

The *Thessalonica* Legacy

Chapter 11: The Voyage South

The Everfree Forest was a dark and forbidding place to the ponies. It was said it didn't operate under the same rules as Equestria. Whereas in Equestria, the ponies were integrated into nearly every aspect of nature, from guiding migrations and directing rainfall to changing the very seasons, the Everfree seemed to get along fine without them. Clouds formed, blew, and rained and animals foraged and hunted completely unaided. It was a scary, unnatural place filled with strange monsters and horrors beyond imagination. Only the bravest of ponies ever even *thought* of venturing beyond its borders.

Rainbow Dash felt as if the trees of the Everfree were closing in on her. She would never admit she was scared, even just a little bit, but she edged closer to Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie just the same. Fluttershy for her part cowered against Corporal Virat's leg. She had picked next to who she saw as the toughest and strongest of their little party as the safest spot to be, and she stuck there like glue.

Liz reached down and gave the little pegasus a reassuring scratch behind the ears. She didn't understand why the ponies were acting so spooked. Nothing the ponies had told them about the Everfree had seemed in the least bit odd. What they described was just the way the world worked, the way the entire universe worked. She *could* understand the tales of strange monsters and terrifying creatures just waiting to gobble up unsuspecting ponies—after all, hadn't mankind told similar stories? Didn't they still talk about the unknown reaches of the Deep Periphery, far beyond the civilized realm of the Inner Sphere?

They were strung out across the forest now. Liz could barely see Ramirez and Dr. Langley through the trees ahead of them. She knew that Twilight, Spike, Applejack, and Rarity would be with them. They had stopped for lunch, it seemed, probably waiting on Liz and the other three ponies bringing up the rear. She couldn't hear the jeep carrying the other humans ahead of them anymore. No matter, they would meet up with them again at the *Felicity Klimkosky*.

Pinkie Pie seemed to be taking the journey through the forest rather well, Liz mused. Perhaps it was because the hyperactive little pony had apparently decided to fill the journey with near-infinite small-talk. Liz was happy to oblige, if only to satisfy her own curiosity. So as they walked, they talked at length about holidays, festivals, and traditions. Pinkie Pie was enthralled that the humans had so many holidays and wondered how they managed to celebrate them all and still get their work done—even the premier party pony knew there were limits to how much celebrating could be done before food started to run low and messes needed to be cleaned up. Liz tried to explain that different religious groups and nations celebrated different sets of holidays, but trying to get across the nature of such a variegated and fragmented society as the whole of human civilization to a pony who had only ever truly known one overarching society was difficult at best.

Pinkie Pie gasped and froze. Her knee was pinching.

The diamond dog could smell food. It sniffed at the air and licked a long tongue over its protruding canines. Its large torso and massive arms were covered in coarse brown hair over which it wore a crude iron cuirass. An iron helmet sat low on its brow, all but covering its beady eyes with their slit-like pupils. He stalked through the forest, walking silently on three paws—two back and one forward. It walked with its body erect, but its heavy forearms were so long it was effectively a quadruped. In its other forepaw it gripped the wooden shaft of a long spear tipped with a wicked iron point.

Diamond dogs were tribal, living in large social groups ruled over by the strongest, or cleverest, of the pack. Packs were very territorial and often skirmished with rivals for access to prime mining grounds. Most at home underground, they dug elaborate subterranean tunnel networks in their search for gemstones, to which they applied an almost mystical importance. Gemstones were the favored food of dragons, and dragons were as living gods to the dogs. A pack that could acquire a large stash of tribute gemstones was a powerful pack indeed.

There wasn't much food underground, so frequent expeditions to the surface to hunt and gather were a necessity. It wasn't prestigious work, though, and was often relegated to the lowest in the pack's pecking order. Having failed to return with anything of substance on more than one occasion, this particular diamond dog was demoralized, desperate, and hungry. He had been reprimanded frequently and denied food repeatedly. One more failure would certainly result in his being expelled from the pack, or finding him included in the next dragon offering. Dragons preferred gemstones, but they weren't particularly picky eaters.

The smell of food grew stronger. Cooked food. Not much in the Everfree cooked their food. Ponies cooked some of their food, but it was rare to find ponies this far in the forest. Ponies were easy to scare, but could be tricky. He had heard stories from another pack that had kidnapped one only to release her shortly afterwards with most of their gemstone stash.

But still, cooked food! The smell infested his nostrils and made his mouth water. If he could somehow get ahold of that food, the luxury would certainly improve his standing in the pack. Maybe he could scare away the owner and claim the food for himself.

He could see the source of the smell now. They were ponies, all right. Three of the little things, one of them wearing a funny hat. They had lots of food, he saw. Lots of food ripe for the taking, once he scared them away. Did pony make for good eating? He didn't know if any dogs had ever tried it. The smell was driving him ravenous.

Movement behind the ponies drew his attention. Something else was there, too. Tall and thin, its green coloring helping it to blend in to its surroundings. It walked over and stood by a tree close to where he was hiding. The diamond dog almost reassessed its plan, but decided in its hunger-addled state that with those scrawny arms, that other creature couldn't be any more of a threat than the ponies it traveled with.

Twilight was glad, and rather comforted, that her friends had all assented to accompany her in her journey with the humans. Spike had been a necessity, of course, as her most immediate link to Princess Celestia. She didn't think she could have kept Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie from coming even if she wanted to, what with the chance for adventure. The others had been more squeamish, but in the end, they couldn't say no to their friend. It also helped that Princess Celestia had subtly hinted to them that Twilight would greatly appreciate the shoulders to lean on.

They had stopped for lunch by the banks of a little creek running through the undergrowth. While Applejack passed out fresh apples and some pre-made sandwiches from her saddlebags, Rarity used an evergreen branch to sweep the ground clear of dust and Spike laid out a picnic blanket with the help of Dr. Langley. While the others busied themselves with meal preparations, Ramirez availed himself of the creek, taking the opportunity to refill their canteens with water filtered through a small, handheld pump. Feeling grungy after days in the field, he had stripped of his combat vest and shirt and splashed the cool water over his bare torso.

"Hey, I thought you said humans didn't have cutie marks," Twilight motioned towards Ramirez's arm and shoulder. She had been interrogating him on Inner Sphere history and politics, and the sudden change in topic caught him off guard. He looked down and held out his arm for inspection. An intricate tattoo of dark bluish-black geometric shapes wrapped around and down and extended halfway down to his wrist. The central design, a sword and skull, he had gotten one drunken night at the Academy with the rest of his training cadre. He had never been very fond of it, and later had it integrated with a series of other tattoos, resulting in the geometric mess now adorning his arm.

"Remember when I asked you if your cutie marks were tattoos? Well, this is a tattoo." He briefly explained the process as he pulled on his shirt and combat vest, hiding the design. Rarity thought it was too gaudy, but asked about the symbolism just to be polite.

Dr. Langley took the opportunity to try and get through to Applejack. The farm pony had never truly warmed up to the humans and had been taciturn the entire trip.

"You know, my grandparents own a farm back on Valexa. Wheat and quillar, mostly, but they do have a small apple orchard."

Applejack wasn't in the mood to talk to the aliens. She still didn't trust them. They were nice enough, but perhaps they were *too* nice. She smiled weakly and politely nodded.

"I spent a lot of time there as a girl," Dr. Langley continued. She'd taken off her white jacket as too cumbersome for a trek through the woods. Despite the hardships of the field, her olive green uniform somehow stayed crisp and clean. "I don't remember their apples even holding a candle to yours, though."

“Thank ya’ kindly,” Applejack said quietly, looking at her hooves.

Dr. Langley paced to the trunk of a tree. She attempted to keep up the conversation. She figured if she could get the pony talking it would loosen her up, “So what all varieties of apple do you grow on your...”

With a bloodcurdling howl, the beast burst from the undergrowth nearly on top of Dr. Langley. A massive paw scythed through the air, the claws missing by a breath. Narrow eyes flashed out from beneath the brim of its metal helmet. With a startled yell, she tumbled backwards in a heap. Applejack leapt to her feet and yelled a warning. Behind her, Twilight and Rarity shrieked in terror and surprise. She ducked as the creature thrust its long spear in her direction. She turned and kicked, but the beast dodged the attack and lunged forward howling. The work pony scampered backwards as the iron-clad monster swiped at her. She tripped on the picnic blanket and fell as it tangled around her hooves. She looked up in terror as the monster towered over her. She could see the wild hunger in its eyes. All she could think about was her family.

The sharp crack of gunshots fired in rapid succession echoed off the trees and rolled away across the hills. The monster fell forwards, face down in the leaves. Ramirez stalked forward quickly, knees slightly bent. He kept the sights of a Federated Long Rifle trained on the prone figure.

Applejack struggled free of the blanket and stood staring at the fallen beast with her mouth open, not comprehending. Her ears rang from the sudden loud noise. Dr. Langley scrambled to her feet and drew her sidearm, dry leaves sticking to her clothes and hair. She held her pistol out in front of her awkwardly, keeping it trained nervously on the bushes surrounding them.

“Sweet mother of Kerensky, what *is* that thing?” adrenaline pumped through her veins. She kept changing her mind which bush to point her gun at.

Ramirez kicked the body over with a heavy boot. The thing lay still, unblinking eyes staring at the clouds above. Three small, neat holes punched straight through its metal breastplate oozed deep red blood.

“What happened? Is everyone alright?” Liz came running, her own rifle already at her shoulder and the other ponies in hot pursuit. She saw the slain beast and cursed, “Nice shooting, Sarge.”

“A diamond dog? One of *those* ruffians?” Rarity turned her nose up at the creature, “Hmm, it looks different from the ones that abducted me to find gems for them. Must be from a different pack. Poor thing looks half-starved to death. But whatever did you *do* to the wretch, darling?”

Fluttershy sobbed, struggling to hold back tears. Rainbow Dash crept forward carefully and peered at the stricken diamond dog, “Hey, is he... Is he *dead*?”

“Dead.” Twilight repeated the word as it worked its way slowly through her brain, “Dead? DEAD?!” She tore her gaze from the diamond dog and fixed it squarely on Ramirez. Terror filled her eyes, “You... You *killed* it!” The fear turned to fury, “You KILLED IT!”

Ramirez stepped towards her, putting up a pleading hand, “Hey, look...”

“No!” she yelled, “No! Don’t you come near me,” she planted her hooves solidly on the ground, the venom in her voice froze Ramirez in his tracks, “Don’t you even talk to me, you... you MONSTER!”

“Hey, that thing attacked *us*!” he jabbed a finger in the direction of the corpse.

“You killed it! You didn’t even give it a thought, you just *killed* it!” Tears streamed down her cheeks, “Celestia was right, you’re violent and dangerous. You don’t think. You don’t think of *anything*. You just kill and you don’t think!”

“Now hold on just a minute, Twi!” Applejack appeared between the unicorn and the human, facing her friend, “He’s right. That diamond dog attacked us, and I think it meant to hurt us. Shoot, if he hadn’t done what he did, I’d probably be a goner right now.”

“But he killed it!” Twilight stamped her hoof.

“I know he did, Twi. And I’m not sayin’ killin’s right or nothin’, but I am sayin’ he done saved my life.” She turned to give Ramirez a sideways smile, “Can’t say I agree with his methods, but I’d say I’d rather have this than it be the other way around.”

Liz elected to bury the diamond dog in a shallow grave while Dr. Langley and Ramirez had a long, involved talk with Twilight and Applejack. Fluttershy sat demurely, listening to the discussion while the image-conscious Rarity plucked the leaves from Dr. Langley’s hair then, unbidden, began pleating it into an elaborate updo. Wanting to feel useful, Rainbow Dash and Spike stood a comical sentry duty, watching if their slain assailant had any friends.

“Have you killed before?” Twilight asked the humans.

Dr. Langley shrugged, “I’ve killed chickens on my grandparents’ farm. And I’ve had patients who...died under my care. The chickens were easier.”

“Why did you kill the chickens?” Fluttershy squeaked, more than a little perturbed.

“We ate them.”

“Oh... well... that’s alright then, I guess,” Fluttershy seemed relieved, which puzzled Twilight and Applejack.

“Ya’ seem rather calm about that, sugarcube,” observed Applejack.

“Well,” came the reply, “animals eat other animals all the time. Otters eat fish, owls eat mice. Really, girls, don’t you know about the food chain? Anyway, humans are omnivores, they eat plants and meat. If they were killing the chickens to eat them, then that’s just part of the food chain.” She quirked an eyebrow and gave a surprisingly sly grin, “Besides, it’s not like we’re totally innocent. We *do* use eggs in baking.”

“What about you, Ramirez?” Twilight prompted.

“Yes, I’ve killed.” Ramirez said softly, “More often than I’d have liked. It’s never easy, and it never gets easier, but in combat and they’re shooting at you...sometimes you just...” His eyes glazed over as he stared unblinking into the mid-distance. “Hitting a tank or a ‘Mech is comparatively easy, you know? You can kind of...forget that there’s someone else inside. You can tell yourself they got out alright.” He idly played with a twig, systematically breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces, “When they’re shooting at you, it’s easy enough. You tell yourself it’s you or them. Your friends are the worst, though.”

“You killed your *friends*?” balked Fluttershy.

The statement brought the MechWarrior halfway out of his trance, “I didn’t kill him myself, if that’s what you’re asking, but I got him killed all the same. I knew there was an ambush in those trees. I knew he’d never make it with that busted leg actuator, but I told him to run into that field anyway.” He’d never commanded a lance of his own before the battle on Valexa. Leading Din Geremek in the run for the mountains following the disaster in the ravine was his first taste of real command. His demeanor began to crack as he relived those moments on the banks of the Sivry River. His vision blurred with hot tears, “We should have gone over the ridge. We should have hooked to the east. Blake’s blood, he was just a kid. God, he was just a *kid*.” He threw the twig fragments away and buried his face in his hands.

Princess Celestia had tried to explain to Twilight about armies and wars. It had all sounded so distant, so foreign to her. What sort of terrible place did these humans come from where they had to fight and kill each other? Where they had to watch their friends die? How did they bear it? She struggled to formulate the question, but Applejack beat her to it.

“Is it always like that? Is it always fightin’ and killin’ where you come from?”

Ramirez smiled weakly, “Not always. Most people go their entire lives without ever seeing combat or having to fight for their lives.” He straightened his back and thrust out his chest, “People like us,” he indicated himself and his fellow humans, “We’re Militia. We’re volunteers. We fight so that everyone else *can* live their lives in peace, so they don’t have to worry about the bigger bully coming to steal their stuff and hurt them.”

“But why do you have to fight each other?” Twilight asked, “Why can’t all the humans get

along peacefully? Solve their disagreements without violence?”

“That’s the question now, isn’t it?” he said with a grin.

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