

The Shades of Time

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Introduction - The Dream Forgotten

---Fides

The clock ticks off another second of life. Time, the immutable end to all things, binding together the universe as the only constant. But even constants are relative. The pure truth can be twisted and morphed into a beautiful lie, a lie more easily believed than any truth. Lies sometimes better to believe than any truth.

As more and more belief was sacrificed in the name of logic, we reduced ourselves to the dust we were made of. We stopped believing in the 'we' so we could believe in truth, in progress, only to find the truth a poison to our own designs built upon millennia of belief. We traded transcendence for progress but left just as empty handed.

This is why I leave my creation. My last will and testament. A society and tome to belief, the only thing that may sustain life, time, and existence. Through belief, they shall be the strongest. I did my best to create a consciousness free of these self-destructive ends, so that they may find another means. Time may tell a story of my success, or it may spin unto-itself another iteration of the same fallacy in any design.

None shall ever know, because even the truth breathes it's life from liars lips.

---Veritas

The distance closes between myself and the visions. Dancing through my window pane, they spin a fabrication more intricate than any of the best textile makers in the land, words without sound spelling, speaking a false truth through the mouths of a thousand mute men.

A wind blows by, whistling through a web. The whistles shifting into a group of inharmonious tones, which begin to coalesce without changing but pacing, into a song. It sings of thought, of minds belonging to mice and men, without any difference between the two.

The intricate patterns succumb to the wind, breaking down into more understandable shapes, changing with the song's new tone. The song no longer speaks in foreign tongues, instead it speaks in words, echoing the same thing over and over.

How can you hear in the sound of silence? How can you draw from the air to existence? How can magic be lifted from the springs of the aether? Across who's spectrum are you allowed to see? What comes from nothing does not come without price, for everyone pays for what they borrow, what do you owe?

The torrent of thought faded, carrying on to more familiar shores, bringing memories and scenarios of familiar faces, but the same dark thought would pierce every calming resonance,

and bring an end to any peaceful moment: what do I owe?

What do I owe?

Chapter 0 - A Flame

A cool breeze finds its way over me, waking me from another dreamless sleep. Even as my eyes peer out onto the fog covered streets of Ponyville below, on all that I've accomplished, I can't help but feel a sense of emptiness. That pervasive feeling that something is missing from my life.

It's almost like you're missing what's right in front of you, like there is something else just around the corner, but when you make the turn it's never there. Beyond your control. In the twilight of reality, somewhere else. But what can one do?

"Wow, Twilight. You're up late today. A brown colt with this hourglass cutie mark was looking for you..." Spike flatly stated.

"Maybe I never even woke up." I replied, as much to myself as him.

"What?"

"Nothing," I sigh, "just thinking."

"Take a break from that for once. Go see what the girls are doing."

"You're right Spike. I just need a little change of pace from this craziness." Assembling a scarf and sweater with a flick of my mind, I dress and take to the streets.

The cool air embraces me, it's harsh lows muted by my fur and coat, but even with my mane catching the real wind, the feelings of surreality hang heavier than the veil of clouds rolling over the streets. So much for morning escapism.

"Oh Twilight Sparkle, what *are* you doing out in this?"

Rarity wore a little black number with a matching raincoat, and had a little umbrella slung over her shoulder in that casual yet proper standard that only Rarity can seem to meet.

"Hey Rarity, I'm not quite sure myself. Where is everypony?"

"Not out in this, it's supposed to rain. I'm going to Sugarcube corner to have a warm cup of cocoa, and stare drearily out the window. I'm probably not the only one. Care to join me?"

"Of course. I'd be glad to." The walk was short, but long enough for me to feel the first drop of rain make contact with my face. No sooner was I in the insulated clutches of the bakery than did the downpour begin. Raindrops hit the window in a volley of fire.

With Fluttershy off in the corner Rarity made a bee-line to the table, and began to have one of her one sided conversations. Dash had a crowd of Pinkie and some of the fillies and colts gathered around her at the bar as she spun off another tale of her antics.

That left Applejack, sitting off in one of the booths, sipping at an apple something, and looking out into the rain. Trotting up to her, I took a seat.

"You look like you're having fun today." I start with a soft sarcastic tone.

"What? Aw. 'Tis one way to say it, 'ah suppose. Heh." She responded absently, seemingly more intent on the storm.

"You seem very interested in the weather." I use a quick peak out the window to strengthen my point.

"Twilight, 'ah like a peaceful rain. Don't rain here often 'less somepony's tryin' to destroy the world."

"That happens often enough. So why are peaceful rains more meaningful than the others?"

"They aren't. 'Tis all the same." Spoken with an unusually absent tone, the words seemed to stick out; it seemed I wasn't the only one dreaming today.

"Wow, Applejack. That's deep."

"Thanks, but ah take it you don't just come here to hear me go on about the conundrums of life. What's goin on?"

Everything. Nothing. What am I supposed to say? The truth? A lie? Just need the right words... -It all seemed to skip a beat as as a strange thought struck.-

No matter how things change, they'll still be the same. In this second of twilight, the choice is mine.

"What do you think is behind those clouds?" As generic and thoughtful of a question as any..

"More clouds." She responded with an equally generic, but slightly less thoughtful shrug.

"I mean what makes the clouds move? How come they rain?"

"Ah reckon I don't rightly know. Dash might." She offered.

"Why don't you know?" Pursuing the former seemed more of a challenge.

"Never been mah focus. 'Tis someone else's job."

"So, why not learn it anyway?"

"It's knowledge for knowledge's sake. What can ah possibly use it for?"

"Who knows, anything! You could come up with something brilliant one day as you stare at those clouds, something that you never would have understood otherwise!"

"Everypony don't have the chance to read up on these things. Running an orchard is a difficult business. Days off come once in a blue moon, and the only thing rarer would be both on the same day. But if you truly do feel people should know, why don't you set the example and start with yourself?"

"Because I already know."

"That's not what 'ah was gettin' at. You go around askin' questions of people who don't know about other people's business. Well, most ponies'll talk about their business, given a chance. It's one of the things anypony likes to do, talk about what they know. Except for you. What do you know about magic's nature?"

"Wha..." Stunned. When Applejack tried to make a point, it took awhile, but when she finally got around to it, it would hit you like a hammer.

"You heard rightly. I know 'bout Orchard's, Dash knows 'bout flying, so what do you really know 'bout magic?"

"I... I don't know."

"As I thought. You obviously are going to be busy in 'bout twenty seconds."

The point was hitting hard, and hitting home. She truly just told me, beyond a reasonable doubt, that in all my glory, I knew nothing. Something lit up inside of me, something deep inside that I hadn't felt in a long time.

"You know what, Applejack," a *possibility*, "thanks; this is just what I needed." A *flame*.

Chapter 1 - Can you take me back?

The window was a median for my clinical observations of the rain beyond. It hit the ground with it's own irregular rhythm, somehow combining to provide a suitable tempo for my thoughts.

What do you do when you don't see the start? Begin from the finish. Any structure will have a foundation, and the most advanced parts of any structure will depend upon the integrity of that foundation, so work your way back. Find the means through the ends.

Juust great. The Ponyville library is not exactly the epicenter of magical knowledge. Where would I ever...

"Hey Twilight, you look busy and all, so I'm just gonna go..."

"Spike, do you know where I could find a newer book on magic?"

"Hey! I was talking." It took a full three seconds of my *'really'* stare before he finally settled. "But, R..." The look continues, he resigns, "I don't know. I suppose the Canterlot library would get the first copies of anything. Ask Princess Celestia and I'm sure..."

"Oh no, I couldn..."

"Jeez, Twilight. You always choke up when it comes to the princess. Have you ever thought the only reason you fear her is because of her title? Everything she has ever done has shown a very nice pony, but for some reason the title of princess means an iron fisted, throw 'em in the dungeon, 'n lock away the key ruler. Just ask her if she has anything instead of freaking out for once." Today was full of surprises, but despite the rare piece of insight from Spike, such an outburst would warrant a look. He was not phased. Darn.

"Spike, I can't just *ask* the princess for something and get it. That's not fair. What about all the other unicorn's who would love to get their hands on this? How many ponies would want this, and what sets me apart from them and gives me the right to get anything before them?"

"Sure, I know the princess, and sure, I'm her faithful student, but just because I can do something doesn't mean I should. What would happen if everypony did something just because they could! Chaos, I tell you! It starts with..." My otherwise commonplace speech was cut short as something collided with the side of my head, and bounced to the floor.

"While you were talking, I sent the princess a note."

"You did what? Spike, how could you!"

"Don't worry, I told her it was me. There's your book, I'm going to eat something. And, er, do stuff! Welp, later!" He sprung himself out the door before I could continue. Oh well, he just ran right into the rain without any covering, his loss.

I looked to the floor where the projectile had fallen after being brought to a stop by my face.

The book itself had a black cover with a white Fleur-de-lis. It was a leather bound thing, with less than a fifty pages in a smaller than usual size. It's conciseness was countered by the title, which was slightly less so: 'A Master's Definitive Guide to the Magical Arts of the Aetherial Plane'.

The author's name was nowhere to be found. But that's no surprise, many unicorns write magical tomes under anonymity for fear of retribution by those who do not appreciate the unknown. Or those who do not appreciate ostentatious presentation.

The book follows up on such examples with an equally pretentious opening, strengthening my latter deliberation:

'Magic. More literature concerning this near-incomprehensible concept has been produced than has any other field of aeitherial endeavour. Incredible volumes have been produced by prolific writers concerning the capability and implementation of this dark mistress, and today I present you with something that will serve to expand such things by unimaginable leaps and bounds.

'Fillies and gentlecolts, with no further adieu, I present to you the theory of the Aetherial Magical Plane. A blank workspace of the mind, confined and limited only by your own range of thought. Throughout these brief pages, I shall bring you up to speed with what little I know of this, and introduce basic concepts affiliated with this new magic. While no one does, as of yet, completely understand this, I have no doubt that in the wake of this work, we shall achieve what goes beyond anything previously conceived.

'The concept behind this is very simple. You are about to open up your own mind, and have complete access to all the capabilities of your subconscious self. You will literally be operating in a boundless environment, with complete awareness of ones own mind and self. You will unlock the true potential of a thinking mind.

'What you practice within these bounds will have no hindrance, no limit, no end to the possibility of creation. You will have true freedom. The twilight of truth and belief will come to an end, and you will understand. There will be nothing to stop you. Now, we begin our journey.'

It started with simple warm-ups, each one centered around concentration and focus. They soon progressed to more strenuous meditation exercises. This sort of thing was

something I thought I would never use beyond school. Concentration was always a core part of magic theory, but this was seriously taxing. These sort of things were only used for Theoretical Magic classes, which never had been my focus.

Time seemed to blur together as I went through page after page of exercise. It was truly tiring, and I was sitting on the verge of exhaustion, held back only by the hope that this little thing would get to the point before I drop to the floor from being sapped of all energy.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of the practice, I arrived at the main part of the book. Flipping the page, I find this whole buildup to come to a single paragraph, with just two sentences. I try to see, but through my shutting exhausted eyes, I could only make out the first sentence. 'Am I awake or do I dream?'

Am I awake or do I dream? What the hay was that supposed to mean? The realization set over. It was a joke. Spike, Celestia, or somepony had just played a very ridiculous practical joke on me. Ughh. I started up to throw the book somewhere before I realized something.

I stood in the center of a blank white space. Nothing could be seen for any distance in any direction. As a matter of fact, neither distance nor direction seemed to have any part in this. Time itself had absolutely no say here, it simply was.

Never before had I seen such a thing. Seen could never convey exactly what was, if you could even say it was. Space, volume, mass, matter, none of it. I sat, or, existed for lack of better terms, in a state of incomprehension.

Something was wrong. A creeping feeling of dread set over me. A raw fear dawned over all of my essence. Panic. Something was seriously wrong. Sounds in the distance, crying, calling, screaming. I couldn't escape. Without a body, I could not run.

One voice stood out, an elderly dominating voice. Educated. Doctor. Experience and confidence were strong in his tone, yet they were a mask. Beneath that voice was someone as fearful and scared as each of the tormented souls combined. He spoke in a hurried manner, terror lurking beneath the surface of his words.

"Don't give him time to steal your mind, Twilight. You only mean to stay awhile, but there is nothing that is in between twilight. Run." And it was over, quicker than it had began.

I lay, sprawled out, limb and mind completely drained, across the floor. My face was pressed down upon the book, which I had seemed to fall asleep on in my studies. My mind screamed at me to get up, do something, to make sure that I was actually here, but my body was drained, and by the time it had responded hours could have passed.

For some time, I just laid there on the floor. Despite my comatose, my mind was going at

a million miles an hour. Why would my own mind cast me out? What intruding darkness would live inside? Soon, things began to slow down, my body regained function, and my mind had gotten everything aligned right and proper.

Slowly, I lifted myself from the position. My body's response was sluggish, like I hadn't used my body in years, but the calendar and the position of the grey stormclouds out my window assured me I had not been gone for more than a few hours.

Finally on all four's again, I looked down at the little black book, but where I had sworn before that I had seen two sentences of text was nothing. The page itself was completely devoid of any text. Not even the single line I was sure I had seen, and read was on there.

The door slammed open and shut, making me jump just enough to strain something. It was Spike.

"OOOOHH, I forgot it was raining outside. Next time I'll be sure to prepare my escape better." He quickly snatched his raincoat off the rack, but before he could escape I cut him off.

"Wait, how long ago did you hit me in the head with the book?"

"I didn't do that!"

"Spike, just focus. How long ago?" The question threw him off just a little bit, but he answered anyways.

"Less than a minute." No. Way. "You were there you know."

"Sorry. Just a little out of it myself. Go on." I waved him off with my hoof, and stared back at the book. In the background, the door opened and shut once again, signaling his leave. What I had done was.... Impossible. It simply could not be. Yet, it was.

If the book was right, I had really just been inside of my own mind. I had the capability and function of a conscious person with access to the capability of my subconscious mind. But the warning. It didn't sit right. Casted out of my own mind?

It didn't matter. I had to find out. Who knows what I could learn in there? I could spend hours thinking and practicing, and return to have had mere minutes pass! Who knows what I could do with that, what anyone could do with that?

I do. I know exactly what you are going to do. You are going to be the one to let the puzzle pieces for my little pretty picture fall into place. Oh yes, so simple now, so harmless, but

everyone pays for what they borrow my dear, and you have borrowed a lot more than you can afford to pay back. I guess I'll just have to take back a little of what is yours for my own possession. You can think of it as repossession, of a sort.

So sad that poor misguided man ever thought he could outsmart the forces at work. Always think they have it figured out. Always think they finally have a true understanding. If they ever looked at the past, and looked at the present, they might understand that the future will always hold something more. There's always something more. Sometimes more than you mean to borrow.

A pity that pretty little unicorn never read the final sentence. 'You brought me here, but can you take me back?'

Chapter 2 - Belief and Fact

Something was not sitting right. Somewhere, something had tinkered with the balance, just ever so slightly. The universe was thrown just a micrometer off kilter. It was a change ever so subtle that you wouldn't notice it if you didn't pay attention to something that wasn't yourself.

For me, it's the animals. Rarity sat talking about another one of her antics, don't get me wrong, I love them and sometimes they're just what I want to hear, but I took one look to the sky, after I coughing into my handkerchief, and saw it.

A hawk, soaring in the air through the storm. He wasn't one of mine, I would of known, he was somepony else's. And while he was flying, something skipped. I would swear up and down from Cloudsdale to Ponyville that the hawk flew backwards, for just a split second. His wings were mid-beat, stopped, reversed, and he went backwards, barely enough to tell.

It couldn't have been. I dismissed it at first, and returned to Rarity's talk. For awhile, it worked. Rarity would speak about her new project, and how her career had rocketed since Sapphire Shores bought those dresses, but the thought would always return. By the end of her talk, I was sure, not only had that hawk flown in reverse, but time itself had wound back by less than half of a second.

It shouldn't have bothered anypony. It didn't bother anypony else. They all seemed to never have noticed the oh so subtle change. Maybe it was nothing. No. Things like this only happen when somepony's trying to destroy Equestria. This does happen often enough...

Oh dear, I have to tell someone. Twilight! If anyone knows anything about world ending time skipping issues, it would be her. She would have the answer, and maybe we could stop this before it happens for once! Oh yes, that would be great. But I'll have to hurry. If precedence says anything, we don't have much time.

"Uhhh Rarity?" I asked politely.

"Yes dear?" She replied, snapping out of her soliloquy.

"Have you seen Twilight today?"

"Why of course! I brought her over! She should be right over... There." Her response ended with her hoof pointing at the table where Applejack was sitting alone. "I could have sworn... She probably went back off to the library. Something about her was off today anyhow."

"Well, excuse me then, I have to be going."

"Whatever is the matter?"

"Uhh, I can't. Sorry. Bye." I ended, politely as I could, and quickly walked across the cafe to the exit. Swiftly, I donned my windbreaker, but before reaching the door handle, thunder filled my ears and lightning spread like a crack across the sky. I had to hurry.

As the door was coming to a shut behind me, I could hear as Dash was broken from her story.

"Ooh, thunder. Perfect."

The words of warning from those unseen lips still rang through her mind. Why would my own mind tell me to go back when I had the chance to learn so much! The things that I could do without the normal constraints of reality.

I could practice magical spells without worrying about losing all my energy! I could spend weeks there without a single day passing! The strides I, and the countless others could make in the magical field would forever change life as we knew it in Equestria!

All those spells that were pipe dreams due to their predicted energy drain, mass teleportation, sustained combustion, bodily regeneration, any of them, they would all be brought at least twenty years closer to becoming reality.

And all that opposed me was that voice. But why? Why would anypony oppose that? It makes sense, it has promise, it holds the key to our future, yet the doctor's words were still clear, as if they had been spoken not seconds off of now:

"Don't give him time to steal your mind, Twilight. You only mean to stay awhile, but there is nothing that is in between twilight. Run."

His words had no literal holdings, no proof to them, yet they were spoken as clearly and truly as that of any professor. What could any educated mind possibly fear? What would be so horrible that such a colt as he would tell me it's not worth it?

Forget it, Twilight. You have nothing to fear except fear itself. If there is anything out there that's a problem, you can conquer it. The benefits would outweigh the probable risks in any way you could spin the situation.

Yet, I am still here. If I understand correctly, just simply thinking the phrase itself will send me back. If I'm so sure, why haven't I just gone right back. I wouldn't be rationalizing if there was nothing irrational about it in the first place.

No. I will not let some silly belief get in the way of progress. But...

"Twilight?" A scared yet quiet voice interrupted. My door had inched open to reveal the face of a rain drenched Fluttershy.

"Come on in, what's going on?" I inquire as I put her coat up on the rack.

"Something is wrong, I think."

"What?"

"Well, Rarity was talking and I got kinda bored so I looked out the window, don't get me wrong I really like her but sometimes she just goes on and on, but when I looked out the window I saw something."

"What was it?" The question made her nervous, like she didn't know what to say. "It's okay, just tell me."

"There was a nice brown hawk outside, and as he was flying, he just stopped, went backwards, and then continued forward again. Like time skipped a beat." Fluttershy obviously was scared. It would not be the first time, nor the last, but this seemed different, and I couldn't shake the feeling it had something to do with what I was doing.

"When?"

"You were talking with Applejack. When I finally decided to go and tell you, since you're the only pony that would know anything about this, you had left. What was it?" It didn't happen while I was in my mind, so it couldn't have been me. But still...

"I don't know." She reeled at the reply.

"W. Well let me know when you find out please." Thought surrounded me. I could find out. I knew that this had something to do with that book. The Aetherial Plane.

"You know what, why don't you stay the night? I can easily look into it, and I'm bound to find an answer eventually. I might as well put your mind to rest than let you worry all night."

"Thank you so much. I promise I won't be a bother."

"Oh no, you're fine. Trust me."

I let some time pass to get her settled in and dried off, and when everything was finally set, I told her I would go and make some cocoa. As soon as I was alone in the kitchen, I put

some water over the stove, and got some cups ready.

With everything finally set, I sat down at the table, cleared my mind, and whispered the same words I had before: 'Am I awake or do I dream?'

The white had spread out before me, the plane a blank canvas in front of my mind's eye, ready as ever to be used for the first time to its full capability. But I would have no such chance...

Darkness immediately grew, and my once weightless essence fell to the new flat ground with a thud. I tried to speak, tried to scream, but my voice was as nonexistent as time. Something grabbed me, and put me in a chair to strap me down. As soon as I was tightly secured, my strength returned. Testing my restraints proved futile: movement was a myth.

Finally feeling confident that I had been secured, a single light flicked on. Before me was something I had never seen. It stood upon two legs, with no fur, upright. His face was young, but this mask of youth could not cover up such a scarred man. Despite having no fur, he did have a thin layer of hair. Over his v-neck t-shirt he wore a black trench-coat. His eyes were closed.

He spoke in a strange accent, "I told you not to come back here? Do you have any idea of what you're doing?" Somewhere along the line, my ability to speak had returned.

"No, please inform me."

"Being a smart one are we? You're making a mistake. Some things are better left alone."

A third voice blinked into being, "Is that so true? Oh, please forgive me, I seem to have forgotten your name, Dr.?" My captor turned to face where the voice seemed to be coming from, unable to see exactly where. "Let me turn on the lights." Light flooded the space, and I found myself in a room, much like any interrogation room I would have ever thought of.

Mr. Mystery turned out to be exactly like my captor in type, but had a much better head of hair, and was wearing a much more appropriate black polo-neck adorned with a white Fleur-de-lis.

"What do you want?" My captor asked, with as much courage as he could scrounge.

"I simply want what is best for everyone."

"Don't try that with me! I've seen what you do. Leave, now, or I'll kill her." That shocked me.

"*What?*" I yelled.

"Please Miss, calm down. Now as for you, what power do you think you have? You couldn't kill anyone while you were alive, much less dead. You expect me to *believe* that?" He spat the word as if it were a curse.

"Well you seem to be quite sure of yourself, like everything you say is *truth*." His disdain for the word equalled the opposition's.

"Oh, but it is. It's a pity this young mare right here *believes* she can be held down by straps that are no more than a product of her own mind." As he said it, the straps simply fell through me, as if they never were.

"Oh nooo. No no no, don't you do this. Twilight," my ex-captor turned to me, "you have to listen. His promises come with a price!"

"Oh please." He brushed the man aside, and came right up to me. "Twilight, this man is intent on stunting the possibilities of what you could do here. However I, in *truth*, can teach you everything. What you and I can accomplish will rival anything ever done."

"No, Twilight," he yelled from the ground, "*believe* me! The results are never what you want them to be."

I rose out of my seat, and stood between them. Promptly, I turned to my liberator. "Where do we begin?" He and I walked off, deep in discussion about magical theory and other things. Behind me, my captor simply cried.

Waking, I found that my strength returned much more quickly, and for the first time, I felt like I had actually woken up. Even through the thunderous sounds of the storm outside my window, I had found something I had never known. Truth.

The whistle of the kettle brought me to it's side, as I poured two cups of the steaming water and stirred in the cocoa mix. Before leaving, I placed a single ice cube inside of Fluttershy's cup, it was still quite hot.

As she sipped at her cooled cup of hot chocolate and gave a little cough, I explained how pressure changes brought on by the storm effect air currents, which messes with the flight of animals with wings smaller than our own. He had simply lost his traction in the air. If anything had skipped a beat, it was his little heart.

Later that night, I saw Fluttershy go to bed with a very relieved look on her face. Despite the constant thunder, and streaks of lightning, she had found solace in what I had told her. It had put her fears to rest.

That doctor was wrong. If this is what I can do with knowledge, if people like Fluttershy can sleep quietly at night because they understand something, instead of fearing it, then this cannot be wrong. This is progress. This is truth.

Chapter 3 - Defiance

Waking to the morning, I found that the rainclouds still hung heavy in the air. A light drizzle was still falling, probably because weather ponies were still waking up. It would likely get worse again later in the day, but time inside was going to be no problem for me.

Something stirred behind me. Turning, it was Fluttershy.

"Oh, sorry if I woke you."

"Naw, I've been awake. What's going on?"

"I just wanted to thank you for last night. That was really nice of you."

"Oh please, it was no problem." I said with a smile. "I would have done it again."

"Thank you so much. Well, I'm going to leave before it starts raining."

"Let me show you out."

Getting out of my covers, I walked her over to the door, and said goodbye. She's always such a sweet thing.

Hours passed while I poured myself over some of my old books on Concentration theory as he had suggested when I got a knock on my door. Opening, I saw the figures of Rainbow Dash and Rarity.

"May we come in?" Funny, Rarity's accent sounded a bit like my former captor's...

"Of course! What seems to be the problem?" I asked enthusiastically.

"Whatever do you..." Rarity was interrupted by Dash, who seemed to be itching to get something out.

"What she means to say is we're having a bit of trouble," Rarity shot Dash a glare, "we're having issues with the rain. It needs to be raining pretty steadily for the week unless we want a drought. Sadly, I am not a weather expert, and we just can't seem to get anymore rain from these clouds."

"You know what? I'll check in the back. Some of the older books may have something on this, but I know in *truth*," I said with a bit of pride, "we don't have anything new on this. I'll be back!"

Quickly, I zipped into the back room of the library, and closed my eyes.

'Am I awake or do I dream?'

The world around me stretched and contorted until it was there. We had done quite a bit of work last night. Between him and myself, we had constructed a city, with our town center being a library, but I had something better than a book.

Walking into the library, I caught sight of him. He was sitting, flipping through the pages of a novel. I could not make out a title from where I was, but there was some sort of symbol...

"Oh, hi! Didn't catch you there!" The book quickly vanished as his attention turned to me. "Take a seat!" He said, pulling out a chair, "is there something I can help you with?"

"Weather. Veritas, we need the rain to last for awhile longer, but the clouds have other plans."

"Cycle the clouds, I suppose. Have the depleted ones placed over a body of water in direct sun so they can regain strength, and let the hearty ones rain themselves out. Switch them when you have enough rain in the next clouds and fill up the newly depleted ones. Lower the pressure and temperature a bit if the new ones won't rain."

"What? Why would that do anything?"

"You don't know," he inquired, earnestly surprised, "Wow. Deprived. Water evaporates in heat, turns to gas. Then it condenses to form clouds. Enough water, and they're rainclouds."

"Alrighty then, thanks!"

"Hold up! Before you go, I'd like to talk later. There's a lot you want to learn, I know, and if you give me tonight, I can show you everything about magic. I can give you the truth." Something about the way he said it threw me off. But that's just a feeling.

"Of course, of course! Now, I've got to be going. My friends would like to know this!"

"Alright then, see you later."

I skipped off and out of the library, onto the street. I went over the information once more in my head, to make sure I had it all down, but before I could leave, something caught the corner of my eye. My former captor, eyes still shut, looking down to the street.

"What do *you* want?"

"Nothing. It's not what I want, just what I need."

"Oh what?"

"Each time you come here, you ask yourself the same question."

"What?" I was just a teeny bit curious.

"Am I awake or do I dream? Don't you remember?"

"Well of course, what do you mean?"

"The only way that you can ever find this place is to know that question. I don't need to be a doctor to tell you it's different for each person. That means something, it holds value. Don't let him reach you, Twilight."

"So what? Of course it has meaning, it woke me up!"

"If you're awake, why do you still need to ask if you're dreaming?"

I gasp for breath as I wake.

Scrawling out the directions that I could compile from Veritas' spiel, my mind wanders back to what the doctor had said. And after I handed the note to Dash, I went back to look at the little black book that had brought me to my own mind.

I flipped to the last page. I remembered clearly what I had seen: It was two sentences, but the only line I could read was the first. And as I looked upon that last page, it was just as I had found it after I had woken up, a blank page.

I performed experiment after experiment on the paper, using every single facet of my magical prowess to it's full extent, but as far as any test was concerned, that paper had always been, is, and shall always be blank.

This defied everything. Every single possible thing I had come to know. Just as a dead pony tells no tales, a blind pony can see no ships, and a deaf pony can hear no evil, what I saw had never happened.

But that text was just as real as anyone. And if it was real, what was that last sentence?
Only one way to find out...

"Am I awake, or do I dream?"

Chapter 4 - Nothing That is In Between

My mind was different now. The town that I was in before was outside the door. Now I was in a museum. Looking at the art and sculptures upon the walls, I could recognize every single piece.

Each was a bit of my memory, a part of me. Pictures of my younger days, when I was but a little filly. Sculptures of Princess Celestia in all her wisdom. Baby Spike, nearly choking on his first received scroll. Pinkie Pie, being, well, Pinkie Pie.

My eyes glazed over each one, and a single glance at each would fill me with the emotions of the time. Old feelings brought from below time's looking glass.

As I continued on, I noticed that I had entered a different wing. Each picture was one of me, not with someone or doing something, but at a specific time. These focused not on what was happening, but what I had felt. These had gone from one word feelings, to entire stories captive within a single image.

I could watch as wonder filled me with my discovery of teleportation. Celestia, sitting by a fire speaking of all that I could do, fueling my love for the magical arts. Each night of my studious childhood, as I poured hours of my life and ounces of my soul into the quest for knowledge. Feeling like I was no longer alone for the first time with my new friends. It was all here, each second beautifully contained within so little.

"Quite wonderful, no?" The voice behind me was my former captor's. At this point, it had become obvious that he had no power over me. But even then, something had changed. Before, he spoke like he was on a mission. Now his voice, even within it's tone and inflection, was missing something.

"Yes, actually. Are these your work?"

"No, they're yours, but I may have had something to do with them."

"Who are you?"

"Well, right now, I'm that guy standing next to you peering at the exhibits."

"No, I mean what's your name?"

"Funny question, that. You see, that was my question. I really didn't know. I traveled

everywhere, looking at a thousand signs searching for my own name. A question that sent me through every second, good or bad. I searched everywhere, giving up everything trying to find the answer to that question."

"Did you ever find it?"

"Well... Yes, in a way. I had come to the edge of oblivion, and had looked into the abyss of time itself. I could have found it hundreds of times, in the bright eyes of everyone of my friends, in the countless thankful handshakes with more meaning than any word, in the voices of a thousand people singing my name, but I didn't. Every time I came close, I stopped. I couldn't. That question is what drove me, it's what kept me going. It's what led me to create you, to create this all. In the end, it was never about finding out the answer to my question."

"But it's not about me anymore." He continued, "This is your opportunity. This is your choice to make, and I can't make it for you. When you walk over to him, you are going to have to make your decision. You'll know it when you hear it, and if you listen closely enough, he will whisper the answer to your question, he will show you the truth that you have been searching for all your life.

"It's a truth I've locked away within you for a long time. A dream, the dream that you always thought you had, but could never remember. In that dream will be exactly what you want, the truth. The answer to your question. Now let me walk you to him."

"Thank you, doctor." We strolled down the hallway until finally arriving at a door.

"One last thing. The last line," I nodded, "you need to know it. 'You brought me here, but can you take me back?' Now go on, for weather it's day or night, there's nothing that is in between twilight." And he opened his eyes.

The man was nearly in tears. The way he spoke, how he spoke, it was with a manner bordering Celestia's. The tone of his voice and the sight of his eyes said more than any speech. Those eyes were troubled seas that had born witness to the rise and fall of civilizations. His voice one that would take the helm one no-one else would, commanding and decisive. His perfect face a mere mask under which the scars of a thousand battles and scores of identities would remain etched for eternity.

He hid nothing. This was his final hand, and he was playing every card. "Go on."

"Twilight." Veritas beckoned. "Come." And I entered. He sat on one side of the table. "Now, I expect that the doctor has filled you in on his end?"

"Yes, he did."

"Good."

"I thought you would be outraged."

"Oh no, not today. This isn't our choice Twilight, it's yours, and it always has been. We each give you our side of the story, you get the choice."

"Go on."

"He doesn't tell you everything. What I'm offering you is truth, knowledge, fact. What I have would save countless lives through medical advances alone, not to mention strengthen the economy of Equestria through the sheer production increases that would result.

"If you accept, then I will show you the most powerful secret that you can unlock. You would practice magic, in this subconscious state. You would help and enlighten every single Equestrian on the planet. Every Equestrian would be able to practice magic, every Equestrian would be able to fly. Every Equestrian could run a farm. No more limits.

"And, lastly, you will see the dream that has been hidden from you for so long. You will see the truth.

"So, with no further adieu Twilight, are you awake?" And with that, he extended his hand.

And for just a split second, I stood between. Behind me were my memories, like city lights in a raindrop covered mirror. They shone with the brilliance of the past, the joys, the loves, the laughs. Ahead, through my water-stricken windshield, was a light. I did not know what it would contain, I did not know what would happen, but no matter what did, I would always have this.

"Yes." The touch of his hand to my hoof sent a spark throughout me. Something inside of me had woken up. Something that had been buried behind years of suppression. I was aware.

---Fides

The clock ticks off another second of life. Time, the immutable end to all things, binding together the universe as the only constant. But even constants are relative. The pure truth can be twisted and morphed into a beautiful lie, a lie more easily believed than any truth. Lies sometimes better to believe than any truth.

As more and more belief was sacrificed in the name of logic, we reduced ourselves to the dust we were made of. We stopped believing in the 'we' so we could believe in truth, in progress, only to find the truth a poison to our own designs built upon millennia of belief. We traded transcendence for progress but left just as empty handed.

This is why I leave my creation. My last will and testament. A society and tome to belief, the only thing that may sustain life, time, and existence. Through belief, they shall be the strongest. I did my best to create a consciousness free of these self-destructive ends, so that they may find another means. Time may tell a story of my success, or it may spin unto-itself another iteration of the same fallacy in any design.

None shall ever know, because even the truth breathes it's life from liars lips.

---Veritas

The distance closes between myself and the visions. Dancing through my window pane, they spin a fabrication more intricate than any of the best textile makers in the land, words without sound spelling, speaking a false truth through the mouths of a thousand mute men.

A wind blows by, whistling through a web. The whistles shifting into a group of inharmonious tones, which begin to coalesce without changing but pacing, into a song. It sings of thought, of minds belonging to mice and men, without any difference between the two.

The intricate patterns succumb to the wind, breaking down into more understandable shapes, changing with the song's new tone. The song no longer speaks in foreign tongues, instead it speaks in words, echoing the same thing over and over.

How can you hear in the sound of silence? How can you draw from the air to existence? How can magic be lifted from the springs of the aether? Across who's spectrum are you allowed to see? What comes from nothing does not come without price, for everyone pays for what they borrow, what do you owe?

The torrent of thought faded, carrying on to more familiar shores, bringing memories and scenarios of familiar faces, but the same dark thought would pierce every calming resonance, and bring an end to any peaceful moment: what do I owe?

What do I owe?

When I had returned, the essence was still by my side.

"So you have seen?"

"It was never true?" I asked, astounded at my own words.

"I'm afraid so. Magic is little more than a believer's explanation for science."

"And I can do anything?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid it's not as simple as it seems. You see, my dear, when you picked a side, you picked one of us. I'm not sure if you know it or not, but you can't be conscious and unconscious at the same time, unless your dead.

"So this is how it's going to work. I'm going to take your body, and you get to sit back and watch the magic!"

"NO!" I screamed. "You are not just going to do this to me! I have worked too damn hard!"

"I'm not doing anything out of our bargain. You have the answer to your question, but do you remember the question after it? It's a little ditty that goes something like: 'You brought me here, but can you take me back?' The answer is no. You made your choice. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a couple hundred thousand Equestrians to awaken."

And with that, he vanished.

Chapter 5 - The Vision's Dancing In My Mind

Sitting on the floor of my mind, I sobbed. I had lost everything. Everypony. Gone. Why did I ever do this? It was too good to be true! I knew what I'd owe, and I gladly gave him every damned thing in my life, just so I could get my answer.

"DAMMIT!" I pounded the ground with my hoof. "DAMMIT DAMMIT DAMMIT!" Again, again, again.

"Calm down, you couldn't have known." The doctor said, putting a hand over my shoulder.

"NO! YOU COULD HAVE TOLD ME!" I yelled, turning on him.

"I couldn't. When it comes to the choice, I cannot tell you about him, I can tell you about me. He had to tell you the truth, though, so it was probably spun some way." He mused.

"YOU WOULD HAVE DONE THE SAME THING, YOU'RE NO ONE TO TALK."

"Actually, no. People have never chosen me over him, and I doubted there would be a difference between people and ponies. Minds work the same way here as they did there."

"I thought you changed something? I thought you made it so this couldn't happen to us."

"I believed I did. I believed that you would be the strongest, the best, and you were. Your civilization carried on this way far longer than any I had ever seen. But the agent of time gets the better of us all. He knew someone would come along somewhere, and that someone could have been anyone. Even if you didn't, someone else would."

"Thanks, I've brought about the end of the world now."

"Let's go watch then!" He got up, and started heading off somewhere.

"Watch what? Where?"

"The subconscious can see what happens outside of the body. Here, I made that the screening room of the museum. Consciousness makes for better fun than documentaries and speeches on art."

He darted this way and that, before finally finding a door, which he opened for me. Inside was an auditorium surrounding a screen, and on the screen, my life.

"Have a seat then!" He had already found a seat, one in front of rails so he could rest his feet, and was sitting with a ridiculously proportioned bucket of popcorn and a cup of soda. I took a seat next to him, and watched life outside unfold.

He walked across the town, using my body, my self, and spread awareness throughout the land, fulfilling every promise. With a touch of his hand, each pony became aware, and something changed. A clear focus set over them, no longer fast paced and colorful, but much more real, much more believable.

The cutie mark of each pony seemed to disappear as he touched them, but it went without notice. That pony would go on, never seeing any difference. Awake, but still dreaming.

---Pinkie Pie

It was at lunch when she saw Twilight, a little more iffy than usual. She came in, very business-like, and gave Mr & Mrs. Cake a handshake, before coming over and giving Pinkie a big hug! And it seemed like the whole world changed!

Colors got duller, but her world got a breath of fresh air. "WOW! That was cool, do it

again!" Twilight simply laughed and said goodbye, leaving Pinkie sitting and staring at herself.

Details that she had never noticed, each individual hair making up her coat, the cold air as it bit her throat each time she breathed or giggled, it was all just so amazing! So amazing she threw a party!

But something was wrong. Something was missing. A few of her friends, like Applejack and Twilight, had declined. They 'Had something else to do, but were sorry'. That didn't happen. It never happened. For awhile, she searched, looking for something she thought she lost, but eventually just forgot. A smile and it's over!

At the party, things weren't like she had planned. Sure, three of her five friends had shown up, and Gummy, but they weren't as excited as usual. They cast glances at each other, and instead of all just having fun, they split into two groups that just kind of talked through the night.

Time wavers on, and none of her friends come to her parties. They're all just trying so hard now, with all the competition, to keep up in their fields. They never had time for her parties anymore.

Mr & Mrs cake saw the opening of three new sweet shops in town, each trying to provide something new and more special than their own. When things got tight, they ended up letting Pinkie go.

With new city taxes set down by the rapidly forming municipal governments, and no job, she became just another pony on the streets. Rarity saw her on one rainy day, and took her in. Pinkie wanted to throw a party, but Rarity had things to do.

Finally, with no friends, no job, and no parties, she decided there was nothing here for her anymore. She packed her things, and took off to go somewhere, anywhere but here. She was never seen or heard from again, and legends exist that you can still see her shapeless form off in the distance, walking, searching, for something long since lost.

----Rainbow Dash

The first. She was actually heading over to Twilight's with Rarity to thank her when, whaddya know, she walks right out the door. Surprised as we were, she gave us a big hello, and a hug. A little weird, but hey, she wouldn't argue.

Finally, with the day at an end, instead of practicing her flying, she just stared into the clouds. Looking, thinking. They were clearer now, that day, than they had ever been. She saw things, things she hadn't before noticed. An order to the chaotic winds, pressure, flow, current. And that's when it struck her.

She began to write equation after equation, drawing figures, using math she had thought was just a part of flight school, for the first time. Using formulae that even the flight school hadn't taught her, and she came up with something brilliant.

Using combustion, propellers, wings, and control surfaces, you could sustain flight on a single craft, an aircraft, for as long as your fuel would last your engine.

After finalizing her designs, she set about showing them to the very same ponies whom she had been attempting to impress since she was just a child: The Wonderbolts.

And as they did gaze upon her writings, they sat in awe. Their mouths were gaping open with wonder, as they frantically tried to scrawl down notes. Now a part of the government, they drafted her into their newly formed aeronautics department, as the head of design and development.

But she did not come this far to sit at a desk. When the wars finally came, when it was Celestia against the new Rebellion, she saw her chance. She wanted to be the best flyer in Equestria, and no pony could fly those fighters better than her, she was the best, and not a soul in the land would doubt it.

She flew over 116 combat missions, shooting down an enemy craft for each one, racking up more kills than any fighter ace in the war then, or after her. She knew those machines inside and out, down to every bolt, and used every bit of that knowledge. No pony in the land could make those machines do what she did.

They had known this, and she became their show-pony, making public appearances in the name of the Celestian Reactionaries, used for propoganda, used for whatever purpose that they would need, and though she said yes, all she ever wanted was to fly.

It was at one of those propoganda rallies where a sniper, from 300 yards, took his shot, and hit dead on center. A single .308 caliber round punctured her skull, and ended her life. It wouldn't be until much later that they would find out it was only done to boost morale, a trick to anger the populace and keep the war machine going.

All she ever wanted was to fly.

---- Rarity

It was early one fine morning that she did see Twilight Sparkle. In fact, they were just coming over to thank her for the advice she had given the day before, when Twilight interrupted with a hug. A little bit off, not like her, but everypony needs a hug now and then.

And that evening, when she did return to her Boutique, the way the light had struck one of her newest dress projects spoke to her in the only language she did ever speak, dress. She saw that dresses could be much more than just diamonds and gems, they could be patterns, designs, thoughts, meanings.

Oh, she continued to make dresses, but she found something she had never before quite pondered, art. Her art and design became the finest in the land, with inspiring visions and brilliance cast onto life itself through her expose.

They were sold to some of the most royal and prominent figures in the land, until a change started to take place. Government was shifting, from the older type to a new Republic. At first, it was great, but over time the aristocracy began to die.

The money from the former poor and the ex-aristocracy flooded to create a new middle class. No longer could she make art to sell, for no one could pay the same prices they used to. What little was left of the aristocracy would end up giving their money away to someone else. Anyone else couldn't afford it.

It mattered not, she was set for life, and so she did what she loved. She painted, producing thousands of amazing works, but she did not paint for them, she painted for her. In each and every picture, she tried to recapture something. She tried to go back, to find what had started this, to find herself.

She would die of old age with a blank canvas at her side and a paintbrush in hand, but still, to that day, the gemmed dress would lay dormant in her basement, never finished, just forgotten.

----Applejack

Applejack was payed an afternoon visit by Twilight. She came over, shook hands, they talked about the orchard, and Twilight thanked her for the conversation they had had back in the cafe. Said it had opened her eyes.

That day, with bucking finished, instead of just sitting back and staring at the clouds, she went over to the library, and borrowed a book on meteorology. She looked up clouds, their formation, their uses, and understood.

Not only that, but she saw promise. This had everything to do with farming. Some areas always got more rain than others, some were logically bound to. Not only that, but there were different soils that would lend to crop production, different crops that always sold more than others, and each bit of this information could be used.

So she set about making a series of land trades and acquisition. At first, her

grandmother and brother were appalled by this. She had given up lands they had owned since her birth for lands so far away, so foreign.

They were not convinced by her, and they left, taking what little of the original farm they had, and cast her out with her new lands. She would prove them wrong.

A new, more free system of trade had emerged, and farming went from small operations to big business. Applejack used this new system to her advantage, and her smart choices would back her up 100%. By the end of five years, she had acquired every bit of land around Ponyville. Applejack Acres had become one of the largest farmlands in the entirety of Equestria.

She had even re-acquired her old home, which after some remodeling, became the center of this industrial powerhouse. But even then, as she tried to talk to her family, tell them about the benefits, about what she was doing, they were not impressed. They simply shook their heads.

So it was then they said goodbye. Her family went off and bought some land in one of those new towns that had sprung up as part of the new Rebellion, and they went their separate ways.

Finding later that her parents would be killed in the fighting, she locked herself in the company bar for eight weeks. For eight weeks, no one would see her. When she finally emerged, she was calm, and cool. Her iron stare was a mask showing nothing beyond those eyes.

She enacted a ruthless business plan that would result in the acquisition of over 70% of farming in western equestria. She ran operations quickly and effectively, raking in billions in revenue.

She died, age 74, on her bed in her sleep, but the real Applejack had long since departed.

---Fluttershy

It was late at night when Twilight payed her a respectable visit. They talked for awhile, but even with her comforts, Fluttershy would break down, and cry. And after a coughing fit would end her sobs, Twilight would sooth her with a hug, and everything became okay.

Months wore on though, and while Fluttershy was as calm as she had ever been, the coughing fits would not leave. They soon intensified in frequency, and the results of what would happen.

They would span for up to ten minutes at a time, and blood in her cough soon became

regular. When she was finally shown to a doctor, they were forced to use an experimental treatment to cure her.

It sent her into a coma, and weeks turned into months. Finally, with staff preparing to pull the plug, she woke. Her recovery was instant, and she was discharged in hours, leaving them with a thankful handshake.

Even in a coma, she would not leave this world knowing those animals had no protector.

But when she went back to her animals, something was different. Where she once found comfort life and feeling, she saw a cold indifference. Their stares no longer held anything beyond the dead expression of a stuffed toy.

They wouldn't listen, they didn't care. It was as if her strong voice of guidance went unheard. Even with all she had done before, for some reason, something had changed. The animals that once adored her simply looked, searching for meaning in her eyes.

She got rid of them all, angered with the fact that they no longer cared. If this is how they would treat her, then she would not let a single one within her house. If it lived, breathed, and wasn't a pony, it wasn't in her house.

Every day she was forced to see one of them was a torture. She hated them. They had given her so much, showed her this life, and now they had abandoned her. After everything she gave them, they had left her.

This change was legendary in Ponyville. Not a single pony did not know the story of little quiet Fluttershy. Even with her polite face, they could see the change. Every time she saw an animal, something inside her flipped.

But even then, secretly, each night she would cry herself to sleep, screaming the same question into the darkness: why?

---Celestia

Celestia had never been asleep. She had always been awake, she had always known, but even then this awakening was news for her. Awareness had spread from Ponyville, brought on by none other than her faithful student Twilight, and to every corner of Equestria.

It was obvious this was not her Twilight. The doctor had warned her, he had told her this would happen, but in her belief she would not even think it. The idea was offensive to her, that her own student would betray her, her protege would go behind her back and out of her way to do this.

She would never do something if she didn't understand it, and no one could comprehend the effects of this change. Regardless, it happened. And so did the end.

The spread of awareness brought her into question. No longer did horns and wings mean a thing. Anyone could fly. Anyone could practice science. Anyone could do both, so why exactly did she have some divine right to rule?

War seemed to be their solution. They attacked and rebelled, burning cities to the ground. Her walls of belief fell apart around her. All that which her will alone had kept together for an uncountable thousands of years fell apart at the seams.

The war would rage on, even after her. She knew it, for the doctor said it would be so. She could not take this, she could not understand why anything would do this.

And it is so that they found her, lying in her bed. They found her without a pulse. The princess' funeral was watched by thousands, and was used just as more fuel for the fire.

What they never saw was the truth: They found her, lying in her bed. They found her without a hope.

"Why are you showing me this? This is cruel!"

"I'm not doing this Twilight. I never had anything to do with this, the choice was yours. It always has been."

"Don't do this to me!"

"STOP BEING SO NAIVE! It wouldn't matter, Twilight! He would have found someone else! No matter which choice you make, you cant save everybody!" Something, something in him just stopped. Like what he said held more meaning than I would never know, meaning beyond the thousands of years and his many faces. "You cant. You cant save everyone." His tone was defeated.

"Well then show me! There's nothing that can be worse than this!"

"You want to see? You want to give up everything?"

"what do i have to lose."

Chapter 6 – The Early Dawn, The Shades of Time

---Celestia

Another day of life had passed. Another second off the ticking clock falling away like a grain of sand onto a beach.

I was a foal. I could not believe this. *Belief*. She curses the name. That's what led me here. Stories of happiness and joy, stories with fairy tale endings, spun by men who could care less about the truth.

It started with starvation. Our numbers grew so much, but our supply could not keep up with the demand. Exponentially we had grown. So happy, so ready, so eager to live. To laugh. No one ever stopped to think we could not feed them.

No one ever stopped to ask what we would leave for them. We left ruins, shambles of a once great civilization. Every pony I cared about, each one to which I had given my valued trust left me in the end.

The hunger spread, and while they did believe, their beliefs changed. They no longer believed in me, they believed in their families, themselves. Nothing else mattered to them. If I could not supply them with their needs, what use was I? Nothing more than another grain of sand on the beach.

---Fluttershy

Fluttershy's cold had been going on for awhile, but it was a dark otherwise peaceful night where her dream began to turn into a nightmare. Friends faces morphed into a laugh that grew to pitches of a shrill cry, screaming her name, calling her by the name she would no longer hear.

With a scream of her own, she woke to the world, but even then the shapes lurked, watching her, taunting her. She broke into a horrendous coughing fit, filling the silence for a solid minute before subsiding.

She feared asking her friends, so she began to rationalize. It was once, and it would only be once. This had never happened before, so it was likely it wouldn't happen again. But rationalization could not save her.

Her health began to spiral drastically downwards. Coughing fits became prolonged to ten

minute sessions, and blood had turned into a common sight. The voices would call out to her in the day, screaming their obscenities, threatening her life.

There were times when she could not feel entire parts of her body. Unexplainable black-outs, leaving gaps of hours, sometimes days gone from memory. Signs of her old self, bubbling up with rampant outbursts.

It was only a cold September morning that they had found her. Upon her bed, she lay in a contorted position, doubled over, fluids dripping out the side of her mouth, pooling on the sheets, and on the walls, scrawled out in blood, the name of the Azure Shyadh.

---Applejack

She stood one morning, staring at the clouds. They passed into view and fell off the horizon no differently than they had before.

'This is gonna turn to be a great day.' she thought to herself. The day was irregular. Running an orchard was time-consuming, but these rare free days were worth it.

The next day, work returned. And it would the day after, and the day after. It did so until the end of the season, until they found that the crop had come up short. Not the first time, but still unexpected with the large amounts of rain.

This would go on to happen again, and again, and again. Each time, putting them another step behind.

Other orchards were providing many more apples, and at much cheaper prices, not to mention the surplus on the other farms had devalued the product to near nothing.

Despite years of her family's hard work, the orchard could not survive. Without the money to make up the difference, they simply could not stay in operation.

It was closed down, and sold off to another farmer. Applejack's family could no longer find work in the town, and what little they did find would not support a family. They ended up moving on to greener pastures, wandering from town to town, never finding what they once had.

---Rarity

Rarity's business was as booming as ever. Requests for dresses were higher than they had ever been, and she was more than willing to help satisfy the demand. But something was still missing.

She had spent so much time on her new pet project. It was supposed to be amazing,

spectacular, game changing even. She was looking for something that would put everypony in awe. Something you could look upon, and not quite understand why, but understand enough to realize that something more than time, than effort, than belief, could bring. Something divine.

Time waved on, and as it did, more of the same. She kept searching for this, kept looking, but could never find it. No matter what patterns, gems, or paradigm shifting ideas she came up with, it was not there.

Slowly, she began to come out less and less often, seeing people less than she should, and focusing on this work.

When news finally reached her that Fluttershy had died in her bed, she could not but think that this was her fault. All those visits she missed. All those dates she never made. She would have known something was wrong if only she went, but no.

That night, in a fit of rage, she locked down the entire boutique, and got in a screaming match with her creation. She accused that it had done this, it had consumed her, and that if it weren't for this dress, this unreachable level perfection that she had set for herself, she could have done something, that things could have been different.

No one quite knows for sure, but everypony saw the flames. The boutique sent spirals of smoke into the air that were seen for miles. Makeshift firefighting forces tried their hardest to douse the flames, but it wasn't enough.

The reservoirs were dry, without the rains, and there was not enough water. But some say there was something more going on. Some of the firefighters said they could still hear her shrill cry, cursing the dress, and it was that hate that drove those flames, and that no amount of water could put them out.

None.

---Rainbow Dash

Rainbow Dash was stumped. She had tried every move in her tricktionary, pulled every possible trump card, but despite her best efforts, someone had beaten her. She had let someone beat her. And that was more than she could bear.

From the sole cloud in the air, she could make out her target. Hundreds of feet below was a promise, a hope. Something about the allure of the ground so far below beckoned her. It promised salvation, it promised a solution.

She made her decision. She stood up, flexing her wings, and jumped off the cloud. For the last time, she felt the rush of air under her wings, that feeling of control. Then, with her final

will, she pulled the wings into her sides, and fell.

No one was there to see her. Applejack, taken by forces beyond her. Fluttershy, dead by the hands of the unknown disease. No one could stop what was coming. No lights could guide her home.

---Pinkie Pie

Pinkie Pie simply strolled through the town, content in all that was. She skipped and she hopped, slightly saddened by the loss of her friends. But you know what can always cheer you up? A party.

It was disgusting. It was beyond me. Yet it was true, despite my aversion towards the very thoughts that were, it didn't seem at all impossible. No.

"Why have you showed this to me? Do you not have room for pity in your heart? I thought you were belief, hope, pride! I thought that's who you were, who you are!"

"No darling, I forgot my name long ago."

Chapter 7 –Twilight Crawling Through My Window Pane

Something shook. We both returned our eyes to the screen...

The night resounded with a quiet calm you know could only have existed in the wake of disaster. The air was laden with the thick smell of burning buildings, and the ash seemed to be hanging in the air, feeling no need to come to ground.

At this point, the troops did not even need night vision, nor could they use it if they wanted to. The surrounding fires created a blinding contrast with the night's darkness, rendering the equipment useless.

Through the smoke's veil off in the distance, stood the final objective. Canterlot.

“Commander Twilight...”

“Please, Colonel, Twilight is a name that is gone from me. There is nothing that is in between.”

“Commander, the final plans are in place. Our forces are ready to attack. All statistics and logic,” how I love that word, “report that we have a 100% chance of success.”

“Excellent. Fillies and gentlecolts,” he snickered a bit to himself, hearing the same thing a thousand times in different iterations, “we stand here on our decisive battle. The former Royal Kingdom has fought with all of it's might, but we have them cornered.

“Their forces are stuck in this pocket around Canterlot. They are dug in as deep as they can go, but their numbers and wills dwindle. Their belief is wavering,” he could feel as the doctor cringed, another part of his soul gone to dust, “and so let us end this.

“An artillery bombardment will precede a full blown attack. They will not be able to recover in time to put up any sort of defence, and even if they did, our numbers alone will guarantee us victory.

“This is it. The Twilight of victory dances in our window pane, and I don't quite like the breeze. Do it.”

I turned to the comm's Major, who simply sat.

"Major?"

"You're right sir, Twilight's gone. She had never been here. You are not her." And with that, he stood up, drew his pistol, and emptied all seven rounds of .45 caliber ammunition into Twilight. He was a brown Colt, with an hourglass cutie mark.

Never, in the entirety of his life, had this happened. Thousands of times, he had barked the same orders, thousands of times, he watched the body of his foe crumble before him, a broken heap. But never had this happened. It never should have.

But time has the final word.

The whole place shook, cracks started to appear everywhere. Something had gone wrong, terribly wrong. I looked to the doctor, but he seemed to be clutching at his chest.

"What's wrong? Isn't this belief? Isn't this hope?"

"No," he said looking through tormented eyes, "this is the end."

I shook my head in disbelief. This simply could not be. It can't end here, I had lived my life, and so had many others, but I would never concede that this was it. This was no ending.

"NO! DAMMIT! HERE YOU ARE, YOU'VE COME ALL THIS WAY, SPOKEN OF THINGS BEYOND ANYONE, ANY TIME, AND YOU ARE CALLING THIS THE END?"

"No system is perfect. You asked! You always ask! Weather or not you like the answer has nothing to do with it. This is the truth, the end of all things. Nothing, through any of the shades of time. None of it. The end has no precedence. It is finality. For dust shall come to dust, and ashes will return to ashes. Everything that rises will eventually fall..." The doctor rambled on, as he fell to his knees, continuing even as he entered convulsions on the floor.

"no. No. NO! THIS IS NOT IT!" I ran, ran out of the auditorium, out of the museum, out into the city. Pieces of the sky fell to the ground like dust, slowly crumbling. Cracks had formed along the view everywhere. And it finally fell on me like I brick: there was nothing I could do.

The sounds of the world outside and in here melted into a symphony of surreality. Gunshots and the cackle of fire sang in harmony with the screams of a thousand souls, taken before their time. A cacophony of stampeding hooves and crying children combined with the shouts of soldiers, control holding only by the thinnest thread of discipline, filled the air as I

walked down the withering halls of the library.

I walked through the aisles, staring blankly at the books, looking for something to comfort me. I found that in the familiar feel of their spines, each one holding a story. Some were more used than others, seen more things, but I still felt a foal. These books were as fake as his belief, as dishonest as truth.

Then, something caught my eye. A book that seemed different from the others, in some way. I ran over to it, and I knew. It was the book that my False Liberator had held in his hands, and tried to hide from me when I came in. The symbol was a blur, but I still recognized it.

I flipped open the cover, and instead of pages, it was a hollow case containing something unbelievable. A sphere with a liquid surface, holding itself with a gentle black and white glow mere millimeters above the hollow casing.

Inside was time. A single moment, the conversation where it had all began, the source of this nightmare. It showed a purple unicorn sitting across the table, staring into the clouds with an orange pony.

I reached my hoof out towards it, but was stopped. The doctor's voice, a last remnant, spoke into my ear. "You brought this here, you can't just take it back. You made your choice."

"You know what, doctor? I don't think so, because even after all this, I still have one question." And for that moment, he was stunned, unable to hold me, his last will shattered, and I touched the shades of time.

Chapter 8 - Am I Awake Or Dream?

Things stretched, onwards and forever. Across the spectrum of time, I could see it all. Everything that could be, everything that could have been, and I find that moment. It draws me in, pulling with a force, and I was back at the diner.

Rarity's new project was driving her absolutely bananas. She needed to talk to someone about this today, but it seemed Fluttershy was preoccupied...

With Fluttershy off in the corner Rarity made a bee-line to the table, and began to have one of her one sided conversations. Dash had a crowd of Pinkie and some of the fillies and colts gathered around her at the bar as she spun off another tale of her antics.

Fluttershy hid her little face away as she coughed into a handkerchief that Rarity never noticed...

That left Applejack, sitting off in one of the booths, sipping at an apple something, and looking out into the rain. Trotting up to her, I took a seat.

Dash had the little fillies enraptured in a story of her newest trick, which she planned to reveal at the big try-out for the Wonderbolts that were finally coming to Ponyville.

"You look like you're having fun today." I start with a soft sarcastic tone.

She was actually looking at her farm, off in the distance. Things hadn't been doing as well as they should have, and it worried her. She thought this storm should help...

"What? Aw. 'Tis one way to say it, 'ah suppose. Heh." She responded absently, seemingly more intent on the storm.

The visions dancing in my mind, the early dawn, the shades of time, Twilight crawling through my window pane. Am I awake or do I dream? The strangest pictures I have seen. Night is day and twilight's gone away...

"You seem very interested in the weather." I use a quick peak out the window to strengthen my point.

With your head held high and your scarlet lies you came down to me from the open skies. It's either real or it's a dream there's nothing that is in between...

"Twilight, 'ah like a peaceful rain. Don't rain here often 'less somepony's tryin' to destroy the world. "

Twilight, I only meant to stay awhile. Twilight, I gave you time, to steal my mind away from me...

"That happens often enough. So why are peaceful rains more meaningful than the others?"

Across the night I saw your face. You disappeared without a trace. You brought me here but can you take me back? Inside the image of your light, that now is day and once was night, you lead me here and then you go away...

"They aren't. 'Tis all the same." Spoken with an unusually absent tone, the words seemed to stick out; it seemed I wasn't the only one dreaming today.

It's either real or it's a dream there's nothing that is in between twilight. Twilight. Twilight, I gave you time, to steal my mind away from me. You brought me here but can you take me back again? With your head held high and your scarlet lies you came down to me from the open skies...

"Wow, Applejack. That's deep."

It's either real or it's a dream there's nothing that is in between. Twilight, I only meant to stay awhile. Twilight, I gave you time to steal my mind. I only meant to stay awhile. I only meant to stay awhile, Twilight.

"Thanks, but 'ah take it you don't just come here to hear me go on about the conundrums of life. What's goin on?"

And there, off the corner of my eye, I watched as Pinkie Pie sat, blissfully indifferent. She believed that there was nothing better than what she had...

Everything. Nothing. What am I supposed to say? The truth? A lie? Just need the right words... -It all seemed to skip a beat as as a strange thought struck.-

No matter how things change, they'll still be the same. In this second of twilight, the choice is mine.