

Prologue

Like so many tales, there is another story behind it.

Without ceremony or fanfare, the night sky filled with light. The moon had risen again over Canterlot as it had every night since Luna's return to the castle. She had gotten back into the habits of her royal life over the past year, but she found herself vexed by unexpected problems. She knocked on an office door. It opened to reveal Princess Celestia as sat on her bed. She was reading a letter.

"Yes Luna?" asked the white alicorn.

"I've got a real problem, Tia" said the Princess. "I've gotten reports about The Blight. It's returned." Celestia put down her scroll.

"Well, I'm glad you made those stones then," said Celestia. "Have you gone to the Hamites to retrieve them?"

"That's just it," said Luna. "They don't have them anymore. They gave them away or they were stolen." She shook her head as she tried to understand. "How could anyone just lose artifacts like that?" Celestia sighed.

"I knew I should have kept them in the vaults," she said. "It's not your fault. I shouldn't have entrusted them with the stones in the first place. The Hamites don't have the long memories that we do, and it has been a while." She stood from her bed, and walked across the room to her desk. "I'll send word to Twilight to gather her friends."

"I don't think that's who we should send," said Luna. "The Hamite have a prophecy. Four cutie marks, four stones. I trust the bearers with my life, but this isn't the sort of quest we can send them on." Luna floated a picture to her sister. Celestia looked down at the illustrations with some dismay. Four cutie marks atop four stones. She recognized two of them.

"This isn't going to end well," said Celestia. "Did you get an idea of where they're supposed to go?"

"Well, the Hamite's have the diamond," said Luna. "The buffalo have another, and one is supposedly in the paws of the diamond dogs. One is even in Canterlot." Celestia continued to stare at the scroll with the cutie marks. She shook her head.

"If we send these particular ponies out there," said Celestia, "one of them isn't going to come back. The ones that do will hate us."

"We all have to make sacrifices," said Luna. "I'm willing to endure the hate of one more

pony. I've been doing it for centuries." Celestia tossed the illustration to her desk.

"No," said Celestia. "No pony will ever hate you again, Luna. This is my fault. I will summon them."

Celestia levitated a quill and set it to scroll. She copied the same message several times. It was nothing more than a request from the postal service to come into the office. The short due date insured that the necessary ponies would gather at the appointed time. With a wave of her horn, the mail vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Please tell them as much as you can," said Luna.

"If you knew you were being sent out to face certain death, wouldn't you balk?" asked Celestia. "No, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to send them in blind. If word gets out of the Blight, ponies will panic. Things are tough enough this year with the drought, and we can't have doomsayers predicting the end times."

"You think they'll be able to do it?" asked Luna.

"If the prophets say it's to be them, then who are we to deny them their destiny?" asked Celestia. "They are adults. They'll know the stakes and they'll know ponies along the way that can help." She looked at the cutie marks, then out her window into night skies of Equestria. "I'm sorry, my little ponies. I hope you can forgive me."

Chapter One: The Elements of Convenience

Just because it's not your destiny to save the world doesn't mean a Goddess won't ask you to do just that.

Ponies everywhere had heard of the exploits of six young mares from Ponyville. They had restored the Elements of Harmony, and defeated Nightmare Moon to bring day back to Equestria. They were heroes to all, and they garnered respect from every pony who knew what happened that fateful night in the Everfree Forest. Most of the citizens of Ponyville had come to expect the best of their star citizens. Whenever trouble struck, they rushed to fix the problem. It was a good system, and the ponies of Ponyville found their lives easier. Not having to worry about every minor disaster meant life went on as it always does. A routine life that included shopping for food, and waiting in line at the post office.

The post office was among the least interesting structures in Ponyville. It was square grey building that stood but a single story tall. It had with few windows and the top was a landing spot for pegasus mail. There was next to no landscaping. Inside, the walls were cold stone that had been covered with posters that advertised the services available to the citizens. A large wooden counter divided the room in half, and behind it stood a turquoise pegasus. A raining white cloud emblazoned her flank.

Medley stood behind the counter. She pulled envelopes from the pile, and stamped them with the practiced efficiency of a sewing machine. Each letter came out, received a stamp, and was tossed into a box waiting behind her. She looked up from her work to see a line had formed at her desk. The ponies were all regular customers.

Cheerilee was one of the local school teachers. Some pony named Pokey stood behind her, and Nurse Redheart had just come in from the clinic. Each of them was holding an official looking scroll that warned Medley how much paperwork was ahead of her. She sighed, and reminded herself why she was here.

At the front of the line was a small purple dragon. Medley found it odd that he was even here, as the dragon was his own mail service when he wanted to be. She put her hooves together on the counter.

"Next, please," she said with as much cheer as she could muster. The line shuffled forward a step as a Spike approached the mail mare with a small box in his hands.

"I need to mail this back to Canterlot," he whispered. "It's the wrong size."

"Wrong size?" asked Medley. She took the package and shook it gently. The contents clanked and rustled inside. Leather probably, with bits of metal. Medley stamped the box; she was certain she didn't want to know the contents. "Fifteen bits, please."

Spike dug around in his pockets for a moment, when he felt a rumbling in his stomach. That feeling meant an incoming message. His belched echoed through the stone hall of the post office, much to the disgust of the other ponies in line. A scroll appeared from the dragon's fire. He unrolled it to read the contents.

Spike:

Gather the ponies there, immediately. There's no time to waste. I will meet you on the edge of the Everfree Forest with further instructions.

Princess Celestia

Spike stared in shock at the letter. A distress message? From the Princess? His mind raced. The ponies there? Of course, Twilight, Rarity and the others! He made for the door. He looked around outside for a minute, and then dashed back inside the post office. The bearers of the Elements of Harmony were out on an assignment from Princess Luna. There was no way to get a message to them.

He looked at the line in the post office. These ponies were here right?

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"Could someone explain why we're following a dragon out to the forest?" asked Pokey. The blue unicorn slashed his horn at the over grown weeds beside the trail in frustration. Bits of leaves fell like snow upon the path as the ponies trod upon them.

"I think we just got drafted," replied Cheerilee. "Are you sure this is legal, Spike?" The mulberry coated earth pony looked at the tiny dragon, hoping for a better answer than "because the princess said so."

"You do know that we have jobs we're supposed to be at, right?" asked Nurse Redheart. She looked along the trail, worried that she wouldn't get back home in time to catch her favorite radio program. She glanced back towards town. She hoped that whatever the princess wanted wasn't too time consuming. The turquoise pegasus fluttered along beside the unhappy group.

"I was in the middle of work," complained Medley. "There's going to be such a back up." She could already hear the voice of her supervisor nagging her for leaving the post office in Derpy's hooves.

"Come on, ponies," encouraged Spike. "It's not every day the princess asks you to do something for her. This is the opportunity of a life time."

"I'd like to remind you that the last time a group of ponies got asked to do something for the princess, they wound up fighting a possessed deity," noted Pokey.

“I’m sure the princess wouldn’t risk your lives unnecessarily,” Spike said.

As the ponies approached the edge of the forest, the wild land beckoned them to approach. They looked at the woods ahead. The prospect of entering such a miserable place passed through their thoughts as a cold chill. Spike glanced around the forest edge. Had there hadn’t been some kind of mistake in his message?

His answer came in a shimmer of golden hooves, and the gentle landing of the white alicorn Celestia. The ponies lowered at the sight of their princess. Spike too bowed before approaching. Celestia looked at the group of gathered ponies.

“Where are the bearers of the Elements of Harmony?” asked Celestia. “Are these your friends?”

“They were occupied with a task from your sister, m’lady,” stammered Spike. “So I brought the next best thing.” He gestured to the gathered group of ponies with a flourished bow.

“The next best thing?” asked Celestia. It was clear she didn’t believe him.

“These are, uh...” he looked at the group of assembled ponies. “The Elements of Diligence!”

“I’m sorry, what?” asked Cheerilee. She stood and turned to face Spike. “Elements of who?”

“Yes!” said Spike, turning to face the group. “This is uh...” he gestured to the blue unicorn with the sharp horn and safety pin cutie mark. He snapped his fingers a couple of times as he tried to come up with his name.

“Pokey,” he whispered. He kept his head down.

“Right! Pokey!” said Spike. “Bearer of the Element of... uh...” he looked around. “Courage! Yeah! Courage! Bravest pony to ever walk Equestria.”

Spike shot an uneasy smile at Pokey. Pokey glared at Spike with a look that said “you’re lucky there are other ponies here.” The dragon walked to the mulberry pony with the daisy cutie marks.

“And, this is uh, Cheerilee, bearer of the Element of...” He leaned in to whisper to her. “What do you do again?”

“I’m a teacher,” she whispered back. “What in the name of Celestia do you think you’re doing?”

“Roll with it!” he said. “Element of Education!” He pointed to Medley. He’d never met

the turquoise pegasus before, and he didn't remember her from anywhere in particular. "And uh..." He spun his hand around trying to conjure a name again. "Colgate!"

"My name's Medley!" she protested.

"Medley! Bearer of the Element of... Determination!" Spike continued. "Finally, there is Nurse Redheart, Element of Preparedness."

"I sure wasn't prepared for this," the white earth pony mused. Spike smiled at the princess as he presented the incredibly confused bunch of ponies. Celestia stared at Spike with disbelief.

"And you say these are the legendary bearers of the Elements of Diligence?" she asked.

"Absolutely!" offered Spike. "Would I ever lie to you?" He smiled nervously.

"Your highness is right," said Medley. "He grabbed us out of the line at the post office."

"Well not Medley," added Redheart. "She was working the counter."

"A second, please!" Spike corralled the ponies to the side. "You guys are making me look bad!"

"We're making *you* look bad?" asked Redheart.

"You drug us out to the middle of nowhere!" hissed Pokey.

"There's no such thing as the Elements of Diligence," protested Cheerilee. "What were you even thinking?" Celestia interrupted Spike's berating.

"Well, I'm glad that you're all here," she said. "Brave ponies, I require from you a service." The ponies all bowed, awaiting instructions from their princess. "Will you accept my task?"

"Do we have a choice?" muttered Pokey. He received a hoof to the ribs from Medley.

"Shut up!" she hissed. "Do you want us to get sent to the moon?"

"Of course they accept!" offered Spike. "They wouldn't have come if they weren't prepared to lay down their lives for your majesty."

"Wait, what?" asked Redheart. "I never..."

"Then I ask of you this task," continued Celestia. "Find the four Stones of Brilliance in the Everfree Forest and bring them to Canterlot. It is of utmost importance that those stones are to me by the time the moon is full again." She spread her wings, and nodded towards the

ensemble. “Thank you, my little ponies. Your bravery will be rewarded.” Celestia flapped her wings, and lifted into the sky. She floated away as silently as she had come. Pokey glanced upward to check that the princess had left. Seeing the dragon’s back to him, Pokey charged and pinned Spike to a tree with his hooves.

“What was that?” he demanded. “I’m not the bearer of anything! None of us are! What are you trying to do?” The rest of the ponies chimed in.

“We’ve got jobs you know!” said Nurse Redheart. “We’re adults! We can’t just drop everything like those kids can!”

“I’ve got a foal!” protested Medley. “What am I going to tell my little girls? Mommy has to hunt for rocks?”

“I can’t just take off from school!” said Cheerilee. “You have to fix this! We’re not some mystical bearers of some made up element.” Spike put up his hands in protest.

“Guys you’re looking at this all wrong!” insisted Spike. “Don’t think of it as a dangerous quest. Think of it as a chance to grow as ponies. Maybe,” he added, his eyes gazing soulfully at the heavens, “deep down inside, you’ll discover that you’ve had these virtues all along.” Pokey shook the dragon, and started screaming.

“You just made them up, you idiot!” screamed Pokey. “We’re not some band of itinerant adventurers! We’re not some gang of young colts all willy nilly for excitement!” He throttled the dragon as he screamed. “We’re adults! We have responsibilities! You’re going to get us killed!”

“Stop it! Don’t hurt him!” chastised Redheart. Pokey stopped shaking the dragon, but continued to hold onto this throat.

“Thank you,” gasped Spike

“If you do,” she continued, “I’m going to have to patch him up, and I’m not wasting any of my time on him.”

“Okay, so maybe a thank you isn’t in order...” choked Spike. Pokey dropped the dragon in disgust.

“This is stupid,” said Medley. “We’re going to get killed in the forest because some dragon volunteered us for an insane, dangerous task?”

“Well, we can’t really ignore it,” said Cheerilee. “She is Princess Celestia, after all.” They all shared a miserable sigh.

“So, what, we’re actually doing this?” asked Pokey.

“Let’s meet at my house tonight to discuss our plans,” said Nurse Redheart. “That includes you Spike. You got us into this mess; you’re going to help us out of it.”

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Redheart tidied her living room in anticipation of her guests that evening. Fresh flowers on her mantle filled her home with scents of lavender and lilac as she put the finishing touches together. A knock on the wooden door revealed Pokey as her first guest. Redheart welcomed him into her home.

“Good evening dear,” he said. “Nothing like an adventure, eh?”

“Here I thought we were done with foalish pursuits like this.” Redheart smiled at Pokey. “Though it’s always a pleasure to travel with you by my side.”

From the box on his back, Pokey levitated the dishes he had brought from his restaurant. Plates of steamed carrots and almond green beans filled Redheart’s home with the aroma of a family dinner. Pokey began setting places at the table when more knocking came from the front door. Redheart opened it to welcome Cheerilee. She had brought a basket of cookies, and a saddlebag full of books.

“What are all the books for?” asked Redheart. She took the basket and set it down on her doily covered end table.

“Well,” said Cheerilee, “we’ve got to find these Stones of Brilliance, so I figured we might as well know what we’re looking for.”

“You assume we’re doing this stupid chore at all,” said Pokey as he walked into the living room. “I don’t recall actually agreeing to do this.” Medley followed Cheerilee into the house. Swaddled underneath her wings was her pegasus foal, sleeping quietly. She was pure white, with a turquoise mane and tail. Redheart immediately gravitated toward the filly.

“Oh my! She is just precious!” cooed Redheart. “Potpourri right? There have just been so many foals this spring; I can’t keep up with them all.”

“Yes, this is little Potpourri,” Medley said as she passed the sleeping foal to Redheart. The white mare rocked foal her in her arms with a loving smile. “And this is exactly why we can’t do this insane task. I’ve got a foal to take care of.” She gestured to Cheerilee and Redheart. “You’ve got an entire school full of children who need you, and you’ve got a ward full of patients needing attention. And you...” she pointed to Pokey. “I... don’t really know what you do, but I’m sure it’s more important than looking for rocks.” Pokey shrugged.

“I just don’t want to do it,” said Pokey. “I’ve had my adventures. Now I’ve got a business to run. Who does Celestia think she is to come down here and push us around like that?”

“Well she is our goddess,” said Redheart. “And to do the will of the goddess is to bring you one step closer to divinity.” Pokey sighed unhappily; Redheart had a point.

Dinner was a quiet affair as Pokey served from his restaurant’s trays. A simple meal shared between ponies old and new gave them a chance to catch up and to learn a bit about each other.

Pokey learned that Medley was a mother of two, and that she was married to a stallion named Snow Catcher. Medley learned that Pokey was a chef, and that he had been an adventurer in his youth. Redheart caught Cheerilee up on the latest gossip from the coffee shops, and Cheerilee told Medley about her daughter’s progress in school that year. The meal came to an end when Cheerilee brought out a tattered tome she had taken from the library. She flipped it open to an illustration of four impossibly cut gem stones.

“These are what the princess wants us to find,” Cheerilee explained. “They’re gemstones that were supposed cut by ancient earth ponies. Using secret techniques long since lost, the gemstones were said to glow with brilliance unmatched by even the finest jewels in Equestria.

“Well that sounds beautiful,” said Redheart. “But what do they do?” asked Redheart. She picked up the foal again. She cooed and giggled at the tiny pegasus. Potpourri smiled and flapped her tiny wings.

“No pony seems to know,” said Cheerilee. “They could be the key to unlocking an ancient curse. They could be the final part of some thousand year spell so powerful Celestia dare not speak its name. They could be shiny rocks.” She flipped the book closed. “They’re apparently some sort of minor artifact that no pony has ever bothered to track down. They could be in a museum for all we know.”

“How did you find all this out anyway?” asked Medley.

“Twilight Sparkle actually pointed me in the right direction,” said Cheerilee.

“You mean she’s back?” asked Pokey. “Well good! Let Celestia’s grad student do her grunt work.” Cheerilee shook her head.

“Oh, believe me, I asked,” she said. “Twilight told me that because she had given the task to the ‘Bearers of the Elements of Diligence,’ it must have something to do directly with us.”

“Did you mention that her idiot assistant dragged us out of the post office because we were the only ponies around?” asked Medley. “Did you tell her that we’re not bearers of anything?”

“She said she’d never heard of the Elements of Diligence, but that’s she’d do some

research about it,” said Cheerilee. “She didn’t seem to believe me when I told her that Spike just made it up.” Her expression was one of pure annoyance.

“I think we should find Spike and tell him that we’re not doing it,” said Redheart. “This is already absurd.” She lifted the foal into the air. Potpourri giggled at the mare’s attentions. “Yes, it is ridiculous!” she sang. “Even a foal would know that!”

“I agree with Redheart,” replied Medley. “We’re not going to do it.”

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It was the next morning when the four ponies met at the library. The tree building was home to resident librarian and student of Celestia, one Twilight Sparkle. The smell of fresh cut grass rolled in through the open windows and mingled with the stale scent of paper. Celestia’s sun hung low in the sky as it shone its early morning light on Ponyville. They all agreed that it would have been the start of a beautiful day if this assignment wasn’t weighing down their thoughts.

“You can’t just ignore a request from the princess!” scolded Twilight. “That’s...”

“Look, dear,” said Cheerilee. “You might not be able to say no to your mentor, but we’re all older than you. We’ve got careers and families that depend on us. We’re not like you and your friends. We can’t just drop everything to run off on some wild goose chase. Imagine if I asked my students to go on a quest to fetch me snickerdoodles.”

Twilight looked up from her desk in exasperation. She sat among stacks of books and scrolls piled about her desk. Her eyes were heavy with the familiar sting of an all nighter. Her night assistant Owolicious was asleep atop one of the bookshelves. She levitated another book from the shelves and flipped through the contents.

“But this is important!” protested Twilight. “These Stone of Brilliance could be the key to any number of things!” She slammed the book shut. “What if they’re preventing a return of Nightmare Moon?”

“Is there any indication of that?” asked Pokey. “Is there anything anywhere of what these things are supposed to do?”

“Artifacts don’t come with instruction manuals,” said Twilight. “But if Celestia said it was important, then she probably had a good reason for picking you four.”

“Celestia didn’t choose us,” said Medley. “Spike did.” The turquoise pegasus glanced around the room. “Where is he anyway?”

“Canterlot, supposedly,” said Twilight. “I actually think he’s hiding from you.”

“With good reason!” shouted Pokey as he pounded a hoof on the table. The clop of hoof

on desk startled the owl awake. “If I catch him I’m going to put him on the menu.”

“Dragon meat isn’t good for a pony’s digestion,” chimed in Redheart. Pokey sighed wearily at her sarcasm.

“The simple fact of it is, we’re not adventurers,” continued Pokey. “Sure, I was in my youth and I’m sure we all did some wilds things. Cheerilee’s exploits on the dance floor are still legendary.” The mulberry pony blushed at Pokey’s remark. And here she thought no pony would remember something like that! “And Nurse Redheart has been all over Equestria helping those in need.” He took his hoof off the table. “But those days are over. We’re adults now. We don’t go on adventures anymore.”

“I’ve never been on an adventure,” chimed in Medley. “And I don’t think I’d want to start now. I’ve got a foal in school, and another barely walking.” She put a hoof on the purple unicorn’s shoulder. “Twilight, we can’t do this. It’s not our responsibility.”

Twilight looked at the hoof on her shoulder, then back to the gathered ponies. She started to speak, but stopped herself. They *were* older than her and her friends, and they didn’t look like they were in any shape to go running around in the Everfree forest.

Twilight looked back to her library, crammed full of notes and scrolls. So many legends of exploits and magic contained here, why did these four adults need to fill another? She was about to say that she would go find the stones when her eyes fell on a picture of her mentor. The sun crept through the window and illuminated the frame. Celestia’s eyes smiled at her, and she revised what she was about to say.

“You have to find these stones,” said Twilight, finally. “I’m sure that Celestia realized Spike was lying, and that he brought whoever he could find. But there’s a reason she picked you anyway.” She took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. “She obviously saw something in the four of you that she wanted. I don’t pretend to understand her reasoning, but you must have faith in your princess. She wanted you to do it, and I can guarantee you that she has her reasons.”

The four ponies’ hopeful smiles dropped as the weight of Twilight’s words fell over them. Of course Celestia knew that Spike was making things up, and she played along with it anyway. She had laid this task at their hooves for a reason, and there was no getting around it. The library went silent as the realization broke between them.

“Well, I guess we’re going to have to find someone to take our places,” said Cheerilee at last. “I hope you don’t mind substitute teaching, Twilight.”

“I’d be honored, Cheerilee,” replied the unicorn. “I’ll get Applejack to help your husband with the foals, Medley. Fluttershy can help out in the clinic in your absence, Nurse Redheart.”

She turned to Pokey. "I know that Pinkie Pie is a..."

"You can stop right there, young lady," interrupted Pokey. "I'd rather lose a week's worth of wages than let that filly into my kitchen."

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Pokey waited by the edge of the forest, his eyes closed in meditation. He hadn't stepped foot into the Everfree forest in years. Every pony had told him that he would never make it only knowing three spells, but here he was again, years later, ready to jump back in the saddle of the itinerant adventurer. His meditation was interrupted by the soft touch down of a pegasus. Pokey opened his eyes to see Medley standing in front of him with a look of confusion.

"You look prepared," she said. She was checking out his armor. "You said you used to do this sort of thing?"

"A life time ago," replied Pokey. He shifted uncomfortably under the blue lacquered scales of his barding. He had put on a few pounds since the last time he'd worn it, and the weight of the armor took some getting used to. A similarly lacquered blue helmet covered his face and head but left his horn exposed and ready. At least it still fit properly. "I used to be quite the horns-pony in the day. Now the only thing I use my horn and spells for is cutting vegetables."

"I do hope that we won't need those skills of yours," said Nurse Redheart as she trotted into the clearing. Her flank was adorned with medical kit on one side, and saddlebag on the other. She wore a pouched collar, neatly filled with bits and pieces. Pokey looked her over and nodded with approval.

"Always glad to have you by my side," said Pokey. Redheart nodded quietly as she stared into the forest. Her pink mane was tied up in a bun behind her head. She ready for whatever Equestria threw at her. She looked around for Cheerilee. The pony cantered up the path, her saddlebags full of maps and scrolls.

"Sorry I'm late," she apologized. "I had to get Twilight settled in with the class."

"No worries," said Redheart. She looked over at Medley, who'd brought saddlebags filled with provisions. "Let's go over our gear before we get started. I don't want to leave anything to chance." Over the next few minutes, they redistributed the food, medical supplies, and gear amongst themselves. Everypony carried something. Pokey stood at the lead, and took a deep breath.

"Are we ready for this?" he asked.

"No time like the present," replied Cheerilee with her usual chippiness.

“If we must,” complained Medley.

“We’re not getting any younger,” said Redheart. And with that, the ponies strode into the Everfree Forest to find the Stones of Brilliance.