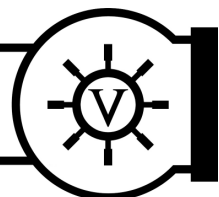


The Writing on the Wall

Horse Voice

PONY FICTION VAULT



The pyramid's perfect geometry stood sharp against the Iblis Desert's smooth curves. Its shadow, growing in the late afternoon sun, brought an early twilight to the outpost of modernity that covered the flattened ground at its base.

Though one of the last to arrive, Daring Do felt the familiar thrill of discovery—a swelling in her chest and a fire behind her eyes. It was not quite the largest ruin she had seen, but even at this distance, she could tell it was the most well-preserved. She flashed a smile and waved at the bridge of the airship whose pace she had been matching, then wheeled away and dove, spiraling toward the pyramid before letting a desert zephyr carry her toward its summit. Once a sharp point, the apex was now weather-worn enough to perch on, and Daring balanced upon it, wings outstretched like a tightrope walker's pole, and gazed down the smooth granite walls at the scene beneath.

Tiny shapes of ponies moved amongst clusters of tents and prefabricated buildings. Several began to hurry toward the makeshift airship landing pad on one side of the camp, as the ship that had carried Daring most of the way from Manehattan began to descend. At the pyramid's base was a rough tunnel entrance, about large enough for three ponies to comfortably walk abreast.

“Started without me, huh?” she thought out loud.

A hedge of metal spikes surrounded the whole site in a perfect circle. Its points not only stuck outward at all angles, but also inward, and Daring saw no pattern to their arrangement. Four stallions, standing on one another's backs, might almost reach its topmost point; and it was half again as wide as it was high. In the late sun, the hedge's long shadows reminded her of black talons, reaching out to rip and tear.

It would take time for the airship's cargo to be unloaded, and Daring decided to reconnoiter before claiming her equipment. She flitted downward, landing just outside the pyramid's recently-dug entrance.

“Glad you could finally join us, Miss Do,” somepony said.

Daring knew that voice. She turned to face the speaker—a pegasus the color of storm clouds.

“Dark Horizon,” she said, eyes narrowing in a mock glare. “Funny. The letter said they wanted the best.”

“Yes,” Horizon said, “but they thought I might need backup.”

Daring chuckled, having known he would counter her needling, as he always did. She sometimes let him hold his own in minor skirmishes, just so it wouldn't seem one-sided when she inevitably proved the better treasure hunter. Then, as the *coup de grace*, she would take him unawares, pin him to the ground, gloat a bit, and steal a kiss. Perfect. In fact, being hired for the same job might be just the opportunity...

"Well," she said, "since this is our first time working together, I guess I should ask what you know." She looked again at the granite wall beside them. "They said it's 'the oldest archeological site ever found,' but I know that's not right, 'cause masonry this advanced was invented about fifteen hundred years ago. So..."

"Oh, they didn't tell you." A boyish grin spread across Horizon's muzzle. "You had better brace yourself."

"Alright." Daring grinned back. "Hit me."

"It's seventy-one thousand years old."

"Nice try. Magic aura dating doesn't go back that far."

"I know. There's an astronomical calendar inside."

"Alright," Daring said, moving toward the doorway. "Let's see." She gestured toward it with a foreleg. "Ladies first."

"Of course," Horizon said, taking the lead. "I know you sure don't qualify."

The two walked in single file through the long, chiseled tunnel, lit at intervals by kerosene lamps.

"Watch out, by the way," Horizon said as they walked. "The director doesn't like how late you are."

"Hey, that's what you get if you call on me when I'm in the jungle." Daring snuck a glance at his haunches before continuing. "They're just lucky I was on the way home when the letter got to my house."

"Well, be warned, this director doesn't like ponies who get fresh."

They emerged into a high, domed chamber, ringed by tripod-mounted arc lamps, from which extension cables ran to a heavy-duty magic battery off to one side. Just ahead, a

dolmen made of four huge granite slabs loomed over them. Beyond that, a broad, square-walled tunnel sloped downward into darkness. Its entrance was surrounded by piles of slag, which Daring could tell had recently been dug up. Amongst all this, a hoofful of ponies moved to and fro, some of whom paused briefly upon noticing the new arrival before proceeding on their respective business.

Horizon led Daring into the dolmen, and she looked around, wide-eyed. Chiseled letters densely covered the first two walls and most of the third. Only the lower fifth of the right-hoof wall was untouched, the letters ending abruptly three quarters of the way across the slab. She picked out dozens of alphabets, each with its own section of wall, and found herself amazed, and a little perturbed, that she did not recognize a single one.

“Look at that,” Horizon said, glancing upward.

Pictograms also covered the ceiling. Daring took off, and, slowly hovering across the chamber’s ceiling, scrutinized them. Some of the carvings were arranged into something like the staves and bars of sheet music, but instead of notes, small points were connected by lines to a central, slightly larger ring-shaped glyph. The pattern changed from one bar to the next, with the dots shifting slightly and the ring remaining in the center.

“What do you think?” Horizon asked, flying up to join Daring.

“Stars, right?” she said, pointing to the dots.

Horizon nodded. “Whoever built this place knew how to predict the stars’ movements.”

Daring gave an impressed whistle. “That’s some advanced math.”

“As much as our own, if not more. Look at this.” Horizon moved toward the southwest corner. “At the beginning, there’s a pictogram of the pyramid and the hedge of thorns.” He pointed to the northeast. “It goes on ‘til the hundred-thousand-year mark, then stops.”

“So what happens after a hundred thousand years?”

“Maybe the world ends.” Horizon’s voice had just enough of a lilt to show he was joking.

Daring chuckled. “Well, if it’s only been seventy-one thousand, we won’t live to see it.”

The duo alighted just inside the dolmen’s entrance.

“Kind of amazing it took this long for somepony to find a tomb this big,” Daring said.

“You must not be familiar with this area. No one ever comes this far into the Iblis. If that one airship hadn’t gone off course, we wouldn’t be standing here.”

“Not necessarily. This morning, I found someone who knows there’s something around here.”

Horizon frowned. “Don’t tell me you leaked something.”

“Well, the airship stopped at a trading post for a couple hours, and I got to talking to...” Daring saw Horizon’s frown deepen. “Hey, it was a camel, okay? They don’t blab.”

“Did he say anything?”

Daring adopted her best impression of an old patriarch’s basso. “Go not there, my friend. The forefathers of my forefathers told their progeny, generation after generation, it was a bad place.” She switched back to her own voice. “You know—usual stuff.”

Horizon bit his lower lip and looked away for a moment, considering. “Well,” he said, “it can’t be helped. But the walls have ears, you know. I’m surprised you’re not more careful, since you’re always being dogged by that blue creature with the hands.”

“Hey, if I can handle Ahuitzotl by my lonesome, I’m sure he’s no match for this whole camp.”

“You always did attract the wrong sort of male, Miss Do,” a voice said.

For the second time that day, Daring turned to see a familiar face, but now found herself surprised. “Dr. Thorn! What are you doing here?”

Thorn was the living stereotype of the Trottingham academic: past middle age, with a greying mane and perfectly round spectacles. He always carried his snout slightly raised, as if the weight of his over-sized brain made his head tilt back. Daring usually found ponies like this funny, but Thorn brought back certain memories, and part of her wondered if he was about to criticize her for something.

“The directors saw fit to bring me here, for my expertise in the field of dead languages,” Thorn said. “Incidentally, I read your report on your expedition to Pohjola. I took it in lieu of your final term paper, and gave it a B-plus, not accounting for it being five years late.”

“Well, thanks for giving me a break...” She stopped herself before the word “sir” could escape her lips.

“I wouldn’t have, if not for your discoveries. Now then, has Mr. Horizon explained the glyphs?”

“Just the ones on the ceiling.”

“Oh?” Thorn somehow peered down at Horizon, despite being a little shorter. “You don’t think much of the letters?”

“I was getting to that,” Horizon said quickly. He had also once been Thorn’s student.

“It is just as well,” Thorn said, turning toward the dolmen’s inner walls. “Allow me.” He began projecting his voice, as though he was back in his lecture hall and not speaking to two graduates in the middle of a desert. “All of the writing systems you see here are the sole examples known to modern civilization, with a single exception: that at the bottom of the rightmost wall, which according to other experts present at this site, is approximately five thousand years old.”

“Five thousand? So we’re not the first ones here.” Daring frowned.

“Indeed. Initially, only the top half of the leftmost wall had any inscriptions. From there, moving top to bottom and left to right, they grow progressively younger and, I’m told, easier to accurately date.”

“So, in other words...” Daring raised an eyebrow. “Everyone who found this place broke in, translated it into their own language, added it to the tablet, and sealed it back up again?”

“Quite right. The entryway behind you already existed, but was sealed by masonry of the same age as the youngest inscription. The first teams to arrive here simply re-opened it.” Thorn pointed to the third wall. “But the seal on the large tunnel heading underground was older: about twenty-six thousand years. Several sets of inscriptions upward, we find one of the same age.”

“That means,” Horizon added, “not everyone who opened the outer entrance opened the tunnel as well.”

Daring tapped a hoof against her head, brow furrowed in thought. “Think maybe the builders left most of the wall space blank on purpose?”

“To allow for future translations.” Thorn gave a short nod—a sign that a student had impressed him a little. “Yes, that is a valid hypothesis.”

“Well,” Daring said, “wouldn’t be the first time a tomb got re-sealed by would-be robbers. Once, there was this...”

“I’m sure he’s heard that story, Daring,” Horizon interrupted.

Thorn continued. “In addition, the old glyphs clearly use several different alphabets, so the message was meant to be widely read. I must confess, I find myself at a loss as to why an architect would make certain of this, and then build a hedge of metal thorns to keep potential readers away.”

“Well,” Daring said, “looking scary is the first line of defense for a lot of old tombs. Obviously, anyone with wings gets over the thorns easily. So, either there were no intelligent species with wings back then or that’s why those thorns are there.” On a sudden impulse, she screwed up her courage and decided to try something she’d never done before: needling the professor. “Y’know, with that in mind, if this place is anything like others I’ve seen, I can pretty much tell you what the writing on the wall says.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

Daring leaned back on her hind legs and haunches, and waved her forelegs like a mad prophet. “This is the tomb of the great and terrible So-and-So! Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair! Whosoever steals the treasure will face the gods’ curse, and the sky will fall on their heads, *et cetera*’.” She stood back up and waved a hoof dismissively. “See enough of these, and you can pretty much guess what they say.”

“Miss Do, you disappoint me,” Thorn said. “Have you not stopped to think of how many tens of millennia passed between this artificer’s construction and the next-youngest civilization we know about? No other message has survived even a fraction of as many years. Culture after culture lived and died, while this place remained. Furthermore, an inscription translated repeatedly by generations of visitors is unprecedented. It is our obligation to try to understand it.”

Daring knew all this was true, but pushed her luck anyway. “So, it’s the world’s longest-running chain letter.”

A look of horror crossed Horizon’s face, and he suddenly interjected. “Hey, here’s something interesting!”

Thorn and Daring both turned to him, expectant.

“I, uh, talked to this masonry expert they brought in. He said he found mortar residue between the stones, but given how perfectly they’re cut, he can’t imagine why they bothered with it. The camp’s top geologist told me the Iblis has had no tectonic movement for millions of years, and it rains here maybe twice every century. So whoever built this place wanted it to last basically forever.”

“Did he say anything about that big tunnel on the other side of the dolmen?” Daring asked. “Cause I assume that’s where they’re sending us tomorrow.”

“No, but that is where we’re going.” Horizon already looked relieved at the change of subject. “A few of the work crew who unblocked it went a little way down, and they said it goes on and on.”

“Cool. Whatever’s buried that deep has gotta be good.”

“Regarding your expedition,” Thorn said, “if you require more information from me, you had best ask now. I will depart this evening on the airship.”

“Aww, and we were just getting caught up.”

“Nevertheless. You of course noticed that I said all the languages on the walls were unknown except the latest. By happy coincidence, my private collection contains a key to translating that language into Old Equus.”

Daring assumed a skeptical tone. “If they’re all translated from each other, won’t that be like taking a photo of a photo... of a photo?”

“Yes, but if the message was as important as it seems, they may have used plain, straightforward wording, and hopefully there won’t be as much loss of meaning.”

“Can’t you just have another copy mailed out?”

“The original is in my vault, and I won’t give anypony the combination for any reason—you understand, I’m sure.” As he spoke, Thorn pulled a watch from his jacket and examined it. “I will take rubbings of the glyphs with me and translate them on the way back. Excuse me, but I must go. Good evening.”

Daring stuck her tongue out at Thorn as he walked away. She had always disliked that some private collectors kept unique artifacts away from the public eye, but had never said so. Some of them were her best customers.

Horizon nudged Daring's shoulder and pointed off to one side with his snout, wrinkles of worry on his brow. Following his gaze, Daring saw a light grey mare, her mane cut short and her face marked by a permanent scowl, marching briskly toward them.

"Ms. Daring Do?" she said snappishly.

"The mare herself."

"I'm Dr. Ivory Tower; I'm in charge of this site. Make any preparations necessary for an extended period of time underground. You will also report to Dr. Lance for your physical examination. Understood?"

"Yes'm!" Daring mock saluted.

Tower's scowl somehow deepened, and she turned and marched away, reminding Daring of a clockwork toy.

• • •

"Try not to let anypony breathe on you."

Dr. Lance was one of those professionals who seemed to never turn his businesslike manner off for any reason. The examination, though not too invasive, had been strictly pragmatic, with no attempt at real conversation on Lance's part. This sudden order was as close to interesting as he had gotten since Daring had walked into the medical tent.

He continued. "A number of the work crew came down with a strain of stomach flu I hadn't seen before, shortly after they broke through that inner barrier. The director said she would have sent the other treasure hunters in without you if that hadn't slowed the project down."

"Maybe it's an ancient virus and they released it by accident," Daring said, with a wry smile.

"Doubtful. At any rate, it's not particularly dangerous, though it can linger if you don't get plenty of rest. And it sometimes comes back, after you seem to have gotten over it."

“Kay. So I’m good for tomorrow?”

Lance signed the bottom of a paper, then passed it to Daring. “As far as I can tell, yes.”

“Far as you can tell?”

“My microscope was broken in transit, and the replacement doesn’t arrive until the next airship, so a more thorough examination is impossible.”

Daring silently thanked Celestia for that, but only said, “That’s too bad.”

A moment later, as she left the medical tent, she silently gave thanks once again, this time for being teamed up with competitors instead of the project’s leaders. After these ponies, she thought, the depths of the earth would seem almost warm.

• • •

Daring was the only one left inside the pyramid when the camp’s activity finally wound down for the night. She had a personal tradition, when beginning a journey, of bivouacking at the head of the next morning’s trail. Though no stranger to the desert night’s cold, she found herself turning over in the dark, thinking of the tunnel whose entrance began a few hoofsteps from where she lay.

What was it that some previously unknown civilization wanted kept safe into eternity? It must be something special—not just valuables or kings’ bones. Maybe, just maybe, it was the find no archeologist or treasure hunter dared dream of: a last will and testament by a culture that wanted to be remembered for all time, and had preserved its combined knowledge. And if they were advanced enough to build such a long-lasting structure, they might have known things no later culture discovered.

This find could change the world.

With that thought, Daring leaped to her hooves, lit the nearest kerosene lamp, clenched it in her teeth, and took off down the tunnel.

It was vaguely square-shaped, with rough-hewn walls, and it sloped downward gradually. After galloping for a few moments, Daring flared her wings and glided down the tunnel, checking her speed only enough to prevent a crash, should a sudden obstruction appear.

On it went. Daring had left the outer ruin’s perimeter some time ago. She reasoned the builders must have used the gradual incline to haul slag out from the diggings. A ramp

like this would be used to make the job easier, suggesting they needed a lot of underground space.

There might be a whole city down there.

At last, the tunnel began to curve gradually to the right. Daring alighted and considered the lamp. It hadn't been full when she had taken it, and if the next length of tunnel was as long as the first, the kerosene would run out before she could regain the surface. She might even find herself in the dark before reaching the bottom. But now that she was so much closer, she couldn't turn around just yet.

She turned the light down as low as possible without dousing it, and stood perfectly still in the darkness. A mild wind from the passage ahead, brought forth by the cooling surface of the Earth, teased Daring's mane. If she listened carefully and emptied her mind, it seemed to her as though the tomb itself was breathing out.

She remained there a while, taking slow, deep breaths of the millennia-old air. She stopped trying to imagine what lay below, instead taking in the ambiance of a place no one had seen in thousands upon thousands of years. Soon, she lost track of time.

After a while, she roused herself, turned the flame back up, and reluctantly began flying back to the surface. Tomorrow—yes, tomorrow, she would go all the way.

• • •

“There's no way you're going.”

As dawn broke, one of the workers had found Daring just outside the pyramid's entrance, vomiting onto the sand. She now lay on one of the medical tent's hammocks, Dr. Lance standing on one side, and Dark Horizon and Ivory Tower on the other.

“It's the same flu,” Lance continued. “If you don't rest, it will get worse.”

“Miss Do, these delays are unacceptable,” Tower snipped. “Mr. Horizon, your team's expedition will proceed as planned.”

“We'll be understaffed...” Horizon began.

“Treasure hunters ordinarily work alone. You and the two others still fit for work will be more than sufficient.”

Daring mustered the strength to speak. “He’s right. I don’t know about you, but I think a tomb that gets opened and sealed up again is real suspicious. You don’t know what the walls say, either. You guys could...”

“How many archeological sites have you plundered?” The director’s tone suggested an unwillingness to argue.

“I... lost count.”

“And how many have contained anything more dangerous than the sort of traps you or Mr. Horizon are qualified to deal with?”

“Well, I don’t know about him, but...”

“Miss Do, you were only invited on this expedition because its sponsors wanted insurance. Now, they want results more. Furthermore, this is an inconvenient time for an allegedly fearless treasure hunter to start believing warnings on tomb walls.”

“Well, Dr. Thorn said...”

“He only said they might be warnings. I am fully confident in the other treasure hunters’ abilities. Excuse me.” With that, Tower marched from the tent.

Lance moved from Daring’s field of vision, and she heard him scratching a quill on paper. Daring heard Horizon’s hooves shifting a bit with... what? Nervousness? Daring closed her eyes and tried to relax.

“If it helps, I was looking forward to working together,” Horizon said at last.

Daring heard his hoofsteps fade into the distance.

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Two days passed, and Daring did not get much better.

Sometimes, she felt well enough to leave the hammock for an hour or two and slowly plod around the camp, either moving amongst the structures or following the hedge of thorns. She did not go into the pyramid, and avoided looking at it whenever possible.

In the early afternoon of the second day, a glint of sunlight off a distant object in the sky caught Daring’s attention, and as she watched, it grew into the shape of an airship. She

smiled for the first time in days, and began making her way toward the landing area. If all had gone well for Dr. Thorn, he would be on that ship, and Daring might be one of the first to read his translation of the prehistoric testament.

When the airship touched down, she was only one of three who gathered near the passenger door, while about a dozen others approached the cargo door at the rear.

They waited. Neither door opened, and no movement could be seen through the portholes, whose inner shutters had been drawn.

“They going to open up, or what?” a brown stallion asked, addressing no one in particular.

Daring saw the door grip move slightly, then jiggle.

“Must be jammed,” the same pony said, and moved to the door.

In her weakened state, Daring barely perceived what happened next. As the stallion reached for the grip, the door flew open, and a blindingly fast storm of black feathers and yellow fur seized him in its talons and carried him into the air, shouting in terror. Daring didn't see what happened to him next, as about fifteen rough-looking ponies, dressed in bits and pieces of light armor and old military uniforms, stormed from the two doorways. Instinctively, Daring flared her wings and reared up. On a good day, she would have swiftly eluded the attackers, or at least put up a formidable defense. As it was, two of them rushed her at once, and while one blocked her sluggish forward kick, the other shoved her to the ground.

Too slow to break her fall, she landed hard, the wind rushing from her lungs and her vision filling with stars. She vaguely heard a drumming of hooves on ground, and angry shouts from all directions.

Above the din, a familiar voice bellowed, “Do not fight us! There are hostages in the airship!”

He had found her again. And this time, he had hired help.

Something gripped her beneath the shoulders and hefted her up. The air around her head filled with the stench of meaty breath. Her vision cleared, revealing Ahuizotl's toothy grin.

“We meet again, Daring Do.”

She spat on his face. “Now you’ve got what I have,” she said.

Though taken aback, Ahuizotl was quick to recover. “What is this? You, of all ponies, too ill to resist?” His chortle sounded like gravel under a door. “This is too rich! Now then...” He slung her under one arm, wiped at his snout with the other, and started toward the pyramid. “You will show us this place’s spoils, or it will be the worse for those in the airship. Your friend, Dr. Thorn, is among them.”

“So, you rushed ‘em at one of the stops on the way, or something?”

“With ease.”

Looking around, Daring saw most of the camp had gathered around the landing area. Many looked angry, and outnumbering Ahuizotl’s mercenaries, would probably have rushed them, if not for the hostages. They made way as Ahuizotl passed, flanked as he was by a mean-eyed tan earth stallion and the black-feathered griffin who had led the attack.

“I bet they don’t even have hostages,” somepony off to the side said. But Daring was sure no pony would risk it.

Slung under one arm, Daring could not look ahead of the little group. She did not immediately see why Ahuizotl stopped a few meters short of the pyramid, nor why everyone present fell silent, mouths open and eyes staring at something ahead.

“What’s going on?” To Daring’s surprise, Ahuizotl dropped her. As she shakily scrambled to her hooves, she noticed everyone present staring mutely at the pyramid. She looked toward it and gasped.

There, in the doorway, stood Dark Horizon. Patches of his coat, mane, and feathers had fallen out, and festering sores had turned the bare hide an angry red. A trail of dried blood ran from his nose and mouth, down to his chest. His glazed eyes stared at nothing. Before anyone could react, his legs gave way, and he crumpled to the ground. His torso convulsed, and he vomited a little bloody foam. A sickly rattle emanated from his throat, and he moved no more.

“Dark...” Daring began to struggle toward him. Her enemies did not stop her.

“A doctor!” the gravel voice shouted. “Whoever is this camp’s doctor, come forward!”

As she reached the body's side, Daring heard Lance's voice say, "Here I am," from somewhere close behind. For the first time, she heard unease in its timbre.

"Tell me what happened to him," Ahuizotl ordered.

As she vainly looked for a sign of life from the mess that had once been Dark Horizon, Lance approached from her right, and, keeping as far from the body as possible, began scanning it with a beam of light from his horn. He then telekinetically rolled it over and repeated the examination.

At last, Lance leaned back on his haunches and screwed up his face in thought. "There is no evidence of physical assault," he said. "It's as though something broke his body down at the cellular level."

"Then it is powerful magic."

"I don't sense any... sir."

"Daring!" Ahuizotl's voice was right behind her now. "What do you know of this?"

"I've never... I mean..." she trailed off.

"Sir," Lance said, voice still wavering, "it stands to reason a civilization able to build a structure lasting this long could employ microorganisms, unknown to modern science, to defend it. If this is the case, we are all in danger."

"Then this body must be burned." Ahuizotl shouted to someone behind him. "You! Bring a quantity of kerosene!"

"In addition," Lance said, "it may be airborne. Quarantine will be necessary. I'm afraid you and your associates cannot—I mean, must not leave."

Ahuizotl raised a fist, and Lance took a few quick steps back. But Ahuizotl seemed to change his mind in mid-strike, turning to jab a finger at Daring. "If I die here, I will see you die first—painfully."

Daring did not answer, but picked herself up and began plodding toward the medical tent, head low.

"Where do you think you're going?"

“I’m sick, and I’m sick of this. I’m gonna lie down.”

Ahuitzotl made as if to stop her, then checked himself, instead nodding to the griffin. “Vlad—watch her.”

• • •

About twenty minutes later, Lance stared out the window of the prefabricated dwelling Ivory Tower had been using as an office. “They’re still inside the airship.” He spoke quietly, so the mercenary guarding the door wouldn’t catch too many words.

Nearby, Tower sat at a folding table, one hoof nervously tapping the tabletop. “And the crowd?” she said.

“Still restless. They’re keeping as close to the ship as they dare. Only a few have dispersed. Ahuitzotl’s guards look ready to fight. Wait. Somepony just came out of the passenger door. He’s talking to the guards. One of them is coming this way.” Lance closed the curtain and stepped away from the window.

A few seconds later, the two heard a shouted command from outside, followed by the drumming of two sets of hooves briskly moving away. Lance opened the curtain again.

“Now what?” Tower asked.

“Ahuitzotl’s crew are offloading the cargo. They’re also sending the hostages out—for less weight, I suppose. They must want to put on extra speed, to get as far away from here as possible.”

“They’re giving up.” Tower’s voice had an undertone of disbelief.

“Mercenaries are only proficient in killing organisms large enough to see. Even if Ahuitzotl wants to stay, they outnumber him. Now they’re getting into the airship.”

The window pane shook as a rumble of machinery boomed across the camp. Lance turned to Tower, expecting her to join him at the window, but she only looked at him expectantly.

He turned back. “Well, obviously, that was the engines. Everypony around the airship is clearing the area. We had better send a message to...” He began making his way to the door.

Tower's hoof-tapping finally stopped. "Well. It seems your stratagem worked, Doctor."

Lance paused, and looked back toward her. "My stratagem?"

"You guessed they would leave if they were afraid of..."

"I only told Ahuizotl the truth. I don't want to cause alarm, but it's possible everypony in this camp will soon die." Lance's voice remained calm, except for a slight tremble in the last word. He did not turn away from the door. "And if Ahuizotl has become a carrier, the disease may spread wherever he goes."

"That would mean..."

"Epidemic, yes." Lance raised a shaky foreleg and wiped a bit of sweat from his brow. "That would make this the first ancient tomb whose curse was fulfilled."

Without warning, the door flew open and Thorn burst in, considerably the worse for wear—spectacles missing, forehead bandaged, wide eyes bloodshot. His composure forgotten, he looked around the room, trying to focus on its occupants.

"Ivory Tower! Is that you?" He squinted at her. "Listen to me! You have to seal up the tunnel!"

"Dr. Thorn," Tower said, "it is good you are relatively unharmed, but..."

Thorn ignored her, galloping across the room in an instant. "Here is the translation." He passed her a single paper sheet, which she took reflexively. "Read it—out loud, please."

Tower paused, bemused, then held up the paper, adjusted her glasses, and began to read.

You should not have come here.

This is not a place of honor. No great deed is commemorated here. Nothing of value is here.

What is here is dangerous and repulsive.

We considered ourselves a powerful culture. We harnessed the hidden fire, and used it for our own purposes.

Then we saw the fire could burn within living things, unnoticed until it destroyed them.

And we were afraid.

We built great tombs to hold the fire for one hundred thousand years, after which it would no longer kill.

If this place is opened, the fire will not be isolated from the world, and we will have failed to protect you.

Leave this place and never come back.

Slowly, Tower lowered the sheet. Grave silence reigned as the implications sank in.

At last, Thorn spoke. “There’s a blank space at the bottom of the last dolmen wall. We must carve the warning there, in every modern language. Then seal the tunnel and pyramid, as they were before. Nopo—no one must open it again.”

“Burn within living things...” Lance pressed a hoof to his head. “So those treasure hunters... And it’s here, too. Maybe in this room. Those workers who got sick—it wasn’t a virus. They unsealed the tunnel, and that ‘hidden fire’ was waiting for them.”

Tower said nothing, standing motionless except for her eyes, which flicked across the page, left to right, again and again.

“Excuse me—Director?” Thorn said.

Her attention broke from the page, and she slowly turned to him. “Yes?”

“Aside from the work crew and the treasure hunters, did anypony else go into the tunnel?”

Before she could answer, hoofsteps sounded from the doorway, and those present turned toward it. There, jaw slack and eyes half-glazed, stood Daring Do. Bloody rivulets ran from her nostrils and mouth.

“Help me,” she said.