

A tall, fanciful clothed woman trotted down the long stone hallway with a nervous, hesitant gait. Her hooves clicked and clacked as she struggled to keep her breathing under control, and her mind focused on the task before her. A sweaty hand continually tugged at her collar, causing her long royal purple robes to shift as if they too were as unsettled as she was.

In her free hand was an ancient scroll contained within a glass tube stoppered by a ruby on one end, and a diamond on the other. Her hooved feet were bare, save for when her long robes got underfoot, making the woman stumble, and yank at the hem. Though poor fitting, her clothing was resplendent with small, artful decorations that covered it from the tip of her hood to the very bottom of the dress.

Several shawl-like accents extended in layers starting at the woman's neck and draped down past her shoulders. Small gold and silver metallic teardrops dangled from it, occasionally bouncing off one another and making a small tinkling sound. From this bottommost layer sprouted a long, thin length of fabric embroidered with dozens of intricate designs which dangled down the front of her robes.

If one was skilled, they would be able to read the flowing golden and silver text written upon it, and that person would be able to learn much of the wizard who wore it. Alas, there was no one around save for the woman, her anxiety, and the clip-clop of her own nervous footsteps. Until at last, she reached the end of the hall, where an ancient, and clearly ill-used wooden door sat closed, seemingly forgotten by the castle staff.

Upon coming to a stop, the woman gulped nervously, running a lavender hand through her short neatly cropped hair of purple, through which ran a streak of pink and magenta. Placing a hand over her heart, the woman tried to still her frantic breathing, and after several seconds of silence, managed to accomplish just that. With her nerves now under control, the woman straightened her robes, rose to her full height, and after making sure her horn had not caught a cobweb, reached for the handle.

Turning it gently, the woman found that the ancient wood had evidently warped, and she gave it a second, sharper twist. Metal creaked, wood groaned, and only after the woman planted her shoulder into the door did it open. Resetting her clothing once more, the woman wiped the thick layer of dirt which stuck to her shoulder before stepping forward.

Slipping soundlessly into the room, the robed individual put the distant torch light behind her and stepped into the darkness. A pulse of magic immediately traveled up her horn, growing until it reached the tip, at which it morphed into a glowing golden sphere. This sphere hovered above her head, bathing the previously dark room in a harsh, unnatural magical light.

With the shadows banished, the woman looked up to where the towering figure of a great hydra stood waiting for her. Though a creature of such a stature would normally chill the woman to the

bone, this one had grey, stoney skin. Even at a glance, the woman could tell that the hydra was indeed still petrified, though she used her magic to check just in case.

Upon finding out for certain that all the old spells were still in place, the woman looked around, a little surprised to find that she was in what looked like a simple storage room. Cobwebs filled the corners, and dust covered every conceivable surface in a thick, unpleasant layer. The room felt more like it should be holding a noble's forgotten collection of rare antiques, rather than one of the most powerful foes Equestria had ever faced.

The woman took a step back and looked up at the hydra, studying its six heads closely, all of which were fully extended, jaws open and fangs exposed. Each tooth was as long as a dagger, with its fangs reaching the length of a longsword, and would normally poke out the sides of the hydra's lips. Right now, however, the petrified creature was frozen mid-strike, its entire body lurching towards a target that had seemingly stood exactly where the woman now did.

The creature towered over the diminutive woman, each neck three times longer than she was tall, and with a body that easily weighed several tons. A long winding tail extended from the back of its body, the appendage thick, and acting as a counterbalance to the creature's many heads. Four legs held up the main bulk of the monster, each one sporting four thick toes ending in razor-sharp claws.

Its scales were thick, and numerous but absolutely covered in slash marks and other signs of combat. Unlike the hydras the woman knew, this one had fierce, intelligent eyes that bore down on the woman, as if watching her even know. Though impossible, the woman found herself unnerved nonetheless, and couldn't help but step away from the spot where its gaze landed.

With a pulse, the golden globe of magic floated above the door, and with a firm push, the woman closed the wooden portal behind her. Turning back to the hydra, Twilight studied its features with renewed interest, starting at the thicker scales which began on the brow of each head. These were no ordinary scales, and were thicker than plate mail, growing several feet down the hydra's half-dozen heads.

These plates were incredibly thick, with each one overlapping just enough to leave virtually no space exposed. Though they only went back a few feet before stopping, it was clear that these extra defenses would have served it well in combat. Indeed its entire body seemed molded purely for just such a purpose, as large bulging muscles could be seen beneath the creature's scaly flesh.

Gulping down the lingering sense of nervousness, the woman, gripped the scroll case, and with a tug, pulled free the diamond stopper. The smell of ancient paper, and aged ink which would normally ease the woman's nerves, only served to make her more on edge. Delicately, she reached into the case, and pulled out a scroll more ancient than her entire family line, or at least as far back as they had bothered to record that was.

Breathing deeply, the woman tentatively unrolled the parchment and beheld the spell which would free the beast which stood before her. Lighting her horn, the woman went through the motions to cast the long-since antiquated spell, moving her arms while whispering the proper rites. Silver magic built at the tip of the pony's horn, a ball of light forming, and growing larger as streams of gold began to intertwine within it.

Her motions grew more exact, her hands twisting into various signs, and sigils as her voice grew louder, the words humming with power. Until finally the spell reached its zenith, and with a single word, exploded into a multicolored shower of light and magic.

"Awaken!"

The energy shot in all directions, only to twist and move so that every last bit landed upon the hydra's petrified form. Wherever these small bits of magic impacted, its grey stone flesh flashed before turning a black so dark that it seemed to sap the very light from the room. While this happened, the woman stood nervously off to the side, her hands balled into fists as she gripped her robes tightly.

Slowly the magic coalesced, until every last bit of the hydra had returned to its natural color, including the golden scales which grew around its head. It even seemed alive, though its eyes remained dull and lifeless, staying grey while the rest of its body was now back to normal. Then a shudder ran through its form, starting at its tail and ending at each of its heads, six sets of golden eyes flickering and opening once more.

Not only were its eyes the most vibrant gold the woman had ever seen, but they glowed faintly in the low light. For a moment they searched the room as if struggling to comprehend what was going on, before latching onto the woman. The heads immediately reared back, twelve eyes narrowing in unison as they bore down on the much smaller creature.

"Who are you?" Rumbled the hydra in a half dozen voices.

The woman could feel each word rolling over her, causing the stone floor to quake. "I-I am T-Twilight Sparkle," she stuttered, slowly growing more confident the longer she spoke. "And you are Ancalagon the black-hearted."

"Just, the black," retorted the hydra, all of its mouths moving in unison.

"Right, of course," replied the woman, bobbing her head slightly.

The hydra's heads spread out suddenly, studying its body and the room intently, ignoring the woman entirely. "Your spell work is good, if unnecessarily cruel like all pony magic," remarked the hydra offhandedly. "Not even I could escape, nor could I harm you."

"Our magic isn't cruel, though I suppose if you used it to torture someone then it would be," declared Twilight Sparkle confidently.

The hydra's heads sneered down on her. "If you would twist up a snake and make it serve as a bow tie would that not be cruel?"

"I um, yes but-"

"Magic is a living, breathing thing with desires all its own, and yet you bind it in place and make it slave to your will," stated Ancalagon, stomping a foot in emphasis. "You stop its flow and wield its power through force. That is cruel."

Twilight sighed. "Ahh yes, the old theory of magical sentience. I can assure you your ideas have been disproven a thousand times over since your time."

The hydra snorted, ruffling the woman's robes. "Your casual brutality aside. What brings you before me? Surely you are not as simple-minded as Celestia and merely wish to taunt me like a child with a caged animal."

"Celestia wouldn't-" Twilight stopped herself and took a breath. "They warned me you get under people's skin."

"Usually it's with fang and claw, but I've found that words tend to do the job just as well," exclaimed the hydra, its heads lowering to the woman's level and giving Twilight a good view of just how sharp its teeth were.

"So I've heard," the woman muttered, coughing into her hand. "Regardless. I stand before you with a purpose, and that purpose is to bring back the Everfree tribes."

The hydra's heads twisted, one with disgust, the other with confusion, a third with rage while the final three contorted in a mixture of all three emotions. After a moment the heads shook themselves before leveling out before the woman once more, fixing her with a firm glare.

"The children of harmony will return when I will it, and not a moment sooner," the heads sneered down at the woman. "Torture me if you will. Stars above, the sisters have tried that angle for centuries."

"They wouldn't do that, stop lying all the time!" Spat the woman, her hands balling into fists.

"Shall I describe to you what it feels like to have your scales stripped back one by one?" Taunted the hydra, faces sneering down at the mage. "I hear it's a lot like having one's nails torn out, only mine are the size of your head and require a crowbar to remove."

Twilight's brow knit and she shook her head. "No amount of disgusting descriptions will change my mind. Now tell me how to bring them back."

"Why? So you can finish the genocide your ancestors started?" Mocked the hydra. "Perhaps you require more slaves to toil in your fields and die in your wars."

"There was no genocide, and slavery has been abolished for over fifty years," replied the woman, a confident smile slowly spreading across her lips.

"Really? If not genocide then what would you call the sacking of Aelin-Tor?" Asked the monster.

Twilight Sparkle blinked. "What are you even talking about?"

"Surely your history books remember one of the most gruesome slaughters to have ever occurred at the hands of your soldiers," began the hydra, a head cocking to the side.

"I've never heard any mention of such a thing, and I am very well-read," Twilight stated, arms crossing over her chest.

The hydra's eyes narrowed, and one lowered itself, peering intently into the woman's eyes. "You truly believe that, don't you?"

Twilight sighed. "I was warned you were a liar, but this is ridiculous. You can't just make up an event."

"You think I would make up the fact that Celestian soldiers slaughtered thousands of men, women, and children before burning an entire village to the ground?" Roared the hydra, heads rearing back in unison. "Do you really think I would dig over half those graves myself for no reason?"

"Fine, I'll play along," muttered Twilight flippantly. "What happened?"

"Aelin-Tor was a neutral town, one that had refused to join the conflict between the invading southerners, and the children," began Ancalagon, his voice softening slightly. "Refugees fleeing the genocide enacted in the sister's name had also gathered there, swelling the town's numbers considerably."

"Southerner? Invasion? What are you talking about?" Questioned Twilight, a frown crossing her face.

The hydra shook one of its great heads, a look of pity crossing his faces. "You wear your blinders with such pride. It would pitiable if not for the cruelties you pretend not to see."

"Answer the questions, monster," Twilight Sparkle demanded, hoof stomping against the ground.

"You are a southerner, and your people emerged from deadwind pass before invading our lands and slaughtering our people," explained the hydra. "Now still your tongue, I have yet to answer the first of your questions."

Twilight grumbled, her hands tightening into fists.

"Good. Now, Aelin-Tor accepted the battle-weary soldiers readily, feeding them, and healing their injuries," Ancalagon remarked, his tone becoming akin to one a parent may take when explaining something to a child. "They had lost their commander recently and were low on supplies. As such, they remained there for some time. Awaiting new orders and spending what little they had on what little comforts the town could supply."

The hydra's eyes grew glassy, and Twilight got the sudden impression that he no longer even saw her, despite the fact that he was staring down at her. "The good people had little to share, but what they did have they offered readily, and generously. The soldiers were well-behaved, at first anyway, but after it was learned that the town's leader was a changeling things went downhill quickly."

"I don't see the problem. Simply remove the changeling and leave," Twilight exclaimed.

"Typical xenophobia," Ancalagon murmured, heads shaking. "If changelings could eat hate a single southerner could fuel a hive for centuries."

Twilight snorted. "It is not cruel to remove a parasite, or kill a pest that spreads disease."

"Changelings are neither of those things," rumbled the hydra. "They are thinking beings with feelings, emotions, and lives. They have a right to live the same as you."

"I think we're getting off-topic again," Twilight remarked.

Ancalagon snorted, sending the woman's hair a flutter once more. "Fine. Though don't think I'll forget how casually you dismissed the murder of an innocent." the hydra cleared its throats.

"Your soldiers did as you no doubt would. Killing the town's leader in cold blood before butchering the rest of the town's residents and burning the entire place down."

"Why would they do that? They already eliminated the threat," Twilight pointed out.

"She had served dutifully as the town's leader for centuries. She was no threat to anyone or anything, save for any fool who may hurt one of her residents," explained the hydra. "As for their

reasons, they were simple. They were paranoid. Add to that a heaping helping of xenophobia and the only surprise is that it didn't happen sooner."

Twilight frowned. "I will grant you that your scenario seems plausible, though I doubt its validity regardless."

"If you released me I could bring you to the field of poppies where they were buried," offered the hydra, a rumble emanating from deep within his many throats. "I could even tell you their names and how old they were when they were killed."

"Nice try, but you are never leaving this room," Twilight replied, hoof tapping impatiently against the ground.

"That being said you wouldn't even have to free me," continued the hydra, its heads smirking. "I could simply point it out via a scrying pool and you could watch as your soldiers dug up the bodies."

Twilight's confident expression vanished, replaced by a deep frown. "Maybe one day I will conduct my own expedition, but not before you bring back the tribes."

Ancalagon smirked, his body resting on the cold stone floor. "Your general tortured me for a century and failed. Your spymaster invaded my dreams for twice as long and got nothing. What makes you think you have something they do not?"

"Because I made a breakthrough. One that will finally allow my ancestors to return," Twilight began, her horn beginning to glow.

"Your ancestors?" Replied the hydra, blinking in confusion. "Don't tell me your family is descended from a slave."

"She was not a slave, and I'll be able to prove it to you when I make you bring them back!" Twilight shouted, her horn shimmering with such energy that the very air around it began to hum with power.

"Foolish girl, your mind magic has no effect on a creature with six brains," retorted Ancalagon.

"I'm not going to control you. I'm going to enter your mind and pry the information out of you!" Twilight shouted back, her hands beginning to twist and move in intricate patterns.

The hydra's eyes went wide. "You can't. Our memories will become muddled and there is a chance one or both of us may suffer complete ego death!"

Twilight grit her teeth. "That is a risk I am willing to take."

With a titanic roar, the hydra's six heads shot toward the woman, jaws open wide, and fangs extended. Twilight remained unbothered however, the woman focused entirely on her spell to the point that she hardly even noticed what was happening. Just as one of the hydra's mouths was about to close on Twilight's head, the spell completed, knocking both hydra and pony unconscious.

And then, they fell.