

## **The Thessalonica Legacy**

### **Chapter 12: The Spaceship in the Woods**

The saboteur suspected their handiwork aboard the *Silvertongue* had been discovered as soon as Captain Tartaglia returned to the DropShip. The Captain had ordered every single person to drop what they were doing and assemble outside the ship. The infantry teams still patrolled the perimeter, but the spacer crew found themselves with nothing to do. They milled around aimlessly and asked each other if any of them knew what was going on. None could say, so their discussions slowly migrated to rumors of beasts spotted in the forest—fire-breathing dragons, lions with scorpion tails, and some sort of lizard with a bird's head. Some tried to apply names from mythology, others insisted they must be more mundane. The bridge crew had heard rumors of talking horses and unicorns, which Private Ackermann was able to confirm, though he was disinclined to talk at length about them.

Aboard the DropShip, Tartaglia sat dumbfounded on the bridge. He and Ling had been part-way through a desperate two-man search for evidence of the saboteur when an encoded message arrived from the JumpShip high above. Mawsley had kept the message short and simple:

*Nav computer repaired. Location confirmed as Terra.  
God help us all.*

The news had hit him like a punch to the gut. He had never been to Terra, the vast majority of the population hadn't, but like everyone he had heard stories of its verdant plains, broad oceans, and tall mountains. The Inner Sphere was filled with spectacular worlds, but none was held quite as dearly as the cradle of humanity.

But Terra was a world of billions. Vast cities dotted nearly every landmass and its skies were filled with satellites and suborbital transports. Untouched by the ravages of the Succession Wars, it was the most industrialized planet in the entirety of the Inner Sphere. Its factories churned out weapons, machines, and luxuries at a breakneck pace, fed with raw materials by Mars and mining colonies beyond. If this was Terra, where were the cities? Where were the factories and the HPG stations? Where were the bases on the moon, the cities on Mars, and the shipyards around Titan?

Yet he knew it had to be true. Somehow, he had always known. But how was it possible? There had been laboratory experiments of K-F hyperspace jumps that seemed to go awry. The theory was that jumps farther than 30 light years should be possible, but none had ever been successfully accomplished. What's more, there were rumors that ships mounted with experimental booms had disappeared from the universe entirely, only to appear at their scheduled jump points much, much later. One rumor spoke of a Star League-era experimental vessel that reappeared at the end of its super-long jump hundreds of years later.

Could that have happened to them? Had they somehow undergone a super-misjump and been stuck in hyperspace for centuries, or longer? How long would they have to be gone to see

the changes they did out there? Millions of years? Tens of millions? Shouldn't there still be ruins around, especially on the moon or in orbit?

He'd heard scientists talk of parallel universes. Maybe they'd somehow left their own universe and appeared over some parallel earth, one where humans didn't exist and ponies ruled the planet? That flew in the face of everything he knew of Kearney-Fuchida physics.

But none of this got them any closer to getting them home. That is, if they could go home.

Leftenant Ling broke their long silence, "So, what do we do?"

Tartaglia sighed deeply. He felt drained, "I don't know." They were silent for a moment, "Do you think we have enough personnel for a colony?"

"Don't even *think* like that!" Ling's ferocity snapped Tartaglia out of his musings, "You're an officer, goddamnit! Look at your shoulder."

Tartaglia glanced at his shoulder and the red and yellow sword-on-sunburst crest of the Federated Suns sewn on his uniform. "We're Davion military!" Ling said pointedly, "It's our duty to our country to do everything we can to get home. More than that," he pointed to a patch on his own uniform of a flaming red torch on a green and yellow shield with a banner that read *Duty Honor Loyalty*, "We're Valexa March Militia. We owe it to our friends, our family, our *planet* to get back."

"And if we can't get back?" Tartaglia asked quietly.

"I said don't even think about that," the muscular man stood, his blond head held high, "Now let's go catch that bastard who tried to blow us up."

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If the Everfree Forest was bad in the daylight, it was even worse at night. After their run-in with the diamond dog, even the humans were on edge, insisting they stick together. One rifle armed human would always lead and one would follow, their deadly guns cradled in their arms. Dr. Langley walked in the middle, constantly scanning to their left and right even as she talked with Applejack, who had finally begun to open up to their otherworldly visitors. They did not run across any other dangerous beasts, but the occasional rustle in the bushes or distant animalistic cry kept them from stopping. They were all exhausted. Only the two earth ponies with their incredible, possibly magical, endurance showed no signs of wearying. They wanted to sleep, to find a nice place to camp for the night, but fear drove them onward.

The near-full moon had reached its zenith and begun its slow decent when Liz heard the rumblings of machinery. Her spirits lifted and her pace quickened as she spied the glow of artificial lights through the trees. She whooped and broke out into a jog, calling out to the sentries she knew would be ahead. Surprised at her behavior, and not wanting to be left behind,

Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy took off after her while the others scrambled to catch up.

As they approached the break in the trees, Liz and the three ponies were suddenly bathed in an intense white light. Fluttershy and Rarity clamped their eyes shut, turning their faces from the harsh glare, each with a surprised squeak. Applejack cowered beneath her cowboy hat, fears of alien abduction once again boiling forth. Liz shielded her eyes with an arm and shouted at the light. A voice called back, challenging them in a threatening tone.

Liz responded with a yell of her own, answering the challenge, “Goddamnit, Quigley, get that spotlight out of my eyes!” The spotlight swung away, plunging them back into darkness. The voice sounded apologetic as another human stepped into view, silhouetted against the glow behind him.

The remainder of their party caught up with them at a run, and all at once they left the cover of the trees.

“Oh, my stars...” Rarity gasped. The other ponies were dumbstruck by the sight that greeted them.

They were close enough that it was impossible to view it all at once. Twilight thought it was a cliff at first, then noticed the angular shape and that it appeared to be made of metal painted a similar green as the uniform Dr. Langley wore next to her, though it appeared more of a ghostly grey in the moonlight. She figured she should try and find the words to describe the immense object, but all that came to mind was “big.” Indeed it was big, as if a giant chariot or more accurately from the shape, an impossibly large brick, had dropped from the sky and came to rest here. If not for the darkness, surely this, this, what was this? A building? A vehicle? Whatever it was, it surely would be visible above the treetops for miles. Bright white floodlights illuminated the ground surrounding where nearly a dozen humans milled about like ants in the shadow of a giant.

“Ooh, is that your spaceship?” cooed Pinkie Pie

“That it is. That’s the *Leopard*-class military aerodyne DropShip, the *Felicity Klimkosky*.” Dr. Langley said with a sweep of her hand.

“But it’s so...It’s so...” Twilight stammered, “Big.”

“Well, it has to carry a crew of nine, plus four MechWarriors, two Aerospace pilots, six technical teams of one Tech and usually six astechs each, with food, water, and supplies for all of them. Not to mention four BattleMechs, two Aerospace fighters, spare parts and ammunition for an extended campaign for each, and enough fuel to get to and from the JumpShip,” Ramirez listed off, enjoying the look of befuddlement on the unicorn’s face.

“And all that is in there now?” asked Applejack.

“Well, not right now. We’re running light. No tech teams, no aerospace, and just one

MechWarrior.” Ramirez answered.

The ponies walked in awe towards the giant starship, ignoring the gawps and stares from the bevy of humans at its base. They couldn't imagine how something so big would ever be able to move, much less fly. If it was made of cloud, then maybe, but metal? A mountain might as well lift from the ground and fly through the air.

“Oh, wow! What is *that*?” Rainbow Dash swooped excitedly towards a large figure standing near an open bay door of the DropShip. It too was large, though not on the same scale as the green mass behind it. Even though it was dwarfed by the DropShip, it still stood easily as tall as a tree. It looked to Dash to resemble a giant human, with two long legs and two arms. It was made of metal, though, with large angular plates covering its entire body like a metal skin. The shins were fat and the round head sat low on the broad shoulders. A series of small fins extended from the back of the head and shoulders, looking almost like decorative feathers. It was painted head to toe in dark green covered with red stripes like an oddly-colored tiger. The arms lay ramrod straight at its sides, the left ending in a splayed metal hand, and the right in a stubby cone. The giant had no eyes, but instead a shielded visor of black reminding Rainbow almost of tinted sunglasses. Though it stood unmoving in the floodlights, Rainbow almost expected it to start moving at any second.

Ramirez smiled broadly, the largest smile the ponies had seen from him yet. He strode up and patted the giant on the shin, just below the painted insignia of the Militia. It was the highest point he could reach as the titan towered more than five times his height above him.

“This,” he said affectionately, “is my BattleMech. She’s a Corean Enterprises VLK-QD1 *Valkyrie* Light BattleMech, and she’s all mine.” He launched into a listing of the ‘Mechs qualities, knowing full well the words meant nothing to his audience but sounding like an exceedingly proud parent, “She masses 30 tons, and got an Omni 150 Extra-Light Fusion powerplant giving her a top speed of 86 kilometers per hour in combat. Thrust-Master Model L jumpjets give her a 150 meter jump, and she’s protected by six tons of StarGuard-three armor.” The ponies looked at him blankly, as did the humans for that matter, but he plowed on heedless, “She’s got a Defiance Model-twelve Extended Range laser in the right arm and a Valiant Arbalest LRM-15 Missile Pack tied to a Sync Tracker 40 Targeting Computer with Artemis-four fire-control system.” He gave the shin another loving pat.

“So...it’s a... girl?” Rarity tapped her chin with a hoof. She had barely followed him up to ‘she’s all mine’, and suspected the others hadn’t fared much better, “What’s her, um. What’s her name?”

Ramirez looked a little puzzled, “Well, it’s not alive, of course. It’s just kind of a long-standing tradition to call a vehicle ‘she’. I’m not really sure why.” He looked up at the giant weapon of war, “As for a name, I’ve never gotten around to it. A lot of MechWarriors will name their rides. I just never could come up with one I was happy with.”

“Oh, well, if they all have names then she’s gotta have a name too!” Pinkie Pie squealed, “I

know if I didn't have a name and all the other giant robots had names I'd feel left out. Ooh! Let's give her a name right now! How about, uh... Big Stompy! Or, no, Thunderfeet! Or how 'bout Brown-eyed Susan, no, wait, that's a flower. Hmm, do we want descriptive or ironic?"

Ramirez's communicator crackled to life and the voice of Lieutenant Dieter Ling sounded in his ear, "Ramirez! Get the doc and get in here. And keep it quiet."

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"We're running out of time. There's just too much of the ship to cover and not enough of us to cover it." Ling was getting disgruntled. He and Tartaglia had spent hours combing through the ship for any clue as to the identity of whoever had sabotaged the *Silvertongue*. They knew from the report from Captain Mawsley and her chief Tech that the saboteur had planted the bomb sometime between when Tartaglia, Ramirez, and Ling had left for the bridge and when the jump took place, and that the culprit had to have come from aboard the *Felicity Klimkosky*.

It was late, they were tired, and they had searched precious little of the ship. Now with four of them it would go a little faster, but every moment they kept the crew outside was another moment their culprit might realize what they were up to. They didn't know who, they didn't know why, and they didn't know if they would strike again.

"Lieutenant, might I suggest we bring on additional personnel to make the search go faster?" Dr. Langley asked, politely standing at-ease.

"Who? We can't trust anyone. The only people who are above suspicion for the crime are right here," he motioned to the four of them standing in the central corridor from the 'Mech bays.

"With all due respect, sir, I can think of six more who are above suspicion," Langley said with a sly smile. Ling raised an eyebrow.

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The inside of the human's starship was depressingly grey. Whatever wasn't grey was covered in warning labels or yellow-and-black striped caution tape. The metal floors clacked dreadfully under their hooves and the lighting gave everything an eerie off-color pallor. The atmosphere felt stale and stagnant, but worst was the smell. Sharp and acrid, like a sweaty saddletrap that had been dipped in a bucket of axle grease, Twilight decided. She knew Rarity would be indignant at the decorating. She was probably just waiting for an excuse to call it a crime against interior decorating or something.

Lieutenant Ling swung open a round-cornered doorway exposing a broad room with three sets of bunk beds with crisply folded linens and thin mattresses set against one wall and a bank of lockers on the other. He moved down the corridor and opened another door to another room identical to the first, then another. Twilight wondered about the purpose of the railways set in the wall and floor. It looked like the bunks could be swiveled to either stand upright, as they were, or

to lay down perpendicular to the floor. She wondered why they would need to rotate like that.

“We’ll start you off here in the Tech bunks,” Ling was saying, “Look everywhere you can think of, anywhere someone might hide something.”

“Just what, exactly, are we looking for again?” Applejack asked.

“Anything that looks suspicious. Anything that looks like it doesn’t belong or that someone is trying to hide it.”

“Like this?” Pinkie Pie pulled a thin paper magazine out from beneath a mattress. She flung it on top of the bunk. “Huh, that’s weird.”

Fluttershy peered at the open page over Pinkie’s shoulder and turned a bright crimson, “Oh! Oh dear. Um... I’d say *that* still works the same way.”

Ling lunged forward and snatched the magazine, crumpling it up in his large hands, “Whose bunk is this? Damn it, Quigley! I’ve told him about this.” He hid the magazine behind his back, his cheeks flushed. “Anything *else* that looks like someone is hiding it,” he said quickly.

“What about this?” Pinkie Pie had managed to open one of the storage lockers. A greyish-black suit draped across her. She held the sleeves up with her hooves.

Ling’s eyes went wide. The report from the *Silvertongue* had indicated the saboteur may be well supplied, but a sneaksuit?

“Where did you find that?” he asked slowly.

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“I’m telling you, Sir. I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Liz Virat twisted her wrists in the handcuffs, “I’d never sabotage a ship! Hell, I didn’t even know the *Silvertongue* was sabotaged!”

“And yet the materials were found in your storage locker. The locker you say no one but you has been in since we first boarded.” Ling tapped his fingers on the materials they had found in the locker, a block and a half of C8 plastic explosives, three detonators, and the sneaksuit. “This sneaksuit’s pretty high-dollar equipment. Who’re you working for, Virat? The Capellans?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir. That stuff isn’t mine! I’ve never seen it before in my life!”

“You will be confined until such time as we can turn you over to the authorities,” he motioned for a pair of her fellow Militia soldiers to lead her off to the bunkroom they had turned

into a makeshift cell.

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