

Myths and Birthrights
By Tundara

Book One: Awakening and Arrivals
Chapter Three: Goddess of the Stars

With a gentle pop of magic that smelled of lilacs, Twilight Sparkle appeared in her bedroom. She wanted to take a few moments to try to calm herself, to lessen the blossoming embarrassment and panic that made her heart clench tight in her chest and her thoughts swim in a hazy sea. She wanted to sit, repeat her mantras and breathing exercises.

Except the voices wouldn't let her.

Where before there had been only a few, now dozens were speaking, with more adding themselves into the mix with every passing moment. There were so many, it was as if she was sitting in the throne room in Canterlot during one of the more rambunctious Day Court sessions. The only difference was she couldn't see any of the ponies, or voices in this case, arguing, only hear them. It was making rational thought very difficult.

"Quiet, please, just be quiet!" Twilight shouted to the empty room, pressing her hooves to her temples and briskly massaging.

For a few precious seconds there was silence, the voices seeming to hear her plea, then they broke out in a riot of noise twice as loud.

Groaning, tears streaming down her face, Twilight staggered towards her bathroom. She had a potion made by Zecora that could help, she hoped. It was only to be used in emergencies, Zecora had stressed that point several times while brewing the potion. Zecora claimed it would relax the mind and sweep away anxiety like a wave washing clear hoof prints on a beach. The shaman had also repeated over and over that the effects of the potion were highly addictive, as well as having a lessening effect with every potion taken.

Knowing her own obsessive tendencies, Twilight had always been too afraid to use the potion. So it had sat hidden behind a box of bath salts on a shelf.

If there ever was a need for the potion, it was right then, Twilight reasoned. She tossed the bathroom door open, her magic flaring so it flew from its hinges to shatter against the far wall. Splinters rained and sprinkled her coat, but Twilight didn't care. Other than the voices, the only thing in her head was the single goal of Zecora's potion and the promise of relief it offered. Unwilling to risk another magic flare destroying the potion, Twilight reached up with her hooves, striking the bath salts from the shelf to the floor where they clattered and spilled across the polished wood.

Twilight grabbed the potion in trembling hooves, pulling out the cork with her teeth before downing it in long, greedy gulps. It tasted like a combination of molasses and turpentine, with a smell just as strong. Her gorge rose to eject the foul concoction, and it was only with tremendous willpower that she managed to keep from spewing the potion across her mirror and floor.

Almost before the last drop had left the bottle, Twilight could feel it begin to work, tranquility and control reasserting themselves within her mind as the potion settled in her stomach. The world was like a moonlit seashore, waves gently lapping at her hooves. No tense muscles, no magic flares. Just serenity, and thousands of voices vying for her attention.

Twilight's eyes flew open, and she sat down with a thump at the realization.

The voices weren't gone, they had multiplied by at least ten.

Yet the potion was acting exactly as promised. Twilight lifted her hoof to examine it in the early afternoon light spilling in through her window. She had never felt so calm or collected, ever. Quickly, Twilight tested some math and numbers in her head, counting Pi to the twentieth decimal place, easy things Twilight used to do for fun. The answers came quickly, yet, the calming of the voices only seemed to grow.

"Twilight? Is that you?" Spike's voice filtered in through the broken door.

Spike walked into the bedroom, a basket filled with party decorations in one claw. He'd been helping Pinkie decorate the library for the party, Twilight recalled, still more focused on her hoof and sorting out why she was hearing 6531 voices. Tilting her head a little, Twilight knew the number was accurate and had stopped growing. Also, without the rising tide of panic, she realized that the voices had been concerned for her.

There were too many to pick out any one individual voice from the cacophony, but Twilight knew she didn't need to in order to understand. A lopsided grin began to form on her face, and Twilight looked over to her number one assistant.

"Yeah, I'm in here, Spike," Twilight said as she trotted out of the ruined bathroom.

"Whoa, what happened here?" Spike asked, his emerald eyes taking in the mess Twilight had made. "And why are you smiling like Rainbow that time Pinkie baked those 'special brownies' that no pony would let me try?"

Whatever Twilight was about to say was lost as she fell to her knees releasing an ear splitting scream. Pain, an incomprehensible amount of pain, exploded through Twilight, rippling down from her horn to the tip of her tail. Twilight couldn't hear Spike as the drake ran to

her side, his voice filled with concern and worry. She didn't even notice Pinkie as the normally laughing and fun loving mare burst into the room, her huge, blue eyes filled with dread.

As quick as the pain came, it vanished, leaving Twilight panting on her side. Groaning, she tried to sit up, but found that her legs were being rather uncooperative.

"Twi', you okay? Should I get somepony?" the normally bouncy voice of Pinkie was strained and taught as a drawn bow.

"No, I'm fine, I think it was just a reaction to..." Twilight's voice trailed off as she was helped into her bed.

A small, but growing, thrum of magic began to build at the base of her horn. Scrunching her eyes closed she tried to block the impending discharge, but it was a bit like trying to halt a buffalo stampede with a stop sign. Behind the magic she could hear approval and anticipation tingeing the voices.

"Pinkie, y-you need to take Spike and get out of the library," Twilight groaned, her teeth grinding together as she fought to hold back the magic, little sparks starting to shoot from the tip of her horn.

"What, but Twilight—" Spike started to protest, but was cut off by Twilight.

"Now! Please!"

Pinkie didn't stop to ask questions. She grabbed Spike and tossed the dragon onto her back. With Spike protests filling the room, Pinkie then leapt out the nearby window, performing a flip as they fell, then bouncing off a trampoline to land safely beside the library. Twilight was thankful, both to Pinkie for having the sense to listen without any of her normal bubbling questions and for Zecora's potion. Without it Twilight was certain she'd have been too panicked and afraid to give the warning in time.

It was a near thing, even with the artificial serenity granted by the potion. As soon as Pinkie vanished through the window, Twilight stopped trying to hold back the magic and was swept aside in a torrent of ancient and unfathomable energy.

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The fresh spring air was brisk and refreshing as it caressed Luna's face. The midnight blue alicorn raised her muzzle to the wind's touch as she leaned forward in her chariot. High above, Sol was beginning a lazy descent towards the horizon, while in the back of her

mind, Luna could feel the moon dreaming.

It was a pleasurable experience for the Princess, one that never failed to put a smile on her lips.

Today, Selene was dreaming of the stars, the thousands of little points of light that kept her company each night. Luna could see the dream like she was watching a play. The moon was a big strong alicorn sitting at a quaint table having tea with Alioth, Polaris, Rastaban, and Subra. The stars were all pegasi, their cutie marks the constellations they belonged within.

The dream was common enough that Luna didn't have to pay attention to the details to know what was happening, so she just tried to relax. Yet, it began to bring forth unpleasant memories, a faint nagging sensation ending any semblance of enjoying the flight down to Ponyville.

It was still a sore subject for her, even now. Ever since Luna's return from her imprisonment within the moon, the stars had been at best persnickety and often outright dismissive of her. At first she chalked it up to her loss of power from the effects of the Elements cleansing her of Nightmare Moon. Gradually that idea had dimmed as she regained her power, her connection with Selene as strong as it had ever been, while the stars seemed to grow more distant. A few months after her return, Luna had tried to re-arrange a portion of the night sky. She had never been that pleased with how clustered some of the stars were in the constellation Gemini.

For several nights she had argued, cajoled, bribed, and even resorted to begging the stars to move. Only once she fell back to direct threats had they finally acquiesced. Happy that some progress seemed to have been made, she had gone to bed that morning with a smile on her face and a skip in her step.

The next night, Luna found the stars back in their original locations and steadfastly ignoring her.

Luna had been beside herself with worry and anger, kicking open the doors to the throne room with the Day Court only half-way through. It had taken all Celestia's legendary patience and tact to calm her sister down as Luna alternated between shouting obscenities out the window to the stars hidden above and breaking down in tearful sobs. The tub of chocolate and mint ice cream has also helped, Luna admitted privately.

Once Luna had been calmed down, Celestia shared a pet theory she'd been silently harbouring, one that had only grown stronger since Luna's release.

Luna was no longer responsible for the stars. Instead, they were looking to a new mistress.

Whatever reaction Celestia had been expecting, most likely explosive epithets followed by violence towards nearby furniture, it wasn't what she received. Luna had sat calmly for several long minutes staring at her own billowing mane in a mirror, then closed her eyes and silently asked the stars themselves if what her sister said was true. They hadn't confirmed anything, but neither had they made any attempts to deny the accusation.

More recently Luna had taken to likening the stars to teenagers, the way they sulked about the night or ignored her when she sent her awareness into the sky. The number of conversations that were halted just by her approach outnumbered the stars themselves. Luna actually felt more welcome among the nobles of the court than she did her own night.

But all that could be changing in the coming nights if Celestia's guess held true, and Celestia was rarely wrong.

A thermal jolted the chariot a little, bringing Luna out of her musings. She was about to playfully chide the two Night Guards pulling the chariot when she heard something very peculiar. It began as a quiet murmur of conversation between Pollux and Ras Thaoum, the two Gemini stars whispering back and forth in excited giggles. Then Propus joined into the conversation.

This was very unusual, as the stars needed to sleep during the day in much the same manner as Luna's precious Selene. The stars would dim their light and nestle themselves within the blanket of aether that served as the barrier between the sky and the endless void through which Ioka swam.

Chewing on her lower lip, but dreadfully curious what the stars were doing awake during the day, Luna stealthily sent her awareness up into the azure sky. The conversation hitched for a moment between the three stars, only to continue unabated a moment later.

[i]There are two of them, why are there two of them? Something's wrong.[/i]
Pollux nervously flickered, the equivalent of a star wringing its hooves.

[i]The other is new, and similar, yes, but just a whisper and a memory carried by the winds. She isn't the mistress, not our mistress at least,[/i] said Ras Thaoum, the star darkening to a deep red shade revealing the star's anger tinged with concern.

[i]She's so sad and worried. I just want to pluck her up and give her a hug,[/i]
sighed Propus. [i]And those three poor little things she brought with her and now Sirius has—[/i]

[i]Shush, Propus, can't you see the Avatar of the Moon is near? That is star business, not hers.[/i] Ras Thaoum turned a shade of mulberry as she interrupted her sister.

Luna winced, Ras Thaoum's words almost like a physical slap to the face. She was sorely tempted to ask what the stars were talking about, but she already suspected it had to do with the three alicorns that had appeared the previous night. None had yet shown themselves, which was worrying, but Celestia was dealing with that situation while Luna was going to deal with another.

[i]Oh, come now, what would loony Luna do?[/i]

Propus waggled from side to side, giving Luna the equivalent of a wave. Far below, Luna gritted her teeth, but refused to be chased off by the stars.

[i]Luna isn't that easy to sway,[/i] sighed Ras Thaoum.

Pollux snorted, [i]No, you just have to go to bed in the evening instead of stargaze.[/i]

Luna hadn't been prepared for the barbed words. Tears threatened to run down Luna's face as the stars words pierced her heart over and over. She knew that they were angry with her, but to be so cold and cruel, she had never expected it of them. Once they had come dancing and frolicking around her and Selene, singing and playing in beautiful displays of light. Now they barely tolerated her presence.

[i]Are you three talking about You-Know-Who?[/i] interjected Regulus. The newcomer received a chorus of affirmatives that almost shattered the last of Luna's will. Taking in a fluttering breath, she steeled herself for what came next. [i]I just spoke to the three sisters. The mistress was just with them. Though her connection was weak and intermittent, they say that she could hear them talking. We must prepare ourselves.[/i]

The deep voice of Rukbat then entered the conversation.

[i]Have you seen what just happened in the—[/i] Rukbat's voice trailed off as the large red star noticed Luna. [i]I'll tell you later. But it was one of the most interesting things I've seen in centuries. I'll leave you with that little teaser. Later![/i]

Rukbat flew off to join the other stars of Sagittarius, who had been joined by those from Libra and Scorpius.

[i]What was that about, do you think?[/i] wondered Pollux.

Flickering in a star-shrug, Ras Thaoum replied, [i]You know how excitable Rukbat can get. She swears she once saw a teleporting dragon with a biped on its back.[/i]

Then Polaris joined the conversation, which piqued Luna's curiosity. Polaris was

known by many names; the North Star, the Guiding Light, and Moon's Bane being just a few. She was the lodestar that all other stars rotated around and by extension the most powerful and important of the stars. When Polaris spoke the other stars listened. She was also one of the four responsible for assisting in Nightmare Moon's escape.

Not wanting to be rebuffed or told of by the powerful star, Luna kept quiet and just listened.

[i]It is time, we have to move early. We can't let that interloper try to steal our mistress away. She is moving towards the mistress' physical form. If we wait for the proper time, it may be too late. We can't allow Nightmare Moon to happen again. I will wake the others that still sleep. Begin the gathering.[/i]

Frowning and turning Polaris' words over in her mind, Luna opened her eyes as she drifted her awareness back to her body. The mention of Luna's mad alter-ego was troubling. Luna wondered if the stars were really worried that she was going to fall or relapse back into the crazed goddess. Perhaps that was why they were treating her so harshly and shunning her presence.

The only other explanation for what Luna had heard was that the stars thought that she was going to hurt Twilight. But the stars had to know Luna would never harm her, not in a thousand years, or ten thousand. Twilight was almost like another sister.

Luna needed to suppress a laugh. There was a very real chance that Twilight was her sister in fact. The other possibility was that Twilight was their cousin; though Luna found that outcome far less than likely. While her mother had been missing since Equestria's formation, that was by choice. Luna's aunt was gone, unable to darken the world with her spiteful presence.

High above, Luna saw star after star glimmer and shine through the blue haze created by Sol. At first it was just a few, then more and more began to shine until every star in the sky was awake and talking.

Luna felt a surge of power from Ponyville, one that quickly faded away but left a peculiar aftertaste in her mouth. Like spearmint and tomatoes. She opened her mouth a few times, rolling her tongue around in an effort to get rid of the taste even as she leaned forward and ordered the zbori pulling her chariot to fly faster. Their leathery wings sliced the air, the pair of guards straining in their harnesses.

Above, the stars began to gather, crowding over the small country town of Ponyville.

She wasn't going to make it in time, Luna realized, not unless she took more

direct actions. Spreading her wings, Luna leapt from the chariot, startling her guards as she passed over them in two great flaps. With the broad span and long primaries of their wings, alicorns weren't normally the fastest of fliers. Using magic, however, Luna could race alongside the swiftest of fliers, or simply teleport to her destination.

This is what she did, disappearing in a flash of light blue magic and appearing just outside the town's library. Back winging carefully, Luna landed next to Pinkie Pie and Spike.

"Lady Pinkamena, Spike," Luna said, giving each a formal nod. "Twilight is inside?"

Jumping at her voice, Spike rushed up to her, claws gripping her pectoral as he stared up at her with huge, pleading eyes. "Princess Luna! You have to help Twilight! She... she... I—"

"Shush, Spike. Do not worry. This is happening earlier than anticipated, but it was not unexpected," Luna said, comforting Spike before striding towards the library's door.

As she approached the door, two new sensations pressed upon Luna.

The first was hundreds of prayers in her name as ponies looked to the sky and saw what seemed to be a second sun forming from the stars gathering so tightly together. Luna smiled lightly as the prayers came, knowing Celestia would be receiving many more. As Physical Alicorns, neither could directly answer the prayers, but they could gaze upon the ponies praying for a short time. Since almost all the prayers were in response to the celestial event unfolding above, Luna didn't bother to send her awareness to check in on the petitioners.

The taste of power leaked through the air, heralding the approach of a powerful entity. Luna paused as she reached for the door with her magic. She could feel both Pinkie and Spike look at her expectantly, but Luna brushed them from her mind, instead extending her senses outward much as she had to listen in on the stars. Instead of sending her awareness into the dark heavens above Ioka, Luna sent herself towards the hills and dales surrounding Ponyville. Among the spring blooms, Luna saw it; one of the portions of the previous evening's wind, desperately clawing its way towards Ponyville.

Where before the wind had been rather harmless and almost playful, it was now alive with desire and fear. Closing her eyes, Luna pushed more of her conscience mind outward to get a good look at the wind. The magic coiled tight within the wind was vaguely familiar, but frayed with jagged edges that popped and hissed against whatever it touched. The wind slowed in its approach, glancing this way and that like a lost child. When it saw Luna, it leapt forward, staring back at the Goddess of the Moon.

"Help them. Must protect them. Danger. Danger. Must protect them!" screamed

the wind at Luna's awareness, the unnatural force gathering speed and momentum.

Snapping her awareness back into her body, Luna cursed herself as a self-centered fool. The stars weren't worried that she was going to harm Twilight, but rather, that the entity carried inside the approaching wind held malicious intent towards their mistress. She was thankful that, at least, she'd teleported the rest of the way to the town.

Luna was about to throw aside the library door when another voice broke through the shroud of self-recrimination and fear in her heart.

"Mother? You're here early," Cadence said as she galloped towards the library, Shining Armour and his parents following close behind. "It doesn't have to do with you-know-what starting prematurely, does it?"

Cadence had that small half-smile that said she already knew the answer. Beside Luna, Pinkie Pie was bouncing up and down with her characteristic wide grin, no doubt barely containing an enthusiastic greeting. Velvet Sparkle and Comet Chaser both slowed to a trot as they approached. Velvet rolled her eyes at her husband as he took long and laboured breaths from trying to keep up with their son and the princess. Luna gave them each a respectful nod, but kept most of her attention on Cadence.

"Daughter, you are aware of what occurred last night, I gather?" Luna asked, not bothering to discuss Twilight's situation, of which both Alicorns were already aware, and instead seeking an alternative source of information on whatever it was that was approaching the town.

"You mean the seven winds and the three," Cadence gave a slight uptick to her smile, "new arrivals? Yes, I am aware. There was a great surge of Love when they appeared. I'd have to have been dead not to feel it, given," Cadence lifted one of her majestic wings to show her cutie mark, the diamond heart surrounded by gold filigree shining on her flank.

Luna nodded, then looked to the north, where whence the wind approached. "What do you make of it now?"

Cadence closed her eyes and Luna could see her daughter practically expand, though she knew it was just an illusion of her senses. For a couple seconds Cadence maintained her extended awareness, very similar to how Luna had listened in on the Stars and Moon, but connected to the tapestry of Love that surrounded all sentient life living on Ioka.

When Cadence opened her eyes, Luna could see the trouble and concern that wiped away her daughter's smile.

"Love, so much love. But it is twisted and malformed. Almost grotesque in its single-mindedness. I don't think whatever is in that wind is alive. It's just repeating the same

thoughts over and over." Cadence glared toward the horizon. "Mother, what is it?"

"I'm not sure. I think the stars at least have an idea. Though they aren't sharing it with me." Luna again reached for the door, and this time thrust it open.

Beyond it was a wall of swirling magenta energy like the funnel of a tornado. Luna sighed while Velvet Sparkle and Comet Chaser both exclaimed oaths to Celestia.

"Princess, our daughter, is she alright?" Comet asked chewing on his lip as he looked at the wall of magic.

"Of course Twilight is alright!" Pinkie exclaimed before Luna could respond, bouncing up beside Twilight's parents and wrapping both in a big hug. "Things are all 'whoosh!' and 'zappy!' right now, sure, but Twilight is going to be just hunky-dory-rific! Right Princess Luna?"

"Lady Pinkamena is correct. While spectacular, this magic is entirely harmless."

Luna thrust a platinum clad hoof into the vortex of magic to prove her point. Little red sparks crackled across the surface of the wall, but otherwise there was no change or reaction. For a couple more moments the magic continued to hum and swirl, then it swiftly began to contract back towards its point of origin. Waving for the others to follow her and wait in the main room, which was half decorated with party supplies, Luna and Velvet Sparkle made their way to the second story landing leading to Twilight's bedroom.

Below, Pinkie began to sing and returned to tacking up a long banner. Cadence, Shining Armour, Comet Chaser, and Spike meanwhile sat watching the princess and Twilight's mother. Hesitating for a moment, Luna could hear movement on the far side of the door. Clearing her throat loudly, Luna gave the door a knock.

There was a startled 'eep' from the other side, followed by the sound of a dresser being dragged in front of the door.

"Uh, who's there?" Twilight's voice filtered through the hardened oak.

Luna and Velvet both rolled their eyes in unison.

"It's your mother, Twily, and Princess Luna," Velvet said, her tone sharp with concern.

"Princess Luna? Oh no! I mean, um, good! Yes, good! I'll, uh, be right out! Yeah, heh-ha-ha!"

Luna could practically hear Twilight's eye twitching in the librarian's voice. Soon to be ex-librarian, Luna corrected with a knowing smirk. The panic was to be expected, but Luna didn't have the time to deal with it at the moment. If she had been more like her sister Luna may have tried to play up the obvious anxious mare a bit, but with the unknown threat of the approaching wind, Luna didn't have the time.

Knocking on the door again Luna said, "If you're trying to come up with a spell to hide your wings, Cadence and I can show you a couple. We've found illusions fairly effective. Celestia has gotten a lot of use and good results from transmutations over the centuries, however. They may be more to your liking."

Silence leaked from the other side of the door.

Very quickly, Luna sent her awareness upwards to check on the stars. They were all still up there, awake and shining, watching with bated breath the events unfolding so far below. A sharp intake of breath on the other side of the door told Luna that Twilight had perhaps sensed or felt something. Or she was just processing what Luna had said. Both were possible.

"Honey, why don't you open the door, and talk to us?"

More silence.

Starting to get annoyed with the delay, Luna was willing to give Twilight one last chance to leave her room peacefully before she kicked the door down.

"I'm, uh, sick! Yeah, that's it, I'm sick," Twilight called, followed by some very unconvincing coughing.

"Twilight Abigail Sparkle, you open this door this instant or, by Celestia's mane, I am pulling it off the wall and coming in there myself! You understand me, missy?"

Luna cringed and scooted a little to the side at the fire and venom that filled Velvet's voice.

"Yes, mother," Twilight said, defeat pressing down her voice and the dresser blocking the door sliding aside. Her ears pressed back, Twilight opened the door just enough to reveal one of her large lavender eyes. Fixating on Luna, Twilight asked, "You're not mad at me, are you?"

Holding back a huff and eye roll that certainly would have only further scared the trembling mare, Luna slowly shook her head and gave her most genial smile. It was a bit like a wolf looking down on a flock of sheep. Cringing back, Twilight opened the door enough for Luna and Velvet to enter. Taking it as an invitation, both ponies trotted into the bedroom.

Twilight backed up nearly to one of the windows trying to make herself appear as small as she could. One ear occasionally flicking towards the window, her eyes flitted back and forth between the princess and her mother. This gave Luna an excellent opportunity to examine Twilight. Walking around her, Luna held her head up like a critic examining a work of art.

The first thing she examined was Twilight's new wings. As Luna expected, Twilight's wings were long, reaching back to cover half of her cutie mark, and would no doubt have a majestic span when in flight. Alicorns shared their wing structure with the Imperial pegasi; long and broad, with the primary feathers seaming to reach out towards the horizon. The tips of Twilight's feathers darkened from the gentle lavender of her coat to an almost midnight black at the tips.

Shifting her gaze, Luna next looked over the changes to Twilight's mane and tail. From them Luna discerned that Celestia had been right. Twilight was a Physical Alicorn, representing some actual manifestation of the world itself. Luna hardly needed further confirmation, but the way the dark midnight blue streaks of Twilight's mane and tail glittered with thousands of tiny lights like they had been dipped in diamond dust bespoke of her connection to the stars.

Luna wanted to cry, shriek, and maybe, just maybe, glare at Twilight, but she held back, reminding herself that the stars had chosen Twilight, if ever there had been any choice in the matter. Twilight was no more to blame for her connection to the stars than a child could be blamed for who her parents were.

Other than her wings, mane and tail, Twilight looked identical to before. Well, except maybe her horn was ever so slightly longer. Not enough to be easily noticeable. With time, that would change, Luna knew. As she became more and more attuned to the stars Twilight would begin to grow. Luna suspected that when Twilight had completely grown into her aspect they'd be roughly the same size. But for now, at least, the new alicorn looked like a unicorn with a sparkling mane that had grown wings.

"I'm sorry, Princess Luna," Twilight muttered, continuing to wilt under the princess' gaze.

"Whatever for?" Luna asked, and she even managed a smile. "You look beautiful. Celestia will be so happy. She was right, you are the Goddess of the Stars."

Luna didn't know how she managed to say those words without her voice hitching or giving any indication of the pain throbbing through her heart. She just sat down beside Velvet Sparkle and gave Twilight a glowing smile.

Twilight's eyes just grew wider and even more frightened.

"Oh no," Twilight gasped, covering her mouth as realization truly sunk behind her eyes. "I stole the stars from you!"

Twilight was almost hyperventilating, the young mare placing a hoof to her chest as she sucked in greedy gulps of air. Luna couldn't prevent the wince of pain. She just hoped that in her anxiety Twilight hadn't noticed Luna's expression.

"Honey, listen, you didn't steal the stars from Princess Luna. That's impossible, right princess?"

Brushing aside the question, Luna instead went to the window. "I wish we had time to get you acquainted with your new situation, Twilight, but, what is the expression? 'When it rains, it pours'. Something is coming, and if what I overheard is accurate, it is you it seeks. We'll have time to discuss your birthright afterwards."

"What are you talking about?" Twilight asked incredulously.

"Close your eyes and listen," Luna explained, doing the same herself. Beneath them, Luna could sense Cadence also listening to the currents of aether in the hills.

It took Luna mere moments to find the entity, now much closer. Within a few minutes, Luna suspected, it would be upon them.

Grumbling to herself, Twilight did as she instructed. Luna braced herself for Twilight's first attempt at detaching her essence from her physical form. At first it was hesitant and unsure, a wavering, slow advance, then Twilight's courage and curiosity took over and she washed over the library in a burst of mint flavoured energy. She lasted only a moment before Twilight's essence returned to her body, Twilight swaying and needing support to avoid falling.

"What was that?" she exclaimed, placing a hoof to the side of her head.

Despite the gravity of their situation, Luna couldn't help but give a small giggle. Luna rarely giggled—it was unbecoming of a princess, after all—but Twilight was too cute as she checked herself over, glancing under her new wings and at her hooves as if to check they were still attached to her.

"What just happened?" Twilight asked, spinning on the spot as she continued to inspect herself.

"We call it our 'awareness'," Luna said as she fell back into her body once more. "I'll explain everything to you, as soon as we've dealt with the approaching trouble."

“Right.” Twilight nodded her head, saying again, “Right.”

“Princess, is there anything I can do to help?” Velvet asked, despite having already stepped up to Twilight’s side.

Looking the middle-aged mare over, Luna simply shrugged her wings. Velvet Sparkle, Baroness of Sparkledale and the surrounding lands, was well known within Canterlot politics for her stern, unflinching support of the crown, and her acid tongue when challenged. Much of Velvet’s past was a mystery. For a time she’d been missing and presumed dead among the endless, ancient forests of Equestria’s northern neighbor, only for her to reappear years later, emerging out of the Everfree with only a cloak of Winter Wolf fur, some travelling provisions, and a powerful enchantment that clung to her like a fine morning dew, blocking her from sharing her missing time.

Celestia strongly suspected that it was Mother who had placed the spell on Velvet. This impression was further enhanced when Twilight had appeared as a barely swaddled infant, only a few days old, her wings and earth-sense already bound, on the doorstep of Sparkle Manor.

“I can not say if you’ll be able to help or not, lady Sparkle,” Luna said, returning her attention to the present.

“What about the others?” Twilight asked, looking towards the open door to the common room, where Pinkie could be heard singing above a low hum of conversation.

Luna didn’t bother to glance away from the window as she stated, “Cadence will protect them. Besides, your stars were convinced that it is you this entity seeks. If it does attack Cadence, we are only a few steps away.”

“Okay, yeah, I guess that makes sense,” Twilight gulped, turning her attention to the same window Luna was peering at with such intensity. A few more moments passed, a low bubbling hissing sound beginning to filter through the panes of glass. “Any idea what it is?”

“Nay. Only that it appeared last eve and is carried upon the wind. It may be the wind itself, for all we know.”

The wind was close now, within Ponyville and slinking around the library. Like the previous night, Luna could feel the tingle of magic. Taking a shallow breath, Luna prepared a series of wards and defensive spells if whatever was coming proved to be dangerous. The wind slowed, gently rustling the leaves of the library, before it moved on, slipping through Ponyville before entering the Everfree. Luna let out a sigh she didn’t know she’d been holding.

“Princess, what was that?” Twilight looked towards Luna, concern and curiosity shining within her eyes.

"Truly, I do not know. Celestia is dealing with it as well as some other concerns. I'm actually surprised she wasn't here, just now." Luna tapped her chin, wondering where her sister could be, before discounting the effort as pointless. The wind was gone, they were safe, and so, Luna could begin the true purpose for her visit. "Now, come, I was hoping to teach you how to listen to the stars. You'll also, probably, be responsible for waking them during dusk, but we won't know for sure for a few more hours." Luna made her way towards the comfortable bed, adding under her breath, "and maybe we can finally find out why they are so mad at me."

Torn between education and dealing with a potential crisis, Twilight hovered by the window for a few moments before slowly rejoining Luna. Just as Twilight turned away from the window, the prospect of learning combined with the assurance that Celestia was dealing with the potential crisis winning out over the desire to act, the wind reared up and burst through the windows.

Flaring her wings Luna leapt across the short divide between herself and Twilight, a gentle blue corona of magic lighting along her horn as she landed. Shattered glass scattered around their hooves, books blew from shelves, while Twilight released out a sharp exclamation.

Like fog, the wind flooded in through the windows, pooling and coiling about the floor. While the surface popped and hissed, inside it was naught but an endless void, pitch black and empty, a night sky devoid of stars. The cloying sulphurous scent of brimstone wafted from the fog, making Luna, Twilight, and Velvet crinkle their noses.

"I know I'm repeating myself a lot lately, but; what is that!?" Twilight yelled, jumping backwards onto a low trunk.

"It... It's a shade," Luna gaped at the creature. "But, that is impossible!"

The shade circled the three mares like a wolf it's prey while Luna and Velvet both cast wards to hold it back. From the room below came Cadence's voice, followed by hooves pounding up the stairs. Snapping around the room, the shade slammed the doors and windows shut, a faint trace of magic around each showing Luna that it was attempting to seal them within the room.

Luna was deeply troubled.

She'd expected Celestia to have dealt with this issue, but so much had changed since the previous night. There had been none of the malevolence seeping off the wind the previous night. There certainly had not been a shade present. Which meant it had to be one of the magical signatures cast from the heart of the previous evening's disturbance. Luna's eyes widened. Seven such shades were loose on Ioka in addition to three alicorns.

While Luna and the others remained behind the protective wards, watching it, the shade lifted itself up the legs of Twilight's bed. There it pooled on her covers before spilling again onto the floor. Luna backed slowly towards Twilight as the shade approached the wards, rising up until it looked like a black sheet draped over a pony. The shade swung its head left and right, a wheezing sound, like wind billowing through a tunnel, emanating from deep within the shade. Stopping the sound and motion, the shade stared past Luna and Velvet towards Twilight.

"Stand back, abomination," Luna growled, spreading her wings wider to create another barrier between it and Twilight as the shade took a step forward, igniting her horn with magic as she called upon a dozen runes. "Identify yourself and your intention."

"Protect them, I have to protect them," moaned the shade, placing one long, ethereal leg upon the wards, blue, purple, and emerald sparks igniting at the point of contact.

"I am Princess Luna, Goddess of the Moon and Shepherd of the Night, take not another step!" The magic around Luna's horn continued to grow, the princess forming a spell that she hoped would drive the shade back. "I won't let you near Twilight."

"The Olympians! I must protect them from the Olympians!" howled the shade, its piercing voice trembling the bookshelves of the library. "The rest, they dream, they abandon them... But I will not. I must protect them."

"Protect whom?" Twilight asked, jumping down from the trunk and walking up beside Luna. The princess felt a hoof touch her just above the flight muscles making her look back towards the younger mare. Twilight gently shook her head 'no' and continued towards the wards. "Who do you need to protect, and who are the Olympians?"

In the doorway to the main room appeared five faces, all of them worried. Cadence and Shining made to enter the room with lowered horns, but stopped when Twilight waved them to wait. Behind them, Spike and Comet alternated between fear and hope. Pinkie Pie just leaned forward and growled like Applejack's dog, Winona.

"The Olympians... they will corrupt them, and if they cannot, then they will destroy them. I cannot allow it! I must protect them!"

The shade reared back on its hooves, front legs kicking at the wards, striking them with a sha-pom-pom sound. Under the third blow, the wards failed. Landing on all fours the shade leapt towards Twilight, howling like a banshee. Twilight reacted first, shooting a simple beam of stunning magic at the shade, while Velvet summoned a torrent of dark green fire. Neither spell had the least effect on the shade. With unnatural speed, it flowed forward, wrapping itself around Twilight, pinning her new wings to her side.

"Give me the power to protect them," screeched the shade, as Cadence and Shining

both shouted Twilight's name, leaping into the room.

Luna cursed; her spell wasn't ready. She'd grown slow and pampered, with little of the blunt aggressive instinct she'd carried a thousand years ago during the War of the Sun and Moon. Then again, she'd been possessed by her own envy and had become a foul creature of darkness and spite. It was perhaps understandable that she was no longer as adept at fighting, but it still grated on Luna's nerves.

Twilight's eyes widened as her magic began to flow from her and into the shade, trails of smoke licking the air in its wake. Cadence and Shining made it only a few steps, their spells reaching the point of release, when the room was filled with a corona of light and a high pitched shriek. A great series of bang sounded, followed by a mighty boom that shook all of Ponyville.

Luna's own spell, so close to completion, fizzled, and from the cries of Cadence and Shining, theirs did as well. The magic from each rebounding on their casters, sending tendrils of burning frost through their horns and down their necks, only stopping at their tails. Grunting, Luna staggered back a step, stung, blind, and worried.

"Twilight?" She and several other voices called together.

"I'm okay, I think," answered Twilight between wheezing gasps.

As her eyes cleared, Luna beheld Peewee hovering in the air between Twilight and her attacker. Flames and heat rolled off the juvenile phoenix, his claws slashing through the shade's head. Behind the phoenix, their lights burning bright, were stars, dozens of them, lifting from Twilight's mane and forming ranks between her and the shade.

It was all the proof Luna needed to know, without a drop of uncertainty, that Twilight was indeed the Goddess of the Stars. Never had Luna seen stars beneath the sky and retain their fiery forms of light and pure aether. Twilight's own eyes were still closed, her stance uncertain as she shook her head as if lost or confused.

Howling again, the shade retreated, pausing at the window to let out a knell that echoed deep into Luna's heart and left her legs shaking. Then it was gone, slinking and vanishing into the countryside.

"Are you alright?" The question came from everypony, all but Luna, Cadence and Velvet crowding around her in their concern.

Each of the others took a window, watching the countryside for any sign of the shade's return. The precaution was quickly proven to be unnecessary, as the energy given off by the shade trailed off, returning to the north. The crowd couldn't get too close to Twilight, the stars

buzzing like angry bees around her while Peewee cawed, shooting a baleful glance at anypony who got too close. After a few more moments, the stars settled, returning to Twilight's mane while Peewee took up a perch on the north-facing windowsill.

There was no reprieve, however, as the moment after there was another flash of light, those this one softer. While Shining and Velvet both jumped into defensive stances, Luna simply gave a low snort.

"You're late, Tia," Luna said, not surprised to see her sister standing near the middle of the room.

"I came as soon as I learned what was transpiring," Celestia said, stepping forward to inspect Twilight herself. "Twilight, how are you?"

"I'm okay, I promise," Twilight grumbled, finally rubbing the last of her blindness away. "Next time, Peewee, not so bright right in front of my muzzle, please?" Twilight added with a forced laugh.

Peewee bristled his feathers, giving an indignant chirp, head inclined as if to say, 'Well, then next time, you can save yourself.'

Luna smirked at Twilight's reaction as the young mare glanced up, bleary eyed but safe, and saw Celestia. She wore her ancient armour, not used since the war Luna and she had fought. The armour shone with the light of protective enchantments etched into the burnished gold plates that hugged Celestia like a second skin. Straps creaked whenever she moved.

"I'm so sorry, Twilight, everypony, for being late. I was attempting to track one of the others when Sol informed me of what was transpiring here." Her face taut with worry, Celestia wrapped her hooves around Twilight, and brought the startled mare into a tight embrace. "One landed outside Manehattan, but has already vanished. I could barely detect a trace of her magic."

"There's more of those... shades?" Velvet growled the question, moving a little closer to Twilight.

"Seven, at least," Luna stated, a note of deep discontent making itself known in her voice. "I had thought them spirits, perhaps. Or maybe I just hoped." Luna gave her head a slow shake, regretting her carelessness, and what it almost cost.

Clearing his throat, Comet said, "You mention shades, but I am unfamiliar with the term, other than it denotes an... undead pony. Is that what... that was?"

Releasing Twilight from the bone crushing hug, Celestia gave Luna a wholly significant

look, one that asked a single, silent question; how much should they tell? Taking the lead, as always, Celestia cleared her throat, before giving a short explanation.

“Shades are not undead. To be undead, one has to be dead first.” Luna chuckled at Celestia’s expert splitting of hairs. “I’m sorry for being glib,” Celestia added, “but we don’t really know much about shades. The only one we ever encounter was long, long ago. Before Nightmare Moon, Discord, and even Equestria itself. It is... a painful memory.”

Celestia looked to Luna, a great weariness settling over her. Luna didn’t need to read her sister’s mind to know what thoughts were taking root within Celestia’s mind. Many were the same as Luna entertained in the long years leading to her fall.

This was supposed to have been a happy day, a shining moment of brightness not seen for a thousand years. Instead, everypony was downcast and dour, or jumpy and on-edge, eyes glancing about in case the shade returned. Even Pinkie was less than her normal, bouncy self, sitting quietly behind Twilight, her lips drawn and pensive, mane a little flatter than usual.

“Full-plate? Really Tia?” Luna giggled, in an attempt to break the pall threatening to hang over the room. “Isn’t that a little... excessive?”

“I thought it better to be over-prepared,” Celestia said, letting out a little snort at Luna’s antics.

Still, it had the effect of lightening the mood. Pinkie giggled, others laughed, and in general the atmosphere improved.

It was not to last more than a few minutes, however, before the three old alicorns all sat up straighter. Luna’s eyes widened as the distinct sensation of an approaching alicorn caressed her senses. She wondered, for a brief moment, why she hadn’t noticed it before, then quickly realised she’d been too focused on Twilight and the shade.

“Well, seems there is not a chance for rest,” Celestia said, making her way towards a balcony. “I’ll be back in time for the party, I promise.”

“Sister, perhaps I should accompany you.”

Luna made to follow, but was stopped as Celestia sharply said, “No!”

Shocked at Celestia’s forcefulness, Luna pressed her brow into a disappointed scowl.

“You must stay and help Twilight adjust to her new position, dear Luna,” Celestia continued, her tone much softer and conciliatory. “You are the best pony to help, being the Shepherd of the Night.”

“Yes, but surely Cadence can—”

“Luna, trust me. I have my reasons. It must be you. It is must be tonight.”

Celestia’s face was hard, but not cold, firm in it’s pleading desire for Luna to listen. Arguments danced on the tip of Luna’s tongue. She worried Celestia facing the approaching alicorn alone. Though, being in Ponyville, Luna, Cadence, and even Twilight, would inevitably be drawn into a conflict if one arose.

Satisfied that everything that could be in hoof, was, and everything that wasn’t soon would be dealt with, Luna gave a nod of consent. There was a trickle of suspicion that Celestia was up to something beyond dealing with shades and alicorns. Celestia had been exceedingly intent on this night for months, smiling and giving coy hints about how memorable it was going to be for everypony.

Her suspicion was only heightened as Celestia said, “There are times where secrets are a necessity, Luna. Don’t fret, they will be revealed in time.” Celestia paused, pointedly looking at Velvet. “Some sooner than others,” she added before briskly stepping out of the room.

Luna frowned at Celestia’s meddling, while Twilight glanced at her mother, and Velvet gave the door a baleful look before taking a deep, fortifying breath. Luna felt for Velvet, the baroness struggling just to open her mouth. She tried again, but only managed a short grunt.

“Mother, what is it?” Twilight asked, her own concern clear upon her brow.

Placing a hoof on Velvet’s withers, Comet said, “Let me, dear.”

Velvet failed to respond to his pleading tone, she just stared at Twilight, a thin line of tears glistening beneath her eyes. Luna wished she could intercede on the pair’s behalf, but it was not her place. Cadence held Shining close as he watched his mother struggle, a look of pain echoed on his own face.

Clearing his throat, perhaps to buy time to figure out the words he was going to say, Comet left Velvet’s side and approached Twilight.

“You’re a smart mare, Twily,” he began, “Smart enough to know that there is a crucial question that has to be asked, and answered—”

“How? How am I an alicorn, Goddess of Stars, when I was born a unicorn,” Twilight said in a voice distant and lost. “No, it... it isn’t...”

Comet steeled his shoulders, bracing himself, either for Twilight’s reaction, or to be able

to say what needed saying, Luna was uncertain.

“No, you’re not saying...” Twilight stepped back as if she’d been struck, piercing her mother with a look that demanded confirmation. “Mother, please...”

Velvet couldn’t so much as nod her head. Spike started to open his own mouth, only to find it filled with a pink hoof, Pinkie giving him a sad look. Her unspoken words were clear, ‘Later, Spike.’

“This isn’t funny.” Twilight’s voice broke around the words. “Tell me this is a joke. Mother? Say something! Tell me—”

“She can’t tell you anything,” Comet snapped, rare anger jarring his family. “Velvet is under a geas. She is literally incapable of telling you, or anypony, anything about your origins.”

“A geas?” Twilight repeated the words as if they were sand within her mouth. Her eyes began to glaze over, Twilight sitting down roughly. “Why would...? How? Who would... Who could do... Why only you?”

Breaking her silence, Luna approached Twilight. “Velvet has been under this geas longer than you, or Shining for that matter, have lived.”

“Then why isn’t she saying anything?” Twilight asked softly, then repeated the question, with force and venom, at Velvet. “Just, talk to me Velvet. Talk to me!”

Tears matting her face, Velvet stood with all the pride she could command, opened her mouth, and said nothing. Her mouth snapped shut once more, and without looking at anypony, she left the room. Twilight stared, shock mixing with disbelief, anger soon following.

Stepping up to Twilight, Comet placed a hoof on her withers. His eyes were pleading and desperate as he spoke, saying, “Please, forgive us for deceiving you. We only ever wanted to protect you.”

“Keeping the truth from ponies doesn’t protect them, Comet,” Twilight spat, brushing off his hoof. “What did you think keeping this from me would accomplish?”

“Twilight, if we had told you, the first thing you’d have done is run off to find your birth mother. You’re a curious mare, and when you have a question that needs answering, you’ll move mountains to find those answers.” Comet tried to give a reassuring smile, but it was weak and hesitant, weighed down by his own fear and uncertainty. “Look how you acted with the myth of Nightmare Moon.”

“That was—”

“One of a hundred examples,” Comet interjected. “We were given the privilege of protecting you, of raising you, Twilight, even from the truth.”

Twilight didn't respond, her gaze distant and unfocused, lost in another time. Comet attempted to give Twilight a hug, only to stop as Twilight stiffened. Moving to the door, he said, “I'll be downstairs with your mother when you want to talk.”

“Very well,” Luna said in her clipped tone, after Velvet departed, “If everypony could clear the room, Twilight and I have many things to discuss.”

The crack of Luna's voice, accompanied by a stamp of her hoof ended any discussion on the matter before it could begin.

“Mother is right, come, everypony. It's good to enjoy the small moments of peace.” Cadence ushered the others from the room as she spoke. “Let's give them some space.”

As Cadence reached the door and made to close it, Luna said, “Thank you, Cadence.”

“I'm doing this for Twilight, not you, mother,” was all Cadence said before closing the door with a harsh snap that rattled the wall.

Cadence's parting words cut Luna to the marrow, leaving her stunned and silent in the middle of Twilight's room. Luna couldn't understand it. For once, things had been going so much smoother between her and Cadence. Luna was certain she hadn't imagined the warmth in Cadence's voice earlier in the day.

Brushing away the age-old agony in her heart, Luna shook her head softly. Dwelling on the past would serve no purpose. Not that night, nor any night. The wounds were of her own creation, and would take her years to mend. Her mistakes, though calling them such was a gross understatement, were her burden to carry.

Luna smirked as she turned to see Twilight sitting by her window, alone and in deep thought, a hoof absently stroking Owlowiscious. The old horned owl had managed, through some obscure method, to sleep through the entire day's craziness with nary a ruffled feather. Given Twilight's lifestyle, today wasn't probably all that out of the ordinary. One of his huge, grey-yellow eyes was cracked open, watching Twilight and Luna with the wisdom of the aged.

“Well, we better get started, if you're feeling up to some lessons, Twilight,” Luna said, bringing Twilight out of her thoughts.

“Uh, are you sure that is a good idea?” Twilight's voice, much like her gaze, was distant and unfocused.

“Of course!” Luna beamed brightly as she pulled Twilight’s chalkboard over. “You just need time to—”

“She just... left. She said nothing, and just left.” Twilight muttered.

Luna needed to get Twilight’s attention off Velvet. “How about I teach you how to listen to the stars?”

Twilight looked uncertain, hovering between anger and sadness. After a few minutes, she said, “Okay. Yeah. Celestia’s lessons always used to help me think and process information.”

“Excellent,” Luna said, giving Twilight a smile with more hope than she felt, Luna began Twilight’s lessons on what it meant to be an alicorn.