

“WAUGH!” Celestia shot up from her sandy bed, startled to find that her hooves were not under her. She swiveled her head around, trying to take in her surroundings with bleary eyes. A single figure resolved into view, standing above her.

Zerishan leaned over Celestia, holding between her grinning teeth a fine glass comb.

“Thanks,” Celestia groaned. Without any prompting, the older zebra mare began grooming Celestia’s mane. It was a significantly faster procedure than doing it by hoof. As Celestia sat enjoying the easy morning, she observed the other ponies milling about, preparing to travel. Flash Burn set down a load of full waterskins in the sand beside Morning Glory, who was lying as still as the night before. Some of the group took their own back, but a few were left for Flash to tend to Glory.

Shimmerdust galloped over to Celestia. “Hey, you already combed it!”

Celestia rolled her eyes, which felt much clearer than they did a minute ago. “Yes, Shimmer. I know you like my mane messy, but it’s really inconvenient for me.”

Shimmerdust tilted her head. “Messy? But if it always goes back to that, then that’s its natural state. Isn’t straightening it out more like messing it up, then?”

Celestia patted Shimmerdust on the head. “Never change,” she said, finally allowing herself a smirk.

Shimmerdust shrugged. “No promises,” she said without the slightest hint of irony. She slowly trotted back over to Twilight Sage, who was carefully arranging items in saddlebags.

Amaranth and Hurricane were busy having a discussion, which appeared to be frustrating Hurricane. Celestia checked to make sure nopony else was available to solve the problem, and, soon enough, resigned herself to the task.

“What’s going on, boys?”

Hurricane made a distraught moan. “I’m trying to explain false advertising to this crazy pony.”

Amaranth shrugged. “It simply doesn’t make sense to me that one would tell lies about a product which are sure to be discovered. Do ponies not demand their money back?”

Hurricane threw his front hooves in the air. “I told you, even if somepony DOES get the courage up to do that, it’s practically impossible for them to prove it happened, and even if they have a case, the courts are freaking awful about handling this, if they don’t just throw the case out immediately.”

Amaranth lifted a hoof as if offering something. “But it is illegal?”

“Yes! And, you know what? So is stealing, but guess what it took ME years to get arrested for!”

Celestia meant to interject, but a horrible feeling pierced her stomach. A split second later, she heard a commotion behind her. Flash Burn was yelling something. Celestia couldn’t make it out, but she

was sure that it was somehow in reference to the fact that Morning Glory was slowly rising to her hooves. The auburn-maned earth pony walked slowly and smoothly across the sand, almost as if gliding, inexorably towards her half-brother, her eyes full of malice.

Hurricane shied away, refusing to meet her glare. "Oh, uh, 'morning. Good to see you up."

Morning Glory's voice hissed from her mouth. "Years?"

Hurricane laughed nervously and rolled his eyes. "Did I say years? Of course I didn't say years, because I only told you I'd be stealing stuff like a half a year ago, so of course I wasn't doing it before then." Glory's expression remained stone still. She didn't turn when Flash Burn rushed over to support her weight.

"Flash? I'm tired. I need you to hurt him for me."

"The kid has a broken wing," Flash said uncertainly.

Glory's voice slowly drifted from hiss to growl. "He also has an UNbroken wing...for the moment."

Hurricane's little remaining resolve broke at those words. He tore off galloping in a completely random direction, screaming pleas for help. Celestia chuckled, certain as she could be that the dark pegasus was as unlikely to need any help as he was to get any.

Flash held Glory by her shoulders. "Glory, you're up! I was so worried."

Morning Glory's features softened, and her voice changed to a dry softness. "What happened?"

"You need to drink water," Flash continued, not answering Glory's question. She held a water bottle to her friend's mouth. Glory hesitantly drank from it.

Celestia stepped over to them. "You intentionally dehydrated yourself and almost died. I don't suppose you remember why?" She kept her voice perfectly level, and her expression neutral. She didn't need any extra force to impress upon Glory the dire nature of the question.

Glory looked down at the ground. "I'm useless," she muttered.

"I beg your pardon?" Celestia said with continued detachment.

"Everything is at stake, and everypony has something to contribute. But not me. I'm not strong. I'm not knowledgeable. I'm not wise. I'm just a bunch of lies behind a pretty face."

Flash Burn held Glory's face in her hands. "That is NOT true. You're my best friend, and we'd never have gotten here without you."

Celestia nodded. "You got us past Cloudsdale, and earned the friendship of the griffons. Surely you don't think that was all unimportant?"

Glory didn't look up, despite her head being held level by Flash. "And since then, I've been dead weight. I just thought...the best thing I could do was keep the useful ponies going."

Celestia put the slightest edge of impatience in her voice. "You have not been the slightest hindrance to our efforts, even when the other ponies were taking the lead. What's this really about?"

Glory paused. "Can I go back to being unconscious, please?"

Flash frowned. "Glory, you're not acting like yourself. I've never seen you afraid to face any problem, whether with other ponies, or with yourself. Do you really feel like giving more than any pony could ever be expected to isn't enough?" Glory winced, and didn't open her eyes.

"Yes." She began tearing up, and sunk her face into Flash's shoulder. Flash Burn patted her slowly, not replying.

Celestia exhaled slowly. She was not satisfied with the issue, but the tension had gone, and there were pressing matters, such as getting everypony moving. The wagon and saddlebags were all ready, so all that remained was to start walking.

"Okay, everypony," she announced loudly, "it's about three or four hours to the capital from here. If we make good time, we'll be at the capital in time for a nice brunch."

Zerishan tilted her head. "Zebras do not commonly eat brunch."

"Then today we're emissaries of pony culture," Celestia replied. "Now, let's get going." She turned to Morning Glory, who had fully collapsed onto Flash Burn. "Glory, I want you in the back of the wagon. You're not okay to walk. We'll see how you're doing in a couple hours, but don't get overeager. You almost died." Glory mumbled something weakly from Flash's neck, but didn't move. The golden-armored pegasus carried her over to the wagon, and laid her down where the water barrels had previously rested. Celestia shouted, "Okay, everypony, move out!"

The small caravan set out once again on their mission.

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From a distance, the zebra capital didn't appear that impressive. Unlike Everfree, and most other major Equestrian cities, there were no towering castles or mansions. At the edge, there were only a very few buildings that had so much as a second story. On top of that, the buildings were primarily wooden huts, even further into the city, where there were no farms.

However, once inside, the ponies found that it was a city indeed. Zebras crowded the narrow streets, flooding them with a sea of black and white stripes, moving back and forth. Though some of the zebras were clothed in simple robes of bright colors, the crowd was mostly a motile monochrome. It reminded Celestia of the tales that equines once had to herd and flee from powerful carnivores, and she felt certain that if she were in the mood for a snack, she would never resort to a headache like a swirling mass of zebras. She found herself walking with her eyes on the ground much of the time. The zebras, for their part, all stared at the ponies. They certainly stood out, with bright manes in styles that were

radically different from those the zebras wore, and with their wings and horns. However, besides awkward staring, the zebras did nothing to impede the ponies.

Zerishan and Adombra made a quick stop to a particularly large wooden hut type building, where they dropped off their goods with what appeared to be a storage business. Following that, they immediately took the ponies towards the center of the town. At around noon, they came to a wide circle, empty of buildings, marked off with stones. Ceremonial masks hung from poles, and patterns were inscribed in the ground with layers of inlaid white pebbles. There were only a few zebras there, all of whom seemed to be old, and keeping to themselves.

"Where are we?" Flash Burn asked before anypony else got a chance.

Adombra gestured towards the center of the circle. "This is a sacred place. It is where our elders convene on matters of governance and culture. Of course, all are permitted to be here, but it is disrespectful to come without good reason. Most who come here do so to pray, or to petition the elders for matters of true importance."

Flash looked around. "Shouldn't a place like this be...I dunno, more private? If it's that important, I mean."

Zerishan shook her head. "To hide decisions from those whom they affect, it is a horrendous thing to our culture. If our leaders were to hide things from us, I think it would eventually cause war between the tribes."

"And we're here, why?" Hurricane asked with a raised eyebrow.

Adombra frowned. "Was I unclear? We must speak to the elders, if you are on a quest which requires you to take the Element of Honesty from our lands. It is their decision to make." The ponies all looked around at the nearly empty circle.

"Unless these geezers are the elders," Hurricane said impatiently, "I think we kinda missed them."

Adombra lightly smacked Hurricane. "You will speak with respect towards these zebras!" Celestia worried at the anger in his voice, but did not intervene. "They may not be the leaders of our people, but they are the wise keepers of our culture."

Zerishan put a hoof on Adombra's shoulders. "Calm yourself, husband." Adombra settled, but continued to glare. Zerishan turned towards the ponies. "The elders are currently with their tribes, but for matters of importance, it is possible to meet with them immediately. It is an ancient working that was set in place long before the city was built around this circle, when it was merely neutral ground for our many tribes. Observe." The zebra mare entered the innermost circle, which was surrounded by ceremonial masks. She intoned something in what Celestia could only guess was a very old form of Zebraic, since it sounded like the language but had no words which she could identify.

Without any further warning, the sky seemed to darken, and great fires of greens, blues, and

purples sprang up from the masks. They all twitched, and swiveled towards the center of the circle.

*"You have called upon the council of the elders, Zerishan L'kulpi of the Falling River Tribe. What do you require of us?"* The voice of an old male zebra came from one of the masks, which moved along with the words. Its tone was kind and patient.

"Oooh, pretty," said Shimmerdust, who looked entranced by the dancing flames.

Zerishan replied in the general direction of the mask that had spoken. *"Seven ponies have come to our lands on a quest of the greatest importance. In order to restore the stars to the sky and save us from darkness, they require the Elements of Harmony. They thus request the Element of Honesty from our people."*

A different mask spoke. It was also an old male, but one who sounded considerably more sickly. *"Bring them forth, if they are here."*

Zerishan made a beckoning motion. "Please come into the circle, so that all the elders can see you."

Celestia started towards the circle, and the other ponies followed, along with Adombra. She looked up at the masks, and they all swiveled to center on her.

"Ah," another mask said, continuing in heavily accented Equestrian, "you did not tell us that the pony goddess had come herself. We are honored."

Zerishan took a step as if staggered. "What? I was not aware."

A fourth mask spoke. "But her soul burns with the very fire of the sun! Hm, perhaps such things are not so obvious to normal eyes." It made a strange chortling sound. Celestia did her best not to slump. She didn't want to appear deceptive in this situation, but she hadn't realized that Adombra and Zerishan were not paying attention to her in the dragon's cave.

The first mask began speaking again. "This is a very delicate situation. Luckily, our ancestors foresaw the possibility that the magic of the elements might be required by beings other than zebras. They provided a manner with which to test if it would be used properly. It is a trial, in which you must prove that you are capable of the Honesty that the Element is connected to."

"Ooh," a fifth mask, distinctly feminine and ancient cooed, "I have always wanted to do the trial. What luck!"

"But," the third mask added, "there are even more important matters that must be taken care of first." Celestia looked around to make sure that the other ponies were as shocked and confused as she was. Satisfied that every pony but Shimmerdust was bewildered, she dared to ask the masks a question.

"What is more important than restoring order to the heavens?"

The third mask spoke gleefully. "Lunch!" All the other masks nodded their assent.

"Oh, dear," Amaranth said so calmly that Celestia would have thought it sarcasm coming from anypony else.

"Besides," the fourth mask continued, "we must all come to be physically present. The trial has no meaning if we watch it through masks which see through all deception."

A sixth mask, with a voice that remained deep and authoritative despite the obvious age of its speaker, announced, "We shall all be able to arrive before sundown. Please return to this circle when the red light first begins to appear in the sky."

With no further warning, the fires of the masks went out, and they hung limp. Celestia blinked her eyes, and realized that the sky had not, in fact, changed in lighting, but that it had only been a false impression of her mind. She turned to face the other ponies.

"What...what just happened here?"

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The ponies spent their afternoon being dragged on a tour of the zebra capital by Adombra and Zerishan. What few sites there were to see were mostly the same: clearings for some sort of ceremony or other. Though they were quite varied in shape and decoration, they were, in the end, large patches of empty ground. Celestia did her best to pay attention to the cultural significance and history of each, but she tended to find herself drifting off after a few hours. Only Twilight Sage remained in rapt attention the entire time.

When the sun drifted closer to the horizon, Celestia urged that the group return to the circle of the elders. Adombra and Zerishan seemed sad that they wouldn't get to see more places, but they didn't argue. They all arrived at the circle just as the sky was touched with the faintest pink.

No sooner had they arrived than the magic fire erupted from the masks again. This time, however, the flames grew in size, engulfing the masks. They sank to the ground slowly, continuing to grow until they were larger than any pony Celestia had ever seen. Then, without warning, they vanished. In their place were six zebras, each wearing a large ceremonial mask. Despite their hidden faces, Celestia could tell that they were very old indeed.

The one wearing the mask that had spoken first in the initial meeting spoke first again. "Welcome, ponies. I am Tahubra, the eldest of the zebras." Tahubra's voice sounded less clear and potent than it had through the magical contact, but still calm and steady. "We have gathered here today to administer the trial of the Element. Are you prepared?"

Celestia steadied herself and nodded. "Yes."

The zebra wearing the fifth mask from before cheerfully added, "Did you dears have a good dinner?"

Before Celestia could reply, Tahubra coughed. "Zeikava, please remember that, at official meetings like this, you may not speak before all the zebras older than you have spoken."

"Pfah!" Zeikava spat, swatting a hoof in the air, but she made no further protest.

The zebra with the second mask sighed. "I am Lomobra," he said shakily. "It is an honor to meet you."

"And I am Zema," the third mask continued quickly.

The fourth mask went next. "And I," he said in a voice far too grandiose for the occasion, "am Fudabra." He waved his front hooves in the air mystically.

"You already know my name," Zeikava said with undisguised spite. She turned to the zebra in the sixth mask, but he only nodded his head, declining to speak.

Tahubra picked up immediately. "The trial is simple. Each of you shall tell your deepest secret, and the current Element of Honesty shall judge whether you have passed or not."

Morning Glory looked around. "I thought you said that seeing through lies would invalidate the trial."

Zema nodded. "Indeed, only the Element of Honesty is privy to knowing if you lied or not, or who lied at all. He will never reveal that information. Much the same, only he knows whether it was your deepest secret that you revealed, and which, if any, did not reveal such. So, if you wish to keep your secret, you will."

"But," added Fudabra, "he is the Element of Honesty, so forcing him to carry a secret to the grave would be quite cruel."

Hurricane rolled his eyes. "Right. And, let me guess: tall, dark, and mute here is the Element guy?" The other elders nodded.

Zeikava smacked the silent zebra on the shoulder. "Well, don't just stand there! Introduce yourself."

There was a silent moment, until finally he spoke. "I am Umbra Mostonoc of the Blessed Leaf tribe." His voice, low and powerful, resonated across the clearing. "I am humbled to be in your presence, Princess Celestia." Celestia felt her stomach jump when he addressed her. She looked around at the other ponies to see if they were having similar reactions, but none of them showed it.

Fudabra chuckled. "What you are feeling, Princess, is what all beings feel when Umbra conveys his feelings to them. Even beyond the magical power to make his words undeniable, he has quite the talent for voice." Umbra shrunk at the praise, without reply. Celestia felt herself settle down. Sincere compliments of such a nature often felt like that, but she knew as well as anypony how rare sincerity could be.

Lomobra interrupted her thoughts with his shaking voice. "You may begin whenever you like. We old zebras are merely enjoying each other's company."

Celestia nodded. "Right. Uh..." she turned back towards the other ponies. "Who wants to start?" There were a few moments of everypony looking around until, finally, Twilight Sage stepped forward.

"I'll go," he said hesitantly. He looked around, clearly waiting for some sort of reaction, but he got none. He took a deep breath, and paused. Then he let it out and screwed up his face, shaking his head as if trying to get something to come off. The few seconds of these theatrics dragged on, but finally, he began in earnest. "I really wish I was able to use magic!" he shouted. He opened his eyes and looked around.

"Sage, darling," Glory said dryly, "while it's a little adorable that you think that everypony didn't know that, you're really going to have to dig deeper."

"No!" Sage said waving a hoof frantically. "I mean yes. I mean – no." He sighed. "Being born without magic happens to unicorns from time to time. There are a few accounts of it happening to nobles. Being able to use magic is hardly a requirement for pony life, even a happy life." Sage slumped further. "But I love magic. I probably know more about magic than any mortal pony still alive. I could incorporate Starswirl the Bearded's theorems into Clover the Clever's 'On Magic and Motion' without even looking at either of them. And being unable to use it, it..." he opened and closed his mouth a couple times. "It feels like I've failed at the one thing I've tried hardest at doing."

Celestia put a hoof around Sage's shoulders. "Even without using magic, you've made many contributions to the study of it. A thousand years from now, the field of pony magic will know few greater contributions than yours."

"And think about what that would mean if I could use magic?" Sage shook his head once. "I want to change the world. That's why I work days on end. That's why I wrote those stupid books about Wonderbolt, a unicorn who happens to go around changing the world because he's so good at magic. That's why I keep trying to get magic. And that's why this whole accident happened and Princess Luna and the whole world are in danger. Because I just can't let go."

"Sage," Celestia said, lifting the unicorn's head so he was meeting her eyes, "don't think for a second that I blame you for what happened to my sister. You had no way of knowing the danger, and it wasn't even your decision to have her cast that spell on herself. If it was anypony's fault, it was mine, for failing to impress upon her the importance of letting her ascension come at the proper time." She pulled him into a hug. "You are my faithful student, and a wonderful pony. Never forget that."

Sage hugged Celestia back. "Hearing that isn't just going to make it all disappear."

"It's step one, my little pony." The pair stood there for a minute. No pony else said anything.

Finally, Twilight Sage slid out of the embrace. "Well, I guess that's my biggest secret."

Hurricane raised an eyebrow. "That seemed a little too easy."

Sage allowed himself a bit of a smirk. "That's all the secrets I keep. Unless you want to hear about what Shimmer and I do in our private time."

"Or when we're sure nopony's looking," Shimmerdust added.

Sage rolled his eyes. "I guess that counts as a secret, too." He didn't seem to pay attention to the generally upset looks the other ponies gave him. "Anyway, I really can't think of anything else. It's somepony else's turn now."

Another awkward lull came, with the threat of total honesty hanging over everypony's heads.

"I'm not dumb," came a voice, finally. Everypony's heads swiveled towards Shimmerdust. She was staring at her hooves, but she continued. "I know everypony thinks I really don't know what's going on most of the time, but I do. The veiled references, the subtle insults, I get them. As much as anypony ever does, anyway."

Sage nuzzled his fillyfriend. "Honey, we don't think you're dumb. Maybe a little odd sometimes, but we've all seen that you're smart and clever."

"You think it's obvious because it's obvious to you, but ponies find it very hard to shake first impressions."

Sage frowned. "We could argue about this all we want, but this is supposed to be a secret you keep, not something that other ponies don't notice."

"But that's just it," Shimmerdust replied with a desperate tinge to her voice that Celestia had never heard before. "I act weird because I want ponies to just write me off as some crazy pony. I mean, it's not acting, exactly, because I really do think about what I talk about, but I know what you're supposed to do when ponies talk to you. You make small talk, you don't engage them in pointless trains of thought, you don't take expressions literally. I could be normal and witty. But I don't cover up my weirdness because I want that distance. That safety net whenever I do something wrong."

"Shimmer." Sage patted her on the head.

Hurricane interrupted, "You don't need some excuse to be who you are. If somepony doesn't like it when you go off on one of your weird rants, that's their problem. And if somepony doesn't like you for who they think you are, well, that's their problem too."

"I know all that," she said weakly. "It's just...it's so much pressure. To be normal. To be liked. To be right. You all go about your lives, expecting something out of every pony you talk to, and you don't even realize it. And every time any pony talks to me, I can feel it. That silent insistence that you fit into the mould. I just worry so much about letting anypony down that I just find it easier to break their expectations early. I'm such a coward that I play dumb just so ponies are happy when I do my job right. So that I'm not always waiting for that horseshoe to drop."

Sage pulled her closer. "No matter what you think, it takes a lot of bravery to act as you like no matter who's watching. You're not a coward."

"I wasn't finished." Shimmerdust squirmed a bit, but she didn't pull away from Sage. "There's a reason I do this. Something even you don't know."

"We grew up together, Shimmer. What did I miss?"

Shimmerdust swallowed, and took a deep breath. "My dad hit me." Everypony breathed in sharply, shocked. "Once. It wasn't the sort of 'punishing a petulant child' thing, though. He meant to hurt me. It was early in my apprenticeship under him. I screwed up something big. It cost him a lot of money. He was yelling, and I kept trying to apologize and then...yeah. And every day since then, I just got more scared of disappointing him. He never seemed okay with me. Looking back, he was always short with me before that, but after, it was even worse. Like I was just one wrong move away. I didn't want to get caught screwing up, so, over the years, I just figured out a way for it to be impossible for me to mess up."

Twilight Sage hugged her tighter. "If I ever get magic, I'm going to finish Starswirl's time travel spell. Then I'm going to go back in time to before your father died, and I'm going to kill him myself."

Flash Burn trotted over to the pair. "Shimmer, we like who you really are. You look at life a different way than we do, but that's not a bad thing. I know that's not the point of what you were saying, but I thought it needed to be said." Shimmerdust just hung her head. "As for feeling like you need to set a low bar," Flash continued, "I understand you. I've had to deal with that constant pressure, too. You haven't met my parents, but let me assure you, they were relentless. But, you know what? Not all ponies are like the ponies who treated you badly. Most of us understand that nopony's perfect. We forgive each other, even when times are bad. I mean, look at Glory and Hurricane. They mess each others' lives up all the time, but they're inseparable when the cards are down."

Shimmerdust shifted her expression with an exaggerated slowness. "Glory...threatens Hurricane with physical violence on a regular basis."

Flash held a hoof to her own chin. "That's a good point. She really shouldn't do that. But when things get serious, like when it's a choice between all her political ambitions or her brother's safety, I know she'd choose her brother, and she wouldn't regret it. There are ponies in this world who are capable of love. Real love. And it's more of us than you think." Shimmerdust searched Flash's eyes. She looked down, then back up. Finally, after a long pause, she replied.

"Are you coming onto me?"

Flash's face fell. "What."

"Because I know I'm all vulnerable and all right now, but I have a boyfriend, and we don't swing. And, even if we did, I kinda only like colts, and while you do have that sorta boyish charm mixed with feminine beauty thing going on there I--"

"I'm not hitting on you!" Flash yelled. She looked like she was trying not to laugh. "I know I've

been acting weird towards you, but...well, I'll explain in a bit. Just...remember that all of us are your friends, even if we haven't known you for very long. We'd never want to hurt you, even if we do it on accident sometimes."

Shimmerdust rested on Sage limply. "I think I need to lie down." Sage gently lowered her onto the ground.

"Right," Flash said, "I think it's time I went. I really want to get this out of the way." The other ponies looked at her expectantly. "Sage?" Sage looked up at her from his place next to Shimmerdust. "I...I..." Flash said, resetting her confession and re-contemplating it each time. Celestia and the other ponies stepped forward, waiting to hear what she was trying to get out.

"I don't have a crush on you."