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There were certain things, Spike had learned over the years, that you simply did not do when you lived with a magically gifted unicorn mare. When she was exhausted after staying up past four reading an astrology textbook, for example, you did not wake her up before noon the next day for anything less important than a meteor strike. When she was practicing a newly discovered shrinking spell and needed a test subject for her first scientific trial, you did not stand obliviously in the middle of the library trying to figure out what “temperamental” meant. And when the love of your life gave you the gift of a lifetime, you did not *ever* let her get a washcloth within ten feet of your face.

But if there was one thing Spike knew better than anything else, it was that when magically gifted unicorn mares got frustrated, angry, stressed, or all of them at once, things could get real hairy, real fast. So when the young purple-scaled dragon woke up to the sound of a door slamming and somepony muttering lividly under their breath, he just laid his head gently back against his pillow and tried to convince himself he was still asleep. As usual, it didn't work.

“Stupid, stuck-up, snobby, incompetent...*argh!*”

Spike squeezed his eyes shut and kept his groan mostly to himself, and opened them again just in time to see a fuming mass of violet fur throw herself onto the bed next to his and scream into her pillow. When the mass didn't move for another thirty seconds after that, Spike reckoned it was safe enough to speak.

“Morning, Twilight,” he said.

Whatever Twilight said in return was blocked off by the pillow still wrapped around most of her head. “So...I guess the presentation didn't go well?” Spike continued tentatively.

“The presentation?” Twilight lifted her head up with a jerk and stared down at Spike, the look in her eyes teetering back and forth between “simmer” and “bake”. “Oh, the presentation was *fine*. Great, actually. It was a *fantastic* presentation, Spike. The best I’ve ever given...no, the best that *anypony* in the history of Equestria has ever given. I mean, what else would you expect from years of research and months of planning and practicing, and a whole day sitting out in the cold waiting for somepony to remember the appointment I set up *three weeks ago*...but of course, that’s no reason for the Board to actually, oh, I don’t know, *pay attention* while I’m showing them the biggest technomagical innovation in two thousand years. Or look me in the eye. Or *stay awake*.”

“So it...didn’t go well?”

For a moment, Twilight looked like she was about to reply, but at the last second she just growled deep in her throat and slammed her face down into her pillow again, where it stubbornly stayed no matter how many times Spike assured her she was overreacting. He was right in the middle of attempt number three when a knock rang out from the door to Twilight’s bedroom, just before it swung open a moment later to reveal a stocky orange earth mare with a braided blonde mane and a well-worn brown Stetson resting between her ears.

“Twilight? You in here?” Applejack called out as she entered. “I thought I saw...well, howdy, Spike! Did I wake ya up?”

“I wish,” Spike replied as he jumped off the bottom step down from the loft, his mood soured and his brow creased into a disgruntled V.

Applejack’s smile wavered, and fell into a knowing smirk. “I take it that means Twilight’s home from Canterlot?”

Spike nodded.

“And I take it that means her presentation didn’t go too well?”

After a quick glance up towards the loft, Spike grimaced and shook his head. To be honest, he didn’t really know what her presentation had even been about. Actually, he was pretty sure nopony did besides Twilight. She’d tried to explain the principles behind it to him once or twice, but the only parts he’d comprehended had been that it had something to do with magical energy and that she’d been working on it bit by bit ever since her days at Celestia’s School For Gifted Unicorns. Four months ago, she’d had some kind of revelation in her sleep—at three in the morning, of course—and ever since then she had virtually lived in her lab in the basement, working on a project she kept saying would change Equestria as they knew it forever. Spike couldn’t imagine what it could be or how an idea someone came up with before breakfast could ever change anything, but it meant the world to Twilight, and as far as he was concerned that

was reason enough to assume it was important. Just hopefully not important enough to require any testing first.

“Twilight?” Applejack hollered again. “You all right up there?”

“M fine,” came Twilight’s muffled, listless response a moment later.

With a heavy sigh and a sympathetic glance at Spike, Applejack trotted up the stairs and went to stand by Twilight’s bed. “C’mon, Twi,” she said, gently prodding her friend in the side. “Ya can’t hide up here forever.”

Twilight rolled over onto her back and grunted, but didn’t get off the bed or take the pillow away from her face. Applejack sighed again, and her smirk began to return. “Aw, come now. It ain’t *that* bad, is it?”

Twilight moaned and nodded vigorously, the motion only visible through the jiggling of the pillow and the tip of her horn bobbing up and down just above it.

“It is?”

The pillow jiggled up and down again.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

Now it was moving from left to right.

“Do you wanna get up and face this like the grown, responsible, intelligent mare you are?”

Left to right again.

Even from down below the loft, Spike could see Applejack biting her lip. “Of course she thinks it’s funny,” he mumbled under his breath as he went downstairs to dig up something to eat. “She doesn’t have to live with her.”

When he came back upstairs a few minutes later with an half-empty box of hay flakes clutched in his claws, Applejack had finally managed to get Twilight up to a sitting position, though her chin was still propped up on the pillow between her forehooves, and there were still more than a few thunderclouds flashing behind her eyes.

“Now just tell me what happened,” Applejack said firmly from her spot next to Twilight on the bed. Twilight let out a grumpy huff and muttered something about the stupid Academy and the stupid Board with their big stupid robes and their big stupid melon heads, but didn’t give her friend much else to work with beyond that. After a minute or so of optimistic patience, Applejack seemed to decide that she’d gotten about all she was going to get.

“Well, a watched apple never falls,” she murmured to herself before raising her voice to speak to Twilight again. “I think I got a bit’a cider in my bag someplace. Home-brewed and bottled from the juiciest Golden Delicious you’ll ever see. A sip or two’a that oughta cheer ya right up. That sound all right?”

Twilight hugged her pillow tight to her chest and said nothing, but nodded slightly after a pause of a few seconds with her face still scrunched into a scowl. After giving Twilight a friendly pat on the back, Applejack got to her hooves and came back down from the loft to poke through the saddlebag she had dropped by the foot of the stairs leading up to it.

“Is she okay?” Spike said, a little bit of concern creeping into his voice despite his best efforts to keep his tone curt. As much as he hated being woken up before he was good and ready to be awake, seeing Twilight so upset was still something he hated even more.

“She’s just havin’ a rough mornin’, is all,” Applejack replied, her voice soft enough not to reach Twilight up above. “She didn’t say much, but I get the feelin’ she didn’t get quite the reception she was expectin’ out there.”

A sudden tickle in the back of Spike’s throat cut off his words before he could even start to say them, and a second later a jaw-cracking yawn split across his face. “You can say that again,” he muttered once he had blinked the moisture out of his eyes and regained the ability to speak. He got a little chuckle out of Applejack for that comment.

“I wouldn’t worry about her,” she assured him. “Give her a few hours to get over it, and she’ll be right as rain. And in the meantime...well, consarnit it all!”

“What?” Spike asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I could’a sworn I had a couple bottles in here...” Applejack said with a frown, glancing back up at Twilight for a moment before turning to Spike again. “Looks like the cider’ll have to wait for a bit. You mind keepin’ Twilight company while I go fetch a fresh jug from the barn?”

Spike stuffed another pawful of hay flakes into his mouth and nodded, parts of a complete breakfast flying everywhere as he did. He was about to go back up to offer a bowl to Twilight when Applejack opened the bedroom door just in time to take a spray of confetti straight to the forehead.

“*Surpri...*oh, hi, Applejack! What are *you* doing in Twilight’s bedroom?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Pinkie,” Applejack countered in a bewildered tone as the pink-maned earth pony bounced into the room. “All of you, actually,” she added a moment later, once she noticed the crowd of concerned-looking mares following

Pinkie Pie inside.

“Oh, where is she? Where’s the poor dear?” Rarity exclaimed, only wasting a few moments rushing frantically around the room before zipping up into Twilight’s loft to console the frazzled-looking filly. Seemingly following her fashion-conscious friend’s lead, Fluttershy flew up to hover anxiously by Twilight’s side as Rarity cleaned up the purple unicorn’s mane with a magically levitated brush, all the while assuring her over and over again that rejection was a natural part of the creative process and that most critics only liked what they could easily understand anyway. That left Rainbow Dash to explain to Applejack how in Equestria they had known to come here so quickly after Twilight got home.

“Combo,” Rainbow said with a shrug, as Pinkie popped up from behind her to clarify.

“That’s right!” the party pony confirmed. “Scratchy throat, twitchy hoof, and pinchy knee means that somepony’s being a grumpy-grumps!”

Applejack blinked, and thought better of the question sitting on the tip of her tongue. “I’ll never understand you, Pinkie,” she said quietly before bending a smile back onto her lips. “Anyhow, I’m sure Twilight’ll be mighty happy to see you girls t-”

“Oh, heavens, just *look* at these bags under your eyes!” Rarity gasped, prodding at Twilight’s cheeks like an artist working a hunk of clay. “Did you even sleep last night?”

“Not re...” Twilight started to answer before Fluttershy cut her off.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” the pink-maned pegasus asked breathlessly, the edges of her forehooves prematurely perched on her chin. “Is she okay, Rarity? You’re okay, right, Twilight?”

“Well...”

“I think she’s got bigger problems than whether she forgot to put on her eye black this morning,” Rainbow Dash commented dryly to the now thoroughly miffed fashionista. “How bad was it? Did they even listen?” she went on to Twilight. “You want me to help you persuade ‘em to give ya a second chance?” The cyan pegasus launched herself into the air and held up both her forelegs in her best approximation of a fighting stance. “‘Cause I got all the persuasive power ya need right *here*.”

“Uh...”

“First of all,” Rarity cut in tersely, keeping her eyes on Rainbow Dash as she gently nudged a quivering Fluttershy out from under Twilight’s comforter, “it is eye *shadow*, not eye *black*. And second of all, the last thing Twilight needs you to do is carry on with this...pugilistic nonsense about fighting the entire Canterlot Occulumental Board

with your bare hooves.”

“Girls, I-”

“Well, maybe a bit’a pugilisticalness is just what they need to get their heads on straight! They’re nothin’ but a bunch’a old geezers anyhow, right?”

“Those *geezers* just so happen to be the most influential and most powerful unicorns in all of Equestria,” Rarity hissed. “They are the pinnacle of all magical knowledge in the realm, and it is the *dream* of every unicorn that someday they might be allowed to join their vaulted ranks and be immortalized for *eternity* in the Hall of the Occulumens.”

“Don’t look now, but somepony’s mane’s turning green,” Rainbow muttered.

“Ooh, where?” Pinkie interrupted before Rarity could pick her jaw back up off her chest. “I wanna see! I wanna see the green ma-”

“*Girls!*”

Everypony’s first reaction was to fall silent and turn towards Twilight, which was why it took them a few seconds to realize the shout had come from Applejack. “Let her breathe, for Pete’s sake,” she continued once she had the whole group’s attention, and with varying degrees of bashfulness the four ponies around the bed backed away and gave their friend a chance to speak.

Twilight took her time making use of the opportunity, and when she did her words were preceded by a shaky giggle. “Well, at least I’m not angry anymore,” she said bemusedly, the corners of her mouth staying perked even after her laughter died away. “Thank you all so much for coming over. You don’t know how much it means to know you guys are here for me.” Twilight paused, then weakly chuckled again. “Even if I haven’t ever bothered to tell you how much this opportunity meant to me too.”

“Aw, don’t worry about it, Twilight,” Rainbow Dash quickly replied as she alighted on the spare bed across the room, her face bent into a playful grin. “You’re always workin’ on some crazy science-y magical junk. We’re kinda used to it by now.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with crazy magical junk,” Fluttershy assured her. “That is, unless you *do* think there’s something wrong with it, in which case we, um...well, I guess we would, uh...”

“I think what we’re all tryin’ ta say,” Applejack explained as she stepped up into the loft, “is that while we might not understand everything you do, we still understand *you* enough to know that’s not what really matters. What matters is that we’ve got your back anytime you need us, and you’ve got ours. We’re your friends, Twilight, and that ain’t

never gonna change.”

The rest of the group all nodded and agreed, and with six beaming smiles on six jubilant faces, the Elements of Harmony crowded together and piled into a warm and affectionate hug. Spike watched the display for a moment or two, then with a gruff snort he rolled his eyes and looked away.

“Mares...” he muttered into the box of hay flakes as he dug around for one last scoop.

For fifteen seconds, the scene in Twilight’s bedroom was peaceful, but after that Rainbow Dash’s curiosity couldn’t wait any longer. “Soooo...now that nopony’s upset anymore,” she said, ignoring the warning glare Applejack sent her way, “what was your presentation about? I mean, you said you never bothered to tell us before, but there’s no reason you can’t just go ahead and tell us now, right?”

“I don’t think Twilight’s in the mood to bring that back up at the moment,” Applejack started to say, but Twilight debunked that claim before her friend had even finished bringing it up.

“It’s fine, Applejack,” the purple unicorn said. “She’s right. There’s no reason I can’t explain my project to you guys. Do all of you want me to?”

“Of course we do, darling,” Rarity answered, an assertion that was echoed by Pinkie Pie—“Oh, yeah!”—and Fluttershy—“I’d like to know about it...”—in the same instant.

Twilight craned her neck past Rarity and looked towards the stairs. “Applejack?”

Applejack glanced around the room, then shrugged and grinned. “If you’re all right with talkin’,” she said, “then I’m all right with listenin’.”

“Sounds like a ‘yes’ to me,” Rainbow interjected. “Now come on, tell us!”

“Okay,” Twilight agreed. “I guess I’d better start at the beginning, then.” She went silent for a moment and shut her eyes, apparently collecting her thoughts, then looked back at her friends with her gaze aimed mostly at Rainbow Dash.

“How much do you know about magic?” she asked.

“Uh...I know everypony has some of it,” Dash said. “And unicorns have a whole bunch of it.”

“Well, yes, that’s right, but how much do you know about what it really *is*?”

“It’s...magic?”

“It’s energy,” Rarity explained with only the slightest hint of hubris. “Magic is a manifestation of natural energy that all members of the equine race can access.”

“Well, yeah. That too,” Rainbow added quickly.

“That’s close, Rarity, but there’s actually even more to it than that,” Twilight said, much to the satisfaction of Rainbow Dash. “Magical energy is one of the last great mysteries of the modern age. In a lot of ways, it’s just like regular energy: different ponies can have different amounts of strength with it, it runs out if you use too much of it, and you can train your body to be able to use more of it for longer periods of time. But in other ways, it’s like nothing else we know of in this universe. We know that it has unique traits for each of the three races, but we don’t know how it always knows what a pony’s special talent is almost before he or she does. And we also don’t know what exactly it does to make pegasi able to walk on clouds, or earth ponies able to know when and where to plant crops, or unicorns able to lift objects and pull them across a room.”

Twilight emphasized her last point by wrapping Spike in her trademark purple aura and hoisting him up into the loft, the baby dragon shouting and squirming the whole way up. Once he was safely back on the ground and looking none the worse for wear, his housemate got up from her bed, paced over to the window, and continued.

“Star Swirl the Bearded was the first pony to ever truly experiment with magic, and his research still forms the basis of all magical theory in Equestria even today, almost two thousand years after he died. He believed that magic was a mystical, otherworldly force that didn’t technically exist on our own plane of reality, that actually functioned as a conduit through the opposing realms of discord and reason. His theory was that magic was nothing more than a visible substantiation of the chaos inherent in an invisible alternate dimension, the counterbalance of which is what gives our own dimension its fertility and effervescence, and us our control over what we refer to as ‘magic’.”

Noticing the blank looks on her friends’ faces, Twilight shook her head sheepishly and backed up a bit. “Think of it this way,” she said. “Imagine that you have two pastures, and that there’s a big fence running between them. On one side of the fence, everything works normally, the way it’s supposed to. And on the other, the exact opposite: up is down, left is right...basically, everything that happened when Discord escaped. Those fields are like the two dimensions Star Swirl talked about, with one ruled by reason and the other by chaos.”

“So...the fence in the middle keeps them apart?” Fluttershy asked slowly.

“Exactly. According to Star Swirl, there’s something that works just like that fence keeping our world, which he called Rationalis, from getting mixed up with Absonus, the dimension of chaos. And magic is...magic is sort of like a hole in the fence, where some part of Absonus can get through to us in a form that we can use. That’s why magic can

allow us to do things that, in a world completely governed by the laws of nature, wouldn't be possible."

"My head hurts," Rainbow Dash groaned.

"So did mine, when I first heard about it," Twilight replied with a laugh. "And I haven't even touched on how complicated the technomagical science gets after that. But it's still what all magical philosophy is governed by to this day. Until about five years ago, it was the closest thing to a reasonable explanation that we ever thought we'd have."

"Wait, *until* five years ago?" Applejack interrupted. "Ya mean there's *more*?"

"Not just *more*," Twilight answered in a hushed, almost reverent tone. "Something else entirely."

She paused again to let her last remark sink in, and more than one of her friends wished she'd quit with the dramatic effects and just get on with it already. "Five years ago, before I met any of you, a pony by the name of Foxtail Meadow came before the Board with an idea he said would change everything we'd ever believed about what magic was and how it worked. He said that magic *wasn't* a border between reason and chaos. He said that there *weren't* two different dimensions that had to remain in balance for the universe to continue to exist. He said that Star Swirl the Bearded, the pony whose wisdom and knowledge we'd trusted for as long as anypony could remember, was wrong, and that he was ri-

"Just get on with it already!" Spike shouted over Twilight's tirade.

After throwing Spike her best disgruntled glare, Twilight sighed heavily and cut to the chase. "Foxtail's theory was that magic wasn't just an anomaly, but a unique form of energy all its own that could be found within every living being in our world. He believed that in the trees and in our bodies and in the very air we breathed, there was an invisible current of inherent magical force that ran through all of us, and that we could all tap into it and use as much of it as we were capable of handling. Most importantly, though, he believed that, given enough time and enough effort, he could find a way to access that current and convert the energy inside it into a physical form...like something you could see and touch and store in a bottle in your cupboard. And since this current drew its power from a symbiotic relationship with living organisms, as long as the world around us remained healthy, it would never run dry. In other words, if we could draw a physical embodiment of magic from this current any time we wanted, we would have a never-ending source of unlimited magical energy. There'd be no spell we couldn't cast, no invention we couldn't design, no dream we couldn't achieve."

A crucial gear clicked into place in Pinkie Pie's head, and she gasped with her eyes almost brimming over with excitement. "I could put magic into food!" she shouted.

“I could make cupcakes that taste like *magic!*”

“It certainly does sound incredible, Twilight,” Rarity said. “But...well, to put it in context, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a magic-flavored cupcake before. If this Foxtail fellow had such an idea, why haven’t any of us heard of it?”

“Hey, yeah!” Rainbow agreed. “Why *haven’t* we heard of any’a this?”

“Because everypony on the Board thought he was insane,” Twilight said, speaking to her friends as if she almost couldn’t believe she’d had to connect the dots for them. “I mean, he’d spent his whole life working a plow in Dream Valley, and he paid for his trip to Canterlot by selling his entire family farm. For someone like that to go before the Canterlot Occulumental Board and claim that their entire interpretation of technomagical theory was manure...well, it was like walking up to Celestia and saying the sun could move just fine without her doing a darn thing. He was laughed out of the city by every unicorn within earshot, and two weeks after that he vanished without a trace. No one’s seen hide nor hair of him since.”

Five ponies and one dragon looked at each other, and their patient smiles slowly began to fade. “Well, then...what was the point of all that?” Rainbow asked bluntly. “Why’d you spend all that time telling us about some broke-flank country pony who didn’t know he was crazy?”

Twilight smiled, and her horn flashed into action. “Because he wasn’t crazy,” she said cryptically as her saddlebag floated up from the landing below. With painstakingly careful hooves, Twilight brought the bag down gently onto her bed, undid the strap on the front and, with her friends watching with furrowed brows, flipped it open.

“Because he was right.”

The collective Elements of Harmony had seen a lot of amazing things in their lives, but nothing prepared them for what they saw inside Twilight’s saddlebag. Sitting at the bottom of the main compartment was a small corked vial only four inches tall and no more than an inch wide, and inside that vial was a swirling, shifting, sapphire-blue liquid that glowed brightly enough to set the whole inside of the bag awash with its eerily ethereal light. Looking at the liquid was like staring up into a clear night sky; the longer you kept your eyes on it and the farther you let your gaze sink into it, the more it felt like the vial had no bottom, like the heavens had no end. The light had an almost physical permanence to it, the fluid an almost exuberant spark of life inside it. The hairs of the backs of each of their necks stood up as Twilight floated the vial out of her bag, and it wasn’t long after that before the fur lining their legs and backs was doing the same thing.

“When rumors of the Board’s decision reached the halls of Canterlot University, it wasn’t long before I heard about it too,” Twilight continued softly. “Most ponies believed what the Board said and forgot all about Foxtail, but I wasn’t so easily convinced. I spent

most of the next two years running a few of my own experiments to see if his theory had any merit, but by the time I came out here and met you guys, I'd pretty much given up on it. It wasn't until about a year after we defeated Discord that I remembered Foxtail again, and it was another eight months, fifteen days, and sixteen hours before I finally had my breakthrough."

"Twilight...what *is* that?" Applejack asked slowly, still hypnotized a bit by the radiance of the vial.

"Exactly what the Canterlot Occulumental Board said couldn't exist," the unicorn answered with pride. "Pure, untainted magical energy, converted into physical form and safely packaged for equine consumption."

"Consumption?" Rainbow asked. "You mean you can *drink* that stuff?"

"Drink it, freeze it into a popsicle...bake it into cupcakes. You can do pretty much anything you want with it," answered Twilight. "In fact, if my theories about some of its more esoteric properties are right, you could even inject it straight into your veins."

Rainbow Dash's throat bulged ever so slightly, and the feathers on her wings ruffled before flattening against her sides. "I...think I'll skip the injection stuff for now," she coughed, giving her shoulder a preemptive rub. Once she noticed Applejack's questioning look, her eyes narrowed and fell to the floor. "I don't like needles, okay?" she mumbled a moment later. "They give me the creeps."

"And you did this all by yourself?" Rarity asked.

"Well...yes, actually. Sort of. I mean, Foxtail did most of the preliminary work, of course, but I guess since I was the first to actually put it into practice, you could say something along those lines..."

"Twilight, that's amazing!" Fluttershy gushed, her cheeks flaring pink when she realized how loudly she had spoken. Pinkie Pie was quick to agree with her, though, as were the rest of Twilight's friends. Even Spike had to admit that Twilight's secret project sounded like it lived up to the benefit of the doubt he'd been giving it. Twilight blushed and assured everypony that it wasn't such a big deal if you thought about it, but the giddy glimmer of self-satisfaction in her eyes was unmistakable.

"So what d'you reckon you'll do now?" Applejack asked, once Twilight's face was even redder than Fluttershy's.

"Actually, I don't really know," Twilight admitted. "In hindsight, I probably should've expected the Board not to be interested, but...I guess I got so excited about the opportunity that I never figured out what I'd do after I took it. I never even came up with a name for this stuff."

“On it!” Pinkie shouted. “Let’s see...Bluedoo Voodoo Juice! Or maybe, Twilight’s Terrific Touguetastic Treat! No...something else with a ‘v’. Vigorous! What rhymes with vigorous?”

“Well, at least that’s one thing you won’t have to figure out,” Fluttershy commented after the inevitable span of a few seconds where Pinkie’s tongue was moving faster than any of her friends’ brains could process. Twilight grinned, a small giggle slipped out of Rarity’s mouth, and soon enough everypony had their hooves clutched around their stomachs and tears rolling down their cheeks. It was a long time before anyone could breathe normally again, and when that time came Pinkie was still churning out names like a hyperactive auctioneer, her eyes distantly pointed towards the ceiling and her hoof stuck pensively behind her ear.

“Boy, she just don’t quit, does she?” Applejack snorted as she wiped her eyes dry.

“Try spending a whole day on a hoofcar with her,” Rarity gushed. “It was a full week before I could even look at a cherry again!” Spike let out a boorish guffaw, and was too late slapping his paw over his mouth to cover the hiccup that followed.

“No kidding,” Rainbow Dash coughed. “You two came back into town that morning, an’ Pinkie was bouncing along like normal and you were just walking behind her with your mane all frizzy muttering, ‘Chimicherry, cherrychanga, chimicher...*bahahaha!*”

There was a short but valiant struggle against the urge to crack up again, but the other ponies in the room could only last but so long before they bent in half and collapsed onto their backs again. Rarity held out the longest, indignantly insisting that it wasn’t funny, but another hiccup from Spike finally set her over the edge, and her peals of laughter were the loudest of the bunch.

“You know, this morning really wasn’t that bad,” Twilight mused a few minutes later once relative calm was restored, the only breaks in the silence coming from the breathy sighs of the prostrate ponies around her and the occasional hiccup from Spike. “I mean, I’ve still got my research, and that vial of...”

“Sparkle Soda,” Pinkie announced.

“...whatever it is. So the Canterlot Occulumental Board didn’t want anything to do with it. They didn’t want anything to do with Foxtail either. I just have to work harder and get more proof. Sooner or later, they have to come around.”

“That’s the spirit, Twi,” Applejack said over another of Spike’s hiccups. “Whatever you wanna do, we got your...whew. We’re with ya.”

"I know you ar...honestly, Spike, it wasn't *that* funny!"

Twilight just barely got her say in before yet another hiccup nearly knocked Spike over, each new spasm seeming louder than the last. "I can't—*hic*—make it—*hic*—stop. I don't—*hic*—know what's wro—*hic*—wrong."

"What's a matter, Spike?" Rainbow teased. "Hey, cherry for your thoughts!"

"Oh, *stop* it!" Rarity squealed.

"Oh, f—*hic*—for Pete's sa —*hic*—sak—*hic*—*hic*—*hic*..."

"I'll get some water," Fluttershy offered, but Spike called her back with a single raised claw. "Just a min—*hic*—minute," he said, his other paw balled into a fist over his mouth. After a tense few seconds and a couple more stray coughs, Spike let his arms drop and sighed with relief.

"All clear," he said shakily. "Wow, that was weird. I never get the hiccups that bad unless I'm getting a letter from—"

A strange shadow passed over Spike's face, and the baby dragon fell silent as his grin twisted into a grimace. He coughed once, hiccupped twice, and then with a mighty intake of air, he belched out a horizontal column of heatless green fire, which swirled into a ball in midair and reformed into a tightly rolled scroll of yellowed paper, tied with a neat black ribbon and sealed with blood-red wax. Twilight lit her horn and caught the scroll just before it hit the ground, and made sure Spike was okay before she took a closer look at it.

"Now *that's* weird too," Applejack said. "It's only been two days since we sent our last letter."

"You...did apologize, right, Pinkie?" Rarity asked tentatively, thinking—as everyone else surely was—back to the circumstances that had led up to Pinkie Pie learning the particular lesson their letter had been about.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, lots!" Pinkie answered. "It wasn't *that* big of a deal, though, seriously. Mane hair grows back, doesn't it?"

"Mm...mm-hmm," Rarity hummed back without making eye contact.

"Actually, I don't think this is even from the Princess," Twilight said. "This isn't her seal on the front here. And frankly, I don't think she'd ever be the type to use black ribbon."

"But then...who else could it be from?" Spike asked. Everyone looked back at the paper again, and now the whole situation seemed almost eerie.

“Well, are you gonna open it or what?” Rainbow eventually blurted out.

Twilight paused to consider the matter once more, then shrugged and unsealed the letter with a tiny *pop*. “Might as well,” she muttered under her breath, her eyes already scanning over the first few lines.

It wasn't the fact that Twilight's eyebrows shot up a third of the way through the letter that really bothered anyone, nor was it the fact that they soon creased downward and gradually bent into a puzzled scowl. It wasn't even the fact that she paused for several seconds once she was done with the same expression still frozen on her face. No, the thing that *really* got everypony's hearts pumping was the fact that, at the end of those several seconds, Twilight moved the letter back down a few inches and started to read it again. Twilight Sparkle never read anything twice, because she never *needed* to read anything twice. She'd zipped through textbooks that'd give the highest scholars in Equestria more than a moment's trouble without breaking a sweat, so if there was something in this letter that Twilight had to go over more than once, that was more than enough to let her friends know that things were not at all fine and dandy in the library that morning.

Once Twilight finished her second read-through, she still hadn't spoken in almost two minutes. Nopony wanted to be the one to break the silence, which meant it ended up being Applejack who did.

“Well?” she said. “What is it?”

Twilight started to reply, but seemed unable to find the right words, or really any words at all. “It's...”

“Just read it aloud, darling,” Rarity requested. Twilight nodded quickly, cleared her throat, and with a deep breath held up the letter for a third time.

“Miss Twilight Sparkle,” she read. “You do not know who I am, nor would I expect you have any inkling of why I am writing to you. I, however, am very interested in getting to know who you are, and more specifically interested in what I believe we can achieve if our respective talents were to be combined.”

Twilight paused, and when no one else took the opportunity to butt in, she continued. “Miss Sparkle, I don't wish to obscure the point of this message any longer than necessary. Simply put, you are the kind of mare with the ability, the intellect, and most importantly the will to push the boundaries of magical theory further than anypony before you has dared to dream. Through my contacts in Canterlot, I have heard of your research regarding the theories of one Foxtail Meadow, and in light of your apparent success in that endeavor, I would like to cordially invite you to present your findings to me personally, tomorrow evening promptly at 1900 Greenhitch Standard Time.”

“Ha! How ‘bout that?” Applejack shouted triumphantly. “Ain’t even the afternoon yet, and you’re already gettin’ another offer!”

“That’s not all,” Twilight said quietly, waiting for Applejack to quiet down before she went on. “Unfortunately, my current state of affairs does not allow any opportunities for international travel, so if you wish to accept my proposal, you will have to make arrangements to visit me at my current residence, the coordinates for which you may find in the postscript below. I expect the trip and my own personal analysis of your claims will require about a week of your time, so please plan accordingly. I would also advise you to dress lightly, as depending on your mode of transport, your journey may be somewhat wet.”

“International?” whispered Fluttershy.

“*Current* residence?” wondered Rainbow Dash.

“*Somewhat* wet?” gasped Rarity.

“The parasprites and vermin that infest the streets of Canterlot would sell their souls for a single ounce of your potential, Miss Sparkle,” Twilight read. “Do not make the mistake of trivializing my desire to help you reach it. Should you choose to decline my assistance, I do not intend to offer it again.” One last pause. “And then there’s just this symbol that looks like a globe and two lines with a bunch of numbers on them. I guess those would be the coordinates.”

For the first time that morning, the silence that filled the room could really be felt hanging heavy in the air. “Well, that’s...good, right?” said Pinkie.

“If that’s what ‘good’ sounds like nowadays, then I must be hearin’ things the wrong way,” Applejack replied. “I hardly even understood half of what that letter said. What was all that malarkey about her ‘current state of affairs’ not lettin’ her come out here to see you?”

“And vermin in the streets of Canterlot?” Rarity scoffed. “What on *earth* is that supposed to mean?”

“Why would somepony ask you to come visit them, and not even tell you their name?” Fluttershy pondered aloud.

“Well, at least we know where to find ‘em, sorta,” Dash pointed out. “That is, assuming it’s even a pony who wrote that. What if it’s just some huge, horrible monster who thinks unicorns taste good with peanut butter?”

“I don’t think a huge, horrible monster would have such neat handwriting, Rainbow,” Twilight reasoned. “Or know how to spell ‘analysis’. In any case, it doesn’t sound like...whoever this is wants to hurt me. If they already know about my

presentation, they must either know a lot of ponies in Canterlot or be amazingly talented with magic.”

“Or be a huge, horrible monster,” Dash repeated. “I’m just saying.”

“So what are you gonna do, Twilight?” Spike asked, peering over his housemate’s shoulder to get a peek at the letter she was still levitating in front of her. He had expected he’d get at least a minute or two to read it himself while Twilight was thinking things over, but to his dismay it only took her a few seconds to set her jaw and make up her mind.

“All right,” she said, and there wasn’t a soul in Equestria who could’ve thought she wasn’t sure about her decision. “The letter said it’d be a mistake to say no to this opportunity, and it’s right. I won’t get another chance like this for the rest of my life. I’m gonna go.”

Applejack took a moment to suck in a breath, then let it out all at once and nodded. “Then I’m gonna go with you.”

“Applejack, you don’t have to-”

“I know I don’t. That ain’t why I’m doin’ it. I said I had your back, and I said what I meant. So that bein’ that, I ain’t about to let you go runnin’ off to another presentation all by your lonesome.” Applejack grinned and raised an eyebrow, almost daring Twilight to tell her no again. “Ergo, I’m comin’ with ya.”

There wasn’t even time to so much as say thank you. “I’ll go as well,” Rarity said. “All things considered, I’d rather like to meet this pony myself. Who knows? It might be a stallion. He might be handsome.”

“I’m in,” added Rainbow Dash with an impish smirk. “Because when it *does* turn out to be a monster and he gobbles us all up for dinner, somepony’s gonna be there to say ‘I told you so’.”

“I’ll come too!” Pinkie Pie declared, and Fluttershy followed suit a moment later, albeit with a bit less exuberance. Spike almost rounded out the group, but one last ill-timed yawn brought out the old “you’re just a baby, someone has to take care of the library, you wouldn’t have any fun anyway” argument, and so seven was once again whittled down to six. To be fair, though, they had a point this time: fantastic possibilities of Twilight’s invention aside, the idea of spending a week in some far-off—and probably gemless—land waiting for her to finish showing it off sounded about as appealing as a root canal.

“Well, I’d say that just about settles it,” Applejack proclaimed once Spike had been more or less appeased. “You reckon we’ll start out around noon tomorrow?”

“We’ve got to figure out where we’ll end up first,” Twilight replied with a laugh. “We don’t even know where this place is yet.”

“The letter said we might get wet. Maybe it’s near a river,” Fluttershy suggested.

“Or the beach!” Pinkie countered. “I love the beach! We could go snorkeling and dive for seashells and lie out in the sun all day! I hope it’s the beach. I could really use some sun, actually. I think my tan’s starting to wear off.”

“It might be a while before we know for sure, girls. It’s been a long time since I’ve brushed up on my cartography,” Twilight informed them as she squinted down at the bottom of the letter, where the coordinates to their new destination were written. “I don’t even know where Ponyville is on a longitudinal scale, let alone this place.”

Twilight wasn’t usually the type to ask for help with academic matters, so her friends knew right away that this was a job for them. Of all the ponies present in the room, though, the one that Twilight probably least expected to jump at the chance first was Rainbow Dash. “Lemme see that for a sec,” the pegasus said suddenly, guiding the floating letter down onto Twilight’s desk and studying it intensely with her bottom lip caught between her teeth. A few moments later, she straightened herself up, nodded, and waved Twilight away without looking away from the paper. “No worries, Twi,” she said. “I gotcha covered.”

Rarity looked puzzled and Applejack looked skeptical, but Twilight was quite impressed with Dash’s display. “You know how to read coordinates, Rainbow?” she asked.

“Yep. Pretty much every pegasus does. Helps with flight patterns and stuff. Kinda just comes naturally. This’ll be easy.”

“Okay, then. I guess that’s settled too,” Twilight said. “Tomorrow morning sounds fine, Applejack. I’ll go ahead and pack in a little bit, and then try to get some rest tonight. I wonder if we should take the ballo...something wrong, Rainbow?”

“How is that...no, I’m fine,” Rainbow said quickly. “Just...just gimme a second.”

“Oh...kay. Anyway, the hot air balloon’s probably the safest way to go. If it *is* at the beach, we’ll definitely need something faster than the train to get there by tomorrow even-”

“What the...oh, *come on!*”

“Landsake, Rainbow, what’s all the fuss about?” Applejack said.

“There’s something wrong with these coordinates,” the cyan pegasus griped. “This place can’t be...this guy must’ve given us the wrong ones.”

“Maybe you’re just reading them wrong,” Rarity said helpfully.

“I’m not reading them wrong! You start at Ponyville, move down five degrees, go east about thirty, and...” Rainbow paused, slapped a forehoof between her eyes, and then sighed heavily and dropped all four legs on the ground again. “Yeah, I’m definitely reading them wrong,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Maybe this will help,” Twilight said. “Scoot over a little bit.”

Rainbow Dash cleared a space on the desk, and on top of it Twilight placed a giant physical map of Equestria and the lands beyond it. As a few stray inkwells hopped forward to hold the edges of the unfurled map in place, Rainbow immediately pulled up to hover next to Twilight, already chattering away about where she thought the coordinates were pointing and how she couldn’t figure out where the hangup she kept running into was. With Twilight and Rainbow muttering too quietly for anyone else to hear, the rest of their friends were forced to work up some patience and wait for them to surface again with a solid answer.

“See, right there!” Rainbow Dash shouted after forty-five seconds of increasingly frantic muttering. “How could that be right?”

“I don’t know,” Twilight replied with just as much confusion, “but it is. If these are the coordinates we’re supposed to use, then that’s where they’re pointing to...what on Earth is going on?”

The cacophony of responses was quick and predictably tense. “Whaddya mean, what’s goin’ on? Where is this place?”

“Is it on top of a mountain, miles from civilization?”

“Is it in a big mysterious jungle full of nasty, horrible creatures?”

“Beach, beach, beach! Please say beach!”

“No, it’s not in any of those places,” Twilight said. “In fact...”

She shared one last look with Rainbow Dash, then turned to face her friends. A look of puzzlement was the first thing they all saw on her face, but the emotion hidden behind that—and the one Spike would remember for years to come—was one of slowly budding fear.

“According to these coordinates, it’s approximately three hundred miles west of the Eternity Coast. The place this pony is telling to go to is right in the middle of the ocean.”

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