

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 than 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.