

**We**  
Sessalisk



In the beginning, they were two.

In other places, royalty spoke of themselves in plural – to show that they spoke not only singularly, but for their nation. But not them. Neither of them was complete without the other. Not an *I*, not even apart, but a *we*.

One sister had dominion over the sun, and the other, over the moon – or at least that is what is written in the earliest accounts of the tale. It is true that it was easier for one to raise the sun, and easier for the other to raise the moon, but their reign over the heavens was no more than two sides of the same coin. Those who understood their power also knew their affinities to be nothing but pretense. Before the two had entered the land, it was the ponies who had changed night to day and day to night. Great things could be accomplished through the efforts of many, even the movement of the heavens. When the two sisters looked from the skies above the Equestrian steppes, with the cities of ponies sprawled out below, it awed them that such things could be built with mortal horns and mortal hooves.

The sisters knew that they could beget utter devastation and ruin, that they could move and shake the world in ways no flesh-and-blood pony could. But to work together, to create, to build, was a power of which they knew nothing. They had thought they understood chaos, that aspect being a large part of who they were. They knew it to be subtle and indifferent, to be of change and of movement. In this land, however, chaos worked against its nature to be given a form, a mind of its own, directly waging war against those who struggled to impose order.

Unlike the simple magics of the sun and the moon, the might of all these ponies, striving and working together as one, was far beyond them. In this land, where forces were given form, where the winds and the rains were given names and bodies, and the lives of plants given hooves and manes, the two sisters saw the alien power of kinship. And they did not understand.

They, who were two, allowed themselves to be as the skies and the grasses and the stars above. They allowed themselves to live as ponies. To know that which made these weak creatures so powerful, they combined their essences into one, embracing the harmony that gave small things strength. In this land where order and chaos were in an eternal stalemate, these two forces planted themselves firmly on the side of order and tipped the scales so utterly that they shattered.

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It was an ordinary day, much like any other, and the young stallion crept slowly towards the Princess' work chamber. He knew that at this hour, on this day, she had no meetings booked. He rapped twice, on her door.

"Please come in," called the voice from the other side.

"Hello, Auntie Celestia."

She looked up from her paperwork and smiled. "A pleasure to see you again, young Syzygy. What brings you here?"

He told her he wanted to postpone the next week's ceremony. Perhaps indefinitely. "It's not the, um, coronation jitters that are bothering me..." he said, "so much as... I don't know... the responsibility, I guess."

"Oh?"

"I know what you're thinking," he said automatically. "No pony knows how to handle responsibility when they first deal with it, I am more ready than I think, I've been trained well – that kind of thing, right?"

The Princess was silent, and her expression said nothing.

"But it's not that," he continued. "Or rather, it's not just that." He looked down, unwilling to meet his aunt's eyes. "I keep thinking about how I'm going to be making all these important decisions – what if I make a law that accidentally kills some pony? Or what if I mess up and the taxes are so high that every pony is miserable, or they're so low that I can't even keep the roads in a decent state of repair?"

"What if something *bad* happens? What if there's a flood or a fire, and every pony will be looking to me for what to do? What if no matter what I try, I can't save every pony? I already know I have to put numbers on lives, and ask myself if it's better to save an orphanage with a dozen foals, or a hospital that might save the lives of thousands, and that doesn't make it any easier. I – I can't do it."

"Prince Syzygy." Her eyes were sympathetic, but her voice was firm. "As the adage goes, the pony who wants power is the last pony who you want to give it to."

He opened his mouth and then closed it. Had she been listening at all?

"Yes, I have," she said.

Syzygy gaped at her. He had been, up until this point, completely unaware that she could read minds. Suddenly, he was very conscious of all the times he'd allowed his wandering eyes to stray to his aunt's subjects, all the times he'd viewed them in a way that was nothing short of inappropriate, all the times he'd been in the same room as her when this happened. He blushed deep red.

She looked at him, her face a mask of amusement. "The crux of the matter is not whether I can see your thoughts, which I cannot, but rather how predictable your responses will be."

"I –" He stopped. "This is going to be one of those 'family secrets' isn't it?"

She appeared to consider that for a moment. "I would certainly appreciate it if you kept what I am about to tell you between the two of us."

To his right, the fireplace crackled and spat, but all he could hear was the thump-thumping in his own chest. His mother had told him about these, that Auntie Celestia might one day take him aside and tell him things that he must never tell anypony. Not even her. And it always sounded so extremely *sinister*. He shivered despite the heat of the room.

"It is nothing horrifying, I assure you," she said. "There are no skeletons buried in the family closet. I will not sell your soul to some malignant entity. I do not require the sacrifice of a newborn foal at dawn. Nothing like that."

"Forgive me if I do not breathe a sigh of relief."

She laughed. "Understandable. Family though we may be, I have not given you any outstanding reason to trust me." She lifted an empty scroll from her basket and drew a large number of lines and dots. "This is vastly simplified, but imagine you are here," she said, using her ink-stained quill to tap at a dot on the far left of the page.

He nodded, not quite sure what to make of whatever this was.

"Now at this point, you are in the room talking with me. Imagine you choose to tell me that I am crazy, and storm out of the room." She tapped at the line branching out from the very first dot.

That was a very easy scenario to envision.

She nodded, with a knowing grin. "Now imagine you *also* stay here and listen to what I have to say. And another where you keep interrupting me. And another where you tear off all your clothing and pronounce yourself king of the underworld." She tapped a line branching from that first dot on the chart for every outcome she mentioned.

"Er," he said. "That last one doesn't sound very likely."

"No, but it's possible, is it not?"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't..." He shrugged, not finishing the thought. Might as well humour her for the sake of whatever this was, he told himself.

"Now let us say that from each of these choices you might make, another tree of possibility branches out from them."

"Yes, I learned all about probability trees in my mathematics lessons," he said.

"I would hope so," replied the Princess. "Otherwise we have wasted taxpayer money on an incompetent tutor." His aunt levitated a small red inkpot out of her drawer. "I doubt your tutor mentioned this, though." She splashed the crimson ink all over the page, getting it on everything except for a single zig-zagged line. "Dramatic, but I hope it gets the point across," she said.

Prince Syzygy simply stared.

"When you have one outcome, it is to the exclusion of all others. By being here now, you have forced countless instances of yourself into nonexistence, all without knowing or understanding. Many of those instances would have gone on to do wonderful things, things that you will never know and can now never accomplish. Many of them would have saved lives. Many of them would have achieved a greatness that the current you could never hope to match."

"That is... extremely depressing," he said finally.

"Only if you do not take into consideration the fact that just as many have gone on to do horrible things, ended numerous lives and caused great harm upon all of ponykind. But the point is that you are here now, and that you are you. If you were any of the others, you would not be yourself."

He mulled over that in silence. "That's an interesting ideology," he said. "But it doesn't change the fact that there will be choices in the future, horrible choices, and that as

prince, it will be my duty to make them. That I could have done worse or better does not change a thing."

"No," she said. "But you can always do your best."

There was another long silence. When he spoke again at last he said, "I don't see why this in particular needs to be kept in confidence. You have told me nothing a scholar could not divine from ordinary philosophy."

"That is because an ordinary scholar could not show you what I am about to show you."

And the world fell away from him, his body, his choices, his life. He saw the things he had done, and the countless webs that spread out from every tiny decision he had ever made, all the pain he had caused at every junction, all his hopes and dreams dissected in nets of twining golden light.

How meaningless they all were.

Time rushed at him from every angle, angles he did not even know existed, ebbing away at who he was and what he was.

He was crushed under the weight of all his choices.

His mind broke.

Then he was himself again, falling to the floor, violently ill. His aunt held him as the tears streamed down his face, even as he fouled her immaculate white coat, not sure whether he should laugh or scream. When the pieces of his mind slowly knitted back together, when the sobbing finally subsided, she looked at him without pity or disgust – simply understanding. "Now do you see?" she said, and he knew that she already knew the answer.

But to ask questions was to imply ignorance. To answer questions was to acknowledge that ignorance. It was an air that had to be affected for the sake of the ones who could not *see*. It was a courtesy.

He nodded.

They did not talk about the incident again.

He did his best to bury that memory under layers of forgetfulness, to lose all the individual futures and instances in an oblivious haze. It was all he could do to keep the half-healed wounds in his mind from cracking and shattering into a thousand glittering pieces.

During his coronation the next week, he found himself feeling like he had already been there, had already done everything he was doing. He could almost predict what some of the lords and ladies were about to say, right down to the word. But the feeling passed.

Years later, when his first daughter was born, he looked at her and found himself shocked to remember flashes of someone who might have been her when she was full-grown. But she was not the filly who lay in front of him, but a *different* her – one with a yellow coat rather than white. One who had not been born, and now, would never be.

And in the nights, sometimes he dreamed. His sleep filled with the futures that would not happen, the "present" that was not, the pasts that had never existed. As he woke, he never remembered a thing, except for maybe what it was like to know everything that could, might, would and had gone wrong.

Every decision was important, even the ones he did not know he was making. Every choice was a death, was countless deaths, of himself and everypony he knew.

All he could do was choose for himself and hope for the best.

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Ponies would often ask her what it was like to live for so long, to see friends wither and fade. They wanted to know if, to one as long-lived as her, the years were water, trickling and flowing without end or comprehension.

In truth, it was often most convenient to see things the way they did. It was not hard to slip into the tides of time, dissecting every moment into fragments that could be experienced at leisure. The seconds did not cohere on their own, but when held together, they were the tiles of a mosaic, a complete picture that could be abstracted. It was the way that was comfortable to her mortal flesh, the way it fell into naturally and without coaxing.

It had been so strange for her at first. She knew time and space to be a vast ocean that curved and shifted in ways known and familiar. She had existed. It had made sense. A day was the same as a second, and a second was the same as a millennium. Questions like 'how long' were meaningless, cobbled together out of ignorance and

misunderstanding. At first, she only humoured the idea, but the more she used their worldview, the more easily she fell into the trappings of their language and thought. That their flawed framework was so contagious, so insidious... it had rankled.

When the workings of each moment were stripped away, all she was left with was a single point sliding in one inexorable direction through time. The *now*. She could not see ahead or sideways – only behind. Life was the cage that was flesh that was duty. It would cloud her vision, but to stay in this world, she had to be like the ones who lived in it.

It was blindness and stupidity, but this was her burden.

When she unshackled herself to be as she was, the world had opened up, and all of time had blossomed around her in shimmering gossamer. She had been home again, but in many ways, she had not been whole. To be herself, truly herself, she had to renounce all that tied her to life. It had been like rending a part of herself that knew, but could know no longer.

It had been like dying.

Her body had chained her to the earth and to the people. It had destroyed all that she was. And somehow it had made her free.

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She speaks to the ambassadors and diplomats. Her words are fair, and some would even say wise, but her mind – her self – is elsewhere. The pathways are foggy and indistinct, but like maize out of a basket, a filly tumbles off a cloud. There are several outcomes.

During one, the filly flaps her wings, choppy and clumsy, but she saves herself before she hits the ground. After that there are more threads, ones where she can't make it back, and others where she overcomes her doubt and returns to whence she came. Then after that, there are more choices, more outcomes, spreading and branching off into clouds of possibility.

In another, the filly simply tumbles until she hits the ground and dies.

And in another, she flounders in the air for a little while before she hits the ground and is crippled. She never flies again. Or she never walks again. Or she never wakes again.

And in another she hits a cloud, and there she stays until she is rescued.



And in another –

The Princess sees enough.

Ponies talk, a buzz of political and economic jargon. She smiles at them, and even before they voice their words, she understands their meaning. As they speak to her, she already knows what to say. It takes an eternity for them to finish, but she waits.

When all deals are brokered, and all treaties written, only then does she take wing to the south.

The second she reaches the place, she speaks aloud. Her voice is the sound of wings, and the forest around her stills. She whispers to the small fliers, the nectar drinkers, and one by one, they flicker closer. She says to them to wait. To stay here till the sun sets again.

They are not happy. They say they are free people to fly where they choose. To taste what flowers they may. That she is the princess of the ponies, and not of them.

And the Princess says that this is true, but reminds them that without her people, there would be no flowers at all. She says this is important, and calls upon an old favour she has been saving for an occasion like this.

And begrudgingly, they agree.

She spreads her wings once more and soars high into the air. The clouds break over her head, and she slips awkwardly into shadow. She wishes she was more like her sister, her sister who could wear darkness like a second skin (*but if this was so she would not be here now*). She pushes this aside; there is no point in wishing when she could be doing instead.

Slowly, what she is looking for comes into sight – soft altocumulus, shaped by hooves into buildings and cabins. Her shade-body flickers sable, and she is inside.

She knows that in the day, the filly's mane would be like the refracted light of sunshine in rain. In the darkness, all colours are grey. She peers closely at the drab, sleeping child.

Shadows are silent. And – as she reaches inside her own aching chest, pulls out the pulsating pigeon's-blood light, lets the filly breathe the brightness into her lungs – she is silent too. She leaves like a ghost.

She looks into the webs of *might* and *could*, and sees two who will move themselves into position, all of their own accord. When she gazes at the somber one, the one who will

know great joy, she almost feels the filly looking back. The solemn filly gives a knowing smile, as if she, too, understands. The Princess shivers and does not look into that one's pathways again.

Later, she rolls a boulder into place and taps it once, lightly, with her horn. She can already feel the tingle of its pull.

There is still one more, the consolidator, the most difficult of all. Even though everything is in place, she knows that her work is not done. She cannot force; she can only coax.

There must always be a choice, or it would not be real. She hopes that, when the time comes, they choose well.

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"Please do not do this." Her voice sounded as if it was travelling from very far away. The once-proud arch of her neck was gone, and her head sagged low to the ground. "Look beyond blood and envy and to the branches of what will be. This will beget nothing but sorrow."

"They do not understand," said the dark sister. She stared out into the vast expanse of night below, her face unreadable. "We have given everything for them and they do not care. *They do not care.*"

"And so wilt thou smite them for their ignorance?"

The dark sister looked up sharply. "*Thou?*" The singular rather than the plural. Her eyes grew wide.

Tendrils of the light sister's mane began to writhe. Her form was now more verisimilitude than truth. "If the sun cannot shine, those who live will suffer and fade. No pony can live without sustenance or breath." Her voice, still sounding distant, carried a quality to it that the dark sister knew all too well.

She responded to the threat in kind, oscillating outwards from her flesh, expanding from the realm of being and into the one where such things were mutable, meaningless. "What matter are their lives to such as we? To them we are a force to be ignored, *shunned*. Best we should rise to their expectations."

Until they flowed together as equals, without shape or time, the pale one said nothing. Without their oppressive bodies, the pathways of what could be, could have been, and

were, laid bare all around them. She let the possibilities break upon her sister, waves of potentiality, crashing on a hard core of thought.

*Now dost thou see? The bleak, lifeless future stretched out for aeons across the timeless waste. Thou shalt bring naught but ruination upon our people. Please, Sister. Cease this madness. For all that lives. For us.*

*Fool. The ideas echoed in all that was, is and will be. What didst thou think to accomplish by drawing us here? Wert thou blind enough to think love any less petty than hate?*

*Dost thou truly believe that we were lacking in perspective?*

*Mortal concepts have no meaning. Our hearts lie too close to those who live and breathe and strive – they have violated us beyond belief, impelled their inanities and trivialities upon our being. We have been broken by them. Hurt by them. All we – I – want is justice, Sister. If what is, is no more, we can be free again. Who art thou to deny this from me?*

And all that could have been, might be, lay before them a darkness everlasting and undying. There was iron in the dark sister's resolve, in all futures from then till the end of time. She would not balk at this. She would not shy from the destruction of a world. It was written in choice and in destiny and in all that would be.

The light sister chose.

*I am Celestia. The pale one tasted the words as they left her, ephemeral, temporary. To speak as they were speaking, to be two, rather than one, was a corruption of what they were. She anchored herself to frailty and impermanence. I give myself freely to the temporality of life. To friendship and to love. I cannot turn my back on our people. Not even for thee, Sister.*

She embraced her mortal form, and all the weakness that entailed. Deep within her, the bindings drew so tightly that they hurt, lashing across her insubstantial form. Her certainties dissolved like a drop of blood in water, but behind them was the solid and simple truth of all life that wants to keep on living. The light sister felt something inside her tear, ripping out of her chest and bubbling out of her mouth – the broken laughter of those who have lost, and have lost everything.

"I am sorry."

And the forces of the world, the harmony that kept it in check, rushed out to the dark sister's empty body, tying it not to the earth, but to her namesake.

*Thou art foolish indeed if thou believest that shell to be more than a puppet, dancing under mine strings.*

"Thou art more *Luna* than thou knowest, Sister. With thy hate and envy, thou hast bound thyself to thy body, just as I have bound myself to mine."

***I have done no such thing!*** The air shook with rage and defiance, mortal emotions betraying what she had truly become.

From the balcony, the pale one looked up to the moon. "I cannot change thy nature, Sister. We may be sundered, but our paths still lie entwined. I cannot heal thine anger without first changing myself, and that is beyond our power. I am sorry."

There must have been words, but they were whispers in the wind. Echoes in stone.

The elder sister did not hear the moon speak again.