

# Paradise

By Slywit



All story art credit to [MadMax](#)

# Table of Contents:

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>Chapter 11</b>	<b>138</b>

# Chapter 1

*It's hard for ponies these days to imagine what it was like back then. If they were dropped into this time before Equestria, it'd be unrecognizable to their eyes.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia as recorded by her friends**

Whip Scar chewed with his head low and his eyes peeled in the soft moonlight. Tension filled his every muscle and he wandered amidst the herd aimlessly. Deep in the wilds of the wide, wide forest known as Everfree, the simple herd of pony grazed the grasses in the fields that sometimes broke the expanse of trees. They, too, were tense though they did not show it.



Foaling was a dangerous time for all. The first few hours of life, a foal cannot walk. Predators sought those times. They preferred to not attack the strong or swift. It did a carnivore no good to pit themselves against the best when all they wanted was a meal. They liked their prey helpless, be it sick, old, or simply unaware. There was nothing so helpless as a new foal.

For that reason, the heard grazed around Lightning Kick, hiding her from stalking eyes and Whip Scar wandered to and fro with nervous energy. Slowly weaving his way to the center, he kept his head below the grass line and spoke while pretending to eat.

“How is It? My little foal?”

Lightning Kick curled on the grass and rested, keeping a small figure protectively close. A soft breath rose and fell on his chest, but she spoke between the quiet pants. “She’s healthy. Just . . .”

Whip Scar’s heart leaped several places it didn’t belong. “Just what? Is something wrong?”

“Just . . . look at her.”

Whip couldn't keep up his charade of nibbling and walked around Lightning to see his daughter. No thought in his mind could have prepared him for what he saw. “Pink . . . hair?”

“Pink as a flower.” She whispered.

Lightning's observation was uncannily accurate. Before Whip's eyes a foal curled peacefully with her mother, wearing a mane pink as a pale rose. If that was not all, her coat shown flawlessly in moonlight, white as a cloud or a drift of snow. But otherwise, a perfectly healthy Earth pony.

“But . . . how?” Whip stared in confusion and some of the rest of the herd couldn't help but crowd closer in curiosity. Browns, blacks, spots, and grays, not a one had a color as wild as pink or pure as white. Whispers began to pass between them. Some in amazement, others in concern. “How will we hide a pink pony? . . .” “A dragon would see her from miles away . . .”

Whip's shoulders flexed as he discerned the words, as he felt the unease. His hide, scared from the lash of human masters he escaped, bristled it's fur. “We'll ask the shaman.”

“You won't have to wait long.” Charging Hoof whispered, his head still down. “She's here.”

Lightning Kick jolted, but resisted more and stayed down close to her foal. Whip stood erect in shock, then looked over the backs of the other ponies to see her coming. Where the Shaman came from or went was anyone's guess. But she knew things no other pony knew. The rest of the herd parted like a sea, and closed up behind her.

“Shaman,” Whip lowered his head in respect.

“Whippy,” She responded in a bubbly voice and moved past him. Whip wasn't sure how, but he got a sense that under her concealing cloak, she smiled. “So this is the foal born tonight? Ya-huh! No mistaking it, now!”

Lightning watched silently, fear crept across her frame and features, and she huddled the new foal just a little closer to her body.

“The stars have guided me here, silly. They gave me a message.” Shaman pointed a hoof matted with dirt, but the gesture seemed to hide a surprising amount of gentleness just beneath the mangy surface. “This foal has been blessed by their hands. The stars wanted to give us a present. She will have the capacity to change this world in ways not even they can see.” Shaman looked to the parents once more, a giggle erupted from under her hood. “You have reason to celebrate, but be warned. *How* things change is beyond anyone’s power but hers.” She turned and walked away just as she came. A slow, deliberate trot, until she vanished under the forest’s shadow. A traveling song echoed through the woods in her voice, slowly fading from ear.

Moments passed, a collective and silent awe on everyone’s lips as the herd surged and fell back, wishing to see this new foal while maintaining their vigil. Finally, Lightning Kick broke the silence with a quiet laugh. “I think I know her name. In honor of those who blessed her,” She licked the pink mane of the new pony. “Celestia.”

The sun beamed down over Celestia’s flank, warm and bright. The filly bounced between blooming flowers, stopping occasionally to eat one in a gulp and see if they tasted as pretty as they looked. “Bleh!” She spit out a bluebonnet, then continued to prance. “Gotcha!” She shouted to a colt, lying in the grass before she pounced. But the warning gave Painted Hoof time to spring up and run.

“ROOOOAARRRR!” Celestia gave chase. “Dragon gonna get ya!”

Painted Hoof stuck out his tongue and laughed as he kicked up dirt on his run.

“Celestia?” Whip Scar’s deep voice carried over the field. “Celestia, come over here.”

“Oh, no!” Celestia shrank away from the chase and trotted back to Whip Scar with her head lowered. “Yes, father?”

But Whip smiled and pulled a stray grass from her mane. “I’ve got something to show you.” Together, they walked through the herd and Celestia had to press close to her father to squeeze between some of the grazing flock. After passing through, she caught sight of Lightning, laying on the ground. “Mommy!” She trotted the last few steps over to the gray mare and touched her neck against Lightning’s in a pony style embrace.

“Celestia, you may look now.” Lightning gestured to a form between her legs, a baby pony with a coat of dark, midnight blue.

Celestia’s eyes widened to saucers and she gasped. “Wwwooooowwwwwwwwww . . .”

“You have a sister.” Whip said, bemused and proud.

Lightning added after him. “Just as you are named after the stars, she is named after the sister of the stars. Meet Luna.”

Celestia leaned forward and sniffed the dark foal. Luna looked up to her with large, inquisitive blue eyes.

Celestia sprung into the air, bouncing around in front of them and speaking in sing-sing. “I got a sister! I got a sister! I got a sister!”

“Careful now, ha ha!” Whip nudged her a step away from the newborn. “You have to be gentle with foals.”

Celestia stopped and nodded obediently.

“Well, now, off you go. Luna will be able to play when she is older.”

Celestia weaved between grazing ponies. “Wait until my friends hear!” Singing in a cocky voice. “I got a Luna! I got a Luna!” Half way back to the fillies and colts, her eyes caught sight of a butterfly and pranced behind it from flower to flower.

Whip laughed to himself and shook his head as he watched Celestia disappear. “Cheerful as the sun, she is. Yet, named after the stars.” He lowered himself by degrees until he laid down next to Lightning and gave a lick to her cheek. “And how is Luna? Able to walk yet?”

Lightning pursed her lips in thought, then slowly nodded. “She is quite different from her sister. But I think she is strong in ways harder to see. If we nudge her, I think she’ll walk.”

Whip stood up and moved to Luna, giving her an affectionate touch from his nose. "Best we get started, then. The sooner she walks, the safer she'll be."

Nudged at her hind quarters, Luna turned and looked at Whip, confused. But inch by inch, Luna responded by getting closer and closer to standing.

"Ahh, there you go. That's my girl."

On all four feet, Luna looked as confused as he ever saw a foal, and promptly fell to her side with a bleat.

"Not quite what I had in mind, but it's a start."

Some minutes later, with patient nudging and encouraging nuzzles, Luna took her first step.

Lightning and Whip both let out a little cheer and Luna responded with a wide smile and a proud raise of her tail before falling on her side once more with a bleat.

"GRIFFIN!"

Every head shot up from their grazing.

"IN THE SKY! GRIFFIN!" Charging Hoof's bellow rung out over the field before he turned to the forest. Already, the first bubbling of panic erupted from the herd. Brays and neighs of surprise and alarm started singular at first, but grew into a cacophony. One by one, ponies began to head for the cover of the forest, bumping and stumbling into each other in chaotic fright that spilled to others like dominos.

Whip turned, but Lightning was already on her feet, standing protectively over Luna. With broad shoulders, he shoved a frightened stallion away and reached under Lightning to grip Luna by the mane with his teeth. Whip was as gentle as he could manage, but Luna brayed at the discomfort before she was set on Lightning's back. Keeping the foal steady, Whip and Lightning moved as one within the herd.

Ponies bumped into each other, stammered, got in the way, or otherwise jostled Whip and Lightning. Normally, such group movements were nothing to an adult pony, but he was trying to steady a foal, and each bump on his side or Lightning's threatened to dislodge Luna and send her tumbling under the rampage of hooves.

Whip's nostrils flared in anger as a mare took a sharp turn to dodge a hill and rammed her shoulder against his chest. The impact shook Luna violently and she cried in pain and fear. But Lightning slowed a step for her mate and Whip used his large size to shove the mare out of the way. Finally, they slipped under the canopy and safety of the trees, Luna still crying out her heart. In a sigh of relief, he set her to the ground and wiped away the tears with a gentle touch of his nose.

But Lightning's eyes were back to the field and asked a question that sent a chill through his spine. "Where is Celestia?"

Her mom and dad had trained her to listen to the warnings of predators. "When you hear the shout of 'griffin' They said. "Run to the forest." They'd repeat the last part. "Remember, griffins, run to the forest." Whip and Lightning drilled it with her. They'd whisper "Griffin!" in her ear and together, they all ran under the trees and stopped once the shadows enveloped them down to their hooves.

The butterfly tickled her nose, when the call went out and sent it flying off. It boomed over the field and she dropped to her haunches in the scare of it, tail pulled up tight to where she sat. She looked to the other ponies. Their faces were like that she had never seen. Their eyes wide and wild, lips peeled back in horrible grimaces. They didn't look like ponies anymore and their hooves beat a terrible thunder as they barely dodged around her to either side, colossal beasts to the little filly.

Celestia cried out in fear of those horrible faces, and pinched her eyes closed. To the sky, she called to mom and dad, over and over as the hooves beat their wild noise. She opened her eyes and ice plunged into her heart and pumped cold water through her veins. The griffin glided above.

The wings spread wide and black as it silhouetted in the sun. They beat slowly and soared, the creature sailed like an eagle on the wind. Celestia froze stiff and couldn't turn away. It was a sight she felt was not meant for her eyes. Like Death itself hovered above her.

A stallion leaned over on its run and bit Celestia across the back of her neck, lifting her off the ground. The force of the grip hurt. Teeth pinched through her coat and mane and she cried anew kicking violently for the pain of it. She knew the stallion, though, and



called him Uncle Apple, despite lack of blood relation (or even "Apple" in his name). The struggles were not directed against him and she was carried to the forest behind the herd and set down in the shadows.

"Go on, find your daddy, little miss." He said with a nudge to her rear.

She stood up and took off, skating along the trees until she found Whip Scar at the edge, looking out. Celestia ducked under his body and pressed her head against his chest.

"There you are!" He breathed a great sigh of relief and let the filly hide underneath him. "Stay close, he'll pass over soon."

Looking over the rolling hills of the field, she saw the shadow travel across.

# Chapter 2

*Before anything is built, first there must be a need.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia as  
recorded by her friends**

“C’mon, we’re going to play *Griffs and Ponies*.” Celestia trotted to where Luna had secluded herself, already mid turn back to the field and expecting Luna to follow as soon as the sentence left her mouth.

“No,” The word rang sharp, the young filly’s attention down on a fuzzy caterpillar. She studied the multiple waves traveling down its long body as it moved, from end to end in mesmerizing grace.

“C’mooooooooooooon!” Celestia moved beside her sister and pushed her by degrees with her forehead.

Luna shifted her hooves for balance, still trying to watch the caterpillar. “No. I don’t want to. Everyone is faster than me.”

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, c’mon!” Celestia continued to push, nearly getting Luna to her feet. “I want you to play, too.”

A huff of frustration came from Luna, losing sight of the caterpillar. “Fine!”

Celestia bound forward, her trot hopping proudly as she returned to the field of her peers. Luna came up behind, tagging along closely with her head low as she approached the field of taller, older ponies.

“Hey! Hey, everyone!” Celestia’s voice carried well over the general disordered play of her peers, and they all stopped to listen as she bounced up in enthusiasm. “Painted Hoof is a griffon!”

Every filly and colt took off a different direction, screaming in the exhilaration of play. Painted bolted up to his feet and gave chase to a group of colts that all scattered.

Celestia whooped and cheered in excitement and ran with a mini-herd for no other reason than that they were running. Luna took a different route. She watched Painted's movements carefully and ran to the opposite end of the field, putting as much distance and as many ponies as she could between the two.

Dirt kicked up behind Painted Hoof as he took off like a shot and another pony was tagged in an instant. The new "griffon" singled out a slower runner and tagged her. And so on it went, the griffon changing hands, causing a wild flow as the herd scattered, combined and scattered again in the game. Eventually, Luna was singled out.

Celestia's younger sister weaved and zagged with the griffon in hot pursuit, buying herself time. But longer legs and stronger bodies eventually paid off and Luna became the new griffon. She stopped, panting fiercely, neck drooped in the inevitability of the game's course. With that moment's rest, she singled out a group in hopes numbers would slow them down, and charged.

Many scattered, but several of the cocky colts stayed behind letting Luna approach, only to bolt a few steps at a time and dodge her every time she got close. They laughed, taunted, stuck their tongues out daring her to continue. Luna pressed on, galloping at full speed trying to surprise them, before moving to a new cluster of ponies and trying to catch them.

The excitement started to die. Celestia groaned in the air of boredom that settled. Each time Luna approached a new group, they'd canter out of her way until Luna moved on and galloped slower and slower as chase appeared fruitless. Celestia reared up and kicked in the air, yelling as loud as she could. "Crimson Coat is a manticore!"

The wails of play erupted anew with twice the chaos as before. Colts and fillies ran in all directions. Two predators about them instead of one, added to the confusion, excitement, and most importantly, the fun! And the disarray gave Luna a chance to catch one unexpected.

In the insanity, Celestia found she caught Luna's eye —hard to miss that pink mane— and her younger sister galloped with renewed vigor after her. Celestia smiled at the challenge and shoved off the other direction, running clear of the herd. It wasn't an uncommon tactic to break away from the crowd when the turmoil grew too great.

Luna stayed tight on her heels, having chosen her target, herd or no. Celestia weaved her path in long arcs more from the thrill than anything. Luna paced herself in a steady

run, evidently trying to overtake her sister through exhaustion. The elder grinned lowered her body and put on even more speed as she crested a hill.

Her hooves tore up dirt in a sudden stop.

Painted Hoof laid limp as a wolf held his neck in its jaws. In those precious seconds it took to come to a halt, every detail about the scene shown in the clarity of a still lake on a sunny day. Painted Hoof was on his back, his limbs hanging in awkward, uncomfortable positions Celestia had never seen a pony take. The blood pooled around the wolf's lips, like drool, from where the colt's throat was crushed or the life choked out of him by teeth and jaw. Painted's tongue dangled out of his mouth, perhaps from when he tried to scream, but the eyes had since grown vacant of any spirit.

Wolves were among a pony's most feared predator. They dwarfed Celestia and Luna, standing as tall as an adult mare. From nose to tail, their body's bled swiftness, and rending teeth could wear down animals far bigger than a mere pony. But worst of all, they never worked alone.

While one wolf made the kill, four others competed for the prize and tried to tear Painted Hoof away, or whatever piece they could hold. But none failed to notice Celestia's approach. The cold, steady stare of a wolf was what nightmares were made of. The emotionless, calculating gaze of yellow eyes set in black faces.

Every limb in her body stiffened as hard as oak and her stomach left her body, leaving an empty, quivering hole where her insides had been. Somewhere in her thoughts, she was aware of Luna's tiny hooves coming up behind her.

"Gotc--!" Luna bumped into Celestia, but never completed her triumphant cheer as she crested the hill herself.

"Run." Celestia turned, pushing her shoulder into Luna before her sister stared too long. "RUN! RUN!" She screamed and shoved Luna to get moving.

Luna fell into step that quickly turned into a panicked flight as she responded half to her sister's state and half to what she saw. "MOM! DAD!" Her terror filled voice cracked as she began to call over and over again, between lapses to breathe.

Behind them, Celestia heard the soft impact of padded feet coming for her. A pair of pursuers, by the sound of their breath. "WOLF!" Celestia felt tears whip down her cheeks, cooled by wind. She drove Luna on, determined not to leave her. "WOLF!"

The alarm already sent waves of loosely organized panic through the ranks of the playing young and grazing adults. The fillies and colts' whoops of play turned into just general noise as they all ran to fall behind the protective rank of their parents. Some adults fled at the sound, others formed together into a cohesive mass. Still more sat still in raw confusion. Unlike griffons, there was no set plan of escape. Wolves' hunting tactics were too varied and cunning for a simple solution.

Whip Scar broke from the herd and flew across the field. His nostrils flared in wild rage, muscles and sinew from his shoulders swelled to power the large stallion's gallop as he went to meet his daughters. Lightning Kick was quick to his side, grim determination on her face. In the disorder, a few more followed their lead.

The wolves peeled off of their pursuit. A meal had already been won, and the opportunity of a quick second started to dissipate.

Whip Scar plunged past the fleeing fillies and placed himself between them and the predators. He kicked the ground and stomped feet with an angry whinny warning off any thoughts of passing him without a fight. Lightning stopped short and drew Celestia and Luna close. "Come on, girls. To the herd, I've got you."

A mare with a brown coat and black feet broke from the ranks that followed Whip and marched forward with an anxious hop. "Oh no, oh Sun, oh Stars, oh no, oh no." She mumbled as she went even beyond Whip to look over the hill. She gasp as if she had been dunked in a winter stream. "No. No! Painted! PAINTED!" She reared on her hind legs and kicked into the air, eyes the size of saucers. "My Painted! No! Get away from him you monsters! Get away!" She pounded the ground, looked as if she'd charge, lost nerve and ran parallel, braced for a charge again, then went back to running. "GET AWAY FROM HIM! GET AWAY! GET AWAY! PAINTED! GET AWAY, GET AWAY, GET AWAY!"

The wolves sat in patient silence, waiting to see if she'd draw near.

"GET AWAY! MONSTERS! GET AWAY!" She stomped and screamed. Other mares moved to her side and slowly pressured her back while she resisted and pushed through them. "GET AWAY!"

"Celestia?" Lightning Kick's soft but firm voice drew her away from the scene. "Back to the herd, let's get you away from here."

With her daughters pressed close to either flank, Lightning retreated to the other mares.

The chief mare led the herd across the fields, away from the expanse with the wolves. Not that they'd be a threat now that they ate, but to move everyone away from the scene of Painted's end. What was left of the afternoon, then, was spent in migration, a carefully organized affair that carried everyone to new fields between the vast expanses of the Everfree Forest. As the sun dropped below the horizon, the migration stopped to rest.

The moment she stopped, Celestia's fell to sitting on her haunches and broke into a loud wail. Tears streamed down her pale cheeks in small rivers, dripping on to the ground below. Whip stepped behind her and stroked her back with his nose. "It's alright. It's been a rough day for you."

Eventually, his low, bassy voice and soft touch turned down the wails into sobs. Celestia choked out words. "Why Painted? He was fast! He was the best at Griffons and Ponies! Why him?"

Luna slipped underneath her mother and pressed her head against Lightning's chest, as she had done since she was a foal. The younger sister had always been hard to read. She never lost a quality about her blue eyes that made her appear to be a distant observer. Luna watched Celestia and her mother in silence, whatever thoughts she had never coming to the surface.

Lightning frowned in sympathy and slowly shook her head. "My poor Celestia, my poor, dearest Celestia. No pony has an answer to that question, other than that what is, is."

The elder daughter's sobs slowed to near ceasing, only a bad case of sniffles remaining as she listened. "But why?"

Whip's low voice responded. "This is our lot in life, as Earth ponies. That is the only answer any one knows. We are prey, and all that entails. Creatures will hunt us. Sometimes, bad things will happen to those we care about."

The pink mane fell over her eyes, and her ears pinned themselves back and flat. Her shoulder's sagged and her forelimbs threatened to buckle.

With her tail, Lightning dried her daughter's cheeks. "This is something we all must pass through, my dearest. It is a tough chew which no one likes to swallow. I was your age when I lost my first friend."

Celestia wasn't sure, but when she looked up, she thought she saw a gleam of a tear in her mother's eye, reflecting the colors of sunset.

Lightning lowered her head and checked on Luna, nosing her side. "Her name was Fall Arrow, and she was like a sister to me. One day, we were playing at the river's edge when a cougar attacked us from behind. It could have killed either of us, but had chosen Arrow. They both fell into the river and I ran to warn the herd. Arrow didn't make it. You never forget your first lost friend, and I am sorry to say it will not be your last. It hurts right now, I know it does. It will hurt worse than anything you know. Tonight, you will feel like grieving, and you should grieve for your friend. Tomorrow will come, and you will feel like grieving just a little less, and a little less. One day soon you will stop grieving and life will continue."

Everything felt too heavy, she wanted to shrink into a ball. She slowly lied down, silently staring at the in twilight.

"C-can you tell us a story?" Luna took a step half out from under Lightning.

Lightning looked to Celestia. "Would you like to hear one as well?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Any one you want to hear or a new one?"

"The one about the Sun and Moon." Luna spoke up again in a quiet voice and retreated back under Lightning.

Lightning took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her voice was moved in a strange poetry, her narration like a song with invisible melodies that none the less touched the heart in her quiet delivery:

*A long time ago, back when legends lived and walked the Everfree Forest, there was born a very special pony. The first unicorn. Her coat was perfect and shined out a magical light on all that gazed upon her. Her mane and tail were as soft as a warm spring breeze. They made her into a princess, for her beauty was unlike anything ever seen. and she used her magic to bring peace to all those who saw her.*

*Hearing of such wonders that roamed far below, the stars traveled many miles through the sky and came here to gaze at the world that created such wonders. Amazed by the unicorn princess' beauty and kindness, they shined down on earth a small reflection of her magic light, and continue to do so in her honor.*

*Seeing that the star's attention turned from her, the Sun grew jealous and moved to Earth to claim it as her own. Trying to overshadow the princess unicorn, the Sun made itself glow with as much glory and passion as she could. But her vanity betrayed her and she shined so bright that it blinded any who tried to look at her.*

*The stars grew angry at the Sun's petty jealousy and made an appeal to their sister, the Moon to put a stop to the Sun's poorly thought out actions. The Moon agreed and tried to reason with the Sun. When the Sun would not listen, they battled. The Sun turned the sky blue to chase away the stars and deprive the Moon of their help. But doing so tired the Sun, so she went to rest. The Moon restored the sky so that the stars could watch the planet and all its wonder. Each morning, the Sun reawakens and turns the sky blue once more in her battle against the Moon. Each night, she tires and the Moon restores the night. They have been fighting for so long, they have forgotten why they fought. But even as they battled through the ages, life continued below and the unicorn lived happily underneath the Sun, Stars, and Moon.*

As the story concluded, Celestia's chest rose and fell in the silent sighs of sleep. Yawning, Luna left Lightning and curled up to her sister's side, resting her head against Celestia's shoulder.



# Chapter 3

*Ah! The joys of youth.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia  
as recorded by her friends**

Celestia's gaze traveled in a practiced motion, a set of movements instilled from when she was a foal. Left, then right, then skyward. Left, then right, then skyward. The motions had long since moved into muscle memory so the filly, on the cusp of being a mare, practiced them unconsciously. Vigilance was needed when traveling the Everfree Forest, even mid-day.

Between thick branches of the tree canopy, Celestia caught a glimpse of sunlight, moving lower on the horizon. "It's growing late. I really don't want to be here at dusk." Colts and fillies of a certain age braved the forest during the day, despite the danger. The craving for adventure was too strong in the young. But even the young had enough sense stay out of the forest as soon as the sun touched land.

"One more moment." Luna dug at the ground with her forelimb. Her hoof made rhythmic claps on the dirt as she unearthed small pebbles of imperfect turquoise. They had found this deposit not long after the herd had settled along this new edge of the forest. Ponies loved beauty: flowers, butterflies, and stones included. But they likewise understood it could be captured in memory, only. Migratory and without tools, it was said that memories are the only things you keep. So each day, Celestia and Luna traveled back to the mineral deposit and gathered a new stone. A new stone, a new memory—and a new chance to show it off to the other fillies' jealousy.

Luna frowned at her quarry once she gathered them. Selecting the brightest, bluest rock with her lips, she planted it safely in her tail. "Yesterday's was better." She fell into a trot beside her sister, practicing the similar motion of a look-out as the two traveled alone. Nothing to the right, nothing to the left, and nothing on the branches to attack from above.

Celestia lead the way, winding through the forest to return to the field. "Yesterday's was great. Round and with specks of black."

Luna's voice fell into a daydream like daze. "Do you think Chosen Oak will like this one?"

The halt came so fast, Luna nearly rear ended Celestia. The younger sister's admiration for the colt Chosen Oak was a poorly kept secret. Mares grinned and giggled to each other to watch Luna's large blue eyes light up when Oak passed by and watch him quietly from a distance. That information passed down to the fillies, who teased Luna and only made her that much more shy about approaching Oak. Celestia glanced over her shoulder. "Oh my, Luna, you must not have heard. Oak stepped on a snake just yesterday. He's seriously sick." It did not need to pass between them that he was unlikely to recover, or survive.

"Oh," The word left Luna as quiet as a breeze. She stopped her look-out's gaze to stare down at the trail in front of her. Celestia resumed the walk back, Luna behind her with head lowered. "That makes two this week."

"Two? In one week? Who is the other?"

"Uncle Apple is growing old. His joints hurt when he moves. They say his Time is coming soon, and he is making peace with his family."

Celestia shook her head. A pony's Time came when they could no longer keep up with the herd. Whether it was a snake bite, or old age, if they could not run, it was simply impossible to shield them from predators. "Two in one week." Thoughts of Painted Hoof drifted through her awareness. Her mother had been right, you never did forget the first. But even prepared to lose more, losing too much, too fast still stung with unexpected pain.

The forest ended on ahead, trees giving way to long shoots of grass and rolling hills. Celestia broke out into a canter, Luna doing the same to keep up. Ahead, a loose crowd of ponies roamed. Foals played, adults grazed or rested, and sentries kept a careful watch on the forest and sky. Only once Celestia was in the herd with ponies at her back did she let out a sigh of relief.

"We're back!" Celestia found Whip in the throng and greeted him by wrapping her neck partly around his: an equine hug.

"Welcome!" He said with a wide smile, and greeted Luna as he did Celestia. "So, what did your forest adventure find this time?"

Luna fished in her tail and pulled out the turquoise rock with her lips before dropping it on a hoof to show off. "Do you like it, daddy?"

He leaned in, admiring the details of the rare stone. "It's lovely. A thing of beauty."

A smile pulled back the lips of the midnight filly, and she raised her tail in a proud arc at the comment. "Is it like what the humans wear?"

"Sometimes, sometimes." Whip gave a nod, then knitted his brow, thinking back. "I didn't see many humans with such stones. Only their chiefs and people who had lots of money could have ones with colors like this."

"Money?" Luna tilted her head.

"It's something that humans love. They give it to each other to get more things. Do you remember how they live in houses rather than fields or forests? When you have a house, you can fill it with things. Money is a thing."

"Oh!" Luna seemed satisfied with this answer and smiled broadly before tucking away the rock back in her tail. "Did your master have a lot of things?"

A laugh erupted from Whip. "That crotchety old cuss? Maybe he had a lot of things, I can't tell what is a lot for a human. But he didn't have a lot of *nice* things in his house or mind, and that's for sure!"

The laugh was infectious and Celestia smiled but inwardly the line of questions started to bore her. Scanning over the herd for friends' faces, she found her eyes drifting over the forest and her thoughts turned to Uncle Apple and Chosen Oak. "Did you fear predators while you were with the humans, dad?"

Whip took a seat on his haunches, considering the question with a long moment of silence. "I suppose there were other things to fear. If master was in a bad mood," He gestured to his back, striped with the scars from where he got his name. "Or if I fell and broke a foot. When I ran, I feared his dogs, nasty creates like wolves, but louder and stupider. But I did not fear predators."

The trees swayed in a breeze that ripped through the field. Dark, foreboding leaves turned only darker as the sky gave way to twilight. "Do you ever wish you could go back and not have to be afraid of them?"

The brown stallion shook his head and the answer came without hesitation. "Never."

Celestia turned her attention back to her father. "Why not?"

"I suppose watching out for medusa, cougars, manticores and the like is not fun." Whip shrugged his shoulders, and tossed back his brown mane. "We'd all be happier to be rid of those things. But forcing a pony to stay when he wants to go, or work for what is not his, and whipping him when he doesn't please you, that just wasn't natural." He gestured with his neck to the field. "Here, I have a herd," He sat up and nuzzled each in turn. "And my daughters." His eyes fell on Lightning Kick and a quiet smile, one he only ever had for her, grew on his muzzle. "And my mate. Things I want to work for. Here, I am happy. Monsters, or no."

Celestia fell silent in thought, but that only lasted a breath before Crimson Coat nearly bowled her over. "Ahhh!"

"Celestiaaaaaa!" He grinned and trotted around with a giddy bounce. "C'mon, we got ol' Tank Flank dared to try to dance the Star Trot in front of everyone! It's going to be hilarious." As quick as he came, Crimson was off like a shot to spread the word.

The night passed fitfully. Dreams of wolves and griffins filled Celestia's rest, and several times she found herself flung to her hooves, awake and panting with fear. The yellow eyes of the wolf remained clear in her mind, still staring with their cold, calculating gaze impressed into her ever since that day some time ago. She curled back up to sleep each time and tried to shake off the feelings that lingered. These things occurred often enough with her, and to some extent, universally, called the Shared Dream.

At a time all too early, warmth bathed her body and light flooded past her eyelids. Celestia groaned over the lost sleep and rolled over. But it was a losing battle, the sun merely grew brighter as it raised itself into the sky. Finally, she rose to her feet and shook out her disheveled, pink mane.

"Good morning, Celestia." Luna's voice held a light and teasing quality. "Not often that I beat you out of rest."

The elder sister grumbled and groggily stumbled forward.

Luna looked over her shoulder with a smile. “Dreams bother you last ni—” The smile vanished and Luna stared unwittingly, jaw dropped, body frozen, eyes wide.

Celestia stumbled back. “W-what?” A flush came over her face.

Without saying a word, Luna approached step by slow step, reached up a hoof and tapped something attached to Celestia’s forehead.

“H-hey!” She raised her own hooves and felt along her face, annoyance rising in her gut. “Did some pony play a prank on mee . . .” Everything melted away from her awareness, like water smeared over ink, as her hooves told her the shape and feel of the new addition to her features. A long, unyielding substance, shaped like a thin cone, curved with ridges that spiraled up to a pointed tip, on the center of her forehead. Celestia’s disbelief nearly matched Luna and she exchanged a single glance before she sprang on her feet and ran full gallop to the river’s edge, heedless of anything else.

She snorted out in agitation as the river’s flow proved unable to catch a reflection. She ran up and down the river bank, bumping into Crimson Coat and knocking him into the water as he drank. “Hey--!” He got out before the splash silenced him. Not that it mattered at the moment. In a crevice of still water, the blue sky bouncing off a smooth surface, Celestia had her first glance at her new, white, unicorn’s horn.

Her breath was stolen by that image. Gingerly she touched it and felt the real sensation of it being a part of her body. She explored it all over, looking for seams, or perhaps some sticky sap that meant someone stuck it on her forehead as a joke. But it was too perfectly matched to her white fur coat, felt too real in hoof, and she threw doubt out the window.

“I’m a . . .” Her face lit up in the pond, shining brighter and smiling wider than she ever had. “I’m a *unicorn!*” She reared up, bucked, kicked, bounced, screamed and hollered, unable to contain the raw excitement of the fantasy made reality. “I’m a unicorn! I’m a unicorn! I’m a unicorn!”

The commotion gathered attention, heads poked up curiously from the herd, Luna came running over at a canter, and even Crimson Coat came out of the river with the sour look wiped from his face.

“A unicorn! A unicorn! A unicorn!”

What followed was, at best, calm chaos. Murmurs rippled through the herd in waves. Mares, stallions, foals under their feet moved forward. A crowd formed around her, growing thicker and thicker. Whispers were traded until the sheer number grew loud. The whispers gave way to outright talking, and that into a cacophony of voices speaking over each other. Gasps, cries to the Sun and Moon, praises, swears or mere trading words all merged. Sentries abandoned their posts as the commotion stretched to the outermost edges, and joined the growing cluster.

Celestia pranced and posed and grinned wide at the attention, strutting through the crowd that left her a respectful distance, while savoring each gasp, each jealous stare from a disliked filly, each look of astonishment as she sought her friends to speak to and squeeze and bounce with in shared excitement. "I'm a unicorn!" She repeated to herself. More than anything, that was her thought. Still finding it hard to believe.

It was the stern command of the chief mare that called sentries back to their posts. The throng of ponies parted, allowing her passage, flanked by Lightning Kick and Whip Scar. The chief, in her grizzled gray fur, stood taller than most mares, though Celestia was not sure if that was merely because she held herself more erect than them. With serious brown eyes, she broke through the crowd and leaned in close to the new unicorn. Celestia, for her part, knelt politely.

The Chief's presence hovered close to that horn, her breath ruffling the unkempt mane. "Little filly, can you cast a spell?" She risked a gentle touch to the spiral of the horn

"I don't know how I'd do that." Celestia blinked up at the chief, but the old mare's attention already turned inward and she went to leave with a purposeful trot. Lightning and Whip followed stealing glances back at their child. The crowd closed around their wake, still marveling at the new horn, but with a curious kind of murmur.

That encounter left her in unease.

The night justified her discomfort. "Celestia," Lightning Kick summoned her away from her friends, with whom she whittled away the last of daylight. As Celestia closed, Lightning Kick turned to lead her to relative privacy among the herd. "There is something important your father and I need to discuss with you."

Whip gave Lightning a passing affectionate nuzzle as she turned to sit and both faced their daughter. Celestia chewed her lip and waited.

"The chief, your father, and myself have been discussing your new . . . blossoming."

The filly nodded her head. Whip exchanged glances with Lightning before she continued. "The uniqueness of your birth has never been hidden from you. Or most of the herd, for that matter. Hard to hide a mane of pink, as I'm sure you know." Lightning let a smile pass over her, but the humor was chilled by the gravity on her face. "There are no stories in our collective memory like yours, no tales of such a birth or growth, and only the faintest stories of unique colors. We believe that this turn of events is the blessing of the stars playing itself out."

Celestia's eyes darted between them. "That's good, right?"

"Yes," Lightning's grave smile returned. "That is good. But it also has certain implications we have been discussing."

Whip gave a quick nod. "The point of this being, it's been decided to take you to the unicorns."

"The unicorns?" Excitement charged Celestia's voice, with equal parts reverence. A wide grin stretched her lips and her eyes dazzled.

"Yes, this herd has no idea how to support your growing. The unicorns will know if you have magical talent, and be able to teach you, if you do."

"I'm going to learn *magic*?" She'd thought she'd squeed the last word and rose to her hooves, trying not to prance off right away.

Whip raised a single eyebrow, then burst out in a short lived laugh. "You're taking this rather well. But yes, you just may learn magic."

"Thank you, daddy!" Celestia's hind and forequarters rocked as she hopped over to Whip and gave him an equine hug. "Mommy!" Lightning received one as well, and Celestia felt her mother hug tighter than normal. But too many other things were on her mind, and she turned to gallop off. "Wait until my friends and Luna he—" Dirt kicked up under her hooves as she ground to a halt. "Luna is not coming with me, is she?"

Lightning shook her head. "I'm afraid she isn't going. While you have a horn, she's just an Earth pony."

The answer drained her of the gallop and the elder daughter left in a walk.

That night brought much needed rest to Celestia. The dreams treated her kindly, and she slept with a peaceful grin and a soft sighing chest. But before sleep had carried her off, her mind was filled with stories of unicorns. Descendants of the first unicorn princess, inheritors of magic. Elegant mares of grace, weaving beauty with their horns. Stallions strong in magic, commanding the elements, striking at predators. Time could not pass swiftly enough. And yet, what of Luna?

The next morning, she tapped her sister on the flank and watched her large, blue eyes slowly open to the early morning light.

“Ehh-mmm . . .” Luna slowly stretched out. The remnants of sleep still gripped her. “Whaaat?”

“C’mon,” Celestia gestured for her to follow. “We need to get you a horn.”

Luna pursed her lips and shot Celestia a skeptical look. But silently, she rose and followed. At the River, with other early rises, Luna refreshed herself, drinking cool water and smoothing over her mane with one hoof. Feeling the last dregs of sleep shrug off with the daylight, she shook out her tail and turned to her sister, waiting in silence.

“Are you ready?”

“For what?”

“To get you a horn.”

Luna looked to the side and down, contemplating what she heard. “How?”

“Uhh,” Celestia’s flower-colored eyes of soft pink widened at the question. “We’ll figure that out.” Turning away Celestia took off at a canter for the rolling fields of green grass. Plenty of room around them, and fewer distractions from all the adults. “Alright!” Celestia stopped and Luna had to back pedal after the unexpected halt. “Well, I think I know what we can do to get you your horn!”

Luna took a seat on her haunches, long shoots of grass tickled her back and rump. Celestia marched and paced in front of her like a teacher addressing a group of younglings without looking at them directly.



“So, the stories say that magic comes from within, and horns are magic. So, we need to get that magic in you, out of you, and on your head. Then you’ll have a horn!” Celestia stopped and smiled to her sister. “That easy!”

A nebulous feeling of doubt rose at the back of Luna’s mind. She maintained a serious expression when met with Celestia’s smile.

“So, start on that. Umm, concentrate. Concentrate on getting that magic out of you.”

The sun rose over head. Shadows marked the passing of hours as Celestia coached Luna in the spacious field, repeating the exercise again and again. Luna had long since collapsed to the ground as her legs grew tired of sitting.

“Concentrate harder! Find that magic.” Celestia only had so many ways she could convey that one idea, and she to simply repeated herself.

“Ehhh!” Luna grunted out with the sustained effort. Muscles tensed all along her body, her face, her head. She grimaced with the force she pushed herself, harder, and harder, imagining a horn of her own. “Ehhh-GAH!” She stopped, exhaustion set into her once again, head and face numb with the unusual work out.

“Luna!” Frustration took over Celestia’s voice. “You’ve got to keep trying. Otherwise, you can’t come with me to the unicorns.”

A colt’s laugh interrupted the air, and Luna jerked with surprise. Crimson Coat approached, having gotten close while Luna tried to find her magic. “Luna? See the unicorns? Why would she do that?” He smirked with the confidence of a joker, a mocking in his voice.

Celestia swiveled to face him with the bulk of her body and held her neck proud and aloft. “Because she’s my sister!”

“Yeah, so? Stars never said anything about her. She’s never going to have a horn. Just going to be a little Earth pony.” A self-amused, uninviting laugh finished his sentence.

Luna stared down, low, observing the grass around her feet, the intricate seedpods, wide blades, and thin, stiff stems. Crimson’s words stung like barbs across her back, each one hooking into skin and drawing blood. She stayed low, and quiet, watching the grass while feeling the words.

“She can get a horn, and she will. Just you wait.” Celestia huffed and widened her legs to stand her ground. “We share blood, so we might as well share this.”

“I’ll be waiting a long time. Just ‘cause you want her to have a horn isn’t gonna get her one. Face it, all she’s going to be is the boring Earth pony sister.”

Celestia dropped her head low and grunted, closing her eyes and pointing her horn at Crimson. It glowed with a translucent pink aura, and he fell to his hind quarters, gasping as icy fear gripped him and paled his face. Celestia strained and groaned louder, the pink glow became brighter, more vibrant. Crimson broke out into a sweat, frozen in place.

The white filly let out a cry as she released the building magic, rearing back. A single, white ember leaped from the tip of her horn and drifted down to the ground on the dalliance of the wind, harmless as a firefly.

Crimson Coat fell to the ground in uproarious laughter. Limbs flailed and he rolled uncontrollably back and forth on the ground.

Luna rose to her hooves and tapped a disappointed Celestia on her flank. “I think I need a break. All this concentration has given me a headache.”

Celestia exhaled and nodded to her.

The younger filly trotted away from the colt and across the field of green. Adults and others milled about, grazing or talking as they always did and Luna weaved her way through the herd to put some distance between herself and Crimson. Returning to the blue river, she trotted downstream, following the winding curve until she felt satisfyingly secluded from the company of others.

Sitting down at the edge, she finally let out a sigh, releasing the pent up tension of Celestia’s training and Crimson Coat’s remarks, though she could not say the sigh was a relaxed one when it left her lips. She knelt to the ground and dunked her face beneath the tugging waters of the river. Closing her eyes, the refreshing coolness stole away some of the headache until she needed air. She laid and thought while staring at her reflection in the water. No horn in sight under that waterlogged mane.

Briefly, she tried to envision the horn using Celestia’s methods, but abandoned it as it returned the headache at the very thought.

“Magic comes from within?” Luna posed to herself and closed her eyes, experiencing every emotion as it whirled around in her head and sorting through them. The pain still lingered from Crimson’s comments, finding a true soft place to pierce. Pressure weighed on her. Celestia would leave without her unless she earned a horn. What would she do at this herd alone? But these were simply emotions. “What is magic even suppose to feel like?”

Her frame lifted in another sigh, this one filled with hopelessness. No shaman ever came at her birth. No pink and white colors marked her as special. Luna opened her eyes and looked down at her leg’s midnight blue coat. While a dark blue didn’t stand out, her shade was at least a little different, and far more pure a color than any pony had seen. But still not special when she stood next to Celestia.

A yawn stretched out her jaw and she rested her head on crossed forelimbs as thought gave way to a light sleep.

When she opened her eyes again, the sun had travelled another short distance across the sky, no longer rising but descending to the west. Luna stretched out her limbs and shook out her neck, casting her mane over her shoulder. With a pang of thirst she knelt to the river and drank. Satisfied, she pulled back and stared into the water, assessing herself after the nap.

And saw a blue horn on the center of her head.

“Oh!” Excitement flooded her veins and she tapped her horn with a forelimb to confirm what her reflection shown her. It was there, responding with a physical sensation that signaled it was a part of her. Face flushed, she inhaled a happy breath.

Her hooves could scarcely carry her fast enough back to the herd as she yelled out her sister’s name. “Celestia! Celestia, come quick! Where are you?” She darted between mares, searching all around, poking her head out at the river and circling back to check the field. Out of the corner of her vision, she caught Lightning first and turned sharp to her

“Mother! Mom!” Luna’s feet slipped on the grass, and her hind quarters fell out from under her, but she stayed on her forelimbs and was up as quick as she fell. She threw herself around Lightning Kick’s neck in a hug. “Mom! Look! Look what I just got!” She stepped back and tossed her mane, showing off her new, blue horn.

Lightning gasped, and caught off guard, her mother was unable to block the anguish and shock on her features. Quickly, she covered it with a smile, but it was too late. Luna had seen it. "That's a lovely surprise, dearest."

In that moment, Luna realized her mistake. Whip and Lightning already had to lose one foal. Now, they were going to lose both.

# Chapter 4

*Change, even that which we most desire, is bittersweet. It's our dual nature to long for the past, while trying to leave it behind.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia  
as recorded by her friends**

Leaves crunched beneath a dozen hooves. A small party surrounded Celestia and her sister, three stallions in all. Charging Hoof, and Little Apple (Uncle Apple's young nephew who Celestia felt earned the title) took place along the young mare's sides, while Whip guided them deep into the Everfree forest. The trip had gone under way in a silence that grew uncomfortable for Celestia. Last thing she needed now was a chance to think. But despite her feelings, the chance at conversation seemed remote, all consumed in their tasks and Luna as quiet as ever.



Instead, the rhythm of the steps at all sides lulled Celestia into a sense of daydreaming. Her mind wandered over her situation, taking her back to that early morning. Saying farewell to friends was easier than she expected. The little pangs of sorrow were overwhelmed by the excitement at going to see the mythical unicorns. She hugged some, made promises to others, and for the best of friends, even shared a teary departure. But even under watering eyes, her smile beamed.

With Lightning Kick, that changed. They both embraced and tried to wear their smiles, but Lightning's mood began to rub off on Celestia. Sure, a mother expected a stallion to leave the herd at that age when wanderlust took them, but she was losing both fillies she had expected to keep to old age. For the first time, Celestia felt the sadness extinguish her enthusiasm.

"I will come back, mom." She buried her face in her mother's neck. "I will come back, I promise."

“My dearest Celestia, don’t be so quick to give your word.” Lightning’s wet cheek pressed up against her daughter. “You have a unique life, and it may carry you far and wide before it brings you back here. Promise me instead that you will make good on that gift the stars have given you. That you won’t let sentiment be your guide.”

“Okay,” Celestia sniffled, but did not let go of the embrace. “I promise that.”

Lightning shared a similar teary eyed farewell with Luna. At first, Celestia thought that Luna’s composure—that of a distant observer— would win out, but after only a few minutes, her younger sister was bawling and Lightning was drying her tears. What words they exchanged were private, as was Celestia’s time with her mother.

And then, with the three stallions, they plunged into the forest at dawn.

She kept her head low to the ground, wishing that something would distract her. Excitement to see the unicorns gradually turned into anxiety. Doubts plagued her mind, growing in strength as each hour passed and she stewed in the silence. Would they like her? *What* were they like? Did she have any actual magical talent or was that little spark all there was? More and more, she began to chew her lip in apprehension.

Finally, she could stand it no longer. “Are we close?” She forwarded the question to Whip at the lead.

“We’re here, actually.”

Surprise shook her and she raised her head over the backs of her escort. Yet, all she found was an empty, still forest, answered only by the chirps of a bird.

“I—uh, don’t understand?”

“They’re probably watching us right now.” Whip kept his deep voice low. “Checking us out before they show themselves.”

She gasped, recalling the stories shared at home when the sun drew down. Unicorns could turn invisible? She had doubted that bit of lore, yet now . . .

“Luna? Celestia?” Whip looked over his shoulder and gestured from his neck for the two to come closer. He then spoke at a whisper. “When we meet them, don’t reveal you were born as Earth ponies.”

“Why not?” Celestia blinked, bewildered. Luna looked between them with curiosity in her blue eyes.

“One day, you may understand more. But for now, just accept that sometimes it’s better to wait before you tell your whole story to those you don’t know. Only when you feel it is absolutely safe should you reveal the secret of your birth.” Having said all he planned to, Whip continued the slow walk with his head forward.

Celestia paused her step, the concept hitting her from somewhere unexpected. Luna stopped next to her, still following the lead of her big sister unthinkingly. Among the close knit herd, there was never room for secrecy, and a secret was always a temporary state. To harbor one? So different from her life in a familiar herd. She marched forward with that on her mind.

“That’s far enough.” A sharp male’s voice called with a tone of one accustomed to being obeyed.

“Well met, unicorn .” Whip halted, those behind him following suit.

A full day and more leading to this. Curiosity surged in Celestia as soon as her hooves stopped, and she peaked around Whip’s flank, trying to steal her first glance at the mysterious pony. The unicorn must have been average male size, except he stood erect, much in the manner of the chief mare back home, only that his spiral horn made him appear taller still. His coat of faded gray was so heavily spotted with white that the gray appeared as mere lines between milky spots. The mane and tail, a dusty off-white, flowed behind him well groomed. Celestia would have called him a mere pony with a horn on his head, except for a sheen that made the colors almost imperceptively richer.

“Three Earth ponies, and two filly unicorns come wandering into the forests. Such an unusual arrangement. And far from an Earth pony’s home.” No jest could be found in him. Dark eyes approaching black marked them with suspicion.

“We come with a matter that concerns your herd.” To the unicorn’s tone of command, Whip responded plainly and with his own kind of dignity. “We’ve come to return two of your kind who were among ours.” Whip stepped aside and revealed his daughters.

Celestia felt exposed as those dark eyes fall on her. A flush came over her face and her knees wobbled despite the fact she tried to stand straight. She felt as much as saw that Luna sidled a few inches closer to her side once Whip left.

It became easier to stand once she saw the surprise on the unicorn's face. "What's with her colors?"

"That is a mystery to us." Whip answered.

His eyes narrowed, aggression filling his voice. "She is well into her years as a filly. Why was she not taken to us as a foal?"

"That's complicated."

The unicorn shot Whip a glare, but turned his attention back to the girls. "Your names."

"Celestia," She hoped her voice didn't betray her nervousness. "and Luna."

The midnight blue unicorn shuffled out but remained quiet, the question answered for her.

His eyes narrowed again, this time in contemplation. The chief turned to a unicorn next to him who Celestia only just noticed. Quiet, and stoic as a rock, he was easy to miss. Short for a stallion, with a curly mane and tail, a gleaming horn of silver sat upright on his head. Flank and shoulders slim, he held himself strangely for his stature: his gaze brimmed with an inner intelligence and he stood like a pony twice his size.

The chief unicorn whispered to his partner who nodded and exchanged a brief word. To the guests, he turned again. "We will accept Celestia and Luna into our herd where they belong, despite their age. You three Earth ponies may return to your fields."

Whip gave the chief a curt nod then went to Celestia and Luna. In turn, he wrap both in a hug, his neck to theirs. "Take care of each other. Who can you trust more than a sister?" He chuckled, though his amusement was darkened by the moment.

Luna might have teared up again, but pursed her lips and tried to appear strong as Whip and Luna exchanged one last glance. Celestia's chest tightened at the sight and when Whip turned to her, but she fought off any more reaction than that.

"I love you both." With that, he turned away and the Earth ponies left.

"Come." The chief's commanding voice gave no tolerance for delay and the sisters jerked their heads toward him. Impatience marked his gait, a hurried trot. When they



came along behind him, he spoke again “Why did the Earth ponies wait so long to bring you here?”

“Uhh, it’s complicated?” Celestia grinned wide, innocent only in the fact she felt clever remembering Whip’s answer.

The chief grumbled under his breath and stopped before the trunk of a massive tree. With a magic glow of gray, the bark on one side of the great trunk folded away and rumbled with a property like hair and ease of brushing aside a leaf. Beneath that covering rested a hole large enough for a pony to slip in with ease.

Celestia had to pull her jaw off the forest floor. She rubbed her eyes with one forelimb and stared agape once more, looking from folded faux-bark, to the hole and back again. Luna exchanged a glance with her, blue eyes wide in wonder and astonishment.

It took a nudge from the small, gray unicorn to get them moving, and they both filed in, wonder not diminished in the slightest. Inside, she found the seams where wood joined wood. Three, or possibly more lesser trees had been molded into the appearance of a single great tree, hollow on the inside, but with a ramp that spiraled up to the top.

“Ebon Swift!” The chief’s voice echoed in the confined space.

The sound of hooves clopping on hard wood came from on high and a black unicorn trotted down the ramp.

“Ebon, I need you to babysit these fillies. I need to call a council. Until then, they are under your care.”

*Fillies!* Celestia spat the word in her mind. Blood boiled within her. *Babysit!* She glared at the chief’s backside when he left the trunk.

The façade of bark fell over the hole, but the inside remained lit by a soft, yellow light that Ebon sent high above them with magic.

“Babysit?” He said with a good natured laugh. His light aloft, Ebon smiled to both of them wide and friendly. Compared to the chief or Whip, he was young, but unmistakably into an age where he could be called a stallion. A black mane fell long around his black shoulders, suiting his name. Ivory teeth appeared all the brighter set into a dark face. “These two young, beautiful mares?”

The glare was wiped off Celestia's face, and her cheeks flushed red. "Th-thanks you." The fumbling of her words only made the blush brighter. Luna shuffled a forelimb on the floor and averted her gaze, but stole a glance at Ebon with her own light flush.

"Don't mind ol' Grumpy Gus, he can be like that when he has something on his mind." The moment the words left him, he winced and made his way over to the hole to peek out. "Don't tell him I said that, or Silver Spear for that matter."

"Who?"

"Silver Spear." Ebon let the disguised tree bark close again. "He's the quiet one always next to the chief. That chief would be Phantom Spell, the Grumpy Gus you just met. My name, I am sure you have heard only a second ago, is Ebon Swift." He inclined his head to the sisters, a playful grin ever present. "It's unusual for me to not recognize two mares around here. What would your names be?"

The white unicorn composed herself, remembering the dignified tone her father took. "I am Celestia. Well met."

"Luna." The midnight blue pony attempted to make her announcement strong, but her voice squeaked out her word under the strain of her shyness. Embarrassed, she drew back a single step, letting her sister stand at the front.

"Well met. Two beautiful names for two beautiful mares. So, tell me." Ebon's eyes glittered in magic light and he leaned in just a hair with interest. "What's your story? If I am to guess, you are new."

Celestia returned a short nod. "We were raised as—" She stopped and recovered without missing a beat. "—by Earth ponies. They just brought us here only a moment ago."

"Is that so?" The exclamation was more for surprise than an actual question. He sat back on his haunches at the thought. "Then you know nothing of the unicorns?"

"Only the stories passed down."

Luna, who had slowly been moving forward from her sister's side, gained her voice. "Which isn't much."

“Hmm, perhaps I understand now.” Ebon nodded his head, and raised a hoof to his chin in thought. “That explains Grumpy’s grump, alright.” He hopped from his haunches and turned to walk up the spiral ramp. “Whelp! There is a lot I need to show you, then. If you don’t mind, follow me.”

The dozen of hooves thudded on wood and echoed across the chamber as they climbed higher and higher. Turning an ear and an eye, Ebon spoke to the mares behind him while leading. “May I ask something, Celestia?”

“Sure.”

“Is that mane color natural?”

Celestia tilted her head up at the stallion. “I’m . . . not sure what you mean?”

“The pink. Is it . . .” Ebon took a moment to rephrase. “Was it the color you were born with?”

“Oh, ha, ha!” Her cheeks pulled back in a smile. “Yeah, I was a pink-haired filly.”

Ebon nodded his head up and down in a slightly exaggerated motion. “Very interesting! I don’t think I’ve seen anything like it.”

“May I ask you a question?”

He turned his head with a broad smile. “Any question at all, and I’ll answer.”

“Can unicorns,” Her voice dropped low, in a sense of awe. “turn invisible?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” The black stallion stopped as the ramp ended at another hole. “Oh, no! That’d be way to much effort. Especially, when we have—” With a white glow of his horn, he pulled back the hole’s cover. “—*this*.”

Light, natural light, poured inside the tree, smothering the magic glow provided by Ebon, who wore a giddy grin. Celestia and Luna walked past the black stallion and stood at the edge of the tree, staring out.

Neither could hide their gasp. They had travelled up into the forest’s canopy and into a whole new world. In front of them, a wide, long branch extended forward with a flat, wide base large enough for two ponies to cross comfortably. That branch met far ahead

by other branches and tangled together in smooth transitions like the joining of strands in a spider web. Down, up, this way and that, the web stretched on in the canopy, unicorns coming and going from tree to tree on their own business. All of this in a world swimming in green leaves, above, below, either side, and bathed in cool shade as the sun trickled through.

“Welcome to the unicorn herd.” Ebon’s said in supreme smugness. “And this is how we hide.”

Celestia stole several more breathes, still taking in all she saw. Timid at stepping forward, it felt as though the world would vanish once she touched it.

“C’mon,” Ebon trotted gaily between them and the branch creaked with his passage. “I’ll show you around.”

Luna stared down at the pathway and tentatively placed her hoof on its smooth surface. Next, another hoof, than three. Finally, she stood high above the ground, on this living bridge. A smile parted her features and she looked up to Ebon for approval.

Kind eyes met hers, then turned to Celestia. “You are quite safe, I’ll catch you if you misstep.”

Taking a deep breath, she willed herself forward all at once and found her hooves clopping on a strong surface.

“There we are.” He turned back and led the sisters along the pathways, showing them bends and turns that extended far in all directions of the canopy. “Phantom Spell did have some reason to call this ‘babysitting,’ even if the word is a bit harsh. You two don’t know our ways and until you do, it’s best you stick close to me. With a little time, you’ll pick it up. Otherwise, it won’t be safe. The first thing you need to know about is the birds.”

“Birds?” Luna asked.

“Birds. We use them to give warning. Different bird calls, different warnings. Ahh, here we are.” Ebon stopped and gestured up with a hoof. High in the branches sat a mare of brown, her head going back and forth in a pattern Celestia recognized as similar to the sentries of her own herd. But over her, a waved mesh of vines and leaves camouflaged her from the sky. “This is just one such look out. This one is responsible for making sure no crazy griffin accidently chooses to rest here. If one does,” Ebon pointed to a series of

birds of several shapes and sizes, that snoozed, preened, or rested on a branch close to the mare. Tied about the ankle with a vine, none attempted escape. “the lookout uses one of them to send out a call. Other lookouts will echo the bird’s call until the rest of us know what’s going on, which lets us know where to go for cover. We have these all over, guarding the sky, watching the ground . . . so if you hear a bird’s call, do as I do and stay quiet.”

The talk of griffins caused a lump to form in Celestia’s throat and she nodded with a swallow.

The warning system taught, Ebon spent the rest of the day showing the new unicorns routes around the forest to different places of safety hidden inside the hollowed trunks of trees. The nature of the forest and need for concealed entrances made the task difficult, so Ebon taught and retaught the locations until the memories formed strong, stressing the importance of remaining hidden.

“Do wolves or cougars try to sniff us out?” Through the day, Luna had just gained enough knowledge to become inquisitive.

“Those little guys?” Ebon laughed and shook his head. “No, nothing that small. They were chased out of this side of the forest years ago. Occasionally, a lone coyote might try to wander through, but a quick zap of lightning sends him on his way.”

Her pupil grew enormous, and her lips curved into a silent *oooh*. “You can do that?”

“Not myself, heh, heh. But some can.”

Celestia narrowed her gaze. “Then who do we hide from?”

For the first time in a long while, Ebon stopped smiling. “There are creatures out there far too dangerous to confront, even with magic.”

“Like who?” Luna asked again.

“Hydra, ursa, when griffins travel in groups, wyvern, manticores, loup garou, trolls, gnolls, occasional human explorers, dragons, well maybe not so much dragons. Dragons aren’t much interested in ponies, but it’s best to play it safe. Nothing quite as scary as a dragon that I know of.”

“Oh.” Luna all but whispered, blue eyes wide.

“But, that’s why we have built this place, and so far, so good.”

The rest of the day passed adding routes and safe areas, for either on the ground or in branches—for all the complicated cultivation of the trees, walking the forest floor remained just as vital and it had its own set of hiding holes. Eventually, the sun crested the horizon, and the colors of dusk settled into the sky.

“Enough for today? I think so.” Ebon nodded his head, and trotted along the tree-paths to another hole in a wide trunk. “Make sure to stay only in places where you know the route to another safe room. You’d never want to get caught outside when a warning goes off.” He chuckled to himself, peeling back the covering with a glow from his horn. “Here we are. It’ll be where you can rest for tonight.” Ebon lifted another magical light aloft to the low ceiling.

Celestia filed in, Luna right behind. At the word “rest” Celestia breathed a long sigh.

“Been a long day for you, hasn’t it?”

The elder sister nodded. Thinking back, the single day felt like many as a memory. The early rise, departure, long and nervous trek through the woods. And then, here, paths to memorize, a new herd, and unfamiliar ways, words, concepts. Her legs ached, her mind fatigued in retaining what she learned, and emotionally she was used up. “It has.”

“Time to rest those eyes, then.” Ebon gestured with his horn. “I’m sure you need no guide to your beds, but if you need anything, just walk down that ramp and ask. Tell them you are the new arrivals, and that should be enough. Sleep well.”

The cover closed in a ruffle, and Ebon’s magical light already began to fade without his presence. “Beds?” Celestia asked herself aloud as she shuffled to a pile of leaves that had a quality of being knitted together with magic. “Like river ‘bed?’” Ebon didn’t think to explain what he meant, and what did a river bed have to do with sleep anyways? Earth ponies slept on soft grass, not “beds.” Touching a hoof to the leaves, they gave the feeling of cushion and Celestia promptly flopped herself hard into its embrace. Close enough.

She expected sleep to come quickly. It did not.

“Celest?”

The light had long since faded. Only pitch black greeted Celestia's groggy eyes, and she debated if there was a purpose in opening them at all. Enclosed in a room up in a tree, not even moonlight softened the night. To her sister's call, she groaned.

"Celest, I can't sleep."

The elder sister groaned again, in agreement.

"It's . . . weird here. It's too high up. And I can't see."

Thoughts of the cool earth filled Celestia's mind. Thoughts of peaceful nights on the field of grass.

"And no one is here. Everyone is sleeping all separated in other trees, instead of together. Celest?"

"Yes, Luna?"

"Can I sleep next to you?"

"Of course,"

The woven leaves across the room ruffled, the sound of hooves approached. A moment later, she felt the brushing of a warm body against hers and Celestia adjusted to make room so Luna curled against her side.

"Luna?"

"Yes?"

"Are you thinking of home?"

"No. Why?"

"Maybe I miss it."

"Oh,"

"Do you miss it?"

Luna's mane rustled as she shook her head. "No,"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe I miss mom and dad. And grass. But not home."

Celestia closed her eyes and rested on the leafy pad once more. A long sigh left her. Luna's chest lifted in her own. Sleep still did not come easy, and her night was filled with the dull ache of knowing what she left behind.



# Chapter 5

*As the years and generations pass before me, there are some things that never diminish. Love, hope, friendship, and learning. Perhaps the last of these is why I decided to make Canterlot a university, for I am ever a student.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia  
as recorded by her friends**

The camouflage cover to their room flew open, rustling in the motion. Light, sharp and bright, flooded in and stung Celestia's eyes. She turned her head away, groaning. Luna shifted against her, burying her face under Celestia's mane. Their first night here had little sleep and they clung to what more they could get. But in vain.

"Get up." Phantom Spell's even tone demanded obedience without delay.

Tendrils of sleep still slackened Celestia's muscles, and it took some effort to rise. Luna made a squeak of complaint as she lost the comfort of curling against her sister and she too had to find her feet. It was strange to wake up here. The sun had always been gentle in its beckon to rise, shining gradually brighter and slowly warming those who fell under her gaze. But here in the darkness of the hidden room inside the tree, it came as a slap in the face, as if night had been torn away in one swift jerk.

"Come." Phantom Spell turned from the hole and his hooves could be heard trotting away in an impatient gait.

Celestia shook herself, mane and tail flying, to send a jolt of energy down her body. Tapping Luna on the flank with her nose, she motioned to the hole. "Come on, before he turns into Grumpy Gus."

The two sisters stepped out of the tree and onto the living bridge at a quick trot. Phantom paused, but resumed his walk as they closed. "I have consulted the heads of the crafts. Your arrival has thrown an unexpected twist in our vines. You know nothing of our ways, and nothing of magic. You are like foals."

Celestia bit her lip to still her tongue, but it failed to stop a huff.

Curiously, Phantom peaked over his shoulder before turning his attention back to the path. "But you are not foals. Had you been younger, we could have merely tossed you into class with the rest of the fillies, and that would have been that. But now, you need special arrangements. Special considerations due to your age. That means time and resources." Arriving at his destination where the bridge met the trunk of another converted tree, he turned around and sat back on his haunches, lifting one hoof to gesture. "We have to draw teachers away from their normal duties, arrange for times, lessons, we have to expend yet more in giving you chaperones and teaching you the basics of what every foal knows." He stomped his hoof down against the wooden bridge where it punctuated his sentence with a bang.

The action startled the mares straight and stiff, eyes wide as they listened.

"As you can imagine, the situation is precarious. Here is how it will go. You get those arrangements. For now. Your tutors will report directly to me with your progress. Show talent or skill that justifies the resources, you get to keep the personal tutors. You don't, and you learn with the fillies."

In the pause, Celestia swallowed a lump in her throat, only after realizing that Luna did the same at the same moment.

Phantom's eyes shifted between the sisters. "It's not a threat, but simply a fact. You are unknowns thrown into a very efficient system. It will take some trial and error before we find out the best way to make use of you." The pale horn on his head took on a gray glow, and the camouflaged cover of the tree peeled back. "On to your first lesson."

Celestia and Luna lurched forward, tension driving them into the hole without delay. Behind, the cover fell closed, and the sound of Phantom's hoof-beat drifted away.

"Hello!" A cheerful, female voice called their attention.

A fraction of a second passed before Celestia could see clearly in the lesser light of a fairy lamp suspended from the roof. Shadows danced and played as the creature fluttered around its small prison, perhaps too primitive to understand its cage. Unlike many rooms, this one appeared built with a specific purpose. Indents, in rows in columns just large enough for a small pony, sat in a floor that sloped to focus point. At that center stood a pony of brown with a mottled white midsection and a pale horn.

The teacher wore a smile that lacked sincerity. It sat on her face like a decoration, a friendly mask she could wear to hide any other feelings. Despite that, her demeanor did not seem sinister in the slightest. "Welcome to your first class day!" Her voice matched her smile, bubbly and approaching singsong in delivery. "My name is Levity, and I teach the basics of magic."

Despite the fatigue, the abrupt morning, stern Phantom, or this silly mare, it only took one word to wipe it all away: *magic*. Giddy feelings bubbled up in the white mare with the pink mane. In a surge of energy, she bounded down the sloped floor and rested her haunches on a front row indent.

Skeptical at first at this teacher, Luna's eyes sparkled and a grin spread her features as she took a seat next to her sister. Sitting tightly on her forelimbs, she eagerly awaited more.

"First, let me get your names!" Levity beamed her masking smile.

Both answered curtly.

"Celestia,"

"Luna."

"Ahh, those are good names!" Her singsong voice replied. "So this will be your first lesson in magic, will it? I'm sure this is quite exciting for the both of you. Never before cast a spell? We'll start at the very beginning."

Celestia gave a glance to Luna, who mirrored her incredulous expression. "No offense, Levity, but we are not foals."

Surprise wiped the smile off her face. "What? Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend. I'm so use to giving this lesson to the younglings that I guess I just fell into my old habits." She cleared her throat, most of the singsong gone. "I'll try to speak more at your level. So," she paused to think. "do you connect to your horns, yet?"

A blush reddened Celestia's cheeks, finding the concept unfamiliar. On the heel of what she just said, she felt quite *foal*-ish. "I'm, uhh, not sure."

Taking a deep and calm breath, Levity half closed her eyes. In relaxing tones, she recited a litany that felt well practiced. "Close your eyes, and follow my instructions."

In the pause, Celestia did so.

“Relax. Breath in until you fill your chest completely. Now relax as deep as you can, letting the air flow out. Reach deep into your thoughts with a still mind and feel what is there. Pay attention to what you experience. In the quiet, do you feel that inner thrum, like a heartbeat? If you don’t, reach for it, let it gush to you like a spring. This is your *will*. It is a power inside you that wants change things. For other ponies, their will is separated from the world. It can only change themselves. But we are unicorns. Our will has a way to the outside world: our horns. Now, take that *will* you have, it responds to what you want it to do. Take hold of that will and guide it forward. Project it out of you, but don’t release it.” Her tone changed to hold the tiniest amount of giddy mischief. “Now, open your eyes.”

Two new glows bathed the room. One a dark blue, the other a pale pink. Celestia gasped aloud. She kept her thoughts on her horn, sustaining the light, and bounced in excitement. “Ohmystars! Luna!”

Her younger sister proudly displayed her radiant horn with a wide smile.

“We’re doing it, Luna! We’re doing it!”

Levity’s melodious laugh caught their attention. “Almost, almost! But what you have right now is nothing more than a lamp.” With a green shimmer from her horn, Levity drew out a round stone no bigger than a hoof, and placed it directly in front of her. “Now that you have it glowing, though, it’s ready to channel magic.” Her masking smile returned as she fell into habit. “A skill every young unicorn must learn is simple telekinesis, otherwise known as moving something with your will! Practice on this granite ball. Your goal is to lift it up, off the ground!” She gestured to Celestia with a forelimb. “Oldest first! Your will that you have up in your horn. Shape it into what you want to change, give it guidance. Connect your will to what you want to accomplish. Then, release it.”

Phantom Spell’s voice echoed in the back of Celestia’s mind as she stared down at the stone. “Show skill or talent . . . or be thrown to the fillies.” The thought quickened her heart beat. She drowned out the voice by focusing on the task. The rock. Lift that rock. She envisioned it happening, the stone rising off the ground at her command. She lent that image to the power channeled in her and felt it take a specific shape, molding as easy as water yet retaining the desired form like clay. It had a purpose now, ready to impose itself on reality. Celestia stared intently at the ball and released the energy of her will toward where it sat.

The stone blasted into the air with the fury of a shooting star. Levity shrieked and threw herself to the ground. It struck the solid roof, splintered a section of wood, and bounced around the room like a hyperactive grasshopper. Luna took a cue from Levity and laid low, covering her head with her forelimbs. Celestia stared dumbfounded, trying to track the rock's frantic flight as the energy bled off in each collision. Eventually, it came bouncing to a stop, then rolled down the floor to bump the cowering, brown mare on the flank.

Levity rose, horrified and staring at Celestia. Her chest heaved in a fearful pant as she tried to catch her breath.

Celestia glanced around the room, noting each dent and each shatter of wood. A split piece of lumber the size of a branch fell from the ceiling and thumped on the floor. Turning back to Levity, she smiled wide and innocent. "Sorry?"

"N-next lesson." Levity squeaked. "Will be about control."

She didn't make the same mistake twice and produced a feather for Luna, rather than a stone. Using these small objects, she put them through the basics of managing their magic, releasing just the amount needed and no more. So engrossed in the reality before her very eyes—in the floating of objects by thought, or creating light at will—time passed in a blink. The next thing she knew, Ebon Swift stood at the entrance, leaning against the wall with a wry smile. Levity took notice and ended the lesson with teaching mental exercises they could practice away from class.

"Already on to control?" The black stallion made room for Levity to file out. She went in a rush not staying a second longer in that room with those two mares than she needed. "You must have left quite an . . . impression?" His dark eyes caught the fresh split wood on the ceiling and he raised a single brow.

"Umm, you could say that." Celestia blushed but smiled, happily trotting up the incline to greet Ebon. Luna followed in her wake. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, just your next lesson." He shoved off of the wall with his shoulder and opened the canvas with a white glow of his horn. "More pathways and hidey-holes."

The blue unicorn let out a tired groan, and Celestia sighed with disappointment.

A quirk found its way to his lips. “Or, tell you what. I’ll show you a little something at every place we stop. Take you around the other unicorns and show you what they do.”

Luna gasped and her wide eyes sparkled at the prospect. Celestia raised her head with some curiosity.

“Out we go!” Ebon went with fresh excitement, holding the canvas open for the girls until they followed him out. The bridges they cross twisted, joined, and forked with no obvious pattern. A pattern would have been a flaw in the camouflage, Ebon explained. So the bridges were erected trying to mimic the forest in all its chaos. Yet, there were signs for those who knew how to look. Vine arrangements, leaf or bark patterns, other things that would not stand out in the canopy, yet could be seen by trained eyes. It was by these things which the web was navigated.

“Hey! Good day to you, Cres!” Ebon nodded his head to an older mare sitting at the edge of an out of the way branch, deep in thought with horn aglow.

She glanced up from her work and the corners of her lips stretched in a soft smile. “Ebon, how good to see you.”

“Cres, I’ve brought you a couple of mares who I’d like you to meet.” He moved to the side and gestured to his followers. “This is Celestia, and her sister Luna. They are the new arrivals from the Earth ponies.” He gestured to the older mare. “Celestia, Luna, this is Crescent Change. She is one of the best weavers of the craft.”

“Weaver?” Luna lifted her head in curiosity, throwing back her mane from her eyes to see more clearly.

“It means I make all the curtains that cover the doors.”

Celestia exchanged a glance with Luna. “Doors?”

Surprise came over her face. “Oh my! The Earth ponies are really different, aren’t they?” She drew up what had been tinkering with. On the pathway, she laid out a bundle of multicolored hairs—browns, whites, grays, blacks— wrapped together like a single pony’s tail at one end. At the other, the strands separated then joined together in a crisscross pattern, formed into a broad square. “This would be a curtain, in the making, anyways. Weaving we call it. When I am done, it will vanish on the bark, like all the others we use to hide. We put it in front of doors.”

Thoughts of the trees she had been going in and out of all day struck her. Even if life on the fields had no doors or curtains, her question took on a humiliating edge in retrospect. "Oh. Those."

But it did not deter Luna from her curiosity. "Is this pony hair?"

"Yes, it is."

Apprehension filled her voice. "Where do you get it?"

A good natured laugh shook Crescent's frame. "Volunteers, and they are quite happy for the exchange."

Ebon cleared his throat and looked to Luna. "Would you like to volunteer?"

The pony took a hesitant step back. "I don't know."

"You'd be able to see how this all is done." Ebon offered with a raise of his hoof.

"I don't want to be bald!" Luna blurted out in panic and took several steps back.

Ebon and Crescent Change turned to each other with a wide eyed stare, then burst into riotous laughter. Luna shrank to Celestia's side as Ebon sat on his haunches and clapped a hoof against the ground. "Ha, ha, oh no! Nothing like that!"

"No." Crescent wiped a tear from her eye. "No, dear, I won't make you bald. We only take every third hair or so. In exchange, I groom your hair. Take out the knots and straighten it."

"Oh," Sheepishly, Luna left Celestia's side and walked forward. "O-okay. You can take my hair."

Standing up from where she sat on the side of the bridge, Crescent moved over to Luna with her horn shining purple. Luna pinched her eyes closed and stiffened her body as she lowered her head for Crescent to look. Gracefully, Crescent bent close to Luna and began to manipulate her hair. She unweaved the knots and tangles, taking the occasional strand from her mane. She cleaned the hair of blemish or oil, and arranged it so it fell around Luna's face and neck anew. Luna blinked her large eyes open. Gentleness calmed her nervous feelings as the older mare worked, curling the ends of some strands, straightening others and arranging them around her horn. Ebon, thinking

ahead, gathered dew and water from among the leaves, and suspended it in air so Luna could see her reflection clear as day.

“Oh my!” The young pony gasped and slowly shifted her perspective to see all sides. Never before had her mane been arranged by anything more than the dalliance of rain or broad gestures of a pony’s hoof. “It’s . . . beautiful!”

“Your hair,” Crescent responded with her own amazement. “It’s exquisite. Soft in texture, but with the richest, most pure blue I have ever seen. I love your mane.”

Luna flushed and she giggled to see the reddening of her cheeks in her reflection. “Hey, I have a question?”

“Yes, dear?”

“You can change the color, right?” She lifted a hoof and pointed at the multicolored mat that lay across the bridge.

“That’s right.”

A mischievous grin spread on her. “Can you make mine pink?”

Crescent chuckled and concentrated on the mane for a fraction of a second. In a swirl of purple magic, Luna’s rich blue turned vibrant rose.

Seeing her reflection, Luna clomped her forelimbs against the branch in a bounce and giggled impishly.

“Now, for a living mane, the change won’t last. It will gradually fade back to your natural colors.”

Celestia caught sight of Luna’s playful glance and shot her an irritated look.

Luna teasingly stuck out her tongue in reply. “Okay, I was just curious, auntie Crescent. But better change me back, I don’t think Celestia will like my new look.”

The elder sister contorted her features and rolled her eyes in a silly face.

Another brief gleam of purple and Luna’s mane was restored blue. “All the better, probably. Phantom Spell would not approve of me changing colors of all the



adventurous mares that come my way.” She gathered up the bundle of freshly cut, blue hair and sighed at the sight of it. “Wasted effort or some such.”

Catching a grim look from Ebon at the sigh, Celestia felt a strange impulse. Like an inkling of something greater sat just below the surface. “Is something the matter, Crescent?”

“You have beautiful hair, both of you.” She tied the new strands together and set it aside, next to the larger, half woven curtain. “It’s a joy to fix manes, but Phantom insist on restricting the arrangements to being practical. Then there is this weaving. For once, I’d like to create styles, or sew a curtain into something to be admired and nothing more. Not for hiding or other things. But,” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s not deemed important by Phantom.”

“Oh,” Celestia nodded her head then dropped her gaze in thought. Luna knelt close to the curtain itself and occupied herself with watching Crescent spin new strands into the design. Something felt wrong. Quickly, her mind went awry when she realized again she was standing on a branch, close to several pony-lengths off the ground, sea of green leaves anywhere she looked. Vertigo clouded her and she began to sway.

“Whoa, now!” In an instant, Ebon was by her and she was leaning against his broad side. “You okay there, Celest?”

She blinked, then sat down. “I-I-I think so. I’m sorry.” With a forelimb, she wiped off her face, trying to rub sense back into it. “Just had a sudden rush.” So much was new, so much different. Her friends gone, parents, starry nights. Left back home.

“Alright, go ahead and just lie down a moment. Let Crescent fix up your hair while you catch your breath. Maybe that lesson was tougher than you thought.”

Wordlessly, Celestia complied and the older mare cleaned up her mane and tail, adding stylized curls much as she did for Luna. Once done, Ebon lead them to the ground level and continued to teach markings.

“What’s that!” Luna interrupted him midsentence. “Over there!”

“That!” He laughed. “Is what I will show you next.”

A streak and flash of blue-white light blinded Celestia. A pop, a pale reflection of lightning and thunder, crackled up ahead. Closing her eyes, she shook her head to wipe

the after-image from her vision, then peered through the trees. Several young colts and an equal number of intense fillies stood in row, finding space in the underbrush. One of the fillies bent her head low and her spread her legs wide and aggressive. Her horn gleamed yellow, flashed, and released a burning ember that shot through the forest and exploded on a tree in a shower of sparks.

Silver Spear was there, behind that filly. He whispered something to her ear. She nodded and her horn glowed yellow once more. The fires caused by that ember became smothered in their own smoke, burning dimly than dying. The filly looked up to Silver Spear for approval and he gave a brief nod that brought a smile to her face.

“Combat training.” Ebon answered. “You are a ways off from even considering such a thing, but I thought you’d like to see some wild spell casting.”

Luna moved to Ebon’s side, observing carefully. A colt bent low next, and a gush of wind stripped a branch of all its leaves. “Can you do stuff like that?” She asked, looking up to the stallion with wonder.

“No,” He shook his head with a smirk. “I do other things.”

“Could you if you tried?”

“No, probably not.”

“Why?”

“Magic is complicated.” He peeled his attention away from the practice range and looked down to the young mare. At that instant, Luna’s blue, wide eyes had captured him. Distant eyes of the observer nevertheless held the impression of deep intelligence. She’d understand what he had to say. “It’s a lesson you’ll probably soon have covered, but most unicorns can only use their best magic in a single given skill.”

A slight inquisitive twist of Luna’s head signaled for him to explain.

“So, magic comes from your inner will, right? A lot of things influence that will. Mood, sleep, and so on. One giant influence is your passion, what you are passionate about. Crescent Change,” He gestured up to the canopy of trees from where they came with a flick of his neck. “She is passionate about design, or being creative, or maybe just hair.” Ebon gestured to the practice field where the colts and fillies cast spells. “They are passionate about defending those who need it, or maybe just passionate about fighting

or seeing fireballs explode. The specific passion can be very different for two unicorns, even if they use it in the same skill."

Luna smiled to him, and nodded her head, pleased. A brief pause brought forth another question. "What's your passion?"

Celestia was shaken from her thoughts and leaned in to listen. "I'd like to know that, too."

Ebon blinked at that remark, blushed deeply at a thought on the tip of his tongue, then shook his head laughing. "I'm not really sure. I just know how I use it. I shape the branches we all use to cross the canopy. My passion is related to . . . bringing ponies together, I guess."

"Ahh," Luna nodded, letting her eyes linger on his face as his attention distracted him.

Celestia stepped forward along Ebon's other side. "That's a wonderful passion." She found herself smiling before a nagging thought resurfaced. "So, who is Silver Spear?"

"Huh?" Ebon was shaken from his introspective moment. "Silver?"

She pointed her horn down the field at the stoic stallion. "Silver. He was with Phantom when we arrived."

"Phantom often calls him when there might be trouble." Ebon responded matter-of-fact. "A close ally, friend maybe even? Either way, Phantom feels just a bit safer when Silver is there, but I guess we all do."

Celestia stopped her expression somewhere between a chuckle and a grimace. "Isn't he a bit . . ."

"Quiet?"

"Short."

Ebon snorted with an unexpected laugh. "Yeah! Yeah he is. But let me put it this way." Ebon knitted his brow in thought. "He's not the most powerful --magically or in size. If you wanted to lift a big rock, or buck a giant tree, you wouldn't go to him. But if you were being chased by a hungry . . . manticore, the first pony you'd call is Silver Spear."

On ahead, a filly summoned a stream of water, only in her inexperience, she summoned it all over the entire line of students in a shower. They screamed like children and scattered to keep dry. Meanwhile, Silver Spear lifted a hoof to his face and shook his head with a sigh.

Luna, Ebon, and Celestia all burst into laughter.

That night passed easier than the first. It was no less uncomfortable to sleep up high in that tree, cut off from the ground, from the stars, and from the herd. They shared a bed again in the pitch black, the touch their only reminder that they were not alone. But the second night, it was less of an alien place, less of an unfamiliar herd, and it was less difficult to fall into a peaceful sleep.

# Chapter 6

*Sister, or brother: I hear the term used sometimes in affection among close friends. Sometimes I wonder if they really understand the complexities of siblings.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia as recorded by her friends**

“The elements of harmony are a form of magic that unicorns must be at least aware of.”

Celestia laid her head against her hoof, bored and slouched in one of the indentation meant for sitting. One of only two students in the class, there was no hiding such blatant displays. The tutor, an old stallion who had decidedly little patience and even less charisma, glanced in her direction with an increasingly irritated look. But for the moment, he continued his longwinded lecture, segueing into a topic only loosely related.

The pink haired pony shifted, glancing over to Luna. Her little sister put up a much better front at remaining interested, sitting soundly in her place, hooves tightly nestled between her legs. She even came to life once the old grump actually covered magic, but her eyes glazed over when the tutor prattled.

“I had first learned of the elements under my sixth master, when I was but a colt and he instructed me . . .”

Luna nodded off.

Their days among the unicorns had fallen into a rhythm, rising in the morning for magic lessons and spending their afternoons under a guide teaching the way of life. Phantom stayed true to his word. Or if he broke it in some way, they never experienced it. The arrangement stuck and a new private teacher was provided each time Celestia and Luna completed the lessons of the last.

But Arcane Pride, the current one, deemed himself doing the two girls a favor, pulled away from whatever his other duties were, and did not appreciate their lack of respect.

“On using the elements!” He raised his voice and stamped a hoof against the wood floor.

Luna started and came awake with a yelp, then sat carefully paying attention once more.

“There are five elements which are utilized: Honesty, loyalty, mirth, generosity, and benevolence. They augment magic and open a vast number of unique spells. Today, you will use one of these elements for a desired effect.” Arcane blinked and leaned forward, trying to see passed his poor eyesight. “Ehh, yes, Luna?”

A raised, midnight blue hoof lowered once he called on her name. Another strange custom he insisted on maintaining. “If the elements of magic are emotion, how is honesty or loyalty an emotion?” Questions, at least, guided the topic and made Arcane more tolerable.

“While those values are typically displayed through acts, they are associated with emotional motivators. There is an impulse that drives an individual to be honest or loyal with their fellow pony. It is that impulse which we use as an element.” The old stallion cleared his throat to stall for his next thought; a sickly sound. “*Will* is the base and can be used on its own for most spells. Think of will as water. The elements are herbs. Water alone is very adaptable and useful. It quenches thirst, soothes, or cleans. But when combined with herbs, the water vastly expands its range. Some herbs deaden pain, others bring about a pleasant taste. Think of magical elements in this way.”

“Are there other elements?”

Arcane lowered his nose and scrutinized the young mare.

“Oh!” Luna lifted up her hoof.

He motioned for her to lower it. “Yes, there are other elements, but never use one that is not an element of harmony.”

“Why not?” Luna hoisted up her hoof again as she blurted out her question.

“The elements of harmony,” his voice came at a hushed tone, “are safe in magic.” Arcane Pride stared at Luna with an intense gaze, his expression grave as any Celestia had ever seen. “If you use another emotion as your element, it changes you. Don’t ever augment another feeling.”

A shiver crept down Celestia's spine. The gravity of the moment was out of place on such a dull pony like Arcane. The most she ever seen from him was irritation.

"Now, for your task. " His resumed the deadpan delivery, but it was easier to pay attention as his phrase signaled an upcoming exercise. "Using the element of loyalty, entwine these saplings." His horn took on the color of gold as he brought forward four uprooted, tiny trees that he placed between them. Two in front of Celestia and two in front of Luna. "A chief feature of loyalty is binding two separate things. It should compliment such a spell so that the saplings become like one."

Celestia hoisted herself up from the slouch and into a proper sit. The blue light of Luna's horn washed over the green buds of the saplings as her sister spoke. "I've heard of these elements before. The basis of unicorn society, right?" She called her own will forth and added a pink light to the room.

"That is correct. The elements were discovered by Kong Qiu, that being his name in the old tongue, during the chaotic times, when he tried to unify magic philosophy with societal functioning . . ."

As Arcane droned on, Celestia toned him out, concentrating on the spell. Loyalty, that was the element. It only took a single thought to find that impulse in her: Earth ponies. The herd. Whip Scar, Lightning Kick, all her friends. The binding force that kept even those she didn't like together while living in the danger of the Everfree Forest. Loyalty. Taking that feeling to her will, she felt the magical nature change and she unleashed it at the saplings. Pink magic swirled around the baby trees, and in a flash, the bark meshed so completely that the two appeared as one. "So, they are like suggestions I guess." The act had taken little effort and Celestia showed that by slouching back in her seat.

"For magic, if thinking of the elements in such a w—"

"I meant for unicorns."

In confusion, and with a hint of indignity, Arcane blinked and tried to stare passed his eyesight at the mare. "I beg your pardon, young lady?"

"The elements of harmony." Celestia shrugged. "Generosity, benevolence . . . " She lazily poked each thought in the air as if they had manifested before her. "I'd have expected to see more of it, being the ideals and all."

“That is a very momentous statement from the mouth of a foal such as *you*.” Arcane’s nostrils flared and he snorted in mounting frustration. “One that makes you look the fool as well. You, of all, could learn much from how we behave. Our society respects the elements.”

Celestia flew to her hooves and leveled a glare back at Arcane. “Yet, our cousins in the fields, the Earth pony, are left to fend for themselves. I suppose generosity doesn’t apply to them?” Something invisible struck the side of her face and threw her head around. The thing curled around her muzzle like growing vines and pinched her mouth shut so only grunts could escape.

Arcane’s chest heaved, his horn wreathed in gold flame. “Enough! This is a classroom, and you are a student! You will keep your mouth closed until the end of this lesson, whether you will it or not.” He took a deep breath, and on exhaling, released most of his fury, if not his annoyance. “Why, if you had been my filly, I’d have tanned some manners into that hide of yours. Something your Earth pony caretakers evidently failed to do.”

Luna sat dead still in shock. Glancing over at her elder sister, whose lips pressed together awkwardly under the binding, she began to smirk, then giggle. Seeing Arcane’s, flustered, red face, the giggling turned into out right laughter.

Celestia rolled her eyes.

The rest of the class passed with the muzzle of sorts in place. But she spoke plenty with her eyes, fuming, or rolling sarcastically, or generally holding contempt at her teacher. Yet, she obeyed, casting spells or sitting in silence. Arcane exchanged an occasionally angry glance at the young mare and only once he was already half way out the door, did he loosen his spell.

Luna laughed again as Celestia shifted her tight jaw and worked her lips. “Heh, heh. Wow, you really made him mad this time. I think he even ended class early.”

The pink maned unicorn shrugged. “Whatever.” But upon setting foot outside, she saw the sun several lengths low, early from its usual place at the end of class. She smiled. “Worth it.”

“They won’t expect us for awhile.” Luna added, echoing Celestia’s thoughts.



“Let’s go find Ebon.”

A frown doured the sister. “I wanted to go see Crescent Change.”

Celestia, already taken a step to go, looked over her shoulder at Luna. “Why?”

“All the unicorns are talking about her.” Her face lit up. “They say that she made this—this . . . thing from hair and wood. She’s treated the hair and bound it so it’s pulled taught by the wood. By plucking the strands, the thing sings. It must have taken her hours and hours to make it just right. Apparently, she never got permission and built it in secret. Phantom is mad, but others are begging to keep it. They say that it’s as if she’s given the stars themselves a voice and it weaves a magic all its own.”

“Huh, that’s weird.” She looked ahead again, tensing to go. “But let’s see Ebon, today.”

“What?” Luna sat back, dismayed. “But what if they take it away? This might be our only chance.”

Celestia shook her head. “No, not today. Crescent will be in the middle of work, and you want her to stop, dig it out of whatever hidey hole she’s put the thing in, and then play it for you. Too disruptive.”

Luna pursed her lips in a pout. “Crescent likes talking to me. She’ll probably be happy to take a break. And Ebon is at work, too.”

“Only probably, not definitely. And Ebon can chat while he works. If we go to Crescent, we might waste our free time. No, we’re going to see Ebon.”

A deep sigh lifted Luna’s chest, and she exhaled dejected. Celestia went, Luna followed behind.

Finding him, at work or even in general, was among the easier tasks Celestia went about. When it came to Ebon, she knew his job and where it took him. The bridges and homes were still living trees, growing and changing as they are prone to do. Given time, they warped at their interconnections and needed routine care, the kind Ebon was skilled at. All she needed to do was remember which places she passed that were still smooth and which were in need of attention. Narrowing the list down, she trotted at a youthful pace across the canopy of the forest, checking them out one by one.

“Ebon!” Seeing the black stallion up above, she broke into a gallop and chose a ramp that would lead to him. Luna came up from behind, galloping just to keep up.

“Celestia, Luna!” He smiled wide and pleasant. White teeth gleamed in contrast to his dark coat. “You’re out of class!”

“Yeah,” Celestia smiled in return, and giddily trotted her forehooves. “Got out early, and going to see how long I can escape the next duty.”

He laughed good naturedly. “Heh, heh! Always keeping your chaperones on their toes, like usual. Walk with me as I work.” He trotted to the next interconnection with a pale glow of his horn. “So, what’s new?”

“Ugh, so much!” Celestia grimaced and rolled her eyes. “You won’t *believe* what Arcane did to me today! Threw a spell on my mouth to get me to stop talking.”

A snort erupted from him as he laughed hard and unexpected. “Wow, I mean, I know each of your teachers must have thought about doing that at least once, but you must have really had Arcane going if he went that far.”

She raised her lip in contempt. “Psh, it’s been building a while. He goes on and on about whatever, and acts like I should *enjoy* his blah-blah-blah. Don’t get me wrong, I like magic, I really do. I can respect teachers who, you know, *teach*. But Arcane Pride only gets around to teaching after a saying a bunch of random details and it’s soooooo boring.”

“Pride may be a little hard to pay attention to, but he’s also one of the smartest unicorns in the herd when it comes to magic.” He bent low and parted the bridge from its neighbor, molding it in white-colored magic.

“Whatever. He’s a hypocrite, too. I’m so ready to be out of his class.”

“You may get you wish soon.” Ebon chanced a glance at her while he reshaped the wood. “The craft elders are just short of exchanging blows to get the both of you.”

“They’re doing what?”

“Arguing like mules. You’re approaching the end of training. Actually, you’ve had more than most, especially advanced stuff. You’ll be getting into actual crafting now. Phantom had hoped you’d show a specific skill and then you could simply go with that. But if at

this level, neither of you have shown leanings, then that's a griffin's hope. He's going to have to make a decision soon, and even if he divides you and your sister, a lot of ponies will be unhappy."

A vague, uncomfortable feeling followed Celestia at the thought. "Why are they all fighting over me?"

The glow faded and Ebon raised his head in surprise. "Are you kidding? As far as I know, nobody has ever seen anyone like you. Just look at you." He turned and gestured over her body with nod of his head. Celestia felt her heart skip a beat as his eyes traveled down then up again. "Your horn is taller than anyone else's, you've got a coat and mane that can only be explained through magic, and you are quite beautiful to boot. Every knows you are special, and your sister too. And that was before you started to show magical talent the likes of which have never been seen in living memory."

Celestia blushed brighter and brighter as Ebon went on, feeling like she grew as red as an apple. Shyly, she averted her gaze from him and tried to resist speaking, knowing it'd come out as a squeak.

"So, anyways," Ebon bent low to his task again, fusing the pieces back together in a seamless join. "Each group wants you for their own reason and are arguing where you'd be best. The sentries are convinced that'd you drive anything short of a dragon away with the volume you can unleash spells. The wood workers believe you will expand our network many fold. The weavers think you'd be able to make new kinds of veils the likes of which are only in imagination. So on, and so on, among all the rest. They go back and forth."

"D-don't I get to decide?" She fought through the flush to say, that idea still making her uncomfortable.

The stallion pursed his lips into a smile, then chuckled. "Ehh, you just might. Phantom might think that'll be the best way to end the fighting."

"I should hope so." Celestia poked Ebon's side. "I just heard today that he was going to destroy someone's toy, that they made on their own. Grumpy Gus is a name well earned for him."

Ebon Swift raised his head and took a glance to both sides before motioning silently for her to keep it down. "I'd rather not have him learn that nickname from me."

Celestia sat down on her haunches, giving Ebon a teasing smirk. "Someone scared of ol' Grumpy Gus's grump?"

"Hey!" He lifted his nose with playful indignity. "I use to have classes under him. You don't know how scary he can be. Phantom was the only teacher who ever got me to stop goofing off. As for the toy, I assume you mean Crescent's invention."

"Who else? If I understand what I've heard, that thing she's built is the talk of the herd. And Grumpy wants to break it."

"Break it? Well, who knows. That's just hearsay. I'd guess he'll just confiscate it. It won't be good for him to leave Crescent's actions unanswered. She spent too much time away from her duties to finish that instrument she made. It'd set a bad example."

"What a serious killjoy! No element of laughter for him." She managed to sit back and cross her forelimbs over her chest with a huff.

"Look, I know you don't really like what he does, but Phantom is a good pony when it comes down to it." With a brief flicker of white from his horn, he merged the pathways. Lifting a hoof, he gestured to the expanse of the canopy. "We owe this all to him. Before Phantom took charge, we were all disorganized. The pathways were unusable, we crowded in the few unbroken hidey holes like rats, food was hard to come by. Unicorns died, Celestia. I was a colt, I remember it happening. Then Phantom stepped forward. He made things work. So many fewer have lost loved ones, now."

"Oh," Celestia slowly placed her hooves back under her. She thought of Painted Hoof and Chosen Oak. Of all the ponies that sent her here at great danger.

Ebon craned his neck, looking back over his shoulder. Following his gaze, Celestia noticed Luna sat quietly at the edge of the limb, some few pony-lengths away. The dark pony stared up at the canopy and tilted her head, flopping one ear as a butterfly of black and turquoise fluttered across a tree's blooming flowers.

"I'll be heading to the next one." Ebon motioned on ahead at another joint, cracked at the seams. "If you give me a moment, I'll meet you up there."

"Alright," Celestia nodded and trotted on.

Ebony Swift turned the other way and closed the distance between himself and the midnight unicorn. "Hey, you." He offered in quiet greeting.

Luna jumped, and jerked her head around, blue eyes large as saucers. "Oh, hey," Her soft spoken voice strained under some hidden unease.

"What's going on?" Ebon chose a spot next to her and sat down.

Luna turned away to gaze at the butterfly once more. She had a curious way of watching it, not marveling at the beauty so much as studying it with interest. "Not much," She shrugged.

"Your sister told me there was some excitement in your class today."

Luna nodded. "Celestia accused the unicorns of being generous only when it suited them."

Ebon choked in surprise and coughed on the saliva, beating his chest with a hoof. "Oh, wow! No wonder Arcane was upset. Do you think your sister was right?"

She shrugged.

"Is anything bothering you?"

"No," Only then did she glance at Ebon again, marking him with a curiosity. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem very quiet. You use to come to me with a lot of questions and liked to listen to me as I'd ramble on about them. But recently, you kind of sit by yourself in your own little world. I guess I wonder why. If there is something wrong, I'd help in any way I can."

"Oh," Curiosity gone, she looked away, distant once more. "Not sure why. Nothing is wrong."

The black stallion frowned as he regarded her in silence. It had been some time since he had seen a smile on her face in regards to him. Always in tow of her sister, too, but that could be merely a similar schedule of duties. She sounded honest, at least in her confusion. She wasn't sure why.

"Alright," Ebon stood up. "I've still got things to mend. I'll be just up ahead if you want to talk. Don't hesitate to ask if you need anything." He managed a smile.

“Okay,” Luna nodded. “Oh, and thanks.”

Ebon’s hooves trotted off, down the bridge.

Luna turned over her shoulder and watched him go with a raised eyebrow. But did not think much more on it. Watching the butterfly, she sighed, her mind trying to guess at what stars sounded like and how hair could make sound. As if it heard, the butterfly descended down from the blooms and landed on the tip of her horn, investigating the enamel with a curled-straw mouth. Luna giggled and stared up at the insect. Then blew a puff of air at its wings, causing it to flutter in the air again before landing back on her horn. Giving it another puff, her eyes caught the purple glow of magic shining dimly through the foliage.

With a gasp of delight, Luna was off like a shot, galloping through the trees and down a hidden ramp that led to the forest floor. Hearing the melodious hum from a skilled voice, she doubled her pace. “Crescent!”

The mature mare sat upright and turned in her direction. Seeing the young pony, she smiled softly. “Luna, how good to see you.”

When Luna closed, she exchanged a hug. “Crescent! What are you working on?”

“Oh, you know.” The mare sent a purple jolt to flop a canvas over, half covered in bark that didn’t quite blend. “Making these things, like always.”

Luna took a step back to a comfortable conversation distance and sat down on her haunches, keeping her hooves close together. “I heard you made something beautiful.”

Crescent smiled with some satisfaction. “That I did, finally following my whim.”

“I heard they were thinking about taking it away.” She frowned, disheartened.

“Well and so, I am pleased to have built it and it has already been shown off. Let them burn it now, if they wish, for I am happy.”

“Not yet!” Luna cried out in horror. “I haven’t seen it!”

“Ah, yes! I nearly forgot that.” Crescent stood up like an excited filly, prancing off with youthful energy. She must have kept it close, because she returned as quickly as she left. “I thought you’d appreciate this more than most.”

Hovering before her in a purple light sat a creation unlike anything Luna had seen, among the Earth ponies, unicorns, or in nature. The wood was shaped like a giant pony's horse shoe, bowing deeply at the center, and fashioned perfectly smooth. At the center, a series of strands, also treated in a way Luna had never seen, sat taut, strung from a bar at the top to the bottom of the bow. Luna touched the strings, in all the gentleness she could muster, afraid to break such a delicate looking device.

"Do you remember those human pathfinders who came through our woods, some months ago?" Crescent broke the silence.

Mesmerized by the instrument, Luna nodded. "I was holed up with everyone else."

"Well and good that you did, we're not suppose to peak out." Crescent giggled. "I did anyways." She smiled, the memory as sweet as honey. "At one point, before they left, they sat down to rest. I heard a sound that I thought came from Moon herself, so I poked my head out to see what such a creature was. In the hand of one of the humans was this." She sent a purple shimmer over the instrument she levitated. "He plucked at it with his fingers and it sang such a lovely tune that I never forgot. That night, I went back to my work and secretly began to make what I saw. It was fraught with problems, but here it is now. A work of pure beauty."

Drawing it close to her body, she held it upright in her hooves and closed her eyes. With magic channeled through her horn, the strings began to pluck and song wept forth as if the wood and strands themselves mourned some loss that no one could understand. Crescent Change hummed with the tune, wordlessly creating a duet, voice complimenting voice. By the time the last note was plucked, both ponies wiped tears from their eyes.

"That's . . ." Luna smiled, cheeks still wet. "That's heavenly."

"Yes, yes." Crescent recovered quickly. "But, enough of it, or my soul will never stop it's anguish. Where is your sister? It's rare that I see you alone."

"Oh," Luna shrugged and sniffled the last song-induced sorrow away. "She's just up there somewhere." She gestured at the trees. "Talking with Ebon."

"Ebon?" Crescent laid down atop folded legs, leaning closer to Luna. "Ebon Swift? And you are not there with her?" She cocked an eyebrow. "Didn't you use to like him?"

“He’s alright.”

Crescent shook her head with a smile. “I mean *like* him. I saw how you use to gaze at him, so deeply whenever you could steal a glance. I may look old to you, whippersnapper, but I am a mare in my prime, and I know he cuts a handsome figure.”

“Oh,” Luna averted her gaze, staring down at her hooves. “No. Or . . . I don’t know, maybe I did?”

“So, what happened?”

Unsure why, a thought surfaced and propelled itself to Luna’s tongue with the piercing force of a needle. “Celestia likes him, you know.”

“She does, does she?” Resting her elbows on the ground, Crescent propped up her chin on her hooves. “Did she tell you not to like him?”

“No,”

“Does she know you like him?”

Luna shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Why did you find this important to say, I am curious?”

Luna rocked once, side to side, while looking up at the trees. “I don’t know. It seemed important. When you asked.”

“So I see.” The mare paused to consider what she heard. Looking back at Luna like an aunt, she continued. “He likes you too, you know. He told me he found you adorable.”

Grimacing at the word, Luna shook her head emphatically. “Adorable? That doesn’t sound like *like* to me. My parents, and my sister find me adorable.” She reconsidered. “Okay, she finds me adorable when not annoying her.”

“I know little Swift well, I know how he talks and acts. He likes you.”

Her heart beat fiercely in her chest with some icy fear. She stared down in thought. The information Crescent gave sat on her mind like a stick above water, ever floating atop



the rapids. But she could not pierce below the waves and understand past the turmoil. "Does he like Celestia?"

Crescent shifted her gaze that sat back up on her haunches. Solemnly, she replied. "He likes her, too. Ebon Swift has a little bit of a reputation among mares here. He's a charmer, that they all know, and he has stolen several hearts before, not all intentionally. However, he often lets a number steal his heart back, for good or ill. He is a kind boy and he means well by his charm. I think it hurts him to have to hurt others. You and Celestia both share his heart right now, and he would not like you giving up on him to defend your sister's feelings. It's not fair to either you or him to act in such a way."

Luna nodded in silence. The tumult ran deep, deeper than Crescent even realized or understood. Thoughts of Ebon swirled the water fiercer and fiercer, until she felt uncomfortable sitting down, agitated and fearful of something in the depths which lurked like a leviathan. She got to her hooves, and shook her body, from head to tail, trying to shake away the lingering thoughts until only silence remained. The tumult faded, as she shifted her attention elsewhere, putting distance between her and that unease.

"LUNA!" Celestia's harsh voice cut through the silence like a shard of obsidian.

The younger sister whirled around, then lowered her head in shame.

"Luna! Where did you go?" Her brow creased in anger and she spoke through teeth half gritted, galloping the last few steps.

Ebon was there behind, but started to give distance as he sensed trouble.

"Because you went off without telling me, I had to lose the last of our spare time looking for you! We're late for the next duty, past any excuse they'll believe. We're going to be in trouble, *again*, and I've still got a stop to make."

"Sorry," Luna flattened her ears and used her mane to cover her face. She knew well she should have told her sister and couldn't find an excuse that justified her position. It had been a willing choice to leave without speaking.

Ebon's voice jumped in at the slight pause. "Time just gets away from even the best of us, every now and then. You might be alright."

Celestia hissed through her teeth as she turned, rearing up on hind legs as she scouted for a path up. "C'mon, Luna, and hurry."

The sisters left at a gallop, Ebon letting them go on ahead. At this point, navigating the forest's secrets was easy, if slow going. She found a tree with an inner ramp up, and her hooves clattered on the wood in the reckless speed which she ran; up into the forest canopy, across the ramps, the sound of Luna keeping up behind if just barely. Sweat soaked through her back, the sustained and vigorous gallop combined with midday heat. Breathing hard, she peeled around turns with hooves sliding under momentum.

"SORRY!" She yelled while squeezing past a startled old mare on a narrow ramp.

"Sorry." Luna meekly added, herself.

The white unicorn slid to a stop, staring at another hidden door. Luna skidded her hooves against the wood, but too late. The midnight pony bounced off her sister's backside and fell into a heap of fur and hoof. The impact sent Celestia to the ground in the other direction and she cursed aloud. "Horse apples! Clumsy mule!" Though to the air rather than her sister.

Horn aglow in sparkling pink, Celestia rose while channeling a spell that cast off the sweat she collected. Taking a deep breath, she gathered her composure.

Which she lost when the curtain flew open and Phantom Spell stood at the entrance. He, and Silver Spear, came trotting out and stepped around the stunned mares with little concern.

"W-wait! Chief Phantom!" Celestia ran a few paces to keep up, then fell into a trot next to him. "Do you have a moment, I'd like to talk."

Phantom eyed her coolly without slowing. "You have until we make our next destination."

"Thank you," She cleared her throat and let out the words in a hurried gush. "So, I have been studying the elements, and that got me thinking, as I learned more and more about the set, you know, honesty, loyalty, funny, giving, and niceness—all that stuff—about the part of unicorn life and how it all worked."

"Better out with it, filly, we're almost here."

Celestia took a deep breath and answered in a burst.  
“I think we should let Earth ponies here.”

Phantom Spell froze in place, turned, and narrowed his gaze. “What?”

She repeated slower. “I think that we should expand our herd to include Earth ponies.”  
But nervousness compelled hasty additions. “Maybe just a few at first until we figure out what to do and then more as we’re capable of adding them , I am sure we could-“

“Stop.” He raised a hoof, and stilled her tongue with the simple gesture. “Enough. And absolutely not. What would we do with a bunch of powerless ponies?” He resumed his walk, though he went a bit slower, Celestia half in his gaze.

“But, they’re not dumb!” She lurched forward to stay at his side. “And they aren’t weak. They could help if we find a way, magic or no.”

“My answer is still absolutely not. Last thing we need here is more mouths to feed, more hooves tearing up dirt and branch, and more bodies to fill our rooms. Let alone ones who will be as ignorant to our system as you were when you first arrived. Even more so, let alone useless ponies who will have no powers, and no way to contribute.”

Celestia’s jaw dropped in horrid dismay. “Just one or two, until we give them work. What of kindness, or generosity? Does that have to stop at the end of a horn?”

“Filly, I know it was your home, but the answer remains no. Trees need mending, food needs collecting, and we must watch the skies and ground for threats. Despite how cozy it must feel to you in the classroom, we are ever at the edge of disaster. Every day, there is a battle against the Everfree Forest’s propensity to chaos.” Stopping at the edge of a door, Phantom turned around while Silver Spear parted the curtain. Using a forelimb, Phantom gestured for emphasis. “One forest fire, one rampaging hydra, one hurricane, and what ground we gained will be lost. I cannot spare ponies for frivolous tasks or flights of fancy. Now,” He stepped through the door. “You had your moment. Return to the tasks assigned to you.”

The curtain fell closed behind him.

The scolding they received was not at all as harsh as Celestia expected. The chaperone, a mare of middle years, treated the whole affair as more trouble than it was worth and kept it brief. She took the sisters among the unicorns responsible for

preparing food and had them pick tree-ripened fruits or gather edible leaves as education on the system of distribution and collection.

But throughout the afternoon, matters weighed heavily on Celestia's mind and pressed down her thoughts. Craft heads, ponies, elements, what she learned had given her a great deal to digest and sort. But with the steady work of picking fruit –and the sneaking of an occasional apple for her and her sister— came a clarity of mind that allowed her to think and chat about her thoughts to Luna.

By the end of the day, she came to a decision.

The sun had fallen behind the mountains before the pace of life here gave her another spare moment. Luna laid down on folded legs to give them rest after the long day, enjoying the touch of the cool, earthen, forest floor. But Celestia couldn't sit still. She paced back and forth, mouthing words to herself of random thoughts as restlessness prohibited any relaxing.

Phantom would pass by here. She left a message with Silver Spear that she wanted to address something further with Phantom, and she was confident that Silver was reliable. Phantom had to come here anyways on his return from responsibilities.

So, they just had to wait. Maddening, slow, horrible wait.

She tossed up a pink light that hovered in the air and danced like a fairy. Under the thick leaves of the Everfree Forest, moonlight seldom reach this low. It was in that light that that she saw the first shadow of their approach.

Luna jumped to her feet, and Celestia faced the pair of ponies. Only to find that it was more than a pair, but a full half dozen. She swallowed before she spoke. "Phantom? I'd like to make an . . . announcement. Of sorts."

"I trust this is urgent as you implied to Silver." He said in a level tone.

"I believe so, but hear me out and see what you think." She cleared her throat, having prepared the basics of what she'd say many times over. "It's come back to me that the craft heads are bickering over where I should go. And that you, Phantom, are caught in the middle."

Phantom narrowed his eyes to regard her.

"I want to tell you that I'd like to take the decision out of your hands. My sister and I, we will return to the Earth ponies, after you feel our teaching is complete." She paused, knitted her brow, then hastily added. "Oh, we'll work long enough so you, you know, didn't feel you wasted your time. But after that, we want to go home."

The half dozen unicorns murmured to each other in bewilderment, yet still sat back as mere spectators. All save two, Silver Spear, who stood quiet and impassive as a rock, and Phantom, who lifted his forelimb to his head and rubbed before replying. "That's ridiculous. This is your home. What is the point of such a decision?"

"Well, chief Phantom." Her knees shook beneath her and she prayed to Moon and the stars that it wasn't noticeable. "The unicorns here, you have it all together with your systems and things. But the Earth Ponies who raised me, the smallest amount of magic I bring back would do them far more good there than having all my magic here. So, uhh, just sparing two unicorns isn't all that much anyways." She kicked at the ground with her front leg. "So it seems better. Generous and all."

"No, absolutely and unquestionably *no*." He planted his hoof on the ground and stood firm and unmovable as an oak. "We cannot and will not spare you."

Anger, hot and pent up, boiled inside her. "Don't / get to decide where I go? What is my home?"

Cold, dark eyes stared back at her. "Filly, that is simply a luxury. And a dangerous one."

Something about the situation, about the trade with Phantom Spell, brought a memory to surface from within her. Words echoed, in her father's voice deep and pleasant. *But forcing a pony to stay when he wants to go, or work for what is not his . . . that just wasn't natural.* The thought lent righteousness to her anger and she pounded a hoof on the dirt. "Well, we *are* going back."

"Celestia," His voice carried harsh warning, like a biting winter wind. "You belong with your kind."

She planted her hooves firm and shouted without thinking. "You aren't my kind!" Whispers exploded around her, barely contained. When they quieted, she added in a determined voice. "I was born and raised an Earth pony. With no horn. It just came one day." With pride swelling, she stood up straight and tall as a chief, tail arching in defiance.

Phantom raised his hoof to his head and breathed a deep exhale. “Just how thoroughly have they got to you? I was sure the Earth ponies had some plan, but this is perverse by any standard.” There was a slight gesture he made to Silver as he lowered his hoof. A shifting of his eyes and a tiny nod.

Luna screamed. In fright and panic rather than pain.

Celestia whirled around, breath suddenly lost and chest tight at the sound. Roots, aglow in silver, burst from the earthen floor and coiled around her sister like snakes, tying legs, waist, and mouth, clamping it shut from sound. A second shimmer, black as water at night, engulfed her horn and snuffed out any light it could emit.

“No, Luna!” Before Celestia could move, the roots broke themselves from the earth and Luna was drug to Phantom’s side by an invisible force, kicking and squeaking muffled protest all the while.

“Listen here, filly *unicorn*.” Phantom leveled an intense gaze, harsh and inflexible as frozen iron. His horn didn’t glow like others, it only reflected light across its surface in the texture and color of his black eyes. “I had hoped against hope that there was no deception in the Earth ponies bringing you here. But now I see their abomination of a scheme.”

Silver already faded into the foliage of the woods, Luna in tow, as the other ponies closed the gap. Celestia surged to follow the gray light, but a level, steady stare from Phantom stopped her, cold sweat breaking out at what she saw. Droplets streaked across his face from that horn, like blood in moonlight, from whatever spell he channeled. Words soft spoken were all the deadlier. “We’ll undo what they did to you in time. But until then, you’ll have to remain for this simple fact. If you run away or disobey me, your sister will never be seen again.”

# Chapter 7

*One part of growing up is realizing that the idols you've constructed of gold are merely gilded granite.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia  
as recorded by her friends**

The nature of Celestia's stay among the unicorns had shattered that evening. Phantom motioned to two of the others to take her away before he turned to his own path. They used their bodies to press Celestia back, shouldering and nudging the mare the other direction. She resisted as water resists a brush, holding still and trying to seep through the cracks, all to keep her eyes on the silver light of magic that took Luna away. But Phantom's unicorns won out and she lost track of where the light faded.

Her heart sank deep into her chest, finding a hole in her stomach to settle. Dread and fear raced through her mind and chased away clear thought. Too sudden, too fast did everything change, too much to know where to resist and where to comply. Celestia let herself be guided for that lack of knowing what else to do, and her chaperones—that title unbefitting them now, were they even friendly?—took her into a tiny, dark room where they stayed and watched, trading shifts through the night. The herd had to sleep, after all.

But Celestia found none. Curled into a tight ball atop her bed, she clutched the mattress of leaves between her forelimbs and stared into empty space, shivering. The first night she ever spent truly alone; her insides ached at that fact with a visceral intensity, almost physical, as if her flanks had been slit open. In the open fields of the forest, Earth ponies always slept next to one another. Coming here, Luna had always been at her side. Luna was gone, now. Life as she knew it gone, with a threat than hung over her head like a boulder. Slavery, her father had called this feeling, stripped of choice to go home, forced to compliance. She longed for another, longed for Luna, to be here to ease her suffering. Occasionally, she cooed softly to herself to nurse the pain.

Confused, tired, and scared, Celestia could only wallow as the hours passed, each one feeling as if she was slowly mauled. After a time seeming an instant and eternity all at once, the curtain parted and Phantom Spell stood at the door, sunlight streaking in through the cracks.

“Get up.” His voice had an unusual wariness, confidence that she’d follow orders lost and replaced with an edge of threat.

Without hesitation, Celestia got to her hooves and headed to the door in a determined trot. Phantom came as a relief, ending the hell of the night. She’d meet his challenge head on and take her first steps through this new situation. In grim silence, she watched and he led.

Their hooves pounded across the dirt and over the roots of the forest floor, each one having their own reason for the impatience gait. Phantom took a route leading to one of the larger tree-homes of the unicorns, composed of 6 or more converted forest woods. As a student, Celestia never ventured inward, having no business to be at the meeting hall of the craft leaders . But as what she was now, whatever that might be, she’d make her debut.

Phantom filed in and held the curtain. Fearless, Celestia hopped over the threshold and into the magically lit interior. But as her eyes adjusted to the paler light, she hesitated. The hall reminded her of an oversized classroom, same sloped floor, same indentations for seats, only the focal point was the dead center of the room rather than one side. However, what made her hesitate, it was filled to capacity. Most were varying degrees of old, when compared to herself. Mares, stallions, coats of all natural colors, and many speaking in a turmoil that hushed and died at her entrance. All eyes turned to her, and her pink mane, and her pure white body. Celestia shrank back from their stare. Her head lowered and her hind quarters bumped against the wall at her back peddle.

“Forward, filly.” Phantom’s harsh tones cut the silence and echoed off of the walls.

Taking a hesitant step, she felt every grim face follow. Mane drooped forward, she did her best to hide behind bangs of hair.

“To the center.” He directed in that same tone and Celestia took a seat on her haunches there.

Off to the side, Phantom gave a nod. The lights dimmed, the crowd disappeared behind a veil of black, all except the center focal point, and one lone mare hoisting a bright, white light high toward the ceiling.

Celestia considered her old as well, though not as old as some. An unadorned tan coat with brown hooves, mane, and nose prompted Celestia to dub her Sandy. Sandy’s horn



shimmered with a faint magenta from the hoisted light and continued to shimmer subtly as she questioned. "Would you please state your name?" Like her coat, her voice was plain, though nasally in delivery.

"C-Celestia, daughter of Whip Scar and Lightning Kick, sister to Luna." Curling her tail close to her body, she scanned the darkness, trying to make out any sort of shape.

"Please, pay attention." The brown mare said with polite insistence. "Now, who are Whip Scar and Lightning Kick?"

"My . . . parents," She hesitated, unsure of what exactly was being asked. "Earth ponies from the herd that brought me."

Whispers passed back and forth around the room. The mare looked off to the side for instruction, then focused back on Celestia. "Such things are impossible. Unicorns aren't born from full blooded Earth ponies. Now, tell us what you know of your birth."

With a sigh, she closed her eyes and did her best to search her memories. Lightning and Whip had told her the story long ago, and the details had to be collected and pieced back together.

"Shaman?" Sandy repeated when Celestia came to that part. The mature mare raised her eyebrows. If she did not know the Shaman herself, she at least knew the word's meaning.

"Yes, she visited my parents and gave them a message. That I had been touched by the stars."

"And did she explain your horn?"

"Horn?" Celestia shook her head. "I was born without one."

Whispers and murmurs doubled, someone laughed and a loud hush was given. Celestia frantically looked left and right, trying to make out anything among the darkness.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. Continue, please, with your next earliest memory."

Celestia sighed in frustration and began to relate her life story as best she could recall. Perhaps in the telling, some may be convinced and release her sister. But periodically, especially on the subjects of the stars, horns, or her parentage, Sandy would interrupt

and calmly stress that such things just didn't work that way. Each interruption threw Celestia off balance again in her recall.

The back and forth lasted hours. Fatigue set in from lack of sleep and blurred her concentration. Thoughts became fuzzy and her eyes burned. Losing attention, Celestia got lost in a daze and wondered when the questions would end, or if it would drone on for yet hours more.

Finally, Phantom raised the lights and stepped past Sandy. "That will be enough for today. Celestia is past usefulness here." With a gesture, he motioned for Celestia to follow.

Groggily, she stretched stiff limbs and swayed as she got to her feet, following with lids that occasionally closed in an inescapable desire to nap.

"Celestia!"

She snapped awake from her sleep walk, with a mane frizzed in surprise to find Phantom glaring at her. "Huh, wha-!?"

"Despite your predicament, you still share our protection, our food, and our shelter. As such, you will be expected to share in labor, like all others. Until you are made well, I will dictate your tasks. I need not remind you what refusal will cost."

"No, sir." Her gaze fell away, thoughts carried on fatigue and daydream.

"Today, I expect you to till these earth paths." With a gesture of his nose and pointing of his horn, he singled out several winding trails where horseshoes compressed dirt.

"Make it appear as no pony has tread over the forest. Make it disappear and keep us hidden and safe. Food will be brought shortly."

Without a further word, Phantom trotted away, returning to the craft hall.

Celestia gave a broad yawn at his back, half in need and half in contempt. When she closed her mouth, she froze an instant, noticing that the chaperones—two mares who whispered to each other but spoke seldom to her—had seen the act.

Fine by her, she thought while drawing will into her horn. Needed the time to think anyways.

The task moved at a snail's pace. The forest was complicated in its chaos, several times did one of the chaperones point to a mistake she missed in tired inattention. Pausing, she rubbed her eyes. The sun traveled lower on the horizon but would not set for some time. Upturning dirt and rearranging plants took little energy or concentration, so she reserved as much of her mind as she could to assessing the situation.

She wanted Luna back.

That was the thought that kept returning. She wanted Luna back, and wanted to take them both home.

And to nap, though that was more an immediate concern. She kept circling back over those few facts, fatigue ever growing.

By an act of mercy, the Sun when it finally set and Celestia whispered thanks to the sky turning orange. They finally led her back to bed and she collapsed into the soft leaf mattress, nuzzling it like a friend. Yet, it was not a friend. Celestia slept, but only in fits. Anxious feelings jolted her awake several times, and she clutched the bed tight between her limbs as she tried to fall back into dreams. Until then, she passed time in thought. Celestia knew what she wanted. Knew her situation. Now, she merely had to plan to reach her goals.

The tasks Phantom set her on would work to her benefit. The unicorns had to care for Luna. At the least, taking water and food to wherever they hid and imprisoned her. With an ear to the ground and a careful eye while she worked, Celestia could construct a mental map of where mysterious food was going and what different trees were being used for. That would narrow down where they kept her sister. Just like looking for Ebon.

It seemed reasonable enough. With that in mind, she drifted off.

Phantom Spell woke her again the next morning, and the day unfolded much as it had before. This time, the meeting hall was nearly empty. Far fewer old ponies sat and watched, though what few were there still disappeared all the same when Sandy hoisted her light.

"Tell us again of your earliest memory."

Already feeling the routine and bored with it, Celestia drew on her vague recollections of yesterday, and rushed out the same answer. "I chased a colt in a game, yelling that I was a dragon—"

“Stop!” Sandy’s nasally voice cut her off, then resumed in polite insistence. “Dig deep, reexamine your memories, and tell us again without drawing on what you said yesterday. Add to it what you can.”

Celestia sighed at the task and searched her mind. “Sunny day, I was just a little filly and chasing a colt, Painted Hoof I think was his name . . .” And from memory again, she began to relate her life story.

“Stop!”

Startled, she bit her sentence off.

“Are you sure you didn’t see a horn on Luna’s head?”

“Very,” Celestia gritted her teeth. The interruptions were already getting under her skin.

“I am sure such a detail is easy to miss. Please continue.”

But even as Celestia did so, Sandy questioned the veracity of almost everything, interrupted her even more than yesterday. To make matters worse, Sandy began to give suggestions to the story, ones she hinted were more plausible, but not going so far as insisting. Everything ground to a halt every time she yelled, “Stop!”

And on and on it went until Celestia began to mumble her answers in sleepy exhaustion, only half listening.

“That will be enough for, today.” Phantom stepped forward, raising the lights. “She has use elsewhere.” He guided her out of the hall, leading her to a new chore. “Tree mending.” He gestured to a thick trunk that housed a few rooms and a path to the canopy. “This one has over grown its last correction and is now at a risk of being found. When you are done with this one, there are others. Virtue Blaze will show the rest.” Without saying more, he left her to the chaperones.

The pattern repeated. A new day rolled around. A day after. A day after that. Sandy questioned her in the morning over her past and Phantom took her to some new task in the afternoon. Each time the sun fell, Celestia added to her mental map and tried to think of more ways to narrow where Luna was hid.

The pattern repeated. And grew worse. Sandy threw Celestia off balance more and more with interrupting suggestions, and the process wore her down. Phantom's task became more and more challenging as he tailored better to her level of skill. The map grew in size and complexity as she added location after location. Sleep alone seldom brought rest.

Celestia shrieked in frustration, a high pitched, girlish screech that hurt her ears as it was loosed. Hurling the bed against the wall of her room, she screamed again. One chaperone tensed, and the other started awake. Tears streamed from her eyes and Celestia buried her face in her forelimbs. *It's hopeless.* Her mental map descended into fog. The details converged, mixed, became blurred. Too much to recall, too much to keep track of, it all slipped beyond her tired grasp. The despair wound its way around her heart and sank it low. *I'll never see Luna again, I'll never see home again.* She bawled and felt like a tiny foal. The tears soaked her cheeks and her hooves and came unending as her voice descended into sobs and sobs carried her into another night of restless sleep.

Luna kicked and squirmed against the bindings that dragged her away. The magic-imbued roots only tightened under the struggle, painfully grinding bone on bone. Mouth pinched shut, her screams of fight came as perturbed squeaks. Summoning a spell, she sent a surge of will to her horn only to find it impeded part way there.

"Sun and Moon!" A pony cursed but she couldn't arch to see who. "She won't hold still."

"Quickly. Phantom Spell can't suppress someone of her power very long." Silver Spear's voice. Calm in delivery and matter of fact in tone.

"I'm trying!"

Doubling her efforts, Luna kicked and screamed anew, surging more will to her horn and lashing out in all directions. An alien touch brushed her forehead, a nearly gentle thing. Gasping, she screamed again and heard her voice ring clear. "Nooooo!"

Luna flew to her hooves, her breath panting under the exertion. The binds were gone. The hold on her magic as well. A shining blue light from the *will* channeled to her horn

illuminated a plain and comfortable room. A bed sat at one side, sizeable and sewn with more leaves than others she had seen. Water collected from rain fed into a bowl via hollowed bamboo, smelling natural and refreshing.

The curtain to the door rustled, sunlight washed in. Silhouetted except for his gray horn, Silver Spear peered in, resolute. Seeing the midnight blue unicorn, his features softened with calm. "Luna, you are awake." He was soft-spoken and quiet as a small stream broken over a rock.

"Yes," Luna nodded, chest still heaving. "I am." Gathering her composure, she sat on her haunches and brought her tail to her side.

Turning to look outside, his horn took on a brighter glow, levitating a bowl and sending it inside as well as holding the curtain aloft. "You are likely hungry. It's been some time since you last ate." Fashioned like a large bird's nest but built from living wood, leaves still budded at the bowl's edges.

Blue eyes shimmered in lust of what she saw. Apples tucked inside, a fine variety of leaves tossed in a salad with hay sprinkled on top. Her stomach growled with the thought of hunger and she looked to Silver with embarrassment.

"You may eat as you are ready." He simply stated with a nod of his head toward the bowl. "Were you hurt in the struggle?"

Luna bent to the bowl and took a large bite from the apple. Food still chewing in her mouth, she shook her head. "No,"

"You have been confined to these quarters for the foreseeable future." From Silver, the statement came as a mere fact, carrying no veiled threat. "There is an enchantment around the walls. I suggest you don't test it."

"Okay," Luna swallowed the bite she had taken. Her stomach replied with great satisfaction.

"You may be here some time." Silver quirked his lips as if addressing a problem. "Would you like some company?"

"No, thanks." Luna shook her head. Silver was no Crescent or Ebon and she dismissed the thought of asking for either of them. What she needed most right now was time to think.

Silver Spear gave a quick nod, accepting the answer. "If you require anything, a sentry will be at the door. Knock for him. The enchantment will otherwise contain sound." Closing the curtain, Silver's hooves trotted away.

Luna took a mouthful of salad and chewed with leaves sticking to her lips.

Where was Celestia?

She sent a bright yellow light into the room and floated it like a fairy, adjusting it so it could mimic the intensity of being in forest shade at high noon. Luna replayed the events of the night before.

Celestia had just revealed the uniqueness of her heritage. Phantom Spell reacted with disbelief, then . . . that's when the roots came out of the ground. In the struggle, things became disorienting. Next thing she realized here, she woke up here.

Calling new will forth, she shaped a spell to reach out and feel along the walls and enchantment. Like the antennae of an insect, the invisible fibers swept over the room and sent back a sensation, both tactile and magical. As Silver had said, a spell had been in place to confine her, her magic, and any sound she made. A strong, thick bubble, very elastic in construction but not invincible.

Forming a new spell, Luna shaped her will into a forelimb with a needle-like hoof and pressed it against the barrier's side. It flexed and held as expected. Gradually, she pushed the hoof deeper, until the magical construct threatening to tear under the pressure.

In the thinness of the stressed bubble, she felt the second spell. Yelping, she jerked back the forelimb and nearly knocked herself over with her own magic.

"Stars and Moon!" She gasped and worked herself back to calm. A binding enchantment layered over the barrier. If the barrier is broken, the spell will swoop in and binder her legs and feet. Undoubtedly, it'd alert the sentry and she'd be subdued before she could break free.

Mulling over the thought, Luna stood up and refreshed herself on the water. At the wall, a voice caught her ear.

"I don't get it." One chatty mare said outside the tree. "Why only that other crazy one? This one Phantom just keeps locked."

Luna sipped silently and kept her ears up and angled for the sound.

"Because Phantom has a system, he always does." A stallion. Could it be the sentries? They must be changing watch. "He's just made another to fix this problem."

"Only one of them. After that pink one is helped, we got her insane sister still locked away."

"What am I, a mind reader? I can't explain everything Phantom does."

The mare laughed. "Your innocent act won't work on me. I know how you are about gossip."

A pause. "Okay, fine. I may have heard something." The voice grew quiet and Luna used a little magic to draw the sound to her ear. "They say the pink one is the older of the two. Wherever she goes, lil'sis goes. So, they help Pinky, and Blues follows."

Luna slowly sat back on her haunches, realization dawning on her. Pieces fell into place, one after the other. While Phantom kept Luna safe-but-caged, Celestia was subject to this mysterious "help." A memory from the night before became clear. *If you run away or disobey me, your sister will never be seen again.*

"Stars and Moon." She spat and glared at the wall where the voices came from. Phantom was using their bond to manipulate each in their own way. A sick feeling gripped her stomach and she scooted the bowl of food off to the far side of the room.

"So, wherever Celest goes, her little sister follows?" With sound confined, no reason to not voice her thoughts aloud. "Let's see what happens when little sister cries for big sister."

Using the bed as a seat, Luna started to shape a complicated spell while musing in thought. Eyes closed, and lips moving silently, she planned her escape. The first part felt easy enough.

The binding spell that sat around the bubble. If she could bring Celestia here, her sister would have no problem destroying it from the outside and they could break free. All the defenses were facing the inward, it would be a synch.



If she could bring Celestia here. That was a big if.

No magic, no sound, no way to signal. But, constructs could be flawed. Perhaps there was a weakness in the barrier she could exploit.

Luna turned her spells to feeling and testing her room, poking at the walls, prodding the enchantment's elasticity and thickness. Each time she felt she learned something new, she added more and more to a complicated spell she built up in the reserve of her mind.

The going was slow, and lasted the rest of the day. When she grew stuck or fatigued, she turned to her salad and ate, or refreshed in the water. At a regular interval, Silver Spear peaked in, checked her condition, and took the bowl to gather more food. Politely, she thanked him at each turn. For all his aloofness, Silver was diligent in seeing to her needs, almost managing to soften her disgust at Phantom's ploy.

When the cracks at the seam of the curtain darkened with nightfall, Luna extinguished her faux-fairy lamp and curled up on the leafy bed. Sleeping alone for the first time, she began to shiver and moan softly with unease, but constructing that spell kept her occupied until sleep whisked her away.

The next morning, she awoke with Silver bringing her breakfast. "You've been alone for a full day. Would you like company?"

The blue unicorn giggled to him with a smile. Only Silver Spear could managed to say those words in such a way that it did not imply flirting. "No, thanks. I'd prefer privacy, today."

The short stallion nodded and closed the curtain.

She spent the morning perfecting the spell she came up with the night before, drawing her will forth and letting it assume the intended shape. It was complicated. Very complicated. It needed to serve a variety of purposes at once and very specifically. First, the spell had to find Celestia. Luna shaped that aspect like lightning seeking the tallest tree from miles away in the sky. Knowing her sister well, she merely had shape it to strike her rather than a tree. Next, it had to draw them together. This part proved more challenging. The signal had to be invisible, and untouchable to outside harm in case a unicorn found it and tried to sever it. It also had to guide Celestia. She went through several ideas before settling on a root. A root sifted nutrients to a tree, likewise

Luna could send messages along the tether. If she could “bury” it in the air, then it’d be hidden from attack.

One final problem. Getting it out the bubble without popping it. Feeling the barrier carefully, Luna tried to soak her spell in another layer of magic that would mimic the texture of the enchantment, like soaking a stick in water so it wouldn’t burst a bubble it poked through.

Taking a deep breath, she summoned will to her horn. “Here it goes . . .” She brought the idea fully realized to that will, felt it take shape as she desired, then unleashed its reality-altering power.

Her magic arched like lightning, then grew like a vine. Reflecting off the bubble, it crawled across the wall, up and around, the tether disappearing in the wake. Eventually, it faded out, expending itself of all energy.

“Blast!” She eyed the wake in disappointment. “Something wasn’t right.”

With little more to do, and closed her eyes and felt along the barrier again. The day unfolded quickly in Luna’s mind, full of more experiments and failures. And so did the next, Silver Spear always prompt with a delicious meal. But that was the only thing that went her way. Something about her plan wasn’t compatible. She tried new aspects to her spells, substituting the lightning for a curious and slower dragonfly. The roots for spider-silk strands. Soaking the magic different shades of enchantment. Even adding what elements of harmony she could.

Nothing worked.

A deep sigh lifted Luna’s chest, and she held her head low, thinking of no magic and no spells. Just a solemn emptiness that filled her mind. Like being submerged and staring into the abyss of a lake at night. Stillness.

“Was this hopeless?”

Silence answered her.

“This spell was perfected by a herd of unicorns and I’m trying to break it in only a couple of days. Am I a foolish foal?”

Soft quiet of the sheltered room.

"Perhaps it's time I ask Silver if he could bring Crescent here. If she still has her instrument. That'd be nice." She answered for herself. "Yes. Maybe I'll ask."

Rising onto limbs weak with lethargy, she walked for the door. But a little visitor caught her eye. "Oh, hello. I remember you."

A black and turquoise butterfly fluttered at the seam of the curtain, passing into the room.

"Come to visit me? I'm glad to see it." She smiled as it landed on her horn, investigating her with its curling mouth.

Luna's eyes widened into saucers and she inhaled a deep breath. "Oh, butterfly, you are a true friend!" With all the gentleness she could muster within booming excitement, she trotted to the center of the room, butterfly in tow. "I can't pass through the barrier, but Silver Spear has many times now in giving me food." She paused. "Do you know what this means, butterfly?" She grinned wide. "You can pass through the barrier as well."

Sitting down on her haunches, she lowered the insect to the remains of an old apple. It settled there, flashing its wings open and closed.

"A friend like you needs a name." Luna lifted a hoof to her chin. "How about," She pointed to him. "Flutter Brave. Because you will bravely carry my message to my sister." Unable to sit still for her excitement, she stood up and arched her tail proudly before leaning down to whisper. "Don't worry, Flutter Brave. I'll give you a little guidance and magic. Then you can signal my sister."

# Chapter 8

*Fear is a powerful tool, but it's best unused. What you control with fear, you destroy.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia  
as recorded by her friends**

“Who saw the horn?”

“My sister, Luna.” Celestia stared at the floor, a numbness deadened her spirit. Every limb felt a loss of strength and she struggled to keep pace with Phantom that morning as he led her to the hall. All she wanted right now was to collapse on the floor and simply lie.

“Recall your memories.”

“I- . . . I- . . .” Some strange details stood out fresh, clean and a memory unraveled in a thread from the thought. Others folded and distorted like a reflection on water when she went to grasp it. What was suggested to her, what she actually remembered, blended together and became indistinguishable.

“Celestia?”

“I don’t know!” Pinching her eyes shut, a sob caught in her throat. “I don’t know.” Unable to hide it, the sob escaped and the tears pooled at the corners of her eyes.

A hoof scraped against the floor, and Sandy’s steps approached. “There, there.” She placed a forelimb about the white mare with the pink mane.

Though the tone of the Sandy felt detached, Celestia couldn’t help it. The touch had been the only real comfort she felt since the night Luna was taken, and she wept for it. Wept for everything. The horrible mess she was in, being barred from returning home, the jumbled memories, her failed plan, the threat that hung over her head and around Luna. The tears came and came and soaked the tan-colored shoulder.

The moment lasted until she could sob no more and silence filled the room. "Come," Phantom interrupted. "That is enough for today."

Peeling away from Sandy, Celestia dried her eyes with her forelimb and followed. Nothing had changed.

After a distance, Phantom halted. "This stream," He gestured to a modest river that cut a swath through unicorn territory, "is notorious for flooding when the rain hits the mountains. Under Simplicity's direction, you're to improve the flow and reduce the flooding."

A black mare with brown-shadowed markings, trotted up gaily at the mention of her name. "I'm afraid I got you doing some grunt work today, if you don't mind." She beamed a smile.

Celestia just shrugged. Phantom had already taken the opportunity to leave.

Enamored with the project, Simplicity talked far more than instruction required. Led up and down the bank, she rattled on about plants to be grown on either side, diverting the stream, widening the base. A chaperone tagged along with ever growing disinterest. Celestia all but stuffed hooves in her ears to make it stop.

But finally, it did. Simplicity became distracted with another matter and left Celestia to a task.

No heart in it, the young white mare trudged up dirt and rock from the river bed. Such a mindless task gave her time to contemplate. A stick, loosed from the mud, drifted down stream and away. *How long must this continue?* A dried leaf floated over the crest of waves, chasing the stick. *How long can I keep going like this?* The whole of the slop she gathered lowered into the river and oozed away in a muddy drift. *Not long.* She bit her lip. *I'm sorry, Luna. Not long.*

A butterfly, turquoise and black, tickled her nose.

"Shoo." Celestia wiggled and contorted her face to shake it off. "Shoo, you little bug."

Much to her surprise, it did. It fluttered off. Landing some pony-lengths away, spindly feet clung to a trunk and it flashed its wings open and closed. A speck of color caught

her eye and Celestia curiously tilted her head. On the lower wing and off to the side, a single spot didn't match. Pink. A bright, tiny fleck of pale pink.

A gasp involuntarily sucked in breath and Celestia bit off anymore of a reaction. Turning back to the river, she took up a new heaping scoop of riverbed while her heart raced. A tiny fleck of pink next to a tiny fleck of midnight blue. No more of a sign was needed. They were sisters. They grew up together and had taken the same magical training. Celestia understood. She had to follow this butterfly.

She checked over her shoulder. Simplicity talked with another, distracted with directing her plans. But her chaperone, one of the mares that traded whispers, boredly kept an eye on the white unicorn. So, at least, she hadn't noticed the message. But she would notice Celestia casting a suspicious spell.

Returning to her work, Celestia hefted the pile of mud up from the bottom of the stream. A song from home casually hummed, she took a step forward and guided the scoop of soggy sludge high in the air along the bank. Another step, another few lengths to drift the mound. When she turned to keep the scoop in view, her rear hoof slipped on a moss covered stone and she stumbled a single step for a single instant. Just enough to intentionally disrupted her magic. "Whoops!" Celestia announced, trying to hide glee as muck fell and splat at on the bank. The splash covered the chaperone along one side from tail to nose in mud.

The mare recoiled in abject, wordless horror.

"Sorry!" Celestia smiled wide and anything-but-innocent.

Simplicity and the unicorn accompanying her rushed to the chaperone's side, blabbering in a distracted panic. Celestia whipped around and called forth a spell to the butterfly. It cast true and hid the discolored spots while leaving a mark, an invisible string that responded to her magic alone.

"Go now," She whispered to the insect. "back to Luna."

Whether it had been conditioned to respond to her voice or her magic, she did not know. Either way, the butterfly fluttered from the tree trunk and disappeared into the forest, the string unwinding in a trail.

With a sigh of relief, she turned toward the babbling mares and failed at hiding a smile. "Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. It just slipped right out when I nearly fell."

The chaperone cast glare that marked her with equal parts anger and disbelief, to which Celestia giggled. Let the little revenge-prank stand as cover for the true trick.

That night, she found rest. Not daring to actually call the string, sleep whisked her away as she imagined clutching it to her chest. While watched day and night, while still subjected to Sandy's interrogations, to chores and heavy lifting, to loneliness, and a herd that held her hostage, she had this string. Now, she just needed a chance to use it.

Morning came as it always had, Phantom at the door, rousing her awake. Though, today felt different. Ease and a subtle air of confidence surrounded the white mare, backed by a good night's rest. Eyes fell upon her anew as she entered the hall that morning. Still only scantily occupied by a group of old ponies, they fell silent with anticipation seeing Celestia's self-assured gait. Sandy, too, looked at her with equal parts hope and trepidation as she adjusted the light.

"Shall we begin at where you tried to cast your first spell?"

Celestia nodded agreement.

"You may start now."

"Crimson Coat had joined us to make fun of Luna. He said that she'd never have a horn—"

"Stop!" Sandy raised a hoof to halt her. "Recall again, you appear to have let inaccuracies slip in once more. Unicorns are born with horns. Try to recall before that, when you and Luna were foals and made your horns glow."

The memory unraveled, crisp and clear. They giggled, keeping up Whip and Lightning on the moonless light by adjusting the color of their horns. Celestia shook her head, dismissing the images her mind filled in. "That never happened. We didn't have horns until we were almost mares."

"Stop, that sim—"

Celestia's horn surged pink as she threw a spell at Sandy, manifesting a hair that wired her mouth shut. "NO! *You* stop, you old goat!"

Eyes widened in shock and fear, Sandy dropped the light she held aloft and darkness swallowed the room. Hooves scuffed over wood, shuffles of weight and movement surged all around as several unicorns brought glows forward, standing and aimed at her. Phantom narrowed his eyes and stood unflinching. Realization hit Celestia, they all waited to see if she'd throw a malevolent force in some ill conceived tantrum.

Tucking her tail close, she sat and took a deep breath. Closing her eyes, she slowly sent a light aloft, dispelling the darkness from the room and illuminating everyone clearly.

Seeing the mare with the pink mane calm and passive, several unicorns extinguished the glow of their horn yet still marked her with suspicion.

Sandy stared dumbfounded and unable to talk, causing the corners of Celestia's lips to pull back in a smirk despite the seriousness of the situation. "Please, allow me to speak uninterrupted." Rising to her hooves, she paced the center of the room. Words came from an intuitive place formed and ready, surprising the young mare as she tried to not let the moment slip by. "Craft leaders, sages, and chief Phantom. For several days, you've heard my story repeated over and over. It is a true story. I was born an Earth pony, as was my sister. We came without a trick, only wishing to ask for your help, you being so knowledgeable with magic. And you have helped." Emotions swelled up inside, the topic too close to untwine thought from feelings. Her voice gained earnest edge of pleading as she continued:

"My sister and I, we've learned so much with your herd, and we have become strong. I know our lives are hard to believe, but isn't my color proof enough? Luna's pure blue and my rose colored mane, isn't that enough to make you believe that there just might be something unique to our birth, something you don't know? My parents, my *Earth* pony parents, didn't lie, just acted in love for their daughters. Yet, all of you choose to believe an easy lie over the truth. It's led to unfortunate decisions, but ones you can undo." The emotions grew intense, swelling ever stronger, and her breath shuddered as she breathed. "We wish to repay you for your kindness and teaching, the whole Earth pony herd is grateful. But let us go, or you'll make us slaves."

Too much, Celestia stopped. Her body quivered, but she kept her eyes dry. Slowly, she turned her head to meet the gaze of what few respected heads of craft decided to watch that day. The ponies stared unmoved, faces implacable and continence stubborn.



*Mules! Old, curmudgeonly mules!* Anger shook her knees. What could some young mare ever do to change their mind? A deep sigh lifted her frame and she lowered her head in defeat.

Phantom's horn shimmered and the spell that kept Sandy silent fell unraveled. "Come with me," he stated calmly. "*Now.*" Jarring harshness punctuated the sentence, a crack in Phantom's composure that seeped fury like a crack in the earth seeps steam.

Out of the hall, he walked slowly across the forest floor with Celestia in tow. Phantom remained silent, choosing his words carefully as he visibly battled inner frustration. "We. . . the elders and I, have watched your progressing condition."

Afraid any word might be the wrong word, Celestia remained silent and grave.

"You show great promise, Celestia. The good you could accomplish is beyond estimation. For that reason, we have given you great allowances in your actions, your training, and your current problem." Muscles in his flank stiffened and rippled, his voice grew gravelly. "But my patience has limits. I've dealt with lost causes before." He whirled around and his black eyes stared unwavering, bare inches away.

Her mouth dropped open in a grimace of fear and she cowered a step back. A root caught her hoof and she fell to sitting, unable to tear away from his gaze as he loomed over her.

"One more time." His nostrils flared and breath ruffled her mane, hot with rage. "step out of line, have another outburst, or be anything but the most helpful, cooperative, responsible unicorn of the herd, and I will kick you out into the wilds of the Everfree forest alone, and we'll try our luck with Luna."

She wanted to tear herself away, but the piercing black eyes pinned her. Wanted to find her feet, yet could do nothing but back peddle uselessly with her forehooves. For several long breaths, Phantom did not move.

Finally, he turned away and resumed a slow walk down the forest path. "Your tasks will be two fold today, as you have morning and afternoon to work now. Fir—"

A ripple of tension passed through the air, traveling like a wave across her body, nose to tail. The sensation was so palatable she struggled to breath the thick atmosphere. Ponies raised their heads one by one as it passed, ears and eyes peeled for an

imminent threat, Phantom's included. Celestia had seen reactions like this before from her Earth pony home.

A moment later, the forest echoed with the chirping of a bird.

The call mimicked the path of the tension wave, other sentries signaling their birds to carry the warning across the forest. The falling notes of a warbler soon filled the unicorn occupied land.

"Stay with you chaperones!" Phantom shot already midflight, galloping with purpose.

Warbler. It took a moment for Celestia to recall her training and match the bird kind to the specific threat. Warbler. . . Warbler. There was a mnemonic to help remember:

*Should a Warbler's tune fall  
An Ursa Major stands tall*

*Ursa Major.*

Her stomach sank. Adrenaline surged, dilating eyes, and priming muscles for action.

*The star bears.*

Unique among the creatures of the Everfree Forest, Ursa were part magic, being composed of night sky, and part animal, kin to bears. Legends described them in impossible terms, dwarfing mountains and reaching the heavens when they rear back. But there was a difference between wild tales of a single witness and the legends of lore passed down in pony kind. The truth was that ponies—even unicorns—posed neither a significant threat or meal to Ursa. As such, they were ignored much in the same way a pony might ignore a colony of ants. But just like insects, an Ursa could crush one beneath its foot and be none the wiser or caring. To unicorns, that threat was doubled as its wide paws flattened trees, and limbs demolished the bridges so carefully maintained as if they were twigs. Little could be done except get out of the way.

Unicorns trotted this way and that, through the canopy, across the ground, each acting on some part of the preconceived plan to be mobile once the Ursa came. While not galloping or braying in panic like the Earth ponies might, to call the subtle chaos calm would have been flat out mistake.

And yet, they had forgotten her. Hearing the call, Phantom left without summoning the chaperones.

Thoughts turned to the night before and that single wish. The chance to use the invisible thread. That chance was now. Breaking out into a gallop, she fled from where Phantom had left. If the chaperones had a sudden clarity of thought and came looking, Celestia would be long gone. At first the direction didn't matter, as long as it was away. She peeled around trees, obscured herself behind a curtain, and took a ramp up to the canopy's branch pathways, spooking unicorns the entire way with her speed and purpose.

Pink light from her horn called to the string, and it answered, bending and contorting to Celestia and laying itself out in a path to guide her to the butterfly. "Yes!" Celestia bucked mid-run with joy and felt a different kind of excitement pulse through her and speed her steps. Shifting her weight to turn and follow the thread across the network of branches, it shimmered only as her light approached. Unicorns gasped, ducked, cursed as she dodged around and turned sharply at the bends and joints.

A stallion's hindquarters backed out of a door, unaware. A cold and sudden fear gripped Celestia as she found her course was straight into his broad side. She planted her hooves, gritting teeth in strain to stop. The bark gave little purchase, but it was enough and she halted just short of disaster. Hearing the sound of enamel scraping wood, the stallion threw himself out of the hollowed tree and whirled to face the unruly pony that barreled down the narrow paths.

Ebon Swift gaped at the white mare, dumbfounded with surprise.

Celestia likewise found no words. Hope surged, sank, then embroiled with confusion as she watched his reaction. Undoubtedly, he of all the herd could recognize she was breaking Phantom's order.

The surprise melted as indecision gripped his features. Tension filled the air where words did not. Ebon looked over his shoulder, staring off into the distance. Celestia followed the gaze and found Phantom Spell's place of work, a large tree that served as a minor meeting hall. The corners of Ebon's lips curved with worry, his gaze locked in place. Eyes widened slightly with visible white contrasting his black coat.

"Ebon!"

He jerked to Celestia at his name, then fixed back on Phantom's work.

“Ebon, please!” Her heart thudded wildly in her chest, her voice strained with desperation. “Ebon! I just want my sister back. Nothing more! I just want Luna safe, and with me.” Tears formed just behind her lids, threatening to break forth. “Please . . . Ebon!”

Slowly, he turned back to Celestia, pity on his features and an agony growing even then in his eyes. Lowering his head in shame, he averted his gaze. In a whisper, he broke his silence. “I’m sorry.”

A white light enveloped his horn, a spell cast off, invisible. A second bird added a tune under the warbler’s, a series of sharp chirps. The tree swallow; signal of an internal pony conflict.

A wound opened up inside, focused and centered in her being. Pain bled from the aftermath in something that simply grew. “Ebon, no . . .” Her voice came as a whisper. The damn broke, the tears rolled freely down her cheeks. Blinking away the watery vision, she shoved passed him with her shoulder and took off in a gallop driven by affliction. Down the ramp, hooves scuffed and slid on smooth wood, spooking two stallions who raised their head to listen to the new bird. But she cut the corner on the last few feet to avoid them, leaping off the side. Legs buckled on a hard landing. Still, she ran, and chanced a glance over her shoulder. Ebon sat unmoving on his haunches, head still lowered, the warnings of a coming Ursa meaningless.

The wind dried her tears. A determination steeled Celestia and stopped the flow of hurt. There could be no time for that now. Phantom had left her with one final chance. Failure now and she’d be thrown to the forest, Luna stolen forever. How long she could survive on her own, she didn’t know. It simply wasn’t done, pony were meant to be together. Alone in the forest, anywhere, she’d reek of vulnerability and the first predator that found her trail—

Painted Hoof’s final moments appeared in her mind. His body limp with limbs laying about unnatural. His neck in the jaws that crushed out life. The thought of her in that place flashed in her mind and she hurtled the very idea from consciousness with all the force she could muster. Such treatment seemed unusually cruel, even for Phantom. Would he go through with it or was that anger speaking? Even the chief had to answer to the herd sometimes.

Either way, it didn’t matter. If he didn’t throw her out, he *would* take Luna. He’d give her the same series of questions and lead her down a road full of doubts and suspicion.

How long Luna could resist giving in, she couldn't say. But they nearly broke Celestia, and she had little doubt that time would be worse on her little sister.

So, she had no time to cry over Ebon. She had an alarm to race. Hooves tore at the ground, kicking up dirt and dust in her wake as she followed the glowing thread. Long curves lead her around tree trunks increasingly less populated. The number of out and about unicorns dwindling as time gave them a chance to organize the flight away. Celestia nearly held her breath, expecting at any moment that she'd round a corner and find the butterfly resting on some trunk or hole that signaled the presence of Luna.

Silver Spear stood, simply waiting. He had chosen a position at the edge of a small expanse cleared of trees. Dust and earth field underneath the overarching arms of the Everfree trees. The thread travelled right between his legs and on beyond.

"Stop." The soft spoken word carried very different qualities than Phantom. It did not come as confident command—though it had a measure of command at the moment—or an implied threat. He had no need or ability for that sort of charisma and spoke simply, as if the words themselves were enough. Celestia had taken lessons under him for combat magic, and an ingrained reflex caused her to listen, slowing to a stop.

"Celestia, turn back now. Find your chaperones and follow their directions."

A chance, perhaps, he offered. A chance to walk away and undue her actions. But, the string had been revealed. Silver would destroy it when Celestia turned away. Luna would fall under stronger watch, and the pattern of life would repeat until they were both tools for Phantom's battle against the Everfree forest. Forced servants for a herd not their own.

Something about the idea was just not natural.

"Silver Spear, I can't do that. You have my sister, and I'll have her back, now."

A moment of silence lingered between them. From some distance away, the low, thud of a giant's foot quivered the earth, almost more physical than actual sound. With it, the snapping of trunks and collapse of trees carried. The Ursa yet approached.

Regret flashed over Silver like a single flicker of flame. Stoically, the stallion spread the stance of his fore hooves, and lowered his center of gravity. Angling his horn at the defiant mare, it emitted a soft gray glow.

Celestia matched him, her horn answering with a bright shade of pink. Living in the dangerous wilds, Earth ponies had, at the least, this in common. When cornered, they would fight.

Staring down Silver, a small smile found its way to her lips. From birth, Celestia had been told she was special. Pure white coat, unique pink mane, touched by the very stars. Her teachers, one by one, all marveled at her talent and power. Phantom would not give her up, the craft leaders all lusted for a chance to have her. Yet, for all the promises of potential, she had never done anything but play the games of a filly.

Finally, it was time to cut loose.

Calling forward the idea of a simple attack spell, Celestia supercharged the it with will and felt it swell with power. Aiming her horn and thoughts, she unleashed the thing at Silver.

A fireball was about as basic as an attack spell could get, taught to scare small and medium predators who had an innate fear of fire. For this reason, a unicorn with a measure of skill typically fired one no more large than a hoof. Celestia's fireball was no shorter than three *pony-lengths* wide.

It roared to life from her horn, singing the hairs of her mane and obscuring all her vision with its size as it rumbled through the air, feeding on the wind generated by the flight. As far as spells go, it wasn't difficult to dodge. In the end, Silver was a pony. While at odds for the moment, Celestia did not have it in her to end his life. The belch of oversized flame ponderously rolled through the air. Merely a flexing of Celestia's muscle to intimidate Silver into retreat.

That's why Silver's next move, shocked her. As the fireball closed, a whip of pure water curled overhead, and lashed down across its center. Steam exploded as water struck hot flame, cleaving the ball in twain. The force of expansion as the water changed form forced the two ends apart and opened a hole. Silver didn't move, didn't even flinch or blink as the path of the fireball separated in front of him and splashed uselessly on the forest behind, burning leaf and trunk.

All her show of strength, all the power that so many had praised before, defeated in a fashion of pure grace; a simple, elegant, controlled counter. Celestia finally realized why a stallion as short as Silver held himself with such confidence.

Through the valley that opened in the center of the fireball, Silver charged.

In an instant, Celestia called up a new spell laced with an abundance of power, and formed an oversized horse tail of pink, glowing magical energy. She swept it along the ground in a wide arch, the way a pony might flick a fly off its back. No need to hurt Silver, she'd brush him out of the way.

Silver's horn shimmered gray and the ground rose ahead and to the side in the shape of an earthen wedge. As the tail swept, he knelt down and slid on his knees. The wedge served as a ramp, carrying the strands of energy up and over the stallion. Dodging their touch with his slide, Silver rose to his feet with all his momentum retained.

Both her spells defeated, and he wasn't even slowed. Silver hardly even expended magic. Jaw dropped, Celestia back peddled away from his charge, buying what little distance she could as her mind stuck on one simple fact. Silver outmatched her.

Seizing the moment of hesitation, Silver's horn shown a shade brighter. Wind summoned from behind him and swept up the smoke from the aftermath of Celestia's fireball. It spiraled in a corkscrew through the air and hammered against Celestia even as she braced for it. The smoke stung her eyes, laid obscuring and thick about her, and an unthinking breath sent her into a wild coughing fit.

A panic surged in her mind when she found herself unable to see, and she lashed out blindly. Her magic seized the very ground, and she jerked it hard, up then down, imagining the top layer as a single, wide curtain that would carry a wave down the length of it. Roots snapped, severed as the ground bucked and separated only to collapse down again in place.

Whatever happened, Celestia seized control of herself and called up her own counter wind to clear the smoke. Vision returned, but Silver was nowhere to be found. With the smoke, he had vanished.

Still trapped in a coughing fit, Celestia had a sudden ping of thought, she was vulnerable. In an instant, she threw up a hardened dome of force that covered her. A gray spell collided low on the barrier, throwing off dazzling spectrums of light and reflecting off to the side. The diverted spell sunk the ground next to her in a sink hole, evidently intended to trap her legs in earth.

Celestia followed the trajectory back to find Silver looking down from the branch walkways up above. "How in the--?" No time to think, and no longer could she concern herself with Silver's safety. Drawing on a large store of will and energy, Celestia

snapped a solid oak apart at the trunk and hurled the entire tree up and through the bridges that held Silver aloft. They shattered, flung some into the air, others hung limply at the points of the break.

Silver sent a wave of gray strength over his small section of the bridge, diverting the point of break, and knelt down and stable. As the broken bridges tumbled through the air, Silver guided their descent. Celestia watched in awe as they fell one by one, building a bridge back to the forest floor even as Silver ran across it.

Not about to sit idly by, she called will to her horn.

Leaves, ripped from branches as the tree was flung through the canopy, cascaded down in a flurry. At the same moment that Silver guided the falling pathways, he fired a second spell into the leaves. They buzzed to life like insects and descended down on Celestia in a swarm, stinging her body from every side and obscuring her vision from Silver.

She yelped in surprise and threw her tail side to side while trying to brush off the stings with her forelimbs in an instinctual reaction to swat them away. Another second past, long enough for her thinking to catch up, and flame jetted from her horn. She swept the fire along the horde, burning leaves to ash.

But, by that time, it was too late. Silver was down his makeshift ramp and charging her but only a few lengths away. His horn gleamed gray. At such close range, spells crossed the distance in no time. The fighting would be fast and fierce. Celestia drew her own will up, lowered her stance, ready to counter whatever Silver Spear threw her way and—

Silver struck his hoof across the side of her face.

It came as a dim realization in some distant part of her mind, piecing together the current sensations with the last seconds of image from her vision. Charging in, Silver had reared back and threw his hoof against her cheek. Everything disrupted. She lost hold of her will, her sense of balance thrown off as her head snapped around. Eyes pinched shut in reflex, keeping her from regaining bearings as pain exploded across awareness. In rapid succession, more blows came, each one snapping her head to the side and stunning her anew.

In the briefest pause, her eyes opened in time to see Silver had twisted around, rear legs coiled back. He kicked with both feet, burying hooves into her ribs. She yelped a



sharp, loud cry, air forced from her lungs by the blow amplifying the sound. Intense, consuming pain erupted in her chest and she went down.

“No, no, no, no! Not good. This is not good!” Luna paced restlessly around her enclosure, foregoing the water. Sweet tasting apples lay abandoned. The magical barrier and the stiff wooden walls of the room did not prevent the chirps of warning from passing through. *Ursa! It had to be Ursa!*

The rapid, rhythmic thuds of trotting surrounded the tree, scattered in undiscernable directions as the herd made ready their flight. A chill crept up Luna’s spine as the single, distinctive beat of a gallop approached the entrance.

“Gather a few unicorns,” Phantom ordered a sentry. “Bring them here and go like your tail is on fire.”

The sentry must have nodded, because he left a second later.

The curtain flew open in a rush, Phantom’s white and faded gray body stepped through and crossed the threshold of the spell. Luna felt her pulse quicken at the sight, fears becoming realized.

Any number of threats would have meant little or nothing to a pony trapped in one of the converted tree-homes of the unicorn. Being hidden usually was enough. But an Ursa! That required careful flight out of the path, out of hiding. Away from the clue she left her sister.

“Come, filly. Be prepared to leave. An escort will arrive soon.”

Luna faced the chief, but cowered a step back. “I . . . can’t.”

“*What?*” Astounded, Phantom’s jaw fell open in absolute confusion. “Why not?”

“I just can’t go.” Ears folded flat. She sensed the coming tension between them and fell back another step.

“Are you *mad*, filly?!” His black eyes widened in shock and Phantom leaned, a hair away from rearing. “There is an Ursa Major on approach! He’ll crush you and this tree on you!”

A lump formed in Luna’s throat and she swallowed. Lowering her head, she felt the impulse to give in, avoid his anger, avoid the cutting words. It started strong, then choked at her neck before impulse became words. Flutter Brave, her butterfly friend, came to her mind. A stroke of luck that would not repeated, and central to her plan of escape. Directing to first seek Celestia then wait here, Luna had never anticipating being moved in her spell on the butterfly. If she went with Phantom now, it would not simply be losing Flutter Brave’s help. No, Flutter Brave rested here only and would unintentionally mislead her sister into disaster.

Luna raised her head. “I can’t go.” A short beat passed where she watched Phantom stare with disbelief. “But if you lower the barrier, I promise to leave if the Ursa comes.”

Phantom raised a hoof to his temple and rubbed it to soothe a headache. “I don’t have *time* for this!” Without another sound, he trotted determinedly out the door.

The midnight blue filly cautiously stepped forward, heart racing from the warnings of an Ursa Major and her stand to Phantom. This was not over.

She heard her breath, deep but stressed, in then out. In then out. By the time she counted the third inhale, the curtain all but tore open. Phantom led the way, serious but with building frustration behind black eyes. Unicorns filed in behind him, both mares and stallions with grim expressions, and arranged themselves either side. Four, five, at least a half dozen spread around in a half circle Luna at the center.

“Come willingly or by force.” Phantom’s patience had been worn that day and it showed by the gravel in his voice. “But you’re not being left here to die because of foolish stubbornness.”

Glancing both left and right, shadows danced in a spectrum of colors as horns came to light. Luna tensed, but not in anxiety, legs planted unmoving as a mule. She met Phantom’s gaze and matched every ounce of determination in his eyes with her own. “No!” The strength and vehemence of her voice surprised her. An inner, untapped emotion, long since buried from the surface of awareness, surged with power and she latched on to that feeling, fueling her defiance. “I’m not going with you, I will decide when I leave here!”

Phantom regarded her with cold silence. His horn shimmered to life with a black, reflective glow. "Take her."

The air physically swelled with unleashed magic. A tendril formed into a snake that slithered around Luna's rear legs, attempting to coil. With a thought, Luna tore the snake to pieces in a blast of raw force. Someone gasped as the collision of such power sent dual colored sparks of green and blue ricocheting off the walls of the insulated bubble. Pinchers of translucent red, inspired by a scorpion, grasped at Luna's midsection before they were split at the seams of the exoskeleton by a formless lance of blue will, adding yet more dances of color.

Several attacks came at once, likely out of luck rather than coordination. Vines ripped through the floor and spiraled up her ankles. The curtain flew open and a spider web, amplified in size and strength by magic, spread to ensnare. Her hairs stood on end, a second's anticipation of lightning being charged to attack.

A primal whinny erupted from Luna and she reared back, snapping the vines. Horn gleaming with blindingly bright glow atop glow, hurricane force winds swirled the room, Luna at the calm center. Wood creaked, the tree shook, and the bubble stressed to hold the bellowing air

Wind caught two unicorns off guard and swept them tumbling and sliding across the ground, crying out as they bruised. The rest broke concentration to anchor their hooves against the ground or otherwise counter the pull. Vines halted, the lightning failed to materialize, and the spider web folded into a useless, sticky ball that rolled like a tumble weed.

"Burning Sun!" Phantom cursed while squinting his eyes against the sting of drying air. His horn bled a black liquid and Luna felt the closing of a familiar dam that obstructed the path of her will. "Now! Do it now!"

"I'll try!" The voice brought out the memory of the night they took her, the pony she heard just moments before the gentle and alien caress stole all consciousness.

"No, no, no, no!" Her will doubled, forcing its way out the closing gap of Phantom's spell and tearing at the dam as it formed. At the edge of her awareness, she felt the gentle brush trying to reach her and she threw her head from side to side and pinched her lids shut in instinctual struggle.

"I can't! She's too wild!" The pony strained. "W-what is she doing?"

“Just do it now before she lifts the tree from the very foundation!”

That sounded like an idea. Luna peeled the wood that Phantom anchored himself to straight off the tree. Wind scooped the board and finished her work, turning it into a plow that shoved Phantom off his feet to tumble and collide against others.

The chief stallion grunted in pain, snorted with fury, rolling as helpless as a foal. Yet still, the gentle caress tried to close in past the tumult of rampant magic.

Opening her eyes, she found him—a dusty colored colt, who stared up mouth agape. Who stared *up*. The floor rested several tail-lengths straight *down*. Startled by her sudden high vantage, she kicked out and found only air beneath her hooves. Confused, a panic took her. Limbs flailed, she screamed, caught in a lazy spin from the swirl of wind. Jerking wildly to see, what she found filled her with awe and stole breath. At each flank flapped a large, blue *pegasus wing*, wholly her own.

The wind slowed, and the creeping touch moved in, drawing Luna back to reality. She looked upward and willed her wings to fly for the roof. Picturing the idea of a huge spinning horn, the spell encompassed her. The brush, the barrier, and the wood of the tree shred to pieces against the blue, transparent, magic force.

Bubble burst, the trap sprung. The binding spell broke free. It enveloped her pinning legs in a bond too tight to break with struggle. But Luna just grinned. The enchantment had been built for a unicorn, *not* a unicorn that had wings. Magic and feet hampered, the wings still beat as strongly as before and she flew out the punched hole, dodged through the canopy of the Everfree Forest, and shot into the sky.

The world opened up beneath her, expanding like a sea of green in all directions, mountains and hills like waves, only the blue sky and shining Sun above.

However, now wasn't the time to lose herself. Shrugging off the binds with concentrated effort, Luna recalled the spell she had tested a hundred times over now in the solitude of her cage. It came primed and ready. With a thrust of will, she sent out her lightning-guided tether to seek Celestia.

Following the bolt, icy fear chilled her veins. “Oh no . . .” The spell arched toward the Ursa Major.

Pain overwhelmed reason and coordination. Celestia writhed helplessly and whimpered as each breath brought a renewed agony. Liquid, the taste of blood, dribbled across her tongue. Several bruises on her face throbbed and swelled. The earth *moved*. It jumped. Startled, senses began to return. The entire world bucked in a steady interval and she bounced painfully, whimpering again.

“Shh . . .”

Opening her eyes, Celestia felt the gentle pressure of a hoof hold her in place where neck met shoulder. Silver Spear glanced down and repeated his hush, the sound soft but urgent.

She followed what caught the stallion’s attention just in time to watch a purple paw fall to earth like a meteor, and the ground bucked again under the collision. Celestia froze stiff in terror. The legends had not been exaggerations at all. The paw of the star bear was beyond estimation, leaving prints the size of a large pond. A single, long, curved claw could have been an ivory tree in its own right, yet was just a fingernail on the beast. Following the paw up to the shoulder, it was impossible to take in the sight of an Ursa Major all at once from this distance. Walking as a quadruped, it was like a wondering mountain, towering above the very tallest trees of the forest. And the Ursa was no more than fifty pony-lengths away, a single step by the bear’s reckoning.

Silver silently watched the Ursa, keeping the helpless mare by his side.

A shudder passed over her body, and she felt the presence of a familiar magic. *Luna!*

Something came to mind. Not speech, but a thought; an idea from an outside source. Her sister was free.

Celestia tried to answer, but found no channel. Another thought came to her, unaware. A question if she needed help followed by a realization that Celestia couldn’t respond; the connection went one way. *No, duh, sis.*

The ground continued its steady bucking under the Ursa’s weight, Silver seemed oblivious an exchange took place.

A more complex idea filtered down to her; Luna sent a spell that allowed her to track Celestia, as well as send messages. She thought it best to flee in this confusion and sent her best guess at a path out. If Celestia could make it, try to immediately. If not, Luna was coming to meet her. Also, there was an Ursa Major harrowingly close.

Celestia rolled her eyes. *Again, no duh, little sister.* Even as excitement softened pain, nothing had been of use. She was in no condition to run and Silver—

Fear layered on fear. If her sister charged in now, Silver Spear stood ready and waiting, not even singed from his first battle. Luna would stand no chance.

Silver pressed with gentle but firm insistence and whispered hush to Celestia's ear once more as the white mare moaned with struggle, trying to find her feet and ignore the pain.

Bewilderingly, another thought came; laughing. An excited, joyous whoop of her sister. The spell—the thought continued— had unexpected qualities; communication wasn't the only thing it could send. Right on the heels of that thought, Celestia felt a surge of energy fuel her body and magic, deadening the pain in her chest and from her bruises.

Not wasting an instant, Celestia seized Silver's leg in pink magic and hurtled him straight off like a plaything. For a brief moment, the stallion tumbled in the air, surprise riddled his features. Then, he amazed Celestia. Silver's horn shimmered gray, and he used telekinesis on his own limbs, righting himself like a jungle cat. He came to a soft landing some pony lengths away—his center lowered, his stance wide and ready.

Exhilarated by the abundance of free energy and jumping to her feet, Celestia lashed out with a tendril of force. Silver prepared to counter.

But it had never been meant for him. The tendril split in two and bent around a puzzled Silver, and he craned his neck to follow the trajectory. The tendrils seized the limbs of the Ursa Major at the wrist. Timing it just as the front paw came crashing down, Celestia shoved with all her strength.

The bear had expected a limb's support as he shifted his weight, only to find nothing. Unable to catch himself as a something pinned his other leg, his massive body had no choice but to fall with the momentum that the step had started. To his shoulder, he began to collapse and roll.

All things considered, Celestia could not blame the stoic Silver Spear for a show of true and genuine surprise, a purple and night-sky colored mountain collapsing in a wave to bury him. It was a testament to a calm and agile mind that Silver Spear cast a spell to half sink himself in the ground, calling forth root after root to harden around him in a sphere of magically-reinforced wood. Ursine being a fatty animal, Silver would be trapped but alive.

Her sister's thought intruded, singing with panic; *you're too close, RUN!*

The Ursa's rolling collapse had not ended at Silver, and Celestia saw the massive, confused head looming over her, still in the process of the fall.

Only a few times of her life, had Celestia ever moved that fast. A trail of dust, leaf and ash kicked up behind her as legs pumped with crisis-induced strength. No time to yell, or even time to breath as the shadow crested over her body, a sound encroaching in a rumble as crushing flesh met forest floor. Trees snapped and popped, ground shook, Celestia gave everything she had to escape the swallowing shade.

Without a blink in between, the shadow stopped and Celestia slipped out as the head of the Ursa crashed. Earth mounded in a wave from the impact and threw Celestia with a yelped squeak, tumbling across the forest floor.

Sprawled and dazed, a moist, wet wind ruffled her mane. Vision came into focus on a single ivory tree, the girth of a redwood. It took a second before her mind caught up, and Celestia found herself staring at a single fang at the end of the Ursa's cavernous jaws.

Having energy yet to spare from Luna's gift, Celestia screamed, sprang to her feet, and ran as fast as her legs could carry her.

*Keep going!* Luna's thought intruded as words; *I'm right behind!*

Leaping over fallen trees and ducking under hanging vines, Celestia left unicorn controlled territory and entered the wilds of the Everfree Forest.

# Chapter 9

*The bond of sisters is never stronger than when faced with adversity. And never weaker when left to ourselves.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia as recorded by her friends**

The border between the unicorn controlled forest and the wilds remained unclear, but Celestia saw she had passed it. Accustomed to a clear floor, telling trail signs, and the subtle influence of magic cultivation, the white mare with the pink mane now ran through a forest filled with underbrush, decayed logs, and hanging vines. Choosing clear paths amidst the uncared growth, she slowed to a smooth gallop. Immediate danger laid out of reach, now she needed to sustain the flight and gain distance. But her thoughts kept turning inward to an anxious question. *Where is she?* For all the reassurance of the spell's message, her sister's escape remained just that: a spell's message.

Shoving through the clinging branches of a shrub, Celestia found herself in a small clearing. A freshly fallen tree had left a hole in the forest canopy, and grass sprung up eagerly at the chance for light. Ahead, a midnight blue pony stood as if waiting where the grass mounded in a hill.

"Luna!" Celestia called, at once desperate and relieved. Redoubling the gallop, she shoved, heedless, through the clinging branches of a shrub.

Blue eyes came up at the call of the name, and a smile rose on Luna's cheeks. She ran to her sister in an excited canter.

Digging her hooves into the ground to slow, but just barely, Celestia flung herself to Luna and wrapped her neck half around in an equine embrace. "I thought I lost you." The words choked with emotion as tears pooled in her eyes. "I thought I lost you several times over." She clung hard.

Luna returned the embrace, her head resting on Celestia's shoulder. A deep sigh lifted her frame, like one letting go of a long held burden. "I was never lost, big sister. You just



didn't know where to find me, yet." A smile remained at the corners of her lips and she closed her eyes.

For a long time, Celestia merely held Luna. Weeks of struggle, of desperation, of hope and despair, of planning and action, all culminated in this embrace. She had her sister. She had Luna leaning against her, safe and sound. And most of all, they were free. Joy welled up from within and forced out blissful tears, content to silently roll down her cheeks.

The spell that had connected them faded, in that time. The *will* that sustained it dwindled, neither pony pouring energy in now that it served its purpose. But as the spell faded, so did the relief from pain. Celestia's breathing grew shallower with each passing moment as the very act of drawing in breath aggravated the injury on her ribs.

Feeling the shift, Luna let go and took a step back. Her gaze traveled over Celestia, from hoof to head. "You look awful."

"Thanks." She said with a sarcastic sneer.

Exhaling, Luna rolled her eyes. "That's not what I meant. Who did this to you?"

"Silver Spear."

Jaw dropped in shock, blue gaze tinged with a betrayed sting. "But . . . *why*? He was always so nice to me."

Celestia raised her nose with a thought, then lowered it. "I . . . may. Have thrown a fireball at him first."

"Oh," The younger sister fell into a surprised silence, her question answered. Turning her head, she gazed off into the distant brush toward the unicorns' home, worry evident on her features. "Do we have time to rest?"

"I think so." Worn legs complained from exertion and Celestia winced as she laid down, atop her knees. She spoke quickly, between the shallow breaths. "The Ursa. It tripped. They're scared now. We have time."

"So . . ." Luna lightly and nervously kicked the ground with a forehoof. "What happened to you, while I was gone?"

Celestia shook her head. "You first."

"Alright." The younger mare paused to think, then related her tale starting from the night she was abducted. Few details were spared in her style of pursing loose memories together into cohesion. She told of Silver's polite vigilance, the bubble spell, her frustrations at crossing it and the stroke of luck with the butterfly.

When she reached the stand against Phantom Spell, Celestia raised a brow. First, curiously at Luna's adamant defiance, then both brows in surprise over the ensuing battle, one against seven.

"When I opened my eyes, I was flying on wings."

"Wait! Wings?" Celestia nearly rose to her feet, except pain sent her back down.

A feathered wing, cradled close to Luna's side and unnoticed, stretched out in demonstration, wide and strong and colored a matching blue. Luna gave it a long glance, still caught in admiration for the new limb.

"Wh-, *how?*"

She shrugged her shoulders and folded it back in place. "I don't know. So much magic was being thrown everywhere, and I was just trying to stand my ground. Suddenly, I had wings, and I was in the air on them."

"Wait! No . . ." Celestia's gaze drifted to the ground in thought. "This is good. Very good."

"What is?"

The elder sister glanced up with narrowed eyes beneath her pink mane. "And somepony saw you flying?"

"At least . . . one." Luna searched her memory. "If not more."

Celestia grinned. "Then we have a lot more time. Than I thought." She unfolded a portion of her story, falling breathless when sentences grew too long. With struggle, the meeting hall evaluations eventually came out, including her appeal on the last day. "Those were elders. And not all of them. I tried to tell that I was Earth pony. You know how stubbornness sets in when old. They didn't believe. But when they hear about the

wings. Maybe some will believe. Even after the Ursa goes. If Phantom wants to chase us. It'll be hard now. Craft leaders will argue."

Luna pursed her lips. "You sound awful. Maybe we should check you out?"

"If you think it'd do any good." Celestia spoke incredulously, rather than giving the idea support. Healing magic was complex, and raw power or talent meant little. Pouring energy into the simple thought *be healed* did nothing. Healers spent many seasons trained on how to properly imagine mended injuries, for even a part as simple and innocuous as a bone was a complex arrangement of shape, life, marrow, and connected to many points of muscle, padding, and sinew. The other half of healing consisted of rote memorization. This herb did that, a fever meant this. Neither Luna or Celestia had anything more than passing knowledge.

A glow of midnight's light engulfed Luna's horn, and she bent her head, eyes closed, as magical antennae felt along and inside Celestia's chest.

It tickled. "Ha, ha!" Laughing sent a fresh jolt of agony. "Stop! Stop that!" Celestia slapped away the feelers with a swat of her hoof.

Glow extinguished, Luna shot her sister an annoyed glare. "Do you want help or don't you?"

"Make it feel less oogly."

A sigh left her lips, and Luna closed her eyes again to reach out and feel, changing the sensory magic to be like warm, flowing water.

It was no less oogly to have foreign magic pass inside, but it no longer tickled and Celestia resisted swatting again.

In utmost concentration, Luna twisted her head. "I . . . don't think anything is broken. Or if it is, it's only a small crack. I . . . think it's just a bruise, swollen and sensitive since its fresh." She dropped the spell and opened her eyes, panting heavily. "Rubbing it might reduce some of the pain."

Celestia nodded. Finding the center of the bruise left by Silver Spear's kick, she shaped her will into a warm and gentle caress that massaged the swelling. The tactile sense softened the pain, if not removing it. Knotted muscles uncoiled to the touch and Celestia

turned back to find Luna half lying on her side, gasping deep. Legs tucked underneath, she held her head tired and low.

“Luna?”

“Hmm?”

As her sister rose, Celestia saw the haggardness on Luna’s face, half covered by dark bangs. Two and two suddenly came together. “That spell you used, when you gave me strength . . .”

She nodded slowly, gaze drifting and unfocused.

“That was *your* strength, wasn’t it? You sent me your magic to use.” Enough to trip an Ursa Major and have plenty to spare. That was, after she fought Phantom Spell with six unicorns at his side, and cast a complicated link spell. The desperate situation might have drawn out force of will in abundance, but not made it limitless. The magic examination her sister gave was not free either, and not aided by dire circumstances. It must have used up anything she had left, including the strength to keep composure.

“A spell for pain, too, in case you were hurt.” Luna added lethargically before lowering her head.

“Rest, then. We have time.” Celestia crawled over alongside, propping Luna up and giving her a warm body to lean against.

“I’m thirsty.”

A pink glow lit Celestia’s horn. Magic gathered latent moisture from the air and extracted what it could from plants. It wasn’t much, but enough for a few gulps. Celestia brought the moisture to Luna’s lips, cradled in a bowl-shaped leaf, .

Draining the water, Luna let a satisfied sigh escape her lips, some small portion of strength regained. A question now hung in the air, one they both felt coming. “So . . . what now?” A spark of hope lit her words. “Do we go home?”

To see their parents again. A dull, bittersweet ache came with the thought. To be among their own kind, or as close to anything that approximated kind for sisters such as them. That had been the plan that set this whole chain of events in motion. They were

going to return home and bring the aid of magic. The dull ache grew as Celestia imagined the faces of Whip Scar and Lightning Kick at a reunion. Yet . . .

Celestia raised a hoof and poked at Luna's wings.

"Hey," The wing and her back fidgeted under the touch. "That feels weird."

"How so?"

"It's like," Luna paused to give it thought. "suddenly having six legs. It's weird to have extra limbs hanging off."

"And you can use them well?"

"I don't know. I don't even know what 'well' is for these things. I fly, I know that."

"But you know *only* that." Her mother's parting words coalesced in thought. *Promise me that you will make good on that gift the stars have given you. That you won't let sentiment be your guide.* The dull ache turned into an inner soreness, a plea, a reminder of how much she missed mom and dad, and longed for their company, their presence, their comfort. *But I promised.* "No, we're not going home."

Luna blinked her surprise. "Then where to?"

"If the Unicorn taught us how to use magic, then we'll get you taught how to fly by the Pegasus pony."

The younger sister met that with a contemplative silence and the distant look she wore more often than not in her observant eyes. A slow nod followed. "How will we find the Pegasi?"

"What do you remember about them from our histories?"

Blue gaze drifted in recall. "There is Ariel, the pegasus that told the heroic chief Virtue Blaze where she flew over water during the Great Drought. Fore Runner, who carried a message of warning to the unicorns of the devouring sprite horde." Luna shook her head. "None of this is of any use. Pegasi had such a minor part to play in our lore. Just nomads and travelers, living more in the air than anything."

"I think I might know just a little more." Celestia peered up at the hole in the forest canopy. The sky looked down from far above, spotted by neither bird or cloud. Leaf and branch shrouded all else. "You were just a foal and couldn't speak when a pegasus came to rest with our herd." She glanced down at the young pony. "You'd probably remember it too, if you were just a little older. I stayed up, listening. I forgot most of what happened now, but I do remember one thing. She said she was heading to the mountains, where her kind herded."

"The mountains?" Luna turned abruptly to her sister in realization. "Could it be the White Top Mountains?"

"That's my hope." Celestia bit her lip. The mountain range that sat west of the Sun's rise and east of the Sun's set, was one the symbols that meant home. No matter where the herd stopped to graze, as a foal, Celestia could crest a hill and see the thrust of Earth reaching so far above the forest that the tops turned white. It was also the only mountains she knew of in any travelling distance. "It's all I have to go on. And it seems reasonable enough. Can you walk?"

Luna sent her a skeptical glance from the corner of her eye. "Can you?"

In response, Celestia hoisted herself to her hooves. Luna struggled a second longer, but got her hooves under her with a little assistance of her wings. It struck Celestia as odd to see the new appendages stretch out, flap briefly like a giant bird's, and shift for balance. Her whole life, she'd grown accustomed to Luna's appearance as a pony, horn notwithstanding, and the change was alien.

Stepping forward, Celestia led the way. Luna followed behind, unconsciously falling into the same place she had since she was a filly, on the hunt for turquoise with her sister. Heads and ears remained alert, seamlessly adopting the sweeping gaze of the sentry while Celestia weaved her way through the untamed forest.

Forest navigation was a rare skill which few Unicorns possessed, and even fewer Earth ponies. Whip Scar had been one such to learn it, by necessity and luck on his flight from his human master, and he taught some of the dangers. Unlike a field, where one can see far and walk in straight lines, a forest required a curving, winding path around obstacles. Each turn made a little error off the original path. Over miles, that error compounded, throwing ponies far off course, or in giant circles forever lost in an endless maze until—Celestia banished the thought of bloody end at the end of a fang and continued forward, judging her path by the angle of light that crept through the

branches. West of where Sun rises, east of where Sun sets. It would do for finding a mountain range, at least.

Walking was a kind of rest in and of itself to a pony. Celestia and Luna spent a life time on their feet, running and playing when fillies, or walking to and fro for duties as mares. With a light pace, the travel allowed them to recuperate.

Until they encountered their first problem.

Leaves grew thick and broad, trees high and tall, as the nature of the land changed. Greedy in their drinking of light, the trees expanded their branches, thickened the canopy, and let nothing but shadow fall to the forest floor. Celestia's orientation was gone and she froze, unsure.

"What is it?" Following, for Luna, let her mind wander and it did not appear to include thinking about how they navigated.

"I'm lost." Celestia gestured ahead with her neck to where the forest grew even darker. "Or will be, if we keep going."

Halting the unconscious vigil, Luna took a more active glance at her surroundings. "I've been thinking."

The white mare turned around and sat. "About?"

"About this trip to find the pegasi. We shouldn't go."

Taken aback, Celestia blinked. "What? Why?"

"Too much is risky." Luna continued in a neutral tone, a faint sign of worry along her brows. "We're going on an old memory and an assumption, either of which could be wrong. And we're travelling dangerous paths where we have little skill to go. What if the pegasus ponies aren't even at White Cap? Maybe we should go back. If we stop at home first, we could get help."

A mirthless smirk pulled one side of Celestia's lips. "And where, pray tell, is home?"

Luna hesitated, blinking. "Ehh . . ."

“Exactly.” Self-satisfaction filled her voice. “I got a little confused in the rush to escape, and I bet you did, too. But I know how to find the mountains. Our choices right now are go to White Cap, or back to the unicorns.” A hint of sarcasm filled her words. “I don’t know about you, but I’m not so eager to throw my trust back on Phantom Spell, wings or no. So, we’re going to the mountains.”

“And if the pegasi aren’t there?”

“Then, we will simply go back.”

“Simply go back?” Dismay evident in the midnight pony. “*Simply?*”

“Going back to the unicorns is my last choice. I’ll take my chances on the extra trip.”

“But I could fly!” Luna threw out in a hurry. “From the air, maybe I could—“

“That’s right!” Celestia jumped to her hooves and excitedly pranced in place. “You can!” She pointed overhead. “Could you fly through the canopy and see White Top?”

Blue wings stretched out wide, but hesitant. “I guess so . . .” Flapping softly, Luna looked straight up into the air, focused and intent. A moment later, her feet lifted off the ground.

For the first time, Celestia realized, she saw the wings in motion. They beat the air in a relaxed manner, giving Luna a characteristic incomparable to any bird. Birds battled the tendency to fall, flapping rapidly or stretching feathers to catch gusts of wind and keep aloft. Luna’s wings treated that tendency with a casual disregard, as if obeying gravity was optional, and one they disdainfully chose to ignore. It contrasted the determination on Luna’s face, to make the wings do something as simple as carry her up to the trees. *Perhaps she really does need to see the pegasi .*

Staring with that thought, she returned to her senses when Luna stopped at the canopy and looked down expectantly. “Oh, right.” Luna’s magic was still exhausted. A pink glow of her horn, and Celestia opened a hole in the trees. Though this allowed sunlight to flood in once more, though Luna’s direction would be far more accurate than the angle of Sun.

She tarried above the trees, glancing all around and taking in more of the view than what was needed. But she found her mark and raised out a hoof to point. Gingerly, she



lowered to a few pony lengths above the ground, careful to keep her arm as straight as a pine. "That way."

"Good," Matching the direction as close as possible, Celestia set off again, winding through the forest. "We'll need to repeat this every hour or so, to stay on course." She said, any argument about the trek as good as over.

A creeping sensation crawled down her spine and settled at the base of her hips. Instinctively, ears shifted for sound and she realized she'd yet heard the footfalls of her sister. Peering over her shoulder, she found Luna still hanging in the air, banking in side to side arcs on her wings as she followed. Celestia turned her head back to the trail at hand, but found her thoughts still back there and her spine still crawled. "Luna? Would you mind coming down for now?"

"Aww," Leaves softly crunched where hooves settled. "Why?"

"It's a bit weird."

"How?"

"I don't know. It just is." It was one thing to become a unicorn; a foal's fantasy to listen to the stories of ponies that played with the elements of creation and wish to join those ranks. Even with the tempting thought of flight, foals rarely fantasized about pegasi, they being largely uninvolved in the histories passed down to through generations. But Luna was neither unicorn or pegasus now, or even Earth pony. She was something new, different, unheard of, and unseen in any lore. While not bad –at the least, Celestia hoped not – the change went beyond juvenile fantasy and into something estranged.

And she took for granted that sometime soon, she'd wake up with her own wings.

"Celestia?"

"Yes?"

"I'm still thirsty."

The pink-maned mare halted their progress. "That's right, I forgot. We both could use some water, and some food." Chewing her lip, she glanced to the dark trees, and leaf-covered forest floor, mind working over the problem. Eyes closed, her horn lit with summoned will and she began to shape it under guidance of thought.

“What are you doing?” Luna asked with innocent curiosity.

“Finding water.” A hint of annoyance in her tone as she tried to keep the spell active.

“Why are you using that?” Luna glanced off to the side. “Water is that way.”

“What?” The horn’s glow vanished in an instant, and Celestia jerked her head in the direction of Luna’s gaze.

“Can’t you see it?”

The elder sister stared long and hard, squinting. “No. Nothing.”

“But we’ll find water that way.”

Celestia shook her head, trying to clear her vision, then turned to Luna. “How do you know?”

The blue mare hesitated. “I’m . . . not sure. It feels like there should be.” She gave an inquisitive look to her sister. “Earth pony sense?”

The ancient inheritance and part of the Oldest Story. Celestia could recall by heart every beat in the tale her mother recited.

*Long, long ago, before the stars turned their eyes to Earth, before Sun grew jealous of the beauty down below, and before Moon answered the call of her sisters, the Earth was naked. Cold winds swept through barren hills, the sky existed in darkness and chaos, and nothing stirred or lived.*

*One day, the Wild Magic passed over the Earth and found it wrong that such a place should have nothing but darkness and nakedness. So, the Wild Magic began to play. It touched the Earth and made things grow. Small at first, the Wild Magic played long and danced with joy at what it saw. Things grew bigger, taller, more imaginative as it got carried away in the throes of creation. Eventually, the Wild Magic covered the Earth with the forest we call Everfree, and made all manners of creature to live and play, too, so that the Earth would never be naked again.*

*Before the Wild Magic left to continue its journey, it made one last creature that it loved more than most. From the Earth itself, it made a mare called Pony, and gave her a*

*companion called Stallion. Because they were made from Earth, they understood it, and the creatures closest to it.*

*Now, we call ourselves Earth Pony, for we came from Earth. And still, many of us remember our connection to the ground where we walk and live.*

Seldom had Celestia given that innate sense thought. Amidst the herd, grass was plentiful, and others always marked rivers or ponds for water, no matter where the Earth Ponies rested. But here, now, what if she did not have that sense? What if it was a story so old, it was mere legend? Then, what was it that Luna saw?

Closing her eyes, she swallowed and emptied her mind. The magic of the unicorn dimmed and constant voice of conscious thought grew quiet, opening the field of her mind to feeling and intuition. When she looked again, she saw nothing new. No magical sight. No empathetic connection to Earth. No ancient heritage awakened.

She just saw what she overlooked before.

The dirt beneath her hooves was dark and soft, giving ample nourishment to the trees and allowing them to grow with their thick branches and wide trunks. The slope of the land channeled rain water through this area, but not so much to cause flooding or turn the soft ground to marsh. Winter would pass by every year, which caused the carpet of dry leaves, but the cold would not be so harsh as to give evergreens an advantage over their sturdy, wider leafed cousins. And somewhere, down the direction where Luna guessed, the rocks had moved and allowed a spring to well up with cold, refreshing water.

All of this she understood without being taught, as natural and instinctual as language. Afraid the epiphany would suddenly vanish, Celestia marched slowly, wordlessly, toward the spring. Luna fell in rank behind, already drifted off in thoughts only she knew. Soon, the sound of water lapping on rock disturbed the air.

Leaping with excitement, Celestia cantered headlong to the spring. Luna broke into a gallop to keep up, and both pranced in, forehooves first, quickly followed by lips slurping clear water.

The spring welled up from between a rocky outcropping and flowed in a gentle, constant stream where it ate away dirt and splashed downhill across smooth stone. Frigid for coming from cold places of the Earth and all the more pleasant for it, Celestia dunked her face in the pool to ease the swell of bruises. The pink mane soaked in the liquid and

dripped it down her shoulders, sending her skin to goose bumps. “Brr!” With a shiver, she shook out her mane and sent the water splashing all about. Luna squealed, the cold droplets chilling her side, and it gave her a burst of energy to summon a translucent shield against any more.

Smirking mischievously, Celestia bent low and let her hair soak again.

Luna’s eyes widened. “Oh, you better no-”

Celestia flicked her mane.

The blue mare squealed again as a shower of frigid rain tickled her side and sent shivers down her flank. She ran, breaking off into a high-pitched laugh while Celestia gave chase and shook herself out to send more freezing water at her sister.

The mane ran dry and Celestia stopped. Only to find Luna already soaking her tail, a wide, mischievous grin on her face.

“You little—” The tail flipping water across her chest cut that statement short with a gasp.

The play sent both mares up and down the spring’s banks, tables turned every few minutes. Squeals, laughs, shrieks of surprise broke the otherwise tranquil forest. But the burst of playful energy could not last long before the exhaustion of the day caught up.

“Okay! Okay . . .” Luna was the first to slow, sprawling herself across the ground, wings and legs akimbo. “I give.” Her coat sopped wet in places as she heaved for breath.

“I win! Princess of the spring!” Celestia posed triumphantly before collapsing in a sprawl herself, a laugh still on her lips. “My first order as princess is to declare you . . .” She touch a hoof to her chin. “Umm, second princess.”

“Second princess?” Luna raised a skeptical eyebrow, smirking.

“Well, of course! Being my sister means you are also princess.”

A light wind blew through the undergrowth. Leaves rustled, tree branches swayed, and both ponies shivered with a sudden chill. At once, the sisters scrambled toward each other and clung tight for the warmth.

“Celest?”

The white mare stopped shivering to look down at the blue pony she’d wrapped her forelimbs around. “Huh?”

“I’m glad you’re back.” Luna leaned her head against her big sister’s side. “That’s all.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” Closing her eyes, Celestia called forth her will and sent out a spell to dry the water collected from the game.

A stomach growled. Loudly.

Speechless, Celestia glanced down, a wry smile slowly growing.

Luna blushed and averted her gaze. “Sorry. I didn’t want to be constantly complaining on this trip.”

“I think asking for food is qui—” The word *food* caused an answering rumble from her own stomach. “Quite okay.” Though held with a straight face, the pink of her cheeks started to out due her hair.

A private snicker became Luna’s answer.

Rising to her feet, Celestia surveyed her surroundings. Tall trees, non-nutritious leaves surrounded the spring’s banks. On second thought, she realized the assessment of the foliage came without traceable reason. Instinct told her they tasted bitter and held little value. *Earth pony sense*. Once she was aware, the knowledge became easier to draw from. Following those instinctive hunches, she walked a path unseen, based on rainfall, plant competition, and soil. But this was different than finding the spring, the goal less assured. Celestia didn’t know where an edible grass or tree grew, just the most likely place they would.

Stomach complaining all the while, time eventually paid off. The white mare stopped and looked up with a smile. The tree above carried branches weighted with ripe, purple figs. A simple telekinetic spell plucked several from their stems and gingerly lowered them to the ground.

Pupils dilated in Luna’s eyes until the whites nearly disappeared. Drool dribbled at her lips as the prize came to rest on the floor. She chose one and launched forward, just

short of a pounce. The smell of fresh torn fruit wafted through the air as Luna devoured the fig. Standing up straight, words came from a mouth still chewing. "It's really good."

Plucking several more, Celestia finally lowered her neck and popped one into her mouth. Sugary juices exploded in her mouth, squeezed from a fruit with savory texture. Swallowing quickly with intense hunger, her lips picked up another and crunched the skin beneath teeth. Her eyes rolled back in pure overwhelming bliss. "Mmm," No food on Earth had ever grown finer than these figs, at this moment.

As the purple fruit disappeared one by one beneath greedy lips and empty bellies, the distraction of hunger dissipated and ambient sounds grew clear.

The tree existed as a hub of activity. Monkeys made mocking, cacophonous noises of play and battle. They swung nimbly from limb to limb, shaking branches and rustling leaves as they chased away rivals, groomed, or gathered their own food. Birds squawked, sang, flew, danced, courted, centering themselves around this ample source of nourishment. Glancing up, Celestia made out a myriad of other, quieter animals. Tree climbing foxes with a taste for figs, chameleons stalking bugs, squirrels and other mammals.

"Luna?"

"Hmm?" Juice dribbled down her chin.

"Grab what you can." Celestia forced her voice to remain calm. "We've got to go. Now."

The younger sister moved without questioning, tucking fig after fig beneath her wings, one final fig kept pinched in her teeth. Fruit followed in a trail behind Celestia, scooped by magic as she resisted the impulse to flee in gallop, instead striding briskly, direction unimportant. Luna in tow and wide eyed, looked at all her surroundings in muffled silence.

In only took a moment for curiosity to get the best of her younger sister. Midnight's light engulfed her horn and magic carried the fig from her mouth just long enough for a question. "What was it?"

"Did you see all that activity around the fruit tree?"

Mouth full again, Luna nodded.

"It was so different than everything else we've passed." Celestia gestured with her horn to the expanse of trees overhead. "These support so little, by comparison. So, all of the animals gathered for the tasty and easy food."

Luna drew in a sharp breath as realization dawned.

"And where the prey gathers, so will the predators. It'll be safer if we stay away." A sigh left her lips and she stopped, gently setting down the three or four figs she took with her. "This will be far enough for now. We need to find our orientation again." She turned around to her sister, expectantly.

A fig dropped from her lips. "Oh, right." Luna lifted her wings. A heaping pile of purple fruit tumbled to the ground at each side, more than two or even three ponies could eat in one sitting.

Celestia stared silently.

"What?"

A single brow raised.

"They're good."

She just shook her head. "Go on." A pink glow danced at the tip of her horn, and a hole opened up in the canopy. "Watch out for tree snakes on your way up. We're still kind of close."

With a brisk nod, Luna concentrated and the wings carried her aloft. Reaching a height above the trees, Luna briefly glanced to all sides. Her eyes fixed on something and she gasped, body going rigid with tension. She scrambled down to the forest floor, limbs moving awkwardly and hurried.

"What? What is it?!"

Blue eyes rose and met Celestia's. They held a look rare for Luna, always so distant and calm, an observer from far away. But now, they sent ice through Celestia's veins. In those seas of liquid cerulean, she saw a child-like, primal terror. Luna's voice cracked as she answered. "*The Sun.*"

Realization blossomed in a physical wave through her body, from nose, to the hairs of her flank. How many hours had past? So much had happened that it was hard to keep track. Neck craned, head shot upwards, and she threw open a hole in the canopy again to look at the sky. Bright afternoon's light faded, darkening slowly to the beginnings of a burning red-yellow.

Fear and adrenaline quivered her lips and she found herself slowly backing away from nothing.

*Night.*

Night was falling on the Everfree forest.

And trapped under leaf and branch, far from home, Luna and Celestia stood awaiting the coming of darkness.



# Chapter 10

*Much of what the unicorns did hurt: myself, Luna, their own kind. I understood why.*

**—Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia as recorded by her friends**

Do not enter the forest at night.  
Do not ever. Always return to the fields before Sun touches the ground to rest.

Whip Scar's grave, deep tone impressed upon Celestia the importance of the rule. The look on his face scared the young filly. Never would she be tempted to disobey. The more she learned, the more the temptation shrank, and turned terrifying.



Many prey, ponies included, used keen sight as their chief defense against predators. Night shifted the balance toward the predator's favor, especially those that favored stealth. They were built for darkness with strong noses, silent paws, and eyes that pierced the veil of black. Such creatures arose at dusk when the light changed and stalked the forests, on search for food caught where their senses were weak. One of the reasons the Earth pony –having no ability in magic— favored the fields was that Moon's light aided their vision and their enemies were less apt to hunt in the open, sticking instead to deep shadows. While the Everfree Forest was dangerous under the Sun, it was death under the Moon.

And here they were, far from home, the shadows growing long and the sky going dark.

“Celestia?” Luna's voice strained under a sense of helplessness, nearly to tears.

The pink-maned mare jerked her head to the young sister and stared in silence, heavy breathing shaking her frame. The mocking calls of the monkeys, still fighting over the figs, echoed from some distance away, laughing and cruel.

“What do we do?”

Regret, sullen and bitter, sunk down to her stomach. This trip had been ill thought out after all. Luna tried to give warning, but Celestia—the elder and confident—just short of ridiculed her for it. She should have listened. Should have thought this through. It had been nothing but problems from the start.

The younger sister lowered her head, eyes pinched shut.

Should have listened. *My fault.* Gone back home or to the—*Unicorns!* Celestia gasped, pieces falling into place faster than she could think. “Luna!”

The excitement in her elder sister’s voice steadied Luna and she rose with hope.

“How did the unicorns survive so long in the middle of the forest?”

Luna drew in a breath, her eyes alight. “By hiding in the trees!”

“Quick! We need to find a big trunk, or several close together.”

In a gallop, Celestia shot off through the forest, Luna at her side. With the days of separation and imprisonment still fresh in their mind, they stayed together. Splitting up now was inherently dangerous, besides.

They raced against time, Sun ever lowering to her rest and the sky ever darkening to orange, then violet. The trees, uncultivated by the unicorns, stretched out their roots and drove other saplings to distance, or simply did not grow wide enough to make a safe shelter. Eventually, Celestia skidded to a stop, kicking up loose leaves. Too much time had passed already. Hunters were waking.

“We’ll have to make do!” she shouted, eying three thick trees that stood marginally closer than the rest.

Stopping next to her sister, Luna looked up at the darkened sky. “How?”

Lower lip bit between teeth, Celestia concentrated on the first tree and called up her will. It warped and moved like a fresh, green stem, finding a new position along ground. “Follow my lead.”

The darker horn glowed and the second tree moved very much like the first. Luna fell to her knees, teeth gritted with the effort.

"That's enough!" Celestia broke Luna's concentration and the blue glow vanished. "You're still drained." The spell that gave her strength enough to trip an Ursa Major, after all, came from Luna just earlier that day.

The third tree bent down and joined its near-cousins. Silently, she mouthed thanks to Arcane Pride for the lessons in the elements of harmony and summoned thoughts of loyalty. Luna sprang to mind, tired and in danger. Whip Scar and Lightning Kick, who had two lost little fillies. All the Earth ponies, still in the field, unknowing of the gift Celestia wanted to bring. All waited. All needed her. She lent those feelings to her gathered will.

The spell changed, a new kind of power imbued. The trees meshed together, bark merging with bark, wood with wood. Three trees, separate but entwined. They stood like a bulb at the base, wide and odd, thinning at the top and jutting upwards like a massive onion plant. Luna stared at it as if her sister had just summoned a foul-smelling weed.

"I know, I know. But this will still cover us."

Skepticism wrought on her features, Luna glanced at her sister. "I think it might attract attention."

"It just needs to pass for tonight. We're not living here. It'll still fool a coyote, or manticore. C'mon! Inside."

Quietly, Luna obeyed, squeezing in the hole on the front. Slipping in next, Celestia summoned her magic and closed it behind.

The orb-like dwelling encompassed all sides, except for a slender hole at the top that followed the shaft of the merged trees, opened for light and air. Already, stars flickered, showing through twilight, Sun nearly gone. Celestia called a faux-fairylamp with her horn and sent it to hang on the roof, washing the interior in a pale pink glow. Finally, she breathed out a sigh of relief, though it was only partial. The adrenaline still coursed through her veins.

A crunch, loud and sudden, of dead leaves startled Celestia and she whipped her head around to find Luna, frozen stiff at her sister's gaze. She shifted for balance and her hoof crumpled more underneath, the snap of dried plant reverberating off the wooden walls in a sound shattering silence.

"Shhh!" Celestia hushed out harsh and desperate. Luna flinched at the sound and her ears folded flat at the reproach. A flicker of pink magic brushed the leaves into a corner and left soft dirt underfoot. "We can't make a sound, not even leaves. If anything outside hears, there will be no point in hiding." Celestia shrugged her shoulders, trying to loosen her taut back. "C'mon." She breathed out at her most quiet whisper. "It's been a wild day. We'll just rest here until morning and move on."

The thought of the day spent in fleeing the unicorns sent a fresh awareness of the little aches and pains she'd collected. Bruises throbbed on her face, her chest reminded her of the buck she received on her ribs. As she folded her legs beneath her, she felt the little complaints of sore muscle and an eerie drained quality at all the magic she expended little by little.

Luna chose a spot of dirt close by her sister and folded her legs as well. She shifted her weight to one side and settled heavily, head lowered at the effort it took to hold it aloft. While Celestia felt the injuries of a fight, Luna sagged with an exhaustion far greater.

But as Celestia glanced up to extinguish the light, her eyes caught sight of the violet sky and all the aches and pains washed away under a surge of chilled fear. In the end, they were still trying to survive the night in the Everfree Forrest, alone, herdless.

Having built the shelter, she knew how slight a protection it offered. The wide spacing of the trees meant the wood stretched so thin that it offered only concealment and little else. She counted the creatures that would break it at a slight effort. Hydra, ura, tiger, dragon, chimera, bear, manticores, even a swift buck would smash a hoof through, or perhaps a storm's wind would topple the whole thing.

In the darkness of the shelter, her eyes had no distraction and she kept them squeezed shut. Instead, her ears stood erect, keeping pointless sentry of the outside. The ice of her fear turned even colder in her veins with the thoughts of latent danger that lied just beyond the thin walls.

Time slowed to a crawl with nothing to tell its passing. Minutes could have been hours, or hours minutes. But sleep, peaceful and serene, was as far away from that place as they were from home. She yearned for her mind to slow the troubling thoughts and allow rest for the day that would come tomorrow. But the knowledge that they slept in Everfree could not be shaken.

A sound, rhythmic and lazy, sent her heart into her throat with a jolt. Feet, wide and padded for silence, stirred over the brush outside, each isolated beat coming closer to where they hid.

She sensed more than saw her sister start and raise her head, alert and listening. Reaching with one hoof, Celestia touched her on the shoulder, a reminder to keep quiet. Luna squirmed under the touch and turned, trying to maneuver close while taking great pains to remain silent. Lips and breath tickled Celestia's ear as Luna leaned up to whisper.

The sounds were unintelligible at first, Luna hardly giving them voice. But after a repetition, a pair of words came into startling clarity as a thought. *The smell!*

A gasp came dangerously close to leaving Celestia's lips before she bit them to keep silent. In setting up this shelter, she had not done a thing to hide their scent!

The padded feet circled the enclosure. A moan –low, deep and rumbling in a huge throat— called through the wooden walls.

Terror seized her body and mind. She wanted to scream right then. Cry out in her terror for no reason other than that she was afraid. Run, too. Run far and fast and without ceasing. It was what she always did, what *ponies* did. Flee from danger and harm. An antsy feeling filled her legs, nearly rising of their own volition to get up and bolt away from this place. The impulse grew in her mind out of something instinctual. All she had to do was let go of the control for an instant and she'd scream and run. She'd fly out of the tree . . .

. . . into the Everfree Forest at night, something huge and deadly on her heels as she condemned her sister to die in the broken cover.

Celestia locked herself down tight to stay put. Uncontrollably, she quaked with the suppressed need, the shudder encompassing her whole body. The halting only amplified her terror, the control over instinct so tenuous that it could slip at any moment and a choked whimper would reveal their presence.

The creature moaned again in agitation. Claws bit into the tree, wood cracking as the sharp nails pierced the outer bark.

The pink-maned unicorn threw her face into the soft dirt, wishing that the thing outside would just *go away*, wishing it over and over. Cool earth rubbed her forehead, that fearful whimper rising so close to being uttered. Any moment, the claws could bite too deep, the beast could press too hard, and once a small hole started, the beast would dig its way inside on just sheer curiosity. She threw her head back and watched the walls, afraid that she'd see a pinprick of moonlight that would mean the animal-of-prey found them.

Instead, the pale glow from the hole hidden at the top illuminated Luna. The midnight blue pony curled in on herself, a wing covering her face and her chest heaving as if she cried. Celestia crawled forward and reached a forelimb around her sister, drawing her into an embrace. Luna buried herself against her sibling's shoulder and Celestia pressed tight in hopes that any accidental sob would be muffled. Blue wings and forehooves enfolded the pale unicorn with a desperate cling. After only a moment, a wetness soaked through Celestia's coat where Luna's cheek lay.

Outside, whatever lurked circled, clawed, circled again, occasionally uttering a moan so low that it approached a growl. The instinct still remained inside Celestia, the urge for a terrified scream and frantic flight, but they no longer pressed. With Luna clutched in her arms and her chin resting comfortably on her baby sister's neck, the impulses merely existing as objects in her mind, and nothing more.

After a time, the sounds of padded footfalls faded into the night. Silence enveloped them, only disturbed by a creak of wood or rustle of branches in the wind.

Three more times, they were visited that night, each a variation on the same encounter. One scratched with dull claws scraping over top the wood. Another made not a sound except for the touch of feet on the forest floor. But each one soon passed and disappeared into the night, silence again returning inside the trunk. After surviving the first, the next three could be endured.

Celestia realized she had fallen asleep only when light tickled her senses. Her eyes rolled open slowly, feeling as if they were set in sand. Daylight trickled in from the hole on top of their shelter and settled in a bright circle off the tip of her nose. Luna still laid in her arms, softly sighing in peaceful sleep. She had adjusted herself, sometime last night, resting her cheek in a more comfortable position along her elder sister's shoulder.

Carefully disentangling herself from Luna —who, though now woken, nevertheless resisted the pull of day by curling in on herself and never opening her eyes— Celestia began to stretch out her limbs. The sleep came with great relief. Pain had been downgraded to merely sore, tired muscles had become simply stiff. The time of separation, imprisonment, and betrayal of the unicorns was now just a memory, with Luna once again hers.

“Come on. Up, you sleepy-head.” Celestia nudged her sister with a hoof, then peered up at the sky. “It’s well into morning. We’re late getting up. I’d rather *not* spend another night here if I can help it.”

Though Luna did not rise that instant, what Celestia said had a definite effect. She stretched out every hoof at the mention of another night in the forest and slowly found the way to her feet, stretching out both broad wings with a groan.

“How are you feeling?”

“Mehh . . .” The blue pony exhaled, eyes still half closed and adjusting to the light. Celestia had opened up a peek-hole in the tree by the time Luna composed herself enough for an answer with actual words. “Better . . . I think I can do magic again.”

Pressed up against the tiny hole, Celestia held off her remark until she got a clear view outside the tree. Nothing lurked now that the day broke, just an empty forest with tall trees and barren floor. “Sleep has always been the best cure for that,” she said absently while widening the hole to stick out her head. If something had yet been waiting at the edge of their scent and now heard them, she was prepared to use the thin walls as a shield against a lethal pounce. But glancing this way and that revealed still nothing but birds casually chirping their songs that filled the void in the trees. Finally, Celestia chanced a exit and slipped outside. Wordlessly, Luna followed. The birds continued

thier cheerful noise unabated by their presence and not a thing stirred to meet them. The hunters had left with Moon.

The thought melted her tension and a deep sigh expelled it. Her rump fell to sit, finally feeling a measure of relaxation. Luna took the opportunity to sit as well, patiently observant and tucked her tail tidily close. Craning her neck, Celestia traded a glance with her younger sister, piecing together what came next. A shadow of a pang in her belly quickly guided the direction. "Well, breakfast it is."

Luna rose and stood with a perky posture at the word. A split second later, she huffed out a breath and pouted off to the side.

"What is it?" The white mare rose and a four-beat walk propelled her forward.

The pout melted away as she was addressed, blue eyes regaining their distant quality. "Oh, I forgot the figs when we were searching for shelter last night." The corners of her lips curved up in blissful memory. "They were so good."

A brief snerk left the elder before she shook out her mane and turned her concentration to the task at hand. She called to mind the method of finding food she had used yesterday. The instinctual understanding of the Earth guided her, and the pale mare led her sister down paths that promised food. All the while, she kept one eye on the woods.

"Keep careful." She flipped back an ear to pay attention to Luna. "I think the safety of the unicorns made us forget how dangerous this place really is." A glance back confirmed that Luna gave a nod and she was keeping sentry to both sides and above. Celestia swallowed, her next thought voiced. "Not *everything* will have gone to bed with Moon."

"I know." Luna but whispered the words.

Standing straight, Celestia marched forward. "After breakfast, we'll press hard. I want to be at the mountains before nightfall."

The trot of her sister faltered a split second, then redoubled to catch up. "*Before* nightfall? Half the day is nearly gone already."

"We'll have to make it." Celestia's neck drooped in a feeling of dread. "We're simply not safe here at night. The trees here just are not good for protection. Our only hope is seeking shelter with the pegasi. So, we need to make the mountains."

"If the pegasi are even there," Luna said flatly

This time, Celestia's trot faltered. "It doesn't matter anyways. A makeshift cave in the mountain will still be better than any of these old trees." She resumed her trot.

“Until we have to come back.”

The pony with the pink mane gritted her teeth and withheld a biting answer. After all, just yesterday, Luna had been right about her worries. With a sigh, she released the building annoyance and continued her walk without replying. “Ahh, here we are!”

The change in the forest had been subtle, unnoticeable to those who paid little attention to flora. Standing overhead, a slightly different tree had taken root, an outlier on territory its species would claim. What mattered to Celestia, though, was that the leaves were highly edible and contained no poison. Licking her lips, she plucked a bundle from the lower branches with a pink glow. Luna did the same and they both hoisted down a small pile which to eat.

The leaves quickly vanished into greedy mouths, each sister getting her fill with a sense of hurry. After breakfast, both went about the task of navigation with little pause, the pattern established from the day before.

“Up you go.” Celestia parted the branches of the canopy above while Luna took to the air to find the mountain range and came down with a hoof outstretched in the direction.

“That way.”

With a short nod, Celestia set out, leading Luna as they weaved through the trees. If they were to have a chance of making their destination before sunset, the pace had to be brisk and Celestia set the gait at a clipped trot. Remnants of fear birthed from the night before remained ever present as a sense of urgency.

The haste gave little chance for idle conversation or to appreciate what they found in the depths of Everfree, where few ponies had tread. Wonders of colors passed, flowers, butterflies and poison frog. Of form, too, strange spider webs and vines. Life as well, with the small animals going about their business. This and yet more all passed by where little attention could be spared and absolutely no time. Ambient sounds of birds, insects, and occasional larger life were the only back drop. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the diverse landscape, eyes always watching for danger.

Sun completed her rising arc overhead and began the long travel to the western horizon. Celestia and Luna paused sparingly and only when opportunity arose. For a drink as they crossed over a river. Food as they spied a tree of nutritious leaf, or where a hole in the canopy allowed grass to grow. Every so often as she felt need, Celestia sent Luna up to view the sky and regain their bearings.

“Not that much farther!” Luna’s voice beamed with excitement. “We’re really getting close now.”

By the shadows cast on her sister, Celestia saw that Sun slowed for no one. There’d still be a push over the last bit of ground. “Alright, let’s hurry the last leg.”



"W-wait!" Luna called down seemingly distracted, her gaze fixed far away. "I think I see something."

Apprehension at any pause bubbled with an equal share of curiosity. "What is it?"

"Just—just a minute!" Luna made a quick placating gesture with a hoof, her wings already prepping to race. "Let me go see."

Celestia parted her mouth to answer but before a word could be uttered, Luna darted away from the hole and out of sight. Taken off guard and too late to say anything else, Celestia yelled to the vacant hole. "Be careful!"

"Okay . . ." The answer already drifting from some distance away as Luna chased the object of her curiosity.

"Tssh!" Celestia huffed out a breath between clenched teeth as she let go of the magic that parted the canopy. Branches whipped back in place with a rustle and the sunlight closed with them, leaving Celestia alone in cool shade. Annoyance and frustration rose in her chest, contracting her brow and putting some tension in her shoulders. Later, she'd have a talk with Luna about that tendency to run off.

At the moment, however, there was nothing for it and nothing to do. After a deep breath inwards, she sighed and released a tension she held since from that morning unthinking. Shoulders and neck relaxed, drooped, and she lowered her hindquarters to sit. The muscles in her legs burned with a dull complaint, no restful walk today for them. Yet, the burn was faint and they had strength yet to spare as they closed the last miles.

The relative quiet and rest of the moment set her mind to thinking. It found little to consider in the trip itself, she was already doing all she could to keep them both safe and make it to the pegasi, and confident in that. Instead, her mind wandered around the forest and all its curiosities.

Tall, straight pines stretched high above the earth, branches fanning out above with thin, needle-like leaves. Cloves sprung forth all along the ground, as thick as grass but many times more vibrant, half burying the scattered fallen bows of trees from past generations. The thin leaves allowed sunlight to brighten the pines and the cloves until the whole world seemed to glow with green radiance. A delighted smile crept across her lips as she saw the beauty, luminescent greens rolling with earthy browns, surrounding all the eye could see above and below. Like all things of beauty for Earth ponies, she absorbed the feeling and committed it to a memory she could revisit or tell in a story.

Birds chirped their song, a pleasant and ambient noise that she realized she missed more than she thought. Among the unicorns, who used their call for warning, the forest was bereft their presence. The singing, then, reinforced the feeling that she escaped. Swept up and glad to be so, she listened to them sing and watched the forest's rolling

colors. Though, as her attention turned to the birds, she found a strange absence of sound behind her. Curiously, she craned her neck around and—

Yellow eyes met hers in a passionless gaze. A wolf —black and trimmed with gray— stood eerily still, just watching her, one paw lifted in stalking.

In that instance, a time so short as to be instantaneous, her mouth parted in shock and fear. Her heart leaped out of her chest and beyond even her throat while her stomach turned into weightless mush. Every part of her body coiled as taught as a scared snake, while thought and sensation melted into a slurry bathed in panic.

She bolted. Celestia was aware of the intention to run a few heartbeats after her hooves were already on the move, churning dirt and clover with a furious thunder. Somewhere inside, a part of her wordlessly knew exactly what such a creature would do to her with its jaws and teeth, the images of that being one of her strongest memories.

Rip her to pieces and eat her bit by bit.

It was written in those yellow eyes, how they regarded ponies so emotionlessly, that killing for food was as a part of them as eating grass was toward ponies. How could a pony feel mercy toward grass? How could a wolf feel mercy toward a pony? The utter unfeeling of their gaze was the part that gave Celestia her nightmares.

A chuffing breath followed close on her heels, the wolf giving chase with the same instinctual suddenness that Celestia fled. The instinct to scream half asserted itself, every quickened breath her lungs exhaled holding with it a sound of half girlish-squeak, half terrorized scream.

Seldom had she ran this fast, only times when extreme danger had gifted her legs with near magical speed. Her pink mane and tail whipped behind her as she plunged headlong into the forest, and she may have outrun the wolf then. She was a young mare in her physical prime, moving at full gallop and driven by fear for her life. On a field, escape was certain.

They weren't on a field. They were in the heart of the wolf's domain.

Celestia never had a clear line through the forest. Every few paces, she plowed through some low-hanging branches or shrubberies, leapt over logs strewn in her path, or weaved around the never ending obstacles of trees, her hooves kicking up clumps of dirt and cloves at each shift of her momentum.

While Celestia handled this well, the wolf simply handled it better. Its long-legged swiftness deftly navigated the forest without slowing, padded feet pushing off logs and dull claws digging into dirt with equal ease.

Together, they weaved the forest in a contest as old as Everfree itself. Unable to turn her attention away from directly ahead, lest she run dead fast into the bough of a tree, Celestia tracked the wolf's chase with her ears. She weaved her trail always in response to his— never thinking, simply doing— placing a tree between them, or an out-thrust rock, or a rolling hill, or anything that would force the wolf to take a slightly longer path, winning a few inches of lead, a few more seconds of time, until the predator would have to give up—the prey too clever and troublesome. In turn, the wolf did the opposite, always looking to cut his path short and close on Celestia until she could be brought down by his jaws.

In the end, it was no contest.

Wolves never work alone.

More chuffing breaths entered her awareness, closing on her flanks. She chanced a quick glance and saw a wolf, a new one, running parallel to her and closing its way through the forest, waiting for its opportunity to sweep in and snare her. A scream ripped from her throat and she veered away. Her ears spied yet another's sound, cutting off that retreat and she had to correct her turn to keep from letting it close.

Her chest contracted, breath coming rapid with a fearful whine on each exhale. With each new wolf she sensed by eyes or ears, her terror grew, until now it was its own adversary that sapped her strength and snuffed rational thought.

The wolf on her flank made her move, darting in from the side. She heard it coming and the terror erupted like a geyser, freezing her breath in place.

She seized her magic. As it closed, Celestia rammed *will* into a raw intention.

*Get away!*

The air at her side *thumped* with a sudden influx of power. Magic, raw and unfocused, cascaded out like a gale-force wind. Pines creaked loudly and popped, swaying back under the push. Branches snapped, twigs and leaves tore from their anchors and thrown like feathers. The she-wolf was lifted off her feet, eyes wide in surprise.

But the magic remained as unfocused as the intent. Without a thought-construct to give magic form, the power—even as much as Celestia could call— dispersed everywhere and what little hit the wolf washed around her like a strong wind. Sent ungracefully back to the ground only few lengths away, the wolf tumbled end over end, mostly uninjured. She found her feet again and resumed the chase undeterred.

Her unicorn magic had failed, some part of her realized in that flight. If she threw power out like that over and over at each wolf, she'd sap herself of strength before she'd scare any of them off. In the height of fear, she simply could not organize effective magic.

A despair came with the failure, a slow sinking feeling that made itself known even at that moment. Still, she ran, never stopped running and relying on her speed to stay ahead of the wolves.

Though, of course, the wolves knew that about a young and healthy pony. Their hunting tactics were too varied and clever for a simple solution.

That realization struck only as she saw yet two more close off her path. They had herded her, using their numbers to press her flanks and guide her retreat. They turned her around so their pack mates could head off her run and entrap her. She was surrounded.

Immediately, Celestia dug in her forehooves, reared back, and bucked with all her might. The first wolf, the one that chased her from the beginning, did not have time to react. Celestia struck out blindly, but one of her hooves sunk into something fleshy and giving. A pop of bone, wet and disturbing, coincided with a sharp, high pitched yelp.

The wolf hit so hard that Celestia was thrown off her forelimbs and stumbled forward, mouth coming up with the taste of dirt she planted into. When she was up, the wolves already enclosed her.

They circled her from all sides, all of them, taking a position to bare teeth and growl ferociously, only to take a new position at some other angle. Celestia threw her head around, trying to look all ways at once. The wolves assumed this tactic in perfect coordination, harassing every side with their presence, distracting her with noise, shuffling as to add more confusion and keep her within the circle of teeth.

When cornered, a wild Earth pony fights. Without magic, Celestia fought like a wild Earth pony. She raised back legs, intimidating the canines with a chambered kick. She reared and brayed in equal parts fury and fear, pressing the circle with the threat of a painful stomp. Each side she approached fell back just out of her range, still growling with sharp teeth on a long, snarling snout and shuffling so no single wolf ever faced her alone.

She never heard the quiet one that sprinted in from her flank. That might have been the point of the growling and noise. The wolf came from an angle behind, avoiding the chance of a kick from the rear legs, but only on the outskirts of peripheral vision and easily missed in the confusion. Teeth sunk into the back of Celestia's thigh. She screamed in pain. She had never experienced it like this before. The teeth had sunk deep and tissues that had never been touched, so deep beneath the skin, suddenly cried out in fresh agony.

Without thinking, Celestia tried to whirl around and gore the wolf from her leg with her unicorn's horn. The instant she did, the wolf peeled off and rushed back into his pack mate's circle, blood still on her lips. Her blood.

The instant Celestia's attention changed, another silent wolf swept in and bit down on her other rear leg. Startled again, she screamed. The teeth weren't the only pain. The strength of their jaw clamping down pinched her thighs, though "pinched" seemed hardly a word to describe just how much it hurt.

Her injured leg came down to save her balance. It stumbled. A third wolf came in for her forelimb and jerked it out from under her.

She fell. The motion seemed to last forever. Her body hung in the air for several terrifying moment as her legs were swept out. Then, she hit the ground. They rushed in. All she could see behind her eyes was Painted Hoof, that scene of him being torn to pieces as the wolves rushed her. Her mouth parted in wordless horror.

"Ha, ha, ha, heh, heh." *Snort.*

Bubbly, girlish laughter stopped all of it. The wolves froze, heads whipped around in surprise. Even though two still held her legs, their eyes darted nervously to the sound of the laugh.

"Hee, hee, hee, ha, ha, ha!" *Snort.*

Celestia held deadly still—dead still, even—afraid that the slightest bit of movement would draw their attention once more and they remember their hunger.

Hoofbeats, casual and carefree as a stroll through a field, carried forward the figure of a pony, concealed in an earth-tone cloak. Only one such pony ever wore such a thing. *The shaman!* Celestia resisted sucking in a breath in surprise.

One of the wolves—a male larger than the rest towering over the mare—leapt out from the pack and interposed himself between the new pony and their won meal. The alpha bristled his fur into something huge, widened his stance, and growled low and intense. The rest of the pack followed his lead and began to close ranks just behind, leaving Celestia where she laid.

The shaman burst out giggling again as if the wolf just told her a really great joke. She raised a hoof to her chest and padded it to calm herself down, then stepped forward as if Alpha was an old friend, closing to a mere outstretched hoof away. Celestia's hope died at that instant, waiting for the shaman to be killed before her eyes by the pack of wolves.

But Alpha stepped back, his growl redoubled, ears pinned to his head nervously. Sensing his apprehension, the rest of the pack let out confused, anxious whines. Some of the smaller broke a few steps away, including one that badly limped.

The shaman didn't hesitate, moving as if oblivious to danger. She lifted a hoof and touched it to Alpha's nose, loudly declaring, "Honk!"

Celestia's jaw fell agape, and she wasn't even sure who was more shocked, herself or Alpha. The wolf stopped growling, ears shot straight up in complete surprise, his own jaw slackened like Celestia's. After blinking surprise several times, his ears pinned down nervously and he bolted backwards. The pack began to scatter, then stopped in front of the downed pony. Shaman resumed her walk forward, ignoring them. The pack broke before her, fanning out into the woods with their tails between their legs.

The mare with the pink mane, laying on the ground in utter confusion, searched desperately for words. "Wha- . . . how. . ."

"Hi, Celi! Good to see you again, and all grewed up!" The shaman lifted a travel dirtied hoof and pulled back her hood. She was an old mare, though younger than the elders of the unicorns. Wrinkles lined her face, already deep with laugh lines. Her coat was predominantly brown, except for a grayed mane, and it held a subtle quality to it that made it unique; very much like the unicorns' richer colors, yet different. A tiny hint of strawberry underneath the brown, perhaps. But her eyes, those were the most unique of all. Pale blue irises like that of a little filly's, retaining all vibrance and wonder of childhood unmarred by years. Patiently, the shaman waited for Celestia to collect her thoughts, a smile on her the whole time.

"How--" Celestia didn't know whether to stare in awe or fear. "How did you do that?"

"You mean the wolfies?" The shaman giggled, a sound it seemed she made often. "Oh, old shaman trick. All the animals that eat other animals think everyone is scared of them. If you're scared, they know you're food! If you growl, they know you're scared and will fight. But if you don't growl or run, then they're scared because you're not. "

From all the exertion, Celestia's breath came hard, though she felt the tendency to hold it, staring confused. "What?"

"If you aren't scared of wolfies, then wolfies are scared of you," Shaman repeated with infinite, seemingly oblivious, patience.

"But . . . laughing?"

"When I laugh, I'm not scared. So, I laugh at them." She giggled again.

Celestia knitted her brow before flopping her head on the ground in defeat. "I still don't understand."

The old mare's face became almost motherly, like an expression an aunt wore for a cherished niece. "Oh, you will, after it sinks in. Go ahead, ask me another!"

Though she lay there, confused, ragged, aware of small wounds still bleeding but not life-threatening, the shaman just played games! Stranger still, she found herself playing

along. A question popped into Celestia's mind and she raised her head. "How did you find me?"

"I'm a shaman, of course!" Laughter came like punctuation with her. "I followed Shaman Sense!"

"Shaman . . . Sense?"

"The message in the ground! Earth talking to me. Little tickles, or itches, or twitches, or wiggles, or giggles, or acheys, or shakeys, that's how she talks. I was out looking for you when my nose began to itch. That was Earth telling me that some pony would be chased by wolves."

Celestia creased her brow in worry, rolling to a more comfortable position upright. The thought occurred that the shaman might, as another pony once put it, 'drink the wrong kind of water.' Mad, in other words. Though she had met the shaman once, twice counting birth, and heard plenty of rumors or stories, this was the longest conversation they'd ever had and she was witnessing firsthand where some of the rumors came from.

And yet . . . she showed up exactly when Celestia needed her and chased away a pack of wolves by laughing at them. Part of Celestia wanted to believe. After all, it was the shaman who had first said Celestia was special. "You were looking for me?"

"Uh-huh!" The shaman nodded. "My back is prickily. A message!" In a blur, the old mare was upon Celestia, holding the white pony's cheeks between her hooves. The sheer speed startled young pony, who found herself staring at those blue eyes, unable to turn away. Their youth was gone, replaced with a frightening intensity. "*Know your limits.*"

Her heart pounding in her chest all over again, Celestia swallowed.

The intensity melted like a snowflake on a warm patch of grass. A smile grew on Shaman's features. "That's the message! 'Know your limits.'" She gently let go of the startled pony and took a step back to reach underneath her cloak.

"Wh-what?"

"It was something I received from the stars, meant for you." The shaman spoke with her face buried underneath the earth-toned fabric, still searching it. "My prickily back meant it was super-important. Make sure to remember it!"

Celestia let out a sigh to calm herself down. Even if not of unsound mind, Shaman was still odd.

"C'mon!" The shaman came out with a weaved basket's handle in her mouth and spoke with it between her lips. The basket was not unlike that of unicorn make, except that it

was still fresh and green rather than dried. “Now, show me the bites. They might get sick if we don’t put on ooie-gooy.”

Incredulous, with a hint of anxiety, Celestia repeated. “Ooie-gooy?”

“Ooie-gooy.” She gestured with a bob of the basket. “It feels all icky, but it’ll stop the sicky! It’ll fix some of the oww as well, so you best let me do it, little Celi.”

Celestia sheepishly outstretched her bitten forehoof, pure white of her coat streaked by blood that slowly ran down the length. Seeing the injury for the first time, Celestia’s eyes welled with tears, her lips pouted, and she felt like a silly foal for that reaction.

“Oh, there, there.” With surprising gentleness, the shaman applied some of the goo and smothered it with soft, furry leaves before binding it all tight with longer, flat ones. Where the shaman got her cloak, and her never ending supplies for healing or mischief remained a mystery to all. Some said it was of unicorn make, others that she traded with many non-ponies. But seeing the hooves tie off the plant securely about her forelimb, Celestia could believe she made it herself. “There we are, little Celi. Now, isn’t that better? You remind me of my own daughter.”

A jolt sent Celestia choking on swallowed saliva and threw her into a coughing fit. “Wait!” she managed between coughs, “Shaman take *mates*!?”

“Of course, silly!” She waved off the matter. “How else would us sha-mares have little sha-foals?” She leaned in to whisper covertly with Celestia, a just-between-us-girls tone. “Don’t tell him we’re mates. I don’t think he knows it yet that I’m just a little bit *crazy*!”

“Oh,” Celestia tried to hide her smile and did a poor job of it. “He doesn’t, does he?”

“Nope.” The shaman began work on Celestia’s rear legs, smearing more goo. “So far, so good. All the way to grand-foals and he hasn’t run away scared yet, so I think it’s working.”

Celestia chuckled.

It seemed to be the reaction the shaman was hoping for. “You can call me Granny Pie.”

“Huh?”

“Ever since my daughter had her foals, she calls me Granny Pie. It’s a little more catchy and less weird than calling your momma ‘The Shaman’ or ‘the Shamom.’ If we meet again, you can call me that too.” Granny Pie finished the binding on the last leg. That seemed the closest thing to an explanation Celestia would get. “Oh, one more thing before I go.” Reaching under the cloak, she pulled out several pieces of white bark with her lips and set it in front of Celestia. “Chew on this before you begin your journey again. If you’re going to make it, you’ll need to.”



“Shaman Sense tell you I’m on a journey, too?”

Granny Pie laughed. “No, silly. You wouldn’t be in the Everfree Forest if you weren’t trying to go somewhere else! Now, tell little Luna and her new friend that I said hi.”

Celestia looked confused. “Luna’s new friend?”

Granny Pie scratched her side like a dog. “Itchy flank. It means that someone just made a friend.”

# Chapter 11

*There are things we overlook in our youth, I was no exception. I neglected to realize that one vital step to growing is to uncover the mystery that resides in ourselves*  
—**Excerpts from the Candid Sayings of Celestia**  
**as recorded by her friends**

Above the rolling leafy expanse of the upper canopy, the mountain range cut off the horizon. Rising up into the sky, they weathered the clouds with granite.

“Not much farther!” A smile parted Luna’s lips as she felt a thrill. The mountains were so very large at this distance, sitting high above Everfree with a sense of stubbornness; old, powerful chiefs towering over the tumult below. “We’re really getting close now.”

“Alright, let’s hurry the last leg.” Worry mixed with determined hope in Celestia’s words.

About to answer, a tiny hint of motion caught Luna’s eye. At first hidden against the backdrop of mountains, a dark speck passed into blue sky, where it stood contrast. “Wait!” Luna focused her gaze, nearly able to make out a rhythmic movement within, like the beating of wings. “I think I see something.”

“What is it?” Celestia clipped her question, unsure.

The doubt in her elder sister sent a jolt of unease through Luna. “Just—just a minute.” She reflexively gestured to stall for time, several thoughts all warring for attention at once. The speck was large enough to be a flying creature—a pegasus, even— and Luna tried to study it. If it was not a pegasus, it was still something and Luna wanted to know. Celestia, already hesitant, could overrule Luna’s desire to explore. Words fought for place to be spoken and justify herself, in a mind already preoccupied. All of this and her chance was slipping by. The creature flew *fast*, faster than anything she had ever seen. “Let me go see,” she mumbled. Wings, already prepped for flying, launched her, escaping before Celestia could refuse.

A surprised and probably displeased Celestia called from behind at the last second, powerless. “Be careful!”

“Okay!” she yelled back, putting on speed.

The realization of how little she had flown came as soon as Luna applied her wings. Celestia had not liked the casual use of gliding, calling it “weird,” so her experience was not much more than two days of brief hovering hops and one haphazard escape.

Another realization came intertwined. Flying –that was actually beyond hovering— was hard. The moment Luna threw herself forward, she dropped like a tossed stone and nearly dove headfirst into the upper branches of the forest. With a startled noise, she flared her wings and jerked back, halting and avoiding disaster by a mere nose lengths. Carefully this time, she concentrated on her new limbs and willed herself up. They flapped furiously, yet oddly gave very little lift, their movements inefficient. Slowly, she rose anyway, and began to flutter forward. Catching sight of the speck once more, she flew in pursuit.

The roaming dot streaked across the sky like a comet. Literally streaking; a long, fading tail of the same unclear color trailed behind, evaporating like dew in the Sun as it went. A wave of urgency doubled Luna's efforts, the opportunity to investigate vanishing as fast as that tail.

Unsteadily at first, she tried to hurry along the tops of the trees, faltering and dropping mixed with quick recoveries and smooth gliding. By not thinking, using pure instinct, her movements became smoother and she gained speed. Luckily, the creature did not fly directly away. Luna closed and it became clear.

*It IS a pegasus!*

Her insides danced with butterflies. Shock killed them a second later. The pegasus flew so swiftly that it would be long gone in only a minute.

"HEY!" Luna shouted to the distant flyer and saw no reaction. "HEY, uhh, PONY!" She called up will to the tip of her horn and sent it to glow bright blue with white crackling sparks, anything to get attention. "Hey, pony, over here!" Rising higher above the treetops, she flew straight up and waved her forehooves. "HEY, YOU!"

She dropped. A split second of weightlessness and she was falling. In struggling to get the pegasus' attention, she forgot that small bit of concentration required to keep her wings in motion. With a yelp, she plummeted, flailing all limbs in panic. A quick thought sent a spell into a tree below, stretching out its branch and expanding it wide to catch her. The tree creaked, bent, and groaned as her hooves clattered against the wood platform. Feeling only a mild pain in her ankles from the fall, her heart remained aflutter at the scare and Luna panted for a gasping breath. Losing little time, she turned her attention to the sky for the comet-like pony.

And found nothing. The sky was empty and clear of all but sparing clouds and Sun on her journey to the west.

Dismay flooded her insides. She scanned the sky again in quick jerks, trying to catch a last glimpse before the pegasus slipped away. Nothing. The pony was long gone. Her shoulders went slack, the dismay congealed inside in her belly. She sat down quietly and tucked her tail close, staying that way for a long moment as disappointment buried her.

This was her fault. She was simply slow and unable to keep up, just like in the old games of *Griffs and Ponies*. Thoughts turned to Celestia and reporting what she had found. The sight of the pegasus meant something, at the least. She turned and took to her wing, heading back to where she last saw her sister, a weight lightening in her stomach.

“*What do you want?*” A young colt’s terse voice sent a jolt through Luna’s body.

Her wings snapped to her flanks and stuck there. Without warning, Luna fell into the treetops, only able to yelp in surprise.

Her face buried into the sea of green, leaves thwacking it on all sides. Thin branches bent and whipped her chest and legs with stinging force, others snapping as she fell through them. Thicker branches caught her like rough fingers and she laid sprawled on her back, limbs splayed all directions.

Opening her eyes and peering up the hole her tumble made, she caught sight of a colt peering back down. A fraction of a second later, his wide, young eyes smiled. He burst out in loud, ridiculing laughter, throwing himself back away from the hole with the force of it.

“Wait!” Luna called, struggling to right herself. “Wait!” Half climbing, half flying, and half swimming through the trees, Luna fought her way back up through the canopy until she burst through the top. “Don’t go yet . . .”

He hovered on his wings, on his back as if solid ground had been there, still clutching his sides with the last of his laughter. From head to hoof, his body was splotched brown and white, even his mane and tail, as if someone had thrown balls of color on him which never washed off. Likewise, his wings were both brown feathered and matching his coat, as unquestionably a part of him as horns were on unicorns.

“What?” He spun around and faced Luna, the question still terse when he noticed she was staring. The colt’s eyes, blue as the sky, held what Luna could only call a youthful transperence. Guileless at hiding anything.

“You’re a pegasus!”

“Uhh, yeah.” He drew his brow down as if he’d just spoken to an idiot and he turned to go. In the space of a blink, his wings launched him away, leaving a brown trail in his wake.

“W-wait!” Luna yelled and hurtled herself forward. “Don’t go yet!” She hadn’t a prayer of catching him, even as she flapped as hard and fast as her wings possibly could.

The colt continued on ahead, Luna in failing pursuit for several agonizing heartbeats.

“I need to ask you something!” She took in a deep breath and nearly screamed to make herself heard. “Where are the pegasi?!”

He peered back over his shoulder in an effortless motion, an eyebrow quirked in curious confusion. Luna’s hope rose, then crashed as he turned back ahead and continued on. Until she noticed thought turning over in his head. Reluctantly, he slowed and allowed Luna to close the distance. “You really don’t know?” He sounded surprised.

A sigh relaxed part of her, even as her wings strained with furious flaps to keep up this pace. “Yes, I need to find them.”

The colt looked her over from head to hoof, having no ability to hide his scrutiny.

Self-awareness, lost in the tide of Luna’s eagerness, forced its way back with a kick. The colt taking stock of her, Luna parsed exactly what was to be taken stock of. Sap from the fall matted her coat in sticky lumps and ruffled the feathers of her wings distraught. Her mane and tail—which she kept so neat and pretty ever since Crescent Change showed her how—had twice the problem. Its own helping of sap knotted her hair into wild, messy shapes and twigs lodged themselves everywhere, green leaves often still attached. If she had been placed next to the shaman at this moment, Luna guessed she’d appear the madder of the two.

Despite maintaining a distant look, she felt warmth gather at her cheeks.

Then, there was the matter of her horn. Though perhaps that could be lost in the quite literal fray.

“You don’t need to kick your legs like that.” The colt pointed down to her hooves, which she realized she unconsciously pumped through the air as if she was running.

Luna pulled them back and tucked them underneath her, trying to mimic the colt. “Oh.”

He regarded her again, a hoof to his chin. “You look like a foal on his first flight. Clumsy and dumb.”

The words pricked Luna and she narrowed her eyes in contempt. A brief flash of her horn sent a stream of summoned water leaping out of the forest and into the colt’s face.

The liquid cascaded across the stunned pegasus, splashing in all directions as his flight carried him down the length of it. Giddy laughter from Luna turned into a full belly laugh as the pony’s surprised yelp turned into a prolonged gurgle.

Luna still grinned as the colt shook out his mane in violent jerks, sputtering his lips to spit the unexpected taste from his mouth. Then, his eyes found her again.

The colt could not have missed her horn now. If she had meant to keep it a secret, she had dashed that plan for her little jab. An impulse rose in her, to shrink away. To meekly weather his rebuke and wait for it to pass. Though he was a colt, he was also a pegasus and his acceptance mattered.

But another impulse rose as well, one far more powerful.

Her ankles itched, remembering the roots that leapt from the ground and ensnared her legs, and the unicorns that dragged her off into the night. The thought occurred of this colt's reaction being somewhat similar now that she revealed herself. The threat stirred something deep inside, a buried thing she had felt twice before. Once when she stood up to Phantom Spell at her escape, and again when Crescent Change accidentally brushed upon it, asking her feelings about Ebon Swift. It peeled her lips back in a snarl, vehemence coursing through her veins.

The colt evaporated all that unease in a flash, a modicum of respect dawning in those transparent eyes. What was more, the respect wasn't directed at the horn, but at *her*. "I guess we're even, now. You looking for where we gather?"

"Yes." Luna nodded, feeling a great deal of relief. And a growing fear of her own emotions.

"You can follow me back." The colt rolled gently to the side and began to pull away.

"Wait! No, I don't think I can."

He returned to her wingtip. "Why not?"

"I have to go bring my sister. If you could tell me where to go instead, I'd be very grateful."

"Your sister?" The colt digested the information, thoughts turning over in his head again. It lasted just long enough to make Luna suspicious, except for how poorly the colt hid his thoughts. "The mountain with the cloud."

"There are clouds everywhere."

"*That* mountain with *that* cloud." He lifted his hoof and pointed to a tall White Cap with a snow-crested peak. It sat in the middle of the range with a cloud nestled to its side just below the treeline. "That cloud will always be there."

"Alright." Luna stared at sight before her, committing the details to memory with the tricks she'd learned as an Earth pony.

The colt began to fly past her.

“Wait!”

He slowed and yelled behind him, “What?”

“What’s your name?”

“Rebel Bolt.”

“*Rebel* Bolt?”

“No!” He rolled to his back, a childlike pout to his lips and his brows drawn down in offence. Even upside down, he glided effortlessly. “Not *Rebel* like what somepony is. *Rebel*, like something you do. *Rebel* Bolt!”

“Oh, *Rebel*,” Luna repeated. “I’ll see you at the pegasus herd?”

An odd look passed over the pegasus at her last statement. “Sure.” With that, he rolled again and shot off like a star, that same trail from before appearing in his wake.

No longer having to move at the colt’s pace, Luna slowed to a hover and watched Rebel’s form shrink further and further, brown splotched coat disappearing among the colors of the ground.

Then, it all sunk in. She sucked in a breath and with it a rush of giddy glee. “Yes!” In the air, she bucked out her hooves, then reared and kicked her forelimbs in a rocking motion of pure joy. “Yes, yes, yes! I found them! The pegasi are here! They’re here, they’re here! Celestia, I found them!”

As if responding to her mood, her wings flapped excitedly and she dashed off the way she came. A moment passed that nearly put a damper on her spirits. She was lost. All the forest looked the same from above. She darted left and right, looking for a landmark, a visual cue of where Celestia and her had parted ways, only to find the canopy stretching out endlessly in rolling green.

“Oh, duh. Magic!” She pressed a hoof to her forehead. Just some days ago, she’d experimented with a hundred ways to find Celestia. Calling one to mind, she summoned a dragonfly construct of blue magical *will*, one that would seek all the traits of her sister. The luminescent blue insect floated in the air, large eyes searching, antennae twitching. After only a heartbeat, the agile dragonfly zipped off a few pony lengths at a time, always waiting for Luna to approach before skipping forward again.

The dragonfly led her a long distance. Evidently, she had covered a lot of ground in her chase after Rebel. As Luna crested another hill, something attracted her attention away from the flitting dragonfly. A star of pink light rose from the canopy, resting at the center of a hole where the branches had been brushed aside in a unicorn’s magic glow. A wide

grin stretched her cheeks and she let her concentration lapse, the dragonfly fading into the air.

“Celestia!” The winged unicorn plunged into the hole at a dive, passing into the shadows of the Everfree forest once again. “Celestia! I found them, I--” She paused midsentence.

Her elder sister slowly opened her eyes, dispelling the *will* she called to her horn. One of her cheeks puffed out, hiding something she chewed with methodical motions of her jaw. Three bandages bound tight on three of her limbs, and her hair had not dried completely from the sweat it had gathered.

Curiosity galled the blue pony. “What happened to you?”

“I could ask the same thing.” Celestia’s lips curved wider and wider with suppressed laughter.

Luna glanced down at herself, aware again of the twigs and sap in her mane. “Oh, this?” Her smile beamed and she hopped in place on all four legs. “I met a pegasus!”

A knowing nod gently shook Celestia’s pink mane. “Ah.”

Confusion stopped her hopping. “Isn’t that great news? We’re on the right path!”

“It is, it is.” Celestia turned and began a slow trot. “It’s just that I expected some news like that.”

“That way.” Luna jumped ahead and pointed with an outstretched hoof. “The mountain with the cloud.”

“First,” Celestia glanced over her shoulder with an arched brow. “We’re going to a stream to clean you up and get a drink.” Her voice grew chastising, from elder sister to younger. “You shouldn’t have left like that. It was foolish.”

“But the pegasus, he was leaving.”

“No, that doesn’t matter.” Celestia’s pace grew brisk with a restrained anger. “If he had been unfriendly, then what? You left without asking, off alone, flying high above the forest. Just days ago, the unicorns kidnapped you. What if something else happened? A manticore or a gorgon found you? How could I help? How would I know?” She paused and leveled a glare back at her sister. “That tendency to run off you have is going to get you into trouble. Bad trouble.”

Luna shrunk under Celestia’s gaze, ears folding flat, eyes cast down. Quietly steaming, Celestia resumed her walk forward, ever so slightly limping, drawing Luna’s eyes back to the leaf-bandages that wrapped around her rear legs. “What happened while I was gone?”



\*

\*

\*

The anger Celestia had built on Luna's reckless, foolish actions evaporated as the question hung in the air. Her steps paused, and she found a crossroad before her in the answer.

*A pack of wolves attacked and nearly killed me.* She knew what that would do. Guilt would crush Luna, she'd blame herself for leaving. Never again would she run off, always keeping Celestia in her sight, always afraid of leaving her elder sister vulnerable.

No, the choice was easy. Keeping Luna by her side through guilt and helplessness was the opposite of her desires. She wanted her little Luna to feel safe and protected, to protect her in reality as well. For that, she needed to know where Luna was and not have her run off without telling. "Granny P- . . . The shaman was looking for me." Celestia shrugged her bandaged limbs. "She gave me this stuff to help me keep going."

In any event, Luna might have been able to help with the wolves. Or she might have been as scared and helpless as Celestia was herself. The scene of Painted's end appeared in her mind, only it was Luna in his place, Celestia pinned and helpless as the wolves—she shuddered. The thought was disturbing. Disturbing down to her very core.

"What stuff?" Luna's head held high again, eager curiosity written all over her features.

Thankfully, she allowed the question to distract her. "Just these bandages where I was hurt, and this. *Bleehhh--*" Celestia opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, resting the white bark she had been chewing on the tip.

Luna giggled. "Gross, stop it."

Celestia brought the bark back inside her mouth and grinned. Her sister was here, safe and sound. It calmed the nerves that her previous thought frayed. With any luck, Luna would assume the injuries came from their flight from the unicorns and not question them more. "Oh, and a message. *Know your limits!*" She parodied the shaman's intensity.

Both Luna's brows rose. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know . . . but she said it was important."

With that for their minds to chew on, it wasn't long before they found the shallow stream and sat at its edge. It flowed languidly between muddy banks, having failed to carve through all the sediment last it was fed by rain. Yet, it wasn't stagnant or soupy, safe to drink for ponies and clean enough.

"Can't stay long." Celestia's horn held a pale shimmer as she gathered water in a ball and used it to douse Luna's mane. "Sun was already far on her journey. You met a pegasus? Tell me what happened. Did you find their herd?"

Luna soured as the water flushed over her and soaked her mane. It loosened some sap, but the sticky mess pulled hairs as Celestia scrubbed at it with a magical touch, intent on not staying longer than need be. The question brought back some of the blue pony's former excitement. "Yes! I did, he told me where. I met Rebel Bolt, he's just a colt, but old enough, I talked to him and he told me where the herd is."

"And the sap?"

"I-uhh," Luna's voice trailed into a shy whisper and she used her wet bangs to hide her eyes. "I'm not good at flying yet."

Celestia dowsed her with another splash of water and separated twigs and leaves from her blue mane, hiding a small smile of amusement. "Can we make it to the pegasi before nightfall?"

Luna pursed her lips to think. "I think so. It'll be close, maybe at Sunset. And you'll have to climb part way up a mountain."

*On injured legs, no less.* Celestia paused the cleaning to give that thought. "Alright." She resumed, a tad rougher than she meant. "As soon as you're cleaned and presentable to the new herd, we'll push hard. Will you be ready?"

Luna opened her wide, distant eyes to stare at her elder sister. "Between the two of us, I have the wings."

After the wash, they quenched their thirst and drank a little extra. Celestia took the lead and crossed the stream, soaking her legs to the knee. Luna cared little for the water, already being soaked, and splashed her way through. At the other side, she spared a little magic to play with her sopping mane, laying it about so it would dry in a dainty, appealing way.

Despite the injured legs, Celestia moved at a brisk trot. In truth, she did not feel their pain over much. Anxiety damped the sensitivity, for the memory of the wolves was still fresh in Celestia's mind.

"Keep careful watch." She reminded her younger sister again that day, yet it held more gravity than before. "The forest . . . it's far more dangerous than we thought, daylight or no." Celestia could hear the worry in her words as her eyes darted through the forest that had lost its luster. Now, she only saw the potential danger around every bend, where things might stalk.

The change was not lost on her sister. Luna stretched her neck tall, looking over the white mare with close attention.

Celestia glanced back. "I saw a wolf," she answered to quell curiosity. It was true, at the least, and would keep Luna's senses sharp. She did see one, after all. And they might come to stalk her once more, now that the shaman they feared had gone. With her spare attention, she prepared a few spells and kept them ready in her mind. She'd not be caught off guard again.

One more time on that trip, Luna flew above the trees and regained their bearings. After that, they were so close for it not to matter. It was more important to make good time.

With the sky turning orange, and Sun taking a lazy shade of red, they came to the foot of the mountain. Staring up the incline, Celestia swallowed a growing lump in her throat. The ground leaped up from a flat plain and began to reach into the sky. Trees nestled where they could, clinging to dirt and earth that had settled in all the crevice, but within sight from the foot, they lost their footing. Jagged, harsh rocks, gray or brown and dusty, forced all but the spare weeds from their face, hopping up the mountain in a series of uneven sheer cliffs. For a moment, Celestia's head felt light the enormity of the task which she was about to undertake.

"We don't have to go all the way up." Luna came along side her sister. "Just to the cloud up there." She pointed with her nose to a large and slightly out of place puff of fluffy white that rested atop a cliff. "Just . . . most of the way." She paused. "At least the mountain's steepness will mean no wolves will be able to follow."

"I suppose that's why the pegasi chose this one." Celestia took her first steps up the side. "C'mon, before nightfall."

In truth, it was too steep for plains-bound ponies to cross. Almost exactly where the trees lost, Celestia had to stop as she had no footing to scale the first cliff. After a moment's silent deliberation, she called forth *will* to her horn and unleashed a spell. The rock molded like clay, rising up in a steep ramp. The attempt proved flawed, and her hooves slipped out from under her on the smooth stone. A second spell and she added to the ramp a series of ripples for her hooves to find purchase.

Thus began the real journey to the summit. "Luna?"

"Mhm?"

With a thought, she sent another spell to undo the ramp behind her. Leaving a walkway straight to the pegasi's home seemed rude for a new comer, if they wished to keep it hidden. "Keep watch of the sky. I'm not exactly well hidden from griffins out in the open."

Luna nodded her acquiescence.

Not far into the journey, the worry of predators vanished from Celestia's awareness. The unease she felt evaporated in a relative security of being so high on the cliffs. Walking was fine. She could walk for days. It was leisurely, restful. It gave one time to think and occupied antsy energy in the legs.

This wasn't walking.

Exhaustion slipped in where the unease left. Every step she made, she could feel her leg hauling her entire weight up against the pull of Earth, groaning in protest and struggling to lift the load. It strained her concentration, sapped her energy, sweat broke out all down her body and she gasped for breath in air that grew thinner and thinner.

The bites marring her legs, though, proved less a problem. They were there, still. She could feel them with every working of her leg in a tactile sense. But even without the anxiety to dampen the pain, something else did. They were no more trouble than the bandages that bound them.

Mindful of that, she turned the white bark over again in her mouth. It made sense, then, what Granny Pie said. *Chew on this before you begin your journey again. If you're going to make it, you'll need to.* Wordlessly, she thanked her.

Her little sister had taken to flight once her legs grew tired, hopping up from ledge to ledge in a single bound. She spent more time sitting and waiting for her sister than climbing.

"Look, pegasi!" Luna's cheery voice grated on Celestia's nerves, not a hint of effort in it.

Never before had the white unicorn felt such intense, juvenile jealousy as she did right then for those wings. "That's . . . nice." She couldn't hide the irritated grumble in her voice. Yet still, she glanced up and saw five winged ponies leave the cloud.

Perhaps out of sympathy, Luna took up disassembling the ramp behind Celestia's progress.

Finally, Celestia's hoof touched the last ledge underneath the cloud. Unable to bring herself all the way up, she rolled over the lip and on to her back, panting for all she was worth. Sun's last rays peaked over the horizon far too the west. Violet overtook the sky, stars glimmered high above, and Moon began her journey, giving pale light to all the creatures below in lieu of Sun.

They had made it. And before night fall.

Luna laid down close by to her sister, waiting patiently for Celestia to catch her breath. The pink-maned unicorn gathered some small bit of magic into her horn and started to sweep away her sweat and the dust from the journey. In only a moment, they would meet a new herd, and a new kind of pony.

Rested sufficiently, Celestia rose to her feet and faced the telltale cloud. It stretched over what she could now make out to be a massive cave, concealing it from prying eyes. The cloud appeared to be constructed of two layers, the top fluffy white and solid, while the bottom was merely a thick mist. Comparing this work to what she learned under the fastidious unicorns, the cover was sloppy. Very sloppy. The entire thing had blown too far to the left, revealing the edges of the cave on the top and bottom. The shape was strange, slightly unnatural for a cloud in a way that caught attention longer than it should. The passage of many creatures on the ledge left a clear trail, guiding the curious intruder right in.

Noting all this, she hesitated. Nervous energy crawled back into her skin. When they had gone to the unicorns, they were able to hide their identity. Blending in had garnered them acceptance, revealing their true nature, suspicion. Here, she could not hide. Even with wings, Luna wore her heritage on her head, and using magic to conceal it would only work until they had to sleep, at best. Celestia, though? She had nothing. She was coming as a unicorn into a foreign herd. How did the pegasi feel about other ponies? True, they often rested with others, but that was a far cry from accepting a wingless mare with unheard of colors, and a blue pony of confused breed. Would they be barred from entering? Or worse, open hostility? Luna, who had wings, seemed to imply the colt was friendly. What if the pegasi allowed Luna and rejected the elder sister? And a colt could be ignorant of his parents' ways, as well.

Luna drew up to Celestia's side and waited patiently. Swallowing that tension, Celestia marched forward and plunged into the mist.