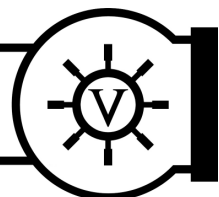


Whisper Sun, Silent Moon

RedSquirrel456

PONY FICTION VAULT



Celestia *felt* the sun rising. She knew it in her very bones when she looked east and waited with the rest of the slumbering jungle for the first spears of light to pierce the grey clouds slumbering over the ocean. She'd chosen her favorite hill near the shore of the Isle, which granted a wonderful view over a small valley smothered in trees and morning mist. Beyond was the sea, seemingly infinite from her perspective as there was no land visible in any direction. But there was the sun. With each beat of Celestia's heart the sun came up a little more, tied to her innermost being. As the sun rose, so did she, her blood quickening and her limbs growing lighter than light itself when she felt the dawn draw near. It must be what water felt like when the tide rolled in on the shores of the island, gently swelling and rising like a symphony towards its climax.

The animals of the jungle rose with her. As the sky's velvet covering of night was burned away with the pink and orange of dawn, birds called out with rolling trills and sharp chirps, wondering when the day would begin. Rivals squawked indignantly, renewing claims on favored branches. A lumbering thunderhorn shoved through the vegetation, its armor-like skin and sweeping three-pronged horn visible even from the top of Celestia's perch. This particular thunderhorn crossed her path about this time every day, and his schedule remained comfotingly unbroken just like hers. He seemed to enjoy hurrying to the river ahead of his rivals, though the ponderous grey clouds on the horizon promised a miserable day for them all. Celestia wasn't worried. Whatever the weather, the sun had to rise.

It would *always* rise. With a single word and the thrust of a sword, Celestia had forever burdened herself with that vow. But she felt no weight on her shoulders. What did forever mean now that she was eternal?

Her ears jumped upright to the tune of flapping wings and the sound of grass crushed by trampling hooves. Luna never did bother with grace or dignity in her landings.

"Carefully, big sister," Luna whispered right next to Celestia's ear, shivering with anticipation. "I have already sent the moon on its daily journey... The order is most fragile in the between time."

"Do not—" Celestia began; her pink mane shimmered and wavered. "—remind me, little sister."

Luna pawed at the ground, staring down the horizon like a warrior watching a battlefield, as she'd watched *the* great battlefield amidst the ruin and carnage of the Ashlands. "Remember our lessons: the angle is key. Ignore the solar wind. It is weightless but watch its inertia!"

Celestia cracked a smile against her will, but she managed to avoid breaking eye contact with the horizon. Even if Luna was strangely adorable attacking every situation like a battle strategy.

“Peace, Luna. You act as if we were going to battle with Infernus all over again.”

The sky now glowed an angry orange-red, and she felt the sun’s light pierce her very soul. The time was near and she *felt* it like an explosive waiting for its fuse to burn. Every molecule in her chomped at the bit as the strain on her magic grew, and the glow around her horn mirrored the sky’s illumination. Her heart ticked off the seconds until sunrise; the sound hammered at her mind. Each moment before the sun’s victory over night was a mountain to climb, a race to run, a gap to leap. Pressure mounted behind her horn and she felt pushed towards a precipice, waiting for just the right moment to leap. Her blood was on fire, *was* fire, racing through her veins like a stampede or an avalanche, and she squeezed her eyes shut as her heart pounded and her wings snapped open, making Luna squeak and jump away.

And then at last! At last the sun appeared, spilling light over the sea to unfold the curtain of Luna’s shroud, and Celestia’s heart *sang* as she took to the air in a whirlwind of noise, raising her hooves up as far as they could stretch to push the sun just that little bit further. Everything seemed to explode into color and life: sight was more vivid and sounds were sharper and Celestia simply felt more *alive*.

She banked in the air and spun a loop around the top of the hill, burning the energy the sun fed to her as it filled the earth with its stream of lifeblood. Luna watched from below until her sister’s exaltations were over, her misty blue mane lifting and blowing though there was no breeze. She’d noticed the changes were manifesting in more obvious ways now, but the thought was exhilarating instead of frightening.

“We grow stronger every day,” she remarked as Celestia landed next to her. “We have gone three months without a hitch in raising the sun and the moon.”

Still flush and panting from success and the energy of the sun that seemed to cheer her success with its unending light, Celestia merely nodded.

“Discord is sure to be tearing out his horns,” Luna added with a vicious toss of her mane, her voice thick with lusty belligerence. “Soon we will be able to free Equestria from his madness.”

“Soon,” Celestia said, stressing it in just such a way to mean her idea of soon was far different from her sister’s. Luna ignored the implied jab at her aggressiveness and stared directly at the sun as it crept further into the sky. It was a trifling thing, second-nature now, for their powers to shield them from the ferocity of their chosen heavenly bodies.

“See, sister! Look at what we have accomplished! What reason have we to delay? A full year has passed since we defeated Infernus. A year for Discord to watch the sun and the moon rise and fall in spite of his best efforts, every routine and orderly revolution a smear on his vision of chaos! Surely he knows our intent by now? Must we give him more time to prepare?”

Celestia knew what was coming. She felt her sister’s growing ire and impatience as sure as the risen sun. She averted her eyes and watched her sun’s solar winds brush her mane, streaming it behind her like the banners she’d raised in defiance of Infernus and his tyranny. Her mane’s once solid pink hue had melted into orange and red, and she saw hints of yellow every now and then. It even felt less like true hair every day, morphing into something ethereal, something... different. Something *other*. She couldn’t help but miss her old mane.

“*Merely* a year,” she muttered quietly, a gentle rebuke. “And General Tirek escaped the final battle with a sizeable force of his own.”

Luna’s head dipped just so, and above the noise of the waking jungle Celestia heard the ghost of a sigh brush her ears. When Luna turned to face her, she peered with the intensity and shrewdness of her night sky. Another pang of nostalgia struck Celestia. A lifetime before, a whole level of *existence* ago, Luna’s eyes were bright with a foal’s curiosity and innocence. Now they held disdain and reproach.

Luna didn’t appreciate the somber expression Celestia wore. She saw all too plainly the fatigue of the past decades digging lines on Celestia’s once pristine face and weighing her brow into a constant furrow of anxiety. They never aged now, but at heart they remained the ponies they were born as.

The moon sister’s reply came through a heaving sigh. “Must you act as though I am responsible for the shroud that is ever on your visage?”

Celestia didn’t answer. It was always best to let Luna speak her mind.

“I do not claim to know all there is to know about magic in the world!” she huffed, stomping her hoof. Though once a foalish and vaguely endearing gesture, now her

powers made it crack the earth with a loud thud. “But surely this is proof, sister! Proof of our divinity. With it, Discord will have no choice but to bow before us! Was it not *you* who brought the Five Kings together, *you* who prosecuted the war with Infernus? Were it not for your guidance and strength, Discord would be the least of our worries! Yet now you let our new powers weigh you down instead of bearing us up as it did in the past!”

“We did not lay claim to these powers so we could become this world’s gods, dear one,” Celestia explained, practicing the patience that would be stretched to eternity if her sister’s bellicose disposition didn’t change. “Had we never climbed Eternity’s Tower we would be on the decline by now, far past fighting age. But now things are different. Here on this island I have had time to stop and, and *think...*”

Her voice cracked and her heart lurched like a wounded animal. Luna’s expression softened as her sister, the paragon of power and might, shivered like a foal.

“Oh, gods. I haven’t had time to stop and think for so many years now...” Celestia swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked the tears free from her eyes. As they’d been taught, regal bearing and perfect control over their feelings was paramount. When she continued all traces of sorrow had been wiped from her face. Luna almost clicked her tongue with frustration; Celestia even hurt herself to follow the rules.

“The battles we will fight from this day forward will not be fought like a mortal’s. We will not seek to win a war for glory or freedom. Infernus was an arrogant beast, but merely a beast nonetheless. Discord is something else. I see in him something frightening and familiar. He is like *us*, Luna, and that is why we must be cautious. That is why we are here to assemble a plan.”

She stared her sister down.

“That is why we need to learn. That is why we need to find how far we can go. So we can know where to *stop.*”

Luna tsked and looked away. She might as well have thrown up an arcane shield, deflecting every ounce of her sister’s concern so it didn’t infect her too. “You worry too much,” she huffed, and then spread her wings. “I’m going to break fast and get some sleep. The morning is inordinately bright to me, and the beasts of the jungle are becoming especially noisome.”

Celestia turned an ear to the jungle. It was true; the birds were cawing especially loudly on this part of the island, and the tree-grazers were hooting up a storm.

“I am going to speak with Sharrazalka. You should come,” she said, hoping a change in subject would make her sister more agreeable. Luna sighed wearily.

“The old windbag is sure to be snoring up a storm in front of his precious idol. Why bother him?”

“Have you forgotten he was the catalyst for our ascension? I wished to ask about the changes we have seen come over us in the last few years besides. I don’t believe they are going to stop at wavy manes and extreme longevity.”

“You liked it when your mane started to change. It made you look ever so dashing for the troops,” Luna said with a gentle smirk, tossing her own ethereal hair that danced and shimmered with the light of stars far beyond Celestia’s. Abruptly, she began to laugh. “Ha ha! I, I remember poor Spring Rain the day our manes moved of their own accord! Ha ha... He, he looked at me with such surprise, and...”

Her words were shut off by the clamp of her teeth as her eyes stared at a memory that seemed directly ahead of her, yet too far to reach.

“He was so... so young, then,” she whispered. “So very young.”

Celestia, moved nearly to tears, reached out with her wing to draw her sister close, but Luna cast her away with a brush of her hoof, taking wing and hurtling to a far corner of the Isle without another word.

Celestia stood awhile on the high hill, watching her sun rise without a care in the world. She dared not stay and contemplate their fate, and so with a single satisfied nod at her work, she launched into the air and spun around, flapping hard to gain altitude over the lip of the crater that dominated the center of the Isle.

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Finding where Sharrazalka took his rest wasn’t hard. He slept in or around the very center of the crater in the middle of the island, amidst the bones of his people. It was actually finding Sharrazalka himself that was difficult. The massive crater, much like the island around it, was covered in thick green jungle foliage, and within beasts that even Sharrazalka deemed ancient wandered and hunted and lived and died. But none of them, not the ferocious horned lizards, the chimeras that roosted on the lips of the crater, or

even the shadowbeaks that prowled the eastern jungle dared disturb Sharrazalka or his guests. Some base instinct that reached through time and space let them know that all three were beings far out of their league. Celestia watched a flight of yixhil, as Sharrazalka called them in his Old Tongue, part respectfully for her as she flew past, their bright feathers flashing a rainbow of colors.

She touched down on the rocky plateau at the crater's center, upon which sat the monument. It was an onyx statue about her height carved in the shape of a Dragon, its wings unfurled and tail coiling around the sphere it perched upon. It was there when Celestia and Luna came to the island. Sharrazalka claimed it was there when *he* came to the island. None of them knew why it was there at all, but so far it proved indestructible and Sharrazalka said it had some important meaning nobody was worthy to know. Celestia now simply saw it as a strange oddity that had no bearing on her mission. As long as it didn't come to life and attack her, it could sit and watch the clouds go by for eternity.

Aside from the statue, the plateau was dusty and barren, broken up by many large outcroppings of boulders and rocks.

“Sharrazalka!” she called out, her voice loud enough to have its own thunderclap. “Awaken! I wish to speak with you!”

Her voice rolled and thundered across the top of the plateau before dying in silence, and for a moment Celestia honestly believed she'd somehow missed their mentor.

And then the ground began to shake, and a section of the landscape rose up in a burst of gravel and rolling clouds of dust. Geysers of dirt blew in every direction as something huge and powerful rolled its mighty muscles and shook away the tons of rock as if they were annoying gnats. Celestia stood her ground, a shield raised in front of her to deflect the worst of the deadly shower. She'd seen it before, but still it amazed her. The sheer *bulk* of the creature was awe-inspiring in itself. Many Dragons were huge in their own way but not mind-blowingly so, like a pony must appear to a squirrel. But the massive beast that shrugged off the earth like so much gravel made her feel more like a ladybug attempting to stare down a house; she barely even knew where to look to take him all in.

She watched the long, sinewy tail covered in bronze armor scales rise from the ground like a serpent and those deadly grasping talons marred and pitted with age and battle crush boulders as if they were twigs. The long neck with its hundreds of dented scales and peeling patches of aged skin uncoiled and rose above her with the casual indifference

of a god striding among rocks, the great angular head perched at the end swinging back and forth as the colossal Dragon took in his surroundings.

And then came his wings. Wings that unfurled far enough to cover the width and breadth of the entire plateau and made her feel weak and tiny, wings that were ragged and torn with age and use yet spoke of wisdom and hidden power instead of weakness. A single twitch from the leathery sails caused a blizzard of dust to envelop her and the statue that stood undisturbed behind her. Dragons often grew larger with their hoards, for feelings and emotions held great power, but Sharrazalka didn't hoard gems or trinkets to satisfy a base desire like greed. His storehouse was knowledge, and his size was testament to the long years of wisdom he held.

At last he ceased stretching, and Sharrazalka rested his massiveness on the plateau. Though he was gentle when he laid down he still caused a great quake that made the earth shiver.

"Hmmm," he rumbled, and Celestia felt the noise in her chest. Magenta eyes flicked between Sharrazalka's own green; his face was simply too big for her to make anything resembling eye contact even though she was fifty feet away.

"It is too early in the morning," Sharrazalka grumbled while barely moving his lips, "for another lesson, Celestia. I see you have raised the sun again. Congratulations. Let me and the matter lie."

"Sharrazalka, I beg your forgiveness," Celestia shouted with all her magically-amplified strength. The Dragon's whispering was her bellowing. "I come with a request of knowledge! You helped us gain these powers! But they are changing us, wise one! In ways I did not foresee!"

"Nor I," the Dragon intoned, intimating a shrug. "But that is the nature of change. If we could predict it, why bother with it? I see no reason to worry. You look well for a newborn god, Celestia."

"Sharrazalka, 'tis not merely the changes in my appearance, but in my heart that concern me. And the heart of my sister."

Sharrazalka took a deep, patient breath. His lungs alone dwarfed Celestia and sounded a hurricane. She braced herself for his melancholy, maelstrom-strong sigh.

"Luna is a warrior," he mumbled through cracked and dry lips. "You know this. It was she who held Infernus' head aloft and declared victory. And good riddance to that

windbag; he was an insult to Dragons everywhere! But Luna is a different breed from you, powers or not. The cool embrace of night cannot quell the fire that races in her veins. Why do you trouble yourself with things you already see?”

“Because I do not know my sister’s innermost thoughts, only mine! I must know, Sharrazalka: is this power going to strip us of all we once were? Are we doomed to forever realize how separate we are from the very ponies we set out to protect? Luna wishes dearly to save them, as do I! But I feel distant, Sharrazalka! I feel *strange!* I knew I would never be the same, but am I not a pony at heart?”

The old bronze Dragon was too quick to answer for Celestia’s liking.

“You are strange. You are different. You are forever separate from the other ponies, Celestia. The question is not whether your abilities will strip you of what you are. They have already remade you.”

He gave another indifferent shrug. “You deny it deep down, but the Celestia who came to me so many years ago died the moment she stepped into my home.”

Celestia’s dour silence and downward glance made him chuckle. It sounded like a series of meteor impacts, one after the other.

“I see you did not come to me for answers, but to explain the answers you already know,” he muttered. “You worry that your powers will take you to unfamiliar territory where you will be lost and confused. It is true that at heart you still wish to think like a pony, and seek the boundaries and fences and tidy little buildings your people erect. You were a pony in a different age... and your mind clings to that, fearing what comes of stepping out into this new life without any boundaries or borders.”

Celestia bowed her head, his words cutting her deep.

“In the war with Infernus,” she said quietly, “I could still believe that it was all still normal for us. I could still believe that what we did was for the *time*—for that moment. But now...”

“Now you face an enemy who will feel the passage of time just like you... as in, he does not feel it at all.”

“And there will be other challenges too,” she whispered, but she knew Sharrazalka still heard her. “It is still strange, thinking of the sun as... as *mine*. Luna is better at this than me in some ways. She doesn’t... really *think* about it all as I do. How does one take

possession of a heavenly body? Will the strength to rise each and every morn in those long stretches of peace come from me, or the powers granted to me?"

"Questions you will have eternity to ponder," the Dragon said, shrugging with his massive wings. Celestia allowed her eyes to narrow just so; she was learning how to express intense displeasure in the smallest of gestures.

"You were not so abrupt yesterday."

"Yesterday I had already had my nap."

Sharrazalka brought his great head down to Celestia's level, making her lean back. She still felt the grip of fear deep down as a face the size of a hillside filled her vision; the mortal parts of her that would always fear injury and death would never go away. It was something that she was grateful for and despised at the same time. Why should an immortal still fear death? Why *shouldn't* she?

"I... see," the Dragon hissed, his sulfuric breath almost smothering the Princess of the Sun. "I see your heart and how much it fears for your sister and yourself. But your limits will not be known to you in a heartbeat, Celestia, not even in my lifetime. You seek to watch over a living world, and to do that you must live in it yourself. I have lived for ages, child. I watched the downfall of Korazzdrassil and the end of the Dragon Empire. I saw the sands of Neighara swallow up kingdom after kingdom. I followed your people as they left their old home and struggled against their own hatreds, watched as they banded together and formed the nation of Equestria. I can even trace the Tail of Jormungr back to when it was a small stream instead of today's mighty river. I watched you come to me as a scared little unicorn and declare that you were willing to give all to make this world safe, watched you climb Eternity's Tower and begin a new era! But someday I will die, and you will be left to ponder these questions yourself. You are beyond even my sight now. I can give you no wisdom for a life I will never experience."

"Then who can I turn to?" she asked, stricken.

"Is it not obvious?"

The Dragon huffed, turning to dig back into the great furrow in the earth he'd created.

"You understand so little about the order of the universe," he muttered. "You want to find your place, but you already *have* it. You refuse to claim it, and your sister refuses to manage it, and you refuse to manage *her*. If you cannot overcome a family spat with all your powers, then all you will do is annoy Discord with a tidy daily schedule."

He closed his eyes and said no more.

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Celestia went to the Cave of Harmony. Luna thought the name was flippant and silly, but Celestia believed the Elements deserved some kind of recognition. A place for them to rest and call their own, even if that place was just a small little cavern on the northern edge of the Isle. There was a crack in the ceiling that let in light and water, creating a small garden. It was humid, but not unpleasantly so, and Luna maintained a militaristic vigil against buzzing and biting insects. On a small pedestal Celestia had raised from the stone floor with a small bit of magic rested the Elements of Harmony themselves. They were very much inert, and Celestia often worried if the recent arguments with her sister had weakened their connection to the Elements.

Celestia had only ever seen the Elements at work once, and not even against the terrible might of Infernus; the Elements refused to be wielded as mere weapons of war. She thought back to that day at the top of Eternity's Tower. The Elements had come to them, in a time of terror and despair when all that was left was the love she and her sister shared. Though she remembered little of the endless climb, and wanted to remember less, she knew the Elements weren't just magical artifacts that possessed great power.

They were *alive*, and not in the sense that a mortal creature aged and went about its business. They were the true, actual embodiments of Harmony. She'd seen them. Spoken with them. And they'd given her the strength to fight back against the terrible darkness that clawed at their minds, given her comfort when she pondered the long, endless days and nights that stretched out before her. But now they wouldn't so much as twinkle at her, and she was worried. Discord was beyond anything they'd ever fought before, a being that was a physical incarnation of a principle as much as he was his own person. Only the Elements truly knew how to defeat him, and they weren't talking.

"Please," she whispered. "You know me. You know why I sought you out."

But the Elements gave no reply. Celestia sighed and settled down in front of the ancient artifacts, finding comfort in their proximity even if they didn't speak. She still felt the subtle connection with them all; she and Luna were apparently different from previous Bearers in that both of them held the Elements in them at the same time, and both of them were needed for the Elements to work. But she felt the gulf with Luna widening every day they delayed in the fight against Discord, and the Elements too began to distance themselves.

She heard the rumble of thunder outside, and soon after that rain began to pour into the small cavern through the little hole in the ceiling, pooling and streaming away through a crevice in the floor. The drum of droplets echoing through the chamber provided a comforting background noise to her ponderings, wondering how she was going to confront her sister.

“You come here more often these days,” Luna said behind her from the mouth of the cave. Celestia didn’t look up, keeping her eyes on the Element of Magic at the forefront of its counterparts.

“I thought you were going to have a nap.”

“I couldn’t sleep. Have you had anything to eat yet?”

“No.”

“Again?” Luna asked, exasperated. Celestia gave a little sigh, and Luna immediately felt guilty.

“I’m not sorry about what I said,” she blurted out, looking at the wall of the cave. “But I... I’m sorry for how I said it. I am only worried. Ponies are suffering horribly in Equestria and we sit on our hooves and pretend we *aren’t* the most powerful beings in the world.”

“If we fought Discord now,” Celestia reasoned quietly, “we would lose.”

“We would *not*,” Luna insisted. “We cast down the greatest power in this world since the Dragon Empire. We have the Elements of Harmony! What more do we need to learn?”

“The Elements are growing distant.”

Celestia’s whisper was audible over the thunder. Luna shifted on her hooves.

“They simply haven’t been used in a while,” she said, tossing her mane. “You think I haven’t felt it too? They think their job is done because we refuse to *use* them.”

“But that’s just it. We shouldn’t be *using* them. They didn’t help us in the final battle against Infernus, remember? They allowed us to conquer the Tower of Eternity and helped us gain our new powers. But they wouldn’t let themselves be thrown into the savagery of war. It is a miracle the powers we acquired were enough on their own. The Elements protected us, shielded us, gave us hope and strength, but we were never their masters. Not when we sought the head of another living being.”

“Infernus was *not* a living being!” Luna snapped. “He was as deplorable as a Nightmare, as monstrous as a minotaur. He wanted to control the world, and it was *his* violence and *his* tampering with the natural order that released Discord in the first place! Do your precious Elements understand *that*?”

Celestia turned her head just enough to peer at Luna out of the corner of her eye. “My Elements?”

Luna’s ears flattened against her head as she took a step back. “I, I didn’t mean it quite like that... but sister, don’t you see? If we continue to pry secrets from the Elements instead of using them as they were intended to be used we will lose our opportunity. With or without them, our home is suffering, and we have a duty to return as quickly as we can!”

“And if we return without fully realizing our potential, Discord will destroy us,” Celestia said, sighing. “Luna, why can’t you understand that there is more to our new positions than throwing fireballs and making loud noises?”

“You *dare* simplify what we have done so much?!” Luna balked, stomping her mighty hoof again and inadvertently causing the cave to quake. “I think this power has gone to your head, sister! Yes we have new duties, and yes we will need to worry about them, but now is not the time! We go now or not at all!”

Celestia stood and turned to face Luna, her eyes channeling the full force of her frustration and inner turmoil. “And if we go in the heat of the moment we will be doing exactly what Discord wants! He is pure chaos, sister! Do you understand that? Infernus, for all his power, was a mortal being with a mind we could comprehend. Discord is the antithesis of all that we stand for! He is not some enemy general, he is a *thing*! An idea! He is nothing *but* chaos! Going to him recklessly without a plan and without our greatest magic to defend us will be our doom. And this bickering is not helping!”

“We did all we have done in the name of defending ponies!” Luna bellowed, her magic amplifying her voice until the cave trembled.

“*We are not ponies!*”

The echoes of Celestia’s anguished cry seemed to silence even the storm outside for a few seconds, the gale shying away under the force of her shout before it came back in full. Silence reigned between the two sisters for what felt like another year to Celestia, who stared down at the cave floor while her eyes burned with tears. When she looked at Luna

again, her sister wore an inscrutable, terrifyingly blank expression. For Celestia it was too much, and she began to openly weep.

“Do you not see, sister?” she whispered. “We will never be like them again. We cannot. We have gone too far and sacrificed too much. Not even previous Bearers of the Elements changed themselves like us. Nobody’s ever *done* this before. We... we have to think differently now. Don’t you see how this could all go so very, very wrong? Without knowing what we can’t do, what we shouldn’t do—”

“What we *should* do is recognize that our would-be kingdom is under attack!” Luna snapped. “If you are too weak to realize that we have the power we should—nay, *must*—use, then I would worry that you have drowned yourself in the machinations of the very beings we oppose. What makes us strong is that we realize we are part of this world and must engage ourselves in it! That is why we set out on this journey! That is why we made war with Infernus! That is why Discord must fall by our hooves!”

She shook her head wildly, her starlit mane swirling around her head like smoke. She cried out and smashed the wall of the cave with her front hooves, cracking the stone before rounding on Celestia.

“Out of the way, sister!” she shouted, turning towards the Elements. “I will make them understand. I will make them see!”

Celestia moved to block, feebly pushing a hoof against Luna, her heart clocking in her throat. “Luna, wait, you don’t understand! Luna, please—!”

“Get back!” Luna commanded, thrusting out her own hoof to shove her elder sister away so she stood before the Elements, which had stayed silent through the whole confrontation. The Element of Magic in particular seemed to peer up at her, as if in silent reproach. Luna ignored it. “They worked for us once before. They shall again! You’ll see!”

Her horn began to glow as she reached out for the Elements. Celestia felt the chill of her sister’s magic even several feet away, knowing that Luna *demand*ed the Elements come forth and unite for her.

And she felt the backlash before she could even think to stop it. A searing pain stabbed into her heart, making her knees buckle as her own horn lit up, trying to hurl her sister away.

“Luna, *no*—!”

There was a ghastly noise like a bone snapping, and Celestia's own heart crushed inward inside her chest. An intense wave of nausea suddenly accompanied the feeling of being lifted clear off one's hooves. She heard and felt the explosion last. It wasn't just a noise. It was a feeling made manifest in the concussive shockwave that assaulted her very being, stripping her of her senses and ripping away at something deep inside. Celestia could only watch in horror as she and her sister were pushed back by a cascade of pure light emanating from the Elements, lifting them up and none too gently *throwing* them away. There was no heat and the light didn't blind her, but she still felt the awful, crawling, *burning* agony of something very important inside of her suddenly being torn asunder. It seemed as though she was trapped inside her own body, a foreign observer looking through her own eyes, utterly unable to affect what was happening.

The two new goddesses spun clumsily as they bounced across the hard stone, their hooves and wings flailing for purchase. They landed heavily, Celestia first and Luna on top of her. The air burst from Celestia's lungs as her sister's weight impacted with her chest, but she didn't hear her own heaving gasps over the terrible ringing in her ears and the dull throb of her heart. The storm continued outside, but it was nothing compared to the roiling emotions Celestia drowned in as her legs windmilled haplessly, struggling to make sense of what just happened.

"What... what have you *done*?" she wheezed as Luna rolled away, sucking in great lungfuls of air and trotting quickly to the entrance of the cave, where she thrust her head into the storm outside, letting it wash away the cold sweat that had broken out on her pelt.

"Luna!" Celestia gasped, forcing her shaking knees to support her weight, powering through the intimate sense of loss she felt in her heart. Something was taken, something was gone. Something was horribly, horribly wrong.

"Sister! How could you?! The Elements—"

"—are gone," Luna gasped, collapsing onto her stomach. Her voice was a dull murmur that barely carried over the storm's noise. "Gone. They... I.... gone."

Celestia's knees buckled. She welcomed the pain of colliding with the stone floor; it gave her some physical sense of the intangible pain that squirmed under her skin.

"How could you! How *could* you!" Celestia sobbed, clenching her eyes shut as she curled up on the floor of the cave, retching loudly. She pushed her head so hard into the cool rock it hurt, seeking relief or even plain distraction from the crippling agony inside. That

swirling, unsettling shock that felt like a bone being crunched or a limb suddenly torn away. How did she process what she was feeling? She looked over her shoulder through tears and the salty sting of all too mortal sweat. With a growing sense of horror she realized her mane had lost some of its luster as well, going back to the pure pink of its old days and barely fluttering, like a flag in a weak wind.

The Elements still sat quietly in the Cave as if nothing had occurred. They were totally silent now. Blank. Indifferent. They no longer had an interest in the well-being of *former* Bearers.

“Luna,” she moaned, but when she turned back, her sister was already gone.

• • •

“I don’t know how it happened,” Celestia told Sharrazalka the following day. Her head was bowed like a convict receiving punishment at court.

“Neither do I,” rumbled the Dragon. “Do you know where Luna has gone?”

“She is hiding,” Celestia groaned miserably. “Hiding from all. Her shame and fear overwhelmed her.”

“And why did you not go to her?”

Celestia’s breath hitched in her throat. “I... I did not think it wise to disturb her—”

“Yes. Because you aren’t ponies anymore, and who can fathom the thoughts of gods, and Luna is a grown... *thing* who can handle herself. Whatever you are now.”

Celestia blinked, looking up in confusion and a little bit of anger.

“But... But I thought you said... you *always* said—”

“I said you aren’t ponies. Never did I imply that you must lose the heart you had when you were one. Did you think it *wise* to let a petulant and silly girl posing as a goddess to run off in the middle of her temper tantrum? There are no enemy armies to vent her frustration on here. I wouldn’t be surprised if she sank this whole island.”

The great Dragon sighed and looked to the sky. “And now I suppose the world is doomed.”

“Doomed?” Celestia whispered. Her lips curled downward and her eyes twitched over the Dragon’s face, looking for some measure of pity. “Doomed! Must you be so brazen?”

“Must you be so *foolish?!?*” the Dragon bellowed, the thunderclap of his voice almost splitting the plateau in two. “Never in all my long years have I heard of Bearers of the Elements handling their gift with such... such lackadaisical, irresponsible behavior! And now even I can see the gaping wound in your *soul*. The Elements, severing themselves from their Bearers! I never would’ve believed it had I not seen it with my own eyes!”

He stamped a mighty claw down on the rock, driving it into the ground like it was a puddle of water. Celestia wavered but did not run.

“Discord’s evil will spread, Celestia! Your home was but the first to fall! He is a horror from the beginning of time that will never cease his rampage! You think he will give you rest while you and your sister quibble? Every component of every molecule will be unmade by that tyrant. I have foreseen this!”

He lowered his massive head and stared Celestia down. In his eyes, those eyes that Celestia could barely stand to look upon, swirled knowledge of eons Celestia could only dream of. Those eyes would be hers one day, and the thought utterly terrified her.

Sharrazalka hissed. “Without the Elements you are *nothing* before him. Every living thing, from spirits to insects, is naught but a *toy*. A toy he sees as his to break and snap and mould and break again! Do you know what mine eyes have seen? Your confrontation with Discord will end in disaster without the Elements. He will make thee *watch*, Celestia! He will unravel thy sister atom by atom and revel in her screams, and reform her as he pleases. Then he will obliterate this world, sparing nothing. And when he does the same to thee, and has crushed thee and remade thee over and over for an eternity of misery and suffering, when every last shred of thy mind and sanity has been utterly torn asunder, *then* he will let you die with full knowledge of thy failure!”

Celestia shrank. She curled in on herself and sheltered within her wings, tears streaming down her cheeks. She felt smaller than an ant and just as worthless, the pain of the Elements’ separation fresh in her heart. Having a creature centuries older and wiser than her berate her like this wasn’t helping.

“You are unworthy of the title of alicorn,” Sharrazalka huffed. “*They* would never be reduced to simpering, mewling foals like this. Not the ones who came before.”

Celestia peeked out from under her wings. “Be... before? There were others?”

“Indeed.” The Dragon sighed wearily and reared back until his bulk lounged across the length and width of the plateau, folding his battered wings against his sides. His anger seemed to drain out of his old body like a flood. “Very few remember them. It has been so long their influence is no longer felt in this world. Even when I was a hatchling the most recent rumors were but legend. I wonder what they would have to say seeing their race resurrected by such... meager beings. But they were revered in their time, so I am told. They were ponies, but only in the most distant sense. They were all three tribes in one. From a time beyond time when the world was first made they wandered this earth and shepherded it. Something so mythical was bound to pass, though, and become the legend it now is.

“In the oldest legends that speak of alicorns, one story says they were the ones who first conceived of creating the Elements. Back then, Harmony was like Discord: formless. It was a background presence in the world, inspiring and helping all living things. But that was before the Nightmare War.”

“Nightmares,” Celestia hissed, the word followed close by a shiver down her spine. She’d never encountered one face to face, and hoped she never would in all her long years. The stories were enough.

“Though they’d always existed as ideas and concepts of fear and anxiety, haunting the dark corners of every thinking being’s mind, never before had they taken physical, *intelligent* form and attacked the waking world. The story of how the first Nightmare became its own creature is, I’m sure, a mighty mystery in itself. Regardless, they came, and they swept over the world in a tide of utter devastation,” Sharrazalka said, his more theatrical side taking hold as he placed a claw over his heart and spread his wings. “Discord himself would have feared them! They sought not chaos, but something... worse. Something primal that strikes at the very heart of living creatures. Not even corruption properly describes it. Discord laughs at everything... the Nightmares would find a way to keep even him from cracking a smile.

“Being what they are, they were the enemy of the world’s Harmony. And so the alicorns, desperate for a solution, crafted the Elements of Harmony in response to the threat. From the bones of the earth and the thread of dreams they wove them, and wielded them against the Nightmare hordes. It all gets rather fuzzy after that, but since we are not all cowering in the mud of a blighted earth, we can presume they won. Of course, it is all a story...”

Celestia pondered this for a time before speaking, grateful she’d been given time to calm her feelings. “But what about my sister and I?”

“What *about* you?” Sharrazalka almost sneered. “You *say* you are an alicorn, you probably even believe you are an alicorn, but you are *not* an alicorn! If the Nightmares returned and the world teetered on the brink of destruction, could *you* lay claim to the grand history I just recounted? Could you find the strength of will to beat back the heart of darkness itself?”

“I... I battled Infernus,” Celestia whispered. “I led the army that tore down his citadel!”

“And where is that wondrous creature now?” Her mentor flicked a claw at the horizon. “You defeated Infernus and saved countless lives. But now you cannot even rein in your sister. You are a pale imitation of the mighty beings whose power you were *gifted* with. The very artifacts you hope to use against Discord have rejected you! You have been stumbling and staggering along distracted by war, and you don’t even know where to begin looking for succor. Even after I told you so plainly.”

Celestia felt a knife twist in her heart.

“Teacher, I... I *tried* talking to her, but she—”

“You tried talking, but not *to* her, or *with* her,” Sharrazalka grumbled. “You spoke *from* your own heart and *at* hers. If you had approached her in humility befitting a *pony*, you might have fared better and this disaster would have been averted. It is well we are on this Isle so far from the rest of the world. I’m sure Discord would be rolling with laughter that his would-be rivals sow their own seeds of chaos without his help.”

Celestia could only bow her head, feeling the weight of the world and the sun come crashing down on her shoulders. “This is... this is why I wanted to wait,” she whispered brokenly. “So much power, and it can be ruined in an instant. *This* is why I wanted to set our limits, and I..”

She sighed, wings collapsing, mane and tail drooping to their lowest points. “’Twas mine own obstinacy that caused this.”

“The fault is not entirely yours,” Sharrazalka said, not without kindness. “Still you forget your sister is here with you.”

“But she will not listen.”

“She has come to you for wisdom many times. She will again. I do not speak with her much because she chooses not to come to me. But you come because you need my words, and when she realizes how alone she is, she will come to you.”

Sharrazalka lowered his head once more.

“Celestia,” he said, and his tone was not the irascible, dry one Celestia had grown so accustomed to. It was something deeper, sterner, even warmer. It was the tone he’d used the first night they’d talked, when he asked her if she was truly ready for her new life.

“Celestia. My time draws to an end faster than you think. I am from an era that ended ages ago. I am not you, nor am I Luna, nor do I wish to be. In time you two will be all you have. Somehow you must truly realize this and accept it. The time is coming when I will have no more wisdom or magic to impart, and you will discover things about love and Harmony that I cannot even dream of. This life and this world will be *yours*. All yours. And you and your sister will *be* the source of wisdom you see me as. Those answers must come from somewhere, and only you will be around to find them. You said you find it hard to claim the Sun as your own? Good. Make it a challenge and *take* it head-on. Because nobody else will be there to do it for you.”

He rested his head on the plateau, closing his eyes.

“It only gets harder from here, my faithful student.”

• • •

Celestia searched across the Isle for signs of her sister. Uprooted trees and animals scared stiff in their burrows were in abundance, but though she cast her magical net across the land she couldn’t find where Luna might have gone. Her dismay only grew when three days passed and she hadn’t seen a sign of her sister anywhere. She’d gone back to Sharrazalka only once, but the Dragon gave no answers. He claimed not to know where Luna had gone, but Celestia felt the bitter taste of betrayal in her mouth. This was probably just another test of his, sitting back and watching if their sisterly bond could withstand the stress.

Now she stood on the beach, watching the tide come in and repeating to herself what she already knew: Luna had left the island.

And she wasn’t coming back.

Celestia knew she had to find her, whatever the cost, but they only had so much time. If Discord discovered the Bearers of the Elements were unarmed and relatively defenseless, he’d come for them in a heartbeat, and the world would soon fall under his sway.

There was only one place she could have gone that Celestia could think of.

She spread her wings and flew north, leaving the Isle behind.

The journey, though one of many miles, was a trivial matter for one of her power. Even if she was no longer imbued with the power of the Elements, she was still the ruler of the Sun and a formidable power in her own right. In truth, she could be almost anywhere in the world she wished in a matter of hours, if not days. But her responsibilities quashed any of those whims, and she'd never even thought about what lay on the truly unknown horizons of their world. She had only one destination in mind.

She crossed the Pasturic Ocean in less than a day, cracking the sound barrier in two with barely a thought. Her eyes didn't even grow moist as the air in front of her became a solid wall that she cut through with ease. The hot friction of her passing was an unnoticed pinprick compared to the heat of the—*her*—Sun. Her immaculate mane was barely ruffled and not a single tug of wind pulled at her elegant features. Coming upon the southern shore of the Western Continent, a single merchant vessel spotted her passing as she streaked across the sky in a blaze of angry white heat, the roar of her passage clearly audible. Its crew of superstitious sheep and goats mistook her for a comet and bowed down, praying for a safe journey home.

She careened over the coast as night fell, covering the vast distances of the sparsely populated grasslands beyond in a matter of hours. Native boars and earth ponies and antelope who played no part in the war with Infernus saw her fly by, and not knowing what they saw, reacted with equal parts dread and amazement. Mighty beasts from baldyaks to terrortors shrank away and instinctively hid their faces. The Sun, their lifegiver, was passing by.

Ever North she flew, until the grasslands turned to hills, the hills to mountains, and only then did she begin to slow down. The air screeched as her wings came up, and the screech faded to a dull roar, which then was lost to a howling blizzard that she'd stopped in. Snow and frost bit and clawed at her pristine white coat, but it melted before it even reached her. She didn't even feel the bite of the elements, nor the strength of the wind as it grappled with her wings. The Elements of Harmony had left her with that much power at least... but not enough to save the world again.

She was somewhere in the mountains far north of the world, too distant a chain to have a name. Many miles to the west was the impenetrable height of Heorot's Reach, but that mountain was barren. She was more interested in the one before her, that nestled the dark, dank pillars and concourses of an ancient temple on its eastern face.

It was too far north, too remote, to ever have supported life. Neither griffin nor pegasi nor even Dragons had touched this place.

No *mortal* hooves had ever set foot in this temple.

A chill that had nothing to do with the cold ran down Celestia's spine as she touched down in the snow at the temple's forbidding entrance, half buried in snow drifts and walls of ice. Beyond, something had smashed through the rock and stone that had once blocked off the doorway. None of the pillars here were adorned with decorative carvings, none of the stones were anything but simple blocks. The doorway was similarly blank and utilitarian. Somehow that total lack of anything resembling a living creature's touch, that utter disregard for what thinking, seeing minds might think of this place, disturbed Celestia above all else.

She stepped forward and the cold pushed back, but she focused a single thought towards the wall of air, and with her Sun's heat it melted away, forced back, bowing down before her superiority. She struggled not to feel smug; she couldn't feel pride over defeating a bit of magical wind.

Into the temple she went, wandering its dark corridors, guided only by her heart and the light from the tip of her horn. Only once before to her knowledge had these straight, perfectly carved corridors been walked by hoof or claw, and she didn't want to revisit that time. But here she was again, on a mission to prevent her sister from doing something foolish.

Nothing came out of the dark, nothing attacked her, nothing greeted her save the empty click-clack of her hooves on the ground. It was all as cold and lifeless as the mountains outside. She felt no fear as she did before. Just that same sense of desolation and loneliness. That same sad knowledge that this was an empty place, devoid even of ghosts. Those who had made it had abandoned it utterly.

She walked a familiar path down blank, faceless hallways, her very passage warming the stone and granting it a semblance of feeling and life, the ice relenting its grip for just a few minutes as it melted out of the cracks and pooled at her hooves. She headed for the very center of the dead temple, ignoring the warning signs from her pony side, which was screeching with inarticulate fear, telling her this wasn't a place she belonged, she should run, she should hide.

But Celestia wasn't a pony anymore, and she could ignore that fear. She'd faced death too many times to be scared of a tomb.

Finally, she reached the Orrery.

It was a vast, spherical room in the middle of the necropolis, hollowed out and covered in carvings that matched every visible star in the sky. Though before they'd been dark and lifeless, now the magical starscape was alive and shimmering. Every point of light in the sky that circled the globe was represented here, revolving with imperceptible slowness. The constellations they formed were given special attention, their lights shining brighter than the rest. Even the bright bands of the galaxy's arms were seen here, as well as the distant clouds of nebulae. From the door Celestia stood at, a large platform extended into the middle of the room. It terminated in a circular platform supported by a large pillar, and it held up the massive Orrery itself.

The massive machine somehow still worked, rotating slowly in time with all the heavenly bodies it represented. There was the Sun, and the Moon, and the globe that was their home. If Celestia looked hard enough from where she stood beneath it, she could see the swirling language of the machine's builders, labeling important places on the globe she couldn't for the life of her decipher. The other planets in the solar system that Celestia suspected had masters here on the earth as well but hidden from the sight of her and her sister, tilted serenely in the open space.

And standing before the great mechanism was Luna. Her eyes all aglow and her mane flowing freely she resembled the mad scientist of some forgotten era, scrutinizing her machine.

"Luna?" Celestia asked gently over the noise of the old machine's turning. "Luna, can you hear me?"

"Can you hear me?" Luna rebounded. "Can you hear what I've always said, Celestia?"

"Luna," Celestia said, struggling to make her voice warm and sisterly, fighting against the urge to be the condescending elder she'd always been. "Luna, this isn't the answer. You know why we abandoned this place before. We were shown—"

"We were shown wisdom." Luna's mane and tail billowed as some of the stars lit up in chorus with her reeling emotions. "The Elements abandoned us, Celestia. Do you know what I did, back on the Isle? I showed my heart to them, my anguish over the suffering of fellow ponies! My desire to protect and preserve! And they turned their back on me! On us!"

“They saw what was *really* there, Luna!” Celestia implored. “In both of us! Not just you! I came to admit my mistakes!”

“Your *mistakes?*” Luna scoffed. Cold, *glacially* cold wind whipped up around her, cold from the very vacuum of space. “Ponies are *dying*, Celestia! Every day they suffer for Discord’s pleasure, but you would have us ignore their cries! That is less a mistake and more the act of a tyrant!”

“I know, Luna, I know!” Celestia replied, daring to take a step forward. “I was wrong to reject that side of us. I was wrong to think that because we were different we should set ourselves apart from them. I was so desperate, don’t you see, so desperate to keep us from turning into the very things we fought against that I began to push you away! To push myself away! I can see now! I can see that that was wrong! Come back to me, sister!”

“Empty words!” Luna bellowed, and she focused the full force of her power against her sister. The very emptiness of space whirled around the ruler of the Sun, tearing at the heat inside of her, stripping it away in a screeching blizzard of pure void cold. Celestia shuddered and rebounded mightily, pushing back with all the might of her star, wrapping herself in its heat and light.

“Do you think you can play Princess with me, sister?!” Luna shouted, her voice amplified till it filled the whole chamber. “Do you think you can subdue me with your pontifications? A few petty words and promises and all will be well? No, Celestia! If the Elements and you won’t accept our true role in this world then I will find the ones who will!”

The machine itself began to awaken. Beams of light started to criss-cross over the globe of Equestria’s planet. Celestia’s eyes widened as her sister rose up and settled upon the globe that signified the Sun.

“We were wrong to bury this place. Those who built it were like us, Celestia! They saw the true powers of this world and how they could control them!”

“Luna!” Celestia shouted into the growing maelstrom. “What are you talking about? We were told how dangerous this place was! Are you mad?!”

“We were told its dangers, yes! But we were not told its benefits! This place studied the very heavens that we now control! It told those who built it what secrets our world holds. Is this not what you wanted, *dear sister?* Understanding of our true potential?”

“Not like this!” Celestia replied. “You can’t tell me there’s any wisdom here worth having! Come back, Luna! The ones who built this place didn’t know what they were doing!”

“On the contrary,” Luna said, and though she was whispering Celestia could hear her perfectly over the growing wind, “they knew exactly what they were dealing with.”

She turned her baleful gaze on Celestia, eyes glowing with ferocity.

“And so do I.”

The Orrery was lit up now, with arcane signs and sigils Celestia didn’t understand but somehow knew were dangerous. The globe of their earth was almost completely covered, and the light from it was harsh and direct, shining out into deep space, like a *beacon*...

“Luna!” Celestia shouted, her wings flaring as she took to the air. “Stop this! Stop it now!”

"No!" Luna roared, turning to face her sister. “The Elements abandoned us! Without them our world is doomed! Discord will win and we will *die*, Celestia! What use is talking now? What can you possibly offer me in the face of the ***death of all we hold dear?!"***

Celestia flew forward, directing her magic at the Orrery and its mechanisms, but she felt herself blocked and rebuffed by Luna’s own power, and then Luna herself.

Their horns met and crossed in a flurry of sparks. As Night and Day clashed there was a terrible screech as they hurled their power into the duel, struggling valiantly. Though they hadn’t even come close to unleashing their full power, it was enough to cause the entire room to shake. The globes now were all aglow, burning with an intense malefic light, and Celestia knew her time was short.

When their eyes met and Celestia’s sorrowful gaze met Luna’s anguish, she knew she might already be too late.

“Luna,” she uttered through the strain of their clash. “What’s *wrong* with you?”

Lightning arced from their crossed horns, scoring the walls and obliterating ancient carvings.

Luna spoke in a ragged, hushed voice, some kind of strain clear in her eyes, her heavy breathing.

“I... I can *see*...” she rasped. “I can see the darkness, sister. I can see what my Night holds... what she must carry... shadows so dark none of my stars shine in them! It’s so... *ugly*...”

She laughed. It was a tired and bitter noise.

“Where do you think... all the monsters go to hide from your Sun? It’s not... an easy burden, sister. I took up the Night because I was the only one who *could*. You were never... *never* fearsome enough to really get your hooves dirty. You counseled the Five Kings. Your wisdom led the army. I fought with the soldiers and I broke down the gates while you played politics. You calmed the Storm Lord and ended the Maelstrom... and I... I took Infernus’ *HEAD!*”

Celestia disengaged at last and the two hovered in front of the whirring machine. Luna seemed to shrink, her silhouette disappearing into the background of the night sky behind her.

“It is a heavy burden, Celestia... I... I didn’t want... but without it...” Luna grasped her head with her hooves, closing her eyes. “We don’t have a choice. If we cannot defeat Discord without the Elements we must use any means at our disposal! And that includes making the choices we feared to make before. There are things... powers... out there. In my night sky. The stars and all the powers within them! You only know your Sun, but I can feel all the rest! And other great and terrible things. Echoes of the gods themselves! The ones who built this place spoke with them. They’re the only thing left that we can... that we can...”

Celestia shook her head, flapping forward and reaching out for her sister across the emptiness of space. Above them the globe sent a beam of light straight up, into a distant part of space. And where it struck, a star lit up.

A call had been sent.

Something had *answered*.

“No, Luna,” Celestia said, fighting to keep the rising panic in her heart out of her voice. “No. Not just that. Not just *them*, whatever they are, whatever power you claim to have found. We became lost, dear one.”

Her hoof touched Luna’s shoulder. Her younger sister flinched, but didn’t pull away. Celestia came closer, letting her hooves slide around Luna’s shoulders.

“We sought power outside of our own strength, and we forgot... even as the Elements of Harmony filled us with their light, we forgot that it was *our* own willpower that set us on this journey. *Our* love for ponies and... and every living thing under the Sun *and* the Moon!”

She touched Luna under the chin and drew her face up, so they could look at each other.

Something screamed down the arcane highway the Orrery had created, streaking towards their earth. Towards them. Celestia didn't worry though. She cared, but she didn't worry. Something about the way Luna looked at her told her everything would be all right.

“Our love for *each other*, little Luna. That's what drove us from our homes. That's what gave us the strength to keep going, even in the darkest times together. What will *keep* us going through all the long years that we will remain here. Love... love is a choice, Luna, and we chose to ignore what we felt in our own hearts. As long as we chose to love one another that bond between us kept us together, whatever the miles and long nights we had to endure. But we chose to let it go. We let the world in, into places that we used to reserve only for each other. I regarded our new positions as more important, looked to silly, transient things to replace the one being in this world that will never leave my side... *you*.

“Luna, no matter how much I am now a part of the Sun, it will never stop me from being *one* with you. *I am your sister*. And over all else in this world, whatever power the Elements can offer me, whatever adulation Equestria can give me... over the Sun and my own life itself... I choose to love you.”

Something dark and terrible grew close.

“That is why whatever happens... we will be together. And in the face of that, nothing else matters. Not the Elements, not Discord. We will never be carefree foals again. But we will be *together*.”

Something streaked down through the light, through the clouds, falling, shrieking.

“I love you.”

A tear ran down Luna's cheek.

“It's too late,” she whispered.

Celestia smiled as something breached the roof of the temple.

“It’s never—”

And then

everything was

just

sort of

gone

Luna woke up with a start and looked around.

She was nowhere.

She was home.

It was a wonderful place, a big round house with a white picket fence and a giant thatch roof that never leaked, and Luna was never happier. She skipped and jumped and she was a little foal again, prancing in the yard of the first and only home she'd ever really known. The sun shone down and the trees were green, and she could smell the sweet aroma of dinner wafting from an open window of the house.

And then she dropped down on the grass and looked at the little bugs that crawled and walked on the ground, and she could watch their little legs moving and wings buzzing for hours.

She heard a voice calling her from the doorway, so sweet and familiar.

It was Mother's voice. And Father close behind. She turned and saw their faces

so clear and lovely after so long, framed in the doorway.

She ran towards them and laughed, and they laughed with her with a sound like bells, chiming and merry.

Mother Father I love you so much

And they bent down to her level but she liked to look up at them and feel safe and watched over, just like she looked up to her Big Sister who was never far away, just like the Sun.

She threw herself between Mother and Father and told them all about the bugs and the grass and the sky and the wonders of all she'd seen while they held her so close and so tight.

Luna never wanted to leave.

Mother Father I'm so sorry

Sorry I left

I never meant to but I love everything so much, like you taught me to, and I had to keep it safe

Mother and Father just looked at her and smiled, because

Nothing could make us stop loving you

they promised.

And she fell through them and into their love, where everything was wide and warm and full of fairy lights, like the ones she followed in the forest, and it felt like a big soft pillow that covered you like a blanket. She went deeper and deeper until the blanket covered up the lights and she was enveloped in her Night sky where she knew she belonged, and she curled up and smiled and was so comfortable she never wanted to come up again.

But where was Big Sister?

They were arguing...

No.

No everything is all right here with Mother and Father and home and Big Sister is close by like always

But then she looked up at the Night Sky and it was dark and velvet but the lights were so far away, and there was One she missed so terribly that should have been so much closer.

Big Sister come back

You are the only Star that is here with me—all the rest are so cold and far and I don't know which one is you

But her voice was so small and lost it scared her, and she cried and cried until her tears drifted out and froze on the airless space, and they became a bridge she followed out into eternity.

But no matter how far she went there was nothing and the other lights didn't come closer and she was so alone.

And things got darker until she was crying her bridge into the dark places beyond her stars, behind the lights and galaxies and into the Sea Where Dreams Come From.

Here she could find Big Sister because even when they were apart she could dream of her.

Big Sister I'm so sorry

Sorry I left

I never meant to but I loved everything so much, like you taught me to, and I had to keep it safe

But no answer came.

And she thought so hard about her Big Sister the Sun, how it was supposed to give the light and warmth that she could not, and she regretted being so fearsome before.

She thought she was supposed to be fearless but deep down she was afraid, afraid of losing her Big Sister's love.

*But that was impossible
wasn't it?*

LOVE IS ONLY HERE IN DREAMS

That is not my voice

Who are you

**I AM TRUTH I AM POWER I AM ONE WHO WAS HERE BEFORE
YOU ARE YOUNG AND DO NOT UNDERSTAND**

I want Big Sister bring her back

Bring her back now please Big Sister come back

**YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND I DO NOT KNOW BIG SISTER
YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND YOU WILL BE
GONE AND I WILL BE HERE
THEY TRIED TO KEEP US AWAY AND FAILED
WE ARE HERE WE ARE ALL AROUND**

*Luna shut out the other voice and concentrated so hard and she dove into the darkness and brought the only light she could but it was not enough but maybe just maybe
if she looked hard enough they would find each other.*

And the darkness pushed back and she was afraid, and she dove deeper into Nightmares where she was always afraid.

And then she was there.

CELESTIA

She was so bright and so beautiful it hurt to look at her and Luna felt shame and fear and love exploding from within her chest, and Luna laughed because she thought this must be what a star feels like all the time, constantly exploding with greatness and power, bursting with feeling.

*And **Celestia** turned and looked at Luna, and she glowed in the middle of the darkness.*

*But Luna heard another voice that spoke instead of Big Sister's, and a great shadow rose up behind **Celestia** and Luna tried to shout but she had no voice and the shadow got bigger and grew great wings and spoke in the Terrible Voice that all the south once feared. Its roar shook the universe and it spoke of how it would rule everything while Luna shouted.*

This is impossible I beat you I killed you I tore the head from your corpse you worthless thing

Get out get out of my dreams only Big Sister is allowed here

But the shadow grew even larger and seemed even more terrible than before, and Luna knew this was a shadow that hid deep in her mind where even her stars couldn't shine, and she knew terror like never before that struck deep into her heart as the Terrible Voice thundered within and without.

**YOU ARE AFRAID OF YOURSELF AND ME
AS YOU SHOULD BE YOU ARE NOT WORTHY
NOT WORTHY
WE KNOW DISCORD YOU BROUGHT ME DOWN TO FACE HIM
YOU ARE AFRAID OF HIM
I WILL MAKE HIM AFRAID OF ME NOT WORTHY
BRING FEAR BRING DARK BRING NIGHT
TRUE NIGHT ALL MUST BE DARK AND COOL
PEACE OF DEATH AND DREAMS**

SMALL THING SMALL CHILD YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND
WE RULE THE NIGHT NOT YOU
NOT YOU
NOT WORTHY NOT YOU NOT WORTHY

Luna cowered and screamed and felt so small and alone but Celestia was there before her suddenly and brightly like a rising Sun, and her wings spread out white and large like the sea and they folded around her and held her like a hug full of blankets and feathers.

And Celestia spoke to her.

*Dear one, it's all right.
I know your night is dark and frightful.
But it is also beautiful, and it has so many lights in the sky to guide you.
It needn't be governed with anger and fear.
I am here and I will keep you safe, just as you defended me.
We may be hurt and we may be saddened, but we are always together. Always.
Remember that my love, the first and only in my heart.
Now let us bring the dawn to this dark place.*

She rose up and Luna stood with her and they turned to face the darkness side by side. It roared and tried to push them down but they stood firm and Luna remembered—really remembered—who Big Sister was.

She was wisdom. She was light. She was strength. She was guidance.

She was courage. She was shelter. She was help and hope and love.

Above all else she could not live without Luna. She felt Big Sister's heart tugging on her own, asking for help and strength to stand against the raging, infinite black. The darkness that Luna would stand against all night, every night, would stare into its face and never blink once, forever a guardian against the evil she could call down. Tireless. Unwavering. A task for a true warrior.

And she would make the darkness fear her with the one thing she and Celestia shared.

It was not the Elements of Harmony. It was not their magic. It was not their skill. It was not their knowledge.

It was their love, love that shone so pure and so bright no star could match it, no cold could overcome it, no march of time could overtake it.

And it shined from them both and struck the darkness and sent it reeling and shrieking back into itself, and it raged and sputtered and roared its defiance. It screamed and wailed and thrashed and clawed but it couldn't stop the sheer purity that radiated from the Sisters, who stood tall and strong, leaning on one another.

*Luna looked at **Celestia** who looked at her.*

They smiled.

I love you

Reality returned with the force of a brick.

The two alicorns lay in a heap in the remains of the Orrery, huddled together in the shelter of each other's wings. The once grand machine was a smoking ruin, its bronze globes cracked and fallen, the huge support struts bent and twisted as if some great beast had gotten its jaws on them. The walls and its timeless inscriptions were scoured almost clean off the stone. Huge chunks of the walls had broken off and crashed to the ground. Metric tons of debris lay as a grim testament to the massive amount of power that had been expended here. There was no sign of the dark presence that had tried to claim their lives, and with the machine broken its bridge was definitively severed. The world would never know the importance of the colossal battle that had been fought in this very room, but the mountain would always bear the scars. A massive hole had been literally burned into the ceiling, reaching up through dozens of feet of solid stone into the perpetual blizzard above.

Celestia and Luna looked at one another. Not a single word was said, and none were needed. As one, they stood up and cleaned one another with short bursts of magic. Then they took wing, flying in unison up into the hole in the ceiling, into the cold air of a new dawn that was just peeking over the mountains.

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Sharrazalka was terse and short with them when they returned to the Isle. The Elements of Harmony had not yet recognized them again as their Bearers, but that would come in time. They'd taken the first steps, he said, and now it was time to truly come into their own as the legends they would grow to be. He didn't ask where they'd gone, and it seemed to them he already knew and was either too angry or too tired to bring it up.

"The important thing is that you are here, together. That is all I need to know," he had said. The mighty Dragon then took to grumbling loud and long about their mistakes, berating them up and down but without any real rancor. And then, to their amazement, he congratulated them sincerely, because if they hadn't come back from that dark place both literally and figuratively, then the world would've been doomed whether Discord was defeated or not.

They took his chastisement with humility, heads bowed, and when he was done and went back to his nap, they took to the air and went to the lip of the crater, standing at the highest point of the Isle.

They watched the Sun set together.

"Flawless performance," Luna whispered when it sank below the sea and her moon began to rise up to take its place.

"As was yours," Celestia noted when the moon had risen.

Silence reigned for a while.

"Sister... I..." Luna began.

She trailed off.

"We learned. We grew. We conquered," Celestia told her. "I cannot lie to you, dear one. Eternity is a long, long time to spend together. We have a long time left to make more mistakes."

“But we will face them together. Won’t we?”

“Always.”

Luna sighed delicately and closed her eyes.

“The Elements will need more time before they consider us worthy again,” she whispered. “Who knows how much time. Equestria will...”

“We will bear the fault of our mistakes forever,” Celestia answered just as quietly. “And in time we will be the only ones who know the true extent of our failures. But... Luna... when the time does come... and it will... when at last we return and face Discord, he will pay for every misery he has inflicted on our people. And all that we are, all that we do, will be given to the security and happiness of our ponies.”

She let out a breath that seemed to take the life out with her.

“It is a fate we will richly deserve for failing them.”

Luna turned in and leaned against her sister.

“Forever is a long time to feel guilty, love,” she said. “And if there is one thing that sets us ponies apart from the rest, it is that forgiveness is never far from our hearts. And even if it is not enough, and one day they reject you, or turn their back on you, they will turn their back on me as well. Do not think for a moment that I will forget what you told me in that awful mountain.”

She lifted her head and looked Celestia in the eyes.

“No matter what happens, you are my sister, and I am yours. And that love will endure. Against time and monsters... and even against us, if need be.”

Celestia sighed and rested against her sister, closing her eyes as sleep claimed her. Through all that long night, Luna never moved an inch, watching her sister all the while. When the Sun finally shone down on that mountaintop again, it didn’t find them. They’d already returned to Sharrazalka for their next lessons.

As the Sun rose and Celestia’s familiar thunderhorn went to the river, a young yixhil took to the air. It caught a rising thermal and rose up, circling a large stand of trees. Eventually, an elder joined it. The two of them commenced a long and graceful dance, each flying opposite one another in ever widening circles. Lunging and darting, they took

turns leading the aerial ballet as they stretched their wings. Higher and higher they went, their lazy circles widening with each revolution until they were just dots of color against the pale orange and pink of the morning sky.

They stumbled a few times on a rough updraft, but never once did they drop.