

## Chapter 11: Lasting Conclusions

Twilight Sparkle drifted into darkness.

The light from the mirror receded swiftly behind her. Twilight felt like she was floating downward, but couldn't be sure. She kicked her legs to no effect. Her body was sluggish and weak, and it wasn't long before she tired herself out with random flailing. Her path remained unaffected by how she swung herself about. Calming herself down, she instead lit her horn in an effort to see farther ahead. The light vanished as quickly as it appeared, and Twilight gripped her forehead in pain.

*I guess this place isn't a fan of my magic either...*

She peered out ahead of her. There were no shapes she could make out anywhere, nor any sources of light or stability. She glanced behind her, and saw that the mirror had become a tiny prick in the distance. Sugar Cane was nowhere to be found. Twilight had lost track of him when she knocked him through the light, and hadn't seen or heard anything since.

An endless void expanded out in every direction, and Twilight could do nothing but tumble through it. All alone into the gaping maw of the unknown.

Time moved at an immeasurable pace, losing its definition the farther she went. There was no frame of reference for Twilight to know how long she had been falling. Eventually, she bowed her head and concentrated.

*I jumped through the mirror... how long ago? An hour, more? Less? It feels like it's only been a few seconds, but that can't be right, I know it's not right, I've done too much moving around for it to have only been a few seconds... It doesn't matter, I don't think... right now, I want to know when it got so cold in here...*

Twilight rubbed her chest, willing some warmth to run through her body. It was too dark for her to even see her hooves in front of her face. She sighed and closed her eyes.

*Think this through... you're in their world, and those things make too many eyes for themselves to be stuck in the dark all the time. Unless they just evolve what they need when they need it, if they come from a place where you just have to think it in... then, could I do that? If all I needed was a solid place to touch down, to get my bearings for a second, could I just—*

Twilight's thoughts were interrupted by her unceremonious landing on a patch of sand. She rolled forward on impact, falling forward over a dune and down a small incline until she finally came to a stop. She sat up to spit the sand out of her mouth.

*Alright, that made sense.*

Clearing her head, she looked around her newfound locale. There was light here, though from where she couldn't say. Wherever she turned, it always managed to come in from behind her. Standing up, she saw that she was on a small, round island. It was made entirely of sand, with a small hill in the center where she had touched down. An inky black ocean surrounded it. Water lapped gently onto the shore in a steady rhythm.

Twilight glanced up. The sky was a dark violet color, only slightly more visible than the water below. The light from the mirror twinkled like a lonely star. Bringing her head back down, Twilight walked in a wide loop around the island. A small, misshapen lump on the opposing side caught her eye, and she wandered over towards it. As she approached, the object lurched forward and shivered, revealing the shape of a very thin figure. Twilight froze, listening to the figure wheeze and cough. She could only see the back of it. After studying it for a few moments she saw that it was wearing a very tattered black coat.

"...Sugar Cane?" Twilight said. The sound of her voice pushed unnaturally through the air.

The figure turned and met her eyes.

"T-Tw... Twilight S-S-Sparkle..." he wheezed. His voice was faint, a far cry from the boisterous tone he had put on back in the throne room. He tried to turn his body towards Twilight, but only managed to turn himself halfway around before he fell forward onto his stomach.

"What... happened to you?" Twilight asked. She studied Cane closely. In addition to his mangled trench coat, his hair was a shredded mess of bald patches and knotted ends. He was emaciated to the point of sickness. His legs, now little more than skin and bone, shook as he tried to support himself. Wrinkles crisscrossed his face, aging his appearance considerably. His horn was gone; a small scab marked the spot on his forehead where it had once jutted out.

"The p-p-part of me that agreed w-with... with this p-place... didn't s-s-stick around," Cane said. He paused to give in to a small coughing fit, offering Twilight a weak smile when it cleared up. "Seems you w-were r-r-right about s-something after all. There was still a little p-pony in me... physically s-speaking, at least."

"Forgive me if I'm still not on your side," Twilight replied. She turned away from Cane and walked towards the waterline. She peered out towards the horizon, her eyes peeled for any irregularities.

"Now then..." she murmured to herself. "What do I do now?"

Cane rolled over, aiming his head towards Twilight while he continued his efforts to stand

up. “You s-shouldn’t h-have come here. You d-don’t b-belong he—”

“Waiting back there would’ve resulted in my death, or being wiped from existence, or whatever it was that was ‘written’ for me. In here is *definitely* better than the alternative,” Twilight snapped. She shot a glare in Cane’s direction as he pulled himself upright.

“There’s n-nothing you... you c-can d-do,” Cane insisted. “I t-ried once. Really, I d-d-did. Long ago. It didn’t t-take. What’s h-happening is h-h-happ—”

“Is happening, and couldn’t happen any other way. Yeah. You told me already.” Twilight rolled her eyes and brought her attention back to the sea. “Well, I aim to change that. Because, if I may be blunt, your story sucks.”

“W-what do y-you think you can d-do?” Cane said, his tone growing sharper.

“It’s like you said. I’m the lead here.” Twilight’s voice softened, and her shoulders sagged. “I’ve... I’ve got to try something. I think I can...”

“Bah. Useless s-sentiment n-now, nothing m-more,” Cane scoffed. “What d-do you know, a-anyway? If I said I c-couldn’t s-stop it, if I’m the one who p-planned it all out, then that’s th-that. End of story.”

“Of course you couldn’t change anything.” Twilight turned and shrugged at Cane. “You’re just the writer. What do *you* know, anyway?”

Cane’s eyes twitched at Twilight’s words. He opened his mouth to respond, only to be silenced by the hoof she put up. Twilight stiffened, perking her ears up and looking all around.

“Hang on...” she said slowly. “I think I can hear... something...”

Twilight stared at the blank sky. It looked the same as it always did, a murky field of velvet that reached in every direction.

*It’s a kind of slithering noise... nothing else on the island, doesn’t sound like something in the water, must be something in the air... but there’s nothing up there. Anywhere.*

Twilight squinted her eyes, letting them adjust to the low light. As her gaze swept past the blip that was the mirror light, it abruptly switched out. She focused on the spot, now as dark as the rest of the sky.

*Something on the other side cause that? No, wait, it looks like something passed in front of—*

Twilight gasped. The source of the noise came into focus over her.

Half the sky was no sky at all. It was something in motion, identical in color and characteristic to the void beyond it; the smooth, featureless belly of a creature whose size knew no boundaries. The water gave nary a ripple to this great beast, and not a single grain of sand was pushed out of place. With a little effort, Twilight could make out the nearly invisible line separating its front from the rest of the sky. It slid past Twilight at a sluggish but steady pace, headed to a destination as yet unseen.

*...That's a big one...*

Another cough behind her. Twilight turned to see Cane staring up at the same sight. He glanced down at her, motioning to the creature.

"Well, there's one n-now," he said with a smirk. "Your move, Twilight."

Twilight narrowed her eyes and turned away from it. Focusing her horn up towards the front of the creature, Twilight took a deep breath and dug her hooves into the sand.

*Steady, Twilight... be ready for the pain, you can take it... and... fire!*

A burst of light purple energy launched out of Twilight's horn. She cried out and recoiled in shock, rubbing her forehead as a buzzing pain bounced around inside. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the projectile streak through the air with a vivid intensity. It sailed on towards the edge, taking more time than Twilight expected, until it finally exploded with a small bloom of light at an infinitesimal spot on the creature's belly. Twilight braced herself.

Nothing happened. The creature kept right on moving like nothing had happened.

Twilight frowned and scratched her chin. "Guess I'll need something bigger than—"

She cut herself off at the sound of splashing in the water nearby. Small waves made their way to the island and broke along the shore in knee-high crests. Twilight stared over the sea, her eyes perked for the slightest movement. Dimly, she made out a large circular object break through the surface and rise quickly into the air.

Even in the dark, Twilight could tell it was another creature. It was impossible to see any fine detail on it, but she could make out its silhouette. A round lump formed the head, with a slender and wavy body extending down from it. Under the head, twin stalks broke out of opposite sides and unrolled down to the top of the water, forming a pair of long, spindly arms.

Soon, the creature stopped rising. Its head tilted down towards the island. There were no eyes to be seen, but there was no mistaking who it was looking at. Silence returned as it stood

motionless. The sound of the beast in the sky was muted, though it continued to roll forward unabated.

Twilight gulped. Large drops of an unknown substance spilled off the creature's back and dripped down to the sea, but otherwise it didn't respond.

"Hey! Um, I'm... um..." Twilight stammered. Her eyes searched up and down the creature, trying in vain to get a better look at it.

"Interloper."

The creature's voice came thundering in at Twilight from every direction. It made her shudder as though she was stuck in the middle of a storm cloud. "Who are you? You do not belong here."

There was a deep guttural quality to the voice, one that lingered in the air long after the sound of the words faded away.

A second splash sounded out, and a second creature appeared. This one was considerably smaller, and shaped like a reverse tear drop. It scurried up the side of the larger creature, moving with dozens of freshly sprouted legs.

Cane watched the creature's ascent, and smiled. "I was w-wondering where my b-better half went."

The small creature hissed. It paused at the halfway point to the giant's head, and turned to Twilight. "It's from the outside! It seeks to put an end to the change! It thinks it has the power to stop us!"

A rumble broke through the air, originating from the large creature. One of its mighty appendages flicked upward, catching the smaller creature on the side and pressing it down. Small black lines shot out from the giant's chest and wrapped around the small creature, pulling it in tight. Within moments, it vanished completely. Another rumble broke through the air.

"Twilight Sparkle," the giant boomed without a hint of emotion. "Why have you come? Your goal is unobtainable. You will not succeed."

"I'm getting really sick and tired of hearing that! I'm gonna put a stop to all of this madness, for good." Twilight shouted back. The stammer was gone from her voice, replaced with a slowly building rage. Her legs stayed straight as iron under her, never wavering in the slightest.

Cane let out a wheezy laugh that quickly deteriorated into another coughing fit.

“T-t-tenacious, aren’t we?”

“There is nothing to stop now,” the voice replied. “We have moved in. We have reclaimed what is ours. The struggle is over. Only you remain. You are too late.”

“You’re wrong,” Twilight said. “I can defeat you. Everything you’ve done... none of it will last, none of it will matter. None of it is even real.”

There was a pause. Then a loud, cracking sound echoed around the island, like a series of trees being splintered in half one by one. The creature rocked back and forth, pushing more small waves onto the island. Twilight cocked her head as she looked on.

*It’s... laughing?*

“You are alone here,” the creature finally said. “You are helpless. You are not even worth our time now, except to crush and be finished with.”

Twilight gritted her teeth and lit her horn up. The buzzing returned in force to her head, but this time she didn’t react. The light stayed long enough to expel a powerful, purple burst. The bolt of energy lit up the creature’s chest as it rushed by. For a fraction of a second, Twilight was able to get a good, clear look at it.

She forced her gag reflex down to keep from vomiting.

The beam collided with the top of the creature’s head. The loud cracking sound vanished, and was immediately replaced with another loud rumbling. This one was much more concentrated than the last one, and went on for much longer.

The island rocked back and forth. Sand scattered into the water, which churned and bubbled all along the shoreline. Suddenly the entire mass lifted up into the air. Twilight fought to stay upright as she rose higher and higher. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cane roll forward towards the edge, pulled along by draining sand. He shot Twilight one last look as he passed. The smile was gone, replaced by a thin frown and the faintest hint of empathy in his eyes. His shoulders gave a limp shrug, and he tumbled over the edge. Twilight heard a distant splash a few seconds later.

The island climbed even higher, going straight for the creature’s head. Twilight pushed her hooves out, getting back into a determined stance. Her stare was one of pure defiance as it looked up at the creature. It let out a low growl, but she ignored it.

“You got your power from those old stories and from those who believed them,” she said. “You used that to get into Equestria. Bits and pieces of you could stay over there on their own, work on their own, but for all of you to be able to do everything, you needed that power boost.”

You needed that belief.”

“Only to get in,” the voice responded. Twilight swore she heard a twinge of annoyance in its words. “Once we arrived, we had no further use for your kind. We dealt with them in turn.”

What little remained of the island stopped rising into the air. Twilight didn’t move as the sand around her hooves fell away to uncover a ground of smooth, green scales.

“Wrong again!” Twilight shouted. “You need that belief. Always have, always will. You need it to make you real, and to keep you real. Without that belief, you are nothing at all.”

One of Twilight’s hooves started shaking, and she quickly stamped down to steady it.

*Go for it. It’s the only argument that can work now.*

“I’m the lead in Equestria’s story. I’m the one who guides it to where it needs to go. Right now, I represent its reality. The *true* reality. And right now, I’m done believing. This little piece of pulp writing is over. Time for fantasy to go back to dreamland, where it belongs. Where it *stays*.”

“It doesn’t work that way anymore,” the creature shot back. “This is not a simple sto—”

“That’s all it’s *ever* been.”

Twilight saw the creature twitch as she cut in. The corners of her mouth curled up into a small grin. “It may have been a pretty convincing little tale for a while, but so are those ghost stories we tell around the campfire. But here’s the thing: they *always* end. And this one’s ending. Now. I’m *done* with it.”

The wet, moldy twang of snapping muscles emitted from the creature’s face. A small spot of black appeared, this one an even darker shade than the rest of its body. The head drew back and unleashed an ear-splitting roar right at Twilight. The force of the yell physically pushed her back, forcing her near the edge. She stood her ground against the audio blast, never giving way to the powerful noise.

“You are nothing now. Absolutely *nothing!*” the creature screeched. “Your time has passed. Your story is irrelevant. *You* are our fantasy. *We* are the reality now.”

“Oh yeah?” Twilight braced herself. “Prove it. Make me disappear, like the nothing that I am.”

There was a flash of movement. Both the creature’s long arms shot up, pulling back high in the air. Past them, Twilight saw the enormous mass in the sky shift directions. It turned on its axis and aimed right for the giant creature and Twilight below it. A dull red glow appeared along

its underside, lighting the sky up in a fire that burned like a thousand sunsets. Twilight saw a legion of eyes flick open with the light. Each and every one of them stared right back at her.

Twilight's horn burned brightly in the dark. She fired out three bursts of magic, each aimed at the creature's head. It screeched at their impacts and brought the arms down at a ferocious pace. Gray fields of energy, identical to the ones Twilight saw Cane produce, emerged on the tip of each arm like a pair of medieval maces.

The bludgeon's aim was true, and they simultaneously crashed down on target. A huge burst of light and color expanded out on impact, and the arms wavered back. Slowly, very slowly, the grey fields pulled back to reveal a small purple bubble sitting dead center on the shattered remains of the towering island.

Twilight's eyes were barely open as she fought back the pain. The buzzing occupied her skull so loudly she couldn't hear herself think. Her legs bent and wobbled, her hooves slipping around on the slick surface. Still, her horn remained lit and the force field active.

"I. Am not. A piece of fiction," Twilight grunted. "I am real. What I do is real. What's happening to me now, the buzzing in my head, the gray energy working to counteract my magic... that's *not* real."

Twilight let loose a long exhale and relaxed her muscles. Her body ceased trembling, and she stood up straight with little effort. Her eyes opened all the way. Her head tilted back, looking past the pressing arms and up to the creature and the falling mass beyond it.

"I know what's real. The love of my friends and family, the magic of Equestria and everypony who lives there... that's what's real. That's all that's real. That's what *counts*."

"Meaningless rabble..." The creature's voice grew strained. It pushed down even harder with the arms. Overhead, the mass came lumbering down and closed up on all sides, trapping Twilight and the creature in a gigantic red ball. Twilight's eyes glazed over the hideous deformities and loose appendages of the illuminated creature.

*It won't get to you now. It's just an empty threat now. Relax.*

A wide, earnest grin broke out on Twilight's face. "It doesn't matter if it's sappy or cliché. That's the point of it all, even. It all exists in the actual reality. The one you don't belong in. Maybe you are real, somewhere. There are lots of stories out here. But you're not real here. Not in Equestria's reality. The one where you don't fit, where you have no place at all, and the one that I'm going back to."

"You speak of nonsense and hollow sentimentality!" the creature yelled at Twilight, its voice shaking even the great red mass. "You can stall all you want with your flimsy magic tricks,



but it makes no difference! We've won! We will trap you in this place until your consciousness ceases to be. Long after the skin has rotted from your flesh, and your bones have turned to dust, long after you will *beg* for death, all the way until time immemorial! You are *nothing*! You are *finished*!"

Twilight's smile grew bigger with each passing moment. "No. You are. This little crossover attempt of yours? It's *over*. Time for it to fade away, like a bad dream when you wake up in the morning. You want to stick around? Time to put your dependence on belief to the test one last time."

Another loud screech pounded at Twilight. She didn't even flinch. Her purple shield shimmered.

"Your magic... it won't save you," the creature growled. "We can break it. We always could."

Twilight couldn't hold back anymore. She laughed, loud and proud.

"There's more than magic here. Because you're right, my magic alone can't hurt you. This is something else. It's my very *being* fighting back. It's the one thing fantasy can't stand up to under any circumstances. Because like I said before... I'm the last real thing in here."

Her laughter fading away, Twilight narrowed her eyes. "And now, I believe it's time for you to go away."

Twilight bowed her head. She heard the creature roar again, felt the last remnants of the island shake under her hooves, sensed the red walls closing in with every bit of strength it could put forth. She breathed deep and channeled all her remaining energy into her horn.

A purple field expanded out of Twilight's horn, followed swiftly by an even more intense white light. The light pushed out in every direction to become a massive ball of energy. It swept out over the creature, past the great red mass, and out further beyond. Twilight kept shoving her magic out as hard as she could.

The light was all-encompassing. It absorbed the pained cries of fearsome beasts and giant monsters, ripping through their thick scales and breaking their sharp claws in two. Still the light expanded. Even with her eyes shut, Twilight's vision was a wall of white against the brightness. The shaking around her increased tenfold, jolting her down to her bones. Eventually she started screaming, not out of fear or concern, but from the surge of emotions coming into her in the moment. The noise and light wrapped together all around her, reaching for a climax that would shatter worlds.

*Just hold strong, wait for the end... whatever it is, wait it out. Hold strong, hold strong—*

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Twilight opened her eyes to a stark-white abyss. She was lying on her back, though she didn't remember ever falling down. She rolled over to pick herself up, and noticed that she wasn't standing on anything. She felt a resistance under her hooves from something supporting her, but there wasn't anything there. There was plenty of light, none of it blindingly so, but it didn't help her see anything. Whichever way she looked, there was nothing but empty space.

Twilight took a few steps forward. She felt the momentum with each step, but it was impossible to tell if she was actually going anywhere. Her hooves made no sound as she walked. The only thing she heard was her heart beating in her chest. She looked around carefully. Her horn lit up and lobbed a small bolt of light in a random direction. She watched the bolt go farther and farther away, finally vanishing in the distance.

"Hello?" Twilight called out. No echo returned to her. She did a quick turn, only to be met by the same sight as always.

Twilight eased herself back, sitting down on whatever floor was there. She scratched her chin as her eyes continued to sweep over her surroundings.

*Did I... win?*

Another field of light appeared around her horn. She sent a dozen more bolts in each direction, following each one to its very end to look for any kind of impact. Still nothing.

*If I got rid of those things, than am I... still somewhere else?*

Twilight rolled onto her back and sighed.

*I know I won. I must've won. I was right.*

"So..." she muttered. "Now what am I supposed to do?"

*Well, think it out... suppose that, even after what you did, you didn't... save Equestria. Everypony's still...*

"Would've been a big waste of time then," she grumbled. Her lower lip quivered and her eyes grew moist. "...that wouldn't be fair at all."

*No... no! Wait, wait... hang on a moment. So Equestria's gone, because you didn't get a chance in time to do anything. But now those other things are gone. That story's over, right?*

“Right...” Twilight sat up, her eyebrows rising. “So it’s just me. I’m the last remaining bit of reality.”

*And as the last bit of reality, you need to bring the rest of it back. Make everything right again.*

“Okay... okay. So I... what? Will it into being?” Twilight rolled her eyes. “It can’t be that easy.”

*I think you just won an argument with an ancient, horrific, now-fictional god on the grounds that it wasn’t allowed to exist in your world.*

“And now I’m arguing with myself again.”

*Correct. So it very well could be that easy. You owe it to everypony to try it out.*

Twilight let out another sigh. “Alright, so... where to begin?”

*Start easy. What about all that stuff that Cane made you forget? Do you remember it now?*

“I suppose I must, right? Not like he can tell me otherwise now.”

*So, Equestria. Ruled by...?*

“By... by the Princess. Princess... Princess... it’s on the tip of my tongue, I know it. Princess...”

Twilight blinked. Her white surroundings clicked a small part of her brain into order.

“*Princess Celestia!* Ruler of Equestria, in charge of the sun, sister of Princess Luna, and the pony I’m the student of... I remember now!” Twilight shouted. Her head darted around with a newfound sense of eager anticipation. The white space remained indifferent.

*I think it takes a bit more than that, but that’s good. You... I remember the Princess. Whatever happened to her when— well, never mind that. That especially doesn’t matter now. Now we need to bring them all back. Go big now. Get it all.*

Twilight took a deep breath. She rubbed her temples with both hooves, staying as calm as she could. Her eyes eased shut.

*First, get the foundations down.*

"I'm real... I know I'm real," she said, easing out each word. "Equestria as I knew it is still real. My friends are still real, my home is still real. That's where I need to be right now. I need to be... home."

*Good, good. Now... now the rest of it. All of it.*

Images flashed through Twilight's mind. She recalled her life, from the earliest moment she could remember to her last days in Ponyville before the winter. All her studies, all her friends, all her adventures flooded out, each memory as vivid and clear as the one before it. A whole lifetime of experience expanded from her. Twilight sat motionless, keeping her eyes closed. She let herself take in every old vision with as much detail as she could muster.

After a period of time she couldn't begin to calculate, she inched one eye open and peeked around.

The blank white void stared back at her.

"Oh come on..." Twilight grumbled, spinning around to look another way. "What can I do right now, click my heels together or—"

Something small and black caught Twilight's attention. She froze, staring at the small object that popped up out of nothing. Sitting not ten meters away, written clearly and legibly, sat a single bit of black text, complete with punctuation: "home."

Twilight cautiously stepped over to it. It was smartly written, as if by a typewriter or similar device, as tall as her knee and only visible from one angle.

*That's a little literal, isn't it?*

She studied the text. It sat there, not moving an inch. Tentatively, she reached her hoof out and touched it.

The word quivered and transformed. A large wooden shape sprang up from the top of the letters, pushing them out of sight. It expanded instantaneously out to full size and made Twilight yell in surprise. She fell back and, in a quick reflex, hunched over into a defensive position. Her body then eased up as she realized what was in front of her.

*That's my... that's the...*

"The entrance to my library?" Twilight gaped at the newfound doorway that lay before her.

*The curved triangular frame, red finish, big top with a big lit candle painted into it that*

*swings out... no doubt about it, that's my door.*

“So that’s... home?” Twilight perked up and dashed over to the door. She looked around behind it, finding only its wooden backside. She put a hoof up against one of the handles, hesitating on the cold metal.

“I just... I just open it. That’ll be all there is to it.”

*That’s all? Just like that?*

Twilight exhaled and smiled. “Just like that. I know it. Time to get back to the story. The real one.”

Without another thought, Twilight pushed the latch and walked through the open doorway.

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The library expanded all around her, looking the same as it always had. The shelves were all in order, neatly organized and recently dusted. A few sunbeams filtered in through the windows to give the room a warm glow. Distant chatter penetrated the wooden walls, the mark of an active and busy outside world.

“Hey, Twilight. Where you been?”

Twilight’s jaw dropped when she heard the voice. She whirled around to see Spike step off the stairs and walk towards her.

“I’ve been looking all over for– hey!” Spike was cut off mid-sentence as Twilight swooped in and gave him an enormous hug.

“Spike!” she cried out, tears streaming from her eyes. “Oh Spike, oh Spike, I missed you so *much!* After everything that– I mean, you were– Oh, *Spike!*”

“Can’t... breathe...” Spike squeaked from between Twilight’s powerful grip. Grinning sheepishly, she released him and took a step back. Spike doubled over, gasping for air.

“I’m sorry Spike, I’m just so... so...” Twilight wiped the tears away from her eyes and moved in for another hug. Spike quickly put a claw up and ducked out of the way.

“It’s nice to see you too, Twilight. Really, it is, believe me.” He backed towards the doorway, motioning outside. “But like I was trying to say before, I’ve been trying to find you. Remember, you promised Fluttershy you’d help her get all the animals organized so they can

start hibernating, and we're supposed to be at her house in ten minutes. We better get moving if we don't want to be late."

"Fluttershy... hibernating... wait!" Twilight's smile snapped out.

She frantically searched around the library, dashing around her shelves, scanning over every spine that appeared in front of her. "Are they here? Are— Spike! Where's the horror section?"

"Twilight, what are you doing?" Spike asked as he watched Twilight scramble around. "We don't have time for— wait, we have a horror section? Since when?"

Twilight ran up the stairs and continued her search. Reaching the proper shelf, Twilight slowed down and inspected a few individual volumes.

"Alright, Cane, Cane, where are you..." she mumbled. Her hoof skimming along in front of her, hovering briefly under each author's name. "What do we— Bow, Burn, Bux, Candy, Cliff... that's all? He's not... he's not here!"

Twilight let out a small laugh. "He's not here... of course he's not here. Why would he be here? He couldn't be here, so he's not. Hah!"

She slumped against the bookcase with a long sigh of relief.

*He's not here, he's not here. His books don't exist, and neither does he. Everything that doesn't belong is gone... right? This reality is all better now? Is it... is it all better for real?*

Back by the doorway, Twilight heard a loud burp. She turned around in time to catch a puff of green fire rise up and vanish.

"Letter from the Princess, Twilight!" Spike shouted out. "Hang on, I've got it..."

"Letter from..." Twilight's smile faded away. A dark shadow crossed over her face as a rush of recent memories flooded back into her mind. "Wait, Spike! Don't!"

A purple light flashed, and Twilight teleported back downstairs. She materialized right in front of Spike, who had just finished unrolling the letter. Before he had a chance to speak, she snatched the letter from his claws and hovered it up in front of her face.

"Dear Twilight Sparkle..." she read out. A bead of sweat rolled off her forehead. "I wish you... season's greetings in this new winter?"

Twilight's eyebrows rose, and she read on. "I trust you and your friends are doing your

part in Ponyville to make sure the change-over goes smoothly and according to plan. I look forward to seeing you again at the Hearth Warming's Eve festival. Until then, stay warm my faithful student, and may this winter pass with good company and cheer! Yours, Princess Celestia..."

Twilight trailed off as she finished reading. She quickly re-read it, and then again a third time, scanning each word to make sure she didn't miss anything. Spike watched on, his expression still confused.

"Well that was nice of her," he said. He attempted a smile, but Twilight's confused expression soured it. "You alright, Twi? You're a bit... twitchy."

"What? Oh!" Twilight put the letter down. She glanced out the door, and saw Ponyville's streets to be bustling with activity. Pegasi flew through the sky with large clouds in tow, while shopkeepers busied themselves preparing for the winter rush.

*This is it. Everything's back to normal. Everything's fine.*

Twilight's shoulders sagged, and she sank to the floor. "Yes, I'm... I'm fine Spike. I've just had a very long day..."

*But... will it stay this way? Do I have to keep believing in it? But that shouldn't be hard to do, this is all real... right?*

"You've had those before, but haven't acted like this." Spike put a claw on Twilight's shoulder. "What's eating you?"

*But that shouldn't be hard to do. I can keep it to myself. Assuming this is all real... right?*

"I'm... Spike, how's everything been over the past few days?" Twilight asked. "Has... has everypony been acting normally? Nothing's seemed... out of place?"

*This is real, isn't it? I mean, what else could it be? There's no trick here, that wouldn't work out. It wouldn't make sense for it to be anything else.*

"Well yeah, Twilight, everything's been fine," Spike replied. "You've seen it yourself, you've been here helping everypony out. Go outside and look if you're not sure. But Twilight, that doesn't answer my question. I want to know what the problem is."

*Of course, what does making sense even have to do with things anymore? After all that's happened...*

"It's a little complicated..." Twilight stood up, moving out of Spike's grasp. She wandered

to the door, stepping on the frame and staring out into the sky. A group of pegasi worked to drag a large grey cloud over in front of the sun. One pegasi in particular zipped around, ordering the others about and flying in to lend a hoof whenever necessary. Looking closely, Twilight was able to make out the leader's rainbow colored mane and cyan body.

*No. This is it. This is reality. It has to be.*

Twilight looked back at Spike with a smile on her face. "I'm sorry to have worried you Spike, my mind was... elsewhere. Had some very weird dreams last night, and I'm trying to shake them off. I am perfectly alright, I assure you, and my head will be right where it needs to be as I get this town fully organized for the winter."

Spike tilted his head. "You're sure you're alright? Because you don't have to do anything right now if you don't want to, you can stay here and—"

Twilight waved off Spike's concerns. "Spike, trust me. There's nothing else I'd rather do today then go out to see each and every one of my friends."

Spike studied Twilight for another few seconds, then shrugged. "Well... if you say so, Twilight. I just don't want you going crazy on me before the season's even started."

"Yeah, I don't think you're going to need to worry about that one, Spike." Twilight laughed. She walked past Spike and onto the first steps of the staircase.

"Hey, where you going, Twilight?" Spike asked. He pointed out the door. "Remember? Fluttershy's house, help count the animals, all that stuff?"

"I know Spike, I know." Twilight nodded and sat down on the stairs. "I just... you go on ahead. I'm going to stay and finish letting my head clear. I'll be over in a few minutes, I promise."

"Okaaaay... well, don't take long, I guess. Meet me at Fluttershy's. I'm gonna tell her you're right behind me, though." With that, Spike walked out the door, muttering to himself about the change of the season and its effect on ponies.

Twilight watched him leave. Her eyes never left the doorway until Spike turned a corner down the road and was out of sight. She let her head swing around, taking in her familiar surroundings with careful ease.

*So we're back. It's over. I won, everything's fine.*

"But will it last?" Twilight's voice was barely above a whisper.

*Why wouldn't it? Who's around to say otherwise?*



"I know, but... after everything that happened, after all I saw, after all that... well, it's just too good to be true that it's all well again. That I fixed it just like that."

*You fixed it because you figured it out. You solved the problem. That's what you do. Be proud of that.*

"Solved the problem, by thinking of the solution... but, what if it wasn't the actual solution, it was just something that seems to have worked?"

*Is there a difference?*

"This is a reality, but is it *the* reality? Am I really where I should be, or somewhere... *new*? Somewhere that's just out of reach of those... things, for now, but what about in the future? What if I did something wrong? What if all this is just waiting for some split-second error in judgment on my part to come crashing—"

*Twilight Sparkle, stop. Just stop. You're going to drive yourself nuts overthinking this thing. You won. You're back. The world is right. The story is going to continue, and it's going to continue the way it's supposed to. Not the way some imaginary boogey monster is going to try and dictate.*

Twilight released a long exhale and rubbed her temples. "Yes, yes. Gotta be strong now, gotta stick with this. Just go and... live my life?"

*Exactly. Don't dwell on what isn't real anymore. Get up, go outside, and be yourself in the world.*

"Right, right..." Slowly, a smile formed on her face. A fresh warmth rose through her body, from her back right down to the tips of her hooves. She brought her gaze down to the nearest window, where she took a peek at the world passing by outside.

*Hey, quit sitting around. They're waiting for you!*

"I know they are, and I won't be long."

*So what are you doing?*

"It's like I told Spike." Twilight's eyes dropped back down to the front door. "I'm going to wait here a little while, and see what happens."

Perched halfway up the staircase, Twilight's body relaxed. Her breathing came out free and easy, her smile a peaceful sign on her face. She drew a hoof along the step, listening to the

wood creak under pressure. Somewhere up in the rafters, a mouse scurried across a beam and sent a few specks of dust down to the floor.

Outside, Ponyville continued operating normally. From over a set of hills to the northwest, a fresh breeze picked up. It had a slight chill to it, the gentle opening salvo of a new season that lay just around the bend. Winter was coming, and like every winter in Equestria's history, it was sure to be an eventful one.