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Observatory Hill, Part Two

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I've never been one to dwell on recapturing my fillyhood.

Let's face it. Being young is an awkward, frustrating experience. You spend years as a tiny little thing in a great big world that's not arranged how you like it, a world filled with adults who are constantly telling you how to live your life. "Too much studying, Twilight Sparkle!" they tell you, shoving you out the door toward a completely unwelcome solitary play session on the lawn outside. "You don't need to memorize the entire Periodic Table! Go get some excitement in your life!"

To which I now respond: Excitement? Excitement? Have you even *looked* at Group VIIa? I swear, until my dying day, I will never understand how anypony can contemplate the Halogens without a little skip to her heart; but, to each her own, I guess.

My point here is that I've never felt particularly warm and cozy about my childhood. I relished each passing birthday as a symbol of my growing control over my own life, and when I finally left home for Princess Celestia's School For Gifted Unicorns, I threw out everything my parents had taught me for a while and spent a few heady weeks going on all-night reading benders and marathon quill-organization sessions, and I don't regret a thing. I love being an adult.

So it came as something of a surprise to me that as Luna and I walked through the chilly black closeness of the Everfree Forest, the foalish part of me that I keep locked so carefully away began to rear her shy little head. The Forest is a frightening place, especially on moonless nights like this, and as our walk wore on, imaginary ghouls and ghosts began to multiply around me despite the best efforts of my rational mind to dispel them. I started to feel smaller and smaller next to the unshakable form of Princess Luna, until suddenly it was like I was a yearling again, huddled close to the warm and powerful and admittedly dangerous creature beside me, trusting her to keep me safe. The quick alternation of faith and fear was exhilarating, like rushing from a sauna to a cold stream and back. At times, I would brush against her flank, and my pulse quickened at the contact. How long had it been since I had let myself feel this helpless?

More importantly, how long had it been since I had enjoyed it?

"Art thou all right?" inquired Luna, startling me away from that particular train of thought, thank goodness. "It's just that thou seem'st a bit anxious."

I laughed nervously. "Well, this is the Everfree Forest. Sort of a fountainhead of weird things that ponies don't understand."

"It has always been thus," said Luna, staring back into a past only she could see. "Thirteen hundred years ago, my sister and I carved a kingdom from this chaos, this land of Discord. Its boundaries have shifted now — my sister has grown powerful in my absence, and Equestria has far forced back the darkness — but it still lives on in the heart of these woods."

"Not exactly helping my confidence level here," I admitted, glancing about.

"We are sorry," said Luna. "Perhaps we should change the topic on which we expound."

"No," I said, suddenly. "Tell me more about those days. Please."

Luna stepped carefully over a rivulet of murky water, source unseen. "What is there for us to tell?" she said, after a moment. "We were two brave and headstrong sisters in service of the Cloverlord, beautiful in our wrath and shocking in our callow impetuosity."

"It's hard to imagine Princess Celestia that way," I said. "Impetuous, really?"

"Oh, yes," said Luna. "And thou might'st be surprised at how little we have changed. At any rate, we came upon this land and beheld how the ponies here groaned under the yoke of Discord, so we imposed Harmony upon it, using tools shown to us by our father."

"The Elements," I said.

"Yes," said Luna. Lightning crackled across the otherwise clear dark sky. **"THAT WAS BEFORE THEIR POWER WAS LOST TO US FOREVER!"**

"Watch it," I said, glancing after a flock of nightjars that had been startled out of the bracken nearby.

"Sorry," said Luna. "That was before their power was lost to us forever."

"Right. Princess Celestia says that she's no longer attuned to them."

Luna snorted. I blinked at her. "Truly, is that what she claims?" said Luna.

"...Yes?"

"I suppose that isn't an elaborate way of speaking the truth. The Elements are lost to us because the magic of our friendship has been shattered, Twilight Sparkle."

I frowned. "Didn't you two make up?"

"My sister and I each brooded upon the subject of the other for a thousand years. Sometimes with a pained fondness, yes, but also with malice and frustration. A few kind words in a fraught situation are not enough to repair a wound as deep as ours. It is unclear to me if either of us is even capable of friendship any longer. Not between ourselves, nor with any other pony."

"I'm sorry, Princess Luna," I said, "but that's just not true. Princess Celestia is my mentor in all things friendship. She must know something about it."

"Hast thou ever been a teacher before, Twilight Sparkle?"

"Yes," I replied. "For, like, a day."

"And when finished, didst thou find that thou understood the subject more than before?"

I thought about this. "In trying to communicate ideas to my students," I said, "I found that I had to break them down in different ways than I was used to."

"And thus, thou didst achieve new insights."

"Wait. You're saying Princess Celestia is trying to re-learn friendship... from me?"

"But of course," said Luna. "And as a result, thou hast been unfairly burdened with the Elements, and thus with the repeated salvation of Equestria."

"Well, it's not as bad as that," I said, glancing at the dark foliage above. "I mean, yes, it's bad, sometimes. But I figure that if someone out there has to save Equestria from evil, it might as well be me. That way I can make certain it's getting done right. In fact, with just a few more world-devouring crises under my saddle-band, I'll be able to develop a comprehensive Save-the-World checklist and from that point on, saving the world will be as easy as pie."

Luna permitted herself a tiny smile. "Twilight Sparkle, thou art adorable."

"Thanks?" I said, dubiously. I don't know why people always react this way; checklists are very sensible and not at all cute.

"Thou art welcome. For my part, I hope that Celestia and I may both one day learn enough from thy friendship reports that we become reunited through them, much as Day and Night themselves are reunited by your namesake, the Twilight." Luna stared up at the winding path before us for a moment, and then hung her head. "It may be an impossible task," she continued. "Friendship roars great and powerful between peers, but there is no pony in

Equestria who is the peer of Celestia. She stands above us all, so very far distant."

"I know how that goes," I said, wryly. "It's kinda like when I try to tell my friends about the latest really exciting astronomical fact I've discovered. They all nod and agree with me but they always do it with this glazed look on their faces. I want to share all of my joys with my friends and feel that same joy coming back to me, but there are just some parts of me that that doesn't work with. Because nopony can relate to them."

"So is it with Celestia," said Luna. "So is it with me."

We walked for a bit. All was silent but the crickets.

"You could be my astronomy friend," I said, instantly hating how small my voice sounded.

Luna nodded. "Twilight Sparkle, we... or, I, would... enjoy that."

"Great," I said, simply, but underneath my heart thundered.

"Oh, and attend, we are here," said Luna. "Griffinwatch Hill!"

I startled. So lost had I been in my own thoughts I had not even noticed the path start to rise, but yes, this had to be the place. Ahead of us, the trees fell away at the foot of a great mound of stone and earth, its surface covered with gray brush that caught the starlight and rustled gently in the night winds.

"THOU SEE'ST?" howled Luna, bending the heather before us in waves. **"THY FEARS OF THE FOREST WERE QUITE UNFOUNDED!"**

I grimaced at Luna for a moment, rubbed at my ears with my hooves, and then took a few hesitant steps out from the tree-line and looked up. My breath stopped short.

The sky was glowing.

It was like nothing I had seen before. In theory, I knew full well that there were more stars in the heavens than I could possibly see with my naked eye; and I also knew full well that viewing conditions in Canterlot, or even in Ponyville for that matter, were far from one hundred percent ideal. But here, on a high bare hill miles from the nearest lamp or fire, the enormity of what I had been missing struck me like a blow. My beloved spring constellations were all there in force, but between and among the stars I could see and name every day were others that I had only before glimpsed through my telescope, now plain as day. And between and among *those* stars were new and strange ones that I had never before seen, twinkling just on the edge of vision. As I stared and stared into the great vault above, I began to get the feeling that there was really no blackness there at all, that if I could just look a little harder into the dark I would

see that every inch of the sky was filled with ancient sparkling starlight, tens of thousands of years old...

My knees shook for a moment and nearly buckled; thankfully for my pride, they did not. I steadied myself, gazing wide-eyed and slack-jawed into the night.

"Thou enjoy'st this," said Luna.

"Yes," I said, my breath coming quick. "I want to see more. I want to see your observatory."

"Twilight," said Luna in what I only later realized was a hesitant tone. I heard nothing of it, busy as I was scanning the crest of the hill, searching for the outlines of a structure against the starlight.

"I think I see it!" I cried. "Race you to the top!" I wheeled about, kicked up my heels a little and then broke into a brisk canter up the gray hillside, cutting a path through the heather as I did so, happy to be climbing, happy to be even an infinitely small degree closer to that gorgeous sky above. Luna followed, quietly, in my wake.

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There was a stillness in the air as we reached the crest of the hill and the ruins of Griffinwatch Observatory. Luna had called the place "small", but I realized as soon as I took it all in that she had been speaking from her rather out-of-proportion Royal Canterlot Perspective. The chamber at the base of the great three-story central tower, now half-crumbled and exposed to the elements, could probably hold half the ponies in Ponyville if you pushed and shoved a little. In addition to the main structure, the observatory complex included a number of smaller towers of unknown purpose, each constructed of the same rough white marble as the central one. Most had fallen to rubble over a millennium of disrepair, but a few remained miraculously intact. A spray of symmetrical wings connected the central tower to its satellites, and capping the tower itself was an arching tangle of verdigris-covered metal, the last vestige of a once-impressive observatory dome.

Luna and I worked our way through the overgrown foliage at the foot of the complex, the remnants of what must have once upon a time been a lovingly-tended formal garden, now a jumbled sea of night-blooming jasmine and moonflower and a bunch of other plants I didn't stop to categorize, so dazzled was I by the pre-Monarchial ruins and the sky above. The scent of the flowers was potent and intoxicating and it made my head swim a little.

"This is amazing," I breathed.

"Thou should'st have seen it when it was new, and whole," said Luna, her voice thick. Suddenly sobered, I turned around to see the Princess gazing up at her old sanctum. Her face was stony,

but I could just barely glimpse a tiny quiver in her lower lip.

I shuffled back to her. "I'm sorry," I said.

"For what, Twilight Sparkle?" she managed, eventually, her eyes still fixed on the cracked observatory tower. "This was what we promised. This is thy boon, be it so humble."

"It's just that this must be very hard for you."

"POPPYCOCK!" shouted Luna. "Our royal emotions are built of sterner stuff than that. And to prove to thou that we are not overly wounded by this, we hereby... give you this place!"

"You what now?"

A mane-flattening gale scoured the surface of the hill. **"TWILIGHT SPARKLE!"** bellowed Luna over the roar of the wind. **"SINCE THOU DOST EXPRESS FONDNESS FOR MY OLD OBSERVATORY, I HEREBY BEQUEATH IT TO YOU AS YOUR BOOOOON!"**

The wind died. A tiny rock clattered down from one of the crumbling towers.

"Thank you, Princess Luna," I said, brushing my mane back into place while picking carefully through a dangerous field of words. "You honor me with your generosity. I, er, thought you just said that coming to see your observatory was my boon."

"We changed our mind," said Luna, breezily. "Our debt to you is too great to be satisfied by a mere walk in the woods. Also, long have we waited to find a pony who understands and appreciates the night as thou dost; had there been more ponies such as thyself a thousand years ago, we might not have succumbed to Envy at all. For these reasons, you will accept the observatory as our gift."

"Is that," I said, wincing a little, "a royal command?"

Luna inclined her head at me. "Whatever is the matter?" she asked. "We thought you liked this place!"

"It's beautiful, Princess," I said. "It's just... it's very far away from Ponyville, and very deep in the Everfree Forest. I love seeing it, I love learning about this part of you, and I'm really looking forward to making some observations while we're here. I just don't think I'm the right owner for this place."

"Of course!" said Luna, obviously struggling to keep the chagrin out of her voice. "Not a very good gift, anyway, in its current state, is it? What were we thinking?"

"No, it's a fine and wonderful gift," I said, in a desperately reassuring fashion. "But I don't think I can accept it."

"We understand completely," said Luna. "How about we just prepare you a late-night pre-astronomy snack as your boon instead? Dost thou like pear and chocolate pie?"

"That sounds heavenly," I said, relieved.

"Good," said Luna. "Except we do not have any prepared that we can just teleport here. **THEREFORE, PREPARE THYSELF AS I SUMMON THY CONFECTION FROM THE INKY VOID BETWEEN THE WORLDS!"**

"No!" I yelled, leaping forward. "I mean... Princess, please don't tear a rift in the walls of reality just to get us a pie."

"But pie is good," stated Luna, blinking at me.

"Listen," I said. "I changed my mind. I always keep a little of Mrs. Cake's granola in my astronomy saddlebags in case I get hungry at night but don't want to have to quit early. Let's just nosh on that. No meddling with incomprehensible forces required."

"If you say so," said Luna, dubiously.

"I do," I said. "And then, if you still want to do something extra for me, you can keep me company while I climb that tower, set up my telescope, and finally get down to some stargazing. The tower's still solid enough, right?"

Luna frowned and brought her hoof down a couple of times, shaking the earth with each casual blow. She looked appraisingly up at the central tower. "Seems't that way," she confirmed.

"Great," I said. "Okay, admittedly, tonight started out a little rocky, but there's still time to make this..."

I struck yet another head-high pose. "...My best night of stargazing ever!"

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Yes, I continually court ironic disaster. Why do you ask?

Luna and I ascended the darkened observatory tower, the Princess's horn and faintly luminous mane lighting the spiraling stairs before us, until we re-emerged, me feeling a bit winded, onto the tower roof. If the view from the hilltop had seemed impressive, the one from the observatory itself was positively commanding. Nestled beneath the great bowl of the heavens, the deep and

green-black forest stretched out on all sides almost as far as the eye could see. I nickered happily and trotted to the parapet, wending my way around some old and shattered equipment mounts as I went.

"Well," said Luna. "Here we are."

"Mm hm!" I said, and then, humming quietly to myself, I began setting up my tripod and telescope.

"Thou art sure that little instrument is going to be sufficient for thy purposes?"

"It'll be fine, Princess." Portable recording desk, check. One, two, three spare quills, check.

"We could conjure a veil of silence for thou, so thou art not bothered by the night-noise while thou work'st."

"Actually, I like the night-noise," I said, turning back to my telescope and performing a quick calibration.

"I see," said Luna. "Oh, we notice that thou hast neglected to bring an abacus!"

"I don't typically use one," I said. "Numbers work better in my head."

"Ah."

There was a pause.

"So there is nothing further that we can —"

"Nope!" I said, orienting myself to the Cynosure. Hello, old friend, I thought.

"Thou art certain," said Luna.

"Princess," I said, laughing a little. "You've done everything I could possibly ask for. Aside from missing my new star, this evening is going to be everything I wanted." I turned back to my telescope, closed one eye, and began exploring.

"Thou missed seeing something earlier," said Luna, evenly.

"Yep," I said, jotting down a few notes and then returning to observation. "Brand new star in the Orion Nebula tonight, but it's set by now."

"New to thou. Thirteen hundred years old, in truth."

"Thirteen hundred forty-four, to be exact," I said. There was a noise of hoof on marble behind me, the sound of Luna trotting away a bit. I paid it little mind. "Just think, Princess," I said. "When that star was born, you hadn't even founded Equestria yet! And that light is just now reaching us. Isn't that wild?"

Luna did not respond. I glanced over my shoulder to find her gone.

"Huh," I said. Then I shrugged and resumed my measurements. Probably, I thought, she's off to look over her old fortress a bit now that she's got me situated. She's been so kind and thoughtful tonight, if a little obsessed with repaying this imagined debt to me with big showy favors.

I scribbled a few more notes. It seemed, I continued on in the back of my mind, that I had finally convinced her that I was perfectly happy with the night just the way it was. What could be better than a night spent stargazing and learning more about a friend? When Luna returned, I decided, going back to my telescope, I was going to let her know that situations like this can teach a pony that there's a certain magic to the simple things. You don't always need to be dramatic for a friend. Sometimes, you just have to be —

— wait. That couldn't be right. I backed up from the eyepiece, blinked a couple times, checked my notes, double-checked my notes, triple-checked my notes, went back to the eyepiece, checked my notes a fourth time, and then simply stood back and stared critically up at the starfield above me.

The stars had moved. It had to be midnight or later, and yet every single constellation had shifted to its early-evening position. And they were still moving! Backwards!

There was a flare of coruscant night-blue energy from a point off to my right, radiating up from the surface of the hill. With a sinking feeling in my gut, I galloped to the edge of the tower and saw exactly what I had feared to see: Princess Luna standing there, braced against the hard surface of Griffinwatch Hill, wreathed in a mantle of unimaginable power. The Night Princess threw her head back and released a triumphant whinny.

"THE HEAVENS THEMSELVES TURN AT MY WHIM!" exulted Luna.

"Oh, dear," I said.