



Observatory Hill

By Jeffery C Wells

Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	17
Chapter 3	29

Chapter 1

"I can't believe you're passing this up!" cried Rainbow Dash, trotting agitatedly back and forth across my floor. "Maybe you don't realize who we're talking about here. This is Moonage Daydream, Twilight! He's, like, the biggest Pony Rock star in all Equestria!"

"I'm familiar with Moonage Daydream, Rainbow," I said, busily putting my spare quills at right angles to my telescope over on my primary organizational table. "In fact, I have a particular fondness for his Hoofington period. There's some beautiful instrumental work mixed in with the louder tracks."

"Yeah, yeah," said Dash. "Instrumental schminstrumental. You know what you need to have a fondness for? You need to have a fondness for being crushed into a way-fun, way-awesome pony pit right up next to the stage in the Ponyville Hippodrome with about a thousand other ponies, close enough to feel flecks from the Daydream's sweat!"

"Exciting!" I said. "Also, kind of icky. I do appreciate the offer, Rainbow Dash, but I've got plans to see a different kind of star tonight."

"Oo!" said Pinkie Pie, leaping up from her position near one of my bookshelves. "There's another concert going on tonight? How come I didn't hear about it yet?"

"Not a musical star, Pinkie," I explained. "A baby star."

Pinkie Pie screwed up her mouth. "A baby star? What do babies do to make them stars? I thought babies just drank lots of milk and tottered around."

"Not a *baby star*," I explained more clearly. "A baby *star*. Fluttershy and Spike and I are going to see a brand new star for the first time tonight. But that's just the opening act! We've got orbits to measure, galaxies to track, and we're even," I said, really pouring the icing on, "going to be trying to prove the existence of the Oort Cloud!"

"Sounds... great," said Dash.

"You know it, sister!" I said. "Hee hee hee."

"Yes," said Fluttershy, smiling over that faint blush of nervousness I've rarely seen her without. "And you're all invited. We're going to go outside and sit on a soft blanket and drink warm cocoa under the dark Spring sky."

"And learn about a whole bunch of celestial objects," I prompted.

"Well... yes," said Fluttershy.

"It's gonna be great!" said Spike, my little dragon secretary, looking up from his dusting. "If any of you want to come, there's still plenty of room on the blanket!"

"Thanks, but no thanks, Spike," said Dash. "Maybe I didn't make this clear enough to everypony here: Moonage! Daydream!" She made a little squeeing noise. "I mean, since when does a humongoid mega-star like him come anywhere close to a little burg like Ponyville? He's gonna draw ponies from a hundred miles around! This is the chance of a lifetime!"

"Afraid I have to keep my concert plans as well," said Rarity. "While I can't say that the music itself is much of a draw, Moonage Daydream is known throughout Equestria for his lavish stage shows, complete with some of the most exquisite and exotic costumes you've ever seen! And if things get too loud, well." Rarity lifted a pair of plush violet earmuffs from her saddle bag and settled them on her head. "Ta da! Fashion accessory *and* ear protection! I won't be bothered by a single noise."

"Very convenient," I agreed.

"I'm sorry, what?" said Rarity, cocking her head at me.

"Never mind," I said. "What about you, Applejack? You don't strike me as much of a rock-and-roll pony."

"Well, that's mighty astute of y'all. I'm sure Mr. Daydream is a fine musician. But you're right, he ain't really my cup a' grits."

"Then there's always complex astronomy!" I said, in what I hoped was a tempting fashion.

"Shoot, Twilight," said Applejack. "It ain't about the music no more. The minute R.D. explained to me how big a draw this Moonage Daydream was fixin' to be, I went right out and got me a brand new vending cart. I'm aimin' to break all kinds a' sales records tonight."

"Well, good luck with that. And I suppose there's no point trying to convince you, Pinkie Pie?"

"What?!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Miss the biggest, noisiest, glowing-lights-iest, happiest streamer-riffic party-time concert Ponyville's ever seen?"

"Like I said, it was a longshot."

To her credit, she did ponder it for a moment. "Nope!" she eventually decided. "I'm gonna party 'til I fall over and then party some more while I'm on the floor!"

"It won't be the same without you guys," muttered Dash, kicking petulantly at a table leg. "I just wish that crummy old baby star would've picked some other night to get born."

"Actually, it did," I said. "The new star we're going to watch was actually born more than a thousand years ago. One thousand three hundred and forty-four, to be exact."

"Who the what now?" said Dash. "Twilight, are you messing with space and time again?"

"I love messing with space and time!" said Pinkie Pie. "Messing with space and time is great!"

"Sugarcube," said Applejack, glancing sidelong at Pinkie, "you do realize you can't personally mess with space and time, don'tcha?"

Pinkie Pie sighed airily. "That's exactly what you said last today," she said.

"No messing with space and time required!" I said. "The star is forming from a gas cluster in the Orion Nebula, which is so very far away it takes the light over a thousand years to reach our eyes. Orion sets at dusk at this time of year, though, so we have a very limited window of observation."

"Wait," said Dash. "Light has a speed? Like sound?"

I smiled. "Yes, but don't get any ideas. As soon as you got anywhere near the light barrier your effective mass would increase until it approached infinity. Surpassing light speed would thus take an infinite amount of time and effort."

"Bet I could still do it," said Dash, sullenly.

"Something to shoot for, at least," I said, amiably.

"My effective mass increases when I eat cookies!" exclaimed Pinkie Pie, helpfully.

"As per typical, Punkin," said Applejack, smiling sheepishly at me, "I'm not sure any of us one hundred percent understand what you're goin' on about."

"Yeah, but I *am* a hundred percent sure that Twilight's gonna be missing the time of her life at that concert!" said Dash.

"Oh, girls," I said. "Don't worry about me."

Then I struck a proud and head-high pose.

"Tonight," I said, "is going to be my best night of stargazing ever!"

* * *

In retrospect, I don't know why I even say things like that.

I yelped as yet another blast of fireworks from the distant Hippodrome caused me to flinch and knock over a stack of brass tokens. I grunted exasperatedly and re-neatened the board with a quick shot of telekinesis. I had been pleased as punch to discover that I had functionally inherited a

beautiful antique Hex board when I took occupancy of the Ponyville library; back in Canterlot I had acquired something of a reputation as a killer Hex player, and under ideal conditions, a pleasant match or two could whisk the boredom right out of any given rainy afternoon. Unfortunately, these were far from ideal conditions. Not for Hex, not for an impromptu evening hot cocoa picnic, and definitely not for stargazing.

I shot a glare at the old racetrack where Moonage Daydream's concert was going full swing. Normally, the place would be just barely visible at the edge of my sight, but not today. Despite the falling dusk, the place was lit up bright — or perhaps brighter — than noon. A score of magical spotlights wheeled and danced crazily through the evening sky, accompanied by volley after volley of rainbow-hued fireworks, the last of which had made me practically upset the Hex board just now.

"I'm so sorry, Twilight," said Fluttershy, blinking at me, "but I wonder if maybe one of those Wind tokens might possibly be in a different place than where it was? Before the fireworks startled us all, I mean."

I frowned. Fluttershy was right. Scowling, I used my magic again and scooted the offending Wind token one space to the right.

"Thank you," said Fluttershy, demurely, and then started stacking tokens on the board with graceful abandon.

"There, there, there, there and, um, there." Said Fluttershy, claiming a huge swath of the board for Wind. "There. I think that's my move. If that's all right."

I blinked, stunned for a moment. "You won," I said, stupidly.

"It kind of looks that way," said Fluttershy. "I'm sorry I was so bossy about moving that piece back before, but it really was important to my strategy."

"You won," I repeated. This night was not going well at all.

Fluttershy fidgeted nervously, perhaps sensing my darkening mood. "We could take a little break from board games now, if you feel like it. You could try your telescope again. I'm sure it'll be dark enough to see something now."

"Fluttershy, it's not happening!" I shouted. "The Moonage Daydream concert is throwing off so much light that it's impossible to observe anything up there! I've never seen this much light pollution in my entire life! So much for getting to see a new star ignite!"

"Oh, well," said Fluttershy. She scooted the Hex board back in my direction. "If we play again, you can have a two-token head start, if you like."

I sighed out through my nose. "Spike!" I called.

Spike zipped up to my side. "Whatcha need, Twilight?"

"Hot chocolate," I said, grimly, stacking up the Earth tokens again and getting them ready for play.

"Roger that!" said Spike, and in a twinkling, he rushed to our tiny little fire, poured me a mug of cocoa, and returned.

I took a sip, and swallowed hard. "Spike... this isn't hot chocolate. It's lukewarm chocolate."

Spike glanced from side to side and then back at me. "I just took it from where Fluttershy set it up."

I looked over in the direction of the kettle, and saw suspended on a chain roughly a yard and a half away from the fire. "You could move it closer," I suggested.

"Oh, no," said Fluttershy. "It's not good to have too hot of hot chocolate. You could burn yourself. Or burn your tummy."

I growled, telekinetically snatched the mug from Spike, and blasted it with a minor Flame Hoof cantrip, causing it to boil and steam and get icky and crusty around the rim, but at least it was an acceptable temperature. I lifted the mug to my lips, and then...

PHOOM! ...went another spray of fireworks. And then "AAAH!" ...went *me*, directly after dumping freshly Flame Hoof'd cocoa all over my face and mane.

Fluttershy reacted with predictable horror as I stood there, dripping, slightly red, and chocolatey-flavored. "Oh, Twilight!" she said, rushing to my side in a rustle of feathered wings. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is *not* 'all right'!" I said, entering full snit mode. I admit this; I am not proud. "I'm going to miss seeing my new star and anything else in the sky tonight, you beat me at Hex, which shouldn't be possible, and I just spilled half a mug of formerly-lukewarm extremely hot hot chocolate on my face!"

"WE HAVE HEARD THEE IN THY ANGUISH!" roared a voice from above, momentarily drowning off the noise of both my snit and the distant rock concert. I promptly spilled the remaining half-mug of cocoa on myself, and screamed again.

An achingly bright shaft of white moonlight slammed down from the heavens and began carving a path through the deserted streets of Ponyville. Dirt charred and cobblestones sizzled in its wake.

"T-- Twilight?" said Fluttershy, who had taken up a huddled position under our picnic blanket. "W-- what is that?"

"I think I know," I said, as the shaft of moonlight drew closer and closer, finally resolving itself into the proud and regal form of...

"Princess Luna!" I said.

"Nightmare Moon!" said Fluttershy, simultaneously. I dropped to one knee; Fluttershy did not move, as it's hard to get any more prostrate than hiding under a picnic blanket.

"Hey, Princess!" said Spike, amiably, wandering up to the Monarch of the Entire Night Sky. "How's tricks?"

"TRICKS ARE EMINENTLY ACCEPTABLE AND EVEN AMUSING IN CERTAIN SITUATIONS!" said the Princess. **"BUT ENOUGH**

PLEASANTRIES! WE HAVE HEARD THE CRIES OF ONE OF YOUR CITIZENS IN NEED, AND AS IT BEHOOVES US TO MAINTAIN OUR SUBJECTS IN A STATE OF WEAL, WE HAVE DECIDED TO GRANT THEE A BOOOOON!"

"Thanks?" I hazarded, looking up from my bow.

"YOU ARE MOST WELCOME, TWILIGHT SPARKLE! IT IS FITTING THAT YOUR BOON BE FIRST AND GREATEST, FOR WE OWE YOU MUCH -- BOTH FOR FREEING OUR HEART FROM THE DARK POWERS OF ENVY, AND BY TEACHING US TO ACT *IN A TOTALLY NORMAL AND NON-THREATENING FASHION!*" Luna stamped decisively at the ground; steaming cracks formed in the dirt at her footfall. Fluttershy whimpered and cowered deeper under our blanket.

"Uh, yeah," said Spike. "About that, Princess..."

"BUT THAT IS NOT ALL WE WILL DO FOR YOU THIS NIGHT!" bellowed Luna, knocking Spike all the way over by force of outburst alone. **"THE CITIZENS OF PONYVILLE HAVE TAUGHT US MUCH SINCE OUR RELEASE FROM OUR THOUSAND-YEAR IMPRISONMENT! IN WARM AND HEARTFELT GRATITUDE, WE WILL POUR OUT NIGHT'S PLENTY UPON..."**

Luna paused and looked around, then continued in a slightly more normal tone. "UPON... ALL OF..."

The dark princess blinked and stared for a moment at Ponyville's deserted streets. "Where is't everypony?" she asked, eventually.

"At a concert," I said, nodding in the direction of the Hippodrome. "I think about ninety percent of the town is there, either rocking out, jotting down notes on the costumes, or, um, selling concessions."

"Oh, fiddlesticks," remarked Luna, biting her lip. "Our timing doth stink pretty bad. Maybe we could just sort of meander over to the stadium and begin granting boons over there."

"Not so sure that's wise," I said, quickly, trying to banish the distressing images floating in front of my brain-eyes. "Maybe you could come back

tomorrow and grant your boons then? I think everypony's kind of distracted what with Moonage Daydream in town and all."

"We kind of wanted to do something tonight," said Luna. "We have sentimental attachments to this evening."

Luna threw her head back then and gazed skyward, her eyes glinting. Strong eldritch winds swirled about her, frazzling my mane as they tore past. **"IT WAS ON THIS VERY NIGHT,"** she intoned, **"A THOUSAND AND ONE YEARS PAST, WHEN WE DID FIRST ALLOW ENVY INTO OUR HEART, SETTING US ON OUR SHORT AND DARK COURSE TO OBLIVION!"**

"Volume," I suggested, woozily.

"Right, sorry," said Luna. "Well! There's only one thing for it, then. If I have to pour out blessings on just a very few ponies--"

"And dragons," Spike commented.

"And dragons, yes," added Luna. "If it's just going to be you three, let's make these some excellent boons, shall we?"

"Princess, you don't have t--"

"Awright!" Spike shouted. "I want me some gemstones!"

I gave my baby dragon a warning glance. "Um... if you please, Mistress Luna," he added.

"Oh, Spike," I said, smirking.

"What? I'm a growing dragon!"

"We do please, in fact!" said Luna. Mystic energies coursed up and down her horn and, suddenly, another bolt of hard bright moonlight crashed into the ground, blinding us for a moment. When the spots went away, Luna's boon for Spike became visible: the tiny crater formed by the moonlight's impact now contained a chest of shimmering alabaster with onyx fittings, filled to overflowing with pure white diamonds.

Spike leaned in close, the stones reflecting in his eyes. A tiny thread of drool escaped one corner of his mouth.

"Plucked from our private stash," said Luna, proudly, "and carefully aged within Equestria's crust. Plus, when thou art finished, thou can't eat the box."

"Say 'thank you', Spike," I said.

"Thank you, Spike," said Spike, dreamily. I chuckled.

"We are pleased that thou seems't to enjoy your boon," said Luna. Then she rounded on the picnic blanket, which still concealed a Fluttershy-shaped lump.

"SMALL TREPID YELLOW ONE!" shouted Luna. **"SPEAK AND RECEIVE YOUR HEART'S DESIIRE!"**

"meep," whispered Fluttershy.

"Meep'?" said Luna, slightly taken aback. "What is this 'meep' of which you speak?"

"I think what Fluttershy means is that she'd like to take a minute to think about her boon. Maybe put it in a letter to you when she's not... overwhelmed by your presence."

"Of course!" said Luna, to the trembling mass of Fluttershy. "Though as noted we would prefer to handle our boons tonight for sentimental reasons."

"You could give her a rain check," I said. "Then you'd feel like you gave her something."

"Oh! Certainly!" said Luna. Another moon-bolt struck the ground, knocking over the cocoa hook entirely and driving away a stubborn owl who had apparently finally decided that enough was enough. When the spots cleared a second time, the second crater contained a rather tiny and anticlimactic slip of parchment.

"Oop," said Luna. "Tamp thy hoof down on that little thing lest it blow away." I did so.

Luna turned back to the concealed Fluttershy. **"THE RAIN-CHECK FOR THY HEART'S DESIRE LIES SAFELY BENEATH THE PUISSANT HOOF OF THY COMPANION!"** she announced.

Fluttershy did not move. "Princess," I said, wincing.

"Oh, right. Our volume." She cleared her throat. "Come retrieve the rain-check on thy, er, wait, possibly 'your', boon, little one."

Fluttershy peeped out from under the blanket. I smiled encouragingly and telekinetically picked up and showed her the parchment slip. Slowly, hesitantly, Fluttershy emerged from her blanket fort and nipped the parchment out of the air.

"Excellent," said Luna. "And what about your boon, Twilight Sparkle?"

"Me?" I said. "Oh, there's no need. Saving you from absolute evil and corruption was my pleasure. Really. No need for any special boons."

"That's not true," said Fluttershy, busily stashing away her rain check. "Oh -- I mean... if you don't mind me saying so. It's just -- well, you were talking so much about how much the light pollution was bothering your stargazing, and--"

"DONE!" cried Luna. **"I SHALL COVER THE LAND IN non-ETERNAL DARKNESS!"**

"No!" I shouted, as Fluttershy zipped back under the blanket. "No, please!"

"Well, what then?" said Luna, petulantly. "I needs't to make some reparation of the tremendous debt between myself and thou, Twilight Sparkle. How about a brand new telescope?"

"Are you going to slam it into the ground and make another crater in the road?"

Luna pondered this. "Possibly," she admitted. **"O CURSED BE MY LACK OF IMPULSE CONTROL!"**

"Okay, tell you what," I said, hastily. "You can do me a favor. You can accompany us all out of town somewhere far away from that concert. Maybe then we can get some decent stargazing in and salvage some of the night."

"You... you want me to walk with you?"

"Yep!"

"That's... that's it? Just walk?"

"Yep!" I affirmed. "Just somewhere nice and dark."

Luna thought about this for the moment. "I know the place," she said, at last. "Twilight, you will accompany me to my old observatory on Griffinwatch Hill."

"Your what?" I asked, suddenly stung by the curiosity bee.

"When my sister and I ruled this country from our palace in what is now the Everfree Forest, I often felt as though I needed... a place of my own. Far from the lights of our castle." Luna's eyes went distant. "And... far from my sister, sometimes." She shook off an unpleasant memory and pressed on. "I found a high and bald hill, which I named Griffinwatch, deep within the forest. And there I founded a small, yet magnificent, observatory where I could make most compelling observations of the night sky."

"I want to see this place," I said. I thought, but did not add, the words, "so bad".

Luna shook her head. "Likely it has fallen into disrepair," she said. "I... have not been back there since my release. I feared that the seeing it in its current state would smite my heart a blow from which it could not recover." Luna squared her jaw. "But for you, Twilight Sparkle, I shall do this."

"Great!" I said. "Come on, Spike! Come on, Fluttershy!"

From under the blanket came Fluttershy's voice. "The Everfree Forest?" she said, timidly. "There're Ursas there!"

"It'll be all right," I said. "They're probably all asleep. You remember our joint research project on the ecology of the Ursa? The stars are in completely the wrong configuration for them to be up and about."

Fluttershy peered out again. "I... think I'd prefer to stay here. No offense."

"But what about our astronomy?"

Fluttershy grimaced. "I was mostly here for the cocoa," she said.

I sighed. "Okay. I understand. But I'd hate to think of any of my friends alone on this night. Spike?"

I glanced over to see Spike, trembling on the thin edge of self-control that separated him from his delicious aged diamonds. "Spike!" I said, louder.

"Huh?" he said, looking up.

"Spike, I'm going to go do some stargazing with the Princess. Please keep Fluttershy company and play some Hex with her or something."

"You can count on me!" said Spike, saluting crisply, though I noticed his eyes were straying back to his new hoard.

"Great," I said. "And Fluttershy?"

"Yes?"

"Go easy on him."

"Gotcha," she said, winking.

"THEN IT IS SETTLED!" thundered Luna, turning to go. **"COME WITH ME, TWILIGHT SPARKLE, AND MAKE HASTE! EVERY MINUTE SPENT HERE IS ONE LESS MINUTE SPENT SEARCHING THE HEAVENS!"**

"Gotta go," I said, grabbing my telescope and turning to trot along after.

As Spike and Fluttershy receded into the distance, I could barely catch one last smidge of conversation.

"I hope Twilight will be all right."

"What's the worry?" comforted Spike. "She's just going deep into the Everfree Forest." Pause. "At night." Pause. "...with Nightmare Moon."

And then they were gone. Fluttershy was right, I thought, looking up at the proud form of Princess Luna trotting along all headstrong beside me. This might be one of the crazier things I had ever done. But there was really no choice, was there? My stargazing was calling.

Astronomy can be a hard mistress.

Chapter 2

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 given 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.

* * *

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!"

* * *

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 Griffonwatch 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.

Chapter 3

"Oh, dear," I said. Then, I shouted down from the parapet of the observatory tower. "Princess!"

Far below me on the surface of the hill and cocooned in a veil of raw shining magic, Luna did not respond. Even from this distance, I could see that her eyes were half-closed with the effort she was expending in pulling the entire sky out of alignment. I took a deep breath and tried again. "Princess Luna," I called out, "what are you *doing*?"

Luna's eyelids fluttered. She glanced back at me and the sky gave a sickening lurch as it struggled to reassert its natural position. "Ah, Twilight!" she shouted back, pulling a rug of joviality over the strain in her voice. "Perhaps thou hast noticed something a bit 'off' about the stars, yes?"

"You might say that!" I yelled.

"Yes, well, we have decided that we are going to give thou what thou most desire'st tonight: a chance to see thy new star! Is that not wondrous?"

"Princess, I don't think—"

"ENOUGH!" screamed Luna, suddenly, in a voice that literally shook the heavens. **"ALL EVENING, I HAVE BEEN TRYING AND TRYING TO REPAY MY DEBT TO YOU, BUT YOU KEEP NOT LETTING ME!"**

I took a couple clumsy and unwitting steps away from the edge of the tower. Luna seethed at me, her corona boiling angry black and shedding rays of dark energy skyward. **"TWILIGHT SPARKLE,"** she continued, **"YOU WILL OBSERVE YOUR NEW STAR TONIGHT, AND YOU WILL THUS PERMIT ME TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT BETWEEN US, AND YOU WILL ENJOY IT!"**

Luna stood, breathing heavily for a moment, and then wrested her composure back into place. "And yes, before thou askest, that *is* a Royal Command. You are now mandated to be pleased, huzzah!"

I swallowed hard. "Yes, Princess," I said, barely loud enough to carry to the ground.

"Good," Luna called up to me, her aura flaring back to a businesslike slate color. "Now this next part isn't a bit tricky, so why dost thou not just run along back to thy telescope and prepare thyself for when we lift the Orion Nebula above the horizon, yes?"

I nodded wordlessly and then stumbled back across the tower roof to my makeshift workstation, taking a few moments to straighten everything once I got there. I was barely keeping it together as it was, and I didn't need clutter on top of everything else. Why do things always go so bad so quickly?

I squeezed my eyes shut and recited the first sixty digits of pi to get steady. All right, Twilight, I said to myself. The night is obviously a wash. Just buckle down, take a quick peek at your star as soon as Luna pulls it visible, and then you can both just go home and bring an end to this charade. I put my eye back to the eyepiece of the telescope and swung it around, trying to orient myself to the off-kilter sky. Tomorrow, I continued, you'll look back at all this and lauaAAAH!

I jumped back from the snarling face in my eyepiece. Thank Celestia that objects in the telescope appear closer than they are, I thought, but what could possibly—

—and then I saw it. Moving steadily through the foliage of the Everfree Forest below was a massive, shaggy, somewhat translucent animal, tall enough that its head just penetrated the surrounding canopy. The creature gazed about at the world with sleepy malice, motes of light flickering beneath its dimly luminescent hide. It was one of the star-beasts, a baby Ursa.

"Oh, no," I said. "This can't be happening!" My research with Fluttershy had clearly shown that tonight's stars were in entirely the wrong position for the Ursas to be up and about! Theoretically, this should be impossible...

...unless tinkering with the starfield and shaking it around had confused the creatures enough that one of them had been jostled awake...

I rushed back across to the other side of the tower, the side closest to where Luna was still braced against the tremendous forces she was bringing to bear against the night sky. "Princess Luna!" I shouted. "You have to stop! You're disturbing the Ursa Minors!"

"Ursas Minor," corrected Luna, calling back over her shoulder.

"Yes, sorry!" I said, genuinely mortified by my incorrect pluralization. "You're right. But the point is, you're getting them all riled up!"

"Worry not, young Twilight!" Luna announced. "I have the beast in sight, and it will pose no threat to thou or thy viewing!"

"How can you have the beast in sight?" I yelled. "It's on the other side of the—"

And then my stomach fell as I looked out over the forest on this side of the tower and saw an identical wake of rustling leaves stretching out behind yet another monstrous blue-black form: a second Ursa.

"Oh, no," I repeated. "Luna! That's not the only—"

At that exact moment, Luna's mantle burst into a twining column of angry red spirals. Gale-force winds howled up out of nothingness, ripping the words from my throat and scattering my astronomy notes into a storm of paper. **"CHURLISH BEAST!"** thundered Luna from below. **"ONE THOUSAND YEARS PAST WE DROVE THY KIN INTO THE CAVES BENEATH THE EARTH, AND WE SHALL DO SO AGAIN!"**

The angry red column reached up into the heavens like a grasping claw, calling to it a score of meteors. With one forceful gesture, Luna hurled them to the ground in front of the baby Ursa. It recoiled from them, bellowing in fear. **"COWER AT THE WRATH OF THE MOON-PRINCESS!"** howled Luna, her Pegasus wings menacingly outstretched. **"HOW DARE'ST THOU DISTURB US! THERE ARE DELICATE ASTRONOMICAL EXPERIMENTS GOING ON!"**

I ground my rear teeth for a moment, made one last futile attempt to be heard over the sound of the wind and the meteor strikes and the sheer volume of Luna's Royal Canterlot Voice, and then gave up and summoned magic of my own. If Luna couldn't hear me from this distance, well then, I simply had to close the distance. My horn sparkled with the crisp, headachy power of a teleport spell as I folded space in two and then stepped across...

...directly into open air. I scrambled comically for a moment, flailed out with my hooves, and managed to catch them on the crumbling edge of the observatory tower. My calculations are sometimes wrong, but they're never *that* wrong — Luna's noisy, radiant magic field had to be warping the Stream completely out of shape. Buffeted by powerful winds, I slowly managed to pull myself back up to the roof of the tower, my mind frantically rolling through calculations that could compensate for the presence of such a huge and chaotic active magical aura nearby. Long story short, I failed.

So take the stairs, I thought, impatiently. I made my way back over to my workstation, which was by now in shambles. I picked up and stowed my telescope in my saddlebags, folded my portable writing desk, counted all the scattered papers and spilled ink as a loss, and then, only then, looked up to see the first Ursa, towering above me.

"Speedy little guy," I muttered, backing away. It growled — an impossibly deep and throaty rumble that shook me from chest to withers — and then lunged at me, paws wide. I yelped and dived for the safety of the trap door leading to the stairs, but was only halfway there when the Ursa's claw caught the last remaining support strut of the old observatory dome, causing the whole huge metal tangle to come crashing down in front of me. I dodged at the last instant, spun practically on the tip of one hoof, and ran off in a new direction, toward the edge of the tower, my writing desk trailing along behind me in my telekinetic field.

When I reached the edge, I bunched my legs beneath me and then leapt for dear life onto the roof of one of the wings that connected the central tower to the outbuildings. After a few seconds of air time, my hooves scraped flagstone and I hit the ground running, charging headlong across the battlemented roof, my nostrils reddening with effort; I was making good progress toward the second tower when a stray meteor from one of Luna's

repeated strikes impacted the floor in front of me, sending me tumbling into the blackness below.

For a moment, all was quiet and dark around me. I got up and checked myself for broken bones, and finding none, I stowed my writing desk in my saddlebag and then illuminated my horn with a Violet Flare spell and shone it around the arching second-floor hallway where I found myself. I had just enough time for a bare glimpse of rag-draped walls that had once been a tapestry gallery of some kind before there was a crash from above and the great paw of the Ursa hammered down from the hole created by the meteor hit, the hole I had just fallen through. I spun around and took off at full gallop down the old hallway, leaping and dodging the wreckage of fallen chandeliers as I went. I could hear the ground vibrate outside as the Ursa tracked my movement along the hallway. The Ursa knew where I was, I thought, but at least in here I'd be temporarily saf—

With a crash, the Ursa's paw broke through the fieldstone wall directly ahead of me, scattering rubble everywhere. I screamed, then ducked and slid under its arm, even as its searching claw thudded blindly down mere inches to my left. I skidded on my face for about a yard and then got my feet under me and continued breathlessly running.

For better or for worse, the hallway was ending soon, and in just a few more seconds I found myself on the top interior level of the tower I had been aiming at. I stopped short, scrabbling against the stone floor to keep myself from tumbling down into empty air; a downward-leading spiral staircase hugged the outer wall, but other than that, the entire tower was a big open space, filled with gears and the ruins of complex machinery, probably an ancient Orrery. I had no time to appreciate the wonder of what this chamber must have looked like in good repair. I had to get down to the first floor, down to Luna, and plead with her to stop this madn—

Again, the questing paw of the Ursa smashed through the wall ahead of me. With no time for anything else, I leapt from the staircase onto its forearm and then back down to the stairs beyond. The Ursa's paw struck the twisted remains of the Orrery at the center of the tower and apparently became entangled. It roared in frustration, pulling back and lifting the entire mass of twisted metal to smash repeatedly against the tower wall as it tried to extricate itself. Now dodging falling stones from above on top of everything else, I finally achieved ground level and burst through the half-

rotten door leading outside to the cool night air even as the entire tower crumbled behind me. Trumpeting angrily, the Ursa waved its paw about, hopelessly caught up in the metal wreckage it had pulled all the way out of the now-destroyed tower.

I re-located Luna's position on the hill by her eye-searing nimbus and speeded across the jasmine and heather in her direction, eldritch wind whipping at my mane as I ran.

"Princess Luna!" I shouted, galloping up to her.

"Oh, hello, Twilight Sparkle!" said Luna, with forced conviviality. A trickle of sweat wended its way down her royal cheek. "We thought that thou might still be up on the tower roof!" Luna turned angrily back in the direction of the Ursa she had been trying to scare away with meteors. "**BACK, CREATURE!**" she thundered. "**BACK!**" More meteors rained down from the sky, shaking the earth as they fell.

"Princess, you have to stop this! You're making the Ursas crazy!"

"But what about thy new star?"

"Forget the new star! I hate to be the one to tell you this, but these Ursas are taking us to the farrier here!"

"Marry, wait, 'Ursas'?" said Luna. "We are sorry, there is a second beast? We must have totally missed that fact! Oh, right, the pluralization problem. Very well, let us direct some of heaven's anger thataway!"

"No!" I pleaded. I wanted to throw myself bodily at her, but I wasn't sure if I should be touching her aura in the state it was in. I wasn't even sure I should be standing next to it.

"Come now, Twilight Sparkle, just a few more minutes." Luna tossed her head in the direction of the horizon. "Soon we will have the Orion Nebula up. Dost thou see'st the stars of his belt over there?"

I squinted. "Yes, I see them, but it doesn't matter, Princess!"

"Of course it matters," said Luna, matter-of-factly. "It means we do not have long to go!"

"I don't care how long we have to go! It's the middle of the night, in the spring! I don't *want* to be able to see Orion's Belt!"

And, suddenly, as if on cue, I could no longer see Orion's Belt. Not because the sky had fallen back into place, but because it had been obscured by a huge mass that had pulled itself head and shoulders out from a distant rocky cleft and then continued to rise.

I had never seen an Ursa Major before, the parent version of the baby Ursas that had been harrying us. I knew all about them: huge, tusked paleoponic things as tall as mountains, who slumbered, sometimes for centuries, in their gargantuan caves deep beneath the hills and rocks of the earth. But no diagram in any ecology textbook could prepare me for the sight of one in the flesh. My knees locked. My mouth went dry. I could do nothing but stare as the paralyzingly huge animal turned to face us, moving with ponderous, nightmarish slowness.

It took a single, league-long step in our direction. Trees flattened beneath its tread. The shock of its footfall scared up birds for miles around, and they rose in huge noisy black clouds into the night.

"Luna?" I finally managed. The Ursa Major took another step toward the observatory, toward us.

"We believe," said Luna, staring straight ahead, eyes flinty, "that we can take this chump."

I finally exploded. "You," I shouted, "are being *selfish*!"

Luna blinked at me, startled. Her corona of power faltered. The Ursa Major took another earthshaking step.

"All evening," I said, trembling, "I have told you exactly what I wanted. Every time you asked me. I never lied. I never hesitated. But somehow, that wasn't enough for you! And now, we're about to die because of it!"

The Ursa Major closed in on our position. I could barely keep my feet now. Rocks fell freely from the ruins behind us. "It turns out," I shouted, "that this never was about me at all! All these elaborate gifts, they're all for you! To make *you* feel better, to the exclusion of everypony else! And I don't want a present like that!"

"Twilight," said Luna, gently, her corona flickering out; and as it did so, the sky slammed back into its customary position with a dizzying jolt. Then the Ursa Major was upon us. We stood there for a moment, silhouetted against the light of the great glowing star-beast, just two tiny little ponies.

The Ursa Major raised one claw and brought it around in a shining arc, cleaving the main observatory tower in two.

Tons and tons of rock tumbled down at us.

I threw myself at Luna, performed the mother of all teleport calculations in my head, and then my horn flared once and we were gone.

* * *

We watched from a distant hill as the Ursa Major returned the remains of Griffinwatch Observatory to the earth. Then, with an ear-splitting bellow that managed to sound nonetheless tender, it called its two children to itself, comforting the one that Luna had frightened with meteors and, with a strange gentleness, working its other child's paw free of the Orrery-wreckage. The Ursa Major sniffed mightily at the sky, gazed appraisingly at the constellations that had now returned to their proper positions, and then slipped back into the Everfree Forest, its young in tow, vanishing without a trace.

Gradually, the normal noises of the night reasserted themselves.

"Twilight," said Luna. "We... I am... sorry."

I nodded, shivering slightly in the increasing cold, the sweat of my recent exertions now chilling me to the bone. Luna looked me over, and then, with a flash of pale orange from her horn, summoned a warm sheet of dry air that immediately made me feel better.

"What you said back there," continued Luna. "On the Hill."

"Forget it," I said.

"No," Luna insisted. "You were absolutely correct. We... er, I, was so preoccupied with all the bad things I've done to ponykind that I couldn't see clearly. I got so wrapped up in my own need to make amends that I stopped caring what you actually wanted. And that's the worst sort of gift."

I nodded. Even confirming what she herself was telling me would feel a little smug and sacrilegious, so I just played dumb for a while.

Eventually I did speak up. "I'm sorry about your observatory."

Luna shook her head. "Don't be."

"Maybe you could build a new one there. It really is a good location for stargazing, if a little... treacherous."

"I may," said Luna. "Or I may not. In either case it will be something completely new, not a relic of the long-buried past, of somepony who's not me anymore."

"But you *are* you," I said. "Ever since I was a little filly, I would look up into the sky and see the image of your face in the craters of the lunar surface. My mother told me stories of the Mare in the Moon, and I would sometimes wonder what kind of person she was, if she was ever lonely up there."

"She was," said Luna, quietly.

I shifted a little beneath Luna's comforting wind-blanket. "You were the first thing I ever observed in the night sky, Princess Luna. And ever since I met you, the real you, not your Envy-corrupted shadow, I've wanted to know more about you, about the mare who introduced me to astronomy. And that's a greater gift than anything else I can imagine tonight."

"So... for your boon, we should..."

"Talk," I said. "Like I said before. Get to know each other, just you and me. It's a beautiful clear night, we've got a nice warm breeze going, the threat of

death has temporarily subsided, I've still got a little granola, and, last but not least, we're magic unicorn ponies. From where I'm standing, that puts us in a happy place."

"Very well, then," said Luna. "What would you like to hear about?"

"Tell me about what tonight was like thirteen hundred and forty-four years ago," I said. "Before anything went bad, before Griffinwatch, before Equestria. Tell me about the night the baby star was actually born, all those light-years away."

And so she did.

* * *

"So I summoned up my courage like you told me to and I turned in that rain check and I asked Princess Luna if I could maybe possibly please have a new pet Cloud Rat for my boon."

"Good for you, Fluttershy," I said.

Fluttershy smiled bashfully. "Angel helped." Fluttershy's little pet bunny nodded affirmatively from his position on her back. "And then Princess Luna said, 'A rat? All thou wantest for thy boon is a rat?' And I was about to say no, because I got frightened, but then Angel poked me and I said yes, a Cloud Rat is a very special rat and I've always wanted to love and take care of one. And it seemed like she was about to say something else but then she changed her mind and said, 'A rat it is!' and now I've got my very own cuddly fluffy little Cloud Rat and I couldn't be happier."

"That's such good news, for so many reasons." I said. Then I glanced around. "Um, where's your rat now?"

"Oh, he's at home, settling in for his first night's sleep in a new place. I'm going back there right now to make sure he's not scared and that he has everything his teeny-tiny little heart desires, but I wanted to stop by and let you know how grateful I was for you talking to the Princess for me last night."

"No problem, Fluttershy. That's what friends are for."

Fluttershy smiled a wee little smile. "See you tomorrow for badminton?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I said, escorting my guests to the door.

After we had said our good-byes, I climbed up to my little sleeping loft overlooking the library proper and started getting ready for bed. The sky was just turning to purple dusk, but it had been a very late and eventful night last night, and I thought it wouldn't hurt me to turn in a little early. Spike had beaten me to it, snoring peacefully in his little basket; truth to tell, he had hardly been conscious at all today, so torpid was he after devouring that entire chest full of diamonds, and then, the chest itself. I didn't mind. Today felt like a rest day.

Tomorrow would be different. Tomorrow was big: studying, studying, badminton with Fluttershy, studying, some card catalog rearrangement, and then some more studying. Oh, and I had two full letters to write. The first letter would be to Princess Celestia, explaining how last night's adventure had taught me that the greatest gift a pony can give to her friends isn't a telescope, or a chest full of jewels, or even a new Cloud Rat pet. The greatest gift a pony can give to her friends is the gift of being a friend, of just being there, listening to them, sharing stories and having fun. The gift of herself. And as I planned my first letter, I thought of what Luna had said about her sister as we walked through the forest together, and I wondered if, somehow, my letter would make Princess Celestia feel less alone. Living forever in the tower of a mountainside castle was not all that different from living in the moon, after all.

The second letter would be to Princess Luna, thanking her for our one not-quite-perfect but unquestionably memorable night together and expressing the hope that we could do it again soon, maybe with a little more talking and stargazing and fewer wild animal attacks. I didn't quite understand why, but I felt somehow that Luna and I had just taken the first steps of a journey together that would lead us to places neither of us could even dream.

That was all for tomorrow. Tonight, I was content to snuggle under my blankets and lose myself to sleep for a while. But before I did so, I trotted over to the small telescope at my upper window and fixed it on the Orion Nebula, just now becoming visible on the horizon line.

I squeezed one eye shut and peered through the viewer, quickly locating the object I was searching for, twinkling softly against the violet dusk.

"Happy one thousand three hundred forty-fourth birthday, baby star," I whispered. "One day late."

I crawled into bed and shut out the light.