

The moon rose over Equestria, and the stars followed.

Luna took a moment to consider her work. The moon was low, waxing crescent and the stars were bright and in their proper places. She was pleased with the galactic disc tonight. Its milky glow nicely highlighted the bright quasars at the crown of Megan, The Helper.

"Beautiful," came the voice of her sister Celestia behind her. "I did my best while you were gone, but I could never match your touch. I don't think I've ever seen the constellation of Megan so vivid!"

"It's nothing," Luna said looking down. She hesitated, giving her sister time to collect herself. Even now, weeks after her return the two alicorns often found emotion overtaking them. Finally Luna turned.

Celestia wasn't weeping, but her eyes glistened in the starlight as the Royal Princesses of Equestria faced each other.

"An auspicious beginning for your big night," Celestia said.

"Night Court?" Luna said, raising an eyebrow in skepticism. "Is it really necessary?"

"It is Luna, as you would know if you had read Notes On Equestrian Administration Memo Number Six," Celestia said smiling. "But since you wrote it, I'm sure you already know both the legal--"

"And popular demand for re-establishment of a harmonized two-tier venue for petitions," Luna interrupted. "That was just theory, and putting aside the fact that you haven't acted on memos two, four or five it just seems like... pandering."

"A princess--" Celestia began.

"Serves her people," Luna interrupted again. "And a princess always eats her alfalfa before desert. Are you going to remind me of that as well?"

The two alicorns paused a moment, before erupting in mutual laughter and rushing to embrace.

"Oh Luna," Celestia whispered, hugging her sister tightly. "How I've missed you."

"Me too, Tia," Luna said, eyes closed lest she have an emotional moment herself. After all, it was her big night.

Separating, the two walked away from the balcony and its view of the sky. Over Equestria the moon rose, the stars twinkled, and all was right in the night sky.

"You know I can't be there because of the Four Seasons celebration in Manehattan," Celestia said. "But the civil service has selected a pony to help you along and she's very good. I've had my eye on her so I thought she'd be perfect. You are in good hooves. Ready?"

"I've sat in with you how many times?" Luna protested. "And I have done Night Court before. I doubt there is anything I can't handle."

"Times have changed little sister," Celestia said, with a twinkle in her eye. Leaning down to give Luna a quick kiss on the cheek she whispered, "Break a leg!" before taking a left down one of the castle's endless hallways.

Luna sighed, noting that Celestia hadn't addressed her second, fourth or fifth memos. They were perfectly logical suggestions, based off her research in the Royal Library during the quiet nights since the end of her exile. Abacus had confirmed her theories after all. Luna made a mental note to stop thinking of her abacus like a pony, but it had been a reassuring touchstone since her return. Abacus... her abacus, was calming and solid with the click of beads demonstrating that while many things had changed, math was a constant.

The Royal Guards opened up the double doors as she approached the end of the hallway. She gave them an appreciative nod, but expected and got nothing in return. Celestia herself had confessed that she found their stoicism a bit disturbing. Entering the Royal Chambers she saw a gray, female, earth pony giving the quick curtsy that was standard amongst the civil service. You couldn't get the business of government done if everyone was always prostrating themselves before the rulers of Equestria.

"Lovely moonrise tonight Princess Luna," the remarkably young bureaucrat said. "I quite admired your highlighting of Megan's crown. If I may introduce myself? I am Applebee, Acting Night Chamberlain By Royal Appointment, Provisional Personal Secretary and Interim Deputy Constable In Chief."

"Apple... Bee?" Luna asked slowing her stride and craning her neck to view her assistant's cutie mark of three bees. "Do you know an Applejack...and....night what?"

"Applejack? One of the Ponyville Apples?" Applebee said, the earth pony matching Luna's pace as they walked towards the throne room. "Distant cousin I believe. I'm from the Baltimore branch of the Apples myself, but I felt my organizational skills would be better utilized in a less agrarian environment."

Luna nodded. What was that about Deputy Constable, she wondered?

"As Acting Night Chamberlain By Royal Appointment," Applebee continued. "I will serve, at your pleasure, as senior official of the Night Court and oversee its business, including liaising with the other senior officers of the Royal Court. That would include the Royal Chamberlain who is also the current Day Chamberlain and the Palace Chamberlain, though that position is de jure unfilled but de facto occupied by Mrs. Shine, the head of the domestic staff. Needless to say, as your Provisional Private Secretary I have full CASE NIGHTMARE clearance and any and all communications between us will be treated with the utmost confidence."

Luna nodded again. It seemed the right thing to do. She tried to absorb the information Applebee had given her. Celestia was an obsessive planner and CASE NIGHTMARE was both the highest security clearance in the civil service and the code name for any threats to Equestria. A misunderstanding in the histories had given Luna the nickname of Nightmare Moon when her jealousy and madness had ended in exile. Luna didn't feel resentful. There was also a CASE NIGHTMARE SUN in case Celestia fell prey to derangement and a CASE NIGHTMARE DUSK in the event Celestia's faithful student's powers spiraled out of control.

She remembered the Royal Chamberlain, a kindly stallion who administered the agenda during Celestia's court. Now she knew what Applebee was supposed to do tonight. Not that there would be much call for it. Mrs. Shine she also remembered a bit more vividly. Luna wasn't used to modern appliances and had made some mistakes in the kitchen shortly after her return. Mrs. Shine had let her know how vexed she was by the resulting mess and small fire with zero regard for Luna's royal station. It had been oddly comforting to be treated like any other pony, but she turned her attention back to Applebee who was still speaking as they approached the throne room doors.

"...naturally you should have a full staff, but the Civil Service has been in complete disarray adjusting to your return," Applebee said, halting before another pair of poker-faced Royal Guards. "Which is why I strongly suggested candida vestis instead of veste fortuita for your opening court. But your insistence, as relayed by your co-sovereign, that we should quote not make a big deal unquote has of course prevailed. Are you ready your Majesty?"

Luna smiled, she had the measure of Applebee now. The civil service of Equestria was vast and did good work, but tended to be a bit obsessed with protocol and titles. She'd mentioned that in her second memo to Celestia. But Luna also remembered the long, lonely nights holding court a thousand years ago. No pony but herself and her guards (insisted upon by her subjects) ever showed up. She had tried, fruitlessly, to send her guards to bed early when it was obvious everypony else in Equestria was asleep.

"Let's break a leg Applebee," Luna said, nodding at the guards. "How bad can it be?"

As the doors opened a cacophony of noise came through the gap between the thick oak doors. The throne room was packed with ponies of every breed, station and all manner of dress? Ponies in formal dress. Ponies in uniform. Ponies wearing shackles. Ponies with piercings? It

seemed like all of Equestria was assembled and waiting for Luna.

"OYEZ! OYEZ! OYEZ! The Court of Equestria is now in session! Let all bow so that petitioners may stand forth..." bellowed a voice from behind the doors as Luna watched a hundred ponies bow in obedience towards the open throne room doors.

Both of which slammed shut with a resounding CRACK! under Luna's telekinesis, cutting off the cries of the pony announcing her presence. The sudden clap startled the guard ponies that had swept open the doors for her. Surprising them would have been a minor triumph if she hadn't already been so shocked. So many ponies! Wide eyed, she turned to Applebee.

"What the hay was that?" Luna demanded.

"The Night Court your majesty," Applebee said, her attention divided between Luna and the normally-stoic Royal Guards who were rapidly collecting themselves from their initial shock. "Your court. A mixture of petitioners, supplicants, ministers, secretaries and various well-wishers and posturers who wish to see and be seen."

Luna nodded while she tried to calm her racing heart. Nodding was a good thing. It seemed to coax more information out of Applebee and it was a thing to do. It was important to do things instead of thinking about all those ponies inside waiting for her.

"Should you wish to cancel tonight's court at the present time, or at any other time during the proceedings you will of course be excused as having more pressing royal duties which require your immediate attention," Applebee ventured. "While I understand that you may be a bit... hesitant to deal with such a large crowd after your extended absence I have the utmost confidence that, regardless of any decision you may arrive at, now or at any point in the future, it will be a correct one and I shall support you completely."

Luna shook her head and then lifted it up, trying to look as regal as her sister Celestia (who was probably halfway to Manehattan by now) and spoke.

"No. Let's do this," she said.

"Of course your majesty," Applebee said. "We will break their legs."

Before Luna could decide whether to correct her assistant the doors were swept open before her. The throne room had not grown any less crowded, though had gotten a bit quieter since her aborted entrance.

"oyez? oyez?" came the voice from behind the doors, growing in confidence as they stayed open. "OYEZ! The Court of Equestria is now in session! Let all bow so that petitioners may stand forth before the throne and have their grievances addressed! The Princess Luna is now in

attendance and court is now in session!"

Luna walked into the room slowly, with Applebee at her side. Whispered instructions came from her chamberlain as she surveyed the room.

"Enter, pause, nod at your subjects to the left, center and now right, turn to your left, approach the throne, sit, a short speech is in order," Applebee whispered.

Luna nodded, pleased that she had kept her head elevated instead of lowering it bashfully and thought about the speech she would give. She was shocked to find she had somehow already made it to the throne and was now confronted by a room full of bowing ponies (one of whom had an eye patch!). She'd already made her entrance somehow. She darted her head to the side to see Applebee confidently sitting next to the throne, well within whispering distance. Applebee gave an almost imperceptible gesture of her muzzle towards the crowd.

A short speech would be in order, Luna thought. She should... what would Celestia do? Thank everypony for being there. That would be a good place to start she could... was she already talking?

"... but since this is veste fortuita instead of candida vestis it would be kind for those without imminent business to clear the way for those with more pressing needs and absent themselves until a later court," Luna said, her heart racing. What the hay was she saying? What had she said? What was candida vestis? Something Applebee said, did she screw that up?

"... thank you again for your devotion to Equestria. Chamberlain, if you would?" Luna said, turning to Applebee. What was she doing? Chamberlain, if you would? Would what? Wait! Tia had said those exact words, Luna thought, during Day Court. It was a thing you said. But what had she said before that? Or even before the part when she'd been speaking in Old Ponyish that she didn't even understand. What did white dress even mean?

"Well done, Your Majesty," Applebee said soto voce with a smile. "Brilliant even, you've clearly prepared for this."

Luna smiled and looked up at the crowd. No pony looked puzzled or confused, so while it may not have been brilliant her speech had at least been coherent. That was a relief. She kept smiling as Applebee stood and began a polite speech thanking everypony for attending but for those without business to get out. Phrased politely and with far too many words, but that was the general idea. The room emptied out somewhat as various ponies pony bowed and left. Luna kept smiling. Was Tia in Manehattan yet, could she send a messenger to summon her back?

The ponies that stayed behind weren't exactly scowling, but none of them were smiling and all of them had serious expressions. That fellow with the eye patch in the front ranks, he must be important, and all the other ponies. Including a shackled batch of shameless, modern ponies,

with wild costumes and wilder manes and ... Midnight Vision? Luna recognized the energetic pegasus from that all-night party called a rave that she'd gone to last week. The princess had drunk way too much and barely gotten up in time to raise the moon, but it was still one of the most exhilarating nights since the end of her exile. What was Midnight Vision doing here and under arrest to boot?

"Can we..." cancel this, call Celestia, go back to the library with a big mug of cocoa and a bigger book of trade statistics she could analyze with Abacus, Luna thought, but found herself saying "...proceed with the agenda, Chamberlain?"

"As the princess wishes," Applebee said, opening a thick folder on the short desk in front of her. "The court will hear from Marshall Trail Burr representing the Equestrian Police, Territorial Marshals, And All Other Services And Organizations Devoted To The Peace Of Equestria And Other Realms And Territories Under The Grace Of Their Majesties."

The scary-looking unicorn pony with the eye patch stepped forward, worked his jaw left and right then spat at the floor. The gob of brown goo was intercepted at the last moment by a silver spittoon held in the mouth of one of the court pages darting forward. The page quickly danced backwards away from Trail Burr, who squinted at Luna with his good eye for a moment before speaking.

"Well, that was a purty speech your majesty," he said with a gravelly voice. "Got a purty speech of my own, but I appreciate your saying we are here for business so I'll be entering this into the record." With a glow of his horn he levitated a scroll out of his saddlebag and tossed it aside, where it was caught by the same page, who nimbly walked backwards holding the scroll delicately between her lips.

"Now the jurisdictional rules between us peace officers has been a bit unsettled," Trail Burr continued. "Since it seems I've got seniority when it comes to us law ponies I've been nominated to ask you to settle the question."

"A moment if you would Marshall Burr?" Luna said with a smile. Seeing a nod from Burr she leaned down to Applebee who quickly darted her head in for a private chat. "What?" Luna asked in utter confusion.

"A quirk of Equestrian law your Majesty," Applebee said softly, "It seems all law enforcement agencies in Equestria can trace their existence via direct descent or through reorganization to the original Night Watch, which consisted of the members of your Royal Guard before your extended absence."

"Bright Eyes and Star Dancer?" Luna asked, remembering the two ponies who had insisted on staying up during the night, despite her protests.

"The same your Majesty," Applebee said. "Subsequent to your departure they insisted on continuing their nightly duties, but with the revised goal of watching over all ponies. According to the archives they insisted that they had grown accustomed to sleeping during the day and... they did not wish you to be alone at night."

Luna sat back, staggered. She'd always meant to go through the old histories to find out what had happened after her banishment. But she had kept putting it off, preferring not to relive that terrible time. To suddenly find out that her little ponies had stayed loyal and continued to serve, not just others, but her? Even after she had gone mad?

"Since they reported to you directly and founded the first police force? Technically all peace officers of Equestria inherited their obligations and their first loyalty is to you and only secondarily to your current co-sovereign, though that is a legality which was never at issue during your extended absence," Applebee said. "Trail Burr is Chief Marshall of the Northern Territories in case you need a bit of trivia to cover this conference."

Luna frowned and made sure Applebee got the full brunt of it. She knew who Trail Burr was, she'd gone over hundreds of reports while researching Equestrian criminal law. She'd hope to have some recommendation for Celestia soon, but right now it was a work in progress. Somehow the fact that she was... Constable-In-Chief of Equestria? That had eluded her. To think that her personal guard ponies had founded the Night Watch? Turning to the grizzled unicorn in front of her...

... she found herself running to embrace him.

"Thank you," she said, barely keeping her tears at bay. "I thank not only you, but every pony who now or has ever taken up a badge. Your devotion to the peace of Equestria honors me. But your service would also make two of the .. bravest and most devoted ponies I ever knew.. PROUD!"

Looking into the one good eye of the shocked Marshall she was hugging, Luna thought she saw a tear of his own forming. Stepping back she felt his awkward fore limbs loosen themselves as she walked backwards (it wasn't as hard as it looked, she must have picked it up from that page) and gave a short bow before sitting back on her throne.

"Maj! I mean your Maamjesty," Trail Burr said fumbling. He wasn't that scary, Luna thought. Not like Bright Eyes when she first met him, with all of his scars.

"That was.. well I'm here for business and ... " Trail Burr continued trying to collect himself in front of Luna's beaming smile. The Marshall lowered his head for a long moment before looking up again. "I'm just a spokespony, I don't command nothing, cept my district. But on behalf of every peace officer in Equestria? Thanks. We do our best and your appreciation ain't no small thing."

Luna couldn't stop smiling. Somehow the scores of ponies attending Night Court, including more than a few she had found intimidating, no longer bothered her. The two devoted ponies who'd insisted they would be her Royal Guard a thousand years ago had not only remained her friends after her madness, they had founded the Night Watch so that she would never be alone, and had inspired other ponies to stand watch and protect her little ponies.

Night Dancer and Bright Eyes. She'd sent them away, shouted at them to go, back when she had been consumed by jealousy. But they'd remained faithful. It was almost too much to bear. How she missed the two of them. Oh! Night Dancer had a crush on Winter Oats, but Twinkle Dare had always gotten up before dawn so he could walk her home. Had she ever chosen between her two suitors?

"Night..." Luna asked, leaning in to quietly address Applebee, her chamberlain. "I mean, next item on the agenda?" Luna said, making a note to devour the CASE NIGHTMARE MOON file. The pain of that time would be a small price to pay to know what had happened to her devoted royal guard.

"Marshall Trail Burr, representing the Equestrian Police, Territorial Marshals, And All Other Services And Organizations Devoted To The Peace Of Equestria And Other Realms And Territories Under The Grace Of Their Majesties currently holds the floor, your Majesty," Applebee said.

Luna turned back to the grizzled unicorn before her. Clearly moved by her emotional outburst and the sudden embrace by his princess, the stallion coughed, and spoke.

"As I was saying, your Majesty," Burr said, still overwhelmed. The one-eyed unicorn idly pawed at the marble floor beneath him. "We've got a question regarding jurisdiction. The marshals, police, sheriffs and what-not are all supreme in their own territory, and outside lawponies are supposed to present themselves as guests and cooperate with the local authorities. Now that is quite a hindrance to hot pursuit, which is something we marshals specialize in. Likewise everypony gets a bit frustrated when their requests for assistance don't get the priority they would if one outfit were in charge."

Burr seemed to regain his earlier poise while Luna listened intently. It was true that jurisdiction was a bit of a mess, but each organization had been created to serve a specific need and expertise in one area didn't mean a lawpony would know how to operate in another. Some kind of reform would be needed, but picking one group to put in charge would be a recipe for disaster.

"I share your concerns Marshall Burr," Luna said. "My sister and I are aware of the problem and we hope to make some improvements in the near future. I'm afraid it won't be decided tonight though."

"Well we were hoping it would be Your Majesty," Burr said. "You are Constable-In-Chief and we figured you wouldn't need to check with your sister."

That last bit came in a rush, as the senior peace officer in all of Equestria, a veteran of countless criminal investigations, ponyhunts, and showdowns delivered it all with a blush on his cheeks.

Luna cocked an eyebrow as she deciphered his words. It was a prepared line, one bordering on a challenge to her authority and meant to test her. She was thankful that her emotional outburst had derailed the intended delivery. Burr hadn't seemed happy to be the one challenging Luna, which made her wonder exactly who was the "we" he'd referred to. Night Court was serious business she reminded herself. There were ponies and other nations ready to probe the dual-court for any weakness.

"Check with my sister Marshall?" she asked lightly, just like Celestia would do. "I can see you are a pony of great experience. Though there may be a few in this court with a few more years under their belt."

The court around her erupted in laughter, heavier than the joke was due. Probably not due to her station, Luna thought, she'd made jokes in Day Court but they had mostly fallen flat. Oh wait, tension. Nobody had laughed since court started and that was, her eyes darted up to the clock, WAIT! That was only TEN MINUTES AGO? It felt like forever! How long did Night Court go on?

"But I'm sure that when you were a colt..." Luna continued, inwardly panicking. Only ten minutes? Could she take a break? Would ponies talk? "... you turned to those with greater experience in the field than yourself. Marshal Lucky Star was your superior I believe?"

Trail Burr stood to attention as Luna thanked the stars that she was an obsessive reader and that bit of trivia had come to mind. The work she had put into her research was paying off in unexpected ways.

"And a finer lawpony I have never served with!" Trail Burr barked, his head erect, his flanks straight. He paused, giving the princess an approving look with his one good eye. "I reckon that's a legit reason for talking things over, being as your majesty has been..." Burr frowned as the royal page darted across the floor to whisper in his ear, before retreating. "...as your majesty has been on an extended absence."

"I have Marshal Trail Burr," Luna said. "But I assure you and all of... Equestria's Finest," Luna smiled inwardly, that was a good phrase! "You will have your concerns addressed. Thank you again for your service."

"Thank you kindly Majesty," Trail Burr, once so fearsome, now one of the few familiar faces in

the new Equestria Luna found herself in, said before bowing and walking off to the side of the court.

Watching him go, Luna leaned down to her Chamberlain, making a mental note that she was having private conferences far more often than Celestia did.

"Extended absence?" Luna asked quietly. "I was banished you know."

"The civil service has determined that both banishment and exile are non-operative terms that do not accurately reflect the current co-sovereign harmonization agenda," Applebee said.

"Accordingly, extended absence is the preferred nomenclature, with of course the greatest of regret for any imprecision the use of said term may cause to historical fidelity."

Luna nodded, more out of reflex than anything else. She'd handled her first night court challenge, two if you ignored her disastrous entrance, three if you included the opening speech she could barely remember. Her eyes darted about the throne room. While most of the ponies there had affable smiles or were intently waiting their turn, more than a few were carefully watching her while pretending to look at someone else. Probing for weakness, Luna thought. The princess noticed that the shackled ponies that had initially startled her with their ... what was it Rarity had said? Extremely fashion-forward tastes? They looked as nervous as Luna felt.

"Applebee, would it be possible to get a list of who's attending tonight's court and where they are standing?" Luna whispered. "I'd like to do a bit of reading on some of the ponies here."

"Already done your Majesty," Applebee replied. "Daring Whooves, my personal assistant, currently sans title or appointment, has been recording all entries and exits. He's a bit naive and new to the ways of the Civil Service, but indispensable to me."

So, she had a staff of two, Luna thought. That's progress, and it meant she wasn't completely alone up here.

"Chamberlain, if you would?" Luna asked aloud, starting to get the hang of this court thing. Night Court may not have been what she expected, but she was rising to the occasion.

"As the princess wishes," Applebee said. "The court will now hear all those who stand accused of violating Equestrian law and have demanded Royal Justice. Let it be known that all words spoken by the accused will be held against them, that they can withdraw their petition and that there is no appeal to the decision of the throne! Choose your course wisely ponies!"

That sounded ominous, Luna thought. Turning to Applebee for information she watched in horror as her Chamberlain bowed, turned and then walked off, leaving Luna totally alone before her court.