

Twilight groaned, her head thumping audibly against the desk. "Augh, this is hopeless. Who would speak such a convoluted language?"

"I don't know, Dusk. It does look pretty neat though," Spike exclaimed, peering down at the strange mix of dashes and dots marked upon the tablet.

"You're just saying that because it looks like it was made by a race with claws instead of hooves," Sunset Shimmer pointed out without looking up from her book.

"Hey, ya, it totally does look like that," Spike agreed.

"I figured that two weeks ago!" Twilight exclaimed, throwing up her forelegs. "But the languages made by races with claws share absolutely nothing in common with whatever this is."

Sunset Shimmer sighed. "Relax, Twilight. I'm sure there's something in these dusty old tomes to help us."

Spike frowned as he looked over the mountains of books which were piled haphazardly on every surface in the library. All save for the actual book shelves themselves of course, those were seemingly reserved for piles of notes and entire dissertations Twilight wrote while taking the odd break. The sight of such disarray brought back many memories for the dragon, most of which were less than pleasant.

"This is gonna suck to clean up," he murmured to himself.

"There is nothing in any of these useless books," Twilight declared before banging her head against the one square foot of desk space not occupied with even more books.

"What about that stack over there? I thought that was the only one we hadn't read yet," Sunset remarked, pointing to a seemingly random pile.

"Those are the only ones we haven't *reread*," Twilight replied. "Not a single book has mentioned anything resembling what we have before us."

Spike peered down at the copy Twilight had created of the tablet, the original of which was hidden away in one of the tree's secret disappearing rooms. Though the words looked like chicken scratch at first glance and were a little frustrating to look at, they at least didn't make Spike's stomach churn. Which, although it was a step up, would have at least given the young drake an excuse to leave the room and do something else.

"Say, did Dark Hallow end up getting back to you? Maybe he knows something about this," Spike offered.

“He sent word yesterday, remember?” Sunset Shimmer replied, closing her book and lounging out on the couch.

Spike frowned. “I thought that was him just notifying us that he had sent it to every linguist he could get his hooves on.”

“That response was from two days ago,” Twilight corrected without lifting her head from the desk. “Yesterday he mentioned that he had passed along the info to Chrysalis who was supposed to talk to Cadance about this.”

“Do you really think she's old enough to really know something about this?” Spike questioned.

“Hey, don't ask me. I didn't even know there was a second alicorn until you guys told me,” Sunset Shimmer remarked.

“I don't know how old Cadance is either, but right now she's probably our only lead,” Twilight declared, standing up from her desk. “If she doesn't know the language herself, she must have at least an idea on where we could go to find out more about it. Maybe it could even point us to where Luna's body is buried.”

Sunset Shimmer sat up and looked over the back of the couch. “Hey, Twilight. Do you think Cadance and Celestia were sisters?”

“Where did that come from?” asked Spike.

The skeleton shrugged. “From what Twilight's told me, it sounds like they got bad blood going back eons. It would make sense if they were related.”

Twilight pursed her lips and hummed. “I don't know about that. Alicorns do live a really long time. They don't necessarily have to be blood related for a grudge to last that long.”

“True. It's just what she did to Cadance...” Sunset Shimmer shuddered. “That seems like the special kind of cruelty that only family inflicts upon itself.”

“Okay, that is messed up,” Spike pointed out.

Sunset Shimmer fell back to the couch. “It's true though.”

“I don't know about that, but this entire line of thinking isn't helping current matters one bit,” Twilight declared. “Does anyone have any ideas whatsoever? Because at this point I'm grasping at straws.”

Spike shrugged. “I say just wait for Chrysalis to pass along word from Cadance. Who else is even over a thousand years anyway?”

Twilight's eyes lit up, and she grabbed Spike by the cheeks. "Nebula is! Oh Spike, you're a genius!"

"I am?" Spike murmured.

"You know, I'd question the logic of a spider knowing any language at all, but this place seems to play by its own rules," Sunset Shimmer added in a slightly defeated tone.

Twilight chuckled. "You'll get used to it."

"So, you girls going to the undertower then?" Spike inquired. "Causes if so, I am so not organizing all of this by myself."

Twilight blinked and glanced around the room at the mounds of books lying haphazardly all over the place. "Err, you're right. We should probably get this in order so we can return the books to the right collections."

"Why don't you get some tea whipped up while Twilight and I start organizing this place?" Sunset Shimmer offered, glancing at the dragon.

"Ooh, good thinking," Spike exclaimed. "Maybe by then you'll have heard back from Cadance."

"That would be nice, but that might take a while. She is organizing an entire resistance network, after all," Twilight replied.

"This is important though," Sunset Shimmer pointed out.

Twilight hummed to herself. "I suppose. Let's just get this cleaned up and worry about what comes next after."

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Sunset Shimmer dropped the final box near the door before attaching a piece of paper to the top, marking it as borrowed from someone called Lady Aribeth. Sunset Shimmer wasn't sure who that was, but given the fact that the box was easily the largest out of the dozen they had been sent, she assumed the individual was quite generous. Either way, with that box's placement the deed was done, and the books had been completely assembled near the door.

"Are you sure you don't need to keep any of these for references later?" Sunset Shimmer asked.

Twilight shook her head. "I have every single one memorized. Furthermore, absolutely none of the languages seem to be linked with whichever one is on that tablet."

“Really? I thought the dragon language was fairly close. Even if the one I know is a thousand years out of date,” Spike offered as he strode into the room, a silver platter sitting atop his open hand.

“It has a passing physical resemblance, that much is true. Though it doesn't seem to share any actual linguistic components with whatever this is,” Twilight exclaimed, gesturing to her recreation.

“Well, maybe they tried to copy it, but failed somehow?” Sunset Shimmer remarked as she trotted over to the couch and sat down. “Like they were missing something.”

“Possible, but in the end that doesn't help us very much,” Twilight exclaimed, the mare seating herself on the other side of the couch.

Spike placed the platter on the coffee table and poured Twilight some tea before grabbing a biscuit for himself. “Well then. Are we going to head to the undertower after a snack?” he inquired before biting into his food.

“I say we gather the girls and go a bit later,” Sunset Shimmer offered. “Because if the spider lady doesn't know, then the only other place left to search would be the undertower.”

“It may be a good idea to search it regardless of Nebula's answer. After all, we don't know how many clues that may help in bringing back Luna may be hidden down there,” Twilight added.

“True,” Sunset Shimmer admitted.

Spike gulped. “Hey, do you think they got rid of those super golem thingies that Celestia left down there?”

“Unlikely,” Twilight quickly replied before sipping on her tea. “Those things are incredibly strong and quite a bit more resilient than the one we faced a few weeks ago.”

“How do they stack up against that other one we fought?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

Twilight frowned. “Both stronger and weaker. The ones in the undertower will rebuild themselves after being destroyed no matter how many times you beat them down. Though not as smart or as quick as the bladed one, they pose some unique problems.”

“At least they don't explode,” Spike pointed out.

“True,” Twilight conceded.

A knock at the door made the trio all turn at the same time, with Spike being the first to react.

"I'll get it," he offered, hopping out of his chair and walking over to the entrance.

Making sure not to get tripped up by any of the boxes, Spike stood on the tips of his toes in order to peer through the small window at the top of the entrance. "It's a changeling. Cadance must have gotten back to you, after all," he exclaimed before tugging open the door.

Where a seemingly random changeling stood, the bored look on his face being replaced by one of surprise as soon as he laid eyes on Spike.

"Is Twilight here? I have an urgent message from the queen to relay unto her," buzzed the changeling.

"Yeah, she's here. Please, come in," Spike replied, pulling the door open a little more and standing off to one side.

"Err, thank you," murmured the changeling.

As the dark creature trotted inside, he and Spike eyed one another curiously, the changeling doing so with naked curiosity while Spike was merely a little confused. The dragon quickly realized that the new arrival wasn't quite as average as he looked on first glance. His hooves were dainty, his body was poorly muscled, and the scent of old books as well as fresh ink clung to him like a perfume.

The new arrival stopped just as soon as he had gotten through the portal and turned to face Spike.

"I hope you don't find it rude for me to ask this so suddenly, but would you mind sitting down with an interview some time? I must admit that I am incredibly curious as to what things were like over a thousand years ago and to be so close to a historical figure as well..." The changeling shivered excitedly. "I would very much appreciate the opportunity to document some of your experiences."

"This is so going to go to his head," Sunset Shimmer remarked.

"It is not," Spike retorted before turning back to the changeling and leaning against the door as sauely as he could muster. "Sure, I could come chat with you sometime."

The changeling's wings buzzed, and a wide smile grew on his face. "Oh, this is most excellent. I will speak to you more after mother has had her meeting."

"Speaking of which," Twilight interrupted. "I hope you have something to help point me in the right direction because right now we're hitting a bit of a brick wall."

"I suppose your options would be rather low, given how few creatures have survived since that time period who are not dragons that have submitted to the great sleep," remarked the changeling and blinked. "Oh yes, and you may call me Biblia."

"That's an odd name," Sunset Shimmer pointed out.

"It's a nickname given to me by my clutchmates," replied the changeling who stepped over to the small seating area. "Now then. I believe we have wasted enough time. Are you ready to begin?"

Spike and Twilight both quickly sat down in their former spots. Upon doing so, the changeling closed his eyes and, after a second of concentration, opened them once more. They were no longer a dull blue, but rather the more detailed gaze of a certain changeling queen.

Summoning his magic, the changeling was briefly bathed in green fire before his body was replaced by the queen's much larger physique. There were two things that were different however, first of which was her lack of scars, second the addition of a horn which the real Chrysalis lacked. Filing this bit of information away for later consideration, Twilight watched as the queen gave her form a brief shake before letting out a long sigh.

"Ahh, it is good to find that my favorite bibliophile has been doing at least some physical training," Chrysalis remarked before scowling. "Though he should really do more than simple cardio. It feels like I'm inhabiting the body of a newborn."

"Try not having any muscles at all," Sunset Shimmer exclaimed.

The changeling queen smirked. "At least you have an excuse. But enough about my child's poor physical endurance. You are in need of information, and I come bearing just that."

"Something useful, I hope?" Twilight prodded. "And not just vague nonsense."

"A little of column A, a little of column B," Chrysalis remarked with a shrug.

"Well, that's something," Spike murmured.

Chrysalis cleared her throat. "Let's get to the most pressing bit of news, namely that Cadance knows that your mystery language was spoken by the primeval dragons."

"And I'm assuming it was created by them as well," Twilight pressed.

Chrysalis shook her head. "I'm afraid that's not entirely true. It's more apt to say that they discovered the language."

“Eh?” Spike muttered, cocking his head. “How do you discover a language? Don't tell me there was some even more ancient species or something.”

“Nothing like that,” Chrysalis announced, waving her hoof dismissively. “The dragons were the first species to rise to sentience, though after doing so, they tired of being alone and most chose to slumber beneath the earth.”

“Which is where the alicorns come in, as they came from beyond the stars and seeded Equestria with ponies in order to create the basis of a society they would one day return to rule,” added Twilight, much to the shock of Sunset Shimmer.

“Wait, hold on a second. Is all that true?” asked the skeleton.

“Indeed, it is,” Chrysalis declared, smirking at the baffled unicorn. “What, did you believe Celestia's version of events were actually true?”

“Well, no...” Sunset Shimmer pouted. “I probably should have listened during one of Twilight's history rants.”

“It was not a rant. I was trying to educate you on all the falsehoods that Celestia--you know what, that doesn't matter. Chrysalis, please continue,” Twilight urged.

“Yeah, so as you know, after that the dragons woke up, enslaved the ponies, and generally enjoyed ruling the place,” Chrysalis continued. “When the alicorns returned and found out what had happened, they went to war with the dragons.”

“What does this have to do with their language?” Spike asked.

“I was getting there,” Chrysalis hissed. “Now, you may be asking yourself how the dragons of old managed to stand up against an empire that spanned many such worlds. Well, that's because they had the breath of creation.”

Twilight sighed and rubbed her temples. “Which is?”

“Their language!” Chrysalis retorted, raising her hooves over her head. “I can't believe you haven't been following my story. If I were your teacher, I would flunk you for that.”

Twilight's right eye twitched.

“Okay, so, what's so special about their language then?” Sunset Shimmer inquired.

“That's because they didn't speak a combination of letters which represented a thing, but rather the thing itself,” Chrysalis declared. “They understood the nature of the world's forces so deeply that their words became that which was uttered, or, rather, their words were that thing.”

“So, like, they could breathe ice and stuff?” Spike questioned.

Chrysalis rolled her eyes. “Yes, but not only that. Particularly ancient dragons had such an understanding of death that just by speaking they could slay their foes.”

“Woah, thats metal,” Spike murmured.

“Quite,” Chrysalis replied with a grin.

“Okay so the tablet then,” Twilight announced, pointing to her copy. “Did they teach the language, or what purpose did they serve?”

“If they could teach you the language, then don't you think you would have figured it out by now?” Chrysalis replied.

Twilight sighed and fell back into her chair. “Point taken.”

“No, they were used to teach an initiate how to teach younger dragons how to revive their more ancient brethren who had succumbed to the slumber,” Chrysalis explained. “Or any other very powerful entity, like, oh, I don't know. An alicorn, maybe?”

Sunset Shimmer clopped her hooves together excitedly. “Alright, now we're getting somewhere!”

Chrysalis nodded. “I have heard that Luna knew a few of the words, but Cadance herself didn't have the aptitude for it, given her inability to use soul magic. Unlike someone like you, dear Twilight. You may be able to learn the entire language, provided you had a teacher. Or spent a thousand years meditating on the meaning of cold atop a mountain in order to understand a single word.”

“That's what it would take?” Twilight exclaimed.

“Pretty much,” Chrysalis declared.

“I wonder if I ate candy for a thousand years, I'd understand it enough to breathe the stuff,” Spike murmured.

“Alright, so where do we find one of these ancient dragons?” Sunset Shimmer asked.

“They are all dead or sleeping somewhere deep beneath the planet's surface,” Chrysalis continued. “Even the past Twilight never explained where she learned how to speak it. Only that they came to her during a long and fitful slumber.”

“Odd word choice there,” Sunset Shimmer murmured.

“Did the other me ever mention this?” Twilight asked, turning to Spike.

The dragon shook his head. “Not once. Why would she hide something like that from me?”

Chrysalis shrugged. “We recovered this all from a journal of hers that was found centuries ago. The how and why of the matter has been lost over all that time.”

“Wait, so that’s it?” Twilight demanded. “You showed up just to say that it’s in ancient dragon language, and that no one knows anything else?”

“I said other stuff,” Chrysalis gruffly pointed out. “Besides, you got a lead now, don’t you? What do you want from me? To do all the work for you?”

“Relax, Twilight,” Sunset Shimmer urged. “It’s better than what we had before.”

Twilight huffed and crossed her forehooves over her chest. “I suppose that’s true. This entire thing just bothers me.”

“Besides,” Chrysalis continued, “we have had people out looking for answers for a very long time. Chances are high that they will be able to help you more in the future. It’s just that without anyone who could actually learn the language in the first place, it hasn’t exactly been high on our research priority list.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just a little bit frustrated and have been reading so long my eyes hurt,” Twilight admitted.

“By the way, Cadance is looking forward to having a more direct conversation with you soon. Hopefully by then we’ll have some good news for you,” Chrysalis added.

“How are things in Canterlot?” Sunset Shimmer hesitantly asked.

The changeling sighed. “Not good. Celestia is doing everything she can to find us, and we’ve only just barely managed to evade detection. I don’t think it will be long before we will need to relocate the headquarters again.”

“It seems like you have your work cut out for you,” Twilight pointed out.

“That we do,” Chrysalis reluctantly exclaimed. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go get this guy a gym membership while he can’t say no.”

And with that the changeling conjured a ring of fire and leapt through it, vanishing.

“I wonder how tough she would be if she had a horn,” Twilight whispered to herself.

"She's surprisingly sneaky for someone who doesn't have magic," Spike added.

"So," Sunset Shimmer hopped off the couch, "are we going to get this show on the road or what?"

"I'll grab Applejack as well as Pinkie Pie. Sunset, you notify Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. Spike, you take Rarity," Twilight ordered. "Tell them to meet up here in a few hours with whatever they might need for a trip to the castle."

"Try not to spend too much time making out with your girlfriend," Sunset Shimmer goaded, jabbing Spike in the ribs.

"Yeah, whatever. You're just jealous that you're not getting boned," Spike retorted.

Twilight's eyes went wide, a sudden maternal instinct welling in her chest. "Spike! You are not old enough to even consider such a thing, young man! Don't tell me I'm going to have to put a spell on your door, so it won't close the whole way."

Spike blanched and awkwardly raised his hands in defence. "No, I wasn't--I mean I wouldn't--it was just a--Sweetie doesn't even--augh!"

Sunset Shimmer snickered. "I hope the pun was worth it, bone boy."

Spike groaned. "No, it was not."

Twilight didn't even notice this short exchange, as she was already hastily searching through her dramatically reduced collection of books.

"I'll have to go down to the other library and find a book on parenting. Oh, and one on dragon biology as well as arachne physiology. Perhaps I should ask Rarity if such a coupling could even produce viable offspring in the first place," Twilight muttered to herself.

"Please, don't do that, for the love of all that is good in the world," Spike pleaded. "I'm pretty sure Rarity would turn me into a coat or a rather fashionable set of shoes if you mentioned that."

"Well, have fun with that, Spike. I'm going to go see what Rainbow Dash is up to," Sunset Shimmer exclaimed before trotting out the door.

Leaving Spike to desperately try to talk Twilight down while the unicorn in question considered launching a full blown investigation into the viability of a dragon pony-spider hybrid.

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“So, do we have everything?” Sunset Shimmer inquired, the pony looking down the line of assembled creatures who stood just outside the treebrary.

“Eeyup,” Applejack declared. “I got mah rope and enough rations to keep everyone fed for a few days, just in case.”

“I really don't think we'll need that many apples,” Rarity exclaimed. “They have rebuilt the road to the castle, after all.”

“Can't ever be too careful,” Applejack retorted, hefting her bulging bags in emphasis.

“I'm just glad they got a nice flat surface the whole way there,” Pinkie Pie added, the troll standing slightly awkwardly due to the fact that her forehooves still weren't quite the same length as her back ones. “My hoovsies are still a little sensitive.”

“Ah, I wouldn't worry about the trip there. I heard back from some friends that a couple of Nebula's spawn are helping guard the area on top of our own patrols,” Rainbow Dash explained.

“Well, it is still the Everfree Forest we're talking about,” Fluttershy pointed out.

“Which is why we'll stay alert, but keep a decent pace,” Twilight claimed. “Now, if everyone is ready, I think we should get moving.”

“Is Spike not joining us?” Fluttershy asked.

“He and Sweetie have a date planned,” Rarity explained. “They are even going to play that roleplaying game together. Isn't that adorable?”

“I wonder which one of them is going to be the failing student willing to do anything to pass?” Rainbow Dash whispered to Sunset, who shared a snicker with the thestral.

“What was that?” Twilight asked, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Nothing, let's go,” Sunset Shimmer swiftly exclaimed.

“Best of luck out there,” announced the lone guard standing outside of the library.

“Thank you, Sergeant Thistle,” Twilight replied.

Together the seven of them all began to trot towards the edge of town, some checking their supplies while others began to speak animatedly about their destination. All in all, their spirits seemed high, and even Twilight couldn't help but be swept up in the flood of positive emotions that surrounded her. Though a small part of her remained unconvinced that anything good would come of this adventure, given how little they had to go on.

As she pondered the possibilities of their newest escapade, Twilight let her gaze drift over the area which surrounded them. Though it was fairly late at night, many of Ponyville's inhabitants could be seen dotting the streets or watching from windows. In fact there were more than a few who were doing nothing but staring openly at the small cadre of friends making their way through town.

Some seemed hopeful, others worried, with nearly every one of them engaging in whispered conversations with nearby beings. Evidently Twilight and her companions had not gone unnoticed, and as usual, the rumour mill in Ponyville worked faster than the postal service. As they left behind the denser inner section of the town, most of the crowds died off, but a few winged beings still followed them from above.

"We seem to have quite a few admirers," Rarity exclaimed.

"It seems so," Twilight murmured.

"I'm not sure I like having people follow us around," Fluttershy whispered.

Rainbow Dash scoffed. "We are town heroes, Fluttershy! It's not like anyone is gonna do anything bad."

"Don't worry about them," Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "It's only natural that someone would be curious as to what kind of grand feat we are off to do this time."

"I don't think working on a research paper really counts as a grand feat," Twilight remarked.

"You said something similar when we went lookin' for answers in that castle the first time," Applejack pointed out. "Face it, Twilight. Trouble seems to like us somethin' fierce."

"Truer words have never been spoken," Sunset Shimmer agreed.

Twilight sighed. "I suppose so. Though hopefully this time we can avoid having to fight more golems."

"Well, now you jinxed it," Rainbow Dash bitterly declared. "At least you didn't say 'it couldn't get any worse'."

"I'm sure we will be fine. We are all together now," Fluttershy offered.

"I do like our chances," Applejack agreed.

"Hey, look, it's those hero types," remarked a young thestral standing at the edge of a small plot of land, half of his body draped over an iron fence. "Where do you think they are off to this time, dad?"

The taller pony standing next to him shrugged. "I don't know where they are goin'. I do know that you shouldn't talk about people behind their back, or at least keep your voice down while doin' it."

"Sorry, dad," muttered the child.

"I kinda wish we could just come out and say what we were planning," Rainbow Dash whispered.

"Me too. I bet they would be so excited to know that we're going to bring back Princess Luna," Pinkie Pie happily exclaimed.

"I don't want to raise their hopes, or yours for that matter, only to dash them," Twilight declared in a firm tone. "We don't even know if it's possible to do so."

"Do have at least a little hope, darling," Rarity encouraged. "One must keep their chin up during a task, lest they end up sabotaging themselves."

"I suppose," Twilight admitted.

Sunset Shimmer shrugged her padded shoulders. "I wouldn't worry about it. I'm sure with my help we can get this done in no time."

"Glad to see someone isn't letting her sudden fame get to her," Twilight exclaimed.

"Nah. I'm not even a part of your little group," Sunset Shimmer retorted. "I'm more like a pack mule. Or a sherpa."

"What's a sherpa?"

"That's rude to donkies, you know,"

"You are so a member of this little group as you so ineloquently put," Rarity declared in a surprisingly firm tone.

"Yeah, Sunny Buns, you're totally a member of our adventuring party!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"That's not what I meant," Sunset Shimmer retorted. "You girls are the heroes. I'm just a hero adjacent."

“That will change in time,” Twilight declared, the confidence in her voice making her friend’s continued disagreements to be forgotten.

Sunset Shimmer merely frowned and looked off into the distance. *Maybe one day*, she silently admitted to herself.

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The group continued through town and out the other side, the groups of gawkers dying off after they entered the Everfree Forest proper. Where they found that the rather poorly maintained road they had walked not long ago had been almost completely replaced by one that was far wider and lacked the enormous holes the last one had, in addition to no longer being mostly overgrown.

The trees which used to block out the sky had been cut down or otherwise relocated away from the ditches which now lay on either side of the road. Smaller critters still zipped over the thoroughfare, but they were few and far between. What few larger creatures they saw were usually pulling carts or munching on the grass which grew on either side.

Traffic was also surprisingly high, and more than a few times the small group exchanged passing pleasantries with the Night Guard patrols. From what Twilight gathered, the area was surprisingly peaceful, the efforts of Dark Hallow as well as the spider clan coming to fruition. This was most noticeable by the scattered webs that could occasionally be seen hanging between trees on either side of the road.

This no doubt discouraged any predator that weren't confident they could take on a giant spider, while a few well placed totems kept the rest at bay. Once or twice Twilight even caught sight of one of the eight-legged creatures, though it was brief. As each time the unicorn laid eyes on one of their mysterious protectors, it vanished into the woods a second later.

It was an efficient bit of teamwork, one that had evidently paid dividends if the greater amount of traffic was anything to go by. Not only were there merchants who used the road, but Twilight also noticed that a few pilgrims could be seen returning from the castle. Most were little more than curious gawkers who wanted to see the fabled site for themselves, but Twilight could tell that there were a few whose interest was more intense.

Those select few usually wore moon pendants around their necks, or were garbed in dark robes and for the most part traveled alone. They were also quite focused on their destination, as few even glanced Twilight’s way, despite the rather eye-catching crew she had assembled. Twilight didn't mind them though, even if their appearance made her think back on the rather public worship of Celestia, which Twilight had witnessed for the majority of her life.

These individuals were devoted, but something about their dogma didn't strike Twilight in the same way that Celestia’s did. There were no allowances for violence in their credo, save for

extreme circumstances and most seemed to spend their time in quiet contemplation. Either that, or they gave themselves wholeheartedly to whatever creative pursuit spoke to them, producing a considerable amount of art.

They weren't even the most fascinating sight however, as it was the work crews which grabbed Twilight's attention. Though the majority of which were dominated by minotaurs, trolls, and other tougher species, there were a surprising number of arachne in their ranks. A scattered few thestrals filled out the rest of the groups, as well as a good number of donkeys. Though they usually pulled the carts of exhausted workers back to town or transported supplies to the castle itself.

Either way, it spoke of a considerable operation, one that had likely taken a good deal of planning. Other than making Twilight strangely proud of her new-found home, it also made the unicorn want to actually start keeping up with current events. It was her home after all, and it only made sense that she would try to keep abreast of what was happening around her.

Twilight was jolted out of her contemplations when the castle itself came into view, its crumbling facade having been replaced by something far more respectful. Though still incomplete and sporting several holes, there were at least no plants growing across the wall's exterior. Most of the small bushes and low trees which surrounded the structure were gone, as were the vines which previously covered the place.

The unicorn regretted always meeting Trixie for her lessons in the undertower, for this was a sight she would have liked to have seen more often. It was a remarkable bit of progress, with the most outstanding part being the complete rebuilding of the gate house. Which was open, allowing visitors and workers to freely pass through to the interior of the castle.

All while under the watchful gaze of a pair of giant spiders as well as a trio of guards who stood atop the walls.

"My goodness, they do work quickly," Fluttershy murmured.

"The boss man has apparently been dumping his life savings into this place," Rainbow Dash added, the thestral flying lazily overhead. "He even offered a bonus if we do volunteer work around the castle grounds on our off hours."

"That is quite generous of him," Rarity offered, the arachne's brow furrowing. "Though I worry he may end up destitute after all is said and done. This isn't exactly a small project, after all."

"I wouldn't worry about it," remarked Applejack. "That Dark Hallow fella did some smart investin' back in the day if Granny Smith is to be believed."

"I wonder if he would invest in my clinic," Sunset Shimmer openly wondered.

"It couldn't hurt to speak to him on the subject," exclaimed Twilight.

"True. I don't suppose we need identification or authorization for entering, do we?" Sunset Shimmer inquired, turning to Rainbow Dash.

Who shook her head. "Nah. Even if we did, all we'd have to say is that we're on hero business, and they'd let us through."

"I don't know, that big head of yours might not fit through that itty bitty gate," Applejack remarked with a snicker.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "Come on. Let's just go see what the spider lady knows about our mystery language so we can do something cooler like fighting monsters."

Together the small troupe passed through the gate, at which point the guards standing just inside brought their hooves to their forehead. Upon seeing this, Twilight tried not to speed up too much, the pony uncomfortable with the strange show of respect. A few of her friends seemed to feel the same, while others merely took it in stride or otherwise shrugged it off.

They made it into the courtyard and saw that the main keep had received even more work than the walls and grounds. No holes could be seen dotting the outside, though scaffolding was still visible over a good half of the place. It was also missing a few windows, but the good majority had recently been replaced.

Trotting through the open double doors, Twilight immediately realized where the majority of the labor had been done, as the interior looked new. Almost anyway, for although the rubble had been cleared away, the majority of the space was undecorated. Neither carpet nor banner dotted the entrance space, and only a few suits of polished armor stood sentinel along the mostly barren walls.

Though the place was clearly still in the process of being refurbished, the scent of dust was no longer so present as to become suffocating. Instead it was replaced by the smell of cleaning solutions, as well as the still lingering scent of rotten wood that could be detected on the light breeze which blew through the place. All in all, it was both surprising and impressive as to what had been done in such a short time period.

"Oh my. I simply must get in contact with Dark Hallow again. Perhaps he may allow me to weave an appropriate banner for these drab walls," Rarity remarked.

"I think he's got more than enough help in that regard," Applejack added.

"Pish posh, darling. There is more than enough space for our dear Nebula, her children and I all to have space to display our work," Rarity retorted.

"If you had mastered silk steel, you may get your wish," exclaimed a familiar voice from the left staircase.

Rarity blushed fiercely. "It's coming along quite well. Don't you worry, I'll have it mastered soon enough."

Trixie strode out into the hallway with a sly grin on her face. "Oh, really now? Because last time you tried, the Great and Powerful Trixie could cut your work with a butterknife."

"She'll get it," Rainbow Dash declared.

"Trixie hopes she does," Trixie replied, a smile crossing her face. "It is good to see that Trixie's associates are here. Though Trixie assumes that they are not here to neither give nor receive a lesson."

"I'm afraid not, Trixie," Twilight exclaimed. "We were actually hoping to speak to Nebula, if at all possible."

"Ahh, you seek out Trixie's illustrious mother. What, pray tell, do you wish to discuss with her?" Trixie pressed.

"We were hoping to find out what she knew about a rather ancient language spoken by the original dragons," Sunset Shimmer answered.

The unicorn lifted an eyebrow curiously. "Trixie knows not if your effort will be a wasted one, but either way, it is nice to see that Trixie won't have to worry about the castle being burnt down anytime soon."

The skeleton rolled her non-existent eyes in irritation. "You wouldn't have had to worry about that regardless."

"Where is our esteemed caretaker anyway?" Rarity intruded.

"She is in the right throne room. Now if you'll excuse me, the Great and Powerful Trixie has a show to put on!" Trixie declared before disappearing in a puff of multicolored smoke.

Rainbow Dash coughed and waved a hoof, shooting Twilight a glare. "You could have at least convinced her that the smoke would ruin a teleportation spell somehow."

"Oh, come on. It's not that," Twilight placated.

"Well, I'm just glad she dropped the old Equish," Applejack murmured. "She was downright hard to understand sometimes."

“At least her metaphors make sense,” Rarity shot back.

Applejack scowled up at the arachne. “My metaphors make plenty of sense.”

“Oh really? What does all hat and no cattle mean then?” Rainbow Dash shot back.

“That one’s an apt description of you,” Applejack retorted.

“Oh, come on, they are funny. Like when she told that salespony that they were slicker than snot on a doorknob,” Pinkie Pie added.

“I rather like the phrase madder than a wet hen,” Fluttershy remarked.

“See? Y’all love my sayings. Rarity’s only got one oar in the water,” Applejack replied with a snort.

Twilight chuckled. “You guys are as windy as a sack full of farts.”

Sunset Shimmer groaned. “Can we please go talk to the giant spider lady now?”

“Rainbow Dash, would you mind leading the way?” Twilight prompted.

The thestral nodded. “Sure thing.”

Setting off once more, the group made their way down the hall before turning to the right and passing through a set of large double doors. Twilight paused briefly, her gaze lingering on the lunar throne room she knew lay directly across from this one. Though the entrance was mostly closed, from what little she was able to see, Twilight could tell that the hallway beyond was spotless and well-decorated.

Evidently they had prioritized that area first, while the other throne room had been cleared and was now serving a more utilitarian purpose. Trailing behind her friends, Twilight noticed that this hall was barren, but clean, all remnants of Celestia’s influence having been scrubbed away. The walls were a flat grey, the ground unadorned, save for the prints of dust-covered feet. Through the open doors in front of them sat a rather large table.

Maps and other papers dotted the enormous piece of furniture while supplies and tools were resting against the walls. A few workers could be seen cleaning up, but they seemed to be on their way out as most were busy shucking off protective equipment. The only individuals who seemed to be still working were Nebula herself as well as a rather tall, lithe thestral mare wearing a suit.

The latter was hunched over a smaller map which seemed to be of the gatehouse they passed through earlier while the other towered over it all. Her eight blue eyes peered down at the organized chaos from a much higher vantage point, seemingly deep in thought. The great spider had shed her armor at some point, though she still wore the long scarf which was draped over her midsection. This scarf was identical to the last one she wore and displayed a waxing moon on one end as well as a waning moon on the other.

Without the silk steel plates covering her body, Twilight could see that the great spider had even more scars than the unicorn had first seen. Long scratches likely earned from battles with beasts were intermixed with more jagged wounds likely caused by blades. Tearing her gaze from the spider's injured form, the unicorn put a hoof over her heart and nodded to the much larger being.

"Greetings, matron," Twilight announced.

Rarity and Rainbow Dash were close behind the other being, repeating the same motion when greeting the spider. The rest of her friends awkwardly replicated the gesture shortly after to various degrees of success, to which the spider replied in kind, placing one of her long legs against her chest and lowering herself briefly.

"You honor me, children. To what do I owe the pleasure of your arrival within the mistress' tomb?" inquired the great spider in a slightly raspy, yet clearly feminine tone.

"Pinkie Pie, would you do the honors of explaining just why we are here?" Twilight encouraged.

The troll took a deep breath. "It all started at this tower where-

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"And that's why we're here," Pinkie Pie finished, the shaman breathing heavily.

"I can't believe you did that all in one go," Rarity murmured.

"Your body must be like twenty percent lung," Rainbow Dash added.

The spider hummed strangely. "I think we will have to pick up the last of our organization another time, dear Raven Heart."

The thestral bowed low. "That is most acceptable, honored matron. Merely request my presence with any one of the guards, and I will return posthaste."

"Thank you again," murmured the spider.

With the thestral trotting out of the room, the seven were now alone with the towering spider. Who seemed to be lost in thought, her gaze becoming distant as she contemplated all of what she had been told.

“Before we get onto more serious topics, I should mention that the golems have been mostly dealt with,” Nebula exclaimed, lowering herself down to Twilight’s level. “Though I have yet to seal them in stone, they are bound by my web.”

“Woah nelly. I bet that was quite the struggle,” Applejack remarked.

“Indeed, it was, but with the help of my favored daughter and the spells you have taught her, we were able to capture them,” Nebula continued. “In fact, I was hoping to get your opinion on what to do with them before I committed to my plan of burying them.”

“I’d like to take a look at them,” Twilight offered, glancing at Sunset Shimmer. “I have a sneaking suspicion that I might be able to drain them of whatever is powering them.”

“Which should hopefully either destroy them or put them into a permanently deactivated state,” Sunset Shimmer continued.

“Then before you leave, I would request you do that,” Nebula declared before tapping a leg against the ground. “With all that being said, let us get to the true topic at hand, but first the bad news.”

“Let me guess. Did you decide to stop helping us and have instead decided to open up a clothing store to rival Rarity’s boutique?” Pinkie Pie interjected.

The spider chuckled. “No. Though even with my weaving skills, I doubt I could compete with my dear cousin here.”

Rarity bowed slightly. “You are too kind.”

“It is that I cannot help you in this regard,” declared the spider. “For I only truly reached maturity after my mistress’ death, and thus could not learn any language from her. Though with all that being said, I have a strong inkling that you will find answers within the undertower.”

“Which would be much easier to get through given that it is no longer being stalked by giant unkillable stone monsters,” Rainbow Dash pointed out.

“But we would still have those traps to worry about,” Applejack added.

“True, but without being pressured by those beasties, I’m sure we could figure out some way to get through all that relatively easily,” Rarity stated.

“Very true indeed,” Sunset Shimmer exclaimed. “Perhaps we should split up. Twilight and Pinkie Pie could go check on the golems while we start digging through those traps.”

“I doubt Fluttershy or I would be much help in that regard. Perhaps we could begin to organize the library in search of anything that may be of use,” Rarity offered, to which Fluttershy nodded eagerly.

Twilight nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Unless you’ve somehow managed to disarm all the traps already?”

Nebula chuckled. “Only a few of them were obstacles to me and my children, most have been untouched and were going to be dealt with later. The majority of the other lesser hazards have not been dealt with either, I’m afraid.”

Pinkie Pie clopped her hooves together. “Alrighty then, ready girls?”

A chorus of agreement came from the gathered females.

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“You know I trusted you when you said it, but I still can’t believe you managed to capture all of those golems,” Twilight exclaimed, the unicorn standing atop a hill overlooking a dozen giant webbed cocoons.

The spider standing next to her prodded the closest cocoon. “They will eventually escape, mind you.”

“Not if we get 'em first, right Twilight?” Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

“Right, let’s start on this one,” Twilight offered, gesturing to the golem which lay at the end of the line.

“Please do let me know how best I can help,” offered the great spider.

“We will,” Twilight replied.

The unicorn nervously stepped up to the twitching white mass and began a quick visual inspection starting at what would be its head. This particular golem had what was likely a large stone slab atop its shoulders given how jagged the top of the cocoon was. Below that details became fewer and harder to spot, becoming vaguely ovoid with only the legs really sticking out.

Closing her eyes and focusing on her new senses, Twilight searched for that same strange energy she had detected within the four-armed golem. Unlike that one, this pile of stone had no singular point wherein the energy originated, the magic somehow permeating its stone body

completely. Tugging at the magic like she would at a living creature's life force, Twilight found that she could feel a trickle of power come from the cocoon.

It was tiny though, barely above even what an ant could produce, which discouraged the young pony. She wasn't about to give up, however, as a theory was forming within her mind, one which would be dangerous to test, but necessary if they were going to destroy the golem permanently.

"Could you cut open the top?" Twilight asked, turning to the spider.

"I could. I must ask what do you hope to accomplish, however," said the arachnid.

"I was hoping to remove the hunk of rock around its head. After that, well... we'll see how it reacts first," Twilight replied.

Pinkie Pie eyed her curiously. "I think I know what you plan on doing. Want me to chomp on the rock right away?"

Twilight chuckled. "Yes, I would like you to consume the creature's head after it's been removed from its body."

"Excellent. I've been hankering for a snack the whole walk over," Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"Whenever you're ready," Twilight encouraged.

Nebula leaned forward and, with a swift movement of her leg, sliced open the top of the cocoon, revealing the rather square hunk of shattered stone that made up the golem's head. Immediately after being released, the chunk of rock twisted this way and that, as if trying to free the rest of its body to no avail.

Twilight took a step back and nodded to Pinkie Pie, who licked her lips.

Reaching down, Pinkie Pie gripped either side of the golem's head before biting into it with a hearty crunch. After chewing briefly, Pinkie Pie went in again, and again, until the block was completely gone. At which point Pinkie Pie fell back onto her rump and let out a burp, licking her lips curiously.

"It kinda tastes funny and not funny, ha ha," Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"Now let's see what we have here," Twilight murmured, igniting her new senses and focusing on the stump at the top of the golem.

She could feel a thin strand of magic reaching out from the main body, as if searching for something. Upon touching the ground, it began to push its way into the earth, seeking out a

block of stone to add to its bulk. Twilight never let it get that far, however, and, after grabbing the thin strand, began to drain it of its power.

After a few seconds, the magic withered and died, a stray whisp retreating back into the main body. Twilight waited, observing the golem closely for several long minutes until finally she was confident that it wouldn't try to rebuild itself again.

"Impressive," remarked the spider. "Do you think that will work for the entire thing?"

"I'm fairly certain it will," Twilight claimed. "If my assumption is correct, then the magic animating the stones will eventually shrink down into one single stone. Which I could then drain of magic and thus destroy it permanently."

"I hope you are hungry, young troll," exclaimed Nebula.

Pinkie Pie looked out over the enormous cocoons with a growing sense of dread. "I really should be more careful what I wish for, huh?"

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"What do you think it is?" inquired Rainbow Dash and leaned towards Applejack.

Who hummed thoughtfully to herself as she gazed down on the square floor tile which had several tiny nozzles inlaid within. "Flamethrower. Either that, or it shoots some kinda gas," she remarked.

"Got any idea on how to disarm it?" Sunset Shimmer asked, turning to Rainbow Dash.

The thestral shrugged. "We were always told to plug 'em with cement if we need to frequently pass over the area, but that seems like a half measure."

"I got an idea. Stand back," Applejack commanded.

Both skeleton and thestral shared a look as well as a shrug before stepping away.

Now with room to work, Applejack spat on her wood covered hooves before rubbing them together. She then placed them at the edge of the square and began to concentrate, prompting a half dozen thick green vines to sprout from her forelegs. Slipping between the stone blocks, the vines seemed to grow longer and longer, the pony herself sticking out her tongue in concentration.

After several seconds of silence, a distant click could be heard.

“There we go, easy peasy,” Applejack declared, retrieving her roots which retreated back into her hoof.

“Are you sure? ‘cause I don’t wanna get blasted with fire,” Rainbow Dash retorted.

“Allow me,” Sunset Shimmer interrupted, stepping onto the square to seemingly no effect. “Huh. Well, would you look at that. You did it.”

“Ya’ll weigh less than a sack of feathers, here, let me,” Applejack interrupted, placing her hoof on the edge of the square and pressing down.

Flames covered the skeleton’s form until Applejack recoiled her limb, revealing a scowling and charred Sunset Shimmer.

“Not cool, man,” she deadpanned.

“Only half of them activated though,” Rainbow Dash remarked.

“I’ll, uh, try that again,” Applejack muttered.

“You do that,” Sunset Shimmer replied. “I’ll go clear out those giant centipedes we saw earlier.”

“Have fun blowing off steam,” Rainbow Dash shouted after the retreating unicorn.

Who merely grunted irritably.

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Fluttershy hummed to herself as she floated along from one stack to the next, her gaze lingering on the many art pieces found between rather than the titles she was supposed to be looking at. She couldn’t help it, the various busts, paintings, and vases were so different that they continually caught her eye. Almost as much as the oddly non-descript alicorn statue which stood sentinel at the entrance to the library itself.

Shaking her head, Fluttershy floated back over the newly restored carpets and passed a reading nook that contained a brand new couch. Running her semi-ethereal hoof over the many titles, Fluttershy focused her mind back on the task at hand. The fact that the library was so poorly organized made it slow-going, and occasionally the spirit had to open one of the books to find out if it was fiction or not.

In the end she managed to stay on task long enough to gather up a small collection of books which may potentially aid Twilight in her search. In the end her finds weren’t terribly numerous, but they were all either dedicated to ancient history or linguistics in some manner. Silently

congratulating herself for finding something useful, Fluttershy made a note of the stack she had cleared and began to float back over to the entrance.

Where a large table had been dragged in from a nearby room and was now being slowly covered in dusty tomes. Sitting next to it was Rarity, the arachne's legs tucked beneath her, allowing the female to rest comfortably while she leafed through a rather thick book. After depositing her finds next to the others, Fluttershy floated over the arachne's shoulder and tried to read what her friend already was.

"Is that a book on troll biology?" Fluttershy inquired.

Rarity shot up, slamming the tome shut tight before spinning around to face Fluttershy. "No, there are other things in there too. Like pony biology and other stuff."

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. "Are you okay? You look rather flushed."

"Perfectly fine," Rarity declared before skittering away. "This is too new, and was likely added by Dark Hallow so we won't need it."

Fluttershy remained silent as she watched her friend disappear into the stacks only to reappear a few seconds later. "Did you find anything at least?" asked the spirit.

Rarity nodded. "Several books, actually. Though I doubt they will be much help, given how esoteric this topic is."

"Wait, what are those?" Fluttershy asked, pointing to a small pile of books Rarity had placed on a nearby chair.

"That depends. You wouldn't happen to be a fan of romance by chance, would you?" Rarity inquired.

Fluttershy blushed. "I may have read a few when I was younger."

"Then I say we have a little break and peruse the tomes I found hidden behind an encyclopedia collection," Rarity offered.

"We really shouldn't..." Fluttershy murmured before biting her lip and glancing at the rather large pile of books the two of them had already collected. "We have gathered quite a few though."

"That's the spirit," Rarity exclaimed, grabbing the pile of novels she had set aside. "Now then, which would you like to read? *A Vision Of Black?* Maybe *The Inlander*, or *The Groom?*"

"What's that last one, on the end there," Fluttershy asked.

“Ahh, *Sensible Sensibilities*,” Rarity replied, plucking the book out of the pile and handing it to Fluttershy. “I haven’t looked over it yet, but the title is written in such wonderful calligraphy that I just had to grab it.”

“It is…” Fluttershy agreed, the spirit gently taking the tome and running her hoof over the pink cover.

“Do let me know how it turns out, darling. I myself am going to try this *Crimson Letter* book. Its cover is just so bold and eye-catching,” Rarity replied.

Fluttershy sat down next to her friend, leafing through the first section and silently marveling at just how ancient it was. Though no dust marred its exterior, the pages were not the usual crisp and clean white color Fluttershy had grown up with. Not only that, but the pages themselves were slightly thicker, with time and use having crinkled them slightly.

Fluttershy made sure to not put too much pressure on the spine, as it was creased in several places and had clearly been well-loved by a former owner. Finding the beginning of chapter one, Fluttershy eagerly began to read, only to be a little put off by just how archaic the language of it all was. Though a little dense, after a few minutes of struggling through it, the spirit began to find it charming rather than frustrating.

Minutes ticked by without a word being spoken, both females eagerly indulging in the fictional worlds they found themselves in. That was until she noticed something fall from the book she was reading, a thin scrap of paper slipping from the pages. Looking down, Fluttershy found what appeared to be a crinkled scroll lying half curled on the floor.

“I think I found something,” Fluttershy stated.

“What was that, darling?” Rarity inquired.

Rather than answer verbally, Fluttershy merely pointed down to the piece of paper sitting on the ground.

“Oh my, what is that? Perhaps someone used a rather unique bookmark,” Rarity offered.

“I don’t think so. It looks too big for that,” Fluttershy replied, the spirit gently picking it up and unrolling it.

The pair exchanged a surprised gasp the second it was fully open, as it immediately began to glow a faint purple. The page itself was divided in half, with the left side being devoted to the most complex magical equation Rarity had ever seen while the other part was filled with calculations as well as a warning at the top which immediately jumped out at the arachne.

“Warning, do not use unless you are capable of level seven spells and have existed for over one thousand years at the minimum,” Rarity translated from its original old Equish. “That is a rather specific requirement.”

“Look at the bottom,” Fluttershy urged.

Rarity did just that. “Property of Twilight Sparkle, royal advisor to Their Majesties Celestia and Luna. If found, return to the Shady Hallow research station. If stolen, heed the warning, lest your soul be torn into an infinite number of tiny pieces.”

“What do you think it means?” Fluttershy asked.

“I don't know,” Rarity replied. “But it sounds dangerous. We had best bring this to Twilight.”