

A Single Step

darf



One day, as she was walking home with her mother from the grocery store, Twilight Sparkle, who was just three years old, stepped on a snail.

It went *crunch*.

The sound gave Twilight a start, as did the feeling of the snail's shell breaking under her hoof. It had been damp the last few days, with rain at night, which meant the snails were out in force. Twilight had seen them milling about the garden at home, but had never stopped to examine one.

As she pulled her hoof away, the half-there body of the crushed snail was followed shortly by tears at the corners of her eyes. She didn't know much about snails, but she didn't need to know anything to tell that the long, squishy thing with the shards of shell above its back was not in a good state. She knew, in her heart of hearts, that she had killed it.

As the tears took over, Twilight froze in place. Her mother, Twilight Velvet, walked a few steps without her before noticing she was gone, and turned around to find Twilight quivering over the smooshed gastropod in front of her.

"Twilight," Twilight Velvet said, "what's the matter?"

"Mommy..." Twilight huffed her words out through the shake of her tears, fighting back the sobs that ached to come out. "I... I... I squished a snail!" The wail came out with her last words, and Twilight began to cry earnestly. Several ponies passing by turned their heads for a moment, then continued on their business.

Twilight Velvet took a look down at the crushed snail, then looked back up to Twilight.

"Oh, sweetheart. It's alright. There are plenty more snails around where that came from." Twilight Velvet wrapped her leg around Twilight's shoulders and rubbed her back softly, the sure-fire cure for a young foal's tears. Twilight's sobs quelled to snuffles.

"But... but that one's gone," Twilight said, her lip quivering as she spoke.

"Well, you didn't mean to squish it, did you?"

Twilight shook her head.

"Then it's alright. Everypony makes mistakes. Now come on, we've got to get home before it starts raining."

Sure enough, a few drops began to leak from the grey blanket of clouds overhead. Twilight looked towards the sky and a big drop hit her right on the nose. She was allowed one more look at the snail before her mother pulled her along, leaving the broken shell and its inhabitant in their place to whatever fate awaited them.

Twilight looked back for the snail as her mother dragged her through the crowd, but after a few seconds, she could no longer see it through the throngs of moving bodies.

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Twilight Sparkle stretched and curled deeper into her blankets. They were warm, and she was in no hurry to force herself out of them. Besides—it was the weekend, which meant she had, at most, some studying to do. The world would wait if she slept in a little longer.

The poking in her side told her that the universe had other plans, however.

With a sour groan, Twilight rolled over. She held a pillow to her head as she forced her eyes open to find the smiling face of her assistant, Spike, staring at her.

“Twilight... time to wake up...”

Twilight grumbled and pressed the pillow over her face.

“Go away, Spike. It’s the weekend. There is no time to get up.”

“But Twilight,” Spike said, hopping onto the bed, “it *is* time to get up. You have to check on the eggs, remember?”

Twilight’s eyes shot open under her pillow.

That’s right. There were baby birds to be looked after.

Twilight let out a low groan as she pulled herself out of her blankets. The chickens she had been incubating for weeks were nearing the final stages of their care, which meant they’d be hatching any day now. And, yes, the morning was the time to check on them to make sure they’d made it through the night. It probably could wait a little while... but Spike was right. Better early than late.

As Twilight began her walk to the small room she had set up for heating, Spike followed alongside her with a series of excited hops. He was still barely fresh out of his egg himself, though he was doing a remarkably good job acclimating to Twilight’s hectic schedule of

studying, researching, and more studying. He was even picking up his vocabulary at an impressive rate, which was a necessity around Twilight Sparkle.

Spike held his claws to his chest and beamed as Twilight unlocked the door to the incubation room. The heat inside was intense, stemming from the series of lamps that were plugged in to keep the yet-to-be-born chickens warm. One lamp for each egg. Except—

“Oh no!”

Twilight ran inside with no regard for the sweltering warmth. Spike watched her go inside with wide eyes before following. Twilight was often in a panic over something or another, so it didn't do to join her immediately.

“Is something the matter, Twilight?”

At one end of the table housing the eggs, Twilight was feeling around her makeshift nest. The low, intense light of the lamps glowed along every inch of the table except for the one Twilight was currently attending to.

“Oh no, oh no, shoot...”

“Twilight?”

Twilight pressed her hoof against the egg, nestled in its bed of straw and delicate holding wires. She pressed her hoof to a few of the other eggs, then back to the one at the end.

The look on her face told Spike that now, maybe he should start to panic.

“Oh,” Twilight said. “Spike, I...”

“Is it okay?”

Twilight shook her head.

“I... I forgot to plug in the lamp at the end last night, after I changed the bulb. It's, uh...”

Spike shook his head.

“No,” he said.

“I'm sorry, Spike.”

Spike stood mute as the tears began to well in his eyes.

Twilight smiled bleakly at him.

“Well... it’s not the end of the world though, right? We still have these five—”

Spike was out the door before Twilight could finish her sentence. She could hear the sound of his sniffles as he fled down the hallway, followed by the slam of his room’s door.

She’d give him a little while, then go check on him.

It was a shame, yes, and one that she could have prevented if she’d been less forgetful... but in the end, it was only a chicken. One that hadn’t even been born, at that. In the grand scheme of things, everything would be fine.

Twilight brought the egg with her as she left the room and headed to the kitchen to find a suitable place to dispose of it.

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“I can’t believe you, Twilight. What were you thinking?!”

Rainbow Dash’s voice was the loudest the library had heard in years, and it caused the pages of a few books to shiver on the shelves, as though they were trembling at the fury of her yelling. In the center of the library’s main room, Twilight backed up from Dash in a similar fashion, but quickly collected herself, pulling herself to a proper defensive posture.

“I had to think quick, and I didn’t see anypony else making the decision. So I went ahead and did it.”

“You didn’t ‘make a decision,’” Dash said, pointing forward at Twilight, her hoof uncomfortably close to Twilight’s chest. “You just acted, and now we all have to deal with the consequences.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is.” Twilight brushed away Dash’s hoof and breathed out loudly through her nose, scrunching her face into a frown. “If I hadn’t done what I did, you might not be standing here right now.”

“That doesn’t mean it was right. Jeez, Twilight, you can’t just kill something and brush it off like that!”

Twilight turned away from Dash and made a show of straightening a volume on a nearby bookshelf, as though it was suddenly more interesting than the conversation. When she spoke, it was in a low mutter, a marked difference from her earlier defiance.

“That dragon was one step away from roasting and eating every single one of you. I saw an opportunity and I took it. And,” Twilight said, turning her head, “in my defense, I had no idea that rock was going to... fall, the way it did.”

“But you knew it might.” Dash stepped forward, her eyebrows low. “You saw a big pointy rock and knocked it onto a dragon, knowing full well it might kill him.”

“I knew that was a possibility, yes.” Twilight pushed the volume she was looking at further into the shelf. “It was a tough choice to make, but I made it.”

“But you killed—”

“That dragon would have done the same to all of you if he’d had the chance. Frankly, I don’t appreciate somepony I thought was my *friend* berating me for a hard choice when I did it to save her and the rest of my friends.” Twilight spun to face Dash, and her eyes glittered.

Dash’s expression softened, and her posture did the same.

“Right,” she said. “I mean... look, of course I’m thankful, but...”

The silence from Dash’s unfinished sentence left the room uncomfortably quiet. Twilight turned back to the bookshelf. The shuffling of the new book she chose to straighten sounded like the hiss of sandpaper.

“I’m just kind of shaken up about it, is all.”

Twilight said nothing. She moved on to the next book.

“We could have figured something out,” Dash said.

The shuffling of the books took over again.

“I’ll try to remember that the next time you’re about to be eaten by a dragon,” Twilight said coldly.

Dash opened her mouth to speak, but closed it with only an ‘ah’ sound escaping. She rubbed a hoof against her shoulder, as though coaxing a soreness away from it.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Is that all then?” Twilight asked.

Dash waited a few seconds. “Yeah,” she said.

Twilight was silent. A minute passed before Dash turned and showed herself out of the library. The door shut with a quiet click as she left.

With her hoof on the book in front of her, Twilight closed her eyes and took in a long, slow breath.

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The Canterlot meeting room was at full occupancy. Ponies holding bundles of papers dashed back and forth in the background, while in the center, a giant table held a map of all of Equestria dotted with pins and lines, tracing boundaries and paths and circling crosses in bright red. On one side of the table, Princess Twilight Sparkle and Princess Celestia sat. Both of them stared intently at the map, holding a hoof to their chins.

After a minute of uninterrupted staring, a nervous looking pony with a brown mane and white coat approached with a small sheet of paper. He waited for a few seconds before clearing his throat. Both Celestia and Twilight looked up to him as though he had appeared from nowhere.

“Um... excuse me, Your Highnesses, but the latest from the front lines is in—”

Twilight snatched the paper from the stallion’s hooves and held it up. Her eyes flickered as she scanned the length of the hurried writing.

“Moving in from the east. The griffons have taken two more towns and are applying pressure to the border.”

Celestia took in a breath and let it out sharply after a few seconds. “That’s four in the last month,” she said.

“And we still haven’t received word from the king on further negotiations?”

Celestia shook her head.

“This is completely unwarranted. A set of trade tariffs should mean heated discourse, not all-out war...” Twilight held a hoof to her forehead and closed her eyes. Her forehead crinkled with thick creases, and a sigh escaped her lips.

She opened her eyes as Celestia’s hoof settled on her back, between her wings.

“The griffons are not exactly known for their diplomacy,” Celestia said. “This is not the first time they’ve... reacted poorly.”

“But I don’t understand!” Twilight threw her hooves out and scanned the whole of the map in front of her. Her horn glowed, and circled another two towns on the east border of Equestria. “In all the time I was a student, there was never any threat of conflict. Now that I’ve been a princess for only a few months, all of Tartarus breaks lose. Ponies have been dying...”

Celestia gave a small nod.

“This is a consequence of war, yes.”

“You say that like it’s something unpreventable.”

“Sometimes, it is.”

Twilight stared hard at the map in front of her.

“We have a battalion stationed at the foot of the Greycap Mountain Pass, overseeing the town there. If we divert their attentions, they could push back against the invading armies here”—Twilight gestured with a pointer to the faintly drawn dotted line pointing in past Equestria’s border—”and even apply some pressure to the griffon encampments beyond that, if we’re successful.”

“That would be a sensible strategy. Part of the problem is that the griffons have yet to be shown any real resistance or consequence for their actions.”

“But... if we leave that town undefended, the invading forces over here could divert and take the town... there’s a water supply there for half the towns over the pass, not to mention the pass itself.”

“This is also true. It is not an easy decision.”

Twilight's eyes were creased under from long nights without sleep, and bloodshot from the same. They turned slowly as she looked at Celestia. "So why can't you make it?" she asked, her voice shaking slightly.

"Because this is something that it is important for you to learn, Twilight," Celestia said. "I will not be around forever, and when it is only you here to make decisions, you will someday need to make many more just like this."

"But you're putting me in charge of ponies' lives! The entire fate of Equestria, if things go poorly."

"Rest assured that I will intervene if that becomes the case."

"So why can't you do it now?"

Twilight held her pointer aloft over the town at the bottom of the mountain pass. Her hoof trembled as she kept it aloft.

"This is your decision, Twilight," Celestia said.

In the background, the noise of ponies darting back and forth drowned out the sound of Twilight's heartbeat in her own ears: loud, and heavy.

The pointer bumped against the tiny house drawn on the map as she lowered it.

"Send the order," she said.

Celestia nodded.

A pony was fetched, and within minutes, was on his way out of the war-room with a letter in hand. In two hours, it would reach the Equestrian militia stationed at the base of the Greycap Mountain Pass. They would begin to move the next day.

In two months' more time, Equestria would win the brief war against the griffons. Casualties would number in the small hundreds.

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The night was almost over.

Twilight was at Celestia's bedside. The bed she had seen every time she had gone to visit her mentor in her private quarters, with the purple lace and gold-trimmed sheets, and the closeness to the window that let the sunlight hit it just so when the morning came around. The bed she had seen Celestia rise cheerfully from for so many years, and where now, she was lying, halfway between asleep and awake. She looked very tired.

Luna was on her other side, looking worn out, but still awake.

Twilight's hoof shook as she laid it atop the blankets. After several seconds, Celestia's hoof met hers, shaking.

"Twilight," Celestia said. Her voice was frail.

Twilight's eyes were misty.

"Princess," she said. "You can't."

"I believe... there is no need... for avoiding the truth... Twilight..." When Celestia spoke, each word came in a wheeze, parted by her gasps of breath. Her multicoloured mane, once as vibrant as the palette of all the earth and sky, hung limply against her head, like a worn-out tapestry. Her frame was thinner, almost gaunt, and her eyes sagged as she struggled to keep them open.

Over the years, she'd convinced herself this would become easy. The first of her friends had been heartbreak. The one after should have hurt less, but more. All of them stung, until at last, the final smile of the last of her friends' faces had vanished, and Twilight had only the future to look forward to. It had been hard, but necessary. All that while, she'd tried to pretend this day would never come.

She couldn't have imagined how much it would hurt.

"There has to be a way," Twilight said. "For more time, to do something. Haven't the doctors—"

"Shhh. Twilight..."

Celestia moved to sit up for a second, but a coughing fit overtook her, sending her back to her reclined posture. Twilight reached out her other hoof as though it might quell the coughing, but Celestia waved it away. She collected herself after a few seconds.

"Everypony... must have their time... eventually, Twilight..."

“But why now?” The tears had begun to leak from Twilight’s eyes now, cascading down her cheeks like twin rivers.

Celestia closed her eyes and smiled.

“Because... it is time. As soon... it will be... Luna’s time.”

“Princess!” Twilight squeezed down on Celestia’s hoof and raised her tear-filled stare towards Luna—but Luna simply nodded, showing little to no emotion in her face.

“I know it is true as well, Twilight Sparkle,” Luna said, her voice, as it always had been, tinged with the lingering touch of her long-held ancient diction. “Even alicorns cannot live forever. Or... most alicorns, in any case.”

“But why—”

Again, Celestia held up her hoof, a whispered ‘shhh’ lingering on her lips.

Twilight was silent, but the tears still ran from her eyes.

“You were... a wonderful student...” Celestia closed her eyes as she spoke, leaning hard into her pillow. Twilight leaned close to her, wrapping her forelegs around Celestia’s chest. She began to cry then, in earnest, though Celestia still smiled. From her seat across the bed, Luna sniffed and wiped a tear from her eye.

Whispered words passed between Celestia and Twilight. They were words only for them.

As they faded, there was nothing more to say.

For the last time, and the first time, the sun rose.

Twilight cried. She sobbed into Celestia’s pillow, and shoulder, and the now fully dull colours of her mane. After a minute, she stood, as though to offer Luna a chance to make her own peace, but Luna waved a hoof and stood herself. She showed herself out, casting only one last look back over the bed before stepping out into the hallway.

Twilight cried until she felt empty. She cried as the long, tender rays of the sun crept over the horizon, leaking through the slightly frosted pane of glass at the far end of the room, stretching over Celestia’s private quarters, and her bed, as it took fully to the sky.

When it was halfway risen, Twilight couldn't cry anymore. She whispered something and finally pulled herself from Celestia's bed, her body shaking from the tears it had wrung out.

She let herself out, and left the warm sun to wash over Celestia's cold bed.

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The last vestige that remained of Old Equestria was the Everfree Forest.

It had been a blight on the vastly industrialized landscape of Twilight Sparkle's kingdom for a long time, impeding everypony's progress and attempts at modernization with its bizarre magic and uncooperative boundaries. The creatures within were even more of a hassle, seemingly not content just to ignore the neighbouring cities, but to attack them, drawing valuable time away from guards who had better things to do with themselves than to chase manticores.

Twilight had been thinking about it for some time. She had called a meeting.

"You can't just wipe an entire forest off the face of the planet," said the shrill sounding earth pony to her left. The pony in question was one Ground Star, a brown-coated, blonde-maned environmentalist who had made her interest in Twilight's forthcoming decision very well known as soon as Twilight had began to court opinions. Twilight was already familiar with her previous industrialization objections, but didn't hold them against her—change was scary, and she understood why some ponies might have reason to argue against it.

"On the contrary, Miss Star, we certainly can, and I see no reason not to." The voice on Twilight's other side belonged to a slick, black-maned unicorn named Heavy Shift, one of the head supervisors of industrial operations in Canterlot city, hoof-picked by Twilight herself. He'd been an invaluable asset in the recent modernization projects, and hadn't been a surprise when he offered to head the other side of Twilight's counsel at the meeting.

Twilight sat in the middle of the two ponies glowering at each other, her hooves held together.

"What benefit is there to leaving the Everfree alone?" she asked, eyes dead set on the order-sheet in front of her, unchecked and missing her signature at the bottom.

“Well, besides the fact that it’s the *right* thing to do”—this earned Ground Star a glare from Heavy Shift, but she continued unabashed—the Everfree is also home to *many* indigenous species and Equestrian lifeforms. If their habitat is removed, it’s very likely that they won’t find anywhere else to survive, which would mean extinction.”

“Extinction for the manticores, and timberwolves, and cockatrices, and whatever other ghastly creatures are still roaming the grounds in that awful forest? Goodness, whatever shall we do without them?”

Ground Star returned the glare she’d received earlier, and Heavy Shift met it with a smirk.

“The forest is the last part of Equestria that’s utterly inhospitable to pony life,” Twilight said, her voice steady. “If it’s removed, we can provide much-needed living space, and begin to convert the forest’s remaining resources for proper use.”

“At the cost of an ecosystem older than any pony city on the continent. Besides which, there is a danger involved... the Everfree, as you know, is home to a wealth of strange magic, which could cause a good deal of difficulty in its removal...”

“If it’s so dangerous, why is it still around in the first place? I’d sleep safer knowing a forest teeming with ancient, hostile magic and monstrous creatures was gone, and I think everypony else would as well—not least of all the citizens of Ponyville, who’ve had to stare at the accursed thing every day since the day the town was built.”

Twilight let the heat on either side cool before she spoke. She knew she could trust her attendees not to speak out of turn, regardless of their stake in the issue.

“I’m not convinced leaving a forest of hostile inhabitants around is an idea worth it simply for the sake of accommodating the inhabitants themselves. Equestria is a pony civilization, and I have to keep the best interests of ponies in mind.”

“So you’ve made your choice then,” Ground Star said. Despite her role in speaking to the Princess of Equestria herself, Twilight could hear a hint of bitterness in her delivery.

“I believed the decision was clear when I requested this meeting, but I hoped I might be shown there was additional evidence to make me reconsider.”

Ground Star sighed.

“If you wipe out the Everfree, you’ll be doing unknowable, irreparable damage to the native biology of Equestria. Those manticores and cockatrices might not be nice, but they’re living things, and destroying the forest will be as good as ending their entire world.”

Twilight stared forward, hooves still held together. She looked slightly to the side, waiting for Heavy Shift’s rebuttal, but none came. His smirk said that he didn’t feel one was necessary.

“I’m sorry,” Twilight said. With a glow of her horn, she raised the black pen on the table in front of her and scratched her signature across the bottom of the work-order, along with a checkmark in the rightmost box.

“I appreciate your time regardless,” Twilight said, finally turning, to her right.

Ground Star sighed, but nodded.

“I understand. I’m sorry I couldn’t convince you otherwise.”

On Twilight’s left, Heavy Shift’s grin was unbearably smug. Twilight gave him a nod, and the grin vanished, along with him and Ground Star shortly thereafter.

Twilight sat, alone in her council room. She read over the order a few more times before raising it, enshrouded in a lilac glow, and sending it off with a shimmering burst of the same.

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Equestria was the most fully evolved society on the planet—Twilight had seen to that. Equestrian ponies were smarter, faster, happier, healthier, and lived in the heart of Twilight’s vision for an advanced culture and societal infrastructure. Ponies everywhere were thankful for her vision, and she was happy she was blessed enough to see it come to fruition. Celestia had told her something, many thousands of years ago, but had stressed strongly that it might not apply to Twilight herself. As time went on, that seemed to be true, which left only a large question mark on the future.

There was the rest of Earth, however.

Over the years, Twilight had caught herself thinking about the other species a bit like the animals she was already used to. She didn’t see it as prejudice—it was simply fact. Griffon technology had long since floundered, and by now, the crude settlements and cities that

griffons called home were like collections of muddy shacks in comparison to Equestria's sprawling cities. The other continents weren't much better, though some of them understood aesthetics better.

Twilight felt bad for them.

But, at the same time, what was she to do? Every attempt at forward-thinking action had been shot down, a universal staunchness applied by every kingdom she had reached out to. Equestria could do what it knew was best, but please, leave other civilizations to their own design. Really though, thank you for the thought.

It was a bit like a problem Twilight vaguely recalled from the not-too-distant past. A forest that had stood out like a sore thumb. Its inhabitants had been mindless, but other continents were intelligent enough at least to understand obligation.

Above the metropolis of Canterlot, Twilight leaned on the aura of her own magic as she floated in the sky, and tilted her head towards the griffon kingdom.

There would be casualties, of course. Even ponies had been resistant to change, and griffons had a history of negative reactions towards attempts to drag them forward.

Was the sacrifice worth it? Perhaps once the other civilizations saw the griffons go ahead, they might reconsider their positions.

Twilight did the calculations in her head. Other voices would only muddy the process.

Yes, it was worth it. She could take care of things herself, if she wanted to.

Maybe that would be better.

Twilight allowed herself a small smile as a haze of energy began to collect around her body. She could bring herself to the griffon kingdom without so much as a blink of light, if she wished—but somehow, doing things this way made it feel more proper.

It would take a few weeks. She'd likely be very tired by the end. But it would be the right thing to do.

With a blinding flash of violet light, Twilight began her journey around the rest of Equestria with a single, ethereal step into the griffon kingdom.

They'd thank her, when all was said and done.

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The sun and moon moved almost like pendulums. Twilight liked to watch them as they spun, sometimes, closing her eyes between orbits and imagining the positions they might be in when she opened her eyes again. She was almost always right, and that was good enough for her.

One sun and moon were scarcely enough. Twilight had realized this after several centuries of societal expansion. She knew that over time, the residual energy of the solar bodies would prove insufficient for Equestria-Earth's needs, and even more, its own mass would be overwhelmed by the ponies living on it.

There were other solutions—new planets to be brought forward, new celestial bodies that Twilight herself could create... but all of that would be a stopgap. Eventually, throughout the hundreds of thousands of years that Twilight knew would pass, over time, all of that would run dry. Space, insofar as she could perceive it, was limited, and eventually it would reach an end. She wouldn't be among the extinguishing of space's last breath, but she knew that one day, she would watch it.

This didn't strike her as particularly troubling, but it reminded her of something she couldn't quite put her hoof on.

So what to do?

There were eons still to go by. Twilight knew that acting prematurely would be unfair, because while the consequence of eternity was one she could already see, that was not the case for everything else in existence. They still had countless millennia to wear out their lives, and too to wear out the universe. Twilight knew, too, that her presence was only a residual of the era that had created her. If Celestia could have looked upon the future and seen what it would have become, Twilight was sure she would have been, in a way, happy, because ponies no longer needed her, or any princess.

It would take a long time for things to change, but that was alright. Twilight could stand to wait.

Atop her lens to the world and universe beyond, enshrouded by the force of her own will, Twilight closed her eyes. She knew she would sleep for a long time, and over that time that her energy, unused, would become stronger in its dormancy, collecting like the dust at the fringe of a collapsing star, until it was finally ready to combust.

When that happened, she would wake up. But it would not happen for a while.

The bed of Twilight's energy was warm. She sighed, and began to sleep.

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Twilight was cold.

She noticed the sensation like a blanket being yanked off, though she couldn't be sure if its removal was slow or sudden. With a momentary pause to remember how they worked, Twilight opened her eyes.

Dark.

Everything was dark. Even the glow of her own energy was gone, because nothing remained to reflect it. Through force of will, she remembered her own appearance, but nothing besides remained. Every particle was extinguished. Every tiny breath of something alive was gone. The universe was empty.

So, it was time to wake up then.

Twilight stretched, though she couldn't be sure if any part of her body even existed anymore. She had faith in the strength of her own energy, with no worry that her plan had given her to an undue end—but, she wasn't sure that her energy was anything more than the force of her consciousness now. She was the only voice in the universe, and no longer in need of a body to bring that voice to life. There was no such thing as 'life' when she was the only thing that was.

With her stretching complete, Twilight's mind travelled outward. It spun through the infinite past of her history, of the far-reaching bookends of space that had seemed so far away when she looked up at them from the ground and were now simply points to be held as she rearranged all that was, like a book on a shelf needing to be straightened. Though she was confident, the touch of the universe felt unfamiliar at first—and so cold.

After a few false starts, Twilight found what she was looking for. Her consciousness took hold of every last fragment of existence, all the ones that unexisted and had faded within the realm of emptiness that they themselves became as all matter and meaning became an endless void, circling forever in perpetuity though they could know no motion or force. Twilight grabbed nothing with her everything, and was too that nothing, and forced, and held, and *pulled*, and all at once herself was else and everything and unbecoming nothing becoming something again. She held and she pulled and she forced and she *squeezed* down the nothing until it was a single point, coalesced in herself which

was the point in its entirety, and all of the things outside it, and only a tiny, imperceptible point of light, held so tight that no force ever known or knowable could describe it.

With her grip fast, she pressed down even more than that. She squeezed the whole of reality tighter down than a single point, compressing it beyond comprehension.

It went *crunch*.

And, as the wont of a very tightly wound ball to come undone, at last so did the universe, and Twilight with it. Where there was nothing, there was everything, all the stars and planets and galaxies and the things on them and in them and everywhere around them. There was, in an undefinable instant, void, and then in the next, there was the universe, as if it had always been, and in fact, had indeed.

And as the spiral arms of every galaxy righted themselves, and the planets found their course in orbit, not thrown by momentum, but simply by being placed where they belonged, the sky on a tiny planet in a tiny system at the instant was a murky, overcast grey. It was an assemblage of clouds, collected like the nebulae of neverending stars, but filled to the brim with rain instead of cosmic dust.

A single, tiny drop fell from one of those clouds, and landed upon the Earth.

And somewhere, a snail, knowing it was raining, began his slow journey across the world. He didn't know what he was looking for, or what would become of him next—but he knew that moving was what he must do, and so, everything was fine.