

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.”

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“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.

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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.