

“The Great Temple?!” Celestia looked around her again. The sparse room around her certainly fit with what she knew of the monks. And, somehow, she felt like she knew she’d been here for hours. She also felt that she was very hungry. “So, uh, you’re not the kind of monks that fast, are you?”

Brother Skipping Stone’s smile didn’t falter even slightly. “We are not. However, what you smell is a meal we have prepared for you ponies.” He gestured towards a large pot atop a fire. “We do not normally eat between breakfast and lunch.” The sound of hooves came from outside the door. “Ah, and here they come now.”

Twilight Sage, Flash Burn, Morning Glory, Shimmerdust, Amaranth, and Hurricane filed into the dining hall one by one. Their faces lit up upon seeing Celestia awake. They looked like they were ready to smother her with affection, but when the old goat turned to look at them, they slowed down and sat around the table.

“This is stew made with vegetables from our garden, and we have all the fresh spring water you could ever hope to drink. If there’s anything else we can do to make your stay here more comfortable, please let any of the monks know.” Brother Skipping Stone calmly exited the room, leaving the ponies to themselves.

Celestia did not hesitate in grabbing a bowl and filling it with sweet, sweet stew. She practically flung it on the table and dove into it before remembering that her friends must be very worried. She looked up from her bowl with a guilty look on her face, marred by stew splashed everywhere.

“So, uh, Great Temple, eh guys?”

Sage was the first to speak. “Princess, you just had the most immense traumatic episode I’ve ever heard of. What happened?”

“No idea.” Celestia grinned. Why was that funny? Something horrible had obviously happened. But it was banished from her mind, and all she could think of was the tasty, tasty food and kind company.

“You were crying every moment you returned to consciousness,” said Morning Glory, who was starting to gather food on her plate.

“Oooh,” Shimmerdust interjected, “that cheese looks like it would be great for your collection. Can you imagine? Great Temple cheese! I wonder if it came from one of the cow monks?”

Morning Glory rolled her eyes and deliberately avoided taking any cheese. Celestia simply chuckled at the ongoing misunderstanding.

“Yeah,” Hurricane said between mouthfuls of grass, “but remember, Brother Skipping Stone did that awesome thing with the chanting and the big chamber and the candles. I didn’t even know goats could use magic. Heck, I thought they couldn’t even speak Equestrian. Guess being a city pony leaves you with a lot of prejudices.”

“Actually, you’re right,” said Sage, “most goats can’t do either. But they can learn to do both, and

the Great Temple is a good place for that.”

Only Flash still had a worried look on her face. “So, uh, you’re alright?”

“Mostly just confused, really.” Celestia began refilling her already-empty plate. “Isn’t the Great Temple closed to outsiders.”

Sage sighed. “Normally, yes, but...” he looked at Shimmerdust, “I swear, I have no idea how she did it.”

“Did what?”

Shimmerdust grinned, “Oh, yeah, the monk at the gate said I couldn’t get by unless we had a conversation first. Idunno. He was really nice, though. No pony’s ever followed me when my mind started wandering before.”

Sage put a hoof on his face. “The guard demanded that we prove ourselves by engaging him in a round of koan, a type of unsolvable riddle used by mystics to meditate upon the universe. It turns out that the only thing more puzzling than the contemplations of wise beings over thousands of years is the innavigable mind of my girlfriend.”

Celestia laughed again. “I have a feeling our visit here will go well.”

Sage frowned. “I hope so. When I asked Brother Skipping Stone to show us the Element of Laughter, he didn’t even respond. He doesn’t seem hard of hearing, so I think something might be up.”

“Oh, he just wanted to speak with the Princess privately about it is all,” Shimmerdust said with an air of contentment. Or certainty. It was impossible to tell with that pony.

“Oh, and that’s another thing,” Hurricane said through a mouthful of food, “the dude knew who you were the instant we walked in with you. He didn’t even turn around to look. I think after we finish this whole ‘Elements’ thing, I’m gonna become a monk and get some kickass powers, you know? And I could go around the world fighting crime with them.”

“I think staying in a cloister precludes going around fighting crime, dear,” Morning Glory said in a reassuring tone.

“Plus, you ARE a criminal,” Flash Burn added with more than a hint of criticism.

“I mean real criminals, not just people who break the law. Ponies who hurt people, you know?” Hurricane didn’t seem too bothered in explaining himself.

“Ponies who break the law are hurting people!” Flash seemed ready to jump from her seat.

Brother Skipping Stone appeared in the doorway again. “I hope I’m not interrupting.” The other ponies went quiet. Even Celestia felt extremely hesitant to speak in the old goat’s presence, despite his absolute serenity. “Since Celestia has eaten her fill, I would like to speak with her privately about the

purpose of her visit.

“But I’m...” Celestia wanted to say that she was still hungry, but she instantly realized that she wasn’t. Three bowls of stew with a hefty portion of cheese and grass will do that to a pony. But, seriously, those were some awesome monk powers. “Okay, sure.”

“Excellent, please join me outside.”

Celestia followed Brother Skipping Stone outside. As she stepped into the sun, she remembered everything.

“Oh.” Celestia sat down on the grass. “Wow.”

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“You are safe, Celestia. Please think slowly.” Brother Skipping Stone’s expression remained unchanged, but his voice sounded more serious.

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“My life has been endangered many times these past couple days, but Nightmare Moon is the only thing I can’t do anything about.”

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“Not alone, perhaps.” Skipping Stone did not sit down.

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“My friends can’t join me in my dreams. Or...whatever it is Nightmare Moon is using.”

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“But they have already joined you in your heart. You need only learn to call on their strength.” Celestia looked up into his eyes. She saw now that, beyond the crinkles of the monk’s eternal smile, those eyes held more wisdom than she had gained even in her centuries of life.

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“You can teach me?”

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“Not exactly, but you can still learn. Before the day is out, even. Come. You may wish to brush your mane and tail before we begin.”

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Celestia used a hoof to lift her mane. Tangled as it was every morning.

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“Oh, blast it to Tartarus.” She followed Brother Skipping Stone, hoping he was leading her to a comb.

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After a bit of preening (okay, a lot more preening than any mane and tail should normally require),

Celestia followed Brother Skipping Stone into the temple proper. She recognized the grand domed ceiling from her earlier episode of consciousness. The decorations of the room were minimal. Some places for monks to kneel, an altar, and lighting fixtures. She found the contrast odd, but paid it no mind. However, Brother Skipping Stone led Celestia past all that to a door behind the altar. The pair descended a staircase, until they were in another room that was familiar to Celestia, the one with the low stone ceiling. It was here that Brother Skipping Stone sat down, next to a circle of candles.

“Please, enter the circle and lie down so that you are comfortable.”

Celestia turned her mouth sideways. It was hard to consider being comfortable lying on rock, but she would certainly try. She folded her legs under herself and looked up at the goat.

“Now, I am going to help you enter a state of meditation, one far deeper than you are used to, even from your many experiences. It is much like sleep, but you retain full consciousness, in a way.” He retained his smile, even in this moment.

“Okay. So, are you going to lead me through breathing and imaging exercises? I’m usually fairly good at those.”

Skipping Stone laughed a little. “Ah, yes, with some hours of work, it might be possible to get you to achieve this state on your own. However-” the goat lifted a single cloven hoof to Celestia’s temple, and the room was gone.

Celestia found herself surrounded by the heavens. Not just the sun and moon, but stars, nebulae, galaxies, comets and asteroids, and things she didn’t even know names for. She was floating, but didn’t feel weightless. She felt she could stare into the beauty of the cosmos forever, but a voice broke her reverie.

“What you are seeing now is your inner self, in the manner your mind can most easily interpret.” It was Brother Skipping Stone. He sounded somehow younger. Or older. Celestia couldn’t really be sure. “There is much here, and you could spend lifetimes meditating on it all, but we must now focus. I want you to think of your closest friends.

Celestia did so, and in an instant, the images of many beings appeared around her. Ponies who had long since died, the ponies she traveled with, other creatures she had grown attached to. She frowned upon seeing that Luna was not among the crowd.

“What you see now is the part of their essence that has merged with yours. Your sister is not among them because her essence is a little preoccupied at the moment.” Celestia was beginning to feel severely outclassed by the monk’s semi-omniscience. “Now, I wish you to think of your implacable foes.”

Celestia had hardly done so before she felt them surge towards her through the cosmos. The most horrible creatures that had plagued her through the centuries came towards her in a single wave. She instinctively held up her hooves, and they bounded off an invisible wall. Celestia looked down to see that her friends were all staring at the enemies with frowns on their faces, as the evil creatures battered

at the force in their path.

"My enemies' essences have joined me as well?"

"Though it may sadden you to hear it, hatred is no less strong than love. But, surely, you wonder why those you love do not fight beside you?"

"I don't need them to. I can handle this fine, in case you didn't notice."

No sooner had Celestia spoken than her enemies ceased their rage and parted to welcome in a new foe: Nightmare Moon. The mare of darkness began pressing against the force. And she slowly moved in.

"They have still not moved, and now you have frozen them. You need only lower your guard and ask them."

Celestia groaned. "Okay...uh, can they get hurt in here? How does this work?"

"Why does that matter?"

"I won't see the ones I love hurt in my battles, nor will I stop loving them just to fight!" Celestia wished she could snarl at the monk's face, but she hardly trusted herself to take her eyes off Nightmare Moon, even if the monk were present.

"Then you will die."

"I only need to fight long enough to get the job done. Just long enough to get the Elements."

"You misunderstand. You will die now. You will die inside. And, believe me, your body is pretty useless without a pony inside it."

"WHAT?" Celestia felt her strength wane. Nightmare Moon seemed infinitely more frightening, not to mention the vast array of foes behind her. "Why are you doing this?"

"This struggle has been going inside you. The only difference is that now you can see it. If Nightmare Moon's essence was not eating at your soul, your strength would keep your enemies so far away that you'd have not been able to see them. That's why you are not normally consumed by the centuries of hatred that have piled up."

"But...what do I do?"

"Let your friends fight for you."

"I'm stronger than them! If I can't fight, how can they?"

"I think you're getting a protector complex mixed up with a big ego."

Celestia snorted. "You're an ass."

"Goat." She could HEAR the monk's eternal smile in his voice.

"Fine." Celestia closed her eyes. She lowered her hooves. "Fight for me."

A roar of noise surrounded her in an instant. She gritted her teeth. Would this be the end?

The noise died in only a few seconds. A moment passed. More. Finally, she opened her eyes. Her jaw dropped.

Her friends stood atop the broken bodies of her enemies. Even Nightmare Moon lay on the ground, fuming, beneath a pile of hooves and claws and other assorted appendages (and at least one butt).

"HOLY SHITBALLS!" Celestia shot up from her sleeping position on the ground of the temple's basement. She saw Brother Skipping Stone sitting in the exact spot he had been when she first fell into meditation. She raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Didn't you just say that love wasn't stronger hatred?"

"Yes, but you are wise to have loved much more in your life. Certainly, there are more beings deserving of love than of hatred. Many are not as wise as you. Or as fortunate." Celestia felt the corners of her mouth pull, though she couldn't decide if it was a smile or a frown. She felt rather guilty about being so angry and mistrustful, and wait a second-

"So, if I wasn't so loving of other ponies, I'd be dead right now?"

"Hm. Yes, I suppose so. I suppose that I should hope you have the same attitude towards goats?" Brother Skipping Stone certainly didn't seem concerned, but he looked at Celestia as if he expected an answer.

Celestia sighed. "Fine, fine, you're right. I'm sure you wouldn't endanger the entire world to play silly games."

"Technically it would be possible to save the world without you. You really do need to work on that ego." Skipping Stone turned to walk up the stairs.

Celestia frowned. It was all she could do to keep from laughing.

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Brother Skipping Stone was quiet up until the moment they reached the door to the dining hall. He opened it, and twelve wide eyes swerved to meet Celestia's. She walked into the room and pounced on the closest friend she could find. Twilight Sage had the honor of becoming the bottom pony of a seven-pony group hug. It was a good minute before everypony managed to exit the pile.

"So, how did it go? Did we get the Element of Laughter?" Flash Burn looked between Celestia

and Skipping Stone.

“We have not yet discussed the matter. We shall do so now,” Skipping Stone said plainly.

“Wait, then what were you off doing?” Sage managed to cough out.

“Dissuading me of some rather nasty delusions,” Celestia said with a grin.

“Uh...”

“I’ll tell you later.” Celestia took a seat and looked at Brother Skipping Stone. “So, you know we need the Element of Laughter to save the world, right?”

Skipping Stone nodded. “Of course. There is no question that we should give it to you.”

“Great! So, that’s settled.” Celestia smiled at her friends.

“Well, no.”

Celestia’s expression fell. “Whaddya mean ‘no’?”

Skipping Stone’s smile did not falter. “We cannot get to it.”

“You mean you don’t have it after all?” Flash began to stand from her seat.

“We have the Element. There has been no deception here. We are simply unable to get to it.”

Celestia sighed. “Can you at least show it to us?”

“Of course. Perhaps you will have better luck. Follow me.”

As Brother Skipping Stone left once more, Celestia looked back at all her friends. In near-unison, they all shrugged.

The seven ponies followed the goat through the grounds of the Great Temple, passing by many monks doing their chores. Celestia noted that they were of many species. Ponies, griffons, goats, cows, pigs, minotaurs, basically anything that could talk and walk on land. They all seemed perfectly content with their gardens and meditations.

Finally, the group approached a shrine standing alone in the middle of a rock garden. It was rather ornate, unlike the rest of the temple, with gold filigrees and elaborate engravings. Brother Skipping Stone stopped at the steps of the great temple. Inside, a large spherical stone with a single geometric symbol sat on a pedestal. It was very similar to the Element of Loyalty.

“You may retrieve the Element.”

The ponies stood looking around.

“So, uh, why can’t you do it? Is it some code of the monks, or something?” Hurricane scratched

his head.

“Not at all. Please, feel free to go up.”

Celestia and the others continued to stand around, looking at each other. None of them moved.

“I will make it easier,” Brother Skipping Stone said with a hint of resignation, “Celestia, please ascend the stairs and take the Element of Laughter.”

Celestia didn’t move. She didn’t feel any desire to move. She didn’t even feel like she should have any desire to move.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Celestia said flatly.

“When the Element of Laughter was turned over to us after the war,” explained Skipping Stone without losing his eternal smile, “an enchantment was placed upon the shrine. Only one who has released all burdens from their heart can enter.”

Celestia’s heart fell. “But...but if you all have been trying for your whole lives to do just that, then how can we possibly manage it?”

Skipping Stone shrugged. “One thing I am not burdened with is the answer to that question.”

Celestia frowned. That was the sort of joke she normally loved, but she felt it was hardly the time.

“Hey, maybe we need to go on a diet.” Celestia turned her head to see who had made such a remark, though she hardly needed to. Shimmerdust was the obvious, and indeed, the only possible culprit.

“Shimmer, what are you talking about?”

“Well, y’know, unburdened heart. Maybe it just means a pony who’s not carrying anything to spare, if you get what I mean, Princess Big-Lunch.”

Celestia rolled her eyes. Not only was that a ridiculous idea, but seriously, anypony would be that hungry after the sort of day she’d had. “Shimmer, I don’t mean to be rude, but that’s just silly.”

Shimmerdust shrugged. “Hey, if they’ve already tried everything sensible, then why not silly?” Celestia sighed, but Shimmerdust persisted, “You know, this whole trip, everything seems to go a lot better when you stop taking things so seriously for just a second.”

Celestia’s eyes shot open. She galloped over to Shimmerdust and hugged her. “You’re a genius!”

“Ponies keep telling me that, but I don’t see it...”

Celestia’s grin was practically tearing her mouth apart. “Just a second! We only need to be



unburdened when we walk in the shrine, not forever.”

“Hey, that’s a great idea!” Sage sounded as excited as Celestia felt. “I’m sure we can find a way to forget our troubles for just a little while.”

Hurricane pumped a foreleg, “Aw, yeah, bring on the booze and whores!” Everypony (and a goat) stared in his direction. “Oh, did you mean something else?”

Brother Skipping Stone tapped a cloven hoof to his bearded chin. “You know, in light of this new idea, I think I have a plan...”

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As the sun descended on the horizon, Celestia reflected on the day. She remembered most of it. But as she sat atop of the pile of custard, pie crust, and giggling monks, she could not for her life how the Element of Laughter had gotten in the mix.