

The Evening Gown

“Luna, are you in here?” Celestia’s voice shattered the protective silence of Luna’s chambers.

Luna cringed slightly, then put down the book she was reading and opened the door to face her sister. “Um, hi.”

“Oh, Luna,” Celestia sighed as she entered Luna’s chambers. “You were doing so well this week.”

“I’m sorry! I know I should be in the throne room! It’s just... nopony ever comes when I hold court.”

“You’ve told me that,” said Celestia. “But holding court at night is your duty, Luna. It’s important that you do it, even if you don’t like it.”

“I know! And I tried to, Celestia. I really did, this time.”

“Then why are you here instead of in the throne room, Luna? If you know what you need to do, why can’t you just do it?”

Luna curled into a ball on the carpet. “I can’t do anything right.”

Celestia walked to Luna and nuzzled the back of her neck. “Please, Luna. I want to understand what my sister is going through.”

“It’s just...” Luna blinked rapidly, holding back tears. “It’s so lonely. I get up there, and I wait and I wait, and nopony shows up. Not to visit, not to pay homage like they do with you, not even to get some boring old dispute settled. It’s just me, alone, knowing that nopony wants to see me. It’s too much, sometimes. I just can’t face it.”

“Why not? I understand that it’s difficult, Luna, I really do. But you know how important it is to face those feelings and do it anyway. Why can’t you?”

“I don’t know! It’s my fault. I’m just not a strong enough pony to do this.”

“Oh, Luna. Why would you ever think that?”

“You said it yourself! Y-you said I just wasn’t t-trying hard enough.” Luna was crying in earnest now, speaking half-intelligibly through gasps and sobs. “You said I didn’t c-care enough about making this work, or I’d do b-better.”

“I shouldn’t have said that. I was just frustrated, Luna.”

“No, you m-m-meant it. A-and you’re thinking it now.” Luna shuddered. “Because it’s true.”

Celestia had nothing to say to that. All she could do was hold her little sister as she cried.

A week later, Luna was holed up in the palace library as she waited for sunset. She levitated a volume down from a high shelf and carefully opened it. The book was a history of the founding of Flankashire three hundred years ago. Luna was trying to catch up on everything she had missed during her imprisonment. When she got lost in the past, she didn’t have to think about the way things were nowadays.

Over the last week, Luna had endured the loneliness and held court every night. She had done her duty, but it was wearing on her. It was her own fault, of course; a princess shouldn’t have to struggle to accomplish something so basic. She wanted to do the right thing so much it hurt, but it was getting harder every night. Luna knew it was only a matter of time before she let her sister down again.

Luna had started wondering why nopony ever came when she held court. There was the Nightmare Moon incident, of course, but things had been just as bad before that. Finally, Luna had figured it out: the nights she made must not be good enough. She had one job, but she messed it up over and over again. That must be why she had no courtiers, no retainers, and no friends.

She had hoped today would be different. For weeks, Celestia had been talking about the upcoming visit from her faithful student and the other Elements of Harmony, and today had been the big day. Luna had woken up extra early in case they asked to see her, too. These were supposed to be the friendliest ponies in all Equestria, and so Luna had dared to hope that they might want to see her in spite of the way she always ruined everything.

In hindsight, it had been a silly thought.

“Rarity, where are you going? The carriage to Ponyville is this way.”

Rarity turned to face her friend. “I know, Twilight, but I wasn’t planning on leaving just yet. You and the girls go on ahead. I’ll catch up with you on the road.”

Twilight frowned. Rarity never walked when a carriage was available. “Is everything

okay, Rarity? This isn't like you."

"Of course! It's just that-oh, you're going to think this is silly. Promise you won't laugh at me?"

Twilight resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I promise I won't laugh at you, Rarity."

"Well, you know how hard I worked on everyone's outfits for the Gala. How proud of them I am."

"Yes, and they were magnificent! But the Gala was weeks ago."

"Indeed it was. And ever since then, I've been... I don't know. Disappointed, I guess." Rarity sighed. "I wanted everyone there to see my gowns. But when the Gala was, ahem, *cut short* I didn't get the chance. Did you know not one pony asked about my work while we were there? Not one! Oh, you must think I'm just a showoff."

"Not at all, Rarity. I know how much those gowns meant to you. But I still don't understand what this has to do with our visit today."

"Well, there's one pony I didn't get to see at the Gala, and her opinion means a lot to me. She's an artist like myself, and her work has inspired me since I was a filly. I was hoping to find her before I left, actually."

"You mean Sapphire Shores?" Twilight asked.

"No, darling. Now run along. There's not much daylight left, and the others will be waiting."

The doors to the library banged open behind Luna. She winced and braced herself for Celestia's rebuke, wondering what she had done wrong this time. To her surprise, the voice that cut through the silence wasn't her sister's.

"*There* you are, Princess! Did you know you are absolutely *impossible* to find?" Luna recovered her composure and turned. The speaker was Rarity, one of the Elements of Harmony. She was wearing a stylish sunhat and matching saddlebags. Luna tried to remember which Element she was, but failed.

The unicorn trotted over to Luna's side, chattering all the while. "You weren't in the throne room so I deduced you must have pressing business elsewhere. But you weren't in the study or the conference room or anywhere else I could think of, so I thought 'what would Twilight suggest?' and well, here I am. I simply can't think *what* I should have done if you hadn't been

here.”

Luna paused for several seconds. “You were looking... for me?”

“Of *course* I was, darling! I’m an *ardent* admirer of your work. Say, what is that marvelous little device you have there?”

“I-it’s nothing.” Luna raised a wing and nudged the abacus behind a stack of books. It was just a silly little tool, but it somehow felt comforting. Private. The abacus always worked the way it was supposed to. Before Rarity could ask about it any further, Luna said, “So, uh, why were you looking for me?”

“It’s about the evening-themed outfit I made for Twilight Sparkle. All inspired by *your* lovely work, of course. She wore it to the Gala, but unfortunately you weren’t there. You must have been busy maintaining that *lovely* evening, I suppose.”

“Er, yes. That was it.” In truth, Luna had avoided the Gala because she was certain she would have messed everything up. Celestia had not been pleased by her absence.

“A blessing in disguise, I suppose. The Gala was an absolute *travesty*. Still, I must admit I’m disappointed you never saw the gown. After all, it’s based on your own designs!”

Luna had nothing to say to that. The one time somepony appreciated her night, and she hadn’t even bothered to show up! Stupid!

“Which is why I brought it with me tonight!” Rarity grinned as she levitated the gown from her saddlebags and spread it in front of Luna. “Please tell me what you think. I’ve simply been *dying* to get your opinion. And I insist you be completely honest!”

Luna stared at the gown for several seconds. She finally recovered her voice enough to stammer out, “This-is this how you see my night?”

Rarity flinched. “Oh, you hate it! I *knew* you’d hate it! I’ll never do it justice! I’m nothing but an *amateur!*” She released the gown, letting it drift to the floor.

“No! Please don’t-it’ll wrinkle!” Luna caught the gown with her magic. She quickly laid it out on the table before she had a chance to do something stupid and wreck it. “I’ve never seen anypony turn the night into something beautiful before...”

Rarity looked up hopefully. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Of course not! It’s so...” Luna trailed off. She couldn’t think of anything to say that would express how it felt to have evidence that someone truly cared for her night. And the gown really was beautiful. To see somepony use her work as a foundation, and then build on it in her own style... it was like seeing the night through fresh eyes. “It’s wonderful, really.”

Luna’s face must have expressed what her words couldn’t, because Rarity all but leapt

for joy. "I'm so glad you like it! Twilight was pleased with it, but a design like this, there's only one pony's opinion that really matters, isn't there? But if this measures up to your standards then-oh listen to me, I'm don't know *what* I'm going on about! Let me just say *thank* you, Princess, for everything!"

"Could you... would you be able to make one of these... for me? I'll pay you, of course."

"This old thing? Oh, no, darling, your color is *completely* wrong for this. Let's see, we could make it navy fading to cobalt, but *oh* we'd have to do something with your beautiful *wings*, my dear, this silhouette won't do at *all*. No, I'm afraid we'll have to design a new dress from scratch!"

"You'd do that... for me?"

"Absolutely, darling, I won't take no for an answer! And I'll have to take your measurements, of course. When might you be available?"

"Tomorrow night, I-"

"Splendid! I'll meet you in the throne room at sundown. But you'll need something to wear the dress *to*, otherwise what's the point? And the next Gala is almost a year away! Princess, will you permit me to throw a ball in your honor?"

"In my honor? Yes, I'd like that!" It would be wonderful to go to an event unrelated to her duties. "But, uh, who would come?"

"Why, all of Ponyville, of course! We know how to treat royalty, believe you me. Everypony who's anypony will be there, I guarantee it! This one really *will* be the best night ever!"

"Are you sure? No pony's ever put on a ball for me before, or anything. I wouldn't want to mess it up. And I bet it would be a lot of work for you."

"Not to worry! I enjoy a good project. Plus my friends will be *thrilled* to help out, I'm sure of it. Between my designs, Twilight's planning, and Pinkie's, er, enthusiasm, it's bound to be just *splendid!*"

"Oh! In that case... thank you!"

"It's my pleasure, Princess. Now, I'm sorry, but I really must take this gown back to Twilight." Rarity folded the gown and stowed it neatly in her saddlebag, then trotted off toward the door.

"You'll be back tomorrow night?"

"Of course, darling!" Rarity called before closing the doors behind her.

Quiet returned to the library. For the first time in a long time, Luna smiled.

Luna didn't notice when Celestia entered the throne room. Celestia recognized the look of concentration on her sister's face. Luna was gazing out the window that filled the east wall. She was completely engrossed with the night sky, adding details or making tiny changes. It was a relief to see Luna so obviously passionate about something; she had been worryingly distant ever since her return.

Celestia couldn't keep herself from grinning as she stepped softly through the empty chamber. Luna's mind was elsewhere, and she didn't notice her sister circle to the far side of the dais on which she sat. She didn't notice as Celestia approached her from behind.

"Boo." Celestia spoke softly, but was merely inches away from Luna's seat.

"Oh!" Luna jumped in surprise and nearly tumbled off the throne. "C-Celly! I didn't see you."

"Obviously. Did I ever tell you you're cute when you're flustered?"

"I, uh. What are you doing up so late?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing," said Celestia. In truth, she had come to be sure Luna wasn't avoiding her duties again, but she wasn't about to say that out loud.

"I'm doing fine, I guess."

"Are you sure? Just last week, you were telling me how much you hated holding court like this."

"Oh, no. I mean yes, it's still lonely and frustrating, but it's not so bad anymore. I've got something to focus on now."

"I noticed you were engrossed in the night. I haven't seen you put that much effort into it for a long time."

"That's right. I met a pony who appreciates my nights. It's... well, everything feels different, now that I know somepony is paying attention. It feels like the things I do matter now."

"One pony." Celestia thought of the Summer Sun Celebration, and the crowds that turned out throughout Equestria to watch her begin the day. "It's... certainly a start," she said hesitantly.

"No," said Luna. "One is enough."