

The night sky was dark and empty, once. There was no moon, no stars to cast light after the sun had set. All was shadow, stark and black. This, however, is not a story of the darkness. It's a story of the lights that fill the sky tonight, the stars.

Once, there was a brother and a sister, Leo and Elara. They were as dear to each other as any two people can be; one could never be found without the other nearby. They were dear to the villagers they grew up around, too. Elara could often be found singing in the village square with her friends, or helping the younger children with their lessons. Leo preferred solitude, and so spent most of his days in the garden, quietly tending to the plants while his sister sang nearby.

The people of the village loved Elara for her brightness—she was always laughing or smiling, always bringing light to those around her. Leo often faded into the background when she was nearby, for he didn't shine like she did. He didn't resent her for this, however. He loved her all the more for her beauty, and was content to stay at her side.

As they grew older, Elara began to look for ways to help ever more people. She grew tired of their small village and its simple ways; she wanted to make an impact on the world she'd someday leave behind.

"There are cities out there, Leo, where there isn't enough food for half the people in them. There are families that can't afford to give their children clothes or schoolbooks, let alone new toys. I can't do anything from here- I can't do *anything*." She would punctuate this by kicking the nearest available object- typically a rock or a chair.

Her brother would nudge her, replying, "But you will, one day soon. Just give it time, Elara- the world isn't ready for you yet." She'd nod, and Leo would tug her over to the garden to distract her—a new plant he had grown, or a new irrigation technique. And they would spend the rest of the day together, all else forgotten.

There were whispers at the time that the Sun was growing lonely in Their abode above the sky. That They were looking for a human partner to reflect Their light to the earth at night, someone who would be Their equal and Their friend. Nobody knew how the Sun was looking for that human, only that They were. And so, in the months after the murmurs started, everyone was looking to the sky, watchful for some sign of change.

Now, everyone expected that the Sun would pick a person of great wealth, or knowledge, or strength. "How else," they asked, "would a human be a match to the Sun's brilliance? How else could that human not be burned away?"

Because of this, everyone was astonished when the Sun came down to the humble village where the siblings lived. The village held no one truly of note, no wealthy merchants or powerful priests. Rather, there were farmers and herbalists, schoolteachers and blacksmiths. Still, everyone gathered in the village square, the Sun hovering just above the thatched rooftops, taking care not to set the village ablaze. All the villagers fell to their knees and looked away, unable to stare directly at Them. They had taken a human form, but only in shape, for their skin was like molten gold, and their eyes like depthless flames.

"I have come to this village to take the one I seek into the sky with me." Their voice was, though full of command, unexpectedly gentle. **"It is not to take them away from their life, but to live as a god and give light to all humanity at night. They will be my equal, my friend. Do you understand?"**

The sole scholar of the village was the only one brave enough to answer. “Yes, great Sun. We understand.”

“Good. Now... which one of you is Elara?”

There was a gasp and a soft cry, as Elara stumbled forward. Her brother reached for her, tears in his eyes, but she couldn’t look away from the Sun. She was trembling, whatever fire in her seemed to have been snuffed out. Her mother started crying, and her father looked down at the ground.

“You mean... me?” she asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You are like me, full of fire and life. Will you come?”

Elara looked from the Sun to Leo, then back again. “I...” Though she hesitated, she knew she could not refuse. Still, though, she asked, “May I ask for one thing?”

“If it is within my power to grant, yes.”

“Can my brother come with me?” When she said this, she looked directly at the Sun, somehow both defiant and pleading.

There was a moment of perfect silence. No one had dreamed that the Sun would come to this humble village, let alone pick one of their own to be Their partner. Everyone was frozen, fearful of being struck down by Elara’s audacity. How could she ask to have another come with her, when she was the one declared worthy? But the Sun seemed unfazed, and when They answered, there was no anger in Their voice.

“So long as he is willing, he may. But he may not be able to return to Earth if he comes.”

Leo nodded, and walked to stand beside his sister. Elara took his hand, and she closed her eyes. “I’m more than willing.” Leo rested his head on top of his sister’s, and they stood like that for a moment. “But... I think there’s another way,” he replied. “I don’t think I have to choose between my sister and my parents. If you give me a seed to a tree that will grow in any way I wish, I think I can have both.”

“And how is that?” The Sun tilted Their head. Their voice was quizzical; They were unused to humans forging a path of their own.

“I want to grow a tree with lights for its flowers, a tree that can house Elara as she crosses the sky, a tree that is so large it grows past the edge of the world. Then, I can climb the tree to be with her. And I can climb down to be with my family.”

The Sun smiled at the pair, impressed by their strength of will. This, of course, is why They had chosen Elara to be Their partner—she knew both loving fiercely, and being loved. The siblings would clearly do anything for each other.

“I grant both your and your sister’s request. Elara will be called the Moon, and she will reflect my light to the rest of the world at night. And, this, Leo, is the seed to your tree. It is the Tree of Stars, and will grow at your command.”

A small glowing light about the size of a walnut drifted down from the heavens, and landed at Leo’s feet. He smiled as he knelt to pick it up, cradling it to his chest like the most delicate of crystal.

“It is time, Elara.”

She ran to her parents, and embraced them both. Though there were tears in her eyes, there was an excitement that wasn't there before. "I love you, I love you. Take care of Leo, he's going to be lonely. And whenever you miss me, just look up. I'll be there, okay? I'm not leaving, really. I'm just up in the sky." They nodded, and held her to them for a moment, before letting her go.

She looked at Leo, and said, "will I see you tonight?" He smiled softly, and squeezed her hand. "You will."

It was late afternoon when Leo went to plant the seed that the Sun had given him. He had decided to walk to the meadow where he and Elara had spent hours gazing up at the sky. He was lonely there without her; it wasn't the same.

The seed was still glowing a soft silvery-white when he took the first spadeful of dirt from the earth. By the time he placed the seed in the ground, the clouds had streaks of rose-gold running through them. He glanced up at the sky, and began to work faster. He hurriedly scooped dirt overtop of it and patted it down as best he could.

Then, looking at the small patch of overturned earth, he whispered, "Grow."

At first, nothing happened. But, after a moment, a slender silver trunk rose from the ground. In a matter of seconds; it had grown to be as tall as Leo, with the trunk the width of his forearm. It grew taller and taller, reaching for the sky, hundreds of branches sprouting and intertwining with each other. Soon, he couldn't see the top of it, only the barest outline of the ever-expanding network above his head.

Only minutes later, the tree stopped growing upwards. To Leo's amazement, a thousand twinkling lights appeared in the sky all at once—the stars.

It was then that the Moon appeared in the sky for the first time. She glowed a beautiful silver, the same shade as the tree's trunk, casting light into the sky as the Sun dipped below the horizon. Leo smiled widely to see her so beautiful, crying openly, all alone.

For the first time in the young world's existence, the arrival of night didn't mean true darkness. No, there was a Moon, there were stars.

Suddenly, Leo started laughing, from sheer joy as seeing the night sky filled with light. He ran over to the tree, and began climbing up and up, fueled by the knowledge that he would soon see his sister. There was some kind of magic in the tree that let him reach the edges of the sky far sooner than he could on his own, for it was only a matter of minutes until he reached the top.

And there was Elara, dancing and dressed in silver, smiling like she couldn't believe she was standing among the stars. He ran to his sister, and they held each other for what felt like forever.

"You're glowing, Elara." His voice was soft and joyful. She squeezed him tighter, feeling as if she never wanted to let him go.

"You gave us stars, Leo!"

"They shine for you, you know." The corner of his mouth quirked up as she laughed. "You're finally helping people, just like you wanted. I told you that you would."

She laughed, and held him tighter. "You were right, just like always."

They let go of each other, and simply watched the tree slowly tread across the Earth. White clouds swirled beneath them, lit up by the light of a thousand stars.

“I...” Elara’s voice trailed off as she looked around her in wonder. “I’m glad you’re with me, here among the stars.”

Leo reached out and touched the star-flower nearest to him, and smiled contentedly. “The Sun made the right choice in picking you. You’re brighter than anything, even Them. This tree... I’m glad it’s now your home.”

“No, home is with you, Leo. Home is with you.”

Some time later, Leo was lying on his back in the meadow, watching the Tree of Stars make its way around the sky. Dawn was coming, and soon the tree’s light would be gone from the sky.

But only until tonight, he thought. Once the Sun leaves, I’ll be able to see the stars again. They never leave, only are masked by the Sun’s brightness. And Elara will be there, too.

The stars were twinkling joyfully. They looked like jewels strewn across a dark canvas, one both vast and endless, yet never empty.

In that moment, lying among the flowers with the stars above him, Leo felt at one with the world. He had grown the stars from a seed. His sister was living among them, as a friend and partner to the Sun. And there would never be pure darkness at night ever again. There was a Moon to give light, there were stars.