

The sun still shone brightly in the sky as the ponies were flown down to the trial cave. The entrance was obvious. Though it was only as wide as six griffons standing shoulder to shoulder, the rock surrounding was carved with ostentatious designs, and it was sealed, unlike every other cave on Griffonmont, by a wooden gate. The gate was decorated with carved letters. Celestia could tell that they were the letters of the griffon language, but the words made no sense to her. There seemed to be some sort of rhyme to it, but it must have been a version of the language older than the war. The ponies were led off the carriage and two griffons stood by the door entrance. They grasped the metal handles to the gates, but did not pull.

Groza stood up on her hind legs. She intoned the words on the door like a chant, then reverted to Equestrian. "All but the brave and strong shall perish in the trial of fire and stone. Only the first to the end shall succeed, but they shall fail who endeavor alone." She fell back onto all fours. "A little melodramatic, but take it to heart. You have to work together if you want to make it through this."

Celestia stepped forward nervously. "What's in there?"

The griffon shook her head. "I can't tell you that. This isn't the sort of thing you're supposed to plan and prepare for. It's all about wits, strength, and courage. In fact," she turned to Flash Burn, "you'll have to take off that armor."

Flash Burn looked nervous. "What? Why?"

"No preparations whatsoever. We'd all go in armored if we were allowed."

"Well...what are you going to do with it?"

Groza gestured to Hurricane. "Have this one look after your things. Only six may enter, and he has a broken wing anyway. We take that sort of injury very seriously around here."

Flash narrowed her eyes. "He is a thief."

"Hey, don't worry," said Hurricane, the roll of his eyes audible in his voice, "I'm not going to fly off with it or anything." He flapped his one good wing. Flash Burn looked at the ground and slunk off to remove her armor.

Celestia turned to the griffon. "We won't need to fly to get through this, will we?"

Groza shook her head. "It's a cave. Griffons don't have room to fly through most parts of it. A pegasus pony might be able to pull it off, but unless that Flash has some pretty slick moves, it won't do you too much good."

"Right," Celestia said distantly, looking at Flash. The fire-maned pegasus was, without a doubt, an amazing flier, but even the halls of the castle were nowhere near as constricting as a cave. "So, how long will it take?"

"Officially, until sundown. The sun should start disappearing behind the mountains in six hours, and that's when they'll close the front doors behind you. After that, those of us waiting at the end are supposed to consider you failed, but there's no door there, so the only issue is that if we all leave, you won't have a witness to determine the 'winner'. Not a problem for your case."

Celestia nodded. The distance to the other side of the mountain, going straight through, could not have been two hours' walk. Six hours was probably more than enough time to determine if anyone was coming out. Her stomach fluttered as she imagined the griffons and Hurricane waiting at the entrance as the sun fell, only to never see the ponies exit.

"But," Groza added, placing a talon on Celestia's shoulder, "I'll wait as long as it

takes for you." The elderly griffon was smiling gently.

Celestia chuckled. "So, you didn't buy that 'Sunny' bit after all, did you?"

"You kidding? Minus the horn and wings, you look exactly the same as you did growing up. We've been best friends for centuries; there's no way I wouldn't recognize you." Groza's smile faded. "I just wish the lie wasn't necessary. A lot of griffons aren't happy with the Royal Pony Sisters right now."

Celestia's head sunk. She looked over at Flash Burn, who was nearly finished disrobing. "We should get going."

The griffon smiled again. "Good luck." She backed up and reared onto her hind legs again. "The entrants are ready," she cried out loudly. "Open the Trial of the Mountain." The two griffons heaved the gates backwards. The heavy doors groaned at being moved, but they opened fully.

Celestia looked back at the other ponies. "Let's move, everypony." The others followed wordlessly into the darkness of Griffonmont.

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"Hey, Glory?" Shimmerdust turned back to face the earth pony, causing the glow from her horn to recede from the cave.

"Eyes forward," replied Morning Glory with a slight hint of impatience.

Shimmerdust faced forward again. "I was just wondering something."

"What?"

"You live in a tavern, right?"

Morning Glory sighed. "An inn, yes."

"So where do you keep all your cheese?" This was immediately followed by gleeful chortling from the other end of the line. Twilight Sage sounded like he was having trouble breathing, but he laughed nonetheless.

Morning Glory's cheeks turned red. "For the last time, Shimmerdust, I do not now, nor have I ever, collected cheese in any way." Shimmerdust made no sound or motion of acknowledgement, which caused Glory to make a "hrmph" sound.

"How much longer until we get to the end of this?" Glory's voice was tired.

Celestia attempted to restrain the weariness from her own voice. "Probably at least another half hour, though it depends on what other obstacles are in our way."

Sage's giggling finally died down. "I can't imagine that we have too much to worry about. The worst we've run into so far was the spike hallway, and we got through that just fine."

Amaranth didn't turn back to speak. "You got your tail caught in the last closing wall."

"Yeah, well-"

"Your tail is only a few inches long."

"Oh, come on." Sage didn't sound terribly disheartened. "How can you be pessimistic at a time like this? Six brave heroes delving through a dungeon full of traps to acquire a powerful treasure...we're on an adventure!"

"I value my life over the idea of 'adventure'," Amaranth stated chidingly. Sage said something back, but Celestia didn't hear it. Flash and Glory were whispering just ahead of her, and she tried to listen in.

"...STILL can't believe he would do something so idiotic." Glory's whisper was harsh and hissing.

"He knew what he was doing," replied Flash softly. Her voice had a bit of an uncertain edge to it.

"You're just making excuses for him because you like him." Now Glory was positively growling.

"Do you really have to bring that up now?" Flash's blush was audible.

Glory made an impossibly feminine grunt and started walking faster. "Come on, everypony. The faster we walk, the sooner we get out of here."

Somewhere distant in the cave, there was a strange "hiss-clunk" sound. Then another one, closer. Then another. The hissing approached the ponies, and with no other warning, a pillar of stone shot up in front of them, causing Morning Glory to scream and tossing her backwards into Flash Burn's forelegs.

The earth pony turned around to embrace the pegasus. "Oh, Flashie, you saved me! I'm so sorry I yelled at you." She buried her muzzle into Flash Burn's neck, which caused the pegasus to make an expression that was at once amused, bemused, and confused. The stone pillar had already fallen back onto the floor, but dust from where it had hit the ceiling settled down onto the ponies. Celestia traced its path back to the floor, and saw that the entire cave in front of them was hewn into irregular section.

"It's another trap," she said flatly. "This entire hall is made of these crushing pillars." Another round of "hiss-thunk"s began. Different pillars hit the ceiling this time. "And it looks like they fire randomly. This is way more impressive than anything we've run into..."

"It's natural," said Sage with a hint of wonder in his voice. "That hissing sound? That's some kind of superheated gas from the geothermal activity under Griffonmont. I wouldn't have expected anything to come up this high, but...I think the entire Trial may have been built around this. Look," he pointed a hoof at the tiles that were, in fact, the tops of the pillars. "These are cut into really irregular shapes and sizes. Nothing even resembling uniformity. I'm not sure what made the cuts, but it wasn't griffons. Possibly some kind of ancient magic, from before Griffons lived here."

"Okay," Flash said, with Glory still wrapped tightly around her, "how do we get through?"

Another set of "hiss-thunk"s. "Well," Sage said uncertainly, "It seems that the interval is regular. Judging from the sound, they don't start too far off. If we start just after one pass ends, we'll only have to contend with one round of pillars."

"What?" Glory let go of Flash. "We have to be in that mess? I already almost got crushed!"

"The only other option is turning back and failing, and going through all the other traps again besides. Do you really want to go through the sticky hall again?" Sage raised an eyebrow with an amused smirk.

Glory stared at the ground. "We agreed to never speak of that again."

Shimmerdust brushed up against Glory. "Aw, come on, it was funny."

Glory grumbled. "I hope these pillars kill me."

The ponies lined up in front of the tiled floor. Another round of "hiss-thunk"s. The

instant one hit in front of them, they broke into a gallop. As predicted, they were still on the tiles when they heard a hissing start. However, the sight ahead made Celestia's heart skip a beat. There was a gout of flame at the end of the tiles, and the instant it cut out, a massive chunk of stone the width of the entire hallway rose up and smashed the ceiling. The end of the trapped section would certainly kill them if they didn't make it in time. Smaller pillars began rising and falling in front of them. Celestia closed her eyes. She heard a hissing sound behind her and knew that she was clear. But then she heard another sound. She only dared to turn her head for one second. Shimmerdust had been pushed off her hooves and fell to the ground.

"Shimmer!" Sage's yell confirmed what Celestia had seen. The unicorn quickly scrambled back up, but she was still far behind the rest of the group. The sounds of the pillars were reaching the beginning of the hallway.

"We're not going to make it!" Glory screamed in panic. Then, suddenly, she disappeared in a blink. She reappeared with Flash past the giant end pillar, but Flash disappeared again. Celestia felt a surge lift her into the air, and by the time she could look down at the ground, she was already at the end. One by one, the other ponies were scooped up by the pegasus and deposited at the end of the hallway, until only one pony remained in the hallway.

Flash looked nervously at the hole in the wall where the flame jet had come out. "I...I-" she didn't have time to finish. The roaring fire pushed everypony back with its heat. And Shimmerdust was on the other side. Flash sunk to the floor. "I wouldn't have made it. She was too far back."

Sage stumbled into the wall. "Shimmer...no..." He stared at the floor. "She can't be...this can't..." Tears began forming in his eyes.

"She might make it," Celestia said hopefully. "Those pillars are random."

Amaranth looked at Sage sadly. "I don't think she'll know to avoid that final stone, and even if she does...the pillars near the end looked like they came up more frequently. I don't think we have that kind of luck. And we saw that the pillars start the instant the flame cuts out."

Flash spoke to Sage in a weak whisper. "Sage...I am so, so sorry."

He didn't get up. "You did everything you could."

Flash stammered something, but then her eyes narrowed. "Wrong."

Celestia saw Flash spread her wings and turn to the flame. Everything seemed to go in slow motion. The pegasus leaped into the gout of fire as Glory reached out a hoof to stop her. There was a pause. The flame disappeared. Shimmerdust flew out into the crowd with enough velocity that she skipped off the floor. A streak of fire just barely cleared the giant stone pillar before it smashed the ceiling. The streak slowed down enough to be obvious as the form of a pegasus, who smashed hard into one wall, then the opposite wall, then finally tumbled to the floor until she reached a complete stop.

"Flash!" Morning Glory galloped over to the fallen pegasus. Flash Burn lay on the ground, the smell of burnt fur rising from her. Blood started to color her near-white coat in spots all over her body and head. "Flash, speak to me. Say something!"

Meanwhile, Sage was helping Shimmerdust up. "Can you walk?"

Shimmerdust's voice was shaky. "My back leg's a bit tender, but I'll be fine." It was the first time Celestia had heard anything in the blue unicorn's voice besides calm

contentment. "Go help Flash." Sage looked uncomfortable leaving her, but he rushed over to Flash Burn all the same.

"How is she?" he asked Morning Glory.

The earth pony had tears in her eyes. "She's not talking to me. She's not moving. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do."

Sage calmly leaned down next to Flash. "She's breathing. She's breathing well. She should be alright, but we have to get her wounds disinfected now. My supplies are in my saddlebag, but-"

"If we're carrying her, it will take us the better part of an hour," Amaranth said calmly. "And if she has any broken bones, that would be a bad idea."

Sage nodded in agreement. "Somepony has to go ahead and get my things while the rest of us tend to her. Shimmer is still injured-"

"I'll go." Celestia passed the other ponies. "They're expecting to see me first, I'll get the bags fastest."

"But, Princess," Sage protested, "your muscles may still be weak. A long gallop could burn your muscles out."

Celestia put on the bravest face she could manage. "Then today is a bad day to be me."

The princess broke into a gallop instantly. After the first minute, her lungs ached, and her legs felt weak. She didn't stop. Her hooves threatened to fall out from under her, but the cave slowly brightened. The end was near. Finally, around a bend, she saw the exit. It wasn't as bright as she had expected, and she could see the others standing outside. She pressed harder, though it still felt too slow. She finally broke into the open air, and she thought she could hear cheers over the wind rushing past her ears. She didn't care. She sought the dark form of Hurricane, the only pony in the crowd.

"Hurricane!" she tried to yell. It came out as ragged breathing which somehow resembled the word she wanted to say. "Flash. Hurt. Sage's bags."

The pegasus squeezed his way through a crowd of griffons. "What's going on?"

Celestia tried to catch more breath. "Flash is hurt. Needs what's in Sage's bag. I gotta go back."

An old griffon cleared his throat. "No outside materials in the trial, pony."

"Sunny has won," said a voice that Celestia identified as Groza's. "The trial is over, Oerda."

Celestia gestured frantically. "I have to go back. No time."

Hurricane put a hoof on her shoulder. "You'll collapse if you try to run. I'll go." He pulled Sage's bags on top of himself.

A young griffon rushed out of the crowd. Erix. "You can't run! Something could happen to your wing."

"I gotta risk it. The bandaging is good; I should be fine."

"But it's that guard pony that you don't even like."

There was a pause. "Doesn't matter. She's hurt, and I can help." Hurricane galloped off into the cave. Once he disappeared, Celestia felt herself stagger. She was caught by a mass of feathers.

"Easy, there. You did it. Now you just have to wait." Groza's voice soothed Celestia. She leaned against her old friend, and she rested her head in the griffon's plumage. Her part was done. She could do nothing but hope.

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An hour passed in silence. Celestia never did stop leaning on Groza, even as her strength returned to her. She found herself able to do little more than worry. There was a good chance that bad news would come out of the cave at any second. None of the griffons said anything. All of them stood reverently, waiting for someone else to make a move.

Suddenly, a griffon gasped. There was movement from the cave. All the griffons clamored around the mouth of the cave, hoping to get a better look. The shadowy forms coalesced into three ponies. Amaranth and Twilight Sage stood on either side of the formation, and in the center, with one foreleg draped over each of them, was a bandaged and bloodied Flash Burn, smiling weakly.

Celestia rushed up to give the pegasus a hug, but when she tried, found that her legs had all fallen asleep. She fell onto her face. It was just as well, since once they were outside the cave, Shimmerdust and Morning Glory took Flash from the stallions and began lavishing her with affection. Glory did so in her predictably melodramatic manner, and Shimmerdust with unmistakable quiet sincerity. Amaranth and Sage stood smiling silently, and Hurricane attempted to pry Glory off Flash to no avail. They all parted when Celestia got to her hooves and walked up to the pegasus.

The princess smiled down at the injured Guard captain. "You were amazing, Flash."

The pegasus gave a weak chuckle, then made a face that looked like she'd just hurt herself. "Just doing my job."

Celestia leaned down and gave Flash a gentle hug. The bandages were moist with disinfectant, and her fur was matted with blood in a lot of places. The princess released her, only for Morning Glory to come rushing back in.

"Never do anything like that again, Flashie! I'll die of worry." The brown earth pony stroked Flash's mane gently.

The pegasus laughed again. "YOU'LL die? Of course, how inconsiderate of me." This hardly seemed to dissuade Glory, but they were both smiling.

A soft coughing from behind made Celestia turn her head around. Groza was standing at the head of the rest of the griffons, looking impatient.

"Sorry," said Celestia, "I guess we're done now."

Groza nodded. "You have passed the Trial of the Mountain. With both my blessing, and the blessing of the Council, I bequeath unto you ponies the Element of Loyalty." The elderly griffon closed her eyes, and golden light appeared in the sky around her. It coalesced into a necklace, but then dispersed into a cloud of dust. The motes settled to the ground, where they formed a plain grey stone sphere, about an eighth the size of a pony, with nothing but a simple geometric character marking its significance.

Celestia bowed, and reached out to grab the stone, but she felt herself bowled over by something heavy. Heavy and equipped with talons. She threw herself to the side to escape further injury, but the talon left a scratch in her side. She fell to the ground and looked up

to see the source of the attack. An old griffon male stood framed by the setting sun.

"No!" came Oerda's weary old voice. "I will not allow our greatest treasure to be handed to these ponyfolk. Not in this time of darkness." He stepped forward, but he was whisked out of view by another blurred form.

"Stand down, you old bastard!" It was Groza's voice. She had knocked the general to the ground, and stood between him and Celestia.

"Your foolish decisions won't matter if there are no ponyfolk to give it to." He lunged into the air, but Groza rose swiftly and smacked him back down to the ground.

"The Council has spoken, fool." She settled back down to the ground in a low stance. "I have spoken."

"Then you are a traitor," growled Oerda. He let out a roar and charged Groza. Groza crouched down as if she were expecting a tackle. However, the general instead swiped at her with a single talon. It didn't look like it pushed her at all, but blood began to come from Groza's neck.

"You...you..." stammered Groza, as she lifted a talon to her wound.

The other griffon backed up a few paces. "Now I am in charge." His expression was grim.

Groza's eyes went wild. "You're a fool." She stood tall, despite the blood running from her throat. "Perhaps you have forgotten what Loyalty means. Allow me to show you." She made a blindingly fast charge and pinned Oerda to the ground.

"But...how?" Oerda's words were quiet. He was being strangled.

"The Element of Loyalty prevents me from being struck down as I defend those I care about. Surprisingly enough, that happens to include a very dear friend of mine."

"Don't...have...Element..." The general was kicking his hind legs into the air, and desperately attempting to wrench Groza's talon off his own neck. He was not succeeding.

"The Spirit of the Elements is stronger than that, fool. And now, you pay for your arrogance and treachery." Groza's talon went high into the air, and then plunged straight down Oerda's beak. The old general made a strangled gurgle, then stopped moving. Groza calmly climbed off his corpse, and faced the crowd of shocked griffons. "These ponies are here to save the world. To harm them is as great betrayal as any griffon shall ever know. Does everyone understand?" The griffons nodded silently. They all appeared to slowly recede from the ponies and the fallen elder.

Groza turned back to Celestia. She crouched down and, with her clean talon, slowly stroked Celestia's mane. "There," she said, with a weak smile and eyes full of tears. "You're safe."

Groza the griffon collapsed on the ground, her neck split open, and her eyes empty of life.