

# Darkest Before Dawn



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# Chapter 1

*This was the most important day of her life.*

An egg and a diagram of the shell splitting in two – it seemed like a very straightforward problem. Heck, the answer was right in front of her: pull the pieces of shell apart into two separate halves, and a dragon will hatch. But how was she supposed to move two objects in two directions at once? She knew that it would be even easier, would use even less power, to send a small spark of magic into the dormant egg, bringing the unborn dragon to life.

Twilight had read in a book that the “Come to Life” spell was so simple it was barely a spell at all. The only things necessary were for a unicorn to imagine an object doing what it normally does, to *want* that object to do what it normally does, and to channel that desire towards the object through her horn. It was one of the most basic spells. Twilight had already performed the slightly more difficult feat of magical levitation, so this should be foal’s play. It was just that... Well... She’d never done it before!

*Her entire future would be affected by the outcome...*

*I have to be calm.* Twilight took a deep breath, and pictured the dragon breaking free from its shell. She held on to the thought with all her strength, and then backed up to give herself room to work. *Oh Celestia... What if I mess this up?* She dipped into her magic and tensed every muscle in her body, focusing all her power and will through her horn. *Pleaseworkpleaseworkpleasework...*

Sparks! It was working! Something was happening! *I’m doing it! I’m-*

The light fizzled and died.

Unready to give up just yet, she ran herself through the process again, but this time she wasn’t even rewarded with a watery glow. Her magic wasn’t working anymore.

*Hatch! Come on!* She tried making gestures, glaring at the egg, even threatening it with her thoughts, but nothing worked. She couldn't fail *now*, not after she had studied so hard! How was she supposed to know that it was a practical exam?

*Please...* A small ball of light gathered on the tip of her horn, but petered out as quickly as it came. She reached out again to the place where she'd always felt her connection to magic, and she panicked as she realised that she couldn't feel a thing. She must have used up all her energy in that last failed attempt. Twilight slumped to the ground.

*And she had blown it.*

It was all her own fault for not studying more, for not being more prepared. She couldn't look any of the examiners in the eye. Her parents watched impassively, like they were waiting. She stared down at the ground and sighed.

"I'm sorry I wasted your time."

Twilight envied the ease which they scribbled into their clipb

**KABOOM**

There was a deafening explosion. A booming peal came from outside and the floor shook from the violence of the sound. Furniture threatened to topple. *What? What was* - Watery light of every colour poured in through the window.

Twilight's lingering focus shattered.

Without even knowing it, her horn started to glow.

*Magic!*

She felt it deep inside herself, natural power rushing forth. The energy blasted out from her horn, following the vestigial trail of her last spell. It hit the dragon egg like a lance. The egg lifted in the air - *I didn't do that* - and the tiny baby dragon emerged, floating foetally at first, but then stretching, clearly alive. Twilight yelped in surprise.

The magic didn't stop. It was like a powerful mental dam had been destroyed, and the little Twilight in her head was left trying to ineffectually

stem the tide. Power tingled all over her body, itching and burning. The room grew brighter and brighter to her until she couldn't see beyond the blinding whiteness. She couldn't move. She couldn't shut her eyes, not even to protect them from the painful light. The magic sought strange pathways out of her body, arcing from her hooves and skin. Twilight convulsed involuntarily.

Then, suddenly and oddly, an outward channel made itself clear; it wasn't her horn. The excess power flowed out of the base of her neck, siphoning gradually from inside of her and from her limbs until she could feel them again. The room dimmed, and her pupils slowly dilated until she could see. At first, it was just four oscillating colours and two magenta ovals on a rosy-white background. It was... a face? The longest horn she'd ever seen spiraled from the... forehead? of the... mare, she realised when her eyes were working well enough to tell the difference. Then she saw that the undulating colours weren't just a byproduct of her magically altered vision.

*Oh dear...*

Twilight was staring right into the face of the Princess.

The last of her magic evaporated. Her hooves touched down on the ground. *I was floating?* All around her, magic was undoing itself. While she was in her trance, her magic had done a lot of things without her knowledge. Twilight heard a thud as her examiners, floating higher in the air than she had, tumbled roughly to the ground. Two potted plants in the corner... *Oh Celestia...* They had been her parents, and now thankfully they were again. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a large purple wall on one side of the classroom shrink into a small purple ball. Twilight cringed inwardly at all the damage she had caused.

"Twilight Sparkle," said the Princess. Her voice was motherly and gentle.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean..."

"You have a very special gift," she said, not sounding mad. "I don't think I've ever come across a unicorn with your raw abilities."

"Huh?"

"But you need to learn to tame these abilities through focused study."

“Huh?!” *Why didn’t she sound mad?*

“Twilight Sparkle, I’d like to make you my own personal protégé here at the school.” Twilight’s mind went blank for a minute.

“HUH?!”

Princess Celestia looked at her expectantly. “Well?”

Twilight glanced over at her parents. They didn’t seem too badly shaken from their brief stints as plants. Her father nodded furiously, and her mother grinned, waving her hooves in the air, as if to say, “Do it!”.

“YES!” Twilight jumped into the air out of sheer glee.

“One other thing, Twilight.”

Twilight let out a sound of confusion as she crashed down to the ground. As she lay sprawled on the floor, Princess Celestia pointed to Twilight’s flanks. Twilight turned her head and where there was nothing but a plain purple stretch of fur before, there was now a magenta six-pointed star surrounded by five smaller stars.

“My cutie mark!” This was all too much. “Yesyesyesyesyesyesyes!” she exclaimed, leaping in circles around the Princess. She’d done it! She’d made it! Even Princess Celestia thought she was...

Oh.

Twilight realised that she was *bouncing around the Princess like a hyperactive frog*.

“Eh... Heh... sorry...”

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Twilight could only contain her excitement for so long. “Did you hear what Princess Celestia said?” she asked as soon as they were out of the school. “She’s never seen a unicorn with my raw abilities! And- and she wants to teach me herself!”

Both parents chuckled at that. "Yes, sweetie, we were there," her mother said.

"Ooh! I can't wait for summer to be over! I wonder what the new school's like? I hope it has a big library! Smarty Pants will love it, I just know it! And I bet Princess Celestia is even nicer when she's teaching, did you see her? She made all the magic just whoosh away, and she wasn't even angry even though I made all the teachers float in the air! And she still wasn't mad when I made that big hole in the ceiling and turned you two into plants... Ohmygosh! I turned you two into plants! Are you okay?!"

Twilight's parents smiled tolerantly at her. "It wasn't so bad," her father said, almost automatically. Her mother took a little longer to gather her thoughts.

"I thought it was peaceful," she said. Her father looked thoughtful for a moment and he opened his mouth to continue. "I used to be a tree you know." Her mother snorted softly.

"What? That's not true." Twilight said, breathing heavily as she walked.

"It is so! I was an old apple tree. Once, long ago, somepony cast a magic spell to *permanently* turn a bad pony into a tree, but it didn't come without a price. As soon as the transformed pony had his roots in the ground, why, mine pulled out of it. My branches turned into legs and my roots into a tail." He and her mother walked a little slower for a moment to let Twilight catch up. She lagged behind, breathing heavily.

"My face that you see here, why that used to be the leafy crown of the tree. Your mother and I met when she was just a little filly sitting under my branches in the shade," he said, turning his head to watch Twilight canter in their direction. "I had always given her my apples," said her father.

Her mother tilted her head. "That implies some questionable things, doesn't it?" she said.

Twilight ran through all the reasons her father couldn't have been a tree. When she tried to say them, though, her breath caught in her throat. She gulped air. Sweat dripped down her sides, rolling in beads off her forehead and into her eyes, stinging.

“Aha, well I didn’t think about that then. I was a tree! Didn’t have any more brains than that lamppost over there.” He gestured in its general direction with his horn. The three of them walked up a slope, slowing their pace. Twilight panted, her hooves feeling like they were made out of lead.

“Maybe we should rest a minute,” offered her mother.

“Yes... \*huff\*huff\* that sounds... \*huff\* good...” Twilight plopped down on to the dirt road, breathing deeply.

“If I were still a tree, I would offer you an apple right about now.”

“You were... \*huff\* Never a tree!” Twilight gasped finally.

Her father nickered. “Twi’, honey, you don’t look so hot.”

“Do you need some water?” her mother said. “I have some here in my bags.” Twilight’s mother was always prepared for this sort of thing.

Twilight didn’t reply for a minute, catching her breath. “I should be fine now. Can we just go a bit slower?”

“Of course,” said her father. The three of them walked at a more comfortable pace, no longer trotting. “But you really need to get more exercise. I never see you playing outside with the other fillies. You never know when you’re going to need to outrun something.”

“Oh, don’t fuss,” her mother said to him, her tone scolding.

“And you never know when you’re going to need to debate an unlikely anecdote while marching up a hill!” he said with a grin, ignoring her. Twilight groaned. She should’ve seen that coming.

“Manipulation is much more effective when you don’t reveal your motivations,” her mother said flatly.

Her father laughed before responding. “Well that was a freebie!”

Twilight just stared at the both of them. “Are you two moonlighting as evil overlords?”

“Technically, I’d be an over/*lady*.”



When the three of them got home Twilight was slightly out of breath again, and covered in a film of sweat. Twilight groaned as she made her way up the steps to her house. *It wasn't nearly that bad this morning.*

Twilight's mother was making daffodil and daisy sandwiches for lunch. Her mother generally treated cooking as a mental exercise and a personal challenge, always trying to figure out the fastest and most efficient ways to heat-treat a meal. More than once, Twilight had ambled into the kitchen at dinnertime, only to encounter the portable family chalkboard covered with intimidating diagrams and differential equations. Her mother, of course, would be hunched in the corner, muttering about heat conductivity while floating a parsnip (or some other vegetable) above some arcane device she had jury-rigged out of forks and batteries.

She wasn't able to cast any time-saving cooking spells, and even if she did, Twilight suspected that she would consider it to be a form of cheating.

With that said, her mother's cooking got the job done. Once she had figured out how to cook something quickly, she really *could* cook it quickly. However, the speed often came at the cost of flavour, and she didn't follow recipes too well. Casseroles were burned more often than not, and soup from scratch was always a disaster. Twilight had learned to go to bed early whenever she saw that her mother was attempting to make soup.

Sandwiches, though, were hard to mess up.

Twilight helped by fetching ingredients, while her father washed the used utensils in the sink. When the sandwiches were complete, the three of them sat together at the table. Her parents' sandwiches floated in the air and Twilight munched at the one lying on her plate.

"What's the school going to be like?" Twilight asked between bites.

"I can dig up the pamphlet for you if you want," her mother replied. "But basically, it's a boarding school for talented young unicorns from all over Equestria,"

"Boarding school..." Twilight plucked the last pieces of sandwich off her plate with her teeth. She chewed and swallowed before opening her mouth again – she was eating with her parents, after all. "Isn't that the kind of school where you live there?"

“Well,” her father said evenly, “We’re only an hour and a half away, so you can come home on holidays and weekends.” He nibbled at his food thoughtfully for a minute before continuing. “Maybe you could even come home after school if you don’t have a lot of homework. Cafeteria food can be pretty awful.” His voice had a suspiciously helpful tone.

Twilight’s father’s cooking was much better than her mother’s. Twilight looked forward to days when he found himself bored out of his mind; she would come home to a kitchen filled with pastries and sweets. There would be so much that they would have to give some away to neighbours, co-workers or classmates. Twilight knew that he knew this, and she flattened her ears as everything became clear.

“You just want me to spend three hours walking every day.”

“Curse you for opening her eyes to my evil ways!” he mock-growled at Twilight’s mother. She laughed in response as she fished the pamphlet out of a pair of saddlebags hanging on the wall. *It’s uncanny*, Twilight thought, *how she does that without even looking*.

Twilight spent the rest of the day in her room, poring over the relatively short pamphlet and recalling the events of the morning with a fluttery mixture of excitement and pride. She examined all the pictures closely, and read the words extra slowly, trying to get a sense of what her new school would be like.

She noticed that all the fillies and colts wore the same thing: brown vests with neckties. This meant that she probably would have to wear them as well. The prospect of putting on a tie every day was a little intimidating, but maybe her father could help with that.

Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, said the pamphlet, was focused on getting students into universities and important jobs. Twilight found this a little odd because it also said that the school’s program lasted for four years. Although that was a *long* time, it would be another six years before anypony could hire her to even deliver papers, and *eight* years before she could be admitted into a proper university. Every explanation Twilight could come up with was rather frightening.

With over a month until the end of summer vacation, Twilight busied herself with learning as much as she could about magic, gathering books that she thought she needed for school, and practicing how to tie a necktie.

There were a bazillion ways to do it, she'd found, but none of them were very complex. No matter what Twilight did, though, her knots were always messy and lumpy-looking.

When Twilight found the time to ask her mother about it later, she had explained about the condensed schooling. Young unicorns would be allowed to attend grown up universities right away, after graduating from it, Twilight's mother had told her as she had dug into the guts of a broken purple alarm clock, pulling out springs and cogs.

She'd said that graduates were so well-trained that they were as magically developed as an adult unicorn. Twilight remembered the screwdriver twisting around and around, tightening screws with an itchy squeak as her mother casually mentioned that the school packed eight years of education into just four. Twilight liked school, but she felt like a vise was tightening around her.

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There was a heat wave a few nights later.

When the weatherponies went on vacation, they went in droves, leaving only interns to take care of everything. Twilight, feeling like she was being steamed alive, wondered if they had taken the interns with them as well this year.

All of the doors and windows in the house were wide open to let in a breeze. There wasn't a single lit candle in the house.

Twilight's father was down the street borrowing ice from a neighbour who had a talent for freezing things. Her mother was using her magic to work on a homemade fan, and Twilight was mixing a pitcher of lemonade in the kitchen from one of her father's recipes. Mom's horn was the only source of light in the whole house. Twilight watched her with curiosity as she poured sugar into the pitcher of lemony water. Her mother charged a dozen batteries with a current from her horn.

There was a whoop of triumph as the blades started spinning. Twilight observed in silence, focusing on trying to get the sugar to dissolve in the water.

"Twilight, sweetie," said Mom.

Twilight gave up on stirring the lemonade, and let go of the wooden spoon she held in her teeth. Half an inch of gritty sugar swirled around at the bottom of the pitcher. “Yeah, Mom?”

Her mother trotted up to where the pitcher of lemonade was. A strainer and a large glass beaker flew from the cupboards. Lemonade poured from pitcher to beaker, and then was strained back into the pitcher. Her mother dumped the damp sugar into the beaker.

“Sugar dissolves faster in water if you apply heat and agitate it,” Mom told her as she turned on the stove. The sugar-filled beaker glowed white with magic as her mother swirled it a careful distance from the short flames using short, controlled motions. Twilight received a brief, but informative lecture on simple syrups and why you shouldn’t heat ordinary glassware.

She watched quietly as her mother poured the now-dissolved sugar into the pitcher of lemon-water. Twilight stared at the lemonade. Oily-looking tendrils of syrup snaked their way down to the bottom.

“Is something the matter, Twilight?”

“I ... don’t know really... Why do you ask?” Twilight walked slowly into the living room. She held the lemonade with her magic, doing her best to keep it steady and not slosh any over the sides. The pitcher wobbled and shook in the air, splashing a few droplets onto the wooden floor.

“Well,” said Mom, dabbing at the spilled lemonade with a cloth. “For one, you didn’t immediately ask a thousand questions.”

“It’s just... I dunno.” Twilight said, after setting the lemonade down on the table. She pawed at the ground, feeling foalishly transparent.

Her mother furrowed her brows. She nuzzled Twilight and rested her head above Twilight’s neck in an equine hug. “If anything’s wrong you can tell me about it, whatever it may be. You know I won’t judge you, or think any less of you, or send you to the moon.”

Twilight thought about that last thing for a moment. It was probably a joke.

“Besides,” she said, flatly. “I’m your mom. I’m not allowed to think bad things about you. They’d revoke my Mom license and throw me into Mom jail!”

Twilight’s eyes widened at that statement. “They have Mom jails?” she asked.

“No, not really,” her mother explained. “I’m trying to break the ice by being facetious.”

“Oh.” The two of them sipped at their warm lemonade, and there was a moment of awkward silence before Twilight continued.

“I... when we were talking about the school...” she started. Her mother listened patiently, waiting for Twilight to collect her thoughts.

“It sounded like afterwards, I would be an adult.”

“Ah,” said her mother after a pregnant pause.

“That’s going to happen anyway, though, isn’t it?” Twilight’s father said suddenly, startling the both of them. They hadn’t even heard him come in. A bag of ice hovered in the air in front of him. He carefully tipped some of it into the lemonade and stirred, the pitcher glowing blue. He placed the rest of the ice in one of the fan’s compartments, and the room cooled noticeably.

“Yeah,” admitted Twilight after a pause. “But I don’t know how to do all the important stuff you guys can. I don’t know how to say the right things and to be brave. I don’t know how the sky works or how to fix things...”

“I can’t even make lemonade,” she finished lamely. “I guess what I’m trying to say is... it’s just... that... I don’t really know if I can be a grownup so soon.”

Twilight’s mother swept the smaller unicorn up into an embrace with both forelegs. “Oh, silly.”

“Ack! Squishing... me...” Twilight squeaked.

Her mother released her. “Sorry.”

Twilight gasped for air.

“Graduating from school doesn’t automatically make you a grown-up mare,” her mother continued. “Not even if it’s the best school in Canterlot.”

“And you’ll learn all those things,” Twilight’s father said gently. “It just takes time.”

“We’re proud of you, and we’ll always be, no matter what you do and what you choose to become,” her mother said. “If you finish school and decide that you just want to spend the next four years going to a normal school and being an ordinary filly, that’s entirely up to you.” She gave Twilight’s father a meaningful look. “Your father and I are perfectly fine with that, and either way, it’s four whole years from now.”

“Mmm... We’ll worry about that then,” said Twilight’s father. Twilight smiled. The three of them spent the rest of the evening in a companionable silence, enjoying the cool wind from the fan and their ice-cold lemonade.

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The next week, Twilight decided to make a trip to the library. She’d finally finished all the books she’d borrowed, and she wanted to take out some new ones. The skies outside were grey and cloudy, hinting at rain. Twilight sniffed at the air briefly, and wondered what it would be like to live in a different city or town, if you could just shout up at the pegasus ponies in the sky, and ask what the day’s weather would be. No matter, though. Rain, shine, or snow, she was going to get some books.

There were some young ponies playing in a park nearby. Twilight even recognized a few. She made sure that they didn’t see her, then broke into a gallop to avoid them. By the time she was at the library, the air was sweet and fresh-smelling, and she was out of breath.

Twilight struggled with the library’s heavy stone doors, trying her best to magically turn the knob and pull back at the same time. She didn’t even bother attempting it physically. The doorknob was higher than she could reach without standing on her hind legs, and it was much too smooth and slippery to grip with her teeth. Even to turn it all the way she’d have to either do a headstand, or have the neck dexterity of an owl. Frustratingly, for a young unicorn, most of public buildings in Canterlot had doors like this. After a while, Twilight gave up and rapped on the door with her hooves.

"Please stand clear of the doors," said a muffled voice from inside. The doors glowed for a moment and opened slowly, revealing a friendly-looking green unicorn with a lemon-yellow mane. She wore a sleeveless buttoned blouse and a short skirt that concealed what Twilight knew was a jug with three "X's" on it.

"Good afternoon Misty Moonshine," said Twilight, using her best manners.

"Why hello there Miss Sparkle! It's nice to see you again," the doorpony said, smiling in response. "Come to return your books?"

"Yup! They were great, and I learned lots from them."

"That's good to hear." Moonshine glanced up at the clouds and flared her nostrils. "You'd better get inside before that storm hits, Sparkle. Smells like it's going to be a doozy."

Twilight didn't need to be told twice. She walked quickly into the granite building, the doors grinding shut behind her.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," Moonshine said, before burying herself in a novel.

Twilight peeked at the cover of Moonshine's paperback. There was a large purple duck who seemed to be very in love with a frightened-looking antelope - *Oryx and Drake*, she read. She dropped all the books off in the return slot, and walked slowly to the magic section on the third floor.

The spiraling granite staircase was carved out of the building itself and Twilight's hooves made a resounding clip-clop noise as she ascended. She always felt like she was being too loud whenever she went anywhere in the library. Other ponies her age said that the library was spooky, but to Twilight, any place that held a lot of books was a safe place, a good place.

She sighed softly as she reached the shelves housing the books on magic. She'd only started on them recently, and hadn't even made a dent in the library's magic collection. This wouldn't do.

Twilight picked out any book that looked like it might be interesting. The shelves went all the way to the ceiling and not even a grownup pony,

even a grown up pegasus pony, could dream of touching the upper shelves. The aisles were much too narrow for flying.

Just because she could, she reached out with her magic and pulled down a book from the very highest shelf. Doing this by herself made her feel wonderfully self-sufficient. She skimmed its text briefly before packing it into her saddlebags, not really caring if this particular book was a good book at all.

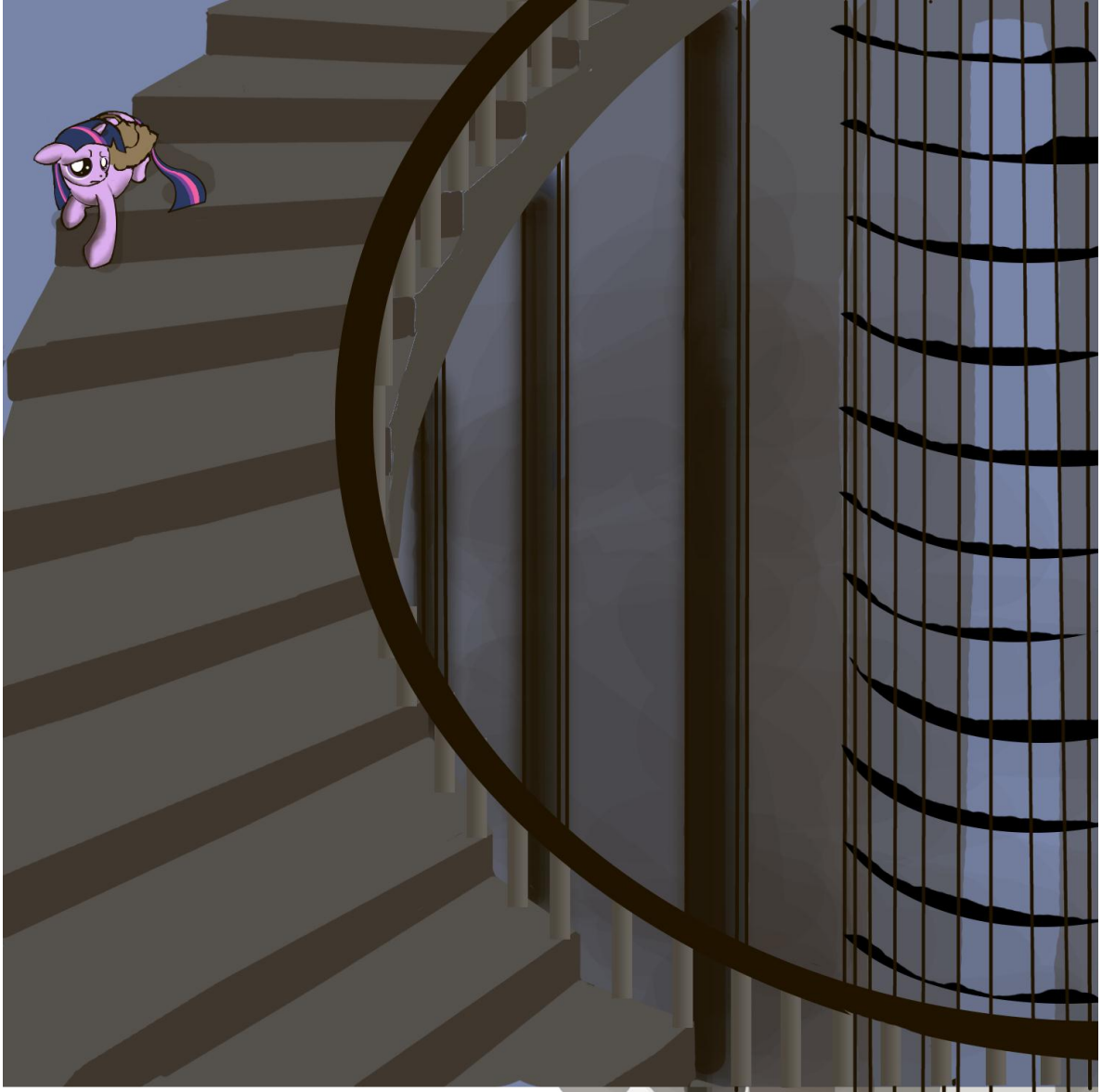
By the time she felt ready to go, her saddlebags were bulging, and her legs wobbled from the weight. She glanced out one of the windows on the third floor landing and saw that it was raining hard outside (The pitter-patter of raindrops couldn't penetrate what Twilight knew to be magically treated glass).

Twilight descended nervously, her left side pressed on the stone wall furthest from the guardrail. A small murmur of sound came from the lower floors of the building. she resisted the urge to take off her saddlebags and buck them down the stairs. And though she considered it, she didn't lower herself on the steps like a foal, resting the barrel of her body on the floor and meeting each new step with two unsure hooves and a shaky shift of weight.

Still, she really wanted to.

Twilight took each step slowly. A scene played out in her head. A hoof would slip, or she would step in *just* the wrong place, and then she would teeter. Her hooves would skitter uselessly at the granite, she would careen headfirst down the steps. There would be a grisly snap and just like that, she would be dead.





She reached the ground unharmed, glad that she'd survived the epic adventure of *Stairs*.

Then she looked back up at them and felt incredibly stupid.

She turned automatically towards the checkout desk, but then stopped. The ponies from the park were standing in the lobby, dripping rainwater on the floors and chatting with each other in low voices.

They hadn't seen her yet. She should go back upstairs and just stay there until both the storm and the ponies were gone. She'd already taken a half step backwards.

“Hey!” yelled a carnation-pink pegasus. “It’s Twilight Sparkle!” A dozen ears perked up and the fillies and colts they belonged to turned to look at her. The librarian sitting behind the desk gave a loud shush.

“Sorry,” the pegasus whispered.

“Twilight, hey! Wait up!” called an orange earth pony in a voice so loud it could barely be considered a whisper.

*Oh no no no...* Twilight thought to herself as she backed up into the stairway.

The earth pony (her name was Marigold, Twilight remembered) cantered up to the staircase to greet Twilight. “Aw, c’mon. What’s wrong? We just wanted to say hi.”

“Uh... Hi!” said Twilight. “I just realised I forgot all my stuff... upstairs. Yeah. And I’m going to be there a looong time trying to find it...” She gave Marigold a nervous smile. “Tell all the others I said hi to them as well, but I really have to be going. Itwasnicemeetingyouagainbye!” Twilight tried to whirl around on a single leg, hooves scrabbling for purchase on the stairs.

Her saddlebags were too heavy. She couldn’t balance properly, and all four hooves went out from under her. She would’ve cracked her head against the stone, but she felt something jerk sharply against her chest. Twilight turned her head, and saw Marigold holding her up by the straps of her saddlebags.

“Ywwllyneedtwukkkwwwgggww,” Marigold spat through gritted teeth. By then the rest of the gang had caught up, and had seen everything.

“Huh?” Twilight’s ears folded back and her cheeks reddened.

Marigold let go of the straps. “I *said* that you really need to watch where you’re going.” Marigold giggled. “Saw you trip right over your own hooves there. Plus, those bags weigh a ton! We can help you get your stuff from upstairs. We got nothing better to do anyway, right guys?”

Most of them shrugged nonchalantly. The pink pegasus, Duncan, pointed at her flanks instead. “Ooo... You got your cutie mark! What is it?”

"It's probably a compass. Anyway, my uncle has a compass cutie mark," said a small blue unicorn filly marked with a brown hourglass. Twilight didn't know her name, but she looked somewhat familiar.

"No way," interjected a gray-maned unicorn – Stalwart Heart. "It's definitely an explosion!"

"Whoever heard of a purple explosion?" argued the first pony. "Anyway, those white things are obviously stars around it and you can navigate with stars so what else could it be but a compass?"

"It doesn't have to be realistic!" said Stalwart Heart. "It's a cutie mark!"

"Does so!"

"Does not!"

"Does SO!"

"Does NOT!"

"DOES SO!" The blue filly pounced on the brown colt. Her neck snaked back and forth as she jabbed at him with her blunt and stubby horn.

"Ow! Ow! Quit it!" He rolled on the library floor, then tried to buck her off. "Stop poking me, you psycho!"

"Not until you admit that you're an idiot!" The blue unicorn grabbed a mouthful of Stalwart Heart's mane and pulled at it. Twilight noticed distantly that the filly was much better at talking with her mouth full than Marigold. *I really have to get out of here*, she thought to herself.

The larger Stalwart Heart swung his head back and forth blindly, trying to knock her off.

There was a smacking sound and an "oof!", but she was only stunned for a second. In a springy catlike motion, she rolled off her side and tackled the colt, biting any reachable flesh.

"Ow!"

No pony was paying attention to her by then, all eyes turned to the fight on the stairs. She "stealthily" made her way to the librarian's counter.

"I just need to check these out quick, please, Mr. Hans," whispered Twilight.

The librarian had his full attention on the distraction by the stairs and hadn't seen Twilight approach. He looked down at her, a little surprised, and nodded impatiently. His horn glowed.

Mr. Hans bent down to touch all the books with his horn, undoing the anti-theft spell on them. "They're due in three weeks," he said automatically, walking out from behind the desk and cantering in the direction of the staircase.

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Twilight was half a block from the building when she heard the sound of hoofbeats behind her. *Stupid! Stupid! Why did you walk in a straight line, stupid?*

"Twilight!" called a female voice. Twilight didn't slow down, but she didn't bother running either; she'd never outrun them.

The blue and brown unicorns pulled up behind her. "Me and Stalwart got kicked out of the library..." started the blue filly. "And anyway we were wondering..."

The three of them walked together in the rain for a while without saying anything.

"What the heck *is* your cutie mark supposed to be?" finished Stalwart Heart. Both unicorns looked at Twilight expectantly.

She sighed. "It represents magic."

"I told you it doesn't have to be realistic!" said Stalwart Heart. The other five ponies had apparently decided that they would rather follow their friends in the rain than stay dry inside. Twilight saw them cantering from the library.

The blue filly sniffed. "Well just because it's *stylised* doesn't mean that it's *fake*."

"You're just mad 'cuz I'm right."

"You weren't right! It's not an explosion either." The filly stuck her tongue out at Stalwart Heart. "Anyway, you're just mad because you're stupid!"

"I was right. Magic is closer to an explosion than a compass!"

"No it's not!"

"Yes it is!"

Twilight rolled her eyes and hummed. This was exactly why she didn't want to hang out with other ponies her age.

The other fillies and colts flanked her on both sides, watching with amusement. To her left, a grey unicorn absently shook the rain off his mane and tail, getting water all over her. Now she was soaked right through her fur. Twilight seethed.

"I bet you still think that foals come from – "

"*Enough* already!" Twilight shouted, cutting the blue unicorn filly short. "I've tried being polite but you ponies just. Wont. Leave. Me. Alone!" Twilight glared at them. Water dripped from her wet bangs and into the mud. "So in case you didn't get the hint - Leave! Me! ALONE!"

"Jeeze, Twilight..." Duncan frowned at her. "We were just being nice."

Twilight didn't recognize the lemon-yellow unicorn colt who spoke next. He looked barely older than a foal and spoke in a very small voice. "Yeah, if you didn't like us being here then you could've *said*." The yellow colt stood next to Duncan, almost seeming to gravitate around the pegasus.

"Jerome says you're kinda a jerk and boy was he right," said one of the fillies, a white unicorn without a cutie mark. Jerome, the grey unicorn who'd splashed rainwater all over her, just stared at a mud puddle.

Twilight grit her teeth in frustration. And then with the worst timing of any natural phenomenon ever, a bolt of lightning arced in the sky. It wasn't far away either. Thunder rumbled through the air almost immediately. Twilight flinched, curling instinctively into a ball, but then she couldn't. Something was tugging her head upwards.

She felt it now, *magic*.

Her horn tingled. She felt her hooves lifting off the ground. *Aw fudge, not again.* Fillies and colts backed away from her, ears flat, pupils little black pinpricks. There was a dull pain in her eyes as everything got brighter and brighter.

Twilight's body jerked involuntarily as a huge surge of energy rushed through her and the world turned to white. There were the shrieks of young ponies, some of the voices cut off mid-scream. She smelled ozone, chemical and metallic.

Last time it had hurt a little. This time it hurt a *lot*.

Her body twitched spasmodically from the effort of channeling so much magic and she lost track of all her own thoughts in a haze of pain.

---

When the glow from her eyes had finally faded, Twilight had no idea how much time had passed. She felt drained, tired all over in a weird way that she couldn't really describe, but at least it didn't hurt anymore.

It had stopped raining and clearly hadn't been for some time, but the sky was still stubbornly cloudy. The damage around her was surprisingly not much, a few disturbed bushes and a slightly dented lamppost that might have even been that way earlier. She couldn't see any sign of the young ponies who had been harassing her all afternoon. She really hoped they had just recovered before she did and had run off.

The air was unnaturally quiet and still.

"...Guys?" she said, looking around for any clue of their whereabouts. The tang of ozone still hung faintly in the air; Twilight didn't know if it was from the lightning or her magic. Underneath though, she smelled fresh urine. Somepony had wet himself. She traced the smell to a spot on the muddy dirt road. Somepony, probably the one who'd peed himself, had stepped in it, tracked it with him, but the trail had stopped abruptly after a few steps. It was like the pony had just vanished into thin air. *Oh no...* What if she'd banished them all to some alternate dimension? Or... or... just made them disappear forever?

Almost as if to answer her question there was a loud pop behind her. She whirled around and saw Marigold sitting awkwardly on the grass, small purple wisps of magic rolling off her body.

“Wha?... What just happened?” Marigold words were a little slurred. In response, half a dozen pops went off around her. Ponies shot up from the grass, waves of violet-coloured distortion rippling through the air.

“Sh-she turned us all into *bugs!*” said the blue unicorn filly with the streak of white in her mane and violence in her temper. A little yellow unicorn colt started to cry.

“I didn’t mean to! It was an accident!” Nopony seemed to want to look directly at Twilight.

The yellow unicorn sniveled piteously, “I wanna go home...” Mucous and tears ran down his muzzle. Duncan got up slowly and trotted over to the little colt. Twilight watched guiltily as the pink pegasus cleaned the unicorn’s face with one of his stubby wings and draped the other wing across the foal’s back. The yellow colt hiccuped and sniffled.

“You made Cavendish cry.” Duncan’s voice was very low.

“What a freak,” said Jerome, finally breaking his silence. “Let’s get out of here before she gets mad again and kills our families.”

Cavendish, squealed. “Noo...” He pulled free of Duncan’s wing and hid behind him, dropping to the dirt.

“I wouldn’t... I *couldn’t*...” Twilight whispered to deaf ears. She hung her head, suddenly very interested in what the ground looked like.

“Go on, Cav. Get up,” Duncan said gently to the yellow unicorn. “I won’t let her do anything to Ma and Pa.” The pink pegasus nudged Cavendish with his nose and Cavendish staggered forward unsteadily at first, but then broke into a run. Duncan turned to Twilight and gave her a very long hard look, filled with distaste. He made an agile one-hoofed pivot and galloped after his brother. Everypony else took off in different directions.

“I bet she blew up her house...” hissed Stalwart Heart to the white unicorn filly.

“Ssshutupshutup... “ she whispered back, ears pressed so close to her skull that her profile was otter-like. “She can proly hear you...” The filly spared a nervous glance at Twilight, who looked back in apologetic shame. The white unicorn squeaked and galloped faster than Twilight had ever seen a filly gallop. Stalwart Heart was right at her heels.

“I’m *sorry!*...” Twilight’s voice broke. She pulled her ears pulled back and held her head low. Nothing was around to hear her anymore except the empty air.

---

Over the next couple of weeks, Twilight studied and practiced her magic. She kept herself busy. She tried not to think about it.

She knew that it was unlikely she’d get in trouble, but at the same time she still didn’t want her parents to know. She didn’t want them peering over her shoulder all the time making sure she didn’t accidentally kill anypony. They would never say it. They would never *call* her a failure. But just them being there all the time... they would be *expecting* her to fail.

Twilight rationalized that if she stayed at home and didn’t leave, it was almost the same as if she had told them to begin with. Summer was coming to an end anyway. It wouldn’t be that long.

It didn’t come up again until the last week before school. She shouldn’t have gotten those books after all. Returning stuff to the library meant that she had to go *out* again.

Twilight planned a circuitous route to the library that cut through a residential area and didn’t involve walking near any public parks or playgrounds. By avoiding the places where young ponies gathered, she thought, she wouldn’t see any of the ponies she’d run into that day, and hopefully she wouldn’t run into any other kids either.

Luckily, nothing really happened on the way. She quickly dropped her books off and made her way back home, retracing her path. On the way back she realised why her original plan wasn’t so clever to begin with. The neighbourhood that she used to avoid the parks was where all those ponies *lived*.



She caught a glimpse of the white unicorn filly from the other day. The filly bolted into her house as Twilight trotted past.

Twilight found that Duncan and Cavendish lived nearby as well; Cavendish didn't see her, mostly because Duncan made it his duty to stand between Twilight and the little yellow unicorn, blocking his view. Twilight didn't say anything to them. She stared down at the pavement and pretended that she didn't notice they were there. She supposed she should have been happy that nopony was bothering her, but instead, she just felt rotten.

---

Twilight used the last few days of summer to practice her magic. She had to keep herself busy if she didn't want to think about anything else. Smarty Pants practiced too. Twilight knew she needed to practice writing without her teeth and the most efficient thing to do would be to combine work and play. It would be perfect.

Smarty Pants' little purple quill scratched at the notebook. Twilight pretended that the grey earth pony doll was inventing very difficult magic spells.

*I have invented a spell to cure all of Equestria of the common cold,* said Smarty Pants, prancing in triumph. *Now it is time to move on to my next lofty goal: Geometry homework!*

"Together we can triangulate the distance of the whole world!" Twilight buried herself in an old textbook, refreshing her memory on some trigonometry her father had shown her. She wished dearly that she had some magic textbooks to pore over as well, but, well... she wasn't going to risk anything like *that* again.

Spending time with her father was a last resort. He would always ask some very pointed questions about why she wasn't doing what she normally did, staying all day in her room or at the library.

"Dad," said Twilight, before he could bring up any other subject. "How do you figure out how big a hippopotamoose is again?"

Twilight's father was kneading a ball of dough with his forehooves, but stopped and cocked his head at the question. "Hippopotamoose?"

“You know...” said Twilight. “The triangle... thingy.” She ran to her room and grabbed her textbook, flipping it open to the page she’d been looking at.

“Oh! You mean a *hypotenuse*,” he corrected. Twilight’s father explained the simple equation to her.

“Oh... But then what about the other sides?”

“Um...” He picked up the dough again and continued to knead absently. “I haven’t really planned a proper algebra lesson for today...”

“But then,” insisted Twilight, “what if somepony kidnaps me and shows me a triangle and won’t let me go until I tell them how long all the sides are?”

Her father made a little choking sound. “That... doesn’t seem likely,” he said, finally.

Twilight frowned. A filly at her old school said that she could get her mother to tell her anything she wanted if she phrased it in a hypothetical situation where something bad happened to her. Maybe she wasn’t going far enough? “What if they *murder* me!”

“By the way,” he said, changing the subject. “Since neither me or your mom are going to be around when you’re at school.” Her father put the springy dough into a large mixing bowl, covering it with a damp cloth. “Would you like to learn how to pronounce any word correctly just by looking it up in the dictionary?”

“*Would* I!”

It turned out that the funny little symbols next to a word in the dictionary were actually characters in an alphabet that was only for pronunciation. There were letters for every sound imaginable, even for ones that she’d never heard anyone use like “voiceless labial-velar plosives” and “alveolar clicks”. The character used for the latter was a slippery one, since she’d always known it as an exclamation mark (or as her mother had taught her, a symbol meaning *factorial*).

Twilight opened up book after book, translating her favourite passages from words into sounds. It was dinnertime by the time she

realised that her father had probably brought the whole thing up to keep her out of his hair, but by then she was having too much fun to care.

“hɛləʊ mɑ:m haʊ wəz juər deɪ,” *Hello, Mom. How was your day?* she wrote on the family chalkboard when her mother walked through the front door.

“You’ve been teaching her the International Phonetic Alphabet, haven’t you?”

“Yup.”

---

Twilight’s parents planned on walking her down to the school on the day before classes started. All three of them carried heavy saddlebags and wheeled luggage. Smarty Pants rode on Twilight’s shoulders. Twilight imagined that she was appraising the cargo with a critical eye. Smarty Pants’ cultured voice echoed in Twilight’s head, *No sewing books, what a shame.*

“Are you sure you need this many books, Twi’?” her father said as they left the house. “The library at your school probably has a big enough collection of its own.”

“It’ll have enough magic bookth for thure,” Twilight said, lipping around the handle in her mouth and pushing the huge suitcase forward with her teeth. She let go of it briefly. “But I bet it won’t have a very big collection of standard literature or poetry. What if somepony else *needs* to read *The Headless Horse* and they just don’t have it!”

“Fair enough,” he told her, pulling a suitcase behind him with his magic, “but just think of how much trouble the trip back home would be.”

Twilight blanched at that. “Maybe it would be alright if I just left some of the bigger suitcases at home.”

“Atta girl,” he said, wheeling the tallest ones back inside.

Stripped down to the bare necessities, literary and otherwise, it actually took a little less time than usual to get to the school.

At the top of the slope, Twilight spun her luggage around, ignoring the looks from her parents and their orders to hurry up and stop wasting time. She clambered on the huge suitcase and held the bag steady with her magic. Facing the bottom of the steep slope she gave herself a teeny tiny push.



Her parents had galloped after her, chastising her at the bottom, but it was worth it.

"Are you sure everything will be alright?" her mother said when the school was in view.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I'm not saying anything is going to go wrong," she said. "I just want to make sure that if anything happens, you would tell us, correct?"

"...Yes?" Twilight said, confused.

"I'm just making sure that it's perfectly clear – "

"Twilight," interrupted her father. "Your mom's trying to say that we know what happened with the other colts and fillies that day you went to the library, and that we don't blame you, but she just wishes that you would *tell* us these things."

"Oh..." she said, cheeks reddening. "I didn't think –"

"No, you didn't." Her mother gave her a serious look. "We've never punished you for things that you had no control over," she said taking a deep breath. "I fully understand that ponies your age have their own lives and secrets that they feel they need to keep. You don't need to tell us *everything*." Her father nodded at that statement and her mother continued. "But when something this dangerous happens, we trusted you to let us know so that we could do our best to keep you safe, so that we could keep all the other fillies and colts safe." Twilight's mother shook her head sadly.

Her mother didn't say it, but the words hung heavy and unspoken in the air: *You let us down*. She had tried not to do it. She'd kept quiet and hadn't let herself out of the house... and she'd done it anyway. Twilight felt like she was about to cry.

"When did you find out?" Twilight whispered, starting to tear up.

"The day after it happened, Twi"" said her father. "We don't live in a bubble you know. We talk to other parents too." He sighed. "No pony was injured and I figure you thought it was no harm, no foul. We were just hoping you would come clean about it on your own."

Twilight sniffled. "I didn't want to worry you..."

Her mother gave her a sad look. "It's water under the bridge now," she said as they reached the front doors of the school. "Just in the future... please do better."

With that, her mother and father combined their magic. Both of the school's front doors shimmered and pulled open, leaving a wide path in front of her. Twilight walked inside, both parents in her wake.

# Chapter 2

The school was empty. Twilight supposed the three of them were probably among the first to arrive. There were some papers stuck to the walls with arrows leading off down a hallway. “New students please follow,” they read.

“Those probably go to your dorm,” said her father, gesturing at the signs. “Would you like us to walk you there?”

“No, I should be fine.” Twilight told them, wanting to be away from... everything... as soon as she could. The worst part wasn’t that they were angry, or even “disappointed”. Her parents had accepted what she’d done. Accepted it like you accept the mud that gets on your hooves, like it was unfortunate, but it couldn’t be changed. There was no point in getting mad at mud, because the mud didn’t care. “I can take it from here.” In Twilight’s eyes, the way they’d acted, it was like they didn’t even think she could possibly understand, like trying to get her to see things their way would be a lost cause.

“How do you plan on getting all your stuff there?”

“I can manage,” Twilight insisted. She closed her eyes and with her magic, felt the space around her father. She saw him without eyes, his solidness, and gently, very gently, *pulled*. Her father hovered a foot above the ground and gently drifted back downwards.

“Whoa!” he said. “You’ve been practicing!”

Twilight glanced briefly down the hallway, following the trail of arrows with her eyes and saw the stairway. She suddenly regretted not asking for help.

Twilight’s mother gasped. “Careful! Don’t strain yourself.”

“Hey!” said Twilight’s father as his hooves sank back to the floor. “Are you calling me fat?”

Her mother looked like she was about to answer seriously, but Twilight interjected. "I can definitely handle a few bags, but uh, I probably need help getting them up the stairs." Twilight peered down the hallway at the stairway the arrows pointed to.

After her parents helped her lug the heavy suitcases to the second floor, Twilight saw that the arrows pointed down another hallway. She turned to her parents who were removing their saddlebags with their magic. "Thanks for everything... I mean, I couldn't have made it without you guys."

Her mother bent down to rest her chin on the top of Twilight's head. "I'm sure you could've taken everything up one book at a time if push came to shove."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Make sure to write at least twice a week," said her father, pressing his muzzle against Twilight's neck.

"And good luck Sweetie," her mother said. "We'll see you soon."

Twilight's father turned to leave. "If you need us for anything, don't hesitate to tell us. We're not far away." There was a pause. Bottled up feelings, things unsaid, they all seemed to hang in the air. This was her last chance before they left. She knew what she did and she also knew that she didn't want them to spend the rest of the year thinking of her like a *foal* whose one saving grace was her own ignorance.

"I'm really sorry about not telling you guys about what happened outside the library."

"It's in the past now, Twi'," her father said to her, but this was the last thing she wanted to hear.

"I know that, but it doesn't excuse what I did. Or rather, what I didn't do. I should have known better... I *did* know better..." She shook her head sadly. "I just... didn't want to disappoint you."

Her mother had an undecipherable look on her face. Twilight was, for a moment, terrified that her mother would feed her a comforting line straight from a parenting book, and then also terrified that she *wouldn't*.



“Sometimes when you lay down a blueprint, the reality of the making is a lot different from the theory of the design. There’ll always be pitfalls and disappointments, on both our side and yours and that’s just the way life goes. The important thing is that despite a bumpy trial you’ve learned from your mistakes.” She wrapped her forelegs around Twilight. “I’m confident that you will be more responsible from now on.” Twilight rested the weight of her neck on her mother’s upright shoulders. Her eyes stung.

Twilight’s father grinned at her. “Twi’, one of these days you’re going to have to stop caring so much about what we think. You worry way too much.”

“I’m sure she gets it from your side of the family,” her mother said, grinning back.

“I’ll miss you guys.”

Her father ruffled her mane, leaving a messy cowlick. “Ditto, kiddo.”

When they had gone back down the stairs Twilight loaded the hefty saddlebags on top of what she was already carrying and was flattened to the ground by the weight. They were much heavier than they looked. *Why did I have to bring so many books?* If she held it very steady and moved slowly she could probably balance almost everything on the largest wheeled suitcase. She would still have to wear her saddlebags, but at least it wasn’t all three at once.

She didn’t trust her magic to be stable enough to hold the suitcase without it toppling. Twilight gripped the handle in her teeth and walked backwards instead, heading in reverse down the hallway after the arrows. The uniform that she was already wearing restricted her movement. She couldn’t move her forelegs as freely as she could before and had to take tiny, mincing steps to accommodate. It made balancing the luggage quite tricky.

She’d been here before, but in the anxiety of her exam she’d only seen the most obvious differences from her old school. She’d observed the sun-shaped sigils on the ceiling and walls with awe the first time around; they gave off a bright sterile light without any noticeable heat. Unusually, the hallway was completely windowless. Twilight supposed that it made sense that a school as prestigious as this could have artificial lights. She

wondered what they used as a power source, electrochemical cells? Magic? Bioluminescence? Okay, that last one was a stretch.

For the first time she noticed the doorknobs on every door. They were a testament to the fact that everypony in the school was able to use magic. The only doors to have them at Twilight's old school were the ones outside of the teacher's lounges and offices.

A deep circular indentation in the wall caught Twilight's eye as she walked past a classroom. She stopped following the arrows to examine it more closely. Her possessions clattered to the floor, momentarily forgotten. The hole was about crest-height of an adult pony, so she had to stand on her hind legs to peer inside. *Huh*, she thought, lowering herself back to the ground, *it doesn't go anywhere*. It was far too geometric and deliberate-looking to just be a broken wall. It was the perfect height and size for an adult unicorn to stick her horn.

Cautiously, she extended her magic to probe the hole. Purple light crept around the edges.

She explored the surface with a tactile kind of vision. Her magic "saw" the world in a way that wasn't exactly sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, sensing certain energies and frequencies that she couldn't otherwise observe. A countless number of viewpoints were centered around the cavity, distancing herself from the two eyes located on her head. It was dizzying to do this and keep her eyes open. It was like looking at a panorama of a landscape and at the same time, superimposing an extremely detailed wireframe image of every possible angle of a single blade of grass; it was also a little like being in two places at the same time. When the worst of the disorientation had passed, Twilight gingerly extended the violet light of her magic into the depression. There was a brightness - crisscrossing lines of light and power, branching pathways looping over themselves recursively. Fascinated, she pushed her senses deeper.



A powerful shock ran down from the tip of her horn to the base of her skull.

Reflexively, she pulled her magic inwards, perspective withdrawing into her head like the tentacles of a startled sea anemone. She gave herself very bad vertigo in the process.

Twilight's magic winked in and out a couple of times, then failed completely. Cross-eyed, she stumbled into a wall, smacking her face into the solid stone.

*"Ow." That was really cool, but.... definitely not doing it again.*

After having a moment to recover, Twilight continued, re-stacking her luggage, then following the arrows down the short hallway.

*It looks like the groundwork of a very complicated spell*, she thought, satisfied.

She briefly wondered exactly what the hole-spell did and how it worked, but pushed the thought out of her mind. She knew that if she kept thinking about it she wouldn't be able to resist going back to investigate. Her horn and muzzle still smarted from the first time.

There was a door at the end of the hallway. Twilight saw out of the corner of her eye that the last arrow pointed to it. Approaching the door at an angle, Twilight turned the knob with her magic and then backed herself into the room, a din of conversation greeting her. Ten feet from the door she dropped all her things and turned around to see what was going on.

The room was full of fillies and colts. Everypony was already here.

*Oh no, was there an orientation or something?* she thought. *Did I miss it?*

She grit her teeth at the possibility, the very thought of being late and missing something important.

There was nothing she could do about it now, but she'd be extra early from now on to make up.

Twilight figured that this must be the area for studying and recreation. It was a large open space with sturdy-looking couches, desks, chairs and bookshelves. She noticed that all the furniture was bolted down to the floor, and some was even bolted to the ceiling as well.

Most of the ponies here were gathered around the sofas, talking and lounging at the same time. She counted eight doors at the far side of the room which presumably led to the dormitories. She mentally made notes of all her future classmates: there were thirteen of them, including herself, more fillies than colts so far, and none of them were dressed in their uniforms yet. Twilight felt conspicuously out of place.

On one side of the room there was a dignified-looking pair of adult unicorns. Twilight observed with the edges of her peripheral vision, trying to

watch them without seeming like she was staring. One was a forest green mare with a top-hat for a cutie mark, the other a grey-black stallion with a single gold ring for his. They lingered around, talking softly to a grey filly wearing glasses, keeping a respectful distance. Twilight guessed that she was their foal.

She wandered off to see what kinds of books there were on the shelves and made it halfway across the room before the grey filly approached her. Everything about her looked plain and unassuming, from the neutral tones of her coat to her black mane and the muddy brown of her eyes. Even her cutie mark, a yellow ladder, did not seem to be very exceptional. Twilight caught sight of the two adults leaving the room. She scolded herself mentally for assuming that all the ponies who came here would look like superheroes.

“Hi there,” the filly said cheerfully. “I’m Echelle. What’s your name?”

“Uh, Twilight Sparkle.” Twilight glanced at the bookshelf out of the corner of her eye. She knew that if she avoided eye contact, pretended to be interested in something else, and made one-to-three-word responses, people would usually stop trying to make conversation. In her experience, ponies her age usually had little of value to say.

“Nice to meet you, Twilight,” said Echelle, looking sincere. She glanced at Smarty Pants, still sitting on Twilight’s shoulders. “Is that your doll?”

Twilight had to choke back the half-formed “Uh-huh” and prevent herself from staring down at her hooves. She knew that she should give Echelle a chance. The ponies here were prodigies; they were the most talented and brilliant young unicorns in all of Equestria. They had better things to talk about than games and music.

Twilight tried to look friendly. “Yeah, her name is Smarty Pants. She has her own notebook and quill.”

“She has pretty eyes,” Echelle said. “I have a bunch of dolls back at home too, but I had to leave most of them behind. Mama only let me bring Merriweather with me.” Twilight watched as Echelle struggled with her saddlebags, flap glowing but scarcely moving. She gave up and reached around physically, pulling out a stuffed pegasus made of red velvet. “This is Merriweather.” Merriweather looked like she had seen better days, but, if

Twilight's knowledge of textiles was accurate, her mane was made of cords of knotted silk.

"What does Merriweather like to read?"

Echelle looked confused. "To read?"

"Yeah, doesn't she have favourite books?" Twilight asked, "Smarty Pants' is *Textiles, a History*. She makes me read it to her all the time. I convinced her to start trying magic books and she likes them almost as much as I do."

"I guess you could say we both like magazines. Neither of us are very good at magic."

Twilight scrunched up her eyebrows. "Did they have you hatch a giant dragon egg for your entrance exam too?"

"Oh no," she said, looking shocked. "That sounds really hard. They just gave me a written and made sure I could do basic levitation."

"*What!*" Twilight was about to articulate, but was interrupted by the looming form of an adult pony.

She was older than Twilight's parents, a vibrant yellow unicorn with steely blue eyes and a blue and purple mane. A pair of smiling suns adorned her flanks. There was a clipboard floating in the air in front of her.

"Greetings!" The yellow mare glanced down at her clipboard and then at Twilight's cutie mark. "You must be Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight nodded in reply and Echelle trained her eyes on the yellow unicorn with interest. Twilight saw Echelle half-whisper-half-mouth something under her breath, but the mare didn't seem to notice.

"I've been popping in every once in a while to see if you had arrived," explained the adult. "Where are your parents?"

"Oh... they didn't come in with me." Twilight regretted that she'd sent them away before she'd gotten here.

“Hm, we will just have to contact them later,” said the unicorn with the clipboard, giving Twilight what she took to be an understanding smile. “Don’t worry. It will not be a hassle,”

Twilight opened her mouth slightly to reply, but then closed it, feeling like she was interrupting.

“My name is Marching Dawn.” The mare punctuated the statement with a curt nod, “One of Princess Celestia’s administrative assistants and acting principal of this school.” She turned abruptly and gestured towards the door Twilight had just come out of, beckoning for Twilight to follow.

There were twelve sets of eyes watching them now, unsure if they were included as well. The mare used her magic to bundle up all of Twilight’s luggage and then swung it effortlessly into the air in front of her. Several heads turned back to whatever they had been doing before.

“I will be escorting you to your living area and explaining to you, the unique circumstances of your stay here,” the unicorn mare said clip-clopping out to the door.

Twilight followed, not sure if she should respond.

“As you know, Princess Celestia has requested for you to be her personal protégé.”

Twilight heard murmuring behind her.

Marching Dawn either ignored it or didn’t hear it. She moved aside her clipboard and Twilight’s luggage, opening the door in front of her with her magic. She stepped into the hallway. “Being princess, however, is a very demanding job and as it is, she cannot devote all of her time to teaching.” Marching Dawn waited for Twilight to step outside before closing the door behind her.

Twilight’s heart dropped. Did this mean Princess Celestia didn’t want to teach her anymore?

“That is why you will be receiving the majority of your education here at the school rather than at the palace.”

That was a relief. This meant that she’d still be Princess Celestia’s student... just not all the time.

“On weekdays you will observe the same schedule as every other student at your level. On weekends you will attend private lessons at the palace. Princess Celestia has some free time between the hours of sunset and sunrise.” Twilight and Marching Dawn reached the spiral staircase and began to ascend at a leisurely pace.

“Does that mean I don’t get to go home until the holidays?” said Twilight, finally breaking her silence.

“That is entirely up to you and your parents,” Marching Dawn told her. “You are a citizen of Canterlot, correct?”

Twilight’s head bobbed in response.

“If you live very close or can arrange a pegasus carriage, going home before the holidays is a definite possibility. Otherwise I do not believe you will be able to make anything but the briefest and most infrequent trips.”

Ah, Twilight had thought as much. She would have to explain this to her parents in a letter.

“But I digress. Your living arrangements are different from the other students. It was requested for you to be situated in the teacher’s living area rather than the student’s.” Marching Dawn continued up the stairs past a landing on another floor. The trek up the stairs would have normally been exhausting, but the principal was carrying all the heavy luggage and the pace they were making was far too slow to make Twilight more than a little winded.

“Why?”

“Well, there is only one dormitory parent per floor, and it was noted that it would require several adults to restrain you, or at least mitigate the damage if you ever lost control of your magic again.”

“Oh...” Twilight’s cheeks flushed.

“Entering and exiting the shared dormitories at night would also be a problem for the other students. Your comings and goings would disrupt their sleep and study. There is no formal lights-out policy here. Students get their sleep when they can get it and are glad when they do.”

“But won’t I be going on the weekends anyway?”



"I assure you, three or four weeks into the school year and you will not be the only Canterlot citizen who decides to stay here for the weekend," said Marching Dawn. "Either way, if you require anything there are teachers in all the surrounding suites who can answer your questions and assist you with what you need." The two of them climbed past another landing on what Twilight had numbered as the fourth floor.

Marching Dawn gave Twilight a quick run-down of the school's workings and schedules when they finally made their way up to the fifth floor. Twilight saw that the staircase kept going up, but the principal walked down the hallway instead. She was curious about the floors above them, but went after the principal anyway.

"Do you have any questions, Miss Sparkle?"

"A couple, yes. Why didn't you just mail my parents about all this?"

Marching Dawn took a deep breath. Twilight thought for a moment that the principal was going to yell at her.

"This was a situation with little precedent. It took months to follow all the proper protocols and jump through all the legal hoops, and we were not entirely sure we could secure all the permissions by the time you arrived."

*She didn't really answer my question*, thought Twilight, but knew better than to say it. Instead she responded with something almost as bad.

"Can't Princess Celestia just do whatever she wants, though? If she says she wants something, doesn't everypony have to listen and then do what she tells them?"

There was a quiet moment as Marching Dawn appraised Twilight, looking as if she was seeing her for the very first time. "Twilight Sparkle, *everypony* has to obey the law, rulers and commoners alike."

The two of them approached a doorway in the hall. Marching Dawn pulled a key from the front pocket of her vest and used it to open the door.

"But doesn't Princess Celestia make the law?" Twilight followed the older unicorn into what seemed like another lounge. The furniture here wasn't as solidly built as the furniture in the student's area, and none of it was bolted down.

“No, Miss Sparkle, I’m afraid she doesn’t.”

Twilight’s mind tried to wrap around that statement as the pair of unicorns trotted to the far side of the room. Surely Marching Dawn wouldn’t lie to her about something like that when she would be seeing and talking to the Princess every week.

“Twilight Sparkle,” said Marching Dawn. “Princess Celestia is the beloved ruler of Equestria, the Goddess of the Sun. She has led us before we could name our forbears and will continue to do so long after our bones are dust.”

These were familiar words. Twilight looked up at Marching Dawn expectantly. The unicorn’s piercing blue eyes met Twilight’s and locked on to them. The floating luggage held rock-steady in the air and did not dip or flag.

“But her word is not the letter of the law,” the principal said finally.

Twilight held her gaze for a moment, but then had to look away.

They walked up to a door with the numbers 508 above the frame. The principal extracted a second key from her vest, lifting it into the air and then using it to unlock the door. Marching Dawn motioned for Twilight to go inside before gently placing all of Twilight’s assorted saddlebags and suitcases on the floor on the far side of the room.

It was a big room. A door to the side hinted that there was probably even more on top of that.

The bedroom was obviously built with an adult pony in mind. To the right of the door there was a huge desk that she was far too short to use. A mostly-empty bookshelf and three fully empty ones lined the left wall, a dresser and wardrobe on the right. An enormous springy-looking bed lay in the farthest wall, right next to a nightstand and under a large curtained window. Twilight had to resist the urge to immediately gallop over and jump onto the mattress.

That would have to wait until the principal left.

Twilight noticed that there was one of the light-giving sun symbols painted on the ceiling, and there were several more on the walls, despite

the fact that this room actually got natural sunlight. The principal saw Twilight looking at the mini-suns and used her magic to draw the curtains shut. The painted suns emitted no light.

“You can control the lights with magic,” said Marching Dawn. “Touch one of the lower suns with your horn.”

Twilight obeyed.

“Imagine how bright you want the room to be,” said Marching Dawn.

Twilight pictured the room filling with a cozy dim light.

“Now send a little bit of magic into the sun.”

The painted suns glowed faintly.

“Oooo!” Twilight was surprised at how easy that was, far easier than any spell she’d ever attempted. “How –”

“The lights were designed around a basic light spell, but the controls are simplified and made very intuitive. Anypony who can use even the smallest amount of magic can use them.” Marching Dawn seemed to anticipate Twilight’s thoughts. “Is there anything else about the school that you wish to know?”

Twilight was worried about asking the wrong things after their recent exchange, but she had so many questions and didn’t know when she’d be given another chance to ask.

“So... what are those holes in the walls? The ones this high,” Twilight lifted a hoof in the air to demonstrate and then twirled her hoof in the air, “with the curly light line thingies in them?”

“Ah, that’s a frequently-asked question,” said the principal. “From the sound of it, you tried to investigate yourself.”

“Heh...” Twilight rubbed the sore spot on her forehead absently.

“The indentations in the walls contain a network of spells that are built into the school,” explained Marching Dawn. “Princess Celestia designed the basic framework almost a thousand years ago, and since then there have been adjustments and improvements made upon her original design.

“Every graduating class makes their own addition to the network. Other than that I am afraid I do not know more about the mechanics than the absolute basics.”

“But what does it *do*?”

“Many things,” she said unhelpfully. “I know that they can be used to control the lights and interior temperatures of the entire building and through them you can project sound through the walls. The unicorn using it doesn’t need to have any specific knowledge or talent to use the spell matrix, much like how the lights operate.”

*The temperature?* Twilight thought, *That sounds incredibly dangerous.*

Marching Dawn looked thoughtful for a moment. “There are probably other uses that I am not aware of, but those three are the most commonly-used features. We have a technician who comes in once a fortnight who is well-versed in the more esoteric functions.”

“What does it use as a power source?”

“The sun,” said the older unicorn, plainly.

“Huh? How?”

“I am not entirely clear on the details myself, but that would be a good question to ask the Princess.”

Marching Dawn clearly did not share Twilight’s interest.

“Speaking of which,” said the principal. “Princess Celestia has requested that you make a visit to the royal palace tonight at seven o’clock. She wishes to speak to you before the start of your classes.

“You can see the palace from outside, of course, and it’s only a twenty minute walk, but if you wish we can provide a teacher to escort you to the palace.”

“I should be fine, but...”

“Yes?”

“So if you stuck your horn into one of those thingies and imagined the school was as hot as a volcano, what would happen?”

The principal groaned.

---

Marching Dawn had placed the keys to both her room and the teacher's lounge on Twilight's night stand, leaving Twilight to unpack her things. As soon as Marching Dawn was out of the room, however, Twilight cannonballed herself onto the large bed, bouncing on it like a trampoline.

“Wheeeeeeeeeeeee!”

This was way more fun than her smaller bed at home. There was just so much room and it was so springy and soft... Every leap launched her high into the air. The particularly good jumps ended up with her scraping her horn on the ceiling.

After Twilight had gotten it out of her system she meticulously unpacked all her books, carefully placing them on the shelves. She made sure to categorize them by whether or not they were fiction as well as by the author's last names. For some reason, no matter how well she organized her books she always had trouble finding the ones that she wanted, but that never discouraged her from trying. The sight of a full bookshelf, books neatly stacked, the scent of paper, fresh and old... it was wonderfully calming.

Nearly an hour had passed by the time Twilight was done unpacking her books. It was a few minutes past eleven, judging from the clock she'd placed on her nightstand. She pulled open the drawers of her dresser, dumped all her clothes into them and then pocketed her keys and left. She made her way out of the teacher's lounge, down the four flights of stairs and out of the school.

It was only a twenty minute walk and she wasn't expected until the evening, but Twilight wanted to make sure that there was no possibility that she could be late for her audience with the Princess.

By mid-afternoon she was cursing her lack of foresight. The trip to the palace was as short as Marching Dawn had said and the palace guards had let her in easily enough. One of the burly white pegasi had even

walked Twilight to the big stone room where she was supposed to wait for the Princess. Still, it was four hours till she was supposed to arrive and Twilight hadn't thought to bring a book or even a snack.

Twilight briefly wondered if there would be time to go back to the school and grab an impromptu lunch. Marching Dawn had told her about how the kitchens worked and although there were times when everypony could sit down for a meal together, they served food at any time of the day, or even night.

If she went back to the school *now*, it would defeat the purpose of her waiting here for so long. If Princess Celestia came out of her meeting early and Twilight wasn't here, this entire ordeal would be moot. Hunger gnawed at her, but she tried to ignore it. Grownups had to deal with things like this all the time. They didn't always get to do the things they liked or wanted, Dad had told her long ago. He said that a lot of being a grownup was being patient and persistent. She would be patient. She would persist.

Her stomach growled loudly.

This was so hard...

It was late afternoon by the time she saw anypony again. Her stomach was more bearable now than it was earlier, perhaps, she thought, because she had gotten used to it. Twilight heard the sound of hooves clicking on stone and her heart rose. She stood up straight and adjusted her clothes, trying to make herself look as presentable as possible.

An green pegasus stallion walked into the room. He had a pine tree for a cutie mark and was absently towing a trolley with numerous cleaning supplies. Twilight stayed standing for a minute, hoping that maybe the Princess might be following behind him. When it became clear that it wasn't happening, she slumped back down to the ground, partly sulking. Somehow, the pegasus hadn't spotted her and jumped a little when he heard the *whumpf* of Twilight dropping bodily onto the carpet.

"Goodness!" said the green pegasus, looking down at her. "I didn't think anypony was in here!"

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to sneak up on you or anything," Twilight said. "Do I have to leave?"

“No. It’s fine if you stay,” he said, pulling a green feather duster from his saddlebags with his teeth. “I might need you to move to a different spot if I’m tidying the area right around you, though.”

With that, he set to the task of cleaning the room, first flying up to dust the tops all six of the large windows, then scrubbing with sudsy water and a washcloth. Twilight watched quietly, trying not to be a nuisance.

“So,” he said conversationally while hovering in the air and polishing the glass of a large window, “you’re from that school, aren’t you?”

“Princess Celestia’s school?”

“That’s the one,” said the pegasus. “This year... Phew. They had us put a *dozen* full grown dragons in the antechamber.”

“How did they all fit?” Twilight had seen the palace’s antechamber on her way in. It was big, but she’d always imagined that adult dragons were *enormous* - the one she’d accidentally transformed during her exam had been, at least.

“Well, it wasn’t all at once, but still! Scorch marks all over the carpets, smoke stains on the walls... Took nearly every pair of wings we had to get rid of the brimstone smell after.”

“What were they all doing here?”

“Eh... I’m not too clear about that. Something to do with all the hatchlings in the nursery, I suppose. They were all gone when the dragons’d left and we didn’t have to clean baby dragon poop off the floors anymore, at least.” He shuddered mid-air. “You can’t diaper the darn things. They kept burning ‘em off. And if you leave dragon poop on the floor longer than an hour or two then it hardens rock-solid. Literally, like a rock.” He grimaced. “Every morning we would have to get out chisels, pickaxes and everything and the... dust would get all over you, in the air, the ventilation... Some of those floors had to be clean replaced.” He shook his head at the memory. “Makes me almost wish for last year’s krakens...”

“That’s... a little more than I wanted to know,” Twilight said, the image being quite vivid in her mind.

He shrugged, which was a surprisingly difficult-looking maneuver in the air. "So, what are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm just waiting for the Princess," said Twilight. "I'm supposed to meet her this evening."

His wings faltered for a split second as he processed that and he left a soapy smear on the window as he slid down a foot in the air. "It's not even sunset yet."

"I've been here since before noon," Twilight told him. "I didn't want to be late."

"You've been waiting in here the whole time... Almost five hours." he said, incredulous, the window forgotten. "Isn't that kind of overkill?"

"I *hate* being late."

"No chance of that, that's for sure."

"Tardiness is tantamount to contempt," she recited. "Being late means that you have no respect for the pony or ponies you kept waiting."

The green stallion blinked.

"I don't want the Princess to think I don't respect her," Twilight explained.

"I can understand that, but since before noon? Aren't you the slightest bit hungry?"

"Yeah... I forgot to pack a lunch."

"Lunch." He looked at her like he half-admired her and half thought she was crazy. "It's almost dinnertime!"

Twilight's stomach rumbled at the mention of food.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'm supposed to have this room clean by sunset, but I'll grab you something from the kitchens if you take over for me until I get back."



“Oh yes, *please!*” She used her magic to yank away his washcloth and scoured the window furiously with it before the green pegasus could reconsider.

As he flew through the door, he called out to her. “Try not to leave suds on the glass or I’ll have to redo the windows again anyway!”

The stallion’s name was Alpine Wind, she’d learned from him after he brought back a heavily-laden food tray. There was a sharp and creamy cheese sandwich on crusty rye bread with a couple of crisp, tart apples and a small mug of cocoa. Twilight’s mouth watered and she dug into her food with gusto.

Out of gratitude she continued to help him clean after she was done with her impromptu meal, sweeping the dust and grit from the floor as he polished all the windows. Alpine Wind, it turned out, had been working at the palace for almost three years. The pay wasn’t bad, he’d said, the food was great and the retirement package was the same as any other government job. Plus, he added, he got to see Princess Celestia every day. The green pegasus claimed that although he may not be something glamorous like a Wonderbolt or a guardpony, he still got to meet some very interesting people. Given the way he’d reacted to her, Twilight wondered if he included herself among that list.

By the time they were done cleaning, every surface gleamed. It was still quite a while till sunset. Twilight was surprised at how glad she was to have someone to talk to and was sad to see him go when they were finally done.

Belly full and eyelids heavy, she curled up with her hooves tucked under her and fell asleep on the thick carpet.

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“Greetings, Twilight Sparkle. It’s good that you’ve had a nap,” said Princess Celestia’s voice as Twilight blinked herself awake. “I’m not sure how long our meeting will take and it wouldn’t do to have you nodding off halfway through.”

*Oh no, what time is it?* She might have slept right through when they were supposed to meet!

“Whar...” Twilight mumbled. “Am I late?”

“I don’t think that would be possible,” Princess Celestia said coyly. “One of my servants informed me that you were waiting in this room all day.”

Twilight blinked a couple of times, her sleep addled-brain processing the words very slowly.

The Princess looked amused and a ripple went down the billowing cloud of her tail. In any other pony it would have been a simple flicking motion. “I came here as soon as I found out, but you looked so peaceful I decided to have a little dinner and let you rest.”

*She was going to skip dinner?*

“Did I sleep past when we were supposed to meet?” Twilight clarified.

“Not at all. It’s actually a little early. It appears you are punctual even while unconscious.”

Twilight stood up slowly, stretching. She stifled a yawn.

“Also,” Princess Celestia added. “Did you know that you talk in your sleep? Who’s this gorgeous stallion who you were going on about - the one with the beautiful alabaster coat and liquid amber eyes?”

*Oh my goodness,* Twilight thought, recoiling in horror. She couldn’t remember her dream at all, but she blushed furiously anyway.

“I’m kidding! I’m kidding,” the Princess said with a smile.

Twilight didn’t know what to expect from the Princess, but this wasn’t really it. She was glad, though, that she wasn’t going on in her sleep about handsome imaginary ponies.

“Anyway, on to business. Did anything interesting happen during the summer?”

Twilight remembered what had happened, what she had said to her parents. She didn’t know how Princess Celestia would react, but she knew what she had promised and what she had to do, no matter how hard it was.

“Yes, in fact...” Twilight said, finding it difficult to continue.

“Oh? Did you go on an interesting vacation or meet some exciting ponies?” Twilight cringed and resisted the temptation to lie flat out.

“I... um... kind of... lost control of... my magic... again...” She did not meet the Princess’ eyes.

“Oh dear.”

“It was an accident.” Twilight’s voice wavered slightly. “I was walking home and there were all these other ponies and they kept talking to me and arguing and then there was a thunderstorm and a lightning bolt was nearby and it was really loud and I didn’t know what was happening and it really scared me and then before I knew it all my magic started coming out again and I couldn’t make it stop and I think I turned all the other fillies and colts into bugs but then it was okay after! I promise! Because they all turned back and they were mad at me and my parents were mad at me for not telling them about it right away, but then I had to make sure I told you or else I would let you down like I let them down and I didn’t want to do that again and *I’m sorry!*”

The Princess looked surprised, and perhaps, a little alarmed too.

“I’m really *really* **sorry**,” Twilight said, eyes full of tears. “It was an accident!”

Twilight flattened herself to the ground.

“Please don’t exile me or arrest me...”

“Oh heavens,” the Princess said. “I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

Twilight began to sob. The Princess put one of her white hooves underneath Twilight’s chin, tilting her head up until the two of them were face to face.

Princess Celestia was old, ancient even, but it hadn’t been obvious until now. For a moment, Twilight felt like she was falling without moving, was looking into something enormous without edges, an eternity that stretched beyond time. Twilight was more than a little frightened, but there wasn’t a trace of hardness in the Princess’ eyes. She radiated kindness

and devotion. Twilight saw now how Equestria could follow her, not just out of duty and tradition, but out of love.

Princess Celestia wrapped her enormous wings around the much smaller unicorn, like a pegasus mother shielding her foal. In Twilight's mind she had a ghostly image of a much larger, less tangible being doing the same to the entire world.

Soft white feathers brushed against Twilight's body, smelling of dew on grass, of too-late nights and pink light just over the horizon.

Princess Celestia's voice was soft as she spoke, "Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

Twilight swallowed the last of her tears. She knew she should be ashamed for crying like a foal in front of the Princess, but for some reason, she wasn't.

The Princess folded her wings and looked out the window. "This just means we need to work on your control," she said. "And maybe take a few safety precautions."

Twilight nodded, not trusting her voice to be steady if she spoke.

"I've seen your magic at work, and it's quite potent. We should probably work outside."

Twilight wordlessly followed Princess Celestia up numerous stairs to the rooftop of the castle. She was just slightly out of breath by the time they arrived.

The night sky was cloudless. Twilight's practiced eye mapped out the constellations in the sky: *Lacerta*, the lizard, *Cygnus*, the swan, *Delphinus*, the dolphin and *Pegasus*... well, the pegasus. Funnily enough, she was partway through *Andromeda* when Princess Celestia decided that they had reached the right spot.

"Here we go. The perfect place to learn to control your magic."

Twilight looked around. It did seem like a pretty good spot. It was wide and open and there wasn't anything fragile-looking, nor were there any other ponies who might get caught in the crossfire of a wayward spell. The only thing that gave Twilight any pause was the fact that there were no

guardrails on the roof. It unsettled her a little no matter how far away she was from the edges.

Presumably, though, the Princess would be there to catch her if she fell.

“Twilight Sparkle,” said Princess Celestia. “Have you been able to conjure up large amounts of magic at will? Or only when you are surprised?”

“I have to admit I haven’t really tried,” Twilight said, then, shyly, “I was afraid that if I did it on purpose I might lose control of it anyway.”

“Fair enough. I will stop any errant spells, so give it your best shot.”

Twilight closed her eyes and tried to mentally recreate the events that happened both times she lost control. She dipped into her magic and tried to send it out of her horn in a chaotic display of power. Her horn glowed weakly and sent off a few sparks, but nothing else happened.

“Um... I’m not sure it’s something I can do on command.”

“How about this?” A beam of magical light shot towards Twilight. Her heart began to beat quickly.

The world started to turn white.

Twilight felt something siphon off all her magic and slowly the sky became an inky black again.

“I guess I answered my own question,” Princess Celestia said, scratching her chin with a hoof.

“What just happened?”

“I apologise. I should have asked permission before I attempted that.” The Princess shook her head, a wavelike movement travelling through her mane. “I simply opened up the barrier between your conscious and subconscious and made your body believe that it was afraid.”

“Oh.” Then to herself, under her breath, Twilight said, “Catecholamine hormones.”

“Among other things,” said Princess Celestia, hearing Twilight anyway. “I wasn’t sure if you knew anything about it.”

The Princess had good ears.

“I read a lot,” Twilight said, by way of explanation.

“I think I have an idea,” Princess Celestia said after a pause. “I can teach you to manage what happens when you lose control or I can teach you to prevent yourself from ever losing control in the first place.”

“Uh...” A pressing question arose.

The Princess looked at Twilight attentively. “What’s on your mind?”

“Is that... the inclusive use of *or*?”

“Yes.”

*Oh, phew*, Twilight thought.

“I believe the best idea would be to teach you to control your magic before you learn to stifle it. It will be much harder to teach you how to manage large amounts of magic if you’re subconsciously preventing it from ever happening.”

Twilight nodded.

“Alright, the first thing you should keep in mind is that magic is supposed to be channeled through the *alicorn*, a unicorn’s horn.” the Princess gestured at her own horn.

“Um...” Twilight said, almost too quietly to hear..

Princess Celestia stopped lecturing, once again giving Twilight her full attention. “Yes?”

Twilight fought to look up. “Sorry for interrupting.” She pawed at the ground nervously with a hoof.

“No matter. What was your question?” The Princess did not look irritated or unkind.

“Isn’t-” Twilight said, trying to find a polite way to phrase what she was thinking, and failing. She considered telling the Princess that it was nothing, but then she’d feel even more rude for wasting her time. “Isn’t that what you are?”

“An alicorn?”

“Yeah,” Twilight said, unsure of herself. “That’s the word I’ve heard ponies use... at least.”

“Maybe,” admitted Princess Celestia. “I prefer to think of myself as a unicorn with pegasus wings and earth pony sensibilities, or perhaps, an earth pony with a unicorn’s horn and a pegasus’ wings or a pegasus with the characteristics of both a unicorn and an earth pony. Still, words are allowed to have more than one meaning.”

Twilight gave a slight nod. This raised even more questions but she was afraid to interrupt a second time.

“Anyhow,” the Princess said, “you had magic coming out of your hooves and eyes and just about everywhere. Preventing *all* magical bleed is impossible, but if a significant amount comes from anywhere but the *alicorn*, it can be harmful to the body and there’s no telling what might happen.”

“What should I do?”

“Don’t try to stop your magic. Focus it through your horn, instead. No matter how hard it is, don’t let it leave through anywhere else. The spell you use, if any, to channel your magic is of little consequence, but make sure to direct it into the sky where it can’t hurt anypony.”

Twilight thought about that for a minute. “What if... um... there’s a pegasus flying by...”

“Don’t aim for him and he should be fine.” The Princess looked around the rooftop, seeming to be scanning for errant pegasi anyway. “I don’t expect you to master it on your first try, or even your fiftieth, but the more you practice, the easier it should get.” Princess Celestia’s horn brightened in anticipation. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Twilight prepared herself for the incoming magic, laying down the groundwork of a light spell in her head and pre-aiming it towards the sky. Light was harmless and even if she hit anypony with it, she couldn’t hurt him or her with *light*.

Princess Celestia’s spell hit her mid-thought. Twilight felt her pulse begin to quicken as the magic filled her body. She pushed it into her horn with all of her lucidity and strength.

It hurt.

It was a little like exercising a muscle she wasn’t aware she had. It was weak, untrained and very prone to overexertion, but it was there.

A blinding beam of light shone straight from her horn right up into the night sky, illuminating the surrounding area as bright as day. Twilight narrowed her eyes to protect them against the brightness before realising, with surprise, that she could see at all. She lost control of her magic then, light turning into hissing snakes that fell to the ground and slithered at her hooves. She wasn’t floating either, she discovered in terror. She dropped any attempt she’d made to restrain her magic and the world whited out for a moment.

“An excellent first try,” said the Princess. “You weren’t sending out any excess magic at all for at least ten seconds.”

Twilight looked around at the miraculously reptile-free roof. “Where did the snakes go?”

“They disappeared when I stopped your magic.”

“Oh.”

The two of them practiced for hours. Princess Celestia looked as fresh and rested as she was at the start of their training session, not a hair out of place. Twilight, however, trembled on her hooves, her mane and coat sticky with perspiration. She had improved greatly after her first try, but after a certain point, she ceased to get better. In fact, after a while she seemed to be getting worse and worse. Twilight groggily wiped the sweat out of her eyes with the back of a foreleg.



Princess Celestia watched her with concern. "I think we're done for tonight," she said.

Twilight nodded, but didn't let herself collapse to the ground in front of the Princess like she desperately wanted to do. It would be undignified and improper. She forced herself to stand on shaky legs.

It was a little upsetting that they hadn't made more progress that night. Twilight didn't want to admit defeat, but she was so tired... It wouldn't be like failing, she told herself. It was more like working on a large project a little bit every day. She would get better.

"You won't like the sound of this," said Princess Celestia, "but before you go back to school, I need to dampen your magic."

"So I won't be able to hurt anypony?"

"Yes. I cannot allow any possibility of the students and teachers getting hurt."

"Okay," said Twilight, trusting the Princess' experience.

"That's it? No opposition?"

"I don't want to harm my classmates or teachers either," she offered hesitantly. "I... came really close to doing that the last time."

"Very well, Twilight Sparkle," said the Princess. "I admire your courage and self-sacrifice."

*Wait, what?*

The Princess' horn glimmered faintly, but it went unnoticed against strange negativity in the air. It wasn't just darkness, an absence of light, but some sort of other negative force - an absence of everything. A tight band of emptiness wrapped around the base of her horn. She could see it now, the not-force in the air. The unconscious connection she'd always felt to magic was severed and suddenly she could no longer see or feel the Princess' spell. She just felt cold and full of nothing.

Twilight's eyes crossed as she tried to look directly at her own horn.

A ring of light slid down the point, stopping above where she remembered the first spell had ended. Then a third spell, a fourth spell and a fifth, covering her horn with a shining cone of spells. She no longer felt the icy apathy she'd had at the start, but Twilight still couldn't feel or sense any magic.

"What did you do to me?"

"I temporarily severed your connection to magic," said the princess. "There are cruder ways of doing it, removing your horn or parts of your brain, taking certain herbal concoctions, so on and so forth, but they're typically reserved as punishments."

"I thought..." Twilight searched for words that didn't make her sound as hurt as she felt. "I thought you were going to make it so that I couldn't harm anypony."

Princess Celestia looked bewildered for a moment. "I did," she said. "The spell will be undone the next time we meet. Your magic isn't gone, just bound."

Twilight didn't know what she had expected; maybe that the Princess would somehow make it so that she wouldn't ever have another magical outburst but somehow leaving the ability to cast spells intact. She felt incredibly stupid for even humoring the idea. If Princess Celestia could do that, she wouldn't bother training Twilight to control her magic. She would just fix her.

"I see," Twilight said, not knowing yet, what to make of what just happened. Would she fail all her classes and be stuck in magic kindergarten for another year? "I guess I should be heading back now."

The Princess began to trace their original path back into the castle. "Allow me to escort you," she said. "You will have trouble getting into and around the school without your magic. We don't know how long you will need to be bound like this, so it would be for the best if I make some changes in the building to accommodate."

Inquisitive overcame both loss and fatigue. "Changes in... the building?"

“You may have noticed holes in the walls of your school. They are not just architectural damage.”

“Oh, Marching Dawn explained that to me,” Twilight said as they walked towards the pair of pegasus guards barring the front of the castle. They bent their heads respectfully at Princess Celestia, who returned the gesture with courtesy. The guards stepped aside mechanically and let the two pass. “She said you could use it to broadcast sound and control the lights and temperature, but didn’t explain much else. She didn’t know where the power came from.”

“Oh, that’s quite simple.”

The road was quite empty at this time of night. Only a couple of ponies still roamed the streets. All of them bowed as the Princess passed, making Twilight feel like she should kneel too. Princess Celestia lowered her head to acknowledge each of her subjects.

“The panels of the school’s rooftop can harness energy from the sun’s light,” the Princess said.

Twilight’s eyes widened. “There’s enough power in sunlight to run a whole school?”

“Enough to run the whole world.”

Something didn’t quite make sense, but Twilight wasn’t coherent enough to pursue that line of thought. Both unicorns walked the rest of the way silently under the moon’s wan light.

When they got to the school Princess Celestia opened the doors for Twilight and allowed her to walk in first before closing the doors behind them. Twilight followed the Princess until she stopped at a nearby hole in the wall.

Princess Celestia, being much taller than an ordinary pony, had to both kneel and bend her neck to use the outlet. She plunged her horn into the indentation.

Twilight knew that something was happening but she didn’t know what. Even before she could cast a single spell, she could always *feel* when powerful magics were afoot. There would always be this charged sort

of anticipation that you could sense in the atmosphere, like the feeling right before a big storm hits. The stone around her seemed to whisper, but there was no familiar tingle in the air. She felt nothing.

“The walls need to know your voice, Twilight Sparkle,” said Princess Celestia, looking regal even though she was bent into what must be an uncomfortable and awkward position. “Please say something to them.”

“Um... Hi, walls?”

The sound of her voice echoed perfectly down the hallway, “Hi walls, hi walls, hi walls...”

“What room are you staying in?” asked the Princess.

Twilight fumbled at the pocket of her uniform with her teeth and tongue for a good while before she managed to get the key out. She dropped the key on the floor and strained her eyes in the dim light to read the numbers. “Room 508.”

The Princess didn’t respond, but after a moment she stood up, shaking out her neck and stretching her wings. “That should be sufficient,” she said. “The doors and lights will respond to your voice now.”

“You can do that?”

“Not me, technically. The graduating class three hundred and forty eight years ago developed that feature,” said Princess Celestia. “Since just about everypony here can use magic, only the odd staff member ever finds a use for it.”

Curiosity overcame tact. “Wow! What else can the school do?”

“There are over a thousand things it can do, although many are just a variation of a single task,” said Princess Celestia. “It would take what’s left of the night to list them all.” The Princess smiled. “Let’s just say, though, that it can’t make very good tea.”

Twilight walked with her as she left the school.

“Thank you for doing all this for me,” Twilight said, bowing deeply for the first time to Princess Celestia out of both respect and appreciation. The Princess put a hoof on her shoulder and shook her head.

Twilight stood, not knowing what she had done wrong. Maybe she was suppose to curtsy?

The Princess looked at Twilight, perhaps a little sadly. "I acknowledge and appreciate your gratitude, but please do not be so hesitant and formal. You certainly do not need to prostrate yourself," she said. "In my eyes, a princess' worth is the same as any of her subjects."

Twilight blinked. Marching Dawn's words suddenly made a lot more sense.

"Good luck, Twilight Sparkle," said Princess Celestia. "I will see you at the end of the week."

She spread her vast wings and launched herself into the night sky. A breeze swirled in the Princess' wake. Twilight peered up into the heavens, watching the distant outline until it was no longer even a little white dot.



She went inside.

“Um... Doors, could you close please?”

The entrance shut itself behind her.

It took Twilight the entire time to get back to her room before she discovered that although it was dark, there was still a small amount of light in the windowless corridors.

Twilight looked up at the sun sigils and saw they were now crescent moons.

*Interesting*, she thought, as she collapsed on to her bed and fell fast asleep.

# Chapter 3

Twilight woke up not feeling rested at all.

She still wore last night's clothes, smelling of wind and sweat. She ran her tongue over grimy teeth.

Twilight glanced at the clock on her nightstand, 6:07 AM – two and a half hours to get clean and ready for school, more than enough. She hadn't really taken a proper look around yesterday, but the second door in her room turned out to be a bathroom.

The strangeness of everything took until that very moment to hit her. She wasn't at home anymore. She'd never had her own bathroom before. For her whole life, Mom and Dad had been there, usually no more than a few rooms away.

Not anymore.

There was a knot in her stomach as she realised how alone she was.

Twilight bit back her anxiety and decided to take her problems one at a time. This was one of those issues that actually would go away if she didn't think about it... Hopefully. First, though, she had to get clean. First... she had to get off her uniform.

There was absolutely no way, Twilight thought, she could undo those buttons with just her teeth or hooves. Just to see what would happen, she tried to reach out for them with her magic. There was an unpleasant sensation as her thoughts parted and refused to collect in the proper ways, splitting and reforming against some sort of mental wall. She could remember how to perform the spell in an intellectual sense, how she'd done it in the past, all the steps in the correct order... Still, it didn't feel right, like the part of her brain that strung it all together was missing.

She fumbled at the buttons of her uniform with her front hooves for a while before giving up. Twilight seriously considered chewing them off the



vest, but even that wouldn't work; she couldn't bend her neck far enough to reach more the very lowest one. It took a while for an alternative solution to make itself clear.

She lay with her belly flat down on the carpet, held her front hooves straight forwards and wriggled while scooting backwards with her hind legs.

Twilight was so glad that no one was watching her right now.

The friction made the vest flip inside-out over her head. It slid further and further, until the bottom hem lifted right over her hooves. Suddenly, the neck hole caught on her horn and the fabric refused to budge any further. Her front hooves were cocooned in the reversed vest over her head.

She was stuck.

“...”

Either she could stay like this all day and skip her classes or lose a bit of dignity and ask for help. Twilight didn't even need a second to consider her options.

She hop-squirmed her way over to the door of her room, unable to walk at all with both forelegs bound inside the vest.

“Open, door.” The door swung into the lounge. Twilight could see through the little hole at the top of her vest-tunnel that there were some ponies in the room. She flopped onto the stone floor. For a moment there was complete silence.

“Somepony please help me...”

She couldn't see anything but she heard the clip-clop of hooves.

“What's going on?” said a deep male voice.

“I tried to take off my vest,” Twilight told him, trying to be as patient as possible. “I got stuck and I need help getting it off.”

From the far corner of the room, Twilight heard a stifled giggle.

The stallion next to her had a coughing fit, one that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

“Ah.” He coughed again. “Sorry, bit of a dry throat.”

She felt the buttons of her vest coming undone one by one. The fabric was pulled over her head and her forelegs were free. She stood up, feeling mortified.

There were six adults around, all keeping very very straight faces and definitely not looking at her. There was a beige mare with an apple cutie mark standing near a sofa. Twilight recognized the mare from her exam. The mare’s face was in a grimace and a corner of her mouth kept twitching upwards.

Twilight forced a smile and grabbed her filthy vest with her mouth. “Um... Thankyousomuchforhelpingmewiththat. Bye!” She bolted back into her room. “Close, door!”

She buried her face in her hooves. This *had* to happen on the very first day.

Twilight took her sweet time washing up, wanting to be absolutely sure all the teachers were gone before she went back out into the lounge. Luckily the shower was similar to the one she had at home, x-shaped handles that could be easily turned with her hooves or muzzle.

Naked and dripping, Twilight looked into the drawer at her other six vests and ties. She didn’t dare try to slip one on over her head.

If she ever got her uniform on, Twilight vowed, she would never take it off ever again. She would bathe in it, be smelly in it, itchy in it.

Clothes just weren’t worth the trouble if you couldn’t use magic.

Her teeth were another problem. Not thinking she’d need it, Twilight had left her toothbrush-glove back at home. Without magic, the little toothbrush itself was going to be tricky to use.

Pinning the toothbrush's handle to the sink with a hoof, Twilight maneuvered her teeth to rub against the bristles. This felt incredibly silly and after a while her neck started to cramp. The toothbrush slipped a little under her hoof, dragging a line of toothpaste across her cheek. *Gah!*

After she was sure she had missed breakfast, Twilight gathered up all her books and made her way up the tower's central staircase to grab something to munch on before class.

The kitchens were cozy looking, filled with ponies who, from the looks of it, were already preparing lunch.

"Missed breakfast?" asked a cyan unicorn mare with a pie cutie mark.

Twilight nodded. "Do you have maybe a muffin or some hay, just anything that's already made that I can take with me?"

"Yup, gimme a sec." The mare left for a moment, walking into another room and then coming back with an orange and a sealed thermos hovering above her head.

"Um, I don't mean to be rude or anything," Twilight said, "but I can't actually eat or drink either of those."

"Whatcha mean? You allergic to oranges *and* coffee?"

*Coffee?* Dad had always said she was too young for coffee. "Oh no, it's not that," Twilight said with a shake of her head. "I just can't use any magic. I can't open the thermos or even peel the orange."

The mare gave her an odd look, but didn't comment. "Be right back then." The cyan unicorn returned with another lid and a knife. She replaced the old lid, and split the orange into four segments, putting them on a paper plate.

Twilight put the thermos in her saddlebags. "Thanks a lot!" She snatched up the plate in her teeth and quickly descended the five spiraling flights of stairs to her first class, *History and Magical Theory*.

The door was already open and looking inside, she saw five ponies dressed smartly in their uniforms, sitting up straight and looking nervous. Twilight kept her eyes peeled for a grey filly with glasses, but Echelle didn't seem to be among her classmates. She glanced down at her nakedness with unease.

*Why do I never show up wearing the same thing as everypony else?*

The clock on the wall said there were still five minutes until the start of class. She devoured her orange slices quickly and walked over to the garbage can with her peels and paper plate. Something hit the back of her head.

Twilight whirled around and saw a crumpled up ball of paper. All the other ponies sat still, not saying anything. Maybe somepony had aimed for the garbage can and missed.

She picked up the paper ball with her teeth and dropped it in the can.

The front row desks were all occupied, so she took a seat behind a brown filly with a wild-looking beige mane. Twilight was surprised to see that the filly didn't have a cutie mark.

A couple of colts strode into the class together and sat on opposite sides of the room.

Two minutes till class starts. Where was the teacher? Twilight pulled the thermos out of her bag. The lid had special grooves for being held with teeth. She tilted her head back slightly and took a small sip of coffee.

"Ppplllbbbtthhh!!!" Boiling hot coffee spluttered all over her desk. Her tongue burned. The thermos clanked to the floor, brown liquid slowly dribbling on to the ground.

Twilight cursed under her breath. Snickering peppered the otherwise-silent classroom. At least she hadn't gotten coffee on the filly in front of her.

She picked up her thermos and looked around for anything she could use to clean up the mess. One minute until class. The second hand of the

clock crawled slowly towards the top.

Twilight gave up and mopped up the coffee with the fur of her left forearm.

She heard another snicker.

She sighed. Definitely not the best first day she'd ever had.

A blue stallion trotted into the classroom, horn glowing. His white mane was styled in a short bob, his cutie mark a golden laurel. A large cardboard box hovered in front of him and floated down onto his desk. With relief Twilight realised that he hadn't been in the teacher's lounge this morning. Still, he looked familiar.

Then she remembered - he was one of her examiners.

A piece of chalk floated in the air and scratched "Mr. Yorsets" on the board.

"Everypony please come up to the front and collect your textbooks."

Twilight pushed herself out of her desk and followed the throng of students. Mr. Yorsets stopped her before she could get all the way to the front of the class.

"Goodness, why aren't you wearing your uniform?"

"Princess Celestia bound my magic," explained Twilight. She knew she was going to have to explain this a lot and she was already sick of saying it. "I can't put my uniform on without it."

Mr. Yorsets stared blankly at her for a moment. Slowly she saw recognition dawn in his eyes. "Oh yes, Twilight Sparkle," he said finally.

When all the students had reseated themselves, Mr. Yorsets cleared his throat.

“Welcome, students,” he said, “to your first day at Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns.”

Twilight reached down to pull a book from her bags and then a pen. She reeked of dried coffee.

“Many, if not all of you, have been told that it is impossible for a unicorn to learn magic outside of his or her special talent.” His head was raised in the air and he held a hoof to his chest. “Here at this school we will teach you how this so-called fact, is merely a myth.” He gazed across the classroom dramatically, making eye contact with all eight of the students.

*What’s with all the pointless theatrics?*

“Any magic can be performed by any unicorn,” said Mr. Yorsets, not breaking his stride. “Some of you will be better or worse than others, but all of you are capable of casting any spell. Once you understand the intricacies of magical theory, all magics will be open to you, whether or not they have to do with your special talent.

“With knowledge, hard work and practice, one can become competent in spells that would normally elude anypony without a natural proficiency in them.

“Magic is not a mysterious force that can only be felt in the heart: knowledge too can set power free. Not every one of its aspects is entirely known or understood, but neither is this the case with any of the more mundane sciences. Magic follows certain inviolable rules and a logic of its own. It is an art. It is a science. Magic can be known and magic can be understood.

“Everypony open your textbooks to page thirty-four.”

No pony was taking notes. Mr. Yorsets had given them very little actual information. Judging from the expressions of some of her classmates, most of them already knew this stuff too.

Still, not everypony was on the same page. One unicorn, a straw-coloured colt with a platinum blond mane, was sitting there with his jaw hanging slightly open, eating up every word. Twilight’s mind meandered,

wondering how dry his mouth must be, and whether or not she'd trade a sandy, pasty mouth for one with a burned tongue that tasted of acrid coffee residue.

"... not only the four pillars of unicorn magic. Who can name them?"

Twilight raised a forehoof. Four other hooves darted into the air. Three of them belonged to a crimson filly with a gold five-pointed star on her flanks. Twilight saw, from the twitch in her remaining leg, that if she didn't get picked soon she would try for all four – and then probably fall off her chair. Twilight lowered her forearm slightly. The other five students had their hooves half-raised, but glanced around the classroom before putting them up all the way.

Mr. Yorsets looked in the red filly's direction and seemed to concentrate for a moment, "Yes, Ms. Gingersnap?"

Twilight hadn't noticed till now, but Mr. Yorsets hadn't taken any kind of attendance or even asked for their names. She counted all her classmates again, realising truly, that there were just eight students in this whole class. Gingersnap tossed her striking gold and black mane. "The four pillars of unicorn magic, also known as the four L's, are the spells: Light, Levitation, Come to *Life* and *Illusion*."

"Correct. Well done."

The red filly puffed out her chest at the praise.

"The four pillars are simply among some of the easiest spells to cast, usually not even needing to be taught. They are also quite useful or even necessary for day-to-day affairs, which makes it highly likely that ordinary ponies will become fluent in them. There is nothing special about the four pillars other than these two facts. Ponies become good at them because of *practice*. Every unicorn has his or her own interests and through basic exercise, spells become better, stronger."

Most of this was already common sense.

*They need boring first classes to get everyone up to speed.* Twilight thought with a resigned sigh.

The lesson was two hours long and by the end of it, the only new information Twilight had taken away with her was that coffee was really gross. After the first half hour or so she had started to fall asleep.

Although it always did the trick, she didn't keep herself awake by flipping through the textbook while the teacher was talking because reading in class usually got her in trouble.

In the end Twilight had done what she'd seen her parents do after a long night of paperwork, and gulped down all the now-drinkable liquid in her thermos. She made sure to do it as quickly as possible so that she wouldn't have to taste it. No wonder Dad had never let her try any. It was awful.

Now her heart was fluttering, she had a headache and there were fifteen minutes before she had to get outside to her next class.





“Here’s what’s gonna happen, maggots,” said Ms. Marie, trotting back and forth in front of several piles of rocks.

Twilight remembered her from this morning as the grimacing beige mare. The sun shone brightly overhead.

“I’ve got a bunch of different sizes of rock here, from little pebble all the way up to boulder. The weights are carved into the sides.” She picked up a cow-sized boulder with the number 800 engraved on it and held it in the air as if to demonstrate. “You runts are going to grab the heaviest thing you can pick up, and then move it across the field.

“When you’re done, do it again, and then after that, again and again and again. Keep doing that until I tell you to stop. Is that *clear*?”

There was a chorus of “yes” and “yes ma’ams”.

The stone flew towards them. Everypony scattered. The boulder hit the ground three feet from where a dark blue filly had been standing just a moment ago.

“Don’t even *think* of picking up something smaller than you’re capable of!” The rock drifted back towards Ms. Marie, clumps of dirt and grass dripping off the bottom. She lowered her voice. “I will know.”

Twilight swallowed nervously, wondering what would happen to her now that she couldn’t manipulate even a grain of sand with her magic.

She watched the brown filly she’d sat behind last class throw a dog-sized rock halfway across the field. The filly ran after it and then tossed the rock the rest of the way. So far it was the biggest thing Twilight had seen any of her classmates lift, but this apparently wasn’t good enough.

“Why aren’t you taking this class seriously, Tambourine?” Ms. Marie asked her in a soft voice.

The rock held steady in the air as the filly opened her mouth to reply.

*“KEEP MOVING THAT ROCK, WORM!”* A boulder crashed down from the sky, missing the filly by inches. Dirt flew everywhere. Twilight hadn’t even seen the rock approach. “You don’t stop until I tell you to stop!”

Twilight winced. The brown filly, Tambourine, obeyed and pushed her rock to the other side of the field with her magic, then started heading back with it the other way.

Ms. Marie followed her, glaring. “If you can lift your rock that easily, *you need a bigger one!*”

Tambourine looked like she wanted to respond, but every time she opened her mouth to say something her rock stopped moving.

Ms. Marie continued to yell. “Go get a bigger rock! What are you, *stupid?! The pile’s right over there!*”

Looking like she was about to cry, the brown filly carted her original stone back to the pile, but it wobbled in the air and kept falling back down to the ground. She’d been surefooted before, but now she kept tripping over her own feet. Tambourine grunted and groaned trying to pick up an even larger weight, one that sparkled briefly and rolled a few inches before coming to a stop.

Twilight flattened her ears in sympathy. It wasn’t fair. Tambourine had been doing better than anyone else in the class before Ms. Marie came along to shout at her. The teacher, though, looked satisfied and moved on to another student, a pastel yellow colt with an orange mane and crossed horn and book for a cutie mark.

Twilight looked around at her classmates and saw that they were all now consciously making sure they looked like they were putting a lot of effort into their magic. Several screwed up their eyes in false concentration and one dark blue filly’s rock, along with its ordinary bobbing, now dropped purposefully in the air as well.

Ms. Marie turned away from the colt she’d been shouting at.

A look of relief briefly crossed his face.

“I can tell you’re pretending,” she said to them all in her low, dangerous voice. Ms. Marie’s huge glimmering boulder floated down from high in the sky.

Twilight and a few others backed away, spreading out, anticipating that at any moment, the rock would come careening towards her.

“You brats think you’re tough? The best of the best?”

The rock split down the middle into two equal halves.

“So good that you don’t need to challenge yourselves? Improve?”

In an impressive display of magic Ms. Marie whittled the rock down into two stone ponies - an earth pony filly and colt.

*“You’re like rocks!”*

Spiderweb-thin lines of light crazed the head of the stone filly.

“Rocks don’t *change*! Rocks don’t *grow*!” Ms. Marie gave a wordless bellow and the head exploded.

Glowing red rubble flew everywhere, barely missing the students, grass sizzling and smoking as pieces skittered around on the field.

“Rocks don’t care about anything! They lay about even when somepony comes along to push them around, smash them up!”

The headless stone filly rose higher in the air. Its left hind leg tore off slowly with a sickening, gravelly grinding noise.

“You can do what you please to rocks because *rocks are dead!*”

The rest of the legs soon followed, ripping off and falling one-by-one to the ground.

***“DON’T BE A ROCK!”***

The filly's legless barrel dropped back to the earth on top of its amputated legs and the pieces of its shattered skull.

Ms. Marie glowered at all of the students. "Now get back to work before I decide to get angry!"

Suddenly, the stone colt heaved into the air and came crashing down headfirst into the stone filly's broken torso. The blank, emotionless expression cracking into the filly's chest again and again and again, rocky muzzle fracturing into smaller and smaller pieces with each blow.

Twilight heard whimpering. By the time the colt's neck was nothing but gravel and sand, she realised that the sound was coming from her own throat.

Panting, Ms. Marie turned back to the pastel yellow colt she'd been ordering about before the interruption. "Look at my face and tell me just how many craps I give about your lack of control! Now, get a bigger rock you little piss-stain!"

Twilight listened in shock. Was it appropriate for a *teacher* of all ponies, to be using that kind of language?

The yellow colt scurried towards the rock pile, ears pinned to the very back of his skull.

Twilight tried to make herself look as inconspicuous as possible, which was hard because she was naked and purple.

There was a filly with a coat of the brightest and most vivid orange Twilight had ever seen, and the filly seemed to have the same idea as her, with even less success. She looked clean and was in her uniform, but wasn't using any magic either.

It was unclear whether the orange filly was one of her classmates. She was taller and ganglier than any of the other ponies and seemed older in some other way that Twilight just couldn't put her hoof on. Still, it was half an hour into class and including the both of them, there were exactly eight students here, just like in the last class. Twilight wondered if she should go over and say something.

Either way, the orange filly paid Twilight no mind, looking at the grass, her own lumpy mushroom cutie mark, sometimes just staring blankly ahead. She never spared more than a passing glance at Twilight or any of the other students.

Twilight watched Ms. Marie order about the rest of her classmates, criticising their technique and inefficiency, although every, “No, lift with your whole body, not just your head,” was accompanied with at least two epithets and a fit of shouting. The teacher didn’t seem to care about Twilight or the orange filly, ignoring them in favour of the other students.

At first Twilight was too terrified of the teacher to start on her homework. After an hour, fear turned into impatience and she began to skim through her copy of *Beginner’s Magical Theory*. Ms. Marie still didn’t pay any attention to her, while the other students toted their rocks and shot her envious sidelong glances.

The teacher was absolutely silent while she scratched at her clipboard. After a few minutes she gave six of the students a slip of paper each. Twilight only knew from eavesdropping on the after-class discussions and by peeking at the other papers that they were the weights they were supposed to be able to lift by the next class. With her book out and magicless, Twilight took longer than anypony else to pack up. Ms. Marie said nothing to her until the students, even the orange filly, were all gone.

“Twilight Sparkle.” Ms. Marie’s voice was calm and even.

Immediately Twilight’s muscles seized up; every hair stood on end.

The beige mare looked directly at her for the first time.

*Is this about me doing homework in class?* Twilight tilted her head up to show that she was listening, but didn’t quite meet the teacher in the eye, not wanting to say or do anything that might cause her to erupt in a fit of rage.

“Until you’ve got your magic back, I expect you to sit quietly at the side and not cause any trouble. Understood?”

Twilight's mouth was dry. Her tongue was thick and disobedient, words curling up and dying in the back of her throat. She couldn't remember how to make sounds.

Ms. Marie's tail swished like an angry cat's.

Twilight gave a weak nod.

"Read or do your homework if you need to."

Twilight blinked at the teacher's apparent mind-reading skills.

"Now scram."

Twilight bit down on her saddlebags and tossed them over her shoulder in one frenzied motion, then galloped away.

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Lunchtime was different.

Twilight had walked past the twenty empty tables that lined the dining hall earlier that morning, paying little attention to them. Now a large chunk were occupied.

The teachers all sat in one area, but not all of them were present. Other than that there was no arranged seating as far as she could tell. All the students, anywhere between fifty and a hundred of them, clustered together to eat in a chaotic, organic way. Many of the older students had food already and took their meals away with them, out of the dining hall.

The fillies and colts who were Twilight's age flocked together from all directions into a shifting herd of about a dozen or so, slowly breaking off to mingle into smaller groups of twos or threes, then clustering back together again around a couple of tables. Twilight didn't know where she fit in all of this. After she returned the empty tray and thermos, she sat at the far end of one of the dining tables, alone.

Four adult unicorns placed covered trays in the middle of every occupied table. They lifted the lids with their magic, then trotted back into

the kitchen. Glazed carrots floated in the air, everypony serving him or herself.

Twilight stared at the food longingly. Her stomach growled.

The ceramic plate was heavy and felt unpleasantly glassy against her teeth as she walked up towards the platter of carrots. Without warning, her right rear hoof planted itself to the ground and she stumbled forward, the smooth plate slipping to the floor. There was the tinkle of broken china.

Somepony nearby sniggered.

Twilight looked down and saw little shards of white porcelain scattered all over the tiles. She couldn't see anything trapping her hoof.

*Come on!* She thought at it in annoyance, tugging at her hoof with all her strength. Suddenly she couldn't feel anything gluing her hoof to the floor anymore. Her leg lifted free. Unbalanced, she teetered, then tumbled head over heels. A sharp pain grazed her left shoulder. She lay there disoriented for a while, then shakily, got up.

A prim female voice came from behind her, "What in Equestria is going on here?"

"Muh?" Twilight turned her head and was face to face with a yellow unicorn mare. She had curly hair of the very lightest shade of purple and a pair of half-moon spectacles.

"What just happened?" repeated the teacher.

"Oh, I tripped... I'm sorry, it was an accident..."

"I hope this isn't something of a regular occurrence."

"Um..."

"You need to tidy up the mess you made, young lady."



“I –” There was a salty metallic smell in the air. The stern-looking mare wrinkled her nose and came far too close to Twilight for comfort, inspecting her shoulder.

“Tsk. Looks like we’ll have to get that taken care of first.”

Twilight peered around the mare and saw a red four-inch gash across her right side, just below her withers. It was bleeding a little and although it didn’t really hurt, her stomach turned a little at the sight. It was just a small cut, though. *What did she mean by taken care of?*

The yellow mare clip-clopped out of the dining hall and Twilight followed sheepishly behind her, consciously ignoring her shoulder.

“Do you know where the nurse’s office is, Ms. Sparkle?”

Twilight shook her head.

“This way, then.”

Twilight trailed after the teacher, down staircase after staircase. Staring at the brilliant-cut diamonds on her flanks, Twilight wondered what the mare’s special talent was. Finally the two reached all the first floor, heading into an out-of-the-way room.

Inside was a dark blue stallion with a bandage over his leg... no, Twilight squinted and saw that it was actually a cutie mark. Without a word, he moved over to Twilight, examining her cut.

“Why are you wasting my time with this?” The nurse frowned, looking past Twilight and at the teacher.

“Her magic isn’t exactly functional at the moment.”

Now he looked concerned. *Sure, talk about me like I’m not here...*

“Ah.” He cocked his head and walked a full circle around Twilight. A soft white light radiated from his horn, then traveled to Twilight’s body, starting down at her hooves and moving upwards. “Just a scan,” he said in what Twilight assumed was his this-won’t-hurt-a-bit voice.

The spell tingled against Twilight's skin, through her muscles and down to her bones, but she bore it as well as she could. She resisted the urge to shake herself off, to physically try to flick away the lingering spell-feeling.

"Mmm-hmm..." His horn flashed and then so did hers.

Twilight's horn itched terribly and then was numb.

"Was this the work of a student?" he asked. It sounded like he already knew the answer.

"If you consider Princess Celestia to be a student," said the teacher, replying for her.

"Oh!" He appraised Twilight's horn with his magic one last time, then bent down to look at her with a serious look on his face. "Young lady, if another student had blocked your magic...

"If *any* untrained pony ever tries to take away your magic, a student, or even one of your parents, I want you to come to me or another teacher straight away.

"With an amateur spell, if you had injured yourself, it could take days, weeks or even *months* to heal.

"You might have gotten a scar or you could have even... gotten sick, from it."

Twilight blanched at that. She wasn't fooled by his euphemism: he didn't mean a cold or an upset stomach, gone after a day or two. She shuddered at the thought. Oozing pus-filled sores, deadly wasting sicknesses, weeks in a hospital bed and bumpy inflamed wounds - all stuff straight out of a horror novel.

"No, no... No need to worry," he said, trying to reassure her. The way he said it, it could be that maybe he was even trying to reassure himself a little. "This is professional spellcraft. All your circulation, magical or

otherwise is in working order.” He pulled a bottle and some cotton balls out of a shelf.

Twilight grit her teeth as he washed and daubed her shallow cut with the stinging liquid in the bottle.

“You should be fine by tomorrow. In the meantime, go get something to eat and if it doesn’t look fully healed by morning, check in with me just in case. Please see her out Mrs. Lonsdaleite.”

By the time all that was over, there were only ten minutes left for lunch. Twilight made her way up to the dining hall with haste, found an empty table and devoured carrots, alfalfa hay and dandelions right off the platters, paying no heed to the stares.

She was starving and didn’t care.

Her eyes darted up to the clock on the wall - three minutes.

Still chewing on a dandelion stalk, she took off again, bolting off in the direction of her next class.

---

One of the teachers of *Science and Mathematics* was an earth pony.

“I call myself Benoit Misiurewics, but you may call me Misiurewics or just Benoit,” said the orange-brown stallion. He had a strange accent, sounding like a pony who had lived or even grown up in a country other than Equestria. He pronounced his vowels slightly differently and stressed different parts of the words than Twilight would herself.

Twilight hadn’t spotted him this morning in the staff room, or at lunch in the cafeteria and he was the only earth pony teacher she had seen in the school so far. He had a fire-blue mane and bright red eyes, and while both were flashy and clashed violently with his coat, neither stood out more than his lack of a horn. It was a while before she even noticed his cutie mark, an extremely convoluted black, white, blue and red curling frond of some sort, spiraling out from the center in several different directions. It was the most complicated cutie mark she’d ever seen. Everything about this pony seemed flashy and outlandish.

The second teacher, on the other hoof, looked absolutely boring. He was an off-white unicorn with a greying mane and beady black eyes. Twilight pegged his cutie mark as a popular model of what a tiny, uncuttable theoretical particle might look like with some sort of base at the bottom. Twilight wasn't nearly as interested in him as the earth pony until, in a watered-down version of the first teacher's accent, he introduced himself as *Peu de la Pouliche*.

Somepony gasped, a purple-maned filly with an orange coat. Twilight's eyes widened in recognition of the name. Her parents, Mom especially, had spoken emphatically about him in a way that bordered between admiration and fearful disapproval. She saw his cutie mark for what it really was.

The second teacher was Few Colt the Blasphemer.

A thousand questions ran through Twilight's mind. ... *Why is he a teacher here at this school - the Princess' own school? ... How did he get a job here at all? What does the Princess think about this? Would she banish him if she knew? Is he going to try to proselytize us? If I pass this class am I going to be a blasphemer too?* Worry ate at her with this last thought. Princess Celestia would renounce her as a student at the very least. Twilight vowed not to let him get to her. She wouldn't be swayed by any of his heretical theories, no matter how convincing he made them sound.

"I understand my name can be quite a mouthful to those born and raised in Equestria, so you may call me Mr. Few Colt if you wish," he said in his dry, mild voice.

There were more gasps. Twilight saw Echelle give a look of surprise from across the room. Twilight had wanted to sit near somepony familiar, but all the seats next to Echelle had been occupied at the start of class, and she'd settled for front row on the opposite side.

Few Colt's ears twitched a little. "This is a large class and Benoit and I will be teaching you basic math and science for the next few months. It will be easy at first. You may know everything we teach you, but I beg, do not take this class lightly. We will move quickly and it will get much more difficult as we go along. That is fair warning, no?"

The first teacher, the earth pony, took over then, going over addition, subtraction and multiplication tables, making sure everypony understood the simplest and most elementary arithmetic. Few Colt wrote on the large chalkboard for him as he spoke, the two almost seeming to have one mind.

“Mr. Wicks?” asked the orange filly who’d recognized his birth name. She had a hoof in the air.

The earth pony sighed. “*Misiurewics*, not Monsieurwics, *especially* not Misterwics. As in Mister Misiurewics,” he said, correcting her. “If you can not say it, please call me Benoit.”

“Okay Mister Benoit,” she said, undeterred. “Why do we have to learn this garbage, anyway? This isn’t sit-there-and-do-equations school.”

Twilight stared at the filly in disbelief. How could the filly who’d first recognised him not know the answer to that question? How could she be so... so... *disrespectful*?

Mr. Benoit looked like he was about to reply.

Few Colt, however, did not give him the chance. “Math has to do with everything! It is the only purely objective field of study that exists. If you want to go into magical research you will need to know numbers as well as any mathematician.”

The filly crossed her forehooves, looking unimpressed.

“If you don’t want to learn math, leave this school, then! Go be some dockworker’s apprentice!”

Misiurewics cleared his throat and flicked his tail. “Maths is on the... *programme* of all schools, no?”

The orange filly cocked her head slightly.

“Whether you are at this school or not, you have to learn maths. It is a requirement. If you have more questions, see me after class if you please, mademoiselle Sky.”

Twilight heard Few Colt mutter something under his breath, but couldn't make out the words.

She didn't like him. He was too touchy and Twilight had a feeling that he didn't like kids at all. She still didn't know why he was here. She didn't *want* him to be here.

Unfortunately, the class was a long one, a four-hour double block of math and science with only a fifteen-minute recess in-between. Four hours every other day for him to whisper his heresies to them, far too long, in Twilight's opinion.

Twilight ached to leave after the first two hours when she was used to seeing the end of a school day. Over the course of the class her cut scabbed over, skin knitting together, becoming whole again, all the while feeling raw and itchy as healing wounds are wont to do. It was hard paying attention to Mr. Benoit's lesson on long division when her shoulder prickled the way it did. The other students shifted impatiently in their chairs until the end-of-the-day bell rang, probably feeling the nine-hour school day just as keenly as she did herself.

After rubbing off the scab, a thin red line underneath her fur was all that was left of her cut by class' end, a thin red line that, in Twilight's experience, would hopefully fade to nothing by breakfast. She was glad the Princess' spell hadn't made her sick or anything.

Twilight had learned from her previous dining attempts and just went straight to the kitchen an hour before dinner would be served. A different unicorn provided her with a flask of hot soup and some dinner rolls that she could take up to her room to eat while she chipped away at her already-sizable amount of homework.

Later that night, while using her pinned-down toothbrush workaround, Twilight had smeared her face with toothpaste three times and poked herself in the nostril only once. She saw it as a great improvement over that morning's attempt.

She meant to go back home that evening to grab her toothbrush hoof glove. She really did.

By the time Twilight was finished with all the assigned reading and math problems, though, the sun had set long ago and she felt sleepy and lazy. *Maybe tomorrow*, she thought to herself with a yawn.

---

The first class the next day was taught by a pinkish-brown mare named Mrs. Lida. Her mane was fiery red and her cutie mark was a scroll, which set in Twilight's mind, the disquieting idea of burning books.

"Raise your hoof if you like reading!" the teacher said cheerily, in a voice more often reserved for much younger students. There were over a dozen hooves in the air.

Sky, who Twilight remembered not entirely fondly from *Science and Mathematics*, was one of the few who had all four hooves planted firmly on the ground. She looked bored.

Textbooks floated in sixteen different directions, one to every student. Then, more books flew at them, novels, poetry compilations and short story anthologies. By the time the teacher was through, there were no fewer than a dozen books on each desk.

Twilight wondered how she was supposed to fit all of them in her saddlebags.

"Take good care of these. You'll be needing them for the rest of the semester, but the sooner you get started on them the better." She smiled brightly. "Now who knows what a gerund is?"

A crimson hoof waved eagerly in the air. "Ooo! Ooo! Me! I know!"

---

Twilight didn't know what she expected from *Practical Application*, but it definitely wasn't this.

The teacher, the one who had taken her to the nurse the other day, offered no textbooks to them. Instead she had all the students write out a list of their skills, even the ones that had nothing to do with magic. She made them put down absolutely everything, even things that were stupid,

like how Ace, the easily-awed colt from *History and Magical Theory*, could walk on his hind legs for three hours straight.

Mrs. Lonsdaleite kept encouraging them with the words, “Always know your limits, but never forget what you’re capable of.”

After they were done with the lists, Mrs. Lonsdaleite made up scenarios and imaginary problems, getting the entire class to brainstorm the best ways to solve them.

“Now if a horde of zombies was at your door, what would you do?” Mrs. Lonsdaleite asked one student, a black-furred colt with a mane of red, yellow and blue.

The two of them had a back and forth relay of questions and answers, determining that the building had windows on every floor, that the zombies could walk but not run and that it was indeterminate if they were intelligent. Strangely, the teacher did not lose patience with all the colt’s questions.

“Umm... Okay,” he said. “First I think I’d go up to a second floor window and ask them if they’re friendly or not. If they respond and it turns out they’re friendly, I invite them in for tea.

“If I don’t get an answer I’ll assume they’re stupid zombies that want to eat me. Then I’ll lure them into the house through the front door and lock them into a room without windows.

“If it turns out they’re smart *and* hostile, I’ll try to reason with them, and if that doesn’t work I can run out through the back door because even though they’re intelligent, they can only walk so they can’t catch me.”

The teacher looked pleased. “Well done, Nightbreaker!” She turned to the rest of the class. “That is an excellent use of problem-solving skills. Everypony else should be taking a leaf out of Mr. Nightbreaker’s book.”

The black colt smiled shyly.



“First find out the most important information relevant to your situation, then use your knowledge, terrain and skills to your own advantage.”

“It wasn’t that great,” said Gingersnap, sulkily. “What if the zombies are tireless and can chase him until he gets so pooped that he can’t run anymore? Or what if it turns out they were only pretending they were stupid or nice so that they could ambush him? I mean, if the zombies were smart at all then they would say they were friendly whether they were or not! Or what if -”

“That’s quite enough, Ms. Gingersnap,” the teacher said, cutting her off. “Those are good observations, but most of those consequences can only come into play after any given action. Like I said, Mr. Nightbreaker’s was an *excellent* example, not a perfect one.”

“What would be a perfect example then?” the filly asked.

Twilight heard Sky’s voice piping up from across the room, “Burn them all to the ground!”

“Call the royal guard!” Gingersnap added, not wanting to be out-done.

A chestnut-coloured colt with a bright green mane decided to add in his two bits as well. “Explode them!” he yelled enthusiastically.

There was an eruption of voices. Just about everypony in the class wanted to find the one perfect solution for what to do with the zombies. Colts and fillies shouted left and right, guessing at the single correct answer. Twilight tried to make herself heard over the other students, insisting that maggots, scarab beetles or some other carrion eaters should be released upon the zombies. Beside her, Echelle was saying something about a machete.

“Settle down, class,” ordered Ms. Lonsdaleite. “If you continue to make such a ruckus I will put you *all* in detention!” The class went quiet abruptly.

“Nearly all of your suggestions were absolutely useless. How are you supposed to call the royal guard if you don’t know if you have a radio and

can't leave your house? Useless! Where would you even find an ursa major to squash all of them? Useless! Do most ponies have scarab beetles or vultures tucked away in their homes somewhere? Worthless!

"Which of you has enough power or skill to ignite an entire horde of zombies? If you can't do it with magic, where are you going to get the materials to start the fire and how would you get it on the zombies? It's a stupid idea at best and a dangerous one at worst. Likewise, Demise, can *you*, *you personally*, set off an explosion large enough to destroy all of them?"

Twilight saw a tall orange filly next to Echelle stare down at her hooves, looking utterly miserable. She was the same filly from Ms. Marie's class, the one who wasn't doing magic. Twilight tried to remember if the tall filly had suggested anything, but her mind drew a blank.

"You are all forgetting that whatever you may be facing, there is always a reason that it's doing whatever it's doing. By trying to destroy the first strange thing you see, without even an attempt to learn its motives, you behave as monsters."

The classroom settled into a shamed silence. Mrs. Lonsdaleite gave them all a stern look. "There is no perfect solution. There is *never* a perfect solution to life's problems."

Twilight sighed in disappointment. She wasn't the only one.

"Still, one must always do one's best."

The class continued on - noticeably, with less enthusiasm.

---

After an abrupt lunch, which Twilight ate in her own room, she made the trek to *Notation, Reading and Casting*. She had been looking forward to this class since Marching Dawn had given her a class schedule.

The teacher was a grey stallion with darker grey hair and purple eyes. There were a couple of music notes on his flanks.

“I’m Jazz,” he said simply. His voice was very familiar. “Oh hey! Vest-girl!”

Twilight’s cheeks reddened, hooves clacking together as she used them to cover her face.

“Nah, it’s cool,” he said with a slight nod. “Could’ve happened to anypony. Reminds me of this one time I had waaay too much to drink and I woke up with my underwear on my head. I still don’t know how that happened.”

Twilight blinked. *Is this appropriate?*

“Oh yeah. Sorry. Class.” He turned around to face all the other students, who were staring at him with slightly confused looks. “Okay guys, I’m gonna teach you all to read spells and stuff. Look into your heart and know everything is real or something like that. Yadda yadda, so on and so forth. Anyone have any questions?”

“Uh,” said Twilight, “aren’t you supposed to be teaching us?”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

“Um... Not really,” a midnight blue filly added, looking more than a little perplexed.

“Well what do you want to know?”

The filly raised her eyebrows. “How to read spellbooks I guess?”

“Oh yeah, that’s easy.”

With a lazy flick of his horn, a desk drawer opened and a book flew out. The book hung in the air, flipping wildly before settling on a seemingly random page.

“Each of the squiggly little symbol things is called a glyph and they all represent different things.”

*Squiggly little symbol things*, Twilight thought.

“It’s sorta how like the alphabet has different letters you can use to represent different sounds, except there’re more of them with magic... and instead of sounds the little marks represent spell formations and stuff” Jazz copied a huge symbol to the chalkboard. “See that swooshy line there?”

The students watched as he traced a part of the glyph in the air using his magic, leaving a large glowing curve right beside him.

“That means to push your magic downwards to the pit of your stomach, or to wherever the heck you get your emotions from. Your liver? Brain maybe? Wait no... that would be up? Dunno. Then this pointy thing here —”

*Wherever the heck you get your emotions from,* Twilight repeated flatly in her head. *This pointy thing.*

He moved his horn upwards, then downwards in a jerky motion, drawing out and adding a different section of the glyph to the first with another line of magic. “That’s to get send all the magic and junk out of your horn.”

*The magic and junk?*

“The kinda dash, hyphen... thingy over there, that’s to tell you that you gotta keep going and do more magic after.” He went over the other three glyphs in the sequence in pretty much the same manner. “...and then you string them together to create a whole spell.”

Twilight gaped at the teacher in disbelief. With all the references to thingies, whatsits, doodads and whangdoodles, she wondered if he knew anything at all about what he was teaching.

One thing that could be said in Jazz’s credit, or perhaps to his demerit, was that he answered any question anypony asked him, no matter what it was. At one point a pale amber filly had asked a classmate, a little too loudly, if he was on drugs. Jazz overheard, shrugged and replied, “Not today.”

Later on, Tambourine asked what crawled up Ms. Marie's butt and died.

His response was just, "I dunno. She's really not that bad if you get to know her. I think there might've been one of those little new potato things once, but I can't remember if that was actually Ingrid or Cloudy Skies... Uh, don't tell her I told you that."

Twilight tried to steer the discussion back on track, asking him about the names of the different things that made up a glyph, and what certain ones did, but the other students kept firing their stupid queries at him, about other teachers and his past, all sorts of things like that.

When class had ended, Twilight had learned far more about Jazz's misspent youth than she ever cared to know, and far less about magical notation than she had ever hoped of learning.

She was exasperated and tired, more than ready to call it a day by then, but she had one more class left, *Control and Practical Precision*. It was a lot like *Mental and Physical Education*, all things considered.

Twilight had to sit out the entire class, spending the whole time watching the teacher, a pinkish-purple mare named Ms. North Star, instruct her classmates on how to pull off delicate and finicky magical maneuvers.

The tall, orange filly was in her class again. She still stood there, off to the side like Twilight, silent, not doing any magic. Without Ms. Marie there, Twilight felt like she should at least introduce herself, since it seemed like they were going to be partners in this game of standing there and not getting in the way of lessons.

"Hi there," Twilight said. She smiled in a way that she hoped looked friendly.

"Hi." The tall filly's voice sounded a little raspy. She looked at Twilight and then quickly looked away.

"I'm Twilight Sparkle."

"Rune."

Twilight searched for something to say, "Uh... Nice to meet you."

"Same here."

*Aha.* Twilight recognized her own trick.

She was about to call Rune out, but just then somepony nearby lost control of the potato he or she was supposed to be peeling. The spud sailed through the air, hitting Twilight in the rump.

"Ow!" She could feel her leg starting to bruise.

"Careful there, Belaq," said Ms. North Star, retrieving the fallen potato from under Twilight's hooves. "Don't apply more force than is necessary and always keep every object in your mind at any given moment. Don't let your concentration flag for even a second."

The filly she was talking to, the one who'd asked Jazz if he was on drugs, nodded and started on her potato again. Belaq saw Twilight watching her and gave her a toothy smile.

"If you ignore it, it'll stop," said Rune suddenly. Twilight was a little startled, having forgotten that Rune was even there.

"Be calm," she said again. "Don't get mad," Rune closed her eyes for a moment, then looked away.

Twilight stood there, confused, but the tall filly didn't say any more. All Twilight's attempts to get Rune to clarify, or even talk about anything else were just met with silence. Eventually she gave up, opening one of her textbooks and starting on an assignment.

---

The rest of the week passed in a flurry of lessons. Between the long school days and the massive amounts of homework, Twilight didn't have any time to go home at all. She had trouble just finding the time to write a letter to her parents about her first week, telling them all about Princess Celestia, not being able to use magic, her weird room, classes, the

teachers, the nine-hour school days, and not being able to come home on weekends. She finished her letter with a plea for them to mail her the hoof-glove toothbrush she'd left behind.

Near the end of the week, Dad dropped in personally, bringing her the glove and all sorts of things she hadn't thought of asking for, like her old hairbrush as well as several magnetic clip-on vests and ties that made things much easier. He also brought sweets and cookies, way more than she could ever finish herself.

"Share them with your classmates," he said with a smile. "They put you up here all by yourself, but you should make some new friends too."

Mom was at work, so when it was time for him to leave, Twilight gave him a hug, not wanting him to go. She told him to give Mom one for her too.

---

When Friday's classes had finished, Twilight wasn't sure she would have time to study with the Princess over the weekend. She wasn't even sure she even wanted to go anymore. She missed Mom and Dad more than anything, last week's lesson with Princess Celestia, now only a distant memory.

Still, she felt like this was something she had to do and made her way to the castle in the light of the setting sun.

She gave all the extra treats from Dad to the palace staff. Cupcakes to the guards, donuts to the cleaning staff, cookies to anypony that passed her by. She didn't see Alpine Wind, but gave extra treats to a mare who claimed to know him, asking her to pass them on the next time they met.

Twilight waited for the Princess in the room she'd been in the week before, having an impromptu dinner of her favourite leftover lemon cake.

"My, that looks delicious," said Princess Celestia as she stepped into the room.

"Your Majesty!" Twilight stood up quickly, so she wouldn't seem improper. "Uh, would you like some?" Twilight looked down at the half-

eaten slice of cake that was all that remained of everything Dad had given her. "I can give you a piece I haven't bitten from."

"Oh no. I'm fine," the Princess said quickly. "I've already eaten."

"As long as you're sure." Twilight was relieved that she wouldn't have to share *this* piece of cake.

"Oh yes."

Twilight didn't need any more confirmation and lowered her head, finishing off the rest of the lemon-flavoured pastry.

"How was your first week of school?" Princess Celestia asked once Twilight had finished cleaning the crumbs off her muzzle.

"I didn't know that the classes would be so long... or that there'd be so much homework!" Twilight backpedaled quickly, "I'm not complaining, though. I like learning and studying... I just got taken kind of off-guard."

"Ah, yes. The school is on a rather accelerated program if I recall."

Twilight puzzled over the Princess' words for a moment, "Don't you make up the school's lesson plan?"

"Once I did, when Equestria was smaller. Now I leave that mostly up to the board of education and my assistant, Marching Dawn." Princess Celestia turned and walked out of the room, motioning for Twilight to follow.

"What happened?" The two of them carried on, up a flight of stairs.

"Nothing much," said the Princess, slightly unfolding, then refolding her wings as she climbed up yet another staircase. "Or perhaps you could say that a little bit happened, and over time, a little became a lot."

"Huh?"

"There are more ponies born every year than the year before. When Equestria was young, I knew every pony by name. With so few of us, it was such a simple thing." the Princess looked wistful for a moment. "One pony



could take care of everything, ruling, teaching, nurturing, providing, but as Equestria grew, I relegated many of my duties to other ponies.”

Twilight felt a little silly. She should’ve known that Princess Celestia had better things to do than teach foals how to do magic. The Princess walked out onto the rooftop, Twilight following closely behind her. The night air was crisp and cool. A crescent moon peeked out from behind a cloud and intermittently through the clouds and Twilight could see *Cassiopeia* shining brightly overhead.

“I’m sorry...” Twilight said finally.

“About what?”

“I guess... that things aren’t the way they used to be. I- I don’t want to have to waste your time when you’ve got bigger things to take care of.”

“Nonsense,” the Princess said, shaking her head. “I have more time than you would think. And no matter how much time you have, life is always too short for regrets.

“One day when ponykind can manage all its own affairs I will have more free time than I know what to do with. My master plan is to speed Equestria along to that point so I can spend all my time getting good at hoofball.”

Twilight faltered in her step as she digested that. “I, uh, didn’t know you played.”

“It’s harder than it looks!” the Princess said with a wink.

Finally, once they’d reached the deserted place on the roof, Princess Celestia turned to Twilight.

“I’m going to remove the binding I placed upon your magic, now. This might feel a little strange.”

All the shingles and tiles of the rooftop were illuminated with a warm, yellowish light. Twilight watched her horn glimmer as all the old spells undid themselves. White bangles of energy unraveled from the tip of her horn to

about half an inch from where it connected to her skull. The air felt a little colder and after the last bit of light left her, she struggled to stand up, her legs feeling weak and shaky. She was surprisingly okay with this, or rather - she didn't care at all.

There was a final ring of *something* or perhaps, *nothing* around the very base of her horn. She felt it first, and then started to see wisps of it dissipating, oddly enough, seeing it better, seeing more of it, as there was less. The air started to take on a strange energy, feeling charged and alive. A strange pressure was gone from her, one that she didn't even know was there, one that didn't fit in with any of her perceptions of her own body, of touch, sight, taste, smell or sound.

It was warm again and she felt strength seeping back into her legs. Twilight filled her lungs with the chilly night air, feeling electric and like every part of her body was filled with light and some unnamed emotion.

"You're right. That does feel weird."

The Princess smiled softly. "So I've been told."

Tentatively, Twilight probed a roof shingle with her senses. All the little pockmarked holes and nicks sent intangible alien sensations through her horn. She lifted a nub of broken tile into the air, feeling a kind of wonder at her ability to use magic at all. She laughed and made the little piece of earthenware dance overhead, a tail of glittering sparks shooting out from behind it.

Princess Celestia sent a second piece of tile into the heavens after it, faster and steadier, leaving long, glowing blue trails. It whizzed around Twilight's tile forming swirling patterns in the darkness. Twilight didn't know how long the two stood there drawing shapes in the night sky.

When at last, Twilight put the little bit of shingle down, the Princess gave her a grin. "Ready to carry on with lessons now, Twilight?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

With that, the two of them continued at the same punishing pace they'd started the week before.

“Be single-minded, Twilight Sparkle. Don’t think of anything else but focusing your magic through your horn.”

It was easier said than done. Discharging that much magic was painful, although it didn’t hurt as much as she remembered. Princess Celestia assured her that she was doing better than last time, but Twilight wasn’t sure if the Princess was just saying that to be nice.

One thing that she could be objectively proud of, though, was during one attempt when she’d caught her concentration slipping, the magic pushing beyond the pathway she’d laid out for it. She hadn’t known it could be done, but she refocused the spell into a slightly different form.

Her light spell changed colours from white to green.

The small escaped bits of magic turned into droplets of applesauce that came splashing back down to the ground, raining on both Twilight and the Princess. She caught herself losing focus again, and the light spell shifted from green to red, more magic coming loose this time, white daffodils sprouting out of the ground.

Finally, she lost complete control and Princess Celestia had stopped her before anything worse could happen.

It wasn’t a success, but it was a breakthrough.

“Princess Celestia?” Twilight asked, later on that night.

The Princess looked like she was just about to send another spell at Twilight, but the light died down to nothing on her horn. “Hm?”

“Why haven’t I run out of magic?”

“You had a lot of magic to start out with.”

Something still didn’t quite add up.

“At the start of the summer I had trouble moving a piece of paper. During my exam I ran out of magic just from failing to do a spell. How come I have so much now?”

“You’ve always had the same amount of magic. It’s just that with time and practice it gets easier for you to access.”

“But isn’t there a limit to how much magic a pony can have? I mean... if I could just send it out endlessly, or even just as much as I’ve been doing during practice, why do we need other kinds of power at all? Wouldn’t everything just be powered with magic?”

“Well, not everypony can use that much magic. It’s a rare gift.”

Twilight’s eyes widened as she thought of all the ways that she could personally provide vital services to all of Equestria. “I should- I should plug myself into some sort of generator so that we’ll have enough energy stored up in case we ever run out of coal or wood or something. Everypony with a lot of magic should!”

“I’m not sure that would be the best course of action...”

“Why not? If I’m the only pony for the job then I should do it, right?”

The Princess looked uncomfortable for a moment. “You only have enough energy for two or three outbursts like that.” She sighed. “I’ve been feeding power back to you so that you can last through these practice sessions.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me?” Twilight wasn’t angry, not really, but still she didn’t understand why the Princess felt the need to hide something like that.

“I’ve never enjoyed touting strength over my subjects, Twilight Sparkle. Perhaps you have already gotten a taste of it yourself, but when other ponies discover that you are capable of using an excessive amount of force... their minds easily turn to fear.”

Twilight chose her next words carefully, gathering her courage. “Princess, forgive me if I’m rude in saying this, but I don’t *care* that you have way more magic than me or anypony I know. I’m just a little filly and you’re ruler of our whole country. You *move the sun*.” Twilight looked at her

earnestly. "I already know that if you ever decided to, that you could destroy me."

The Princess cringed.

"But I also know that you wouldn't do that to anypony."

The two stood there in silence for a long time.

"You are braver than I gave you credit for, Twilight Sparkle." The Princess looked sad for a moment. "I apologise for not being more upfront."

"That still brings up another question, though." Twilight tilted her head quizzically. "How much power do *you* have?"

"That, my faithful student," said Princess Celestia with an unreadable expression, "is an answer that would be best saved for another night."

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Twilight was more tired than she would admit. The Princess must have seen it too, since she ended the lessons early, only an hour and a half past midnight. A servant showed her to a guest room, one that was normally reserved for visiting dignitaries. She noted the lavish surroundings, groggily.

The bed was luxuriously soft as she curled up into it and she fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning she delighted in the ordinarily unpleasant task of brushing her teeth. The toothbrush floated into the air on its own, without the aid of her hooves. Not once did she get frothy toothpaste all over her face. The bathroom, too, was very fancy, with everything made of white or black marble, even the toilet. Twilight pretended she was an officer from a foreign country, holding her head high and arching her neck regally. She used her toothpaste to draw downturned eyebrows on her forehead and a large moustache above her mouth. She made a serious face in the mirror.



“Admiral Blackmane, today we march to war!” Twilight raised a hoof in the air. “All hooves to the cannons!”

She giggled and washed the toothpaste off her face. It felt a little wrong to leave such a nice room in a mess, so she cleaned the sink and made the bed before she left.

Twilight tried to find her way to the palace’s large dining hall for breakfast. She got lost several times and had to ask for directions, but eventually made it into the huge hall in one piece.

The Princess and a number of other ponies were already seated. Twilight pulled out an empty chair with her magic and sat down.

Several of the grownups glared at her.

*Am I at the wrong table?* she thought nervously, worried that she had already made some sort of faux pas.

“Young lady, this isn’t some sort of cafeteria where common fillies can just plant their filthy hooves anywhere,” a nearby mare hissed at her.

Twilight glanced at her hooves. They *were* a little dirty, but she’d cleaned them this morning... and then she had to walk all the way to the dining hall. Maybe she was supposed to put on a pair of the elegant white gloves most of these ponies were wearing?

“What nerve,” said a younger mare beside her.

A white stallion made a tutting sound. “Not even properly dressed either.”

Twilight's cheeks flushed and she got up from her chair, leaving the table. *I'll just... eat my meals in the kitchen from now on*, Twilight thought to herself. She turned to leave the room, hearing more sounds of disapproval from behind her.

Suddenly there was silence and then the scuffling sounds of hundreds of chairs sliding backwards. All noises, of eating and talking, stopped. Twilight turned around to see what was happening, and saw that Princess Celestia was standing. The other court ponies were following suit.

"Twilight Sparkle," she said gently, although her voice carried across the huge room. "Such a hasty exit is unnecessary. You may seat yourself next to me."

The word *may* implied that she had the right to refuse. Twilight wasn't sure she wanted to be so close to the center of attention in this room - to be under the scrutiny of all these dignified, courtly ponies, stares piercing her from every corner. She'd read somewhere, though, that refusing such an offer from royalty would be a breach of etiquette all on its own.

Twilight trotted nervously to the Princess' side at the end of a long, rectangular table. Several ponies scurried in from everywhere, bringing cutlery and a chair. A server brought her a small glass bowl with fruit, granola and yogurt, all arranged in several layers to make a colourful parfait. It looked almost too pretty to eat.

She looked down at the two spoons and three forks on the table, not sure which one to use. "Small one on the left," whispered Princess Celestia.

Twilight levitated the small spoon carefully, keeping it as steady as she could, lest she appear like an amateur magic user in front of *these* ponies. She felt their eyes on her still. Twilight didn't have much of an appetite anymore, but ate mechanically because she felt she should.

Beside her, the Princess went very slowly, barely touching her food. She ate a spoon of her fruit salad occasionally, almost as if to let the attentive servers know that she wasn't quite finished yet. When the eating of all the ponies in the room had slowed down considerably, Princess Celestia finished off the rest of her fruit and stood quickly before a server

could bring her another portion. Twilight saw the rest of the court get up off their chairs as well. Not wanting to seem even more out of place, she did the same.

All at once, everypony knelt, which Twilight hastily mimicked. The Princess returned the gesture with grace and then turned to exit the room.

Twilight stood there for a moment, unsure whether she was supposed to follow or go off on her own. All the gentry were already leaving.

“Aren’t you coming, Twilight Sparkle?” The Princess walked quickly without turning around and Twilight’s hooves made muffled clop sounds on the carpet as she cantered to catch up.

“The first time few times dining at the royal table are always intimidating, but you get used to it eventually,” said Princess Celestia.

“Tell me about it. Those ponies were kind of mean...”

“The nobility are all old families. They do their best to be courteous in their own way, but many of them pride themselves on knowing everypony worth knowing.” The Princess, walking slower now, turned left and headed down a corridor. “They’re not used to seeing new faces join them for breakfast, especially when those new faces start violating the little rules and protocols that they make for themselves. Try not to judge them too harshly.”

“Oh,” Twilight said, trying to remember what she’d done earlier. “What did I do wrong?”

“Mmm... well, among other things, the court ponies have seating arrangements for themselves. The chair you took earlier belongs to Duke Solar Wind, and the mare who scolded you earlier was his wife, Duchess Prominence. She probably wasn’t too keen on you taking her husband’s place.”

“I had no idea,” said Twilight, feeling disgraceful. “I didn’t mean to be rude like that.”



“Nothing of great importance,” Princess Celestia said. “The thing about etiquette and politeness is that although they can add ease to a social situation, they are essentially meaningless.”

“But you’re always so polite!”

“Only because it’s expected of me,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. She stopped in front of a door. “There is going to be a meeting with the Board of Meteorology in this room in about ten minutes. You are welcome to explore the palace in the meantime, or you could even accompany me if you wish. If you do decide to come, though, I would suggest you grab something to read.” Princess Celestia turned the handle with her magic and stepped in. “You will likely find the meeting to be quite tedious.”

Twilight had always wanted to see what weatherponies did and how they made the weather, but decided to heed the Princess’ warning anyway. An hour into the meeting she was glad she did. All the cool stuff, like statistics and weather trends, weren’t a part of the meeting at all. The only thing they talked about was budget!

Twilight followed Princess Celestia from meeting to meeting that day, finding out just how busy the Princess’ day-to-day affairs were, and boring.

The councils didn’t even stop for lunch. At noon servants brought dainty little watercress sandwiches, which Princess Celestia nibbled at politely, but didn’t really eat, and a flagon of clear white grape juice, which Princess Celestia sipped at, but didn’t really drink. Twilight was more than happy to have the Princess’ share, not really having anything else to do. She’d taken three naps and finished almost the entire weekend’s worth of homework by sunset.

Some time after dinner, the two of them found themselves back on the dim rooftop. The Princess stood casually on the tiles, horn aglow.

“So, what did you think of today?”

Twilight watched in awed silence as the sun set behind her, feeling very privileged.

She remembered the Summer Sun celebration, the keen yearning for knowledge, the first strange stirrings of power. She remembered how, not long after...

The thing she'd tried to do.

The months-old memory was still fresh like a wound.

She didn't expect, or even want to move it. She only wanted to see if she could feel it in some way other than just the warmth of its light on her coat. It would be like scrying, she'd thought.

She had stood outside where she could see, could remember how she'd gone against all common sense, the pain of staring right into its light. She had sent her magic up, high in the sky, stretched it and stretched until its glow was invisible, too thin to see or feel. Her touch had gone farther than she'd hoped, past the rooftops of Canterlot, higher even than the clouds. She could remember what it was like to have the whole mountain, above her, beneath her and inside her. There were phantom pains in Twilight's eyes as she remembered how her two perspectives had become one.

Eventually, this part was hazy and hard to recall, she'd gone to some vast empty place, cold and black, even in the light of day. It swallowed warmth, thought and light like the ocean swallows tears. There was nothing she could anchor herself to here, and her magic was already pushed too hard, pulled too far...

Dad had found her on the porch, had brought her back inside where she'd slept for a whole day. It was another day before she could see with her eyes again. She'd never told him or Mom what she'd tried to do, and they hadn't asked her, but they'd almost certainly guessed...

"How do you do it?" Twilight said after a long pause.

"Do what?"

"Sit there all day, every day, in boring meetings, I suppose," Twilight said, not entirely sure what the Princess would think of her if she admitted what she'd done.

“They may not seem that interesting or relevant to anyone not well-versed in the bureaucracy, but I assure you that it’s not as dull as it appears to be on the surface.”

“But you’re the *princess*, shouldn’t you be more than just a bureaucrat?”

“What I am is just a reflection of what ponies require of me.” Almost as if to emphasize what she’d said, her horn flashed and the sun finally sank below the horizon. Immediately, her horn blazed a second time and the moon began its glacial arc across the sky.

“Could... you teach me how to understand what they’re talking about?”

“Tomorrow, if you choose to attend the meetings again, I will do my best.”

This night’s lessons weren’t much better than the night before. Twilight didn’t make any new breakthroughs and she was just as bad at the end as she was at the start. She’d managed to stay awake until dawn, though, which was a marked improvement over last night. Maybe it was all the naps.

Princess Celestia stood where she’d stood the whole night, doing whatever arcane magics she used to raise the sun.

“You don’t need to fly for that?”

“Not at all. What I do at the Summer Sun Celebration is mostly just for show.”

Twilight had expected this answer, and it didn’t change how impressive the feat was... but it was still a little disappointing somehow. “Ah,” she said, not knowing what else to say.

Princess Celestia started heading down the stairs, which Twilight suspected the Princess used only because Twilight didn’t have a pair of wings herself.

“You should get some sleep, some breakfast, or perhaps both.”

“Aren’t you tired?” Twilight asked, genuinely curious.

“From the looks of it, not nearly as tired as you must be.”

Twilight supposed that was a correct assessment.

Breakfast passed by in a sleepy fog. Occasionally Princess Celestia would whisper suggestions to Twilight, which she would then follow mindlessly. To be frank, she was too tired to really care what the aristocrats thought, too tired to even notice them. She fell asleep with a spoonful of porridge halfway to her mouth and woke up seconds later with a sticky muzzle covered in oatmeal.

Twilight couldn’t remember what happened next, only that she somehow wound up in a meeting with the Princess and she had all her homework with her. She found herself slowly gaining consciousness in a place full of voices, and raised a hoof to wipe away the crusted drool from the side of her mouth. Unwittingly, Twilight had fallen asleep sitting next to Princess Celestia, who apparently, hadn’t decided to wake her.

*Oh jeeze... I hope I wasn't snoring too.*

Princess Celestia was true to her word and for the remainder of the meeting, whispered to Twilight, explaining the meaning of some of the jargon in laypony’s terms, the ideas behind everything that was happening.

Sleep-deprived as she was, Twilight could absorb very little. The Princess’ lessons oozed their way through her head like a river of mud, slowly, and leaving behind an incomprehensible sludge of concept and vocabulary.

Twilight did her best, but so little made sense to her the way she was. This stuff probably had the potential of being interesting... if only she could clear the gunk out of her mind that was making her so sluggish and stupid.

Freedom came at last when the meeting came to a close.

*I'm useless like this. Being here is the same as not being here.* "Sorry Princess Celestia," she said, "but I think I really need to sleep."

"I would say so! Pushing yourself so hard is unhealthy." Princess Celestia trotted down the corridor to what Twilight assumed was yet another meeting. "We will meet again at the usual time, in the usual place. Get a good rest, my faithful student."

When Twilight woke up she couldn't recall much that had happened before her nap other than that there had been a meeting and she'd ended up back in bed.

It looked like late afternoon outside. Twilight went through the ritual that she did every morning, washing, brushing and the like. It was a little odd, though, that it was already four o'clock. She packed up her things and finished off the last bit of homework she had left before dinner. The Princess was already there by the time she got down. Twilight knew now that if she started with the cutlery on the inside and worked her way towards her plate, she'd usually be okay. It paid to copy whatever Princess Celestia was doing, since everypony else seemed to be as well.

Twilight waited on the rooftop for the Princess to arrive. Princess Celestia had taken off after dinner to an emergency consultation. It wasn't an ordinary meeting, private or something, and far away. Twilight couldn't attend. It was dark by the time she spotted a white speck over the horizon.

Four golden-shod hooves touched down on the tiles. "I am sorry for the wait, but I was needed urgently."

"It's alright. The view up here's amazing!" She used a hoof to point at the sky, "Draco, Perseus, Auriga... I can even see *Camelopardalis* over there." Twilight squinted at a fixed point above them. "I need a telescope to see it at home, in *November!*"

Princess Celestia looked distant and Twilight worried she was boring her. "It's refreshing to see young ponies taking a proper interest in the night sky," she said after a while. "Only rarely do you see a non-pegasus so enamoured with constellations."

“Pegasus ponies are big on stargazing too?” Twilight mentally revised her opinion of pegasi, putting them into much higher esteem.

“Above the glow of the city, the light of the stars is more robust. When travelling far over land or sea, over long distances and changing landmarks - they can be used to find where you’re going,” the Princess said. “Or they can be used to find your way home.”

“You can see them better when you’re flying?” Twilight, filled with envy, could hardly believe it. She’d sent *herself* into the sky and hadn’t seen them at all. It was *months* before she had enough saved up to buy her first telescope... *all the lawn mowing and lemonade stands...*

The Princess looked amused. “Yes, the higher you are, the easier it is to see stars.” She gestured at the mountaintop with one wing. “You are quite lucky to to be living in Canterlot, in that sense.”

“What’s it like to fly?”

There was a funny look in the Princess’ eye as she said, “I thought you would never ask.”

Twilight felt gravity change directions. She tried to dig her hooves into the ground, but the slickness and hardness of the roof tiles made it all but impossible. She flailed wildly as she was pulled to the edge of the rooftop, looking for something, anything to grab on to.

There was nothing.

Twilight’s mouth went dry. Out of sheer desperation, she wrapped herself in a cocoon of her own magic. It was useless, like trying to pick yourself up by your own saddle. She went straight over the side of the roof.

Twilight fell.



Windows and stone blurred past. There was no screaming and her life definitely didn't flash before her eyes. Still, in the back of her head she thought, as you can only think when you're falling off the top of a tall

building, how funny... and disappointing it was, that she'd be in magic kindergarten for the rest of her life.





White forearms locked around Twilight's midsection.

"Gotcha."

It had been only three seconds before Princess Celestia caught her, but it was forever.

The Princess, wings outstretched, dipped in her flight. There was a rush of air and a couple of powerful downstrokes and they started on an upwards ascent.

"Why'd you do that for?" Twilight said, once she'd recovered enough to speak. Twilight, now seated on the Princess' back, was shivering, only partially from the cold. Her fur would be standing on end if it wasn't being blown back.

"You asked." Mighty wingbeats on both sides pushed them higher and higher in the sky.

The Princess' mane glowed faintly and surged violently on a gale of its own. Occasionally a wisp of it would break against Twilight's body, transforming into long, colourful, but *ordinary* hairs. The hairs would move with the actual wind until they stopped touching her. Free of Twilight's influence, they reformed back into light, moving once again, of their own accord.

If Twilight wasn't so angry, she would have found it fascinating.

"You could've just, you know, *described* it to me." Twilight's voice dripped with sarcasm. "At the very least you could've said, 'How about we go for a nice ride over Canterlot then, Twilight?'" She knew how unwise it was to antagonize the only thing that was keeping her from splattering messily against the ground five hundred feet below, but she persisted anyway. "You didn't-" Twilight had to catch her breath, the wind stealing it away from her. "You didn't have to *throw me off the castle!*"

“I could have done those things, yes,” admitted Princess Celestia, her voice remarkably clear despite the continuous drone of the breeze. “But then where would the fun be in that?”

Twilight let out a sigh that was immediately blown away. She felt a bit of a shift as the Princess stopped ascending. Princess Celestia spread her wings wide and they broke into an even glide.

As far as Twilight could tell, the Princess was flying slowly, but the wind was constantly growling, lashing at Twilight’s face, making it difficult to breathe and hear. Cold air blasted cruelly into her eyes, drying them out and forcing her to blink over and over again. She lay flat and pressed her limbs close to her body in a vain attempt keep the wind from snatching away any lingering warmth.

She looked up above them, eyes stinging. *This was what it was all about, wasn’t it?* But the stars didn’t seem any closer or brighter this close to the ground.

She peeked over the Princess’ wings and risked a downwards glance.

It was a little like what she’d seen when she’d sent her magic up into the sky. Before it had been like being everywhere at once; her house had been below her, but it had also been above her, beside her and *inside* her - big, small, medium-sized all at once.

Now she was standing on the highest tower in the world, looking down. The lights of Canterlot glimmered below, tiny and distant. The lights bled and weren’t as clean, but they looked a little, she thought, like stars. Twilight shivered. *Not the just the highest tower*, she thought, *the highest moving tower*.

“Are you cold?” asked the Princess.

Twilight’s teeth chattered and she fought to be heard over the wind. “Aren’t you?”

From her back, Twilight saw Princess Celestia’s horn flare briefly.

Suddenly, although Twilight didn't feel any warmer, the cold didn't bother her anymore. The wind was still pounding against her face and body, but with much less discomfort, feeling more like a breeze during a hard gallop. Inhaling was no longer like trying to drink straight out of a hose and it took a few blinks, but her eyeballs no longer felt raw and abraded either.

Twilight touched a forearm to her face, experimentally. Her nose was still cold but was warming up. "If pegasi can't cast that spell..." Twilight said, not bothering to finish the thought. She marveled at how well her voice carried now.

"They don't need to." Still gliding, Princess Celestia beat her wings once, sending them a little higher in the air. "It is, as you would say, 'part of the package'."

"Oh." Twilight's curiosity overcame her anger. "What happens if I fall?"

Princess Celestia sounded almost offended when she spoke. "You won't fall."

"Not even if I jump off?"

"Twilight Sparkle," said the Princess. "I can use magic."

*Oh yeah. Obviously.* Twilight was silent for only a moment. "Let's say hypothetically that you decided to let me hit the ground -"

The Princess' wings fluttered. "A hypothesis, perhaps worth some consideration."

"If I hit the ground with this spell on me, what would happen?"

"Take care in how you phrase your questions and to whom you ask, Twilight Sparkle. There are beings who will respond demonstratively."

It took Twilight a moment to realise what the Princess was trying to say. "Ah..." she trailed off nervously.

“There would be pain, but not nearly as much as if you weren’t spelled. This high up, about a thousand feet or so, you would probably break every bone in your body. You would almost certainly die.” After a moment of gut-wrenching silence, Princess Celestia spoke again. “You might bounce too.”

“I’m sorry.” Twilight said, fearing that any moment the Princess might drop her again. “I shouldn’t have kept asking.”

“No matter. You might find that some things, though, are better left unsaid.” Princess Celestia spilled air from her wings, pitching forward and skimming low over Canterlot. “I didn’t want to frighten you any more than I already have.”

They veered next to a large tower and Twilight felt like she could almost reach out and skim one hoof against the stone. Although it was dark, she could see ponies below, going about in their affairs. Princess Celestia and Twilight flew overhead, unnoticed.

“Why don’t they see us? Are you using magic?”

“Not at all. Unless they know something is already there, unicorns and earth ponies rarely look up.” The Princess pulled her wings a little closer and stooped through the arch of a bridge, wingtips grazing both sides.

Twilight anticipated a crash. Time seemed to slow and her heart jackhammered in her chest.

They rose unscathed from under the bridge, climbing again to Canterlot’s skyline. The flashy demonstration made sure that ponies in the street noticed them now. Unicorns scurried to and fro, perhaps fearing another similar stunt.

“They’re just like ants,” Twilight remarked, looking down at them.

Princess Celestia flared her wings, braking midair. Twilight vaulted forward. She struggled to stay on the Princess’ back, wrapping her forehooves around her neck to keep from falling.

“Twilight,” the Princess said, an edge in her voice. She was flapping constantly now, fighting to maintain a hover. “What did you just say?”

“That...” said Twilight, her mouth going dry in fear. She had never seen Princess Celestia like this before. “The ponies down there... they-” She saw herself in her mind, falling to the ground, breaking every bone in her body. “They look like ants...?”

“Don’t,” said the Princess, sounding full of some unnameable emotion. “Don’t say things like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Twilight said, the words becoming a squeak. She managed to rasp out, “I won’t do it again,” before her voice failed completely.

Twilight felt the Princess’ sides heaving gently, breathing deeply. “I apologise,” Princess Celestia said, after a pause. “I realise that what you said was out of innocence rather than malice. I didn’t mean to dredge up old memories and lose myself like that.”

As scary as the Princess had been, she was downright restrained compared to Ms. Marie, and Twilight thought as much.

“In the past I have known ponies, great ponies, who let their hubris get the best of them.” The Princess sounded sad now. “When you hold yourself high above the world, it’s easy to lose sight of those beneath you... You can’t help but look down at those below.”

Twilight wondered what had happened, but it seemed like a touchy subject. It wouldn’t be like inquiring about magic or math... asking about this seemed wrong somehow.

“I-”

“You don’t need to express either sympathy or remorse, Twilight Sparkle. This was something that happened long ago. I should be over it.”

Twilight didn’t know what to say. She held on tighter, though, as the Princess tilted her body upwards, ascending more quickly and

aerodynamically. Twilight peered over her wings and watched as Canterlot shrank underneath them, as they flew higher than the mountaintop.

In the darkness Twilight could make out a patchwork of farmland, towns and suburbs below. It was so even and organized. Far in the distance there was a dark tangle of forest that spread chaotically on the edges of a large orchard.

Twilight felt the air grew colder and thinner, but the chill didn't faze her anymore and every breath came easily. Deep down she knew she should feel lightheaded and dizzy.

For a long time the only sounds were the muffled wind, the steady beat of wings and the soft sigh of breathing.

Twilight braced herself for an impact with the clouds as they approached, but they broke against her like fog. The Princess kept flying, higher and higher until even the clouds were far below them. Eventually it was cold enough to be uncomfortable and even the thinness of the air made Twilight gasp occasionally.

Princess Celestia stopped beating her wings, stretching them out to catch the air, straightening out and soaring miles above the ground.

Twilight looked up.



Falling off the roof had been worth it.

Twilight glimpsed a smile on the Princess' face. "Ready to head back now, Twilight?"

Twilight nodded once before remembering that the Princess couldn't see her, "Yeah," she said weakly, still in awe.

Princess Celestia made an uncharacteristic whoop as she folded her wings and spun straight into a nosedive. The world smeared past in streaks of colour.

Twilight held on for dear life, not caring that she was screaming right into the Princess' ear. Canterlot loomed closer and closer, blotches of purple and grey becoming buildings and streets.

Suddenly the Princess opened her wings. Momentum kept Twilight going, pressing her into Princess Celestia's back. It should have given her whiplash, but something held her in place and she felt strong, sturdy.

She looked down and saw her school. From above, the roof was shaped in a perfect replica of Princess Celestia's cutie mark.

"Our excursion took most of the night," said the Princess. "Safe to say, our lessons for tonight will be postponed till next week."

The castle grew nearer. Princess Celestia landed on the rooftop where they had started that night and she lowered herself to let Twilight jump off.

Twilight waited patiently as the Princess bound her magic again. Even though the other spell probably hadn't worn off yet, she still felt deathly cold when that first ring of negativity touched her horn. She was already growing to hate it.

"Please forgive me for throwing you off the castle earlier," the Princess said once she was done. "Young ponies usually enjoy that kind of excitement, but it was folly for me to assume it of you without asking, especially for the sake of my own amusement."

"I understand," Twilight said. She really didn't, but she felt like she should say it anyway. What kind of crazy pony would you have to be to find it fun getting tossed off a building?

"I trust you can make your way back to the school on your own."

Twilight nodded.

The Princess smiled mischievously. "Unless you would like a ride..."

"Oh, thank you, but I should be fine!" Twilight said, as politely as she could, but perhaps a little too quickly.



“Very well.”

# Chapter Four



**Magic Kindergarten Class Photo**

All ponies in the picture are listed are from left to right.

**Back row:** Enigma, Demise, Ace, Rune and (the dorm parent) Ms. Teaks Warmaid.

**Middle Row:** Twilight Sparkle, Tsunami, Nightbreaker, Gingersnap, Malachite

**Front Row:** Pebbly Crunch, Tambourine, Somepony Else (AKA Elsie), Echelle, Belaq, Lexicus, Azure Sky (Sky)

The mid-morning air was brisk as Twilight walked to class. Her winter coat was starting to grow in shaggy clumps and she felt lumpy and misshapen in her uniform. Frosty grass crunched under her hooves. The little magnetic clips made it possible to wear clothes at all, but lately, buttons would slide out of place where particularly dense clumps of fur tried to shove their way through.

She had missed her parents at first, even missed her stupid old classmates, but Twilight found that the best cure for homesickness was to throw herself into her studying. The books were always willing to give any knowledge they might have as quickly or slowly as she required them to, and it was safe to say, they never judged her for it.

Twilight's lessons with the Princess had progressed very slowly over the last two and a half months. After the first month, her classmates had said things like, "hasn't she gotten over that yet?", or "do you think she's just pretending?", and then eventually they had stopped talking about it altogether. It was true, though, that she and the Princess would occasionally have nights off to stargaze, take walks, or talk about other academic subject matter ranging from physics to monsters to ancient history. Although Princess Celestia was often cryptic, she never replied to questions with anything along the lines of "I don't know," and at the very least, would work with Twilight to find the most plausible answer; Twilight looked forward to these nights the most.

Suddenly, Twilight was forced to dodge out of the path of one of the blind, half-deaf second year students, on his way back from the field. Bumping into some of the more reckless ones (or the slower learners) was a fairly-frequent occurrence.

Magic was still her favourite subject, but her lessons on control were always the same frustrating slog night in and night out: the Princess would cast that spell at her and Twilight would try to concentrate while not freaking out, and at the end she would go to bed tired and feeling helpless. She could hold on to herself for nearly ten minutes before the magic would start slipping away from her again, and then another two to three minutes of changing spells before she'd completely lose her focus.

Princess Celestia told her that this was to be expected, since Twilight's body and mind were still catching up to her abilities, but it didn't

keep the slow progress from being disappointing. Her control wasn't nearly good enough to consider removing the binding spell, and she'd spent most of the school year magic-free.

Back at her old school, she had taken it for granted that everything was tailored for young ponies of all sorts. They were never asked to use scissors and they never had to take notes for longer than maybe ten or twenty minutes. Clearly the expectations here were that everypony would use their magic to write, rather than their mouths. After most of her classes, she wasn't able to talk or eat for hours because her teeth and jaw ached too much, and as gentle as she was with them, she'd destroyed countless quills by biting down on them just a little too hard.

Sports like tag and hoofball weren't too popular at Princess Celestia's school, either. The other students were fond of games like bird-in-the-cage, dog's dinner, or jackstones - unicorn games. This was something that Twilight approved of and would have gladly taken part in, had she been able to use magic herself. It was getting to be irritating how everypony around her made such a point of using spells for everything.

Since the beginning of the school year, she'd never been asked to do a single thing in Magical and Physical Education. She figured she could either view it as a colossal waste of time or as a handy free study block. It always paid to look on the bright side.

*Anyway, Twilight thought, with more than a little bitterness, if my magic worked I could pick everypony else up and throw them off the mountain. Probably.*

By the time she'd gotten to class, Rune was already there waiting for her.

Twilight and Rune went through the same sort of ritual day in and day out. They wouldn't exactly greet each other, not even with a nod, but Twilight would stare at Rune, and maybe if she was lucky, Rune might look up.

Twilight liked to think that she and orange filly were sort of friends. Sure they never went out of their ways to talk or hang out or be nice to each other, but Rune was never mean.

A few weeks ago after a long and frustrating math class, Belaq had poured glue on Twilight and stuck a pair of paper wings on her back.

*“Look, Little Miss Suckup’s pretending to be the Princess!”*

All the other ponies had laughed, even Echelle - who was still nice to her, but in a very polite kind of way. Only Rune had stayed silent. She’d looked at Twilight with her sad green eyes and walked away.

Once class was in session, Twilight realised that she shouldn’t have wished so hard to be able to do stuff.

Today they were running laps.

Twilight had seen the track before, but she didn’t think that anypony used it outside of sports clubs. The other students used their magic to carry weights as they galloped. Twilight ran unencumbered, but every breath she drew was like needles in her chest.

Ms. Marie cantered after them with a boulder in the air. “Keep running or Boo’s gonna find out how *your* blood tastes!”

Twilight shuddered, remembering what Ms. Marie had done with the enormous rock the day before Nightmare Night. She still had bad dreams about wickedly sharp stone spires dripping crimson. *It* would come down from the air and she would die again and again and again. All the while, there would be that horrible guttural laughter...

She clenched her teeth and pushed herself to gallop a little faster.

At the very least, Twilight was glad she wasn’t the slowest runner in the class anymore.

Lexicus and Rune competed for last place. Lexicus, a light yellow colt with a book and horn for a cutie mark, was wheezing and shaking by the time he’d gotten halfway around the track. He, however, was also carrying a rock slightly bigger than himself. From the looks of it, the rock might even be the heaviest one in the class.

Rune trotted slowly, only looking up occasionally. The orange filly was inexplicably deaf to Ms. Marie's shouted threats and ran only when Lexicus had gotten ahead of her.

Far ahead were Pebbly Crunch, Tsunami and Elsie. None of them were particularly good runners (compared to some of the fillies and colts at Twilight's old school), but were the best among everypony present.

Next to Twilight was a green colt named Malachite, and just a few lengths in front, Tambourine. The brown filly carried a stone that rivalled Lexicus' in size, an impressive feat for somepony of her tiny stature.

Twilight just wished that Tambourine would drop the rock on herself and break all her legs.

Suddenly the ground behind Rune erupted in a shower of gravel.

"*Move it*, Rune!" yelled the teacher, as the boulder sailed back towards her. The floor glowed for a moment and the gravel crater mended itself. "Elsewise I'm gonna make you wish you were never born!"

From the other side of the track Twilight saw the orange filly actually *stop* running.

For the first time Twilight had ever seen, Rune *smiled*. The long-legged filly grinned like it was the best joke she'd heard all day.

Several emotions flashed across Ms. Marie's face. Twilight wasn't sure if she'd imagined it or not, but she thought for a moment, that the teacher looked sad. She was probably dismayed that somepony did something other than run screaming in terror for once.

Rune's expression returned to normal. Suddenly, she started galloping, leaving everypony else in the dust.

---

Practical Application was one of the few classes where Twilight could participate fully without hurting herself; Mrs. Lonsdaleite seldom requested

note-taking. This class may not have been very interesting or helpful, but it was definitely one of the most pleasant.

The the next day, Mrs. Lonsdaleite asked the class what they would do if a colony of vampire bats attacked them.

“Incinerate them!”

Even if she didn’t recognize the voice, Twilight didn’t need to turn around to figure out who had just spoken. Sky had once proposed (hopefully as a joke) that crossing a large, bridgeless canyon could be accomplished by setting the canyon on fire until it was a lake of molten rock. Twilight had no idea why the filly’s cutie mark was a blue rectangle rather than some sort of inferno.

“Actually,” said Twilight, not bothering to raise a hoof. “Princess Celestia told me that all vampires have a disorder that makes it impossible for them not to stop and count seeds that you scatter on the ground.”

Mrs. Lonsdalite looked impressed. Everypony else just looked annoyed.

“If you throw some hayseed, wheat kernels, or best, poppyseed at them, they should be occupied for long enough for you to escape.”

“Very well done, Ms. Sparkle.”

From the other corner of the room, she saw Gingersnap glaring at her.

---

Twilight worked on square and cube roots in the shade of a large tree. With a coat this long and thick, being inside a heated building was almost unbearable.

The sounds of distant conversation broke her concentration. She could make out that it was a filly speaking.

“... -ould you do it?”

Then a different voice, slightly louder... they were getting closer. "I read all about it, Tammy. You just need to align the pins and use something to provide torque."

A third voice this time, laughing. It sounded like... Belaq. "That's probably like saying all gardening requires is going in and doing stuff to plants."

"Aw, shut up," said the second voice. "I know what I'm doing."

Math homework abandoned, Twilight peeked from behind the tree's trunk.

*Oh horse apples.*

It was Tambourine, Gingersnap and Belaq and they were walking her way.

Mercifully, they hadn't seen her yet. Twilight looked around for any way she could escape, but there was nothing for her to hide behind or hide in. If she wanted to get back into the school she'd have to run past them. *It just had to be these three...*

They came closer.

"I wonder if she's got fancy things from the palace in there," said the voice that must have been Tambourine. Twilight rarely heard Tambourine say anything in class, but the brown filly made up for it by being incessantly cruel to Twilight whenever she could, especially if either of her friends were around.

She heard Belaq speak next, "More like a thousand costumes of Princess Celestia."

Somepony snorted with laughter.

"I bet all the time she spends up there she's dressing up as the Princess and making goo-goo eyes at herself," Belaq said in a sneering kind of tone, growing louder as they approached.



"I wouldn't be surprised," said Gingersnap in her know-it-all voice. "She still plays with dolls."

It took a while for it to click, for Twilight to realise they were talking about *her*.

"Wait," said Tambourine, "how are we supposed to get in there if she's always in there too?"

*Wonderful. Just wonderful.*

Now on top of having to get away from them, she'd have to keep them from breaking into her room as well.

"Ooo! I know!" said Gingersnap, sounding very much like how Twilight knew her to be during class. "We could invoke Truancy!"

Any student at the school had the right to skip out on lessons as long they handed in all their assignments before the start of the lesson, weren't missing a test and gave at least a day's notice. Twilight remembered reading about it in a footnote on page 854 of the student's handbook in the library, and she listened fearfully as Gingersnap explained it to the other two.

"That's cool," Belaq said dismissively, "but kind of a dumb plan."

The crispy sound of hoofsteps on grass stopped. The fillies were right on the other side of the tree. Twilight hoped they couldn't hear her heart pounding in her chest.

"What? No it's n-"

Belaq cut her off. "If even one of us doesn't show up for class it's going to be obvious that it was us."

"I thought it was a pretty good idea, Ginger, but... uh..." Tambourine said in a quiet voice that Twilight had to strain her ears to hear, "You're right too, Belaq. I don't want to get in trouble..."

*Toadying sycophant*, Twilight thought, and in her head, called all three of them the worst names she knew. *Conceited tyrannical presumptuous know-it-all, worthless prattling...*

There was a “humph” sound.

“I know,” said Belaa in a bossy voice. “How about we go in when everypony’s sleeping? You can *Quiet*, right Ginger?”

“Pfft. In my sleep.”

Twilight listened as they schemed.

Her muscles were cramping, but she didn’t dare move or shift - the grass, her clothes, something might rustle. What was more difficult was making sure to breathe only out of her nose, slowly, regularly and softly. There could be no gasps, sighs or sudden intakes of breath. More than one storybook character had accidentally revealed his or her hiding spot by breathing too loudly.

The three fillies eventually decided that the best time was three hours past midnight. Gingersnap couldn’t enchant more than one pony at a time and eager to prove herself, agreed to go in alone.

After they had all this figured out, Twilight had to sit there until lunch was almost over, listening to them talk about books, homework, test scores and all sorts of interesting things that she would have normally found wonderful to talk about, had they not been huge jerks and had she been a part of the conversation. They sauntered away, still talking, oblivious to Twilight who was just a few feet from where they’d been.

When they were finally too far away to hear anymore, Twilight crawled out from behind the tree.

If they had walked any further, if they looked behind the tree’s trunk...

She had been as lucky as an earth pony, she thought. Her cutie mark could be a shoe. It could be a clover.

Twilight shook out the cramps and the pins and needles feelings in her legs and crept back into the school.

---

For the rest of the day, she thought about what would happen later that night and weighed her options. Twilight could hardly think of anything else in Jazz's class, even though (in anticipation of the upcoming exams) her classmates were asking all the right questions, and thus, Jazz was giving a -sort of- proper lecture.

They might have been annoying and boring, but the ponies at her old school had thankfully never given her trouble like this before. She'd read a lot of stories about it, though, and hopefully with them she'd be able to find a solution.

In her books it would always go in one of several ways:

In some stories, despite being small, nonathletic and maybe even outnumbered, the hero would defeat her pursuers and prove that she had some sort of hidden power all along. Twilight knew she *did* have one of those, but unless Belaq, Gingersnap and Tambourine (against all common sense) tried to sneak attack her at the royal palace on the weekend (which they already weren't going to do), there would be no way she could magic her way out of this one.

In other stories, the hero would get picked on for a while before learning that she could tell a trustworthy grownup and then somehow, everything would be fixed and nothing bad would ever happen again.

This didn't seem very realistic to Twilight.

One of the unwritten rules of every schoolyard was that no matter how valid or serious the issue, telling on another student would make you the dreaded *tattletale*, the *snitch*. She knew she was unpopular already, and having one more mark against her couldn't really hurt, but still. Nothing had happened yet and nothing would be stopping them from redoubling their efforts in different and inventive ways that grownups *couldn't* pin on them. If there was anything that had really been hammered into Twilight's head it was that although you had the occasional filly or colt who'd gotten in

with money or good study habits, the rest had minds like razorblades, ones that they could easily cut you with if you weren't careful.

Sometimes in books it would turn out that the mean ponies had a bad life at home. Their parents would be angry and hit them, which made them do these things to other ponies in turn. If this was the case, Twilight would certainly feel *bad* for them, but it wouldn't change the fact that she would be getting picked on too. In her stories the hero would fix things at their homes and solve their differences and everypony would go off and be friends. Twilight really couldn't see this happening - ever.

Finally, just once, Twilight had read a story that was very different from all the others. It was in the juvenile fiction section and all of the characters were kids, but it didn't seem to be the same as all the other adventure stories for young ponies. The hero... if you could call him that, had done cruel, ruthless things to his tormentors, things that had really hurt them and made everypony afraid of him. Twilight knew she'd thought nasty things towards the other ponies; she'd called them horrible names in her head and wished for terrible and unlikely things to happen to them. Still, she didn't know if it was the same as hurting them on purpose, and she knew all too well what it was like for everypony else to be afraid of her...

*Why does this have to be so complicated?*

Twilight slumped in her seat. Why couldn't she just say some magic words and then nopony would be enemies anymore?

---

Twilight stood inside her room and stared straight at the door leading out.

"Excuse me, Mister-slash-Miss-slash-genderless honorific Door," she said. In fairytales, being polite and thoughtful could get you very far. Even inanimate objects would bend over backwards to help a pony who treated them courteously.

Nothing visible or audible happened.

"Doors, there are these ponies who are going to try to open-"

The door swung ajar as soon as she said that last word, and she had to push it shut again. Maybe she had to phrase it precisely in a way that didn't use the words "door", "open" or "close"?

"Doors, if you could not, under any circumstances, allow these three fillies into the room I would be really appreciative." Twilight started describing them.

The door made no response.

"If you can understand me, please give some sort of sign."

Still nothing.

Twilight sighed. *Back to the drawing board.*

---

The moon rose full and brilliant that night, but Twilight's curtains were shut, blocking out any light. All the little moon sigils in Twilight's room were at the lowest setting as she lay there thinking, waiting and dreading.

Twilight wondered if maybe this was a mind game, maybe they had set the whole thing up so that she would overhear and that she would lose a night's sleep from pointless worry. She wouldn't put it past them. How would they even know what room she was in? Maybe it would be tomorrow night instead? next week? a month, even? Maybe it would never happen at all.

Still, she waited.

What else could she do?

She hadn't even started on the day's homework, and yet she waited.

The clock on her nightstand ticked, eight minutes until three. Tick - tock - tick...

Twilight saw the handle of her doorknob turn. There was no noise as the door slid open. Faint light spilled in through the crack.

In this dimness, she couldn't see the colour of the hoof that stepped through, but Twilight imagined it was red. The filly's horn gave off a sickly glow that painted her face in shades of grey. The hairstyle confirmed that it was Gingersnap.

The filly's hoof hit a book as she walked in, but was unnaturally silent as she did so, not making the slightest scuffle or thud.

There were books strewn all over the floor, looking like they had been thrown or knocked over.

Gingersnap glanced at the empty bed, then looked around in apparent confusion. Her mouth moved soundlessly and she bent down to look under the bed, only to find cobwebs and dust. *Just have to angle it 67°...*

Suddenly there was a hissing noise.

The filly's eyes widened. Her mouth moved some more, once again, giving off no sounds. She backed up against a wardrobe.

A shadowy shape moved in the far corner of the room, something without the obvious glow of unicorn magic

The filly's horn flared, sending a bright beam of light where the thing had moved.

There was nothing but scattered clothing.

She bucked open the door to the bathroom, looking like she was fighting to keep herself under control

It was empty.

Panicked, the filly spun around, flashing light into every corner of the room.

She could see now, the sanguine liquid splattered all over the walls. There was a uniform in the corner, torn and soaked with red.

**SLAM!**

Dark and unlit by any horn, the door shut behind her.

The filly opened her mouth wide in a mute scream. She pounded on the door with her hooves that made no sounds.

Finally she remembered herself, pulled at the door with her magic and nearly tripped as she galloped out as fast as she could.

Half an hour passed.

An hour.

No pony came back.

Eventually, when Twilight was sure she'd be left alone, she threw off the uniforms draped over her body and carefully lowered herself down from the top of the wardrobe. It creaked dangerously, but thankfully, didn't tip.

Hiding on ceilings was clearly a cliché for a reason - like the Princess had said, unicorns and earth ponies never looked *up*.

Twilight picked up the wad of clothes in the corner, the ones she'd tossed from the top of the dresser.

The books she'd use to climb - the ones she had to kick down to conceal her hiding place - those went back on the shelves at random; Twilight vowed to sort them out properly in the morning. Finally, Twilight used a damp towel to wipe the mixture of rust, paint and table salt off the walls. The very highest stains she couldn't reach without the aid of magic or a chair. *Tomorrow*, she said to herself again.

She looked sadly at the vest on the floor. Dad wouldn't be very happy about that, but it had been a necessary sacrifice. She remembered how careful she had to be to make sure not to make a mess on the carpet.

The whole thing had been strange. She'd come out as the clear winner and didn't have to hurt anypony, but Twilight hadn't learned any valuable life lessons and she wasn't any closer to being friends with Gingersnap or any of the others. She had expected it to be something she could jump around and celebrate, but after it had happened, she wasn't sure this something it was okay to be proud of.

After an hour when she was done cleaning, when it was getting so late that it was getting early, Twilight climbed into bed, exhausted, and fell fast asleep.

---

Gingersnap's eyes widened in shock when Twilight walked into class the next day. Her red and gold mane was in disarray and although her eyelids drooped occasionally, she held herself in an alert posture. She was clutching, for some odd reason, a burnt loaf of bread.

It was obvious to Twilight, that the filly hadn't slept a wink the entire night.

Belaq rolled her eyes as Gingersnap darted to the very back of the class. Twilight watched as Tambourine glanced back and forth between the two of them, looking like she was debating whether she should follow.

*"Hengstwolf,"* she heard Gingersnap hiss.

*Huh.* That's not what she had been going for, but thinking back though, it *had* been a full moon last night.

Twilight sat down in her usual seat, trying to seem like she had no idea what the crimson filly was talking about.

Two things happened at once. Just then, Mr. Yorsets walked into the room, and at the very same time, Gingersnap beamed Twilight in the back of the head with the bread she'd been holding.

"Children!" Mr. Yorsets said, "What is going *on* in here!"



“She’s a *hengstwolf*!” Gingersnap said, sounding like she was on the verge of breaking into hysteria. “I-She-Last night sh- Look in her room!”

“Miss Gingersnap, you have always been a good student and I will look this over, just this once, but it’s shameful to waste food and if you’re going to play silly pretend games, please do so on your own time.”

“It’s not *wasting*,” Gingersnap insisted. “And it’s not pretend either. Hengstwolves are vulnerable to rye and ash.” She pointed to Twilight who was massaging a bruise below her left ear. That loaf had been hard. “Look at her! She was weakened by it!”

“Um,” said Twilight. “I think ash means from an ash *tree*, not things that are burnt.”

“See! She knows her own vulnerabilities!”

Mr. Yorsets raised an eyebrow. “I understand that the end of a semester can be stressful-”

“But-but-” Gingersnap looked about to cry.

“And it seems to me like you aren’t getting enough sleep. Perhaps a visit to the school nurse might be in order?”

Twilight picked the loaf of bread off the ground with her teeth and placed it right in front of her on her desk. She looked right at Gingersnap and gave her a bright smile.

Gingersnap ran out of the class, sobbing.

Sighing, Mr. Yorsets shook his head and went after her.

As soon as he was gone, BelaQ turned to Twilight and growled. “I don’t know what you did, suckup, but you’d better watch your back from now on.”

Twilight gave her a smug, self-satisfied grin. “Maybe it’s you who should watch yours.” She bared her teeth, then threw her head back. “Awooooo!”

A couple of ponies stared at Twilight. Belaq looked like she was about to hit her, but the teacher walked back into the classroom before she had the chance. He was alone.

“Back to your seats, students,” he said, and began the lesson.

---

Twilight avoided the trio for the next couple of days. On the weekend when the Princess asked her if anything interesting had happened that week, Twilight couldn't find it in herself to conceal the truth. She, in all honesty, *wanted* to tell somepony about the things she'd done.

*After all, she thought, what's the point of winning if the only pony who ever knows about it is yourself?*

She recounted the events dramatically, relishing the points where she'd gotten the upper hoof, much more than she had in the immediate aftermath. Twilight was so absorbed in her own story that she didn't even notice how Princess Celestia hadn't laughed once during the retelling, only listening with a concerned look on her face.

“That was not the best way to handle the situation, Twilight Sparkle.”

Twilight was dismayed. “How? I taught them all a lesson, didn't I?” Her plan had gone off without a hitch.

“True as that may be, it wasn't the *correct* lesson.” Princess Celestia looked grim. “Those fillies only pick on you, correct? No pony else?”

“Yeah, but I don't see what that has to do with anything...”

“Perhaps you are their favourite target and they will decide to start bullying somepony else once you're out of the picture. Perhaps they are just bad ponies.”

That sounded about right.

“To me, however, it sounds like they felt *threatened* by you.”

“By me?” Twilight shook her head. “I can’t even use magic.”

“The fillies in your classes should be your peers. By not socialising with them, you either mark yourself as a pariah or somepony of a much higher standing.”

“Oh.” Twilight didn’t fully understand, but the more she said this night, the stupider she felt. “So what should I do?”

“Whatever your heart tells you to.”

Twilight barely held back an irritated groan. Her heart was telling her to fly into a rage at the completely unhelpful non-answer.

The Princess winked. “Then again, that’s pretty awful advice if you ask me.”

“*Thank* you,” Twilight said, grateful that the Princess hadn’t been serious.

---

She would have to get everypony alone. The Princess had explained to her, why it wouldn’t be a good idea to talk to them all at once. It would be a pain, though, because she didn’t have *any* classes with just Belaq, Gingersnap was avoiding her, and the only class she had alone with Tambourine was, well...

She flagged down the brown filly after another brutal track session. It didn’t seem possible, but after running, Tambourine’s mane was even messier than usual.

“What.” She seemed confused at the fact Twilight had approached her at all.

Twilight fought for breath and against the urge to shrink off somewhere. “I just want to talk,” she said, panting. “That’s all.”

The filly gave her a contemptuous look. "Talk to yourself then." She huffed and continued trotting away.

"But wait," Twilight called after her. "This is important!"

"*Fine*," Tambourine said. "This had better be good, you friendless little runt."

*Little? Runt!* Twilight screamed mentally, *you're smaller than me!*

She put on her best poker face and remembered Princess Celestia's words, in her thoughts, abridging long explanations into simple instructions. *Don't be condescending. Don't make them feel stupid. Don't make it sound like you're doing them a favour... That was a lot of "don't"s.*

Twilight took a deep breath. "I think, uh." She reached for some words she remembered from a novel. "I think that your actions have been hurting me more than you realise and, um, if you would just take a moment to see things from my perspective then perhaps you might see that we're not so different after all?"

Tambourine stared for a moment and then broke out into laughter.

*So much for that...*

After a while she stopped and looked at Twilight casually. "Listen, do you know what *bathos* is?"

Twilight did, but she didn't get the chance to answer.

"It's when something happens in something dramatic or tragic that is unintentionally funny."

She had no idea what this had to do with anything, but she knew if she interrupted, Tambourine would probably stop talking and leave, so she just nodded.

"So picture me, a teeny tiny filly-

*You still are.*

“and I read all these books with kid heroes that can beat up dragons and win the girl and do whatever they want, and then they go back to school and somepony comes along and starts picking on them.

“‘Oh no,’ they say, ‘even though I beat the stuffing out of a fire-breathing lizard three thousand times my size, there’s no way I can fight a bully who doesn’t have any magic or superpowers at all.’

“So then they go and talk to the bully and find out they’re all tragic and troubled and then give them *that exact same speech you just gave me*. The one that never works in real life, when somepony else has all the firepower - but then it actually does.

“Now tell me that’s not bathos.”

Twilight didn’t know what to say, but after a while, things started to slide into place. “You... you were picked on before too, weren’t you.”

“Congratulations,” said Tambourine. “Would you like a medal?”

Twilight shook her head in disbelief. “But then... *why?*”

“You’re the world’s most entitled pipsqueak, that’s why.”

*Why does she keep trying to make fun of my size?* “No...” said Twilight, trying to clarify, “if you know what it’s like to be teased and made fun of, why are you doing it too?”

“*Because,*” said the brown filly, sounding like she was stating the blindingly obvious, “you can’t be at the bottom if somepony *e/*se is there instead.”

“But... That’s just *mean!*”

The filly shrugged. “Lots of stuff is mean, kid. Deal with it.”

Twilight lost her temper. “Don’t call me a kid,” she said. “You’re smaller than me! You don’t even have your cutie mark yet! *You’re* the kid!”

A wind started to pick up, dead leaves taking flight. The smaller filly breathed heavily and her eyes glowed. *"I'm not a kid!"*

All four of Twilight's hooves lifted off the grass and she was incredibly, frighteningly, light. The sky tilted and spun while the air shimmered faintly around her.

She searched automatically for something she could use to hit Tambourine with; if she could hit her with something, if she could break her concentration, the spell would stop before anything really dangerous happened. Her thoughts exploded into brightly-coloured slivers of light as she tried to lift a rock with the magic that she forgot she didn't have.

Twilight closed her eyes, pulled her hooves in towards herself and prepared for a painful impact.

And then nothing.

She tumbled to the earth, headfirst, and not at all gently, but it hadn't been the throw or slam she'd been expecting.

For some reason she didn't understand, she had been let go.

Tambourine was shaking. She wasn't crying, but it looked like she was trying very hard not to. She looked drained from the heavy duty magic.

"I'm sorry," Twilight said.

The filly didn't look at her. "Just go."

Twilight opened her mouth to speak, but then thought better of it. She walked away quietly, leaving the brown filly alone on the grass.

*That could have gone better...*



Gingersnap avoided Twilight with an almost religious fervor. She'd left Twilight alone since the night she'd broken into her room. Twilight was content with this arrangement, but Princess Celestia had insisted that they settle things between themselves.

It was frustrating.

“Come *on*, Gingersnap,” Twilight yelled down the hallway. “Quit running!” After waiting almost half a week for a good opportunity to catch the filly by herself, Twilight had realised that it would never happen unless she took some initiative. “I only want to talk to you!”

Gingersnap’s hooves pounded loudly on the floor as she galloped away. “Leave me alone!” She darted down the central staircase and out of Twilight’s sight.

“Also don’t run down the stairs,” Twilight called out, feeling a little queasy at the thought. “You might fall and break your neck!”

There was no response, but Twilight went after her anyway, following the echoing hoofsteps and the lingering scent of fear.

She cornered her in the second storey bathroom.

Twilight tried not to be intimidating or scary, not sure how she could look either of those in the first place. “Look, I don’t want to hurt you...”

“Go away!” Gingersnap had shut herself in a stall and clearly wasn’t coming out until it was obvious Twilight was gone.

“Could we just talk then?” Twilight said patiently, not wanting to repeat what happened with Tambourine. “You can stay in there.”

Gingersnap’s voice trembled. “What do you want from me?”

“I just want to say sorry for how I acted the other day... and for scaring you.” Twilight sat down on the tiled floor outside the stall, expecting that she’d be there for some time. “I was just hoping that we could forget about that stuff and start fresh.”

“What *are* you?”

“An ordinary unicorn just like you,” she said evenly. “I knew you were coming that night and you didn’t leave me much choice but to do something about it.”



“But... what was all that stuff then? the blood on the walls, the weird noises coming from everywhere, the things moving without magic...”

Twilight gently explained everything that had happened, that the original intention was to make the room seem *haunted* so they wouldn't try anything like that again. This was what the Princess thought was best, but Twilight quietly mourned the loss of the few unknown advantages she had against these fillies.

After she was done, they both stayed there on their respective sides of the door, not saying anything for a long time.

“I really hate you, you know that?” Gingersnap said at last.

“I didn't mean t-”

“No,” the crimson filly said, cutting her off. “Don't get me wrong. The execution was perfect. I learned to *Quiet* maybe a week after I learned how to read, and I had no idea that sound distorted on the edges of the field like that.”

“Uh,” Twilight said stupidly, not knowing what else to say.

“We're good on two conditions,” said Gingersnap. “First of all, you don't put up your hoof in class until at least five seconds after I do.” There was a click as the stall door unlocked. “Secondly, you don't let *anypony* know what just transpired, either today or the other night.” She opened the stall with her magic and stepped out. “*This* never happened and *that* never happened.” Her voice was businesslike and her expression was dead serious. “If somepony asks, we were playing some sort of game. Got it?”

“Yeah,” Twilight said meekly, a little perturbed at how quickly Gingersnap had regained her composure, “got it.”

“Good.”

She watched as Gingersnap marched brusquely out the door. It swung back and forth, creaking.

---

The only pony left to talk to was Belaq. She seemed like the leader of the three fillies and Twilight had thought it would be best to see her last.

Neither Tambourine or Gingersnap had bothered her since she'd spoken to them, and Belaq, frustrated by the lack of support, had picked up the slack and tried to fill in the shoes both of them had left behind. There wasn't a single class with her that didn't include some sort of cruel magical prank while the teacher's back was turned.

"Okay," Twilight said once *Notation, Reading and Casting* was over. After the stunt Belaq had just pulled, she was going to be finding bits of glitter in her mane for months. "We need to talk."

Belaq didn't look back as she walked away. "Oh, do we? Are you going to make me stop being friends with myself now too?"

"That's not what I'm trying to do." Twilight cantered to keep up. "I just want to be left alone."

The amber filly stopped in her tracks. "Oh yeah?" There was a thick layer of disdain in her voice. "You didn't need to make them leave *me* alone too."

*They're not friends anymore?* "I wasn't *trying* to make them do that." Twilight pawed at the ground. "I just wanted to make things okay between us."

"Well now things aren't okay between *us*."

Twilight tried to pick up a different tack, remembering that she'd occasionally seen her classmate carrying around adventure or horror novels. "Just think of how you've been acting," she said. "You're like the *villain* of a book, picking on somepony weaker who's never done anything to you."

Belaq snorted. "Oh come on," she said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm not Tammy. I'm not gonna cry just because you're drawing parallels to books I like."

“How did you find out about that?”

“We still *talk*, you know,” the filly said. “You didn’t screw things up that much.”

“Well, what can I do to fix this then?” asked Twilight, hoping it wouldn’t be something like thirty bits a day and a hundred push-ups every morning.

“Leave.” There wasn’t a trace of humour in Belaq’s eyes. “Go find another school or go live with your fancy princess and leave *us* alone.”

“But...” Twilight shook her head. “That’s totally unreasonable!”

“Those are my demands and I’m sticking to them.”

“Even if I leave,” Twilight pointed out as logically as she could, “it doesn’t mean that everything will be the same again between you three. It just means I won’t be here.”

“One obstacle out of the way.”

“But even if you didn’t offer to let up on me, if I left, you wouldn’t have a choice anyway.”

“You really aren’t very bright, are you?” Belaq said, tossing her mane. “I never said I would leave you alone you if you left. You just asked what you could ‘do to fix this’.”

*Ugh, we’re playing this game then.* Twilight hated it when the other kids here made a point of using exact wording. They would use it to weasel their way out of anything.

She constructed a sentence in her head, laboriously making sure that there was no room for misinterpretation.

“Okay,” said Twilight finally. “What actions could I take to ensure that you and those influenced by you, directly and indirectly, will no longer harass me or cause me harm in any way?”

Belaq grinned slyly. "Well I can't speak for those influenced by me indirectly..."

"No," said Twilight. "You are *not* going to loophole out of that phrasing, put a nest of mongooses outside of my room and claim it to be indirect influence when they attack me in the middle of the night! or... anything else like that!"

"No mongooses." the filly said with a nod.

"No mongooses, alligators, chickens, anything under the general blanket of harassment or harm."

"Well," said Belaq, sticking out her tongue. "You could start by finding another school..."

Twilight put a hoof over her face. This was going nowhere.

"I can't reason with you, can I?" Twilight said with an exasperated groan, then under her breath but just loud enough to hear, "I'll just have Princess Celestia send an assassin..."

"*What?*"

"Oh, I just said I can't reason with you."

"No, that last thing."

"Can I?" She knew that the Princess wouldn't approve, but after that last stunt, she wasn't going to give up this chance to get Belaq's goat.

"No, after that."

"Oh," Twilight said innocently. "You heard that?"

Belaq narrowed her eyes. "Princess Celestia doesn't *have* assassins!"

*Let them come to their own conclusions, the Princess had said. The end result will be much more effective. Clear the way, but don't pull their*

*reins down the path. Ideas and doubt can be sown by strangers, but only thrive when tended by their owners. Whatever that meant.*

“Yeah, you’re right. I just let my imagination run away with me sometimes.” Twilight gave a purposefully awkward smile. “I’m gonna go now.”

“Wait!” BelaQ called to her. “Don’t assassinate me!”

Twilight kept walking. *Wow, is it really this easy?*

“I’ll be good! I promise!”

*The Princess is a genius.*

BelaQ left her alone for the rest of the semester.

# Chapter Five



As exams drew closer Twilight grew more and more frantic.

During her weekend lessons she would practice weightlifting and manipulating finicky grains of rice rather than trying to manage her own magic surges, trying to cram a semester's worth of progress into a few short weekends. The Princess told her that all this was unnecessary, but Twilight assumed that, as a mentor, Princess Celestia was just trying to be reassuring.

She had lined up along with everypony else to get into the individual assessment room, and when it was her turn, she was told to leave. The one thing that everypony had neglected to tell her was that being unable to use magic actually *exempted* her from the tests she was dreading the most.

As she packed some things for the trip home, she wondered absently how Rune had fared. She'd come up with the theory that Rune must have had to repeat a year or something, which was why she was so much bigger than everypony else. Princess Celestia, was always unhelpfully nonspecific whenever the subject of classmates came up, and wouldn't tell her a thing.

Twilight's parents showed up on the day before winter vacation started.

"Mom!" she yelled. "Dad!"

Since Twilight's magic was still bound, the principal, who Twilight had seen almost nothing of during the school year, helped carry her luggage down outside. No pony else received similar treatment, which made Twilight feel a little guilty, if only for a moment.

"Who's this tall filly in front of us?" Dad said, craning his neck high and low, left and right, looking around Twilight but not at her. "Have you seen my daughter? She looks a little like you, but is much, much shorter."

"Oh shush, silly," said Twilight. "I saw you three weeks ago!"

Twilight's mother laughed and nuzzled her. "To me it seemed like three years," she said as she picked up her daughter's lone suitcase with her magic. "Did you learn anything interesting over the last few months?"

"Sooooo much!" Twilight launched into a long, breathless description of everything that had happened during the school year that she didn't have time or room to write about in the letters she'd sent back home.

Maybe she was in better shape, or maybe it was just that it was a lot colder, but the trek home wasn't nearly as arduous as it had been during the summer. Twilight and her parents only had to stop once to let her rest.

"... and then we learned how to find out how far something's gonna fall from how long it was falling!" Twilight said as they reached the front door of their home.

She opened her mouth to speak but then closed it again as she saw the inside of the house. It was all different.

It was all... *fancy*.

The old staticky radio, the one that broke at least once a year and that Mom had to keep fixing, had been replaced with a sleeker black model. There were more bookshelves, lots and lots of bookshelves. Books that used to be stacked double on the shelves and piled up on top of each other now sat in single neat rows.

"What happened to the old couch?"

There was a brand new brown sofa where there used to be worn grey one. They'd had it since before Twilight was born and she'd learned about stars and math and words while sitting on it or near it. To her it smelled the way learning should, and like home.

"We donated it," Mom said. "It was getting pretty ratty."

*There was nothing wrong with the old one,* Twilight thought. *The new sofa probably isn't even as comfy.* "Why?"



“Over time objects wear out through repeated use from things like friction and-”

Twilight’s father cleared his throat. “I think she means why now.”

“Oh.” Her mother looked around at all the new things they’d bought while Twilight had been away at school. “While you were away your father picked up extra hours at the observatory and we could afford to replace a lot of the odds and ends around the house.”

Dad nodded. “Mhm. We also built another study.”

Twilight entered the house feeling a little apprehensive about what other unpleasant changes waited for her.

---

Twilight and her parents sat on the new sofa as she told them more about her classes.

“So let me get this straight,” said Dad, after a long and colourful description of Ms. Marie’s classes. “Your gym teacher-”

Twilight shook her head. “Physical and Mental Education.”

“Okay, your *Physical and Mental Education* teacher chases you around with a giant rock, shouts death threats and verbally abuses you for two hours straight every other day?”

Twilight nodded. “That’s the gist of it.”

“Wow,” he said. “When you wrote that she was mean, I thought you meant that she just gave a lot of detentions or something.”

“How is this allowed to continue?” her mother asked. “Haven’t there been complaints from parents?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Twilight said. She rubbed her nose with a hoof. “Maybe she threatens them too?”

Mom looked scary. "Have you told the Princess?" she asked. "What does *she* think?"

"I don't know either." Twilight looked down at the floor. "I sorta... assumed she already knew and I didn't... want to sound like a whiner..."

"That wouldn't make you a whiner, Twi," Dad said. "That's pretty serious if it's true."

"Of course it's true. Why would I make something like that up?"

"Oh I dunno." Her father shrugged. "Getting almost smashed by a teacher makes for a good story."

Twilight sputtered indignantly.

"Relax," he said with a wink. "I believe you."

Her mother had left the room at some point and was now wearing a dark jacket and boots. She looked like she was about to leave.

"Where are you going?" Twilight asked.

"To the palace," said her mother. "I need to see the Princess about what's going on at your school."

"Dear," Twilight's father said in a very level voice, "it's dark out, there's a blizzard planned for tonight and the palace is over an hour away."

"And?"

There was a pause.

"Well at least give me some time to put something on too."

Twilight trotted to the closet to grab something warm to wear, but her mother stopped her. "Twilight, you need to stay here," she said. "If the snow gets deep you won't be able to walk through it at all."

“But I want to come too.” Twilight pouted. “What if you guys get snowed in at the palace? What if I’m trapped inside for a whole week by myself?”

The urgency left her mother’s actions. She had a look on her face that could only be comparable to somepony who’d spent all her days with a duck on her head, never noticing it until one day in her adult life, somepony had simply pointed out to her that she had a bit of a waterfowl problem. “One of us should stay...”

“We can bring the toboggan,” Dad said, decisively.

Twilight’s face lit up with glee. “We have a toboggan?!”

Her mother glared at him. “That was supposed to be a surprise!”

“Oops.”

---

Tiny flakes of snow started to fall as the three of them trekked to the palace. The brand new toboggan was strapped to Dad’s back and he struggled under its weight.

“I love you and all, Twi,” her father said after a while, “but if you’d told us about this *before* we’d gotten home then I wouldn’t be considering selling you to the circus right now.”

Mom snorted. “Pass that over to me then, you big baby.” She didn’t wait for a response as she undid the ropes with her magic and hefted the toboggan to herself.

Twilight knew her father was joking, but she still felt bad that she couldn’t help at all with carrying the little wooden sled. If only she’d been a little bigger, or if the snow was a little higher, or if she could use her magic... it was such a waste.

Somehow she’d imagined that the winter that she could finally use magic would be different from all the other winters where she couldn’t.

By the time they were halfway down the hill there was a very thin dusting of snow on the ground. Twilight longed to climb on the toboggan and slide down the rest of the way, but from the looks of it, she'd only scrape up the bottom.

Once the palace was in sight, Twilight looked up at the sky, watching as fat snowflakes fell. She blinked furiously as one of them fell right into her eye.

The pegasus guards at the gate stopped them as they drew near.

"Halt," the one on the left said, holding out a wing. "What business have you at the palace?"

Despite the glamour on his barding concealing his actual coat and cutie mark, Twilight recognized the night guard's voice. "Gus," she said. "This is my Mom and Dad. They just want to talk to the Princess." *Come to think of it*, Twilight thought, *I don't know what he looks like without his armour on anyway.*

"Carry on then, Ms. Sparkle." He folded his wing.

Twilight looked up at both of the guards. "Do either of you know where the Princess is right now?"

They didn't.

The guard to the right (Honoured Journey, most likely) whispered, "thanks for the cupcakes, sir," as they passed, much to Twilight's father's confusion.

They shook off the snow, wiped their hooves on the mat and looked around.

What Twilight gathered from her lessons and time spent at the palace was that Princess Celestia had her last meeting before sunset (which in the wintertime, was quite early) and afterwards, was free to do as she pleased. Still, she had no idea where the Princess was supposed to be on an ordinary night like this, how to find her or even if she was in the palace at all tonight. It was past dinnertime so she wouldn't be in the dining hall, and

despite her frequent visits, Twilight had never seen where Princess Celestia's bedchamber was supposed to be.

Neither her mother or father seemed to have a clue either.

"Isn't there a reception desk or something?" Twilight's father said eventually, his voice echoing in the large room.

Twilight lead her parents from the antechamber to the throne room, to the dining hall, up and down the hallways and to every place she could think of. The palace was mostly empty at this time of day, and flickering candles lit each room and corridor. They'd been allowed to leave the toboggan near the front door and they weren't stuck carting it around the castle with them, but Twilight suspected that her mother and father's hooves ached at least as much as hers did.

There was still no sign of the Princess.

"It's not that big of a deal," Twilight said as they trotted down an empty hallway. "I mean, nopony's ever gotten hit by that big boulder of hers yet. She's probably missing us on purpose."

Her mother grit her teeth. "**Princess Celestia!**"

Twilight winced and her father flattened his ears.

Her mother galloped down the hallway, hollering at the top of her lungs.

After a while, a white form appeared around the corner, flanked by several guards. "Greetings," said the Princess. "I'm honoured that you decided to visit, but it may behoove you to lower your voice. As early as it is, some have already gone to sleep."

"I didn't mean to wake you," said Mom, bowing as she spoke, "but there are things going on at your school that you really should know about."

"You needn't worry about me," Princess Celestia said with a wink. "My guards, on the other hoof..."

Twilight looked at the four white pegasi around the Princess. They looked cranky.

“Sorry,” her mother said.

“You and your husband should come with me,” said the Princess. “We have much to discuss.”

“What am I supposed to do, then?” Twilight said, noticing that Princess Celestia hadn’t included “your daughter” in that statement.

“I believe it’s best if you stay here for the time being.”

Dad cocked his head. “I think Twilight could tell you better than us what’s been going on at that school of yours.”

“Be that as it may, some of these issues may be sensitive. I have an inkling of what you wish to discuss, and perhaps this problem has an answer that is for parents, rather than children.” With that, Princess Celestia whisked Twilight’s parents away. All four guards trailed after her sleepily.

Twilight sat on the carpet, sulking. The Princess had basically shut her out and said that this was grownup business. *I hate it when they do that.*

After ten minutes, she began to wonder why they couldn’t have left her in the palace library or something instead. After half an hour she fell asleep.

---

Something was nudging Twilight’s shoulder. “Five more minutes...” she muttered.

“C’mon, Twi,” Dad’s voice said, “time to go home.”

“Huh...”

Twilight felt something raise her gently to her hooves.

“Wake up, sweetie,” said Mom, her horn glowing.

She followed her parents out of the palace, zombie-like. An icy blast of air from outside shocked her into full consciousness. The wind had started to pick up.

“So what did she say?” Twilight asked as she climbed on the toboggan; Mom wrapped a blanket around her to shield her from the worst of the cold, and the drifting snow.

“Princess Celestia just explained a few things to us,” Mom said. “Everything’s been sorted out.”

Both parents tied its ropes to themselves and tugged. The little sled pulled through the snow in jerky little skips, but after a point began to slide forward more smoothly

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Her father replied next, “Just that we talked to her, she told us about everything that’s going on and that we figured that, for the time being, you should be fine.

“But then what did she say?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” he said.

“Is this about birds and bees again? Because I read all about them.” Twilight took a deep breath as she recalled what she’d learned. “Birds, class *Aves*, warm-blooded vertebrates that lay eggs and have feathers. Bees, order *hymenoptera*, eusocial two-winged insects that produce honey and may or may not have stingers depending on species.” She glared at them. “I’m not a naïve kid anymore!”

Her mother stopped pulling for a moment and stood there until the front of the toboggan clipped at her heels. She opened her mouth.

“Yes,” Twilight’s father said, before her mother could reply. “That’s it exactly.”

“Fine then. Be that way.” Twilight huffed. “...Grownups.”

She wanted to sink into a sullen silence for the rest of the ride home.



But for some reason, she couldn't.



---

The blizzard played out till morning, just as scheduled, and when Twilight woke up, the snow was eye level. She saw that her mother was already up, fixing coffee, and Twilight bounded outside, not bothering to put on a jacket.

Deprived of her ability to walk, she leapt from snowdrift to snowdrift. She stood in a compressed patch of snow, rearing up to peek her head over the edges. "Look at how deep it is, Mom!" She giggled as she stood back on all fours. "I can't even see you!"

Her mother, who was sipping coffee by the front door, just smiled and reached down to gather some snow with both forehooves.

Splat! Twilight was smacked in the side with a shimmering snowball.

"Hey!" she said. "Not fair! You're not allowed to use magic!"

Twilight's mother smirked playfully. "Are you going to try to stop me?"

Twilight formed a clumsy snowball with her hooves and tossed it back. The snowball went wide.

"I've seen more accurate trajectories on bottle rockets!" Mom said. "You can do better than that!"

"Autonomy, civil rights, sisterhood or death!" Twilight cried, as she charged towards her mother with undignified little hops.

She pounced on her mother, covered in snow, and they fell to the ground laughing.

---

Twilight walked around the house with Smarty Pants, looking for things that had changed while she was gone. Three months was a long time, but more had been replaced while she was away than in the last three years. Every time she walked past the new study she got a strange chill, like somehow the architecture was changing around her - a room where

there used to be a wall. The fact that somepony had actually gone in and *built* the room assuaged her very little. Celestia help her if she started to doodle all-black drawings of her house with footnotes and little minotaurs in the margins.

Mostly, she saw, it was new bookshelves. Here and there, old clocks had been replaced; some things had been given a fresh coat of paint, and it took a while before she thought to peek in the drawers, but she saw all the cutlery in the kitchen now matched too.

She prodded the new couch with a hoof. It smelled of freshly cured wood and new fabrics, nothing like the old sofa at all. Now that she wasn't around all the time, her parents could afford so many new things... They'd even bought her a toboggan and if they hadn't, who knows what *e/se* they could've gotten.

*Hm...*

She knew that her parents had done the week's grocery shopping the day before the blizzard hit, and fished the receipt out of the trash with a hoof.

*Two hundred bits! Jeeze...*

A few years ago Twilight had spent the whole summer scrimping and saving to buy a telescope and all of that was less than what her parents spent a week on food. She did the math in her head. *Adjusting for size that means I eat around fifty bits a week... I'm costing them thousands of bits a year! Just in food!* She saw a lot of zeroes in her mind as she did the calculations for how much she must have cost them during the course of her entire life.

That was a *lot* of telescopes.

No wonder they could never afford to buy new stuff until she was away at school. And now that she was back... There must be some way that she could keep herself from costing them so much money. Maybe she could eat rehydrated noodles? Those were pretty cheap, but then that hinged upon her parents being okay with buying nothing but dry noodles for her to eat. *Hm...* There was one food that was even cheaper (and even

more traditional) than pasta. Getting it this time of year, though, presented somewhat of a problem.

Twilight went outside and dug in the snow where her mother had cleared a walkway earlier that morning. There would be grass underneath. It would be frozen and would most likely brown, but it would cost absolutely nothing to eat.

Her digging was rewarded with a few scraggly blades peeking out from the snow. She reached down to chew.

*Blech.*

In the spring, when it smelled fresh and appetizing, she'd once tried eating raw grass. It was... okay. Bland, tasting like it needed salt, or salad dressing or something, but then again what could she expect? Even in comparison, this stuff was awful. It tasted like soggy hay that had gone a little off.

Not very tasty, but it was free.

Twilight spent over an hour, digging up grass to munch on. Breakfast hadn't been all that long ago, and she wasn't even hungry; no matter how much she seemed to eat, though, the grass felt more like it was taking up space than actually being filling.

"Twilight!" her mother shouted from the front door. "Your father's made l- Are you eating the lawn?"

Twilight looked up sheepishly with a mouth half-full of yellowish grass. "Uh." She tried to hide her distaste as she swallowed. "It tastes really good?"

Her mother raised an eyebrow. "There are sandwiches inside, and I'm not going to lie and say that your father slaved hours on them, but you know better than to spoil your appetite before a meal."

"Grass is the healthiest food in the world," Twilight said, trying to salvage the situation. "It's home-grown and natural and you get to... see every... step of it being made." Her mind raced frantically, searching for the

right words. "All the processed and cooked foods we're eating, like hay..." *Thinkthinkthink what else do modern ponies eat?* "and sandwiches, are terrible for you because they're nothing like the diets of our... wild plains ancestors." *Oh Celestia save me.* "And from now on I'm only going to eat raw grass like we were born to do!" She tried to look proud and fierce.

"What are they doing to you at that school."

---

Over the course of that day, Twilight's parents tried to coax her into eating regular food, but she refused. It was hardest around dinnertime, when they forced her to sit at the table even though she wasn't eating anything.

"Mmm... this mushroom casserole's so good," her father said, eating in slow, luxurious bites. "Mmmmmm...!"

Twilight could smell how rich and creamy it was, not grassy at all. Her mouth watered.

"Why yes," said her mother. "And these potatoes are so buttery and fluffy. They melt right in your mouth."

She knew her parents were doing it on purpose. She also knew that if she told her parents what *she* was doing, they'd tell her she was being silly and would do stuff like make a portion of food for her anyway and then throw it away when she didn't eat it. Parents were weird like that.

"Well this casserole tastes like an angel died and instead of decaying, it ascended to an even *higher* plane of existence... in flavour!"

No, she had to stick this out to convince them she really was adamant on this all-grass diet. Her stomach told her that it had half a mind to punch her in the face, leap out of her mouth and crawl around on the table devouring everything, but she had to do this. It was for the best.

"May I be excused?" Twilight said, for the third time that meal. An all-grass diet had a *lot* of fibre.

Her mother, being the cruel torturer that she was, said, "Yes, but you have to come back for dessert."

When Dad brought out the freshly-baked apple pie, smelling deliciously tart and cinnamony, Twilight wanted to break down and cry.

---

She lay on her bed that night, thinking of more ways to save money. Her parents must be spending bits on her in other ways too. It was expensive to... heat the house, but then they would do that even if she wasn't there... The things they bought her had certainly cost money, clothes and toys and books. She looked at Smarty Pants and her bookshelf. *No pony would buy a used doll like me*, Smarty Pants said, *removing me from the situation would accomplish nothing*. That was reasonable enough.

Her books, on the other hoof, could be sold at a used bookstore for a fraction of the original price. Selling all these things that had been gifts, though... something about it didn't feel right (and not just the fact that she desperately didn't want to sell any of her book collection).

Usually when she had trouble figuring things out, a long, hot soak in a bubblebath would help her find her best ideas. Although the room at her school was nice, it had a shower rather than a bathtub and she missed bubblebaths dearly. She trotted into the washroom to start running the water and then it hit her. She was costing them money by using water too! Hot water!

*Ugh*, Twilight thought. *I'm going to have to spend the next three weeks being smelly at this rate... Unless...*

It wasn't too late to go out yet. With a bucket in tow, Twilight made her way outside to make the most efficient and cost-effective use of all the house's ambient heat.

After half an hour, she looked back at her work, feeling pleased. She went back into her room to await the fruits of her labour.

"Twilight Sparkle!" yelled her father later that night. "Why is the bathtub filled with snow!?"

---

Dad had accused the school of turning Twilight into a flankster.

"One of those stallions that hang out in groups and wear baggy clothes and flashy jewelry and call mares... rakes?" *Hm... that's not right...* "Oh! No wait, they call them h-"

"That's gangsters, Twilight," Dad said, cutting her off. "And I don't want to hear you using that word unless you're talking about gardening."

"Okay," Twilight said. "What's a flankster then?"

"A young flankie," he said, with a shake his head. "You're on a raw grass diet, you don't want to shower and I'll bet that pretty soon you're going to start attending classes at the local university, and a community garden that grows *medicinal* herbs."

That last thing wasn't a bad idea. Then they wouldn't have to visit the doctor anymore, and she could sell anything they didn't use. This would have to wait until spring, though.

Twilight's father was also on to something when he mentioned local university. University students knew how to live cheaply and she'd heard stories of them living for years off virtually no money. Canterlot University was nearby, and even though classes were out for the winter, there would be bound to be a few students who were still hanging around. Twilight could ask them how they saved their money, and then she'd be able to do it too! The only thing she needed to do was figure out a way to make the university students take her seriously.

In her head she hatched a plan. Her name was Eventide Glitter, Eve for short; she had achondroplastic dwarfism (Twilight had to look that one up to get the pronunciation and the details right); and she was majoring in thaumaturgic sciences (i.e. magic), despite having a dwarfism-related disability that prevented her from actually being able to cast spells. Before bed, Twilight practiced looking very serious and grown-up in the mirror until

she could pass as prematurely old, and she recited her backstory until it became as ingrained in her head as all the prime numbers below a thousand.

Tomorrow would be a big day, but first... another trip to the bathroom.

*Stupid grass...*

---

Twilight told her parents that she was going to visit the university library to check out some rare books they had. It wasn't technically a lie, since Canterlot University had an unrivaled collection of magic books and there was no way she would pass up an opportunity to at least look. When she told them, though, she saw Dad give Mom a look that Twilight could only interpret as the visual equivalent of, "I told you so."

The roads had been cleared the day before, so the way to the university was quick and easy.

"Hello," Twilight said to a passing mare. "My name is Eventide Glitter and I was wondering if you could tell me what the lower income students do here to save money."

"Is this a census?"

"Yes," Twilight lied. "Also, I have achondroplastic dwarfism."

"Uh... what?"

Twilight knew that grownups found it unsettling when kids spoke in big words, so she racked her brain for a needlessly verbose way to phrase what she'd say next. "My diminutive stature commonly incites conjecture from others about my relative maturity. I am merely aspiring to clarify the most immediately pressing catechism that must be weighing on your... cerebrum." She finished this with her "grown up" look. *Phew. That was a mouthful.*

"Um, okay... What was the question again?"

“How do you save money? Other than eating grass and not taking showers.”

The mare looked offended.

*Huh? Oh.* “I wasn’t trying to say that you don’t shower. I meant that... other than... those methods,” Twilight finished lamely.

“Well if you have to know,” the mare said in clipped tones, “restaurants and supermarkets throw out a lot of their food at the end of the day, and most of it is still good. Some of us also do composting and our own gardening. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere to be.”

That last tip wasn’t too helpful since it was too cold to do any planting. Neither did the idea of going through other ponies’ trash for discarded food appeal to her very much. Still, after a while on nothing but grass, maybe even garbage would start to look tasty.

After a quick browse of the library (most of the magic books were still too advanced for her), Twilight went through the university, asking anypony she could think of about their money-saving methods: double paned windows, sharing textbooks, seeing dental students rather than actual dentists... Not too many of them were very useful.

The best idea only hit her when she walked past an advertisement on a bulletin board: I am a mare looking to split 2 bdrm suite at 4108 maplehoof tower, no pets or pyromancy, rent is 300 bits a month - please send letter with return address so we can set up meeting time.

*Roommates!* It was so simple! No wonder nopony had mentioned it. It should have already been blindingly obvious. All Twilight had to do to bring some more money into the household was to rent out her room!

If she put up an ad and went the mail route, she might be back at school by the time anypony responded. No, she’d have to take matters into her own hooves. Twilight spent hours standing near the bulletin board, flagging down everypony she saw, asking if they, or anypony they knew, were looking for affordable housing near the university. It took twenty-seven tries, but finally she found a taker.



"I can offer you a room for much cheaper than anything on that board," Twilight said to the unicorn colt (or perhaps he was old enough to call a stallion) she'd seen checking out the bulletin. He was mint-green and had, for some odd reason, a turkey cutie mark.

"How much?" he asked, after Twilight had explained how she really had achondroplastic dwarfism to him.

"Five bits a day," she said, "or one hundred and fifty a month." She figured that at half the price the other pony was offering, nopony would be able to refuse.

"And it's a single room?"

"Yeah, but curfew is between 6 at night and 9 in the morning," she said, thinking of her parents. "And you're not allowed to leave the room during that time. At all. Not even to go to the bathroom."

"That's weird... Why?"

"Because of my condition I need lots and lots of sleep. If you wake me up I get... heart murmurs." There was a moment of silence. "The other tenants are very cranky too."

"I guess I can invest in a bucket, then."

*Ew.* "Any other questions?"

"Just one. I have a girlfriend and we're just starting to get serious. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Why would it be?" Twilight asked, genuinely perplexed, but trying to make the question sound rhetorical.

He wanted to see the room before he bought it, so Twilight lead him to her house and showed him. It was lucky that her parents had gone out on a Sunday.

"The books need to stay here, but I'll move out the dolls and clothing before you move in," she told him. She quickly thought up a lie to explain

their presence. "They belonged to my daughter..." *Oh poop. Now I need to explain why she's not here.* "It was such a... um... tragic accident."

"I'm so very sorry."

*Oh no...* she thought, realising what she'd implied and then how unconvincing she was being. Twilight buried her face in her hooves and made sobbing sounds. She really wished she knew how to cry on the spot, but if she squeezed her eyes hard enough, they sometimes started to tear up.

"There, there," he said awkwardly.

"It's alright," Twilight said, remembering some lines from a book. "I have to move on. This is something I must do."

"You're not one of those ponies who cry all night, are you?"

"Nope."

"Oh good."

"Is this arrangement to your liking?" Twilight said, remembering that she had to talk like a grownup.

"A pretty swanky setup, if you ignore all the stuff for little girls. Plus, you can't beat the price. I'll take it."

"Great. You can move in tomorrow at 10 am. It was a pleasure doing business with you."

*Woohoo!* Twilight thought to herself as he walked out the front door. *I'm renting stuff out! Just like a grownup pony!*

*Wait... Where am I supposed to sleep now?*

---

Twilight looked around the house for a good place to set up camp. Her parents would notice her sleeping on the couch every night, so she had to pick somewhere a little more discreet. There was a broom closet under the stairs, but she'd have to be a wizard to fit in there, with all the other stuff

that was inside as well. If she shifted everything around, though, she could probably squeeze in all the things she would have to move out of her room.

There was a lot of room in the cabinet underneath the sink. She had to push all the bottles to the sides and move certain things to other cabinets and cupboards, but there was eventually enough room in there to fit a pillow, a blanket, Smarty Pants and herself. This would do for now until she got back to school.

The next morning after her parents had gone to work, Twilight helped the new boarder bring in all his things. She had to explain how she had problems with her magic as she lugged a suitcase up the stairs with her teeth. She was thankful that he didn't have very much in the way of earthly possessions.

After that was done, she spent the rest of the morning digging for grass. It was easiest to get the stuff on the sides of the road that the snow plower ponies had cleared, but grass was so hard to get full with. She'd already eaten a quarter of the roadside on her street, and in four days, the entire stretch of road would be exhausted. Her neighbours definitely weren't too happy either, when she started eating their front lawns.

Twilight had resorted to trying to clear out a big enough patch of grass to eat on her own lawn, which was hindered by the fact that the snow was higher than she was tall. *No wonder ancient ponies invented other kinds of food*, Twilight thought as she chewed a hard-earned mouthful of turf. *This stinks.*

"Neat," said the colt, as he sidled up next to her. "I didn't know you were into the whole raw grass thing."

"It's very healthy," Twilight said, not sure who she was trying to convince.

"Hm..."

Twilight watched in envy as the colt easily moved aside a large patch of snow with his magic and exposed a stretch of grass.

He bent down to nibble on a frozen tuft and made a face as he swallowed. "Yup. Garbage is still better."

*Don't tempt me.*

"I'm going dumpster-diving with my girlfriend later," he said. "Would you like to come?"

Not having anything better to do, Twilight agreed. Besides, the snow was starting to get crusty and hard to dig in.

That afternoon she, the colt, and the unicorn filly who was his girlfriend, went to the back of a large fresh produce market to look for any discarded vegetables. Twilight was told that the pickings were better at night; the garbage level would be much higher and you could just reach in and grab what you wanted. Since they were working around a curfew, though, they wouldn't be able to be choosy.

Neither of them were small enough to fit through the lid of the large dumpster themselves, nor were they skilled enough at magic to rummage through the trash easily from such a distance.

Twilight's size was what won out in the end.

"Okay," said the colt, "the compactor at this store comes on every twenty minutes during the day. I just heard it go off five minutes ago so if we get you in and out in ten minutes we should be peachy."

This seemed dangerous, but for some reason, Twilight wanted to impress these ponies. "Uh huh," she said, trying her best to sound unaffected. *Eventide Glitter wouldn't be afraid.* "I've been in worse."

She climbed into the basket they'd brought and the colt and his girlfriend carefully lowered her into the compactor with their magic.

The air was surprisingly warm in the dumpster, *heat from the rotting vegetation*, Twilight guessed. It didn't smell as bad as she had expected it to, mouldy, damp, and maybe a little funky, but not putrid. It grew dimmer as they lowered her in, and even after her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could barely even see her own hooves. Twilight lost sense of her own

body, seeing nothing but blackness and feeling only the humid, blood-warm air and the basket around her sides. She felt her weight shift and heard a squelching sound as she touched down on the ground. *Please just let that be soggy cardboard...* She stepped over the sides of the basket, wishing dearly that she could cast any sort light spell. *A beam, a flare, a glow... I would trade my tail just for a spark.*

Twilight squinted up at halo of light around the opening. "It's dark down here..." she said quietly to nopony in particular, "and this is questionably legal."

She nearly tripped over some long, tapering sort of root vegetable, either parsnips or carrots. Into the basket they went. Twilight groped around blindly with her hooves and felt a bag of either cauliflower or broccoli to her right. To her left, there was a burlap sack filled with heavy, roundish objects. Everything went into the basket. It was too dim to get an accurate measure of space and Twilight kept imagining that she heard the compactor starting up and the walls silently closing in around her. *Oh goodness... Please don't forget about me in here...*

Everything suddenly got darker as the filly-mare poked her head over the entrance. "Time's up, Eve," she said. "If you didn't get much, we can try again after the compactor does another sweep."

Twilight felt herself being lifted out of the compactor, followed closely by the basket of vegetables. Once she was safely outside again, she vowed silently to never to go back down.

"Potatoes! Nice." The colt looked through the basket approvingly. "Next time leave the scree, though," he said, pointing at the carrots.

"You don't like carrots?" Twilight asked.

"Nah, I like them just fine. Scree's the stuff that's not in bags. It touches all the other garbage and that's kinda gross."

That seemed like an oddly specific distinction to make about what was and wasn't gross when it came to *eating garbage*, but all Twilight said was, "Ah."

The colt's girlfriend inspected the produce. "I was gonna suggest another trip, but you scored big with the potatoes. That was a great job. You're pretty cool, Eve."

Twilight smiled. Maybe she could get used to being Eventide Glitter - as long as she didn't have to keep eating grass and getting put inside dumpsters.

After trimming off the green bits and the sprouts, the potatoes made a passable soup with the broccoli. There were leftovers being kept cold in a bag hanging outside the window, but Twilight hadn't touched them or mentioned them. She had to explain the well-stocked larder to her new boarder by saying that all the food in the house belonged to a pair of mysterious and cranky tenants with sharing issues. She had to concede the salt and pepper, though. Twilight ate as much as she could (it wasn't grass!) and told the colt and his girlfriend to take the rest away with them or to his room. When her parents came home, having to account for the leftovers would complicate things even more.

"Why?" he asked.

"The other tenants will eat anything lying around," Twilight said, thinking quickly. "And since they won't share any of *their* things, that's not very fair, is it?"

"Wow, things can get pretty passive-aggressive here, can't they?" said the colt's girlfriend.

Twilight didn't know how to respond to that. "Uh... Yes?"

The colt shrugged. "At least the toilets flush and the walls don't have holes in them."

---

Twilight was used to her mother being at work until six every day, but it was strange seeing snow outside and *not* the familiar form of her father. She couldn't remember a single winter holiday where he hadn't been home all day baking festive cookies or making homemade candy canes. Still, Twilight could only be thankful for the fact that he was working more; she would have gotten caught long ago otherwise.

After the colt had retired to his room for the evening, Twilight made sure to clean up anything that might have given away the presence of another pony in the house. She had to climb a series of chairs, but all the pots and pans went back into the cupboards where she'd found them, and she hid the colt's jacket and boots in a seldom-used hall closet. She'd just finished cleaning when she heard her parents opening the door.

"Hey Mom! Hey Dad! How was work?" she said as innocently as possible.

"A lot of number crunching as usual," said her father. "Your mom's got the biggest news, though."

Her mother started describing the research her team was doing on the Horsehead Nebula. Twilight was engrossed. She forgot about blinking; she forgot about the colt upstairs; she was so attentive that it took her a good five minutes to notice that her father was tapping a hoof impatiently, almost as if he was waiting for her mother to get to the point.

"... hidden protostars near the base! When we were running the tests we went for coffee and after I got my double espresso and offered a position on Phobos we went back and -" Twilight's mother paused for dramatic effect. "It turns out that the glow is because of - get this: Ionized. Hydrogen. We think the ionization has something to do with the nebula's relative position to Orion! It's still too early to tell, but-"

"Ooo! How did you find out that it was hydrogen?" Twilight asked, having only held back the questions until now through sheer willpower. "What kind of test did you run?"

"Dear," Twilight's father said to her mother, "as fascinating as the Horsehead Nebula is, I think you glossed over the most important part."

"I was *just* getting to the part about the magnetic field entrainment. Just be patient."

"No," he said. "Your promotion."

“Oh, that.” Twilight’s mother spoke less animatedly than she had before. “There’s been a new project, the Phoebus program, that the heads of the department still have to clear with the Princess. If it goes through I have a ten-year contract on it, which includes a pay raise and other benefits.”

“Does this mean that we’ll have enough money so that Dad doesn’t have to work every day anymore?”

“I’m actually going back to my old schedule in a few days, no matter how that goes. Zebra sunrises happen every day, but I only get three weeks to spend with my one and only daughter.”

Twilight was suddenly glad that the colt had paid a week in advance.

---

Twilight’s mother diced onions from the far end of the kitchen. “Your father and I have discussed it, and we apologise for not being supportive of your new diet earlier.” Standing far away, she scraped them into a frying pan where they sizzled and smelled delicious.

“Yeah,” said Dad, as he emptied a packet of spaghetti into some boiling water. “We’re not going to make you sit at the table and watch us eat anymore. That was a jerk move and we’re sorry.”

A straight up apology from her father - if her mother hadn’t also apologised, Twilight would have been suspicious. Perhaps they would catch her, sit on her, force-feed her cake.

Mom nodded. “We think it’s great that you’re trying to get healthy and in shape.”

*Oh.*

After her mother was done with the onions, she cleared the entire backyard of snow. Twilight watched as she compressed large drifts of snow into surprisingly small ice bricks, stacking them neatly on top of each other. “Like basic levitation,” her mother said “For a brick shape, apply even force in six directions at right angles to each other, all towards a fixed point; use



equal pressure on opposite faces; alter the amount of pressure for the desired dimensions.”

In very little time, the entire frosty yard was laid bare. Twilight looked at it, still feeling full from the soup. Her mother was watching. She took a bite of grass and smiled as convincingly as she could. “Thanks, Mom!”

Twilight stood outside for hours, pretending to eat while her parents cooked and had dinner inside. It was possible that this was actually worse than watching them eat.

That night she waited until both had gone to their room and crawled into her little nest under the sink. There had to be a way to keep Dad from finding out about the colt living in her room. Maybe she could persuade him to keep working? She couldn’t really change the agreement with the colt to say that he could never ever leave the room, could she? In the end she gave up. Maybe she would have a better idea tomorrow.

---

“So, because of the construction that’ll be going on in the hallway, you’ll have to leave your room by a ladder on the outside of your window,” she told the colt. “There are gonna be ponies working on the house and stuff, so you can only go through the rest of the house between midnight and six in the morning. On the plus side, the curfew no longer applies!”

Twilight had spent the better part of a day gluing bent pieces of coat-hanger onto a rusty old ladder she’d found in the dump so that it would, somehow, be less obviously a ladder. Getting it back home had been a nightmare. She’d propped it up outside her window and told her parents that it was going to be a trellis for plants in the spring.

“Weird, but okay.”

Twilight looked at his turkey cutie mark. All of a sudden, it made a lot more sense.

The colt lowered himself out the window. “Seeya later.”

*Phew.*

Later on Twilight explained that because of the construction, most of the house was off-limits until late at night.

This was getting to be a lot more trouble than it was worth.

Her father was home all day every day for the rest of that week, and he was baking like the apocakelypse had been foretold. The baked goods were endless, and Twilight wasn't sure how she should feel about the fact that she was enabling him. Every afternoon she would help him make cookies: buttery shortbread that had to be left in the snow before you could slice the dough, spicy gingerbread with tons of molasses and fragrant lavender cookies cut into shapes. She would never get to *eat* any of these cookies, but they were fun to make anyway.

Over the course of the school year, Twilight had found herself becoming increasingly nocturnal. On weeknights (most frequently Mondays), she had often lain in bed for hours before giving up and finding a book to read. At home it was just as difficult, perhaps even more so, with the pipes so close; every toilet flush or running tap became a roar right in her ears. Each night after her parents had gone to bed, Twilight lay curled up under the sink with her head on her pillow, listening to the sounds of the house settling and the self-conscious shuffling of the colt's hoofsteps. She would lie there in the darkness, wondering if anypony suspected anything until her worries became dreams.

With both her mother and father home on the weekend, it seemed twice as likely that she'd be caught, twice as risky. Late Saturday night, Twilight heard two sets of hoofsteps rather than one and panicked. She thought that the colt and one of her parents were down in the house at the same time. She only settled back down once she heard the whisper; it was female, but it wasn't her mother.

*Safe.*

On the Wednesday night of the next week, Twilight stole out of her cupboard to take what was her fifth trip to the bathroom that night and bumped into her dad on the way.

"You go first," he said, and Twilight was happy to oblige.

It was only after she went inside that she realised that logically the best thing would have been to let *him* go first. The last pony to use the bathroom would spend the most time standing in the hallway, thus having the highest chance of bumping into the colt. It was too late now, though. *Dad would suspect that something was up if... wait!*

Twilight flushed the toilet, turned the tap on and off quickly and left the bathroom. "All yours," she said and started to make her way back to the kitchen.

"Wait a minute," Dad said. "Why are you going downstairs?"

"Uh... I wanted to get a snack."

"But don't you only eat grass now?"

Twilight thought quickly. "Yeah, an outside snack." She glanced at her hooves. "I have to eat more food and more often if I'm only eating grass." Technically that wasn't a lie.

"I don't think going out this late is such a good idea," he said, "even if it's just into the backyard."

She briefly considered asking him to come with her to lend credibility to her story, but then that would just lead to more questions when she didn't go back to her room after that too. "I think maybe I'll just get a drink for now then," she said as she turned to go down the stairs.

Her father raised an eyebrow. "There's a faucet right here, Twilight."  
"Yeah," she said. "but then I don't want to hog the bathroom since you need to use it."

"Are you trying to sneak out of the house?"

Twilight recalled some things the Princess had said - *To hide a large misdeed, ponies often shift the focus to a lesser misdemeanor. Sometimes claims can be so fantastic that one has no choice but to believe them.* "You caught me!" she said. "I was going break into the neighbours' house so I could practice turning them into sheep," she said. "Ha-ha ha. Ha..."  
*He's not buying it.*

“What’s going on, Twilight?”

“Uhh...”

A creaking noise came from Twilight’s room.

Her father turned towards the sound immediately. “What was that?”

“Probably just the house settling,” said Twilight. “I hear it all the time at night.” Also, technically not a lie.

There was another creaking noise.

Dad walked towards the door, horn glowing. “You’re hiding something in there, aren’t you?”

Twilight darted in front of him, barring his path. “No, really. I’m not. I just really don’t like it when you guys go into my room without permission.” She continued to talk as her father picked her up and put her down on the ground behind him. “This is a violation of privacy!”

*Aw man...*

Her hooves felt glued to the ground and she couldn’t make a move to stop him anymore. She couldn’t even see her door. The only thing she saw was Dad turning a corner and barging right into her room. All of a sudden, her hooves unstuck themselves and she staggered forward. She peeked her head around the corner, fearing what would come next.

There were several screams all at once: a high pitched mare’s scream, and Dad’s. Twilight saw the colt’s girlfriend running down the stairs and out the door.

Dad was yelling now and Twilight could only make out some of the words (“shameless reprobate”, “cheap motel”, “in our house”).

There was a loud crack as her father tore off the leg of a hall table and raised overhead.



*"Who are you and what the heck is going on?"* Dad waved his makeshift club.

The colt looked like a moose who was about to be hit by a train, stunned and unable to act.

Twilight's mother stepped out into the hallway. She walked past Twilight, looking at her only long enough to make sure she was unharmed. She marched with purpose towards Twilight's bedroom, looking intensely annoyed. She picked up the rest of the table, the heavy broken furniture rising to the ceiling in an unspoken threat.

"Now," said Mom, "could you please explain why you are in my daughter's room?"

"I- I rented this room from Eve." He looked around frantically and pointed a hoof right at Twilight.

*Uh oh.* "Uh... I can explain?"

Her parents stared at her blankly.

The colt used the distraction to dart back into the room. "I don't really care how cheap the rent is anymore, Eve. You're right about these guys being crazy!" There was a flash of magic and he galloped out the front door with all his possessions.

"Um..."

It all came out then, all her concerns about money, and how she was costing them more than they could afford. She confessed to everything she'd done, hoping that total honesty would buy her mercy. "I made seventy-five bits, though," she added at the end. She went into the cabinet under the sink to retrieve it.

"Twilight," her mother said, "we don't have financial issues. None of that was necessary."

“I kinda thought you would say that no matter what.”

“Bits are just pieces of metal with an arbitrary value that you can use to exchange for goods or services. Nothing more. ”

“You see why I do all the bookkeeping?” Dad whispered to Twilight with a wink.

Mom glared at him briefly. “It’s true that money can give security and peace of mind, and yes, we spend more money than households without fillies and colts of their own. Still, I would rather have one Twilight Sparkle than a thousand new bookshelves.”

“It’s not fair that you have to give things up because of me. I just wanted it so that you wouldn’t have to...”

“We don’t spend money on you because we have to,” said her mother. “We do it because we *want* to.”

Her father nickered. “sides, are you kidding, Twi? Those scholarships that your school gives out pay for practically everything.”

“I know you had the best intentions,” Twilight’s mother said, “regardless, you shouldn’t have done something like that behind our backs.”

“Yeah,” said Dad. “We’ll discuss your punishment in the morning and I’ll take that money, thank you very much.” The coins drifted towards him. “This is going towards buying you a new bed.”

“Is her old bed broken?” asked her mother.

Dad looked Mom in the eye for a moment, the two seeming to have some sort of conversation without actually talking.

“Oh,” said Twilight’s mother after a while. “Your punishment for tonight, young lady, is that you have to sleep on the couch.”

“Aw... Couldn’t you just ground me or something?” Groundings, to Twilight, were the equivalent of disciplining any other young pony by forbidding him or her from helping with chores.

“We will,” said her mother. “Oh, we will.”

---

The next morning Twilight’s parents told her that she had to find the colt who she’d rented out her room to, apologise for the deception and return five of the seven days of rent that he’d paid in advance. Twilight was surprised when she realised that she’d never learned his name; the three of them had to go down to the university and ask for a pony that matched his description.

“We apologise for the whole incident,” said Twilight’s mother, after they’d found him. “It’s just that when our daughter gets an idea in her head, she really makes sure to follow through.”

“For the record, I’m sorry about lying to you about everything,” Twilight said as she gave the colt his money back.

“It’s cool. I’m just glad I got my deposit back.” He tucked the money away into his saddlebags. “I’d paid for a month at the last place I was at, and after my room got eaten I didn’t get back a single bit.”

“Alright, stay fresh,” Twilight said, repeating something she’d heard him say once.

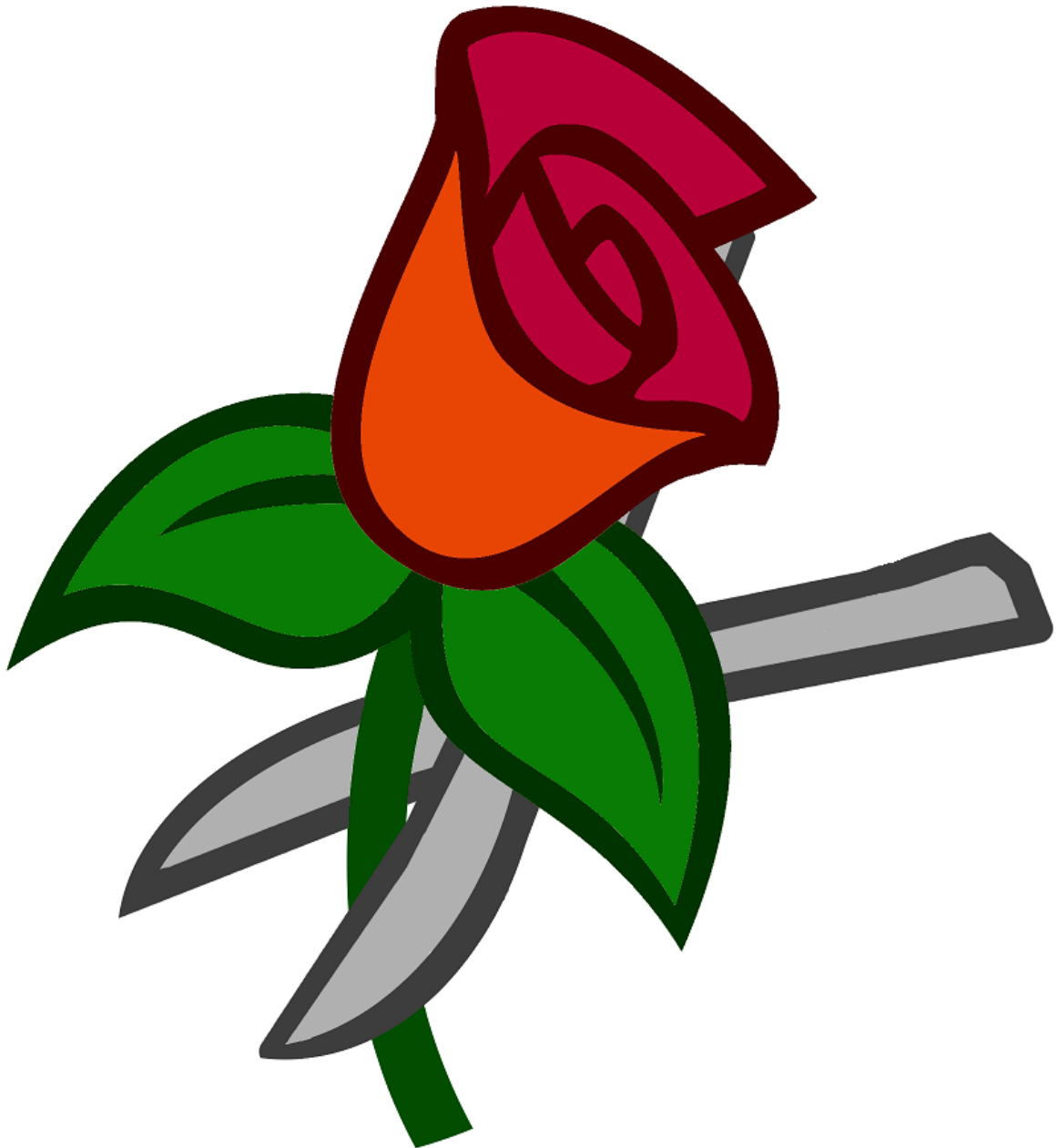
“Peace, Eve... Twilight... Thingy...” The colt turned and walked away.

“Let’s pick you out a nice new bed,” Dad said. “Then after, you’re grounded until school starts up again.”

“Yay!”



# Chapter Six



“He was not strong in body or magic, but without knowing of the concept, he had always been the most rational of all his peers. He looked at things with logic, before logic had a name, seeing how the world worked, knowing that things followed objective rules of their own and that they could be discovered with enough experimentation. This does not sound very impressive now, but this is a very difficult leap of imagination when one does not have language.

“He was an ambitious pony and wanted to learn magics that would better all of ponykind. He left his home one day on a long and arduous journey that is irrelevant to the discussion at hand. It happened, though, that at the end of his quest he came upon a very old creature near a lake.”

“What did it look like?” Twilight said. She and the Princess stood on the rooftop under a cloudy night sky. “I mean... What was it?” She had read this story before, in *A History of Magic*, as a summarisation of events. It was very sparse on the details.

“The oral accounts are unreliable and there are many interpretations of what the creature may have looked like. Some insist that it must have been a simple water goblin, one that had somehow learned magic; others say it was a flaming wheel covered in eyes; and more still say that it was a shifting mass made of thousands of insects, speaking with the wind of their wings. Still, its appearance is not important in the grand scheme of things.

“Looking at the creature, the stallion somehow knew that his journey was drawing to a close. The creature beckoned him towards the lake and motioned at its surface. The stallion saw his own reflection and thought that he was being shown that he had the ability all along.”

Without warning, the Princess fired a beam of energy at Twilight.

Caught off-guard, her heart began to beat at a frantic pace. The glow of her eyes threatened to blind her. She held on to herself and in a practiced, almost reflexive response, she pushed the magic through her horn into a white corona of light.

“This was the wrong answer and the creature knew so,” Princess Celestia said. She spoke with the dramatic oration of a storyteller, ignoring her pupil, who shook with the effort of channeling her own power. “It

wrapped the stallion up in its magics and there was nothing but pure thought. With guidance, the stallion thought the world. The stallion thought himself. A thousand things and more, he thought, but the most important was that he was in the eye of the storm as the universe changed around him, like a dream. The power was not within, but where he stood in relation to everything else.”

The blazing white sphere of Twilight’s spell fizzled and became a golden beam. It painted the rooftop in yellows and oranges and lit up the sky as bright as day. She clenched her eyelids shut and struggled to stay focused on both the Princess and her spell.

Princess Celestia cleared her throat, the meaning being, *keep your eyes open.*

Twilight obeyed. It felt like staring into the sun.

“He had once thought himself a grain of sand in a vast desert, insignificant and ignorant of the sky or the ocean, of these things that shaped the world. In the creature’s embrace, he knew now, how his own self tainted what he saw. More importantly, he saw how this was essential.”

The story had been difficult to visualise from the start, but in addition to listening, she now had to force herself to try to understand whatever ideological point the Princess was trying to convey. Twilight’s mind felt like a pretzel, twisting and turning over itself, and she felt her spell take the shape of sparks, spraying from her horn and fizzling to their death on the roof shingles. This was a perilously distracting form of the basic light spell, but the shift was so automatic that it wasn’t even a conscious choice

Princess Celestia carried on, despite the blisteringly-hot sparks that danced around her hooves. “The stallion said ‘I,’ and the creature said ‘yes.’”

Twilight waited for the Princess to continue, but nothing else was said. She felt the magic weakening, and formed the rudiments of a glow, the same spell she’d used right at the start. It felt right to finish where she’d began.

The Princess watched in silence for this last part, not bothering to provide any sort of distraction.

Twilight breathed heavily as the last of the magic left her body. Her eyes dimmed. The night around her looked very, very dark. "Aren't you skipping the part where he discovers many of the fundamental theories of magic and some of the first language and storytelling traditions?" she said, trying to make it sound like what she'd just done had been as simple as stretching, warming up before a run.

Princess Celestia gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Those are important too."

Twilight waited for a compliment that never came, before giving up and saying, "I don't get it."

Sometimes when Twilight asked the Princess a question, she would get a story in response. It was usually obvious what the story meant. It would have a clear-cut moral, even if Princess Celestia didn't say it. This was the first time all the significant events were *missing*.

"Twilight Sparkle, you have noticed the nexus of your spells, haven't you?"

"You mean, how when I move things, I move them from where I'm standing?" *I did well, didn't I?*... This wasn't the first time she'd managed to hold on to herself, but it was the first time she'd managed to work her way through a story as well - an extremely obtuse story to boot.

"Yes. It may seem obvious, but this rule is often taken for granted. *You* are the center of your spells. Everything that they do must be in relation to yourself."

This was one of the laws of magic, all of which Twilight already knew. "Ohh... so the story is about how he discovered the principle of essence."

"In a fashion," said the Princess.

Twilight wanted to cry out in frustration. "What was the point of the story, then?"

“Rote learning will only take you so far. To truly understand, you must find the answers yourself.”

All Twilight had wanted to know was why her classmates were still all cagey around her, and she got this long and irrelevant story.

“Perhaps a different approach might be of more use,” the Princess said, using what must have been some sort of freaky mindreading ability. “Have you read much about theoretical particles, Twilight?”

“Oh yes indeed!”

“Then you must be aware of Hoofenburg’s experiments a few years ago, where he attempted to view an infinitesimally small particle and predict its movements.”

Twilight nodded. Her mother had told her about this one.

“What do you remember, was the result of this experiment?”

“Well, from what my mom said, every time he tried to use his spell to look at the electron, the electron would move *because* he was using a spell on it. Even though the magic was just a *looking* spell, it somehow moved the particle as well.” Twilight thought for a moment, then added, “I think some ponies are working on making a super powerful microscope to try to view particle movement without using magic. They want to make sure there’s no interference, so they can look at it properly.”

“Yes. That is correct,” the Princess said. “Now what conclusion can you draw from Hoofenburg’s experiment.”

“Uh... That you shouldn’t use magic to look at really small things?”

Princess Celestia had an expression that said ‘*go on*’.

“... Because... you move them around with your magic when you try it?”

“Correct,” said the Princess. “Now what does this say about the act of observing things?”

“That... by... That by looking at something... you can change it!”

Princess Celestia smiled. “Excellent reasoning.”

“But wait, what about when they make the microscope to look at the electron without magic? It won’t change then, right?”

“Have you ever taken a plate and cut either one slit, or two parallel slits into it-”

“Oh! And then you shine a light through the slits onto magic light-sensitive paper? My mom showed me that one too! It was cool!”

The Princess nodded. “The results of that experiment, along with Hoofenburg’s improvised study will lead to some interesting interpretations of the phenomenon. I’m not going to go into details, but let’s just say for now, your conclusion still stands.”

“And what does this have to do with my classmates?” Twilight said, trying to force the conversation back on topic.

“Well, what I would suggest is that you put each of them into a box and then leave them there for a number of days, then when the odds of your classmates being alive is roughly fifty-fifty-”

“What!? That’s horrible!” Twilight’s mane bristled. When she saw the proud look on Princess Celestia’s face, she knew this last statement had been some sort of test.

“The last pony I proposed that to thought it was a brilliant idea and immediately went out to try it... I believe he was most likely a sociopath.” Moroseness briefly flashed across the Princess’ face. “And that poor cat was never the same afterwards.”

“So what would the serious answer be?”

“Whether you are aware of it or not, watching and waiting is still a conscious choice, and the world around you will treat it as such. Life does not halt for observers any more than it does for participants.” The Princess used a wing to gesture at the sky above them. “Spend more time with your classmates, Twilight Sparkle. Hiding in your room and studying them from afar is not conducive to making friends.”

*First Mom and Dad, and now the Princess... “I see.”*

“Do not be offended, my faithful student. My intention was not to patronise you with stories and analogies,” the Princess said. “One day I hope these lessons will hold more food for thought than the single answer you seek.”

Twilight knew that finding enlightenment and inner peace wasn't her forté. All the books she'd ever found on the subject just read as insipid nonsense to her. “So if I see you on the road I'm supposed to kill you?”

Princess Celestia laughed harder than Twilight felt that line merited. “Mu!”, she said as she fired another spell towards her pupil.

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Despite every instinct screaming at her not to, Twilight decided to take the Princess' advice.

Twilight went with the expectation that her classmates would have ulterior motives of some sort; there would inevitably be some kind of double cross. Perhaps she would be coerced into some sort of embarrassing and unnecessary hazing ritual so she could be humiliated in front of everypony else. It was the kind of thing she saw in books all the time.

At the very least she could bear it all stoically and go back to Princess Celestia at the end of the week and tell her what an unmitigated disaster socialising had been. Then they would talk it out and the Princess would hopefully drop the matter for good.

Instead of going straight down to the kitchens after *Math and Science* and heading back to her room like she usually did, Twilight loitered around the halls like the rest of her classmates. She felt very out of place.

Everypony was talking to everypony else, and she just stood there trying to look as friendly and approachable as possible. She knew what would happen next.

“Hey, Twilight,” said Echelle. Elsie stood beside her, looking impatient. “Wanna sit with us at dinner later?”

Echelle would occasionally ask to have meals together, but Twilight would always make the excuse of having assignments to do. Technically that was never a lie. It always felt like the grey filly knew that Twilight would always say no, and only offered because she thought she was being charitable and magnanimous.

“Today...” Twilight said. *I have an eight page paper due tomorrow and I haven't triple-checked it for mistakes yet.* “Yeah, actually. That sounds great.” She gave what she hoped was a warm and amiable smile.

Echelle seemed a little surprised, but smiled back politely. “We’re going to study until then. If it’s not too much trouble, you can join us if you’d like.”

Twilight shrugged. “Sure,” she said, surprising Echelle a second time. *Maybe I'll get to triple-check that essay after all.*

The three of them made their way up the stairs to the first year dorm. It was the first time Twilight had been inside since the very beginning of the year. It looked a lot more *lived in* now. There were books lying around haphazardly, and there were non-uniform sweaters and boots, hung up on racks or pushed against the sides of the room. A few of the moon emblems on the wall were burnt out and blackened, and some of the bolted-down furniture had scorch marks on it.

“Did Sky do that?” Twilight asked, pointing at the singed-looking sofa with a hoof.

Elsie laughed. “Oh no. That was Pebbly Crunch,” she said. “Ace farts a lot in his sleep or something, so Pebbly came out to sleep on the couch last week, and then had a nightmare and burned everything. It was so *loud!*” Elsie started laughing again. “I came out to see what was happening and Ms. Warmaid was running around like crazy trying to put out the fire.”



“That sounds... really dangerous,” Twilight said, not sure how the blue filly could find something like that funny.

“Eh, stone building with spells on it. Not like it was gonna spread,” she said with a shrug.

“You had to be there,” said Echelle. “Besides, stuff like that happens all the time, am I right?” She winked at Elsie.

“Oh come on.” Elsie glanced at the blank stretch of fur on her flanks. Her dark coat made it hard to tell, but it looked like she was blushing. “Are you ever gonna let that go?”

Twilight looked up at her, curiosity piqued. “What happened?”

“None of your beeswax,” Elsie said, turning an interesting shade of purple.

Echelle winked again and made a crossing motion over her chest with a hoof. “My lips are sealed.”

The three of them parked themselves on the smoky-smelling sofa and started on their math homework. Their classmates would mill back and forth occasionally. When Tambourine walked by and saw Twilight casually studying with Echelle and Elsie, the bewildered look on her face was almost comical.

“No, Echelle,” Elsie said, much to Twilight’s relief. “If  $x$  is 5, then you’re dividing by zero.”

Twilight thought she might be overstepping her bounds by correcting Echelle’s abysmal algebra and was glad that Elsie had been the one to bring it up. She cringed a little every time she looked over at the grey filly’s work.

“But when I divide by zero, the answer is right. See?”

Elsie put a hoof over her face. “Twilight, for the love of sheets and all that is holey, help me out here, please...”

At the start of the first semester, Twilight had learned that Echelle's parents paid an exorbitant amount of money each year to ensure that their daughter had a spot in the school. She was shocked to find that nearly half of the colts were doing the same thing. Still, it explained a lot.

Twilight drew out a funny little equation her dad had shown her over the break that proved you could get any answer you wanted to if you divided by zero, giggling around the quill in her mouth as she wrote it. Weirdly, Echelle didn't seem to find it funny at all. She just stared at the equation for a long time, looking utterly perplexed.

When the time came to go down for dinner, Twilight had no idea if she was being mocked or not. Echelle held the paper in front of her, and she looked at it intensely like it held the secret meaning to all of life.

"Dude," said Elsie. "You're gonna like fall and die if you keep reading that when you're going up the stairs."

There was good sense in this, but Twilight did not say anything.

"Stop being such a mom," Echelle said. "I think I'm finally getting somewhere!"

"What the flip are you talking about?" Elsie stopped walking up the staircase and snatched the paper from her friend and shook it in the air. "The point is that this makes *no sense*."

"Hey! Give that back!"

"What do you mean by getting somewhere?" Twilight asked, finally finding the nerve to speak.

"You know," said Echelle. "Remember last week when we did that test and half the class' answers were all just a bunch of random ones and twos, but Mr. Benoit marked them right anyway?"

"Oh that?" Twilight said, remembering some of the tests she'd seen. "It wasn't wrong. They just answered in ternary." She wished that they'd let her in on it too. That was actually pretty cool.

The three of them bantered about classes on the way to the dining hall. They sat down at a table, and chatted as they waited for the food to arrive. Twilight was surprised when Rune joined them, seating herself quietly next to Echelle. The four of them took up half a table by themselves, but after Rune arrived, nopony else sat down with them.

“So what’s your deal, Twilight?” Elsie asked, as she and Echelle made their saltshakers joust each other. “Why are you all up in the teacher’s lounge with no magic?”

“*Elsie!*” said Echelle. “You can’t just go up to somepony and ask them that. It’s too forward!”

The dark blue filly rolled her eyes. “*Now* who’s being the mom.” There was a clink and her saltshaker’s lid flew off after a particularly hard ram from Echelle’s. “Nice!”

“You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to,” Echelle said to Twilight, apologetically.

“It’s okay,” she said. This was actually the first time anypony here other than a teacher had asked her about it. “I had an incident during my exam when I hatched my egg. I turned both my parents into plants and I broke part of the school. Then in the summer, I accidentally turned some ponies into bugs.” Rune had been looking down at the table, but Twilight saw her look up at this, listening. “The Princess didn’t think it was safe for me to be downstairs with you guys and she put a binding spell on my magic so I wouldn’t do anything like that again.”

“Oh wow.” The lid of Elsie’s saltshaker glowed as she screwed it back on. “So are you gonna be like an earth pony forever?”

“No,” Twilight said. “Just till I learn how to control my magic. I’m getting a lot better.”

“Hey,” said Echelle. “I don’t mean to presume or anything, but shouldn’t you be safe to live downstairs if you don’t have your magic anyway?”

“Yeah.” The Princess had actually suggested this before, but Twilight had begged to keep her private room. She predicted that all her things would get vandalised if she had to share a dormitory with all her classmates. “I have to keep the room until the lease runs out, though. Those are the rules.”

A server walked by then, and lowered a tureen of potato salad down on the table. There was no serving spoon, and Twilight looked at it not knowing what to do. Without saying anything, the grey filly took Rune, Twilight and Elsie’s bowls and filled them with salad, seeming to barely pay attention to what she was doing. She nodded. “Ah.”

Twilight felt a deep and wordless gratitude.

“Thanks,” Rune said in her raspy voice.

Twilight watched as the bowls floated back towards Rune, Elsie and herself. Echelle filled her bowl last, piling the salad on high.

“What about you, Rune?” Twilight said. “Why don’t you have magic?” She had asked this on more than one occasion, but she’d never gotten any sort of answer. Hopefully, telling her own story would put Rune enough at ease to share hers. “Did you have a bad exam too?”

Rune said nothing. She looked back down at her potatoes and lowered her head into the bowl, eating like a pegasus or an earth pony.

“She’s a scholarship student,” Echelle said, putting an odd sort of emphasis on the word “scholarship”. “Oh look, they have turnips today. Do you like turnips?”

“Huh? But I’m a scholarship student...” said Twilight. “*Elsie’s* a scholarship student.”

Elsie had pulled an enormous bottle of orange hot sauce out of her saddlebags and was drowning her salad in it. “Rune’s an orphan.”

Twilight saw Elsie wince as Echelle kicked her under the table, but the orange filly continued to eat, acting like she hadn’t heard anything at all. Echelle gave Elsie the dirtiest look imaginable.

“Well it’s the truth,” Elsie said, as she tucked into her food.

Echelle’s immediate response was to glare at her again. The only thing that kept the silence from being awkward was the background noise, dozens of other ponies eating and chattering at the same time. Twilight took this as a cue to start eating herself, and the four of them ate without talking until the meal was over.

“Come again tomorrow if you’d like, Twilight,” Echelle said as they all went back to their rooms.

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The next day after Mrs. Lonsdaleite’s class, Twilight followed Echelle and Rune back to the second floor dorm. They were greeted by a blast of freezing air as Echelle opened the door.

“We usually have lunch in here, but the heating spells broke this morning,” Echelle said. The condensation from her breath crystallised into powdered ice around her mouth and nostrils.

Twilight’s teeth chattered. “But it’s got to be colder than outside in here.”

“Yeah. This is the coldest setting, apparently. In our rooms it’s just *off*, so it’s not that bad.”

“Why are we here, then?”

“I always meet Elsie here before lunch,” Echelle said. “She won’t know where to find us otherwise.”

The three of them waited in the chilly lobby for Elsie to arrive. When she did, her bags were stuffed full of food. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

Food was allowed in the library, but both Echelle and Elsie agreed that having lunch there was “cliché”. They went outside instead.

The fillies found a sunny spot near the track where the grass wasn't too frozen or soggy, and set up a lazy kind of picnic. Azure Sky and Enigma sat on the other side of the field, having their lunch outside as well.

Twilight watched in horror as Elsie drank carrot soup that was about a third hot sauce.

"What?" she said. "It's just made from tabasco peppers and vinegar."

"Uh..."

Elsie used her magic to open up a compartment of her saddlebags. The pocket looked like it had a custom lining made of rubber. Slowly, and very carefully, she removed a black envelope. Twilight could see a toxicity warning on the back.

Although Elsie kept her distance, she lifted the flap with her magic and smiled lovingly at the white powder inside. It looked like there was nothing she would like to do more than cuddle the powder or caress it. "I'm legally not supposed to have this. It's considered a weapon in a lot of places, and you can't even buy it unless you're an adult and sign a bunch of waivers."

Twilight wisely took a few several steps back. "Are those anthrax spores?"

Elsie folded the black envelope and put it back in her saddlebags. There was a faint shimmer in the air, looking like a tiny will-o-wisp. It took Twilight a while to realise that there was a nearly-invisible fleck of the white dust inside. The glowing mote of powder landed right inside Elsie's thermos of hot chocolate.

Twilight's eyes widened. "Are you crazy?!"

The hint of a smile twitched at the corners of Echelle's mouth as she watched them, but she didn't say anything.

Elsie lifted her thermos up, slowly, dramatically, and then took a big sip. "Ahh..." she said. "Nothing beats pure capsaicin for that extra kick."

“That’s *lethal* in high doses!”

“Explains the waivers,” Elsie said, breathing hard. “You want a sip?”

“You have a *death wish*!”

Echelle was snorting with laughter by then. Rune’s face was as still as a frozen lake, but there was a faint glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

“What’s so funny?” Twilight demanded.

After Echelle had calmed down enough to speak she said, “wait for it.”

“Wait for wh-”

Elsie yowled. She bolted over to one of the remaining patches of snow. It was absolutely filthy and was nothing more than a hard crust of ice. She licked it furiously as tears streamed from the corners of her eyes. “It burns! Oh Celestia, it burns...”

“Yeah,” said Echelle. “That never ends well. I honestly don’t know why she keeps doing that.”

Twilight could hear Sky and Enigma laughing from the other side of the field.

Elsie whimpered miserably for the next twenty minutes, not touching any of the food, especially not her “hot” chocolate.

“Capsaicin is soluble in milk and alcohol,” Twilight said. “If you drink some normal hot chocolate or use some mouthwash, you’ll probably feel better after.”

“No thank you,” she rasped, then looked up, past Twilight.

Echelle and Rune did the same.

“Hey,” said a gruff voice from behind Twilight.

She turned and saw BelaQ standing there, looking angry. *Uh oh.*

"I spent the whole holiday at the library fact-checking everything that could have possibly been an assassination," BelaQ said, "And well what d'you know? There wasn't anything at all. All of Equestria's political opponents were dealt with diplomatically. None of them have ever died mysterious and convenient deaths. None have even gone missing. Not one."

"Uh," Twilight said.

"You *lied* to me."

"I didn't do anything of the sort!" She glanced frantically at Echelle and Elsie, hoping that one of them would back her up.

"You and I have a score to settle."

"But I've never done anything to you..."

"That's a lie and you know it." She shoved Twilight back with her magic.

Twilight's legs gave out and she fell backwards onto the grass.

By now, Sky and Enigma had trotted over to see what the commotion was.

Sky looked at Twilight, sitting in a tumbled heap on the ground, then at BelaQ. "What the fuck is going on?"

Twilight flinched. She knew that Sky had just used a horrible, horrible curse word, and had *never* heard it aloud before. She'd read it in a misshelved library book long ago and couldn't find the word in the dictionary when she'd looked for it. When she asked Dad about it, he told her it was an awful word that she should never ever say. She couldn't believe Sky had spoken it so flippantly.

"Princess know-it-all here, is a big fat liar who keeps trying to ruin my whole life, that's what."



Sky sneered, her upper lip curling back. "So what, are you gonna fucking fight her?"

"If that's what you wanna call it."

Echelle and Elsie didn't say anything. It looked like the last thing they wanted to do was to get involved.

"All I fucking hear," said Sky, "is some shitty-ass reason to beat up a pony who's minding her own business."

"I'm not making it up, unlike her," Belaq said. "And stop swearing at me."

"You gonna fucking make me?" Sky pawed the ground and lowered her head, looking like she was about to charge. "Cuz I will cut you like a *bitch*."

Enigma stood off to the side and kicked at the turf nervously. "Whoa, Sky," he said. "I think you might be getting a little carried away, and-"

"Can it. I can deal with the *qybah* myself."

Although Twilight had no idea what it meant, she saw Belaq's eyes narrow at the second-to-last word. "What the heck's your problem?" she said. "My fight's with Twilight, not *you*."

"Yeah, you got it right there," Sky said. "If you're gonna pick on some sorry *sei bat po*, pick on one who can fucking use magic, you facecunt."

There was a light, happy sensation in Twilight's chest when she heard these words, but at the same time, she was also pretty sure that she'd just been referred to with some sort of obscenity.

"*What?*" said Belaq "That doesn't even make any sense!"

"It does if you walk backwards and upside-down your whole life!"

Twilight's ears were on fire and she felt a blush spreading to her cheeks.

"That makes even less sense!"

"*Kohl Ikreh!* Your face doesn't make any sense!"

"You're really starting to tick me off."

Sky responded by tackling BelaQ, yelling strange obscenities the whole time. Twilight felt her ears getting even hotter. They were probably bleeding too.

"*Futete*, you camel cunt! I bet your elbows are faces!" Sky brawled like an earth pony, biting, kicking and headbutting, not bothering with magic at all.

BelaQ fought back defensively, dodging Sky's wild and mostly-random attacks and occasionally knocking her aside with spells.

Twilight wondered if she should step in.

"*Kire asbe abi too koonet!*" Skye said, sounding like she was making the words up. "*Yah pin noteph ziva!*" She delivered a vicious bite straight to BelaQ's fetlocks, then bucked her right in the jaw.

... *Nope*, thought Twilight.

BelaQ shrieked in pain and her horn glowed vividly. It didn't look like she had the raw power to throw or lift Sky, but she was pinning her to the ground with some sort of spell. She limped slightly. "Jeeze! What's your *problem?*"

In response, Sky used her own magic to push BelaQ off her feet. Without a stable fulcrum, the spell holding her down winked out. She charged towards BelaQ, head lowered, horn aimed at the fallen filly's side.



The air shimmered and Twilight briefly saw two long, tapered tines of light. There was a lightning-quick snap in the air, then a horrifying spray of blood. Sky was on her side, choking and gasping. It was all so fast, Twilight had no idea what had just happened.

“Oh my gosh...” Belaq put her hooves over her mouth, her now-red hooves.

Twilight barely kept her lunch from coming back up at the sight of her. She was dripping with Sky’s blood. The metallic stench was so thick in the air that Twilight could practically taste it.

Belaq moaned and curled up into a ball. “Oh my gosh...”

Enigma rushed over to his friend, getting her blood all over his white coat. “The fuck did you just do?”

“It’s just- just a pruning spell- just for gardening- I didn’t mean-”

He ignored her and knelt down close to Sky. “Hang in there, buddy,” he whispered. “Just hang on...”

Echelle was busy evacuating the contents of her stomach, and Rune was nowhere to be found, but Elsie walked up to Sky slowly. “Help me turn her over,” she said to Enigma, as light flickered weakly around her horn.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“She’s *hurt*. We have to do something or she’ll bleed out.”

With Enigma’s help, she used both her body and magic to roll Sky onto her other side.

Twilight gasped. There was a deep gash across the light-orange filly’s neck and face, splitting her right eyelid and *Oh Celestia*... Frightful amounts of blood poured from just above Sky’s shoulder.

Elsie pressed a hoof below the part of the wound that was bleeding the most. "Hold on, Sky," she said. "Rune will be back with help any minute now. Everything will be okay."

*This is all my fault.* If she hadn't tricked Belaq, or if she hadn't been here today... If she'd just been brave enough to fight her own battles... if she'd been brave enough to step in and stop the fight before it got this far...

Elsie and Enigma were the ones who were fixing things. Rune wasn't even here, and she was still being more useful. *This is all my fault*, she thought, *all my fault and I'm doing nothing*.

It felt like an eternity before she saw Rune and the school nurse galloping towards them.

"She's hurt her eye," Elsie said. "And she was bleeding a lot from her neck. I think she might be in shock."

The school nurse nodded and wrapped Sky up in a very gentle levitation spell. Twilight watched him carry her back inside the school.

Belaq was still curled up into a ball, staring despondently at the dark spot on the grass. "I wasn't trying to hurt her..."

"Yeah, well you did anyway," Enigma said. The red staining his coat was darkening into a dingy brown.

Echelle looked queasy still. "How can you be so calm?" she said, looking at Elsie. "How did you know what to do?"

"My mum rescues animals," she said. "It's not the same, but sometimes they're really hurt when you find them and..." Her voice broke. "If she's not okay..."

"She'll be fine," Echelle said. "She'll be back in class tomorrow, just you wait and see."

"You don't know that. If... if she's not, then it'll be..." Elsie wiped her eyes on her filthy foreleg and sniffled. "I'll be the one who messed it up..."

“No.” There was steel in Enigma’s voice as he spoke. “I think we all know whose fault it is.”

Belaq stood up, trembling. She didn’t say anything as she limped her way back to the school. Twilight saw Rune follow her, walking slowly, close by her side.

Twilight helped Elsie and Echelle pack up their things, but none of them spoke a single word.

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*Notation, Reading and Casting* was Twilight’s next class, but nearly half the students were absent. Enigma didn’t show up, nor did Elsie or Belaq. She knew that Jazz was talking, but none of the words seemed to make any sense.

Half an hour into the lesson, Mrs. Lonsdaleite’s voice boomed from the walls. “Twilight Sparkle, please report to the principal’s office.”

Twilight knew she was going to be in trouble for what had happened during lunch, and she also knew that she deserved whatever she got. Still, by the time she found her way to the seventh floor office, her stomach was doing flip-flops.

Everypony who was there that afternoon was already waiting in the office, sitting in uncomfortable-looking chairs. Everypony but Sky.

She looked around at all her grim-looking classmates. Belaq and Elsie looked like they had washed since lunchtime. Enigma’s skin still looked a little pinkish underneath his white coat and it took her a while to figure out that it wasn’t because he was still dirty, but because he had scrubbed himself so hard to get clean.

The silence was deafening.

After a while she couldn’t take it anymore. “What are we waiting for?” She was very aware of the sound of her own voice, echoing off the stone walls of the waiting room.

Echelle was the one to answer. "The principal isn't here yet."

They were all quiet after that.

Twilight jumped when the door swung open and Marching Dawn stepped in.

"I want to see you all individually in my office." The principal's voice was stern. "Starting with you," she said, looking at Enigma.

The colt got out of his chair and followed her. After twenty minutes, he left her office and walked out of the room. Over the course of an hour, Echelle, Elsie and Rune went in too, before Twilight was asked to come in herself. Only Belaq remained.

"Please take a seat," Marching Dawn said, as Twilight entered her office. "I would like to hear your version of the events."

The chair was too large for her, but Twilight sat down in it to the best of her ability. "Before the break, Belaq and her friends were picking on me." She put her whole visual attention at the corner of Marching Dawn's desk, not wanting to make eye contact with the principal. "I talked two of them into leaving me alone, but I couldn't get Belaq to listen. I told her... I convinced her that I could have her assassinated."

Marching Dawn nodded. "Continue."

"She found out that it wasn't true, and then came to confront me about it when I was having lunch with some of the other girls."

"From what I have heard, you have always eaten your meals alone until recently. Was there a specific reason you having lunch with the other fillies?"

Twilight realised what the principal must be implying. "I-I wouldn't... I didn't plan for any of this to happen. The Princess just told me I should make some friends."

"I see. What else happened this afternoon?"

“Well... after Belaq pushed me, Sky came over... and...” Twilight was finding it hard to continue. The memory was still frighteningly vivid.

“They fought.”

“Yeah...” She tried not to think about it too much. “Sky was winning, I think. But then Belaq...”

After it was obvious she wasn’t going to continue, Marching Dawn pressed on. “What is your interpretation of the events?”

“I shouldn’t have given up so soon when I was trying to talk to Belaq before. It all happened because... because it was my fault.”

“I should have been more clear,” the principal said. “From what you witnessed, did it seem that Sky’s injuries were caused purposefully?”

“I don’t know. It all happened so fast. Belaq seemed really sorry, though. I don’t know.”

“Very well. Please tell her she may come in as you leave. You are dismissed from lessons for today, and I will tell your teachers to send your homework.”

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Even though she didn’t have to attend that day’s classes, it still felt like she was doing something horribly wrong by not being there while they were in session. Maybe she should show up anyway. *If I did that, she thought, would everypony think I was being horribly insensitive?*

After two hours of sitting in her room and unsuccessfully trying to lose herself in a reading assignment, she decided to go down to visit Sky.

Enigma was already there.

Sky lay on her side in a cot, surrounded by thermoses. She had a bandage over her neck and another over her right eye. “And then did you see me give her that kick?” She pumped a hoof in front of her. “Pow!”



Enigma smiled. "Yeah, you were awesome."

"Uh... Hi guys," Twilight said.

Sky craned her neck to look past Enigma, then winced and lay back down. "I totally saved you back there. Was that amazingly freak-tastically cool or what?"

"Yeah," Twilight said, feeling awkward. "Uh... thanks."

"That *salope* got in one good hit, but I was owning her."

"What's a saw lop?" Twilight asked.

"Something bad," Enigma said. "It's always something bad."

Sky laughed. "It's a-"

"The nurse is in the next room!" he said, cutting her off before she could explain.

"Fine, be a pansy." She stuck out her tongue.

Twilight tried not to stare at the bandage over her eye. "Are you okay?"

"I've been through worse," she said. "One time when I was little, my sis took me flying, and I slipped and, well, if you can name a bone, I prob'ly broke it. It f- It was really painful." She laughed as if something like that was actually funny. "One of my legs was starting to set by the time they got a doctor, and they had to break it again or it'd heal all jacked up. This little scrape ain't nothing."

Twilight's mouth was hanging open in horror.

"Better close that or somepony might put something in it," Sky said with a wink. "And I ain't talking boogers."

"Gross." Enigma said. "Yeah, yeah. You're hardcore. Yadda yadda."

"You got that right," the orange filly said. "Pass me another soup."

"Jeeze," he said as he rummaged for one in his saddlebags. "That's like the fifth one. Don't you have to pee?"

She floated the thermos over to herself. "You wanna watch or something? Sicko."

"Ew, no. I'm not *you*."

Twilight felt a blush creeping into her cheeks. "I'll just be leaving then," she said as she backed out through the door. *There is seriously something wrong with that filly*. "I'm sorry you got hurt trying to help me."

"All in a day's work!" Sky called out to her.

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The next day, Belaq didn't show up for *History and Magical Theory*, or for that matter, any of her other lessons. Twilight wondered where she was.

Sky, however, was back in class with an eyepatch by at least lunchtime.

"Yarr!" she said. "Give me all yer booty!"

"Is your eye okay?" somepony asked.

"I be havin' a touch of th' pirate pinkeye, 'tis all! Now walk th' gangplank or face me cutlass! Arrr!"

It was odd that she was back in class so soon. At Twilight's old school, Sky would have been suspended for at least a couple of weeks for fighting.

When she asked the orange filly about it, she responded with, "Aye! What ye're supposed t'do, be make like thar's nothin' better in th' world than t'be homeport an' nay at school. Then they give ye detention."



For the rest of that week she wore the eyepatch, although Twilight noticed that it would sometimes show up on her left eye as well as the right. It took until Friday for the teachers to work it out.

“Take that off this instant, Azure Sky,” Mrs. Lonsdaleite said to her.

Sky was resting her cheek awkwardly on a hoof. “But me eye, ‘tis still a-healin’! It be a ghastly sight t’see!”

“You were wearing that on your other eye just a moment ago.”

“Fine,” Sky said sullenly. Twilight heard her mutter something about a pewter mad ray.

Echelle hadn't asked her join at lunch or dinner after the incident. They would still greet each other politely when they saw each other, but there was something awkward about it. Twilight found it easiest to view the whole thing as some sort of test; she had studied hard, given it her all, and despite her best efforts, she had not passed. Perhaps if she'd stepped in to do something about the fight, or if she'd been as brave as Elsie, maybe the whole friendship thing might have worked out. It could have been that they just thought that being friends with her was too much trouble. Maybe it wasn't even that. Maybe she just had a bad personality. No matter what the reason, Twilight was loathe to try again. *Anyway, she thought, you probably aren't allowed retakes for this sort of thing.*

She had prepared a long apology for Belaaq the next time she saw her, but didn't really get much of a chance to deliver it. The amber filly didn't show up to a single class that week, nor did Twilight bump into her in the hallways or in the dining room. There were rumours that she'd been expelled.

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"Well I honestly didn't anticipate for any of that to happen," the Princess said.

Twilight was only half-joking when she replied. "But don't you know everything?"

"*Nopony* can know everything," Princess Celestia said. "To quote somepony I know, 'these eyes of flesh see only the world material, time a droplet on a river eternal. One can only guess where the current flows.'"

"And where it stops, nopony knows?" Twilight said, knowing full well that she was being cheeky.

The Princess laughed. "That certainly rhymes much better than what was said afterwards."

"Which was?"

"Is there any mustard left, I believe."

Twilight looked up into the dark cobalt of the night sky. "I don't think I can make friends." In her mind's eye, she traced the lines of *canis major*. "I thought it would be different here, because everypony is good at magic and smart and they like to read and know how to do math, but every time I try, something always happens," she said. "I know things like fate and destiny aren't real, but if you're not the one who's been causing all this stuff, then maybe I'm just not supposed to have any. Maybe it's just not *me* to have friends."

"Why, if that wasn't the biggest load of nonsense I've ever heard in my life," the Princess said. "You have at least one friend already."

"Who?" asked Twilight, but the Princess simply smiled.

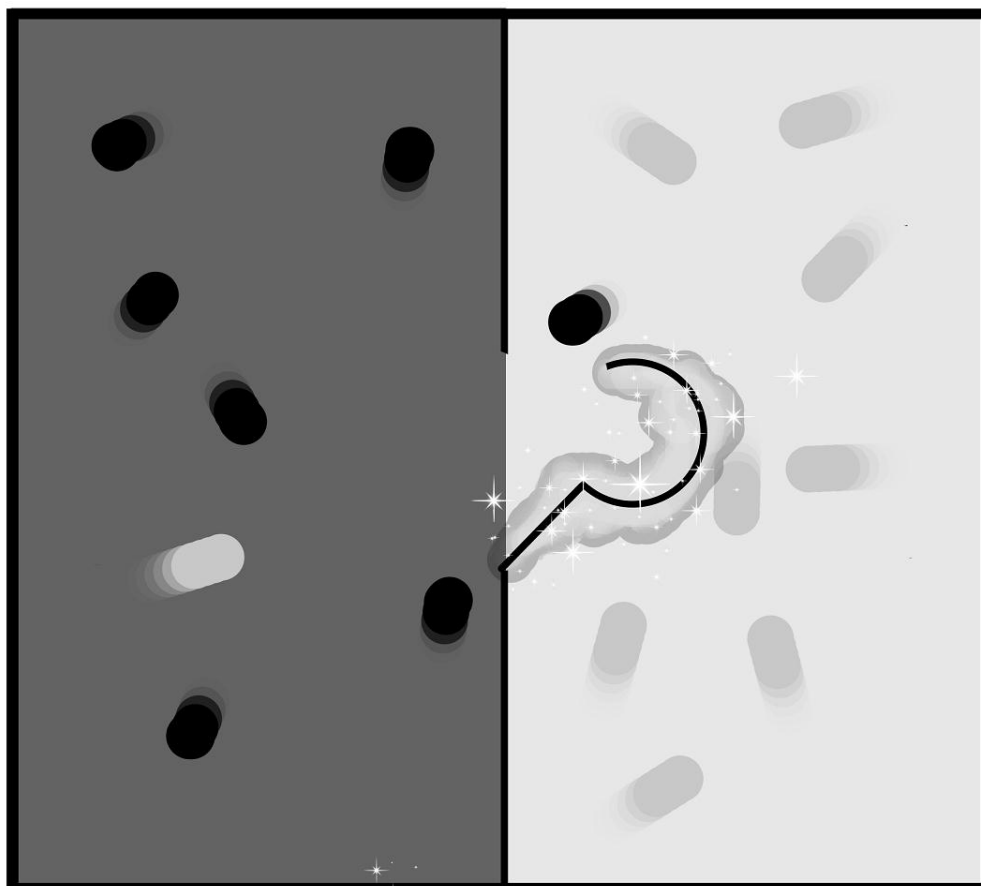
"Your classmates will come around, Twilight Sparkle, and not everything will always be the way it is now. No pony should spend her whole life alone," she said. "You just need a little patience."

"I guess..." Twilight said, not convinced.

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# Chapter Seven

This chapter is dedicated to the three Isaacs in my life. Rest in peace.



There was sleet pouring from the sky, and the roof was slippery and treacherous that evening. There was no sign of the downpour letting up.

Usually when the weather was bad like this, the Princess would take the night to teach Twilight about other things, literature, history or even politics.

Twilight took a good look around at all the *glass* windows and felt herself fill with apprehension. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Princess?"

That Sunday, for some insane reason that Twilight could not comprehend, Princess Celestia had decided that, despite the weather, they would continue with their magic lessons. Indoors. In a room filled with priceless antiques and paintings.

"Certainly," the Princess said. "I have full confidence in your abilities."

There was the flash of a spell, and Twilight sent the full force of her magic through her horn. The room filled with the aroma of gingerbread; it started off tantalising but soon became cloying, overpowering. Her nose tingled, but she rode the wave of her own energy, pushing it through her horn, letting the gingerbread fragrance become stronger and stronger, until it wasn't so much a smell as it was the *concept* of a smell. She kept her breaths deep and even, just like the Princess had taught her and breathed in the pure idea of it.

She held on, letting the thought feed the magic and the magic feed the thought until she felt the flood of her power turn into a trickle.

"Do you think they would have any gingersnap cookies in the kitchens right now?" Twilight said, once the last of the magic had faded away. They definitely wouldn't have gingerbread in February, but gingersnap was the next best thing.

"Why don't we check?" said the Princess. "That was very good, by the way. I was starting to crave cookies myself."

Unlike at school, the palace kitchens didn't run all night and day. Twilight knew that most of the kitchen staff lived in the royal castle, and

there were usually at least a few cooks on call at any given time, in case there were important ponies like the Princess who wanted midnight snacks.

The full staff was present when Twilight and the Princess arrived, which was not unusual at this time of night. Typically, though, she found that they cleaned and closed up shop, rather than baking at full force like they were now. She thought she'd been imagining it when they were approaching the kitchens, that it had been the lingering effects of her spell, but clearly she hadn't. She had smelled gingerbread because they were *baking it*.



"I'm sorry Princess," said the head chef, who would have normally gone home by now. "But everypony in the palace seems to want gingerbread tonight, of all things. I'm afraid we're very backed up."

"That is quite alright, Praxis," she said with a gentle smile. Princess Celestia winked at her pupil.



Twilight's mouth was agape as she watched one of the cooks casually grate zucchini into a mixing bowl. Things like zucchini, lemons and strawberries were practically worth their weight in gold this time of year; the only way anypony could get ahold of any was if he or she was wealthy enough to own a conservatory or a greenhouse. The cook squeaked when she saw that the Princess was watching, and began stammering apologies for using such an expensive vegetable.

"Is that zucchini gingerbread loaf?" the Princess asked.

The cook made some sort of "meeble" sound, then nodded.

"Wonderful! Cherry Tart, you'll certainly have to let me try some once you're finished," she said.

"\*squeak\* O-of course, Your Majesty." Cherry Tart's horn glowed and she began to grate with vigor. "Ohmygosh the Princess knows my name!"

Twilight looked around at all the ponies who were making things that looked and smelled like gingerbread. "I did that?"

"It would appear so."

"Is there a counter-spell? I don't want to be mind-controlling everypony..." Twilight said. "That seems kind of evil overlord-y."

"You might not have noticed, my faithful student, but there are still ponies washing dishes or taking out trash." The Princess gestured with a hoof. "Your spell was certainly suggestive, but if you had cast a spell to control minds, half the palace would be here, either trying to bake, themselves, or fighting over the batter."

Twilight made a *hmm...* noise. "That actually sounds kind of good," she said, thinking of the special chocolate chip cookie dough Dad would sometimes make. "The, uh, batter I mean, not making everypony fight."

The Princess had a cook whip up some gingerbread dough (without the raw egg), and Twilight snacked on it as they made their way back to the room.

“You have mastered the ability to channel your power without causing chaos, and I believe that the time has come to start teaching you a new lesson in magic.” The impact of this statement was spoiled a little by the gingerbread dough stuck to the side of Princess Celestia’s face.

“Um...”

“The next thing you must learn will undoubtedly be more difficult. You must learn to keep your magic in check at all times.”

“Uh...”

“I do not believe that this will be safe to practice indoors, so lessons will end early for tonight.”

“Okay,” Twilight said. “There’s some, um, gingerbread dough on your face by the way.”

Princess Celestia’s eyes crossed as she looked at the glob of brown dough on her cheek, then she laughed.

After Twilight had packed her things, she went to wait for the Princess to lock away her magic for the week. Experience had taught her that she was going to hate what was about to come next.

“Farewell, Twilight Sparkle,” the Princess said to her in the atrium. “I look forward to seeing you again on Friday.”

“Wait, aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Oh, how thoughtless of me.” Princess Celestia left and returned with an umbrella, the functional, but unfashionable kind that came without a saddle. It was a unicorn umbrella. “Hopefully next week’s lessons will come with better weather.” Twilight saw a faint smile on the Princess’ face as she turned to leave.

She stood there, confused, before she realised what had just happened.

She didn’t know what to say.

“WOOHOO!!!” seemed to suffice.

“Guys!” she said to the identical-looking door guards. “It’s almost Monday and I have my magic! Look!” She opened the umbrella and held it in the air.

The face of the guard on the right was as expressionless as ever. “Er, congratulations Ms. Sparkle.”

“Congratulations,” said the guard on the left. Twilight couldn’t recognise his voice.

“Hehe, thanks guys!”

She marched out into the freezing rain, twirling her umbrella and not caring how cold or wet it was. She had books to shelve and this night was going to be a good one.

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The next morning Twilight made a point of putting on a button-up uniform rather than a magnetic clip-on. She’d mostly outgrown the ones Mom and Dad had gotten her at the beginning of the year, and it was a very tight fit. She hoped the buttons wouldn’t pop off. Still, there was a warm fuzzy-feeling that filled her chest as she stood in front of the mirror, wearing the first proper uniform of that year she’d put on herself.

She marvelled at the ease of all the things she normally took for granted. True, she had her magic at the palace, but she never had any sort of routine there. She would wake up whenever she felt like it and plan her day on the fly, around whatever the Princess had decided they would be doing that evening. Packing her saddlebags and quadruple-checking their contents only took two minutes. Brushing her teeth was no longer a slow and clumsy affair. By the time she was ready to go down to the kitchens, she found that she was already twenty minutes ahead of schedule. *This is amazing.*

She stood in front of the doors, the stupidly obedient doors. She didn’t ask them to open; she just opened them. There was a goofy grin

plastered on her face. “Good morning, Mr. Misiurewicz!” she said to the orange stallion. The last part of his name was long and unwieldy, but Twilight liked to say it just to prove that she could. “Nice to see you.”

“Good morning,” he said in his funny accent. “You are here bright and early today.”

“The Princess gave me my magic back!” she said. She screwed up her eyes and the books all flew out of her saddlebags in an orderly line, circled once overhead, then rearranged themselves neatly back in the bag. “Ta-da!”

“Very good!” Benoit rapped his hooves on the floor a few times. “I have some magic myself.”

“*How?* You’re an earth pony!”

“Ah, but see?” He used his teeth to pull a coin out of a pocket (This alone, was impressive, since Twilight always had trouble removing objects from her pockets.) and threw it in the air with a flick of his neck. Suddenly it was spinning on his hoof. Twilight hadn’t seen it fall. “Magic!” he said.



She laughed in spite of the cheesiness of his trick. “Nice one! How did you do it?”

“That is a secret,” he said with a wink. “Secret earth pony magic.”

Twilight snorted but went on her way. *It was probably hidden under his hoof when threw it.*

The kitchen staff was used to her by now. When she asked for some food to take away, the stallion brought her back a thermos with one of the special lids, which of course she didn't need anymore. She made sure the stallion was watching when she put it into her bag with her magic. Her grin kept getting wider and wider. She explained the situation, thanked him and headed down to *Language Arts*.

The door was locked, but that wasn't a problem. It was probably an oversight by the Princess, but Twilight had found out fairly quickly that any classroom door would open for her if she asked it to, even ones that were supposed to be locked. She usually preferred waiting for the teacher to arrive first, but today was special. She was going to be the first one in class today. She was going to set up and ready before everypony else. It was going to be fantastic.

Twilight told the door to open and walked in. The curtains hung open, but the room was still a little dark. Before she was aware of what she was doing, she had already told the lights to brighten.

"No wait, get dark again, lights."

The room dimmed.

She put her horn against one of the suns on the wall and imagined that the room was brighter. "Hehehe..."

There was a steaming mug of coffee on top of Ms. Lida's desk and a cardboard box on the floor beside it. She'd probably stepped out for a bit. Twilight peered inside the box and saw that it was filled with books. They already had all their assigned reading material, but occasionally the teacher would bring in more for extra credit assignments.

She decided to get a head start and floated a book (*I, Krasue*) over to a desk in her favourite spot in front row. There were copies of *The Sturdy Colts* underneath, an odd choice for extra credit reading.

*Weird*, she thought, as she glanced at the first page, *Ms. Lida's already marked it with red pen*. She flipped through the book, skimming. Certain words were struck out, like viscera and blood and die, and all had scrawled corrections written above them. Sometimes, pages at a time were crossed out, with the simple word "sanitize" overtop the first paragraph. She gave a mental shrug and started reading in earnest.

Twilight was halfway through the third chapter when Ms. Lida walked in. Ms. Lida looked back at the door and mumbled something along the lines of, "I was sure I locked that." She glanced over at Twilight reading quietly at her desk. The teacher was momentarily bewildered, but seemed to regain her composure quickly. "Good morning," she said cheerily. "For showing up first today, you get a gold star!"

There were six charts on the wall with names on them, one for every class Ms. Lida taught. Gold stars were stuck beside every name, since Ms. Lida tended to give them to anypony who handed in their homework on time. At the end of every month, the teacher would put up a new chart and give a prize to the pony with the most stars. Gingersnap always won, of course. Then again, she didn't have nearly as many stars as some student in a higher grade named, "Tisamenus".

"Can I put the star on?" Twilight asked.

"The chart is very high and we wouldn't want you to hurt yourself," Ms. Lida said as the glowing star floated through the air and pressed itself onto the paper.

"I can use magic now, though!" She flipped through the pages of the book in front of her to demonstrate.

"That's nice," the teacher said, before looking properly at exactly what book Twilight had. "Oh dear!" There was a whoosh of displaced air as the book zipped back to her desk.

"Huh?"

"Those aren't ready for young eyes! How far did you read?"

"About halfway through chapter three but-

The teacher relaxed visibly. "Ah."

"Wasn't that extra credit?"

"Of course not," Ms. Lida said, sounding aghast. "I would *never* add *I, Krasue* to the curriculum. I'm part of a group that make books safe for young unicorns, like yourself, to read."

"Oh... I've already read all of *The Sturdy Colts*, though," Twilight said, looking down at the box. "I mean, before today. Not all just now."

The teacher shook her head sadly. "I'm very sorry."

Something about the idea didn't sit well with Twilight. "Isn't it bad to change what's already written in books?"

"Where you would get that idea? The ponies who write books, that's authors, always find other ponies to look through their work for them and help them to change the mistakes and make the books better. Those helper ponies are called editors."

"I *know* what authors and editors are," Twilight said. She almost said, *I'm not a baby*, but caught herself in time. "But then, that's before they publish them, isn't it?"

"Sometimes ponies notice mistakes, even after books are published, so they go back and change them. That's why books have different editions."

That was true, but there was still something that didn't seem quite right. "But-"

Gingersnap walked into the classroom. She looked a little surprised - perhaps that someone had gotten to class earlier than her - and sat down a few seats from Twilight.

"But this is *different*."



Ms. Lida sighed. “One day when you are older, Twilight, you will understand.” Her face had the “discussion closed” expression on it that grownups sometimes gave kids when they thought they were asking too many questions.

Twilight had an inexplicable urge to find a copy of *I, Krasue* and read every single page and decided to put it down on a checklist like the Princess had taught her. She pulled some paper, a quill and some ink out of her bag and caught Gingersnap staring at her obvious use of magic. Twilight smirked and did the book trick she’d done for Mr. Misiurewicz earlier. After reshelving all her books, she’d spent almost two hours practicing it in front of a mirror the night before. It had taken a lot of work to make the movements look smooth and effortless, and Celestia help her if she didn’t at least get to show it off.

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Lunch and her other two classes had been underwhelming. Twilight had sat in the dining hall by herself, knowing that it would be awkward, but wanting to prove that she could eat like a unicorn in front of everypony else. Nopony cared.

Notetaking was much easier, admittedly, but she was sorely out of practice. The Princess had never asked her to take notes, and Twilight tended to finish most of her homework on Friday, before Princess Celestia had a chance to unbind her magic.

Twilight’s magical writing was slower and even less legible than her mouth-writing. Compared to the quick and easy way her classmates wrote, she felt like a tottery foal trying to keep pace with a herd of adults.

The last class of the day was *Control and Practical Precision*.

*Finally*, Twilight thought, *I get to be good at something for once*.

“Alright,” Ms. North Star said. “Who can tell me the difference between active and passive levitation?”

*Huh.* It's not so much that the question was hard, but this was *theory* and they'd already gone over it with Mr. Yorsets. She saw a yellow foreleg rise into the air.

"Yes, Lexicus?"

"Passive levitation requires giving an object commands, or directions before casting the spell. The commands and the path of the object cannot be changed once the spell is cast. Active levitation has no set commands and the object's movements must be controlled in real time." As usual, the colt spoke like a particularly dry textbook.

"Correct. Now why is it dangerous to use active levitation to move objects that are heavier than yourself?"

Gingersnap wasn't in this class, so Twilight's hoof shot up immediately, tying with Lexicus'.

Lexicus spoke before either Twilight or the teacher had a chance to tell him otherwise. "Unlike passive levitation, the opposing force of an active levitation spell is naturally centered on the pony who casts it. Actively moving a heavy object with magic is equivalent to doing the same with one's body."

*Aw... No fair,* Twilight thought. He always did that.

"That's correct," the teacher said with an exasperated sigh. "But please don't answer unless called." Without looking, Ms. North Star drew out a diagram on the board and several equations accounting for the laws of motion.

She hoped the equations were just for flavour. Even with all she'd learned about math and physics in the last five months, Twilight had trouble working her way through them. She knew that the *F* stood for force, *v* was velocity, and *t* was time, but everything else was a blank to her.

Ms. North Star pressed on. "Now who can tell me what the workaround is for this?"

Twilight raised her hoof, once again, twinning with Lexicus.

“There’s a spell to counteract it,” Twilight said, after the teacher had chosen her. “You can use a spell to put all the force on the ground.”

“Very good.”

Twilight felt herself fill with the warm glowy feeling of hard studying being paid off.

A large lump of clay landed on Ms. North Star’s desk, and Twilight watched as the teacher used her magic to smooth it out into a completely flat brick. The teacher placed a book on the desk beside the clay.

“You can cast the ‘Foundation’ spell to move an object of any weight, but keep in mind that it does require extra energy and concentration.” Ms. North Star’s horn glowed, but Twilight couldn’t see any obvious magic transpiring. “This is what happens if you don’t distribute the weight over a large enough area.” The book rose slowly in the air, and a circular indentation began to form in the clay, getting wider and deeper as the book lifted higher.

The book fell back onto the desk with a loud crack that made everypony jump a little in their seats.

“Now if you happen to be *standing* on something that starts shifting or sinking, it can be pretty dangerous. Not to mention you’ll probably lose your concentration and drop whatever you’re carrying, too.” She bundled up the clay and put it back into a drawer of her desk. “It takes a lot of practice and study to figure out exactly how wide you need to spread the influence of your spell. Too big and you’ll use up all your magic. Too small and you’ll end up making craters.”

Nightbreaker’s hoof rose into the air. “Ms. North Star, I saw you do that on your desk. It wasn’t on the ground.”

“You don’t need to use the ground,” she said, “or even force the spell downwards. You can use any neighbouring mass in any direction.”

“Oh!” he spoke again without raising a hoof. “So then you could make the radius of the spell *really, really* small and then aim for somepony’s brain and then lift a chair or something.”

*What!? Oh for the love of... Why would you even want to do that?*

“I can tell Mrs. Lonsdaleite must *love* you,” the teacher said. It was true. “Yes, technically you could.”

Elsie turned to him and snorted. “Dude, that’s way complicated. Just stick a pencil through their eye.”

*Is everypony here a psychopath?* Twilight thought.

“But what if you don’t *have* a pencil?”

“Who doesn’t always have a pencil?” Elsie floated about two dozen of them out of her saddlebags.

*Real unicorns use quills*, Twilight said to herself, thinking of all the ones she’d broken at the beginning of the year. In October, she’d tried using a pencil, but had bitten down on it so hard that one of her wiggly baby teeth had fallen out. It’d been a little traumatising.

The teacher cleared her throat. “If you two are done discussing the best way to give each other brain damage, we can continue on with the lesson.”

“Sorry,” they said, seconds apart.

Ms. North Star took the class outside and in several trips, brought out what looked like Ms. Marie’s large collection of rocks, plus more rocks on top of that. Twilight really hoped that they wouldn’t be running laps.

There was a flare of light, and all the rocks crumbled into sand, then spread out into a flat, roughly circular shape, large enough for everypony to stand on. *Ms. Marie isn’t going to be too happy about that.*

The teacher explained the steps of the spell, and showed them how to change its diameter. “Feel the push of the ground against the edges of

your mind,” she said. “If you can feel it pushing back, you know you’ve done it right.”

She made them practice casting the *Foundation* spell without actually lifting anything first. Without another spell it wouldn’t *do* anything, of course, but the teacher explained that it was just to get a feel for the magic. When Twilight tried it out, she was amazed to feel concentric circles of earth spreading out beneath her, like the rings of Saturn.

To carry something at the same time was another matter completely. Whenever she would lift one of the supplied rocks, even a small one, she would lose hold of her *Foundation*, or if she put priority on grounding the rock, the rock would rise for a little bit and then drop from the air. It was a little bit like a trick Dad had taught her, where she would lie on her back with her hooves in the air, and make clockwise circles with the hoof of her right hindleg, and then she would try to draw a 6 with her right forehoof. The circles she would make with her hind hoof would always change direction, no matter what she tried, and this was similar, except inside her head.

Lexicus and Enigma seemed to be the only two who were having any degree of success, although admittedly, it was not much. It didn’t look like Lexicus could expand the diameter of his *Foundation* spell any wider than about an inch, and Twilight saw him leave big pockmarks in the sand every time he tried to lift anything. Enigma could expand his spell a little wider, but when the sand sunk in, he would lose control of his rock and fling it halfway across the field rather than simply dropping it.

Rune sat quietly outside the ring of sand. One of Enigma’s rocks came close to smacking her in the forehead, but it exploded in a shower of gravel before it hit her. Her eyes went wide, and then, unexpectedly, she started to weep.

*It didn’t even hit her...* Twilight hadn’t pegged the filly as a crybaby.

“Oh jeeze... I’m so sorry, Rune,” Enigma said as he walked over to her. “I didn’t mean to hit you.”

“You didn’t,” the teacher said, looking uncomfortable. “Next time be gentle with the lifting, Enigma, and don’t force it. Not every accident is

going to be a near-miss like that.” She turned to Rune, not saying anything about the tears. “You might want to stand back a little bit more.”

*This is pointless*, Twilight thought, as the rock slipped from her grasp for the umpteenth time. *When am I ever going to need to lift anything that big anyway?*

It was getting cold, and by the time it was too dark to see, Ms. North Star let the class go early. Twilight had almost forgotten what it was like to have magic again, with all the senses that magic entailed. The air felt wobbly and tingly as sand reformed back into rocks.

---

She ate her dinner in her room while staring at a spellbook. Most of the fun of having her magic had worn off, replaced by the dull realisation that she was in the same boat as everypony else. If anything, all her classmates were in a schooner and having been in a drifting lifeboat for the last five months, Twilight had finally come across a pair of oars and was now desperately paddling to try to get onto theirs before her teeth and horn fell off.

*Your talent is magic*, Smarty Pants told Twilight as she reorganised her books for the second time that night. They were already organised, but when she didn’t physically have to walk over to the shelves, the activity became repetitive and soothing.

*I know you can get better at this*, Smarty Pants said from the bed. *All you need is practice.*

Twilight smiled. “You’re right!” She ran through the steps of the *Foundation* spell, back and forth until it was a pattern that she could ignore. The solidity of the ground drummed in her mind, tap-tapping in a rhythm all across her floor. She walked and changed the spell’s dimensions, feeling it slide along the walls and ceiling, smooth planes of support and mass. With hardly a thought, she poured power into the spell, making it huge, bigger than the entire building she stood in, then collapsing it, turning it into a small, tiny pinprick in the ground. She widened the diameter, then pressed against a spot on the stone floor, marking it with a hoof and her spell, then leapt through the rhythm of the magic in her mind, rivers of not-quite-sound and not-quite-light.

*Concentrate.* She was aware of the irony of subvocalising the thought. She used her teeth to take a book off the shelf, all the while, holding on to the spell. This was like her practice with the Princess, she told herself. She flipped it open with her hoof and began reading aloud; the spellpattern wavered in her thoughts. "Step by step, it must be done. And AC said, 'LET THERE BE-'" She read until there was only the spell and her words, then stopped.

Carefully, laboriously, she began to go through the rudiments of levitation, working it through the pattern of her *Foundation*. Gaps in the spells naturally seemed to fit with each other. How hadn't she noticed it before? These two spells were *made* to go together. The book began to rise. She gasped. "Yes!"

It fell.

"Monkeyfeathers!"

Well, now she knew how to do it at least - as long as she didn't move or start talking to herself.

Twilight wondered how difficult it would be to concatenate *three* spells at the same time. Surely there was a point where doing one spell would become as automatic as breathing or blinking and... *oh darn*. Now she was aware of her breathing and blinking; clearly she wasn't going to get any more spell practice done that night because she would be too busy not letting her eyes dry out.

---

Twilight walked out to Ms. Marie's class nervously. The teacher had gone easy on her because she didn't have any magic, but with it back, what was stopping Ms. Marie from letting loose five months of withheld rage?

The teacher's favourite boulder, the one with the 800 carved in the side, seemed to be whole and in one piece again. Her large pile of rocks looked perfectly intact.

“What are you waiting for, you brickheads? Get moving!”

Twilight looked at the rocks. How was she supposed to know what size she should choose? Next to her, Tambourine picked up a rock that was almost the same size as herself. By the time everypony else had already chosen, Ms. Marie was glaring at her.

“Uh...” Twilight clenched her eyes shut and groped around blindly with her magic. She felt for the biggest one she could find, and then, frantically, *pulled*. All of a sudden, the rocks disappeared. “Huh?” She opened her eyes and looked around. She couldn’t see them anywhere.

Suddenly there was screaming. Everypony was scattering and looking to the skies. *Oh no... Ms. Marie is throwing her rock again!*

Twilight ran, not knowing what else to do. There was a soft thunk as Ms. Marie’s rock landed right at her own hooves. *Huh?* She looked up.

Half the rockpile was suspended in the air, glowing in a web of magic. Ms. Marie’s horn looked like it was on fire. The rocks lowered slowly to the ground.

Ms. Marie picked her favourite boulder again, and stomped her way towards Twilight. “*What is your PROBLEM!*”

“I- I’ve never done this before.” *Please don’t hurt me pleasedonthurtme.*

“What kind of brainless, spineless blob of *idiocy*,” said Ms. Marie, “*THROWS* the rocks instead of picking them up!”

“I-”

Ms. Marie slammed her boulder into the ground beside Twilight. “Pick up your Celestia-blasted rock and get running!”

Twilight swallowed and levitated the nearest rock - it was light, about the size and weight of a large watermelon - and she ran. This was harder than the other fillies and colts made it look. Her hooves were heavy and clumsy; every step was a burden.



“Too small!” the teacher yelled.

A much larger rock whizzed through the air and landed about ten feet in front of Twilight. She stopped and put her old one to the side of the track.

“Pick them *both* up, dung-for-brains! I don’t care if Celestia herself comes down to this track! You keep running until I tell you!”

Twilight whimpered and lifted both rocks into the air. She put an unsteady leg forward. Both rocks together must’ve weighed as much as any one of her classmates *plus* their rock combined. Her whole body felt like it was made of lead, and the ache in her joints was unbearable. *What if I...* Class was two hours long; ten minutes had elapsed; it took two minutes on average to do a full lap, so there were 55 laps in the amount of time left. She screwed up her eyes in concentration and traced the cycles of the track in her mind.

“I TOLD YOU TO KEEP RUNNING!”

She bit back her fear and kept focused. There was an empty feeling as the magic drained out of her horn. The rocks began to circle the counterclockwise route of the track, without any direction from her at all. Yes! Twilight galloped under them at her regular pace. The weight had left her body, every step she took was unencumbered.

She picked up her hooves with glee, and galloped past everypony else. *Suckers!*

After half an hour, Twilight was drenched in sweat and she was more than ready to collapse.

Ms. Marie glowered at them. “Stop running!”

*Uh oh.* Twilight looked up at the the two rocks in the air. She’d forgotten about breaks. She tried to hold on to them, but the magical shape they had taken on under her own influence was strange and oily. They moved with a slippery, unstoppable purpose.

“I said stop running!” Ms. Marie shouted at her.

She glanced back at the rocks one last time, then staggered, exhausted, to the side of the field where everypony else was panting and massaging their legs. Her rocks kept spinning around the track.

*“What are you doing?”*

“Um...” Twilight flattened her ears. “I made the rocks circle the track... fifty-ish times...”

The teacher blinked. “That was not the point of this exercise,” she said in a quiet voice.

Twilight braced herself for the giant boulder that would inevitably come crashing out of the sky.

“You vermin sure took your time figuring it out.” The remaining rockpile flew towards the empty track, fusing into rings, spires and tunnels.

*Is this happening? Had that been some sort of test?*

“Those rocks of yours, move them through the obstacle course, spin them around the poles twice, down the tunnels and through the hoops.” Parts of the course began to move and shift around, making it impossible for any set of commands to account for all the changes. “Your break’s over! Get cracking!”

Everypony groaned. They hadn’t rested for more than two minutes.

At the end of class, Ms. Marie rounded them all up into a group. “I’ve heard that you rockheads have been learning how to lift bigger things.”

“Yes sir,” they said in unison. No pony had the energy for anything more than the most halfhearted of affirmations.

“Next class I want to see you all carrying weights heavier than yourselves. I don’t need to tell you what’s going to happen if I catch any cheaters.”

---

Twilight teetered back into the school, dragging her heavy hooves. She was actually looking forward to the four hours of mundane sciences - sitting, motionlessness, and no magic. Not in the mood to climb the stairs to the cafeteria, up to her room, then down again to *Science and Mathematics*, she took her lunch with her straight to the classroom.

The door, like she'd expected, was locked. "Open, door."

She walked into the classroom and saw Gingersnap standing in the front of the room, horn glowing and squinting at the floor. The crimson filly didn't even look up at Twilight as she approached.



Twilight looked down at the patch of ground Gingersnap seemed to be having a staring contest with. "What are you doing?" she said.

“Ahhh!” Gingersnap’s eyes went wide, and she jumped half a step backwards. “Don’t do that!” the filly gasped, once she’d calmed down enough to talk.

“Uh... Sorry?”

She looked up at the door and pulled it shut with her magic. The handle jiggled back and forth a few times, clicking, but never turning all the way. “How did you even get in here? That door’s supposed to be locked.”

“I can open doors, remember?” The door swung out into the hallway at those words.

Gingersnap made a sound of frustration and closed the door again. “I didn’t know that included *locked* ones. Hasn’t anypony ever heard of privacy?”

“Erm,” Twilight said, not sure if she should point out the irony and, perhaps, hypocrisy of that statement. “What were *you* doing in here anyway?”

“It’s none of your beeswax. I just like being early for class, that’s all.”

Twilight glanced at the floor Gingersnap had been staring at earlier. “It looked like you were casting a spell.”

“Yeah?” she said. “What’s wrong with doing homework? I bet I do way more than you.”

“You’re setting up a prank, aren’t you?” Twilight probed the ground with her magic, looking for a skein of spells or a trigger of some sort, but not finding anything out of the ordinary. She mustered up her courage, walked towards the most likely spot, and prodded it with a hoof. Nothing happened. “You’re up to something.”

“*I’m* up to something, Miz Hengstwolf? What’s with all the coming to class early and the spells? I bet now that you have your magic back, *you’re* stalking *me* and have some sort of awful revenge planned, or maybe you’re just trying to show me up.”

“That’s not it at all,” Twilight said. “My legs are just sore and I didn’t want to have to keep walking up and down the stairs to find a place to eat.” She levitated the paper bag out of her saddlebags and placed it on a desk, pulling out a carrotburger and hay fries. “See? Lunch. I’m not stalking you or doing any of those things!”

“Whatever,” Gingersnap said. “You’re not supposed to be in here right now anyway, so you need to leave.”

“It’s a free classroom,” said Twilight, feeling petulant. “And if I shouldn’t be in here then neither should you.”

“Go fall off a cliff.”

Twilight ignored her, sat down at a desk, and began to eat her lunch. She kept her senses on the lookout for any sudden magic, but Gingersnap didn’t do much other than sit on the farthest side of the classroom from her. She smacked her textbook loudly onto her desk and flipped violently through the pages, sighing loudly and huffing the whole time.

When Mr. Few Colt walked in, Twilight took a few deep breaths and tried her best to look calm. Gingersnap was here too. He wasn’t going to... he wasn’t going to start preaching to them about latitudes and sines. He wouldn’t. It would be unconscionable.

He walked up to the front of the classroom and removed several books from a shelf. A piece of chalk hovered in the air and he started writing out the same formulas that Ms. North Star had drawn the day before.

*All the teachers must be coordinating their lessons*, Twilight thought. That morning, Mr. Yorsets had taught them about spell synchronisation. She let out a sigh; It didn’t look like Few Colt even cared that she and Gingersnap had somehow gotten into his locked classroom. He barely even noticed that they were there.

Mr. Misiurewicz showed up for class more often than not, but today did not appear to be one of those days. For the first three weeks of school, all they had done was arithmetic, and Twilight hadn’t been sure if Few Colt was anything more than just a glorified teacher’s assistant. It turned out

that the two stallions taught their own respective classes, and Mr. Misiurewicz, unlike Few Colt, was simply not needed on the days that he wasn't giving a lesson.

The classroom began to fill, and more and more ponies poured in from the halls. After everypony was seated, Few Colt cleared his throat.

"Today, class, we learn about Colton's laws of motion and the laws of thermodynamics." He did not ask anypony if they knew what they were. Instead, he tapped on the equations on board with his floating piece of chalk. "Colton's first law, unless an unbalanced force acts on it, an object in motion will stay in motion, and an object at rest will stay at rest.

"Second, the change of momentum in a body is proportional to the impulse impressed upon it, which happens along the direction of the right line which that force is impressed."

His description of the second law made almost no sense to Twilight, but the chalk rapped against the only equation on the board that she could understand,  $F = ma$ . Force equals mass times acceleration.

"Third, to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

"Now," he said, "this third law is not perfect, but we get from it the law of conservation of momentum, where in a closed system, no energy can be created or destroyed."

He went over the laws of thermodynamics in pretty much the same fashion. Twilight saw Enigma waving his hoof madly in the air, but Few Colt didn't call upon him until he was done with his lecture.

"What is your question?"

Enigma looked pensive, but Twilight could hear fear in his voice. "Mr. Few Colt, when you say a closed system, does that, um. Is the universe a closed system?"

"Theoretically, yes."

“So then... that means...” The white colt went very quiet, and Twilight thought, for a moment, that he had lost his train of thought, or had run out of things to say. “The universe will eventually reach equilibrium. Everything that exists will just one day... it’ll just be heat?”

Twilight swallowed, but her mouth was dry.

The teacher nodded, seeming reluctant to do so. “*If* this was an eventuality, it would take a very long time, many many times longer than my lifespan or yours.”

Enigma looked down at his desk. “That’s alright then, I guess...”

---

*Why did he have to say that?* Twilight thought. It would be true, even if he didn’t, and it wasn’t like anything good came out of knowing it. She worked on her magic with fervor. No pony was one hundred percent sure where all the energy from magic came from, but maybe if she did enough of it, if every pony did enough of it, they wouldn’t have to worry about the whole universe becoming nothing but heat. Maybe everything would be okay.

Enigma approached her in the hallway the next morning. Outside of class, he and Sky seemed to be joined at the hip, but today, he came alone. “Twilight,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. His eyes were glassy and it was all puffy around them. His white fur did little to hide how pink his nose and cheeks were. “Could you do me a favour?”

Twilight could not say no.

“Could you... You know the Princess, right? You talk to her all the time?”

She nodded.

“Would it be okay if,” he looked down at the ground, “if you took me to see her?”

“Why?”

"If I told her," he said. "If she knew what was going to happen... it's just... it's stupid, and it's not *right*." He sniffled. "I don't know what else to do."

"I don't know... What if she can't do anything?"

"I have to at least *try*. She moves the sun and the moon. If anypony could do something about it, it's her."

"Um..." Twilight looked at him and he looked away. She remembered the way he was after Sky had gotten hurt, but it wasn't anything like this. It was like he'd given up hope. "If you want, you could just tell me what you want to tell her and I could ask her for you."

He shook his head. "I need to do it myself."

"Okay then, I guess..." she said. "Come with me on Friday after class."

---

Ms. Marie's Thursday class was just as grueling as Tuesdays had been, and once again, Twilight was in no shape to climb the four flights of stairs to the dining hall, the one up to her room, and then the four down to *Science and Mathematics*. She knew better than to have her lunch in class before it started, though.

There was a pretty good chance Gingersnap would be there, doing whatever the heck she did in empty classrooms by herself. The room next door was the *Language Arts* classroom, and she knew that Ms. Lida didn't teach on the afternoons when she had math and science. If she ate lunch in there, she wouldn't have to go up and down the extra five flights of stairs. She could just go next door when the clock on the wall told her it was time for class.

She told the door to open.

Gingersnap was inside, horn lit up while staring fixedly at the floor. She must be one of those ponies who got anxious unless they performed



specific rituals in each room, Twilight thought. Touching doorframes or counting the windows seemed to be the typical thing, though.

Twilight sighed, then closed the door as quickly and quietly as she could. She could have her lunch in the other classroom instead.

---

The next day, Enigma walked with Twilight to the palace after their lesson with Ms. North Star. Just about everypony had gotten the hang of the *Foundation* spell except for Demise, and, well, Rune, of course. Twilight and Enigma trotted together out of the school's front doors, breath steaming in the cool night air.

"I can't guarantee anything," Twilight said. Grownups often said things like that when they thought something might go wrong. The Princess had explained that it was because saying something like that at the start made them less responsible if things went badly later.

Enigma kept walking, not turning to look at her. "I have to do *something*, even if it doesn't work. Maybe she knows something that can help us figure it out."

"Yeah, that sounds something she could do."

"I've never met her before. Is there, um, anything I should know? Like, does she hate it when you use certain words? Is there a royal etiquette I'm supposed to follow?"

"Not really. Princess Celestia isn't very fond of ponies being overly-formal with her," Twilight said, "but if we make it in time for dinner, you might want to be careful, since the court ponies can be a little uptight." Their hooves clacked against the stone as they walked across a bridge.

"Dinner?"

"Start with the cutlery farthest away from you, and work your way to the closest ones whenever they bring a different course. Don't just sit at any random table - gentleponies practically start wars over their seating

arrangements, and when in doubt, just copy whatever the Princess is doing.”

“I see,” Enigma said, not sounding like he really cared about what the court ponies thought. He was quiet for the rest of the trip.

As both of them approached the dining hall, they were greeted by the sounds of eating and the tittering of polite conversation. The server ponies were dishing out salads, which Twilight had learned meant that dinner had only just begun.

She also knew that it was bad manners to approach the Princess so brazenly when a meal was in session, but the sooner she did this, the sooner it would be over with. Enigma, at least, didn’t seem to notice any of the glares that the nobility were giving him.

“Princess,” said Twilight, “my classmate here is very worried about something and he wants to talk with you about it.”

“Why, certainly,” she said, putting down a forkful of kale and turning to the white colt. “Is this very urgent?”

Enigma opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He knelt on his forelegs.

“Please, you don’t need to bother with that,” said the Princess, and Twilight shot Enigma an I-told-you-so look.

Enigma got up again, then looked at the Princess awkwardly, not quite meeting her in the eye. “I...” It didn’t seem like he had the nerve to finish.

“If you would prefer to discuss the matter in private, this I can also arrange.” Princess Celestia gave him a soft smile.

He pawed at the ground with a hoof. “It’s nothing private,” he whispered at last. “It has to do with everypony.” His voice was stronger now. “I need to talk to you about entropy.”

The Princess sighed. “*Peu de la Pouliche* really needs to be more sensitive, sometimes.”

*She knows about him?* If Twilight’s head could have been punctuated with anything at that moment, her ordinary thoughts would have been afloat in a sea of exclamation marks.

The Princess looked at him, perhaps a little sadly. “Please have a seat and help yourself to the food.” Several servers had already brought chairs, plates and cutlery out. “This sounds like an after-dinner discussion.”

Twilight took her usual spot to the left of the Princess, while Enigma sat on the right. After the servers put platters down in front of them, she noticed that the colt didn’t touch his food at all. He was only pushing it around on his plate.

When the meal was finally done, the Princess stood up to leave, and Twilight followed, but Enigma was still staring down at his uneaten food.

“Enigma, come on,” Twilight said.

One of the servers stood a polite distance away from him, clearly waiting for the colt to get up so she could take his plate away.

He looked up. “Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking...” He trailed after them.

The Princess lead the two of them down a hallway, up a series of stairs, and in and out a number of buildings, to a part of the palace Twilight had never been to before. She stopped outside a large pair of doors where two white pegasi stood guard. The doors swung inwardly and she stepped into a spacious bedroom, decorated in whites and golds. Twilight saw that the window was wide-open, making the purpose of the guards rather moot. Perched on the window, was a large reddish-yellow bird. It crooned affectionately as the Princess walked into the room, and flew to greet her.

The Princess stroked the bird with a wing. “Why, hello to you too, Philomeena.”

Philomeena, as the Princess had called it, flapped its way back to the windowsill, fluffed its feathers and lowered its floofy body over its feet.

It took a while for Twilight to figure out that this was the Princess' chamber. What had thrown her off was the empty cradle in the corner.

"Enigma," said the Princess. "I believe you had a something you wished to discuss."

The colt swallowed visibly. "In class we learned that over time, everything equalises, pressure, concentration, energy... and that you can't undo it. Eventually all the stuff in the universe is going to be one... one *homogeneous* thing." He pronounced all the vowels in homogeneous; it was like he'd never heard it or said it aloud before. "And then after that there can't be anything anymore." Enigma's eyes glistened. "There won't be any ponies, and there won't be any animals or plants or stars. There won't be anything... Everything will be dead and there would be nothing that could come after."

His words made something crumple up inside Twilight's chest. She didn't think she should be here to see this. Enigma said it wasn't private, but this *felt* private.

The colt looked down at the carpet. "There'll only be darkness and... and heat."

"My little pony," said the Princess, "did your teacher not tell you how long this would take? That this would be not for at least ten to the hundred, literally a googol, of years?"

"Saying that it's not going to happen for a long time doesn't help. It's still going to *happen*. Please, Princess. If there's anything you can do to stop it, you *have* to."

The whole time, Princess Celestia had been listening to him intently, nodding occasionally. It was as if this was the first time she had heard this. "There is an old adage that states that nothing can last forever," she said. "There are theories that this even includes nothing."

"I don't understand," Enigma said. "Are you saying that this is *okay* because things aren't *supposed* to last forever?"

“Not at all,” said the Princess. “There is a popular theory, that everything that exists once expanded from a single point, billions and billions of years ago.” She sounded wistful now. Princess Celestia looked out the open window and into the sky. “One interpretation of this is that from this point onwards, all that is and was, will eventually become nothing but a dilute gas.”

Enigma nodded once, slowly, and Twilight quashed the urge to discreetly leave the room. She didn’t want to be here for this, but she knew that the Princess was about to say something important, something she would never repeat.

“This is only one leaf on the tree. Using spells and arcane equipment, an astronomer named Hubble found evidence of this expansion causing everything to expand outwards, even now.” Princess Celestia paused, perhaps to let the statement sink in. “There is a theory that once the expansion has ceased, all that exists will collapse inwards upon the point where everything began.”

Enigma shook his head. “How is that any better?”

*She’s leading in to something, Twilight thought. Can’t you see?*

“From a certain point of view, it’s not.” The Princess’ tail billowed strangely; it might have been a swish on any other pony. “Still, there is another scenario in which everything rebounds from this single point, crashing outwards in a wave of genesis, repeating a pattern of destruction and creation for eternity and forevermore.”

“So history would just repeat itself,” Enigma said, “over and over.”

“Yes and no. The prevailing belief is that events would only reoccur on a cosmological scale. The little things, like history, life, the patterns of light in the sky, those things would alter drastically.”

“That seems like a really weird and complicated theory to believe in,” the white colt said. “I’m not sure it makes the most sense either. Isn’t there some switchblade thingamabob that says the simplest explanation is the most likely to be true?”

“Razor,” said the Princess. “One could say that the simplest explanation of all is that everything that exists will always continue to exist the way it always has. There are other theories, ones of other places outside of ours, kinds of energy that obey no laws known to ponykind, active creation and destruction by one or more deities... Any one scenario seems as improbable to a firm believer of any other.”

Twilight did not want to speak, but she knew that she had to ask now, or the moment would pass and she would never be able to ask again. “Which one is true?”

The Princess let out a sigh. “That is not for me to decide.”

---

Twilight lead Enigma down a hallway to where she was pretty sure the Princess had taken them down before. The Princess had asked her to show Enigma the way back in case he got lost. She wasn't entirely sure that she wasn't lost herself.

“Is she always like that?” Enigma said her, once the Princess was out of earshot.

“Like what?”

“Does she always, uh, I guess, give all those ideas and suggestions and theories, without actually *saying* anything.”

“Huh? She gave a lot of information,” Twilight said, somewhat defensively. *Aha. East wing. Now I know where we are.*

Enigma followed Twilight as she turned down a corridor. “Well, you know what I mean...”

“Mm.” She did not, in fact, know what he meant, but also didn't want to look stupid by saying so. “So do you feel better now?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “I'm more confused than I was before.”

“But at least you know it doesn’t have to be true, right? That everything dying and the world turning into heat, it’s not the only thing that can happen.”

“I still think it probably will,” he said. “But now that I know the Princess can’t do anything about it, I know I have to figure out how to fix it myself.”

“How?” Twilight said. “You don’t even know if that’s what’s going to happen, plus, if the most powerful pony in all of Equestria can’t ‘do anything’, then what are *you* supposed to do about it?”

The castle’s atrium drew nearer.

“I don’t know just yet, but if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that no matter what, if you look hard enough you’ll always find answers. I just have to be persistent. Like Sky says, you sometimes gotta stick your hoof in the butt of life if you wanna punch the answers out of its throat.”

“What?!”

“Oops. Sorry,” he said. “I forgot how rude that sounds when you say it out loud...”

Twilight showed him past the two pegasus guards at the door. “I don’t understand how you two are friends,” she said. “I mean... you don’t seem to have a lot in common.”

“More’n you’d think,” he said, briefly lapsing into the informal kind of speech he tended to use around Sky. “Thanks for taking me to see the Princess,” he said. “I owe you one.”

Twilight waved as he walked down the dark road alone. “No problem.”

---

“You know about Few Colt?” Twilight said to the Princess, once she’d gotten back. She’d wanted to bring up the issue before, but with Enigma there, it just hadn’t seemed right.

“We’re good friends.”

“*Huh?*”

“I met him at a conference once, and offered him a job at the school after his career took a bit of a nosedive. I heard they needed a science teacher.”

“What!”

“Oh yes, it was a bit of a fiasco. No pony seemed very keen on hiring him at the time.”

“But... but *why?*” Twilight asked. “Don’t you know what he said? The things about- about the sun and the earth and- and...”

“Of course,” said the Princess. “It would be unprofessional to take such things personally, though. It’d be even worse to let them stand in the way of a good friendship.”

Twilight shook her head. She really didn’t get Princess Celestia sometimes.

“Distractions aside, it’s about time to start your magic lesson for tonight. In addition to channeling the energy through your horn, you must also have peace of mind, calmness. Do not let any one emotion take control. Fear has its place, but for the sake of this exercise, you need balance.”

Twilight looked up at the Princess, confusion in her eyes. “That sounds more like some sort of zen exercise, not magic.”

“Harmony is the greatest magic I could ever teach you, save one.”

“Necromancy?” Twilight guessed. “Turning lead into gold? A mass healing spell?”

Princess Celestia chuckled. “No, Twilight Sparkle. It is the magic that you find in others, the care and affection they feel towards you and you to them. The power of society, ethos, *φιλία*.”



“What was that last word?”

The Princess said it again.

“What does it mean?”

“That is what I hope you will learn one day. For now, though, we must focus on magic.” Princess Celestia closed her eyes and breathed slowly, in and out. “Clear your mind.”

Twilight tried her best. *Peace of mind... be calm...*

She felt her heart race, an urge to gallop far away from wherever she was. *No fear...* Her magic bubbled and seethed, starting to pour out from somewhere deep inside her. *No fear...*

Her head jerked upwards. A blinding whiteness tore across her vision as her eyelids were forced open. She began to rise in the air.

Out of habit and practice, she pushed the magic out of her horn, casting the last spell she remembered using. She felt the earth stretch out beneath her. Her power forced the spell outwards, farther and farther until it touched a wobbly barrier on all sides. *Water.* She felt it go down, underneath, along inclines and slopes, pressing far and deep until the edges of the spells met and became one, a sphere.

She was the earth.



Then she was herself.

Twilight came to her senses, looking into the concerned eyes of the Princess.

“That,” said Princess Celestia, “was a very big spell.”

“What happened?”

There was mischief in the Princess’ smile. “You did not quite succeed at inner peace.”

“I could tell.” Twilight resisted the urge to roll her eyes, but she could not hide the feeling from her voice. “This spell you’re using,” she said. “The purpose is to make me *feel* scared, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“So then... wouldn't it be kind of pointless to go looking for balance and harmony and all those sorts of things? I'm not afraid of anything psychologically or intellectually, only physically.”

“That is a good observation,” said the Princess. “Still, the use of such exercises is not only to confront phobias or the traumas of one's past. You must find parity within yourself. All things have their place, fear and joy, love and hate, Light and dark, sun and moon.”

“So...” Twilight trusted the Princess' judgement, but this was all starting to sound a little mawkish. “I'm not supposed to just stop being afraid. I'm supposed to have some sort of... metaphysical... epiphany?”

“Balance is not the same thing as enlightenment,” said the Princess, probably sensing what Twilight was getting at. “Unless you believe life is nothing but strife and suffering, and don't mind renouncing your desires towards anything worldly, I wouldn't suggest trying for it.”

“How am I supposed to be balanced, then? If it's not physical, if it's not in my head and it's not a feeling... What am I looking for? What am I trying to control?”

“Magic.”

Twilight sighed. “That's very... unhelpful.”

“Like I have said before, there is nothing to be learned from being given all the answers.”

“That's not true,” Twilight said. “Let's say I have a radio. It's a complex device made by other ponies, one that I don't know how to make myself. I don't even know where to start. An unearned answer, in other words.”

The Princess nodded, listening attentively.

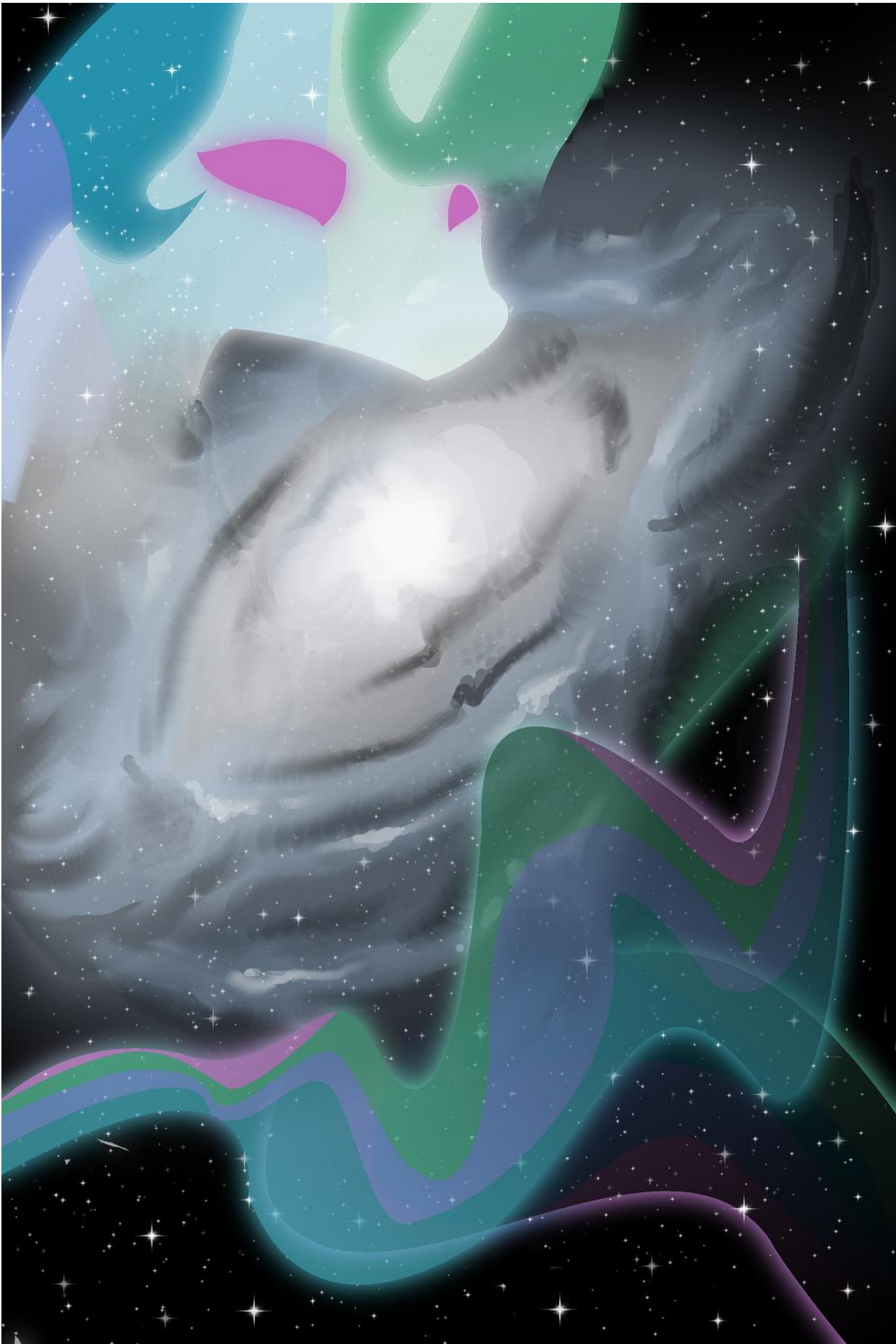
“I take it apart and I find that inside it’s made of a bunch of metal things, and then I touch one of the metal things and shock myself.” Twilight spoke from experience. “I already know that this shocking thing is a battery, but then it also turns out I can touch the wires to it to transmit a current. If I try it next to another radio, then static starts to come out of it! By being given a radio, an answer, I just learned the basics of how radios work!

“If I had to get there on my own, I would’ve never done it.” She was aware she was lecturing, but she couldn’t stop. “I would’ve never thought, ‘hey, I should make a battery and then touch wires to it, and then find some sort of receiver to catch the signals its giving off.’” Twilight found herself getting more and more frustrated at the Princess’ line of reasoning. “You can learn things from answers too.”

“*Delight, allegiance, truth, empathy, and altruism.*” Starlight shone in the Princess’ eyes, and something else, something utterly alien. “Follow the sixfold path. The last step brings unity.”

Twilight had held the world in her magic earlier, but as big as it was, it was infinitesimal compared to what she was seeing now. Without changing in size, the Princess seemed to take up every corner of reality, authoritative... terrifying; there was no anger in her, or even impatience, only an *otherness*. Twilight recalled the second time they met, that fearful moment when she’d looked into the Princess’ eyes. She tried not to let her feelings show.





Princess Celestia's expression softened. She didn't change at all, but seemed to *shrink* somehow, and become ordinary. "The last step is up to you."

Something significant had clearly passed, but Twilight had no idea what it meant. The Princess' words had not made sense, nor had the moment of... whatever had just happened.

White wings spread themselves wide, gesturing towards the heavens. The Princess closed her eyes. "Clear your mind."

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By Monday, Twilight still hadn't made much progress with the whole "inner peace" thing. She did find, though, that taking deep breaths and imagining that she was studying seemed to help her control the panic attacks. It was difficult to get involved in a pretend scenario while concentrating on a spell, but with the techniques she'd discovered, her shortest magical outburst couldn't have been any longer than five minutes. Twilight had a feeling that this probably wasn't what Princess Celestia had in mind.

She galumphed down the stairs to Mr Yorset's class. *Seven forty-five*, she thought with glee. With her magic back, it was hard to believe how long it used to take her to get ready in the morning.

The classroom's doorknob glowed magenta as she tried to turn it. It stopped before going all the way, locked. She could simply ask the door to open, but... an urge rose, one that told her to keep turning the doorknob. The thought was stupid, impractical and illogical, but she wanted to see if turning the knob enough could make it open anyway.

Twilight let out a little more magic, urging the knob to turn harder - nothing. Slowly, she dribbled out more and more force, far more than strictly necessary. There was a grinding, then snapping sound deep within the door. *Uh oh. Why did I think that was a good idea?*

Maybe she could fix it before class started. She tried peering through the keyhole, but the space was too dark and small to see anything. Her horn flickered as she sent out tendrils of magic to probe the insides of the

door. The space grew around her senses, wide and jagged. There were cylinders around her, ones that seemed like they could move. Woven into the metal and wood, there were little nodes of power, curling around them like capillaries.

She thought, for a moment, that something was alive. The metal shifted and warped. Etheric light brushed against her own magic, feeling broken and strange. It was shouting an urgent message that she couldn't understand (the instructions felt like they were in another language), but the door seemed to be responding. Intuitively, she felt a kind of meaning, that something was wrong, not the way it was supposed to be. The door appeared to be fixing itself.

Twilight let out a sigh and withdrew her magic. She immediately suppressed the urge to find out exactly how much damage the door could repair. "Door, are you able to open?" she said.

The door dragged outwards slowly, almost in a sickly fashion.

"Sorry..."

If the door heard anything, it did not respond.

Gingersnap was standing in the back of the room, staring at the floor, clearly doing magic of some kind. Twilight just ignored her and found herself a seat near the front of the class. She flipped open her history textbook to the chapter they would be looking at next class, *Foundation and Empire*. Only five minutes later, halfway through Commander Hurricane's founding of Pegasopolis, Gingersnap yelped and began shouting.

"You're such a lousy little sneak! How long were you sitting there!"

Twilight looked over her shoulder and shrugged. "My parents told me that I shouldn't judge anypony for things that they can't control. It's okay."

"What!"

"Well," said Twilight, "every time I'm early for class, I always see you going into different rooms and doing your 'routine' in them. You don't have to be embarrassed, but I won't tell anypony either."



Gingersnap narrowed her eyes. "This is the part where you get me to do your homework for you, or give you four bits a week."

"Huh?" Twilight said. "Why?"

"That's just how it goes, isn't it?"

Twilight turned around fully. "Uh... no?"

"Well what do you want then?" Gingersnap said.

"Nothing? Wait... actually... You should probably see somepony about that. From what I read, you can't really get rid of your compulsions unless you ask for help."

Gingersnap looked as confused as Twilight felt. "Wait," she said, after a pause. "You think I have OCD?"

"Um... Don't you?"

The crimson filly started to laugh, and then stopped. She looked like she was thinking, considering something. After much deliberation, she said, "You know, I hadn't thought about it much, but now that you mention it, I think I might."

"See?" Twilight said. "Was that so hard to come out and say?"

Gingersnap started to snicker. She covered her mouth with both hooves, looking like she was trying hard to stop, but it just wasn't working. She fell to her side and started guffawing, biting the back of a hoof in a vain attempt to stifle the laughter.

Twilight did her best not to step on the filly's thrashing tail as she walked over. "I know you must be happy to know what's been bothering you the whole time, but-" She looked at her classmate, now feeling unsure about the whole situation. "Hey..." she said. "You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

Gingersnap's only response was to laugh even more.

“If you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’m going to tell somepony.”

That sobered her up. “You said.” She pulled herself to her feet and looked Twilight square in the eye. “That you wouldn’t tell.”

“That was when I thought you had a problem,” Twilight replied, unfazed. “Now I know you’re just being a jerk.”

“Why does it matter, anyway?”

Twilight resisted the urge to stomp a hoof. “It matters because you won’t tell me!”

“Why do you need to know so badly? Would it kill you to mind your own business?”

If Twilight was honest with herself, she knew that it probably didn’t make much of a difference whether she was told or not. It didn’t seem like Gingersnap was doing anything bad or sinister, just embarrassing. Still, the fact that she was being so secretive and defensive about it was... infuriating.

Twilight didn’t have to speak. The look on her face probably said it all.

The red filly sighed. “Fine. You have to *promise* not to tell anypony.”

“I promise,” Twilight said, barely even thinking about it.

“You have to mean it.” The red filly shook her head. “You can’t tell anypony at all. If you do... I’ll...” Twilight couldn’t divine whether that was a reproof or a regret. Gingersnap did not finish the thought.

“I swear on my life, then. I swear upon the sun, the moon, and the will of the Princess.” Twilight took a deep breath and tried to recall the whole thing to the best of her ability. “Should I renounce my oath, may I suffer, may I flounder, may I rot. I swear-”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” Gingersnap looked down at the floor. “I...” She breathed in and out a few times, as if to calm herself down. “Oh, so help

me Celestia if you tell, I'll..." She paused. "I've... been... having trouble... with a spell."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "You're messing with me again, right," she said. "Is that all?" She glanced at the clock. There were about twenty minutes to class now.

"What do you mean 'is that all'?" Gingersnap glowered at her. "Not everypony has magic as their special talent! Not everypony can learn spells perfectly on the first try! Some of us have to *work* at it."

"Well yeah. I have trouble with magic too," Twilight said, remembering not only her lessons with the Princess, but the entire week before. "Was that a *Foundation* spell you were doing? Everypony was messing up on that one."

"Um." Despite the unassuming nature of the word 'um', her tone implied that Twilight was an imbecile. "Everypony was *not* messing up. It's such an easy spell. Everypony could cast it right away, even Ace and Echelle. I saw it myself."

Oh. "You can't cast the spell at all, you mean?"

"Isn't that just what I just said?"

"What do you usually do when you try to learn a new spell?" Twilight asked. Maybe there was a problem with Gingersnap's process.

"I just learn them," she said, scuffing a hoof. "I don't think about it. I can't remember."

"You can't remember?"

Gingersnap tossed her mane. "I don't know why I keep talking to you if you're just going to keep repeating what I say."

"How can't you remember, then?" Maybe this would work better if she was as clear and composed as possible. "Do you black out or something?"

"Magic isn't something I think about. I just do it and it happens."

“That’s not how you’re supposed-”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Gingersnap snorted. “We go to the same school, you know. Learning and memorising are the things I’m good at, not, I don’t know... doing magic the ‘correct’ way.”

“I wasn’t-”

“You can’t help me, okay,” she said suddenly. “Stop trying.”

“Well then maybe that’s why you stink at it.” Twilight was completely out of patience. “You won’t let anypony help you. You’re stuck and set in your ways and if you keep it up then you’ll fail all your classes and flunk out!”

“Your concerns have been noted,” Gingersnap said coolly.

“Ugh!” Twilight stomped back to her desk. “Go back to being lousy at magic, then. Just pretend I’m not here.”

The filly took a seat in the front row on the opposite side of the classroom. “Class is about to start anyway.”

After five minutes, still no pony walked in, especially not Mr. Yorsets, who seemed to be chronically late.

Gingersnap stared at the book at her desk, not looking up. “So um,” she said in a small voice. “How would you do it?”

“Define a small area and project onto that space,” Twilight said, also not looking up. She heard Gingersnap sigh. “You could also imagine you’re looking at something with your magic, except your presence is more solid and less involved. Be one thing pressing flat against the ground or whatever.”

“I didn’t think of it like that before...”

Twilight kept reading her book. "Mmhm." Trying not to make it obvious, she peeked over the cover and saw Gingersnap looking back at the ground, performing some sort of magic.

It was hard to see; it was overshadowed by the intense look of concentration on the red filly's face, but Twilight detected the barest traces of a smile.