

The sound of bubbling oil and sizzling dough assaulted Twilight's ears as she mindlessly powered the machine with her horn. Surrounding her were rows upon rows of carts containing stacks upon stacks of freshly baked toroidal pastries. Or as most ponies called them, doughnuts. The greasy metal and scummy floor of the dimly lit room looked strikingly clean compared to the state of her magically dyed coat. But this was actually the highlight of her day. Sort of.

A door to her right swung open and a pegasus pony wearing a store uniform and a very clean apron strode in. She had a bright white coat and curly golden locks. Her skin showed a few wrinkles but she carried herself with a youthful energy Twilight was envious of. Her boss, known to the public simply as Surprise, owner of Sprinkles and Surprises. Her eyes scanned the room quickly and then landed on Twilight.

"Oh, there you are, Starlight. I need another batch of Moonlight creams and a dozen Zap Apple Sprinkles."

Twilight nodded wordlessly, and applied the proper modifications to machines two and three. Surprise scurried back out to the main room without another word, leaving Twilight to her thoughts again. She levitated the Moonlight cream and the Zap Apple filling from the storage bin and placed them in their respective machines. Somepony rich must be out there, because Zap Apple doughnuts were very expensive, seeing as how the only place to get Zap Apples was Flim Flam Fields.

Twilight set the machines to go and let herself slip into the same monotonous trance she had for the past... Twilight blinked. How long had it been? It seemed like just yesterday she'd wandered in here and started boiling innocent pastries in oil. Flim Flam Fields was just a painful memory she'd worked very hard to forget. Twilight hadn't set hoof there since the days when she was [i]princess of friendship.[/i] What a brilliant idea to settle working in a doughnut shop that got part of their supply from the wretched place.

Twilight shook her head. Those years had been her biggest mistake. Friends didn't make things better, they just made it more painful when the inevitable happened. Princess Celestia had been wrong, and Ponyville had been doomed from the day Twilight Sparkle first set hoof there.

Surprise only came in a few more times, usually just to pick up more doughnuts and carry them into the main counter area. It was otherwise quiet, the hum of the machines drowning out any painful thoughts. When the bell finally rang to signal the end of the day, Twilight took her time shutting the machines down and dragged her hooves sluggishly across the floor.

She gave a nod to Posey on her way out. The yellow earth pony quickly scooped up her danish and scurried out the door, letting a few snowflakes flutter in.

Twilight gulped. Past that door stood the outside world, where everything was either warm and sunny or cold and windy and everypony except for her was happy no matter which. Twilight tried to contain her excitement as she reluctantly lifted her hoof and stepped forward.

Twilight pulled her scarf tighter around her neck as she stepped out into a mild flurry. Cantor liked to have winter early for some reason, but for the life of her Twilight couldn't imagine why. She glared up at Firefly, who was too preoccupied with adjusting the clouds to notice. The breeze bit at Twilight's ears as she walked, and she slipped into a nearby alleyway to escape it. She was greeted with the familiar sight of dumpsters and discarded garbage, as well as the occasional frozen puddle. Cantor's latest decorations.

Twilight caught sight of her reflection as she passed over one and stopped. Her re-tinted gold eyes stared up at her with a lifelessness that would have shocked her years ago. Her midnight coat was getting shaggy, and Twilight could not help but notice the gray leaking into her silvery black mane. Gone was the cheerful smile that had greeted Spike every morning, or the fierce determination that had faced down Nightmare Moon, Discord, Chrysalis, and Tirek.

Twilight sighed. It must be nice to have Surprise's energy. The ragged unicorn looking up at her didn't even halfway resemble the alicorn who had walked out of Ponyville all those years ago. She didn't even have her friends to support her this time, to drag her back to reality and show her how everything wasn't so bad. Just as well. Everything *[i]was[i]* so bad. What was the point anymore? She was without friends, without her crown, without even a tenth of her magic. No pony even knew who Twilight Sparkle was anymore. She had died the day Starlight Twinkle strode into Cantor.

Twilight lowered her head so that her horn nearly touched the ice, then let her body follow. Why did Ponyville have to die? Why couldn't she save it? What use was a princess who had no subjects to rule over, or protect? What reason did she have to even continue existing? Surprise didn't need her. She didn't technically exist. And who would miss her? All of her friends were gone, and Princess Celestia didn't even care enough to look for her. If she had, she'd have found Twilight by now. She hadn't exactly made it hard. Okay she had, but it was for a good reason. Twilight Sparkle was a useless excuse for a princess, and deserved to vanish, unnoticed, forgotten.

What would be the best way? The most painless? The cleanest? The least noticeable? Perhaps, her birth had given her one last gift. Earth ponies couldn't do magic, but Twilight could. She could become a block of ice. Without a preset counter spell, she would be helpless, locked into her inevitable fate until spring, when she would melt away, and no pony would ever have to know. Even if Cantor dissipated and somepony found her, they wouldn't know what they had found. It was perfect. The feel of magic aura surrounded her horn, and a single tear froze on her cheek as she released the spell.

"You're slipping, Princess." An all too familiar voice called out from everywhere at once. "The Twilight Sparkle [i] know would never cast a transformation spell without giving herself an escape route." The ice beneath her sprouted eyeballs where hers had appeared to be, and the whole sheet swirled to life. It rose up and coalesced into a form Twilight hadn't seen in years. The magic in her horn dissipated, shattering the spell and leaving a still silence in the air. Discord leaned down and closed Twilight's jaw with a soft paw. "Giving up on finding answers? That doesn't sound like my old friend at all. Are you sure you're her?" He turned and stared with one very large eye into her own downcast gaze.

Twilight looked away. "H-how did you find me?" The words were almost voiceless, spoken through trembling lips.

Discord rolled his eyes and flicked her nose. "Oh, dear Twilight, don't insult me. As if your disguise wasn't flimsy enough. I must admit it took us a few decades to find the doorway to your little pocket dimension here, but if you really wanted to hide you should have picked a name that didn't match your own so perfectly. I mean, really. Twilight Sparkle? Starlight Twinkle? O-ho, very original, I must applaud you. I would expect nothing less from Princess Celestia's prized pupil."

He'd donned a graduation cap and held a scroll in one paw. Twilight stared at him deadpan, lacking the enthusiasm to glare. If he wanted to taunt her for running away, let him. "The makeover was a nice touch, though I think you missed a few feathers when you lost the wings, and I doubt anyone other than Princess Luna would appreciate that shade of coat." He ran a few claws down her back as he paced a tight circle around her.

"I applaud your location for this little sojourn, however. I wasn't aware you were a fan of Supermare."

"I'm not. Spike was. That's his comic book."

"Still trying to find to lost friends I see."

"What do you want?" she breathed, any strength having left her voice. Discord simply twirled himself around and worked his overactive tongue, as usual.

"Oh, it's not what [i] want, Twilight, but rather what [i]you[i] want. For somepony so intent on getting back what she lost you seem pretty bent on avoiding the one place you'll find it." He held out a finger to let a butterfly land on it. No, actually, it was a moth, with a yellow body and pink dappled wings. He stroked it gently, staring expectantly at her. Twilight blinked slowly and looked away.

"She's not there. She hasn't been for years. None of them are."

“Oh, and how would you know? You never visit. I’ll bet she’s just *[i]dying[/i]* to see you.”

Emotion that hadn’t stirred in years flared up inside Twilight and her horn lit up in an instant. “You take that back!” she half shouted at him, her voice breaking into a sob at the last moment. Tears formed in her eyes as she glared at him. Oddly enough, she met that very same glare in his eyes. This wasn’t the prankster she used to love to hate. There was something else brooding behind those old eyes.

After a moment, Discord simply threw up his hands in front of him. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. All I know is if you really didn’t care, that little jab wouldn’t have bothered you, and ‘Posey’ I believe her name was, wouldn’t have been so fond of you. You’re looking for something, Twilight Sparkle. Something you lost long ago, and a little butterfly told me it currently resides in Ponyville. But of course, you don’t *[i]want[/i]* to go to Ponyville, you’d rather stay here and sell doughnuts to an ersatz herd of your long lost friends for the rest of your miserable life.” He pulled a zap apple cream doughnut out of the air and took a bite out of it, flattened eyes daring her to retort.

Twilight looked down at the thickening snow. “Not anymore. I’m done selling doughnuts. I just want it to be over.”

“Well, then you’ve got nothing to lose, haven’t you? I think you at least owe your friend the honor of one last hug, don’t you? How very selfish of you, to rob her of that, when she did so much to help you while you were around.” He flicked her painfully across the face with his tail.

Twilight didn’t move. Deep ridges set into her brow as his words hit like a speeding Rainbow Dash. Twilight groaned at that thought. She couldn’t even get her friends out of her head.

“Well, I can see you really don’t care about your friends. Fine, go freeze yourself. I’ll see you when spring comes.” A gust of wind blew down the alley, carrying Discord along with it in an icy blast that struck Twilight across the face.

The moth he’d been holding fluttered down afterward and landed on Twilight’s nose. It flapped its wings a few times, then took off and disappeared into the sky. Twilight looked back down at her sheet of ice, summoning up her magic once again.

Her friends weren’t there. They wouldn’t be.

The spell grew stronger, building in intensity.

They’d abandoned her. She’d *[i]had[/i]* to leave.

The wind picked up, swirling about her and creating a small vortex of snow around her horn.

Twilight glared at the sheet of ice, daring it to challenge her resolve. She was going to do this. She couldn't take her life anymore. It had to be done.

But what about Fluttershy?

The ice shattered as the spell collapsed around her. Twilight fought to maintain it, but it was too late. She'd lost her focus, and the magic she'd built up had escaped.

"Dammit!" She smashed what was left of her frozen puddle with a hoof, then collapsed onto the ground, crying. Discord was right. She had to go back. Just one last time, to say goodbye. She owed it to Fluttershy, and Discord.

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Butterflies flapped noiselessly around the great tree, in memoriam of the pony who had once cared for them all. It was a beautiful sight, but Twilight couldn't approach. The old cottage had been empty and uncared for for over a decade, and the Everfree had moved in, swallowing up the flower meadow she and the others had helped plant. The only thing preserving Fluttershy's house was the tree that had sprung up around it, protecting it from the twisting vines that now covered the path, barring Twilight's advance further.

The cold autumn breeze blew through Twilight's mane, sending chills down her spine. She wrapped her scarf more tightly around herself and ruffled her remaining feathers. The only other sound besides the wind was the leaves crunching beneath her hooves. Gray clouds covered the entire sky, just like they had since the day she'd left. It almost seemed fitting that the sun never shone on this place anymore. Twilight didn't like remembering.

Twilight gave a last mournful look at the flock of butterflies, faithfully guarding the tree, then turned away. Whatever it was Discord had sent her here to look for, it wasn't this. She wandered back into town, her hooves carrying her to the only other place that felt relevant: The charred remains of Golden Oaks Library.

Ash littered the ground around the old tree. No pony had dared approach it after that day. Broken bits of wood were everywhere. Twilight kicked a gray lump on the ground in front of her, flipping it over. Part of it crumbled into ash, but the cover had remained mostly intact. The words came back with a multitude of memories she'd tried to forget.

[i]Super Natu[/i]

It had been so long since Twilight had seen this book—since she'd even set hoof here. It was a strange feeling, being back. Discord had told her she might find what she was looking for here,

but Twilight wasn't so sure. There was nothing here that she wanted, and there was nopony to greet her either. Not even Spike or Owllovisious.

Twilight nearly cried as she remembered that day. The silly bird had come to her one night while she was studying, and had been so helpful ever since. She never did learn where he came from, but he was a good companion. He didn't deserve what had happened.

She took a few steps closer, stirring up some of the ash covering the ground near her old home. No. Not anymore. She really shouldn't be here, but it held the most memories, and she found herself unable to leave. There was nowhere else she wanted to be right now.

Twilight paused by the door, or what was left of it. Spike should have been here. He was always here, ready to welcome her home. But then he'd just vanished one day. No warning, not even a letter. How could he have forgotten about her?

She looked up through the now missing floors of the great oak tree. There were so many memories here. Some were happy, some were painful, but Twilight turned away. No. She [i]didn't[/i] want to be here. Whatever she was looking for, it wasn't here either, and there was a lot of the old town she still needed to see.

Eventually her hooves found their way to the Carousel Boutique. The windows were boarded up, the exterior decorations stripped, the paint sprayed over several times. The place was little more than an empty shell of a memory. Twilight didn't try to break in. She knew what was in there. Rarity hadn't come home since before Twilight had left.

Sweetie Belle had tried to take over the shop, but she didn't have her sister's talent for designing. The boutique had gone out of business, been sold back to the town, and had everything inside removed. It had been abandoned for years, until some of the younger fillies and colts had vandalized it and used it for a clubhouse. They had also eventually left, but the old place still held the scars.

Twilight wasn't sure why she'd come here. Maybe some small part of her hoped that she'd find Rarity, but the rest of her knew that Rarity was never coming back. She'd left all of them behind to chase her own dreams. She didn't care for them at all. Twilight shook at the thought. Why did everypony have to go? Why couldn't they stay behind so she didn't have to feel alone? She stomped her hoof and left.

Apparently Sugarcube Corner was next on her list of stops. Why here? Twilight didn't want to go in, but she still hadn't found what she was looking for. Just a quick look, and then she could leave. Twilight slowly pushed open the door and stepped inside. The Cakes had moved out long ago, leaving the place to Pinkie.

Twilight scanned the main room, but there was nothing here other than a few discarded bags of flour, and a lot of mold. Twilight gulped, and pressed a hoof onto the first stair leading up to Pinkie's old room. Her heart began to race, and not because the boards were old and creaky. A lump formed in her throat as she climbed. She knew what she was about to walk into. Oh, Celestia. Whatever she was looking for, please not let it be this. Finally Twilight reached the top of the stairs and reluctantly pushed open the door.

Everything was just as they'd left it all those years ago. Withered balloons littered the floor and hung eerily from the upper loft. The wallpaper was torn and brown stains were splattered over what was left. Confetti was spread across the small carpet, collecting in large concentration near the opening of a faded blue cannon. A long crack ran the length of the barrel, and one of the wheels that had once held it lay on the floor, broken off at the axle. It was like a party gone wrong, and Twilight was the unfortunate guest.

On the bed lay a crumpled note in Pinkie's mouthwriting. Twilight didn't need to read it again. She looked up at the rope hanging from the rafters. They still hadn't taken it down. A lump formed in Twilight's throat, and the tears welled up under her eyes. Pinkie had always been afraid her friends would leave, but Twilight had never imagined it would actually happen, or what Pinkie would do when it did.

Why? Why had Twilight come back here? She'd known what she would find. Her very presence wouldn't just make it all better, make them all come back. But she couldn't let go of what used to be here. There used to be so many happy memories. Where had they all gone? Twilight tore herself away from the wistful scene and fled back down the stairs, nearly tripping as one of them broke beneath her hooves.

She didn't bother trying to find Rainbow Dash. No pony had seen her for years. The last thing she'd done for the old town was make it rain for three weeks, setting the sky permanently gray. She was the reason everything was always so gloomy.

No, there was only one place left to go. One pony Twilight had to visit to maybe find what she was looking for, if she even knew what that was. Twilight raced as fast as her weary hooves would carry her. She passed an old broken scooter as she ran past the stream bed, still trickling along. Everypony was gone.

No, not everypony. As she bounded up the hill, Twilight's eyes fell upon row after row of apple trees, fully laden with ripe apples. Her heart fluttered as she passed under the wooden archway marking the entrance to Sweet Apple Acres, but it sank when she saw the sign was rotted and cracked. She slowed to a meandering stroll, barely finding the strength to climb the hill to the farmhouse. Much of the old orchard was dead now. The apples no longer grew in the outer fields, and the trees there were inhabited by bats.

There was a light on, so she knew somepony was home, but it had been so long since she'd been here. Would they even remember her? Twilight walked up to the door, took a deep breath, and slowly knocked. A minute passed. Two minutes. Three. Twilight sighed. It was probably a bad time. She turned and trotted away, back down the path. She'd found nothing. Discord was wrong. There was nothing here.

Twilight heard a low creak behind her, and flicked her head around.

"Huh? Who's out there?" a familiar voice called out. Twilight held her breath. After so many years... the door creaked all the way open, and the wide brim of a stetson had poked its way around the edge, followed by a knotted blond mane and finally, an orange face with freckles. Those old green eyes Twilight had come to love locked on to her, and widened instantly.

"Applejack."

Twilight's vision blurred. Her heart raced faster than it had in years and her breath nearly stopped. Finally, part of Ponyville that wasn't ruined by time. Twilight practically flew through the air toward her old friend. "Oh, Applejack I can't believe it's really you."

"Whoa nelly! H-hold up now—oof!"

Twilight collided with Applejack and the two landed on the ground next to the doorway, hard. As she gazed into her old friend's eyes, Twilight's heart froze, and the smile left her face faster than it had appeared. Something was wrong.

"What the hay? Get off me you—"

"Applejack?"

"Huh?"

Applejack's face was crumpled in pain, and she lay clutching her right shoulder. Her hair was much grayer than Twilight remembered it, and her skin bore few wrinkles.

"A—Applejack. It's... It's me, Twilight."

Applejack's eyes snapped wide open, and all the color drained from her face. She forgot her shoulder for a moment and simply stared at Twilight for at least a full minute.

"Twilight... *[i]ouch[/i]—I uh, I'm really glad to see you again an' all just—*[i]ngh[/i]—I ain't quite as unbreakable as I used to be." She looked up at Twilight, not with the fierce, determined eyes she had once known, but with aged, worn out eyes that had seen too many days of labor in the**

fields. This wasn't Applejack. Or at least not the same one. Twilight got off her old friend, barely able to believe what she was looking at.

"Applejack... what happened to you?"

Applejack winced as she stood up. She stumbled once or twice on her newly hurt shoulder, but eventually found a firm stance and put on a smile.

"Time. Life. I got old, Twilight. Didja forget? That thing that happens to us normal ponies not gifted with darn near immortality?" Applejack gently elbowed Twilight in the chest. "But forget me. What happened to [i]you[/i]? I seem to recall a nice, lavender coat and a fine set of wings on ya."

Twilight hadn't realized her mouth was open until it snapped shut. Her face grew hot as she realized she was still wearing her disguise. When she finally found her voice, it was quieter than Fluttershy's had once been. "Oh, I um... I didn't really want to be found."

Applejack frowned. Twilight had never told her why she'd left. She hadn't told anypony.

"I tried to change back when I got here but..." Tears formed in Twilight's eyes again. "Oh, Applejack, I'm sorry. I just—"

Applejack leaned forward and put a hoof on Twilight's shoulder, smiling sympathetically. "It's alright, Twilight. You're here now. Come on inside. I've got some cider brewin', and I'm sure Pinkie would love to see ya again." She beckoned with a hoof, and trotted back inside.

Twilight's heart skipped a beat, tears drying instantly. "Pinkie?! She's... still here?"

Applejack turned and shot her a pained look. She struggled to form words for a few moments, then let out a long sigh. "She ain't the same as she used to be, Twi. But yeah, she's here." Applejack turned and trod into her house with her head down. "I think."

Twilight's blood ran cold at that last part, but she warily followed Applejack into the farmhouse. Applejack's knees shook with each step, making her look like a slightly younger, orange version of Granny Smith. Twilight turned her attention to the walls instead. Pictures covered nearly every square inch. Apple Bloom stood next to her two friends in one of them, showing off their cutie marks. Twilight had nearly forgotten the Cutie Mark Crusaders. The next generation really grew up fast. Another picture showed the most recent Apple Family Reunion. Just looking at the low turnout was heartbreaking.

Twilight kept walking and followed Applejack into the living room. More pictures lined the walls, but a lot of these were pink. Even the furniture had been swapped out for pink or blue items. Her eyes drifted to the corner of the room, where she saw something that made her heart stop.

Applejack, followed her gaze, then sighed.

“Like I said, she’s still here, I think.” The two of them stood in silence for a few moments, before Applejack spoke up again. “I’ll let you two catch up while I go an’ get the cider. Give me a few minutes.” She disappeared through the kitchen door, leaving Twilight alone with Pinkie, or what was left of her.

Twilight’s heart ached as she gazed at her old friend. It wasn’t right. She shouldn’t look like this. Pinkie sat hunched over in a wheelchair, staring blankly at the floor across the room. Her mane was dangled across her chest in long, uncurled strands, and her hooves rested lifelessly in her lap. She lifted her head slightly at Twilight’s approach, but she wasn’t looking at Twilight. Drool hung from her lip, and the way she stared blankly at open space made it hard to imagine that there was anypony alive behind those eyes. Pinkie returned her head to its previous position after a few moments.

Applejack was right. Pinkie might be here in body, but not in spirit. Gone was the happy, exuberant pony who had brought joy to all of Ponyville. Left in her place was a broken, lifeless husk. This wasn’t Pinkie Pie at all. Applejack returned a moment later with a tray in her mouth that had three mugs of cider on it. She set it down in front of Pinkie and picked up one of the mugs.

“Feel like some cider, Pinkie? Our old friend Twilight’s here. Seems like a good time for some celebratin’.” Applejack held the mug out to Pinkie, doing her best to smile. Pinkie’s hooves moved very slowly, but she took the mug from Applejack. Then, in an act that seemed impossible in her condition, Pinkie brought the mug to her lips and tilted it back. Some of it spilled down her chest, but Twilight saw Pinkie take a long, painfully slow swallow. A snail might have moved quicker.

Applejack smiled at her, then looked over at Twilight. It wasn’t a real smile, but Twilight could tell Applejack was trying to be comforting.

“Well, she seems a bit livelier than usual. I told you she’d be happy to see you, Twi.” Applejack held out a mug of cider to Twilight, who grabbed it with her hoof.

Twilight moved and sat down on the couch, staring at the ground between her hooves. She could tell there was something here that she’d come back for, but she couldn’t quite put her hoof on what it was. She looked back up at Applejack, who was sipping her cider happily. The silence in the room dragged on and Applejack’s unusually happy attitude was growing uncomfortable.

“How—how is she?” Twilight asked without looking up.

“Who, Pinkie? She seems alright. She hasn’t moved much since the day... well, you were there.” Applejack gulped, and the silence in the room returned while she fumbled for more words. “Well, I uh... she seems happy enough, all things considering. I think she can understand what we’re sayin’, though it’s hard to tell since she doesn’t respond much anymore.”

Now it was Applejack’s turn to look forlornly at the floor. Pinkie’s incident had been a result of many things that involved all of Twilight’s close friends, but none of them had ever seen it coming. Rainbow Dash had taken it the hardest. She’d made it rain before she left, and it had continued to rain for weeks before the clouds ran out.

It only made sense. Pinkie had always held a special place in all of their hearts, but in Rainbow Dash’s more than anypony else. Rainbow Dash had managed to find Twilight, and dragged her back to Ponyville. But when they’d found Pinkie, it had been too much for the poor girl. When she smashed her cloud home that day, Twilight knew even Rainbow Dash wasn’t coming back. She could still feel the radial fracture in her horn from when Rainbow Dash had kicked her.

No, Twilight blamed herself for what happened. She hadn’t been happy, and Pinkie was the only pony who saw through it, but Pinkie was also the one pony Twilight’s happiness could affect bad enough to...

“What happened to this place, Applejack?” Twilight’s breathing became heavy. Applejack stopped sipping and looked up. She set her mug down and let out a sigh.

“To be honest, sugarcube, I ain’t really certain. Sometime after you left the first time, ponies just started uppin’ and leavin’. It was like all the magic had left this place. No pony new ever came to town, and all of Pinkie’s efforts couldn’t keep everypony happy. It’s like you were the life of this place, Twi.”

“But that’s impossible,” Twilight gasped. “Everypony was happy *[i]before* I got here! It’s not like they needed me.”

“No, but you left a big impression on all of our hearts, sugarcube.” Applejack smiled briefly. “Not to mention savin’ the town on countless occasions. There’s a reason you had that big fancy castle out by the edge of town for a while. Heck, Celestia forgot to raise the sun for nearly a week after you up and vanished. She even had us search the whole everfree for you.”

Twilight got up and walked over to the window, looking out toward where her old castle had once stood. It was true. She was the princess of friendship, after all. She should never have left. Twilight closed her eyes, letting a few more tears fall. She’d hurt them. She’d hurt all of them. And she had never wanted to.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, not turning around. “I just couldn’t stay.” Twilight heard the sound of hooves hitting the floor behind her.

“Why not, Twi? You used to love this place. You once said Ponyville was your home.”
Applejack’s voice wanted to be kind, but she was too lost for answers. Twilight didn’t blame her.

“Yes, Applejack. I used to call this place my home, but that was when I wanted to be here.”

Twilight heard Applejack take a step backward.

“Ponyville [i]was[/i] my home. It was where all my friends were. It was where I learned the magic of friendship, found the spark deep inside me—inside all of us. There was nothing I loved more than to study magic, and to be with my friends.

“But over time, that spark faded. All of my friends became more distant—more disconnected. I lost the love for magic I had once held. And then when Rarity left... it was just too much.”

“But, sugarcube, Rarity [i]had[/i] to leave. Her business had outgrown Ponyville. She got a great offer from a stallion in Canterlot, and she had to go oversee the expansion of her new company.”

“But she wasn’t around. I missed her too much. I missed all of you.” Twilight’s tears ran faster, and she let out quiet sobs. “I don’t even know if she’s still in Canterlot. I spent a good many years there, and I couldn’t find her. Rarity’s gone.”

“S-sugarcube, I...” Applejack let out a long sigh. “What’s this really about, Twilight? You didn’t come back here just to blame us all for makin’ you feel sad enough to leave. You ain’t like that.”

Twilight considered turning around. She knew Applejack was right. But it was less painful if she didn’t have to stare into those old green eyes. She didn’t want to accept the truth.

“It’s just... everypony became so different. Everything changed. Apple Bloom and the others all got their cutie marks. Scootaloo started helping disabled ponies learn to walk, or fly, or live without the use of their horns. Sweetie Belle opened up a school for magic. Apple Bloom and Big Macintosh moved away after Granny Smith died. Derpy went back home to Applewood. Cheerilee retired.”

Twilight continued to look out the window, wishing the old town would just go back to the way it was, but she knew it wouldn’t. She sobbed into her forehooves as she leaned over the windowsill.

“Nothing was the same. It wasn’t the same town I fell in love with. Maybe you’re right, Applejack. Maybe I was the life of this town, but you know what? This town was also the life of me, and without it? Without that spark I just—I just couldn’t stay.”

Twilight felt a hoof land on her shoulder, but she still refused to turn around.

“After F-fluttershy... and then the castle dissolved, well, I knew it was time to leave. If the magic of friendship had fallen that far, this place certainly didn’t need its princess anymore.”

A small scroll slid its way onto Twilight’s hooves, guided by a pink hoof. Twilight gasped, and turned to see Pinkie, sitting in her wheelchair next to the window. Her eyes still showed no signs of life, but the hoof on Twilight’s shoulder, and the scroll in her hoof told Twilight there was still some spark of her old friend in there, somewhere.

Twilight looked down at the scroll. It was in Pinkie’s own mouthwriting, but it was old—far too old to have been written recently.

“P-pinkie... was this b-before...”

Pinkie didn’t respond. She turned her chair around slowly, and rolled back to her corner, facing away from the room. Twilight looked back down at the scroll, and read the words Pinkie had written so long ago. It was a poem. Well, more of a song—Twilight recognized the different parts—but there was one stanza that popped up repeatedly.

[quote]Ponies change
You gotta move on
But this night just feels like it goes on for so long

And I don't know how I can take it
I'll just wear a smile and fake it
but the night has left the day in disarray
[/quote]

Twilight’s tears dried up, and her breath caught in her throat. All this time, Pinkie had felt the same way. Twilight looked over at Pinkie, sitting motionless in her corner. Twilight had never known. She should have been a friend. A true, true friend.

She let the scroll fall from her hooves, and looked over at Applejack, who returned her gaze with a somber expression.

“Yeah, she showed me that, too. It’s part of why I’m still here. Why I never left. I mean, I’ve got the apple farm to look after and all; and Pinkie of course, but business has been dead ever since everypony left. I have to travel a lot to make any sales, but I always come home. This is where I grew up, and it’s where I’m gonna stay. Ponyville is my home, Twi, and it’s yours, too.”

Twilight collapsed onto the couch.

“But... but it’s just so different.”

“Yeah, it sure ain’t the same as it used to be. Heck, I don’t know if Ponyville will [i]ever[/i] be anything like it once was, but that’s life, sugarcube. It’s like Pinkie said: ponies change, and you gotta move on. Nothin’ is ever like it once was, but that’s okay. You never forget all the fun times you had. Sure, the same places might disappear, but your memories last forever, and so do your friendships. We’re always together in our hearts, sugarcube, no matter what physical distance might separate us. We’re bonded together by the magic of friendship. You taught us that, Twi. And we ain’t never forgot it.”

“B-but Fluttershy—”

“Is still here with us in spirit. Didn’t you see all the wildlife that lives around her cottage? Who else do you know who loved animals that much, and cared for them? They wouldn’t stick around if there wasn’t something of her left.”

Twilight got off the couch and threw herself into Applejack’s waiting hooves. She didn’t know how long she cried for, but it didn’t matter. There was nopony here who wasn’t crying with her in some form. When the two of them separated, there were tears in Applejack’s eyes, too.

“Y’know,” she said, wiping her eyes and smiling, “sometimes I like to think that the scars we bear are just little reminders that life goes on, even when things change, or when ponies get hurt. You’ve just got to pick yourself up, take the knowledge and experience that you gained, and make a better future for yourself. You’re a strong pony, Twilight. One of the strongest I’ve ever met, and you’ve got a big heart. Why don’t you go give it to the world, instead of hiding yourself away? Okay, sugarcube?”

Twilight smiled back. “Thanks, Applejack. You’re a good friend.” Applejack beamed, and picked up the discarded mugs of cider they’d left on the ground. Twilight turned around and picked up the scroll she’d dropped, then walked over to the corner where Pinkie sat.

“Thanks, Pinkie. This helped a lot.”

Twilight leaned in and hugged her, ignoring the pink curl of hair poking her face. As she did, Twilight felt a rush of magic escape her horn, and the familiar feeling of air under her feathers returned. A single tear fell from one of Pinkie’s otherwise lifeless eyes and landed on the scroll in her lap. She moved a hoof to cover it, and when the hoof returned to its regular position, the scroll was gone. Twilight smiled. So she could still do that. It warmed her heart to see so much of her old friend still active, despite her disability.

Twilight said goodbye to Applejack and left, feeling much more alive than she had in years. No, Ponyville would never be the same, even if Twilight came back to stay, but that didn’t matter anymore. What mattered was that her friends were still with her, even if they were miles apart.

Twilight made the trek across town to Fluttershy's cottage. The vegetation was too thick to get near the house, but just standing here, staring up at it felt resolute enough. Discord had been right. Twilight *had* been looking for something, and it had been right back here the whole time. Twilight smiled and turned her back on Ponyville for the last time.