

Skyfall

Concept and Writing by Viktor Lionheart

Chapter 10: Lunar Cycle

The last echoes of the conversation she had just overheard whispered in the corners of her consciousness as she tried to make sense of her emotions. She suddenly felt afraid – all of the drive, all of the doubtless purpose in her actions up to this moment seemed to sputter and fade, leaving nothing but a helpless silence within her. Images of her sister flashed before her mind – over and over, the same sequence of tired, empty eyes, of insincere smiles, of half-hidden sighs, all the while the words of her father still rang in her ears.

“...I fear that her concern has grown to the point of obsession, so much so that I had as of late become worried that it would cause her to come under more stress than she could handle...”

Celly...was that why you were so upset with dad? Were you two talking about...me?

“...It is my belief that the return of Acheron, in conjunction with the responsibility she feels for Princess Luna has caused her to suffer a breakdown of sorts...”

Suddenly Luna felt sick. She doubled over, bracing against the nearby wall, one hoof on her stomach as she fought to stay calm. Once again, her vision was filled with the image of her sister, surrounded by the wreckage of her bedroom, drenched in her own blood. But before that...she remembered the wound on Celestia’s cheek when she had appeared in the courtyard, just after she had given her the journal.

The weight of the realization struck like a hammer-blow to the back of her neck. Luna felt all of the strength drain out of her limbs as she cast dizzily about for something on which she could steady herself. Celestia’s words, too, now began to dance through her thoughts, crystal clear despite the haze of nausea through which she floated.

“...I’m sorry that I hurt you. I was only doing what I had to. Maybe someday you can understand that...”

A wordless despair gripped the princess from the base of her throat as the cascade of memories began to blur, the tide of her emotions crashing together and shattering again into a thousand icy daggers, each and every one pointing accusingly inward.

Could it be...you weren’t hiding anything? Was all of this because I thought you were lying to me?

Everything suddenly seemed to be happening so fast, Luna felt herself falling, falling, as though caught in a dream, the entire world spiraling out of control all around her. Her wings

brushed against something cool and soft. Instinctively, she grabbed for it, breathing in short, uneven gasps.

Is this...my fault?

Silence. The parade of images and its company of voices ceased in their march, the churning of her stomach lurched to a halt, and the only sound that permeated the suite's stale air was the reedy whispering of her breath as a single, tiny tear rolled down her cheek. Why? What could have made Celestia *do* that to herself? She had suspected that Celestia hadn't yet forgiven herself for what had happened so long ago, but something like this...

She thought of the endless nights she had spent on the moon; it had been almost like a dream. Though she had looked down upon the planet below and watched the pattern of life as it flowed across its surface, the passage of time had been something always just beyond her grasp. Although some part of her knew of the length of her imprisonment, she had watched the ages tick by through a blurred lens, unable to fully appreciate the weight of each day, of each year, of each century as they marched slowly onward. And yet Celestia had been fully, excruciatingly aware of each and every moment of those thousand long years, all alone, outliving everyone and everything she cared about. The thought had occurred to her before, though it had almost always been dismissed, as up until the past couple of nights, her sister had seemed so...*happy*.

She cursed herself for her selfishness. How could she have dared to think that she could begin to comprehend what her sister had been going through? Of *course* Celestia would be protective of her in light of the clear and present danger that threatened their kingdom. After all, aside from their father, she was the only family she had left, her only constant *friend*.

Idiot, idiot, idiot! Why did you yell at her like that? She was just trying to protect you!

Luna sat in the shadows, her face buried in the softness of the something on which she leaned with all of her weight. As she drew a deep, shuddering breath, a faintly familiar scent flooded her nostrils, and with it came the warmly reassuring touch of a dearly held memory, a memory which had lost none of its clarity in the years since its passing.

The memory seemed to wash over her like a wave of soothing warmth, the dusty yet calming touch of nostalgia enveloping her mind. It came suddenly and without warning, as though in response to her pain, and as it flooded her thoughts, she felt the tugging threads of agony slipping away until they were nothing but a steady murmur in the back of her mind. Slowly, as she opened her eyes, it was as though she were lying once more in that very hospital room, just over two years ago, every detail of the scene that surrounded her as vivid and clear as the night that she had witnessed it.

The hospital room in the royal suite stretched before her, bathed in the amber glow of

sunset. This night in particular stood out among many others that had been spent in this room, bound to her bed by illness during the weeks after her return from the moon. This night, she remembered, took place approximately two weeks after she had been saved by Twilight and her friends in the ruins of her ancient home. Due to the length of her imprisonment and the circumstances surrounding her return two weeks ago, Luna had collapsed almost immediately after she had left Ponyville, effectively drained of nearly all of her magical power and very seriously ill as a result. Over the past two weeks, Luna had spent her days in her hospital bed, visited daily by the army of doctors and nurses that constituted the hospital staff, along with their assortment of therapeutic salves and oils, all specially designed to facilitate the return of her magic, though the process was slow and delicate nonetheless. On this particular night, she found herself watching the sunset as she always did, waiting with something less than enthusiasm for a very specific arrival.

Princess Luna yawned, stretching with a series of satisfying cracks and pops as she allowed herself to bask in the feeling of contented drowsiness that washed over her as the last fingers of the setting sun disappeared over her windowsill. She closed her eyes, savoring each ray of caressing warmth, willing them to linger for but a few moments more before disappearing beneath the veil of newborn stars that sparkled weakly in the darkening sky. Somehow, she couldn't help but feel a tinge of sadness coloring the edges of her thoughts as she smiled to herself, shifting slightly to move closer to the bowl of her favorite soup that sat steaming on her nightstand. As she inhaled the faintly spicy aroma of the deep orange liquid, her thoughts turned to the door at the far end of the room and, more specifically, whom she expected to see walking through its open archway at any moment.

One by one, the creatures of the night began their ritual of song, and Luna found herself drawing the blankets up around her head to drown out the noise. Wincing a bit from the effort, she focused on the window past the foot of her bed, bathing its shutters in a faint azure light, her horn crackling weakly as the magic reached out toward its targets and slowly drew them together. A soft click and the shutters locked shut, bathing the room in silence once more just as the faint patterings of distant footsteps began to echo in the outer hall. With a start, Luna set down her bowl of soup and arranged herself on the bed so that it would appear as though she were already sleeping, turning away from the door to bury her face in her pillow just as the door creaked to life and the visitor entered her bedroom.

“Excuse me, Majesty, may I – ah...”

With the sound of the vaguely familiar male voice that drifted toward her from the far side of the room, every muscle in Luna's body suddenly relaxed. She exhaled, somewhat surprised to find just how tense she had been until that moment, and turned about to face him. There in the now open doorway stood a somewhat more than middle-aged, sturdily built pegasus bearing the golden insignia of the captain of the castle guard. His body still shone with the crisp contour of muscles honed from years of military training, though she could just see the first betraying flecks of grey dotting the edge of his mane. As she gazed at his stern, lined face she

remembered that he was called Hussar, and that he had been assigned as her personal caretaker for the duration of her recovery. Recovering from his momentary falter, Hussar snapped back to attention, staring out of practiced courtesy at an invisible point fixed about a foot above her head as he addressed her again.

“Apologies, milady. If I had known you were-“

Luna sighed to cut him off. “Don’t worry about it, Hussar, I wasn’t asleep. What were you saying.?”

Hussar cleared his throat before speaking again.

“Ah, yes...Princess Celestia requested that I inform you that she will be a bit late this evening. Regrettably, a situation in Trottingham has need of her attention for the time being, though she instructed me to assure you that she will be here before long.”

“I see...thank you, Hussar. Was there anything else?”

“Ah...nothing in particular, your highness, although...” He cleared his throat rather loudly, shifting his weight slightly from one hoof to the other and back again. Odd, Luna thought – Hussar was typically formal to a fault around her and her sister, yet for some reason he seemed a bit nervous tonight.

“If you should need anything, the princess instruc...I mean...that is to say, I would be happy to stay here until Princess Celestia arrives...should you desire...company.”

It wasn’t that he found the idea particularly distasteful, Luna knew – Hussar simply didn’t seem to be very skilled when it came to social interaction. He doubtlessly would have blown on her soup to cool it for her if she had asked, but his loyalty and experience served him little when it came to conducting himself on anything other than a professional basis. She allowed herself a small smile at his obvious ineptitude.

“No, thank you Hussar, I’m alright. Besides, I wouldn’t want to bore you – I fear that I’m not exactly an adept conversationalist.”

Though he showed no obvious sign of relief, his posture almost reflexively reasserted itself into its normal meticulously maintained composition.

“As you wish, milady. Nonetheless, should you need anything at all, I shall be just outsi-“

“Actually, Hussar, I think that you should get some rest, yourself.”

The voice came without warning, and as it floated through the open doorway, Luna immediately felt a wave of nausea course through her body. Seconds later, the elegant curve of

Princess Celestia's muzzle poked through the door and smiled gently at the flustered expression on Hussar's face.

"P-P-P-Princess! I thought-"

"Trottingham can do without me for the time being. The dispatch I sent their way should be more than adequate to settle the issue."

As she watched her sister step inside, Luna's expression hardened just for an instant before she remembered herself, smiling weakly as her sister turned to face her.

"Besides, I decided that there are far more important things for me to see to here." Celestia smiled, casting a hinting glance in Luna's direction. Hussar worked his jaw in silence for a few moments, his gaze darting uncertainly between the royal sisters.

"Honestly Hussar, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I insist. You've earned some rest. Off you go then."

With a gentle nod toward the door, Celestia dismissed him, though he did not immediately respond. It took several more seconds for him to decide what to do with himself, and judging by his expression, he only reluctantly assented to Celestia's request. He coughed, clearing his throat a little too loudly, then bowed deeply to each of them in turn, snapping a crisp, if somewhat unnecessary salute before marching briskly outside. The moment that his tail disappeared from view, Luna heard the door click shut with a wave from her sister's horn, and she found herself staring directly into Celestia's eyes.

Despite herself, Luna looked away, absently tugging her blankets up beneath her chin, releasing a faint, unsteady sigh as she tried to pretend that she didn't currently feel as though she were about to be sick. As Celestia walked slowly over to settle beside her bed, she seemed completely unaware of her condition, and the cheerful energy in her voice vaguely reminded Luna of the happy excitement of the voice of a child at play with a close friend. Indeed, she had been amused at first at her sister's conduct upon her return, but it was quickly beginning to grow tiresome, and she presently felt in no sort of mood to be with Celestia at the moment. She tried to ignore the feeling, her mouth twitching feebly at the corners as she tried to smile.

"I hope he hasn't been pestering you too much. He's an unmatched role model for the other guards, but sometimes I'm afraid he takes his duty a bit too seriously."

No response. Celestia paused for a moment before continuing, her tone unchanged.

"How are you feeling? Nurse Dewfeather tells me that you've been improving steadily, but you're still having-"

“You didn’t have to stop what you were doing to come and see me, you know.”

The words left a faintly bitter taste in Luna’s mouth, and she had said them with a tone a little less kind than she had intended. She glanced at her sister, her eyes only lingering for an instant before she added,

“I’m fine. Th-thanks...”

Immediately after the words left her lips, she turned ever so slightly away, her eyes staring determinedly at anything that wasn’t her sister. Celestia blinked, her smile fading somewhat. She swallowed, leaning closer to the bed.

“I’m glad. I know it must be a terrible bore being stuck in here all day with nopony but the doctors to keep you company.”

She sighed, a sound that carried with it a small but unmistakable whisper of sadness, her serene smile nonetheless lingering on her lips as she bent her neck to reach into the small saddlebag at her side. When she emerged, a stack of books bearing the stiff, unremarkable covers that were the hallmark of the academic works of which Luna was so fond hung from her teeth on a length of string. She deposited it gently upon Luna’s bedside table beside the still full bowl of soup, removing the hefty pile of finished tomes as she did so, her gaze hanging for a moment on the steaming bowl as she cleared her throat.

“I’m happy to see that your appetite for reading hasn’t diminished. Honestly, I’m always amazed at how quickly you go through these. If you’d like, I could have somepony bring up the rest of Carbuncle’s works? I know how you enjoyed his musings on the theoretical metaphysics of the void.”

After a short delay, Luna’s voice replied in a tired monotone, her words listlessly drooping out of her mouth as though she were only half aware of what she was saying.

“...Yeah, that’d be great...thanks.”

“Good. In the meantime, I thought you might enjoy something a bit more...fanciful for a change.”

As she spoke, she carefully untied the bow atop the stack of books and selected the topmost volume from the rest, picking it up with her teeth and placing it gingerly on the pillow beside her sister’s head. Luna’s eyes still wandered aimlessly about the room, reluctant to linger on anything for more than a few seconds, and determined not to turn anywhere in the direction of her sister, but as she felt the object’s weight sinking into her pillow, she found herself drawn to it.

The book was small, much thinner than the others that her sister had brought with her,

but this was not what immediately singled out this particular book out in her mind. The instant that her gaze fell across its cover, she felt a small twinge in her throat, suppressing the urge to gasp as the image on its familiar, if faded exterior swam across the sea of her memories, sinking deep into the years of her childhood.

Between the elegant golden curves of the archway that framed the scene below, a single, beautifully drawn willow tree stood over a tiny red squirrel and a young unicorn who sat by the side of a river, her hooves dipping in the water. Through the cracking paint and the faded pastel colors, the image still shone clear as day, just as she had seen it so very many years ago. Slowly, carefully, Luna lifted the book between her hooves, inhaling the scent of its aged paper, gently caressing the smiling face of the horned mare as the memories of the countless imaginary adventures in which she had seen that same pony live floated through her thoughts.

“Clementine and the Willow Gate...”

With a fond chuckle that sounded deep in her throat with the blissful, untouchable warmth of a happy memory, Celestia shifted her weight onto the side of Luna’s bed, gazing fondly down at the little book in her sister’s hooves.

“This was...when I was a filly...”

“Do you remember? You used to love these stories. When you were little, there were many nights when you would absolutely refuse to go to sleep without hearing a story about Clementine and her adventures in the world of Willowrun.”

Completely forgetting the tension that had troubled her not seconds ago, Luna found herself transfixed by the peculiar little book. Her hooves moved automatically, parting the rough yellow paper to the page that she had read countless times in her youth, the beginning of her favorite chapter. Without a word, her eyes scanned the first lines of text, her mouth silently forming each word out of memory – even if she hadn’t had the page in front of her, her eyes had seen these words so many times before that by now she knew them all by heart.

On a very ordinary day, in the very ordinary little town of Pinegrove, there so happened one very ordinary little pony upon the most wondrous and extraordinary of all wondrous and extraordinary things...

“At first glance, it didn’t look to be a particularly special little tree, and it certainly wasn’t pretty enough to bother having a picnic under, thought the little pony, but as she looked upon its cracked and drooping branches, she couldn’t help but notice that it was in fact, a very peculiar tree indeed.”

Without warning, the giddy tittering of childish laughter escaped Luna’s lips, and was almost immediately silenced as she slapped a hoof over her mouth. Celestia’s smile widened

as she finished reading those last few words, uttering a tiny chuckle of her own as she leaned closer to her sister.

“I know that you probably already know all of these stories by heart, but I thought maybe they might cheer you up, hm? In fact, I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you really laugh since the celebration in Ponyville”

In an instant, all of the discomfort that had gripped Luna’s stomach returned, and she suddenly felt very keen to distance herself from the smell of her sister’s mane. She stiffened, shifting automatically away from Celestia’s warmth, her hooves fumbling slightly with the book.

Celestia’s smile disappeared.

“Luna? What’s wrong?”

She did not respond. As quickly as it had come, the simple, absolute happiness that she had felt a moment before had vanished completely, leaving naught but a hungering emptiness within her. She suddenly and desperately wanted to be alone.

“Luna? Please, tell me, are you alright? Do you feel sick?”

Luna snorted loudly in an exasperated half-laugh. For the first time that night, she turned to face her sister and stared directly into her eyes without hesitation, if only for a few seconds. It started in something like anger – not at her sister; she couldn’t quite tell where it came from or whom it was directed at, if anypony, but she could sense that her sister hadn’t made her angry. Instead, when she looked into her sister’s beautiful, gentle violet eyes, her heart quickly and violently swung downward into a crushing and all-consuming guilt. Her chin shuddered faintly as she forced herself to look away, her mind casting about in a barely controlled frenzy for some excuse to cover for her behavior.

“S-sick? No...No I’m fine. Just fine.”

Even if she had not spoken the words herself, she knew only a fool would have believed them for the audible tremor in her voice. Celestia scanned her little sister’s features with a look suddenly full of concern, finally abandoning all pretense of ignorance.

“Luna...I’m sorry, was it something I said? I didn’t mean to-“

“Look, I told you I’m *fine*. Besides, who said anything about me needing to be cheered up? You always ask me how I am and I tell you the truth, it’s that simple. I’m fine”
That two-word mantra kept repeating itself in her mind but no matter how many times she thought it, it didn’t seem any less false. Unsurprisingly, her sister didn’t seem convinced, either.

“Luna-“

“Thanks. Thank you, for the book I mean. It’s great, all great. Everything’s *great*.”

The anger was back again, returning with rapid ferocity, and as it came it only seemed to magnify her guilt. Why couldn’t Celestia understand? Why did she always have to stick her muzzle in other ponies’ business? Why couldn’t she just leave her *alone*?

Alone.

The word suddenly ballooned within her thoughts, obliterating all but its own looming presence, crushing down on her like a mighty weight upon her shoulders. Any moment now the dam would burst, and she couldn’t bear the thought of having Celestia see her like that, not after...after...

Stop it, she yelled inwardly at herself. *You have no right, no right...*

“Luna, *please*. It’s alright, you can tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Bothering?” Luna squeaked. Her voice was high and unnatural. “Who’s bothered? I was just fine before you came in.”

Idiot! Why the hay did you say that?! Take it ba-

“It’s the nightmares again, isn’t it? Please, Luna, you must believe me when I say that you were forgiv-“

“I’m not *having* any *nightmares*”

The voice with which she spoke surprised even herself with its quaking fury. She glanced spastically in her sister’s direction, wanting simultaneously to apologize and scream in her face, but no words would come.

“Don’t lie Luna, *please* – I know that you’re hurting. Nurse Dewfeather’s told me about how you toss and turn every night. Sometimes you even wake up screaming and can’t fall asleep again.”

“I don’t...I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

Luna was panting heavily now, biting her lip to force back the tears.

“I’m sorry Luna, I know that a part of you at least must be angry with me – please, *please* help me to understand so that I can *help* you!”

“How many times do I have to say it? There’s nothing to understand, I just need some more time to-“

“If you would just *talk* about what you’re feeli-“

“I DON’T *NEED* TO TALK ABOUT ANYTHING!”

Celestia reared back, her mouth hanging open in wounded surprise as Luna finally lost control. She screamed at her sister, the tears streaming from her eyes even as she tried in vain to pretend that they weren’t there.

“I DON’T need help, I DON’T have any trouble sleeping, and I *certainly* DON’T need to be told that I’m forgiven by YOU!”

In the same instant that the last few words had left her mouth, she regretted them with powerful intensity. That was not at all the way that she had intended to say it, but at the moment she was far too angry to be able to focus, and her rational mind retreated beneath the din as she sank like a child into a rancorous sulk. She whipped away from her sister, drawing her blankets upward with such force of motion that most of them landed not on her back but off of the other side of the bed, though she made no effort to correct them.

“Why don’t you just *GO!* If you’re just going to do nothing but worry over me all day then I don’t need your company and I don’t want it! There’s no reason for the people of Trottingham to suffer when I feel perfectly *FINE!*”

Silence. With every fiber of her being, Luna wished that she hadn’t just shouted at her sister at the top of her lungs, wished that she hadn’t just spoiled her sister’s gift with such a childish display. She railed against herself, willing herself to disappear beneath her blankets. Yet try as she might, the gaze of Celestia’s eyes still bored mercilessly into the back of her head and the pain that seemed to echo through her body as though she were nothing but an empty shell was as inescapable as ever.

For what felt like hours, neither pony moved until, with a much softer tone, Luna spoke again. As she whimpered into her blanket, the choked muffle of her words was barely audible in the deafening silence.

“S...s-s-sorry...”

Several more seconds of excruciating quietude.

“I-I’m s-sorry I yelled at you...I know you’re just...just...”

She heard her sister take one step closer to the bed and flinched.

“Luna...”

“Please...please just...just go...just go.”

Celestia didn't immediately respond. Slowly, the sound of her footsteps punched the air as she plodded toward the bed. Luna didn't dare to respond, even as Celestia's shadow fell across her face, and she felt the affectionate, if brief nudge of her muzzle brush across her fur. She simply stared resolutely into her pillow as she heard her sister walk toward the door before stopping to speak once more.

“Luna, if nothing else, know this. I *love* you, little sister. *Nothing* will ever change that.

No response. Luna simply pulled her blankets closer, ignoring the longing ache in her gut.

“I'll...” She cleared her throat, and Luna thought she could feel her sister's uncertain smile from across the room. “I'll just have Dewfeather drop by in a little while, okay? If at any point you need anything...or if you ever do need to talk, you know that you can come to me, don't you?”

Silence. A heavy sigh drifted through the air to Luna's ears and seemed to hang there like a clammy fog.

“...I'm sorry to have upset you, little sister...please just try to get some rest. Goodnight, Luna.”

Luna waited as she heard the soft padding of her sister's hooves turning about on the carpet, holding her breath as the rumbling groan of the heavy wooden door pierced the air. She dared not move until the last, barely audible click of the door's latch reached her ears. The moment she was alone, she finally allowed the tears to flow freely. In an instant, she felt utterly exhausted, her chest heaving weakly as she wept soundlessly into her pillow.

Why? Why can't she just mind her own-

She knew that this wasn't Celestia's fault, knew that she had just behaved like an ungrateful child in front of her sister after Celestia had so dutifully worked to satisfy her every need, not just this night, but every night for the past two weeks. A part of her wanted to throw aside her blankets and run after her into the hall, but even if she had the strength to do so, something in her gut would not allow it. It wasn't pride that held her, but rather a profound and heavy shame, a shame that had no distinct form, cruelly vivid yet hauntingly apart. It was as though a voice whispered from the corners of her mind, growing louder whenever she pictured the face of her sister, taunting her, admonishing her for a crime she didn't dare to remember.

She clamped her hooves together around her head, squeezing the edges of her pillow against her ears so powerfully that it hurt. No words, no thoughts came to comfort her as she hiccupped pathetically into the soft, welcoming warmth that enveloped her face in darkness. The light that leaked through her blankets from the still brightly burning lamps around her room assaulted her senses like a creeping stench. She wanted to sink into her mattress, to run away from the light, from the castle, from her sister's smiling face, to somehow disappear from the world, but the limp, dismal weight of her body anchored her against the frantic tides of fancy to which her mind fought to escape.

The moment that her sister had left, all of the tension in her body had seemed to instantly take its toll. Every part of her felt suddenly heavy, pinning her in place as her exhaustion finally began to cloud the jittery spasms of her train of thought. Out of instinct more than anything else, the first dim murmurs of deep sleep called to her, drawing her away from her bedroom, away from the cruel reality of her existence. She welcomed it without thought, without hesitation, throwing herself upon its inky embrace.

One by one, the traces of the world around her seemed to fade easily away. She felt the flow of tears slow at first to a trickle, then stop, and soon could not even remember why she had been crying. Her body, so heavy as it had been mere seconds ago, seemed to melt away, leaving nothing but a vague sense of vertigo as though she were falling, drifting down to the depths of the abyss like a feather on a Summer breeze. As she fell ever farther, the last thoughts of guilt slipping out of being, even the warmth of her luxurious bed seemed as nothing but the shadow of a memory. What was left of Princess Luna breathed, a sound that seemed to come from outside herself, and surrendered to the alien bliss that accepted her without question or concern, surrounding her shapeless consciousness, dripping into the spaces between her thoughts until there was nothing but the infinite darkness.

And in that darkness, something stirred. In much the same way that a single seed begins its journey of growth with the first tiny, blindly reaching threads of life, its progress imperceptible but no less real, a new reality began to bloom into being around the sleeping Princess.

Slowly, as though she were emerging from a pool of water, a faintly familiar image began to swim to life before her eyes. It was a brilliant Summer day, and the invigorating scent of pine flowed from everywhere at once as a pair of ponies walked leisurely along a forest path, each carrying a basket of various assorted treats. Here and there, one of them would stop as one small creature or another came running up to investigate, and select a treat from their basket, placing it at the creature's feet before returning happily on their way. Yet, despite the distinctly soothing nature of the scene, Luna felt dimly aware of a growing dread, whispering deep in some dark corner of her consciousness. A single thought flickered into existence and vanished just as quickly before she could fully grasp what it meant.

This is how it always starts.

She watched herself with an odd, unreachable sense of déjà vu, as though she were an invisible observer, completely apart yet somehow connected to the scene that unfolded below. The young Princess Luna, no more than seven years old, scurried happily along beside her elder sister, smiling from ear to ear as she watched another small squirrel chitter up at her from the bushes to her right before running eagerly up to her hooves. Celestia, too, smiled broadly, though she was busy watching her little sister, a tiny sparkle of pride shining in her eyes. As gently as the excited youngster could, Luna plopped a small pile of treats at the squirrel's feet, at which he immediately began running joyful circles around her hooves.

Celestia laughed, watching the little creature scurry about.

"It seems you've made a friend."

With all of the infectious energy of a small child, Luna giggled to herself as the animal's bushy tail tickled her tiny body. She crouched to bring her face down to the little creature's level as it dove headfirst into the pile, chittering excitedly all the while.

"Poppy...I'll call you Poppy!"

The squirrel squeaked loudly, and the little princess took it to mean that it was pleased with its new name, though in reality it was more likely because its mouth was full of tasty treats. She had seen squirrels before – there were a great many of them in the royal gardens, though they were almost always too skittish to get close. This was the first time she had ever been able to see such an animal up close. Celestia looked as though she were about to protest for just a moment, but simply shook her head, deciding to indulge the filly, at least for now.

With a stab of nostalgia, Luna remembered the woods through which she watched herself play. When she was little, she and Celestia loved to play in the courtyards and the gardens, but Celestia had told her that "a growing princess's world should never be limited to the castle grounds," as she put it, and had decided to take her outside by herself, without her typical entourage of guards. The forest and its creatures were something strange and new from the sights and sounds of the castle, and it filled the little princess with a sense of unparalleled wonder.

The strange, inexplicable whisper of dread seemed to intensify slightly as the sound of rapidly approaching hooves began to echo throughout the patch of woods from somewhere along the path behind the sisters, as though she knew what would happen as soon as it arrived. As Celestia turned about to face the newcomer (Luna being too distracted by her squirrel friend to pay much attention to anything else), she scowled momentarily, upset to have been disturbed while spending what little free time she had with her sister, but her chagrin was quickly swept away by what she saw. Down the path, a single unicorn guard came hurrying toward them with an expression of dire concern on her face. As the sound approached, Luna's squirrel leapt

backward, startled by the sudden noise, and bolted for the bushes, hastily gathering up its prize as it did so. Without a moment's hesitation, Luna dove after her friend just as the approaching guard came into view. As the mare skidded to a halt, she turned immediately to what she thought was the only other living being in her immediate vicinity.

"Princess Celestia!" The guard snapped a salute, waiting to be recognized before speaking. Celestia simply nodded, prompting her to continue.

"Thank you, Milady." The guard mare dropped her hoof, inhaling deeply. "My apologies for disturbing you at a time like this, but I'm afraid a matter has arisen that demands your immediate attention."

"What's happened? Was somepony hurt?"

"I'm not exactly sure of the details, milady, but we've received word that an accident in Cloudsdale has caused a massive explosion at the primary weather factory. Until repairs are completed, the entire area between Ponyville and Phillydelphia will either be...out weath...erating...ed avail..."

The young Princess Luna ran through the tall grass away from the path, and the gaze of the elder Luna shifted away from the guard to follow herself, the voices of the guard and her sister growing rapidly fainter as she ran ever farther into the wilderness, the squirrel bouncing along not far ahead with its cheeks full of treats.

No...go back...don't follow him...please, just go back...

Once again, the thought was swept instantly away as though it had never existed, yet some trace of it echoed persistently from an unseen source, like the beat of an invisible drum, slowly getting louder and louder. Somehow, Luna knew that something terrible was about to happen, but no matter how she tried, she could do nothing to warn the little filly below of the impending danger.

The younger Luna giggled to herself as she ran, the frantic dodging of the squirrel before her nothing more than a game to play with her new friend. Far behind her, the pair of ponies continued their conversation, completely oblivious of her absence as the little princess chased her playmate, completely unaware of how much time had passed or how far she wandered, until at last she stumbled over a rock, falling flat on her face. The squirrel bounded out of sight, the sound of its excited chittering immediately swallowed up by the rustling of the grass as it passed through.

"Poppy?! No, Poppy, wait! Where are you going?"

Luna scrambled to her feet, ignoring the pain in her knees, and stumbled forward just as

a sudden, sickening shriek pierced the air several meters ahead, causing her to stop dead once more. The child waited, her tiny ears straining to hear any sign of her little friend, but there was only silence.

“P-Poppy? Are you okay? *Poppy!*”

Don't follow him any more...just go back, go back and it'll all be fine...

The little princess ignored the plea of her elder self, thrusting herself through the wall of grass with all of her tiny might only to stop short for a third and final time, her breath catching painfully in her throat.

There lay Poppy, caught between the jaws of a fox, his tiny body completely motionless as it sagged limply over his attacker's glinting teeth.

As she watched with eyes spread wide in shock, the fox placed its prize on the ground and lazily turned its gaze to her, licking its bloody lips in grim satisfaction. For several moments, the two simply stared at each other until Luna's eyes fell once more to the ragged form of her little friend. Without a sound, the tears began to flow.

“P-P-Poppy?”

The fox cocked its head, sniffing the air. It regarded the filly with curiosity, but did not approach, nor did it back away when she staggered toward the squirrel's limp body in disbelief. It was no use – no matter how she pleaded or poked the little squirrel would move no more.

Poppy was dead.

“Y-you...you...”

Luna stomped on the ground with all of the puny force she could muster, causing the animal to tense slightly, baring its teeth in a low growl.

“Y-y-you...*Stupid doggie!*”

Luna glared at the creature without the faintest trace of fear in her eyes, her words shaking with sorrowful rage. She stepped away from Poppy's body, screaming at the top of her lungs as the tears streamed down her face.

“Stupid, *bad* doggie! Why did you do that? Why did you hurt my Poppy?!”

The fox faltered for a moment, surprised at the ferocity of the noises that the little thing before it produced despite its size, but it quickly recovered itself, growling ferociously as it glared

down its muzzle directly into Luna's tearful eyes.

"BAD doggie! Bad, bad bad!"

As though on cue, the little princess's horn sparked to life as the last few words left her lips. Suddenly, the animal's posture crumpled. Though it could not understand the brilliant azure light that now erupted from the creature before it, it was completely and utterly terrified, and no longer had any intention of fighting.

It's happening again...please, no...

"You hurt my friend...I'm gonna punish you for what you did!"

The light intensified, and the fox began to slowly back away, its tail shaking between its legs. All around them, the air crackled and buzzed as though electrified, the long blades of grass blowing outward in all directions. With each breath, each word, the light grew brighter, bathing the princess, the fox, and the squirrel's dead body in nearly blistering heat. With a final, piercing whine, the light collapsed upon itself, collecting in a tiny white-hot point at the tip of her horn.

"I'm gonna make you PAY!"

Celestia stopped in midsentence as she was struck with the sudden and clear sense that something was terribly wrong. She raised a hoof to silence the guard, spinning quickly about, her eyes frantically scanning the ground at her feet.

"Luna? Where-"

She whirled about again to face her.

"Did you see her? Where did she go?"

The guard simply blinked in surprise, eyeing the Princess with concern.

"Her? Milady, who are you talking about? There's no one here but-"

Once again, the silencing hoof shot upward as the sound of a child's anguished cries drifted through the forest to Celestia's ears. Though she could not make out what it was saying, it did not take more than an instant for Celestia to recognize the speaker. Without another word, she immediately turned toward the source of the sound.

Before she could take a single step, she found the breath being knocked from her by the shock wave of a massive explosion straight ahead. She staggered for a moment, struggling to

regain her bearings as a sudden rush of motherly instinct blasted all other thought out of her mind.

Without a moment's hesitation, the princess bolted directly into the heart of the ball of crimson smoke that billowed out of the depths of the woods, her lungs contracting painfully as she tried to find the voice to call Luna's name. The guard called after her, but the sound was immediately drowned out beneath a tide of adrenaline as Celestia surged forward toward the source of the explosion. The space that had separated them disappeared in seconds beneath the movements of Celestia's long, powerful limbs as she bounded over a final tuft of grass before skidding to a halt.

There on the ground below, was her younger sister, wailing at the top of her lungs with the limp body of a dead squirrel stretched across her hooves, and the charred body of...something. What had once been an orderly assembly of fur and flesh was now a twisted, bubbling horror, still twitching feebly as it smoldered in the crater that the blast had left beneath it.

The body had not so much been blasted apart as it had been warped nearly beyond recognition. Its limbs stuck out at impossible angles at the end of what appeared to be something akin to tentacles, and the gaping maw of its skull had been twisted into a grotesque, perpetual grin at the center of the mass of torched flesh. The trees too, were changed – enormous, oozing thorns had erupted along each blackened trunk, and the limbs of each had warped and wound around each other in a series of fantastic knots. All around them, the forest roared as vast spreads of canopy and grass alike burst into flame, the little Princess Luna wailing all the while.

Celestia said nothing. She simply stared in horror at her little sister and what she had done, the forest burning away in all directions. As Luna watched, the scene seemed to shimmer before her, the cries of her younger self mingling with the sounds of fire and fleeing wildlife in a low rumble. Slowly, the colors of the forest drained away, and the world fell silent, the image fading out of existence in a blurred mass of grey and black.

Before Luna had the time to think upon what she had just witnessed, the image changed again. The mess of greys and blacks began to intensify, forming shadows and shapes, and a slow trickle of deep blue filtered into the mix. Once again, she had the impression of looking through a shimmering haze as she saw herself anew, far from the forest or the roar of destruction. The Luna she saw before her now was much older than the filly she had seen moments ago, nearly as old as she was now, though...something was odd. Slowly, as she drifted through the half-resolved memory of her youth, a number of familiar remnants seemed to arrange themselves around her, gradually forming a coherent picture. Yes, that was it – with a sudden spark of clarity, she realized what was missing.

The Luna that stood below, just under sixteen years old, wore a heavy coat made of

pristine white material that squeaked slightly as its folds rubbed together with each subtle movement of its wearer. All around, ponies dressed in the same strange garments paced silently between a series of tables spaced very closely together throughout the length of the chamber below. It was not a particularly large chamber, but it appeared to be a laboratory, and as the last few wisps of obscurity faded away to reveal the long spreads of scientific equipment, Luna's attention was drawn not to them, but to the flank of her younger self.

She was a blank-flank. In all of her years, she had never been graced with the identity of her cutie mark as so many others had long before her, and it was something of a shameful secret, known only to herself, her sister, and a select few of her most trusted guards. Not that she could see anything under the thick fabric of the lab coat she saw herself wearing, but somehow she distinctly remembered her habit of covering her flank with clothing at all times to fend off unwanted comments.

Yes...this must be it...this is the day...but...why am I so afraid?

Young Princess Luna pored over a vat of bubbling orange liquid, her horn glowing faintly as various pieces of scientific equipment whizzed through the air around her, each periodically stopping here and there to autonomously take measurements on a dozen different experiments in progress across the entire length of the laboratory. This must have been during her time as assistant director of the magical science division at the Citadel, she thought to herself. Over the years, she and her team of assistants had spent many long nights crowded into this laboratory as they worked toward a greater understanding of the laws of magic that flowed throughout their world. It was her home, her haven – it was here that she had always felt most at ease. Here, she had helped her people from behind the scenes by developing spells for terraforming and seasonal shifting, medical treatments for many of the strange magical maladies that had cropped up during the years following the Shattering, and countless other magical solutions to the problems of everyday life. She remembered, too, the experiment over which she saw herself working on the table below; it had been she, herself, who had developed and then refined the process of manufacturing artificial rainbows, which had since become something of a staple in pegasus cloud construction.

For several moments, no one moved or made a sound until one of these ponies reached for a clipboard at the far end of his table and the tinkling of glassware broke the stiff, silent rhythm of his work as a beaker of fine white powder was knocked to the floor in his haste. Instinctively, he reached for it, but before he could stop it from shattering on the concrete below, it suddenly ceased in its descent and floated back up into his hooves, bathed in a faint azure light. Without turning to face him, Luna spoke in a stern, clipped tone.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, Erlenmyer, but please try to contain yourself. Those components may be derived from trees, but those beakers certainly don't grow on them, if you take my meaning.”

The pony named Erlenmyer blushed, stuttering nervously.

“Y-Y-Yes, Milady...sorry Milady...”

Above them on the staircase leading down into the laboratory proper, a single loud, raspy bark of laughter echoed across the room. Luna continued about her work as though she had heard nothing, though she did allow a small smirk to grace her lips at the familiar sound.

“Running a tight ship, as always. Good...good...”

With an occasional creak and pop from his aged joints, an elderly unicorn hobbled slowly down the stairs, guided by the helping hoof of a scrawny, much more youthful pegasus clad in the golden armor of the Citadel guard. As she watched from her incorporeal perch somewhere in the ceiling of the chamber, Princess Luna recognized the pair of ponies. The elderly stallion was Professor Watson Crick, her teacher and mentor throughout the years of her youth. Ever since she had first discovered the power of her magical abilities, she had practically lived between the library and the lab, Professor Watson guiding her every foray into the world of magic. She had been told many times of her sheer talent for the magical arts, and Celestia believed that the professor would be able to help her learn to control and focus her abilities into a productive outlet. Although, in truth, Luna had learned all nearly that he had been able to teach her in less than half the time it had taken him to learn it; she was brilliant, and he had only been familiar with the more archaic forms of magic prior to the Shattering. Now, his role was much closer to that of a peer in the realm of magical study, though Luna still felt the need to treat him with a certain degree of respect.

The other, much younger pony in golden armor was another constant companion of hers and was named Fawkes. As she thought hazily back upon her times with the scrawny colt, she realized that he was the closest thing she had ever really had to a friend during those years. During what little time she had that wasn't occupied by reading or labwork, Fawkes would accompany her and even played with her in her days as a child. She could remember many a night when Fawkes would faithfully wait upon her every need or whim while her sister was busy with royal business. He was one of the only ponies with whom she had shared the secret of her cutie marklessness, and the only one aside from her sister with whom she felt comfortable discussing the matter.

Luna addressed the newcomers without turning away from her work.

“I'm sorry, professor, but it seems we're a bit behind schedule. I'm running the numbers on batch seventeen, compound six again with a bit more heat on 8% reduced solutions of each primary. Too much overlap in the banding pattern...”

Luna's words trailed off absently into a stream of quiet muttering, her eyes dancing rapidly among the objects in the spread of equipment on her table.

“No kidding?” The elderly pony grunted as he steadied himself on the final step of the staircase.

“Thank you, Fawkes. Heh, leave it to you to find fault in perfection.”

This time, Luna couldn't help but turn around to look incredulously in his direction. Though she tried to hide it, she blushed slightly at his compliment, however circuitously delivered it had been.

“Perfection? I should be offended. As a scientist, I know no such boundary as the construct of “perfection.” You're the one who taught me that.”

He chuckled again, his voice like the dusty crackling of aged paper. The sound was a fondly familiar one for the Princess, and filled her with a childlike sense of admiration.

“Well, as a scientist, you should also know that there is always an exception to the rule. But I digress...I didn't come down here just to praise you, my dear.”

“I should hope not. You sounded like a fireworks display coming down those stairs just now.” Luna jabbed, her eyes betraying a hint of a jocular grin as she turned back to her work.

The professor frowned slightly, adopted a look of mock chagrin.

“I'd ask you if you'd ever heard of respecting your elders, but that would require conceding to the implication that I'm old. Maybe these joints of mine don't work so well as they used to, but my brain's still sharp enough to remember what's important. Speaking of which, aren't you forgetting something?”

At her mentor's words, Luna stiffened slightly, more alarmed than she would care to admit at the possibility that some aspect of her work was lacking. Luna cocked an eyebrow, scratching her chin in thought as she swept the room with her eyes, glancing from table to table for any sign of inefficiency.

“...Forget? Solutions triple checked for concentration accuracy...heat adjustment every two minutes...no, no I don't believe so. I've checked everything myself – it's all-“

“With all due respect, Milady, the...celebration?”

Luna breathed a sigh of relief, rolling her eyes as she turned her head to address Fawkes.

“How many times? I'll *be* there, I just need another few-“

“*Please*, milady, Princess Celestia’s waiting – *everypony’s* waiting...” he pleaded, his eyes darting nervously back and forth as though he were whispering a secret that he was concerned somepony might overhear. “They’ve all gathered outside the castle to see you. It doesn’t look good, keeping that many ponies-.”

“Oh *please*. We both know it’s just going to be a few reporters and the usual assembly of locals and my sister’s friends. Hardly a crowd worth bothering over.”

Even if the other ponies would never admit it, they knew that on any other day she probably would have been right. Despite Celestia’s best efforts, Luna remembered that her younger self saw the process of making friends as little more than a distraction from her valuable work. She never bothered attending any sort of social event unless forced to do so upon the insistence of her sister, and as a result had become somewhat alienated from her peers. Not that she minded at the time; to her, Fawkes was the perfect companion, assisting her when she needed help and not nagging her for attention when she didn’t.

At the moment, the young pegasus seemed at a loss for words, his eyes darting between the princess and the professor as though he were asking for permission to speak again.

“I...it’s...”

Mercifully, the old unicorn cut in, clearing his throat roughly and adopting a roguish grin.

“What the boy *means* to say is that you might be a bit surprised at how many ponies wanted to see your coronation.”

That last word took a moment to sink in. Luna opened her mouth to offer a retort when it hit her, causing her to falter slightly as she temporarily forgot the liquid bubbling away before her. She turned slowly about, fixing the pair with a puzzled frown.

“Co...coro...just what are you getting at? It’s just another birthday, nothing special.”

Watson smirked mischievously, an expression she found somewhat striking. Her mentor was not without a sense of humor, however dry it was, but neither did he often take to smiling like a boy with a secret as he did now.

“If you’re so curious, why don’t you see for yourself? Fawkes, kindly take her upstairs, will you?”

Luna didn’t budge. She simply stood there, staring at each of the two ponies in turn, waiting in vain for an explanation.

“Go on, lass, and be quick about it. I’ll see to things here while you’re away.”

“You’re serious. What could-“

“And you’re *late*. Get a move on before poor Fawkes has a heart attack!”

Fawkes looked as though he was about to huff indignantly in the unicorn’s direction, but then seemed to half-heartedly agree with his sentiment, gesturing behind him with a nod of his head. For a few more seconds, Luna continued to scrutinize each of them in turn before finally conceding with another grandiose roll of her eyes, irritably snapping her safety goggles down over muzzle to hang about her neck.

“...Oh very *well*. Let’s get this over with, then...honestly, I don’t see the point in these silly things anyway.”

Impatiently, she shook her head, pushing past them as she plodded hurriedly up the stairs and out of the laboratory with Fawkes running close behind. In her opinion, her time was better spent doing research rather than wasting it on pomp and circumstance like the birthday parties her sister insisted on throwing for her every year. She suspected that this whole “coronation” business had merely been some bit of skullduggery on Celestia’s part to get her to show up on time for once, though some part of her couldn’t help but feel a bit curious nonetheless as she trotted ever upward toward the castle grounds.

Is this when...? Then why do I feel so...sad?

After what seemed like an eternity to her anxious mind, Luna felt the soft warmth of the Summer sun shining down upon her as it bled across a cloudless sky, painting everything it touched with a soft amber glow as it sank slowly below the horizon. No doubt the castle pegasi had arranged for that just for this occasion. As if on cue, a pair of these pegasi clad in brilliantly polished parade armor bolted straight toward her the moment she had stepped outside. Without a word, each bowed his head, extending a hoof to point toward the magnificent marble archway leading out of the northern garden and into the area of the public grounds known as the Promenade. It was little more than an enormous, empty circle of stone bereft of the ubiquitous opulence of the Citadel proper, but it was this place where Princess Celestia delivered the majority of her public proclamations, and where Luna had reluctantly spent much of each birthday in years past.

With a defeated sigh, Luna resigned herself to falling into step between them, Fawkes silently leading the group, as she marched toward the distant sound of excitedly chattering voices, mentally preparing herself for the same gauntlet of questions the reporters always threw at her. Thankfully, the burden on her was minimal – Celestia had always been more adept at what she referred to as “pony skills,” and it was therefore her duty to do most of the talking. As

assistant director of the magical science division, the most Luna ever had to say was what she planned to work on next and how happy she was to be able to serve her people in such a capacity.

As she approached the Promenade, she gradually became aware of the sheer volume of the rumble of voices from just beyond the archway. Odd, she thought – by the sound of it, there seemed to be quite a *few* voices. Far more than she had expected, at any rate. With a vague sense of dread, she had just begun wondering to herself just what her sister was up to when she suddenly found herself frozen in place by the spectacle before her.

Everywhere she looked, not a single square inch of bare tile was visible beneath the ocean of ponies that extended in every direction, filling the entirety of the circle and beyond, their chattering now escalating into a dull roar as their Princess came into view. Despite herself, Luna found herself standing with her jaw hanging dangerously close to the ground – she simply couldn't believe how many ponies had managed to cram themselves into such a space, even as large as it was. Sure enough, standing tall above all of their heads and wearing an expression that belayed an almost criminal degree of self-satisfaction, Princess Celestia beckoned for Luna to join her on the raised platform in the center of the crowd. As the guards on either side pressed her gently forward, her limbs moved her automatically toward her sister through the tide of excited faces. With a sudden, plummeting dread, she became keenly aware that she was still wearing her lab coat and safety goggles.

“Fillies and Gentlecolts, I wish to thank all of you for coming here today to share this very special day with us! I give you...Princess Luna!”

As Celestia finished speaking, the crowd erupted in a cacophony of cheers, the ground beneath them shaking with the rhythmic pounding of uncountable hooves. Luna simply froze – the cheering, the sea of smiling faces, the sheer magnitude of the occasion overwhelmed her. This was not the same run-of-the-mill meet-and-greet to which she was accustomed – something else was going on here, something big, and whatever it was, Luna was certain it made her extremely uncomfortable.

“*Sister dearest...*” Luna smiled a bit too broadly as she whispered in Celestia's ear, waving stiffly to the crowd all the while. “Have I missed something? Or am I suffering some sort of mass hallucination?”

Celestia stood elegantly smiling at the crowd as she turned her head ever so slightly to the left to whisper in return.

“Happy birthday.”

“What is this?” Luna hissed. “Why didn't you tell me there would be this many ponies here? I look *awful*.”

“If you had planned to shown up on time, perhaps you would have prioritized more appropriately for the occasion. Besides, everypony seems to think you look just fine.”

“But I-“

With a single, deft motion, Celestia silenced both her sister and the crowd around them. All eyes were trained on the royal sisters, waiting anxiously for one of them to speak.

Luna looked about with a start as she felt Celestia’s wing nudge her pointedly in the side.

“Oh, I, um...th...th-th-thank you, all of you, for coming here to share my birthday celebration with me! I...I must say I am...surprised to see how *many* of you there are.” She smiled weakly, then added, “But...but I am delighted that all of you could attend!”

Celestia nodded, and the crowd burst into another bout of joyous revelry for a brief moment before Celestia bade them fall quiet once more. Luna blushed, trying desperately to resist the urge to tidy her mane as her sister began to speak, her voice full of a confidence and presence that had been somewhat lacking in her own impromptu address.

“This day, as does every birthday, stands not just as another marker in the endless passage of time, but serves as an important reminder to each and every one of us of just how special the day of our birth truly is. A birthday is a day of new beginnings. A birthday reminds us of who we once were, of who we are, and of who we someday hope to become. With the passing of each year, we remember those whom we hold dear, those whom we have lost, and most importantly, we remember how each of those individuals have guided us along the path of life toward a brighter future. That is why tonight, on the night of my sister’s sixteenth birthday, I have asked all of you to join us that we way make this night a shining new memory to look back upon in future years. In a few moments, I will ask you to join with me as we launch ourselves headlong into a bright new era of peace and prosperity for our people.”

As she spoke, her horn began to glow, and the last lingering rays of the setting sun disappeared beneath the horizon, bathing the Citadel and the crowd of ponies in darkness. From the shadows to her right, Luna heard her sister’s voice once more, though this time it was much softer, and aimed directly at her.

“Luna, I want to give you something, but before I do, I must ask you to relax.”

Instinctively, Luna did the exact opposite. Every muscle in her body tensed painfully as she tried desperately to read her sister’s face through the curtain of inky blackness that enveloped them.

“W-what? How can you expect-“

“Just breathe. It’s okay, you’ll do just fine, I’m sure of it.”

“Do just fine? Do *what* just fine? What are you-“

Luna was beginning to panic. She had never liked these things to begin with, but the sheer abnormality of the sequence of events so far had placed her far from her comfort zone. Her older self remembered the feeling clear as day as she watched herself try to remain calm – it was utterly at odds with the smooth, logical ease that had always accompanied her in her laboratory.

“Breathe. Just breathe...”

Reluctantly, Luna forced herself to comply. Squeezing her eyes shut, she took a long, deep breath and held it. Almost immediately, she felt her heart beginning to slow, and her mind sliding back into some semblance of focus. As she reopened her eyes, she could see the dim outlines of the countless figures all around her, each and every starlit face fixed steadily on her.

“Luna, for your birthday present...I’m giving you the moon.”

For a moment, words failed her. She simply stared at the outline of her sister’s face before finally finding her voice.

“*What?!*”

“For as long as I have ruled our fair kingdom, I have held the responsibility of raising the sun and the moon on my own to begin and end each and every day. It is a weighty duty, and I think, perhaps, too heavy for just *one* pony to bear. I would be honored, little sister, if you would help me to rule our land by sharing that burden with me.”

What was left of Luna’s grasp of the situation sputtered out of existence under the weight of those words.

“You’re old enough now to be able to serve our people in a fuller capacity, not that your previous contributions have not been anything less than revolutionary in improving the quality of life for our citizens. I’m asking you, Luna, raise the moon this night, and every night forever after, and let us rule Equestria together, as it was always meant to be. Let this night shine forever as the night that Equestria witnessed your rebirth as its second eternal guardian.”

“You...” Luna turned slowly about, taking in the suddenly ludicrous scene in which she found herself. All around her each face smiled warmly up at her. Not a one showed any sign of impatience, nor any trace of doubt. They all *knew*. They all knew what she was supposed to do, and it terrified her.

“Are you asking me to...but I *can't!*”

“Yes, Luna, yes you *can*. I've told you before – you've got more raw magical talent than any other pony I've ever *seen*, but more importantly than that, you're my *sister*. I know that you can do this.”

Luna was starting to lose control again as the task that lay before her began to sink in. Her breath came in short gasps as she started whirling about in a panic, searching for some means of escape.

“No...no *no!* how could you do this to me?! I can't raise the *moon!* I could never, I...I don't even have my cutie-“

“Luna, look at me.”

“I...I'm just a *scientist!* I'm not even that *good!* I can't...can't possibly-“

“*Look at me.*”

Whether by the force of the gaze with which her elder sister fixed her, or by the realization that there was no way she was going to get out of this, Luna wasn't sure, but she stopped cold, her eyes locked with Celestia's. For a moment, the sea of expectant faces vanished; nothing existed save the pair of sisters below the starry sky.

“Luna, I'm asking for your help because I know that together, we can accomplish so much more for our people than I ever could alone. I'm asking for your help because I know what you're capable of.”

Luna couldn't speak – she simply stared into her sister's eyes, fighting back mortified tears. Without a word, Celestia embraced her sister, holding her head close to her heart. Somehow, the steady, gentle pulse seemed to calm her. For a few moments neither sister moved, caught in the timeless warmth that held them both before Celestia finally pushed their bodies apart.

“I'm asking for your help because above all, I *believe* in you, little sister.”

Silence. As she looked up into her sister's face, she saw not the cold, impartial mask of rulership, but the face of a pony to whom she had looked up for as long as she could remember, a face that had always been there with a gentle smile or comforting thought whenever she needed one, a face that to her, represented everything that she hoped to someday become, but had never truly believed she ever could. Now, as she looked into that familiar face, it was suddenly somehow all she needed.

Her fear was gone, but neither had it been replaced by anything remotely reassuring. Luna stared up into the fathomless depths of the night sky, feeling like the tiniest of insects standing before a mountain of darkness.

This moment...everything changes in this moment.

With a deep, steady breath, she closed her eyes, reaching slowly outward with her magic. The darkness seemed to stretch forever in every direction, but there, glowing in the endless night...a pulse, so tiny it was barely there at all. Her consciousness seemed to drift toward it, around it, reaching out to caress it as though it were a newborn animal, a tiny little flame of life so delicate that the slightest breeze could shatter it forever. As she drew the threads of her magic around the little pulsing light, she could feel its warmth flowing within herself, feel it grow, shining brighter and brighter. It felt distinctly solid now, no longer quite so fragile as it had been when she had first reached toward it. Slowly, steadily, the light grew and grew until it finally resolved itself into an enormous, silver sphere, shimmering among a sea of stars.

Somewhere, deep inside herself, she felt something stir. It began as a murmur, like the ripple of a single drop of water on the surface of a tranquil lake. Gently, as the ripples bounced around the corners of her mind, rebounding upon themselves again and again, they began to grow, the surface of the lake trembling like the skin of a drum. Under the light of the silver orb, she saw the myriad threads of magic within her twisting, flowing, weaving in and around each other in fantastic patterns, and right in the center, the ripples of energy that seemed to direct them in their eerily familiar dance. She felt something in that moment that she had never felt before, like an immense pressure pushing upward from the deepest part of her consciousness, a massive force that had lay just beyond her grasp until just now. It whispered to her in wordless song, calling her toward it, crushing down upon her with the enormity of its existence, and yet touching that font of power filled her with an exhilarating sense of freedom, as though her body were suddenly weightless, as though the world around her suddenly made sense just as it did in her laboratory. She saw the magic that flowed not only within herself, but within the crowd of ponies around her and beyond – it was a dance of life, as old as time itself yet somehow strange and new – all of the pieces seemed to fall into place, a colossal, fluid mosaic of life and at their center, the shining, sparkling sphere.

It was the moon; *her* moon. The memory of those words danced in and out of her thoughts only half-formed, the discarded lullaby of a small child. She could *feel* it, as though it were a part of her, as though it were inside her. Without knowing how or why, she saw it rising, rising, the weight of the massive hunk of rock gliding effortlessly upward as though it were full of nothing but air. As she watched it rise higher and higher, she suddenly became aware of a sound echoing in the darkness. Such a strange sound, she thought, so loud, so vast, and yet she could not determine from whence it came. All at once the sound closed in around her, filling her with a strange, detached sense of relief, though for the life of her, she could not comprehend

why.

The cheering hit her like a tidal wave. There, shining like a brilliant silver eye in the night sky, the full moon bathed the castle grounds in its ethereal radiance. For a moment, Luna simply stared into the center of the sphere, her ears throbbing in protest at the noise as she struggled to comprehend what had just happened when something warm fell across her back. With one magnificent ivory wing, Celestia embraced her sister, gazing down at her with eyes overflowing with pride.

I did it...I actually...Did you see me Celly? I did it!

"I'm so proud of you, Luna," she whispered, smiling gently. "I *knew* you could do it."

"I...I actually did it..."

She stared into the throng at nothing in particular, the waves of joyous sound washing about her as though she were caught in a dream, undeniably there, but somehow detached. For several moments, Luna simply waited in a numb haze before she finally realized that they were all cheering for *her*.

"Luuuuna! Luuuuna! Luuuuna!" over and over, the crowd chanted her name, swaying side to side in rhythm with the pounding of their hooves.

Without warning, Luna burst into a fit of riotous laughter. All of her tension, all of her anxiety evaporated in an instant beneath the cascade of giggles. She wasn't even really sure why she was laughing, but no matter how she tried to stop it, it just kept coming. She laughed and laughed until her lungs were sore, and still the crowd around her cheered as loudly as ever. As she watched her younger self shuddering with each wave of revelry, she felt the same infectious joy creeping into the edges of her consciousness, as though she were the one standing on that platform, reliving that wonderful night.

This had been the single happiest night of her life.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts, Thank you! Thank you all for sharing this night with my sister and I! With your help, I know that the two of us can create an even brighter future for Equestria and all of its inhabitants! Thank you all!"

With the last of Celestia's words, the roars of stomping hooves only intensified. At the same time, as the waves of laughter finally ceased, something else caught Luna's attention. It began as a tingling warmth somewhere around her midsection, then slowly seemed to condense itself into a small patch of heat on either side. She wondered only half-heartedly at the peculiar sensation, still too engrossed by the excitement of the crowd as the warmth slowly intensified, until finally it demanded her full attention. As she turned her head to look back upon

her body, she found her eyes drawn to the part of her labcoat that covered her flank, and her breath caught painfully in her throat.

Almost immediately, Luna wanted nothing more than to be away from the crowd. She was no longer afraid of the sea of ponies, nor did she feel any need to return to her work in the laboratory; if she was correct, this was something far more important, far more urgent.

She whirled about, gazing pleadingly at her elder sister, her wings twitching with something between excitement and shock. Celestia's smile faltered somewhat as she locked eyes with her little sister, a faint trace of concern flickering through her features. Without breaking the constant formal composure with which she presented herself before the crowd, she bent her head downward slightly to whisper in Luna's direction.

"Is something wrong? Are you feeling al-"

Luna was too excited to let her finish.

"Celly, it's time, It's *time!* I think it's finally happened!"

This time, Celestia couldn't help but frown in puzzlement at her little sister's behavior.

"Time? Time for wh-"

As she spoke, ponies bearing the telltale assortment of scrolls, quills, and the eager abandon indicative of the reporter's guild came bustling forcefully in their direction, each of them shouting questions at the top of their lungs. Without a word, Luna fixed her with a look of frantic exasperation, twitching her head almost imperceptibly in the direction of her rear end. For a few moments, Celestia simply stared blankly back until a spark of comprehension leapt into her eyes. Without hesitation, she raised her hoof to silence the crowd, clearing her throat as she did so.

"If I might make one small request, I would like all of you to please move inside to the great hall, where you will find that our chefs have provided an exquisite meal for all of you. Please, eat, drink, and be merry to your heart's content. Luna and I will join you shortly, and we will be more than happy to answer any questions at that time. Thank you again!"

The instant that she had finished speaking, Celestia gestured curtly to the guards around their platform, who immediately began clearing a path for them to make their exit. As they walked slowly out of the circle of the Promenade, Luna struggled to maintain some semblance of formality, her eyes locked on the archway that led into the northern gardens. Immediately upon leaving the view of the crowd of ponies as they marched into the Great Hall, Luna broke into a run with Celestia close behind, the somewhat puzzled guards remaining by the gate at a single commanding glance from their superior. In a frenzy, the little princess ducked behind a

wall and, fixing her teeth around one shoulder of her labcoat, tore it away from her body with all of her might.

Before the discarded cloth could even touch the ground, a gasp escaped Celestia's lips as she gazed down upon her little sister's flank. Immediately, Luna whipped about to see it for her herself, her neck wrenching painfully from the sheer velocity of the motion.

There, on Luna's once blank, purple-coated flank, lay the elegant silver edge of the crescent moon afloat in an inky pool of darkness, still sparkling softly before her eyes. Even as she saw it, Luna couldn't believe it – after sixteen long years, she finally had earned her cutie mark.

I remember this...Celly was so proud of me...

But before the memory could sink in, once again Luna saw the image begin to shimmer and fade before her. All of the light seemed to drain away, the scene growing darker and darker until the only visible shape was the crescent moon on Luna's flank, glimmering faintly before it too faded from existence. As her vision darkened, she felt the memories of what she had witnessed slipping away, falling through the fingers of her consciousness like sand through an hourglass.

For several moments, Luna seemed to float numbly through the sea of silence that surrounded her, unable to fully comprehend how she had gotten there, until a tiny sound in the distance seemed to draw her slowly toward it. Almost imperceptibly, the sound grew steadily in volume and her eyes began to resolve a variety of shapes in the darkness, unrecognizable at first, but as she watched they began to change and blend together into complete, logical forms. It was a bird, she realized – a birdsong that she knew, though she could not remember why. The lilting tune of its merry chirping floated about her as she looked upon the new scene that had unfolded not from the same bird's eye perspective as before, but in a first-person view. Though she had no control over the body she seemed to be inhabiting, she could feel it moving stiffly forward, and could clearly sense the turbulent flow of its tangled emotions as it scowled at the floor.

She walked alone in an enormous, gilded hall, surrounded by columns that towered high above her into the darkness, beyond the reach of the long, slanted beams of moonlight that painted her face. The only sounds to break the heavy silence were the hollow echo of her footsteps, strangely magnified by the enormity of the hall, and the last muffled traces of the bird's melody as she passed beyond the entrance to the Eastern Gardens on the way to her tower. She remembered now – her room in the Citadel had a large balcony overlooking those gardens. Every evening, as the gardens' nocturnal inhabitants began to stir and the creatures of the day lay themselves to rest, that particular bird – Celestia had said it was a phoenix – would sing one last tune before it, too retired for the night. She had always loved to listen to its song – it was always just a little different, yet tonight she sensed that her younger self wanted

nothing more than for it to stop.

As quickly as she could without breaking into a full run, the younger Luna stomped up the spiral staircase to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her with a flick of her horn. In the same movement, she summoned a cacophony of crashes and bangs as the windows all around her room were drawn forcefully shut, drowning out all noise from the creatures outside. In silent fury, she paced back and forth across the resplendent violet carpeting, working her jaw back and forth in slow, grinding movements. In all of her seventeen years, she could not remember a time when she had been more infuriated, more humiliated...and, she sensed, more ashamed. The feeling was blisteringly clear, though for some reason, Luna could not seem to remember what in Equestria had made her so upset. She did not have long to linger on the thought however, as her attention was suddenly commanded by a severe flash of amber light from the corner of her room.

Princess Celestia folded her wings stiffly about herself as the light from her recent rematerialization faded, all the while glaring sternly down her muzzle into her little sister's eyes.

Celly? What's wrong? Why do you look so mad?

It was Luna who spoke first.

"You certainly took your time getting he-"

"Not. Another. *Word.*"

Despite her own anger, the overpowering authority with which her sister had spoken to her caused her to bite back the rest of sarcastic remark. For a few moments, neither pony spoke, each glaring into the other's eyes until she finally averted her gaze. Luna was thankful that her younger self had done so – even if she could not remember why she felt so ashamed, seeing her older sister look at her like that multiplied the feeling ten hundred fold.

"You will speak only when I have *finished*, is that clear?"

Without turning to meet her gaze, Luna felt herself nod, albeit hesitantly.

"First, I want to make it clear that I understand what it was you were trying to do, and that I can appreciate that sentiment. However, that does not change the fact that due to your carelessness, several ponies very nearly met their deaths tonight. Can you understand that?" Luna whipped her head upward to offer her retort.

"I was only trying to-"

"*LUNA!* Just answer the question."

Once again, the two sisters' eyes met in silence for a few moments before Luna turned shamefully away.

"Yes."

Satisfied, Celestia's features softened somewhat, though her tone lost none of its matriarchal fury.

"That said, I have to ask - what were you thinking? You know how hard all of our subjects must work each day – how could you expect them to be able to do what you asked of them without endangering themselves and others?"

Luna began to answer, but was immediately silenced by a warning glance from her sister.

"We're just lucky that their injuries are not serious. Nonetheless, I am *very* disappointed in you, young lady. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"...Look, I'm sorry, alright? I just wanted..."

"Don't you *dare* take that tone with me. If you're not going to take this seri-"

"I *am*, Celestia, if you'd just-"

"*I told you not to interrupt!*"

Her mouth still hanging open in silent protest, Luna seethed at the sound of her sister's voice, but dared not muster another attempt to interrupt her. Slowly, as she cowered before her sister, the fragments of memory began to collect themselves, drawn together by the sheer force of her emotion. She remembered it now; why she had felt so ashamed of herself and why Celestia was so angry with her. Her younger self had recently developed a spell that would, in theory, give ponies the energy to work or play or carry out whatever business they needed to during the night – a spell that would ultimately replace the need for sleep. However, in her eagerness to prove that it was a success and earn the praise of her sister, she had tested it on a group of construction workers that were working to renovate part of the Citadel's inner wall, and as a result, several of the workers had overworked themselves to the point that a single error in judgement had caused an accident in which most of the crew had been injured. Thankfully, Celestia had noticed the work going on upon her return from some late-night business in the new settlement of Stalliongrad and had been able to intervene before anypony else was hurt. Naturally, she was furious with Luna, not only for testing an unfinished spell on their subjects without her knowledge, but for neglecting to properly oversee the work to prevent such an accident from occurring. As her sister continued her lecture, Luna resigned herself to

weathering the storm and attempting to explain herself when Celestia was a bit calmer.

“I will hear your side of the story in due time, but for the moment I want you to take that time to think about what you’ve done. This is exactly why I told you to consult with me before making any decisions involving the welfare of our subjects. If I hadn’t found out when I did, who knows what could have happened? This isn’t the first time, either. Its stunts like these that make me wonder whether you’re really ready to accept your responsibility as Princess.”

“Well, maybe somepony should think about whom they’ve asked for help before they go being all picky about how they go about it.”

The words had come without warning, like a shot in the dark, and Luna regretted them almost the instant they had left her lips. For a moment, Celestia was too shocked to speak, the adamant scowl that had painted her face faltering noticeably before reasserting itself to match the angered glare with which her younger sister now fixed her.

“How *dare* yo-“

But something inside Luna had snapped; no matter how she had tried to help her sister over the past year, it had never seemed to be good enough. Every time Luna had tried to implement a new regime for the improvement of their subjects’ daily lives – allocating additional hours to work rather than sleep, suggesting an overhaul of the approved educational system for a more intense curriculum, and lowering the minimum age at which ponies could legally be employed, among others – she had been shot down at every turn with some canned excuse concerning the importance of relaxation and revelry or the lessons that children learn while at play rather than those they learn in the classroom. This wasn’t the first time she had spoken with her sister about it; it all sounded so wasteful to her. If their people’s happiness was truly so important, was it not vital to maximize the productivity of their land? So much time was wasted daydreaming or mucking about in the dirt, all while a fascinating world of magic and its relationship with nature went to waste around them despite the fact that it could teach them so much more about themselves if only they bothered to look for it. She was sick of trying her hardest only to be dismissed, sick of being sent to her room like a child, and sick of her sister’s preachy holier-than thou attitude when all she had ever wanted was to help, just as she had been asked to do in the first place. Luna advanced on her sister, finding a shaky new courage in the wake of her last remark that urged her to push her advantage while it lasted.

“Stop! Do you have any idea, *any idea* how much of a hypocrite you’re being right now? As if you’ve *never* made any mistakes before. I worked harder than anypony to get my spells to work, I’ve *always* worked as hard as I could to develop magic that would help our people. This was just *one* mistake – if I can just refine the spell, then-“

“*Absolutely not!* I appreciate that you’ve made extraordinary contributions to the welfare of our people, but ponies need the time to sleep each night so that they can recover from the

day's work. What you're talking about just isn't natural! ”

“Oh please, “*natural?! Really?! This coming from the pony that raises the sun every day. Or have you forgotten that you single hoof-edly control the entirety of Equestrian agriculture, not to mention their primary source of heat, and-*”

“*Watch it, Luna. I didn't choose that burden, and I'm not about to take it as lightly as you seem to be.*”

“Oh sure, you didn't *choose* it, but you're not in any hurry to lighten the load, either, are you? I've been trying to do things like this so that ponies wouldn't need to rely so much on sunlight. What would happen if, for some reason, you couldn't raise the sun one day?”

“Young lady, that is *quite-*”

“STOP CALLING ME THAT!”

Immediately, Celestia launched herself forward, stomping one hoof as loudly as she could as she loomed over her little sister in silent fury. But Luna wasn't going to let it stop her, not this time – she didn't falter for a moment as she stepped slowly, pointedly forward, meeting her sister's gaze without wavering in the slightest.

“Luna, I'm warn-“

“You just *love* to hear yourself talk, don't you? I'm not just a kid anymore, and I'm not gonna let you silence me just because you don't like what I have to say!”

“*LUN-*”

“I've done nothing but try to make you happy ever since you asked for my help! But every time I try to show you what I can do, it's never good enough! When will I be good enough to help you? When?!”

“*ENOUGH!*”

“NO! I-“

But she never got the chance to finish what she was going to say, for as the words left her lips, she was struck silent by a stinging pain across the right side of her face. Celestia stood with one hoof still held high, panting heavily as Luna stared at the floor in shock. As Celestia gently lowered her hoof to the floor, it was all Luna could do to stop herself from breaking into tears. When Celestia spoke, it was with a voice much softer than the icy monotone she had until recently employed.

“Luna, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I had to do that, but there is something you *need* to understand. I asked for your help in ruling Equestria, that much is true, but that does *not* give you the right to make such weighty decisions on your own. What I meant for us was to rule *together* – to each have an equal part in every decision to better serve our people. It’s not that I don’t appreciate your efforts – I do, I mean that, and I know how hard you’re working, but it takes a certain amount of experience to be able to understand exactly what it is our people need from us, and at what point we overstep our bounds and begin meddling in affairs that are not ours in which to interfere.”

Luna didn’t respond – she simply glared at the same point on the carpet below as though willing it to burst into flame.

“Perhaps I misled you when I asked for your help, and for that, I apologize. Or, perhaps I was wrong to have asked for so much – you’re still too young to understand just what our people-“

“Shut up.”

For a moment, Celestia didn’t bother to reprimand her sister. Though Luna could not see her sister’s face, she sensed a slight lull in her anger as she spoke again.

“...Luna, I’m sorry that I struck you, but can you understand why I’m angry? Can you-“

“I *said* shut up.”

Without warning, Luna’s head shot upward and in her eyes Celestia saw a wrath she had never before witnessed. As Luna watched from her seat within the body of her younger self, she could see, just for an instant, that same hateful glare reflected in the face of her sister, and for that single, crystalline moment, she was utterly terrified of what she saw.

No...no, not again! Stop it! Don’t talk to her like that...she’s just trying to help...

Before Celestia could properly respond, Luna began her attack anew, each and every word quaking with wounded rage.

“So you *lied* to me, is that it? Just who exactly do you think you are?”

Recovering herself, Celestia shot another warning glance in Luna’s direction but to no avail. With renewed vigor, Luna launched herself once more into the fray.

“Who are you to determine what our people *need*? Who are *you* to dictate what amounts to a fair balance of power? As far as I can tell, all you’ve done is deny me my efforts

just so you can preserve what you seem to think is right. Tell me, Celestia, how exactly is that *equal*?”

“Luna, please, do not delude yourself for a moment that I consider myself superior to you in any way. Your unique insight was exactly-“

“Yeah, I guessed that much, thanks. That’s just the problem, isn’t it? You’re *jealous*.”

“W...What?!”

“Don’t try to deny it. Everything was fine before you asked me to help – I could work on whatever I saw fit in the lab, and you never said anything to stop me, but now suddenly everything I do is a problem.”

“Luna, you’re behaving like a child. There is *nothing* personal about this, and the fact that you would even try to make it into-“

“Oh *please*. Face it! You’re so used to everypony praising and adoring you for raising the sun every day that when you saw how happy everypony was at my birthday last year you felt threatened! You said it yourself; my developments have revolutionized our society! Without me, our people would be decades behind where we are now.”

Luna stomped at the ground, advancing on her sister as she yelled at the top of her lungs.

“But it goes even farther than that! You’ve told me for as long as I can remember that I was the most magically talented pony you’d ever *seen*. Even more than *you!*”

As she screamed, her voice rising higher and higher, tears began to form in the corner of her eyes.

“I could be so much more! When I raised the moon, I realized that for the first time in my *life!* I can do so much more for our people than you ever could, and that *terrifies* you!”

“*Luna!* I-“

“How can you ask me to go back to locking myself away in the lab for *who knows* how long? How can you ask me to do that, when I know now that there’s so much *more* that I’m capable of! How, when all I’ve ever wanted...all I’ve ever wanted to do was help you, and now I finally feel like I *can!*”

As suddenly as it had begun, Luna’s tirade came to an abrupt halt, a few shining droplets trickling slowly down each cheek. For several moments, the sisters stared at each other, each a bit surprised in their own right at what had been said. Finally, Luna tore her gaze away, biting her lip in an effort to fight back the tears as she stared resolutely into the far wall.

The windows rattled gently as a bitter evening gale whistled through the trees of the garden below, and a single, muffled cry could be heard above the wind as the phoenix warbled the last note of its song before turning in to sleep. Luna suddenly felt cold. She longed to turn her head about and apologize to her sister, to say *something*, but her younger self refused to comply. Try as she might, she could not tear her vision away from the unfeeling stone of her bedroom wall. When the voice of her sister broke the silence at last, the sound seemed to cut to her core, crushing the will from her in an instant.

“...It seems that there is much that we need to talk about...”

Though she could not see her sister, Luna felt a single comforting hoof touch her shoulder. She wanted desperately to reach out her own hoof to greet it, but in the same instant that it had made contact, she felt her younger self pull forcefully away, stubbornly maintaining her cruel silence.

For a moment, Celestia’s hoof lingered in midair, then dropped to the ground as she uttered a heavy sigh.

“Perhaps we both need some time to calm down. If you’d like, I could have some of your favorite tea brought up to you in a few minutes, and maybe we can talk things over when you’ve finished?”

No response. Luna heard the sound of her sister’s footsteps as she walked somewhat hesitantly toward the door.

“...Luna, I’m sorry if I’ve hurt you or made you feel like you’re not helping me by what you’ve been doing, but...but that doesn’t change the fact that there are still some things you must learn to be able to prevent such mistakes from happening in the future. For the time being...I think its best if I suspend your authority, at least until we’ve had a chance to talk about what’s really going on here.”

Almost immediately, the field of Luna’s vision whipped about with such force that she felt her head would surely come tumbling from her shoulders as she stared into the eyes of her elder sister once more. The sadness she saw within them shook her somewhat, but it wasn’t enough to quell the sudden surge of anger she felt boiling in her gut. For a single, excruciating moment, time seemed to stand still as she yearned to answer Celestia’s silent apology in kind, until it was unceremoniously shattered by a deafening crash.

As the light faded from her horn, Luna stared in horror at the back of the door that her younger self had just slammed in Celestia’s face.

I’m sorry...sis, can you hear me? I’m-

“IDIOT! That pompous, self-righteous-“

Please just open the door, it's not too late, you can still-

“FINE! DO YOU HEAR ME?! JUST HIDE BEHIND YOUR AUTHORITY LIKE YOU ALWAYS DO! COWARD!”

Even as she felt herself say those hurtful words, she sensed the profound shame from whence they had sprung needling away deep within herself. She was angry, angrier than she had ever been in all of her life, but the force of her fury was naught but a method of distracting herself from how she really felt.

In a wordless bluster, Luna stomped about her room in rapid, irregular circles, panting wildly as she struggled to find some outlet for her anguish. A myriad of half - formed words rampaged through her thoughts, each beginning only to abandon itself in search of some new, fouler utterance to besmirch the face of her sister.

Though no wind blew outside the walls of her bedroom, the windows all around her began to rattle as they shuddered in their frames. Luna struggled to maintain her focus, to muster some shred of willpower that would force her out of the door and back to her sister, but she was utterly helpless as she felt herself being swallowed by the sheer force of her younger self's emotion, the tinkling of porcelain and glass joining in the rattling cacophony. All around her, odds and ends throughout her room began to titter and dance as though a quake were shaking the room, though the room itself remained perfectly still.

“Why?! Why can't she understand?! I just-“

A crash as a tiny glass orb that had until recently occupied a place on her nightstand came tumbling to the floor. The moment that it hit, shards of sparkling brilliance exploded outward in every direction as the magic that had been contained within sparked out of existence in a blaze of colors.

“Hypocrite! Self-centered, powermongering...”

The end of her sentence was lost as another mighty crashed echoed throughout the room. This time, a crystal vase that had housed a selection of her favorite flowers from the royal gardens was smashed to oblivion, scattering its contents far from the bookcase on which it had stood. But the noise only served to agitate her further. Louder and louder, the windows shuddered almost to the point of breaking, all the while Luna quaked in silent rage, hot, fat tears streaming down her face. A faint light began to glow from the tip of her horn, growing rapidly brighter until it cast long, shimmering shadows on everything in the room, reflecting off of the piles of broken glass in a cascade of twinkling points. The light and the noise seemed to blend

together in a raging blur, assaulting her from all sides until with a final, guttural roar, it evaporated in an instant, the light collapsing in upon itself in a single, blinding point.

The next thing Luna heard was a piercing whine that drowned out all but the pounding of her own heart. In a moment of terrifying clarity, she realized the power of the magic that stood ready to erupt from within her, and suddenly found herself fighting with every ounce of her willpower to bring it under control. Like a bomb about to explode, the light at the tip of her horn sputtered and flared, great sparks of white-hot energy crackling outward in every direction. The force of the spell, formless as it was, felt impossibly powerful, far greater even than the power she had felt on the night that she had raised the moon. All of her anger, all of her shame vanished in an instant in the wake of the clear and present danger that threatened to overwhelm her, whispering to her, urging her to let it run free.

It was as though a voice were calling to her, a voice at once familiar and bizarre. It spoke in wordless phrases, needling away at her resolve as she fought to maintain her focus. It seemed to flow like the melody of a song, its lyrics not as words but a cocktail of emotional surges, splashing across her consciousness in great swaths of vivid color. The sensation began to mingle with her terror, not diminishing it in any way but rather, reshaping it, transforming it into an exhilarating, intoxicating rush of sheer adrenaline. Her older self remembered the feeling, the deep, dark power that had called to her on that night; as scared as she was, it felt...wonderful. Slowly, the sound intensified, increasing in pitch until her ears throbbed in protest. She was scared, so scared, and yet she could not help but bask in the eerie euphoria of the rush of power that she felt coursing through every inch of her body. It writhed against her will, screaming to be set free, and as it overtook her, a single image, clear as day, bloomed into being before her mind's eye.

It was a door, a single, colossal steel door, bereft of any sort of decoration or trace of frivolity. Its broad, severe shape pressed into the fabric of her memories, stirring to life words spoken by her sister many years ago, telling her of what was hidden by that massive metal frame. Behind that door, she could hear it – that was the source of the voice. Something behind that door was calling to her, begging her for her help, and somehow she knew that only she could be the one to answer its call. If only she could reach out and open it, if only she could tap into the source of that power...

Just as it always had whenever she had needed it, the logical, scientific mind that had guided her throughout her years of study kicked into gear. She remembered her lessons, counting as steadily as she could, mentally listing off the five species of magical force and each of their various derivations, then the applications of each as she had worked with them, and so on, her breath coming in short, pained gasps, the light still crackling furiously as it struggled to release itself. Slowly, the words of her mentor, Dr. Crick, began to float through her consciousness, telling her to feel the magic, to let it flow rather than attempt to direct it with brute force. And feel she did – as carefully as she could, she drew the writhing threads of magic back within herself, slowly dismantling the spell piece by piece until at last the light began to

fade, and she felt her strength gradually begin to return.

As the last traces of radiance faded from the room, all was quiet. The windows had ceased in their chaotic dance, the remnants of the cascade of broken glass lay still where they had fallen across the floor, and though her heart raced furiously in her chest, Luna finally felt herself begin to calm. She forced herself to breathe in long, slow draughts, half afraid to open her eyes, feeling the flow of magic within herself to make sure that she was in control again. The only trace of her outburst that remained was the lingering image of the door, hanging in her thoughts for just a moment before it, too faded into nothingness.

“What the *hay*...” She grunted, keeping her eyes tightly shut as she tried half-heartedly to recover the image of the door, to recapture some shred of the power that still tingled at the edges of her awareness. “What in the *hay* was that?”

Without fully comprehending why, she was utterly fascinated. This was not the first time her magic had reacted to her emotions, but it had always been just *her* magic – whatever it was she had seen, whatever it was she had heard, it was something different, something outside herself and yet undeniably, alarmingly similar. And that wasn’t all; she had seen that door before, many times, in fact. It lay deep within the Citadel, in an enormous underground hall. Her sister had called it the “Sanctum,” and she had told her that it was never, ever to be opened under *any* circumstances. When she had asked why, Celestia had simply said that there are powers in this world beyond our understanding, powers that no pony was ever meant to control, and that that door protected us from what that power might make us become. That had been back when she was a filly - after years of working in her laboratory, the door had just become another of the Citadel’s many antiquated oddities and had faded from the scope of her curiosity in favor of her studies into the arcane arts. Now, as she dwelled upon its ominous silhouette, the memories came flooding back, and the academic within herself screamed to know what secrets it held. But she suppressed it – something felt wrong, though she couldn’t seem to put her hoof on it. She was angry, she was tired, and the logical part of her mind told her that she was not in any state to be able to trust her impulses. It was something she could investigate later, if she did at all.

As she opened her eyes, the silence seemed to press in on her from all directions. She scanned the room, cursing to herself as her eyes fell upon the spread of jagged glass around her feet, the once meticulous arrangement of elegant purple blossoms now lying tattered and wet on the floor below. Her anger had subsided, but in its place it had left nothing but an empty hole, the recent exchange with her sister running on a loop in the back of her mind. For a few moments, she simply sat staring at the floor until her mind instinctively resigned itself to attending to the opportunity for some distraction.

With a casual flick of her horn, she whisked every speck of glass from the carpet into the dustbin by her bed, and had been just about to tend to the soaked portion of carpet when a sudden sound from the far side of the room sent her heart rocketing back into her throat.

“Princess Luna? May I come in?”

The owner of the voice knocked once more, the echo of his hoof against the heavy mahogany door sounding like the crack of a gun with each solid impact.

“...Milady, is everything alright? Princess Celestia requested that I bring you some tea. If you're not busy, it would be best to drink it while it's still hot.”

Right...the tea. She inhaled deeply, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment longer to steady herself. As she settled back into a semblance of quietude, she cleared her throat and prepared to address her visitor.

“Yes...yes, thank you, Fawkes. You may enter.”

With a mighty groan from the aged wood, the door swung slowly open to reveal the scrawny form of the pegasus named Fawkes, who was carrying a tray bearing an elegant silver teapot in its center set next to a single equally well-crafted cup. As he stepped into her bedroom, he gingerly set the tray down upon a small table before turning to face her with something of a concerned expression on his face. His eyes first came to rest upon the young Princess, then darted quickly around the room, settling on the flowers, the dustbin, and back to the princess once more. As he did so, Luna felt herself reflexively attempt to assume the traditional air of impartial propriety, but if the look on his face was any indication, the pegasus wasn't about to buy it.

Fawkes? He shouldn't be here...why is he...?

“...Milady, if I may be so bold, are you...feeling alright?” Fawkes's mouth twitched sheepishly, as though he were aware of how lame the question sounded. He grinned hesitantly, trying to approach the situation lightly. “Not that I'm against...*ahem*...redecorating, it's just that Princess Celestia seemed a bit...distracted...”

“Well maybe she should just mind her own damn business.”

The instant that the words had left her lips, she wished they hadn't. At first, Fawkes simply stood there, his eyes wide with surprise, his mouth moving dumbly up and down in silent protest until he finally remembered himself and snapped to attention.

“A...apologies, Milady, I didn't mean to-” he stammered, immediately abandoning any traces of familiarity.

Luna sighed to cut him off, shaking her head in exasperation. She suddenly felt rather tired.

“No...no, I'm sorry, Fawkes. You've done nothing wrong...” she trailed off, frowning her

brow and placing one hoof over the bridge of her muzzle. She let it linger there for a moment or two, then dragged it slowly down the side of her face, releasing a defeated sigh as she did so.

“...I’ve just had a long day, that’s all. Please, come inside.”

Fawkes cocked an eyebrow, eyeing her pensively for several seconds as though he didn’t quite believe it were that simple, but thankfully, he didn’t press the issue. Instead, he silently resigned himself to pouring a stream of scarlet liquid from the teapot before pulling up a cushion on which she could sit. He coughed slightly as he pushed the little silver cup in her direction, not quite willing to meet her eyes. When she took the cup, he moved to stand halfway between the table and the door, apparently not quite sure what to do with himself and ultimately deciding to strike a professional pose and to stare determinedly off into the distance, waiting for her eventual command.

The hair on the back of her neck tingled slightly in the awkward silence as she stalled by taking a long, slow sip, biting back the urge to gag as the still scalding liquid poured down her throat. After testing her tongue on the inside of her mouth to make sure she could speak clearly, she broke the silence, her words tumbling out a bit more quickly than she had intended.

“Fawkes, can I ask you a question?”

He nodded, a nervous grin splitting his features.

“Anything, Milady.”

She hesitated for a moment before continuing, testing the question several times in her mind to see just exactly how absurd it was going to sound.

“How did you get your cutie mark?”

“...I...Milady?”

Luna didn’t respond at first. She simply stared at him, her expression expectant but not demanding. Fawkes paused, not entirely sure how to react to such a personal question from his superior, but neither did he dare to keep his lady waiting. He coughed loudly, attempting to muscle past the restrained formality that had been ingrained in him as a part of his training.

“I...um, well...”

He turned to stare at his own flank. There, ensconced between a pair of willow branches gleamed a single, silver shield. As he gazed at it, it seemed to fill him with a newfound confidence. When he began speaking again, his voice carried a sense of fond nostalgia, his smile returning, a bit less nervous this time.

“Well...it was when I was about nine years old at that year’s summer sun celebration in Trottingham – that’s where I grew up. Princess Celestia hadn’t raised the sun yet, so all of the night’s festivities were still in full swing. I was there with my little sister...but...um, if you don’t mind me asking, milady, why do you ask?”

Luna blinked slowly, trying with some effort not to break her expression of polite curiosity.

“I’m just curious that’s all. It’s...it’s relevant to my research. And please, Fawkes, though I appreciate the thought, you’ve known me long enough to know that you needn’t dwell on formality in my presence.”

“...As you wish, Mil-“

She cocked an eyebrow.

“...Luna.” A slow grin spread across his face before he continued. She recognized that grin – that was the real Fawkes, the pegasus she had come to know as a friend. Out of respect, Fawkes was almost always rigidly formal around her or Celestia, but whenever he and Luna were alone, or if Luna seemed to have a lot on her mind, it was much easier for him to relax and be himself. After serving as her personal caretaker for so many years, Fawkes was somepony she felt comfortable with, and who always seemed to know how to cheer her up when Celestia wasn’t around. As he spoke, Luna felt some of her tension melting away, and was thankful to have some pleasant company to distract her from her troubles.

“As I was saying, I was there with my sister – it was her first time there. My father was busy with his shop, so he had given us some money to enjoy the celebration. He said it was my duty – he told me that he was counting on me to watch over her and make sure she was safe.”

He chuckled gently, momentarily caught up in the memory.

“Anyway, she was so excited that she ran ahead of me. I lost sight of her, just for a second, but evidently that was more than enough time for her to get herself into trouble. When I found her, a group of young colts had stolen her money and were playing keep – away with it behind one of the stalls. When I saw how upset she was, it knocked the fear right out of me. I ran right up to them and demanded that they return her money.”

Luna couldn’t help but frown slightly in admiration. She nodded, anxious to hear the rest of the story.

“...’course, they didn’t like that very much. I did what I could, but small as I was I couldn’t fight them. They knocked me to the ground and started kicking me over and over again while my little sister watched. I had felt so sure, so confident that I had been doing the right

thing when I tried to help my sister, but I was utterly helpless as they beat me to a pulp. I had just about given up when I heard a whole bunch of ponies coming from behind us and the kicking suddenly stopped. When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was the golden armor of the palace guard. I guess we'd made such a fuss that they had heard the commotion and rushed to our aid. My sister explained the situation and they returned our money, and the colts were taken away to be disciplined. That was when it happened - as the guards helped me to my feet, my sister started yelling about something and pointed to my flank. When I looked, there it was. I didn't know at first how it had gotten there or what it meant, but something I had done on that night had earned me my cutie mark."

"So...it was because you protected your sister? Because you stood up to those colts, even though you knew the odds were against you?"

"Well, I guess you could say that, but for me it goes deeper. I didn't know what to make of what I saw. I think I was more angry than anything else."

"Angry?" She blinked in surprise. The word had caught her completely off-guard – she simply couldn't imagine anypony being unhappy about getting their cutie mark.

"Why in Equestria would you be angry?"

"I was angry because for all of my bravado, I could do nothing to help my sister when she needed me. It was like a kick in the teeth, getting a shield for a cutie mark when I felt like nothing more than a punching bag."

"But...I don't understand...you weren't happy at all?"

"Not at first, no. What happened after that was what changed my mind. I was too upset to say much of anything to the guards, so after they returned our money I grabbed my sister and started to take her right back to my father's shop. It was then that I heard a voice that would change my life."

Luna's eyes were wide with anticipation. What had begun as idle curiosity was now reborn as full-fledged fascination.

"A voice? Whose?"

"Princess Celestia."

It was as though she had been slapped in the face. Immediately upon hearing her sister's name, Luna's mood plummeted back into a sour rancor, but Fawkes seemed to be too wrapped up in his story to notice. She felt her face spasm into an intense scowl, just for an instant, as he continued to speak.

“She asked me if my sister and I were alright. I told her I was fine, but she didn’t seem to buy it. I kept telling her that we didn’t need any more help, but no matter how many times I said it, she insisted on escorting us back to the shop. Of course, my father was more than a bit surprised to see her with us, and he asked me if anything was wrong. I told him what had happened, how I had failed to protect her, and how sorry I was for being such a poor excuse for an older brother. But, to my surprise, Princess Celestia vouched for me. She praised me for my bravery, and told my father that my little sister would always be safe in my care. I just couldn’t believe it – here I thought I was having the worst day of my life and the Princess was making me sound like some sort of hero. I tried to tell her she was wrong but-“

“Feh. Good Luck with that.”

“Did you say something?”

“Hm? Oh, no, sorry – just thinking out loud. Please, continue.”

“You sure? I...I haven’t said something to upset you, have I? You look-“

“No, really, it’s fine. So, you were arguing with my sister?”

He cocked an eyebrow, casting an appraising eye upon her before he replied. He wasn’t sure what had caused it, but somehow, Luna suddenly seemed to be a bit on edge. But, being too polite to pry, he simply shrugged, deciding that it would be best to continue his story for the time being.

“...um, yes, well I...wasn’t exactly arguing, per se. You see, I tried to explain that if I were really so heroic, I wouldn’t have needed her guards to rescue me. Regardless of how it may have turned out, she told me, If I were as much of a weakling as I seemed to think I was, I would never have dared to stand up to those colts in the first place, but there was an important lesson to be learned here as well. On that night, she told me something that I’ll never forget.”

“Oh? And what’s that?” Try as she might to prevent it, she couldn’t help but allow a tiny amount of sarcasm to creep into her tone.

“She told me that nopony, no matter how strong their resolve may be, is ever able to do everything by himself. To be a true hero, one must not let fear of failure prevent them from doing what’s right, but one must also not be afraid to ask for help when one needs it. A true hero doesn’t just stand up to adversity, but knows how to rely on others when the battle before him is too great for him to fight alone.”

Luna said nothing, silently mulling the words over in her mind. Typical, she thought – just like her sister to spew some pompous drivel about the power of teamwork or some such

nonsense. She couldn't help but be a bit amazed – somehow Celestia still managed to lecture her when she wasn't even in the room.

“She told me that I had been extraordinarily brave, and that with a little experience, I could become a shield that would protect everyone and everything I care about, and that would be well-loved in return. I was stunned, and I thought to myself, here is a pony that watches over the livelihoods and well-being of every living creature in Equestria. I had never thought about it before, but I realized that even she might need a little help from time to time, and that there was nothing at all wrong with that. The guards that she traveled with were not simply her protectors – she depended on them to help her in carrying out her duties as the ruler of Equestria, and so, in turn, did all of her subjects, myself and my sister included. On that day, I decided that there could be no better way for me to protect and to serve those that I love by becoming one of the royal guard. Needless to say, I have since come to terms with the identity of my cutie mark.”

For several moments all was silent. Luna gazed listlessly into the carpet, her half-finished cup of tea suspended in midair in a bubble of azure light, the dark liquid within it no longer steaming as it had when she had begun drinking. Fawkes's proud smile faltered somewhat, his eyes flicking back and forth between the princess and her teacup. As he cleared his throat, Luna's eyes seemed to slide back into focus, and she jerked her head upward to face him.

“...Luna, If I might be frank, I'd like to say that I could not be happier serving under you. The work I do as your guardian is something that fills me with pride each and every day, and it is with great pleasure that I dedicate myself to serving the peoples of Equestria through you.”

Fawkes...you were always so kind to me...thank you...

“...thank you, Fawkes. I mean that. I just wish my sister could have heard you say that...”

He blinked, his smile drooping in a puzzled frown, but Luna did not respond. Instead, she sighed heavily, absently discarding her still half-full teacup on the tray beside her.

“...Luna? Are you-“

Without warning, Luna's eyes snapped upward to meet his gaze, sparkling with newfound determination. She nodded to herself, as though confirming that her mind was set.

“No, you know what? I'm done wishing.”
In a sudden rush of activity, she jumped to her feet and marched stiffly toward the door.

“L...L-Luna?”

Without turning to face him, she yanked the door open and stomped out into the hall before turning about with an impatient expression on her face.

"I think I fancy going for a walk. Care to join me?"

"I...what? Where did that come fr—"

"I'm in a hurry. You coming or not?"

Before he could reply, she disappeared from his vision as she began running full tilt down the hall toward the nearest staircase. Out of sheer bewilderment, he leapt clumsily to his hooves to follow after her. He called after her as she ran, demanding to know what was wrong, but she simply ran faster, ignoring his pleas.

As she watched the hallways and staircases whip by her younger self one after another, Luna suddenly wanted nothing more than to scream. The feeling had come out of nowhere, but it could not have been clearer; something horrible was about to happen, just as it had a thousand years ago, and just as it had every night in her dreams for two weeks past. She struggled to gain control, but no matter how hard she wished to change her course the ground still rushed past her at an alarming speed, Fawkes still called her name while he fought frantically to keep up, and the younger Luna did not falter for a moment in her resolve.

She could see it. The door, the enormous steel door behind which lay the source of that strange, familiar power that had called to her minutes ago. She was sick and tired of it – every time she tried to prove herself, every time she had tried to help, every time she even tried to have a friendly conversation with somepony, her sister was *always* there. It was *always* about Celestia and what *she* wanted and what *she* had done for their people. For her entire life, she had been outshined by Celestia in every respect, and in that moment she had decided that the only way she was ever going to break free of her sister's shadow was to force her to recognize the fact that she wasn't a weak little child anymore. Everything Celestia had done, she was capable of doing and *then some*.

Deeper and deeper into the castle she ran with Fawkes close behind, and as she descended, her determination seemed to find new strength with each step. She had felt something like the power that now called to her from the castle's depths before; not just in her room, but when she had raised the moon for the first time, and even when she was a child, she remembered hearing its call whenever she had been upset or lonely. But that door was something different. Whenever she had felt the power's presence, it had always come from somewhere deep inside herself. Tonight had been the first time she had felt anything like it coming from an external source, and somehow she knew that it was just what she was looking for, that somehow it was connected to her by an invisible, unbreakable bond. She knew that the power beyond that door was the same as that within herself, yet something about it was different – it almost felt...*alive*...and strong. Far stronger than any magic she had ever known.

Down one final magnificent staircase the pair of ponies plummeted until there, at last, stood the object of her desire. Perhaps it was the light, but the doorway seemed much larger than it had in her vision. It loomed over them as though judging them, daring them to remain in its presence. Almost in the same instant that it had come into view, she heard it.

Like a chorus of half-heard whispers it danced through her ears, beckoning to her from behind the wall of steel. It seemed so loud now, so clear, and yet Luna could not quite seem to grasp what it was saying, only that it wanted desperately for her to come toward it.

“Lun...*hah*...Luna, what the *hay* was that about? What are we doing he-“

“*Ssh!* Listen!”

He gaped at her incredulously, but she ignored him. She squeezed her eyes shut, basking in the eerily familiar sound, trying to understand the words that seemed to tumble over one another and disappear before fully forming. She could just pick out fragments of coherent thought, as though catching a glimpse of a small piece of a photograph, but never being able to resolve the whole picture.

“...Milady, I’m sorry, but this is most irreg-“

“Would you shut up for a second? Just listen! Can’t you hear it?”

She saw...the moon, hanging above the Citadel, basking the world below in silvery brilliance. Below it, a sea of ponies extended outward in every direction, beyond the reach of her vision; they were cheering, chanting a single word over and over again without end, and in their center...

She saw herself standing tall, on a pedestal in the center of a place much like the Promenade, but much, much larger. It was her name – the crowd of ponies were endlessly chanting her name, whistling and whooping all the while. She stood in silent awe, transfixed by the scene that unfolded before her. The Luna she saw smiled and waved to her subjects, beaming proudly, and as the scope of her vision swung about, soaring away from herself and the crowd of adoring ponies, she could see enormous, fantastic shapes dotting the horizon, each shining with a myriad of sparkling lights like the stars in the sky above. Somehow, she knew that they were buildings, cities – an entire civilization living on the foundation that she had created in conducting her magical research.

“...*un...na...*”

As she watched, the world seemed to explode outward in all directions – everywhere she looked, she saw the fruits of magical science in every facet of the society below. It was perfect, utterly perfect just as she never could have imagined it. And best of all – not a single trace of

Celestia's influence was apparent.

"LUNA!"

As abruptly as it had emerged, the shining, perfect world of her dreams shattered, and she was back in the murky hall with her back to a very exasperated Fawkes.

"...Milady, forgive my impertinence, but what in Equestria has gotten *into* you? First you run all the way down here like the castle's on fire without so much as a word of explanation, and then you start swaying back and forth on the spot like you're stuck in some kind of trance!" A bit annoyed at his interruption, she turned to face him. He was clearly starting to become quite nervous, and as a result his automatic formality had begun to reassert itself. He spoke again, a bit more softly this time.

"Lady Luna, *please*, tell me the truth – are you feeling alright?"

"You're telling me that you don't feel it at *all*? You don't hear anything?"

"Luna..." He searched her face with eyes wide with concern. Despite himself, a note of fear crept into his voice.

"Milady, what are you talking about? There's no one here but us..."

Silence. In her frustration, Luna whipped away from him and stomped directly toward the door, staring it down, ignoring the lump that it's colossal shadow summoned in her throat. Part of her was still afraid of what lay beyond that door, but her mind was set – the world she had seen could be her future, could be everypony's future. She could have everything she had ever wanted and more, if only she reached out and took it.

After a moment of intense quietude, Fawkes broke the silence, a shaky note of determination in his voice.

"Milady, as your personal caretaker, I must insist that we return to your room at once. This is wrong – I've heard the things Princess Celestia said about this place, and it's enough for me to know that we shouldn't even be here. Now, come with me –"

Without warning, Luna twirled about on the spot to face him, and the glare with which she fixed him caused him to stop dead.

"Milady, I don't know what's got you out of sorts, but it's readily apparent that you're not yourself. If you do not come with me immediately, I shall be forced to–"

"To what? To go and tell on me?"

“Milady, I-“

Once again she turned away, though her voice lost none of its fire.

“If you really care about my well-being, you’ll stay right here with me. This is something I have to do.”

“Do? What could you possibly have to –“

“And don’t worry, Fawkes, I’m absolutely fine.”

With a last lingering look over her shoulder, Luna smiled back at her faithful companion, finding some vague amusement in his flustered composure.

“In fact, I’ve never felt better.”

Before he could react, Luna was gone. In a flash of brilliant azure light and a mighty crack, she had disappeared on the spot, leaving him bewildered and sputtering in the darkness by himself.

It was as though she had leapt out into the middle of a storm. This was not like any other teleport; normally, she simply imagined the distance that she intended to travel and the threads of her magic pulled her easily in and out of the aether. As she struggled against the current that spilled across her formless existence, it was all she could do to stop herself from dissolving into nothingness. Inch by intangible inch, she forced her way forward, concentrating on the distance that she had intended to teleport across, ignoring the roaring void that threatened to engulf her. Slowly, as though seeing a light at the end of a tunnel, she felt the current begin to weaken, and just when the last of her strength was about to be spent, she felt the sting of the cold, stale air grating against the inside of her lungs as she tumbled head over hoof on the rough stone below. She cursed in the sudden darkness, wincing as the pain from her impact lanced up her hooves.

Inky blackness obscured her vision in every direction, though her ears screamed in protest. The noise that had been but a shadow of a whisper until now roared throughout every piece of her consciousness, screaming in the dark. She cast blindly about, ignoring the urge to clap her hooves over her ears, trying to determine the source of the noise.

This is wrong...why didn't you listen to him?! Get out...get...

Slowly, a faint sphere of light began to form at the tip of her horn as she identified the source of the sound at a point approximately twenty feet in front of her. Almost in the same instant that it came into view, the chorus of screaming voices suddenly ceased, bathing her and

the strange monolith that stood before her in total silence.

Towering over her in the half-light stood a single, broad obelisk that broke off into five distinct arms at its apex, at the end of each of which hung a single stone orb about the size of her head. There, in the center of the display and at the highest point of the obelisk, a sixth orb perched, impossibly balanced on the very tip of the structure. Almost immediately, she noticed something different about that sixth orb – not only was it easily twice as large as any of the others, but unlike the others, its entire surface was completely bare. The five smaller orbs, on the other hand, each had a unique multifaceted design carved into their surface, almost like a two-dimension representation of a gem. Without quite understanding how or why, she knew that those orbs were what had been calling to her, begging for her attention.

Slowly, she stepped toward the alien structure, each footstep echoing endlessly throughout the length of the massive chamber as though she were accompanied by a full host of ponies. The sound seemed to press in on her from every direction, and for a moment, Luna had the fleeting impression that she could hear the countless unseen guardians of this forbidden place charging in to punish her for her hubris. But no matter how her emotions railed against her, no matter how her older self struggled to change the course that she now followed, she felt herself being drawn inexorably toward the base of the obelisk.

It was...impossible, for lack of a better word. The structure as a whole was a thing of depthless beauty; by far the most awe-inspiring thing she had ever witnessed, and yet it somehow also managed to be utterly repulsive to her most basic instincts. As she came to a halt at the structure's base, she found herself wondering at how such a thing ever came to be, no less how it came to be locked away in this place.

For several moments, she stared into the sixth orb as though expecting it to give her some signal to tell her what to do next. In that instant, she felt like a child, a weak and ignorant foal, and had just begun to consider turning back and apologizing to Fawkes when it happened.

are YOU afraid?

The voice had come from within herself, and yet she found her gaze glued to the very center of the sixth orb. As she struggled to respond, to force her lips to form the questions that blazed across her mind, it repeated its simple yet paralyzingly direct inquiry.

are YOU afraid?

"...I..." She paused, drawing a deep, steady breath, forcing herself to approach the situation logically. Though it may have seemed strange on any other day that a lifeless rock had just spoken to her, it somehow felt almost natural that it should ask her such a question.

"Who are you?"

I am you, and you are me.

"I...*what?* No, I mean who am I speaking to? Why can't I see you?"

*I am YOU, and you are me. YOU see me ONLY in seeing YOURSELF. I am ALL THAT YOU were, ALL THAT YOU are, ALL THAT YOU WILL BE, SHOULD YOU HAVE THE **WILL** TO GIVE me LIFE.*

She gawked at the orb, hoping for it to continue, but the voice fell silent once more. She shook her head, trying to think of a more specific way in which she could rephrase her question.

"What do you mean, you are me? Why did you call me here? What is the nature of our connec-"

are YOU afraid?

Luna opened her mouth to repeat her question, but decided against it before the sound left her lips. Whatever it was that was speaking to her seemed determined to have its own question answered before it yielded anything more than riddles in return. For a moment, she considered telling the voice that she wasn't about to be intimidated by some silly talking rock, but something told her that trying to assert her authority here wasn't going to help her much. Besides, though she was somehow certain that it was the orb that spoke to her, the voice had come from somewhere deep inside herself, as though it were actually her that was speaking, as though it already knew the answer that it sought. She inhaled deeply, searching deep inside herself for the truth.

"I don't know what you are, or how we're connected, much less how you are even speaking to me...so yes. I am a little afraid. Is that so wrong?"

For a moment, all was silent as Luna stared stonily into the surface of the orb, determined not to allow her fear to make itself apparent in her features.

"...Did you hear me? I sai-"

WHY are YOU Here?

She paused once more, excited at the progress, however slight it may have been.

"I am here because I heard your call," she answered confidently.

Almost immediately, the voice answered back, drowning out the end of her response

with its own booming presence,

THE FLAME DRAWS THE MOTH, BUT THE MOTH KNOWS NOT WHAT CREATES THE FLAME, NOR CAN HE EVEN COMPREHEND IT AS SUCH. WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Despite herself, she stomped on the ground in frustration.

“Oh come on, don’t start that again! I tol-

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

“I...I don’t know, I...I felt...something, something like my own power, but somehow different. Was that you?”

FEAR OBSCURES THE TRUTH, AND LEADS THE SEEKER ASTRAY. LOOK PAST THE CLOUD OF YOUR FEARS, SEE THE TRUTH THAT GAVE ME BREATH. I DID NOT CALL YOU HERE, NOR AM I THE ONE WHO MUST MAKE THE CHOICE. THE DOOR IS OPEN, YET FEAR BLOCKS THE PATH.

“...fear? What choice? what are you-“

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

She wanted to scream, to demand that the voice stop talking in circles, but she knew that it would only repeat its cryptic question until she found some way to satisfy it.

“The truth...fear obscures the truth...”

How had she answered it before? She had looked inside herself, and answered honestly. But that was the truth, wasn’t it? The only reason that she had come was because she had heard the call of a power that was somehow connected to her own. What did it mean? Why was it talking about fear? So many questions, and at the root of all of them, one burned brighter than the rest.

“Why am I here?”

The moment that she had asked herself that question, it all seemed crystal clear. In a flash, she remembered the perfect world she had seen as she stood outside the door, the world that she had been working toward for all of her life. She remembered the rage, the shame she had felt as she cowered before her sister. As she felt the last smoldering embers of that wrathful passion stir once more, the memory of her friend’s words leapt to the forefront of her

mind:

“...to be a true hero, one must not let fear of failure prevent them from doing what’s right...”

She closed her eyes, finally sweeping aside her fear as she spoke with newfound confidence.

“I am here because I know that I can be so much more than what I am right now. I am here because I’m sick and tired of my sister holding me back when I could do so much to better our society, if only I were given the chance. I am here because I need to prove to my sister and to myself that I can create the future of which I have dreamed.

THEN I ASK YOU AGAIN - ARE YOU AFRAID?

For one final time, Luna closed her eyes, feeling the flow of her emotions begin to settle as she made her decision.

“No. I am not afraid.”

*THEN YOU SHALL KNOW ME, AND KNOW THAT I AM GIVEN LIFE THROUGH THE STRENGTH OF YOUR **WILL**.*

In the same instant that the voice had finished speaking, Luna found herself covering her eyes as she was assaulted by a blast of the brightest light she had ever seen – even with one hoof over each eye, the light filtered through, piercing her eyelids and scorching the flesh beneath. It only lasted for a moment, however - as the light began to fade, she experimentally opened her eyes to let a tiny crack of light filter through, blinking rapidly to clear the fuzzy reddish haze from her vision. At first, the chamber was pitch black once more, her eyes struggling to adjust to the sudden change in brightness, and she wondered briefly if she was even still in the same place, but all other thought was quickly swept aside by what she saw.

It appeared to be a suit of elegantly crafted armor, consisting of a breastplate, a set of greaves, and a helmet, complete with a hole for her horn, all of which were made of shining azure metal. Each piece bobbed gently through the air as they floated downward from the sixth, central orb and came to rest at her feet, all except the helmet, which remained floating at the level of her eyes as the voice spoke again.

*FEAR IS THE NEMESIS OF WILL. YOU HAVE CONFRONTED YOUR FEAR AND MADE THE CHOICE. AS IT HAS BEEN, SO IT ALWAYS WILL BE, THROUGH AGELESS TIME, IT IS THE **WILL** OF THE LIVING THAT SHAPES THE FUTURE FOR OTHERS TO FOLLOW.*

As the helmet bobbed gently up and down before her eyes, she felt her hoof rising to grasp it without her actually commanding it to do so. The armor was the most captivating sight she had ever seen; she could taste the power radiating from it, feel it as it coursed through the air around her, longing for her touch.

KNOW THAT I AM YOU AND YOU ARE ME, THAT THROUGH YOU I AM GIVEN LIFE AND THAT THROUGH ME YOU ARE GIVEN THE SAME. KNOW THAT I AM **VENGEANCE**, AND THAT MY POWER IS NOW YOURS.

As Luna watched her younger self in utter horror, the scene seemed to unfold in slow motion, her own outstretched hoof hanging cruelly in midair, just millimeters away from the faintly glowing dome of polished metal. No words, no last rush of strength came to her aid as the last of the foggy haze that had enveloped her until this moment evaporated in an instant. In a flash of clarity, she could see everything that was about to happen, and knew just as clearly that she would have to sit through every excruciating detail without any hope of stopping it.

The hair on the back of her neck tingled slightly as her hoof made contact with the smooth metal of the helmet, her heart suddenly racing in her chest with an exhilaration that had come out of nowhere to send her mind reeling with the images of her perfect world once more. This was it, she thought; this was all that she needed to make her dreams reality, and it was all hers, made specifically for *her*. It even had a mirror image of her cutie mark, an elegant crescent moon emblazoned in the center of the breastplate. Somehow, though she could not fully understand why it had called to her on this particular night, she felt sure that this was and had always been a part of herself, as though it had been waiting for the right time to awaken. As she lifted the helmet, testing its weight between her hooves, she smiled absently, basking in the rush of possibility.

The same feeling that had washed over her in her bedroom greeted her anew as she lifted the helmet above her head in a bubble of magic, only this time she felt not a shred of fear – the power that pulsed within her and the power that radiated from the armor began to harmonize with one another, fitting together as naturally as the pieces of a puzzle, the waves of magic crashing together within her mind in an intoxicating cascade of adrenaline and shuddering anticipation. As the helmet descended, the tip of her horn sliding easily through the hole at its crest, the air seemed to drain out of the room around her, bathing all that she saw in silence. Slowly, gently, the polished metal slid over her ears, over the bridge of her muzzle, before finally coming to rest atop her mane.

With a sound like shattering glass, everything in her vision went black. Instead of the smooth, organic transition that had separated the previous visions of her past, the images that now flashed before her in rapid succession ripped into her the void of her awareness with sadistic fury.

Before she could fully comprehend the change in her surroundings, Luna found herself running down the moonlit length of one of the Citadel's opulently endowed hallways, the rapid staccato rhythm of her hooves echoing in the night, her vision clouded by a creeping, reddish haze. It was as though she was falling, careening through the darkness without any control over her velocity or direction, the surge of sheer adrenaline consuming every thought before it could fully form. For the first time in her life, the veil of cold, practical logic had been completely lifted away, and like a river overflowing its banks, the raw, bestial glee of the power she felt burning within her flooded her mind with a viciously giddy sense of absolute freedom.

The halls rushed by as though illuminated by the stark, harsh radiance of so many flashes of lightning, each scene lasting but a single curiously vivid instant before being swallowed by darkness. Immediately, her entire being hungered for an opportunity to test the extent of her new power, her mind calling in out with an ecstatic, terrifying abandon for a challenger of any kind. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind that she spotted the small cluster of guards running straight for her. In the space of single second, she saw the guards in the distance and almost immediately felt the feeble, insect-like impacts of their bodies against hers as she knocked them effortlessly aside, the silently screaming face of one terrified unicorn burning into her vision before the light faded from view once more.

In the mere moments that it had taken them to realize her sudden proximity, she had incapacitated them all in a single swoop. The thought sent a shaky, soaring high coursing throughout her entire body. Some small, distant part of her was horrified at what she had just done, but the ease with which she had beaten them, the sheer graceful precision that so naturally came to her as she had instantaneously decided which guard to strike first and exactly how to direct the energy of her attack so as to neutralize, but not permanently harm every one of them was far too powerful for her logical mind to be able to reassert control. Already, she was drunk with it, and hungered for more, even as her older self screamed soundlessly away from her front row seat, utterly helpless to stop the sequence of events that she knew would soon follow.

She felt it again, this time infinitely more vivid, as though each resounding pitch sprang from the vital rhythm of her own heart. The same wordless, intoxicating melody beat within her very soul, the same hauntingly unreachable tune that had called to her in the distance now building with furious intensity. The pounding of her heart beat as the drum that drove her ever faster, the rasping of her breath as the prelude to the deafening crash that would come at the crescendo's peak.

The very air around her seemed to shudder in fear as the first peals of manic laughter came bubbling up from the bottom of her lungs, the sound tearing into the darkness, echoing endlessly throughout the halls as she thundered up one staircase after another. Each slice of moonlight that slashed across her vision added to her sudden and overwhelming thirst for freedom. For what felt like ages, the halls stretched agonizingly onward until at last, at the end of one final stretch of blackness, a small sphere of silver light called her out into the open.

With a sound like an avalanche, Princess Luna burst from the shadows of the Citadel's labyrinthine corridors, the cool night air washing over her like the first drops of water come to slake an ancient thirst. Before her hooves could touch the soft, dewy grass for more than an instant, she blasted off into the night sky. Up she soared, up above the walls of the gardens, above even the tallest of the Citadel's high towers and still higher, until at last she turned and stopped dead, her wings churning the air with each powerful thrust as she hovered in place.

The full, shining moon stared gently back at her, its silken radiance bathing the world below in an eerily static beauty. As she looked into its looming silver face, she could feel the cold, silent fury of its light pouring into her, the sudden rush of its shining presence ballooning within her as though nothing else existed. She basked in the ebon magnificence of the endless night that engulfed the world below, relishing the feeling of the wind that whistled through her feathers with the exhilarating chill of sheer altitude. The laugh that burst from her throat pierced the sky, sounding oddly shrill in the thin air, falling around her like an invisible rain. The raw, unadulterated bliss that surrounded her made her feel like an entirely different pony, as though young, impotent little Princess Luna was naught but a distant memory. She inhaled, taking a long, greedy draught of the night air, shuddering as its invigorating aroma seeped slowly down into her lungs and sent her heart dancing in a euphoric jig.

As her wings sliced effortlessly through the air, and the giddy ecstasy of her freedom began to fade, she slowly became aware of a new feeling. It was not emotional, at least, not directly, but it seemed to permeate every inch of her body, as though it flowed through her blood with every beat of her heart. For the first time since her escape, she looked down at her body. What she saw sent a strange, tingling fear shooting down her spine, but with it came a distinctly fresh joy. Her once soft lavender fur had become a deep, elegant black, sparkling with a sheen almost like metal in the moonlight. Her limbs, too, had lengthened, and bulged slightly with powerful bands of sinew and muscle that stretched from her hooves across her entire body. She flexed experimentally, feeling the ease with which they responded, sensing the power of the tension in each hoof. Her wings and mane had undergone a similar transformation; each magnificent tenebrous feather swept easily through the air like a blade through butter, extending in a great arc of black against the deep violet of the night sky. A sparkling cloud of cobalt fog sprouted from the back of her neck and swirled about her, enveloping her in a cascade of twinkling lights shining as brightly as the stars above.

Next she looked to her torso. Across her chest lay the smooth curve of the same azure metal she had seen in the depths of the castle, complete with the crescent moon mirror-image of her cutie mark in the center of the breastplate. Reflected in the metal's shining surface, two pale green eyes, their pupils long, narrow slits like those of a cat, stared ravenously back at her. Those eyes – at once frightening and captivating – widened in surprise, darting nimbly back and forth as they examined the dim outline of the face reflected in the armor's surface. Just as with the rest of her body, the fur on her muzzle was black, but the shape of her face had changed, as well. Her features no longer hinted at the youthful roundness of the reflection to which she had

become accustomed. Rather, the angle of her jaw had sharpened and the length of her muzzle had grown into a sleek, elegant curve that meshed perfectly with the shape of the dome of polished metal atop her head.

She looked...beautiful, she thought. As refined and mature as her sister ever had, if not more so. If only Celestia could see her now...

If only Celestia...

She faltered suddenly in midair, her head jerking upward as she found an utter and profound sense of revulsion churning in her gut.

Celestia...if Celestia could see me now...

Her vision flashed with the images of her sister's disapproving glare when she had slapped her in her bedroom, and every other time she had been dismissed, or chided, or told just how much she still had to learn.

Celestia...why would I want her to see me?

Once again she saw the Promenade as she had on every birthday of her seventeen years past. There she stood, not surrounded by her peers or by those she loved, but by strangers; the ponies ever to come to her birthdays were only those who already knew her sister. The only reason they ever came was because Celestia had asked them to do so.

The thought sent a sudden spark of anger arcing into her thoughts. Her wings beat the air ever faster, her lips twitching upward to expose a long row of shockingly white teeth as she whipped her head this way and that, taking in the scene of the Citadel below. Everywhere she looked, she saw the banners bearing the intertwined sun and moon, the very emblem of her identity bound forever to her sister's shining sun.

...Why would I want her to be here now? She's always here, even when I want to be alone, and especially when I don't.

All of those ponies...every one of them had come to the Promenade on her sixteenth birthday by her sister's bequest, all so that they could see her raise the moon...

Her sister's words floated unbidden across her mind.

"Luna, for your birthday present...I'm giving you the moon."

Slowly, her gaze lifted away from the castle below to fix once more upon the enormous silver sphere. As she felt its cold light wash across her face, a low growl began to rumble in her throat.

Giving me the moon? Giving ME the moon?

She squeezed her eyes shut, the growl now building rapidly in volume as she poured a stream of magic into the tip of her horn.

“You...”

Her eyes snapped open, locking onto the nearest tower as she dove, aiming straight ahead to the tower’s apex. There, hanging beneath one of its narrow windows, her target hung fluttering limply in a gentle breeze.

“Who...the *hell*...do you think you ARE!”

Without even making the conscious decision to complete the spell, she saw the tower detonate in a catastrophic blast of shattered stone and splintering wood. As its crumbled shaft began to collapse, the royal banner that had been at the explosion’s epicenter fell pathetically downward from its lofty perch, burning in a brilliant orange blaze of scattered threads.

The tower was not enough. With a single thought and all of the effort it would have taken to crush an insect, she had demolished it instantly, and her anger immediately leapt to the next available target as she fell screaming from the sky.

Far below, the elegantly curved walls of the Ivory Citadel were bathed in flash after flash of blinding orange light as the jagged purple shards of magic fell from the sky, vaporizing everything they touched. She sliced through the air, flying at a speed her normal, smaller wings never would have been capable of matching.

The song of her rage sounded clear across the castle grounds as she roared in blind ecstasy, swooping high into the air to examine the extent of her work. As she came to a stop above the clouds, she panted heavily, the chilly night air stinging her nostrils. Far below, the first cries of alarm floated up to her ears as the castle burned away in all directions.

Every banner, every sign of her sister’s influence had been obliterated. She grinned to herself, watching all of the little glinting shapes darting impotently about as they struggled to find the source of the attack. Once again, some tiny little voice in her mind screamed in protest, but the noise was drowned beneath the fresh wave of laughter that escaped her lips.

Where are you? She thought, her impatience getting the better of her. *It’s only a matter of time...*

She closed her eyes, basking in the waves of acrid smoke and panicked voices, focusing one final blast of magic into the tip of her horn. With a mighty roar, the night was cleaved in two

about her as the lance of blinding violet light exploded from her horn, rocketing downward to splash across the gardens, setting them ablaze.

In the same moment, a shadow flashed into being at the edge of her vision. Her grin widened grotesquely, the intoxicating mix of rage and exhilaration sending her heart racing to new heights. Without turning to face her, she greeted the newcomer with a single word.

“You...”

Celestia hovered at her level with at least twenty pegasi at either side, staring directly into her eyes.

Luna remembered that look; she would never be able to forget it. As she gazed through the eyes of her younger self, she could see as clear as day that her sister had no idea who she was.

“You’re late to the party, *sister*. You *know* I don’t like to be kept waiting...”

Her voice...younger Luna suppressed another laugh. She hadn’t noticed it until now, but even her voice had changed. It was fierce, yet elegant. Frightening, yet beautiful. The perfect voice for a Princess...

Or a *Queen*.

“Who are you? I demand that you stop this at once or I will be forced to take action!” She goggled at her sister, somewhat surprised. “Really, Celestia? I’ve just blown up about half of your castle, and you’re asking me if I want to surrender? Pompous to the end, aren’t you?”

“Enough of this! You cannot-“

“NO!”

Without even having to focus, the force of her voice sent the entire flight of ponies before her spiraling out of control. They fluttered spastically, trying to regain altitude and to reform their ranks as Celestia barked orders in every direction.

Luna sneered, booming down at them with unparalleled delight at the sound of her own voice.

“I will say when it is enough! I will dictate what’s going to happen here, and I will be the one giving out *pardons* – if I see fit.”

The moment that she had regained herself, Celestia wasted no time in retaliating.

Without a word, she swung one hoof sharply downward, sending her guardians hurtling forward as she began to charge a spell.

Luna was ready. Before they could travel more than a few feet, all of them were suddenly enveloped in an enormous violet sphere. One by one, their wings slowed to a halt, and they fell like stones from the air, unconscious. All except Celestia, who, seeing their peril, immediately abandoned her attack and swooped sharply downward.

Luna cackled gleefully to herself, sending blast after blast of searing purple energy arcing downward, taking care not to hit her sister directly but to force her to dance crazily about as she attempted to cast the spell that would rescue her guards. It was a marvelous game to the young Princess, watching the object of her envy jerking to and fro like a puppet on a string, utterly obedient to her will.

With a mighty grunt, Celestia dodged one last lance of heat and loosed a brilliant flash from her own horn. In an instant, the guards' descent ceased, and each of them floated to the ground as gently as a feather where they lay there, motionless. The moment that she was sure they were safe, she streaked angrily upward to meet her attacker once more.

But Luna did not continue her attack. She simply hovered with a wide, hungry grin plastered across her face, enjoying every second of her sister's anguished expression.

Celestia glared at the mysterious creature before her, panting heavily. Luna had never seen her like this before; it was at once terrifying and majestic, and a part of her could not help but find a sense of reluctant awe in her sister's presence. The same reckless hunger assaulted her from within, itching for just a taste of her sister's power to compare to her own. She waited, but it soon became clear that Celestia wasn't about to be as reckless a second time, not when she knew just what she was capable of.

"Learned some respect, have we? It's about damn time."

Celestia said nothing, her horn crackling fiercely as she launched a missile of light straight toward her. With an absent sigh, Luna dodged easily to the side as her sister's attack shot harmlessly past.

"I'm surprised, Celestia. You're usually not this sloppy. Or maybe I'm just *better*."

The moment that she had come to a halt, Celestia whipped about as she sent another bolt of white light spiraling toward her. She moved to dodge once more, but this time, Celestia had been ready. The spell split apart into an enormous glowing net, wrapping itself tightly around the younger Princess as they collided in mid-flight.

She panicked for a moment, her wings held uselessly at her side. As the ground rushed

upward to meet her, she flexed her limbs against the shining walls of her prison until with a mighty effort, her newfound strength broke through the threads of magic and she swooped sharply upward to meet her sister once more.

This time, her smile had disappeared, replaced by an angry scowl.

“Not bad, Celestia. But let’s not fight; if that’s the best that you can do I doubt you’d last very long, anyway.”

For just a second, Celestia was struck motionless by the shock of seeing her spell so quickly broken. Recovering herself, she simply continued to glare at her in silence, but did not attack. She hovered uncertainly, her great ivory wings churning the air about her as she searched Luna’s face for any sign of her next move.

Far below, the castle continued to burn, and the cries of alarm had been replaced by the shouting of orders as guards throughout the grounds struggled to douse the flames. The fury of the blaze cast a jittery orange glow upon the royal sisters as they circled slowly about each other in the air like a pair of vultures surveying the wreckage below.

“What do you want?” Celestia’s voice quaked with barely controlled rage.

Luna smiled.

“...Just to talk.”

Celestia growled, but made no other response, keeping her eyes locked with Luna’s own.

“No, really...That’s all I wanted. Well, alright, I’ll be honest: I want to do the talking while you do the listening. I thought it would be a refreshing change of pace, don’t you?”

She began to circle faster, and Celestia instantly matched her movements. They spiraled high into the air, above the smoke and flames, neither of them breaking their respective glares even to blink.

“I want what I’ve always wanted, and what you’ve systematically denied me since the day of my birth...” she whispered, her tone even and calm. Nothing would prevent her from earning the respect she knew she *deserved*; not this time, not ever again.

Celestia faltered slightly, a shadow of doubt flickering across her features.

“Who are you?!” she asked again, her voice slightly hesitant. “Why do you speak as though you know me?”

Luna was beginning to lose patience again. Her sister's surprise had been amusing at first, but her ignorance, feigned or not, annoyed her now.

"You really don't recognize me? I should be hurt."

Slowly, she picked up speed, circling gradually closer.

"Stop playing games, you *fiend*. Tell me why you're doing this!"

"Ooh, now we're calling names are we? You're lectures aren't usually so petty."

"What are you-"

"*Think*, Celestia. Look at me, I *know* you can see. Even you can't be this stubborn." Suddenly, Celestia stopped. She hovered closer, not enough to be in immediate danger but close enough to take a long, hard look into her eyes. She simply stared at her, taking in every aspect of her unfamiliar form, until at last her eyes fell to the crescent moon on her breastplate. Immediately, all of the color drained from her face, her jaw spasming weakly as she backpedaled in midair. When she spoke again, her voice carried none of the rage or authority it had held moments before, but squeaked with an utter and paralyzing loss.

"What...what did you..."

Luna laughed, a cruel, sadistically gleeful cackle as she saw the spark of dawning realization shining in her sister's eyes.

"Do you like my new look, Celly? It's a bit much, I know, but I think I could get used to it." Luna turned so that her sister could see the crescent moon Cutie Mark on her ebon flank, striking an impressive pose to show off her powerful physique. As if in a trance, Celestia drifted closer, reaching a single hoof forward. Luna allowed her to approach, even as Celestia caressed her cheek, staring up and down the length of her body in silent horror. The two sisters hovered there, face to face, as Luna waited with shuddering anticipation for her elder sister to speak.

Celestia's jaw quivered weakly, her eyes still wide with shock.

"What did you *do*?" she asked simply.

Luna blinked innocently.

"Me? Why, I can't take all of the credit. After all, where would I be without my dear *sister!*"

The attack was too quick to dodge, even for Celestia. She spun away, an angry streak of crimson staining the fur on her face where Luna's hoof had connected. Before she could collect herself, Luna bolted forward, slamming into her sister with enough force to send them both tumbling downward toward the wreckage below.

The sight of her sister's blood sent an odd spike of nauseating adrenaline into Luna's gut. She had not intended to strike as powerfully as she had, but at the same time the sudden and consuming anger that she had felt at her sister's appearance hungered blindly for more. Every time her sister had dismissed her, every time her hopes had been crushed after working so hard just to please her...

One way or another, she would make her feel that pain.

In a mighty bloom of smoke and with a sound like thunder, the Princesses collided with one of the Citadel's sloping walls. With a sharp grunt, Celestia tumbled over herself, skidding to the ground twenty feet below as her younger sister hovered victoriously over her, grinning with rabid glee.

"Incredible...I can see why you lied, Celestia. It's only natural to fear competition." Scrambling to her hooves, Celestia spat the dirt from her mouth, her face still rigid with disbelief. She simply stared at her little sister, too stunned to move.

"Luna...Luna what have you done? Can you...can you even hear me?"

As silently as a fish through water, Luna arced gracefully down to meet her, scattering the thin layer of ashes that had already formed on the grass beneath her as she landed.

"I've done nothing *but* hear you sister. What choice did I have? But if I've learned anything it's that what you haven't been telling me is what's truly *important!*"

With a sharp grunt, she swung again, but this time her sister was prepared. In a somewhat clumsy leap, Celestia darted away just as the tip of Luna's hoof caught the last feathers of one wing. She whirled about on one hoof, nearly toppling over herself in the process, and turned to face her younger sister just in time to greet the next blow.

Luna's shining black hoof connected with Celestia's jaw with a sharp crack, and almost immediately a small blossom of scarlet began to sprout from her pale lips. The force of the blow destroyed what shaky balance she had managed to achieve, sending the Princess painfully earthward where she landed spread-eagled on her stomach.

"How does it feel, big sister? HOW DOES IT FEEL?!"

The voice that spoke Luna's words was savage, flying at her elder sister like the claws of a hungry beast. Somehow, her anger seemed to grow with every second that she watched Celestia flounder before her. It was insulting; the thought that she had been held in place by this hypocritical weakling enraged her, driving her far beyond the point of restraint. She bolted at her sister, leaping forward to strike with both hooves.

In an instant, Celestia seemed to shake aside any lingering traces of bewilderment. She leapt to her feet in a single swift motion, her wings flaring wildly at her sides. Just as Luna's hooves came within an inch of striking her once more, she turned to face her sister, a faint spark of pinkish light flaring across the tip of her horn.

Luna stopped dead, the tip of one forehoof just barely brushing the side of Celestia's muzzle before freezing in midair. Immediately, she attempted to correct for her sudden and inexplicable loss of momentum, but her body had gone completely rigid; she tumbled forward, her helmet connecting with the ground with a hollow *thunk*. She snarled, whipping her head this way and that, but the rest of her body refused to give any notice that she was commanding it to move. Despite the furious hatred that had bloomed within her at the indignity of her falter, she was suddenly and utterly impotent, and this only enraged her all the more.

Celestia simply gazed in silence at her little sister as she flailed on the ground, a soft pink mist enveloping all save for Luna's head. Whether from the force of her emotion or the strain of maintaining her spell, Luna wasn't sure, but she could clearly see the spastic twitching in her sister's features as she gazed blankly downward.

Indeed, Celestia seemed as though it was taking all of her willpower just to remain standing. Through gritted teeth, her breath hissed harshly with the strained rise and fall of her chest. Her eyes roamed across her little sister's body once more until they came to rest on the helmet just above her eyes.

"L...Luna?"

The word was barely above a whisper. Luna grunted angrily up at her, still unable to move.

"The armor...th-that's...that's it, isn't..."

She trailed off, unable to finish. With what seemed like a tremendous effort, she squinted, the light from her horn spiking in intensity as Luna felt a strange pressure around her ears.

"NO! Don't you DARE!" she howled, pulling away with all her strength. Slowly, she felt the gentle weight of the metal dome lifting away.

Celestia opened her mouth, but whatever she had been about to say was choked out of existence before it could pass her lips. Her horn crackled suddenly, a cascade of sparks falling about her as the light that surrounded the helmet began to waver.

Luna sensed her chance. With an enraged roar, she flexed her wings outward, and immediately felt the shell of her sister's magic shatter like cheap porcelain. She thrust powerfully forward, connecting with her sister's neck as she knocked her to the ground once more.

This time, she didn't get up. All of her energy had been depleted in the few moments that she had managed to keep Luna pinned.

With a slight shift of her neck, the helmet slid easily back into place. Luna snorted in prideful disgust, leisurely walking over to her sister's side where she knelt to bring her eyes level with Celestia's pale face. Without a word, she took in the scene before her, a slow, cruel grin creeping across her lips.

Her sister's body shuddered slightly with each breath, and the sight of Celestia's incapacity made her feel...Luna searched for the right name to identify the sensation. This was something unprecedented; ever since she had left the castle she had envisioned this moment, had shuddered with the anticipation of her undeniable victory. And yet, as she stared down at the victim of her ambition, she could not escape the persistence of the single word that was thrust to her attention.

Dissapointed.

"What?" she whispered, her grin suddenly fading.

"Luna..." Celestia choked as she struggled to lift herself from the ground. "Luna, please... if you're in there, please answer me..."

Luna's face quickly contorted into one of profound disgust, stepping away from her sister as though she were something utterly repulsive.

"What?!"

"I know...I know what you did..." Shakily, she rose to all fours, spitting a small spatter of blood that stained the grass beneath her hooves black. "It's alright. I know it can be confusing, but you don't have to let it control you..."

"SHUT UP!"

She panted heavily, her eyes darting aimlessly about. It wasn't that she was afraid – far

from it – but seeing her sister so easily reducing to a stumbling, spitting mess had completely upended her grasp on the situation. A part of it was little else than blind anger: as though she was purposefully holding back. She had expected a fight, a lengthy and difficult battle that would ultimately prove to her sister and herself how foolish and naïve Celestia had been when she were finally declared the victor. She refused to believe that the sister whom she had admired for so many years could look at her like that, for no other reason than knowing who she really was.

She couldn't believe that Celestia looked scared.

"What right have you to lecture me now? Do you think I'm stupid? I can see it painted all over your face, *Celly*. You're afraid of me. You're terrified!"

"Luna, no. I'm not afraid of you, sister, I could never be—"

"LIAR!" she screamed, stomping the ground as loudly as she could. For all of her power, for all of her brilliance, she suddenly felt like nothing more than a child, and it infuriated her.

"Have you no shame?! If you're not going to face me properly you can at least be honest! And you call yourself a Princess. The only reason you stopped fighting was because you realized who it was that was fighting back!"

"You...you used the power of the Stones, didn't you?" she panted, slowly advancing on her little sister. As she walked, the flames that engulfed the garden nearby now turned their jittering orange fangs upon the grass behind her, casting a stark shadow that stretched far beyond the reach of her hooves.

"In the sanctum, behind the door...You saw it didn't you?"

Luna's eyes shot wide, the image of the bizarre, looming silhouette of the Sanctum's structure flashing before her mind's eye.

"I...what?"

"They asked you a question, didn't they? They spoke to you like they'd known you all your life."

"H...How did you-?"

"The power that you're feeling...It's intoxicating. Frightening, even. But that's not what matters, Luna, because you're strong. You're strong enough to control it. Please—"

"What could you possibly know about how I feel?! How could you ever understand?!"

This time, Luna stood her ground. She scowled at her sister, her anger rising once again.

"I'm sorry Luna..."

"Stop that." She growled, her tone biting through her sister's voice with a heavy finality.

"Take your anger out on me, if you must, but do not harm anypony else. Do not do anything more that you will regret, Luna..."

"I SAID SHUT UP!!"

Without warning, Celestia was knocked to the ground with a sickening crack, the once resplendent white fur on her chest still glowing at the edges of the sizeable scorchmark that Luna's spell had left behind. Luna didn't even wait for Celestia to touch the ground before launching herself forward, spit flying in all directions as she bellowed at the top of her lungs.

"I HATE YOU! All you do, all you ever do is lecture, lecture, lecture. And now, here I am, finally capable of making my dreams reality, finally capable of making you see just how much stronger I am and you have the GALL to tell me what to do?! I can't believe you!"

Celestia gasped for breath, her hooves scraping the ground as she tried to claw at the burning patch on her chest.

"You knew...you knew all along about the power of those Stones, and yet you never once, not ONCE, saw fit to share that power with me?! Admit it! You never wanted a sister...you just wanted a PET! A good little girl to stay locked in the dark so that you'd always have somepony to PITY!!"

"Luna..." she whispered, her voice hoarse. "Luna, no...I never wanted-"

"Don't. Call me that..." she growled, each word quaking with blistering hatred. "Don't you ever call me that again. I don't need you, not anymore. If I am to have a name, it will be one that I deem fit for Equestria's new ruler."

Celestia tried once more to rise to her hooves, but her legs collapsed beneath her as though they were made of jelly. The only sound that escaped her lips was a faint, feeble cough.

"If I am to have a name, it will be one that ponies fear and respect! It will be a name that reminds them of who they speak, and just as vividly assures them of the consequences of disrespecting me as you have."

As she spoke, her head lifted slowly to face the sky. Directly above, shining like a great mottled eye, her beautiful moon hung in ominous silence, a perfect foil to the crackling chaos that engulfed the world below.

“The mistress of the night...more powerful and far wiser than the Goddess of the Sun ever could be...I will be called Nightmare...Nightmare Moon!”

The name had come from deep inside herself, from that same inner voice that told her now to step purposefully forward. Immediately upon hearing it spoken, it satisfied her deeply. She flexed her powerful body as though trying it on for size, relishing in its magnificence.

Her hooves made not a trace of sound as they carried her toward Celestia’s floundering form. She glared hatefully downward, eyeing her sister as she would the tattered remains of a half-squashed slug.

“Pathetic. I don’t know what sickens me more; the fact that I used to look up to you or that somepony as shallow and petty as you could have held me back for so long...”

She knelt once more, staring into her sister’s eyes at point blank range.

“Maybe now you’ll finally understand...after I lock you away in a cramped little laboratory, far from everything you know and love. I wonder just how long can you go without seeing your beloved *sun*.”

Celestia made no sound. Instead, her lips moved as though to form two soundless syllables as she tried to whisper her name, a single fat tear rolling down the side of her face as she did so.

“In fact, I think you and your *subjects* have relied on your little crutch for far too long. A *real* Princess can rule their people without such resorting to such petty means. I will show them all just how much they don’t need you. Under my rule...this night will last forever.”

“No.”

The voice had come from somewhere behind her, and in the same instant that it entered her thoughts she whirled about to face its speaker.

Though his features were somewhat muddied by a thin layer of ash and one wing hung limply at his side, Luna recognized his face immediately.

“By my sworn duty as your personal caretaker and loyal attendant, I must ask that you stop this, Milady.”

To emphasize the point, Fawkes thrust his chest outward, though the gesture's effect was somewhat diminished by the soot that tarnished his armor. Nonetheless, Luna could not help but be struck in silent awe for a moment at his sudden and inexplicable appearance.

Fawkes?! Fawkes, no! You can't be here! This is when...

But the thoughts of her older self, however frantic, fell upon deaf ears. In a show of haughty indifference, she chuckled dismissively in his direction.

"I suppose it's ironic that you recognized me right off the bat. Even Celestia took a couple of minutes—"

"No." he repeated, shaking his head sadly, his tone surprisingly defiant. Luna couldn't remember a time when he had been so forcefully direct. She paused, cocking a curious eyebrow.

"You are not my Lady Luna..." he said flatly. "The Luna I know would never have done any of this."

Without warning, Luna felt her confidence take a sudden blow. Though she had not exactly had the opportunity to predict his response, this had not at all been how she had expected Fawkes to react. He simply stared at her in silence for a few moments, causing her to grin, suddenly unsure what to do with herself.

"The only reason I recognized you at all was that I happened to overhear what Lady Celestia just said. I was there with the group of pegasi that you nearly *killed* when Princess Celestia ordered us to attack.

He blinked slowly, his face twitching slightly into an expression she Luna couldn't quite place.

"When you nearly killed *me*."

His tone for once was deathly serious, and it was not something with which she was certain she was ready to cope. She turned about fully to face him, her grin now gone as she looked him over from head to hoof. Something that wasn't quite shame tugged at her conscience as she gazed into his icily steady eyes.

"I'm surprised at you, Fawkes. I was just having a little fun, that's all. I never really intended to hurt anypony, least of all you," she quipped, her tone somewhat indignant. "I thought you'd understand that. It's not as though you were in any genuine danger."

He didn't blink, nor did his face waver in the slightest, but that didn't stop Luna from

sensing something new in his expression. His features were livid, and yet, something in his eyes seemed almost...sad.

“I see... Then this is what you call fun, is it?”

He gestured with his wing, which she now saw had been partially burned with what was left of his feathers blackened and charred all along the edges, while with his other wing he motioned to the area at large. The flames throughout the castle still burned as brightly as ever, and the dull rumble of the burning gardens had grown to a deafening roar as the flames spread ever closer. Luna simply grimaced, suddenly angry at his intrusion. He was being stubborn; she was in control, and his lack of faith in her abilities was rather annoying her.

“Fawkes...” Celestia coughed as she finally found the strength to speak again. Luna glanced quickly behind, having momentarily forgotten her sister’s presence, but did not turn to face her.

“Fawkes, stay...out of this. There’s no need for you to get hurt...”

“On the contrary, Milady...” he replied without taking his eyes off of his charge. “With all due respect, it is my duty to prevent any harm to come to Lady Luna, even if that harm be inflicted by none other than herself.”

His voice was earnest, almost comically noble as he stated what to him seemed to be an obvious fact. Luna loosed a single, barking laugh, recovering from her surprise at his appearance, though still not quite sure how to interpret the way his conduct was making her feel.

“Oh Fawkes, I’m touched. But you needn’t be so eager to protect me. I think it’s fully evident by now that I can handle-“

“The only thing evident to me, is that you have allowed your temper to control you.” Fawkes whispered, instantly abandoning his previous manner in favor of one far more dire.

The words immediately put an end to Luna’s thought process. His tone had pierced straight through her like a white-hot arrow, leaving nothing in its wake but the bitter ache of a deep and profound shame. If nothing else, Luna felt as though she had just been berated by her own very disappointed father, and the feeling only compounded upon itself as he continued, his expression icily blank.

“Celestia was right. You are behaving childishly, and it is time somepony made you realize that.” He stepped easily forward, his features set with such determination that she could only watch as he approached. “I did not dedicate my life to serving you so that I could allow you to throw everything you’ve ever cared about away like this. Step aside, Luna, and stop this

foolishness before you destroy what respect I still have for you.”

And there they were, the words that she never could have imagined leaving Fawkes’s lips, and yet she could not deny the howling emptiness within her that they left behind. She simply stood there, her confidence suddenly faltering badly as she stared into Fawkes’s eyes and knew that he fully meant every word.

Perhaps at the time, she didn’t fully register the feeling in her head; there was not enough rationality left to put the pieces together, but her heart knew better than words could tell what it had felt. It wasn’t his words, or the way he said them, but the look in his eyes as he glared unblinkingly back at her. In the same moment that she identified the emotion in his eyes as complete and utter betrayal, she felt her own heart break.

But sorrow was only a brief reality in the waking of her mind. She stared first at her companion, then to her sister, and back and forth between them. The loyal knight that had stayed by her side, always there for her with a gentle smile, and the object of her hatred, bleeding on the ground in shameful defeat. He was protecting her...the thought dawned with a sickening wrench of her stomach. After so many years, after all of his kind words, when her moment of glory had come, he had chosen Celestia.

He had chosen her sister...over her...

She wasn’t exactly sure how it happened. The conscious decision to act never actually crossed her thoughts, but rather, the movements of her body seemed to take place outside of the field of her own awareness. The only thing that she did register was the sudden heat within her heart, the momentarily crushing sense of despair flaring quickly and violently into a hot and passionate rage.

Hate. She hated him. The world around her seemed to rapidly condense into a ball of screaming noise as the events of the past few hours all began happening at once, flashing across her perception in rapid succession, each accompanied by its own spark to add to the fire. Through the haze of her suffering, she watched as she turned to face her sister, a strange, jittery light emanating from just above her vision.

In the same moment, Fawkes’s eyes shot wide in shock as he darted forward, already too slow to stop her. Celestia’s crumpled form filled her vision as the light grew brighter, and she found her vision settling somewhere around her throat, just above the collarbone. Her sister said nothing, but neither did any sound seem able to permeate Luna’s awareness by this point; nothing but a steady, piercing whine broke the silence as her horn gave one final flare, and detonated in a blast of dazzling purple light.

It was slow, cruelly slow as she watched the beam of malevolent energy leave her horn, boring through the air like a worm through an apple’s core, greedily devouring everything it

touched. Fawkes's hooves entered her vision first, his burned and battered body following close behind as he flung himself before the magic's path, a silent, sadly distant picture of loss painting his face. Even as the spell's first fulminous finger touched his golden armor and she felt the air driven sharply from her lungs, the instantaneous and mercilessly throttling surge of regret came far too late to allow her to act.

He smiled, before it was over. Just before the light left his eyes, he smiled at her, just as he always had, as though he were telling her that everything was going to be alright. That kind, carefree grin burned itself into her memory, searing her thoughts in a permanent guilty scar, before with a sudden flash, that moment was over.

Fawke's lifeless body crashed to the earth, his mouth still frozen in a friendly smirk that no longer quite reached his magnificent orange eyes.

All at once, the reality of her deed completely and violently snapped her thoughts into a state of screaming clarity. She could not bring herself to blink, nor could she coax a single choked breath from the frozen steel weights that had once been her lungs. The light of the rising flames cast an eerily stark light upon the pegasus's face, reflecting dully off the empty orbs of his eyes in a cruel mimicry of the life they once held. Yet no sound could reach her, even as Celestia rose shakily to her feet, her face gaunt and drawn with shock. She felt...nothing. Not pain or sadness or regret, nor the stirring, crimson rage that had burned not a moment ago, just...nothing.

Celestia's mouth moved in slow motion, but Luna could not begin to tear her gaze away to try to make out what it was she was saying. Instead, the only outside force that could penetrate her polarized awareness was a faint trickle of pinkish light that seemed to creep into her field of vision from every direction at once. The spell...some tiny spark of cogency sputtered feebly in the yawning void, the thought it whispered so tiny yet nearly deafening in the emptiness that surrounded it. The spell that had been intended to imprison her sister had been too strong...far too strong for her to control, and now...

A single tear. A flash of blinding pink light. An endless scream, clawing through her body like a hail of bullets. The final memory of a friendly smile...All of these thoughts flashed before her, singular, disconnected, and excruciating.

Luna screamed. It was a sound of unbound, bestial agony, like the deathcry of a rabbit just before its existence is severed. Her chest heaved violently as her limbs exploded outward in all directions, failing wildly as though to fend off the freezing cold that suddenly and inexplicably assaulted her senses. She registered a sharp, stinging pain in one wing, and then a rush of vertigo before, with a heavy thud, something cold and hard collided painfully with her face. All around her, something soft and warm seemed to envelop her body, binding her limbs at odd angles, wrapping more and more tightly about her as she struggled blindly in her terror.

A deafening crash, barely audible above her own persistent shrieks. The sound of hooves impacting dully on the carpet, skidding to a halt just around her head. The blood still pounded in her temples as she flailed in blindness, and through the murk of bewilderment, the first words began to take shape.

“What...? Get them...doc...!”

“Lun...hear me?! It’s al...”

She felt something pulling on her legs, but the sudden proximity simply terrified her further. Her horn flared wildly, sending a lancing pain arcing deep into the back of her skull, but the flood of adrenaline and noise all but obliterated the sensation in almost the same instant that it came into being. Somepony was calling out a name, over and over again, drowning out all of the other voices in the room. Her heart beat ever faster, as though it were about to burst, just before...

“MOVE.”

Somehow, without being exactly loud or particularly fierce, the presence of that single word blasted all other sound out of existence beneath it. Immediately, Luna felt the rush of vertigo again as she was lifted bodily into the air by some unseen force, the warmly strangling entity tearing violently away in a single snapping motion to be replaced almost instantly by something new.

A different sort of warmth surrounded her now, but it was not outwardly hostile, nor did it attempt to restrain her as she flailed against it, still screaming though her lungs were raw and sore. She beat at it mercilessly, striking with her hooves at anything she could reach, yet still the entity’s gentle embrace refused to release her, yielding easily to the flurry of blows. It was not until she felt its frantic pulse and sensed the gentle brush of its hot breath against her cheek that she realized that somepony was holding her in their hooves. Slowly, the breath carried words upon its loving touch to her panicked and scattered thoughts, and was soon followed by the lilting tones of a softly sung melody. It was a simple, merry tune, and yet the voice with which it rang carried a faintly sorrowful note of its own, the very same voice that she instantly remembered with a deep and timeless fondness, though she could not understand how. So familiar, so warm, and so very welcome as it sang, like a lullaby to soothe a frightened child.

*The summer wind a secret hides
In weeping leaves of golden gleam
Its mournful cry to leave behind
A happy shadow of youth’s dream*

Come those who hear the summer’s song

*To dance along the gilded wreath
No more to weep, thy sorrows gone
The whispered promise so to keep*

*But blissful slumber thou be warned
Too soon to find in either plane
The brightest rose to hide its thorn
Still stings the fool with equal pain*

*So listen, child, to hear the call
The chord which breaks 'neath August sun
And hurry 'fore the gold leaves fall
And mask the door to Willowrun*

As the familiar voice floated through her thoughts, her struggling slowed, then finally stopped altogether. Her lungs still tore at the air, fighting for breath, and out of pure instinct, she found herself clinging to the welcoming warmth that surrounded her. No longer was it something to be feared; without fully understanding why, it had suddenly become the only thing she could turn to for comfort. Still the voice called out from somewhere nearby, persistently chanting a single name over and over again, and as she listened to its tearful cries, she realized with a start that she recognized the speaker.

“Celestia!...Celestia...Cel...lesti...a...” Luna sobbed, burying her face in the wall of softly inviting fur before her. Her shoulders heaved ludicrously as she coughed into her elder sister’s chest, wrapping her hooves as tightly as she could around Celestia’s body. Without a word, Celestia curved her head slowly downward to nuzzle her sister’s forehead, cooing softly in her ear.

“Cel...C-C-Celly...”

“It’s alright Luna, I’m here. I’ve got you.”

“He...h-h-h-he’s...h-he’s...”

“Shhh-shhh-shhh” Celestia whispered, raising one hoof to brush her sister’s mane, but Luna simply squeezed tighter, as though she were afraid she would let go.

“Milady, do-“ came a voice from somewhere off to the left, but it was almost immediately cut off.

“Out. Now.”

Without another word, several sets of hooves could be heard scurrying to the door, which soon thereafter closed with a soft click.

“H-he’s d-d-dead...Oh, Celly, h-he’s *d-dead!!*” Luna wailed, her words muffled by her sister’s fur. “He’s dead, and it’s a-all m-m-my f-faul-lt...”

Celestia said nothing, but as Luna continued to weep, she simply held her tighter. Nothing she could have said would have been able to comfort her further, she knew, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was Celestia was there, after everything she had done, after causing so much pain, Celestia was still there for her without question or hesitation.

For hours, Luna remembered, they sat in the darkness of her hospital room as her big sister held her in her arms, simply letting the tears flow. Slowly, the shadows seemed to melt away, and the memory of that night began to fade from her thoughts. It felt like waking from a dream, and as she drew in one shaky breath, she found her lungs stinging faintly with the clammy air of the empty hospital room.

Luna opened her eyes, her face still buried in the pristine white sheets of the bed in the center of the room. As though in a trance, she turned lazily about, her eyes settling on the place where she and her sister had sat two years ago. Swallowing hard, she rose to her hooves, stepping softly over to stand on the spot, staring directly into the carpet.

“...*Idiot...*”

Luna scowled, mentally slapping herself. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to raise her vision to the door at the far end of the room and, with a determined snort, she stepped purposefully forward.

It didn’t matter if she had made a mistake, or if she had accidentally hurt her sister, not as long as she could still fix it. What mattered now was that she did anything she could to make up for it, not for her, but for Celestia’s sake. She didn’t have time to be sitting around in the shadows feeling sorry for herself like a selfish child, she told herself, not when Celestia had always done everything in her power to make her happy. She knew what she needed to do, and knew that there was only one way that she was going to make things right.

She paused just inches from the door, steeling herself. Still the fog of nausea hung in her gut at the thought of what lay on the door’s other side, and the deep, throbbing ache of her past deed still tore at her heart, but the thought of standing by and doing nothing while her sister suffered was infinitely more painful. She owed Celestia everything for what she had done for her, and she wasn’t about to let herself take that for granted a moment longer. Even if she had been responsible for her sister’s pain, she had to at least do her best to apologize.

“Celly...thank you” she mouthed, taking a deep breath and holding it. With the faintest

muffled pop, Luna's body disintegrated into a fine purple mist, sliding easily beneath the door.

To be continued in Skyfall: Chapter 11