

The Steadfast Sky : Chapter 20

The Grey Potter

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~Celestia~

“What do you mean my sister isn’t here?! I was assured that they would be rescued as well!”

Deep in the city, where the buildings seemed to crumble with age, I stood in a narrow alleyway. The air was muggy, ground a filthy slurry from the recent rain. Streams of garbage collected along the walls, and I swore I saw a rat or two snatching up apple cores and discarded bread crusts. I shivered, but held my ground. These ruffians, these *ingrates*...!

“Where is my sister?! Where are Luna and Discord?!” I screamed at the door. They had half hidden it beneath a moldy blanket, an extension of the alleyway’s slop. Through the barrier, I could hear voices, hardly muffled.

“Sprout, what the heck?! You led her here?”

“Well she said she had nowhere else to go, so...”

“A secret base is supposed to be kept a *secret*, Sprout! That means nobody comes here but us!”

There was a quiet mumbling, probably an apology. I leaned closer to the door, glaring at the peeling paint.

“I’ll, I’ll kick this door down, if you don’t give me answers!” I shouted, face inches from the frame, “I swear, I’ll do it!” Kick the door down? Preposterous! What is coming out of my mouth? I’m panicked! I’m panicked and worried, and... and Tia would do this! For my friends!

I spun around and with an angry squeal, I bucked the door with my hind leg! It barely scuffed the surface, sliding away before it had fully contacted. And... Ow... did I pull something? Ow... Wait no, I can’t stop now! I scooted a little closer, and with a squeal I bucked it again!

“Go away!”

“Yeah, no girls allowed!”

“No girls allowed?!” I cried, flabbergasted. I spun round, shouting at the door once more, “I thought I was rescued by a legitimate resistance! Not some little boy’s secret club!”

I squealed as the door slammed open, flung wide by an earth pony a little older than me, a tattered scarf around his neck and face twisted in fury.

“Don’t you *dare* insult us, you, you you pompous filly! We are a real—!” In an instant I had charged by the colt, knocking into his side in my haste. I fell down a short flight of steps and bounced off a

dilapidated railing, wooden structure shaking as I stumbled to my feet. I charged down another flight of stairs, skidding onto another platform. The door colt shouted angrily above me as I flung my hooves atop the rickety railing.

“I demand to speak with your ringleader!” I sputtered, face boiling. “Take me to him!”

I stood tall on the staircase’s second wooden platform, a line of steps leading up to the door, and another short line leading down a wall, to the ground. Over the crumbling railing, I saw a sunken room, gaps where windows would be near the ceiling, most boarded up, or covered with cloth. The walls and floor were stone, dusty and dry, save a leaking puddle here and there. To me, the room looked like a gutted store, if only because the only permanent feature was a single lonely counter. Its wood was thick, and maybe once it had been varnished. But age was taking its toll, its surface scuffed, and the edges looked like they were gnawed on by rats.

Empty as it was, it was very thoroughly decorated. Paint, angry graffiti, was splattered on every surface, the walls, the floor, even the steps and counter. ‘Down with the city,’ ‘rise of the earth ponies,’ sometimes just nonsense, and sometimes distastefully lewd images I don’t dare describe. There were exactly two doors, one behind the counter, and one on the far wall. The latter was adorned with a patchy banner of a crescent moon and a suggestion of a bird, the former unadorned.

There were only a few ponies in the room itself, some resting on blankets, playing games by lamplight. A rubber ball bounced away from a game of jacks. There was the rustle of cards being dropped. A bulky Earth pony dropped down from the counter where he was resting his forelegs and opened the door behind him, vanishing beyond it.

“Lady!” a sweaty leg was thrown roughly across my shoulders, trying to drag me down. The scarfed pony from above had finally come for me. “We rescued you, so show some freaking gratitude and leave us alone!”

I spun on him, face tight from my glare.

“I didn’t want to be rescued if that meant I’d be separated from my friends!”

He snorted, “Well, sor-ry! We did all we could back there! Now—” He grabbed my cloak in his teeth and yanked, clasp digging into my neck...

“Stop! Stop or I’ll scream!”

“You seem to be doing enough of that already.”

The splotchy pony I had seen earlier, the one from the roof, exited from the rear door, standing behind the counter and looking up at me. Without his floppy hat, I could now tell clearly that he was a unicorn, and about my age. The heavysset colt stood by the door as the unicorn looked up at me, calm, unaffected by my shouting.

“Let her go, Courtie,” he said, “She’s already inside, so there’s no more harm in letting her talk.” I was

released, and just as I dropped back on the platform, I was shoved. A jolt of panic shot down my spine as I nearly tumbled down the last flight of stairs, somehow managing to keep my feet. I ran into the far wall, straightened myself, and shook my sopping hood off my face. Straightening my shoulders, I strolled over, jutting out my hoof in greeting.

“Baroness Celestia,” I stated swiftly. Although... when was the last time I used *that* name? It sounded very strange to me... “My friends call me Tia,” I hastily corrected.

“Rock Pith.” He stated bluntly. There was a moment of silence as he looked me up and down. I let my mind wander for a moment... what is the cutie mark for leading a boy’s resistance force... thing? I glanced over, but to my surprise, there was only a hairless scar on either flank, where his cutie mark should have been. “So?” he started. “What’s your problem?”

I frowned. Such a rude way to phrase the question! But he seemed to be sincere...

“You see, Rock.”

“Call me Pith.”

“You see, Pith... It’s not that I’m ungrateful that you were able to get me away from those guards...”

“Of course you’re ungrateful, why else would you be banging down my front door?”

My frown grew even deeper as he calmly shot back his retort. Someone in the room snickered.

“Fine, I’m not grateful,” I replied. “When I was being led away, I was assured that my friends would be saved as well! Now I don’t know where they could be, or what I should do. So tell me, *Pith*, why were your ‘Sickle Ravens’ only able to save me?”

“Seriously?” He snorted, covering up a wry smile with his hoof, “You’re asking me why? Why we couldn’t do more, risk more for two ponies we didn’t even know, nor care about?” He shook his head and sighed, raising his voice. “I’m sorry, Tia, but it was a lost cause. Be grateful that we were able to get *you* away. Be grateful, and leave my generous brothers be.”

Other ponies began poking their snouts out of the other doorway, sneaking into the main room. All of them were colts, young, or younger than me. Their faces, their clothes... Pith was the only one who looked like he washed up regularly, and as more and more colts entered the room, I noticed it getting warmer, and smelling more like hot fur and sweat. Hidden in the new crowd, somebody cheered for their leader.

“You tell ‘er, Pith!”

“Why’d you invite me down here if you were just going to talk to me like this?” I snapped.

“I only want you to see the plain logic of this, lady. Or is it too hard for your frail, emotional filly mind?”

My jaw dropped as Pith smirked at me. What a... not even a slap to the face was that—!

“E-excuse me?!” I stammered, completely stunned.

“My brothers!” Suddenly, seemingly for no reason, Pith hopped up on the counter, voice turning into a declaration. “Look at this wretch! Crying, screaming, beating at our door... All because of her separation from her friends!” He looked over the crowd of three or four dozen colts, face stern, pose bold. “This is why, my brothers, we do not bring any filly back to our secret base! They’re unstable, and jeopardize our—”

“You ingrate!” I shouted up at him, flabbergasted, on the edge of tears. He was silent, his back remaining turned to me. “You do *not* talk about another pony that way! What kind of colt are you?!”

Shouts rose from the pack. “He’s Pith!” “Pith, yeah!” “We’re the SICKLE RAVENS lady!” “Yeah!” “Caw!” I could feel my face, boiling hot, disgraceful, disgraceful insults digging in me like knives... I was being put up as some kind of spectacle, humiliated...

I snapped my jaw shut. I would not stand for this kind of treatment! Not after all that I had been through! I scrambled up on top of the counter, barely wondering if the old thing could hold my weight.

“Well, well you know what group I’m a part of?!” I stammered. “My friends, the two that you Sickle Ravens failed to rescue, were the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony!” The room was silent, colts staring at me. “That’s right, you’ve just let all hope for Equestria drop right into your enemies’ hands!”

“The Elements of Harmony?” somepony murmured. More and more followed, a swell of whispers.

“What the crap are those?” “Never heard of ‘em!” “What’s the filly talking about?”

“Never heard of the Elements of Harmony?!” I jumped as Pith’s voice suddenly boomed beside me. The room fell quiet to his words, enraptured. He laughed and shook his head. “Never heard of... didn’t I ever tell you, my brothers?”

There was a general murmur of denial.

“Well,” I began, “The Elements...” Pith’s leg thrust out in front of me. I stared at it.

“Allow me. The ELEMENTS,” Pith shouted. “The Elements of Harmony, the last hope for Equestria!” He paced up and down the short stage, eyes never leaving his audience, voice heavy with an overdramatic gravity. “Ancient spirits, born to protect the world! Hidden! Stowed away by our enemies, by Big Apple, for fear that they would rise against him! Because only the Elements can lead Equestria to peace and prosperity. This changes everything. Everything, my brothers!” Suddenly, his face whipped around to me. I recoiled, almost falling off the stage. “Baroness Celestia... that’s not your true title, is it?”

“Well,” I fumbled, confused. So, so very confused. “Well that’s a tricky...”

“You are actually a Princess aren’t you?”

I coughed up a laugh, exasperated. “A what...?!”

“It’s alright, Princess.” He placed a hoof on my shoulder, voice, posture, everything very quickly

becoming sympathetic. What in *Equestria*...? "You don't have to hide anymore. You can admit, you're so much greater than a baroness."

"A Princess?!" "I've never seen a real live Princess before..." "Wooooow."

"Sickle Ravens!" Hoof still on my shoulder, Pith spun on his audience. "Do you know what this means?!"

There was a bit of murmuring, then loud and clear, a single shout.

"WE'VE RESCUED A PRINCESS!" A colt squealed, "A REAL LIVE PRINCESS!"

Cheers, a stomping applause erupted around the room.

"And we'll rescue another!" Pith shouted, somehow louder than the crowd. "The Elements need our help, brothers! This will be the greatest undertaking of our lives! The greatest blow we will ever deal to Big Apple and his evil tyranny!"

Suddenly, his face smashed into me, his lips quickly mashing against mine. My entire body seized up, and I slapped him away with the back of my hoof. What was?! *What is all of this?!* He took it, eyes have closed, full of contempt. The crowd gasped and laughed "She got you good!"

"How *dare* you...!"

"I'm sorry, but I think I love you Princess Tia." I tried to stammer something else, but he shoved a hoof over my mouth. "Even if you're an emotional filly. I'll help you find your friends, and the Elements."

I swatted his hoof away, wiping the dirt, the drool from my face. "What?! *What?!* What is wrong with you?!"

But my voice was drowned out by the cheering and the stomping of the crazed Sickle Ravens. Have I been transported to the moon?! *What is this moon logic?!*

"Alright, everybody, now go to bed!" Pith somehow shouted over the crowd, "We've got a long day tomorrow if we're going to rescue the Elements!"

"Alright!" "Pith Pith Pith!" "Go Sickle Ravens!" "CAW!" "Caw caw!"

The colts began uproariously cawing as they streamed through the far door, shoving past one another in their haste to go... wherever. Pith hopped off the counter, completely and totally tranquil.

"That was a nice hook Tia, the 'Elements of Harmony.'" He said calmly, as if we were talking about this over tea. "Did you just come up with that on the fly?"

"A-are you this group's fool?!" I sputtered, still wiping my mouth on my fetlock. "Did I get dragged into some kind of stage play!?"

"No, and somewhat."

I dropped down. "Then what was...?!"

He turned and walked back through the doorway he first came from.

"Through here, let's talk in private."

"I-I refuse! You've insulted me, *violated* my personal space...!"

"Fine. Have it your way."

I stammered as he vanished. The pale blue Earth pony that had originally fetched the leader waited by the door, holding it open for me. This is just... what preposterous group have I gotten myself involved in? And yet, he's already agreed to help get my friends back... Wary, reeling, I headed through the door myself. My brain was aching. Just twenty-four short hours past we had been hiding from the griffins... This is too much. Far, far too much for one day.

And I was certain this would prove to be even more exhausting...

Inside the door was a small, tight hallway, leading to two other doorways. There was barely room to turn around, especially with the heavy earth pony trying to squeeze by me. Pith pushed open the right entrance with his shoulder, allowing light to seep into the hallway. I peered inside, but was almost shoved in by the thick earth pony, apparently following after us.

The room I entered was windowless. Narrow, but long. A shotgun room, I think it's called. A straw mattress sat on its own box, and the space was barely wide enough to fit two of them side by side. It was lit by several lamps, one resting on a thick chest of drawers shoved perpendicular with the bed. One on a cluttered desk, one hanging from the ceiling, over a threadbare rug thrown across the one barely open portion of the floor. A coat rack with one arm missing sat by the door, Pith's wet cap slung across it.

"Feel free to hang up your cloak," the thin colt offered, hopping up on his bed. "Take a seat."

I peeled off my wet cloak, immediately struck by how cold it was. I wasn't going to get any warmer wearing this... Hoping the coat rack's arm didn't snap off, I hung my cloak from it, and shrugged off my bags to the side. I watched the bizarre colt as I settled into the one chair, a rickety old thing that looked like one of the legs was coming off. The Earth pony settled alongside the wall, resting on the ratty rug and looking to his leader.

"So, what can I—"

"What. In Equestria. Was that?" I cried through grit teeth, interrupting the splotchy leader. "First you insult me, then you call me a princess, then you insult me again?! What's going on?!"

"Well, at first I was just going to turn you away," he admitted with a shrug. He was just suddenly so... nonchalant! "But then you dropped a great hook, one I thought would really rev my Ravens up. It's been a while since I've had a good story I could get them behind."

"A story?" I wheezed, "You only decided to help me because you thought you could turn it into a great

story?"

He nodded placidly.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"And, to be perfectly clear, are you actually crushing on...?!"

"Nope, part of the act." He flickered into a smile. "Sorry to disappoint." Holy... he has no *idea* how much of a relief it is to learn that little... aspect of his performance was fake. Uhg, my mouth still feels dirty... But there's still so, so much wrong here...

"I, I don't believe you. This is..." I stared at him, casually resting on his stomach. "This is the resistance force in this town? A bunch of colts getting excited over stories?"

Again, he nodded, accepting.

"One of them, yes."

"You... this..." I stammered, "What kind of leadership is this?!"

"The kind where I manage several dozen young colts, half of which aren't even old enough to have their cutie marks yet." He shrugged. "Sorry, I've just found this method works best with them."

"You tore me down, Pith!" I interjected, "You say you're managing colts, but that's not something you should be teaching them!"

"Let me make it up to you Tia. We *will* be rescuing your friends." He suddenly smiled, dark, and pained. "Heck, I've already got a good idea where one of them is..."

"You still shouldn't...!" He rolled his eyes, and I looked at the colt sideways. Wondering... "Okay then. Where? Where *are* my friends?" I asked.

"I'll show you tomorrow," he dismissed with a wave of his hoof. Oh no you don't...

"Tell me *now*."

He frowned. "Well, the unicorn..."

"Luna."

"Well, Luna... she, right? She'd be taken to Pocket's place, the unicorn hostage correctional facility." He almost seemed to spit out that name. "I can show you that tomorrow. It's too late for us to be wandering around out there, just to take a look."

"And Discord?" I asked. He smirked again, suppressing a laugh.

"That's an odd name," he said lightly.

“Where would he be?”

“Well, if I was to make a rough guess? In a cage.”

I frowned. “That’s a horrible guess. Don’t talk about Discord that way.”

“I’m serious. He’s not a pony, so he’s probably caged up somewhere...” He thought for a moment, pulling at his fetlock, as if he was trying to straighten it. “He’s weird looking, so maybe Big Apple’s menagerie, if they don’t ship him out of the city altogether.”

“Alright.” I nodded. “Alright. Thank you, Pith, for being honest with me.”

“Your welcome?” he suppressed a quiet laugh again.

I still felt... well, these Ravens are going to help me. But what was up with this leader? It came to me then that this could just be another act, just saying exactly what I wanted to hear, trying to calm me down. That... really doesn’t sit well with me. The silence wasn’t sitting well with me.

“Oh, and by the way?” I suddenly said. “I wasn’t lying. About the Elements, I mean.”

“It doesn’t really matter at this point if you were or not,” he calmly replied. “I’ll help you either way.”

“I. Wasn’t. Lying.”

Now it was his turn to give me a strange, sideways glance. Was that him? I still doubt it...

“Well then.” He settled into his forelegs, face serious. “You better tell me exactly what I’ve gotten my Ravens into.”