Celestia found herself yelling more out of shock than anger. “The Element of Generosity?! Seriously?”

Kremhault the Terrible shrugged. “It would be very difficult to make a joke in this way.”

Morning Glory seemed much calmer than the other ponies. “Well, that simplifies things greatly. You see, Mister Kremhault the Terrible, we’re in dire need of the Elements of Harmony, and you, one of the most generous creatures in the world, seem to possess one. I think we’re already one step closer to saving the world, don’t you?”

Kremhault smirked. “I am happy to give thee all that thou dost require, but I am afraid I cannot take it at thy word that thou will use the power of the Elements of Harmony properly. It is too great a power to risk.”

Glory sighed. “Well, time for plan B.” She nudged Celestia. “Go on, no point in covering it up anymore.”

Celestia wanted to protest, but she failed to find any sort of reasonable objection. “Alright.” She stepped forward. “I am Princess Celestia, leader of Equestria and steward of the sun. My sister has fallen victim to a horrible magical accident, and we have reason to believe that the Elements of Harmony are the only power capable of restoring her, as well as the proper heavenly cycle.”

Kremhault nodded. “That sounds like a wise course of action, though thou certainly lacketh proof of thy divinity.”

Celestia frowned. “Ugh, right. I was forced to take the form of an earth pony to properly maintain a stasis spell. I don’t have any magic right now.”

Kremhault tilted his head. “Stasis spell? Ah, so that must be what is doing that.”

Celestia raised an eyebrow. “Doing what?”

Kremhault gestured in the air. “Dragons are quite sensitive to the magic of the world. Since the stars fell, I noticed something tearing away at the very patterns of this land’s magic. Many creatures which can cast spells hath the capability of drawing upon such magic, but it is almost never necessary.”

Twilight Sage sighed. “Yes, we noticed that effect when the spell was first cast. Everfree is most likely falling apart by now.”

Celestia thought back to Everfree. The castle had been torn apart in the hours she had been unconscious. Over ten times that amount of time had passed since then. There was no telling how far the destruction had spread.

“So, you can understand why we need to hurry with this, don’t you?”

Kremhault nodded. “I am sure thy quest is urgent, else thou wouldst not be crossing the desert

in these dire times. However, I still cannot simply grant you the Element of Generosity."

"Why not?" Celestia resisted the urge to stamp a hoof indignantly.

"The Elements of Harmony are useless unless a creature possesseth the spirit which is also harmonious."

Sage protested. "The ones who had the last two Elements knew them well, and made no objections to us taking them. Surely they believe she can use them."

Kremhault shook his head. "Perhaps thy spirit was ready for them, but each harmonious quality needs must be present individually. And I have not been presented with proof that thou art generous."

Celestia gave the dragon a flat stare. "I would give anything for the ponies of Equestria, and for many others. How is that not generous?"

The dragon closed his eyes, his brow furrowed. "Thou art loyal to thy people and thy friends. But generosity is far more that. Thou canst not be loyal to all creatures, but thou canst be generous to all creatures. To give of thyself not of thy fellowship, but of simple knowledge that thou hast no greater right to happiness than any other creature, is the true spirit of generosity."

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "So I should give my enemies what they want as well, is that what you mean?"

Kremhault shrugged. "If I judge you well, thine enemies hurt others. It is quite wrong enabling such. But, indeed, those that thou dost hate are still deserving of thy generosity."

Celestia tapped a hoof to her face. She wanted to say something, but Morning Glory pre-empted her.

"Well, how exactly are we supposed to show that Princess Celestia has this quality? I can certainly vouch for her. We both give much to ponies whom we don't very much like. Part of the job, you know."

Kremhault replied, "Out of generosity, or convenience? But, indeed, perhaps thou simply hast yet to discover the generosity in thy hearts. It is easy for me to discern that which is at the forefront of a creature's heart."

Celestia grinned. "Well…I don't suppose you do vision quests? That got us through the last one real quick."

The dragon shook his head. "I do not. But perhaps the trials of thy journey shall reveal more of thy true selves."

Sage raised an eyebrow. "So, what does that mean for us?"

Celestia hung her head. "I think it means 'get lost and come back later'."

Kremhault tilted his head. “How could thou come back if thou became lost?”

Sage laughed and said something in Draconic.

Kremhault nodded. “Ah. Of course, thou art welcome to stay as long as thou requirest. But perhaps thou art best if thou dost hurry on thy way. I am sure thy quest for the remaining Elements of Harmony would benefit from thy haste.”

Celestia sighed. “Right. I guess we’ll just stop here on our way back, and hope. Come on, everypony, let’s go.”

Amaranth cleared his throat, a sound so soft Celestia felt she would have missed it if not for the echo of the cave. “We appear to be missing some ponies.”

“What?” Celestia looked around. Hurricane, the two zebras, and Shimmerdust were all nowhere to be found. “Where did they go?”

“Thy friends appeareth to be enjoying the treasures.” Kremhault gestured to the massive mound of glass.

As if on cue Zerishan burst from the top of the pile. “We are rich! With the money we could make from even a few of these pieces, we could buy a house in Equestria and retire for life. Hooray!” She dove back into the pile, and Adombra immediately popped up.

“We could buy a pool! We could buy pool girls! Hahaha!” He disappeared as well.

Hurricane came out next. “We could buy passports for every pony in Equestria! We could just buy out the whole Senate and make those stupid laws illegal!” He followed suit with the zebras. Celestia waited for Shimmerdust to appear, but the unicorn mare didn’t show up.

“Shimmer?” Celestia said expectantly.

“Right here,” came a reply from only a couple feet away. Celestia jumped. She searched with her eyes for a second before she noticed Shimmerdust’s blue coat sat among the bottom of the pile of glassworks. Her glittering mane was almost entirely indistinct from the artworks she rested upon.

“Oh.” Celestia walked next to Shimmerdust. “I’m surprised you don’t have some sort of weird reaction to all this.”

Shimmerdust’s response was in an even more distant tone than usual. “Every single piece of glass in this collection is made of sand that is either perfectly pure or else has deliberate impurities for color. There is even selection for granularity. The kind of sand required to produce such works is incredibly expensive, to the point where only a widely recognized master or else an artist with a very wealthy patron could afford most of these materials. And yet, the variety in work quality goes along grade levels, from malformed baubles to perfectly tuned chimes. It’s baffling.”

Sage stepped in. “Honey, the dragon probably made all these himself, and just had a long time of

practice."

Shimmerdust looked up. "Oooohhhh."

"I'm not sure about the sand," Sage continued. "There's plenty around here, obviously, but it's not pure, I think."

Kremhault shrugged. "Dragon stomachs digest many things, but sand is not one of them."

There was a large "EEEEEWWWW" from inside the pile, and Hurricane came tumbling out.

"Agh, I touched dragon poo! Get it off!"

Glory smacked her younger brother on the head. "Don't be so offensive."

Kremhault added, "If it maketh thee feel better, I used vomit."

It quite clearly did not make Hurricane feel better, and he continued making retching noises.

Celestia laughed. "Well, I think the zebras would certainly appreciate some of your work, if you're not too attached to it. They certainly deserve some reward for risking their lives for us."

The dragon nodded. "Thou art welcome to as much as thou canst carry. And I do notice that thou hast a mostly-empty wagon nearby."

Celestia smiled. "Thanks. You know, dragon or not, you're a really nice guy."

Kremhault smiled. "I thank thee. And thou art, princess or not, 'nice' as well." Celestia winced. Dragon royalty was probably worse than any of the nobles she'd ever had in court. Revealing herself as a princess had probably not done her any favors.

"Well, everypony," she called, "if any of Kremhault's works catch your eye, ask him if he is willing to part with them, and let's get moving. We can probably still make it to the capital by nightfall."

As she walked out of the cave to bring the wagon to the entrance, she noticed Adombra and Zerishan slowly pushing a mound a good deal more than one or two glassworks out of the hoard.

If the desert sun was any less strong in the evening than it was in the middle of the day, Celestia hardly noticed. The cart was just as full as it had been when the group left Mission, only now, most of the water had been replaced by nearly-priceless art pieces. Hurricane, rather tired from running from Scorpio, started trading out with the other ponies. Only Sage stayed up front for very long at all, though, as the other ponies quickly grew tired of the inconspicuous glances at their rears. Even Shimmerdust noticed them, which surprised Celestia, though she decided not to say anything.

Flash Burn flew up in the sky for the fifth time that hour. "Alright, everypony, good news and bad news," she said as she rejoined the group. "The good news is that we're nearing the edge of the desert. The bad news is, there's no way we're making it to the zebra capital before sunset. We won't even reach

the border of zebra territory." Flash landed on the ground, and pulled a waterskin out of her bag. She tilted it back, but put it back into her hooves and frowned. "I'm out. How much do we have left in the barrels?"

Zerishan bit her lip. "The barrels are empty. I divided the water between our waterskins as evenly as I could, and none was left."

Flash slumped. "Well, that's great. I tell ya, flying around the desert in armor? Not a good idea."

Morning Glory rushed over to Flash's side. "Flashie! You really must take more care. No more flying for you today, and take some of this." She hoofed her waterskin over to Flash Burn.

"Uh, don't you need that?" Flash asked, clearly hoping for a negative answer.

"Hardly as much as you do, clearly. Take it." Glory waved the waterskin in Flash's face before the pegasus mare finally took a swig.

"Thanks, Glory. I think I'll make it fine."

Morning Glory beamed. "Any time, dear. You know anything of mine is yours." The two gabbed for a bit before the dryness of the air convinced them to save their voices.

As the sun set, their pace slowed to a crawl. It wasn't hard to tell why. Twilight Sage and Shimmerdust were both lagging far behind. Their breath was ragged, and though they levitated their waterskins above their heads, nothing came out.

"I think we need a break," Sage said with a raspy voice. "It's just too hot."

Celestia shook her head. "We've got to keep going. We only have until the last rays of the sun disappear, and I want to use every second."

"I p - I can't walk anymore," Sage stammered.

"Urgh," groaned Morning Glory. "If it will get you moving, take my water. I'd say try sitting in the back of the wagon, but there's hardly room."

Flash raised a hoof. "Glory, you can't just keep giving away your own water. Maybe somepony else has some to spare."

The other ponies in the group looked around at each other. One by one, they took empty waterskins out of their saddlebags.

Glory huffed. "Well, let's take care of our stragglers, and then try to take it easy, shall we? It doesn't matter how fast we go if we don't reach the finish." She gave some water to Sage, then to Shimmerdust. "And that's the last of mine, so make it count."

Sage made a face. "Alright, thanks. We'll try." The two unicorns picked up pace a little, and the

group continued on.

As the last rays of the sun disappeared behind the horizon, Celestia tensed. She knew that she was well-shielded against Nightmare Moon's attacks, but she wasn't sure if she was able to stay awake during the night, regardless. Adombra was still walking, and she didn't want to suddenly collapse, causing a lot of worry. However, as she was about to speak, she heard a dull thud in the sand. She looked down at her hooves. She was still standing. Then what-

"GLORY!" Flash screamed from behind her. Celestia turned around and saw the dim silhouette of a pony lying down. She presumed that it was Morning Glory. The other ponies crowded around the form.

"Heat stroke," said Sage grimly. "She was holding back on her water."

"You can fix it, right?" Flash sounded on the verge of tears.

"The supplies in my pack would do very little. We need water. If we don't get her some, and soon, she…"

Flash grabbed Sage's shoulders. "She what? WHAT?!" There was a pause.

"We'd better find some water." Twilight Sage made no motion to expound on the matter. And he didn't need to.

Flash reached down and picked up Morning Glory's limp form. "Hang on, Glory, I'll get you to some water."

Amaranth interjected. "It's all but pitch black out. You won't be able to see a thing, even if you carry a lantern."

"The light isn't focused enough to reveal water from even a few meters high," Sage agreed.

Flash clutched her head with a hoof. "Agh! What do we do? What do we do?"

"Duh," came a voice from somewhere a bit further away from the other ponies.

"Who said that?" Flash screamed, halfway between fear and anger.

"Me!" Despite the unhelpful answer, Celestia identified the voice as Shimmerdust.

"Shimmer, please, this is a crisis," Celestia said as calmly as she could manage, which was, to her credit, quite a bit calmer than she felt. "We're trying to think of solutions."

"Well, we have one," said Shimmer, as if it were obvious.

"Honey, what are you talking about?" Sage asked, as confused as all the other ponies.

"We're towing a wagon full of glass, everypony. I guarantee there's something we can use as a

lens in there. Artsy glass always does funny things with light." There was a long silence.

"Well, I feel stupid," said Sage at last. "Come on, let's test some on a lantern." Sage and Shimmerdust carefully made their way over to the wagon. Shimmerdust immediately selected a strange sculpture, and positioned it in front of the lantern. It was perfect.

Flash grabbed both objects instantly. "Thanks, both of you. I'll be back soon." She nestled Morning Glory on her back, securing her with her saddlebag straps, then took off into the night sky, as fast as she could.

Without her divine link to the heavens, Celestia found it hard to measure the passage of time when her mood was heightened. The other ponies were still, and she had never relied on her biological sense of time. Nonetheless, she was confident that it was over an hour before Flash Burn's lantern came streaking back towards the group. The pegasus didn't slow until she was almost at the ground, but landed gently, setting Morning Glory down in the sand as if it were a bed.

"She's still there. I left her in the water for a bit, and held her head up. I filled these waterskins too." Flash paused. "Is she gonna make it?"

Sage nodded. "If she were weak or old, I wouldn't be sure, but as far as I know, Morning Glory is quite healthy. Physically, at least. She could wake up any time now, and she'll recover fully in a matter of days, as long as we give her a lot of water and salty foods."

Flash stood over Glory worryingly. "Well that's good. And what exactly do you mean by physically?"

Sage raised an eyebrow. "She did just willingly put herself in a lethal situation that she didn't need to, or even seem to want to. I'd bet my books that she's not well, though I wouldn't go so far as to say she's mentally ill."

Flash snorted. "She saved your behind, you and your stupid fillyfriend!"

Sage quickly mirrored Flash's anger. "Hey, don't you take this out on Shimmer! We'd have never gotten this far without her."

"You're only saying that because you two are sleeping together!"

Sage growled. There was a pause. "I don't know what's going on with you, but I don't want to hear about it anymore. Unless it's absolutely vital to finding the Elements of Harmony, you and I are no longer speaking." He walked away at a quick trot, lying down where Shimmerdust had already fallen asleep.

Flash Burn raised a hoof. "Wait, I-" She cut herself off and hung her head. Celestia walked over to Flash's side. She wanted to wrap a wing around the pegasus, but lacking that option, she gave her a regular hug.

“You okay?”

Flash sniffled. “I just…I was so worried. And I wanted to blame myself, then I wanted to blame somepony, ANYpony. I don’t know why…well, okay, I guess I do know why it was Shimmerdust. But I don’t wanna talk about it right now. You know.”

Celestia held the hug. “I’m sure you two will make up. Sage might be angry for a while, but a sincere apology will help if you wait a bit.”

Flash breathed heavily, obviously trying to hold in tears. “I don’t want to talk to Shimmerdust. I’m not sure I can even make my apology sound good.” There was a long pause. “I fucked up, didn’t I?”

Amaranth appeared on Flash’s other side. “You gave into the worst of your feelings at the worst of times, for the worst of reasons.” Flash looked up at the green earth pony, and he looked back at her. There was a pause. “You fucked up.” In spite of his harsh words, Amaranth wrapped a hoof around Flash’s back, right next to Celestia’s.

Flash sank into the double embrace. “Our whole mission is jeopardized now. As if we didn’t have enough to deal with already, what with at least one pony almost dying somewhere around twice a day.”

“If you’re counting by occurrences, closer to one and a half, and that’s not even accurate to two significant figures,” Celestia said absentmindedly. Amaranth and Flash looked at her with confusion. “What? Sage isn’t the only smart one here. I’m his teacher.”

Flash snickered. “Sorry. You just tend not to correct ponies much.”

Celestia smiled gently. “I try not to. But when you’re so pessimistic about our little sojourn, I feel I have to.”

“Right, because staring death in the eyes a little more than once a day is a walk in the park. I feel like I should be feeding some pigeons. Everything’s just going so well!” Flash was smiling, but tears were streaming down her face. “Damn it. DAMN IT!” The pegasus collapsed on the ground, holding her hooves on the top of her head. “I’m sorry. I just…sorry.” She didn’t stop crying.

Celestia looked to Amaranth. “Keep her company, okay? I’m going to make sure everypony else is doing alright.” Amaranth nodded, and Celestia left the two ponies to head over to Twilight Sage.

Sage was lying down next to Shimmerdust, quite clearly not asleep. He gently cradled her in his hooves. His eyes flickered when Celestia approached, but he made no motion to get up.

“Everything okay?” Celestia asked, despite knowing the answer.

“I just don’t understand,” Sage said, burying his muzzle in Shimmer’s mane. “I thought we were becoming friends. I thought she liked me. And Shimmerdust. I don’t get why she’d say anything like that.”

Celestia thought carefully to explain without giving away the secret beneath it all. “Flash Burn is nearly obsessive about what, and whom, she cares about. It’s why she worked so hard to become

Captain of the Day Guard. And it's why Glory being in danger got to her so much. She really wasn't in her right mind."

"I thought I was getting good at getting ponies to like me," Sage continued, as if Celestia had said nothing. "But I'm in the same place I always was. Glory hates my guts. Amaranth…I really can't read that guy, but he's nowhere near as friendly with me as he is with Flash. And now the Captain hates me too."

"She doesn't hate you," Celestia pressed.

"I wish I could believe you." Sage sunk low into the sand, holding Shimmerdust closer.

Celestia bent low next to him. "Sage, ponies aren't perfect. Sometimes we hurt ponies we really do care about, without meaning to."

"Mf."

With as much royal charm and grace as she could muster, Celestia raised a single hoof. After a slight pause, she brought it down on Sage's head.

"OW!" He jolted a bit, almost letting go of Shimmerdust, who didn't even stir. "What was that for?"

"Sometimes we hurt ponies because we care about them. You're going to talk to Flash before sundown tomorrow." Sage glared into her eyes. There was a moment's pause. Celestia raised her hoof again.

"Ah! Okay, okay, I'll do it. At least stop treating me like a foal."

"I'm centuries older than you," Celestia said with a smirk. "No matter how old you get, you'll still be my little pony."

"Goodnight," Sage said as finally as he could. It was obvious he was swallowing a chortle.

"Goodnight," Celestia replied, as calmly as ever. Satisfied that the group's issues were taking a good course, she found a place to lie down, breathed deeply, and prepared for another confrontation.

The blackness of the mental plane was becoming familiar to Celestia. Though its darkness was similar to the starless sky, there was a depth to it that even the night could not match. The minds of all creatures, even those long gone, lurked somewhere in those dark distances. Celestia wondered if she could reach them, in the same way that Brother Skipping Stone could reach her mind.

Nightmare Moon's form seemed to melt out of the blackness when it appeared. Her face was the same mask of rage and hatred as Celestia had come to expect. The monster stared at Celestia silently.

"Well, sister dear?" she said venomously, "How does it feel, knowing you've delayed the horrors

I will bring upon you? It will be so sweet when we are finally reunited." The mare of darkness paced around Celestia, always keeping a good distance away. She kept an upright posture, towering over Celestia's earth pony form. However, her helplessness was quite apparent to Celestia beneath the malevolent façade.

"Your taunts are nothing new to me. I don't suppose you think repeating the same thing over and over makes it scarier."

Nightmare Moon laughed, which Celestia found more terrifying than anything she had actually said before. "So, you're saying I need new material? I like the way you think, Celly."

Celestia frowned. "It doesn't matter what you say. We're going to find the Elements of Harmony. We're going to fix everything. You can't stop us."

Nightmare Moon batted her eyelashes. "Your taunts are nothing new to me."

Celestia stamped her hoof. "Why are you doing this? You claim to want love, yet you only aim to inspire hatred and fear. Have you lost all understanding of pony-kind?"

Nightmare Moon shrugged as she continued pacing. "Ponies will come to love me after I rule. They only ignore me because of you. You and your hateful sun. When all is in darkness and I have made you mine. I will be loved."

"Ponies can't live in darkness. They'll perish." Celestia turned to keep facing the evil mare, not trusting even the realm of thought to keep her safe from surprise attacks.

"They will live under the providence of their new queen," Nightmare Moon explained with a fanged grin.

Celestia growled. "How dare you even think about calling yourself that."

The mare of darkness reduced her expression to a self-satisfied smirk. "It seems appropriate. The cosmos will bend to my will. I have no intention of following rules that exist for no reason other than to diminish me."

Celestia began approaching Nightmare Moon. She stared her in the face. "You can't even give gratitude to the powers that bore you? You sicken me."

Without warning, Nightmare Moon leaned down so that the tip of her muzzle was touching Celestia's ear.

"Too close, sister dear."