[center] — ✶ — [/center]

Twilight wasn't the only person discovering the giant emerald cube hanging from an oversized wooden pole taller than any building in Ponyville outside of Rarity's half-finished tower and, perhaps, the old palace, if it was still considered a building, being encased in rock and in the process of being excavated and demolished.

Even as she watched, more and more dragons were congregating to nibble on the imitation salt lick, and since dragons had all been reduced to near pony scale, the fact that it was hanging out of reach from the pole with a rope two ponies thick going through the center of it seemed... not cruel, necessarily, but certainly intentionally difficult.

Maybe Twilight was reading too much into it, though. Dragons had wings, after all—or they did after a certain age. It was probably just coincidence that half of the dragons attracted by the mysterious giant emerald were all toddlers of similar ages violently pulling, clawing and kicking anyone who tried to climb past them on the pole, though slick metal band twenty hooves up that that was stymieing their progress might have been another clue.

Maybe it was a traditional game? That still didn't explain where the giant emerald had come from, but, well, it probably wasn't her place to do anything about it, no matter how much she wanted to go down there and ask questions. She'd have to ask Luna and Rarity if they knew anything about the installation, since it must have been a significant undertaking.

Pushing the matter to the back of her mind, Twilight continued on to Spike's new home to check up on him and see if he was free to work today, or if he was still busy settling in.

From a distance, the manor with castle stylings was still not quite Twilight's taste, but the flat expanses of dark stone did resemble some of the new construction that was going on in Ponyville, though it certainly took it in a different direction. Considering that, her mind casually drifted to how she might style her own tentative projects as she came in for a landing on Spike's front lawn.

Twilight's train of thought was instantly derailed when the decorative metal shoe of her regalia slid off something in the grass, nearly causing her to twist her ankle. After steadying herself, she investigated and found a walnut-sized emerald in the grass, and it wasn't alone. The whole area was littered with them—and similarly sized rubies.

Strange. Had she done something wrong with the grass? Was it growing seeds five hundred times too large? On closer inspection, that didn't seem to be the case, as the emeralds and rubies didn't resemble seeds of any kind; they were just clean, raw emeralds as you'd expect to find in the ground. Maybe, being made of emerald and ruby themselves, the grasses were absorbing the underground gemstones as nutrients, only for them to expel the excess on the surface?

Well, whatever the case, she couldn't let herself get distracted; it could only be a good thing, she supposed. Dismissing the matter for now, she approached the manor door and knocked.

The panicked scrambling of claws on stone reminded Twilight of similar situations that had happened back at the ex-library, which made her smile. She supposed that it was still habit in spite of them no longer having anything to keep secret. Even the matter with the Ring of Ashmund had been settled, though perhaps they should write up some proper paperwork to formalize it above and beyond the simple transfer papers that Spike had arranged. It wasn't Spike that was holding onto it, for one thing.

Eventually, Spike answered the door, and it was still a bit of a shock to have to look up at him when he was standing upright. Nonetheless, the awkward smile and the scratch at the back of his neck was all Spike, so she was reassured that he hadn't changed that much.

Half a second later, though, the smell of smoke hit her, much as it had yesterday morning at the ex-library. Having lived with Spike ever since hatching him, she was used to the milieu of scents caused by dragon fire, but this was quite a bit more than the usual.

Probably.

It could have been that she'd just been used to the smell, and now she wasn't. Had she smelled like smoke for her entire time as Celestia's personal student, and no one had mentioned it to her? Given the fact that Celestia had once spent the entire day at court with a donut on her horn pretending nothing was out of the ordinary and no one had dared say a word, it was more likely than Twilight would have liked to admit.

Probably not, though. Rainbow Dash, at least, would have said something—and Rarity, too. Funny that Applejack, the ex-element of honesty, wasn't on her short list, but more because she probably just wouldn't think it was worth mentioning.

"Oh, hey, Twilight," Spike said, glancing quickly behind him with uncertainty. In the large, central room behind him, Twilight could see some, but not all of his 'harem,' including Ember. Of the black dragon who had been de-aged, there was no sign, and she had to think for a moment to remember the laid-back green one, who was also not present.

"Hey, Spike," she returned his greeting with a cheerful smile. "How are things going? Still settling in?" she asked, making a show of craning her neck to peek behind him.

Spike stiffened, took another look behind him and began to relax. "Things are... fine," he said unconvincingly. "Completely fine. Um. Come in?"

Spike backed into the room, and Twilight followed him in. Other than the smell of slightly sulfuric smoke, there didn't really seem to be anything out of the ordinary, so she wasn't sure why Spike was acting so nervous.

Twilight nodded to the dragonesses in the room. "Empress," she greeted Ember with a slight bow, then turned to the others. "And Carnelia and Kindle, if I'm remembering right?"

The dragonesses all returned Twilight's greeting with varying levels of interest, and Twilight took a look around the main hall of the manor. It was pretty much how she remembered it, of course, though with fresh eyes, she noticed that the floor looked a bit off.

"That's strange," she said, frowning at the floor. Curious, she walked out into the middle of the room, feeling the floor out with her hooves. "Oh, wow. The floor isn't even flat, here," she remarked, slightly ashamed of her work. "Sheesh. I must have been more tired than I thought I was at the end, there, yesterday. I'm sorry, everyone. I can fix it now, if you don't mind clearing out for a second?"

Spike and Ember shared a series of looks that clearly meant something, and it was Spike that eventually answered. "Yeah, sure, Twi. We didn't really notice, but you might as well."

That made sense, she supposed. No doubt the girls were all used to uneven flooring to begin with, and there was a good chance it wasn't as noticeable with their flexible claws anyway.

After some deliberation, the dragons all congregated around the front entryway where the floor looked fine and let Twilight get to work.

After spending all afternoon on it yesterday, it was a little easier getting into the mindset of using what she was calling her dream magic, though she appreciated the fact that she was doing this indoors where a random passing pegasus wouldn't see her and... somehow intuit that it was related to Discord's magic.

Okay, fine, it really was a silly fear, but nevertheless, it wasn't something she really wanted to call too much attention to before she was prepared.

In no particular hurry, Twilight took the star out of her peytral and let the magic flow out into the room, doing what she could to direct it into the dark stone flooring.

Strangely enough, the floor resisted. Oh, it was certainly working; her magic was overcoming whatever was causing the resistance, but that there was any resistance at all was strange for something that she'd created out of nothing just the day before.

Now that she thought about it, the whole room was lacking the feeling of familiarity that she associated with places that her magic had seeped into. Admittedly, there were six dragons living there and one of them had an ancient artifact capable of changing the entire dragon race across the globe, so it wasn't necessarily inexplicable, but it did come as a surprise.

Even so, Twilight's magic was a constant, overpowering force and soon enough, the ground was almost a part of her. With a thought, she flattened the surface, gave it a small amount of texture for traction and made sure that the stonework was evenly spaced.

Twilight also considered adding some reinforcement spells just in case, but they weren't necessary for a building this size, and if the dragons were putting off enough magic to overpower her lingering magic in a day, then those spells probably wouldn't last very long anyway.

Then again, these were dragons she was talking about and Ember might decide to impress guests at full-size, so maybe she ought to think of something.

...Any second now...

"Twilight?" Spike asked after a minute of two of nothing happening.

"I'm thinking, Spike," she said, sitting down and crossing her forelegs over her chest. "What's a visual sign of stupidity?"

Spike looked baffled. "A... bad report card?"

Twilight chewed at her lip as she considered it. "I'll give it a shot," she said, and magicked up a small index card. On it, she wrote a series of failing grades and tossed it at the floor.

Nothing happened.

"Yeah, I didn't think so... which is probably why it didn't work," she said, talking to herself. "I kind of wish Pinkie Pie were here; she'd probably have a suggestion."

Everyone in the room stood quietly, waiting to see if the most inexplicable of Twilight's demigoddesses was going to take the chance to show up, but of the pink party pony there was no sign.

"I think she's actually back to working at Sugar Cube Corner today, actually," Spike said, slightly uncertain.

"Drat," Twilight said, standing back up. Maybe she would pay her a visit there, though. It wouldn't hurt to get something to eat, and she could ask for suggestions at the same time. Something other than the bear claws, though. They were a little— "Aha! I've got it!" she declared.

She bent over, reached into the stone floor and pulled out a box of baking powder.

The floor shriveled up and deflated, which was not ideal, but understandable. Twilight was satisfied, in any case; she'd just have to repeat the process.

The dragons were all still completely lost, and looking a little impatient. "And... what was the point of that?" Ember dryly asked.

"Hm?" Twilight said, then realized that she had not quite explained herself. "Oh, well, I was trying to figure out a way to make the floor stronger just in case, but I didn't think any of my regular spells would last. I got stuck trying to figure out how to connect dense, meaning unintelligent, to dense, meaning the amount of mass per area of volume, but bringing up Pinkie Pie reminded me of baking, where things are made less dense if you add a leavening agent like baking powder. Conversely, removing baking powder made the floor more dense."

"O...kay?" Ember said, clearly not seeing the logic, which... Twilight was a bit envious of, honestly.

"Anyway," Twilight said, turning back to the room where, with a flex of her will she created another thick slab of stone on top of the first and acquired another box of baking powder out of it, causing it to sink by half, and since the surface was cracked and wrinkled like a fallen soufflé, she finished it off by smoothing it out as she had before, making adjustments along the way any time she spotted anything that wasn't quite right.

Once she was all done, she tapped her hoof on the ground. The sound that came back was notably muted and she nodded, satisfied. "That should do it," she gauged. "I don't know that that's really necessary, but it certainly won't hurt. The methodology leaves something to be desired if you wanted the walls or roof done, so I'll still have to see if I can come up with something better."

"Huh," said a slightly rough, squeaky voice from off to the side. Apparently Slag, in her tiny baby black dragon form, had shown up at some point and was testing the floor with her claws. "That's good stuff." Ember was less obvious about it, but after walking back out onto the repaired part of the floor, she did a similar test with one of the claws on her feet and nodded to herself.

"Great," Twilight said, glad to be of use. "Has anything else come up?"

The dragons shared a round of looks and Ember in particular looked like she was searching for something to bring up, but if there was something, it seemed to escape her.

"Well, if you think of something, let me know," she told them when no answer was forthcoming. "And in that case, Spike—did you have anything you needed to do today, or did you want to come help me with... whatever comes up. I'll have to check in with Luna and Rarity to how things are going, first."

"Actually..." Spike said, slightly trepidatious. "I do kind of need to go back to the old library and bring my stuff back here—and there are some things we should buy, too."

"Oh," Twilight said, looking around herself and realizing that he was right. "Right. That should have been obvious. That's fine, then. Go ahead and pack everything when you get there and when you're done I'll have some guards bring it out here—oh, and I suppose the crown is covering this, so let me mint you some bits for your shopping."

The room was already full of Twilight's magic, so she didn't even need to expend any more or make a shield bubble to contain it in order to bring a hefty bag of coins into being. "No need to record it, this time. I'm heading over to see Luna now, so I'll let her know about it."

Spike looked exasperated and slightly resigned, and it was the red dragoness named Carnelia that actually picked up the bag, weighing it appreciatively and taking it over to show Ember.

"Please tell me this isn't going to be a thing, Twilight," Spike said, trying to shake his head and watch the dragonesses at the same time. "You can't just mint new bits every time you need to pay for something."

"I mean, technically, I ***can*** do that; I'm entirely capable of it," Twilight defended, slightly sheepish at having been called out like that. "It's a rounding error at best, anyway, but we ***are*** recording and accounting for it."

Spike rolled his eyes and said, "It's about how it looks, Twi. If ponies keep seeing you magic up gold here and there, they're going to get the idea that it's not worth as much—you know that."

"Yes," Twilight agreed magnanimously. "But in counterpoint: I didn't bring any bits today, so there. This is hardly public anyway."

"Fine, fine," Spike said, letting the matter go. "You should get going, though, so you don't forget to tell Luna about it."

It was Twilight's turn to roll her eyes, now, but she did agree. If Spike had his own things to do, then she needed to get going. "Alright, then," she said, turning to leave. "Like I said: just pack up your stuff and we'll have someone else do the rest. I'll let Luna know about that, too, since I don't know where I'll be today."

Spike acknowledged that, and they said their goodbyes.

[center] — Spike — [/center]

Thirty seconds later, Ember had fashioned a surprisingly not terrible golden statue of Spike, which she then proceeded to take bites out of. "Om nom nom," she announced, chewing on it's shoulder.

Spike's face was buried deep in his hands, but that didn't stop him from hearing the sounds she was making.

"That was... interesting," Carnelia observed, completely unbothered by Ember's antics. Concentrating, she let out a small lick of flame and produced a golden flower that was, honestly, quite a bit better than either of Ember or Spike's efforts at detail and control.

"Great..." Spike said, grumbling to himself. "Just great... Now you've all got the ability to make gold. That's subtle."

"Aha heh heh..." Kindle laughed rather awkwardly. "I didn't catch any of that, actually."

Ember swallowed the mouthful of gold she was chewing and chimed in. "I couldn't follow the density thing because I had no idea what she was actually doing at the time. There's a reason I had to get her to do things more than once, you know."

"Same," Carnelia agreed.

Slag, though, had her little baby arms crossed and was frowning. "I only came in at the end, there, but I think I got it."

"Really?" Ember said, brightening up considerably. She put her teeth on the golden statue's arm, tore it free and tossed it over to where Slag was sitting on the ground.

Slag took the arm, which was longer and probably heavier than she was and held it standing on its end in front of her. Without overthinking it, she let out a stream of her blue flame and watched the forearm shrivel down to half its size.

"Hah! First try!" Slag cheered, then tipped the arm over and began to eat it. The golden claw was unchanged and went down just fine, but the dense, shrunken part gave her pause and she had to really chew it. "Oh, wow. That's gotta be what jerky is like to everyone else. This is really gonna really give my jaw a workout when I'm like this."

Naturally, everyone's attention shifted to Spike as the only one who hadn't yet chimed in with anything he learned during Twilight's short visit, now that they'd all been made aware of Ember's discovery.

Spike, unfortunately, had been far too nervous about keeping secrets from Twilight to really pay too much attention to what she was doing, though... "There was ***one*** thing I noticed," he said, scratching his chin. "But it wasn't just ***what*** she did; it was ***how*** she did it."

Spike looked around for something to demonstrate on, and standing just a few steps away was the obvious. The golden statue of him had lost its arm, most of its shoulder and half of its face before Ember's hunger had been sated. Actually, no, that was perfect.

Spike approached his golden doppelgänger, gave it a considering look, took a deep breath and let out a long, slow flame that lasted a good twenty seconds, though it took five just to figure things out.

What Spike had picked up was how Twilight had used her magic over a period of time to shape the floor. So far, virtually all of the dragon magic that they'd managed had all been in single, powerful bursts, but under the heat and magic of the small, relatively weak flame, the gold didn't quite melt, but flowed into a new shape, shifting from moment to moment as Spike corrected the image in his head, resulting in a significantly more true-to-life statue of Ember, aided by the fact that she was right there.

"Aw, you ruined it," Ember said, pouting as she looked over Spike's work. "I don't wanna eat my own face."

Frankly, Spike didn't know how he was supposed to interpret that, and maybe that was for the best.

[center]— Spike —[/center]

It was nearly noon by the time they actually left the manor. First, they all wanted to get more magic practice in while things were still fresh in their minds, then Spike had to corral the girls to all shower, to which the general consensus was some combination of, "What, ***again?***" and "Can't I use the lava fountain instead?", so Spike had to explain the standards of hygiene in pony society. Finally, when they were all pretty much ready to go, Kindle had go wake up Drift, and they spent another little while explaining everything that had already happened that morning.

Finally, once they'd all made it out the door, they took off and headed into town, only to stop at the edge of the property when they saw what was going on with Ember's distraction emerald. "Oh, for—I should have known something like this would happen," Ember grumbled, and immediately began to land.

What was 'going on' was a decently-sized group of dragons standing on and around the giant emerald charging other dragons twenty bits for all-you-can-eat access—or so the sign said. From the looks of it, not a lot of the dragons actually had bits, but there was also a pile of... not exactly valuables, but a number of odds and ends that might, ***possibly*** have been worth something at the local pawn shop. Spike wasn't quite sure why a dragon would have a blender, and he just hoped none of it was stolen.

Ember, of course, strode right up, pushed the weedy brown dragon minding the pile aside, and started rummaging through it.

"Hey!" the brown dragon shouted, his voice cracking. "What are you doing?! You can't—"

"What I'm ***doing***," she said, pulling her claws out of the pile and standing straight up. "Is seeing if there's anything worthwhile here I can take for my cut."

"Your ***what***?!" Another, slightly better built dragon with a similar look to him asked. "What makes you think ***you*** get a cut? Who do you think you are?"

Spike facepalmed and muttered, "Not again."

"Geez, Ems," Kindle chimed in, projecting her voice loudly for show. "You'd think these dragons had never seen their Empress before."

This time, the claim seemed to make the dragons a ***little*** wary, as more and more of the group noticed the altercation, but they still seemed doubtful. Ember decided to push her claim by holding her right claw up vertically, showing off the ring. The moment they saw it, she pulsed the power a little and spoke through it like she had during her announcement to all the dragons across Equestria. This time, though, it was only those present who heard her.

What she said was... slightly less empress-like.

"I know, right?" reverberated her voice, and then the moment was over.

Several of the dragons were cowering now, though the unimpressive brown dragon who had first objected actually impressed Spike by standing his ground. "Yeah, well... s—so what if you are?" he said almost convincingly, keeping an eye on the ring on her claw. "Is that how it's gonna be, then? You do ***this*** to us," he gestured at himself, "and then come around and take whatever we manage to scrounge up for ourselves? I should have known you were all talk!"

Spike suddenly felt very awkward standing there, trying not to watch the confrontation that was taking place, which was ironically in sharp contrast to most of the situations that Twilight had encountered on becoming an alicorn.

Twilight, though she was barely more than a pony as far as anypony knew at the time, had still had to fight to keep everyone from bowing and scraping on the sight of her, while Ember, who really did have quite incredible power thanks to the Ring of Ashmund, was perhaps a little ***too*** inconspicuous and coming off as kind of a bully.

Ember, for her part, had to visibly restrain herself, which was more than Spike thought she was capable of. "No," she growled out. "I am not shaking you down because I'm your empress—I'm shaking you down because ***that***," she pointed back at the manor, which was barely visible in the distance, "is my castle, and ***that***," she pointed up at the emerald, "is the emerald that ***I*** made to feed all the sorry dragons like ***you*** who are getting desperate because they've never done an honest day's work in their life and they're still figuring things out."

Spike blinked. Ember was being a little generous about her intentions behind the giant not-a-salt-lick, but Spike had to admit, she actually reminded him a bit of Twilight, there.

Was that a good thing or a bad thing in the context of public relations between an empress and her sort-of subjects?

The dragon looked at the emerald, then back at Ember, looking somewhere between doubtful and terrified. "You... made it?" he squeaked.

Ember clearly didn't like being questioned, but she controlled herself and her anger disappeared into an exasperated sigh. "Fine—I'll prove it," she said, and took off into the air.

Once Ember was a distance up, she used the Ring of Ashmund to grow to the massive size that she'd outdone her father with back when she was making her speech up in Canterlot. She didn't spend much time that way, though, letting loose a full blast of fire to form a large ruby apple nearly the size of the emerald salt lick. One flap of her wings later, she had shrunk down to only triple her usual size, adding a wooden stem and emerald leaf to the top of the apple to complete the look. Satisfied, she took a slide off the side and was completely back to normal by the time she landed back where she was, next to the rest of them.

The dragons were suitably impressed.

"Um—right," the brown one that had ended up as their spokesman said, barely even stuttering. "We'll just... go, then, I guess..."

Ember, however, had a look on her face that said that she had a different idea. "Actually..." she said, still working it out in her head. "Actually... no."

"No...?" the other dragon asked.

"Yeah, no," Ember said with more confidence. "The one that looks like an apple, you let people eat. The other one, you charge them for, but only..." she looked at Spike. "What's a meal usually cost for ponies?"

"Err—" Spike considered it for a moment. "Five or ten bits? But something like an apple or a tomato is around a bit—less when they're in season."

Ember looked back to the brown dragon. "You charge them two bits per dragon for the emerald, and you get to keep half."

"O...kay?" he said, looking to his friends to see if any of them understood the point, but they didn't look any less confused. Spike wasn't entirely certain himself, but he could guess that she wanted to get dragons used to actually participating in the economy rather than stay on the fringes as scavengers or even thieves, which brought up a point, actually.

"And," Spike chipped in, waiting until he had everyone's attention. Once he was sure that Ember didn't mind his interruption, he pointed at the pile of things that had already been traded for access. "You shouldn't be taking in anything but currency," he told them. "No barter. Pawn shops are monitored and have rules about what they can do so nobody abuses them."

"And by abuse, he means selling stolen items," Carnelia clarified significantly more sternly with an eye on the pile of items. "The empress does not wish for dragons to be seen as common thieves."

Ember tried to make it look like these additions were things that she had definitely already thought of; she really did. Spike hoped that it actually worked.

Slag agreed with a grunt and added her two bits. "Yeah. We oughta take that stuff to the... ponies who handle that sort of thing," she said. Unfortunately, her gruff mannerisms weren't nearly as effective coming from her tiny frame, which forced everyone present to have to look down to realize that she was even there.

In fact, everyone who didn't know that Slag was a big, tough adult aged down due to her injury thought the childish declaration was adorable.

Actually, it still kind of was.

"R—right..." the brown dragon asked, looking forlornly at the pile of items. "Of course."

[center]— Spike —[/center]

Of course, it took a big more than saying it to actually make it happen. Ember made a crate, for the confiscated items, and then they had a crate of confiscated items that Ember was frowning at.

"I'm not carrying that," she declared, arms crossed and looking away from it. The other dragons were giving them a wide berth now that everything was settled, so Ember could let a little of her petulance show. "How would that look? Me—the empress—carrying ***cargo***."

Spike rolled his eyes, but she had a point. "That ring ***does*** work on dragons other than you," he dryly reminded her.

Ember brightened up. "Oh, yeah—I can just make one of ***you*** big enough to carry it," she said, then considered Spike. "Not you," she instantly declared.

Spike blinked, but wasn't terribly disappointed to not have to do manual labor even if he did wonder what it would actually be like to be properly adult-sized.

"Not Slag either, obviously," she added, continuing to verbally work through her options. "Carnelia might chip a claw and Drift lags behind enough as it is. Congratulations, Kindle, you volunteered yourself."

"Oh, no," Kindle deadpanned. "How horrible it is to be forced to be turned into the largest dragon in the world in exchange for having to carry a box."