



The Everfree Forest was never a welcoming place for the ponies of Equestria. Those who lived nearest its borders knew to expect the unexpected if they ventured in.

Yet, something was distinctly off nonetheless. The forest grew silent, the residents sensing it as well, just before the earth trembled and startled flocks of birds roosting in the mist-shrouded trees took off in feathered flurries of panic. The quake, while not strong, still had more than enough power to draw the attention of anyone nearby.

Dawn was coming. Purple and red kissed the horizon, but the brighter stars had not yet faded. Here, as one ruler of this land made way for the other, two ponies traveled the old mountain path from Stalliongrad.

"You feel that?" the stallion said, an earth-pony with a mint-green coat, his mane and tail white and touched with blue.

"Yes," replied the other: a unicorn mare a shade of faint violet and blood-red hair tipped orange. "Do you think it was a landslide?"

He shrugged, eyes scanning his surroundings. "Could've been anything in this place. I'm never exactly thrilled when it comes to these trips."

Few traveled the old path between Stalliongrad and Ponyville these days. The creatures were no less dangerous in the old times than now, but the alternate roads had improved since then. They were longer routes, circumventing the forest altogether. Still the old path was quicker, and

the young mare wasn't much for patience, nor her stallion friend for winning arguments.

"But I thought you liked my cousin?" she whimpered, having scarcely glanced at her surroundings since the quake.

"Well, generally if I could choose between missing a visit and skirting through these woods, I'd opt-out, Plume'."

"I thought we agreed not to use that nickname," she growled. "Am I made of smoke, Peppermint?"

"Alright *Plumeria*. Though you know, four syllables? Gets a bit wearing.

"But honestly." He rounded on the gnarled trees below. "Who would build a village that bordered *this*, let alone earth ponies? Earth ponies who, y'know, can't fly away, or conjure defenses, or fight off *half* the things living in here. *Unlike* crazy unicorn mares who apparently think it's no big deal."

Plumeria smirked, but did not argue.

"These trees'll hide anything," he continued. "Way I hear it, Ponyville went through a plague of parasprites *and* a rampaging Ursa-Minor, in the same Celestia-forsaken summer!"

"Well, maybe some ponies *like* a little excitement, Pep?" Plumeria said, face glowing at the notion of a town where the days weren't as dull as in Stalliongrad: home of Equestria's biggest mine and forge.

"Hey, watch it!" Peppermint shouted, his hoof shooting out to stop Plumeria whose head was still locked in his direction, heedless to the earth beneath her hooves.

"What? Oh."

Plumeria looked over the sudden and distinct lack of road. It looked like a great chunk of cliff had broken loose and smashed into the forest below, taking their path with it.

"I guess we know where that landslide happened," she said, gawking at the mess with eyes like saucers.

"Well, that's just *great*," Peppermint fumed, kicking a few offending stones into the chasm. "No way we're crossing that."

"Maybe there's a way down?"

"Down?" Peppermint retreated a few paces as if she'd threatened to push him off. "Oh no, no deal. I'm not trudging through these woods off the path. The path is freaky enough."

"We won't strike out at random," she said, leaning over to look for an easy grade or series of hoof-holds, "we'll follow the cliff. The path drops back down to the woods anyway. Maybe we can—"

A sudden, rocky "crack" shot out into the morning air. The bit of path they'd been standing on gave under their weight. Both shouted in surprise and fear as they slid down atop their modest chunk of mountain at an alarming rate.

Plumeria's horn glowed red, magic shrouding the rock they were sliding on. Over a good fifty feet they slowed, yet the rock still shattered upon hitting bottom and sent the pair tumbling over hard earth, a few smaller rocks tumbling after them.

"Ulgh, what a ride," she groaned, getting back on her hooves. The fall had fazed her, it was true, though not nearly to the extent of her friend.

"Ah, no! No no no," Peppermint said as he gazed around, finding no immediate return to the safety of the path. "Hope you're happy you got your wish: now we *both* get to run screaming from whatever's in there."

But Plumeria—who had only partially heard him—emitted a small gasp, looking past Peppermint to the cliffside.

He whipped his head around, seeing nothing. His widened eyes attempted a frown, but couldn't seem to make up their mind. "What, what is it?! I- I don't see anything! Don't just *do* that! I'm already freaking out over here!"

"There was something there," she said, "something in the cliff with a little yellow eye!" She cantered over to inspect the mound of loose rocks, lifting some with magic and casting them aside.

"Hey, we already caused *one* pygmy-landslide by foaling around," Peppermint said, "we don't need to bury ourselves..."

He stopped talking as he stared at her work. "Too," he finished.

It was narrow, but a negotiable space nonetheless, a faint blue light gleaming within what ought to have been utter blackness.

"Oh wow!" Plumeria cried. "That landslide must've unearthed some old cave! We've *gotta* check this out!"

Peppermint glared at her. "We're already knee-deep in problems! I want to get back on the path, now!"

"Fine," she huffed, "go scout us a way back. I, however, am checking this out."

With that, she trotted inside, Peppermint giving the Everfree Forest one long look. With a groan, he too darted in.

Both soon realized that the cave wasn't natural. Rough rocks hewn straight from the mountain bore white marks from whatever had gouged them out. Less than a minute of walking into the bowels of the cliff and they came upon a flat wall of grey metal, a large blue bulb glowing near the top.

"It's so pretty. I've heard of stuff like this: bioluminescence, I think," the unicorn mused, extending a hoof.

"No no no, don't touch it!" he cried, attempting to stop her, but too late.

The light blared white at her touch, as six pill-shaped lights below flashed before lighting in a sequence. From the left, the second light lit, before the fourth. It continued this pattern, all the lights flashing between each cycle.

"Whatever it is, it's not moss," Peppermint said, realizing the surface was hard and glassy.

Plumeria's eyes narrowed as a thought struck her, and hit the sixth light when the lights all flashed. She was rewarded with a "beep" that rang with encouragement.

"It's a test!" she cried. "Maybe it's some sort of vault?"

This time the lights ran one, then two, then three, and then all flashed again, as if in question.

"Four?" Peppermint offered, barely breathing as he watched..

Plumeria shook her head. "No, too easy. Any school-filly would get that. I wonder though."

The only thing she noticed about all the lit numbers was their prime value. She pressed the light that would be next, if she were right: light number five.

All light suddenly extinguished with a deep click, thrusting them into total darkness before odd mechanical noises emanated from somewhere deep within the mountain. A moment later and the wall sank into the floor with another positive tone from the machine, light from within granting them sight as both ponies stared transfixed upon the new space they had revealed.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

It had been nearly a year since Twilight Sparkle first arrived in Ponyville; Spring was in full bloom, and the day of the Vernal Equinox had arrived. Twilight and her friends had been specially invited by Princess Celestia to attend a ceremonial celebration in Canterlot. Nearly a year since the defeat of Nightmare Moon, Princess Luna was to join her sister in celebrating their reclaimed unity.

The six mares —and one pint-sized dragon— wore their stunning clothes from last year's disastrous Gala, patched up to their former glory after the abuse they'd undergone. The walk towards the palace was long, but it offered ample time for conversation.

"Oh, I promise I'll never tire of those marvelous towers," Rarity cooed, entranced by the ornate spires of the grandest Equestrian city. Set into the side of a towering mountain, it practically defied gravity.

"I quiver every time I imagine visiting Canterlot," Rarity said, "I'll always envy your foalhood, Twilight Sparkle."

"It was a nice place to grow up," Twilight agreed with a smile. "Bit formal though."

"So, still running on 'confused' here," Spike said. "Didn't we honor Luna's return the day she got back?"

"Yeah, I don't get it either," Rainbow Dash said, hovering restlessly. "Spring Equinox, no Equinox. Seems kinda' pointless."

"It's meant to be more meaningful that way," Twilight began. "The Equinox marks the exact middle-point between the longest and shortest days of the year: the Summer Sun Celebration and the Winter Moon Celebration. A point where night and day are considered equals."

"Oh, and it's '*Vernal*' Equinox," she said, "not 'Spring' Equinox."

"But I thought there was one in the fall too," Dash said "Why didn't they do it then?"

"Easy-peazy, play Parcheesi!" cried the high, excited tones of Pinkie Pie, bounding up behind them. "Who wants to celebrate *new* stuff when all the *old* stuff is withering away?"

"And," Fluttershy added, also advancing to the head of the ranks, "it's also when all the animals need to find shelter, migrate or hibernate to escape the cold."

"Actually," Twilight said, beaming at Fluttershy, "that's pretty much it. The latter seasons of the year are representative of endings. Not the best tone to set. But Spring is about—"

"Birds singing, and flowers growing, and bells ringing and the sun a' glowing!" Pinkie Pie sang.

"Uh, yeah," Twilight agreed with a smirk. "New beginnings and new life. And besides, our celebration in Ponyville was informal. *This* will celebrate the partnership of the princesses with all of Equestria!"

They walked seven abreast up the well-kept path to the palace whose brilliant emerald lawn teemed with excited ponies from every corner of Equestria, but only the esteemed guests would have access to the palace itself.

Once at the gates, Twilight approached the doorpony, a unicorn.

"Your party, miss?" the doorpony inquired.

"Twilight Sparkle, seven?" Twilight leaned towards him.

"Twa... twi... Ah yes. Welcome!" he said, checking a name off his list. His magic unlatched the velvet rope as he ushered them inside.

Grinning ear-to-ear, Twilight led them to a tall tower not far from the entrance, *after* Rainbow Dash spotted some of the Wonderbolts on their way in the opposite direction, quietly geeking out once they'd passed.

They ascended a flight of outdoor stairs to a door Twilight was all too familiar with. The door surrounded itself with her magic and opened.

"I present to you." She paused theatrically. "The Royal Archives!"

Within was a room of white and blue marble, crammed with bookshelves stretching to the ceiling. Ornate furnishings and a magnificent hourglass adorned the cavernous space. A great multi-pane window in place of a wall allowed natural light to fill all but the darkest corners. Through a door set into this window was a balcony, a perfect viewing spot for later.

"Whoo-wee! Ain't that a heap a' readin'!" Applejack exclaimed, marveling in spite of herself.

"This'd keep anypony busy for—" Rainbow Dash paused, leering at Twilight.

"Pretty much my entire life," Twilight confirmed. "Actually, I *still* haven't read everything here. Oh, this place was home away from home when I was a filly. I worked as the Librarian of the Archives as my first real job."

She beamed into the ether, reminiscing as her friends casually looked over the spines of so many works.

"*Till to Chill: A Beginners Guide to Agriculture*?" Applejack read, her eyes narrowing with every word. "Now what kinda" pony'd think she'd learn farmin' by readin' some dust-ridden old book? Might as well give foals written instructions on how to blink."

"Oh, you mean like that one chapter from '*Coltrane's Optometry*', about maintaining an even frequency to maintain lustrous, sparkling eyes?" Twilight gushed, receiving a blank stare from Applejack as her question answered itself.

"So," Spike said, "what are we meant to be seeing here? I know it's a big to-do, but are the princesses just gonna be passing each other some sacred items or something?"

"Sure it's important and all, but I kinda' hoped there'd be more to this than symbolism," he finished, making some of them grimace.

"Oh, you'll see Spike," Twilight giggled. "I received a hint from the Princess in our invitation. See, there's a more 'practical' reason they waited this long. I take it you've noticed how the moon's been moving over the past year?"

Spike looked out the window. Indeed, the moon had been imposing on daylight more and more each day through the months. At present, it was side-by-side with the sun, though effectively invisible with the sun's shadow overtaking it, save for the finest sliver on its far side.

"Yeah," Spike whispered, staring intently at the satellite. "What's up with that?"

Her grin only widened. "Let's just say I don't think you'll be disappointed."

"Aww, Twilight," Spike whined, "don't tie me up in suspense like that!"

Even through the windows, fanfare erupting from below got the attention of every foal, filly and stallion. A few of the friends gasped before cantering swiftly out onto the balcony.

They stared down at the walkway beneath them, where a stallion in a black vest spoke into the mouth of a horn that was spread like a great brass vine to the tops of several towers.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts," he boomed. "On this, the day of the Vernal Equinox, we celebrate the unity of our most esteemed rulers.

"Having returned from her place of exile many months ago, Princess Luna, Keeper of The Night, has since reclaimed her place alongside our beloved Princess Celestia, restoring the cycle of

night and day to its former harmony."

His pause was filled by cheers of approval, with a sound like waves crashing onto shore.

"Now, residents of Equestria," he said at last, "I present your Princesses!" He gestured with a flourish, towards the tallest of Canterlot's towers as the blue streaks and smoky trails of the Wonderbolts soared towards it. Rainbow Dash's went taut with a smile she only reserved for the elite team.

The figures of Celestia and the notably smaller Luna stood upon the tower, lights from their horns glowing like beacons for all to see. Suddenly, the sky itself glowed, as several ponies pointed overhead to a glorious crescent sliver that began approaching its celestial counterpart. A white noise of excited mumbling broke out as the ever-thinning crescent shrank into the moon's shadow.

"They're gonna crash!" Spike shouted, his extending claw gently pushed down by Twilight.

"Shhh, no they're not," she whispered, not taking her eyes off the spectacle. "Watch."

Finally, moon and sun met, the lunar shadow consuming it entirely so it became pitch black against the brilliance of the other. As it slowly blocked out the sun, the surrounding sky turned blackish-red as though the heavens themselves were on fire.

A great flash erupted from the sun's edges as the moon overtook it entirely, great tendrils of stellar flame dancing outward along its borders. The stars could be easily seen in the sky as a brilliant aurora of every color danced overhead.

The ponies watching underneath oohed, aahed and cheered until the moon relinquished its place with the sun and came to a rest on the other side, the spell of the eclipse breaking as the sky returned to a brilliant blue.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

"An eclipse!" Pinkie Pie squealed, bouncing up and down as they made their way back down the stairway, talking rapid-fire. "A *real* solar eclipse!

"Oh my gosh, it was so amazing! I never thought I'd see a real eclipse! Well, I never thought I'd see a real sonic rainboom, or an evil mare of darkness, or Twilight single-handedly fend off a super-colossa-gantic-stellar-baby-bear, but I *really* never thought I'd see a solar eclipse! There hasn't been one a' those in—"

Pinkie tripped herself up and landed on her chin, back legs paddling the air as though she were

swimming.

"Over a thousand years," Twilight finished for her. "Wow Pinkie, no twitchy-tail on that one?"

Pinkie smiled, but otherwise neglected to move an inch. "Nah, I can't Pinkie-Sense *myself*, silly! What sense would *that* make?"

Twilight only smirked, rolling her eyes.

"I've only heard of eclipses in stories," Fluttershy added brightly, abandoning her timidity.

"And about five-hundred astronomy books," Spike muttered.

"But I'm rather puzzled, dears." Rarity quirked an eyebrow towards the group at large. "Why *has* it been so long?"

"A fair question, Rarity," was the reply of an authoritative, yet gentle voice.

They turned toward Princess Celestia, who stood at the bottom steps, multicolored hair drifting as always in an absent breeze. Princess Luna beamed a few steps behind her elder sister, like a shadow, her starry mane likewise adrift.

"Princess- er, Princesses." Twilight knelt before them, her friends following suit.

Celestia smiled and bowed her head. "It once was that eclipses were occasional events. In times of great hardship or great prosperity, Luna and I would adjoin the sun and moon, offering our best wishes or our solace.

"But after the day my hooves were forced by Nightmare Moon." Celestia barely paused as her sister shifted uncomfortably. "Though I had the power, I couldn't bear to take this last thing. Not while my dear Luna was alive and well, even if she was trapped where I might have never seen her again."

The center of Luna's brows rose toward her horn, as she smiled up at Celestia.

"Though I assumed command of the moon as well as the sun," she continued, "I did so with a heavy heart. I did not for a moment let myself revel in or enjoy the control I was forced to assume."

"Oh, sister!" Luna cried, her face full of affection as she trotted next to Celestia, nuzzling against her.

Luna turned to the group. "Our sincerest gratitude for attending! It means much, given the

trouble we caused you as the Nightmare."

"Aw, don't sweat it," Rainbow Dash said. "That was some of the best excitement I've been party to."

"And besides," said Applejack, "you were hardly yourself now, were yeh'?"

Luna shrugged and fidgeted. "Well, yes, water under the bridge I hope."

"We're glad you came," Celestia said, "but I had actually hoped to speak to you in person, Twilight."

"Oh." Twilight winced, not quite meeting her mentor's eyes. "I really don't have anything to report right now."

Celestia waved her down. "Oh no, no, that's fine. Actually, I wanted to extend to you an invitation, to take a private course in some more advanced magic here in Canterlot."

There were a few short gasps as Twilight's face went blank.

"A-a *private* course? As in, one-to-one, face to face, no other students? U-under you?" She gawked as Celestia politely nodded.

"Princess, I- I don't know what to say!" she blurted, "It would be an honor, but—"

"'But?'" Rarity exclaimed. "Twilight Sparkle, surely you're not declining such an opportunity for our benefit?"

"I'm not, it's just—" Twilight spluttered.

Once more she found herself interrupted, by Fluttershy. "We would never *dream* of holding you back, Twilight. You should really do this for yourself."

Fluttershy recoiled the instant attention turned to her, mumbling, "I mean, if you want to."

"It wouldn't be forever, Twilight," Celestia said. "Only a few months, really. And I wouldn't ask you to cut yourself off from your friends. I'm sure it would be fine if any of them wanted to come along."

Twilight steadied visibly. She turned to her friends, who didn't need words to know what she was asking.

"Aw, sorry Twi'," Applejack said, "Granny n' Macintosh are gonna need me on hand this early in

the season. And besides, I'm not sure I'd last a week here before these high-falutin' folk wore down my last apple-buckin' nerve— No offense, yer' Highness."

"And you, Rarity?" Twilight asked.

"Oh, it's always been such a dream. but what about the shop?" Rarity entered an argument with herself. "Well, I suppose I could run a small operation here- oh how exciting!

"But what about Sweetie Belle?" her sensible side asked. "Mother and Father went vacationing in Manehattan and left her with me for the month! I couldn't just uproot her from *her* friends, after all; it was the very reason she declined to join them."

"Well heck, Rare'," Applejack said, "we can look after yer' sis' if you want. I bet Apple Bloom'd be pleased as punch! It'd be like havin' a sleepover, every—"

Applejack's smile vanished entirely. A moment's pause and it returned, fake as zirconium. "Every night."

"OH, thankyouthankyouthankyou-so-much, Applejack!" Rarity gasped, hugging her so tightly she might have been fitting her for a corset.

She released Applejack from her iron grip before putting a hoof to her mouth and giving a dignified cough. Still, she whispered to herself. "Easy, Rarity old girl. Oh be still, heart of mine."

"Well I can come!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, instantly beside Twilight. "I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Cake will understand."

"I'd come too, but," Fluttershy said, lightly kicking a crack in the tiling. "Oh, I just can't leave my animal friends behind. They depend on me, y'know."

Twilight nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean," she said, "but at least I can actually bring Spike along."

Spike had been at Twilight's side, wearing a smile nearly as false as Applejack's, the center of his brows rising as the conversation went on. Upon hearing this last sentence however, his face went blank and he remained silent.

"Uh, I guess I could transfer here for a while," Rainbow Dash said, the slightest smugness coating her voice as usual. "I bet the weather patrol could benefit from my expert touch."

"Well," Twilight said, "I guess that settles it! I accept."

Celestia nodded in approval, while Spike's face darkened to the notice of no one.

"Very well, my faithful student. You'll have until tomorrow night to be ready, and by sundown an escort will arrive for you."

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Twilight almost busted down her front door.

"Ooh, Spike! Can you believe this! I'm going to be taught advanced magic, one-on-one, by the Princess herself!" she paused as her brain churned, her smile not leaving her face. "Oh, I need to let Owlwiscious know. Spike, have you seen him anywhere?"

"No," Spike bristled. "But I guess it's cool to finally be spoken to by the 'great' Twilight Sparkle."

It was as though Spike had thrown a bucket of ice water over her head. She turned, the slightest crease in her eyebrows. "Wh- what are you talking about, Spike? Is something wrong; are you feeling okay?"

"I'm not going," was his curt reply.

Twilight's eyebrows rose as she tilted her head unconsciously. "Not going?"

"Back to Canterlot," he elaborated. "I'm gonna stay here in Ponyville."

Twilight's tongue clucked as she frowned, levitating luggage from upstairs down near the horse-head bust. "Don't be ridiculous Spike, I already accepted the Princess' offer."

"Yeah, accepted it without sayin' a word to me," he muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"I *like* Ponyville, Twilight," he answered, his face the keenest impression of a sad puppy-dog. "I've got real friends here, it's *tons* better than stuffy old Canterlot was! And you asked everypony else what *they* wanted, and then completely forgot I was there..."

"At least *Rarity* remembered she had a little sister she didn't want to uproot. / got compared to one of Fluttershy's helpless woodland critters!"

Twilight blushed and averted her eyes from his. Another moment later and inspiration struck.

"Oh, well it's too bad you're not coming, seeing as *Rarity* is coming too. I'm sure we'd have all kinds of time together."

"Uh." His expression softened momentarily, until he shook his head like a dog ridding its ears of water. "That's not gonna work on me, Twilight! *You* might've made your bed in Canterlot, but I'm stayin' right here!"

Twilight groaned, massaging her forehead before turning back to him. "Spike, I'm sorry I didn't involve you with the decision, but you've gotta understand. I'm *responsible* for you. You're still only a baby."

"I'm also a *DRAGON*, Twilight," Spike said. "Remember? Don't tell me you've never read about dragons! We stay 'babies' for decades. You were just a filly when I was born, and now you're a full-grown mare! I'd be a *teenager* if I was a pony!"

"Yeah, I'm a baby, but not like you're used to," he continued, "and whatever you *think* you are to me, it's *NOT* my *mom*!"

"I—" Twilight balked. "I don't think I'm like your— well... maybe I *should*! Who *else* do you have?!"

The second she'd said it, Twilight recoiled with a gasp, her ears turning sharply downward. Meanwhile, Spike's eyes turned wide as saucers and began to glimmer as he stared at her.

"Spike, I— I didn't mean—"

Spike cut her off, his voice wobbling in his throat. "No, y-you're right Twilight. Who else *do* I have?"

"N-nopony knows what happened to my mom or my dad. But y'know what? M-maybe I don't *need* one at all! Maybe I don't *need* anypony!"

Twilight's own eyes burned as she watched him. "Spike, I didn't mean that, I'm so sorry!"

"Just *go away*!" he cried, rounding on her as only a true reptile could. "I *don't* need you! I can take care of the library just like I always have! I'm not coming with you, a-and I don't *want* you here!"

Twilight approached Spike slowly. He'd turned his back on her. "Alright Spike. I know you can make your own decisions. And I— I'm sorry, I—" Twilight sped to her room, barely making it inside as she finally burst into tears.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Pinkie, Rarity and Rainbow Dash arranged to meet in front of Twilight's house the following day. Each of them were packed for the long haul. Twilight had moved slowly as she packed and was so distracted that she barely realized she'd been trying to stuff her telescope into a full bag. She finally made it downstairs. She'd been dreading this all day. Spike was sitting at the dining room table. He'd barely moved. Staying angry overnight didn't seem easy, for Spike had long since downgraded to a sulk.

"Well," Twilight broached, slowly, "they're waiting for me outside."

"Alright," Spike said flatly. "Cool."

The response wasn't angry, but it was no less disheartening. "I've asked Applejack to visit now and then, to see if you need anything. If you need to, you know how to reach me."

"Right," he said.

Twilight took a step or two towards the door, but stopped herself and walked right up to him from behind, taking one hoof and wrapping Spike in a small, fierce hug.

"I love you, Spike. And if you're not here when I'm back, I'll still love you. You'll always have a home with me. Just please, take care of yourself."

Spike barely moved. Twilight felt herself on the verge of tears again as she finally made her way out the door. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself before meeting the others outside.

Try as she might, she couldn't hide her feelings from the others, especially Pinkie Pie. It was a short tale to tell, but by the time Canterlot was close enough to see individual windows, Rarity was still consoling her.

"Oh, don't you worry dear. Spike will come around. He may be rather peeved, but really he's a sweetheart."

"He wouldn't even look at me when I left," Twilight muttered, head and shoulders drooping.

"Aw, Rarity's right Twilight. He just got his iddy-biddy-baby dragon feelings hurt. He's only *pretending* he doesn't want anything to do with you," Pinkie Pie said.

"Spike just needs time to cool off," Rainbow Dash offered, fidgeting and feeling distinctly weird about being airborne without using her wings. "I'm betting you'll get a letter from him in no time, and you two will be back to being buds."

Twilight did her best to force a smile. "I guess."

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Things went more or less swimmingly upon their arrival. Celestia had fixed things so that the group shared a space near the palace walls. It was a cozy little duplex, two floors separating a work-space from a living space upstairs. Celestia had evidently been listening to Rarity when she mentioned running her business here, for the seamstress positively gushed at the layout.

"And just when I'd have been satisfied with stitching in a living room!" Rarity gushed, her front hooves together as though in prayer. "Oh Twilight, it's simply darling!"

Rarity had unpacked faster than any of them, even the infinitely organized Twilight, and set about touring their little slice of paradise. Fully furnished in typical Canterlot fashion, their stay looked to be a comfortable one.

It was all courtesy of the kingdom. However...

"You're going to need a job Pinkie," Twilight said.

Pinkie Pie tilted her head in surprise. "I am? But *you* don't have one."

"I'm listed as a full-time student," Twilight explained, "so *my* expenses are covered. Everypony else is gonna need to pull their weight though, if we're planning on *eating* while we're here that is."

A gurgling sounded deep within Pinkie, allowing Twilight a much needed opportunity to smile.

"Oh, well. What are Rarity and Rainbow Dash doing for work?" Pinkie asked.

"Well, if you recall, Rarity is running her shop downstairs, and Rainbow just asked for a transfer to Canterlot's weather-team."

"Oh, hey! You think maybe Rarity needs any help?"

"No, Rarity does not," answered the fashionista herself as she made her way upstairs. "Besides, dear, do you expect me to pay you with *my* earnings? Private trade is not an unlimited wellspring of funds, darling, and I'll hardly be as effective here as at my Boutique."

"Actually Pinkie," Twilight said, "I shot a recommendation to Pony-Joe's Donut Shop. Joe said he'd love to have you on!"

Pinkie Pie's eyes lit-up. "Oh, that just sounds so completely splendorific, Twilight!" Pinkie cried,

hooves shooting out of nowhere to wrap her friend in a vice-grip embrace.

"I thought you might like that," Twilight wheezed, patting Pinkie on the back in hopes that she'd be released.

The next day, Twilight decided to walk Pinkie to her first day at work, not expecting the distractible girl to indelibly recall her only visit to the little shop.

"Thanks again for walking to work with me, Twilight. You're *really* considerate!"

"Well, off and on," Twilight admitted, ears flattening.

"Aww, you're still broken up about Spike, aren't you?" Pinkie eyed Twilight with a pout.

"How do you do it, Pinkie?" Twilight asked. "You're always so... spirited and agreeable. It's not like *you've* ever really hurt anypony's feelings."

"Oh, that's not true." Pinkie shook her head. "Just ask Fluttershy sometime! Believe it or not, I wasn't *always* the master prankstress you see today. I learned the hard way that she doesn't respond well to a practical joke."

"But it's not like she shut herself in her house and refused to speak to anypony for days and—" Twilight stopped mid-sentence as Pinkie stopped walking and actively avoided eye-contact with her.

Twilight gaped. "You're kidding."

"Nopey-dopey-lopey." Pinkie shook her head again, with less enthusiasm. "Turns out, she's *real* sensitive. Boy was I in the doghouse!"

"Well, what did you do?" Twilight asked, leaning towards her.

"Oh, lots of things! I tried baking a cake, sent her apology cards. I even wrote a song for her! Though to be fair, '*Tarred and Feathered in Ponyville*' wasn't my best effort."

"Oh my *gosh*," Twilight said, gawking as she tried her best to hide an unwanted giggle with her hoof. "That's *terrible*!"

The image of Fluttershy she'd just conjured was too funny to ignore, yet too awful to be allowed.

"I know, right? Fluttershy thought so anyway. But it turned out that the more I tried to fix things, the worse they got! Believe it or not, after I left her alone, she came out and forgave me a few days later!"

"So," Twilight said, staring at the floor momentarily, "I just need to give Spike space?"

"Well, duh!" Pinkie frowned at her. "That's what we told you in the first place!"

"Well, yeah, fair enough," Twilight admitted. "I just didn't know it worked!"

"Well of course it worked!" Pinkie sighed. "Would your pal Pinkie Pie give advice that didn't work? Yeesh Twilight, between that, my Pinkie-Sense and the Parasprites, you'd think you didn't trust my judgment!"

This time it was Twilight's turn to avoid Pinkie's gaze, forcing her to heed their surroundings a bit more. This led Twilight to stop dead as she noticed—

"Hey!" she cried. "Where's the—?"

"The Donut Shop?" Pinkie said, pointing behind them. "We passed it two blocks ago."

"Two blocks a—? Pinkie, why didn't you say anything?" Twilight asked, the slightest crease in her wide-eyes.

"Well, y'seemed like you *really* needed to talk," Pinkie said, "but that'll have to do it for now. I've got donuts to make! See ya' later, navigator!"

And with that, Twilight was only left to watch as she bounced off into the distance.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Twilight's new studies proved challenging and exhilarating. Within the first few lessons, she had added a few more spells to her repertoire. It was basic, but she was able to ignite targets now (though given her limited practice, she'd only achieved the level of a lit match) and was capable of producing a spell that allowed her to cut through objects with a focused ray of magical power. Twilight was surprised the princess trusted her with such dangerous spells. Of course, she was an adult now, but Celestia had been her fillyhood teacher, and for a moment she was strangely aware that at some point she had grown up without really noticing. Poor Spike...

Back in Ponyville, Spike returned to the Library after a long walk. Night had fallen, and Spike saw a small, rather adorable owl perched on the windowsill.

"Oh, hey Owlowiscious," Spike greeted the owl, his eyelids drooping with the rest of him. "I've just been... thinking."

"I know Twilight was inconsiderate and that she can turn a little bossy, but am I being too hard on her?"

"Hoo?"

"Twilight. Oh wait, right. But I mean, she *did* say she was sorry," Spike muttered under his breath.

"Hoo-Hoo."

"Yeah, and she did really seem like she meant it."

"Hoo!"

"I made her cry," Spike said, finally, before he slumped where he stood. "Oh. I really did blow this out of proportion, didn't I?"

"Hoo..."

Spike smiled at the little featherball. "Heh. I know you're not really saying anything, but still, it helps me think.

"Y'know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna hitch a ride straight to Canterlot! And—" Spike opened the front door, only to see something he certainly wasn't expecting.

"Uh. H-hello?" Spike said to the figures shrouded in darkness outside, who stood a foot taller than the door.

One of them spoke in a smooth male voice. "Is this the home of the unicorn, Twilight Sparkle?"

~~~~~  
~~~~~

In the middle of a grassy courtyard of Canterlot, Twilight Sparkle was in the midst of learning a shield spell. Twilight was already versed in a defensive force field spell, but this was a quick-cast spell for more personal and immediate dangers. As her horn glowed with power, a fluorescing purple mass spread out in front of her.

"Excellent, Twilight." Celestia beamed "But try not to strain more than your magical reserves. You seem tense."

Twilight followed her advice, trying to maintain the shield without flexing from the effort. But in

that moment, something whirled in emerald sparks from above Celestia's horn, falling to the floor with a smash. It was a vase, still slightly smoking.

"Spike?" Twilight whispered.

As if in answer, more items emerged. A singing book. A table. A red-hot metal joint attached to a slender pipe— which emitted numerous, loud bursts of light from the open end.

Twilight could have sworn she felt the noise in her chest. At first only startling the two, they soon realized that anywhere the loud, spastic thing pointed was struck by something thin, fast and apparently invisible, cracking some sections of the opposite wall.

Celestia managed to grab the curious object with her magic before it could flail towards her student. Eventually though, the noise and flashing stopped, replaced by a series of loud clicks, the open-end of the pipe smoking. In a few moments even this ceased, and the silence was deafening.

"Princess," Twilight asked after a while, "what *is* that?"

Celestia wore an expression Twilight hadn't seen since the night of the Gala, when they both stumbled upon chaos that had consumed the ballroom.

"I don't know. Guards!" she commanded, and a pair of golden-armored pegasi entered.

"Princess," they muttered, bowing.

"I need you to assemble a squad," Celestia ordered, "and make your way to the Ponyville Library with all haste. Search for anything out of the ordinary, anything out of place. And find the young dragon who answers to the name 'Spike'. Bring him here if you find him. Go now!"

Twilight rocked back and forth on her hooves, not breaking her gaze upon Celestia until at last she could remain silent no longer.

"Princess, what do you mean 'if they find him'? What's happening, is Spike in trouble?" Twilight's eyes pleaded with her mentor, who stared for a moment in contemplation.

"I haven't been entirely honest with you Twilight," Celestia said. "When Luna and I cause an eclipse, the energies coursing between us have occasionally opened our eyes to glimpses of events that haven't happened yet. The last time, I saw Nightmare Moon. I never guessed it would be my own sister."

Twilight's pupils constricted as she considered this. It felt to her like time had sped up around them.

"This time," Celestia continued "I saw *you*, shrouded and consumed by darkness. I wanted you safe Twilight, so I asked you to stay here, where it would be harder for somepony, —or something— to harm you."

Twilight felt her fears confirmed rather than alleviated. "But, why didn't you just tell me this from the start?" she asked.

"The future is always changing. There was no certainty in the threat, and I didn't want to frighten you if I didn't have to."

"But if it doesn't know I'm here, then it would start looking for me at home!" Twilight cried, before she gasped. "Oh please, no! It's my fault he's still there! I can't let this happen!" Twilight began racing from the yard.

"Twilight, *NO!*"

Twilight stopped at the seriousness in Celestia's voice, as though she were about to leap off the highest tower in Canterlot.

"This will all have been in vain," Celestia told her hoarsely, "and any danger Spike is in will only double if whatever is responsible is still there waiting for you!"

Twilight stared at Celestia. She had never been so uncertain in her entire life, and yet, only one thing could quell the terror. Her horn began to glow.

"I'm sorry Princess."

"*Twilight Sparkle!*" Celestia cried, as her student vanished in a great flash.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

Twilight rematerialized just outside the gates of the palace. Despite her efforts, her jumps were constrained by distance, and she had to know where she was going. On the main road, she could only transport herself a modest distance. Already worn from the lesson, it cost more and more effort to make each jump.

Finally, she found herself on the outskirts of Ponyville. She looked around wildly, steeling herself for whatever threat might arise. But it wasn't enough.

Her tense vigilance turned instantly to gut-wrenching horror as she looked towards the village. A fierce orange glow was coming from the place she called home: the library was on fire.

"No," She breathed, before galloping as fast as her legs could carry her, past shops and homes. Past the ajar doors of concerned pony-folk who watched on.

Twilight wondered why they weren't helping, before she realized the Ponyville Volunteer Fire Brigade was on the scene. Great hoses led by earth ponies fought a losing battle against the massive, flaming hollow tree, which by this point had lost nearly all of its leaves to the blaze. Embers from burnt paper soared through the windows as unicorn ponies combined their power to create a giant version of Twilight's same shield spell, preventing other buildings from catching fire. Twilight heard shouts confirming that the town pegasi were on their way as well, presumably to hit the Library with a rainstorm.

"Whoa, Ma'am!" a stallion firefighter shouted over the roar of the inferno. "I'm sorry, but this is an emergency situation! We can't have anypony too close to the building!"

"Have you seen a baby dragon anywhere? Did he come out of the library?" Twilight asked, hoping against hope, the loss of her home and her books meaningless in light of the situation.

The stallion merely shook his head. "Nothing's come out and nothing's gone in; too dangerous in there. Paramedics are en-route, but we haven't heard a thing about anypony inside—

"*HEY!* Where are you going?!" he bellowed, as Twilight shot past him, magically forcing the front door open like a cannon in spite of her exhaustion. It fell off its hinges, having barely held on in the first place from previous trauma.

Scorch marks littered the room, the surface of the floor not merely burnt, but damaged by what must have been impressive force. Even built into the wall, shelves had collapsed and dumped their payloads onto the floor to smolder.

"Spike!" she shouted, smoke stinging her eyes. "Where are you?" Twilight could barely hear her own voice above the terrifying sound. If Spike were in here, he'd never hear her.

She threw objects off the floor and to the side as she looked. Cracking noises from the tree added to the already cruel sense of urgency as she rifled through rubble.

"Please Spike," she said to herself, spirit falling with every bit of furniture that did not yield the diminutive dragon. "Please be okay."

"Twilight!" croaked a weak voice that terrified her. It barely carried above the sound of the rushing flames, but it was too loud to be her imagination.

She found the source of the noise, beneath a stack of shelves and proceeded to lift them off. "Don't worry Spike," Twilight told him. "I'm here, I'm coming to get you!"

Finally, she saw his face, and with one final heave he was free. "Never again, Spike," Twilight said, hugging him between her cheek and fore-hoof. "I won't leave you like that ever again, I swear."

Twilight traded one fear for another, as she realized Spike was having trouble moving on his own, his reactions tepid given the situation. She got him onto her back with difficulty, and used her remaining power to transport them both away from the blaze.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

"Twilight," Spike murmured, "you came back."

They had appeared in the middle of a road in the center of town. Twilight knew the hospital was three blocks from where they stood, but she was worn down. She'd exhausted her magic, and could only trot down the road at a steady pace.

"Of course I came back for you!" Twilight said, deeply unsettled that he appeared so weak. She kept up her pace. "I'm getting you to a doctor, just hold on tight!"

"You shouldn't have. They were looking for you. I tried to stop them."

"Who was looking for me?" she asked, anxious both for an answer, and to keep hearing Spike's voice. She felt she had almost been *less* frightened in the burning library.

Spike sounded more lucid as he concentrated. "Tall, really tall. Most were metal, but one had skin. I only saw his face."

"Twilight," he said, growing increasingly quieter, "I'm so tired."

Twilight felt Spike's weight lift from her back as his grip slackened and he slipped off onto the hard, cold earth.

"Spike!" she cried, turning around to find her friend lying on his back in the dirt. She could see he was still breathing, but it was labored.

She laid on the ground next to him. "Spike, come on, we need to move! I need you to grab hold, I can't lift you with magic this time, and you're too big any other way," Twilight finished, feeling powerless.

Spike's hand reached for her withers, but he couldn't quite haul himself on. He soon gave up, lying on his back again.

"Twilight, I'm sorry I—"

"No, *I'm* sorry!" Twilight shouted. "It's my fault you were still here! If I hadn't been so selfish, we wouldn't have fought, but I *still* never should have left you!" She called out to the darkness in desperation. "HELP! PLEASE, MY FRIEND IS HURT! SOME PONY, *HELP!*"

"Twilight, tell Rarity—"

Twilight cut him off again. "Don't you *dare* start saying goodbyes!" she bawled. "Don't you start giving up! You're a *dragon*, you're *FIREPROOF!*"

"Why would the bravest, toughest little dragon I ever knew be beaten by a fire?" she choked, her eyes watering.

It was true. Spike was bruised in a number of places, but he was not bleeding. It only amplified how helpless Twilight felt that she couldn't understand what was wrong.

"He did something," Spike said, "all these can things all over the floor. Something flashed, a-and it felt like something was hitting me harder than I—" Spike stopped as something flew onto the roof of a building near them.

Twilight called to it. "Owlwiscious! Spike's hurt bad, please, get help!"

"Hoo!" And with that, the bird set off once more into the night.

"Twilight, I'm scared."

Tears streamed from Twilight's quivering eyes as she nuzzled him. "I'm right here, I won't let anything happen to you."

"The wind." He shivered. "It's just blowing through me. Why is everything so cold now?"

Twilight betrayed a sob. All she could do was hold him tighter. She couldn't let him go. The world would end if she ever let him go.

"Twilight," he said, "I know you're not my mother, but I wouldn't have minded."

Every muscle of Twilight's face scrunched up. "Neither would I. You're my best friend, Spike. I love you so much!" She buried her head into his shoulder, beginning at long last to lose control as Spike's eyes slowly shut.

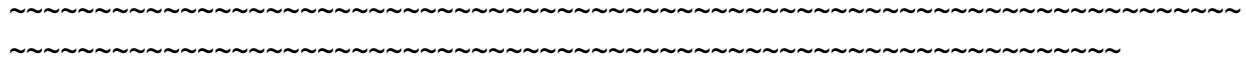
"Spike?!" she cried, her pupils turning to pinpoints. "*NO!* You need to stay awake! You've *GOT*"

TO fight!"

Twilight shuddered as sobs wracked her body. "*Please,*" she wept, "*don't leave me.*"

"Twi... light..." The last syllable was but a breath, as two sets of eyelids met, and Twilight felt her best friend's body slacken.

And Spike was gone.



Twilight Sparkle let out a scream that shot out through the dark streets of Ponyville, and in that moment, something in her broke. She felt numbed to the world around her. Rain from the village pegasi streamed down from above, as the orange glow of the Library dimmed slowly. She felt none of it.

Applejack and Fluttershy arrived, but their voices sounded like they were underwater. It was as though the world had slowed down. For a long while, nothing happened, as Applejack kept her distance and bowed her head, putting a hoof around Fluttershy who was instantly a mess of tears.

Nobody was capable of saying a word upon seeing Spike lying still on the ground. Twilight, covered in mud and her coat stained from ash in the fire, tenderly curled up next to him.

And for what felt like an eternity, that was how it stayed.