Within and Without
A Season One MLP Fanfic
by Cloudy Skies
Prologue

Please note: This version is outdated. The updated version can be found here:

http://www.fimfiction.net/story/18270/Within-and-Without

The Sun hung low on the horizon. The innumerable towers that made up the Canterlot skyline cast shadows that fell not on the city itself, but rather on the mountainside in which the city was embedded. As had been the tradition every evening for over a millennium now, Princess Celestia stood upon the tallest balcony of the royal palace enjoying the last rays of sunlight.

As a more recent addition, Luna stood at her side trying not to feel like she was tacked on to the beautiful picture with spit and glue. Where Celestia stood with her head high and wings spread out as if to catch every last bit of light like a sail in the wind, Luna was hunched over the railings, staring down at the city below. The quiet between them was tainted with the usual tension of these meetings, but Luna did not want to disappoint her sister by refusing to join her. Besides, it was practical. It would not do for the moon princess to be absent when her namesake was raised.

Thus passed the last moments of the day, and with an almost imperceptible flare of magic from the horn of the elder sister, the Sun slowly disappeared. Left behind was a vivid orange sky that gradually darkened, paving the way for the Moon's part in keeping the order of the sky unbroken. Folding her wings gracefully, Celestia turned and looked at her sister. Luna, for her part, was watching a baker close his shop in the streets far below. She idly wondered if he was happy.

There was a pregnant pause, and Luna could count down the seconds in her mind until Celestia would say that she worried about her. She would express concern that she hadn't yet opened her court. Suggest that she try to “get out more.” Her timing was off by less than a heartbeat tonight.

"I worry about you." Celestia’s words, so often spoken, seemed to hover between them for a moment while both of them contemplated exactly how spent and useless they were. They were almost part of the ritual, now, and fell flat to the ground as if they'd never been spoken.

"If you will not open the night court, will you sit with me in the day court tomorrow?" Princess Celestia tried instead, voice laden with concern that was every bit as genuine as it had been the last two hundred times times she had asked similar questions.

"Perhaps," Luna lied, watching the baker round a corner and disappear from view, leaving the street empty for the moment. The fact that Celestia's sympathy was pure as daylight only made it more painful that she could not bring herself to say yes.

"If not for yourself, then do it for your loving subjects who wish only to see you, Luna." The sun goddess was pleading now, and Luna couldn't help but turn to look at her, though she knew the reluctance was plain on her face. Trying to fool her own sister had never been anything but a losing prospect. They had always seen straight through each other.

"My subjects?" Luna asked, noting Celestia's little sigh and continuing before her words could be taken amiss. "I try to love every pony as dearly as you do, Tia, and you know that, but this place..." Luna gestured with a hoof towards Canterlot at large. "It is not home. Not like the castle was. This city is beautiful, my chambers are opulent, and I've been met with nothing but understanding and compassion in magnitudes I do not deserve." Swallowing as bile rose in her throat, she forced the last words out before she lost the courage to say them. "Yet all the generosity and kindness in Equestria can not make this feel like *home*."

In a rare moment of deference, Celestia nodded, and when she managed to reply, the words were heavy with sorrow. "I understand."

The sisters watched the last remnants of color bleed out of the sky. As if by an unspoken signal, reacting to an inaudible horn or an invisible flare, Luna closed her eyes. For the second time this evening, alicorn magic briefly lit the balcony, and shortly thereafter, the Moon rose up to take its place. It was followed soon after by the stars that dotted the night sky, all falling into place where they belonged in constellations and formations. When everything seemed in order, Luna's attention was fixed on the exquisite marble tiles of the balcony.

The carefully choreographed melancholy debate had played itself out for now, Luna figured, the night sky being the final point on the program. She took a moment to gather herself before looking her sister in the eyes, clearing her throat unnecessarily. Celestia's attention had never left her younger sibling.

"Do you have a moment?" Luna asked.

"For you, always," Celestia replied without hesitation.

"I, ah. Inside, perhaps?" Luna did not even wait for a reply and began walking down the steps that led to the interior of the palace.

Her sister glanced up at the sky and nodded in understanding. "Of course."

Well inside the palace proper, the royal sisters walked together down a hallway that seemed doomed to be always considered too large. It would be impossible to find a use for all

of the space the delicately arched hallway offered. The ponies of Canterlot had tried to make it hospitable, a wealth of statues and tapestries each worth a fortune lining the walls. All they served to do, Luna felt, was make the hallway seem even larger by comparison, swallowing up the artists' efforts.

"I have finally gotten around to perusing all those 'friendship reports' written to you by your student, Twilight Sparkle," Luna began. "I had something of a dream, and remembered you suggested I read them."

Celestia's countenance eased up a little and she offered a genuine smile. Luna's was relieved; the sympathetic smiles her sister usually bombarded her with did neither of them any good, she was sure. For once, Celestia seemed truly happy with her.

"I am pleased to hear it, my dear sister," Celestia said, motioning for Luna to go on.

"I also read the relevant correspondence with Mayor Mare of Ponyville and all official documents concerned with the six Elements' bearers," Luna continued. Celestia nodded as if she had expected as much.

"Have I mentioned that Twilight Sparkle reminds me of you in some ways?" Celestia asked with a little chuckle. "Never content with finding just the answer to the question. She, too, has to understand absolutely everything pertaining to it."

Luna nodded, only half-listening. Her heartbeat quickened a little as words jostled for position in her throat. "I did not stop there. I felt I could not leave any stone unturned when I started researching the role of the Elements in the past months. I was reluctant to look into it at first, you see. I mean, it is not so much a sore subject as, well. The Elements have changed. It's not the same as when you wielded them, or the time before..." The words tasted very bitter. This wasn't how had she had imagined the conversation going. Her eyes stung. Celestia apparently noticed Luna's discomfort, and slowed until their walk came to a full stop.

"Luna," the sun goddess said, simply, making the younger sister look back up at her. When had Luna's eyes slipped to the ground again?

"I am weak, Tia. There is no reason why this should be hard to talk about. Ridiculous," Luna spat.

"Not more ridiculous than the fact that we can not seem to look each other in the eyes without feeling pain," Celestia said. "Go on, please."

Luna took a deep breath trying to steady herself and nodded even as her brain went off on a tangent. She was seized by a single thought, engulfed by what had been an aside of what she meant to talk about, but she couldn't let go of it. "I am not sure how to say this."

"Yet you are going to say it," Celestia stated not as a command, but as prophecy delivered with a smile.

"I just thought about the Elements and how much closer our association with them used to be before. Many things have changed in my absence, as is natural." Luna felt a seed of trepidation take root in her heart as she spoke. She had meant to comment on the reports, not discuss history, but she was rapidly losing control of her mouth.

"A lot of things have changed, yes," came the reply in a carefully measured tone. Her sister seemed a little confused, even more so as Luna went on.

"You leave the Elements to their own devices most of the time, and they grow so much with each passing day, but they are, for all purposes and intents, unguided. Their bonds are strong, and they seem capable, but I do not know what to make of your approach."

Celestia was quiet for a long while. There was no menace to the silence, but Luna's mind conjured up for her visions of a million ways in which this conversation could go horribly wrong. Regardless, she could no more stop speaking than she could stop breathing. Something welled up in her, and it had to be said.

"You know what effect the Elements of Harmony have on ponies. They used to be our greatest tool, our strongest weapon." Luna's had to pause and gather her courage at this, her mind visiting a moment a thousand years ago and snapping back, all in the space of a second. Her voice was thick sadness and loss. "And our closest friends."

Every second that Celestia didn't reply was pain, now. Luna was unsure of what to make of her sister's reaction, or rather, lack thereof. The sun goddess was rigid perfection, frighteningly similar to a statue of her likeness a scant few paces away, except for the multi-hued mane and tail billowing on an unseen wind.

"The world is bigger, yet smaller, now, Luna. Ruling is not an easy task, and my time is limited," Celestia said at length. Luna could swear she heard the unspoken addition of *"At least when you are alone, and your sister spends the day wailing and gnashing her teeth, being useless."*

"This is different," Luna said with a small spark of anger that even she felt was undeserved and out of place. "There are no excuses with the powers you command."

Celestia glared at her with one eye. "I still cannot be everywhere at once. Neglect? Is that my crime? Have I done wrong by them? Have you forgotten why we do as we do?"

The night princess snorted. "You have done no wrong. According to the books that have

been written in recent times, the Elements are tied to you, and yours to do with as you please. Pawns. I read the *Elements of Harmony*, *Predictions and Prophecies* - all the books written after my banishment. None of them mention the old order. None of them mention that they were mine, too, once." Speaking of what had happened so long ago only emboldened Luna, pain fuelling her. Her voice had risen, becoming almost an accusatory yell. Her tongue was its own creature now, a vile thing over which she held no power.

Celestia's face hardened and her voice became crisp. "They are yours too, the Elements, but most of all they belong to themselves. It is perhaps too easy to forget, but don't you *dare* lecture me, Luna."

The unnatural heat of Celestia's anger washed over Luna, and a lesser pony would've automatically prostrated him or herself before the sun goddess. She glowed with a painful light and looked like she could ignite any moment. Princess Luna, however, just felt a cold core in her gut grow and envelop her, darkness tainting the edges of her vision as her own power flared. She heard herself reply. "It seems we are both forgetful. Me, I forget that history is written by the *victors*."

A soft noise shattered the princesses' standoff, and they turned as one to face a pale blue earth pony who had no doubt just been walking past. The pony seemed frozen in fear, his pupils mere pinpricks, and the clipboard he'd dropped ignored. Luna quickly glanced around and noticed that the nearest duo of unicorn guards, usually stone-faced creatures with all the emotional range of a slab of granite, also stared at them. They were all transfixed, eyes wide and fearful.

Luna looked down at her own hooves and felt wretched. She wanted to throw up, and Celestia seemed similarly shaken. The two alicorns folded their wings carefully and took a few deep breaths before Celestia spoke up, once more smiling gently and warmly. It was all too easy to pretend nothing had happened, but Luna refused to let herself forget.

"Scribble, take the rest of the night off. Earth Razer, Bonfire, you are dismissed." How her sister knew the names of the seemingly-identical guardponies without even being able to see their cutie marks, Luna did not know.

The earth pony attendant Celestia had named Scribble slowly managed to figure out how his legs worked and began vacating the area. He paused every few steps to turn and bow low before the princesses in mechanical repetition. His eyes were streaked with tears.

"Your Majesties, we are fit for duty." One of the guardponies tried as they both bowed low.

"Dismissed," Celestia repeated. "Thank you for your hard work."

The unicorn ponies gave another bow and marched smartly down the hall, leaving the two sisters truly alone. Luna nudged the closest door open with a telekinetic nudge and slipped inside, followed by Celestia. It seemed to be a meeting room, empty save for a mess of tables. Luna gave a single flap of her wings and alighted on a sturdy table before turning to face her sister. She lay down, resting her head on crossed hooves, and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Tia," she said, feeling cold and numb.

"I'm sorry, too, Luna," Celestia said, walking over to nuzzle her sister gently before sitting down on her haunches by the table. It took a long while before Luna realized what was wrong with her sister's face. She had to decrypt the expression, bit by bit, to understand what it was she saw.

Fear. Celestia was afraid. She had not seen that in a thousand years and more, and it made *her* afraid in turn. Luna stared in abject horror. "Tia..."

"We are feared. All I wish is for the ponies who seek to live under our rule to be happy. I can understand why some may hate me, and I try learn from my own mistakes; I am not perfect, but I never wanted to for us to be feared. Sometimes I think even Twilight Sparkle fears me. Why..." Her voice petered out and her eyes closed. Luna felt her stomach lurch at seeing her indomitable sister like this.

"It is my fault," Luna muttered. Immediately, Celestia's eyes sprang open again, moist with tears. A trace of savage anger crept back into the elder sister’s voice, but with a different purpose.

"Do not let me hear you say that *ever* again! This is not your fault. I have forgiven you and you have forgiven me. It *is* over! It is the past, curse it!" Celestia's voice managed to carry an unnatural echo even in the small room.

Luna winced, but her mind was her own again now, and she was thinking as she spoke. "We have, and I hope it is, but I am still causing this. We are making each other behave like this. Tearing each other apart. Ever since I came back, we've done little but quarrel. Let me go to Ponyville."

Celestia looked away and gave a shuddering sigh. "A thousand years apart, and you wish to leave me alone again because you think you are the problem? Ponyville?"

Shaking her head a little, Luna explained. "I just cannot seem to get comfortable here." She shifted atop the table. "Things are not getting better, either. Rather the opposite. Remember I said I had read the friendship reports?

Spurred on by a nod from Celestia, Luna went on. "Twilight Sparkle and her friends are

growing to be fine ponies, but I found a few items in the reports I wonder about. I did some, ah, extra research, and I think I have a plan..."

It was deep night when Luna gave the order for the librarians and archivers to put all the papers, reports and charts back in place. The rather inconspicuous meeting room had not seen this much activity in years, and Luna was sipping on her sixth cup of black tea when Celestia leaned against her affectionately. "I am proud of you, Luna. Tell Twilight Sparkle and her friends I said hello, and do come back in one piece."

Luna nodded and leaned back into her sister, feeling hopeful for the first time in a long while. "The Elements will benefit a lot from this, I think. It will be a good experience for all of them."

"For all of you," Celestia agreed with an enigmatic smile.

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Chapter 1