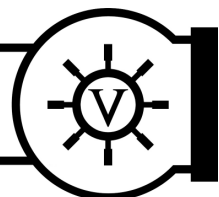


# Never So Far Away

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PONY FICTION VAULT



*The forest of April awakened from sleep, and flowers unfolded through snow.*

Twilight smiled at the beauty of it all. How had she missed this place for so long? She had lived in Canterlot for most of her life, not fifteen minutes' brisk trot away, but had never come here. Yet Fluttershy, who at the time couldn't have been to the mountainside city more than once or twice, had found it in less than a day.

A little while ago now, her mother had mentioned some kind of new museum of botany opening up in the capital in one of her letters, so she'd passed the news to her new pegasus friend. Fluttershy had visited, but she apparently hadn't been impressed.

"Oh, it was nice," she had said, in typical Fluttershy fashion, "and I'm sure they tried really, really hard making all the exhibits, but..." she trailed off, scratching at the ground with a hoof. "It was nice."

Fortunately, the day hadn't been a complete waste for her friend.

"Oh, but I found the most wonderful little patch of woodland, Twilight..." Fluttershy had then went on to speak at length of her discovery, and this time the enthusiasm was real. Twilight had listened, though she eventually had to get a map out because she had no idea which place Fluttershy had been talking about. Curiosity satisfied, she'd then promptly forgotten about Fluttershy's forest until today, when, during a guilt-induced visit to her parents, the memory resurfaced and she decided to spend the afternoon looking for it.

"This *is* better than a botany museum," she said to herself. A part of her felt she was betraying a piece of herself. She'd never learn the names of the plants, or interesting facts about their physiology, how they were discovered, and their role in the wider ecology like she could in a museum. But...

*"My dear Twilight, there is more to a young pony's life than studying."*

The forest was lovely. Even if she wasn't learning much. Besides, she was supposed to be relaxing, wasn't she? Mother's orders. In two weeks, she was giving a talk back at the school on the subject of friendship and the Elements of Harmony and fully half the unicorns in the school were expected to attend. Not to mention Princess Celestia *and* Princess Luna. Her notes were already prepared, the paper was written but that hadn't stopped her spending all yesterday in her old room drafting and redrafting them when she should have been spending time with her parents.

What would Celestia say? Well, that was obvious, she'd say the talk was good, but would she mean it? Would Twilight just see a mask that hid the princess's inner regret at all the time she'd wasted on her student? The princess had given her so much over the years: knowledge, wisdom, her understanding and love, it was a debt she could never repay. But she had to keep showing she was trying—

Twilight felt a light impact on her temple, stopping her in her tracks. Had somepony just thrown something at her? Down by her forehooves lay a suspicious, half-rotten walnut shell. Puzzled, Twilight looked about for the perpetrator, noticing that there weren't any walnut trees in her immediate surroundings.

"Is somepony there?" she asked the forest. She couldn't see any ponies and there were few possible hiding places that she could—

Another walnut shell bounced off the top of her head. *What the?*

"Now I know that somepony is there."

Wait, maybe she should look up? Typical unicorn thinking, forgetting to do that. Rainbow would laugh at her.

Perched on a branch and looking for all the world like it was the most innocent creature in all of the wide, wide world of Equestria, was a large, regal-looking bird with feathers the colour of fire. It burst out in a series of squawks that sounded like laughter, then, to Twilight's surprise, flew down and landed on her back. Her nostrils filled with a faint scent of ash and smoke.

"Philomena?" Twilight asked. Really, there were only so many possible explanations for phoenix this far north. When the bird squawked an affirmative, she asked: "What are you doing here?"

Philomena squawked a few times in response.

"Um, I don't think I understood that."

The phoenix let out a single, frustrated sounding squawk, before burying her head in her wing. She then repeated the pattern of squawking, but louder and with bigger gaps between the sounds, and raised a wing to point.

"You want to me to go in that direction?" Twilight ventured.

Did birds keep lists of ponies they considered mentally deficient? Twilight suspected she'd just been added to Philomena's. Nevertheless, she set out in the direction Philomena indicated, and this seemed to satisfy the bird. After a few steps, Philomena took flight again, alighting on a nearby bush and waiting expectantly.

"Right, you want me to follow you, got it," Twilight said.

Under Philomena's guidance, Twilight headed away from the gravel path, deeper into the forest proper. She soon lost sight of the path on the other side of a steep rise, but she wasn't too worried about getting lost like she might have been in some of the wilder parts of Equestria. This close to Canterlot, there simply wasn't miles and miles of untamed land to get lost in.

After a few minutes of walking, Twilight became aware of the crashing sound of water on water that seemed to be getting louder, and, as Philomena lead her over the top of a second rise, she found herself looking down into a secluded little pool. It was perhaps only slightly bigger than the Ponyville meeting hall. It was surrounded on three sides by walls of dark, moss covered rock, over which fell the small stream she had heard. Little bits of lingering winter ice clung to the edges of the pool where the rocks provided shade. Above the walls, trees loomed, shielding the basin from everypony who was not flying directly above it.

The pool itself, however, was not the focus of Twilight's attention. Sitting on a pebble beach before the water, watching the spray from the waterfall, was a large, white, winged mare, whose distinctive multicoloured mane and tail shifted continually as if blown by otherworldly winds. A familiar mare, but today there was something different about Princess Celestia. It was so obvious it took Twilight a moment to work out she wasn't wearing her usual regalia of golden crown, torc, and shoes.

An avian vocalisation from beside Twilight attracted the princess's attention. As her mentor's eyes fell on Twilight, she vaguely felt like she should be panicking, but strangely the feeling never came.

"Twilight," Princess Celestia greeted her, with the very slightest hint of surprise, "I wasn't expecting to see you today."

"Nor I you, Princess, but I guess Philomena had other ideas." Her laugh at the end of that sentence sounded a little awkward to her ears. Oh well.

"Do come down," the princess called up.

The route to the bottom was a little steep, and Twilight was no mountain goat. She managed to get only half way down before something under her left forehoof slipped, leaving her precariously balanced and in serious danger of taking an undignified slide to the bottom. She shifted her weight slightly, and promptly slipped forward an inch. A miniature avalanche of tiny stones bounced down onto the beach.

“Ah...” she considered her next move carefully.

To hay with it. She lit her horn and teleported herself down to her mentor’s side.

“It’s a bit tricky to get down here without wings, isn’t it?” the princess said, with that sly smile of hers.

“Um. Yes!” Twilight said, with a slight chuckle. She looked about. “Wow, you wouldn’t think you were anywhere near Canterlot from down here!”

It was indeed the truth. With the high cliffs blocking vision, and the waterfall drowning out any more distant sounds, it really was possible to imagine oneself in the center of some vast, wild forest, rather than a five minute walk from a well maintained public path full of afternoon dog-walkers and parents with foals. The illusion was only slightly spoilt by the intrusion of the top of the white mountain over the treetops.

Princess Celestia had returned to watching the waterfall, and Twilight felt an urge to break the silence. “What are you doing here, Princess? I thought you’d be busy... um...” she floundered. What was it that princesses did all day? “Balancing the tax laws...?” She suspected that, some rather prominent pieces of popular fiction featuring the Princess notwithstanding, ancient tax laws and signing things only formed a small part of Celestia and Luna’s duties. “Not that there’s anything wrong with you being here,” she added hastily.

Damn it, how had she been so self-absorbed and oblivious that she had spent over ten years with Princess Celestia without picking up anything about the specifics of what the princess did?

*Wait. Don’t answer that, brain.*

Moving on...

Fortunately, she needn’t have worried about accidentally offending her mentor, because the princess simply smiled at her, impishly almost. “Ordinarily, yes, but today is one of those rare and wonderful days where there appear to be no disasters unfolding, no

foreign dignitaries visiting, and nothing else is happening that needs my immediate attention.”

“So today is your day off?” Twilight asked.

“Just the afternoon, I’m afraid,” the princess replied. “So what are you doing here, Twilight?”

“The same, I guess,” Twilight said. “I was in Canterlot visiting my parents, but Fluttershy said I really needed to have a look at these woods sometime, so here I am.”

“I find it is important to occasionally take some time to renew oneself,” the princess said. “Isn’t that right, Philomena?”

The phoenix, who was now perched, preening herself on a nearby rock, squawked in response.

“It isn’t often I get time to spend time alone without having to worry about other ponies.”

Twilight grimaced. “Oh. Well. If you’d prefer to be alone,” she said, moving to stand. “I’ll just get out of your mane.”

“Nonsense, Twilight,” the princess said, pushing her back down with a gentle hoof. “You’re out here to be alone, I’m out here to be alone,” the impish grin returned, “we might as well be alone together, that way we won’t get lonely.”

Twilight blinked. “I, er, don’t think that made any sense, Princess.”

“It didn’t?” The princess’s expression was perfectly straight.

“No because logically...” Twilight began, but the princess simply laughed, causing Twilight to frown. “Huh?”

“Oh, Twilight, I’ve missed having you around,” the princess said.

A little piece of the lavender unicorn melted. The princess still remembered her and thought of her fondly. She knew this. She really, really did. It was just that sometimes... on dark nights, or when she hit rough times, when nothing was making sense, and Canterlot seemed so far away, and...

It was good to be reminded.

Twilight noticed something else. Like the absence of the regalia, it had been so obvious she'd been missing it. The princess had simply been calling her "Twilight." Not the more formal "Twilight Sparkle," as she usually did. Just "Twilight."

Maybe...

"Celestia," she chanced. That word, all on its own, felt strange in her mouth. In some ways it was almost thrilling. She should be feeling mortified, perhaps, but out here in the privacy of the little pool she couldn't be. She stole a glance at Celestia. Well, she didn't look angry. Wait, now she was raising an eyebrow. What? Oh, right. She'd just said Celestia's name on its own. *Say something, anything.*

"Er, sorry, I think I forgot what I was going to say," she managed. Stupid, stupid.

If Celestia had noticed anything amiss, she didn't comment on it. She didn't seem angry, or anything. The two mares sat in silence for a few minutes.

Eventually, Celestia reached down and began sifting through the pebbles. The action looked purposeful, and Twilight looked on curiously.

"Twilight?" Celestia said. "Has anypony ever taught you how to skip stones?"

"I, er, don't think so." Twilight said. "But I think I understand the principles."

She lit her horn, and levitated a stone, unconsciously biting her lip as she did. Quickly spinning an object that light with magic wasn't exactly taxing, but it did feel quite awkward and fiddly. She threw the stone with a flick of her head and was rewarded with a rather anticlimactic splosh as it hit the water. A single splosh.

"You could use magic, but I rather think this is one of those things that is more satisfying to do without," Celestia said. "Let me show you."

The Alicorn of the Sun selected a flat stone, drew her foreleg across her body, and flicked the it out across the pool. Two splashes.

"Well, that wasn't very good either," Celestia remarked. "Your turn."

Twilight picked up a rock, and tried to emulate Celestia's posture. Draw a foreleg across the body, flick the stone like it was coming from a sling, simple. The stone traced a parabola up and down and hit the surface at too steep an angle. A single splash.

"Let me try again," Twilight said. This time she lost grip on the stone too early and it sailed off in completely the wrong direction. Philomena let out a startled squawk and took to the air, flashing Twilight an angry look as she did so.

"Wooops, sorry Philomena, I didn't mean to do that," Twilight said. She was never going to get off that list now. The phoenix landed on a boulder directly behind the pair of mares, and resumed her preening.

"I don't think you are holding your forehoof quite right," Celestia said, stepped forward. "If you don't mind?"

Twilight nodded, and Celestia adjusted the way Twilight held the stone, moving her leg forward and backward in slow motion until Twilight had the action down.

"Now try."

The stone few out. Two splashes.

The two mares spent the next few minutes skipping stones across the water. Twilight got mostly twos, but managed a few threes. Celestia's own throws tended to result in mostly threes, but Twilight was pleased to note that she seemed to be quickly catching up with Celestia's track record.

It was relaxing. On another day, Twilight might have felt the urge to fill the silence with questions or perhaps an explanation of some fact she had learned, all with the ulterior motive of letting the princess know that, yes, Twilight Sparkle had been working hard and, yes, Twilight Sparkle still cared. Not today. Today she was simply content to skip stones with Celestia.

At one point Celestia managed a four, after which Twilight heard her let out a little vocalization of elation, half under her breath. It was strange, hearing the princess become excited about something so simple.

"Luna would be laughing at us both, you know," Celestia said. When Twilight raised an eyebrow, Celestia continued. "She's really good at this. She claims her record is thirty-six, though the most I've ever seen from her is a twenty-nine."



“Thirty-six?” Twilight said. “Wow, that’s a lot. What’s your record, Celestia?”

Celestia was silent for a moment. Twilight couldn’t be sure, but it almost looked rueful.

“Five,” Celestia admitted at last.

“Five?” Twilight echoed.

“Five.”

Twilight found her shoulders were shaking, and soon she was outright laughing. She wasn’t even sure what was funny. Celestia gave her a flat look, though the corners of her mouth were ever-so-slightly turned up.

“Well I didn’t see you do any better, young mare,” Celestia said, which only caused Twilight to break into a fresh batch of giggles. “And not a word from you,” she added, trying to glare at Philomena, who was guffawing behind a wing.

“Um, sorry,” Twilight said, once she had gotten control of herself again.

“It was fine summer day, a couple of years before the signing of the Dubris Treaty that unified north and south Equestria, if I recall,” Celestia said. “I’d had a particularly frustrating day, though I no longer remember what the problem was, and I just had to get away to have a think. I was flicking stones out over Lacus Ceresius, ah, that would be Lake Latigo in modern Equestrian, and I managed to get five bounces. I was very proud of myself, but,” Celestia shook her head, “no pony was around to see it.”

“Oh well,” Twilight said, “at least I saw your four.”

“That you did.”

Awkward silence. Twilight glanced up at the position of the sun.

“Oh, no. I said I’d be back at my parents’ by five o’clock, so we could have a nice family meal together.”

“Well, you’d best be off then. I, too, should really get back to the palace.”

“Okay, Princess.”

“I’ll see you at your presentation. I’m looking forward to it.”

Oh. Right. The presentation.

“Don’t worry, Twilight,” Celestia said. “You’ll do fine. And even if you don’t, I’ll still be proud of you.”

“Really?” asked Twilight, too hopefully.

“Of course I will,” Celestia said. Then, after a moment: “Twilight, do you think less of me now that you know that I am, without doubt, Equestria’s worst stone skipper?”

“No, Princess, of course not,” Twilight replied immediately.

“Oh?” Celestia said, raising an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Because it’s just some silly stone skipping,” Twilight said, wondering where Celestia was going with this. “What kind of a pony would I be if I cared about that?”

“Then you think so little of me,” Celestia said, “that you believe I would not forgive you as you have just forgiven me?”

A knife twisted in Twilight’s gut. That wasn’t it at all! “What I mean is—” she stammered in protest, but floundered. But this was different! How? But surely—? Maybe from the point of view of—? She closed her mouth.

*Checkmate.*

She was surrounded on all sides, left unable to escape. She’d been outwitted and outmaneuvered; her only option, the white flag. And she couldn’t be happier to fly it.

“Thank you,” was all she could say.

“If there turns out to be some problems with your new theories,” Celestia said, smiling again, “and I doubt there will be—remember, of the ponies attending, only one is a genuine, living, breathing wielder of the Element of Magic, and she will be giving the talk. But, if there is a problem, then as your mentor, we can work it out together. But as your friend”—Twilight’s breath caught—“I do not give a rotten hay bale about how some talk went. I will be there for you if you need me, never so far away as you might think.”

Twilight basked in the words and the moment, simply allowing herself to be loved just this once, despite all her faults and shortcomings. But like all moments, it had to end.

“I’ll try not to forget that, Princess.” *But I will*, she thought glumly. *I’ll try, but I’ll just start worrying again. I’ll convince myself I can’t possibly be good enough for you, or that...*

“Twilight,” Celestia said, interrupting her ruminations. “If you ever need to remember today,” Celestia continued, seeming to read her thoughts, “just for some reason, remember this: you can skip stones now, and you couldn’t before.”

Twilight reached down and picked up a small stone. It was undeniably true. She had learned to skip stones.

“See you in two weeks, my faithful student.”

Celestia’s horn briefly glowed a rich gold, and the gleaming white alicorn dissolved into sun-coloured mist, which flowed up and out of the basin. Philomena took to wing and followed, leaving Twilight alone on the pebble beach, holding her stone.

Her doubts and worries crept back over the edges of the basin, ready to gallop down the walls and consume her once more. The afternoon’s events were already seeming a little unreal. Had she really...? Did the princess really name her a...? She drew her foreleg across herself.

She was lazy. Spoilt. A fraud. She didn’t deserve the trust and love she had received. Only dumb luck had prevented her exposure. These things, they were not true. She knew this. She really, really did. She just had to remember. The stone flew out across the water.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Five splashes.

Twilight Sparkle looked about at her completely empty and witnessless surroundings.

“Darn it,” she chuckled, clapping her hoof to her face.