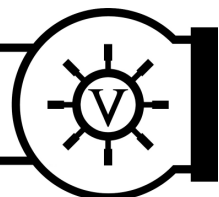


Fire Spores

applecinnamonspice

PONY FICTION VAULT



“Did you—?”

“Cleaned the shelves, reorganized the desk, sorted out the card catalog, dusted the books—”

“Even the—”

“*Especially* the super special rare books—reference only, of course—shelved towards the top so the younger fillies can’t get to them.”

“Great! So now there’s—”

“Breakfast? Toast with daffodil butter and a refreshing grass smoothie to get your brain muscles pumping.”

As the plate and glass sailed across the table towards her, Twilight Sparkle couldn’t help chuckling a bit to herself. “Wow Spike, it’s like you don’t even need me anymore.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t go that far.” Spike grinned proudly before heading back to triple check the morning check list of what needed to get done at the library today. Twilight had slept in a bit that morning after a rather grueling studying session the previous night, which usually meant that her number one assistant took advantage of this and caught a few extra Z’s himself. She was surprised when she woke up around ten o’clock to find both her room and the library spotless, clean and organized, all of her books back in their proper places with fresh parchment, quills and ink ready on her desk. Hearing the little dragon humming to himself in the kitchen as he mixed up her smoothie, Twilight felt touched that he had taken it upon himself to wake up early and get everything ready for her for the day, plus make her breakfast. *He really is growing up...*

“Besides,” Spike added as he joined her at the table, “it’d get way too boring around here without you going crazy about something every other day.” He gave her a joking smile as Twilight frowned down at him. *Scratch that—he’s still immature as ever*, she thought as Spike started to laugh at her glare, only for it to be followed by a coughing fit.

“Ooh, that doesn’t sound very good.” Twilight winced, watching little puffs of smoke fly out of Spike mouth each time he coughed. “I hope you’re not getting sick. Hearth’s Warming Eve is only a few days away and I’d hate for you to miss out on the festivities.” She, Spike, and the girls planned to head to Canterlot and attend a professional production of the legend of the founding of Equestria, followed by a gift exchange on the train ride back to Ponyville and a sleepover back at the library so they could all ring in the new year together.

“Aw, don’t worry about it,” Spike said hoarsely as he resurfaced from his fit. “Pretty sure it’s just dust from cleaning the super special rare books up top.”

“Speaking of which,” Twilight said as she polished off her breakfast and trotted towards the high shelf where the reference books rested, examining them carefully, “they’re certainly clean—but I don’t think they’re alphabetized. I think you know by now that *Star Swirl’s Complete History* should go after *Here’s Some More Star Swirl History*.”

“Oh shoot, I *knew* I forgot something!” Spike smacked a claw to his forehead, rushing over to push the ladder towards the high shelf. Scampering up to the top, he had to pause to cough some more, concluding with a little gag, “Yep, definitely the dust.”

“Look, don’t push yourself too hard,” Twilight said, a little wary of Spike’s frequent coughing. “It doesn’t need to be done right this instant—”

“No can do, Twilight,” Spike said in a businesslike fashion, pushing the books around on the top shelf in their correct order. “A true number one assistant works hard, no matter what ails him.”

Twilight smiled up at his adorable nobility. “Spike, you really are something. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Aw, thanks.” Spike blushed a bit at her compliment, just as a loud knocking at the front door interrupted them.

“Twilight!” came a loud, brash voice they both knew belonged to a certain blue pegasus. “You in there?!”

“I suppose this is what I get for sleeping in,” Twilight sighed, using her magic to open the door for her friend, who zoomed into the room as if she had planned to break down the door anyway.

“Oh man, Twilight you *have* to see what I got Rarity for her Hearth’s Warming Eve present!” Rainbow Dash said excitedly, carrying a cardboard box in her front hooves.

“Rainbow Dash, this is *supposed* to be a *secret* gift exchange!” Twilight cried indignantly up at Rainbow Dash hovering above her. “You’re not supposed to tell which pony you’re buying for.”

“Lighten up, Twilight, who cares if it’s a secret or not? It’s the thought that counts anyway.” Rainbow waved her hoof at her dismissively. “Besides, do you actually expect a pony like Pinkie Pie to keep it secret for long?”

“Touché,” Twilight had to admit, “but I’m still keeping the pony I’m giving *my* gift to a secret.”

“Anyways, so remember the other day when Rarity was totally *freaking out* ‘cause she found a gray hair in her mane?” Rainbow said, fiddling with the string on the box.

“Vaguely,” Twilight said sarcastically—how could she forget? The debutant unicorn’s bloodcurdling scream could probably have been heard clear to Fillydelphia.

“Well, I dropped around twenty bits and got this new mane color for her!” Twilight’s jaw nearly hit the floor when she saw the bottle Rainbow withdrew. It was completely filled with liquidated faux silver gems.

“Uh...Rainbow?”

“I know, right?! It’s gems, just like she loves! But it’s liquid so she can put it in her mane! This has got to be the most awesome gift ever!”

“I uh...” Twilight had half a mind to tell Rainbow that Rarity would never put such a cheap, tacky color in her mane, but to spare Rainbow’s feelings she ultimately decided against such blunt honesty. That was Applejack’s department after all. “You know, I’ve been thinking about getting a new mane color myself...uh...why don’t we go back to the store and you can...er...help me pick one out, too?”

“Sure, why not?” Rainbow said enthusiastically. “Guess I’m becoming quite the expert at this mane stuff, huh?”

“Uh, something like that,” Twilight murmured, levitating her scarf around her neck as Rainbow zoomed out into the snowy Ponyville air. She called up to her assistant, still perched at the top of the ladder, “Spike, I guess I’m going out for a bit!”

“Okay, have f—” Spike coughed several smoke-filled times before finishing, “—have fun!”

“Oh, and Spike?” Twilight called up to him. “There’s some cough medicine in the pantry, I want you to take some this morning.”

“*Fine*, whatever,” Spike mumbled disgruntledly as Twilight shut the door behind her. He hated that icky cough medicine—it tasted bad and made him sleepy. And he wouldn’t be of any use to Twilight if he was sleepy. “Besides,” he said to himself as he pulled out *A Mare’s Magical Guide* to move it to its correct place, “it’s just a little cough, nothing to worry about—”

The little dragon’s face quickly twisted into that of horror when an unanticipated and very violent sneeze burst from him, sending a shot of flames from his nose that completely engulfed the leather bound book in his hands.

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“I’m back, Spike!” Twilight called out as she opened the door to the library a few hours later. “And I managed to convince Rainbow Dash to return that flashy mane color!” Luckily, there had been a deep purple color similar to Rarity’s natural mane that they were able to buy in its place. On the way back, she stopped by Sugar Cube Corner to pick up some holiday baked goods at Pinkie Pie’s “bestest best friend forever” discount price.

“Where do you want these, Twilight?” came the cheerful voice of the pink earth pony, balancing three boxes of freshly baked cookies on her back.

“I’ll take them from here, Pinkie,” Twilight replied, levitating the boxes off of Pinkie’s back. “Follow me into the kitchen and we can—” She gasped the moment her gaze traveled to the floor of her library, letting the boxes fall clumsily as she struggled to take in what she was seeing.

“See, I *told* you I should’ve carried them.” Pinkie sounded a little annoyed as she went to gather the boxes. “They were too heavy even for your magic to handle, you silly!”

“What the *hay*...” Twilight managed to squeak out, moving closer to find her suspicions confirmed. A pile of about three or four blackened and burned books was sitting at the foot of the ladder leaning against the shelf—right where the reference books resided at the top.

“Twilight...?” Pinkie asked, finally noticing her friend’s distress. “You don’t look so good. You okay?”

“No Pinkie, I’m *not* okay,” Twilight snapped at her, causing Pinkie to recoil a bit as the lavender unicorn snorted angrily, calling up the stairs, “*Spike!*”

A clearly audible gasp followed, punctured by a loud sneeze. “Aw great, burned the handkerchief now,” came the muttering voice of the little purple dragon as he descended the stairs, slowly and hesitantly to face the long hard lecture from Twilight that was sure to come. In spite of her anger and frustration, Twilight couldn’t help noticing that Spike did not look well at all.

“Spike, you look awfully pale,” Twilight said evenly, trying to keep her temper at bay for just a little bit longer. “Did you take the medicine like I asked you to earlier?”

“Yeah,” Spike sniffled, wiping his nose on the back of his wrist. “I did—I swear I did!” he added hastily upon the glower Twilight gave him.

“Are you sick, Spike?” Pinkie asked, cocking her head curiously to the side as she examined the little dragon’s paler purple hue. “I better leave then. I don’t wanna get the sniffles—”

“No Pinkie stay, *please* stay!” Spike begged desperately, glancing at Twilight out the corner of his eye and hoping that if Pinkie stuck around then his unicorn companion would go easier on him.

“If you took the medicine, then why are you—?”

“Ah-*choo!*”

“—sneezing,” Twilight finished. Pinkie squealed and jumped out of the way as a shot of flames blazed past her, barely grazing her mane as Twilight marched closer to Spike. “And what do you have to say for yourself about *this*, huh?” She indicated the scorched pile of what barely resembled books.

“It was a total accident, Twilight, I didn’t mean to,” Spike tried to explain through a congested nose, but Twilight barely noticed as she used her magic to sift through the ashes.

“Spike, how many times have I told you to get away from the books when you feel a sneeze coming on?!”

“They were coming out of nowhere, there wasn’t much I could do—!”

“That’s no exc—*no!*” Twilight suddenly cried out as she reached the bottom of the pile. Levitating to her eye level, she saw that it was her now completely destroyed copy of *A Mare’s Magical Guide*.

“Um...no charge for this delivery, okay? Okay!” Pinkie dropped the boxes back on the floor and shot out the door of the library, leaving the two of them alone.

“Spike, how could you?” Twilight whispered, futilely looking to see if the book was salvageable in any way. “This was the very first book Princess Celestia ever gave me when I began my studies with her. It—it was really precious to me, and now it’s gone...forever.”

“I’m so sorry, Twilight...” Spike trailed off, feeling worse from guilt than his physical illness. He would have almost preferred it if she’d yelled at him and punished him—anything would have been better than this bitter disappointment reflected in Twilight’s tear-filled eyes.

“Please leave, Spike.”

“But Twilight—”

“Just *go away*,” Twilight shot at him, turning away as she let the charred book fall at her feet. “I can’t talk to you, I—I can’t even *look* at you right now.”

Spike let out one last sneeze before miserably trudging back up the stairs to the bedroom. The drowsy effects of the cold medicine were starting to take effect as he crawled under the covers inside his basket. But if there was anything Spike hated more than taking disgusting medicine, it was seeing Twilight so upset. And the worst part was...he had been the cause of it.

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Twilight opened her eyes the following morning, staring up at the oak ceiling of her bedroom as she gathered her thoughts, recalling everything that had happened the previous day: Spike catching a cold and his constant diligence which led to the destruction of four of the rarest books in her reference section, including the Princess’ gift to her from back when she was just a filly. After she had gotten over the initial shock of losing *A Mare’s Magical Guide*, she realized that—in retrospect—she had already mastered all of the spells in that book and didn’t really have a need for it anymore. She sighed as she rolled over, squeezing her eyes shut tight against her pillow. Sleeping on this had made Twilight realize that her emotional attachment to that book had made her react to her assistant far more harshly than she intended to.

*Poor Spike...*she thought unhappily, opening her eyes to gaze down at Spike, sleeping with his back to her in his little basket at the foot of her bed. *I should wake him up and*

apologize—tell him I was just angry and didn't mean to sound so cruel. Getting up out of bed, she crept over to Spike's basket and reached out a hoof to gently shake him awake.

She gasped and withdrew her hoof as if she'd been burned, which wasn't far from the truth. Spike's scaly body felt like it was on fire, and Twilight could just barely make out his shallow breathing patterns over the sound of her own pounding heart.

"Spike?" she asked in a tone just over a whisper, shaking him a bit harder than she meant to. "Spike, are you alright? Answer me." A wave of relief washed over her when Spike moaned a little—at least he was responsive. However, the panic came back full force when Spike rolled over to meet her gaze. He was *far* paler than yesterday with beads of sweat rolling off of his forehead as Twilight yanked the blanket away from him.

"No..." Spike muttered, reaching out for the blanket. "C-cold..."

"What?" Twilight pondered in a hushed voice, throwing the blanket back over him. "How can you be cold *and* sweating at the same time?" Spike yawned widely and Twilight nearly jumped backward. His tongue was swollen and parched with little red and white spots dotting all the way back to his throat as he gave a slight dry cough.

"This is not good." Twilight shook her head as she bit her lip. Taking mental inventory of all of his symptoms, she dashed down the stairs to the library. Pulling out book after book, she flipped through every mention of illnesses and their indicators, including several books Zecora had recommended to her. When nothing she read appeared to completely match Spike's symptoms, Twilight was forced to conclude fearfully that this was not some pony illness—this was a *dragon* illness.

"No, no, no, no, no..." she repeated continually under her breath. Her library contained hardly any dragon lore, let alone a complete record of their known illnesses. After a quick look through the books she knew had references to dragons in them, Twilight sank to the ground on her haunches and buried her face in her hooves.

What could she do? The Ponyville pediatricians wouldn't know how to help; she learned that not long ago during Spike's sudden growth spurt. Zecora was gone on a trip to add more herbs to her collection, plus a trek through the Everfree Forest to her hut would take far too long. And there was no way Twilight could get a letter to Princess Celestia with Spike in such awful condition. Resigning herself to a dead end, she stood to head back upstairs and check on the little dragon when a sudden knock at the door made her heart leap hopefully.

“Twilight darling, are you awake?”

“*Rarity*,” Twilight breathed, flinging the door open with her magic to reveal the pristine white unicorn. “Am I glad to see you.”

“I was just talking to Silver Shimmer—you remember her, she used to work at the spa and now she’s at *Mane-ingful Color*—and she told me you and Rainbow Dash intended to buy me a ‘*gag gift*’ for Hearth’s Warming Eve,” Rarity recounted in one breath as she trotted into Twilight’s main room with her nose in the air. “And frankly I’m a bit upset that you would stoop to Rainbow’s childish level of practical joking for a celebration as sacred as Hearth’s Warming Eve—”

“Rarity I’m sorry, but this is a bad time,” Twilight interrupted her, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice. “Spike is sick and I don’t have time to—”

“Spike?” Rarity whirled around to face her, concern evident in her sapphire eyes. “He’s ill? How badly?”

“It started out as a cold yesterday. This morning he has a fever but he *also* feels like he’s freezing, and there are spots on his tongue and throat.” Twilight paced the floor, recounting the symptoms to her posh friend. “I’ve never seen anything like this before, and it’s not in any of my books. It’s some sort of dragon thing and I know next to nothing about their ailments and Spike’s upstairs all—” She gasped, realizing it had been at least a half an hour since she left Spike alone.

“Spikey-wikey, I’m coming!” Rarity called dramatically, galloping up the stairs with Twilight at her heels.

“*Shh* Rarity, don’t wake him!” Twilight hissed as loudly as she dared when they reached the landing to Twilight’s room.

“R-Rarity?” Spike groaned as the little dragon rolled over to face them. He cracked his eyes open and Twilight’s heart tightened when she saw how bloodshot they were. “Is that you?”

“Oh you poor little *thing*,” Rarity cooed, running a hoof over his sweaty forehead before pulling back suddenly, glancing back at Twilight. “He’s not contagious is he?”

“Not to ponies, I’ve gathered that much,” Twilight replied softly, and Rarity resumed stroking his scaly head while Twilight’s mind worked frantically. “Think, Twilight, think think *think*...” There had to be some pony who knew something about dragons; a pony

with experience dealing with various sicknesses, of all types of creatures...and the answer hit her like a ton of bricks.

Of course, Twilight slapped a hoof to her forehead, *why didn't I think of it before?!* "Rarity, could you stay here with Spike just for a little while?" she asked, turning to dash back down the stairs. "I've had an idea. If he wakes up, just—"

"I'll be fine, Twilight, I took care of Sweetie Belle when she had the pony pox a few years back," Rarity assured her. Twilight barely bit back the retort that this was more severe than the pony pox, but since it was pure luck that Rarity just happened to show up at her door this morning, beggars couldn't be choosers.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Twilight nodded, galloping down the stairs three at a time and out into the chilly morning air towards Fluttershy's cottage.

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"You're sure those are all the symptoms?" Fluttershy confirmed as she flew beside Twilight back to the library, carrying a large first aid kit in her front hoofs. Not only was Twilight fortunate enough to find Fluttershy at home, but also found a few books in her collection with a substantial amount of information on creature illnesses—dragons among them—and stuffed a few into her saddlebag.

"Positive—unless anything's changed since I left," Twilight mused mostly to herself as the front door to the library came closer in sight. Banging it open, Fluttershy moved faster than Twilight had ever seen her fly up the stairs to the bedroom. Then she remembered that Fluttershy tended to fly at her full potential whenever a helpless creature needed her aid.

"Fluttershy! Oh good thinking, Twilight!" Rarity sighed in relief as she stepped aside so the timid yellow pegasus could examine Spike.

"Any changes?" Twilight panted, completely out of breath from running to the edge of the Everfree Forest and back in a matter of minutes.

"He asked for you, he could barely speak," Rarity said in a mournful tone. "I told him you'd be right back and to just rest until then."

"Twilight, how long has his breathing been this rough?" Fluttershy asked quietly, glancing at the spots in his mouth.

“Since I woke him this morning—he was *fine* yesterday.” Twilight voiced aloud the phrase that had been cropping up in her thoughts from the start. *He was fine yesterday...*

“I’m going to get the others,” Rarity announced, racing down the stairs to the front door.

“Rarity, stop!” Twilight called from the top of the stairs. “They’re all getting ready for the holiday, don’t bother them with this—”

“Spike is part of this family, Twilight,” Rarity stated in a firm, scolding tone that took Twilight aback. “They would *want* to be bothered by it.” Without another word, she turned tail and galloped out the door as Twilight closed her eyes and breathed deeply to calm her racing heart.

“Twilight, open that book with the leather cover,” Fluttershy finally said after several moments of silent inspection, “and find the chapter called *Fire Spores*.”

Twilight levitated the book out of her bag and flipped to the section Fluttershy mentioned. “Fire Spores: a common illness among dragons that often begins with what appears to be a common cold, followed by an intense fever and internal spots along the oral cavity. No known cause of Fire Spores has been determined.”

“That’s what I thought.” Fluttershy nodded, running a cool cloth over Spike’s head as Twilight began to relax a bit—it was a *common* dragon illness. “I did a bit of reading up on dragons after you and Spike first came to Ponyville and I kept the books I thought would come in handy someday.”

“Fluttershy, you’re a lifesaver,” Twilight sighed. “I’m indebted to you for this.”

“Not at all, Twilight.” Fluttershy shook her head. “Now, the cure should be on the following page.”

Twilight was about to flip the page when a footnote caught her eye: “Fire Spores are ultimately harmless to full grown dragons; like a virus, it will pass in a matter of days with proper care. For a baby dragon—” Twilight froze, rereading the line several times as Fluttershy looked on in anxiety. Drawing a shaking breath, she finished: “For a baby dragon, it can be potentially fatal.”

She barely heard the door open downstairs, hardly heard Applejack call, “Hang in there, Spike, we’re comin’!” as three sets of hooves pounded up the stairs with Rainbow Dash flying above them.

All she heard over this commotion was the small weak voice coming from the little basket on the floor calling her name pleadingly. “Twilight...”

Dropping the book, Twilight rushed to Spike’s side, reaching out to hold his claw tightly in her hoof. “Fluttershy, what do we do?” she asked in a low trembling voice as Fluttershy rushed to retrieve the fallen book.

“It’s a potion,” Fluttershy recited calmly from the book, bound and determined to keep her head now that Twilight looked positively sick with worry. “It looks like all of the ingredients can be found here in the Ponyville shops...um...except...silkworm vines.”

“There’s only one place those grow,” Twilight recalled from one of Zecora’s herbal books. “Near the summit of Mount Canter, the second largest mountain in Equestria.”

“Twilight, Rarity told us everything,” Rainbow Dash said solemnly as the rest of her friends arrived, looking down at Spike from where she hovered. “Is there anything we can do?”

For a moment Twilight said nothing, her eyes focused solely on Spike whose face was contorted in pain. Swallowing the hard lump in her throat, she looked up at her five friends with determined purpose. “Spike’s condition is only going to worsen if we just stand here worrying, so listen up. Rarity, you’re going to stay at Spike’s side and watch him. I’m going to compose a letter to Princess Celestia and tell her what’s going on. Rainbow Dash, I need you to fly to Canterlot and deliver that message, and don’t come back until she’s written a reply. Applejack and Pinkie Pie, I need you both to start brewing this remedy for Fire Spores in the kitchen.”

“Let’s move, Pinkie,” Applejack ordered to Pinkie as she picked up the book with her mouth and they both trotted down stairs.

“But Twilight, we still don’t have the silkworm vines,” Fluttershy reminded her hesitantly.

“And that’s where you come in,” Twilight said, levitating an aged roll of parchment from her bookshelf and spreading it out on the floor—a map of Equestria. “On foot, Mount Canter is a day and a half from here. But in flight, that can easily be shortened to less than a day. Fluttershy, I need you to retrieve the silkworm vines from the summit.”

“Oh I don’t know, Twilight—”

“Please, Fluttershy,” Twilight implored her, taking her face in both of her front hooves. “You know these remedies, you’ve worked with them before. You’ve cured so many sick animals with your incredible gift and you’ve gone to great lengths to help them—lengths I didn’t even know you were capable of. I’m prepared to go to any length it takes to save Spike...and as your best friend, I *know* you can do this.”

“Okay,” Fluttershy whispered, nodding vigorously. “You’re right Twilight, I’ll...I’ll do it.”

“Do be careful, dear,” Rarity called to her as Fluttershy stood on the sill of Twilight’s window, ready to take off. The yellow pegasus smiled in a rare show of confidence before spreading her wings and soaring gracefully off into the sunlight.

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“Rainbow Dash just left,” Twilight told Rarity as the rays of the sunset painted the sky in an orange hue. “Hopefully she gets to Canterlot before the sun goes down.”

“And Applejack and Pinkie?” Rarity asked, throwing an extra blanket over Spike, who was shivering violently.

“They got back from the market a little while ago, I told them to let us know if they needed our help,” Twilight answered, then smiled a little. “I doubt it though—they’re the two best cooks in Ponyville.”

“Indeed,” Rarity agreed. Spike had been moved into Twilight’s bed so he would have more room, and since then his body temperature seemed to be stable. It was still very high, but didn’t seem to be getting any worse—it was the internal chilliness eating away at Spike that worried them now, plus his stomach seemed to be aching which caused him to inhale sharply every now and then.

“Twilight?”

“Yes?”

“How are *you*?”

“Don’t worry about me Rarity, I’m fine.” Twilight attempted to brush her off, but Rarity would not stop gazing at her intently, as if she was trying to read her mind. The ivory unicorn finally looked back down at Spike, whose head was in her lap as she gently stroked his head.

“I’ve always felt guilty,” Rarity said softly so as not to wake him. “You know...that I could never truly return Spike’s feelings for me. He’s sweet and hardworking, and when he comes to help me out in the boutique I feel like I take advantage of him, which is awful because I genuinely do care for him. Like a child I want to shelter and protect from harm, not unlike my own younger sister. Do you know what I mean?”

“I...know *exactly* what you mean,” Twilight said, propping her forelegs up on the edge of her bed pensively. “I hatched Spike, I—I helped raise him from that moment on with the Princess watching over us both. He ruined a lot of my books back then because he’d have these spurts of fire breath before he could control them. But as he grew he proved to be useful, so useful in fact that...well...before I made any real friends, he...he was just *there*. He was just my assistant, the little dragon I ordered around when I couldn’t find a book or needed my desk organized or some other stupid chore that needed to get done. No pony’s taken more advantage of him...than me.”

“But Twilight, he loves being your assistant,” Rarity said soothingly, covering Twilight’s hoof with her own.

“That doesn’t excuse how I treat him.” Twilight shook her head. “Yesterday I got mad at him for accidentally burning a few of my rare books. I just *expect* him to be perfect all of the time, to pick me up when I fall short and be the voice of reason when I can’t be. We’ve been in each other’s lives for so long that I’ve never once even considered the fact that one day he might not be there at all.” Twilight pressed a hoof to her mouth as she choked back tears, Rarity moving a bit closer to wrap her foreleg around her. “When I met you girls and learned about the importance of friendship, I realized that Spike is probably the closest friend I’ve ever had. He’s literally always been there for me, and now...I can’t do a thing for *him*.”

“That’s not true,” Rarity said quietly, wiping a stray tear from Twilight’s cheek. “You’ve done more for him than any pony ever has. He’s a little dragon all alone in this world, and Twilight...you’ve given him a family. And that’s something he can cherish forever, despite the bad times you two have had. Regardless, good always comes from the most troubling of times.”

Twilight sniffled as she shared a meaningful smile with Rarity. Truthfully, she hadn’t always seen eye to eye with her fashionista friend, but every day she seemed to discover something new about her—and how she continued to stay true to her generous nature. Rarity cared for Spike just as much as she did, and they were both willing to see this through to its end.

Whatever end that might be, Twilight's smile faded as she looked down at her pale sleeping assistant, holding his claw in both of her hooves. "This could kill him, Rarity," she said aloud without thinking.

Thankfully, Rarity didn't gasp dramatically or faint in fear, but kept her comforting foreleg firmly around Twilight's shoulders. "He'll pull through this, Twilight...I promise you he will."

Princess Luna's moon was just beginning to rise into the starry sky when Rainbow Dash returned, flying at full speed towards Twilight's window, which she managed to open just in time before Rainbow crashed into it. "Mission accomplished," the blue pegasus declared proudly, holding out a scroll that Twilight immediately levitated from her grasp and unrolled, scanning it hurriedly as Rarity and Rainbow both listened intently.

"She says we're doing everything right," Twilight paraphrased, rolling the parchment back up, "and now it's a matter of waiting it out and keeping Spike's condition stabilized until Fluttershy returns."

"I hate to think about poor Fluttershy flying around in the dark out there," Rarity mused with a glance out the window. "Do you think she's alright?"

"Don't worry about her," Rainbow said. "She may be a scaredy pony, but she always pulls through when the going gets tough."

Twilight sighed. "I thought the Princess would be able to help us out more than that. That maybe she knew something we didn't."

"Twilight, she's a princess, not a miracle worker," Rainbow said sternly, folding her forelegs across her chest. "I saw her when she read your letter—she looked *really* worried. Kinda like you do right now."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's come over me." Twilight buried her face in her bedspread, her hooves gripping her mane. "I'm just expecting everything to fall into place, when in reality I feel more lost than ever."

"You hear that, kid?" Rainbow said to Spike's sleeping form, still curled up against Rarity. "You got everypony here worrying about you, especially Twilight. You—you need to get better, alright?" Spike rolled over and moaned agonizingly, one claw clutching his stomach as his face contorted in pain. "Aw geez..." Rainbow muttered under her breath, turning away to wipe her eyes on the back of her hoof.

“Pinkie, I cain’t believe y’all would do somethin’ that senseless,” came the angry voice of the southern earth pony as two sets of hooves trotted up the stairs.

“I *just* wanted to sweeten up the potion to make it taste better—*duh!*” Pinkie retorted with an air of attitude. “You know what they say: A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine—”

“That ain’t the point, sugar cube!” Applejack cut her off, turning to glare at her once they reached the landing. “Our little Spike’s life is hangin’ by a thread, and if we don’t git this right he could d—”

“Applejack, shut *up*,” Rainbow Dash hissed at her as Twilight moved sadly away from the group to sit by herself in a corner of the room. Applejack sighed deeply and hung her head.

“I’m sorry, Twi—everypony,” she added to the rest of the room. “This whole thing is plumb stressin’ me out and when I’m stressed, every little thing gits on mah nerves.” She turned to Pinkie, whose mane had flattened just a bit. “I’m sure the sugar ain’t gonna hurt the medicine none.”

“Course it won’t, silly,” Pinkie said, ruffling Applejack’s mane a little. “Besides, I’m nervous about Spike too.”

“We all are.” Rarity nodded as Spike groaned again. For a few moments everypony was silent, watching Spike closely for any alarming changes—all except Twilight, who continued to sit with her back to them.

Rainbow Dash was the first to speak. “Twilight? You okay?”

“It’s getting late,” the lavender unicorn finally responded tiredly, still not looking directly at them. “You should probably all be heading home.”

“Are you *nuts?*” Rainbow said indignantly. “We’re not leaving you alone.”

“How could you even suggest such a thing?” Rarity asked, sounding genuinely offended. “We’ll all sleep downstairs in the library tonight, right girls?”

“A ‘Get Well Soon, Spike’ sleepover party!” Pinkie exclaimed happily, bouncing into the air excitedly.

“*No*, Pinkie,” three voices chorused at once, returning Pinkie slowly back down to earth.

“Come on, y’all.” Applejack motioned all of them towards the stairs. “I’ll git the extra blankets and pillows.” Rarity gently lifted Spike off of her lap and settled him into Twilight’s bed, giving him a small kiss on the cheek before following Pinkie, Rainbow and Applejack towards the stairs.

“Wait.” Twilight whirled around to face her friends. “Thank you...thank you all so much for everything you’ve done today.”

“Aw, Twilight,” Applejack breathed, trotting over and hugging her tightly. “He’s gonna be alright...we’re all in this together.” After a few moments she pulled away, leaving with the others so Twilight could be alone with Spike.

She started suddenly at the raspy voice that came from her bed. “Wh...what time is it?”

“Spike.” Twilight rushed over, peering down at him anxiously. Still pale, still achy, his speech still muffled due to his swollen tongue. “It’s nine-thirty at night—you slept all day.”

“Oh,” was all he said, rolling his head to the side to gaze at her. “You look awful.”

“I could say the same to you.” Twilight scoffed a bit, then ran a hoof over his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Lousy,” Spike replied. “*Really* lousy.” Twilight’s heart broke with every ragged breath he drew, but was determined to remain strong now that Spike was awake, looking up at her with pleading eyes. “Were you and Rarity talking earlier?”

Twilight nodded. “You heard all of that?”

“Heard something about...how Rarity cared about me.” Spike managed a small wistful smile. “Then you talking about...taking advantage of me?”

“Spike, I’m so sorry about yesterday!” Twilight blurted out as she climbed into the bed, laying her head dejectedly on the pillow next to his. “I get so wrapped up in my books that I forget about you and how important you are to me. I don’t need *A Mare’s Magical Guide*, I don’t need any of those books—but I need you. Not just as the greatest assistant a pony could ever have, but as the most special friend *I’ve* ever had.”

“You really...mean that?” Spike whispered, his eyes welling with tears.

“Yes,” Twilight said. “I...don’t know what I would do without you.” Moving at the same time, they reached across the bed and latched onto each other, hoof in claw, and held on tightly. Their silent communication of assurance in one another’s eyes was enough for both of them to eventually drift off into a decent night’s sleep.

• • •

“Fluttershy should be back by now,” was the first thing Twilight heard when she awoke the next morning—the day before Hearth’s Warming Eve. She cracked her eyes open to find the four friends of hers who spent the night sitting at the foot of her bed, talking softly.

“You know Fluttershy, she doesn’t fly as fast as I do,” Rainbow Dash replied to Rarity, for once not hovering in the air but sitting quietly with the others. “She’ll get here when she gets here.”

“Unless somethin’ happened to her,” Applejack said worriedly. “Ya know this winter weather—it can change to somethin’ nasty in the blink of an eye.”

“I’m already worried so much about Spike, I can’t be worried about Fluttershy, too,” Pinkie fretted, burying her face in her hooves. “Too much worrying makes my tummy ache.”

Twilight sat up in bed and the four of them jumped at her abrupt movement. “Twilight, I’m sorry,” Rarity said timidly. “Did we wake you?”

“It’s fine, I should be up from time to time to check on Spike anyway,” Twilight answered, shifting around to where Spike lay sleeping next to her, gently reaching to feel his warm forehead.

“Spike?” Twilight said in alarm, all grogginess from her sleep evaporating in an instant.

“What is it?” Rarity shoved past the others to get to the bed as Twilight pressed her ear to Spike’s chest.

“He’s so cold...and his heartbeat is really weak.”

“No,” Applejack said firmly, moving towards the bed herself. “Don’t you do this, Spike...don’t you *dare* do this to us. Not after all we’ve tried to do for you.”

“Don’t do what?” Pinkie asked as she and Rainbow gathered next to them. “What’s happening?”

“Pinkie, get Fluttershy’s leather book from downstairs—*now*,” Twilight ordered the pink earth pony, who raced downstairs as Rarity cupped Spike’s unresponsive face in her hooves. “Spike, look at me,” the white unicorn begged. “*Please* look at me, wake up darling.”

“I got it!” Pinkie called through her teeth, carrying the book in her mouth. Tripping on the landing, the book went flying across the room—which Twilight caught with her magic before it smashed through the window.

“Here.” Twilight flipped open to the page that had the potion recipe and scanned to the bottom. “This potion **MUST** be completed and administered in a timely fashion. Especially in the case of a younger dragon, any delay could result in a severe decline in body temperature, loss of consciousness, or even...” She couldn’t say the final word aloud, but she didn’t need to—they were all thinking it nonetheless. A decision needed to be made and *fast*.

“Applejack.” Twilight looked up at her blonde friend, sweat beading her brow. “Get the potion and give it to Spike.”

“There’s still an important ingredient missin’,” Applejack explained. “I cain’t do that—”

“Yes you can, because I’m ordering you to.” Twilight glared at her, her desperation beginning to reach unhealthy levels.

“Twilight, calm down. Fluttershy will be back any minute.”

“We don’t have time to wait for Fluttershy!” Twilight shouted at Rainbow Dash. “Give him the potion now!”

“Do as she says,” Rarity said sternly to Applejack, who shook her head as she turned and ran down to the kitchen.

“Spike?” Twilight said as evenly as possible to the nearly still form of the little dragon. “We’re going to give you this drink and it’s going to help you feel better. But you need to wake up so we can give it to you, alright?” She was in the process of propping Spike’s head up on the pillow when Applejack returned, carrying a vial in her teeth.

“I’m warnin’ you, Twilight,” Applejack said crossly, yet there was a hint of anxiety in her tone. “Without the silkworm vines, I dunno what this’ll do to him.”

“That’s just a chance I’ll have to take,” Twilight said, levitating the vial over to Spike and unstopping it. “It’s our only hope.” Rarity was able to pry Spike’s mouth open once they got him sitting upright. Twilight held her breath as she very slowly used her magic to tip the vial into Spike’s mouth, the liquid just moments away from touching his tongue...

“*Fluttershy!*” Rainbow Dash cried out in cracked voice, pointing a hoof at the bedroom window. Twilight let the vial drop in surprise, caught in an instant by Rarity’s magic as Rainbow opened the window to let Fluttershy in. The poor pegasus looked like she’d had a rough trip: there was snow and ice sticking out of her matted pink mane, and she had dirt and small cuts on her legs and face.

“It was so high up,” Fluttershy panted heavily, collapsing to the floor in exhaustion, “and I got caught in an ice storm on the way back, but—” She smiled triumphantly as she held up a small sack from around her neck. “I got them.”

“Quick, crush these and put them in the potion!” Twilight cried out, tossing the sack to Applejack.

“Darn it Fluttershy, what took you so long?!” Rainbow landed beside her weary childhood friend. “Don’t scare us like that again!”

“Ah, *ha!*” Pinkie said, pointing a hoof at Rainbow. “So you *were* worried about her!”

“No!” Rainbow said indignantly, then deflated with a glance at Fluttershy’s sweet smile. “Okay, maybe a little...”

“This is it, girls,” Twilight said as she levitated the now completed potion back towards Spike. “Let’s make it count.” Gathering around the bed, Twilight saw her five friends holding onto each other out the corner of her eye as—at last—she tipped the vial into Spike’s mouth, sending the slimy liquid down his throat.

There was utter silence as everypony waited, watching with bated breath for Spike to move, to sit up, to speak—*anything*. Several minutes passed, and still nothing. Spike remained motionless.

“He’s...” Rainbow said in a hushed tone, making the first dent in the quietness, “he’s not moving.”

“This cain’t be right,” Applejack’s voice trembled. “Pinkie and I mixed that potion perfectly, we—we followed the instructions.”

Twilight bit her quivering lip as she gathered Spike’s cold little body into her forelegs, pressing her ear to his chest once more. “His heart...it’s getting *fainter*.”

“It’s my fault,” Fluttershy whimpered into her hooves, tears beginning to spill out of her eyes. “It’s all my fault. I flew as fast as I could, I swear I did, but I was still too *late*.” She burst into sobs as Rainbow Dash moved to comfort her. “I’m sorry, Twilight—I’m—I’m so sorry!”

“No...” Rarity choked out, overcome with grief as she collapsed against Pinkie Pie, weeping openly into her mane. “No—no, he’s just a *baby! No!*”

Twilight could do nothing but stare down at the still form of her little assistant, as if in a trance or daze of some sort. She pulled Spike’s body closer against her chest as she wiped a bit of potion from the corner of his mouth, his eyes closed and unflinching. It wasn’t until Applejack appeared next to her and nuzzled her softly that the tears silently fell, dripping onto Spike’s pallid face. This was real. This was completely real and irreversible, and no amount of magic could change it. Spike was truly gone.

All of the inner strength left Twilight’s body as her head dropped onto Spike’s chest, unleashing in that moment all of the emotional turmoil she had been holding back, leaving her breathless. No pony attempted to calm her, not one of her friends—all shedding tears of their own—knew what to say to ease her pain. They simply looked on as she bawled loudly for what seemed like ages—only able to control herself to gasp out a single sentence, spoken so softly, yet every one of them heard it.

“Spike...*I love you*.” Still holding him tightly against her, Twilight closed her damp eyes and gently kissed his forehead.

“Can I get that in writing?”

Twilight’s eyes flew open as the others gasped out loud. The corners of Spike’s mouth were turned up in a smile as his eyes opened slowly to gaze up at his devoted caretaker, color flooding back into his face.

“He’s alive!” Pinkie Pie cheered with a giant whoop into the air. “He’s okay!”

“Oh *Spike!*” Twilight exclaimed through joyful tears, pulling him close as Spike wrapped his little arms around her neck, stroking her mane as she cried into his shoulder.

“Spikey-wikey!” Rarity called out as Spike pulled away from Twilight to embrace her. “My little gem, you’re alright.” She covered his face in lipstick-stained kisses as the smitten dragon sighed happily.

Fluttershy moved forward to feel his forehead, grinning from ear to ear. “His fever’s breaking,” she confirmed, opening his mouth to check his tongue. “The swelling’s gone down and his spots are starting to fade.”

“Fluttershy, you’re *incredible*,” Twilight sniffled as she and Rarity nearly knocked her over with a hug. “You saved his life.”

“I knew you’d pull through!” Applejack crushed the still dazed Spike against her as she and the others fussed over him.

“‘Cause he’s the coolest little dragon *ever!*” Rainbow Dash added, rubbing her hoof against the top of his head.

It must have been hours that the six of them hugged, kissed, and laughed with Spike—and Spike certainly wasn’t modest about receiving all of this attention. It was when he started helping himself to bowls of ice cream from the others that Twilight finally put her hoof down. One by one, her friends left for home, promising to return early the next morning for their Hearth’s Warming Eve trip to Canterlot.

“Glad I won’t have to miss *that*,” Spike said as he lay back against the pillows in Twilight’s bed, sucking on a gem Rarity had left for him. Twilight froze in the midst of placing a book back on her shelf, deep in thought. It was a close call today—*far* too close—and Spike hadn’t been aware of any of it. In the end, she decided that revealing the entire truth of his illness could wait for another day. *For now*, Twilight pulled out a box from her closet, wrapped in red and green paper, *I have something more important to take care of*.

“Spike?” she said, trotting back over to the bed. He looked up at her inquiringly as she levitated the box into his lap. “Happy Hearth’s Warming Eve.”

“Wha—am I the one you bought—?” Twilight beamed and nodded as Spike started to rip into the paper, lifting the lid off the box. Inside was a large scrapbook with a picture of himself and Twilight on the cover. “Wow,” Spike breathed as he opened the cover, sifting through the memories on page after page. “I don’t know what to say.”

“The book’s only half full,” Twilight said. “The rest is for you to fill on your own.” Spike turned the pages until he reached the first blank one in the middle.

“Hey Twilight?” he said, staring thoughtfully at the page.

“Yes?”

Spike looked up into her violet eyes and smiled. “I love you, too.”

It was all it took for Twilight to dive into the bed, nuzzling Spike’s cheek as she wrapped him in a warm embrace, the scrapbook sandwiched between them. “*Spike...*”

“You’re not gonna cry again, are you?” Spike asked, his voice constricted as she cuddled him close.

“Yeah, I probably am,” Twilight sniffed, sitting up so she could tuck Spike into her bed and shut out the light. She waited until she could hear Spike’s deep even breathing before she headed down the stairs to her library desk. Dipping her quill in the ink pot, she let it hover for a moment over the blank sheet of parchment before she began writing:

Dear Princess Celestia,

I am overjoyed to report that all is well with Spike. The potion was administered in time and he will make a full recovery. Over the course of the past couple of days, however, I learned probably one of the hardest lessons about friendship.

My relationship to Spike has always been difficult for me to describe. My assistant? My best friend? In the end they are forever one and the same, even if my advanced magical studies cause me to put his assistant status over our friendship. But above all else, Spike is incredibly precious to me—and often you don’t know how precious a friend is to you until you’ve nearly lost them. I know that no matter where life takes me, this day will always stay in the back of my mind. The day I almost lost Spike, and the day I realized his presence in my life has brought about some of the most special and rewarding moments I’ve ever experienced. I can only hope that on the day when I do have to let him go, our time together will have been well spent.

*Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle*