

## Celestia: The Last Princess

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### Prologue

How in Equestria had she managed to get lost *here*? Her, Twilight Sparkle, star pupil... no, *only* pupil of Princess Celestia, getting lost in the Royal Castle of Canterlot which she had called home for so many years? This was surreal! Unthinkable! It made no sense! And yet here she was, surrounded by unfamiliar stone walls and twisting passageways that did not strike a chord or ring a bell anywhere in her mind. Either the castle was a lot greater than she anticipated, never having been much of an explorer in her youth, or she had been in Ponyville a little too long. Perhaps the corridors had been redecorated? She certainly remember the lighting to be brighter before. She had to resort to a lighting spell, making a headlamp out of her horn.

Twilight tried a door. It gave into a large but very unfamiliar library. That was surprising. There were several libraries she had never needed, thus frequented. But one she had never even heard of or seen once? That was unheard of. She *had* made it a point of being aware of the location of every single library in the castle and seeing them at least once. But she wasn't after books right now, as surprising as that may have been and this place wasn't helping restore her sense of direction. So she closed it.

Whatever commotion was still going on at the Grand Galloping Gala, it did not disturb the absolute silence of this place. Spike was taking everypony on a small quick tour of the castle, but essentially taking them to their quarters. Twilight *was* going to join them. She wasn't going to isolate herself in her personal chambers while her friends were still in the castle. But she wanted to fetch something. That little item she had not thought of taking with her all that time ago. Yet she ended up here.

Several doors later, Twilight closed the door that led to a small study, tried the next one a few meters further down and froze. It was absolutely cavernous here, like she had walked into a cathedral. Twilight stepped back and looked at the last door she opened and back in the large room. No mistake. This hall extended well past where that small study should have been and yet there was no sign of it, not even a box-like intrusion. Just flat wall. Then she recalled the lesson: architectural magic. Powerful unicorn architects could build structures that seemingly defied the laws of classical physics, fitting more space than was physically possible.

This particular room looked big enough to get lost in *again*, so Twilight moved to close the door. But the glow of her horn had cast a small flicker of illumination on the room and what she saw put a death grip on her curiosity.

This hall really was like a cathedral. Long, boxy, rectangular, mighty pillars rose from the ground all the way to a ceiling so high, Twilight could barely make out the pillars spreading, meeting each other in gothic pointed arches. The place was so big, four pillars supported the high ceiling width-wise. Beyond them, little sparkles. Going to her right, past the two pillars revealed the source of the twinkle: reflection of her horn's light off gold and silver frames.

The lavender unicorn couldn't help it. She called upon a different lighting spell, one with a bit more power. There was once a unicorn colt who cast the same spell, albeit with much more difficulty in a large dark place, not unlike this one. And he had been frightened out of his mind by the experience.

Twilight, on the other hoof, felt something closer to shock and awe.

Portraits.

Portraits absolutely everywhere. As far as the glow of her horn would reach, almost every bit of wall had been covered by the framed paintings, some of which even had gems. Not two of them had quite the same size, proportions or frame design, an oddity considering the consistency prevalent in the rest of the castle.

Unicorns, fillies and colts, mares and stallions stood in almost every conceivable pose. Some were sitting, by a tree, at a desk, on very fancy seats while others stood. Some were seemingly floating off the ground and some were sleeping. One was hanging upside in the frame the way a certain pink pony would have been proud of. And those were just the ones she could see.

The only truly consistent part of the portraits were the two bottom corners, where three circles had been drawn. On the right, red green and blue circles and on the left, magenta, yellow and cyan. Most of the them had the circles touching each other, creating various different colours, combining into white on the right and black on the left. Yet quite a few had at least one circle completely isolated from the rest. Beneath each portrait hung a metal plaque matching the frame upon which the name of the pony had been engraved.

The portrait that gave the sparkles that attracted her was by far the largest. Bringing her horn higher, Twilight took a hasty step back. It was a portrait of her.

Twilight could never remember posing to have a portrait of her done. She was still a filly when it had been painted and was wearing a dress that would have made Rarity weep if she had tried to make it. It couldn't be normal fabric. It just couldn't. The drapes of cloth seemed to flow off her back, down her flank and legs like mist pouring down a hill side. The forms went into impossible shapes and connected in ways that defied sight. Stranger still, was her expression. She didn't recall ever giving that face to anypony.

In the bottom two corners, Twilight saw that her two circles were missing entirely. No. Not missing. But so faded, they were difficult to see.

Quickly, she walked of deeper into the hall, hoping to find another portrait as big or even bigger than hers. Twilight had felt a twinge of pride when she saw her portrait, and how it was at least twice as large as the next largest one. But now, considering how wrong she looked, Twilight had a surge of self-consciousness and hoped there would be another portrait to take the attention off hers. In fact, had it not been for her name being written on the plaque below, she would have seriously reconsidered if that was her at all.

When the door left the lighting provided by her horn, Twilight wondered if she should been worried. But the hall kept stretching forward in a straight line, so she reasoned that if there was a corner, she'd turn and go back straight away. But for the time being, she kept going forward. Just like at the entrance, portraits covered almost every bit of wall. But as Twilight glanced at them, she realized something odd was going on.

It wasn't that the portraits had faded or that they had been poorly painted. But none of the unicorns seemed to have faces. Which was ridiculous. She could very well the places where the paint had

been applied, where the face should have been. She could make out the shapes and shades. But somehow, the whole thing refused to cohesively come together as a face, like her mind wasn't capable of *understanding* those faces.

Twilight finally stopped when she saw the end of the hall and found what she was looking for. It wasn't just bigger than hers. It was a gargantuan. Covering the entire wall, its frame had been carved out of a single block of amethyst. Twilight increased the intensity of her horn's light and took several steps back on her way to the its centre, struggling to see it all at once. Far taller, it was also far wider. A green bubble threatened to pop inside Twilight. It protested that her portrait *should* have remained the biggest one here. That this portrait was actually cheating.

Indeed, the unicorn filly only took the right half of the canvas, the left remaining completely blank. Her face was the only other one Twilight could see. The filly couldn't be any older than any of the Cutie Mark Crusaders. She stood in a royal, practiced formal pose, but her right leg was slightly off and betrayed the fact that she didn't want to be there, that she wanted to run away and hide. Her coat was a pearly, almost ghostly white. Her mane, flowing down the sides of her cheeks down to her shoulders in sumptuous curves Fluttershy would have envied, shared a similar if a bit softer shade of pink. But most striking of all were her deep ruby eyes. Twilight could feel herself getting lost in them.

There was a strangeness about them. The painter had done a magnificent job of them, no question there. An unspeakable silence came through those eyes, like they stared and saw things nopony else did. And what she saw filled her with sorrow. But there was also determination and resolve. What Twilight felt the most, however, was an unrelenting sense of dread and resignation, like somepony who knew their end was nigh and wanted to accept it with dignity.

"Is that you, Twilight Sparkle?" a voice called from somewhere far back, left behind in the darkness. But it was all too familiar.

"Princess Celestia." The lavender unicorn answered as her mentor stepped into the glow her horn cast. She gave a bow.

"What are you doing here?"

"I... got a bit lost and saw this... chamber and... had a look."

The alicorn had a small smile. "I suppose this is what I get from encouraging your curiosity so much."

Twilight gave a nervous chuckle, as the princess turned to the painting.

"She is quite a sight, isn't she?"

Twilight nodded. "I have never seen such a large painting before."

Princess Celestia's smile turned to a laugh. "The painter absolutely hated doing it. She told me that every stroke was a torturous experience. She never actually finished it." Celestia nodded to the empty left half.

"She said that?" Twilight gaped.

"I asked her to speak freely."

"But why would anyone hate doing such a painting?"

"For one thing," Celestia said, "it is a bit larger than what she was used to. For another, she was afraid of heights."

Twilight left a few seconds go by. She didn't know if it was appropriate to ask, but Princess Celestia had told her that all her questions should be asked. But did that apply outside an academic setting?

"Who... is she?"

Celestia seemed to consider how to answer the question as much as Twilight debated asking it. "My first student," she finally said.

Twilight felt her heart sink about five centimetres. She always... *supposed* that Princess Celestia had to have had other students before. She had an entire school after all. But she never asked her mentor about that and in many ways, she had hoped that she would be special in having Celestia as her mentor. But now...

"What was..." Twilight squinted at the plaque beneath the painting, "... Solena like?"

The unicorn looked out for the slightest sign of going too far. If Celestia as much as twitched in the wrong direction, she would be more than happy to put an end to this conversation. It really only served to feed the green monster that wanted to know how much of a threat a filly that probably died eons ago was to her current position. It was stupid. She shouldn't have asked. But the white alicorn was already walking down memory lane.

"Solena wasn't her name. It was her title." Princess Celestia finally said.

Twilight gave her a quizzical look.

"The title of Solena was not unlike yours today. She was my personal protégé at the time."

"Oh. Well, what was her name?"

Princess Celestia gave a sad smile. "I don't know."

Twilight did a double take. "I'm sorry?"

"I never knew her name. Things were different back then." Celestia sounded almost apologetic. "Solena were called only by their title and eventually, it would replace their name. It symbolized absolute commitment to the position. I don't know if she even remembered her own name."

Twilight felt her guts go empty. She always thought of herself as extremely committed to her

studies. But this? Forgetting your own name? Forgetting yourself? What would be left behind after all that? Twilight suddenly felt a warm surge of thankfulness towards her friends.

"Solena was the last one of her kind. There were no other solenae after her. I was so incredibly stupid at the time. I never realized the damage it was causing her. In many ways, Twilight, she reminds me of you. Very studious and a hard worker. A little too much in fact. She struggled in spite of me, but never truly tried to go beyond the boundaries I had set, even if they were crushing her. She missed out on so many golden opportunities in her life. Things she could have felt, seen, experienced, she only discovered much later, but it was too late by then."

Princess Celestia gave a bitter laugh.

"She was also amusingly altruistic. Her little sister, a Selena, would get her into a world of trouble and more often than not, she would pretend it was her fault or idea all along. I've lost track of the amount of times she was punished for something she never did."

"She had a little sister?"

"Who was a student as well. A Selena, like a Solena, was simply called by her title. Selena studied under Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna had students?"

"You sound surprised."

"Forgive me, Princess Celestia. I meant no offence."

"Then why the surprise? Unless you are insinuating you believe Princess Luna unfit to teach?"

"No! Not at all!"

"Then explain yourself."

Twilight swallowed hard. "It is simply that I never really... knew Princess Luna and-"

"*Know Princess Luna*, Twilight." Princess Celestia cut sharply. "Princess Luna is alive and well. You do not *know* Princess Luna."

Twilight could feel the sweat start to bead and perfuse through the fabric of her ruined gala dress. "Forgive me, Princess Celestia. I do not know Princess Luna and it just never really occurred to me that she may have once... been a teacher and-"

"That's enough, Twilight." Princess Celestia said. Her horn gave a small puff of light and Twilight felt the light from hers leave as if air had been sucked out of her lungs. The room was plunged into complete and absolute darkness. A second later, snowflakes of light began to flutter in the nothingness, falling from a cloud unseen. They cast the feeblest of light. Twilight could just make out the outline of her mentor as they fell on her and nothing else.

"Please follow the light. It will escort you back to your friends."

A second cloud was dropping snowflakes and began to move away. One last look at her teacher and Twilight knew this was her only chance to leave before things would get dire. She gave a bow again and almost ran full gallop at the quickly fading light. Her hooves clacked loudly.

The snowflakes didn't give enough light to see them, but Twilight could just feel the countless pairs of eyes from the portraits follow her as she passed. When she reached the doors, they silently swung open. But before she went through, Princess Celestia's voice resonated.

"One more thing, Twilight." It sounded so distant, it was dreamlike. "Please do not come back here again unless invited."

"Yes, Princess Celestia" Twilight said and walked out. The doors shut behind her, the booming sound echoing down the deserted halls.

From the shadows of the pillars, a black cloud swirl into existence. It spun itself into a conical mass before dissipating just as quickly, leaving a Princess Luna in the room.

"You did not have to send her away like that." she said, but quickly saw that maybe she did.

Celestia had slumped herself almost down to the cold marble floor, her head hanging as though it were too heavy to carry. Her wings, usually folded neatly or spread regally now hung uselessly by her sides, the feathers picking up dust. The aura of beauty and grace that she normally had with her was now gone, swallowed by the shadows around.

"You didn't have to tell it that way either."

"I told her the truth." Celestia muttered.

"No." Princess Luna walked closer and sat by the white alicorn. "You told her *a* truth. But you chose the one that causes you the most pain. Why punish yourself for that which has already been forgiven?"

"Pardon... must first be accorded by the self. One who is guilty at heart will never be innocent."

Luna leaned against her sister, muzzling her softly. "My dear sister. Open your heart to me. Let me see what ails you. Show me your guilt. Share with me what haunts you. That I may excise the pain from your heart."

For once in her life, Celestia felt small. In here, in this cavern, she tasted the bitterness of insignificance. Suddenly, she felt unworthy of having a loving sister like Luna.

"How can you speak this way, Luna?" she said, her face hidden behind her falling mane. "You offer me forgiveness, compassion and love when I have given you none of these things. What kind of heart beats beneath your bosom?"

Luna pulled Celestia's hair out of her eyes, placing it gently behind her back.

"I used to ask myself the same kind of questions, Celestia. A wise ruler once told me that there should be no end of compassion in a princess' heart. That there should be no act she cannot forgive. A wise ruler once pardoned me a lifetime of evil, saving me from an eternity of damnation. She threw herself to a world of silent suffering, of pain she cannot scream to lament. I used to wonder: what kind of heart did she possess to show love to such a being? And she told me that a sister's love was unconditional. That a sister's love would never falter.

"Those were the words that kept me going for a thousand years. When the sun was taken from me by the world, when the stars failed and went dark, your words made me remember who I was: a loved one. When you came to visit me, Celestia, I was shielded, hidden from you. But *I* always saw you clear as the day you bring forth. And I saw the ache you carried with you for my sake. The screams you never gave, the tears you never shed, I have heard and felt them both.

"You saved me from eternal suffering. Now let me do the same, Celestia. No one should have to suffer alone."

Celestia slowly turned towards her sister. For the first time, Luna noticed that the passing of time had made their mark on Celestia. The face, which a thousand years ago seemed like such a fertile land from which love seemed to grow, now seemed to have dried and cracked beneath a merciless sun.

"This is not illness or pain, Luna, but atonement. It is mine to bear."

"You wish to atone for a sin you did not commit, sister." Luna said, putting a wing on Celestia's back. "Just like old times."