

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’s 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.

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“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 groused. 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 pwobems go bye bye.” Cheerilee and Medley giggled 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.