

Sunset Looms Chapter 3

The Grey Potter

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Time passed, as it tends to. I lost count of days, held aloft by a small rekindling of an emotion I'd like to call hope. This was my new path. Urged and encouraged by Twilight Sparkle's letters, I poured myself into getting reacquainted with the ponies of Equestria. The first few reports were not very applicable, certainly, but I knew eventually that here were my instructions for reconnection. I placed my faith in them for a long, long time.

Eventually, Eventually, I told myself. Patience. I have all the time in the world.

But a depressing pattern was formed, given context. Each and every one of them described friendship. Friendship is sharing. Friendship is accepting. Friendship is pride, is faith, is understanding. Each and every one, friendship is what friendship is.

I had thought my salvation would come in the form of her reports. Yet, my only achievement, the only thing I got out of the experience, was to make my frustrations even more blisteringly painful.

Twilight Sparkle, you have taught me the properties of friendship, but I still don't know what friendship is! What separates it from being courteous? I already know how to have faith and understand ponies, how else would they think of me as kind? How else would I garner their respect and admiration? What must I do to connect, to share, to speak?

If this was all there was to friendship, then friendship is a lonely position indeed. It means that I've been the greatest friend in the world, and no one else has returned it to me.

That is what I had thought, at first. I must encourage others to return my hand of friendship. And what better place to start than a circle of friends I already wished to be connected to? I had resolved myself to make friends with the Bearers of Harmony. If anyone understood and could return my hoof of friendship, then it would come from the Elements of friendship themselves.

In practice, it was easier said than done.

No, no, it was not any fault of theirs. I was simply too busy to really... get into the experience, I suppose. To really understand what made these ponies and their friendship tick. The disparities between each member were, are, so strange and vast. They seemed to share no or few common opinions or hobbies. What brought them together? What cemented their friendship so strongly that they could bear The Elements? I could never tell, and Twilight Sparkle offered me no answer.

Also, I must apologize to them for a few mistakes I have made. I assumed, being the Bearers of Harmony, that they would be able to use the Element's powers frequently, and could be effective at managing problems most ponies could not. I have been informed by now that this isn't so. I should have known better.

From all the effort I put into understanding and befriending them, all I learned was their names. A courtesy.

As for Twilight Sparkle herself...

I still enjoyed the few moments I could spare for Twilight Sparkle, but the brevity and infrequency of the meetups made each successive one more and more painful. Parties carefully planned, cut short by schedule. Stealing away from the castle offered even less time. Each one makes me wonder,

why did I end the days of our study so hastily? I wanted her to make friends, to not grow up lonely. I did not want her abandon me. Or my own schedule deprive her of me. Why couldn't she have friends, and still continue to learn about magic, or whatever topic she wished. The trips made me long to be seated beside her as we used to, talking about magical theory, cosmos, any topic. Any at all.

Should I be trying harder, dropping duties to continue this study while she, her friends, still live? Devote myself to molding these ponies into friends?

Or was this venture entirely foolish from the start?

~x~

"Thank all of you for your continued dedication and service!" Luna shouts from my lofty throne, her mane flowing as mine does, like an ever-shifting blanket of stars. Heavyside military personnel kneel at her feet. Not many, only half a dozen unicorns, all donned in gilded barding. "You are the spectacular few," Luna continues, "You are those allowed to guard we, the royal sisters! How hard it must have been, your journey to get to this point!"

She went on, reciting her part in the ceremony, pausing only for Patterns', our general's, contributions. I remembered giving this speech, over and over, at least twice a year. Sometimes four or five times. An endless blur of muscled stallions... It was very odd to stand beside the throne, see someone else recite the lines. And even stranger to see this stranger pour heart into each syllable and word. She certainly was taking to her reinstatement well.

I was certainly grateful. With half of my schedule handled by my sister, it allowed more time for observation of my subjects, for reconnection. It wasn't much of a difference yet, as Luna could only take set-in-stone ceremonies at this point. But maybe someday, I'd have actual free time when I needed it.

I looked up and down the line of guards, at our General, and I wondered if it would be easier to make friends with them. A pony of the court. I did not want to make friends arbitrarily, but at the moment, I was quite possibly getting ever so slightly desperate. Certainly, I had all the time in the world to find someone special, but then, what would be the point? They would just die on me a few years later. And I did not want to wait for Twilight Sparkle, the closest thing I had, to die in the meantime.

Maybe I just wanted Twilight Sparkle to be that someone special... She already was, what point was there in denying it any longer? Every time I think of her I get lost in dreams...

As I had then. Already the ceremony had moved beyond the Pass of Medals. Luna gives her final two lines, and the stallions respectfully depart, marching out the door in line.

"How did I do, my sister?" Luna asked as she rose from my throne. She almost lost her regal step in her hurry to ask me this question, grinning. I returned the smile, an automatic reaction.

"Wonderfully, Luna. You really command their respect and attention."

We began walking out of the Throne Room by another entrance. We had nowhere in particular to go at that point, a rare hour of peace. At least until a kitchen exploded or another trivial accident demanded our attention.

"Yes! This is a situation where the Canterlot Royal Voice may be used effectively! Ah but..." Luna lowered her voice, "I guess just talking with you, I don't have to use it."

"Oh... oh, the Canterlot Royal Voice. I hadn't noticed."

"You hadn't?"

"You just sound like yourself, Luna. You have always had force behind your every word."

"Thank you, sister!" Again, she had to lower her voice, "But I think I'll try and get used to talking normally, like you. Twilight Sparkle said that it's the accepted composure of the day."

Ah, even the name caused me to pause. "So you've met Twilight Sparkle then."

"Yes! I visited Ponyville this past Nightmare Night, remember? I've become friends with her, so I hope to visit again sometime!"

"You've become friends."

"Yes! She is such a likable pony, did you know that she—"

"How."

Luna looked up at me then. Shock. Surprise on her snout.

"What do you mean, how, sister?" she asked.

I doubt she could tell how I felt. She saw this friendship ordeal as nothing, as a whim, a fun little thing. I was stiff, I couldn't walk properly anymore, and she wondered what the matter was. Friends. So easily? While I struggle with... is it really something that only takes a single night?

"Tell me what happened," I demanded. Placidly.

She slowed with me. "Are you alright, Celestia?"

I regained feeling in my legs and promptly walked by her. To show her. "I have been studying friendship with Twilight Sparkle for a long time. It's a surprise that a friendship could be formed in a single meeting."

"That's how Twilight Sparkle met all of her other friends, is it not?"

"Yes. I suppose."

"Are you Twilight Sparkle's friend?"

"I am her teacher."

"Do you... want to be her friend?"

I don't think it occurred to Luna to not ask that question. Was I too hasty in dismissing Luna as a potential attachment? I didn't know what to say. Honesty was Luna's Element, not my own. Should I admit to my needs, my pain, or simply keep—

"Celestia, you're doing that thing. You're getting all tangled in your thoughts."

"I'm sorry." I cover, "Luna, I... I think I need to go over a few things. Can we talk later?"

She laughed softly. "Sister, sometimes I think you think too much. Can you tell me what's bothering you so much about this?"

"Tonight? After you move the moon?"

She nuzzled against my nose, trying to reassure me, I was certain. "Shall I leave you a few hours to craft the most perfect story of your troubles? Tell me now, while you still struggle with this!"

"I'd rather not."

"And *that* is why you absolutely must! We have not had a nice long sister to sister talk since I have arrived! I know you are busy, but you are not right now, and I do worry about you sister!"

"Ah... the Royal Canterlot..."

"Oh, so I have gone back into it! You see the troubles I have? You did not know about them, and I do not know about yours! Let us head to your room and chat like the sisters we are!" She playfully shoved my flank, clearly losing her composure in her ridiculous tizzy.

"Alright, alright. I'll tell you what's on my mind. You seem rather eager for this, Luna."

"I am!"

~x~

I delayed our talk for as long as possible. I really only succeeded at delaying it until we reached my room. Not enough time to 'craft the most perfect story' as Luna put it. Oh, listen to me, I'm using her

terminology now.

I let the sun fall into its setting pattern and found my favorite spot, a soft rug in the center of my room. Luna sat beside me, thankfully not as close as she kept in the hallway. The same distance Twilight Sparkle would sit from me. Luna pulled over a pillow and joyfully fluffed it before dropping down atop it.

If anything, it was a different dynamic than Luna and I's last talk.

"So, Celestia, tell me!" Luna started, "What is on your mind? No, no, don't get all caught up in the words, just tell me, my sister!"

"Well... Twilight Sparkle. She's on my mind. She is my student."

"Yes, you told me that!"

"So I did."

"What about her, Celestia? She seemed like such a pleasant and likeable pony!"

I feel like that's something I should know, yet, with the distance growing between Twilight Sparkle and I... "I'm glad... I... I feel as though I've run into her worrying and fretting more and more. And her reports. They aren't all by her anymore..."

"Do you want them all to be from Twilight Sparkle?"

"I didn't want her to fret anymore about her friendship reports... She was getting so worked up about getting them in on time, so I allowed others to write them. And so... Oh, listen to me, explaining these things. I doesn't really matter."

"It sounds like it does matter! You are the one who brought up the reports as a point of pain."

"You really seem to be enjoying yourself, Luna."

Instead of balking at the suggestion, she laughed. Still loud, she continued, "I am chatting with my sister again, and it seems like you really are getting yourself in a tangle about Twilight Sparkle." She scooted close to my face and grinned, "Dearest Celestia, do you have a crush on the little purple pony?"

Under normal circumstances, I would retreat into myself to process this. A crush? A crush on a little meaningless... no, not meaningless, what am I thinking? My silence, once a comfort, spoke volumes to my sister. She knew more about my habits than I admitted.

"Oh my goodness!" Luna scooted away from me, cradling a fallen jaw in her front hooves. "You have a crush on this Twilight Sparkle?"

"Don't use that word, crush, sister. It's, it's belittling." I was blushing, wasn't I? Stammering, trying to cover this, find what I really thought. Pathetic. "Frivolous and silly. We are not little foals who—"

"So then, you love Twilight Sparkle."

"Love?" Oh, how I wish the space between my ears was private once more, that I could be allowed to think to myself, and be able to deflect these mental blows. I used to have all the time in the world. Now I had to answer to a pony who knew me too well, yet not well enough at all. Luna demanded that I remain in the present moment, that I step out of a path and fumble around with feelings I had no way to handle anymore. Now 'love' was the word echoing around my head, building and building louder and louder, until it allowed for no other thought. In the haste demanded by my sister, I had but one answer: "Yes. I love Twilight Sparkle."

What an odd thing to say. What a crazy thing to be coming from my mouth. Was it true, was it false? I needed time to think, but my sister afforded me none. She snuggled up against me, joyful as a filly.

"Oh, my dearest sister, I had no idea! I haven't heard you speak of love since your foray with

Baron Blueblood, all those years ago.”

“They call themselves Princes now...” I muttered.

“Oh, they’re not important. What is important is you and Miss Sparkle! Have you told her your feelings yet?”

How could I if they had only just occurred? “No.”

“You’re spending too much time in your own thoughts aren’t you?”

And you spend too little, I wanted to say.

“You better tell her, before it’s too late!”

“I... I suppose so.”

“Is this all that’s bothering you, Celestia?”

“Yes.” I answered in the hopes that she would be satisfied and leave me alone. This was far too much excitement and rush for one as old as I.

Luck was with me, she was happy with that answer. She asked me nothing more that demanded much attention, and eventually Luna trotted off. I remained. Alone once more. Alone to let myself comb over tangles and my turbulence.

How do I handle this? How did I ever handle this? A flurry of nonsense and white noise was in my mind. It was not how I wish to spend the rest of my time. Disconnected tranquility was preferable to that, that overblown pining. Love was still beating around my head, refusing to lose its place.

Love, love, LOVE. Was it the right answer? Should I spend weeks, months, years trying to sort it all out? Spend more time than I already had? How long had it been, one, two years since I sent my young student away? Too long. I needed her here with me. Now.

In my pathetically hasty state of mind, I decided something incredibly foolish. Twilight Sparkle has learned and taught me enough about friendship, little as she was able to teach. Her studies were over. Her schooling was over. Twilight Sparkle was graduating and she was coming home.

~x~

I’m sure Twilight Sparkle told you what happened when she arrived. It should have been obvious from her letters what would happen, but my head felt far too muddled to think straight about these things. Can you imagine it? My head, once so clear and concise, once so set in stone and immovable, confused? In all my duties, once so easy, I was distracted. Love, love, love, the word itself pounded around my head. Never to be thought out or explained. It was just a wrecking ball, smashing every errant thought.

I almost forgot to arrange a carriage for my fair student. But I did. I set aside the rest of the day, pushing as many duties as I could on Luna so I could wait for Twilight Sparkle’s arrival.

Giving her my own carriage for transit was what I wanted, what the wrecking ball demanded, but I at least understood that most ponies would find that blasphemous. I found for her instead the grandest transport I could manage. Not two, but four white pegasi pulled the cart, of course wearing the royal gilded barding. The cart itself matched their coloration, whitewashed wood with gold foil twisting and looping into complicated patterns. It probably took months of the most skilled unicorn’s time to make. There were no gems adorning the craft. Its purpose was utilitarian, and gems might have overdone the design, just a tad. But I felt as if she deserved them. That she should have them Somehow.

Love, said my head. Love.

Inside the carriage was my precious student. Twilight Sparkle. Practically dressed, as always. The cart, so grand, outshone her, making her seem exceedingly plain in comparison. Out of place even. Among all the white and gold, her purple coat made her stick out. I dare not compare her to a swollen

thumb, but I could see where most ponies would see the comparison. Most importantly, it made her visible from miles away.

It made me able to watch her as soon as she left Ponyville skies. I admit, it was exactly what I did.

She landed uneventfully and stepped out. Smiling, unchanged, just as I always remembered her. Spike wasn't with her. Travelling with her things, I assumed. I was glad, of course, all I wanted then was to be with my student. No, no longer my student. My friend, hopefully. Or more...

"Welcome back to Canterlot, Twilight Sparkle," I said. My voice was even then, practiced as it ever is.

"I'm glad to be back, Princess." Ah, it had been ages since I heard her voice. A small and precious joy.

"Glad to have you back as well. Do you remember where your old room is?"

"The tower? Wow, is that still mine? I thought another student would have it by now."

"Of course not! Shall I bring you there?"

"Oh, alright!"

We began walking, just us two, side by side. We talked lightly. Graduation. Ponyville. The School. Luna. Teacher and student once more. I'm not sure if small talk was a comfort or a grating pain. It was wonderful, being able to just spend time talking with her again. And yet, I needed to tell her, as soon as possible. My feelings would not be tamped down forever. They beat inside my head, even louder than before, making conversation a difficult joy indeed. She seemed to be working up the courage to say something important.

Oh, I hoped for the best. What is Equestria was I expecting?

"Princess Celestia," she said to me. I turned to her, smiling my smile, gentle. Understanding. Unconflicted. She returned my smile, slightly nervous, yet confident. "As soon as I'm done with my graduation, I'm going to move back to Ponyville."

That stopped me solid. "Whatever for?"

She stopped beside me. Craned her neck up, her eyes meeting mine to display her surprise. "Well... that's where all my friends are, of course! And they'll need a librarian, so—"

"But Twilight Sparkle, I was going to offer you the position of High Court Mage."

"Yes, and I'm very grateful for the offer," her voice was still smooth, set in stone. Smiling her apologies away. This was unlike her. Or was it, I didn't know. I didn't know her. "But I'd rather live with the people I care about than have the position of my dreams."

"I can offer them positions here. They're all talented mares. They can have good jobs here as well."

"I'm sure you can't offer all of Ponyville a job, princess! That's my home now, it's where I want to be."

She was so sure, so ready to leave me, to leave all of this for good. And now, then, I wouldn't get any letters either. I had said that her studies were over. I had tried to bring her close, and all it had done was sever the last of my ties.

I didn't lose my composure. I stayed exactly as I always was on the outside, collected. Straightforward. Calm. I leaned into her smiling face and asked her, "Twilight Sparkle. Aren't I your friend?"

She gave me the same smile, the smile that she had just dismissed me with. I pressed on before

she could speak again, before she could break my heart further.

"If I am your friend, then why are you so casual about abandoning me here?"

"Abandoning?" I had finally gotten through. Her apology smile dropped. "Oh, Celestia, I'm not abandoning you."

"Then why have you turned down this position? Why are you leaving me? What am I to you?"

"Princess Celestia, you're my teacher, my mentor. All teachers eventually have to say goodbye to their students, as do the students have to say goodbye to their teachers. Remember? I sent you a letter about that a few—"

"I remember the letter, I remember the lesson. But Twilight Sparkle, aren't I more than that?"

"Of course you are." A flutter in my heart. "You're the Princess, the ruler of this land." And an emptying. "If there's another disaster, we'll probably have to overcome it together." A black and vacant ocean. Her smile was returning too, as if she understood what my worries were. She didn't. She had to be informed. I don't know how I let her be so thick skulled. It needed to be pounded down.

"Twilight Sparkle, I love you."

"Why thank you, I—"

"You do not understand!" I don't know what my composure was at that point, or what I appeared to be to her. I was going to get through to her. Now. "I love you. I love you more than any other pony alive, or ever had lived."

"So, as a teacher to a student..."

"No. Not like that."

In a small voice, "So, love me, love me?"

"Love you. Love you."

"Oh dear," she squeaked.

Not the response I wanted. Of course it wasn't. And saying it had only made the pounding louder, louder. Love, love, LOVE LOVE. It's not even a word anymore, it's a *need*. I don't have needs, I'm not supposed to. But I needed her!

And by the look on her face, she wasn't going to fulfill this desperation of mine.

"I'm going, to uh." She backed away, pointing over her shoulder. "I'm going to go now."

"Why?!" I was shouting, oh Celestia, why were you shouting? I think I caught myself then, in a wreckage of myself. My body had fallen out of a regal posture, and my mane was wild, no longer flowing in waves, but in jagged folds. Its violent flow had tipped my tiara to the side, and threatened to eject it entirely. I corrected myself, straightening. "I'm," I said. Nothing more.

"Princess, I gottagonowbye." She galloped off, as fast as she could. I stood, rooted to the spot.

Stiff, staring at the blazing blue sky, my sky. Twisting my face into a rigid position, and trying not to cry.

Trying not to cry. Ridiculous. What have I become?

~x~

Luna found me back in my room. I'm uncertain how either of us got there, but there we were. She watched me for several minutes. Was she waiting for my invitation? Trying, as I did, to think of something to say?

"I just spoke with Twilight Sparkle," Luna said at last.

"Have you?"

"Celestia... You really scared her. I still don't think she's calmed down. Why would words of true

love scare her?”

I didn't wish to respond to that. I didn't even want to think about how I hurt Twilight. Love wasn't even beating around my head anymore. Nothing was there. Nothing at all. Pathetic. Pathetic pathetic.

“I don't think you were completely honest last time...”

“You didn't allow me time to be.”

“I thought that it would make you tell me the truth. It usually does.”

“It *did*, Luna.” I turned to her, forcing her to look me in the eye. “When you knew me a thousand years ago, it *would have*. I've changed. Did you think I wouldn't?”

“I don't know... I hadn't.” She came and sat beside me, pulling a pillow under her. “Tell me the whole story this time sister. Tell me everything, and be honest about your thoughts. I'm here to help you.”

I had started going over what I would say, what needed to be said and what didn't need to be, but Luna spoke again, seeing me take too much time.

“Celestia,” she said, “I am your friend. I am trying to be your friend. Please. Tell a friend the truth.”

I had never felt so inferior. So chided and childish. Yet... desperation. I was desperate. I needed what Luna had to offer me. A caring hoof... A kind one. Her elements to compliment my own.

And that is exactly what happened, Luna, to the very best of my recollection. I hope I haven't disappointed.