

Words Failed Her

Nonsanity

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PONY FICTION VAULT



Twilight Sparkle's eyes flashed back and forth across the page, eagerly devouring the words. Piles of newly arrived books surrounded her, covering the library's floor in uneven stacks. She was curled up in a circle of open volumes now riddled with bookmarks, a page turning every few minutes with a violet glow of unicorn magic.

She loved how the library's tree always stayed comfortably cool even on a particularly hot summer day such as this. Staying inside and reading a good book—or maybe twenty—was the perfect way to pass the hottest mid-afternoon hours, and these new books had completely captivated her.

Spike was climbing up a ladder with a thick omnibus, trying to find a place to cram it into the packed shelves. “Why did the princess have to send so *many*? There's no room here for all these!”

Twilight didn't look up from her reading. “They need to be kept safe while they renovate the Star Swirl the Bearded wing of the royal library. It's an honor that she trusts us to look after some of them.”

“Hah. An honor, she says. All *I* see is a lot more work for me!” Spike shoved the large book into a gap just barely wide enough and leaned against it with all the weight his small dragon frame could provide.

Twilight chuckled. “Don't worry, they started days ago. It won't be long before they're done. Now let me read. This book is *amazing!*”

“Twilight! Twilight Sparkle!”

She sighed. *So much for reading.* She looked up to see Mr. Cake, of all ponies—breathless and alarmed—running into the library and looking wildly around the room.

Twilight stood up from behind the piles of new books. Seeing her, he galloped over, eyes wide with panic. “It's Pinkie Pie! She's under some kind of curse. We can't stop her!” Too agitated to stand still, he trotted in place in front of her, his hooves beating an irregular rhythm on the wooden floor.

“*Pinkie?* And there's no such thing as curses, Mr. Cake.” Twilight frowned.

He shook his head, nearly losing his already-askew hat in the process. “I wouldn’t know about that, but I know bad magic when I see it. You’ve got to come to Sugarcube Corner and help her, right away!”

However, Twilight had already come to the same conclusion, based solely upon his current state of agitation, and was floating her saddlebags towards her back. “Spike!” she called out. “Find my copy of *Malevolent Maledictions and Misspells*.”

Spike, as usual, had been listening and thinking ahead. He was already halfway up another ladder, reaching out for a squat black-bound tome that lurked there. “The curse book. Already on it!”

“There’s no such thing as—” Twilight began, but a glance at Mr. Cake’s anguished face stopped her. She just levitated the book out of Spike’s hand and into her bags. “Never mind. I’ll be back soon—I hope.” Then she turned and followed the rapidly departing baker.

With his longer legs and nervous energy, Mr. Cake quickly outpaced her through the hot, empty streets of Ponyville. She had to teleport the final stretch so that she could be right behind him as he shoved his way through Sugarcube Corner’s front door.

Twilight immediately started coughing as she ran into a cloud of flour dust that filled the whole bakery. She could hear the sounds of falling pans and breaking crockery from the kitchen, along with Mrs. Cake’s plaintive cries of, “Please, Pinkie! Put the rolling pin down. No, don’t do th—*Oh!*” A fresh cloud of flour billowed out from the kitchen door.

Twilight ran past the now motionless Mr. Cake and rushed, still choking on the dust, into the large kitchen. She could see only shadows through the fog of flour, but a moment’s concentration and a sudden, all-encompassing violet glow—and the dust was gone. She coughed the last of it from her lungs and looked around the room.

Pinkie Pie, covered in white flour and globs of yellow cake batter, was moving from counter to counter as if in a trance, carrying bowls and measuring cups back and forth. She slipped and slid in the mess of spilled milk and other ingredients that covered the floor but didn’t cease in her steady—if sloppy—preparations. Her eyes were unfocused and staring straight ahead.

Mrs. Cake hovered nearby, not getting in Pinkie’s way but trying to stay near enough to catch anything breakable that fell.

Twilight's nose twitched to the acrid smell of burning sugar, and she turned to look at the oven. It was jammed so full of muffin trays and cake pans that the door wouldn't close, and thick black smoke was seeping out from between the batter-filled cookware.

First things first, she thought as she trotted over to turn off the stove.

As she did so and turned away, however, Pinkie was suddenly there, reaching for the knobs. "Preheat at three-fifty," she mumbled in a monotone, turning the oven back on and returning to her mixing.

Twilight started to reach for the knob again, but Mrs. Cake stopped her. "That won't work. She'll just turn it on again. I've tried several times!" She absently brushed a lock of her disheveled mane out of her eyes, smearing flour across her cheek.

Frowning, Twilight looked down the side of the oven and found the gas valve, twisting it closed with her magic.

She approached the nervous and worried Mrs. Cake, who was almost as messy as Pinkie Pie from her attempts to stop the mad baking. "What happened, Mrs. Cake? How did Pinkie get like this?"

"I don't know! This was how I found her. I came down from putting the foals to bed for their nap and she was... like this!" She waved a hoof at Pinkie, who was cracking eggs onto the bottom of an upside-down bowl.

Twilight bewilderedly watched for a moment and then asked, "What was she doing before?"

"Before?" Mrs. Cake thought for a bit and said, "There *was* something about a new recipe she wanted to try."

Twilight's ears perked up. "Aha! A new recipe. What was it for?"

Mrs. Cake shook her head. "I don't know. But it must still be here somewhere." She moved over to the counter and began rummaging through the piles of gooey utensils and mixing bowls that covered it.

Pinkie continued her "work," oblivious to the presence of anypony else in the kitchen, shoving another baking sheet into the jammed oven.

At least the smoke has stopped.

Mrs. Cake had found a pink card and, after brushing it clean, started reading it. “This is it. It’s a recipe for cupca—” Her eyes suddenly went unfocused, and the card dropped from her hooves to the floor. She slowly turned, picked up a jug of milk, and began pouring it into a bowl.

“Mrs. Cake? Mrs. Cake!” Twilight called, but she was completely ignored. Both Mrs. Cake and Pinkie slowly moved around the kitchen in the same methodical, clumsy way, the same vacant expression on their faces.

“It’s contagious,” Twilight whispered as she backed toward the door, only to bump into Mr. Cake who was standing there watching.

He started to push past her into the kitchen. “Honey? Dear, speak to me!”

Twilight’s horn glowed, and with a flash of violet light and an airy popping sound, the two of them were outside the front door. Mr. Cake staggered and looked around in alarm.

“Sorry about that, but it looks like whatever’s going on, it’s contagious. I didn’t want you to get it too.” She trotted over to the window to peer inside.

“Contagious?” he repeated, a worried frown on his face. Suddenly his head snapped around to look at her. “The twins!”

She immediately ran back over to him, asking, “Where are they?”

“In the nursery, right up there,” he said, pointing to the second floor window.

Twilight’s horn glowed once more, and the window opened. A moment later a crib floated out to land between the two of them, the twins still fast asleep within.

Their father dithered over them for a moment, perhaps counting to make sure they were both there. Then he reached out as if to pick them up, but his parental instincts balked at waking a sleeping baby and he let them be. Instead he drew himself up and stood guard over the crib like a worried soldier.

Twilight had pulled the black tome from her saddlebags and was already flipping through the pages. “No... no... no... Could this— No. No... None of these bear any resemblance to what we’re seeing!” Having looked at every spell in the book, she slammed it shut and shoved it back into her saddlebags.

She turned to Mr. Cake. “I’m going to have to go back to the library and do more research. With the gas off, I don’t think they can hurt themselves. But don’t let anyone in there till I get back.”

Mr. Cake just nodded, obviously willing—even grateful—to let Twilight call the shots. He just looked back at his bakery with a worried frown. Twilight started galloping back towards the library.

“Stop right there, Ahuizotl!” came a shout from above. She skidded to a halt as Rainbow Dash landed hard in front of her, squatting tensely and scowling at Twilight.

Twilight drew back slightly. “Rainbow Dash. What’s wrong?” *Why is she upset with me?*

Dash started to creep forward, eyes flashing with anger. “Return what you have stolen from me, Ahuizotl!”

“Ahuizotl?” Twilight blinked before remembering where she had heard the name: the Daring Do books. “It’s me, Dash. Twilight Sparkle.”

“You won’t get away with this, Ahuizotl. That chalice is mine! Your minions can’t help you now.” Dash kept advancing with a fierce scowl, and Twilight had to slowly back away to maintain some distance between them. She wasn’t sure what Dash would do once she got close.

She’s acting out the books! It’s just like Pinkie and the recipe... This is worse than I thought! Twilight stumbled over a rock. *Think! I’ve read those books, and I know which ones Dash has read. I just have to—*

She stopped her backpedaling and drew herself up haughtily, speaking in her best rendition of a royal voice, “I am Simurgh, keeper of the Gaokerena! You have earned my favor by your actions, Daring Do. For this, I give you,” Twilight floated one of her feather quills out of her bags towards Dash, “one of my feathers. Burn it and I shall come to your aid. Take this boon and—” Twilight stumbled here, unable to remember the rest of the speech. She finished as best she could. “Take this boon and fare thee well!”

Fare thee well? That was awful! She held her regal pose and waited, hoping that the deception worked. *She did read that book... right?*

Dash stared long at the feather floating before her with a puzzled and unfocused expression. Then she shook herself and took a staggering step forward, plucking the

feather from the air and tucking it into her mane. “Thank you, great Simurgh. It was nothing. It’s just what I do,” she said, then leapt into the air and flew unsteadily away.

“Whew!” Twilight plopped to the ground for a moment to rest, wiping the sweat from her brow. If Rainbow Dash had been reenacting the scene Twilight thought she had been, then getting her diverted to a different one just saved them both some major lumps. That was the start of a *big* fight between Daring Do and Ahuizotl. Luckily, though, it *had* worked, and now she could get home and figure out a cure for what was starting to look like an epidemic.

Twilight galloped the rest of the way to the library, bursting in through the door only to once again begin coughing, this time on thick black smoke. “Spike! Spike, what’s burning!”

She ran towards the thickest concentration of smoke, near the fireplace, and found Spike slowly tossing a book into the fire. “Spike! Stop that!” She froze the book in midair and lifted him up with her magic. “What do you think you’re *doing*?”

That was when she noticed that Spike’s eyes were unfocused too, just like the others. He was muttering something, quiet and indistinct. Twilight immediately recognized the signs of yet another victim, but she risked bringing him closer to make out what he was mumbling.

“Mustn’t... read...”

“What? Mustn’t read *what*, Spike?” He only repeated his utterance, however, and continued walking in place while suspended in midair.

Twilight looked around and into the fire, and to her relief saw that he had managed to only burn three books so far. She tried to lift them out of the flames, but the crumbling remains were beyond saving. She couldn’t even tell what their titles had once been. It could be weeks before she’d be able to tell what was missing. Twilight felt her eyes start to water and wanted to blame the smoke, but she knew that the tears were for the books.

It’s silly. They’re just things. However, the thought that those *things* might have been originals—or *worse, unique*—was heart wrenching to her. *The princess trusted us to protect these books!* She felt a touch of anger grow inside her, and she turned back to the young dragon she held aloft with her magic.

Looking at him, however, the anger completely drained away. He *was* just a young dragon, after all, and under a—she couldn’t bring herself to even *think* “curse,” but that

was what it appeared to be. Twilight lowered her head, an air of gloom about her she couldn't shake. *This is spreading too fast!*

It was then she noticed the charred and discarded remnants of a scroll. *A message from the Princess!*

“Spike, what did the Princess say? What was in her letter?”

“...Mustn't... read...”

Twilight blinked, and the answer rushed into her head. *Words. People are being infected by words! The recipe, the Daring Do novel, Princess Celestia's letter... And whatever you're reading when you get infected determines the form of your condition. Celestia was trying to warn me! I've got to tell people not to—*

All of a sudden, she was deeply aware of the shelves and shelves of books right behind her, every one with a different title in clear, bold letters on its spine. If any of those books was infected, she would end up just like Pinkie and Rainbow Dash—and Spike. Perhaps the only thing that saved her as she had run into the library was the thick smoke, but now that was dissipating and if she turned away from the fireplace it could mean—

She slammed her eyes shut and her horn flared bright.

With a flash that she could see through her closed eyelids and a clap of sharp sound, she was outside the library, Spike still floating next to her. She started to open her eyes but had another realization: signs. *Every shop and street corner has words, signs. They could be infectious too. I just don't know!*

With another flash and pop, she cracked her eyes open slightly to look through her lashes. Seeing the edge of a grove of trees ahead, she teleported a third time.

Surrounded by thick trunks of wood, with not a word in sight, she could fully open her eyes and look at Spike. He was unchanged, still walking in place where he hung, still muttering the same two words over and over.

“This is for your own good, Spike. *And for the library.*” She summoned a strong, wide ribbon of magic that wrapped around her assistant, binding him to the base of a tree. “That should hold you while I figure out what to do.”

She sat down and pondered.

What she wanted to do most of all just then was *research*. To go through her vast library of reference material to find some mention of a sickness like this—with the hope of also finding the cure—but that was the one thing she could *not* do. In fact, she couldn't even return to town—not without finding some way to protect herself.

Twilight's desire to read her way to safety was such that even the black-bound tome in her saddlebags seemed tempting. *I already read from that, didn't I? It should be safe.* No, she couldn't trust that it was *still* safe, particularly after having had more encounters with the infected.

Besides, it was just a book of—

“Curses! Spike, it's a book of curses, and I just went through it cover-to-cover. There's a spell in there that can protect me!” She reached for the book with her magic, but stopped herself before its spine came into view.

“No... I have to just remember what it said about that spell—how to cast it.” She gulped. “And I've got to get it right on the first try.”

She closed her eyes again to concentrate, imagining the book open before her, flipping the pages.

She sat like that for several minutes before rising and opening her eyes. “Okay, Spike. Here goes...”

Her horn began to glow, its violet aura pulsing and giving off sparks of raw magic. This was a complicated spell, made more so by casting it upon herself. Curses—or malevolent spells, Twilight reminded herself—were never meant to be self-cast. She pushed her worries down and focused.

The aura twisted around her horn like a crawling thing trying to escape. It surged downward, engulfing her head in violet light. Twilight gasped, her eyes going wide and pupilless for a moment. Then the effect was suddenly gone, her appearance back to normal.

Twilight shook her head, dizzy. She dropped onto the patchy grass between the trees and panted. *I think... I think I did it.*

She swallowed and pulled herself together. *There's only one way to find out.*

Malevolent Maledictions and Misspells floated out of her saddlebags and came to rest on the grass in front of her. After only a moment's hesitation, she let the book fall open.

She stared at the pages and at the delicately scribed passages that filled them.

And they were meaningless to her.

The spell had worked, the very spell that could be lying open before her right now, for all she knew: the Illiteracy Spell.

I'm immune.

The one spell she knew that *wasn't* in that book, however—the lack of which now causing tears to pour from her eyes—was its cure.

Because there was none.

Twilight trotted back into Ponyville, Spike again floating alongside her as she returned to the library. “I’m going to make you as comfortable as I can, Spike, but then I have to leave.”

“...Mustn’t... read...”

She frowned. “Yeah. There’s not much chance of *that* now.”

Back inside the library, she headed directly upstairs to the bedroom, looking straight ahead as she passed between the many shelves of books. It wasn’t that she questioned her safety—she was *sure* the spell had worked—but it was almost painful to look at all those spines head-on and not be able to—

Twilight sighed heavily as she tucked the mumbling Spike into his bed, securing him once more with the ribbon of magic. Confident that he was as comfortable as his restraints would allow, she went back downstairs into the library proper.

Her eyes slid over the shelves of books, noting their different sizes, thicknesses, and colors—but not their titles. The spines had interesting designs, marks she knew intellectually were words, but the spell—the “curse”—was thorough, and no comprehension remained. Every trace of literary knowledge had been wiped from her mind.

“I guess I’m stuck with what’s already in my head.” Twilight said it out loud because the room seemed so much... quieter without the words. She shivered in the warm air.

Stop moping, Twilight! This was the only way to fix the situation... that I could think of. Whatever this situation is. She drew herself up and took a deep breath. *Time to find out.*

She set off for Sugarcube Corner.

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Neither Mr. Cake nor the twins and their crib were where Twilight had left them. That worried her, but there was no time to start searching for them right now. *Maybe Mr. Cake decided to move them somewhere safe—or just out of the heat. Hopefully, to a place without a lot of words.*

Inside the bakery, things were quieter than before. There was no cloud of flour, either. *They probably ran out.*

In the kitchen, she found Pinkie Pie and Mrs. Cake still going through the motions of baking, though at a slower pace. With no more ingredients—except what had already covered every available surface, the two of them included—not much progress was being made. All of the bakeware was now in or around the cold oven, and every bowl and utensil had been emptied from the drawers and cabinets and lay scattered about the room. The two bakers seemed to be tiring.

Twilight waded into the mess, looking for the dropped recipe amid the spatulas, whisks, and rolling pins that had turned the kitchen floor into a slippery minefield of cooking implements. It took longer than she thought it would take to find it, as the pink card had been kicked some distance from where Mrs. Cake had dropped it and was hidden under a discarded cutting board.

It appeared blurred by liquid of some sort, or at least she thought so. Because of the spell, it was impossible for her to tell if the letters were right or not. She understood none of what was written, except that one part was obviously a list, and another part wasn't.

Twilight felt as though she was in some strange mirror world where nothing made sense. She noticed her breathing was becoming rapid and short, and she tried to calm down. *This is turning out to be more unnerving than I imagined,* she thought, looking back over her shoulder at the two kitchen zombies.

She took the recipe card out into the café section of the bakery. Once blotted clean with a napkin, she thought it didn't look quite so bad. She placed it on one of the small tables and sat down before it.

Now then. Let's see what we can find out.

She closed her eyes and focused her mind on the little card and its words. Magic began to flow through her, and she willed it into new shapes as it passed, directing it towards the recipe.

Tell me your secrets...

Without her vision, Twilight could feel a distortion in her magical aura as she settled it over the table. She probed at it, growing excited, and feeling a small lump overlapping the card. Suddenly it sucked in a wisp of her magic and moved.

Her eyes shot open, and there before her was a small figure.

At first, Twilight thought she saw a tiny pony completely covered with writing—but there was no pony. The words of the recipe had risen up and taken pony shape, hovering free from the medium upon which they had been transcribed: the now-blank index card.

The small figure turned to look at her with no visible expression between the delicate swirls of ink that Pinkie had once used to write instructions on how to make cupcakes.

Twilight wasn't alarmed. It didn't feel menacing or sinister. In fact, it didn't provoke any emotion from her at all. It just *was*.

And then just as suddenly, it wasn't.

She blinked, but the vision was gone, the words once more confined to the little pink card.

I think we're getting somewhere.

She snatched up the card and rushed out the door.

• • •

Waves of magic washed over the hundreds of books that filled the library, and each tome that felt wrong was yanked from its shelf and tossed into a growing pile on the floor. Twilight wasn't trying to be thorough and identify every such infected book, but she wanted to get as many as she could in one place. Not every new book was infected, but some of her own now were.

When she was done, Twilight also added the recipe card to the pile. Then she settled down on the floor in front of it and closed her eyes once more.

It appeared when I inadvertently gave it some power. Let's see if we can do that again.

It wasn't a basic flow of magic she summoned up this time—it was a torrent. She had read countless volumes describing the techniques that unicorns throughout the ages had used to gather the power for great spells. She had learned from them all—even the *greatest* of them all, Star Swirl the Bearded. His methods in particular could gather vast quantities of raw magic very quickly, but the unicorn that used them had to be prepared to handle the result.

Twilight had practiced.

Now the forces whirled around her, rippling her hair. The magic was invisible to the eye until shaped by will into a spell, but she didn't have any spell in mind. She summoned nothing but the power itself, raw and amorphous, and sent it flowing through the pile of books before her.

At first the magic just passed right through, but then it began to be absorbed, twisted, and structured. Twilight could feel the power taking on a new shape before her, much like it did when she cast a complex spell, but this was not a spell of *her* making. It was casting itself—using the power she fed it.

I hope I'm doing the right thing.

She let out a long shuddering breath as the spell's magical momentum forcefully sucked the last tendrils of power from her. She sagged, every muscle in her body sore from the stress of her mental effort. When she inhaled, the musty smell of old books that she loved so much was suddenly much stronger than before.

Even before she opened her eyes, she knew she was no longer alone.

Every book in the pile had been dislodged and lay open, blank pages fluttering and rustling in an unfelt wind. Floating above them was a figure—a figure composed of what looked like the finest ironwork filigree imaginable, thin black lines curling and crossing, so densely packed she could barely see through it.

It's beautiful.

It was a pony—life-sized this time—with a long beard and tousled mane sticking out from under a pointed hat. The spell's body, formed from the words in the books, seemed to glisten with inky wetness as it turned its head towards her. It was a familiar silhouette.

“Star Swirl?” they both said in unison.

Twilight jerked her head backwards in surprise. Its voice had been deep, resonant, and somehow wet and dusty at the same time. However, more than the voice, it was its words that had surprised her. *Is it imitating me?*

“Um... Hello?” she tried. It didn't echo her this time. She opened her mouth to try again—

“Hello,” it said.

It's not just a static figure! I must have given the spell enough raw magic to make it temporarily capable of speech. Its shape... it must have imprinted on its caster, and that looks like—

“Who are you?” Twilight asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“We are the guardians of Star Swirl. Keepers of the wizard’s spells and tomes. We are his.” The figure blinked, or at least there was a blink-like flutter to the calligraphy where the eyes should have been.

“Star Swirl’s... You look like him.” Twilight tipped her head to one side and the other, seeing the light shimmer over the figure’s surface. The old, dry ink was once again liquid now that it was freed from the pages. However, liquid or not, the ink hung in what she could now only assume were the shapes of letters.

If this was Star Swirl's spell, it can't be evil. Can it?

“We are his. He made us.” It lowered its head to look at her more closely. The rest of its body remained motionless. “You are not he? You felt as he feels. You summoned the power as he does. Are you Star Swirl?”

Twilight almost blushed at being compared—no, *mistaken*—for her hero, but it was neither the time nor the place for such reactions. She cleared her throat and got shakily up off the floor. “I learned from his books. He was a great wizard.”

“He is the wizard. He made us.” It paused. “He... was?” It seemed confused.

There's no telling how intelligent this thing is. It may not know how much time has gone by.

She chose to say her next words slowly and carefully. “A long time has passed since you were created. Thousands of years.” She watched it watching her impassively. It was a rather intimidating sight, she thought. “Why are you here now, in these books? Why are you hurting my friends?”

“We are... lost. We are the guardians of the wizard. We are... his. Where is... the wizard?” Bits of the apparition were starting to float free from their fixed positions, drifting along its surface. Holes formed and closed again as thousands of words shifted.

“Um, he’s not here.” She hesitated. “He died long ago.”

“*Where* is the wizard?” Its voice was getting louder, and more words were losing their places.

Oh, no... This isn’t going well. I don’t think it’s very intelligent at all. I may have to bluff my way through this.

She pulled herself erect and used a more formal tone as she asked, “Why do you seek the wizard Star Swirl?”

The drifting words seemed to settle a bit, becoming less agitated. “We seek our words. The wizard forged our words for us to live in. Our words are gone.”

She looked down at the blank pages, confused. “But the words are all right here. I mean, they were, you’ve—well, you’re wearing the words. They haven’t gone anywhere.”

“These are not our words.”

“But these books... Most of them are from the Canterlot Royal Library. From the Star Swirl the Bearded wing.” She pointed at the pile. “These would be *your* books.”

The figure raised its head haughtily. “We do not live in these weak pages. These are not our words. Our words are forever.”

“Weak pages... forever...” Twilight began to pace back and forth before the impassive figure, thinking hard. Its head followed her motions precisely, its blinks as regular as clockwork.

“Wait,” she said, coming to a halt. “You said ‘forged’ just now, yes?”

“Yesss.” Its affirmative was the dry rustle of old parchment.

She stood before it and asked, “What exactly *are* your words?”

The figure drew itself up, and when it spoke the words seemed to emanate from the very walls themselves, powerful and persuasive.

“Ye who enter here protect these tomes. They are your future. They are your past. Keep these words safe from harm. Help them to be read by those who seek their wisdom. Teach the words. And bring Ye not plums here.”

“Plums?!”

The guardian looked down at her and said matter-of-factly, “The wizard did not like plums. Their juice stained the pages. He spoke of this often.” Twilight thought there might have been some trace of emotion in that last statement, but she couldn’t be sure.

Twilight shook her head, a smile growing on her face. “I know those words! I’ve seen them before... somewhere in the Star Swirl the Bearded wing.” She started to pace once more before stopping short. “The plaques!”

She did a little hop in the air and cantered back to the guardian. “There are small brass plaques all around the library, on every shelf and wall, and all of them say the *same thing*.” She rubbed her mane with one hoof, a crooked smile on her face. “You get so used to them, they fade into the background. I had even forgotten about the ‘plums’ bit. I always wondered about that...”

Twilight looked up at the guardian, its words once more steady as iron. “There must be hundreds of you. You each lived in one of those little brass plaques. You were spells Star Swirl created to enforce his rules.”

“Yesss.”

“And now... and now they’re renovating the library—they must have taken down the plaques!”

“Yesss.”

“So you moved into the books themselves because you had no other words to live in.”

“Yesss.”

“And some of the books were sent here! But... how did you end up in Pinkie’s recipe?”

The guardian shifted slightly, looking towards the library door. “We searched for our words. We looked for new words that could have been ours. Directive words.”

“Yesss—I mean, yes... I see! Words that describe actions, rules, or instructions. And once inside, your effect served to enforce the new words upon whoever read them, just as you did in the library. So Pinkie Pie started baking, Rainbow Dash started acting like Daring Do, and Spike destroyed books to prevent anyone from reading them.”

“The words were weak. We are strong.”

Twilight nodded and said, somewhat sarcastically, “Yeah. It didn’t work quite right, did it? But... you can reverse the effect, can’t you? Undo what you did?”

The guardian was silent.

Twilight bit her lip as the silence stretched on before busting out, “There must be *some* way!”

The surface of the figure started to roil, words sliding about once more—all of them at once this time, creating a damp susurrant of sound. Twilight took a step back in alarm. As quickly as it had started, the words froze back in place. “Give us our words.”

“But I don’t have one of the plaques here!”

“The medium matters not. Only the words are important. Give us our words to live in and make things right.”

Twilight’s ears perked up with hope. “Just write your words down? Okay! We can do that if you think it will help everyone. Spike, take a—oh.” Spike was still incapacitated upstairs, so she turned towards her writing desk. “*Oh!*”

Twilight slumped to the floor. “I can’t!”

The guardian leaned in closer to her. “Why?”

Though she had good reason for doing what she had done—she couldn’t have gotten this far without it—Twilight still hung her head in shame, tears beginning to form in her eyes. She said softly, “I don’t know how to read or write anymore.”

She heard a wet rustling sound and looked back up at the guardian. Its side was shifting, reforming. Soon a single shape stood out amid the myriad of words that formed its body: three lines radiating away from a central point, two upwards and one down.

Twilight wiped the nascent tears away. “What’s that?”

“It is a Y,” it intoned. “**Teach the words.**”

She gasped as she realized what the guardian meant. It was offering to teach her the words to write. She gazed at the simple shape, feeling it settle into a waiting Y-shaped

hole in her mind. She turned her head towards the shelves of books and scanned their titles. Each Y she saw on their spines was a shout of joy in her mind. *I can relearn! The curse didn't take that away from me!*

Twilight floated a quill and parchment over from her desk and settled down in front of the guardian's inky flank, a fiercely determined expression on her face. "Okay," she said, touching the quill's tip to the paper, "I'm ready."

The words shifted. Her lesson began.

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"Wha? Wha's goin' on?" Spike rubbed his fists in dry eyes, blinking rapidly and looking around. He was lying on the library floor surrounded by blank open books. He sat up, groaning and stretching his back and arms. "What *happened?*"

"You're back!" yelled Twilight, scooping him up into a tight hug.

"Hey! Urf—Leggo!" He squirmed in her arms.

Twilight looked up at the still-hovering guardian over Spike's shoulder. "Thank you! Just... thank you!" She sniffed, a happy tear rolling down her cheek.

She had spent the better part of the last hour painstakingly copying each letter of the guardian's words onto parchment, repeatedly making mistakes and then starting from scratch. It didn't want any erased words on the page. It had been so frustrating but at the same time such a delight to hear that purposeful scratch of quill on paper again.

When she had held the finished page up in front of Spike, a piece of the guardian nestled within its words, he had instantly awoken from his trance. Now he was squirming free from her arms. "What's gotten into you, Twilight? I was just taking a na—What is *that?*" he yelled in alarm, pointing at the dark form of the floating apparition.

"No time to explain, Spike. I need you to make as many copies of this as you can, as fast as you can." She handed him the parchment that contained all of her hard work and the cure for everyone that was affected by the errant spells.

Spike looked at the page, reading the words. "Ugh. Who wrote this? The penmanship is *terrible.*"

She blushed. “Just... make the copies, Spike. These are special words—I can’t duplicate them with magic. Each one needs to be written out from scratch—no mistakes—or the spells can’t move inside them.”

“Well, okay,” he said warily, rapidly dashing off the first copy with ease. “But I want to know what’s going on after that!”

Twilight snatched up the fresh page and started for the library door, pausing for a moment next to the guardian as a line of floating text peeled away from its body and settled into the freshly written words. “I promise I’ll explain everything soon. Just keep copying.”

“Wait! You’re not going to leave me here with—with *that*, are you?” he called, pointing at the strange black form.

“He’s harmless! Keep copying. And send one to the princess!” was all he heard as she vanished out the door.

He looked back at the guardian which slowly turned its faceless head towards him. “Erk—” sputtered Spike as he leaned back from its intent gaze in alarm. Wide-eyed, he stiffly turned back towards the table and picked up his quill, his eyes trying to watch the figure through the back of his head as he copied.

To my faithful student Twilight Sparkle,

Your quick thinking and skill at magic have saved us all from a terrible catastrophe. I couldn't be more proud of you. I'm so glad everyone in Ponyville is once again well, and you'll be happy to hear that the cure was also a complete success here in Canterlot.

The magical plaques have been restored to the library, and Star Swirl's old spells again reside within them. The library is once more safe from the terrible scourge of plums!

Good luck on your new studies, Twilight. I'm sure you'll do well.

Princess Celestia

“Plums!?” asked a confused Rainbow Dash as Spike finished reading the letter to the group.

Twilight laughed. “I’ll get to that part in a moment.”

She had presented the basic story of what had happened to the crowds at the celebration held in her honor earlier that day, but now her friends had all gathered in the library to hear it again in greater detail—and to tell their own tales of what had happened to them. The arrival of Princess Celestia’s letter had interrupted them.

“What ‘new studies’ was she referrin’ to?” asked Applejack, tipping her head to one side.

“Ah yes,” said Twilight in a more serious tone. “Spike, I need you to fetch me a book.”

Spike leapt to his feet. “Sure thing! *Malevolent Maledictions and Misspells* again?”

“No!” Twilight shuddered at the mention of the book. She then chuckled and said, “No, Spike. I need... *Auntie Albatross’s ABC’s*.”

She turned to her friends with a smile, rubbing her hooves together with happy anticipation.

“I have a lot of reading to catch up on.”