

Two Truths and a Skye

By Tales

With assistance from Madbug and Skye



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Chapter 1

Princess Luna loved the garden behind the castle. It was something she often did since her return from exile. The garden hadn't been there a thousand years ago. Then again, neither had most of the castle. Or most of Equestria, for that matter. There were new towns, and cities—sometimes Luna even got lost in the castle, in her own home. There were so many new ponies to meet, so many new places to see. Everything was new. It made Luna feel like a helpless newborn foal.

Luna hadn't left the castle grounds since the Summer Sun Celebration. The celebration had had multiple meanings this year. It had celebrated her return, but also her defeat. And of course, as usual, the longest day of the year. There had never been a celebration for the longest night of the year. But Luna was used to people celebrating her sister. Celestia had always been the favorite sister.

Walking in the garden reminded Luna of her imprisonment on the moon. Things were lonely, but not as quiet. It was a place to be alone without truly being alone. Celestia was nearby in the castle, and there were all sorts of animals in the garden.

Luna wasn't used to other ponies quite yet. She wanted to have friends, and to be able to talk with other ponies. She just didn't know how. Even if she wandered around the castle grounds, ponies tended to avoid her—even the guards. Luna knew why they didn't trust her. But she wasn't Nightmare Moon anymore. She was just Luna. Lonely Luna.

Walking in the garden gave Luna time to think. She often went there to sing, being too embarrassed to ever try singing in front of anypony else. She would also do her fair share of writing, making up poetry or new songs. She liked to sketch the animals that she saw in the garden, and, being there so often, saw many of them regularly.

Even though Luna was free to go wherever she pleased, she stayed close to home constantly. Even when Celestia went to public pony events, Luna

declined and roamed the castle by her lonesome. Celestia never pushed Luna to go anywhere she didn't want to.

Yet, as Luna continued through the garden, she reached the back wall. The end of the garden. And even though she was a princess of Equestria and had all the joys a pony could ask for, Luna couldn't help but feel like a prisoner in her own home.

* * *

Once the sun was in its proper place for the day, once everything was seen too and all letters, forms, bills, amendments, treaties, and various other pieces of paperwork were given her yay or nay, she was finally given time to herself. She could feel the tension building up in the space between her shoulders and wings slowly relieve itself as the stress melted like morning frost on the grass. Celestia had no trouble dealing with her work, at times it kept her occupied, but when she had other pressing matters on her mind it could teeter to the point of becoming almost unbearable for the ageless mare. She tucked her wings to her side and rested at upon her throne.

So far, everything was in perfect working order. Nothing was out of place. No troubles were being had. And yet, something nagged cautiously at the back of her head like she was forgetting a minor detail. That was what bothered her. The main thing on her mind at the current, ever since the Summer Sun Celebration, was her younger sister.

How the ponies treated or reacted to Luna at times hadn't slipped the graceful mare's eye, nor would it have it worried her as much if she didn't see how it was affecting her baby sibling so.

Raising to her hooves and watching the guards at the sides of her throne instantly spur to attention, she nodded softly to them both, and they eased, if only slightly, in their armor.

"Do either of you know where my sister is at the current?" she asked softly.

The guards made no motion, no turn of a head or flick of a tail, but one of them answered her. "Princess Luna, your highness? Last I saw of her, she was making her way to the Royal Garden."

Smiling, Celestia gave a soft word of thanks and made her way to the garden by hoof, enjoying the look of her home and seeing if she could spot

anything new today. The maids had placed Sun Bloom in several vases, and several suits of ancient Equestrian armor had been newly polished.

Once she had made her way out to the garden, she let out the faintest of sighs as her blessed sun touched her face, feeling the warmth caress her muzzle and forelock, before she trotted softly into the main center of the garden.

"Luna?" she called out gently. "Luna, are you here?"

Luna turned suddenly at the sound of someone calling her name. She walked back, toward the castle, glancing around for the source. That was when she saw Celestia.

"O-o-oh, it's just you. Hello there, sister. Did you want me for something?"

Celestia smiled at her sister with a soft and affectionate expression as she came in to sight. She quietly approached Luna as she looked down at the night sky colored filly, and found herself all the more joyful that she was in fact here, and not in the moon as so many nightmarish, paranoid thoughts still tried to convince her of.

"I'd just finished with my duties and had come to see if you were alright." She glanced around the garden for a moment, and then glanced back to her sister. "How are you enjoying the garden? Not that much has changed, and I'm wondering if it's still a place of comfort for you."

Luna glanced around at the beautiful garden, not recalling much of her time before her exile.

"Everything-everything is fine." She tried to look confident in her answer, even though things were far from fine—and she felt that it was impossible for things to ever be right again.

The smile on the Celestia's face faltered ever so slightly as she sidled up next to her sister, one large pristine wing moving to delicately rest on the blue filly's back as she watched her closely. Long multicolored bits of mane occasionally gave a whispering touch to the younger sister's side or cheek as the sun mare watched her quietly.

"Nothing troubling you at all....?" She tentatively asked.

"That—that tickles." said Luna, not sounding at all pleased by it. She turned her face away from Celestia's gracefully flowing mane.

What was meant to be a comforting gesture quickly worried the elder Princess. Celestia blinked and watched her younger sister's attitude and demeanor change, her brow furrowed in a concerned frown as she tried to gently nudge her sibling's cheek with her muzzle. Just some effort to show she was there for her.

Luna shut her eyes tightly for a few seconds, and then opened them again, half expecting to be back in exile. There had been so many times when she had dreamed about being back, and now that she was...she was still afraid that even this was all a dream.

Luna stood, keeping her face turned away and her eyes averted from her sister, but Celestia's wing did not let up.

"Everypony hates me." she whispered.

"No, Luna...that isn't true." It couldn't be true, not after the greeting the filly was given in Ponyville. It just couldn't be. Holding her wing to Luna, she watched her sister quietly.

"Luna, they just don't know you the way I do. I'm sure they love you greatly for the gift you give them."

Luna gave a huffy sigh, but didn't turn her face back to look at her sister. "You've been doing just fine taking care of things, as I can clearly see. As far as everypony in Equestria is concerned, I'm not needed anymore." she sighed again. "Besides, they don't trust me. No pony does." Luna paused, and looked at Celestia. "And why should they, anyway, after what I did? I don't deserve for them to love me like they love you. I can't just come back and pretend like nothing happened; take my place by your side like I'm supposed to. Even if everypony accepted me as a ruler, my powers are so weak now that I wouldn't even be able to complete my appointed task." Luna paused, turning away from her sister again. "It's just better if I stay away from everypony for awhile. For a long while."

Watching her sister, the princess felt her worry grow, before it released as a soft and gentle sigh. She wanted to help her sister overcome these paranoid thoughts and this self loathing. The thought of the ponies hating her young sibling for a misguided lapse of judgment was enough to irritate the elder Princess. But she didn't allow herself to feel angered, nor irritated in the slightest. If she should feel angry at anyone, she should feel so at herself.

Looking to Luna, she let out a very faint sigh and drew closer to the dark indigo mare. "Luna...in time, your powers will return, and I will help you. I miss the beautiful nights you brought to Equestria."

Choosing her next words carefully, she gently shifted her head so her mane swept lightly from her face. "That is another thing I wished to speak with you on...I've been considering organizing a celebration..." She paused a moment or two before continuing, tucking her wings delicately to her sides. "...In honor of the moon..."

Luna looked up at her sister, a glimmer of joy in her eyes...but it quickly faded.

Celestia smiled softly at the brief glimpse of happiness in her sister's eyes..before it vanished.

"Why?" Luna asked, seeming to be utterly confused by this announcement. The Summer Sun Celebration was annual, a celebration of Celestia's sun...Luna had always attended, staying by her sister's side and generally enjoying herself. The sun was something to actually celebrate—after all, it was warm, and enjoyable, it made things grow so that ponies could eat. The moon did nothing to aid ponykind in their lives.

"I don't...I don't deserve that." Luna said, brushing off Celestia and beginning to walk away.

Celestia watched her sister walk off for a moment, before she followed just a step or two behind and called out to her.

"Sister, do not doubt the beauty of your night...without your moon, the oceans would become wild and unruly and eat parts of the land or disappear where it is truly needed. Rare herbs and flowers grow in your night like the Lunar Blossoms and the Moonbright Root..." She took a small

step closer and smiled weakly at Luna. "Luna...in the brightness of my day, no one can appreciate the sight of my sun...I think it would be lovely for them to appreciate your moon."

Luna stopped and whirled around. "You don't get it. You just don't get it!" she stamped a hoof. "You've been ruling over Equestria for a thousand years, taking on both the duties of the sun and the moon."

Wincing at the young Princess' outburst, Celestia let her sister speak despite how much it pained the older sibling.

"The ponies of Equestria don't see a need for me anymore. Some of them don't even know who I am. Those that do fear me or hate me. Joining you in ruling Equestria wouldn't help anypony. I still haven't even gained back enough power to do my job properly. What kind of ruler can I be now?"

Celestia watched her in a forlorn manner, and kept politely silent until Luna was finished. She approached her again, just a few steps closer, and let her sad eyes run over the filly, with a soft sigh that escaped through her nose gently.

"We promised each other that we would rule together, long ago. I know your powers aren't strong enough Luna...but one day they will be...and I want you to be there by my side to raise your moon when that day comes..."

Luna stared her sister down, her head tilted downward.

"Don't talk to me about promises! That promise was broken a thousand years ago! You have no idea what it was like! You have no idea!" Luna breathed heavily, and her eyes filling with tears. She was angry. Angry that Celestia could be so stupid. She pretended as if nothing had happened—and truly, nothing had happened....to Celestia. Luna was the one who had had to suffer.

Blinking at such an outburst, Celestia tilted her head back slightly as if that would give Luna some amount of space. Then she just listened and watched her sister with wide eyes.

"You can't know what that's like! A thousand years of loneliness and darkness. I would have rather died that day!"

Luna ran off, past Celestia, through the garden and toward the castle.

There was so much anger and sadness that escaped her sister in that instant. Celestia was so shocked that she barely had time to call out for her sibling before it was too late. She turned and watched the midnight blue filly run off, and rose a hoof to follow her.

"Luna, wait! I—I..." She only managed two meager steps as she watched Luna run off.

But Luna paused only to wipe the tears from her eyes, so that she could see properly, and then dashed off into the castle.

A small and forlorn sigh escaped Celestia. Her brow furrowed sadly as she swallowed her sorrow. She wanted to cry, and the bubbling feeling in her throat compelled that want so badly. She felt her voice choke, and her hoof gently thudded against the soil in the faintest irritation.

She whispered weakened words beneath her breath, though Luna was long gone.. "I...I had no choice....."

Chapter 2

Luna paused at the edge of the Whitetail Wood, her breath coming in rasps. After she had glided down the mountain, she had run almost the entire rest of the way. The last rays of sun were disappearing, and night would soon be upon Equestria. Luna, once she caught her breath, ventured into wood.

Skye watched the dark pony from his vantage point on his ledge. He'd been sunning himself up there, and enjoying the last few rays of the day while they were still there, though he imagined he'd have to get up sooner or later and forage for something to eat. He'd considered exploring Sweet Apple Acres again...there were almost always stray apples laying around that were usually still good. Or maybe he'd find something lucky like a berry bush on the way. He made a mental note to check the few he did know of on the way.

Sometime later, Luna was walking silently through the woods, her hooves treading lightly on the forest floor. Sounds of crickets filled her ears, along with the flapping wings of owls and other flying night hunters. The scent of earth was heavy in the air, and Luna breathed in heavily, sighing with pleasure as she took in the night. The castle garden she enjoyed just fine, but it was nothing compared to the wildness of the wood. There was so much more to take in here.

The moon cast a pale glow through the trees, creating shadows of creatures that weren't really there. Any other pony wouldn't have dared to walk in here alone at night. But the night was Luna's element.

She pricked her ears, listening to all the sounds of night. She sniffed, taking in the scents of bark and wet leaves and dirt and sap. Being in the woods like this was one of the few pleasures that she had since her return from exile, especially during the night when there definitely wouldn't be any other ponies around. No one would bother her, and she could be free and alone.

This pony, Skye had never seen before, at least, not up close. Though he'd heard rumors of Nightmare Moon from various ponies who had murmured in hushed whispers on their way through the wood, he'd never felt the need to approach them and learn more. The Peryton had noticed the change in

the moon, after the Summer Sun Celebration was over, and had seen several fireworks taking place in the distance over the Everfree Forest, but then it had been quiet.

Just about as quiet as this. He crouched, then angled his antlers forward. Night time was his favorite time of night as well, it was easier to do what he was about to do, and the shadows almost always were the best help. His antlers sparkled as he closed his eyes, then began to concentrate. On the path nearby Luna, a shape shimmered into focus nearby a tree, somewhat ethereal and silent, but as luminescent as the moonlight itself as it slipped amongst the trees to keep pace with the strange mare. It waited nearby for her to take notice, merely waiting without intruding, watching to see what she'd do next. Maybe she was a lone traveler who needed company, but it was always safer to find out first.

Luna swiveled her ears as the hair on the back of her neck prickled. She was being followed.

It wasn't unusual for that to happen in the woods. There were always various creatures around, some dangerous, some not. Regardless, Luna always had to be on her guard.

She caught a shimmer out of the corner of her eye, and she whirled in its direction. In almost the same instant, her head lowered and her horn glowed, preparing for whatever it might be. The figure shimmered, wavered for a second as she turned and lowered her horn to it, as if her unicorn powers were having an affect on its appearance.

Then it solidified further, while still remaining transparent, the figure of a winged deer gazing placidly at her. He stood where he was, just a few feet away off the main path, still somewhat obscured in the shadows of the trees , as if powered by the light of the moon itself and given form by the absence of shadow elsewhere.

Luna paused when the glowy form did not attack, raising her head slowly as her horn went out. She stared at it, waiting for a movement, still ready to fight.

Luna cocked her head to the side and inched forward a couple of steps, still unsure. "Hello?" she called to it, and the figure wavered again.

"Hello." came its reply, almost as if distantly but still from the figure. Almost ghostly, but without that ghostly demeanor. "Are you lost? I couldn't help but notice you were alone. The wood can be a dangerous place for a lone pony, especially at night. I don't mean to scare you."

The deerish figure came closer, no scent, no sound, almost eerie, but as it did, Skye suddenly thought that Luna might get the feeling that this wasn't a spirit at all. It had too much form, too much life, and didn't drift or frizz into smoke. It just appeared transparent, and even seemed to be breathing.

Luna laughed, an eerie, almost deep laugh didn't fit her cute filly sized body. She paused, watching as the ghostly luminescent figure edged forward. She stiffened, still prepared for a fight, but chose to answer his questions.

"Me? Afraid of the dark? Surely you must be joking. And I do not fear you, nor any creature of the wood. The darkness is my realm, my element, my home. Don't you know who I am?" Luna seemed to ponder this last question herself for a moment. "Then again, perhaps you do not."

Skye's image wavered for a second as he became wrapped in thought, before it solidified again. The figure seemed to relax, and sat down where it was, the roots and leaves showing through the form, but at least it appeared less threatening.

"Well, most ponies are afraid of the dark, and they usually don't come strolling through the wood unless they're stuck here too late on their way elsewhere. But you don't seem to be going anywhere in particular, which tells me either you're here on purpose, or you're lost."

"Tell me, what sort of creature are you?" Luna asked, curious about a creature she knew nothing about. This ghostly thing was intriguing, not quite animal, but seemingly not fully spirit either.

At her question, he cocked his head again. "Why, I'm a Peryton. The wood is full of them, if you happen to know where to look. And not just here in the wood, but we're all our own way. I considered myself company for the Mare in the Moon, before she vanished from its face. I'm usually up at night while

most ponies are asleep. It's my job to keep them safe as they pass through here. Someone has to, and I've been doing it for many years now."

He cocked his head. "I'm sorry, you're difficult to read...most ponies are pretty open with their thoughts when they're dreaming, but you're very guarded. Only Princess Celestia is as difficult...you're not related to her, are you? Maybe a cousin?" he looked up to the moon for a moment. "Or, you wouldn't happen to be Princess Luna, perhaps? The only pony of your color I'd ever heard of was her, but I don't know why she'd come down to our humble woods, especially this time of night."

Luna laughed, this time a more natural giggle. The deer form visibly relaxed at the giggle, his ears splaying at the delightful tinkle. That seemed a lot less guarded and for a moment, he even got a flash of a playful filly, but he didn't think he'd say anything right off the bat.

"Well, I suppose I should introduce myself. I am Princess Luna of Equestria, sister of Celestia and ruler over the night. Or at least I was, a thousand years ago." She gazed up at the moon, seeming to lose herself in thought for a few moments. Then she turned back to the creature. "A Peryton, you said? I can't say that I've ever heard of such of thing, but, it has been awhile since..." she drifted off, and quickly tried to change the subject. "What is it that you meant by "dreaming"?"

Skye got the feeling this pony was lonely, and the more she spoke, the more that feeling grew stronger. "Well, Princess Luna," and his image dropped into a bow, his head lowering.

"Oh, you don't have to—" Luna started as she watched the Peryton bow. She stopped herself, because she realized, that while he didn't have to, he technically still should. She was a ruler now, or would be soon, and she needed to get used to being revered again.

"I'm honored to meet you. I'm Skye, a companion and watcher of the Whitetail Wood." he straightened back up, his image fuzzing a bit as he did. "Perytons are magical creatures that inhabit the wood, at the fringe of imagination and dreams, and it's taken me many years to perfect the aspect. In answer to your question, you're having a bit of a dream right now. I'm not really here."

His head nodded up towards the ledge. Luna glanced up at the ledge at his indication, and saw a small figure silhouetted in the moonlight. Skye's figure on the ledge was difficult to make out from this distance, even as short as it was, though a slight sparkle could be seen from where his head was, even though the figure continued its presence. She continued to listen to the dream Peryton, while still staring up at the ledge, trying to make out more details.

"As ponies come through the forest, it's a lot easier for me to watch them from my vantage point without disturbing or frightening them, especially when they're lonely and need a companion for their travel. You may not remember me through your imprisonment, but I used to watch you from the day I was fawned. I'm not nearly that old, and I have to say you don't look anything like a thousand years old yourself! Perytons have a very long life-span, longer still the more we are remembered and dreamed of. It takes a bit of focus to be able to maintain a daydream, and less if you're actually asleep. Night dreams, while being more chaotic, are easier to influence and look into. The more guarded the pony, the more difficult it is to get in, but daydreams are always easier if the focus can be shifted to something."

Luna turned back to the Peryton form. "I can't say that I remember you...of course, that's true of a lot of things. A thousand years is...a very long time."

"It doesn't surprise me if you've never heard of me. We Perytons work very hard to keep a low profile where we can, and I try to suggest to ponies that it'd be better if they didn't tell anyone about us. The last thing we need are large crowds all coming through looking for us, after all."

"Princess Celestia mentioned a sister long ago, but it has been so long since we have had a conversation, she and I." Skye said thoughtfully. "She's so busy with her work in the city of Canterlot that she rarely comes to see me anymore."

"Celestia must be busier than ever..." Luna said. "She had to take on both the sun and moon cycles after I was banished. And she's been single-handedly ruling Equestria as well. I guess...I guess it must be hard for her."

"I can see some of Celestia in you, or at least, a bit of a family resemblance." Skye said. "Though," he continued, the twinkle in his eye not merely from a shimmer. "You're much cuter."

Luna paused at his last comment, blushing, and turned her face away. "I'm not—" she lightly cleared her throat. "I'm not that cute."

At her modest response, he smiled. "Oh, I never say anything I don't really mean. Celestia may be lovely, herself, but you're no less a Princess in my eyes." As she looked away, Skye's luminescent form frizzed into a sparkly cloud before returning to its shape closer than it had been. Closer than he was before, he might be a bit startling in his proximity, and a slight coolness radiated from his form nearby, like the caress of a tender breeze.

"It seems that once the hold of Nightmare Moon was broken, I was reverted to the age I was a thousand years ago...at least physically. I've also lost a considerable amount of power in my time away, and after Nightmare Moon's defeat as well. I pale in comparison with Celestia."

"Reverted?" Skye queried. "That must have been some powerful magic to do that. Nightmare Moon was a scary figure from the talk of the ponies. Maybe there was a reason you were brought back this way. Celestia's very leggy, almost a horse in her size, easily the tallest pony I've ever seen! It's hard to think she was once just a little filly like you. She had a lot of growing up to do, I guess, and she grew into her shoes quite well. Maybe one of these days she'll be happy to return your realm to you, when you're ready."

"Well, the body Nightmare Moon resided in what was my full grown form. But, with the way that I acted...I don't know if ponies will trust me once I regain my true form." She paused. "I suppose I deserve it though." she lightly sighed. "Perhaps...perhaps one day I shall return to ruling the night...perhaps..." she trailed off.

"I imagine not," he replied, "Once trust has been shaken, it can be very hard to earn it back, but it's not impossible. All you have to do is keep working at it, and it'll naturally happen." For a moment, he fuzzed out, and reformed in the shape of the adult Nightmare Moon, mirroring her expression, before returning to his form. "She's nothing to be afraid of, we're all of us a little dark on the inside. But I wouldn't say you deserve it. Can you tell me more about your side of the story? I would be eager to learn."

"Why don't you come down so I may see your true form?" Luna said suddenly.

At her request, Skye nodded, and the ghost-like figure faded out, leaving behind a faint sense of headiness that passed quickly.

A few moments later, there was a rustling, and the darkened form of the blue Peryton poked his head out from between a small copse of bushes, and cautiously emerged. This time, he was much more solid. His hoofsteps made an audible sound, as well as his short whiffling breaths, as he sniffed the air around himself before stepping out into the path. He was much smaller than Celestia, and only a little bit smaller than most ponies, but much more slender in shape. His antlers, darkened now, nevertheless were his most treasured feature, clean and free of any debris of the plants he might have walked through on his way down. This time he bowed again, lowering his head. "The true me, Princess."

Chapter 3

“Thank you...Skye, was it?”

Skye stood back up, and shook himself off, settling his feathers back into place, and looked down the path for a moment before turning his gaze back to the Princess.

Now able to see his real form, Luna began the story that Skye had asked for. Skye's ears swung forward to listen as she spoke. “About what happened that night...It's....complicated...That night is one of the few things I remember, unfortunately....I don't....I don't like to talk about it...” Silence persisted between them, as Luna thought about the fact that this creature treated her...normal. Even after finding out who she was, what she had been and done...None of it seemed to matter. It was strange, and yet...pleasant.

“Something happened. A spell went wrong...I was trying out something new....And...something got out.” She paused, staring off, recalling what had transpired all those hundreds of years ago. She shuddered.

“Maybe it was a demon of some sort...I just know that I couldn't control it. Celestia didn't know any better. It had a hold on me, my body, my mind, my memories....There wasn't anything I could do.”

“I was banished, trapped for a thousand years....in more ways than one. I should never have tried what I did, but I...I was curious. If I could have imagined what would happen...” she trailed off once again, but only for a moment. Skye nodded here and there as the details began to come out.

“The Elements of Harmony finally released me...I hope. The physical part of Nightmare Moon was destroyed, but...she might still be around. That's why I'm afraid to take my rightful place as a ruler. I could screw things up again. I just...I don't know...”

He mulled this over, looking thoughtful as the conversation played back in his head. It definitely sounded as if she'd had bottled this up for a while,

and needed to share it with...anyone, someone who would listen. And he was patient, not saying anything until she had finished speaking.

"That definitely sounds complicated. I'm sure there's more details than you're ready to share with me just yet, but you definitely sound like you've needed someone to share this with for a while now. You can always come to me, Princess, you're always welcome here, if you need someone to speak to. My ledge is up there, and I can usually be found there unless I'm elsewhere for something." he paused for a moment, looking back down the path again, ever watchful. "We can't all be blamed for our mistakes, as long as we learn something from them. From the sound of things, you merely made a mistake. Granted, it was a mistake that could have had terrible repercussions, but such is life. I think Princess Celestia felt at the time it was the best thing to do what she did, but even she surely feels remorse for what she did."

"Thank you, Skye. You are a very wise and kind Peryton. I would like to believe you about Celestia, but....she has not yet approached me about it. She acts as though nothing happened...and yet, nothing did...to her."

At her comment at his wisdom, Skye chuckled. "Ah, I'm not so wise. I've had many years to ponder things, and some of them are like a puzzle. The right pieces fall into place if you look at them long enough. True wisdom comes from knowing the philosophy, and knowing when to act on it. I make my own mistakes all the time. I'm just here to help. I may not always be right, but I'll never purposefully steer you wrong."

Skye circled around her, nosing several stones from the path that had collected from various travelers, and picked up a few stray branches as well. Luna watched as Skye slowly moved around her.

"You know, I used to tell you stories when you were up there. None of them were as fantastic a tale as the Elements of Harmony, mostly the musings of a young fawn exploring his imagination. Maybe with this release, you will be free to explore yours. A great ruler learns as well as rules, but even Celestia has wishes." he paused, now on the other side of Luna. "What do you wish for most, Princess?"

Luna looked surprised at his last question. "You ask a question that one would think it would be easy to answer...and yet, I cannot. There is nothing that I want now...there is nothing I deserve.

Skye pondered this, scrunching his face for a moment, before relaxing in a smile. "It's okay, not everyone knows what they wish for in life. Some find their wishes, some never do, it's a matter of deciding what makes you happy."

Luna thought for a moment. "My only wish, I suppose, would be for things to have never changed. For Nightmare Moon to have never existed."

Skye thought about her last comment, and sat on the path once more, digging a little furrow in the soil near the side. "You wish Nightmare Moon to have never existed. But have you thought about what might have happened if she had not? Maybe a thousand years of solitude changed your sister from what she was then to what she is now. She might not have been as kind and benevolent a ruler. No pony ever gets what they feel they deserve, yet every action they take has their consequences and benefits. You've come here tonight. Had you never come, you might never have met me, and we might never have talked. You'll leave here tonight with the memory of our conversation and it will change you. How, I can't say, but I hope it's for the better, just as it has changed me. I can't grant your wishes, that's beyond me. But I can help you find your dreams."

Luna paused before she spoke. "I know that you mean well Skye...but did I have to bear punishment in order for my sister to better herself? I did not gain anything from this. I only lost."

Skye continued. "A thousand years is a long time. Has it been that long already? As for Celestia, you realize how much she's gone through, these past thousand years. You've admitted yourself that she might have much on her plate. Maybe this is why she hasn't approached you. Yet, has she given sign, of any kind, of trying to be a good sister to you? A friend? Maybe something subtle you may not have realized? Brought you tea in bed, or passed you a fresh dessert? It might be difficult for her, too, and more difficult still to recognize it."

"When she—gives me favors, I do not know what she wishes to accomplish. Perhaps she truly feels sorry...or perhaps she is just trying to

be the better pony. If she wishes for forgiveness, I wish that she would just say so."

Luna looked thoughtful before she spoke. "Earlier today, she mentioned something about wanting to hold a "moon celebration." But I did not listen....for I do not feel that I deserve that. Celestia has been ruling over both night and day, sun and moon....and yet I have done nothing worthy of praise. I am not somepony to be celebrated."

He smiled, making a waving gesture with his hoof. "See, I'll bet that was her way of trying to show you she's happy you're back. Celebrations seem to be the norm around here. There was the Summer Sun Celebration, which was to bring all the ponies together, and now she wants a moon celebration...again, to bring ponies together. You might be surprised, I'd recommend going to it. You're her sister, and she feels you deserve recognition. You are, after all, Princess of the night, your very name means the Moon." he made as if to touch her shoulder, but thought better of it. "Don't over think things, sometimes you have to take the moment as it comes. Celestia's not used to having a sister, and a younger one at that. She's spent these thousands of years in the company of her court, and looking up every night to see you there, reminding her of what she'd done."

Skye's hoof found the ground again, and he doodled a little circle in the soil. "Perhaps you should tell her you don't want favors, that you just want your sister. But maybe...maybe that last is a wish I might be able to grant. I cannot fly, but I would be happy to speak to Celestia on your behalf. If she doesn't come here, then I'd muster up the courage to go up there." his eyes rose to the shadowed city of Canterlot. "If it's what it took for two sisters to be truly reunited. She is the day, and you are the night, the beautiful night." he looked higher still to the moon overhead and the stars sparkling there. "Have you ever truly looked at it? Sat down here, as one of us, and gazed up into its depths? You were to bring out the moon, and she the sun. I'm sure she's never truly appreciated it as much as we do."

"No, Skye." Luna shook her head, then sighed. "What happens between us, we must resolve ourselves. And I want for Celestia to say what she means, without any persuasion."

"Then the solution is simple." Skye said. "You'll have to face her someday and resolve this on your own, or risk creating a rift as large as the one that

kept you apart in the first place. In a game of chess, one side must always make the move first. Perhaps this is similar, only instead of conquest, the endgame is compromise. But at the very least, think about what you'll have to do. The last thing you want to do, is to bring Nightmare Moon back and risk being trapped again."

Then Skye did reach out, and lightly placed a hoof on Luna's shoulder. She started at his touch, nearly jerking away...and then she realized that there was nothing wrong. There was nothing wrong with ponies and other creatures showing her affection through touch. It had just been so long...It was so strange to Luna, now, to feel the touch of others.

"I think you did gain something, during your imprisonment. You gained a new way of looking at things, and you gained your youth once again. When your sister has to pass her crown to someone, can you think of no pony who would be best suited to fill her role? Perhaps it might have been less painful to have spent those thousands of years together, but part of being a Princess is sometimes sacrifice. Maybe yours is sacrificing the years you might have spent, growing up together and fighting constantly with one another, for a thousand years of peace ruled first by one, and then the other in turn, with years in between to enjoy each others company. Celestia can't live forever, none of us do, surely you knew that."

He removed his hoof and placed it back on the path, as Luna spoke. "What the future may hold...not even Celestia can know."

Skye suddenly perked up. "For now, why don't you come for a walk with me? I know where there's some maple syrup trees that should just about be ready to be harvested, and some of the buckets may be full."

"Thank you for the offer, Skye." Luna replied, following a few steps behind him.

"There is much that Celestia and I must sort out since my return. It is difficult enough to find time to be together, but even then...we do not communicate all that well. Things are left unsaid, continually. It's...hard for me to say what I feel properly, without knowing what Celestia's thoughts are."

Silence came between them for a few moments, then Skye turned for a moment to look over his shoulder at Luna. "I hope you don't feel I was admonishing you. If there is only one thing I can hope, it's to give suggestions as food for thought. But I want to see you happy, Princess. There is much on your mind."

"You are wise, as I said before, and very caring, as I can clearly see. I know that what you say is meant only in the best of intentions. You seem to notice so much more about me than Celestia does."

His hoofsteps padded lightly on the packed dirt of the trail as he led the way through the darkness lit by the brilliance of the moon and the stars overhead. "I understand." he occasionally lifted his head to sniff at the cool breezes as they sent various scents along the way, and his ears constantly twitched to catch the sounds of leaves or the occasional night bird calling. He had remained quiet as she spoke, thinking over her words.

Skye occasionally turned to look back at her as if to reassure himself that she was still alongside, his gaze catching her own as they proceeded down the path.

As she continued, Skye watched her speak, and thought on this too. "We're sisters, we should be able to read each other, know what the other is feeling. And yet, our connection has faded with time." Her ears drooped and her head lowered, saddened that the sisters no longer had the bond that they once held.

"The confusion will also fade with time. Because you are sisters, that bond will never truly fade and can only grow stronger if you let it. Just keep at it, Princess. There's been much between you that needs time to heal. And I promise there is at least one creature here in the forest you can call friend."

"Skye, I am very grateful to have met you on this night. Thank you for offering your friendship. It seems that if there is anything I am lacking these days, it is friends." Luna smiled ever so slightly as Skye turned to look back at her once again. But as he turned his back to the path, her smile faded as she thought about how she had acted to Celestia just a few hours ago. There was so much they needed to talk about, and yet...it seemed as if every time they were together, they avoided the necessary topics that they should discuss.

Luna decided to try moving the conversation to a different note. "Tell me Skye, do you have any family nearby?"

As her question came, he shook his head. "Not directly, not anymore. My own parents have long since moved on. There comes a time in our lives when the old generation must give way to the new, and then we fade. Never completely right away, they still live on in my memories, and will only be truly gone when I have also moved on. There are others of my kind about, but none of them are related to me, nor am I bonded to any at this time. Little Aven is the youngest Peryton I know of at present, and she tends to spend her time in the Everfree forest helping wayward travelers, just as I do here. I suppose having as much time to myself as I do leaves plenty of room for family and romance, but it is different here, where it tends to come as a matter of course. Does that answer your question?"

Luna listened to Skye speak on the current Perytons that lived scattered over Equestria. "Yes, I suppose it does." she mused. "But do you not get lonely, taking care of the forest alone?"

As they approached the copse of maple trees and their buckets collecting their sweet treats, he slowed and turned to check the nearest one. Luna watched as Skye went about his task, checking buckets here and there under the trees. As he moved about, he spoke. "Occasionally, but you were up there to keep me company through the long and quiet nights when nopony was coming through. There are often enough travelers that come through that I don't feel completely alone all the time, but some nights it does get somewhat solitary. On those nights, I may wander, sometimes almost as far down as the edges of Ponyville. I can't get up to Canterlot so easily, the cliffs are too steep." he fluttered his wings. "While I don't worry about falling, the last thing I want to do is show up there all dusty and dirty, and I can't just charter a balloon."

He made a little sound of pleasure as he discovered a bucket nearly full of the sap. "Ah, here we go. Would you like a first taste, Princess? Nopony will miss a little bit of this, and the trees make plenty to go around, and the flavor just sticks with you all night, especially if we find some blackberry bushes to nibble at. There's plenty of food here in the Whitetail Wood that it often consumes plenty of time looking for it as well."

Luna came over to him at his offer, dipping a hoof into the bucket.

Skye continued speaking. "We might even see one of my cousins or perhaps, another Peryton if we're lucky. So you see, I'm never truly alone, there are others. This is just where I tend to stay."

Luna lifted the sticky substance to her lips, licking off the sweet nectar of the trees. She was sure to get all of it, so as not to have a sticky hoof.

The Peryton grinned as Luna dipped her hoof into the bucket, a light coating of the sticky treat dabbed against the tip. When she'd taken her taste, he dipped his nose into it, then lifted it and licked the sweetness from it politely. A delightful sugar rush raced through him, causing him to shiver and flutter his wings.

Luna finished cleaning herself off. "Thank you Skye. This really is delicious. We never get syrup this fresh up at the castle. In fact... I don't think I've ever had it straight from the tree. The fact that trees don't grow on the mountain may have something to do with that, though." She giggled.

"I love it fresh from the bucket, and it only gets better after it's distilled down to syrup, but I don't usually get it that way." Skye said.

"What is it that draws you to this particular wood Skye?" Luna asked.

Skye licked his nose again, then looked up to the Princess. "Well, I was born here, and I've felt content enough to stay. Some of my kind have ranged further outwards, but I've never felt the same wanderlust. And...I suppose there's a bit of magic here that keeps me drawn to it. I'm sure there's a number of wonderful sights in Equestria worth seeing, but for all I knew, all I ever need is right here. The least I can do is share what I have with others."

"Maybe we should see if Canterlot's botanists can't grow a tree or two up there in the gardens for you. I hear the Canterlot gardens are truly a sight to see. Someday, I would like to see them for myself, if there's ever a way I can make it up there." he looked up to the castle perched on the side of its hill.

"The garden is so lovely this time of year." Luna said. "I go there all the time. There are so many different flowers and trees and animals. You should see it at night. That's when I like it best."

Skye perked his ears, listening to the description, visions of flowers and other animals running through his head. He'd never seen the gardens, not in all of these years, but he'd heard stories and bits and pieces that made him eager.

Luna continued. "It's one of the few place I can go outside of the castle, without seeing a whole lot of other ponies. Most ponies in Equestria aren't too fond of me right now."

Skye was brought back down out of the clouds as she spoke this last bit. "Well, maybe they just need a chance to get to know you. Their track record hasn't exactly been very good, and they're all relatively young. Younger, technically, and they haven't really had a chance to get to know you yet. From what I've seen, I think you're an engaging young filly who just needs a chance. Certainly haven't tried to destroy me or given me reason not to like you. On the contrary."

Then Skye looked thoughtful. "That reminds me...Did you fly down here all alone, Princess? All the way from up there?"

Her brow furrowed at his next question. "I uh...walked, actually, mostly. Well, it was more like ran, to be precise. Well, that is, I had to fly down the mountain, but I ran the rest of the way."

The deer dipped his nose into another bucket, sampling its contents, though one eye remaining on Luna. He glanced up at the city of Canterlot again, and pictured her escape from her perceived prison.

"I had trouble seeing because I—because I was crying." Luna's face fell, thinking again about the childish way she had acted. She looked up again quickly, throwing a weak smile on her face. "But it's nothing that you need worry about Skye."

Chapter 4

Another lick of his lips, and another delightful shiver. But Skye noted her change in expression, and followed suit. "I'm sorry if I made you sad, Princess. I do worry because I care what happens to you. It's in my nature and it's part of me, and I wouldn't change it. Forgive me for being inquisitive, but the more I know about you, the better I get to know you. Here, your secrets are safe, and I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to. Everypony cries, it's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"It is not your fault Skye. It seems that these days, I cannot stay happy." Luna thoughtfully looked up at the moon. "It's funny, really. I should be glad to be back, and yet...I find that I am not. But I would not give it up to go back to my imprisonment, oh no. But it has been so long that I cannot seem to find a place here any longer. As for crying...it's simply something that a Princess should not do...it isn't...proper."

Skye turned, and nudged another bucket. "Here, have some more. I promise you'll feel right as rain before long. Then maybe we can find some of those berries I was talking about." he added.

Luna moved over to Skye and dipped a hoof into the bucket, then licked it clean once again. It was sweet, yes, very sweet indeed. But it did not bring her the pleasure that it had the first time. Still, she smiled, to show that she was grateful.

"Berries sound wonderful! Maybe I could take some back to the castle if—if that's alright."

The deer licked his lips again, then turned and began to lead her down a side path, one less evident than before. The bushes pressed in, leaves brushing on either side, but still evidence of an animal trail of some kind. As they walked, he occasionally dropped his nose to the ground and sniffed at various tracks, watchful of any hidden dangers. Once or twice, he paused and held a low-hanging branch aside for Luna to pass. Luna blushed every time Skye held a branch out of the way for her. She wasn't used to other creatures, not even ponies, doing her any sort of kindness. But Skye was

different. He continued chatting with her as they walked. "It's too soon. Someday, you'll look back on these days and wonder why it took so long. We form memories of things we cherish, at the strangest of times and don't even think about it until later. I think I prefer you here to up in the moon. I'd talk to you then, but you can talk back to me now. And I'm sure even Celestia cries."

They approached a dark mass of growth, and as it became evident in the moonlight, discovered to be a vast blackberry bush that had been here for ages. Signs that it had been nibbled by other passersby were visible, but there were still several large masses of berries all over itself. "Now comes the next best part. The biggest ones are the sweetest, but also not always as flavorful. So you go for some of the big ones, and then some of the smaller ones to add a bit of tart. And think about the maple sap as you do, and compare the flavors. Sweet, and tart. Combine them both, and they're like memories." he delicately nibbled a few nearby, chewing carefully so not to squirt too much of the juice. Even then, some stains still decorated the fine whiskers around his lips. "Too many of either will make you sick of them. But combined, and you have something worth enjoying."

When they had reached the berries, Luna did as she was told, sampling berries here and there. She was very dainty about it, careful not to squirt juice anywhere—it just wasn't proper for a Princess. There were some berries in the bushes at home, true...but Luna wasn't sure if some of them would be poisonous or not. After all, no matter how colorful the berry, it didn't erase the danger it could hold.

Skye paused, his tongue flicking out to lap away the juices that had collected on his chin, angling his ears towards her. He smiled as he noticed the careful way she picked berries from the bush, watching and approving as she took one, then another. There were a great deal on this particular bush, it appeared as if it had many years to grow and from the look of the indentations around it, was frequently patronized by other creatures of the forest.

Luna swallowed some berries, and then spoke. "Perhaps, Skye, when you visit the Royal Gardens, you can tell me about the types of edible plants that are there. There are berries there, as well, but I admit I have not been able to taste them. I do not know which ones may be poisonous and simply

for decoration rather than consumption. I am no Botanist, Skye, but you seem to know a great deal about the plants of the wood."

At her complement, Skye ducked his head. "When you're born and raised here, you learn quickly what to eat, or starve. Many creatures of the forest will show you what is edible, and what is not, if you look. There's a great deal many things to eat here. Fruits in the trees, scattered by seeds left behind by birds or other creatures, or careless ponies that drop their snacks along the way. The main road doesn't stay clear of its own accord."

He paused, thinking on Luna's suggestion. "I think I would enjoy that someday. If there's a way I can visit without intruding. Perhaps a quiet lift some night, somepony could come down for me in one of those fantastic balloons I see crossing overhead from time to time. I would be delighted to accompany you through the castle gardens."

"Well, generally at the castle we if we need to travel anywhere, we use Pegasus drawn chariots. We don't really have a place for balloons to land, and they aren't very practical considering for us royals, anyhow. Celestia is far too large, and I will be one day too. But I could always send for you that way. I would—I would enjoy that as well." she smiled.

Skye suddenly thought of something, and looked up to the trees nearby. He soon located one with a nest perched in its branches. Quietly, he indicated with his antler the sleeping contents. Luna looked up when he indicated the tree, squinting up at it, trying to see the nest that was barely visible in the moonlight.

Skye spoke. "Oh, for example, these birds. They love the berries, too. They come, they take some, and they drop some wherever. When the berries land, they grow, and they come back for more. In their way, they help feed us all, by taking them further and further. The wood is full of them."

"It's an entirely different world out here, isn't it?" Luna said, half to herself.

Skye's ears perked suddenly and he turned to glance off in another direction. As Luna gingerly reached for another berry, she felt Skye press against her. Skye had turned and was attempting to guide Luna back the way they had come, or at least, into the immediate undergrowth Luna was about to reprimand him, but then he spoke. "Shh, something's coming."

Luna turned, looking behind them, while keep step with Skye. "What is it?" she whispered.

The Peryton ushered Luna behind some thicker bushes, just low enough to hide them from view, but overlooking the berries they had just been picking at. He shh'd her again after a moment, and looked out over the edge of the bush. Then he leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "I'm sorry for being so forward, Princess. But another one of your subjects is coming by, probably for a nibble at the berries."

In a few moments, a regular deer poked its head out from around a tree, her slender form following a few moments later. A doe, followed by a couple of fawns barely old enough to scamper on their own entered the moonlit clearing. "Many creatures of the wood are awake this time of night, searching for food." he murmured. His warm breath tickled her ear as he spoke, just loud enough to be heard.

"But they're very shy, and seldom come when company is about. I heard their footfalls as they approached, but it might have been our voices that attracted them. You never know with deer."

Luna peeked over the bushes to see, her dark mane blending in with the surrounding shrubbery. She spoke in hushed tones. "I am aware of the creatures of the night. It is the time when I am most active as well, being ruler over it."

Skye nodded, still keeping an eye on the deer as they supped on the bush. "It's not common to see them this soon at night. I suppose you would be, I was not sure how versed in the nocturnal animals you would be. I apologize, I meant no affront."

Skye leaned back a bit to watch as the doe brought her fawns in to nibble at the berries. "Are there any in Canterlot? Any traces?"

"I have seen very few creatures outside of what reside in the castle garden. Mostly it is small animals and flying creatures, likes rabbits, squirrels, and birds, as well as bats and owls. Deer, I suppose, cannot make it up the mountain, and, even if they could, the garden is boxed in on all sides by walls." Luna said.

Skye listened to her explanation, his ears splaying. "I suppose it would be difficult for them, just as it is for me to make the trip. I've seen some of our more sure-footed cousins on the mountainsides, but I can't even make it up partway without fearing of setting off an avalanche, and that would be dangerous indeed."

She inched her head upward ever so slightly, to get a better view. "Oh, they're so cute!" she whispered. As she shifted ever so slightly, her foot pressed against a stray twig. It snapped, sounding much louder than it was in the quiet. Skye had been smiling, but at the sound he quickly turned to look back at the deer, then he froze. Luna gasped and ducked down. She held her breath waiting. The doe looked up sharply, her fawns flattening instantly to the ground as they listened.

Skye held his breath as well, waiting scant few heartbeats before a soft bleating noise, his antlers sparkling for a moment. Then he held silent and watched. After several moments, the doe calmed back down and went back to browsing with her fawns, who rose as if nothing had happened. "Aren't they cute? Two more precious lives with their mother. When they grow up big and strong, have fawns of their owns, I'll watch them as well as I can, as I would any who come here." he whispered again.

Suddenly, as they finished feeding, the deer dashed off, their white tails flagging silvery in the moonlight. Luna watched as the deer disappeared off into the darkness. She sat down on the ground, turning to Skye as he spoke. "And off they go. I may never see them again, but I'm proud to know they live here too. To be a part of life's story, as I'm proud to be a part of yours, Princess."

"Thank you Skye. I'm flattered, really—" she paused to yawn, covering her mouth with a hoof and then blushing. "I'm sorry that was rude—" she was interrupted by another yawn. "—terribly rude..." she sighed. "—But I really am glad that I met you, you've been—been—" Her eyelashes fluttered as she fought drowsiness. "—so kind and generous...." she yawned again, sliding down and laying her head on her front hooves. "I shouldn't—shouldn't—'s not right....at all..." Luna mumbled something else, before she fell fast asleep.

The Peryton smiled at her, and nodded as she settled down. He continued to watch her as she began to yawn, though he remained seated where he was. "Sleep well, Luna." as she began to fade, laying her head down on her hooves. "Sleep well, and dream too." he settled down nearby as she closed her eyes and began to breathe regularly, the soft sounds of sleep.

Skye looked up to the moon where her figure had until so recently been on its surface and flicked his ears, then down to the sleeping pony in the soft patch of grass she'd bedded down in. He'd watch over her through the night, as he always had before, as he always would for as long as he could, keeping the Princess of the Moon company for many years to come.

Chapter 5

In the morning, Skye stretched and yawned, shaking the fine layer of dew that had accumulated in his coat and looking about. He'd only napped a little, being a light sleeper naturally, though the princess was still fast asleep by this time. Skye licked his lips, and cast about. He thought to himself, *if she's as thirsty when she wakes up as I am, she's probably going to appreciate some water. Hopefully I can be back before she wakes up.*

Taking a moment to ensure the princess was safe from immediate danger, he gave a flick of his tail and bounced off towards his favorite watering hole. Not too far in the distance, but definitely a good enough distance to get a good stretch of his legs in. This was his favorite time of morning, too, when everything smelled so fresh and awake. As much as he loved the night, he loved the day as well, even if he normally slept through most of it. But for now, he had to get his fill in and then get back to the Princess before she woke.

But it wasn't long before Luna was awake. The sun shone down, warming her skin. She sat up, glancing around and remembering the previous night.

"Skye?" she called, noting that he was surprisingly absent from view. "Skye?" she called again, louder this time. She yawned and stood up, stretching in the morning air. "Skkyyyee!" she called out, a little louder still. There came no answer, just the chirping of birds and the rustle of leaves in the wind.

Drat. she thought. She looked 'round again, this time trying to get her bearings. Even though she may not have realized at the time, she had been lost even before she met Skye. He had led her deeper into the forest without her completely realizing it, and now she was especially lost. Everything had looked different at night, what little that could be seen, that is.

She sat down again, trying to figure out which way to go, when she remembered—the sun! It always rose in front of the castle, and set behind it...so all she had to do was figure out the direction of the sun and head

east. She stood up once again, and then thought that perhaps Skye would be back...it wouldn't be very polite of her to leave...but Celestia was probably so worried.

Luna laid down on her front hooves again, closing her eyes and trying to figuring out what to do.

Meanwhile, Skye was nosing about, looking for a bucket or container, or even a bowl, anything he could bring water back with him. It would be easier to show the princess where the river was, but he felt it would be nicer still if she awoke with a fresh bowl nearby. The berries and the sap were so very delicious, but tended to leave one parched.

In his distraction, he began to lose the track of time, and had been gone for nearly an hour before he realized he'd been busy for too long and that Luna was surely awake by now. The forest was thick enough that any sounds carried oddly, though he got a tingle through him that someone was calling for him. About that time, he realized he'd wandered too far, and turned on his hooves to dash back the way he had come. The leaves parted easily from his lowered antlers, and he stepped nimbly over root and gopher hole, the way invisible to any but those most versed with this area of the woods. It hadn't taken him too long to find the stream, but he didn't know how well the princess could track him through these thicker parts of the woods.

The guess on the guard was a hundred percent correct. Soon enough an entourage of golden armor clad stallion's were making their way into the forest in thin swarms by obvious order to find the night princess. They would check behind trees and in caves. In fact, they were checking everywhere for their royal lady, with the older one following in check as she entered the woods; even with her guards trying to change her mind, they just couldn't dissuade her. Celestia's mind was set and as she entered the wood, her eyes narrowed ever so slightly with the task at hoof. Despite the emotions she was feeling, her mind was rolling with like a thunderstorm.

She hadn't seen her sister all night, and the worry and the twinge of her own self loathing reared its head, as well as her own fear. So much fear. The fear of losing her sister. The fear of losing...everything. With her brow wrinkled in worry, Celestia and her entourage ventured ever deeper into the winding forestation.

The memories of this place, wandering the trees quietly and exploring the night so long ago. Meeting strange creatures. Several in question she had befriended unconditionally. How many friends had she seen pass on in a thousand years that she had been so...needing of company? Shaking those thoughts from her head, she kept her eyes open for her sister.

They had searched all night long. Until she had had to raise the sun, Celestia and the guards had been searching the castle. As large and as spacious as Canterlot Castle was, it was like searching for a needle in a haystack if you were trying to find anypony in there. Especially if you didn't know where to look.

Eventually they fanned out. Several guards were scouting out in Canterlot at the moment, but Celestia felt it best to go where there were less civilian ponies and this...just felt a right place to be in, in the long run. With her sun beating down and her worry increasing, she called out hopefully into the depths of the woods.

"Luna!? Luna are you here? Luna???"

Luna lifted her head again, surprised. She had dozed off again, though for how long she wasn't sure. She looked around again for Skye, but he was still not around. She heard something that sounded almost like an echo, calling to her. *Luna...* She shook her head, thinking that it had been a dream...but then she heard it again. "Luna!"

She stood up, yawning once more and looking around again. "H-hello?" she called tentatively.

There was no answer.

She took a step forward, and then thought better of it. She turned her face toward the sky, finding the sun and getting her bearings.

Luna headed off in the direction of the castle, hoping that Skye would not worry for her if he were to come back. She would visit him another day, and explain things, if she did not see him again before she left the wood.

As he broke through the woods and dashed down the path, he was suddenly surprised by an oncoming group of travelers, and nearly ran

headlong into them before he quickly whisked back into the forest nearby and froze, waiting for them to pass. This was going to delay his return to the berry bush, and at their pace, he didn't dare make a move until they sufficiently made headway.

Oh, why didn't he just wait until she'd woken up first? He was nor normally prone to making these sorts of mistakes, but he wasn't accustomed to spending as much time in the company of one such as her. Even Celestia rarely stayed very long when she came to the wood, and it was often months between visits. There was no telling the next time she'd be back, but with Princess Luna missing, she was surely to come looking for her and likely with a full complement of guards, and that wasn't going to be pretty either.

The Peryton watched the ponies approaching, and nearly breathed a sigh of exasperation. They were plodding along so slowly. He could risk...no, that'd likely give him away. A daydream at this point might help, but it was difficult with more than two, and there were at least five in this group. Maybe he could just pretend to be a regular deer...the woods were thick.

Suddenly, his keen ears pricked as he caught the sound of Celestia's voice calling from the distance. From the noise of their cart and their talking amongst each other, the ponies in his way couldn't hear it, but he certainly did.

"Oh, very good, Skye. Now both of them are here, and you know Celestia's not going to be happy with you for losing her sister. After such a great start, you had to botch everything up and leave Luna there all by herself to get a drink of water instead of waiting." finally giving up, he startled the ponies in the group with a loud deer bellow and dashed off into the woods, hoping they'd just mistake him for another of his cousins. There were many paths through the wood, but much of it was thick and overgrown and easy to get lost in. His sense of direction helped, but he preferred to avoid dashing blindly through it like this. Soon he left the paths behind and slipped in and out of brush and bounded over low-hanging boughs on his way back.

Skye crossed another path and came to a skidding halt as he nearly ploughed into one of Celestia's guards. With a sparkle of his antlers, he

sent the guard a daydream that a particularly noisome breeze had just rushed down the path to stir the leaves, danced around him quickly and then bounded off in a different direction from the bewildered pony. Then Skye quickly resumed his dash through the woods.

There was commotion going around with the guards at the sudden deer howl that ran through the woods. Celestia stepped down from her cart, much to the fretting of the guards as the princess furthered herself into the woods. The symptoms of the confused and dazed guard she came across with her entourage sparked her memory slightly as the guard let out a faint nicker at things he could see, but no pony else could. Raising her eyebrows she turned to the two others following her.

"Take him back to the carriage." She said authoritatively.

Despite the resistance her guards put up, they eventually conceded and took the stallion back as the princess ventured deeper into the woods

As Skye ran, he realized what had caused him to make such a mistake in all these years. Fawn love, or puppy love as others called it, having spent an entire night with the Princess of the Moon. He was nearly giddy with it. Not quite real love, not romantically anyway. But still a strong emotional response he hadn't expected sent him all aflutter, even as he tried to control his emotions. She was such a little thing, and terribly cute. He immediately felt protective. And of course, he'd made the mistake of thinking of her as a fawn and that she'd stay put until he returned.

But Princess Luna was no deer, and it was clear to him that she would definitely do as she would. And now her big sister was here with the guards. Oh, hooves! If Celestia got hers on him, he was going to be in a world of shame. If only he could get back to...oh Celestia, where was she? As Skye returned to the berry bush, Luna was gone. He lowered his head and tried to sense where she went, but those glass slippers of her masked her footsteps.

"Luna?" he called, "Princess Luna, where'd you go?"

Celestia's brow furrowed in faint concentration her eyes wandered over the woods, every branch, every bird that tweeted, every squirrel that scampered and the memories grew and grew with every sound and smell.

She visited this place less and less nowadays. Why? It was so beautiful here. So calm. Much calmer than Canterlot at times.

But she shouldn't be focusing on that. She should be focusing on her sister. A tight, twisting pain in her chest still pinched and made her wince at the thought of her sister out here. And alone. But that...howl.

Celestia arched a brow slowly as she made her way into the depths before something caught her attention. Was someone else calling her sister's name? Blinking, she followed the voice curiously.

Skye moved this way and that, trying to pick up Luna's trail, hopefully before anything happened to her. The woods were full of the unknown, and even being a resident as long as he had, even he didn't want to have to tangle with them. Bears, possibly mountain lions, and any number of other unknown dangers that the woods possessed to those who were not versed in the signs. But his search was proving futile, at least in the immediate vicinity, and he began to expand it more. As he did, he heard Celestia's voice calling for her sister, his large ears swiveling to catch her tones as she inquired.

"Hello? Is someone there?" She called out. "Please, I need to find my sister!"

Skye shrank back at her call, knowing that he was going to be in for it if she found out he was the one who'd lost her. *Oh, why didn't I just wait until she woke up? I'm used to being independent because I have been for so long.* But standing around was going to get him nowhere, and possibly Luna in far more trouble. Sure, she was a princess, but she was still young and by the look of things, new to the world's dangers outside alone.

As the search continued, the Celestia's heart sank. Why hadn't she dropped the subject earlier? Why hadn't she just begged her sister's forgiveness like she should've done the first night instead of doing small favors and small, 'helpful' things to try and help the night princess feel more at home after a millennia of loneliness. Of solitude. She may have been on her own, but there were ponies here, ponies to talk to...on the moon...nothing. As beautiful as it was, it was cold and vacant, like an endless cold desert...

The pain twisted into her chest like a blade, halting the princess briefly in her steps and causing the guards to inquire of her state, but she disregarded them. Politely. But still disregarded them as she was urged further on by the knowledge that somewhere in this maze of trees and wilderness, her sister was here. Alone. And unguarded.

Or at least she thought that.

From the look of those guards, Celestia hadn't come alone, Skye observed. She'd never come to the wood with them before unless she was on a mission. He was torn between the choice of coming outright and telling her what he'd done, or finding Luna before the worst happened and risking her wrath later. He decided that maybe more sets of eyes were better than none, and that hopefully she'd understand for the immediate future long enough.

Chapter 6

Luna looked around, trying to figure out where she was. The trees were thicker here than where she had started, and though sunlight shown through the branches, she could not find the actual sun. The branches were too thick to try to fly through to get above the trees.

Luna sat down, looking this way and that—but not gaining any sense of direction. “Horse feathers!” she said, swatting at some fallen leaves with a hoof. *I should have just waited for Skye.* she thought. Then again, she didn't know if Skye was going to come back at all.

Her stomach rumbled, and she was reminded that she hadn't had anything for breakfast. Come to think of it, all she had had for dinner was the bit of honey and berries Skye had offered to her. It was probably late afternoon by now, and if so that meant that she had missed lunch as well.

She heard a sound off in the forest, and looked around for the source. There was no telling what sorts of creatures resided in the woods. Luna had been perfectly comfortable walking around at night, but in the daylight, things were different somehow.

Her eyes focused on something lumbering through the trees, and she squinted at it even as it drew closer. Its brown color made it blend in with the surroundings, and Luna kept losing sight of it. But as it came closer and closer, Luna realized with dread what it must be: a bear.

Luna stifled the urge to yell upon first seeing it. She had never seen a bear in real life. She'd read about them, seen a couple of pictures—but she knew that they could be dangerous. She could try to make a run for it—but that would just make her more lost. She couldn't fight it; she didn't know how.

Then the bear caught sight of Luna. It moved in her direction, slowly, still walking, as though it might only be curious. But Luna wasn't taking chances. She stood, slowly backing away, hoping that maybe the bear would lose interest and turn the other way. But it kept coming, and Luna

kept moving backward, glancing behind herself every now and again so that she wouldn't trip on something. The bear edged closer, and Luna couldn't go any faster backwards.

All of a sudden, the bear decided that it didn't like Luna. It stood on its hind legs, still several yards from her. Luna continued moving backwards, frightened by the sudden display. The bear lowered itself back to the ground with a thump, letting out a roar. Then it charged.

Luna saw it and turned tail. There was nothing she could do. Spreading her wings at an attempt at flying would slow her down too much to risk it. She heard its heavy paws behind her, slamming against the forest floor. She turned her head for a moment to see if she was gaining any ground between them. She lost sight of it for a moment, and continued running forward and looking back, trying to find it again.

Skye, meanwhile, turned and bolted through the woods down the small animal trail towards the larger road and nearly bowled Princess Celestia over as he emerged from the undergrowth. When the explosion of blue fur and antlers burst from the bush, it caught the lady of the sun off guard and her soldiers rushed forward. Glaring at the opposing force with brutal narrowed eyes, the trained elite simply following the natural instincts distilled into them from months of training to protect the princess, baring down onto the Peryton before it spoke up and made the princess blink with some familiarity twinkling in her eyes.

"Skye?" she questioned, a little shocked to see the blue furred creature again and wishing quietly it was on more fonder terms. He began to apologize, and confusion crossed her features.

"Oh, excuse me, Princess, but I...I've done a terrible thing. I've lost your..." but as he'd started to apologize, that sense that he was needed began to race through his spine, and his large ears picked up a faint scream in the distance.

"I don't understand, Skye, what did you-"

That scream...

Luna?

"Luna!" Skye cried out, and dashed off in the direction his keen ears pointed him. In a moment, he'd vanished as fast as he'd emerged, leaving Celestia and her guard behind in a series of rapid, graceful bounds.

Turning her head in the way the Peryton dashed off into, Celestia neither hesitated, nor paused to follow, and neither did the golden plated entourage. Several guards stayed behind to guard the chariot and the one that had been bewildered by Skye. But those, at the moment, were the furthest things from the princess's mind as she tried to follow her best through the undergrowth. Her slender legs made it easy to step over most of the bushes and her magic parted the branches that would dare even try to snag as the lustrous mane and tail that followed behind her as a multicolored trail.

Luna, however, wasn't watching where she was running, and was stopped by a tree in her path, smashing into it. She immediately fell onto the ground, her head pounding and her breathing labored. She closed her eyes, trying to rid her head of the dizziness she had just caused herself. A crash caused her to jump and turn around, and there was the bear again. She didn't have time to move, so she reared on her front hooves, pretending as though she were going to attack back. The bear charged again, this time swiping at Luna's head.

"I'm coming, Luna!" Skye cried out, his breath coming in heavy, rapid grunts as he tried to zero in on the sounds of the scuffling. Suddenly, he broke into the small clearing, nearly right behind the bear as it had charged, and in a few bounds, nearly caught up as it took a swing out of the tree.

Luna ducked, and the bear instead struck the tree with its claws, showering Luna with bark. She raced out from under the bear as it was stunned for a moment, tearing off into the trees again.

Being smaller and easily missed, Skye was easily overlooked as Princess Luna reeled and took off, the bear hot on her heels.

Luna kept her eyes ahead this time, but she heard the bear behind her, its feet pounding as fast as her heart. Her breathing came in gasps, her hooves pounded on the ground, not going nearly fast enough.

"Help!" she called out in last desperation. "Help!" she cried again, racing in and out of the trees trying to lose it. But try as she might, it stayed with her, the heavy paws with the thick claws drawing ever closer.

As she screamed for help, Skye put on an extra burst of speed, catching back up to the running pair and this time moving alongside the bear. Angling his antlers, he dug his hooves in and turned, driving them firmly against the side of the bear and nearly wrenching his neck from his shoulders as he did so.

The bear naturally didn't enjoy being jabbed at by a pair of sharp antlers and tripped, taking a tumble with its large bulk. Faced with this new threat, it nearly forgot Luna as she gained her advantage, and turned to growl with bared teeth at the deer who had now braced himself on his slender legs. Eying the larger creature from behind his antlers, Skye snorted, lips pulling back as he gritted them. His antlers began to sparkle, and the ghostly form of a much larger creature began to take shape, overlapping his, though this had little effect on the bear, who acted as if he couldn't see it.

"Stay behind me, Princess." Skye growled, a most uncharacteristic sound coming from his throat as he showed down the bear. It took a lunge at him and he nimbly danced aside, then reared up and struck at the threat with his silvery hooves. One-two, they struck at the bear's body, one-two, one-two.

Luna's ears perked at the sound of Skye's voice. She halted and spun around, sliding on the slippery leaves. She saw Skye, fighting against the bear, pounding against it with horn and hoof. There was nothing she could do.

When Skye touched down again, he dug in, narrowly missing a swipe from the massive paws. Just one hit and he'd be done for, but he'd had experience as a creature of the forest enough to watch for himself, even if he were also watching for the form of the princess, and hoping he'd drawn the ire of the massive beast from its desired breakfast.

Oh yes, Skye was mad now, feinting at the bear as it tried to circle around. The ghostly shape of an Ursa grew more solid over him as he drew his focus on the threat, before it fuzzed as he lunged forward and struck at the

bear's head with his hooves again, one-two, one-two, then reeled to take a kick at the beast.

Luna stood frozen in place, her sides heaving and her legs shaking. All she could do was watch as Skye danced around the bear, not quite having the upper hoof, but too fast to be caught—so she thought. That was the moment the bear took its opportunity, and it swung at him, its massive paw catching the Peryton in the hindquarters and spinning him around, large gouges appearing in his flank where the sharp claws dragged against his hide. Skye screamed at the sudden searing pain, and knew that if help didn't come in moments, that both he and the princess would merely end up a late brunch.

Feeling her heart pounding in her chest as she heard the sounds ahead, the stomping of hooves on fur and muscle and the ominous growl of a woodland bear that made the matriarch's eyes widen in such familial fear. Her sister was there. She could hear her screams and Skye's grunts and soon enough a fretted wail of pain as it sounded like the creature made contact.

“SKYE!” Luna screamed, but before she could take a step forward, the bear turned its eyes on her. She paused, but was quickly forgotten, as the bear remembered its current prey. Luna took a few steps forward, and then paused again. Hearing commotion behind her, she turned to see Celestia and her royal guards.

The bear looked all too irritated as it loomed closer to the pair of blue, four legged creatures when Celestia finally caught sight of the scene. And before the giant furred brute could land a final blow to the already wounded mythical cervine, there was an explosion of white and multiple color that burst from the bushes.

Catching the creature off guard, the tall, pale horned creature stood with a subtle, imposing glare to her eyes in front of both the wounded Skye and her sister. This only made the bear raise its paw to strike out in further anger at being withheld from its breakfast, when all of a sudden those bright, magnificent wings opened up and there was a blazing flash of white light from Celestia's horn. Catching off her wings, it made the flash all the more large and frightening, causing the woodland beast to let out a growl of

fear and pain as it quickly turned tail and fled back into the depths of the woods, while it still had its eyesight.

Once everything was clear, the light diminished from the regal mare's horn and she looked back to Skye and Luna. Eyes wide in relief, but also fear and concern for both their well beings. The royal guard quickly piled into the clearing and formed an outward pointing circle around the group, eyes and ears alert from more danger.

"Are you both alright???"

"SKYE!" Luna yelled, racing over to his side. she looked him over, glancing fearfully from his face to the wound, trying to decipher how bad it actually was. The wound looked deep, and his blue fur was stained with blood and dirt.

"Skye? Skye, I'm so sorry!" she bent her head and licked his cheek. "We'll make you better, alright? You'll be okay. Celestia—Celestia can help?" she glanced up at her sister, then back to Skye. "Everything'll be okay, Skye. Just stay with me. Please." she pleaded with him.

Watching the sadness and desperation in her sister's eyes, Celestia lowered herself to look over the Peryton and the worry twisted in her chest. They looked superficial, enough to bleed but not deep enough to hit an artery...still if he kept bleeding out...

Skye's sides heaved like great bellows from the adrenaline rush of the fight with the bear, though his eyes were somewhat dazzled by Celestia's brilliance, his mind still had not quite come to terms with what had happened. He'd acted instinctively, he'd done what he had to do, and the thrill of it was still racing through his system. As Luna tried to get his attention, his eyes seemed to see right through her for several moments before they flicked, and began to draw back into focus on her. The sparkling of his antlers fizzled out, and the ghostly image of the Ursa faded into thin air from around him. He began to shake as his body began to come down from the rush of the fight. As he returned to the world around him, his injured flank started to wobble, seeping rivulets of blood down the sodden cerulean hide.

"Luna?" he whispered, then stronger "Luna! Luna, are you...Oh Princess Celestia, you're...you're here..." he looked from both ponies, and to the guards who'd flanked her. As Luna looked towards to him, and towards his wound, his eyes followed her and widened as they took in the damage. Large furrows drew through his flesh, deep but not life-threatening, but the sight of his blood as it stained his leg suddenly became too much for him. He looked back towards Celestia, his eyes already slowing in reaction as he began to wobble all over.

"I'm...I'm okay." his voice wavered, then his legs buckled and he fell forwards onto the grass, followed by landing on his side with a heavy thud, and went unconscious. Luna called out his name again in desperation. She saw his sides moving in rhythm, a sign that he was still alive...for now.

Celestia turned head to one of the guard, the pony instantly straightened up under the gaze of his princess and she expected no less in times such as this, one wing moving to delicately rest on the cervine-like creature's wound to stem the bleeding.

She spoke direct and authoritatively. "Guard, fetch me the vial I keep on the chariot of Philomena's tears, with speed."

And like that, the guard set off with another to make sure he would come back safe. The rest of the guard filled out the gap the two had left in the circle in order to protect the princesses and their friend at all costs.

Once done, Celestia glanced back at Skye and Luna.

Had they both kept each other safe? Had they met sometime in the night? Creasing her brow, such thoughts quickly evacuated, watching her white wing stain pink as she kept it there to ease the bleeding of the unconscious blue winged stag, before her eyes turned to her sister. The real relief now showed as a slight shine came to her eyes. So relieved to see her alright, to see her in one piece.

"I promise you, Luna, he is going to be just fine."

"O-okay." Luna stammered in response to Celestia. She had regained her breath, but her legs still jittered, and she wobbled where she stood for a moment. She swallowed hard, staring at the slowly growing pool of blood.

She was exhausted from running and lack of food and water, and that was about to take its toll.

"Celestia—Celestia I—" Her vision grew cloudy and dark, and she was suddenly light headed. She felt the sensation of falling, but there was nothing she could do. Everything went black as Luna fainted.

As the world faded from the pair of them, Celestia could only cradle the pair in her large, broad wings as the worry emanated from her.

Glancing to her guards she let out a weak sigh.

"Get them both to the castle...let them a room..."

A day would pass...but her sister was safe.