

The Everfree Forest was definitely the creepiest wood Phil had ever visited. The trees were ancient old-growth monsters, further confusing his idea of scale. His own body had seemed so huge compared to the humans he left behind, but now this place made him feel small all over again.

The trail was narrow and poorly maintained, so thin in places that his cart threatened to leave the path entirely and tumble into the abyss. He managed to drag it along, even when only one of its wheels was touching the ground beneath him.

There were plenty of untraceable sounds of wildlife around them as they walked, crushing twigs and scampering over leaves. But Phil never got a good view. Despite Sky Beak's warning, nothing attacked them during their trek. The Storm King's soldiers didn't follow them either, or if they did, they never caught up.

Soon enough, an artificial shape rose ahead of them from the shadows—a vast castle. Getting to it wouldn't be easy, as the path ended at a cliff spanned only by a rope bridge. Peering beyond the cliff, Phil caught a better look of the castle's outline. This one was much easier to wrap his head around than the crystal-shaped one they had left behind, as this castle was made of stone, having overgrown by numberless years.

There was light visible in its broken windows and smoke rising from holes in its tumbled roof. "We can't cross this bridge with so much weight," Starlight announced. "Stop here. We'll let ponies know we've arrived, and they can carry these supplies across."

"Supplies, right," Carlos said, annoyed. "Those things we could have brought if you had warned us we were going to another world, instead of taking us from the middle of the game. You know, our home had some pretty killer weapons, but none of us brought any."

"Killer is too extreme," Sky said. "Except for the Storm King, perhaps. If he escapes, he might raise another army and return one day."

"That's not the point—" Carlos began.

A strange howling silenced him as it eerily swept across the clearing. It sounded like wolves, though louder and deeper than any wolves Phil had ever heard back home. They were probably the sort of monsters you didn't want to run into in the middle of the night with your back to a cliff.

Starlight seemed to be thinking along those same lines, because she backed towards the bridge. "How are you supposed to use a bridge without hands?" Phil asked, following her. "How do you stay steady?"

"By walking very, very, carefully," she answered. She'd ditched the disguise, keeping only the lantern floating in her magic now. But the supernatural glow of her powers was almost as bright as the lantern itself. That would be a neat trick, maybe as good as having his hands back. But if Phil could figure out his wings...

They crossed. Phil's wings opened as soon as he was over the dark expanse beyond, spreading as wide as he could make them. That meant the feathers brushed against the ropes on either side. It probably wasn't strong enough to hold him if something went wrong, but maybe he could catch the air and glide?

Thankfully, the bridge was in better shape than it looked. It barely seemed to notice he was there. It did worse for Aaron, who made it creak and rumble with every step. But Phil himself was built for flight. Maybe he even had hollow bones.

But he was far from weak, or else he would've broken something when he attacked the ogre.

Phil still felt much better once his hooves were on solid ground again.

"I thought moats were supposed to be filled with water," Danny said. "Not just a bottomless cliff!"

"The Castle of the Two Sisters has been abandoned for a thousand years," Starlight finally said. "There have been a few efforts to restore it, but none serious. It's full of old magic, traps, and dangerous creatures nesting in the lower levels."

Then she grinned. "At least, that's what we make sure everypony believes. So long as the place is thought to be so dangerous that nopony would dare come here, it means we can keep hiding here. The Storm King's army doesn't understand magic that well; ogres don't have any of their own. So the more dangerous they think it is, the less likely they are to check for us."

That made some sense. The group closed ranks anyway. The newly-arrived humans knew just as little about magic as the ogres did, after all.

The castle's front doors looked entirely collapsed, having vanished into a pile of rubble. But instead of approaching that entrance, Starlight took them to a random section of wall, and then pushed aside some vines hanging there. It revealed a postern gate beyond, which opened with the glow of her horn. "Welcome to our hideout—the last vestige of resistance to occupation."

"We're trusting you a great deal by bringing you here," Sky Beak said, leading the way in. "But if we're captured, you can bet the Storm King won't change you back. If he learned about your world, he would only threaten you too. There's no threshold he won't cross to grow his power and expand his dominion."

"I think he would regret it," Phil muttered. The hippogriff looked doubtful, but Phil didn't elaborate. They were still his kidnappers, after all. They weren't willing allies who he could trust with whatever he knew.

The castle's interior looked as abandoned as it did on the outside, at least for a while. They walked through crumbling rooms, overflowing with broken furniture and ancient art. At least there was no sign of looters here. If anything, the rooms looked *too* abandoned, like show scenes in a theme park. The walls were covered in comically large spider webs, and there was almost no room to step through the rubble.

But then they came to another door, this one made of sturdy, rough wood. Starlight banged one hoof up against it in a rhythmic pattern. "Password changes every few days," she supplied. "You'll have to memorize it. If you don't get the right reply back, run."

Someone knocked on the other side in a similar musical pattern. Then the door opened, and another unicorn appeared on the other side, along with a wave of bright light. The space beyond was warm and well-lit. More importantly, another smell came from within, one Phil hadn't even realized he was craving until that moment.

Food! Suddenly, he realized he could eat a horse. Or eat like a horse, anyway.

"It's about time. Trixie was worried you were stranded in another world!"

"Trixie shouldn't have worried," Starlight said, gesturing over her shoulder. "We found what we were looking for—warriors willing to help Equestria's cause."

"Willing is one way to put it," said the bat. When he spoke, Phil recognized his voice too. That was Harvey, a tight end for the Eagles. "They refused to change us back unless we helped you. It was a straight-up kidnapping."

"Trixie is in *tears* for you," said the horse, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "They lost their country; their people are enslaved—but all they ask for is a little help in return? How inconsiderate!" She stepped aside, opening the way into the room beyond.

Past a narrow hallway was a common room of considerable size. The space was underground, without windows to speak of, but the locals had made up for it the best they could. There were bright lights overhead, a roaring fire in a huge fireplace, and several long tables. A few dozen horses were inside, of all shapes and sizes and ages.

Other than a few vague patterns, it was hard to put together any coherent things they had in common. The ones with wings had lighter shades, the ones without wings or horns were typically a little bigger, and the unicorns had different tails than the rest.

Starlight had been telling the truth when she said the horse creatures didn't wear clothes. A few of them had cloaks or jackets, but the rest wore nothing at all.

They were also one of the most pathetic, downtrodden groups he had ever seen. They resembled the victims and refugees he saw in the saddest war photos from troubled regions of the globe, huddled and beaten down. They were a scrawny group, and most were dirty and disheveled. There probably wasn't much running water in this broken-down castle.

By the look of things, mealtime had just finished, with many groups moving away from the tables to help clean up. He held out one wing to get Starlight's attention, pointing towards the open kitchen. "I hope you plan on feeding us while we're here. We've already saved you once today."

"Yes," she said, sounding even more worn-out than she had been before. "Trixie, can you take care of them? I need to get a crew to unload our supplies before the animals get them."

"No," the unicorn said flatly. "Absolutely not. *I* will see to the supplies. *You* deserve a chance to rest. Trixie can only assume a physical transformation must be exhausting."

"Thanks, I think." Starlight continued past her. "Alright everyone, with me. I can introduce you to the other leaders once we get you fed. Everypony should be here."

"And this is where I leave you for the time being." Sky Beak inclined his head towards Phil. "Thank you for helping with our escape. I look forward to a larger demonstration of your battle prowess over the coming weeks." He left, taking off into the air and flying away across the room. Phil watched him go, wishing that he could do the same.

"Every...pony?" Carlos asked. "You look like horses to me."

Maybe they resembled horses in some ways. Phil didn't argue with him, as he had thought of the aliens using that same word up until that moment. But no earth horse had such huge eyes or came in such varied colors.

"No horses in Equestria," Starlight said. "You'd have to go to Saddle Arabia for that. We're ponies. Three main tribes—unicorns, Pegasi, and earth ponies. That's you, you, and you. You're a thestral, uh...I don't think I caught your name."

"Harvey," he supplied.

Their little conversation attracted plenty of stares from the ones they passed. Phil could only imagine what he might've thought if he heard someone in a restaurant explain to a relative what it meant to be human. But the *ponies* here were so beaten down that no one questioned them. Or maybe they knew about Starlight's mission and supported her efforts to find help from Earth.

They ate bowls of plain soup at an empty table. Phil didn't say much during the meal, instead focusing entirely on getting as much into his system as possible. For his first meal in another universe, it was neither spectacular nor offensive. He couldn't taste anything resembling meat in the bowl, but surprisingly didn't miss it.

Starlight finished before any of the others. "I'm going to find Rainbow. You ponies stay here please, don't wander."

She didn't give them a chance to argue, vanishing down an open doorway—literally vanishing in this case, with a flash of light and everything. So, unicorns could *teleport*? That was cool.

"So," Carlos said as soon as she was gone. They were hardly *alone* in the room, but every other group had their own subdued conversations going. Most of the locals had gone off by then, so there were only a dozen or so ponies left, whispering quietly to each other. It was as close to privacy as they were likely to get. "We're actually here. We're doing this. Putting our lives at risk for the people who kidnapped us."

"You think we should defect?" Harvey asked. "Their enemy—maybe he would send us back to Earth. Might be worth it to him just to get us out of his hair."

"Before we've even done anything?" Danny asked, indignant. "I don't see it. There's no reason for him to be afraid of us yet. And once he is, I'm sure this 'Storm King' guy would just throw us in prison anyway."

"We can't do that," Phil said, setting one hoof onto the table with a loud, dramatic thump. "I'm as upset as you all are. It's wrong what they did. But look around you. These people didn't do anything. They're the ones who suffer if we do that."

Several low murmurs passed between them—mumbled agreement, mostly. They weren't heartless.

"The damage is already done," said the bat pony. "The whole world saw what happened to us. If we could even go back now, it would all be for nothing."

*And there would be no reward,* Phil privately added.