

Nocturne

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With assistance from Kits



Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	17
Chapter 3	31
Epilogue	52

Chapter 1

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I would be more than happy to visit Ponyville and discuss my recent changes to the night in more detail. Please reply with the most convenient evening for you to host, and please keep this as just a simple social call! Also, you may want to invite Sweetie Belle. I believe she may enjoy our conversation.

*Sincerely yours,
Luna*

Two Months Earlier...

Princess Luna's horn glowed as she snapped the copy of "A History of Equestria: XXIV" closed. She tossed it onto an ornately engraved table with a thump, grimacing as she eyed the stack of sibling volumes she had yet to crack open. The alicorn's gaze again wandered to the door outside, to her personal balcony, and this time she gave in and stepped out of her quarters and into the fresh air.

Canterlot spread out before her, whites and golds, but her eyes were drawn to the stylized Sun decorating the tip of a nearby tower. From there she looked out to the real Sun, just preparing to set, and she let out a slow sigh. *I should be raising the Moon by now*, she thought to herself, closing her eyes. *I should be doing a lot of things...*

"When I had those books delivered to your room I didn't mean for you to read them all in one sitting, dear sister," a voice chimed from nearby, Luna jerking to look. "May I join you?" Princess Celestia was hovering in the air nearby with slow flaps of her massive wings. Her off-white coat and gold adornments matched all too well with the city below.

"Yes, of course," Luna replied, forcing a small smile to her face. She knew a large one wouldn't be very convincing.

Celestia landed with enviable grace, hardly a cllop to be heard as she drew nearer. "It has been days since I last saw you, Luna. I hope you didn't mistake those books for an assignment?" Celestia leaned in to nuzzle Luna's cheek with the lightest touch, but even that made Luna wince. It was small, but it was there.

"No, it's just that I thought I would be more helpful if I knew more about what I missed." Luna turned away to look back out over Canterlot, and past it to Ponyville, the Everfree Forest, and beyond. "If I'm going to have equal responsibility in caring for your subjects then I need to know a lot."

"*Our* subjects, dear."

"Right. Sorry." Luna turned to look up at Celestia, brow furrowed. "It's not that I'm trying to shirk responsibility!"

"I know," Celestia said. "When your full magical powers and connection to the Moon return then we will know it is time for you to return to your role at my side."

"I..." Luna knew that her sister worked all day long, answering courtiers and reviewing reports from all corners of Equestria, meeting with diplomats, deciding the fates of thousands and thousands of ponies... And then spent most of the night on it, too! Sometimes it seemed like the closest thing Celestia had to a break was reading Twilight's reports from Ponyville. "I'm sorry." It was all she could say without breaking into tears.

"So am I, Luna," Celestia replied, again nuzzling Luna and again ignoring the cringe it inspired. "If you ever want to talk about anything, you know that I'm here for you, right?"

"I told you before, I don't remember any of it. The time of my exile, or being Nightmare Moon... It's all hazy, like it wasn't really me. Like..."

"Like it was all just a nightmare?"

Luna sighed and turned to look away again. The only thing she could remember clearly is that she loved her sister more than anyone and she wanted to make her proud.

"You know I forgive you, dearest," Celestia said. "Most Equestrians will never know what happened, and those that do have also forgiven you."

"I know..." Luna replied in a dull monotone. *But how can they forgive somepony so easily for almost destroying all of Equestria? How can you?*

"There was one more thing I wanted to make sure you know, Luna." Celestia's voice was always so soothing, always giving off an aura that let you know she was there for you. Almost always. For just a moment it changed in tone, turning rougher. Luna couldn't help but look back at her sister once more.

"If I had known that the Elements of Harmony would banish you to the surface of the Moon I never would have used them. I would have found some other way." Celestia had tears in *her* eyes, which stared deep into Luna's.

Luna was angry at herself for becoming Nightmare Moon, was guilty that she had scared so many ponies, was sad that she couldn't yet help her sister with the tiring tasks of ruling and raising the Moon *and* Sun every day... But this? It was the worst.

Please, sister, please don't cry!

"Please! It's, it's okay, really," Luna rushed out, her throat sore with held back tears of her own.

"It's very important to me for you to understand that." Celestia had already blinked away her tears and put a smile back on her face, her voice starting to return to normal.

"Yes, okay, I'll... keep it in mind. I promise." Luna forced a smile again and nodded, and Celestia's own smile grew larger.

"Thank you. And please don't push yourself too hard. I am certain everything will come back to you in time."

I hope so... "Me too."

Celestia leaned down and angled her head to press a gentle kiss to Luna's forehead, just below the horn, then made eye contact. The touch turned Luna's stomach, but she resisted the urge to pull away. "I know this is a hard time for you, Luna. I *am* here for you. When you're ready."

Luna turned away and nodded. "I know." *You have the weight of the whole world on your shoulders, and you already worry about me constantly... And for some reason you*

think you have something to be sorry about when it's all my fault. How can I tell you it feels like here's a big hole in my soul when you'll just blame yourself?

Luna lifted a hoof and pointed at the sunset, its intermingled pastels totally lost on her. "It's almost time."

"Yes. It's all right, I'm glad to continue raising the Moon until you are ready. It *is* quite beautiful."

Luna just nodded again, staring at the horizon. Looking at the setting Sun was much easier than looking directly at her sister.

Celestia flapped her wings, lifting several feet off the balcony's floor. "And please, reconsider my offer to attend the symphony together? I am certain you would enjoy it. I will have a record player delivered to your room tomorrow. Please give it a try, for me."

"I will. Goodnight, sister."

"Goodnight, Luna!"

And then Luna was alone again. Her gaze landed once more on the faux-Sun adorning the tip of the nearest tower. She closed her eyes, but all she could see was her sister's face, with those big pink eyes filled with tears. She bit her lower lip to silence a sob and spun, rushing into her bedroom and slamming the door shut behind her.

Hours alone had done nothing to raise Luna's spirits. When she finally lifted her head from the tear-drenched pillow the mare discovered it was well into night. Seeing the stars through the window struck her hard and before she knew it Luna had burst out onto her balcony and taken flight.

Canterlot passed by in just a few beats of her wings. Soon Luna was shooting out over a sea of green that was the Whitetail Wood, her hooves skirting past some of the treetops. She instinctively angled toward a small circular clearing surrounded by dense tree cover where she could find some privacy. Throughout the flight her mind was blank, just concentrating on flying fast and being anywhere, anywhere at all, except Canterlot.

As soon as Luna landed she looked up and let out a soft gasp. There it was: the Moon. *Her* Moon, full and lighting up the sky with its pale glow. She hadn't moved the Moon in

over a thousand years but she still felt possessive, even protective, of that great celestial body. She held no malice toward it being her prison, just a familiar sense of pride and adoration.

How long has it been since I spent some time with you? A week? I'm sorry.

Luna dropped to her haunches and looked around herself. She had found a perfect little glade, with short grass and several bunches of knee-high flowers in a smattering of colors. The plants stirred in a light night breeze that made Luna shiver pleasantly and fidget her wings. A deep breath pulled in the scent of sap and moist earth, and the aroma of the nearby flowers was almost good enough for Luna to taste. All of this was highlighted by the twinkling of the stars and the glow of her Moon, casting everything in just the right tone of light.

It was the best place she could imagine to dedicate some time to the Moon, but Luna sighed as she looked back up into the sky. "What's wrong?" she asked her Moon with a fragile whisper, "What's *missing*? It feels like you're so very far away..." Moisture welled in Luna's eyes, threatening to form into droplets, as she lifted a hoof to the sky.

The moonlight warmed the skin under her coat in a way that only the princess of the night could feel, but it wasn't enough. Her link with the Moon was lacking a depth that she could just barely remember. There was still an ephemeral cord binding them together, a bond that gave her emotional and magical strength, but the weakened connection was bittersweet.

A nearby rustling in the woods alerted her to movement, and the mare turned her head to see a curious raccoon peer at her through some undergrowth before continuing on its way. The soft hoot of an owl in the opposite direction caused Luna's ears to swivel in that direction. She furrowed her brow. "Hmm..."

Something... Something's not right.

There was a tickle of recollection, a fragment of the memory of sitting in the grass on a perfect night like this and listening. Luna couldn't remember what it was, but *something* had made her head bob and her horn sway side to side.

She closed her eyes again and concentrated, ears perked. A gust of wind made the grass and leaves rustle. A woodpecker in the distance provided a percussive beat. The drone of a mosquito flying by her ear, the voice of that owl hooting again, the patter of little paws, a cricket playing its song...

As each sound reached Luna's ears a new image filled her mind. She could see the woodpecker hammering a tree, set on a backdrop the color of the moonlit sky. Then the owl hooting on its branch, leaves rubbing against each other in the wind, the cricket on a blade of grass drawing one wing across the other... Each image appeared with the matching noise, then disappeared as it passed. But... it was wrong. It wasn't bad, but it was... Chaos. Uncontrolled. Just not right.

But what's missing...

Then, by random chance, the sounds of the woodpecker, owl, and cricket blended together in the night air, accompanied by the mental image of all three playing together, side by side, the notes intermingling into a chord. Luna leapt to her hooves. "That's it!" she cried, a nearby bird squawking indignantly at her outburst. She didn't notice, wings out, a smile splitting her face.

The music! The music of the night! I remember now! Every noise, every voice, they're all instruments in the ensemble!

Luna looked left and right, then back up at the Moon. "I'll be back tomorrow! I have work to do!" The mare lifted off and shot back toward Canterlot. *I'll bring back the music and improve the night, just like I used to! I'll get my powers back and help take care of the night and the day!*

"Just leave the tray there! I'll get it later!" Luna called to the bedroom door without turning, the knocking not enough to pull her attention away from the work at hoof. The door swung open to the hum of unicorn magic, but it wasn't a castle porter who entered the room.

"Sister, are you all right?" Celestia asked, stepping over the untouched food the last attendant had left for Luna. "I was informed you haven't eaten in two days."

"Uh huh. Just one sec, sis," Luna replied without sparing a glance. She swung her head side to side, eyes closed, lifting her glowing horn at either end of the swing, humming a melody. She nodded and used her magic to take down some musical notation with a quill and parchment before her.

The soft clip-clop of Celestia's approach stopped mid-step. "Luna, are you... Are you composing?"

The darker alicorn turned to face her sister with a shy little smile. "Yeah?"

Celestia rushed across the room and tucked her chin over her sister's neck in an equine hug. "That's wonderful!" Luna tensed by reflex, but was grateful to find that the contact was more comforting than not.

That is, until Celestia took a step back and looked down at Luna, speaking. The older sister had small, happy tears in the corners of her eyes, but Luna's stomach lurched as the sight reminded her of Celestia's tears the last time they spoke.

I'm so, so sorry...

"Luna?"

Luna shook her head quickly. "I'm sorry, um, I didn't... What?"

"I asked, how much do you remember of the past?" Concern spread on Celestia's face. Luna turned away and looked down so she wouldn't have to see it.

"Not much, not yet. Music theory and stuff. Notation. That kind of thing."

"I'm not surprised that's the first thing that came back. Do you remember your music of the night?"

Luna nodded and looked over at the parchment spread over a table. "That's what I'm working on right here."

"I wasn't able to properly keep that going without you, Luna. You were always the expert on music and sound. That's why I kept trying to drag you to an orchestra or choir with me. I had hoped it would at least make you smile."

"Heh, yeah. I'm sorry, I probably should have gone with you." *I really, really should have...*

"It's all right, there's always next time. For now I'm just glad to see you doing what you love again. And, about the meals?"

Luna turned back to her sister and waved a hoof at the air dismissively. "I've been using magic instead. I hate wasting everypony's time, though, so... could you ask them to stop bringing me food?"

Celestia smiled. "They'll do that for you if you ask, you know. You *are* a princess."

Luna rubbed a hoof at the back of her head and chuckled weakly. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Just make sure to eat a few healthy meals a week, all right? Oh, but I'm being terribly impolite to our guest!" Celestia turned to the suite's door.

"Guest?" Luna asked, taking half a step back.

"Ha, guest!" a voice cracked from just out of sight. "Don't worry about me, Celestia." The owner of the voice stepped into view, an elderly unicorn mare with a gray coat and a curly golden mane. "I was eavesdropping the whole time anyway."

"Luna, this is Aura, our former Chief of Support Staff. Everypony from nursemaids to cooks to cleaning crews took orders from Aura for decades."

Aura stepped into the room, where Luna could see the two crossed purple knitting needles and ball of sky blue yarn that made up her cutie mark. "They would *still* be taking my orders if you hadn't forced me into retirement, you tyrant."

Luna gaped as Aura said those words with a straight face, then more as Celestia laughed.

"Aura was on leave for 6 months to care for a newborn family member in Trottingham and I used a little known rule--"

"Little known because you wrote it in!" Aura accused.

"--that any support staff off duty for at least one season may be retired at the discretion of a princess. Retirement with full pay and benefits, I decided."

Aura snorted. "Thank goodness for small favors."

"Now I've re-hired her as an advisor, an expert in domestic matters. She makes her own hours and it doesn't breach her retirement contract. She sends the extra money to Trottingham to cover the filly expenses."

"At least you put Silver Shine in charge of this loony bin. She has *some* sense in her head."

Luna looked between the two again, then shook her head. "I've never heard *anypony* talk to you like that before!"

Aura leaned toward Luna and asked, "What, do you *want* me to call you Princess Luna and grovel at your hooves every minute of every day? Or night?" She waved a hoof around in the air. "Whichever?"

"Um. No?"

"I didn't think so." Aura stepped closer and offered the still-raised hoof. "Pleased to meet you, Luna! I think we're going to get along swimmingly." Luna took the hoof and Aura shook it with surprising strength.

"You can trust Aura with anything, sister. She has been my friend and confidante for generations." Celestia smiled at Aura.

"Pfft, generations." Aura leaned in closer to Luna and stage-whispered, loud enough so Celestia would certainly hear. "Your sister is *exceptional* at making an old mare feel young again."

Celestia chuckled and shook her head. "I'll leave you two alone to get acquainted. I have a few minor duties to attend to." The large alicorn leaned forward to nuzzle Luna's cheek, who was still staring at Aura and barely noticed the contact. "Take care, dearest."

"Uh, yes, you too, sister." Luna watched Celestia close the door behind herself with a soft click, then turned to meet Aura's purple eyes.

"Um."

"Oh, don't mind me!" Aura turned away and walked to one corner of the room, dropping to her haunches with a small wince. Her horn hummed and she summoned a basket of

multicolored yarn into midair with a pop and a sizzle. "I'm just going to sit here in the corner and knit if you don't mind."

Luna decided that she did mind, but not not enough to say so. She also worried that anything short of a real princessly order wouldn't be enough to eject Aura if her mind was set on sticking around. The last thing she wanted was a scene.

"I guess..."

"Great. You look like you could use a blanket." And with that Aura's attention seemed to be devoted entirely to the effort of magically suspending the needles in midair and performing intricate knitting at a speed that left Luna staring. The princess eventually turned back to her music with a tiny sigh.

"That's *Nocturne*, isn't it?" Aura asked.

"Huh?" Luna jerked her head up and looked over her shoulder. After an hour of near-silence from her "guest" she had practically forgotten there was another pony in the room. The rhythmic tick-tick-tick of Aura's knitting needles had faded beneath her notice long ago.

"That song you keep humming little bits and pieces from. It's *Dusk's Nocturne*, right?" Aura continued knitting, eyes still focused on the needles as she looped together stitch after stitch.

"There isn't a name for it yet," Luna explained. "I'm still writing it."

"Oh? Okay, but it sounds like a variation on the theme from *Nocturne*."

Luna gritted her teeth and turned to fully face the unicorn invading her personal space. She mulled over what to say, seriously reconsidering ordering Aura away.

"It's beautiful, that's all."

Luna's jaw immediately unclenched. She opened and closed her mouth several times. Aura pretended not to notice.

"Really?" Luna finally asked, almost too quiet to be heard across the room.

"Anything that reminds me of *Nocturne* gets a special place in my heart. It's been my favorite song for..." Aura barked a short laugh. "For 'generations.' But it sounds like you're going to outdo it with that little ditty."

There was no hint of sarcasm in Aura's voice. Luna searched the unicorn's face for a smirk, or even a smile, but there was none to be found. Butterflies fluttered about Luna's stomach as those knitting needles kept on tick-tick-ticking away.

"I... I think I'd like to hear *Dusk's Nocturne*, then."

Aura pointed toward the record player that a retainer had delivered days ago; it had sat untouched while Luna composed. "Check to see if you have a copy."

Luna hovered the collection of records into the air and flipped through them until she found a Canterlot Philharmonic Orchestra album that included *Dusk's Nocturne* as the last track. "That's a good recording," Aura commented. "Go ahead, put it on."

As the record started Aura laid her knitting needles and yarn down atop the basket and closed her eyes.

The scratch-pop of the player's needle sliding off the record brought Luna back to reality. Her eyes fluttered as she opened them, touching a hoof to the dampness on her cheek. She'd been crying, but with a smile on her face. Luna could just barely recall *something* passing through her mind during the song, a memory of listening to music while leaning up against something warm, but it was gone again.

The alicorn glanced at Aura, who was looking at her and also smiling. It was the first time Luna had seen her with more than just a passing smirk, and she liked it.

"Beautiful, huh?" Aura asked.

"Yeah... And haunting," Luna replied, looking at the record player. Her horn hummed and Luna almost reset the needle to play it again, but instead she just nestled the arm of the player back into its resting place and turned it off.

"That's a good word for it," Aura commented with a nod. "Haunting."

"And powerful, and..." Luna's smile faltered. "It's very good," she stated, her voice souring as she walked back to look down at the sheet of her own music. "Very, very good."

"And that's a bad thing?" Aura asked.

Luna lifted her parchment into the air with magic. She "held" it so tightly that it rustled. "How can I improve something like that?" she asked, the pitch of her voice rising. "All I'd be doing is... *ripping off* something so... so *perfect* that it... it..."

"Do you know what a nocturne is?" Aura piped in.

"Huh?" The parchment in Luna's magical grip stopped fluttering. "I... It sounds familiar, but I don't remember..."

"It's a song inspired by the night. Out of respect, or love, or gratitude."

Luna's eyes danced from Aura, to the record player, then out the window to the late sunset. She could just barely see the first stars appearing in the sky.

Inspired by the night, Luna thought, biting her lower lip.

When she looked back at Aura the unicorn was reading the back of the album cover. "Listen to this. 'The Canterlot Philharmonic Orchestra concluded the concert with their annual performance of *Dusk's Nocturne*, a song that has touched hearts for a thousand years.'"

Luna blinked. "A thousand years?"

"You were always a composer, right?"

"I think so? It feels so *right*." Luna was pacing as she spoke, eyes on the floor. "I can't remember anything else, but all these things came back to me like harmony and dissonance and a whole lot more. And my sister..." Luna stopped walking, her voice softening. "She was so happy when she saw me writing music. Like... it was a step in the right direction." *Like maybe I would get better soon...*

"So the first thing that came back to you was this song, which just happens to be a thousand years old, back when you were composing your best stuff." Aura grinned. "I hate to break it to you, Luna, but I'm starting to think *you* wrote *Dusk's Nocturne*."

Luna's eyes widened. "Me?!"

Aura clopped one hoof to the floor and laughed. "It only makes sense! I never thought I'd get to meet my favorite composer!"

Luna shook her head, eyes flicking between the record player and her musical notes a half-dozen times. *Could it be true?* "But... I..."

The unicorn snorted. "Is it so hard to believe that you wrote a song that's been celebrated for a millennium?"

Luna shuffled her hooves and looked down at them. "Um. Yes?"

Aura laughed again in one short, raspy crow. "Celestia told me all about it. You're both artists; she paints and you compose. Did you know she still paints?" Luna pulled her head back up at that, ears perked. "She puts her art out there, under a fake name of course. Most ponies like it but critics look down their snouts at it. She considers that a 'sign of success,' the old loon." Aura's grin belied the fact that she agreed.

"But your music," Aura continued, "*everypony* loved your music. And just like your sister you never took credit for it."

Luna thought back to her mental state in the middle of Dusk's Nocturne moments earlier: her eyes closed and tears on her cheeks, smiling and swaying her horn side to side as if conducting the music herself. Everything that Aura was saying resonated with something deep inside the alicorn. *I...*

"I always wondered why no composer took credit for such an incredible..." Aura trailed off, pulling Luna's attention back to the unicorn. "That devious old goat!" Aura got caught up in a laughing fit that set her to coughing. Luna approached and raised a hoof but Aura waved her off, shaking her head and clearing her throat.

"No, no, I'm fine, dear, thank you! I just realized, your conniving sister knows that Nocturne's my favorite song. She didn't bring me here just for you, but as a favor to both of us."

A tiny smile was creeping back onto Luna's face. "Do you really, *really* think that maybe I..." She couldn't even get the words out.

Aura nodded. "I do. And I wasn't yanking your hoof when I said you're improving the song. I can't wait to hear a full orchestra perform it."

"I'm not..." Luna caught a glimpse of the Moon out a nearby window and inspiration struck. "I have work to do, but will you come back in two days? At the same time? I have something I want to show you." The dark mare's horn glowed and thrummed as she collected her quill, ink, parchment, and several books into a tidy bundle with her magic.

"I'll be here," Aura said with a nod.

Luna's eyes searched Aura's, flicking back and forth between them, before the princess leapt forward and threw her front legs around the unicorn in a tight hug. Aura chuckled and rubbed Luna's back with a hoof.

"Thank you," Luna said quietly before pulling away, tears in her eyes and smiling widely. "Thank you!"

She scooped up the bundle of supplies with her magic and bounded through the open balcony door. She beat her wings twice, then laughed and pulled into a tight double-loop over Canterlot that left her pointing straight up at the Moon. Her wings snapped repeatedly through the air as she gained altitude, gazing into her celestial friend's glow.

Luna's breath caught in her throat. The Moon seemed *huge* to her, as if she could reach out and touch it. She could feel more than the Moon's light, too: every contour and crater was mapped out in her mind, as if she was holding it in her hooves. What had truly caught her off guard was that Luna could *hear* the Moon again, a clear, ringing note as it strolled across the sky.

Luna raised a hoof upward and whispered one word. "Soon..."

And then she tucked into a steep dive, heading for her private glade and the first recital of the night's new song.

Chapter 2

“Spying on your little sister?” Aura asked in a whisper, having caught Princess Celestia in the act. The larger mare had the door to Luna’s quarters open just wide enough to fit her nose through, letting music spill out into the hallway. Celestia didn’t respond to the jibe, just shifting over to make room for the unicorn to also sneak a peek. Aura tip-hoofed closer to fill the gap.

Luna stood at her table, facing away from the door. She was listening to a record of orchestral music, head swaying side to side and her blue tail swinging in counterpoint. The onlookers could just barely hear her humming along. Luna’s collection of musical books had expanded significantly in the two days since Aura’s last visit, several stacks taking up half the table’s space, four of them open on the table with a number of bookmarks sticking out between pages.

Luna’s horn gave off a purple glow as she held a quill aloft, and at one point she paused the record to whistle a short melody, glance at a book, nod to herself, and take several seconds of notes on the parchment before her. She whistled the tune again, then nodded several times and gave an excited little flap of her wings. “Perfect!” she decided as she reached out to the record player again with her magic. Her tail hadn’t stopped swaying, and when the music came back on it was still marching along to the beat.

Celestia noiselessly withdrew from the doorway and took several steps down the hall, leaving Aura to close the door and join her. The older sister was smiling, even more widely than her usual serene look.

“Am I biased, or is my sister adorable?”

Aura snorted but nodded her head. “Yup, she’s a cutie all right. Makes me wonder what you were like when you were little.”

“A royal pain in the flank, I’m sure.”

“So nothing’s changed then.”

Celestia chuckled quietly, a short, companionable silence falling between them until she glanced at Luna's door. The smile faded from her face.

Aura's voice softened. "Something *has* changed."

"Luna and I are sisters, but we were also the best of friends. We always relied on each other." Celestia lifted her head in thought, eyes focusing on a featureless spot of the wall. "I always had a more public face and made the easiest decisions, but it was a major change to rule without her input."

"And her support?" Aura asked.

Celestia nodded, looking back down at Aura. "Do you recall those times I came from meetings with a diplomat or business-pony and told you all about how unreasonable and rude they were?"

"You would describe them so calmly, and then sit there and smile while I shook my hoof and called them walking piles of manure behind their backs," Aura recounted. "I was filling in for Luna?"

The princess nodded. "Yes, though you use much more colorful language."

"It's a gift."

There was another pause, but this time Celestia ended it in a soft voice. "I banished her for a thousand years, Aura. Now she's finally home, but I still don't have her back." Celestia's eyes locked onto Luna's door again.

"It sounds like you blame yourself for all of this."

Celestia inclined her head hardly an inch, but it was an affirmative.

"Do you think *she* blames you?" Aura asked, angling her head toward Luna's door. Muffled music still piped into the hallway through the wood.

"I don't know." Celestia shook her head. "Maybe not, but when her memories come back she might."

Aura shook a hoof in Celestia's direction, drawing the princess's attention back. "I'll bet this whole leg that what you two need is to sit down together and have a brutally honest chat. You're ready for it, but she's not. So, here's what Dr. Aura prescribes.

"You," Aura punctuated by nudging Celestia in the chest, "need to go get some rest, and think things through. I've never seen you so caught up with something, and it's no wonder. You haven't felt like this in hundreds of years, right?"

Celestia nodded.

"There are ponies who bury guilt for a few weeks and it eats them alive. You've been burying this for a *thousand years*! I'm shocked you haven't burnt down half of Equestria yet!"

Celestia's smile started to return. "The thought hadn't even crossed my mind..."

Aura poked her ruler again. "No fires! Meanwhile, I'm going to work on your sister. I can't imagine how guilty *she* feels about all this. Plus she's re-learning what to do with her life, like a filly all over again. We have to give her some time."

Aura's voice lightened and she smiled up at Celestia. "I know it's been forever, but can you give an old mare a couple weeks to try to make things right?"

"Of course. Thank you, Aura." Celestia leaned forward and nuzzled the side of Aura's cheek.

Aura returned the touch and snorted. "Hay, what are friends for? Besides, you introduced me to my favorite composer, so I owe you one."

"So you figured that out, hmm?" Celestia asked with a casual air, her calm smile fully back in place.

"You tricky old ne'er-do-well." Aura shook her head and made a shoo-ing gesture toward the bedroom. "Luna's expecting me any time now. You scoot over there and say goodnight to your little sister."

Celestia looked at the door for a long moment before crossing the hall. She rapped on the door twice with her hoof and opened it just wide enough to slip her head inside. Luna was still swaying in place to the music, her back to the doorway, but she lowered the volume with a whisper of magical power.

"I'm on my way to bed soon, Luna, but I wanted to wish you a pleasant night."

"You too, Tia," Luna replied without turning away from the table, so completely absorbed in her work that she didn't fully realize who she was speaking to. "Sleep well!"

Celestia froze and stood watching her sister's horn rhythmically toss side to side, the volume of the record player turned back up. Eventually she withdrew and closed the door behind her.

"What?" Aura asked, prompted by the unreadable look on Celestia's face.

"Just like old times," was the reply, spoken almost too quietly to be heard, and then Celestia smiled with small tears in her eyes. "She called me Tia," she said, louder. "It's been far too long since I heard that nickname."

"I told you everything would be okay," Aura replied. "Now go bring the Moon out so Luna can show me her surprise."

"Just hold your horses," Aura wheezed as she pulled herself up an incline in the middle of the Whitetail Wood. She leaned against a tree at the peak, catching her breath with her eyes closed.

Luna stopped mid-canter and looked back over her shoulder, her face framed by branches criss-crossing the night sky. She flew back to Aura's side with a sheepish smile, sending some leaves fluttering with flaps of her wings.

"Um. Sorry." Luna landed and scuffed at the forest floor with a hoof. "I guess I'm a little bouncy tonight. But, we're really close!"

"Great. Wonderful." The tempo of Aura's panting steadily slowed.

"I'm sorry to drag you through the woods, Aura, but I haven't shown anypony else this place yet. It felt wrong to turn the glade into a landing strip." *Maybe I was a little too selfish*, Luna thought, biting her lower lip.

"Don't worry, I get it." Aura's hips creaked as she settled her weight evenly on her hooves again. "Plus the trip back will be easier, right?"

“Yes, but... Maybe I could go get the guards--”

Aura waved the thought away with a hoof. “C’m on, let’s go,” she insisted and started walking again, leaving Luna to follow. The alicorn watched Aura for a moment, then shook her head and caught up.

Moments later they broke through the last of the cover and stood under the glow of the Moon, its rhythmic thrum perking Luna’s ears and bringing a smile back to her face. She stood at the edge of the glade and watched as Aura walked out into it with slow, measured steps, looking in all directions and then up. Luna’s breath caught in her chest as she watched Aura stare into her Moon for a very long moment, the unicorn’s coat silver in its light, mane rustling in the silent breeze.

I can feel it... She really likes the night...

Aura looked around herself one more time before turning to Luna with a smile. “You have good taste. But we already knew that.”

The words coaxed a shaky chuckle out of Luna. She stepped into the glade and blinked a little dampness from her eyes. “I guess, but this isn’t what I wanted to show you. It’s going to take a minute to warm up, so please get comfortable.”

Luna moved to the center of the glade and steeled herself, taking a deep breath. She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at Aura. The unicorn had taken a seat in the grass and was watching her. When their eyes met Aura nodded and gave a “go on” motion with a hoof.

It’s now or never...

Luna turned back to the woods and closed her eyes. Her horn lit up very slowly, starting at just a quiet drone but building up and up. The tone raised in pitch all the while, until it trilled like a songbird, Luna’s horn a thin spear of dark purple light that pointed directly at the Moon. The alicorn had spread her hooves out past shoulder width as if bracing herself, wings spread wide.

The magic released all at once, Luna’s horn dispersing a flat purple-black disk into the trees in all directions, parallel to the forest floor. Aura watched it sail overhead, the air faintly sizzling with power, nearby foliage taking on a lesser sympathetic glow as the wave passed.

The forest went completely quiet and still for several heartbeats, not a single animal chirping or leaf twitching. Luna stood unmoving, but she didn't have long to wait. She smiled as she felt her call being answered. Squirrels and birds, bees and snakes, even the trees, the clouds, and the wind itself all came to attention.

Now.

Luna's eyes flashed open, glowing from deep inside with the same light her Moon provided to Equestria every night. She hummed a long, crystal clear note and her horn sang out to form a perfect duet. Her tail began to sway to the beat provided by the Moon's rhythmic voice, the primary feathers of her wings twitching in unison.

Soon her horn was dancing side to side along with her tail, and then with a sharp upward swipe the first note of her song pierced the stillness of the night; the performance had begun.

Luna didn't release her magical focus until the last note faded from hearing. She furled her wings back into place and turned to look at her audience.

Aura was staring at her, moonlight reflecting from dampness at the crease of each eye.

Luna took half a step back, the image of her sister on the verge of tears flashing through Luna's mind again. "I... What's wrong?" she asked in a small voice. *What did I do?*

"That... that was..." the unicorn started, voice hoarse. She cleared her throat and asked, "What was that?" Aura looked out into the forest and then back at Luna. She shook her head. "There isn't anything in Equestria that sounds like that! I've heard all sorts of birds and critters used in music and probably every instrument known to ponykind. Where did those noises come from?"

"I... I'm sorry, I thought..." Luna squeezed her eyes shut tight, body starting to shake. *She didn't like it... I can't even do this one thing right!*

Aura's eyes widened in realization and she shook her head quickly. "No! Luna, that was the most incredible thing I've ever heard!"

Luna's eyes snapped back open to look into Aura's.

"Luna, it was... my goodness. I don't know! It was as if the forest was singing to me, all of it at once, but everything was all smooth and soft and... what's-the-word, *ethereal!*"

All the tension went out of Luna in a rush and she fell to her rump. She opened her mouth, but all that came out was, "... Oh."

"And that's before I even get into the composition itself! You took the two intertwined melodies of *Dusk's Nocturne*, combined them into one, then wound in another all new melody. They play off each other so beautifully!" Aura was waving her hooves around in front of her as she spoke, more animated than Luna had ever seen her.

She likes it. She... she loves it.

"Where did the music come from, Luna?"

"Huh?" Luna cleared her head with a quick little shake.

"The sounds, the instruments, whatever. What were they?"

"I... Well, everything you heard is out there, in the forest." Luna waved a hoof at the Whitetail Wood, which had resumed its natural murmur of night life and breezes. "I used the leaves, hollow trees, the wind, and magic to... to shape each sound before it got to you."

"That's a real gift, Luna. That's amazing." Aura shook her head slowly, smiling.

Luna blushed and looked down at the grass. "I didn't do all of it. I mean, I guess I laid the groundwork, but... you could say I taught the night what I wanted you to hear and just pointed it in the right direction. It did the rest."

Aura shook her head again, still smiling. "Wow."

"What?" Luna asked, lifting her head and tilting it a few degrees to the side.

"Just... All of this." Aura's hoof gestured to indicate the glade, the forest, the Moon, and Luna in one motion. "I'm honored. Thank you."

Luna looked back down at the grass for a moment, then met Aura's gaze and smiled. "I'm very glad you enjoyed it."

"Everypony is going to love it, Luna."

The princess shook her head. "Oh, no, I couldn't--"

Aura raised a hoof to stop her. "You don't have to take credit for it, but you're *going* to share this song. You'd be doing Equestria a disservice if you kept it to yourself."

Luna inhaled and parted her lips to speak but Aura raised just one eyebrow and the alicorn knew that she'd already lost the argument. "Okay, as long as it's anonymous."

Aura held up a hoof to her lips, ears perked as she looked off into the forest. "Am I hearing things?"

"What?" Luna asked. *Maybe she noticed?*

"I heard... just a little bit of music on the wind. Did you do that?"

Luna laughed and reared up, then bounced to her front hooves and kicked at the air with her hind legs, wings flapping once. "Yes! It worked!"

Aura just watched, smirking, and when Luna stopped she caught the look and blushed again, chuckling weakly at herself. "Um. That's the new music of the night."

"And what does that mean?" Aura insisted.

"Well, I can't keep everypony up all night with music, and I would hate to wake up early sleepers. Sooo, I kinda snuck little snippets of the song into the night. Just a handful of notes here and there, or maybe a little improvisational take-off from one of the melodies, things like that."

Aura didn't reply, keeping her ears perked. Then she caught it, a gust of wind carrying the hoot of an owl, a branch sliding along the bark of a tree, and the song of a cricket, but blended and smoothed and combined such that they were barely recognizable. It was only a few notes, but it made her shiver at the memory of her recent musical experience.

"I hope everypony likes the music of the night," Luna murmured, looking up at the Moon. "I want them all to enjoy the night, and this is the best thing I could come up with..."

Aura pursed her lips and mulled over her words before starting. "Luna?"

"Mmm?" Luna turned back to her friend.

"It's subtle, and beautiful, and everypony who knows what they're hearing will love it."

Luna smiled and started to speak, but Aura raised a hoof.

"But! Not everypony will know what they're hearing. Like I said, it's subtle. I have an ear for this sort of thing, plus I just heard the song. There are ponies who will never pick up on it, even if they listened for their whole lives."

Luna's face fell and she glanced out into the forest, in the direction of Ponyville and all its sleeping ponies. "... Oh." *She's right. Of course she's right. What was I thinking?*

Aura approached and turned Luna's head so that she was forced to meet the unicorn's eyes. "So here's what we're going to do." The tone of Aura's voice, plus the allure of a plan of action, pulled Luna's mind to attention.

"First, we're going to distribute sheet music of your song... What's it called?"

Luna shook her head. "I... haven't named it yet."

"First, you're going to name your song! Then we're going to spread it across Equestria. It'll take some time but eventually everypony will hear it. And then they'll start recognizing the music of the night, and talk about it, and make their friends stay up with them to hear it, too."

Luna looked back and forth between Aura's eyes. *That... That could work. But--* "But then they'll know I wrote the song, won't they?"

Aura shrugged. "So you just say that the song inspired you. No big deal." Luna opened her mouth, but Aura continued before she could be interrupted. "And while that's going on you're going to keep improving the night, but not with music."

Luna blinked. "But--"

"No buts! Your sister can't hold a candle to you musically, but she still came up with bird song, right?"

"I guess that's true..."

"I'd say bird song is the best thing about the morning, and lots of ponies would agree with me. So I want you to think about what you can do to make evening better. Start small, something simple."

"But... not musical?" Luna asked, eyes wide.

Aura snorted as she caved under the pressure of that pleading gaze. "Okay, maybe a *little* musical. It's only fair, since Celestia made all the singing birds in those terribly gaudy colors."

Luna giggled, then shook her head a little. She took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. "Thank you, Aura." *I don't know where I'd be without you*, Luna thought, smiling again.

"Hay, what are friends for?" Aura said with a chuckle to her voice.

Luna looked at the unicorn, trying to discern what she was laughing about, but Aura shook her head. "Oh, you just reminded me a little of Celestia. You two are definitely sisters."

Aura started out of the glade, but Luna just watched, not moving to follow. *Sister...*

She eventually caught up; the unicorn had picked a slow enough gait that it would be hard not to overtake her. "You don't want to talk about her yet?" Aura asked.

"I don't think so," Luna replied in a small voice.

"Okay, I can respect that, but I do have to say that she loves you, and misses you. She doesn't blame you for anything that happened, either."

"I..." Many thoughts tumbled through Luna's mind, particularly, *Because she blames herself!* It took her a few moments, but in the end Luna just nodded.

"You need to share your talent with more ponies," Aura decided suddenly.

Luna nearly tripped. "Huh?"

"There's a certain purple unicorn that you reminded me of earlier today. When she gets an idea in her head she can spend days nose-deep in books and not even notice. Twilight Sparkle loves magic more than anything, but I've seen her up at all hours of the night with a telescope, sketching constellations and taking notes."

"Really? I know some ponies use the stars for navigation, but--"

"Plus, she's Celestia's student. It'd be good for you two to share some friends."

"Oh." Luna glanced over at Aura and took a risk. "And you call *my sister* devious..."

Aura snorted, but it was reaction enough that Luna giggled under her breath.

As the two made their way back down the incline Luna started brainstorming on Aura's assignment. *Something small and simple...*

"All right, I think I'm ready," Luna said. She lowered a copy of *Nocturnal Fauna of Equestria* onto her table and turned to Aura, the gray mare sitting in her customary corner of the room.

"Oh?" The tick-tick-tick of Aura's knitting needles didn't slow.

"Yes, I think so. I was so very close last night and I just figured out what went wrong." Luna tidied up her workspace as she spoke, neatly stacking the rest of her books and rolling up a scroll. "Are you ready for another trip to Whitetail Woods?" she asked, smiling.

Aura never took her eyes off of her floating yarn, her horn quietly humming. "Why don't you show Celestia?"

Luna's face fell and she looked off to the side at nothing in particular. "She... She's so busy. I don't want to bother her." *It's barely even an "improvement," anyway*, Luna thought. *It's not really worth her time...*

Aura hummed, but didn't speak for a few moments, the knitting needles continuing their work. "I'll let you weasel out of it this time, but you have to promise me you'll play her your new version of *Nocturne* someday. The way you played it for me."

But... Luna's mind whirled, reaching out for a reason, *any* reason, that she could say no. She was proud enough of her music that she couldn't say it's not worth Celestia's time, especially since part of her knew that her sister would really enjoy it.

But... Some aspect of her mind still resisted the idea. Thinking about how Celestia would be proud of her made Luna happy and uncomfortable at the same time. *I don't deserve her being proud of me*, went through her head and Luna closed her eyes tight. Another part of her, one that had only recently started to speak up, clamped down on the unpleasant thought and stifled it. She re-opened her eyes.

Only then did Luna notice Aura was looking at her with a small smile on her face, her knitting needles unmoving and silent.

"Well?" Aura asked in a lilting voice.

Luna sighed, then shook her head at the whole situation. She was surprised to find herself smiling back, even if it was just a little. "Okay. Someday."

Aura nodded. "Good." She went back to her knitting and let a few moments of silence pass before speaking again. "So, what about Twilight?"

"Huh?" Luna's head tilted. "You mean Twilight Sparkle? What about her?"

"Why don't you show *her* your project?"

Luna blinked, then shook her head slowly. "Aura, I don't even know her."

"So?"

"So?" Luna started pacing. "So how would she react if I just... just *showed up* out of nowhere, knocked on her front door, and... and..." She trailed off; she couldn't even imagine the scenario!

Aura continued the train of thought. "... And then you say, 'Hello, Twilight Sparkle! I'm Princess Luna, and I'm here to show you some magic I just came up with to improve the night! You'd be the first pony to ever see it, plus I'll tell you all about how it works! Oh, and Celestia says hi!'" Aura paused in thought, tapping her chin, then smirked. "I think she might explode."

"The last time she saw me, I... I think I was trying to kill her." Shaky glimmers of memory, of the Elements of Harmony saving her from herself, bubbled up to the surface.

Aura shrugged. "Water under the bridge."

Luna just stared for a moment, then shook her head again. "Aura, I understand what you're trying to do, but I can't just--"

Aura cut her off with the stomp of a hoof and then shook it at Luna. "All this 'but' and 'can't' business isn't going to do you any good," she said firmly, curly golden tail giving a single flick.

Luna opened her mouth, but when she realized she was about to say, "But," again she closed it and sighed.

Aura unsummoned her basket of yarn with a pop and then walked to Luna's door, catching the alicorn's attention. "Soon you're going to be ruling Equestria with your sister and running the night. I can think of a big hoof-ful of reasons that you should get out there, show off your stuff, get feedback from real live ponies, and maybe even make some friends."

The door swung open with a gesture of Aura's horn, but she paused before leaving. "If it's not going to be Celestia or Twilight, then think about who'll like your change the most. See what *they* think. I'm going to go finish your blanket. I'll see you in a couple days."

Aura stepped through the door and closed it behind her, the gray mare leaving Luna standing in the middle of her bedroom with one hoof raised out.

"I hope she's not mad at me," Luna murmured, but she got the impression that if Aura was mad she would tear down brick walls and chew through steel. The image made her giggle quietly, but that just turned into a sigh. The princess stepped out onto her balcony, eyes low.

What am I going to do? Maybe an invisibility spell?

The warmth of the moonlight on Luna's coat sent a surprised shiver through her body. She looked up at the Moon, an unbidden smile coming to her face.

What do you think I should do? she asked, but the Moon's voice carried only that one tone, repeated over and over, that set the beat for the music of the night. *You make a better metronome than conversationalist... But I forgive you.*

Luna's gaze lowered, then flicked to something bright in the corner of her eye. It was Ponyville, lit up in the early night. It was too far away to make out any details with the naked eye, but something on a deeper level called out to Luna, in the same way she knew that Aura enjoyed the night. There was at least one little pony down in Ponyville who very much did *not* want to go to sleep.

Who will like my change the most? Luna repeated Aura's words in her head. A plan took shape all at once and the princess nodded to herself as she turned to leave. *I'm going to need the right spell, though. Time for another late night library run.*

She couldn't help but grin a little. *You win, Aura, but I hope you're okay with a compromise!*

Chapter 3

Okay, maybe this wasn't the best idea...

Luna peered out from a bush on the edge of the Whitetail Wood. Her tail stuck out of the other end of the shrubbery, but she hoped nopony would notice.

Celestia had just set the Sun, and in short order two mares from Ponyville had started a campfire. She recognized them as part of the group who had fought Nightmare Moon, but she couldn't recall the names of the behatted orange earth pony *or* the white unicorn who held herself with such poise. *I'll find out later*, Luna decided, determined not to forget once she did.

However it wasn't the two adult ponies that had drawn Luna there, but the three fillies they were chaperoning. Luna watched the trio run back and forth across the clearing, shouting something about cutie marks. They were so busy they didn't even seem to have noticed that it had become nighttime.

Luna felt more and more nervous the longer she watched them play. It was obvious that they were close friends. *How do I... just push myself onto them? I don't even know what little fillies like. What if they don't even care about my addition to the local night life?*

Then Luna's eyes landed on something she hadn't noticed before. Near the fire, beside the two conversing mares, was a pile of bug nets and several empty glass jars. *They came prepared. I guess I can't back out now...*

Luna glanced up at the Moon, took a deep breath, and nodded.

She summoned her magic, hoping that the buzz of her horn was too far off for anypony to hear. She spread her awareness out in all directions, then tensed. *There!* It didn't take much effort for her to guide two of the tiny creatures toward the ponies, and it only took a few moments for one to notice.

"Fireflies!" the little orange pegasus pony shouted, her small wings flaring out as she pointed. Both of her friends perked up.

"Get the nets!" the earth pony filly shouted, and the three of them dashed back to the fire.

"Don't go gettin' off too far now," Luna heard one of the adults say.

"We won't, sis!"

"Nope!"

"Nuh uh!"

And then the three ran toward the fireflies, holding nets in their mouths. Luna concentrated her magic again and had the fireflies make their way off into the forest, into another small clearing that was out of sight of the older ponies. The three fillies gave chase, and Luna slunk after them.

When she caught up they were all running about the clearing, trying to capture one of the half-dozen fireflies that flitted about. They held the nets out sideways, running past the bugs and swinging their head to sweep the net toward one.

Luna watched them for a while from a new hiding place and stomped down on the urge to leave, or maybe just stay in hiding and see how they reacted to her surprise. *I went through all the trouble to learn this disguise spell. I have to at least try, don't I?*

"Got one!" the pegasus filly gloated, holding her net to the ground so the firefly inside couldn't escape.

... Go! Luna urged herself, stumbling out of the underbrush.

"Good job!" she shouted, all smiles. The three fillies yelped, whipping around to stare at her. To their eyes she was a unicorn filly at just the same age, her coat color unchanged but her cutie mark hidden.

"Um. Good job?" she repeated as the awkward moment stretched, her smile going distinctly crooked.

"She scared you good, didn't she?" the earth pony asked the pegasus with a grin and a nudge.

"Did not!"

The little white unicorn with the two-tone mane waved a hoof. "Hay! Are you new to town? What's your name?"

"Uh..." *My name? Oh rolled oats, I never came up with a name!* Her mind groped out for one. "Um, Black Snootie! Yup, I'm Black Snootie. Just, um, visiting. With my family. From... New Hoof... ington... ville." Luna chuckled weakly.

"Uh huuuh..." the unicorn said, then shrugged. "Well, I'm Sweetie Belle."

"Apple Bloom!" the earth pony chimed in with a grin, the big red ribbon in her mane bobbing.

All eyes turned to the orange pegasus. "Aww, it got away..." she lamented down at her net, then looked up. "Uh, heh, Scootaloo..." she said, rubbing a hoof behind her head and smiling crookedly.

"Hay, you don't have your cutie mark either, Snootie?" Sweetie asked Luna, leaning to look.

"Um, no, not yet," Luna replied. "I guess I'm still trying to find my place in the world." *Though I might be on the right track!*

"Us too!" Apple Bloom said.

"We're the Cutie Mark Crusaders!" Scootaloo announced.

Apple Bloom cried out, "And we will never rest until we get our cutie marks!"

Sweetie Belle nodded energetically. "Never rest, never eat, never sleep, never bathe!" she added. Her teammates looked at her pointedly. "What?"

"I'm sure you'll all get your cutie marks very soon," Luna assured them.

"Thanks!" Apple Bloom replied, Sweetie and Scootaloo nodding along. "You too, Snootie. You seem like an all right pony to me."

"Uh huh!" Sweetie agreed.

Luna smiled. "Thank you." *Really, thank you...*

"Hay, you wanna catch some fireflies?" Scootaloo asked.

Oh, here's my chance. "Actually, I think I saw something over-- Oh, look!" She lit up her horn and pointed a weak cone of light across the field. It was convincingly wobbly, only as strong as a filly could pull off, but it's intention was to cover up the casting of a much more complicated spell.

"Huh?" the Crusaders asked, looking.

Most of the fireflies had spread back out into the woods, so that the only light around was the Moon and stars overhead. At first there was nothing to see, but then a tiny pink light glided into view from between tangled branches. It was definitely smaller than a firefly, but clearer and steady in brightness compared to the flashing patterns of its larger cousins. It bobbed in place, then flicked to a pure white light.

It was soon joined by two more, blue and green, and they swung in a low arc together and all changed to the same shade of bright green. Another few appeared, then more, and more, until they practically formed a low lying cloud bank of multicolored sparks that started to spread out across the field.

"Woah," Scootaloo said.

"What *are* they?" Apple Bloom asked.

"I call them fairyflies," Luna replied. "Um, I mean, that's what they call them where I'm from."

"Cool," Sweetie Belle mumbled, all three of the fillies staring. The mass of fairyflies started to separate into groups, small masses that flew in rough blobs but all swooped down and then back up at the same time. Every fairyfly in each group shared the same color, which was always different from any neighboring swarms. Several groups then broke off together and started slowly circling each other in twos and threes.

"I bet I can catch the most!" Scootaloo whooped, snatching up her net and racing forward.

"Yer on!" Apple Bloom hurried to catch up, net in mouth.

Sweetie Belle stayed and watched with Luna, the pair sitting side by side. Scootaloo's net passed through a cloud of fairyflies but just before impact they dispersed in all different directions, swirling in twos and threes through the air, before recombining into a loose group once more.

"It's like they're dancing," Sweetie commented, watching three swarms spin together through the night.

"Oh?" Luna asked. She looked over at the unicorn. *Does she get it?*

"Uh huh. They keep flying around and changing colors at the same rhythm, over and over, like it was to a beat."

Luna nodded quickly. "You're absolutely right!"

"And..." Sweetie looked off into the woods, ears perked. "I think it's the same beat as..." She didn't finish the sentence.

"What? The same beat as what?" Luna insisted. *Has she noticed it? But she's so young!*

Sweetie Belle looked at Luna, then down at the grass beneath her hooves. "Welllll... No pony else believes me, but there's a song that plays at night." She looked back up at Luna quickly. "Not all the time, I mean! I'm not crazy! But it's just little bits, now and then, and it all adds up to song. A really, really pretty song. I heard a little of it a second ago, and it was right along to the dancing fairyflies."

Luna stared for a moment, then smiled and nodded repeatedly. "You're right!"

Sweetie's eyes widened. "You heard it too?!"

"Yup!" Luna replied. *If this little filly has picked up on the music of the night then maybe a lot more ponies have noticed it than I thought!*

"I'm so glad somepony else hears it, too! Isn't it pretty?"

Luna chuckled and nodded once more. "I guess it *is* kinda nice..."

"Very nice," Sweetie insisted. "I wish I could hear the whole song in a row. I've been kinda figuring it out, though."

"You have?"

"Yeah. Um." Sweetie licked her lips, then started humming a tune. Luna stared; it wasn't perfect, but it was clearly the main theme to her new nocturne. *What a great sense of pitch, too!*

"You figured that out in just a few nights? That's amazing, Sweetie Belle!"

The white filly blushed and looked down at the grass. "Eh, I just stay up late when I sleep over with my sister Rarity, because she works hard after hours, so I have a lot of time to listen at the window."

Luna filed away Rarity's name, then glanced down at the unicorn's flank and shook her head. "I'm surprised you don't already have a musical note cutie mark, or a treble clef or something."

Sweetie shook her head quickly. "Nuh uh, it's going to be something to do with fashion! My sister is a famous designer, and I want to be one just like her."

"Oh, so you aren't good at an instrument, or singing, or anything of the sort?" Luna asked, legitimately curious.

"Welllll... I'm an okay singer."

"Just okay?" Luna prompted.

"Pretty good, I guess..."

Luna giggled softly. "Best in your class?"

"... Maybe," Sweetie Belle answered, but quickly added, "But I can't sing in front of an audience!"

"Oh?" Luna asked, "Why not?"

"I, I just couldn't!" Sweetie exclaimed.

Luna left it at that for a few minutes, just watching Scootaloo and Apple Bloom as they fought to capture her flighty new improvement to the night. They each had several in

their net and every time they caught another they would go over to the other pony and count, gloat or cringe, and get back to it.

When Luna looked back at Sweetie Belle the little unicorn was watching the closest swarm of fairyflies, and up close she could see that it was slowly spinning. It was just as Luna planned, to have each one orbit a central point, so that each grouping was its own separate solar system. Several of those systems circled another floating point as if making up a small galaxy. They would carry on for an hour each night before separating and going off to eat and rest.

"Sweetie, I really, truly understand what you mean when you say you can't," Luna began, catching the unicorn's attention. "What if they don't like it? What if you mess up when everypony has their eyes on you? What if you aren't as good as you think you are? What if... There are a lot of what ifs, aren't there?"

Sweetie nodded a little.

"But I'm starting to realize something. Think about your favorite song, or story, or piece of art. That had to come from somepony who stuck their neck out and took a risk to bring something beautiful into the world. If they never did, we'd never have anything pretty to look at, or listen to, or read... It would be awful."

Luna took a deep breath and was surprised to find little tears in her eyes as she spoke, looking up at her Moon. "Everything everypony does to share their talents is an improvement to Equestria, and the whole world. And whether your talents are singing, or making dresses, or..." *Improving the night...* "... or *anything*, we should use those talents to make everypony else happy if we can." She looked over at Sweetie, smiling. "Shouldn't we?"

Sweetie Belle stared at Luna for a solid five seconds, then off into the forest. "I don't know..."

"Who says you can't do both, anyway?" Luna asked, raising a hoof into the air. "Sweetie Belle, Singing Seamstress Extraordinaire!"

"Now you're just being silly," Sweetie insisted.

Luna shook her head, still smiling. "Nuh uh. I'm really not."

The pair watched fairyflies together for several more minutes. Luna's small smile grew when she picked up on Sweetie's quiet humming of a tune close to the song of the night but slightly different, set to the same beat of the dancing lights surrounding them. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo had finally tired out and were flopped on their backs, watching the spectacle as well as it circled over them.

Somepony yawned, and it spread across all three Cutie Mark Crusaders like wildfire. Luna stood, stretching. "I should go. My, uh, parents are going to be worried about me if I'm gone too long."

"Bye!" Scootaloo called, waving a hoof from her back.

Apple Bloom sat up and waved as well. "See ya around, Black Snootie!"

"We *will* see you around, right?" Sweetie asked quickly.

Luna nodded. "I really hope so! And think about what I said, okay?"

Sweetie nodded back, and smiled just a little. "Okay."

Luna asked all three on an impulse, "So do you like fairyflies?"

Apple Bloom nodded and poked her hoof at a nearby swarm. "They're *real* neat!"

Scootaloo sat up and pounded one hoof into another. "Yeah! They're way harder to catch than fireflies. I like a good challenge."

Sweetie nodded plenty. "They're--"

"*Gorgeous!*" a voice called from the edge of the clearing, every head turning toward it. Luna took the chance to unfurl her invisible wings and leap into the forest. She found a dark perch high in the tree cover and watched as the two adult ponies stepped into the clearing. It was the unicorn who had spoke, Luna recognizing her now as Rarity.

"What *are* these darling little lights?" Rarity asked.

"Fairyflies," Apple Bloom answered. "I bet we're the first ponies to see them around these parts! Aren't they neat, Applejack?"

The orange earth pony looked about herself, eyes wide, then nodded. "I reckon they're awful pretty."

Luna had heard enough. She swooped out of the tree and glided away a decent distance, then zipped up through a break in the branches to sail over the Whitetail Wood. She looked up at the Moon and beamed.

"I'd say that went pretty well. What do you think?" she angled her wings to bank side to side in lazy arcs, keeping her eyes on the Moon all the while. "My target audience was impressed. Their big sisters were impressed. I guess you'd call that a success!"

They really enjoyed it. It made their night! Well, maybe not the mares, but the fillies... Luna imagined that all three of them would remember that night for the rest of their lives. "Oh, and I made a friend!" she told the Moon, then chuckled. "Well, I guess Black Snootie did." *I'm going to have to visit Sweetie Belle again someday soon,* Luna decided.

Luna spotted her private glade and circled down to it, her horn already glowing in preparation. It would take a lot of effort to spread to spread fairyflies all across Equestria in one night. Without thinking she reached out a tendril of magic to the Moon for support, and she felt her connection with it strengthen until it was nearly a solid beam of force. The voice of the Moon was more akin to the beating of a heart which she could not only hear but also feel throughout her whole being.

She gasped and landed roughly, stumbling and then staring up at the Moon with glimmering eyes. She could feel more now: its steady progress across the sky, the track it followed every night, the caress of starlight across its surface... Her heart sang as a single tear trailed down each cheek.

It's almost time, isn't it? Oh, sister, soon I'll be able to take so much weight off your shoulders! I'll never be a burden again!

Luna worked through the entire night and most of the morning. She was too weary to remember curling up on the grass for "just a little nap," but it was the tug of the Moon rising overhead that woke her. She stood, stretched, yawned, and then looked up at her Moon. She reached her mind and magic out to the Moon again and felt that firm, steady connection from the night before.

I'm going to try it! she decided at that moment. *Tomorrow night I'm going to bring you out. Just you wait and see!*

Though, I guess I better tell my sister, Luna thought as she lifted off and started the short flight back to Canterlot. *After a thousand years it might be a big shock to have the Moon move on its own!* She felt the familiar twinge of mixed emotions at the thought of speaking to Celestia, but it had shrunk down so small she could easily ignore it.

As Luna cleared the cliffs below Canterlot her face brightened further. *First, I have to tell Aura how well things went!*

She landed on her balcony and trotted into the quarters, but the room was dark and the corner was missing its customary knitter. *I wonder where I could find her. Maybe she's asleep?*

Luna stopped mid-step and looked around herself, realizing that since her return she'd been so busy feeling sorry for herself that she never really *looked* at the room she'd spent most of her time in! Canterlot was covered in warm colors, reds and oranges and yellows, but she had been placed in a room with blues that ranged from near black to the sky at false-dawn. It was particularly lovely in the dark with her unnaturally good night vision. The walls were adorned with art of the Moon, the stars, and landscapes under nighttime skies; Aura's words days ago came back to Luna and she wondered, *Did my sister paint these? She must have picked this room and decorated it just for me.*

Her eyes were drawn to a multicolored lump resting on her worktable, and as she approached she recognized the pattern as Aura's knitting. Luna whispered, "Is this...?" Her horn glowed as she lifted it, and the blanket rustled open, lit by her horn.

It was made up of dozens of connected squares. Each square started with a color in one corner and then each outwardly radiating thread was a slightly different color. It left the blanket resembling pearlescent dragon scales, with each "scale" bearing a unique color scheme. As Luna looked closer she noticed that the colors were taken directly from the manes and coats of her and her sister; pink and violet, dark blue and green, near-white and near-black. She almost didn't notice, but a few threads of silver and gold had been expertly snuck in.

Wow...

A note rested on the table, written in a flowing cursive with excessive splotching at each period. Luna could imagine Aura writing it, punctuating each sentence with just slightly too much vigor. The note read,

I thought this might liven up your room a little.
Not too much, just the right amount.
Let me know what you think.

See you soon.
Aura

Luna looked over the blanket one more time, then quickly folded it into quarters to set it back on the table. "Okay, now I *have* to find Aura tonight and thank her," she told herself.

Luna jumped in place at a quick rapping on the door. "Princess Luna, permission to enter?" a gruff voice asked.

"Um, yes, please come in," Luna answered, pulling the door open with a trickle of magic.

A pegasus guard bowed quickly to her and then rose and said, "Your Royal Highness, pardon the intrusion, but I was ordered to wait here for your return. Princess Celestia sends word for you to meet her in her quarters immediately. She was clear that is it very important."

Luna held her breath without realizing it. Nothing like this had happened since her return. *What could possibly be wrong?*

"If you wish, Princess, I could escort you--"

"There's no need, thank you!" she replied, running to her balcony and taking flight. It only took an ounce of her newly strengthened will to seek out where her sister was. Luna swung out over Canterlot, angled such that she'd end her flight at Celestia's private balcony. Her heart raced. *What could it be? Maybe... I messed up with the fairyflies? Ecosystems are very delicate...* She steeled her jaw and nodded. *Whatever it is, I'm not running away anymore.*

Luna glided onto and over Celestia's balcony and didn't land until she was through the doorway, expecting to be ready for anything. She was taken aback by the sight of her

sister resting on a knit blanket on the floor, sadness creasing her face as she stroked a hoof across the material beneath her.

Luna's stomach sunk and she took a small step backward. *What could have happened?*

The two made eye contact and Celestia took a shaky breath before she spoke. "Aura has..." Celestia swallowed before she could finish. "She's passed away."

Luna froze in place. Celestia kept their eyes locked together.

"She fell asleep knitting, not for the first time, and went in her sleep. She... she had a smile on her face."

Luna finally took a breath, then another, but didn't move. Celestia went quiet, focusing on keeping her sister's gaze.

"No," Luna finally whispered. Celestia didn't reply. "No," Luna repeated, louder, and then focused her magic. *Where is she?* she thought, her power reaching out in every direction, seeking out the magical signature that could only be Aura.

"Sister, I'm sorry, but there's nothing I could do. It was natural causes."

"No," Luna said, in a calm, assertive voice, as if she were ending the discussion with that one word. "Ah ha, there she is!" she called out, finding just a glimmer of something and focusing on it.

"I'm not certain if seeing her would be best for you right now, Luna," Celestia said in a soft voice.

"Excuse me," Luna said, and nodded to her sister. She saw Celestia's face for just a moment, registering sadness and worry, but also fear. She ignored all of it. Luna leapt away and swooped down out of sight.

The entire flight and walk went by in a blur. Luna pushed her way into the back rooms of the royal hospital, not noticing the protest, and then apology, of the coroner whose night shift she had interrupted.

And then she had found her. The search spell had lead Luna to a low cot with a plain white sheet spread over an equine shape. A curly gold tail hung off one side, the tip

touching the tile floor. Luna's magic probe was still active and it told her that the body was unmoving, cold, and silent. And, most certainly, Aura.

"No..."

"Princess?" the coroner asked, but Luna didn't hear the mare's voice. Luna backed out of the room, shaking her head.

"No..."

Luna darted out the nearest open window and looked left, then right. She didn't know what to do, but she had to... had to do *something!* *She's... she's...*

Celestia's voice came from overhead. "Luna... Please come back with me."

Their eyes met again for just a moment, and then Luna whispered, "No," and fled.

Luna landed in her glade in the Whitetail Wood, shaking, not noting or caring that her rough approach tore up clumps of grass.

She started pacing back and forth with hard hoof-falls, crushing flowers, shaking her head every few steps. "No, just... No. How could..."

Her jaw got tighter and tighter as she continued. "No," she insisted, her eyes starting to dampen. "No. No. NO!"

In one swift motion she took flight and shot to the nearest tree. Her horn ignited in purple fire and power surged through her entire body down to her hooves. She turned, bucked, and kicked. The tree didn't break so much as *explode*, raw magical force destroying it from the inside out, wood and bark scattering in all directions. The concussion rocked through the forest, sending birds and animals alike into flight.

Luna opened her eyes without realizing she'd closed them, staring at her glade. It was covered in steaming chunks of tree, many sizzling on the verge of fire. One large piece had rolled halfway across it, steamrolling grass and flowers alike. And there on the edge was a single fairyfly, fleeing from the wrath of its mistress.

Luna shook as she remembered finding the glade and her repeated visits while practicing her magic and music. She let out a sob when she remembered Aura sitting in the middle of the clearing in complete approval of the setting, and then in adoration of her music.

And now she was destroying it.

Luna looked up at the Moon, and then winked out of existence.

Luna re-appeared in almost pure darkness, but could feel the land around her as if it were a part of her own body. Above were the stars, brighter than anywhere in Equestria. All around her were the flat expanses and craters of her old prison. It was cold, but Luna hardly felt it.

She was in the bottom of a crater on the dark side of the Moon.

Luna screamed, her horn lighting up the area around her as she tore out a chunk of the rock underneath her hooves and levitated it up so she could kick it as hard as she could. It exploded not unlike the tree, and in the low gravity of the Moon white-hot pieces of rock flew in all directions.

It didn't help.

Luna sobbed as she pulled up another hunk of moon rock and crushed it under her front hooves, then surrounded the top of her head with magical force as she ran headlong into a third even larger target.

It didn't help.

Finally she collapsed, sobbing, as fine moon dust started to float slowly down around her.

Only then did Luna realize she couldn't hear anything. Not her own screams, not her sobbing, not the impact of a head-sized stone that landed nearby. Not even the Moon's beat.

Nothing.

Celestia's words from just weeks ago slithered into Luna's mind. *"There was one more thing I wanted to make sure you know, Luna. If I had known that the Elements of Harmony would banish you to the surface of the Moon I never would have used them. I would have found some other way."*

A thousand years without anyone, or anything, or... even a song. Not a single note.

Memories started to come back to Luna, painfully fast.

Dusk... A talented musician, a master of many instruments and a player of more. Luna's best friend for years, and consort for decades. Their hearts marched to the same beat.

So much time together, playing and composing, singing and dancing. Loving.

Luna leaning into Dusk's side in the center of a perfect forest glade under the Full Moon, deciding how to make the music of the night even richer. Working on their new nocturne together.

She spent every moment she could close to Dusk, stealing what little time she could get before it was too late.

Then mortality caught up. Dusk had died, alone, while Luna had been busy doing her princessly duties. When Luna got home someone told her there had been a smile on Dusk's face.

Night after night spent curled up on the grass in their private glade in the Whitetail Wood, crying herself to sleep, remembering Dusk's voice.

Depression and loneliness haunted Luna for months. Nothing helped. Whenever something small raised her spirits she would see Dusk's face, or hear a song, or glance at a sunset, and fall into the same hopeless downward spiral.

Luna may have overcome this on her own, but something subtle and wicked made sure that Luna could never recover. Every night it would come into her dreams and whisper into her ear. Its ideas sounded less and less vile as time passed. Its twisted logic began to make sense after nearly a year of helpless emotional pain.

You were always jealous of us! Luna had screamed in Celestia's face. *It was always you and me versus the world, and then Dusk came and made me happier than I had ever been! You could never do that! And that's why you let Dusk die!*

Celestia had just sat there, composed but heavyhearted. *All ponies must pass away, Luna.*

You didn't even try! Luna had stomped her hooves hard enough to score the marble beneath them. And why would you? Everypony loves you for the Sun, and the daytime, all your puffy white clouds and bright, shiny colors. They celebrate the morning and then hide away at night. But I had found someone else to love, and you couldn't stand it, could you? It's not all about you, "Tia!" Luna spat out the formerly loving nickname with sarcastic venom.

Luna, please, I don't want to fight. I am so sorry for your loss. Celestia had approached, intending to take her sister into an embrace. *Please, let me help you through this pain.*

Its voice shook Luna to the core. *SHE'S GOING TO "HELP" YOU BY PUTTING YOU OUT OF YOUR MISERY! LET ME IN AND I WILL END THIS! NO MORE PAIN, NO MORE LONELINESS! WE WILL BE TOGETHER FOREVER!*

And she had let it in.

Confrontation, darkness, and blood. Second thoughts... and the realization that it wasn't her decision anymore.

Celestia crying openly as the Elements of Harmony swirled around Luna's transformed body.

And then... darkness. Silence.

Sometimes the Nightmare would give Luna back control just long enough for her to fully mourn her losses. Dusk was gone, Celestia had banished her, and all sound was robbed from her. She couldn't bear the sight of Equestria from on high so she stayed on the dark side of the Moon when she had control.

And then the Nightmare would assert itself, drag Luna to watch the Sun rise over Equestria, and laugh at her.

NO MORE LONELINESS, LUNA! WE'RE TOGETHER FOREVER NOW!

Now the Nightmare was gone, but Luna was all alone again.

She curled up and silently cried herself to sleep.

Luna awoke much warmer than when she had fallen asleep. She lifted her head weakly to find she was looking right into Celestia's eyes. The older sister had pressed up close to Luna's side in her sleep and spread a wing over her.

They gazed at each other for a long time. Neither of the alicorns tried to speak.

Finally Luna closed her eyes and disappeared, moon dust from her coat settling to the surface.

Dear Diary,

I cannot find Luna. She has somehow hidden herself from all magical detection. I have searched everywhere that I could think of, twice, and there is no sign of her. The guards are scouring Whitetail Wood and the edges of the Everfree Forest, but I already know this is in vain.

Magic powerful enough to hide herself from me... I have to assume that she has her memories back.

If this means the return of Nightmare Moon... I cannot bear to think of it.

I sent her away for a thousand years, and now this. Will I ever be able to atone?

Celestia

Dear Diary,

More than a week of nothing, and then today the blanket that Aura knit for Luna went missing. I did not feel my sister or her magic in Canterlot.

I fear this means she either sent another to collect it or that it wasn't my sister who came to take it, but... another. A Nightmare that delights in tricks, mind games, and pain.

I cannot be certain, however. Luna's magical obfuscation may just be that good. Shadows and quiet stillness are her domain, after all.

I cannot give up hope.

Celestia

Dear Diary,

The New Moon just rose, and not by my hoof.

The only thoughts keeping me from despair are that it was only a few minutes ahead of schedule, and that I cannot imagine Nightmare Moon attacking with the Moon dark. She would be at her weakest.

I'm here for you, dear Luna. Please come back to me.

I'm so very sorry.

Celestia

Luna appeared far above Canterlot, looking down upon her home. She saw an off-white speck on a balcony and nodded. *There she is.*

Luna tucked her wings and dove hard, nose pointed straight at her sister. Her hiding spell was still very much intact, and she was above and behind Celestia; she would never know her little sister was coming. Luna lowered her horn, a nimbus of black-purple surrounding it as she summoned her strength.

She spread her wings to slow her descent, magic cushioning the sudden deceleration. She released the spell keeping her from detection just before landing on the balcony.

Even so, Celestia gasped and sidestepped, her own horn surrounded in a pearly white aura as she brought it to bear.

The magical light winked out almost immediately. "Luna!" Celestia moved to approach, but Luna lifted a hoof.

"Wait, sister, I have to show you something. Just... listen and watch, okay?"

Celestia paused, but nodded slowly. "All right."

Luna pointed up into the sky and both sisters looked up to see nothing but stars. Luna's horn lit up again, humming its signature note, as she triggered the last step of her complex spell.

The night slowly fell silent. The quiet drone of ponies doing early evening business faded away. The wind slowed, then stilled. Celestia glanced over at her sister once but then looked upward again.

Luna's tail started swaying, and only by force of will did she keep her head still. *Here it comes...*

The first note of *Aura's Nocturne* rose seemingly from all directions at once. It wasn't just the forest singing but every noise, from the tone of ponies' voices to the clip-clop of their hooves on cobblestones, the squeak of a wagon's wheel and the bark of a pet dog. No individual noise could be identified for long as Luna's magic blended and smoothed groups of noises together into separate instruments.

As the song continued it reached more and more ears the ponies below stopped and looked around. Heads popped out of windows, and fillies just sitting down to sleep sat up in bed. Hooves and wagons stopped, voices dropped, but the sounds of the song naturally progressed in a new voice that was just as pleasing as the last. No pony could mistake it for random noise; there was a distinct melody, one that some ponies were starting to recognize.

Celestia's ears perked as she listened, glancing down at her subjects and then back at Luna.

"Keep looking right around there," Luna whispered, pointing upward again.

They both watched as a strand of blue-green light grew across the sky from the horizon. It started as a straight line, but organically bent and wavered as if in an incredibly gentle breeze. As the second melody of *Aura's Nocturne* joined in a second string grew across the sky, parallel to the first and very close, and then with a briefly increased glow they merged into a thin band of light. The hue began to change, and after several seconds it had changed into silvery gray.

The music continued, the first two melodies playing against each other, somber tones and instrumental friction. "I'm sure you recognize the first melody," Luna murmured. "Dusk and I came up with it together a thousand years ago. The second one is purely my own. It represents me, when I was trying to remember who and what I am." A third thread of light crawled across the sky, and after it merged to make a thicker band of wavering color it shifted slowly into a soft pink.

There were several short moments of quiet, and then a burst of noise, almost discordant, accompanied by the appearance of another thread. The cacophony resolved into a third melody, firm but not unbending. "And that is Aura." Luna's voice went hoarse as she swallowed tears. "You know how she was. I'd still be lost without her. That's her guiding me back to the Moon. And to you."

The streets below filled with ponies who stared up into the sky, ears perked, watching more strands of light grow and merge until a curtain of ever-so-slowly flowing light covered half the sky in soft, changing light. All three melodies of the song intertwined, knitting together with the display in the sky to mesmerize ponies across all of Equestria.

"I wanted to do this on the New Moon, because this is about Aura and Dusk, not me." Luna spoke as the music continued, creeping toward a crescendo. "Every New Moon these lights, the Aurora, will play out across Equestria, in a permanent elegy. And a reminder, of a lot of things."

The music reached its climax, the melodies interweaving harmoniously, triumphant, celebrating Luna's return to her sister's side. "I still miss Dusk, even after a thousand years of mourning," Luna began, pausing to keep herself from crying too hard. "But... but I really, *really* miss Aura."

"Me too, Luna," Celestia said, emotion thick in her voice.

As the music faded, leaving the Aurora spread across the sky, Luna turned to her sister. She wiped tears from her face before she spoke. "I know that you forgive me," she said. "If anything, you feel like there is nothing to forgive, right?"

Celestia nodded. "Precisely."

"That's how I feel about you! The exact same thing." Luna stepped closer, almost near enough to touch.

"I was out of my mind. I let evil magic as old as the stars guide my hoof. I was going to destroy the entire world, just to feed its sick hunger for pain and loss. You saved... all of this."

Luna waved a hoof out over Canterlot, Whitetail Wood, Ponyville, the Everfree Forest, and everything beyond.

"All of it. You did the *right thing*. I am beyond grateful for what you did, otherwise I would have had all of eternity to mourn my mistakes."

Celestia stared at her sister, eyes searching her gaze.

"I completely forgive you," Luna finally said. "I know you regret where I was sent, and you wish you could have found another way, but if you hadn't acted when you had..." Luna shook her head.

"I forgive you, Tia." Luna leaned forward and just barely touched the tip of her nose to her sister's. "Please believe me. I forgive you."

Tears welled in Celestia's eyes, and for the first time in a long time the sight didn't make Luna's gut clench. She smiled and nodded. "Really, sis. I forgive you!"

Celestia rushed forward and tucked her head and neck around Luna's, pushing close and crying. "I'm so happy you're back," Celestia whispered, voice raw with emotion.

"Me too, Tia," Luna replied, fresh tears creeping from her closed eyes down to her smile as she nestled into her sister's embrace. "Me too."

EPILOGUE

"Welcome home, Tia!" Luna gave her sister a brief nuzzle as she landed on the balcony.

"Thank you, Luna," Celestia returned the touch and the pair stepped into Luna's quarters.

"Did the trade agreement go over well in Trottingham?" Luna asked as the sisters settled down onto opposite knit blankets Luna had spread on the floor moments earlier.

"Yes, very well. You always had a knack for numbers. And what have you been up to in my absence?"

"Visitors were light today, so I had a lot of time to dedicate to policy and correspondence."

"Just policy?"

"Wellll... I may have gotten in a few pages of a new song, as well."

"Oh?" Celestia asked.

"One plump, pompous pony went on and on and on. He thinks I took some very detailed notes on what he was saying. Actually, I was kinda scribbling down a jaunty little tuba tune in his honor."

"I see. Perhaps we should play it for him the next time he visits?" Celestia's eyes twinkled.

"That might be pushing it, Tia..." Luna smirked. "Sounds good to me!"

A gout of green fire swept in through an open window and swirled over Celestia's head, resolving into not one but two scrolls.

"Twilight Sparkle?" Luna asked, and Celestia nodded.

"This one is for you, Luna." Celestia said, passing it over magically.

"Oh?" Luna unrolled the scroll and read it aloud.

Dear Princess Luna,

I couldn't help but notice the incredible additions to the night that have occurred recently! I have seen Princess Celestia raise the Sun, and it is very impressive, but I know nothing about your work. I know your time is valuable, but perhaps you would be willing to entertain some correspondence regarding this matter? I do believe an understanding of your magic may help to further my studies under Princess Celestia.

Thank you for your consideration!

*Sincerely,
Twilight Sparkle*

"Ah, an adoring fan!" Celestia cried, grinning.

"Trying to make me blush, now?" Luna asked, glad that her coat was so dark.

"Is it working?"

"Wouldn't you like to know..."

Luna re-read the letter to herself, smiling. "Aura suggested that I make friends with Twilight, actually."

"I'd like to think she had good taste in friends," Celestia commented.

"Me too." Luna paused, then nodded. "Forget correspondence; I'm going to pay Twilight a visit." She started writing a response, then added, "And we don't want to forget Black Snootie's little friend..."

"Black Snootie?" Celestia asked.

"It's a long story..."

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I would be more than happy to visit Ponyville and discuss my recent changes to the night in more detail. Please reply with the most convenient evening for you to host, and please keep this as just a simple social call! Also, you may want to invite Sweetie Belle. I believe she may enjoy our conversation.

*Sincerely yours,
Luna*

--THE END--