

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 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 she 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.