

# Luna's Best Night Ever

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# Chapter 1

It was the night of the Grand Galloping Gala and Princess Luna was thoroughly flustered. She stood in front of her mirror, pouting at her own reflection. Celestia had gone to great lengths to set the evening up for her, lowering the sun early and helping her to raise the moon and coerce the stars out of hiding so she would have time to prepare herself. She had even taken the liberty of personally greeting every guest on her behalf so that Luna wouldn't have an excuse to escape from the party itself.

Luna adjusted her tiara and smoothed out the dress Celestia had picked out for her for the fifth time in as many minutes. She frowned a little at the puffy, lacy affair that now adorned her form, all ribbons and silk and crushed velvet with a large, elaborate skirt that made her feel uncomfortable about the size of her flank. When Celestia had told her no bit had been spared to prepare for the gala Luna had been shocked, even appalled by the flagrant misuse of the treasury to fund an event solely for the aristocracy. When Celestia had then added that the elements of harmony were invited and that Luna herself was to be the center of attention for the evening she had nearly fainted. Luna cursed that mischievous smirk her sister always wore when she was being a... a... Luna thought it over for a moment and decided that her sister was acting like one of the trolls of myth, creatures of deception, trickery and schadenfreude. She nodded to her reflection, who was wearing a smile of triumph at the shared discovery. She cursed that mischievous smirk her sister always wore when she was being a troll.

Her desire to gloat was quickly crushed when she remembered she was still in the dress and was still expected to head out into the ballroom to socialize. The realization of just how utterly unprepared she was hit her like a falling piano. As if socializing wasn't difficult enough with a millennium-wide culture gap, the fact that the elements of harmony would be there filled her with a mixture of fear and dread. Certainly after the defeat of Nightmare Moon they had been friendly with her, even going so far as throwing a party and celebrating with her, but were they in good spirits because of her or because she was no longer Nightmare Moon? She shivered at the loneliness of the thought and felt something like laughter in the back of her mind as the tiny sliver of her former self stirred among her

memories.

Her eyes scanned the bare walls of her room as the mocking chuckles of Nightmare Moon ceased echoing through her mind. No one was glad she had returned. Celestia's room had pictures and letters adorning the walls, with many more forming neat piles in her study for her to peruse at her pleasure. After transforming into Nightmare Moon and blowing her old room up in the process all Luna had to line the walls of her new bedroom with were books on culture, history and law and an abacus that she had rescued from a museum. She walked over to it, idly clicking and clacking the beads.

Even with her magic still somewhat unstable after returning to what she supposed could be called normal she had been able to restore it completely, the wood shiny and polished with black wood-stain, the beads painted with silver and pale blues. It looked just like the night sky and she manipulated it just as freely. She smiled and quickly calculated just how long she'd be out among the crowds if she went along with Celestia's plan, taking into account the numerous excuses she had prepared to buy a few minutes here and there to herself. Her jaw dropped as the last bead hit home and she stared at the abacus as though it were telling her a most horrifying and obvious lie. But Abby wasn't lying and she knew it. Hours. Not brief periods where she could acclimate herself to the crowds punctuated with breaks, but huge stretches of time exposed to the general populace with nothing to defend herself from their prying eyes and silent disapproval. She did a quick calculation of how long she would have to be around the elements and was equally crestfallen.

She looked back in the mirror at the under-confident alicorn with worried, teary eyes. It just wasn't possible, not in the slightest. If she brought Abby and a book with her she might feel a bit better but she knew they would mock her for treating inanimate objects like companions like a filly with a security blanket. A sound startled her from her reverie and she looked out the window at the courtyard. Trumpets were blaring and horns announced the arrival of the first wave of guests for the evening. A carriage was pulling up to the castle, with many more behind it. Ponies slowly made their way out of it and the stallions pulling it carried it away to make room for the one behind it, and the one behind that. Soon a small crowd had gathered by the front gate and fireworks were being set off.

It was by the bright pink and blue glow that Luna saw them. The elements stood in a group, with the crowd and yet somehow apart from it. She strained her vision but found she could only barely make them out, unable to tell properly which was which from such a distance. But it was unmistakably them. Luna could see the faint aura of magic around them, remnants of the power they had gathered and used to cleanse her. And then she heard them sing.

She watched as they led the whole crowd in a huge, elaborate chorus number and could hardly believe her eyes. They each sang of their dreams and hopes for the evening and Luna could feel inside her the urge to help them welling up from nowhere at all. It was simply there, this compulsion, stemming perhaps from their song itself, perhaps from somewhere deep inside of her that wished to be appreciated. She nodded to no one at all and walked back over to the mirror to straighten her tiara and delicately wipe her eyes. She nodded in satisfaction and headed for the door. The party could wait, she was a princess on a mission.

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As Luna strode purposefully, or at least as purposefully as she could while constantly glancing over her shoulder nervously, down the hallway her eyes landed on Prince Blue-Blood. The poor boy was fiddling with his bowtie and looking around for a helping hand. She recalled one of the elements talking about finding her prince charming at the gala and smiled. Objective one of six, she mentally noted, set the stage for true love to blossom. She fought back her apprehension and approached him. The moment he saw her he jumped ten feet in the air in surprise before looking around for an emergency escape route and bowing humbly. His smile did a very poor job of hiding his unease.

"P-Princess Luna, such a pleasant surprise. How good to see you again."

Luna's heart sunk a little but she suppressed her urge to run back to her room and sulk for the moment. She had a job to do, after all.

"Prince Blue-Blood, do you have a companion for this evening's event?"

His eyes widened and Luna's brain managed the same mental leap he had made right as he began stammering.

"W-What? I-I-I... I couldn't possibly- Not that I don't want- I mean, think of the scandal, not to mention-"

Luna cut him off by raising her hoof to silence him. Celestia would have reprimanded her for exuding an ice cold, regal air in that moment instead of loosening up or even using actual words, but Celly wasn't there and she needed him to be quiet for a moment so she could explain. Her mane and tail turned a shade darker and began to shimmer slightly as she unconsciously brought forth Nightmare Moon's influence little by little, her coy and commanding tone echoing through Luna's words as she spoke.

"That will be enough. I was not referring to myself, Blue-Blood, but to a young lady who wishes to spend the evening with you, a regal and royal prince. It was with the sole intent of discovering if you would be able to accompany this young lady tonight that I ask this question, not so that I could ask you for your time myself."

Blue-Blood's expression was one of pure fear and Luna realized what she was doing, fighting against the subtle hold the evil persona had on her mind. Her hair returned to its normal shade and she smiled shyly, turning her head away and trying not to die of sheer embarrassment on the spot.

"Unless of course you had other plans besides wooing a potential suitor, in which case I'm sorry to have bothered you."

He gulped. Grabbing his hoofkerchief from his pocket he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I-It would be an honor to accompany her. I-I'll be sure to spend the whole evening with her."

Luna beamed, spirits lifted.

"Excellent! And be sure to be as regal as possible. She's expecting someone with refined tastes and a suitably royal personality."

Blue-Blood nodded dumbly. He folded his hoofkerchief and pocketed it.

"Regal," he said. "Got it. I'll be a true noblecolt the entire evening,

chivalrous to the core."

Luna blinked, then thought for a moment. All her knowledge of culture and history told her something was off.

"But mares of this era don't expect chivalry, do they? Aren't they more akin to the mares of the 1600s who expected, and indeed accepted, horrible behavior from their lovers?"

"Are you telling me to be a snobby jerk to this filly?"

Luna didn't know how to respond, so she simply pretended the answer was obvious.

"It certainly wouldn't hurt to try, and she seems keen on nobility, famous throughout history for its many social foibles and mistreatment of others."

Luna walked away slowly, smiling to herself and leaving a very confused Prince Blue-Blood to figure out how to interpret her odd command. Despite briefly slipping up with her self-control under pressure she had already managed to arrange for the first of the elements to have a wonderful evening, with her every expectation fulfilled. It was a wonderful sensation, the feeling of having done a good deed with the promise of a reward. Her good deed would surely earn her a smile from the element of generosity. She mulled over what to do next and decided to head to the gardens to get all of the animals ready to make some new friends.

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The gardens were lovely in the evening and Luna had made it a habit to stroll through them on lonely nights when there were no more decrees to sign and she needed a brief respite from her books. The animals knew her presence well by now and paid her no mind, which up until that point had been exactly as she liked it, but tonight was different and Luna needed them all in one place. She walked over to a small rabbit that was munching on some grass. It watched her, chewing slowly, and Luna had to admit that the little animal was charming, or more colloquially, cute. She smiled at it and the rabbit simply kept eating, its eyes always on her. She slowly walked closer.



"Excuse me, sir or madam here, but if I might have a moment of your time I have a favor to ask of you."

The bunny turned around and hopped off into a bush leaving Luna to question just how good its manners were and whether or not it was intelligent enough to have any. In any case such a reaction to polite introductions was unacceptable. She followed after it, running around the bush and chasing after it.

"Come back! I merely wish to inquire about a simple task that I have need of your assistance with!"

The rabbit picked up speed and the sound of her voice and hoofs startled all the other creatures and critters in sight. She sighed, exasperated and annoyed. No, not annoyed. Never annoyed, she reminded herself. Never angry or furious or filled with rage or anything of the sort. Hassled, delayed even. Every obstacle was a chance to find a solution, not an excuse to give into petty wrath and destroy another perfectly good bedroom and frighten everyone and make everything worse and make everyone hate her all over again. Nightmare Moon stirred within her once more and provoked her emotions as she brought them under control again, making her more and more frustrated and upset. Her plan would be ruined if she didn't hurry and she still had so much preparation to complete. She had to help them, somehow, but when it came to animals she was just a useless filly. Hopeless. No hope. No light, only suffocating darkness that drove others away. She sniffled, pouted, scowled, shuddered, and then felt rather than heard the noise coming from her mouth, a sound usually reserved for calling dogs and frightening small animals.

The high-pitched wail of complete and utter sorrow echoed through the garden and sent shivers through every living thing that could hear it. Her shout slowly subsided as she heard someone coming close and heard a voice that was vaguely familiar. A yellow pegasus in a green dress was making her way through the gardens and Luna tensed with sudden fear as recognition hit her. The animals, she decided, would be perfectly fine on their own and didn't need her help finding the element and making friends with her. She scurried off back to the palace, not feeling a thin wisp of dark shadow and pent up unhappiness peeling off from her and taking with it some of her hidden pain, making its way to the element of kindness to corrupt and corrode her judgment and drive her more than a little insane.



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As she made her way from the gardens she made her way through the terrace area and watched an orange pony kick her stand open, flags popping out and apple treats on display. She watched as she sold a pie to a passing member of the Wonderbolts and realized that not only was this an element of harmony, but she was already making her dream come true. Still, Luna felt compelled to help. She gathered up her courage and approached a pony on his way to the stand. He glanced her way and his monocle slid from his face, hanging from its chain just as low as his disengaged jaw.

"P-Princess-"

She held up her hoof.

"Lovely night, wouldn't you agree?"

The pony nodded.

"Y-Yes, your finest one ye-"

"It's almost as lovely as those apple... fritters over there."

Luna wondered just what a fritter was as she read the label but she didn't let her curiosity stop her from making her best attempt at a sale pitch.

"What did you say?"

Luna smiled.

"Fritters. Apple fritters. You should go and buy one."

The pony looked around for a moment, unsure what to say.

"I was just about to, Princess, when-"

"Then hurry along, kind sir, and partake of as many as you desire. And spread the word of this stand and the quality of the products it sells."

The pony inched away from Luna little by little, hesitation spreading across his features.

"Yes, certainly, I'll... get right on that."

The pony took off at such high speed that Luna nearly believed that he had turned into smoke and vanished. She sighed and turned to the next pony in the vicinity, attempting to make her sales pitch to them. Again she was met with disappointment, fear and strange looks and one by one the ponies around her began to give the booth a wide berth simply to avoid having her come over and attempt to persuade them to make a purchase. Luna kicked the ground, feeling utterly defeated by her poor social skills. The element of honesty seem to be in high spirits though, confident in her stall. Luna decided to leave her be and trust that thing would be alright. She wandered off to see if she could find the Wonderbolts and assist one of the other elements with her goal of spending time with them.

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The Wonderbolts, it turned out, were in the middle of an enormous crowd of ponies, all of them famous performers, aristocrats or businessponies. Luna gulped, walking towards the mob and trying to make out the less-than-subtle blue colors of the Wonderbolt uniform among the multicolored outfits. Ponies turned their heads to look at her, staring and gossiping. She lowered her head a little, trying not to meet anypony else's gaze. The gossip must have been contagious, because by the time she made it to the Wonderbolts they were each busily swapping stories and rumors about her. It was then she noticed the rainbow mane behind them, jumping up and down trying to get their attention. She walked over to them one by one, trying to talk to them and direct their attention where she wanted it, but every time she managed to pull one from their discussion the element of loyalty was already making a similar attempt elsewhere, too far away for her to call out to her without it feeling awkward, forced and frightening.

She cast her gaze around the room for an alternative when she saw a colorful blur do a flip and catch someone's falling glass. The element of loyalty looked around expectantly for the praise of her idols but Luna could see even from far away that she had failed to impress anyone besides her. As the rainbow-maned pegasus walked away, head hung, Luna felt her

heart go out to her. The element might be brash, but they both wanted the same things; acceptance, praise and appreciation. Her head searched for ideas and Luna's gaze came to rest of a statue near the middle of the room. She smiled, her knowledge of physics and her keen eye for details quietly computing the weight of the alicorn sculpture and the force of its landing.

It would be just enough that a strong pegasus could easily catch it, but enough that the feat would be impressive, a perfectly tolerable amount. And an object that big would catch the attention of everyone in the room. Luna walked over to the refreshment table and poured herself a glass of punch, her horn glowing softly as it levitated in front of her. With her magic already flowing she discretely directed it to the statue, altering the distribution of its mass to make it top-heavy and easily tipped. Then she did the same to the base, creating a small but steadily growing crack that would result in total collapse right as the party was dying down and the Wonderbolts would be free to rush over to inspect the heroic act of the element. It was the perfect plan, and so long as the statue fell as the pedestal broke apart it wouldn't fall as quickly, minimizing potential damage. And really, who would knock it over before then?

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As Luna made her way to the entrance hall she couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the sheer number of ponies gathered there, lining up to shake hoofs with Celestia. And there by her side was the Element of Magic herself. Luna dove behind a tapestry to hide while she figured out what to do next, but the element seemed to have already succeeded at spending time with Celly on her own, albeit not the time alone that she had sung about only hours before. Success was success though, and if... Luna's mind searched for a name to put to the face and remembered Celly had called her "Twilight Sparkle". Luna blinked, her eyes running along the folds of the unicorn's dress and taking in the star pattern. Twilight Sparkle. Stars. The evening sky adorned with the glittering jewels that heralded the night to come. She felt herself smiling.

If Twilight Sparkle was already happy with the evening then she felt it best not to interfere. Besides, she mused, what would she say? How could she approach the one who had freed her from her own darkness, this pony whose very name underlined their connection? Luna felt a warmth spread

across her cheeks and a sudden wave of nervousness at the thought of talking to Twilight. Just as before a feeling entered her heart that seemed to well up from nowhere at all, but she knew that whatever the sensation was it was pleasant and warm like a candle in the dark.

She found herself staring a little longer than she had intended, her eyes locked on Twilight's. She took a step forwards, then another, moving from hiding place to hiding place. What felt like minutes rapidly became hours as she studied both the element and her own reactions, looking for words she hadn't used or heard in a thousand years and feeling things that she had thought she had lost forever. Joy. Longing. Envy. She realized that she was now only a few feet away, peering over a vase as she hid behind its pedestal with Celestia directly in her field of vision. She felt jealous of her sister once more, but it wasn't over the hearts of every living thing in Equestria. It was just one mare, one very special unicorn that she felt compelled to let her emotions run wild for. This new envy stemmed from Celly being the object of Twilight's affection, her beloved teacher. Luna fought it down with some difficulty. Logic. Rationalization.

She hadn't been part of Twilight's life up to this point, Celly had been there since she had been a child. Such distribution of Twilight's... Luna hesitated to call it love, but it felt like the emotion Twilight showed Celly was the love a child shows its parent. It was only natural. And despite being a student of the sun it was the stars that she was wearing, nestled in the deep blue hues of the night sky. Luna's smile grew little by little and she stopped paying attention to hiding her presence. As the last pony walked off to enter the main hall Celestia turned to Twilight, stepping between her and Luna almost on purpose. Suspiciously convenient, Luna mused, trying to inch around her sister and finding herself blocked at every turn as she spoke to her student.

"Now then, my star pupil, shall we head off to join your friends? With my duties complete I'm free for the rest of the evening and I want to hear all about your adventures firsthand. A letter can only tell so much, after all."

Twilight beamed, almost jumping for joy.

"Yes! I mean, yes, Princess Celestia. I've been wanting to have a chance to talk to you for so long."

Luna stopped in her tracks and remembered what her goal all along had been. Here she was trying to catch Twilight's attention to talk to her when the whole point of searching for her had been to ensure she had time alone with Celestia to catch up. And she still had yet to find the element of laughter to make her night complete as well. A loud crash echoed through the halls, followed by another, and another. The room shook with the force of an especially loud thud and all three mares stared at the door that led to the main hall.

"I think we should hurry along and see what that was, Twilight. If it's something your magic can fix perhaps you can demonstrate for me just how much your magic has progressed."

Twilight nodded, mildly concerned by the sound.

"I just hope nopony got hurt."

Celestia and Twilight headed off down the hall and Luna watched them go, unsure what to do. The hall was completely empty save for a pair of guards who were too busy staring out at the night sky and the rows of carriages to notice her presence. Well, she thought to herself, she had at least managed to try to help the elements have a good evening, even if it was difficult and filled with mistakes. The animals might have been a touch frightened by her, but the element of kindness would easily smooth over their fear and hesitation and make friends with them. She had certainly made a poor salesmare but the element of honesty clearly had a knack for business and didn't need a helping hoof to appeal to the party-goers. The element of generosity would be wooed by the prince, especially after the tips she had given him. And as for the element of loyalty, rigging the statue was a sure-fire way to make her a hero when it fell over.

She walked off back to her room, pondering the fate of the element of laughter. The pink party pony would be too hyperactive for a refined party, but this was the modern era and quite different from what she had grown up knowing. Perhaps in the thousand years she had been imprisoned parties had become more relaxed? Whatever the case, the element of laughter could certainly handle herself when it came to parties, even with her quirks.

Her thoughts turned back to Twilight and the feeling of connection she had

felt when she saw her. Had she simply been too caught up in the excitement of having the darker part of herself driven away to notice it? Luna vowed to find out, her mind already working through the long list of books she'd need to read to figure out what was going on. Lore, myths, legends from generations before and after her banishment. Already she could feel the excitement of a new discovery upon her. It felt wonderful.



# Chapter 2

The hallways were always empty right after the sunrise, with ponies scurrying about in their rooms preparing for the day ahead or climbing into their beds after a long shift attending to the princess of the night. It was the only time Luna felt comfortable walking by herself in the castle halls, and the only time she wore her dressing gown. It was warm and comfortable to wear during the cold morning hours, but she felt it indecent to be caught wearing it by anyone besides Celly. And Celly had called it adorable before ruffling her mane the last time she had seen her in it.

She saw something moving out of the corner of her eye and turned to look. A statue, little more than a stone bust of a famous colt on a pedestal. Luna moved carefully over to the bust, inspecting it. There was another quick motion from behind it and Luna chased after it, nearly crashing into the attendant who had been hiding there. Both squeaked as they toppled over and fell to the floor. Luna rubbed her head as she stood.

Silver Verve was cowering on the floor, eyes wide with panic. The attendant seemed absolutely horrified.

"I'm so sorry Princess Luna! I was on my way to tell you something and I saw you and you looked so serene and deep in thought so I didn't want to disturb you so I hid! Please don't be mad!"

Luna moved behind the pillar to hide her attire, hoping he wouldn't make as big a fuss over it as her sister. When it seemed he either hadn't noticed or didn't care she smiled a bit and offered the colt her hand, helping him to his feet. Silver was one of the few ponies who wasn't afraid of her, primarily because he had slept through the return of Nightmare Moon and missed the Summer Sun Celebration entirely. He didn't have a clue who she was, aside from "the exiled princess", and Luna enjoyed keeping it that way. It made it less awkward to speak with him.

"Silver, if it's something urgent then don't feel apprehensive about approaching me."

Silver nodded, rummaging through his saddlebag and pulling out a scroll.

He unfurled it and cleared his throat before reading it.

"Princess Celestia has requested you join her for breakfast this morning as opposed to dining alone. She has several matters to discuss with you and wishes to speak with you about last night."

The scroll rolled back up the moment his hoof released it and he packed it away.

"My sister is in our private dining room I take it?"

He nodded and smiled.

"She only just sent me off with the message for you, but the castle kitchen has been putting the meal together for you both since she raised the sun up."

"Then I shan't keep her waiting a moment longer. Thank you, Silver."

Silver blushed and smiled.

"I live to serve, m'lady."

He bowed and Luna gave him a small nod before turning away. She walked off towards the dining hall when she heard Silver call out to her.

"Pardon my asking, Princess, but shouldn't you get changed first? I mean, it's not really my place to comment on your choice of attire."

Luna halted and looked down at her dressing gown, then back at Silver. She blinked before turning bright red and dashing off down a different hall in the direction of her room.

Silver's voice echoed as he yelled.

"S-Sorry!"

-

She could already smell breakfast as she approached the large double

doors leading to the dining hall. It was the smell of hot tea and fresh fruit mixed with freshly baked breads. She couldn't help but smile to herself as she entered, ready to tell Celly all about the night before and how she had helped everyone. The expression on the Sun Princess's face drained every ounce of happiness from her.

Celestia was smiling broadly, the room lighting up with the sheer glow of her happiness in a very literal way. Luna instantly regretted everything she had ever done up to that point, including being born, pushing Celly down the stairs when they were little and had been fighting, and that one time she had eaten the extra piece of chocolate cake. She recognized that look, the saccharine smile that was the exterior of an inner storm brewing within. Something had obviously gone terribly wrong and Celly was barely containing an explosive amount of fury that would be divvied up among several cruel and humiliating punishments.

"Good morning, dear sister. You're late for breakfast, but since you had a big night that's understandable. I started without you, I hope you don't mind."

Luna nodded dumbly and took her seat across from her sister, eyes directed in front of her at the table. Celestia loaded Luna's plate up with pancakes, toast and a heaping scoop of fruit salad. She smiled and sipped her tea, watching Luna eat with hesitant bites.

"Is something the matter, Luna?"

Luna gulped, turning to face her sister.

"Nothing at all, Celly. W-Why do you ask?"

Celestia finished the rest of her tea, drawing out the pause by refilling the cup and blowing on it to cool it.

"I was just wondering since you seem a little... jumpy. Am I making you nervous?"

Luna looked around the room for escape routes. Teleporting away would be futile, but if it was anything like the last time she'd have to run for her life or end up in the rabbit suit again, strung up with the flag for a full day to be

mocked by passing guards. Finally her eyes came to rest on her sister again, on that same glowing smile and dazzling eyes.

"Y-No! Of course not! Why would I be nervous around my beloved sister?"

Celestia tapped her chin, looking up at the ceiling. Her spoon slowly swirled the tea in the cup as she added cream and sugar.

"Well, you did infect one of the Elements of Harmony with Nightmare Moon's influence, ruin the sales that another needed to compensate for the apples she brought to the gala leaving her with a substantial loss, foil the budding romance of yet another Element and cause her to lose face in front of nearly every noble in Equestria and sabotage a statue that landed on, you guessed it, another Element, giving her wing and back sprains and keeping her from her duties as a weather pony. Aside from that, though, I can't think of a reason for you to be nervous."

Any minute now, Luna thought. Any second and Celestia would have her on the first express flight back to the moon. In the bunny suit. Trapped in a stuffy, scratchy and utterly absurd outfit for another thousand yea- What?

"What?"

Luna stared in disbelief at Celestia who was slowly sipping her tea, eyes closed. One of them opened slightly, eyebrow lowered, to form an expression similar to a glare but more akin to a comical squint. As the cup settled on the table Celestia turned to face her with a frown.

"Luna, I am disappointed. Not only did you purposefully avoid nearly everypony the entire night, but the few ponies who you did talk to ended up frightened of vendors booths the rest of the night or wound up covered in cake at the hooves of irate fashion designers."

Luna grimaced.

"But I was only trying to help! And I thought that everything was going alright!"

Celestia shook her head and sighed.

"My dear sister... It pains me to have to send you far away again but I have to do something about this situation. I-"

"Please don't send me to the moon in the rabbit suit! I couldn't handle exile again, I just couldn't!"

Luna's eyes welled up with tears and she begged the raw magical forces of reality that she wouldn't be locked away again with nothing but the darkness in her heart for company. Celestia's unflinching expression made her heart ache and Luna backed away slowly, her horn glowing with defensive magics. She sniffled, biting her lip.

"Don't send me away again, sister!"

Celestia stared at her for a moment. Her horn glowed for a brief moment and her magic unmade the thin barrier Luna had cast, the blue fragments of her magic clattering to the floor before vanishing. With another flash Celestia teleported directly in front of her.

"Sister..."

Luna felt her body quivering with a sickening fear, her breath coming in short gasps.

"Do you really think I'd be so cruel as to lock you away in the moon again? I won't make that mistake twice."

Celestia's expression softened and she lowered her head. Luna wobbled a little before her hind legs gave out and she fell on her flank, eyes widening in confusion.

"We both made mistakes that day, Luna. And your mistakes weren't even your fault. If I had just listened to you more..."

She looked at Luna and the expression of relief and breathlessness she now wore. Celestia moved towards her sister slowly but she didn't expect the sudden impact as Luna latched onto her, hugging her tightly and knocking her off balance. She rested a hoof on Luna's back and rubbed in slow circles until the sniffing subsided.

"Are you really so afraid of me, Luna?"

Luna shook her head and wiped her eyes, looking up at her sister from behind her hooves.

"No, I..."

She looked down at the floor.

"Yes. I am scared, sister... But not of you. I'm afraid of myself. Every mistake I make always causes you such trouble, and I get worried that I'll do something terrible that you'll have to punish me for."

Celestia nuzzled her sister and smirked.

"Like causing a series of events that led to property damage, personal injury and poor manners?"

Luna nodded solemnly. Her gaze shifted slightly and she kicked the ground.

"Oh, don't be such a silly-filly. Yes, you made a mistake. Mistakes. You made multiple mistakes. But it's not the end of the world."

"You're going to send me away again though. You're going to banish me."

Celestia sighed and looked around for a moment to make sure no one was around before prodding Luna's horn with her own. The magical discharge sent a severe shock through Luna's body and every hair on her body stood on end. Her body went rigid and she coughed up a few black clouds of smoke before examining her blackened coat and tail. Celestia couldn't suppress her laughter. The princess of night drew herself up to her full, less-than-imposing height and stamped her hoof, her sorrow replaced by indignation. Her wings flared wide and she did her best to scowl.

"Celly! You promised me that you'd never do that again! You know how much I hate it!"

Celestia held a hoof over her mouth and tried to calm herself down. Even though the noise had stopped she was still shaking from time to time with



muffled chuckles and her eyes were just as teary as Luna's. Luna pouted, unsure what to make of the situation, before retaliating with an equally forceful flare of magic. Celestia's feathers crackled with arcane light, wings fully extended and mane frazzled. The two sisters exchanged looks before giggling, then laughing heartily. They leaned against each other for support, wiping their eyes clear and using magic to sort out their unkempt appearances. As their laughter died down Luna sighed and let her gaze fall back upon the floor.

"So what's my punishment?"

Celestia pretended to be deep in thought for a moment, her expression overly dramatic and her hoof stroking an imaginary beard.

"I've decided that you're going to repay your debt to these ponies by fixing the problems you caused, and that means that you'll have to take a trip to Ponyville. It's going to take a few days at least, but I don't want my little sister to be scared all on her own."

Celestia's eyes became half-lidded and her smile became a grin.

It was that face again, Luna thought, the smirk of a troll. She raised an eyebrow and took a wild stab at what she was about to say. Did she know about Abby? Was she going to make some kind of joke out of her beloved abacus?

"So you'll be staying at the library with Twilight Sparkle for the duration of your punishment. And with any luck you might just socialize for a change. You remember Twilight, don't you?"

Luna nodded, words eluding her. She wondered for a moment if Celly poking fun at her abacus would have been better or worse than forcing her into the same house, let alone the same town, as the one pony who put her more on edge than her sister.

"Excellent. I've already made the arrangements, and I'm sure everypony there will be quite eager to see you again."

Luna put on a smile but her eyes were wide and nervous.

"Of course. The entire town of Ponyville. All eyes on me. It'll be wonderful."

Celestia hugged Luna and smiled.

"Oh I just knew you'd agree. And that means you'll have a chance to socialize and enjoy yourself while you're there."

Luna laughed and a small, awkward noise emerged from her mouth that could have been gibberish. Celestia's smirk returned and Luna knew precisely what it meant. It was this or the bunny suit. And the bunny suit wasn't an option. Luna gulped.

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Luna packed her bags carefully by hoof, not trusting her mind to maintain focus long enough to levitate everything into its proper container without damaging something. Her head was swimming. In a matter of minutes her mood had been tossed to every extreme that she dared tread upon and now she found herself being "banished" to Ponyville to fix problems she hadn't known she'd caused. And she'd be living with a unicorn who made her heart flutter and her mental functions sink to the level of an especially thick pudding.

As she went to pack Abby away she stopped for a moment and considered the wooden object. Would Twilight laugh at her? Would it be a mistake to take Abby? She clutched the abacus, holding it closely. The beads clicked and clacked as she snuggled it, rocking back and forth. Abby could come, she decided, and no one would have to know about it. She placed an extra blanket along the bottom of the suitcase and tucked Abby in.

She felt an urge to speak to it, to kiss it goodnight before closing the lid, but she shrugged it off. It was foolish enough to feel so much attachment to an inanimate object, and even more so to speak to one when it wouldn't talk back. Anyone who'd do such a thing must surely be insane, she mused, or simply too young to know better. She folded the blankets over Abby carefully to keep it safe and zipped the suitcase shut.

Luna spared one last glance at her room as she packed the last few books for her trip. Barely anything remained to indicate it was ever hers. She ran a hoof along a suitcase and sighed, focusing her mind and trying to clear it.

She let her magic flow through her and directed it like a dam correcting the flow of a stream. It seized hold of the suitcases and lifted them up, and with a little effort she began moving them towards the door.

Goodbye room, she thought to herself. Goodbye safe castle walls and isolated chambers. Goodbye solitude and comfort and regal authority. And hello Twilight.

For the first time in a thousand years the blackest parts of her heart stayed silent, her thoughts drawn towards the mare who had captured her interest.

# Chapter 3

Luna pulled the last of the confetti from her mane and tail. She sighed and tossed it over the side of the chariot, watching the colorful paper drift away. Celestia had given her a proper sending off, complete with banners saying things like "Do your best!" and "Go, Luna, go!" Luna wondered whether her sister was using her pranks and outrageousness as a coping mechanism or a punishment. Possibly both, she mused, a hoof resting on the suitcase where her own coping mechanism lay. She had insisted that Abby's suitcase remain by her side for the duration of the trip and managed to keep even Celly from seeing inside it.

It was somewhat saddening to think about for too long at once and Luna attempted to distract herself with mental games. She counted the clouds and imagined what object their shapes represented. Surely there was an artist among the weather patrol, because each fluffy lump of white was carefully sculpted into a delicate floral arrangement. The trails of vapor connecting each one reminded Luna of her own works and the thin bands of dust and gas that she manipulated, weaving them among the stars as she led them through the night.

She started committing patterns to memory, her eyes trailing over every shape and curve of the clouds. The landscape was exquisite and seemed so very different from what she remembered. A thousand years of change had swept across it and Luna wanted to know every nook and cranny again, to bask in the world. She turned her gaze to the place where the sky met the earth and smiled at the peaks protruding from the ground, jagged mountains scraping at the heavens above.

Ponyville was an expanding point on the horizon, a civilized blob breaking up the skyline. Another hours flight at this pace, maybe more. It was hard getting used to terrestrial distances after using her magically enhanced sight to spy upon her lost domain from the moon. It was certainly much easier to judge by scent and sound, and the apple orchards were much closer. Luna could smell, and almost taste, the ripe red apples. She felt her stomach cringe a little and she realized she was hungry.

On the moon she had starved. Without food or water she had longed to

slake her thirst or ease the endless pains of her empty stomach. Technically neither she nor her sister needed sustenance of any sort, but taste was a sense that she couldn't imagine living without savoring, and hunger was a painful experience if left unchecked. And a thousand years of hunger had burned that feeling into her mind.

"Excuse me, sirs, but would it be possible to increase our pace? I don't mean to rush you, only I find myself getting rather peckish."

One of the pegasi pulling the chariot looked over his shoulder at her and Luna gulped. His expression was the same stern look as all of Celestia's guards, unflinching and unchanging. He looked her over for a moment before nodding.

"Then I advise you to hold on to something, Princess Luna."

Luna barely had enough time to brace herself before the pegasi suddenly rocketed forwards. After a split second their harnesses drew taut and the chariot followed after them. Luna couldn't help but feel an intense terror and exhilaration as she clung to the hoofrail for dear life. The suitcase beside her began sliding backwards and Luna latched onto it with her magic, binding it with ethereal ropes and dragging it along.

For the briefest of moments her magic moved without her instruction, binding her, the chariot and the pegasi pulling it. It was only for a single second, but it was enough to startle her. The rope she had conjured thinned and snapped and Abby fell from the chariot. Luna heard a scream and wondered where it had come from before she realized that she was the one screaming. She then realized that she had leaped from the chariot, falling after the suitcase.

She spread her wings and dove, magic slowing the falling luggage as she conjured new bindings to trap it in the air. Her horn glowed and flashed as she finally caught up to it, biting on the handle and hauling it upwards. The pegasi had slowed to a stop and were only now doubling back around. Luna hovered over to them and climbed back into the chariot.

"Are you alright, Princess?"

Luna nodded.

"Shall we try that again, sirs? Only this time I think I would enjoy it greatly if I could secure my belongings properly first."

One of the pegasi chuckled but the other seemed agitated.

"Of course, Princess Luna. I apologize for not waiting."

"Take as long as you need, we'll be patient," the other added with a chuckle.

Luna couldn't tell if the pegasus was laughing at her or his co-pilot and pushed it out of her mind, binding the suitcase to the chariot with a sticky ball of magic.

She braced herself properly this time, strapping herself down and giving each pegasus a nod. This time when they took off at full speed she was only jostled around a bit, the wind whipping her mane back and forth.

She looked out at the land below and resumed making her mental map of the area. She watched the way the river curved around the town and the hills rose up around it. She immersed herself in its geography and wondered how many different ways there were to arrange the stars to get a perfect view of each from every hilltop at once. It would certainly be an interesting project to work on and she mentally filed it away for later.

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As the chariot touched down Luna couldn't help but notice the lack of crowds. The streets, while certainly not empty, weren't filled to the brim with ponies expecting her arrival. It was as though Celestia hadn't actually warned anyone of her arrival, a thought so hopeful that she immediately dismissed it. Celly wouldn't squander a chance to mess with her, especially when she was so aggravated. Any minute now somepony would jump out at her, or a crowd would be hiding behind the corner of the next building, or-

"Princess Luna?"

She yelped and leaped away from the sound of the voice, falling over her



suitcase. The glue holding it to the chariot flexed and stretched before snapping back into place, pulling out from under her and flipping her over a second time. She looked up meekly from her position on the ground at the guard who was already shaking his head. The other was shaking with what was more than likely stifled laughter.

"Do you require us to escort you to the library?"

Luna got to her feet as quickly and carefully as she could, failing on both counts and ending up stumbling on top of the suitcase once again. She sighed and straightened up, freeing the suitcase from its enchanted restraint and levitating it along with the others.

"I simply need to get my bearing straight. If you would be so kind as to point me in the right direction I would be most grateful."

The pegasi exchanged unreadable looks before one gestured down the road.

"Head down the main street, you can't miss it. It's the only building made out of a tree, and it has a sign with a book on it."

The suitcases made their way down the road and Luna followed behind them, shielding herself from the crowds as best as she could. She looked over her shoulder at the guard.

"Thank you."

They both bowed low and turned, wings flapping hard as they pushed off the ground and flew off with the chariot. As they vanished behind a passing cloud Luna considered the possibility that this was just the beginning of a miniature hell engineered by her sister. She drew the suitcases closer to her, peering around them from time to time and keeping them between herself and anyone else passing by. One of the suitcases smacked into something and Luna collided face-first with it. She rubbed her nose and lowered the suitcase, peering around it.

On the ground was a bale of hay with glasses and a coat. Resting directly on top of it was what appeared to be a tiny alligator with purple eyes and a lazy, nonchalant expression of indifference. Luna backed away from it

slowly, raising an eyebrow. The alligator didn't even seem to register her presence, something for which Luna was grateful. Even though it was small the scaly creature still evoked a feeling of fear and apprehension in her. Before Luna could think back to the source of her phobia the alligator became a green blur and she felt several pinching sensations all over her body as twenty toothless bites nipped her from top to bottom.

She shrieked, panic overwhelming her better judgment. She tried to bat the alligator away but every time she worked up the nerve to strike it latched onto her hoof and nibbled its way up her arm. She tried running around in circles and bucking but its jaws remained firmly clamped on her at all times.

"Gummy!"

The Element of Laughter jumped out from the bale of hay and rolled along the ground right past Luna. As she did her tail seemed to engulf the alligator, pulling it away. Pinkie Pie struck a dramatic pose and turned to Luna.

"Sorry about Gummy, he always gets chompy whenever he meets new people."

Luna stared at Pinkie Pie and her enormous smile for a moment, still quivering.

"Yes... of course... chompy indeed."

"Well duh! I mean, you're Princess Luna, which means he's never met you before. And if he's never met you before then he's gonna get chompy and excited about meeting you!"

The dark blue mare's eyes widened while Pinkie Pie's narrowed. Gummy stuck his head out from the pink party ponies' tail.

"You remember me?"

Pinkie Pie opened her mouth to speak and then suddenly gasped. Her body seemed to levitate above the ground for a moment, tail sticking out straight and limbs twitching. She dashed off as fast as she could, even more of a blur than her pet had been. Luna's gaze remained on the place

where she had been a moment before, her brain still processing what had just transpired. When she snapped back to her senses several passing ponies had stopped to look at her, some confused and others with slowly dawning recognition visible on their faces.

"Meep..."

Luna collected up her belongings and hurried on her way, the wall of floating luggage surrounding her completely. She ran almost blindly, eyes scanning the buildings around her for some sign of the library. Finally she came upon the large tree with a sign and a building carved into the living wood. The library seemed odd in a way that Luna couldn't place. No matter how she looked at it she couldn't shake the feeling that something strange was going on, and yet she couldn't detect any magic coming from it at all.

She approached the entrance and turned the doorknob. There was an odd, frightening creaking noise and the wooden facade fell towards her, crashing into the street. She stood there, staring at the door, cringing and wondering if this was another prank or a genuine screw up. Suddenly the door swung open and a certain pink party pony grinned merrily at her.

"Hi, Luna! Come on i-"

Pinkie Pie looked past Luna at the pile of painted wood and broken support planks.

"Huh, somepony made a really big mess in the street. Don't they know how dangerous that is?"

She turned her attention back to the princess and grinned.

"Come on in!"

Luna opened her mouth to speak but Pinkie Pie had already put a hoof on her shoulder to lead her through the doorway. Beyond it was what appeared to be a bakery filled with balloons and ponies. Pinkie Pie entered and dragged Luna behind her. Everypony looked at her and smiled, some bowing and others merely nodding their heads gently. A pink face took up Luna's vision completely and a shout that nearly deafened her sounded through the entire room.

"Surprise! It wasn't the library at all! It's your "Welcome to Ponyville, Luna!" party! Princess Celestia told me to throw you the biggest, bestest party ever so I did! What do you think?"

Luna recoiled in shock, flailing and falling backwards onto her flank. Everypony's eyes landed on her and the Element of Laughter seemed a tad concerned.

"What's wrong, don't you like parties?"

"...meep..."

# Chapter 4

The punch was cool and refreshing, if a little bland. Luna sipped it slowly and watched the other ponies at the party as they chatted and played. The music, some new style called "pop" that she had never heard of, was playing loudly and served as the backdrop for the event. The cheerful melodies reflected the happiness that everypony else was feeling. Luna finished her glass and refilled it for the third time, taking another bite from one of the cupcakes forming a neat stack on her plate. They were much too sweet for her taste but she continued to eat them in small, refined nibbles.

-

The moment everypony had seen her enter Luna's instincts told her to run. Instead the sudden shock of being in the spotlight had frozen her in place, sitting on the floor and unable to budge.

"Luna? Are you OK?"

She needed a way to escape the situation or shift focus away from her. Her mind searched for answers while her eyes scanned the room.

"Is something wrong? Oh! I didn't ask if you have a heart condition! Quick, somepony give her CPR!"

Luna felt her stomach rumble again. Her eyes fell on the buffet spread out on the table at the back of the room. An idea struck her.

"Food."

"Huh?"

Pinkie Pie tilted her head and held up her hoof to block the colt who had charged forward to assist. Luna got to her feet and composed herself. She mentally blocked out the presence of everypony else in the room and focused on the pink mare in front of her. The nervousness of talking to an Element of Harmony was more manageable than her stage fright in front of a massive crowd.

"I've just had a very long trip and I haven't eaten since this morning. I'd like to eat something so that I don't collapse or anything else of the sort and ruin this welcome party you've thrown in my honor."

-

Luna didn't know how Pinkie Pie had managed to gather up that plate of treats from halfway across the room and she didn't think she wanted to. Whatever kind of temporal-spacial magic had been involved it had allowed her to retire to the edges of the party in peace. She took another bite and cringed. How anypony could stomach so much sugar in one sitting, let alone one treat, was beyond her. Set down the plate and finished her drink.

The moment the cup hit the table Luna felt a hoof on her shoulder. She turned around and came face to face with the Element of Laughter.

"So what do you think of the party? I tried to make it like the Gala but then I thought 'no way, she'd never wanna have a repeat party' so I had to come up with something special just for you. And then I thought 'but what if she wasn't at the Gala', because I didn't see you but I saw everypony else so I tried to make it like the Gala, but not really like the Gala in case you had already been to the Gala already."

Luna expected to be more shocked by the pink ponies sudden appearance but she supposed the novelty was wearing off. At the very least she wasn't screaming in alarm, which was a good start.

"It's... It's a lovely party, really. You didn't have to go through so much effort for my sake."

"It was no trouble at all! Parties are my specialty, especially welcome parties. And birthday parties. And I've been known to throw really awesome parties for no particular reason."

"I certainly don't doubt it."

Luna inched away and bumped into the table. She smiled nervously and shifted sideways.



"What about you? What's your special talent, is it just the moon or other stuff too?"

She halted. Luna's smile became slightly more genuine at the sudden interest in her talents and she looked Pinkie Pie in the eye.

"My sister governs the day and I govern the night. Despite the weather pegasi maintaining the weather and determining how clear the sky is we do our best to make sure that the canvas upon which we create is beautiful for everypony who can see it. We are far more like artists, myself in particular. Celestia's sun is the source of life and light and all of its power has to be channeled into one point in order for it to support all of Equestria. Since the moon has less taxing duties like the tides and tracking the months I have far more creative liberties with the shimmering dust that remains. That's why I made the stars and change them throughout the year."

Pinkie Pie smiled.

"That's really cool! You're all like 'I'm gonna be all fancy and make the night all pretty and still follow through on my duties' and Celestia is all like 'I'm gonna be a shining beacon of hope and light!'"

She thought for a moment.

"Then what's an eclipse?"

Luna blushed and chuckled.

"Whenever me and my sister had a big fight I used to cover up the sun with the moon as a childish prank. Celestia made a habit of repeating it from time to time in my absence, 'to remind ponies everywhere that the moon and the sun are connected', she said."

"Hey! You laughed!"

Pinkie Pie grinned. Her eyes were wide and she was jumping up and down.

"Yes, I suppose I did, didn't I."

Luna smiled softly.

"Thank you."

Pinkie Pie poked Luna on the nose and shook her head.

"It was no trouble at all, Princess. After all, a brave knight like me has to do her duty in the line of battle. But you should totally laugh more, then you'll really have fun at the party!"

Luna was about to chuckle when she heard an almost musical sound. It was such a melodic noise, so sweet to her ears that she couldn't help but turn to face it. Pinkie Pie followed her gaze and grinned. Twilight was coming down the stairs with the Element of Honesty, both of them chuckling over a joke that the earth pony had just finished telling.

A thousand thoughts made their way through Luna's brain and in keeping with the spirit of the evening she chose to follow the most panicked and fearful of them. She trotted over to the refreshment table, made sure nopony was looking her way, and dove under it. She lay on the floor catching her breath for a few moments. She looked to the side and saw a mass of pink that hadn't been there moments before. A mass of pink with an enormous smile. Luna gulped.

"You're really silly, Luna! If you wanna talk to Twilight you should just go over there! Or... are you scared? Twilight isn't scary, silly-filly!"

Pinkie Pie giggled and Luna stared at her with a mix of disbelief and panic at just how noisy the pink mare was being while she was trying to hide. She looked out from under the table at the ponies who were now staring in her direction. Including Twilight. Luna retreated once more, shielding herself with the tablecloth. Her eyes never left Twilight until she was out of sight. Finally she turned and looked at Pinkie Pie. Embarrassment and anger welled up inside of her.

"There are no words to describe my feelings right now."

Pinkie Pie considered her words for a moment.

"What about sounds? Colors?"

Luna's eyebrow twitched. Her mane darkened.

"Are you a complete foal?"

Pinkie Pie poked her on the nose.

"That's not very nice! I thought you were done with being a mean, evil... not-fun person."

"Evil?"

Luna reined in her emotions and steadied herself.

"I... I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. Well, I do, but I didn't mean for it to."

"Apology accepted!"

The princess sighed softly.

"In fact, I'm gonna help you get over your nervousness!"

Luna blinked as she watched the glint in Pinkie Pie's eye, a shimmering reflection of a light source that she couldn't find. It was completely dark under the table and yet her eyes were shining. When they flashed again she leaped behind Luna and smiled.

"Come on! Let's get a move on, lazy bones!"

Before Luna could protest Pinkie Pie bit down on Luna's tail and dragged her out from under the table before getting behind her and shoving her in the direction of Twilight and Applejack. She stumbled a little and came to a halt in front of them. Her heart was beating fast and she felt light-headed. She attempted to smile and maintain her composure, failing to keep her nerves hidden.

"Princess!"

Twilight smiled and bowed low. Applejack took off her hat and repeated the gesture.

"Please, don't humble yourselves on my account."

They both straightened up and Applejack grinned.

"Sorry, Princess Luna, it's one a them old habits that die hard."

Luna nodded and smiled softly.

"I understand, but since I'm scheduled to stay here in Ponyville for quite an extended period of time I think it would be simpler if you did away with the bowing entirely. I'd hate to cause a commotion simply by walking down the street."

Twilight nodded in agreement.

"I'm sure that everypony here just wants to show you proper respect."

Luna could see Pinkie Pie out of the corner of her eye as Twilight continued to expand upon her theory that all the politeness was out of kindness and not a fearful attempt to stay her wrath. The pink mare looked at her, then at Twilight and Applejack. A strange look of realization slowly covered her face and Luna was hesitant to begin imagining what she was thinking. Suddenly Pinkie Pie took a deep breath, but when she spoke it wasn't her voice. It wasn't even coming from her. The voice of the Element of Loyalty could be heard coming from somewhere in the back of the shop, laughing her most obvious and obnoxious laugh. Luna would have remarked that it was a fantastic display of ventriloquism if it wouldn't have blown her cover.

"What in tarnation... Now what is that filly doing here when she's suppose'ta be gettin' some bed rest? And she better not'a been flying or so help me I'll teach her the meanin' of 'intensive care'!"

Applejack tipped her hat at Luna and Twilight before making her way to the kitchen. Pinkie Pie gave Luna a less than subtle wink and followed the other earth pony. Twilight watched them go and sighed.

"Sorry about that, Princess. After the Gala Rainbow Dash couldn't fly without being in pain and she's had to stay in bed, and everypony is really worried about her. She had to take time off from the weather team so she

could recover."

Twilight chuckled.

"She's been complaining all day about the cloud sculptures. Rarity had a lot of time open up after some clients dropped so she's been flying around making the skies look nice."

She glanced at Luna's puzzled expression.

"Oh! Right, you weren't there for the Best Flyer competition, were you. There's a spell that lets ponies fly for three days and Rarity is the only pony I've ever used it on."

"So she becomes an alicorn?"

Twilight shook her head.

"It's more... Oversized butterfly wings. I tried to make them feathered but the spell wouldn't work like that. It's almost impossible to turn a pony into something they're not."

Luna smiled.

"Surely for the Element of Magic anything is possible, with the proper application of force and control of course."

"You're far too kind, Princess. I don't think any of us has been able to use the powers of our Elements since we freed you from Nightmare Moon's hold. My magic might be growing but without the Element of Magic I'm still just an ordinary unicorn."

"Ms Sparkle, you're the most extraordinary mare I've ever met. Please believe me when I say that."

"I'm not that special, Princess, honestly."

"I sincerely doubt that fate would have entwined my fate with yours if you were anything less than exceptional."

Luna blinked, then blushed. Twilight was staring at her now with a look of confusion and apprehension. The princess became more flustered by the second.

"I mean, surely you feel it as well, the bond between us? At the Gala, when I saw you I could detect the faintest traces of it."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. She didn't seem very convinced.

"I don't really know what it is you're getting at, Princess. And I didn't see you at the Gala at all."

Luna nodded.

"I was running around all night, I..."

She opted to gloss over how badly she had screwed the evening up.

"I was busy tending to the night for most of the party. But I saw you, with Celestia. Briefly."

"Well, alright then. But I still don't know about this connection between us. I mean, I don't really feel anything strange around you. Maybe it's a lingering effect from when the Elements saved you?"

Luna could feel a small, sharp pain in her chest.

"Ah, well then. Forget I ever mentioned it, it was probably my imagination. Too much stress, perhaps. Anyway, I don't want to keep you. I'll be staying at the library, after all, and we'll have plenty of time to talk then."

Twilight nodded and smiled.

"Alright then. Enjoy the party, Princess."

-

Luna stood at the table and drank, hoping that the punch was spiked or otherwise tampered with. At the very least it would numb her a little. A hoof came to rest on her shoulder, but instead of yanking her away or shaking

her to get her attention it felt comforting. Luna glanced over her shoulder at Pinkie Pie. Her tangled mane and tail had deflated somewhat and Luna couldn't help but feel that her balloon cutie mark was one of the most appropriate she'd ever seen during her reign.

"Are you OK?"

Luna turned back to the table and topped her cup off.

"A princess should know better than to assume her own imagined feelings are reflected in the heart of a mare she hardly knows. The only thing that isn't OK is my pride."

"Your pride?"

Pinkie Pie seemed utterly puzzled. Luna nodded and swirled the punch a few times before taking another drink.

"Yes, I made a mistake in believing that she felt the same way about me. It's not her fault that she said those things to me, it's mine for thinking that she'd feel as strongly about me as I do about her."

Pinkie Pie nodded.

"You know, getting told something like that is hard. You've got every right to mope."

There was a brief flash of blue light and Luna's gaze fell. Pinkie Pie seemed utterly oblivious to the fact that her vision had wandered.

"But come on! It's a party, you should be laughing and having fun!"

Luna couldn't tear her eyes away from the blue pendant now hanging around the Element of Laughter's neck. Even as she was being led back towards the crowd she kept staring at the physical embodiment of laughter. The Element had manifested and Luna didn't have a single clue as to why.



# Intermission 1

The walk back to Sweet Apple Acres was usually a long one, but Applejack barely noticed the time pass by as she walked. The path seemed to meld together into a single, drawn out moment and she didn't remember each step as she took it. Her mind was somewhere else entirely, wondering where Rainbow Dash had flown off to after the party. Not only had she disregarded everypony's concern by not staying in bed and resting, but she hadn't stuck around at the party to at least say hello to her friends.

Applejack adjusted her hat a little and looked up at the sky. The clouds were sculpted into roses and the afternoon glow made them look golden, but there wasn't a trace of a rainbow trail or blue blur to indicate where the pegasus might be. She kicked a stone and watched it skitter along the path before bouncing into a ditch and sighed.

It was bad enough that Rainbow Dash never seemed to care when she got hurt. Every bump, scrape and bruise got shaken off like it was nothing, even when everypony tried to get her to take a break. It was always "one more trick", "one more lap". When she had gotten herself stuck in a tree and a branch pierced her leg she was walking around the minute Fluttershy finished bandaging it, saying that since she flew all the time a little leg injury was nothing to worry about. Applejack wanted to strangle that little blue devil sometimes for causing so much stress for everypony and making her worry all the time.

But it was the fact that Rainbow Dash had avoided her that hurt the most. She had lied about getting plenty of rest, and then tried to hide it by running away. Applejack felt a sort of stabbing sensation in her chest at the very idea of somepony she trusted lying to her face about something so important, but the fact that it was Rainbow Dash made it even worse. Every sneaky trick always seemed worse when Rainbow Dash did it. It felt like a personal attack, or a betrayal. Applejack knew Rainbow Dash had no idea how she really felt, but even as friends there were limits to what the flier could get away with.

By the time she had made her way to the edge of the orchard she had

worked herself up again and frustration and worry filled her mind. The sun was just beginning to near the horizon and there wasn't any time left in the day to track her down. Applejack scaled the nearest hill and looked out at the fields, wondering just where her friend had gone off to. She sighed and walked over to a tree, spinning around and bucking it hard. She raised her head to catch an apple and was instead greeted by the sight of a rapidly approaching, rainbow-colored mass.

Rainbow Dash landed with a thud on top of Applejack and the two lay there for a moment, shocked, confused and in no small amount of pain after the collision. Applejack carefully pried herself out from under Rainbow Dash and stood up, dusting herself off.

"What in the hay were you doing in my tree, Rainbow Dash?"

Rainbow Dash got to her hooves, rubbing her eyes. She blinked a couple of times, squinting at Applejack as her eyes adjusted to the glare of the setting sun and adjusting the bandages wrapped around her wings and back.

"I was taking a nap. You know, resting? Like you said I should?"

The earth pony glanced at her, eyes narrowed. She picked her hat up off the ground and shook a stray leaf off of it before putting it back on.

"Don't you lie to me, Dash. I know you were at that party for Princess Luna."

Rainbow Dash's eyes widened slightly and her jaw fell open, hooves dropping to the ground. She jumped forwards and grabbed hold of Applejack's shoulders, shaking them frantically.

"Wait, there was a party for the princess? And nopony told me? AJ, I just missed my big chance! If I had gone and impressed the princess with my flying skills then she'd totally invite me to Canterlot to perform for everypony, including the Wonderbolts!"

Applejack rubbed her temple and sighed, shaking Rainbow Dash off. She took a few steps away from the blue mare and circled around her.

"I know you were there, so quit tryin' to hide it."

The pegasus threw her hooves up and grumbled.

"I'm telling you, Applejack, I've been here all day. You've been nagging me to rest so I figured I'd get you to stop by taking you seriously. Sorta. I may have used my wings a little to get up here, but after that I didn't use them at all, I swear."

Applejack looked her in the eye, scrutinizing every facet of her face. After a moment she turned to face the setting sun and sat down, getting comfortable. There hadn't been a hint of a lie in her words or her expression. Had she really been in the tree during the party? Applejack gazed out at the orchard. The orange light made it look like the trees were on fire, and the apples gleamed like hot embers, shining amid the leaves. Even as a filly she had come to this spot whenever she didn't know what to do. It was like the trees could speak to her here, could answer her questions. And now they were telling her to trust her friend.

"I believe you."

She glanced over at Rainbow Dash and smirked a bit, watching her friend sit down beside her. For a moment she caught herself staring, self-conscious. Her own body was, at least to her, stocky and too muscular for anypony to find her attractive. Not like Rainbow Dash at all, the mare with a gymnast's figure, all lithe figure and supple curves. Applejack wondered to herself if all pegasus ponies were like that. If they were she certainly didn't notice it half the time. It was only around Rainbow Dash that the innate splendor of the fliers presented itself to the apple farmer. She tried to clear her thoughts and speak.

"So, you'd 'ave tried to perform for the princess if anypony had told you there was a party?"

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, of course I would have. I mean, it's not an opportunity that comes up often."

Applejack gave her a look of disapproval and Rainbow Dash gulped.

"Of course, I wouldn't have used my wings at all. I'd have just done... uh... other things. I know plenty of other tricks that I don't need my wings for at all."

Applejack chuckled, shaking her head.

"O' course you do. You know, I've never really understood your obsession with the Wonderbolts. I mean, I get that they're your idols and all, but there are other flyin' groups out there too."

"Yeah, but they're nowhere near as good as the Wonderbolts! They're the best fliers in all Equestria, the fastest and most amazing pegasus team that ever lived."

A stray thought wandered into Applejack's mind and a coy grin plastered itself across her face.

"Are you sure it's not just the costumes?"

Rainbow Dash tilted her head, confusion filling her features.

"Huh?"

"Just a thought. You're always trying to convince Rarity to make you a replica, so I was just thinkin' that maybe you're just tryin' to get a real Wonderbolt outfit or something. Although I never pegged you as the kind of mare to enjoy spandex to that degree. Whatever floats your boat."

The pegasus stared at her wide-eyed, cheeks bright red, and Applejack couldn't suppress her laughter. She stamped her hoof against the ground, giggling and trying to catch her breath.

"Sorry, Dashie, I just couldn't resist makin' the joke."

Rainbow Dash folded her forelegs and looked away.

"Yeah, well it's not very funny. I genuinely look up to them, AJ. It doesn't have anything to do with... that sort of thing."

Applejack leaned in and grinned once more.

"So you're not gonna deny it then?"

The blue mare spun around to face her, standing up and furrowing her brow.

"Yes, I'm going to deny it! It's not about the costume, or the spandex or whatever!"

Rainbow Dash's words were a mix of anger and uncertain embarrassment. Applejack chuckled a little.

"Well alright then, if you say so. I guess I'll trust you on that one too."

Rainbow Dash growled in frustration and sighed, sitting down. She stared out at the trees and Applejack gave her a moment to cool down from the provocation.

"So you've just been here on the farm the whole time?"

Rainbow Dash responded with a roll of her eyes and another sigh.

"Pretty much. It's not like I was gonna fly all the way back to Cloudsdale when everypony would just yell at me for it. You guys always give me such an earful when I get hurt."

Applejack hesitated for a moment and put her hoof on her friend's shoulder.

"It's just cause we get worried about you. You're always so stubborn about your injuries."

Rainbow Dash looked up at the clouds for a moment and brushed her bangs out of her face.

"So you're not stubborn at all?"

Applejack gave Rainbow Dash a light shove on the shoulder.

"At least I learned my lesson about takin' it too far. You always make it

seem like you just don't care what the hay happens to you, or what anypony else thinks or feels about it. It's like the rest of us don't even matter to ya. It's just plain selfish, Rainbow Dash."

"Selfish?"

Rainbow Dash turned to face Applejack, anger washing over her face.

"How am I being selfish by doing whatever I want with my body? It's my decision, AJ. If I wanted to I could fly all over Ponyville with my sprain and nopony should be able to say anything about it. If I wanna be a little self-destructive that's my own problem."

Applejack backed away a bit, trying to keep her expression steady and her voice even, failing at both.

"Are you really that dense? I mean, I knew you had a hard head or you would've died after so many crashes, but I didn't realize it was cause you had such a thick skull."

Rainbow Dash's wings flared aggressively and she winced slightly as they strained at the bandages.

"Hey! Are you trying to say I'm stupid or something?"

Pain slowly filled Applejack's voice, little by little, her frustration and worry tinging every word with anger.

"I reckon I just did. Only a stupid filly without a single ounce of loyalty in her body would ignore her friends when they're worried. You're the only mare I know who's ticked me off so much, and all because, despite me being worried about you, you go around actin' like you're invincible or somethin'. I really wish I could just stop carin' about you and let you get yourself killed, because at this rate that's exactly what's gonna happen, and when it does I'm gonna wonder why I ever put up with you in the first place."

The fury vanished from the blue mare's face, her eyes widening in shock.

"I... AJ, I didn't mean to-"

Applejack closed her eyes and steadied herself. When she opened them again her voice was measured and soft.

"I respect that it's your body, but I'm also your friend, and if you want it to stay that way then you need to understand that when you get hurt, it hurts me too. It hurts everypony who looks up to you, respects you, and... and loves you."

Rainbow Dash blinked, tilting her head, brow furrowed in confusion.

"Love me? What, you mean like... Scootaloo or something? I mean, I know she looks up to me like a sister."

There were few instances that Applejack could recall where her attempts at subtlety were too subtle for the other pony to catch her drift, and she had to wonder if the pegasus was plain dumb or playing dumb. She hoped it was the latter.

"...Let's go with that. But do you get my meanin'?"

Rainbow Dash nodded slowly.

"I... I get it. I'll try to be more careful from now on. If there's an emergency then I'll take care of it as fast as I can so I can rest more."

"Rainbow."

Applejack frowned and Rainbow Dash groaned, tilting her head back and casting her eyes upwards.

"Alright, fine. Even if it's an emergency I'll be sure to take care of myself. Happy?"

The farmer smirked.

"Almost. I think I'm gonna do somethin' to keep you out of trouble."

The pegasus eyed her with suspicion for a moment

"You're not gonna shackle me to a bed or something just to make me rest,



are you?"

With a grin Applejack took off her hat and looked at it for a second before reaching over and setting it down on Rainbow Dash's head.

"Nah, I think this'll work better."

Rainbow Dash tilted the hat a bit, shifting her mane so it sat more comfortably under the brim.

"Your hat? How the hay is this supposed to keep me out of trouble?"

The earth pony smiled and sat up.

"I want you to take care of it for me."

Rainbow Dash stopped fussing with her hair and paused.

"Why in Equestria is it my job to take care of your hat? And how does taking care of your hat do anything?"

Applejack's smile faltered and she pressed her face against her hoof.

"I really hope you're just playin' around, Rainbow Dash. It's supposed to be symbolic like. This hat is important to me and I want you to keep it safe for me so you'll stay out of trouble yourself."

The pegasus tipped the hat back a bit and adjusted the drawstring.

"If you'd have just said that to begin with I would have known what you meant."

Applejack sighed softly.

"Nevermind. Just... just hold on to it for me?"

Rainbow Dash saluted.

"I'll guard it with my life. You can count on me, AJ."

She started pantomiming, crossing her hoof over her heart.

"Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

Applejack smiled.

"Good."

They basked in the silence that draped itself over them and Applejack finally felt the unease that had settled in her chest begin to melt away, replaced with a slowly quickening heartbeat and heat slowly rising to her cheeks as she savored Rainbow Dash's presence.

"Say, uh, Applejack?"

Applejack blinked, her reverie broken.

"Hmm?"

Rainbow Dash prodded the ground with her hoof, drawing lines in the dirt. She stared at the shapes she was making, not meeting the earth pony's eye.

"It's, uh... it's kinda weird seeing you without your hat. No offense or anything."

Applejack gently jabbed Rainbow Dash's side to try to get her to stop staring at the ground, eyebrow raised.

"What do you mean, 'weird'? You mean, like, goofy or somethin'?"

The pegasus turned raised her hooves defensively, inching back a little.

"No! No, no, I mean... It's different. You always have your hat on so it's kinda part of your... you. It's kinda nice to see you like this though."

Applejack straightened up a little bit.

"You... You think so? I don't look dumb without my hat?"

"Of course not. You look... great."

Applejack looked at her mane, toying with the tie at the end.

"I doubt that. I don't have nearly as nice a mane as you do, Dash, especially on account of how I forgot to brush it this mornin'. I probably look a right mess."

Rainbow Dash snorted a little, laughing.

"You you kidding? Do you have any idea how long it takes me to tame my hair after a nap? That's why I keep it so short. I really wish I had a mane like yours, one I could wear long so it flows in the breeze. I'm more than a little bit jealous of you, AJ, if you let your hair down in a storm you'd look awesome."

Applejack chuckled.

"Oh please, if anythin' I should be jealous of you. You're the beautiful one."

They both blinked, staring at each other.

"Beautiful? You think I'm... "

Applejack gulped, cursing her innate honesty and the subtle way that the truth had of slipping out precisely when she didn't mean it to.

"Uh... I mean, you're much better lookin' than I am. I'm a plain Jane, nothin' special. You? You're all bright color and pretty figure. You're so flashy I bet the colts are all over you at your flyin' events, with your good looks and your charm."

Rainbow Dash ran her hoof along the lines she'd drawn the ground, eyes half-lidded and expression wistful.

"I dunno, I always thought you were the better mare. We can argue looks all you like, but personality? You've totally got me beat. I know I'm not always the easiest pony to get along with, and I tend to be a bit... Quick to react, slow to think. Not looking before I leap. That sorta thing. You're patient and understanding, AJ, and I think that makes you the better catch."

Those colts could care less once they see I'm all flash and no substance."

Applejack reached out and touched her hoof to Rainbow Dash's cheek, turning the blue mare's face towards her own.

"Dash, any pony would be lucky to have you in their life. I count my blessings every day and I count you twice because I value your companionship that much. You're... you're my super-star, Wonderbolt or not, and you always will be."

Rainbow Dash smiled softly, all her flair and brashness replaced by what Applejack could only assume was a feeling of genuine acceptance.

"Thanks AJ. You'll... heh, you'll always be the 'apple of my eye'."

Applejack smiled softly and looked out at the orchard with a sigh. That joke was an old one, but she didn't really mind it coming from Rainbow Dash. Her eyes wandered along the horizon, tracing the edges of the trees as they caught the last of the daylight. Subtle wasn't working. It figured that Rainbow Dash would only catch her drift if she did something as brash as the acrobatic flier's usual attitude. Bracing herself for the worst, she turned to face the blue mare.

"Hey, Rainbow Dash?"

"Yeah AJ?"

"I... There's something I need to tell you."

"Huh?"

"Well... That is to say... Oh, ponyfeathers."

Applejack grabbed the drawstring of the hat and pulled Rainbow Dash close, kissing her abruptly. After a few moments she leaned back and let go of the hat, letting a stunned Rainbow Dash return to her sitting position.

"I... I like you a lot, Dashie. Quite a lot, and as more than just being friends. I just couldn't not tell you anymore, it's been eatin' me up inside since I worked it out for myself. I know you probably don't feel the same way, and

that's fine. I... I'm sorry for the kiss if that's the case, you probably hate me an awful lot for just rushin' in there like that."

Applejack chuckled nervously, watching Rainbow Dash's expression shift, eyebrows slowly lowering into a slight scowl.

"I just... If I didn't do somethin' about it I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror anymore. I had to let you know, and bein' subtle wasn't cutting it so I had to be blunt and-"

Rainbow Dash smacked Applejack across the face and the earth pony felt the world spinning around her for several seconds. When gravity resumed pointing in the same direction she blinked the world back into focus. Rainbow Dash's scowl had now become a look of anger and disappointment.

"That one was for kissing me without considering my feelings first."

Rainbow Dash raised her hoof and aimed for the other cheek as Applejack brought her hoof to where the first blow had landed, closing her eyes and bracing herself. The second strike was little more than a friendly swat and as Applejack opened her eyes the pegasus was smiling at her.

"And that one is for being a complete motormouth and not letting me get a word in edgewise. You know, to tell you I like you too."

Rainbow Dash gently stroked Applejack's uninjured cheek.

"I've been waiting a while trying to figure out what to do about it. I figured I'd try to be patient for once and not just rush in blindly. And what happens? You rush in blindly instead, and completely out of nowhere."

Applejack narrowed her eyes slightly, raising an eyebrow.

"Dash, I've been hinting at it all afternoon."

Rainbow Dash pulled her hoof back and folded her forelegs in front of herself.

"It went right over my head, you could have made it just a little bit clearer."

You kinda suck at being clear and subtle at the same time. At least, to me."

The farmer smiled softly.

"If I didn't want to kiss you right now I'd push you down this hill and laugh. Well, that and your injuries, but mostly the kiss."

Rainbow Dash chuckled a bit.

"And if I didn't want to kiss you back I'd drag you down this hill with me."

"So what's it gonna be?"

The pegasus shifted and moved beside Applejack, toying with the hat.

"I dunno, rolling down this hill might be fun. But maybe it can wait until I'm all healed up and ready for action."

"Agreed."

Applejack scooted a bit closer and kissed Rainbow Dash gently. The other mare reciprocated and Applejack could feel a hoof running through her mane before pulling at her neck a little, deepening the kiss. After a moment they pulled back, panting a little and smiling. Rainbow Dash looked out at the trees for a moment and grinned.

"You know... it might not be so bad taking it easy. Maybe I can help out around the farm a little bit. I'm the Iron Pony around here after all, a little leg exercise while my wings heal up shouldn't be a problem. I mean, if you can do it-"

Applejack rested her hoof on the hat and tipped it forwards before pressing down, flattening it against Rainbow Dash's face and smirking.

"Alright then, "Iron Pony," we'll see what you've got tomorrow mornin'. You can help me with the chores I had to put off to go to Princess Luna's welcome party. And... you've always got a bed here if you need one. We'd be glad of the company. That never stopped bein' a thing or anythin'."

Rainbow Dash pried the hat from her face and put it back on properly,

scowling for a second before smiling playfully.

"But where are you gonna sleep, you don't have a couch."

They both smirked and Applejack gently nuzzled Rainbow Dash's mane.

"Feather-brain."

"Stubborn workhorse."



# Chapter 5

Luna spent the rest of the party with her eyes glued to the necklace. Neither of the other two Elements present at the party had manifested a focus for their power, which made it all the more troublesome that the pink mare had apparently called hers forth. Luna hoped that it was instinctive, a reflex action. The Element of Laughter had told her to lighten up, perhaps it was just something that happened whenever they were embodying their nature to its fullest extent. The troubling part was that nopony besides her seemed to even notice it existed.

She decided to ask Twilight once she had the nerve again. After having studied the Elements for so long under Celestia's orders she'd surely have some sort of explanation for it, especially if it was innate magic like that of a unicorn. She was so lost in thought that she collided with something soft and purple. She blinked and found herself face to face with Twilight's flank. Twilight turned to look at her, eyebrow raised. Luna let out a soft, embarrassed squeak and took a step backwards. Twilight smiled.

"It's gonna be pretty late soon. Let's go get you settled in at the library so I can show you around before dark. I bet you're really tired, huh."

Luna nodded, feeling her cheeks warm up and trying to hide whatever blush might be forming on her face.

"Yes... Settled in..."

She smiled a little, then frowned as coherent thought once again took hold.

"I'm a bit tired, yes, but I still have my duties to attend to. And I have to watch over the night,"

Twilight seemed a bit puzzled so Luna continued.

"I don't actually need sleep, it's just a pleasant experience. Celly sleeps sometimes too, but very rarely. I think she fell out of that habit when I was away."

"Celly?"

"You know, my sister. Celestia."

Twilight smirked a bit at the thought.

"That's kind of cute that you have a nickname for her. What does she call you?"

Luna's eyes widened for a moment.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all. I mean, surely she must call me something, but it's not like there's a particular nickname that she uses for me."

Luna half-expected to hear her sister's voice echo through the room, obnoxious and squeaky tone stinging her ears and piercing the silence with a loud "Luuuuuuuu!".

"Huh... Well, maybe that's normal between siblings, with the younger one coming up with a nickname out of admiration? I never had a younger sister to call me 'Twi' or anything."

Luna smiled softly. She pictured a young foal asking Twilight to help her with her homework.

"But Twi," she'd day, "it's too hard for me to do it myself."

And then the foal would pout and complain until Twilight's giving nature gave in and she'd help, looking so cute and frustrated. Celestia had been exactly the same when they were younger, except for the days when she'd coat Luna's blanket with poison joke oil so that the stars would rise in the sky as a thousand childish scribbles and the moon would be replaced with one of her baby pictures. That prank got old when instead of messing with the sky it made her invisible in a far more literal sense than her emotional security could tolerate.

"I kinda wonder what it would have been like growing up with an older sister like Celestia. You must have all kinds of stories."

Luna nodded and smiled.

"Celly was, and still is, quite the master of the practical joke. Her schemes and tricks formed a major part of our relationship growing up. She was always a wonderful sister but she never missed a chance to tip the prankster's gambit in her favor. I have many tales of our feud of chicanery and shenanigans. But I digress. I wouldn't want to bother you this late in the afternoon with the trivialities of helping me unpack my belongings, it can wait until the morning when the night has ended."

Twilight nodded and smiled.

"Alright then. I'll see you la-"

Pinkie Pie skidded to a halt beside Luna and slid her hoof around her shoulders, smiling at Twilight.

"I'm gonna borrow this, I hope you don't mind."

Both the princess and the scholar stared at the pink mare.

"You're gonna wha-"

Twilight was cut off as Pinkie Pie pulled Luna out the door and past her in a pink and dark blue blur. Twilight stared at the empty space they had inhabited for a few moments, shook her head, and started walking home wondering whether or not the princess would survive the night intact.

-

"You were totally falling apart out there, soldier! You completely lost track of your mission objective and failed to secure key resources that would be vital success!"

Pinkie Pie led Luna down the road, further and further from the party. The sudden appearance of the army helmet wasn't lost on Luna, and she wondered if it had manifested from the same extra-dimensional space at the necklace. She opted to play along and avoid the headache involved with resisting.

"I hardly messed up my mission, commander, if anything you kidnapping

me made things worse!"

Pinkie Pie looked at her incredulously.

"I did no such thing! I evacuated you before you totally blew everything!"

"Blew what? What possible purpose could kidnapping me have served, I ask you!"

Pinkie Pie lightly jabbed Luna's shoulder with her hoof.

"You were totally going to bail! You, soldier, showed fear in the face of the enemy!"

Luna raised an eyebrow.

"Twilight is not, nor has she ever been, my enemy."

Pinkie Pie took off the helmet and discarded it.

"Oh, alright then!"

Luna halted.

"So all of that just now... had no meaning whatsoever?"

"Kinda, I also really wanted to go to the karaoke bar and needed somepony to come with me!"

"What is a karaoke bar?"

Pinkie Pie walked backwards, her expression a mix of confusion, shock and joy.

"You don't know what it is!? You are going to have so much fun!"

Luna sighed and resumed following after her.

"Anyway, I was doing perfectly well talking to Twilight. Even if I was a nervous wreck and rambling like a school-filly."

"Well, if you didn't like her so much then you wouldn't be so nervous."

"Yes, probably, but-"

Luna blinked.

"How long have you known?"

"Known what?"

Pinkie Pie smiled. She swerved a bit as she walked, dodging obstacles without looking at them, her eyes locked on Luna's.

"...Commander, how long did you know I was preparing to do battle for?"

Luna watched Pinkie Pie pull another helmet, or perhaps the same helmet, out of nowhere and put it on.

"A true commander knows everything that takes place on the battlefield. Like the ambush that I set for Applejack. She and Rainbow Dash are opposing factions, this much is obvious to a truly cunning general. It was clear that I had to present a viable threat to AJ and Rainbow Dash is the only enemy she'd run off to fight like that. You were preparing a raid against Twilight and froze up right when she fired a warning shot."

Luna's brain tried to process the analogy and gave up.

"So you kidnapped me to keep me from messing up the conversa- the mission?"

Pinkie Pie nodded. Luna raised her hoof in salute.

"Thank you, commander."

"At ease, soldier."

Pinkie Pie smiled and discarded the helmet.

"We're here!"

-

The lobby was a small, quaint room decorated in what Luna presumed to be a conservative style by modern standards. A colt sat at the desk reading a newspaper. Pinkie Pie walked over to the desk and grabbed the top of the newspaper, lowering it. The colt chuckled a bit.

"Evening."

"Evening! Me and my friend are here for the early bird special!"

The colt glanced at Luna for a moment.

"Huh. Well I'll be."

He got up, bowed, and returned to his seat.

"Always an honor to have royalty as guests, princess. Welcome to our humble establishment."

Luna nodded slightly.

"It is a pleasure to be here and experience the culture of my subjects firsthand after so long away from them."

"Less talky, more party!"

Luna and the colt at the desk both blinked and Pinkie Pie got out a little purse. She opened it up and set her bits on the counter. The colt counted them, nodding to himself as he went.

"The usual room then?"

"Yep! And drinks for two!"

The colt nodded and walked into the back room. Luna leaned around to look through the doorway and felt herself tugged in the other direction by Pinkie Pie.

"This way, silly-filly!"

Pinkie Pie led her down a long corridor lined with doors. Some were closed and Luna could hear the sounds of singing ponies beyond them, some singing well and others causing the princess to wish she could rip her ears off instead of having to put up with the noise. Finally they came to a stop in front of a room with VIP printed on it.

"Voice imprint protected?"

The pink mare giggled.

"Nope! Very important pony! I come here all the time to sing with my friends so they let me use the VIP lounge whenever it's free."

Luna nodded and opened the door. Beyond it lay a slightly mismatched collection of couches, a large table, and a stage with a microphone. Pinkie Pie burst past her and immediately leaped onto the biggest, cushiest couch available. The cushion gently sagged beneath her and she got comfortable.

"And now for the debut of the moon princess, all the way from Canterlot, Luna!"

Pinkie Pie covered her mouth with her hooves and simulated the roar of a cheering crowd.

"Yeah! Go Luna! Rock on!"

Luna shut the door behind herself and sat down on a couch. She and Pinkie Pie exchanged glances for a moment before the Element of Laughter started gesturing towards the stage. Luna raised an eyebrow and looked at it.

"What?"

Pinkie Pie gestured to Luna, then to the stage before finally miming singing.

"Oh! Charades! Try once more, I think I'm beginning to grasp it... Is it related to tropical fish?"

"No! Well, yes, but I mean that you have to sing."

"What, do you mean on the stage? In front of... you?"

Luna half-expected the room to be packed so she'd have a reason for nervousness. Instead they were alone, and the Element of Laughter was one of the only ponies who she could trust not to judge her voice.

"Yep! Otherwise you could just be in the shower!"

"...Alright then."

Luna walked over to the stage and hopped up onto it. She approached the microphone and cleared her throat.

"Ora sì ch'io son contenta; sembra fatto inver per me-"

Pinkie Pie got up from the couch and pointed at a small television. She tapped it with her hoof a couple of times and the picture on it changed.

"Use this, then it'll play music for you to sing along with. For such a clever mare you don't seem to know much about this kind of thing."

Luna felt her cheeks heat up and she looked away.

"It's hardly my fault, I was in the moon for a millennium. So much has changed since then."

Pinkie Pie poked her on the nose and Luna looked at her. The pink mare didn't remove her hoof.

"Pinkie?"

Pinkie Pie giggled.

"Boop."

She hopped back off the stage.

"I don't wanna treat you like a little foal and I don't think you wanna be



treated like one, but I'll do my very best to explain every last itty bitty teeny tiny detail so that you understand everything."

Luna nodded and smiled softly. Despite apprehension as to just how good of a teacher the pink mare might be it felt good to know that somepony was watching out for her.

"Thank you, Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie Pie nodded and pressed the screen a few more times.

"Let's start you on something easy. Think of it like... eating a couple cupcakes to get your stomach ready for a whole cake."

As Pinkie Pie made her way back to the couch Luna tried to to stare, mouth agape at her and failed at containing her combined disbelief and concern. A sound drew her attention and she looked at the television once more. Music began to play and Luna watched as on the screen a video began to play. Celestia had told her about the way that television's worked but that didn't make them any less fascinating. And the music, despite being far more lively than what she generally enjoyed, was layered with interwoven melodies. The singer was quick talented as well. Her admiration for the flashing colorful lights and the song to which they moved was interrupted by Pinkie Pie shaking her vigorously.

"Sing! You've gotta sing, silly!"

Luna stared at the words that were appearing on the screen. They were the lyrics, lighting up as they were sung. Beneath them was an indicator of how high or low the note was. She froze up. It was all happening a little too fast and by the time she worked out what a particular note was going to be it had already passed. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Pinkie Pie biting her lip and flailing her limbs. It was obvious the pink mare had a lot to say that she was barely restraining and it was a massive distraction for her already taxed patience with all this musical nonsense. Finally the song came to an end and Luna sighed. She levitated the microphone over to Pinkie.

"All this modern music... I don't know a single song, and I somehow doubt that I'm going to magically improve my ability to read the notes by sight. I

think I'm just going to watch."

Once more Luna had to wonder just where these items materialized from as a pair of pink headphones were placed upon her head. Pinkie Pie smiled and sat back down.

"Just pick a song and listen to it for a while until you've got it memorized! Or until you feel confident. One or the other. Ooh, but both would be even better!"

Pinkie Pie grabbed the microphone and ran over to the machine, scrolling through the track list. Luna followed the end of the headphone cord and found it was plugged into a small device with a screen and several buttons. It was a fascinating piece of technology and she began tinkering with it a little. She pressed a few buttons and began working out their functions. Suddenly music came blasting out of the headphones and she yanked them off her head and tossed them halfway across the room. She gave Pinkie a concerned look but she was already midway through a rousing rendition of "Camptown Races".

The moon princess picked up the device again and fiddled with it until she found the volume controls. Once it was set to a more suitable level she browsed the music selection. The library of thousands of songs was a veritable feast for her ears, modern tracks and older styles right there at her hooves. She randomized the order, hit play, and listened. The song that came first sent a shiver down her spine as she listened to it. It was simple, haunting, and the lyrics truly spoke to her.

She took off the headphones and set them aside. Pinkie Pie finished her song and held the last note until the machine returned to the selection menu. She smiled at Luna, bouncing up and down.

"So did you pick a song? Didja? Didja? Huh?"

Luna nodded.

"It's a bit of a sad one, I hope you don't mind."

"Sad songs can be lots of fun too! Especially when you're sad because then they make you feel better!"

Luna nodded and smiled. She levitated the microphone from Pinkie Pie's grasp once more and stood before the screen. She scrolled down to Ever Dream by a band called Nightwish and selected it. The music began to play and she sang.

"Ever felt away with me, just once that all I need, entwined in finding you one day... Ever felt away without me, my love, it lies so deep, ever dream of me..."

The heaviness of the instrumental sections hit her much harder through the sound system than it had over the speakers, sending a deep rumbling through her chest that stirred something primal that had gotten lost in all the refinements of royalty. It made her smile. She glanced over at the pink mare whose wide eyes and wider smile were directed solely at her.

"Thank you."

By the time the song was over Luna's smirk had become an expression of deep and meaningful pain, overflowing with the lonely despair of her imprisonment. She let her passions guide her from note to note, making the melody her own. A thousand years ago it was only proper for a mare in high standing to know how to entertain the court and the moon would have been even more inhospitable without music, even if it was only mindless humming. But the inner fire that engulfed her now was something else entirely, as though all of her sorrow had been bundled up into an enormous balloon and somepony had come along and stuck a pin in it to let it trickle out and away. The music cleansed her, if only for a little while, of her pent up feelings.

She closed her eyes as the final chorus came. For a brief moment she felt the darkness inside her stirring, but it wasn't Nightmare Moon. It was a gentle shadow, the soft and silent blackness of a still night, warm instead of chilling and comforting instead of spiteful. Pinkie Pie's gaze lowered to her necklace as she finally noticed it. It was shining as brightly as the day it had helped cleanse Luna and her hooves lifted off the ground.

"Woah!"

Luna barely heard her, lost in the song.

"Ever dream of meee-eee!"

The necklace shattered into shining blue dust and Pinkie Pie landed with a thud on the ground. The dust circled around Luna before fading into her. She opened her eyes and looked at the screen, Something felt different, but she couldn't quite place her hoof on it. And then she realized how much her cheeks hurt from smiling so hard, and how happy she was feeling. She turned to Pinkie Pie, whose jaw was quite literally on the floor, and chuckled.

"You look remarkably silly like that, Pinkie. I don't think I've ever met a pony who could do that before now."

Pinkie Pie jumped up and down excitedly.

"That was amazing! You were all like 'La la la! Dream of me!' and it was so cool because you were really good at it and then the necklace was all glowy and flashy and then all of a sudden it became stardust, and then when you were done singing it all kinda sparkled and glittered and went inside you!"

Luna looked at Pinkie's now bare neck and blinked. The Element of Laughter, or at least the crystal that composed the magic of the element, had vanished as quickly as it had arrived.

"And now you're smiling! And really happy!"

The princess nodded slowly. Despite being terrified of what Pinkie Pie was saying she couldn't deny that her fear was somehow diminished. She recalled something similar happening the last time the magic of the Element of Laughter had been used dispelling Nightmare Moon's illusions by laughing at the fear. She chuckled a bit and set the microphone down,

"I guess I'm just... feeling too good to worry right now. Later on I'll likely be panicking, worrying like a little foal, but for now? I think I feel like singing another song."

Pinkie Pie was at the song selection screen before Luna even saw her move and some kind of music involving horns, drums and what she could

only assume was an accordion began to play.

"Then let's party!"

Luna caught the microphone Pinkie tossed her way using her magic and returned the gesture when Pinkie Pie slung a hoof over her shoulder. The polka was loud, obnoxious and pointless, but it was horrendously fun to sing along to "Weird" Alfalfa's music even if the lyrics were some of the most absurd tripe Luna had ever heard in all her life.

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Luna walked into the library. Twilight was at her desk, face immersed in a book. Luna smiled softly and walked over to her.

"I've returned, Twilight."

Twilight barely looked up at all, consumed by whatever she was reading or researching.

"That's good. Glad you made it here alright."

Luna chuckled a bit.

"I'm going to go raise the moon now and prepare for the night. And Twilight?"

"Hmm?"

Luna took a deep breath and began walking out the door, her horn glowing softly.

"I like you."

Twilight blinked. She looked at the door but Luna was already flying off into the sky. She had barely heard what Luna had said, but she had felt it. Some dark thing, soft and warm, had filled those words and Twilight could feel them lingering in her head and making her heart ache with some strange and new feeling. It made her smile.

# Chapter 6

Luna felt confident. The thousand niggling doubts that had clouded her mind evaporated with a smile and a chuckle. She felt like she could do anything, especially after what she had just said to Twilight. She looked up at the sky for a moment and realized that all she had done was admit to liking her, nothing more. Her victorious attitude deflated slightly as she imagined Twilight waving aside what she had said as little more than an acknowledgement of friendship. She made a silent vow to properly express herself when the next ideal moment came along.

The streets were pleasantly quiet and Luna relished the peace. Vendors were packing away their goods and closing shop for the day and everypony was making the slow, lazy trip home from wherever their day had taken them. The setting sun turned their shadows into tall, majestic creatures that roamed the streets with elongated strides that carried them a few graceful inches before halting. Luna was too busy admiring them to notice the ponies casting them were staring at her. She lifted her head, smiling to herself, and came face to face with a green unicorn mare and her cream-coated companion with a two-tone mane and tail, each eying her with a mix of confusion and surprise.

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry, I must have lost focus for a moment there."

Luna did her best not to imitate their expression, trying to giggle away her embarrassment and failing.

"Princess Luna? Oh my, it is you, isn't it? It's an honor to meet you."

The earth pony smiled and bowed before giving her friend a light smack and motioning for her to do the same. After a moment of holding her hoof over where she had been struck, realization dawned on her.

"Oh! Right. Yes, very honored."

She performed a hasty, slightly less graceful bow and resumed rubbing the sore spot, scowling at the now frustrated earth pony. She looked back at Luna and smiled.

"Sorry about that. I think it was me who lost focus that time. I hope that you'll forgive me for not bowing immediately."

The pair exchanged glances and Luna chuckled a bit.

"Worry not, unlike my sister I tend to not be much for ceremony. I understand that I can be a bit... intimidating, especially considering the problems Nightmare Moon caused when I was released from the moon, but I hope that everypony will treat me no differently than anypony else."

The unicorn lightly prodded her friend in the shoulder.

"And this is why we ask these questions before we smack ponies upside the head."

The earth pony rolled her eyes and smirked.

"We both know that you'll have earned it one way or the other before nightfall."

Luna chuckled and gestured to the setting sun. Its light was slowly beginning to fade little by little.

"Then you had best be quick, I'm due to raise the moon shortly. I'll hold off so that you can use the light to return home safely and swiftly."

The green unicorn opened her mouth to speak and apparently thought better of it. Her companion bowed once more.

"Good night, Luna."

Luna bowed to them each in turn and walked away. She heard the unicorn say something in a sarcastic tone followed by the sound of another smack and shook her head, smiling. She looked to the west. There was hardly any light left as the sun dipped below the horizon. Luna spread her wings, flying upward with slow, measured flaps. The moon was almost never raised with any ceremony except around the harvest time when festivals continued into the early hours of morning, and this was no different.

So why was everypony watching?

Luna gazed down upon Ponyville and the small crowd that was gathering beneath her. Colts and fillies called out to her and cheered, stallions and mares looked on in awe. Every night she raised the moon from the tallest tower of the castle, hoping to glimpse somepony somewhere gazing up at her night and finding none. And here she was, miles from home and being brave for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, with her subjects smiling at her and awaiting the raising of the moon. Her eyes teared up as she closed them.

In her mind she could feel the turn of the world beneath her and the pull of the stars as they tugged at the pattern she had woven them into. The power of the night surged through her in a way it never had before. She could feel it running down her horn and out her hooves like a current, her mane and tail flowing in a gentle evening breeze. Luna wiped away the tears rolling down her cheeks and her smile curved into a crescent shape. Every drop that fell became a shining speck that wove itself into her mane and reflected itself in the night sky, and as the moon began to rise it was her smile shining down on Equestria.

She flung her wings open wide, held aloft by force of will alone. The ponies beneath her let out a collective gasp and Luna smiled, opening her eyes. Slowly she returned to the ground and raised her head to look at the sky.

There were so many stars. The night sky was so full that Luna couldn't help but laugh a little. Nebulae and brilliant clusters of young stars formed streaks of color and pleasing patterns. Dust and tiny meteorites fell from the sky as burning lines that lasted only a few moments and seemed to join the new shapes together. She turned to the small crowd, cheeks red and smiling softly.

"Oh dear... I seem to have gotten carried away. I hope it isn't too bright for everypony; I know most of you are on your way to bed."

The crowd began to murmur, full of awe and appreciation. Three ponies, barely older than foals, approached her slowly with smiles on their faces.

"It's... It's so lovely..."



"Princess, how the heck do you expect me to sleep and miss this? It's so cool!"

"Yeah! Hey sis, can I stay awake just a little longer? Please!?"

Whichever mare she was addressing must have been just as deeply moved, because no reply came from among the crowd. The filly sighed and walked off, her friends following. One of the stallions looked over at Luna and took a step towards her. He lowered his head.

"Thank you, Princess Luna, for this beautiful night."

He smiled softly and rose, walking away. Several of the other ponies looked at each other and at her. They began to bow, and soon the entire crowd was following suit.

"Oh, please, don't feel like you have to bow. It's really nothing more than duty."

One of the younger colts stood up straight.

"But Princess, how else are we supposed to show our... uh... respect?"

Luna chuckled a bit as his mother rolled her eyes and ruffled his mane.

"Simply enjoying the night is enough. I don't require your prostration, I simply desire..."

Luna felt a cold chill run down her spine and a twisting feeling in her stomach as though somepony were rearranging her insides. She tried to avoid grimacing and mostly succeeded, merely tensing up slightly. The feeling passed momentarily and in its place was a faint throbbing sensation that almost burned.

"I simply desire your appreciation."

Luna took a few steps away from them.

"I apologize, something has come up."

She spread her wings and took flight, leaving behind the confused crowd of ponies before another word could be said. In her head she went over the list of things that could possibly be wrong. She looked up at the sky and closed her eyes. The pattern was twisted, as though somepony had bent it out of shape. The lines upon which the stars hung had been gathered up to write a message. Luna opened her eyes again as true fear made itself known to her for the first time since she had lost herself.

"Come find me, Luna. Artemis awaits."

Luna untangled the stars bit by bit and followed the flow of magic back to its origin. It was cold and dark like the void that the stars held at bay. The path was not only plain but the caster had made the effort to make it easy to follow. Luna looked towards the center of Ponyville, the place the spell seemed to emanate from, and began to fly towards it.

As she descended she could feel the oppressive presence of the black shadowy mass before she actually saw it. It clung to a pale yellow pegasus mare like a veil, both sprouting from her and using her form as a support. Its eyes glowed an icy blue and a horn of black fire sprouted from its forehead.

"Luna. At last. I've been longing to meet with you face to face."

Luna recognized the voice almost instantly. One of the Elements of Harmony, the Element of Kindness. But the tone was cruel, commanding and harsh.

"Just who are you?"

The veil moved, dragging the body along with it like a puppet on strings, throwing back its head and laughing. For a moment they became one, fragments of blue armor circling around them, mane and tail streaked with blue.

"You always were slow when it came to picking up on this sort of thing. Perhaps I should simply spell it out for you? Or maybe you finally recognize your own face?"

Luna took a step back, and then another. Her eyes widened and her horn

flared defensively.

"No, you... This is a trick. It's an illusion. You are my weakness, it is completely impossible for you to try to take over anypony else."

Nightmare Moon took a step forwards. Her host did the same.

"This pony has a very weak will, little foal. Try as she might she can't bring herself to resist me, so afraid of the cold and the dark that I could plunge her mind into. Even while you restrain the greater portion of our power and keep it from my grasp, just a stray fragment was enough, a shred of my will escaping your prison. And now I'd like the rest of it back. And our body, of course."

Luna stared in fear, absolute terror rooting her to the spot. She watched Nightmare Moon draw closer, her victim pulled along with sudden, jerking movements. The shadows loosened their grasp slightly, barely anchored to the pegasus mare.

"Luna..."

It wasn't Nightmare Moon's mouth that moved, but her host's.

"Help m-"

The veil of shadows drew tighter around her form and there was a strangled, gasping sound. Luna's mouth fell open, horrified. Nightmare Moon chuckled softly as her form solidified once more.

"I'm sorry, where were we? Ah yes, destroying you."

Nightmare Moon's horn swelled and glowed, encasing itself in a towering black inferno. Luna's eyes widened as the shadow solidified and she stood rooted to the spot as it charged. The only sound was Nightmare Moon's cruel laughter.

There was a sudden flash of blue light and Nightmare Moon stopped in her tracks. She scowled a bit at the thin flecks of silver that floated around Luna, watching them settle around her neck and stick to her. Luna observed the motes of stardust closely as they gathered around her,

brushing her hoof against the silver band.

At her touch the dust became solid, forming a chain and a shimmering crescent medallion. Luna reached up a hoof to touch it, gently toying with the moon pendant and bringing it to her face to look at it. It was brighter than the full moon but the light didn't hurt her eyes to look at and hanging beside it was a little blue balloon-shaped charm. As she toyed with it she could swear she heard Pinkie Pie laughing, singing her childish songs about giggling at the ghostly. The sound reassured her.

"Laughter."

The word wasn't so much spoken as invoked, a call to the Element itself. Luna smiled softly, releasing the pendant. It felt warm and weightless like a comforting presence, shrouding her in the same manner as the black veil around the Element of Kindness.

"To banish fear."

Her eyes met Nightmare Moon's and her smile became a faint smirk.

"I won't let you hurt anypony, Nightmare Moon. I am not a scared little foal anymore. Leave her quietly or suffer the consequences."

Nightmare Moon glared, eyebrows furrowing.

"We'll see about that. Even if this form is hard to maintain, I have one thing you do not. I have rage, fury. The fury of a night princess scorned is dangerous, is it not? We both know well the damage a tidal wave can cause, or a single falling star."

She gestured to the sky and grinned cruelly.

"And you've done nothing with your display earlier but give me plenty of ammunition to level this town with, little foal. It seems you fail to realize the situation you have put yourself in."

Luna felt the sky being shifted once more and the burning sensation in her gut returned as the pattern began to creak under the strain. A single star broke free of its bonds and dropped from the sky. Luna's horn glowed,

trying to combat Nightmare Moon's magic with her own. The frayed threads of the sky wove themselves around the star once more and snatched it out of the air. Luna breathed a sigh of relief as it pulled itself back into place but her relief rapidly turned into confusion as Nightmare Moon's grin grew.

"Congratulations are in order, I think. You've regained some small scrap of magical power. You stopped a single star with your power. But what about five at a time? Ten? I could unleash the heavens upon you, little foal, and then what would you do?"

Luna drew herself up to her full height and spread her wings, horn glowing.

"I would fight. I would remake the night sky a thousand times and stop you at every turn."

Luna's horn glowed brighter and she scrapped her hoof against the ground. Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes.

"What, copying that trick? That purple mare was the first and shall remain the only pony to fool me with that charade."

Nightmare Moon smiled, her horn igniting once more. Her host quivered and squeaked.

"Allow me to remind you which of us is the real queen of the night."

Luna's horn glowed brighter, a sputtering flame forming at the tip. Nightmare Moon cackled.

"Oh? So you really think you can fight me?"

They charged at one another, wings flaring. Luna bit her lip and concentrated. Their magic collided and Luna's hooves dug into the ground as she was slowly pushed backwards. She flapped her wings, closing her eyes and trying desperately to focus her magic. There was a ripping sound as something tore and Luna fell forwards. She watched as Nightmare Moon's flaming horn disintegrated, her own horn piercing through it. Nightmare Moon gasped and her host screamed in agony.

Luna stood there panting for a few minutes as the shadowy veil faded and

reformed over and over. There was blood on the ground and Luna could feel more on her horn, hot and slick. The Element of Kindness lay on the ground, thin cuts all over her body from where the shadow had torn at her to get a better grip. Luna wiped her horn clean, trying not to think too hard about which wound was her fault.

"Are you alright?"

The Element stirred slightly and stood up.

"Yes, I... I think I'm alright."

Luna smiled softly until she noticed that the eyes were still the same cold blue and her lips retained their cruel smirk. The shadows coiled around her slowly and Nightmare Moon shuddered a little bit.

"Interesting..."

She chuckled a bit and examined her host's body, testing the wounded limbs and stretching.

"Well now, it seems that once again the odds are in my favor where they belong now that I know you can only hurt my puppet."

Luna braced herself but no matter how hard she tried her magic refused to come forth. A tiny blue spark leaped from the tip and fell uselessly to the ground. Nightmare Moon watched it for a moment as it sputtered and died before looking Luna in the eye. She shook her head gently and reformed her black fire.

"Useless, little foal. Utterly useless."

Luna laughed defiantly but the sound did little to quell her growing fear and quickly became a brief, nervous giggle. She gulped and watched Nightmare Moon lower her head, charging right at her. Luna dove to the side, spread her wings and took to the skies. Her entire body felt heavy and her horn ached from pushing her magic. Luna glanced over her shoulder at Nightmare Moon as she took off after her, black wings wrapped around pale yellow and forcing them into motion.

"That's it, run! Fear me, cowardly little fake!"

She swung her horn in Luna's direction and the black flames flew from its tip. Luna swerved out of the way and felt the deep chill in the air around it. Her mind searched for a solution and she heard a faint jingling sound. She rested a hoof over her pendant.

"The Elements of Harmony..."

She glanced at Nightmare Moon. The Elements had vanquished her twice before, and as she had put it, just a fragment was enough. Luna tried to clear her mind and focus on the pendant, summoning up what little magic she had left. It sparked and flickered but refused to do anything more. Nightmare Moon readied another blast of flame, the black shadows growing from her horn.

"Now then, foal, it's time to take my body back for good. Be a good filly and hold still this time."

Luna moved to dodge and found herself frozen in place, not by fear but shock. She could see red droplets falling from the host's body, overworked and injured. She could feel that same pain inside herself and it made her wings lock up. Luna fell towards the ground, the flame barely touching her horn and grasping at it slightly. It left a thin layer of soot and ash on the tip as it flew past. Luna steadied herself and flew lower to the ground.

"You know you can't escape me, stop running!"

Nightmare Moon scowled as she spoke, hovering in place.

"I'm not running away, but I told you I won't let you hurt anypony."

Luna dropped to the ground and glared up at Nightmare Moon. She stamped her hoof.

"You... You are my responsibility! So I say to you, Nightmare Moon, that even if I have to turn my body over to you to do it, I won't let you lay a hoof on anypony else so long as you live! I refuse to let you hurt that mare further!"

Nightmare Moon swooped low over Luna and kicked her across the face, knocking Luna to the ground. She smirked and flew above her once more, horn swelling with tendrils of shadow.

"Your compassion falls on deaf ears, foal."

Luna coughed and, with some difficulty, stood.

"You're wrong, Nightmare Moon. Because there is somepony here who knows what true kindness is and why it's worth fighting for. And it's for her that I made that offer, so that she knows she's not alone."

A pink glow began to form around Nightmare Moon's neck and dragged her towards the ground like an anchor. It crystallized, taking the shape of a butterfly and Nightmare Moon thrashed her limbs, clawing at the air. She landed on the ground and her legs buckled beneath her.

"What? Impossible! I broke her will, she can't resist me! She can't!"

The necklace began to glow, a pale pink light that seemed to shine with tenderness and compassion. Nightmare Moon screamed in pain, her voice becoming more and more bestial by the second. The shadows melted away and she staggered, barely in control of her host. One eye shifted color and she panted, her hooves yanking at the necklace.

"No... Get it off of me! I can't lose like this, I refuse! I'm the real princess, not you, how could a mere fake overpower me!?"

Luna hovered closer and landed, walking towards her slowly.

"It's over. You are my burden, not hers nor anypony else's. I will find a way for us to coexist, a path for both of us to talk along. Together."

Nightmare Moon spat at her.

"Never. I will never submit, not to you or anypony else, and especially not to a pathetic little Element of Harmony. I- Oh my goodness..."

She shook her head and rubbed her temples.



"Oh my goodness... Luna, I...- No! Your body is mine now, foal, I won't- let you hurt anypony!"

The pegasus cried out in pain. She turned and ran off, shadows curling around her once more as she fled. Luna watched for a moment and decided to stay put. The night was still young and so long as there were stars in the sky Ponyville would be in danger. She looked around at the town and the handful of ponies peeking out of windows and around doorways at her. It would be safer in the morning, when the Element of Kindness would have an easier time fighting back. She turned and walked back towards the library, limping slightly. At the very least there was some hope remaining.

# Chapter 7

The front door was locked and Luna felt awkward standing there in the long silence between knocking and Twilight finally opening the door. Luna ached all over and smelled vaguely of sweat, blood and dirt. She could still feel the chill along her horn from the black fire, and although she supposed it was keeping a splitting headache from forming it was uncomfortable in its own way. She smoothed out her mane and tail as best she could and was in the process of wiping her horn down a second time when the handle turned.

"Welcome back, Luna."

Twilight was absolutely beaming and Luna momentarily forgot where her hoof was rubbing until Twilight's cheeks began to turn pink, then light red. Luna's face lit up scarlet as she released her horn and her hoof made an audible thud as it struck the ground. Both of them attempted smiles that did little to make the situation any less embarrassing for either of them. The silence dragged on and Twilight gave a small cough. Luna faltered for a moment before speaking.

"Twilight, would you happen to have a bath or other bathing facility that I could make use of?"

As if some spell had been broken, Twilight immediately appeared less tense.

"Of course, Princess. Come on in, I'll give you a tour and show you where the shower is. I got your bags here safe and sound as well, but I decided that I'd move them into the room once you got here in case you wanted them a certain way or something."

Twilight gave Luna a smile that the moon princess had given to her older sister many times before, one of appeasement and uncertainty. The purple mare obviously didn't want to offend her, either out of fear or respect. Luna nodded and followed Twilight inside, closing and locking the door behind herself and leaving that particular negative thought outside. She turned

around and came face to face with a particularly charming owl.

"Who."

Luna smiled softly.

"I am Princess Luna of Equestria, and it is an honor to meet you."

"Who."

Luna blinked.

"Surely you've heard of me. The princess of the night, who raises the moon and stars?"

"Who."

The owl nodded appreciatively and Luna opened her mouth to speak before Twilight tapped her on the shoulder and motioned away.

"Maybe trying to talk to Owlacious isn't such a good idea, princess. He's just an owl."

Luna glanced back and forth between Twilight and the owl, smiling.

"And a very clever one at that. I've never met one with such a grasp of language before."

Luna chuckled softly.

"He certainly is intelligent, it's no wonder that he chose to make his roost here in the library with a like-minded individual such as yourself."

Twilight looked confused for a moment, and Luna felt slightly concerned before she remembered that not everypony understood Owlish as well as she did. She contemplated mentioning it and decided against boring Twilight with needless details. Luna moved past Twilight to look at the rest of the library. The walls were covered in books, as were sections of the floor. Her luggage formed a neat pile in the middle of the library and she turned back around to face Twilight.

Just as she was about to thank her properly something stopped her, making its presence known with as much suddenness as one of Celestia's trapdoors. There was a certain scent in the air, one of musty tomes and aged wood mixed with subtle floral notes. Luna blinked and chuckled softly to herself at the realization that the unicorn was close enough that Luna could almost work out extracts she used in her soap. She was tempted to try but her heart was already racing just thinking about it and she could feel her cheeks heating up.

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle, for taking care of me on such short notice and for all that you've done for me so far."

Luna bowed and smiled.

"I shall try to be less troublesome in the future, barring another encounter with Pinkie Pie."

They both laughed softly.

"Well, as long as she doesn't pull you into something too extreme not even Pinkie's shenanigans will be problematic, princess. It's no trouble at all."

Luna nodded and turned back to her luggage, lifting the bags off the floor with her magic. Her horn suddenly stopped glowing and the suitcases hit the floor, the stack toppling over. She grimaced slightly and her horn provided her with a jolt of fresh pain. Twilight's expression quickly became one of concern.

"Luna? Are you alright?"

Luna waved her hoof dismissively.

"I'll be perfectly fine, I just appear to have... overexerted myself and my magic this evening. Too many new stars, not enough patience."

She attempted to laugh but it came out far more forced than she expected it to be. It was starting to become increasingly apparent that the power of laughter and its ability to diminish fear was still beyond her grasp.

"I suppose having a prolonged respite in the shower would do me a world of good. Could I trouble you to direct me there first and give me the tour once I've cleaned myself up and taken, to use the colloquial term, a breather?"

Twilight let out a barely suppressed giggle at her words and Luna attempted to piece together just which phrase had been funny, both to avoid seeming foolish and to make use of it later to get her to laugh again.

"Of course, princess. Take as long as you need to. I was just finishing up my reading for the night when you knocked so I'll go wrap that up while I wait. Right this way."

Twilight walked over to a set of stairs leading down under the library and Luna followed closely behind her. The basement may as well have been another building in and of itself, carved out of the root structure and the surrounding earth. The central room held an assortment of large contraptions that Luna supposed were either highly specialized scientific instruments or mundane, common devices like water heaters and earthquake detectors.

Branching off from it were several chambers with large, almost imposing doors that rivaled the sturdiest of Canterlot palace's in their needless expansiveness. Twilight reached the bottom of the stairs and pushed one of them open. Luna moved past her and peered into a simple but elegant room with a mirror, tub and several shelves of bath supplies.

"Well, here we are."

Luna smiled softly and walked inside.

"I think it's lovely, Twilight. Pretty, understated and organized. It really reflects its owner."

Twilight smirked slightly and started heading for the stairs.

"Just shout if you need anything."

Luna nodded.

"I will."

Luna closed the door and looked around for a moment before sliding off her tiara and slippers and reaching for her necklace. Her hoof slid through the air where it was supposed to be and she looked down. It was gone. The dangling moon pendant and the balloon charm had vanished along with the chain they had hung from. She rested her hoof against her chest for a moment, trying to remember when the warmth had left her but the way Twilight made her heart flutter made it hard to distinguish the presence of the silver charm from the feeling of safety that radiated from the purple unicorn.

She unclasped her mantle and set it aside with the rest of her belongings. After a moment more of thought she walked over to one of the shelves, pulling down a bottle with bubbles on the label. Luna took hold of the shampoo with her hooves and with a click opened the top. She eyed it with suspicion for a moment, wary of repeating her last experience with liquid soap. Celestia still refused to let her live down her first attempt at a modern shower and her private bath still had a perfectly preserved outline of Luna's body from when the container had exploded.

She took aim at her hoof and poured some of the gel onto her hoof. It was Twilight's scent, or at least part of it. She sniffed at it, taking in the hints of lavender and violets. The thought of coating herself in it suddenly became charged with a sensation not unlike her first attempts at plugging in her lamp, but the tingling was much more pleasant, and although it made her mane stand on end it didn't frazzle or singe it.

She stepped into the shower and began to smear the soap along her form, wincing at every little bruise or cut that decided to take that particular moment to let her know that shampoo on a wound was not fun and not appreciated. She took a moment to breathe, trying to brace herself for the initial blast of icy water and instead finding her mind clouded once more by the pleasing smell that now filled the shower. She shivered a little and reached out to grab hold of something to support herself, her hoof landing on the shower knob and turning it. She gave a small yelp as the water hit her and shuddered. As the shock wore off she giggled a bit and sighed, shaking her head.

The water was cool and soothing. Modern bathing facilities always ended

up reminding Luna of the great storm, the droplets striking her face like cold pebbles. That was the last night she remembered clearly before her transformation and it was incredibly bittersweet to think about. Celestia had been busy arguing with a team of pegasi, the predecessors to the modern Wonderbolts, about the heavy winds and rain that were starting to cause floods. The sun was due to slip below the horizon any minute and even though nopony would be able to see it behind the clouds Luna had wanted to raise the moon.

Looking back Luna knew her sister was just trying to be practical. Celestia had told her to be patient so that she could get the storm cleared up and Luna had taken it the wrong way. It had hurt so badly thinking her sister didn't care an ounce for her beautiful moon or her duties as the princess of the night. That had been the tipping point, Luna thought to herself. That was when all the pranks and jokes, all of Celestia's exhausting duties and her own impatience boiled over, coming together to give rise to Nightmare Moon.

Luna didn't know when the tears had began but she wiped them away and got her breathing under control so Twilight wouldn't hear her sobbing. She took a moment to compose herself and rinsed the last of the soap from her mane and coat. Despite her melancholy memories Luna felt a bit better. Her tired muscles were relaxed and didn't feel as heavy as before, and the pain in her horn and face were reduced to faint tingling sensations. She turned off the water and stepped out of the shower.

Twilight's towel rack held an unsurprisingly large number of purple towels and a much smaller quantity of various other colors. She pulled down a particularly fluffy blue towel and wiped off as much of the remaining water as she could before wrapping it around her mane, grabbing a smaller one for her tail. She gave each a firm squeeze to wring them out and walked out of the bathroom. The sudden coolness of the air made her pull the towel from her tail and drape it over her back for warmth.

The library was pleasingly quiet as Luna made her way back up the stairs. She moved as silently as possible, watching Twilight read for a moment. The tome was ancient Equestrian, and the pages certainly showed their age. Luna inched closer, trying to work out what the book was about. She spotted her name but before she could finish the line Twilight slid a bookmark carefully into place and closed the cover.

"Huh, the water stopped. Luna must be done."

Twilight glanced over at Owlowicious, who was staring at Luna.

"Who."

Luna's eyes went wide at the owl's statement and she flailed her hooves at the him. Twilight looked in the direction Owlowicious was facing and Luna had her hooves back on the ground just in time to not make a fool of herself once again.

"Good evening. I'm all done with my shower now, as you can see."

Twilight raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I certainly can."

Luna gestured to her tail.

"Shall we proceed with the tour? I'd like very much to get my brush from my bag once everything is where it is supposed to be. My mane and tail have a dreadful habit of frizzing and knotting if I don't attend to them before they curl up."

Twilight blinked as Luna pulled the towel from her mane and Luna felt a sudden urge to run to a mirror, especially as Twilight's lips curled into a smile. Celestia's smile, the one she wore when Luna tripped down stairs and landed with a squeak or gazed longingly at a particularly delicious-looking stack of pancakes. She knew that the only word going through Twilight's head was "cute" and she wasn't really sure how to feel about it. She ran a hoof through her wet mane. Already the ends were beginning to twist ever so slightly and her tail was in essentially the same state. Twilight chuckled a little.

"Of course, princess. You already know where the bathroom is, so I'll just go over everything else quickly."

Twilight motioned to the stairway leading to the second floor.



"Up there is the bedroom. It's nothing too fancy, but there's a patio and a little observatory on top of the library."

If Luna wasn't certain she was mistaken she would almost have believed Twilight was blushing.

"I keep my telescope up there and look up at the stars when the pegasus ponies leave the night sky clear. I don't think I've moved it except for that meteor shower I went to watch with my friends. I guess stargazing is kind of a big hobby of mine."

Luna smiled softly until she realized two small but related facts.

"Twilight, have you had a chance to look outside since I raised the moon?"

Twilight shook her head and Luna's smile widened.

"What say we go and have a look at that telescope of yours? I do believe you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Luna took hold of one of her bags and began hauling it towards the stairs before it suddenly lifted off the ground, wrapped in a sheathe of lavender magic. Luna peered around her bag at Twilight who was busying herself levitating the other bags. She smiled at her and Luna released the handle to speak, the bag moving aside.

"Really, Twilight, I am a full grown mare and I am quite capable of carrying my own luggage, with or without magic. I don't wish to impose upon you any more than I must."

Twilight smirked a bit and shook her head.

"Don't think that it's any trouble, princess. It's no trouble at all, really."

"But Twilight, I simply must insist-"

Twilight's horn glowed a bit brighter and Luna's luggage began to encircle the moon princess, spiraling around her like dancers before making their way, single-file, up the stairs.

"I'm being literal, it's nothing at all for me. When I first came to Ponyville my magic was... not out of control exactly, but I didn't have such a good grasp of it. But now I can lift things like suitcases without much trouble, or clear entire apple orchards in seconds. Doing something like that is like holding the door open, or saying 'bless you' if you sneeze. Courtesy."

Luna's eyes went from amazed to awed and she looked back and forth between the floating procession and the unicorn conducting it several times before following the suitcases upstairs. They bobbed only slightly and if any of them strayed from Twilight's intended path Luna didn't notice at all. She stepped up into the bedroom and checked the stack of bags. Perfectly organized by size and weight, the larger and heavier bags at the bottom and the lightest resting on a broad, level surface. Luna smiled and turned to Twilight, bowing slightly.

"Thank you very much, Twilight. Your assistance is greatly appreciated, and your skilled use of magic is quite impressive."

Twilight crossed her forelegs and glanced sideways, apparently embarrassed by the compliment.

"Really, it's nothing."

Luna chuckled softly.

"I can see why my sister boasts about you so much. A unicorn with talent like yours only comes along once in... Actually, I don't think I've ever met a mare with magic like yours. Certainly Marelin was a skilled and powerful colt but he only truly came into his own in his later years. And even then it was only thanks to his study of the craft, not that my sister will ever admit he learned more as a journeycolt than as her student. You are well on your way to surpassing a legend, Ms Sparkle, and that is a fact."

Twilight's jaw hung open in such a manner that Luna was reminded of taffy, in particular how it stretched down low enough to brush against the carpet.

"You think I'm as powerful as Marelin? Wait, Marelin was Princess Celestia's student too? Wait, Princess Celestia is proud of me? She... brags about me?"

Luna nodded.

"She's proud of all of her students, and throughout the ages every truly noteworthy unicorn has at some point learned under her. You are joining what I suppose is a long legacy of mighty and powerful mares and colts doing good deeds, righting wrongs and giving my sister yet another excuse to brag to me about her accomplishments."

Twilight seemed too preoccupied bouncing up and down like school-filly who just got everything she ever wanted to notice the sad note with which Luna spoke the last few words but she couldn't help smiling at the purple mare as she leaped around the room, eyes closed and cheeks taut in the biggest, happiest smile her face could hold. Twilight's eyes fluttered open and she descended back to the ground. She turned to face Luna, cheeks tinged pink.

"I... uh..."

"Really enjoy having my sister think highly of you?"

Twilight nodded and Luna rolled her eyes, smiling softly.

"Heaven forbid I should see the day that all a pony craves is my approval for once."

Twilight stammered for a moment, hooves flailing.

"It's not like that, princess. It's just..."

Twilight paused, trying to find the right words.

"Celestia was the mare I looked up to as a filly. I saw her once at the Summer Sun Celebration when I was just a little filly, and when she raised the sun I was in awe. I had never seen anything like it before, such majestic power. At the time I wasn't allowed out at night, and my bedtime was too early to see much of the stars anyway. All I knew was the light of the sun, its warmth, and Celestia was the one who gave it to me, to everypony in Equestria. And then I became her pupil, her personal apprentice. I left home and stayed at the castle and I guess in a way Celestia became my second mother. It probably sounds really silly that I see her that way, now

that I'm hearing how it sounds out loud."

Luna shook her head softly, wiping her eyes.

"It's not silly at all. Celly truly is a majestic mare, with a big heart and fierce power that she uses for the sake of others. I envy how you can look up to her without feeling jealous, and her because of how she made you feel so special without having to lift a hoof."

"Luna..."

Twilight looked down at the ground and Luna walked over to a suitcase, pulling out a small hoofkerchief and using it to dry her eyes one last time as she composed herself.

"Let's head to the observatory, shall we? I think at this rate I'll have stalled our little tour so many times that it'll have become nearly absurd."

Luna grabbed her brush and walked up the stairs to the second level of the bedroom. She glanced at the beds, one surrounded by books and slightly disheveled, and the other much wider and laid out as neatly as possible without the peculiar magical spell created specifically for fussy mares tired of fitted sheets that refused to wrap around the mattress properly. She supposed that Twilight had set aside the more expansive one just for her and she wondered if it was because of the luxury or because she had accurately guessed that the little bit of extra height required a little bit of extra leg room.

Twilight followed behind her as she stepped outside and onto the patio. Luna looked around for a moment before walking up the steps leading to a platform on top of the library and halted as she heard Twilight gasp. The unicorn had her eyes fixed on the night sky and Luna smiled softly, wondering if it was the same expression she had worn during that first Summer Sun Celebration.

"See something you like, Ms Sparkle?"

Twilight nodded dumbly, mouth slowly falling agape.

"Come and take a closer look then."

Luna giggled a little at the double-meaning of her words as she made her way towards the telescope and sat down, getting comfortable. Twilight followed behind, stumbling up the stairs and unable to tear her gaze away from the stars. She waved her hoof in the direction of the telescope and grabbed hold of it, pulling it closer and angling it at a particularly colorful patch of dust and young stars.

Luna felt a compulsion to say something and hesitated. Twilight seemed utterly consumed in watching the night sky as it turned above her and any innuendo she could supply would only break her concentration, or worse, be ignored entirely. She felt like she was forgetting something and it nagged at her. It nagged and fussed and meddled with her thought process until finally the joy of being around Twilight faded into the background and she recalled what had happened only hours prior.

"Twilight?"

Twilight didn't look up but made a vague noise of affirmation as she adjusted the telescope, zooming in on something that had caught her interest.

"I need to tell you something important."

Twilight blinked, raising her head and glancing at her.

"I..."

Luna stood up and looked out at Ponyville from the observatory. The commotion, or what little there had been, had died down. It was almost as if everypony in town was used to random, nearly catastrophic events coming and going.

"I suppose a little background information is required. Do you know why my sister sent me here?"

Twilight nodded and smiled.

"You wanted to pay a visit to Ponyville and meet with your subjects. Princess Celestia said you were lonely at the castle all by yourself."

Luna shook her head and glanced over her shoulder.

"That was a lie. I'm not here because I'm lonely, although that certainly was true, and a perfectly adequate reason."

"What do you mean?"

Luna turned to face Twilight.

"I'm the reason that the Grand Galloping Gala was such a disaster."

"Huh?"

"And because of me Nightmare Moon has taken control of Fluttershy."

"Huh!?"

"And the only thing that I can think of that might have any chance of saving her is the Elements of Harmony, which seem to be manifesting in response to the sudden arrival of this dark presence. I... Equestria needs your help. I need your help, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight's eyes went wide.

"HUH!?"

# Chapter 8

Luna had expected the panicking. Being honest and open was refreshing, but she knew that it also had consequences. Twilight's stunned expression and slight, nervous twitch seemed to indicate that the consequence of telling the truth about the gala and Nightmare Moon was the total mental collapse of the purple mare.

"Nightmare Moon is... back?"

Luna nodded and Twilight's mouth moved, forming words that came out as faint whispers and quiet babbling.

"Twilight? I... didn't mean to hide it from you. I was ashamed of what I had done at the gala, and I still am. I've been trying to figure out the best possible way to correct things and-"

"That's not what I'm worried about. How long have you known?"

Twilight's eyes were focused and her fear seemed to have rapidly shifted to anger. Luna wondered if being screamed at by Twilight for making a huge mess of things was better or worse than having to fight Nightmare Moon again on her own.

"Known... about Fluttershy?"

Twilight nodded, standing up.

"About... What time is it now? It was shortly after sunset that I realized something was amiss. Somepony was tampering with the night sky, so I followed the magic back to its source. It was then that I discovered the nature of your friend's possessed state, and, in the duel that followed, obtained the minor bruises that now decorate my body under my fur."

Luna wondered for a moment what was going through Twilight's mind. The unicorn's brow had furrowed and she was glaring at the princess, looking for all intents and purposes like she was prepared to impale the alicorn with

her horn. Her words were spoken through gritted teeth.

"And you didn't tell me sooner, because...?"

"Because..."

Luna closed her eyes. The only pony that had ever yelled at her was Celly. The memories were bitter and the look on Twilight's face pushed them to the front of her mind. She could hear the words her sister had spoken, words of disappointment and slowly building anger, words of deep shame. The thought of Twilight screaming at her made her tremble, and any semblance of power or composure she had melted away. She could feel the faint darkness inside herself, her fears piling on top of one another and feeding it, and she couldn't find it in herself to laugh them away.

"Because... I was going to tell you and got distracted..."

"Distracted!?"

Twilight stamped her hoof and Luna quivered, body shaking. Her body shied away slightly and she lowered her head, hiding her face behind her hooves.

"Distracted is when you mean to file a few reports and get caught up in rereading them and lose track of time! Distracted is when you're taking a gift to somepony and meet a friend on the way and talk to them! What in the world could possibly have distracted you from the fact that one of the biggest threats to Equestria is on the loose, and in control of my friend's body!?"

Luna cautiously opened one eye. Her voice was the soft and meager sound of a guilt-riddled filly.

"...You..."

Twilight blinked. Her tone lost its fire, replaced with annoyance and impatience.

"I couldn't hear you. Say it again."



Luna opened her other eye and raised her head slightly. Her eyes met Twilight's for only a moment before gazing at the floor, staring at a knothole as if trying to scry answers through it.

"You did. I... find you distracting. Regardless of my plans, the whirling machinery of my mind comes to a halt the moment I enter your presence. All other thought vanishes, all preparation becomes nothingness."

She glanced up at Twilight again and caught the slightly confused expression on the mare's face. Luna looked away once more, struggling for words.

"It's because I... like being around you very much. I find comfort in your presence, Twilight, a comfort that until I met you I had never known. I intended to tell you right away, but the moment you opened the door I lost sight of all the things that had transpired, the things I meant to say."

She could hear the sound of Twilight's approaching hoofsteps, each dull thud feeling like a nail being stuck into her coffin.

"Luna... I'm... I'm mad. And more than a little let down. I-"

Luna couldn't hear Twilight's next words over the sound of a familiar voice whispering in her ear.

"You've upset her, Luna. You've disappointed her and now she's never going to forgive you."

Luna whispered under her breath.

"Stop it..."

"It's the truth though. All you ever wanted was her love, her appreciation, and now look what a mess you've made of things. Truly pathetic, if you ask me."

"That's enough."

"Why don't you just run back home to Celestia, tail between your legs and crying like a filly? It'd certainly be more useful than sitting there like an idiot,

especially since she's not going to give you a second chance."

"I... said... Stop it!"

Luna threw her head back, shouting the words. Her voice called forth the winds, carrying her cry to the far corners of Ponyville, echoing through every street and home. Her wings flared and she felt herself rising from the ground, horn throbbing. The night sky above her seemed to darken, eyes clouding. Nightmare Moon laughed inside her head.

"Yes, that's the way! Get angry! Hate me, and set me free! Relea-"

"Luna!"

The princess could barely hear Twilight over Nightmare Moon. She felt like she was swimming in a massive void, the unicorn's voice echoing across it from an eternity away.

"Twilight...?"

The world suddenly began to spin as a force began dragging her back down to the patio. A violet light pierced through the shadowy haze and Luna felt a hoof strike her on the cheek. Her vision slowly cleared and she realized that she was being restrained by a barrier of magical energy that had locked her wings at her sides and shackled her to the railing. Twilight panted softly, holding on to Luna's shoulders.

"Are you alright?"

Luna nodded slowly and Twilight ended the spell, wobbling a little as the glow from her horn died down.

"Good. Now, let's try that again, only this time without you almost floating off into the sky and screaming at me."

Luna nodded again, cheeks burning with embarrassment and eyes drifting, trying to find somewhere else to look. Twilight grabbed Luna's chin and tilted the princess's face towards her own.

"Look me in the eye."

The blue mare struggled at first but slowly managed to meet Twilight's gaze. Her expression had softened, the anger and disappointment barely there, replaced by concern.

"Now then. I'm mad, Luna, but not at you. I'm disappointed that you didn't tell me right away but I can't really blame you if it's something you really couldn't help. I'm not angry or upset with you. But Nightmare Moon coming back? My friends being in danger, and fighting? That makes me upset. That makes me angry. I'm worried about Fluttershy, and everypony in Ponyville could be in danger, too."

Twilight sighed softly before putting on a smile.

"So you want my help beating Nightmare Moon? You've got it. But next time, do you think you could write down what the emergency is in case you get dumbfounded by me again?"

The laughter began before Luna could stop it, a soft chuckle followed by a few moments of barely contained giggles.

"I'll... I'll make sure to bring parchment with me to record my reports for you. Perhaps I should acquire a dragon of my own to serve as my scribe and transport them to you. Although I think there's some other pony doing precisely that and reporting to my sister."

Twilight blinked, her smile slowly broadening before she began to laugh as well.

"I don't think it's gotten to the point where you'd need to give me a report on what you want to tell me each week."

Luna nodded, smirking slightly.

"Dear Twilight Sparkle, it's a beautiful day out. Yesterday I saw a deer. Sincerely, Princess Luna."

The unicorn let out another giggle and sighed.

"I know you might not have seen much kindness in the past year because

everypony is getting used to you being back, and I know that it's easy to get lost in the joy of somepony finally understanding you, but next time try to hold off on enjoying it too much until after you've said what needs to be said."

The princess bowed slightly, blushing.

"I shall do my best to keep that at the forefront of my mind."

Twilight nodded. As Luna raised her head she felt Twilight's hooves shifting from her shoulders to her back, moving to embrace her. She stood completely still as Twilight hugged her, her heart racing and cheeks turning a brighter shade of red. Slowly, gently, she raised a foreleg and wrapped it around Twilight, returning the gesture. She smiled softly, taking a deep breath and letting herself relax.

"You used my favorite soap."

The alicorn blinked.

"Hmm?"

Twilight pulled back slightly and smirked, grabbing hold of part of Luna's mane and gesturing to it.

"My soap. You used my favorite kind. I guess it's fine since I didn't exactly say you couldn't. It's a really nice smell, isn't it?"

Luna nodded.

"Very much so. Which reminds me that I need to brush my mane properly before it knots up..."

The purple mare shook her head.

"I'll take care of it. We have a lot to talk about and there's not much else to do while brushing your mane except talk. Besides, I think you've done enough tonight. If we're gonna face Nightmare Moon then we should both take it easy and use our heads."

With a smile Twilight walked over to the stairs and made her way back towards the bedroom. Luna stretched a little bit and followed behind her, looking up at the sky. It could have been romantic, she mused, to sit there all night without a care in the world and watch the heavens turn above them, and in her younger years she would have done just that and left the fallout for Celestia to clean up as payback for the pranks.

She trotted over to the stairs and smiled a bit. It was hard trying to be mature sometimes, dealing with her own problems for once. She owed it to Celestia to clear up her own mistakes, and she had to repay to Twilight for getting her friends involved. As she followed Twilight into the library she promised herself that she would become the kind of dependable pony that might have a shot at the unicorn's heart, no matter what.

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Twilight walked back and forth across the bedroom. The pacing was helping her focus and despite the faint shaking of her hooves between steps she liked to believe she was taking the return of Nightmare Moon rather well, all things considered. She finally came to a halt and turned to face Luna.

"So Princess Celestia's box with the Elements of Harmony inside is probably empty if they've been appearing in front of you. The problem then becomes how to make the rest of them appear so that we can defeat Nightmare Moon for good."

Luna nodded.

"At the moment it seems like the power of a single Element is enough to at least weaken her significantly. When the sun rises she will be weakened even further. If nothing else we can at least free your friend when dawn arrives. Magic like yours will easily overpower her."

Twilight seemed to focus her attention on a particularly interesting section of the floor, deep in thought and nodding slowly. Luna took the moment to reflect on what had transpired. In a little over a day she had caused another major disaster, spoiled a perfectly good party with her misguided intentions, and found a subtle compulsion in the back of her head that even now made her stare a little longer than she intended at the purple mare. She smiled

softly. Twilight's look of intense focus, eyes narrowed, brow furrowed, was one of the most adorable things she had ever seen. Luna snapped herself back to her senses, trying tune out the distracting thoughts.

"Speaking of magic, Twilight, mine seems to be weakened substantially at present. With but a thought you can manipulate objects, altering shape, size and color as easily as most unicorns breathe, something that I should be able to match or even exceed. And yet simple levitation requires intense concentration, and it is only my affinity with the night that allows me my sway over the moon and stars at this point."

Twilight came to a halt, raising her gaze up to the ceiling and losing herself in her thoughts and planning. Her horn glowed softly and rolls of parchment unfurled around her. She looked through a gap in the wall of paper at the princess.

"Sorry, what did you say? I got a little distracted there."

Luna chuckled softly.

"I said that my magic is weaker than it should be. I was wondering if you'd be able to help."

The purple mare put a hoof to her chin and thought for a moment.

"Well, not just yet, but as soon as I finish this I can try to lend you a hoof. I just need to do some calculations and estimates so I can work out a plan. I really wish Spike hadn't broken my calculator though, this is going to take most of the night..."

A moment passed as the princess processed her words. Luna's smiled widened and she leaped to her hooves, running over to her suitcase and practically tearing the zipper open. It was Abby's time to shine, and no doubt the only opportunity she'd have to flaunt the device without shame.

"Never fear, Twilight Sparkle, I have just the thing!"

She delicately pulled Abby from her resting place, turning the abacus over in her hooves and walking over to Twilight with it. She set it down on the floor.

"Please tell me they still teach you how to use one of these in school."

Twilight blinked, stacking the pieces of parchment up beside the abacus.

"Uh... I looked it up on my own. But I've never had a chance to practice with one before, so that doesn't help me much. Unless, if I might be so bold, you'd be willing to help me out."

Twilight bowed, smiling, and Luna did the same.

"You may be so bold, Twilight. Of course I will assist you."

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Luna was honestly surprised by the sheer quantity of magical apparatuses that Twilight kept in the library, ranging from simple mechanisms for measuring lifting force to complex puzzles requiring lateral thinking and subtle application of levitation, among other things. The fact that Twilight seemed slightly embarrassed about holding on to these relics of her school days made Luna smile softly as she put Abby away. She could certainly empathize.

"Let's see... How about we start with a few measurements. Most schools like to keep track of a mare's progress as she develops, and it'll help me figure out what kind of practice you need to overcome whatever is blocking your magic."

Twilight got out a piece of parchment and began writing out a simple chart as Luna walked over to a set of weights connected by chains. The objective was to levitate only one weight and use it to raise the others up one by one, each one heavier than the last. The numbers on the weights were part of a ranking system; a filly might get a two or a three, but most mares couldn't graduate without earning a seven or more. Luna's horn still ached but it was a simple enough task to levitate a few small weights.

She closed her eyes and focused. The pain clouded her focus but she fought through it. When she was little every bump and scrape felt like the end of the world, and as a filly she was sure her horn would break in half every time it hurt. As she lifted the first weight she reminded herself that the

pain was little more than the throbbing of a tired muscle, and that the very act of casting a spell meant she still had power in reserve. She could hear the chains clinking and felt the pull of each weight against the force of her spell. Five metal spheres rose from the ground easily enough. Gritting her teeth she tried for a sixth.

Twilight looked up from the chart she was making and blinked, watching Luna. A blue aura surrounded her horn and bright sparks shot from the tip, the faint crackling of wild magical energy beginning to fill the room. She set down the quill and parchment.

"Uh... Princess Luna?"

The weights clattered to the floor and Luna panted a little, straightening up and catching her breath.

"Yes?"

Twilight walked over and with a flick of her horn gathered up the weights in a neat stack.

"You started from the wrong end."

Luna sighed softly, hanging her head.

"Of course, I've become so tired that my aim is off as is typical and understandable instead of worthy only of derision and scorn."

She stretched, wings spread wide, and closed her eyes once more.

"Still, no reason to be disheartened. Shall I begin again?"

Twilight smiled and grabbed the quill.

"Go for it."

Luna could feel a pressure building at the base of her horn and the pain felt like it was going to split her skull open but she fought through it. Each weight followed one after the other and with a great heave she hoisted as much as she could bear, holding it up as Twilight counted down from ten.



"Three... Two... And one! Excellent, princess, you're doing great!"

Her horn hummed and sparked slightly as she set the weights down and Luna pressed her hoof to her temples, trying to combat the dizziness that was setting in.

"Huzzah! Jubilations. Now all I require is that Nightmare Moon be reduced to the size of an ant so that I might deposit the stack of weights upon her and finish this problem once and for all. How many of the weights did I manage to raise?"

Twilight chuckled a little and began writing.

"You got a nine, not too shabby."

Luna walked over to a chair and settled herself on top of it.

"It's not enough, though. Household tasks are simple enough, and when I am in top form I can carry my own luggage, but I require far more power if I'm to assist you tomorrow."

Twilight walked over and rested a hoof on Luna's shoulder.

"You'll get there in time, don't worry. Just having you there, keeping her occupied while I put my plan into motion? That's more than enough. Don't feel like you have to take care of this all by yourself, Luna. You didn't mean for it to happen, it's not your fault."

"But it is my fault, Twilight."

Luna lowered her head and rested it on her hooves.

"I am the one who ruined the gala, whose mistake allowed a terrible force to take control of your friend, who-"

Twilight cut her off by raising her hoof and Luna silenced herself reflexively. She stared at the unicorn for a moment, mildly shocked at her audacity.

"The Elements of Harmony didn't completely cleanse you, Luna. It's not

your fault that we weren't strong enough to help you properly. It's our fault, my fault, that it was even an issue to begin with. And if you refuse to let me take the blame for that then I'm gonna keep refusing to let you blame yourself for screwing something up when you had nothing but good intentions."

Luna nodded slowly and sighed.

"Very well, Twilight Sparkle. I refuse."

She smiled softly and curled up slightly.

"From now on neither of us shall carry any burden regarding implied guilt for misguided actions or ineffective cleansing of ancient evils."

Luna closed her eyes and got comfortable.

"I do believe I'll take a brief respite for the moment, if it's not too troublesome. I simply need time to recover and sleep is the quickest way to do so. I will be up in precisely one hour."

Twilight nodded and walked over to the training equipment.

"Alright then. I'm gonna read a little bit and figure out what to work on next."

Luna mumbled softly, too tired to find the right words. Twilight giggled a bit and got out a fresh piece of parchment.

"Dear Princess Celestia..."

She caught herself speaking aloud and quieted herself so Luna wouldn't be disturbed.

"Today I learned the importance of forgiveness. Even when somepony makes a mistake, it's important to look at what they meant to do instead of what the end result was. Your sister, Princess Luna, taught me that when she asked for my help solving a problem she had made for herself. Instead of berating her for it, I realized that it's harder, but better, to work with a pony who is truly repentant and make things better. No pony deserves to be burdened with guilt for something they didn't mean to do. Your faithful

student, Twilight Sparkle."

She set the letter down and checked it over for a moment. Spike could send it in the morning, for now there were other things to attend to. Twilight picked up the stack of notes and calculations that Luna had been working on and spread them out on the floor, piecing together the components for the spell and letting her magic flow freely. A faint weight seemed to rest on her head but she barely noticed the tiara that formed above her.

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Celestia sipped her tea and looked out at the night sky with a faint smirk. Everything was going according to plan, and with a little luck and patience everything that she and her sister had lost would soon be regained. The stars were as beautiful as they had been a thousand years ago, the night Nightmare Moon had risen up against her. Wherever Luna was, she was finding her happiness again. The princess took another sip and put the finishing touches on her design for a collapsing bed frame to replace Luna's with. Even if Luna didn't manage to bring somepony home with her, Celestia refused to miss the opportunity to rig a few elaborate schemes and put them into place. She chuckled to herself and sighed. Soon everything would be alright again.

# Chapter 9

Sleep always felt strange to Luna. It was like willingly entering a void, shutting out the world and entering a place where only she existed. Other ponies dreamed when night came, but often Luna felt like the hours she spent awake were the dream and the time she spent asleep was the cold reality, crushing loneliness mixed with a pleasant sense of calm and ease. It was a sensation she had grown used to during her imprisonment, albeit not by choice.

She opened her eyes lazily and yawned, hoof reflexively covering her mouth to politely conceal the action. One by one her senses sharpened and her connection to the waking world returned. The stars had progressed of their own volition and she took a deep breath, tracing their paths to work out how far along they were. Her eyes widened at the realization that hours, not just one or two, had passed since she had begun her nap. She hopped off of the couch and ran to the window. The cold light of morning was already beginning to tinge the horizon and she cursed herself for wasting the entire night resting.

Luna looked around the room. The training equipment was stacked neatly in one corner, and in another Twilight lay in a crumpled heap, surrounded by books and pieces of parchment. The blue mare spread her wings and quietly glided over her, circling in front of the unicorn. Twilight was fast asleep, one hoof resting on a copy of *Magical Theory: Spell Construction and Analysis*. Luna smiled softly and closed her eyes.

There wasn't a hint of pain as she raised Twilight off the ground with her magic. Her horn felt good as new. The moment the mare was floating Luna flew up to where the beds were and guided Twilight's sleeping form under her blanket. She carefully tucked her in and watched her for a moment. Twilight looked so peaceful like that, perfectly at ease. Luna leaned forwards to kiss her cheek and hesitated at the last second, blushing. She gave Twilight a quick peck on the cheek and had to suppress an embarrassed giggle as she flew back down to the pile of notes.

As she skimmed and organized the pages Luna hummed to herself, joining

the song of the night sky. The voices of the young stars echoed in her head, singing to her in a chorus of joyful tones that wove a melody from dissonant chaos. She smiled softly, preparing to put them to rest for the day. She stacked the last book, folding a fresh sheet of parchment to serve as a bookmark, and headed for the door to the balcony.

Celestia had likely already begun the task of raising the sun, but it wasn't far enough along yet for Luna to feel the sun's influence on the sky. She hovered, flying above the library and coming to a halt just above a thin metal rod. She rested a hoof on the end, balancing upon the copper pipe and reaching out her forelegs to the sky. She could feel the moon resist her, the force of Nightmare Moon's magic refusing to yield quietly. As the sun began to lazily rise the darkness melted away and Luna's horn glowed brighter, pushing the moon back onto its rightful path.

Little by little her magic waned, but as it did the moon began to move on its own once more, inching below the horizon and taking the stars with it. Luna smiled softly, a feeling of weight slowly moving into her limbs and body. The daylight didn't rob her of her power so much as take away the night that bolstered it, and the feeling of lightness that accompanied the evenings evaporated a little at a time. She hopped down to the balcony and flapped her wings once to steady herself, landing as gracefully as she could manage.

She walked back inside, half-expecting Twilight to rise with the sun. Luna glanced at the scholar and smirked, deciding to let her sleep. She walked downstairs and wondered if it would be rude to prepare breakfast. It had been a thousand years since she had last even attempted cooking, but it couldn't be that much different and the library was sure to have an abundance of recipe books. Luna smiled to herself. Twilight was sure to be impressed.

---

Luna scrapped the last of the black gunk from the ceiling and sighed. She set the cleaning rag down and scanned the basement for any remaining stains. It was increasingly apparent to her that the flame from a Bunsen burner was not intended for cooking, no matter how much magic one used to amplify or control the flame. She looked through the recipe book again and checked her calculations. Maintaining three-hundred-fifty degrees of

radiant heat from all angles was proving tricky and she didn't have enough eggs left to make another quiche after the last one scorched and then exploded. She decided to cut her losses and called it quits, heading back upstairs.

As she filed the cookbooks away one by one she noticed the tome Twilight had been reading was still on the table. She put away the last book and walked over to it, carefully opening the weathered cover. What greeted her eyes was one of the most elaborate illuminations she had ever laid eyes on. The author had spent hours swirling inks onto the page with the greatest of care, blending them seamlessly and using them to create shades and tones. Woven among images of ancient Equestria and its legendary figures were letters, each a piece of art in and of itself. Luna's hoof hovered over each as she read the title.

"Parables of Princeps: Fables for Foals."

The pages crackled slightly as she turned them, examining the passages. It didn't require a century tending to Canterlot's library to know to be careful with the book, but it certainly helped that Luna had spent more hours helping preserve the forgotten wisdom of Equestria than any other mare. The book was old, but appeared to have been written during her imprisonment. Many of the stories had changed, evolved over the years, with new endings or completely new sections. Several had moral lessons crammed in with no warning or reasoning, while others were built around a single theme.

As she turned another page she saw her name in the illumination of one of the titles. Curious, she scanned the image for the rest of the words. The tale of "Luna and the Broken Moon" was not one she was familiar with, but a nagging feeling like she was forgetting something immediately took root in her mind. She started to read.

---

There was once a great and terrible serpent. So mighty was this beast that the sun and moon were like marbles that he rolled carelessly across the sky at his whim. So wily was this creature that those that stood against him were soon turned against each other. And so it was that the serpent ruled over the land, tormenting forever the ponies that inhabited it with neither

rhyme nor reason to control him.

In time two sisters came across the serpent. Seeing the suffering of the ponies they devised a plan and snatched from him the sun and the moon. Celestia, bright and shining, took the sun and with its light burned away the dark clouds with which the serpent wove his treachery. Luna, dark and mysterious, used the moon and stars to weave the wisps of shadow into a cage to contain the serpent, binding him with his own lies. Content with their victory, they celebrated.

The moment the sisters believed the serpent defeated, he escaped. Seeing how they used the sun and moon against him, he transformed his tail into stone and threw it into the sky. The serpent's tail smashed the moon into seven pieces and broke his cage apart, leaving a single scarred fragment in the sky and discarding the rest to the earth, broken and useless. The serpent smiled upon the sisters, laughing his terrible laugh and convinced of his own superiority. And just as he had done to the sisters, so they did to him. For in the moment he believed himself invincible, the sisters took up the six pieces of the moon and turned the serpent's spell on the rest of his body, transforming him into a statue. Thus the two became the saviors of all Equestria.

---

Luna stared at the page. She could only barely make out Discord's face in her memories but she knew that he was the serpent. Something stirred inside her and she could feel Nightmare Moon trying to suppress it. The Elements of Harmony had been forged from the broken pieces, binding Discord forever, but it hadn't been the moon that had broken that day. It was-

A knock on the door made her jump. She gently closed the book and ran to the front door, opening it carefully.

"Good morning, Twilight. I just thought I'd-"

The Element of Generosity stared at the princess of the night, who returned the gesture. Luna was certain that Rarity wasn't a pegasus, let alone an alicorn, but that apparently didn't stop her from having grown a pair of butterfly wings.

"Twilight is asleep at the moment. After my arrival yesterday there was... a bit of commotion. I'm sure she'll be with you the moment she wakes."

Rarity smiled warily.

"Yes, of course. Well, I don't wish to impose on you. Good day, Princess Luna."

She bowed and turned to walk away. Luna bit her lip and reached out her hoof.

"Wait."

Rarity froze, looking over her shoulder at Luna. The princess hesitated. How many other chances would she get to talk with her alone?

"I wish to speak with you. About a great many things. Particularly about the gala."

Rarity's cheeks turned bright red and she bowed, almost groveling.

"I'm truly sorry about my behavior, Princess Luna. It was most unladylike of me to act like that at the gala, especially to a member of the royal family. I can hardly imagine the shame and humiliation I must have brought upon you and Princess Celestia with my outburst, and it pains me that my first impression upon the upper class of Canterlot was one of ignorance and unsophistication as I squandered the opportunity that your sister gave to me by... by acting like a petulant filly!"

Luna stood in awe for several seconds, mouth hanging open as Rarity's eyes began to tear up.

"Yes, well... That is to say... Please, come inside."

Luna smiled softly, eyes darting back and forth between Rarity, the library door and the empty street.

"It's rather unladylike to have ones weaker moments become public affairs, is it not?"



Rarity rose up and wiped her eyes, nodding and brushing herself off.

"Yes. Yes, of course, forgive me."

Luna closed the door behind Rarity as she stepped inside and walked over to a table, taking a seat. The unicorn sat across from her looking like she was ready to be scolded. Luna thought for a moment about what she wanted to say and took a breath.

"I'm sorry."

Rarity blinked.

"You're... sorry? Oh, please don't tell me that you're here to tell us what our punishments are for the gala. I simply couldn't take it."

Luna's hoof raised off the table slightly but she didn't raise it to command silence. Instead she reached out to Rarity, resting her hoof over the white mare's.

"I'm sorry because the events that transpired at the gala were my doing, caused by my mistakes and stemming from my misguided attempts to make it, as you called it, 'the best night ever' for you and your companions. Each disaster was an accident and I was the source of each."

Rarity smiled softly.

"It's nice of you to try to make me feel better, Princess Luna, but it was Prince Blueblood's actions that led to my poorly contained anger, and it was only because of his attempt to use me as a shield that I let my temper get the better of me."

Luna chuckled a little.

"While I'm not sure of the specifics of that particular event, not that my sister hasn't already held it over my head, I can assure you that none of it was your doing. I was convinced that I knew what I was doing, so when I heard you were looking for your prince charming I immediately took my limited knowledge of this era and sought out Blueblood. It was only

because of my instructions that he acted the way he did. I was... more than a little mistaken about what your expectations were regarding royalty, and which time period you were hoping to emulate. My assumptions proved false and you rejected the facade he had put on."

Rarity's eyes didn't look like they could widen any further, and neither did her mouth. To say that she looked shocked would be an understatement that Luna doubted even the most ignorant of ponies would make the mistake of referring to her expression as such. The princess was certain an entirely new word would have to be devised for it.

"So all that time... Every arrogant and petty... All those presumptions..."

Luna nodded, bowing her head low.

"It is with the humblest of apologies that I have come to Ponyville. I hope that you can forgive me. I was doing what I thought was best at the time and ruined your evening and, from what my sister has told me, your reputation."

After a moment of composing herself Rarity sighed.

"It's perfectly alright."

She smiled at the princess.

"I'm certain that once the misunderstandings are cleared up everything will go back to the way it was."

"If there is anything, anything at all, that I can do to make up for my mistakes... It would be a simple enough task to arrange for a meeting with the high society of Canterlot, or at the very least the heads of the fashion industry there."

Rarity shook her head.

"I couldn't ask for such a thing. Those kind of opportunities have to be earned, and I wouldn't want to use favors to make my dreams come true when the true measure of success is to make it on talent alone. It just wouldn't be proper of me. I can think of one thing though."

Luna perked up a bit and Rarity's smiled broadened slightly.

"If it would be possible, even for just a night, to see Prince Blueblood again and... perhaps have a chance to start over again? I know he probably thinks very poorly of me at the moment, and quite frankly I don't blame him after what happened, but I want to know if my fairytale, whirlwind romance has to remain just a story in my head or not."

The princess raised her hoof.

"I, Princess Luna of Equestria, solemnly vow that it shall be done."

They both laughed softly and Luna rested her hooves on the table.

"Given a few days to sort the details out it would be easy to convince him to meet with you again. If you are, as I suspect, a lady through and through then he certainly must have seen your better nature as you endured his poor behavior. And it goes without saying that should he choose to court you, you would have my blessing. I can think of no finer mare, no pony better suited to join the aristocracy, than the Element of Generosity herself."

Rarity bowed, wiping her eyes once more.

"You flatter me, Princess Luna. I'll simply have to make sure I don't disappoint you in the meantime."

Luna chuckled softly.

"There is no flattery, only truth. You are a brilliant designer, a true friend and a lady in an era where crass behavior is frowned upon but accepted. Even if the evening wasn't my fault I would still make the same offer to you and your friends. You have all earned your second chances already, and I hope to earn mine."

It was Rarity's turn to reach out to the princess and they both smiled.

"Don't worry about a thing, Princess, I'm sure that the others will be just as understanding. Except perhaps for Rainbow Dash, but she'll cool down

quickly enough. Her temper is quick to flare and just as quick to change."

Luna nodded slightly and Rarity straightened up.

"This certainly changes things. And here I was preparing to exile myself, or resign myself to tending the skies for the rest of my life. With my fashion career in jeopardy and Rainbow Dash recovering from an injury I've been using my newfound free time to beautify Ponyville a little bit."

The blue mare blinked.

"The cloud roses are your doing? They're absolutely wonderful."

Rarity waved her hoof dismissively.

"The weather team doesn't seem to appreciate my work. All the stray bits of cloud left over from my carvings tend to bunch up and throw off the weather systems, but a little extra rain here and there is a small price to pay for some of the most gorgeous sunrises and sunsets this town has seen in a long time."

Luna nodded, thinking back to her trip into Ponyville. One of the first things she had noticed were the clouds. It certainly gave the place a very different look.

"In any case, now I'll have to work on a new gown for when I see him again. A lady has to look her best, after all."

Rarity was practically beaming, smiling brightly. Luna chuckled a little, then mulled the idea over.

"Rarity, I take it you are well versed in... shall we say, the arena of romance."

The unicorn adjusted her mane slightly.

"Well, I like to think so. I've had my fair share of experience with such matters, to put it politely. A lady doesn't kiss and tell, after all."

Luna smiled, blushing softly.

"Would you be... willing to help me with my own romantic interest? I've had my eye on somepony but I barely know where to begin with courting them in this day and age."

Rarity stood up, hooves on the table and leaning forwards. She was almost grinning.

"Oh, of course I'll help you, my dear. No need to worry, I know precisely how to draw the eye of any stallion in a hundred miles."

Rarity slid forwards a little further.

"And if you feel like you need somepony to confide your secrets in, you can trust in me. I absolutely love collecting juicy gossip, and I can keep a secret under pressure."

Luna stared at her for a moment, inching back slightly.

"Well... I... It's not a stallion that I have my eye on."

Rarity blinked.

"It's... not? Then who, Princess?"

"What I want to know is who is being so loud this early in the morning..."

Twilight groaned a little as she descended the stairs, eyes half-lidded. She glanced at the table and blinked, smiling softly.

"Oh, good morning, Rarity. Are you here about the spell?"

Luna and Rarity glanced back and forth between each other and Twilight, and Rarity's eyebrow raised slightly. Luna's cheeks turned dark red and the white mare blinked before smiled knowingly while Luna looked down at the table.

"Yes, I just came by to make sure how long these wings were going to last for before I try flying on them again."

Rarity walked over to Twilight and flapped her wings a few times. Twilight's horn glowed softly for a moment and she yawned.

"You've got another day or so left if you don't overdo it. You'll be fine, just come by tomorrow morning so I can cast the spell again. I'll try not to sleep in again."

With a nod Rarity smiled.

"Thank you, Twilight."

She turned to face Luna.

"And thank you, Princess Luna, for a most informative conversation."

She headed for the door, calling over her shoulder to the princess.

"And don't worry, I've got just the thing to help you with your troubles. We'll discuss it over lunch if you and Twilight aren't too busy later on."

She gave Luna a wink that went unnoticed by Twilight and opened the door, taking flight. Luna stared at the doorway for several seconds before closing the door with her magic and looking over at Twilight. The unicorn's mane was all over the place and looked as disheveled as the pile of papers Luna had first found her among.

"Good morning, Luna. Sorry about not waking you up on time, I got a bit too absorbed in my work again."

Luna stood up and smiled, trying to fight back the blush on her cheeks and calm down.

"Think nothing of it. It would appear I needed the rest. As did you, it seems."

Twilight nodded slightly, eyelids drooping. Suddenly her eyes opened wide and she gasped.

"Rarity's wings!"

The princess tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Twilight?"

Twilight smiled, jumping up and down.

"I had almost forgotten about that spell! It's difficult to perform so I don't like using it, but it's just what we need!"

Luna shrugged slightly.

"You still haven't told me about this brilliant plan of yours, Twilight."

The unicorn chuckled a little.

"It's all pretty simple. Right now Nightmare Moon is weakened because of the sunlight, and because Fluttershy is actively resisting her using her Element. If I use that spell on myself then I'll be able to fly, and hopefully keep up with you both. If we can trap Fluttershy's body so Nightmare Moon can't run away again I can use the new failsafe spell I've been working on to get rid of the portion of Nightmare Moon inside her. And if it works then I might be able to find a way to use it on you and save you. For real this time."

The alicorn stared at her for a moment.

"Do you really think it's possible to do so?"

Twilight nodded.

"I'm sure of it. We'll find a way, with or without the Elements."

She laughed softly.

"Looks like I get to be a hero like in my books and save a princess."

Luna chuckled slightly.

"Oh, brave and noble Twilight Sparkle, I am forever in your debt."

Twilight assumed a dramatic pose before bowing in a low, sweeping gesture.

"Tis nothing, fair Princess Luna. As an Element of Harmony it is my job, nay, my duty to defend the weak and the innocent from all manner of darkness."

Luna walked over to Twilight, resting a hoof on her shoulder.

"Arise, Twilight Sparkle. Arise a hero and receive your reward."

Twilight stood up and they both smirked, looking into each other's eyes. A moment passed, and then another, but to Luna time might as well have been standing still. She leaned a bit closer.

"...Luna?"

Twilight was slowly turning bright red, and Luna couldn't help but notice the note of hesitancy and confusion in the mare's voice. She eased back, attempting to hold on to her own composure.

"I... Well, that is..."

They both looked away in embarrassment.

"Perhaps it would be best if we abstained from acting out scenes from romance novels."

Twilight nodded slightly.

"Y-Yeah... let's hold off on that sort of thing for now."

Luna blinked.

"For now?"

She turned to face Twilight.

"What do you mean?"



Twilight kicked at the ground gently.

"I mean that... I don't know what I mean. Everything is just happening too fast and I barely know you that well but I feel like I want to, and what you said last night isn't making it any easier to keep my thoughts straight."

Luna stared at her.

"You mean when I said that you distract me?"

Twilight shook her head.

"The other thing. When you said that you like me a lot, right before you left to raise the moon. It... It made me feel... content. It felt nice to know how much you cared, it was like all my life I had been trying to get you to notice me and I didn't even know it. That innate connection between us that you said you felt, that kind of thing."

Twilight sighed softly.

"I'm a mare of science and rationality. I've never had time for romance or anything, I don't even know how it feels to have a crush on somepony. The way you make me feel, the thoughts I get in my head around you... I need time to sort them out. You confuse me on a level I didn't know even existed, a level that I don't think my scientific method can help me on."

She turned to face Luna, bowing slightly.

"I know you care about me a lot and want to act on those feelings, but... I'm just not ready yet. I need time to process things. Then I can give you an answer. I'm sorry."

Luna's chest tensed slightly, a weight forming in her heart.

"Twilight Sparkle."

She sighed softly and did her best to smile.

"I have waited a thousand years locked inside the moon with no company save for my own shadow. Waiting days or weeks for you to determine the

path your heart wishes to follow is nothing by comparison, though for you I would gladly wait out the rest of eternity even if I would never stand a chance."

She rested her hoof on Twilight's shoulder.

"If time is what you need then have it. I will wait for you."

Twilight smiled softly and stood up.

"Alright then."

Luna nodded and smiled.

"Now then, let's go and save your friend."

The unicorn's expression became one of determination.

"You got it, Luna. But first we've got a little side trip to make. We're going to need some help, and I know just the pony for the job."

Twilight headed for the door and Luna followed closely behind her. Well, she mused, at least now she'd have something to gossip with Rarity about when she saw her later.

# Chapter 10

Celestia giggled to herself as she lowered the last doll into place and tied a rope around it, attaching the other end to the large metal spring. With a flick of her horn she levitated pigments from their pots and gave the blank face the scariest expression she could think of. It ended up somewhere between terrifying and shocking, and she smiled as she examined her work. Silver Verve would be coming back any minute now, and when his hooves caught the thin tripwire in the doorway it would spring the trap, locking him in a wicker cage and dangling the hoof-crafted horrors over him.

Celestia smirked. It would serve him right for the stunt he pulled with the mane gel. Addressing the court at Canterlot with an afro was anything but dignified, especially when everypony was too intimidated to mention it. She wondered if Luna had put him up to it, or if he simply felt inclined to continue the prank war on her behalf while she was away.

The sound of hoofsteps from the hallway caught her attention and she ducked behind a plant, using her magic to make it grow taller and the leaves broader to conceal her form completely. She brought her hoof to her mouth, already on the verge of bursting into peals of laughter. Any second now and the prank would be complete. She could already see the expression on Silver's face, sheer terror followed by nervous quivering. It would be absolutely priceless.

The hoofsteps stopped at the doorway for a moment before resuming. There was a yelp, a snapping sound, and several loud crashing noises followed by a scream. Celestia jumped out from behind the plant and shouted in triumph.

"Gotcha!"

Silver Verve lay in a tangled heap on the floor, the cage having fallen sideways on top of him. Celestia looked up and saw that she had forgotten to make sure the lines would all release at the same time. Glancing back at the colt, she noted that he also appeared to have tripped over the line before it released the trap. Some refinements would be necessary, and a

repeat performance on Luna an absolute must. She lifted the cage off of Silver and set it aside, pulling him out from under a doll made to look like the child of an Ursa Major and a dragon. The attendant groaned and staggered to his hooves, swaying slightly.

"Ow... That hit me like a ton of bricks..."

He opened his eyes and blinked, waiting for them to focus properly on the pony before him. Gold, white and blue colorations filled his vision and he froze up. As his sight finally cleared he gulped. Celestia gave him a wry smile.

"Sorry about that, Silver. It was my first time using that particular design and it seems it needs a bit more work before I can use it to properly scare somepony. Are you alright?"

Silver nodded slowly. Celestia's smile grew ever so slightly.

"Excellent news. I take it you found it alright?"

With another nod Silver reached back and pulled out a small scroll. Celestia took hold of it with her magic and examined it carefully. The parchment had been enchanted to renew itself constantly in order to preserve it. Luna's ancient magics were still strong, soaked deeply into the fibers and ink. She pulled the ribbon off and discarded it before unfurling the page. Silver shivered slightly.

"Princess... I'm sure you know what you're doing, but this still feels wrong to me. This scroll... I mean, the wards and the locks on it were extensive..."

Celestia peered over the top of the scroll at him and blinked.

"Are you saying you don't want to read it?"

The colt shook his head so rapidly Celestia thought it might fall off. Luna always ended up with the best assistants, or at the very least the most amusing, and Celestia considered reassigning him for the sake of her own entertainment.

"Of course I want to read it, anypony would kill for a chance to read those

hidden secrets. But..."

His cheeks turned rosy and he looked down at the floor.

"...Is it really alright for you to be reading your sister's diary?"

Celestia smiled and turned her attention back to the scroll.

"I'm just looking into a few things, and making sure of a few hunches. It's not like she ever wrote anything incriminating in her diary anyway."

Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the last lines.

"Then again..."

Silver inched closer, eyebrow raised, trying to sneak a peek. Celestia either didn't notice or didn't care, her thoughts obviously elsewhere.

---

Dear Diary,

Today Celly was so mean! Just because we're princesses now doesn't mean she can be a jerky-jerk jerk-face. Discord threw the land into such chaos that we have to rebuild everything from scratch, including the heavens themselves. Celly decided that the day and the night should be a set length so that everypony knows when there'll be light and darkness, but then she decided that the day should be twice as long as the night! It's not fair! Sometimes I wish Celly would stop treating me like a little filly. "When you're older you can have a longer night, when you're more responsible." And that's gonna be never! And to top it all off, ever since we beat Discord I keep getting these weird headaches. Celly says she's gonna find out what that spell he put on me was, but I don't think she even knows where to begin with it. His magic is strange and unnatural, and even now it's constantly changing inside of me. I'm scared, and I think Celly is too, but she'll never admit to it. I just wish we still had the stone spheres that flew out of me. Then we might have a clue. Until then, I have to put up with Celly's constant fussing and meddling and jerk-face-ness.

---

Celestia rolled the scroll up and secured it with its ribbon. Silver leaned back and straightened up slightly, watching the parchment hover through the air before sliding into the case at his side. The princess turned and walked over to a window, opening it and looking out upon Canterlot.

"Silver."

The colt stood up a little straighter, trying to keep his nervousness out of his voice.

"Yes, Princess Celestia?"

"Come and sit with me a little while."

He walked over to her, glancing back and forth between her and the view. Celestia's expression was unusually grim. After a moment she sat down and sighed, gesturing for him to do the same. Silver made himself comfortable and looked up at her. Celestia's eyes seemed fixed on a spot somewhere near the center of the castle gardens. He didn't dare ask why, and Celestia was thankful that he had opted to remain silent. It gave her a moment to think.

"Let me tell you a little story, Silver, about the Elements of Harmony and a creature known as Discord."

---

The ponies of Ponyville were used to the occasional royal visit. It wasn't uncommon for Princess Celestia to conduct the holiday celebrations in person, and over the course of a millennium they had perfected the graceful air with which they bowed in her presence, the polite tone of speech with which they greeted her and the respect with which they tended to her needs. Which is precisely what made it so difficult for them to know how to act around Luna.

The alicorn glanced down a side road and saw a group of ponies bow down. She chuckled slightly and returned the gesture, her wings flaring and the tips of her feathers brushing against the ground. Straightening up, she turned to catch up to Twilight and glanced back at the confused and smiling

faces of the group.

"Having fun?"

Luna turned back towards Twilight and nodded, smiling.

"Very much so. I've decided that prostrating myself before my subjects every time they bow before me will get the point across that I don't wish to be treated as their superior, only as their equal. It's also remarkably amusing to see their reactions."

She looked up at the sky as they walked. Her mind refused to stay settled on anything except Nightmare Moon, but she knew if she brooded for too long it would cloud her judgment. It was much better, she thought, to let her mind wander and to focus on happier thoughts while she still could so that stress wouldn't plague her the way it was obviously plaguing the librarian beside her.

Luna looked at Twilight again. Despite getting plenty of sleep she looked completely worn out, but that likely had more to do with the fact that she had the most adorable case of bed-head and so focused on the task at hand that she didn't seem to notice or care. If they weren't on a mission to eradicate a force of darkness before it seized control of an innocent mare for diabolical purposes, Luna would have gladly invited Twilight to let her return the favor and brushed her mane with as much affection as the unicorn had the night before. Twilight looked at Luna out of the corner of her eye and blinked, facing her.

"Is something wrong?"

Luna smirked slightly.

"You didn't hear a word I just said, did you? You were so wrapped up in thought that you went into... I believe the phrase is 'auto-pilot'. I could have been trying to tell you something important and you'd never have known."

Twilight's face turned rosy and she looked down at the ground.

"Sorry, Luna. I just... I have a lot on my mind. Nightmare Moon, the planning, and... you. And then there's everything else that I have to keep

up with, the checklists to complete, the schedules to maintain... I'm doing my best not to panic by trying to sort it all out in my head."

Luna nodded and sighed.

"I understand. I was trying to lift your spirits by joking around, but it seems I'm still not particularly good at it."

Twilight gave her a soft smile.

"Well, I certainly appreciate the effort. I think I just need some time to process all of this. So feel free to keep trying, I just don't think I can relax until this is all over."

Luna smiled and extended her wing, brushing the tips of her feather's against Twilight's cheek.

"I'll do my best, Twilight."

They passed by the last collection of buildings wordlessly, stepping onto the path that led to Sweet Apple Acres. Luna could recall the day that Ponyville had been founded and the land divided up. No pony had wanted the spacious farmland because it was made up of rolling hills instead of level plains, until a colt named Johnny Appleseed came striding into town with a satchel of supplies slung across his back and a mission in his mind to start an apple orchard.

The crop was an instant hit, and it wasn't long before he had enough money to pay off the loans on the land and court the lovely Amber Drops, the mead maker's daughter. Together they perfected a recipe for apple cider so crisp and refreshing that barrels made their way into the court kitchens of Canterlot to be poured for royal guests and unscrupulous kitchen staff who weren't above sneaking a sip. Luna savored the memory, imagining what new treats they had added to their roster. She glanced at Twilight. A refreshing cup of cider might do the worried unicorn a world of good.

She cast her gaze westwards, towards the bright, clear skies. The sun hung in the air, balanced on a golden thread that only her sister could see, tugged along like an obedient dog on a leash. It was nothing like the stars



and the moon. The sun was simple and powerful, its light granting life or searing it away as Celestia willed it. The only ponies who could influence it were the weather patrol, their clouds and storms closely monitored and supervised by Canterlot. Luna smirked as a peculiarly bright set of wings attached to a regal-looking unicorn mare fluttered towards the lone cloud that was drifting towards Ponyville. Perhaps there was one pony who could also influence the hold of the sun freely besides her sister after all, albeit not by much.

"Tell me, Twilight, do you report to my sister about the progress of your studies?"

Twilight shook her head.

"Only when it applies to a lesson I've learned. I kinda prefer keeping it a secret so I can impress her when I see her."

Luna nodded and grinned.

"Is that so. So my sister has no idea that you have such a spectacular flight spell mastered to the point where you can cast it and not be absolutely exhausted by it?"

The unicorn raised an eyebrow.

"Not that I know of, Luna. Why do you ask?"

Luna gestured towards Rarity's retreating form.

"Let's just say I have a new prank in mind for my sister, one involving a sudden unexpected shower during her morning walk in the gardens. Can you imagine her, stooping low to sniff a flower, when all of a sudden a cascade of water falls from the sky and douses her? The look on her face..."

They both smiled, giggling softly. Silence fell about them as they approached the farm. They rounded the last few hills, and as the orchard came into view they could almost make out the sounds of Applejack working; the thudding noise of hay bales being slung from the loft to the barn floor. Luna looked around at the fields for a moment, taking in the

scenery. It was not entirely unlike the farms she had seen centuries ago, though modern conveniences surely made the jobs easier and the lifestyle a bit more relaxed. There was another loud thud from the barn, followed shortly by a shout.

"Hey! Watch it, Applejack! That one nearly took my head off!"

Luna and Twilight exchanged confused glances.

"Was that... the Element of Loyalty? I thought this farm belonged to the Element of Honesty."

Twilight shrugged, barely able to hear Applejack's retort. It was something about silly fillies needing to mind where they were standing.

"Maybe Rainbow Dash is helping Applejack out? Let's go take a look."

As they approached the barn door they could clearly make out the sound of Rainbow Dash's voice as she and Applejack engaged in a few rounds of verbal jousting. Twilight couldn't help but chuckle a little; the pair of them always seemed to be competing or arguing with each other, but anypony who knew them could see that they were actually good friends.

"I don't care where they're normally supposed to go, Applejack, you didn't look and you didn't warn me!"

"I didn't think it'd be necessary, little miss Iron Pony. I figured you'd be light enough on your hooves to avoid it if you had to."

There was a rustling sound of something landing on straw and Twilight poked her head in through the doorway just in time to see Applejack leap from atop a hay bale at Rainbow Dash, tackling her to the floor. Twilight was about to say something in protest, remembering Rainbow Dash's injury, when she froze up. Applejack was kissing Rainbow Dash, who was kissing back. A bit forcefully, as well. Twilight blinked as Luna leaned around her to see what the commotion was. The princess hesitated before whispering.

"Were they always this close?"

Applejack broke the kiss and sat up, her hooves sliding away from Rainbow Dash's as she released her. She smiled, panting a little, and stared into her eyes for a moment.

"Though apparently not light enough to avoid me."

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes and stopped midway, her gaze focused on the doorway and the two confused ponies standing there. It was hard to tell at first glance who they were with the sun behind them, but the horns, crown and mane colors gave them away fairly easily.

"Uh... Hey, Twilight. And Princess Luna."

Applejack's head spun around and she looked out the door, eyes wide.

"Twilight! What a, uh... pleasant surprise!"

Twilight's jaw hung open in a prolonged, silent gasp. Luna gently prodded her shoulder, her gaze moving from the two mares disentangling themselves on the barn floor to the scholar and back.

"I do believe you've incapacitated Twilight. I think I'm going to have to commend you, if only because you've demonstrated a capacity to completely blindside her."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash gave her confused stares and Luna sighed softly.

"Was that not clear? Let me try this then: Well done. You broke her."

Twilight closed her eyes and shook her head, blinking. After a moment's pause she finally spoke.

"Well, I can't say it's a complete surprise, but... How long have you two been a couple for?"

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow.

"Not much of a surprise? What the hay is that supposed to-"

Applejack pressed a hoof to Rainbow Dash's lips.

"Since yesterday. We both admitted to things we've been hidin' for a long time and it just sorta happened all at once."

Twilight nodded slowly. After a moment she sighed.

"I don't have time to make a big deal out of this, so I'm just going to accept it and move on and potentially flip out later when we're not completely doomed. We have an emergency, girls."

Luna nodded.

"A very serious one at that. Nightmare Moon has returned. A portion of the darkness that plagued me broke off and escaped, and is presently attempting to use Fluttershy as a vessel."

Rainbow Dash and Applejack exchanged worried glances. Applejack adjusted her hat and bowed.

"We're at your service, Princess Luna."

---

Applejack loaded up her saddlebags with everything she could think of, choosing quickly and carefully. She tied the flaps closed and tossed it onto her back, fastening the buckle. She glanced in the direction of the shifting noises beside her and scowled.

"Dashie, you're not coming with us."

Rainbow Dash dropped the bag she was filling and stamped her hoof.

"Yeah right! There's no way I'm letting Twilight run off to fight Nightmare Moon on her own, and that goes double for you! I don't care if I'm hurt, I'm coming with you. I have to."

Applejack shook her head.

"No, you don't. Twilight already explained that she only needs one of us,

and if you think for one minute that I won't tie you up and leave you here in the barn until I get back you've got another thing comin', missy. You promised me you'd stay out of trouble, and correct me if I'm wrong but didn't I just make that clear to Twilight while she was explainin' everythin'?"

The pegasus opened her mouth to protest, and Applejack could read the look of "who cares about promises?" on her face, but Rainbow Dash simply sighed and lowered her head.

"I guess now I know how you feel all the time, huh. I'm scared, AJ. Not a lot, I'm not some stupid filly afraid of the dark or anything, but... just a little bit. I feel like something really bad is going to happen to you if I don't follow you. And Fluttershy... I mean, she's my oldest friend and all I can do is stay here in the barn? I just can't... sit here and do nothing about it..."

Applejack brushed her hoof against Rainbow Dash's cheek and the blue mare jumped forwards and embraced her in a crushingly tight hug. Applejack held her close, giving her a soft squeeze. Rainbow Dash sniffled.

"Not so tight, Applejack, you'll squeeze all my tears out... You're gonna make me look like a great big sissy or something. Not cool"

With a chuckle Applejack ruffled Rainbow Dash's mane and kissed her cheek, letting the other mare bury her face against her chest.

"I'll just have to come back in one piece and make it up to you then, won't I."

Rainbow Dash nodded and nuzzled her gently.

"You'd better, because I'm not gonna let you get away with making me cry. Jerk."

She kissed Applejack and held her for a few moments longer before releasing her. Applejack smiled.

"Your jerk."

---

Applejack adjusted the straps on her bag as she walked towards Luna and Twilight. The unicorn looked her up and down for a moment before nodding.

"Got everything you need?"

Applejack chuckled a little and flipped one of the flaps up, revealing stacks of rope, several harnesses and a variety of other tools.

"And the other side has the rest of my gear. I think we're about ready to head out."

Twilight smiled and adjusted her own pack.

"Alright then. Let's get going."

They headed for the door, walking down the path towards the main road. Rainbow Dash watched them from the doorway, cursing her injured back and uttering a silent prayer for Applejack in the same breath.

---

Silver Verve stared at Celestia, eyes wide. The princess returned her gaze to the gardens and sighed. He looked down at the floor, the gears in his head whirling. He stood up slowly, shaking his head.

"I... I don't believe it. So Luna is... was... Nightmare Moon?"

Celestia nodded.

"Some small part of her was transformed by Discord, as damaged and fragmented as the moon was by the time he was done with it. And while my magic could pull together the pieces of the moon and bind them together once more, there was nothing I could do for my sister. By the time I realized that the Elements of Harmony were the key to mending her broken mind, she had already been consumed."

The colt shuddered slightly as he pictured Luna, wrapped in a veil of shadows and transforming the landscape into a twisted nightmare realm.

"So what are you going to do, princess?"

Celestia's lips curved into a wry smile. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she turned to face Silver, smiling broadly.

"Do? I've already done it. I feel it in the turning of the earth beneath my hooves that by the time the sun has set my sister will be free once more."

Her brow furrowed and her smile vanished.

"I just hope that freedom won't come in the form of... no longer being among the living."

Silver Verve gulped and looked out at Equestria, straining his eyes and trying to glimpse Ponyville in the distance.

"Princess Celestia... I have a request..."

She blinked and tilted her head.

"Name it, Silver. I suppose I owe you something in return for the mishap earlier."

Silver nodded slowly.

"Well... It's a bit of a big one."

Celestia grinned.

"Go on."

---

"So what's the plan, Twilight? Anythin' I should know?"

Twilight assumed the dignified posture of a military commander, facing forwards and donning a slightly stern and serious expression.

"Our goal is to rescue Fluttershy. The objectives in support of that goal, in order of priority, are securing Fluttershy so we can keep her safe, removing

Nightmare Moon's influence over her or extracting her, and defeating Nightmare Moon for good. Our first step will be to get Fluttershy somewhere safe and possibly restrain her. I have a few things we can use to distract her if need be."

Applejack nodded.

"And Princess Luna here is gonna make sure she doesn't fly off or anythin'?"

Luna chuckled softly and Twilight shook her head.

"Actually, Applejack, that's where you come in. Remember that wing spell I cast on Rarity? Well, it might not make you especially fast, but with your lasso and Luna helping corral her it shouldn't be too much trouble to snag her if Nightmare Moon makes her try to run for it."

"It'll be just like a rodeo! Except with less cows and more Fluttershy. And less rodeo clowns. Do you think we'll need a rodeo clown, Twilight? Because I am all over it if we need one, I even brought my face paints!"

Pinkie Pie smiled, adjusting her helmet and apparently oblivious to the stunned expressions pointed in her direction. She hopped along down the road and looked over her shoulder.

"Come on, everypony, or you're gonna be late!"

Twilight stammered for a moment before running after her.

"Pinkie! What do you think you're doing?"

Pinkie Pie skidded to a halt and smiled, jumping up and down on the spot.

"I'm coming with you to help! There's no way Nightmare Moon could resist a good party, all she needs is some cheering up and she'll leave Fluttershy alone!"

Twilight was about to speak when a movement beside her made her hesitate. Luna rested her hoof on Twilight's shoulder and smiled softly.



"Pinkie Pie, Nightmare Moon only comes out at night. Why don't you run home and arrange for an evening celebration? By the time we've visited Fluttershy's house and returned it will be approaching evening, so we'll invite her in person so you have time to set everything up. It needs to be a party fit for a princess, after all, so do your best."

Pinkie Pie's smile grew.

"I always do my best, Luna. Ain't no party like a Pinkie Pie party! I'll save you some frosting!"

Luna blinked.

"Because you're going to eat all the cake?"

Pinkie Pie nodded and began skipping off, humming something tunelessly. Applejack chuckled.

"Seems like you've got a natural talent for understandin' Pinkie there, princess."

Twilight nodded, eyebrow raised.

"It's almost uncanny. Usually I only barely know what to say to her when she's being deliberately belligerent, but you diverted her without even missing a beat."

Luna shrugged and smiled.

"When your own logic doesn't work in an argument, sometimes the best manner of doing something is to apply somepony else's."

As Luna resumed walking, Applejack turned to Twilight and smirked.

"I bet you're mighty mad you didn't think of that first, am I right?"

Twilight shook her head and smiled.

"Actually, I'm impressed."

Applejack watched the dreamy expression on Twilight's face for a moment before grinning.

"Is that right. Impressed. Is that the only thing you are right now? Because I'm pretty sure you're also fallin' for a certain princess, unless my eyes aren't livin' up to my Element and deceivin' me."

Twilight turned to face Applejack, her mouth agape and cheeks turning red.

"That's... I..."

Applejack walked past her and snickered.

"Uh-huh. I believe you, Twilight. Whatever you say."

She took off at a run to catch up to Luna and Twilight stood there for a moment before chasing after them.

---

Fluttershy's house was eerily quiet. It wasn't unlike the pegasus to speak in softer tones than the mice that lived in her wall, but there were usually birds singing or some great beast growling as it awaited her tender care of its ailments. Instead the grounds were as silent as a graveyard. Luna inched closer to Twilight as they walked. The princess of the night, though she would never admit it out loud, was slowly growing more and more terrified. Her imagination flooded her mind with all manner of possible terrors that could be lurking behind the door.

Just as the mental image of a fiendish, shadowy tentacle beast took a perverse turn that she both hadn't expected and hadn't expected finding intriguing, she felt a hoof on her shoulder pull her back a step. She glanced at Applejack, who motioned towards the house. They watched as Twilight approached the door and knocked on it.

"Fluttershy? Are you in there?"

There was no answer. Twilight knocked again.

"If you're in there, open up."

Silence once again fell upon them. Twilight's horn began to glow and she leaned forwards to tap the lock. Suddenly the door swung outwards, smacking Twilight in the face and knocking her aside. Fluttershy stepped carefully out of her house, gasping when she finally noticed Twilight in a heap on the ground. Twilight echoed the sound as she caught sight of Fluttershy's eyes, one of which had the same slit pupil as Nightmare Moon.

"Fluttershy... Are you..."

Fluttershy took a step backwards, and then another.

"S-Stay back, Twilight... I don't want to... I don't want her to... to make me hurt you..."

Fluttershy looked around nervously and caught sight of Luna. Her eyes widened and she clutched at her head.

"No! Oh goodness, no!"

Twilight scrambled to her hooves, running back towards Luna and Applejack, horn glowing brightly. They watched as Fluttershy's normal eye began to shift, her voice slowly being replaced by the booming sound of Nightmare Moon's, black shadows rising up around her and beginning to wrap around her body.

"No? You poor foal, you shouldn't try to resist your ruler. It's very impolite."

Twilight cast the flight spell on Applejack, trying to shape the cocoon properly. Applejack's hooves flailed as she was raised off the ground.

"Careful there, Twilight, I don't think we have much time."

Twilight gritted her teeth.

"I'm trying! Luna, distract her!"

Luna nodded and stepped forwards. As Nightmare Moon's body solidified she laughed cruelly. The noise was harsh and slightly distorted, and Luna couldn't help the shock creeping onto her face as she realized that

Nightmare Moon's physical form was little more than patchwork, broken fragments of armor swirling around her and Fluttershy's body clearly visible through cracks in the shadowy skin.

"What do you think? Not nearly as sturdy as my last form, but now you'll gaze upon the face of the mare you're trying to save and hesitate. Your fear of hurting her will make you weak, won't it Luna? You'll be terrified to use your magic and your horn."

Luna shuddered at the thought. The last thing she wanted was to sacrifice Fluttershy or allow her to come to harm. But she steeled her resolve and advanced.

"It won't even come to that. You'll be defeated before I even have to cast a single spell. With the Elements of Harmony we will undo the damage you have done and unmake you once and for all."

Nightmare Moon forced Fluttershy's body into the air, flying upwards slowly.

"We shall see."

A bright flash lit up the landscape and Nightmare Moon had to cover her eyes, wincing. Luna turned around and smiled. Applejack flapped her wings experimentally as they unfurled. They were entirely unlike Rarity's, a pair of ordinary pegasus wings as plain and serviceable as her hat. She kicked off the ground hard and soared upwards, spiraling around for a moment before hovering and taking a length of rope out of her pack.

"Ready when you are, princess."

Luna nodded and ascended, gliding around to the other side of the black mare. Nightmare Moon lowered her hooves, blinking for a few moments before casting a glance at Applejack.

"...Interesting. I see you've broadened your collection of tricks, Twilight Sparkle. Do you have any others?"

Twilight nodded and threw her pack open, levitating several glass crystals into the air. Each were shaped like one of the Element pendants, and as her magic coursed through them the glass began to shine, changing color

to match their namesakes.

"Something like that!"

Nightmare Moon stared at them as they hung in the air, horrified.

"Impossible... There's no way you could have called them forth on your own! It has to be a trick!"

Twilight smirked, her horn glowing. The crystals began to shine, circling around her.

"Checkmate, Nightmare Moon."

Applejack dove forwards, tying her lasso mid-flight and throwing it at the distracted alicorn. The loop caught hold of Nightmare Moon's horn for a moment before passing through it, the shadowy mass dissipating and slowly beginning to reform. Luna charged forwards, flapping her wings hard and trying to pounce upon the dark mare.

"I have you now, villain!"

As Luna and Nightmare Moon dove and flew around each other, Twilight nodded in satisfaction and dispelled the levitation holding the crystals up, redirecting all her energy into the cleansing spell. The ground beneath her hooves quivered slightly as she struggled to twist the spell the correct way. A ray of soft light shot out from her horn and flickered before vanishing. As the glass forms landed and broke on the ground Nightmare Moon raised an eyebrow and glanced at Luna and Applejack. She grinned.

"A bluff? How delightful. You weren't delaying, you were trying to rid me of my confidence! Let's see how you like it when I do the same to you."

She charged at Applejack and kicked her foreleg hard, puncturing one of her wings. The earth pony flailed a little as she lost her balance and fell, both wings dissolving. Luna dove after her, trying to levitate her and slow her fall. The moment Applejack was back safely on the ground Luna heard the strange, crackling noise of a fizzling spell and a gasp of shock and pain. She turned in Twilight's direction only to discover that the unicorn's chest was now impaled upon Nightmare Moon's horn. The dark mare cackled as

she lifted Twilight up, staring into the unicorn's terrified and tear-filled eyes.

"Checkmate, whelp."

Luna was certain that she was screaming Twilight's name. She could feel the rumbling in her chest, the straining of her throat muscles as they tried to contain and focus the sound. But it was silent in her ears. Everything was silent except Twilight's whimpering and Nightmare Moon's mocking laughter. As Nightmare Moon pulled back Twilight's body crumpled, shaking with every pained breath. Luna felt a mix of frost and fire in her veins, the bitter chill of fear and the burning heat of fury mixing and flowing through her. She felt herself scream again.

The world began to turn dark before her eyes and she could feel the darkness inside her growing, feeding off of her anger. The two pieces of Nightmare Moon desired to be whole once more, and Luna felt herself beginning to give in. She stared at Twilight's body, wondering which breath would be her last. When she finally tore her gaze away her eyes met Nightmare Moon's. For a moment she felt like she was being consumed once more, that it was all over.

And then something changed.

A heavy weight settled around her neck, and the clattering of a chain made itself known to her as the silver necklace formed once more. All her anger and worry melted away and became calm clarity as the Element of Laughter emerged with a loud and comical pop. Twilight wasn't dead yet, and likely wouldn't be if she got help quickly enough. Nightmare Moon was possessing the only pony in Ponyville both close enough and skilled enough to save her. Luna felt her magic responding before she even called upon it, swirling around her horn.

"Applejack?"

The farmer glanced at her and responded, voice shaking slightly.

"Uh-huh?"

Luna narrowed her eyes and Nightmare Moon smirked slightly as the princess prepared for a charge.

"Take care of Twilight while I finish this."

Nightmare Moon cackled and stepped over Twilight, giving her an almost casual kick to her wound as she did. Twilight let out a sharp cry of pain.

"You barely overcame me last time, my little copycat, it was only a fluke. And your trinket is worthless. You have nothing with which you can best me."

Luna tuned out Nightmare Moon's insults, closing her eyes. Her magic pulsed and she felt the necklace throbbing in time with it, resonating and reacting. As she focused the magic in her horn she felt the pendant pull at the threads of her energy, reshaping it. The spell shifted and her power flowed into the chain, the silver links glowing. It was a feeling like hunger, an emptiness that refused to be left unsatisfied.

Nightmare Moon let out a yell as the Element of Kindness formed around her neck once more and she tugged at it, trying to rip it off. The chain refused to come undone and the metal burned her shadowy body, threatening to disrupt her once again. Suddenly the crystal began to glow and the Element began to disintegrate, turning to swirling dust that flowed towards Luna.

Applejack was too busy pulling cloth and string from her pack to notice the necklace around her neck until it was already dissolving, the glowing powder distracting her slightly as she dragged Twilight away from the fighting. The moment they were hidden she went to work, trying to stop the bleeding and assess the damage.

Luna tried to focus her magic back into her horn to prepare her attack, but the necklace didn't let up a single scrap of power until it suddenly became heavier and released a surge of magical energy that knocked her onto her flank. She looked down at the two new charms that hung in front of her, a butterfly and an apple. Kindness and honesty. Luna turned her attention to the now weakened Nightmare Moon, watching the shadows try and fail to reform around her host.

"I do believe you were saying something about a fluke?"

Nightmare Moon scowled and charged, forcing Fluttershy's body into motion and flaring her wings. Her horn ignited, a torrent of dark blues and blacks flowing freely. Luna concentrated, trying to coerce the necklace into doing something to help her. Once again the charms refused to do anything except hold back her fear, but as she focused she felt her magic shift and move more easily. She focused it into her horn and prepared to clash with Nightmare Moon, bracing her legs and refusing to budge an inch.

The sound of the collision was like a scream. The magical energies wove into and through each other, grinding and churning. Luna lowered her head slightly and attempted to push forwards, but her muscles felt like they would tears under the strain.

Nightmare Moon flicked her horn back and forth, inching her face closer to Luna's and grinning maliciously. She gave another hard shove and her forehead collided with Luna's, their horns giving off bright blue sparks as they each tried to maneuver into a better position. The flames on Nightmare Moon's horn began to swell little by little and Luna's eyes widened.

"You can't possibly mean to... You'll destroy us both!"

Nightmare Moon grinned.

"My dear, deluded double, you're making assumptions about where I'm aiming."

She turned her head, pushing hard and forcing Luna's horn aside, the flames collecting into an orb.

"For example, you might be as strong as I am, but you're not the biggest threat here."

Luna watched in horror as Nightmare Moon flung the sphere at the bushes where Applejack and Twilight were hiding. She felt the necklace react reflexively, taking control of her magic once more. All the built up energy in her horn changed, and her bare horn collided with Nightmare Moon's for a split second before she was teleported in front of the fireball.

Luna watched it approach as though it were in slow motion, the churning



surface closing in inch by inch. She stamped her back legs against the ground, hooves digging in to the soil slightly as she braced her body, closing her eyes and trying to gather enough strength to dispel the blast. Her horn sparked and surged with power, but by the time enough had gathered to shield her body the flames struck her. The half-formed barrier soaked up most of the force, but the black blaze tore through it, singeing her coat and mane in places and knocking her backwards.

Nightmare Moon was already lunging for her by the time gravity had reminded Luna which direction it was pointing in, and as she tried to move out of the way Nightmare Moon grabbed her forelegs and held them over her head, pinning her. She tried to struggle and escape, but Nightmare Moon's shadowy limbs began to wrap around her hooves, binding them like chains. Luna tried one last trick, attempting to levitate her foe and pry her off. A band of blue magic wrapped around Nightmare Moon's middle, tearing her off Luna and tossing her sideways.

Luna stood as quickly as she could, holding Nightmare Moon to the ground with her magic and moving over her, flopping down on top of the mare and grappling with her. She cast her eyes towards the bushes and called out.

"Twilight! If you still have strength, you must cast the spell!"

---

Twilight's eyes fluttered open slightly. She was vaguely aware that she was on the ground, and that she was in a great deal of pain, but everything else was a vague blur. The only thing that pierced the haze was Luna's cry. It sounded clearer somehow, as if her mind were trying to latch onto the words.

"Luna...?"

Applejack finished tying the tourniquet and gently patted Twilight on the cheek, peering over the bushes to see what was going on.

"Just rest, Twilight, Luna can handle it."

Twilight shook her head.

"Applejack... She needs me..."

She tried to stand and winced. The cloth around her wound felt wet and sticky, and she'd read enough from her biology books to know that she was probably only minutes from passing out if she lost any more blood. Applejack slipped a hoof under her back and helped her sit up a little at a time, the other hoof on the wound to hold it closed.

"And you call me stubborn..."

Applejack tried to chuckle but it came out forced. Twilight stood up and leaned against Applejack, closing her eyes slightly. Every single part of her body felt heavy, and it was tempting to lay back down and drift away.

"Take me to her... I have to save them..."

The earth pony nodded and led her out from behind the bushes. A burst of black fire shot over their heads and sailed off into the distance and Applejack had to duck to keep her hat from getting damaged. Nightmare Moon let out a loud yell as Luna struck her across the face and adjusted her hold.

"Twilight! While I have her held down, cast your spell! Once Fluttershy is free she can easily tend to your wound, try to fight through the pain!"

Twilight nodded slowly, closing her eyes. The heavy feeling grew as her magic coursed through her body. It felt like the only thing holding her up was instinctive telekinesis, and here she was siphoning off the last of her magical strength for another big spell. She grimaced slightly, her mind going through the motions of casting, the manipulations and concepts needed to prepare the spell.

Applejack could feel Twilight's legs wobbling and shifted a little, trying to support her weight without brushing against her wound. She kept giving Luna nervous glances, wondering when the princess would finally run out of strength. Nightmare Moon let out another shout, grinning.

"You can't be serious! You don't even have the Elements of Harmony, but you honestly believe you can defeat me?"

She started to laugh and Luna drew back her hoof, slapping her across the face and glaring at her.

"Defeat you? Twilight will eradicate you, you foul demoness. You might be acting tough right now, but you reek of fear. You know that this day is your last."

Nightmare Moon's eyes widened, but before she could retort a wave of indigo energy washed over them both. The spell felt like being chopped up into chunks, and then having each chunk forced through the eye of a needle before being reassembled. Luna and Nightmare Moon screamed in pain, writhing and slumping against the ground.

Little by little Fluttershy's voice replaced Nightmare Moon's, and wisps of shadow began to fly out of both their bodies, forming into a small black orb. As the spell ended Luna collapsed to the ground beside Fluttershy, staring up at the orb. She smiled as Twilight's magic wrapped around it.

"It's over..."

Twilight staggered slightly, and Luna watched the unicorn's horn flicker as her legs gave out beneath her. The energy around the orb vanished and it disintegrated into black mist that vanished in the sunlight. She felt Nightmare Moon's magic vanish completely and smiled to herself, standing slowly. Her head felt clear, and despite the ache in her body she felt refreshed.

"Luna! Help!"

Applejack gently shook Twilight, trying to get her to wake up. Twilight's eyes remained closed, her breathing shallow. Luna took one look at them and sprinted over.

"Applejack, tend to Fluttershy. Wake her as quickly as you can, but be mindful of her wounds. Nightmare Moon wouldn't let her host die, but she's likely going to be in a lot of pain."

Luna gently levitated Twilight onto her back and walked towards Fluttershy's house. She knew nothing of modern medicine or what new advances had been made, but she refused to let the one good thing in her

life vanish before her eyes. As she set Twilight down on the nearest bed she pulled open cabinet, got out a medical book and got to work.

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Nightmare Moon panted heavily beneath the shade of a large tree. Her body was little more than vapor, but she was a single entity once more. Already she felt her power returning, her form solidifying a little at a time. It would take a few days to generate a complete body from nothing, but she would be more than a match for Luna by then, more than ready to possess a new host. She grinned. The endless night would soon begin anew.