

The Steadfast Sky : Chapter 14

The Grey Potter

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~Celestia~

In the city, I was my sister's guardian. I made sure she was safe, was warm, and taken care of. Out here, I thought this would continue. I would always protect my friends, from all danger. I'd be the strong one. The word of logic and reason. The pillar.

Yet constantly, constantly, I was losing both of them. More than that, they could handle themselves just fine, better than fine, while I just react to every situation with fear. While I wasted my time panicking, searching, Luna found the proper solution to her displacement, and led us to her. She didn't need me to be her big sister, her caretaker anymore.

I held her now, at the bottom of an underground cave, and stroked a few leaves out of her mane. Only a few hours gone and it's already so messy...

"Tell us not to take risks, and then you go jumping down a random hole..." Discord dropped beside me, landing softened by a few beats of his wings. "Who's the risk taker now, *mom*?"

"Oh, hush." I reluctantly released my sister and took a few steps back, regaining my posture. Luna smiled at me, cheerful as always.

"Man, am I glad to see you guys!" she exclaimed, "Did you really get that lost?!"

"Yeah, if you can call it that!" Discord snickered, "Searching on the ground was hard, and of course Celestia said we shouldn't split up, so..."

"It was a haunted forest!" I snapped, "I dread to think—!"

"No, hey, it was a good idea." Discord raised an eyebrow at me, "It would have been near useless to look separately."

"Yes..." I pawed the ground, face hot. At least I could attribute any tears to my relief. I coughed a little, trying to maintain at least some form of dignity and poise. "Anyway... Luna?"

"Yep!"

"You've gotten one of those necklaces as well..." Luna looked down to reaffirm my statement, then gave me a single nod.

"Uh-huh!"

“How did that happen?”

“Well I was showing Golden Jubilee a play of mine, and—”

“I’m sorry...” I waved a hoof to quiet her, “Golden Jubilee...?” I looked deeper into the cave, puzzled. “Is there another pony down here?”

“Nope! Well... yes, but I’m pretty sure he’s dead.” Dead?! A body?! Luna was subjected to such an atrocious sight and she’s still smiling as she always does?! Apparently ignorant to my disgust, she continued. “Do you want to come see? I left a marble trail!”

“No! Luna! You put on a play for, for a dead body?!”

“No, no, no, silly!” she giggled, “It’s his statue! C’mon, lemme show you!”

Luna spun round and began running off into the shadows, further into the cave. My worries failed to be alleviated as I lit up a small light and followed, keeping my pace steady. I heard Discord scamper behind me, and snicker softly at my side.

“The look on your face!” he laughed quietly. I refused him an answer, and continued to press after my sister.

Abruptly, the uneven walls of the cave led to a square corridor, carvings speaking clearly of unicorn stonemasonry. Floating on the ceiling, among the roots and vines of massive plants, were little blue lights. Believing them to be a magical feature, I was startled when one drifted towards me and hovered away. So they were alive!

And yet, Luna ignored them. Did that mean they weren’t dangerous, or did it mean she still doesn’t understand the concept of danger? She was still such a young filly, still so ignorant of the world! Should I just trust her, just as I would a friend? It felt strange to think that... Wrong.

Finally, we came to what she wanted to show us. A circular room, intricately detailed by fine craftsponies, yet heedlessly left to become overrun.

“So, what happened!” Luna began, “I came into this room with the sad statue, and the little markings said he was a playwright!” She pointed to an epitaph at the feet of the Pegasus. “But he looked so sad, and I thought, maybe he has to see a happy play! So I put on a play for him, and when I was done, this light came from above and POOF! Necklace!”

I walked up to the statue as Luna spoke, looking over its form, its artistry. The halls and chambers of this place were simple, a few stone-shaping spells here and there, a unicorn with the right spells could have this place carved within a week. This statue, on the other hand, was different... Just looking at the cutie mark, it was neither a raised nor sunken relief, as would typically be the easiest way to represent the design. It was instead another type of stone, seamlessly inlaid into place. It was unlike anything I had ever seen... Certainly possible, but almost needlessly complicated in procedure.

The attention was not lost to other sections of the statue’s body. The heavy mane and tail were similarly

colored and smoothed, tightly packed into gently descending spirals. The divide between hoof and fetlock was crisp, carved almost to the hair, without a hint of weathering or damage. I began to wonder... What did the face look like, hidden away under the years of plant life? Damaged by the roots, probably. But...

Luna finished her story as I began brushing away the plants that coated his face. His expression poked out from under the moss, twisted in pain befitting his posture, almost frighteningly lifelike. I could make out the shape of individual teeth, the exact creases of his snout... Even his eyelashes, something so delicate and small, were still in place. And they were not merely a suggestion carved into the face, but actual raised hairs, each one painstakingly separated from the others.

And that had survived damage from plant life! What in Equestria was this statue made of? Who could possibly be its craftsman? Should I try and snap an eyelash, to see if it was even possible to harm? I held myself back, but continued to move aside the plants that had overtaken the playwright. With a swipe of my hoof I pushed aside more vines, but, halfway across his head, my hoof scraped into something hard, something immovable.

Surprised, I moved around it, trying to reveal what had stopped my foot. Stone, another section of the statue. Still partially hidden, jutting from the center of his skull, was a slowly spiraling horn.

My eyes snapped up, reconfirming that there were wings on this rock's body. Wings and a horn? An alicorn! Was this a character from Golden Jubilee's play? An idealization of the playwright? That made the most sense. It was as if, in death, they portrayed the stallion as ascended to a higher state of being.

But who would put so much time and attention into one lost and forgotten playwright, into carving him in such pain? No pony was worth this much, no matter how beloved.

But what if this Jubilee himself was an alicorn?

If he was... I slapped a hoof over my mouth.

"Guys... I've got this crazy idea. Please help me get rid of it."

"Okay!" Luna said, "What is it?"

"No, oh goodness," I shook my head, "It's, it's absolutely *crazy*, positively absurd to think—!"

"C'mon, tell us!"

"The... the statue is an alicorn..." I waved a hoof at it. Discord peaked around my shoulders, silent. "And Luna, you got a necklace that was practically identical to Discord's, and... oh my goodness. Discord, Luna..." My friends leaned in close as I stumbled with the absurdity of my final sentence. "What if these artifacts are the Elements of Harmony?"

Silence greeted me, my friend and my sister staring up at me, stunned.

"I-I can't think of what else they could be!" I tried to recover, "I mean, it was a story book, but... The

Elements were owned by alicorns, as both of these were. They reacted to friendship and teamwork, and the storybook pictures look *exactly* like these necklaces, like little golden bands! The gemstones aren't the right colors, but I—

"WOO HOO!" Discord leapt up and punched the air, refusing to let me finish. "Holy *crap!* We're not your ordinary adventurers, heck no we aren't! WAHOO!" He continued cheering wildly, leaping and gliding around the tomb in a crazy joy. Luna laughed and started chasing him, echoing his cheers.

"You're not supposed to just *accept* this!" I cried with a stomp of my hoof. "Tell me I'm wrong! It's just *ridiculous* to think this!"

"You seemed pretty adamant to defend the idea just a second ago!" Discord laughed.

"Elements of Harmony! Elements of Harmony! YAY! Hooray!"

"But it was just a silly storybook!" I tried to assert, "A tale for children!"

"Yeah, a storybook with *gold foil* on every page!" Discord retorted, "Somebody must've thought it was a pretty dang important story to dump their bits into it!"

"That's ridiculous! Arguing that a story is considered real because somebody wanted to tell it well!" Discord and Luna continued to cheer and play around me, tearing around the tomb and squealing. "You two! AUG! Why did I even bring this up?!" I dropped to the ground. I tried to pick through my thoughts, trying to comprehend this, and what it means. Alicorns were just a legend... and this statue could just be a representation. Well made, certainly, but proof of nothing!

But the original bizarre stone from Discord... That was in the hooves of an alicorn, a real one. But all that proved was that aspects of the story were true, not necessarily every detail of it. I never got proof that the Elements *weren't* real, but... Oh, I just don't know!

"Hey Luna, I didn't know you could use sonic magic," Discord said somewhere behind me. "Why didn't you use that sooner?!"

"Because I didn't know I had it either!"

Discord barked a laugh, "The Elements of Harmony must have activated your secret powers!"

"Omigosh you're right!" There was a clatter of hooves, Luna supposedly bouncing around. "Discord, Discorddiscord! Did you get secret powers?!"

"I dunno, but I was always weak in shadow magic! Maybe the Element'll help me cast some of that!"

"You know shadow magic?!"

"A little!"

"OMIGOSH!"

“HOLYCRAP!”

I covered my ears as they began to have a squealing battle. Those two are still just *kids*! They’re just taking what I had to say in one stride, accepting it without thought or question. Am I the only rational one in this team?!

“I wonder which Elements these are?” Discord asked.

“Well, we’ve only got six to pick from! Kindness, magic, laughter... uh... honesty.” Luna popped into my vision. “Hey big sis, what’s the other two?!”

“Loyalty and Generosity,” I grumbled.

“Yeah, and those!”

“So, so yours, Luna! You put on a play for this guy so um...” I watched Discord as he tapped his chin, “Kindness? Generosity? Actually, what’s the difference...”

“But it was also a funny play, so maybe it’s Laughter?”

“But if this guy only put on sad plays, why would he have the Element of Laughter?”

“Maybe people thought all of his sad plays were really funny!”

Discord doubled over with laughter. “Oh jeez, that’s *really* depressing!”

“Anyway, anyway,” Luna bounded forward and pushed her snout against Discord’s necklace. “If we’re going to guess by ownership, yours is gonna be real easy!” She stumbled back. “What do you think the Shadow Stallion would have?”

“Um...” Discord’s smile fell as he dropped down on his haunches. “Yeesh, that’s a hard question. Uh... Honesty? Generosity?”

“*Generosity*?” I snorted.

“Well, I don’t know, he doesn’t seem to be a virtuous guy!” He laughed nervously. “Of course, he wasn’t wearing the element either, so...”

“And you’re sure he was an alicorn?” I asked. Doesn’t hurt to double check...

“Positive.” Discord nodded. “He had wings, and I definitely saw him cast magic. Heck... the guy just *looks* magic. He’s got...” Discord waved his birdlike claw, trying to grasp for the word. “This really bizarre aura. Like a living shadow.”

I winced. “I think that’s really more than enough about that...”

“Yeah, and it’s not helping us learn anything about your element!” Luna said. “Back to when it was

earned!"

"Hm..." After a moment's thought, Discord smirked. "Well I did *generously* let Basil keep the dam."

"That wasn't yours to give, Discord!" I snapped. "That's not what Generosity is!"

"Well then uh... I was using a lot of magic." He shrugged. "Maybe it's Magic?"

I sighed loudly and threw myself up to my feet. I can't think like this, with two, two *children* yammering about their toys! "Can we *please* leave now?! I don't want to spend the night in this place!"

"Oh, right, sorry!" Discord dropped on all four feet. "We should get out of here..."

"Now Luna," I spun on my sister. "Pick up your toys..."

"Okay!" She nodded, stopped, then shook her head. "Wait, no, not okay." She waved at the statue, where Tottering Trottingham was positioned. "I think Mr. Gold needs a friend more than I do! Now he won't be lonely!"

I frowned. It's not like the doll was originally mine and held a good amount of sentimental value. To even suggest just leaving it, like it was some sort of throwaway object!

Oh Celestia, get ahold of yourself! I trotted off, not wanting to give the matter any more attention than it deserved!

~❧~

It was dark by the time that we got back to the road, and I was glad that we managed to make it back at all. Discord and Luna wouldn't stop yammering about the Elements and magic... they didn't even notice I wasn't talking. I just dropped by a tree and tried to get to sleep, trying to sort things out... Trying to come to terms with the fact that my friends only listen to me when they want to. When it makes things more *fun* to them.

How could they listen to me one moment, then ignore me the next?

Did they even care what I was saying?

And they were just so *overjoyed*. There's nothing wrong with sleeping on the side of the road, with barely subsiding off wild grass and the rewards of odd jobs! And some magic items are clearly the mystical long artifacts of Harmony! I mean, what else could they be?!

The other two had long since fallen quiet and gone to bed, no matter to a reasonable sleep schedule. I was still awake, working myself to tears, face burning hot.

"I feel so lost..." I whimpered to myself.

Discord chuckled above me. I pressed my forelegs down on my snout, suppressing a sob.

"How can you say that, you're the one who has the map!" he snickered.

I tried to keep quiet, curling up tightly.

"Aw... no 'hush, Discord!?' No 'Thank you for pointing out the obvious.'?"

I dug my snout deeper into my forelegs, shivering, throat aching with the effort of trying not to reply. Discord was silent above me.

"Woah, are you crying?"

I wiped my nose on my fetlock and refused to answer. What if I opened my mouth and all that came out was a sob?

The shadow of Discord bobbed into my view, two pale lights serving as his eyes. They settled right next to me, hovering ominously, simply staring. They tipped sideways.

"Do you uh... need a hug?" I failed to reply once more, but my friend didn't need an answer. I only heard him shift, one light vanishing, and his paw was around my shoulders. His wing was folded, but I could feel it shift against me as he breathed. I winced as his head rested against my neck, his stiff fur an irritant, and the bizarre white horn already getting tangled in my mane, hooking on knots.

"What's the matter, Celestia? Jealous?" he laughed softly, "Nah, that's not funny... Um, sorry." His arm slipped away, and he sat quietly beside me, watching. "Please tell me what's wrong..." he finally muttered.

"I don't think I'm suited for life out here," I replied softly, "Not at all..."

"Why do you say that...? Out here, Celestia... we're free, you know? We can do anything, go anywhere. There are no walls that can hold us anymore."

"Is that how you see it? You and Luna?" I asked, mopping up my face with a fetlock once more. "I don't feel that way... Without walls, there's no guidance. There's no point, or purpose, or direction. We're just lost, aimless and... there's just no control, not to anything."

Discord shifted beside me. "Honestly... I kinda like that."

"I don't. I like an order to things. A system to work with, or even to work around. Out here... I feel rudderless, pulled around without control. And it scares me."

The two lights in his eyes flickered.

"I think I can understand that. Being rudderless..."

I hacked out a snort. "Can you now?"

"Yes. I can." His eyes vanished. Closed, or just turned away, it was hard to tell. "In the city, I was the one being controlled. No direction I chose was going to be my own... I'd just wind up on patrol eventually. That or dead..." One little reflection reappeared, tilting up. "But out here, nothing holds me back. I chose where I go and what I want to do. Having no direction, it feels like my direction. Thinking, woah, what's beyond that next hill?! I don't know, but I wanna go see. And I can go see."

"I don't really work like that... And... and it frustrates me, when I get pulled around like that." His reflective eyes vanished again. I hoped he could see my expression, get what I was trying to say. "Just living moment to moment... We've got to have a plan larger than that, we can't grow up just running from hill to hill, only thinking in the short term!"

There was another shifting sound beside me, as well as an annoyed sigh. Angry blood returned to my face, why would he not *listen*?!

"When you'd get so passive aggressive, Celestia?"

I kicked him. I smacked my hind hoof right into his side, bouncing off his flank. He didn't make a sound, his eyes reappearing, suddenly far too close.

"That aggressive enough for you?!" I hissed.

"Ow, Celestia," he replied. That's it?!

"I'm upset, I'm scared, and you just keep sniping at me!" I quietly cried. "You keep ignoring how I feel!"

"You're ignoring how *we* feel!" Discord snapped back. A claw dug into my chest, jabbing at my ribs. "You are so convinced that Celestia is always right, in every case! News flash! You. Don't. Know. Everything! So stop acting like you're some ultimate authority over the two of us, because, as you *just said*, you aren't suited to wandering around out here!"

"You're, you're incorrigible!" I sobbed, at a loss for what to say.

"For once, I am glad I don't know what a word means!" Discord snapped back. I felt him stand, but his heat never left. There was a thud beside me, and Discord's eyes reappeared. "I sorry..." His voice was low, still not entirely sympathetic. More like a child who's been scolded. "I was trying to make you feel better, but... I think I failed. Forgive me?" I refused to reply, staring at him, knowing he could see my face like this. "What if I apologized for eating those carrots too?" I snorted, but felt myself ease.

"Apology accepted," I muttered.

"And if you want a *long term* goal... well, I think we have a clear one now. Get all the Elements and take down the Shadow Stallion."

I let my head drop again. He was only trying to be nice, I tried to assure myself. Never mind how

ridiculous that sounded.

"How could we even *attempt* to do that?" I asked.

"We've already *got* two," he urged.

"That's just... ridiculous! Overwhelming! Impossible!"

"Celestia... the Elements are right in front of you. I'm *wearing* one!" There was a little clatter, the shifting of his necklace, and then it was lying across my foreleg, still warm from his neck. "It's not only possible, it's happening! You said that your cutie mark meant you wanted to bring the sun back to Equestria. Well, this is how we can do that!"

His words stung. My silly, lofty goal... it is absolutely comparable to this situation, comparable in its airheaded insanity. How could such a ridiculous dream, imagined in a moment of weakness, wind up being my brand for life?

"But we're just two fillies and a colt," I pleaded, "We can't handle this!"

"Yes we can. Yes *you* can."

"No I—"

Suddenly, Discord threw his weight across me. He dropped his head atop mine as he hugged my neck, side digging into my back, and the strangely slick texture of his lizard leg jamming into my right flank.

"I'm trying to help you, Celestia!" he exclaimed. "Bad as I'm failing at it, I think this is something we can all get behind! And, as your friend, I believe in you. Once you figure this out, you can do it. You can do anything!"

I sniffled as the necklace's gemstone sparkled intensely on my head, shining in my eyes.

"That is so corny. Even the Element thinks so."

"Corny is the best kind of story," Discord replied firmly.

"Life is not a story."

"If we succeed at this, it will be. Right in a little gilded volume, Elements of Harmony, part 2. The part where Celestia, Luna, and Discord were all awesome adventurers. Friends forever!"

"Gilded? The proper term," I laughed, wiping away the rest of my tears, "*Is illuminated.*"

"Both. At once."

"Sure." I laughed. "Sure, why not."

There was a little gust as Discord hovered himself off my back, dropping next to me once more.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Yeah... yeah a little bit. I've just got to think this over a bit more, but I think I'll be fine. Thanks, Discord."

He nodded, and his eyes vanished. I heard his claws scraping on the tree trunk. But with a soft whump the reappeared. His wing brushed my back as it retreated to his side.

"I got it," he said.

"Got what?"

"Why don't I start calling you Tia?"

"Tia? Why Tia?"

"Well..." A suggestion of his paw began waving beside me, making his eyes flicker. "Celestia is ladylike and refined. She always does the proper thing, and never ever toes the line. But Tia! Tia isn't afraid to get her hooves dirty. Tia is nice and gentle, but she'll do anything, go anywhere if it means she can protect her friends."

"Do you really think changing what you call me will do anything?"

"Well, why did you want to call me Resonance? There's more to a name than just random sounds, you know that." He was silent, letting the idea sit. "I think this'll help you see things as the new you."

"Do I need a new me?" I asked him quietly.

"I dunno, you're having trouble, so maybe?" A suggestion of a shrug. "Um... sorry if I'm offending you again... I'm just trying to help."

"Perhaps we can try it out, for a few days."

The lights bobbed vigorously then vanished again as he climbed his tree, claws scraping at the bark, leaves rustling. Then things became quiet... as quiet as they could be, at night in the wild.

"Hey Discord?" I called up softly. His eyes appeared above me, floating, attached to nothing. "What about... the Bringers of Harmony? For our adventuring group name?"

"Sounds weighty. I like it."

"And... you think we can talk more? Just about serious stuff?"

"I'd love to, Tia."