

## Sunset Looms Chapter 2

The Grey Potter

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I should mention that I knew my orders for Twilight Sparkle to make friends would not be swallowed easily. Passing mention and direct questioning of her priorities did not change Twilight Sparkle's outlook on her life. To me, it was clear her own path was set, erroneous as her decision was. To encourage her to change, I constructed for her a temporary official position. She would inspect preparations for the Summer Sun Celebrations in Ponyville. Hopefully the interaction with many would at least grant her a few friends. I did not expect miracles to be worked. I did not expect to be contacted with overwhelming acceptance of all things friend-related. I only hoped that the necessity of connection and friendship be sparked within her. Maybe she would meet another bookish pony at the library. Someone to study and learn with.

However, before I could send her orders, I received a letter. Twilight Sparkle wished to bring to my attention an entirely different matter. This Summer Sun Celebration was the thousandth since the capturing of Nightmare Moon, and could bring with it the dark pony's release. She urged me to act.

I considered myself informed and sent Twilight Sparkle to her task regardless.

I admit, I had forgotten about the prediction surrounding my sister's release. Once, hundreds of years ago, I had been approached by a mathematician and astrologist. His name escapes me, as his discoveries were limited and quickly forgotten. The stallion warned that on a certain day, the patterns of the stars and moon could produce a sort of rudimentary fairy ring. This circle could allow Nightmare Moon a path or focus, allowing her to break through the bonds formed by the Elements of Harmony.

Despite the dire tidings, I still felt that I had no reason to worry. One pony's predictions did not mean the event was inevitable. And if it did come to pass, I would simply use the Elements of Harmony to trap my sister once more. I would do the same in a thousand years' time, and the same again a thousand years from that if it came to it. It was a cycle, like every other aspect of my life. A new and long cycle, but I was sure in five thousand years it would be as normal and routine as every other aspect of my life. Depressing. Another pointless and endless task. But one I would accept with time.

I continued with my business around Canterlot at my usual pace, without urgency or rush. Decorations, catering arrangements. Last minute checkups and mess ups. Alterations and confirmations. It took attention, even if it was only trying to sort out what a dozen frazzled ponies were trying to tell me. Did it honestly matter if the napkins of an event were changed from white to red? To some ponies, it apparently sent their entire life into a downward spiral of misery. I had to tell them as politely as possible that they were getting too caught up on trifles. If I had a moment for my mind to wander, it went more to combing over the state of Twilight Sparkle than to my actions regarding Nightmare Moon.

As events began moving into night and parties began needing less of my attention, I departed for the old Castle of the Two Sisters.

There was an old ruin a few miles outside Ponyville, once the magical and municipal center of all of Equestria. The Castle of the Two Sisters, where Princess Luna and I had ruled together before her rage had overtaken her. It had been years since I had been there... since anypony had been there. The Everfree Forest that surrounded the castle was heavily enchanted, filled with beasts, placed there at one time to protect us. With no unicorn magic to control it, the magic and beasts had fallen to chaos, striking out at what they pleased.

As for the castle itself, barely any of it remained. And yet, it was miraculously intact for near a millennium of neglect. Stone walls still stood tall, even as their roofs had collapsed. Despite the vines coating the walls, hardly any soil or leaves had drifted into the rooms. Once more, I suspected the

remnants of unicorn magic still held this place intact. Luckily for me, that meant the Holder of Harmony was still in place.

It was an obtuse addition, thrown together in the middle of the throne room floor. The Holder of Harmony was a lump of rock carved hastily to keep the Elements of Harmony in a fairy circle, to maximize their effect. The roof of this room had been intentionally removed, to allow access to the night sky, while still being protected by the magic within the walls. It had its purpose, one that did not require it to be a testament to art and expression.

Here I stood. In front of the Elements, after all these years. They had turned into cold stone after so long, an inactive state. A drained state, I imagined. It was no matter at all to me, as I easily set my connection to the stones, calling out for their aid. Attempting to renew the seal they had been holding for so long.

My magic wrapped around them, but would go no further. They did not react. The Elements remained cold, inert, useless.

I realized I no longer held within me the emotional attachment one needed to use them.

A miscalculation.

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What happened next was very... strange. I will attempt to describe the experience.

I don't know when I ceased to be aware, nor when I awoke. I'm not even sure if awakening is the exact term for how I became aware. Quite possibly, events transitioned normally, and I've simply forgotten. To me, I went from pacing the ruins for another solution to the center of the sun.

No, that's wrong. I became the sun.

All the proof I had about being Princess Celestia was my own memories. All the proof that I had that I was the Sun were the memories of the Sun. I remembered moving the Sun, while simultaneously remembering being the Sun moved by myself.

As both Sun and Pony, I could muster no magic. I tried to move, but there was nothing left of me to move. All that there was, all that I was, was light, blinding light and heat. I was aware that I, as the Sun, was stationary. But I was not aware of anything else. I did not feel space, nor stars, though I knew of them.

I surmised that Nightmare Moon had arrived, in accordance with the prophecy. It was intelligent, her first action to get rid of the only one who could oppose her. Was this the new cycle she and I were destined for? A thousand years of interchanging sisters, one of war, another of peace? One of oppression unchanged and the other of change so fast and frequent to become meaningless?

As the Sun, I was assured of the mind-numbing bliss of ignorance.

As Princess Celestia, I wondered if a thousand years of monotony would be more or less torturous than a thousand years of routine. If departure from the observation of Twilight Sparkle would drive me mad.

I think I may have panicked then.

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There was no need to spend my time worrying. I was only the Sun for a few hours at most, enough time to look back at the event and wonder why I was worried at all. Where I had failed with the Elements of Harmony, Twilight Sparkle had succeeded. She had made not one or two friends, but five, each attuned perfectly to an Element.

I returned to the Castle of the Two Sisters when I was freed. Twilight Sparkle and her friends stood where I arrived, decorated in the activated Elements. They were distracted by my reappearance, but I was not. My sister lay, stunned, not as Nightmare Moon, but as I remember her. She was Princess Luna, confused, alone, with magic broken like glass fragments all around her. I immediately offered my returning sister sympathies and a place back by my side, as co-ruler.

I told Twilight Sparkle to stay in Ponyville and continue her studies on friendship, obviously the

true victor of the day. This time she leaped at the chance, failing to doubt my decision at all. Once more she saw it as a request... maybe I should start thinking of my directives for her as that. Would that be friendlier?

Barely an hour passed before I began regretting my emotional reactions.

It was a frazzling past two hours. I had just... *accepted* the bizarre scene and my sister immediately, taking no time to assess? An irrational set of actions. I actually think I was crying. Crying. What was becoming of me, that a few hours of insanity would reduce me to relying on the unreliability of emotional judgment?

I wasn't going to go back on my word. Twilight Sparkle and I still needed the lessons she could provide. But as for my sister, Luna...

I once knew a Princess Luna... When we first wielded the Elements of Harmony, she was Honesty, Laughter, and Kindness. She felt it important that others saw her as powerful, but her heart was on her hoof, and you could always tell what she was feeling. She felt like it was her place to act the role as Princess, yet always found connections with her subjects. She never could manage to be aloof as I was, and it was hard for her to act rationally in the face of sorrow, or even joy. She was always welcoming of travelling performers, but since most performed by day, there were many shows she missed.

That Princess Luna would never begrudge all ponies, or curse Equestria. Princess Luna would never become a being so corrupted as Nightmare Moon. The moment I saw her transformed, I accepted that she was reformed? That somehow her very attitude had changed with her appearance? Certainly, she apologized, her entire attitude altered. But...

Luna, my sister. If you are the same as I remembered, it does not change what to do with you...

I felt the accepted routine was to try to reconcile. To put all in the past and attempt to make friends with her once more. To stop her from falling back into her sorrows. But as I was, I was uncertain about how to approach her. I knew how to win ponies to my side with courtesies. When to be casual and when to be formal. When to grant boons and when to withdraw them. Not all had been fooled, but most accept me as a caring pony, if not a very personal one. Was sincerity and attention the only boundaries between true and false friendship? I did not know... and Twilight Sparkle had not yet sent me any lessons on the matter.

I considered waiting for Twilight Sparkle's advice, but how long would that take? How long would I avoid my sister, and how long would it take for my absence to drive even more distance in our relationship? The decision to continue down my preplanned paths seemed much more appealing. I had to talk to Luna swiftly. This was a matter of the safety of Equestria. Even if I only pretended to care for her, it was still a better option than leaving her to regress once more.

I might not even have to pretend... It was a distinct possibility that Luna might be the only one who would understand a millennium of loneliness.

~x~

The Castle of the Two Sisters had been built with the symmetry of night and day in mind. Both my sister and I ruled equally. Whatever one had, the other had in full. Our rooms were once the same size, and both decorated grandly. Both on opposing sides of the castle, one a reflection of the other, like the sun and the moon.

When she became corrupted and forcibly removed from her rule, the design of the castle no longer seemed appropriate. In a scant few years the capital was moved to Canterlot. A new castle was built around its sole ruler. My quarters were the grandest in the castle, and no other living space would dare to outshine it.

So, even if I wished to claim Luna as my equal, simply having her stay in her own room brought to light our inequalities. Her room was large, and already decorated with her colors and cutie mark, decorated to suit her specifically. But it was an inescapable inevitability that her room would be smaller and less personal than my own. I hoped dearly that she wouldn't take offense to this.

It was a few nights past her rebirth, and Luna was seated in front of the hearth. It was the only light in the room and not out of necessity. Black candelabras were placed among the dark banners and silk, all unlit, blurring into the dark stone. I cautiously approached my sister. As I did, I noticed Luna was fiddling with her mane, dragging her hooves across it. Where she pulled, her naturally purple mane darkened, became transparent and smoky, glittering like night.

I made myself known by rapping on the stone floor, "Good evening, Luna."

She turned on her pillow to look at me. I tried to read her expression, but she shadows and loose hairs of her mane played with her expression, standing in the way of my analysis. I tried to not let it stop me from sitting beside her.

"Good evening, Celestia." All these years and all her transformations, her voice remained the same. She sounded tired, yet even that did not stop her from half-shouting every word, as if it added meaning. "Ah... how... How are you doing? How have you been, my sister?" Luna asked.

"I am..." doing very well, thank you. That would have been my response. But now, here, was honesty a better option? "Off-kilter. It's all very strange to me."

Luna tugged at her mane, "Yes. Yes, myself as well. Everything that has happened. It is a little hard to take in. Equestria, it has changed so much."

"Don't worry, I think you'll enjoy the changes. What do you know if it already? Oh, do you know from your observations as the Moon?"

"No... were you not able to see with the Sun's perceptions?"

"I knew I had things to see, but not the ability."

"Ah, right! I have forgotten, it took me a while to see past the rock of the moon!" she raised her voice, but it didn't seem like she had become any more excited or happier. Her voice lowered almost immediately, as if she realized she was shouting. Shouting more than usual, I mean, "I could see the stars and Sun, a planet below. I was able to see continents and clouds, but no more than that."

"Well, there are cities now that never sleep. Even at late hours, Manehattan is still active. I think you'll enjoy it." She shifted on her pillow and gave me a crooked smile.

"Do you believe that I'd fall to madness again, sister dearest?"

I wished I was the one who had an excuse for silence, "It had passed my mind... I don't want to lose you again, Luna. It's been... lonely."

"Concern yourself not! I feel as though that madness has been lifted from me." She did not react to my admission, at least not the part I had hoped. Her smile straightened, into something that might be taken as a proper grin, "However, I do think I would like to see Manehattan! Once I have made myself presentable again, at the very least. My poor mane..." she stroked it, fading the color once more, "I will not have it so plain, so common when I go out again!"

"I was hoping to reintroduce you to the court *soon*, Luna..."

"I am sorry, but when I am reinstated, I wish to stand as an equal to you, Celestia." So she had noticed our disparities, "Our subjects have been without me for a thousand years! They can stand to wait another few months!"

I wasn't certain if Luna expected the Ponies to welcome her with open hooves, but I wasn't about to tell her otherwise.

I didn't have much to say beyond that. The conversation was stiff and distant already, what more tedium could I add to it? I wanted to bring up loneliness again, see if it was a way to connect and understand one another. See if I really wasn't the only one to suffer this. While I calculated, she spoke again.

"You do forgive me, correct, sister? I must be assured."

"Of course I do Luna, you weren't yourself."

"It was..." again, she fidgeted. If she were any other pony, I would have politely had them speak up or move on. There was no gain in letting a pony get lost in their own thoughts. But this was my sister,

and I was certain that understanding included patience.

"It was as if I was dreaming," she said, "You know what a dream feels like. You do and feel crazy things, illogical things. Things you would never even think of doing. Yet you... No, I. I was always aware of myself, that it was me doing these things. Yet I was barely aware... I am not certain how to describe it. I knew it was me that was raising my hoof, yet I was watching myself do it. And as I watched, I was unable to inhibit my own feelings. My emotions became exaggerated, as things are in dreams... So when you say I was not myself... I am not certain if I was or was not myself entirely. It is why I must keep apologizing. I must make up for my lack of control."

"You've already made up for it, Luna. A thousand years on the moon... it must have been lonely." I felt as though this was the crux of what I wanted to discuss with her, what she and she alone might understand. Loneliness, a thousand years of it. If we could share that burden together... then I knew there would be nothing else between us.

"It is funny when you say that! A thousand years..." she smiled at me, "What is the passage of time in a dream? I have heard this phrase before... 'it felt like yesterday'? Or just yesterday? How much *has* changed, Celestia? Is it true that there are Ponies who trot at night? A new castle? How much more has become so strange? I wish to know!"

I remember having to even my seating. The room had gone all wobbly. "A lot has changed, Luna. A great deal."

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I left her room that night feeling that, between my sister and I, there was an uncrossable chasm. Did I wish that my sister had suffered, so we could share each other's pain? I would have been the cause of her suffering then, the one who banished her instead of attempting to heal or save her. I should be glad that she slept all these years, unscathed and ready to pick her life up again.

But I wasn't ready. I knew then that I wasn't ready to approach my sister, or any pony. They rushed trying to figure out what place Luna would have in their ceremonies, as if a change in number of rulers was the one thing that could tear the world apart. They did not care nor understand that their one active ruler was suffering. I was so experienced at hiding it, that I didn't even know how to express it to them. So I thought, often alone and on the balcony, watching quietly as the moon rose, no longer under my power.

I'm shaken, uncertain, and I do not like the feeling. I wish to forge a new path and pattern, and yet I wonder if my patterns are what are keeping me away from my pony subjects, keeping me distant and lonely. I at least when I was distant I had the assurance of a path to follow. New territory is not something I've had to deal with for hundreds and hundreds of years.

I constantly comb over and analyze my thoughts, and before it helped me straighten them. But with each sweep more and more tangles and knots form, more complications arise. I don't even know if my introspection is working for me anymore. I lose sleep as I ponder. I thank the stars that I do not have to move both the sun and moon anymore, I hardly have the focus for one celestial body, but two?

Why has this issue left me so frazzled? Twilight Sparkle, you are the one who has formed the cracked in my façade, yet I turn to you to correct them? Or should I think of it as your duty to correct them? I don't even know if a pony should be praised or punished anymore. Are you even to blame, Twilight Sparkle? You merely opened my heart a crack, yet now so much confusion is pouring in. I barely knew what to think of you, and now I must worry about how to approach and connect to each pony I meet? Absolutely preposterous. How have you done this to me?

Not only done this to me, but all of Equestria. Not days go by since I told Twilight Sparkle to leave the castle, and she has already made her mark on the world. The masses... my pony court approached me not days later with the request to immortalize her and her friend's achievement in sculpture and stained glass around the castle. Everyone now knows how special she and all of her friends are. I suppose I should get around to remembering their names as well but...

Twilight Sparkle, I beg of you, please, send your guidance quickly.  
An hour later, she did.