

Chapter 10: Closer to God

Winter beat down with a peculiar ferocity. From the winds whipping across the tracks, to the torrent of snow coming in sidelong, to the temperature dropping another degree below freezing with every passing minute, it was a cataclysmic example of nature's power. For once, there were no ponies in the sky to take control. The storm's rage went unchecked, reveling in newfound freedom.

Nevertheless, Twilight Sparkle pressed on. The train tracks stretched out in front and behind her, nearly invisible under the frozen deluge that continued to push against them. They wrapped around the outskirts of the high mountains in a long, twisted path to the peak. To one side, a sheer drop into a canyon so deep that Twilight couldn't see the bottom. To the other, a solid wall of granite that jutted up into the sky. Occasionally the tracks passed through a tunnel carved into the rock, but though these brief safe havens offered Twilight relief from the wind and snow, she never paused in her journey. Even as the wind dragged her bandages down her body to reveal frozen patches of skin, and her scarf slipped enough to allow ice to form along her cheeks; she kept moving forward, one step after the other.

Past the canyon... four tunnels... bridge around the next bend... no, wait... one final tunnel, then the bridge... that's it... gotta be it

Twilight shivered with weakened muscles. She couldn't feel anything below her knees, and there was a rising pain in her chest. The surrounding landscape was a blur of snowy darkness. The only indication that she was progressing at all was the speck of light high in the distance, which grew clearer with every shove through the weather.

Sun went down... when? There was still a little light when I started walking, and I haven't been at it that long... have I? But if I'm already this close to the end...

The wind howled against her. With every fresh gust, it threatened to blow her right off the tracks and over the precipice. She barred her teeth behind her scarf and took another step forward. Turning a corner, the light vanished behind a long outcropping. The tracks carried on below, slicing through the mountain. Twilight quickened her pace.

Last tunnel... gotta be the last tunnel...

The wind shifted directions and rushed at Twilight from behind. It propelled her forward into the tunnel, sliding her along the slippery tracks faster than she could run. A loose rock caught her hoof and she tripped forward, landing square on her shoulder. Her anguished cry barely edged out the gale for noise.

I'd know where I was if I could think straight, and I could do that it wasn't for all this stupid wind!

She cried in frustration again. The noise echoed in the small space and came back to her so loudly that she stopped screaming in surprise. Fighting the pain as she stood back up, she tentatively approached the mouth of the tunnel. She stepped into the open and was confronted by a distinct stillness surrounding her.

"Ummm... what?" Twilight peered up to see a fleet of storm clouds billowing in silence. No more wind came in from any direction. The air was clear and the only snow around was already on the ground. She glanced back through the tunnel, but couldn't see anything through the darkness.

It stopped... just like that?

Twilight scratched her chin, scraping off a few ice shavings in the process. Taking the setting in for a few more seconds, she shrugged.

Of course it did. Why am I even surprised by stuff like this anymore?

With no wind to push it around, the air settled in like a frozen blanket around Twilight. Her bones creaked as the frost pushed against her. She continued taking long strides forward; she shivered only when the desire to do so was so overpowering she couldn't stand it. Otherwise she expressed no reaction to the climate.

Up ahead, the mountain dropped off to the side. The tracks continued straight over a deep gorge. The light was on the other side, peering down at Twilight from its high vantage point. Looking carefully around it, Twilight made out the soft outlines of tall towers and sturdy stone walls.

Made it... and not a second too soon.

Her legs twitched, and Twilight broke into a run towards Canterlot. The cold air whipping past her came down like a swarm of bees, stinging her skin all over. Twilight shivered again and pulled her scarf even tighter. A few small rocks tumbled out as she ran past, plunging into the darkness on the side of the bridge.

Okay, there was definitely just a shallow stream here before, not some bottomless pit. And I know the bridge was a lot shorter than this.

She slowed down as she approached the end of the bridge. Two guard posts sat quietly on either side of the tracks. Twilight's nervousness gave way to slight confusion when she peeked inside. Both were empty, with a small trace of snow building on their floors.

The tall perimeter walls loomed through the darkness. Overhead, the distant light in the

tower vanished again, this time sinking behind the ramparts. Moonlight replaced it, pushing in through the clouds and bathing the city in a soft glow. Moving up from the tracks, Twilight hopped over a low wall and entered the train station. The pathway was clear of snow, which had been neatly plowed into a tall bank along one side of the path. Bits of manicured bushes, still a healthy green in spite of the opposing elements, poked through the white frost.

Much like the guardhouses, the station and surrounding buildings were completely deserted. Twilight frowned as she walked through the main gates into the city, where a similar scene awaited her. Barely any snow sat piled on the streets, which appeared recently plowed. Storefronts and houses sat dark and shuttered. Twilight wandered forward along the cold concrete, following a path that winded haphazardly through the city towards the tallest towers. Her steps clicked softly into the night, the first real noise she'd heard since the wind died down. Somewhere behind her, a small pile of snow dropped off a rooftop and landed on the ground with a muffled thump.

Before long, Twilight was deep into the city. The streets grew tighter, the patches of snow on the ground more common. Eventually, she opened her mouth to say something, only to put her hoof up to stop herself.

Remember what happened last time? I don't think drawing attention to yourself is the best idea right now.

"At least this place isn't a wreck," Twilight murmured. She glanced around, looking at the walls and windows as closely as she could manage. Everything looked immaculate, the same as it ever did. "Maybe everypony's just asleep?"

After all that's happened, I highly doubt it's that simple—

"Hello?" Twilight's call echoed through the nearby alleyways. After a moment of letting it retreat into the distance, she perked her ears for a reply. Nothing. Canterlot remained as silent as a tomb.

Probably for the best. Just get to the palace and try to work things out from— Hang on, this street looks familiar.

Twilight turned another corner and stopped in front of a moderately sized house. Like the city surrounding it, it lay dormant. A few small trees and shrubs occupied the yard behind a low iron fence. Twilight put her hoof on a post and stared up at the dark walls.

Just another house. And yet... so familiar. It's almost like... wait...

Twilight looked up. Above her was a large, rectangular window opened onto a balcony. One of its doors was slightly ajar, and even in the faint light and low angle, Twilight saw the top

of a crowded bookcase. An attached ladder hung off to one side with a few misplaced titles stacked upon it.

This is... that's my... didn't I used to live here? I can't remember for sure, but this really does look like—

The sound of shattering glass ripped through the night air. Twilight whirled around. A few more shards collapsed onto the pavement around the corner, and then silence returned. Twilight remained still, holding her breath as she tilted her head in the direction of the disturbance.

Not this again. Stay calm, stay ready. Stay calm, stay ready...

A few blocks down, another window shattered into pieces. And then another, and another. Soon windows all over Canterlot were breaking, raining down onto the streets and snow banks in showers of broken glass. Finally, back in the house Twilight had been looking at, one of the windows by the front door cracked in two. Twilight turned back around in time to see it slide out of its frame and explode into tiny pieces once it hit the ground.

Right as the final bits of glass touched down, a bright light shined through the window. It was joined by similar lights shooting out of the broken windows all around her. Soon the streets were vibrantly lit up in an intense display of illumination. Through the windows, at a point Twilight could barely make out, dark shadows pressed forward. A low gurgling emerged from the houses, providing a steady background noise that rose up until it dominated the city.

Stop waiting around like a sitting duck, run!

The ground beneath Twilight's hooves rumbled, and Twilight bolted down the street. Large icicles broke off and hurtled to the ground, forcing her to dip and weave her way back to the main street. Shooting past more broken windows and beams of light, she saw the tall towers of the royal palace rise up in front of her. That single light, now dim in comparison to the activity of the rest of the city, remained active in the tall tower. From her new perspective, Twilight was able to get a better look at the source of the light.

The throne room! Somepony's got to be in there... Princess Celestia must be in there!

A loud screech pierced through the air around her. Twilight quickened her pace. She dashed up the huge steps in front of the palace and made for the great double doors that marked the entrance. Unlike the rest of the city, the palace was silent and dark, save for that single beacon. The doors weren't locked, and Twilight was able to shove them open on the first try.

"Princess Celestia!" Twilight shouted as soon as she was inside. "Princess Celestia! It's me, Twilight! Where are you?"

She skid to a halt along the slick tiled floor. Leaning back, she quickly pushed the doors shut. The noise outside was instantly muffled by the thick barriers, and silence returned to the atmosphere. Twilight glanced back and forth along the dark hallways, waiting to hear something other than her frantic breathing.

“Princess Celestia?” Twilight called again. Her eyes crept along the corridor, hovering over every door and glancing upwards at the high ceilings.

“Princess Luna? Anypony? Hello?” She turned and moved towards the short staircase in front of her. At its top was a T-intersection. Taking the route to the right, she headed down the corridor towards the throne room. No light penetrated the walls, moonlight or otherwise, forcing her to go at a snail’s pace to avoid running into anything.

Rounding another large corner, a crack of light stood out in the dark. A large set of doors sat slightly ajar up ahead. Beyond them was the well-lit throne room. As Twilight trotted forward, her ears caught the sound of a small ring flutter through the doorway.

“Princess!” With a final burst of speed, Twilight ran down the hall to the doors. She stepped through the frame and immediately came to a complete stop so fast she nearly fell flat on her face. Steadying her position, she gaped at the sight that lay before her.

The floor was flooded with papers. Single sheets, each blanketed with lengthy blocks of text, were scattered about from one wall to the other. The throne was gone, along with all other bits of furniture and decoration that had once adorned the chamber. Even the large mosaic windows had lost their various illustrations, leaving only blank, solid colors in their place. All that was present now was a grand mahogany desk by the far wall. Occupying most of the space was a massive typewriter, while a small, neatly-organized stack of papers lay beside it.

Sitting in a tall chair behind the desk, hitting the typewriter keys in rapid succession, was a lean gray stallion. He was dressed in a smart black trench coat, the collar wide around his neck. Though his curled white mane suggested a great age, his face had a youthful vigor to it, exemplified by a pair of piercing blue eyes. His hooves moved gracefully across the typewriter. The instrument clicked away as he set down sentence after sentence. The carriage dinged and jumped to the right, and he looked up. His lips hooked into a small smile.

“Hello Twilight,” he said. His voice let in the faintest hint of some strange foreign accent. “So glad you were able to make it. Please, please, do come in.”

Twilight arched an eyebrow but didn’t speak. Moving cautiously, she stepped into the chamber, threading her hooves between the papers onto the few blank spots on the floor. Behind her, the doors effortlessly swung shut. Twilight stopped a few steps in. Her eyes flickered over the contents of the fallen pages before settling on the stallion. He gave a small nod and

returned his focus to the page in front of him.

“Wondrous device, this thing,” he said, gesturing to the typewriter. “Although I admit, it takes a little getting used to. There are times when I wish I was born a unicorn; a little magic would make things run smoother. In fact I’d just as soon go back to writing with a simple quill, but it was my last editor who got this for me. He insists upon it, says it makes it easier to spot the errors. I don’t see what he’s complaining about, he’s never missed any before. I swear, it seems like he’s got eyes like a—”

“Who are you?” Twilight asked directly. She took another small step forward.

“Ah, my apologies,” he said, the smile growing on his face. “I do get away from myself sometimes. Though I am surprised you don’t recognize me. Your literary sense may not be what it used to be, but surely my appearance rings some sort of bell.”

Twilight’s face glazed over as he stared back.

That smile... so familiar... he almost looks like... like...

Her eyes widened. Her recurring dream roared to life. Images of her library burning ripped through her head like a bolt of lightning. The obscured figure that always smiled at her became clear, his voice matching up with the figure seated before her. “You’re... you’re the pony from my...”

“Getting warmer...” He chuckled to himself. “Sugar Cane, at your disposal. And may I say it is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“You... how...” Twilight started, before her mind went blank. Her mouth shut tight as she found herself at a complete loss for words.

“Yes, yes, I know where you’re going,” Cane said. He resumed typing, the keys once again moving at breakneck speed. “However, I’m afraid I’m going to need some silence from you for this next part. I’ve got a bit of a monologue to deliver and only so much time left to do so. Please, be seated.”

Twilight’s body shook. She dropped to her knees and sat rigidly on the ground.

“Thank you,” Cane said, pausing his typing briefly to recheck several lines. “Now, where to begin...”

The typewriter dinged. He snatched the page out, set it onto the growing pile on his desk, replaced it with a fresh sheet of paper, and continued on.

"You have my apologies for what you've been through." Cane peered up at Twilight's many bandages. Her breathing grew sharper as he looked on. "Most of it was incidental, I assure you. The important idea was to keep your magic at bay for a few key scenes, because, and don't take this the wrong way, you can be a rather overpowered character at times. Makes it very hard to keep the tension up. Of course, all that's over and done with now, so give me one moment now and I'll have you feeling much better."

With an extra flourish in his wrist, Cane typed out a long and winding sentence. Twilight gasped. Her body shook again, the shiver running from nose to tail. A surge of warmth shot along with it. Her cracked ribs became good as new, her raw wounds haling over with fresh skin and tissue. The bandages unraveled and drifted to the floor. Twilight took a deep breath, and shook her head as she exhaled. She glanced over herself, rubbing a hoof over her head and horn. No pain responded to her touch, no buzzing sensation infiltrated her skull.

Cane paused his typing to look Twilight over. "There we are. Right as rain."

Twilight looked at Cane. She started to speak, but Cane swiftly put a hoof up to stop her.

"No need to thank me," he said. "It seemed only fair."

Another ding, another sliding the carriage to the right.

"It's funny," Cane mused. "For years I thought I was making all this up. Maybe I was, back when I first started writing. I don't really remember anymore. But now, they tell me what to write. I can add embellishments here and there, maybe give it a few twists, but the grand scheme was all them. They gave me the power to make it all real... and now it is."

A mild tremor rocked the palace. Trails of dust sprinkled down from distant spots in the ceiling, and a few papers shifted in place. Cane didn't stop typing.

"My books have always pushed the concept of there being something more, of all those horrible, slimy things trying to break through to our world. Who knew that was actually the case? I didn't get much from them at first. Just a little extra boost, enough to draw in more readers. That was the whole point in the beginning. More readers, more believers. The more believers there are, the more power they can give out to me, and the more power I can put out in my words."

Another tremor, this one with more force to it. Cane took a moment to steady his desk.

"I've come a long way since then. Gone are the days where I could only vaguely influence events, or hope that some random fan would pick up the clues and give me assistance. Now I just need to think it through, to write it out, and it happens. The whole world on my desk, and me with editorial control."

"No." Twilight shuddered at the sound of her own voice. She had to take a long breath before she could keep speaking. "No. Stop. I know the world is in trouble right now, I know strange forces are attacking Equestria, I know monsters are everywhere... but don't sit there and tell me this nonsense about you typing out a sentence and making something come true. Of all the impossible things I've seen over the past week—"

Cane laughed and hit another key. Twilight's mouth shut tight, her voice caught in her throat.

"I don't need you to believe me," he said. "Whether you choose to accept the truth or not is irrelevant. Right now, you are what I write. I control you, and that—"

"No pony controls me," Twilight muttered. Cane raised an eyebrow.

"Interesting..." Cane studied Twilight closely, his smile frozen in place. "Allow me to prove it then."

Cane brushed his hooves in a tender stroke up and down the sides of the typewriter, and then began typing once again. "As it got close to the end, I found it necessary to excise certain characters. They would've just gotten in the way otherwise, or caused too much clutter. Some of this even you have noticed, when you think hard enough. The Cake foals whose names you forgot moments after saying aloud. The Princesses who occupied this castle not hours ago, one of whom was an especially *devoted* connoisseur of my work, now long vanished from this world—"

The Princesses! That means... But they both can't be gone, just like that? Not Princess... Princess... why can't I remember her name?

"—I told you, because I wrote them out. Much like I did the occupants of that house you paused at on the way up. Your old house, specifically, and the family to go with it. Including your dear brother and his loving new wife."

"My— what?" Twilight drew her head back in confusion. "I don't... I don't have a... brother... do I?"

"You tell me, Twilight." Cane shrugged. "If somepony suddenly vanished, and you couldn't remember them anymore, and all the evidence that they ever existed to begin with vanished along with them, then did they ever really exist at all?"

He gestured to the walls. "Move away from ponies now. Coming up here, you noticed something was amiss. You were right in thinking that the entrance to Canterlot wasn't so imposing before. I took the liberty of altering the geography around here into something more...

aesthetically suitable for the conditions. I don't think a short bridge over a babbling brook would've had the same effect, do you?"

The clicking of the keys stopped. Cane tapped his forehead. "Every idea whose origin you couldn't trace, all those strange thoughts and bits of information you couldn't possibly know, all those leaps of logic that turned out to be true. All that came from me, from right here. Not that I need to deal with that anymore."

He leaned in and ripped the page out of the typewriter. With a lazy toss, it sailed into the paper ocean in front of him.

"All that and more. It's all there, like I said." Cane gestured all around the room. "All the ins and outs, all the new faces and final remains of old ones. Along with some old drafts, dropped plots –which reminds me, you all really should've explored that temple more– and tossed ideas. It's not an exact science, what I'm doing. It requires constant tinkering as the story morphs along."

Cane pointed to the neat stack next to the typewriter. "But as you can plainly see, it's almost done now. The end is in sight, the final chapter presently upon us. It just needs some finishing touches."

Twilight rubbed her forehead. Her hoof trembled rapidly against her skin. The breaks and bruises from before may have been gone, but a fresh headache had quickly moved in to take their place.

Think Twilight, just think. What he's saying... he can't be right. Think. Who were you coming here to see? The Princess, your teacher, the leader of Equestria... what was her name? You had family in Canterlot, where were... right? Did I live here? I moved to Ponyville from here... where did I...

"You shouldn't rack your brain over the nonexistent. Certainly not at a time like this." Another fresh page inserted, another round of rapid typing from Cane. "I suppose this could be considered one of my shorter stories. I only started it this past week. Think about this too, while we're on the subject. In all your years of study, Twilight, had you ever heard of the Northern Wastes before a few days ago? You spoke of books in your library on them... what books? Could you find them now? Think of their titles? It never existed. Not before I wrote it. The same goes for Dr. Copper Star, who, despite apparently being one of the Princess' fellow protégés, you had also never heard of until a few days ago. She was my creation. I brought her into being as easily as I kicked the Princesses out."

Cane took a break to re-read the last few lines he'd just typed. His hoof traced across the page in front of him.

“Anyway, short novella, epic novel, it’s all the same,” he mumbled. “Whatever the format, it’s still the harbinger of the great change. That’s what counts the most.”

Think fast, Twilight... okay, that might work.

“Why?” Twilight blurted out so suddenly it made Cane look up. She ignored her quivering lip and pushed on. “Why... why would you *do* something like this?”

Cane frowned, taken aback by the question.

“Because that’s the way the story goes,” he answered plainly.

“But...” Twilight strained, rapping her hoof on the floor. “But... why us then? Why specifically single us out to—”

“Why *you*?”

Cane pushed out of his chair. He rounded the desk and approached Twilight, pushing pages out of the way with every step. “Why, why, why... let’s think this one out. Why, out of all the ponies in Equestria, out of all the available individuals and personalities and groups, would I have chosen you and your nine friends? Why go through the effort? I could’ve simply created a new batch of characters, sent them up North to start the chain of events that led things to where they are now, but I didn’t. Instead, I chose a group that always has so many interesting and *important* things happen to them. Now, why would I do that? Think carefully... what could the reason possibly be?”

He leaned against his desk, staring at Twilight. She let her eyes flash back and forth between Cane and the desk, her mind racing.

“Um, because, uh...” Twilight stammered. Beads of sweat rolled down her forehead.

Stay focused. Something to keep him where he is, that’s all I need...

“The Elements of Harmony?” she offered in a voice weaker than she would’ve liked.

“The Elements of Harmony!” Cane practically shouted with glee. He stamped a hoof on the floor, the smile roaring back to his face. “I like that, that’s cute. The Elements of Harmony. This world’s favorite deus ex machina when things turn sour. I’m surprised at myself for not trying to introduce those earlier, but then, I suppose that would’ve just amounted to more filler.”

A few more papers fluttered out of his way, which he continued to ignore.

“No, I’m afraid not my dear, though I suppose that’s at least somewhat in the direction of

the truth,” he said. “Still, it’s something much more... basic than that.”

Cane took a few steps forward, standing firm in the center of the room.

“Twilight, every pony has a story to tell. You know this, everypony knows this. It’s a fact of living life, because that life *is* the story. It may not be particularly interesting, or satisfying, or even coherent, but it’s a story all the same.”

He paced back and forth in a wide arc across the chamber. Twilight, still rooted to the spot on the floor, followed him with her eyes.

“Ponies aren’t alone in this, naturally,” Cane continued. “All species have them. Particularly relevant would be the stories that dragons have. Not just their personal ones, but the collective one their race shares, that goes far beyond what ponies know into what we’re dealing with right no—”

Cane paused and shook his head. “I’m sorry, I believe I got off point. The thing is, though, it’s not just ponies, or dragons, or whatever that have a story. Equestria itself is no different. This land is a wide, epic place, and has a tale to match. But what it needs, just like any good narrative, is a lead character. Each and every one of us is the lead to our own story, but every once in a while, for whatever reason or set of circumstances, some ponies come along that double up in that protagonist position for something much bigger than they are.”

Cane paused mid-step, his back to Twilight.

“Twilight, right now... or rather, up until very recently, those leads were you and your friends. All the big events in Equestria revolved around you lot, and many more things past that. Your little side adventures may have only used a few of you, or may have seemed insignificant on the surface, but it all truly mattered. Ten friends of various backgrounds, relations, races, and species, brought together to represent this chapter in the ever-expanding chronicles of Equestria.”

Cane swiveled around and extended a hoof in Twilight’s direction.

“Of the ten, of course, you are the leader. You are the unifier. Even you must be aware of this on some level. How no matter your level of involvement with something, or how useful you’ve been to the situation, you’re still the most important pony in Equestria. I’ll freely admit I’m not sure *why* you fulfill this role. I don’t know how that’s chosen. Maybe nopony, *nothing* can know that...”

Trailing off, Cane’s hoof wavered and fell to the floor. He resumed his pacing. “No matter, I suppose. What does matter is to have you all involved in this.”

He pushed his hoof through a large stack of papers, watching them scatter like leaves around him with each flick of his ankle. "The base nature of fiction is that it is separate from reality, that it is inherently not true. And the tales of the old ones, those grand sagas from which they derived their— well, my point is they were nothing but myths and legends in this day and age. Just ghost stories of things that go bump in the night, and no matter how popular my books, however strong my message, however fanatical my fan base, that wasn't something I could change. Not on my own."

Keep him talking... only getting one shot at this.

Twilight took a deep breath. Slowly, she spread her legs wide, pushing herself against the invisible weight on her back to get into a firmer stance.

"I needed to combine that fiction with Equestria's reality. With *your* reality. To introduce a story, push you ten into it, and twist the bonds of reality and fiction, of truth and fantasy, until you couldn't tell one apart from the other. Once that happened, and my story became completely entwined with yours, then they were able to begin their journey home. What I said earlier, about the initial point just to gain more believers, that's the concept here. Just in a much more... *significant* way. It's almost a matter of believing it enough to make it *real*."

Still smirking, Cane returned to the center of the room. He leaned against the desk, taking a deep breath in the process.

"And, as you can plainly see, it worked." Cane ran a hoof along the veneer. "The story was told, the belief gained, the reality altered. Now, the journey back has begun. And, in the process of all this, I've elevated myself. I'm a god now, for lack of a better term, with powers beyond the comprehensions of any in this land."

"Spare me," Twilight spat out. She narrowed her eyes at Cane. "A god's not supposed to be a hack horror writer. You're nothing but a puppet for... whatever it is that's coming this way. Whatever delusions of grandeur you've got, whatever ideas you have that you'll be considered an equal to what's apparently coming to destroy Equestria... even I have to laugh at that. You're just another poor pony, dealing in things far bigger than your sense of worth."

Cane pushed off the desk and stepped towards Twilight.

"A snide taunt won't help you here," he said, an icy undertone breaking into his voice. "Least of all an inaccurate one. Over the course of all this, with the coming of the change and what's been gifted to me, I have... lost some of that pony essence. I've grown past it, above it. I may be Sugar Cane in mind and body, but in spirit I am... so much more."

"You're no more than a messenger," Twilight countered. "A servant— no, less than that. A slave, doing his master's bidding and smiling all the while."

Cane moved even closer, taking his time with each forward step.

"Interesting that you say that, considering what you've been through tonight," he said. "Your friend Pinkie proved to be quite adept at moving through the ranks assigned to her."

"Pinkie... what?" Twilight's head tilted. For a second, her legs loosened up and her hooves threatened to slip out from under her.

"She was always a big help, by virtue of what a *special* pony she was." Cane smiled, his tone lightening again. "You may have been the main character, but she was the one who was always aware of things beyond the margins. Sometimes she saw more than she could believe, could do things that made no sense. All things you know well of, but just idly dismissed. She was a fine target, a sure source of assistance once she was made a fan. Something that was easy enough to accomplish; with a few well-placed copies of my latest work and an impromptu launch party by some diehard fans, she was hooked right in. It didn't take long from there to take a firm grasp of her subconscious, and guide her to the goal. She was a very enthusiastic learner."

His smile fading, Cane scratched his neck as his eyes fell to the floor. "Of course, that didn't last forever. As beneficial as she was throughout the process, as much good as she did, she became rather... unmanageable towards the end. That is another thing I'm going to have to apologize to you about, actually. There was no need to put you through that extra bit of stress. She acted on her own initiative, and while I do admire her commitment, she failed in a key area."

Cane leaned forward until his mouth was inches from Twilight's ear.

"*Belief*," he whispered. "She didn't believe it *right*. She thought she did, but she lacked the *true* faith in *me* to see things through to the end."

Twilight gritted her teeth. Her body resumed its formerly tense position. Meanwhile, Cane straightened himself up and turned back towards his desk.

"You handled the dragon part well, by the way," he said. "Sure, I got the idea in your head, gave you the directions, but I wasn't sure how you'd develop it. As I alluded to before, that species has always been... troublesome to deal with when it comes to these matters, and it would have been most unfortunate for that to have caused your untimely demise. But, you performed admirably, and the scenario played out as well as I'd hoped it would. Congratulations."

He stopped short of his destination, again standing in the center of the room. Throwing his arms out wide, he stretched out, limbering up his back and shoulders.

"Well, that's all there is to it," he said, his voice growing more casual by the second. "What little else I have to say I can toss in the postscript. The end of days is here, Twilight Sparkle. The completion of this world and all who inhabit it, crushed into ruin by the great creations of old."

Cane abruptly tossed his head back in the air and sniffed in deeply.

"Can you smell that?" he asked with closed eyes. "It's in the air. Every species can smell its own extinction. They haven't fully arrived yet, so there's still plenty of ponies milling around out there... but not for long. I don't know how many will go in the first wave, but I do know the ones that endure that won't have a pretty time of it after that. Soon, they'll all be gone. Nothing but a bedtime story for the children."

Steady...

"You know, I believe I actually did you a favor here," Cane said, his head falling back down. "I've always been the sort who preferred to see the end coming. To get blindsided like that, the sheer shock of it all... and that wouldn't have even helped matters. If anything, it would've made what was about to happen *worse*. A whole eon's worth of inevitability crashing down on your head in an instant. I'll understand if you don't want to thank me for letting you in, but that won't stop me from letting you know you're welcome."

Now!

Twilight stood up, pushing her hooves into the floor so hard the tile cracked. "For once, you're right about something. I should be thanking you. Specifically, thanks for healing me earlier. I needed that."

Cane turned around in time to see the purple field appear around Twilight's horn. A split-second later, a solid ray of violet slammed home into his chest. The force of the impact sent Cane flying back like a ragdoll, and he smashed into a wide column across the chamber. A large center beam of light held him in place while a series of smaller shots pounded his body on all sides. After a minute, the color faded away as the beam dissipated, leaving his broken, bleeding body lodged in the marble.

Twilight breathed deeply as her horn flickered out.

"I'd actually forgotten how good that felt," she said, a smile pushing out on her mouth. Shaking her whole body out and flexing her rejuvenated muscles, Twilight walked towards the desk. The typewriter seemed even bigger up close, and she took a moment to take her bearings and look over all the keys.

"It's like I said before." Twilight glanced back at the wreckage behind her, locking eyes with Cane's oddly-angled head. "Your delusions have gotten the best of you. I listened to what you said, I put the pieces together. The story part, the change that's happening... after all that's happened, I can buy that as true. But it's not you. It's the story itself. The writing. If you have to write it down to make it happen, as opposed to just... willing it into being by standing around and thinking it, then there's something to be said about the typed word."

That makes sense, right? Yes, it does, don't doubt yourself now, have... have faith...

"So I think it's time to introduce a little constructive criticism as to where this story is headed," Twilight said. She stepped around the typewriter and knelt down to the floor. Peering down at the small words before her, she rapidly read over the last paragraph on the page.

"Twilight ached to remember the Princess who had been her mentor for so long, but nothing came to mind. It was as if her mind had been wiped clean of all memories. Meanwhile, Cane continued to explain his master plan, taking a special kind of pleasure in dragging out each part of the explanation. He typed away as he spoke, pausing occasionally to proofread the lines he just finished—' Oh no, I'm afraid this won't do at all. Too... *melodramatic*. Let's take things in a fresh new direction, shall we?'"

Twilight bit the page out of the typewriter, chewed it into a tiny ball, and spit it to the floor. Before it even hit the ground, the palace shook with a renewed intensity. Cracks appeared in the stained glass windows, and the tiles of the floor looked ready to burst at the seams.

"Looks like somepony's not happy with this." Twilight scrambled to put a fresh sheet into the slot and align it just right. "Everypony's a critic. Now, to make things right again..."

Twilight closed her eyes and took one long, deep breath. She exhaled slowly, ignoring the loud sounds and quaking world around her. Her eyes popped back open, her horn lit up, and the keys started to press in turn.

"Twilight Sparkle quickly got to work on the typewriter," Twilight narrated aloud. "The room cracked and roared around her, ready to gobble her up under untold tons of stone, but nevertheless, she pressed on. She knew the end was near, but it was not to be the end that Cane had so viciously lobbied for. It was a different sort of end, a light at the end of a tunnel, a fresh sense of perspective on things."

Overhead, massive splinters shot through the ceiling. A chunk of stone the size of a carriage dislodged itself from the mortar around it, and hurtled to the floor where Twilight and the typewriter sat.

"The stone was coming in fast. Twilight steadied herself and did nothing. She had suddenly realized what all was really happening, and how to make it finally stop once and for all.

It was a relatively simple thing, one that would come into play just as soon as the boulder found its target and—”

“Are you alright, Twilight?” Fluttershy’s question was the first thing Twilight heard when she opened her eyes. She was crumpled in the corner of her bed, breathing heavily and sweating profusely. She blinked as a view of reality returned to her. The others looked at her from their sleeping bunks. The late-afternoon sun shone through the windows, while the rest of the world rushed by as the train moved steadily along. The motion of the train car and the clicking sound of the tracks provided further foundation for the scene.

“Uh...” was all Twilight managed to get out at first. A few shakes of her head brought back some of her composure. “Uh, I’m... fine? Just a... just a bit of a... bad... dream?”

“Bit nothing. My dear, you look as if you’ve had quite a shock.” Rarity’s eyes flashed with concern. “That’s certainly no way to begin a vacation.”

Twilight shook her head again and stared around the car. Her friends continued to stare back. “I... I was... dreaming?”

“You’ve already said that part,” Rarity noted. She levitated a small, monogrammed handkerchief over to Twilight’s forehead to dab some sweat away. “Not a good sign when you start to repeatedly babble.”

Twilight pushed the handkerchief away and hopped onto the floor. She scurried back and forth along the corridor, studying every other pony closely as they went by. Out the window, she saw a grey sky whipping by over a tall mountain range.

“Where are we going?” Twilight demanded. “What day is it? How long have we been traveling? How’s... Spike! Where is Spike?”

“Whoa there, Twilight,” Applejack said, putting her hooves up. She rolled out of bed and stood next to Twilight. “No need to get into a fuss. Spike’s asleep, an’ he’s earned the rest, so don’t go shoutin’ too loud neither. We’re just goin’ to Canterlot right now. The Princess invited us all to the opening ceremonies for the winter season, you know that.”

In the last bunk on the left, Pinkie Pie looked up, her eyes flashing with interest.

“Nice—” she started to say, but Twilight swiftly jumped in.

“Nice exposition, Applejack!” Twilight slid past Applejack and hurried up next to Pinkie. “That’s... that’s what you were going to say, right?”

"Wow, good guess Twilight!" Pinkie said, her voice its usual perky self. "How'd you know? Ooh! Have you developed a Twilight Sense now? Because that would be way cool! You have to tell me how it works, unless you can't, because that's okay too. I know how it is with those sorts of things."

"What are you reading, Pinkie?" Twilight reached over and tipped the object out of Pinkie's hooves. A thin, raggedy magazine fell to the floor, its bright and colorful cover facing up at Twilight. She read the title out loud. "Laugh-and-a-Half Brother's Novelty Joke Catalog, Winter Special?"

Pinkie bobbed her head in enthusiasm. "Just doing a little browsing. They have a store in Canterlot, and I want to see what I have to stock up on. Why? Do you need something too? Do you want me to recommend something? Because they have some really neat stuff out this year, including a brand new inflatable—"

"Uh, no thanks Pinkie," Twilight said, backing up a few steps. "Uh, sorry to, uh, bother you like that..."

"No worries at all!" Pinkie scooped her magazine back up and went back to scanning through the pages with a smile on her face. Twilight slowly walked back over to her bunk and flopped down. Her gaze flickered to the small bundle of sheets in the bed across from her. A small scaly tail poked out one end, a few snores coming out the other.

"You sure you're alright, Twilight?" Rarity asked. "I know this trip was very last-minute, but I wouldn't think that would cause you to act so... out of it."

"Believe me, I'm fine," Twilight said. She hung her head and let out a long exhale. "It's just been a very peculiar day so far."

A pause entered the conversation, and silence settled on the car. The only noise to be heard was the muffled clicking of the train tracks. The weather outside got progressively grayer as the cars travelled higher and higher into the mountains. Little dark specks moved around in the sky pushing clouds into place and kicking snowfall into gear. Twilight leaned her head against the window and smiled as she stared off into the distance.

"...wait, is this it?" Dash spoke up. Twilight turned away from the window as all eyes went to Dash. "This is how it ends? It was all just a dream?"

Twilight's eyes widened, her breathing quickened. "What are you talking about?"

"This thing here. You just change it so that everything that happened was a dream, and it's all fine now?" Dash scratched her head, her voice sounding dismissive. "Seems like a pretty

lame way to end it all.”

“Yeah, that does seem pretty half-baked to me,” Applejack said. “Not exactly the most entertainin’ way to end the story. It doesn’t even make a whole lotta sense, not with all that was said an’ done before now.”

“What...” Twilight shivered all over. “What are... how...”

“Um, I, um, agree,” Fluttershy added in. “Not that I liked how the story was going at all, but after all that, I don’t think this will, um, give any sort of closure to the reader.”

“I concur, Fluttershy. It’s just so done to death.” Rarity turned her attention to the other side of the train car. “What do you think, Pinkie?”

“Points for trying, Twilight!” Pinkie chirped. A single drop of blood forced its way out from her eye. “But it won’t be that easy, not no way, not no how.”

Twilight jumped out of bed, landing hard on the floor below. The others continued speaking around her, no longer addressing her personally or even acknowledging her presence. Twilight looked wildly at each one, her expression falling each time and more sweat flowing off her.

“Everypony, wait! I’ve got to...” Twilight gripped her head. “I’ve got to figure this out, I—”

The sound of screeching metal cut Twilight short. The train car lurched forward, tossing the occupants around in every direction. A large explosion ripped through the forward section of the car, turning every window into a shower of tiny shards. Twilight was thrown into the ceiling with enough force to dent it. She felt pain rip through her head and the warm drops of blood spill out of her nose. There were no screams in all the confusion, only the sound of more metal grinding against metal as the train continued to buck and crash.

The car twisted around again, and jerking Twilight out the nearest window. She sailed through the air, getting a quick glimpse of the wreckage of the train in the process, and landed sideways in a large bank of snow. The cold moved in as soon as she touched down and disappeared into the powder, hitting her with such a shock that her body completely froze up for several seconds. She sank deep into the white fold, her vision growing fuzzier and fuzzier while her legs numbed up.

Finally, she twitched and kicked forward. Flailing around, she pushed herself upward as fast as possible, ignoring the aches developing all over her body. It wasn’t long before one hoof poked free into open air. Her head followed suit shortly thereafter, and she took a long breath, the first one she’d had since she’d been ejected from the train.

Snow stretched out in every direction in a wide, hill-covered range. The mountains were gone, along with any sign of the train. The clouds in the sky had a much darker and stormier appearance, and wind screamed at her from every angle.

Back in... back in the Wastes?

Twilight worked to shake the excess snow from building up on her bruised face. Over the sounds of the storm, she heard shouting behind her. Flipping herself around, she saw four dark shapes approaching her from the white flurry.

Hawks was the first to come into focus, steps ahead of the rest of his team. He ran straight up to Twilight without once staggering in the deep snow.

"Miss Sparkle!" he shouted, his voice once again carrying over the storm with little effort. "Miss Sparkle! Are you alright?"

"I'm... I don't..." Twilight searched for words. Over her head, Hawks directed his teammates to check something over a nearby hill, then returned his attention to Twilight.

"Just tell me what happened." Hawks' voice sounded soothing to Twilight. "Can you do that for me?"

"I thought I fixed it, or I tried to fix it..." Twilight's mouth hung open as she looked at the rolling hills of snow around her. She felt along her face and found that the blood from before had vanished, along with the pain. "I don't know what's happening..."

"It's just not a way to end things, Miss Sparkle," Hawks said. "Either that way, or this way. It's not going to work."

Twilight stared up at him, her expression getting even grimmer.

"Don't worry. You can still think of something." Hawks leaned in and gave her a strong hug. "Please don't give up. For all our sakes. Don't give up."

Twilight felt the warmth radiating off of Hawks' body. She sighed, her body sagging against the large stallion.

"Get ready," Hawks voice whispered to her. "It's not over yet."

Beneath her hooves, Twilight felt the ground split in two. She slipped out of Hawks' grip and down into the snowy hole. Hawks stared down after her as she fell, ignoring the hoof she put up.

“Just have faith, Miss Sparkle!” he shouted after her. “You can do it!”

Twilight fell further and further into the snow. Soon the hole at the top was just a dot in the distance, getting smaller and smaller until it disappeared altogether. The hole tightened around Twilight, pushing her forelegs up against her chest. She couldn't see or hear anything, she was simply lost in a small space.

Suddenly, light pushed through the darkness, and Twilight landed onto a hard surface. Shaking her head, her gaze was met with the closed ceiling of a small padded room. She straightened herself back up in time to see large metal door swing shut and lock her in. A small pane of glass sat on the upper half of the door, giving Twilight a look at the black number ten painted on the front and the two large ponies in white uniforms standing in the hall.

“Now you're going to stay in there until you learn to behave,” one of them said to her. Before she could respond, they both grinned at each other and turned to walk away. Twilight tried to stand and walk to the door, but found that she was bound tightly in a large strait jacket. Still, it was a small room, and Twilight made quick progress rolling forward and leaning up on her hind legs. Forcing herself the final steps to the door, she leaned up against the glass and watched the two leave.

“Hey, get back here!” she shouted. “I'm not insane, you hear me? I'm not insane!”

Her calls were quickly drowned out by a chorus from the neighboring cells.

“Hey, I'm not if she's not!”

“I'm not crazy either! I'm just misunderstood!”

“Let me out already! I won't get mad anymore, I promise!”

Catcalls rang throughout the hall. Twilight slid to one side and shut her eyes, lightly banging her head against the soft walls.

“I'm not insane, I'm not insane...” she muttered, her voice ready to crack. Then she paused, sniffed, and looked up.

“Wait, I know I'm not insane.” Clarity reentered her voice. “Why was I saying that? Where am I now, I don't recognize this place...”

Something shuffled around the cell behind her, and Twilight knew she wasn't alone. She whipped around and was confronted by a dark shape lingering against the padding of the opposing wall. Though the light of the room made it hard to make out, it only took Twilight a few moments to figure out what it was.

"This is a rotten way to end it," she said, her tone dripping with contempt.

The dark shape chuckled. "This isn't the ending. You haven't read it yet."

The shape rippled and lashed out at Twilight. She tried to dodge to one side, but couldn't move fast enough. The shape grabbed her head, forced it around, and pushed it through the plate glass of the door. It shattered, tearing parts of her skin to ribbons and making her scream against the pain. The cell lights snapped out, and Twilight's world blurred away.

Papers launched into the air as Twilight's body sprang up. She gasped for breath and tried to stand, only to collapse back down to the floor. The throne room sprang up around her, the same as it was the last time she was there. Sugar Cane stood at its center, staring into Twilight's eyes.

"Are we quite finished?" he asked, tilting his head in Twilight's direction. "I could've stopped it right away, but I felt it would be good for you to see that folly on for a bit. However, as amusing as that exercise was, I don't think there was any reason for it to continue any longer."

He brushed a few bits of dust off his jacket and turned to walk back towards his desk.

"I don't deal in twist endings, Twilight." Cane took a seat and continued typing. The typewriter clicked obediently as his hooves danced across the keys. "There is no trick out of this. There is no last minute solution, no special portal or secret spell to make it all suddenly go away. What's happening is happening, and can't happen any other way."

Twilight looked around. The crater she created by sending Cane flying into the wall was still there; another piece of plaster crumbled to pieces as she looked on.

"You recovered quickly." Twilight groaned and sat back up. She felt aches and pains in all her limbs, even though she was back to her previously healthy state.

"I think you'll find your magic to be a bit less effective on things that don't normally exist in this realm." Cane smirked and glanced up from the page. "But you've already had experience with that, haven't you?"

Twilight grunted and worked her way back up to her hooves. "Always a way..."

"My control is absolute. I think, therefore you are, and yet you still have doubt," Cane said.

He gestured to the walls around him. "Another demonstration perhaps? Here, have an easy one. Did I ever tell you my favorite color was blue?"

Twilight blinked, and the room transformed itself. Every square inch of surface in the room was a dark shade of solid blue, from the ceiling to the windows to the floor. The hole in the wall was gone, along with the large doors leading to the outer hall. Only blank walls remained to trap the two of them in.

Twilight shook off the sudden change in scenery and stared down Cane. "Parlor tricks with the room, 'allowing' me to try to change things... you're stalling. You don't stall unless you're trying to put something off or work something out... something going wrong, is it? What do you need the extra time for?"

"Always looking for the logic," Cane said, returning his attention to his typing.

"Maybe it's because part of you is trying to put it off. You say you're not *all* pony anymore, but that means *some* of you still is."

"Always trying to rationalize. You can't grasp the full scale of things—"

"And if that part is still there, he's still trying to fight against the rest of you, because he *doesn't* want to bring about the complete destruction Equestria."

"—and just where we are *at* it!" Cane snapped with a hint of venom in his tongue that made Twilight jump. He slammed the carriage to the side and pulled the paper out, placing it on top of the stack.

"There. All done." Cane motioned over the pages, flicking slowly through the stack. "Every word typed and checked, ready for my new publishers to experience."

"Come on, enough of that," Twilight urged. "No pony acts like this from the beginning, and no pony can just give up to the end of days. There's got to be some part of you, any part, that—"

"I can see you are not fully *appreciating* the situation," Cane cut in, rising from his seat. "So I suppose I will have to force the matter more forcefully."

Moving faster than Twilight could anticipate, Cane stepped around the desk and faced Twilight directly.

"I said magic here had no effect on something like me, something that's so far outgrown Equestrian boundaries, and that's true." Cane tapped his forehead and pointed to Twilight. "But it should work just fine on you."

Twilight instinctively stepped back. Her horn lit up again, flashing a vibrant violent in Cane's direction.

Cane laughed at the sight. "Very pretty. I think I'll finally take this opportunity to see how the other third lives."

He closed his eyes. A black field of energy materialized around him, spinning around in a dozen different directions and sending off tiny sparks of energy. The field expanded outward briefly, then pulled in, growing smaller and smaller until it was localized directly over his eyes. It stayed there briefly, and then sank down through his skin. As soon as it did, a bump appeared in the same spot. It pressed outward with a fine point until a unicorn horn ripped through and rose into position. The skin healed behind it, and seconds after the whole process started, it was over. Cane opened his eyes, his new horn looking slick in the room's blue light.

Twilight's horn flared up. She fired another burst of purple energy at Cane, only for him to push back with a faint black burst of his own. It sliced right through Twilight's blast and struck her upside the head. She fell to the floor, clutching the sides of her skull and writhing in agony.

"Mmmmmm... I can certainly see the appeal in one of these." Cane's nostrils flared. He stepped steadily towards Twilight. "You know that feeling, Twilight? You've had it before. It's the feeling of the other side, of Equestrian magic being put in its place by the higher power of the old ones. You can't fight it."

Twilight shoved her hooves down and forced herself back up. She glared at Cane with a look of pure, white-hot fury.

"Come now, Twilight," Cane said, indicating to the wall behind him. As Twilight watched, a tall set of double doors sprouted up out of the ground, growing taller and taller until they reached the ceiling. "Time to see just what I've been waiting for: the perfect view."

Cane's horn shimmered black. Before Twilight had a chance to react, a dark magical bubble surrounded her body. She grimaced as the energy pushed against her, sending powerful shocks through her mind. The sphere picked her up and fired her across the room, sending her crashing through the double doors. Cane ambled on behind her, the stack of papers from his desk levitating dutifully by his side.

Twilight slid several meters along the floor into the long, thin corridor. The sphere vanished by the time she stopped, but it took her a few seconds to clear her head enough to stand back up. She was met with a sight of her staring back; a massive mirror covered the entire wall in front of her. Twilight looked over her reflection's shoulder and saw that an equally-massive window stretched across the opposing wall. She turned around slowly, taking in the vast vista and all it had to offer.

Equestria was laid out before her. The dark night sky and snow-covered ground made it difficult to see very far, but Twilight was able to make out most of it. The mountain range stretched out to one side and dropped down in the immediate foreground, giving way to a wide valley. A bright orange speck down below marked Ponyville, which continued suffering from the unchecked fire that continued to gut the town from within. A second dot next to it marked the mirroring blaze in the Everfree Forest. As her eyes swept over the land, she made out more and more similarly orange glows. Fires broke out everywhere, with town after town going up in flames.

Cane stepped into the hall behind her. "Breathtaking, isn't it? A celebratory blaze in every city, and bonfires on every block. The hard work of some of my most loyal and grateful fans."

"I... I saw that devotion up close," Twilight said. She worked hard to control the waver in her voice. "I don't think they're going to be doing much reading anymore, though."

"A good fanbase always finds a way to adapt beyond the original medium."

Cane stepped up to the window next to Twilight. His head panned from one end of the window to the other; when he finished surveying the view, he smiled. "Even when they don't know what's coming next. None of them do, not really. Though I'm confident they'll love it."

"I think you've just developed an audience that's easy to please." Twilight gazed up at the ceiling over Cane's head. A large, heavy chandelier swung uneasily back and forth, still limber from an earlier tremor. Twilight focused on it; a small purple bubble appeared around its heavy chain, and with a quick flash, the chain broke in half. The chandelier plummeted to the floor, only to be thrust aside by a dark wall of light at the last moment.

Cane turned and looked down at Twilight. His eyes beamed under his glowing horn.

"Right angle, wrong direction," he said. "Let me help you with that."

Dark fields snapped up around Twilight's jaw. The pain rocketed back into her head, but the field kept her mouth shut and her cries silenced. Slowly, the fields turned her head back towards the window. She struggled against it as best she could, but was unable to escape from its grip. Soon she found herself staring up at the night sky.

"They're here..." Cane murmured. "Can you see?"

It took Twilight's eyes a minute to adjust to the low light. Then she saw it. Clouds blanketed the sky, just as before, but now they were completely and totally flat. Not a single lump billowed out of place, leaving an immaculately smooth surface that stretched out to every horizon. Then, starting at the center of the sky but quickly expanding outward, the clouds lit up.

The churning darkness gave way to a dim gray shine, and from there to a point brighter still.

The light encompassed everything. For a shining instant, the whole of Equestria was illuminated for Twilight as a great, snow-covered landscape. Then the instant passed, and the shine receded into the clouds. Though the light was too bright for Twilight to look directly at it, its rays didn't extend far down from the sky, and much of the land was once again bathed in darkness.

A dark shape lumbered against the shine. A second one pushed past it, then a third and a fourth. Soon the shapes were everywhere, writhing around within the lit cloud cover. One of the shapes slithered out from the rest, and guided itself down to the ground. The fields around Twilight's jaw were gone now; she didn't need any outside help to keep her transfixed on what she was seeing.

It was a tentacle of awe-inspiring proportions. Dozens of miles long and with a girth as wide as a city block, with pulsing scales of sickly-green and a series of relatively tiny spikes running along one side. As it approached the ground, its tip split off into a series of progressively smaller appendages, each of which guided themselves to a different part of Ponyville. When they reached the town, the floodgates opened in the sky. A hundred tentacles of identical size and texture broke through the cloud bank and rushed towards the cold ground below. Many aimed for the burning cities, while others angled off to the darker spots.

A roar rose up from the valley. Cries and calls of every possible origin echoed through the cold night air, a symphony of screams as every resident of Equestria shrieked in pure horror. Overhead, the many tentacle ends joined up into one gargantuan mass. It shoved its way through the remaining fragments of the overcast to reveal a creature of impossible scale. Eyes flicked open all along its slimy skin, while a pair of jaws the size of a mountain top snapped open into a mouth of vibrating teeth and tongues.

"Ah, now there's a special sight." Cane pointed to a small spot near the far mountains. Tiny black shapes flocked up en masse to meet the nearest falling monstrosity. Jets of flame, miniscule compared to their foe, fired out of their mouth at every opportunity.

"They never did know when to quit. Actually, it's quite fortunate that ponies managed to take control in this period. Had dragons risen up as the dominant force, we may have had a serious problem on our hooves... so to speak. But, even with all their lore and legends passed down, all those secrets that they clung to, they grew decadent in our absence. Clung to their territories and gorged on their treasures. Now whatever harm they can do is merely superficial. Pathetic, really. But, what can you do. Now, where was I..."

Over next to Cane, the top sheet on the floating stack of papers separated itself from the others and hovered in front of his face. With a slight pause to catch his breath, he began narrating the page.

“Twilight stared at the devastation in silence, her mind not wanting to accept what she could plainly see was true. She wanted to scream, but no sound escaped her throat, so the Old One in the sky screamed for her. It unleashed a volley of pained cries that shattered the bonds of reality, screeching louder and louder until it reached an ear-splitting crescendo of misery that rocked Equestria to its very core. Then the cries died away, as they were but a brief precursor of the sounds of the pain and desolation that the world’s inhabitants would soon encounter for themselves. She watched some try to flee, others try to fight, but it made no difference. All were soon consumed into a void of infinite suffering. Twilight stayed here, in this spot, until her end came. It didn’t take long as more and more of the others came up into the world. In light of her place in the great change, for all she had done to get here, they granted her a quick death instead of a spot amongst the forsaken. It was the least they could do. With that, the final blip of abject resistance finally wiped out, the absolute end arrived. And then there was nothing. Nothing but them.”

Cane looked up from the page. Twilight sat motionless in front of the window, her eyes locked forward. He smiled, letting the story drop to the floor.

“That’s just Equestria’s end, Twilight.” He spoke with a hushed air, barely audible over the din outside. “Yours is included there, but even I can’t say those specifics. We all perceive it differently, and as for what you’ll see when the walls come down and the final moments are upon you... well, I hope I was accurate when I said they’ll make it quick.”

Twilight kept staring out.

...Twilight, move your head. Move it. Turn away, kick a hoof, do something...

Behind the two of them, the mirror on the wall lit up. No glare appeared on the window, even as the mirror’s reflection disappeared into a light as bright as the sun. In a few spots, the flat surface bulged outward, pushed by something unseen.

Cane turned and looked into the light, using a hoof to shield his eyes. “Here they are now, then. Come for you. Come to... turn me fully...”

Ignore him, ignore whatever he says, you’re not about to just limply sit here and do nothing, come on...

Cane moved towards the mirror, reaching out to touch it. “I’ve wondered what was on the other side. Wondered where they spent so much time waiting. What sort of things they can see over there.”

You know what’s happening, you know what’s supposed to happen. You can change it. Don’t give up, don’t give up, always a way, always a way...

"Always wondered. And yet..." Just before his hoof touched the edge of the light, Cane pulled back. He looked on a second longer, then turned and moved back next to Twilight. "My place is here. I know this. It always will be, even as I morph beyond this pony body. Every god has a kingdom, and there he must remain."

Push, fight, don't give up, fight it, after everything that's happened, just don't give up...

Cane glanced down over himself, sliding a hoof along his shoulders.

"I suppose they'll let me decide the final outcome here," he speculated aloud. "To know when to flip that switch, push out the remnants of life once and for all—"

*Fight it, fight it, **FIGHT IT!***

"—I'd say I've earned that. Wouldn't you, Twilight?"

Cane glanced down at Twilight in time to catch sight of her rear right hoof rushing up to meet him. It connected with his jaw, producing a crack loud enough to echo throughout the hallway. Cane fell to his back, pushed by enough force to send him against the small section of wall barely visible under the mirror.

Twilight stretched her back out as she brought her leg back from the kick and stood up. "That's not your place to decide," she said softly.

Cane gurgled, a few broken teeth falling out from his mouth. He looked at Twilight with an expression of pure disbelief.

"You... you can't move," he managed to get out. "You can't... change a-anything... n-not n-n-now..."

Twilight moved forward across the hall. Explosions rippled through the background, shaking the ground to the point where she had trouble standing. Crashing rock and a muffled impact beyond the walls signified other towers in the castle falling to pieces. One of the tentacles from the sky changed course, turning right towards the wide window.

"I'm still here. There's *a/ways* a way to change things in a story if the protagonist is still around," Twilight said. "That's how stories *work*. You should know that."

Another chandelier came crashing down to the floor. Twilight kept moving, ignoring the pieces of flying crystal that came her way.

Cane attempted to stand, but couldn't get more than halfway up. He rubbed his

forehead, taking great pains to draw in every breath.

"It's... it's already been w-written," he garbled. "That's... t-that's all there—"

"No. Not all there is. Not yet." Twilight looked up past Cane, staring into the mirror. Behind her, the tentacle drew even closer. It picked up speed with each passing second, coming towards the castle as a great dark force of energy.

Cane stifled a gasp as he watched Twilight lower her stance and flex her rear legs.

"No... no!" he shouted, spitting out another mouthful of blood. "It's... that won't... you can't!"

"Time to take the fight away from here," Twilight said. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "Somewhere where it can actually do something... I hope..."

Twilight leapt forward right as the great window behind her imploded. The tentacle rushed in to fill the room, breaking out into endless streams of flesh that fired after Twilight at a lightning pace. Cane slumped his way up until he finally stood at his full height. His horn glowed a faint level of black, but he couldn't get a spell off in time. Right before the tentacle surged in and flooded the room entirely, Twilight collided with Cane, forcing him through the mirror along with her, where they disappeared into the bright light.