

# Beyond Judgment

## Part I: Twilight's Discovery

It happened by pure chance; A simple connection that almost wasn't made. Had a single synapse in Twilight's mind fired differently in that moment she would have never pieced together the first two parts of a puzzle she didn't know existed.

Twilight was standing in her basement, pouring over a new book she had received from Canterlot the day before: *The Safety Guide to Advanced Magic*. She had been looking forward to delving into this one herself since the incident with Trixie, so extra precautions were taken to ensure that she wasn't disturbed. Every entryway into the building was closed, locked, and if possible, bolted. The door to the basement itself was even barricaded with a spare bookshelf, for good measure. Hoof written notes were placed neatly on the front door and the windows saying that Twilight was not to be disturbed and that the library was closed for the day.

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“Is that really necessary?” Spike had asked her earlier after hanging the last sign. “You don't have to say the library's closed. You're the only pony around who actually reads any of this stuff.”

“That's beside the point!” Twilight replied, holding her head high and placing her hoof proudly on her chest. “The lack of business at this library should have no bearing on how I conduct it. It's a matter of principle.”

“If that's the case, then you wouldn't close the place and do your studying somewhere else.”

“No, this book is more important than the library.”

Spike slapped his hand on his face and sighed. “Whatever.”

“Don't worry, Spike, I've got a special job for you to do while I'm studying.” Twilight said, patting the dragon's head.

Annoyed, Spike swatted he hoof away, and then saluted at the idea of being given a task. “Right! What do you need?” he said, and produced a parchment and quill.

“First, I need you to go to Sweet Apple Acres and get me the largest apple you can find from the smallest tree in her grove. Then, I want you to go to Carousel Boutique and get me three ounces of powdered rubies – just don't eat it. Finally, I want you to go to Zecora's and bring me a jug of potion-grade purified water. Purify it yourself if you have to. Got all that?”

“Purified ... water. Got it!” Spike said as he finished his dictation. “Wow, that's one heck of a list. It'll take me all day to get this stuff!”

Twilight used her magic to open the front door, and started to push Spike out through it with her head. “Well then, I guess you'd better get on that. Goodbye Spike. Remember, don't come back until you've

got everything!”

Caught off guard and physically off balance by Twilight's insistence, Spike hesitated before closing the door. “Jeeze, it's like you're trying to get rid of me, or something. What's all this for, anyway?”

“I'll tell you when you get back. Hurry, though, you've got a lot to do and daylight's burning!”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm on it.” Spike said, turning to leave and waving back. “Have fun studying.”

Twilight sighed in relief as she magically closed the door. She then retrieved a quill and the checklist she had hidden from the baby dragon in the drawer of her study table. “Send Spike on a pointless errand that will keep him occupied all day ... Check!” she said, ticking off the final item.

Spike was surprisingly resourceful on his errands, and never returned empty handed without good reason. So just to make sure he wouldn't get back until nightfall, Twilight had asked Zecora to spend the afternoon “keeping him busy” with that water – if it wasn't too much trouble, of course.

“If a stall tactic is what you need, have no fear, you can count on me!” Zecora reassured her. “He'll spend all day on a useless brew, and once upon nightfall, I'll send him home to you.”

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All the effort of closing up the library and sending Spike out on a pointless quest wasn't just for her own peace of mind, but for safety's sake. After all, Twilight was preparing to study a safety manual, and it's impossible to practice safety during dangerous spells without, well, danger. A stray bolt of energy in an open field could go anywhere, but in her basement, at least she was contained. The downstairs room was at least as large as the main room upstairs, but the walls were of solid rock. The roots of the great old tree the library was carved out of weaved and tangled around the walls. Nooks and crannies carved out of the underground stump and stone served as shelves for books and other supplies. Other than that, the basement was left mostly empty. She usually reserved this place for running larger experiments like this. Twilight herself would be alright, probably, she just wanted to make sure everyone else would be, at least.

Back when Twilight had faced the grumpy Ursa Minor, she had used every bit of her magical power to ease him back to sleep. More power than she was aware she had at the time. The adrenaline rush at the time kept her going afterward, but she paid for it the next day with a terrible ache all through her body, especially her chest, head and, somehow, even her horn. She refused to pour that much energy into a spell until she could get her hooves on the *Safety Guide for Advanced Magic*.

And so, barricaded and secluded in her basement, Twilight spent hours reading through the first half of *The Guide*. Actual testing of her most difficult spells would have to come after she thoroughly studied the book, perhaps even memorized it. After all, the second most important thing other than being accurate is being safe. She took copious notes and kept them stacked nearby. Having anticipated the need for cross referencing some information, she made of a point of selecting every possible book she expected to need and placed them in the shelf she barricaded the door with. After verifying everything she could, it wasn't long before each and every one of those books were stacked in a pile around her. It was one of the most intense study sessions she had ever done.

As she began to get a migraine, Twilight needed to take a breather; so said *The Safety Guide for Advanced Studying* she had read long ago. This break was more or less involuntary as she collapsed on her side and several books, notes, and quills fell around her. One such note landed on her face, which she blew away with a snort.

“So tired ... my head ... but I can't quit.” Twilight mumbled to herself. “If I'm going to keep learning magic, I have to be able to learn even stronger spells ... If I can't do that safely, I'm no good ... This is too important ... I can't let Celestia down.”

Twilight's heart wanted to go on, but her mind wouldn't. So, she rolled over with her head on a book as a pillow and allowed herself a small nap. Again, this was largely involuntary; she had actually rolled over because she landed with the spine of a book wedged against her own as she fell. Once she turned and her cheek touched the cool, soft leather binding of the other book it was lights out.

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A few hours later, Twilight eased back into consciousness. She slowly staggered onto her hooves and looked around, dreary-eyed.

“The first thing to do after falling asleep during a study session is to determine where you were before you passed out.” Twilight said to herself, quoting *The Safety Guide to Advanced Studying* with a little bit of a dazed slur and a droopy eyelid

Twilight shook her head a bit to regain her composure and started to collect and organize everything around her, glancing through all her notes and the open pages of the books where they lay. They all swirled around her in a purple aura of magic before settling into their places. “Also, check any paper products in the vicinity of where your head was to ensure that you didn't drool on anything. If you did, immediately rewrite any notes, and tally the cost of any borrowed books that have been damaged.” she continued.

The thought of harming that wonderful book that was kind enough to be her pillow was enough to startle Twilight back into focus. She magically lifted it up to her face and examined it all over in a panic. Seeing that it was alright, she sighed deeply and indulged herself with one last nudge of the cheek before placing it down with the others.

“Okay, that's enough fooling around. Back to work.” Twilight said, delving back into *The Guide*.

The particular chapter she was on was about how a unicorn can tell if she is pushing her magic too hard. “ ... *It is difficult to verify what it is like to continue to increase the power of a spell with this kind of suicidal intensity as unicorns have forfeited their lives in this manner. However, there are records of a few unicorns that have pushed themselves to the brink and survived. Descriptions vary, but they all seem to involve the caster's physical feelings becoming numb. Almost as though the pony's neurological system is imploding in on itself into the very center of her body.*”

This line sounded familiar to Twilight. She thought hard, and searched her memory for where it was. “Feeling ... center of body ... I've heard that in a spell before ... What was it? ... Ah! A detection

spell!”

*Click.* The first two pieces of the puzzle came together.

Abandoning her post, Twilight ran upstairs. Taking a moment to dislodge the bookshelf from the door, she went back into the main room of the library and began to search frantically for the *Mind's Eye: A Compendium of Sensory Spells* book she was looking for. The main room of the library was about two stories tall, all carved out from the inside of the tree. The lower level was where most of the books and other things were kept in shelves carved out from the wood. Floral design carvings adorned the shelves and other surfaces along the walls and ceiling. At the upper level there were balconies both on the outside and the inside, which also included Twilight and Spike's bedroom.

“Oh, if only Spike were around, he'd know where it was ... Ah, ha!”

There it was, all the way in the back of the book, the most difficult spell listed in the “Sensing Ponies” chapter. *“All living creatures seem to emit a kind of energy. Studying this energy is extremely difficult as only this, the most advanced sensory spell ever conceived, is able to detect it. If a pony is able to successfully cast this spell, she will be able to feel the energy in other creatures. This energy is always focused in the center of its body, around the heart.”*

“Oh, wow, so this detection spell senses the energy of a pony. The same energy that fades when a pony ... uses too much magic?” Twilight whispered to herself. Something didn't seem quite right about that.

It was all getting a little spooky. But Twilight knew to be prepared for that when she read that unicorns had died from pushing themselves too hard. “Wait, I've heard that before too ... Sensing the heart ... Oh! It was in a story I read from a war history book!”

*Click.* Another piece fit together.

This story took twilight a little longer to find in all the history books. She was afraid she wouldn't find it at all since the story wasn't about magic, but about a scout who's companion was mortally injured during a failed mission: *“She was bleeding so much, I couldn't do anything about it. I don't know healing magic, I just sense things. A fat lot of good it was doing us now! I kept telling her she would be alright soon, but she never said anything back. I just held her in my hooves. All I could do was sense. I sensed her blood spill slowly on the ground. I sensed her breathing slow. I sensed her heart stop. I sensed her energy fade away. I sensed all of it.”*

A chill went down Twilight's spine as she read the passage. But it all made sense. The energy these books were all talking about wasn't just magic or feeling, it was the life force of a pony. “I've read about the idea of a life force before ... Medical books! I need healing spells!”

*Click, click, click.* The pieces were all coming together. Twilight was figuring something out, but she wasn't sure what it was yet. She had completely forgotten about magical safety at this point. To the contrary, she was making something very unsafe.

Most of the advanced healing spells Twilight read about made some kind of mention to a life force. It generally involved mending the body in such a way so as to let the energy flow naturally and aid the

recovery of a patient. The finer points of this made her feel a bit squeamish. Each new connection made Twilight more and more excited. She was definitely making a big discovery.

“I've gathered enough evidence to prove the existence of a soul!” Twilight shouted, bounding around the room like Pinkie on an exceptionally good day. “I could write a thesis! I could write a book! I could win an award! I could-!”

Twilight stopped suddenly as a new idea dawned on her. She had evidence, but to really prove it she would need more than that. She needed a use for it.

“I need to invent a spell! My very own spell! I've never invented a spell! This kind of thing only happens once in a lifetime!” Twilight gasped. “Celestia will be so proud of me! I just need to think, what can I do with this?! Ah, I know!”

*Click.* Just one last piece left to fall into place.

Twilight recalled another quill and parchment from her desk. She then transcribed everything she had just discovered about the function of life force. The use of a telekinesis spell in combination with the sensory spell she just learned, she theorized how it would be possible to hold onto life force without letting it fade away. Of course, a number of healing spells would be necessary to recover the body of the pony whose life force was already fading. She then read aloud as she wrote the conclusion of her spell. Her writing was calm and steady, but her voice was shaky and ecstatic.

“And so, with the body restored from the initial injury, the life force is then pulled back into the body and allowed to fill back into it. All of this must be done shortly after the injury, since the body will immediately begin to decay. Furthermore, once the life force is faded completely, there is no known way to bring it back. Using these techniques, it is entirely possible to bring a recently dead pony back to life!”

There was a long pause in the library after Twilight finished her writing. The quill and parchment hung in the air as the significance of what she had just written sunk in, her eyes still wide and somewhat crazed. She could bring the dead back to life. She wasn't even sure Celestia herself had that kind of power.

*Click.*

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A few hours later, just as night started to fall, Spike returned from his errands. He struggled to carry a jug of the most pristine water anypony had ever seen, while balanced on the lid was a measuring cup with shimmering red powder and topped with a small, green, unripened apple.

“I'm home, Twilight!” Spike shouted from behind his jug as he came through the door. “Do you have any idea how long it takes to purify all this water? I was blowing fire and boiling this stuff all day!” He set down his spoils from the afternoon, and then puffed out his chest triumphantly. “But I got it all by myself!”

Looking around, he noticed Twilight was nowhere to be found in the main room. Everything was perfectly shelved and organized, just as he left it earlier. “Huh, that's strange. I figured she'd tear this place apart like she always does.”

Spike headed up the staircase and looked for Twilight in the bedroom. “Twilight?! I got the ruby dust too! Rarity just about fainted when I told her I wanted to crush the stuff! Oh, man, that would have been great if she did! Uh, I mean I could have picked her up and carried her to a couch, or something, and show off how strong I am!”

Unable to find Twilight upstairs either, Spike headed back down to look in the basement. He was starting to get a little worried; she never stays out late unless Pinkie's throwing a party or something. She wouldn't be anywhere but here while she's studying, but why wasn't she responding? “The apple was the hard part! Applejack's got all kinds of small trees, and most of them don't even have apples! The only one on any of them is this lump!”

Spike reached for the door to the basement and opened it. “Twilight?”

Sure enough, there Twilight was after all. She was just finishing up cleaning the last of her mess from earlier that day. Having apparently been too focused, or too distracted, to hear Spike shouting earlier, his short question startled her and she flinched. The book she was putting back also jerked, knocking a few more on the floor.

“Ah! Oh! Spike, you're home!” Twilight replied, sounding a bit jittery.

“I got everything you wanted. You okay, Twilight?”

“Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Did you find everything you needed alright?” She asked, starting to pick up the books she dropped.

“Nah, nothing you're number one assistant couldn't handle!” Spike said, puffing up his chest again. “But wait, you're the one who needed all this junk. What's it for anyway?”

Twilight trotted – cantered – up the staircase past Spike. “Oh, nothing, don't worry about it.”

“Nothing!” Spike shouted, irritated. “I spent all day getting this stuff, and you don't even want it?”

Turning back, Twilight said “I'm sorry, thank you for getting all this for me, really. I just don't need it right now is what I mean. It's been a long day, I think I just need to go to bed.”

“If you say so.” Spike said, then stretched and yawned. “Yeah, I'm worn out too. I walked clear across Ponyville today. It's like somepony picked the longest errand for me on purpose.” He said, raising an eyebrow at Twilight.

Twilight didn't respond, and just continued cantering up to her bed. A brief look of concern flashed across Spike's face. He didn't know what to make of her behavior, so he just shrugged it off. “Ponies!” he thought dismissively.

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After having dinner by himself, Spike went up to the balcony to his own basket bed at the foot of Twilight's. She seemed sound asleep so he climbed in and started to settle down for the night.

“Um, Spike?” Somepony whispered.

The voice was so soft, Spike thought it may have been Fluttershy for a second before he realized it was coming from Twilight, who had lifted her head. “Yeah?” He replied.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Can it wait until tomorrow?”

“It's just that ... Would you mind sleeping over here with me tonight?”

That caught Spike by surprise. “Huh? But we haven't slept together since you were a filly. Well, except that time you read that headless horse novel. Is that what this is about?”

“Um ... Yes.” Twilight replied, forcing a smile.

“Eh, I'm too tired to care right now. Whatever you want.” Spike said begrudgingly before hopping onto Twilight's bed and curling into a ball. “Good night, Twilight.”

Twilight scooted over a little bit so she could feel Spike's back against her own. “Thanks, Spike.”

With the warmth of a familiar body next to hers, Twilight was able to get to sleep a little more easily. But still, she had a nightmare about ponies rising from the dead. Ponies from the past, many of which whose bodies were ravaged by time. They reached for her, calling out to her.

*“Why couldn't you save us, Twilight? Why couldn't you have been here earlier?”*