
Wind Shadows

Cold rain sluiced down from a black night sky as the last glimmers of the other reality vanished, instantly soaking them to the bone. Twilight squealed in surprise, but Luna was too exhausted to react. Fragments of images still whirled in her head, a jumbled chaos of memory that made it hard to think.

Some part of her was eased by that largesse, no matter how painful the acquisition might have been, as if a piece of her soul had been returned to her. But that was only one small candle against a far larger darkness. She had sworn never to lose control again, to never take up the mantle of Nightmare Moon again. But she had been frightened and angry and alone, and it hadn't taken all that much time for her to make that same choice again. That only confirmed what a narrow precipice she walked, and yet...

And yet. She was herself again, in one piece, the remnants of a goddess' power and knowledge fading but not this time ripped from her. An improvement, withal. Twilight was saying something to her, the words lost in the hiss of the rain and the muddle of her own thoughts, but the tone was not recriminating or frightened or angry. Heedless of the cold, Luna closed her eyes and savored that.

She was forcibly stirred from her reverie as a hoof poked her in the ribs and Twilight shouted in her ear. "We need to find shelter!" Lightning flared nearby, scattering bright splinters of light from the heavy rain and reflecting sullenly from the low clouds above. Thunder snarled close on its heels, rattling her teeth.

It was enough to jar her into motion. She followed after Twilight, her hooves squelching in mud, the only illumination the inconstant strobe of lightning and the glimmer of the unicorn's horn. But the darkness had never been an obstacle for Luna, and when she saw the straight-sided silhouette of a building she steered them that way.

It was merely a few rough slabs of stone, without windows or a proper door, the roof angled and ill-fitting. But it was safer than a tree and drier than an open field and, most importantly, empty. It wasn't until Twilight pulled out the blankets that Luna felt the cold, shivering as she huddled into the cloth and wishing for something heavier.

“Luna...” Twilight said eventually, in a thoughtful tone. “I thought you said you weren’t a goddess anymore. I thought Nightmare Moon was gone.”

She winced, feeling the sharp knives of anxiety. There was no way to avoid it. The alicorn looked down at her muddy hooves instead of at Twilight as she spoke. “Nightmare Moon will never be gone. She is me. She’s me making bad decisions. She’s me choosing to hurt and destroy. I’m damaged, Twilight. I put so much of myself into being that person that I’ve lost my way in my own mind.”

She added into the silence, quietly. “I’m sorry. For what I said to you.” She didn’t say she didn’t mean it, because it would have been treading too close to a lie. She didn’t believe it now, but when she had accused Twilight of treachery she had meant every word.

“I...” Twilight trailed off and Luna risked a look over at the unicorn. The smaller pony was looking at her, and smiled a small smile when she caught Luna’s eyes. “I understand, Luna,” she said at last. “I could almost believe it myself. This is really my fault, so I -”

“Don’t,” Luna pleaded. “Don’t say it.” She felt bad enough about the confrontation between herself and Twilight without having to deal with an apology.

“Um. Okay.” Twilight said uncertainly, and looked away. Thunder grumbled and rain hissed, and Luna huddled deeper into her blanket with an obscure sense of shame. “I still don’t have any idea where we are.”

“Oh.” Luna’s head jerked up with an aftershock of knowledge left over from her brief time as empowered goddess. “I think I do.”

“What?” Exasperation leaked in to Twilight’s voice. “Why didn’t you say something before?”

“I didn’t know before!” She couldn’t completely suppress the hysterical edge to her words. “It’s something I remember because of...” She shook her head helplessly, at a loss at how to recapitulate the time spent as Nightmare Moon.

“...oh,” said Twilight in a very different tone. Water dripped from the crude roof. Rain fell, lightning flashed, thunder growled. “And?” She prompted when Luna didn’t elaborate further.

Luna tapped her hooves against the ground, trying to think of how to push the concept out in words. “The world itself,” she said at last. “Dreams. Remembers. Hopes. Fears. When a continent sinks beneath the waves, it is not truly lost. When a city is being built, the *idea* exists before the bricks are laid. If such a thing as the soul of a world exists, that is it.”

“So this isn’t real?” Twilight sounded skeptical, and Luna could hardly blame her.

Ephemera didn't usually create a populated landscape with a sun and a moon and a sky.

"Oh, it's real. This is the...page upon which Equestria is printed. The primeval conception of the land itself. But it's not Equestria, and it's not a place for ponies."

"Yet here we are." Twilight looked upward, where the endless drumming of the rain sounded against the stone.

"Here we are," Luna agreed. "And I really don't know why."

"Well you know," Twilight replied, "I think I'm glad we are."

Luna blinked, astonished, and Twilight gave her a small, embarrassed smile. "I know it hasn't exactly been fun, but...we've accomplished things. Or you have, Luna. You freed Tozómuc and you got all that memory back. That wouldn't have happened if we hadn't come here."

"I...suppose." The larger pony admitted grudgingly. Twilight's point of view baffled Luna, for whom the most looming issue was her relapse. But that didn't seem to register at all in the unicorn's worldview. It was astoundingly optimistic and criminally naive. And it was glorious.

Twilight's unconcern seemed to make the problem diminish, somehow. Luna was distantly astounded; she didn't know that one's troubles could shrink like that. But it was only a transient phenomenon. Twilight's next words brought worry crashing down again.

"Still, we don't know how to get back. Unless you could...?"

Luna shivered. "No, Twilight. Don't ask. Just...don't. Please."

"Okay." The unicorn looked glum for a moment before brightening up again. "Well, we'll just have to find something else. Maybe something like what brought us here. Or maybe we can find a city being built." She giggled softly. "And just step out of the fireplace like in a foal's story."

Luna gave Twilight a small smile in return, but it faded quickly. She couldn't share Twilight's optimism, even if the unicorn's presence seemed to abrogate her despair. She had some intuition of the vast gulf separating them from everything they knew, but she didn't have the heart - or the words - to try and convince Twilight of it.

The storm blustered and blew for hours, wind flinging itself fruitlessly against the walls of their shelter, but finally light began to filter through the dense clouds. Shades of grey edged into existence inside the crude building, painting the two of them in a dark monotone. Then a break in the clouds let the sun shine through, directly through the open entrance and into their eyes.

“Ack!” Twilight laughed, holding her hoof up to shade her eyes. “That just seems to fit with the rest of this day, doesn’t it?” She stood up, folding her blanket, her hair and mane alternately frizzed and flattened. Luna imagined she didn’t look much better, but at least they were dry. “Let’s see where we are.” They stepped out together, and stared.

It was an exceedingly ugly place. Grey rocks jutted out of dark mud the color of dried blood, a bleak broken landscape that seemed drained of color. The remnants of the storm scudded away behind them, parting around an enormous spire of stone. It wasn’t just an outcrop; sharp lines spiraled up from the base, giving it the appearance of a unicorn’s horn embedded in the ground.

It took a blink for Luna to resolve it into walls, cut into the natural fortress and running up and up. And at the very top something moved, flickering and rippling, though what exactly it could be was impossible to say from this distance. There was something about it that made Luna uneasy, though it was an elusive feeling, hiding at the back of her mind.

“We must have gone a long way inside that...clock thing,” Twilight commented, taking a few steps toward. “There’s no forest anywhere.” She glanced back at Luna with a smile. “But it looks like we’re somewhere interesting. What *is* that?”

“I have no idea.” Luna shook her head, kicking at a rain-damp rock. It squelched as it shifted in the mud. “It’s as if it were carved like that though, and all this is what’s left over.”

“But who could have done that? You said this wasn’t a place for ponies.” Twilight was starting to pick her way toward the base of the spire, and Luna followed.

“There are many other things in the world besides ponies,” the alicorn replied darkly. “We should be careful.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. And who knows, we might run into somepony who could help us.” Twilight stopped to shake caked mud off one of her hooves. “Though I admit this isn’t exactly the most welcoming place I’ve ever seen. Doesn’t anything grow here?”

“It doesn’t look like it.” Luna was astounded that they hadn’t injured themselves stumbling around in the dark and the storm. The ground underfoot was exactly the wrong mix of rocky and muddy, making it difficult and treacherous, and sharp stone edges scraped against her chaussees more than once. After only a few seconds of the struggle she took to wing, still trying to make out what was atop the spire, and below her purple flared as Twilight teleported ahead.

Where wall met ground, there was an opening that was more ragged hole than proper arch, but the ramp inside was glass-smooth. Luna hopped down from the wall as Twilight

stepped through onto the ramp. "It's a bit of a climb. I could fly up to see what it is," the alicorn offered.

"We should probably stay together." Twilight said. She was probably thinking of the last time they had gotten separated. "We're not in *that* much a hurry."

Luna nodded agreement and the two of them began the walk. The ramp walls defined a narrow slice of sky, and were themselves plain and unadorned. There was really nothing interesting about the path other than the fact it existed. The wind whistled mournfully through the narrow slot of stone, whipping at her mane and making her squint.

Her sense of unease grew, as if there were some half-remembered familiarity about the place. As they climbed, debris began to appear on the ramp, pieces of metal strewn haphazardly along the stone. Then chunks embedded in the walls, covered in verdigris and the faded remnants of some sort of symbol.

Then around the curve of the wall appeared a much larger slice of metal, leaning at a drunken angle between the two walls, leaving a small passage. Twilight bounded ahead, examining the strange detritus. "You can actually see the writing on this one!" She squinted at it. "I can't read it though. It's just the same set of symbols carved over and over."

Luna stepped up next to her, the vague uncertainty crystallizing into real fear. "I can," she said, her voice flat and drained of emotion.

"Well?"

The alicorn closed her eyes and whispered. "The wind is hungry."

"What does *that* mean?" The smaller pony frowned at the metal, tracing the writing with a hoof. "Some kind of riddle?"

"It means we have to get out of here. *Right now.*" Luna stepped back, looking around wildly. She didn't see what she was afraid of, but that was no comfort. It was only a matter of time.

"What? Why?" Twilight cocked her head questioningly at the alicorn, but obediently began trotting after her back down the ramp. "Do you know what that means?"

"Celestia isn't the only one who dealt with monsters," Luna told her, shards of memory coming together, building the story for her even as she told it for Twilight. "And not all things can be killed. But I thought they were gone forever."

"Thought *what* were gone forever?" The unicorn had a justifiably impatient edge to her

question. Luna opened her mouth to answer, and then skidded to a halt. Twilight nearly ran into her as she followed the larger pony's example.

"That." Luna pointed a hoof at a sunlit patch of wall, where a diamond-shaped shadow danced and twisted, even though there was nothing to cast it. She lowered her voice. "Twilight, can you teleport us away from here? Back to that rock hut, maybe?"

"I'm not sure, it gets a bit iffy if I can't see it," Twilight said dubiously. "But I can try. And then you can tell me why you're afraid of a little shadow."

"I'll tell you what I can remember," Luna promised. "Just go!"

The unicorn watched as Twilight closed her eyes, and a brief glimmer surrounded them...and a gust of wind tore the burgeoning magic to shreds. The unicorn squeaked and stared around. "What was that?"

"Wind shadows," Luna growled. "Come on."

"I still don't know what you mean!" Twilight complained, cantering along behind. She might have been confused, but she was hardly protesting their goal.

"Even after Discord, the world was full of harmful and destructive things. Some of them 'Tia dealt with...some of them I did. This was something I sealed away long ago...there's nothing living around here because they ate it all."

"But what are they?" Twilight sounded nervous, as well she should be. Luna stopped again. The sun was shining full on the ground now, and a half-dozen sourceless geometric shadows drifted lazily across the stone.

"Brothers of the biting wind and the scouring wind. They are the hungry wind, and they would consume everything if they could. The shadows are the only way you can see them, cast by whatever twisted them at the beginning of time." Luna's voice was low and harsh, and she stared at the harmless-looking but extraordinarily dangerous line of moving shapes on the ground.

Twilight stepped up next to her, speaking quietly. "Then...how do we avoid them? Or fight them?"

Luna shook her head. She had a fragile chain of memory, but the entirety of her knowledge was buried deep in the inaccessible part of her psyche. None of what she knew was good. "They are the wind," she said at last. "You can probably counter them with stillness, but not forever."

Twilight nodded and frowned, pacing a short line behind Luna as she thought. “Oh, I wish I had my books,” she complained aloud. “All right, let’s try this.” The unicorn’s horn flared, a sphere spreading outward from the tip, a slow wavefront that left behind a faint purple haze. As it passed Luna, sound faded and muted, the light dimming and turning red. From inside, she couldn’t see how far the spell extended, but it was only a second or two later that Twilight’s mouth moved.

“Okay, let’s go.” The unicorn’s words arrived a heartbeat later, distant and faded. The two ponies began walking forward again, though it was more like trying to move through water than through air. There was no sound of hoofsteps at all, and they walked in an unnatural silence.

It wasn’t enough. Luna saw something flash through the air between them, carving a tunnel through the spell. Then another, and another, and the spell collapsed, the tattered fragments of magic snapped up by swirls of malevolent air, shadows swirling wildly on the rock around them. Then one of those shadows flitted over Twilight’s back, and the unicorn screamed as a bloody track appeared across the path it had taken, a strip of flesh neatly excised with a gust of wind.

“Stop!” Luna shouted, hard and commanding enough to surprise even her as she stepped in front of the wounded unicorn, even though that was no real protection against what they faced. “You know who I am,” she told the empty air. “What are you doing?”

The air replied.

*The
world’s trembles the
heart under of incarnated
the weight goddess.*

The voice was thin, wavery, and toneless, sinister from its very lack of emotion, the source constantly moving as it spoke.

*All feed
things her and shall
are to on we
drawn them*

Luna’s eyes narrowed. Though it was true that *she* could no longer wield that power, it still existed in some way. The idea that unconstrained, uncontrolled divinity was warping this place seemed altogether too probable. And it was, again, entirely her fault. The alicorn pushed the jumbled welter of thoughts and emotions aside as best she could, focusing on what she could possibly do in the here and now. “I won’t let you do that,” she said flatly, though she had

Twilight stopped when she could see no more shadows and the wind was still. The unicorn knew she couldn't leave Luna behind. She didn't even want to leave Luna alone with the hungry wind, a stinging and bleeding back an insistent reminder of what they were and what they could do. She winced and cast a small spell to curb the bleeding and ease the pain - she wasn't practiced enough with more thorough healing spells to have faith in their efficacy.

"Think, Twilight," she muttered. "You can figure out some way to fix this. Checklist, what do we know?" She didn't have the physical version, and in that moment she missed Spike terribly. Hopefully he was enjoying himself with his parents, and that he wasn't *too* worried about her.

That wasn't helping. "Checklist checklist checklist," she repeated. What did she know? One: That it was made of wind. Two: That it cast a shadow. Three: That Luna somehow trapped it a very long time ago. Four: That it ate everything, even magic, and left only rock and mud. Five: That the only assets she had were two blankets, some food and water, two scarfs, her mind and her magic.

She stamped her hoof in frustration, the sound ringing off the stone surrounding her. There had to be some way, some thing that could fight them. She glared around at nothing in particular, seeing only more stone. Rock. Her eyes widened.

"You have got to be completely insane, Twilight Sparkle." It was an utterly untenable idea. She didn't have any of the spells she needed; she'd have to invent them from scratch. And yet she had to try. She didn't know what to make of Luna's parting words - not yet - but for herself, she knew she couldn't obey those instructions. She was going after Luna.

But she was going to do it right. She couldn't be absolutely certain she was actually alone, though she suspected that if she weren't, there'd be more than one strip of hide missing. She took a breath, and this time the glimmer along her horn was faint, spreading out to wrap around her body in tight interweaving strips. Her vision blurred and turned monochrome, wavering as if it were seen through muddled water.

If it were working, from the outside she would be nearly invisible, inaudible, a phantom very much like the things she was hunting. It seemed particularly apropos, and from the manuals of war that she had read, a sound strategy. She began to canter back up the ramp, making no noise and casting no shadow.

The spire was barely short of a mountain. She passed more metal debris as she ascended, the remnants of some construct from Luna's first imprisonment of the terrible things. Now that she knew what to look for, every piece of degraded metal had the phrase punched into

its surface, over and over again. *The wind is hungry.*

She shook her head, pushing that to the back of her mind as she focused on the magic she would need. Her hooves carried her through the simple curve of the spiral ramp while she bent her intellect on the task of inventing spells without the aid of quill or paper. The monochrome world slipped by as she ghosted upward.

The sun rose higher in the sky, shadows shifting, the lines cast by the sharp walls shrinking as it neared midday. She was panting as she neared the top of the spire; even though she was used to walking it had been a long uphill climb, and at speed. What had been blurred motion from the ground was visible now: the remains of a metal tower, twisted and bent where it had burst from the inside, loose pieces swirling constantly in a powerful eldritch wind. A hungry wind.

She hardly dared to breathe as she crept closer. The bright light of the sun illuminated only a single figure, but many shadows. Luna rested at the base of the tower, her head bowed in utter despondency, her mane fluttering in fitful bursts. She seemed whole, but the shadow she cast was surrounded by a flickering swarm. Feeding.

Twilight felt sick. It was all she could do to keep from rushing over to the forlorn pony, instead proceeding step by slow step, spell at the ready. She felt incredibly conspicuous, creeping across the open space, near to bursting with unreleased magic. Sweat beaded on her brow as she expected a dive by some drifting wraith.

But she made it to within a few feet of Luna unaccosted. She couldn't get nearer without stepping into the invisible maelstrom whirling about the alicorn, joined, by evidence of the shadows, to the frenzied whirl above. She couldn't possibly warn the pony what was about to happen. Twilight inhaled, slowly, deeply, and then released the spell.

Her disguise blasted apart as hurricane winds exploded outward from her, cracking the stone under her hooves and seizing building-sized chunks of metal in its grasp. The only thing spared was Luna, who was abruptly stripped of shadows as the wind was forced to bend however temporarily to a greater gale. The alicorn's head jerked up, staring at Twilight, an expression of bottomless surprise and hope flashing across her muzzle. "Luna!" The unicorn called to her.

Luna bounded forward, joining Twilight in the still heart of the magic storm as it went out and out, shrieking against the stone spire. "What are you doing!?" Luna hissed incredulously, looking out at the debris hurtling through the air. Twilight couldn't reply, gritting her teeth as she poured more and more power into the spell, drawing on the well of energy deep within her. The vortex extended down the sides of the mountain, hissing and growling, a cacophony that became flat and emotionless words.

We
will you we
consume will eat
 your
 bones.

She couldn't reply to that either. All her focus was reserved for the magic she was handling, spinning out of her core and away to power the wind. Below her, the rock began to shift, great jagged cracks running down the sides of the spire. The immense tornado tightened around the rock face, faster and faster.

But she could feel the strands of power that drove the wind being severed, eaten by the creatures she was trying to constrain. She poured more and more of herself into the spell, but things began to fray. The rock shifted under the two ponies, and another magical thread snapped, sending a stray puff of wind across Luna's shoulders. The alicorn cried out as a bloody track appeared across her coat, a piece of mane cut out with surgical precision.

With that cry, something within Twilight Sparkle shifted subtly. Her mind seemed to expand, and her eyes blazed white as everything became so very simple, simple. Her original plan of simply trapping the wind inside the mountain would not work; it would still retain the strength to break out. But stone was still a worthy answer to the problem.

She looked out, past the roiling blaze of the goddess beside her, a dark illumination like fire seen through water, to the ugly, swarming shapes of the hungry wind. She gathered them in, gathered them in, the sound of wind reaching a hellish pitch as it was crushed against the rock. But that noise was nothing compared to the sound of tortured rock as she stomped her hoof, and the mountain burst asunder.

"Twilight..." Luna breathed, eyes wide and frightened. "Not again." But the words were distant, distant, and energy crackled around them as Twilight's attention flew further outward. They stood, suspended on nothing, pieces of mountain larger than houses whirling by. Far below an enormous pit yawned where the roots of the mountain had been torn from the earth.

Then the tempo changed, and the unicorn's muzzle curled upward in a fey smile as a red glow suffused the unnatural storm. It cast a shifting light over the ponies, fighting with the white blaze of power at the tip of Twilight's horn. The first breath of heat stole into their safe, still space, and flames burst into brief life here and there amid the chaos as the sharp edges of shattered stone softened, softened.

Droplets of molten rock whipped around the vortex, shimmering orange-red as Twilight forced more and more heat into the chaotic debris. Lightning flared far below them, coruscating uncontrollably, the accompanying thunder lost in the bedlam. And Twilight smiled, smiled as she struck out at the remaining dregs of the spire, balancing the two of them atop a

wind-churned pillar of magma.

Twilight's hooves waved like a conductor's as she forced the dark essence of the hungry wind to mix with the molten rock, pulling the vortex in tighter, tighter. The heat rippling the air blurred the view from their magic-laced bubble, but Twilight saw everything, everything.

*You
cannot this.
do*

The unicorn's smile widened to show teeth. The wind was now the motion of stone rather than the motion of air, a naked volcano rising from the landscape with blinding white magic erupting from the top. "I can," she whispered, she whispered, and brought her head down sharply.

Magic crackled and hissed as the lava was chilled instantly to black obsidian, a wave running down the pillar as whirls and vortices were stilled permanently and the wind was silenced. Volcanic glass crackled and popped as it was forced into being, the heat being pushed down further and further. As the tower joined the ground, the heat was cast out, cast out, into the field of mud beyond.

It exploded. The roar was indescribable, even through the protective bubble of Twilight's magic, and nothing large enough to be considered debris remained as steam and dust billowed into the air, blocking the sun, blocking the sun. Darkness fell, and the only illumination was the crackling flare of Twilight's magic.

Her power surged in exultation, her mind expanding outward, expanding outward. Luna's divine night seemed to stay with her, always present no matter how far she went, visible from deep within the earth and high up in the air. The magic that held them both suspended crackled and spat, the sphere expanding as the glow from Twilight's eyes grew brighter.

A whisper came from somewhere far away, far away. Twilight paid no attention, straining further and further outward, the power within her burning so bright, so bright. And then there was a soft touch on her muzzle, and from her eyes of flesh and blood the unicorn saw a terrified, worried face. "Twilight," it said. "Stop." The unicorn stared at that face, knowing it was familiar, knowing it was important. And then she remembered. "Please," Luna said, and Twilight let the bright spark go.

She fell down and down, through all the layers of perception, slamming back into her own skin at the moment the spell that kept them aloft vanished. The two ponies dropped several feet to the newly-made obsidian peak, and Twilight slumped to the ground, unutterably weary. Luna crouched down next to her. "Twilight? Are you...?"

“S’mee,” the unicorn slurred with a tiny smile. “Thanks.”

“Thanks?” Luna laughed with a manic hysteria, then coughed on the dry, hot air whipping up from the devastated landscape below. “I have to thank *you*. You came back for me. You didn’t leave me.”

“Course not,” Twilight mumbled, squinting at Luna through the spots dancing in front of her eyes. “I’ll never leave you.”

She didn’t understand why the alicorn suddenly burst into tears, smiling and bending down to nuzzle her. “Oh, Twilight.” She shook her head, and the unicorn blinked up at her muzzily.

“What’d I say?”

The larger pony looked suddenly shy. “I...I’ll tell you later.” Luna stood up again, looking at the ominously dark cloud looming above them. “We need to leave before that all comes back down. There isn’t any shelter around here anymore.”

“Why not?” Twilight asked it automatically, then the memories caught up with her. “...oh. Right.” She wobbled to her hooves, taking one unsteady step before Luna moved to support her.

“There isn’t a way down,” Luna said quietly as they peered over the edge. It was a long, steep cliff of pure obsidian, reaching down into an enormous crater that surrounded the newly-made pillar. The alicorn gave Twilight a sideways smile. “I’ll have to carry you, but it’s been a very long time since I tried that.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Twilight felt blurred and unfocused, as if she couldn’t quite wake up.

Luna bent and hoisted the unicorn over her shoulders, and Twilight held on tight as they left the ground. The larger pony stretched her wings, soaring high on the thermals rising from the crater below. Twilight stared down at the blasted, dessicated landscape, and felt half-guilty, half-proud that she had managed to do that.

The edge of the cloud’s shadow cut a distinct line across the bleak mud plain some distance beyond the crater’s rim. Luna’s wings worked as she made for that goal, and above them the pyrocumulus growled ominously. They emerged back out into the sun, and a flash of green on the horizon signaled the end of the blood-colored desolation.

But Luna was already dropping altitude, out of practice in bearing more than her own weight, and she landed some distance from the beginning of a more lush plain than the one

they were leaving. Twilight looked back, and shivered at the ominous black obelisk that stood shadowed under an unnatural cloud. "It looks evil," she said at last.

Luna shared it her look. "It may be," she said softly. "But it's not your evil. You've wrought a better prison for them than I had ever thought of."

Twilight ducked her head in embarrassment. "It just came to mind after I saw they'd left all the stone. Though...the melting thing didn't occur to me until after -" She stopped and waved a hoof vaguely. "Well, it seemed the right thing to do. Now, it kind of frightens me."

"Fully half the things you do *terrify* me, Twilight." Luna gave her a wry smile. "But the other half of the time you make me into a better pony than I could pretend to dream."

The unicorn flushed, not certain how to respond to that flattery, and Luna added something more in a thoughtful tone. "In that, you make a better goddess than I do."

"But...I'm not - I could never be a goddess!" The very idea felt absurd to her. There was only Celestia and Luna, and any concept of replacing them with a mere mortal made no sense at all. "Besides, you're just...out of practice, is all."

Luna giggled. "That's the most understated truth I've ever heard."

Twilight grinned back. For the moments that she could pull Luna out of her depression, and when she wasn't being Nightmare Moon, the alicorn shone quite brightly. She hoped she would see more of that, and less of the suffering that seemed to plague Luna. "Maybe you need to study? I could help you. I'm *good* with that." It was a weak joke, but a joke nonetheless.

"It's an idea, at that," Luna smiled. "Lesson one: how to wear a tiara properly."

They slogged the rest of their way to the beginning of the grass, and Twilight heaved a sigh of relief as they finally reached a surface that was kinder to her hooves and legs than stone or mud. They were both filthy from the knees down, but Twilight felt recovered enough to cast a basic cleaning spell. It didn't feel nearly as cleansing as a proper bath, but it at least kept their coats unmatted and Luna's chausses shining.

A rolling, rippling savanna stretched out ahead of them, dotted here and there in the distance with oddly flat-topped trees. It seemed deserted of even the smallest fauna, but after the spectacle that she'd put on, Twilight wasn't surprised. In fact, despite the boundless perception she'd had, she hadn't even thought to look. It gave her a flash of insight into how difficult Luna's and Celestia's duties had to be, if their godhead was anything like what she'd experienced.

"Do you think what the winds said is true?" She asked after a time. "That you're

changing this place just by being here?"

"It may be." Luna looked up at the clear blue sky. "Though I expect you've changed the place more than me..." She gave Twilight a brief smile. "It's possible. I really can't tell."

"I saw it," Twilight confessed. "Before. I could see your goddess...ness."

"Really?" Luna stopped short and gave her a startled look. "So it's actually still there."

"Oh, yes." Twilight nodded. "And it's...beautiful, actually." She opened her muzzle to say something more, then shut it tightly as her ears caught up with her mouth.

"Is it now?" The alicorn smiled shyly at Twilight. "What does it look like? There aren't any mirrors that reflect godstuff."

"It's...all darkness and light mixed together, constantly moving." Twilight strained to remember that otherworldly perception, which didn't quite fit into a merely mortal mind. "Like...a nebula, if you could see one up close." She would have offered to use the memory spell again, but she could barely hold on to the images; even now, she could remember the impressions more than the event.

"That...does seem appropriate." Luna nodded and glanced skyward for a moment. "'Tia is all shining light, it hurts to look at her sometimes. And you..." The larger pony glanced sideways at Twilight. "I've seen you channeling the Elements of Harmony, but with what you can do without it, I wonder how much of it was the Elements, and how much was you."

"The Elements didn't feel like *that*, though." Twilight protested. "It was focused. It wasn't just me, either, it was all my friends."

"Somehow I keep forgetting that. I can remember how they all look, but..." She shook her head. "I'm just not in the habit of thinking of friends."

"Well you should start!" Twilight half-scolded her. "I know all *my* friends would love to spend time with you when we get back." She paused at that for a moment, remembering when Celestia had sent her to Ponyville with the express purpose of making friends. Now she was trying to do the same to someone else.

"I'm...willing to try." Luna sounded hesitant, and Twilight felt slightly guilty. She didn't want to force Luna into a pretense of cheerfulness, especially since Luna was starting to discover the genuine article.

"In your own time," the unicorn temporized. "I'm sure we'll be buried in work when we get back."

The plain remained deserted as the afternoon rolled on toward evening, and Twilight stopped at an acacia-ringed pool of water. The obsidian spire was still visible in the distance, surrounded now by a dark and angry haze. The unicorn would have preferred to be out of sight of that monument before stopping, but she was exhausted. "I need to rest," she told her companion. "It's been a long day."

"Of course." Luna halted and looked back at the black obelisk as well. "It has been pretty eventful for you. I think I'll stay up a little bit though. I want to see the moon."

Centuries of Stony Sleep

The unicorn drowsed beside her as Luna watched the first silver arc edge over the horizon. She had almost gotten used to sleeping by night rather than by day, if nothing else than to avoid being confronted with a legacy she could no longer touch. The starless sky and the distant orb of the moon still hurt, but it was a more remote pain.

It was a strange day for her. She had failed to properly carry out her duties, the responsibility trusted to her as a goddess, or else the hungry wind would not have remained even in the secret soul of the world. And yet, it had been taken care of anyway. It was the first time in a very long, long time that anyone had helped her with her burden. It was the first time that it had occurred to her that she didn't have to do things alone.

Celestia was always so poised, so confident, and Luna had never managed to quite reach that same point. But perhaps she didn't need to. It was an oddly freeing thought, that she didn't have to try and do everything herself. Of course, prior to Twilight she had never encountered anyone who could begin to appreciate what a goddess could do, and what they had to do. But she had never looked, either.

It was on this meditation that she watched the moon rise, watched it bathe the landscape in soft silver light. But slowly, inevitably, the doubts crept in again. If Twilight, as a unicorn, no matter how special, could do what she could not, what role was left for her? She stared upward and had to wonder why the moon needed a goddess.

Luna woke to the sound of bells. They rang out, slow and sweet, tolling the morning hour. She lifted her head and looked around, confused and wondering. The oasis that they'd chosen was the same yet not the same; the grass was greener, the water was clearer, the trees were slightly different. But the trees were in the same places, the subtle rolls of the ground hadn't altered. It was as if a new place had been sculpted atop the old.

She met Twilight's eye as the unicorn blinked sleepily. "I heard it too," she said in reply to the unasked question. "What's going on?" She looked around, taking in the same changes

Luna had. “Oh, wow. I guess that answers that. Things are being shaped around us. Well, you.”

“It...seems so.” Luna far from happy about that. She knew better than anyone what a snarl of emotions her divinity was tangled in, and if it was affecting the fabric of this reality unchecked, it bade ill for the safety of their journey. The last tones of the bells lingered and faded in the air, and she got to her feet.

“So let’s go see what that is!” Twilight was her usual cheerful self. The unicorn began packing their campsite again, and Luna helped with only half her attention. There was again the sense of odd familiarity, something she couldn’t quite place about that sound. She could only hope it wasn’t another terror from a past she couldn’t remember.

“Let’s just be careful,” the alicorn said. “There’s no telling what it could be.”

“Careful. Check.” Twilight grinned briefly and looked around. “I think it was coming from this direction.”

The two ponies moved forward carefully, past a screen of low trees and tangled underbrush. The trees became thicker, forming a wall on either side, and the underbrush cleared. Ahead, the trees formed an arch, framing the green passageway, and Luna shared a glance with Twilight before they stepped through.

It was a palace, all white stone and gold spires, gleaming in the sun. It was *the* palace, surrounded by brilliant green and gleaming against the blue vault of the sky. Luna stared, open-mouthed and unblinking, at a place that hadn’t existed for a thousand years.

“What is this place?” Twilight asked, her voice hushed in deference to Luna’s awe.

“You’ve seen it before,” Luna replied without looking away from the enormous complex. “But not like this. The palace of the pony sisters. My home.”

“But...you live in Canterlot.”

“I live there now. But I grew up here.” Luna started forward, and Twilight tagged along behind. A broad stairway beckoned, pristine alabaster and gold rail leading to an exquisitely carved door. The wood shimmered with an amaranthine glow in the sunshine, untouched by time.

“So this is a...memory of the one in Equestria?” Twilight’s hooves sounded on the stone behind her, and Luna ran a hoof over the deep engravings in the door.

“Or the original,” Luna mused. “The first bastion of order, built so deeply that its

foundation rested in something more fundamental than bedrock.”

“So who built it?” The unicorn stepped up next to her, surveying the architecture with an appreciative eye. “It’s beautiful.”

“Why, thank you.” The larger pony smiled, a faint hint of her sister’s impishness dancing in her eyes. “Tia and I made it, at the very beginning. When we were but foals.”

“What?” Twilight blinked at her, looking back and forth between her and the door.

“I’m sure that you built a fort for yourself when you were small.” Luna cocked her head at the unicorn.

Twilight flushed. “Well, yes,” she muttered. “But it was made out of books.”

“When a pair of goddesses makes a fortress to be safe in, it is rather more substantial.” Luna chuckled softly and pushed the door open. “Welcome to my home.”

Bright light streamed in through crystalline windows, the rich scent of wood and silk welcoming them into an enormous, well-furnished hall. Chairs and divans were scattered along the walls, with tapestries hanging above them. Columned arches supported supported gaily colored pendants, and at the very far end was a dais containing the largest orrery Twilight had ever seen.

Luna walked inside, hoofsteps deadened by a strip of carpet stretching the length of the hall, and inhaled deeply, breathing the heady perfume of memory. There were things she had forgotten, in the mess and muddle of life, pieces of an earlier age that were just now coming back to her. “Tia and I used to play here,” she told Twilight softly, making her way down the long hall toward the orrery. “We would pretend at moving the sun and the moon.”

Her horn flickered, and the sphere of the moon moved along its track, rotating silently, the cratered surface reproduced perfectly on the model. Twilight joined her, looking at the enormous device. “It’s hard for me to imagine either of you being that small,” she confessed. “You both seem, well, eternal.”

Luna opened her mouth to reply, but stopped as distant laughter sounded. Intermittent hoofsteps sounded from a nearby hall, and echoing voices. A side door slammed, and the two ponies watched, speechless, as a pair of alicorn foals dashed across the floor. The goddess of the moon stared as a younger version of herself gamboled across the carpet, followed by a similarly aged Celestia.

“I’m going to get you!” The Celestia foal called, and the matching Luna squealed, wriggling underneath the orrery. Celestia followed, voice echoing tinnily as she stuck her head

under the metal base. “Mwahaha!”

“Eeeee, no!” The alicorn foal leapt up onto the polished brass mechanism, tiny wings working to make the jump, hooves scrabbling as she went from one orb to another.

“Aha, you’re on my sun!” Young Celestia frowned in concentration, her horn gleaming, and the orb of the sun swung through on its track. The young Luna squeaked and lost her balance, hooves flailing as she plummeted down to land on top of her sister, the two of them sprawling in a giggling heap.

“Is that - are you - ?” Twilight sounded as surprised as Luna felt.

“These *are* just memories. I think.” The alicorn watched her childhood self scamper off again, smiling softly.

“Well, you two were adorable.” Twilight grinned, and it was Luna’s turn to blush.

“Be that as it may,” the alicorn coughed. “I wonder why we’re seeing them.”

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be any magic around here...” Twilight turned in a slow circle, horn rippling with faint power. “But it doesn’t seem like things are magic here, anyway. They just are.”

“Well, at least only my dignity is in danger,” Luna muttered, shaking her head. “Still, I’d like to follow them. I...don’t really recall much from this early on.” In fact she didn’t recall much at all, relative to the endless centuries she had experienced, but more and more had been leaking through over their journey. These were the first memories she truly welcomed, holding a simple joy that she’d nearly forgotten.

“And you can give me the tour while we’re here,” Twilight agreed. “Celestia never talked much about the past, let alone something like this.” She waved a hoof at the finery. “And I don’t recall many books about it either.”

“We’ll see what I can recall.” Luna led the way through the side door, the carpeted stone winding upward along the perimeter of a tower. Through the windows could be seen the gold and green of the grounds, along with flashes of blue from cheerfully babbling fountains.

“There’s a terrace up there,” she told Twilight, “where we could watch the sky.” She glanced over at the unicorn. “You can imagine how important that was. At Canterlot we have a balcony.” Luna looked upward, along the winding ramp. “It’s nice, but I think I preferred the terrace.”

“Well, where you grew up is always a little bit special.” Twilight said softly. “I mostly

grew up in the palace, and now I live in a library tree, but I feel nostalgic whenever I think of my parents' home."

Luna nodded, voices echoing from above as they climbed toward the roof. Another door stood at the top of the spiral, inlaid with a sun and a moon, and it unlocked with an audible click as the goddess of the moon touched her own symbol. She pushed the door open, spilling illumination into a starry night.

Luna stared, glancing between the bright sunlight spilling into the tower ramp and the moonlight cast across the terrace floor.

"I guess it's more than just people that are memories," Twilight said, sticking her head out past the threshold and looking around. "It's cold out here," she said, surprised, her breath steaming.

"It's winter," Luna said slowly, as recognition dawned. "Look." She pointed a hoof at two ponies standing on the terrace. It was herself again, next to her sister as always, but here Celestia was eclipsed by the splendor of Luna's aspect.

Her mane fell in a waterfall of stars, the moon on her flank glowed with an inner light, and her coat seemed to hold the very depth of night itself. Luna had decidedly mixed feelings about seeing herself that way, painted with a glory she could no longer conjure, but she stepped forward anyway.

"The Winter Moon Festival," she commented to Twilight in an undertone, making her way to the rail next to the younger version of herself. The grounds around the palace were sprinkled with lights, like a mirror of the sky above, hundreds of small bonfires to warm the ponies gathered for the celebration. The fires threw faint illumination over tables and awnings, chairs and divans scattered over the field. "This used to be my time."

"What happened?" The unicorn asked, looking over at the past alicorns, who in turn watched their subjects.

"I - " Luna began, and was interrupted by her younger self.

"Our Loyal Subjects!" The voice from the past boomed, and Luna winced slightly at her own memories from using that particular effect. "We Hope You Have Been Enjoying The Festivities!" Cheering and hoof-stomps came from the assembled crowd. "Good! Look To The Skies, Our Subjects! The Main Event Is About To Begin!"

"It was a meteor shower last year," Celestia murmured to the young Luna. "What did you have in mind for this time?"

“See those comets?” She waved a hoof upward, where a pair of wispy-tailed streaks rode in the sky.

“You wouldn’t.” Celestia sounded gravely amused, and Luna grinned in synchronization with her memory-self.

“I would. But first...” The young Luna’s horn glowed softly, and from the horizon came the shifting, hued curtains of an aurora. They rippled across the sky, painting the black between the stars with a palette of colors.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Twilight said softly, and Luna tore her gaze away from the heavens.

“I’d nearly forgotten myself.” Luna shook her head, wondering how she could have let something like this slip away. The show wasn’t over, either. Above them, the twin comets began to spiral around each other, drawing closer. They danced down, down, until they suddenly hit the atmosphere and ignited. The fiery bolides met the aurora and exploded with a tremendous roar, providing a kind of natural firework display.

The clouds of debris grew and fuzzed into haze, reflecting the light of the aurora, muting it into shifting pastels. The haze transmuted to snow, falling from a nearly clear sky as the water from the comets froze again in the chill upper atmosphere, shining and reflecting both the moonlight and the auroral glow.

“That’s *amazing*,” Twilight Sparkle said, and Luna felt a warm glow of pride.

“One of my best years,” she admitted. “I had to start those comets going two decades earlier. The pegasi spent three days cleaning up all the clouds I ended up making, but it was worth it I think.”

“Definitely,” Twilight agreed emphatically, and Luna lifted her head to the sky. It was hard to believe that she’d forgotten what she loved to do, over the years. She knew it had been a long, slow decline, more her fault than anypony’s, but this reminded her what heights she could aspire to.

“Celestia didn’t revive the moon festival because she didn’t want to usurp my place in it,” she told the unicorn. “She wanted me to hold the first new celebration for it, when I got back. She always had faith, even that long ago.” She turned to Twilight. “And so do you. I -” Luna faltered for a moment, her mind unsure as to what her mouth was about to say. “...thank you.”

“Of course, Luna!” Twilight gave the alicorn a smile. “I may not be the most perfect judge of character but it’s obvious to me you aren’t evil or anything.” She laid a reassuring hoof on Luna’s shoulder. “Just a little hurt.”

“Less than I was, I think.” Luna smiled at the snow. “I wonder what else...or when else...is here.” With one last look she started to cross the terrace, headed toward the spires and windowed halls beyond.

After a moment Twilight’s hoofsteps sounded as she hurried after the princess. “I wish we could stay here and watch this, even if it is cold.” Luna glanced back thoughtfully at Twilight’s wheedling tone.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to get separated. I suppose there isn’t any real hurry.”

“Yay!” Twilight grinned gleefully, and pulled the thermal blankets from her saddlebags. “I’m getting a lot more use from these than I thought. Good thing I’m so organized.”

“It really is.” Luna chuckled softly, settling in next to the unicorn to watch the echoes of herself from millennia past.

Twilight had seen glimpses of the whole and healthy Luna before, but this was the first time she’d had an unobstructed view. And it wasn’t just the memory, either. Her Luna was more relaxed and confident, more centered than before. She had to wonder if the alicorn even realized it.

She glanced sideways at the Luna she knew, then at the memory who stood by the rail. They were strange mirrors. They both had pride in common, but it seemed there was little else. The real alicorn seemed darker but humbler, smaller but more solid. She was, perhaps selfishly, glad that she had the older Luna. It would have been difficult to call the goddess in the memory anything but ‘Princess.’

Once the snow stopped falling, the aurora rolled away, moonlight and starlight playing over the pristine white coat of snow surrounding the revelers. The bells tolled midnight in long, slow rolls of sound, and the night - and winter - faded. The night sky turned back to day, a late afternoon, long shadows stretching across the terrace.

“Aww.” Twilight was a little disappointed, even if the main show had been over. “Well, I suppose we should go see what else is around here.”

“Next time I’m sure you’ll have the whole night,” Luna offered, an odd expression crossing her face as she realized exactly what she had said. But the alicorn didn’t correct herself.

“I’d like that.” If Luna was determined there would be a next time, despite the

impossibility, Twilight wasn't going to gainsay her. She took a moment to pack the blankets back in her now well-used saddlebags, and the two ponies resumed their interrupted journey across the terrace.

"There's a banquet hall through here," Luna told her, heading for another detailed door. "I think some days we didn't even get off the top floor."

"There are some days I don't leave my balcony," Twilight observed. "I can more than believe that."

Luna giggled. "I probably should tell you to get out more, but I'm one to talk." There was another soft click as Luna touched the door, and it swung open to reveal a long table and more enormous windows. Even though there was no food set out, the smell of fresh-baked bread seemed to linger in the air.

"This is a very odd place." The unicorn couldn't help stating the obvious. The patchwork of memories made for a disjointed experience, and she had to wonder if they'd be able to tell if something - or somepony - were real, rather than simply a shadow of the past.

"I must confess it never did all this when I lived here." Luna waved a hoof around. "Though maybe I should be surprised it didn't. It was fairly saturated with magic for a very long time."

"But magic is a very specific process," Twilight protested. "It doesn't just produce random results, especially not this targeted, all by itself."

"Well, not normally, no." Luna agreed. "But the slightest thought of a goddess might well be made manifest somewhere that is saturated with power, just waiting for somepony to shape it. It would not be unlike a unicorn's own inner power."

"Wow, a unicorn palace." The unicorn grinned. "Almost as good as a book fort."

Luna laughed softly, reaching for the far door of the banquet hall, but the door opened before she could touch it. Twilight blinked as another memory-Luna came into the dining room, this one looking much younger, barely past the filly stage. The appropriate Celestia followed her.

"I'm not sure...oh." Luna said, and Twilight looked inquiringly at the alicorn. "This must have been just before we went off to...deal with Discord. See the necklaces?"

Indeed, each of the two were wearing a necklace with three gems strung on it; three moons for Luna and three suns for Celestia. They looked nothing like the Elements of Harmony in Twilight's time, but that was hardly surprising. The unicorn couldn't help but feel a slight chill,

thinking of her own confrontation with the chaos god.

“I’m...I’m a little scared, ‘Tia.” The filly Luna looked up at the sun goddess, touching a nervous hoof to her necklace.

“Me too, sis.” The small Celestia lowered her head to give her Luna an affectionate nuzzle. “But we’ll be all right. He can’t do anything to us if we don’t let him.”

“Right.” The small Luna lifted her head, looking determined. “And we have the Elements of Harmony, too.”

“Indeed.” Celestia smiled down at her sister. “As long as we’re friends, we’ll be able to face anything.”

“We’ll always be friends, ‘Tia!” The filly Luna beamed. “We won’t have to worry about that.”

Twilight heard a soft intake of breath from the older Luna, but instead of looking pained, the alicorn merely appeared wistful. “Luna?” She asked softly.

“It’s amazing what you forget, and what you remember,” Luna replied. “It’s been a long time since I had any sort of...perspective.”

“Are we ready?” The memory of Celestia gave the younger Luna a hug, and the filly nodded.

“Ready, ‘Tia.”

“I wish I could tell them that everything works out.” Twilight watched the two young goddesses walk the length of the banquet hall.

“We can never know that at the time, though.” Luna said softly. “We can only hope it is so.”

“I suppose.” Twilight watched the pair walk out the far door. “It’s easy to forget how long ago this was,” she added after a moment. “It seems so real.” She turned to the larger pony. “Where *did* the Elements of Harmony come from, Luna?”

The alicorn shook her head. “You’d have to ask ‘Tia about that. What we’re seeing is coming back to me, along with a few other fragments, but most of my past is still a bit hazy.”

Twilight nodded. She had a strange, tangled feeling of guilt and responsibility for that, even if it was not strictly her fault. But perhaps it was for the best, given how many years of bad

memories the goddess would have.

The bells began to toll again, and Twilight waited, counting. The hours it kept seemed to be those of the memory, not of the outside world, so there was no sense paying too much attention. But each roll of sound was commanding, sending faint vibrations through the floor under her hooves.

The tenth toll hung in the air, and light faded from the dining hall. The setting sun cast ruddy outlines of the windows on the far wall, picking out motes of dust floating in the air. Twilight lifted a hoof as the sun suddenly shone in her eyes. "So...what time is it *actually*?"

"Hmm. I'm going to assume late; we did spend some time watching the Moon Festival." Luna stepped up to the window. "But it seems we'll have actual lodgings for the night, for once."

"True!" Twilight was looking forward to that. An actual bed and bath would be so very welcome, even if the surroundings were a little strange. But Luna didn't seem worried by anything the palace might hold, and she was willing to trust the alicorn's instincts. Everything Luna had been reluctant about so far had held some danger.

"Well, then, this way." Luna resumed her interrupted tour. Twilight marvelled at the size and richness of the halls and rooms they passed, easily rivaling Canterlot in terms of grandeur. But then, Canterlot hadn't been built from nothing but divine will and imagination.

At the end of a broad hall were two doors across from each other, one emblazoned with the symbol of the sun, and one with the symbol of the moon. Between the two was a small balcony, facing south to judge by the sun, and a faint breeze ruffled the hanging curtains. A voice floated to them from the balcony, a young voice. "You can do it, Luna!"

The two ponies exchanged glances and walked forward toward the balcony. They peered through the curtains at yet another alicorn pair, this one very young, barely older than the foals who had played on the orrery. The small Luna flapped her tiny wings vigorously, hovering over the balcony as her horn glowed, while Celestia stood below, her neck arched and tense.

A silver sliver appeared on the horizon, and then slowly, surely, the moon rose. The Luna foal faltered and fluttered back down to the balcony, where Celestia steadied her. "I did it, 'Tia! I did it! It's my moon!"

"I told you that you could do it." The alicorn put a wing over her sister, and Luna craned her neck upward.

"It's not as bright as your sun," the night goddess said, sounding disappointed.

"I suppose not...but it doesn't have to be the only thing in the night sky."

"Oooh!" The young Luna jumped up again, looking excited. Her horn glowed and spat sparks that circled upward, framing the moon with four stars. The small goddess looked at them with the critical eye only the young could muster. "Maybe I'll do more later."

"Is that...?" Twilight barely dared to ask the question.

"The first time I raised the moon," the older Luna confirmed. "Oh, I was so excited. I probably should have been *more* excited, but even then I thought I'd burst." She smiled at her younger self, who had her forehooves propped on the balcony rail. "I think I kept it night for almost a week."

Twilight giggled. "I can see myself doing that too. I remember the first time I used my magic. It was just for books, but I read until I was stiff."

"Well, this wasn't the first time I used magic..." Luna looked out at the cool silver orb hanging in the sky. "But it was certainly something special."

"I'll say." Twilight agreed. "I'd love to see you put up the rest of the stars."

"Ah, but I don't think we would have time for that." The moon goddess chuckled. "It was certainly not all done in one night."

"Not even a week-long night?" Twilight teased her, and Luna laughed.

"No, not even then." The goddess waved her hoof at the two small alicorns on the balcony. "Celestia wouldn't help me with it, but eventually I realized it was because it was *my* night, and she didn't want to encroach on my prerogatives."

"And a gorgeous night it is, too," Twilight told Luna, and was rewarded with a shy smile from the alicorn. She dared to continue, if hesitantly. "I have a telescope, you know. I've spent so many nights up watching the sky, and it really is beyond words. It's...awe-inspiring, even frightening, to think that you did all that."

"Thank you," Luna said, and there was more warmth in her voice than Twilight would have expected. "And not just for the compliment. You've gifted me not just a second or third or fourth choice, but the ability to appreciate and take advantage of it."

Twilight blinked at this unexpected confession. "I, um, you're welcome!" She smiled hesitantly. "But really, I haven't done anything special."

Luna chuckled and shook her head. "It may seem that way to you, but you're special to

me.”

The unicorn wasn't sure how to respond to that, kicking awkwardly at the floor with a forehoof. Silence hung between them for a time, broken only by small, subtle noises from the memory lingering on the balcony. Somewhere the bells began to toll, and the four stars outside faded away, leaving only the moon and an empty palace.

“Well, I suppose we should find our beds, and hope there's nobody in them.” Luna looked away from her contemplation of her celestial charge and nodded agreement.

“Well, you can use Celestia's rooms.” The unicorn chuckled softly. “I don't think she'd object.”

“I suppose not.” Twilight tentatively pushed at the sun-sigiled door that was next to the balcony, and it swung under her hoof. Moonlight dappled a scattering of blankets and furniture, cast in monochrome by the night. She glanced back at Luna, who was entering her own room. “Good night, Luna.”

“Good night, Twilight.” Luna smiled, and the door closed.

What woke the unicorn was the tolling of the palace bells in the distance. She blinked at the bright light reflecting from a soft palette of color, a bright spread that reminded her of nothing so much as Celestia's mane. There were tapestries on the walls, soft carpets underhoof, a closet and of course the bed, but it was rather spartan otherwise for a royal bedroom.

It might have been simply a consequence of the palace's pristine status, memories aside, but the Celestia Twilight knew lacked the abundance of keepsakes an immortal might be expected to have. Twilight could nearly believe that a younger sun princess would have foregone decoration entirely. It was strange to not even see books, though, and she shook her head at an odd sense of disorientation before she made her way to the door.

“Luna?” Twilight poked her head into the hallway, an ear cocked to hear any further memories that might be occurring. When no such event presented itself, she crossed over to knock on the moon-engraved door. It swung open under her hoof, showing her an empty room.

It was a far different room than the one in which she'd spent the night. It wasn't just the color scheme; paintings hung on the walls, oils and watercolors of a dozen different scenes and as many ponies. A faded portrait of the royal sisters, looking young and cheerful, stood on a small table, an 'L' scribbled in the corner as the artist's signature.

Twilight couldn't help but to step inside. She walked slowly along the row of hanging pictures, where she could see the individual brushstrokes and the same initial on each one. These could be, she realized, the first paintings to ever exist. Even if they weren't, the artwork

represented the mortal strivings of the goddess in a way that any number of words could not.

She abruptly felt that she had intruded too far into something very private. She gave the room one last glanced and backed out, closing the door behind her. Luna had to be somewhere nearby. The empty halls seemed larger and colder without somepony to guide her, the carpets and tapestries absorbing all noise and turning it into a noiseless crypt.

The unicorn found herself moving faster, cantering through the broad, sun-soaked silence as she hunted for any sign of Luna. She found no sign of Luna or of memories until she stumbled across the ancient audience hall. Voices leaked through a delicate stone filigree, a blurred slice of a pair of thrones visible through the decorative screening.

Twilight followed that wall until she found a door, pushing her way into what seemed to be a private audience. Or rather, the end of one. Two pairs of guards escorted two groups of ponies away from the dual throne, revealing her Luna on the far side of the room.

Luna gave her a small wave, and Twilight trotted across to her. "I'm sorry I didn't wait for you," the alicorn said, "but I was following a memory."

"Oh, that's quite all right!" The smaller pony was relieved to see Luna; she'd been half-panicked from the idea of getting lost in different pasts. "What's going on?"

"There was a time - a long time - when Celestia and I ruled together. Actually together; it wasn't a division of duties, it was cooperation."

"You are so much better at empathic solutions." Twilight jumped at Celestia's voice, but it was only the memory of the alicorn sitting on the throne. "I suppose," the sun goddess continued dryly, "I shouldn't expect everypony would see things my way."

"Oh, 'Tia," said the matching Princess Luna fondly. "If everypony saw things your way, they wouldn't need to come to us to resolve their problems."

Celestia laughed, soft and musical. "And how boring a kingdom we would have then. I shan't complain so long as it's both of us. I don't think I could do it by myself."

The petitioners and the guards disappeared out the far door, and the palace bells tolled as the memory faded, leaving the ponies a large, empty hall. Twilight looked over at Luna, who was staring thoughtfully at the vacant thrones. "Should we look for more memories?"

"No..." Luna said slowly, then repeated it. "No. I think I've seen all I need to. This was my past, but you can't stay in the past forever. It's time to move on." The alicorn turned to face Twilight. "My past has been coming back, in bits and pieces, and there are other powers in this place that could help us. There is one in particular that we have had a key to all this time."

“What?” Twilight stared at Luna. “You’re joking.”

“Alas, no.” Luna shook her head. “Those dragon medallions, you still have them in the saddlebags?”

“Of course.” Twilight opened the flap of one of the bags, various scavenged vegetables and a folded blanket floating out as she rummaged for them, finally levitating them into the air. “Here.”

The larger pony placed one around her neck, and Twilight followed suit. Luna’s horn glowed, and thin threads of magic wrapped themselves around the discs. It was a spell that didn’t hold much power, but it was extraordinarily complex, reminding Twilight that Luna had been casting spells for longer than unicorns had existed.

“So what does that do?” Twilight studied the spell as best she could. She didn’t dare try to tease any of it apart for fear that it would do some damage to the metal it was enmeshed in.

“It should lead us to it. And it to us.” The alicorn turned and began walking toward the exit of the audience hall.

“Lead us to what?” Twilight trotted after her, frowning down at the pendant hanging around her neck.

“Do you remember Scar’s seal of office? That was not merely a symbol. Celestia is the sun, I am the moon. The dragon lords are the ouroboros. And we’re going to find it.”

Concluded in [Apotheosis. Part 3](#)