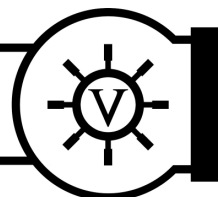


For Those We Left Behind

Drakmire

PONY FICTION VAULT



A knock sounded at the library door.

Twilight looked at it but remained silent. She returned to staring down at her hooves and the neatly folded letter between them.

"Twilight, dear, are you home?"

No, Rarity. I'm not.

The door opened without Twilight's response. She heard Rarity approaching, but rather than greet her guest, she shifted her gaze out the window.

"Ah, there you are, darling. Would you be so kind as to loan me Spike for the rest of the day? I'm running *dreadfully* low on rubies, and the Fillydelphia Fall Fashion Fantasia is just around the corner."

Be calm.

"Sorry, Rarity. I gave him the day off."

The sound of hoofsteps on wood stopped just beside Twilight. She glanced up, then looked out the window, pointedly ignoring the letter in her hooves.

"Oh, that's *quite* all right," Rarity said. "Do you know where he might have gone off to?"

Twilight shook her head.

Serene.

Rarity remained quiet for a moment. From the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Rarity giving her a long, searching look.

"Twilight?" Rarity sat down and glanced briefly at the letter. "Is something the matter?" She brought her head low, shifting around, but Twilight avoided her gaze.

"Twilight." Rarity reached a hoof out and gently turned her friend by the chin. "Twilight, look at me."

Twilight obeyed for a moment before looking away again.

"What's wrong?" Rarity asked.

Empty.

Twilight tilted her head toward the letter. "My mother died three nights ago."

Precise.

"She passed away in her sleep."

Accurate.

"Peacefully."

Subjective.

Rarity leaned over and pulled Twilight into an embrace.

"Oh, my poor dear, I'm so sorry."

Twilight blinked as tears spilled down her cheeks; her lips trembled, and a lump formed in her throat.

Calm.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The constriction in her throat eased, and Twilight put her head on Rarity's shoulder.

"I just..." Twilight's words faltered and died.

"It's okay, Twilight. Take as much time as you need."

Twilight closed her eyes and let her mind drift. A few minutes passed before either of them spoke again.

"Mom..." Twilight's voice cracked; her mouth worked silently for a moment before she regained control. "My mother was on sabbatical in Trottingham to talk with the other professors there."

"What happened?"

"A stroke, the doctors said. Sudden, quick, and painless. I just..."

Twilight stopped. She tried to continue on, but her mind had run out of track. She closed her mouth and fell silent.

"Tell me about her?"

"She was... my mother," Twilight said after a long minute. "I never really knew her. I boarded at Celestia's School from when I was just a filly until graduation, then I studied directly under Princess Celestia. After that, I came here. I wrote home maybe half a dozen times over the years." Her voice trailed off. "I never really knew her at all."

Rarity nuzzled Twilight.

"I'm afraid I don't know what to say."

"That's all right. I don't either."

"Have you told the others?"

"I've been alone here since morning. Just... thinking."

"Thinking."

"Yeah."

Rarity nuzzled Twilight again.

"I'm not going to presume to tell you what to do, but I just want to remind you that we're your friends, Twilight. We'll be here for you when you need us."

When.

Twilight sighed.

"Thanks, Rarity. I think I'm going to get some rest and then decide what's next."

"Whatever you want, darling."

They stood and walked to the door.

"What of your father?"

"He'll be back in Canterlot in a few days." Twilight paused. "For the funeral."

Rarity lowered her head.

"Is there anything I can do to help? Would you like me to accompany you?"

Twilight forced a smile.

"Thank you, but it's all right."

Rarity opened the door, stepped out, and looked back.

"Twilight?"

"Yeah?"

"I hope you'll tell me more about her one day."

A pause.

"Yeah."

Twilight turned around, and the door closed behind her.

• • •

Twilight pushed her dinner away. Most of the food remained untouched.

"Thanks, Spike." She pulled herself away from the dining table and found a spot on the sofa, pulling a blanket up around herself as she fell into a thoughtful silence.

He waited nearby, worrying the serving tray in his claws.

"Anything I can do to help?"

Twilight gave it a moment, then shook her head.

"C'mon, please? She meant a lot to you, and that means a lot to me, so..." He gave her a hopeful look.

Twilight sighed and patted the seat next to her. Spike obliged, and she pulled the blanket up around them.

"I don't know what to do, Spike, let alone tell you how you can help me."

"Well..." He scratched the side of his snout with one claw. "The service is in three days, you said?" She gave him a nod. "Do you know what you're going to say?"

Twilight froze, then her eyes went wide.

"A speech. I..." She began trembling, but stopped when Spike touched her shoulder gently.

"Easy, Twilight. Just..." He looked around. "Just tell them what you loved about her. About who she was and what she did."

Twilight nodded slowly. She glanced his way, and her eyes gave him the smile that her mouth couldn't.

"Sometimes I forget that you're older than you look."

Spike blushed and scratched at his spines.

"Aw, thanks, Twilight. But I mean it. If there's anything I can do to help... anything! Just tell me, okay?"

She put a foreleg around his shoulders and drew him into a hug.

"Thanks, but you already have."

• • •

The Canterlot Library dwarfed both her tiny book collection at home and the sizable book collection in Princess Celestia's personal study. Twilight breathed in the smell of morning air and old knowledge; it felt good to be back, circumstances aside. She stepped up to the counter and looked around.

A light-pink head poked out of a nearby doorway. The mare it belonged to gave Twilight a startled look, then trotted over after depositing a stack of books on the nearest counter top.

"Miss Twilight Sparkle," the pegasus said. "I beg your forgiveness – I didn't realize you'd arrived."

Twilight favored her with a polite smile.

"That's all right, I just got in. Is Dewey Dott around? He should have been expecting me today."

The pegasus ducked her head.

"The head librarian sends his apologies, as urgent matters are keeping him tied up. I'm afraid that he's left me to attend to your needs, but he set aside the materials you requested."

Twilight's smile grew softer around the edges, less brittle, more appreciative.

"Thank you, Miss...?"

"Dawn Star. Pleased to meet you." She sketched a quick curtsy, then regarded Twilight with an anxious expression. "Is something the matter?"

Twilight realized she had been staring.

"It's just... Star was my mother's name."

"I'm so sorry, Miss."

"Your name isn't your fault."

"Not for that. For your loss."

Twilight remained silent for a moment.

"Thank you, Dawn. Please, just call me Twilight."

Dawn ducked her head again.

"As it pleases you, Twilight." She backed up and half-turned. "Now, if you'll come this way, there's a private reading room set up for you."

They ascended three flights of stairs and walked through the stacks before they arrived. Dawn opened the door and stepped forward to tie back the curtains. Motes of dust spun through the shafts of sunlight before vanishing into washed-out shadow. She nodded to a pile of books and newspaper clippings lying atop a wooden desk.

"Might I inquire as to the subject matter?" Dawn asked.

"You haven't been curious?"

"I am just that."

"I meant before I got here."

"I'm curious, but not a snoop." Dawn paused. "At least, not without permission."

The corners of Twilight's mouth twitched.

"My mother. I never asked her about her work. She was always just kind of... Mom. You know? Dad's out of town, so all I've got..." Twilight gestured to the desk.

Dawn gave a polite nod, then turned to leave.

"I should let you be, then. I'm sure you know your way around, but please let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Twilight watched her go. Alone, she opened the first book within reach and began reading.

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An hour later, a cup of tea appeared beside Twilight. She set aside the article she had been reading and looked up to see Dawn giving her a nod.

"Thanks," Twilight said.

"Meeting with much success?"

"Yeah. Have some time?"

"I'm at your disposal," Dawn said as she found a seat.

Twilight paused.

"You knew me out there. Without an introduction."

"I did, yes."

"How?"

"Princess Celestia's only pupil and a prominent bibliophile? Your reputation preceded you." Dawn paused. "That, and the head librarian gave me your description."

Twilight digested this, then turned back to the articles.

"Funny what we learn about others without actually knowing them." She brushed aside one newspaper clipping and laid another flat for Dawn to see. "My mother was a professor here in Canterlot teaching Non-Equestrian History. This is her at a round-table meeting with her peers from other nations."

A smooth but faded newspaper photograph showed Star Sparkle seated beside a minotaur and a griffon. The angle of the shot hid the table's other occupants from view, but a buffalo horn jutted in from the edge of the frame.

"What are they discussing?"

"Prejudices, mostly," Twilight said. "Not their own, of course, at least not specifically. But the idea that we need to foster a greater understanding with one another, and how often we've failed to do that throughout history. All of us, not just ponies."

"Even just a little of that would go a long way," Dawn said. "Is this what you're looking for, then?"

Twilight glanced over for a moment before nodding.

"Kind of."

"Bit for your thoughts?"

Twilight glanced over again.

"If you don't mind me asking," Dawn said. "If I'm prying, tell me off."

"You're prying," Twilight said, wearing a faint smile. "But it's all right. It's nice to have somepony to talk to about this."

"It helps to keep their memory alive," said Dawn.

Twilight gave her an appraising look. Dawn lowered her eyes before looking away.

"Yeah," Twilight said after a moment. "All of this, this isn't her, but it's more than I ever had, really."

"How do you mean?"

"I just... took her for granted, I guess. Both of my parents, really. Never really learned who they were when they weren't busy looking after me."

"Sounds like something you could remedy, at least in part?"

"I plan to, once my dad gets back."

"Then this..." Dawn gestured to the reading materials.

Twilight stared at the books.

"I wanted to have something to ask him about. I wouldn't even know, otherwise."

"Surely, Princess Celestia –"

Twilight was shaking her head.

"It's just... a very personal matter. I learned a long time ago to not go running to her for every problem, especially ones I can work out on my own."

Dawn nodded, then rose.

"I need to get back to my duties, and I've kept you from your reading long enough, but I'll be just downstairs if you want somepony to talk to."

"Thanks," Twilight said, losing herself in the books and only vaguely noting when the door closed behind her.

• • •

The first light of the moon found Twilight standing outside of a house she hadn't seen since she was a filly.

Home. Twilight paused. *No, it hasn't been mine for a long time, it's just theirs now.* A longer pause. *No, just Dad's.* She pulled the key from its old hiding place and opened the door.

"Mom, Dad, I'm home..." Her voice grew tremulous as it trailed off. Only darkness and silence greeted her in return. She stepped inside and closed the door.

The lights flicked on as she walked down the entryway, slowly, trying to reconcile the house she had known with the one now. The pictures were new, for one, lining the walls of the long corridor wherever space had been found. She recognized some faces like dreams that had faded by morning: here an old family friend, there a long-time neighbor. She paused at one showing Star and Lucent Sparkle along with an enormously happy Twilight only hours after she had gotten her cutie mark. Twilight smiled.

The photos began losing their familiarity after that. Her parents featured in ones more than twos for a time, though they were always smiling, always happy for the camera. Twilight began noticing a unicorn mare around her own age, teal of body and blue of hair, appearing regularly in Star's photos. Twilight remembered seeing her alongside Star in some of the newspaper clippings. She peered closely, trying to make out the pony's mark, as if that could help her remember the pony's name, but there was never a clear shot of it.

Willow... Something. Bark? Willow Leaf? Willow Wasp?

Twilight shook her head and tucked away the question for later. The library would be there tomorrow if her curiosity got the better of her.

In one photo, Willow and Star stood dressed in formal attire, posed with a griffin in the same. In another, the two ponies sat at the near end of a table, surrounded by zebras as they shared a dinner together. In most, they had been photographed with representatives of faraway lands.

In the last photo on the wall, Star, Lucent, and Willow appeared together. No formal attire, no diplomatic sit-down with others, no sign that they were doing more than having a pleasant dinner at Star and Lucent's home. All three had been caught mid-laugh. Twilight wondered what the joke had been.

She set her bags down in the living room and considered reading, but after spending the entire day in the library, her brain had reached full capacity. From out in the hallway, a grandfather clock chimed ten times, and she decided to call it an early night.

The hallway leading to her old bedroom was short, but as Twilight walked, checking off the things she would do the next morning, she passed her parents' bedroom and caught the faintest trace of a scent on the air.

Her mother's floral perfume: understated, inoffensive, unbearably familiar. A rush of memories crashed over her then: the rich hue of her mother's mane in sunlight, the softness of her mother's fur as she drew Twilight into a hug, the bell-tone sound of her mother's laughter carried on a summer breeze.

Twilight squeezed her eyes shut as the first sob came, silent and wracking. She leaned against the wall and slid into a graceless heap, her breath coming in ragged gasps and thin whines as she finally let go. Her eyes hurt, and her throat hurt, and her heart hurt, and she just wanted to sleep.

She closed her eyes, but her mind showed her memory after faded memory, and when those ran out, showed her images of things that could now never be. Eventually, despite the frayed carpet and hard stone beneath her, Twilight passed into a dreamless, unbroken sleep for the first time in days.

• • •

In the morning, Twilight stood outside an unfamiliar door, hoof raised but arrested. After a moment's hesitation, she shook her head and knocked.

The door opened, revealing a teal unicorn wearing a puzzled, if friendly, expression.

"Hello?"

"Hi, are you... Willow Whisper, by chance?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I was wondering if we might talk for a bit."

Willow was already beckoning Twilight inside as she finished speaking.

"Please, of course, I should have recognized... Oh, I'm so... Please, please, here."

Willow closed the door behind them.

"Well," she said, looking Twilight up and down. A moment later, she turned abruptly and led Twilight out of the foyer and into the kitchen, gesturing for Twilight to take a seat at a small table.

"Tea?"

"Please."

The gas stove hissed to life, filling the awkward silence between the two as they politely tried to avoid looking at one another.

Willow took a deep breath and said, "I've heard a lot about you."

"From my mother?"

"And your father, yes."

"You're a bit of a mystery to me, I'm afraid."

"How did you know me then?"

"Some of my mother's unfinished letters. To you, not me." Twilight wore a tight smile. "I got curious this morning and started going through her things."

"No need to apologize."

"I wasn't."

"Sorry," Willow said.

"I noticed you in a lot of their newer photos and started wondering who you were."

"Just one of her students."

"More than that, I'm guessing?"

"Just a student who shared her enthusiasm."

"A daughter she never had," Twilight said. The hissing of the burner went undisturbed for a long minute.

"She talked about you a lot, you know," Willow said.

Twilight remained silent, but her ears swiveled to attention.

"Not... not about what you just mentioned," Willow said. "More that she wished she could have told you about the wonderful things she's seen and the creatures she's met." A pause. "She said she didn't want to bore you, though."

"I wouldn't have been bored."

"Princess Celestia's favored, and only, student?"

"I wouldn't have been bored," Twilight said.

"She thought you might." A click, and the hissing stopped. Willow set the cups on the table and poured for two, then sat and waited. Eventually: "I'm sorry."

Twilight looked away, and her ears drooped.

"Yeah. Me too."

"Lucent should be back this evening."

"Yeah."

"Do you want to talk until then?" Willow asked.

"No."

"But –"

"But I should," Twilight said. She rubbed her eyes with one hoof and took a sip of tea.

"I'm sorry," Willow said.

"You said that already."

Willow bowed her head for a moment, then spoke.

"I first met Star when she was teaching a class on deerish narrative traditions. Did you know that they don't use any sort of writing?"

Twilight shook her head.

"They don't, they really don't. I'd signed up for the class just as a filler credit, but Star's fascination with their entire culture was contagious. It really came through in the way she spoke about them, the kinds of assignments she gave us that encouraged us to dig deeper and really think about what kind of impact that would have on their tribal knowledge. She even managed to arrange a sort of exchange program with them, and –" She gave Twilight an apprehensive look.

"And what?" Twilight asked.

"Sorry, did I say something?"

"A lot of things," Twilight said. "Why'd you stop?"

"You had a look. This isn't boring you?"

"No. Go on, please."

Willow studied Twilight for a moment before continuing.

"And I was the only one in the class who was willing to go through with it. Six months abroad studying such a different culture!" She smiled at Twilight. "The deer were very polite."

Twilight returned the smile, in part.

"Shared her enthusiasm, huh?"

"Not just about the deerfolk, but all sorts of others." Willow gave Twilight a puzzled frown. "This is all news to you?"

"I didn't keep in touch as much as I should've."

"Sorry."

"Yeah. We've said that already."

"Still sorry." Willow looked down at her tea. "She loved you, you know."

"She was my mother."

"Yes, but I mean..." Willow fidgeted with her cup. "Never mind. Forget it."

"What?"

"No, just forget it."

"Tell me." Twilight paused. "Please?"

Willow fidgeted with the tea cup again. She started to bring it to her lips, stopped midway, then set it back down with a clatter.

"You weren't wrong before." She looked up, met Twilight's gaze. "I could see it when she looked at me, sometimes. When I'd get excited about something that she wanted us to understand, she'd smile and give me this look, like she was so, so happy, but then her eyes would go distant and she'd look a little sad and I'd get this feeling like it wasn't really me she saw standing there anymore." Willow blinked rapidly and looked away.

"I'm sorry," Twilight said. She placed a hoof on Willow's own.

"Yeah."

• • •

They steered the conversation through safer waters for a time, taking advantage of the weather for a stroll to help put their minds at ease. However, as lunch came and went, they found themselves returning to the reason for their meeting.

"I'm supposed to say a few words," Twilight said.

"I don't think it has to be anything formal."

"That's just it – I've got almost nothing *but* formal knowledge. Her published works, clippings from the campus newsletters, even the stuff we talked about has been my mother as a professor."

Twilight stopped, giving Willow a searching look.

"What?" Willow asked.

"There was a picture. You and my parents at dinner, laughing. What was that?"

"Oh. Nothing much, I guess?" Willow sat on her haunches and scratched at her mane. "Star had just come back from abroad and just wanted to have dinner together. Why do you ask?"

Twilight peered at her and tried not to look hurt.

"What was she like?" As Willow began to speak, Twilight hastened to add: "Personally."

Willow closed her mouth and appeared to give it some thought.

"Goofy," Willow said after consideration.

"What?"

"Goofy. You know, cornball humor, terrible puns, laughs at her own jokes." Willow grimaced. "Laughed at her own jokes."

Twilight nodded and looked pensive.

"It's not really a fair question, I guess," Twilight said. "I can't really expect you to fill me in on an entire life that I neglected."

"You didn't -"

"Don't." Twilight looked up, met Willow's gaze. Twilight smiled to soften her words. "Please. It's all right."

"Maybe Lucent?"

"Maybe." Twilight cocked her head and gave Willow an appraising look. "I've got a few hours, want to see where I grew up? The school, I mean."

Willow shook her head.

"Sorry, I'm actually expecting visitors in a little bit. Another time?"

"Sure," Twilight said, shrugging.

Willow paused.

"Honest. Sometime when things aren't so grim."

Twilight smiled and said, "All right. I'll give you more warning the next time I drop by then."

Willow turned to go, but Twilight stopped her with a gesture.

"Do me a favor?" Twilight said.

"Yeah?"

"Write your folks."

Willow smiled.

"I will. Promise."

• • •

When the moon rose over Canterlot, it found Twilight in her parent's home, waiting. She had a book propped open before her, but having reread the same passage for the dozenth time, she rubbed her eyes and decided to take a break. She flopped on her side a moment before she heard the door opening, heard somepony scuffing their hooves at the welcome mat and jingling a set of keys. She sat up and waited.

"Hey Dad."

Lucent Sparkle paused as he entered the living room.

"Hey kiddo."

"I'm not a kid anymore."

Lucent studied Twilight in the dim glow of the house lights.

"No, I guess you aren't."

Twilight trotted over, and the two shared an awkward hug.

"How was the trip?" Twilight asked as she stepped back.

"About what you'd expect." He turned and floated a silver urn out from behind him; it came to rest on the mantle a moment later.

Twilight stared at the urn for a long minute. Then: "I don't know what to say."

Lucent pulled her close and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

"I know the feeling. I'm sorry, kiddo."

"Yeah." She glanced at him. "Me too."

They waited in silence for a time, but Twilight's growling stomach spoiled the moment.

She laughed nervously, but Lucent smiled at her.

"C'mon, let me fix something up for you." He led them to the kitchen and gestured for Twilight to have a seat at the dining table. His voice emerged muted and hollow as he rummaged around in the cabinets. "It's good to see you again, kiddo, though I wish times weren't what they are. How long have you been up from Ponyville?"

"A couple nights now."

"Been keeping yourself busy?" He pulled out a box of oatmeal and set a kettle on to boil. "I don't like the idea of you stewing here by yourself."

"I met Willow Whisper today."

Lucent paused, then nodded slowly.

"How'd that go?" he asked.

"We talked a lot. She seems nice."

"Willow's a good pony."

"She was supposed to be me." Twilight's voice held no accusation, but Lucent frowned all the same.

"Now hold on, that's not fair –"

"No."

"– Willow's a good pony," he repeated. "It was hard on your mother, you know. After you graduated –"

"Dad."

"– she thought you'd be around again, finally. She wanted to show you her work –"

"Dad."

"– talk to you again, catch up on all the times –"

"Dad!"

Lucent grimaced and stopped.

"Sorry, kiddo. It was just hard on both of us."

Twilight swiped a foreleg over her eyes.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm sorry too."

They ate their porridge in silence.

"I don't know what to say tomorrow," Twilight said.

"You don't have to say much, just a few words."

"I want to say more than that."

"The eulogy?"

Twilight shook her head.

"You'll do better than me for that," she said. "I just want something a little... more." Twilight glanced up, then back down to her empty bowl. "When I was talking with Willow today, it made me realize that I don't know *how* to say what I really want. How you and Mom were there for me, even though I barely wrote. How she had this passion for her job that I never even knew about, and yet she never imposed on me. I wouldn't have been bored. I wouldn't!" Twilight looked up, meeting Lucent's gaze. "But I was so busy living my own life that I just..."

He reached over and placed a hoof on hers.

"It's all right, Twilight. C'mere." She shuffled around the table and he pulled her into a hug. "Just say what's close to your heart. Mom'll understand. She always did."

Twilight spent a few minutes snuffling into his shoulder like a filly before she drew back, wiping her eyes with the back of her foreleg.

"Thanks, Dad."

Lucent smiled.

"Just be honest. You don't need to give a long speech or be eloquent or poetic. Just speak from the heart."

He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

"Go on, get some sleep. I know we're not looking forward to tomorrow, but I know Mom wouldn't want us staying up all night moping over her."

"Yeah," Twilight said with a half-hearted smile.

Her hoofsteps fell softly on the carpet where she had lain the previous night. She smelled her mother's perfume again, in passing, but she felt only a twinge of regret this time. The door to her old bedroom opened, and she went inside and fell asleep on a bed that had remained unchanged since she was just a filly.

• • •

The morning of the funeral, a thin veil of fog covered the ground, matched by overcast skies and a damp breeze.

Of the dozen speakers, the funeral program called for Twilight next-to-last, preceding only her father and his closing eulogy.

She thought of what she would say and tried not to fidget.

The service itself passed Twilight by as she waited in a fugue state. She fought to stay attentive, to absorb the kind words and thoughts of Star's friends and colleagues, almost all of whom were travelers from far abroad.

A shimmering leonine figure spoke of Star's generosity in distant Singapony; two camels told the crowd of Star's altruism in unforgiving Alpacaстан; a regal zebra mare shared a story of Star's empathy and understanding in scorching Marebasa. All spoke fondly of the pony she was, not the profession she held, and Twilight felt their affection for Star in their every word.

Willow Whisper gave them something much more personal: a brief tale of the pony she had come to love as much as her own mother. Twilight nodded as Willow looked her way, and they shared a momentary smile.

When Willow stepped down, Twilight rose. She walked to the podium, her thoughts turned inward, glancing for only the briefest of moments at the silver urn holding Star's ashes. She ascended and gazed out over the waiting crowd.

"We all have regrets: words left unsaid, memories never made, loved ones we neglected. My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I regret all of these things. I regret that I never really knew my mother. I regret that only recently did I try to learn who she was, what she did, the lives she's touched, the sorrows she's known. I've spent the past few days trying to remedy that, but all I'm left with are fragments of memories, pieces of times long gone, bits of a pony that I never knew. I'm left trying to grasp at the fullness of her life as I try to condense it down into so many words and phrases, articles and books and stories.

"And I am no closer to knowing her than I was before.

"Star Sparkle was my mother. She led a wonderful, beautiful life that I feel privileged to have known, even in the faded memories of my childhood and the glimpses I've seen in your words and the words of others. From her, I learned to cherish what I have, *whom* I have, while I have them." She looked at Lucent and gave him a tremulous smile. "Our lives are lessened by Star's passing, but as we share her memories between ourselves and others, we keep her alive in our hearts and our thoughts. I can only hope that as you think on her and all she did, who she was, and what she accomplished, that you remember to appreciate those close to you, and that you let them know that they are loved."

• • •

Twilight felt drained. She'd missed the majority of her father's speech, though she'd come away with the lingering impression of being caught up in a warm embrace, and for that, she smiled.

The guests shuffled by and expressed their condolences to her, one by one. She nodded and gave polite thanks, but forgot their faces a moment after they were gone.

Finally, a familiar, benevolent, wondrous pony stood waiting before her. Twilight looked up into the eyes of Princess Celestia.

"My dear Twilight Sparkle," Celestia said, bending down to nuzzle her.

"Princess," Twilight said, closing her eyes as her throat constricted.

"I am so sorry for your loss, my little pony," Celestia said, drawing back. "I wish I could say that the future will mend your heart completely, that you'll be left with only the good times, but you are ever my faithful student, and I would not lie to you."

"Thank you, Princess." Twilight didn't know what else to say.

"From one who has lived for so very long, I have only this to offer: we carry our loved ones with us, always. When the pain fades, our hearts will remember them. When the sorrow fades, our minds will remember them. When the memories fade, our souls will remember them. Always, we carry them with us. Be at ease, and let your mother's love guide you ever to peaceful waters."

Thus spoken, Celestia leaned forward and kissed Twilight upon the brow. Twilight squeezed her eyes shut as two tears trickled down her face.

"Thank you, Princess. I'll remember."

Celestia left, leaving only Lucent and Twilight and Star beneath the cloudy skies.

Twilight approached the urn, and Lucent approached alongside her. A peaceful silence passed between them. Only the wind and leaves and the grass spoke, sending long gusting sighs across the funeral grounds.

"Hey, Dad?" Twilight looked up, studying Lucent's face. "Can we..." She faltered. "Will you tell me about Mom? About you?"

Lucent gave Twilight a sad, soft smile.

"Yeah," he said. "I'd like that."