

Celestia took a deep breath as she raised her eyes to an infinite void. She flexed her legs, her back, her neck, checking to make sure they were in working order. Then she relaxed. It would only be a matter of time before her new defenses would be put to the test.

It could have been seconds or hours for all Celestia knew, but eventually, a voice came from the darkness.

“Well, sister dear,” it spat, full of hate so seductively smooth, “I’m surprised at you. We were having such a good time.” Nightmare Moon materialized from the void, face contorted in rage. She paced back and forth, far out of Celestia’s reach.

“You know you can’t win, creature. I will have my sister back.” Celestia kept her calm. She let the memories of the previous nights fall from her mind. They meant nothing.

“I AM YOUR SISTER!” Nightmare made a motion, as if she was lunging, but didn’t move any closer. “You have always hated me. You have always wanted me gone. They all have!”

“Even in her worst moods, the real Luna could never believe that.” Celestia shook her head. “You have her memories, but you’re not her.”

Nightmare Moon steadied herself and smiled a horrible smile. “Fool. I lived those memories. I am your sister in every way. Perhaps you don’t recall seeing me like this before?”

Celestia frowned and tensed. There was something nagging at the back of her mind. “No.”

“LIAR!” Nightmare Moon’s accusation sounded more triumphant than angry. “The rage, the unnatural eyes, the darkness? You recall it well. The first time I saw a pony die? The first time a pony abandoned me? You were there for all of them. And you have never been able to shake the feeling that your dear little sister was WRONG. Was BROKEN.”

“I love my sister. I love her more than the world itself.”

“YOU HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT ME A MONSTER.” The nebulous mane of Nightmare Moon came alive like fire.

Celestia gritted her teeth. “No.”

“I COULD NEVER MAKE YOU LOVE ME. I COULD NEVER MAKE ANYPONY LOVE ME.” Nightmare Moon’s voice echoed off walls that weren’t there.

“You’re wrong.”

Nightmare Moon’s rage died down. She stared at Celestia. Celestia stared back.

“What’s wrong with me, Celly?”

Then the Nightmare disappeared.

Celestia felt a pain in the small of her back, and she opened her eyes to the familiar ceiling of one of the cells of the great temple. Somehow, the beds of the monks were MORE uncomfortable than regular ground. However, they were a remarkable improvement over stinging tears and vomit, so Celestia couldn't help but smile as she greeted the sunrise. Or, she would have, if the ponies surrounding her hadn't been blocking her view of everything.

"Uh, good morning, everypony." Celestia raised an eyebrow. They all looked nervous.

"Sleep well, Princess?" Morning Glory managed to say at last.

"Yes, I'm fine. It looks like my little problem is taken care of for now." She smiled, hoping that it would calm everyone down. It seemed to work well enough, as the other ponies backed up a step or two, but they didn't break formation.

"It's just, well," Twilight Sage said uneasily, "you haven't really told us much of what's been happening to you. We're worried."

Celestia started moving out of the circle. "I'm sorry, I should have been keeping you all informed. Nightmare Moon was using her power to attack me even though she's stuck in stasis. It was working, but Brother Skipping Stone taught me to draw on the strength of the love in my heart, so now I'm fine." She wanted to laugh at how silly it sounded, but she kept her calm. "Rest assured, it's behind us. I promise to let you all know if anything else starts to worry me. So, breakfast?" She trotted towards the exit of the small bedroom. She stopped as she felt a tug on her tail. "Shimmerdust, off."

"But--"

"Somepony get me a brush, please."

Breakfast was nothing like the grand feast of the previous day. The ponies ate together with the monks, a simple meal of porridge. Afterwards, they picked up their belongings and assembled at the entrance, prepared to say their goodbyes.

Erix fought her way through to the front of the crowd of monks. "Hey, good luck, guys, okay? It looks like I'm gonna be stuck here a while, and I don't want the world to end before I get a chance to say goodbye to Grandma, okay?"

Celestia smiled. "Take care. I promise, you'll get to go home."

Erix looked like she wanted to say something, but she just wandered back into the crowd of monks, who quickly closed in to say goodbye to the rest of the ponies.

Finally, it seemed that all the monks were done. Only Brother Skipping Stone remained. He stood to face Celestia directly, as placid as ever.

"Remember, Celestia, to trust in your friends. It is the only way you will be able to complete this journey and return harmony to the world."

“I will, Brother Skipping Stone.” Celestia felt more certain than ever that she would be able to, this time.

“And one more thing.” Skipping Stone’s face lost its characteristic smile, making the old goat look positively ancient. “It is unknown to our history that ever were there two divine beings. If the world is to be saved, you will lose somepony very close to you.”

Celestia knitted her brow. “I’m not losing Luna.”

Skipping Stone’s smile reappeared. “I trust in you, Celestia. Goodbye.” He turned, and disappeared into the crowd before Celestia could make any retort.

Celestia pulled her mouth back into a frown. “Yeah.” She turned to the other ponies. “Alright, everypony, it’s time to go. There’s a village at the foot of these mountains. From there, we should be able to find transportation across the desert. We only have ten days, and the homeland of the zebras is over a day’s travel each way if we’re lucky. Let’s move!” She reared and kicked the air as she set off in a trot down the mountain path from the temple gate.

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“...the launching point of hundreds of expeditions over the years of Equestria alone. There is architecture from cultures that we can’t even name, the town has stood through so many ages. Pinion the Blackhoof wrote that-“

“SAGE!” Everypony in the group yelled in unison. Twilight Sage had promised to give them a brief rundown of the place they were headed, and ten minutes later, they were all wondering where he learned the definition of “brief”, since it was obviously not any standard Equestrian dictionary.

“Uh, sorry.” Sage stared at the ground.

Shimmerdust patted him on the head. “I’m sorry for yelling, honey, but seriously, you haven’t even told us the name of the place, and you’re talking about archaeology.”

He perked up instantly. “Oh, well, that’s interesting, too! Equestrian society calls it ‘Mission’, which is an adaptation of the Draconic word ‘Mykh-suhun’, which is sort of like the word for ‘embassy’, but some believe that’s also an adaptation of-“ Sage cut himself off. Everypony was glaring at him again. He hung his head in defeat, and Shimmerdust gave him a peck on the cheek.

Morning Glory cleared her throat. “So, I am to understand that the population of this place is greatly non-pony?”

Celestia took over for Sage. “Yes. By the time ponies came to the land that would become Equestria, Mission was already very populous. However, it is a very accepting place, and since that time, it has been more accessible to ponies than other species, so there is still a strong pony presence.”

Flash Burn flew in front of the group. “Okay, so, what exactly do we do when we get there? I

doubt we can just accost a random citizen and say, 'Hey, take us across the desert and out of Equestria on a blind search for magic that has not been seen in so long it's practically myth'. Pardon the pun, but that won't fly."

Celestia grinned. "I guess we'll just have to wing it." This drew a chortle from Glory and Sage. Hurricane, however, grumbled. Celestia picked up on it immediately. "Are you okay, Hurricane?"

"Okay?" Hurricane growled. "Yeah, I'm okay. I'm fine. Peachy dandy super wonderful, even! It's not like I'm being dragged across the world unable to do the one thing I do best and being USELESS while everypony I know could die from starvation and cold before I ever get to see them again. No, let's all tell stupid riddles and jokes and act like nothing's wrong!" He stormed off ahead of the other ponies, with a face that made his stormcloud-colored coat redundant. Celestia picked up her pace a bit to try and catch him, but Morning Glory headed her off.

"I'm sorry he snapped at you, but it's best if you let him be right now. There are a lot of ponies in Everfree that he looked after, and he's always anxious when he can't do anything." Glory stepped back to give Celestia her space. "And, besides, he's just an irritable young stallion. He's been so moody lately. Poor thing hasn't even had his first kiss yet."

"Well, I hope you're not asking me to fix that," Celestia said with a smirk.

"HEAVENS no!" Glory stopped dead in her tracks. "Eugh, I don't even want to think about it." She sat there slightly dazed until Flash nudged her to keep moving.

"So," Flash said, landing next to Glory, "what did you mean when you said your brother had ponies to take care of?"

"Oh, well," Glory said dismissively, "those of us in the lower parts of the city who are better off, for whatever reason, usually end up being responsible for those who can't even afford to eat. Most just drop a bit or two into a reputable collection box, but Hurricane made rounds to shelters, and especially orphanages. He loves foals, you know? He's not much for cooking or housework, but he's very entertaining, and very athletic, so he makes their lives easier nonetheless. It's not uncommon for ponies his age, especially before they find a steady job."

Flash made a face like she was trying to fight off brain freeze. "So, uh, what was with the whole 'being the biggest thief in Everfree' deal, then?"

Glory sighed. "That's my little brother being an idiot. He wanted to help more, so he figured he'd try the whole 'steal from the rich, give to the needy' thing. I'm sorry to say I gave my tacit approval. I thought he'd be discreet. Don't get me wrong, the amount of money he raised for the orphanages was impressive, but if the money were traced, they'd get shut down. I don't think he knew that."

Flash laughed. "Come on, they wouldn't really kick foals out on the street just for accepting donations they didn't even know were crooked." But Flash's laughter died down when Glory shot her a look that was supposed to be even, but had a deep sadness beneath it. "Seriously?"

“Most of Everfree’s criminals are ponies who were left to fend for themselves from a young age, or were displaced from society by unfair laws or competition in their field of work. Amaranth’s muggers, for instance? I know one of them. He used to be an artist. He would have been doing well, except he tried to get his paintings sold by an Upper Quarter dealer without a proper license. He was fined for all he had.”

Amaranth piped up from behind her. “How in Equestria do you know that? When did you even hear about me being mugged?”

Glory waved a hoof. “I have my ways.” Sage mumbled something that Celestia couldn’t hear. Apparently Glory either didn’t notice, or didn’t care. The ponies continued down the mountain trail, watching as the sun climbed slowly into the sky.

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The town of Mission was odd to look at. The outskirts were composed almost entirely of tents, and further into the town, buildings of varying architecture and material were laid haphazardly, creating streets that required incredible patience to even get a cart through. The inhabitants were no less varied, some being creatures Celestia had never even seen outside books before. The group of seven wove their way through innumerable merchant stalls before finally arriving at the part of town that was mostly permanent structures.

Celestia turned to Twilight Sage. “So, can you read any of these signs? I can recognize some Equestrian, and some Zebraic, but that’s about it.”

Sage looked around with a calm concentration. “Yes, some of them. From what I can tell, there’s a lot of linguistic throwback, and even more language mixing. I mean, right there is a Griffon word that hasn’t been common in Griffonmont for over a century.”

Celestia frowned. “I think I’d recognize it.”

“Yes, you would, if it weren’t written in Sand Scratch, a common language near the desert. I only know the alphabet. Don’t worry, it’s just a sign for a laundry/tailor service.”

“Well,” Morning Glory chirped happily, “at least everyone seems to be SPEAKING Equestrian, to some extent. They seem to default to it around here when there’s not an obvious shared language.”

“Right,” said Celestia, “so all we have to do is figure out who we need to talk to. Where do you think we should start?”

Sage stopped and pointed. “I could be wrong, but I’m pretty sure that office is a cartographer. Or a scribe. Or possibly an artist.” He paused as the other ponies frowned at him. “What? Maybe you all can do a better job of translating what appears to be some mangled hybrid of Draconic and pre-Equestrian pony language?”

“Ooh, maybe he’s an artist who draws continents!” Shimmerdust was at the window of the

office. "There's so many pictures of them hung up front here, and they're pretty."

Sage blushed. "Uh...let's go inside."

Inside the office was a cramped space, with the walls and desks all completely covered with parchments and papers, most with maps on them. Two larger desks were staffed, one by a stallion with a coat the color of red clay, and the other by a slender, cream-colored horned creature that Celestia recognized as a gazelle, a being from near the homeland of the zebras. They looked up in unison as the group entered, but the pony went right back to his work, carefully making lines with a charcoal stick.

The gazelle didn't come out from behind her desk, but she moved her work aside a bit in a futile attempt to make it appear as if there were some room on her desk. "Hello, ponies," she said in accentless Equestrian, "how may I help you today?"

Celestia stepped up to the desk. "We need to get to the zebra capital as soon as possible. Do you have anything that would help us cross the desert?"

The gazelle kept a straight face, but her shoulders fell. "I'm afraid that the desert is featureless. The best I can do is give you a map of the southeastern edge, so you can navigate to the capital once you've crossed. Normally I'd tell you to just go by the stars, but I don't think we'll be seeing them soon."

Celestia frowned. "Okay, well, we'll take that, then. It's better than nothing." She turned for her saddlebags, but the gazelle interrupted her.

"Wait, please. The southern desert is easy to get lost in. Perhaps you should travel with a caravan instead."

The stallion at the other desk mumbled. "Let 'em spend their bits, Lecar. We ain't seein' 'em again in any case."

Lecar shot him a glare, but continued. "If you go to the other edge of town, you can find many traders who travel the desert. Most are probably avoiding travel right now, but you might be able to convince someone to take you. Especially if you have money."

Celestia bit her lip. "Oh. Well, thank you, then. I'm sorry there's nothing we can really buy from you, then."

Lecar waved a cloven hoof. "Don't worry about it. Believe it or not, on an average day, all the maps you see in here would be gone before sunset. We sell a lot of copies when ponies are actually out and about. You should head out soon; with no stars, any caravan will have to travel entirely by day."

Celestia turned to leave. "Okay. Thank you again." The rest of the ponies moved outside so that Celestia could reach the entrance. Celestia stepped outside and shut the door behind her. The instant she did, she heard the two cartographers begin a shouting match inside the office. "I think we'd better get out of here, everypony."

The party traveled to the other side of Mission, which was very similar to the initial part of town.

However, many of the tents were replaced by wagons and carts, which were attended by rather upset-looking merchants. Morning Glory took up the task of striking up conversations with various groups of them. However, unsurprisingly, none of them were willing to brave the hot desert day.

As the sun climbed higher into the sky, Celestia hung her head low. The group's quest looked like it was becoming futile indeed. Her ear twitched as she heard a voice yelling from one of the wagons.

"Hey, you fillies shake those pony parts!"

Celestia glanced at Flash Burn, who immediately (and correctly) interpreted the look as permission to relieve some tension with a good old-fashioned chewing-out. Flash burst over to the wagon, upon the steps of which was seated a male zebra, old enough that his black stripes were turning grey. He held a ceramic jug between his hooves. But, quick as Flash was, she didn't reach the zebra before a hoof from inside the wagon struck him upon the head.

A female zebra of approximately the same age stepped out, not removing her hoof from the male's face. "Husband! For the hundredth time, stop bothering ponies. It is not even yet noon, and you are already drunk. And is this the expensive wine?" Her voice was thick with a standard Zebraic accent, making it rather obvious she was choosing to speak in Equestrian purposefully. "Begging your pardon, ponies. These past few days have been hard on us, and my husband has chosen to relieve himself of the pressure of the day a mite earlier than is entirely appropriate." She snatched the jug from her husband and placed it behind her.

The zebra stallion laughed. "You know I don't need wine to appreciate some heaving haunches." This earned him another smack to the head. He didn't seem to mind too much.

Sage raised an eyebrow. "Does he always like to alliterate when he's drunk?"

The mare shrugged. "We zebras enjoy word game. Most of us like to do such things when we are in a good mood." She looked at her husband again. "For one reason or another."

Celestia interjected. "Is this traveling wagon yours?"

"Why, yes it is. But we haven't done so much traveling, since we cannot cross the desert in a day, and we do not wish to be stranded in the starless night. Tales have been circling of strange beasts that wander."

The stallion murmured something in Zebraic, but Celestia didn't catch it, not being fluent enough in the language to pierce the drunken mumbling.

The mare returned, "For the last time, the Cave of Wonders is not a real place, I don't care WHAT you think you saw!"

Celestia frowned. "Oh. It's just that we need to get to the zebra capital as soon as possible, so I was wondering if you might know how we can do it."

The zebra mimicked Celestia's expression. "We would be your best chance, and it's impossible

for even us. What is so urgent that you would brave the hot desert day and the starless night?"

Shimmerdust jumped. "We're saving the world! And stuff."

Celestia rolled her eyes. "We're trying to find the Elements of Harmony. They're a legendary source of magic, native to Equestria, but the Element of Honesty lies somewhere in zebra lands."

The zebra's eyes went wide in shock. "What you speak is true. This mystical power has graced many of our leaders in years past, and shaped much of our way of life. But, you cannot expect to be granted the greatest treasure of our people without any founding whatsoever."

Celestia motioned for Sage. "Actually, we've already got two of the Elements." Sage opened his pack, showing the two spherical stones. "We need all five to restore balance."

The mare pondered for a moment. "Your case is strong. Perhaps strong enough to sway the elders. But you will have to prove your worth, that is for sure."

The zebra stallion spoke up from his slump. "By shaking those big beautiful-" he was interrupted by a swift hoof to the mouth from his wife.

Flash groaned. "Great. I wonder which of us will almost die THIS time?"

The zebra seemed to ignore her. "I am Zerishan. My husband is Adombra."

Shimmerdust tilted her head. "Hey, just because he's drunk doesn't mean he's dumb."

Zerishan locked eyes with Shimmer, seemingly bewildered. There was a moment of silence before Zerishan began laughing. "That is his name, child. Oh, my. Where was I? Yes. We will attempt the journey across the desert. My husband is the greatest wagon-driver I could hope for, even when he can't muster up an ounce of politeness through the gallons of wine." She dragged Adombra to the front of the wagon by grabbing his ear with her teeth. He seemed quite nonplussed, but began hitching himself up.

"Feel free to take a peek while you're back there, fillies." The zebra stallion laughed, glad to be uninterrupted as his wife was pre-occupied.

Zerishan sighed. "Ignore him. He will become at least a little more pleasant in a couple of hours. Now, help me load our cart, please. We need a lot of water if we're to make this in good health."

The ponies quickly helped hoist the barrels into the back of the wagon. Zerishan performed impossible feats of sorting and stacking, making them fit alongside food, merchandise, and other assorted items. It seemed like no time at all before they were ready to go.

"Now, perhaps one of you ponies would like to help pull? It will make the journey easier."

Hurricane jumped up. "Oh! I can do it. Don't need wings to do that!" He bounded towards the front of the cart. Adombra hitched him to the second harness in a few quick motions.

Celestia looked around. "Well, I'm glad that went easily. Thank you, Zerishan, for giving us this



chance.”

“Oh, don’t thank me yet, pony. We’ve yet to make the journey.” She hoisted a pair of saddlebags onto her back, and kicked her husband once. “Let’s go!”

Flash Burn darted back at something. “Hey, wait you forgot your…” she held a ceramic jug in her hooves, but she sniffed at it curiously.

Celestia looked back at Flash. “Is that Adombra’s wine jug?”

Flash kept inspecting it. “Yeah, but…this is just plain grape juice.”

Celestia looked up to the front of the cart. She noticed Adombra turn and wink.

“This is gonna be a looooong trip,” she moaned to no pony in particular.