

Chapter Two: Enter the Everfree Forest

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

After an hour walking along the worn trail, the ponies came upon a hut deep in the forest. The outside was simple enough; a grass thatched roof, wooden walls, and a few windows. From inside the hut floated chanting and the sweet smell of something brewing over a hickory fire. Pokey sized up the cottage and approached. He knocked on the door; his hooves echoed with the thud throughout the hut. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a stately zebra standing behind. Her fetlocks were adorned with bangles and her ears were pierced with gold bangles. She looked at group of ponies with a raised eyebrow.

“Are these unannounced guests I see?” she asked in a accented voice. “What do you want from a zebra like me?” Pokey looked at the gathered ponies, unsure as to what direction to take the conversation. Cheerilee stepped up instead.

“Zecora! Dear!” she said, offering a hoof. “I’m Cheerilee Daisy. Twilight Sparkle has told me so much about you. These intrepid bunch of ponies are Pokey, Medley, and Redheart.” She smiled as Zecora accepted hoof, and shook. “That dear unicorn sent us your way in hopes that you could help us out. I hope we’re not interrupting anything.”

“Friends of Twilight are you?” she asked. “Is there something that I can do?” She motioned them inside the dirt floored hut.

A cauldron simmered near the window, and filled the air with a hint of cinnamon. Tribal masks adorned the walls, as did bookshelves full of tattered tomes and dusty scrolls. Pokey looked with unease about the hut. He’d known many zebras in his time, but none like her. She clearly wasn’t Kin.

Zecora ladled cups from the cauldron. She offered them to the ponies. They accepted politely. After greetings were shared, Cheerilee spent the next half hour regaling Zecora with the tale of Spike’s unbelievable actions. Zecora listened, and nodded sagely.

“These gems you seek,” rhymed the zebra, “you can find them all within the week.” Medley rolled her eyes.

“Oh, well I’m glad that you’re so confident about all of this,” said Medley with a tone of sarcasm. “Can you tell us where they are so we can be done with this silly adventure?”

“I know not where the gems are,” she replied. “But those who do? They are not far. If you were a bird, there you could flap, but you’re not, so do have you a map?” Cheerilee reached into her saddlebags and pulled out a map of the Everfree forest. Zecora picked up a piece of charcoal in her teeth and marked a route. “These pigs are called the Hamite,” she said. “But

beware, they like to fight.”

Medley cringed at the idea. She hadn’t been expecting violence on this trip, and she certainly didn’t want to fight pigs. Not that she knew any,, but still They weren’t even ponies. And to be getting help from a Zebra? She hoped this whole quest wasn’t going to involve getting her hooves dirty with a bunch of other species.

“I’ve done some research on the Hamites,” said Cheerilee. “They’re reasonable folk.”

“They can be, if you are kind,” said Zecora. “Some hate ponies, and others don’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said Pokey. He rolled his neck. “I’ve dealt with pigs before. You just gotta show them who’s boss.”

“I don’t want you hurting any pony,” protested Redheart.

“They’re not ponies,” said Pokey. “Every pig I’ve ever met has tried to kill me. They’re savages.”

“That’s actually a misnomer,” said Cheerilee. “They’re civilized, but don’t have the same basis of agriculture or magic that ponies do. They traditionally forage for food, and since they don’t build cities, their culture changes quicker than ponies.” Pokey stared into space, ignored the mulberry pony.

“Thank you, Miss Zecora,” said Redheart. “We should be going now.”

“Good luck to you ponies all,” she replied. “The task you have been given is quite tall.”

The quartet of ponies walked away from Zecora’s hut, little more confident in their quest than they entered it. The forest seemed to thicken around them as they left the hut's clearing, and the branches swallowed them in darkness. Pokey’s horn glowed dully as he swiped his head, hacking through the undergrowth. Brush fell his at his feet. It left a carpet of branches for the others to walk on. As they walked deeper in to the forest, the canopy swallowed the sky. They were left in a darkness that Pokey’s glowing horn alone couldn’t counter. Redheart fished through her pack to produce a lantern. Medley held it in her teeth, and fluttered above the ponies to illuminate the way.

With the added light of the lantern, Medley looked for trails that would require less work. To the south, she spotted a path. Pokey began to slash through the underbrush toward it. They eventually came to a road of packed earth that led deeper into the forest, and hopefully towards the village they sought. Pokey rolled his head along his shoulders to stretch his stiff neck muscles. Cheerilee unrolled her map again.

“Well according to our maps,” said Cheerilee, “the Hamite village should be due east of

here, about four hours walk.” The disgust on Medley’s face was enough to fill the already dim forest with even more gloom.

“I’ve never even heard of these pigs,” Medley complained. “Why couldn’t it be ponies? Or even donkeys? This is the worst adventure I’ve ever been on.”

“I thought you said you had never been on an adventure,” asked Redheart.

“I haven’t,” replied Medley with a huff. “By default then, it’s the worst.” Pokey simply rolled his eyes and started down the earth path.

“If she’s going to whine the whole time...” he muttered to himself. The ponies followed Pokey as Medley circled above. She kept the lantern aloft to spread light in the dark corners of the forest.

The ponies had walked in relative silence for an hour when the snapping of a twig put the party on high alert. Pokey dropped his horn low and spread his hooves wide. He made ready to react to the slightest movement. Medley lifted the lamp higher as Cheerilee and Redheart took cover behind nearby trees. Another twig snapped less than two dozen yards away. Then another. Sweat dripped down Pokey’s brow. His muscles tensed, ready for whatever came next.

There was explosion of branches as a crimson coated sow leapt from the bushes. Her face was streaked in panic and her fur was matted in blood. A piglet scurried behind her; the child was squealing in abject terror. The piglet caught on a branch and tumbled in front of Pokey. Pokey looked down, unsure as to what was happening. He had less than a second till it became apparent. A lion’s head crashed through the brush, bat-like wings and a massive scorpion tail trailing behind it. Medley screamed.

“Manticore!”

The lantern fell from her teeth and shattered on the forest floor. The ponies and pigs were left in near darkness. The manticore’s lion head roared and scythed his razor claws at the unicorn.

The massive paw slammed into the earth where Pokey had stood only an instant before. He had spun out of the way to deliver a massive kick to the manticore’s teeth. The beast reeled backwards a moment before it snapped back. The manticore pounded his fists into the earth. It’s paw landed only inches from the piglet. The piglet squealed, as he struggle to get to his feet. The beast turned its eye back on its prize and dove at the child.

Without even thinking, Medley found herself diving at the beast with an incomprehensible war cry. Both hooves struck the manticore’s face. The impact knocked its maw wide, and threw the creature from its feet. Medley rebounded off a tree and rocketed back

towards the stunned piglet. In a single swift motion, the piglet was in her hooves and in the trees.

The manticore lashed back at Medley only to find empty air. It was met instead was the sows barreling charge. The pig knocked the manticore off his feet and into the dirt. Pokey looked up at the sow as she rained hooves on the beast. It was back on its feet in a second.

The massive scorpion tail shot forward; the barbed stinger found purchase between the sow's shoulders. The sow screamed in agony, dropped to her knees. Redheart shot forward, and kicked the stinger free from the sow's back. Cheerilee dashed out to tackle the sow away from the beast. The girls had joined the fight.

The ponies dodged and weaved from the attacks, barely able to keep ahead of the beast. Pokey realized that this fight needed to end now. He couldn't get close enough to kill the manitcore, but he knew of something else that would put that creature out of commission. He charged at a tree; his horn burned with intense black light. He buried his horn into the tree, and snapped his neck away.

His spell had made his already dangerous horn impossibly sharp; it cut through the tree as if it were slicing paper. The tree heaved sideways, and brought down the forest canopy as a hailstorm brings down the sky. The manticore looked up at the last second as it caught the weight of the trunk across its back. The beast's roar threatened to deafen the ponies before it was smothered in the branches.

Pokey stood above the creature in victory. He darted his head around the scene looking for more threats. He found only his pony companions, and the sow that stood wheezing beside him. She looked up at Pokey.

The sow was shorter than Pokey, but wider and low to the ground. She was caked in her own blood, and started to wobble uneasily. Her eyes lost focus as she opened her mouth to speak. The sow fell to the forest floor before uttering a sound.

Redheart was on her fetlocks in an instant. She snapped open their medical supplies and began to treat the sow. Medley fluttered down from the branches, the piglet still wrapped in her hooves. She stared at the scene in shock. Never in her life had she even imagined such violence. The piglet wriggled to escape from Medley, so he could run to his mother's side. She wrapped her hooves around him tighter, and turned him away.

"Nurse Redheart's going to fix your mommy," she reassured the piglet. "She's going to be okay, I promise." She looked back as Pokey and Cheerilee dropped down to help Nurse Redheart. She was yelling orders to the ponies as she prepped a syringe. "You don't need to see that," said Medley. Her voice cracked, as she tried to put on a brave face for the piglet. "Come on, let's sing a song. Do you know any songs? Please teach me one of your songs." The piglet

tried to look back at his mother. Medley's brought the child's focus back to her instead and insisted that he teach her a song,

"Um... There was an old boar," the child began as he tried to remember the words.

"There was an old boar!" Medley sung back. Her voice was still shaking. "Okay, good! Teach me more! I want to know!"

"He knew how to snore," the piglet continued. "And every day, he laid on the floor."

"Good! Good!" encouraged Medley. "Keep going! I want to hear your song."

The piglet continued to sing his song about the boar who snored on the floor for a handful of verses. Medley insisted that he repeat it again and again as her companions worked on the sow. Cheerilee compressed the sow's chest. Pokey breathed for the sow, by holding her snout and breathing deep into her lungs. Nurse Redheart recited a silent prayer as she slammed a needle into the pig's flank. The pig gasped, and began to breathe on her own. With the sow narrowly alive, Redheart collapsed against the tree. Pokey put a hoof on her shoulder.

"She's going to make it," he said. "We just need to get her to the village."

"She's lost so much blood," mumbled Redheart. "I've never treated a Hamite before. And with that manitcore poison, I just don't know if our antitoxin will work on her..."

"Hey!" snapped Medley. "Don't say that! She's going to make it. Tigros here needs his mommy, and I promised him that you would make her better!" Her eyes filled with tears. "Ponies don't break promises." Redheart looked up at the frightened piglet and the tearful pegasus.

"You're right," she said, as she came to her senses. "We can't break a promise." She stood up, and gazed into the forest. Cheerilee unrolled her map again.

"If we double time it," said Cheerilee, "we can make it by sun down." She looked at the fading day that filtered through the hole in the canopy, then at the crushed remains of the beast. "In fact, we're going to have to. The manticore landed on the lantern."

They left the grisly scene within a few minutes. Redheart had fashioned a sling from her tent, and Pokey set it between the two earth ponies. They easily carried the weight of the sow as Pokey's horn lit the way. It was becoming too dark to fly, and Medley was forced to run alongside. The piglet clung desperately to her as the ponies galloped along the forest path. Their thundering hooves scattered the small creatures, and the ferocity of their step warned other predators to stay away. The herd found itself outside a torchlit village within the hour.

The path to the village widened as the ponies slowed to a sweaty trot. Two massive boars, each the size of a pegasus, stood watch over the entrance to the village. Their tusks had been

adorned with decorative metal plating and intricate carvings, while their crimson coats were covered in yellow tattoos. The boars dropped their heads, ready to charge at the invading herd.

“We’ve got wounded!” said Pokey. “Get out of the way!” The boars looked between Cheerilee and Redheart to see the downed sow. Their eyes latched onto Pokey; they bristled in anger.

“Did you do this to her?” demanded the larger boar. Pokey’s horn flashed a dangerous black aura as clear warning to his power.

“Get out of my way,” growled Pokey.

“Stop it!” yelled Redheart. “This sow is dying! Stop your macho posturing and help us!” The boars looked at each other uneasily for a moment, and then stood.

“Follow me,” the larger huffed.

The village existed as a multitude of trees that had been grown together over the decades to form perfect baskets of habitable space beneath their boughs. Each had two levels that formed an hourglass shape from the twisted trunks. The upper levels were connected by a series of wooden rope bridges that hug with a lazy sway in the forest air. Fires burned outside their houses, and pots of various dishes brewed beneath the forest’s canopy. The clay soil had hardened over the years of use into a cracked terracotta landscape. Small patches of moss grew on the trees, illuminated by the torch lights in the center of the earthen paths.

The ponies felt the eyes of the village upon them as they marched the sow through town. Hushed whispers passed between the pigs as the ponies walked by. Medley was sure she’d heard some pig use the word “pignapped.” She looked at the growing mob following them.

“Pokey...” she whispered nervously.

“I know, Medley,” he hissed back. “Just keep that piglet with you, no matter what.” The herd came to a stop in front of a large tree made from several smaller trees that had been twisted together some time ago. They grew as one now, and towered over the village square.

A massive sow came from beneath its branches. She was adorned in fine silver jewelry, and a great purple robe. A brilliant glittering diamond cut with seemingly impossible geometry hung from her neck. The pigs bowed in unison at the sow. The sow looked upon the ponies with curiosity. Her eyes fell on the wounded mother and the shivering piglet.

“What has happened?” she demanded. Pokey took a step forward and prepared for the worst. “What have you done to my daughter?”

“Grandmom!” squealed the piglet He wriggled free from Medley. The Elder sow glared

at the ponies. Cheerilee cringed under her baleful gaze, but Redheart stood firm.

“Your daughter was attacked by a manticore,” Redheart said. “She nearly died there in the forest. We made a promise to Tigros that she would be okay.” She came eye to eye with the sow. “And ponies don’t break promises.” The sow softened her glare. The elder stepped back, and relaxed.

“Fetch Alamos,” said the elder sow. “My daughter requires urgent care. You four may come with me.” Two boars took the sling from Cheerilee, but Redheart refused to let go.

“She’s my patient,” Redheart said. “I’m going with her.” The boars looked to the elder for wisdom; she simply nodded. Redheart and the boars disappeared into the village while the three ponies and Tigros followed the elder sow into her tree home.

The inside of her home was adorned with masks not unlike Zecora's. Intricate tapestries of beadwork hung upon the walls, and a mat of woven river stones carpeted the otherwise dirt floor. The sow sat in the center of the room, and motioned for the ponies to sit as well. Tigros huddled up to his grandmother and stared at the ponies.

“Tell me what happened,” she said. Each of the ponies related their tale, downplaying their role in the defeat of the manticore, and focused instead on the rescue of Tigros and his mother. The sow nodded as she considered the tale.

“I see,” she said at last. “You are seeking the stones then?”

“Yes,” replied Cheerilee. “Our princess has asked us to find them. She didn’t tell us what they were for though.”

“I know of your princess Celesita,” said the elder. “It is said she makes the sun rise.”

“That’s true,” replied Cheerilee. “She is our goddess and our princess. Her wishes are our honor to fulfill.” The elder sow considered this as she gazed at the three ponies in her home.

“And you have come here at her command?” she asked.

“Well,” said Cheerilee with a smile, “this is where our journey has taken us.” The sow smiled back.

“You are wise in your speech, wine colored Pony,” said the sow.

“Oh, please,” she replied. “Call me Cheerilee.”

“I am Elder Thasrow,” offered the sow. “The daughter whom you have brought home to me is Tesha, and her son Tigros, you have already met.” Thasrow looked over the gathered ponies. She stared at each for a moment. She paused long enough to unnerve Medley. “You are

clearly a diplomat of sorts,” she said at last to Cheerilee.

“Well, I’m actually a school teacher,” replied Cheerilee. “Some would argue it’s a lot of the same thing.” Thasrow nodded to Pokey and his armor.

“And you are obviously a mighty warrior,” she said. He simply grunted in reply. “And your friend is clearly skilled in the art of medicine. But you...” she turned to face Medley, who backed away from the massive sow’s gaze. “What skills do you bring to this party?”

“She just happened to be there when we got drafted” said Pokey. “Still, it’s always handy to have a pair of wings.” Thasrow nodded at the idea and accepted the unicorn’s answer. She stood, and then turned to face one of the beaded tapestries on the wall. She gestured to it, and beckoned the ponies to come forward.

“It has been foretold that you would arrive,” she said. The ponies approached, and tried to garner meaning from the assembled beads. In the center of the bead work was a depiction of the four Stones of Brilliance. Each was done in a different stone: lapis lazul, ivory, turquoise, and jasper. Inside of each of the stones was much smaller, more intricately beaded mosaic: a safety pin, a red cross surrounded by hearts, a thundering cloud, and three daisies. Medley stepped back in shock.

“You mean, you knew we were coming?” she asked. “Those are our cutie marks.” She looked back to her own raining cloud. “Well, most of our cutie marks, anyway.”

“This tapestry has existed in our village for nearly five centuries,” explained Thasrow. “Every few years, our shamans have a vision, and craft a new mosaic to fit in the stones. These pictures have changed a dozen times in my life. In fact, our shaman finished the new one only yesterday. It takes about a month for her to make a new one.” She pointed to the bottom of the tapestry. Tacked to it were hundreds of cutie mark mosaics that stretched to the floor. The last one was a raining cloud. “So to answer your question, no, I did not know that you were coming. I knew only that ponies would one day come here.” They exchanged uneasy glances. It was clear that Celestia had left a lot out of her explanation.