

Return to the stars

A Royal Destiny / Worlds Apart crossover story by Aien Hime

As she softly let her brush pet her hair, she couldn't help but feel a little sad. In the large window in front of her she saw her long yellow hair flowing from her neck. Soon, it would all be gone. It was so long, so pretty... She had let it grow all her life, but now she had to cut it off. It was a custom every married woman had to face. And soon, she would be one of those. Not that it meant anything towards her future husband. After all, she was the oldest woman of her household and heir to the position of steward family of Ekiyu forest. It only meant that if she took a husband, her family considered her old enough to handle responsibilities, and considered her able to step up to the position of steward any time. To cut off her hair only showed her allegiance to the queen.

Yet, as she felt her long, soft hair again, Elia couldn't help but wonder if it was all just a façade. Did she really have to cut off her long hair to show the country she was willing to serve her queen? None of the common folk had to give in to any such weird customs. Nor did anyone at the court cut their hair. Only the steward families had to do this. Did queen Hazante even care? Yet, it wouldn't help her to think about it like this. Even if the queen wasn't bothered with whether she cut her hair or not, her family most certainly was. Her engagement to Konrou from the border district was a big deal, and for their wedding, they would follow every custom there was. For a few generations now, her family had to marry with boys from lesser families. Her own father had only been the son of a merchant who traded with ponies from the trade route. Elia suspected this was why her mother was so pressed to have her wedding as formal as possible; she was ashamed of her own husband. But boys were a rare thing in noble families in this country. My, even among the common folk boys were lesser than girls. The other side of being the strongest country in the continent, she supposed. After all, the powers the royal family of this country possessed were legendary, but not passed down on boys. Yet, the powers were dominant when it came to inheriting, so almost no boys were born in even the lesser noble families.

But Konrou was one of those rare boys born in a noble family, and he was to be her husband. The father of her future children. The reason she had to cut her hair. Not that she disliked Konrou, he was a nice man, as far as she could tell. She had only met him twice, after all. Their parents had arranged the wedding. She was still enraged by it, that she could not marry the man she loved. There was no such man in her life at the moment though, but that didn't mean there still couldn't be one in the future. She had not been able to convince her parents to wait a few years. She still felt so young, like there was yet so much to do. But she had no other brothers and sisters, so she had to be ready if something happened to her parents... She put her brush back on her vanity. It could not be helped. It was her future, laid out before her, something she could not walk away from.

"Eila, sweetheart," a voice said from the other side of the door.

"Come in," Eila said, and a moment later her mother appeared in the room. Not for the first time these days, Eila considered her mother's short hair strange, and she wondered how her mother would have looked like if the stupid tradition didn't exist.

"Are you not yet in bed? You know tomorrow will be an important day."

"I know, mother," Eila said with a sigh. "I know. Tomorrow Konrou will arrive for the wedding, and I have to look nice and presentable. I just couldn't get some sleep, that's all."

Eila noticed the concerned look that had appeared on her mother's face.

“Oh, dear, you must be so excited. But staying up isn’t going to bring tomorrow to you faster. Now, come and go to sleep. You need all your energy tomorrow.”

Her mother had walked to her bed and had taken the sheets up. Yeah, right, excited. That was exactly the right word, not. Yet she followed her mother’s advice, because she knew better than to argue with her. When she lay in bed and her blankets were nicely tucked in, her mother gave her a goodnight kiss.

“Sleep well, my dear. I will see you tomorrow morning. I am sure all will go just fine.”

“I know it will, mother, I know it will,” Eila replied dutifully. Her mother smiled at her one last time, and then took her candle with her and left Eila’s room. Even before she had stepped into her bed, Eila had been convinced she would not be able to fall asleep. She simply stared out of her window to the bright stars in the sky. Her future... Would it really be like this? Was she bound to her fate, just like the stars were bound forever to the great blue in the sky? No, it wasn’t like that. It couldn’t be like that. Because... there were falling stars, right? Those that had broken free of their destiny and began a journey on their own.

Talking about falling stars... Eila sat up straight in her bed. Something was moving in the sky. A light... was it? A falling star? She could make a wish! But it didn’t look like a falling star. It wasn’t a dot of light far away from her. It was like... Someone was actually falling out of the sky! Before she could move or act, the pony that had fallen out of the sky had hit the ground. Eila didn’t hesitate, she got up, opened her window and jumped out, once again being grateful for her room on the ground floor. She ran through the bushes, and found herself in front of the garden walls within only a few moments. She hoped her old way of climbing over the wall, by using the old tree, would still work for her. Slowly she put a hoof on the lowest branch, and sighed with relief to find the old branch still didn’t break with her weight. As she climbed the tree, she wondered why on earth she was doing this. Was she running away? Was that what she truly wanted? Or did she really want to help the pony she saw falling from the sky.

When she reached the top, she paused. She looked over the fields than were between the forest and her mansion, but she didn’t see anything that looked like a pony. Had she imagined things? What pony fell out of the sky, anyway? It is not like ponies could fly. And she couldn’t have fallen off the mountains, that was still miles from here. But just when she was about to give up, she saw something sparkling on the ground, a few hundred meters from herself. Was it the pony? She jumped off the wall into the high summer grass, and galloped towards the light that she had seen.

When she reached the pony, she had to blink quite a few times before she could believe her eyes. In front of her lay the most extraordinary pony she had ever seen. A pony with a silvery white coat and silver mane that shone with a purple glow in the light of the moon. her entire coat seemed to give off some light, like she was something really special. Was she a star fallen out of the sky? Were stars actually ponies? Was this what happened when stars fell down? But what interested her most was not even the sparkling coat, nor the beautiful hair. She finally realised why this pony came out of the sky. For this pony had not only a horn on her head, like the legendary unicorns, but also beautiful wings on her back, something she had never seen nor heard before.

Eila shook her head furiously. What was she doing? This beautiful pony obviously needed her help, and all she could do was wonder about this pony.

“Hello?” she whispered softly.

“Can you hear me?” The pony didn’t move or respond. Slowly Eila touched the pony’s back with her hoof.

“Hey. Are you okay?” she whispered again. This time, the pony made a soft sound. Not much later she slowly opened her eyes to reveal a soft purple color. As soon as she saw Eila, she jumped up, only to almost fall back on the floor again.

“Wow, take it easy there. Don’t worry, it’s okay,” Eila said with a soft voice, but the pony still looked at her suspiciously. Eila didn’t really know what to say, so she just waited for the pony to respond. The pony looked from Eila to the forest to the mansion, and back at Eila.

“This isn’t right...” she whispered softly. “This isn’t right at all... Where am I?”

"Are you lost?" Eila asked, not sure what to say. The white pony was still inspecting the surroundings.

"No... Please, tell me, where am I?" she asked, and she stared at Eila.

"You're close to Ekiyu forest, in the Friendship Lands." If possible, the white pony looked at her even more confused.

"What?"

"Eh... you know the Friendship Lands, right?" Eila asked unsure. How could the pony not know the Friendship Lands? Were they not the strongest and best-known country on the continent? But the pony shook her head, which made Eila even more unsure of where this pony came from, who she was in the first place.

"May I ask where you came from? Maybe I know that place, and I can help you to get back there," Eila proposed. The pony didn't reply to her, but instead she simply stared at the sky.

"You came from up there?" Eila asked bluntly.

"Maybe... something like that," the winged unicorn replied.

"So... you got to get back to the stars?" Eila asked unsure. How could a pony possibly come from the stars? Yet she had never seen a pony with wings before, let alone heard from one. Probably... It could be that she came from up there. What did she know?

"Can't you fly back up there?" she asked when she noticed the pony was not going to reply to her previous question. To her surprise, the pony smiled at her.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. I need to open a gate, but I don't think I can do it here like that. I need some kind of magic, because for some reason I cannot call upon my own here. I don't know why, but it's like it has all left me, like I... left my ability to go back on the other side of the gate."

Okay, that wasn't helping at all, Eila thought. Some kind of magic, eh...?

"Well... I know our royal family has a kind of magic. Royal powers, they are called. It's said it runs in my family too, but only a teeny bit, because I am a descendant of some princess, long ago. But it's so little we can't do anything with it. But I could take you to the queen's palace. It's a few days walking from here, but maybe they can help you?" Eila proposed, but the pony shook her head in response.

"I'm afraid that won't do. I don't have a few days to walk there, nor do I want any to see me, even if I can hide my wings and my horn."

While she said that, the pony glowed a bit, and then her wings and her horn mysteriously disappeared. Her mane turned purple, as did her tail, and suddenly the pony looked like any common pony she had ever seen. There was no trace left, nothing to see that would make one wonder whether there was something special to her.

"That's better," the pony said, and Eila noticed for the first time she actually had a really sweet voice.

"May I ask your name?" she asked Eila.

"My name is Eila, of the steward family of the Ekiyu forest region," Eila said formally, as she had practiced so many times.

"My name is Lunarstar," the pony told her. Lunarstar... a fitting name for a pony who sought to return to the stars.

"I assume that is Ekiyu forest?" Lunarstar asked while she pointed towards the trees in the distance.

"Yep, that it is..." Eila's voice trailed away. Ekiyu forest... didn't an old story tell...

"Maybe I can help you after all!" she said excited. Lunarstar looked at her wondering, and Eila continued: "An old tale says that Ekiyu forest was born as a gift to the ponies that lived in this region for helping the queen in her time of need. It is indeed a wonderful forest, full with fruit trees and herbs with all kinds of functions. Anyway, it is said that it was born out of a stone gifted with the

royal powers of the queen of those days, which should be in the center of the forest. I am sure that if there is anything that can help you, it would be that stone.”

Lunarstar pondered over her words for a little bit.

“Are you sure of this tale?” She asked at last.

“Has anyone recently seen the stone?” Eila sighed and shook her head.

“I... I don’t think anyone has ever seen the stone.” This time it was Lunarstar’s turn to sigh.

“So if we should go looking for it, it’s just one big gamble.”

“I guess so...” Eila felt some kind of hopelessness coming over her. She had been so sure she had found the answer to Lunarstar’s problem, but the white pony was right. There was no guarantee whatsoever they would find the stone.

“Is it a big forest?” Lunarstar asked. “Oh, no, not really. You can travel from east to west in only three hours.”

“If it’s so small, then why hasn’t anyone ever found the stone if it is real?” Lunarstar asked. Eila noticed the sarcasm in her voice. She didn’t believe the story, and now that she thought of it, Eila wasn’t even sure whether she did.

“The story said the stone was protected by magic, and only those with a pure heart can find a way to the stone. To protect it from ponies who wish to use it for their own purposes, and all that.”

For a while, they just stood together silent in the meadow. The night sky was growing ever darker, while more and more stars appeared at the sky. From time to time Lunarstar looked up, probably wondering how she was going to return home. Eila wondered if she could ask the pony where she came from, whether there were more worlds than her own out there, a world where maybe winged unicorns were not so rare. But she didn’t even dare to ask, for she did not want to offend the pony or scare her away. She liked Lunarstar, for the few moments that she had known her. She had taken her own worries away for a short while, worries that somehow seemed so unimportant now.

“I think we should try to find the stone,” Lunarstar said to the darkness.

“You think? But what if we don’t find it?” Eila wondered.

“Then we’ll look for another way. But I really want to go back, for there are things I must do...” Her voice trailed off into the night.

“Will you come with me?” she asked a moment later.

“I dunno, I...” Would she come with Lunarstar? Konrou would arrive tomorrow, and she had to look rested and happy when she would meet him. Wandering all night with Lunarstar probably wouldn’t make her rested, and she somehow doubted she would be happy, whether they would find the stone or not. Yet did it really matter that much? She wasn’t so sure she wanted to marry Konrou anyway. She wanted to marry someone she loved, not someone she just... liked. And she wanted to help out Lunarstar. Wasn’t her returning home more important than her own silly wedding?

“I’ll come with you,” she said firmly, and she saw the relief on the pony’s face.

“Follow me, I know the entrance to the forest.” She turned her back to her mansion, and walked towards the forest in front of her. She heard Lunarstar hurrying after her.

“Do you know your way in there?” she asked Eila.

“A little,” she replied, “as long as we stay on the roads. But it shouldn’t be that much of a problem. If we can get passed the magical barrier, I am pretty sure we will find our way to the stone without a problem.”

“You’re right. But I’m afraid getting passed that barrier will be the largest problem, if nobody has ever done it...”

"Nobody has ever mentioned getting to the stone," Eila corrected Lunarstar. "That doesn't mean nobody has ever done it."

Within minutes, they had reached the borders of Ekiyu forest.

"Does anyone live in here?" Lunarstar asked while they searched for the path leading them into the forest. "Nah, nobody. This place belongs to all who live in this part of the country; its recourses are for the good of all. My family has to make sure nobody abuses it. But nobody lives there, so it's not like we have to be afraid of being seen, this deep in the night."

This was something she hoped more than knew for sure. She didn't like the idea of her mother or father finding out that she was out here with a pony she barely knew, sneaking off into Ekiyu forest to find something that very well might be nothing but a legend, while she was going to meet her fiancé tomorrow. "Oh, here it is," she said, when she saw the sand path appearing before her. It leading into the darkness was not something she found particularly comforting, but she knew this was the only road they could take. Besides, any other road would probably be just as dark.

"Shall we enter?" She asked Lunarstar. "I suppose. It's dark, but to find the stone, we probably have to enter, right?"

Eila nodded in agreement, and then stepped on the road and walked into the forest. Strange, she thought, how different the forest looked in the darkness. She didn't recognise anything of the cheery, light forest she had played in so much as a child. But their goal was inside here, and there was no waiting for the morning.

“How are we ever going to find our way to the stone when we can’t see a thing?” Lunarstar complained, after she had tripped over a branch – again. They had been following the sand path for a while now, and they had discovered nothing yet. In fact, it was hard to see anything at all. The trees covered any possible light from the stars, so it was pitch black in the forest.

“If we’re going to find it, I’m pretty sure it won’t be a matter of seeing, but of feeling... believing. Trusting our hearts.” Eila said to the mysterious pony, who didn’t reply. Eila believed what she had just said- that was the path they should follow. Ponies travelled through this forest every day, seeing or not wouldn’t make a difference. There had to be another way to cross through the barrier, if only she could find out how.

For a few moments they continued to follow the path, sometimes almost losing the path, sometimes falling over branches on the ground. Eila furiously wished she had some kind of light, even though it wouldn’t help them reach their goal, it would definitely make the journey a lot easier.

“So what kind of family are you from? You mentioned your family has to maintain this forest,” Lunarstar asked when it appeared their path was going straight forward for a while.

“Oh, I’m the daughter of a steward family. There are quite a few of those, scattered across the country. We are local rulers, because the queen can’t possibly govern the entire country completely herself. And one day I will follow my mother, and become the steward of this region myself, or steward of Ekiyu forest as it’s officially called. Of course it includes more land than this forest, but that’s the official name.”

“Sounds like ponies here have quite a political structure, eh? Not something I’ve been used to.”

“Well... the country is not only large, but truly influential. Our queens are strong in the Royal Powers, and our history is long and rich. There is nobody who can stand up against us and survive, which scares me, sometimes. I’m not sure I want to be involved in such power.”

“But you can use it for good,” Lunarstar observed.

“That’s true. Once I am steward, I will try to improve life for all ponies in my region, it’s just... I sometimes don’t know if I can. My parents never let me take care of myself, so how am I supposed to know how to take care of others?”

“I think you’re rather good in it,” Lunarstar pointed out.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re helping me out, right? Without any selfish thought of your own. I find that truly remarkable. Not many ponies would act like that, you know.” No, in fact she didn’t know. How could she not help this pony? It was like something... she could not not do.

“They say it’s in the Royal Family’s blood,” Eila told Lunarstar, “To protect and guide the ponies they govern. They say it is the essence of the royal powers. Guide and protect.”

“Do you hold any of those powers?” Lunarstar asked, while they followed the path, that was now bending itself through the forest.

“I guess... I do, a little. The steward families, each of them, are founded by a child of a queen. My family descends from a unicorn, Daiya was her name.”

“Unicorns live here?!” Lunarstar asked surprised, and Eila felt bad that she had to disappoint the pony.

“They did. Sometimes they appear in a royal bloodline, usually as one of the later born. But the last one existed quite a long time ago. The royal families fear now they will never exist again, because it had never been so long since the last one was born. But who knows, maybe they will rise again, once.”

Suddenly the road bended deeply, and Eila stopped walking.

"What is it?" Lunarstar asked her.

"I don't know... it should be somewhere around here, the purple stone..." Eila's voice disappeared into the darkness.

"Purple stone?" Lunarstar did not understand.

"Yes... a stone that was somewhere near the road. It just always was there, and nobody questioned it, but now that I think of it... it was a rather weird stone. It was pure purple, and plants and trees couldn't or didn't grow on it. As children we used it as a place to meet each other, but now I think it has more significance than that."

"And it should be around here?"

"Yes, if this is the place I think it is. It's so hard to tell without the light of day."

Eila tried to find out where exactly she was, but without much success. She wasn't even sure if she was in the right place. Was the stone really here? She walked around a bit, but she didn't recognise anything at all. She was glad she was on the road, or else she would have been horribly lost.

"Why don't we just walk on? I don't think it was here after all," she told Lunarstar, who sighed wearily in response.

"Maybe I'll never get back home," she said when they were walking again.

"Of course you will!" Eila said surprised. She wasn't even sure of what she said herself, but she definitely did not want Lunarstar to give up hope.

"Even if we don't find the stone, we'll think of something else! And if we can't find a way, I will be sure to ask the queen. She'll help you, mark my words."

The light that appeared in front of her almost blinded her. It was a purple light, and Eila recognised the shade. It was the stone she had been looking for only a few moments ago! When their eyes had adjusted, they hurried towards the stone. It was indeed shining, as if someone had put loads and loads of candles inside, and it suddenly was see-through.

"What happened?" Lunarstar asked when they had reached the stone.

"I don't know! I said what I said and it illuminated!"

Lunarstar smiled mysteriously. "Then I guess you do have them."

"I have what?"

"The royal powers you speak of. You told me their essence was guide and protect. You just said you would bring me home, no matter what. You found the essence of your royal powers, that sure do run in your blood. That's why the stone responded, because you are true to your heart."

"Thank you, Lunarstar." Eila smiled at the white pony, who now looked all purple in the light of the stone.

"But now what do we do?" she asked, and she searched the surroundings.

"I think I see another light over there!" Lunarstar exclaimed, and she pointed to a place deeper into the forest, away from the sand path.

"You're right!" Eila agreed when she also noticed the purple light in the distance. They hurried towards the light, which wasn't easy through the overgrown forest. They stumbled over branches, fallen trees and rocks a few times, but they reached the stone in the end, which like the other one, was not overgrown with plants at all, in fact, there was hardly any green close to it.

"There's nothing here, either." Lunarstar said disappointed, but Eila had already noticed the next stone.

"It's a path, or something! We should just follow the lights, and then we will find the true stone, I think!" She said excited.

“It does sound logical, doesn’t it? Let’s follow them, then, if we can, if the forest isn’t too overgrown with weeds and all,” Lunarstar agreed. Eila walked on through the plants, exited. So maybe the story was true, after all! Was she going to see the large stone, the heart of the forest she had to protect? And would it help her friend back home? Eila wasn’t 100 percent sure yet, but she truly, deeply hoped so.

"So how many have we passed now?" Lunarstar complained.

"I dunno... fifteen?" Eila sighed.

Their walk through the forest had become more and more troublesome; there were way too many trees and bushes to walk comfortably, and sometimes they had trouble finding the next stone. Eila had wondered a few times now if they weren't simply walking in circles, but she didn't recognise anything either. Even Lunarstar, who had been determined to see what was at the end of the line of stones, was beginning to complain now.

"Do you have any idea where we are?" Lunarstar, who walked behind her now, asked.

"No, to be honest. I've never been this deep into the forest. It's kind of forbidden, though I don't know exactly why. I've never been too far from the path. But I suppose we should be fine. The lights will guide us back if we don't find anything."

"There's the next!" Lunarstar pointed out. Eila saw it too, now, another purple light in the distance.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" She asked the white pony behind her, and she began to walk a little faster. Yet when they reached the next purple stone, it took them a while to find the next; it was further away than most of them had been, and as they soon found out, much harder to reach. The bushes were much closer now, as were the trees, and it was hard to reach the stone. Eila silently wondered how she ever was going to get home and pretend nothing had happened while her body was covered in scratches from branches now. Yet before she even could begin to think of a solution, her heart skipped a beat and she stopped walking, which caused Lunarstar to almost bump into her.

"What?" she asked irritated.

"Over there..." Eila almost whispered, while she pointed into the distance. Lunarstar stood next to her now, gazing to the place Eila was pointing. A bright light was shining there, reaching them broken because of the trees that blocked it. It was much brighter than the ordinary purple stones for sure; whatever caused this light was much larger and higher than any of the stones they had seen up until now.

"Let's go check it out!" Lunarstar shouted, and she ran towards the light, almost tripping over a branch she hadn't seen.

"Come on, Eila!" she yelled, and Eila began to follow her. Soon enough they reached the source of the light, and Eila first couldn't believe her eyes.

A giant purple stone stood in an open spot inside the forest. It was much higher than the others, and it was shaped as a decayed pyramid, pointing towards the sky. It was so much brighter and more magnificent than the stones that had guided them here, that Eila felt no doubt that this was, indeed, the stone they were looking for, the source of this forest gifted to them by a queen of old times.

"It's beautiful..." Lunarstar said while she walked around the huge stone.

"It really is... isn't it..." Eila agreed. It was the most magnificent thing she had ever seen, and it made her feel... content with the world, like somehow she was sure the world would become exactly like it should be. Were these the mysterious powers the royal family possessed? The powers she too, apparently, somehow possessed?

"But now what?" Lunarstar asked, which brought Eila back to the real world.

"Now what?" she asked confused.

"Yeah, you know... what about the stone, how are we going to use it, how am I going to get back home?"

Now that was something Eila had not yet thought about. Here they were, at the stone, and yet they had no idea how to use it.

"Try touching it," Eila proposed. Slowly Lunarstar approached the stone, she raised her hoof, and

reached out for the stone. Eila almost backed away for whatever could happen, but to her disappointment, nothing happened, at all. Lunarstar touched the stone again, and again at different places, but nothing whatsoever happened.

"Guess that's not it..." she said when she returned to Eila. "Maybe you should do it? You're probably the one that activated the stones in the first place." She suggested to Eila.

It sounded like a find idea, but when Eila touched the stone, again nothing happened, except that Eila could feel the stone... in a different way, like she was aware of its presence not only through her touch and her sight, but also because she could feel it... like she had another sense that told her that yes indeed, the stone was here. Maybe that extra sense that she felt was her share of the powers of the royal line, not strong enough to be actually used but still able to detect the presence of other powers?

"Nothing, Lunarstar... I can feel something odd, like I sense the stone is here, but that's it."

"Why don't you try wishing for something?" Lunarstar suggested. Eila once again touched the stone, this time she softly said: "I wish you could help me return Lunarstar back... to the stars."

She felt a weird flow of the powers through her body, but other than that, nothing happened. They waited for a while, and Eila tried it again, but once again, nothing happened.

"I'm afraid it won't work." Eila sighed. Lunarstar shook her head furiously.

"I refuse to accept that! There has to be a way. We made those stones light up somehow, so we must be able to activate this stone, however, whatever!"

Eila sat down in the sand, with her back to the stone.

"I know Lunarstar, I know... if only I knew how! I would like to help you so much, I really do, but I don't know either. Maybe only the queen knows now, how to use stones like this, or maybe you need to be able to handle those powers to make the stone work, I dunno... but I don't know it either. I wish I could help you return to... wherever you are from, Lunarstar."

Right when Eila was finished speaking those words, the stone lit up, and Eila was almost pushed away by the strength of powers that came flowing out of it. She quickly got back onto her four hoofs and stood next to Lunarstar, watching as the stone began to shine brighter and brighter.

"You did it again..." Lunarstar whispered while the stone actually began to open. It split up in four triangle shaped rocks, that slowly opened like a flower. They now saw the light came from within the stone, not from the rocks themselves. Something was in there that was so light it could actually shine through rock. When the stone was completely open and the four sides were lying flat on the ground, The light slowly began to dim, like it was focussing now on a smaller spot. The light began to take a peculiar shape, until Eila began to realise what it was – the light was shaping itself like a pony! When it had completed, Eila and Lunarstar were actually looking at a pony made of light, a pony wearing a crown Eila recognised all too well – the royal crown, which was still worn today by Queen Hazante, the crown that was said to hold special powers of its own.

The pony's long mane, made of millions of little lights, were like a wave on a lake that was bathing in the day's last light, while her eyes shone like bright stars in the sky. Her long tail was like the long grass in summer dancing on the wind.

"*Eila Daiya... You have summoned me,*" the pony said, without even moving her lips. She simply stood there, motionless, and it was like she transferred her words directly into Eila's mind.

"I... I guess I did..." Eila stammered. She glanced at Lunarstar, who was as amazed by the pony of light as she was.

"*I will grant you one wish, Eila Daiya, future steward of Ekiyu forest, descendant of Princess Daiya, but one wish only. I have seen your heart is pure. Choose your wish carefully.*" One wish... One wish

only. Yet, Eila suddenly realised, with that one wish she could change everything for herself. She could wish for the freedom she so desired, freedom from the steward line, freedom from the crown, freedom from her arranged marriage...

Yet when she looked next to her, she saw Lunarstar looking at her hopefully, waiting for her to repeat the words that had released the pony of light. It was indeed what she had come here for in the first place. To help Lunarstar get back home. It would be easy, to wish for her own freedom instead of Lunarstar's journey home. She could run away from everything with her new friend, and start a new life. But yet... Was it hers to decide what this pony was going to do?

"I have decided what my wish will be," she told the pony of light.

"Tell me, and I shall grant it."

"I want my friend Lunarstar to return to her home, wherever it is." Eila told the pony of light firmly. She would not let her own selfish thoughts guide her now. She would not decide for Lunarstar what to do, and she had already decided. Whatever it was she wanted for herself, she would be able to get through another way than a wish.

"So you accept your own destiny?" The pony asked her, and Eila was stunned. Did the pony actually know what she had been thinking?

"I do." She said, and she was surprised to feel she didn't even feel any doubt. Just a moment ago, she had actually thought of wishing for a new life of her own, but now that she had spoken the words out loud, she knew she would never be happy if she had chosen for herself. Her new friend needed this wish more than she did.

"Very well," the pony of light said, and she closed her eyes. For a moment nothing happened, and Eila and Lunarstar looked at each other expectantly, wondering what was going to happen next. Eila just wanted to ask if everything was going okay, when the pony opened her eyes again. Lunarstar began to glow. Her wings and her horn appeared again, and her mane turned back to silver. Eila was sure this was not Lunarstar's own doing. Lunarstar began to float in the air, and she soon was floating a few feet above the ground. She first looked a bit shocked, but it didn't take long for Lunarstar to accept the situation.

Apparently Lunarstar had the idea that everything was going well, for she smiled at Eila.

"Thank you Eila, I'll never forget this!" she yelled while she kept floating higher into the air, and Eila couldn't help but smile back.

"No problem! Any time! If you ever find a way to come visit me... Be sure to do so!"

"I will. Eila... I'm sure you'll become a great steward one day. Just do what you said you would... work to make everyone's life better, like you did for me," Lunarstar said with a smile, and then nodded at the pony of light.

There was a flash that blinded Eila for a moment, and when she got her sight back, she could still see Lunarstar shoot towards the stars. Then, as if nothing had happened, she was gone.

"So she came from the stars after all," Eila whispered. She had appeared so soon... But now she had appeared just as quick.

"It is not something you will be able to understand Eila. But you chose well." The pony of light startled Eila. She hadn't expected the pony to be there still. But she still stood there, in all her royal glory.

"Thank you... I guess. Will Lunarstar arrive at her home safely?" Eila asked. "*She will. But you must return also. Dawn is coming.*"

"I know..." Eila had almost turned around to return home, when she changed her mind.

"Who are you?" She asked the pony. "How come I could find you now, while I never even so much as heard a story about you before?"

The pony of light smiled. "*I am no who, Eila. I am but a memory of a queen from the past, the strength of her royal powers stored inside this stone to bring happiness and good luck to this part of the country, for she cherished it. And you could find me because your heart was set on helping your friend. For that is the essence of our existence, Eila. To help and protect, to guide and teach. Do not doubt what lays ahead of you. When the moment comes, you will know what to do.*"

Before Eila could ask more, the pony of light began to fall apart in millions of different points of light, that slowly returned to the centre of the stone. When all light was gathered there, the four parts of the stone slowly began to close, until the stone had completely returned to its original state. It was still giving off light, but a lot weaker than it had before. Eila knew she had to hurry if she ever wanted to find her way back; the lights would go out soon. She galloped as much as she could on her way

back, often tripping over branches and piles of leaves. Yet when she finally reached the stone on the sand path, she somehow didn't feel relieved at all. Was it really over? When she looked back while she tried to calm her breathing, she couldn't see any of the stones. Even the one at her hoofs had lost almost all of its light.

She shook her head, and began to walk back. The path seemed so much darker now, the dark trees so much scarier. She could sometimes see the hoofprints she and Lunarstar had made on their way into the forest. It felt ages ago now. So much had happened since then. Eila felt she had aged so much in only such a short period of time. Maybe, now, she was able to face Konrou tomorrow. Maybe he was not the guy she had always dreamed of, but he would do. He would be a great steward's husband, one who could raise their children well. And her hair... she couldn't help but smile when she realised maybe it wasn't such a big sacrifice after all. There were more important things in the world, ponies who needed her help. And who knows, a lot of influential ponies would attend her wedding, right? Maybe she could convince the queen to drop the weird tradition. I'll do whatever I promised you, Lunarstar. I'll work to make everyone's life better.

When she reached the open field again, and she saw the lights of her house in the distance, she finally realised how tired she was. In contrast to the path, the crossing of the field felt like ages. She climbed the wall of their mansion, and when she was on top, she stared at the stars one last time. Was Lunarstar up there, one of those countless points of light? Had she really been that, a star falling out of the skies, a star that had chosen her own path in life? Eila smiled softly. Maybe, falling stars were just that. She noticed the ray of light in the corner of her eye, and she turned her head just in time to see the falling star disappear behind the mountains that marked the borders of her country. Maybe, that too... was another pony, seeking someone's help to return home.

Eila jumped off the wall, and softly walked towards her window that was still open. She climbed inside, and had a quick peek at herself before she got in bed. She looked horrible; her face was scratched, her coat dirty... but it didn't feel bad. She had helped someone, made a new friend, discovered the secret of a forest that one day she had to protect... She didn't mind to have some scratches from an experience like that. Yet, for all that she had done, her bed was now the most appealing thing she could think of. She took her brush, and for one last time, brushed her long hair. Then she lay down in her bed, pulled her blanket over her body, and soon fell in a deep sleep.