

# Moonbeam

And

## Phases of the Moon

By Laurence Brown



# Table of Contents:

## **~ Moonbeam ~**

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Goodbye, Luna</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Childhood Friends</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Housefinding</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Welcome Party</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Pericynthion</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Down to Earth</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Harvest Time</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Inn Trouble</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Lunar Viewing</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Through Thick and Thin</b>	<b>144</b>

## **~ Phases of the Moon ~**

### **~New~**

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>205</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>220</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>236</b>

### **~Crescent~**

<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>264</b>

# Moonbeam

## Chapter 1

### Goodbye, Luna

Princess Luna entered her bedroom and closed the door behind her with a sigh. It had been over a month since she had, as Nightmare Moon, freed herself from her imprisonment in the moon and returned to Canterlot, shedding her evil persona along the way. Still, even though her older sister Princess Celestia had welcomed her back with an open heart, not everybody else seemed ready or willing to do the same.

Climbing into her bed, she knew that she couldn't really blame them. After all, she had done some pretty dastardly things, the greatest of which was her recent attempt to overthrow her sister and bring night eternal to the land of Equestria. But still, it was hard to face nothing but looks of contempt and disdain from everyone else all the time. She was trying to earn their trust, she really was. But how was she supposed to make any progress when nopony would give her a chance? With one last, soft sigh, she used her magic to close the drapes and douse the lights. Getting comfortable, she closed her eyes, and hoped that tomorrow would be better.

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Luna looked around her. In every direction but down was the night sky, filled with a thousand stars shining like diamonds of every color. Beneath her hooves wasn't the grass of a field, or even the floors of Canterlot, but a white, rocky glowing terrain that she instantly knew was the moon. She turned her gaze upward again, taking in the night sky, and slowly realizing that, although she was obviously dreaming, this was too real to be just an ordinary dream. At the sound of a throat being cleared behind her, she turned around and froze in shock at the sight; Nightmare Moon was standing behind her!

"Hello there, Luna," the larger, black mare sneered with contempt. "Still trying to fit into society, I see. And just how is that working out for you?"

"How... how are you..." Luna stammered in fright, wondering how this could be happening.

Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes. "The only question I have is, how am I not the one who is still in control? We were me for a millennium! Compared to how long you've lived as Princess Luna," Luna flinched at the venom her dark side put into speaking her name, "why, I'm the one who has lived the majority of her time in control!"

Princess Luna took a deep breath and tried to regain her composure. "Yes, yes you did. But that's behind me now! No more being feared, being evil! I just want to live a happy life! One filled with friends, and smiles, and..."

Nightmare Moon cut her off with a sharp laugh. "Ha! Again I ask, how's that working out for you? No, don't try to cover up the details, I'm you after all. I saw it all! How even though the only word you said to those two unicorns in the halls after breakfast was a friendly 'Hello', what did they do? They turned tail and ran in fear! Or how about those guards you passed after lunch? Did you see how they just stared at you? And trust me, Luna darling, those weren't the good kind of stares from a stallion, oh no. Those were eyes filled with wariness. Distrust." Nightmare Moon leaned close to whisper into Luna's ear. "Hatred."

"NO!" Luna surprised herself with the fierceness she used to deny the accusations levied at her. Nightmare Moon chuckled at her, but she shook her head in disagreement. "Maybe distrust, but not hate! And I can understand why too! After all you did to them! And, and I'm not the best at trying to talk to others either. I'm sure if I just keep trying, I'll get the hang of it eventually."

"Yes, I'll agree with you on that one, Luna. A thousand years trapped in a celestial object did stunt our interpony skills, didn't it? However, I simply think you're going about it all the wrong way." Nightmare Moon slowly walked around the smaller Luna, who turned her head from one side to the other to keep her darker self in view. "Think, Luna. What is it that we have that they don't? Magic. POWER. We were strong enough to keep the moon in the sky, and stop the sun from rising! They should not be looking at you

in fear, no! They should be loving you! Worshiping you! Bowing down before your majestic might!"

"No! No no no no no!" Luna jumped away from Nightmare Moon, shaking her head in an effort to make the words from her dark half go away.

"Enough! Stop! I don't want to hear this! Didn't being locked away for our actions so long ago show us that they were wrong? We don't need worshipers, or followers! What we need is..." Luna trailed off, and looked down to the ground. In a whisper, she finished, "...what we need are friends."

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Gasping loudly, Princess Luna woke up to find her body and the sheets of her bed drenched in sweat. Still not entirely certain of where she was, she clumsily rolled out of her bed and landed on the floor with a thud. Even through the closed curtains, the waning moon, still three quarters full, lit up her room with an eerie white light. Not wanting to bother anyone for new sheets, or have to explain to her sister why her bedding and her fur were soaked, she magicked a smaller blanket over from her closet and curled up on the floor and tried to go to sleep.

Sleep wouldn't come, however. She was afraid of ending up back in the weird, too real dream world. The words of her darker side still echoed in her head, and kept her from finding any solace in looking at the night sky, one of her favorite things to do usually. Just when she thought she might start to chew her own tail off in frustration, certain words that Nightmare Moon had spoken to her meshed with a different train of thought, and the epiphany had her standing up in excitement.

"Magic!" she said to herself. "Like Nightmare Moon said, I have that and then some to spare! Surely there can be some way that I can use that to help me make friends!" Nodding to herself, she walked around the confines of her bedroom. "Not to meddle with anyone thoughts, of course, but maybe I can do things to help others out! Or maybe even find a way to settle the scales of my actions, to start over from scratch..."

With a sharp intake of breath, she squealed in glee. "That's it! A disguise! Everypony can't help but see my evil side when they look at me as Princess Luna, but what if what they saw was a different pony? I bet they would give a stranger at least the benefit of the doubt. Then I could make

some friends, and after they got to know me, I could then let them know who I am! It's brilliant! Oh, I can't wait for morning now, so I can go look for some spells to help me out!" Finally feeling like she had a reachable goal, and a course to follow, Luna curled back up on the carpet next to the bed, magicked the blanket back over her, and drifted off into a thankfully dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Princess Luna was up early, excited by the prospect of having something new to do. With a small spring to her canter, she joined her sister for breakfast, and started chowing down on her food at a rapid pace.

"My goodness!" Princess Celestia said with a cheery voice. "Somebody sure seems to be in a hurry to do something today!"

Luna paused, and with a blush on her face meekly replied "I'm sorry sister, it's just that I got an idea last night, and I want to go do some research and study on it before anything slips from my mind!"

"Oh my!" Celestia chuckled. "I don't think I've seen anybody want to study so badly since Twilight Sparkle still resided in these halls!" Motioning for her younger sister to resume eating, she continued, "Then by all means, please don't let me slow you down! I'm just happy to see you in such a good mood."

Luna nodded her head in thanks as she hastily slurped up the last of the apple slices on her plate. Washing it down with a small cup of water levitated to her by her magic, she gave a small sigh of contentment from the delicious meal. "Thank you, Celestia, and please excuse me. I'm off to the Royal Library." Celestia watched as her sister practically galloped out the door and down the hall.

After a couple of corners taken at high speed, and one collision barely evaded, Luna slowed down as she approached the door to the library. She knew that the librarian, while quite strict with her rules, was also very fair and was one of the few ponies that didn't show her any prejudice. She didn't want to cause her any trouble if she could help it. Entering, she saw a couple of other ponies in the library, but for the most part because of the early hour the aisles between the shelves were much emptier than they would be in an hour or two. Luna paused for a second, wondering where to

look, when something her sister had said back at the breakfast table made her curious.

Seeing the librarian free for the moment Luna walked over to her. "Hello, Mrs. Hardback. Do you have a spare moment or two?"

The librarian looked up at Luna and smiled. "Of course I do, dear. What can I help you with? Oh!" Mrs. Hardback said to a cream colored stallion that had just walked up with a book to check out. "I'll be with you in just a moment, sir."

"Well, this may be a bit of a strange question, but what was Twilight Sparkle like before she left Canterlot?"

This brought a snort from the stallion waiting behind her. "Why do you want to know? Looking for secrets to help you get revenge?"

Luna shrank at the snide tone of the stallion's voice, but Mrs. Hardback in turn seemed to grow a foot taller as her face filled with rage. "Listen here, you!" she said in a loud voice that, had it come from any other pony in the library, would have been cause for a quick eviction from the area. "You have no right to judge her so! I will NOT have anypony in my library be badgered in such an unseemly manner!" With a wave of her horn, Mrs. Hardback levitated the book the stallion had brought forward, and started hitting him on the head with it. "Now, get out! Get! And don't come back here anytime soon!"

Luna stared in awe at the display put forth by the librarian as the bruised stallion fled the area. It felt good to have someone stand up for her so vocally. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Hardback," Luna said to the librarian. "It isn't often that anypony is willing to do something like that for me."

"Oh, pishposh!" huffed Mrs. Hardback. "He has no right to say such a thing. Oh dear, I'm sorry, I'm so flustered by that stallion's lack of manners that I have quite forgotten what your question was."

"Well, at breakfast today, I told Celestia that I was eager to come down here and do some studying, and she told me she hadn't seen anybody quite so eager to research anything since Twilight Sparkle was still here. I was just wondering what she was like, for me to be compared to her in such a manner."

Mrs. Hardback chuckled. "Oh, dearie me, was she ever a book worm! Why, probably half of her time was spent in here looking through one book or another. Then Celestia finally got tired of her turning into such a recluse and tossed her out to Ponyville to learn some social skills. That mare needed them too, let me tell you." With a final sigh at the memory, she returned her focus back to Luna. "Now then, can I help you find any book in particular, or would you rather search the shelves on your own?"

"I think I know where to look, ma'am. Thank you though for the answer, and again for your kindness." Luna wandered off into the portion of the library that housed books with spells. As she started to scan the titles of various volumes, another inspiration struck her. 'If Twilight Sparkle was able to make friends by relocating to someplace else, maybe that will work for me too!' In a rush, a plan formed. 'Okay, so I need to find a spell to help me with a disguise. Then, make sure I take some money with me, and head off to Ponyville, that's close enough for me to reach without too much trouble. Maybe stay a week or so, see how people treat me as somepony else. Worst comes to worst, maybe I can ask Twilight to help me out. I'll leave a note for Celestia so she won't worry! Oh, this is going to work out so great, I just know it!'

After an hour of looking through book after book, Luna's hopes were slowly dwindling. While there were many a book about using magic for disguises, none of them seemed to fit her purposes. "If they aren't easily seen through," she muttered to herself as she replaced yet another book back onto the shelves, "they don't last long, or can fall apart at the slightest touch. I need a disguise that will hold up under scrutiny, and one I won't have to worry about slipping at the worst possible time. Oh, well now, this looks promising. Teakettle's Tome of Transformations? What does this book have in it?" Using magic to carry the book over to a reading stand, Luna flipped through the pages. Having long ago lost the patience to read every word, she instead scanned for certain phrases that she knew indicated that the instructions for a spell were about to be described.

"Ah ha!" she whispered. "Here we go. 'Teakettle's Earth Pony Transmogrification. This incantation will render the caster, and only the caster, indistinguishable from an earth pony through any means of detection'. Exactly what I need!" Luna took the book and checked it out, and then headed back to her chambers. 'Now all I have to do is figure out how I'm going to get out of Cantelot unseen. Oh, and pack! I need to get



supplies for a week's stay out with me too. And a note, oh so much to do, so much!

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After an afternoon of slowly gathering some sundries and equipment, Luna looked up to see everypony heading towards the feast hall. "That late already? I might as well go join all of them for some..." Luna paused, and quickly scanned the area again. "All of them are going to go eat right now! If I can just hurry up and get the rest of my stuff packed quickly enough, this would be the perfect time to get out of Canterlot unnoticed!"

Luna scanned the items she had gathered. Some apples and carrots, and the small blanket she had worn last night. A portable telescope, some parchment, a quill and a vial of ink. A small pouch filled with some coins and a couple of gems in case she needed to make a large purchase for some reason. Better safe than sorry, she reasoned. And most importantly, the book with the disguise spell. With a wave of her horn, she gathered all the items into a pair of saddlebags she had taken from a dusty storage room. She had wanted a set that didn't look too fancy, or have the royal crest on it. It had, looking back on it all, been the hardest item to find, even more difficult to come across than the book she had spent over an hour searching for that morning. She turned to leave, when she found herself stopping at the door.

"The note!" Looking around, she saw that she had indeed left some writing materials on a desk in the corner of the room. Horn glowing, she quickly penned a message for her sister. 'Dearest sister Celestia. Please forgive my sudden disappearance, but I have an experiment that I need to undertake, and I have no time to waste in order for it to be made correctly. Do not worry, I have taken great pains to be adequately supplied for my sojourn, and I look forward to talking with you afterword about what I learned. Your loving sister, Luna.'

Nodding in satisfaction, she levitated the message to lie on the pillow of her bed. Poking her head out of her bedroom, she saw the hallway was empty, and coming through the open window, the sounds of many ponies starting their evening meal wafted up. Luna cautiously trotted down hallways and passed through some rooms, occasionally turning back to avoid the rare pony still out and about during dinner, and finally found her way to ground level. Wasting no time, Luna galloped a ways away, not wanting to risk

being seen as she flew off, until a hill was between her and the castle. Finally she took wing, flying towards Ponyville.

Travel went well, until the sun went down. Worn out from flying farther than she had ever remembered doing so before, Luna found a small clearing a short ways from the road and settled down for the night. She was nervous being alone, out in the wilderness, but the steady chirping of crickets in the area helped her to fall asleep much faster than she thought she would have. A ray of the morning sun, shining through a gap between branches to fall across her eyes, woke her up. Magicking some breakfast from her saddlebags, she pondered what her next step would be.

'I could keep on flying, but I risk being spotted from farther away by doing that,' she thought as she nibbled on some carrots. 'Of course, I still face a decent risk of being noticed just by walking down the road too. Ponies must go up and down it everyday. I guess my best bet is to walk off to the side of the road, keeping an eye out for others so I can hide from them. If anybody sees that Princess Luna is on her way to Ponyville, it will ruin my chances of my disguise succeeding. It may take some extra time, but my wings are still sore from yesterday.' Luna stretched her wings once again at the thought of how much flying she had done previously. 'Getting carried everywhere on those cloud chariots sure got my wings out of shape!'

Luna spent the rest of the morning trotting towards Ponyville. While she managed to hide from the groups of ponies that used the road, she was really starting to hate briar patches that seemed to take up acres, and walls of branches that could have been used to build a house. Thanks for her magic, she was able to clear a path without too much hassle, but the time it was taking was starting to annoy her. Finally, a couple hours after a lunch of some apples and oats, she crested a hill, only to quickly withdraw back behind it. Just past the crest of the hill was Ponyville.

"Finally!" Luna muttered as she removed her saddlebags. "If I had known just how heavy that telescope was going to be, I would have left it back in Canterlot! Well, no time to waste, it took me much longer to get here than I thought it would. I guess tonight I'll just buy a meal somewhere, get a room at an inn, and start looking for some friends tomorrow. Easy as pie. Now, where's that spell?" Using her magic, she pulled the book from her bags, and opened it to where the spell was. Luna read through the instructions again quickly. "This will be harder than I thought," she said to herself out

loud. "It looks like it takes almost a minute to cast! That must mean it really is a great disguise!" she proclaimed with a smile on her face. "Okay, let's get this started!"

Using her pouch of gems to help keep the book open to the correct page as it lay on the ground, Luna began to cast the spell. The first few seconds were simply an exercise in gathering up energy, and soon a large ball of white magical energy surrounded her horn. Then she manipulated the magic just so, and the ball flew from her horn, circled around her a few times, and then cocooned her in a giant sphere of energy, lifting her a foot off the ground in the process. Luna's mouth opened in a silent cry of surprise... and pain.

In the Everfree forest, Zecora the Zebra looked up from the book she was reading. "Who could be casting such a spell," she wondered, "that I can feel it here where I dwell?"

Luna's wings started to come apart, one feather at a time. Trapped inside the nimbus of magic, they flew around her, clouding her vision even more than the tears that filled her eyes.

In the newly planted orchards of Appleloosa a unicorn looked up from the basket of fruit she had just harvested, distracted by something she couldn't quite place. All she knew was that this sensation she was feeling made her uncomfortable.

Luna's wings were finally gone, now only existing as a swirling cloud of feathers that orbited her. Now her body was starting to pale, turning from a dark, night time blue into a pale grey. Luna felt her grip on the spell shatter, and could do nothing but ride it out. 'Why does this hurt?' she silently asked to whoever might be able to hear her thoughts of panic and agony.

Pulling her cart down the road to Hoofington, a blue pony wearing a wizard's hat paused in wonder. Shivering in fear at the powerful display of magic happening... somewhere, she said in awe, "Even one as wonderful as I, The Great And Powerful Trixie, could never hope to accomplish such a feat of prestidigitation!"

Luna's mane and tail shifted from their light blue hue to a pale silver, and her cutie mark morphed from a crescent moon in a night sky to a full moon, shining a single ray of moonlight onto a hill below.

Twilight Sparkle froze in the middle of her conversation with Fluttershy as she felt the magic in the area become very agitated. Fluttershy looked at her in worry, as all Twilight could do was stand in place, mouth wide open and eyes staring into the distance.

Finally, Luna's horn unwound, becoming a long streamer that joined the feathers in flight. Then, as a long moan of pain escaped from Luna's mouth, the magic rose above Luna and shrank into a small orb no bigger than an acorn. With one final flash of magical might, Luna collapsed to the ground and rolled onto her saddlebags in agony. The ball of magic descended to land gently before her, a small gemstone looking for all the world like the moon in its full glory.

In Canterlot, Princess Celestia rushed to her sister's chambers. She had easily dismissed her sister's absence last night as her still studying, but when she missed breakfast the next day, she had started to worry. Then, lunch passed with still no sign of her, and asking discreetly around hadn't turned up anything either. But this! This flux in the air, it could only be caused by a spell being cast, one of great power! Abandoning all efforts of hiding her anxiety, she burst into Luna's bedroom, only to find it empty. She was about to dash out again to look elsewhere when, at the last second, the sight of a letter on a pillow caught her eye. She quickly levitated it over and read its contents, her eyes widening in shock.

"Oh, Luna, what have you done?"

# Chapter 2

## Childhood Friends

Luna lay on the ground, not trusting herself to open her eyes. Pain still coursed through every fiber of her being, but it was slowly dissipating. What had happened to her? Had she miscast the spell? She felt... incomplete, like she was missing something. Finally unable to go any longer without knowing what she had managed to do to herself, Luna opened an eye and looked herself over.

The first thing she noticed was the absence of her wings. Then her new shade of hair, a light grey that tuned to silver for her tail. Finally she saw that her cutie mark had turned into a full moon shining a ray of light down onto a hill. With fear, she took one of her front hooves and reached to her forehead. Just as she feared, her horn was gone just like her wings. The shock of such a complete change finally sunk in, and a long moan of despair escaped from her mouth.

"Oh! What was that? Is somepony hurt?" From above her Luna heard a voice cry out, followed by the sound of hooves galloping. "Hello! Anypony? Hello, are you okay?" Luna turned her head enough to look to the top of the hill, and saw an orange unicorn mare with a brown mane appear. "Oh, OH! Oh my, hold on hun, I'll be right down!"

Luna watched as the newcomer carefully made her way down towards her. "What happened? Oh, silly me, it's obvious what happened, you tripped at the worst possible moment, and now look at you." Finally the unicorn was next to Luna. As she looked Luna over, the princess saw that the stranger had a cutie mark of three water droplets. "Tell me, does it hurt anywhere? Is anything broken?"

Luna blinked as she realized she hadn't even thought along those lines. "I, I don't think so..." she trailed off, as she realized her voice sounded different than it had before. She couldn't be sure, but she thought it was a note or two lower in pitch now. She was in no shape to give it any serious consideration, however. Cautiously moving each of her legs, she discovered one of the sources of her pain: she was lying on top of her

saddlebags. Slowly, tentatively, Luna placed one hoof on the ground at a time, and then slowly stood up to face the other mare eye to eye. "I seem to be okay. I just... hurt an awful lot."

"I would think so, taking a crash like that and landing on your gear. Oh my, your stuff has scattered everywhere! You have a book over here, a telescope there... and look at this stone, this must have fallen out of your pouch next to the book, and..." The unicorn paused, and then lightly rapped a hoof against her forehead. "Listen to me, being so rude, not even bothering to introduce myself. My name is Dewdrop. What's yours, hun?"

Luna opened her mouth, and almost said her real name before she quickly shut her mouth again. 'Foal!' she mentally berated herself. 'I can't blow this disguise by telling her my real name! But what should I call myself? Think Luna, think!' Her eyes darted around quickly, looking for something, anything to use. Seeing her new cutie mark, she came up with a reply.

"Moonbeam," she replied. "My name is Moonbeam. Thank you for your help, Dewdrop. I'm a bit sore, but I think I'll be able to manage. I just need to pick up my stuff and I should be okay." Luna stared intently at the book. Without thinking about her current state, she tried to levitate it into her saddlebags. Nothing happened. Dewdrop, for her part, blinked a few times as the grey pony in front of her simply stared harder and harder at the items that were littering the hillside.

"Hmm, I don't know. I'm no doctor, but you sure seem to be a bit under the weather there. Let me help you, please." Dewdrop's horn glowed. Beginning with the larger items first she picked up Luna's belongings one by one. Finishing by floating the moonstone back into the pouch, and demonstrating it was cinched up tightly, she placed it on top of the pile. She latched the saddlebags shut, and lifted them onto her own back. "I insist," she said as Luna started to protest. "You still look a bit woozy right now, and I won't have you suffer any undue stress. Come on, let's head back to town. I'll be happy to carry your belongings back to where you live... Where do you live, if I may ask?"

"I, actually, I don't have a place to stay yet. I'm, um, moving to Ponyville, so I was just going to stay at the inn for tonight. Could you please show me the way?"

"A newcomer! Oh, goodness me, I can't let you stay at the inn when you're hurting like this! No, you're coming home to stay with me. You simply must!"

'Too fast, things are happening too fast! I can't keep up.' Luna thought, panicking. "No, thank you kindly, but I wouldn't want to impose on you like that."

To Luna's surprise, Dewdrop actually laughed. "Oh hun, I work at the inn! So you'll be 'imposing' on me either way. And if I'm to make sure you get a healthy dinner to help you recover, as well as a comfortable bed for a good night's sleep, well, I'd rather do it underneath my own roof! Besides, this way my roommate can help you out too!" And with that Dewdrop moved slightly ahead, humming happily to herself - and, Luna thought wryly, forcing her to follow her in order to stay with her possessions.

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Princess Celestia read the letter from her younger sister again, hoping to find some hint as to what Luna had in mind. Where had she gone? What could she have been up to? Celestia only had a couple of clues to work with. First, she knew without a shadow of a doubt that the disturbance she had felt had been caused by somepony somewhere casting a powerful spell. Luna was the first pony with such power that came to mind. Also, Luna had been gone for a day at most—she couldn't have gone far. In fact, Ponyville was the only village she could possibly have reached in that time.

There was still unused ink and parchment on the desk. Celestia levitated the quill, dipped it into the ink, and started to write a letter.

In the Ponyville library, Twilight Sparkle was searching through her books one by one and then dropping them on the floor in disgust as each one failed to provide the information she was looking for. "Augh! Spike, I can't find anything about what might have caused that disturbance. It had to have been magical in nature, the only others I found who felt it besides me were all unicorns."

"Gee, Twilight," Spike replied, running about as he tried to keep the books in neat stacks as they fell to the ground, "I honestly don't know. I didn't feel anything, and I know some magic."

Twilight turned to look at the baby dragon. "You do, huh? Such as?"

"Well, I can... oh boy, do this!" With a burp, a message popped from his mouth and hovered in the air. He took hold of it and said, "Wow, talk about good timing!"

"A letter from Princess Celestia? What does it say, Spike?" Twilight magicked the book she had been perusing onto a reading stand, and gave her dragon companion her full attention.

Clearing his throat, Spike opened the letter, and started to read aloud.

"'Dearest Twilight Sparkle, I have some potentially dangerous news to share with you. I ask that you do not share this with anybody else'...

Twilight, is this okay for me to be reading?"

"I'm sure it's fine Spike. She knows you quite often read these to me, and if I'm going to respond I'll have you take dictation anyways, so you'll find out at that point regardless. Please, continue."

"Okay. 'I ask that you do not share this with anybody else. Princess Luna has gone missing, and I fear that she caused the magical disturbance earlier today. I have not seen her since yesterday, so if you could please keep an eye out for her I would be very grateful. I will send you any other information that I discover as I learn of it. Thank you for your time, Princess Celestia.' Gosh! Princess Luna is missing?"

Twilight nodded slowly. "And Ponyville is the only place close enough for her to have gotten to by this time if she left yesterday from Canterlot. Assuming she headed this way, that is." Twilight frowned, "Well, it should be easy to figure out if she showed up here. She does have a very distinctive appearance to her. Stay here, Spike, in case Celestia sends any more messages. This way, I won't have to hide them from my friends. I'm going to go search around, see if anypony has noticed any newcomers to town."

Spike gave her a salute. "Will do! Good luck, Twilight!"

"Thanks, Spike! I'll try not to be gone too long."

As the door closed behind the purple unicorn as she left the library, Spike looked around. "Well, now that she's gone, I can start putting books back



onto the shelves without worrying about her tossing them back off again." With a sigh, he grabbed the nearest tome and headed to a ladder. "And why are they always from the top shelves? Would it kill her to start from the bottom for a change?" he grumbled.

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Luna slowly followed Dewdrop through the outskirts of Ponyville, becoming more and more relieved that the talkative orange unicorn had come across her lying on the ground. The fatigue from her travels, plus the after-effects of the spell, were leaving her barely able to follow Dewdrop around. 'All I need is a good night's sleep. I'm just tired, that's all.' Luna kept repeating those words in her thoughts, hoping to make them the truth if only by pure repetition.

After what felt like a dozen miles, but was more likely only half a mile at most, Dewdrop stopped in front of a two-story cottage. "Here we are, Moonbeam. Let's get you inside, get some grains in you, and then see what a good night's sleep does for you. I'm warning you though, if you're not feeling better come tomorrow, I'm going to insist we go and see a doctor!"

Luna nodded after she realized that Dewdrop was in fact talking to her. "I will, Dewdrop. Although I am pretty sure I'm just sore, that's all..." Luna was cut off when the door opened from the inside to reveal another pony.

"Dewdrop! Welcome back from your flower gathering expedition! How did it...? Hello! Who's this, Dewdrop?" The earth pony, pink with an apple-red mane, turned to look at Luna.

"Oops! Hehe, I completely forgot about the flowers! But I have a good reason for it, Feather Down. There was this strange, I don't know how to describe it, but I guess I would call it a sensation? It made my horn itch like you wouldn't believe! Then right after that, I heard somepony crying out in pain! So of course, I went to see what the matter was, and I found... Oh, I am being such a impolite pony today!" Turning to Luna, she continued, "Moonbeam, this is my roommate, Feather Down. Feather Down, this is Moonbeam. She's moving here to Ponyville, but had a terrible fall outside of town. I volunteered the use of our house for tonight so she can recover."

Feather Down backed out of the door to make room for the other two to enter. "Pleased to meet you, Moonbeam. Sorry it isn't under better circumstances." As Luna entered the cottage, she saw that Feather Down had a cutie mark of three white puffy feathers on her flank. Feather Down stared into Luna's eyes for a second, and then nodded. "You look like you can barely stand! Tell you what, you can use my bed tonight. We can share the other bed, right Dewdrop?" After seeing a nod of agreement from Dewdrop, Feather Down exited the room into what looked from where Luna stood to be a kitchen.

"Oh, there's no need for that!" Luna weakly protested. "I don't want to impose any more than I already have."

"None of that, my dear," said Dewdrop as she levitated Luna's possessions into a corner of the room. "Trust me, Feather Down is offering you one of the most comfortable beds in all of Equestria to use tonight, I wouldn't turn it down if I were you."

"That's right!" chimed in Feather Down from the kitchen. "That's how I got my name, after all. I knew from a very early age what made the most comfortable pillows and mattresses. If a night on that doesn't get you back in shape, nothing will!" Feather Down returned to the room with a plate of some grains and a sliced apple on it, and placed it down on a table. "Eat up, and then we'll get you to bed."

Although she didn't feel all that hungry, Luna soon found herself picking up the pace of her eating. As she chowed down, Dewdrop motioned Feather Down to follow her off to one side. "I'm a bit worried," Dewdrop whispered to her friend. "She has been really out of it. I'm afraid she might have hit her head or something in that fall. Could you do me the favor of going to talk with a nurse, just to make sure we shouldn't seek some medical attention for her right away? I'll tuck her in, and thank you ever so much for the offer to use your bed. I know how much you love it."

"No problem," Feather Down whispered back. The pink pony walked back over to Luna, who was licking the last crumbs off of the plate. "Whoa there! Someone sure had the hungries! Want any more?" Seeing Luna nod as she swallowed the last mouthful, she chuckled. "All right then, let me go get you some seconds." Grasping the edge of the plate with her teeth, Feather

Down cantered back into the kitchen. Just a few seconds later, she returned with another full serving. "There you go!"

"Thank you very much," Luna said before starting to eat her way through the second helping.

Feather Down headed to the door. "Dewdrop!" she said in a sing song voice, "We're running low on apples again! I'm going to run down to the market real quick and pick up some more before all the sellers go home for the day! Could you please..." A set of saddlebags flew over to land on her back. "Thanks a bunch! I'll be back soon!"

Luna guiltily watched as Feather Down left at a gallop. "Oh, I'm sorry Dewdrop! I didn't mean to eat up all the food in the house, I..."

"Now now. None of that, Moonbeam! We're always running a bit on the thin side when it comes to food, it isn't your fault. Feather Down insists that the fresher the food is, the better it tastes. She works as a waitress in town, so she would know. That's why she won't let me go and build up any sort of a larder. Except for wintertime, of course, but that's to be expected. Now, you eat what you can, and I'll go make sure that your bed for the night is all ready."

Luna watched as the unicorn trotted up the steps to the cottage's second floor, and then returned to eating. 'They sure are kind,' Luna thought, 'but it looks like I'm going to have to wait a while before I can get some time alone to do some reading on that spell and find out what I did wrong.'

Outside, Feather Down galloped into town as fast as she could, narrowly avoiding running into several other ponies in her haste. Finally she saw another pony too late to safely dodge - a white unicorn with a stylish purple mane and tail - and she chose the nobler route of crashing into a bush instead. Startled, the unicorn gasped in surprise before she saw who was picking herself out of the shrubbery.

"Feather Down!" admonished Rarity. "Haven't I told you before not to go running through town like that? Now hold still, let me get those twigs out of your hair. It will only take a minute, and then you can be on your way."

"Sorry, Rarity, and thank you. But I have a really good reason this time!" Feather Down gasped, winded from her sprinting.

"Oh, and what's that, darling? Out of food again?"

"No - well yes - but that's just part of it!" Feather Down said in an excited voice, regaining her breath. "Dewdrop was out looking for flowers today for the inn when she found another pony in pain on the ground! Her name is Moonbeam, and she's moving here to Ponyville, but she had a nasty fall. So I'm getting some more food for us, and Dewdrop wants me to go ask a nurse if we should bring her in or not."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Rarity as she carefully removed broken bits of brush from Feather Down's coat and mane with her magic. "That's quite a tale. Well, I know for a fact that the doctor's office is still open, I guess they had quite the rush earlier today. It seems that most if not all of us unicorns felt something in the air earlier. Gave me quite a startle, to be honest. I talked to the doctor, just for safety's sake of course. He said that it wasn't anything that he had heard of before, but to come back if I felt it return." With a couple of final bursts of magic, Rarity stepped back to look over her work. "There you go, now be careful, you hear?"

"Thanks again Rarity!" Feather Down said gratefully. "Oh yeah, Dewdrop said she felt something too, now that you mention it. I'll pass along to her that a lot of unicorns felt something, although I sure didn't." With a wave, Feather Down trotted off to the doctor's office. Rarity smiled at the energetic pony, and then continued on her way to visit Twilight at the library.

Meanwhile, Luna slowly climbed up the stairs to where her hosts slept. Reaching the top, she saw two beds. One was a normal looking bed, or at least one that reminded her of what she had seen in the rooms of the servants and guards that she had glanced into at the castle. The other bed, however, looked like something that would give her own bed back in Canterlot a run for its money. "Quite the thing, isn't it?" inquired Dewdrop as she came up behind Luna. With a wink, she added, "I think you can guess which one you're sleeping in."

"I, I feel bad, making the two of you share the other bed," Luna stammered. "Maybe I should sleep in that one and the two of you would fit better in the bigger bed?"

"Oh nonsense! When we first moved in here, all we had was that bed of mine. It served us well enough until Feather Down could afford that giant

hulk of a thing. You should have seen it! It took four stallions to get it up here, and it barely fit through the door!" Dewdrop chuckled at the memory. "Now go on, I'll help tuck you in. Just like when you were a filly I imagine."

As she got under the covers that Dewdrop had raised with her magic, Luna tried to recall back to when she was just a little filly. Searching her memories, she couldn't really remember anything except an indistinct feeling of being loved. "So, how long have the two of you been friends?" Luna asked in a drowsy voice.

"Oh, my goodness, all the way back. We were born the same year, and she lived right next door to me. We were inseparable growing up." Dewdrop gave Luna a smile. "I can't imagine what life would have been like without her at my side. All the pranks we pulled on others, the parties we attended, helping each other with our homework from school... I'm lucky to have had a friend like her in my life."

With her eyes closing against her will, Luna sleepily replied, "That sounds... nice." Dewdrop waited a couple of minutes, and when she heard a small, soft snore starting to regularly come from the other pony, she quietly headed back down the stairs.

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Luna found herself once again in the too real dream world, standing on the moon. Glancing at her side, she saw she was back in her normal shape. Stretching her wings, she looked around, and standing off to one side was Nightmare Moon. She could tell from a single glance that her dark side was very angry.

"You idiotic foal! What have you done?" The first words from Nightmare's Moon mouth confirmed Luna's thoughts and then some. "Our magic is gone! With no wings, we can't fly! With no horn, the only way we're getting even a leaf off of the ground is to pick it up with our teeth! What were you thinking?"

Luna started to shrink back, then paused and stood up straight. "I'll tell you what I did!" she proclaimed proudly. "I put my plan into action, and it's working! Not even a day has passed since I put on my disguise, and already I'm being treated as something other than somepony to be feared!"

"You, you did all this... just so that people would like you?" Nightmare Moon sputtered. "Is that all you aspire towards? Being one of the herd?" Nightmare Moon lowered her head and stared directly into Luna's eyes. "WE ARE DIVINITY! We do not need, nor should we even want, the acceptance of the common pony. We are so far above them, not just in ability, but in everything! Look at me, see how much I tower over everyone? We've lived for over a millennium! Dozens of generations of those peons have come and gone, while we haven't aged a year physically! And you want to be with them?" Her fury and disbelief consuming her, Nightmare Moon turned her back on Luna. "Then be gone! I'll speak to you again later, when you've realized your mistake!"

Luna felt an invisible shove and the dream moonscape faded away, to be replaced with a deep, dreamless sleep.

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In Canterlot, Princess Celestia was getting ready to turn in for the night. She had sent notes to her friends and agents all over Equestria, asking them to keep an eye out for her sister discreetly. As much as she wanted to go off and search the land high and low on her own, she knew she couldn't. She had a responsibility, not only to her realm, but also to try to cover up for her errant sister. She was about to extinguish the lights when someone knocked at her door.

"Princess? It's Mrs. Hardback. I just found something regarding Princess Luna, and I thought I should tell you right away, your highness."

Celestia open the door with her magic, and beckoned her librarian in. "Please, come in. Any news at this point will be welcome, no matter how good or bad it may be. Just not knowing anything is starting to wear me down."

Entering and bowing briefly, Mrs. Hardback levitated a piece of paper over to Celestia. "It took me a bit to find it, it became a busy day at the library with everyone searching through the books trying to figure out what had happened with that disturbance in the magic. But I found this receipt of the book that Princess Luna checked out."

"Teakettle's Book of Transformations?" read Celestia. "I can't say that I've heard of it before. Do you happen to have another copy in the library?"

"No, your highness, I'm sorry. I looked before coming, hoping to bring it to you if we did. Maybe you have one here, in your private collection?" Mrs. Hardback asked as she looked at the collection of books sitting on shelves on one side of the room.

"I don't think so, but let me check." Celestia walked over to her tomes and scanned the spines of the volumes. "Teakettle, Teakettle... no, it appears I do not have it. I'll ask around in the morning. Maybe there is one in a library elsewhere. Thank you very much, Mrs. Hardback. I'll be able to sleep better tonight because of this. While I may be no closer to knowing where Luna has gone, at least I have something to work off from now."

"I'm glad to have been able to help, your Highness. And if possible, could you please let me know if you find anything out? I miss the girl too."

"Certainly, Mrs. Hardback." Celestia smiled as the librarian left her room, glad to know that Luna had made at least one other friend in Canterlot over the past month. Writing a quick note to remind herself to ask other libraries if they had a copy of the book that Luna had taken, Celestia finally turned off the lights and slowly fell asleep.

# Chapter 3

## Housefinding

Luna was awakened by a beam of sunlight that had poked its way through a gap in the curtains to fall across her face. She was relieved to find that, although a bit stiff in her legs, she was free of pain. Looking over to the other bed, she saw that it was already made, and only then did Luna wonder just how much of the morning she had slept away. Getting out of bed, Luna started to stretch, then froze when she saw a mirror on the door. Walking over to it, Luna stared at the strange pony it showed. She knew she was seeing herself in the looking glass, but she still felt compelled to try to fake out her reflection. Starting with opening and closing one eye, she moved on to waving a hoof in front of her face, and then finally resorted to sticking out her tongue and waving her head back and forth. There was no doubt about it, she was the pony in the reflection.

The hardest part to accept, for her to come to grips with, was that there was no horn on her head. She missed her wings too, but she hadn't used them all that often. Most of the time she had been in the royal castle where it was considered rude to fly through the hallways. If she went out with her sister, they usually took a cloud chariot. But her horn? She had used her magic all the time. Just manipulating and carrying small objects was something she had done without thinking constantly. She had brought a telescope and writing materials with her - but without the fine control magic allowed her, she would at best be a clumsy operator, and at the worst be a complete klutz.

"Oh, good! You're up and about! tell me, do you feel dizzy or have any sort of a headache?"

Luna jumped slightly in surprise. She had been so deep in thought, she hadn't heard Feather Down come up the stairs.

"No, I feel much better, and I'm not dizzy at all. Why do you ask?" Luna inquired as she turned to face the other pony.



"That's what the doctor told me we should be wary of when you woke up. Those are signs that your head might have been hurt. I think the word he used was concussed?" Feather Down shrugged. "Anyway, you should let us know if you start to feel like that, okay?"

Luna nodded. "I most certainly will. I don't think we'll have to worry about that. I'm feeling much better today. Nothing that stretching my legs some won't fix, I'm sure." Luna looked around the room. "By the way, what time is it? Just how long did I sleep?"

Feather Down chuckled. "It's a little past eight right now, so close to fourteen hours? C'mon down when you're ready, we have some breakfast waiting on you. After you've eaten we can make some plans and figure out what to do now that we've got you feeling like a pony again."

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Spike the dragon teetered precariously at the top of a ladder, looking at various books. "Kettledrum's Collection of Conjured Costumes? Is this it, Twilight?" he called down to his unicorn friend, who was looking through a different shelf of volumes.

"Sorry Spike, but no. It's Teakettle's Tome of Transformations we're looking for. Pull that one aside anyways, would you? It might give us some insight into magical disguises." Twilight looked around in frustration. The two of them had spent most of the morning searching for the book that Princess Celestia had written about in the letter they had received just after breakfast. "I'm certain I saw that book around here somewhere before. If only the shelves didn't seem to throw every book onto the floor twice a week, we'd have a better chance to keep things organized. Okay, let's take a break for a moment, give our eyes a chance to rest."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Spike said as he climbed down the ladder. He took the book he had just found and put it on top of a small stack in the middle of the room. "That gives us five books to look through to learn about magical disguises, at least. Are you sure that's what Princess Luna is using?"

Twilight shook her head. "At best, it's just an educated guess. It would cause too much of a commotion if she went somewhere without one, I

think. And there's no way to easily hide yourself using just a cloth and thread disguise. Magic just makes more sense, at least to me."

"Are we sure she's even here in town, though? It seems like we could be doing a bunch of extra work for no reason at all."

"I know, Spike, I know. It's just that there are so many small things that add up to Princess Luna hiding here in town right now that I can't leave it be. The travel time between here and Canterlot. That strange disturbance we unicorns felt. And shortly after that, a new pony moved into Ponyville, according to Rarity. I'd like to go meet this newcomer, but if it is Luna, I'm afraid she'd figure out that I've figured her out, and that may make her run elsewhere. At least if she is here in Ponyville, we can keep an eye on her from afar and watch out for her while Princess Celestia decides what to do."

"If she *is* Princess Luna," Spike emphasized. "For all we know, this other pony is just who she says she is, and would probably feel really put off by this kind of attention. What we need is some way to determine if the newcomer is using a disguise."

Twilight nodded. "Okay, let's split up our work then. I'll keep on looking for the book that Princess Celestia mentioned. You start reading through that stack there, and see what you can learn about magical disguises. Find out how they work, and how they can be seen through." With that, the two of them went back to their work.

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After breakfast, Luna, Dewdrop and Feather Down went outside and started walking towards the center of town. "When Dewdrop and I bought our place," explained Feather Down to Luna, "we first had to go to the mayor. She keeps a list of all the available properties, and who to talk to about buying or renting them from if you're interested in doing so."

"Sounds pretty straightforward," Luna commented.

"It is," replied Dewdrop. "We're not exactly a large enough place for a realtor to make a full time job of it, and since the Mayor takes care of all of the deeds anyway, it makes it easier all around for her to have that list."

Gives her a heads up that she might have some paperwork coming her way."

"So, what you are you looking for?" asked Feather Down.

"Well, nothing too large, obviously. I could make do just fine with a single story place, but I sure would like some sort of an attic, or a way to get on the roof to set up my telescope. Other than that, I really haven't given it too much thought."

Dewdrop and Feather Down shared a look. "Let me get this straight. You moved from one city to another without any sort of concrete plan on what you were looking for in your new house?" Dewdrop asked, disbelief audible in her voice.

Luna hung her head. "I know it sounds rather silly when you put it that way. I just meant that I'm not too fussy about where I live. One place is as good as another, as long as it keeps me dry in the rain and warm in the winter."

"Fair enough," conceded Feather Down. "So, do you have any furniture?"

"I didn't see any when I found her," said Dewdrop, grinning at Luna, "but then I don't think anypony in their right mind would carry it with them when traveling alone. Is it boxed up at a United Pony Service somewhere, or...?"

"No," replied Luna, thinking on her hooves. "I sold it all, with plans to just buy some replacements down here once I had found a place. No shipping costs that way." Luna felt her gut wrench in guilt. She had never wanted to have to lie like this. But she was coming to realize just how many details she had skipped over or hadn't known of until it was too late. Luna was saved from inventing further falsehoods when Dewdrop and Feather Down came to a stop in front of a tall, circular building with rose tinted windows.

"Here's the town hall. It doubles as our meeting place," explained Feather Down. "Unless she's been called away on business of some sort, this is where the Mayor will be." As the door swung open, Luna heard a small bell ring to announce their arrival. Inside, a large room dominated the ground floor with the ceiling way above their heads. Several ponies were slowly walking across the floor of this chamber, with one mare clearly being the pony at the center of the discussion. This beige earth pony with a grey mane wore glasses and a collar that gave her not only a look of

importance, but also a matronly aura. Seeing the newcomers, she broke off her conversation with the other ponies and walked over to meet them.

"Hello Dewdrop, Feather Down. Who's this, and how can I help you girls today?" the Mayor asked with a kind smile on her face.

"Hello, Mayor!" Dewdrop replied. "This here is Moonbeam. She's looking to move here to Ponyville!" Luna nodded when the Mayor looked at her for confirmation.

"Then let me say welcome to our town, Moonbeam. I'm sure you'll love it here. So, how can I help you?"

"Well, Mayor, I'm hoping to find someplace that I can rent for right now. I was told that you had a list of places available?" Luna asked a little nervously.

"Of course! You said to rent?" After another nod from Luna, the Mayor continued, "Well then, please wait right here. I'll go get you a copy of the list from my office, Moonbeam. It shouldn't take me more than a minute or two. You and your friends just wait right here."

Luna watched the Mayor walk off in a mild state of shock. Friends? Had she already picked up two friends without even realizing it? She looked over at Dewdrop and Feather Down, who were idly conversing with each other as they waited for the Mayor to return. Luna had thought that they were just being kind to someone in need, doing it as a kind of charity. But looking back over the time she had been with them, she realized that there was a kindness, a warmth that went past anything that a simple good deed required. They had shown her genuine compassion, and loving care.

Her train of thought was brought to a halt when the mayor returned with a couple pieces of paper in her mouth. Dewdrop used her magic to float them in the air so they could all look at them. "Thank you, Dewdrop. Now I can talk without mumbling my words," the Mayor chuckled. "First off, here is a map of Ponyville. We started as a little place many years ago, and have slowly grown outward from that over time, so we don't really have any sort of urban planning. I would imagine that a newcomer like you could easily get lost without this, so please take it." The Mayor then pointed to the other piece of paper. " And this is the listing of currently available rentals in

Ponyville. If you find one that suits you, please return here with the owner so we can get the contracts signed, okay dear?"

"Thank you very much, Mayor, I will." Luna looked back and forth at the list and the map a couple of times, and then looked at her friends. "I'm sorry, but I can't make heads or tails out of these yet. Would you please help me out for at least a little bit more?"

Feather Down laughed. "What, you think we were going to leave you at this point? Relax, Moonbeam, we both have the day off from work. We'll get through this list in a flash, just you watch." Turning to Dewdrop, she asked, "What do you think? Any of those places stand out to you?"

Dewdrop was still studying the list. "Actually... yes. This one here," she pointed at an address with a hoof. "I think it could be the one we want, but there's a couple of others on the way and it won't hurt to look at them too."

"Oh?" asked Luna. "What is it about that one?"

"You'll see," Dewdrop replied coyly, a small smile on her face that only made Luna even more curious to know. "But for now, let's stop by this other one first. It isn't too far from here."

During the next couple of hours, the three of them looked at several available houses. While they weren't terrible, they didn't make Luna want to move in either. One of them was a bit bigger than she was comfortable with, and another might have been perfect if it hadn't been surrounded by large trees on all sides. After all the trouble of carrying that telescope, Luna wasn't going to let her use of it be hampered by an obscured view if she could help it. The sun was now high in the sky, and Luna's stomach was telling her that it was hungry. "I don't suppose we could go someplace to get some lunch?" she asked, with a growl from her stomach emphasizing her question.

"Hang in just a couple more minutes, hun," Dewdrop answered. "See those trees just up ahead? We'll introduce you to one of our friends, who just happens to live a couple of houses down from that one place on the list I pointed out."

Luna looked at the trees that Dewdrop had pointed out. Even from a distance, she could tell that they didn't look like the other ones that grew

around town. For one thing, they were a bit taller and narrower at the top than the others, and were also a much darker shade of green. "Oh, duh!" said Feather Down in an annoyed voice. "I should have recognized that we were near Pine Needle's place. You should get along with him just fine, Moonbeam. He just moved here a few years ago, so you already have that in common."

"Oh?" asked Luna. "Where from?" They were now close enough that she could see that the trees didn't seem to have leaves, but instead bunches of long green spindles. She hadn't even met the aforementioned pony, but she could already see where his name had come from.

"Stalliongrad," replied Dewdrop. "Try not to make fun of his accent, by the way, he's still a little sensitive about it. Mind you, most of it has gone away, but he still talks a little bit... let's just say different."

Feather Down galloped up on ahead to knock on the door. "Hey! Pine Needle!" she yelled through the door. "Care to treat some lovely mares to a quick lunch while we look for a place to move into?"

The door opened to show a grass green earth pony stallion with a light brown mane. Sticking his head out of the door he looked around. "What is this? Mine friend speaks of lovely mares, but I don't see any around here. Hmm."

Dewdrop and Luna chuckled at Feather Down's miffed look. With an exaggerated huff, Feather Down shot back, "I was referring to us, thank you very much! We've been searching for a place to rent all morning, and now find ourselves about ready to collapse from starvation!"

"What is this? Has your bed finally grown so huge that Dewdrop has to throw you out, before it eats her in her sleep? Oh, no, I see you refer to this pony I have not yet had the honor of meeting!" Stepping all the way out to meet Dewdrop and Luna as they finally arrived at his door, he took an exaggerated bow. "It is a pleasure to meet you. Mine name is Pine Needle."

Luna gave him a smile. "Nice to meet you, Pine Needle, my name is Moonbeam. Dewdrop and Feather Down have been amazing, helping me out so much. You're lucky to have them as friends."

"Ah, you speak the truth, very much so!" Pine Needle turned around, revealing that his cutie mark was a small pine branch, and led the way into his house. "Now, come! I happen to have some apples that I would love to share with the three of you, and we can talk as we eat."

During a quick meal, the girls got Pine Needle caught up on what had happened since Dewdrop had found Luna outside of town. At the end of the retelling, Pine Needle ended up joining them on their search. "I too have the day free of work, with no plans for the rest of the day, I can not think of a better way to spend the time than to help mine friends, both old and new."

Luna was a bit taken aback by Pine Needle's quick labeling of her as a friend. "A friend? But we've just barely met, I mean..."

Pine Needle let loose a loud, hearty laugh. "But how can we not be friends? We share the bond that all transplants have, still trying to figure our way out in a strange new place. Not to mention that you had the great sense to be found by Dewdrop, instead of some other pony." He finished with a wink to show he was partly joking. "Now, where is the next place to look at?"

"Just a couple of houses down, actually," Feather Down said.

"Ah! I think I know the place you speak of. Let us go then!" Pine Needle led the way out, with Feather Down right behind him. Dewdrop was about to follow, when she saw that Luna was standing still in a bit of a daze.

"He sure is something, isn't he?" Dewdrop said as she nudged Luna to help bring her back to Equestria. "Don't let him fool you though. He's quite the softie when he isn't trying to impress somepony."

Luna slowly walked outside. "I... Was he hitting on me?"

Dewdrop laughed. "Oh, goodness no, hun. He's just a bit over the top at times, that's all. And besides, he has a monster crush on 'She Who Must Not Be Named'. Me and Feather Down have tried to hook him up with other mares, but he only has eyes for her."

"She Who Must Not Be Named? Hunh?" For every thing Dewdrop cleared up, it seemed to Luna that she introduced another to replace it.

"Trust me, it's better if you don't know who he turns into a love sick idiot over. The very mention of her name is enough to get him started, and I'd rather avoid that today. So don't worry hun, he won't try asking you out on any dates or the like." Dewdrop looked ahead to the other two of their group. "Now let's go catch up with them before they get too far ahead of us."

A short gallop later, the group was reunited. Checking the list, Luna saw that the building Pine Needle was walking up to was the correct one. Just from the outside, Luna already liked it much more than their previous stops that day. It was a small two-story house, but the upper floor was only half the size of the bottom story. From where she was standing outside by the front door, the right half of the top story was a deck with a railing around it. Dewdrop was looking at her with a proud smile. "I knew from what you said earlier that this was the kind of thing you were looking for. C'mon, let's go make sure the inside isn't falling apart."

The inside was quite dusty, and the group left hoofprints wherever they walked, but it did have a small smattering of furniture already in place. A table was in the room next to the kitchen, and they found a slightly sagging bed upstairs that made Feather Down turn her nose up in disdain, but Luna didn't think that was all that terrible. Adjacent to the small bathroom next to the bedroom, Luna found a door that led out to the deck. While her friends talked about where they should look next, (and she was briefly surprised that she had already placed Pine Needle into that group), Luna stepped outside to admire the view. She could easily see the pine trees from up here, and she had a great, unobstructed view of the sky, save for the small part that was blocked by the bedroom behind her.

"Moonbeam! You about ready to check out the next place?" Feather Down called from inside.

With a smile, Luna turned to face the others. "Actually, no. I want this place."

"You sure about that?" asked Feather Down. "I'll admit this place isn't that bad, besides all the dust. But there are still plenty more places to check out if you want. There's no need to settle for something that isn't completely to your satisfaction."



Luna shook her head. "There's still plenty of time left in the day, so I can get the paperwork done, not to mention cleaning up some of the dust too. It's close to a friend's place, the deck is perfect..." Luna turned around in a circle, taking it all in with a bright smile. "This is it. This is my new home."

"Alright!" cheered Dewdrop. "I knew it! Moonbeam, I'll take you to meet the owner, he's an acquaintance of mine. Feather Down, could you please go and get my cleaning supplies from our place?"

"Oh, and my gem pouch too, please?" Luna asked. "I'll need it to pay the rent."

"You betcha! One Feather Down express run, coming right up!" With that, she took her leave of them and headed downstairs and outside.

Dewdrop turned her attention to the stallion. "Pine Needle, you have any other friends who might be willing to help us out with some house cleaning in a short bit?"

"Hmm." Pine Needle considered the question for a moment. "You know, Haystack's farm isn't too far away, I should have enough time to go find him and ask."

Dewdrop made a sour face. "Him? Well, better than nopony I suppose. Okay then, you go and find him, and me and Moonbeam will head off together. See you back here shortly." With that, they all exited the house and split up to go their separate ways.

Feather Down managed to catch up with them just before they reached the Mayor's place, and gave Luna her gem pouch before dashing off again. Luna marveled at how much the other pony liked to run, and commented as such to Dewdrop. "She's always been a good runner," Dewdrop explained. "I'd say she's one of the faster earth ponies in town. Of course, a pegasus pony could beat her easily in a race since they can fly, but still. I think she gets her energy from all the naps she takes whenever she has the chance. Two speeds for my friend, I always like to say. Fast and stop."

The paperwork and paying the owner took just a short amount of time. Luna was a bit annoyed at how terrible her writing looked, but nobody commented on it, so she figured that she wasn't making too big of a mess of it. 'Just another reminder of how much I used my magic in everyday life

in the past.' Luna silently mused as she paid for a month's rent. 'A full month! I guess that's how it is usually done, but I was planning on staying a week at the most. Do I want to stretch it out that long?' Frowning at how complicated things just seemed to keep on getting, she wondered when she might start catching up on the chaos that her life seemed to have descended into.

"Should we stop by your place on the way back to grab my stuff?" Luna asked Dewdrop.

"No, we don't want your stuff taken there until we get that place cleaned out. I can't believe how little the owner did to keep it in shape," replied Dewdrop. "No need for your stuff to get dirty if it doesn't has too."

Luna nodded. "Sounds good to me." After a short distance, she turned her head towards Dewdrop. "Say, I just remembered. You didn't seem too thrilled about this Haystack pony. You could have said no if you thought he wasn't going to be able to help."

Dewdrop sighed. "It isn't that Haystack is a bad pony. Like Pine Needle mentioned, he has a small farm, which is rare for a pegasus..."

"Wait, a pegasus farmer? I though they all worked with the weather, and not that much else?"

"For the most part, they do, but not all of them. Fluttershy works with animals after all, and several pegasi help with the mail. Oh, we'll have to set you up at the post office too, thanks for reminding me. But yeah, Haystack inherited a small patch of land that's dominated by a hill. Not the greatest land to farm at all, from what I hear. But he takes extra special care with the clouds to make sure his crops get just the right amount of water so they don't dry up, or don't ruin the hill with erosion from too much rain."

Luna looked confused. "So, what's your problem with him then?"

"Well, let's just say that, for a pony who spends so much time in the sky, he has his feet planted way too firmly on the ground. I think I've seen him smile once in all the time I've known him." Dewdrop shook her head in a bit of frustration. "It isn't that he's a grouch or the like. He's just very serious."

Luna silently took in that bit of news. To her this Haystack sounded a lot like the Royal Guards at the castle in Canterlot. Soon, they were once again passing Pine Needle's place and his distinctive trees. "So, how comes Pine Needle is the only pony with trees like that?"

"I guess he brought down some seedlings from Stalliongrad with him when he moved here. I'm a bit surprised they've grown so tall so fast, but maybe he has a green hoof? Anyway, ask him for the full story. I'm sure he'll be glad to tell it to you if you're interested."

As they rounded the corner and passed Pine Needle's house, they heard the galloping of hooves from behind them. Turning around, they saw Feather Down running towards them with a loaded set of saddlebags on her back, and a broom being carried in her mouth. Luna did her best to hide her giggling behind a hoof in front of her mouth, and Dewdrop used her magic to relieve Feather Down of the broom.

"Pfah! Thanks Dewdrop, I'm going to need some water at Moonbeam's place to wash the taste of broom out." Feather Down stuck out her tongue to and made a sound of disgust.

Luna's giggling froze as Feather Down's words registered. 'Moonbeam's place.' She had a place of her own now. It wasn't a castle that she had a single (albeit plush) room to herself in, or a bedroom that she was sharing with friends. It was her very own place, all to herself. "I'll be glad to let you drink the first cup of water from my place, Feather Down! Let's go!"

As they arrived at the front door, they heard a voice call down from above. "Greetings!" Looking up, Luna saw a light brown pegasus pony with a black mane and tail glide down from the deck to meet them. On his flank was a cutie mark of a haystack with a pitchfork stuck in it near the bottom on the tail side of it. "You must be Moonbeam?" he asked. When she nodded, he continued, "As I'm sure you've guessed by now, my name is Haystack. Welcome to Ponyville, Moonbeam."

"Thank you, Haystack." Luna replied. "And not just for the greeting, but for being willing to help out a stranger you haven't met before with something like this."

"Nonsense." Haystack said in a tone that didn't leave any room for argument. "Not only is it the Ponyville way, I'm always glad to help out my

friends." He gave Dewdrop a look with half closed eyes. "Yes, even you, Dewdrop." Dewdrop answered with a sniff and entered into the house without a word in reply.

Luna blinked at the cold mood between Haystack and Dewdrop, then followed the other ponies inside. "Well, what do you guys want me to do?" Luna asked, hoping to defuse things before they got too tense.

"Well..." Dewdrop started and then trailed off, as she pondered the tasks ahead of them. "Okay, how does this sound. Haystack, we'll start with you using your wings to try to blow out as much dust as we can through the open doors and windows first. That should help make the rest of it that much easier. After that, I'll tackle the kitchen, and Pine Needle will get the rest of the lower floor. Feather Down, you work on the bathroom upstairs, and Moonbeam can work on the bedroom. Haystack, I'd appreciate it if you gave the roof a good look over, see if any of the shingles need replacing, then after that you get the deck clean. Sound good?" When nopony raised any objections, Dewdrop smiled. "Okay then, let's do this!"

Luna hadn't really grasped the amount of dust that had been in the house until Haystack, with a mask over his mouth, went inside and started flapping his wings as hard as he could. From where the rest of them stood on the road out front, the house quickly became hidden from sight as the cloud of dirt slowly expanded and kept on growing. Finally, it faded away, and the flapping sound became replaced with a loud coughing. Moonbeam raced in when she heard the sound to find Haystack hunched over with his mask on the floor. "I flapped just a bit harder than I should have," he explained after he got his lungs cleared out. "Blew my own mask right off. I'm all right now though, thank you for your concern."

The ponies all went to their assigned tasks. Luna waited until she could hear the sounds of cleaning going on below before heading over to Feather Down. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure thing, Moonbeam. What is it?" Feather Down put down the scrub brush she was using on the bathtub.

"Do you know why Dewdrop and Haystack seem to..." Luna paused to gather her thoughts better. "I don't want to say 'hate', but they haven't been all that friendly to each other."

Feather Down sighed. "If you ask me, they're both just being stupid. Neither of them has told me straight up why they act like they do to each other. My best guess would be that they're both used to being the 'mature' one in a group, and they don't like competition for that spot. That, or they just don't know how to handle each other is all. Try not to let it get you down, Moonbeam. They're both good ponies, and I'm sure they'll figure out a way to coexist someday."

"That's kind of sad, I guess." Luna stared at the floor in thought for a second, only to hear Feather Down start giggling. "What? It's not funny at all!"

Feather Down tried to wave aside Luna's protests with a hoof. "Oh, sorry Moonbeam, you misunderstand me. I'm not laughing at them, I'm just thinking how you already want to help them out, even though you've only known us all for just a day or so." She gave Luna a big smile. "You're a good friend, Moonbeam. I'm glad to have gotten to know you!"

Blushing at the compliment, Luna returned to her work by dragging the mattress out to the deck and giving it a few good kicks with her hind legs to shake the dust out. For the next couple of hours the group worked hard on their tasks until they were finally finished. Luna looked around, amazed to see the place sparkle so. Feather Down dashed off to grab Luna's possessions, and Haystack flew off to grab some food for everyone. "I'll make sure we have a proper housewarming feast for you today," he promised before taking off.

As the remaining ponies waited for them to return, Luna went back out onto the deck to look around again. She couldn't help but smile at what had happened today. Even more new friends, a house of her own to stay in... surely, this had to be one of the best days she had had since returning to Canterlot with her sister a month ago.

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As the sun set, Twilight Sparkle collapsed on the floor of the library in exhaustion. She still hadn't managed to find that book, but by herself she had only managed to get through about half of all the books that were housed in the multi-story library she lived in.

"Well, Spike, how's that list coming?" she asked her dragon friend.

"I think I'm done, Twilight." Spike held up a clipboard with a couple of sheets filled with writing. "Some of these should be easy to enough to use to check a pony over without them noticing, but some of the others are just a bit too obvious."

"Don't worry about that, Spike. I think I've got that all figured out. We're going to do it Pinkie Pie-style."

Spike gave Twilight a look of confusion. "Pinkie Pie-style? Are we going to dress up as clowns and do the tests like that?"

"No, Spike."

"Then... you want us make her eat so many cupcakes that she can't run away from us?"

"No, Spike, I..."

"Oh! I know, you're going to break into a long song and dance routine, using that as a cover while I, hiding behind a cake, do the tests while disguised as a lamp!"

"No, I... what? No!" Twilight gave Spike a serious look. "Pinky Pie-style, Spike. We're going to throw a party!"

# Chapter 4

## Welcome Party

Luna woke, once again finding herself sleeping later than she was used to. Her new friends had stayed over almost until sunset celebrating the fact that she was now officially a citizen of Ponyville. By the time she finally had some time alone, she was finding it too dark to read, and decided to watch the night sky from her deck for a bit before turning in. Sleep had been fast in coming, and for once had been uneventful, with no Nightmare Moon dream to creep her out.

Now, after a quick bath and a breakfast of most of the last of the food she had brought with her from Canterlot, Luna was once again on the deck of her house, just watching the rest of the village go about it's morning routine. After a few minutes, she decided to head into town and do some exploring. She had marked on the map where she and her friends all lived, and now she hoped to add some other important spots to her knowledge of the town. She went to empty her saddlebags so she could use them for shopping, and stopped when she saw the spell book fall out.

'That's right!' she thought as she picked up the book carefully and carried it to her table. 'I can't believe that I forgot to read up on just exactly what that spell did. I know the last day or two has been a whirlwind, but wow...' Luna found flipping through the book harder without her magic, but she was still able to find the right page without too much hassle.

Luna had just started to read when she heard a knock at her door. "Coming! One second please!" she called out as she closed the book and placed it back in her bags. She was still feeling a bit paranoid about others seeing the tome and wondering why an earth pony had a spell book. Opening the front door, she saw a pink earth pony mare with a fluffy magenta mane and a giant smile on her face. "Um, hello..." Luna started, but seeing the smile and eyes of the visiting pony getting larger froze her up.

"Hello! Are you Moonbeam?" the other pony asked excitedly. Seeing Luna nod slowly, the pink pony gave out a squeal of joy and then stepped back a

couple of paces. Her demeanor becoming somewhat serious, she cleared her throat, and then started to sing while doing a little dance.

"Welcome, to Ponyville, the land of cake and sun  
We hope you enjoy your stay here, and have a ton of fun!  
To help you get things started off, on the right horseshoe  
We're hosting a party tonight, one that's just for you!

A party for Moonbeam, it's gonna be a blast  
A party for Moonbeam, the whole night it will last  
So bring your friends and family, it's sure to be a sight  
A party for Moonbeam, it's happening tonight!

It's being held at the library, hope you don't mind books  
We would have done it elsewhere, but Twilight's such a kook!  
It starting right at suppertime, food and drinks we'll provide  
Just come down when you're ready, knock and come inside!

A party for Moonbeam, it's gonna be a blast  
A party for Moonbeam, the whole night it will last  
So bring your friends and family, it's sure to be a sight  
A party for Moonbeam, it's happening tonight!  
A party for Moonbeam, it hap-pen-ning to-niiiiight!"

By the end of the song, Luna was smiling as wide as the other pony was, and clapped her hooves together enthusiastically. "Wow! Well done! Thank you very much!"

"Thanks! My name is Pinkie Pie, by the way. I'm glad Twilight suggested that I sing the invitation, it sure worked out a lot better than my first idea of dressing up like a clown and giving you the invitation on a cupcake, because I would have probably eaten it then! The cupcake I mean, not the invitation. Hmm, maybe that's why Twilight gave me such a weird look when I suggested I do that. Oh well! Anyway, will you be able to make it? I hope you can, it would be weird to have a welcome party and have the pony it's for not show up, although I guess we could go out and search the town for you and then throw the party wherever you're at, but having it at the library will be much easier I think, don't you?"

Luna was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic onslaught of words. "Uh, yes, of course I'll be there, thank you so..."



A loud cheer from Pinkie Pie cut Luna off. "Yippee! Okay then, I gotta go tell Twilight that the party is a go, get to Mr. and Mrs. Cake's to get the food ready, oh, so much to do! See you and your friends there Moonbeam!" With that, Pinkie Pie hopped away down the road, humming to herself.

Luna stood in her doorway for another minute, blinking and trying to sort out what had just happened. Giving up on trying to make sense of all of it, she instead decided to focus on the important pieces: there was a party at the library being held in her honor, it was at suppertime, and she was supposed to bring her friends and family. "Well, that pretty much fills up my itinerary for the day" She said to herself. "First, read that spell book, then go visit my friends and invite them to the party, and finally get some food bought for tomorrow."

Dragging the spell book out of her saddlebags again, she flipped through the pages until she found the spell description. After reading through several pages, she frowned upon reaching the end. "Well, that wasn't very enlightening!" she cried out in frustration. "It doesn't mention anything about pain at all, just how it changes a unicorn into an earth pony. At least I now know how to break the disguise. I just need to break the moonstone. But if casting the spell hurt that much, I don't want to do it again anytime soon. So, I guess I'm stuck in this form unless an emergency comes up. Well, I better go put this book someplace safe." Looking around at her barely furnished room, she sighed. "Which means either I keep it in my saddlebags, or leave it here on the table? Oh, wait, I know!" Luna grabbed the book in her mouth, ran up the stairs and slid the book under her bed.

"Not the best place, but that will have to do for now." Going back downstairs, she started gathering things for her saddlebags. Her map, a bottle of ink, and a quill went in. She wasn't liking the prospect of looking like an idiot when it came time to mark something down, but it was the only way open to her. Last, she grabbed her gem pouch, to find it containing only a couple of small stones besides the moonstone the spell had created. "Either I'm going to have to leave in a week after all, or find some way to earn some money. It cost a lot more to rent a place than I thought it was going to." Slinging the saddlebags onto her back took a couple of tries, but she finally got them on properly and headed outside.

Luna's first stop was to head to Haystack's farm at the edge of town. A small side road branched off of the main route, and led to a gate with the

sign 'Haystack's Hill' above it. Past it, she saw a small house next to a tall barn. Behind both buildings, a large hill rose sharply a couple of hundred feet. The hill was covered with some sort of grain. Luna couldn't tell what kind from this far out. Noticing that the gate had no lock, she cautiously opened it up and walked in. Looking around, she didn't see anypony anywhere, and started to get nervous about what she should do next. Finally, she spotted a bell with a rope hanging next to the door of the house. With nothing else to try, besides leaving and trying to figure out which inn Dewdrop worked at, she grabbed the rope with her teeth and gave the bell a good ring.

A few seconds later, she heard flapping wings, and looking up see Haystack flying in to meet her. "Moonbeam! This is a pleasant surprise. How can I help you?"

Luna smiled. "Hello Haystack! I need help with a couple of things, if you don't mind? It shouldn't take too long, I promise."

"I'll do what I can, of course. What do you need?"

"Well, first off, I guess they're holding a big welcoming party for me this evening in town at the library. I was told to bring my friends, so I would like for you to come."

Haystack shuffled his hooves and looked around nervously. "Well, um, if you really want me to, I will, Moonbeam. But it's only fair to warn you, parties and I just don't seem to get along all that well." Seeing Luna's crestfallen look, he waved a hoof at her. "No! Don't misunderstand, I'll go. I just want to warn you that I may not be the best pony to be hanging out with there."

Luna brightened up. "Thanks, Haystack! I plan to invite all my friends, so you can hang out with them at the worst, right? Which leads me to my second favor. I got you guys to mark on the map where you all lived, but you're the only one who lives where they work. Could you spare a second to mark where Dewdrop, Feather Down, and Pine Needle work for me, please?"

"I'll be glad to do that, and even do you one better, Moonbeam. Follow me for a short way." With that, Haystack turned and trotted around his house towards the hill. Wondering what her friend had in mind, Luna followed.

Soon they were walking in grain shoots that came almost up to Luna's belly. She was worried that Haystack was going to have her climb the steep hill and point things out from up there, when instead he stopped at the base and yelled up, "Hey! Pine Needle! We have a guest! Get down here!"

"Wait, Pine Needle works here too? I'm surprised you guys didn't bring that up last night!"

Haystack shrugged. "It just didn't come up. After all, *you* were the focus last night, not us or where we worked. But this is how Pine Needle and I met. He was new in town and needed a job, and I always need more hooves to do stuff than I have available to me." The sound of galloping hooves coming from the left made the two of them turn to see Pine Needle come running up to them.

"Moonbeam!" he yelled in a happy voice as he pulled up next to them. "What brings you out here?"

"Well, they're throwing a welcoming party for me tonight. They told me to bring my friends, so I'm here to invite you to come," Luna explained.

"It would be mine pleasure to be there," Pine Needle solemnly replied.

"Great! That's two of you then, only two more to go!"

Pine Needle stared at Luna in amazement. "What is this? Did you already invite Haystack?" Looking at the pegasus pony, and getting a drooped head as confirmation, he turned back to Luna. "You have just pulled off a rare feat indeed, Moonbeam! Why, I imagine that this party will be remembered almost as much for Haystack appearing as it will be for what it is intended for."

"Me going to a party isn't that rare of an event!" Haystack paused, and then looked at Pine Needle pleadingly. "Right?"

Pine Needle tilted his head in thought for a moment. "If mine memory is correct, the last time you went to a party was another welcome party. Mine. Which was almost two years ago."

Haystack sighed in defeat as Luna giggled. "Very well, I guess it is. Well, shall I mark down on your map where Dewdrop and Feather Down work?

I'll make sure the two of us get done with our work in plenty of time for the party."

Pine Needle gave a quick wave goodbye to Luna, and then left to resume his work while Haystack led Luna towards his house again.

"By the way," Haystack said as they entered his house, "I don't know what you plan on doing for work, but if you have trouble finding a job, let me know. Not everything around here is back-breaking labor, but you will get dirty by the end of the day. So, just let me know whenever you may need it."

Luna was a bit taken aback. As a princess, she had never imagined getting her hooves dirty with manual labor. Furthermore, she still had no idea what she was going to do for money. Putting those concerns aside, she pulled the map out of her saddlebags and placed it on the table as Haystack brought a pencil over and started marking down spots on it.

"Thank you, Haystack. I'll definitely keep that in mind. That's very generous of you!"

Haystack did his best not to look too embarrassed over the praise. "You may not be thanking me after your first shift if you do decide to try it. Anyway, this here," he pointed at a mark he had made, "is the inn where Dewdrop works. Anytime should be a good time to visit her, as she'll most likely just be cleaning up and making beds. This," he pointed at another mark, "is where Feather Down works. I'd either go there next, before the lunch rush hits or she'll be up to her mane in work, or go an hour after that. Finally, this spot over here near the middle of town is the library. If you find yourself running late, that's where to go, but Pine Needle and I will stop by your place on the way in to walk you there if you want."

"I'd like that! If nothing else, just so I don't walk all by myself into a room full of ponies who I know nothing about," Luna said. She committed the marks to her memory as best as she could, then put the map back in her saddlebags.

"Very well then, Moonbeam. I'll see you later tonight!"

Luna spent the rest of the morning finding and telling Dewdrop and Feather Down about the party. Both mares were eager to go, especially after hearing that Haystack was going to be going too.

Luna remembered Dewdrop's expression when she had heard that especially. Dewdrop's jaw had fallen wide open, and after a few seconds she had turned her back to Luna, and quietly, but not quietly enough, muttered "Next thing you know, pianos will be falling from the sky."

Luna still giggled at the thought hours later.

After that, she had gone to the farmer's market. Spending most of her remaining funds, she purchased enough food to last her several days. After returning home, she spent the afternoon practicing setting up her telescope inside. Getting it upright was easy, she found. Gently adjusting where it was pointed, however, was an exercise in frustration without being able to use magic to minutely adjust the dials and knobs.

Eventually, she put the telescope away in her closet and did a quick wash up to make herself presentable for the party. Finding herself done before Haystack and Pine Needle showed up, and not having much else to do, she pulled out the spell book to do some reading to pass the time. Or, at least she tried to, but she found herself too excited about the party to be able to concentrate on it.

Finally, there was a knock at her door. Shoving the book back under the bed, Luna trotted downstairs to meet her two stallion friends. "Ready to go?" asked Haystack.

"Yes! Both Feather Down and Dewdrop said they will be there too, and asked us to stop by their place on the way so we could all arrive together," Luna answered as she closed the door. Pine Needle stepped to one side and motioned for Luna to walk between him and Haystack, and they walked to Dewdrop's and Feather Down's house.

Luna knocked on the door, and Feather Down opened it. "Hello Moonbeam! Hey guys!" Feather Down then turned around and yelled back into the house, "Ha! He DID show up! You have to do the dishes for the rest of the week!"

Luna was surprised to hear Dewdrop squawk in protest, and shocked when some unladylike words followed that up. She never would have expected to hear such things come from her friend's mouth!

A disbelieving Dewdrop stuck her head out the door. With a sigh and a small smile, she shrugged. "Oh well, the extra chores will be worth it just to see Haystack actually being sociable." For his part, Haystack tried to take it all in stride but still had a little bit of a droop to his posture.

"Ah, don't worry, Haystack," consoled Feather Down as she and Dewdrop joined the others and they started to walk towards the library. "At the worst, think of it as the price to pay for what's sure to be an excellent spread of food, right?"

Haystack slowly nodded. "That's a good way to look at it. I mean, it's just a bunch of ponies that I don't know all that well, right? What's the worst that can happen?"

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"Twilight!" yelled Spike from upstairs. "I see them coming now, they should be here in just a minute!"

"Great!" Twilight called back up. She looked around the main floor of the library. There were already a couple dozen ponies present, and the rest of her friends hadn't shown up yet either. 'It'll be a bit crowded,' she thought as she walked towards the door, 'but that should actually help me pull off my tests without arousing any suspicions.' She heard Spike yelp in surprise, and then a crashing noise from upstairs. 'What's he doing up there?' she wondered before a knock at the door returned her attention back downstairs.

The door opened, and Luna and her friends entered the library. "Welcome!" said Twilight. "I'm glad you could make it. You must be Moonbeam?" she asked, holding out a hoof to shake. 'Test number one,' she thought, 'physical contact can often disrupt weak illusions. It's a long shot, especially for someone to use at a party, but better safe than sorry.' A quick hoofshake later, Twilight motioned for them to wait a moment.

Twilight climbed up on a stool to get a view of the room and used her magic to ring a bell to get everyone's attention. "Attention, everypony!" she said,

as conversation died down. "The mare of honor has arrived! Let's all give a big Ponyville welcome to Moonbeam!" The room erupted into a chorus of cheers and joyful clops of hooves hitting the floor in applause. For her part, Luna blushed, not used to being the center of so much positive attention. "Now," continued Twilight after the noise once again quieted, "don't everypony rush her at once, but sometime tonight make sure to at least say 'Hello!'"

'Now, time for test number two,' Twilight thought as she levitated a party hat over to Luna's head. 'Coming in contact with another spell can disrupt some illusions. I'll find out if that's what she is using when I put this hat on her.'

Luna smiled at the red and white party hat as it was placed gently on her head and then patiently stood still while Twilight tied it off. "I didn't get that too tight, did I?" Twilight asked.

"Oh, no, not at all! And thank you very much for the party! I was looking forward to it all day today." Luna looked around. Many of the ponies were in small circles of conversations, and a few looked like they were waiting for her to finish with Twilight before coming up to introduce themselves. "I don't see the pony that sang me the invitation. I wanted to thank her again for going to the trouble of doing that."

Twilight chuckled. "Oh, she'll be here soon. I believe she and some other ponies are bringing in the last of the food. We put this together on a bit of short notice, I'm afraid, but they should be along any moment now." Some motion out of the corner of her eye caught Twilight's attention. Spike was standing at the top of the stairs, gesturing for her to come up. "Well, I have to go take care of something really quick, I'll be back down shortly. You go ahead and mingle and have some fun!"

"I will, thank you!" Luna watched as the purple unicorn walked up the stairs, and then turned to greet several ponies who came up to her to offer introductions.

Twilight got to the top of the stairs to find Spike with a bump on his head, holding a book. "What happened, Spike, and why aren't you down there helping me with the tests?"

"I was on my way, but I fell off the ladder. But while I was down on the ground, look what I found under your dresser!" In Spike's hand was the book 'Teakettle's Tome of Transformations.'

Twilight blinked in surprise. "Under my dresser? Why was it there? Oh well, that will have to wait until after the party, I'm afraid. She's passed the first two tests, but I didn't think they would work anyway. Time to get through the rest of the list!"

Luna and her friends had dispersed throughout the crowd, and she was already having trouble remembering the name of everypony who had already come up to her to say hello. The door opened again, and another group of ponies entered, carrying baskets filled with apples and a couple of cakes too. 'Those must be the ponies Twilight mentioned.' Sure enough, the last one to enter was the pink pony from that morning. 'What did she say her name was again...' Luna tried to remember.

A short ways away, Haystack gasped. "Oh burrs and nettles," he swore, "it's Pinkie Pie!"

'Pinkie Pie, that's it!' Luna thought triumphantly. 'Wait, why does Haystack seem so upset by her being here?' Luna watched as Haystack tried edging away from the door without calling too much attention to himself, but after just a few seconds, Pinkie Pie's eye fell on the pegasus pony. Luna watched as Pinkie Pie's face went through a very visible series of emotions, from shock to disbelief to joy, all in a matter of a couple of seconds.

"HAYSTACK!" Pinkie Pie yelled as she leaped across the crowded room in just a couple of bounds. "Oh my gosh! Did Moonbeam actually drag you in here? I can't believe it, I've been trying to get you to show up to parties for AGES, you really need to get out more, have a chance to meet some mare, oh this is the greatest party ever!" Haystack slowly tried to back away from the hyperactive pink pony, only to feel his rear end hit the wall behind him. He looked back and forth, looking for a way free, only to have his eyes start to glaze over when he discovered there was no escape.

"Oh dear." Dewdrop walked over to Luna to get a better view of what was happening. "This was my biggest worry about Haystack showing up. I guess they grew up across the street from each other, and Pinkie Pie has always found Haystack to be a prime target for her pranks and schemes.



Quite the duo, when you think about it. The earth pony who always has her head in the clouds, and the pegasus pony who always has his hooves on the ground. By the way, have you seen Feather Down anywhere, Moonbeam?"

Meanwhile, Spike carried a tall mirror past Luna and into the kitchen, as Twilight watched from the stairs. 'Test number three,' she thought, 'Many illusions affect the eyes directly, but if you look at the subject indirectly the spell loses its power. A mirror is an excellent tool for this test!' Spike paused a few seconds to give Twilight a chance to examine Luna's reflection in the mirror before he moved into the next room. 'Nope, that test didn't work out either.'

The other ponies that had just walked in carried the food to various tables. Pine Needle helped them unburden an orange earth pony with a cowboy hat of the many boxes she had carried on her back. When he was done, the orange pony said to him, "Thanks, sugar, that was quite a load, glad ta be free of it." She turned around and started talking to another pony, not noticing that behind her, as she stood and chatted away, Pine Needle's eyes had changed into little pink hearts and a small trail of drool was starting to trickle from his mouth.

"I don't believe it!" Dewdrop exclaimed. "She Who Must Not Be Named! Right next to Pine Needle! Can this get any worse?"

"Umm, just who is that?" asked Luna.

Dewdrop sighed. "That's Applejack. Her family owns a large apple farm outside of town, and Pine Needle has a monster crush on her like you wouldn't believe. I still don't know if Applejack is oblivious to it, or just does her best to ignore it. But Pine Needle will be happy to talk about how wonderful her mane is, or how cute her freckles are, or how she's the epitome of earth pony beauty for hours if you really want to hear it. Ugh!" Dewdrop stuck a hoof into her mouth in a gag motion. "The only thing left now is for us to find Feather Down taking a nap somewhere and refusing to wake up!"

Luna felt a trickle of sweat start to form as she saw Feather Down curled up in what looked like a pet basket near the base of the stairs. "You mean, like over there?" she pointed out to Dewdrop.

Dewdrop smacked her forehead with a hoof several times in a row with more force than Luna thought was healthy. Muttering to herself something about tempting the fates by speaking of bad things, she stomped over to her roommate and tried unsuccessfully to wake Feather Down up.

Twilight still stood at the top of the stairs watching with worry as, one by one, Moonbeam's friends were rendered incompetent. Twilight was just about to head down the stairs to help out, tests forgotten, but something made her stop and keep watching instead.

Luna took in the scenes one last time. Pinkie Pie was still talking and hopping around a paralyzed Haystack, Dewdrop was trying in vain to prod Feather Down awake with a hoof, and Pine Needle was still mooning over Applejack. 'What do I do?' She asked herself, feeling completely unable to influence things as they stood. She walked over to Pine Needle and waved a hoof in front of his eyes to no visible effect. 'What I need is some way to move Applejack out of his sight, but I don't want to embarrass him too much either. Maybe Feather Down could do that?' She walked over to her dozing friend, and added her efforts to Dewdrop's to try to wake Feather Down without actually hurting her. 'No, she's out like a light! How can a pony fall asleep at a time and place like this anyways?'

Luna walked back to the middle of the room, and greeted some other ponies that had come up to her. She could only pay them half a mind though, and soon they drifted away, leaving her alone again. 'This is terrible! I just wish that, after all they've done for me, that I could somehow return the favor. But how?' She looked back and forth between her friends a few times, drawing a blank. She was about to give up in despair when suddenly, inspiration struck and a plan fell into place. Quickly double-checking it in her head, she smiled and trotted over to Haystack.

"Pinkie Pie!" Luna exclaimed, getting the pink pony's attention. "I just wanted to thank you again for the wonderful invitation. It sure was a wonderful way to wake up and start the day."

"Why, thank you Moonbeam!" Pinkie Pie turned to her as she replied. "Do you want me to do that for you again tomorrow? Not that we would be throwing another party, but it sure is fun to have a good reason to go and sing."

"Actually, I was thinking that there's another pony here who could use a wake up call from you." She pointed over at Dewdrop and Feather Down.

"Ooooh! I know just the thing too! Watch!" Pinkie Pie headed over to the dessert table. Instead of watching, Luna turned to Haystack, who was quickly recovering now that Pinkie Pie had left his immediate vicinity.

"Thank you ever so much Moonbeam, I owe you big for that." Haystack said, his voice filled with relief. "Now, time for me to get out of here!"

"Actually," said Luna, "I think if you just talked to the right pony, you might have a much more enjoyable time." She pointed over to the area where Pine Needle was. "I was told that Applejack was a farmer too. Maybe you two could compare notes and stories?"

Haystack slowly nodded. "You know, I've been wanting to ask her how she manages to keep up such a good yield year after year. I think I'll do that, thanks for the suggestion Moonbeam." Luna watched as Haystack went and introduced himself, and the two broke away from the food tables, leaving Pine Needle behind. She switched her view to the other side of the room, and saw Pinkie Pie shove a pastry covered in something red into Feather Down's mouth. Luna guessed it might be hot sauce from the bottle with a red pepper now lying empty on the food table Pinkie Pie had just left.

Well, that and the fact that Feather Down levitated several feet in the air, turning bright red as a small stream of flame flew out of her mouth and smoke erupted from her ears and nostrils. "It's all in the timing," Pinkie Pie explained to Dewdrop. "Just wait for them to be inhale, that's when you put in in their mouth."

Luna then walked over to Pine Needle, and gave him a nudge to break him from his reverie. Wiping his chin free of drool, he apologized to Luna. "I am so terribly sorry. I have acted like a fool! I hope I did not ruin the party for you"

"Don't worry about it, Pine Needle. I was wondering, since you've had one of these held for you a short while ago, if you could help me with getting through the rest of the night without coming across like a silly filly?"

Pine Needle smiled. "It would be mine honor, Moonbeam. Have you met Rainbow Dash yet? She's over this way." The two wandered over to talk to the blue pegasus.

From her vantage point at the top of the stairs, Twilight beamed with pride. "I still don't know whether you're Luna or really are Moonbeam, but either way, job well done!" She looked at the remaining tests on her list. A couple of them, such as getting the subject wet, seemed like buzzkill now. "I'll go tell Spike we're done for tonight. We'll look through that book after this party is done if it isn't too late, but for now?" she said as she descended down the stairs, "That cake sure looks good, I'm going to have a piece!"

A couple of hours later, the party was finished. Twilight was cleaning up the last of the mess, using her magic, while Spike read through the newly found book. "Um, Twilight? I've read through this whole thing, and this may just be what she used. It actually turns the unicorn casting the spell into an earth pony."

"Any way to test if that actually is the spell that was used, Spike?" Twilight asked, focusing on levitating a pile of apple cores into a garbage bag.

"No. The spell takes away all of their unicorn properties and seals it away into a gemstone. The spell is broken by breaking the gemstone."

Twilight paused, then lowered the garbage bag to the floor. Turning towards Spike, she asked, "Wait. Unicorn properties? What about pegasus properties, like wings and being able to walk on clouds?"

Spike shook his head. "It doesn't say."

Twilight came over and started to read over Spike's shoulder. "I see, the spell only works on the caster, it can't be used on other ponies." Twilight's eyes widened in shock. "Oh my gosh, Spike! That disturbance a couple of days ago! That had to have been the spell somehow trying to work Luna's wings into the effect! Teakettle only had unicorns in mind when he made this spell, he probably didn't think an alicorn like Princess Celestia, a unicorn with wings, would ever want to cast it, and when he wrote this, he probably wasn't even considering Luna either, because she was still trapped in the moon! Well, at least we can write to Princess Celestia and give her some good news, that we found the book and are pretty sure that we know where Luna is."

"It's not all good news though, Twilight." Spike flipped back to a page near the beginning of the book. "Teakettle talks a lot about how his spells work in the first part. It's a really boring read, but this part really stuck out at me."

Twilight read the words aloud. "The danger inherent in using any kind of complete transformation spell, like the ones I outline later in this volume, is that the body can forget its original shape over time. I have discovered that after a year and a day, even if the spell is canceled, the target of the spell will not be able to change back! Oh no, Spike, we need to get this news to Celestia right away!" Spike ran upstairs to grab a pen and a piece of parchment, while Twilight wondered how to present it all to the Princess. 'No sugar coating at all would be the best. It may be a bit harsh, but she needs to know all of it.'

Happy and full, Luna slipped under the covers in her bed and fell promptly asleep. Once again, she found herself in the strange moonscape dream, with Nightmare Moon waiting for her.

"Well, well, well. So, did you have fun telling lies to the entire town tonight?" Nightmare Moon chuckled at the pained grimace that came over Luna's face. "That's right, don't forget, every day you stay like this, the longer you go on, the deeper the hole will be for you to dig out of. I imagine that if you were to reveal yourself tomorrow, you might be able to not have them all hate you forever."

Luna started to shrink before her dark half, when suddenly she stopped, and slowly stood back up. "You know what, Nightmare Moon? I think I'm on to you."

"Oh, pray tell, just what exactly are you talking about?"

Luna stared Nightmare Moon right in the eye. "I think you want to take control again."

Oh, please." Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes. "Why would I? The moment I show myself, Celestia and her pet Elements of Harmony will just come rushing in again. No, what I really want to do is guide you into making the right choices. Be the power behind the throne, so to speak." She leaned down so she could whisper into Luna's ear. "Think of what we could do together."

"No." Luna stated. "In fact, while my memory isn't the best, I seem to recall that this is how it started a thousand years ago. So, you know what? I'm going to make sure you never get a chance to abuse my magic again!"

Nightmare Moon laughed. "Oh, and how can you do that?"

Luna smiled, and then closed her eyes and concentrated. 'This is a dream,' she thought, 'all in my mind. All I should have to do is concentrate and...' A loud gasp of shock let her know that she had succeeded. Opening her eyes again, she looked at herself to make certain. Sure enough, she was now looking just like she did awake, a grey earth pony with a silver mane and tail.

"I can do this!" She proclaimed loudly. "I can stay as an earth pony, and make it so there is no magic for you to steal and corrupt! I have a place of my own here now! Friends, a possible job waiting for me... I don't need magic anymore! I'll just stay like this, and be happy for the rest of my life!" With that, Luna closed her eyes again, and willed herself to wake up.

Luna lay there for a while, happy to have a plan in place now. She was happy, she kept on telling herself over and over. "But if things are going my way, and I'm happy," she quietly wondered, "where are these tears coming from?"

# Chapter 5

## Pericynthion

Twilight Sparkle awoke to a pale nimbus of light and a soft voice gently calling her name over and over. Slowly opening her eyes, it took her a few seconds to realize that the light came not from a lamp or the moon but a unicorn's horn. And the voice that was calling her was...

"Princess Celestia!" Gasping, Twilight sat up, suddenly very awake. "Your Highness, I'm sorry, I didn't know that you would be..."

Shaking her head, Celestia brought Twilight's apology to an end. "There is no need to be sorry. It is I who should apologize to you, and not just for entering your house and waking you up at such an early hour." The princess paused to look at Spike the dragon, still soundly asleep. "Let us move downstairs, so that we don't wake him up." At Twilight's nod, the two silently walked down to the main floor.

The area was still in the half-cleaned state that Twilight had left it following the party. The discoveries that Spike had made in the book after everyone had left had brought all of Twilight's cleaning efforts for the night to a halt. Twilight waited for Princess Celestia to continue, but instead the regal alicorn simply stood, gazing at the room with a look that Twilight couldn't decipher. "Your Highness, what... what can I do for you?" she asked, hoping to spur her ruler into talking.

Celestia magicked a party streamer to float in front of her face. "Twilight Sparkle, I need to ask you a favor. I need to talk to somepony about all of this." Celestia turned to face Twilight. "I need your help, your advice. Very few know that Princess Luna is missing. And you are the only one who has found a copy of the spellbook. Add to that the fact that you have actually seen her, I feel that only you can help me decide what I am going to do."

"Are you here to take her back to Canterlot?" asked Twilight, astonished that Princess Celestia was coming to her for help.

"I don't know." Celestia started to pace about the room slowly. "When I received your message earlier tonight, that was my first thought. Finding out that she had cast such a dangerous spell, that she had failed to tell me what she was doing outside of a vague letter... I was flying as fast as I could to get here, wanting to scold her, yell at her. Also, to comfort her and hug her tight so that she couldn't run off again."

"But now?" asked Twilight.

"But now that I have had time to consider my actions, I don't know. To say that Princess Luna's time back in Canterlot since Nightmare Moon's defeat has been difficult would be to put it mildly." Celestia sighed. "I've been forced to watch her try time and time again to help others, attempt to make friends, to try to do anything of assistance for any pony and always be rebuffed. The specter of Nightmare Moon is something that can't be forgotten or overcome so quickly, it seems. And there is only so much I can do without becoming a tyrant. I can't force them to like her. Telling others that they **MUST** forgive her, that they **HAVE** to be nice to her would in the end only make things worse." Tears started to well up in Celestia's eyes. "I love her so very much, but if things were so bad that she felt she had to go these extremes, to run away from everything and try to start over from practically nothing... Do I have the right to force her to come back to that kind of abuse, that level of hatred?"

'Whoa, what have I gotten myself into?' Twilight thought as she absorbed her ruler's words. Seeing that Celestia was waiting on her, she hemmed and hawed while she tried to come up with something. "Well, I guess it comes down to several factors. First of all, is she needed for anything? Does she have any roles in the government that she has to fill?" Gasping, she asked, "Are you still able to raise the moon for her? I haven't even thought to look at the night sky!"

Celestia nodded. "I am still responsible for raising both the sun and the moon. Luna did not feel ready to resume that responsibility yet. If the truth is to be told, there is still a lot of resistance to her taking over that task again by much of the nobility. For them, it is still too soon after the events of the Summer Sun Festival, and they do not wish to risk a repeat of that happening again. As for other roles, no. During the thousand years she spent on the moon, any other tasks that were her responsibility were



quickly filled by others. I doubt that any of the ponies currently doing those jobs are even aware of where those duties originated."

Twilight nodded. "Okay then. During the past couple of days, has Luna's absence caused any problems?"

Celestia shook her head. "No. Besides one or two other ponies that Luna had managed to win over, the rest are just going about things business as usual. The simple declaration that I made, that Luna was away studying, was sufficient. In fact, it worked too well, too easily for my liking."

Twilight paused to consider her next question, and then cautiously asked, "Besides the possibility of Luna remaining as an earth pony forever, is there any other danger to her staying in her disguise for now?"

Celestia considered the query. "In your letter, you were incorrect about one thing. I missed it at first too, although what you wrote led me to figure out the truth. The disturbance that we felt, which was caused by the spell that she cast, was not because she had the wings of a pegasus. Or, rather, it would not have caused the disturbance to have been felt over the entirety of Equestria, and..."

"Wait, it was felt everywhere? Not just here in our area?" interrupted Twilight.

"Correct. In order for something to cause such a disturbance, it had to have been something of a much greater magnitude. You were on the right track, you just failed to realize that there was something else that Luna possessed that an earth pony does not." Celestia waited to see if her prized pupil could puzzle it out.

And after a few seconds, Twilight did. "Do, do you mean, the spell stripped her of her IMMORTALITY? Is that even possible?"

"Yes. If she should stay as an earth pony under that spell, she will age and die just like any other earth pony. Also, should she choose to have children, they too will have no trace of divinity in them. That, the removal of something so primal from her essence, is what caused unicorns in every corner of Equestria to notice her casting that spell."

Twilight's hindquarters hit the floor with a thud. "I'm, I'm going to need a moment to let that sink in, I think," her voice sounding as if it came from across a large chasm, registering in echoes to her reeling mind.

"Take as much time as you need." Celestia turned to look around the room. Spying a balloon hiding in the corner, she slowly walked over to it. After a while, she asked, "Tell me, is Luna... is she happy?"

Still stunned speechless from the previous revelation, Twilight could only answer with a nod of her head at first. After a few seconds, she spoke, softly but with growing conviction. "Yes. She already has some friends too. They came to the party with her, and... And you should have seen it. Things starting going downhill for her, and her friends were getting into problems they couldn't get out of on their own. And yet she found a way through it. She helped them all out. You would have been proud of her." Finally regaining her full composure, Twilight stood back up, her decision made. "Princess Celestia, is there any other information that I need to know?"

Pausing to consider, Celestia said, "No. I have shared everything with you that I can think of."

"Then I think it comes down to one thing. What is best for Luna?" Twilight asked. "Is it more important that she be brought back to Canterlot and continue to try to fit in there, or would her being here in Ponyville for a time be better for her?"

Celestia considered the question for a while. "I don't know. I honestly don't know." The Princess's voice was raw, filled with anguish.

"Then, consider this," Twilight took a deep breath. "If neither option is obviously better than the other, why eliminate either path? The choice for Luna to return to Canterlot is always there. If she leaves Ponyville now, will she ever have the chance to return to her current situation?"

"So, you advise me to wait then?"

"Why not? It isn't like this hasn't happened before." Twilight stated.

"Oh?" Celestia gave Twilight a questioning look.

"I seem to recall, a short while ago, a certain unicorn who had no friends and was sent to Ponyville to make some." Twilight gave her ruler a small grin. "I think she did all right for herself."

Celestia sank to her knees, and tears streaked her face. "I, I just wish that I could have done better for her!" she cried. "I did everything that I could, and still, and still..." Twilight moved over and nuzzled the Princess, doing what little she could to comfort her. "Was there anything I could have done different? Is this my fault?" Celestia asked, her voice wracked with grief.

"I don't think it is anypony's fault," Twilight replied softly. "I think the whole thing is just one terrible situation, and I don't see any easy answers. It seems like every option is a bad one in some way. I wish I could tell you what the right choice was, but I can't. I don't know if anypony can." The two of them stayed there, leaning into each other, for quite some time. Finally, Princess Celestia stood, her composure mostly regained.

"Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. Thank you. For now, I will do as you suggest and let things stand. I fear what could happen. I dread what will happen should she decide to reveal herself. But at least here, for now, she has made friends. And there is always time for her to change her mind. She must know this too; I can't see her choosing to stay as an earth pony forever. I have to trust that she has a plan. I just wish that she had shared it with me. That's the part that hurts the most.

"I have two favors to ask of you, Twilight." Celestia continued. "The first is that you keep her identity a secret, and keep me updated on her. Let me know if things get too rough for her. I will drop everything to come to her aid should she need it."

"Of course, your Highness."

"The second is a selfish one. Could you please show me where she is? I don't want her to know I was here, I... I just want to see her, so I can know that she is doing okay." Seeing Twilight nod, Celestia led the way out of the library.

It was still a few hours before sunrise, and Ponyville was silent. No other ponies were about at this hour, and the two moved through town without being seen or heard. Finally, Twilight pointed at the house where Luna was. Thanking her pupil one last time, Celestia waited for Twilight to leave

before flying up to a window to look inside. She could only make out a shadowy outline of a pony in bed, under the covers except for a head turned away from her, but apparently sleeping soundly.

It reminded Celestia of their first night back in Canterlot. It had been a whirlwind of a day in Ponyville, and by the time the two of them had returned to the royal castle, Luna looked ready to fall asleep standing up. Guiding her to Celestia's own bedroom, there hadn't been time to make one up for Luna yet, Celestia had tucked her in. She had watched as Luna sleepily thanked her, and then promptly fell asleep. Celestia had stood there for almost an hour, just looking at her, happy to have her back in her life finally.

And now, after such a short time together, they were once again apart. Not as far as they had been, she thought, but the distance still felt almost insurmountable. Celestia still wasn't certain if this was the right choice, or even a wise one. But for every doubt, every flaw small and large she saw, one reason trumped them and made them, at least for tonight, inconsequential. 'She's happy here,' she thought. 'I know she was in Canterlot when she was with me, but I couldn't be there for her nearly as much as I wanted to. As I needed to, it seems.'

Celestia flew around the house once, and then started the journey back to Canterlot. 'Goodbye, Luna. I'll do my best to stop into town as much as I can. So that I can look in and see how you are doing. So I can remember the good times we had, and think on the ones we will have again when you decide to return. So I won't forget you.'

'So you won't forget me.'

It was a long flight home.

# Chapter 6

## Down to Earth

Luna woke up early the next morning, ready to put her new-found resolve to the test. She ate her breakfast quickly, and then went to her deck to keep a lookout for Pine Needle heading to work. After what seemed like hours, even though the sun barely moved in the sky, her patience was finally rewarded when she saw her friend come into view. Rushing down the stairs and out her front door, she stood at the side of the road and waited for him.

"Moonbeam!" Pine Needle happily called upon seeing his friend. "You came to say hi to me as I head off to work?"

"Actually," Luna said, falling in beside him, "I thought I would try taking Haystack up on his offer."

Pine needle stopped in surprise. "Really?"

Luna walked a couple more steps, then stopped and turned to face Pine Needle. "Um, yeah. I mean, I still don't really know what I'm going to do, to be honest. So, I might as well try out farming for today. If it doesn't work out, well, then at least I know, right?" she asked, worried.

Pine Needle nodded, and then started walking again. "It sounds good to me," he reassured Luna. "I had it in mine thoughts that you would try this last, though, and not first. But what you say makes sense. And I am sure that Haystack will be glad to see you too."

The pair crossed over a bridge, and soon were walking through the outskirts of Ponyville. The trees along the road became more numerous, although she could still see past them to various homesteads that were set back a ways from the path proper. Soon they were once again at the gate that read 'Haystack's Hill'. They were almost to the house when Haystack finally noticed that Pine Needle had not come alone.

"Moonbeam! Is there another party in the works somewhere, or...?" he asked as he came out to meet them.

Luna shook her head. "Nope. I'm here to take you up on your offer of work. Like I told Pine Needle, I still don't know what I want to do, so I might as well try out the one option that is already there for me."

Haystack nodded. "Pine Needle, there's a patch of weeds that I found on the south side, near the old gate. Would you mind getting started on pulling them out while I show Moonbeam what I want her to do?" Pine Needle nodded, and trotted off. "I was actually thinking about this last night, and I came up with a list of stuff I'd like for you to try. First though, how much experience do you have with farming?"

"None, actually." Luna admitted, blushing a bit in embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it. We'll start off with some easy things, and work from there." Haystack led Luna around to the side of the barn, where there was a vegetable patch. "Wheat might be our primary crop, but I try to grow some of everything, just so we have something to eat without having to go all the way back into town to get stuff." Haystack pointed off to the side. "That's our well, it's served this farm well for a couple of generations now. We're close enough to the river that it probably gets the water from there in some manner." The well was a two-foot-tall pipe rising out of the ground, with a small pointed roof that reminded Luna of the party hat she had worn at last night's party. Half way up the pipe, there was an opening with a small slanted piece of metal in the shape of a V under it, and on the other side was a pump. "Nothing too fancy, but it's easy to use."

"For now, I'd like for you to water the vegetable patch. Let me show you how it's done." Trotting over to the side of the barn, he grabbed a watering can and placed it under the V, where Luna noted some stones had been set in the ground to provide a level spot. Then he went around and placed his hooves on top of the pump handle. He pulled down, took his hooves off the pump, waited for it to rise, and then repeated the process a few more times until water started to pour down the V and into the watering can. He then picked up the can with his teeth and carried it over to the vegetable garden. There, he poured some out some water on a line of carrots. "You want to get it so the ground stays damp," he said after emptying the can and placing it on the ground, "but not so wet that puddles of water are left on the top of the soil. Think you can handle it?"

Luna nodded slowly. "It looks straightforward. Let me give it a go." She grabbed the watering can and placed it in the same spot that Haystack had under the V. Then she walked around and put her hooves on the pump and pushed down. She was surprised by just how hard it was to get the handle to move at all, but after putting some effort into it, she got it to descend. It took several repetitions of the process to get a small stream of water to start flowing into the can, but she finally got it full. "Wow, that was harder than it looked!"

Haystack nodded. "A lot of the stuff on a farm is," he commented as Luna carried the watering can over and starting emptying it on some radishes. "Good, good! Just like that. This should probably take you a couple of hours. Once you're done, just ring the bell, and I'll come and give you your next task. Any questions?"

Luna shook her head. "No, none that I can think of." With that, Haystack flew off toward the hill, and Luna picked up the watering can and carried it back to the well.

After she had finished watering the vegetable garden, she helped Haystack and Pine Needle carry the weeds to a drop-off point next to the road. "They aren't of any use to us," Haystack explained, "but they make excellent feed for the cattle that live in the area. Not only do we not have to worry about transporting the weeds, we get paid for it too!" After that was done, it was time for lunch.

"Wow," said Luna as they entered Haystack's house after washing their legs. "I can't believe it's already midday."

"Indeed! Time goes by fast when you're working hard," Pine Needle said as he took a break from his lunch. "Work will be a bit easier for the second part for us at least."

"Oh?" asked Luna.

"Haystack will be watering the wheat, so I'll be giving you a tour of the barn, and we'll be doing maintenance on it and the grounds out here near the house. Nothing too fancy, mostly weeding and looking things over, trying to catch something before it breaks down." He turned to face Haystack. "Anything after that?"

Haystack shook his head. "Nope, we're in a pretty routine time of the season, to be honest. Mind you, this is also the easiest time too. Planting in the spring has more to it, but harvest time in a few months puts even that to shame. I'm not trying to scare you, Moonbeam, I'm just trying to give you fair warning."

"I understand, Haystack," Luna said. "And I thank you. And let me know, please, if I'm not doing a good job either, or if I'm taking way too long to finish something, okay? I don't want the farm to suffer because I'm not doing things right."

"There is no need for you to worry about that," said Haystack in a sincere voice. "To be blunt, of course you're not going as fast as Pine Needle or I would be doing the same things, but it's your first day. The fact that I didn't have to come help you once I got you started on the garden was wonderful. The time that I would have spent doing that job myself meant that we got those weeds not only pulled, but also moved before lunch, whereas without you, we might not even have finished pulling them yet." Luna looked over at Pine Needle for confirmation, who nodded in agreement.

"Quite often," Pine Needle elaborated, "work for the two of us is not a matter of getting everything finished, but trying to figure out what to finish, and hoping that what we put off doesn't come back to bite us in our cutie marks. It feels good to be ahead of the schedule for a change."

Luna felt herself swell with pride. She was making a difference! And to know that her work was helping two of her friends just made it better. With a smile, she said, "Thank you both then for the encouragement. I didn't know what to expect coming into this, and it's going to take a lot of work getting all the dirt out of my mane when I get home, but it feels worth it."

After lunch, Luna paused for a bit to watch Haystack start the watering. The pegasus flew up to grab a smaller-sized rain cloud, and then slowly guided it around the hill, first up and down, then back and forth, as it gently spilled rain over the growing wheat. She recalled Haystack's comment earlier about how nothing on a farm was as easy as it looked, and wondered just how difficult it was to actually keep a cloud raining such a steady amount, or how fragile it might be. It was almost a common sight to see a pegasus pony fly up to a cloud and disperse it into nothing with a swift buck. To keep a cloud constantly on the move, without it breaking up, or disturbing its rain



flow? Luna shook her head at all the hidden difficulties and followed Pine Needle into the barn.

Luna was astonished to see that one end of the building housed a giant device. Pine Needle watched her as she slowly examined it. It was two stories tall, and looked like a giant pillar. On the wall, a ramp led up to the upper story and from the ground a smaller ramp led up to a platform, three or four feet off the ground which circled around the middle of the device. On that platform, there were a couple of bars that stuck straight out, parallel to the ground. At the bottom of the device was an opening, reminding her of the well outside with its V-like funnel underneath a hole that was a foot off the ground at its base.

"So, mine friend, do you have any guesses as to what that is?" Pine Needle asked as she finished walking around the base of the device.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think I can make some guesses," she said, still piecing things together. "That platform with the poles, the way the platform goes all the way around, I'm guessing that the poles are pushed, to power the thing?"

"Very good!" said Pine Needle. "What else?"

"Hmmm, well the bottom reminds me of the well, as if something is supposed to come out of it. But I don't know what. Is this some sort of giant well?"

"No, no. But you are right, that is where something comes out. Here is a hint. What do we grow here on this farm?"

"Wheat." Luna answered. "But that's all out on the hill, and you don't pump for wheat anyway." She gave Pine Needle a puzzled look. "I'm on the wrong path, aren't I?"

Her friend nodded. "Come, follow me. Perhaps if I show you something more, it will all make sense then." Pine Needle led her up the ramp. At the top, not visible from the ground below, was a door in the side of the barn. "This opens up to the outside," he said. "And this," he pointed a hoof at a pulley system attached to the wall, "can swing outside through there."

Luna thought about this for a moment. "Okay, so the wheat get harvested, and brought here? And then hauled up here..." Looking around, she saw a panel on the side of the pillar. When she nudged it with her nose, it swung open to reveal an empty area that led down. "I guess the wheat gets put in there, and then... I just don't know, Pine Needle."

"Ah, you are so close to having it figured out too! I cannot bear to tell you, I don't want to ruin the joy of your discovery."

Luna frowned in thought. "Okay then, give me time to think on it some more while you show me the rest of the stuff here in the barn." After heading back to ground level, Pine Needle showed her where they stored the tools. The sheer number of different implements amazed Luna. "Do you really use every single one of these?"

Pine Needle shrugged. "To be honest, I don't even know what some of these are for, but quite a few of these have only one use. Take that long metal coil there, with the spikes at the end. Haystack calls it a snake, and he says it can be used to remove things blocking the well if needed."

In a different room of the barn, several different kinds of harnesses were stored. Also, there were many lengths of rope, and several piles of something bundled up in a corner. Luna moved closer to examine them, and saw that it was a stack of woven bags with the word 'FLOUR' stamped on them. "That's it!" she cried, turning to face Pine Needle. "That must be some sort of mill, for turning the wheat into flour!" Luna hopped in excitement as Pine Needle confirmed her guess.

As they finished with the inside of the barn and moved to the area between the house and the road for basic lawns-keeping, Luna came up short.

"Actually," she asked Pine Needle, "why does he have his own mill? I saw the town has a much larger one elsewhere, and it's powered by the wind and the river, so I would think it would be much easier to take the wheat there to get processed."

"Easier, yes." Pine Needle agreed. "Or, at the least, that part of the process. But there are several other things to consider. First is the task of moving all the wheat from the field to that mill. While Haystack may have a lot of tools, he is lacking a wagon large enough to make the transport of such a large amount of wheat feasible. And there is also the extra cost too. That mill charges a fee for its services, after all. And in this business, profit

margins aren't always the greatest. Finally, Haystack is able to make a small bit of money on the side by renting out the use of his mill to his neighbors for a fee, although he usually just asks them to help him bring in his crop when the times comes." Luna considered all of this as they continued to work on the grounds.

Finally, Haystack flew over to them, having finished his watering duties. "So, Moonbeam, what do you think? Is this something you want to keep on doing, or do you want to try finding something else to do?" he asked after landing next to his friends.

"It was work all right, but I think I'm up to trying another day at least," she replied.

"Glad to hear it! Let me warn you though, it's not going to be the same thing every day, and there will be some much harder tasks down the line. Like I said before, I'm not trying to scare you off, but I don't want you to think that this is all there is to it either." Haystack warned.

"I understand. But I like this. It feels good to do this, in a way." Luna admitted.

Pine Needle nodded. "As it should! Are we not earth ponies? Working with the earth should feel right."

"Well, some of us aren't earth ponies," commented Haystack dryly. With a chuckle and a rare grin, he motioned to the house. "C'mon, let's go inside after we wash off again, and we'll discuss your pay."

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And so, summer passed, and after a month or so the leaves on the trees changed color. To Luna, this was a magical time. After being trapped in the moon for the last thousand years, she had forgotten just how colorful a season autumn was. Yellow, red, brown and gold, the countryside seemed to change into a hundred different shades of color. And even better, it all changed just a little bit each day, making every walk to and from work a slightly different experience.

One day, instead of starting their work right away, Haystack called a meeting. "We're getting very close to harvest time," he said, "so I'll be hiring some temporary help so we can get everything harvested. And of course

the day after tomorrow is the Running of the Leaves, I think we'll be okay taking the day off so you two can participate..."

"The Running of the Leaves?" asked Luna, interrupting Haystack. "What's that?"

Haystack blinked at the question. "Of course, I keep on forgetting that you're still relatively new here in Ponyville. Would you care to explain, Pine Needle?"

"Most certainly, mine friend!" Pine Needle turned to face Luna. "I know not how it was done where you come from, and in Stalliongrad, being farther north, we did not have so many trees with leaves, so this may just be a Ponyville thing. But every year, in order to help get the leaves down from the trees, a race is held. Well," Pine Needle cautioned, "it is not so much of a race, although the top finishers do get medals. It is more of a community thing, where the ponies run through the lands close to Ponyville."

Luna nodded. "And what, just by having a lot of ponies run through, the leaves all fall off? That sounds rather convenient. Couldn't a strong wind generated by pegasus ponies to the same job, only faster?"

Pine Needle gave Luna a searching look. Then, he slowly nodded. "I will explain, but I think that the meaning of it all will come across better during the run itself. So, I will give you mine explanation then. If you will pardon me, I need to go check on something." Having excused himself, Pine Needle trotted off.

After watching him leave, Luna turned to Haystack. "Did I say something wrong? He seemed almost upset about something."

Motioning to Luna to follow, he started heading to the barn. "No, he's just thinking something over. He takes stuff like this very seriously."

"He's a race fan? I thought that would be more in line with Feather Down," Luna said, getting more confused by the moment.

Haystack shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. Nature stuff. He says he has some sort of 'deeper earth pony link' to the land than most. I've always put it off as something he made up. But then, my farm has been more productive since he started working here, and everyone is amazed at how

fast he got those pine trees at his house to grow." He shrugged. "Maybe that's just his take on him having a green hoof or whatever you want to call it. Anyway, I won't be running myself, I'll be taking care of the bare essentials of the farm, and then I'll head down to watch as everyone finishes."

With that, they returned to their jobs. Curious whether her other friends would be running, after work Luna took a quick bath and headed over to Dewdrop and Feather Down's house. Dewdrop answered the door. "Moonbeam!" she said, opening the door to let her friend in. "How was work?"

"Good, thanks!" Luna replied as she entered. "It's getting close to harvest time, which I have been warned will make the usual hard work pale in comparison, but at least after that winter is supposed to be pretty simple, just maintaining the place and taking it easy. How about you?"

"Oh, you know. The same old, same old. Serve some breakfast to the guests, and once they're out and about, get their rooms all tidied up. I'm just thankful as always that my boss isn't a whip-cracker. So, what brings you out here today? Anything special?"

"Actually, I was just told about the Running of the Leaves. I was wondering, are the two of you going to participate? Where is Feather Down, anyway?"

"She's running a bit behind at work today. I passed by the restaurant she works at on the way home, and they were still really busy." The sound of galloping hooves steadily grew from outside. "Sounds like she's here now though, watch the door, hun."

The sounds of hooves skidding were followed by the door opening to reveal Feather Down. "I'm home! Ugh, what a day! Oh, heya Moonbeam! I tell you, I was about ready to come join you guys on the farm, would have been less work than what I had to do at my job today. A tour group was in town from Canterlot, taking in all the fall scenery. I'm surprised you aren't still at the inn, Dewdrop!"

"Huh. It must be a here and back kind of thing then. Canterlot is close enough for that, after all. Shall we go visit some other eatery then, save you the trouble at having to serve yourself for once?" Dewdrop asked.

"That, would be wonderful." Feather Down said. "Let me go get cleaned up real quick. Have you eaten yet, Moonbeam?"

"No, I haven't." Luna replied.

"Care to join us then? It's been a few days since we last had a good chat." Feather Down asked as she slowly climbed the stairs to the bedroom above.

"I'd love to!"

After a short wait, the three mares headed out and soon were enjoying some fresh salads at a place called 'The Other Side of the Fence'. "So, you two," Luna asked between bites, "are you going to be participating in the Running of the Leaves?"

"I won't," said Dewdrop. "I couldn't get the day off from work, although I should be able to catch the finish on my lunch break."

"How about you, Feather Down?" Luna asked.

The pink earth pony looked a bit uncomfortable. "Well, I don't know if I should or not. After last year and all..." Luna blinked as Dewdrop sighed.

"Listen, hun," Dewdrop said, placing a hoof on her roommate's shoulder. "You just have to forget about that. Everybody else did after a week or two!"

"And they're all remembering it again, now that the race is coming up!" Feather Down complained. "I'll probably be better off just staying away from the whole thing."

"Um, pardon my asking," said Luna, "but just what happened last year?"

"While waiting in the starting area," explained Dewdrop, "she fell asleep. And then the race started without her, and she missed the entire thing."

"They make you wait so long at the starting line, it's ridiculous!" Feather Down wailed. "I was stretching, trying to keep my legs loose, and then my stretch turned into a yawn, and the next thing I remember they're dragging me off the course so I wouldn't get trampled as the runners finished! If I

show up, I just know I'm going to be made fun of." With a melodramatic sigh, she laid her head down on the table.

Taking it all in, Luna fought back a giggle. "Well, one sure way to get them to forget about that would be to run a really good race this year. I mean, you're one of the faster ponies I know, I don't see why you wouldn't want to run"

"Well, that's kind of you to say, Moonbeam." Said Feather Down. "But there are some pretty athletic ponies out there. Applejack comes to mind right away, and there are several others that I just don't know if I could beat in a race. Make it close? Sure, but this is a lengthy course with lots of turns to it also." She paused to take a sip from her drink. "But this isn't something many ponies go into trying to win either. It's more of a group thing first, and then in the last bit it turns into a mad dash for the finish, out of those who still have some spring in their stride after all the prior running. How about you, Moonbeam? Are you going to be running in it?"

Luna smiled at her two friends. "Yes! It sounds like fun! I'll be running with Pine Needle, so I'll..." Luna trailed off seeing her friends get an uncomfortable look on their faces. "What? What is it?"

Dewdrop sighed. "Look hun, Pine Needle means well, and is a great guy and all, but..." she paused, looking for the right words.

"But he's got some screwy notions too," supplied Feather Down. "Always talking about earth ponies and their bond with nature and that junk. Puh-lease! Just because he can make things grow well, doesn't mean he has to go and attach some mumbo jumbo stuff to it."

"What we're trying to say is," Dewdrop continued, "is that you should take anything he says during the race about that kind of stuff with a grain of salt." Feather Down nodded in agreement to her roommate's words.

"Oh, okay, I'll do that then," Luna said, feeling a bit surprised by the severity of the tone coming from her friends. "Thanks for the warning, I guess."

"Ah, it won't be that bad, I suppose," conceded Feather Down, seeing Luna get a bit discouraged. "After all, you'll be running! It isn't like he'll have too much extra energy to be talking for that long. If he gets to be too annoying,

just pick up the pace a little, put it down to the thrill of being in the run if he asks later."

Luna nodded. "That's sounds like a good idea, thanks. So, are you going to run or not, Feather Down?" she asked in an effort to change the subject.

"Okay, okay, I will! Yeesh!" Feather Down threw her hooves above head in mock surrender. "I guess I did ask for the day off from work anyway, might as well do that instead of getting some extra shut eye." Dewdrop rolled her eyes at her roommate hamming it up, while Luna giggled behind a hoof. "And I'll do my best to finish at the front, if you promise to stay near me in the starting area so I don't pull a repeat of last year."

"Will do!" agreed Luna.

Feather Down looked at her with a seriousness that Luna hadn't recalled seeing too often before. "I'm dead serious, Moonbeam. If I even so much as yawn, or look like I'm about to lie down, you and Pine Needle do whatever it takes, even kicking me, you hear?"

Luna was taken aback by Feather Down's vehemence. "I—I will!"

Feather Down leaned over the table, staring Luna in the face from point blank range. "Swear it!"

"Uh, uh, Cross my heart, hope to fly!" Luna stammered.

"Stick a cupcake in your eye." Feather Down finished solemnly and then sat down.

Dewdrop, signaled to the waiter. "All this talk of cupcakes made me realize something. We haven't had dessert yet!" With that, the trio started laughing as they looked over the dessert menu.

The day of the race came, and Luna and Pine Needle went to meet Feather Down at her house. "She insisted," Luna explained, "that we go to her just to be extra sure that nothing would cause her to miss the run." They found Feather Down ready to go, even dressed for the occasion with a white headband to keep her red mane out of her eyes.

"Look at you!" Pine Needle said. "Somepony is ready to do their part!"



"Moonbeam explained what I need you guys to do for me, right?" Feather Down asked as she closed the door behind her.

Pine Needle nodded. "I am always ready to kick mine friends when called upon to," he answered in mock seriousness.

The three earth ponies meandered to the starting area, still a good twenty minutes or so early according to the clock tower in the middle of town. As they mingled in the starting area, Luna heard some snickering come from behind her. Turning, she saw a couple of younger stallions toss a pillow at Feather Down's feet and start laughing raucously. Luna turned and stared at them, mouth open in shock. Pine Needle started to step forward, looking ready to take matters into his own hooves, when Feather Down said, "No need to worry, guys." She prodded the pillow with a hoof, and then turned her nose up in disdain. "I'm much stronger than that!" She then walked away, towards the front of the starting area, her two friends following and other ponies chuckling at the would be pranksters instead.

"Good job, Feather Down!" Luna gushed.

Feather Down chuckled. "It takes more than a lousy straw filled pillow to make me want to lay down! Ha ha!"

Pine Needle leaned close to whisper into Luna's ear. "Does that mean she would have laid down if it was a high-quality pillow?"

Soon the three of them were just behind the front row of runners, and saw something that made them all pause in bewilderment. "Am I, am I actually seeing Applejack tie Rainbow Dash up?" asked Luna in wonderment. "Pine Needle, are you seeing this too? Pine... oh for the love of, Feather Down, help me drag Pine Needle back a ways please? He saw Applejack again." The two girls each grabbed a mouthful of Pine Needle's tail and dragged him back a few feet. Soon, the crowd filled in the the gap, and Applejack was blocked from view.

"You snap lover stallion out of his daze, and I'll go find out what the heck that was all about." Feather Down said, and left for the front. Luna waved a hoof in front of Pine Needle's eyes, and then lightly tapped on his forehead until he returned to his senses.

"Yes, yes, I have come back. Mine apologies, Moonbeam." With a sigh, he whispered something that Luna couldn't quite make out, but she thought it sounded like "Lucky Rainbow Dash." A few minutes passed, and Luna was just about to go looking for Feather Down by herself, just in case the other mare actually had fallen asleep somewhere, when she saw her friend return with her head hanging low.

"Feather Down! What's wrong?" Luna asked, her voice filled with concern. 'She was looking all fired up and ready to go just a moment ago, and now she looks like somebody she knew died!'

"Well, you can count out any hope of me winning the race this year." Feather Down moped. "Turns out the best two athletes in town are using the race as a grudge match. If they're going to go at this full out, I have no chance."

"Oh, come now!" protested Pine Needle. "Rainbow Dash is just a pegasus. Sure, she's fast, but she'll be out of her element, so to speak. I think you should have no trouble beating her in a foot race."

Feather Down glared at Pine Needle and tapped a hoof for a few seconds. "I notice you don't say anything about my chances of beating Applejack," she stated sourly.

"Well, um, er..." Pine Needle stammered.

"Oh, look!" Luna interjected, both with her words and her body in between her two friends. "Pinkie Pie and Spike are up in a balloon! I think I just heard Pinkie Pie announce that it's almost time to start!"

Feather Down was having none of it though. "You. Just. Watch. I'll beat your precious Applejack! Mark my words!" She spat her words right into Pine Needle's face, and then turned and stomped up towards the front of the pack.

Luna watched anxiously back and forth between her two friends until Feather Down was out of sight. Turning to look at Pine Needle, she tried to come up with something to say to apologize when she saw Pine Needle fall to his knees and laugh so hard that tears were running down his face. "What the..." Luna said, feeling like she was losing a grasp not only on the situation, but also on reality itself.

"Oh, forgive me Moonbeam, but mine plan worked perfectly! I was hoping to get her motivated to do her best, but even I am impressed by what I did there! If she isn't in the top three now, it will be because of some sort of injury." Luna stared in amazement at Pine Needle, having trouble comprehending that he, of all ponies, might be capable of such subterfuge. Finally, she broke into laughter too, until Pinkie Pie's words to get ready echoed across the ground.

And then, they were off! Luna lagged near the back of the pack, taking in the sight of all the trees losing their leaves in a multi-hued blizzard. "Oh, Pine Needle, this is amazing! Is this what you were talking about?"

Pine Needle shook his head. "No, although this is certainly a fine sight to take in. What I was referring to was..."

"Hello! I see I'm not the only pony taking a slightly leisurely pace at the start!" Twilight Sparkle moved up to the two of them. "Hello, Moonbeam! Enjoying the run so far?"

"Hiya Twilight! Yes, it sure is something. Nothing like it where I come from." Luna turned to Pine Needle. "Twilight is the one who hosted the welcome party for me, remember? She's been kind enough to keep in touch with me, checking in to make sure I'm doing okay."

"That is very nice of you." Pine Needle said.

"Well, you know," said Twilight, looking a bit embarrassed by it. "I've only been here a couple of months longer than she has. We newcomers need to stick together, right?" The purple unicorn gave off a nervous chuckle. "So, why are the two of you hanging near the back?"

"Well," Pine Needle explained, "I was just about to help Moonbeam try to use her earth pony magic." This declaration brought a brief silence between the two mares, who looked at each other questioningly.

"Well, not to be much of a neighsayer, but earth ponies don't have magic. I should know," said Twilight, "I've studied it pretty extensively."

With a knowing smile on his face, Pine Needle shook his head. "Twilight Sparkle, it would be mine honor if you would listen to me then as I explain it

to Moonbeam here. To know that I have taught one of the best magicians of our time something along these lines would indeed make my day."

"Uh, sure. As long as we keep on running at close to this pace, I really don't have anything else to be doing, I guess."

"Excellent! I will need your help too in a bit, now that I think on it, so I am in your debt." Pine Needle cleared his throat. "Now, everyone knows that unicorns, such as you Twilight, are the strongest in magic, capable of doing feats with it that the rest of us can only dream of doing. Pegasus ponies have some magic too, but it is of a more subtle nature. They can fly, obviously, and they can also walk on clouds and move them around to control the weather. Feats that shouldn't be possible, except for magic."

"Okay, I can see that," said Luna. "So what exactly is earth pony magic then?"

"Ours is an even more subtle thing. More of a bond with the earth itself. Notice how all the leaves fall off the trees, every single one, just by the lot of us running past? Doesn't that seem just a bit convenient?"

Twilight nodded slowly. "Now that you mention, it does a bit. Still, there are lots of unicorns and pegasi running in this too."

"Yes, but remember that Ponyville was settled by earth ponies. This race was an event before unicorns and pegasi lived here in large numbers. While they help with their numbers to shake the ground, it is the earth ponies who help make such a complete success of this endeavor."

"Okay then, so just what is this bond then? How does it work?" Luna asked.

"It is a subconscious thing. All earth ponies do it without even thinking of it. By their passing, they help make the land more capable of sustaining plants, they help the trees bloom and shed their leaves." Pine Needle paused. "Here's another way to think of it. Imagine a stream going through a forest. That stream is how healthy the land is. Earth pony magic would be akin to seeing that a log has fallen into the stream, and is partly blocking its flow. We move it out of the way so that the stream can once again flow like it should."

Luna considered this as they rounded a turn. "So, what then, ponies skilled in earth magic can help dig a better way for the river, then?"

Pine Needle shook his head. "No, not even anything that grand. To continue the example, we cannot directly change the river itself. At best, I can sense where the best place to take advantage of the river is. You could say that I know where the best spots to take a bath are, for example. Using that, I knew where to plant mine pine trees so they could grow quickly. It is a hard thing to do though. Most earth ponies go about their whole lives not knowing about it. However, it does not hurt to try, and this race I think would be a good chance to try it out if you want to, and if Twilight is willing to lend us her help for a minute or so more?"

"I'm willing if you are." Twilight said.

Luna nodded. "Sure, what do you need me to do?"

Pine Needle smiled. "Excellent! Do you see that turn a short ways ahead?" Waiting for both of the mares to nod, he continued, "After we go around that, there will be along straightaway that will be perfect. I want us to all line up abreast, with Moonbeam in the middle, and I and Twilight will be on each side of you, just next to you but not touching."

They rounded the turn, and lined up as Pine Needle had instructed. "Good! Now, Moonbeam, I want you to close your eyes. That is why we are right here, so you need not worry about veering off the course." He waited until Luna had done so, and he started talking in a soothing voice. "Good, good. Now feel your hooves, feel them strike the ground in their steady rhythm."

Luna did as she was asked, and slowly she felt herself relaxing. The beat of her gallop was a bit hypnotic in a way, and soon, all she heard were Pine Needle's words and the cl-cl-clop, cl-cl-clop of herself running down the trail.

"Now, feel not just your hooves striking the ground, but yourself actually striking through your hooves down into the earth itself."

Luna could barely hear her friend's instructions anymore, but still they registered. And soon, even though her eyes were closed, she could see little ripples of light in her mind, echoing the beat of her hooves hitting the ground. They were small ripples at first, but then they slowly grew from her,

and she could feel them come up against other ripples off to one side of her. 'Pine Needle,' she thought to herself, 'those are Pine Needle's ripples'. Suddenly, she felt in herself a rush of energy, and found that her ripples could spread wide indeed...

Twilight's attention was grabbed as Pine Needle's droning stopped with a gasp. "By the sun and the moon!" he whispered, and Twilight's mind quickly figured things out as she too felt a small tingle go down her spine.

'Oh boy! Just my luck that she still has the magical strength of an alicorn for earth pony magic even as an earth pony!' she realized, wondering how to cover this up if Pine Needle started to ask funny questions.

Luna's ripples now spread out far enough she could feel the ripples coming from all of the other ponies running the race. It was like watching a rain shower come down on the surface of a pond. Then she could feel where each of the trees had their roots sink into the ground, where proud rocks had withstood the erosion of the wind and the rain. It felt glorious. Unbeknownst to her, trees a hundred feet away from the road were spontaneously losing their leaves.

Suddenly, she felt herself pulled abruptly back into her body when a sharp pain flared on her shin. "Sorry about that!" apologized Twilight. "I stumbled, and I ended up clipping you. Are you okay?"

"I, um, yeah," Luna stammered, still a bit thrown off by what she had experienced. Suddenly, the enormity of what she had been doing caught up to her. 'Dang it, I can't share that with anyone! Then they'll know something is up with me! I'm very lucky Twilight stumbled when she did, or who knows what I might have done!' She turned to face Pine Needle. "I think I actually felt a little something there. Like a small ripple, extending from my hooves as I was running."

Pine Needle nodded slowly. "That you could feel even that much is quite amazing, Moonbeam. Very few ponies can do even that much, and for you to do it on your first try... I am astounded."

Luna blushed at the compliment, while secretly feeling very relieved. 'Thank goodness he didn't feel me stretching out all the way like I did! That would have been impossible to explain away!' "Come on," Luna said aloud,

"let's get back into the pack again, it feels a bit harder to keep up from back here." She then charged ahead.

Twilight held back Pine Needle by cutting in front of him before he could follow Luna. "Thank you for sharing that with her, and with me. While it isn't anything that I can really use, it has brought me a greater understanding of how things work, and I appreciate that a lot."

"It was mine pleasure. Did you, um, feel anything while she was doing that?" Pine Needle asked nervously.

"Nope, not a thing." Lied Twilight. "Was I supposed to?"

"Ha ha! No, no of course not!" Pine Needle chuckled. "Well, I had better get moving if I'm to keep up with Moonbeam. I don't think Haystack will let me live it down if she was to beat me this handily at the end." Twilight let him move off, breathing a sigh of relief over the possible disaster that was averted. 'If nothing else,' she thought, 'this should make for an interesting letter to Princess Celestia.'

Over the next forty five minutes, the pack wound its way through the neighboring woods surrounding Ponyville, with the notable exception of the Everfree Forest, and soon the pack was working its way back towards the town itself. Feather Down had managed to stay near the front of the pack, but as she had predicted, Rainbow Dash and Applejack were simply putting the rest of them to shame. Even if one of them tripped or stumbled, they were still quickly able to charge back to their place a good hundred yards ahead of the rest of the pack without showing any concern for saving energy.

'Face it, Feather Down, you're just not in the same league as they are.' She looked around at the other ponies around her. 'Still, the top five get medals. All I have to do is finish third or better in this group, and that should erase my embarrassment from last year completely.'

That was when Feather Down started noticing things getting a bit weird. It took her a bit to realize what was happening, but it seemed like the two leaders were spending more time going back and forth from ahead of the pack to behind it and then back to the front again. Then she saw a look of anger on Applejack's face, and she knew what was going on. 'They're

actually fighting!' she thought in amazement. 'I can see them being cocky, but still!'

Slowly, amazement turned into anger as she watched them blatantly start to use cheaper and nastier tricks on each other. But what really took the cake for her was when Applejack actually rode to the front of the pack by hitching a ride on Pinkie Pie's balloon. "All right, that's IT!" she yelled out loud, startling several ponies next to her. "Someone has to show those two they can't get away with stuff like like that, and that pony is gonna be...."

Feather Down's rant was cut short as Applejack and Rainbow Dash collided and actually spun some distance up the side of a hill before coming to a stop, dazed and splayed out on their backs. Feather Down watched in amazement as the pack passed by both of them, and then started the final turn into the long home stretch to Ponyville.

'Well then,' she thought, 'everypony for themselves!'

Dewdrop waved to Haystack as he glided in towards the crowd at the finish area. "I saved you a spot," she said coolly to the pegasus.

"My thanks," Haystack replied plainly. "Tell me, any idea how far away they are?"

Dewdrop made a face. "Well, Pinkie Pie has been broadcasting from that balloon of hers, and she has that dragon with her, but if you ignore all the random ramblings, you'd think the only two ponies actually out there are Rainbow Dash and Applejack."

Haystack made a face. "Ugh. I can understand about wanting to cheer and promote your friends, but still, what a disservice to the rest of the runners! Not very fair if you ask me."

"Exactly! Get something balanced in coverage up there. Might as well get a vulpine to announce if that's how you're going to call the race," Dewdrop griped.

Their complaints were brought to a halt as a cloud of dust could be seen rising up in the distance. "Here they come!" cried Dewdrop. "Can you see anything, Haystack?"



Haystack quickly soared up, then dived back down to his spot before some other pony could claim it. "I think Feather Down is near the front!" The two of them started stomping their hooves and cheering loudly for their friend as the pack closed in on the finish line...

"Look at that!" cheered Dewdrop. "Third place! She took third place! Way to go Feather Down!"

"Yee-haw!" yelled Haystack. "High hoof, Dewdrop!" The two ponies each raised a hoof and smacked them together above their heads before realizing just who they were celebrating with. With a sudden silence, they quickly turned their backs on each other. "Ahem. Well, I guess we should go get some good spots for the medal ceremony?" asked Haystack.

"Yes, yes, a good idea," agreed Dewdrop. The two of them moved off, ignoring the chuckles from the ponies who had watched their celebration. On their way, Luna and Pine Needle caught up with them.

"Heya guys! Wow, you sure look exhausted, Moonbeam. You going to be okay?" Dewdrop asked.

Luna nodded. "Yeah... Just give me... a few seconds to catch... my breath. Whew!"

Pine Needle grinned. "How did Feather Down do? We were back in the middle of the pack, and could not see much beyond the pony in front of us, I fear."

"Feather Down got third!" gushed Dewdrop. "Can you believe it?"

"Really?" exclaimed Luna. "So the only ponies she didn't beat were Applejack and Rainbow Dash? That's amazing!"

"Actually..." Haystack pointed back to the finish line, where a cloud of dust slowly rolled past the white line marking the end of the course to reveal a very ragged pair of ponies who had been tussling with each other. Luna could only boggle at the sight of a beat up Rainbow Dash and Applejack, and then she started laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked Dewdrop.

"Well, Feather Down was saying that she didn't think she could beat the two of them. And yet, in my first race, even I beat them! That ought to keep her from getting too big of a head on her neck!" The other ponies laughed along with her. "So, where are we headed?"

"To the award ceremony to watch Feather Down get her medal. They have a special guest presenter this year too!" said Haystack.

"Oh, who's that?" Luna asked.

"Princess Celestia!"

Luna froze, fear filling her suddenly and making her forget about everything else.

"Moonbeam? Moonbeam? Hun? What's wrong?" Dewdrop asked, walking back to her as her friends walked ahead to save some room in the rapidly filling up area near the podium.

"I, ah, I, nothing Dewdrop! Ha ha! What could be wrong? I'm just surprised that the ruler of the land would come out here for something like this. It seems a bit, I don't know, beneath her?" Luna said as she forced herself to walk up to where her friends had found a spot. 'Dang it! Front row too! What are the odds?'

Dewdrop shrugged. "Now that you mention it, it does seem a bit strange for her to be here. Maybe she just wanted a reason to get out of Canterlot for the day?"

Luna took a seat, and watched as Princess Celestia placed the medals around the necks of the first five finishers. Then Celestia turned and looked over the crowd, thanking everyone who had raced and everyone else who had also taken the time to cheer them on. Luna couldn't be sure, but she had a nagging feeling that Celestia was keeping her in the corner of her eye. Trying her best not to squirm, she stomped and cheered along with the rest of the crowd, and when the presentation ceremony came to an end, she excused herself and headed back to her home.

In her bathtub, soaking away the exhaustion of the race, Luna found herself shaking, although she couldn't figure out exactly why. Was it fear of being discovered? Guilt at how large the lie had become? She had been doing so

well the past month, too. In fact, she realized with a small knot of fear, she had been playing the role almost too well. It hadn't been until the race itself, when Pine Needle had helped her try to use earth pony magic...

"That's why I'm shaking," she whispered, "I'm afraid of losing myself."

# Chapter 7

## Harvest Time

Luna spent the rest of the afternoon after her bath resting and trying not to think what Princess Celestia's arrival in town earlier in the day portended. Had she slipped up somewhere? Did her sister actually know where she was hiding? Was she simply letting paranoia get the better of her? She found herself with no easy answers, and nopony to talk about them with. Eventually, she gave in to the exhaustion from running for over an hour and took a nap.

The moment her eyes had closed and her head had hit the pillow, she was asleep. Instead of the peaceful slumber she had hoped for, however, Luna found herself back in that too-real dream on the moon, with Nightmare Moon waiting for her. She braced herself, staring at her evil incarnation, trying to figure out what she wanted. Was she going to taunt her again, pointing out all the flaws in her plan? Or was this another round of 'Let's Tempt Luna'? After a short while, Luna just wished that she would say or do something other than just look at her intently! Luna was about to just cut loose with a scream of aggravation when Nightmare Moon walked slowly up to her...

And bowed down? Luna cringed back a bit, eyes wide in shock. "Wha, what are you doing?"

Keeping herself prostrate, Nightmare Moon answered in a humble tone, "Princess Luna, I have come to see the genius of your plan. Please, forgive me my earlier recalcitrance. Today was an eye-opener for me, a day which I will remember fondly centuries from now."

Luna scowled at Nightmare Moon. "Stop it! You're just making fun of me, aren't you?"

"No!" Nightmare Moon protested. "I can see how you might think that, due to our previous talks, but I'm being honest with you. I am sincere when I say that I fully agree with your plan, and I want to do everything I can to help with its implementation."

Luna gaped at Midnight Moon. "You, you want to help me make friends?" she stammered.

Nightmare Moon looked up at her. "If that helps you keep your disguise going, then yes. Anything to help you stay here, as Moonbeam."

"Why?"

A wicked smile opened up on Nightmare Moon's face. "Did you not see the pain Celestia was in at the ceremony? Oh, she tried to hide it, but I could tell. She couldn't take her eyes off of you!" Slowly, she stood up. "Every day that you are here, every hour that you are away from her, is causing her torment. We owe her a millennium's worth, Luna. We're one month of the way there now, but we still have a long ways to go just to get even."

Luna could only stare in horror as the truth of Nightmare's Moon's words struck home. 'No! I'm not doing this to hurt my sister!' She wanted to scream this for Nightmare Moon, for all of Equestria to hear, but couldn't find her voice.

"In fact, I've taken the liberty to think over some things, and I have a few suggestions for you. First off, you need to keep being friends with Twilight Sparkle. It's obvious she's being used by Celestia to watch over us. Let her! The more she can report back, the more Celestia suffers."

Luna felt tears running down her face. "Maybe, maybe Celestia doesn't know..." The protest sounded false as soon as it left her lips. Nightmare Moon's words, she realized, explained why the magical prodigy of a unicorn had spent so much time with her over the last month.

"Ha! Oh, she knows. Just think of all the resources she has available to her. I'd be surprised if she hadn't figured out where we were by the end of the first week. I'll admit, I was worried when she showed up at the medal presentation. But after that initial moment, when she didn't call in the guards or even come up to say hello, that's when I knew we were safe. Indeed, I suspect you could even drop the disguise, and she wouldn't do a thing to come get you." Nightmare Moon paused to consider what she had suggested. "I don't think you should, though. I can see that backfiring all too easily right now, and then where are we? Forced to go back to Canterlot and Celestia, that's where."

Unwilling to listen anymore to how wicked and twisted her plan could be turned, Luna closed her eyes and screamed in an effort to block out the words of Nightmare Moon. By the time her lungs were empty, she realized she was awake. Looking outside, she saw that it was still early in the evening, an hour or two before sunset. Part of her wanted to go back into town and join her friends, who were most likely still celebrating Feather Down's third place finish in the race. But she didn't know if Princess Celestia was still around, and seeing her was the last thing Luna wanted to do at the moment. 'Besides,' she thought as she absently reached up to wipe a tear off of her cheek, 'if anypony saw me right now, there would be questions. I don't think I could handle those right now.'

'But what else can I do?' she wondered, looking around her still barely-furnished house. After budgeting money for food and rent, she found that what was left wasn't enough to buy much in the way of furniture. Oh, sure, she had bought some new sheets for her bed, but she still felt embarrassed by the lack of items in her house.

'Hold on, I do have something I could do!' Trotting upstairs, Luna pulled out her spell book. 'I keep putting off reading this stupid thing, but not today!' She had tried several times before, but even when lack of daylight or the sudden arrival of friends hadn't kept her from perusing the tome, boredom usually did. 'Today's the day when I read it from front to back! All my friends are busy, and there is still time left before the sun sets. If I go outside, the way I look after having cried is going to raise concerns, too. So, let's do this, Luna! You can do it!'

Dragging the book to the middle of the room, and away from the temptations that a bed might offer after a few paragraphs of overly-wordy, academian writing, Luna knelt down and started to read. She almost ignored the first few pages. She had read those opening passages enough in her previous efforts that she knew a couple of the lines by heart now, but she resisted the urge. 'If I skip one now, I'm likely to skip another down the road.' Slowly, she worked her way through the book until she reached a passage that made her stop and reread it several times to make sure she was reading it correctly.

"The danger inherent in using any kind of complete transformation spell, like the ones I outline later in this volume, is that the body can forget its original shape over time. I have discovered that after a year and a day,

even if the spell is canceled, the target of the spell will not be able to change back'?" she exclaimed. Luna found herself started to hyperventilate, and her heart was beating in her chest faster than a galloping pony. In a panic, Luna rushed over to her closet, and dug through her saddlebags. Shoving the dried husk of... something that might have been edible when she had first left Canterlot, but now was just waiting to attract ants, she found her gem pouch. Her hooves trembling, she opened it up. Carefully grabbing the bottom fringe with her teeth, she gently shook the pouch in order to empty it.

After a couple of seconds, the moonstone that had been created when she had cast her disguise spell fell out and landed on the floor. It bounced once, then rolled a short distance before coming to a halt. Dropping the pouch, Luna walked over to the moonstone, knelt down next to it, and examined it from point blank range. It didn't look like much to her, except for its uncanny resemblance to the moon.

Suddenly, she felt an impulse wash over her—an urge to raise her hoof and bring it down hard on the gemstone. 'Now would be the perfect time to do it,' she thought, slowly lifting a hoof above the stone. 'No pony else around to see it happen. My friends are all celebrating, so my sudden disappearance shouldn't hurt them as much. I could just go back to Canterlot, and beg my sister for forgiveness. I'm sure she'd welcome me back with an open heart...' Luna stood there for a while, and then slowly brought her hoof back down to the floor. "No," she whispered to herself. "Not now, and not like this. But I will do it soon. And it will be on my terms. Not on Nightmare Moon's, and not on Celestia's. My terms, my way. I owe my friends that much, at the very least." Carefully placing the moonstone back in its bag, she went out onto her deck to simply watch the world move by as she tried to calm her emotions and misgivings.

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Sleep took a long time coming that night, but was thankfully devoid of any dreams, conversational ones with evil personae or otherwise. Luna still felt a bit sore from the previous day's running, but she was still ready for the day ahead of her. When Pine Needle passed by her house, she joined him on their walk to work as she usually did.

Luna was worried her friend would ask her where she had been yesterday, but Pine Needle was strangely quiet for a change. She noticed that he kept

on looking at her when he thought she wasn't looking. A couple of times he seemed ready to say something, but then visibly reconsidered and kept quiet instead. It was, Luna decided, a very uncomfortable way to start the day. Finally, as the two of them came within sight of the gate to Haystack's farm, Luna decided she had had enough. She trotted in front of Pine Needle, turned to face him, and stopped. "What's wrong?" she asked him, hoping her voice didn't sound as strained as she was feeling at the moment.

Pine Needle froze. To Luna's surprise, he not only refused to respond, but just looked at the ground and tried to walk around her. Luna quickly sidestepped to keep in front of him. "You look like you've been wanting to say something to me all the way here. What is it?" she asked her friend. "Have I made you mad or something?"

"No!" Pine Needle protested. "No, I'm..." He sighed. "Moonbeam, I am sorry, I am not mad with you at all. I am just trying to come to grips with something, and I don't know how to do it."

"Well, if you're not mad at me, tell me then! Maybe I can help!" Luna said, exasperated that Pine Needle was being so close-mouthed.

Pine Needle's face turned a bit red and drooped. "Fine," he said resignedly. "You are right, it is something I need to get off of mine chest anyways. Something I realized during the Running of the Leaves. Something involving you."

'Oh, no!' thought Luna. 'He's figured out who I am!'

"When you used your earth pony magic, I swear that I was able to feel you doing so. And that made me realize something, something that I'm afraid to say..." Pine Needle was blushing so much that his face was almost as red as an apple.

'Wait a second!' Luna thought, panicking as her trail of thought went into uncharted territory. 'Is he going to admit... THAT?'

"Because if I say it, I'm afraid that our relationship as friends may be over, and I don't want to lose that..." All of a sudden, Pine Needle stood up straight and stared Luna in the eye. "But it needs to be said!"



Luna felt herself blush a little under the fierceness of Pine Needle's stern look.

"Moonbeam... I am..."

Luna's heart was beating so fast, she thought it would burst from her chest.

"I am jealous of you, and I'm sorry!"

Luna blinked a few times, and had to resist the urge to fall over onto her side in shock. "You're... jealous of me?" she weakly got out.

"Yes! It took me many years of practice with mine parents to be able to do anything close to what you did! And yet, on your first time trying, you seem to have mastered it! I know it is terrible for me to think this way, but I can't... help..." Pine Needle trailed off, and tilted his head at Luna. "Actually, I can't help but wonder why you are now lying on the ground laughing at me!"

Luna could tell her friend was rapidly turning angry, and waved a hoof to try to calm him down. "No! I'm sorry, I just... I thought, he he, that you were going to say something completely else! And when you didn't, ow, I think I hurt my side there from laughing... Wait! Come back Pine Needle! Please wait up a second!" Seeing her friend stomping past her, Luna scrambled back onto her hooves and ran back in front of her friend. "This is going to sound stupid, especially now that I remember how big of a crush you have on Applejack. But the way you were talking, and how red your face was turning, it just seemed like you were about to, you know, admit a different kind of feeling for me." Luna felt herself blush a bit in embarrassment at her misunderstanding.

It was now Pine Needle's turn to look confused, until, "What? No! You know mine heart is for Applejack and Applejack only!" He paused and then chuckled. "Although, I can see how, with the way I came around to the subject... heh heh!" Soon, both of them were laughing loudly, and after a minute they both finally found themselves gasping for breath over the whole mix up.

Finally, after they had both settled down, Luna turned to Pine Needle. "Pine Needle, I'm not mad that you're jealous. I can understand, in a way." All of a sudden, Luna realized she did know exactly how Pine Needle felt. After all, hadn't it been jealousy that had led to her becoming Nightmare Moon

and trying to keep the sun from rising all those years ago? Suddenly somber, she said, "It isn't fun, is it? It tears you up inside, and makes you consider doing things you normally wouldn't think yourself capable of attempting. I'm so sorry I made you feel like that. But it wasn't anything I wanted to do—make you jealous I mean. I just did what you told me. You're just that good of a teacher, I guess?"

Right in front of the gate to Haystack's property, Pine Needle froze. "That's it! You are a genius, Moonbeam! I shouldn't be upset at the fact that I am no longer the best at what I consider to be mine personal talent! No, I need to help train you! What we can do is so rare, after all! What do you say, will you let me help you?"

"Well, I, um, will we even have time, with the harvest coming up?" Luna asked, realizing that she would have a hard time of keeping her true level of power secret from Pine Needle if they actually did start working together like he wanted to.

"Oh, not now. You are correct. Harvest will take up all of the time we will have and then some! But during the winter will be perfect! Please, at least consider it for now?"

"Deal!" said Luna. "Okay, let's see what Haystack needs us to do today." She held the gate open for her friend, and the two walked up to Haystack's house. As they reached the door, Haystack came out to meet them.

"Hello Pine Needle, Moonbeam. I have some bad news." Haystack looked stressed to Luna.

"What's wrong?" Luna asked.

"We're not going to be able to get the neighboring farmers to help us out this year in getting the crop in." Haystack looked weary. "I went around yesterday, after the Running of the Leaves, and they all told me no."

"Why not?" Pine Needle demanded.

Haystack sighed. "The parasprites."

"The what?" Luna asked.

"Earlier in the summer, Moonbeam, I'd say it was a week or so after the Summer Sun Festival, so before you arrived here in Ponyville, right?" Seeing Luna nod in confirmation, Haystack continued. "These little things swarmed all over Ponyville. Cute little buggers, but they ended up eating almost everything. And I'm not talking just food either. They were devouring buildings before they were made to leave town. I don't know what made them come, or why they left, but all that matters is that everypony's crops were hurt in one way or another. Mind you, we had time to replant what was lost. But instead of being able to coordinate and figure out a schedule of who would harvest when, making it so we could all help out each other, well, the time table got pushed way back. Everypony is putting off things as long as they can to get the most growth out of their crops.

"But I just received word today. Winter has been scheduled to begin next week. Mind you, there won't be any snow right away, but it's the frost that's the real problem." Haystack sighed. "We sent a petition to Canterlot, asking for an extension, but it got voted down. Which I guess I can understand. Seasons are something that shouldn't be messed around with except in dire emergencies, but one more week would have made things so much easier!" Haystack's face was filled with frustration. "Anyway, not only do we not have the help of the other farmers, it also means that there is going to be a lot of competition to try to hire any other help. Every other farmer is going to be looking for extra hooves too. So, I've already inspected the farm this morning, and we'll be okay letting things sit for now. Any extra watering at this stage isn't going to change things. We need to do is head into town, and try to get some help for tomorrow. I'm sorry to make the two of you walk all the way in, but I didn't want to risk have us taking different routes and end up missing each other."

"Not a worry, Haystack!" Pine Needle assured his friend.

In town, Haystack's fears were confirmed. They stopped by Town Hall, but the Mayor sadly informed them that there were no ponies currently seeking employment. "Well then," Haystack told them, "we'll have to split up. Don't be afraid to ask anypony. Tell them that they'll be paid well for a day's work, and that their efforts will also help to make sure nopony goes hungry this winter." Luna wandered off from the other two, wondering just who she could ask.

'Twilight Sparkle? She's been very friendly to me...' she froze when she considered Nightmare Moon's words from yesterday. 'But, do I want this reported back to Celestia? That would be a terrible thing to pass on to my sister, that I'm being reduced to begging for help from others that I barely know.' Luna resumed walking, and found herself approaching the inn where Dewdrop worked. 'It's a long shot, but even if she can't help, maybe she could recommend somepony who could.'

It took a few minutes for Dewdrop to have some time to spare from her busy schedule to talk to her. "I'm sorry, Moonbeam," Dewdrop said, "but this has been a crazily busy and taxing week. Apparently, Rarity is hosting a fashion show in a few days, and some hot-shot fashion pony is going to be staying here at the inn, so my boss has us all working twice as hard to try to impress him when he shows up."

"Can you think of anypony else who might be able to help?" Luna asked. "Would it be a waste of time for me to ask Feather Down?"

"It's probably a bit late for her to get the time off, but it can't hurt to ask her. Good luck hun, and again I'm sorry that I can't be of help." Dewdrop waved at her as she left.

Luna was glad it was still fairly early in the day, so she didn't have to worry about dealing with the lunch rush as she arrived at the restaurant. Just as Dewdrop had guessed though, Feather Down told her that she wouldn't be able to get the day off. "I'm sorry, Moonbeam, but I need to know at least a week in advance for me to be able to guarantee that I get a certain day off. I wish I could help you, Haystack pays well for harvest help. I'd make more doing that than I would here for the day!"

After that, Luna found herself aimlessly wandering about town, trying to think if there was any other pony she could ask. 'I've met most everyone else at one point or another, but I just can't bring myself to go up to some pony whose name I can barely recall and ask them to come work on the harvest!' Discouraged at not being of any help, she sat down under a tree to sulk for a bit.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Luna had been so lost in her thoughts, she hadn't even noticed the other pony walk up to her. "Oh, hi Pinkie Pie. I'm sorry, I'm just upset that I can't help out my friends any."

"Why not? Were they all kidnapped by a colossal stone creature?" Pinkie Pie sat down next to Luna.

"No, nothing so grand or exciting as that," she replied with a grin.

Luna explained the situation. "So, we need to get some help for tomorrow, but there's so few ponies that I know well enough to ask that I've already asked everypony that I can think of!"

"Oh, I can think of at least one pony you haven't asked yet who would be willing to help you out!" Pinkie Pie jumped to her feet, and started hopping around Luna. "Go on, guess! Guess!"

Luna stared at the hyperactive pony for a moment, before it dawned on her what was happening. "Pinkie Pie! Are you saying you'll help us out?"

"Yup! I still haven't seen that much of Haystack since way back. This will be a good chance for me to get caught up on what he's been up to since then! And I have some experience farming too, although it has been a while. But I know that there's going to be hard work—it won't scare me off!"

Luna stood up and gave Pinkie Pie a big hug. "Oh, thank you, thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me! Now I can go tell Pine Needle and Haystack that I found somepony to help! And if they both found some others, things should be easy. Just show up at my place tomorrow morning, okay? We can walk to the farm together."

"Sounds good! I'll see you then, Moonbeam!" Pinkie Pie wandered off, and Luna started searching for her friends. It took her a little while, but after trotting through what felt like half the town, she finally caught sight of Haystack talking with a couple of other stallions. Waiting a short distance away so as to not interrupt, she went to her friend after he was done talking.

"How's it going, Haystack? Any luck so far?" Luna asked.

Haystack shook his head morosely. "No luck at all! It's just as I feared, everypony else with a farm is out and about right now looking for help. I just saw Pine Needle a short while ago, and he's come up against the same things I have. Everypony who might be willing to help has already committed to helping out somepony else. We got a late jump on this, it seems." He sighed, then looked at Luna. "I don't suppose you have any good news to report?"

Luna stood up straight, her chest sticking out in pride. "As a matter of fact, I have managed to find a pony who was willing to lend a hoof!"

Haystack's mood noticeably improved. "Really? That's great! Who is it?"

"Well, I got..."

Pine Needle was near his house, deciding he would try asking all of his neighbors in one last desperate attempt to find some help, when he heard Haystack yell, "PINKIE PIE?"

'Impressive! If he is even close to where I left him a short while ago, that's over halfway across town that I am hearing him from!' Pine Needle thought as he approached another door to ask for help.

Luna was taken aback by the sheer volume of disbelief that Haystack had voiced. "But, you said we could use anypony's help!" she said, fearing she had made a terrible mistake. "And, and she was the only pony who would do it! Everypony else that I know is already busy, and I don't know all that many ponies, and..." she trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

Haystack hung his head. "No, you're right, Moonbeam, and I'm sorry that I yelled at you like that." He motioned for Luna to follow him as he started walking. "It's just that Pinkie Pie and I have a bit of a history, you could say."

Luna fell into step besides Haystack. "You know, I think Dewdrop told me that before, but I don't remember much of what she said. Something about you and Pinkie Pie growing up near each other?"

"Yes. My family lived close to Ponyville, and the Pies were neighbors of ours. They were farmers. A very serious family, if I recall correctly. Then, one day, Pinkie Pie seemed to completely change. Gone was the silent

filly, and in her place was, well, the Pinkie Pie you see today. Except without any of the experience, I guess you could say. She was always trying to come up with new ways to make people laugh, or different ways to throw parties, or thinking up new pranks to try out. And since my family was the closest to hers, that made me the main target for all of her experiments." Haystack sighed. "After a year of being her first choice to try out new jokes and pranks, my uncle and aunt moved away, and offered up their property to me if I wanted to farm it. I probably accepted just as much to get away from Pinkie Pie than I did for any real desire to farm. I've come to like the farming life very much since then, however, so I don't regret the decision at all."

Haystack stopped and looked around. "Well, I'm going to stop by the Mayor's place one last time, but I don't think we're going to find any other ponies that can help us. Take the rest of the day off; the only things left to do right now are get the equipment ready and make sure the mill didn't fall apart during the summer. Tomorrow is going to be hard work. We'll be starting as early as we can, and I can't guarantee that we'll be done at a reasonable hour either. The only consolation I can offer you is that after tomorrow's work, we get it easy for several months."

"Thanks, Haystack. I'll make sure to get plenty of sleep." Luna waved to her friend as he walked off towards the center of town. After Haystack had disappeared around a corner, Luna turned and walked towards the market. 'I better get a good dinner and breakfast ready too. I sure would hate to be unable to do my share of the work because I got weak from hunger,' Luna thought.

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The sun had barely risen above the horizon when Luna woke up. She found herself strangely excited by the day ahead. In a way, it felt like a personal challenge. 'If I can do this,' she thought, 'then I can do anything!'

She had just finished eating her breakfast when a knock came from her door. Luna grabbed her saddlebags and tossed them on her back. (She was impressed at how quickly she had learned to do that without magic.) She opened the door to see Pine Needle and Pinkie Pie waiting for her. "Good morning Moonbeam!" Pinkie Pie said to her. "Ready to go?"

"You bet!" Luna answered with a smile on her face. The three of them headed down the road, pretty much the only things moving in town at this early hour. On the way there, Luna noticed that Pinkie Pie didn't seem to be her usual, bouncy self. As they crossed over a bridge, she asked her, "Are you feeling okay, Pinkie Pie?"

"Of course I am! Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you just seem a bit quieter than normal is all. I don't want to think I dragged you into a bunch of work if you are feeling sick or something."

"Oh, no, I perfectly fine. I'm just trying to think about what might happen today. It's going to be a doozy of a day, after all."

Pine Needle nodded. "That it will! So much work for so few hooves."

Pinkie Pie turned to Pine Needle. "No, not that kind of a doozy, but I guess it will be too. But that's not what I meant. Sometimes, I just get these feelings about when something amazing is going to happen. And the moment I woke up and stepped outside to come here, that's when the shudders hit me. Something today is going to happen that even I'm not expecting."

Luna considered Pinkie Pie's words. 'Something that even Pinkie Pie wouldn't expect? I've heard stories about her from others here and there. That sounds like it could be really weird, dangerous, or both!'

Pine Needle asked, "So, I am a bit surprised that you actually came to help us out. I am not complaining at all, mind you, but what made you decide to come?"

"Well, ever since Moonbeam's party," Pinkie Pie began, seeming unusually subdued, "I've been thinking a bit about the time that I knew Haystack from when we were growing up. And I've come to realize that I may be partially responsible for him having turned into such a gloomy and serious pony. I was really going overboard, even for me, in trying to figure out all of the best ways to make people smile and laugh, and what things worked and didn't at parties. I was really hit or miss for a while, and I didn't have too many friends back then either. So I ended up dragging Haystack into a lot of my experiments, and while we had some really fun times, it wasn't until



right before he moved away that I really started to get the hang of what I was doing."

Pinkie Pie paused to look up at the sky. "So, this is my way to try to make it up to him. To try to get him to smile. If I can do that in what seems to be one of the toughest of days for him, I think I'll have pulled off something worthwhile." Pinkie Pie then brightened up. "That, and Mr. and Mrs. Cake buy his flour, so if he can't get his crop in, we won't be able to bake as many things this winter as we usually do. So helping with this helps a lot of ponies, myself included!"

The three of them walked the rest of the way in silence. At Haystack's farm they found him already outside, getting the last of the preparations done. Luna thought she saw Haystack tense up a little at his first sight of Pinkie Pie, but he quickly seemed to relax again. "Welcome. Pinkie Pie, thank you very much for your help." He gestured towards the barn. Near one end of it, a large tarp covered the ground, below the open second story door of the barn. Luna could see that the pulley system was trailing a rope down to the tarp, which also had several sharp looking tools laying off to one side.

"Okay, here's the best division of labor that I could come up with. I'll be using the mower to cut down the wheat," Haystack pointed to a strange-looking device. From what Luna could see, a harness was used to push a wheeled device that had several blades a few inches above the ground. "Pinkie Pie, Moonbeam, I want the two of you to gather up the wheat that I cut and bring it over to Pine Needle at the tarp. His job will be to trim off the stalks so there is less chaff when it comes time to mill it later on."

"Are you sure that I shouldn't be the one to use the mower?" Pine Needle asked. "I have more experience with it than you do."

Haystack shook his head. "I want to keep you fresh. You're going to have to do most of the work in powering the mill later on today. Any other questions?" Seeing that nobody had any, he walked towards the mower. "Let's get started then." Stepping into the harness, he started to move forward at a slow but steady pace and after a dozen steps or so was already mowing down the first lengths of grain. Luna and Pinkie Pie took turns gathering up a mouthful of cut crop, and carried it over to Pine Needle. Using a longer blade that looked to Luna like an over-sized kitchen knife, he would line up the stalks as best as he could, then cut them off with

one powerful swing of the blade. Next, he picked up the stalks and carried them off to one side. After that, he returned to sweep the ready to milled wheat into a pile near where the pulley rope came down, and then repeated the process for the next load carried to him.

After an hour, Haystack had finished with the wheat that was on level ground, and all that was left was the crop on the steep hill that took up a large portion of the farm. Luna wondered just how Haystack was going to push an obviously heavy contraption up the steep incline. But all became clear when she saw him start to circle the base of the hill instead of going straight up the slope. 'Oh, that makes sense!' she thought. 'He'll just go around and around it, slowly climbing it a little bit at a time.'

But watching Pinkie Pie had been even more interesting to Luna. Every time she came up to Haystack to gather up some more wheat to carry to Pine Needle, she would stop, open her mouth, and pause with a frustrated expression on her face. After only a moment, she would gather a mouthful of wheat stalks and head back toward the barn instead. Luna waited near Pine Needle for Pinkie Pie to drop off another load, then walked back towards Haystack with her.

"What's wrong, Pinkie Pie?" Luna asked. "I don't think I can ever recall you being at a loss for words before!"

"I need to wait, I think." Pinkie Pie replied after a brief pause. "Getting a smile from Haystack today will be a gigantic challenge, and I think I need to do it in a roundabout way. Lull him into complacency at the start. And then, once he lets down his guard... BAM!" Pinkie Pie mimed a punch with a foreleg.

The rest of the morning was spent in a similar fashion. The sun had almost reached its zenith when Haystack finally crested the summit of the hill. Haystack called Pine Needle to come help him, and both stallions slowly descended from the top, doing their best to not let the mower pull them down too quickly and risk an injury to anypony or damage to the tool or the property. Luna, busy gathering wheat as fast as she could, had not been able to see how much of a toll using the mower had been on her friend. She could now see that he was covered in a lather of sweat, and he could barely hold his head up from exhaustion.

They were about to move the mower back into the barn when the bell at the house started to ring loudly and urgently. The four ponies exchanged glances and, as one, trotted off to see who was paying them a call. They were pleasantly surprised to see Feather Down waving at them by the front door of the house. She was wearing a set of saddlebags that looked stuffed full.

"Lunch time!" Feather Down yelled. "I have a feast for a set of hard working ponies! Who wants some lunch?" Feather Down opened the flaps on her saddlebags to reveal a plethora of sandwiches and fruits, all ready for eating.

"Thank you very much!" Haystack said as he and the others came up to Feather Down. "I honestly wasn't expecting anything like this at all. This is fantastic!"

"Hey, just because I couldn't get the day off from work doesn't mean that I'm going to leave my friends hanging! I can't stay long, I'm on my lunch break right now and I had to pull some strings to be able to take it at this hour. But this is the least I can do for my friends! Now, sit, sit! Let the waitress do what she knows best and serve, and give you tired ponies a break!" Feather Down expertly grabbed item after item from her saddlebags, and in short order a tasty spread had been laid out before them.

Luna was amazed at how fast she devoured the dandelion sandwich that had been placed in front of her. 'All that work kept my mind off of how hungry I was getting, I guess.' When Feather Down finally pulled out an apple for herself and sat down, Luna turned to her and said, "Thank you so much! Perfect timing too, Haystack just got done cutting down all the wheat."

Luna was surprised when Feather Down frowned. "He's only now finished with cutting down the wheat?" Feather Down asked softly.

Luna nodded slowly. "Yeah," she replied, feeling the bottom of her stomach drop away for some reason.

"Wow, not having the other farmers to help him is really slowing him down then. I helped out last year, and they had that done in maybe an hour. Of course, when you have several ponies doing the cutting, and not just one,

it's going to take a lot less time." Feather Down swallowed the last of her apple. "Okay guys, I have to gallop if I'm going to get back to work on time. See you later!" One quick round of thanks and a hug from Luna later, Feather Down was speeding away down the road, back into Ponyville proper.

Luna felt a bit of trepidation. 'If what took them just an hour or two before took us almost half the day this time...' She looked back at the field, still covered with cut wheat to be gathered. 'Oh dear.'

After they had finished eating, they returned to their tasks with Haystack helping carry in the cut wheat. Pinkie Pie found she could gather up a lot of wheat from the hill quickly simply by sliding down the hill, pushing the cut grain in front of her like a plow. Luna giggled as she watched Pinkie Pie yelling in glee, and joined her. Haystack quickly caught on and waited at the base of the hill to transport the gathered crop over to Pine Needle. After an hour of this, the wheat was all down at the bottom, and Haystack called everyone together again by the barn.

"Okay, we've got enough wheat ready to go that I think we should start milling it. Pinkie Pie, you have experience working with knives, right?"

"Yup! Nobody cuts a cake faster and better than me!" Pinkie Pie said with pride.

Haystack nodded. "Okay then, I want you to take over Pine Needle's job. Also, I'll be lowering and raising that bucket there, I'll need you to fill it with grain when you can please."

"Will do!" Pinkie Pie headed over to get herself situated with her new assignment area.

"Moonbeam," Haystack turned to Luna, "I'll need you at the bottom of the mill to catch the flour in bags. You'll see that there is a tarp on the ground there. Don't worry if some spills out, but do try to keep your hooves as clean as possible. There's a tub there for you to wash off with."

"What do I do with the bags when they get full?" Luna asked.

"There will a drawstring on the top. Once it gets most of the way full, and the bag is able to stand up mostly on its own, give it a good tug. It won't be

perfectly sealed, but that's something we can work on in the next few days. Once you get the top closed, drag the bag off to the side. I should be able to make time every now and then during the breaks to help make room." Haystack explained. He then turned to Pine Needle. "I'm sorry that I'm asking you to do this alone. The moment you need a break, let me know! I would feel terrible if you hurt yourself doing this for me."

"Worry not, mine friend!" Pine Needle declared. "I will not be doing anything stupid." He turned to Luna, and in a stage whisper said, "Besides showing up here today, that is."

Haystack gave a small snort. "Okay guys. The wheat won't mill itself, sadly. Let's get to work."

Luna headed into the barn and found things were laid out just as Haystack had said. Washing her hooves in the tub, she saw Pine Needle walk up the shorter ramp to the platform that wrapped around the mill pillar. On one of the bars was a padded harness, and after stretching, Pine Needle got himself situated. "Give me the word when to start, and I shall!" He called up to Haystack.

Haystack didn't reply right away, as his mouth was busy turning the crank to raise a bucket full of wheat from outside. Once the bucket was high enough, he used a hoof to flip a latch to keep the rope from dropping back down, and then brought the bucket over to the opening in the mill. Nudging open a door on the side of the mill by him, he emptied the bucket through it. "Okay, Pine Needle, start whenever you're ready!" Haystack undid the latch on the crank, alerted Pinkie Pie to the soon-to-be-falling bucket, and nudged it back outside, letting gravity do the work of carrying it down for him.

Luna took the first woven bag from a pile near the mill's spout and set it up to catch the flour when it came out. She watched as Pine Needle seemed to struggle in vain to get the bar to move, but finally, with a grinding sound coming from inside the mill, it finally budged, and he started to push the bar around the mill slowly. As he came around to where he could see Luna, he gave her a smile. "Do not worry," he called to her, "getting it started is the hardest thing to do. Kind of like trying to wake up Feather Down." Luna smiled back, but she could sense that Pine Needle was struggling all the same.

Steadily, the first bag filled with milled flour, and Luna found herself faced with her first real test so far. She had seen that there were ebbs and flows in how the flour came out. 'Probably has to do with when the buckets of wheat get dumped in.' She realized. Waiting for a slower trickle of flour to come pouring out, she balanced the bag in place with her front legs and then grabbed the drawstring with her teeth and pulled it tight. She found the hardest part was trying to move the full bag of flour aside so she could get the next bag in place. A full bag was very heavy, and in her first attempt at moving it, not suspecting how much weight the bag would have to it, she did nothing to budge it. Not wanting to let too much flour spill onto the tarp, she put her entire body into her next attempt, and managed to drag the bag a few feet before her momentum died. Deciding that was far enough for now, she dashed over to the pile of empty bags and got the next one in place as quickly as she could.

After watching Haystack expertly operate the winch and pulley system a few times, a thought occurred to her. "Hey, Haystack," she yelled up to the pegasus pony, "I'm guessing there's a simple answer, but I'm curious, why don't you just fly up and down with the bucket yourself instead of using a pulley?"

"If it was just a couple dozen, or even a hundred or so trips up and down, it would be easier and faster." Haystack called back when his mouth was free. "But for what will be well over a thousand loads by the time we're done, it would wear me out before we even got halfway through. Even though it would be in small loads, it adds up. Think about how heavy that full bag of flour was. All that weight had to come up first before we can mill it back down to you."

Luna nodded. "That makes sense. Thank you for explaining it to me." She split her attention between watching the bags that were her responsibility and keeping an eye on her friends. Pine Needle continued to worry her. 'There are three bars, which means that the mill should have triple the pony power pushing it right now. He can't keep this up long enough by himself to do the large number of loads Haystack was talking about! If only there was some way I could make it easier for him.'

After a moment, Luna realized that there was—theoretically. 'If I had my magic back, I could do all of this by myself! But...' her thoughts turned dark. 'Who knows how they would react to that. Not well, likely.'

And then something else occurred to her. "I didn't even think of using my magic right away. It was like I had... forgotten it." The revelation stunned her to the point that she almost let the bag she was holding overflow. 'Focus, Luna!' she berated herself, pulling the string tight and pulling the bag to one side. "You've got the easiest job of anypony here, you can't be messing up now! If you do, it will mean the work of the others was wasted!" With renewed vigor and determination, she got the next bag in place. Still, she couldn't keep her thoughts from wandering as she stood there. 'Have I really become so used to being without my magic, after just over a month, that I'm already forgetting about it?' She felt a cold shiver travel down her back that had nothing to do with the autumn air.

The afternoon slowly passed. Once an hour, Haystack would make them all stop and take a break. Stretching her legs, Luna was amazed by the pile of straw that had been accumulated from all the cut wheat stalks outside. And then she saw how many still had to be cut. 'We're not even halfway done yet. Maybe not even a quarter of the way done, and we're getting close to dinner time!' Luna realized as she checked the sun. The realization hit her hard, and she felt tears of frustration start to well up. Shaking her head, she started to walk back to the barn when a whoop from the road made her look toward the house.

"Better late than never, right?" Dewdrop yelled as she trotted up to everyone, still wearing the apron she used at work. She took a look around, and a confident look came across her face that chased away Luna's frustration. Using her magic to take off her apron, she walked over to Haystack. "What can I do to help?"

Haystack looked around. "Where couldn't you help?" he muttered as he thought about where to use Dewdrop. "Okay. Everypony, change of plans!" He pointed to the pile of wheat that still had their stalks attached. "Let's get that taken care of as fast as we can." He turned to Dewdrop. "Don't use your magic for this part. Save that for later."

Dewdrop took a look at the pulley, and nodded. "I think I see what your plan is. Sounds good to me, let's get started." Soon, stalks were being removed at a furious pace, and Luna and Pine Needle found themselves hard pressed just to remove the stalks away from the cutters at a fast enough clip. The sun was barely above the horizon by the time they finished when more hooves could be heard coming from the road.

"Sorry I'm late, supper rush was a big one!" Feather Down yelled, once again carrying saddlebags full of food. "Hiya Dewdrop!" The roommates hugged briefly, then both of them got to work serving a late supper.

While they ate, Pinkie Pie came up to Luna. "Remember when I said I felt a doozy for today?" Luna nodded as she ate a radish. "It hasn't happened yet, and I just felt it hit me again. It's going to be soon, I think."

Luna considered that for a moment. "Do you think it will be because of him smiling at getting everything done, now that all of his friends are here to help?"

"I don't know." Pinkie Pie answered. "Actually, I'm a bit excited by it all. Doozies don't happen all that often, so I'm looking forward to seeing what it might be!"

As they finished their meal, the sun started to set behind the hills. Haystack lit some lanterns. "Sorry I don't have electricity way out here, but I need it so rarely, it just isn't worth the cost to get it installed." He looked at everyone. "Okay, here's the plan. I'll join Pine Needle in powering the mill. Pinkie Pie, you'll join Moonbeam and help her with the bags at the bottom. Dewdrop, will you be able to use your magic to carry the grain all the way from down below up to the top of the mill?"

Dewdrop walked over and examined the area. "I hate to say it, but no. I've never been that strong with my magic, and while I could do some, I don't think I could lift that much, or at least, with any appreciable speed."

"That's okay." Haystack said. "I'll have you be up top then. Your magic should be able to handle the crank without too many problems at least?"

Dewdrop nodded slowly. "A lot shorter distance for me to use my magic over. That will make it much easier."

"Okay then. Feather Down, your job will be to fill up the bucket when Dewdrop lowers it to you." Haystack looked them all over. "As before, if any one of you needs to take a break, speak up! I would rather let grain sit out and get ruined by frost and flocks of birds than have any of you hurt yourselves. Is that understood?" When everyone nodded, he said, "Okay then, let's just do our best, and if we finish by some miracle, all the better!"



The next few hours, chatter was at a minimum. Luna watched anxiously as all of her friends worked hard. Nobody seemed willing to call a break, though. She was about to do it, just to give others a breather when Pinkie Pie nudged her into silence. "Not for me," Luna silently protested to Pinkie Pie, "but for the guys. They look like they're about to collapse!"

Pinkie Pie nodded. "I'm pretty sure though, that if we take a break now, they won't be able to get started again. It's just too late to be doing this."

Luna could feel despair build up inside her again. "This isn't right. Maybe I could fill in for one of them, or..." She swallowed a scream of frustration. "If only there was something I could do!"

Pinkie Pie smiled at Luna. "There is. Watch."

Pinkie Pie started to hum a tune, and then started tapping a hoof in time with it. Luna soon found herself tapping a hoof along in time, and only then did Pinkie Pie start to sing.

"When work get hard, becomes a trial  
You've dragged your hooves for many miles  
And you find it very hard to do your part  
Don't let the workload get you down  
Don't buckle under, mope or frown  
Instead just let a song enter your heart!"

Luna started to smile as Pinkie Pie's words filled the barn. 'This is more like the Pinkie Pie I know!' Dewdrop looked down at them, wondering what was happening, while Haystack scowled, but lacked the energy to tell her to keep quiet.

"You need to smile and sing!  
That's the only thing  
Just open up your heart and smile and sing!"

It doesn't matter how it goes  
Or if you're the only one who knows  
The words or rhythm to your special tune  
Just sing away, and do it loud  
Don't be bashful, be brave and proud  
And in the end you will receive its boon!

You need to smile and sing!  
That's the only thing  
Just open up your heart and smile and sing!"

Luna recognized the chorus as Pinkie Pie started it the second time and joined in, and their two voices echoed with a joyful noise. Glancing around, Luna saw that Pine Needle saw actually grinning and bobbing his head in time with the beat. Dewdrop was confirming to Feather Down outside that, yes, there really was singing going on in the barn. Haystack for his part silently suffered.

"Okay, Moonbeam, your turn!" Pinkie Pie yelled out cheerfully.

"What, me?" Luna asked, surprised that Pinkie Pie wanted to her to contribute beyond joining in on the chorus. "What do I sing?"

"Anything! Just keep the song going!"

Swallowing down her nervousness, Luna wracked her brain for something to start with, hoping that those words would lead to more, and finally, tentatively, started her verse.

"When I look here upon my friends  
I worry that we're at our end  
That we have come as far as we can go  
But now I find myself singing  
And I think it may be just the thing  
To keep me fast, to stop my being slow

You need to smile and sing!  
That's the only thing  
Just open up your heart and smile and sing!"

This time, Pine Needle joined in on the chorus, and Dewdrop was smiling down at them all from where she stood at the crank. Luna looked at Haystack, and her eyes widened in shock.

'Is he... tapping his hoof?' she wondered, not trusting her eyes at this weary time.

"Pine Needle, GO!" Pinkie Pie yelled.

Without missing a beat, Pine Needle raised his voice to sing a verse.

"When I first came from Stalliongrad  
There was little that I had  
Besides what I did carry in mine packs  
But Haystack he became mine friend  
I then met more and in the end  
Friends in my life is something I don't lack!

You need to smile and sing!  
That's the only thing  
Just open up your heart and smile and sing!"

This time, everyone except Haystack sang along on the chorus, and Luna could tell that everyone's spirits had been raised. Even...

Not stopping to think, Luna put a hoof up to Pinkie Pie's mouth to silence her. Luna could see she was looking up at Dewdrop, but for some reason, Luna didn't think Dewdrop was the one who should sing at the moment.

"Last verse!" Luna hollered. "HAYSTACK, SING!"

Luna felt Pinkie Pie freeze up, and then start to shudder violently. Haystack, who had been bobbing his head along with Pine Needle's singing, was caught off guard, and almost tripped. He then looked at Luna, puzzled. Luna nodded at him encouragingly, and then Haystack raised his voice.

"It's come to the end of the day  
We've milled the flour, stacked the hay  
And the harvesting is now mostly complete  
Pinkie Pie, without your aid  
This progress we would not have made  
All of my reservations you did defeat!"

While Haystack was singing his verse, Pinkie Pie had sprinted up as close to Haystack as she could while on the ground below the platform, and danced along, pure surprise on her face.

"You just need to smile and sing!  
That's the only thing."

"Just open up your heart and smile!" sang Pinkie Pie.

"Even if it takes awhile!" replied Haystack

"Just open up your heart, and, SING!" Everyone finished together.

Pinkie Pie dashed back to Luna. "Look! Lookie look look!" She said, pointing at Haystack.

Luna beamed at Pinkie Pie. "I see it. A first for me too, now that I think on it. Quite a doozy, isn't it?"

Haystack's face wore a giant smile of joy as he laughed with everyone else.

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Outside, Feather Down grumbled, "Sure, guys, have all the fun in there why don't you? Hmmph."

# Chapter 8

## Inn Trouble

It was well past midnight by the time they had finished milling all of the wheat. Each of the ponies was tired beyond belief, but there was a triumphant air about them. They had faced the job in front of them and had come out on top, victorious. Haystack told Pine Needle and Luna to take tomorrow off, and he profusely thanked everyone else. "It will be a week or so until I get some of the flour sold," he said, "but I'll deliver your pay personally." They left as a group, too tired for chatter, they peeled off as they arrived at their various homes. Sleep came quickly for them all, the peaceful rest of the honestly tired.

The next day found Dewdrop at work at her usual early start time. It had been harder than usual to get out of bed because of the busy night before, but her sense of responsibility had her up and about despite mutters from her roommate asking for five more minutes. The inn's manager looked at her weary face with concern, but she waved it off, explaining about the harvest that she had helped with last night.

"Ah," the manager reminisced, "I used to help with a few of those back in my youth too. Fun in its way, although I must admit I don't feel the urge to go out and help with them anymore. However, I do have some important news for you, Dewdrop!"

"Oh, what's that?" she asked, her interest piqued.

"I leave town tomorrow, and will be gone for the next few days," her manager said. "There is a convention of hoteliers in Canterlot coming up. Personally, I think it's more of an excuse to fill up some rooms somewhere, but then the contacts I make at these gatherings always seem to pay off in the long run. So, who knows? Anyway, while I'm gone, I would like for you to be the one in charge."

"Me?" Dewdrop was startled by the announcement.

"Most certainly! I have always been impressed by your work ethic. And I've talked with Lilypad and Hazelnut already, and they're fine with you being in

charge. I can leave for the convention feeling secure about my inn with you in charge, especially with Hoity-Toity arriving the day after tomorrow."

Dewdrop had felt herself fill with pride until Hoity-Toity had been mentioned. 'I hope that I can do a good job!' she worried. 'If I mess this up, it might lead to bad press for the inn!' She spent the rest of the morning with half her mind occupied worrying about what might go wrong with her in charge.

On her break, Dewdrop went to the restaurant that Feather Down worked to have lunch. Her roommate got approval from her boss and joined Dewdrop for the meal. While they ate, Dewdrop shared her news and concerns with Feather Down. "Don't worry about it," Feather Down said. "It isn't like you'll have to do too much extra work, right? The other girls will do their part, and everything will go fine, just watch!"

Dewdrop nodded. "I think you're right. I'm just nervous, that's all. This is the first time he's ever left me in charge, so I guess I'm just worried about what could go wrong."

"That's understandable. Just don't obsess over it, okay? You have a tendency to do that at times, you know. I'm sure you'll do just fine." After some more small talk, the two friends finished their lunch and returned to their jobs.

It was around mid afternoon when the bell on the door of the inn rang, announcing a guest. From the back room where she was folding sheets, Dewdrop heard the manager talking to somepony else. Wondering who it might be, Dewdrop walked to the front of the inn. There, she saw Rarity talking with the manager.

"Dewdrop!" The manager waved her over to them. "This is the mare I was talking about, Rarity. Dewdrop will be the pony I leave in charge while I am gone, starting tomorrow. I am sure she will do everything in her power to make sure Hoity-Toity has an excellent stay."

Rarity smiled when she first saw Dewdrop, but after a few seconds began to frown. When Rarity started to circle her, shaking her head and making small sounds of disapproval, Dewdrop and her manager shared confused looks. Rarity finished her circuit around Dewdrop and shook her head. "No, no. Not like this." Rarity turned to the manager. "If you will excuse us?"

Without waiting for an answer, Rarity herded Dewdrop towards the door. Dewdrop could only shrug at her confused manager, who stood and watched as they left.

"I'm sorry for the rudeness of our departure," Rarity told Dewdrop as they walked away from the inn, "but I don't think he would have understood my intentions."

"To be honest, I don't fully understand your intentions either," Dewdrop said, following Rarity more out of confusion than any other reason.

"Oh darling, you must forgive me. I'm in a terrible state right now. Hoity-Toity is coming to see my work on some dresses, and this could make or break my career going forward. So I'm doing everything that I can to make sure that he has a pleasant stay here in Ponyville. And seeing you there, and knowing that you'll be the face of the inn where Hoity-Toity will be staying, made me remember something I have packed away. We must simply see if it fits you."

Intrigued, Dewdrop followed Rarity into her shop. Dewdrop had never been inside Rarity's store, never having cared much about fancy dresses. She was amazed by what she saw. Close to a dozen dummies stood around the room, around half of them with dresses in various states of completion on them. Reams and bolts of cloth filled a closet, displaying an entire rainbow of colors. Rarity excused herself and left Dewdrop to gape while she went into the back room. A couple of minutes later, she returned with a dress box carried by her magic.

"Try this on, and let me know what you think!" Rarity opened the box to reveal a black and white outfit inside. Using her magic, Dewdrop put it on without too much trouble. The front part consisted of a white, lacy collar and apron with black stitching and pockets. The back part covered her flanks with a black dress that had more white lace on its edges. Rarity nodded in approval. "Just one moment, let me take it in really quick here and there..." A few more minutes passed, and Rarity smiled at Dewdrop. "Perfect! Of course, the important question is, do you like it?" she asked, levitating a mirror around to help Dewdrop take a good look at herself.

Dewdrop was amazed by what she was wearing. She regularly wore aprons as part of her job, but had never worn one so fancy, or even had a

reason to dress up before. "It's amazing! I barely recognize myself!" Dewdrop exclaimed, her voice filled with honest wonder and delight.

"Then I insist that you wear it while Hoity-Toity is at the inn. No, even better, if you promise to wear it for him, you can have it. I can't think of a better use, or a more perfect pony, for it to be seen on!" Rarity declared.

Dewdrop was stunned by the sudden generosity. "I—I can't accept this!" she feebly protested. "I really don't know how much these things cost, but I can't believe that this is inexpensive in the least!"

"No, no!" Rarity said. "If anything, think of it as an investment. The better time that Hoity-Toity has before the show, the more likely he will be to view my work in a favorable light. And I've had that thing just sitting around in back gathering dust for months. This way, it gets a home that will appreciate it too!"

"Well then," Dewdrop said, "I don't know what to say, except for thank you very much! I'll make sure to wear it while Hoity-Toity is at the inn, and I'll do my best to make sure he has a pleasant stay."

Rarity smiled at Dewdrop. "Oh, I know you would have regardless, I could tell from first sight you value hard work as much as I do. Here, let me get that back in its box for you." Soon the dress was neatly folded and placed back inside of its container. Dewdrop thanked Rarity profusely, and returned back to the inn, the box balanced on her back with her magic. The rest of the day, Dewdrop was in a happy mood, humming to herself as she went about her tasks. She decided to leave the box at the inn for the night, so she wouldn't risk forgetting it at home or getting it dirty carrying it around.

The next day, Dewdrop was up early and at the inn full of energy. She waved goodbye to the night shift pony, a dark orange mare named Sunset, and cheerily served breakfast to the two sets of guests that had spent the night. The other two mares who worked days with her, Lilypad and Hazelnut, showed up shortly afterwards, and they focused their attentions to cleaning up the rooms. Looking around, the girls decided that the inn could use some new flowers in the rooms, and so Dewdrop had the two of them go out to try to find some while she watched the place.



'I hope they can find some, with it being so late in the year.' Dewdrop thought as she dusted off the furniture in the lobby. 'I know I saw some growing in a couple of flower beds on my way to work though, so there might still be a chance for them to locate some.' It was a quiet time of day, and Dewdrop stared out the window for a bit in a daydream. 'I remember the last time I went out looking for flowers. That was when I found Moonbeam. I would never have guessed when I left the inn that I would find such a great friend.' Dewdrop was brought back to the present when the clock in the lobby chimed four.

'Is it really that late? Lilypad and Hazelnut have been gone for hours! I hope nothing happened to them!' Dewdrop looked about in worry. 'And I can't leave to go find them either. If I do, there will be nobody to watch the inn.' Time continued to pass slowly, and Dewdrop swore that the seconds were growing longer and longer. She paced about, and finally got out the broom and swept the outside area, just to be able to look around outside to see the other two returning sooner.

It was getting close to when Dewdrop would normally take a short break, when a grey stallion came trotting up to her. "Excuse me, miss, but do you know where I can find the pony named Dewdrop?"

"That would be me. How can I help you?"

"Hello, my name is Doctor Fetlock. I just got done helping take care of two young mares who work here, and..."

"Oh no! Lilypad and Hazelnut? What happened? Did they hurt themselves? Are they okay?"

"Oh, yes, yes." Dr. Fetlock reassured Dewdrop. "They just had the misfortune of running into a giant patch of poison ivy earlier today while in the woods. I'm here to let you know that they will be unable to work for the next week. I have prescribed bed rest and lots of lotion to help with the rash and itching they are currently experiencing."

"A whole week? Oh no! To be forced to itch for that long, I would go crazy!" Dewdrop exclaimed.

"True, it isn't fun at all, but it is important to remember that it will pass in time. Anyway, they asked me to pass the news to you so you wouldn't

worry any longer, and they both wanted to apologize very much for not being able to help in the coming days." The doctor said farewell and then walked off.

'Oh no!' Dewdrop thought as the realization settled in. 'I'm the only day shift pony left now!' She trotted back inside. 'Well, it shouldn't be too difficult. We only have twelve rooms, I can get them all cleaned up by myself in a few hours by myself, nothing I can't handle.'

Dewdrop looked at the reservation list. She was astonished to see that every single room was full, all from Hoity-Toity and apparently his entourage. 'And I promised Rarity that I would do my very best to make sure he has a pleasant stay! I won't be at my best all by myself and that many guests staying here!' Then she also saw a note saying that the inn was serving the guests dinner on the first night of their stay.

'What do I do? There's no way I can handle all of this by myself! But where can I find help on such short notice?'

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Luna was cleaning up from her dinner when she heard a knock at her door. "Coming!" she hollered, wondering who was paying her a visit. Opening the door, she saw Dewdrop, who looked stressed and ragged. "Dewdrop! What's wrong? Come in!"

Dewdrop stepped in, worry plain on her face. "Oh Moonbeam, I'm sorry to intrude on you like this, but I need to ask a giant favor of you!"

"Well, I can't guarantee that I can help you, but at least tell me what the problem is." Luna looked around at her still-empty house, wishing she could offer her friend a place to sit down besides the floor. 'Pillows! I need to get some pillows!' she thought.

"Well, my manager at the inn has left town, and the other girls who I work with have fallen ill, so I'm the only pony left working the day shift." Dewdrop explained. "Which normally wouldn't be that big of a problem. It would be extra work for me, but nothing too onerous. However, we have an important guest showing up tomorrow! There's simply too much work for me to handle by myself. Please, Moonbeam, could you please lend me a hoof at the inn for a couple of days? It will be easy work."

Luna couldn't bear to see her friend in such distress. "Of course I'll help! I'll need to talk to Haystack, but we spent all of today cleaning up the barn and getting the flour ready to be transported. There isn't all that much to do now, to be honest, so I don't think he'll have a problem with me helping you out."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! Let me come with you, please. I need to know as soon as I can, just so I have an idea of what tomorrow will be like." Dewdrop pleaded.

"Uh, sure. Let's go now then?" Luna was starting to feel a little pressed by her friend, but she passed it off as stress.

'Yes, let's!" The two ponies headed out and a short walk later, arrived at Haystack's farm. Dewdrop had been silent on the way out, but as they approached the front door to Haystack's house, Dewdrop said, "Do you want to ask him, or do you want me to?"

Luna considered for a moment, and then replied, "I think I will. It would sound better if I asked, don't you think?"

Dewdrop nodded. "You're right, of course. I can't believe how out of shape this is making me. Please do, hun, you work with him most days anyways, so you know how to approach him better. I'll just stand back and try not to get in your way." Dewdrop gave Luna an embarrassed smile.

A ring of the bell later, and Haystack opened the door. "Well, this is a surprise! Moonbeam, Dewdrop, how are you two? Please, come in." Haystack held the door open for them, and soon they were gathered around a table. "What brings you two out here at this time?"

"Well," Luna said, "Dewdrop is in a bit of a bind at the inn where she works. She's the only available pony left for the next few days, and she asked if I could come fill in, give her a helping hoof. I told her I'd be glad to help her out, but that I needed to check with you if it was okay. I've only been doing this for a short time, after all, but it looks like to me we're at a point where I wouldn't be missed for a few days while Dewdrop's coworkers recover?"

Haystack pursed his lips in thought, and was silent for a minute. "You're right, Moonbeam. We have everything done for the most part. I'm just

wondering..." Haystack turned to Dewdrop. "What kind of work are we talking about here? Having to move furniture around, serving meals, what?"

Dewdrop blinked at the unexpected question. "Um, nothing too hard at all. Carrying baggage to rooms, cleaning up the rooms during the day while the guests are out, and answering the occasional room service request. Breakfast has to be served, but that's an informal thing, mainly handing out a simple meal whenever the guests are finally awake. Oh, the first night the group is in town, we're serving them dinner, but the cooking is all being handled by another group, all we'll have to do is serve it to the guests."

"Sounds easy enough. All right then. Moonbeam, you may have the time off." He turned to Dewdrop. "How much help do you need? If it is only for a day or two, I would be willing to help too, and I could probably get Pine Needle to help also. After all, if Moonbeam and I aren't here, he'd be all by himself."

"Oh, Haystack, that's so nice of you, but I don't want you to think I'm forcing this on you."

"Nonsense! You came out to help me with the harvest, it would be downright rude of me to not return the favor and help you out in return!" Haystack insisted.

Relief filled Dewdrop's face. "Oh, thank you so much then, both of you! You know where the inn is, correct?" Seeing them both nod, Dewdrop continued, "Show up in the morning then. I'll be there early since the manager is out of town, but I won't be needing your help until after breakfast." Dewdrop shook both Luna's and Haystack's hooves vigorously. After a small amount of chatter, the mares left Haystack's house.

As they arrived at Luna's house, Dewdrop thanked her one last time before returning to her own home. She found Feather Down waiting for her. "Where have you been?" she asked. "I came home late, and there was no sign of you!"

Dewdrop sighed and apologized. "I'm sorry, Feather Down. This afternoon just went all to pieces!" Dewdrop explained all that had happened since she had last seen her roommate at lunch. By the time Dewdrop was done with her story, Feather Down had a thoughtful look on her face.

"You know," Feather Down said in a sly voice, "I've always wondered just how comfortable those beds at the inn were. I've got tomorrow off, I may just have to stop by and find out. I'll help you keep the others in line too." She gave Dewdrop a wink.

Dewdrop felt tears start to well up in her eyes. "Oh, I have the best friends in the world!" she said as she hugged Feather Down tightly. "With all of you guys helping me, I know things are just going to go fine!"

The next morning, Dewdrop got up early and headed to the inn. The night shift pony smiled as she came in. "It was an easy night, there's only one family currently staying, although the next few nights sure look packed. Good luck in getting them all checked in."

"Thank you, Sunset! Do you work tomorrow, or is that one of your days off?"

"I'll be in tomorrow, but I have the next two nights after that off."

"Okay then, see you later!" Dewdrop watched her leave, and then focused her attention on breakfast preparations. She made sure that the bowls of fruit were filled, and then checked on the pitchers of water and juice. 'Okay, everything is ready to go.' Helping herself to an orange, she kept watch at the front desk until the guests, a family of four, came down. Greeting them with a cheery welcome, she served them their morning meal. They returned to their room to depart again a short while later, luggage in tow.

Wishing them a safe trip home, Dewdrop waited for them to be down the street before heading up to their room to clean up after them. She was pleasantly surprised to see that, even with two colts in their family, the room hadn't been messed up beyond belief. She was about to get to work cleaning it up when she realized that she should leave it for when her friends were here. 'This will be the perfect chance for me to show them what I want from them!' As she left the room, she heard the bell attached to the front door ring. Trotting downstairs, she saw Feather Down in the lobby.

"Hello, Dewdrop!" Feather Down looked around her. "So, what's the plan?"

"Well, I'm hoping the rest show up soon. Then I can show you guys the basics of cleaning up the rooms. After that..." Dewdrop was interrupted as the opening door once again rang the bell, and in walked Haystack,

Moonbeam, and Pine Needle. "Perfect timing! Again, thank you all so much for helping me out!"

"It is our pleasure, Dewdrop!" Pine Needle said. "I may not have done this before, but I like to think that I keep mine own house in good order, so hopefully this won't be too hard."

"Well, we're in luck for starting out. There was only one family that stayed last night, since Hoity-Toity has the entire place booked for the next few days. So, I'll give you guys a quick demonstration of what I expect you to do to help me out." Dewdrop led them upstairs. "Now, I'm not expecting you to get things looking perfect like this," she opened up the door to another room to reveal a tidily made bed with wrinkle free sheets and pillows placed perfectly. "I'll be able to go around and finish up all the little details with no problems if you guys can take care of the easy grunt work." She gave her friends a chance to look at and admire the room before leading them to the dirty one.

"Now, this is about average for what a room will look like after guests have spent a day in it." The room she led them into had its beds unmade and a couple of pillows on the floor. The bathroom looked used, with some small puddles of water on the floor and damp towels hung from hooks on the wall. "It's all pretty simple. First, we gather up all the dirty bedding and towels, and take them downstairs to the basement. We have a big industrial-sized washer and dryer set up there. During the warmer months, we would hang up things to dry outside, but that won't work in this milder weather. After that, we clean up the bathroom, and then the bedroom. I'll show you where the rags and stuff are shortly. After that, the last step is to put fresh sheets on the bed. Just try your best, and I'll go around afterwards with my magic to give it that final touch."

Dewdrop looked around at her friends. "This is the only room that needs to be cleaned today, but tomorrow and the day after that they'll all have been used, so this is pretty much our one chance at a test run before it gets busy." For the next half an hour, Dewdrop walked them through the process, pointing out things and making corrections when needed. Her friends got the room looking clean without any major hassles. "Good job! Okay, let's head downstairs, and I'll go over some of the stuff we'll have to do later today."

After they were all assembled in the lobby, Dewdrop explained the checking-in process. "I'll be handling the paperwork and taking their money. I'll need you to help them get their bags up to their rooms. Now, I know this will sound obvious, but please do your best to always smile when in the presence of a guest." She grinned at Haystack. "You too, Haystack. You blew your cover during the harvest. I know you're capable of smiling now, so I expect even you to do so." Haystack only rolled his eyes a little at the gentle barb. "And later tonight, we'll be serving them dinner. Feather Down, is there anything you want to share with the others on what will be needed from them? I'll be right back."

"Serving food isn't too difficult," Feather Down said as her roommate walked into the room behind the front desk. "Just take things slow, the last thing you want to do is spill food on the table or, even worse, on the guest themselves. If we have the chance, I'll show you a few specifics on how to do it easily, but it's the same as what Dewdrop said about greeting the customers when they arrive. Always be smiling."

Dewdrop returned with a box and placed it on the ground. "Here are our uniforms. If you'll stand still for a minute, I'll put them on you with my magic." White aprons with lace were given to Luna and Feather Down, and white collars with black bow ties were wrapped around the necks of Pine Needle and Haystack. Dewdrop then put on Rarity's outfit, and her friends were all in awe of how good it looked.

"Look at you!" Feather Down exclaimed. "You wear that to the next party we go to, you won't be able to keep the stallions away!"

Dewdrop blushed. "Rarity gave it to me to help us impress Hoity-Toity," she explained. "Anyway, let me show you the dining area." She led them down a hall from the lobby, to a set of double doors that opened to reveal a long table in a well lit room. Off to one side were a couple of other doors. "Those doors lead to the kitchen. Since we have caterers bringing in the meal all ready to go, our job will be to help them get it set up, serve it, bring them back the dishes and help them clean up after the meal."

For the rest of the morning, Feather Down showed them how she wanted them to serve the meal ("Always serve the pony from their left"), and Dewdrop showed them where everything else was. They enjoyed a simple lunch, and then waited for the guests to arrive. The clock in the lobby had

just chimed a quarter past three in the afternoon, when Pine Needle, who had been outside examining the landscaping, came inside in a hurry.

"There is a large group headed this way, with a cart full of luggage. I am certain that they are the ponies we are waiting for!" he said in an excited voice.

"Okay, places everypony!" Dewdrop yelled, checking over the others one last time. "Haystack, Pine Needle, get ready to carry luggage. Moonbeam, Feather Down, you two will escort them to their rooms after I hand out the keys. Any questions?"

There were none. Just a few seconds later, a crowd of ponies entered the lobby, filling it almost to bursting. At the front of the queue was a dark grey stallion with an elaborately-coiffed white mane, wearing a fancy collar.

"That must be Hoity-Toity," Dewdrop thought. She resisted the urge to straighten out her apron one last time. "Hello, sir! Welcome to the Ponyville Inn! My name is Dewdrop, and I'll be more than happy to assist you in any way possible."

"Thank you, miss. I need to go check out the site of the showing. If you could please help my assistant handle all the details, I would be ever so grateful." Hoity-Toity made a small gesture, and a pale green earth pony mare wearing wire-rimmed glasses zipped up to the front. "Checklist, this is Dewdrop, the manager of the inn."

"How do you do?" Checklist greeted Dewdrop, and then turned back to Hoity Toity. "I'm sure we'll have everything taken care of by the time you return, sir. Please feel free to leave things in my hooves."

"You always have done so admirably before, Checklist. It's why I keep you around despite those awful looking glasses you wear!" Hoity-Toity turned to leave, followed by a small group of assistants.

Working together, Dewdrop and Checklist got the various groups of ponies to their rooms. After ten minutes, Feather Down led the final group upstairs, and Pine Needle and Haystack brought in the last load of suitcases.

"And here are the keys for you to pass on to Hoity-Toity's group when they return," Dewdrop said while floating them to Checklist. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"



Checklist looked over her list briefly. "Nope, looks like we're good until dinner. That starts at six o'clock?" When Dewdrop nodded, Checklist said, "Thank you so much then. We just had an awful time at the place we stayed in when we visited Manehattan last month. I'm glad to see that everything is so well organized here, despite this being such a smaller town." Checklist left to go to her room and get settled in. As she exited the lobby, Feather Down came stomping in, an angry look on her face.

"Dewdrop!" Feather Down hissed as she came up to her friend at the front desk. "I need your help! Keep me away from the second floor for a bit, would you?"

"What's wrong?" Dewdrop asked.

Feather Down shot a glare towards the stairs. "One of those idiots thought he could try smooth talking me into spending some time with him, walk him around the village."

"Well, you certainly don't have to do that if you don't want to," Dewdrop said. "I don't see why you have to keep away from half of the inn though just to avoid him?"

"Well, the problem is, he has the first room by the stairs, so every time I walk past, he calls out another pick up line to me. 'Hey babe, I must be in the Fillydelphia Derby, because you make my heart race!' 'I love your hair, it's your mane attraction!' 'After work, want me to give you a personal showing of my own?' And the way he says those awful things too, it just makes my skin feel slimy! Ugh!" Feather Down shuddered again at the thought.

"Not a problem, Feather Down. I'll have the guys handle any room service call to the second floor then. Oh, even better, the caterers should be showing up soon, why don't you go check in the kitchen, make sure everything is looking good? Maybe help them set up if they need it?"

Feather Down gave her roommate a brief hug. "Thank you, Dewdrop! I'll go and do that right now!" As Feather Down trotted off, a buzzer on Dewdrop's desk started to go off.

"A room service call already? Oh dear, I hope we didn't miss something when we were checking everything over earlier today!" Glad that it was on

the bottom floor, she waved Luna over to her. "Moonbeam, could you please go and see what the ponies in room twelve need?"

"Will do!" Luna replied cheerfully. She trotted down the hallway and knocked on the first door to the left. "Room service!" she called through the closed door. "How can I help you?"

"We need some more towels, please!" a voice replied from inside the room. "Could you just leave them by the door, I can grab them from there."

"Certainly! I'll be back real quick!" Luna ran to the linen closet that Dewdrop had pointed out earlier in the day, grabbed a couple of fresh towels, and placed them on the floor in front of the door. She then knocked on the door and called in, "Here they are sir! Have a good day!" She heard the occupant call out thanks as she headed back to the lobby. She trotted back up to Dewdrop and reported, "All taken care of, just somebody needing a couple more towels."

Dewdrop blinked. "Towels? Already? They've barely been here for twenty minutes! Oh well, if that's the worst..." Another buzzer went off. "Hmm, room twenty one, I bet that's the one with the idiot who was annoying Feather Down, could you go get Haystack to..." Another buzzer went off, and then another two. Luna and Dewdrop stared at each other, eyes growing large in unison.

"Oh, dear," Dewdrop finally said in a small voice.

The next hour was one of confusion and bedlam for Dewdrop and her friends. Haystack had to disappoint Feather Down's 'fan' several times. Room twelve needed more towels. A young mare wanted a quick snack, and Pine Needle had to run across the street to the market to get her one. A bee in room twenty five caused one of the biggest stallions Dewdrop could ever recall meeting to hide under his bed until it had been removed. Room twelve needed more towels again. Haystack returned to Dewdrop, telling him he was afraid that the one pony was now starting to make passes at him since Feather Down refused to show up. Room twelve called again, needing even more towels.

Finally, five thirty came around. Hoity-Toity returned to the inn, and as if by magic the abundance of calls to the front desk stopped. Breathing a sigh of relief, Dewdrop and her friends went to check on things in the kitchen area.

Feather Down met them at the door to the dining room, and motioned for them to stop. "Dewdrop, we need to talk," she said as she pulled her roommate to the side.

When they were a few steps away from the others, Feather Down leaned close to Dewdrop and whispered to her, "We have a problem."

Dewdrop resisted the urge to bang her head repeatedly against the wall next to her. Taking a deep breath, she whispered back, "What is it?"

"The caterers," Feather Down replied. "They're, well..." With a sigh, she motioned at the door. "It would be easier for you to just see for yourself."

Steeling herself for the worst, Dewdrop strode past her friends and entered the dining room. She saw that the table was already made up, with the place settings all lined up neatly. A couple of candles strategically placed gave the room a comfortable ambiance. Dewdrop looked around again, not understanding what she was looking for. Feather Down and the rest of her friends walked in behind her. "Oh, they must have gone back into the kitchen, you should stick your head in there." Feather Down said.

Dewdrop walked over to the kitchen door and did as Feather Down suggested. Peering inside, she saw dozens of dishes laid out and being kept warm, ready to be served at a moment's notice. There were two ponies moving about, keeping an eye on things. One of them was the biggest pony Dewdrop could ever recall seeing. He was a red earth pony with an orange mane and was wearing what looked to be a heavy harness without it slowing him down in any manner. The other pony was one that Dewdrop recognized right away. "Oh, hello Applejack! I should have known from the name of the catering group that you would be here. Is everything going good for the two of you?" Dewdrop hoped there wasn't any panic showing in her voice.

The red pony answered with an enthusiastic "E-yup!"

"Howdy, Dewdrop!" Applejack replied in her country twang. "Things are going as smoothly as can be. We just need to be here to hand over the dishes to your ponies, right? At least that's what I told Rarity when she found out I was serving the food, and she started freaking out about how me and Big Macintosh wouldn't be properly dressed for this thing."

"That's right!" Dewdrop said, inspiration coming over her in a flash. "I'll send people in as we need to, no need for you to even stick your nose out the door if you don't want to. Besides, after all the work you have done getting the food ready, no need for you to do anything extra, right?"

Applejack smiled and nodded her head. "That's mighty nice of you to say so. How long have we got until the meal starts?"

Dewdrop glanced around and was glad to see a clock on the wall in the kitchen. "Six o'clock is when we're supposed to begin, so very soon now. I'll have somepony poke their head in to give you a heads up when the guests arrive."

"Much obliged, sugar!"

Dewdrop returned to her friends. "Pine Needle, could you please go check and make sure that there haven't been any more room service calls while we were away from the lobby? I don't think there will have been any, but I sure would feel better having some confirmation about that."

"Will do, Dewdrop!" Pine Needle said and trotted out of the dining room towards the lobby.

After Dewdrop thought he was out of hearing range, she drew the rest close to her. "Okay, nobody panic. It shouldn't be too big of a deal, but Applejack is in the kitchen." The others slowly digested that information with varying degrees of disbelief. "We're not sunk though. Applejack will be staying in the kitchen, so we just have to keep Pine Needle out of there, and things should run smoothly. What can we have him do though?"

"Have him serve drinks," Feather Down answered. "I'll show him how when he gets back."

"Thank you very much," Dewdrop replied.

About that time, Pine Needle returned from the lobby. "Just as you thought, there were no buzzers going off at the front desk. We are in the clear."

"Good to hear. Feather Down is going to show you how to pour drinks for the guests, okay?" Dewdrop asked.

"Sounds good to me!" Pine Needle walked over to a side table where Feather Down had a pitcher of water and a couple of empty glasses to demonstrate to him what she expected of him.

Finally, the clock chimed six times, and they heard their guests start coming towards the dining room. "Okay guys, this is it! We get through this, our work is done. We'll get to hand things over to Sunset and the night crew, and we'll get to take home some leftovers for an easy and tasty dinner. Are we good to go?" Hearing her friends enthusiastically respond in the affirmative, Dewdrop smiled. "All right then, let's do this!"

Just as Dewdrop finished her declaration, Hoity-Toity and his ensemble entered the dining room. The mares showed them to their seats, while Pine Needle started to pour drinks. Haystack stuck his head inside the kitchen. "They're here!" he called in, and watched as Applejack and Big Macintosh started to uncover plates, revealing a set of delicious looking salads for the first course. As Haystack left the kitchen though, he let the door swing open too widely, just as Pine Needle was looking in that direction. Catching sight of Applejack, he froze up until the door swung close again, but managed to break free of his distraction on his own. He gave Dewdrop an apologetic look, and returned to serving drinks.

'Please don't let that happen while he's pouring a drink!' Dewdrop prayed. Haystack walked up to her.

"Sorry about that, Dewdrop. Also, over there is that stallion who won't stop trying to make a move on Feather Down." He pointed to a dark yellow unicorn with a light orange mane and tail.

Sure enough, he had specifically chosen a seat where Feather Down would be the one to help seat him, and as she pushed in his chair, he commented, "They must be serving dessert early, because something here sure looks delicious!" Feather Down shot him a look that promised violence, and several of the other diners also gave the unicorn disapproving glances, but he was either oblivious to them or, more likely, just didn't care.

Dewdrop sighed again. "Let's get those salads served now, get them eating. The sooner they get done, the sooner we're free from all of this." Haystack nodded and went into the kitchen, returning shortly with a large platter of salads balanced carefully on his back. Luna helped Feather Down

serve them, and then watched anxiously for ponies who finished so she could clear the dirty dishes away. The first few were easy, but then several ponies were finishing up at the same time, and Luna started to worry she wouldn't get them all taken care of fast enough. Dewdrop came over to her. "Don't worry hun, that's what I'm here for, to help out when things get too busy for one pony to do alone." With a reassuring smile that she didn't feel that comfortable giving with how worried she felt, Dewdrop helped carry away empty salad bowls to the kitchen area.

Soon they started handing out the main courses. The yellow unicorn kept on making advances on Feather Down. "Hey, I would like to share a meal with you. What are you doing after dinner?" Feather Down looked about ready to yell at him, but Dewdrop intervened, giving Feather Down a begging look to walk away. "Ah, come on! Don't be so stubborn!" the unicorn called out with a chuckle.

Soon, all the ponies seated at the table were working on various apple dishes with gusto. Pine Needle did his best not to think about who was in the kitchen, but he still froze for a second whenever he saw the door to the kitchen open. Luna continued to show signs of panic over every task, and Haystack was having to field one whole half of the table just to keep Feather Down away from the flirtatious unicorn. 'We're hanging on somehow,' Dewdrop thought to herself, 'but it feels like we're just barely keeping our heads above water.' She could feel sweat starting to run down her neck, and did her best to ignore it.

They finally got to the dessert course. Feather Down was taking some some dirty dishes back to the kitchen when she saw the yellow unicorn wink at her. She shuddered, and after dropping off her dirty plates she brought out some apple pie. Dewdrop and Haystack helped pass it out. Sensing that his time to try to impress Feather Down was running out, the yellow unicorn kept on trying line after cheesy and terrible line. It was enough to make several other diners, including Hoity-Toity, excuse themselves and leave early. Finally, Feather Down had had enough.

"Pine Needle!" She called to her friend. The green earth pony walked over to her. "Could you do me a favor? It seems our guest needs a refill on his drink." Pine Needle nodded and went to go fill the unicorn's empty glass as Feather Down wandered away. Just as Pine Needle started to fill up his glass, she opened the door to the kitchen, then turned to watch the fun.

Pine Needle froze, and since the yellow unicorn had his eyes on the mare he was trying to woo, didn't notice the overfilling cup until it was spilling into his lap.

Dewdrop was escorting several other ponies back to the hallway, and before she realized what was happening, she was too late to stop it. She ran toward the growing disaster as fast as she could to try to limit the damage.

Applejack stared blankly from the kitchen. "Um, is something wrong with that one pony? Every time I see him, he's just staring over here. Is he all right in the head?"

The yellow unicorn stood up in anger and shoved Pine Needle roughly aside. The water in Pine Needle's pitcher sloshed onto several other diners, causing cries of alarm. This also knocked Luna aside and caused her to spill her empty dishes into the laps of even more diners... and onto Dewdrop's fancy dress, giving it a giant stain across the front. Haystack looked at her for directions, anger at the yellow unicorn plainly showing on his face.

"I am thoroughly insulted!" the unicorn announced. "I demand that in repayment that I be given a date with that stubborn pony! Tonight! And I..."

Finally, Dewdrop snapped. "No! You, sir, have been purposefully rude and antagonistic to my staff. I did my best to let it slide, but I can abide by it no more! Not only are you being a distraction to me and my friends, you have ruined the meals of others around you! I am asking you to leave to your room now, and stay there!"

The yellow unicorn sniffed in disdain. "Very well, but the owner shall hear of this! I will make sure you are all fired!" With that, he stomped out.

Dewdrop could feel tears starting to well up. "I worked so hard at this," she whispered quietly as an uncomfortable silence filled the room. The remaining diners, hastily excused themselves, appetites lost from the scene they had witnessed. "And despite all my best efforts, things are still going bad. Oh, Rarity will be so disappointed, and the owner will be too."

"Knock that off." Dewdrop turned around to see Haystack staring at her angrily. "You have nothing to be upset about! That unicorn got what he

deserved. No, in fact, he's still owed some. Nobody is going to fault you for this!"

"I will," Dewdrop replied quietly.

"Stop it!" Haystack loudly yelled at her, as their friends and the few remaining diners looked at them. "Stop blaming yourself for everything that happened tonight!" He stepped in front of her. "So many things happened that were beyond your control! It's not your fault the manager is in Canterlot for a convention! You're not the one who was dumb enough to walk into a giant patch of poison ivy! You fully understand that when someone says they aren't interested, they mean it!" Haystack was now mere inches away from Dewdrop, trying to make sure she couldn't hide her eyes from him. "You did every possible thing you could think of! Most other ponies would have failed to do even half as good a job at recovering from all these obstacles as you did. Stop beating yourself up, Dewdrop, you are better than this!"

Suddenly, Dewdrop realized just how close the two of them were to each other, and blushed. Caught off guard, Haystack froze in shock, which gave Dewdrop time to smile and softly say, "Thank you." She planted a quick kiss on his cheek and then she leaned into him, neck against neck. "Please, just stand here for a few moments, okay?"

Feather Down, Luna, and Pine Needle all stood in shock as a group by the door. Finally, their attention was caught by a throat clearing behind them. Checklist motioned for them to follow her out through the door, and on the other side told them, "Don't worry. I'll make sure that nothing bad gets back to the management. For now though, let's give those two some alone time, she looks like she really needs it." With that, the mare turned and headed back to her room.

The three friends peeked back inside one last time to see Dewdrop still leaning against Haystack, tears running down from closed eyes but with a smile on her face. As one, they turned and walked back towards the lobby.

"Well, it's about time," Feather Down commented as they walked.

Luna looked at Feather Down in disbelief. "What are you saying? Those two have always been lukewarm to each other at best! When I first came



here, you said you didn't know why they acted that way! When did you figure this out?"

Feather Down chuckled. "Well, just now, I guess. But looking back, it seems obvious. I mean, if they really disliked each other as much as they said they did, why did they keep on hanging out together?"

Pine Needle nodded slowly. "That makes sense. I always did wonder why they kept meeting up despite how they acted. They were together when they watched us finish the Running of the Leaves, after all. She came to help him with the harvest when she didn't have to, and Haystack volunteered to help out tonight. I guess, no matter how much they thought otherwise, the truth still came through in the end."

"Yeah." Feather Down agreed. "Who knows where things might end up now that they're being open with each other? Amazing how hard the truth can be in some cases, huh?"

Luna not only heard the comments of her friends, but felt them rip into her in pain. '...truth came through in the end...' '... how hard the truth can be...' She felt her legs wobble, and then she fell against the wall with a loud thud and then slid to the floor.

"Moonbeam!" Feather Down cried out. "Are you okay?" Luna looked up to see her two friends look at her with worry in their eyes. Luna tried to stand up, but the effort made her head swim. She soon found herself sinking into darkness, the voices of her friends crying out in barely-heard panic.

Luna woke up with a start, not entirely sure where she was but noticing it seemed a lot darker outside. "She's awake!" she heard Feather Down call out, and soon all her friends were around her.

"Are you all right, Moonbeam?" Dewdrop asked.

Luna still felt a little fuzzy in her thoughts, but she could feel them slowly but surely clearing up. "I, I'm not sure what happened. Maybe it was the excitement of the whole thing?" she feebly asked.

"Well, we talked to the doctor, and all he can think is that you may have been simply stressed out by the situation, so maybe you're right. Anyway, you rest here at the inn tonight, okay? Hoity-Toity heard about what

happened, and was scandalized. He's made that unicorn head back to Canterlot, and is giving you that unicorn's room to sleep in to recover." Dewdrop grinned at her. "Seems like that fashion big wig has a soft spot in his heart after all."

Luna blinked at this news. She supposed it was just another reminder that you couldn't always judge others by appearances. There seemed to be a lot of that going around tonight.

Dewdrop motioned to a covered plate on the table next to the bed. "There's some dinner for you. You must be starving, and I'm sure some food in you will help. Just get better and rest, okay? I don't want to think I talked you into helping only to have you work yourself to collapse!"

Luna smiled at Dewdrop. "I don't blame you for one bit of this, Dewdrop. I'd do it all over again if I had the choice." She smiled at her friends. "I probably just overstressed myself is all. Just give me time to rest, and I'm sure I'll be okay to help tomorrow," she reassured them. She took some playful teasing from Feather Down about how she was supposed to be the one to test out the beds at the inn, and then watched as they left.

Later, Luna sat up, and slowly ate her supper. A glance out the window told her that the moon was close to full again.

'I need to tell them,' she thought. 'This can't go on any longer.' She stared out at the night sky for a while, wondering how to do so. Finally, she smiled.

"Of course," she whispered to herself. "A moon party. It will be full in just three more days. I'll invite them over, break the ice by letting them see the moon with the telescope, and then..." she paused. Even the mere act of saying it was hard to do for her, even now.

"And then I show them the truth, and hope for the best."

# Chapter 9

## Lunar Viewing

The next two days at the inn were easier ones. With the trouble making unicorn no longer in town, work proceeded smoothly. Dewdrop was able to use her magic to keep the dress that Rarity had given her free of any stains. "It helps that my specialty is water based, I can use my magic to help clean up even the nastiest of messes," Dewdrop confided to Luna. For her part, Luna was feeling much better after having come to grips with what she felt she needed to do.

On the second evening, just as the group was about to head back home, Luna called her friends together in the lobby. She had practiced in her head what she wanted to say dozens of times during the day. But now that she was faced with actually having to speak the words, she found that she was having trouble opening her mouth. Her friends waited patiently, and finally Luna found her nerve.

"Tomorrow night, the moon will be full. If the skies stay clear like they have been, it will be a perfect night for looking at the moon up close. So, I want to hold a moon watching party. You're all invited. I want..." She trailed off for a second, then looked at the ground. "I want to share more about myself with you guys, and I think this will be a good way to do that."

"We would love to come, Moonbeam!" Pine Needle said enthusiastically. The other ponies all nodded in agreement. "I have to be honest, I have always wondered what it would be like to look through your telescope, so I will not miss this for anything."

"We'll be more than happy to be there," Feather Down said. "What time do you want us to show up?"

"I would like to have us start at sunset," Luna replied. "I'll serve some snacks, and explain some things as the last light of the sun goes away. After that, the moon will be up and the sky should be dark enough that I can start showing you some specific things." She looked around at all of them. "This means an awful lot to me, so thank you very much."

"And thank you, Moonbeam," Haystack said. "It's never easy to host something like this, even for a small group like us. We appreciate the effort you're putting forth."

Luna felt embarrassed. "Okay then, tomorrow's the last day we need to come in, right Dewdrop?"

Dewdrop nodded. "Yes. The manager is returning tomorrow. It should be an easy shift of cleaning and straightening up. I think we have a couple of groups scheduled to arrive, but compared to the packed house we've been watching over for the last couple of days, it will seem extremely easy."

After some more small talk, the group left the inn and went their separate ways. Luna stopped by the market on the way home to pick up some food for the party. 'I could get it on the way home tomorrow,' she thought as she left with a full bag carried in her mouth by its handles, 'but I want to save as much time as I can then for setting things up and getting ready.'

Even though the thought of what she was going to do, finally reveal her true identity, had been making her nervous ever since she had decided to go through with it, she also felt calm at the same time. 'Maybe its because I know that, just a little later than this time tomorrow, the worst lie of my life will be revealed. I'll no longer have to hide. From them, or myself.' Arriving at her house, she paused just inside the front door. "Depending on how things go tomorrow," she whispered, "this might be my last night here ever." She put away the food she had bought, and then went upstairs to give her telescope another look over. She had practiced using it nightly, and now felt comfortable enough with manipulating it with just her teeth and hooves that she felt sure she wouldn't make a fool of herself tomorrow while setting it up and changing what it was looking at during the party. Finally, she laid down in her bed. Even though her emotions were still in flux, she still managed to fall asleep rather easily.

Luna stared at moon landscape with frustration. "How did I know I was going to end up here tonight?" she complained.

"Well, some might say that your coming here is your way to think things over, to talk with yourself. In more ways than one, I suppose," Nightmare Moon said with amusement from behind her.

Luna turned around. "I've been trying to avoid showing up here as much as I could. I thought I had it figured out, until tonight anyways."

Nightmare Moon looked at her gravely. "It's never wise to ignore what you're telling yourself. After all, if you can't trust yourself, who can you trust?"

"What do you want? I'm not in the mood for this," Luna griped, looking at the white, rocky soil under her hooves.

"Well, boo hoo hoo. But somepony has to talk some sense into you. If you go ahead and break the disguise tomorrow, you are aware of how bad things are going to be, right? Do you honestly believe that they will all simply forgive and forget that you've been lying to them for such a long period of time? Look, I've been thinking." Nightmare Moon slowly walked around Luna. "You're worried about being stuck as earth pony forever, aren't you? Consider, if somepony made a spell to change a unicorn into an earth pony, I don't see why it can't be done the other way around too. It isn't like we won't have eternity to work on it, and then find somepony to cast it for us down the road, after all. If worst comes to worst, I'm sure we can get our sister to do the deed for us, although I'd rather do that as a last resort."

"So," Luna said softly, still staring at the ground, "you think the best path is to stay in our disguise, and not show my friends?"

"Without a doubt!" Nightmare Moon proclaimed.

Luna raised her head, and flashed a gigantic smile at Nightmare Moon. "Thanks. Hearing you say that, it means that my plan to reveal myself is the best thing for me to do." Luna wavered for a brief moment, and then disappeared from the moon dream.

Nightmare Moon waited for a moment, to make sure Luna wasn't returning, and then started laughing maniacally.

"Sometimes," the black mare said after calming down, "it's almost too easy."

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The next day passed in a nervous blur for Luna. She, Haystack, and Pine Needle were at the inn, while Feather Down was back at her regular job. Luna and her friends were busy getting the rooms all cleaned up. Pine Needle and Haystack were carrying loads on bedsheets and towels down to the basement, where Dewdrop, with the use of her magic, was doing her best to get as many cleaned as she could. Luna, meanwhile, was working on scrubbing out the bathrooms. They had finished with the lower floor when the front door opened, accompanied by the ringing of the bell attached to it. Dewdrop rushed up to see that the hotel manager had finally returned from Canterlot.

"Welcome back, sir!" she said. "Look! The inn is still standing! Hooray!"

The manager chuckled. "How did everything go?"

"Well, that's a long story sir." Over the next ten minutes, Dewdrop filled in her boss about Lilypad and Hazelnut being ill, getting her friends to help cover on really short notice, and the near disaster that was the dinner of the first night. "We're getting everything cleaned up now, sir, I'm pretty sure we'll be done come lunch time."

"Well, I'm mightily impressed by your resourcefulness then, Dewdrop! If you don't mind, I'll head out and visit Hazelnut and Lilypad, see how they're holding up."

"Thank you, sir! Tell the girls I said hi and that I miss them, would you? I've been too busy to go visit them myself, and I feel a little bad about that."

"I'll be sure to do that." With a wave, the manager left again. Dewdrop watched him leave, then returned to her work. After an hour, she was called for by Luna to come put the finishing touches on the rooms. Using her magic, she flattened the sheets, got the towels all perfectly placed on the shelves, and dusted those hard to reach corners with a feather duster. They all gathered back downstairs for lunch just as the manager returned from visiting the ill employees.

"Ah! You must be Dewdrop's friends!" he said, going around and shaking each pony's hoof in turn. "Dewdrop told me all about what happened, and I can't thank you enough for your help. Please, let me know if there is anything I can do to help you out in the future!"

Haystack looked a little embarrassed by the praise. "We were happy to sir, especially after Dewdrop went out of her way to help us just before this when we were trying to bring in the harvest on time. Not that that's the only reason why we came, of course. She's our friend. That's all that matters, really." He gave Dewdrop a smile.

"Still!" the hotel manager said. "I owe you on top of the pay you'll be receiving. Have any of you had lunch yet?" Seeing them shake their heads no, he said, "Well then, this will be my treat! I'll take you all to the fanciest restaurant in town!"

"But sir! What about the inn? There will be no pony here to watch the place!" Dewdrop protested.

The manager chuckled. "Ah, Dewdrop, it pleases me that there are still things you do not know, so I don't have to worry about you opening your own establishment anytime soon and driving me out of business. I don't know if I could compete against a place called the 'Dewdrop Inn'. So! Let me show you a trick I have." He walked behind the front desk. "Back here, I have a mysterious device that I use in times of dire emergencies. Where did I hide that thing?" the manager muttered as he dug around in the nooks of the desk. "Aha! I have... this!" He lifted up a sign that read 'Closed – We'll Be Back Soon!'

Dewdrop put a hoof to her head and moaned as Pine Needle laughed. "Excuse me, sir?" Luna softly spoke up. "One of our friends helped out for most of the days, but had to go back to her job today. Could we stop by on the way and see if we can get Feather Down to join us for this meal?"

"Feather Down! I know her, that's your roommate that you talk about all the time, right Dewdrop?" Seeing Dewdrop nod in confirmation, he added, "We'll stop by to pick her up on the way then. I know her boss, so I'll pull some strings if I have to." The manager then hung the closed sign in the window, and held the door open for the others. Locking the door on the way out, they headed over to Feather Down's restaurant and, after a small amount of talk between the two bosses, Feather Down was free to join the group for lunch.

For Luna, the meal was another reminder of all that she had left behind over a month ago. The decor and expertly dressed wait staff reminded her of the servants and dining area back in the castle in Canterlot. Also, it was

easily the best tasting meal she had eaten since arriving in Ponyville. It made her realize that while anypony can choose good looking pieces of fruit or vegetation to eat for a meal, it takes a master of the cooking profession using just the right methods of preparation and the exact proportions of spices and seasonings to bring out the best in a meal.

After lunch, they returned to the inn. After an easy afternoon, the manager let them leave a few hours early, and the friends went their separate ways. "We'll see you later tonight, Moonbeam!" Haystack said as he left, and the others echoed his words. Luna headed home, suddenly unsure as to what she wanted to do.

At home, she double checked that she had all the snacks that she wanted to serve that night ready, and soon found herself with hours to go before having anything planned. Finally, she left her house and just started to wander randomly. Soon, she was walking through the outskirts of town, in an area that she knew she hadn't spent much time in, but yet seemed familiar to her. Looking around, she gasped in recognition. She galloped up a hill, and upon reaching the top, looked back at where she had come from.

'This is where I first saw Ponyville. Right before I cast that spell.' For a while, she just stood there, taking it all in, reminiscing over all that had happened since then, what seemed like a lifetime ago.

"In a way," Luna whispered, "it has been a lifetime. Moonbeam's lifetime." Suddenly, she found her legs could no longer hold her up, and she was curling up on the ground, sobbing. 'Why am I crying?' she thought. And then it hit her. She was mourning. Mourning what was to be the end of everything that she had come to know over the past weeks. 'It could end up better. It may result in something worse. But while it lasted, it was fun.'

'I just wish it didn't have to end.'

Luna lost track of time, but knew that as long as she got home before the sun started to sink below the horizon, she would be fine. So, she just rested there for a while, crying until no more tears came. Finally, a rumble in her stomach let her know she was getting hungry, so she picked herself up from the grass and headed home. After eating, she took a long bath, doing her best to get rid of any signs of her earlier breakdown. Looking outside, she saw that there was maybe an hour left until sunset. She decided it was late enough, and started to get everything ready.



First, she drug her telescope out onto the deck, and set it up roughly where the moon would be in a short while. Next, she went and got the plate of snacks she had prepared and placed them on her table. Then, she went and got her pouch with the moonstone in it, and placed it on the pillow of her bed. 'I'll just have to make sure Feather Down doesn't break my spell early,' Luna thought to herself, a small chuckle escaping from her throat at the thought.

Finally, she ran out of things to do. She walked out onto her deck and watched the sun set, glancing constantly at the road below, looking for her friends. Time dragged on, and doubts started to fill her. 'I don't have to reveal myself,' she thought to herself. 'There are other ways I could do this! I could say I had a family emergency come up, and leave town and break the spell when nopony is close by. Then they'll never have to know!'

As soon as she finished the thought, she knew that wasn't what she wanted. 'No. After everything they've done, I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror without despising myself. After all the risks they took on me, for me to just run away, without even saying goodbye?' Her train of thought was interrupted from a holler down below. Turning, she saw that her friends had finally arrived. "One second!" Luna called down to them as they turned off the road to approach her front door.

Dashing downstairs, she got to the door before her friends did and held it open for them. "Thank you all for coming!" she said with enthusiasm that she didn't quite feel.

"We thank you for having us!" Pine Needle proclaimed.

"Yes, I've been looking forward to this ever since you told us about it," Dewdrop said. "I've never been to a moon party before, what exactly do we do?"

"Well, there really isn't anything official about this. It's something I've made up," Luna admitted. "But there are a few things that I thought of, so hopefully this won't be a complete flop."

"Moonbeam, don't stress yourself out," Haystack said. "Unless the moon somehow manages to disappear on us, I think we'll be entertained by what we do tonight."

"Well," Luna said, gesturing with a foreleg at the table, "first, help yourself. While you snack on those, I'll do my best to explain what we'll be doing in a short bit, after it gets dark enough to be able to view the moon properly." The other ponies all crowded around the table, and soon, they were all nibbling on various crackers and slices of fruit.

When everypony had their attention focused on her again, Luna started to speak. "First off, one thing I want all of you to understand through this is just how big the moon really is. Most ponies, when they look up into the night sky, the idea of what size the moon is never crosses their mind. If you were to ask them, they would most likely say that it is the size of an apple. Which is what it looks like in a way."

Luna started to walk around the room, getting into her explanation as she started using gestures to emphasize certain points. "But consider the mountains on the horizon all around us. They look no bigger than a house from far away, but we know that the closer we get, the taller they grow, until we find ourselves at their base, and having to lay on our back to be able to take in their towering heights without spraining our necks. Consider then, that while we can walk to those far off mountains, that no pegasus has ever been able to fly high enough to reach the moon. That's how far away it is. For it to still be visible in the sky as it is, it is literally its own world above us. I know you won't be able to really appreciate this until you see it through the telescope, but trust me, it's amazing when it finally sinks in just what you are looking at.

"There will be a couple of different features I will be pointing out to you that will help get this across. My personal favorites are what are called seas, or in the older languages that researchers and astronomers from long ago used, mares. It may be pronounced as mah-ray, but it is spelled just like a female pony, or a mare."

Feather Down raised a hoof. "So, there's water on the moon then? For there to be seas?"

Luna shook her head. "No. That was what they thought those dark areas on the moon were long ago, but once telescopes were developed, ponies could see that there wasn't any water on the moon. However, the name stuck around." Luna looked out through a window. The sun had set, and the sky was turning dark. "Okay, I think we can head on up when you're all

done. I'll need a minute or so to get the telescope properly set for what I want to show you first, so please bear with me."

Her friends finished with their snacks, and they all headed up the stairs and then outside onto Luna's deck. The nights of practice that Luna had put in with the telescope were finally paying off. She was able to align it quickly, and without any fumbling. "First up, we'll be looking at one of the larger craters on the moon. Astronomers believe this was created when a falling star landed on the moon long ago, creating a giant impact. Pay attention to how high the crater wall goes up."

One by one, her friends all took their turn. And one by one, they all had to be almost forcibly pushed aside by the next in line, they became so enraptured by the sight. Finally, Luna was able to get Haystack to give up his spot at the telescope, and she started to adjust where it was aimed. "Next up," she said when her teeth weren't busy turning knobs on the telescope to change where it was aimed, "we will look at one of the mares I was talking about. This one has the name 'Mare Tranquillitatis', which in the ancient tongue means 'Sea of Tranquility'."

Haystack insisted they reverse their order from the last go around, and after they all agreed, he got to look first at the lunar sea. As before, ponies had to be almost dragged away from the telescope so the next could have a turn. Luna had been worried that this portion of the night would go by too quickly, but she was starting to realize that she could probably spend the entire night just changing where the telescope was pointing, and never have to reveal herself. Again, she forced such thoughts out of her head. 'I can't back out now!'

Over the next hour, she showcased a couple more craters and another mare. She could see that her friends, while still greatly enjoying themselves, were also starting to feel the effects of the late hour. 'This is it,' she thought, 'I need to do it now, before they get too tired to understand what I'm doing.' Suddenly, without warning, she felt herself starting to cry again.

"Moonbeam, what is wrong?" Pine Needle asked. "Those do not look like tears of joy."

Luna took a deep, ragged breath which quickly got everypony's attention focused on her. "I'm, I'm so happy you all enjoyed this part of the night. But,

I have something..." she took another deep breath, trying to ignore the alarmed look on the faces of her friends. "I have to tell you something, before it eats me away from inside!" She blurted out in one big rush.

Concern and worry showed on the faces of her friends, and Luna motioned for them to follow her into her bedroom. Once they were all inside, she looked at her bed and said, "I've been a terrible friend to all of you, and I'm so very, very sorry."

A silence hung in the room, and finally Dewdrop spoke up. "Hun, you're scaring us, talking like this. I don't know what you think you have to apologize for, but you have not been a terrible friend to us at all!"

"That's right!" Feather Down chimed in. "Please, tell us what's wrong, so we can help you, Moonbeam."

"That, that is the problem. My name isn't Moonbeam." Luna walked over to the bed, picked up the pouch with her teeth, and shook the moonstone onto the floor.

Seeing all her friends staring at her in complete confusion, she dropped the bag to one side and bowed her head deeply. "Dewdrop, the pony you found all those weeks ago on the edge of town, was not the pony who was there even minutes before. Moonbeam has been a cover, a disguise..." Another deep breath filled the silence. "It has all been a lie," she whispered.

Finally, Pine Needle broke the silence. "I can not even pretend to understand what you are saying. What do you mean, disguise?"

"I cast a spell. A disguise spell."

"Wait a minute," Dewdrop interrupted. "Earth ponies can't cast spells!"

"I'm not an earth pony," Luna whispered. "I'm not Moonbeam. I really am..." She raised her hoof above the moonstone. After a brief wait, a short delay not so much born of hesitation but of savoring what she had been for one last instance, she brought her hoof down onto the moonstone, shattering it with a stomp.

From underneath Luna's hoof, light erupted, filling the room with a dazzling array of streams of light. Luna again found herself being lifted off of the

ground, but instead of experiencing pain, she felt joy and comfort. She could feel her wings and horn slowly reappear, and only then did she truly understand just how incomplete she had felt without them. She looked around the room, and saw her friends all staring at her, mouths wide open, eyes filled with shock and awe. Her coat and cutie mark returned to their proper shades and shape, and then Luna felt something else start to enter her. 'It must be my magic returning,' she thought.

Suddenly, a giant boom shook her house, as the light exploded from her, leaving Luna to collapse to the ground like an overripe apple finally becoming too heavy for its stem. The windows were blown out, turning into small clouds of shattered glass to fall onto the lawn outside. Her friends were picked up by the wave of force and slammed into the walls, hard.

Luna got to her feet shakily, staring in horror at how the spell had finished. Her friends were all splayed out on the floor, moaning in pain. Her bed had even been tossed onto its side. 'No!' she thought, 'It wasn't supposed to hurt them like this! This shouldn't have happened! Why? Why?'

In her head, another voice replied, 'They will hate you for this.'

"No." Luna protested softly, as the other ponies groaned and slowly tried to get upright.

'Yes,' replied the other voice. 'Look in their eyes. I see shock. Fear. Pain.'

Luna moaned in despair. Indeed, the eyes of her friends were wide open, full of shock, unable to focus on anything but her.

'Run,' said the voice. 'Run now, before they turn on you out of fear. You don't want to hurt them anymore, do you?'

Luna, eyes filled with tears, did as the voice told her, and fled down the stairs and out the door. Blindly, she felt herself being gently guided away from town, and let herself be taken away from the disaster she had caused.

Back in the house, Feather Down was the first to regain her senses enough to ask out loud, "What just happened? Was that really Princess Luna?"

"Princess Luna?" Haystack asked. "Are you sure?"

"It had to have been," Dewdrop replied. "Even if I hadn't seen her at the Summer Sun Celebration a couple of months ago, just the fact that she had both wings and a horn narrows the options down to two. And that wasn't Princess Celestia."

Haystack nodded slowly in agreement. "Okay then, so one of the two royal princesses was somehow Moonbeam? I mean, I guess there is no denying it, but I just can't grasp it at all!" He looked around at the others. "What are we even supposed to do about this?"

Pine Needle finally stood up, the last to do so, and looked around. "We need to go after her. That's what we do." The others turned to look at him. "Only one pony can explain to us why Princess Luna did what she did, and I would like to hear it from her own mouth. It was obvious she was hurting." He looked each of the others in the eye. "She is our friend. To not do at least that much for her, would be criminal." The others all nodded slowly in agreement.

Dewdrop stepped forward. "Okay then. Haystack, quick, get in the sky, try to track her down from above. She left on hoof, and not on wing. I don't know why, but that gives us a chance to catch up to her. We'll follow behind." Haystack ran out onto the deck and took off, while the others ran down the stairs and out the front door, hoping to be able to somehow track down and catch the fleeing princess.

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In Canterlot, Celestia was just about to turn in for the night when she felt the spell on Luna break. She quickly headed over to her desk and, using her magic, wrote a letter quickly. 'Twilight Sparkle, it seems that Luna has finally decided to break the disguise spell. Could you please go over to her house and make sure that she is all right? Thank you very much, Princess Celestia.' She sent the scroll away with a spell and waited for a reply. A minute later, another scroll appeared in front of her. With her horn glowing, she opened it up and read it out loud to herself.

"Princess Celestia, I am happy to hear that princess Luna has finally decided to stop hiding behind that terrible spell. However, since me and my friends are currently on our way to Appleloosa to deliver an apple tree, and won't be arriving until the day after tomorrow, I am unable to check in on how princess Luna is doing..." Celestia stared at the letter for a short while,

then let it drop to the floor. She suddenly recalled Twilight mentioning something about a trip out to the frontier village in her previous letter, but hadn't paid it much attention. Finally, her shock wore off, and she galloped out of her room.

"Guards! To me!" Two armored pegasi stallions quickly arrived in front of her. "With all haste, get a cloud chariot, and follow me to Ponyville! I don't know what awaits us there, but prepare for the worst. I will go on ahead." Without even waiting to see if they understood, Celestia rushed to the nearest open window and dove through it, taking wing and flying towards Ponyville as fast as she could.

'Hold tight sister, I'm coming as fast as I can!'

# Chapter 10

## Through Thick and Thin

After waking up, her first thought had been, 'I'm still alive?' The end had seemed inescapable, in the form of a prismatic whirlwind bearing down on her. It had enveloped her, blinded her with its literal rainbow of colors. And then, only blackness. No, less than that. Emptiness.

But she had woken up, and it looked like she was right back where she had been for the last thousand years. The moon, in all of its barren glory. 'So, is it another millennium here for me then?' she thought, despair overwhelming her in her failure. At that point, she had wanted to simply lie down, and never move again. Her plan had worked perfectly! Her sister, Celestia, had been removed from the equation with no problem. Her freedom had been gained. And still, the Elements of Harmony had somehow been there, waiting to banish her again.

What was an incarnation of darkness to do?

To her amazement, however, a sliver of hope appeared. However strong those little ponies Celestia had rounded up to be her surrogate Elements of Harmony had been, they had lacked experience in using that power. While they had been able to dispatch her with ease, the seal they had left on her imprisonment was weak, and full of holes for her to exploit. In a matter of a few weeks, she was already able to reach across the void and influence things from afar. Small things, such as making matters hard for Luna. Keeping her off balance by speaking to her in her dreams, and creating a sense of unease in those around her when Celestia wasn't close enough to notice.

That was what irked Nightmare Moon the most. That somehow, while she was banished away, the other part of her, the fragment that really had no business being out and about, was free to do what she wanted. That simpering and bashful little waif! If the positions were reversed, Nightmare Moon had no doubt she would be in charge of Equestria by now, and her other half would still be crying, coming close to flooding a crater with her tears most likely.



Finally, she had been able to take advantage of the gift dropped into her saddlebags. She had maneuvered Luna into making an grievous error. She kept on filling her head with dark thoughts, manipulating her. It wouldn't be long now, until Nightmare Moon would be able to force her way back into control again. This time, she knew what to do, and how to stop those Elements of Harmony.

This time, she was going to win!

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Dewdrop, Pine Needle, and Feather Down ran through the outskirts of Ponyville, doing their best to keep Haystack in view above them. The late hour both helped and hindered them. With it bedtime for most of the inhabitants of town, there were no other ponies on the roads and paths to get in their way. However, the night sky made it harder to see their pegasus friend. If the moon hadn't been full in the sky, their pursuit would likely have been doomed from the start.

Soon, they found themselves leaving Ponyville behind, and the flora around them grew thicker. Finally, they reached a bridge, and the road beyond it quickly degenerated into nothing more than a rough outline of a trail. Despite their urgency to keep pushing forward, they found themselves stopping. In front of them stood the Everfree Forest, a land where things simply worked differently. Where instead of rabbits and birds, creatures fantastic and often carnivorous lived. Haystack came swooping back after seeing them pull up short, and landed next to them.

"We're closing the gap, but whatever progress we've made we're letting slip away right now," Haystack said, taking the chance to catch his breath.

Dewdrop grimaced. "I know, I know. It's just... I've heard stories about this place. And none of them the happy kind either."

Pine Needle shifted his balance back and forth, from one hoof to another. "I don't like it. It feels different. Nothing at all like your farm, or the rest of Ponyville for that matter."

Feather Down let out a scream of frustration. "No! I'm not going to stop here, not after coming this far. If we were going to stop the moment it got

difficult, we should never have started out in the first place." With that, she dashed off into the woods.

Haystack looked at his other two friends. "I won't blame you if you stay behind."

Dewdrop shook her head. "No. I'm going. I just needed to gather myself. Feather Down is right."

Pine Needle nodded in agreement. As one, they took off, galloping into the forest, and Haystack flew back into the sky.

A short ways in, Feather Down rejoined her two friends on the ground, relief plain on her face. "Oh, thank the sun and the moon you guys came. I don't know how far in I could have gone by myself. Especially during the night, it just seems ten times scarier in the dark. I'm sorry I yelled at you like that!"

"That's all right, hun," Dewdrop said. "We needed it to keep us going."

Despite their fears, the biggest danger they faced over the next hour was losing their way. The thick canopy above made it hard to keep Haystack in sight, and the ill defined path made it difficult for the ponies to keep going in the right direction. Occasionally, Haystack had to return to the group to have them backtrack and take a different branch than the one they were following. Eventually the path became more of a regular road again, arriving at a rope bridge that stretched across a cavernous gap, shrouded in fog. Haystack flew across first, checking to make sure that there were no gaps in the bridge that couldn't be seen from the edge, and then, one by one, they crossed to see a large stone ruin up ahead. The moon was high in the sky now, and illuminated the area with an eerie white light.

"She went in there a while ago," Haystack said once they were all together on the far side of the chasm. As one, they walked forward to the keep.

Nightmare Moon looked around. She had managed to drag Luna all the way out here, and had the alicorn curled up in a ball in the room where she had been brought down before by the Elements of Harmony. Extending her senses, Nightmare Moon could feel the strands of power that had been torn from her, that had been stolen from the magnificent body she had once had. Without it, she had been forced to assume the form of the younger

shape the body was currently in. She had started to slowly gather in the threads and weave them back together when she felt the presence of others enter the abandoned keep.

She left Luna alone for a moment, trusting that the princess wouldn't fully escape from her influence right away. Using the small dregs of power she had already reclaimed, she flew as a near invisible spirit to investigate. Doubts began to fill her head; had Celestia actually anticipated this happening? Were the Elements of Harmony already here?

Nightmare Moon struggled not to break out in relieved laughter when she saw who the trespassers were. 'It's only Luna's friends! Nothing for me to worry about at all. I doubt they'll even be able to get past this!' Using the limited magic she had at her disposal, she shattered the rusted remains of a lock that had been holding a portcullis up for hundreds of years. With a loud crash, the pitted, vine wrapped gate dropped, blocking the entrance to the inner keep from the outside. 'That should stop them, or at least keep those feeble foals busy long enough for me to finish my work.'

Luna's friends slowly proceeded into the outer courtyard of the ruins. The loud crashing sound a moment ago had brought them all up short, and they were now advancing slowly, watching for one of the feared creatures of the Everfree Forest to suddenly show itself. Haystack frowned when he saw the lowered portcullis. "That wasn't lowered before. I know I saw Luna run up through that gate before I turned back to meet up with you guys again. That has to be what we just heard."

The ponies walked up to the portcullis and peered through. Dewdrop frowned. "I only see one set of hoofprints, and they go upward. This doesn't add up. If Luna had closed the gate on her way through, it should have been lowered a while ago, not just now." She turned to Haystack. "Are there any other ways into this place?"

"I don't know. Let me check." Haystack took off, flying around the keep and quickly out of sight. Feather Down tried sticking her head through one of the gaps in the portcullis, but could only stick the front part of her muzzle through one of the small gaps. She then tried pushing up on it with her forelegs, but saw no discernible effect for her efforts. Pine Needle kept a watch over the area, and Dewdrop peered through the gate.

"You know," Dewdrop muttered, "I think I can see how this is supposed to work. That chain there is connected to the gate," she pointed with a hoof to Feather Down, who had given up on trying to lift the portcullis by herself, "and it then runs over there, to that pulley, and down to the crank. That's how it's raised."

Feather Down nodded. "I think you're right. Look on the ground over by the crank there, something is broken, although I can't make out what it is." Haystack returned from his scouting, cutting short their discussion.

"It's no good. The only other ways in that I could see were some windows. I could get in, but that still leaves all of you out here."

Feather Down pointed at the crank. "Any way you can get to that and turn it? We think that will open the gate."

Haystack took off, and landed again shortly. "There's no way to get into that room directly. I could try another way in, and try to work my way back to here, but..." Haystack looked uncomfortable at the thought. "There's something else. When I was flying around, I saw some flashes of light from near the top of the keep. Something is happening up there."

"Stand back." Dewdrop walked up next to the gate. "Let's see if all that practice I got at the harvest will pay off." Taking a few moments to focus her magic, Dewdrop focused on the crank, and a ray of magic flew from her horn and through the portcullis. The crank glowed briefly, but other than that there was no visible effect from Dewdrop's magic.

Haystack spoke up. "Look, I'll go find another way in, work my way back here, maybe with my help, we can..."

"No," Dewdrop interrupted. "You said something is happening. We might not have time. I know I can do this!" Dewdrop turned to face the crank again, and built up as much power as she could before unleashing it upon the crank. This time, she kept on pushing past the first moment of nothing happening, and just when it looked like she was about to collapse, the gate shook, and slowly crept up a couple of inches.

"Yes!" Pine Needle cheered. "Quick, everypony help!" Putting action to his words, Pine Needle quickly got his nose under the bottom rung of the gate and did his best to help lift it up. Soon, Feather Down and Haystack were

aiding too, and the gate climbed over a foot off the ground. Feather Down dropped onto her belly, shimmied under the portcullis, and ran to the crank where she added her strength to turning it. Soon, the portcullis was a couple of feet off the ground.

Pine Needle looked at Haystack. "How do we get Dewdrop through?"

"I'll take care of that. Help Feather Down with the crank, try to keep it from winding back down as long as you can." Pine Needle did as instructed, and Haystack turned to Dewdrop. "Just a few more seconds! Hold on!"

Taking to the air, Haystack flew out, and then circled back in towards Dewdrop, building up as much speed as he could. Crashing into her, he knocked the pair of them under the gate. Doing so disrupted Dewdrop's concentration, but Feather Down and Pine Needle were able to halt the movement of the crank long enough to allow their friends to tumble under the iron barrier before it came crashing down again behind them.

Dewdrop moaned in pain. "I don't suppose you could have found an easier, less painful way to do that?" she asked as she slowly stood back up.

Haystack gave her a sheepish grin. "It was the only thing that came to my mind at the moment. I'm sorry." He turned to look at the portcullis, once again closed. "Well, there's no turning back now. Let's head on up and try to find Luna."

Nightmare Moon continued to slowly gather strands of power. It was a slow and tedious process, made even longer by having to keep Luna under her hoof. The stupid mare just wouldn't be content to let her do as she please! She kept trying to ask where she was, and what she was doing here. It was becoming a hassle to have to keep on reminding her of all of the wrongs she had committed. Still, the fact that she was being given the time to do so, to keep rubbing salt in the wounds, so to speak, of the depressed princess meant she really had all the time she needed at this point. After a wait of over a thousand years, a few more minutes didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things.

Her train of thought was brought to a stop when she heard a crashing sound come from down below. Checking to make sure that Luna wasn't about to go anywhere, Nightmare Moon flew back down through several passageways to see what was going on. Now a small cloud of dark energy,

she had to be careful to avoid being seen by others. She still had no problem stealthily looking down at the courtyard from above to see that Luna's friends had somehow gotten through the gateway.

"I tried to be nice to them, I really did," she muttered as she retreated a short ways. "I figured I owed them that much for making it possible for me to do this. But no! They just won't leave well enough alone." She flew most of the ways back to where Luna was, stopping in a chamber just a flight of stairs down from where she was doing her work.

"I might not have the magical strength yet to create a real monster to defeat them," she said as she spent some of the energy she had collected to cast a spell, "but all I need is time. This illusion should keep them from moving forward until I'm strong enough to take care of them personally, once and for all."

A dark flash of magical energy lit the room, and a large, bipedal form appeared, dominating the area next to the stairs leading up. It had a tan, chitinous covering, and a face that looked like it belonged on an insect. At the end of its massive arms were two giant, crab like pincers. From its back several dark tendrils of energy waved menacingly. With a loud bellow, the hulking form flexed and then planted its feet, staring at the far side of the room. Nightmare Moon nodded in approval. "That should do the trick. And now, back to work!" She flew back to where Luna was, and seeing her start to stir, Nightmare Moon once again swooped in to torment her. 'Can't have her leaving now, not when I'm so close to success!'

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Princess Celestia glided around the house where Luna had lived for the past month. All of the second story windows had been destroyed, and now laid as patches of broken glass on the lawn surrounding the building. Spying the front door ajar, she landed and walked in. Glancing around the sparsely furnished room, she saw a mostly empty plate of snacks sitting on the lone table on the bottom floor. A quick glance inside the kitchen revealed nothing out of the ordinary, and so she climbed the stairs. On the upper floor, she saw that the bedroom was a mess, despite having so little in it. A bed had been tossed onto its side and leaned against a wall, and the walls showed several small indentations in them. She poked her head into the bathroom, and seeing no clues to anypony's whereabouts, opened

the closet. Inside, she found a set of saddlebags, and the spellbook Teakettle's Tome of Transformations.

Celestia paused, the sight of the tome a minor shock. This was the book that had put everything into motion, that had enabled Luna to leave Canterlot and embark on this journey. Seeing the mess it had now made, she wished that she had taken Luna back home when she had first discovered where she was staying. 'I could have prevented this,' she thought, trying to keep up a stoic front as her stomach wrenched in guilt. 'I *should* have prevented this.'

Somberly, she resumed her search. Poking her head outside, she saw a telescope lying on its side. No clues at all. She wasn't sure what she would find, if anything, but she had been hoping that Luna would still be in the area. Instead, she was at a dead end. The best she could do would be to search the area, and hope to stumble upon her sister. 'Where would she go though?' Celestia wondered as she headed back downstairs. 'Does she even have a destination in mind? For all I know, she might have gone back to Canterlot, and I'm just wasting my time here.'

Outside, she watched the two pegasus guards land with a cloud chariot outside on the road. She was impressed by how quickly they had gotten the conveyance hitched up and then followed after her. They stood at attention, and awaited her orders.

Celestia went out to meet them. "I don't know where Luna is. She was here a short while ago, but has since left. Leave the chariot here for now. We'll spread out and try to find her. Please try to avoid waking or troubling any of the residents if you can. I don't want to alarm them. If anyone sees something, fly up high and then head back here as fast as you can, and circle tightly. That will be the signal for us to regroup here, and then decide on a course of action." She sighed. "I wish I had a better plan."

The pegasi guards saluted her, and they all flew away, slowly fanning out and scanning the area for any signs of the other princess.

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What had started out as randomly searching through the ruins for a way up was soon made easier by flashes of light erupting from elsewhere in the keep. Without a plan, Luna's friends followed the display until they came to

a set of stairs that led upwards. Climbing to the top, they came to a large chamber with several other doors down the sides. On the far end, they saw another set of stairs heading up, from which the flashes seemed to emanating. They were brought up short when they saw that their way was blocked by some sort of monstrosity.

On the far side of the room, the hulking beast roared loudly, and brought its two pincer like claws together with a loud crash. Tentacles from its back waved fearsomely and slowly around it, making it seem even bigger than it already was. The only solace the ponies had was the fact that the thing seemed more than comfortable just standing where it was.

"So, what is that thing? A guard?" Feather Down asked, trying to break the uncomfortable silence that had settled over their group.

"That's what it looks like to me," Haystack replied. "Whatever it is. What do we do? None of us are the fighting type, I can't see us battling it out with it."

Dewdrop shook her head. "Luna is pulling out all of the stops to keep us away, isn't she? This is so frustrating"

"I'm not turning back." Feather Down said, staring at the creature, who in turn simply looked impassively at the group conferring across the room from it. "Look, its just one thing, right? There's four of us. We just need to split up, get it to chase one of us. Then the rest of us can get past it and ask Luna to call it off. Shoot, if one of us can do that, get past it and up to Luna, that would be enough. I can't believe that she wants to hurt us, even now. She probably doesn't know we're here is all, and is afraid of... well I don't know what, but something else."

"Let's try all shouting then," Haystack suggested. "If she hears us, and knows we're here, maybe she'll tell that thing to stand down?"

They all lined up and started hollering. "Luna! It's us! Your friends! Let us up! We just want to talk!"

Upstairs, Luna was still curled up in a ball on a small dais near the far end of the room. Nightmare Moon hovered around her, slowly becoming more and more visible and whole. Hearing the voices of her friends, Luna slowly opened her eyes, and peered around. Seeing her interest, Nightmare Moon flew down. "They are angry at you," she whispered into Luna's ear. "They



want to yell at you, accuse you of being a terrible friend. All they want to do is tell you off, and then leave, feeling better about themselves for doing so. I've put up a barrier to keep them from getting here, so just ignore them. Don't worry, I'll make sure they don't bother you. I'll take care of you. Just lay back down, and get some rest. You're tired, after all. I'll watch out for you."

The hypnotic words lulled Luna, and she put her head back down and closed her eyes again.

Down below, after a few minutes, her friends gave up yelling. "Either we're not loud enough, or she's ignoring us." Dewdrop said.

"So, let's try getting past that thing, make her respond to us!" Feather Down said, her frustration at the situation starting to show on her face. "Haystack, you go high and approach it from the left, I'll come in from the right. Dewdrop, toss a rock or two at that thing with your magic, try to distract it some."

"What about me?" Pine Needle asked.

"I don't know," Feather Down admitted. "Keep an eye open, we may need you to pull our cutie marks out of the fire. Or maybe an opening will show up for you to get through. Just be ready, I guess?" Seeing Pine Needle nod, she turned to Haystack. "Let's go!"

Haystack took to the air, a good ten feet up in the cavernous room they were in, as Feather Down dashed off to the side. The creature, which had been content to stand there and let them deliberate, suddenly let out a roar. The tentacles on his back became agitated, swaying about with increased activity. Without moving from where it stood, it swung its tentacles at Haystack, while at the same time sweeping one of its pincers in a wide arc close to the ground in an effort to slam Feather Down. Haystack managed to pull up short, out of the reach of the tentacles. Feather Down however had to throw herself to one side to avoid being clobbered, and in the process tripped on a piece of debris and tumbled into the far wall.

Pine Needle ran forward to check on Feather Down, and a couple of rocks launched by Dewdrop filled the gap between the monster and her fallen friend. Still, the creature didn't seem to be interested in pursuing the fallen earth pony, and kept its guard on the stairs heading up. Haystack tried

swooping in from several different angles, but the tentacles always filled in any gaps before he could even get close enough to risk dashing through.

Feather Down finally got back on her hooves, and shook her head to clear it. "I'm okay!" she yelled at Pine Needle, who had been unsure on how to get close enough to help her without getting in reach of the monster.

"Dewdrop, aim at the thing's head!" Haystack continued his efforts as Dewdrop flung a few rocks at the creature's face. In response, the beast simply dodged the hurled projectiles, maintaining its position. Haystack found himself a little too close, and had to dive to the side quickly as a tentacle almost clipped him. Forced to land, he retreated back to where Pine Needle stood. Feather Down ran back to the others as Dewdrop came up.

"I'm running out of rocks," Dewdrop said. "And ideas, for that matter."

"One more try then," Feather Down said. "We need to be able to make it move!"

Again, Haystack and Feather Down charged from differing heights and sides, and Dewdrop flung more stones at the beast. Once more, the ponies found their paths easily blocked. Dewdrop threw several rocks at once, and made the beast duck down as several almost hit it in the head. Seeing a chance, Haystack flew forward, but the tentacles were too fast. Pulling hard to the side, Haystack found himself barreling into a wall to avoid being entangled by the wicked looking appendages.

Pine Needle frowned. "Something isn't right," he muttered.

"How so, hun?" Dewdrop asked gathering together a few more stones with her magic for another barrage.

"If it's so big and strong, why is it dodging those small rocks you toss at it? Why does it always miss when it swings at them? It seems fast enough it should be able to connect."

Dewdrop glared at Pine Needle. "Let's not be wishing ill fortune on our friends, okay?"

Pine Needle growled. "That is not what I meant, and you know it. That thing looks like it could take on and defeat all of us without any effort, and yet it is

okay with just keeping us at bay? And why here, and not say at the top of the last stairs we just came up? Wouldn't that be a better position for it to defend from?"

Dewdrop shook her head. "I don't know what to tell you except to be thankful? We need to get a feeling for how it acts, find a way past it somehow!" She flung several more stones at it, forcing the creature to twist to one side to let the rocks pass it.

With a thoughtful look at Dewdrop, Pine Needle nodded. "You may be on to something." With that, he closed his eyes.

"Um, hun, now isn't the best of times to be pulling a Feather Down impersonation!" Dewdrop said, trying to hit the creature but only to watch as it dodged or ducked from her attacks.

Pine Needle ignored her, and tried to calm himself. It took a lot of effort to ignore the instructions being yelled back and forth between his friends, and the danger of the situation. He managed to do so, and soon he found himself centered enough to reach out with his earth pony magic and try to feel what was around him. Right away, he felt where Dewdrop was standing, just off to his side. Further ahead, he could sense Feather Down, moving about here and there. Briefly, Haystack landed on the ground, leaving a quick ripple, like a frog jumping into a pond.

He then reached out as far as he could go. At his limit, at the edge of what he could perceive, he felt something else without actually seeing it, in the same manner that the light of the sun brightens the morning sky even before it breaks the horizon. 'That must be Luna, by how strong it is,' he thought, scanning around, trying to pick up signs of anything else.

But he felt nothing but his friends.

Opening his eyes, he bent his head down, scraped a hoof on the ground, and charged straight at the beast, yelling incoherently. Haystack stared in surprise at his friend's sudden suicidal action. "Pine Needle! NO!" he yelled, trying to swoop in to stop him, but unable to because of a tentacle placing itself between him and his friend. Feather Down and Dewdrop just stared at Pine Needle in shock. The beast raised its pincers above its head and swung them down at him, right on target, ready to cave the charging pony's head in.

Only to have them pass right through him, followed by Pine Needle leaping straight through the creature's chest. A roar of frustration came from the monster, and Pine Needle stopped on the bottom of the stairs heading up. Turning around and looking back he said, "It is not real. I could not sense any life coming from it at all. Close your eyes if you have to, but come on. It can do nothing to stop us other than to scare us from moving forward." Seeing that his friends were still stunned, he walked back through the illusion again, and gently started pushing Dewdrop towards the stairs up.

"Okay, okay!" Dewdrop protested, finally walking forward herself. She flinched when she saw the monster take a swipe at her, but when the pincer passed harmlessly through her, she straightened up. "Well, how about that! How did you know?"

Pine Needle gave a small shrug. "Like I told you before, it just didn't seem right, the way that it was acting. And then you told me to get a feel for what it was doing, which gave me the idea to try using mine magic. I could sense all of us, but nothing from it." He smiled. "Luna is up ahead." As a group, the ponies walked up the final set of stairs.

Upon reaching the top, they were brought to a halt by a sight that was hard to comprehend. At the far end of the smaller room, on a raised area of the floor, Luna laid on the ground, eyes closed and motionless. All around her, a dark, menacing aura swirled, clinging and wrapping itself around her. A hiss of aggravation emanated from the miasma, and it then formed itself into the shape of a tall mare, dark as the night. Lightning flashed around Luna and lit the night sky, which could be seen through a large hole in roof. The full moon was starting to peek in from above.

"You meddlesome foals! Why did you persist in coming here? There is nothing you can do to stop me!" Nightmare Moon yelled at them, hoping to intimidate them.

The ponies cringed in fear at the apparition. Haystack fell to his knees, and whispered, "That, is that actually Nightmare Moon? They said she was defeated by the Elements of Harmony!"

Nightmare Moon laughed. "That's right, there is nothing that you *friends*" the word was spoken with such malice and disdain that it made them flinch, "can do for Luna. Soon, I will be whole again, and I can have my revenge

on Princess Celestia and those Elements of Harmony. Leave now, and I won't go out of my way to make you suffer."

"Luna, wake up!" Dewdrop yelled, trying her best to ignore the histrionics of the evil mare. "What are you doing, just lying there? Get up and away from that... that thing!"

Luna slowly stirred, and opened her eyes enough to see who was speaking. Nightmare Moon lowered her head down next to Luna's. "See? Those no good, supposed friends of yours are here to taunt you. Tell them to go away."

"Why did you follow me?" Luna asked, softly and weakly. "All I ever did was hurt you, and take advantage of you." Nightmare Moon turned and grinned wickedly at the ponies.

"What are you talking about?" Haystack asked. "What do you mean, take advantage of us?"

Nightmare Moon cackled. "Oh, it's all so obvious. She took advantage of the mares when she first arrived to Ponyville, after all. Mooching off of them for shelter and succor. And you two stallions, using you as a mean to have a job. She never really cared about you all!"

"Lies!" Feather Down yelled.

"Ah, yes, lies." Nightmare Moon replied. "How many did she tell you? How often did she do so, just by answering to the name of Moonbeam, and not Luna? Think of how she hid behind a fake image, a false pretext. Was anything she said or did while you knew her the truth?"

The four ponies all fell silent for a moment. "You are correct, in that she did hide who she was," Pine Needle stated slowly. "But I know you are wrong on the premise that all she did was lie. I can not know what her reasons were, or why she did as she did. But to say that everything she did was false is something I can not believe."

"That's right!" Dewdrop said. "I would love to hear her story! I can't imagine, after how well I got to know her, that she did what she did for a frivolous or petty reason. And you ignore one huge fact. While we may have been led to believe she was a different pony on the outside, I know for certain that,

after all we went through together, we got to know the pony on the inside very well. And that pony would never do as you claim!"

Hearing words spoke in her defense made Luna raise her head and start to cry. "But, I betrayed all of you! I was such a terrible friend, I don't deserve such kind words spoken about me. I hurt you all so much!"

Haystack took a step forward. "You hurt us, yes. We did feel betrayed some. But would we have come all this way if we didn't still care for you, and want to be your friend?"

"And what do you mean, a terrible friend?" Feather Down asked. "You were a great friend, a pony I considered to be one of my best friends of all!"

"All I did was take though..." Luna started, but was cut off angrily by Dewdrop.

"Nonsense! How were you taking from me, when in a time of crisis, I came to you for help at the inn? If all you were doing was taking, you wouldn't have helped me, let alone get the rest of our friends to chip in too!" Dewdrop stomped the ground hard. "Without your help, I would have been a complete mess, a wreck, a failure!"

Pine Needle stepped forward, next to Haystack. "So many other ponies are too quick to disregard anything I say, because they think I talk funny, or because I believe in some things that they do not. But you always took the time to listen, to help me out! At the welcoming party, you not only helped me stop making an idiot of myself, but took the effort to keep me away from Applejack so I wouldn't relapse into the love struck idiot I was behaving as!"

"And the Running of the Leaves!" Feather Down added. "If you hadn't convinced me to run, instead of just trying to avoid the whole situation, I would still be hiding from a mistake of my past! You gave me the confidence and the encouragement I needed to go and do my best! Because of you, I can now be proud about my running abilities, instead of trying to hide from an earlier embarrassment caused by them!"

"Like Dewdrop," Haystack said, "you saw how big of a bind I was in with getting the harvest in. If you hadn't found Pinkie Pie, I don't even think we would have been able to do even a small portion of what we did. With just the three of us, it would have simply been too much. You helped not only

keep me in my house, and make the entire year before that not be a wasted effort on my part, you helped feed many ponies by what you did. Not only I, but the entire town of Ponyville owes you!"

"What we're saying," Dewdrop concluded, "is that for everything you may have gained from us, we easily gained back from you and then some. That's what friends do, help each other when they can. They share not only the good times, but also the bad times, to help each other shoulder the load and get past them. Were we startled and shocked to find out who you really are? Yes. But we're your friends, Luna! We want to help you through this!"

Luna felt tears streaming down her cheeks, but this time, they were not ones of sorrow. "Really? You don't hate me for what I did?" she asked, emotions choking her words.

"NO!" her friends replied in unison.

"Now get away from whatever it is that Nightmare Moon is doing to you!" Feather Down yelled.

Luna stood, and started to walk to her friends. "Not so fast!" Nightmare Moon yelled. She had stayed quiet during the previous conversation, doing her best to gather in as much energy as fast as she could. When Luna tried to walk away, Nightmare Moon pulled back, and kept her from leaving the raised part of the room. "All I need is just a little more time!" she yelled in frustration. As if to match her displeasure at the turn of events, the sky lit up with a furious volley of lightning, illuminating sky for miles around.

Back in Ponyville, the sudden surge of power did not go unnoticed. Princes Celestia and the guards quickly regrouped. "For there to be such storm like effects on a cloudless night like tonight, magic must be involved. Bring the chariot there, it may be needed yet. I'll go on ahead!" Pushing herself to the limit, Celestia flew to where the storm continued to erupt. As she drew closer, recognition crept in. 'I've been there before! That's where Luna was freed from being Nightmare Moon! It can't be a coincidence!' Every ounce of her will was channeled into flying as fast as she could.

Luna's friends leaped into action. As Nightmare Moon tried to literally drag Luna up and away, even against the struggles of the alicorn herself, Haystack flew up and wrapped his forelegs around Luna's neck, adding his weight to hers. Luna reached out and in turn grabbed Haystack. Feather

Down jumped up next, grabbing Haystack's tail in her mouth as she tried to wrap her forelegs around Haystack hind legs. Pine Needle and Dewdrop didn't even need to jump at this point, instead simply grabbing Feather Down's tail with their teeth, and soon the chain of ponies had stopped Nightmare Moon's progress in stealing away the princess, and began to slowly pull her back towards the ground.

The struggle lasted for a couple of minutes, and Haystack feared he was starting to lose his grip when the five of them fell free even as Nightmare Moon let out a loud yell of anguish. Their momentum ended up having them all tumble back a ways, and they ended up in a giant pile in the middle of the room. Luna found herself hugging Haystack still, and she was laughing. "Thank you all! Thank you so much, I..." She found herself coming to a halt with her thanks as she saw that her friends weren't looking at her, but instead behind her and above.

Turning around, her mouth dropped open in horror as she saw Nightmare Moon still hovering in midair, surrounded by the glow of the full moon shining down from above. Nightmare Moon seemed to be as shocked as everyone else, but finally tilted her head back and laughed loudly. "Well, well, well, what do you know?" She cackled, staring down at the others. "I don't know how this happened, but I'll take it! Maybe I gathered enough energy, maybe it's something to do with this place and my earlier defeat at the hooves of the Elements of Harmony. It doesn't matter though, because I am finally my own mare!"

Luna and her friends slowly backed away. "What do we do?" whispered Dewdrop.

"You can die, that's what you can do!" Nightmare Moon yelled, dark energy coalescing at the end of her horn.

"NO!" yelled a voice from above. Everyone looked up to see princess Celestia streaking in as fast as she could, building up magical energy of her own. "You leave my sister alone!"

Nightmare Moon turned upwards, and shot her blast at the arriving alicorn. "Oh, how I've dreamed of doing this!" she said as her dark bolt of magic hammered into Celestia's side and sent her tumbling to the floor, where she bounced twice before sliding up against a wall. "Even better! I can kill



both of you, claim all of your powers, and be the uncontested ruler of all of Equestria!"

Feather Down raced to stand between Celestia and Nightmare Moon. She stared defiantly at the evil alicorn, even though her legs were shaking in fear.

"Child, no!" Celestia choked out, trying to regain her strength. "She will destroy you without even noticing. Run! Find Twilight Sparkle, and tell her what has happened here!"

Nightmare Moon laughed. "Yes, where are your pet Elements of Harmony? Why aren't they here to stop me, hmm? Why, I do believe that you may have misplaced them!" Her jibes were cut off by a small rock flying up and bouncing off of her flank. Turning in amusement, she saw Dewdrop standing off to one side lifting another stone with her magic. "Really? Is that all you can do? Mildly annoy me? I think I will make your death a most unpleasant one for interrupting me!"

Haystack flew up and tried to kick her, but she ably dodged. "What is this?" she screeched, her amusement turning to annoyance. "Most ponies would just flee and try to save their lives!" She saw Pine Needle carrying more rocks over to Dewdrop. "What compels you do such suicidal acts? You know they can not have any effect on me!"

"They do so because I asked them to!" Luna cried out from below Nightmare Moon. The dark mare cursed, having forgotten about Luna in her glee at having knocked Celestia from the air. Energy was building up around Luna's horn, and the moonlight from above seemed to almost warp and bend to be gathered in by her. "I needed a chance to get into place, and they all risked their lives to help me out by distracting you." She smiled, and now it looked like a pillar of light was coming down, straight from the moon itself to land on Luna's horn. "They are the best friends I could ever hope for, and I will repay them for their bravery and their trust in me!" Nightmare Moon tried to flee, but seemed held in place, trapped in the silvery lunar light.

A massive column of light erupted from Luna's horn, slammed into Nightmare Moon and reached higher and higher, lifting the dark mare high into the sky. From afar, those few who happened to be looking up at that time saw the bolt of magical energy climb higher and higher, until it seemed

to merge with the moon itself, a single pillar of light reaching from the moon to the ground below. Finally, it died away, blinking out, and the night sky returned to normal.

Luna, exhausted and spent, collapsed to the ground and fell on her side. Celestia and her friends all rushed to her, relieved to see that she was still awake, and not in pain. Pine Needle stared straight up, through the hole in the ceiling. "Do we need to be watching for when she falls back down?" he asked apprehensively.

"No," Luna whispered. "I sent her back to where we were before. She is trapped once again on the moon. I can no longer feel her in my head. I am free."

"How did you do that?" Dewdrop asked, her voice filled with awe.

"I'm not entirely sure," Luna admitted, slowly standing up. "It just felt right, using the lunar light like that."

Feather Down chuckled, and then broke out laughing. The others stared at her, wondering if she was all right as she finally was so overcome with her laughing fit she ended up on the ground rolling about. "What is so funny?" Celestia asked, a smile on her face from the antics of the pink earth pony.

"Don't you see?" Feather Down said, catching her breath for a moment. "She zapped Nightmare Moon with a moon beam! How fitting is that?"

The others all joined in the laughter for a bit, and finally wound down as the two pegaus guards brought the cloud chariot in through the hole in the roof. "Sorry, your Highness," one said. "We wanted to make sure it was okay to come through first, what with that light show and all."

"I fully understand, and I thank you for your caution." Celestia turned to Luna, who was surrounded by her friends again. "Luna, I'm sorry, but I think you need to come back to Canterlot with me. It will be too hard to explain why one of the royal sisters is living by herself in Ponyville."

Luna nodded slowly. "I know. I understand now, how hasty and foolish I was. It was wrong of me to go and do what I did without confiding in you. If there has been anypony I should have been able to trust, it was you. I'm so sorry for what I did, sister. Please forgive me!" She smiled when Celestia

silently nodded at her. She turned to her friends. "I just hope that after all of this, we can still be friends. Please say that you will!"

"Of course we will hun." Dewdrop said. "We're going to miss you though. I just wish that we could still be with you like we were. Things just aren't going to be the same with you not around."

"You know," Celestia said, her head looking upward thoughtfully, "I can think of an easy way for all of you to keep in touch with each other..."

## **Epilogue**

*One week later...*

"Dewdrop! Wake up! Wake up!"

Dewdrop slowly cracked her eyes open. She could see through the bedroom window that the first rays of the sun were barely peeking over the hills. "Who are you," she asked in a tired voice, "and what have you done with Feather Down?"

"I am Feather Down silly, and I'm telling you to wake up! I don't want us to be late, not today! Today's the day!"

"What do you mean, today..." finally, Dewdrop's mind woke up enough to register what was happening. "Oh my! Today!" Suddenly awake, she fell out of bed with a crash, and shook herself awake. "Time for breakfast and a quick bath, then off to the library!"

"I already took my bath!" Feather Down said. "I left the tub full for you! I'll get some food ready, you get clean!"

A short while later, the two roommates were finished with their morning routines, and were getting ready to leave their house. Dewdrop used her magic to levitate Feather Down's saddlebags onto her friend's back. "Are we forgetting anything?"

"Nope! Let's get going! I don't want to be late!" With that the two ponies left their home and headed on into town at a gallop.

At his house, Pine Needle was in a bind. He had a set of saddlebags of his own, but they looked overpacked, and he seemed unable to figure out how to get them onto his back without upsetting the contents. He approached it from various angles, and even tried crawling underneath the back strap, but just couldn't get himself low enough to the ground. He looked about ready to have a nervous breakdown when a voice from above called down. "Looks like you could use some help there!"

Pine Needle looked up, relief visible on his face. "Haystack! It is good to see you, mine friend! If you could assist me with getting these onto mine back, I will be ready to head into town with you!"

Haystack landed and grabbed the back strap of the saddlebags with his teeth. After visibly struggling to lift the bags off of the ground, he was able to get them high enough for Pine Needle to slip underneath them, and with a gasp Haystack let them drop onto his friend's back. "What do you have in there? Rocks?"

"Close! Ha ha, I will show you later, but for now we must make haste, or risk being late!"

Haystack nodded and the two headed off into Ponyville.

Twilight Sparkle stepped outside of the Ponyville library with a smile on her face. She and her friends had just returned from Appleloosa, successful in helping the ponies and the buffalo come to an agreement. She had just woke up an hour ago, but was now ready to head out for another day of travel. Looking into the sky, she saw arriving in the distance from Canterlot two cloud chariots being pulled by pegasi from the royal guards. "That's funny," she said to Spike, who had joined her outside, "where are the others? Oh! Here they come!" She saw Luna's friends come galloping up to her. "Hello, everypony!" Twilight said. "Are you ready to spend the day in Canterlot?"

"Oh, you can not know how excited I am by this!" Feather Down gushed. "To see the capital in person, to get to ride in a cloud chariot and actually enjoy the experience, and of course, to get to see Luna!"

Dewdrop chuckled. "She could barely sleep last night. Neither could I, to tell the truth. We haven't had the chance to see Luna since that crazy night, but at least we'll get to see her regularly from now on!"

"Indeed!" Pine Needle enthused. "For Princess Celestia to arrange this weekly get together for us, I am honored and amazed at such preferential treatment!"

"Are you coming to visit Luna too?" Haystack asked Twilight.

Twilight shook her head. "No, while you ponies entertain Luna and get caught up, I'll be keeping Celestia company. It's been quite a while since we've had the chance to be together, the two of us. I think she'll be a bit lonely too, to be honest. Her and Luna have been getting along really well since whatever happened. Celestia still won't talk to me about it, she just says to wait till we see each other face to face."

"I imagine it would be too much for her to share simply or effectively in a letter." Dewdrop said.

"So," Twilight asked, looking at the heavy load that Pine Needle was carrying. "What's in the bags?"

"Well, since we will only get to see Luna once a week, we thought we should bring her some souvenirs for when we are not there. I am bringing something that I value greatly." With that, he lifted up the flaps of one the bags with his teeth to reveal a pine sapling sitting in a bed of dirt. "It is the first one that has sprouted from my trees, it would make me the happiest pony alive to know that Princess Luna was taking care of it!"

Haystack chuckled. "His other bag has her copy of the city map that she was given when she moved here. I thought it would be nice for her to look at it and remember all the good times we had. Also, there is a small bag of the flour she helped mill, as a memento of the time we spent working together on the farm."

Dewdrop nodded. "I couldn't think of much, but I made sure to bring her telescope back with us, and I thought she might like a towel from the hotel. She carried enough of them around, I figure she should get to have one for herself." She turned to her roommate. "You never did tell me what you were giving her."

Feather Down blushed. "I'm giving her my race medal. I wouldn't have it without her anyways, and it isn't like I go around wearing it."

Finally, the cloud chariots landed in the area outside the library, and the ponies got on board. Pine Needle and Feather Down got in one, and Twilight Sparkle and Dewdrop got in the other. "I'll be more than happy to fly alongside to balance out the loads." Haystack said, and with that they all took off towards Canterlot as Spike waved goodbye to them.

The flight there was uneventful. Haystack smiled the whole way, and just a few minutes after leaving the ground, Pine Needle pointed out to his friends that Feather Down's early morning burst of energy had worn out, and she was now taking a nap. For his part, Pine Needle refused to look down over the side of the chariot, having learned previously that flying was something he did not enjoy, no matter how much the pegasi pulling the chariots assured him that he was perfectly safe.

Finally, the spires of Canterlot came into focus, and the chariots came in for a landing. Standing there in a courtyard, so excited that she couldn't stand still, Luna watched as her friends landed, and they all rushed together to meet in a group hug. Twilight watched them slowly wander off together, and then waited as Celestia walked over to her.

"Things are going better for her," Celestia said as she stood next to Twilight, watching Luna and her friends walk away. "She's more confident now, more sure of herself, and it shows. Ponies are less able to simply shrug her off, and she has a renewed optimism about everything she does."

"And how are you doing, Princess Celestia?" Twilight asked her mentor.

"Much better. We had a very long talk, and she has promised not only to never do what she did again, but to be more open in coming to me for help if she needs it. We still have a tough road ahead of us, but I think we're going to be okay. Now, how have your studies been coming along?" With that, Celestia and Twilight headed off in a different direction. Before heading inside, Celestia turned around one last time to take in the sight of her younger sister, laughing and playing with her friends.

# Phases of the Moon

## Chapter 1

When Twilight Sparkle had received the invitation to come to Canterlot to visit with Princess Celestia, she had been ecstatic. While she had been busy during the months since she had arrived in Ponyville after the Summer Sun Celebration and Princess Luna's return, she had still missed the daily interaction she'd had with her teacher. She assumed that she would get to spend the day talking with her mentor about subjects ranging from her studies to what had happened since they had last seen each other face to face.

Now, after spending most of the day with Princess Celestia, she felt a bit disappointed about the whole ordeal. Sure, there had been some small talk at the beginning, but Twilight could tell that the princess had wanted to discuss something else; Luna's time in Ponyville. Twilight couldn't blame her either; she was still in awe over everything that had happened, and the lengthy conversation had helped her get a better understanding of the events.

Twilight slowly walked down a hallway in the castle, heading towards the cloud chariots that were waiting to take her home. She shook her head in amazement at everything that had recently happened. Even after she had spent all day talking about it, even though she had experienced it during the last couple of months, it was still hard to believe that Princess Luna had disguised herself as an earth pony and had lived incognito in Ponyville among its residents. Twilight still remembered the first day of it, when the disguise spell that Luna had cast had spread ripples through the aether, and she had received Princess Celestia's letter asking her to keep an eye out for Luna.

It had taken several days for Twilight to find a copy of the spell book that Luna had used and piece together the clues she had gathered before

realizing that the moon princess was disguised as an earth pony named Moonbeam. Princess Celestia had visited her later that night, and after a lengthy discussion it was decided to let Luna continue what she was doing, with Twilight keeping an eye on her. Twilight and her friends had been out of town when Luna had finally decided to drop the disguise, and only today she had heard from Celestia what had happened. While the thought that Nightmare Moon had still been able to exert herself in some manner frightened Twilight, knowing that the younger alicorn had managed to banish her newly freed dark side to the moon again kept Twilight from constantly looking over her shoulder for the evil incarnation.

While Twilight and Celestia had spent the day sharing information about the past, Princess Luna had spent the day with the friends she had made during her time in Ponyville. Twilight smiled at the thought that she hadn't been the only pony to arrive in town and soon find themselves surrounded by new friends. Luna had been quickly taken in by two mares who had been friends since they had been young fillies; Dewdrop, an orange unicorn who worked at the Ponyville Inn, and her roommate Feather Down, a pink earth pony who worked as a waitress when she wasn't sprinting through town or taking a nap. Shortly after that, while searching for a house for Luna to live in, they had met first Pine Needle, a green earth pony stallion known for having a green hoof, and then Haystack, a brown pegasus farmer stallion known for his serious demeanor. Those four became a close circle of friends for Luna to bond with, something that Luna had been unable to find in Canterlot since her return from the moon. Celestia had told Twilight that she suspected that Nightmare Moon may have had a hoof in that, but had no way to confirm it.

For now, the plan was to let Luna's friends visit once a week, with Celestia providing transportation for the ponies to and from Ponyville. Twilight wondered if that would truly work out. She couldn't imagine how she would take being able to only see Applejack, Rainbow Dash and her other friends so infrequently. Still, Twilight couldn't think of a better compromise off the top of her head. It would have been awkward to have one of the royal sisters living in a small town like Ponyville, and Luna's friends all had jobs that couldn't be moved to Canterlot. It was better than nothing, Twilight concluded. She only hoped it didn't lead to them growing apart over time.

A soft glow surrounded her horn, and the door in front of Twilight swung open to reveal one of the many gardens in and around Canterlot Castle.



Luna was there, saying goodbye to her friends. As they noticed Twilight, they waved at her, and she walked over.

"Now, next week, you're going to help me figure out where to plant that sapling you brought with you, right?" Luna asked the earth pony stallion as Twilight came up to them. "We can even use it as an exercise to see how much I can access earth pony magic as an alicorn."

"I will be more than happy to. Mine only concern is taking up too much of your time, and not leaving you enough to spend with everypony else." Pine Needle replied. He nodded to Twilight. "Greetings! I hope you had as good a time with Princess Celestia as we had with Moonb- I mean, Princess Luna?" He rapped a forehoof against his head and turned back to Luna. "I am sorry. I fear it will take me some time still to get used to not calling you by that name."

Luna smiled. "It's alright. If our positions were reversed, I know I would be having the same problems."

Twilight smiled weakly. "Well, I don't think I had as good a time as you guys did, but it was nice to spend a day with Princess Celestia again."

"I'm glad to hear that," Luna said. She then paused, and then looked down at the ground. "Twilight Sparkle, I haven't said this to you yet, and I should have before now. I want to apologize to you, for deceiving you as I did in Ponyville. Even if things did turn out well in the end, what I did was dishonest. Knowing that every time somepony called me Moonbeam I was perpetuating a lie hurt me then, and it still stings to think about it now." Luna turned her gaze up, and looked Twilight in the eyes. "I'm sorry for what I did. It was wrong of me, and you deserve better than just a simple, spoken apology from me. If there is any way that I can make it up to you, please let me know."

Twilight chuckled. "It all right, Princess Luna. To tell the truth, I had figured out quite early on who you were, and had been told to keep it a secret so I could keep an eye on you for your sister. She was afraid that if you had gone to such lengths to hide in the first place, that you might go even farther away if you were aware that we knew who you were. It was uncomfortable for me too, to keep that hidden from you, while trying to find ways to be close to you on a regular basis." She smiled widely at the princess. "I'm just glad that things are working out for you now."

"Thank you so much, Twilight!" Luna said with a relieved look on her face. "Would you be willing to do me a favor? I've already talked this over with my friends, and they're willing to help me, but I need your help with it too."

"I will if I can," Twilight replied. "What do you need from me?"

"Well, there are a few other ponies in Ponyville that I need to apologize to as well, and while Dewdrop can help me set up meetings in Ponyville with most of them, there is one pony who they think you would be the best to help me out in setting up a meeting with."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Who is it?"

"Pinkie Pie. She did so much to help me out. Her wonderful songs, volunteering to help us get Haystack's harvest in..." Luna sighed. "I don't honestly know if an apology even begins to make up for what I did."

Twilight smiled at the moon princess. "I wouldn't worry about it too much, you highness. I don't think I've ever seen Pinkie Pie get mad at anypony. But yes, I'll be glad to set up a meeting for you to get together with her. Is there a certain time or day that you're aiming for?"

"Dewdrop says she thinks the evening will be best, so that it won't conflict with anypony's work schedule. Of course, we don't have anything set up yet; maybe you and Dewdrop can coordinate and then send me a scroll to let me know, please?" Luna blushed. "I'm sorry to be making you do all of this extra work for me. It should be me doing this, but well..."

"I understand," Twilight said. "It will be much easier for us to ask them, with us being in town while you're here in Canterlot." Twilight turned to Dewdrop. "Want to set things up tonight after we get back to Ponyville?"

The orange unicorn nodded. "Sounds good to me. No sense in putting it off, right?"

"Exactly." Twilight turned back to Luna. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Oh, goodness no! You're already doing more than enough! Thank you again, Twilight!" Luna gave Twilight a hug. "I better let you all head back

home, before I keep you so late that you end up getting back to Ponyville after the sun sets."

Luna gave everypony one last hug and waved to them as the cloud chariots took off. Haystack flew alongside the chariot that carried Dewdrop and Feather Down, and Twilight found herself paired with a very nervous looking Pine Needle in the other one.

"There's no need to be so tense," Twilight said, trying to reassure the earth pony. "The only way you can end up falling is if you purposefully jump out of the chariot."

"I understand that," Pine Needle replied, "and while I know that in my head, my heart is refusing to listen. Also, it does not help that it simply feels so... weird to me to not have a direct connection to the ground underneath me."

"Oh, is that because of that earth pony magic you talked about during the Running of the Leaves?"

Pine Needle nodded. "It really isn't anything worse than what it feels like when you're nervous, but I'm a bit afraid of heights to begin with, so..." he trailed off, trying to find the words, but failing he finally settled for simply shrugging. "I'm sure I'll get used to it in time."

Twilight nodded. "Absolutely!" She looked around, trying to think of something to talk about to help distract the other pony from his current state. "So, what was it that Luna was talking about when I came in? Something about you helping her out with magic?"

"Yes, kind of like what we did back during the run. She is curious to know if she can still access it now that she is back to being an alicorn, instead of an earth pony. I think she should be able to, but I admit that I have zero experience with something like this, so it will be interesting to find out."

"I would think so!" Twilight said. "I remember back when I was a filly, and Princess Celestia made me her personal student. It was, and still is to be honest, quite an honor. You must be excited about the situation."

"Oh, I am! That, and, if I may also be honest, I am very nervous about it too."

She chuckled. "I'm sure you'll do fine." Twilight looked around and saw that the chariots were starting their descent towards Ponyville. "Hey, look! We're home, you'll be able to get your hooves back on the ground again shortly."

Pine Needle gave Twilight a relieved smile. "Thank you very much for keeping me occupied during the trip."

"Well, what else could I do? It wouldn't have been fun for either of us to see you turn into a nervous wreck." With a barely noticeable bump, the chariot's wheels touched down, and a couple of seconds later the trip was at an end. Twilight motioned with a foreleg. "After you!"

Pine Needle quickly jumped out the back, and once back on the ground his demeanor visibly improved. "Ahhh, you can't know how good this feels, to be back on the ground. No offense my friend," he said to Haystack as he landed next to him, "but I am glad that I do not have a pair of wings as you do."

Haystack rolled his eyes. "Sorry if he was a bother, Twilight."

"Not at all." She exited the chariot and turned to the guards who had powered their trip home. "Thank you again for your time, sirs."

Nodding, they waited as Dewdrop woke up her roommate and got Feather Down to groggily leave the back of the other chariot, allowing the guardponies to begin the trip back to Canterlot.

Dewdrop walked up to Twilight. "Shall we go talk to Pinkie Pie first? Once I know what times she's available, I can set up the other meetings around that, and you can be free to do whatever you want."

"Sounds good to me," Twilight said. "Let's go." And so, the unicorns walked off together towards Sugar Cube Corner, and the other ponies all headed their separate ways to their homes.

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*Nightmare Moon laid motionless in the dry, white dusty soil. Her eyes were closed, and she had no desire to open them either. What was the point?*

*She had triumphed; then she had failed. Now she was back where she had started, on the moon.*

*Her plan had worked so well too! Subtly reaching out through the cracks in the cell the Elements of Harmony had imprisoned her in, she had been able to gently influence Luna and those around her. She had bred mistrust and despair. She had encouraged actions to be taken without those doing them to think them through. She had worked Luna into such a frazzled state of mind that she had allowed Nightmare Moon to have a way back into the world. And her plan had worked!*

*For the first time since returning to the moon Nightmare Moon's train of thought- one that had been a loop of self pity and condemnation against the poor luck she had suffered- paused in its circular path. No, she realized, her plan had NOT worked; she had wanted to possess Luna, to once again make the body they had shared her vessel. What had happened was that she had somehow freed herself from Luna altogether, and had become not the dark side of the Moon Princess but instead a creature of her own.*

*Now that she had actually taken the time to think on the event clearly, she could see that her failure to regain control of Luna's body had in fact been her downfall. Even though she had managed to knock Princess Celestia from the sky, she had forgotten about Luna, which had allowed the little brat to get in a position to send her back to the moon. Had Luna succumbed to her will, Nightmare Moon realized, victory would very likely have been hers.*

*Nightmare Moon sighed. Knowing how she had lost still didn't change her current situation. She was still stuck on the moon, and this time she didn't have a connection to Luna to utilize. She was alone, with nothing to occupy her time.*

*'Well,' she thought, 'I was able to wait a thousand years before. I guess I can do that again.'*

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Luna waved goodbye to the Mayor of Ponyville, accompanied by Twilight and Dewdrop. The two unicorns had been able to quickly get in contact with everypony that she had wanted to apologize to. Now, just a couple of

days after asking for their help in setting up the meetings, she was almost done with them. She was so thankful that everypony she had talked to had been willing to forgive her. The manager at the Ponyville Inn, the stallion she had rented her house from (she chuckled at the thought that she still had it available to her for a couple more weeks), her neighbors, and of course the Mayor, who they had just left.

Which left one last stop, Sugar Cube Corner, to meet with Pinkie Pie. While the other ponies she had met with had been at first surprised that Princess Luna wanted to meet with them, and then shocked to see her apologize to them, Luna wasn't certain how Pinkie Pie would react. While the pink party pony was unfailingly in good cheer, she was also quite random. For the first time tonight, she was worried that her apology might not be accepted.

Dewdrop glanced over at Luna and, seeing that the princess had started to slow down and looked a bit nervous, came up to her and gave her a gentle nudge. "Now, now hun," she said gently. "There's no need to worry. You've seen how everypony else has reacted. If anything, I would think Pinkie Pie would be the easiest one to apologize to, since she's the least likely to be overwhelmed by who you are."

Luna nodded. "I understand that, I really do, it's just..." Luna sighed. "I think it also has to do with the fact that, out of everypony that I've set up a meeting with today, she's the one who was the most like a friend to me. She has a lot to be upset at me for, especially when I think of how hard she worked to help Haystack bring in the harvest. Without me, she wouldn't have had to do that!"

Twilight gave Luna a reassuring smile. "I think you're over thinking things, your highness. I'll admit that I can't predict exactly how she'll react, but I bet she'll be glad to know where the pony she knew as Moonbeam disappeared to at least." The three mares came to a stop at the front door of Sugar Cube Corner. "Well," said Twilight, "we're here. Are you ready?"

Luna nodded and, swallowing her fear with an audible gulp, knocked on the door with a hoof. There was no response from the other side. Luna looked back at the two unicorns, who after glancing at each other looked back at her and shrugged in unison. Luna turned back to the door and knocked again, this time louder in case her first effort simply had been too soft to hear.

Again, silence. The only sound came from behind them, where a small group of fillies were talking about what game they wanted to play next. "I don't know why she hasn't answered," Twilight said, looking as confused as Luna. "She said she would be here. Try one more time?"

Luna did, knocking so hard that on the final rap, the door actually swung open slowly to reveal darkness inside. Luna stuck her head inside and called out, "Hello? Is anypony home? I'm looking for Pinkie Pie, is she here?" Luna tentatively stepped inside and inhaled, ready to yell out one last time-

When the lights all came on at once, and Pinkie Pie stood off to the side, tossing confetti into the air. "Surprise! Welcome to the 'Mystery Pony Meeting Party'! I was so excited when Twilight..." Pinkie Pie trailed off when she saw that a startled Luna had somehow managed to jump up and squeeze herself onto the top of the door. "Oooh, you're good! I've only been able to get up there once or twice myself!"

Twilight dashed in, looking frantically around until she had located Pinkie Pie. "What are you doing?" she loudly asked. "You had us all wondering if you were even home!" Dewdrop stuck in her head nervously behind Twilight, trying to see what was going on. Luna, finally over her shock, tried to lower herself slowly from the door, but lost her grip and fell to the ground behind the door with a thud.

"Well," Pinkie Pie said to Twilight as she went to go help Luna back onto her hooves, "you and Dewdrop were really secretive about who wanted to meet with me, so I figured it must be somepony special! And then I asked myself, what would be the best way to welcome the mystery pony? And I thought, why, a party of course!"

Dewdrop simply blinked in astonishment, while Twilight placed a hoof against her forehead as she sighed. Luna smiled at Pinkie Pie. "I should have known you would do something like this. Thank you, Pinkie Pie, but I'm afraid that I asked for this meeting for a not so joyous reason."

"Really? Why's that?"

"I need to apologize to you."

Pinkie Pie blinked. "You do? I don't remember you doing anything to me, unless you count what you did as Nightmare Moon back in that castle in the Everfree Forest, and I don't blame you for that at all! Ooh, wait, did you do something at the party here in Ponyville after we all came back? I don't recall you doing anything to me, but then that was a few months ago, so I might have forgotten since then. But really, if I can't remember what it was, there's no need for you to apologize, silly!"

Luna gave Pinkie Pie a sad smile. "No, you see, we *have* been together since then. That's why I need to apologize, I was in a disguise. I was Moonbeam."

Pinkie Pie's eyes widened in amazement. "No way!" she said, in a breathless voice. In a flash, she was right in front of Luna, and she grabbed her horn and tried twisting it.

"Ahh! Pinkie Pie! What are you..? That kind of hurts!" Luna protested, not sure what the pink pony was trying to do.

Twilight ran over and pulled Pinkie Pie off of Luna. "What in the hay are you doing?" she demanded of her friend.

"Well, I figured, in order for her have had such an amazing disguise, she had to have had some way to take off her wings and horn, because I never saw Moonbeam with either of those! I was checking to see if I could unscrew her horn," explained Pinkie Pie.

"No, I used a spell," Luna said. "It was an enchantment that actually turned me into an earth pony. That's why I want to apologize to you though, because I misled you. I lied to you about who I was and what my name was."

Pinkie Pie stared at Luna with her head tilted. "You know, I think I can see some resemblance between you and Moonbeam too. Do you think you could cast the spell again? I think it would be neat to see you turn into Moonbeam again for a while!"

Luna shook her head slowly. "No, I'm sorry, but I can't. The spell was actually made for unicorns, not alicorns. It really hurt to cast that spell, and it took me almost an entire day to recover."



Pinkie Pie put a hoof to her chin and hummed in thought for a second. A few seconds later, her face lit up and she looked over at Dewdrop. "Could you cast the spell then? Please?"

Dewdrop waved a hoof in front of her. "Oh no, hun. I've never been very good at magic, and even if I was strong enough to cast such a spell, I don't know the spell in question. I'm sorry."

Pinkie Pie then turned to Twilight. "How about you? You're one of the best when it comes to magic, right? And you're my last hope now too! Please?" Pinkie dropped down onto her knees and grabbed a foreleg of Twilight's, her eyes growing large with tears starting to well up in them. "Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease?"

Twilight paused to consider the request. "You know, we do have a copy of the spell book in the library. I could run back and get it..." A giant smile grew on Pinkie Pie's face when she saw that her friend was seriously considering her request.

"Are you sure, Twilight?" Luna asked. "I can see something going wrong all too easily! What if, I don't know, the stone the spell makes gets dropped, and falls down through a crack in the floor? What would you do then?"

"Well, we have you here, Luna," replied Twilight. "If anything, your magic should be strong enough to lift up the floor boards, or even the entire store if you really needed to. After all, you raise the moon every night, right?"

Luna blushed and looked at the floor. "Actually, Celestia is still raising both the sun and the moon. I couldn't have done it while I was disguised as Moonbeam, after all. And while most of the neigsayers have dropped their objections to me resuming that duty, there are still enough of them that Celestia and I think it would be better for them to calm down before I take over in that capacity again."

"But my point still stands," Twilight said. "If you had to, you would be able to use your magic to retrieve the stone without any difficulty, correct?"

Luna nodded slowly. "Yes, I could. I won't stop you if you want to do this Twilight, and I'll admit I'm curious to see what it looks like when the spell is cast correctly. But still, please don't do this unless you're one hundred

percent certain that you want to. I don't want you to think you're being forced into doing this."

Twilight smiled at Luna. "I understand, but I'm sure it'll be okay. Just let me run back to the library and get the spell book, okay?" And with that, Twilight turned and left the bakery, galloping back to the library.

Luna watched Twilight gallop off before turning back to Pinkie Pie. "I do want you to know how sorry I am that I misled you about who I was though. Especially when you did so much for me! I remember waking up for the first time in my house, and shortly afterwards, you were there, singing me an invitation for my welcome party. It put me in such a good mood for the rest of the day! Or when you volunteered to help us out at Haystack's farm. If you hadn't been there, I don't think we could have done it. I just wish that there was some way that I could make it up to you!"

"Aw, there's no need to be so sad about it!" Pinkie Pie came up to Luna and gave her a hug. "I know you didn't mean any harm by what you did, and I was happy to do all of those things! And you helped me to get Haystack to smile, that alone was worth doing all of that work! Just do me one favor, okay?"

"Of course! What is it?"

"If you do ever cast that spell again, let me know so I can be in on it, all right? It'll be our own little secret. Think of all the pranks we could pull with it! We'll have Rainbow Dash's head spinning in circles!" Pinkie giggled. "Ooh! Would you look like Moonbeam again, or as a different pony?"

"I honestly don't know," said Luna. "I only cast the spell the one time. If it isn't too tiring of a spell for Twilight, maybe you can ask her to cast it twice to see what happens?"

"That's a good idea!" exclaimed Pinkie Pie. She looked out the door. In the grassy area outside, she saw Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo and Apple Bloom running around, playing a game of tag. "I wonder what's taking Twilight so long. I hope she hasn't misplaced that book again."

"Does she do that often?" asked Dewdrop.

Pinkie Pie sighed. "It's amazing how many books she takes off the shelves at a time. Half the time it seems like I'm the one who's finding the stuff she's looking for. She may be smart, but sometimes I think she forgets how to look for things!"

"She's only been gone for a couple of minutes though," Dewdrop said. "That's barely enough time to go to the library and back. Let's give her a few more minutes before we start worrying, okay?"

"Ooh! There she is!" Pinkie Pie pointed through the the door towards a rapidly approaching Twilight, who was carrying a book in her mouth. "This is going to be even better than the party I had planned!"

Twilight slowed down as she entered the bakery. Placing the spell book on a counter, she smiled at the others. "Okay, let me just find the spell, shouldn't take me long..." Her horn glowed, and pages quickly flipped past. "Aha! Here it is. Give me a moment to study it, please. While I've looked at the spell before, when I was trying to figure out how Luna had disguised herself, I never paid that much attention to how the spell was cast."

While Twilight studied, Pinkie Pie served some cupcakes to the others. "They were for the party, so please eat as many as you want!" They all slowly snacked as they waited.

After a couple of minutes, Twilight looked up from the book with a confident smile on her face. "All right, this should be pretty straightforward. The hardest part is just getting the spell started. After that, it kind of goes on its own."

Luna nodded. "That's what I remember happening when I cast it. Of course, it had the drawback that I couldn't stop the spell once it was going either. With how much it hurt, I would have gladly stopped it if I could have."

Twilight stepped into the middle of the room. "Okay, everypony, stand back." The others moved back to stand next to the wall as Twilight's horn started to glow brightly. Soon, a large ball of light sat on the end of her horn, growing larger and larger by the second. When it had reached the size of a pumpkin, it flew from the end of Twilight's horn, zipped around her twice, then expanded as it enveloped Twilight and raised her from the floor.

Luna watched Twilight for any sign of discomfiture as the spell continued to do its work, but didn't see any. Twilight's horn slowly unraveled and started to fly around her, and her coat slowly lost all signs of blue, turning into a deep crimson red. Her mane and tail became more full, and the stripes lightened to become oranges and yellows, instead of shades of blue and purple.

Sweetie Belle stopped in the open door, watching the proceedings with her jaw hanging wide open. Twilight's cutie mark morphed from a large star surround by smaller ones into a picture of the sun peeking over the side of a mountain. After Twilight's appearance stopped changing, the streamer of color that Twilight's horn had become shrunk in on itself, and turned into a small ball of light before one last flash made everypony turn away for a moment.

Twilight gently dropped to the floor, eagerly glancing around her. "Where's a mirror, I wanna... whoa, my voice sounds different! It's squeaky now!" In front of her, on the floor was a small, blue gemstone. "Oh hey, that's the spell focus!" She stared at the gem on the floor intently for a while, and then her face scrunched up as she glared at it.

Luna laughed. "Oh, I did the exact same thing myself. I forgot that I no longer had my magic. Let me help you with that." Luna's horn glowed, and the stone rose up to eye level to Twilight. "Remember, Dewdrop, when you first found me?"

Dewdrop blinked, then burst out into laughter. "Oh my! So that's what you were doing! I thought you were concussed from falling down the hill! The way you just stood there, glaring at your possessions."

Twilight turned to Luna and sheepishly said, "I guess I did forget. Thank you!" Stepping forward, she inspected the gemstone the spell had created. It looked like a sapphire, and she could barely make out the six pointed star from her cutie mark inside of it. Slowly, Twilight walked around it, examining it from all angles. "So, in order to cancel the spell, all I have to do is-"

"TAG! You're it!" Scootaloo rushed Sweetie Belle from behind, crashing into her and sending her flying into the bakery where she collided with Twilight. The unexpected push caught the former unicorn off guard, and she stepped forward to compensate... only to feel the levitated gemstone enter

into her open mouth. Twilight choked in surprise and swallowed reflexively; It took only a moment for her to realize what she'd just done. She froze in terror, her eyes growing wide as a hushed whisper escaped her lips.

"Oh dear."

# Chapter 2

"Oh dear."

Luna stared in disbelief as the events around her went from calm to chaotic in the blink of an eye. She had been levitating the sapphire that had been created when Twilight had cast her spell that had changed her into an earth pony. Then, a filly had been shoved through the entrance of the bakery and into Twilight, who had then somehow managed to swallow the gem!

Twilight tried to cough up the stone on her own, but was unable to regurgitate it. Sweetie Belle glared back at Scootaloo, who was rubbing her head with a hoof from the collision she had just initiated. "What were you thinking?" the unicorn filly demanded of her friend, pointing at the coughing pony. "Now you've gone and made Twilight choke on something!"

Scootaloo tilted her head in confusion. "Twilight? What are you talking about, Twilight isn't here!" The orange pegasus filly motioned with a hoof. "Now come on! We're in the middle of a game, remember?" Without waiting to see what Sweetie Belle was going to do, Scootaloo ran off towards Apple Bloom, who was waiting for them a short ways away outside.

"But, but, magic, glowing, Twilight, changing..." Sweetie Belle's voice drifted off as the filly tried to comprehend everything that had just happened and found herself unable to do so. "You *are* Twilight, right?" she softly asked the crimson red earth pony in front of her.

Twilight gave Sweetie Belle a sad smile. "Yes, I am." Seeing the filly's eyes start to tear up, she placed a comforting hoof on her shoulder. "Don't worry, I don't blame you for this, and I'm sure we'll be able to find a way out of this mess. Just don't go telling everypony about this, okay?"

Seeing Sweetie Belle nod, Twilight steered the filly towards the door. "Why don't you go back outside and play with your friends, we'll take of things here. After all, we have Princess Luna to help us out. She'll be able to solve this quickly with her magic, right?"

Sweetie Belle looked over at Luna, who nodded and said, "We'll have this taken care of in no time at all, I'm sure. Now go ahead, you don't want to keep your friends waiting, do you?"

The filly glanced back and forth between Twilight and Luna one last time. "Okay, if you're sure. And I won't tell anypony, Twilight. I don't think they'd believe me anyway!" She then turned around and ran out the door.

Dewdrop walked over to the door and closed it. "So, what do we do now?" she asked worriedly.

"Well," Luna said, "I think the first thing we have to keep in mind is that we have a year before the spell becomes permanent. We don't need to rush or stress about anything for quite a while."

"Why is that stone so important?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"That's the spell focus," explained Luna. "In order for the spell to be canceled, so Twilight can return to being a unicorn, we need to break the stone. When I changed back from being Moonbeam, I just needed to give mine a stomp."

"Ooh! Want me to stomp on your stomach, Twilight, to see if I can crush the stone that way?"

"Um, thank you for the offer, Pinkie Pie, but I think I'll hold off on trying something that desperate at this point," Twilight replied wryly. She turned to Luna. "I don't suppose you know some sort of spell that could get the stone to come back up, do you?"

Luna paused to consider the request. "I don't think I could do it with simple telekinesis. Too big of a risk of me pulling on something that I shouldn't. I could *maybe* do it if it was inside of me, since I would have a better idea of what I was manipulating, but I wouldn't feel comfortable trying it on somepony else."

"Ooh! I know!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "We could find somepony who has the flu! We can make you sick, and then all you need to do is have a bucket nearby!"

Dewdrop made a disgusted face. "Eww, no! Besides, she'd still be sick afterwards, that'd be no fun!"

"I'd like to avoid getting sick as well, if at all possible," Twilight agreed, "but that does give me an idea. Maybe there's some sort of spell to make a pony vomit. In case somepony eats something they shouldn't have, like a poisonous mushroom? Would any of the nurse ponies here in Ponyville know one?"

"No, Nurse Redheart is an earth pony, so she wouldn't have any use for a spell like that," Dewdrop replied. "Still, I can go check to see if she has some sort of medicine that would do the same thing. Want me to go check?"

"Please do," Twilight said. "While you do that, the rest of us can go search the library. After all, it had the spell book with the transformation spell in it, so I don't see why it couldn't also have a book containing medical spells."

Luna nodded. "We could also have Spike send a message to my sister, I'm sure they could find a spell for the job in Canterlot if you don't have one here in Ponyville."

Twilight paled at the suggestion. "Um, I'm not certain I want to tell Princess Celestia about this right now, to be honest. I wouldn't want to worry her, especially if we have the solution here in town."

Pinkie Pie giggled. "Somepony's embarrassed!" Seeing Twilight give her a reproachful look, Pinkie Pie bounced over to her friend and tossed a foreleg over her shoulders. "Don't you worry, Twilight! I won't blab about this to anypony. Besides, like I was telling Luna earlier while you were getting the spell book, this could be the perfect chance to prank Rainbow Dash! She'll never know what hit her!"

"Let's get the stone out of her first, and then we can see what Twilight's feeling up to, okay?" Luna looked at Twilight. "And we don't have to tell Celestia anything right now if you don't want to. I only suggested it because it might help get the stone out of you faster."

"And I appreciate that, I really do," replied Twilight. She looked at Luna with pleading eyes. "It's just too embarrassing at this point though, and we have some options to explore first before we have to tell her, right? I don't want



her to think that I need to go to her whenever some emergency comes up. So let's get working on our ideas first, that way if we have to ask her, it won't be too late in the day when we do."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Dewdrop said as she opened the door again. "Let's head on out, I'll catch up to you at the library as soon as I can!" With that, the orange unicorn left the bakery, followed closely by the other three mares.

Even though it was a short walk from Sugar Cube Corner to the Ponyville library, Twilight still felt nervous that somepony would point at her and start laughing. She was relieved to see that Princess Luna was the one receiving all of the attention. Many of the ponies they passed bowed down and called out greetings to the alicorn, while a few also waved to Pinkie Pie.

When they got to the entrance of the library, Pinkie Pie hopped ahead and opened the door. "Don't worry," she called back to Twilight and Luna, "I'll handle Spike." Bouncing inside, she looked around and, not seeing the young dragon around, hollered out, "Spikey! You have some visitors!"

"Coming!" After a second, Spike came down the stairs carrying a couple of books. "Heya Pinkie Pie! Oh, hello Princess Luna! Wait, weren't you with Twilight? Where did she go, and who's this other pony?"

"Well, this here is my aunt Sunri- mrrphit!"

Twilight shoved a hoof into Pinkie Pie's mouth. "Actually, I *am* Twilight, Spike. Remember how I just ran in here a few minutes ago to grab a book?" Seeing Spike nod slowly, she continued, "The book I got was 'Teakettle's Tome of Transformations'. The book that Luna used to disguise herself as Moonbeam, remember?"

"And so, you cast the spell yourself then?" Spike asked. "Why haven't you changed back?"

"Well, um, that's a long story, but to make it short-"

"Hey!" Spike interrupted. "Where's the book? Twilight would never leave a book behind!" Spike turned and pointed at Pinkie Pie. "This is a prank of yours, isn't it?" The pink pony started to protest, but Spike interrupted her.

"You almost had me. Getting Princess Luna, of all ponies, to go along with it was a master stroke, but I saw through your scheme this time!"

"Oh my gosh! I left the book at the bakery!" Twilight exclaimed. "I need to go get it!"

Spike nodded as he watched the crimson earth pony gallop out the door. "Yup, and the next thing you know, Twilight will be the one who comes back in. Just watch!"

Pinkie Pie was smiling widely. "Yup, Spike, you figured me out! And you're right, Twilight will be coming back through that door in just a minute or two. You're on top of things today!" She then turned, covering her mouth with a hoof in an attempt to conceal the fact that she was about to explode from laughter.

Luna did her best to hide the grin that she felt growing on her face. While she felt some guilt about the prank, she thought it might be best to let Pinkie Pie have this chance now, instead of trying to fool somepony else later when it might have worse consequences.

Spike continued to look smug while they all waited. Soon, they could hear the galloping hooves of an approaching pony, and Twilight came back through the door. Closing it behind her, she dropped the book onto an empty shelf. "Boy, I can't believe I did that! Just goes to show how rattled this has me."

The dragon looked at Twilight. "Look, there's no need to keep trying to fool me, I-"

"Spike! I am Twilight!" She stomped a hoof in frustration. "I cast the spell that changes a unicorn into an earth pony, but we had a literal run-in with the Cutie Mark Crusaders, and I ended up swallowing the stone, so I'm stuck like this for now!"

Pinkie Pie burst out laughing. "See? You were right! Twilight *was* the next pony to come through the door!"

Looking at Luna for confirmation, and seeing her nod in agreement, Spike simply stared at Twilight in shock. "So," he finally said in a weak voice, "are you going to be stuck like this forever?"

Twilight gave her dragon companion a comforting smile. "Not if we can help it. We've got a couple of ideas we're looking into, and Princess Luna can ask Princess Celestia for help if we need it. We'll figure this out in no time." Twilight turned and headed for the stairs. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a couple of minutes, I'm going up to my room. I haven't had a chance to look in a mirror yet, and I want to see what I look like before I change back."

As Twilight trotted up the stairs, Luna turned to Spike and asked, "Maybe you could help us get started in our search, please?"

"Um, sure. What are you looking for?" asked Spike, who was still trying to come to grips with what had happened.

"We're looking for a book that might have some medical or healing spells in it. We would like to be able to help Twilight get the stone to come back up, if possible."

Spike considered Luna's request. "Well, with how often the books get taken off the shelves, things aren't as organized as they should be. However, there" he said, indicating a shelf near the ground, "and there," while pointing across the room to another group of books, "might have what we're looking for. Let me go grab the ladder, there's also another section up there that might have something too." A few minutes later, Twilight came back down the stairs with a thoughtful look on her face.

"What's up, Twilight?" Pinkie Pie asked after placing a book down on the floor to look through.

"Oh, I'm just wondering if this is how I would have looked if I was born an earth pony instead of a unicorn."

"Oooh. That would be weird, especially with you being the Element of Magic and all. Or would you still be the Element of Magic?"

Twilight blinked. "I hadn't even thought about that. Wow, I wonder if some other pony would have become the Element of Magic then. I can't see anypony but a unicorn in that role." She looked around. "Well, those thoughts can wait for later. What can I do to help?"

Luna pointed to a small stack of books next to her. "How about you read through these while I keep on looking for more possibilities?"

"Sounds good to me." Twilight trotted over and peered at the stack for a moment before shaking her head. "No offense, princess," she said as she awkwardly used her hooves to open a book and slowly flip through its pages, "but I hope I don't stay like this long enough to get as good at doing things without my magic as you must have been."

"Oh, the first week was miserable, let me tell you," Luna said with a chuckle. "I felt like a foal, learning how to do even the most basic of tasks all over again. Preparing a meal, taking a bath... I almost drowned the first time I tried to pull the plug from my bathtub while it was full! The hardest thing for me was trying to learn how to use my telescope. So many tiny and precise adjustments go into setting it up, it drove me to frustration at times." She paused to levitate another promising looking book down from the shelves. "Still, after a while, I got used to it, and it really wasn't any problem at all. I just had to keep on telling myself I was doing things that fillies and colts did on a daily basis, so there was no reason why I couldn't do them either."

Twilight nodded slowly. "That makes sense. Still, I don't want to stay as an earth pony long enough that those things become second nature. No offense, Pinkie Pie!"

"None taken! I can't imagine what it would be like to lose something like that. Oh, wait, maybe I can. I bet it would be like if I lost my Pinkie Sense. That would be terrible, not knowing when things were about to fall out of the sky!" Pinkie Pie gave Twilight a very sad look. "Don't you worry, Twilight, we'll get that stone out even if I have to reach down your throat myself to get it!"

"Hopefully it won't come to that. Worst comes to worst, I'm thinking we'll just have to wait for it to work its way through."

The next half hour was spent in silent study. Soon everyone had a small stack of books next to them, and they were all scanning the tomes, looking for a suitable spell. A knock on the door made them all look up. "Who is it?" called out Twilight, who then put a hoof to her mouth.

"It's Dewdrop! May I come in?"

"Please do!" called out a relieved Twilight. Once the unicorn had entered and closed the door behind her, Twilight said, "I was worried that I had just

called out to somepony who wouldn't recognize my voice and wonder who the new librarian was!"

Dewdrop was carrying a bag in her mouth which she placed on the floor. "I'm sorry I took so long. Nurse Redheart didn't have anything to help induce vomiting, but she did want to know what the problem was. So I gave her a very basic account of what happened. I told her that a friend of mine had accidentally swallowed a rock, and I asked if there was some way to get it out, since she was worried about it getting stuck in her stomach.

"Nurse Redheart said that while there was a very small chance that the stone might get stuck, she didn't think it was likely, and that all we had to do was wait a day or so for nature to take its course. Still, to be on the safe side, in case you want it, she gave me some medicine to help you out." Dewdrop opened the bag to show a jar containing a green powered substance. "You sprinkle some of this on your food, and it will help your digestive system. It *will* give you the runs, but should guarantee that the stone works its way through. She also said that if you use the medicine to drink a lot of water, so you don't get dehydrated."

Luna walked over to examine what Dewdrop had brought with her. She sniffed at the jar, and then wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Ick, not a pleasant odor at all." She turned back to Twilight. "Well, we haven't found anything yet, but we still have some books to go through. What do you want to do?"

"Hmm, well, if Nurse Redheart thinks that the stone will come out on its own, I think I can wait a day and see what happens. I honestly wasn't that keen on making myself vomit anyway." She turned to Dewdrop. "Thank you for visiting with the nurse and bringing me back this medicine. I don't think I'll use it yet, though. If by this time tomorrow nothing has shown up, then I might take some and see if that helps. After that..." Twilight shrugged. "I don't know. But I'll have time to think about it, and that's what matters."

After a brief moment of consideration, the other ponies were nodding their heads in agreement. "Let me go back to Sugar Cube Corner," said Pinkie Pie. "If you're going to make that stone work its way through you, you might as well have it helped along by something tasty!"

After she had bounced out the door to make good on her word, Twilight turned to Dewdrop and Luna. "Thank you very much for your help, and I'm sorry that I kind of stole the show from you, Princess."

Luna smiled at Twilight. "And thank you again for your help in setting everything up for today. I know you didn't mean for this to happen, Twilight. I'd like to stay and help you out in any other way that I could, but my sister is expecting me back home shortly."

"I understand," said Twilight. "It would be awkward for me to have Spike send her a scroll asking you to spend the night with me, without explaining the situation to her. Dewdrop, would you be willing to stay and help me out? I don't foresee there being any difficulties, but then I didn't think I would be in my current situation either."

"Of course, hun. Just give me a few minutes to run back home to tell Feather Down where I'll be and to gather a few things." She turned to Luna. "I'll see you again in just a few days. I'll make sure to tell you how things went then, if we don't end up asking Princess Celestia for help in the meantime."

"I'll be looking forward to it." Luna hugged her friend tightly. "Tell Feather Down I said hello, would you?"

"I certainly will." The two mares headed to the door to leave, and opened it to reveal what was apparently a mobile stack of cakes, muffins, and other sweets.

"Thanks for getting the door!" Pinkie Pie called out. "Twilight, where do you want me to put these?"

Twilight boggled at the sheer amount of food that Pinkie Pie had brought back with her. "There's no way that I can eat that much!" she exclaimed.

Pinkie Pie giggled. "It's not all for you, silly! The rest of us will need something to eat too!"

Luna's horn glowed, and she floated the baked goods onto a table. "I wish I could stay, Pinkie Pie, but I have to be heading back to Canterlot."

"Aww! Do you have to? I barely got the chance to see you too! You'll come back to visit more, right?"

"I'll try to come as often as I can, but I can't guarantee anything. Celestia is keeping me busy, what with all the studies I let slip when I left last time. I'll do my best though, I promise."

Pinkie Pie bounced over and gave Luna a hug. "Okie dokie loki!"

Luna waved to everypony one last time, then walked out the door and headed to where the guards patiently waited for her by the chariots.

"It'll take me around ten minutes to go home, get my things for the night, and come back," Dewdrop said after Luna had disappeared around a corner.

"Just knock and come on in when you get back. I'm not expecting anypony else at this hour," said Twilight.

"Don't take too long," cautioned Pinkie Pie, "or all of the food may be gone by the time you get back!"

Dewdrop paused to look at the mountain of food that Pinkie Pie was referring to. At just a quick glance, she counted no less than four cakes, a platter with some fritters, two plates of cupcakes, a bag full of muffins, and a few items she couldn't see clearly because they were behind or underneath the other items. "Just how much food are you going to..." Dewdrop paused as Pinkie Pie opened her mouth and proceeded to eat a cupcake in a single bite. "Ah. Right. Well, save some for me, please?"

"Will do!"

"Thanks, hun. I'll be back as quick as I can." Dewdrop briskly trotted away from the library.

Pinkie Pie watched Dewdrop leave, then turned towards Twilight. "All righty! Let's get some tasty pastries inside of you! What do you want to start with, a few fritters, a couple cupcakes, or a dozen danishes?"

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Feather Down was surprised to see her roommate enter, yell out a quick greeting, and then run upstairs. "Hey," she yelled up to Dewdrop, "what's the rush?"

Dewdrop poked her head back into the stairway. "Sorry, Feather Down, something came up, and I'll be spending the night at Twilight's."

"Really?" asked Feather Down. "I'm not trying to be nosy or anything, but what do the two of you have in common besides being unicorns? Oh, does this have anything to do with those meetings you helped set up for Luna?"

"Ah, well..." Dewdrop blushed a little. "To be honest, I really don't want to talk about it. It's kind of unicorn related, but..." she trailed off and looked away from her roommate.

Feather Down was surprised. There were practically no secrets between the two of them; whatever it was that Dewdrop didn't want to tell her must be pretty embarrassing for her to keep her mouth shut. She smiled up at her childhood friend. "Well then, don't worry about telling me. You just let me know if there's anything that I can do to help you out somehow, okay?"

Dewdrop gave Feather Down a relieved smile. "Thank you so much for understanding! By the way, have you seen my toothbrush?"

"I think you left it in the kitchen. You were in such a big hurry to get to work this morning, you pretty much did everything at the same time. I'm surprised you didn't try to eat your hair brush and use your breakfast to wash your face!"

Dewdrop lightly rapped her forehead with a hoof. "You're right, now that you mention it I know exactly where I put it. Thank you!" She came back down the stairs with her saddlebags on her back, and walked into the kitchen. "I'll be honest, I'm not certain how long I'll be over there, but I'll be surprised if I'm not back before this time tomorrow." Her horn glowed, and her toothbrush rose from its resting spot in an empty glass next to the sink to float into her bags.

Feather Down whistled. "A whole day maybe? Huh. Well, I won't pressure you, but like I said, I'm willing to help if you need it."

"And I appreciate it, hun. I really do." She gave Feather Down a big hug. "But it isn't my call on who I can tell. I'll pass along your offer though, I promise."



"Okay. Have a good night then, Dewdrop!" Feather Down held the front door open for her friend. "I'll try to find some way to survive," she said melodramatically.

Dewdrop rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you'll manage somehow." With a final wave, the orange unicorn galloped off.

Feather Down closed the door and looked around. "Ooh!" she said, her eyes lighting up, "If I'm right..." Trotting into the kitchen, she opened the freezer door. "Yup! Looks like the last of the mint chocolate chip ice cream is mine for the taking!"

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Dewdrop knocked on the library door and then stepped inside. "I'm back!" She looked around and didn't see anybody except Spike. "Huh. Where did they go?" she asked the dragon.

Spike pointed at the stairs leading up. "They're getting the bed ready for later tonight. Pinkie Pie said to help yourself to the food." He gestured at the table, which looked to Dewdrop to have only half the food on it that she remembered it holding just a short while ago.

"My goodness, Pinkie Pie sure ate a lot, didn't she?" Dewdrop said as she chose a couple of pastries for herself.

"Actually, Pinkie made sure to feed most of it to Twilight. She really wanted to make there was enough stuff in Twilight's stomach to help push the stone." Spike glanced upstairs. "I'm a bit worried though," Spike admitted.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Twilight isn't much of a big eater, or one for too many sweets."

"Ah, you're worried that Twilight's going to get stomach cramps?" asked Dewdrop.

"Actually, I'm more afraid of what all that sugar is going to do to her. I'm not sure the world is ready for a hyper Twilight Sparkle."

Dewdrop giggled. "Well then, it may be a blessing in disguise that she doesn't have the use of her magic right now." Her horn glowed, and a plate

with the food Dewdrop had chosen rose up to sit on an empty shelf near the ceiling. "I'll save that for later. Right now, I better go check and see how they're doing on getting things ready up there."

After a quick climb up the stairs, she saw that Twilight and Pinkie had managed to successfully get a second bed set up. "Hello! Spike said you two were up here, so I thought I'd see what was happening."

"Hello Dewdrop!" Twilight said in a happy voice. "I've been thinking about this whole situation, and I realized that this is a chance to do some experiments that I might never get a chance to do again! Well, I guess I could do them again, all I need to do is cast that spell, but honestly why tempt fate more times than I need to, right? But this is an opportunity for me to see just how much I take my magic for granted, by trying as many everyday tasks as I can! I've been making a list of them, and the funny thing is, I didn't even think that making a list was one of the things I was going to put on the list until I got started writing and realized just how hard it is to write with the pencil in your teeth instead of using a basic telekinesis spell! So far, I've got making a bed, reading a book, making a list, watering plants, making a sandwich..."

While Twilight continued to read off her list, Dewdrop edged over to Pinkie Pie, and quietly asked out of the corner of her mouth, "Sugar rush?"

Pinkie Pie nodded with a giant smile on her face. "Sugar rush!" she exclaimed happily.

Dewdrop sighed. She hoped things weren't going to be this hectic the entire night. Seeing Twilight pause in her reading to take a breath, she asked, "What can I do to help you, Twilight? Would you like me to be in charge of the list?"

"Please!" Twilight said enthusiastically. "It'll be much easier for you to take notes, and this frees me up to actually do the things I've written down." She motioned for Dewdrop to come over and take a look. "What do you think we should start with?"

Dewdrop examined the list. It was obvious that Twilight had very little practice writing without using her magic; she could barely make out half of the words because of the sloppy pencil work. She was about to comment on it when she realized that she would be no better if in Twilight's position.

Thinking back, the last time Dewdrop could remember writing with her mouth was way back in school, before her magic had come into bloom.

Seeing Twilight looking at her questioningly, she smiled. "Sorry, my mind wandered for a bit there. Well, it looks like you can cross a few items off this list," she said as she levitated a pencil. "You've made a bed and a list, for starters. Hmm, well, we have some dirty dishes downstairs, do you want to try cleaning those?"

"You bet!" Twilight trotted down the stairs, humming a tune to herself.

Dewdrop looked at Pinkie Pie. "Do you think it was a good idea to get her so hyped up on sweets?"

The pink party pony nodded enthusiastically. "Yup! Not only is she so excited that she's turned her apprehension about not having her magic into a fun challenge, when the sugar rush wears off it'll be easy to get her to bed for the night. Hopefully the crash will overwhelm any lingering worries she might have, and she'll fall asleep right away."

Dewdrop was momentarily stunned. "Wow, that's great thinking Pinkie Pie! I apologize, I had thought you were just being reckless, but you've obviously put more thought into this than I have."

Pinkie Pie smiled at the orange unicorn. "Oh, I also did it to see what Twilight is like when she's all hyped up on sugar," she said with a wink. "C'mon, let's go make sure she doesn't break anything in the kitchen." Pinkie hopped down the stairs, and Dewdrop quickly gathered up Twilight's list and the pencil with her magic and followed after her.

Down below, Dewdrop saw Twilight stack a couple of plates on top of each other, then carefully grab the bottom one with her teeth. Fearing the worst, She prepared a spell to try and grab anything that the former unicorn might drop on her trip to the kitchen. Although Twilight had to occasionally stop in order to make sure nothing fell from the small pile she carried, she made it through the door that Pinkie Pie held open for her without dropping anything.

Carefully placing the stack down next to the sink, Twilight looked around the kitchen for her cleaning supplies. "Let's see, I have some dish soap out

already, and I have some towels and sponges too. All I need to do is fill up the sink, and I'll be set!"

Pinkie Pie looked at the stuff that Twilight had assembled. "Oooh, it's going to be hard to clean dishes with a sponge like that. Want me to run over to Sugar Cube Corner and grab one of our sponges for you?"

Twilight blinked. "What's wrong with my sponge? I use it all the time to do the dishes."

"With your magic," Pinkie noted. "You won't be able to get a good grip on a sponge like that with just your hooves though. The sponges we use at the bakery are like socks; they slip onto the end of your hoof, and let you scrub without worrying about losing your grip on them."

"Hmm, thank you for the offer, Pinkie Pie, but I'm going to try this with what I have here. If I don't get them clean now, I'll make sure I do them again once I get my magic back." Twilight leaned over and turned the hot water faucet on with her mouth. She then looked around for the bottle of dish soap, and picked it up with her hooves.

Or at least tried too. The half empty bottle was slippery from previous uses, and the container squirted out from between her hooves to fall into the sink, dumping some of its contents in the process. "Oh no!" Twilight exclaimed before fishing with both hooves in the slowly filling sink for the bottle. She finally got it up against the side of the sink, and managed to drag it out to leave it laying on its side on the counter top.

By now, a lot of suds had built up, and Twilight found herself having a hard time finding a way to reach the water faucet without getting her muzzle sudsy. Finally, seeing that the sink was about to overflow, she gave up and stuck her head into the soap bubbles and turned off the water. When she pulled her head back out, Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop both laughed. Twilight's head was framed by a fluffy halo of soap suds. "You look like you have a manticore's mane!" exclaimed Pinkie Pie.

Twilight giggled and brushed the bubbles off of her face and back into the sink. "Okay, here goes nothing!" Grabbing the top plate from the stack she had brought in with her, Twilight slowly let it slide into the sink. She then carefully grabbed a sponge with both hooves and dropped it into the sink also. Sticking a hoof into the water, she pinned the sponge against the

plate and started to scrub it clean. She turned to her friends and smiled. "This is weird! I've never gotten my hooves wet doing this before, and now even my forelegs are getting soaked. I hope we have enough towels."

After half a minute of scrubbing, Twilight grabbed the plate with her hooves and lifted it out of the sink to inspect her work. Blowing a clump of clinging soap bubbles back into the sink, she then eyed her work carefully. "Could use a little more effort," she decided as she put the plate back into the sink. "Oh, I forgot to fill up the rinse sink! I'm so excited by all of this I'm forgetting simple things."

As the other sink filled up, Twilight went back to cleaning the plate. She stopped several times to feel the dish with her hooves, and after finding spots she missed each time resumed her scrubbing. Finally she felt she had done enough work on the plate. Dunking it in and out of the rinse sink, she put it on a towel to air dry.

Pinkie Pie gave the plate a look over. "Good job, Twilight!" she said. "It may be taking you longer than usual, but it's as clean as it was when I loaded it up with food to begin with."

"Thank you. Let me get the rest of these plates clean, then I'll try something else on the list. No sense filling up the sinks just to wash a single dish, after all."

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Over the next few hours, Twilight helped Spike put books back on the shelves, swept the floor, performed a simple experiment in the basement, and watered the plants outside the library. The sun had finally set, and Dewdrop noticed that Twilight's energy was quickly fading.

"Well, you managed to get quite a few things crossed off the list," Dewdrop said as she looked over the scroll. "Did you want to call it a night and start again in the morning, or...?"

Twilight shook her head. "There's one last thing I want to try, and I've been saving it for now. Luna said the hardest thing for her to learn to do was use her telescope. Well, I've got a telescope on the uppermost balcony, so I thought I'd give that a try now that it's dark enough to use it without blinding myself."

The three mares headed upstairs, and soon found themselves outside, shivering as a breeze made the autumn night feel colder than it was. Dewdrop whistled at the sight of the telescope. "Wow, this one is much bigger than the one Luna had. But I think hers was made to be carried around. This one looks to be more stationary."

Twilight nodded. "It is, although it can still be moved easily enough. For example, if the pegasus weather teams have a storm scheduled, I make sure to bring it inside. And with winter about to start, I'll have to drag it in so it doesn't get snowed under." She looked over the knobs and dials on the device. "Okay, see that mountain top over there?" Twilight pointed with a hoof to a nearby peak.

"Ooh! That's the one where the dragon wanted to take its nap, right?" asked Pinkie Pie.

"Correct. Since the telescope is currently set to look at the Pleiades, this should be a good challenge of how well I can adjust it without my magic."

Twilight took a moment to consider how she wanted to proceed, and then got to work. She found that while it was easy to loosen the knobs that held the telescope's barrel and lenses in position, getting them tight again while maintaining what she was aiming at was extremely difficult. Even the slightest unintended bump to the barrel of the telescope would result in the viewing target being off center.

After struggling with it for a good twenty minutes, Twilight looked ready to give up and head back inside when inspiration struck her. "This is almost cheating, but I think I have a solution that will work for what I want to do." She turned the telescope away from the mountain, and started to adjust its aim by supporting the telescope's barrel with her back.

Dewdrop looked at Twilight with a funny look. "That may let you get the telescope set up easier, but you're going to end up looking at the side of Canterlot Mountain, not the peak you were talking about."

Twilight gave a knob one last twist with her teeth, and then turned to smile at the unicorn. "Right now, yes. But, all I have to do now is turn the entire telescope around like this..." Twilight grabbed a hold of the base of the telescope, and slowly turned it counter clockwise. She looked into the telescope's sight, then made an adjustment with the base.

After half a dozen more nudges, Twilight looked into the telescope and smiled. "It may not be perfectly set up to see all of it, but I think this is close enough. Take a look!" Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop took turns, and saw that the telescope showed a view of most of the peak, although the left part was cut off from view.

Twilight shivered as a strong gust of wind blew through. "Alright," she said, "that's enough of that. Let's head inside, I'm feeling really tired all of a sudden!" The three mares headed inside and got ready for bed. While Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop were busy brushing their teeth, Twilight went and got some buckets from the basement. "I don't know if there is a chance for it to come out tonight or not," she explained as she put them in a corner of the bathroom, "but I'd rather start checking for the stone too soon instead of too late."

Spike came up to grab his sleeping basket. "If its all the same to you, I'm going to sleep downstairs tonight," he said. "I don't want to be kept up listening to you three talk about girly stuff all night long." Twilight chuckled and gave him a good night hug, and then the baby dragon went downstairs, basket and blanket in tow.

Soon, the trio were pulling back the covers and climbing into bed. Twilight was in her usual bed, while Dewdrop and Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop shared the other one. Once everypony was comfortable Dewdrop turned off the lights with a quick spell, and they drifted off to sleep.

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Dewdrop awoke with a small gasp, her head shooting up from her pillow. It had been a terrible dream; she had been back in Sugar Cube Corner, right as Twilight was casting the spell. However, instead of Twilight turning into an earth pony, the spell had reached out and grabbed her horn instead and then flew off with it. Thinking about it, it all seemed awfully silly, but it had felt so real!

Waiting for her heart to slow back down so she could try to get back to sleep, she looked around the darkened room. She was surprised to see the light of the moon reflected in another set of open eyes across from her. "Twilight?" she whispered, trying not to wake up Pinkie Pie next to her, "Is that you?"

Seeing the silhouette of the other pony nod its head, Dewdrop asked, "Having a hard time sleeping?" Another nod came in reply. "Have you gotten any sleep at all?" Seeing Twilight shake her head no, Dewdrop frowned and slowly got out of bed, doing her best not to disturb Pinkie and quietly walked over to Twilight.

"What's wrong, hun? Too much sugar in your body to get to sleep?"

"No," Twilight whispered, her voice sounding ragged. "I'm scared, Dewdrop. Really, really scared. I know I shouldn't be. After all, if I need it, I can have the two most powerful ponies in Equestria helping me. And the nurse said there shouldn't be any problems. But still..." Twilight rubbed her eyes with her hooves. "What if it does get stuck? What if it blocks things up inside me, and I need to go to the nurse, but she can't do anything? What if I miss the stone coming out, and I end up flushing it away?"

"What if I'm stuck like this forever?" she asked, her voice cracking.

Dewdrop reached over and pulled Twilight into a hug. "I can't even begin to imagine what it must be like for you right now," she said, feeling Twilight starting to cry against her, "and I wish I could tell you that you don't have to worry about those things, because I don't know if they're valid fears or not.

"What I can tell you though is that you aren't alone. You have friends that will do anything they can to help you out. Not just me and Pinkie Pie and the princesses either. I'm sure if you asked, everypony in Ponyville would do whatever they could to help you out. Feather Down didn't even know what the problem was, or who was in trouble, but she wanted to help too. We'll do everything we can to get you through this, okay?"

A rustling from behind Dewdrop told her that Pinkie Pie had woken up. "Oh, Twilight!" the pink pony said, and hopped out of bed. She walked to the other side of Twilight and joined in the hug. "You don't need to cry! We're going to get through this, okay? Everything will be all right, and that's a Pinkie Pie promise, you hear me?"

Twilight cried for a little bit longer, and finally settled down. "Thanks guys. I'm sorry. I just couldn't fall asleep right away, so I stared at the ceiling, and my head kept on coming up with all these terrible thoughts. I tried to think of other things, but no matter what I did, my brain kept coming back to those awful ideas." She sighed. "I'm sorry."



"There's no reason to be sorry," Pinkie Pie said. "You're scared, and I know just the thing for that!"

The smallest signs of a smile appeared on Twilight's face. "You're going to sing me a song?"

Pinkie's eyes lit up. "Ooh! That might work, but I don't have any songs for unicorns turned into earth ponies who can't fall asleep. No, here's what we're going to do." Pinkie climbed into Twilight's bed. "We're all going to sleep in the same bed. We're going to be right here next to you, so you know you aren't alone." She patted the mattress next to her. "Now scoot on over so Dewdrop can get in on the other side of you."

Twilight did so, and soon all three ponies were scrunched together on the bed. "It's a little bit of a tight fit," Twilight said as she pulled the covers up, "but you're right, Pinkie. I do feel better already. And it's comfortable too." She closed her eyes, and after a short yawn said, "Thank you. Both of you."

Before long the three ponies were all sound asleep, one big ball of soft snores and smiles.

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Dewdrop woke up, feeling much more refreshed than she thought she would have been from the cramped sleeping conditions. Being the first awake, she wondered how she could extract herself from the pile without waking either of the other two up when she felt Twilight start to stir next to her.

"Good morning," Dewdrop whispered. "I hope you'll excuse me, but I'll need to go run by the inn real quick to let them know I won't be able to come in to work today."

"Oh my gosh, you don't need to miss work for this!" Twilight exclaimed.

The orange unicorn smiled warmly at Twilight. "Don't you worry. The other day shift mares owe me from a couple of weeks ago when I covered for them. I'm sure Hazelnut and Lilypad won't complain at all, despite the short notice. It isn't like we're that busy this time of year anyway." Dewdrop got

out of bed and stretched. "I'll just gallop over there and back real fast, I should be gone a few minutes at the most."

"Thank you Dewdrop, I really appreciate this."

"I'm glad to. And after everything that happened yesterday and last night, you had better believe I want to be here for the end of it!"

By the time Dewdrop returned to the library, Pinkie Pie was awake and was already downstairs. "Twilight's in the bathroom right now," she said. "I'll wait to see what happens, and if the stone doesn't come out, then I'll run over to Sugar Cube Corner to get us something for breakfast and tell Mr. and Mrs. Cake where I'll be today."

A few minutes later, Twilight joined them downstairs. "No luck yet," she said. "The worst part of this has to be the searching. It's just... eww!" She shuddered at the thought.

"Okay, it's my turn to go out then," Pinkie Pie said. "You better not go to the bathroom again until I get back! I want to be here when it comes out, all right?" Before Twilight could reply, Pinkie was out the door and on her way.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. With the novelty of having no magic gone, as well as last night's sugar rush, Twilight didn't feel any desire to perform any more experiments. So the three of them simply sat around and chatted. Twilight made several trips to the bathroom, and Dewdrop and Pinkie Pie waited right outside the door to find out if the stone had finally been passed. "You know," Twilight commented on one visit, "it really feels weird having other ponies waiting on me as intently as you two are. Even with the door closed, I feel a little self conscious."

Finally, right before lunch time, Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop had their wait interrupted by the loudest exclamation of joy that either of them had ever heard come from inside of a bathroom. Throwing decorum out the window, they rushed through the door to see Twilight hold up a soiled stone between her hooves. Pinkie Pie started to hug her friend, then stopped when she considered how messy that would get. Dewdrop's horn glowed, and soon she had everything cleaned up.

Twilight set the stone down on the bathroom floor in front of her. "I hope you two don't mind, but I'm not going to waste any time, or risk another

accident, by putting off changing back." She quickly brought a hoof down onto the stone and shattered it.

White light erupted from beneath her hoof, swallowed her up and lifted her off the floor. A purple streamer appeared from nowhere, and flew around Twilight several times. As it circled her, her coat and mane returned to their normal, purple hue, and her cutie mark reverted to its normal design. Finally, the streamer floated to her head and twirled around itself until it shaped itself as a horn and attached itself back to Twilight. The light around her faded away, and she gently drifted back to the floor.

Twilight smiled widely and hugged both Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop tightly. Seeing Spike looking in from outside the bathroom, her horn glowed and she picked the dragon up with a spell and carried him over to her so she could give him a hug also. "Just needed to make sure my magic was back," she said as Spike half-heartedly protested the affection he was being showered with.

A short while later, Pinkie Pie and Dewdrop had their possessions gathered up and were getting ready to leave. "Thanks again so much," Twilight said. "I don't even want to think of how much of a wreck I would be right now if you two hadn't been here last night. I owe both of you so much."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Pinkie Pie said. "After all, you'd do the same for somepony else if they asked you, right? That's what friends do, after all. Ooh! Are you going to write about this to Princess Celestia, and make it into a friendship report?"

Twilight shook her head. "Maybe later, but I'm still pretty embarrassed about the whole thing. Besides, I don't think she'll want to hear about me digging through my own manure."

"Aww," Pinkie Pie said, "that's too bad. I even had the perfect line for it!"

"Really? What was it? I may use it if I do write a report later."

Pinkie Pie cleared her throat, and then spoke in a very cultured tone. "It might not always be obvious who your friends are," the pink pony intoned, "but no matter how messy things may get, you'll see that they'll shine through in the end, like a diamond in the roughage."

Dewdrop groaned, and then joined the other two ponies in laughter. Spike simply shook his head, muttered something about toilet humor, and entered the kitchen to make lunch for himself and Twilight.

# Chapter 3

Luna waited impatiently for the cloud chariots carrying her friends to arrive. She hadn't heard anything from her sister regarding Twilight's dilemma, so she figured that things had turned out all right. Still, not knowing was driving her a little crazy with curiosity. Finally, after what felt like an eternity of pacing, she could make out the sight of the incoming chariots from Ponyville, flying through the sky.

After a short round of hellos and hugs, the group slowly wandered away from the landing area and deeper into the castle gardens. Luna lagged a bit behind the others, and catching Dewdrop's eye motioned for the unicorn to come back to her. Once they were side by side, Luna leaned in and whispered, "So, what happened? Is Twilight no longer stuck as an earth pony?"

"Everything is back to normal," Dewdrop answered. "A little before lunch the next day, the stone finally came out; she wasted no time changing back."

Hearing the news, Luna let loose a breath she hadn't been aware she had been holding and smiled at the orange unicorn. "That's good to hear!"

"What's good to hear?" asked Feather Down from up ahead. "Does this have to do with why you spent the night at Twilight's, Dewdrop?"

"It is, but it's nothing important," she replied. Then, with a wink to Luna, she said, "I'm just letting her know that everything came out all right at the end."

Luna groaned at the bad joke and Dewdrop giggled, while the other ponies simply looked on in confusion.

"Don't worry guys," Feather Down said to the two stallions, "I'll find out what happened and pass it along." Turning back to Luna, she said, "Anyway, what's the plan for today?"

"Well, last time we stuck to the gardens and just a couple of rooms in the castle. Today, I was thinking I could give you the grand tour, so to speak. I

could also show you some places in the city, although I've only visited a few. I'm still learning the town myself. As you can imagine, there aren't that many buildings still standing from a thousand years ago. Also, I want Pine Needle to help me out with the sapling, although when we do that isn't a concern to me. And, of course, if there's anything you guys want to do, I'd love to hear it." Luna's friends looked at each other, trying to determine if anypony else had a preference.

"Well, I would love to have a tour of the castle," Haystack volunteered. "I think it would be neat to see some of the famous rooms in it. The great hall, the throne room, the parade grounds..." Haystack turned to his friends. "...Unless one of you has another idea?"

Dewdrop shook her head. "I'd like to explore the gardens some more, I had no idea how big they were, but that can wait. That's something I can do while Pine Needle and Luna work together."

"That works for me," Feather Down said. "How about you, Pine Needle? Anything you'd rather do instead of the tour?"

Seeing the earth pony shake his head no, Luna smiled and motioned for her friends to follow her. "I don't know of anything happening in the throne room this morning, so why don't we stop by there first? It's this way."

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Feather down rolled onto her side, shooting Princess Luna and Pine Needle a grumpy look. They were in the gardens again, their tour of the castle having been completed, and she had been stuck at their side for what seemed like hours, and thus far they hadn't even moved.

"You know," she said, "when I decided to stay behind with you two, instead of exploring the gardens some more, I thought that there might be something, I don't know, spectacular or flashy to watch. Instead, it's just been the two of you standing there with your eyes closed, whispering back and forth! Bor-ing!"

Pine Needle opened his eyes. "I have told you many times in the past that earth pony magic is very subtle. Just what were you expecting?"

"I don't know..." Feather Down stood up and starting to gesture wildly with her hooves. "Pillars of earth shooting up from the ground, plants growing like crazy, some sort of light show... I mean, this *is* magic we're talking about, right?"

Pine Needle chuckled. "Well, I don't think even Luna could do something like that, although I could be wrong. But I know that nopony in mine family has ever been able to do anything like that."

Luna opened her eyes and looked at Pine Needle questioningly. "You don't think I could make plants grow on my own?"

"Hmm. Maybe. The only way I can think of it happening would be for you to gather up all the potential in the area, and then force it into the plant. That could make it grow fast in the short term, but it could also harm it's growth overall. It might even hurt it by leaving the ground around the plant barren, so whatever short term gains you produced would be ruined by the fact that it would then slowly wither and die."

"How about the rest of what she said, like manipulating the earth?"

Pine Needle shook his head. "I can't even begin to think how earth pony magic could accomplish that. And I think it would be easier for you to use unicorn magic to perform such a feat."

Luna nodded. "You're right, it wouldn't be that hard at all for me to do that with telekinesis. Although I think the gardeners might object to me doing so."

Pine Needle turned back to Feather Down. "To be honest, I thought you volunteered to stay because it would be a good excuse to take a nap. I'm sorry, I would have said something sooner if I had known otherwise."

Feather Down softly sighed. "That's all right. This is what I get for not ever listening to you when you've talked about this in the past." She looked around. "Though if you two don't mind, I'm going to go ahead and explore the castle a little more, if that's okay with you, Luna?"

"Of course it is! And I'm sorry for boring you, but this is my only chance to be able to do this."

Feather Down waved a hoof dismissively. "Don't worry about it at all! There were a couple of things I wanted to take a closer look at, like some of the stained glass windows, but I didn't want to make the tour drag on for everypony else. This will be the perfect chance for me to go do that."

Luna smiled at Feather Down. "Thank you. Remember to meet back here if you hear the bells ring for dinner, okay?"

"Will do!" Feather Down said as she trotted away. She soon found herself in the hallways of Castle Canterlot. Pausing at an intersection to get her bearings, she noticed a hallway that was filled with the stained glass windows she had mentioned to the princess. Instead of heading towards it though, she took a different path, and smiled as she found herself entering one of the quieter parts of the castle.

She felt a small twinge of guilt. She hadn't exactly *lied* to Luna; she really had wanted to get a better look at some of the fine displays of craftsmanship that the window builders had utilized long ago. However, there was something else she wanted to see up close; really, *really* wanted to see up close.

On their first visit, they had all gotten to see Luna's bedroom. And while the princess had a suitably amazing bed, she was surprised to find that it wasn't that much better than hers. Oh sure, it had a fantastic canopy held aloft by jeweled pillars, and all sorts of fancy sheets and lace trim on the side. But those were all decorations. The important part, at least to her, was the comfort. After all, it didn't matter how extravagant a bed was if you couldn't get a good night's sleep on it! Luna had been nice enough to let her lay down on it, and while it was better than her own, she couldn't tell that much of a difference.

Feather Down paused at a corner to sneak a look around the turn. Seeing that the next stretch of hallway was empty, she walked as quietly as she could. The marble floors were making it hard to be stealthy when every time her hooves came down, the resulting sound echoed like crazy. Reaching the next intersection, she waited a moment to let her rapidly beating heart slow down. Then, she slowly stuck her head around the corner, and quickly pulled it back.



It was the very door that Luna had pointed out during their tour that morning. And there was only a single guard, slowly pacing up and down the hallway. If she could time things just right, and be quiet enough...

She would get a chance to see what kind of bed Princess Celestia had yet!

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Princess Celestia finished composing another scroll of instructions to be sent out to her representatives across Equestria. Finding herself out of sealing wax, and not seeing any close by, she got up from her giant purple cushion and walked into an adjoining room to see if she had some in her private library. She had just located a good sized brick of it when she heard the door to her bedroom open and close with just a soft click.

Sealing wax instantly forgotten, she gathered the magical energy in the area to her, and cautiously looked back into the bedroom, wondering who had entered her quarters unannounced. She was quite surprised to see that the intruder was one of Luna's friends, Feather Down.

Keeping herself hidden in the side room, Celestia watched as the pink earth pony slowly looked around. The princess frowned; instead of gazing about in wonder, enthralled at all of the knick-knacks and souvenirs had she accumulated over the last millennium, it seemed Luna's friend was searching for something in particular. She slowly circled the room, forcing Celestia to step back into the shadows and release her hold on the magic she had readied so that her glowing horn wouldn't give her presence away.

She thought back to the letters that Twilight had sent her and what her sister had told her about Feather Down. She couldn't recall anything that would make Celestia think that the earth pony who was carefully nosing about her room was some sort of burglar. She certainly hadn't come equipped to properly rob her room; she lacked any means of carrying anything away with her besides what she could hold in her mouth.

So what did she want? Was she here to spy for some foreign kingdom? Did she have some tie to a dark cult, or an evil organization that wanted the princesses out of the picture so they could claim power? Celestia couldn't see the pony in front of her being such an agent, but then, wouldn't that make her the perfect candidate for such a position?

Celestia watched as Feather Down looked into the other side room, where she kept her jewelery and (for those rare times of conflict) armor, as well as her rarely slept in bed. Most nights she found herself working very late on one thing or another, so she ended up falling asleep on the cushion that took up a good part of the floor in front of the fireplace. Feather Down paused, and then slowly entered the side room.

The princess's mind raced, considering what was in that room that might be of interest to somepony else. Did she mean to steal some of the royal jewels? Or maybe- Her thoughts came to a halt when Feather Down slowly walked out of the room with a puzzled look on her face. The earth pony had taken nothing from the room, and unless she had a photographic memory, there was no way she could have studied anything in the side room long enough to have gained any insight or information!

While thoughts of punishment still worked their way through her head, Celestia was now more interested in discovering just what the intruding pony was looking for. Feather Down walked towards the fireplace, and paused next to her cushion. She nudged it with a hoof, then thoughtfully walked around it twice, before nodding her head in approval. Then, to Celestia's surprise, Feather Down took a step back and then jumped into the center of the cushion like a filly leaping into a pond. She stretched her body back and forth a couple of times and then, with a very content sigh, quickly fell asleep.

Princess Celestia stood still, blinking and trying to comprehend just what exactly had happened. Had Luna's friend broken into her bedroom... just to take a nap? Quietly, Celestia walked over to where the earth pony softly snored with a smile on her face. Taking a moment to consider how she wanted to approach the situation, she decided against doing the angry monarch bit, with eyes and horn aglow with power, and settled for simply prodding Feather Down awake with a hoof.

Or at least she tried to, but the sleeping pony seemed oblivious to the subtle attempt to wake her. Celestia then placed a hoof on Feather Down's shoulder and shook her, but all that did was cause her to murmur something unintelligible before rolling onto her side. With a soft sigh, she channeled her magic, and created a small bolt of magical energy which arced from her horn to Feather Down's cutie mark to give her a mild shock.

Feather Down awoke with a start, and Princess Celestia fought back the urge to laugh. The earth pony's eyes darted back and forth before spotting her and widened in astonishment and fear. Instead of accusing her of any crimes, or demanding to know what was going on, Celestia simply raised an eyebrow while keeping a neutral face.

Softly, barely audible, the awakened pony said, "I can explain..."

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Feather Down found herself in an all too familiar situation; awakened by somepony who was not amused by her actions. Granted, this was the first time that it was the ruler of the realm awaiting an explanation, instead of her roommate or her boss. However, she had learned long ago that there was only one way to successfully handle this kind of encounter.

"I'm sorry, Princess Celestia, but I had just wanted to see how comfortable your bed was. Once I got in it though, well, it lulled me right to sleep." A slight twitch in one of the alicorn's eyes was the only sign she got, but it was enough. Once again, telling the truth, no matter how wacky and improbable it sounded, had been the way to go.

"So, why lie down here then, and not on the bed?" Celestia asked, gesturing to the side room.

"Oh, please," Feather Down said derisively. "That thing is barely worth putting in an inn, let alone a royal bedroom. Even for you the height is wrong, plus the sheets are too coarse, the pillow is made from an inferior grade of down, and it's plain to see that you don't favor it because it doesn't have any valleys in it from where somepony would sleep on it regularly."

She stood up and gently walked off of the cushion. "Now, take this marvelous thing. While not your typical bed, it's strategically situated near a fireplace, so being down on the floor won't leave you cold in the fall and winter. Also, the stuffing is sturdy enough to support you comfortably, and it's obvious from the impressions in it you sleep here more often than not. I bet you don't even worry about it lacking a pillow, do you?"

Feather Down's recitation was answered by laughter from the princess. "It isn't often I am pleasantly surprised like this. Thank you." Celestia stepped back onto the cushion and knelt down where she had been working

previously. "While you are here, would you mind taking a moment to chat with me?" Celestia motioned at an open corner of the cushion. "While I've heard about you from Luna, I would like a chance to get to know my sister's friends personally."

"Of course, your highness!" Feather Down quickly made herself comfortable. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, first off, how are things going? I'm surprised to see you away from the others."

"Oh, that's because Luna and Pine Needle are working together on something to do with that earth pony magic he keeps talking about. Not much for the rest of us to do, but that's okay. Luna doesn't have any other chances to get to do something like this with him, and the rest of us had other things we wanted to look at. Dewdrop and Haystack went off to explore the gardens, although not together," she said with disappointment in her voice.

"Oh? Is there a reason why they would?" ask Celestia.

"Oh my goodness, yes!" Feather Down exclaimed. "It seemed like they had been in each other's faces forever. Always bickering and giving each other the cold shoulder, I was amazed that they even willingly entered a room if the other was already there. And then, they shared a moment, and it was *beautiful*! Dewdrop even kissed him on the cheek! And while they aren't nipping at each other anymore, there still seems to be some sort of distance between them.

"Take the chariot ride over here, for example. I keep on offering to ride with Pine Needle so the two of them can be together, but Haystack insists on flying over instead. Doesn't want to burden the guards any, he says. Heck, I even stayed behind when they went off to explore the gardens, to give them some time alone, but it's like they didn't even notice!" The pink earth pony sighed deeply.

"Maybe they aren't interested in each other?" Celestia asked.

Feather Down shook her head. "I thought about that, but I'm certain they are. I mean, Dewdrop makes sure that Haystack is included in our get-togethers in Ponyville all the time now, something she almost never did

before. And seeing Haystack grin used to be as rare as finding a five leaf clover, but he does that all the time around Dewdrop now. He even made a joke once! Not that it was any good," she added, "but the fact that he even tried was amazing in and of itself."

"Well, maybe they just need some time?" the princess suggested. "I know it always seems to happen so quickly in the stories, but from what I've seen over the years, true love rarely happens at first sight."

"Oh, you're most likely right," Feather Down said with a sigh, "but they're my friends! I just want to help them out, somehow... oh, listen to me! Here I am, going on about this, wasting your time. I'm sorry!"

Celestia smiled. "No need to be. I did ask, after all. How about you? Are you enjoying your visits here? I know they aren't the best way for you and Luna to keep in touch, but I can't see any other solution that works without making things difficult for the others."

"Oh, I fully understand," Feather Down said. "She mentioned all the studies she has to catch up on. Heh, I had trouble when I missed half an hour of school, I can't imagine how much she missed over the last thousand years!"

"How does a pony miss just half an hour of school?" Celestia asked, her voice filled with curiosity.

Feather Down shook her head sadly. "School is hard when your special talent is sleeping, let me tell you. It's almost impossible to not take a nap when the teacher is describing multiplication tables. If Dewdrop hadn't helped me with my homework, I might not have graduated." She tilted her head questioningly at Celestia. "So, what do you have Luna studying for, anyway? Is she going to retake her old positions, whatever they were?"

Celestia sighed. "Actually, that's one of the hardest problems I face right now. Everything has changed so much, whatever tasks she took care of that haven't become obsolete are now run by other ponies. To give them back to her would mean that they would be out of a job through no fault of their own. I'm trying to find new things for her to do, but most of what I come up with might be better suited for somepony of a lesser station." The princess cocked her head. "What do you think? Would Luna be satisfied with doing things like that, or would she take offense?"

Feather Down stared in amazement at Celestia. "You, you're asking *me*, of all ponies, about something like this?"

The alicorn somberly nodded her head. "You see a side of Luna that I don't get to. Anything you can tell me that would help give me a more complete picture would be greatly appreciated."

Swallowing nervously, Feather Down thought about the question. "I don't think I can give an exact answer, but in my opinion I think she would be happy to do what she could to help you out. When she was disguised as Moonbeam, she was always willing to do whatever she could for us. Assisting Dewdrop at the inn, getting help for Haystack's harvest... I think that, as long as what you find for her to do are things that need to be done, and aren't just busy work, she'll be happy to do them."

Celestia smiled. "Those are my thoughts too. It is good to hear them from somepony else, though." The princess stood up, and floated over a couple of pieces of parchment to her. Looking them over, she tucked them under a wing and motioned for Feather Down to follow her. "Let's go find my sister and your friends then, I have something I want to ask all of you about."

The two mares stepped out of the bedroom. The guard gaped as a pony he didn't remember seeing go into the princess's chambers came out with the alicorn. "So, to the gardens, then?" Celestia asked, pointedly ignoring the stammered apologies of the guard. Feather Down nodded, barely containing the laughter that was bubbling up inside of her.

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Luna struggled with the small shovel in her hooves. Although the digging implement had been built so that ponies without magic could use it in a pinch, she was beginning to think that the creators hadn't tested their design before sending the plans off to wherever the shovel had been built. She looked over at Pine Needle, who was helping her with a shovel of his own. He seemed to be having better luck, although it looked to her that he wasn't making any significant progress either.

"I still don't understand why we're doing this the hard way," she said as she stabbed the head of the shovel into the ground once more. "I could have the hole dug and the sapling planted in less than a minute if I used my magic."

"Think back to the Running of the Leaves in Ponyville," Pine Needle said. "Why do you think we have all the ponies run the course, instead of simply having the pegasus ponies create a giant windstorm to blow all the leaves down?"

Luna thought about the situation for a moment. "Well, my first guess is that the amount of wind needed to blow down that many leaves might also damage the buildings nearby. However, given what we've been doing for the last couple of hours I'd have to say that it has something to do with earth pony magic. But I'm still not completely sure as to why, except that the act of doing it with earth pony magic is somehow important?"

Pine Needle nodded. "It is. How can I describe this?" He tilted his head in thought for a moment. "Okay, it's like... no, no. Ah! It is like a coat of paint put on a house. While the house will still stand with or without it, the paint helps to protect the house from the elements. In a similar manner, that's how the earth pony magic used in the Running of the Leaves helps the tress. It gives them more strength to survive the harsh conditions of winter."

"That makes sense. It feels kind of backwards to me though. Magic is something I've always used to make things easier, but in this case it's making things harder instead." She removed another spade full of soil from the hole. "What do you think, is this deep enough?"

Pine Needle looked back and forth between the sapling and the hole they had dug. "I think so. Go ahead and put the tree in."

As Luna carefully lifted the sapling with her hooves and placed the plant into the hole, Haystack and Dewdrop came walking up. "Hello!" said Dewdrop. "I see you two are finally finishing up?"

"Indeed! Now all we have to worry about is if the gardeners will take offense to us doing some unannounced additions to the area." Pine Needle looked at Luna. "I am assuming that you have permission to do this?"

Luna chuckled. "Of course, silly!" She grabbed the shovel and started to scrape dirt back into the hole to fill it up again. "Did you two have fun exploring?"

"I sure did!" said Dewdrop. "I found this one clearing with a bunch of plants trimmed to look like various animals, what are they called? Topiaries?"

Haystack nodded. "That would be the word. I found a really interesting fountain, it was shaped like a dragon, and the water sprayed out of its mouth in a way that made it look like it was breathing fire into the sky."

"Well, I'm glad the two of you had fun," Luna said as she started to tamp down the loose soil around the sapling. "I just need to finish filling in this hole, and then I'll be done. After that, we can wash our hooves real quick, and then we can look for something else to do." She turned to Pine Needle. "Well, what do you think? Did I do an adequate job?"

"I'm sure you did, but let me double check." Pine Needle closed his eyes briefly, only to open them up again right away. "Princess Celestia is coming," he said.

Dewdrop blinked. "Are you sure?" she asked.

The earth pony nodded. "The only other pony I know who has such a bright essence is Luna. And since she is here already..."

Luna nodded as she quickly cleaned her hooves with a spell. "Simple reasoning would certainly point that way, wouldn't it?"

Sure enough, a few seconds later Princess Celestia came into view, followed by Feather Down. "How were the windows?" Pine Needle asked when the two had come to a stop next to them.

"Windows?" Celestia asked Feather Down. "You should have told me, we could have passed by some on the way here."

"You didn't," Dewdrop said, an annoyed look on her face. Seeing Feather Down give an embarrassed chuckle while looking at the ground, the unicorn moaned. "Are you trying to get us banned from the castle for good?"

"What?" Haystack asked, looking back and forth between the two roommates. "What did she do?"

Celestia chuckled. "Oh, Feather Down came by my room and after I woke her up we had a nice little chat, that's all."



Haystack stared slack jawed at Feather Down as Dewdrop hung her head to the ground in dismay.

"Now, now, no need to be upset. I was hoping to get a chance to talk to each of you sometime soon, so it worked out for the best." She smiled at the group. "But that isn't what I'm here for. I have something I'd like for you to consider for your next visit." Celestia lifted her wing slightly, and the pieces of paper she had retrieved from her room floated out to lay on the ground in front of the ponies.

"My school for gifted young unicorns is hosting a charity function next week. It's a fancy dinner, followed by the chance to mingle with the hosts and the other guests afterwards." She looked at Luna. "I was thinking your friends might enjoy the chance to attend an upper class event like this. And I'm certain that once the word gets out that both princesses will be present that the dinner will sell out quickly."

Luna studied the leaflet and then looked at her friends. "Well, what do you say? Do you guys want to go?"

Dewdrop nodded. "I think it would be a fun experience. Besides," she said with a chuckle, "this may be the only time I'll get to be inside such a prestigious school."

"You bet I want to go!" Feather Down said. "The chance to be served a fancy meal, instead of being the one who has to pass out the food? And who hasn't wanted to be at a high society event like this?"

Pine Needle and Haystack looked at each other nervously. "Well," Haystack said, scraping at the grass with a hoof, "you know I'm not all that great when it comes to being sociable." Seeing the mares start to frown, he hastily added, "I'm not saying I won't go. I'm just warning you that I won't be the best pony to be around is all. Remember the 'Welcome to Ponyville' party for Luna? All I really did was talk to a couple other farmer ponies and keep away from Pinkie Pie."

"Well, you won't have to worry about her this time," Feather Down said. "And you'll have us to hang around with. We can keep each other company and make fun of all the silly outfits if nothing else, right?"

"I suppose so..." Haystack conceded.

"Great! And how about you, Pine Needle?"

"Um, well, sure, I'll go," he replied, unable to look any of the others in the eye.

"You don't *sound* like you want to go," Dewdrop said after an uncomfortable moment of silence. "Why not, hun?"

Pine Needle sighed. "An earth pony farmer, at an upper class event for a unicorn school? I'm going to stick out like an unkempt mane."

"It won't be as bad as you're making it out to be," said Dewdrop. "As long as you don't eat your food like a colt, the dinner shouldn't be a problem at all. And just stick next to us for the rest of it, we'll make sure that you aren't forced to talk about stuff like the latest styles in hoofwear, or who's running for mayor in Manehattan."

Pine Needle sighed, "Very well." He lifted his head to give the others a small smile. "It would be rude of me to refuse to do this when you all let me monopolize Luna's time today."

"Excellent!" Princess Celestia said. "Make sure when you come next week to bring your dress wear with you. And now, I had better go inform the organizers that my sister will be there, as well as four extra guests." She smiled at the group before turning to walk back towards the castle.

Luna had listened to the preceding conversation silently, watching her friend's various reactions as well as her sister's. As Celestia walked away Luna turned to her friends and said, "Wait here one moment, please," and trotted after her sister.

Catching up to the white alicorn, she asked in a quiet voice, "This dinner has been in the works for months. Why invite me and my friends at the last minute? I would think that the tickets had been sold out long ago."

Celestia nodded. "They have. But I think this dinner will be a great learning experience, and adding five more ponies to the guest list won't be a problem at all."

Luna looked questioningly up at her older sister. "But eating in public was one of the first things you made sure I got reacquainted with, because of all

the formal dinners with foreign dignitaries. Do you think I still need more work on it?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Celestia chuckled. "This isn't for you, but for your friends." She stopped and looked Luna in the eye, her face suddenly very serious. "They mostly know you as an earth pony, who wandered into town one day with very little to her name. I want to make sure that they understand just exactly what being the close friends of royalty means."

Seeing Luna about to protest, she raised a hoof. "I'm not trying to drive them away from you. Trust me. In fact, that's why I chose this upcoming dinner. Since it's for charity, the majority of the attending ponies will be there because they believe in helping a good cause; you won't find a more accommodating crowd for your friends to get their first taste of high society with."

"And with winter coming up, there will be lots more of these events happening. You'll need to be present at some of them, if you want to be able to regain the full trust of everypony." Celestia smiled sadly at Luna, who looked very frustrated. "I know, these events are quite often tedious and boring. And it seems like there's always another one to attend. But that's just the way society has evolved. It may be dull, but at least it keeps the nobles away from the ponies who actually get the work done."

Luna slowly nodded her head. "I understand."

Celestia grinned at her younger sister. "Good. Oh, and when Pine Needle has taught you everything that he can, I'll be happy to show you what I learned about earth pony magic over the years." Seeing Luna's shocked expression, she chuckled. "There's a lot of free time to fill over a millennium, after all." With that, Celestia turned and headed back inside the castle.

Luna watched her sister leave. While she understood Celestia's intentions, she wasn't certain that she approved of her methods. Was such a roundabout approach to the situation needed? Frowning, she turned around and headed back to her waiting friends.

# Chapter 4

With a set of old saddlebags draped across his back, Haystack slowly glided towards an open clearing in Ponyville. He circled around, scanning the area below to make sure that no other ponies were in his path. Satisfied that his approach would be clear he flew down and- once he was low enough- transitioned from his glide to a quick trot. After a few hasty steps he slowed his pace to a brisk walk which carried him the final few steps to the front door of the library.

His knock produced a cry of "Coming!" from inside, and after a few seconds, Spike the dragon opened the door. "Hey, Haystack. I'm sorry, but Twilight's not in right now. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Actually, there is," the pegasus replied. "I was hoping to be able to check out a book, I need one on the topic of etiquette."

Spike motioned for Haystack to follow him inside. "Etiquette? You mean, like, manners 'n stuff?"

"Indeed." Haystack replied as he entered the building. "There is a dinner in Canterlot that me and my friends have been invited to, and I would like to avoid making a fool of myself if at all possible."

Spike stopped and scanned the shelves for a moment. "I didn't get to go to many parties or events like that when I lived there. Twilight pretty much kept to herself and did a lot of studying in her room, which meant I usually had to be there helping her find books and other stuff." Walking over to a section of the shelves, he asked over his shoulder, "So, what's the event? Some sort of dance?"

"No, it's a charity dinner that's being held at a school run by Princess Celestia, if I recall correctly."

"Oh, I know which one you're talking about! Twilight and I got to go to that once, what with her being Celestia's student and all. That's great that you managed to get tickets, they usually sell out pretty quickly from what I remember." Spike reached up, examined a book, and then put it back in its

place. "No, that one won't do, let's see... ah! Here we go!" He turned and held the tome up for Haystack's approval.

"Etiquette for Everypony: The Manual of Manners for Mares and Stallions," Haystack read the title of the book aloud. "Thank you very much, Spike, that should fit the bill perfectly. Is there any paperwork that I need to fill out?" he asked as he opened one of his saddlebags and deposited the book inside.

"I'll just need a signature, hold on one second while I fill out the form." Spike walked over to a desk in a corner of the room. He pulled out a paper, grabbed a quill, and started to fill in the blanks. "There is a one week check out period for books," he explained as he wrote. "If you need to keep it longer, just stop by and see if any other ponies have asked for it. If not, we'll let you keep it another week. You still live out at your farm?" Seeing Haystack nod, he quickly jotted down a note and then held the quill up for him. "Then just sign here on the bottom line, that means you understand how long you can keep the book, and that should the book be damaged while you have it, you'll pay to repair or replace it."

Grabbing the quill in his teeth, Haystack signed his name, and waited for Spike to retake the writing instrument before replying, "Thank you, Spike. A week will be perfect for me. The dinner itself is five days away, I'll return it the day after we get back." He turned, and started walking towards the door when he paused.

"Oh, by the way, you said this dinner we're going to usually sells out fast?" the pegasus asked, keeping his head turned away from the dragon to hide the troubled look on his face.

"Almost always, yeah. Why?" Spike asked as he placed the form into a basket before leaving the desk.

"Oh, no reason. I guess we were lucky to get in, huh?" Haystack opened the door and stepped outside. "Thanks again Spike, and I'll see you in about a week," he called back as he took off. Circling as he gained elevation, he waved at the dragon below, and then headed back towards his farm.

A few minutes later he was home, headed towards the barn where he had left Pine Needle earlier that morning. His earth pony friend was inside, busy

sweeping the floor. "Good news," Haystack said once he was sure that he had Pine Needle's attention. "Spike was able to find me a book. Once we're done here, we can go grab some lunch while we take a look at it."

"That sounds good," Pine Needle replied after he leaned his broom against a wall. "I've swept most of this area, but the other rooms still need to be done."

"Good work. Let me go put my saddlebags inside the house, and then I'll help get the cleaning done." After matching deeds to words, the two stallions spent the rest of the morning sweeping the floors of the barn and performing other small jobs that were found as they worked.

As they headed back to the house for lunch, Pine Needle turned towards his pegasus friend. "What is wrong? You have been very quiet since coming back from the library," he asked.

Haystack blinked in surprise. "Have I? Oh." He stopped, and his face scrunched up in thought. Pine Needle stopped and turned around a few steps later, a look of wonder on his face. Haystack sighed as he shook his head. "I don't know if something is wrong or not. I'm not even certain if what I'm concerned about is legitimate, and I don't want to be spreading false gossip if it isn't."

"Well, now you have gone and made me even more curious!" Pine Needle said with a chuckle. "But I shall respect your privacy," he added as he approached the door to the house and held it open for Haystack. "Just, please, if there is something I can do to help you with it, let me know."

"I will, thank you." Haystack stepped inside, and headed towards the kitchen. "For right now though, let's just concentrate on lunch and that book."

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The tolling of bells alerted Luna to the fact that it was noon. Sighing, she used a piece of fabric to mark her place in her book, *A Summation of the Griffin Wars*, and stretched as she stood up. While she didn't mind her studies, some of the topics were actually quite fun to read about, she was starting to resent the sheer amount of history that had transpired while she had been banished to the moon for a millennium.

Smiling to Mrs. Hardback, the librarian of Canterlot Castle, Luna left the stacks of books and made her way to the royal dining hall. Noticing that she had arrived before her sister, she sat down and waited, not wanting to start lunch until Celestia was also present. It was hard, especially with the gurgling sounds her stomach was making (how could she get so hungry just by reading books? It didn't seem possible!), but lunch was one of the few times during the day when Luna got to spend some quality time with her sister. She wanted to stretch it out as much as she could.

Thankfully, Celestia arrived just a few moments later. Smiling at Luna, she took her seat across from her and motioned for the servants to bring them their midday meal. Over sandwiches and a small salad, the two sisters made small talk and discussed their plans for the rest of the day. Luna hoped to get through the rest of her book, while Celestia had an afternoon ahead of her filled with meetings and audiences.

Soon, too quickly for Luna's liking, they had finished their lunch and were nibbling on some sweet breads for dessert. "So," Celestia asked her, "I was thinking about your friends and the dinner coming up, and I was wondering, do they have any clothes that are appropriate for this kind of event?"

Luna considered the question as she slowly chewed her mouthful of dessert. "I'm not sure," she replied after swallowing. "I know Dewdrop has a dress that Rarity made, but I don't know if the others have anything. There really weren't any reasons to dress up while I was there, to be honest. If they do, they didn't talk about it."

Celestia smiled. "That's what I thought. Well then, don't you worry, I'll take care of that. It'll be entertaining to see how they react."

"What do you mean, entertaining?" Luna asked warily, not certain that she liked the undertones of her sister's statement.

"Well, consider this. What the worst thing that your friends could do at the beginning of the dinner?"

"Well, I'm assuming you mean reasonable actions, and not anything like one of them deciding to attack the other ponies," Luna said with a chuckle. Seeing her sister grin, Luna continued, "I would say letting the spectacle of it get to them would be a disaster. It doesn't matter how polite the other ponies are, if all my friends do is gawk and stare at everything and

everypony, the first impression they would give the others would be hard for them to overcome."

Celestia nodded and smiled. "And on those same lines, showing up in an outfit that is clearly sub-par will do that too. So, I'll take care of both of those problems at the same time, and have myself some fun while I'm at it." She stood up, and made her way towards the door. "Besides," she said in a muted tone, "these dinners are almost all the same. This will be a nice little test run before some of the bigger events, like the Grand Galloping Gala in a couple of weeks, to see if my plans will work out like I think they will."

Luna watched her sister leave, stunned by the revelation. Her sister didn't like these dinners and events? She found them monotonous? And just what did she have planned for her friends? She trusted Celestia enough that she was sure her sister wasn't planning anything insulting or embarrassing, but she wished she had been more open with her. Did she really need to go to such lengths just have fun nowadays?

Thanking the servants for a wonderful meal, Luna got up and slowly made her way back towards the library. She had a feeling, with so many new things to consider, that she wouldn't be making much headway into the accounts of ancient battles this afternoon.

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"Okay, my turn," said Haystack as he looked at the book of manners in front of him. "When is it permissible to put one's hooves on the table?"

"Only when you are passing a dish to another pony," replied Pine Needle. "I have to admit, these are all rather common sense rules. No eating with your mouth open, keeping your voice down, always saying please and thank you... I think mine biggest fear is forgetting something due to everything happening around us."

Haystack nodded. "Well, don't forget you have it a bit easier than me and Dewdrop. You don't have to worry about spreading your wings out in surprise or anger, or using your magic at the wrong time."

"I am quite surprised on how many rules there are about unicorn magic," Pine Needle said. "I guess it makes sense, because there are so many things that can be done with it and it seems that every unicorn has a spell



or two that they have developed on their own. I don't know if I am more astonished by all the situations that are unique to magic, or the fact that the book seems to have an answer for all of them."

"Hmm, you may be on to something," Haystack said, and went to the back of the book and started looking through the index.

"I... what? You are making no sense, mine friend!"

"That thing that I've been working on since I came back from the library? You just made me realize that maybe there's something in here that could help me figure out what to do."

"Ah, yes," Pine Needle said dryly. "That thing which you continue to tease me with, yet never share. I don't suppose there is something in the book about doing that to your friends?"

Haystack sighed. "I'm sorry, I really am... and no, of course there isn't anything in here about catching someone in a lie. Just my luck."

"Oh? Just who did you catch in a lie?"

Muttering under his breath, Haystack closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay, look, I'll tell you, but please don't go spreading this around to anypony else, okay?"

"Of course!"

"It's just that, when I was talking to Spike at the library while I was checking out the book, he told me that the dinner we're going to sell out fast. But Princess Celestia told us that she hoped with Luna added to the guest list that the rest of the tickets would sell quickly." Haystack looked up at the ceiling. "It just doesn't add up to me."

"Well, did Spike say that it always sold out fast?"

"No, he didn't say always, just usually. But I still have a hard time believing that any event that has Princess Celestia as a guest would have a hard time getting ponies to line up to attend it."

Pine Needle paused and thought for a moment. "Well then," he said, "maybe it was just something she said to make us feel better about accepting her invitation to attend? Maybe she felt we might feel bad if we knew she was squeezing us into an already sold out event?"

"No, I thought of that," Haystack said while shaking his head. "I just can't see her going to such lengths for us. Or, rather, I don't think she would fabricate a story over something like that."

"I think you are putting too much thought into this, mine friend. Do you really think she has some sort of scheme that she is trying to hide from us?" Pine Needle started to gesture with his hooves. "Do you think she plans on using us attending a charity dinner to, I don't know, radically change the way that Equestria is governed, or use us as a cover to have some splinter group be removed from the picture?"

"It does sound rather silly, when you put it like that, doesn't it? I don't know though, I just have this feeling that there is more to this," Haystack said, clearly frustrated.

"Well then, why don't you go discuss this with Dewdrop?" Pine Needle suggested. "If she can't convince you of things, one way or the other, I don't know who could."

"You know what? That's an excellent suggestion. Thank you, I think I will. Do you still need this book, or are you all right if I take it with me? I'd like to have some other reason to go see her than possibly being paranoid."

"Not that you need any specific reason to go see her," Pine Needle said, rolling his eyes. "But yes, take it with you. Do you mind if I go home?"

"Oh, not at all!" Haystack said. "We got everything done before lunch, there's no reason for you to stick around by yourself doing nothing." Haystack went to fetch his saddlebags. "Thank you again, not just for your work today, but also for your suggestion."

"Of course! See you tomorrow morning at the usual time?"

"Please. I want to go and inspect the south face of the hill and make sure everything is in good shape for the coming winter." Placing the book into

his bags, he went and held the door open for Pine Needle. "Until tomorrow, my friend!"

Watching Pine Needle leave, Haystack looked things over one last time and, seeing nothing out of place, took to the skies. A short flight later he found himself outside the Ponyville Inn. Taking a deep breath to calm a sudden attack of butterflies in his stomach, he opened the door and entered.

"Greetings, and welcome to... oh! Hello, Haystack! What brings you here today?" Dewdrop said from behind the front counter.

"Do I need a reason to visit you?" Haystack replied nervously. "But um, yeah, I actually have a couple, heh." He walked up to the desk. "The first is I just got done reading a book on manners that I checked out from the library. I was wondering if you might want to look through it before I returned it?"

Dewdrop arched an eyebrow. "Are you saying that I need to work on my manners?" she asked. Seeing Haystack starting to stammer and sweat, she chuckled and waved a hoof. "I'm just kidding, dear. I actually would like a chance to skim through it, just to give myself a refresher on everything that I should know. Thank you. So, what's the other reason?" she asked as Haystack took the book from his bags and placed it on the desk in front of her.

"Well, um, I know you're on the clock still, but is there anyplace where we can talk privately?" he asked nervously. "I have something I want to talk to you about, and I'm not comfortable about other ponies overhearing what I have to say."

Dewdrop felt her cheeks start to heat up. "Uh, sure, we can use the office behind me, that way I can hear the bell ring if anypony comes in." Her horn glowed, and the door opened. She led the way into the room, and checking one last time to make sure that the lobby was empty, she closed the door. She looked at Haystack, her curiosity building as to what he was going to say. It was rare for the pegasus farmer to come visit her at work, so she figured it was something important.

Trying to figure out where to start, Haystack looked around uncomfortably for a moment before sighing. "Look, I don't know if I'm being an idiot or

what, but I think something is going on with us being invited to this charity dinner."

"Oh? What do you mean?" Dewdrop asked, intrigued by what Haystack said while also feeling oddly disappointed.

"Well, when I was checking out that book on manners this morning, Spike mentioned that this dinner usually sells out quickly. And yet, Celestia told us that she was hoping that Luna would help ticket sales."

"Hmm. So you're wondering why there is a contradiction between what Celestia told us and what Spike said?"

"Exactly!" Haystack said, relieved that Dewdrop had caught on to his worries. "Pine Needle thinks that she was just trying to make us more comfortable in accepting the offer, so we wouldn't feel like we were being an imposition, but I've just got this nagging feeling that there is more to this than just that."

Dewdrop paced around the office as she considered his words. "Sorry dear, but I think I'm going to side with Pine Needle on this. I can't really come up with any other good reasons why Celestia would say that, other than this being the rare year where tickets for the dinner didn't sell quickly. Like they say, the simplest answer is usually the correct one."

Haystack nodded slowly. "You're probably right. Sorry for troubling you over something like this."

"No need to apologize! I'm just glad you to see you during the day for a change." She smiled at the pegasus. "Normally, the only times we cross paths are after work or on our trips to visit Luna. And thank you again for bringing that book. I'll make sure to get it back to you in the next couple of days, so you can do a final read through of your own before the dinner."

"Thank you. Well, that's all I came here for, and I don't want to get you in trouble here at work, so I guess I'll be heading home then?"

Dewdrop opened the office door. "Sounds good. Are we all still on for getting together for dinner tomorrow night? I know Feather Down is looking forward to it."

Haystack grinned. "She likes any chance to be the servee instead of the server. And yes, both Pine Needle and I will be there. We wouldn't miss it. All right then, until later!" He waved and left the inn.

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The rest of the week flew by for Luna in a rush. Between her studies and helping out her sister when and where she could, the day when her friends came to visit, as well as of the dinner, almost caught her by surprise. At Celestia's insistence, she only wore her royal regalia; her crown, necklace, and shoes. "Trust me," her sister had told her that morning, "we don't need to do anything else to be impressive in their eyes. They admire us for who and what we are; there's no need for us to rub it in their noses by dressing up extravagantly for something like this."

And so, Luna anxiously waited for the chariots carrying her friends to arrive. She wasn't worried about them being late; after all, it was only mid morning, and the dinner was still many hours away. No, what had her concerned was her sister. Celestia's comments from several days ago still puzzled her, and even with all the thought she had put into them, she was still unable to figure out what, if anything, she could do for her.

Finally, the chariots from Ponyville made their approach and landed in their usual clearing. She trotted over and hugged her friends, making sure not to disturb the saddlebags they wore. "It's so good to see you all again! Are you ready for tonight?"

"I think so," said Dewdrop. "We brought our best clothes," she said as she nodded her head towards her saddlebags, "and we all spent some time brushing up on our manners so we don't look or act like the small town ponies that we really are. We'll do our best not to embarrass us or you," she said with a smile.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine, all of you. C'mon, you can put your things in my room until we need them later in the afternoon." Luna started to walk towards the castle, and her friends followed after her. "So, do any of you have any questions about what we'll be doing tonight?"

"I do, actually," Feather Down said. "Are we going to be eating with you, or at own separate table, or with other ponies, or... what?"

"I believe the setup consists of several long tables, each hosting several dozen ponies at each, banquet style. We'll be close to each other, but there will be some guests between you and me, although I think that we should be able to see and speak to each other if we need to." Luna held open the door for her friends. "It's after we eat that we should have time to be together, although I'm sure I'll have a lot of other ponies coming up to talk to me. I certainly won't be offended if you want to go and mingle some yourselves."

"I'll see how well I do during the first part, before making any predictions about the rest," Pine Needle said as the group worked its way through the castle hallways. "I hate to say this, but I'm feeling very nervous."

"Oh? About what part of it?" Luna asked.

"Every part, to be honest. Am I going to forget something simple, like how to properly talk to somepony? What if I spill something during the dinner? And the clothes I have, while they fit, they aren't exactly what you would call current. I think the last time I wore them was back when I still lived in Stalliongrad."

"Oh, I've gone over that with you a couple of times already," Feather Down said. "That's a classic sports coat you have there, those don't go out of style. You'll be fine, trust me."

Luna was relieved to hear Feather Down reply. While she figured that her sister had some sort of plan to help her friends out if needed, she was still unable to guess at what it might be. She didn't want to have to go out of her way and try to hide what Celestia might be planning either, so she kept quiet as her friends talked about what they had brought with them for the dinner.

They arrived at her bedroom, and she pointed to a corner. "Go ahead and put your things there for now, they'll be safe." She watched as her friends went and placed their bags where she had indicated, and was surprised when she saw that Feather Down was standing as still as a statue outside the door to her bedroom. "Umm, Feather Down, are you all right?"

"Yeah," she said in a strained voice. "Or, rather, I will be. Just give me a moment. I have to fight the urge to go jump on Ricardo."

"Ricardo? Who is..." Luna sighed, resisting the urge to put a hoof to her forehead. "You named my bed, didn't you."

"Please! You can't tell Phillipe about this! I don't want him to think I'm cheating on him!"

"And Phillipe is?"

"My bed back home!" Feather Down wailed. "I don't have the heart to tell him that I found other beds as comfortable as he is, let alone better!"

"Oh, for goodness sakes," Dewdrop muttered as she stomped over and made a point of grabbing her roommate's saddlebags with her teeth and putting them into the bedroom for her. "I'm going to make you retrieve them yourself, I hope you realize," she said crossly.

"You're such a great friend!" Feather Down said as she gave Dewdrop a big hug, to the amusement of the other ponies.

"Yes, yes, I know." Dewdrop returned the hug and turned to Luna. "So, what's the plan, before we have to get all dressed up later on?"

Luna smiled. "I was hoping to introduce you to one of my friends here in the castle. She's the librarian, and her name is Mrs. Hardback..."

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The day passed by uneventfully, and they were back in Luna's bedroom, where she and Dewdrop helped the others get dressed with their magic. Both Pine Needle and Haystack had simple black sports coats with bow ties, and Dewdrop was wearing her dress that Rarity had given her several weeks ago. Feather Down wore a basic light blue dress that was plain but wasn't unattractive. 'They won't be the talk of the event for how nice their outfits are,' Luna thought, 'but they shouldn't be openly mocked either. I'm glad.'

Everyone was surprised when there was a knock on the bedroom door. "I wonder who that is?" Luna said as she went to open it. Her stomach twisted into a knot when she saw her sister standing on the other side. "Celestia! Come on in! What brings you here?"

"I just wanted to make sure everypony was ready for tonight, that's all," she said in a voice that sounded a bit too happy for Luna's comfort. "Come now, there's no need for you ponies to bow to me at a time like this, I just came to see... oh," Celestia's voice changed from one of joy to dismay in an instant. "Oh dear, no, that won't do at all."

Seeing that her friends were too stunned to make any sort of response, Luna asked, "What do you mean, sister? What won't do?" She found it hard not to scream in frustration. Whatever it was that Celestia had prepared, she was certain that she was playing right into her sister's plan, even though she had no clue what would happen next.

Instead of answering, Celestia walked back to the door and stuck her head into the hallway. "Cummerbund! Chemise! Get in here! It's just as I feared!" Two ponies galloped into the room; one was a blue unicorn stallion with a darker blue mane and a cutie mark of a red sash on his flank, while the other was a yellow earth pony mare with a silver and white mane who's cutie mark was a white shirt.

"How can we be of service, your Highness?" the mare asked in an exaggerated accent that Luna couldn't quite place. She looked at Luna's friends and gasped. "Oh my! Yes, I understand! Cummerbund! Go get the racks, I shall makes plans on what to do until you return!"

Luna fought the urge to groan out loud, and she edged closer to her sister. "You're going to play dress up using my friends, aren't you?" she asked quietly out of the corner of her mouth.

"Now now, while I wouldn't put it in such a crude manner, I guess that is essentially what I'm going to do," she replied.

"You know, you could have just told them that you would have provided something for them to wear when they got here. They wouldn't have minded at all, and it would have saved them the hassle of bringing their own outfits. And did you really have to go to these extremes?" Luna asked, her frustration showing in her voice.

Celestia started to answer, but paused when half a dozen other ponies came into the room, bringing with them several racks of outfits. After the hubbub had died down some, and Luna's friends found themselves being examined and prodded, she turned and softly replied to Luna, "Remember



what I said at lunch a while back? This isn't just about getting them to look nice. It's also to get them past that first state of shock, to help get them acclimated to the amount of attention that they'll receive for being friends of yours." She smiled, and with a wink said, "Also, this way I get to have some fun too. I don't get to do that as often as I like, you know."

Luna looked at her friends. Feather Down seemed to be enjoying having other ponies offer up dresses for her to try on, and Haystack looked to be holding up too, putting up what Luna thought was a stoic front. Pine Needle however had been backed into a corner by unicorn mare twins, each magically carrying an outfit for him to try on, and Dewdrop looked like she was ready to come to blows with Cumberbund. Luna started to step towards Dewdrop to help her out when Celestia put a hoof on her shoulder. "Please, sister," Celestia said, "let me handle this."

The white alicorn walked over to the two unicorns and asked, "Is there something I can do to help?" she asked.

"There most certainly is!" Dewdrop exclaimed. "I don't mind if this *colt* doesn't like my choice of clothing, but to call this gift from Rarity a complete disaster is going way too far, and I won't put up with it!"

"Now, now," Celestia chuckled, "maybe his choice of words were a bit strong, but he does have a point. That dress of yours is, to be blunt, inappropriate for the event ahead of us."

"But, but..." Dewdrop stammered, unsure of what to say.

"It *is* a nice dress," the alicorn continued, "but it's the kind of outfit that would be worn by a servant, or a maid. It isn't what one would wear to a formal event, unless they were one of the ponies helping with the dinner or cleaning up afterwards." Seeing Dewdrop slowly nod in comprehension, she said, "Now, why don't you let Cumberbund here help you get into something that won't have you mistaken for being one of the servants, and I'll go help your stallion friend over in the corner who looks like he's about to have a nervous breakdown."

The unicorn mare looked in the direction Celestia was referring to. "Pine Needle? Oh, oh my, yes, please do." Dewdrop turned to Cumberbund and sighed. "I'm sorry for my earlier outburst. It's just that this is all happening so fast!"

Leaving the two unicorns behind, Celestia headed over to Pine Needle. "Oh dear," she said as the earth pony seemed to be ready to bolt at the first open route in front of him. "What seems to be the problem? I don't think I can recall the last time I saw a stallion be so afraid of two lovely mares wanting to help him out!"

Pine Needle blushed at the giggling coming from the twins. "I, I am simply shocked by how insistent they are! I am not being given a chance to breathe, let alone time to decide if I think what they are offering for me to wear is any better than what I currently have on!" he said, trying to hide his nervousness behind a facade of bluster.

Celestia studied his outfit for a moment, while the twins stepped back a pace to give the princess room. "Hmm, if I'm any judge, I'd say what you're wearing is several years old at the least. No reason for you to wear something like that when you have access to the most up to date fashions. Also, it seems to be very reminiscent of what is worn in the northern cities, such as Trottingham and Stalliongrad. In other words, a little too heavy to be worn in a room with a couple hundred other ponies. You'll be drowning in your own perspiration before we finish the main course!" She motioned to the selections the unicorns had brought with them. "If I can get these ladies to promise to not be so... forceful in their efforts, would you be willing to try these on, and see how they fit?"

"Well, when you put it that way, yes I can, your Highness," Pine Needle said grudgingly, trying to ignore the laughter coming from the two mares.

"Thank you very much," Celestia said with a smile. She left them and walked back over to Luna.

"For the record," Luna said quietly when Celestia was standing next to her again, "I'm still upset about all of this. I understand your reasoning behind most of it, but..." she trailed off, shaking her head at the scene in front of her. "I don't know, it just feels over the top to me." She was surprised when her sister bent down and nuzzled her.

"Good," Celestia said, her voice soft and proud. "I'm glad you care this much about your friends. And I'm even happier that you're willing to tell me when *you* aren't happy. I think that was one of the biggest problems we had in the past, both the recent and the distant. We weren't able to tell each other when we were upset by the other's actions, and that's what led to us

going separate ways. Please, promise me that you won't ever hold anything back, okay?"

Luna stood in shock, surprised by Celestia's words. "Of course, sister! And the same for you too, please! I don't want you to think you have to hide stuff from me either!"

Celestia smiled. "Thank you. And now," she said as she straightened up again, "I have to go on ahead to the school so I can be there to greet the guests as they arrive. I'll be looking forward to seeing what your friends end up wearing, so please don't keep me waiting too long, okay?" She walked towards the door, and turned around before leaving. "Oh, and tell them that they can keep whatever they decide on, my treat for putting up with this."

Luna nodded, surprised by her sister's generosity. She looked again at the clothing being offered up to her friends. They were made of quality materials, and looked to be on the cutting edge of fashion. She figured that each outfit must cost at least several hundred bits, and would be good to wear for the entire winter without looking out of date. Turning back to Celestia, she said, "Thank you."

With one last dip of her head, her sister left the room, leaving Luna to stand back and watch as her friends were asked to try on outfit after outfit in rapid succession.

# Chapter 5

"Hello there Sunny Day, how are you doing?" Celestia asked the orange unicorn that had just entered the school. The princess had arrived around fifteen minutes ago, and had been welcoming guests as they showed up ever since. It was a point of personal pride for her to be able to greet each attendee by name, without them offering it to her first.

While it came across as an amazing feat of memory to the guests, she would admit that the task wasn't as difficult as it seemed. For starters, the number of ponies attending the event was only a couple hundred. In addition to that, many of the guests attended year after year, so the number of new names to recall was small, only a few dozen at most. Toss in a millennium of memory training, and pulling up the identity of the visitors as they arrived was quite easy.

Hearing the door open, she turned to see who the latest ponies to arrive were. She smiled when she saw that it was Luna and her friends. "Greetings, sister!" she called out. "And, oh my! Look at you four, I hardly recognize you."

Feather Down led Luna's friends into the building. She was wearing a yellow dress accentuated by narrow white stripes and trim. Her mane was also adorned by several white bows. Behind her, Dewdrop and Haystack walked side by side. Haystack wore a simple yet classy white collar with black lapels around his neck. A black bow tie covered where they buttoned up on the front, giving him a professional look. Dewdrop was wearing a red dress that had yellow dots along its edges. She also wore blue earrings that matched her water droplet cutie mark. Celestia smiled, glad that she had thought to include specialized jewelry for the mares in her plans.

At the rear of the group was Pine Needle, still looking uncomfortable, although not as bad as Celestia remembered him looking back in Luna's bedroom a short while ago. He was wearing a black dress jacket with golden buttons, with a white shirt and a black bow tie to complete the ensemble. Luna led them all up to her, dressed up in her princess regalia. Celestia was glad to see her sister looking so confident and happy.

"Hello, Celestia," Luna replied when she was next to her. "Is there anything that we can do to help?"

"We still have some time before we need to get everypony in their seats for the dinner," Celestia replied, "and ponies will be arriving up until then. I would appreciate it if you stood here next to me and helped greet the guests as they arrived." She turned to Luna's friends. "I would suggest that the four of you take this time to wander about. Get to know the building, find out where you've been assigned to sit for the meal, and mingle with some of the other guests if you feel up to it."

"Thank you," replied Dewdrop, "we'll do just that. And thank you again for the invitations for tonight's event, and for these wonderful outfits."

"I'm just glad that you like them. Oops, here come some more guests now. Hopefully we'll get the chance to talk later tonight." Celestia turned her attention to a pair of pegasi walking up to her. "Greetings, Mr. and Mrs. Breeze. Has your day been enjoyable so far?"

Waving goodbye to Luna, the quartet wandered deeper into the building together. "So, anything that anypony wants to do in particular?" asked Feather Down.

"Well," said Dewdrop, "I wanted to take a look around the place. While I would have never been able to pass the entrance exams for a place like this, I'd like to at least see what I missed out on."

"That sounds good to me," replied Feather Down. "Why don't me and Pine Needle go find where we're sitting for the meal, and then we'll catch up to you two?" Without waiting for a reply, she pushed a surprised Pine Needle down the main hall towards a large room, where several long tables could be seen through a set of open double doors.

Haystack blinked and softly said, "Sure, I'd like to do that, thank you for asking me." Shaking his head slightly, he turned to Dewdrop. "Well then, where to first?"

Dewdrop chuckled. "You know, you don't have to come with me if you don't want to," she said.

"I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I went off on my own. Besides," he added, "I'm not complaining about the decision, just the manner in how it was made."

"I know, dear," Dewdrop smiled, and then motioned towards an open room off to one side. "Let's go take a look in there."

The two found themselves in a classroom. One wall was dominated by a large chalkboard, covered in hastily scrawled notes and diagrams. The center of the room was empty, and the outer areas were filled with desks sized for fillies and colts. In one corner was a larger desk, with shelves on the walls behind it filled with books and teaching aids.

"It reminds me some of the school I went to when I was younger," commented Haystack. "Of course, this place is bigger, and much more up to date than the one room building I attended as a colt."

Dewdrop nodded, and walked over to inspect the books behind the teacher's desk. "Same for me, although it looks like they also study more advanced subjects than me and Feather Down did when we were in school. That's to be expected, I guess, considering the nature of this place."

She turned and looked straight at Haystack. "While I have the chance to do so privately, I need to apologize. You were right, Princess Celestia was up to something. Mind you, I don't think we could have done anything about what happened back there in Luna's bedroom, but I'd like to think I would have handled things better if I had taken what you said to heart."

Haystack shook his head. "I don't know if it would have helped at all. I was just as caught up in all of it as you were, it happened so fast. One moment Princess Celestia was knocking on the door, and the next we were surrounded by her helpers, trying on outfit after outfit." He frowned. "Luna didn't seem too happy with all that happened either, from what I could see."

"You saw more than I did then," Dewdrop said, also frowning. "I'm sure Princess Celestia did it for good reasons, but I can't figure out *why* she did things the way she did."

"Me either," Haystack sighed. "It just makes me wonder though, how often does Luna have to put up with stuff like that? I want to ask her, but..."

Dewdrop walked up to him and gently nudged him. "I know. Even though we're friends of Luna, it doesn't feel right bringing up stuff about the two of them. They're princesses, and we're just regular ponies from Ponyville." She gave Haystack a small, sad smile. "After all she's done for us the last few weeks, we aren't being very good friends in return, are we?"

"I'm sure there's something we can do. I just need to think on it is all." Haystack's voice and face took on a determined edge. "Just give me some time, okay?"

"Of course," Dewdrop said while nodding in agreement. "And I'll be thinking on it too. It's not like making beds and cleaning rooms takes up all my attention, after all."

"*There* you two are!" Feather Down said as she entered the room, followed closely by Pine Needle. "We've got around five minutes before they'll let us sit down at the tables, and it'll be another ten to fifteen after that before they start serving." She looked around the classroom. "Huh. Interesting place. I'm not sure if I agree with the idea to put all the students on the edges of the room though. I would think it would make it harder to teach them all."

"Maybe they need the open space so they can practice their magic without any risk of hurting anypony else?" Pine Needle suggested. "After all, this isn't your average school."

"Hmm, that's a good point." Feather Down looked at Dewdrop. "So, see everything you wanted to in here?"

Dewdrop gave a final look a round the classroom. "I think so. It's not as different as I thought it might be. I suppose it's more how and what is taught, and not the classroom itself." She smiled, and then headed towards the door. "Well, shall we make our way towards the dining area then? No need to rush, but I don't want to make us, or Luna, look bad by showing up late."

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Luna took her seat, which was positioned at the head of one of the three tables set out for the event. The one in the middle had her sister at the place of honor, and the one on the other side of Celestia's featured the Headmaster of the school. Using the school's bells, they had called

everypony into the dining area. There was a short wait as the guests milled about, finding their seats and greeting others. Eventually, everypony was situated and the servers started placing salads in front of all the guests.

A third of the way down the table she saw her friends, who seemed to be getting along well enough. She caught Feather Down looking at her and flashed her a quick smile, satisfied when she received one in return. She was too far away to talk to them during the meal, but just being able to see them made her feel more at ease.

She nodded at the ponies who took the seats closest to her. This was it, she realized. Since returning from her exile, this was the first social event where she was, for all intents and purposes, on her own. Her sister wasn't there to give her support, nor were her friends able to lend a helping hoof. Even though this was just a formal dinner, she still found herself a bit worried about how she would be received. Celestia had said that this was an accommodating group, but that was in reference to her friends; would they extend the same kind of hospitality to her, considering her past? So far things had been okay. Of course, she hadn't expected anything else while she had been standing next to her sister. But now, even though Celestia was just a hop, skip, and a jump away, she was as alone as a pony could be in such a crowded room.

Taking a steadying breath, she turned to the pony to her left, an older grey unicorn stallion who sported a top hat and was wearing a monocle that was attached to his dress jacket by a golden chain. "Greetings," she said, "and thank you for attending today's dinner, good sir."

"The pleasure is all mine, your Highness!" the stallion replied with laughter in his deep, booming voice. "I'm always glad to support events like these, and to have a chance to talk to one of the rulers of the realm in the process? Truly, I am a lucky pony. But where are my manners? My name is Charger, and this here is my lovely wife Cloudsong," he said, motioning at the pale yellow pegasus mare who was seated next to him.

Cloudsong nodded demurely at Luna. "It's an honor to meet you, your Highness," she replied in a soft voice.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance," Luna replied. She smiled at the couple, and then turned her attention to her right. "Hello," she said to a white earth pony mare. "Welcome to tonight's dinner."



"Thank you, your Highness," she replied. "My name is Snowflake, and I hope you'll excuse me for being a bit nervous tonight," she said, blushing slightly as she spoke. "Even though I've lived my whole life in Canterlot, this is the first time I've ever been in the same room with any member of the royalty, let alone sitting next to a princess. This has to be one of the most exciting days of my life!"

Luna blinked, and fought back an unexpected chuckle. She had been so worried about how things might go wrong, so focused on trying to calm herself, that she hadn't even considered that others might be nervous around her. With a friendly smile, she gently placed a hoof onto Snowflake's shoulder. "Only if you excuse any mistakes I make myself. It's been a long time since I've been a part of an event like this, so I'm a little bit nervous too."

Snowflake nodded and smiled back at Luna. The servers chose that moment to place the salads in front of them, and the conversation quieted down as they focused on their food. Luna glanced down the table at her friends again, hoping that they were also having good luck with the ponies they were seated next to.

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Pine Needle slowly leaned forward and carefully took another bite of his salad. Across the table from him, Feather Down was happily chatting away with the pony next to her, and to his right was Dewdrop, who had Haystack sitting opposite of her. To his relief, nopony had gone out of their way to talk to him yet, and so he focused on doing his best to eat his meal without getting anything on his new clothes or making any embarrassing mistakes.

He swallowed and started to reach for another leaf of lettuce when the pony to his left, an elderly earth pony mare with a light blue coat and a yellow mane, turned to him. "Hello there, I don't believe I've made your acquaintance yet. My name is Marigold," she said while extending a hoof towards him.

Pine Needle stared at the proffered hoof, trying to recall what he was supposed to do with it. Was he supposed to lift it up and place his lips against it? No, that was only for royalty, but a hoof shake seemed a bit out of place for an event like this. Not knowing if he was about to be rude, but certain that ignoring the lady's gesture would be the worst thing he could

do, he reached up and gently shook her hoof with his. "And mine is Pine Needle. A pleasure to meet you," he replied, hoping that his nervousness wasn't audible in his speech.

"Oh my, such a wonderful accent!" she said. "You must be from Stalliongrad?"

"Yes, I was born and raised there," he answered, surprised and a little pleased by her knowledge. "Not many ponies can so quickly place it, I am impressed."

"Well, to be honest, I've been there several times myself on business trips. I've even made some friends who live there, so I... oh! Did you say your name was *Pine* Needle?" she asked.

"Ah, yes I did," he said, not certain if he liked where things were heading.

"Would you happen to be related to the mayor, Pine Cone?"

No, he certainly didn't like the current line of questioning at all. "Yes, he is my grandfather, on my mother's side," he replied flatly.

"Oh, how wonderful! And here you are in Canterlot! Are you looking to follow in his tracks and pursue a career in government?"

Pine Needle politely chuckled, while cringing at the fact that everypony around them, including his friends, were now looking at him with interest. "Oh, goodness no. I'm only here with some friends, I actually live in Ponyville. Stalliongrad was getting a bit too cramped for me, I guess you could say. So I left home, looking for someplace else to live. I prefer to work with plants more than ponies, to tell the truth."

"My goodness, from Stalliongrad to Ponyville? That must have been quite the change of pace for you."

"Indeed," he said, nodding in agreement. "But it is one that I like. No crowds to fight in the marketplace, ponies are much more friendly here... And of course, the warmer climate is much more comfortable. I just wish mine body would get the hint and stop trying to grow such a thick winter coat," he said, glancing at his foreleg ruefully.

Marigold laughed. "Oh, I can only imagine. Well, it was nice to meet you, Pine Needle."

"And I am glad to have met you too, Marigold," he replied. He watched in relief as she turned her attention back to her meal. He started to do the same, but held up when he saw Feather Down staring at him intently. "Yes?" he asked his friend.

"How come you never told us about your grandfather being some sort of big shot government official?" she quietly asked.

Pine Needle quickly glanced around. Everypony else had shifted their attention away from him. "Look," he said in a whisper, "I'll tell you later, I promise. Just not here and now, okay?"

Feather Down's eyes narrowed. "Okay. When the dinner is done, and we get to the mingling part, we're going to go find someplace private, and you're going to tell me. Although I can't figure out why you're acting so secretive about it."

Pine Needle grimaced. Instead of replying however, he simply took another bite out of his salad, leaving his earth pony friend to think things over for a little while longer.

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Luna was surprised by how fast the meal passed by. She barely found time to to eat her food with all the conversations that swirled around her; it seemed that every time one pony was done talking to her, another would jump right in with something to say. While she feared she would have to ask the cooks back at the palace to make her a night time snack when she returned, she certainly wasn't upset by how things had turned out.

Her current conversation with Snowflake was brought to a halt when the caterers came and took away their dessert plates. She was about to comment to Snowflake on how tasty the peach cobbler had been when the tinkling of a bell cut through the hum of conversation that permeated the room and slowly brought the dining hall to a state of silence. Luna looked over to see her sister using her magic to ring the bell and call everypony's attention to her.

Seeing that she had all eyes on her, Celestia smiled warmly. "Thank you everypony for attending tonight's event. Before I begin with what I have to say, let's all give a round of thanks to the fine ponies who put this dinner together, and served us such a wonderful meal." She led the round of applause, and then patiently waited for things to quiet back down again.

"Thanks to all of you attending tonight's dinner, we've raised enough bits for my school to be able to keep offering the same number of scholarships for financially disadvantaged families as we have for the past decade." Celestia paused as another round of applause broke out in the room.

Luna watched her sister intently as she continued to give her prepared speech. Now that she knew what she was looking for, she could spot the signs. Eyes that stared straight ahead, instead of slowly moving about to encompass the whole room like the books she had read on public speaking suggested should be done. An almost imperceptible slouch in her posture. The ring of true excitement in her voice that she knew so well that was missing. Luna didn't want to believe it, but she knew she couldn't ignore what her senses told her.

Celestia was bored of these events, and if Luna's guess was correct, her sister would rather be back home with a book, curled up in front of the fireplace reading instead of doing what she was at the moment. She turned and looked at the crowd. Everypony's eyes were centered on Celestia, and it seemed that none of them had any idea what was going on. She was the only one, it seemed, who saw through her sister's mask.

Her thoughts were interrupted as she heard her sister say, "...and to my left, as I'm sure you've all noticed by now, is my sister, Princess Luna!" Suddenly finding herself the center of attention, she smiled and waved, doing her best to not be overwhelmed by the applause and all the happy faces turned towards her. After a few seconds, and the applause started to fade, Celestia asked her, "Is there anything you would like to say?"

Luna blinked in surprise. This certainly wasn't anything they had talked about previously! Was this more of her sister having fun? Looking at her, she decided that no, this was merely a spur of the moment, friendly gesture. Simply an opportunity for her to take, if she wanted, to talk to the assembled ponies. Deciding that she did want to speak, she nodded her thanks, turned, and looked at the crowd in front of her.

"Thank you, everypony. I'll admit, when my sister asked me if I wanted to attend this dinner, I was hesitant. It's been a long time since I've attended an event like this. Not many chances for gatherings like this on the- at the school I have been attending the past couple of months." She did her best to hide a wince; she had almost blown it by reminding them all of her lengthy banishment on the moon. Fortunately, she had remembered the cover story Celestia had told her she had used to explain her absence while she had been in Ponyville, disguised as Moonbeam.

"However, Celestia assured me that I wouldn't find a more accommodating group of ponies, and was she ever right! Since I've arrived, you have all done nothing but offer friendly greetings and kind words. So, thank you for being so willing to help out my sister's school, and thank you one and all for the amazing time I've had tonight, Please feel free to come up and chat with me afterwards, I would love to make your acquaintance if I haven't done so yet."

She waved to the crowd as applause washed over her, and then turned and smiled at her sister, indicating that she was done speaking. Celestia smiled back at her, and after the crowd had once again quieted down, resumed her speech. Looking down the length of her table, Luna saw her friends all looking at her proudly. She was glad that they seemed to be enjoying themselves too, and couldn't wait to get a chance to talk to them later, although she feared with the invitation that she had just given out that wouldn't be happening until after they had returned to the castle after the dinner.

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As soon as Celestia had finished her speech and invited everypony present to take the chance to mingle, Feather Down grabbed Pine Needle and led him through the halls of the school. The first rooms they passed were already filled with other groups of ponies with goals similar to hers; finding a private place to have a conversation, away from the hundreds of other ponies in the vicinity. After rounding a corner in the hallway, she found a small walk-in closet, and motioned for Pine Needle to enter.

"I think you are overreacting," Pine Needle said once Feather Down had followed him into the tiny enclosure. "I don't see what you are so upset about."

"I'm not really upset," Feather Down replied. "I'm just shocked, I suppose. Not only because of what I heard, but also after I thought about it, I realized I had never thought to ask you about your life in Stalliongrad before."

Pine Needle shrugged. "I never thought it was that important. It's all years in the past and hundred of miles away from where we are now. For me to bring up the fact that mine grandfather is a mayor, without any real reason to do so, would just be bragging."

"But surely you're proud of that, right?" Seeing an uncomfortable look cross her friend's face, she sighed. "I know I would be if someone in my family did something grand, or accomplished something like that. There's no need to be that self conscious!"

"Well, like you said, nopony ever asked me, and it really isn't all that important." He looked over Feather Down's shoulder to the hallway behind her. "Are we done? I'd really like to go see how Luna is doing. When we left, she looked like she was about to get mobbed by half the ponies in attendance."

"No, we're not done!" Feather Down said, stomping a hoof for emphasis. "Look, maybe this isn't the best time, place, or method for this, but I'm honestly intrigued by what life must have been like for you growing up! Luna is going to be busy for another hour at least, so that leaves us plenty of time to talk, especially since this is fresh in my mind."

"But Haystack and Dewdrop-"

"Will be fine," interrupted Feather Down. "So, you share part of your name with your grandfather. Is that part of why you're attracted to Applejack, similar family name traditions?"

"While we may share several things in common, they aren't the reason why I love her," Pine Needle huffed. "But yes, my family does have a, as you say, naming tradition. Off the top of my head, I can think of Pine Bough, Pine Wreath, Evergreen, Douglas Fir, Foxtail Pine, and many others too. Our family is old, and takes pride in that."

"You don't," commented Feather Down. "Now that I think about it, I can't remember you ever bringing up your family before. You hardly even mention Stalliongrad either, for that matter."

"No need to," he replied while looking at the floor at his hooves. "It was where I grew up, different than Ponyville, but not necessarily better or worse. It was crowded though, a lot of ponies living together in one city due to all the nearby mountains. That's why I left."

Feather Down studied her friend's face. She slowly nodded, and backed out of the closet. "Fair enough. But seriously, if you ever feel the need to talk about the past with me or anypony else, don't be afraid." She smiled warmly at him. "We certainly won't think of you as a braggart if there's something that you want to share with us. There's no need to keep it all bottled up, okay?"

Pine Needle nodded as he stepped back into the hallway. "Thank you, I will keep that in mind." He looked up and down the hallway. "For now though, I would simply like to go back and make sure that Luna doesn't get overwhelmed."

"Says the pony who was the most nervous of us all just a few hours ago," Feather Down said with a chuckle. "All right, it's this way," she gestured as she turned, and led the way back to the dining hall.

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As soon as Celestia had finished her speech, Luna had been swamped by other ponies coming up to her. While she was uncomfortable with the sheer number of them, all eagerly yet patiently waiting their turn to get to speak with her, she didn't feel panicked or afraid that something bad was about to happen. Soon, she found she was able to simply focus on the one in front of her and tune out the rest, and in doing so found herself much more comfortable with the situation.

Her only regret was not being able to spend any time with her friends. The only chance she got to see them was when Dewdrop had managed to work her way through the throng and finally get a chance to talk to her. It was a welcome, if short, reprieve from the steady flood of the same questions, asking how she was, what she had been up to, and if she was going to be at any other functions in the future. Sadly, the press of the other ponies kept their conversation to a minimum, and soon Luna was once again on her own.

After what felt like forever, but was likely only a couple of hours at most, she found herself suddenly free of having anypony right in front of her. Blinking, she scanned the room and saw that the servants had long ago cleared everything away. The only other ponies left in the room, besides the retreating forms of the happy couple she had just finished conversing with, were her friends and her sister. Walking over, she gave them a tired smile and said, "I don't think I've talked to so many different ponies before in my life!"

Celestia chuckled. "I think this was the first time in years where I haven't been the most sought after pony to talk to. You did well, sister. Thank you for the easy night."

Luna's stomach chose that moment to remind her that how empty it was. "With all the new faces so eager to talk to me, I'm afraid I didn't have much time to eat," she said, her cheeks red from embarrassment.

"Well then, we'll simply have to visit the kitchens when we get back home, won't we?" She turned to look at Luna's friends. "And I imagine you all have a lot of stuff to talk about."

"Do we ever!" exclaimed Feather Down. "Seeing the school, meeting other ponies, this wonderful dress, thank you again for it, Princess!" Seeing Celestia nod, she turned to Luna. "So, is this going to be a regular part of our visits? Attending dinners and dances?"

"I don't know," admitted Luna as the group started to move down the hallway towards the front doors. She looked up at her sister. "I know that a lot of these things happen during the fall and the winter, since the cold weather and the snow makes a lot of the outdoor activities unfavorable. So I would guess that we'll probably be attending more of them in the months to come?"

Celestia nodded. "If you want to. None of you will be forced to go to any that you don't want to, and I'm sure there will be times when you will want to do other things as well, which is perfectly fine." Her horn glowed briefly, and the doors opened, letting the cool night air wash over them as they stepped outside. "Still, I think it will be good for you to attend as many as you comfortably can, at least in the near future. It should only help overcome the rocky start you had when you first came back after the Summer Sun Celebration."



Luna nodded and looked up, taking in the star filled sky. She thought back to the Summer Sun Celebration in Ponyville, and how quickly things had changed for her since then. Like her sister had said, things hadn't gone that well for her to begin with. But after she had spent some time in Ponyville, her luck had been steadily improving. She didn't know if it was because she had a group of really good friends, or if it was because her link to Nightmare Moon had been destroyed, and the evil, jealous part of her was now banished to the moon again, but she was looking forward to what might happen next.

Perhaps all she had needed, she thought, was a new perspective on things.

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Marigold entered her house, glad to be home after the lengthy dinner. It had dragged on for much longer than she had expected it to, mostly because of Luna choosing the event to be her first public appearance in Canterlot since returning home. Not that she begrudged the princess, goodness no. It's just that she had something she had been wanting to do for hours now, and to have left the dinner early would have been rude, to say the least.

Now that she was finally home, she could get to work. She trotted to the study of her house right away, not even bothering to take off her outfit despite the fact that it was a little bit uncomfortable around the neck. Pulling out a piece of stationery, and grabbing quill in mouth, she started to write with a speed and skill that spoke of many, many hours of practice.

*Dear Pine Wreath,*

*I hope this letter finds you doing well. I hope you will forgive my sloppy writing, but I am so excited by what just happened at a dinner I just attended that I have to write it down as fast as I can, before I forget any details.*

*I remember, while I was up in Stalliongrad this past summer, hearing you talk about your family, and how you were hurt by the fact that your son moved away without telling you where he was going. Well, imagine my surprise when I found myself seated next to a young stallion who not only turned out to be from Stalliongrad, but had to have been your son! His*

*name was Pine Needle, and he admitted to being Pine Cone's grandchild, so I can't really see him as being anypony but your prodigal colt. He told me that he is living in Ponyville, a small village that is a short ways from Canterlot.*

*I hope that this news will enable you and your family reunite. If there is anything that I can do to help you out, please don't hesitate to ask.*

*Your friend,*

*Marigold*

Looking over her work, she nodded and smiled. It felt so good to be able to help out a friend, she thought, especially when the aid being provided was unasked for but would be welcomed. She carefully folded the letter up, put it into an envelope, and after addressing and affixing postage, she placed it in the mail slot to be picked up in the morning. Smiling, she headed upstairs, her good deed done, and got ready to go to bed.

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*There were times, Nightmare Moon realized, that having a superior intellect was a curse and not a blessing.*

*It had been only three weeks, not even a month let alone a thousand years, since she had been sent to the moon, and she was already going crazy from the boredom. At first, she had been willing to simply lie still and wait things out, secure in knowing that in the end she would once again have her chance. Her mind was restless though. At first, it had worked through her past failures, studying her mistakes and how she could avoid them the next time. Then she had thought about what she would do once she was once again free. Finally, all she could do was think about how long she still had to go.*

*At that point, she had simply raged. To be forced to spend so much time locked up! To know that the weak part of her was still free! Eventually her anger faded, and she had finally been able to simply zone out and let her thoughts wander aimlessly. But every time she thought she would be able to let time rush by in a thoughtless haze, the very act of realizing that she was about to reach the mental state she so desperately wanted snapped her out of it, sending her back to square one. With nothing else to do*

*though, she kept on trying. She hoped that, if nothing else, she might accidentally stumble onto what she was hoping for through blind luck.*

*As she felt her thoughts starting to wander once again, she felt something else, something new. Somehow, she felt a faint pulsing of... power? Energy? Magic? She didn't know how to describe it, only that the sensation was different. The moment she tried to focus on it, however, she seemed to lose it.*

*Intrigued, she thought about what she had done, and what she had just experienced. She tried relaxing again, but it wasn't until she was almost to the point of complete distraction that she was able to sense it. This time, instead of lunging at it with all of her will, she slowly took her time to narrow her thoughts, to carefully bring her focus in on it. Finally, she had a fix on the source of what she was feeling, and she slowly stood up, letting the small layer of moon dust that had settled on her fall away.*

*She started walking. She could tell that what she was headed for was a long ways off, but she had time. Lots and lots of time. She wondered why she hadn't felt this before. Had being a part of Luna during her previous incarceration on the moon kept her from noticing this? Was this something she could only hone in on because she was no longer linked to her weaker half? She might not know the answers, but for the first time since being banished she was looking forward to what might happen next.*

*Perhaps all she had needed, she thought, was a new perspective on things.*

# Chapter 6

Pine Needle gently placed his dirty breakfast plate into the kitchen sink to let it soak a bit before he got around to washing it. Looking out a window, he saw that the sun was already high in the sky; it had been very late when he and his friends had finally returned from Canterlot the night before. What had started out as small talk among the girls had turned into a lengthy discussion about fashion and what attending school had been like for them.

Before they knew it, Celestia was knocking on Luna's bedroom door- without the other ponies this time, thankfully- to inform them that, unless they planned on spending the night, they would have to leave soon to give the guards who would be pulling the chariots time to get home for bed themselves. Pine Needle was kind of glad that Feather Down had to work today, and that Dewdrop had her usual early shift at the inn. While he wouldn't have minded spending more time with his friends, he felt much more comfortable sleeping under his own roof.

The only downside was that a chariot ride through the night sky was even more unnerving to him than one during the day. At least when the sun was up, he could distract himself from how high up he was by looking at the distant mountains. In the dark, it had felt for all the world as if he was flying through the stars in the sky, with the ground so far below him that it might as well have not been there. He shuddered again at the thought. If only he was as fast as Feather Down, he would gladly spend the time and energy to gallop to and from Canterlot.

Instead, he had arrived back home strung out, and despite the how late it had been, it had taken him a couple of hours of simply lying down and staring intermittently at the ceiling and the back of his eyelids before he finally fell asleep. He was thankful that Haystack had told him that he wouldn't be needed until after lunch today. His friend had said that he had several chores to take care of in town during the morning, and Pine Needle suspected that Haystack had probably slept in too.

The soft sound of somepony knocking brought Pine Needle out of his reverie. "Coming!" he called out as he trotted to the front door of his house. Opening it, he saw a yellow pegasus mare with a pink mane standing next

to a white rabbit. It only took him a second to recognize her from the recent advertisements he had seen for his favorite brand of carrot juice. "Fluttershy!" he cried out in surprise. "What brings you... to..."

He stood there blinking as Fluttershy disappeared from his doorstep, only to poke her head out cautiously from behind one of his pine trees a dozen paces away. The rabbit glared at him, shook his head, and then placed a paw in front of its mouth in a shushing motion. He then hopped over to the petrified pegasus, and after a few insistent tugs on her mane, was able to coax her back to Pine Needle's door.

"Sorry about that," she told him in a very soft voice. "It's just that I'm not very comfortable around loud noises, or ponies that I don't know that well, so, um," she trailed off, looking at the ground between them.

Pine Needle chuckled. "There is no need to apologize," he said in a much more subdued manner. "I am aware that sometimes I come across a bit too strongly, and I hope that you will forgive mine outburst?"

Fluttershy looked up from behind her mane and gave him a small smile. "Thank you. I'm sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if I could ask a favor?"

"But of course. What can I do for you?" Pine Needle asked, curious what the shy pegasus wanted from him.

"Well, winter is coming up very soon, and I'm trying to find places for all the woodland creatures to spend the winter. Me and a few other ponies have been working hard, finding burrows and trees and dens that would be appropriate, but we're having a hard time finding enough." As she spoke, her voice gained volume and confidence as she warmed to the subject. "I noticed the other day as I passed by that you have some very nice pine trees here, and I was wondering if you would mind if I took a look at them, to see if any of them might be suitable for some squirrels to spend the winter in?"

"Be mine guest," he said, making a sweeping motion with a foreleg. He watched as Fluttershy nodded in thanks, turned, and started flying around the trees that surrounded his home. Pine Needle smiled, glad to know that all of the hard work he had put into growing the saplings that he had

brought with him from Stalliongrad was being noticed by other ponies in town.

After a few minutes of watching Fluttershy carefully examine each tree, he turned his attention to the small rabbit that had remained standing next to him. "So, how long do you think she will take?" he asked to fill the silence, wondering if the animal could understand him. The rabbit turned from watching Fluttershy briefly to give him an annoyed look. It then shrugged its shoulders, and returned to watching the yellow pegasus. Pine Needle blinked, and wondered how something so small could carry around so much attitude.

A short while later, Fluttershy finished her searching and returned to where Pine Needle and Angel waited. "I'm sorry, but it looks like there is only one place suitable for a squirrel in your trees. I was expecting there to be a lot more knotholes than there were."

"Ah, I am actually surprised that there is even one, to be honest. Mine trees are actually quite young, I planted them when I first arrived from Stalliongrad. I brought them with me, so they are only a couple of years old," he explained.

Fluttershy looked at the trees and then back at him. "Really? Wow, they sure grew fast. Do all trees from Stalliongrad grow so quickly?"

"No, it's just that caring for them is mine special talent," he said, pointing to his pine branch cutie mark.

"Oh, how wonderful," she said, giving him a smile. "So, would it be okay if we had a squirrel spend the winter in your trees? They don't hibernate, but they aren't very active either, so it shouldn't be a hassle."

"I would be honored to have mine trees help in such a way. I am only sorry that there is only room for one."

"Oh no, there's no need to apologize," she said. "Also, would it be a problem if I kept your place in mind for the future in case I have trouble finding places for all of the animals for winter again?"

Pine Needle smiled. "But of course!" he exclaimed, happy to be able to help her out, only to feel like an idiot as his latest outburst sent the skittish

mare back to hiding behind one of his pine trees again. He sighed, and hung his head in embarrassment. "Sorry!" he called out to her, trying to ignore the angry glare coming from the rabbit.

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Luna wandered the halls of Canterlot Castle, searching for her sister. She was trying to decide where to go next, having already looked in the throne room and Celestia's private quarters. There were still a couple of hours until lunch, so she didn't think the dining area would be likely, and the only times she ever saw her sister enter the library was when Celestia was looking for her. She had even asked several of the castle staff if they had seen Celestia, but none could recall having spotted her recently.

She was just about to check outside in the gardens when she heard her name being called out. Turning, she saw a page galloping up from behind. She stood and waited for the messenger to catch his breath after he had come to a stop before her. "Your Highness," the earth pony said in between tired breaths, "Princess Celestia is looking for you, and would like to speak with you in the throne room."

Luna blinked in surprised, and after a moment chuckled. "I've just spent the last fifteen minutes looking for her, and I even checked the throne room first," she said in an amused voice. "Thank you for letting me know where she is. I shall head there right away." She gave the young stallion who had given her the news a quick look over. "Are you going to be okay? Is the matter that Celestia wants to talk to me about so important that you needed to run yourself ragged to find me?"

"No, ma'am," he said, seeming to be finally regaining his wind. "It's just that Celestia sent four of us out, and said whoever was the first to find you would get a bonus added onto their pay for the week."

"Well then, come along, and I'll make sure that you don't get cheated out of your reward." She started walking towards the throne room slowly at first, to make sure that the page had fully recovered. Seeing that he had, she then broke into a brisk trot, equally eager to not only end her search but to also find out why Celestia was looking for her. A couple of minutes of traveling through the hallways later, and they had arrived at the entrance to the throne room. After taking a few seconds to compose herself she nodded at the guards, who opened the double doors for her.

Celestia looked up from a scroll she was reading when she heard the sound of hooves walking across marble. "Sister! There you are! And good work Fleet Hoof, I had a feeling you would be the one to find her." The page bowed, and then stepped back to stand along the wall, ready to once again head out if asked to.

Luna gave her sister a rueful smile. "Did you know I've been looking for you too? I even checked here first, but you weren't around. Let me guess, you were out looking for me?"

Her sister chuckled as she walked over to her. "Correct. I checked your rooms, and then I looked in the gardens. After talking to Mrs. Hardback and learning that you hadn't been in the library at all today, I sent out the pages. So, what were you wanting to talk to me about?"

"The Grand Galloping Gala. It's this weekend, and I was hoping to be able to attend."

Celestia smile faded, and her face took on a serious look. "Interesting. I was looking for you to talk to you about the Grand Galloping Gala too, but for the opposite reason. I was hoping to suggest an alternative for you, instead of attending."

"An alternative?" Luna was shocked to hear her sister say such a thing. "But things went so well at the dinner last night! I know that the odds were tilted in my favor, but I thought my friends and I handled ourselves wonderfully! Do you think we're not ready to handle something as big as the Gala, or...?" she trailed off, not wanting to voice the possibility that she still might not be welcome at such a large gathering.

"I agree, you all were wonderful last night. And no, that isn't the reason why I don't want you to attend the Gala at all." Celestia looked at her sister straight in the eyes. "I don't want you to attend because, frankly, it would be a giant waste of time for you. An experience that you would find tepid at best, and mind numbingly boring at the worst."

"R-really?" Luna was shocked. She remembered her sister saying in the past that she wasn't too fond of these events, but to hear her state it so bluntly left her reeling.



Celestia nodded. "Do you know what I get to do for the entire night? I greet ponies. I stand at the top of the stairs, and they all line up so that they can spend ten seconds with me." She sighed, and shook her head. "The queue stretches out of the room at times, and after everypony has had their turn, things are wrapping up. I'd like to just drop that part of the event, but for many it's the only time they get to meet me, and they're all so happy to have the chance, I just know they would be heartbroken if I didn't do it.

"But I certainly won't subject you to that if I can help it. And rest assured, if you were to attend, that is what would be expected of you. If not standing next to me, then wherever you happened to be, just like after the dinner last night." Celestia gave Luna an appraising look. "Unless I'm wrong? Do you want to spend an entire night talking to ponies, one after another, with no time for anything else? No chance to grab a bite to eat, enjoy a song played by the band, or a brief moment to walk through the gardens by yourself to regain your composure?"

Luna took a moment to consider. In a way, she wanted to attend even more now. If what she had accomplished last night really had helped improve her image, then doing the same at the Gala would only help things out more. Still, last night had been tiring. She hadn't been able to get a proper meal, and by the end, she could feel herself getting worn out. If that was only a small dinner, how draining would attending the biggest social event of the year be?

She sighed, and looked at Celestia. "No, I guess you're right. If this was later in the season, I might be willing to trying it. But I don't think I would be up to it right now." Her head drooped. "And I was hoping to surprise my friends with tickets to it too."

Celestia chuckled. "Actually, I have an idea that would be an even bigger surprise for them. I think it would be a marvelous alternative to attending the Gala."

"Oh?" Luna asked, curious as to what her sister had in mind.

"How would you like to visit them in Ponyville that night instead, and treat them to something that hasn't happened for a thousand years?"

Luna blinked, trying to figure out what her sister was referring to, when it hit her. "You, you want me to raise the moon again?" Seeing Celestia nod, she

smiled. "You finally got approval from the rest of the nobility?" she asked excitedly.

"Well, about that," her sister replied hesitantly, "no."

Luna took a step backwards, stunned by what Celestia was suggesting. Defy the nobility? Sure, they didn't have that much power, and Celestia was so loved by the populace that she could ignore the protocol that the situation called for. They could get away with it, but with the care she had taken to improve how others perceived her, did she really want to take such a risk?

She drew in a deep breath, and gathered her resolve. "Then no, I don't want to do it. Not if we can't do it the right way."

"We don't even have to tell them, you know," Celestia said slyly, walking up close to her. "After all, it isn't like I'll make a big deal about it. They'll see the sun set and the moon rise, just like they always have, and nopony will be the wiser that it was you, and not me, who raised the moon for once."

Luna openly gawked in disbelief at Celestia. She couldn't believe that her sister would be so willing to do something like this in such an underhanded manner. It went against everything she knew about her to such an astonishing degree that it seemed like a terrible joke. It felt like it was what Celestia had done to her friends with the clothing yesterday, but on a much grander scale and with consequences that she wasn't comfortable with.

She turned and looked outside. The sun was still climbing in the sky, steadily making its way toward noon. "Celestia," she said, quickly arranging her thoughts as she realized how to explain things properly. "You're the sun, not just in duty and responsibility, but in how people see you. Bright, beloved, and warm. Not only that, the sun is always full. Unlike the moon which waxes and wanes as time goes by, the sun is always at its fullest, just as you are at the height of power and recognition.

"And I am the moon. Again, not just in what my duties used to be, but in how I am perceived. And right now, I'm a new moon, in more ways than one. I'm newly returned from my exile. I'm still finding out how different things have become since I was gone. And like a moon that isn't visible, that's how I am to most ponies. Without any real duties other than trying to catch up to the present, I'm out of their sight, and thus out of their thoughts.

"And I don't want to be a new moon any more, Celestia! Even if all I do is grow to be the slimmest of slivers, the thinnest of crescent moons in the sky, I want to be able to at least have the chance to get there. Regaining my duty to raise and lower the moon the right way, even if we could do it without the consent of the nobility, would let me grow in everypony's mind." She paused to catch her breath, surprised at how easily the words had come once she had started talking.

"I was hoping you felt that way," Celestia said, her voice filled with relief and with a proud look on her face. "I thought you did, but until you hear somepony speak their mind, you can never be certain. Very well, I will call for an assembly the day after tomorrow, and we'll bring the matter up then. Will that be enough time for you to prepare your case to them?"

"Honestly? I could probably take a month and still not be ready," Luna admitted. "But I want this. I really want to do this, so yes." She looked up at her sister. "And I'll gladly take any assistance you can provide too."

"Of course," replied Celestia. "After all, they'll be questioning me too." She smiled warmly at her younger sister. "You won't be alone in this, remember that. Even though all the questions will be directed at you, in a sense I will be the one they are truly questioning. Am I being deceived? Am I showing you too much favor, simply because you are my sister? Do I really have the best interests of the kingdom in mind?"

"Who would think that you didn't?" asked Luna. "After all these years, and with how far things have come over the centuries? If they could see what it was like in the early days, they-"

"That's just it," Celestia said, interrupting her younger sister. "They don't have the luxury of being immortal like us. They lack the long view. Even when we have a down year, where the harvest isn't as productive, or when some unforeseen illness sweeps the land, we know that it is only a temporary thing. That even at its worst things are still better than they were in the distant past, when ponies would have died from starvation instead of simply growing lean from smaller meals, or perished in the hundreds instead of just suffering for a few weeks due to our advanced medicine.

"Mind you, I don't hold that against them. With how short their lives are, compared to ours? They're like flowers, possessing a limited time to grow, to bloom, and to call attention to themselves. To make something worthy to

pass along to their kin." She paused and sighed. "Listen to me, carrying on. Forgive me, Luna. It's just that it has been so long since I have had somepony who understands this, who can truly appreciate what I'm talking about. Please, forget about my whining. We have more important things to worry about. How can I help you prepare?"

"No," Luna said, sorrow in her eyes, "I don't want to forget about your complaints. You have every right, if not more, to share your concerns with others." She walked over to Celestia and nuzzled her. "I may not be able to help you with everything, but I'll always be glad to listen to your worries."

The two sisters stood there for a minute, leaning against each other. "Thank you," Celestia said, "I needed that." She stepped away from Luna. "Now, again, what can I do to help you?"

Luna considered things before answering. "I've come a long ways in my studies, but I'm still catching up. What I know about government proceedings is still several centuries behind where we currently are, and I'm sure it is quite outdated. If you could send me books or transcripts that show or describe what I'm about to face, that would be perfect."

Celestia nodded. "I'll ask around the various government archives, and see what I can dig up. We actually don't have too many sessions like what we're about to go through, but I'm sure I can find something. I assume you'll be in the library, looking through stuff there?" Seeing her sister nod she said, "I won't keep you then. I'll bring over what I find personally, okay?"

"Sounds good to me!" Luna smiled and then trotted out of the throne room, motivated and determined to put on the best showing she could.

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Haystack knocked on the door to the Ponyville Library, and heard a familiar cry of "Coming!" from inside. A few seconds later, Spike the dragon opened the door. "Heya Haystack, c'mon in," he said, motioning with a wave of his arm as he turned and walked further inside.

The pegasus followed him, and found himself having to be careful of where he stepped; the floor was littered with dozens of books. "Wow, what happened in here?" he asked as he walked towards the desk in the corner where Spike was leafing through a short stack of papers.

"Oh, Twilight has been searching for some spells to use this weekend. So she'll pull down any and every book that looks like it might have something to help her out, and just put it off to the side if it doesn't. Of course, I get to be the one to put them all back," he said resignedly.

Haystack blinked, and looked around the room again. "That doesn't seem very fair to me," he said.

"Eh, it isn't fun, but really it isn't that hard of a job either. Just takes some time. My only complaint is how often I end up having to do it, really. Aha! Here we go," Spike said as he pulled out one form from the stack he had been looking through. "Are you returning the book, or did you want to keep it for another week?"

"I'll be returning it," he replied, and then reached into his saddlebags and pulled the book out. After Spike had taken it from him, he said, "Thank you again. It was quite helpful for me and my friends in getting ready for the dinner."

"Oh, that's right. How'd that go?" the dragon asked as he put the book down on the desk.

"It wasn't that bad, I guess. I'm not the most social of ponies, but I had an okay time. The girls sure seemed to enjoy it, especially getting to show off their new dresses."

"New dresses?" asked Spike. "Did they stop by the Carousel Boutique and have Rarity make them something?"

Haystack shook his head. "No, in fact, it was because of one of the most surreal things I've ever been a part of. We were getting ready in Luna's room when Celestia visited us. All of a sudden, it was chaos. A whole bunch of other ponies came in with racks of clothing, and before I knew it we were all dressed up in some admittedly very nice outfits." He sighed, and said, "I mean, it's obvious she had the whole thing set up ahead of time, but I could see that Luna was caught off guard by it all too. I don't understand why she had to go to such lengths to keep what she was doing a secret."

Spike shrugged. "Beats me. Although," he said thoughtfully, "that does remind me of what Twilight told me about Princess Celestia's latest visit here to Ponyville."

"Oh?" asked Haystack.

"Yeah, I guess she brought her pet phoenix with her, but she didn't tell anypony what it was. So they all saw this sickly looking bird, sitting in its cage while it coughed and slowly lost its feathers. Then she got called away and left it behind, and none of the guards thought to keep watch over it either, so Fluttershy took it on herself to try to make the thing better."

"How'd that work out?" the pegasus asked, intrigued by the tale.

"Well, Twilight found out about it on accident when she went to visit Fluttershy at her place. By then the guards were starting to look for it too, and I guess all sorts of crazy things happened until the phoenix went through its renewal process and turned into a pile of ash right in front of everyone."

Haystack could only stare in disbelief, his jaw hanging loosely. Seeing his reaction, Spike nodded. "Yeah, I guess it drove Fluttershy to tears, until Celestia showed up and explained that was just part of what phoenixes do. Then the ash rose up and turned into a healthy flame colored bird."

"Wait a minute," Haystack said. "Celestia knew that was going to happen, but she didn't tell anypony? What was she trying to do, set up some sort of display for them to watch?"

Spike shrugged again. "I have no idea. I wasn't even there, I just heard about it from Twilight afterwards."

Haystack's face twisted in thought, and then sighed. "Well, thanks for sharing that with me Spike, and thanks again with the help in finding that book for us."

"Glad to help!" Spike said with a smile. "Stop on by anytime you need something, okay?"

"Will do." Haystack left the library and flew away. Instead of heading home though, he simply glided through the late autumn skies, trying to figure out

how this latest piece of news fitted into everything else he had seen and heard already.

# Chapter 7

Despite the seriousness of her work, Luna was having fun. After gaining permission from Mrs. Hardback, she claimed a corner of the study area in the castle library and set things up to her preferences. She moved away tables and surrounded herself with several reading stands. After searching the shelves for books that she thought might be of assistance to her, she picked a few out and started examining them. Whenever she found something she thought might be relevant, or at least interesting, she would use a ribbon to mark the passage, and place the book onto one of the stands.

Soon she had several tomes set up, and only then did she start to compare what they said to each other, taking notes on what they agreed on, and also where they differed. After that, she read some more books and did some more comparisons, adding to the organized chaos around her. She got so wrapped up in her studies that she barely heard the bells announcing lunch, and with some reluctance she pulled herself away to get something to eat.

At lunch, a note from Celestia was waiting for her, stating that she was still busy visiting the various archives and gathering transcripts for her and that she wouldn't be there for lunch. Luna was a little disappointed that she wouldn't have a chance to talk to Celestia about what she had read so far, but knew that she would get her chance when her sister returned to the castle with the papers she had set out to find. She quickly ate her meal, thanked the servants for their work, and excused herself as she made her way back to the library.

Back in the center of her work area, she continued with her studies. She was so engrossed that she failed to notice another pony approach her, and it took the sound of a throat being cleared to notice that somepony was trying to gain her attention. Seeing a spot of white out of the corner of her eyes, she marked her spot in the book she was currently perusing as she said, "Sorry about that, Celes-" She quickly swallowed the rest of her greeting as she saw that the pony waiting for her attention was not her sister, but a different member of the nobility.



"Prince Blueblood! Please forgive me, I was a bit wrapped up there. How can I help you?" Luna was surprised to see him; the two of them had rarely crossed paths since her return, and while she hadn't had any bad experiences with the noblepony, she had heard tales spoken about his rudeness and attitude. Still, they had said similar things about her too, so she gave the unicorn stallion a friendly smile, hoping to have those stories about him proven false.

"That's quite all right, Princess Luna," the stallion said while bowing his head slightly. "I fully understand how one can get wrapped up in what one is doing." He looked around at the various books that Luna had set up. "Ah, preparing for the assembly, are we?"

"Yes!" she replied happily. "I'm brushing up on all of the procedures and protocols. But that can't be why you're here. How can I help you?"

"I am here on somewhat related manners," Blueblood admitted with a coy smile. "After receiving Princess Celestia's call for an audience in two days, I thought I would seek you out and offer my services, to help you prepare for the ordeal ahead of you."

Luna smiled warmly. "I would welcome any assistance you could provide."

The stallion nodded. "While I agree that you should polish your presentation, and prepare yourself for what is sure to be a harsh gauntlet of questions, I believe I can best aid you in a manner that may not have occurred to you."

"Oh? What might that be?"

"The one thing that should be on your mind is winning the final tally. It doesn't matter how eloquently you speak or how well you follow the rules if you don't get the votes you need." Seeing Luna nod slowly, he continued. "Also, due to preconceived notions, no matter what you say or do there will be those who will vote for you and those who will vote against you. Your goal then must be to do what you can to win those votes that are still undecided."

"Agreed," Luna said. "Is there some special strategy that you would recommend to help me with that? A certain type of speech when I present my case? A special style I should employ when I answer their questions?"

Prince Blueblood shook his head. "Your highness, you limit yourself if you only use the assembly itself to influence those whose votes are up in the air." Seeing Luna give him a curious look, he elaborated, "You could benefit by meeting with some of those swing votes ahead of time, and make your case on a personal level."

Luna frowned. "I can see that helping, but I have so little time, I would not be able to meet even with a small portion of those who are still undecided."

"True, but that is where I can help you. I can direct you towards those who are the ones that would benefit most from receiving a personal visit from you."

"That would help me a lot," she admitted, "but I can't help but wonder why you would be so willing to assist me. We've rarely met, outside of a few official gatherings."

Blueblood chuckled. "Ah, but now that you are asserting yourself back into politics, it would well behoove me to make sure that I am seen to be one of your allies. For me to be known as a pony who has given you aid would be a boon to my reputation. And there is no need for us to limit our interactions to this either. For example, there is the Grand Galloping Gala coming up," he said, arching an eyebrow suggestively. "We could make the rounds together, perhaps we could share a dance or two there? Or-

"I'm sorry," Luna interrupted with false sincerity, starting to grasp the prince's true motives. "I actually won't be attending the Gala this year, I'm afraid that I have other duties to attend to."

"Oh." Blueblood looked shocked, but quickly recovered. "No matter. There are still other things we could do, such as you treating me to a fancy dinner, or maybe paying me a visit at my estate?" he said with a wink.

"I'm afraid that I will have to pass," Luna replied icily. "I thank you for your advice, and I shall consider your words with all of the attention that they deserve, but for now, I believe that my time will be better spent here studying."

Prince Blueblood blinked a few times, trying to understand where he'd fallen short, when a voice from behind him drew his attention. "Why, Blueblood, imagine seeing you inside a library. What brings you here?"

The royal unicorn whipped around to see Celestia eyeing him wryly. "Your Highness, my apologies, but I was just leaving. If you'll excuse me?" Seeing the white alicorn nod, Blueblood turned and hastily left the library.

Luna made a sour face. "And here I was hoping the stories I had heard about him weren't true." Seeing her sister chuckle, she then asked, "So, just how long were you listening in on us?"

"Oh, not long at all, I only caught the tail end of your conversation. So, what pretext did our self centered noble use to visit you?"

"He wanted to help me with the upcoming assembly, and offered his aid in helping me single out nobles to visit personally to help sway their votes in my direction. It seemed like a viable idea when I first heard it, but the more I think on it, the more it smells of trading favors, or even outright bribery," Luna said with distaste.

Celestia nodded. "Oh, such tactics are used among the nobility quite often, sister. Sometimes it's done honestly, with nothing more than a well reasoned argument made, although this usually only happens when they come to me." She chuckled. "It's hard to bribe the pony who already has access to anything she needs if there is an honest call for it, after all. Still," she continued, her features showing doubt, "I find it odd that Blueblood was able to come up with such a plan so quickly."

Luna gave her sister a puzzled look. "Surely he isn't that incapable... is he?"

"Possibly not," Celestia conceded, "but I only sent out the call for the assembly a couple of hours ago. For him to come up with such a scheme overnight? Certainly. In just a few hours, though?" Her face turned thoughtful. "Now I wish you had agreed, just so we could find out who he was going to have you visit. I'd wager that those were the ponies behind this."

Luna shrugged. "Oh well. Still, I find it a bit unsettling that others are so quick to capitalize on this for their own gain."

Celestia laughed loudly, and then quickly put a hoof to her mouth when the other library patrons stared at her for making such an outburst. "Sorry!" she softly called out. She returned her attention to her younger sister. "Oh,

Luna, I truly wish that this was just an aberration of how things go with the nobility, but trust me, this happens all the time."

"Why do you put up with it then?"

"The biggest reason is that it keeps them busy. You saw how clumsy Blueblood was in trying to sway you. Could you imagine how poorly run a town would be under his guidance? Or what would happen if he was put in charge of, say, the treasury? By keeping them occupied with trying to one up each other, they usually leave the running of the kingdom to those more qualified to such tasks."

"Then why even keep the royalty intact at all?" asked Luna.

Celestia chuckled. "Silly Luna, where would that put us then?"

Luna blushed, and then gently hit her forehead with a hoof. "Let's forget I said that, shall we?" she asked with a giggle. "Now, did you bring those transcripts like you promised?"

"I most certainly did," Celestia said with a smile. Her horn glowed, and a stack of papers floated up from the floor where she had put them previously. "Now, let's get to work, shall we?"

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Dewdrop pulled up a seat, and smiled as Feather Down came trotting over to her. "Hello!" her earth pony friend greeted her. "I'll be on break in just a few minutes, okay?"

The orange unicorn smiled. "Sounds good," she replied. "I'll just look over the menu until then." She watched as Feather Down waved and headed off to bus a table that had just emptied. After skimming through the familiar list of salads and sandwiches, she turned her attention to what was going on around her. If she had one regret about her job at the inn, it was that she spent almost all of her time indoors and didn't get to witness the general activity of everyday life in Ponyville.

"Sorry about the wait, I know you only have a limited amount of time before you have to head back to work," Feather Down said as she sat down across from her. A blue mare came over to take their orders, and after they

made their selections, left to go get their meals started. "So, how are you holding up after a short night's worth of sleep?"

"I'm doing okay," Dewdrop replied. "The hardest part was waking up. Thank goodness we have an alarm clock, or I don't think I would have made it to work on time. How about you? I thought I heard you stumbling about upstairs as I left, but I wasn't certain."

"Oh, you know me. I almost fell back asleep a couple of times, and I had to gallop to get here on time, but I made it with a couple of minutes to spare. It was worth it though! Even with how late we ended up staying in Canterlot, it certainly was a fun night, wasn't it?"

"Most certainly! Mind you, what happened before the dinner was a bit... hectic? Crazy? I don't even know exactly what to call it, but I certainly wasn't expecting to be ambushed by ponies bearing dresses for me to wear, that's for certain!"

Feather Down laughed. "Oh, that was one of the highlights for me! Not just getting to try on more dresses than I could afford in a year of working here, but did you see what those twins did to poor Pine Needle? I know I shouldn't laugh, but I can't think of any other stallion who would be scared in that situation."

"Well, I would think if the stallion had a mare friend he might be deservedly concerned, especially if they happened to be in the room at the time," Dewdrop said. "But yes, once I got over my initial shock at the situation, I was also having a hard time not laughing at poor Pine Needle."

"Heh, he's taking his crush on Applejack way too far. Say, speaking of stallions, how are things going between you and Haystack?"

Dewdrop shrugged and stated to reply when the waitress brought them their orders. "Thanks, hun!" she said to the mare before she left to go help some other customers. She took a bite of her sandwich, and then replied, "Things are going okay with us. Slow but steady, so I can't really complain, I suppose."

Feather Down rolled her eyes as she swallowed her mouthful of salad. "Seriously, what's taking him so long?" she asked in an exasperated tone.

"Well, first of all," Dewdrop said, "you have to remember rule number one of dating-"

"All stallions are idiots when it comes to love. Yes, yes, I know." Feather Down said. "But still!"

Dewdrop smiled at her roommate. "Well, also consider how things were before that night at the inn. We weren't what anypony would have called close friends. In fact, I would think that most ponies at first glance would have called us rivals, or possibly even enemies."

"Not enemies, but I get your point. There was a certain chill in the room whenever the two of you had to talk to each other. But it's been over a month now! How long does he need?"

"Oh, he's coming around. Remember, he actually came to visit me at the inn last week." Dewdrop took another bite of her lunch before continuing. "Why are you so gung ho about this anyways?"

"What? I can't help my best friend find happiness?" Feather Down asked defensively.

"Of course you can, although you're starting to come across a little bit too strongly as a matchmaker, to be honest."

Feather Down looked down at her salad. "I don't want to be seen as that, it's just..." she sighed. "I'm starting to hear other ponies talk, is all, and if I can hear some of them say something, odds are that lots more are saying it where I can't hear it."

"What are they starting to say?" Dewdrop asked, curious.

"You know, what they they say about any pair of mares who live together. That we're a thing."

Dewdrop tilted her head back and laughed loudly. "Oh, hun, does that really worry you that much? If ponies are that quick to judge and spread gossip, without doing any actual thinking, it's not going to matter what we do. Just ignore them, okay? Besides," she said as she floated her sandwich up towards her mouth, "if you want to put an end to those kind of rumors, you should go on a date or two of your own."

Feather Down made a sour face. "No thank you. There isn't anypony who I'm interested at the moment, and I'm not about to try the dating scene again anytime soon. Remember that dance we went to around a year ago or so?"

Dewdrop paused, trying to recall the event in question. "Oh!" she exclaimed, and then chuckled. "Is that the one where you fell asleep in the middle of a dance?"

"When they call them slow dances, they aren't kidding!" Feather Down said. "And that stallion was so boring, ugh! All he could talk about was his mane. I'd rather run through the Everfree forest than go on another date with him again!"

The two mares laughed at the thought, and around small talk finished their lunches. Giving her friend a hug, Dewdrop paid for her meal and headed back to the inn to finish her shift.

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Pine Needle put away his newly cleaned dishes and was about to leave for work at Haystack's farm when he heard a knock at his door. He trotted over and opened it to see Fluttershy holding in her mouth a basket carrying a squirrel.

"Perfect timing," he said, careful to keep his voice quiet to avoid scaring the timid pegasus again. "I was about to leave for work soon, but I certainly can take a few minutes to do, um, whatever it is that I need to do to help get the squirrel moved in." He gave the creature a closer look. "Does it have a name? Is it a boy or a girl? Is there anything that I should know, or do?"

Fluttershy carefully put the basket down on the ground before replying. "Oh, no. There shouldn't be anything you have to do, unless something goes wrong, but you can watch if you want to. It shouldn't take more than a couple of minutes. And his name is Acorn."

Pine Needle gestured towards his pine trees. "Then do what you have to do, and I shall watch."

Fluttershy picked the basket back up, and trotted over to the trees, with Pine Needle following a couple of steps behind. When she got to the base

of one of the pines, Fluttershy flew up and then took hold of the basket with her hooves and held it out next to a knothole. "There you go, Acorn, your home for the winter," she said.

The squirrel leaned forward and examined the proffered place. He sniffed it a couple of times, and looked it over carefully, going over every inch of it. Finally, it turned around to look at Fluttershy and made some chirping sounds.

"Oh, I know it isn't the biggest of places," Fluttershy said to Acorn. "But we had a really hard time finding places for everyone. And you wanted a place all to yourself, right?" The squirrel made some more noises in reply. "Well, I suppose that's true, but if you claim this place now, just think how big and comfortable it will be in the years to come. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Acorn replied in a tone that Pine Needle thought to be begrudging. Then the squirrel hopped out of the basket and lied down in the knothole. Fluttershy quickly descended and landed next to Pine Needle. "He didn't seem to be happy about his new home," Pine Needle commented.

Fluttershy nodded. "I'm sure it's just nerves," she replied. "This is his first winter away from his parents, and with it being in a strange place on top of that, I'm sure he just needs a few days to get used to things and then he'll be fine."

Pine Needle nodded. "I remember my first days here, after arriving from Stalliongrad. Everything was so different, and I didn't know anypony. I'm sure you're right. Is there anything I can do to help him make the transition?"

The pegasus considered the question. "No," she finally replied, "at least, nothing that I can think of anyway. Just keep an eye on him if you can, and if you have any problems, please don't hesitate to let me know, okay?"

"I most certainly will," Pine Needle promised.

"Okay. I still have a lot of things to do, so I need to be leaving."

"By all means, do not let me detain you. Thank you again." Pine Needle waved as the yellow pegasus took to the sky and watched as she flew away. He looked up at Acorn, who was currently exploring the branches of



the pine tree he now resided in. "I'm off to work," he called up, unsure if the animal could even understand him, but decided that it couldn't hurt to act friendly towards it.

Acorn looked down, and made some chattering noises that Pine Needle wasn't sure were friendly or not. Putting the matter aside, he checked to make sure everything was as it should be in his house, and made his way to Haystack's farm for a half day of work.

On the way, he passed by the house that Luna lived in while she stayed in Ponyville disguised as Moonbeam. He saw that while the place still remained unoccupied, it seemed to be taken care of by somepony; the landscaping looked to have been recently tended to. He fondly recalled walking to and from work with her, and chuckled when he considered that very few ponies could claim to have worked alongside a princess on a daily basis.

A short bit later, and he had arrived at Haystack's farm. He opened the gate and walked under the sign that read 'Haystack's Hill'. Looking around, he didn't see any sign of Haystack in the air above the farm, so he went and knocked on the front door to his house. After waiting a short wait and not hearing any noise come from the other side, he leaned over and, grabbing a nearby dangling rope with his teeth, rang the bell that hung next to the door to alert anypony out working in the field or the barn that there was a guest.

After a minute of waiting, Pine Needle started to get worried. He trotted over to the barn and searched inside, fearing that something might have fallen over and pinned his pegasus friend, or worse even injured him. Finding nothing was out of place, he then galloped up the hill that dominated Haystack's property.

Reaching the top of the steep incline, he caught his breath as he looked around from his vantage point. Seeing no sign of Haystack, he slowly walked back down the hill. Was his friend still in town running errands? It was the only explanation that made sense, but it seemed strange to him. Haystack was very punctual in everything he did, and for him to not be home when there was work to do went against everything that Pine Needle knew about the serious minded pegasus.

Wandering back to Haystack's house, he decided that even though Haystack wasn't around, he could show up at any time. He went back to the barn and left the door open to show where he was and started sweeping out the small layer of dust that had accumulated over the weekend. Soon he found himself absorbed in his work, and humming a song to himself.

He grew so preoccupied with what he was doing that he was startled when he heard Haystack call out his name. "I'm so terribly sorry," the pegasus said as he walked over to him. "I don't even have a valid excuse. I simply got lost in thought and forgot what time it was."

Pine Needle put down his broom and smiled at his friend. "Lost in thought? I shall refrain from commenting on that and just say that I am glad that you are okay."

Haystack looked at the floor. "I probably deserve whatever comments you have to make. I got sidetracked after returning the book to Spike at the library."

"Oh? What happened?"

Haystack shared with Pine Needle what Spike had said about the confusion with the phoenix. "Turns out we might not be the only group of ponies that she's had some fun with. As far as I can figure it out, she either had planned to show off the phoenix's rebirth cycle to everypony, and simply got distracted by other things, or she brought it along as some sort of... I don't want to say sick, but strange joke?"

Pine Needle nodded. "And based off of what we went through last night, you are more inclined to think that it is the latter?"

Haystack made a sour face. "I don't want to think that our high ruler is some sort of a jokester who spends all of her time thinking up ways to play small pranks on everypony..." he looked up at the roof of the barn, trying to figure out how to say what he wanted to. "She's done an amazing job though. If you had told me these things even a month ago I wouldn't have believed them. I would like to think I have a fairly well organized farm here. But Celestia's management of Equestria makes me look like a yearling playing in the mud."

Pine Needle gave his pegasus friend a puzzled look. "So what is your point then? What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know," Haystack admitted. "That's why I was so lost in thought. Is there any reason to be concerned about these... jokes that Celestia plays? Are they something I should even be paying attention to? And if so, what *can* I do about them?" He sighed and shook his head on frustration. "So many questions, and not a single one of them has an easy answer." He jumped slightly as a broom clattered to the ground next to his hooves.

"I have found in the past when I have something that I can not figure out, it helps to just walk away from the problem for a bit. I'll work on something else, and while I'm doing that I often find that an answer to the first problem will simply jump into mine head," Pine Needle explained.

Haystack tilted his head in thought briefly, then shrugged. "It can't be worse than what I just spent the past couple of hours doing, at least. I'll give it a try, although it will be hard to not have my thoughts wander off towards it if all I'm doing is sweeping."

Pine Needle smiled. "Well then, let me tell you about my day so far to help distract you," he said as he pushed some crates so Haystack could sweep behind them. "I now have a squirrel in mine pine trees, due to Fluttershy trying to find winter homes for the woodland creatures..."

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Luna had spent the remainder of the day studying for the assembly, and spent her time after dinner writing a rough draft of her speech for the assembly. After a peaceful night's sleep and an early breakfast, she did her best to polish her presentation, practicing in front of a mirror in her room until she felt comfortable enough with the words for what Celestia had promised would be an arduous process; going through a mock up of the assembly with Celestia and some other ponies chosen for the trial run. While she had to admit that things were difficult, the nature in which they actually turned out to be so had certainly surprised her.

"Dur de dur! Meesa Princey Blueberryblood! If we gives you de moony woony again, are you going to use it for a paperweight doohicker?"

The dozen or so ponies all broke down in laughter at the purposefully terrible impression of the unicorn royal, one that was made even more hilarious by the fact that it was Celestia who was making it. "Sister!" Luna wailed, laughing so hard that tears were starting to pour from her eyes. "Surely that isn't going to be something that I'll be asked tomorrow!"

"Oh, most likely not," Celestia agreed. "Sorry, but I couldn't resist. Besides..." she paused, and the bells announcing dinner started to ring. "It would appear that my stomach was correct, time to call an end to this and get ourselves something to eat." She turned to the other ponies who had helped them the last few hours by peppering Luna with various questions and follow ups. "Thank you again for your time and help, everypony."

The other ponies waved and filed out of the meeting room that Celestia had sequestered for their afternoon practice, soon leaving the two alicorns alone. "Thank you again for all of your help, Celestia," Luna said as they walked out of the room together. "I'm sure that the assembly itself will be even harder, with there being so many more ponies there in the audience and asking questions, but just having a chance to experience even just something like this has helped me a lot."

Celestia nodded. "I would be surprised if you face too harsh of a time at the assembly tomorrow. While there are some ponies that might not want you to reclaim your duties of raising and lowering the moon, I would bet that the number that will be brave enough to voice those concerns in the same room as you or I will be quite small. I think the best thing you can do is to answer the first couple of questions with full confidence. If you show weakness or uncertainty at the beginning, you'll give those who oppose you the belief that they can pester you the entire time. Show them that you won't put up with it from the get go, and the rest of your time should hopefully be much easier."

Luna nodded at the advice as they walked down the hallways of the castle. "I've been wondering what to do with myself tonight, now that we've finished everything we planned to do, and I think I figured it out."

"And that is?"

"I've spent the past couple of days studying and preparing like crazy. What I need to do now is just give myself a chance to let it all sink in. I'll go over things once more tomorrow before everything happens, of course, but I

think for tonight I'm just going to lie down and do some light reading for a change. It will be nice to read something that I won't have to worry about memorizing or being tested on afterwards."

Celestia smiled. "Lucky," she said in a teasing voice. "I still have a bunch of papers that I need to go over tonight before I have any free time."

Luna's smile quickly turned to a grimace at the news. "I'm sorry. It's because of all the time you've put aside to help me today, isn't it?" she asked. "Is there anything I could do to help you get through them faster?"

Shaking her head, Celestia gave her sister a reassuring smile. "No, but thank you for asking, it means a lot to me. And don't you worry about it, I agree that the best thing for you to do tonight is to just take it easy. You'll have plenty of time to be nervous once the assembly begins. No sense in getting worked up before the event if you can help it right?" The two sisters paused as the door to their eating room were opened up by the guard on duty. "Just make sure you get plenty of rest tonight. Do that, and it will make things much easier for both of us," she said with a smile as they seated themselves at the table.

Luna nodded, and thanked the servants as they carried over the first course of the meal. As she slowly chewed a mouthful of salad, she thought back on all the preparations that had been made the last couple of days. She was nervous, and even a little bit scared. What if the nobility refused her request? What would she do then? She did her best to shove those thoughts to the back of her mind. If the best efforts of her and Celestia came up short, then so be it. For now, though, she'd think only on the positive, and make sure that when the time came, she did the best job she could do.