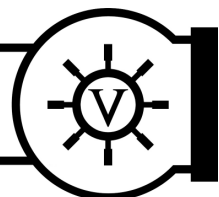


# My Maker

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She's my friend. We're together every day.

Whenever I'm with her, it always starts with those tiny pinpoints of light. They start to invade my vision, breaking through the blanket of darkness like beams of sunlight through a barred window, and bring me out of *that* place. Out of the blackness, I see a face start to take shape. At first, it's nothing more than a pair of violet eyes, gleaming like a water lily on a beautiful summer's day. It's so bright here, so warm... so inviting.

But then the face becomes clearer; the outline makes itself apparent, forming the shape of her chin and cheeks. Her features are soft, juvenile even. But the centerpiece of her young face catches my attention the moment it fades into clarity:

Her *smile*... I know that smile well. The sunlight from the window falls on her shining face, illuminating the grin as if her teeth were made of diamond. It's the smile of a filly, no older than five or six years old. Her beaming face is ignorant and full of carefree idealism not yet corrupted by the world. It displays the emotions that every young pony should feel, and yet... there's something deeper: an expression of true understanding.

Any adult would rationalize that she doesn't *truly* understand it; they would convince themselves that she's nothing more than misled about her own feelings, but she *does* understand; I know it. It's love.

Yes, I know that smile well. It tells me one thing clearly:

It's playtime again!

"Hi, Smarty Pants!" she exclaims, squeezing me so tight that I think the stuffing might burst from my seams. "Did you miss me?"

Oh, if only you knew, Twilight; if only I could sigh and smile at you, if only I could tell you just how *much* I missed you, if only I could relate to you that I had been counting every second until you returned, I would, but –

You know, don't you? Even when I'm trapped in a body that can't move, or smile, or even whisper "I love you," you can see it. You see past my tattered button eyes, beyond the patches on my limbs to the very core of who I am. You don't even know I can see or hear you, yet you truly love me; that's all it took to bring me here.

She sets me on the circular carpet in the center of her bedroom and places a wooden rack full of slender glass tubes next to me. Inside, I'm smiling broadly; there's nothing in them but food coloring and water. I'm sure she understands that, and I'm also sure that she

could be more than trusted with real chemicals. There's no blaming her parents for their lack of faith, however; they don't see what I see.

They're not here when Twilight sleep-talks about physics, or star formations. They don't watch when she reads textbooks years ahead of her grade level. Maybe someday, they'll understand and let her be who she truly is, rather than give her water to mix in beakers.

"Here's Equestria's number one chemist on the Canterlot Science Channel!" she announces in her best attempt at a stallion's voice. In reality, it sounds more like a mouse's squeak. "Twilight Sparkle has discovered an entirely new chemical called 'blughe'," she says as she pours a vial of green water into one full of yellow. "One of the primary properties of blughe seem to be that it can be created by mixing euyhlo and grynne," she adds, feigning deep concentration. Maybe she's imagining herself on a stage, or in a Canterlot University classroom.

"And here's Ms. Sparkle's faithful assistant and collaborator, Smarty Pants!" she exclaims, holding one of my stuffed hooves up to an imaginary microphone. "Smarty Pants, what's *your* take on the discovery of blughe?"

"Well, I believe this is a massive step forward for pony kind," she speaks for me in an absurdly exaggerated falsetto.

"Yes, I couldn't agree more, Smarty Pants," Twilight speaks for herself. "And I know that I would never have made this great discovery without you by my side."

If I had real eyes, they would be sparkling with tears.

"We believe that blughe will be the key to widespread desalinization; owing to the fact that its color is the same as water's, it's perfectly reasonable to assume purification is natural," she imitates the stallion once again.

I wish I could just burst out laughing. It amazes me that such a bright little filly can be so imaginative at the same time...

"It appears to have worked!" she announces in that same stallion voice. "Applying blughe to sea water has apparently completely purified it. Now all we need is someone to test the effects."

She looks around at the imaginary crowds of ponies for a volunteer.

"You there, Miss!" she addresses one of the creations in her own voice. "Would you be so kind as to test this water for me?"

She pantomimes handing a glass of water to the imaginary mare. "Oh no!" she squeals. "The chemical changed her into a hideous monster! Run, Smarty Pants, RUN!"

Tucking me between one of her fore-hooves and her body, she runs around the room, screaming in a desperate attempt to ward off the fictional monster.

"Wait!" she yells, speaking in that same ridiculous soprano voice she attributes to me. "Blughe is formed by mixing euyhlo and grynne! Could that mean that applying them both separately could counteract the effects?"

"Brilliant, Smarty Pants!" she says, bolting back toward the vials of colored fluid and pouring them on each of her fore hooves.

I watch from my resting place under her chest as she wrestles with the imaginary beast. "We did it!" she says finally in the stallion announcer's voice, hugging me to her cheek. "The mare has been returned to her normal state! Smarty Pants and Twilight Sparkle save the day once again!"

She supplies the cheers of the audience before squinting her eyes in anticipation and turning to look over her shoulder.

"I have no idea why it won't just *appear* already!" she pouts, folding her fore-hooves in exasperation as she glances at her still blank flank. "I mean, I play chemist every day! Shouldn't that be enough for a chemistry Cutie Mark?"

If I had the ability, I would be shaking my head knowingly. This is coming from the filly who just got first place in a science fair three years ahead of her. I don't think you need to wait much longer, Twi; if my observations mean anything, you'll be as brilliant as Starswirl the Bearded by the time you're ten years old. *What* your Cutie Mark is of won't matter; you'll get one soon enough.

"You really think I'll get one that soon?" she asks with sparkling eyes.

If I had a mouth, it would be frozen in a gaping hole. What, is she telepathic too?

I know she didn't really read my mind, of course. We just think on the same level. Perhaps my personality has worn off on her?

...Or maybe she's worn off on you, Smarty Pants? Don't forget who the imaginary friend here is.

Setting the beakers gently back into their case, she places her face only inches from mine with an elated expression. "I almost forgot! Do you want to see the picture I drew today?"

Will you be more powerful than Princess Celestia some day? Of course I want to see your drawing, silly!

I watch with a glowing feeling as she trots to her saddlebags. Face contorted in intense concentration, she forces a purple sheen to appear around the straps. A small sheet of paper floats gently on the air as she approaches me once more.

I wonder what she drew this time. Maybe she redesigned the architecture on her dream palace again, or adjusted her theory on the physics of red giants. She comes up with the most fascinating ideas sometimes; what could it be?

She places the drawing directly in front of my face, beaming behind the paper. The impression is penned in glorious detail, unlike anything I've ever seen. Her image is of a beach at sunset, just as the golden orb begins to dip below the horizon. At the very center, encircled by a heart are two figures: a small unicorn filly and a tattered yet life-sized impression of...

*Me.*

"Do you like it?" she inquires expectantly.

When I see her work of art, every fiber of my cloth being desperately wants to burst into happy tears; it's all I can do to know that this drawing is the most meaningful thing she's ever created.

This is unlike *anything* I've ever seen before.

"I'm so glad to hear it!" she exclaims.

There it is again: my little psychic, Twilight Sparkle. If only you could *really* hear my thoughts...

"Twilight?" a mare's voice calls from outside the door.

Twilight's door opens as the clip-clop of hooves on her carpeted floor penetrates my ears. Is it that time already?

"It's time for bed, sweetie!" the mare says, patting Twilight on the head.

Twilight glances up at her mother with the most superb begging face I've ever seen. "Can't we stay up a little longer, mom? Smarty Pants and I were playing!"

Seldom in my short life have I wanted to nod my head more. Yeah mom, can't we stay up just a little bit longer?

She shakes her head with a smile. "There will be plenty more time for you two to play tomorrow, but for now, it's a school night; little fillies like you need their rest!"

With a tiny "hmpf!", Twilight picks me up and starts glacially toward her bed.

"Slowing down isn't going to stall your bed time any more, kiddo," her mother chuckles.

Twilight seems to realize this herself; without another word, she climbs between the sheets and pulls the covers to her neck. She positions us face to face with one another as she kisses me on the cheek.

"Can a pony love something, even if it's not real?" she asks as she strokes my face.

It's amazing how a tiny filly like her can ask such a profound question. I wonder if she even understands?

Her mother smiles knowingly. "Is this 'thing' real to *you*, Twilight?"

Twilight glances at my ever-blank expression with an amazing amount of love and tenderness I've never seen before. "She always will be."

I can practically feel my imaginary heart filling as she says those words. I'm *real* to her.

"That's all that matters," her mother says. "Goodnight, Twilight."

I watch as she kisses Twilight on the cheek before turning to leave. "I love you," she says as the room goes dark.

I can just make out Twilight's smiling face from the moonlight streaming through the window. "I'll see you in a few minutes, Smarty Pants."

She places her hooves around me and squeezes me tight once more. In only a matter of minutes, her breathing becomes steady and gentle. I wish I could join her in those dreams... for that matter, I wish I *knew* what dreaming was like.

Rag dolls don't do that, I suppose; not enough brains, maybe? I wonder what would happen, if I could just do what she does for one night.

But what I have is enough: I get to lie here with my closest friend in the world. Whether or not she's awake, we're still together, and I can see from her face that she's dreaming about *us*.

I learn to relish any time we have with one another. Time seems to pass... too quickly when I'm with her, unnaturally so. Hours will pass as minutes; seconds to me will be a night to her. She'll wake up, and then –

*A rooster will crow.* I groan internally. Darn it, not again! How does this always happen?

"Morning, Smarty Pants!" she says, rubbing her eyes with a hoof. "Did you sleep well?"

Well, I laid here next to you all night, if that's what you mean.

"I have to go to school today," she says as she jumps out from under the covers and knocks me askew. "But I promise we'll play more later, okay?"

She zips around the room, picking up various books and sheets of paper as she does. Sparing only enough time to stuff the items into her schoolbags, she slips the saddle on and makes for the exit.

As she places a hoof on the door, she looks over her shoulder suddenly. "I almost forgot!"

She trots back to the bed and kisses me gently on the forehead, just as her mother kissed her last night

With one last hug, she bolts out the door, the pattering of hooves on the staircase telling me all I need to know.

Once again, I curse my inability to sigh.

It's waiting time again.

When she leaves, it always starts with those pinpoints of darkness. They invade my sight, obscuring my vision like a blindfold on a beautiful summer's day.

Finally, the blackness consumes me entirely. It's so dark here, so cold.

So I'm back to *that* place; the place where all us imaginary creatures go. Well, I haven't got a lot else to do here. Back to business.

*One... two... three... four...*

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She's my friend, my *best* friend. It seems like we're together every week.

*Finally*. Here they come, those dots of bright light. Lately, every time I see them makes me feel as ecstatic as the day she first brought me here.

Our visits are more... sparse these days, but everything about them is familiar. I watch in awe as her face fades into view; she's...

Different now. While she's not yet some grown mare, she's not young anymore, either.

The last traces of baby fat seem to be melting away from her cheeks, and her features are no longer that of a little filly; she's... growing, toeing the threshold of adolescence. Her features are sharper, slightly more toned and –

Her *smile*. I knew her smile would never change. She's still got that youthful idealism and carefree attitude, that same amazing fillyish persona she *always* used to have. And yet...

Some of the light seems to have left her eyes; she's still the old Twilight Sparkle, but somehow, she's not quite as hopeful; it's as if she saw some of the evil of the world and was never quite the same. The smile of an older filly, nine or ten years old.

Yes, I know that smile all too well; she might be different, but she's still the Twilight I know and love.

Some things *never* change.

"Oh my goodness, I can't even tell you how excited I am!" she bursts out, giving me that same familiar squeeze.



I'm excited to see you too, Twilight; I'm glad we feel the sa-

"I got my Cutie Mark today!" she says, turning to show me her no longer blank flank.

Oh... that's wonderful, I suppose. I just thought you meant about seeing m-

"It all happened in my entrance exam," she interrupts my thoughts again. "I was supposed to hatch a dragon egg. For some reason, nothing was happening; I thought it was a lost cause, but then out of the blue, a huge rainbow appeared in the sky! After all that happened... well, long story short, this appeared on my flank!"

I study the new Cutie Mark from my seat on her bed, and all at once, my suspicions are confirmed: I *always* knew her Mark would have something to do with magic, and here it is: a six pointed star, the testament to all the hard work she's been doing through the years.

"Celestia took me under her wing as her personal protégée!" Twilight beams in excitement. "I already have my first assignment from her: I'm supposed to study each planet's orbital cycle over the next few days and analyze their effect on unicorn magic. We'd better get started!"

She whisks me from the bed and sets me on a stool next to her window, where an impressive new telescope stands. She immediately places her eye on the slender metal tube, magically jotting her notes down as she studies the skies intently.

But that means... no playtime today? I understand you're Celestia's personal student now, but does that mean...?

And so I just sit. For hours, as a matter of fact, as she slowly turns the telescope to observe the star strewn air above. Of course, I'm perfectly happy to be with her, but things feel... different now. Her thoughts are no longer entirely on me or the time we're spending together. They're split now; she's more intently focused on her work than on us. Could this mean what I think it does? Could she be... slipping -

*No*, Smarty Pants; you know Twilight wouldn't *ever* forget about you; she *loves* you! She cares about you more than anything; even her new studies won't change that. And yet...

"I think that's about enough for tonight," she says finally as her clock chimes a dozen times. "I'll need to be up bright and early to get to the palace tomorrow."

So... that's it? That's alright, I guess. I was hoping for a bit livelier of an evening, but we still got to spend some time together... right?

She climbs into bed, suspending me magically and laying me next to her as she pulls the covers across her body. At least *this* will never change; I'll always get to spend the night with her.

But wait... I'm facing away from her? My eyes are no longer trained on her shining face, she's placed me the other direction to stare intently at the black, wooden desk across the room. Why would she face me away from herself?

"Goodnight, Smarty Pants," she whispers, shifting around under the blankets. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She magically extinguishes the lights; the darkness consumes us both once more, and once more, I'm left with little more than my thoughts of the young, sleeping filly behind me.

She's changing, there's no doubt about that. No longer is she the bright eyed filly that squeezed me tight every time she was afraid, or sat with me as she read me stories; she's growing up.

But she would never leave me behind... would she?

I feel her breathing rise and fall behind me, shifting the blankets in time with her breath. You're talking crazy, Smarty Pants. Twilight cares about you, why else would you be in her bed right now? You mean too much to her; she's been with you far too long to forget you so easily. We're just... not together as much anymore; there's no need to read into it any further.

And why in Equestria am I spending time thinking about *this*? I should be enjoying the time that we *do* get to spend together, rather than scaring myself with irrational thoughts. I only hope that the sound of that rooster won't come too –

*COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!*

You can't be serious; another night has gone by like *that*? That's what you get for over-thinking things, Smarty Pants. You know deep down that Twilight will always care about you, no matter how much older she gets. Just stop worrying.

"Rise and shine, Twi!" her mother's voice calls as she enters the room. "We have a lot to do today, and you're not going to get any of it done lying there!"

Twilight rubs her eyes and jumps out of bed, knocking me askew as she does so. Wait... aren't you going to say "Good morning, Smarty Pants"?

I can only watch as a sinking feeling appears in my non-existent stomach. She zips around her room as she always does in the morning, gathering up her school supplies and preparing for the day. Don't you... want to say hello, Twilight?

"Alright!" she says finally, slipping her saddlebags on. "I'm ready to go!"

I watch Twilight as she makes for the door, not even casting a second glance to me as she leaves.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to Smarty Pants?" her mother suggests.

You are... aren't you?

She casts a look reluctantly over her left shoulder. "Oh yeah... sure, I guess," she says uneasily.

Phew... I have to admit, I was scared there for a moment, but this confirms it: she *does* still care.

She trots back to the bed for only a moment. "Bye, Smarty Pants," she says half-heartedly. She does this without a kiss on my cheek, without a hug, without even touching me.

My "heart" sinks as she looks upon me. The sparkle in her eyes isn't as vibrant as I remember, her gaze isn't the same tender look she always gave me; where's that hug I've been looking forward to all night?

"I'll see you later," she tells me with an obligatory wave as she leaves the bedside once more.

I hear the door shut as Twilight and her mother leave. *Later?* Surely you meant "later today"? She couldn't ever forget me... could she?

And here it comes: the invading darkness, pulling me back to *that* place, where all us imaginary creatures go. She'll be back eventually, I know she will.

No, she'll be back *sooner* than "eventually". She's got to come back; I'm her best friend! Right?

The darkness consumes my vision again, blocking out the bright light streaming through the bedroom window. I'm not going to think about that; I won't even consider the possibility that she'll forget me. She cares too much.

Back to business then. *One... two... three... four...*

And yet I wonder: how long will it be *this* time?

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She's my friend, my *only* friend. It seems like we're together every month.

*2,505,495... 2,505,496... 2,505,497...*

It's almost startling when it happens: when those beams of light start to break through the darkness of *that* place, it takes me a moment to realize what's happening. Can it be? Is she really, *finally* coming back to play with me again?

*Yes.* Just like always, I start to see her features take shape. First comes her eyes, those *gorgeous* violet pools of beauty that I never get tired of looking into. I knew those eyes could never change. They look... they look... different?

The shining bliss that used to occupy them... *NO!* It can't be gone, no one could ever take that part of her away. But even as I try to convince myself, I can see it: her youthful idealism, her drive and unending care... they've been replaced by a hardened, determined persona.

Someone took the Sparkle out of my little Twilight Sparkle.

*Who did it?* I don't care if I'm a rag doll, I'll find him and figure out some way to make him pay for hurting Twilight.

Yet these malicious thoughts are pushed out of my mind as I wait for that last bastion of hope; no one could *ever* take away Twilight's smile. No matter how much she changes, Twilight will always have the prettiest smile in the world. It's got to be there! It's –

*Gone.* Her wide eyed, toothy smile is absent for the first time I can remember. She's staring at me with a completely stony face, staring at me as if she were made of stone.

*How?* What happened to the adorable little filly I know and love?

As her face fades fully into clarity, I can see the *new* Twilight: she looks amazing now, well into adolescence. Her features are defined and beautiful, just like I always knew they would be. She's completely different now, a young mare of twelve or thirteen years old; she's... changed.

"Hi, Smarty Pants," she whispers wearily. "I thought you might like to spend some time with me today."

More than anything, Twilight. I don't care how long it has been since the last time I saw you; all I care about is that we'll finally get to spend some time together, just like we always used to.

"Come on," she mumbles, setting me back on her bed.

I manage to contain my excitement only by nature of being inanimate. What will we be doing today? Drawing pictures? Telling stories and laughing? Maybe we can –

But she just pulls out a single textbook and opens it to a marked page. She props me up against her pillow and becomes engrossed in her studies without paying an ounce of attention to her best friend.

What... we still aren't going to play? I thought you meant that we would –

But then again, this is what all of our visits have been like lately. When she finally brings me back from *that* place once in a blue moon, we do little more than lay on her bed and study into the night.

I'm still spending time with her though, right? As long as I'm with my best friend, should I care about what we're doing?

So I just sit and watch; I observe her as she turns page after page, absorbing every ounce of information the book has to offer her. Maybe if she finishes in time, we'll get to play for *real*.

...Does wishful thinking really do me any good?

"What do you think of this?" she asks me, placing an image of a magical rune before my eyes.

I'm startled when she addresses me. These days, I'm just there to be a body (or rag doll) to take up space as she pores over those books.

Well, for starters, I think –

"Oh, what am I asking you for?" she interrogates herself, placing a hoof on her temple in exasperation. "You're just a doll."

To her, that comment is nothing more than an offhand self-reprimand. To me... it cuts to the bone. She doesn't... *she doesn't care anymore?*

I want so desperately to ask a single question: *what happened to you, Twilight?* Who took away that beautiful little filly I love? Who took away my best friend?

She turns away from me and returns her attention to the textbook, shaking her head in disapproval.

Twilight... I'm right here. Don't I matter? Aren't I still your beloved Smarty Pants?

"Well," she starts with a yawn. "I think that's just about enough for tonight."

She doesn't even look at me as she says this; she's talking more to herself. Setting the textbook on the floor, she magically lifts me off the bed.

I knew it; I knew she would never *really* change. It's finally playtime again, we're going – Where *are* we going? Why are we headed toward the desk?

My question is answered as she sets me face down on the hard wood. I can hear her turn to walk back toward her bed without a second glance. Aren't we going to be together tonight?

"Three o'clock," she sighs. "I've *got* to stop studying so late."

I heard her bed creak as she places herself between the covers, her breathing gradually slowing as she dips out of consciousness.

But... we've *always* spent the night together! Every night when she was a filly, she would –

*That's right*, my conscience snickers. "*When she was a filly*" is the key phrase here. *She's not a little filly anymore, now is she?*

She still *loves* me, I know it! Twilight has always loved me; she could never let me go so easily!

*Look at yourself, Smarty Pants. You're as far away from her as physically possible. Would she really do that if she loved you? She didn't even say goodnight.*

Of course she –

*Didn't*, did she?

I search desperately to find something to soothe my conscience, and yet... it's not there. The same blank expression I always wear doesn't do justice to what I feel on the inside; I'm distraught, I'm hurt, and I'm –

*Crushed.* She always promised... she spent her whole *life* promising that she would never forget me, that she would never leave me alone. She would never break that promise, would she?

And there it is: that rooster crow, the sound I always hated to hear every morning. This is it: I need *something*, anything to convince me I'm wrong. *Please*, Twilight; if there were ever a time, this would be it.

I hear her rise from the bed with a groan and set her hooves on the carpeted floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her lift the previous night's textbook from the floor and hold it magically above her head.

Come on Twilight, *please*. Do something to convince me you still care, I need *something!*

As she makes for the door yet again, I see her stop dead. Could this be it?

She glances at me for only a second before closing her eyes and directing her gaze downward. With a sigh, she shakes her head and starts toward the room's exit.

*No.* No, Twilight, don't *do* this! I know you still love me, I know you still *care!* Don't make me go back in the dark, I don't want to go!

But it's no use; I hear the front door slam, and my worst fears are confirmed: she's gone. In more ways than one, perhaps.

And they're back, those points of darkness. They've come to claim me once again. Maybe this time will be the last.

In only seconds, I'm engulfed by the shadows. My consciousness has left that world, just like it always does.

In *that* place, I can feel my body begin to shake. The darkness is the only place I can truly move, the only place I can truly be *real*. Here, my emotions know no restraint.

Though I can't see them, I hear tears begin to pelt the darkened floor of *that* place.

How long will it take *this* time? A day? A week? A month?

It doesn't matter anymore; maybe one day, she'll be back, and I'll get to look into those violet pools of beauty.

But for now, this is all I know: the sound of my own thoughts as I await her return.

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I stopped counting a long time ago. For that matter, I can't for the life of me remember *what* I was counting for in the first place. The memory is so hazy I can scarcely make it out. All I know is that it had something to do with a little filly... a little filly I loved with all my heart, and –

Light? Pinpoints of light? That used to mean something to me; it used to be a sign of some kind. Does it have something to do with that little filly?

A face... a face is fading into clarity. This is all so familiar, yet it's also new. I feel like I've done this all before. A very, *very* long time ago.

Violet eyes, she has violet eyes. They're sharp and mysterious, a window into her soul.

Yes, I remember. She's my friend, my maker. She's the reason I came to this world.

That smile... that smile I used to know and love, it's *back*. It's tainted by world-weariness, a devious outlook and long suffering. But it's still there.

She's a quick witted mare with a disposition to match, always ready to take on a challenge. I used to know her.

I *used* to.



Yet beyond that sharp and piercing gaze, something else exists. Regret, pity perhaps; whatever she's about to do, she wishes with all her heart that it wasn't necessary.

She's Twilight. Twilight Sparkle. The little filly I used to know.

Beauty has overtaken her; now a mare of nineteen or twenty, her appearance is astounding in its completeness. Her features are defined and elegant, yet the dark circles resting under her eyes attest that she's more concerned with study than romance.

I've missed her the same way I missed the touch of sunlight on my cloth body and the gentle caress of a summer breeze.

Yes, I know her. I don't think that knowledge ever left.

"Hi, Smarty Pants," she whispers, gripping me tightly just like she used to, when the monsters would creep out of the closet. While tortured and regretful, her smile is tender and absolute in its testament of love.

I can scarcely believe my own thoughts as I contemplate that word: *love*. For the first time in years, she *truly* loves me, just like the first day I was passed down by her mother. "I'm sorry so much time has passed since I last played with you."

Played with me? Could this mean...?

Is it *finally* that time again?

"Some days, I wish I could go back to a place I would never have to worry," she tells me as she sits on her bed. "I wish with all my heart that I could be content just sitting with you for hours, mixing colored water and talking about the world. Sometimes, it's *all* I want."

On the outside, I'm nothing more than an immobile puppet. Yet on the inside, my thoughts are fraught with the tears I can't let fall, with the words I can't speak:

I've loved this pony my entire life, and yet I can't tell her.

It's torture incarnate. That's all I want too, Twilight, to go back to that old days when there were no worries or concerns. That's my only wish.

"I let go of you for so long... I thought I needed to stop caring about childish things like stuffed animals. Do you remember?"

Never in my life have I wished I could *just* let my impossible sobs ring through this room; of *course* I remember. I spent every one of the billions of seconds counting, waiting, *hoping* you would come back. Your love shook me to my core –

And then destroyed me.

"My life is changing so much... part of me just wants the change to stop!" she says helplessly, waving a hoof in frustration. "I wish that I didn't have to care or worry anymore, I want to go back to the *old days*."

My immobile body proves itself useless once again as I do my best to nod. *I want that too!* Can't we just –

"But I can't go back to the old days," she says with a heavy sigh. "I could spend every day wishing and dreaming about the sunny afternoons we used to spend together. I could resign as Celestia's student and do nothing more than play with you all day... but I can't. I can't keep living in the past. I need to move on."

The words strike me like a blow to the chest. Don't say that, Twilight! You don't need to move on, things can be different! They can change!

"Celestia is sending me to a place called Ponyville soon," she explains. "She's trusting me more and more every day, and I need to prove I'm mature enough to deserve it. I can't keep focusing on what my life used to be. I may hate myself for it, but... I have to do this."

I can feel myself shaking as her hooves vibrate around me. Please, *please* don't –

"Do you remember the first day I laid eyes on you?" she asks. "My mother handed you to me, and told me that you meant everything to her when *she* was a filly."

I tremble in her hooves as I recall that day with stark clarity. I remember, Twilight.

"I wanted so much for you to be real, I wished with all my heart that you would be a *real* friend for me to have and hold. But it never happened."

I would have traded every year of my life for the ability to shake my head. It *did* happen... every summer day by the pond, every midnight study session, every birthday celebration... I remember every moment.

"My life is about more than just you and me now, Smarty Pants; I need to... I need to let you go."

I can feel my consciousness dripping with the tears I can't let out. *Please, it doesn't need to be this way! We can still be together, just like we always were!*

"My heart just isn't in it anymore," she says tearfully. "I could pretend being with you still means as much as it used to, but I can't keep lying to myself that way."

She bends down and gives me a gentle kiss on the forehead. I feel as if my entire world has been stripped away; I'll relish the feeling of her warm lips on my body for the rest of my life. One of the last touches I'll ever feel.

"I'll always remember you," she says, giving me one last squeeze. "I'll never forget how much you meant to me, how you made me smile when I was alone and how you never gave up on me, even if you were just an imaginary friend full of stuffing. I'll always remember... but it's time."

She turns around and trots toward her closet, her tears dripping to the carpet as she does so. Opening the slatted closet door with a shimmer of violet magic, she lifts me and places me on the top shelf.

She looks into my eyes a last time; age means nothing now, her expression being exactly the same as that filly I used to know and love. Her eyes are stained with regret and horror; her lips tremble with pain incapable of being expressed even by her tears that flow like a river.

"Goodbye, Smarty Pants," she says with a choked sob. "I'll always love you."

With that, the door begins to shut slowly. She never breaks eye contact with me, even as she stows me away forever.

As the darkness consumes me, I can feel myself going back to *that* place, the only place I can truly express my feelings.

I feel those tears that were previously incapable of being shed pelting the darkened ground. I just sob endlessly into the darkness, having no words to express it.

She was my friend, my best friend, my only friend. My maker. She was the reason I even *had* a life, the reason I was able to live in a world that I didn't belong to.

She was the only creature that ever loved me that much. Now, she's gone as well.

I guess... I guess I always knew this day would come. No matter how hard I tried to convince myself she would always love me...

It had to be.

Maybe years from now, she'll pass me on to her own filly, just as her own mother did. Maybe. Those fillies will get to play with me just like she did. They'll have tea parties or fun at amusement parks, snow days and presents on Hearth's Warming Eve. They'll see me... but I won't see them.

Only *she* could bring me from *that* place.

Would I have been better off? Would it have been better for me never to have woken up? If I had stayed *there*, blissfully unaware of what I was missing, would that make it any easier?

Is it better to have nothing, so that it can never be lost?

Encircled by the shadows, I can't help but remember the very first day I saw her. The moment her mother handed me over, Twilight nuzzled me with her cheek and just stared in amazement. That look she gave me made me feel like I was the only thing in that world that mattered; nothing else was important besides us. Looking back on that day, I'm reminded –

*No*. It *wouldn't* be better to have nothing.

*You always knew this day was coming, Smarty Pants; you knew she would have to grow up one day. Are you going to let regret stain all those wonderful memories?*

Finally able to use my body in *that* place, I shake my head. No, I'm not going to be bitter; I'm not going to regret. I'm going to be proud.

It'll always be my wish: to be with her again. I'll lie in the dark every day for countless eons, wishing I could go back. But I can still know that I brought a little joy back to her life, even when she was sad.

She was my only friend; she was my maker. But I've finished my part; I've done my duty. I wonder where I'll go next. Maybe *this* place will be warm and bright some day, just like it was warm and bright when I was with her. Maybe I'll dream... maybe I'll get to relive all the time we spent together.

My fictional life was full of too many "maybes". I'm done with maybes, and being unsure about anything.

I have the only absolute I need, the only truth I know will never change:

"I love you, *Twilight Sparkle*."

• • •

It's so familiar.

It's still just as dark in this place, but it's not as cold, or as biting. It's as if my memories keep me warm.

I wonder how many years –

My train of thought halts abruptly as I feel a strange... pulling. The same sensation I used to feel when she would hold me in her arms and start to bring me back.

I scarcely want to believe my imaginary nerves as the sensation overtakes me. Could this possibly mean what I think it does...? Am I going –

No, Smarty Pants, don't think that way; it's only going to make the truth all the worse.

Yet even as I berate myself for hoping, I see them: those blessed little glimmers of light that always used to mark the beginning of our time together. They're breaking through my vision for the first time in what feels like centuries, ripping me from the bondage of this place.

Could it be her? Could my little *Twilight Sparkle* be back?

I symbolically cross my "fingers" in eager anticipation as I wait for that familiar sight: the sight of those violet eyes, and that *beautiful*, gleaming smile.

There it is: the face is starting to take shape! It's... it's...

It's not the same. The eyes, they're not violet; they're dark green. Around them, a blurry red face begins to take shape. This is no mare; he's a stallion, perhaps as old as twenty-five years. At first, he's intimidating, even terrifying.

Yet almost instantly, my fears of him fade into nothingness. His face is shining with joy just from the sight of me. Maybe he's not Twilight, but somehow... he's just like her in every way. That tenderness, the care in his eyes... it's all there.

*He* brought me back? Could he truly love me enough?

"Eeyup," the stallion rumbles in a low yet powerful voice.

He brings me to his chest and grips me tight, just like *she* used to do. As I lay motionless and feel the beating of his heart, I can do nothing more than be astounded; somepony other than Twilight *truly cares*.

It's dark where we are; the sun must have set hours ago. I feel the stallion cradle me as gently as he might a newborn filly, climbing into the bed that rests behind us.

He positions us face to face as he pulls the covers over himself. "Welcome to your new home, Smarty Pants," he whispers as he strokes my face. "I hope you like it here as much as you did with Twilight."

For only a split second, I want to doubt that. I want to believe that no pony could ever love me as much as *she* did, and that I would never care about anypony as greatly as I cared about her. And yet...

This stallion is genuine. That look in his eyes is impossible to fabricate; a stallion who has only known me for a short time truly cares just as much as she did.

And why shouldn't he? Age and gender are no object to love. All that matters is who he is on the inside... and I'm looking forward to finding out *just* who he is under all that muscle.

Twilight is gone. I may have finished my purpose with her, but now I have a new purpose: I have a new pony to bring love and joy to.

I watch the blankets as they begin to rise and fall in time with his breath. I don't even know his name, and yet... I'm already becoming attached.

Just like I did when *she* was a little filly.

And so it starts again: this eternal cycle that I'm doomed and blessed to repeat for the rest of my days. I'll be with them; I'll come to care, and I'll come to love.

And then, I'll watch with bittersweet tears as they go on as well.

Twilight brought me out of *that* place, and I'll always love her for that. But now, I have a reason to live beyond her: I have my big red stallion. My big red stallion with those *beautiful*, forest green eyes.

Oh, yes... I think I *am* going to like it here.