure we can mix something to help your complexion, the puffiness under your eyes is quite atrocious. Maybe at least a few strokes from a brush for your mane?"

"Ah don't need any cleanin' when we got bigger apples to bake, ah tell you what," Applejack snapped, pointing a hoof at the Rarity on the right. *Wait, when have there been two Rarities?* "I just need to know that my brother and sister are gonna be okay, okay?"

While her words were filled with strength, her body was now openly rebelling, Applejack letting loose a long, loud yawn as a symbol of her fatigue. Rarity crossed her hooves, not saying a word as she nodded her head to a large mirror in the hallway.

"Oh hey, it's that there big mirror Blueblood liked," Applejack said as she turned to her reflection. The sight of her face made the former templar reel back. She knew she had bags under her eyes, but didn't expect those bags to be black, wrinkly, and appearing to be filled to the rim with lumpy apples. Bloodshot eyes stared back at the reflection in front of her, with one eye seemingly trying to droop, only to perk back up and begin the cycle anew.

With a heavy sigh, she turned to her unicorn friend, though they did not see eye to eye. "Maybe yer right, Rarity," Applejack said in admission, returning her gaze to the mirror, "Ah guess ah do look like a tree racked with fungus. But Red Apple needs me, and so does the party and the Wardens and..."

“And you will help no pony if you don’t take care of yourself first.” Her words were fierce, brooking no argument, yet there was no harshness underlined, instead only a tone of great concern. “I know you want to be there for everypony, but in this ragged state, you’ll fall down flat on your face. Rest for a few hours at least; we’ll come by right away and get you if anything happens at all.”

Applejack conceded, following Rarity back to the guest chambers. Once they arrived, both ponies said farewells before going their separate ways, Rarity to help with maintaining Red Apple and Applejack finally getting some much needed rest.

As the door closed behind her, Applejack fell onto the bed, her hat falling off her head with little grace as it landed on its side. She rolled onto her back, looking up at the blank castle ceiling. With a heavy sigh, the earth pony closed her eyes in an attempt to let sleep overtake her.

Her nerves said otherwise. Applejack was not the kind of pony to simply sleep when work had to be done, but the prissy pony was right in that if she didn’t recover from her fatigue, she could bring more harm than benefit to the rebuilding effort.

Think about what yer friends are doing, Applejack thought as she closed her eyes, they’re doing their gosh darnest to help ya, and you need to be in top shape to help them. Inside the quiet bedchamber, she focused her thoughts on the journey and where it would take their party next, if only to distract herself from the present and allow sleep to rule for a few hours at least.

Twilight awoke with her head pounding once again, groaning as she made her way to the wash basin to give her face a quick dunk. The water was warm and refreshing at least, giving her a feeling of cleanliness after a long night of travelling in the dirt and fighting monsters. The stench of death still lingered in the halls of the castle, but there was a new air of calm around the castle now that the ponies who worked the building were striving to return it to a state more familiar.

She left the guest room that was offered and began to make her way down to the court hall where she was going to meet her friends to discuss where to move on from here. Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Rarity turn away from another of the guest rooms, her eyes marred with concern.

“Oh, good morning dear,” Rarity said, “I was just making sure Applejack got some well-deserved rest. She’s been up all night watching over Applebloom and the Arl. I do hope we can find a way to help both of them. My ward and Trixie’s incantation will last a long time, but still...”

“We’ll find a way,” Twilight said with reassurance, “We’ll find the book of spells used by

the unicorn Arl Maim sent over and see if we can't find a reversal spell. Then we'll head to the Chantry and ask for help from the sisters there to find the Mane of Stars."

Rarity stopped in her tracks, appearing dumbfounded. "You actually want to go after an old legend?" Twilight nodded her head as she continued walking down the stairs, being careful to avoid the castle staff still busy with their duties.

"Flemeth was supposed to be a legend," retorted Twilight, "But it turns out she's real. In any event, I don't think we have any other options. The Arl needs to be healed, the demon expelled from Applebloom, and what we have available just isn't enough."

"What about traditional means of exorcism?"

"The Desire demon is heavily attached to Applebloom through the false horn. If we remove it, we could risk brain damage, if we go into the Fade, we could risk being possessed ourselves or hurting Applebloom. If we had the help of the Tower, it would be easier but..."

"That would mean exposing little Sweetie Belle and likely Dinky as well, something I will not allow." Twilight raised an eyebrow as Rarity stepped in front of her, "If the Tower comes here, they bring the templars. They'll take away Dinky and likely do something horrible to Sweetie Belle, and I will not stand by and let the templars do what they want because of some Pride demon possessed ruffian painting the images of apostates everywhere."

Twilight looked on as the unicorn with the violet mane kept walking. "If the Mane of Stars is what we need to find, then that is what we shall find," Rarity said, "I will follow your lead Twilight, though I want you to consider that we should do our best to save everypony we can. None of this was their fault: not Arl Macintosh, Applebloom or Sweetie Belle's. They are victims, and we should do what we can to make sure they are not victims a second time."

Rarity turned away then, heading in the direction of the dungeons where Sweetie Belle still hid, leaving Twilight alone in the halls of Red Apple Castle. She let out a heavy sigh as she turned into the court hall, noting that Bann Braeburn was giving officers orders while Trixie was in a corner, apparently flustered. When the blue unicorn saw Twilight approach, her horn began to glow, levitating a large book upwards. At least, what was left of a large book. Twilight's ears drooped, knowing all too well what this meant.

"We found this in the wizard's chamber," Trixie said, "There is nothing readable left of the book. The demon must have torched it after taking the filly as its host. Reversing the spell is going to be very difficult, even for someone as wonderfully gifted as me."

Twilight said nothing as she began to pace the room, trying to gather her thoughts as to what their next move should be. Without the Arl, they could not stand up to Loghoof and

Maim as long as a few other nobles stood against them. They could ask Braeburn, but one Bann was not going to convince the majority of the Bannorn, and the Teryn had the support of the much better equipped Arlings. Applebloom needed to be healed, but all methods she could think of were too dangerous. They needed a miracle.

They were going to go after a legend. "Trixie," Twilight said at last, "Wait here while I gather everypony and bring them back here within the hour. I'm also going to the Chantry to talk to the sisters there about the Mane of Stars, and yes I am planning to go after a myth."

Before Trixie could say anything in protest, Twilight was already galloping out of the main hall's doors and rushing towards the town. She passed by several guards who turned to see a sprinting unicorn dash past them as if there was another crisis. Her staff floated by her side matching speed perfectly as she bounded out of main gate and onto the hilly road.

Pinkie was on the road with Rainbow Dash in the sky in an effort to remove the landmines from the road. The pink pony had her nose buried in a map, pointing out one area with a hoof.

Rainbow swooped down the ground, gripping a large rock in both hooves and hovered to the point where Pinkie indicated. As Twilight neared the bomb-removal duo, Pinkie looked up at the incoming mage, then back to her map of mines, then back up with a look of fear.

"Twilight! STOP!" The jarring shout from the grenadier made Twilight skid across the ground to a halt. She looked down to see an ornate round shell on the ground, the trigger raised high and ready for a waiting hoof to detonate it. Twilight's eyes bulged as she looked down at the lyrium-based explosive, stepping away slowly. One more step and she would be blasted to pieces.

"See? This is why I don't like making landmines!" Pinkie stepped carefully on the path towards Twilight, pushing against her body until she was well enough away. Rainbow dash flew over to the mine, looking at Pinkie who nodded a signal. With a grunt, the cyan pegasus dropped the large rock onto the mine. Twilight shielded her eyes with a hoof as a blast of smoke and blue fire erupted from the bomb.

"I am so sorry!" Pinkie clung to Twilight, tears brimming in her eyes, "You almost got blown up by my work, and if anypony got hurt by anything I make I would feel so awful not only that but if it were you I would never forgive myself but we needed to trap the path to beat the zombies but you almost got hurt and...and..."

Twilight hushed the sobbing pony who stuck close to her side, trying to bring the situation under control. Dash had landed next to them, patting Pinkie's shoulder with a hoof for some measure of comfort. "Don't worry Pinkie, everything is fine," she said in an effort to calm Pinkie down, "I'm sorry I made you make those landmines. I didn't

know how strongly you felt against them. I'll never force you to make something you don't want to make ever again against ponies."

We do what we must. The words of Duncan and the purpose of the Grey Wardens told Twilight that her word to Pinkie would become broken if they needed to make use of the explosive traps again. Could Twilight keep such a promise that Pinkie need not make such dangerous weapons? All around her on the dirt path was the telltale sign of the effect the mines had on the incoming battle. She had heard of the attack on Red Apple and what role the defenders played, including how the mines had thinned out the marauding undead.

"We'll adjust our tactics next time," said Twilight, "We'll try to find an alternate solution if we can. I'm just glad and very proud to have such a responsible pony out here removing the hazards to make sure nopony else gets hurt."

"And you, Dash, thank you for helping Pinkie. I'm sorry I rushed right into such a dangerous zone without thinking and worried the both of you."

"Don't worry about, Twi," Dash said, "We got everything here covered. That was actually the second last mine. Once we get the one I was gonna blow, we'll be ready for whatever else we need to do. Isn't that right, Pinkie?"

Pinkie's tears dried quickly, grabbing both Dash and Twilight in a big hug. "As long as we are all together, we'll keep winning and saving ponies and then we'll never need to use bad bombs ever ever forever again and we'll have a big party and ponies can be happy again!"

When the last landmine was safely disposed of, Twilight went about telling Dash and Pinkie her plan to find out everything she could about the Mane of Stars. Dash expressed doubt about going after something that may not exist, but Twilight had expected this. What she did not expect was Pinkie agreeing with the idea that the Mane of Stars existed, and was just waiting to be found.

"Somepony once told me 'all myths are true, but few are accurate'," Pinkie said as they walked together down the path towards the town, "If the story of the Mane of Stars has been around for so long, why shouldn't it be real? Ooh! Maybe the Mane grants wishes! Oh, I could wish for the must supertastical party ever and everypony could be invited! Or maybe I could wish for all those mean ponyspawn become not-so-mean, and then have super - duper -fantastic - completely - off-the-hook party of all time!"

It was a refreshing thought filled with optimism that made Twilight smile with her friends, enjoying the typical line of thinking Pinkie brought forward even if it was a little too hopeful or completely bizarre. There was also some measure of wisdom to be gleaned from the earth pony's words, and after seeing unbelievable things such as demons, ponyspawn, the Fade and Flemeth herself, perhaps the Mane of Stars was real as well.

They left once they made it to the town, with Pinkie and Dash returning to the castle while Twilight continued on her way to the Chantry. This was not a meeting Twilight was looking forward to; for the most part the Chantry sisters she met in the Tower were condescending if not outright cold towards her and the other unicorns. It likely didn't help that they had the templar order to maintain whatever hold they wanted over the Tower. With the exception of Fluttershy, Twilight did not know how sisters outside of the Tower acted. Even after saving the town, there would still be distrust because the core of the attacks was caused by a unicorn. There was some hope that they would be at least somewhat similar to the kind pegasus Twilight had come to rely on.

She found some comfort in seeing the Chantry no longer as packed as it once was, with all the ponies who had hidden away inside having returned to the township proper. There were still many injured ponies inside, as well as those simply paralyzed by fear of the outside world. Many of the fillies and colts Twilight had seen when she first arrived were gone, but the few that did remain still held despair in their eyes. Loved ones were lost during the darkened nights, never to be heard from again.

If Twilight was going to help any pony young and old, she was going to need help finding the Mane of Stars. As she approached the assembled Chantry sisters, Fluttershy among them noticed Twilight and walked towards her, her soft smile bringing a new light to the entire Chantry.

"Oh, hello Twilight," Fluttershy said, ignoring the disdainful looks of the other sisters, "I hope you had a good rest. What brings you to the Chantry? Has something happened to the Arl and little Applebloom?"

"There hasn't been any changes, and what I'm about to suggest is going to sound..." Twilight stopped for a moment as Fluttershy watched with expectant eyes. *Is this going to sound far-fetched to a pony like Fluttershy who claimed to have received a vision from Celestia herself and seen the firebird, the herald of Sun Goddess inside her dreams?* If anypony was likely to support Twilight's notion it was the pegasus Chantry sister.

Twilight explained her plan to find the Mane of Stars to Fluttershy, hoping that the yellow pegasus could use some connection with the Chantry to find out as much information as she could. Once Twilight finished, Fluttershy considered the plan for a moment before asking the unicorn to wait as she walked over to the other sisters. They spoke for a moment before splitting into several directions, each going into different rooms of the Chantry. As they went their separate ways, Twilight looked over the books in the shelves that sat in the main hall, if only out of curiosity as to what the Chantry taught compared to that of the Tower.

Among the several volumes of the Chant of the Sun and Moon were several history books as well as anthologies of stories and legends. Nothing that seemed to have any practical value even though it was likely that the Chantry controlled education throughout

Equestria. Even compared to Equestria's Tower and all the other Towers across the world, the Chantry would have the greatest gathering of scholars and researchers to educate the masses and learn more about the world. There had to be at least several scholars who found some headway in discovering the Mane of Stars.

Twilight levitated a book titled "History of the Imperial Age". It was a record of the old world during the height of Imperium rule and its fall to not only Luna, but the Second Blight. As Twilight flipped through the pages, several entries caught her attention. One was about rise of the First Blight and the how it decimated the northlands of the Imperium:

After the ascension of Luna to join her sister in the Seat of the Heavens, the Unicorn Imperium splintered into two distinct factions: one that had converted to the new Chantry of the Sun and the Moon, and another who still held on to the worship of the Old Gods, despite their draconian masters having been banished by the power of Luna. The two factions continued to fight a bloody civil war, until the first breach in the land opened and spewed forth the dark tide that was the ponyspawn.

The Imperium was ravaged a second time by the ponyspawn since their rise, now a shattered empire that has never been able to recover its power since. The First Blight turned its attention to Filais and Yokefelach, tearing the land apart as they neared victory. In an act of desperation, the newly formed Chantry called for all the faithful nations of the land to unite in a holy gallop to fight against the ponyspawn. They also extended an olive branch towards the Walkers of the Grey, who for years had been looked on with suspicion.

The Walkers of the Grey were long known to being the most capable and skilled in battle against the ponyspawn, however little was known about them since the rise of the evil tide except that a small group of Walkers had better fortune against the monsters than the majority of Imperium forces. The Imperium had declared the Walkers heretical and even in league with ponyspawn they fought often against, and despite the fall of that empire, the feelings of mistrust lingered still. Many of their practices that were known, such as ritually marking their bodies with the blood of ponyspawn were deemed bizarre, and even Chantry scholars today wonder if the Grey Wardens continue these practices of their ancestors. There were many instances recorded that the Walkers took the blood of the ponyspawn to use in dark rites, but this is only rumor, even amongst the Grey Wardens of today. The Walkers were exiled to the Dark Tunnels, where they carried out their battles and rituals in secrecy until the First Blight spilled into the land above.

The gesture of peace was accepted, and special rights and protections were given to the newly formed Grey Warden order for as long as they fought with the Chantry against the ponyspawn. This includes their Right of Conscription, the

promise that the order would not be used as bargaining chips in politics against other nations, as well as the formation of treaties with the various nations, including the pegasi of the Eastern Dales and the donkeys of Orzamule.

With the defeat of the First Blight and the complete collapse of Imperial rule over the world, this marked the end of the Imperial Age and the beginning of the Exalted Age, which saw the growth of the Chantry expand far beyond the borders of Equestria and Filais, its influence being felt as far as Pura Raza and the Free Plains...

The Grey Wardens had a large effect on history, but just like anything else, what the Wardens had enjoyed was easily forgotten if convenient. The situation now, as well as the supposed rebellion in Equestria caused by the wardens was more than enough testament to that. Still, Twilight was grateful that the treaties she held had been honoured by the Unicorn Tower, with hope still high that they will be honoured again by the donkeys, pegasi, as well the support of Arl Macintosh and his influence with the rest of Equestria's nobility.

Yet as she skimmed through the text, there was no mention of where the followers of Luna had buried her remains including the Mane of Stars. She searched through several more books and found nothing on the subject. It was as if the entire legend was simply word of mouth, or simply disregarded as meagre fantasy.

As Twilight put the books back neatly on the shelves, Fluttershy approached with a small bag filled with several scrolls of parchment. The other sisters joined them, some bearing scrolls as well, while others came empty hoofed. Twilight thanked them and began opening the scrolls one by one, wincing at the apparent chicken-scratch that was the excuse for writing. While it was true that not every pony could write as neatly as a unicorn with magic, she had seen several ponies write just as well with proper mouth work and a quill.

What notes she could read belonged to a "Brother Biblio," and they detailed how he travelled all across Filais and Equestria to find the Temple of Luna, where the Mane of Stars was supposedly protected.. The sisters said that Biblio was a scholar from Filais who spent his life looking for Mane of Stars and had stopped by Red Apple months before heading to Trotterim to visit the main temple there and then apparently he travelled north to the Frosttop Mountains.

"They say Brother Biblio kept reciting this Twilight," said Fluttershy as she pushed another sheet of parchment to Twilight. It appeared to be a hastily drawn note, with a short message that sounded more like a piece of poetry. Fluttershy leaned in close to read the note for herself as Twilight recited the note aloud:

*"Strength of heart, strength of the mountain,
The underkings carved her tomb there.*

*Fierce her fury, fierce as the gale,
The sky lords summoned the storm there.
Long trek south, long to her first home,
The earth walkers brought her stars there.
Words of the Chant, words of power,
The Fade dreamers protect her there.
Here she lays, here she waits,
To follow her path and meet her there.”*

Strength of the mountain, Twilight mused to herself as she lifted her map out of her saddle bag to look it over. Brother Biblio had travelled to the Frosttop mountains which made sense as they were the largest mountain range in the highlands. Records from the Tower spoke that they were very dangerous, not only due to the chilling temperatures but all manner of strange and ferocious creatures living there.

The templars and the various unicorns who came back with stories of the outside world had said anypony who ventured into deep the Frosttop mountains were never heard from again. If the followers of Luna were going to hide the Mane of Stars anywhere, there would be the best place to ensure the relic never fell into the wrong hooves.

The underkings must have meant the donkeys, but they were known for their reclusion. Luna must have done something to have the donkeys wish to construct her tomb in the side of a mountain. Or maybe it was even inside a mountain, like how Applejack described Orzamule.

Fierce as the gale would indicate the powerful blizzards that made climbing the mountain nearly impossible. A temple on top of a mountain with such storms protecting the summit would make accessing the tomb a difficult trial, if not a lethal one. The sky lords would have referenced the pegasi, the only civilization Twilight knew of that had control over the weather. Now that power had been lost to time and centuries of warfare seeing the pegasi numbers become ever thinner.

If they did decide to climb the Frosttop mountains, they would be up against the very forces of nature, something completely unpredictable and savage when in comparison to the ponyspawn and demons of the Fade. They would have to traverse through the range and hope to stumble upon the tomb. As far as plans go, this was shaping up to be the most foolhardy.

Long trek to her first home also pointed to the Frosttop Mountains only because it was recorded that Luna was born in Equestria, or was often quoted as longing to return home to Equestria during her campaign against the Imperium. If there was any good news, it was that they wouldn't have to travel to Filais or another nation.

Words of power must indicate that unicorns placed spells on the tomb to protect the Mane of Stars. Twilight shook her head in frustration as she looked over the poem and the rest

of Biblio's notes. "Where did this poem come from?" Twilight turned to the sisters, trying to hide her dread of where they were likely going to find a legend.

"Biblio kept reciting the poem," said one of the sisters, "When we asked which holy or poetic text it came from, he smiled and said he wrote it himself after all the clues he discovered. He appeared to live only for the Mane of Stars, everything about his life as he told it was about finding the relic."

"And now we have to find him to find the Mane of Stars," Twilight said, looking at Fluttershy. "How am I going to convince the others that this isn't some wild goose chase? What if we get to the mountains and nothing is there? This isn't like climbing a tower or getting to the heart of a castle."

"Is that doubt in its voice? I thought it would have a plan the moment it figured where we need to go." The condescending voice with an echo could only have come from Shale as the golem pony walked into the Chantry, its heavy hooves crushing the stone floor beneath it with powerful clops. The sisters quickly backed away with frightened eyes despite Fluttershy smiling at the golem as Shale moved to join the pair.

"It has confronted pony spawn, demons, and now zombies," Shale said while looking down at Twilight from its tall stature, "Surely a mountain is no great threat. It will also have the Strong and Mighty Shale by its side, so that means victory is assured. Do you like that title? The loud one inspired me to come up with something for myself, though I believe it fits me than 'Great and Powerful' fits the it."

Twilight covered her face with her hoof as her magic furled up all of Brother Biblio's notes and the poem, tucking them away in her bag. What was Shale going on about already having a plan to climb a mountain? As far as the lavender unicorn was concerned, that was the entirety of their plan. It was the only hope they had to save the Arl and Applebloom. It was a shot they would have to take.

"Do you think we can find the Mane of Stars Shale?" Twilight asked the golem. Shale laughed, a hollow, reverberating noise that was more incredulous than anything

"I have no particular interest in such mundane relics squishy ponies put stock in," Shale said, "After all, I have myself to believe in. As the only golem in Equestria, I like to believe I should be considered a grand relic to be seen with awe and fear. As far as climbing a mountain is concerned, I will be with it, and the others will be with it I am sure. Strength in numbers and all that and if there is one thing I know it is strength. Even if I do constitute the majority of it all."

Shale was right. Twilight could count on the support of all her friends to challenge the mountain and find the Mane of Stars. Their journey was going to take them to depths of the earth and to the dark reaches of the Everfree Forest: what was a mountain compared to the other two? Danger was behind every tree and shadow that lurked their path, a

mountain would be no different.

“All right,” Twilight said with a smile towards the golem and the yellow pegasus, “We’ll head back to the castle to meet with the others and then we’ll figure out the best way to navigate the Frosttop Mountains.”

They left the Chantry to find themselves out in the midday sun. They walked with Shale doing most of the talking, mostly gloating about past battles that the golem remembered, but when pressed about how the stone pony could remember such battles and not its history, Shale somehow shrugged it away as “remembering the good parts.”

As they made their way into the main court hall, the rest of the party were already standing around and chatting, waiting for Twilight to arrive. They stood around Twilight, with Applejack stepping forward towards the unicorn mage.

“We’re going to find the Mane of Stars.” Both Twilight and Applejack said this in unison, which only elicited a smile from the two Wardens. It warmed Twilight’s heart that she and Applejack were sharing the same thoughts about finding the myth. Confidence was rising knowing that the Grey Wardens were united in this endeavour.

“I’ve found out where a Chantry scholar named Brother Biblio went searching for the Mane of Stars,” Twilight explained, drawing her map from her saddle bag, “He went to the Frosttop Mountains, leaving a clue in the form of a poem.”

Twilight levitated the small parchment page and brought it to the eyes of the other ponies. They each read the poem, their faces appearing to mull over the words written by the educated monk. Spike was the last one to read the poem, who quickly returned it to Twilight with a puzzled look in his eyes.

“That mountain range is extremely dangerous Twi,” Applejack said, “We’re gonna need a lot of cold weather and mountaineerin’ supplies. Not tryin’ to be a negative nelly, but I don’t know how well all of us can climb those peaks. The unicorns of the group aren’t really physical specimens if ya catch my meanin’.”

“We’ll have to manage.” Twilight brought up her map to show how they were going to progress to the mountain range. They would take Ditzy’s boat north across Lake Blackwater past the Tower to the northern edge of the lake. Then they would hoof their way to the northern passage leading to Frosttop mountains. From there, it was a search for the right mountain top where the tomb was being held.

A shiver ran through Twilight’s spine as an image of a cold snowy wilderness ran through her head. Biting winds the likes she had only felt when they were under control. Nights that defined deep freeze. Wild animals that survived the harsh climates on ferocity and bloodlust for any pony foolish enough to wander through their domain. If they found the temple where the Mane of Stars, what sort of defences would they encounter? Would

they be stopped the moment they stepped through the hallowed halls of an ancient tomb?

“Those mountains sound scary,” Fluttershy whispered. Pinkie Pie wrapped her foreleg around the former bard with her usual broad smile on her face.

“Just think about how much fun we could have!” The pink earth pony always seemed to find a positive spin on any situation. “We could have a mountain climbing party! We can sing hiking songs, and play outdoor games! Ooh, we can build snow ponies and have snowball fights and do all sorts of fun snowy things! Oh Twilight and Trixie have never seen this snow, this is going to be so great! And once we find the Mane of Stars, we can make wishes for parties and happiness and laughter and...”

“And once we find the Mane of Stars, we’ll use them to heal Applebloom and Arl Macintosh.” Twilight looked to see all her friends stand around her expecting something else. “You all believe we can find the Mane? That we can find a legend? What if we go to the Frosttop Mountains and find nothing?”

“Darling, we are going to have to cross that bridge once we get there,” Rarity said, “Legends have some measure of truth to them, and a single pony scholar from the Chantry had to be on to something if he set out on this journey alone. I think together we’ll have much better odds.”

Looks of confidence surrounded Twilight, each pony ready to leave on a moment’s notice. Twilight smiled at her friends, telling them to gather whatever supplies they felt were going to be necessary. They would need warm clothes, plenty of food and water as well as means to melt snow into drinking water while in the mountain range as well as climbing supplies such as hooks and ropes. It was quite the list, but all of it was going to be needed if they were going to survive the climb, much less actually make it to their goal.

They split into several directions throughout the castle and back to town to find the needed supplies for the trip, except for Shale and Twilight. Shale shrugged when Twilight gave it a confused look.

“I don’t need supplies,” Shale said plainly, “No need to eat or be close to heat. Perhaps I shall find some lyrium in the event the unspeakable occurs. I have enough cracks and crevices enough as is simply by age. Age! I am still a young golem after all. I have appearances to keep up.”

The rock pony walked out with quaking hoof steps, leaving Twilight alone in the large room. Her face broke into a smile, until she couldn’t help but giggle as she went about her own business to prepare for the long journey north.

“So this how it’s gonna be, Mac,” Applejack said to her comatose brother, trying not to see the pained expression on his face as his breathing was incredibly shallow and weak, “We’re goin’ to the northlands, to them Frosttop Mountains. We’re gonna find the Mane of Stars, and we’re gonna heal you and Applebloom real well, ya hear? You’ll be back on yer hooves real soon. We’ll find it, even if we have to go to BlackCanter and back. Everything’s gonna be all right, ya hear?”

Applejack leaned in and kissed her older brother on the forehead, something she had not done since she was a filly. It was what she should have done when she was taken by the Chantry to become a templar. This was not how their reunion was supposed to go, but it was enough for now. They were going to find the Mane of Stars, even if it killed Applejack. Which was likely to happen on such a damned fool errand.

Damned fool errand ah’m agreein’ to, she thought as she left the Arl’s bedchambers and headed towards the castle armoury to begin preparing her supplies. There was no point in fussing about it further; the look Applejack saw in Twilight’s eyes told her that the path was decided and without any argument to challenge her, they were going north.

There were only a few guards in the armoury, but they were quick to help out Applejack find all the gear she was going to need. One thing she never thought about was the quality of her armour, having not looked into getting her simple splint mail repaired since Ostequus. Many pieces were bent and damaged if not outright missing, and the armour would not last another fight against any enemy whether it was a calculating solider or a savage thelock.

The earth pony Warden decided to replace her armour for proper protection, not only against weapons and claws, but against the frozen cold of the northlands. There was plenty of winter gear unused during the middle of summer, including plate armour with a woollen quilt undershirt. She fitted the armour on with the help of the guards, until Applejack was decked in the best protection she had ever worn. The plate was heavier than what she was used to, but there was a certainty that she would get the hang of wearing thick metal sheets on her frame.

Applejack looked around the armoury, thinking about grabbing a few extra pieces of armour for her friends. She asked the quartermaster for some help in finding the right armour sets, being directed to suits of chain and reinforced leather used by lighter infantry and scouts. It might take some convincing on her part, by Applejack was sure she could get Fluttershy into some light chain mail under her Chantry robes. Ponyspawn were no fools, and often made a beeline for anypony with a bow. She was also able to find a heavier suit of chain with metal plating that Pinkie could wear, whereas a suit of scout armour of reinforced leather would give Rainbow Dash added protection but still keep her vaunted mobility.

There was nothing she could find that would not over encumber the unicorns of the groups. Simple heavy wool cloaks were all she could think of as protection against the

elements. They did have their magical barriers and shields to protect them, but this thought only brought a good chiding from within Applejack; she should be making sure that there was no need for them to use their spells to protect themselves.

Next Applejack looked over the weapons. She found a new sword for herself to replace the dull blade that she had used since Ostequus, one that not only held its sharp edge, but also bore the Red Apple symbol on the pommel. The sword bit felt right clenched in her teeth compared to the common blade she used for a long time. A good Red Apple blade for a good Red Apple pony.

The orange earth pony found an applewood bow for Fluttershy to replace the ash bow she had when they first met in Ponyring, as well as a quiver of arrows. Applejack then found a sturdy mace for Pinkie with a heavy but well-balanced steel head. The others didn't need weapons from the armoury; the unicorns had their staves, Rainbow Dash had her mother's dagger, and Shale was a cantering battering ram.

With aid, Applejack loaded a chest with all the gear she had picked out and pulled the container on a wagon out of the castle towards the dock. It felt good to do some simple work for a change rather than fighting monsters. Pulling a wagon filled with apples was something the young mare missed. Simple pleasures, simple burdens. Not the weight of an entire nation and its ponies on her shoulders.

It came to her surprise that Braeburn galloped up to her side as she was going down the hill path, matching her trot as she descended the beaten road filled with craters. "So you and all them mares are really gonna go head 'em on up north," he said, looking over at his cousin with a hopeful eye. Applejack simply nodded as she carefully traversed the damaged path.

"That's right," Applejack replied, moving through the town heading towards the docks, "We're gonna find the Mane of Stars. Might take us a while, so I'm leavin' Red Apple in yer hooves until we get back." Braeburn was well known for keeping Appleoosa a prospering part of the Bannorn, and the ponies there respected their Bann, even if he had a history of eccentricity. He was just enthusiastic about seeing ponies prosper, which eased any concerns that Red Apple was being left unattended.

"I'll take good care of Red Apple till ya git back, cousin." Braeburn smiled. Together the two pushed the chest onto the ship with Ditzzy's help. With their cold weather gear safely stowed onto the ship, it was now time to work on navigation. Wasting time on Lake Blackwater simply would not do in Applejack's point of view.

"All right Ditzzy," Applejack said as she kept the grey pegasus's attention on her, "We are goin' north to the Frosttop Mountains. North, got it Ditzzy?"

"North!" she repeated, "We're sailing north!"

“Not south, we’re already south, can’t go much further south than this in a boat. Not west either, we already went west. Did some good there, don’t need to go west though. East is right out, ya hear?”

Ditzy nodded slowly. “You just want me to go north. Not any other direction. Just north.”

“That’s right!” Applejack smiled at Ditzy, “Just pretend there are a lot of tasty muffins north. Them oatmeal flavoured ones ya like so much. Do you think ya can get us north if there are tasty muffins over yonder?”

“I know I can!” Ditzy flew up to the helm of the ship, the hunger for baked treats on her mismatched eyes clear and apparent. “All aboard! Next stop: the muffin north!”

Hopefully with Ditzy now under some measure of focus, they could make it across the lake with haste. With the lives of Macintosh and Applebloom in the balance, there was no time to waste getting lost on the lake. Applejack stayed on the boat helping Ditzy and Dinky prepare as the rest of the party milled onto the deck while Braeburn said his goodbyes before heading back to the castle. Once again, all the ponies were ready to go except Shale, who stood back on the dock.

“It seems we are at this impasse once again,” the golem said, looking up Twilight with an expectant look, “I’d rather not slog my way a lake again. Couldn’t it remove half of the useless junk in the hold? It is carrying the only golem in Equestria after all.”

Twilight had a glint in her eye as she stepped towards the golem that made Applejack smirk. “Don’t worry Shale,” she began, “I have just the right spell for you that will make your trip on the boat as comfortable as possible.”

Her horn began to glow, encasing the golem in a violet glow. Shale began to protest loudly as the magic lifted it much like any other object Twilight lifted with her horn’s power. It was a strain, Applejack could see, but it seemed to work. The golem was lifted in the air and hovered to the center of the ship.

“This is degrading!” Shale glared at Twilight, who simply smiled.

“This lets you travel with your friends,” she said, “Rarity and Trixie will switch off when I feel tired. Now we can get going.”

The anchor was raised and the sails were lowered. As the wind took the ship off the dock and onto the lake proper, Applejack stood on the bow and saw the beckoning mountains ahead. Legends surrounded the Frosttop mountains, but fear gripped her heart wondering if they would become nothing more than myths on the winds if they failed.

Spike stayed in the cargo hold, feigning sleep as Twilight lowered him into the same basket he used as a bed during their trip from the Tower to Red Apple. Even if he wanted to sleep, the baby dragon would not let dreams of gemstones and Rarity enter his head, not when he was faced with the truth he had caused.

I pushed her into the Wardens, Spike thought as he rolled around in the basket staring blankly, I'm the one who shortened her life. She says it's not my fault, but she's just saying that to make me feel better. To put on a strong face for the rest of the group.

They had come so far and the threat of the pony pawn loomed ever closer over their heads he could not think of going up to Twilight and asking her to quit, to leave the Warden business to Applejack or the Wardens from Filais or anypony else. She would refuse, saying they made it this far on the road, might as well continue on.

As the dragon tried to get some sleep, his mind raced for any solution he could find to make Twilight's life a little easier, a little better. Try as he might, Spike could only roll around in his bed, every idea dashed because he was too small or did not have the ability to accomplish them. There had to be a way he could do something. There just had to be.