

The Box

It was an absolutely gorgeous day in Fillydelphia. The sun shone brightly on the bustling pony city, and ponies everywhere went about their business in the downtown area. Some were sitting at the numerous outdoor cafés, enjoying lunch in the sun. Others were chatting with friends or shopping at the high-scale clothing boutiques. Not all ponies were pleased on this fine day, however. One pony in particular was walking glumly down the street, sharing her disappointment with the dragon on her back.

"I can't believe it, Spike. How can there not be a single magical book in Fillydelphia that I don't already have?"

"It's not like Fillydelphia's known for its magic shops, Twilight. Besides, you've already got tons of books back home. Why do you need more?" The dragon responded. He was quite small, being still very young. He had purple scales with lime-green for an underbelly, spines, and eyes. He sat comfortably atop the flank of a similarly purple unicorn pony. Her long straight hair was mostly a deep blue, with two streaks, one purple and one pink, running through it. Her cutie mark displayed a six-sided, pink star with five smaller, white stars radiating out from it.

"It's not like I need more, I was just hoping to find some nice keepsake from this trip. It's not often Princess Celestia sends me to another city."

"Why did she need you here anyway? The library was doing just fine."

"Spike! You call that fine? The books were in terrible disarray. Their fiction section wasn't alphabetized by author at all, and they had Arts and recreation as the 400's, when everypony knows the 400's are for Language."

"Maybe it's just you who organizes books like that, Twilight." Spike replied, already lost in this conversation.

"Nonsense! I read it in a book back in Ponyville. Regardless, everything is in order now. Fillydelphia has a fully working, properly organized library again, so I want to get something to remember the trip by. And what could be better than a book?"

"How about we try that store?" Spike asked, pointing just a short way up the street. "It looks like they could have some old books there."

Twilight trotted up to the storefront and read the sign out loud, "Fillydelphia's Antiques." She continued with the smaller words written next to the worn wooden door, "Your one stop shop for all things Fillydelphian. Spike, this is perfect!" She said, excited to have finally found a promising store. "Though I wonder why we didn't see it here before?"

"It's pretty easy to miss with all these newer stores around." Spike said, pointing out how dilapidated this particular store looked. While the rest of Fillydelphia's stores gave off a sense of cheer and cleanliness, this particular store looked poorly taken care of. The wooden planks out front were worn with years of hoofs treading upon them, and a few planks were missing altogether. The windows were dirt-encrusted and looked as if they hadn't been cleaned in years. Cobwebs hung in the corners above the store's awning. The whole building was very small, no more than thirty hands wide by forty-five hands long.

Walking inside, Twilight noticed the store had to be lit with candles despite the sunny day. The dirty window panes didn't even let the sun advance inside. "Hello? Is anypony here?" Twilight asked. The store seemed to be abandoned; it had no customers and no workers. The shelves throughout the store were filled with old, strange trinkets that Twilight didn't recognize. The counter itself had a few knick-knacks on

it like the other tourist stores in the city. A few key-chains with the city's name were there, alongside some snow-globes of Fillydelphia's skyline. Spike hopped off Twilight's back and walked to the back wall of the store. "Over here, Twilight." He called, "They've got tons of books!"

Twilight was surprised when she walked to the back wall by Spike. This entire side of the building was covered with books, ten shelves high. Starting on the far right, she saw books she recognized. They were crisp and new, books she had seen at the other shops in town. "Magic for beginners, Running for Eggheads, Supernaturals, I've read all these already." She said to herself as she examined the shelves. As she went further left, however, she noticed the books looking more damaged and old. About in the middle of the massive wall of literature she saw one that caught her eye. "Weather patterns and cloud control, by Night Shift. Wow, that is an old book. Year of Celestia, 892. I wonder what else is here."

"Bah, how long are you going to be in this musty old place?" Spike asked, "You've already been staring at those musty old things for almost fifteen minutes."

"Sorry Spike," She replied, "This is just so interesting. I didn't even know some of these books existed!"

"Well, you take as long as you want. I'm going back to the restaurants to get some lunch."

"Sure thing, Spike. I'll meet you later." Twilight said before going back to her search for the perfect book to bring back to Ponyville.

The number of books per year got fewer and fewer as she went left. Not more than a few shelves left of Night Shift's book, she found a very old tome entitled "The war of the Elements: Celestia v. Nightmare Moon." "Year of Celestia, 15, wow" Twilight said, and let out a small whistle. She didn't stop for that book, however, and pressed on, looking for whatever she could find that was even older. The books were practically falling apart further on, and she could barely make out the words on the binding. She had just barely been able to read the letters, "Necroponycon" on one of them when she heard a voice behind her asking, "Can I help you, ma'am?"

Twilight jumped and turned around quickly, letting out a small yelp like a filly who'd been caught with her hoof in the cookie jar. Behind her stood an old, grey-haired, male, unicorn pony. His coat was mostly off-white, with black speckles throughout his body. His cutie mark was a half-unraveled brown scroll with gold handles. He looked kindly at the startled unicorn pony staring at him. "Don't mind the hoof," He said, wagging his withered front-left hoof at his customer, "Lost use of it almost...oh...three years ago now, but I get by fine. You have an interest in the old works, do you?" He asked.

"Um...yes." Twilight said, finally regaining her composure. "I see you've got a lot of wonderful books and other things here. I'm looking for something to commemorate my time in Fillydelphia."

"Just visiting then?" He asked.

"Yes. I live in Ponyville. I was just in town for today-"

"And you wanted to find out about some of the history of Equestria, eh?" He asked with a sly smile. "Well I've got plenty of books for you about history here. What exactly are you interested in?"

"Well, like any other subject I guess I should start at the beginning. What's the oldest thing you have here?"

"You mean besides me?" He replied, laughing heartily. "No, no I'm kidding."

Twilight smiled awkwardly. It was difficult to pay attention to the old pony. His left eye didn't seem to focus quite right, and it was distracting her constantly. She had to continually remind herself not to stare at it, or at the hoof he'd mentioned.

"There are plenty of books there," He said, motioning to the wall with his snout, "Or did you really mean it when you said the oldest thing I have?"

"Yes. I assume it's the book farthest to the left?" She said, having quickly caught on to the pattern of organization the store used.

"Well, that would be the oldest BOOK I have." He said, looking toward the lower left corner of his shop. "But not the oldest THING. Tell me miss....."

"Twilight."

"Twilight? Really..... What's your last name?"

"Sparkle, Twilight Sparkle." She replied.

"I see...." He said, stopping his sentence to ponder in silence. "Twilight Sparkle."

After just a moment with a quizzical and slightly surprised look on his face, the male pony turned to Twilight and asked, "Miss Twilight, what do you know about the rumors of the Time Before?"

"The Time Before?" She said, "I've never heard of it."

"Well," The male pony said, "There was a rather popular theory a few decades back that ponies were not the first intelligent creature to live in Equestria. They theorized that, long ago before Celestia, Luna, or any living pony existed, a different type of animal ruled Equestria. They said it was a strange monkey without hair, who walked on only two legs. They said this monkey even had cities and civilization, just like we do. They never had any solid evidence of it though, so the whole idea died down quite a while ago."

"So why are you telling me this?" Twilight asked.

"Well, you said you wanted a keepsake." The pony said, "I have something in the back room that might interest you." He turned and half-limped, half-jumped to the small back room of the shop. His useless front limb moved like he was walking on all fours, but he obviously couldn't put any weight on it. He returned in a minute, levitating a small wooden crate and holding a silver key in his mouth. He set the box and key on the counter. "This," He began, "May have belonged to one of those monkeys in the Time Before. I had it looked at by an archeologist friend once. He said it was old, very old, but he said that ponies could have made it just as easily as any imaginary ancient civilization."

Twilight was taken aback. The box did look incredibly old. It was a wooden chest complete with black metal hinges, a small silver lock on the front, and two strips of black metal running from either side of the lock once around the chest. "That *is* an old box." Twilight said, "What's inside?"

"I'm not sure," The old pony said. "It didn't feel right for me to open it."

"What do you mean it didn't feel right? You didn't look inside when you bought it?"

"I never bought it." He replied. "One day I just found it on the stoop outside my shop."

"Well, I did want a little keepsake. How much do you want for it?"

"Nothing. It's yours, if you want it."

"Nothing?" Twilight said in shock. Surely just the old construction of this box would make it valuable to a true collector of antiques, let alone whatever treasure was inside. "Why?"

"I told you already: because it's yours." He said. "Take a look at the key."

Twilight felt a cold shiver run down her spine when she saw it. "There's no way." She thought, "How in Equestria can this be possible?"

"What the...how...did you do this while you were back there?"

"No miss," He replied. "That's been carved into that key since the day I found it outside my door. I didn't open the box because I knew it belonged to somepony. Apparently, it belongs to you."

She turned back to the key. "Twilight Sparkle" was neatly cut into the shaft. "Somepony must be pulling a joke." She thought. "But still, it is my name. Whoever it was wants me to have this box."

"Well fine then," She said to the store keeper. "I'll take it, since it's meant for me, it seems. Thank you."

"No, thank you, miss." He said. "I hope you like it. If you find anything interesting inside, be sure to let me know, would you?"

"Do you want me to open it now and let you see?" She asked.

"No, that wouldn't do. What if it's something embarrassing inside? You should be the first to see it. Just send me a letter when you do."

"Ok," Twilight said and started toward the door. The box now taking up position where Spike had been earlier. She trotted out to the restaurant district in Fillydelphia to search for her dragon friend. As she started looking through the numerous outdoor cafés, she realized she had forgotten to get that male pony's name. She galloped back to Fillydelphia's Antiques and tried to enter through the door. It was locked. She tried to peer in through the windows but the grime made it impossible to see inside. She knocked on the door and called out, "Sir! Sir? Are you still in there?"

"What are you doing, dear?" A kindly mare walking in the road asked Twilight as she passed.

"I'm trying to get the owner to open up. I forgot to get his name." She responded.

"The owner? Of Fillydelphia's Antiques?"

"Yes." Twilight said, "Do you know him?"

"Scrolls you mean? Well, I did. He died three years ago. Horrible accident. One of his bookcases fell on his hoof. He was trapped under it for days before the poor pony died of thirst. He was mostly a loner, his wife died a few years earlier and his foal moved away. Almost nopony ever visited his store, so no one hear him shouting for help. His son sold off most of the store's items in an auction, and the building's been empty ever since. Did you say you meet him recently?" The mare asked, puzzled.

"Um...no. I just, thought...never mind. Thank you." Twilight said before walking slowly back toward the restaurants, deep in thought. "Three years ago? Then who was that?" She mumbled to herself. "What what in Equestria is in this box?" She said. "I guess I'll find out when I get home. First, I better find Spike."

“So she really said he died three years ago? That is bizarre.” Spike said, leaning his elbow against the box. “So have you checked out what’s inside yet?”

“No Spike, what if it really is something dangerous from the Time Before? If I opened it in a crowded town like Fillydelphia they might start a stampede. You know how jumpy ponies can get sometimes. I had to make sure it was secure inside the tree house before I opened this thing.”

The box was resting in the middle of the main area of Twilight’s tree-house library. The whole house was lit brightly, leaving it a stark contrast to the deep darkness of night outside. Twilight noted with some amusement that the box looked just big enough for Spike to fit inside. “Maybe if he gets too obnoxious I’ll stuff him in there.” She thought.

“So, instead of opening it in public, where other ponies could help us if something goes wrong, you’re going to open it alone. Inside our house. With just us around?”

“Yes. I know you and I together can handle any monster or terrible thing that comes out of this chest.” Twilight said with confidence. “Besides, I listened carefully to it, and there aren’t any air-holes, so I’m pretty sure whatever’s in here isn’t alive.”

“Well, alright then. But it is getting pretty late,” Spike said with a yawn. “Should we open it now or wait until tomorrow?”

“Well, I do want to see whatever’s in there, but it has been a long day. I guess we can wait.” Twilight said, smiling at her assistant. “Besides, my wittle baby dwagon is soooo tired from his long day of twavel.” She said while putting her face close to his, talking in a joking manner that she knew would annoy him.

“Haha, very funny.” He said, pushing aside her snout. “I just wanna wake up early and crack this case open.” Spike turned and started walking slowly to his bed. “I hope it’s treasure” He continued sleepily, “I could use it to start my hoard.”

Twilight watched as Spike waddled off to bed. She took one last look at the strange new addition to her house and turned toward he own bed. “We’ll know in the morning.” She thought as she nestled into a comfortable position under the covers.

Twilight awoke with a start and shivered. The room had gotten drastically colder since when she went to bed. She could hear the wind howling in through the open window. ‘Must have forgotten to latch it.’ Twilight thought, turning to close the window above her bed. She reached her hoof absentmindedly at the glass and bumped into it. She hadn’t taken the time to notice that this window was still closed. At that moment, she heard the wind whistle again through the tree house.

“Great,” Twilight said to herself, stretching her legs slowly over the side of her bed, “Now I’ll have to go find which one’s open.”

She stood up and walked slowly and quietly around the house. She took a single candle in her mouth for light, and noticed Spike snoring loudly in his tiny bed. Twilight smiled and thought about how he’d need a new one when he grew up a little. She checked every window on the first floor and found nothing amiss, but still the wind swept into the house, chilling Twilight to the bone. “Why are the beautiful days always followed with such cold nights?” She complained. “I’ll have to ask Princess Luna if there’s a way she could make the nights warmer.”

Having not found the offending window on the main floor, Twilight stood at the bottom of the staircase leading up to the attic. She’d only been up there once before, soon after moving in. She used it to store books and some furniture that she wasn’t going to use.

The stairs ended with a solid wooden door shut firmly at the top. Twilight could hear the wind getting louder as she approached, and knew this had to be the offending room. She turned the door's handle with her magic, and slowly opened it into the dark room, hoping the squeaking hinges wouldn't awaken her dragon. She peered in through the darkness to find the offending window, and could hear a soft creaking sound mingling with the whistling of the wind. She turned her head toward the sound and saw an old rocking chair that had come with the house being blow back and forth in front of an open window.

As she approached, Twilight thought she could see something sitting on the chair as it rocked slowly back and forth. Squinting in the darkness, she saw what looked like a small, smooth creature wearing what looked like a white dress. It stared at her, unmoving, with two pale, chubby arms hanging limply at its sides. Twilight shook her head and looked at the chair again. It sat empty, rocking back and forth in the wind.

Twilight blinked. She could have sworn...."my eyes must still be sleepy," She thought as she shut the window with a big yawn, "Oh well, back to bed." The very tired pony crept slowly back down the stairs, snuggled back into her warm bed, and was very soon asleep.

The next day, Twilight was woken rudely by her dragon housemate. "Twilight!" It yelled at her from the main room, "Did you move the box?"

She stretched all four of her stiff legs into the air before rolling out of her comfortable bed. "No, why?" She replied, walking into the room by him. She stopped at the threshold of the bedroom: the strange chest HAD been moved. The evening before, Twilight was absolutely certain she had left it in the middle of the room. Now, it was sitting at the bottom of the steps that lead to the attic. She blinked and looked again. The box was still there.

"Now how did that...oh I get it. Hahaha, good one, Spike. Moving the box to make me really think there's something scary inside."

"But Twilight, I didn't..."

"Now now Spike, you can't fool me like that. You'll have to think of something better than that to get me. So, why don't we open this up and see what it is?" Twilight said, fully confident that she'd foiled Spike's little attempt to rattle her. She levitated the key from the countertop on which it rested, and stuck it into the keyhole in the front of the mysterious box. She turned the key in the lock and opened the cover as far as possible with her hoof.

Once she saw the object resting in the box, her smile disappeared instantly. "Well, I guess this qualifies as something better. How'd you do it, Spike?" Twilight let out slowly, with great tension in her voice.

"What are you talking about, Twilight?" The dragon replied, "What did I do?"

"This thing" the purple pony said, pointing toward the box, "I saw it last night, sitting in a rocking chair for just a moment. How'd you get it there? How'd you pull it away without me noticing? How'd you get it back here? And why? I know, you must've just taken the key, opened it up and put it there to scare me right? I see, I understand completely now. Well, good job Spike it worked."

"What? But I..."

"But seriously, Spike, you should really be more careful. Who knows how old this thing is? You shouldn't use fragile things like this for pranks."

Twilight grabbed the doll in her mouth and set it gently down on the floor. It was a small, white porcelain doll. It had light brown colored hair painted onto the top of its bulbous, circular head. Covering that head was a small whit bonnet lined with lace. Two strips of lace draped down either side and were tied at the

chin with a tiny bow. The same white dress as seen last night was on the doll; it had very few frills which seemed designed to accentuate its simplicity. Twilight looked at it from every angle, often raising it with her magic to check underneath it and all around. The strangest thing of all to her were that its appendages, two up high and two down low, didn't end in hooves. Instead, each one have five little projections at the end. Fingers, almost like Spike had, but without any trace of proper claws. Spike sat nearby, looking at turns from the doll to Twilight and back again.

"So...what is it?" he finally asked.

"I'm not sure," Twilight said, still studying the doll intently, "it looks like some kind of...hairless monkey I guess."

"Monkey? I haven't even seen one of those before. Didn't Celestia have one in her royal zoo?"

"Just the remains of one, actually." Twilight said, "I've never seen one alive, but this is much smaller than that one was. And, again, it has much less hair. Still, the basic physiology is the same: two arms and legs, much like you. But it doesn't have scales, just this white hide, which is very hard. It almost feels like a plate. I wonder who would make a doll out of porcelain instead of softer stuff, like felt. You can't even have a filly play with this, they'd break it. It is, all in all, a very strange thing."

"So, instead of a big scary monster, or an evil book or something, we get a doll of some unknown creature made out of plates? Okay, this is much weirder than I thought it'd be." Spike said. "So, what do we do now?"

"We research!" Twilight said, her voice filling with both excitement and determination. "This is a creature we've never seen before, something ponykind has long forgotten. We'll have to dig deep, figure out what it is, and let everypony know of our findings. Just think: we may even become well known historians from this."

"Do you think maybe Princess Celestia would know about this?"

"Of course Spike, I hadn't considered that. Take a letter: Dearest Princess Celestia, I have come upon a strange object, something unlike anything I've seen before. I have reason to believe it may have come from a period know as "The Time Before". It appears to be a small facsimile of some sort of hairless monkey, but it is wearing clothing as well. If you have any information, or have heard of something like this before, I would be very glad for your help in this matter. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle."

"Aaaand...done!" Spike said, rolling the scroll up and breathing on it. The paper disappeared in a puff of green smoke, and he looked back at Twilight. "So now we've just got to wait until-Barrrrp!" Spike burped, and up from his throat appeared a tightly wound scroll, much like the one he'd just sent out to the Princess.

"My dear Twilight Sparkle, I do not know about this "Before Time" you speak of. I suggest you destroy whatever strange thing you may have found. Princess Celestia." Spike ready off the new letter quickly, "Well, that was fast." He said afterward. "I guess the Princess doesn't know anything."

"I suppose not," Twilight said, rubbing her chin with her hoof, "We'll need to search here. Spike: get me all the books we have dealing with history."

"What do you want me to do with this thing?"

"Oh, right. Take the doll, very carefully put it back in its box and bring it to the attic. We'll store it there until we know what it is."

Spike did as he was told. He knew when Twilight was in a serious mood, and it was never a good idea to

distract her at those times. Returning down the stairs, he found the unicorn pony already searching hastily through a stack of books.

“No...no....no...” she said in a monotone fashion, tossing aside the tomes that held no interest for her. “No...Oh! Maybe....no....no....no....” She continued, quickly going through an entire shelf that she had emptied out on the floor.

Twilight took the few books that she'd deemed worthy and brought them over to her bookstand to begin reading. “Spike, could you clean up the rest?” she asked absentmindedly, already reading the first chosen book. “I've got a lot of reading to do.” She explained.

Spike sighed and dutifully bent down to start clearing out the disheveled pile. He wished Twilight would be more careful with her own library, but if she were neater he'd almost be out of a job. ‘Twilight's Assistant’ would be a poor title if she never needed assisting. He thought about the long day he'd have ahead of him, picking up after Twilight while she ransacked the building, looking for a single book that could clue them in to the mystery of the doll.

Twilight read frantically all day, and had barely finished searching a third of the library before yawning loudly for the second time in quick succession. Her yawns, once merely an infrequent annoyance, became constant intrusions to her reading as the day wore on. It was quite dark by the time she decided to end for the day, and Spike was already snoring like a lumberjack determined to take down an entire forest. She yawned again and closed her current book, trudging slowly in the direction of her bed when she heard a bump above her.

Twilight paused and listened. She heard multiple small thumps on the ceiling. They ended, and she began to hear a steady, beating creaking from the same area. Creak and then stop. Creak, stop. Creak, stop. Creak, stop. She held her breath and tried to figure out the source of the sound. ‘It has to be that rocking chair in the attic.’ She thought, ‘Maybe that window blew open again. Oh well, I'm too tired to check it out now.’ And she continued her short journey to the waiting bed, putting the monotonous creaking out of her mind.

The sun shone brightly through the gently, lacy curtains. Twilight was turning restlessly in her bed, trying to keep her eyes out of the merciless sunbeam. Spike's snoring had affected her worse than she had anticipated. She was barely able to sleep at all last night, and wanted to catch up on it this morning. Twilight didn't have any obligations, only her self-imposed project to work on, so she could sleep if she wanted. However, it appeared Celestia's bright yellow servant had other ideas.

Twilight groaned and rolled out of bed. It was time to start another full day of studying. She had to get to the bottom of what that thing upstairs was. She walked into the main room and met Spike as he was organizing some of the books she'd left out from the night before.

“Good morning, sleepy head.” He said as she entered. “Applejack came over earlier. She wanted to know if you could meet her at the farm later today.”

“Oh, I'd love to Spike,” Twilight said, “But I've just got to find out the history of that doll. I know it's going to be a huge discovery.”

“Did you find anything yesterday?”

“No, nothing yet, but I know I'll find out if I keep trying. If there's nothing in this library, maybe I can ask Princess Celestia to look at hers in Canterlot.”

“Well, okay. I promised Rarity I'd help her make some dresses today, so you're going to be on your own, if that's alright.”

"Sure thing, Spike. Just be back by dark." Twilight said and allowed her dragon to leave. 'He deserves a day off now and then.' She thought to herself as he closed the door behind him.

Twilight turned and once again launched herself into her books. She used her magic freely to bring and send all manner of paper into her sight. When she saw a cover that interested her, she opened it up immediately and began to scan the pages. Any historical information, texts about non-pony creatures, or even old myths she read fervently. No clue, regardless how small, would escape her this day.

She had been about her task for a few hours, into the early afternoon when she again heard a bump upstairs. Twilight's ears perked up at the sound, and she set down her current book. She gently laid it down on the ground and walked slowly toward the staircase as more quick, soft thumps occurred above her. Twilight heard a gentle creaking just like last night as she reached the landing and pulled open the door. She quickly looked around the attic, and noticed that her box was open. She turned toward the old rocking chair and saw two baby-blue glass eyes staring back at her. The limp arms still hung pathetically at the doll's sides as it swayed back and forth from the motion of the chair.

'It didn't just...no...Spike must've...but why would he....it doesn't matter.' Her thoughts were jumbled, trying to decide if she believed the doll had moved itself to the chair, or if Spike and placed it there before leaving. She eventually decided she wasn't quite crazy enough to believe the doll was alive and carefully levitated it back into its case and shut the lid. Thereafter, she went back downstairs and continued her studies.

Spike arrived home at his appointed time to find Twilight still snout-deep in a book. He saw the massive pile of books on the floor that he was most certainly going to be expected to clean up. He sighed deeply and began his standard duty without a word. He was just getting into a good cleaning-groove when Applejack ran in through the door.

"Twilight! Are you okay?"

"Um...yes, Applejack, I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Applebloom said she saw a face staring out of yer window upstairs on her way home from school. Spike here told me earlier you'd be too busy studying to come over, so I know you wouldn't keep company, so it had to be an invader. Where'd they attack? Are you hurt? Or.....*GASP!* They brainwashed you!"

"What? No, Applejack, I'm fine, really. There's nopony here but me and you."

"Hey!"

"Oh, Spike. I'm sorry, I didn't notice you come in. Nopony except me, you, and Spike."

"Hm...well, okay, if you say so. I'll have to give Applebloom a talking to about spreading tall tales."

Applejack said as she turned to go. "But you would tell me if somepony WAS invading your house, right?" "You'd be the first to know." Twilight said with a smile. "Whew, I am tired." She said after Applejack left, "How about some dinner, Spike?"

"I'm good." Spike said, "Rarity gave me some gems for helping her out today. They were delicious! But filling."

"Well, I'm going to have some apples." Twilight said while walking toward the cupboard. "And then I'm going to sleep. I'm still tired from last night. Your snoring kept me up forever!"

"Aww, come on." He replied, "It can't be that bad."

“Well, the sound is horrid enough, but the smoke is just terrible! I practically suffocated.”

“What?! I can barely breathe fire now. Give me a hundred years or so, THEN I’ll give you smoke.” Spike said, and he added under his breath, “Stupid Twilight, making fun of my smokelessness.”

“What was that, smoky?” She teased from across the room.

“Nothing.” Spike said grumpily, and he walked toward the bedroom.

Twilight Sparkle smiled and looked around her house. It really was messy. She made a mental note to clean up after herself a little better during studying sessions. It just wasn’t fair to make Spike clean up all this craziness that she created. She went into the kitchen and decided on just a light snack of oats before heading into her own bed. The day hadn’t been very illuminating. She’d have to ask Princess Celestia if she could borrow her books tomorrow.

Twilight was stuck in a very small room. There were no windows, no doors, and no roof. Twilight looked up and saw a wooden lid, opened up about halfway on its hinges far above her. Looking up through the opening, she saw the doll staring back at her. Its painted face holding its toothless grin as it peered at the tiny pony. As she watched, the doll’s features began slowly to shift. First its nose got longer, then its eyes widened, its hair began to cover its entire face in short, purple fur. Its posture changed so that the creature was soon standing on all fours. Twilight was staring back into herself.

The larger Twilight smiled and said something the smaller Twilight couldn’t understand to an unknown entity to its right. Tiny Twilight watched in horror as big Twilight looked back at her, smiled again and slowly shut the lid. She heard the click of the key locking her in. Surrounded by darkness, Twilight began to pound on the walls of her prison when she felt the air around her getting warmer. Soon, she was coughing violently as the room filled up with a deep, black smoke. Flames began to work their way through the floor, and were licking at her hooves when Twilight awoke with a loud gasp.

She sat upright in her bed, breathing heavily. She looked quickly over to Spike’s small bed and saw him still fast asleep. She listened in the darkness for what seemed like forever as she tried to catch her breath. The creaking was back. She heard it, coming from upstairs as it always did. She sat and listened to it, wishing it would stop. She was unsettled enough by the dream she’d just had, and the constant creak was not helping.

The clock struck three from the adjoining room. As the sound of the last chime faded away, Twilight realized that the creaking had stopped. She heard tiny patters from the ceiling and one long creak. She then heard more pattering, but in a different pattern from before. After just a few seconds, Twilight realized the earlier steps were feet across the floor, but this was the sound of something descending the stairs.

Twilight jumped out of bed and bolted across the room. She stopped at the staircase and looked up it.

There, silhouetted in the darkness, sat the doll.

Twilight quickly walked back to the bedroom to check. Sure enough, Spike was still sound asleep. She returned to the main room and considered the doll. It appeared to have moved down another step or two, but Twilight couldn’t be sure. Regardless, she was now certain Spike was not playing a prank on her with this doll. Maybe it had some sort of spell put on it? If so, was it from another unicorn? Or from its creator? Either way, Twilight had a new mystery to solve.

She quickly scooped up the doll and brought it back to its box in the attic. Not taking any chances, Twilight set it down inside and was certain to lock the lid this time.

"There, no more surprises until I figure out just what you are." Twilight said as she walked back to her awaiting bed. "I'm sure the Princess will help me. I hope the Princess will help me." She said to herself as she settled in to finish her night's sleep.

Twilight awoke early in the morning, before Celestia had begun her early morning trek across the sky. She ran quickly to the attic to check her prisoner. To her relief, the box was still shut tight and locked securely. She breathed a sigh of relief and walked back downstairs to wake up Spike.

"Hey, wake up." She said, nudging him with her hoof.

"Wha? No...no..." Spike grumbled, shifting positions and pulling his blanket closer to him.

"Wake up!" Twilight Sparkle insisted, kicking him a bit harder in the side.

"What? What?! I'm awake. Geeze." Spike said, grumpily as he sat up in his bed. "What is it?"

"I need you to take a letter, Spike."

"Can't it wait until I'm done sleeping?" He asked, starting to lie back down.

"No, it can't." Twilight said, "We need to get an audience with the Princess today. I need to find out what that thing is right away."

"Fine, what should I write?"

"Dear Princess Celestia, In light of certain events, it is imperative that I be granted temporary access to your personal library. I request this most humbly, and ask only that you trust me as your student that this request is necessary. Your faithful student: Twilight Sparkle."

"Okay, got it." Spike said as he finished his notation. He rolled the paper up as he had so many times before and breathed it into ashes. The paper, of course, then found its way to Princess Celestia. Once it was gone, Twilight Sparkle and Spike began the process of finally cleaning the house back to its normal state.

"So, you're done with the books here then? Did you get through them all?" Spike said after a few minutes of silence, hoping to break the tension.

"No, not quite, but none of them could possibly hold the amount of useful information like I'd find from Princess Celestia's royal library. The books there, why they....they'd rival that old bookstore in Fillydelphia..." Twilight said. "Spike come on, we've got to—"

The pony was cut off by a belch from the tiny dragon. Reaching out his hand to grasp the new arrival, Spike unrolled the answer from the princess and read, "My dearest student Twilight Sparkle, while I wish you could confide your troubles in me, I understand that sometimes a young pony must be allowed to handle things on her own. I simply cannot turn down such a sincere request, and have already sent my chariot to bring you to Canterlot. If there is anything you wish to discuss with me when you get here, please see me in my throne room. —Princess Celestia. Well, at least it seems like she's going to help."

"I hope so Spike," Twilight said, "I can only hope she won't be *too* mad I didn't destroy it right away."

"Me too." Spike said, "Although, I want you to be perfectly clear with her: I had nothing to do with this."

"Ha, alright, Spike. I'll let Celestia know it wasn't your fault."

Just as she finished speaking, Twilight Sparkle noticed the chariot already descending into Ponyville. The

guard ponies were indeed fast flyers, and their beautiful gold-embroidered transport shone magnificently. In fact, it looked out of place in the small town, being something that was obviously more at home in a castle than a city with dirt roads. Twilight and Spike stepped onto it as they had so many times before, not even considering what other ponies would give to have a ride in Princess Celestia's personal chariot.

The guard ponies took off without a word, flying swiftly and calmly up toward Canterlot. They arrived shortly, having had a very uneventful trip, and landed just outside the Princess's throne room. Twilight walked with an air of false confidence to greet her teacher, not sure how to let her know that she had not followed the Princess's advice.

"Twilight Sparkle, how good to see you." Celestia called out from across the cavernous hall when Twilight entered. "I trust things aren't going too badly. Is there any way I can be of assistance?"

"Well" Twilight began, "I really just wanted to—"

"Princess, Twilight thinks the doll is alive. She's looking for a book to prove it." Spike butted in, destroying any hope of being subtle on the subject.

"Twilight? Is this true?" The Princess asked, looking very regal and very disappointed sitting on her golden throne.

"Yes, but..."

"I thought I told you to destroy that thing. Why have you kept it?"

"It represents so much! We have no idea where, or when it came from. This could be a major discovery about the Time Before and—"

"My poor student, of course I know where it's from."

"You...you do?" Twilight asked bewildered. "But why didn't you tell me?"

"

Princess Celestia let out a deep sigh. "Come with me, you two. Let's not discuss this out in the open." She motioned with her mouth toward the guards at the foot of her chair. She then led the small purple pony and the baby dragon to her private study. Once there, she faced them and sighed again. "I had hoped to avoid this, but I know exactly where that thing is from." The princess began again, "And it is as you suspected, a very old object indeed. It is, as you said, from the Time Before. Before ponies ruled Equestria there was another race, an ugly, evil, hairless, bipedal thing that thought itself master of all others. It had subject all creatures to its will, and lorded over them with an iron fist. It even ate certain creatures if they got out of line. They were truly barbaric."

"That sounds horrible!" Twilight said, blanching.

"It was. Fortunately, these...**things** had grown complacent by the time Luna, myself, and our pony followers attempted a coup those many, many years ago. We were able to drive them completely from Equestria, and they have since gone extinct."

"I see, so this is—"

"Yes, that doll, which looks like a hairless monkey as you called it, is actually a representation of one of their foals. They used it to play with, getting some strange satisfaction from controlling a member of their own species. Regardless, I've come to consider all such artifacts from that time evil. They must be destroyed, and even the memory of their existence purged from this land. I do not know what sort of magic they must have put on it to make it seem like it's alive, but that doesn't matter. All I know is, the

safest, most effective way to destroy both them and their creations is by burning them. Twilight Sparkle, please, as your teacher, your princess, and your friend, I beg of you to go home and destroy that doll immediately.”

“I will, Princess” Twilight said after just a moment of shock. She had never dreamed of hearing something like this, let alone from the Princess herself. So, she had driven a different sentient species from the land over a thousand years ago. Twilight mumbled to herself, going over in her head what all this meant as she absentmindedly found her way back to the chariot and accompanying guard ponies. Spike was right behind her when she got in. The Pegasus ponies taking off finally jolted her back to reality, allowing her to prepare herself for what must be done when she returned. “I hate to destroy so valuable a piece of history,” She said, more to herself than to her dragon, “But for the Princess, I must.”

The chariot landed in Ponyville in the late afternoon, just as the shadows were lengthening to signal the end of another day. Rarity was knocking hard on the tree-house door when they arrived, yelling, “Twilight! Twilight?! Open up, are you there? Sweetie Belle said she saw something in the attic on her way back from school. A face, somepony moving around in your house. Can you hear me?”

Spike walked right up to her and tapped her on the flank, “Rarity? We’re right here.”

“Not now Spike,” Rarity said without looking back. “I’ve got to get Twilight’s attent-Oh! Twilight, there you are!” She said, finally turning around when she realized that Twilight tended to be where Spike was. “Now listen, the fillies have been saying some disturbing things about your tree-house lately, and I just thought you should know before these rumors get out of hand.”

“Thank you, Rarity. I’ll take care of it right now. You can let them know they won’t be seeing any more faces in my attic from now on.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Rarity asked.

“No, I’m sorry, I can’t. Just know that it’s not going to be a problem.”

“If you’re sure, darling. Well, come by the shop tomorrow, if you have a chance. I’ve got this great new idea for a dress for you. It’s going to be a part of my Spring collection.”

“Certainly, Rarity. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

That minor crisis averted, Twilight Sparkle went into her house, ready to finally remove that accursed doll from existence. “Now be careful Spike,” She said as they went inside, “If it really is alive, and I think it is, it’ll try to put up a fight when we destroy it. I need you to be ready for anything.”

“Hmmp.” Spike nodded, readying his small but still sharp claws to swing at the possible attacker. He and Twilight slowly peaked around the main room when they arrived. There was no sign of movement. “Be on your guard,” The pony said, hoping to calm herself, “It’s small so it could be anywhere, we’ve no way of know-“

She was cut off by a very loud thud from upstairs. She dashed ahead up the staircase and heaved into the door. “It’s barred the door, trying to stop us from getting in!” Twilight said as she strained against the heavy wooden frame. “Come on Spike, help me push!”

“Couldn’t you use your magic to move whatever’s blocking the door?”

“No, I can’t see it so I’d have no idea how big it is, or where to move it to.”

“Okay then, stand back.” Spike said. Twilight obliged and he began attacking the door with his claws,

tearing little chunks of wood out with each swipe. Inside, more thuds could be heard as more furniture and other heavy objects were placed in the way.

"I just need a big enough hole to see." Twilight said as Spike's progress got more pronounced. "Just a little more...there! I can take over from here." She said as an exhausted Spike slumped off to the side of the step. He'd pawed at the door as hard as he could, and he'd opened up a small hole, almost large enough for Twilight's head to fit through in the door. She was quickly tossing objects aside with her magic when they heard a new noise: the breaking of glass. "Oh no, it jumped out the window!" Twilight yelled as she moved the last piece of furniture blocking their path. "Quickly, go after it!"

She shoved the door open at last. It gave a loud thud as it slammed into the wall on its hinges. Spike immediately rushed to the window and, forgetting safety, jumped through the broken glass to the ground below. He ran directly away from the house, the most likely path the doll had taken. Twilight ran to the window in turn and watched him go. "Alright," She said aloud, "Now I've just got to-" Twilight heard a loud thwack and her vision blurred. She stumbled heavily and turned around to try and see her attacker. Her head ached terribly, but she still shook it to try and regain her sight. She felt another heavy blow fall on her poor skull, and the entire world faded into blackness.

Spike, out of breath and leaning against the now shredded attic door saw Twilight Sparkle staring into the wooden box that unholy creature had arrived in.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

She smiled and turned to him, "Of course, Spike. It never left, it was just trying to trick us. I have got it trapped back in its box, though."

"Oh, good job, Twilight. So, now what?"

"First," The pony began, "I do this."

She shut the lid deliberately and locked the doll once more inside.

"And then?"

"Well, the Princess wanted us to burn it. Would you care to do the honors?"

"Of course, hey, is it...is it banging on the inside of that box?"

"Yes, it must know we are about to end its reign of terror."

"Still, I feel a little sorry for it, to have to be burned up like this..."

"Me too, Spike." Twilight said, becoming very impatient with the dragon, "But we must do what Princess Celestia says."

"I suppose you're right." He said, walking over to Twilight. He looked once more at the wooden box as the pony placed it on the ground. He hesitated for just a second and blew a mighty blast of fire breath on the structure. The box ignited almost right away. Spike thought he could hear the doll coughing up the smoke as he watched the thing burn. After just a few minutes of watching to make sure the fire didn't spread to the rest of the house, all that was left of the horrible thing from the Before Time was ash.

"You did good, Spike." Twilight said, putting her hoof on his shoulder. "You did good. Let us go see if we cannot find some gemstones for you to eat. Perhaps Rarity has a few extra that we could borrow?"

“Okay!” He said, walking off with her happily. He was glad just to have it over with, and wanted to put the past, crazy few days out of his mind forever.

Credits: Influenced by “Creepy Doll” by Jonathan Coulton.