

Luna's Ascent

By Fluttershy Oakley

In the air there is a delicate balance of tension and expectation. Luna is about to, for the first time in over a millennium, meet some regular ponies and she is not sure what would happen. It would be fair to say she's nervous. It would be fairer to say that she's petrified; everypony had reason enough to hate her. Not that what happened could truly be said to be her fault at all, but it was still a possibility that things could turn out poorly. Even if they didn't, things might return to how they were before-hoof, the doubt, the shame.

"You okay?" Celestia is there much the same as when Luna knew her before, a little bit taller, a lot wiser. But it gladdens Luna's heart to see that the years had not turned her sister cold or unhappy. "You know, things always have a way of turning out if you just give them long enough to." A little smile plays at Celestia's eyes; gladdened further is Luna that her sister seems not to hold any ill will against her. It would shock most to see this level of sheer... acceptance, but not Luna. She knows well what Celestia was capable of.

"Thanks. I'm just a little on edge you know. It's been so long. Even before you were always the social one." Luna looks around at the plush furnishings, at the exquisite chez-lounge that seems almost as if it has been bred for many generations to be the most comfortable object in the universe. She then looks over at her sister's mane. The reason being that it is full of fluff; they have been lying down on the floor for some time now talking. Well, Celestia had done most of the talking, Luna doesn't really have that much to talk about; she had pretty much summed up her entire time in her first sentence: "I'm so sorry! I've missed you so much big sister." Celestia had almost immediately reciprocated.

"I've missed you too." After a short while they had discussed all the major points of what had occurred. Celestia was horrified to hear about her sister's fate (until then nopony truly understood the extent of how trapped Luna was). "I've been waiting for this day for so long. Things can't be... good without you. These past thousand years I have not been happier than I am now. Luna, we'll never be separated again, my heart could not bear it."

After that they had come to Canterlot (which fortunately wasn't too far from the ruins in the Everfree forest) they had pretty much straight away come to Celestia's chambers to prepare for a party that somepony called Pinkie Pie seemed intimidating insistent on throwing. Luna was hardly in the party mood, hence the need for preparations; Celestia is having a few of her... acquaintances over for tea (Luna got the impression Celestia didn't really have the opportunity to make many real friends, her status put her far out of the reach of such things). These ponies were just to get Luna used to talking again. Celestia thought that if thrown straight into the thick of a party Luna might get a little overwhelmed.

"There's some fluff just... it's over your ear.. I'll get it." Luna carefully teases out the fluff from

her sister's mane, and just as she is doing so they hear a noise. Hooves on soft carpeting! Instantly they both rush to one of the many sofas that are scattered around the room and try to look natural. Through the ornate door came three very noble looking ponies. Well to be more accurate, two noble looking earth-ponies and a younger pegasus pony who gave the semblance of one who should be noble. Instead she looks more bored than anything else.

"Lady Maple Cucumbertree, Lord Hickory Cucumbertree! What a lovely surprise, I wasn't expecting you so soon!"

At this the firm smiles that have been plastered over their faces grow even firmer, but with an apologetic tone somehow wedged in. Luna finds it quite interesting how with barely a flicker of change so much has change had occurred regardless. She also finds it interesting how without seeming to change direction at any point they are now headed toward the door.

"Oh please forgive us your highness! It was so rude of us, we'll part your company presently, allow me to pardon myself enough to..." Lady Cucumbertree's tone has that particular nasal quality that can only really be achieved through decades of aristocracy and practiced aristocracy at that. Celestia steps up quickly to meet them closer to the door.

"Now now, don't be silly! Come on in, help yourself to some tea." Celestia escorts them over to the sofas, and as she does so she looks Luna in the eye silently asking: Do you need more time? Luna reads this easily and gives a barely perceptible shake of the head: No, I'm fine.

"Oh your majesty! How astute, to know that we jolly well adore tea, it is awfully good I find. One shouldn't listen to this balderdash about the caffeine being bad for you though. Total poppycock!" Hickory's tone is slightly less grating than his wife's, but his words baffle and amuse Luna.

"Well, I thank you for telling me. To be honest I hadn't heard it was bad for you, but now I'll know for sure." Celestia then says with slightly ironic tones, although limiting the irony enough so that only Luna would notice it, "Oh where are my manners? Allow me to introduce you all. Luna, this is Lady Maple and Lord Hickory Cucumbertree, they have their very own lumber company, don't you know?" Her eyes sparkle as she says this. "And this fine pony is Shadowlotus, I think you two will get along splendidly. But if I might ask, where are your parents? To be quite honest it was them I was expecting, not that your company is any less welcome of course. And please, do sit down, why do you never sit down? Lady, Lord, Lotus, this is my sister Luna." For the first time since entering the room they seem to notice the slender and unimposing figure sat just a few inches from Celestia. The two older ponies seem unsure of themselves, Hickory shows this perfectly by beginning to sweep into a bow, which seemed quite a challenge in itself as he and his wife are seated, but upon realising that neither of the others were attempting bows he coughs and turns a little red. Luna is more interested in Shadowlotus though, for whilst she seems quite relaxed she also seems significantly more dignified than the others.

Her midnight blue mane elegantly sweeps over her shoulder before flicking casually upward at irregular intervals. It isn't that she looks posed at all, it is just that she seems incapable of being inelegant. Upon hearing Celestia's request her eyes shine with interest for the first time since Luna has seen her. Her tail is dark purple with a couple of forest green streaks that curl in on themselves just before the tail ended. The majority of her coat though is only slightly lighter than the rest of her, being a deep red. Still, it is dark enough red to only be seen separate from black because she has a black streak in her mane. Luna realises this is probably the darkest pony she has ever seen, just about every single colour seems tailored to the purpose of blending into shadow. The colours blend together as well to give the overall illusion that this pony isn't as dark as any of the colours on their own indicate. Her cutie mark is very confusing upon first glance, but upon the second Luna can glean that it seems like two intersecting spirals, one a dark green, the other black. Very peculiar, and try as she might she just can't see what it is.

"Now now, princess, when are you going to realise I just prefer to stand? The folks are doing something in the fields. You know, actually they're keeping it a secret from me too? Anyway, they sent me to apologise in their stead. To be honest I don't think they could be bothered to come all the way up here." Here Shadowlotus employs an overly cheeky shake of her head, as though she is disappointed in her parents behaviour. The lord and lady seem shocked by how informally the young pony is addressing royalty of this calibre. Luna notices that there is a distinct difference between the two parties; Shadowlotus is calm and her voice speaks honestly, the other two are anxious and their voices can't help but betray this fact. Shadowlotus stops shaking her head and turns to Luna with a warm smile: "Luna, it's a pleasure to meet you". Something is certainly reserved about her words, but Luna can't quite put her finger on it.

"Yes, it's a pleasure and an honour to meet you my grace," Lady Maple says with an air of smugly superior etiquette, "if your majesty will indulge us in how we find you this fine evening?" Luna feels almost ill with the obsequy of this woman. She doesn't understand why Maple feels somehow inferior, at least that's what the language implies. A little unsure of how to respond Luna feels a bead of sweat roll down her flank. She decides to go with:

"I'm, um, fine. How are you?" Smooth. Ineloquent though her response was, Luna accepts that it was just about as good as she could manage right now. Whilst hardly all consuming, the fear, the social fear she had almost always felt, is affecting her more than she would like. She had been expecting it of course, but that doesn't make dealing with it all that much easier.

"Oh most grand your grace, most grand. Well not everything is to be commended of course, but what in life is? Let not the follies of others and what not, hey?!" Luna doesn't really follow Hickory's last sentence, but then a lot about this gentlecolt doesn't seem to make sense; everything from his coiffed mane to his curled tail is pristine and surely the height of fashion, but his natural demeanour throws this off. He simply doesn't have the voice to pull it off; it's as though he has practiced speaking, much like his wife, but has been a rather poor student who

instead of articulating well merely blathers his way through conversation with a plethora of generic and vague phrases. Luna of course forgives this desperate attempt at attempting to bridge what he must feel an incredibly large gap in social standing; she believes it is these insecurities that cause his prattling on and can easily sympathise. But she also knows that if it were possible to make these ponies feel less obliged to courtesy and use honourific's with every opening sentence then Celestia would already have done so; it's obvious that she feels just as uncomfortable hearing these meaningless words being implemented with such sincerity.

“Well whatever is the matter? Perhaps there is something I can do to help?” Celestia's sincerity at this point feels so much more natural to Luna than the kowtowing and scraping. It seems unfair to her that one should seem silly and the other kind, when in reality they were of course both equally responsible in the perpetuation of these kind of rituals. But upon pondering it further she realises that these two, though they doubtless have plenty of other fulfilling pursuits in their lives, will likely go home tonight knowing that they have followed the rules social conduct and find some measure of comfort, maybe even satisfaction, within that.

“It honours me, your Excellency, that you would ask after our humble affairs,” Maple exalts, “it feels so trivial to mention this to one such as yourself but... The neighbours keep us up all night with their constant parties! Such a pithy problem I am sure you must agree but it's turning out to be a real nightmare, we just can't get to slee...” It is only now that she realises what she has said; her eyes flick desperately from Luna's face to the floor. Even as this is happening a snort of laughter erupts from Shadowlotus's lips. She covers her mouth with a hoof and turns slightly away, but the chuckles are unmistakable. This makes Luna feel... better, she realises. If this faux-pas had left an awkward pall it would have been simply awful, but the fact that this young pony was laughing... it makes the actual Nightmare seem a lot less real. “Oh, my grace a thousand pardons! I fear my intolerable idiocy may have bested me, I vow that it shan't happen again! The shame I feel your majesty, if you only knew!” Luna feels in quite a good mood about the whole affair and hastens to pardon them, punctuated by Shadowlotus's ever-increasing laughter:

“No no, really don't worry about it... um...” Her words, though feeble in both design and deliverance, seem positively august compared to the previous pleas for forgiveness. At her words Celestia can't help but stifle a few giggles herself. Though Luna can't truly appreciate the humour of the situation, she certainly appreciates the comfort brought by the two peeling ponies.

So passes most of the afternoon: The lord and lady fumbling and bumbling with aristocratic delicacy, each pit-fall being jocularly admonished by Shadowlotus with her own particular brand of irony, Celestia clearly enjoying the young pony's jibes but trying to remain impartial and maintain an air of civility whenever something said goes slightly amiss, Luna in resolute and uncomfortable silence, before they leave a couple of hours shy of sunset.

“We simply must do this again.” Celestia says before closing the door on the simpering couple. With them gone, she breathes out long and hard. “I always think that they’ll surprise me, and sure enough they always do. Well, now it’s just the three of us, how about we have some cupcakes? I hear they’re supposed to be quite divine. Perhaps you know of them Shadowlotus? I believe they are made in Ponyville.”

“Oh yes, they’re pretty good. Mr and Mrs cake always put a lot of effort into them. Their daughter Pinkie Pie has a nasty tendency to eat them, but the ones that get past her are well worth it.” Something about the name Pinkie Pie rings a bell in Luna’s ears but she can’t quite place why it was resonating so; could Pinkie Pie be one of the countless names that lord and lady Cucumbertree had regaled them with? Her mind is rather deadened after the countless very interesting, very lengthy and above all incredibly detailed stories that she has heard recently. She doesn’t think they did mention this pony but can’t be sure. With the company diminished she feels confident enough to partake in conversation:

“Who is Pinkie Pie? Is she one of those caterers that we were recommended?” Luna asks looking quizzically at Shadowlotus first and then to Celestia. There is something about the look on her face that makes Luna feel like she has asked something wrong; Celestia doesn’t look unhappy per se, but she does look a little less comfortable than before.

“Nah, she does bake but she’s hardly a caterer. She’s an all pink (quite garish if you ask me) pony from Ponyville. She’s completely insane, all she does is party and occasionally burst into full musical numbers.” Shadowlotus says this with a tone that implies she full-heartedly approves of Pinkie Pie’s “insanity”. “She’s a real laugh, but I wouldn’t be around her when she’s having one of her ‘episodes’. She’s definitely a few stitches short of a saddle if you catch my drift.” Laugh. The words echo in Luna’s head: Pinkie Pie, who banished fear by giggling in the face of danger.... Suddenly the meaning of Celestia’s slightly reserved features made sense; she still wasn’t quite sure how to approach the subject of Luna’s return. When it was just the two of them they could of course be open, but in front of somepony? Strangely though, Luna didn’t actually mind it being brought up all that much. Maybe if it had been one of the two departed ponies she would have minded, but this young pony didn’t seem so wrapped up in appearances. A shame really given how just about anypony into that kind of thing would likely kill to have natural colours like those, Luna thinks. Because of this, Luna doesn’t really feel the need to make up a persona in front of her like she had before. “Why do you ask?” Now it is up to Luna to decide whether she feels comfortable enough to talk openly with Shadowlotus about her recent experiences. She realises with shock that it hasn’t even been a day since she was encased in shadow, that perhaps she should have a little more time getting used to social interaction before revealing such personal details about herself. It isn’t that she thinks Shadowlotus doesn’t know anything about her past, but she knows that if she tells the whole truth then question will lead to question until she’s forced to think and talk about things she really would rather not.

“Oh, the name rang a bell is all, and now I remember where I heard it.” At this point Celestia makes as though to intrude on the sentence, but before she can Luna holds up her hoof. “As I recall it’s the name of the pony who’s throwing my coronation party. Actually, she’s also one of those that rescued me from Nightmare.” No pony is more surprised than Luna to hear those last words come tumbling out of her mouth. After her rationalisations it was patently obvious that she should keep her mouth shut, she thinks, so why didn’t she?

“Really? Pinkie Pie? Honestly, the most I thought she’d amount to was writing the world’s greatest detective/polo song or some such. She’s just chock full of surprises isn’t she?” Shadowlotus’s words may seem uncaring but her eyes express how she recognises Luna’s vulnerability in what she had just said. She was also allowing Luna to talk further on the subject if she so chose or entirely breeze past. Not for the first time in those few hours Luna observes just how subtly Shadowlotus has understated her own power in the situation, allowing one of the two princesses instead to lead.

“She’s throwing the coronation and party tomorrow actually. I don’t suppose I can convince you to come?” Celestia’s face had over the course of the past few sentences reverted to normal before she says this and now holds one of hope.

“Come on Cel, it hardly sounds like my kind of thing now does it? Nah, I think I’ll have to tend to the crop anyway.” Something seems a little reserved in the way she says this, and it isn’t hard for Luna to see what it is; Shadowlotus is clearly quite intimidated by other ponies. It was obvious from the moment that the lord and lady had left the room.

“Well I wasn’t expecting much else really, I was suggesting instead of the actual party perhaps you can make it to a little post-party gathering. There’ll only be a few ponies, I’m thinking of inviting your parents, a gifted student of mine named Twilight Sparkle and her friends. I have a few details I need to work out with her anyway, I’m sure she’d be really upset about coming back to Canterlot so I’m going to have to arrange something else for her. You know she’s never been exactly the social type, and I fear separating her from all her friends at this point really might do some damage. Oh I’m sorry,” Celestia says a little bit embarrassed, “it’s been on my mind a little bit. Anyway, do you think you can manage that?”

“How many friends are we talking here, fifty, a hundred?” Shadowlotus says this jocularly, but it’s evident that she’s more than a little nervous about her words; if Celestia suggests a number too high then she would have to unfortunately reject her offer, but by asking for a quantity she implies that she does want to go. Luna feels for her situation and before Celestia replies with a potentially higher figure she says:

“Just the five sister, please! I’m already going to the coronation, and I swear I’ll get better, but for now can it just be those few? I don’t really know what I’d have to say to anypony else anyway... Would that be okay?” Luna’s words themselves are, although not entirely untrue, clearly for Shadowlotus’s benefit. Celestia looks at her and her countenance barely tries to

conceal how proud she is. With a little glow of warmth growing inside of her, Luna realises that she had just experienced, for the first time in millennia (for even before her imprisonment she spoke solely with her sister), a feeling of camaraderie, a feeling of friendship.

“Why of course Lu!” Celestia turns from her sister back to Shadowlotus with an almost apologetic look in her eye, apologetic as she now feels as though she is harassing her young guest. “Just the 6 of them, us three and your parents. Oh yes, Twilight will likely wish her assistant to be there. They really are devoted to each other, it’s quite sweet. If you don’t want him there then don’t worry; I’m sure he won’t be offended.”

“All right all right! If it means that much to you I’ll come and of course Twilight’s assistant can come, if Luna doesn’t mind,” at this point she checks with Luna who nods with a feigned look of resignation, “but those crops won’t tend themselves you know, I’ll still only be able to make it to the little get together.” She still looks a little nervous at the prospect, so Luna distracts her:

“What kind of crops do you grow, celery, carrots.....Apples?”

“Well, my parents grow most things from carrots to parsnips. I help them out and on the side run a small garden. I sell the flowers you see...” She looks at and scuffs the ground at this point. Luna is confused, it seems there is something she’s not saying. Regardless, Luna’s eyes light up at the mention of a garden.

“A garden? I don’t suppose there’s any chance I could... I’m sorry, I mean, that must be nice, I, um...” Luna had been getting so comfortable talking with this pony that she had until now been filled with confidence. It is only with her rather assuming question that she remembers that she doesn’t really know this pony. Given her natural shyness, Luna feels uncomfortable asking anypony for anything. She feels a little bit bad for even attempting to ask.

“You want to come see it? Sure. I mean, it’s not that special right now so don’t expect too much but sure, whenever you want.” Her tone again speaks of hidden secrets, but Luna just can’t figure it out. Celestia glances over at Luna and even if she didn’t know of her extreme fondness for horticulture, Luna realises that the sparkling, almost hungry look in her eyes could tip off just about anypony that she is more than a little enthused about visiting.

“Would it be more than a little presumptuous to ask if we could visit now Shadowlotus?” Celestia enquires. Her question is more than a little fruitful:

“Why of course, your majesty. It’s not like anypony has anything better to do. It’s not like a certain somepony actually has other plans. Seriously, it’s fine, but don’t you think...”

“Well that’s just grand,” Celestia says abruptly. Luna finds this almost shocking; it isn’t like her sister to interrupt. But then she also feels sure that if Celestia didn’t have a good reason then she wouldn’t have done so. “We should finish our tea and get going so we can be there

before Lu has to raise the... Oh horseapples!" She exclaimed suddenly. "I'm afraid I have to go, I've forgotten I've got a meeting with a couple of Oranges, they've come all the way from Manehatten and I can't be late. I really am sorry Shadowlotus, I'll have to cancel, but would you mind showing Lu around? I'm sure you'll have a great time!" Her words, though pushy and incredibly obtuse (as compared to her normal level of candour), somehow convince Shadowlotus to continue with the plan as normal, despite his never truly giving consent to it in the first place:

"Of course, if you still want to come then feel free."

"I really am sorry that I have to go, I've a frightfully boring night ahead if that makes you feel any better for my being so... inconsiderate." There is not a single thing about her face that even hints that Celestia is sorry, but that glint in her eyes... Luna has seen that glint only on a few occasions and knows that whenever it appears she should just go with whatever her sister is suggesting, it is hardly like she has a choice anyway. "I won't be back until three-thirty, maybe even four O'clock. Don't feel you need to wait for me before coming back and remember, your coronation is at two tomorrow afternoon in Ponyville. Shadowlotus, it was a pleasure as ever to share the day with you, I'll see you tomorrow." She hugs Shadowlotus before hugging Luna. In her ear she whispers: "Love you Lulu".

She doesn't know why it affects her so much, but the name triggers a lot of emotion from within her that she didn't know she still had. It may have been over a thousand years, but so many memories and feelings from a single word? Not so strange perhaps, but very unexpected. She returns the sentiment in kind: "I love you Celly." Although arguably few, inarguable is the case that the tears they both have forming wells just beneath each eye are of no consequence. The tears vanish as though they are the final, hoarse whispers of a departing ghost before the two alicorns separate.

On the brief flight over to the garden Luna and Shadowlotus talk a little about their past, but mostly about their present. It transpires that, though their histories are obviously very different, the way that each pony approaches the world is very similar; both wish for social interaction but are incredibly intimidated by even the prospect of such things. Both enjoy nature. For some reason Shadowlotus skirts around any kind of conversation regarding his garden, but as the wonderful landscape scrolls past them with rivers splicing fine fields, curling ever in one direction or another before disappearing into the distance, Luna doesn't feel at all like asking. Soon Shadowlotus begins a gentle descent and Luna follows. They were flying fairly high to begin with and the change in temperature is noticeable. Luna recognises the ground directly below them, it is where Nightmare had been forced out of her. Yes, the mysterious Everfree forest reaches in all directions like an uncertain moss; its trees stretch up as though to scratch the sky with their scraggly and broken branches. Some others still are thickly endowed with foliage and it is these that look the most sinister of all; lurking behind the leaves appear all

manner of assorted eyes, some red, some a sickly yellow. Yes, the mysterious Everfree forest was not a place anypony should wander into unprepared, Luna thinks. She knows what manner of creatures lurk there and distinctly has no wish to meet them again. It is for this reason that she is relieved when the forest ends and there is a large ploughed field in its stead. They descend sharply and land on a small tufted hillock at the end of the field. Shadowlotus now looks quite uncomfortable, and with a few unsure tones in her voice she nervously says:

“The garden’s here, it’s not much to look at right now...” She is right, the so-called garden is a pitiful excuse for flora; there are dead stalks and dead vines, all lie sprawling as though without purpose. Luna doesn’t understand why Shadowlotus hasn’t just come out and said that her garden is yet to grow, that it is between seasons. Unusual for a garden to be so seasonal, she thinks, but if that was what Shadowlotus desired in a garden who is she to judge? Maybe gardens have changed in the years I have been away, she thinks sceptically, perhaps this is a beautiful garden which I’m just not appreciating. Strange, she thinks with pensive focus, a thought like that would have sent me into a shame spiral before, what is different?

“I... Um. Is your garden going through a transition at the moment? Or...” Luna trails off embarrassed at pointing out something that may have been of embarrassment to the young pony.

“It is actually, but really soon it’ll be one of the finest in all of Equestria.” Shadowlotus doesn’t even seem to be bragging, more stating a matter of fact. “If you would like to wait a short while you will see it begin.” True glints of excitement flash in her eyes. Luna knows that she will miss something special if she leaves now, but the moon is due to rise.

“I’d love to stay Shadowlotus, I’ll be back as quickly as I can, but I must away to raise the moon. Unlike my sister I never got into the habit of doing it from a distance, so I’m afraid I do have to go. I’ll be back in a few minutes at the most though. Please, I know this must be trying to your patience but...”

“Oh shush, go raise the moon silly! Do what you’ve got to do then get back here!” Shadowlotus’s tone is growing stronger by the second, her eyes dancing further with ever-more increasing light. “Just make sure you don’t get lost on your way back...” Again that secretive smile, those evasive tones subtly suggesting that which could not be interpreted.

With a grateful smile Luna dashes off for the horizon. The confusing nature of her companion’s final sentence does not hold her long, as a joy almost overwhelming pierces through her. She is going to raise the moon. For so long she had been denied this honour, this right of hers by birth. As she reaches the horizon the feeling of power flows out through her horn, the great celestial body surges upward and her smile grows wider still. She is content. This contentment, however, does not distract her from her previous engagement, and so it is with a sigh, not of disappointment, not of anything other than happiness, that she returns at full speed.

I'm lost, Luna thinks. She can't understand how she could have gotten confused; the number of times she had returned from the horizon to the precise location that she was before her departure bordered on the uncountable. And yet, here she is, without a clue where she is. The Everfree forest is just as close as it was before, she can see a nearby village, again equally close. But all around her there are majestic and strangely effervescent plants of all kinds. Truly startling roses clamber over one another in glowing bushels, from their petals a thin, almost invisible stream of flecks float upward on currents of undetectable air. Within each of these flecks there are ladders made of sparkles that slant deep into their cores, cores that cannot be seen but which nonetheless shout out loud of transcendent beauty.

"Luna? Do you like my garden?" The little insecure tones are now entirely gone from Shadowlotus's voice, instead they are confident strokes, gone are the uncertain wavering notes.

"It's... Breathtaking. Truly, it does my heart good to see it... But these growths that have come do shock me further still... Wh.. How?" Unsure herself of why she spoke so plainly and archaically, Luna cannot help but gaze around at the ethereal surroundings; in all directions where before had been dead stalks littered upon the floor now sprung grand hedges, all imbued with little flowers of a multitude of colours. Where before had been dead vines now sprout living webs of plants, all tied through the same root but their heads of an assortment of differing colours again. From all around the air is speckled and sparkling with the mysterious flecks, the atmosphere looks soft, and all the flowers have their centres turned to the rising moon.

"They live only in the moonlight." At this Luna snaps around to look at Shadowlotus, her jaw still not entirely clamped shut. Shadowlotus looks... different. It is as though she is the same but... more dynamic. Her already striking figure has grown in all proportions except outward, it is as though she is the same size, but there is more of her. Her cutie mark too has changed, but this is a physical change; where before had been small and incomprehensible spirals now an image of a black water lily resting on a darkly green lake lies. Again, it is as though it was always there, but being without eyes enough to see it kept it trapped under a spiral of colour. This is new to Luna, she has never before heard of such plants or ponies whose cutie marks are liable to change. "I'm glad you came back."

"You're hardly the only one..." Her words seem extremely lacking in such austere surroundings but she is too amazed to care. "Again... This is... I don't understand?" Shadowlotus's grin grows to an unforeseeable intensity. In lieu of words from Luna, she explains further:

"This is my private garden. You see, I always had a greenhoof, but my cutie mark didn't come around until I really, really started focusing on the soil. I always helped my parents on the farm, but I was getting more and more frustrated at how... poorly they treated the seeds. I just

knew, I don't know how, that there were better things they could be doing. You see, if I really tried, I realised I could see how plants would grow before they did. Then your sister shows up, out of the blue. Well, she was visiting my parents for some reason or another, and she asked what I was doing. I told her and she... Well, she gave me some seeds. She said they were her personal project, that she had been trying for hundreds and hundreds of years to get them to grow but just didn't know how. Long story short, here they are. Your sister developed plants that only grow at night, but they are tricky to use. They're sensitive to pressure and soil acidity, and all number of things most ponies don't even know affect plants. Then, one day that first bud comes out of the ground, and bam! Cutie mark city, population me."

"They're beautiful. I haven't seen a garden better than this in possibly my whole life. Wait... You say my sister made these seeds but couldn't make them grow?" Luna is still in a kind of trance with the sheer magnitude of the environment. It really does have a stupefying effect, its warmth pulsates through Luna's eyes a colour. It is as though the air itself is throbbing with a dark midnight blue, but the eyes' stubbornness does not permit themselves to see it.

"Yeah. It had long been her dream to have a night garden. You know, it doesn't feel entirely natural to say this but someone has to, she missed you everyday, and especially at night. She really wanted something to just remind her of you... She was so happy when this garden sprang up a few months back. You know, she couldn't send you back to the moon... She thought that if gardens like these grew over all of Equestria that she wouldn't have to. But it was too late, it was too hard. I struggle to keep even this one little garden alive. I know it's not your fault. It, wasn't your fault right?" The small, slightly ashamed look at the floor tells Shadowlotus that Luna and Nightmare Moon were separate entities. She continues: "but Nightmare... The very idea of her was tormenting your sister. She knew she couldn't use the elements of harmony again, her plan was to get gardens like these growing, maybe one day get night crops so food could grow at night. Do you understand? She wasn't going to banish you again, she couldn't. She wanted Nightmare to feel appreciated, for you to feel appreciated and hopefully get past her enough to talk to you. And if she couldn't talk Nightmare around to letting down the moon then perhaps the food grown at night would keep the pony life pretty much the same. Did she manage to talk Nightmare around?" It is a surprise to hear such torrents of conversation from a previously so reserved individual, and the question shocks her; before so subtle and now so direct, Shadowlotus was definitely a unique pony. Although such an upfront question about something so sensitive would normally trigger great amounts of fear and suspicion within her, there is again that sense of calm that Luna can't place. It's like she's... okay with answering:

"She didn't talk her around. Nightmare didn't talk to her at all. She fled from Celestia, she was a coward!" Strange jubilation resonates through Luna as she, perhaps for the first time, really realises she is free; free to move, and say what she wants, free of mind and body. Free. "It was these other ponies... We're meeting them tomorrow. They... freed me. They didn't use the elements of harmony they... were them." It isn't sorrow that covers her soul, but it is close. Humble is the word she is looking for. Gratitude and almost debilitating sensations rush through Luna now. If it weren't for Twilight, and Pinkie Pie and the others she would still be trapped

under Nightmare's terrible influence, it is so like her big sister to think that she could reason with the darkness, Luna thinks, but she knows that Nightmare would never have let her go. It doesn't matter how much appreciation she got, Nightmare would never have had enough. The ardent efforts of ponies like Shadowlotus would have helped Equestria, but Luna would have been lost forever in the fetid cellars of Nightmare's own unique and exquisite torture.

"What was it like?" Shadowlotus's face is inquisitive, but caring too.

"It was... Okay. In the beginning it was bad, but after years and years it became less of a problem you see, you learn to cope with captivity, you sort of manage to..."

"Stop. I understand if you don't want to tell me, but don't lie and pretend it was fine. If you keep everypony in the dark you don't allow them to get to know you, or help you. Please, let me help" Such a rebuttal so aptly spoken stuns Luna into a brief silence. She's right. Luna had spent so long denying how she felt to her sister that it feels unnatural to be honest about her feelings. Now seems as good a time as any to start:

"It was... excruciating. Never a moment passed that wasn't torment being trapped in that darkness, being shrouded in that horrible... It... Clung". Clung, not clings. Again, she realises she is free. If she were so inclined she could believe that it was all too good to be true, that madness had produced this world and she was still in the grips of those cloying Cimmerian shades. "It was awful, and I... This will sound silly, but over the years I came not to hate Nightmare but pity her, and feel nothing at the same time. I can't imagine being such darkness..." A weight lifts from her. A weight that she never knew she had; she understands now, and can finally accept, that Nightmare was not a part of her, she was merely an affliction. Until now Luna has been uncertain, hadn't know if that terrible entity might again engulf her, but those doubts still and are laid to rest. A few tears enter her eyes. "Thank you Lotus, I didn't... You're right, I needed to just... You can't.."

"That's okay. Come on, get over here!" Locked in an embrace, Luna's entire world brightens to a dazzling spectacle. The best way, both in accuracy and quality, to describe what is happening to her is to say that she is happy. So long with never more than a few glinting glances at happiness and now so unbridled within her... Happy. It feels good.

They talk for some time more, the moon has risen to almost it's full height when there is a rustling from the bushes. A pink mane pops out at the same time a quiet (and it's quietness is only dwarfed by how lovely it is) voice calls out softly:

"Shadow? I do hope I'm not interrupting, but if you wouldn't mind... Mmmhm." The latter sound is emitted as a pony with a yellow coat sees Luna. It's the oddest thing, but at the mere sight of her this muted mare begins to tremble slightly, almost as though she is cold. Cold or not,

she looks distinctly uncomfortable.

“Fluttershy, this is Princess Luna, Celestia’s sister, there’s nothing to be worried about...”

“Shadowlotus, we’ve met before. She’s one of those six, she’s not like you, she has reason to worry.” Luna turns to face the quivering pony. “Please, I’m sorry for everything, let me explain...” Luna takes a deep breath to begin but is interrupted, surprisingly, by Fluttershy:

“It’s okay.... You were different and, um, I mean no offence, but you’re nice now so that’s all that... I’m sorry, I don’t mean to say...Um.” Fluttershy starts emanating a peculiar high pitch squealing noise. Luna now understands that this pony isn’t making the noise out of some form of communication, it’s more of a small, slightly reserved panicking noise. That is adorable, Luna thinks. She can recall almost nothing that melts her heart in such a simple way from all of her years. Granted, a large segment of those years she was trapped in the moon, but she had many years before that. Never certainly had she met anypony who was so afraid of social interaction, puts whatever little foibles I think I have to shame, Luna thinks, surely this couldn’t be all the time though? No, before she knew that Luna was there she was a little less apologetic. Not much, but still enough such that it wouldn’t be infeasible to have a conversation with her. As it is though, her eyes are clamped shut out of sheer, inexplicable fear. Not of anything in particular, just pure anxiety about saying the wrong thing. Luna finds this endearing, as it reminds her of how she used to be, how she still is, except that this pony was almost all shyness, clearly rife with insecurities, but not the kind that Luna had any idea of.

“Fluttershy is it? Don’t worry, you didn’t offend me... I’m glad you said that. Really, I am... Please don’t feel bad on my account, I didn’t mean to upset you...” At this Fluttershy’s eyes snap open and she tries to meet Luna’s eyes. She’s... not all that successful, but manages to settle on looking intermittently from her hooves to a few feet in front of her.

“Oh, you didn’t upset me... I’m sorry.” Definitely a few insecurities in this pony. Then Luna realises that Fluttershy had been about to ask Shadowlotus something.

“You didn’t come here to apologise though, don’t let me get in your way, it was lovely to meet you...”

“Don’t go because of, oh Klutzershy, you loudmouth! I only needed to ask Shadow... but I can see you’re busy, I’m sorry...” Fluttershy makes as though to fly away, but just before she can Shadowlotus says: in tones that are on a border between exasperated and amused:

“What is it Fluttershy?”

“Well, if you’re not too busy, and you haven’t got anything else you need to do, I mean I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important...” At this her eyes start to fill slightly with tears, not to spilling point but certainly moistening. “... I can’t find Angel-bunny anywhere! Normally I’d have seen

him in the evening but it's been hours since then and I didn't see him this morning and I just can't..." Now Fluttershy is crying. Again, it is hardly waterfalls but the fact that she is crying at all seems... unjust. Each tear made Luna's heart ache and just wish to comfort her.

"I'm sorry Luna, do you mind if I go look for Angel?" Shadowlotus seems quite sorry about the affairs, and her brows raise when Luna says:

"Can I search as well? I don't know what this Angel-bunny looks like though... Fluttershy can you..." Luna is interrupted by a blur of pink and yellow as Fluttershy flings herself over to hug them both. They are inundated with gratitude from the shy little pony, Luna is given a description, and they head in different directions.

"Um... Princess, Princess Luna?" The words reach her ears but only barely. Enough though to fly in the direction that they came from. Fluttershy is there calling out, and upon seeing Luna flaps over with a huge smile on her face. "Shadow found Angel, he was fine all along, I'm so sorry I... I don't know, I was just being silly and I'm sorry you got dragged into, I mean, um..." Less unsure of herself certainly, but also still daunted by conversation with Luna Fluttershy again descends into silence, but this time the squealing doesn't occur. This makes Luna happier still, that in such a short time this pony feels more comfortable around her. If she seems less intimidating to this pony then maybe things wouldn't be as bad as she thought. Luna can see a future for herself now where she isn't ignored, or despised.

"That's quite alright Fluttershy, please don't fret! I enjoyed the scenery at least. As long as is Angel okay then that's all that matters. Tell me though, how is it that you see this rabbit so often? They normally stay away from towns don't they?" Luna enquires. She feels that if she can get Fluttershy to talk indirectly about herself, perhaps through the medium of one that she cares about then she may open up and relax more.

"No, they don't usually, but Angel lives near me. He's just a darling, he's ever-so helpful. He keeps my hooves on the ground, oh, he's just lovely..." Fluttershy continues in this vein as they fly toward the night-garden. As they approach, Fluttershy says: "I'm sorry, I forgot to thank you, for looking when you didn't have to. I... is there anything I can do...?" From her tone Luna knows that she is significantly less intimidating to the pony.

"No, I don't think there's anything, thank you. Oh, I should mention that I'll be seeing you tomorrow after the coronation if you have no objection? I'd be delighted if you could come, as it is I'm a little afraid about going, I don't know how your friends will react to me. If they're as forgiving as you then it will be fine. But I don't know..."

"My friends? You don't mean, oh dear... I'm sure they'll be fine, but will you? I can't imagine... I mean, if it were me I'd be terrified... If you want, if you don't have plans, if you don't

have any objection, you could come to my cottage before the ceremony for some tea, it's ever-so soothing. But I'm sure you're busy, another time maybe... but..." Luna is warmed by how this pony has changed in just a few minutes, how before the best she could manage was squeaks but now had enough confidence to arrange a meeting.

"Are you sure? That would be just perfect. I hate to say it but the idea of tomorrow makes me more and more nervous with each passing minute, I think tea would be great... About twelve O'clock, is that too early, or too late..."

"Oh wonderful! No, no twelve is fine. My cottage is just down here, Shadow's garden is just under a minute that way. I'm sorry but if it's okay with you I think I should go to bed, I have a lot to do. I mean, if you need me I'll manage, but I don't think there's anything I can do for you, but what if..."

"Fluttershy?"

"Yes Luna?" Her cyan eyes look into Luna's expectantly.

"Go to bed, have some lovely dreams. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you, I'll see you tomorrow!" Fluttershy floats down to a small garden of her own. It is in front of a beautiful cottage by the edge of the Everfree forest, all around are hundreds of different animals. Not so many as to constitute a swarm, but enough to marvel at. Butterflies flutter by chickens and geese, mice scurry around without fear. What impresses Luna the most is how as Fluttershy glides to the ground the animals part, but only the necessary amount, there is no frantic scrabbling to get out of the way, indeed many of the animals flock to her once the pegasus has landed. Luna doesn't see what happens next as she drifts out of sight.

She circles around the garden first, the aerial view betrays the beauty that can be found from the ground, before Luna landing softly behind Shadowlotus. She lands so softly that she isn't noticed and sneaks up from behind.

"I hear you found Angel." The jump is small, but Luna notices it.

"Luna! Yes, well, he was just running around. There was absolutely nothing wrong, but you know.. When you get used to something sometimes it can be hard when there's a change to that... That Fluttershy is a genius."

"Hmm?"

"Well, she would never ask if she thought I would mind. The thought would just not be there

to do so, but she's so unassertive that if she wants something you feel compelled to just do it for her! She's a tricky little devil and no mistake. What did you think of her?" She says it casually, but Luna can tell that this means a lot to Shadowlotus. Likely more than merely through association, being neighbours they likely interact (especially given Shadowlotus's and Fluttershy's {likely} seclusion from society) with each other more than anypony else. Even if Luna didn't know the right answer, she feels driven to uphold her character:

"She was... So careful! Lovely, elegant... Really elegant now I come to think of it... But so shy! Why so shy?" It should again be noted that Luna is hardly a social butterfly herself, but even she thinks that Fluttershy is quite... sensitive.

"Sensitive isn't she? As far as I've been told she's always been that delicate, certainly as far back as she can remember. Shame really, she does have so much to offer..."

"I saw! All those animals gathered around her so happily, I don't understand... How does she do it?"

"That? Oh that's just one of her 'gifts'. Word to the wise, do not get on her bad side. It's virtually impossible, but if you manage it you'll be sorry. You know she's just about the scariest little pony it's ever been my pleasure to meet. No, when I mention what she has to offer I more meant her essence, her, I don't know..."

"Kindness?" Luna says with a hollow certainty.

"You could try and define it so simply I guess, but it's hardly like she's a two dimensional character with only one trait. I think it's how her kindness and other qualities interact that make her so amiable. Someponies get irritated by how reserved she is, but I doubt that that'll ever be important to ponies like us." The moon is beginning to sink under the horizon (the search for Angel had been as lengthy as it was fruitful) and the flowers are wilting, again they are unusual in this respect to as they do not just die, or fall to the ground. Instead, the little flecks that pour out of them diminish in number and the ethereal light dims. They withdraw into themselves not in a physical sense, merely in an observable sense. It is as though they are still there, but cannot be seen. Luna can no longer feel them if she tries, but the impression that they are there is distinct, an impression wrought not from present circumstances but only from the knowledge that they were there. "I'm afraid I must sleep now. If I don't slumber before the sun rises then I will surely never rise myself for our meeting tomorrow." Luna is a little disappointed, but then she does understand; it is both a great curse and gift that alicorns need not sleep, indeed that they cannot sleep.

"So I take it you won't be able to make it to Fluttershy's cottage for tea before..." Luna feels bad now. Well, bad isn't entirely fair. It would be fair to say that she feels as though she has overstepped a boundary, Fluttershy may have reacted well to both of them individually but Luna realises she has no idea whether the yellow mare would feel comfortable with them both there.

“No,” a measure of relief floods Luna, “but good for you! You must really have made an impression, she hardly ever invites anypony for tea, she’s usually too scared that they’ll refuse or worse, think that she’s being pushy. She is ever such a silly pony sometimes, but it all adds up to being her. At the end of the day, you can never really know what it is about somepony that you really like, you just have to realise... yawww,” this last expression is a yawn, Shadowlotus appears to be fading fast, almost as though with no flowers left her resolve and energy too recede and wane until she is left vacuous of any action of circumstance, “realise that it may be the qualities about them that you think are mundane or.. Yawww, unimportant are actually the things you like most. I’m really sorry, I’ll see you tomorrow... I’ve got to...” Luna has never seen somepony get this tired this quickly. Not for the first time she wonders what it is like to allow your mind to rest, to sink into unconsciousness, unfeeling slumber.

“Have a good rest Shadowlotus, thank you for showing me your garden. It has been a most tranquil experience.” Normally she would have just left, but following some kind of instinct Luna leans forward and hugs Shadowlotus farewell. Amateurs and professionals alike could easily see that she is learning how to be open, that she is learning how to let friendship into her heart.

“Here you go... I hope you like it.” Fluttershy pops a cup of tea in front of Luna. They are sat in the back garden of her cottage, the weather is fair and the occasional insect bumbles past with a pleasant buzzing sound. Angel is a little way off, hopping around as rabbits tend to do. Occasionally he bounds away and returns with one item or another to which, regardless of its utility, Fluttershy always gives thanks. “Are you more confident now?” They have been talking about the ponies Luna is due to meet in a few hours. Whilst still a little fear resides, Fluttershy has greatly helped her insecurity about meeting the ponies that freed her. The tea is... wonderful, just the right infusing of herbs and what taste like spices.

“This is divine Fluttershy, truly, I can’t remember the last time I had a cup of tea as good as this. But seriously, I have to thank you for helping me today, without your this I would be in a state right now.”

“Oh that’s okay, I’m glad you feel better. Really all I wa...Meeee!” Fluttershy is interrupted by the sound of crashing from within the cottage, causing her to scream. This scream is quite piercing, although quite brief as the reason for the commotion becomes apparent:

“Sorry Fluttershy, I was just trying out a new...” A pegasus pony with a blue coat, multicoloured hair and lightning bolt cutie mark trots out of the cottage, but upon seeing Luna stops dead still. “What’s she doing here?” It’s evident that this pony is suspicious of Luna. This was more the kind of greeting she had been expecting from all ponies, and it kind of made her feel good that she hadn’t blown small insecurities out of proportion, that her rationalisations weren’t entirely off.

“I invited her, why?” Fluttershy asks. It is at this point that Luna truly sees Fluttershy for what she is; she genuinely sees no reason why anypony wouldn't be happy with Luna's company. She appears to have accepted her not at face value based on recent events, but at a deeper level which applies to all things. That all things must be good, and so they should be treated such. Suddenly her reaction to Angel's disappearance makes a lot more sense. “Would you like some tea?” The blue pony seems incredibly tempted, clearly this tea was a regular treat that was well known to some (Shadowlotus had seemed to have experience with it), but her hackles are still slightly raised. She makes to sit down, then says to Fluttershy:

“Well just yesterday she was the enemy right, how do we know we can trust her? Maybe she's just gathering enough information about us so she can destroy us!” It seems to Luna that this pony doesn't even believe what she's saying herself, more that it should be said.

“Rainbow Dash, why would you think that? Luna is lovely, she helped me look for Angel for half the night!”

“Or so she says, what are you up to, huh?” It's evident that her looking for Angel hadn't raised Rainbow's opinion of her all that much, but Luna felt like Rainbow Dash was easing up, even becoming slightly jocular. It seems Fluttershy does have a lot of sway with just a few words despite her initially almost non-existent presence. Not non-existent in the way Luna appears, as so subtly poised that she isn't noticed, but small and delicate.

“I'm sorry about what Nightmare tried to do, but you've got to believe me, that isn't me, I mean... Um, it's not me...oh..” Just as quickly as she had gained it her confidence plummeted. This is the first time she's had to apologise to somepony who felt like they deserved an apology, and it's trying her. Small tears form at the edge of her eyes, she hastily removes them but there was no way either pony was going to miss them. The most annoying part about it all is Luna didn't feel upset enough to cry, she merely cried for the idea that somepony felt as hurt as she had made Rainbow.

“Oh don't cry! Everything's okay, Rainbow Dash didn't mean it, did you?” Again, Fluttershy produces incomprehensible amounts of comfort within Luna, she feels safe when the yellow pony comes to her side and rubs her nose gently against Luna's neck.

“Sorry all right? I didn't... Fluttershy, don't give me that look! I didn't mean it okay? I was just saying, I didn't think you'd start crying.” It's bizarre, almost all of the vehemence has fled Rainbow Dash's argument. It's not Fluttershy's words that convince her, it's definitely more that she didn't realise how forceful she was being toward an innocent, and with recognition she feels she can't repent enough.

“That's okay, it's understandable. But it wasn't me you have to know that! I'm willing to look past it if you are.”

“Well, okay...” It is clear that Rainbow Dash is being given a way out of her predicament and that she is taking it, but she is never going to admit that. There is a lot of pride in this one, Luna thinks. “Hey, you wanna come fly with me? I could really use somepony’s opinion on a move I’ve been having trouble with. Anypony else will likely just say I’m great, as always, but I really don’t know how good it looks. You up for it?”

“I would, but I did say I’d have a cup of tea with Fluttershy...”

“Oh no., don’t worry, go ahead, I’ve got to make sure the animals will be okay while the coronation goes on anyway.”

And so it was that Luna ended up looking at Rainbow Dash as she shot through the air at frightening speeds, spinning and spiralling in displays that impressed Luna. She felt it best that she didn’t show up her new companion, so she was taking a purely observational (and subtly teaching) role.

“Maybe tuck your peripheral feathers in when you turn just before the finale?” It isn’t that Luna is plainly a better flier (although as with both alicorns she just is), but she has had significantly longer to learn all of the ins and outs of flight. With her advice, Rainbow Dash has been performing to a mild, almost insignificant, but existent degree better. Although she had been sceptical at first, Rainbow’s pride has given way to sheer admiration as Luna teaches her technique after technique.

“That. Was. So. AWESOME!” Rainbow squeals. “I mean, I could have figured this out for myself, but thanks anyway. You know, you’re alright Luna, I can’t wait until we get to spend a bit more time together.” The reason they have no time left is that the coronation is in five minutes. Luna had wanted to go for quite some time, but Rainbow dash kept persisting with a mixture of demands, taunts, pleas and jibes to keep her there. Much though Luna is flattered by this, she wishes she could have been ready half an hour ago.

They soar over from Rainbow’s castle and streak toward Ponyville. They maintain pace for a while, then Rainbow Dash slowly gets an advantage. Even so, she struggles to be faster than Luna, and there is barely anything in it, a few noses at the most. Then Dash slows down, Luna shoots ahead and when it seems like there is no possibility of anything other than turning into an unhappy stain on the floor, she gracefully stops in the space of a few inches.

“Woah...” Rainbow Dash is left speechless, and with good reason; there is no pony living or dead who can pull off such an incredible feat except for Luna.

“Luna, it’s so wonderful that you could join us!” Celestia’s voice slides through the air like a serpent, the words are mockingly barbed. “No no, no hurry. I mean, if you’d care to get up here

with me, your coronation is in... two and a half minutes.. Take your time!" She is clearly joking, and her eyes sparkle when she sees that her sister is 'hanging out' with Rainbow Dash. "Making friends already I see..." Luna is a little bit taken-aback by this statement; she didn't think that she was making friends. At most she was just teaching, and having tea, walking through gardens and... and, she realises, that's pretty much what friends do. It surprises her that something that had seemed so mysterious, so unattainable, before she was accidentally just falling into. With this realisation her world changes; gone are the niggling doubts, gone are the suspicious fears. It seems so silly to her now that she couldn't have understood this all sooner, but she feels that by having friends, by having ponies who care about her (Celestia had never counted until now; Luna felt sisters had to care for one another) it doesn't matter if she doesn't get the recognition she deserves, or that she feels she is worthless; if somepony else thinks that she, Luna, is worth being with, that their day is improved by seeing her, then how can she possibly consider herself invalid, a waste. The world seems to get much smaller at this point, a lot less frightening, instead of being filled with endless, empty wastelands, nothing but desolate and deserted towers sticking out of the ground like broken and uncaring feelers, dust sweeping through, cloying the air and suffocating the ground, the ground cracked and weeping all manner of unfortunate and viscous fluids, dead trenches scarring the ground into which nothing rolls, with no purpose, nothing to do, and with nowhere to go with nopony to know, the stars deathly still and unmoving, static and unchanging, their glints long expired as they glare down at the cracked and desolate ground, strewn with the wasted time and efforts of wasteful and inept denizens, through the carcasses of the fallen the wind whistles, it whistles and rattles, and through the empty bones singing of sorrow and undone glory come ghostly memories that haunt the cold and uncaring wasteland...

Instead of this, the world had grown, sprouts of trees and vegetables popped out of the ground, birds tweeted the day away high up in the clouds and in trees alike, larking around with all manner of other satisfied creatures, the jubilant grass grows luscious and full, soft mists form dew drops on all manner of plants and leaves, and all around run ponies, laughing and playing, caring for one another with word and action. Rich scents waft on gentle zephyrs that tickle the trees, rustle the grass, lift the birds along their way, deep colours and light colours intermingle like a plethora of paints splashed artfully upon a fine canvas, shadows form and dance with the light, they weave and caress each other without form, without substance, all that they know is the dance of light. And above all this the stars wink and gesture, they smile and glow with all the warmth they can down on Equestria, providing a little light for those that care to witness it, to never let the song of the dance of shadow and light go unsung.

It's quite a noticeable change. But there isn't enough time to think of it, as the coronation begins. It's a formal and tedious affair; several lengthy speeches are read by dignitaries and assumedly important ponies from the four corners of Equestria, all stating in official terms how wonderful it is to have Luna and Celestia ruling side by side once again, how they should not be separated etc. etc. etc. After what seems like a lifetime, the ceremony is completed to the sound of everypony cheering and jumping for joy (whether for Luna or merely the end of the arduous speeches she cannot tell), birds come out of nowhere and drape a string of flowers over Luna's

neck. Celestia notes where Twilight and her friends are and wanders over and begins saying something. Whatever it is she says must be well received, for their slightly glum faces stretch up into joyous smiles, which strangely makes Luna smile. All around her ponies are enjoying themselves, playing games and eating food, and were it not for her earlier epiphany she may not have understood it, but now feels compelled to join them, to talk to them, to learn what makes them happy and do it for them! I'm ecstatic, she realises, I've rarely been so happy, and never for long. Just as she is to mingle, she is struck with shyness. This is not bad though, it just is, it does not make her less happy. She knows she'll never be a Pinkie Pie (who she can see is bouncing around with little to no regard for her surroundings. On closer inspection, as she bounds inanelly her eyes are closed!) or Rainbow Dash, but Shadowlotus and Fluttershy seem to be happy with their lot in life. Before she would have felt this shyness to be bad, to be holding her back, but now she accepts it merely as a way of being. The feeling is relaxing.

After some serious partying has occurred and all has wound down, Celestia beckons to Luna. She follows her big sister into a tent, where waiting patiently are a brown earth-pony, Fluttershy, Twilight Sparkle and a very poised unicorn with a precisely positioned mane. Upon seeing her, Twilight and the poised unicorn become a little uncomfortable, not so much as to look it, but enough such that a very perceptive pony could notice it in their tone. Fluttershy looks up at her and smiles, shifting along the bench which she and the brown pony are sat on to make room for her. Gratefully, she takes the pew and is immediately engaged in conversation:

"Well how d' you do? My name's Applejack." Her voice has a very rural quality about it, it is open and friendly too. Luna finds herself immediately liking this pony.

"I'm Luna. You know, I should apologise for anything I've done to cause you har..."

"Aww save it sugar-plum, none of that weren't your fault now so your apologising ain't gonna make two bits of difference now will it?" Her complete acceptance is almost as heart warming as Fluttershy's was, not due to any fault of hers, but having had it announced at her ceremony the events that led to Nightmare moon's inception, that her and Luna were separate, could not do anything other than diminish the forgiveness of ponies who forgave. The sheer wide-eyed nature of Fluttershy's acceptance was shocking, other ponies could not hope to have that unreasonable degree of faith that she had.

"Still, I should. Tell me about yourself Applejack, what do you like to do?" Her new found zest for life is clearly affecting her, making her open, making her happy.

"Well, me and my brother Big Macintosh run Sweet Apple Acres, the finest apple orchard this side of Fillydelphia. It's mighty hard work, 'specially 'round Applebuck season, but it's good, simple work too. There ent nothin' I enjoy more than seeing them trees a growin' an' them apples a sellin'" During this speech her eyes intermittently haze over and sparkle with delight. This pony is certainly passionate about apples, Luna thinks. "So, err, apart from raisin' the moon and all, what do you like to do?"

“Oh.. Um. I’ve never really thought about it before. I suppose that sounds silly. I like singing,” at this Celestia looks over at them from where she had been engaged with her student, “but mostly I just love gardens, beautiful gardens with trilling birds and felicitous flowers. Really I like looking at beautiful things...”

“I, comple’ly understand. I...” At this moment there is an explosion of colour and laughter as the energetic Pinkie Pie and dazzling Dash come waltzing through the door.

“...so I spelled out his name and got on the boat! Hey guys! Great party am I right? Balloons and cake and pin the tail on the pony! Hey Twilight, oh I’m soooo glad you get to stay here! Because when you said you’d have to leave I was so sad, and then when Celestia said you could stay I was so happy it made me just want to bounce up, down, and up! And down! Up and down and never stop! But then there were cupcakes and you know how I like cupcakes and Luna you should totally come make cupcakes with me!” This is all said in about two breaths, breath that seems to have been stolen from everypony else. Luna at least is shocked, this is the first time she has heard this borderline psychotic speak. Just as she’s about to respond Rainbow Dash kicks in:

“Sorry we’re late everypony, Pinkie Pie had to party until the end, which explains why she’s so lethargic,” *lethargic*? “what’s happening?”

“Well,” Celestia says, “We were just having a few little chats until you came in, there’s some lemonade and apple juice over there then come sit down.” At this point she says to Luna: “Come over here and speak to Twilight for a bit, I need to talk to somepony outside for a while.” Sure enough some very hoity-toity character is outside waving urgently at Celestia, even her demeanour spoke of long, diluted sentences without form or structure. Settling by Twilight, Luna introduces herself. Twilight returns it in kind:

“It’s lovely to meet you again Luna, I’m Twilight Sparkle and this is Rarity.” Twilight’s voice is blandly anonymous and straight forward, not in tone, but in emphasis. It is as though she is saying the words out of reflex rather than anything else, something is clearly on her mind.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Rarity says, “how are you finding our adorable little village?” Luna detects a small note of dissatisfaction within her words. Looking at this fabulous figure she can see why: she is clearly designed for a much more metropolitan lifestyle.

“It’s perfect!” Luna says with genuine enthusiasm. “The things I have seen here, the ponies I have met, it’s all just so idyllic, so nice!” Rarity winces at the word nice, but upon realising that it was not meant as a back-hoofed compliment, that indeed the word nice can be something other than an insult, her features soften; still though her countenance has a grave air, a tautness. Twilight too shares this hidden tension. “Whatever is the matter with you two? You seem so... stressed...” Twilight snaps to attention and looks a little embarrassed. Despite this she manages

to work up the courage to ask:

“Rarity and I... we were just wondering what it must have been like for all those years in solitude, nopony to talk to, nowhere to go... We just didn’t really know if we should bring it up or...”

“It’s okay. Of course you can ask. It was hiding things, deception, that got me into this mess in the first place. Neigh, it’s important to ask what you want to have asked, speak as you wish to have spoken.” She does not know where these words came from, but they seem to fit the situation fine.

“Well... Okay... Please tell us, what was it like?” Rarity ventures.

“It was...” Just as she is about to indulge them in a description of how bad it was, but how she came to terms with it, Shadowlotus’s words came to her mind: ‘If you keep everypony in the dark you don’t allow them to get to know you, and Luna did want to be known. She had learnt in the past day that ponies like her for who she is, not who she wished she could be. So now she feels no shame, or discomfort in admitting the truth: “eternal hell. You can’t imagine, time didn’t seem to pass, there was nothing, only darkness. I could see nothing, hear nothing, the only thing I could sense at all was this sickly, pulsating darkness that pressed around me without fail. It engulfed me and strangled me, choked me and gave me unwelcome company. It was an eternity of nothing I felt entombed but my body was the tomb! When I had all but given up hope there came a little slither; this tiny but blinding shaft of light pierced the tomb, and with that light I slowly began to see until now,” She looks around and sees everypony looking at her in silence, “now I see things brighter and more beautiful than I ever could before. I can’t express how much I want to thank you all for saving me... I don’t think I ever could...”

“It was no big whoop sugar-cube” Applejack has stood up and is moving toward Luna, her mouth opens to say something but then Rainbow Dash interrupts:

“Hay, it was fun! We just ran up there and then WHAM! I bet the other ponies were scared, but hey, I should be thanking you.” Rainbow Dash seems genuinely convinced that it was all fun, despite the fact that it blatantly wasn’t, that Twilight could have plummeted off a cliff, or they could all have been savaged by the manticore. The others in turn all give their reasons for not needing thanks, that it was an honour, that without it they wouldn’t have known themselves as well as they do now. And instead of being sceptical, of doubting them, Luna accepts what they say, and she is all the happier for it.

It’s the next day and Luna is making cupcakes with Pinkie Pie in Sugar Cube Corner. She has through the previous day met all of Applejack’s relatives (as they were to be leaving soon, and she felt compelled to introduce just about everypony she met to them), listened to Rarity

talk endlessly about fashion and sophistication, given Rainbow Dash more tips and given Fluttershy some gardening advice and helped her feed the animals whilst tidying up the wilderness behind her cottage, during the night she had spent more time with Shadowlotus (who apologises for her and her parents absence the day before), but first had spent an unseemly amount of time with Twilight whilst she rushed around trying to find some book or another and ask Luna questions about its contents. She had been introduced to Spike, but he was too busy running errand after errand to really get much time to talk to Luna. He seemed pleasant enough.

At the moment Luna is dubiously mixing incredibly obscure ingredients in a bowl. Pinkie Pie is reading out item after item to the almost silent Luna. The reason she is so resolutely silent is that Pinkie Pie is permeating the atmosphere with questions and stories. Sometimes her train of thought derails slightly and leads them down an unexpected avenue but their destination always leaves them introducing cohorts of laughter to groups of giggles.

“...and now we add whatever flavour we want!” Pinkie Pie’s voice soars above the roar of the whisk that is trundling through the gloopy cupcake mix.

“Anything? So if I added cheese it would taste good?”

“Sure! It doesn’t matter what you add now the mix will always come out yummy scrumptious! You can add cheese, or peas, or bees! But I wouldn’t add bees, they’d be angry, and there’s nothing worse than an angry bee! Except maybe a few angry bees, or a whole lot of angry bees! Bees and he’s and me’s and knees, they all get a little bit angry if you bake them!”

“So... If I put my socks in them..?”

“No silly! Who wants a sock cupcake? I hate socks. Would you like a sock cupcake?”

“Well, no, but you said... I mean...”

“Don’t be *mean*, I’m sorry, we can make cupcakes made of socks if you want... you want to right, huh huh huh?” Her eyes are hopeful for some reason and Luna feels like she can’t disappoint them.

She knows that no matter how hard she tries to be herself, nothing is going to deter these ponies from spending their time with her. Luna has known since her epiphany that she doesn’t need to be special to be loved, she just needs to be. She can try as hard as she likes to impress everypony with her nightscapes, but at the end of the day the only difference she can make is to the ponies that she knows, that she talks to, that she helps and cares about. With a little sidelong glance at Pinkie Pie she knows also that these ponies are such ponies, that she cares for them, and whilst that may not seem to make a difference to an observer, that it makes all the

difference to her. She takes a bite of the horrific sock cupcake.

It's the most delicious cupcake she's ever tasted.