

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 vermilion 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-pplaosa!” 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 Univeristy 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.”