

The air in the ceremonial circle hung at a steady calm as Twilight Sage locked Flash Burn with an unreadable glare.

“Look, Captain, when I was single, an advance rejection would have at least saved me some trouble, but-“

“No!” Flash interrupted. “That’s not- just...” she sighed. “I was going to say that I do have a crush on you, but, I thought about it. And, when I did, I realized that it was something else.”

Celestia raised her eyebrow. “Flash, you’ve fancied him for a long time. I’d certainly like to hear your explanation for this, since we’re in a lot of trouble if it’s not the truth.”

“Right,” Flash said looking at her hooves. “It’s weird, but Shimmer talking about her dad made me think of mine. My father was incredibly demanding and controlling. And all the ponies I seem to get close to are, well, not. Princess Celestia, Glory, Amaranth, you all not only accept me, but you praise me, more than I ever feel like I deserve. And Sage...well, he just does the same thing. What I thought was infatuation was just a feeling of acceptance from a pony I found physically attractive. I’ve seen what Sage and Shimmerdust have, and it’s something far beyond that. They don’t just accept and admire each others’ qualities. They love them.” Shimmerdust kissed Sage on the cheek in response. Flash continued, “Twilight Sage, I think you’re wonderful. You’re kind, intelligent, dedicated, and a bunch of other stuff. But I don’t have romantic feelings for you. I just needed a push to move on to other requirements for a life partner besides ‘nicer than my dad’, is all.”

Sage scratched the back of his head. “Okaaaay...well, I guess I’m glad that’s not hanging over us anymore, even though I had no idea this was a thing. Seriously, how long, Princess?”

Celestia shook her head. “You don’t want to know.”

Amaranth smiled. “So, Sage, I guess you’re a magnet for girls with daddy issues?” Celestia’s stomach seized up. Partially out of anger, but mostly out of worry. She turned to see every pony and zebra in the circle shoot Amaranth with a gaze that could rot milk. Flash Burn slowly advanced on Amaranth, who slowly shifted expression to one of realization.

“Amaranth,” Flash began in a voice as cold as a Windigo’s breath, “please understand that the beating I’m about to give you is in response to certain things you said, and is not a reflection on our friendship.”

Amaranth gulped. “So this is one of those things I’m not allowed to joke about?”

“Correct.” And, with that, the pegasus warrior was on him, pinning his limbs to the ground.

Celestia sighed. “Flash, we do not injure ponies for being insensitive.”

Flash paused, but did not let Amaranth up. “I was just gonna bruise him a little. Seems proportionate to me.”

Hurricane rolled his eyes. “Right,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “because you’re so

good at restraining ponies without significant injury.” He flapped his one working wing.

“I...that’s...” Flash stammered. She let go of Amaranth. “You know what? I’m tired of this. I’m sorry I hurt you, okay? I was trying to do my job and I slipped up. I cried, seeing you getting treated. But having you nagging me about it for the rest of the journey isn’t going to fix things, and it isn’t going to make accidents never happen again. I’m sick and tired of having to measure up to everypony’s unrealistic expectations of me!”

Amaranth shook his head like he was trying to get dry. “You just got finished saying how we aren’t like that.”

“Right,” Flash said with sagging shoulders. “I just...I’m always imagining it. Every time somepony says ‘you did the best you could’ or ‘we don’t expect you to do whatever’, I can’t shake this stupid feeling that they’re just covering up how disappointed they are in me. I guess I’m still scared to disappoint anypony, so I never let myself any slack. And it’s been tearing me up inside. I don’t know what to do.”

Fudabra interjected from the outside of the circle, “Our clinical recommendation is openness and honesty, but we have a bit of skewed point of view.”

“You know that we are not supposed to interfere in the trial,” Tahubra chided.

Celestia giggled. “Does a joke really count as interfering?”

Zema held up a single hoof. “It is advice that is true, but it is hardly relevant to the ponies’ success in the trial. We shall continue.”

Flash took a deep breath. “Right. I guess...I guess this is all about me being neurotic and worried that I’m never good enough. But I should stop trying to measure up to some dumb standard and just be me. And trust that you’ll all still like the real me.”

Amaranth shrugged. “If it helps, we all know that when you sweat, you smell like eggs.”

“What?” Flash said, recoiling a little. “I do not!”

Celestia covered her mouth with a hoof. “Actually, I’ve heard other members of the day guard talk about it before.”

Shimmerdust tilted her head. “So that’s why I was dreaming of eggs after Griffonmont...”

Flash stamped her hoof. “Enough! So, I spilled about being an insecure foal; it’s somepony else’s turn. Who’s left?” She pointed accusingly at the remaining ponies. First at Amaranth, then Hurricane, then Celestia, and finally...the empty patch of ground where Morning Glory had been standing previously. “Where’s Glory?”

There was a cough from the outer circle. Tahubra stepped aside to reveal Morning Glory slumped behind him. She didn’t look like she was actually trying to avoid detection, merely collapsed

into a ball.

Celestia inched forward towards her. "Glory? Are you alright?"

"No," came the muffled reply. Glory didn't turn to look back at her.

"Glory, all of us have to do this thing. I know you prefer to keep your private life private, but the world is at stake."

"I can't." She managed to sink even further.

"Glory-" Celestia urged, but she was cut off by a dark hoof held in front of her face.

"Leave it to me." Hurricane maintained a bored look on his face, but Celestia could swear she saw the slightest hints of a grin in his expression. The pegasus slowly advanced on his half-sister. "Hey, Glory, you better come in here."

"Hurricane, don't you dare," Glory said with a suddenly sharp tone. Hurricane continued unabated. "If you do, I swear, I will exact my revenge on you." He pressed on. "Hurricane. HURRICANE." Glory's attempt at a dominant voice ended up sounding more desperate than anything. Hurricane was right on top of her. "Hurricane, please don't." Unheeding, Hurricane picked a single feather from his good wing, and held it in his teeth with a broad grin. He lowered it towards Glory's neck.

Morning Glory erupted in flailing and shrieking. Hurricane needed only prod her occasionally to get her to continue her antics. Despite Glory's apparent terror, Celestia chuckled. She had not known that the normally unflappable earth pony was ticklish.

Finally, Glory managed to land a solid hit on Hurricane, allowing her an escape. "I can't believe you would do that to me in front of everypony!"

Hurricane shrugged. "No secrets here, right? Now, come on. Whatever you got shut up in there, we need out here. It's a little important."

Glory was at the point of tears. "I can't do it, okay! I can't stop hiding. I'd rather be stuck with a miserable lie than face the disaster that the truth could bring."

Sage joined in on the escalating yelling match. "Whatever it is can't be worse than the end of the world."

"It is to me!" Glory was breathing heavily by this point. "I would rather die than lose...than lose..." she shrank back down. "Oh, it's all given away already."

Hurricane raised an eyebrow. "We're not all as good at tearing apart secrets as you are. That's not much to go on."

"You'd get to it eventually. I might as well say it." She slowed her breathing and slowly walked back into the circle. The other ponies surrounded her, waiting on her big reveal. She finally looked up

from the ground, staring straight at Flash Burn.

“Flash, I love you.”

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Flash Burn blinked a few times. Everypony was so quiet that Celestia swore she could hear Flash’s eyelids.

“I...bwuh?” Flash replied to Morning Glory’s confession.

Glory’s eyes returned to her hooves. “We’ve been best friends for so many years. You’re courageous, kind, and talented, but you somehow manage to overlook...no, forgive, all my flaws. I’ve never felt so attached to any pony.”

Flash was clearly not past the stage of utter confusion, but she had reached coherency. “So, wait, you mean ‘best friend love’ kind of love?”

“No,” Glory said flatly. “I do love you as a best friend, but I’m also in love with you. I’ve dreamt of the day when I was finally...when I was finally good enough for you. When I could stop being a manipulator and a whore and be something even close to the pony you deserve.”

Flash lowered her eyebrows. “Glory, you’re NOT a-“

“It doesn’t matter what you say,” Glory said, cutting Flash off. “Nothing’s going to make me feel worthy of you. I’m never going to be that mare. Not that you even like mares in that way, I guess.”

Celestia stepped in. “Is this what your recent behavior has been about? Trying to be ‘good enough’?”

Morning Glory turned away. “It’s hardly ‘recent’. When I started my life in politics, I was hardly interested in crusading for the common pony. But Flash, she made me want to be better. Not just to impress her, but because ponies like her deserve a perfect world. And I’d give my life and everything I have to make that world come a little closer.”

Flash raised a single eyebrow. “You can’t be telling me that you’d stop doing your work if I weren’t in the picture.”

Glory shrugged. “Not now, no. I realized some time ago that all the ponies I care about, and many of the ones I don’t know, deserve a better life. I couldn’t turn away from this path. But you’re my guiding star, Flash. Whatever life brings, without you, it feels empty.”

Flash sat down on the ground. “This...this is a lot to take in.”

“I understand if you don’t want to be friends anymore,” Glory said with a hint of a sob. “I’ve basically been lying to you for years, and I know you’re not comfortable with mares who-“ she stopped when Flash’s hoof covered her mouth.

“Like I could get mad at a pony for having a secret crush. And besides, you’re my best friend. I don’t know about this whole love thing, but I care about you. Whatever you feel, we need to talk about it, alright?” Glory nodded silently. “Good. Now gimme a hug.” Flash hugged Glory, who sank into her. The earth pony broke into tears in Flash’s embrace.

Celestia felt a little tension melt away when Flash and Glory hugged. “I guess it really is important for us to open up to each other, huh?”

Zema interjected from the outside. “Our ancestors did not make this trial to make lives worse, you know.”

“Right,” Celestia replied with a smirk. “So, who’s next?”

Morning Glory tore one hoof away from Flash, pointing it straight at her brother. “Hurricane, you dragged me into this. You go.”

Hurricane took a step back. “Come on! Aren’t you happy to be closer to your one true love or some crap like that?”

Glory narrowed her tear-filled eyes. “I can do far worse things to you than tickling,” she said venomously.

“Okay, fine!” Hurricane threw his forelegs in the air. “I’m not really a deep dark secrets kinda guy anyway. This’ll be a snap.”

Celestia leaned closer to the dark pegasus. “Good. So what is it?”

Hurricane leaned away from her. “Uh...” He looked from side to side. “Well, okay, I guess since there’s no girls around.”

“I beg your pardon?” Celestia said. She was rather amused by Hurricane’s attitude, but his misperception was a little startling.

“Well, there’s my sister, ew, my sister’s girlfriend, ew, Shimmer, who’s pretty hot but too weird for me, psychological issues or not, and then there’s you, who’s hundreds of years old, so you don’t really count. Plus a couple old zebras.” Hurricane gestured in empty air, as if he was trying to count. “So, yeah, nopony I’ve really gotta keep my image with.”

“Hurricane!” Glory snapped. “Have some respect.”

Zeikava barked from the circle. “Well, we are old. My husband is three years younger than me and he creaks more than my old chair when he moves.”

Celestia coughed. “Can we just get to this horrible, reputation-ruining secret?”

Hurricane scratched his head. “Right. How do I put this? I guess...I like performing, or something.” There was a long pause.

"That's it?" Sage yelled.

"Hey, it's a big deal!" Hurricane shouted back. "All that time I spend at the orphanages? I'm putting on little stunt shows. Flying is a big part of my life, but...I don't know. You can't really make a living just doing cool tricks in the air. I mean, even aerial ballet is only kinda close, and that's lamesauce."

"I did aerial ballet," Flash grumbled indignantly.

"Yeah, that's not exactly a surprise," Hurricane replied, earning a contemptuous glare from the other pegasus. "Anyway, the whole thievery thing was basically an excuse. All I've ever wanted to do is show off. And I guess that's kinda stupid. I mean, sure, ponies enjoy it, but it's still mostly about me." There was a brief pause.

"That's a terrible secret," Sage said at last, provoking an avalanche of agreements from the other ponies in the circle.

"I know you're deeper than that, brother," Glory urged.

"Hey, that's all I got," Hurricane protested. "What else do you want?"

"Maybe you could tell us why you're so unpleasant all the time?" Amaranth suggested.

"Hey," Hurricane said pointing a hoof at Amaranth, "screw you, girly boy. This is who I am. You know what being nice gets you? Nothing. You know what sitting around worrying about other ponies gets you? A lot of wasted time. You know what trying to help ponies gets you? Screwed over and stepped on by all the ponies who are just gonna walk all over you. So, what's the point of helping? Better to just watch everypony suffer at the hooves of those privileged few who get to inflict it, and fend for yourself. Anypony who does otherwise is an idiot, and is gonna get dragged down with the rest of them." The young pegasus looked like he was coming close to tears.

"So you think that acting more like the ponies who hurt you will keep you from being hurt?" Celestia asked.

"No! What? I don't know!" Hurricane looked as directly away from Celestia as he could.

"Cold-heartedness is not strength, Hurricane. And compassion is not weakness."

Hurricane hung his head for a second. "Have you ever been to an orphanage, Princess?"

"Many times," Celestia replied. "It's sad to see foals without parents, but at least they're treated well."

"Guess you've never been when they weren't expecting you."

"What do you mean?" Celestia asked, tilting her head slightly.

Hurricane let out a large breath. "I bet they prepare for your visits. Always. But that's not what an orphanage is really like. Sure, some are lucky. Well-funded, run by good ponies. But most?"

Overcrowded, underfed, and abused. The ponies who run those things get more money for every orphan they have alive, not every orphan they have healthy. Go to an orphanage unannounced, and you'll see foals who don't get a full meal most days, and mostly eat gruel. You'll see the older ones keeping the younger ones in line with beatings, or worse. You'll see them with diseases that no magic can treat, that rich ponies don't even know exist outside medical journals, because nopony living a healthy life is even at risk. And that's the lucky ones. Alleys in the lower part of Everfree are full of the homeless. Some are just unlucky, but most of them are sick, either in the body or in the head, and they can't afford to be treated, and nopony will let them work. They beg and steal just to make it through a day. Try walking through that every time you leave your front door, and tell me if you can still afford to be compassionate. If you can actually live with each and every one of those ponies weighing down your every step. If you can fight off a mugger knowing that he'd rather dig through sewer grime for a single bit than hurt anypony, but he's already done that for hours that day, and he has a whole family to feed. If you can watch your own sister fight hoof and tail for just a small relief for everypony, but still hand out her only meal of the day to somepony can't pay his bill at the restaurant."

Celestia breathed in deeply, but couldn't find her words quickly. "Hurricane, I...I'm sorry."

He waved a hoof in the air, still not looking at her. "Yeah, well, Glory says you're practically boxed out of the legal system most of the time. It's not your fault. And it's not the fault of ponies like Flash either, I guess. A lot of you are just trying to do your jobs. Doing what you think is best. It just doesn't matter."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?"

Hurricane slumped to the ground, hiding his face. "There's just too much fucked up in the world for it to matter what anypony does to fix it." Celestia walked over to Hurricane and put a hoof on his shoulder. Though he was doing his best to hide it, she could tell that he was crying a little.

"No kindness is too small to make a difference, Hurricane," she said gently. "You can't give up just because you don't feel that what you're doing is enough." Hurricane grunted.

Sage tilted his head. "So, I guess Hurricane's big dark secret is that he really does care?"

"Whatever," the dark lump on the ground muttered.

"Okaaaay," Sage said with a raised eyebrow. "So, that just leaves you, Princess, and Amaranth."

Celestia smiled. "Mine relates to all of you, so I would prefer to go last. Amaranth?"

Amaranth stood frozen. He looked around at all the other ponies gathered around him. Finally, in a completely flat voice, he said, "I don't have one."

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"What do you mean you don't have a secret?" Celestia asked, trying to disguise her nervousness.

"Princess, you and everypony here knows I can't lie worth anything. That's why I gave up trying

long ago. For as long as I can remember, I've just told everypony the straight-up truth. I don't keep secrets. Not my own, or anypony else's. Even when it's unpleasant for other ponies, I always say what's on my mind. I don't intend to be mean, but I don't hold back when I have something negative to say. I know a lot of ponies dislike me for it, but I don't think I could change if I wanted to." The green earth pony shrugged. "I don't have anything."

"We all have to tell our biggest secret, Amaranth," Sage urged. "Otherwise, we're stuck."

"I'm sorry, but I can't think of anything I could possibly be hiding. I've even gone as far as telling other ponies how many times a day I pick my nose." Amaranth looked over at something. "No, Hurricane, that does not need air quotes." Celestia turned around, but Hurricane looked like he hadn't moved.

"Well," Celestia said, turning back, "just...try something. Maybe there's something you haven't told me? Ponies often feel too intimidated to speak honestly to me."

"I never have, but I'll try." Amaranth breathed deeply. "You often treat your position on the throne as one of motherhood rather than governance. You frequently exercise authority on matters where other ponies might be better trusted with it. Although you project humility outwardly, you can be vain, especially about your looks. You can be forgetful or flippant with matters other ponies find very important, possibly because you have quite a different perspective than us." He paused, appearing to be thinking of more.

"Ouch," Celestia said with a bit of a laugh. "I've heard it all before, but still, brutal."

"You really think that badly of the Princess?" Flash asked.

"I don't think badly of her," Amaranth protested. "Princess Celestia is a better ruler than I could ever hope for. She's wise and compassionate, and even in areas where she has faults, she allows other ponies to help her overcome them. Besides that, I care about her very much. She's always been a friend to me."

"See, now, THAT you've never said to me before," Celestia said wryly.

"Yeah," Sage added, "for all that you're honest with other ponies, you're certainly slow to point out good things about them."

Amaranth shrugged. "Well, most ponies already know their best points. They certainly seem to carry themselves like they're wonderful enough. Some ponies can be really in your face about their better features or, at least, what they believe to be their better features. It's hardly something ponies need to hear often."

Morning Glory laughed. "Dear, ponies act like that exactly because they're afraid they're not good enough."

"What?"



“We’re all torn down by other ponies, and by life, on a constant basis. Always trying to measure up to those we think better than us. Always afraid of being judged. We put our strongest sides forward because everything else feels weak. Believe me.”

Amaranth held his chin. “I...I never really thought about it like that.” He looked at Celestia. “Is that really how ponies are?”

Celestia nodded. “Except for some really crazy ponies, we’re all just big balls of insecurity in cute fluffy coats.”

“But you’re all wonderful!” Amaranth pointed at Morning Glory. “You can see into a pony’s heart as easily as most ponies can see the sun at noon. You’re a great planner, and despite having the tools to get anything you want, you’re incredibly selfless. And, for what it’s worth, you’re attractive even when you’re not putting all that effort into it.”

“Aww,” Flash cooed, “I’ve never seen you be so sweet out of nowhere.”

“And you,” Amaranth shifted his hoof to Flash Burn, “I know you said you’re always worried that everypony expects so much of you, but if that’s ever true, it’s because you really do seem perfect. You’re an incredible fighter, flier, and leader. What’s more, you’re driven, more than any amount of pressure from others could make you. It’s like your heart is an eternal fire.”

Celestia gestured towards the circle. “Why don’t you go ahead and do everypony?”

Amaranth tilted his head. “Okay.” He turned to Sage. “You’re the smartest pony I’ve ever known. Princess Celestia may have centuries of knowledge and experience, but you must learn an entire new field every week to know everything that you do. I’ve never seen a pony with such a passion for studying everything around him.” He looked at Shimmerdust. “I haven’t known you very long, but you always seem to have something to add that nopony else ever could. Even if it’s sometimes completely out there, you see the world differently. If the way normal ponies think shines a light on the world, then you shine on it at a different angle that just makes the shadows disappear.”

“Ooh,” Shimmerdust said with a grin, “does that make me like a goddess or something? Do I get to have wings?”

“Uh,” Amaranth said scratching his head, “I meant it more like a metaphor.”

“I’ll take metaphorical wings,” Shimmerdust replied.

“Anyway,” Amaranth turned to Hurricane, “I haven’t known you long either, but you really are very strong. It has nothing to do with you being bitter and closed off. You complain sometimes, but even though you continually suffer hardships, you are always ready to give everything you have left into whatever you feel you need to do. And it seems like you don’t even think about it, either. You just charge ahead, full tilt. I mean, I guess there are downsides, but in any case, you must be unstoppable once you choose to do something. All you need is a little direction.”

Hurricane waved a hoof in the air. "Feh. Men don't ask for directions."

"Okay, maybe you need a few more years of growing up, too," Amaranth admitted.

"Hey!"

Celestia stepped between them. "So, Amaranth, how does it feel to be an entirely new kind of honest?"

Amaranth looked at his own hooves, as if inspecting them. "Huh. Kind of weird. But good. I guess ponies are as afraid to give an honest compliment as an honest insult."

"Maybe more," Celestia chuckled.

"Well," Amaranth replied, "I guess that's the closest thing I have to a secret. Not exactly dark, but I think it was all overdue to be told anyway." Celestia nodded.

"I guess that makes it your turn, Princess," Sage said hesitantly.

"Right," Celestia said with determination. As she prepared to give her speech, she saw Shimmerdust twitch, as if she was listening for a distant sound. "Something wrong, Shimmer?"

Shimmerdust looked back to Celestia. "Hm? Oh, well, it seems like when somepony drops something big, there's this sudden pause in everything. I'm trying to see if I can catch it." She hunched down, wagging her tail in the air, like a cat waiting to pounce. The iridescent hairs glistened madly in the firelight. Celestia told herself that must have been why Sage had his eyes glued to that particular region.

"Uh-huh," Celestia said as non-dismissively as she could. "Well, I guess ponies get caught off-guard by things like that, so things slow down. Now, it's time for my big secret." Celestia inhaled and braced herself. Shimmerdust grinned widely.