

Once again, the yellow pegasus crept into bed, exhausted from her day's labors. Once again, she sighed, alone in the pooling darkness. She wrapped the blankets tightly about herself, a barrier against the silence, and turned to stare at the wall through errant strands of her mane.

The night deepened, and the light from the rising moon played with her silhouette, casting her shadow against the blank wall beside her bed. She tried to smile. At least someone she knew would keep her company. Her lip trembled, and once again, she wept until she fell asleep.

The next day began as the last: rise early, prepare a meal for the animals who were recovering in her care, then tend to the problems of any small visitor who had arrived at that hour. From there, it was a simple checklist. Birdhouses clean? Check. Burrows stable? Check. Eggs collected? Check. Angel's grave... well, that deserved more than a check mark. She paused, as she always did, and watered the flowers that grew by the tiny headstone. Check.

Then it was time to prepare lunch for her wards, and for herself. She lost herself in her work, tending with efficiency and a gentle touch, then rested for a while. From the slight rise near her home, she could watch the sun follow its graceful arc through the sky, and the citizens of Ponyville go about their afternoons.

Ah, Ponyville: she rarely visited, and even then, it was only to restock whatever supplies she could not fabricate for herself. Even when she was there, she would travel in silence. No pony really thought about her, she knew, unless an animal was in need. Once it was in her care, they would put her out of their minds again. It had been different, once.

Some time in the past, there had been a new pony in town: a unicorn who was talented, and intelligent, and devoted to her studies. More importantly, she was also socially awkward, and tended to prefer quiet friendships. They had bonded almost instantly, after a difficult first meeting, thanks to the unicorn's dragon companion.

The next day, they had traveled together with other friends - *her! traveling!* - into the Everfree Forest, to defeat what appeared to be a truly frightening threat to Equestria. She had helped a manticore, of all things, who just needed a little love. Then, with her new friends, she defeated the terrifying Nightmare Moon, revealing the younger sister of the Princess, Luna.

It felt like a dream, now. When the adventure had ended, the unicorn - Twilight, she thought her name was - returned to her studies under the Princess. The rest of the group of adventurers, like herself, returned to their lives. Such as they were. That would be three years ago, this summer.

She still had the necklace. It was tucked away, high on a shelf in her armoire. From time to time, she would pull it out, and look at it in the morning sun. Lately, though, it just made her feel lonely.

Lonely was a poor word to describe the feeling. Abandoned was closer, but still not quite right.

With some effort, she pushed the debate out of her mind. She glanced at the sky, and mumbled in frustration. She had been woolgathering, and now it was late.

She returned to her work. First, the day's last meal for her patients. Then, helping a blue jay with a cut on his leg. The poor thing, it must have been waiting a while for her, judging by the stains on her stoop. Finally, a quick good-night to the creatures heading for their own beds, and a hello to an early night-visitor or two. The rest of the evening would be hers.

Not that she had any plans.

She mused, then, on her options. She could head into Ponyville, but at this hour most of the ponies would be turning in. She could go on a walk... but it was scary in the dark, even under a full moon, and the Everfree was very close. She resigned herself to another night at home, with her thoughts.

After a simple dinner of oatmeal pancakes, she decided to spend some time at the tiny pond near her home. Angel had helped her build what amounted to a pier, a few summers ago, so she could rest by the water without sitting in the mud. He had always been helpful, despite his sour disposition. She missed him terribly.

The pond was quiet. It was still cool in the April evenings, and most of the crickets and frogs would rather stay warm in the mud and muck. She watched the moon and stars in the water, the faint shimmering of its surface imparting a magical feeling to the familiar sight. She used to feel at peace, here. Warm, despite the chill. She realized she felt... nothing. An emptiness, matched only by the void above.

Not for the first time, she wondered what the point was. She spent her days helping the woodland creatures, and sometimes, by extension, the ponies of the nearby village. She spent her nights alone with her thoughts. She never had a visitor who was not in need, and never spoke to a creature who was not in pain.

She pondered leaving it all. She could move into Ponyville... or move to another town... or slide silently into the dark waters here...

No... she couldn't. So many creatures depended on her, and her alone. She had her duty, both to her talent and the animals under her care. As tempting as it would be to do something else, be something else... it wasn't meant to be.

"Meant to be," she murmured into the still air. She chuckled, then, without mirth. The silence broken, she spoke again. It felt good to voice her thoughts, even if she was alone. "I wonder how much of this was *meant to be*. Whose grand cosmic plan deemed it necessary for me to be so alone, so... *without*. If this is *meant to be*, I'd like to talk to the person making the decisions."

She rolled over on to her back, and gazed at the moon. It was waxing gibbous, and would be full tomorrow, if she judged correctly. "I just," she continued, "just... try so *hard*..." Her voice fell into a whisper, and tears began to well in her eyes. "...and no matter how much I love, and how much I care... and how much Kindness I show..." The emphasis was clear. "It's never enough." The tears flowed freely, now, running back into her pink mane, leaving a damp trail like a mask.

"I... I don't know anymore," she whispered to the dark, her voice a bare squeak. "I don't know *anything* anymore, except my work." With that final admission, she began to sob, and rolled back onto her chest. Sharp, ragged breaths did nothing to alleviate her despair, and she wept in the darkness until sleep rolled her under.

She woke the next morning with the dawn. Her mane was a tangled mass, her coat and feathers unkempt from her night in the cold. Shuffling into her home, she went through the motions. Food. Patients. Chores. Tombstone...

The tombstone.

A flash of anger overtook her. She knew it was irrational, knew it was misplaced, but it didn't matter. Why did he get sick? Why did he have to die? Didn't he know she needed him? Didn't he care? It wasn't... it wasn't *fair*. Shocked at her own selfishness, she snapped out of her rage. She was shaking the tombstone, *glaring* at it, and forced herself to stop. Try as she might, however, she couldn't let it go.

She collapsed to the ground next to it, crushing the flowers under her weight. "Oh, Celestia," she cried, "I'm pathetic. A rabbit. I needed a *rabbit*. A rabbit was my only friend." She laid there, wrapped in her melancholy, for nearly an hour before rising to meet her other responsibilities.

The rest of the day was spent in a haze. She performed her tasks to the best of her ability, but there was no true care in her deeds, no extra time spent with her patients. She ate a small meal of leftover greens, and returned to the pier to sit, and wait. She waited for sunset, and waited for moon rise. In time, it did, the barest edge of its silvery orb clearing the horizon and illuminating the darkness. The mare watched it until the moon had risen fully, and then settled down to watch its reflection in the water.

"I wonder, sometimes," she began, "if you can hear me, Princess. And I wonder, sometimes, if you would listen if you could." She glanced at her silhouette in the stars below, then looked again to the moon. "I'm lonely," she said, simply. "Utterly, profoundly lonely. All there is for me is my work, and sleep, and work again. I don't feel any appreciation for what I do... nor love, nor respect. I'm just 'that pegasus with the animals', if anyone even thinks of me at all."

She took a breath, and looked at the moon directly. "If Celestia spoke truthfully", she winced at the words. Doubting the Sun Princess felt akin to blasphemy. "If she spoke the truth, then you know how I feel. You did all you could for those you love... only to have them take your efforts

for granted. I... I don't want to be worshipped, or honored, or adored." She looked back into the water, and dipping her hoof into it, sent ripples across the reflected sky. "I just want a friend."

She fell silent, and watched the ripples expand outwards, making the stars dance.

Hours passed, and the moon reached its apex. The pegasus stood, stretching her legs, and her wings. She looked up into the night, and said, "I... should probably spend a few hours in my bed. I need my rest. Thank you for listening, Luna."

She turned towards her home, rolling her shoulders to relieve the stiffness. Much to her surprise, a voice answered from the shadows.

"You're welcome," it said, simply. It was a low, feminine voice, and seemed almost to caress her with a physical touch. She froze.

"Please, don't be afraid," continued Luna, stepping from the darkness beside the pond. "I'm pleased to hear from you, although I wish it were under better circumstances. It's been some time since we last met, hasn't it, Element?"

"I... uh... yes," she answered, reflexively backing away from the alicorn.

Luna smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling with concern. "You aren't the first to talk to me at night, and I doubt you'll be the last... but I felt compelled to visit you in person. I'd like very much to know what's going on, and perhaps, in my own small way, I can help."

"Oh, no, I couldn't..." she began, drawing up on herself.

"Nonsense. If you're embarrassed or worried about me, here, well... call it repayment of a debt."

This confused the pegasus, and for a moment she forgot her fear. "Debt? What debt?"

"All those years ago, in the Everfree Forest," she glanced in its direction, "you freed me from *my* loneliness. It would be poor manners to deny you the same."

"I don't understand... I mean, I do... but not really."

"Come," replied Luna. "Let us rest here, on the hill. I'll explain everything."

"Oh... okay," she replied, curiosity winning over timidity. She followed the slate blue pony up the hill, and rested beside her.

The Princess settled down, and looked out over the sleeping village. A silent moment passed, then she took a breath, and began. "When you, and your friends, stopped my plans... you did

more than that. You changed me, possibly more than you can know. Each of you, each Element, tore down a barrier between my true self, and the world around me.”

She looked across the sky, glancing from constellation to constellation. “Honesty tore away the lies I’d been telling myself. Generosity removed the envy I held for my sister, and her ponies. Loyalty reminded me of my duties to the Great Cycle, duties I had shirked. Laughter took away the sadness I had worn like armor. Magic... well, that’s a little harder to describe. She reminded me of all the possibilities in life, all the people and lives I could touch.”

She smiled at the pegasus by her side. “But your change... your *gift*... was more profound. You showed me that I could be loved. I was *worthy* of love, and the care of another. Without Kindness, the other gifts would be wasted on a heart that was still cruel, because I would not know how to be otherwise. It was your gift that allows me to be here, now, with you.”

“I’m happy I helped you, Princess, and I’m happy you’ve found your way. I’m just... not. Happy. Or anything, really.”

Luna nodded, and continued. “That’s why I’m here. I don’t want to see you make the same choices I did, the same mistakes. While you wouldn’t end up as I did...” she trailed off, and looked at her old prison for a moment. She continued, “You’d still do yourself irreparable harm.”

“But what can I do, Luna?” she pleaded. “I’m shy, painfully so. I have so many responsibilities, and so much to do. I simply don’t know *what* to do, either to feel better, or to change.”

“Will you be my friend?”

There was a pause, and the pegasus looked into Luna’s eyes, searching for a clue.

“I’m sincere, Fluttershy, and I ask you again. Will you be my friend?”

“Y... yes, yes, of course I will,” she replied, nervously, “but...”

“No buts. Friends don’t take excuses. Your loneliness is not unique, indeed, I *know* its depths. But, *together*, I think we could face it.” She smiled, and despite the chill, the pegasus felt warmth once more. “So, I ask you: will you be my friend? Will you listen when I need you to, be there when I ask? Most importantly, *will you rely on me when you need someone to do the same?*”

“Luna,” she began, timidly. “I... yes. I will.” She began to cry, but for the first time in years, they were tears of joy. “I would love to be your friend.” She rested her head against the alicorn’s side, and hid her face in her mane.

Luna placed a wing over her companion, and gently pulled her into a hug. “And I am honored to be yours, Fluttershy.” She rested her head gently upon her pink mane, and with tears in her

eyes, she murmured, "Now, tell me everything."

Celestia pulled a velvet cloth over the palantir, obscuring the scene, and settled down to sleep. She smiled through her window at her sister's moon, still a few hours from setting. "I'm so relieved you're beginning to understand, sister. You *are* worthy of love, and respect, and admiration. You are a beautiful creature, as mysterious as your night, and, sadly, as rarely appreciated."

She rested her royal head against her pillow, and murmured as sleep rolled her under.

"Sometimes, it just takes a little Kindness."

The smile on her lips lasted well into morning.