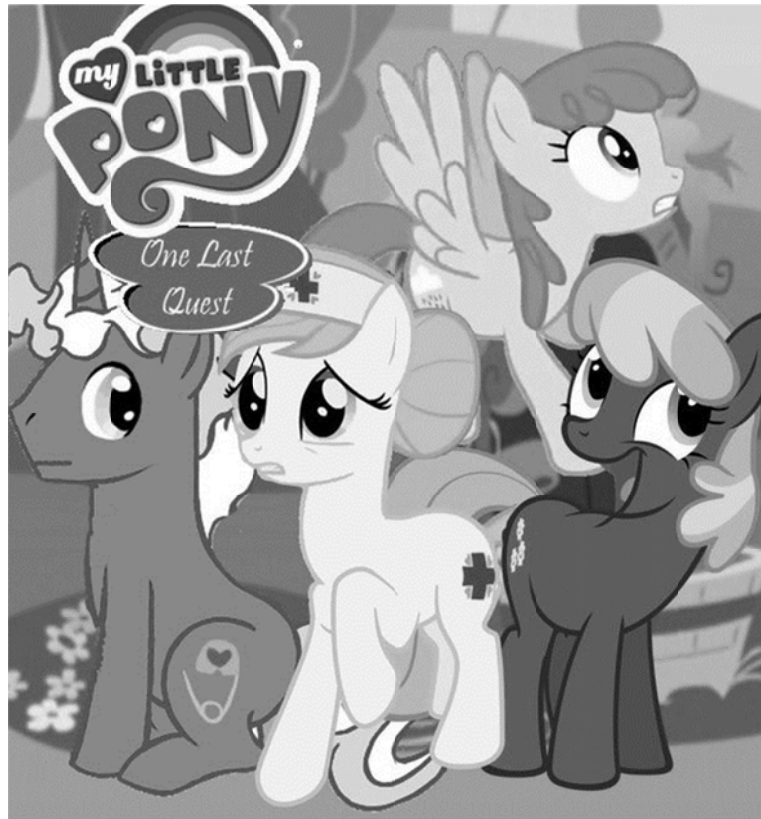


One Last Quest

By: Vanner



Dedication

I'd like to thank the team that brought us My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. Because of their creative genius, there is a community of friends out there for us all.

I'd also like to thank everyone who has taken the time to read, review, or edit this tale. Your kind words have inspired me to be a better writer.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Equestria Daily for putting this story out there for the bronies.

Bro hooves to you all.

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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 stuck, 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?

...

"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 his 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.”

...

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."

...

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 clomp 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 wild 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."

...

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 chipperness.

"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.

Chapter Two

Enter the Everfree Forest

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself

After an hour walking along the worn trail, the ponies came upon a hut deep in the forest. The outside was simple enough; a grass thatched roof, wooden walls, and a few windows. From inside the hut floated chanting and the sweet smell of something brewing over a hickory fire. Pokey sized up the cottage and approached. He knocked on the door; his hooves echoed with the thud throughout the hut. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a stately zebra standing behind. Her fetlocks were adorned with bangles and her ears were pierced with gold bangles. She looked at group of ponies with a raised eyebrow.

“Are these unannounced guests I see?” she asked in a accented voice. “What do you want from a zebra like me?” Pokey looked at the gathered ponies, unsure as to what direction to take the conversation. Cheerilee stepped up instead.

“Zecora! Dear!” she said, offering a hoof. “I’m Cheerilee Daisy. Twilight Sparkle has told me so much about you. These intrepid bunch of ponies are Pokey, Medley, and Redheart.” She smiled as Zecora accepted hoof, and shook. “That dear unicorn sent us your way in hopes that you could help us out. I hope we’re not interrupting anything.”

“Friends of Twilight are you?” she asked. “Is there something that I can do?” She motioned them inside the dirt floored hut.

A cauldron simmered near the window, and filled the air with a hint of cinnamon. Tribal masks adorned the walls, as did bookshelves full of tattered tomes and dusty scrolls. Pokey looked with unease about the hut. He’d known many zebras in his time, but none like her. She clearly wasn’t Kin.

Zecora ladled cups from the cauldron. She offered them to the ponies. They accepted politely. After greetings were shared, Cheerilee spent the next half hour regaling Zecora with the tale of Spike’s unbelievable actions. Zecora listened, and nodded sagely.

"These gems you seek," rhymed the zebra, "you can find them all within the week." Medley rolled her eyes.

"Oh, well I'm glad that you're so confident about all of this," said Medley with a tone of sarcasm. "Can you tell us where they are so we can be done with this silly adventure?"

"I know not where the gems are," she replied. "But those who do? They are not far. If you were a bird, there you could flap, but you're not, so do have you a map?" Cheerilee reached into her saddlebags and pulled out a map of the Everfree forest. Zecora picked up a piece of charcoal in her teeth and marked a route. "These pigs are called the Hamite," she said. "But beware, they like to fight."

Medley cringed at the idea. She hadn't been expecting violence on this trip, and she certainly didn't want to fight pigs. Not that she knew any,, but still They weren't even ponies. And to be getting help from a Zebra? She hoped this whole quest wasn't going to involve getting her hooves dirty with a bunch of other species.

"I've done some research on the Hamites," said Cheerilee. "They're reasonable folk."

"They can be, if you are kind," said Zecora. "Some hate ponies, and others don't mind."

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Pokey. He rolled his neck. "I've dealt with pigs before. You just gotta show them who's boss."

"I don't want you hurting any pony," protested Redheart.

"They're not ponies," said Pokey. "Every pig I've ever met has tried to kill me. They're savages."

"That's actually a misnomer," said Cheerilee. "They're civilized, but don't have the same basis of agriculture or magic that ponies do. They traditionally forage for food, and since they don't build cities, their culture changes quicker than ponies." Pokey stared into space, ignored the mulberry pony.

"Thank you, Miss Zecora," said Redheart. "We should be going now."

"Good luck to you ponies all," she replied. "The task you have been given is quite tall."

The quartet of ponies walked away from Zecora's hut, little more confident in their quest than they entered it. The forest seemed to thicken around them as they left the hut's clearing, and the branches swallowed them in darkness. Pokey's horn glowed dully as he swiped his head, hacking through the undergrowth. Brush fell his at his feet. It left a carpet of branches for the others to walk on. As they walked deeper in to the forest, the canopy swallowed the sky. They were left in a darkness that Pokey's glowing horn alone couldn't counter. Redheart fished through her pack to produce a lantern. Medley held it in her teeth, and fluttered above the ponies to illuminate the way.

With the added light of the lantern, Medley looked for trails that would require less work. To the south, she spotted a path. Pokey began to slash through the underbrush toward it. They eventually came to a road of packed earth that led deeper into the forest, and hopefully towards the village they sought. Pokey rolled his head along his shoulders to stretch his stiff neck muscles. Cheerilee unrolled her map again.

"Well according to our maps," said Cheerilee, "the Hamite village should be due east of here, about four hours walk." The disgust on Medley's face was enough to fill the already dim forest with even more gloom.

"I've never even heard of these pigs," Medley complained. "Why couldn't it be ponies? Or even donkeys? This is the worst adventure I've ever been on."

"I thought you said you had never been on an adventure," asked Redheart.

"I haven't," replied Medley with a huff. "By default then, it's the worst." Pokey simply rolled his eyes and started down the earth path.

"If she's going to whine the whole time..." he muttered to himself. The ponies followed Pokey as Medley circled above. She kept the lantern aloft to spread light in the dark corners of the forest.

The ponies had walked in relative silence for an hour when the snapping of a twig put the party on high alert. Pokey dropped his horn low and spread his hooves wide. He made ready to react to the slightest movement. Medley lifted the lamp higher as Cheerilee and Redheart took cover behind nearby trees. Another twig snapped less than two dozen

yards away. Then another. Sweat dripped down Pokey's brow. His muscles tensed, ready for whatever came next.

There was explosion of branches as a crimson coated sow leapt from the bushes. Her face was streaked in panic and her fur was matted in blood. A piglet scurried behind her; the child was squealing in abject terror. The piglet caught on a branch and tumbled in front of Pokey. Pokey looked down, unsure as to what was happening. He had less than a second till it became apparent. A lion's head crashed through the brush, bat-like wings and a massive scorpion tail trailing behind it. Medley screamed.

"Manticore!"

The lantern fell from her teeth and shattered on the forest floor. The ponies and pigs were left in near darkness. The manticore's lion head roared and scythed his razor claws at the unicorn.

The massive paw slammed into the earth where Pokey had stood only an instant before. He had spun out of the way to deliver a massive kick to the manticore's teeth. The beast reeled backwards a moment before it snapped back. The manticore pounded his fists into the earth. Its paw landed only inches from the piglet. The piglet squealed, as he struggle to get to his feet. The beast turned its eye back on its prize and dove at the child.

Without even thinking, Medley found herself diving at the beast with an incomprehensible war cry. Both hooves struck the manticore's face. The impact knocked its maw wide, and threw the creature from its feet. Medley rebounded off a tree and rocketed back towards the stunned piglet. In a single swift motion, the piglet was in her hooves and in the trees.

The manticore lashed back at Medley only to find empty air. It was met instead was the sows barreling charge. The pig knocked the manticore off his feet and into the dirt. Pokey looked up at the sow as she rained hooves on the beast. It was back on its feet in a second.

The massive scorpion tail shot forward; the barbed stinger found purchase between the sow's shoulders. The sow screamed in agony, dropped to her knees. Redheart shot forward, and kicked the stinger free from the sow's back. Cheerilee dashed out to tackle the sow away from the beast. The girls had joined the fight.

The ponies dodged and weaved from the attacks, barely able to keep ahead of the beast. Pokey realized that this fight needed to end now. He couldn't get close enough to kill the manitcore, but he knew of something else that would put that creature out of commission. He charged at a tree; his horn burned with intense black light. He buried his horn into the tree, and snapped his neck away.

His spell had made his already dangerous horn impossibly sharp; it cut through the tree as if it were slicing paper. The tree heaved sideways, and brought down the forest canopy as a hailstorm brings down the sky. The manitcore looked up at the last second as it caught the weight of the trunk across its back. The beast's roar threatened to deafen the ponies before it was smothered in the branches.

Pokey stood above the creature in victory. He darted his head around the scene looking for more threats. He found only his pony companions, and the sow that stood wheezing beside him. She looked up at Pokey.

The sow was shorter than Pokey, but wider and low to the ground. She was caked in her own blood, and started to wobble uneasily. Her eyes lost focus as she opened her mouth to speak. The sow fell to the forest floor before uttering a sound.

Redheart was on her fetlocks in an instant. She snapped open their medical supplies and began to treat the sow. Medley fluttered down from the branches, the piglet still wrapped in her hooves. She stared at the scene in shock. Never in her life had she even imagined such violence. The piglet wriggled to escape from Medley, so he could run to his mother's side. She wrapped her hooves around him tighter, and turned him away.

"Nurse Redheart's going to fix your mommy," she reassured the piglet. "She's going to be okay, I promise." She looked back as Pokey and Cheerilee dropped down to help Nurse Redheart. She was yelling orders to the ponies as she prepped a syringe. "You don't need to see that," said Medley. Her voice cracked, as she tried to put on a brave face for the piglet. "Come on, let's sing a song. Do you know any songs? Please teach me one of your songs." The piglet tried to look back at his mother. Medley's brought the child's focus back to her instead and insisted that he teach her a song,

"Um... There was an old boar," the child began as he tried to remember the words.

“There was an old boar!” Medley sung back. Her voice was still shaking. “Okay, good! Teach me more! I want to know!”

“He knew how to snore,” the piglet continued. “And every day, he laid on the floor.”

“Good! Good!” encouraged Medley. “Keep going! I want to hear your song.”

The piglet continued to sing his song about the boar who snored on the floor for a handful of verses. Medley insisted that he repeat it again and again as her companions worked on the sow. Cheerilee compressed the sow’s chest. Pokey breathed for the sow, by holding her snout and breathing deep into her lungs. Nurse Redheart recited a silent prayer as she slammed a needle into the pigs flank. The pig gasped, and began to breathe on her own. With the sow narrowly alive, Redheart collapsed against the tree. Pokey put a hoof on her shoulder.

“She’s going to make it,” he said. “We just need to get her to the village.”

“She’s lost so much blood,” mumbled Redheart. “I’ve never treated a Hamite before. And with that manitcore poison, I just don’t know if our antitoxin will work on her...”

“Hey!” snapped Medley. “Don’t say that! She’s going to make it. Tigros here needs his mommy, and I promised him that you would make her better!” Her eyes filled with tears. “Ponies don’t break promises.” Redheart looked up at the frightened piglet and the tearful pegasus.

“You’re right,” she said, as she came to her senses. “We can’t break a promise.” She stood up, and gazed into the forest. Cheerilee unrolled her map again.

“If we double time it,” said Cheerilee, “we can make it by sun down.” She looked at the fading day that filtered through the hole in the canopy, then at the crushed remains of the beast. “In fact, we’re going to have to. The manticore landed on the lantern.”

They left the grisly scene within a few minutes. Redheart had fashioned a sling from her tent, and Pokey set it between the two earth ponies. They easily carried the weight of the sow as Pokey’s horn lit the way. It was becoming too dark to fly, and Medley was forced to run

alongside. The piglet clung desperately to her as the ponies galloped along the forest path. Their thundering hooves scattered the small creatures, and the ferocity of their step warned other predators to stay away. The herd found itself outside a torchlit village within the hour.

The path to the village widened as the ponies slowed to a sweaty trot. Two massive boars, each the size of a pegasus, stood watch over the entrance to the village. Their tusks had been adorned with decorative metal plating and intricate carvings, while their crimson coats were covered in yellow tattoos. The boars dropped their heads, ready to charge at the invading herd.

"We've got wounded!" said Pokey. "Get out of the way!" The boars looked between Cheerilee and Redheart to see the downed sow. Their eyes latched onto Pokey; they bristled in anger.

"Did you do this to her?" demanded the larger boar. Pokey's horn flashed a dangerous black aura as clear warning to his power.

"Get out of my way," growled Pokey.

"Stop it!" yelled Redheart. "This sow is dying! Stop your macho posturing and help us!" The boars looked at each other uneasily for a moment, and then stood.

"Follow me," the larger huffed.

The village existed as a multitude of trees that had been grown together over the decades to form perfect baskets of habitable space beneath their boughs. Each had two levels that formed an hourglass shape from the twisted trunks. The upper levels were connected by a series of wooden rope bridges that hug with a lazy sway in the forest air. Fires burned outside their houses, and pots of various dishes brewed beneath the forest's canopy. The clay soil had hardened over the years of use into a cracked terracotta landscape. Small patches of moss grew on the trees, illuminated by the torch lights in the center of the earthen paths.

The ponies felt the eyes of the village upon them as they marched the sow through town. Hushed whispers passed between the pigs as the ponies walked by. Medley was sure she'd heard some pig use the word "pignapped." She looked at the growing mob following them.

"Pokey..." she whispered nervously.

"I know, Medley," he hissed back. "Just keep that piglet with you, no matter what." The herd came to a stop in front of a large tree made from several smaller trees that had been twisted together some time ago. They grew as one now, and towered over the village square.

A massive sow came from beneath its branches. She was adorned in fine silver jewelry, and a great purple robe. A brilliant glittering diamond cut with seemingly impossible geometry hung from her neck. The pigs bowed in unison at the sow. The sow looked upon the ponies with curiosity. Her eyes fell on the wounded mother and the shivering piglet.

"What has happened?" she demanded. Pokey took a step forward and prepared for the worst. "What have you done to my daughter?"

"Grandmom!" squealed the piglet. He wriggled free from Medley. The Elder sow glared at the ponies. Cheerilee cringed under her baleful gaze, but Redheart stood firm.

"Your daughter was attacked by a manticore," Redheart said. "She nearly died there in the forest. We made a promise to Tigros that she would be okay." She came eye to eye with the sow. "And ponies don't break promises." The sow softened her glare. The elder stepped back, and relaxed.

"Fetch Alamos," said the elder sow. "My daughter requires urgent care. You four may come with me." Two boars took the sling from Cheerilee, but Redheart refused to let go.

"She's my patient," Redheart said. "I'm going with her." The boars looked to the elder for wisdom; she simply nodded. Redheart and the boars disappeared into the village while the three ponies and Tigros followed the elder sow into her tree home.

The inside of her home was adorned with masks not unlike Zecora's. Intricate tapestries of beadwork hung upon the walls, and a mat of woven river stones carpeted the otherwise dirt floor. The sow sat in the center of the room, and motioned for the ponies to sit as well. Tigros huddled up to his grandmother and stared at the ponies.

"Tell me what happened," she said. Each of the ponies related their tale, downplaying their role in the defeat of the manticore, and focused instead on the rescue of Tigros and his mother. The sow nodded as she considered the tale.

"I see," she said at last. "You are seeking the stones then?"

"Yes," replied Cheerilee. "Our princess has asked us to find them. She didn't tell us what they were for though."

"I know of your princess Celesita," said the elder. "It is said she makes the sun rise."

"That's true," replied Cheerilee. "She is our goddess and our princess. Her wishes are our honor to fulfill." The elder sow considered this as she gazed at the three ponies in her home.

"And you have come here at her command?" she asked.

"Well," said Cheerilee with a smile, "this is where our journey has taken us." The sow smiled back.

"You are wise in your speech, wine colored Pony," said the sow.

"Oh, please," she replied. "Call me Cheerilee."

"I am Elder Thasrow," offered the sow. "The daughter whom you have brought home to me is Tesha, and her son Tigros, you have already met." Thasrow looked over the gathered ponies. She stared at each for a moment. She paused long enough to unnerve Medley. "You are clearly a diplomat of sorts," she said at last to Cheerilee.

"Well, I'm actually a school teacher," replied Cheerilee. "Some would argue it's a lot of the same thing." Thasrow nodded to Pokey and his armor.

"And you are obviously a mighty warrior," she said. He simply grunted in reply. "And your friend is clearly skilled in the art of medicine. But you..." she turned to face Medley, who backed away from the massive sow's gaze. "What skills do you bring to this party?"

"She just happened to be there when we got drafted" said Pokey. "Still, it's always handy to have a pair of wings." Thasrow nodded at the idea and accepted the unicorn's answer. She stood, and then turned to face one of the beaded tapestries on the wall. She gestured to it, and beckoned the ponies to come forward.

"It has been foretold that you would arrive," she said. The ponies approached, and tried to garner meaning from the assembled beads. In the center of the bead work was a depiction of the four Stones of Brilliance.

Each was done in a different stone: lapis lazul, ivory, turqouis, and jasper. Inside of each of the stones was much smaller, more intricately beaded mosaic: a safety pin, a red cross surrounded by hearts, a thundering cloud, and three daisies. Medley stepped back in shock.

“You mean, you knew we were coming?” she asked. “Those are our cutie marks.” She looked back to her own raining cloud. “Well, most of our cutie marks, anyway.”

“This tapestry has existed in our village for nearly five centuries,” explained Thasrow. “Every few years, our shamans have a vision, and craft a new mosaic to fit in the stones. These pictures have changed a dozen times in my life. In fact, our shaman finished the new one only yesterday. It takes about a month for her to make a new one.” She pointed to the bottom of the tapestry. Tacked to it were hundreds of cutie mark mosaics that stretched to the floor. The last one was a raining cloud. “So to answer your question, no, I did not know that you were coming. I knew only that ponies would one day come here.” They exchanged uneasy glances. It was clear that Celestia had left a lot out of her explanation.

Chapter Three

There's Always a Catch

Quests aren't easy, especially if you're not the one who's supposed to be on it

"I think," said Cheerilee at last, "that we should probably tell Redheart about this." They stared at the tapestry, unsure as to what to make of it. It not only had their cutie marks, and the stones they were supposed to find, but a blood red background that tendriled along the edges as if to signify some kind of creeping doom.

"So you're saying," summarized Medley, "that Celestia sent a seemingly random collection of ponies off into the forest to find four mythical stones because of some piggy prophecy."

"Hamite," corrected Cheerilee. "Piggy is a bit of a slur."

"Hamlet Prophecy then," said Medley, annoyed at the correction. "The point is, Celestia didn't tell any of us this, and now we're fighting manticores and who even knows what else?"

"Actually," said Cheerilee. "If Thasrow has the Stones of Brilliance, we can take them to Canterlot and be done." The sow shook her head.

"The Hamite's have only the diamond," replied Thasrow. "The other three have been stolen, or given as gifts for services to us. Truth be told, after the first few hundred years, we forgot why we had them." Medley's heart sank at the news their journey would have to continue.

The ponies and Tigros followed Thasrow outside toward another tree home. This one was larger than the others and the outside was decorated with masks and spears. Exotic mosses grew in a moat around the base of the tree. Thasrow knocked on the door; she was greeted by a wizened and wrinkled boar whose coat had more grey than Hamite crimson. Somewhere in his life, he'd lost an eye.

Without speaking, the boar waved Thasrow and the ponies inside. A few cots lined the room and the walls themselves were covered in clay jugs hanging from bronze hooks nailed into the tree. At the far end of the room

lay the rescued sow. Tesha had been bathed and bandaged, and appeared to be sleeping quietly. Redheart sat near Tesha. She was speaking to another boar; comparing techniques and treatment options for the sow. Redheart stood as Elder Thasrow approached.

"I understand I have you to thank for saving my daughter," said Thasrow. She bowed in thanks to Redheart, who return the bow.

"It pains me to see any creature hurt," said Redheart. "Pony or pig, we're all children of the sun." Thasrow slid the diamond off her neck.

"I'll give you this stone for saving my daughter and grandson," said Thasrow. She removed the diamond from her own neck and put it around Redheart's. "With them come the hopes of the next generation." Redheart took the stone with reverence.

It felt like any other gemstone the size of a grape: solid, heavy, valuable. The diamond was cold though, as if it had been in a river and not around someone's neck. And the cut! It looked as if it had been forged from the stars rather than chipped away by the hooves of ponies. The diamond amplified the light instead of reflecting it and the sheer brilliance was almost difficult to look at.

"Thank you," said Redheart. "You've made this journey already easier. You have no idea what this will mean to the Princess." Thasrow nodded quietly.

"I know that your path ahead is a difficult one," Thasrow said. "I know these stones are valuable to your people, but they have been nothing but shiny baubles to us. If we had remembered, we could have given them to your princess when she returned."

"Are you saying Celestia was here?" asked Redheart.

"Your other princess," said Thasrow, "though she came bearing Celestia's seal as proof of her office." Thasrow looked out into the woods. "I wish I could tell you that your journey to find these stones will be an easy one, but I cannot. Of the four, only the diamond is still in the Everfree Forest. The sapphire was given as a gift to the buffalo of Appleloosa plains three hundred years ago."

"I'm familiar with them," said Redheart. "Such kind and gentle folk. If they have the stone, they'll happily let us have it if we've got a good

reason." She smiled absently and stared into space. Pokey winced as if he'd been stung by an insect.

"The ruby was taken by a scholar from your city of Canterlot two generations back," continued Thasrow. "Note I said taken. The Hamites let a researcher borrow the gem, and he never returned it."

"An oversight, I'm sure," said Cheerilee. "Most of the time when things get loaned to universities, they get returned promptly. It's entirely possible that it got misfiled and lost in a collection. We'll have no trouble finding it."

"Well, at least we can get there mostly by rail," said Pokey. "That should make the rest of this quest easier. Do you know where the last gem is?"

"The emerald was stolen a century ago by the Diamond Dogs," said Thasrow. "I don't know what's become of it since; It's probably still in their filthy clutches." She spit at the mention of the creatures. Pokey shared in her disgust. The Diamond Dogs were the worst creatures in Equestria. Why Celestia hadn't driven them from the lands was beyond him.

Cheerilee busied herself writing the locations down on her map. She started to consult a book before tracing lines on her scrolls. Medley looked down at Cheerilee's map. She sketched a route for a moment before flipping the pencil back behind her ear.

"Okay then!" Cheerilee said. "If we head onto the Diamond Dog's territory first, we can pick up a train in Bridleburg to make our way to Appleloosa." She turned her map sideways. "And from there, we backtrack to Canterlot, pick up the last stone, and deliver them to Princess Celestia."

"You make it sound so easy," whimpered Medley. "I've heard the Diamond Dogs enslave ponies and eat the uncooperative ones."

"I wouldn't worry about the Diamond Dogs," said Pokey. "They won't lay a paw on you or anyone else. That's a promise." Medley backed away from Pokey. She knew that he was serious, and for a moment, she was more afraid of her traveling companion than any of the dangers that lie ahead on the trail.

"We should head out in the morning," said Redheart. "I'd like to see Tesha through the night, if that's alright with you."

"You are free to stay as long as you like," said Thasrow. "My scouts will lead you to the Diamond Dog territories whenever you are ready."

Medley had trouble falling asleep that evening. Only a day out, and they were already a quarter done with their task. With the prospect of facing the Diamond Dogs, Medley felt no confidence in her alleged abilities, especially since seeing the mosaic with the mismatched cutie mark. It had been in the pile of discards, certainly, but the elder sow's words had bothered her.

It was true that she had no real talent for adventuring: Cheerilee was the brains, Pokey the brawn, and Redheart the nerve. Here she was, useless but for a pair of wings. She was quick enough, sure; even quiet. But there were ponies like Rainbow Dash or even Cloud Kicker who could fly circles around her. Here she was stuck in the middle of some sort of prophecy, destined to do what exactly? She stood up from her grass bedding and walked out into the night.

She fluttered quietly through the village, looking in at the happily sleeping Hamites. Sows and piglets shared warm beds, leaving Medley homesick. She already missed her fillies. The only thing she ever felt she was good at was raising children. If they hadn't needed the bits, she wouldn't have been at that post office, and she wouldn't have gotten roped into this mess.

She worried how Applejack and her husband Snow Catcher were doing with the fillies. Especially Potpourri; how would her foal do for so long without her mother? A tidal wave of jealousy washed over her. Applejack was a good looking young mare, at home alone with her fillies and her husband. Here she was, out traipsing about in the woods on some stupid assignment from the princess. Snow Catcher would find out that he didn't need the saggy old mare. He'd take the kids off to a nice farm with the rich young cow-pony.

Medley sat by a dying fire and stared into the glowing embers. Her imagination ran wild. Medley found herself trying to push away the creeping thoughts of paranoia and jealousy that were invading her mind. Visions of Snow Catcher and Applejack mocked her over an empty home. It was all she could do not to cry.

Cheerilee awoke when she heard door close. Medley had apparently left to wander about the village. Or maybe she was going to try to go

home? Cheerilee got up from her grass mat. She stepped over Pokey and Redheart who were quietly sharing one of the other mats.

Cheerilee left the building to see Medley looking in on the Hamites. She eventually fluttered beside a fire ring, and sat down. Cheerilee thought she heard crying.

"What's wrong?" asked Cheerilee as approached the fire ring. Medley looked away trying to hide her tears of misery.

"Oh, nothing," she lied. "Just, tired and I can't sleep." Cheerilee sat down, and put an arm around her.

"Don't go fibbing to me" said Cheerilee. "You're not a pony that can lie with a straight face." Medley turned to look at Cheerilee's unflappable smile. It somehow made her feel worse. She began sobbing and buried her face in Cheerilee's shoulder.

"I just want to go home!" she wailed. "I just want to see my babies in bed! I don't want to see anyone else hurt! I don't want Snow Catcher to run off with Applejack!" Cheerilee had followed her misery up until that last statement. She sat in stunned silence a moment trying to follow the logic and came up short. Perhaps Medley's train of thought had derailed somewhere along the line, taking the conversation careening off a cliff with it.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Cheerilee. "Your husband isn't going to run off with Applejack. Why would you even think such a thing?"

"She's young and pretty, and alone with him," she sniffed. "She's got a great body from bucking apples, and that accent that drives the stallions crazy. I'm the only mare he's ever been with. Why wouldn't he want a mare like here? I'm just old and saggy, and out here on this fools errand for a princess that doesn't care enough to give us details."

"Old and saggy?" asked Cheerilee. "Sweetheart, if you want old and saggy, check out these flanks. You're still looking great, especially for having two kids."

"You're just saying that because you like mares," sniffed Medley. Cheerilee nearly choked on the remark.

"Where in the name of Celestia did you hear that?" she sputtered.

"You mean you don't?" asked Medley.

"No, why would you even think that?" she asked. "I mean, sure, I experimented a bit in college, but..."

"I'm sorry," sniffed Medley. "It's just... you know I haven't left my fillies alone for more time than it's taken me to go to work and back? I hate that post office. If Snow Catcher had gotten that promotion last year..." her voice trailed off. She looked at her companion, who sat simply listening to her misery. Medley began sobbing again. "I can't do this, Cheerilee. I don't belong out here. Ponies like you and Redheart, you've been out there to see the world. And Pokey!" She threw up her hooves. "My goddess, he's wearing a suit of armor. Who in Equestria even has barding like that? He's like a samurai from legends. I'm just a scared pegasus who misses her children." Cheerilee put her arms around the despondent pegasus. She hugged Medley, and stroked her mane with a reassuring smile.

"I want to go home too," she said. "I want to go back to my students and my classroom, and pretend none of this ever happened. But the princess believes in us, and she sent us out here for a reason." Cheerilee pointed to the shaman's hut. "Tigros is still with us because you saved him, Medley. Not Pokey, not Redheart, not me. You did that. Without you, Tesha wouldn't have a reason to wake up. You saved a life. Can you really say that it wasn't worth it?" Medley looked back at the shaman's hut and wiped her eyes. She hadn't even thought about what she'd done, she just jumped into action.

"I don't see how motherly instincts are going to save the day," she sniffed.

"Those instincts might come in handy again," said Cheerilee. "It's not like every pony gets to be a mother. I know I'll never be one." Medley was taken aback by Cheerilee's confession.

"You... can't...have..?" she stammered. "I'm so sorry, I didn't..." Cheerilee simply smiled at the pegasus.

"I'm okay with it," she said. "It's part of why I decided to become a teacher. I try bringing my cheer and wisdom to a whole generation of ponies rather than just one foal of my own. It's part of who I am. And anyway, I'm too old to be starting a family." She patted Medley's shoulder, and then looked into her eyes. "It's okay to miss your children. I miss my

students. But we're not out here forever, and they know that. Snow Catcher is a good husband, and a good father. He's not going to run off with Applejack any more than you're going to run off with Pokey." Cheerilee smiled at the pegasus. "Besides, you're not that much older than Applejack anyway. It's not as if you're some old mare like Redheart and I." Medley finally broke a smile. Cheerilee was right; she didn't have anything to worry about.

"You're not that old," said Medley. "Thank you ; I'm glad you're out here with me."

"We're all in this together, Medley," she said. "The rest of us have been through this sort of thing before. You have to know that you can count on us. We're counting on you too, even if you don't think you can do it." Medley nodded. She understood what Cheerilee was getting at. "Come on sweetie, it's time to go to bed."

As morning broke, Celestia's sun filtered through the thin canopy of the forest and into the Hamite Village. Medley awoke still feeling sore and tired from yesterday's ordeal. She thought about what Cheerilee had told her, but she still didn't feel much confidence in her own abilities. Still, there were three ponies counting on her, and she wasn't about to let them down if she could help it. She gathered food from her packs and set towards the fires to make breakfast for her companions. Waiting at the embers was Tigros. Medley smiled at the piglet as she began to work.

"How are you feeling today?" she asked.

"I'm okay," he said. The piglet looked at the ground and hoofed at the clay. "Alamos said that mommy is going to be okay in a couple days."

"I'm so glad to hear that," replied Medley. "She's going to be so happy to see you're okay. It was pretty scary back there!"

"How did you fly like that?" asked Tigros. "I've never seen anything like you or that metal pony."

"Well that metal pony is just a regular pony who is wearing a suit of armor, but me? I'm a pegasus," explained Medley. She stretched out her feathered wings in display. "I'm from an entire city of pegasi. We live in the clouds, high above Equestria." Tigros stood there, jaw agape.

"A whole city?" gasped Tigros. "You mean there's more like you?"

"Lots more," Medley said. "There are families of mommies and daddies and children, just like your village. Only we can fly and live in the clouds." She smiled at the piglet. It was always nice to talk to children. They were always interested in what you had to say, especially if you were different from them in any way. For a piglet to talk to a pegasus must have been like talking to an alien from another universe.

"So do you have a family?" asked Tigros. Medley folded her wings back and turned to her cooking.

"I do," she said. She tried to hide the sadness the piglet's question brought. "But I had to leave them behind so that I could..." she paused. Trying to explain what she was actually doing out here to a piglet seemed a bit over his head. "So that we could save you and your mommy," she said finally. The piglet's eyes went wide. He jumped into Medley's arms, and embraced the pegasus.

"Thank you!" he said. "When mommy wakes up, I'll tell her all about you and the metal pony and how you beat up the monster and saved us all." The piglet scrambled to the ground and out into the village. Medley watched the piglet run and smiled sadly as he left. It was good to feel a child's embrace, even if it wasn't her own.

"You're burning breakfast," said Pokey. Medley nearly jumped out of her skin. She spun around and glared at the unicorn.

"You nearly scared my cutie mark off!" she scolded. "What's the idea sneaking up on me like that? How do you even move so quietly in that armor?"

"Because you're burning breakfast, and years of practice, in that order." He looked over the pot where breakfast was boiling over. "You want me to finish that?"

"I cook breakfast every morning, I think I can handle this," she said, shooing the unicorn. "You may be some big fancy chef, but I can manage oatmeal over an open fire." Pokey shrugged and wandered away. She looked back at the oatmeal. It wasn't burnt yet; how dare he criticize her cooking? She tasted it to find the oatmeal was, in fact, burnt. "Stupid samurai chef pony." She grumbled unhappily and pulled breakfast from the fire. None of the ponies complained. Pokey didn't mention it. He instead gave Medley an "I told you so" look.

Soon after breakfast, the ponies had loaded their saddle bags again, and readied themselves for the half day's journey into Diamond Dog Territory. Pokey remained quiet the entire time. He seemed lost in thought. Redheart had exchanged notes with the shaman for some of his healing mosses, while Cheerilee borrowed a few tablets from the Hamites to show off to her class. Elder Thasrow approached the ponies as they readied to leave.

"These are my finest scouts, Luaga and Lawre," she said. The two crimson boars bowed to the ponies. The ponies bowed back. "They will lead you to the Diamond Dog Lands, and keep near the forest edge if you need them. Be warned, though," she said. "I've had several families go missing near there. I don't want the same to happen to you."

"We'll look for them if we can," said Redheart. "I don't want to make promises I can't keep."

"As you say, ponies keep their promises," smiled Thasrow. "May your goddess and ours be with you, friends of the Hamites." The ponies bowed to the elder sow and set off along the earthen trail.

The boars set a quiet trotting pace that was easily matched by the larger ponies. The ponies found themselves gliding through the thick woods as the boars cleared the path ahead of them. The herd trotted in silence for hours before they found a clearing to rest around mid day. They shared bread and trail mix with the boars, who were interested in the ponies' exotic foods. Luaga copied Pokey's instructions, promising to bring them back to his wife.

They talked for a short while about the missing families, but came to no real conclusion. Perhaps they had left for greener pastures. Hunting was scarce along the edges of the Diamond Dog territories. The larger dogs made better predators than the small pigs, but were too clumsy to come far into the forest. After lunch, they continued along their path, reaching the edge of the forest within the hour.

The herd peered out from the safety of the tree into the blasted landscape of the Diamond Dog Territory. Massive boulders were strewn about the packed dirt, and sporadic sand dunes filled depression in the shallow bedrock. There was little vegetation to cover the landscape, mostly scrub bushes and the occasional overgrown tree. Wide swaths of red moss grew over some of the larger rocks. The carmine boulders jutted from the

skin of earth like a pox. Medley looked out at the rolling hills with some concern.

“What a horrible place to live!” she said.

“It’s home to horrible creatures,” replied Pokey. “Speaking of which, look over at that ridge.” The group turned its attentions to a form coming over a nearby hill. The shadow was squat and broad. It wore some sort of horned helmet, and held a whip. The whip snapped at other forms following the creature. Much smaller forms; filly and colt sized forms. Cheerilee gasped in horror as she realized what was happening.

“Those are children!” gasped Cheerilee. “That Diamond Dog is herding children into that cave!” Medley bounded into the air, only to have her tail grabbed by Redheart.

“Hold it!” Redheart chastised through clenched teeth. “You’re not going to get yourself killed by flying out there.”

“But the children!” Medley protested. She came back to the ground. “We have to help them!”

“Yes, we do,” agreed Cheerilee. “But we’re not going to do that by charging in all gung ho.”

“Why not?” asked Pokey. “It’s always worked for me.”

“And how many years ago was that?” asked Cheerilee. “I don’t doubt your ability to take on a Diamond Dog or three, but that cave is full of the beasts. I’m not going to be the one to tell Trixie you got killed because you did something foolish.”

“Then tell my sister I died doing what Luna would want me to do,” said Pokey. “We’re going in after those kids, and not one of you is going to stop...”

His bravado was interrupted by another group of Diamond Dogs entering the caves, this time with a crowd of Hamites bounded in chains. Luaga and Lawre snarled in rage, ready to charge out themselves. Redheart stomped on their tails to hold them back.

“It looks like this rescue just got a lot bigger,” said Redheart. “If we want to pull this off we need more information.”

“Who are you to tell us how to rescue our families?” demanded Luaga.

“Those Dogs will make meals of our kin!” growled Lawre. “You would have us wait?”

“Absolutely not,” said Redheart. “I’m saying if you four go charging in there, you’re not going to come back out. We need a plan, and to make a plan, we need information.” Pokey looked back at the trail of Hamites. A massive Diamond Dog at least four times the size of the others rolled a boulder in front of the cave. Pokey had to concede the point; they did need a plan.

“Alright, Cheerilee,” said Redheart, gathering the boars and ponies. “You’ve got a map of this region?” The mulberry pony produced it from her saddlebag, and rolled it atop a flat rock. “Good, now we need some fresh intelligence. Luaga, Lawre, I need you to sneak around that hill and see if there are any other entrances. Try not to be seen.”

“It’s the middle of the day,” protested Luaga. “They are almost sure to see us.”

“Actually no,” chimed in Cheerilee. “Diamond Dogs are known for taking afternoon naps during the heat of day. They stay up later than most creatures to make up for it.”

“How’d you know that?” asked Medley.

“Aside from the studies I’ve done on the Diamond Dogs, Rarity told me,” she said. “She managed to escape from a group of Diamond Dogs by whining.” She looked at the crimson boars and the armored unicorn. “Looking at our party, I’m guessing that option is off the table.” Pokey and the boars grunted in unison.

“Medley, I need you to get an aerial view of the landscape to fill in the holes,” said Redheart. “Keep your back to the sun. Grab a couple clouds, and nothing will be able to see you.” Medley gulped, but shook her head. “If nothing else, Pokey, Cheerilee, and I will wait here for one hour. If you’re not back by then, we’ll assume you’ve been captured, and make with the rescue from there.” Luaga and Lawre nodded in unison and disappeared back into the forest. Medley took to the sky.

From above the tree tops, Medley saw the squat hill that the Diamond Dogs called home. The dirt mound was covered in holes and stones of all sizes. Boulder lay strewn about the top of the earthen mound, some arranged in patterns crudely resembling dogs. The mossy boulders looked even more like infections from this height. By keeping her back to the sun, and occasionally hiding behind a cloud, Medley was able to note every hole and boulder on the hill and the few she saw coming back to the forest. She arrived back at the forest, a chunk of cloud proudly adorned with her map of the area.

Cheerilee drew on the map as Medley and the boars collaborated their sightings. After an hour of descriptions, Pokey and Redheart looked over the map with increasing frustration. From everything that had been described, the holes were all decoys. There was only two ways into the caves and one of them that was through the front door.

"I mean, unless we're going to fly down this shaft," said Pokey. He pointed to a crevice. "I don't see how we're getting in."

"What wrong with flying?" asked Medley. "I know I could probably carry one of you."

"That's a good idea honey," said Cheerilee. "But how are you going to get the children out? It will take far too long to get all of them out that way." Medley hadn't considered that, and stepped back in thought. Redheart's eyes lit up with an idea.

"Start cutting some branches," she said. "I've got a plan." For the next hour, they assembled a lashed basket big enough to hold a dozen children. Redheart and Cheerilee managed a pulley system out of some round stones, and there was enough rope in the ponies' saddlebags to lower it to the bottom of the crevice. The ponies and boars looked up from their work and paused a moment.

"This has just become very real," said Luaga.

"I can only pray this goes according to plan," said Lawres.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," said Pokey. "But we do this right, and we're not going to contact the enemy."

"Can we go over the plan one more time?" asked Medley, her voice shaking.

“Luaga and Lawres will be with Redheart and I at the top,” explained Cheerilee. “You are going to fly Pokey down the crevice and make your way toward the cages. He’ll open them up while you herd the kids. We’ll haul up the children as soon as you get them to the basket.” She smiled. “Once they’re all free, Pokey gets in the basket. You fly out, and we all leave.” Medley nodded. It was a simple plan alright. She just hoped it went smoothly.

Chapter Four

Keeping Their Word

Ponies don't break promises

Medley struggled to keep the armored unicorn aloft. This crevice was only about six feet wide, and descending the near vertical shaft would have been tough enough without the additional weight. The jutting rocks didn't help much, as Pokey kept knocking rubble from the sides. He had said something about making it smoother for the basket; Medley was too busy trying not to drop him to pay attention.

Medley gingerly touched down at the bottom and dropped Pokey. Getting up was going to be much more difficult, but she felt worse for the four up top. Pokey was pretty darned heavy. She worried about what would happen to her if the whole plan collapsed. Medley pushed such thoughts from her mind; she knew would rise to the occasion.

Pokey glanced around the crevice to find a tunnel at the end. The Diamond Dogs were either unable or unwilling to close off this shaft, and the half-hearted efforts to block the tunnel crumbled easily. Wooden supports lined the stone walls, though the conditions of the beams were deplorable at best. They sagged low and barely supported the weight of rock above them. Pokey crept for the nearest tunnel. Medley fluttered behind, unsure if her untrained hooves would make noise on the stone floors. She peered over the unicorn's shoulder as he looked down the narrow tunnels. She listened carefully, unable to hear much beyond her own breathing.

From far down the tunnel, she thought she heard the whimpering of children. She tapped Pokey's shoulder and pointed. He nodded and started in that direction. Medley fluttered above him, ready to move at a moment's notice. The tunnel spanned an agonizing distance as they crept through. They came to the entrance of a low cavern where a dozen cage doors sat rusting on their hinges. The otherwise solid iron doors had bars in the top where the Diamond Dogs could torment their captives. Supporting the walls were more of the rotting timbers, crawling with crimson moss. Medley glanced around; she pointed out the sleeping guard.

A dog slept on a chair, kicked back with a horned helmet pulled over his eyes. The squat brute's mangy grey coat crept with vermin, and his claws were covered in both dirt and rust. From his belt hung a corroded brass key. Pokey motioned with his hooves for Medley to fly over and get it. She shook her head. Pokey again gestured to the dog, and made a punching motion. Medley again refused when she heard whimpering coming from the furthest cage.

"I just wanna go home!" cried a filly's voice. The guard snapped awake. Medley and Pokey ducked back into the tunnel and prayed they hadn't been spotted. They heard the dragging of knuckles and the rattle of keys approaching the far cell.

"I'm tryin' to sleep, yah brat!" boomed the dog. There was the rusty squeal of a hinge. "I'll teach yah to talk back!" The sound of a slap and a filly's cry echoed through the hall.

The Diamond Dog turned around just soon enough to catch a face full of pegasus hooves at maximum velocity. The same blow that staggered a manticore knocked the dog's teeth loose. He collapsed onto the floor in a twitching heap. Medley stood above the dog, teeth clenched in rage. She looked to her side, to see a cage full of fillies and colts cowering in the corner. Medley found her control again, and smiled at the children.

"It's okay, sweeties," she said in her most motherly tones. "He won't hurt you anymore. We're going to get you out of here."

"Who's we?" asked a colt.

"Us," said Pokey. The children gasped in amazement at the armored unicorn. "Come on, let's get you out of here." Medley rounded up the children from the first pen and directed them back down the hallway.

"Be very quiet children, don't make a sound," she warned. "You don't want those nasty dogs to know you're leaving do you?" The fillies and colts quietly cantered down the stone halls to the awaiting basket. The pegasus picked up the ponies and deposited them in the crude elevator. She warned each of them to keep as quiet as possible. With the last filly loaded, Medley grabbed the rope in her teeth. She tugged on the rope three times, and then twice again. The basket slid silently up the sides of the shaft.

A second group of fillies and colts trotted into the room. They were all shushing each other, and trying to be as quiet as children can be. They

looked up the shaft, a few whimpered. Medley directed them in a quiet game of “hooves on top” to keep their minds off the escape. The basket emptied, and an agonizing minute later, returned to the bottom. She lifted the children into the basket, then returned to the pens. A group of crimson piglets awaited her. They were cowering in their cell.

“No one’s going to hurt you,” she reassured them. “I’ve got friends waiting up top. Come on now kids, Medley won’t let anyone near you.” The piglets followed the winged creature, unsure as to what to make of her. She seemed nice enough, and she wasn’t one of those dog creatures. Even as she plucked them up and into the basket, they found comfort in her kind voice and gentle manners. Medley tugged on the rope again, and crept back through cavern.

Pokey was struggling with the lock on the last of the cages. The key was bent in his teeth rather than turning. It snapped in half, and crumbled to pieces. Pokey cursed under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” whispered Medley.

“The lock’s rusted shut,” he whispered back. “I can cut through it, but it’s going to be loud.” Medley looked back down the stone tunnel, then to Pokey. The coast was clear for now.

“Do it,” she said. “We can make it out of here even if it does attract guards.” Pokey nodded and his horn glowed a deep black.

“Hold it!” hissed a voice from inside. Pokey’s horn went dark. Medley peered over his head into the cage. Inside was a mixed group of colts and fillies. Some were zebras, others mules and donkeys. Medley came face to face with a larger filly wearing a dark hooded cloak. “Who sent you?” she demanded.

“We sent ourselves,” said Medley. “We got the rest of the children out, but your lock is jammed.”

“We don’t have time for this,” said Pokey. The donkey cocked her head at the sound of Pokey’s voice.

“Pokey?” asked the donkey. “Is that really be you?”

“Jenny?” Pokey stuck his muzzle through the bars. “Luna above, it is you! What are you doing here?”

"It's War Jenny now." said the donkey. "I'll explain later. Can you get us out of here?"

"Stand back," he said. "This is going to be noisy." His horn flared with dark light.

Pokey slashed through the lock and the hinges in a single arcing path. The iron door shrieked in protest. It fell off the hinges and crashed to the ground with the sound a church bell being dropped down a flight of stairs. The children poured from the cage as the hallway beyond filled with alerted yips and barks.

"Come on kids!" said Medley as she herded them toward the escape. "We've got a basket waiting for you! Hurry up, please! Follow me!" Pokey and Jenny backed down the hallway behind the children. The chattering barks from the opposite hallway were getting louder.

"We've been made," warned Pokey. "Get those children out of here!"

Pokey slashed at the supporting timbers to cut them off near the ground. War Jenny reared back and kicked one out of place. The Support beam collapse, and brought the wall of the cavern crumbling into the hall. The unicorn and donkey galloped through the tunnel to the small opening. Medley stared up the shaft; the rising basket had already found itself at the top. Medley looked uncertainly at the two. The basket would only be able to support the weight of one of them.

"I think the basket will carry you, Jenny, was it?" she said. "Will you be okay down here for a minute Pokey?"

"Why are you taking me first?" asked Jenny. "Take him, I can make it out."

"Take her," shot back Pokey. "I'll be fine; it'll only take a second." Shouting at the top of the crevice interrupted the conversation. The sounds of a fight filtered down the shaft.

"Get them out of here!" they heard Redheart yell. "Cheerilee, run!" The basket plummeted to the bottom; and smashed into splinters on the rocks below. Debris began to pour down the hole. It lodged in the crevice, and tumbled atop the ponies underneath. They made for the tunnel exit instead.

“They’re cutting off our exits,” said Pokey. The yipping and barking from the collapsed tunnel became louder, as did the scratching at the rock. “And that cave in isn’t going to last. Jenny, did you see another way out?”

“Follow me,” she said, and galloped down the tunnel. Medley flew close behind. Pokey slashed out more of the support timbers to bring smaller cave-ins. Hopefully it buy the trio time. They galloped through the upward sloping tunnel, as they followed War Jenny. The air down here was hot, moist, and filled with dust of collapsing tunnels. The catastrophony of a full alert rattled the walls and echoed through the halls. Jenny whipped around a corner, and skidded to a stop. Pokey and Medley almost ran her over.

Ahead, the trio saw another row of cells. These were larger, with barred doors instead of the iron slabs they had seen earlier. Dozens of eyes watched them round the corner; pony, zebra, donkey, mule, and Hamite alike stared at the armored unicorn, the cloaked donkey, and the fluttering pegasus.

“War Jenny!” yelled one of the mules. “Please, save our children!”

“Pokey and the pegasus already have,” she said. She approached a cell.

War Jenny pulled a hair pin from her cloak. With the pin in her teeth, she began picking the lock on the cell full of mules. Medley watched in fascination as the donkey turned her head, twisted, and opened the lock. The cell door swung open.

“Some of us are hurt,” said a mule. “But those who are not will fight with you, War Jenny.” The cages murmured in agreement. The sound of tumbling rocks boomed from the tunnel below. Medley looked down it in panic.

“Those rock slides aren’t holding!” she warned. “You’re not going to have time to pick all these locks!” Pokey stretched his neck and again, his horn again flared with black light.

After ten seconds of screaming metal, the cages clattered open and three dozen creatures in various states of health were free. The Hamites were furious, as were the zebras. They started off down the tunnel. Medley flew in front to stop them in their tracks.

“We’ve got to move as a herd,” she said. “Support the injured, leave no pony behind.”

“They’ve already started sealing the exits,” said one of the zebras. “We’ve got to go now.” Medley looked back at the gathered herd to see that only a few were injured. The herd would move faster without them, but they would assuredly die. She shook her head.

“No pony left behind,” she said. “That’s a promise.” The zebra looked to Jenny; she nodded solemnly.

“These ponies saved our children,” she said. “War Jenny will not let this pegasus break her promise.” The ponies helped the weak and injured onto the backs of the larger Hamites. When they were ready, Medley gave the signal. The herd charged through the tunnels towards the surface.

Every ten meters or so, another hole would close from above, raining rocks and dirt on the herd as they galloped through the tunnels. The hill filled with the thunder of a hundred hooves from all walks of life. A few foolish Diamond Dogs jumped in the path, only to be smashed to the side, and trampled underneath. They came at last to the main exit where a half a dozen Diamond Dogs were pushing a massive boulder in front of the door.

“Capture Team! On those curs!” ordered War Jenny. “For Luna!” A half a dozen of the equines broke off from the herd and galloped at the Diamond Dogs. With the precision of a drill team, they threw the Diamond Dogs from the ridge into a ravine. The boulder rolled down the incline. It crashed into the ravine atop the vanquished mutts. The rest of the herd galloped for the exit, their thundering hooves rattling debris from the ceiling of the massive chamber. Pokey slowed his pace to make sure the weakest got ahead of him; Medley took to the air to check the rear of the herd. The last of the injured Hamites made it to the door, followed by Jenny.

“That’s everyone,” said Medley. “Let’s get out of...”

A boulder blindsided the pegasus. The boulder crushed her against the cave wall, and with a sickening crunch, she fell still. Pokey ran to her side. He ducked under the second rock as Jenny dove out of the cave entrance. The boulder shattered against the exit, and rumbled the wall of the cave. The wall crumbled around the boulder’s impact and sealed the cavern.

War Jenny rolled out of the way of the collapse. The rock slide had blocked the path as sure as the boulder would have. The rest of the herd that could fight had taken the battle to the Diamond Dogs on the surface. Equines and Hamites were kicking, biting, and trampling their way towards Redheart and the two scouts. The two scouts and white pony made their way to the rest of the herd, battered but otherwise safe. War Jenny put a hoof to her lips and whistled. A dozen equines turned to face her.

“Back in!” she ordered. “Clear these rocks! We will not leave them behind!” At her command, the equines descended on the rocks like a pack of wolves. Rubble began to fly as if their hooves were steam drills. The Hamites joined in the effort. The equines and the pigs started tripping over each other, and tempers flared.

“Enough of that!” yelled Redheart as she limped towards the entrance. A massive gash graced her shoulder, making the walk difficult. “Mothers, go into the forest. You’ll find a red Pony named Cheerilee. She’ll direct you to your children. Hamites, clear away the rubble that the equines knock down. Anyone with medical training, stop digging and come with me.”

“You heard the pony, Kin of Luna,” said War Jenny. “Get to it.” The mob broke, and began following Redheart’s instructions. War Jenny trotted towards Redheart. The white pony had sat down in an effort to keep her front leg off the ground. War Jenny grabbed a piece of her cloak and began to tear it off.

“What are you doing?” asked Redheart.

“Binding that nasty gash on your shoulder,” replied War Jenny. Redheart waved her off.

“I’m fine for right now,” she said. “Plus I’ve got real medical supplies. Worry about the others.” She turned to face the approaching mule and unicorn. “You have medical training?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” said the green unicorn with the stethoscope cutie mark. “We’ll round up the injured and bring them back to the forest. You need to come with us though.”

“I’m fine,” repeated Redheart.

"Yeah, yeah," said the mule. He hoisted the white pony onto his shoulders. "I'm fine, I'm fine, and then you drop dead. I'm a nurse too honey, I know how you feel." They carried her off towards the forest as War Jenny made her way to the cave entrance.

"How's that excavation coming?" demanded War Jenny. "I want them out here, and I want them out here now!" The cave rattled again with what sounded like a dragon's roar.

Pokey turned to face whatever was throwing the boulders. Standing in the tunnel was a Diamond Dog nearly twice the size of a bear. Pokey's eyes widened in terror; this creature looked more like a dragon than a dog. Its hair was half gone, replaced by scars and swaths of carmine moss. His roar rattled the cave; the tunnel behind him collapsed in a spray of rock and dust. Pokey looked for any exit, only to find himself trapped in the cavern with this nightmare creature. Medley lay behind him; her breathing was labored and sporadic. She could barely open her eyes to see the creature.

"Help..." she begged in a distant whisper. "Please Pokey... don't let me die down here..." Her head sank to the stone floor, and her eyes closed. Pokey turned away from the downed pegasus to face the creature. He stomped a hoof.

The armored unicorn charged the massive beast. The creature roared back and slashed wildly at Pokey. The scything claws of the Diamond Dog caught in his armor to throw him across the room. He slammed into a wall; the scales of his armor bent against the rocks. Pokey shook off the blow and bounded back to his feet. The creature returned the charge and smashed into Pokey at full force. Pokey managed a good swipe across the creature's legs before the impact sent him reeling.

The creature, now frenzied by the sight of his own blood, howled and pounced at the unicorn. Pokey dodged to the left, and kicked. He landed a solid shot to the ribs of the beast. He felt a satisfying snap in the dog's chest. He spun in place, as he traced the flank of the beast with his horn. The razor edge opened a deep wound that spilled crimson onto the cavern floor. The Diamond Dog responded with a kick of his own that sent Pokey spinning across the ground. He rolled out, and bounded to his feet.

Pokey panted underneath his barding; his wounds and age were creeping up on him. This wasn't how he planned it at all. The Diamond Dog wasn't even fazed by the deep cuts; he just kept right on coming. Pokey

dropped below another claw, and bolted underneath the creature. His horn dug along the beast's torso to open a gaping wound. Pokey stabbed upward, striking deep into the belly of the beast. The Diamond Dog scrambled backward, and bellowed in agony. The beast kicked wildly to escape the unicorn's razor horn. He connected with a paw that sent Pokey to the ground in a heap.

Pokey's head swam. There were suddenly two of the Dogs, then one again. Pokey shook off the double vision, and again rose to his feet. The Dog was cowering now. He growled like the wounded animal he was. Pokey pressed the advantage, and charged the beast. The beast roared in pain and swiped a terrified claw. The blow sent Pokey sailing. He smashed face first into a boulder; his helm bent under the impact.

His muzzle shattered under the dented helmet. His nose ran with blood that traced a vermilion trail in the stone. Pokey pushed himself to his feet; he was barely able to keep moving. The dog pounced again, and slammed Pokey into the cave wall.

The claws tore at his armor. They cracked through the plates, and stabbed deep into his flank. Pokey slashed desperately. He took half a paw from the creature. The dog shrieked in pain and tossed Pokey to the ground. Pokey staggered back to his hooves. His yellow eyes rolled in his head before they came to rest on Medley lying silent beneath the rubble.

She had risked her life to save the children of ponies and Hamites she didn't even know, and this was how it ended for her? To be a meal for some inbred beast? Something in Pokey's mind snapped. He found strength in boundless anger. His wounds suddenly didn't matter. He stood, unmoving as the creature closed in for the kill. His horn flared with a massive black light.

"I promised her not a paw," he growled. "NOT A GODDESS DAMNED PAW. PONIES DON'T BREAK PROMISES." With his horn forward and a bellow of righteous fury, Pokey charged the beast for a final time. The diamond Dog returned the charge. The cavern shook with an ear splitting roar.

Chapter Five

Broken

The war isn't over just because the battle's been won

Pokey felt himself coming around. As if rising from a lake, he swam to the surface of consciousness to find a white pony standing above him. It was Death, come to lead him into the afterlife. Pokey closed his eyes again, and he tried to stand. Pokey was ready to follow the reaper pony to his fate. He found himself largely unable to move; his bones were sore and stiff. He opened his eyes again to find that it wasn't Death who was standing above him, but the beautiful mud spattered face of Redheart.

"Glad to see you back with us," she said.

"Uggh," he protested.

"Now don't you dare try to move," said Redheart. Pokey looked at her, trying to cock an eyebrow in disapproval. He found his face hurt far too much for sarcasm. He saw the freshly bandaged wound across her shoulder. He stared at it, then back to her, as if to ask just what happened. "Oh, that's just a present from those rotten dogs," she said. "I gave them what for, don't you worry. Luaga and Lawres did too. Cheerilee managed to corral all those kids to a safe place by herself and keep them quiet till your herd came charging out of there." She nodded to the gathered group of ponies. Pokey stared at them. What he didn't see was seeing a single donkey, zebra, or mule among them.

"Where did they go?" he asked, weakly.

"The Kin of Luna?" she asked. "As soon as they came flying out of those caves, they turned right back around to dig you out and Medley out. Quite the industrious punch of equines, if I do... Hey, what are you doing? You can't move!" Pokey struggled to his feet against his own wounds.

"Medley!" he yelled. "Oh, Goddess, Medley!" Redheart swallowed hard and looked away. "Oh no," begged Pokey. The color drained from his face. "Oh, no, no, no, please, no. Not Medley. She's has a foal for Luna's sake. Please tell me she's alive."

"She's alive," said Redheart softly. "But I don't know if she's ever going to wake up. She may not even make it to Bridleburg." Pokey's ears flattened in rage. He shot to his feet.

"Where is Jenny?" he demanded. "Where the hell is that donkey?"

"War Jenny?" asked Redheart. "She took her equines and..."

"She left?" he demanded. "After what we did for her, she LEFT?"

"Calm down!" scolded Redheart. "I was trying to say that War Jenny took the Kin of Luna and Medley to Bridleburg. You know how amazingly fast they are over land. If they hadn't taken Medley, she would have died out here for sure." Pokey's rage subsided, and he felt weak in the knees. He glanced over to the assembled crowd of ponies that stood nearby with their rescued colts and fillies.

"What are they still doing here then?" he asked. Cheerilee came from the rear of the herd.

"They're all waiting to leave," said Cheerilee. "You saved each and every one of these ponies. They weren't going to let you walk all the way to Bridleburg by yourself." Pokey smiled weakly, as he tried to remain standing. His barding nearly fell off as he stumbled onto Redheart.

"Hey now," she said as she guided him to the ground. "Let's get that armor off you and get you onto a stretcher. You're in no condition to be walking anywhere."

"I'm fine," protested Pokey. "I just need to..." He flopped onto his side. Redheart shook her head at the unicorn.

"Tsk," chided Redheart. "You are the worst patient my dear Pokey. Cheerilee, grab that strap there and pull." His armor fell to pieces around him as the straps loosened. Swaths of the lacquered plates fell off the leather backing and into the mossy soil. "My goddess, what happened in there?" She asked. "I thought this barding was meant to protect you."

"It did," groaned Pokey. "You'd be looking at a half a pony now if it hadn't."

"You look terrible," said Redheart. She pulled off his crushed helm and cringed at the sight of his uncovered face. "Your nose is clearly broken, as are a half a dozen of your ribs."

"That all?" asked Pokey. "I'll just walk it off."

"You've also got a sprained hoof," chastised Redheart, "so you're not walking anywhere. Cheerilee, tie him to the stretcher." The mulberry pony cheerfully broke out her rope.

"I dunno about you," said Pokey, "but the whole school teacher bondage thing doesn't do it for me." Cheerilee smile turned into a shocked gasp. Redheart snickered.

"Well, he's clearly not feeling that bad," Cheerilee said as she her cheeks turned an even brighter shade of red. "I think he'll be fine."

The herd set off with Pokey's stretcher draped across the backs of two stallions. He would have complained, but his injuries had drained his will to argue. The beating he received from the Diamond Dog rattled more than just his bones. He felt mentally drained, as if he'd left part of himself back in that cave. And to see Jenny after so many years! He hadn't expected to run into her on this trip. Last he'd heard she was far off to the east.

Pokey tried to sleep, but he found his dreams disturbing. He was back in the cave with the Diamond Dog, only it was larger, more sinister. They had smoking black eyes and talon oozing with ichor. It had a thousand tongues and teeth like shards of glass. He felt his spells gone; he had not even a light to stave off the darkness. Medley lay crushed behind him, pleading and begging for help as she died. A dozen more of the creatures appeared from the shadows and fell on the unicorn.

Pokey awoke screaming. It was the middle of the night, and a half a dozen other ponies popped up to see what the problem was. Redheart woke by his side in an instant. Pokey wheezed and gasped in panic under the waxing moon. The other ponies laid their heads back down and tried to sleep.

"What's wrong?" Redheart asked. Pokey wiped the sweat from his brow and looked around the encampment. Two dozen ponies and foals slept quietly around a fire. The town of Bridleburg was only a pinprick in the distance beyond. Pokey turned back to Redheart, and shook his head.

"Bad dream," he said. "Nothing to worry about. Just... a bad dream." Redheart looked unconvinced.

"Want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No," said Pokey. "I'm fine. I just need to get some rest." He laid his head back down on his hooves. "I'll be fine. You get some sleep." Redheart laid back down next to him, and put her head on his shoulder.

"Trauma like that doesn't go away once it's over you know," said Redheart. Pokey sighed wearily. "Sure you're hurt now, but what about a few weeks from now when you're back at home? You think what happened back there is just going to go away once your bones knit? I saw what you did to that Diamond Dog; that level of violence doesn't just disappear from your mind. You needed help before, Pokey, and this isn't going to help anything."

"You act like I've never killed any pony before," muttered Pokey. "I've done things that would curl your mane, sweetheart, but at this rate we'll be lucky to see home again. We didn't even get the damned emerald we came for."

"Oh forget about that," said Redheart. "We're done with this silly quest. You're in no shape for travel and poor Medley..." Her voice trailed off into a cold silence.

"She's not going to make it, is she?" asked Pokey. Redheart simply shook her head. Pokey put an arm around her and the ponies fell asleep together underneath the stars.

Celestia's sun rose over the river the next morning. A few ponies made breakfast from the remains of Medley's supplies. The week's worth of food for four was just enough to feed two dozen starving mouths. Some ponies went hungry just so their children could have a few more mouthfuls. Even with the small rations, they remained optimistic. Bridleburg was only a day's trip away, and they would all be home again before nightfall.

Pokey refused the stretcher today. Despite his fitful rest the night before, he felt strong and well enough to walk on his own. Redheart had bound his ankles, and Cheerilee had charmed some of the stallions into taking his saddlebags for him. The three walked together at the rear of the herd.

"So..." said Cheerilee. "What now?"

"What now?" asked Pokey. "Now, we're done. We didn't find what we were looking for, and Medley got killed in the process."

"I think Celestia will understand," said Redheart. "I just hope the stones aren't so important that we've doomed Equestria by failing her."

"If our crazy despot wanted the stones so badly, she should have sent the best after them," shot back Pokey.

"Did you ever consider that maybe we are the best?" mused Cheerilee. Pokey and Redheart turned to stare in unison at the white pony. She looked back at them. "Think about it," she said. "Pokey's probably the greatest horn-pony of his generation. Redheart is as good with a needle and a scalpel as any unicorn." She looked back at the trail. "I'm apparently so smart it scares Twilight, and she's a certified genius." She looked back up at her companions. "The only wild card was Medley, and she wasn't supposed to be out here in the first place."

"I'm going to punch Celestia in the teeth if I ever see her again," seethed Pokey.

"I'll thank you not to talk about our goddess that way," snapped Redheart.

"It's her fault she's dead!" shouted Pokey. "There's a dozen young pegasi in Ponyville who would have pounced on the opportunity for adventure. That little show off Rainbow Dash would have blown out a wing jumping at the chance to come with us. Who does Celestia send instead? A mother of two with zero experience outside her home town. You saw the mosaic. It wasn't supposed to be her out here anymore!" He spat on the ground. "Celestia sent her on this quest. That makes her as guilty as me and that damned Diamond Dog."

The rest of the day's journey continued in silence. The herd talked joyfully about their return home while the trio of Ponyville residents sulked in the rear. They were tired not only from the journey, but from the understanding that they were giving up. Cheerilee had agreed to go to Canterlot to confront the Princess, but aside from that exchange, the ponies hadn't spoken for the rest of the day. As night fell, the herd entered the city of Bridleburg to the cheers of its residents. After they collected Pokey's belongings, the Ponyville trio quietly wandered past the celebratory crowd and into the city.

The city itself was odd. Rather than the packed dirt paths of Ponyville, the streets were cobbled with limestone. The buildings were all single story, made from great slabs of cut rock. At the center of the town rose a massive two story building, its facade carved with reliefs of industrious ponies mining the earth. The Ponyville residents didn't bother to marvel at the wondrous constructs. Pokey led them toward the clinic he'd been to so many times before. A small grey donkey wearing a lab coat passed them on their way there.

"Excuse me," asked Cheerilee. "There was a herd in town yesterday with all manner of equines. Were you with them?"

"There wasn't a herd through here yesterday," replied the donkey with a thick accent. "War Jenny came through 'ere, though. Brought a pegasus on her back."

"Do you know where she is?" asked Cheerilee.

"Jenny?" asked the donkey. "You won't find her 'ere. Ponies in this town hate her kind. They barely tolerate me, and I'm their doctor." Redheart opened her mouth to say something, when she was interrupted by the donkey. "But I'm guessin' you're not askin' about her, now are yah? Your friend's at the clinic." He looked over the trio. "You bunch look like you could stand a visit yourselves if you want to follow me."

The trio trotted behind the donkey through the cobbled streets of Bridleburg. Sounds of celebration filtered through the alleys, and fireworks found their way into the air. It sounded like someone was giving a speech. The trio ignored the festivities; they had far bigger concerns. They came finally to a long squat building covered in red mosaic crosses. The inside was as elaborately decorated as the outside with white tile floors, and the walls adorned with pictures of ponies caring for others. A massive portrait of a pure black earth pony hung on one wall, surrounded by dozens of smaller pictures.

A bored unicorn sat behind a stone enclosure reading a fashion magazine. The sapphire eyes of Ponyville's resident fashionista fluttered from the cover. The unicorn looked up from her magazine at the entering ponies and put it down with an exasperated sigh. When she saw the donkey taking up the rear, she tossed the magazine behind her, as she tried unsuccessfully to hide it.

"Good to see you again, Dr. Castor," said the pony with a saccharine smile.

"Get beds ready for these three," ordered the donkey. "How's the pegasus?"

"Sedated," replied the unicorn. She came from around the enclosure. "What's wrong with these three?" Dr. Castor glared at the unicorn.

"Heartache, if you can't see what's wrong with these ponies, you'd better get your eyes examined," scolded Dr. Castor. He walked through the swinging metal doors and the Ponyville trio followed. The treatment area was much like the lobby; all white tile and calming music. Redheart felt immediately at home, and reached out to grab a nurse's hat.

"What do you think you're doin, love?" asked Dr. Castor. "I'm guessin' by that cutie mark ah yours and that 'can do' attitude that you're a nurse." He glanced over to see if the unicorn was out of earshot. "Probably a darn sight better than the one I've got, if you've manage to keep Pokey alive."

"I am," replied Redheart as she affixed her cap. She paused. "Wait, how you know Pokey?"

"Well you're in no shape to be treatin' patients, that's for sure," he replied. It was clear he was ignoring the question. He tapped a hoof onto a nearby bed. "Up you go. You can't be workin' on your friends with your shoulder like that." Redheart sighed, and followed the doctor's orders. He looked over Cheerilee with a critical eye. "You're not too bad off," he said. "Didn't take much of the fight?"

"She was the one rescuing children," said Pokey. Dr. Castor nodded, and gestured her to a bed.

"Heard about you," he said. "Jenny said you nearly took off the head of the first zebra that approached those fillies." Cheerilee smiled nervously.

"I'm just a bit protective of kids," said Cheerilee with her normal spunk. "Comes with the territory, I suppose." Dr. Castor turned finally to Pokey.

"Crikey, mate. You're a right mess," he said. "How are you even standin'?"

"I'm more concerned with Medley," Pokey replied. "Where is she?"

"She's sedated," said Dr. Castor. "Now sit down and lemme fix you three up before we go see your friend." The donkey worked for a few minutes on Redheart, replacing her bandages, and applying a special blend of oils that would help reduce scarring. He complimented Redheart on the fine work she had done on the others, and the stitching done by the doctor who had come with them. With Redheart gauzed up, he moved to Cheerilee. Aside from a minor scratch or two, she was fine, as she spent the bulk of the fight keeping the children calm and out of danger. Dr. Castor came at last to Pokey.

"So," said Castor, as he examined the unicorn's torso. "Been a long time."

"I could say the same," groaned Pokey. "You get a chance to talk to with your daughter?"

"Not really," replied Dr. Castor. "You know as well as I that the Kin a' Luna aren't too well regarded here. With her bein' the new chief, ponies get real nervous when they see her. I had s friend of mine sneak her out of town. You want anesthetic for this?" he asked. Pokey shook his head, and Dr. Castor passed Pokey a wooden block. "Alright then, bite on this." The unicorn bit down as Dr. Castor put his hooves to Pokey's chest. With an awful snapping sound, he set the broken ribs in place. Pokey whinnied in agony. The donkey repeated the procedure twice, with similar results. Pokey dropped the block from his teeth.

"Oh my goddess," panted Pokey. "I forgot how much that hurts."

"I'm going to do your muzzle next. You sure you don't want that anesthetic?" asked Castor. "You're no spring chicken. I wouldn't think less of you, mate"

"That sounds fantastic, doc," said Pokey as his head slumped onto the pillow. Redheart and Cheerilee listened at the curtain as Dr. Castor worked on Pokey. Confident he was in good hooves, Redheart walked gingerly towards the back of the clinic. She and Cheerilee passed through the metal doors and into the extended care ward. They walked to the nurse's station where a white pegasus with blue mane sat looking over charts. Redheart looked at him, then at his cutie mark. It was an open umbrella.

"Brolly?" she asked. The nurse pegasus looked up, and blinked in amazement.

"Redheart?" he asked incredibly. He closed his charts and stood up to greet the white pony. "My goddess, how have you been? I haven't seen you since school." He looked at her shoulder with shock. "What happened to you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she said, dismissing her bandaged shoulder. "Your Doctor Castor took care of that scratch. What are you doing in this backwater town?"

"Go where the jobs are," he replied. "What are brings you to Bridleburg?"

"We're here to see Medley," smiled Cheerilee. Brolly's smirk sank at the mention of the pegasus.

"Oh," said Brolly. "So that's what happened to you. Here, follow me." He fluttered up from his desk and led the ponies down the tiled hallways to the back most room. He quietly opened the door and gestured the ponies inside. Cheerilee's usual smile failed her, and she gasped in horror.

Medley lay on a steel bed surrounded by beeping machines. A slow, steady scribble ran along a strip of paper, measuring the shallow beat of her heart. She lay covered by a white sheet; half a dozen tubes disappeared underneath it. Only her serene turquoise face lay exposed. She could have been sleeping peacefully. Redheart fought back her emotions, and tried to think clinically. Cheerilee couldn't hold on to such thoughts, and ran from the room sobbing. Redheart turned to Brolly. She searched for words.

"How's her vitals?" she asked.

"It's only a matter of time," said Brolly. "Pegasi aren't meant to take abuse like that. It's because of you that she's even made it this far, but her body is hanging on to something else." He looked at Medley. "I know we've seen violence in our time, but this... this just goes so far beyond. Who would do this to a mother?"

"No pony would do this," said Redheart. "This was done by a monster. I have only myself to blame. I'm the one who sent her down there."

“She went of her own volition,” interrupted Pokey as he limped into the darkened room. “And I did too.” He looked down on the broken pegasus, and gently stroked her mane. “We did the right thing, though. We saved all those ponies, all those colts and fillies. They get to live a free life because of her. How many of them do you think will even know her name?” He looked up at Redheart. “She died so that children could be free.” He turned around, and headed for the door. “It should have been me.”

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Redheart. He didn’t answer. The door slammed shut behind him.

Chapter Six

Faith and Miracles

Maybe the reason your prayers don't get answered is because you're asking the wrong Goddess.

Pokey walked away from the clinic, blindly wandering the cobblestone streets. He had gone searching for answers in the waxing moon. He found himself far out of town near a massive stone building. A waterwheel churned on one side, and the dam walls formed a picturesque waterfall. The door hung loosely on its hinges, and the smell of hard cider wafted from the inside. He was glad to see that someone had repurposed the waterwheel. Pokey walked inside.

The building smelled of grease and mold; the stone interior was permanently damp from the decades of spray seeping through the windows. Small puddles formed in the depressions in the stone, and the floor sloped slightly towards drain in the center. All the furniture was stone, save for the badly warped doors that lay propped open with rocks. A familiar grey hooded donkey stood slumped over a stone desk. A deep blue unicorn with a grey mane and blueprint cutie mark sat on the other side of the desk. He was drinking straight from a bottle. The unicorn looked up at Pokey.

"Can I help you?" he slurred. Pokey looked around the room. Hundreds of feet of pipes and gauges adorned the walls. Pokey wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he was pretty sure this wasn't it.

"This isn't a bar, is it?" asked Pokey. War Jenny's head shot up from the desk and swiveled to look at him.

"Nope," replied the unicorn. "This is my power house." He looked at the bottle levitating beside him. "Probably shouldn't be drinking on the job, but what the hay. It's been a terrible week."

"Hey you," sang War Jenny. "Where are your new girlfriends?"

"At the clinic with Medley," said Pokey. He sidled up to the table and nodded a horn at the other unicorn. "Who's your friend?"

"Name's Blueprint," he replied and offered a hoof. "Unicorn, architect, and tinkerer, extraordinaire!" He tossed back his hooves to exaggerate his achievements. Blueprint toppled over backwards. Pokey managed to grab the bottle with a spell before it toppled over too.

"Thanks," said Blueprint from the floor. "Can I have that back? There's plenty more in the fridge if you want one." Pokey put down the bottle, and levitated two fresh ones from the fridge. Blueprint climbed back up to the desk, and rested his head on his hooves. "So you must be Pokey."

"I am," he replied. Pokey snapped the cap off the cider bottle. He picked up a straw from the table and dropped it in his beverage.

"I have been led to understand that you're some kind of unicorn samurai?" Blueprint eloquently slurred. "Where's your armor?" Pokey nodded to his packs.

"In pieces," replied Pokey. "I don't think I'm gonna need it on this quest anymore."

War Jenny pitifully fumbled with her cider. She tried to pry the cap off with her hooves, then with her teeth. War Jenny held the bottle out to Pokey and pouted. Pokey caught the cap between the ridges of his horn and popped it off. She set the beverage on the table and clopped her hooves happily.

"Jenny and I just met a week or two ago" said Blueprint. "Did you know that she's the leader of the Kin of Luna?" he asked in amazement. "That means she's like a princess or something!" Pokey would have raised an eyebrow at her if his face hadn't hurt so much. She smiled and held out her hooves.

"Thaaat's me!" she said. She nearly spilled her cider. "Got elected a few years ago on a platform of aggressive expansion and wealth acclamation." She steadied her drink. "I'm War Jenny now, and I'm fierce." She growled playfully. "Grrr."

"How'd you two meet?" asked Blueprint as he floated another cider to the table.

"She's the sister I never had," replied Pokey. "Well aside from my the sister I do have. Trixie and I used to run around causing trouble. War Jenny

here joined up with our band of vagabonds when we rescued her from a lizard.”

“It was draaaaagon,” sang War Jenny. “You never tell the story right. I was trying to sneak into a dragon’s horde to steal some of his gems. You know the old rhyme. ‘Kin of Luna, always rich, never home. To keep our wealth we always roam.’” She hiccupped, and giggled at her rendition of the children’s rhyme.

“When the dragon woke up, she nearly got eaten,” continued Pokey. “Luckily, Trixie and I happened to be exploring the same cave. We managed to save her, and get away with half his loot.”

“We didn’t get any treasure from that,” protested War Jenny. “Pity too, he had some great stuff. All you got was a scorched flank out of the deal. I at least got some new family.” She smiled happily, and put her arm around Pokey. She looked into his eyes. Her face drained from happily intoxicated to sadly serious. “Hey, Blueprint, I gotta talk to Pokey for a bit. We’re gonna go outside.”

“Whatever,” saluted Blueprint. “Hey, if you want your armor fixed, bring it here. I can fix anything.” Pokey regarded the drunken unicorn with a skeptical eye.

“You think he’s up to the task?” Pokey asked. War Jenny shrugged.

“I dunno,” she said seriously. “He fixed a bunch of toasters, and he did design a blast proof apron for the miners. I’d say he’s good for it.” Pokey dropped his saddle bags. The ruined armor spilled from them. Blueprint looked over the scales in amazement.

“You weren’t kidding,” he said. The unicorn looked at his bottle of cider. “I’ve had way too much to work on this tonight, but give me a day or two and I’ll have it back to you.” Pokey shrugged.

“I almost don’t care anymore.”

Pokey escorted War Jenny past the broken door and out into the clear spring night. They walked quietly for a while. They wandered up the hill, and along sandy banks of the reservoir. Waves lapped quietly on the shore as the two walked at the water’s edge. Jenny finally broke the silence.

“I thought you had retired from this sort of thing,” said Jenny.

"I did," replied Pokey. "I was perfectly happy in Ponyville. I had a nice quiet life as a chef, a small house in the middle of town, a cat who hates me. I had it pretty good."

"I thought you never wanted that kind of life," said Jenny. "Some mare got you tied down?"

"No," he replied. There was a hint of sadness in that statement. He sat on the sandy banks. "Had a thing for one, but she never really felt the same way." Jenny sat down beside him and looked up at the moon.

"I know how you feel," she said. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," replied Pokey.

"I'm sorry about your friend." Jenny put her head on his shoulder. "Why was she with you anyway? She didn't seem to have that spirit of adventure. She seemed more like a housewife." Pokey sighed miserably and slid down into the sand.

"I was in line at the post office when one of Celestia's minions grabbed us," said Pokey. "Rather than trying to find the ponies he was supposed to, he dragged us out to the forest. Celestia gave us the task instead. Medley protested the most, but when Celestia mentioned a reward, her eyes lit up." He held out his hooves in defeat. "And here we are."

"That doesn't seem like a great way to hand out quests," said War Jenny. "I'm sure if I started doing that, there'd be a full scale revolt on my hooves."

"Kin of Luna don't have post offices," said Pokey. "Plus you're not some power-mad goddess autocrat who orders her subjects around. I can't imagine anyone else doing that." He put his head down his hooves. "And because she chose poorly, a mother of two is dying. It's mostly my fault. I couldn't protect her, and I walked out of there alive."

"I dragged you out of that cave," corrected War Jenny. "The girl too. I'm amazed either one of you is alive. Luna was looking out for you."

"You know I don't believe in her anymore," said Pokey. "I don't even believe in Celestia anymore." War Jenny stroked Pokey's mane, and wrapped her arms around him.

"It's a hard thing to lose your faith," she said.

"It's kind of freeing," replied Pokey. "Beholden to no gods, and no ponies, the errant samurai chef take his life into his own hooves with renewed vision and clarity." He rolled onto his back, and stared up at the stars. "Has that epic tragedy feel to it, you know?"

"It's pretty hard to deny a goddess when you've met her," said Jenny. "It's harder still to deny some pony when they're staring you in the face and giving you orders."

"I'm done with that," said Pokey. "Celestia can find her own damn rocks."

"You don't mean that," chided Jenny. "You didn't go out on this quest because she told you to. You went out because you wanted one last hurrah."

"And look what I've lost because of it," said Pokey, rolling back toward her. "I've lost an heirloom. I've lost what little faith I had in Celestia. I lost a friend." He put his head back down in the sand. "Worst of all, Jenny, I broke a promise. Ponies don't break promises."

"You didn't break anything," said Jenny. "That creature never laid a paw on her." Pokey raised his head, and stared at her questioningly. "I could hear you yelling through the land slide. We all could. The fact that you killed that thing is a testament to your devotion to a promise. I can't think of another pony that could have come close to doing what you did."

"Fat lot of good it did Medley," he grumbled. Jenny stroked his mane again.

"Have you tried praying to her?" she asked. "She always listens."

"Why would she listen to me?" asked Pokey. "I'm just a traitor to my faith. I stopped praying to her and starting praying to her sister. I can't even pray to Celestia anymore. I have nothing but hate in my heart for her. There are no prayers for those without faith." War Jenny picked up Pokey's head and guided him to his feet. She held his hooves and looked up into his soulful yellow eyes.

"Pray for your friend then," she said. "Have faith in the goddess that you were once proud to call your own." The moon shone upon them, and silhouetted the ponies on the beach front. Pokey lowered his head, and prayed with War Jenny.

He barely remembered the words anymore. His thoughts fumbled before he found his prayers again. Not the mindless daily mantra of normal prayer, but the true begging for answers. He prayed for forgiveness. He prayed for strength. He prayed for a reason to keep going.

He found himself praying for Medley. Praying that she would someday recover. Praying that she would be able to go home to her children and her husband. Praying that she'd be able to be happy again. Praying that she would be able to teach her children to fly. He prayed to the moon for a miracle.

What he got was a goddess standing before him.

The moon goddess Luna walked across the water toward the praying ponies. Pokey saw her first, and dropped into a reverent bow. War Jenny did the same; the equines humbled themselves before the alicorn. Her blue hair drifted lazily behind her purple coat, almost covering her midnight blue flanks. A moon graced her flank as it graced the sky; serene and touching. She dipped her head to the bowing ponies.

"It's been a long time since I've heard such sincere prayer," she said, softly. "I heard you both praying for some pony else; some pony who can't pray for herself." She turned to Jenny. "My dear Jenny, your kin have always been faithful to me, even when I was not myself." War Jenny only nodded, daring not to speak in the presence of her goddess. "And you, Pokey." The unicorn barely looked up. "You used to have such faith in me. I know you still do, even if you barely know it yourself." Luna's eyes drifted out into the city, seemingly to search for something. She turned back to Pokey.

"I know how you're feeling," she said. "Defeated, confused, angry. I've felt all this towards her too. Please don't hate her. She has her reasons for what she does, I promise you. And she has her reasons for sending you." She approached the two equines, and gently brought them to their feet.

"Never lose faith," Luna said quietly. "Though you're kin of the night, the sun and moon both need your love. Without one, there isn't the other." Luna embraced them both. "Even if my sister doesn't always show it, she loves you all. Remember our promise to equines everywhere. Even when the clouds cover the sky, the sun and moon will always watch over you."

Luna kissed them both on their cheeks. She let Pokey and Jenny go and disappeared into the moonlight.

"I told you she listened," said War Jenny. Pokey stood dumbstruck. "Are you ready to believe again?"

...

Cheerilee stood at the bar table, a straw in her glass of white wine. There were three others beside it, each long since emptied. She stared out into the town's celebration, and found herself missing the past. Life was simple when she was a young teacher. She was out on the town every other night just enjoying being a pony. Somewhere along the line she had become an adult. She tried playing a few of her favorite old records on the jukebox, but found no comfort in "Ponies Without Hats." She stared at the table and wondered where things at gone so wrong.

She felt guilty for walking out of that battle with barely a scratch to her name. Redheart was going to have a nasty scar. Pokey probably wouldn't feel right for months. And Medley; poor, sweet Medley. How was she going to break the news to Snow Catcher and her fillies? She spent so much time trying to bring cheer into the world, she could barely stand to see someone hurt.

"Am I so shallow I can only handle joy?" she asked herself. Her head slumped onto the table. "Obviously not, or I wouldn't be standing here feeling guilty."

"It's called survivor's guilt," said Dr. Castor. He walked up to her table, and stood next to Cheerilee. "A twister rips through your town, leavin' every pony homeless but you. You feel guilty because your home wasn't torn to pieces too. You feel like other are judgin' you because nothin' bad happened." He waved a hoof at the waiter, who disappeared into the kitchen. "No one's judgin' you, doll. You were an important part of that rescue. Just 'cause you weren't punchin' in heads doesn't mean you weren't part of the fight."

"It should have been me instead of Medley," Cheerilee said. "I should have been down there. Earth ponies are tougher stuff than pegasi. I could have taken that hit."

"Darling, no pony could have lived through what happened to her," said Dr. Castor. "Maybe the biggest, meanest stallion around could have

left there a cripple, but don't think for a minute that you could have survived that."

"That doesn't make me feel much better," said Cheerilee.

"Well then what will?" asked Dr. Castor. "Clearly not four glasses a' wine." Cheerilee glared at the donkey. Her frown fell into a defeated sigh and she slumped to a sit.

"I don't know anymore," said Cheerilee. "I thought this was going to be fun and exciting. A break from the normal routine, you know?" She rolled the straw around in her glass. "Sure I protested at first, but once we got on the road, I felt like a kid again. Then there was that fight with the manticore, and now this..." She sighed, her candy striped mane fell in her eyes. "When did Equestria become so dangerous? Everything used to be all candy hearts and tea parties. Now it's nothing but danger and terror. I can't imagine taking my eyes off the kids for more than a minute these days." She looked up at Dr. Castor. "What do you think?"

"I've got a few years on you, so let me tell you a story" said Dr. Castor. "You ever hear of the Kin a' Luna Rebellion?"

"Of course," said Cheerilee. "I mean, it was more of a skirmish than an all out war, but it's still important history in this part of Equestria."

"I was just a young medic back then..."

"Wow, you are old," blurted Cheerilee. She put a hoof to her mouth, her mulberry cheeks became a bright fuchsia. "Oh my goddess, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I'm old, I know it," said Dr. Castor. "Anyway, the point is, the world was dangerous back then too. I woke up in a pile of ponies that the Kin a' Luna had left for dead. I somehow survived where the others didn't. I felt guilty about it for years till I began to understand that I was still standin' for a reason. You are too, doll, even if you don't know it yet." Cheerilee looked up at the donkey.

"You really think so?" she asked.

"I know it," he said. The waiter to whom he had waved earlier dropped a paper bag on the table. "Thanks, mate. Put it on my tab." He picked up the paper bag in his teeth. "That about does it for lunch. You going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine," said Cheerilee. "You keep saving the world."

"You too, dear," replied Dr. Castor. "Don't lose faith, love. She's always watching out for you." Dr. Castor trotted out the door, leaving Cheerilee to ponder his words. She picked her head off the table.

"Check please."

...

Redheart tearfully went through Medley's chart as she searched for any prayer of hope. Not a single figure on it pointed to anything but disheartening news. She kept her glasses on as she tried to hide her tears behind a facade of professionalism. Brolly came in and offered her a glass of warm tea.

"How are you holding up?" he asked. Redheart took the glass and set it on the table.

"You know how it is with these terminal cases," she sniffed. "Always looking for that one spark of hope; that sign that everything is going to be alright." She looked down at her charts again and tossed them to the side. "At my age, I expect ponies to start dropping because of poor lifestyle choices and not enough exercise. At her age, who expects this? Her biggest concern should be that foal of hers."

"It's tough," said Brolly. "You lose patients; it's part of the business. You get used to it. You harden your heart; fill it with black humor so you don't break down crying at the end of the day." He turned to Redheart. "Not you though. You took nursing to an art form, and made yourself feel every single patient that passed through your hooves. You were so incredible in school, we all thought you were going to shoot to the top and never come back down." He put an arm around her. "You traveled the world, spreading your love and care to any pony who needed it, and then you settled down in Ponyville." Brolly sighed. "What happened?" he asked. "We set out to save the world and now look at us. Two old nurses watching ponies fall through our hooves."

"I'm sure you've done more good than you can imagine," said Redheart. "Think about all the patients that come through here. All those ponies with broken bones you've taught to walk again. All the newborn foals that have left, happy and healthy, their whole lives ahead of them. Think about the fillies you've saved, and the colts you turned away from

bad lifestyles.” She put a hoof on his shoulder. “We’re only two ponies. Maybe we can’t save the world, but we can make it better.” Brolly nodded thoughtfully.

“You always were too smart to be a nurse,” said Brolly. “But thank Celestia you are.” He left Redheart to her vigil. She lay down on the couch to rest her eyes.

Despite the comfortable couch in Medley’s room, Redheart slept poorly. Her shoulder bothered her, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that some pony else was here with her. She slowly opened her eyes to see a large, purple pegasus standing over Medley. Redheart snapped awake, and onto her feet.

“GET AWAY FROM HER!” she screamed. The Pegasus turned her head to reveal a long and elegant horn. Redheart balked as she realized that she stood in the presence of a goddess. She recoiled in terror, and threw herself to the floor. Luna leaned down to speak to Redheart.

“It’s not her time yet,” she whispered. “I didn’t know the prophecy had changed. She wasn’t the one who was supposed to do this. I’m so sorry for what’s happened.” Luna stood again, and gently kissed Medley’s peaceful face. A cold glow filled the room. The machines spun into a frenzy; bells and alarms chimed in every configuration. Paper spewed from the heart monitor; the pen bounced like an earthquake. Glass vials of fluid shattered as the room exploded in light. Redheart shielded her eyes from the divine wrath; intense heat rushed through her.

Brolly was at the nurses’ station filling out paperwork when he heard a scream coming from the hall. He tossed down his papers and galloped for the door. The door burst open, to fill the hallway with a pale blue light. Brolly dodged past the swinging door and into the room.

Redheart lay on the floor; the couch had flipped on top of her. Brolly kicked the couch off, and bent down to help her to her feet. Redheart ran to Medley’s side and tried to gauge what happened.

The pegasus slowly opened her sea blue eyes to see Redheart and another pegasus standing over her. She tried to speak, but found no words. Her eyes scanned up to the ceiling, then the walls. This wasn’t the last thing she remembered. Where was this? She tried to roll to her feet.

“No, no!” admonished Redheart. “Try not to move too much, dear. Here, let me.”

“What happened?” she gasped, looking at the destroyed hospital room. “Where am I?”

Cheerilee trotted though the tiled floor of the extended care wing. She carried flowers in her mouth; something beautiful to balance the misery of ruined life. She took a deep breath and opened the door to Medley’s room. Cheerilee dropped her flowers in shock.

Redheart was wrapped in a hug with Medley, who sat awake and confused. Cheerilee sputtered trying to come up with words.

“It’s a miracle,” she whispered.

Chapter Seven

Detour on the Long Road Home

Sometimes you decide to continue along the path others have chosen for you

Pokey awoke the next morning to the rhythmic churning of a waterwheel providing power to the city of Bridleburg. He was above the powerhouse in a small, damp apartment covered in outdated and peeling floral wallpaper. Pokey looked around for War Jenny, only to find Blueprint sleeping it off on the couch. He quietly left the sleeping unicorn, and walked back towards the city.

After buying coffee from a surly, chocolate colored pegasus, Pokey found his way back into town along the cobblestone roads. He wasn't really sure what to do next. The visit from Luna left him feeling better than he had in years, but what about Medley? Was his prayer really answered? He opened the hospital's back door and wandered inside.

Pokey approached Medley's room, ready for just about anything. The curtains were thrown wide, and morning sunlight poured in through the panes of glass. There was no Medley. There was only an empty room. His face fell. Luna hadn't answered his prayers after all.

"Pokey?" asked a quiet voice behind him. He turned around to see Medley standing there with a tear in her eye. She rushed to embrace the unicorn. Pokey stood stunned to the spot.

"You're alive!" he said at last. He looked her over, and ran a hoof through her mane. "Luna be praised, you're alive."

"She came to me last night," said Medley. She stared into his soulful yellow eyes. "She said that you prayed for me. You saved me, Pokey. I'm here because of you." She kissed his cheek. "Thank you." Pokey found himself speechless.

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"Absolutely we're done," said Pokey. "When your quest requires divine intervention, it's a sign that you've reached failure on an epic scale."

He levitated a muffin from the table, and took a bite. Crumbs fell to the napkin laid beneath it. "What's more, you weren't even supposed to be on this quest. I seem to remember you were leading the charge to not do this."

"But we have to finish!" protested Medley. "I feel... better. Smarter. Move clever. I don't know." The frustration gathered in her face as she grasped for words. "It's like I'm supposed to be here now. Whatever She did, it made me realize that I can do this too. I was supposed to do this at some point, I still can. We have to keep going."

"Sweetie, we almost sent you home in a box," said Redheart. "You're not going anywhere but back to your family. You've got other things to worry about now." Medley huffed, and turned to Pokey.

"What about you?" asked Medley. "You're just going to give up? That doesn't seem like the Pokey I've come to know."

"I don't know about the other two," said Pokey. "But I'm still in rough shape. If there's any more fighting on the road ahead, I'm afraid I'm just not in the condition to do it." Dr. Castor had fixed him up well enough but the injuries from his past weren't playing well with his fresh ones, and the painkillers dulled his lightening reaction time. His flank itched.

"Pokey's right," chimed in Cheerilee. "We're in no shape to go back after the emerald."

"Well then what about the buffalo of Appleloosa?" asked Medley. "Surely you can talk them out of their sapphire. Or the Ruby in Canterlot! We can go there, and come back with an army and..." Pokey sighed wearily as he tried to find the right words.

"I don't know why you're so concerned about all this," said Redheart. "The only thing you have to worry about getting home."

"But I want to help!" protested Medley. "I've done nothing but complain this entire trip, and I've been out of the loop for almost two days." She turned to Cheerilee. "You told me the first night we were out that a party has to count on each other. I've counted on you three to keep me going, and I going to return the favor." The rest of the table sat in silence. Redheart and Pokey exchanged an uneasy look.

"The buffalo are a proud people," said Cheerilee, breaking the silence. "They don't really value pony artifacts, so it's possible we may be

able to get the sapphire from them with no problem.” She glanced around the table. “I don’t know as much about them as I should, but I know that Redheart has been out there plenty of times.” Redheart stared out the window, lost in thought. “Right, Redheart?”

“Oh, yes, buffalo,” Redheart snapped back to the conversation at hoof. “I just love the buffalo. Such gentle giants,” she mused. “Strong, handsome, quiet. So much respect for the land. Kind hearts, gentle hooves...” Her voice trailed off wistfully, followed by a jealous sigh from Pokey.

“Sounds like someone has a type,” giggled Cheerilee. Redheart glared at her.

“I... do not!” she protested. “They’re just... good looking... and earthy... and...” She flustered to halt. Most of the table erupted in laughter as the white earth pony blushed as red as her cutie mark. Pokey only sat quietly.

“Then we’re going to Appleloosa?” beamed Medley.

“Well it sounds like it,” said Cheerilee. “Redheart is definitely interested in getting her hooves on them.” Redheart’s flustered protest came only as an incomprehensible babel, while Pokey just stared daggers at the Cheerilee. “You, however, are getting on the next train to Ponyville.”

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Medley found herself staring out the window of a passenger car, just watching as the Diamond Dog lands sped past. The train chugged along. The ponies in front were galloping along at a steady pace towards Ponyville. The tracks ran along the edge of the Everfree Forest, then cut to the east along Dame River. Soon, the Diamond Dog territory would be out of sight, and Medley would be left with a spectacular view of the Forest.

She rested her muzzle on her chin, and thought about what she would tell Snow Catcher and her foals. The truth? That she had failed the princess’s request, and nearly died? That she met Luna? That the others sent her home in disgrace? Her thoughts were interrupted by the squeal of metal on metal; the train slowed to a stop. She looked out the window. The train ponies unhitched themselves from the engine, and climbed into the cabin. With the steep hill ahead, it was just too much for them to pull. They’d be on steam power for the next leg of the journey.

Far in the distance, she saw the cavern where she it all nearly ended. She felt as if it were calling to her, taunting her for being just out of reach. In that cavern there was a gem with her name on it. And there were other gems there as well, ones she could take without repercussions. With the Diamond Dogs routed, she should be able to get in and out of the cave without a problem, right? The emerald was bound to be in there somewhere, and with all the commotion, who'd have thought to take it? She made up her mind.

Medley walked with a nonchalant air toward the rear of the train as other ponies shifted around the cars. She slid open the door to the caboose, and stepped inside. Stacks of luggage were piled behind brass rails. A dark shape emerged from behind the luggage as Medley made for the rear door.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked War Jenny. Medley nearly jumped out of her turquoise coat.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "My goddess, can't any of you Kin act normal?"

"I'm here to see that you make it home safely," said War Jenny. "That means not getting off this train."

"I'm just stretching my wings," lied the pegasus.

"I've been following you four since you left the clinic," said War Jenny. "I saw that spark of greed practically turn your pretty blue eyes green. There's no mistaking it." She stood from the pile of suitcases, and walked to the fluttering pegasus. "You're going to get yourself in trouble when you get home."

"You don't know anything about my home," huffed Medley.

"I know that you hate your job," said War Jenny. "I also know that you love your children. Those three came out here because they wanted a break from reality. No matter how much they complained, it was a nice distraction from the hum drum life they've grown accustomed too. You, on the other hoof, are out here for the money." Medley's eyebrows sank into a glare.

"I... you... how..." she stammered.

"Why else would you be trying to go out there again and risk your life?" asked War Jenny. "I know you think those stones are valuable. I think that you have no idea just how valuable they are."

"Wait, they actually do something?" asked Medley. War Jenny facehoofed.

"Did your goddess tell you nothing?" she sighed, staring at the ceiling. "Look, Luna always instructed my people to find wealth, but to always give it away. We were always to look for these stones, and give them back to her."

"What did she need with them?" asked Medley. "Are they some sort of key? What do they do?"

"They're the key to undoing a great blight," said War Jenny. "My people have been forced across the river for the past few hundred years and we haven't been able to get into Equestria to look for the stones. Now your goddess has sent you after them, meaning the time for their use is nearly at hand." War Jenny glared at Medley. "It also means I can't let you steal them."

"It's not about the stones," protested Medley. "I would never try to steal an artifact like that. Do you really think I'd want to bring the wrath of Celestia and wind up on the moon? It's just..." she shifted nervously. "Celestia promised us a reward for our services. I really need the bits. I've got two fillies, and they keep cutting back Snow Catcher's hours, and..."

"There are better ways to finance a life than adventuring," chastised War Jenny. "Especially in your condition." Medley softened her glare into confusion. War Jenny sighed in weary frustration. "You're telling me you don't know? You city ponies never pay any attention, do you?"

"Know what?" asked Medley. "What are you even talking about?"

"It's not my place to tell you," said War Jenny. The train started to roll again as the boilers reached temperature. "And I managed to distract you long enough to prevent you from getting off the train."

"I guess you did," said Medley, innocently. "I'll tell Pokey you did a great job when I catch up to him." She dashed out the back door. The donkey grabbed at the handle only to find Medley had barred it from the

outside. She rushed to the other door to find it barred as well. War Jenny was trapped inside the Caboose. Medley waved to War Jenny through the window as she took to the sky. Jenny stared out at window at the pegasus as she dashed towards the Diamond Dog cavern.

“Son of a nag,” cursed War Jenny.

Medley’s heart raced as she streaked into the sky. She’d never pulled a trick like that before. Where was this sudden inspiration coming from? She felt free and young, ready to take on anything. She felt like a Wonderbolt. She found herself cheering as she soared through the air. She spun around in the sky with not another creature daring to occupy her air space. For the first time since she was a filly, she felt truly free.

Medley looked down at the Diamond Dog’s territory. Such an ugly scrubland! And that horrid red moss! She’d just have to deal with it if she wanted to find that stone. She flew toward the cave, tucking in her wings and diving faster, much faster than she had ever before. She never wanted to come back down. She buzzed the cave entrance a few times, finding unexplainable joy in her flight. By the time she actually landed, her wings were tingling with elation. She wanted nothing more than to adventure now. She could see why her companions had spent their youths doing it. She boldly fluttered past the excavated cave-in into the massive cavern.

The remains of the Diamond Dog that had nearly killed her sat unmoving in the center of the room. Medley had been woefully unprepared for the sight. Pokey hadn’t just killed the beast; he’d taken off its head. Medley found herself trying to keep down her breakfast. She saw another, smaller patch of blood on the ground near a crushed boulder. It had long since dried, mixed with the dirt and moss of the Diamond Dog’s lair. She stared at the spot, remembering what had happened.

That boulder had come from nowhere. She remembered looking over to see it hurling toward her. She didn’t have time to react. Just... lights out. She remembered Pokey’s horn filling the room with that dangerous light. She remembered him yelling. She remembered walking along the clouds, following a pure white pegasus towards a bright light. She remembered Luna came to her and said that she had reasons to keep going. Then she woke up in a hospital. If it weren’t for Luna, she wouldn’t be here now.

A wave of panic swept over her as the realization sank in. She shouldn't be here. Here she was, so elated by freedom that she'd forgotten that it took a miracle to save her. Had she escaped death only to throw off her old life? She fluttered backwards out of the cavern when a familiar sound struck her ears. Whimpering.

The whimpering was definitely that of a child. Medley's heart thumped. Had they left a filly behind? Had they missed an entire row of cages? The herd had galloped out of here so fast, they hadn't stopped to look for other captives. And with the thundering of a hundred hooves, who would have heard the cry of a child? Anyone still trapped in there would have been two days without food or water. Medley began to follow the whimpering,

Her wings silently flapped through the tunnels as she listened for the direction of the child. With the way sounds echoed, Medley found herself lost. The tunnels became maze around her. She landed, and tried to make a plan.

What would Redheart do? Knowing her, she'd probably have a search pattern organized, and split the party in two. She hoofed at the stone, as she tried to come up with something similarly clever. Planning had never really been her strong suit, but Luna's touch meant she was more than she used to be, right? The hoof marks on stone gave her an idea.

She fluttered her way back to the entrance, and scratched numbers into the stone. She began systematically searching the tunnels, flying down the full length before turning around and returning. Along the way, she picked up the Diamond Dog's discarded treasure, and hid them in the deepest pockets of her saddle bags.

The whimpering was moving in response to her rock marks. Whoever was in here didn't want to be found. She turned a corner into a branch tunnel when she spotted the child. A Diamond Dog, no bigger than a foal, cowered from the turquoise pegasus.

"Please don't hurt me," begged the child. He covered his face with his paws as he tried to hide from Medley. She bent down and picked up the child. She held him to her chest. She patted his fuzzy head, and rocked him gently.

"It's okay, sweetie," she said. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. No one's going to hurt you." She looked around the tunnels. There had to be a clue as to where his parents got off too. She found only rotten timbers, half collapsed tunnels, and more of the red moss. "Where are your parents?" she asked.

"I don't know," he whimpered. "There was all this noise, and the ground was shaking, and daddy got buried in that pile of rocks over there, and won't wake up and..." The child buried his face in Medley's chest. "I'm scared! I want my mommy!"

"Shhh," comforted Medley. "I'm sure we can find your mommy. What's your name?"

"My name is Pupp," he sniffed. "Can we find mommy now?" Medley looked at the collapses. It was a grim sight, and she prayed that the child's parents weren't among them.

"Why don't we go outside so we can see if your mommy left for another cave?" She and the child fluttered back towards the cavern entrance. Medley covered the Diamond Dog's eyes from the horror of the eviscerated beast. No child needed to see that.

So where would the mother have escaped to? Medley looked down at the dusty earth around the entrance. Hoof prints of all shapes and sizes covered the main entrance, but an overlapping series of newer paw prints led south from the cave entrance. She'd been too busy buzzing the entrance to even notice. The Diamond pup sniffed the air.

"I smell her!" he said and hopped out of Medley's arms. He put his face to the ground and sniffed. After a minute of snorting in the dirt, he finally pointed south along the paw prints. "She went this way!" Pupp dashed off, following the tracks. Medley easily caught up with the loping pup, and she fluttered alongside him.

"Take it easy," said Medley. "You don't want to tire yourself out." The pup stopped in his tracks, and stared at the ground.

"I'm sorry," he said. Medley heard the child's stomach growled. "Mommy always has food. I don't know where she is, but I can smell her." Medley dug around in her pack for a moment. Where was all of her food? She finally produced a few muffins she had saved for the voyage home. She passed it to the child.

“Here you go, sweetie,” she said. “I don’t know if you like carrot cake, but it’s all I have.”

Medley looked in her pack with disappointment. Of course Redheart would have redistributed their supplies; she was the queen of preparation. She snapped the flaps closed and looked up. Pupp was chasing the trail again. Medley rolled her eyes and chastised herself for forgetting the cardinal rule of parenting: Don’t take your eyes off the kid. She flew beside Pupp; his tiny legs could hardly carry him faster than a trot.

For a half an hour, Pupp scampered along the sandy soil of the Diamond Dog territories as he followed the scent of his mother. He avoided huge swaths of red moss that crept along the ground, as they moved toward the river. It wasn’t long before they arrived on the banks. Pupp sniffed the air. He looked up at Medley.

“I can’t smell her anymore,” he said. “All I can smell is this gross stuff.” He pointed to the large patches of vermillion moss that came nowhere near the river. Medley looked at Pupp, then out at the river. They Diamond Dogs had probably crossed near here, which meant they weren’t far behind. She looked up at the sky.

“How do you feel about flying?” she asked. A minute later, Pupp was whooping and barking in joy from Medley’s back.

Medley flew high into the air as she looked out on the lands for any signs of tell tale Diamond Dog holes. After a few minutes of searching, Medley had begun her decent near a cave. She landed near a fire ring with Pupp still riding her back. He hopped off and sniffed the air with vigor.

“Mommy!” he yelled and dashed into the cavern.

“Sweetie, wait!” called Medley as she rushed in after him.

It took a second for her eyes to adjust to the dim light beyond. She saw spread on floor of the cavern a dozen different blankets, beaded in fine gems and semi precious stones. Lying on those blankets were several Diamond Dogs gyps about the same size as Medley. Instead of the fuzzy slate grey of the males, the gyps were ginger colored and sported luxurious silky coats. They looked much like large versions Applejack’s dog, Wynona. Most had beautifully jeweled necklaces, and several wore fine silk sashes. One of the gyps came running as Pupp dashed for her. The gyp picked up the child in her paws and wept.

"My baby!" she sobbed "Oh my dear, sweet Pupp! You've come home to me! I thought you were gone forever!" She smothered Pupp with hugs and rocked the child in her arms. Tears ran down her muzzle as the rest of the Dogs came to lavish attention on the returned child. Pupp's mother noticed Medley. "Who are you?" she demanded. The scene turned from heartwarming to icy in a split second. The gyps turned, and with hackles raised, bared their teeth at the pegasus.

"Uh... I'm... Medley..." she said as she backed away from the cave. "I..."

"Mommy, she helped me here!" interrupted Pupp. "She found me in the cave, and then I sniffed you out and I flew on her back across the river!" The gyp looked at her, and handed Pupp off to another mother. She stepped towards Medley. The pegasus froze; her wings suddenly refused to obey her commands to fly away. The gyp reached for Medley, and pulled her into a heartfelt embrace.

"Thank you," she whispered through her tears of joy. "My son has returned to me." She wiped her eyes. "I cannot offer you enough thanks, pegasus." Medley breathed a sigh of relief.

"Any mother would have done the same," she said. "I don't think we're that different, really." The mother nodded, and released Medley from her embrace. The rest of the pack surrounded Medley to offer thanks for returning their prodigal child.

They escorted her deeper into the cavern into what appeared to be a nursery. Dozens of Diamond Dog pups played happily together. The boys, still fuzzy and adorable youths, roughhoused and jumped on each other, while the girls played with dolls and toys. The canine offered her water and a mat to sit.

"I am Bella," said the Diamond Dog. "I am the first wife of our tribe."

"First wife?" asked Medley.

"The chief chooses a wife first," explained Bella. "It is her job to keep the other women in line. It is a job she keeps until she retires, or dies. When Pupp's father ascended to chief, the old first wife retired to allow me the position."

"I saw what happened to Pupp's father at the hill," said Medley. "I'm sorry it came to that."

"Yes, I am too," said Bella with some sadness. "Even if you think him evil, he was an effective leader and a good father. But I cannot bring myself to hate you, as the men folk do. You have brought me my son, and I can tell some pony like you did not come to that hill with malice." Bella looked around the nursery, as if listening for something in particular. She continued in a whisper. "Our new leader, Scratch is a vile and evil dog. He hates ponies with unmatched passion, especially after what happened on the hill." Medley didn't know what to say to that. She thought about apologizing, but she wasn't in the least bit sorry for what they'd done. She found herself at the edge of her abilities trying to come up with an adequate response. What would Cheerilee do?

Cheerilee would have already known about the all about the tribal practices of the Diamond Dogs, and that their women were beautiful canines. She gazed about the nursery and looked at the children. So much joy from these children, and yet one day, they too would grow to enslave ponies like herself. She couldn't comprehend it.

"Why do you do it?" asked Medley.

"Do what?" asked Bella.

"I don't pretend to understand your ways, so forgive me for being rude," said Medley. "But why do you take others and force them to work for you?" Bella looked sadly at the mat she was sitting on.

"Do you see the fine furs on which we sit?" she asked. "The jewels around our necks? Our husbands and fathers give us these things as an act of love. They want so much for us to be happy." She looked sadly at the children. "They are willing to spread misery to others to dig up these gems, and find these things for us." She gestured to the Pupp, who had busied himself climbing atop a dog pile of children. "He doesn't know it yet, but he will do the same. A girl will catch his eye, and his friends will all say 'give her diamonds, give her furs, give her all the beautiful things of the world.'" She turned back to Medley with a defeated smile. "Our men, as you may have guessed, aren't exactly clever in matters of the heart."

"But to enslave others!" said Medley. "Can't they see it's just wrong?"

"They don't let us women work," said Bella. "They just want so much to shower us with gifts, and let us live in luxury." She looked down at the floor. "Most of us don't care for it. Ponies and pigs, they have families too. We try to treat them well, and do what we can, but our husbands insist. Who are we to resist their wills and their gifts?"

"I can see where it's nice to receive gifts," said Medley. "I see them so infrequently these days." Bella gave her a confused look. "Oh, it's not because Snow Catcher doesn't love me. Money's tight even with us both working and..."

"You... work?" asked Bella. "Outside your home? Hunting and digging like the men?"

"No, not at all. I work at the post office," said Medley. "Or at least I hope I still do. Their policies on deity assigned quests of absence are somewhat fuzzy."

"You're on a mission from your god?" gasped Bella.

"Oh, yes, that," said Medley. "I came here to find a necklace made of a single, brilliant emerald." She picked up a stone from the cave floor. "It's about this big and seems to shine even when there's no light." Bella nodded.

"The stone you seek is on the collar of Scratch," she said. "But he will not give it to you. It is the symbol of the chief, and it is won in single combat. The only reason he is chief now is that he stole it off my husband's body." Medley cursed under her breathe. Of course they kept it nearby; it wouldn't be that easy to just abscond with it. At least she had knowledge now, and that was a good enough start. She could come back with Pokey, make the challenge...

And Pokey was still injured. She'd forgotten about that. She paused to gather her thoughts, as she looked back at the children. Medley wanted to free these children of the cycle of slavery and oppression. She could see now that the Diamond Dogs weren't evil, but instead misguided in their ambition and devotion. Perhaps she'd make her way back here someday to help them.

"I'm glad to have shared this time with you Bella," said Medley at last.

"Thank you again," replied Bella. She stood and escorted Medley to the cave entrance. "Let us get you out of here before Scratch comes home."

"I wish I could have learned more about you and your pack," said Medley as she walked alongside Bella . "I feel like I could teach you so much. It's too bad I have to leave so soon."

"What's your rush?" scratched a voice. Medley turned in panic. Behind her stood a Diamond Dog, with skin like gravel and teeth like shards of broken pottery. From his neck hung an acorn sized emerald of impossible brilliance. "Why not stay forever?"

Chapter Eight

Seeing Red

When it all suddenly makes sense, you often find out how much trouble you're really in

The train rattled along the rails, pulled by the might of four enormous earth ponies. The steam engine lie quiet, as the engineer ponies had no need of its power across the open plains. The train ponies galloped along the tracks. Behind them was tons of steel, wood, and passengers. Three of those passengers were headed south from Bridleburg after they had put their friend on the train toward Ponyville.

Pokey lay on his bunk. He was quietly meditating as Redheart stared wistfully out the windows. The passing mesas and scattered dwellings were familiar scenery for her. The Appleloosa mesas always sent Redheart back to better times. For Pokey, they conjured mixed memories of happiness and violence, though the two were thankfully unrelated.

Cheerilee stood at the table as she worked on her "Equestria Daily" crossword puzzle. Seventeen down as was "newborn pony." It was, of course, foal. It sparked a thought. She looked up from her puzzle and toward Pokey.

"I'm worried about Medley," said Cheerilee. "She seemed so different at breakfast this morning. She actually wanted to be out here to finish this quest." She tapped her pen on the desk, as she tried to come up with a eight letter word for a type of bit. Snaffle. "She's complained the whole time about being home sick, and when we try to send her home, she begs to stay?" She started writing again on an different clue. "Something doesn't add up."

"I didn't send her back to Ponyville because she was home sick," said Redheart. "It would have actually been nice to have her with us." Cheerilee solved twenty three down. Phillydelphia.

"We sent her home because she was pregnant," said Pokey. Cheerilee nearly swallowed her pen.

"Are you serious?" demanded Cheerilee.

"Absolutely," said Redheart. "Probably about a month along now." Cheerilee stood flabbergasted and sputtered as tried to come up with words that would fit just how insane this situation was.

"Then why in the name of Celestia was she out here risking her flank with a bun in the oven?" asked Cheerilee.

"She needed the money," said Pokey. His eyes were still closed in meditation. "Celestia promised us a reward if we completed this quest. She said that her finances were tight, and whatever Celestia gave us would go a long way to helping out her family."

"There's easier ways to make money than going on an insane quest when you're pregnant!" shouted Cheerilee to no one in particular.

"I'm pretty sure she doesn't know yet," said Redheart. "She'll figure it out once she realizes she missed her cycle this month. She's actually quite lucky in that regard."

"I can't imagine how," said Cheerilee. "I'm surprised she didn't lose the foal with that beating she took."

"Remember what you said about motherly instincts?" asked Pokey. "Her body knows she's with child, and kept her going through what would have killed most of us. Being a mother is her special talent, and it saved her life. The only reason it's not her cutie mark is, well, how would she have discovered that talent?"

"Well then, I'm glad she's headed home," replied Cheerilee. She went back to her crossword puzzle. A thought struck her a moment later. "Wait a second. What do you mean she doesn't know? You didn't tell her?"

The train chugged along the rails of the Appleloosa valley as it quietly covered the miles between the two cities. Redheart was reading a romance novel and Pokey sat playing solitaire. Cheerilee looked over the Hamite tablets she had acquired a few days ago. Pokey kept glancing out the window at the passing landscape. He grew more concerned with every glance. He set down his cards.

"You know," said Pokey. "The last time I was out here, the ground was a lot less red."

"You noticed that too?" asked Redheart. "We're going by too fast to get a good look, but something is definitely different." She put down her romance novel, and looked out the window. Sure enough, the sandy landscape had taken on a vermillion tint, and the normally orange mesas were near crimson. It was like suddenly being on a different planet. Redheart gazed out the window with growing concern. "I wonder what the buffalo have to say about it?"

"Probably that it's the settler's fault," said Pokey. "They may have come to an accord over the apple trees, but that doesn't mean they like each other."

The train ground to a halt just inside of the borders of Appleloosa. Pokey and Cheerilee had just stepped off the car into a wonderland of earth ponies. Most were wearing spectacular hats and stylish vests. Redheart emerged after them, a bonnet affixed in her pink mane.

"What's with the bonnet?" asked Cheerilee.

"Keeps the sun out of your eyes," she said as she looked around the platform. "It is the fashion out here, you know. You really look like a tourist without one."

"If you two are the experts on this area," asked Cheerilee, "then why doesn't Pokey have one?"

"Hats get in the way," said Pokey. "Besides, Appleloosa isn't where we're headed. We're headed out to buffalo country." They had just gathered their saddlebags when they were greeted by a large yellow pony wearing a stylish brown vest. His apple cutie mark was partially obscured by a large bandage.

"Welcome to Aaaaa-pplaoosa!" he nickered. "Always pleased to see new visitors to our humble town."

"Seriously, Braeburn?" asked Pokey. "Every time?"

"Gotta make folks feel welcome," he said. "What better way than with a fine how-do-you-do as soon as they get off the train? And if it isn't Miss Redheart herself! I didn't know you two were comin' into town."

"Sort of an unexpected trip," said Redheart. "What happened to your flank, Braeburn?"

"Oh, that little scratch?" asked Braeburn. "Caught the business end of a rock slide about two days ago. No big deal. Haven't seen you in a while, what brings you two love birds out here?"

"We're on a bit of an assignment from Celestia," said Redheart. "How are the crops doing?"

"Not so good," he replied. "Ponies ain't feelin' well enough to work the fields the past few days. Somethin' ain't right out here, and it's got the buffalo spooked. It's in the air. If I'd have known you were comin' I'd have told you to stay away."

"Does it have anything to do with all the red soil?" asked Redheart. "I noticed it on the train ride here."

"I dunno about that," said Braeburn. "I do know that there's a lot of ponies talkin' about leavin'. Dr. Chocolate Sun is tryin' to figure out what's causin' all this if you want to help."

"We're on a schedule," groused Pokey. "No promises."

"You never were the friendly type," said Braeburn. "Who's your other friend?"

"This young lady is Cheerilee," said Redheart. "This is Braeburn, a dear friend of mine from way back." Cheerilee extended a hoof and smiled. Braeburn took it, and kissed it gently.

"Such fine ladies as you shouldn't be wandering around town unescorted," he said. Pokey stared blankly at the yellow pony.

"Do you ever do your job?" asked Pokey. "For that matter, when is the last time we ran into a pony that actually does their job on this excursion?"

"Dr. Castor?" offered Cheerilee.

"He's not a pony," said Pokey. "The question still stands."

Redheart and Cheerilee ignored Pokey, and followed Braeburn into town. The yellow earth pony was taking the time to point out the improvements they had made since Redheart had been out here last. The rebuilt clock tower chimed five, and the streets filled with earth ponies on their way home. Redheart looked over the crowd with horror. Most of the

ponies looked terrible. They were emaciated and gaunt; quite a few looked like they were starving to death. From the crowds came bursts of coughing fits. Nearly every pony wore a scowl or a worried expression of doubt.

“My goddess,” said Redheart. “You weren’t kidding, Braeburn. This is worse than the evacuation of Stalliongrad.”

“Now you know why folks are all worried,” said Braeburn. “It somethin’ doesn’t change here soon, we’re going to have a ghost town come harvest time.” They continued their walk through town, and finally came to a stop at the local clinic. “And here’s where ponies are winding up,” he said. “Dr. Sun hasn’t been able to nail down the problem yet, but if you want to know more, you can ask him.”

“Thank you Braeburn,” said Redheart. “I’ll be sure to find you if I need anything else.” Braeburn trotted off into the village and left the Ponyville trio behind. Redheart shot an uneasy glance at Pokey and Cheerilee. Pokey cut her off before she could say anything.

“We have other problems to deal with,” said Pokey. “I realize that there’s a problem, yes, but that’s not why we came here. We don’t have time to solve every issue we come across. We don’t need side quests.”

“I can’t just let these ponies suffer!” said Redheart. “What would you have me do?”

“Worry about our current task first,” said Pokey. “You seem to have forgotten we’re on a time frame here. Or do you not remember about Celestia saying she needed these stones before the next full moon?”

“I haven’t forgotten anything!” shot back Redheart. “What, because there’s suddenly no way to solve this problem with violence, you’re not interested in helping?”

“You think I enjoy killing?” demanded Pokey. “Like I’m one of those Diamond Dogs? Is that what you really think of me? That I’m some soulless murderer?”

“Stop it!” yelled Cheerilee. “My goddess, why are you two even fighting? What in Equestria is wrong with you?” She stamped her hoof in the dirt. “Pokey’s right, Redheart; we really don’t have time. We need to find the buffalo, get the Sapphire, then get to Canterlot. We’ve got a week

to do it, and that's not even counting the time it's going to take us to find the emerald."

"Remind me again why we're doing this?" asked Pokey. "Have you suddenly figured out the purpose of the stones or do you think Celestia's sent us on a quest to build our friendship? Maybe they're a birthday present for her pet bird!" He held out a hoof. "Who even knows?" He sat down in the dirt; his saddlebags slipped off his flank.

"Well it's clear your painkillers are wearing off," huffed Redheart. "You've never been this miserable when we've come out here before."

"I wish you weren't right all the time," said Pokey.

Cheerilee happened to glance at Pokey's cutie mark. It'd been a while since she'd seen it; his armor and saddlebags always covered it in the past. A safety pin. Such an odd cutie mark for somepony like him. There was something off with it. Cheerilee raised an eyebrow.

"Pokey, what's that on your flank?" she asked. Cheerilee approached to take a closer look.

"That's a cutie mark," said Pokey sarcastically. "I thought you would have paid at least little attention during college." Redheart approached and saw what Cheerilee was concerned about.

"Not your cutie mark," said Redheart. "There's a patch of red moss growing on your flank." Pokey craned his neck, as he tried to see what they were talking about. Sure enough, a patch of red moss adorned his flank. It blended in with some of the scabs from his fight.

"Huh," said Pokey. "I hadn't noticed that."

Despite his vigorous protest, Redheart dragged Pokey into the clinic by his tail. Inside, they found the walls of the wooden building adorned with posters discussing vaccines and other public health issues. Warnings were posted about the dangers of the so-called "Red Dirt" that had been popping up around Appleloosa.

A chocolate colored unicorn with a sunshine cutie mark sat behind a desk. He was going over a scroll; the unicorn's look of distress filled the room with more dread than a clinic should probably have. He turned at the sound of the opening door. He rolled the scroll to greet the incoming ponies.

"Oh, Nurse Redheart," he said. "I wish I could say I'm happy to see you again." He limped over to welcome the white Pony. A fresh set of bandages adorned his fetlock

"Why is that, Dr. Sun?" asked Redheart as she dropped Pokey's tail. "And what happened to your leg?"

"Oh, old Salty got a bit belligerent, and tagged me with a bottle," said Dr. Sun. "Wasn't even a fresh one. But there's this malicious red moss that's been poisoning the entirety of Appleloosa," he continued. "What's worse is that it's airborne and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do about it. I received this scroll from Canterlot University just today. They seem to think it something really dangerous." Redheart picked up the scroll and began reading. She snapped it shut after a minute.

"So this all from airborne exposure?" she asked. "What would happen if this moss found its way into an open wound?"

"I have no idea," said Dr. Sun. "I can't imagine it'd be good." He looked over the white earth pony for a moment. "My dear Redheart, what did you do to your shoulder?"

"Oh, I got into a scrape with a Diamond Dog," said Medley. "It's really nothing to worry about, though I do need to change the dressings. May I borrow some?"

"Oh, let me," said Dr. Sun. He floated her bandages off, and recoiled in horror. "Redheart, when's the last time you changed these?"

"This morning," she replied. "I didn't notice any..." she looked at the wound on her shoulder. Red moss had begun to grow at the edges. "Oh my goddess."

"Not you too," said Pokey. Cheerilee checked over her scratches to find the same thing. The moss blended in so well with her coat that she hadn't noticed.

"I've got it too," she said. "Did we get this from the Diamond Dogs?"

"The moss is that far north?" asked Dr. Sun. "Has it hit the Everfree Forest yet?"

"I didn't see it there," said Redheart. "But that was almost two days ago."

"We need to get these wounds clean," said Dr. Sun. He put on a mask. "When's the last time you had a bath?"

"Probably before we left," said Redheart. "Why?"

"Well, from what I've seen," replied Dr. Sun. "This moss dies when the surface comes in contact with water. Especially when it's on skin. I've seen a few infections like this in the past few days and a fresh bath takes care it right away."

"Presumably it should die when it gets into lungs then. If it's affected by water like that, anyway," said Cheerilee. Redheart furrowed her brow, trying to think.

"No," she said. "Not with the air so dry here." She looked gravely at Dr. Sun. "Any ponies that haven't been infected?"

"There's only a handful of ponies I've seen who haven't gotten the respiratory effects, myself included," said Dr. Sun. "I have no idea why. There doesn't seem to be anything in common."

"When did you get injured?" asked Redheart.

"About two days ago," replied Dr. Sun.

"And when did ponies start having problems?"

"About two days ago," said Dr. Sun.

"Check your bandages," said Redheart. Dr Sun unwrapped his own fetlock to find a similar red moss growing on his wound. He recoiled in disgust. "None of your potions or spells fixes it, but simple water kills the moss? You've been cleaning your wound with alcohol then?" Dr. Sun nodded, shaking his fetlock. "The ponies who aren't infected, most of them have come in for injuries right?"

"I... really don't know" said Dr. Sun. "I haven't treated that many wounds this week. Every pony seems to be too sick to be getting injured. The only ponies that come to mind are myself and Braeburn." He pulled a chart from the wall, and began flipping through it. Redheart joined him and found exactly what she was looking for. She pointed to the physical exam.

"In the past two days, there have been two injuries," said Redheart. "Your fetlock, and Braeburn's flank. Over the past three days, Pokey,

Cheerilee, and I had our own scrapes to contend with. I do think that these injuries have kept us safe.””

“I don’t follow,” said Pokey.

“Vaccination,” she said. “We’ve gotten the moss into our blood stream, so we’re immune to the respiratory effects. It’s kind of like anthrax; the respiratory form is deadly, while the cutaneous form is mildly irritating. We can be cured of it by a simple bath.” She turned to Dr. Sun, who had busied himself with washing his fetlocks. “What are you using to treat your respiratory patients?”

“Right now?” asked Dr. Sun. “Clean beds, sunshine, and fresh air. Nothing else seems to be doing any good.”

“Have you considered using a sauna?” asked Redheart. Dr. Sun stood there a moment. His brain turned over the idea for a moment when his eyes lit up.

“That’s brilliant,” he said. “But we’ve only got one sauna in town, and the entire population is infected. Even if we wanted to build more, most of the ponies that have the knowhow are far too sick to help.”

“Start rounding up the ponies who have the knowhow then,” said Redheart. “We’ve got to get Appleloosa back on its feet.”

By the time Redheart and the others had left the clinic, it was late enough that the restaurants had closed. The only place still open was the Salt Lick, which was a somewhat disreputable watering hole. Still, the ponies had to eat, and with Medley’s supplies gone, it was restaurants until they could resupply.

The ponies all felt much better after a bath, and true to Dr. Sun’s treatment, the moss had turned brown and fallen off. The Ponyville Trio sat around a table in a dark corner, as they looked over Cheerilee and Redheart’s notes. Cheerilee looked over the clay tablets the Hamite’s had given her. They were mostly children’s tales and pieces of creation myth. Her eyes wandered over a section about the Great Flood.

“You know, this moss reminds me of The Blight,” said Cheerilee.

“The Blight?” asked Pokey. “As in flood mythology, Biblical blight?”

"Exactly," said Cheerilee. "Almost every culture has piece of flood mythology." She pointed to the clay tablet. "The Hamties talk about the Great Waters, and the Diamond Dogs refer to it as the Great Bathing." Cheerilee searched through her saddlebag a moment before coming across her tattered copy of The Book of Celestia. She put it down in front of the ponies, pointing to a passage.

"And lo, did Celestia see that the Blight had conquered all the lands outside of Equestria, and the ponies of the plains had fallen victim to its taint," she preached, standing on her rear legs. "The land swallowed in a sea of Red, our goddess saw no way to save her home, but to flood the plains with a terrible rain that lasted for forty nights and forty days." A crowd of ponies stopped to listen to Cheerilee's oration.

"In the sacrifice of these lands did Celestia save Equestria from the red Blight, and make peace for ponies everywhere." She raised a hoof to the sky. "And thus did Luna order the creation of four stars in the heavens to save the land from Blight, and to spare the lives of those infected by its madness. Together as sisters, the goddesses ensured Blight would never again infect the lands, that the rains would never again be forced to wash clean the sins of Blight, as rain washes clean all sins of Equestria." A few ponies applauded Cheerilee's fine preaching before turning back to their drinks.

"You think these stones are the stars that Luna created?" asked Redheart.

"That... actually makes sense," said Pokey. "The Kin of Luna have always been told to look for gems and wealth. I'm guessing after the whole 'Nightmare Moon' incident, the Stones of Brilliance either got lost or stolen. This must have been what we were looking for." Pokey considered the implications for a minute. Many of the kin's actions suddenly made sense.

"Well then, we've got to find the Stones," said Redheart. "Ponies lives are at stake here, and we need to help them."

"I realize that," replied Pokey. "But how are we going to solve this town's problem and find the stone in time?" Cheerilee looked down at her notes. She reread the passage in her Book, then looked up at the ceiling. She smiled as the idea crept into her mind.

“We need to make it rain,” she said at last. She looked around the bar at all the earth ponies, and her smile faded. “We could really have used Medley because I don’t think there’s a single pegasus in Appleloosa.”

“There is another option,” said Redheart. “And it picks two apples with one hoof.”

Chapter Nine

Think Different

Just because you can't come up with a great idea doesn't mean that some other pony can't either

Medley's fetlocks chafed under the Diamond Dog's cuffs. She sat in the dark, trying to hold back her tears. Bella had begged Scratch to leave her alone, but he would have no part of it. The gyp had received a sharp slap for her insolence, and Medley found herself chained to a wall. She stared up through the grating into the night sky. If she could get free, she could fly away from here and leave this horrid place once and for all. If she did that, she wouldn't get the emerald. Without the emerald, this whole trek would have been pointless. She laid her head down on her hooves and tried to think.

What would Cheerilee do? She'd probably be able to sweet talk the Diamond Dogs out of the emerald, or institute some sort of rebellion. Medley didn't feel her oratory skills were up to the task, especially given her low position of bargaining. Diplomacy wasn't going to solve anything here at the moment.

Well, what would Pokey do then? He'd cut off the cuffs, then kill every last Diamond Dog, most likely. Medley grimaced at the very thought of such violence. She was no warrior, but when all you have is an razor, every problem looks like hairy chin. She didn't even have that gift, so that idea was out too.

What would Redheart do? She probably wouldn't have gotten herself into this mess to start with, that's for sure. Either that or she would have already had the others on some sort of gambit to rescue her and the emerald. Medley, of course hadn't thought that far ahead. She thought of all her friends as she tried to come up with anypony else who could solve her dilemma. She thought back to the train.

"What would War Jenny do?" she asked herself. Well, if she were War Jenny, she'd pick the locks on the cuffs and steal everything that wasn't nailed down. Medley looked at her cuffs for a moment, and thought back to the tunnels. She had taken a pin, and with a few quick turns of her

head, undone the lock of the cage. Could it really be that simple? Medley fished around in her mane for a moment before finding a bobby pin. She plucked the pin up in her teeth, and jammed it into the keyhole on her cuffs. A moment of unskilled fumbling later, and the cuff snapped open.

“You’re kidding me,” she said. “It’s that easy?”

She looked around for a moment, and undid her other cuff. She fluttered above the stone ground, and slipped out of the unguarded hallway that was her cell. She flapped around the corner only to duck back into the tunnel. Two burly Diamond Dogs walked past the tunnel. They were snarling about their routing at the hill. One mentioned that they should just eat the pegasus in payment for all the dogs lost there. The other slapped him.

“We need slaves more than we need a meal, you dolt!” he said. “How we gonna get diamonds and gems for the ladies if we ain’t got no slaves, huh?” The two beasts walked past Medley. They were paying more attention to their own ham handed violence than to the tunnel where the prisoner was supposed to be. She flapped out behind them, and flew toward the exit.

Some of the tunnels here had fresh timber supports, while others were simply rough cut stone. The Diamond Dog’s amazing claws could easily tear through rock, and it was clear they had expanded well into this cavern in just a few days. In the few hours she’d been a prisoner, she’d heard the crumbling rocks of excavation. She already recognized several new tunnels, some of which had been filled with barrels of water and other supplies.

Medley slipped into one, and miraculously found her saddlebags atop a heap of leather and skins. It stank of Diamond Dog, but it was reassuring to have her packs back. The secret pockets inside even had her purloined gems. She quietly stuffed some more gear into her bags: rope, a lantern, dried foods, some canteens. She turned around to leave, when a squat, simple looking Diamond Dog walked into her.

“Oy, what are you doing out here?” he bellowed. Medley grabbed a shovel off the wall and with a panicked swing, knocked the Diamond Dog off his feet. He slumped to the ground in a heap. Another Diamond Dog came running after the noise to find the first dog lying in the corner. He kicked the dog.

“Get up!” he yelled. The mutt staggered to his feet. “You think you can just go nappin’ on the job?”

“I saw that pony in here!” he protested. “She’s escaped!”

“No one gets out of those cuffs, you fool,” said the second dog. “I ought to have you whipped for bein’ so ignorant!” The first dog’s eyes darted around the room. There was no sign of the pegasus after all. Maybe he had imagined it. He left the supply cave and wandered down the tunnel, unsure of where his sudden headache had come from. Medley fluttered down from the ceiling and put the shovel back on its rack. That was too close, and she vowed not to get caught again. She fluttered out into the tunnel and toward the entrance.

What Medley found about Diamond Dogs was that they never looked up. Their sloped foreheads and heavy brows made it easier to stare at the floor. She made her way back to the nursery and crept past sleeping Diamond Dogs and fluttering by inattentive guards. The pups were all asleep, happily curled up with their mothers in their own separate dugouts. She passed Bella, who sported a brand new black eye.

Medley looked down at her and Pupp; guilt ate at the back of her mind. If she had left a minute earlier, neither one of them would have been in this predicament. On the other hand, she couldn’t just leave her here with an abusive sociopath. She fluttered up to Bella, and shook her gently. The copper coated gyp opened her eyes.

“What are you...” she lowered her voice. “What are you doing out here?” she hissed. “You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“I can’t just leave you here!” whispered Medley. “Come with me. There’s got to be a better life then this for you.” Bella gestured at all the sleeping dogs and pups.

“I can’t leave them,” said Bella. “They’re safe because of me. I stand up for them. Don’t worry about me, I can take it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” said Medley. “The way they treat you is unacceptable. Do you really want Pupp to grow up like that beast?” Medley gestured out toward the exit. “There’s an entire world out there full of possibilities. It took me this long to learn that just because you’re here, doesn’t mean you wouldn’t be better off somewhere else.”

“What about the rest of the women?” asked Bella. “Should I leave them behind to suffer the wrath of the men in my absence?”

“Well, no,” said Medley. She looked at all the sleeping pups. She grimaced as she tried to think like Cheerilee. Her brain feverishly cranked out an idea she had earlier that night. “Revolution!” she said at last, and a bit too loud. Several of the mothers raised their heads. Medley dove into the dugout, and hid under Bella’s blanket. The mothers set their heads back down. Bella lifted the blanket to find Medley covering her head.

“Are you out of your pony mind?” she whispered. “They would cut us to ribbons, and make our lives even worse. They shower us with gifts. All we have to do now is keep the children safe. So what if we can’t work? Or make decisions? Or...” Her voice trailed off hopelessly. “It’s not that bad.”

“Is it?” asked Medley. “Back in Ponyville, our mayor is a mare. The richest ponies in Equestria are mares. Our Goddess is a mare. There’s nothing that your men can do better than you. Are you just afraid because they’re bigger than you?”

“Somewhat,” admitted Bella. “Their claws can rip through rock, what would they do to us?”

“I’m betting yours can too, right?” asked Medley.

“Well, yes, but...”

“You think size matters?” asked Medley. “You know that massive Diamond Dog back at the hill?”

“Atlas, yes,” cringed Bella. “He was the worst of the lot; I’m glad he was never chief. He was too stupid to lead anything but his own tail. I have no idea what killed him, but it must have been a horrendous beast.”

“My friend Pokey did that,” said Medley. “He’s not much bigger than I am, but he has more fight in him than a dozen of your best warriors. Size doesn’t matter, Bella. It’s how much you want it.” She looked around uneasily. “And right now, I just want to get out of here.”

“Then leave us,” said Bella. “My mother lived this way, and her mother lived this way. We’ve been like this for generations. Most of the women here wouldn’t know what to do with freedom if they got it.” Medley sighed, and came out from under the blankets.

"I can't force you to come with me," said Medley. "But I want you think about it."

"I promise I will," said Bella. "Now get out of here before you get caught."

Medley fluttered out of the nursery and toward the cave entrance. The tunnel here had been reinforced with fresh timbers, and the walls had been expertly graded. The construction here was already superior to the previous cave, probably to prevent any errant pony heroes from wrecking this one. Medley poked her head out into the entryway; a massive round boulder had been rolled in from the cavern entrance. She cursed under her breath. Medley fluttered back down the nursery to ask Bella if there was another exit, when she ran head first into Scratch.

"Hello, Poppet," he croaked. "Out for a midnight stroll are we?" He bared his grimy claws at the pegasus. Medley fluttered backwards into the cavern as the dog's booming steps awoke every single mother and pup. Other Diamond Dogs awoke and flooded into the cavern entry. Now Medley was trapped and surrounded. She looked about the room. Redheart would have had a plan for this. What would Redheart do?

"Any last words before I make your hide into a rug?" growled the Diamond Dog.

"Don't hurt her!" barked Bella.

"Shut it woman!" bellowed Scratch. The Diamond Dog violently backhanded the gyp into a wall with a powerful blow. Bella fell to the ground, concussed into silence. Medley's mind furiously pounded out a plan. It was a long shot, but it was all she had.

"I said, you got any last words, pony?"

"I challenge you!" said Medley. Her voice wavered. "I challenge you for leadership of the Diamond Dog tribe!" A murmur ran through the gathered crowd of dogs. A pony? Challenging a Diamond Dog? Absurd! Scratch chuckled. His gravelly voice set Medley's teeth on edge.

"Little pony, you have no idea who you're messing with do you?" demanded the dog. "I am Scratch, fiercest of the Diamond Dog's, victor over scores of mutts and curs. You are but a harmless little pony, what can you even do against me?"

"I'm sure that's what Atlas thought, too," shot back Medley. She found confidence in her boast. "All that tells me is that you're afraid of me. Who wants such a weakling for a chief that he won't even fight a pony? And a mare at that!" Medley stood with her wings outstretched at the center of the cavern. A ring of Diamond Dogs surrounded her and the chief. The room again filled with ripples of dissent.

"Silence!" demanded Scratch. The room felt silent at his bellow. "You shall have your challenge, Pony." He pointed a rusty claw at Medley. "And I shall have your hide."

"Then we fight tomorrow at noon," said Medley.

"Then we fight with claws!" shouted Scratch.

"Then we fight outside!" shouted back Medley.

"Then we fight to the death!" roared Scratch.

"Accepted!" bellowed Medley. She scarcely believed what she had just agreed to.

"I choose my second as Blade!" growled Scratch.

"I'm sorry, second?" asked Medley. "Oh! A second. Um... I choose Bella!" calling out the only name she knew here.

Satisfied with the terms of the duel, the Diamond Dogs dispersed. Medley was left alone in the cavern entrance with the copper coated gyp. She helped Bella to her feet, and escorted her back to her dug out.

"Are you insane?" asked Bella. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"I'll be fine," said Medley. "As soon as we get outside, I'm going to bolt and..."

"You can't do that!" protested Bella. "I am your second! That means I will have to fight in your stead!"

"Is that what that means?" asked Medley. Her eyes widened in panic. "Oh my goddess, I didn't know."

"Your heart is in the right place," said Bella. "But your mouth keeps writing checks your flank can't cash."

"You have banks?" asked Medley. She had no idea where the gyp would have even learned such an idiom.

"What's a bank?" asked Bella.

"Never mind," sighed Medley. "I need to get some sleep. Big day tomorrow. Only get killed once you know." *Or in my case, twice*, she thought to herself.

Medley spent the night curled up with Bella and Pupp. She slept better than she had in days with a child by her side, and awoke late the next morning to the sweet sunshine of a new day. It looked to be a beautiful day.

She gazed out into the dusty wasteland and thought hard about her future. On one hoof, she could fight, and possibly get herself killed. There would be no divine intervention this time, and no pony would ever know what had happened to her. On the other hoof, she could run away, and leave Bella to die in her place. That would leave Pupp without a mother. Neither solution was acceptable.

She thought back to the train and realized that War Jenny been right all along. She was trying to protect her. And what that donkey even mean "in her condition?" Medley suddenly felt sick to her stomach. She retched, and lost her breakfast behind a rock. She retched again as she tried to remember what War Jenny had said.

Don't you city ponies every pay attention? echoed War Jenny's voice. Medley suddenly put two and two together. She began scratching at the dirt with a hoof. She was counting days. Medley came up with the number forty seven. Medley slumped into the dirt.

"Shit."

She sat outside a moment before Bella and Pupp walked outside. The gyp stopped and turned to the pegasus. Bella tried to analyze the look of shock on her face.

"What's wrong?" asked Bella.

"Forty seven days," she said. Bella furrowed her brow trying to understand the pegasus. Was this some sort of code?

"I... what?" asked Bella, nervously. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Fourty seven days," said Medley. "That's twelve days late."

"Late for wha..." Bella stopped. Her jaw dropped as the meaning of the numbers came to her. "You cannot fight! I won't allow it!"

"If I don't fight, you will," said Medley. "I'm not about to risk your life for mine."

"You're risking your child's life too!" shouted Bella. A few of the other mothers perked up at Bella's shouting. They surrounded Medley.

"You're with child?" asked a ginger coated gyp. "You cannot fight like that! Why would you have even come here?"

"I didn't know!" wailed Medley. "Oh goddess, what am I going to do?" She paced around the dirt under Celestia's sun. Noon was rapidly approaching. She put her hooves to her head. She needed to think of a brilliant plan. What would Cheerilee do? Or Redheart? Or War Jenny? None of their advice came to mind as Medley's thoughts swirled in her head. A voice boomed from the tunnels.

"It is time," called Scratch. "Where is my future rug?"

The mothers backed away. from Scratch. Some pushed Medley into the bushes. Others stood in front of the bushes to obscure the turquoise pony from the chief and his cronies. Scratch strutted out of the cavern, prancing like a peacock. He wore an ornately quilted vest with metal plates sewn into the patterns of violent imagery. On his right shoulder pad were at least twenty deep scratches of tally marks. Medley stared from the bushes as the scene unfolded. "The fight is going to begin, with or without you little pony," taunted Scratch. "Where are you?"

"She is with child!" shouted Bella, her hackles raised. "I will not let you fight her!"

"If there is no fight, then she will be my slave again!" taunted Scratch. "You think I have no mercy? Two ponies are better than one for digging. Put her back in irons, and all is forgiven."

"No," growled Bella.

"Then you will fight?" he asked. "She has left you to die in her stead? How brave! Now you see why we use ponies as slaves and food!" He laughed viciously, and the other Diamond Dogs laughed with him.

Bella leapt at Scratch. She landed a ferocious bite; Her teeth sank her teeth deep into his arm. Bella swung her back legs around and kicked. The vicious scratch tore one of the plates from his armor. Scratch came back with a underhanded swipe. His rusty claws glanced the gyps coat and threw copper fur everywhere. Bella dodged backward, and swept the monstrous dog's legs from under him.

Scratch fell backwards, knocked flat by the gyps kick. She pounced on his chest, and went for the throat. A vicious paw scythed through Bella's coat and filled her copper fur with streaks of crimson. The blow threw her off his chest. Scratch bounded to his feet, and charged Bella with a two handed uppercut sent her tumbling to the ground.

Medley tore through the bushes and past the mothers trying to protect her. She jumped in front of Bella. Her wings were flared in defiance. She knew exactly who to think like now. What would Pokey do? Pokey would end this clown using every dirty trick in the book.

"You touch her again," growled Medley, "and I promise that I will end you."

"So the pony appears!" laughed Scratch. "I now get to kill two ponies instead of one! What a great day to be me!"

His words stuck in Medley's ears as his crony's hollow laughter echoed behind him. It didn't matter that he threatened her. It didn't matter that he'd threatened Bella. It didn't even matter than he was twice her size, and twice her weight. What mattered is that he dared to threaten the life inside her. The beast struck at Medley; she dashed to the side and lined up a charge. Scratch picked up Bella's head and, held his claws to the gyp's throat.

"Give up now," he demanded. "Or your friend dies." Medley stomped a hoof.

Like a bolt of lightning Medley dashed across the dirt. Medley caught Scratch in the chest with both hooves, and slammed him into the side of the cave. Scratch heaved as the wind was taken from his lungs. Medley grabbed the dog's ornate vest, and with a vicious head-butt, blasted off the ground. Fueled by unbridled rage, she rocketed toward the river. The cave became a speck on the ground below. She stood on a low hanging cloud,

and held the cur out above the swirling waters. Scratch finally recovered enough to look down.

“What are you doing?” he shrieked. Medley locked eyes with the Diamond Dog; his pupils went wide in fear.

“Ending your reign of terror,” said Medley. “Bella and Pupp shouldn’t have to live in fear of beatings and repression from you or anyone else.” She grabbed the emerald collar with her teeth, and tore from around his neck. “I told you what would happen if you touched her again,” she growled. “And ponies don’t break promises.” She shoved Scratch from the cloud. She watched in triumph as he plunged into the churning waters below.

Medley touched down a few minutes later amid the gathered crowd of confused Diamond Dogs. She unfurled her wings, presenting the sacred Emerald of Brilliance held in her teeth. The Diamond Dogs, male and female both, bowed to her. Bella hobbled up to her.

“You did it!” she cheered. “You actually did it!”

“I’m not even sorry,” she said. “I guess that makes me a murderer.”

“You’re not a murderer, Medley,” Bella reassured her. “You’re a hero. Scratch thought he was fighting a weak mare, one who would follow the rules, and cower after the first blow.” She looked up at Medley, her eyes wide with awe. “He didn’t realize that ponies aren’t weak. You have shown us all a better way, Chief Medley.” Bella bowed to Medley, and backed away. She looked down at the emerald in her mouth. She was their chief now, wasn’t she? She put the collar in her saddle bag, and flapped into the air to address the Diamond Dogs.

“Diamond Dogs,” she announced. “I am not your chief any more than I am one of you. I came here to retrieve the emerald your people stole from my goddess centuries ago.” She looked out on the crowd of dogs as she held their rapt attention. “Look at your lives. Look at your ways. Just because you’ve always done something doesn’t mean you have to keep doing it.” She pointed to the gyps. “Look at your family and ask yourself if you would want them to suffer the slavery that you are so willing put on others.” She pointed to the men. “Look at your wives and mothers. Don’t they have ideas that would make you stronger and better?” She addressed the crowd as a whole now.

"I've seen what Diamond Dogs can be. Whatever Scratch was, whatever Altas was, that's not it. You can be more than savages and raiders. You can be a force of good, a source of wealth and inspiration to your kind. You're not evil; you just don't know anything else. Maybe a new leader can teach you something different." Medley turned at last to Bella. "You were willing to die for me and my child. I can't thank you enough."

"You brought back my baby to me," said Bella. "Consider us even."

"The Diamond Dogs need a leader, and you're the only one willing to stand up for the weak," said Medley. "Will you lead in my place?"

"What if I'm not strong enough?" asked Bella. "What of the challenges? I am no fighter."

"Then abolish the challenges," said Medley. "You're the ruler now. They'll follow you." She put a hoof on the gyp's shoulder. "Raise this tribe like you would a child. Nourish them and help them grow to their potential, just like you would for Pupp."

Medley took to the sky towards Bridleburg, and left the Diamond Dogs to their new future. Bella watched her fly away and smiled happily. Such a promising young pegasus would surely make an excellent mother again.

Chapter Ten

The Dances of the Skies

Only when you let go can you find freedom

Redheart was amazingly chipper about wandering out into the buffalo territories. She hummed most of the way through the canyon. Pokey was left sorely annoyed. Cheerilee studied maps of the region as Redheart led the herd across the desert floor.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" asked Cheerilee. "I'd hate to wind up like, well, him." She nodded to a dessicated buffalo skull in the sand.

"We've got three days worth of fresh water," said Pokey. "And we both know this region like the back of our hooves. Stop worrying so much."

"Worrying is what I do," said Cheerilee. "It's not every day you walk out into an infectious wasteland."

"We've been vaccinated," replied Redheart. She had been unable to remove the smile from her face. "And besides, I think you'll really enjoy the buffalo. They're extraordinary folk."

They walked past yet another moss covered boulder towards the distant plume of smoke when Pokey stopped suddenly. He turned back into the dessert. Redheart and Cheerilee turned to look at whatever he was facing.

"What is it?" whispered Cheerilee.

"You can come out now, Little Strong Heart," called Pokey. A young buffalo appeared from behind the rocks; her khaki hide stood out in sharp contrast to the moss covered rocks.

"You may actually be getting better as you get older," smiled the buffalo. "And Miss Redheart, I know that every buffalo will be happy to see you again" Pokey shook hooves with the young buffalo, and introduced Cheerilee.

“Cheerilee is a school teacher,” he said. “She’s a scholar of ancient Equestrian history and non-pony cultures.”

“A pleasure,” said Cheerilee. “How long have you been following us?”

“Not too long,” she admitted. “With all this red dirt, it’s much harder to hide.”

“That’s actually what we’re here about,” said Redheart. “How is the herd fairing?”

“Not too well,” admitted Little Strong Heart. “We’re not as sick as the Appleosans yet, but we’re getting there.” She looked around the landscape, her eyes filled with worry and doubt. “It’s going to get worse isn’t it?”

“Not if we can help it,” said Pokey.

With Little Strong Heart at the lead, the ponies came to the village in short order. Tepees rose into the sky, staked to the moss covered ground in small groups. A few buffalo were scraping the moss from their tepees, while others wandered the village looking for ways to help. A few buffalo jumped to alert at the presence of ponies, but relaxed when they saw just who had come to visit. A buffalo approached the group. His coat was a dusty brown, and though he was smaller than most of the buffalo, he still towered over the ponies.

“It is an honor to see you again,” he said. He bowed his horned head. Redheart stared deep into buffalo’s dark eyes for a moment.

“A pleasure as always, Plains Strider,” she said at last. Cheerilee thought she heard sadness in the greeting. She turned to see a tear forming in the corner of Redheart’s eye. Redheart caught her staring, and affixed a smile. “May we speak to Chief Thunderhooves?”

“I will let him know you have arrived,” said the buffalo. He nodded to Pokey, who simply nodded back. A few children came barreling from the tepees. They ran circles around the hooves of the ponies.

“Miss Redheart is back!” one of the khaki coated buffalo called. The children shouted and danced around her. Redheart leaned down to nuzzle the calves.

"I'm so happy to see all of you again," she said. "I missed you all so much!"

"Oh wow!" shouted a deep brown buffalo calf. "It's really him! He's really here!" The young boys stared in reverence at Pokey.

"I'm beginning to feel like the odd pony out," teased Cheerilee. "I had no idea you were so revered among the buffalo."

"Are you kidding?" asked one of the buffalo. She had been scraping moss off her tepee. "Pokey is a legendary warrior among the buffalo. He and Miss Redheart come out this way at least twice a year, although she probably shouldn't." There was venom in that statement, and Cheerilee felt its sting. The buffalo stopped scraping for a moment, and looked at Cheerilee. "I don't believe we've met."

"I'm Cheerilee," introduced the pony. "I'm a teacher, and amateur cultural anthropologist."

"A mare of letters," snorted the cow. "I am the medicine cow, Standing Grass. What brings you out this way? A book you're writing? A magazine article perhaps?"

"Nothing of the sort, actually," said Cheerilee. "We're here on an assignment from Princess Celestia, and, on a related note, to help with the Red Dirt." The cow huffed dismissively.

"Good luck with that," she sneered. "I've done everything I can to try to fix it, but nothing seems to work. Baths only kill the moss on the skin's surface. Once it's in the lungs, there is no hope."

"Actually..." said Cheerilee.

"It's a good thing the buffalo are made of sterner stuff than you ponies," interrupted Standing Grass. "I hope you don't die out here. I really don't know anything of your burial rituals." Cheerilee was too flabbergasted by the buffalo's rudeness to react. Standing Grass wandered away just as Chief Thunderhooves arrived to greet the ponies. The massive umber coated buffalo greeted the ponies with a raised hoof. The ponies returned the greeting.

"Greetings," boomed Chief Thunderhooves in his usual monotone. Pokey groaned, preparing for the chief's traditional introduction. "For many moons we have greeted you pony folk as friends of our tribe. Much have

we learned from your wisdom, Miss Heart of Red, and too your courage, Horn of Black. For eons we..."

"Chief, can we skip this part?" asked Little Strong Heart. "I think they're actually here for a reason, not a social call."

"Oh," replied the mud colored buffalo. "Very well then, what brings you back again to our home, friends?" Redheart stepped forward and bowed to the chief.

"We have come to ask for the Sapphire of Brilliance," said Redheart. "Our Goddess Celestia has need of the stones, and has sent us on a quest to find them." Chief Thunderhooves nodded thoughtfully.

"I would happily give it to you, Heart of Red," said Thunderhooves. "But we no longer have it. We gave it to a researcher from your city of Canterlot two summers back." He looked to the sky as if to summon a memory. "She said that the Princess had need of it then too. I thought I mentioned that when you two were here that summer." He scratched a hoof to his chin. "Kind of rude, now that I remember it. She had an unusual name. I believe it was Ingrid Marie." Cheerilee's jaw dropped.

"You've got to be kidding me," she blurted. "That nag was out here?"

"Cheerilee!" admonished Redheart. "Language!"

"Sorry, sorry," apologized Cheerilee. "That... mare has been a thorn in my side since she was my professor." Cheerilee's brow furrowed in disgust. "My apologies, Chief Thunderhooves; my language is wholly inappropriate for such refined company."

"No offense taken," replied Thunderhooves. "I didn't care much for her either. No matter!" He clopped his hooves together. "We will have a tepee set up for our guests, and a celebration in honor of your return." The herd cheered.

"That's really not necessary," said Pokey.

"Actually a celebration is quite in order," said Redheart. "Chief, I need to speak with Dancing Hooves about a rain dance." Thunderhooves shook his head and stared at the ground.

"She will not be able to help you," he replied. "Her time is near, and the Red Dirt has taken its toll on her fragile body." Redheart was taken

back at Thunderhooves words. "She will not be able to perform the Dances of the Skies, and none of our calves have the spirit of dance to learn what she has to teach."

"Oh no," gasped Redheart. "Please, let me look at her. Perhaps there's something I can do."

"You are welcome to try, Heart of Red," said Thunderhooves. "Standing Grass has done all she can. You may find Dancing Hooves in her tent."

"Thank you chief," said Redheart, sadly. "I'm sure we'll see you this evening. In the mean time, I'll see what I can do to comfort Dancing Hooves." She turned back to Pokey and Cheerilee.

"I wish I had actually paid attention in my Buffalo Studies class," said Cheerilee. "I was far too distracted that semester by this fantastic grey stallion..." She gazed at the sky dreamily for a moment.

"I thought you dated mares in college?" asked Pokey.

"THAT WAS A PHASE," snapped Cheerilee. "Sleep with one or two mares, and apparently you're a vanilla frosting lesbian for life! Sheesh!" A few buffalo turned to stare at Cheerilee.

"At any rate," said Redheart, trying to pull the conversation back to the matter at hand. "The rain dance is made up of two parts."

"Wait," interrupted Cheerilee. "The Dance of the Skies is an actual dance? I thought it was just a metaphor for the ceremony and prayers."

"How well did you do in that class anyway?" asked Pokey.

"I got a C," admitted Cheerilee. "The Buffalo just weren't that interesting to me back then." One of the passing cows stopped and shot her a dirty look. "No offense," she apologized. "Now the Zebras, there's a fascinating bunch of equines."

"You're a curious pony," said Pokey. "I'm glad I've gotten to know you."

"Well thank you, dear," said Cheerilee. She turned back to Redheart. "Now about this dance."

“Right,” said Redheart. “It consists of two parts: The Meeting of the Land and Sky, and the Call to the Clouds. The Call to the Clouds is done first by one dancer. The Meeting of the Land and Sky comes next and requires a partner.”

“Okay,” said Cheerilee, processing the information. “So, the one dancer who can do both these dances...”

“Is currently ill,” finished Redheart.

The ponies started trotting to Dancing Hooves’ tent. Signs of the mosses spread were everywhere in the village. The dirt had been tinged red with its taint, and many of the buffalo bore swaths of vermillion moss on their backs. The ones who didn’t were pale and sickly. Though the buffalo were larger than the ponies, they too were succumbing to the effects of the moss.

“I’ll see if she can teach one of the calves the dances,” said Redheart. “I don’t know that we’ll be able to find any buffalo that can do both parts though.”

“Does it have to be buffalo?” asked Cheerilee. Her mind churned along on an idea. Redheart looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m betting it’s never been done.”

“Since when has something being impossible factored into this trip?” asked Pokey.

“There’s no harm in asking,” said Redheart. She grabbed the tent flap in her teeth and held it open for the ponies to pass inside.

The inside of the tepee was surprisingly roomy and pleasant. The walls were covered in tribal designs, and tally marks of years gone past. A mural of the Buffalo’s history graced the far wall of the tent, and a small fire burned in the center. A woven grass mat lay on the ground, with a silvery-umber buffalo resting quietly on it.

“Dancing Hooves?” asked Redheart quietly. The cow opened her eyes, and glance at her visitors.

“Oh,” she said. It was clear she was trying to sound happy. “Oh, my dear Heart of Red, you’ve come to see me off to the final stampeding grounds have you?”

"That wasn't my plan," said Redheart. "I came here to help cure you."

"It is far too late for that, child." The buffalo coughed with such intensity that Redheart feared she might pass before their very eyes. "I am an old cow, and I have been an old cow since before I met you." She squinted at the two ponies standing in her home. "Ah, Horn of Black! I knew I'd see you again before I passed. Is this mulberry filly your wife?"

"Sweet mercy of Luna, no," replied Pokey; Cheerilee punched him. She hit surprisingly hard for a mare. "This is Cheerilee," he said as she rubbed his shoulder. "She's a teacher and a dancer, much like you." The buffalo eyes widened, and her smile grew.

"Ah, a dancer!" she said. Dancing hooves tried to get to her feet. "Have you a spirit of music, and a heart of dance?"

"Music has brought me joy all my life," said Cheerilee. "And dance has taken over my spirit when I let it run."

"I was hoping you could teach us the Dances of the Skies," said Redheart. Dancing Hooves nodded solemnly.

"The Call to the Clouds is tricky, and must be performed precisely," said Dancing Hooves. "I have not been able to teach it to a single member of my herd, and I fear the dance will die with me." She looked up at Cheerilee. "But I think you may have the spirit to learn. What is your name?"

"I'm Cheerilee," she said.

"No, Cheerilee, what is your spirit's name?" corrected the buffalo. "What is the name your spirit calls when when you set yourself to dance? What do you feel when the music takes you?" Cheerilee's thoughts darted around in her mind, trying to understand what she was asking. What took over when she danced? What had she always done when her spirit came alive in the fires of movement?

"Prancing Crimps," she said suddenly. "I always had my hair in crimps whenever I danced. The music and my mane filled my spirit with fire." The buffalo smiled knowingly.

"Then you are Prancing Crimps to our tribe," said Dancing Hooves. "You shall learn my Call to the Clouds. The other dance, I cannot teach you for your spirit of joy will not take the lesson to heart. The Meeting of the

Land and Sky requires sorrow.” She pointed a hoof at Redheart. “You, however, already know it, and you already have a partner.” Redheart’s smiling face turned to sorrow in a single moment.

“How dare you,” she choked. “You know I can’t.”

“If you are to call the rains, then you must,” said Dancing Hooves. “I will teach Prancing Crimps the Call to the Clouds, and tonight we will prepare to call the rain.” Redheart threw the flap open and galloped into the camp. Cheerilee gave a confused look to Pokey.

“I think I need to have a word with her,” said Pokey and he followed after Redheart.

Pokey found Redheart a few minutes later. She was playing a game of tag with the children. She had on her best fake smile to hide tears. She chased after the children. They squealed in delight as they avoided her.

“Don’t let the pony get you!” called Redheart. The children giggled and screamed around her. They came in close, and then ran away again. She tagged one with a hoof, then dodged away. “You’re it! Now catch me!”

“Redheart, can I talk to you?” asked Pokey. She shot the fake smile at him.

“Can’t you see I’m playing tag?” she asked.

“Hey kids,” said Pokey. “I’ll give five bits to whoever can find me a snipe.”

“Whoa, five bits?” asked a khaki buffalo calf. “Come on, I know where I can find one!” The children stampeded away. Pokey and Redheart were left standing alone in the field.

“Level with me,” he said. “What’s really wrong?”

“I... can’t talk about it,” choked Redheart. She looked away. “Not in the open at least.”

“Then let’s take a walk,” said Pokey.

Redheart and Pokey walked in silence out of the village. One hoof in front of another, they walked to a spot where no one would hear them, and no one would pry. They stopped a few hundred yards away, surrounded by

the moss covered rocks and tumbleweeds. There wasn't another soul around for a quarter of a mile.

"I'm in love," blurted Redheart.

"Not with me?" asked Pokey. She glared in rage at the unicorn.

"Are you ever not a complete ass?" snarled Redheart.

"I'm sorry," he said, quietly. "I have no right to be inconsiderate."

"The problem is..." she looked back to the village. "I in love with a buffalo," Pokey seemed unsurprised. "Oh, don't tell me you find it abhorrent, too" said Redheart. "I've gotten enough of that from every pony else." Pokey only shook his head.

"Not at all," replied Pokey. "I've never loved anyone but ponies, but when the spirit of love finds you, it doesn't fall along lines of reason. Ponies, mules, or even buffalo; love brings hearts together, no matter who they belong to." He looked out to the mesas. "Back when Trixie and I ran with the Kin of Luna, I knew a Diamond Dog and a zebra who were devoted to each other, heart and soul." He looked back to Redheart. "So how did you meet?"

"I was here doing charity work," reminisced Redheart. "I thought that going out and teaching civilized medicine to the savages would look good on my resume."

"Savages?" asked Pokey. "Really?"

"I was a foolish filly back then," said Redheart. "I used to think they were filthy, brutish creatures with barely a spark of sentience. But I got here and found all this." She gestured out to the mesas and the rolling scrubs lands of the desert. "And then I actually met them. I learned about their ceremonial magic and tribal cures. I started to understand their language, their culture. I began to understand them. And that's when I met Plain Strider." She looked into the mesas, her eyes filling with years of onrushing memories.

"You were there at the council of tribes weren't you?" asked Pokey.

"I was," said Redheart. "I remember that armor of yours, and how good it looked on you. If I hadn't met Plains Strider, I probably would have wound up in your bed that night."

"You tell me this years later," scoffed Pokey. "Thanks."

"Oh hush," admonished Redheart. "It's not like we didn't spend plenty of time together later. Anyway, the medicine bulls had gathered to discuss new treatments for the pox that had come up from the south."

"If I recall correctly," said Pokey, "The Kin of Luna got blamed for that, until you proved it was a Diamond Dog infection."

"Yes, that was quite a misunderstanding," sighed Redheart. "But that's where I met him. He was a messenger. Everything about him just spoke to me. His kind eyes, his soft voice, his charming wit. I just fell mane over hooves for him." She shrugged. "I don't know why, I never found any other buffalo attractive in the least. There's just something about him." Pokey nodded silently as he took in her story. "After that, I tried to come out here as often as possible. We met in secret out here in the plain, talking for hours, and making love under the stars." Redheart looked up; Pokey deliberately avoided her eyes. "We had been meeting in secret for years when we were finally found out."

"Standing Grass," said Pokey. Redheart nodded

"She said our love was forbidden." She choked on her confession as she tried to find the words. "She told me that we were to never see each other again, and if I came near him, she would kill him to preserve his honor." She looked up at Pokey, her beautiful blue-grey eyes filling with tears. "But I couldn't stay away. I had to see him. I still came back to the tribe as often as I could, every time staying in the village under her hateful gaze. I couldn't be with him anymore, but I could see him." She looked up at Pokey as tears streamed down her muzzle. "And that was enough, I guess."

"So you've been torturing yourself all these years by coming out here," said Pokey, staring out into the setting sun. "And those times on the train you and I spent together?"

"I wished you had been him," sobbed Redheart. Pokey simply nodded and put a hoof around his companion. Redheart bawled into his shoulders. Sobs of regret wracked her body. Her crying left tear stains on Pokey's soft blue coat. He held her in silence. The years of misery and pain ran through her sobs as if a damn had burst. "I'm sorry Pokey," she wept.

"All these years I've used you to torture myself with what I can't have. I knew how you felt, but I just couldn't give up on him."

"I forgive you," said Pokey. He stared into the distance. "Love makes us do strange things. Plain Strider loved you the same all this time, even when he knew about us." She looked up at Pokey in shock.

"You told him?" gasped Redheart.

"He asked me to look after you," Pokey admitted. "I moved to Ponyville at his instance to keep an eye on you and to keep you safe. I had a feeling about you two, which is why I told him what happened."

"And what did he say?"

"He said that he was glad you had found comfort, even if it wasn't with him."

Redheart sniffed looked back at the village through her tears of regret. All this time, and yet here she stood at the same impasse she had stood at before. Could things really be different this time? Was that what was supposed to happen?

"Do you think he still loves me?" Redheart asked. "After all these years? After everything that's happened?"

"Plain Strider loves you more than you can imagine," said Pokey. "I know you haven't spoken more than greetings in years, but I have. He wants nothing more than to be with you, but he made me promise to never tell." His head sank to Redheart's shoulder. "And ponies don't break promises." He closed his eyes, and tried to find the words to apologize. "I should have told you. I haven't been a very good friend to you, and I'm sorry."

They stood in the grass for a long time. Redheart tried to make sense of it all while Pokey stood as her pillar of support. He looked back at the tribe as the sun dipped low behind the horizon.

"I suppose we should be getting back to the tribe," Pokey said at last. He helped Redheart to her hooves, and wiped the tears of regret from her eyes. She tried to read his face. There was sadness there too, but it was the pain of loss rather than the pain of regret that hid behind his yellow eyes. She slipped the brilliant diamond from around her neck, and put it around Pokey's instead. She touched his chest, and looked into his eyes.

"Whatever happens, promise you won't hate me for what I've done," sniffed Redheart.

"I could never hate you," he said. "No matter what, I want you to be happy."

They walked in silence back to the tepees. The celebration was already getting underway as darkness took the sky. Buffalo sang and danced; they told stories of great triumphs and of the spirit's victories. They found Cheerilee dressed in feathers and beads as she emerged from Dancing Hooves's tepee. Her mane had been crimped, and she stood smiling from ear to ear. Pokey and Redheart stared in shock.

"I am ready for this," beamed Cheerilee. "I hope I've got these moves down right; I'd hate to call up a snow storm."

"You'll be fine, dear," said Dancing Hooves as she shuffled from her tepee. "Prancing Crimps has the spirit of a true dancer. I am glad to have passed my dance to her before I leave this world." She looked at Redheart. "Are you ready to do your part?" Redheart looked at Pokey, who only nodded in silence. He disappeared into the village with a purpose.

"Yes I am," she said.

Dancing Hooves shuffled over to Chief Thunderhooves and whispered in his ear. He held his hooves up, and the gathered crowd became silent.

"Heart of Red and Horn of Black have asked for our help," he boomed. "They have asked us to call forth the rains to save the ponies of Appleloosa, and to cleanse this red dirt from our home." The crowd cheered and stomped their hooves. They hooted at the rising moon and the skies above. "But none of my tribe have the spirit of dance needed to call the rain," he said. The crowd murmured, and looked embarrassed for its failings. Guilty glances passed between them.

"This is not the fault of member any of our tribe," Thunderhooves continued. "The spirits can be fickle, and their blessings may not come when we need them too. Dancing Hooves has found a spirit able to carry the Calling of the Clouds." He raised his hooves to the sky and summoned the crowd to join the circle. "Gather, buffalo. Gather now and listen to the tale of the clouds, and watch their dance. Give now your songs and prayers to the sky as Prancing Crimps fills our circle with the spirit of dance." He

noded to Cheerilee. She stretched her hocks, ready to dazzle the Buffalo as they began a singing chant

“Long ago when the world was young,” boomed Thunderhooves, as the chanting filled the night. “The sky and the land were as one.” Cheerilee danced on her back hooves. She threw her fetlocks in the air and spun in a circle as the chief continued his story. “But the land and sky knew they could not be together if life were to graze upon the plains, and soar into the heavens.” She pranced from hoof to hoof around the fire as she swept her arms, and leaned toward the licking flames.

“As the world separated, clouds formed at their split.” Cheerilee cocked her arms, and shook her fetlocks as she danced around the fire. “The clouds are the children of earth and sky. They are land to those who can reach them, and but wisps of vapor to the children of the land.” She leaped over the fire and spun as her arms stretched for the heavens. Cheerilee landed on her feet, and slowly twirled around the fire ring

Her beads and feathers trailed behind her and wrapped the mulberry pony in soft whiteness that resembled a cloud. She felt lighter on her hooves as she twirled. She swooped in great arcs across the fire ring.

Cheerilee felt herself becoming the spirit of the clouds. She whipped in circles as the buffalo chanted and sang around her. The moistening air filled with the hum of a dozen mantras. The night air practically sang with electricity as clouds rolled in from the distance.

High above, the clouds heard the ceremony and came to listen to their tale. The sky filled with darkness, and blocked out the waxing moon. Appleloosa Valley was covered in shadows, and the night grew darker still as the clouds rolled in.

Cheerilee continued her dance. More clouds to the valley than had been seen in ages came to watch their story. Cheerilee felt the spirits of the sky watching her as she danced with every ounce of her spirit. She threw her hooves to the sky as the clouds above rumbled their approval. Thunderhooves looked to Dancing Hoofs. The graying buffalo nodded, and the chief continued his tale.

“We have called the clouds to watch us now,” he whispered. The songs of the buffalo had become a hushed hymn. “But to bring forth their tears, we must remind them of the story of their parents.”

Redheart appeared from Dancing Hooves's tent. She wore the blue robes of ceremony that represented the sky. Plain Strider appeared from the other side of the ring. He was wearing the wheat colors of the earth. They danced opposite the ring. They reached out across the fire to each other, and inches apart, they circled the flames

Standing Grass moved to protest, but found herself shoved back down by an angry hoof. Pokey glared at the cow. His horn glowed with inky black light to punctuate the unspoken threat. The buffalo growled at him, but said nothing.

Plains Strider and Redheart danced around the circle. They came close together, only to be driven apart again by the grace of their movements. For every step they took toward each other, they took another two back. They spun, and reached again over the flames in agonizing proximity before they pulled away. A drop of rain fell between them. Thunderhooves continued his tale.

"The sky and the land are two estranged lovers forced to watch as the other passes by," sang Thunderhooves. Plains Strider and Redheart swept past each other. They came within a hair of touching. The white pony and the dusty brown buffalo swirled again. Back to back they stood, then stepped away. They turned and locked eyes in a shared memory. The flames flicked and spattered in protest as the clouds above trickled rain upon the ceremony. Thunderhooves voice became song as he prayed to the heavens above

"For the creatures of land and creatures of sky to be," sang Thunderhooves, "the lovers must remain apart, forever destined to watch the other from afar." Redheart and Plains Strider danced to each other. They avoided touch only by the sheerest of divides. Redheart's robes brushed against Plains Strider. They stepped back one final time, their hooves outstretched to each other, and to the heavens. They touched with but an iota of contact. They stared across the divide, and their eyes fixed on the other.

"Thus ends the tale of the earth and sky, and because their love can never be, the heavens weep for them."

Lightning and thunder wailed from far away. It filled the plains with the shocks of light and echoing booms of sorrow. The clouds burst forth

and sobbed torrents of rain onto the valley. The clouds filled the sky with endless lightening. The buffalo darted for their tents.

Redheart and Plain Strider stood alone in the downpour. Their hooves still touched as the sky fell around them. In that moment, among the lightening and the rain, they found each other again. Redheart pulled Plain Strider close, and pressed her lips to his.

Pokey was sopping wet when he entered the tent. He didn't bother to shake off he simply stared back into the downpour. Cheerilee stood near the fire. She was near vibrating with elation. She had removed her ceremonial garb, and was wringing out her feathered dress. She chattered happily when she saw Pokey enter.

"Can you believe it?" asked Cheerilee. She was still grinning. "We actually called the rain! I haven't danced like that in my entire life. And Redheart! Celestia above; the passion in her dance! I had no idea!" Pokey stared into the village. He was barely listening to the pounding rains or to Cheerilee jubilation. She walked to the flap to see just what he was staring at.

He watched as Redheart threw her arms around Plain Strider, and as she sobbed in his arms. He watched as the rains fell around them, and as the bolts of lightning illuminated their shared sorrow and joy. He watched as the heavens poured upon them, and how they held each other as if to never let go again.

Cheerilee didn't see what happened next. Instead she watched Pokey as he failed to hide his own tears.

Chapter Eleven

And Then There Were Three

When the Goddess closes one door, she opens another

Pokey sat staring at the inside of his tepee for hours, listening to the rain. Cheerilee sat across the fire, and watched as the blue unicorn stared into space.

"She's not coming with us," he said at last. "I'm betting we never see either one of them again."

"I know," said Cheerilee. The rain outside continued, though it had slowed from a downpour to a steady cleansing rain. The ponies sat in silence for a while; neither wanted to discuss what had happened. Cheerilee tried to break the uncomfortable silence with thoughts of the quest ahead.

"Do you think we'll be okay without her?" asked Cheerilee.

"We'll be fine," said Pokey as he stared into space. "You said you know the mare that has the sapphire?"

"Ingrid Marie," groaned Cheerilee. "I was sort of hoping she'd be dead by now." She looked at the fire ring for a moment. "I guess that's a pretty horrible thing to say."

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Pokey. "If some pony has managed to earn your ire, then I'd say they're not a pony I'd want to associate with. You're a good mare, and any enemy of yours is an enemy of mine." Cheerilee walked across the tepee, and sat down next to Pokey.

"I'm sorry," she said, softly. "How long has it been?"

"Years," answered Pokey. "But every time we came out here..." He hung his head. "I thought this trip would be the one that put us together forever. I thought Celestia had answered my prayers. I should have known better. Celestia hates me and wants me to suffer." He looked up again at the walls of his tepee, and searched for a moon to pray to for answers.

"Did you ever tell her?" asked Cheerilee.

"I did," said Pokey. "Every time we lie in bed on that train, I told her I loved her. She told me she loved me too. And I suppose she did, in the way that you do when you're lonely enough to seek comfort with some other pony." Pokey shook his head. "But she's with her soul mate now, and not even Celestia could tear them apart."

The rain abated to a trickle. The tent filled with the sounds of tiny patters of rain on leather. Pokey stood up, and gathered his saddlebags. He moved for the flap before Cheerilee spoke up.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Cheerilee.

"I'm going after the emerald," he replied. "You shouldn't have any problem finding the two stones in Canterlot. Which reminds me..." He pulled the diamond from his neck and tossed it to Cheerilee. She picked up the chain from the dirt floor. "Maybe I'll find it," he said. "Maybe I'll get killed along the way. Who knows?"

Cheerilee's mulberry face turned purple with rage. How callously he tossed aside not only their quest, but the one piece of the puzzle they actually had. Pokey trotted for the tent flap, when the diamond cracked him in the back of the head. He turned around to see Cheerilee fuming.

"Damnit, Pokey," admonished Cheerilee. "You think just because you're heartbroken you can go throwing away your life? You think you can really do this by yourself?"

"What happened to your unshakable faith in my abilities?" he asked sarcastically.

"Don't talk back to me," she snarled. "I've watched you do things I can scarcely believe. You've saved the lives of dozens of ponies. You killed a beast ten times your size. You saved an entire village. You made miracles happen, Pokey; real honest to goddess miracles." Her face screwed up in frustration. "You've done so much in such a short time, and now you just want to throw it all away because you're upset that Redheart found happiness?" Pokey hung his head and sighed.

"She never told me no," he said. "She never said her heart belonged to another. I should have known; I was just too blinded by what I wanted to see it." He turned back to Cheerilee. "I don't care about this quest anymore. I've lost everything I've held dear: my family's heirloom, my faith in myself, and most of all, her." He looked up sadly at Cheerilee. "I don't have

anything else to lose but my life. Why not sacrifice that too at the altar of Celestia whims?”

“Because that’s not who you are,” said Cheerilee. “You’re Pokey Pierce. Greatest warrior of a generation. Slayer of monsters and beasts. Rescuer of children. Kin of Luna.” She approached, and put her head on his shoulders. “You’re all these things, Pokey, but most of all, you’re a fighter. You refuse to let anything else beat you; why would you let this?” Pokey closed his eyes, and sat quietly in the dirt. Cheerilee sat next to him, quietly offering what support she could.

“You’re right,” he said at last. “I can’t leave you out here alone. We’re not done yet, and I can’t let personal tragedy get in the way of our insane despot’s request. Let’s head to Appleloosa. We’ll figure out what to do when we get there.”

...

The fledgling sunrise shone dully through the clouds, barely illuminating the valley as it crept over the horizon. He should have been tired, but all Pokey felt was numb. He realized that trekking four hours over open ground in the rain and dark probably wasn’t the best idea, but he no longer cared. Cheerilee walked silently beside him as she followed the soft glow of Pokey’s horn.

They walked silently over the miles. The wrinkled brown husks of moss fell away from the rock faces as they walked by. Sure enough, the rain had caused the moss to crumble, and the ground lost its vermillion tint. Their plan had worked as expected. The ponies and buffalo both would be happy to be free of the mosses’ scrouge.

In that early morning hour, Pokey and Cheerilee trotted into to the city of Appleloosa. It was far too early for anything to be open. The stores sat closed as they waited for the morning sun to peak through the clouds and dawn a new day. The pair sat in silence at the rail station, and listened to the rain patter against the station roof.

True to her word, Redheart had saved the ponies of Appleloosa, and given their quest at last a meaning. It had also given her what she always wanted. Whatever Celestia would have offered would pale in comparison to what she’d already received. Pokey knew that no such reward lay at the end of this road for him. He thought back to Medley, and how he had

watched her annoyed pouting when her train rolled away. She would get what she wanted eventually. And Cheerilee? Well, they were headed to make the life of her arch nemesis miserable, and she'd go down in history as the mare who found the Stones of Brilliance. What more could she ask for?

In the distance, a train whistle sounded. Pokey checked the town clock, and then looked at the schedule. This train was six hours behind. It occurred to him that the sudden rain had probably washed out the track somewhere along the line to Bridleburg. The ponies aboard the train were going to be really annoyed when they found out the town was still shuttered for the evening. Pokey watched as the train pony's iron shoes sparked against the metal tracks as the cars ground to a halt. One of the train ponies looked up at the clock, and, upon seeing the time cursed loudly. He looked over to see Pokey and Cheerilee at the station.

"Hope we're not too late for you," he said. "Track washed out a few miles up. Darnedest thing, a real gullywasher blew up from out of nowhere. I did take all that red moss off the tracks though," Pokey just nodded, and watched as the passengers exited the train. More than one of the ponies had a few choice words for the train ponies.

"Where's the next stop?" asked Pokey.

"This train is headed back to Bridleburg," said the lead train pony. "We're far enough behind that we're just gonna combine the two."

"There's not a roundhouse till Stalliongrad," said Cheerilee. "How do you switch the cars?"

"Oh, we got a unicorn that does that," replied the pony. "Not so bright, but boy howdy can he lift stuff."

It would be several hours before the train had been flipped to the correct direction. The town had long since opened for business again and Cheerilee and Pokey found themselves at the Salt Lick. Despite the seedy atmosphere, they really did have good waffles.

"And then there were two," sighed Pokey as he staring down at his breakfast. "Do you think Celestia had a purpose for sending us specifically on this quest?"

“What do you mean?” asked Cheerilee. She covered her own breakfast with syrup.

“Look at how it’s turned out so far,” said Pokey. “She sent Redheart out here to reunite with Plain Strider. You’re out here because you’re the only pony smart enough to figure out what we were supposed to be doing. Medley wasn’t supposed to be out here, and I’m pretty sure she sent me out here because she wanted me to be miserable,” said Pokey.

“That’s unfair of you,” chastised Cheerilee. “She sent you out here to protect us. Somehow, she knew that the road would be dangerous. There isn’t another pony out there that I’d rather have by my side.” Pokey nodded and continued to eat his breakfast. They ate in silence for a while before Pokey spoke up again

“That really means a lot to me,” Pokey admitted. “I realize that I’m not going to get what I wanted out of this journey, but I’m glad that I can keep you from harm.”

“Don’t forget about Medley,” said Cheerilee. “You saved her life twice.”

“She’s probably at home right now, curled up in front of the fire with her foals,” mused Pokey. The thought actually made him feel less miserable.

...

Medley winged into Bridleburg late that evening. The high winds and sudden rush of clouds to the south had really surprised her. She had gotten her cutie mark from being an expert on predicting cloud patterns and rain, but it was a skill that turned out to be not that helpful. Most pegasi were by weather savvy by necessity, and there were more weather savvy pegasi than there were jobs for them. She had lost her previous job in the snow factory because she had taken maternity leave, and there were scads of other equally qualified pegasi to take her place.

The way these clouds moved, and the way they took moisture with them was unlike anything she’d ever seen. Medley was sorely tempted to follow them, but her nagging instincts told her to do otherwise. She flew over the city and searched for the clinic. The plan was to find Dr. Castor, give him the emerald, and then go home.

Medley had come to the realization that she probably shouldn't be out here in her condition, but she couldn't just take the stone to Canterlot. The trio would go looking for it in the Diamond Dog Territories, and realize that some pony else had already gotten it. Redheart, Cheerilee and Pokey would have to come back through Bridleburg on their way to Canterlot. Even if they wanted to go directly after the emerald, they'd still have to come back here. She'd leave word at the train station for them, and leave the emerald with whoever she could trust. That way, Pokey couldn't yell at her for having completely ignored his instructions.

She fluttered over the city and finally spotted the enormous red mosaic cross that served as the landing pad atop the hospital. She touched down on the red stone to find the vermillion moss covered most of it, as it had in the Diamond Dog territories. She shook it off her hooves, and headed down the stairs.

Dr. Castor stood in the middle of the clinic; He was ordering around ponies like some mad orchestra director. Many of the ponies here were emaciated, and closer resembled the walking dead than a healthy populace. The red moss began to creep along the edges of the walls, and ponies. Dr Castor spotted the turquoise pegasus coming in from the landing pad, and ran to her.

"What are you doin' 'ere?" he demanded. "You think you'd have the good sense to go home after yah nearly died. Trust me when I say Luna's not stingy with the miracles, but you're pushin' your luck."

"What happened here?" asked Medley, staring at the scene in shock.

"That damned red moss is what happened," said Dr. Castor. "All those ponies from the caves? They brought it back with them, and it's spreadin' like wildfire." He looked at Medley for a moment, and then tossed a surgical mask at her. "I don't even wanna think about how this moss would affect your baby. Get out of town while you can."

"I need to give you something," said Medley.

"What, your undying gratitude?" asked Dr. Castor as he set up another vaporizer. "Luna did all the work, love. Send some thanks her way. Poor gal really doesn't get the respect she deserves."

"No," said Medley. She pulled the emerald collar from her saddlebag. "I need you to give this to Pokey."

The emerald shimmered in the hospital lights, then flared an explosive green. The room filled with the light and bathed the ponies in its warm emerald sheen. For a moment, the world went green as the emerald pulsed lights into the clinic. One of the ponies whinnied in terror as the light pulsed, then flickered away. The room went silent, as every pony in the room felt the weight of the sickness lifted. Dr. Castor looked at the emerald with utter confusion.

"What the duece was that?" he demanded. The moss in the corners of the room had shriveled into black husks, and then crumbled into dust. Ponies scarcely able to breathe before found their lungs cleared, and the color returning to their coats.

"I... have no idea," said Medley. "Is that what these things are for?"

"Love, I dunno where you got that rock," said Dr. Castor. "But you may have just saved Bridleburg."

...

Once again the ponies found themselves on a train, this time headed north to Bridleburg. The train clacked along the rails. It was louder now that the spreading moss was no longer muffling the sounds of the tracks.

"You think that rain storm is really going to fix the problem?" asked Pokey.

"I'm guessing not," said Cheerilee. "Remember all the moss in the Diamond Dog Territories?"

"It does rain there more frequently," said Pokey. "But I get the impression that water doesn't kill the moss, it just inactivates it for a while."

"I think you're right," said Cheerilee. "According to most texts, after the great flood cleansed the lands, there was a tri-colored rainbow that graced the sky." She fished the Diamond from her pack, and set it on the table. "Diamonds don't produce that sort of light, but they can refract, reflect, or focus it."

"Here's the better question," said Pokey. "If these stones are meant to kill the moss, why hasn't it been dying around us?"

"I'm not really sure," said Cheerilee. "I'm guessing it's because they're supposed to work together. But if they're supposed to cleanse the entire

world, they should have some power by themselves, right?" She looked at the diamond again. "Unless..."

She held the diamond to the sun light, and angled it at the table. The diamond absorbed the sunlight, and amplified it's brilliance till neither pony could stand to look at it. The diamond focused the amplified sunlight into a pinpoint of heat. The table burst into flames before Cheerilee could put the diamond away.

"The diamond is a focus," said Pokey as he pounded out the fire. He pushed open the train window with a wave of his horn. "It doesn't do anything on its own, which means we need all of them to really fix the problem." Cheerilee pondered as the smoke ventilated from the windows.

"Hey, this is a no smoking car!" yelled a voice from the hall.

"Sorry!" Cheerilee yelled back. She turned back to Pokey; waving a hoof, and coughing. "We should be writing all this down so in a few thousand years some other band of ponies won't have to figure this out," she said.

"You're going to have to do that," said Pokey. "I can barely read." Cheerilee looked surprised.

"Really?" asked Cheerilee.

"It's not really something I worried about in my youth," admitted Pokey. "Trixie and Jenny always did the reading and thinking for us." He looked out the window as he watched the town of Appleloosa become a dot in the distance. "I kind of wish they were here."

"I'm not a good enough traveling companion?" smirked Cheerilee.

"It's not that," he said. "I just miss my sisters." Cheerilee looked at back Pokey with doubt.

"War Jenny is your sister?" she asked. Pokey shot a confused look at the pony.

"Not literally, no, she's not even a pony," said Pokey. "Didn't anyone ever explain the birds and the bees to you?" he joked. "I mean, you've been around a while. I'm sure you've figured out where foals come from; especially since you managed to not have one of your own." Cheerilee's persistent smile shattered at the callous remark. Her eyes filled with tears

as she ran sobbing from the train car. Pokey stood stunned for a moment. What had just happened?

The train had found its way into Bridleburg before Pokey even caught glimpse of Cheerilee again. She said that she was going to get a hotel, and that Pokey could find his own accommodations. Pokey walked through the streets; the light of the near full moon filled the sky with its pale beauty. He trotted toward the clinic, hoping that Dr. Castor would lend him a room for the evening.

By the most fortunate of circumstances, Pokey ran into Dr. Castor as he was escorting a turquoise pegasus out of the clinic. Her flank boldly marked with a raining cloud. She looked up to see Pokey staring in total confusion.

"Hi!" she said happily.

"What in the name of Luna are you doing here?" he demanded "I thought I put you on the train back to Ponyville."

"I got off," Medley said with a smile. She danced up to Pokey and gave him an enormous hug. "I told War Jenny that I would tell you that she did an excellent job trying to keep me on the train." She stepped back, still grinning. "She didn't actually though, or I wouldn't be here." Pokey face-hoofed so hard he thought he might break his nose again.

"My goddess, Medley," he said. "I put you on that damn train because you're..."

"Pregnant?" she asked. "Yeah, I figured that out already. Thanks for telling me, by the way," she said sarcastically. Medley looked around a moment. "So where is every pony?" asked Medley. Pokey ignored her question.

"Why aren't you in Ponyville?" he asked.

"Because I was getting the emerald," said Medley. She dug the emerald from her pack, and presented the gemstone in her teeth. The acorn sized stone pulsed green, filling the street with its emerald light. "And I figured out what we're supposed to do with them."

"Use it to destroy the Blight so Celestia doesn't have to flood the world again?" said Pokey. Medley frowned; so much for the thrill of being smart. She stuffed the emerald collar back into her bag.

"What's this about a flood now?" asked Dr. Castor.

"Flood mythology, Doc," replied Pokey. "The Time of Cleansing to us, anyway."

"Right then," said Dr. Castor. "If that's what you're tryin' to prevent, then don't let me get your way." He looked to Medley, then back at Pokey. "Do send this young lady home though, would yah?"

"Believe me," said Pokey. "I've tried."

"Where is every pony?" asked Medley again.

"I'll let Cheerilee explain," said Pokey. "She's at the hotel."

"Well if she's there, then what are you doing here?" asked Medley.

"I think I upset her," said Pokey. "I made a crack about her not having any kids and..."

"You did what?" barked Medley. "You inconsiderate ass! How could you?"

"How could I what?" asked Pokey. "I thought we were at the point in our friendship where we could joke around a bit, but apparently not."

"She can't have foals, you idiot," growled Medley. Pokey grimaced. The weight of his sheer stupidity crushed him like a piano from the sky. He face hoofed again.

"I gotta go get some flowers," said Pokey. "I'll meet you back at the hotel."

Cheerilee stood in her hotel room listening to the radio. The walls were decorated with a light pink floral wallpaper, and the same cheap art she'd come to expect from Equestria's hotel industry. A sad song came in over the airwaves, making her feel even worse. She felt foolish for having snapped at Pokey, but he was so absolutely callous that she couldn't help herself. The knock on Cheerilee's door was unexpected. If it was Pokey, she'd vowed to punch him in the face. She took a deep breath and opened the door to find Pokey with a bouquet of flowers, and somber frown.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I had no idea. I shouldn't have even joked about it, and I'm sorry. I'm a horrible pony." Cheerilee stared at the flowers, then back at Pokey. She sighed, affixing a small smile.

“You’re forgiven,” she said. “I shouldn’t have been so sensitive. I’m too old to be starting a family anyway. It just caught me by surprise, that’s all.” The door opened wider to reveal Medley, standing beside Pokey with a cart of food. She stared in disbelief for a moment. “Didn’t we put you on a train?” she asked.

Chapter Twelve

Somewhere Other Than Here

You can't run from your problems fast enough to make them go away

"That's the most beautiful story I've ever heard," said Medley. Her eyes were full of joyous tears. "Like a story book princess come home to her prince. I'm so happy for her." Pokey ground his teeth and forced himself to remain in silence.

"Yes, it's wonderful," said Cheerilee as she tried to change the subject. "You said something about a revolution?"

"Yes!" chirped Medley. She pulled the emerald collar from her bag, and dropped it onto the table. The emerald sparkled just like the diamond. It amplified the light and gave the room a green tint. It pulsed a bit, but nothing like it had done at the clinic. Cheerilee stared in disbelief at the stone. She looked back at Medley, completely baffled.

"Where in Equestria did you find this?" she asked.

"After I got captured, I starting thinking like you three," replied Medley. "I was cornered and out of options, so I challenged the Chief of the Diamond Dogs to a fight to the death for control of the tribe. It's apparently been used as the symbol of office."

"And that was Pokey's contribution to your ideas?" asked Cheerilee.

"Actually, Redheart's," replied Medley. Pokey choked on his drink.

"You did what?" demanded Pokey. "Luna above, child, I put you on that train to protect you and then went and almost got yourself killed? Again?"

"It turned out fine," she huffed. "I know it could have just as easily ended horribly, but that's not what happened, all right? I got the emerald, now we're half done. Did you get the Sapphire?"

"Its apparently in Canterlot," said Cheerilee, her eyes narrowing. "In the hooves of my arch nemesis." Medley scratched her mane in confusion.

"You have an arch nemesis?" she asked. "Wow, she must be a real nag if you of all ponies hate her."

"Language, ladies," chastised Pokey.

"I find it pertinent to remind you that you swear more than both of us combined," admonished Cheerilee.

"At any rate," continued Pokey, "you're getting on the next train for Ponyville, even if I have to tie you up and stuff you in a trunk."

"I thought you weren't into that sort of thing," said Cheerilee.

Pokey hung his head, and sighed. He couldn't go around cracking jokes at Cheerilee if he wasn't ready to take them back. He also reminded himself that Cheerilee knew where the last two stones were and that he needed her help. Medley tutted at Pokey.

"My dear old man, I am a changed pegasus," she said. "I'm not the wide eyed girl that once I was, and if you think you can threaten me, you've got another thing coming." Pokey facehoofed again. His face still hurt from the broken muzzle, and the growing frustration at his traveling companions wasn't helping anything.

"Medley," said Pokey, "I know you're riding high on your taste of first blood, and you suddenly think the world is your hayloft." He pounded a hoof on the dining cart; the dishes clattered as they jumped from the steel tray. "But I'll be damned by both Goddesses if I see you get hurt again. You have a child on the way. What happened to your motherly instincts?"

"They're telling me that you two need me," she said. "I was always told to never give up, and to never let a pony stop me from doing the right thing." She looked Pokey directly in the eyes. "Redheart was the grounding influence on you two. You and Cheerilee need me. If I leave you alone, you two are liable to level half of Canterlot searching for the stones." She put up her hooves. "I sent word to Snow Catcher and the fillies that I'd be home in five days. If we're not done by then, I'll leave. Deal?"

"Five days," said Pokey. "If we find ourselves in another fight, you go home then and there. Agreed?"

"Then it's settled," said Cheerilee. "You go home in five days, done or not." They shook hooves. Medley grabbed a bottle of wine from

underneath the cart. She held the bottle in her hooves, and pulled the cork with her teeth.

“What do you think you’re doing?” asked Pokey.

“Well, I can’t have any,” said Medley. “But we got another stone! That’s reason for celebration, isn’t it?” Pokey nodded in approval.

“Our pregnant and fluttery friend makes a good point,” said Pokey. His horn glowed, and the bottle poured two glasses of wine. Medley raised her own glass of juice as Cheerilee and Pokey raised their own. “A toast!” he announced to the gathered ponies. “May we find the remaining stones quickly, and may our enemies rue the day they upset dear Cheerilee.” The glasses clinked, and for the first time in several days, Pokey smiled.

Pokey slept on the floor that evening. Medley and Cheerilee shared the queen sized bed. Cheerilee got up in the middle of the night to sleep in the tub, as Medley apparently sleep fluttered. She had kicked Pokey in the head a few times as her wings flapped her sleeping body around the room. Pokey found himself wondering how Snow Chaser put up with it.

Morning came all too soon for the battered stallion. Pokey snuck out of the hotel at dawn’s first light with purpose. He had to retrieve his armor from Blueprint. He also had to retrieve donuts, but the armor was his highest priority.

True to his word, Blueprint had repaired the barding. Each of the scales had been backed with a thin coating of rubber, and the lacquer had been refinished in a deep blue that light seemed to fall into. The leather had been replaced with a woven metal fiber that moved as easily and quietly as a shirt.

The armor wasn’t just repaired. It was better than it had ever been; it was quieter and provided more protection than anything he had ever seen. But what he wore now wasn’t what his father had left him. That, like so many things on this quest, had been shattered against the rocky shores of fate. Despite how it looked, how it felt, and how it moved, Pokey found himself wishing for his old barding back.

Pokey walked through the streets of Bridleburg toward the train station. His new duds attracted the attentions of every mare in town. He could have sworn he heard some pony wolf whistle. An older earth pony recognized the armor’s design and shot him a hateful glare. Pokey made

his way back to the train station to find Medley and Cheerilee holding shopping bags. Medley's bags included one from a hardware store in addition to some bags with clothing.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"Well we're going to Canterlot, right?" asked Cheerilee. "I'm probably going to have to argue a case before Canterlot University to get the stones, so I needed a new collar. And Medley apparently has sticky hooves. Seems she made off with some of the Diamond Dog's treasures and did some shopping of her own." Pokey raised a skeptical eyebrow at the pegasus. She grinned, and tried to not look guilty.

"I'm out here because I need the money," she admitted. "I figured a few extra gems here and there couldn't hurt. Plus I got them from the ruined caves, so it's not like they'd miss them."

"We have our thief at last," said Pokey. "I knew you were out here for a reason."

"Too bad we lost our nurse," said Medley. "We were almost a real adventuring party for a moment."

"Yeah," sighed Pokey. "We almost were."

...

"I'm really starting to get sick of riding trains," said Pokey. The car swayed gently as they stood at a table, awaiting drinks.

"Would you rather walk?" asked Cheerilee.

"I wish I could teleport," said Pokey.

"Twilight's the only pony I know who can do that," said Cheerilee. "It's really a pity, though. We'd be done by now if you could just pop us from place to place."

"Let's not bring up my magical inadequacies," said Pokey. "I've got enough issues without adding an inferiority complex to the list." The train clattered along the tracks for a few minutes as the table went silent. The waiter came by to deliver tea for the table

"So, Canterlot University?" asked Medley. "I never went to college. What was it like?" Pokey started in with a snark about Cheerilee's romantic

preferences in college when she shot him a look that said armor or no, she would injure him for finishing that thought.

"It was more than just parties and ponies," said Cheerilee. "It was a lot of hard work, and unfortunately, everything was geared toward unicorns. About half the classes were magic related and that left me without a lot of options. So I chose history and non-pony studies. I would have gotten my PhD, if it hadn't been for that... mare." She practically spat the word.

"Ingrid?" asked Pokey.

"She blocked my paper on The Kin of Luna Rebellion because she thought it was too sympathetic toward their cause," she huffed. "I should have known better than to try to present such a paper to that bigot."

"Sorry, Kin of Luna?" asked Medley. "Who are they?" Pokey and Cheerilee exchanged a glance before Pokey started to explain.

"The Kin of Luna are the equine worshipers of our dear goddess Luna," he explained. "They're nomads, of sorts, and consist of every type of equine in the world. Zebras, donkeys, mules. Ponies too, when they join. There are also a few tribes that have giraffes." Medley grimaced.

"Sounds like an unruly bunch," said Medley. "Why would any pony want to join with them?"

"Because they accept every member of their tribe as an equal," said Pokey. His voice was tinged with annoyance. "Anyone can become their ruler. In fact, you've already met theirs."

"I have?" asked Medley.

"War Jenny," said Pokey.

"You mean to tell me that your old girlfriend is the leader of an entire nation?" snickered Medley. "Boy, talk about choosing to dump the wrong pony." Pokey's eyes narrowed into a hateful glare.

"Jenny is like a sister to me," growled Pokey. "And I am a Kin of Luna. So before you go thinking they're a nation of your inferiors just because they're not ponies, think again." He stood from the table. "And just remember who dragged you out of that cave next time you want to think less of a donkey."

Pokey stomped off and left Medley and Cheerilee in silence. Medley looked down at the table. She instantly regretted making fun of something she clearly didn't know enough about. She looked up at Cheerilee with a concerned glance.

"Wow," she said. "I had no idea."

"Well, you never asked," said Cheerilee. "And it's not like he volunteered the information. He's just upset right now because of Redh..." Cheerilee bit her tongue. Her eyes widened in amazement at how much she had almost let slip.

"What about Redheart?" asked Medley.

"That's really not my place to tell," said Cheerilee. "Care for a scone?"

Pokey found himself again staring out a window. He was, quite frankly, sick of traveling at this point and really just wanted to go home. But Ponyville just wasn't going to be that much of a home anymore. Perhaps he'd return to Jenny and the Kin. She was probably still in the area around Bridleburg, and Dr. Castor would always know where his daughter was. Maybe he'd start traveling with Trixie. She always seemed to know where she was going, and she would be glad to have her brother back by her side.

The door to the sleeper cabin slid open. Medley quietly walked inside and closed the door behind her. She stood next to Pokey. He glared at her through his helmet.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I wanted to apologize," said Medley. "I'm afraid what I know about non-ponies is kind of limited, and I just assumed that all the other equines were practically savages." She folded her wings to her sides. "I guess I should know better, having dealt with the Diamond Dogs, and the Hamites."

"Old prejudices are hard to get rid of," said Pokey. "You're kind of naive about the world. You've probably never left Ponyville before now, and your inexperience has almost gotten you killed." He looked over the mare, who stared down at the floor.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "For what it's worth, I'm glad I've gotten to know you and all the others I've met on this trip. I think its bringing us all closer together."

"We've only been out here, what five days? We've barely gotten to know each other, and here we are half way done." Pokey shrugged. "Chances are, we'll finish this up, part ways, and never see each other again."

"I hope not," said Medley. "This trip has changed my life. You're a really fascinating pony, Pokey. And who knew that Cheerilee had such depth? I thought she was just a school marm, and here she's a good enough dancer to call the rains? And Redheart! It's like something out of those romance novels she was always reading..." Medley caught the look of frustration in Pokey's eyes, and changed the subject. "But you; you've done it all: traveled the world, saved a village, fought beasts and monsters. You're pretty amazing."

"Thanks," said Pokey. He was looking for a way to end the conversation. "Just doing what's required by the dear goddess." He sneered the last sentence, and tried to fill it with as much disdain and hatred as he felt for Celestia.

"I wish you wouldn't hate her," said Medley. "Can't you love them both?" Pokey turned and locked eyes with the pegasus.

"Medley," said Pokey, "let me tell you something. From the bottom of my heart, and the depths of my very soul, I do not believe that Princess Celestia cares one whit about us ponies."

"Well I think you're wrong," said Medley. "Luna told me that even when the clouds cover the sky, the sun and moon will always watch over you." Pokey regarded Medley with a look of suspicion. When had she heard that? "And I think that you're treating Celestia unfairly just because she didn't give you the answers you wanted right away. She's a goddess, and she works in mysterious ways." Pokey ignored Medley. He turned back to stare out the window. Medley huffed and made for the door. "Don't blame me when you get sent to the moon," she said, and slammed the sliding door behind her.

It was another hour before Cheerilee came into the sleeping car to find Pokey still decked out in his armor.

"Don't you worry that you're going to stand out in Canterlot wearing all that?" asked Cheerilee. "The Kin of Luna design may make you a target."

"Not really," replied Pokey. "And even if it does, so what? I'm invincible in this suit. Ponies do what I ask because they're afraid of me. The intimidation factor is amazing."

"Pokey," sighed Cheerilee. "I think the real trouble is that you're afraid."

"You must have me mistaken for some pony who's not wearing sixty pounds of barding."

"You're afraid of the future," said Cheerilee. She lay down on her bed. "Now that Redheart's gone, you don't have anything left to work for. You're adrift without a purpose again, and because this quest is coming to an end, you're afraid you'll end up like you always were."

"And how's that?" asked Pokey, sarcastically.

"Alone," said Cheerilee. "What are you going to do when you get back to Ponyville?"

"I'm not going back," said Pokey.

"So you're going to leave your restaurant behind? All your friends? Your house? Your cat?"

"That cat really hates me," noted Pokey. "And I don't have any friend in Ponyville. I only went to those stupid parties because Redheart wanted me to. That, and I hate balloons." Pokey muttered to himself. "Lousy pieces of junk."

"I tell my students that you need a goal if you're going to go anywhere in life," said Cheerilee. "What's your goal? If anything in this world could make you happy, what would it be?" Pokey thought for a minute about what Medley had said to him.

Why can't you love them both? His eyes narrowed.

"Thank you Cheerilee," he said. "I think I know what my goal is now."

"Anything I can do to help?" she asked.

“It’s better you don’t know,” replied Pokey.

...

The train arrived in Canterlot precisely on time. The Ponyville Trio disembarked to the glittering spires of the capital city, and made their way toward Canterlot University. Pokey followed silently behind Cheerilee and Medley. He was taking in what joy he could find in this unfamiliar city. The spires and waterfalls of the city made him feel somehow at home. Touches of unicorn magic permeated the city, and the impossible landscaping and even more impossible topiary made it feel welcoming. Pokey decided at once that he’d stay here for a while after they had completed their quest.

Cheerilee had put on her ruffled collar and glasses to get that perfect professorial look. Medley had gotten fake glasses, and had put her hair up in a bun to appear older and more like she belonged on campus. Cheerilee led the trio to the entrance of the university, where they were stopped by one of the royal guard. He looked over Pokey’s armor jealously before questioning Cheerilee.

“What is your purpose at the university this afternoon?” asked the guards-pony.

“I have need of the Ancient Artifact Archive,” said Cheerilee. She dug through her saddlebag and produced a small wallet with a few stamped pieces of paper. The guard looked at them, looked at her, and then waved them on through. They walked away from the guards shack at a trot.

“What was that?” asked Medley. Cheerilee shoved the wallet back into her saddlebags.

“The Ancient Artifact Archive is restricted to professors, PhDs, and current students,” said Cheerilee.

“I thought you said you didn’t...” Cheerilee put a hoof to Medley’s mouth to prevent her from speaking the rest of that thought.

“If I get caught, they’ll take my teaching license,” warned Cheerilee. “I still have my student ID from when I was in grad school; I just... updated it a little.”

“Wouldn’t they have changed?” asked Medley.

"I had Twilight Sparkle forge me a copy of hers," admitted Cheerilee. "But seriously, don't tell anyone. We could all get in very serious trouble. The archive is full of dangerous things."

"I like this less and less," said Medley.

"You wanted adventure?" said Pokey. "This is an adventure. If you don't like covert ops, the train station is that way. Me, I love these sorts of jobs."

"I wish I shared your enthusiasm," said Medley. They trotted through the campus grounds, and through the spiraling towers that made up the university. They passed squads of tittering unicorns, some of whom stopped to stare at Pokey's armor. Pokey grinned back, gave them a wink.

"Really Pokey," admonished Medley. "They're half your age!"

"What can I say?" asked Pokey. "Mares love a stallion in uniform." They walked until they came to a squat, unhappy looking building far on the corner of campus. Cheerilee closed her eyes, and took a few deep breaths. She pushed open the front door and walked through.

Though the building was only one story on the outside, it sank deep into the earth, plummeting down a dozen stories of half open space. Bookshelves stretched down into the bowels of rock, and display cases lined the aisles for as far as they could see. An old blue stallion with a pure white mane sat at the front desk; he was snoring quietly. As Cheerilee approached, the stallion looked up. She noticed his cutie mark: a golden laurel wreath.

"Cheerilee!" he said with some excitement. "Why I thought you graduated years ago!"

"Oh pony-feathers," muttered Pokey. "Of course the stallion at the front desk recognizes her."

"Why yes, Professor Yorsets!" said Cheerilee with the same joy. "It's so good to see you again. How are the wife and fillies?"

"They're just great, thanks for asking," said the Stallion. "Young miss Blue Belle attended that horrid gala this spring where those insolent mules from Ponyville trashed the event. The horror!" Pokey bit his tongue. He remained silent at the offensive remark. "But enough about me and mine!"

He looked at Pokey, and lifted his glasses. "My goodness, is that Pokey Pierce?"

"Yes indeed it is, sir," said Cheerilee.

"Why I hadn't heard you were married!" he exclaimed.
"Congratulations on landing quite the accomplished horns-pony."

"Oh, you know each other?" asked Cheerilee, nervously.

"Well not personally," said the stallion. "But his exploits are quite famous in certain parts of Equestria. Oh, where are my manners?" he asked. "Cheerilee, you will introduce me?"

"Oh right," said Cheerilee. "This is Medley. She's a non-traditional student whom I'm showing around the campus."

"Charmed," bowed Medley, having no idea what was going on.

"And of course, you know of Pokey," said Cheerilee. "He and I were married last spring. I'm just showing him my old stomping grounds. This is Dr. Bastion Yorsets, professor of non-pony studies."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," the stallion replied, bowing.

"Likewise," said Pokey, sarcastically.

"Dr. Yorsets," said Cheerilee, getting to the heart of the matter, "I was wondering if I could use the Archives. I'm working on an article about the Hamites and their flood mythology."

"You're not a student anymore are you?" asked Dr. Yorsets.

"Well, no," she said, finding it hard to lie to her favorite professor any further. Pokey ground his teeth, and tried not to groan at Cheerilee's selective honesty. The blue stallion looked around for a moment; he leaned in to whisper to Cheerilee.

"I'll let you in dear," he whispered. "But only because it'll annoy that nag Ingrid Marie." Cheerilee giggled, and tousled her old professor's mane.

"Thank you so much, sir" she said. "You always were my favorite." They walked past the front desk and into a gilded wire elevator. Cheerilee looked at it for a moment, as if summoning a memory. She pressed one of

the middle numbers, and the cart sank slowly into the bowels of the Archive.

“Married?” asked Pokey. “Really?”

“Play along,” said Cheerilee. “I didn’t expect he’d still be working here.”

“That’s the second time some pony’s confused us for a couple,” noted Pokey.

“I know,” said Cheerilee. “Why does every pony assume I have such terrible taste in stallions?” Pokey opened his mouth to reply. “Say anything about mares, and I will throw you off the balcony.”

“How are we going to find the Ruby in this mess?” asked Medley. “I can’t imagine finding anything here.”

“Medley, dear,” said Cheerilee. “An archive like this is made for finding things. You just have to know how to look.”

“Looks more like a needle in a haystack,” said Medley.

“It’s actually more like a needle in a needle stack,” said Pokey. “I can’t understand any of this.”

“That’s because you don’t know how to look,” said Cheerilee.

The elevator opened to a wonderland of boxes and display cases on the lower floors of the archive. The trio got out of the elevator and stood flummoxed for a moment. Cheerilee walked over to a filing box full of cards, and pulled out one of the drawers. She shuffled through the cards for a minute, then put the drawer back. She shuffled through another and found the one she was looking for. She pulled a pencil from her collar and wrote down a number on a piece of paper. She presented the archaic code to Pokey and Medley. They stood waiting for an explanation.

“It’s the location of the ruby,” said Cheerilee, brightly.

“I can’t read that well, but I’m pretty sure that’s not a word,” said Pokey.

“Follow me,” Cheerilee sighed.

They trotted through the expanding aisle of boxes, twisting and turning till they came to a beautiful mahogany display case lined with soft velvet. Tablets lined the edge of the display case, as did a few Hamite masks and spears. In the center of the case there was a blank spot where the Ruby should have been, and a small card that read "Artifact transferred due to royal request." Cheerilee stared at the card in disgust.

"You have got to be kidding me," she said.

Chapter Thirteen

Challenge Accepted

He comes at you with a hoof; you come at him with a horn. That's the Canterlot way.

"I keep telling you, Celestia hates me," said Pokey. Cheerilee ignored the remark as she dug through a stack of boxes. She finally came to the scroll she was looking for and began reading its contents. "I mean, it has got to be personal at this point. Why else would she send us out to find something she already has?"

"Because there's more royalty than just her," said Cheerilee.

She showed Pokey and Medley the scroll she had been searching for. It had been embossed with an official royal seal, and contained enough legal language to make any pony's head spin. Pokey raised an eyebrow of the top of the scroll. He couldn't read half the words on the page.

"What are we looking at?" asked Pokey.

"And who is Blueblood?" asked Medley as she scanned further down the paper. Cheerilee looked over the scroll in disgust.

"Blueblood is a prince who thought the Ruby of Brilliance would look great in his home," she said.

"Let me guess," said Pokey. "This was ten years ago."

"Actually, it was part of a spring redecoration," Cheerilee replied as she rolled another inch.

"Isn't prince a fairly significant title?" asked Medley. "I'd hate to go upsetting the nobility and wind up in prison. We'll just explain that we're on a mission from the princess, and he's sure to give us the stone."

"I doubt that," said Cheerilee. "He's likely to treat us as commoners." She looked over the rim of her glasses at Medley. "I'd say we have less chance of getting to him than we would of getting to Luna."

“Great,” groaned Pokey. “Another stuffy, over bred, pain in the flank royalty to kiss up to.”

“I’m sure he’s not that bad,” Cheerilee lied. She looked through the archive one last time before placing her boxes back on the table to be re-shelved. “So, then we’ll go find Ingrid Marie and...”

“What about the ruby?” asked Medley.

“We’ll have to get that last,” said Cheerilee. She looked back at the Hamite cases. “Ingrid Marie may be a stuck up nag, but she’s not royalty. We can get in to see her, and we don’t even need an appointment. I spent part of my graduate studies as a secretary. You’d be surprised what you can get with a few kind words and a bottle of wine.”

They made their way back up the elevator and to the front desk, where Dr. Yorsets was quietly napping. He snapped to attention as the elevator door clanked open. The unicorn smiled as Cheerilee and her companions approached.

“You find what you were looking for?” he asked.

“Yes and no,” said Cheerilee. “Isn’t that always the way with research?”

“It really is,” said Dr. Yorsets. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Actually there is,” replied Cheerilee. “Where is Dr. Marie’s office?”

“She’s the assistant dean, these days,” said Dr. Yorsets. “I’m glad I got tenured when I did, else she would have gotten me fired long ago.”

“Well I hope to make her miserable for you,” smirked Cheerilee. She extended a hoof to her professor. “Do take care of yourself, sir.”

“You too, darling,” he replied as he shook hooves.

The trio walked through the massive double doors of the Archive and out into the campus. The sun hung low in the sky; the day had been passing the ponies by as they canvassed Canterlot. Something caught Pokey’s eye as they exited; the distraction caused him to walk face first into a large white stallion.

“Pardon me,” said Pokey.

"How dare you!" whined the white unicorn. "A commoner has touched me! The indignity of it!" It was then Pokey noticed the amber maned stallion had otherwise surrounded himself with several other large unicorn stallions. Cheerilee had to bite her tongue to prevent herself from swearing. The stallion stared at Pokey expectantly.

"Aren't you going to bow in the presence of your prince?" he demanded. The other stallions surrounding him moved up. It was a clearly presented challenge to the blue unicorn.

"And why would I bow to you?" asked Pokey. "You look like another stuffy, inbred blue blood to me." Cheerilee cleared her throat loudly, as if trying to warn Pokey of something. Pokey was too busy with his macho posturing to notice.

"How dare you!" he said again. "Gentlecolts, take care of this ruffian." The stallions took a step forward as Pokey shifted into a battle stance. They paused a moment as they came to the realization that this wasn't their normal commoner.

"Sir," said one of the stallions. "I'm pretty sure he's not a commoner. That armor he's wearing is uh..." The unicorn searched for the appropriate words. "Well it might be nobility."

"From what backwards country?" scoffed the white stallion. "I've never seen anything like it, and it's certainly far inferior to my own."

"I am a Kin of Luna," said Pokey. "And I suggest you keep walking if you want to keep your pretty hoofs unscuffed."

"You have challenged my honor!" scoffed the stallion. He floated a white slipper from his pocket, and slapped Pokey's chest with it. "I challenge you to a duel." Pokey's laughter came so quickly he didn't have time to suppress it. He let out a short guffaw before regaining his composure. "Well, do you accept, Kin?" demanded the stallion.

Pokey considered for a moment before floating off one of his armored shoes. He cracked the white stallion across the face with it. The white stallion fell to the ground in a heap of twitching unicorn.

"I accept," said Pokey. "Have your second meet mine at the Canterlot Commons Inn at seven to discuss preparations." He put his shoe back on, and trotted away. The mares followed, though they were far too

stunned to comment. As they got further away on campus, Cheerilee regained enough composure to explode at Pokey.

“Do you know who that was?” she demanded.

“Some stuffy, inbred blue blood?” asked Pokey. He really hadn’t considered who he had just challenged.

“That was THE stuffy inbred Blueblood that we were looking for!” shouted Cheerilee. “You... you... just assaulted royalty!” Pokey shrugged.

“I accepted his challenge,” said Pokey. “I don’t wear slippers, so I used what I had.” Cheerilee’s protests turned to strangled noises of rage. Pokey giggled underneath his helmet as they trotted for the administrative offices.

“We’re never going to get the ruby from him now,” said Cheerilee. “I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

“We’ll just have Celestia order him to give it up,” said Pokey. “It’s not like he has any real authority anyway. We do live in an autocracy, you know.”

“You’re surprisingly well spoken for someone who can barely read,” noted Medley.

“Explore enough of the world, my dear Medley,” replied Pokey, putting on sarcastic airs, “and you too will learn all sorts of things. Things like when to use proper etiquette, or when to smack some pony upside the head with an iron boot.”

“Who’s your second?” asked Medley. “Do you even know any pony in this city that’d be willing to fight for you?” Pokey paused, and looked at the pegasus.

“That’s a great question,” he said. “I’m even more impressed that you know what a second is.”

“Explore enough of the world...” Medley parroted in the same sarcastic tone.

“I guess it’s going to be Cheerilee,” said Pokey. He nodded to the earth pony.

"I'm not going to fight Blueblood if you chicken out," huffed Cheerilee.

"No, you're not," said Pokey, "because I'm not going to chicken out. You just need to set up the time and place with his second, so I can wipe that smirk off his over-bred face." They trotted to the administrative offices to find them still open.

The administrative office was a castle in its own right, but in miniature. The spiraling outdoor staircases led to the highest levels where purple domed roofs held golden spires. The lower half of the building was made of pure white marble, and featured a massive carving of Celestia raising the sun. Cheerilee stood unimpressed.

"This way," she said cheerfully. She pranced up the stairs knowing that what she was about to do would annoy Ingrid about as much as possible. They came to the office door at the top of the stairs. It hung open and creaked softly in the gentle breeze. The secretary's desk had been cleaned out, and the inner door hung open. A few bottles of cider rolled across the carpet as the ponies stepped into the office.

The walls had been papered with a red, quilt like texture, trimmed at the edges with gold. A border of yellow with red apples paraded around the ceiling, traveling down the walls at the hutch on the far wall. A beige unicorn with an umber mane sat slumped over on her desk. Tears spotted the beautiful wood surface, and an obnoxiously pink piece of paper sat crumpled at the edge. The unicorn looked up to see the visiting ponies.

"Dr. Marie?" asked Cheerilee, quietly. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, um..." she wiped her eyes. "Yes, what can I do for you?"

"Dr. Marie, you may not remember me..." started Cheerilee.

"No, I remember you," she sniffed. "It's good to see you again, Cheerilee."

"Yes," said Cheerilee. She looked around the office at the empty cider bottles before seeing that the bright pink paper was a termination slip. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she sniffed. "I've just been terminated. Fired. Given the old heave ho. I guess all my years of being a nag have finally caught up with

me.” She blew her nose into a handkerchief, filling the room with a stunning rendition of a foghorn. She floated it away, stuffing it inside her desk.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” said Cheerilee. “What happened?”

“Oh, I upset that snotty young aristocrat Blueblood when I wouldn’t give him some stone I acquired a few years ago.” She gestured over to a small glass display case that contained a sapphire the size of an acorn. The gem lit up the room with a soft blue glow. “That, coupled with my less aggressive stance towards non-unicorn students made it easy for the board to dismiss me. I didn’t even care about that stupid stone really. I just didn’t want that foppish gelding getting his hooves on it.”

She looked at the stone; tears still formed at the corners of her eyes. She floated another cider from beneath her desk, and struggled to open the cap. Pokey walked up and snapped it off with the ridge of his horn.

“Thank you,” she sniffed. “Though I’m surprised you would treat your horn like that. Most spells require precision trimming to function.”

“Not mine,” said Pokey. “None of them have anything do with precision.”

“I believe I could have taught you some things back in the day,” said Ingrid. She gave Pokey the once over, and smiled. Ingrid pushed back a wisp of mane from her tear stained face. “I probably still could, if you’ve got some time.” She winked at Pokey before she turned back to Cheerilee. “I’m guessing you’re not here on a social call, considering I single hooofedly ruined your academic career.”

“We’re actually here about that stone,” said Cheerilee. “Celestia asked us to find the four Stones of Brilliance, and you just happened to have one.” Ingrid took another sip of her cider.

“There’s four of these?” she asked. “Where are the other three?” Cheerilee dug the diamond necklace out of her saddlebag as Medley pulled the emerald collar from hers. The three stones lit up the room with an unearthly aqua light that poured from the windows and onto the campus. The light died down after a moment. Ingrid Marie was speechless. “That is the single most beautiful thing I have seen in my entire career,” she gasped at last. “I’ll happily give you the stone. Do you know where the last one is?”

"Blueblood has it, apparently," said Medley. "But we're going to have a heck of a time getting it. Pokey cold cocked him with an iron shoe after he challenged him to a duel."

"Oh, that braggart had it coming, I'm sure," smirked Ingrid. "But I'll let you in on a little secret. He has a massive gambling problem. It's in your best interest to get that stone away from him before he pawns it off to goddess knows who."

"Fantastic," muttered Pokey.

"I'm sorry you've gotten yourself terminated," said Cheerilee. "There are always open positions at Ponyville schools if you feel you can handle a bunch of young fillies and colts."

"Maybe it's all the cider talking," said Ingrid. "But that sounds like a splendid idea."

"Then I hope to see you soon," said Cheerilee, taking the sapphire. "Please take care of yourself."

"You too dear," said Ingrid as they made for the door. She looked down at her drawer, and spoke again. "And for what it's worth, I'm sorry. Your paper on the Kin of Luna Rebellion was the finest scholarly article I've ever had the pleasure of reading." She pulled a dusty sheaf of paper from her drawer, and dropped it on her desk. She floated a stamp from a wire rack and marked the stack with a large APPROVED FOR DEFENSE. The stack floated to Cheerilee's pack, and found its home among her other books and maps.

"I met a donkey a while back who changed my mind about the Kin, and non unicorns in general," said Ingrid. "He was a doctor who proved to me that you didn't need magic to do great things. It's because of him I started seeing what other equines could do, and it reminded me what I did to you. I dug up your paper as a reminder that my own prejudices robbed the academic world of a brilliant mind." She looked at the stamp, and tossed it out the window. "Maybe I can make children happy like you, instead of making adults miserable." Cheerilee trotted to her old professor, and gave her a hug. She walked out the door, flanked by Medley and Pokey.

Ingrid stared for a moment at her desk and near empty office. Her horn glowed as she lifted the desk, and flipped it upside down. She giggled

as the inkwells soaked into the rug, and the cider bottles rolled across the floor.

“Well that was kind of anticlimactic,” complained Pokey. “I was expecting some serious academic kung fu, or at least a mane pulling cat fight.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” said Cheerilee, looking back at the tower. “I really hope she does come to Ponyville.”

“I thought you hated her?” said Medley.

“I used to,” said Cheerilee. She continued down the steps. “But hate is a funny thing. It can turn to pity in a second when you realize that the pony you hate isn’t a monster, but misinformed. I’m sure no one knows that better than you.” She smiled. “I think she’ll be alright.” Medley looked up at the clock tower.

“We have to get to the inn so we can meet with Blueblood’s second,” she said, pointing to the time.

“I can’t wait,” giggled Pokey. “I haven’t fought a duel in years.”

They arrived in short order at the Canterlot Commons Inn. Despite being one of the cheapest hotels in Canterlot, the trio would be forced to share a room due to cost, rather than simply wanting to remain close. The common area was littered with the underclass of Canterlot. A single impeccably dressed grey stallion with a white mane and a compass rose cutie mark sat with his flank against the wall. The stallion was busy fending off drunks trying to roll him for booze money. The entire room stopped to stare as Pokey entered the bar like some samurai from legend. The stallion immediately stood up, and ran to Pokey.

“Oh thank goddess you’re here,” he said. “I’m South Pole, Blueblood’s lawyer, err... second.” He extended a hoof, smiling nervously. “Can we go somewhere else?” he asked, looking around. “Anywhere else?”

“This is the only place we can afford,” lied Pokey. “Quite frankly we were expecting more camping and less hotels. Our purses are running on fumes.” While this wasn’t strictly true, Pokey was pretty sure he could weasel a better place to stay out of this guy.

"I can put you up in a much nicer place close to campus if you'll just get me out of here," begged South Pole. "I've been here for an hour, and I'm afraid I might get shived if I stay longer."

Pokey and South Pole stepped outside to find Medley and Cheerilee yelling at two drunken earth ponies, explaining that they were not for rent. Pokey took a step toward them as his horn pulsed with its terrifying black light.

"Problem, gentlecolts?" he asked. The earth ponies scrambled over themselves to get away from the terrifying samurai unicorn. He turned back to the grey stallion. "Lead on."

"Well, if it isn't South Pole," said Cheerilee with a smirk. "I haven't seen you since you left for law school in Manehattan."

"Cheerilee!" he said. His face lit up with joy. "I... didn't expect to find you hanging around with an armored lunatic." Pokey shot a look at South, and he cringed in terror. "Not that there's anything wrong with hanging out with armored lunatics in shady parts of Canterlot. I'm kind of envious. About the armor." He adjusted his tie. "Shall we go? To some place less... stabby?" They called a carriage and within minutes were in a far nicer neighborhood. Cheerilee flounced her candy striped hair at the grey stallion.

"So how did you come to work for Blueblood?" asked Cheerilee.

"My law firm assigned me to him," South Pole said. "He's always in some sort of trouble and making challenges to others. When he saw I was on the Canterlot University fencing team, he appointed me as his so called second." He floated a stack of papers out of his saddle bag, and passed them to Pokey. "Now if you'll sign here, here, and here, we can pay you the standard amount to not show up."

"Shouldn't you be discussing this with her?" asked Medley. South Pole looked at Cheerilee uncertainly.

"You're his second?" he asked.

"I guess," replied Cheerilee. "It was either me or her, and she's pregnant." South took a deep breath, and floated the papers to her.

"Okay, so YOU sign here, here, and here..."

“Oh he’s most definitely coming to this fight,” said Cheerilee. “Blueblood has sullied the honor of the Kin of Luna, and Pokey demands satisfaction.” She embellished her speech with great dignity to try to quantify the scale of Blueblood’s injustice. She hoped it sounded as ridiculous as she thought it did.

“You’re kidding me,” said South Pole. “You’re a Kin? You look so... knightly. I thought the Kin were all, you know, terrorists.”

“Wow,” said Cheerilee. “I realize you slept through that class, but really, terrorists?” She tutted at the unicorn. “I’m disappointed in you, South. I thought you were better than that.”

“Wait,” interrupted Pokey. “This guy was the stallion you distracted yourself with during your Buffalo Studies class?” Pokey shook his head. “Cheerilee, I thought you had better taste in stallions back then.” Medley looked confused.

“I thought you dated mares...”

“THAT WAS A PHASE, DAMNIT,” shrieked Cheerilee. South Pole coughed, trying to steer the conversation back to what amounted to reality.

“At any rate,” continued South, “you really want to fight a duel with Blueblood?”

“I cracked him with my shoe for a reason,” said Pokey. “And it wasn’t because he had a fly on him.”

“Well you’ve made me happy at least,” said South Pole, as they pulled up to the hotel.

They exited the carriage to Canterlot Carriage Suites. The building was made of the same white marble that adorned most of the city, and rose twenty five stories into the sky. Though dwarfed by the other buildings around it, and its luxury faded from the years, it had that certain charm that one only found in smoky bars and old jazz clubs. The ponies walked inside the lounge area and stood at the low tables.

“Why would your employer getting in a duel make you happy?” asked Cheerilee.

“Because it’d be nice to see his massive ego cut down a notch,” said South Pole. He levitated a pen from his satchel. “Don’t get me wrong,

Blueblood's no slouch when it comes to duels. He wins most of them, and he's put ponies in the ground before." South tapped his pen on the table, and started writing things on the documents. "But you look like you've seen real combat, and that armor of yours is straight out of a history book. Now, as to the terms of the fight..."

"Any pony else hungry?" asked Medley. "I could use some donuts."

"There's a wonderful donut place down the street," said South Pole. "I'll buy."

South Pole ordered a room for the trio before they left in search of fried pastries. A short walk brought them to the donut shop near campus. Behind the counter stood a light tan unicorn with a brown mane and a cutie mark of sprinkled donut. In front of the counter sat a small purple and green dragon; he was nursing a cup of hot chocolate. Spike turned around as the door bell chimed, and his face went white.

"Uh, hi guys," Spike said, as he backed away from the ponies. "W...what's up?" Pokey wrapped Spike in a telekinetic blanket before he had the chance to run. Pokey slammed the dragon to the ground. With murder in his eyes, Pokey's horn sparked with dark light.

"Hey!" yelled the stallion behind the counter. "You leave him alone!"

"This lizard ruined my life," snarled Pokey.

"As a lawyer," said South, "I have to advise you that assaulting a dragon in the city of Canterlot carries with it serious jail time."

"Please don't hurt him," said Cheerilee. "I'm sure that Celestia's punished him for what he's done already."

Pokey slammed Spike into the ceiling with his telekinetic powers. He threw spike into the wall before letting him drop to the floor. Pokey stomped out of the donut shop. He was cursing a blue streak as he left. Spike wobbled to his feet.

"I thought he was going to kill me," said Spike.

"Well I wouldn't have stopped him," said Medley. "I very nearly died because of your thoughtless actions."

"Wait, you're actually out looking for those stones?" asked Spike. "I thought you managed to get out of it."

"No," said Cheerilee. "And in case you haven't noticed, we're short a party member." Spike looked around and noted the absence of Redheart. Spike's face dropped. He put his head in his hands and shook his head.

"Oh, man," he said. "I didn't think that you could actually die out there. I thought that Celestia's quests were all fun and games."

"Well, they're not," huffed Cheerilee. "Medley wouldn't be here if it weren't for Luna's intervention, and Pokey wasn't exaggerating when he said you ruined his life. He's sacrificed so much for this quest that there's not much left of him to give."

"But you found the stones right?" asked Spike. "I mean, if you've got them, Celestia can just give him back the things he lost, right?" Cheerilee just shook her head.

"You really don't get it, do you?" she asked. "I realize that you're just a child, but I would have hoped that being a dragon would have given you a better sense of perspective. You changed all of our lives. In Pokey's case, it wasn't for the better." Cheerilee sighed. She looked out at Pokey stomping back to the hotel. "Go back to Ponyville, Spike. If I were you, I'd pray to the dragon gods for forgiveness. I'd also pray that you never meet Pokey in a dark alley, because if he sees you again, he will probably kill you." Spike ran from the building and into the city in a blur of purple. Medley shot Cheerilee a confused look.

"Why did you let him think Redheart died?" she asked.

"Because it'll make him think the next time he decides to shirk responsibility," said Cheerilee. "Guilt is a harsh punishment, but it's probably fitting for his crime."

"Are you gonna order something?" asked the stallion behind the counter.

"Sorry about that," said Cheerilee. "A Bostallion crème and a coffee."

"Coffee and an apple fritter," said South Pole.

"Alfalfa and maple walnut," said Medley. South Pole stuck his tongue out at the horrid choice. "What?" she asked. "The whims of a pregnancy appetite are not to be questioned."

The ponies arrived back at the hotel to find Pokey pacing in a circle and muttering angrily about something. South Pole looked at Cheerilee with some uncertainty. Cheerilee only shrugged.

"He'll be fine," said Cheerilee. "Now you were saying about the details?"

"Oh, yes," said South. "The prince prefers duels to be unarmored save for helms, with no magic, and to the first blood." He pulled a few papers from his satchel. "That's probably the safest for both parties, and it's seen as the most civilized."

"Makes sense," said Medley as she enjoyed her donut.

"Now, you might want to consult with your armored friend over there about what he wants," continued South, "but anything else, and I'll have to consult with the Prince." Cheerilee looked over to Pokey. He was still pacing and talking to himself. Cheerilee affixed a worried smile.

"Let's not bother him with the details just yet," she said. "I'll sign these for him." Cheerilee clicked her pen, and scribbled her flowery autograph on the legal papers. "And there you have it."

"Fantastic," replied South Pole. He floated the documents back to his satchel and looked around for a moment before moving to leave. He stopped halfway to the door, and turned around.

"Would you like to have dinner tonight?" he blurted. His grey cheeks practically turned red with embarrassment.

"Um..." said Cheerilee, caught dishoofed at the question. She looked at Medley, who grinned and nodded. "Well, I haven't had a shower in two days, but... sure, I guess. Give me half an hour."

"Uh, great!" he said, nervously. "I'll go call us a carriage." He walked out of the hotel, leaving the pegasus and the earth pony exchanging looks.

"Well, well," smirked Medley. "Someone has a date."

"It's not a date!" blushed Cheerilee. "I mean, he probably just wants to make sure of all the legal nonsense is squared away."

“Sounds like a date to me,” grinned Medley. “Let’s get you up to the room so you can get ready.” The girls disappeared upstairs, and Pokey stopped pacing. He closed his eyes for a moment, and drew a deep breath. He left to go find the hotel gym. He hoped they had a kicking bag.

Chapter Fourteen

The Art of the Duel

This isn't Stalliongrad! There are Rules!

Exactly a half an hour later, Cheerilee walked from the elevator with her new collar ruffled. Her candy striped hair fell in cascades down her neck. She wore the Sapphire of Brilliance around her neck to accent her shining green eyes. Cheerilee winked back at Medley, who waved as she got in the carriage. Medley sighed as wistful memories of her own days of dating came back to her.

"Oh, to be young and on the dating scene again," she smiled.

"You know she's older than you, right?" asked Pokey. The blue unicorn was dripping with sweat, and his white mane stuck to his helm.

"I was being sarcastic," said Medley. She caught wind of the stallion, and waved a hoof at her nose. "You could really use a shower."

"I could really use a drink," he said.

"Shower first, then the bar," gagged Medley. "Trust me, you reek of testosterone."

The carriage rolled along the cobblestone streets of Canterlot as it carried the teacher and lawyer ponies toward a medium sized castle. The architecture was typical of Canterlot: domed roofs, spiraling outdoor staircases, and sweeping white walls. Cheerilee was not impressed, and South Pole could see it.

"You start to get used to it after a while," said the unicorn. "All this overblown architecture makes me wish I was back in Manehattan. Those ponies knew how to build a city."

"I've never been," said Cheerilee, looking back at her date. "I hear it's nice."

"It really is," mused South Pole. The carriage rolled to a stop outside the castle. "Not as unicorn centric as this town. It gives you a wider variety

of cultures and customs. Better than all the high minded snobbery that seems to pervade this town.” Cheerilee nodded out to the castle.

“Speaking of snobbery,” asked Cheerilee. “What is this place?”

“This is Blueblood’s Southtown home,” said South Pole. “He stays here when he doesn’t feel like going back up town.”

“Really now,” mused Cheerilee. “It must be nice to have that much money to throw around.”

“Yeah, well,” coughed South Pole. “It’s not like his entire book keeping is on the level. His massive gambling habit alone...” South bit his tongue, as tried to put the words back in his mouth.

“Oh, I already knew about that,” said Cheerilee.

“Most every pony does,” said South Pole. “But what doesn’t make sense is how much he wins.” They walked along the side gardens until they came to a small, nondescript wooden door. “I think he’s a cheat.”

“Quite the accusation, coming from his lawyer,” smirked Cheerilee.

“Hey,” defended South. “I’ve earned every cent I’ve made from him, fair and square. He may be a cheat, but he pays well.”

“I don’t doubt your integrity,” replied Cheerilee. “In fact, I admire that you’ve managed to stay pretty much the same awkward South Pole I’ve always known.”

“Thanks?” asked South, unsure if that had been a compliment.

South pushed open the door to reveal a kitchen staffed by a sleeping mule and brown earth pony. The duo sprang to full alert as the door slammed shut. They began running around comically, trying to look busy. They slowed to a halt when they saw it was only South Pole who had come in.

“Hey, hey! If it isn’t our favorite lawyer!” said the tan mule.

“We had a favorite lawyer, Hinny?” asked the brown pony. “I thought we were payin’ him to keep us outta jail.”

“I dunno about you, Garson, but that makes him my favorite,” replied Hinny. He gave Cheerilee the once over, and nodded his approval. “And

you bought a fine lookin' mare witcha" He turned to the brown pony. "I told you he was straight; now pay up." Garson tossed a small satchel of bits at the tan mule, and muttered in disgust. "What can we do fer you two lovely ponies tonight?"

"How does dinner for the lady sound?" asked South Pole. "Is anyone else here? I'd like to show her around the estate."

"Nah, the boss ain't here," said Garson. "Heard he was off this evenin' drinking with some underage fillies."

"How's that different from any other week day?" asked Hinny. They high hooved, and erupted into laughter.

"So..." asked South, "dinner?"

"We gotcha boss," said Garson. "Imma make for you a spaghetti in a white wine sauce with a side of asparagus in holindaise. For desert, a strawberry tart with fresh whipped cream. That sound good for you and the lady, boss?"

"Fantastic," said South Pole, glancing at a locked wrought iron gate. "Is the wine cellar open?"

"Nope," replied Hinny. He tossed a key to the unicorn. South Pole caught it on his horn, and dropped it in a pocket. "And we didn't see you'se two go down there neither." South bowed to the duo.

"You are gentlecolts and scholars," said South.

"Nah, we're a buncha cooks," said Garson. "But you treat us good, and that makes you a good guy." He turned to Cheerilee. "This pony's an okay fella, Miss. You be nice to him, eh?" She smiled and nodded to the brown pony. He turned away to begin dinner as the two walked down the stairs.

The wine cellar was as beautiful a sight as Cheerilee had even seen. Her inner lush wept to behold so many glorious bottles of exquisite vintages. Fine wines dating back dozens, even a hundred years lined the walls, all behind gilded brass cages. South Pole came to one cage, and opened it with the key the mule had given him. He floated over a few bottles, and showed one to Cheerilee.

“Sauvignon blanc, from the Vineyards outside of Manehattan,” she read. “Vintage... why that’s the year we graduated!”

“I thought it appropriate,” grinned South Pole. “I do know how you love the white wines.”

“I’d ask if he’d notice them missing,” said Cheerilee. “But I’m guessing Blueblood doesn’t care much for the domestic vintages.”

“Blueblood wouldn’t know good wine if it bit him,” said South Pole. “I wouldn’t even work for him, if the money wasn’t so good.”

“So go back to Manehattan,” suggested Cheerilee. “I’m sure you can find just as nice a job there. It would beat this hideously expensive city.”

“Maybe you’re right,” said South Pole, floating the wines to the dumbwaiter.

“Hey you’s two down there?” called the brown Pony. “Dinner’s ready whenever you are.”

Cheerilee and South Pole walked back up the stairs and into the lavish dining room. The walls were covered in portraits of Blueblood’s lineage, all staring at the long oak table that graced the center of the room. Walnut framed double doors sat on either end of the dining hall, with smaller doors for the servants cleverly hidden behind carvings of unicorns. Cheerilee nodded in approval.

“Very...” she searched for words.

“Late century?” asked South Pole.

“Why yes,” said Cheerilee with a smile. “It seems your time in school wasn’t a total waste.”

Garson brought out the ponies’ meals. They ate with friendly conversation for a while, and in the course of the meal, polished off two of the bottles of wine. Hinny cleared the plates when they were done, and brought a magnificent strawberry tart with fresh whipped cream. The two equines had proven their kitchen skills, and Cheerilee was happy to give her compliments to the chefs. Hinny and Garson left the house, but not before reminding South Pole to lock up when he left.

“Allow me to give you a tour,” said the unicorn. “Despite being a stuffy bore, Blueblood has some amazing taste in architecture and design.”

“I would love that,” said Cheerilee. She was enjoying the pleasant warmth of her dinner wine.

South Pole walked Cheerilee through the foyer, a spanning marvel of roman columns and arches. The border was made of compass roses hammered from bronze. Lined along the walls were mannequins that displayed ancient suits of Equestrian armor. Cheerilee noted the lack of pegasus or earth pony armors among the sets. She also noticed that most of them looked like they were on loan from the ancient artifacts archives. South Pole confirmed her suspicions.

“Blueblood firmly believes in the superiority of the unicorn over all other equines,” said South Pole. “And all others exist to serve the glorious unicorn race.” South rolled his eyes in disgust.

“And what do you think?” asked Cheerilee.

“We’ve all got cutie marks don’t we?” he asked. He took a glance at Cheerilee’s. “That means we’re all good at something. Yours is about spreading cheer. Mine tells me to seek the right paths and find the truth.”

“What about blank flanks like mules and donkeys?”

“They’re the lucky ones, I think,” said South Pole. “They don’t get their destiny tattooed on their hind quarters when they’re young. They can do whatever they want with their lives, and no one will think any different.” Cheerilee tossed her caned striped hair with a smile.

“Smart answer,” said Cheerilee.

They walked through the foyer and through the dining room where they came to the gardens. Filled with beautiful trees and a hedge maze along the side, the garden was as fine as Cheerilee had even seen. Birds sat in the central fountain, and played in the gently flowing water. South Pole plucked a rose from one of the bushes and floated it into Cheerilee’s hair.

“Why thank you,” she blushed. “You’re certainly the gentlecolt. I bet you bring all the ladies here.”

“Not really,” replied South Pole. He looked rather embarrassed. “Once they hear I work for Blueblood, they assume I’m the same stuck up bigot that he is, and want nothing to do with me. The mares that want to get close to me because of him...” He cringed, clearly disgusted by the thought. They walked along the edge of the gardens for a bit. They stood quietly for a moment to listen to the birds and creatures that enjoyed this oasis of life in the city. It was pleasant, and in many ways, a simple charm denied to most ponies that lived in the city.

“It is nice to spend time with an old friend,” said South, as they walked back to the manor. “I’m glad I’m able to offer such hospitality to some pony that appreciates it, instead of expects it.” South Pole’s face lit up with an idea. “I know what I wanted to show you. You’ll love it.” He opened the door off the garden and escorted Cheerilee inside a study.

The study was a wonderland of books and maps with display cases interspersed along the walnut shelves. The room was bordered in the same walnut trim and decorated with compass roses. Windows separated some of the shelves and provided a stunning view of the gardens. Massive slabs of iron hung outside the windows, embossed with scenes of unicorns defeating monsters. At the far end of the study was another display case with a single shimmering gemstone.

“The Ruby of Brilliance!” gasped Cheerilee. She trotted over to the case. The stone pulsed with a red light that filled the room with warmth.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” asked South Pole. “He brought it up from the archives a while back, and made it the centerpiece of his study. I think he cares more about that hunk of rock than he does any pony in Canterlot.” Cheerilee looked for a way to open the case.

“I need that stone,” said Cheerilee.

“What?” asked South Pole. Cheerilee moved closer to the case, and pushed the ruffles of her collar away. The sapphire and ruby flashed together, to fill the room with a majestic purple light. South Pole stood stunned to the spot.

“That was...” he searched for words. “Amazing. How did you do that?” Cheerilee held out the sapphire around her neck.

“These two stone are part of a set of four,” said Cheerilee. “You may have heard about the Red Moss coming out of Appleloosa and Bridleburg?”

“Yes, but...” he struggled to come up with the thought. The wine had slowed his train of thought to a single pony. “What does that have to do with this artifact?”

“Oh, Southie,” giggled Cheerilee. “You never were a pony of the Book.” She trotted over to the shelves and pulled a copy of the Book of Celestia from the stacks. She flipped to the passage about the flood, and pointed to the verse of the stones. “These two stones and the other two that we have are the stars. Their function is to end the Blight. Celestia sent us after them.”

“You’re working for the princess?” asked South Pole.

“You got it,” replied Cheerilee with a wink. “That’s why I need that stone.”

“I would give it to you in a heartbeat, but...” he looked around. “I don’t have the keys to that display, plus it’s alarmed, and...” He stopped mid-sentence; his grey face lit up again. “I got it! What do you think of a wager?”

“Wager?” asked Cheerilee. “Wager for what?”

“The duel!” replied South Pole. “You wager your stone against his, and the winner takes both. I’m sure Pokey will wipe the floor with Blueblood. Losing that stone will really stick it too him.”

“That’s brilliant!” said Cheerilee, throwing her arms around him. She kissed the unicorn, to his complete surprise. “I always knew you were brilliant.” She smiled as South Pole tried to come up with something intelligent.

“Well then...” he stammered at last. “Why don’t we draw up the papers...” He levitated a quill from a mahogany desk. “And then we’ll... uh...” South dropped the quill as Cheerilee kept her arms around him. She was still smiling.

“Why don’t you worry about that later, Southie?” she purred.

...

“Where do you think she is?” asked Pokey. He had long since showered and was now on his eighth or ninth bottle of cider. The hotel room was typical of mid century design complete with dated wallpaper and

blurry paintings of fields to line the walls. Medley looked up from the pile of locks she was fiddling with and found herself wondering the same thing.

"Maybe her date went really well?" she offered. Pokey grumbled at the thought.

"I'm glad some ponies are having fun on this trip," he grouched. Medley turned back to her locks.

"Don't come sniffing around my flanks," warned Medley. "I'm a married mare with one on the way."

"You're not my type," he retorted.

"Then who is?" asked Medley.

"White earth ponies with hearts of gold and manes of pink candy floss," mused Pokey. He turned his bottle upside down to find it empty. He levitated another, and popped off the cap.

"What, you mean Redheart?" asked Medley. The padlock she had been working on snapped open with a click.

"Yup," said Pokey. He drank straight from the bottle. "Her and I, we had what you might call a 'thing,'" He slurred and maked air quotes with his hooves. "You also might not call it that, seeing as how it ended up. We went out to the buffalo all the time, and came back on the train. We were, as they say, together in those times." He took another long swig from his cider. "Sometimes in Ponyville too. She was lonely, I was lonely. I guess we just sort of used each other for companionship." Medley looked a bit surprised at the revelation.

"I didn't know you and she were an item," she said.

"We weren't," admitted Pokey. "Not really anyway. Her heart belonged to that buffalo. I was just there." He took another sip. "Lucky me."

"You're not taking it very well," said Medley. "If you really loved her, then you'd be happy for her." Pokey cocked an eyebrow at the turquoise pegasus.

"I'm so happy for her I could burst," said Pokey. "Seeing her reunited with Plain Strider was at once the happiest and most miserable moment of my life. I am sincerely happy for her, but in the same breath is the

realization that I can never have her. Thusly, I'm miserable for me, and me alone." He lifted his bottle to Medley. "Salut." Medley put down her lock.

"Oh, grow up," chastised Medley. "You're gonna cry because you didn't get the girl? That's so foalish of you. Every pony knows you pick up the pieces and move on with your life." She stood from the desk and walked over to Pokey. "Acting like a whiny gelding isn't going to get you anywhere but rejected."

"Did you just call me whiny?" asked Pokey.

"Yes I did," said Medley. "Now you have two options. One, you can try to drink your problems away. That'll get you a cider gut and liver disease. You think you'd be able to squeeze into your precious armor when you're all fat and flabby?"

"Probably not," admitted Pokey.

"Well then your other option is to pony up," encouraged Medley. "Make your life better. Have a goal."

"I gotta goal," muttered Pokey.

"Well, what is it?" asked Medley.

"Let's just say our meeting with Princess Celestia will provide me with more happiness than you can imagine," said Pokey. His tone was cryptic, and left Medley with a sense of unease.

"Fair enough," replied Medley. "Then what are you doing to that end?"

Pokey looked at the bottles surrounding him. Medley was right; he wasn't doing anything to help himself along the way. In fact, he was probably causing more trouble, given the hangover he was going to have tomorrow. He dumped the remainder of his cider in the sink.

"You're right," sighed Pokey. "Acting like a colt isn't going to get me any closer to my goal. I need to get some sleep. I've got royalty to maim tomorrow."

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Cheerilee arrived back at the hotel early the next morning. She was grinning from ear to ear. Pokey laid his head on the restaurant table, and stared at the ceiling. Medley dug into a stack of pancakes.

“Good morning,” Cheerilee sang. “I trust you all had a wonderful evening.”

“Oh Luna, kill me,” moaned Pokey. “You morning ponies.” Cheerilee simply smiled and tossed a stack of papers at the hung over unicorn.

“These are the terms of your duel,” she said. “Unarmored except for helms, no magic, to and the first blood. All very civilized.” Pokey levitated the documents with Herculean effort. He squinted with one eye as he tried to read them.

“Well that’s not very fun,” muttered Pokey.

“It’s not supposed to be fun,” said Cheerilee. “It’s supposed to be about honor, chivalry, and a few other things that escape me at the moment.”

Cheerilee looked down at Pokey, then to Medley. Her eyes questioned the source of his misery. Medley tousled the unicorn’s mane. Pokey could barely find the strength to growl back at her.

“Poor wittle Pokey is all hung over,” cooed Medley. “He thought drinking could make all his pwoblems go bye bye.” Cheerilee and Medley tittered in unison.

“I hate both of you,” mumbled Pokey. “I just thought you’d like to know that.”

“Lightweight,” mocked Cheerilee. “I had a bottle of wine to myself, and I had a fantastic night. And a great morning, too” She winked at Pokey. He slid his head off the table.

“That’s way too much information,” moaned Pokey. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go try to cut off my own head.” He staggered away from the table. He hissed at the light like a feral cat. Medley smirked at Cheerilee.

“What?” she asked.

"I never thought you were the type to just jump into a relationship," said Medley.

"Who said anything about a relationship?" asked Cheerilee. "Can't two consenting adults do what they do behind closed doors and not make a big fuss of it?"

"That's not the way I was raised," scoffed Medley. "I was taught you only have one partner for life. I've only ever been with Snow Catcher."

"My dear Medley," said Cheerilee. "I thought this trip had expanded your horizons."

"Not about that," she blushed.

"Physical intimacy doesn't always equate to love," said Cheerilee. "I've been with plenty of ponies, and the one thing it's taught me is that if you confuse the two, well... what's happened to Pokey is a testament to that."

"I really don't want to discuss this further," said Medley. "Let's just say our beliefs differ and leave it at that."

"Fair enough," said Cheerilee. "By the way, I found the Ruby."

"You did?" gasped Medley. "Do you have it?"

"Well no," admitted Cheerilee. "I bet our Sapphire against it. When Pokey wins, we take both. Use Blueblood's gambling problem against him, so to speak."

"There's a reason you're the brains of this outfit," saluted Medley.

"I know," replied Cheerilee with a smug grin.

By the time noon rolled around, Pokey had recovered and felt in fighting shape. His throat was still dry, and his head still hurt a bit, but he was looking forward to the beating he was going to give that snotty aristocrat. They arrived at the dueling grounds across the street from the Southtown manor with minutes to spare.

Blueblood and Pokey met in the ring; their seconds stood beside them. A small crowd of Blueblood's entourage had gathered to witness the fight. Medley was there to witness for Pokey, and stood under a white

parasol. The two combatants stood horn to horn, Pokey in his deep blue lacquered helm, and Blueblood in an embossed gold plated champron.

“Gentlecolts,” said South. “The duel is to the first blood. When first blood is drawn, the duel is over. The wager for this duel is a ruby and a sapphire. To the victor go both stones. There will be no magic permitted, and no armor except for helms are to be worn. These are the terms of the duel as agreed upon by your seconds: Myself, and Cheerilee, respectively.” He nodded to the mulberry earth pony. She winked back. He cleared his throat. “Are there any questions before we begin?” he asked.

“Let’s get this over with,” said Blueblood. He stretched his neck muscles. “I have other, more important things to attend to.”

Blueblood slashed at Pokey before South Pole even had a chance to move out of the ring. Pokey caught the horn with his own and parried the swing as he had a thousand times before. He countered with a swing and caught the ridges of Blueblood’s horn. Pokey’s razor sharp horn sent shavings flying.

Blueblood stepped backward a moment. The natural sharpness of Pokey’s horn wasn’t what he was expecting. Blueblood mentally revised his strategy and began to fight defensively. Pokey stabbed twice and slashed in three sparse movements. Blueblood parried the thrusts and ducked away from the swing with the grace of a butterfly. A lock of his finely coiffed mane fell to the sandy ground. Pokey smirked.

The white unicorn dodged backwards, and then dashed at Pokey. He stabbed for his flanks. Pokey shuffled to the left to let Blueblood rush past. Pokey swung his razor sharp horn at Blueblood’s flank, and took a swath of the prince’s amber tail with the swipe.

Blueblood’s entourage booed while Medley and Cheerilee clopped their hooves excitedly. Blueblood spun on his hooves and violently slashed at Pokey’s rear. Pokey ducked under the attack and came up with a swing of his own. Blueblood moved fast enough that the razor horn sparked viciously against his champron instead of his shoulder. Blueblood attempted to trip Pokey with a swinging fetlock. He caught Pokey’s shin, and threw the blue unicorn off balance for a moment. Pokey blocked a swing and parried a thrust. They crossed horns and came eye to eye.

“Don’t start fighting dirty,” warned Pokey. “You start playing by my rules, and you’re going to lose an ear.”

Blueblood threw a head butt that pushed Pokey back a step. Blueblood came down with three precise swings, each parried by Pokey. Pokey returned the thrust, and swung again. He came shoulder to shoulder with the white stallion. Blueblood tried for another trip. Pokey picked up his hoof to avoid the trip, and swung wide. Blueblood dodged the laughably wide attack but missed the crashing right hook that sent him to the ground.

“I warned you not to fight dirty,” said Pokey.

Pokey stabbed for the flank, hoping to score a touch. Blueblood rolled away and came up swinging. Pokey caught two swings with his horn, and caught a faint scraping across his helm. He had to admit that Blueblood was a skilled opponent, but this fight had gone on long enough. Pokey took a step back; he was ready to end this battle. He thought he saw Blueblood’s horn twinkle. Pokey found the world black in an instant.

“Bastard!” yelled Pokey. “You used magic!”

He swung his head as he blindly tried to gauge where the blows would come from. He caught one of them with his horn, then another across his helm. On the third swing, he felt the faintest of scratches on his shoulder. His vision came back in just enough time to see a rivulet of blood fall into the sandy soil.

Chapter Fifteen

The Heist

Revenge is a dish best served cold. Revenge is sweet. So it's kind of like ice cream.

"I'm telling you, he cheated," cursed Pokey.

"I believe you, I really do," said South Pole. "But I didn't see it, and neither did any of the other ponies."

They stood outside a cafe, now two stones short of their goal instead of just one. Rain had had been ordered to roll in, and pegasi filled the sky with unhappy grey clouds. The scratch on Pokey's shoulder had stopped bleeding almost as soon as it had started. It was no worse than a paper cut, but it had been enough to lose both the stones to the cheering of Bluebloods cronies.

"I'll challenge him again," demanded Pokey. "Two stones for two stones."

"I doubt he'll go for that," replied Cheerilee. "Did you see how angry he got when you took off part of his tail?"

"Then what are we going to do?" asked Medley. "Break in and steal the stones?" The table fell silent at the remark. They all turned to look at South Pole. He put up his hooves in defense.

"Oh no," he said. "I would definitely lose my job if I helped you plan a heist."

"Then I'm going to steal your keys," said Cheerilee.

"I thought you hated your job?" asked Medley.

"I do," admitted South. "But I can't just go throwing away the past few years of work because some group of ponies and my old girlfriend asked me too." Cheerilee pouted at the unicorn and tried her best to look heartbroken. "Look, I can't give you keys to the stones because I don't have them," he said. "I know how to get on the grounds, and I can get you inside, but after that, it's up to you to get the stones. I suggest that you do

whatever it is you're planning on doing tonight before he moves them to his main mansion. You'll never get past his security there."

"Just because something's impossible doesn't mean it can't be done," said Medley. "Still, I think I can get into that case."

"What?" asked Pokey. "Medley, if you think you're going to participate in this heist, you're out of your pony mind."

"And why not?" asked Medley. "I'm quiet. I can fly. And I can pick locks."

"Since when?" asked Cheerilee.

"Since I saw War Jenny do it," she replied. "It turns out it's not that hard. I got those cuffs off didn't I?"

"A Diamond Dog's cuff and a jewel case are two completely different things," said Pokey. "Plus you're pregnant. Why do I have to keep reminding you of this?"

"I've been practicing!" said Medley. She dumped a saddle bag full of opened pad locks and hair pins onto the table. Some of the pins were broken, but the locks were all otherwise undamaged. "I can do this, I know I can. Besides, this isn't my first ride into motherhood. A mare can stay happy and active until her eighth month of gestation. Nine in my case." Pokey rolled his eyes.

"I'm pretty sure 'healthy pregnancy exercise' doesn't include burglary," said Pokey.

"Alright, hold on now, let's think," said Cheerilee. She tapped a hoof to her temple. "You say you're fine, Medley, and I'm guessing you've got the experience that would tell you otherwise. What important is we need to see if you can open a jewel case." She thought for a minute till an idea came to her. "If you can get the Hamite case at the Archive opened, then you should be able to open the jewel case. Otherwise, Pokey's going to have to pull a smash and grab."

"That's not going to work," said South. "If the case is broken, it will trip the alarms."

"So?" asked Pokey.

“So, parts of the alarms are giant metal plates that slide over the windows,” said South. “Blueblood isn’t the type to call the police at the first sign of trouble. He sends his goons in first, and then calls for the royal guard to clean up what’s left.”

“We’re just going to have to not set off those alarms then.” said Medley.

“Right,” said South. “I don’t even want to think about what will happen if you get caught in there.”

“Oh, Southie,” giggled Cheerilee. “You mean ‘we’ don’t you? Now you’re an accomplice to grand larceny.” South stood speechless for a moment as he realized that he had just committed a felony.

The four ponies found themselves again at the squat stone building housing the Ancient Artifacts Archives. Cheerilee flashed her forged student ID at the pegasus working the counter. She waved them through without even turning away from her fashion magazine. Pokey recognized it as the same one the nurse in Bridleburg had. As the gilded brass elevator sank into the stacks, South looked around remembering all the time he had spent here.

“Wow,” said South. “This brings back memories.”

“Good ones?” asked Medley. South Pole thought a minute. He recalled falling off a balcony after three straight all-nighters.

“Not really,” he replied.

The elevator doors clanged open, and the ponies got off. They trotted through the stacks, Cheerilee’s sense of direction lead them right back to the Hamite artifact case. Medley looked around for a moment to see if any other pony was nearby. The other ponies stood with their flanks to her to block the sight of the pilfering pegasus from any pony who might walk by.

After an agonizing minute, the sound of a click echoed through the empty halls. The ponies turned around to see Medley. She was holding one of the Hamite masks to her face.

“Booga booga,” she chanted. Cheerilee shot her an aggravated look.

“Put that back,” admonished Cheerilee. “I thought you had more respect for Hamite culture than that.”

"I do," said Medley. She took off the mask and flipped it around to show Cheerilee the card on the back. "This one is for good luck. I figured we could use all we could get." Medley put it back in the case, and closed it. She rubbed her hooves together in glee. "Now let's go pilfer us some jewelry."

"I'm going to get disbarred," whined South.

"It'll be fun, I promise," said Cheerilee.

They rode back up the elevator, and a minute later, spilled into the foyer. Now they were ready to start planning the heist in detail. South Pole saw the front double doors opening. He recognized several of Blueblood's entourage walking in. South pushed the Ponyville Trio into a corridor, and shushed them.

"What are you..." asked Cheerilee.

"It's Blueblood," he said. "Hold on." South trotted into the open, and greeted the white stallion with a bow.

"Ah!" said Blueblood. "South Pole, my devoted second, I trust you approved of my fine hornspanyship this afternoon?" South ground his teeth.

"Never better, sir," said South.

"I am having a masquerade this evening to commemorate my victory over that Kin," he said. "Bring a date, won't you? And not that horrid candy maned mare you had your eyes on this afternoon. Really, South, try to have some dignity. She looked like a school marm, for Celestia's sake." South tried to hide his shock. Did Blueblood really see him staring at Cheerilee's flanks during the duel? His mind churned as he tried to come up with a plausible story.

"Sir, she was a slave to that... Kin," spat South. "He cut off her horn, and forced her into servitude. She escaped with me after the duel, and asked me to pass on her eternal gratitude for saving her." South put on his best aires of disgust.

"How dare he defile our proud horns?" shouted Blueblood. "I'd have killed him if I known that!" He scoffed, annoyed that he had missed an opportunity to slay an enemy of unicorns. "Very well, bring her if you wish. Your other friends, too, if you have any. Be sure to wear your most amusing costumes; I want to laugh this evening."

“Very well, sir,” replied South. “We shall see you at the north residence then?”

“Oh no,” replied Blueblood. “That’s still being repaired from last week’s gala. We’ll see you at the Southtown manor.” Blueblood perked up his ears. “Did I just hear some pony swear?”

“Probably some poor pegasus student who can’t hack it,” said South. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll let you be on your way.” Blueblood and his entourage trotted past South Pole, leaving the grey stallion to mull his thoughts. South retrieved the Ponyville trio, and shuffled them out the door before any pony could see them. Pokey looked back at the archive in disgust.

“Are you bucking kidding me?” demanded Pokey.

“Language!” chided Medley.

“And really? A unicorn?” scoffed Cheerilee. “I’m proud to be an earth pony.”

“I panicked!” admitted South. “How was I supposed to know he actually paid attention to what I was doing? He should have been paying attention to the duel.”

“You should have too,” said Pokey. “I realize Cheerilee’s easy on the eyes, but if you had been paying attention, you could have caught him cheating and we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“I’m sorry!” said South. “Look, give me a break, I didn’t expect you to lose.”

“Well I didn’t expect him to cheat,” said Pokey. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“Colts, stop fighting,” interrupted Cheerilee. “We can’t pull off this heist now. Burglarizing a jewel case with a house full of ponies? It’s insane.”

“Unicorns,” corrected South Pole. “He doesn’t invite other ponies to this kind of shindig.” They walked in silence away from the archives for a bit before anypony spoke again.

“You know what?” said Pokey. “This might actually work to our advantage. You two go as guests. Medley and I will come in over the hedges and pull off the heist. You get to keep your job, we get the gems. Every pony’s happy, except Blueblood, but he can take a flying leap.”

“Sounds dangerous,” said Medley. “You think it’ll work?”

“Here’s hoping,” said Pokey. He looked over Medley for a minute. “But you’re not going to be sneaking anywhere with those colors.” Medley looked back at her coat.

“What’s wrong with turquoise?” she asked. “I’ve been this color my entire life.”

“Yes, but have you ever tried to sneak out of your house in the middle of the night?” asked South. “You stick out like a sore hoof. You’ll need a disguise.”

“Ooh! Can I get a ninja outfit?” she asked. “I always wanted to be a ninja.”

“Now you’re thinking like a thief,” said Pokey. “A ninja costume will be perfect. In fact, we should all hit the costume store. We’re going to make this a night Blueblood won’t forget.”

The costume shop wasn’t that busy, and the ponies found themselves enjoying the selection a bit too much. Medley found a ninja costume that covered most of her body, leaving only a few tantalizing patches of her coat exposed. Cheerilee suggested taking it home as a gift for Snow Catcher once they were done. Pokey didn’t really need a costume, but chose a black carapasion to cover his armor, and a charcoal face powder to dull his coat. It was Cheerilee that took the longest to decide.

She first tried on a similar ninja costume to Medley’s but found the idea of playing a thief a bit too much like showing her hoof. She also tried a maid costume to tease South. Cheerilee came from behind the curtain, holding a feather duster in her teeth. She winked at South.

“Je suis un peu Pouliche,” she said. The grey unicorn was far too shocked to react, and Cheerilee flounced back behind the curtain with a giggle. To continue her torment of the stallion, she came out in a uniform resembling the one she wore as a school filly. All three of the ponies stared

at her as she spun about in her skirt and blouse. Medley's turquoise cheeks turned bright red, and she looked away in embarrassment.

"I can see why the mares liked her," said Medley.

"Well, I can't go attracting that much attention," said Cheerilee as she disappeared behind the curtain. "Pity, I look great in this outfit." She finally settled on an explorer's costume. She enjoyed the pith helmet and vest, and vowed to wear it more often once she got back to Ponyville.

"Go back to the school filly outfit," insisted Pokey. He was met with an angry stare from South Pole. The grey stallion paid for the purchases, and they left the store. South floated the bill of sale into his pocket as they walked.

"Why were there five costumes on that receipt?" asked Pokey. South Pole ignored the question, and tried not to blush.

After a brief walk, the four ponies found themselves back at the Canterlot Carriage Inn. Cheerilee and South worked together for a few minutes on a crude map of Blueprint's manor. They laid it on the bed. Cheerilee produced chess pieces from somewhere, and used them to represent the ponies.

"Once I see the coast is clear," explained Cheerilee, moving a queen into position on the map, "I'll come to this hallway, and South," she moved a bishop in front of her queen, "will signal you from the window."

"Why am I a bishop?" asked South. "I'd rather be a rook."

"Medley's the rook, that's why," said Pokey.

"Well you get to be the knight," complained South. "That's clearly superior to a bishop."

"I am a knight," shot back Pokey. "Of sorts."

"I'll make you both pawns if you won't behave," threatened Cheerilee. "Now, once we make the signal, it's up to South and me to distract Blueblood," she moved the black king into place, "long enough for Medley and Pokey," she moved the knight and the rook over the hedgerow and into the study, "to make the grab. We only get one shot at this, and if we blow it, Medley's in serious trouble."

"The party works to our advantage," said South as he pointed to the King. "Blueblood's not likely to assault some pony in the middle of a gala. He'll probably let his guards handle it. I can get you out of jail with minimal fuss."

"What about the guards?" asked Medley.

"They shouldn't be able to see you," said Cheerilee. "And if they do, well that's what Pokey's there for. Don't let them get away to raise the alarm, though."

"You are to fly away at the first sign that everything has gone south," said Pokey.

"Gone me?" asked South Pole.

"Uh, haywire," corrected Pokey. "Hinky. Stale." He struggled to come up with synonyms. "The plan falls apart. Anyway, you're to run at the first sign of trouble, do you understand me?"

"Loud and clear," saluted Medley sarcastically.

"Once you make the grab," continued Cheerilee, "Fly the stones to the castle, and Pokey will allow himself to be arrested. I'm sure a royal pardon will be easy to come by once we're done."

"Wouldn't be the first time I've found myself in the slammer," muttered Pokey. He glanced at a clock on the night stand. "Alright, this all goes down in an hour; let's synchronize our watches." The ponies all looked at their fetlocks. Pokey blinked in embarrassment. He had never worn a watch. "Okay, never mind."

"I've got to get this fake horn scar on," said Cheerilee. "The rest of you get into your costumes. The carriage should be outside in a few minutes waiting to take us to the manor."

"Medley and I will walk there," said Pokey. "We'll watch for your signal starting in exactly two hours. If the plan's a bust, break a window." The ponies all put hoof in the center, and shook. There was no turning back now; every one of them was going to leave this hotel room a criminal. They dispersed to work on their own parts of the plan.

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The carriage ride was quiet and uneventful. Both ponies inside the carriage remained in silence on the way there. Once again, South and Cheerilee rolled up to the manor, and once more, they were unimpressed by its architecture.

"I really can't wait to leave this city," groused South. "I never thought I'd get tired of spirals and domes, but I find myself wishing for the concrete slabs of Manehattan."

"You'll get there soon enough," said Cheerilee. "Just make it through tonight, and we'll be fine."

"We?" asked South. His voice was hopeful.

"Don't get your hopes too far up," Cheerilee replied with a smirk. "Let's just see how things work out, alright?"

Cheerilee brushed her candy striped hair down her head to hide the horn scar that she and Medley had carefully applied. They stepped out of the carriage and down the receiving line where they shook hooves with a few of Blueblood's esteemed guests. They came finally to the white stallion himself. He was sporting the Archive's ancient unicorn armor. He also had gotten a hair cut to hide the damage Pokey had caused to his mane and tail.

"So good to see you," he sneered. "And I heard what happened to you my poor dear. If I had only known, I'd have made that fool pay with his life. You will let me help you, of course?" Cheerilee bowed to the prince.

"Thank you, your highness," she said. "Your generosity knows no bounds."

They walked through the arched foyer to find an array of costumes. Some ponies wore complicated masks of feathers and furs. Others used their magic to play with the light and created fantastic illusions of dragons or griffons. The two ponies mingled for a while. Cheerilee caught a glimpse of Hinni and Garson disappearing from the dining room.

Cheerilee found herself being complimented on her costume, and questioned about her horn. A few tears convinced them that it was a sore subject, and they left it at that. One unicorn dressed as a ghost seemed to be following Cheerilee and South throughout the party. Every time she

went to the punch bowl, the ghost tried to get closer. She managed to duck under a table and lose him. She trotted back to South Pole.

"I think we're being followed," whispered Cheerilee. South tossed his head back in a hearty laughter, and caught a glimpse of the offending unicorn.

"I think you're right," he muttered.

Some pony questioned where South Pole's costume was. He replied that he was dressed as a lawyer, and handed out fake subpoenas. Most of the unicorns got a kick out of the gag. Many had been recipients of the real deal themselves.

An hour into the party, Cheerilee had managed to lose her tail. The ghost unicorn was nowhere to be seen, but Cheerilee could feel him closing on her. Blueblood stood before the crowd. He lifted a glass, and clanged on it with his horn.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts," he announced with a sweeping bow. "I bring you here today to celebrate your great Prince, none other than myself, Blueblood." Polite stomping filled the room. "But to the point, we are here to celebrate victory on the field of honor!" Cheers filled the hall, as did the stomping of feet. "My victory? Why it was triumph over a so called noble of a Kin of Luna," announced Blueblood. The room filled with boos and hisses

"Death to the savages!" yelled some pony.

"And what is worse?" continued Blueblood. "This Kin was one of us, the glorious race of unicorns." More boos and hisses filled the room. "And to add to his treachery and treason, this Kin of Luna has maimed one of our own." Shocked gasps filled the room. A murmur ran through the crowd. Cheerilee shrank to a back wall, as she fiddled with one of the hidden servants exits as she tried to escape the hall. "My dear Cheerilee, will you please come forward?"

The room turned to face her. Cheerilee looked around in panic. She tried to come forward, but found her legs heavy. Her heart pounded in fear as she made her way to Blueblood. His entourage cleared a small circle for her.

"The finest minds of magic are here this evening," he said to Cheerilee. "Surely some pony here can help this poor mare?"

"I've... grown to accept my fate," said Cheerilee. Her voice quaked in what sound like fear. "I dare not show my scars to such regal ponies..." The room filled with pitying murmurs.

"Surely some pony here as the skill to help her?" demanded Blueblood. "Are we not unicorns? Do we not command the greatest magic in Equestria?"

"I'll help her," said a familiar voice. The unicorn dressed in a simple sheet that covered all but her caring blue eyes appeared from the crowd. "Cheerilee, was it? Come with me, dear, and we'll fix that horn of yours." The crowd stomped and applauded as they walked from the dining room. South Pole took the opportunity to slip out of the room and around to where he was supposed to signal for Medley.

Cheerilee followed the ghost unicorn to one of the guest bedrooms. She shut the door behind him, and pulled off the sheet. Underneath it stood a white earth pony sporting a fake horn, and a candy floss mane.

"Redheart!" gasped Cheerilee. "What are you doing here?"

"The better question is, what are you doing here?" she demanded. "What do you think you're doing sneaking around pretending to be a unicorn?"

"I could ask you the same thing," said Cheerilee. "I came after the last two Stones of Brilliance. How did we even know we were here?"

"I've been two steps behind you for a day now. The doorman at your hotel told me where you were headed, so I snuck in around the side." said Redheart. She glared at Cheerilee. "By the way, thanks for leaving in the middle of the night."

"Sorry," sighed Cheerilee. "That was Pokey's idea. I think he was just too devastated by you leaving to hang around any longer." Redheart sighed.

"Well, we've got no time to worry about that," said Redheart. "We've got to get out of here."

"Absolutely not," protested Cheerilee. "I've got Medley and Pokey coming in to steal those stones."

"Are you serious?" demanded Redheart. "I thought we send that pregnant filly home?"

"Believe me," groused Cheerilee. "We sure did try. Now she's going to pick the lock on the case and get the stones." Redheart looked completely shocked.

"Where would she even learn a thing like that?" asked Redheart.

"Long story," said Cheerilee. She peered out into the hallway.

"Why would you steal the stones?" asked Redheart. "Why didn't you just tell him that Celestia sent you after them? Or have Celestia come and get them herself? Why the cloak and dagger routine?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," admitted Cheerilee. "I mean, after we lost the sapphire by betting it on the duel..." Redheart put a hoof to her face in frustration.

"Now I'm really sorry I didn't catch up with you sooner," said Redheart. "Alright, what was your plan once you got in?"

"I was supposed to distract Blueblood," replied Cheerilee.

"Oh," gasped Redheart. "I've gone and botched your whole plan haven't I?"

"I think we can recover," said Cheerilee. "Put your costume back on, and let's get out of here."

They trotted out of the bedroom and toward the study. The hall was barren, save for one grey unicorn pacing near the window. He saw the Cheerilee and the ghost approaching.

"So..." he asked, nervously. "How's your horn regrowing?"

"She's with me," whispered Cheerilee. "Get in, quick." South checked the hallways, and the three slipped inside.

...

Medley fluttered above the hedgerow just high enough to see the light from the window. Her black outfit helped hide her in the cloud filled sky. About ten minutes after the appointed time, she saw a light flash twice,

then twice again. Medley pulled her hood over her mane, and Pokey tossed his carapison over his armor. Pokey nodded to the Medley.

“Show time.”

Medley hefted Pokey over the hedgerow. She found him easier to lift this time as they touched down silently in the gardens. Pokey scanned the area, and Medley took to the sky again. She fluttered near the treetops and motioned to Pokey positions of the royal guards patrolling the grounds. Most of the guards out here were earth ponies for some reason, and they didn't bother to look up.

Pokey easily slipped past the guards as Medley made her way to the door. She shrank into the shadows as Pokey passed the hedge maze. A dark coated earth pony trotted around the corner of the hedges. His helm was askew, and lipstick stained his bronze collar. Pokey nearly ran into him. A swift right hoof sent him tumbling to the ground. A unicorn mare emerged from the bushes; her costume disheveled, and mane in tangles.

“Polaris?” she asked. “Where did you get off too?”

The unicorn mare trotted past Pokey. He held his breath, the mare only inches away from stepping on him. She trotted off, and found her way back into the manner via the kitchen door. Pokey stood, and breathed a sigh of relief. He dragged the guard from under his carapison, and stashed the unconscious pony in the hedge maze. Pokey made his way across the lawn to the study. Medley floated down from the parapets as Pokey unlocked the door with a quiet click.

“It's all you,” whispered Pokey. “I'll wait out here in case anything goes wrong.” He sank into the shadowy corner of the study; his yellow eyes were only just visible in the darkness. Medley nodded and flew inside.

Medley fluttered into the darkened study. The two stones glowed in the case together; they filled the room with a pulsing violet light. Medley floated above the floor to the case. She pulled her pins from her clothing and bent down to start on the lock. This one was tougher than the artifact case, but she was confident she could do it. Medley held the pin in her teeth and jiggled left and right. She heard a click, but it wasn't from the case. It had come from the door. She cursed quietly and ducked behind the display.

Light poured in from the party outside. Two unicorns and Cheerilee walked into the study. Medley's hooded face peered from behind the case.

"Where is she?" asked South. Redheart lifted the sheet of her disguise. Medley saw the two ponies she was expecting, and the one she wasn't. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad to see you," said Medley. South stared at the door nervously.

"How much longer?" asked South.

"Another minute," whispered Medley. "I've almost got it."

"We should go out there and run interference with Blueblood," suggested South. He moved for the study door. A voice echoed in from the hallway.

"Well, my fine young filly, allow me to show you what I won from that duel."

Blueblood opened the study door. The lock clicked open just as the white stallion entered the room. A unicorn, barely older than a filly and dressed in a nurse's hat stood by his side. Blueblood stared in disbelief at the pegasus breaking into his case.

"How dare you, you worthless savage!" bellowed Blueblood. "Guards!"

"I can explain!" said Cheerilee.

"And you!" he shot at South Pole and Cheerilee. "How dare you come into my home and help this swine! You're fired!"

"You can't fire me!" shouted back South Pole. "I quit! En garde!" The grey stallion dashed at Blueblood and crossed horns with the aristocrat. The sounds of the fight echoed into the receiving hall, and the thundering hooves of Blueblood's entourage soon closed in on the study.

Medley bucked and kicked the case free. The glass fell open, but it set off alarms of panic throughout the manor. The snap of a cable came from somewhere in the walls, and the massive iron slabs fell from the walls outside. They impacted the ground like the ringing of a school bell; each one blocked any hope of exit. Pokey nearly jumped out of his skin as they

crashed into place. He stared at the thick iron plating for only a moment before his horn flared with dark light.

Medley grabbed the two stones and frantically searched for an exit. Cheerilee shoved the unicorn filly out of the way just in time to prevent her from getting trampled by the barreling entourage.

The iron plate on the south wall screamed in protest as Pokey's impossibly sharp horn shredded the metal. It took a second, but he had cut a hole large enough for Medley to fly out. The plate fell backward into the garden, and crashed to the ground like a gong. One of the unicorn guards ran around the corner to investigate. He saw Pokey, and charged the armored unicorn. Pokey caught the horn with his own, and sent him spiraling flank over mane into the fountain.

South Pole valiantly dueled with Blueblood. He ducked and weaved to avoid even the touch of the white stallion's now glowing horn. The entourage closed in to surround the two unicorns. A red unicorn stabbed at South, only to receive a buck to the face from the Redheart. She kicked and bit at the armored opponents to drive them back from the two duelists.

"Kill them all!" shouted Blueblood. He stabbed at South Pole, threw a hoof. "Cleanse my home of their savage filth!"

Pokey smashed horn first through the windows. A shower of glass shards peppered the flanks of the unicorns fighting with Redheart. He rolled between them, and slashed at the straps of their barding. In the same maneuver, he leapt across the room at Blueblood.

The unicorns' armor fell away, and for a second they stood in shock. Redheart spun in place and bucked, knocking the unicorns off their feet and into the book cases. Pokey dodged under one horn and kicked another unicorn in the teeth. Another caught a horn on his armor, and received a vicious head-butt for his troubles.

"Get the stones outta here!" yelled Pokey.

With the gems clenched in her teeth, Medley galloped for the glass and dashed out into the night sky. She spiraled through a exit and blew past two pegasus guards who had come to investigate. They bolted after her; the pegasi guards were much faster than Medley ever could. She looked around desperately. They were only seconds behind her now; she needed a distraction. She dove into the hedge maze. The explosion of

branches sent bits of shrubbery everywhere. The two pegasus guards landed, and dashed in after her.

"Where do you think she got off to?" asked one. He looked around the corner, ready to attack/

"I don't know," said the other. "Keep an eye to the sky, she may try to bolt."

"Please," scoffed the other pegasus. "She's not fast enough to out run either one of us." Something reached from the darkness and smashed the two armored helms together. The pegasi clattered to the ground in a heap of armor and feathers.

"I'm fast enough to outsmart you two," said Medley. She stood from the bushes. And took to the sky toward Canterlot Palace. She prayed to Celestia that her friends would make it out of there in one piece.

Redheart kicked out the legs of the remaining entourage. South Pole was having a difficult time keeping ahead of Blueblood and had suffered several small gashes from Blueblood's magically enhanced horn. His horn twinkled again, and South went bling. Blueblood charged in for the kill when he was blindsided by a crushing buck from Cheerilee. The kick sent him careening into the fireplace, and the mantle cracked under the impact of unicorn and armor.

"You think you can hurt me, earth pony?" demanded Blueblood. "I'll have your head!" He charged at Cheerilee only to be slammed into the wall by Pokey telekinesis. South's vision returned, and he joined Pokey in holding Blueblood in place.

"Cheerilee, run!" yelled South Pole. A burst of magic pulsed from Blueblood's horn. His spell broke the unicorns' spell. Blueblood stood up and stamped a hoof at them. Cheerilee refused to run; she stood in defiance across from Redheart. The four ponies moved sideways to circle the aristocrat.

"You hit him high, we'll hit him low," said Pokey.

"Four on one?" snorted Blueblood. "Typical cowardice from the Kin of Luna."

"I told you once that you don't want to fight dirty with me," warned Pokey. "Let us walk out of here, and we won't hurt you. I can promise you

this won't end well otherwise." He stomped a hoof. "And ponies don't break promises."

"I'll see your head mounted above my mantle before I do that, Kin," spat Blueblood.

Cheerilee dashed at Blueblood. He rolled past her as horn twinkled again. Cheerilee cried out in shock as he vision left her. She tried to stop herself, but ran head first into a desk; scrolls and papers went flying everywhere.

South charged at Blueblood. The aristocrat parried the charge and stabbed South Pole in the flank with a glowing blue horn. South staggered for a moment and tried to swear. He tumbled to the ground; his legs twitched as his body went numb. Redheart dashed in to help Cheerilee, and was met with a crushing buck that sent her tumbling.

"Such is the fate of those who fight the crown," spat Blueblood. He stepped over the defeated ponies to come hoof to hoof with Pokey. "Worse is the fate of those who are traitors to their own kind." Pokey looked down at the defeated ponies, and his heart swelled with rage. The last time he'd felt this fury, he'd taken the head off a Diamond Dog. Maybe he'd get that lucky again.

The two horns clashed. Pokey's razor sharp horn taking shavings off Blueblood's. The white stallion's horn glowed a dangerous blue. He head butted Pokey and threw a spray of books from the shelves with a burst of magic. Pokey dodged the books and grabbed a chair in his teeth. He swung and smashed the side of the unicorn's armor with thirty pounds of mahogany. Blueblood staggered back, and then lunged forward.

His horn caught on Pokey's armor and bounced off. Pokey responded with a head butt of his own that sent Blueblood reeling. Pokey reared onto his back legs, and clapped both hooves to the sides of Blueblood's head. He spun, delivering a roundhouse kick that sent Blueblood to the ground.

The stallion spun to his feet. His horn slashed, catching Pokey's fetlock. His armored shoe prevented injury, but the impact knocked him off balance and to the ground. Pokey rolled away from the thrust at his exposed underbelly. He bounded to his feet, and threw a left hoof. The impact dented the unicorn's helm and staggered the white stallion. Pokey moved in to finish the fight as Blueblood's horn twinkled.

Pokey again found himself blinded. He was prepared this time, and he listened for the heavy breathing of his opponent and stepped. Pokey played back in his mind how Blueblood always attacked. Slash, slash, step, thrust, step. He counted to himself.

Pokey's horn flashed black and sliced the air with its impossibly sharpness. He felt contact, then familiar sensation of his horn bisecting all it touched. He heard only screaming, and he knew his horn had found its mark.

The top three inches of Blueblood's impressive horn clattered to the walnut floor. He dropped to the floor in a convulsing heap. The aristocrat wailed in pain as he clutched his face. With his horn broken, his spells began to fade. South Pole pushed himself to his feet as Pokey's vision returned. The blue unicorn stallion looked down at Blueblood. The stallion rolled along the floor in agony.

"Damnit," said Pokey. "I was aiming for his throat." He looked at the tip of the unicorn's horn as it rolled across the floor. "Well, I guess his blood's not so blue after all."

Chapter Sixteen: Hail to the Queen

How does one fathom the responsibilities of a queen? Or for that matter a Goddess?

Four ponies sat in two prison cells across from each other. The black bars had been enchanted to resist magic, but none of the occupants had any interest in making an escape. They were still wearing their costumes from the party, and they all felt a little ridiculous sitting in jail.

"I am definitely getting disbarred for this," said South Pole.

"At least you have a great story," smiled Cheerilee. "That was probably the most exciting thing I've ever done."

"This really doesn't compare to my best 'I woke up in jail' story," said Pokey. "But I gotta say, that was a great kick back there. I think you knocked a few of his teeth loose."

"It felt really good," said Cheerilee. "Nothing says equality like hooves to face."

"I really wish I had found you sooner," said Redheart. "I'm sure this could have all been prevented with a little better planning. Really, Pokey? A burglary in the middle of a masquerade? Don't you read enough stories to..." She paused, loathe to bring up Pokey's inadequacies. Pokey only shook his head.

"You do what you can with what you have," said Cheerilee. "I'm just glad no pony got hurt." Every pony stared at her. "Well, no pony that mattered, anyway," she clarified with a flippant gesture. "Really, has anything actually gone according to plan on this trip?"

"We couldn't go a dozen yards without tripping over some pony we knew," said Redheart.

"Well, that's part and parcel of the adventure business," said Pokey. "You wander enough of the world and sooner or later familiar faces start popping up." He rested his head against the prison wall. "Speaking of which, where the heck did you come from?"

"I've been a half an hour behind you for the better part of the day," said Redheart. "It wasn't until I ran into Spike at the train station that I

actually found out where you were staying.” She turned around to look in Pokey’s direction. “Did you really threaten to kill him?”

“I would have, if those two hadn’t stopped me,” said Pokey. “Why didn’t you catch up with us sooner?”

“Because you left in the middle of the night, you inconsiderate jerk,” said Redheart. “I came to your tent early in the morning to find you two gone. When I got to Appleloosa, the train was pulling out of the station and I had to wait for the next one. Thanks for leaving me. I thought we were better friends than that.”

“I figured you and Plain Strider...”

“What? Would abandon you?” asked Redheart. “Why would you think that? We were supposed to stick together, and help each other. For all your talk of family and Kinship, you were sure quick to leave me behind. You went and dragged Cheerilee off before I could even explain what happened.”

“And what did happen?” demanded Pokey. “You and Plainstrider vowed your hearts to each other? Swore never to part again? Made love in the rain?”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” snapped Redheart. “We were planning on coming back to Ponyville once we had finished with Celestia’s quest. I thought you’d be happy for me.” Pokey threw up his hooves in exasperation.

“I’m so happy I could scream,” said Pokey. “Fantastic. A big damn happy reunion. Horray.”

They sat in silence for a while longer and stared out at the rising sun. It was early that morning when a member of the Equestrian Royal Guard trotted to the front of their cells. It was a large white pegasus wearing the armor of his office.

“You four have caused quite a stir,” he said.

“We tend to have that effect,” mumbled Pokey.

“And South Pole, my goddess,” he continued. “How in Equestria did you hook up with this bunch of lunatics?”

“Good luck, I guess,” said South as he rubbed his head. “Talos, this is Cheerilee, my uh...”

“Girlfriend,” smiled Cheerilee. South Pole beamed at confirmation of what he’d already suspected.

“And this is...”

“Pokey, yeah,” he said. “You’ve become quite the talk of the town. Did you really cut off Blueblood’s horn?”

“Only the tip,” admitted Pokey. “It’ll take a few weeks, but it will grow back. If he’s looking for an apology, he can forget it.”

“No, I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” said Talos.

“And she is...” South Pole had found himself at a loss. “You know, I don’t believe we were properly introduced before we were arrested.”

“Redheart,” she said, smiling. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Talos. He cleared his throat, and dug a royal proclamation from his armor. He put it on the desk and orated. “Hear ye, ponies of Equestria. The Ponies known as Medley, Pokey, Redheart, and Cheerilee, and any who have aided them, are hereby absolved of all crimes and misdemeanors, performed in pursuit of their assigned royal quest. This includes, but is not limited to: assault, burglary, breaking and entering, assault with magic, forgery, grand larceny...” Cheerilee rolled her eyes.

“Well when you say it all like that, it makes it sound bad,” she said.

“...unlicensed dueling, and jaywalking.” finished Talos. “Furthermore, Princess Celestia requests their presence at the Royal castle tomorrow afternoon. That is, today, as she wrote this last night.” He rolled up the scroll. “So, basically, you’re free to go.”

“See, I told you,” smiled Cheerilee. “Royal pardons all around.”

“I’m too pretty for prison anyway,” said Pokey.

“Oh thank Celestia,” said South, breathing a sigh of relief. “Now all I have to worry about is the bar committee.”

“Oh, you’ll be fine,” said Cheerilee. “I’m sure most of them will think Blueblood got what he deserved.”

A few minutes later, the ponies had been released from their cells, and were let back into the city. Pokey immediately left to walk back to the hotel while the others waited for a carriage. It took him an hour, but he finally made it to the Canterlot Carriage Inn. The others, he discovered, had already left for the castle.

Pokey stood in the shower for a long time. He rested his head on the wall, letting the water run through his mane and down his back. It had been a very long night. Though the Canterlot jail cells were probably the most comfortable that he'd had the pleasure of visiting, he hadn't gotten much sleep.

His plan for the meeting with Princess Celestia swirled in his mind. All at once it seemed like the only answer and the worst idea he'd ever had. He was already sorry that Redheart had joined them, and he only hoped Luna wouldn't be there. He turned off the shower, and donned his armor for what he was sure was going to be the last time.

Pokey made his way to the palace alone. The streets didn't glitter as brightly as he first remembered, but they still had that shine of elegance. He was going to miss Canterlot. If his planned worked as he had hoped, he was going to miss a lot of things. He came to the edge of the city, and the cascading cliff faces of Canterlot Castle

Pokey stood amazed at the towering spires of the palace. He gazed up at the domed roofs, each pointed with a unique star shaped weather vane. The sounds of waterfalls pouring over the edges of the pools far below echoed against the verdant cliff sides and filled the palace with a calming white noise. He took a deep breath, and started up the stairs.

The blue unicorn trotted up the gorgeous marble steps of the palace. Royal guards lined the stairs. Their golden armor shimmered in the beautiful clear day. A few eyes followed Pokey to admire his barding, but otherwise remained unmoving. Talos greeted Pokey at the top, and escorted him through the massive open halls into Celestia's throne room. Cheerilee, Medley, and Redheart had arrived far ahead of him and stood in front of the throne. Plain Strider and South Pole waited quietly by the sides. The Stones of Brilliance hung around the mare's necks.

"Glad you could make it," whispered Medley. "I was beginning to think you left town." She put the sapphire around Pokey's neck as he stood beside his companions.

"The thought had occurred to me," replied Pokey. He looked around at the assembled crowd. "I probably should have." Talos reappeared from behind a curtain, and cleared his throat.

"It is my great honor to present to you the ruler of our land," announced Talos. "She who brings us the sun every morning. The good, the wise, and the bringer of harmony to Equestria, her royal highness, Princess Celestia." The lavender curtains separated and the room bowed in reverence. The majestic white alicorn entered the room; her pastel rainbow hair wafted in the nonexistent breeze. She smiled gently at the gathered ponies. Pokey simply stared, and refused to bow to a goddess he no longer believe in.

"It is my great honor to present to you the ruler of our land," announced Talos, again. "She who brings us the moon every evening. The kind, the brave, and the bringer of peace to Equestria, her Royal highness, Princess Luna." The ponies remained bowed, and Pokey finally joined them as the azure curtains separated. In strode the purple alicorn; her blue hair cascaded like a waterfall down her neck. She greeted the ponies with a bow.

"My ponies, please rise," asked Celestia. The four stood and faced their goddess. "Last night, Medley flew to my tower with the four Stones of Brilliance I had asked you to find." She looked down at the ponies. "In your journey, you have traveled through the breadth of the Everfree Forest and to the depths of the Diamond Dog caves. You have returned from the plains of the buffalo, and to the heart of our beloved Canterlot. You have traveled Equestria in order to save it, brave ponies." She looked to Pokey. Pokey only glared back.

"Along the way, you've face peril and terror far beyond that of what any ruler can expect of her equines. I am truly sorry for having laid this task at your hooves." She looked back to Luna, who nodded quietly. Celestia floated the Diamond away from Redheart as Luna took the Emerald, Sapphire, and Ruby from the other three. The stones hung brilliant around the goddess's necks. A pulsing white light filled the throne room.

"I'm sure you've figured out by now what these are for," said Luna. The ponies nodded, waiting in anticipation to see them in action. "I made these stones a long time ago to save the world from another flood. While I was... away, they were taken from the palace, and given to the Hamites for safe keeping. Over the years, they forgot what the stones were for. They

were stolen, or given as gifts because none of them knew how important they were. When I first heard reports of the Blight returning, I went to get them back. When the Hamites didn't have them, I asked my big sister for help."

"You were not who I would have originally chosen for this quest," admitted Celestia. "A new generation of heroes should have been called to arms, but the Hamite prophecy said to send you four instead.

"I realized that this was the sort of quest would take the maturity and grace that comes with age, rather than the brash impetuosity of youth." She stepped down from the platform. "And I knew that along the way, you'd have to rely on your past experiences and contacts to help you. I also knew you would be called upon to do things those young ponies like Twilight wouldn't have thought of." She looked at her gathered heroes.

"Redheart would seek to save a village by calling the rains," said Celestia. "Medley's desire to protect children brought peace and equality to a tribe who would otherwise know none. Cheerilee's gifts of knowledge and expertise brought the pieces together, and Pokey..." She looked sadly at Pokey, and shook her head. "Your strength and courage brought them all home." Pokey stood still. It wasn't time yet.

"Sister," interrupted Luna. "It's time."

Celestia nodded, and took to the sky. The sun rose higher in the sky at her command, and filled the skies of Equestria with its life giving light. She hung in the air, hooves outstretched to the heavens as Luna took flight. The moon started its ascent early, and soon it moved to overshadow the sun. The ponies gasped as the eclipse formed in front of them. The moon slid into place in front of the sun; the edges of the sun's light radiated around the rim of Luna's moon. It was in that moment that the Stones shone brightest, and filled the sky above with a trembling light.

A tri-colored rainbow burst forth from the corona of the eclipse. It spread in a circle of light across the skies of Equestria. The rainbow spanned across the sky and rolled through the air in a wave of color that cleansed the land below. The patches of moss which had snuck into the palace popped into clouds of black dust, annihilated by the power of the stones. A crack of deafening thunder rattled the throne room beneath them to shake the very foundations of the castle. The rainbow rolled through the heavens and showered the land in radiant light. It continued its journey,

and finally disappeared from view to cleanse the land. Luna's moon rolled across the sky again, and dipped below the horizon. The goddesses touched down in front of the four ponies.

"My dear, sweet, Medley," said Celestia, approaching the turquoise pegasus. "I'm truly sorry for what happened to you. When Luna told me she had to intervene on your behalf, I wept to think that I had nearly killed a mother of three. I didn't find that the prophecy had changed until two days ago when I received word from Thasrow that you had come. It was a mistake to send you, and I am sorry for the pain I've caused you."

"I was happy to serve, your Highness," said Medley, bowing to her princess. "You are a mother to all ponies. Even if I wasn't supposed to be on this quest, I would happily serve you again."

"There is no need for that, Medley," Celestia replied. "You can go home to your children, and raise them as you have always wished. For you, I offer the promise of education for your children, and a sum to be paid to you and Snow Catcher annually. Never shall your finances trouble you again."

"Thank you, your majesty," Medley said. Her voice was barely a whisper. "You have given me the greatest gift of all." She came to Cheerilee, and bowed before her.

"My dearest Cheerilee," she said. "I know you have no desire of material wealth. Instead, I have something you have sought since you were a filly." In a puff of smoke, a scroll appeared before the princess. "For your scholarly work, I am proud to award you with the title Doctorate of Philosophy. From hence forth, and according to your wishes, you may be called Doctor Cheerilee." The earth pony's face filled with joy. She bowed to the princess and her smile lit up the throne room.

"Thank you, your highness," replied Cheerilee. "I will use this gift to spread knowledge in your honor." Celestia smiled at Cheerilee, and shook her head.

"A gift implies you didn't earn it," said Celestia. "Your work with the stones and the paper that Ingrid Marie forwarded to me indicates that you have earned your diploma a dozen times over. I know you'll use your new title to spread knowledge, and I know your boundless cheer will keep

education in the minds of all you meet.” She turned to Redheart, and only smiled.

“I have what I’ve always desired, your majesty,” she said as she bowed to her princess. “It was because of your quest that Plain Strider and I are reunited. Nothing you could offer could compare to what you have already given me, and to have served you is the greatest reward of all.” Celestia nodded, and at last came to Pokey.

“My dear Pokey,” she said. Celestia walked in front of the blue unicorn. He stared, stone faced, at the wall behind her. “I can’t fathom how much you’ve lost. Is there nothing I can do for you to ease the burden of what I have asked of you?”

“I only want a word alone,” said Pokey. His voice was as cold and flat as marble he stood on.

“Surely, whatever it may be, you can ask in front of your companions?” asked Celestia. “Have you not become family over this trip? Have your hardships not brought you closer together?”

“It’s personal,” said Pokey. “If you don’t wish to speak with me, I’ll just leave.”

“Very well,” said Celestia. “Please follow me.” She led Pokey to a door behind the throne room, and the two disappeared inside. Cheerilee looked up, worried at Pokey’s secrecy. Redheart bore a look of serious concern as the door shut behind them.

“Your majesty?” asked Medley. Luna looked to the Medley; her face was blank with fear.

“I really don’t think she should have done that,” said Luna.

Celestia’s private office was surprisingly simple. A fireplace crested with a crown burned in one corner, and a stand for reading scrolls sat next to a low, round bed. The walls were a subtle blue, and tapestries hung from the walls depicting maps and stars. A basket of flowers grew in the corner. Celestia turned to speak with Pokey. He was at Celestia’s throat in an instant. His horn shimmered with a dark light.

“You’ve taken away everything I’ve ever had,” Pokey growled. His horn glimmered an inch from Celestia’s perfect white neck. “I used to pray to you,” he said. His voice was quaking in rage. “Every day, I would call to

you, asking for a sign that you cared. You have never answered the prayers of your followers. Not once have I seen a sign that you cared, Celestia. NOT ONCE." His horn was shaking now; his whole body trembled in righteous fury. "I have sacrificed everything I had to your damn quest.

How many more ponies must suffer because of you?" His eyes narrowed, and he drew breath in ragged gasps. "Give me a reason why I shouldn't kill you and free ponies from your tyranny. GIVE ME A DAMN REASON."

"Because your life has been a lie Pokey," said Celestia. Her voice was as calm and dulcet as if she were addressing a child. "Everything you've done since you left the Kin has been a lie. You're not a chef. You're not a home body. You don't even like cats." She stared at Pokey's glowing horn; it reflected in her eyes. "You've been lying to yourself, Pokey, and that's the one pony you should never lie too. You worshiped me when you thought it would make Redheart happy. Why would I answer insincere prayers? You're a Kin. You worship my sister, like so many other ponies. Why didn't you pray to her, Pokey? What made you think she wouldn't listen?" Sweat formed at Celestia's brow, and dripped down her face.

"I know you hate me Pokey," she said. "But I love you. Hard as that might be to believe, I love you just as I love all my little ponies." Pokey kept his horn to her neck. He searched for the courage to strike her down. All it would take is the flick of the neck, and here he stood, unable to finish the job. Maybe Blueblood was right. Maybe he and his Kin were cowards.

"I don't expect your love in return, Pokey. I only ask that you understand. I do what I must to make Equestria a better place for every pony." Celestia stepped back. Pokey stepped with her, and pinned her to a corner. "You think I'm a horrible tyrant, that imposes my will on ponies for my own sick amusements. Or perhaps that I'm some salacious monster who preys on the bodies and emotions of ponies to feed my insatiable lusts and ego. But I'm none of those things, Pokey." She searched his eyes. She was looking for the hero she knew was inside this hate filled monster that stood before her.

"What I am is a Princess," she said. "And sometimes that means sacrifices. Do you know why I didn't want to send you on this quest?" Pokey simply glared as he tried to force himself to strike. "I didn't want to send you on this quest because I knew how much you'd lose." Pokey's face lit up with shock. He moved his glowing horn from her throat.

"What?" he asked. His horn still flared with dark light.

“You were the only pony in all of Equestria that could have done what I needed you to do. I didn’t know all of the challenges along the way, but I did know that you, and only you, were the only pony who I could count on to bring all those other ponies home.” Pokey’s spell wavered; the black light flickered a moment. “You are the greatest of your generation, Pokey. Don’t ever let any pony ever tell you different.” Celestia put her head on his shoulder. Her neck was only a merest touch away from the dark light. Pokey stood transfixed to the spot, unsure if she was bluffing.

“This was your last quest, Pokey,” said Celestia.” Look at what you’ve accomplished. You are the pony who saved Equestria from the Blight. Fillies and colts will look up to you and want to be like you. Ponies will see that your Kin aren’t just mules and donkeys, but equines with hearts and souls that beat just the same as their own.” Celestia’s words pierced through Pokey’s hate, and his spell failed him. He stepped back from the princess, overcome with guilt.

“What you’ve done will open the flood gates of love and tolerance once more. It will show ponies the best of all walks of life, and bring forth peace to our lands once again.” Celestia stepped away from Pokey, and spread her hooves for battle. “So if you still want to kill me now, go ahead. I won’t send you away; I won’t call for my guards. But I can promise you Pokey, I will not go without a fight.” Her own magnificent horn glowed with the same black light Pokey had come to depend on. “And you know what they say about ponies and promises.” Pokey shifted into stance. He cursing his cowardice for not striking when she was defenseless.

Pokey and Celestia circled each other in the small office. Pokey searched the alicorn for a weakness, any vulnerability. He watched for an opening; that one opportunity to strike her down once and for all. They both knew this battle would only have one blow. Pokey glared at the princess with unbridled hate. Celestia only looked down on him with regret.

“That horn of yours is dangerous, Pokey,” she said as they circled. “It’s probably one of the few things that could really hurt me.” She stared into his yellow eyes, not with hate or anger, but with infinite sorrow. “You have always used your power for good.” Tears filled the corners of her violet eyes. “Please don’t make me do this.”

You’ve always used your powers for good.

Celestia's words cut through his rage as surely as his horn would have cut through her. He thought back on this quest; on all of his quests. Over the years, he'd lost, and he'd sacrificed, but in every situation where he had triumphed, he'd brought forth only good.

Now he stood before a beloved goddess, not as a hero accepting the spoils of victory, but as an assassin. Had he fallen so far from his ideals because she had made him lose something? What would Redheart think? Or Medley? Or Cheerilee? This wasn't what a warrior would do. Pokey's dark light flickered out, and he fell to his knees.

"I filled my heart with hate for you," sputtered Pokey as tears of rage and guilt choked his throat. "And I came here to end your reign of terror." He looked up at the white alicorn. His yellow eyes were full of the pain of failure. "But you're not a tyrant any more than I'm an assassin. You're just like every other pony; you do the best you can with what you have. Sacrifices are always required to achieve good, and I lost sight of the fact that I am that sacrifice this time." He slumped to the floor, defeated in spirit and broken in soul. "I have nothing left of me to give. I am a traitor to myself, and all that I've ever believed in." He removed his helm and let it clatter to the floor. Pokey closed his eyes and presented his neck to the princess.

"I accept your execution as a sweet mercy. Please swing true." The dark light that surrounded Celestia's horn faded as she wrapped her arms around Pokey. She held the unicorn as a mother cradles a child.

"I love you Pokey," she said. "Please forgive me. I promise I'll never ask anything of you again."

Epilogue

No story truly ends

It was the late in the winter when Medley heard hooves knocking from outside. She gathered up her foal, and made for the wooden door. Behind it stood Redheart. Her candy cane scarf accented her cheerful smile.

"How is little Rain Fall doing?" she asked.

"He's doing great," smiled Medley. "How is Plain Strider handling the winter?"

"He keeps claiming to be built for the harsh snows," said Redheart. "But I know better. He'll come around and buy some galoshes eventually." She unwound her scarf and hung it up on a nearby peg. Potpourri dashed up to the white pony and hugged her legs.

"Hi!" she exclaimed. Redheart picked up the filly.

"Oh, you've gotten so big!" said Redheart. "What has your mommy been feeding you?"

"Only the finest fruits and vegetables we can afford," smirked Medley. "I'm so glad you decided to come back to Ponyville."

"Plain Strider wanted to settle somewhere that would accept us," said Redheart. "And where better than my own home town?" Cheerilee appeared at the open door with a basket of cookies in her mouth.

"Well, look who it is!" said Redheart. "Explored any new ruins yet, Dr. Cheerilee?"

"Not at all," said Cheerilee. "A summer break of digging through the hills of Stalliongrad will seem like a picnic compared to these fillies and colts." She glared at Medley. "Speaking of which, your filly..."

"I know, I know," giggled Medley. "Ingrid Marie told me all about it. I'll be sure to give her a firm talking to."

"It was pretty funny though," said Redheart. "There wasn't any permanent harm done, just a bit of discoloration of her mane. She'll figure these kids out eventually."

"Is South going to be able to make it?" asked Medley.

"I'm afraid he's in Manehattan these days. We uh..." Cheerilee looked away. "We don't get to see each other much anymore."

"Oh, dear; I'm sorry to hear that," said Medley. "I really do like him."

"I do too," said Cheerilee "We're going to spend the spring break together, and we've got some plans for later in the year. We'll be okay." Cheerilee looked out the window. She thought she saw a dark light piercing the falling snow. "Have either of you heard from Pokey?" she asked. Medley shook her head. She poured out a few glasses of wine, and passed them to the other ponies

"Not since Fall," replied Medley. "I think he's really gone for good this time."

"I hope not," said Cheerilee. "I miss his foul mouth."

"I miss his crass humor," admitted Medley.

"I miss his company," said Redheart. "He was always an interesting pony to be around."

They stood in silence a moment with their thoughts. Behind them, a fire warmed the house, and the children happily stood at the hooves of the mares. Cheerilee raised her glass to the ceiling.

"To Pokey," she said. "May he find faith."

"May he find love," toasted Redheart.

"May he find his home," toasted Medley.

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The moon shined down on the landscape as it climbed through the night. Miles upon miles away, Pokey sat beside the fire with War Jenny. He stared into the Kin's campfire. A few of the Kin were enjoying the products of good forage, and generally celebrating life. Pokey thought of the news

coming from Equestria, and how his quest had played into the changes that were sweeping through the country.

The Kin of Luna had started coming back to Equestria after word of the deeds of one had traveled the lands. True to her words, Celestia welcomed home all those who worshiped her sister, and urged peace among equines everywhere. There were growing pains, as was expected with any growing family, but the salvation of Equestria at the hooves of a Kin had helped bridge the gap.

“What’s going on inside that head of yours, dear brother?” asked War Jenny. “Not thinking about leaving us again, are you?” Pokey shook his head.

“I sometimes wonder if I’ll ever find what I’m looking for,” said Pokey. “Maybe I’ll travel with Trixie for a while. She’s always been good at finding what she’s looking for.”

“And what are you looking for?” asked War Jenny.

“Meaning,” said Pokey. “I’ve been given all these gifts. I have all these memories and adventures and quests, and nothing seems to tie them together.” He looked up at the moon. “Every night I pray for answers, and every night I come up with nothing.”

“Don’t start to doubt your faith, Pokey,” said War Jenny. “You know that they both listen to you.”

“My faith is the only thing I’m certain of anymore,” said Pokey. “And I thank Luna for giving me the strength to keep going.” He closed his eyes, and laid his head on his hooves.

“So why question her for meaning?” asked War Jenny. “Did you ever consider that what you’re looking for can’t be found here?” Pokey’s head perked up. He looked at his sister as her idea sank in. He nodded, and considered the wisdom.

“I suppose you’re right, my dear Jenny,” said Pokey. “Finding meaning in life really is that one last quest that we all take.”

Pokey stared up at the moon, and prayed to the goddess he knew listened. He offered only thanks, and asked only to see the next moon rise. In the morning, he would pray to the sun, and thank Celestia for a new day. The encounter at the palace had changed him, and given him the faith in

both Goddesses that most ponies never felt. It was a sense of completeness that he had been missing his entire life.

He looked out onto the campsite, where mules and unicorns foals played together in the moonlight. They would be moving on in the next evening, but where ever they camped was home.

Home. Pokey considered the word.

Ponyville had never really been his home, though he had resided there for a number of years. The lies he had told himself had brought him only misery. Though he missed Redheart, her happiness had given him the courage to seek him own. Happiness starts at home, and he had found home again in the arms of his Kin. Home was where you could be yourself, and here among the Kin, Pokey's was home once more.