

By Moon's Light

Brea's hand caressed the mare's warm muzzle, which she answered with a breathy nicker. Entirely black, the Friesian mare blended into the stall like an ethereal shadow, the glint of her eyes the only spark of light within the darkened stable. Brea gently traced her fingers to the mare's trailing forelocks, brushing them aside before kissing the mare upon the tip of her nose.

"I'm sorry, Moon. I really am." Her words hung in the air for a moment as she leaned into Moon's shoulder and wrapped her arms around the mare's broad neck. The last months felt like an eternity, but sharing Moon's warmth once more chased the darkness in her heart away. Darkness. Under the blanket of early dawn, she could join Moon—just their thoughts, heartbeats, and breath in the starless void.

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The grass surrounding the arena remained green and lush, early dawn's dew already evaporating with the midday sun. By noon, July's humidity commenced and, thankfully, disguised Brea's clammy hands as she fidgeted with the edges of Moon's reins. Around the arena, spectators flocked to the stands while a few equestrians warmed up by allowing curious children to greet their steeds. Hastily, Brea checked her phone's time before stepping into the nearest stirrup.

"Good luck! You and Moon are going to do great!" exclaimed a familiar voice. Brea smiled at the girl who stood at the edge of the stall doorway, coils of black hair peeking out from beneath her riding helmet.

“Thanks! You and Copper are going to do great too,” Brea replied as she continued mounting Moon. Brea gave Moon an energetic pat on the shoulder before steering her in the direction of her friend, Lyric. “You heard her, girl. Let’s prove her right!”

The sun created a glossy sheen upon Moon’s black coat as Brea guided her closer to the arena. Everything about this summer day echoed the word *new*. A new experience to begin within a new arena, and new scallop braids with white ribbons adorning Moon’s neck. Not to mention, Brea was about to ride in her first ever show with the first horse of her own.

For an entire year, Brea had avidly researched the purchase of a dressage horse of her own but to no avail. However, the moment her gaze locked upon Moon’s photo in the local newspaper, she felt something spark within her. She’d always adored Friesians with their lengthy strides, feathers, and wavy manes but never imagined the opportunity to purchase one. Even better, Moon’s previous owner had been a kind elderly woman who simply wanted Moon to have an opportunity to ride with another. Perhaps Moon’s owner had seen the glint in Brea’s eyes as she caressed Moon for the first time, but by the end of Brea’s visit to the ranch, Moon was loaded into their trailer. Today, Brea would aid Moon in achieving the life her previous owner had envisioned for her.

“And next into the arena is number eight, Moon Dancer ridden by Brea Fettleison. Moon Dancer is currently a seven-year-old Friesian mare, and this is Ms. Fettleison’s first time showing so a warm welcome to her and Moon Dancer!” broadcasted the announcer from over the speakers. Brea patted Moon’s shoulder one last time before bringing her to an energetic working trot into the arena.

They moved as one entity, Moon and Brea guiding and following each other's cues. Moon's limbs moved gracefully beneath Brea as they slowed to a halt for Brea's brief salute under the spotlight of the sun. Brea then returned Moon to a working trot to reach the end of the arena.

Left. Left. Canter. Brea's mind buzzed with directions, contemplating each subtle tug of the reins and lean of her body. Moon's hooves thumped a steady rhythm in the packed sand that Brea wished her own heartbeat could slow down to meet.

Time both slowed and accelerated within the arena. As Brea eased Moon from her last working trot to a halt for a final salute, she knew that they'd made a few mistakes. However, Brea's heart soared within her chest as she guided Moon out of the arena. She leaned forward in her saddle to embrace Moon's neck before continuing on toward a grassy space to spectate.

"We did it, Moon! You were amazing," Brea whispered into Moon's ear. Lyric sat atop her chestnut Hanoverian stallion, Copper Monarch, and high-fived Brea as she passed. The rest of the show day continued as expected, and Brea shook with excitement as she was handed a yellow ribbon from the judge—her first ever ribbon.

"Oooh, that yellow ribbon really matches Moon's coat nicely!" mentioned Lyric as they loaded their equipment and tack into their trailers.

"And your red ribbon matches Copper really good too!" Lyric and Brea hugged each other before parting ways for the evening. Already, the crickets had commenced their chirping in the late afternoon air as Brea led Moon into the trailer.

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Like the afternoon of their first show, the crickets chirped just outside the stable, breaking the stillness before the approaching dawn. Across from Moon's stall, the yellow ribbon still hung

with a layer of dust upon its silky fabric ruffles. It matched Moon's saddles and bridles that lay dormant with a similar film of dust within the tack room. How long had it been since Brea stepped foot in the tack room? Moon let out a sigh.

"I missed you." Brea felt the need to apologize ten times more and travel back in time, warn her past self that something was wrong. The last few weeks, Brea lied on her back in bed, gazing up at the ceiling and contemplating why she hadn't paid more attention to Moon's hesitancy. She'd created excuses for all of it. The sky was slightly cloudy, hence the hint of a bluish-gray haze in Moon's eyes. When Moon began to shy away from common objects, Brea blamed it on the wind, a shadow, anything else. To be honest, she was scared of the unknown and of potentially losing her dear friend. It was finally Lyric who noticed the changes and convinced Brea to contact the veterinarian.

Destined to be permanently and completely blind. Each word shattered upon the stable floor. Brea had only been showing Moon in dressage for a year; they'd achieved so much together. The words brought tears to Brea's eyes, a devastating blow to everything Brea had envisioned for their future. *It'd be best, Brea thought, for Moon to spend the rest of her life free to roam in the pasture without the stresses of riding.* A few weeks later, she mentioned her thoughts to Lyric.

"But Brea, Moon likes riding with you. You were riding her the same day you got the news. Why wouldn't it be any different now?" said Lyric as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't know. I guess I just want Moon to live the happiest and most stress-free life she can," replied Brea.

"Brea, how did you feel going blind in one eye?" questioned Lyric after a moment's pause. Brea shook her head.

“That’s different—”

“Not really. You and Moon share so many things in common. If you can still ride and do all the things you love while being partly blind so can Moon,” explained Lyric. Brea gazed through her bedroom window to the stable afar with a sigh. “Brea, how long has it been since you’ve even visited her?”

“I don’t know, a few weeks. I just don’t know how to treat her,” replied Brea.

“Treat her how you’d normally treat her! She’s still Moon, and nothing else about her has changed. Please, if you don’t feel like riding her, at least visit her soon and give her the love she deserves,” pleaded Lyric. After Lyric left, Brea couldn’t sleep, tossing and turning within the confines of her bed. Finally, as her alarm clock blinked four o’ clock, Brea sauntered to the corner of her room to throw on her stable boots.

Now, Brea stood in Moon’s stall, wondering how to gain the mare’s forgiveness. The sky brightened to indigo, and the first birds began to sing from the distant oaks and maples. For the first time since Brea entered Moon’s stall, Moon stepped away from the dark shadows at the back of her stall to near the stall door. Brea’s gaze followed in Moon’s direction, landing upon the dusty yellow ribbon upon the wall.

Trailing one hand along Moon’s side, Brea crept her way out of the stall to the tack room. The room still held the fragrance of grain, fresh hay, and aging leather as Brea drifted inside. She reached for the familiar blue halter upon the nearest hook, feeling its solid weight in her hands for a moment. Moon tilted her head to the side as she listened to the jingling of the metal halter buckles in Brea’s hand. The halter slipped over Moon’s ears and muzzle easily, allowing for Brea to attach the leadrope.

“It’s been a long time, Moon, but I think it’s time we take a walk. You know, you and I have a lot in common now,” exclaimed Brea.

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“Halt,” Brea whispered. Moon slowed to a halt center arena for Brea to complete her salute. A song by The Byrds danced in the air from the arena speakers as Brea directed Moon into a medium walk. Moon’s limbs fell into the rhythm of the music with the same energy as the guitar’s chords.

“Trot.” Moon followed as they’d previously practiced. Unlike their first dressage show, Brea maintained a steady grip upon the reins as she guided Moon with almost entirely her words alone. Now, Brea worried that her voice might waver or be drowned out by the music, but Moon continued to follow, reassuring Brea with each step.

“Shoulder-in.” The travers were no doubt the most complex move for Moon to learn. *Forehead straight. Weight on inside. Slide outside leg back.* Brea shifted her weight in the saddle, her outside leg sliding behind Moon’s girth. To Brea’s relief, Moon maintained her rhythm as she angled her body to the right. Brea struggled to contain her smile as Moon continued down the edge of the arena. Together, they danced across the packed sand.

“Halt.” Moon slowed to a final pause mid-arena. Brea held both reins in one hand to extend her right arm, nodding to the judge. A farewell and bow from both of them. As they exited the arena, Brea embraced Moon’s neck and patted the mare’s shoulder with pride.

“We did it, Moon! You were amazing,” exclaimed Brea. From her spot in line for the arena, Lyric waved her hands and whistled a congratulation. Moon nickered and swiveled her ears to the side in response. Brea’s mind had been so focused on guiding Moon and swarmed with

exhilaration that she wasn't exactly sure how well they'd done overall. However, Brea's heart thudded within her chest—breath hitching for a moment—as the announcer broadcasted the names of those receiving awards for her class. The sun cast a glow upon Moon's black coat as Brea walked her into the center of the arena. Despite the bluish-gray haze of Moon's eyes, they shone like any other's, glinting in the warm light.

“And first place goes to Moon Dancer ridden by Brea Fettleon! And...” Muffled voices suddenly cut through the announcement for a brief moment. “...we've just learned that Moon Dancer happens to be fully blind. What an amazing accomplishment for both of them!” A cheer rose from the crowd. Brea planted a kiss upon the side of Moon's neck.

“You hear that, Moon? They're cheering for you!”