

O42

By Cat Eats Dog

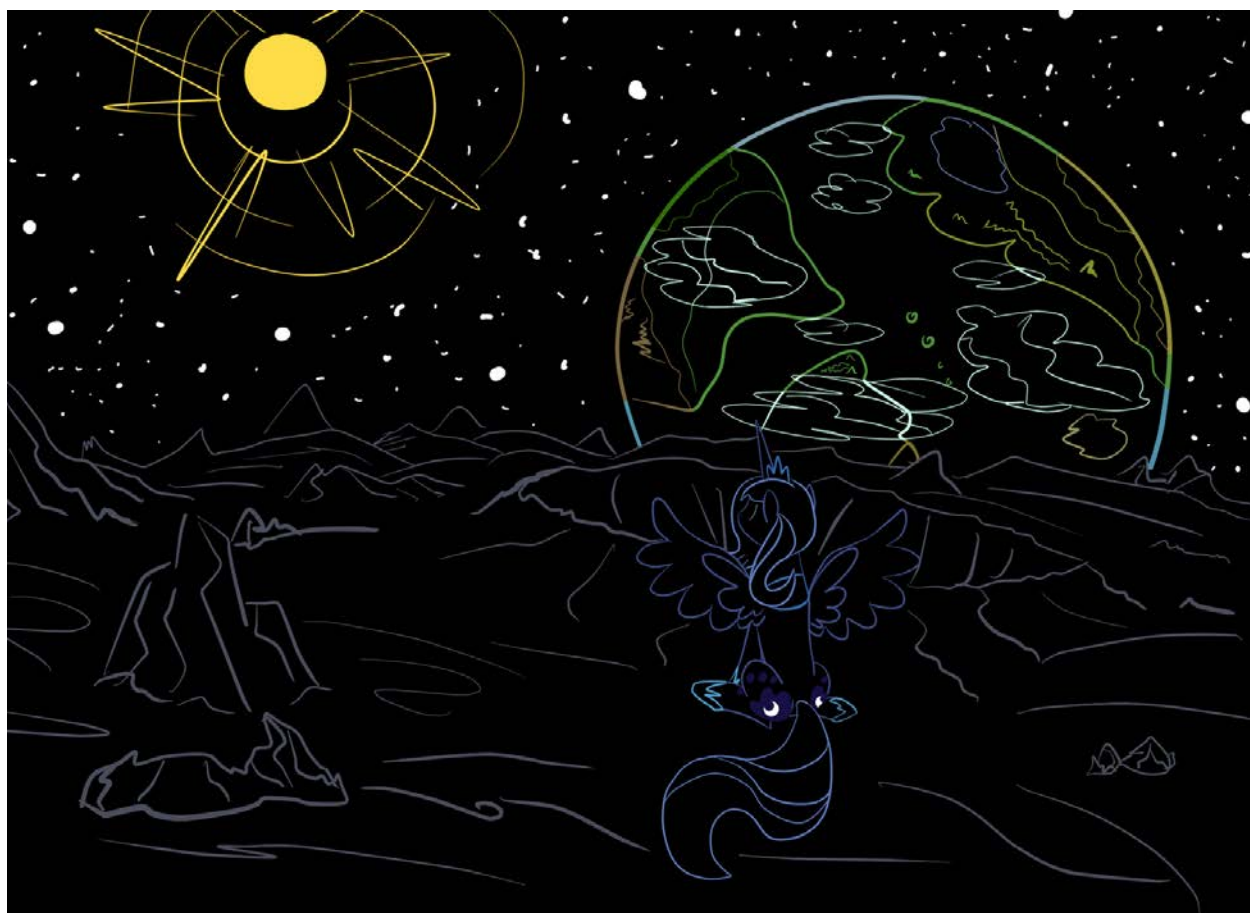


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Prologue

The Second Chance

"Designed and produced by Dashovski Enterprises. The Avio 42 series of mid-sized freighters were once the must have freighters amongst space truckers. Most freighters at the time were either very slow or very awkward. The version one Avio 42 was DE's attempt to combine adequate cargo space with speed and versatility. With 250 tons of cargo space, comfortable living space for a crew of 8, passenger capacity of 22, infirmary, dual laser rotating drives, a single massive hyper jump capable laser propulsion drive, impressive shielding, room for a plethora of different types of weaponry and an Aquadria power core with a 300 year breakdown the Avio 42 was every space trucker's dream. Provided they could afford it at the time. Today most Avio 42s have either been broken down for parts or can be found rusting away in ship graveyards. Other versions were designed and released but none were as widely used as the original."

- "Keep On Flying - The Classics Edition"

"I have quite a few older ships kept here," The old Earth Pony says as he carefully makes his way over the debris littered ground of the much older ship graveyard. "Watch your step. I don't clean up much. Not sure if you'll find anything you can use. Mostly just piles of junk. In my own opinion, of course. Err, what exactly are you looking for again, young lady?"

The old Earth Pony gets no response.

"Err, young lady?" He asks again.

Once again nothing. He stops and looks to his side. He is currently showing around a purple unicorn and her orb-bot companion. The Unicorn has a rather unique dark blue mane and tail that both have a purple and a pink streak through them. While the orb-bot's base color is purple with green spines around part of it, making it appear as if it has a green mohawk. Both the Unicorn and orb-bot are no longer at the old stallion's

side. He turns around and spots the unicorn giving some old ship her full attention. He trots over.

"Something strike your fancy?" He inquires.

Without taking her gaze off the ship she asks, "Is that an Avio 42?"

The old Earth Pony looks over the ship, "Seems so. Looks to be a version one model. That ship has been here since my father ran this place. What a clunker. Power core is probably..."

"It has a breakdown of 300 years." The unicorn interrupts.

The old pony blinks at her, "Does it now? I dunno, young miss, I have a few newer ships dumped around here somewhere."

The purple unicorn shakes her head, "It's a fixer upper, sure, but an intact Avio 42 is a rare find. I think it deserves a second chance. I want this ship."

The old pony looks surprised, "Err, ya do?"

The aged stallion looks back over the old freighter. All he sees is something that, to him, a second chance would be wasted on. It wouldn't even make for good scrap. He looks back at her. Perhaps she's crazy. Perhaps he should refuse the sale. He shakes his head, clearing his mind of such thoughts. She seems set on a purchase and he needs the money.

"So, how much bits ya got?" He asks.

The unicorn loudly clears her throat. Suddenly rustling and metallic clanks can be heard as her orb-bot companion rises up out of a nearby pile of refuse. The orb-bot hovers over and projects a holographic display in front of the old pony.

"Will that be enough?" The unicorn asks.

It is more than enough. Way more than enough. Much more than he would have asked for but he wasn't about to say that, "That...will do just fine."

"Great!" Twilight says. "I assume it will also cover towing and delivery charges?"

"Sure, I'll have a team get right on that." He struggles to control his growing smile.

"Please have the ship delivered here." The little robot says as the hologram shifts to form the name of a planet and a location on the planet.

"No problem."

The purple unicorn nods, turns, and begins to trot off as the hologram disappears and the orb-bot hovers after her.

"Young miss?" The old pony calls after the unicorn.

The unicorn stops and looks back.

"What about the name?"

"Name?" The unicorn asks.

"Every...Uh...good ship needs a name. What should I put down in the paper work?"

The unicorn looks back at the ship for a moment and then turns back to the old pony, "Owlowiscious. I'm going to call it The Owlowiscious. 'O 42' for short."

Chapter One

Teacher

"The Eques System houses numerous opportunities for those ambitious enough. While the many habitable worlds have much to offer in terms of employment one of the most venturesome businesses takes place off world in the vast vacuum of space. Space Trucking can not only be very profitable, it offers a level of adventure one could never find on-world. However, it is also one of the most risky forms of self-employment one can undertake with some of the highest fatality rates."

- *"The Eques System and You" Vol. 2*

"PLEASE CLEAR THE AREA! REPEAT: PLEASE CLEAR THE AREA!" A robotic voice blares with urgency. Engineers and other personnel take heed and retreat to a safe distance, leaving the large docking bay clear and ready for a ship to land.

The docking bay personnel watch as an ancient freighter lumbers into the docking bay. As it comes in for a landing its rotating drives change direction causing it to slow and then stop in a hovering position. The ship slowly lowers until its no more than a foot off the floor. The landing gear engages as the thrusters deactivate. The ship bounces slightly as it touches down.

A rugged and heavysset Earth Pony pushes his way to the front of the crowd. He wears dirty overalls and a hat that's in desperate need of a wash. He yells with a commanding tone as he motions a hoof at the freighter, "Alright, you mooks, move it! Let's get this hunk-of-junk serviced and ready to leave!"

The group springs into action. They bring out ladders and place them against the ship. Workers ascend the ladders to clean the cockpit windows and check the engines. A large tanker with a huge hose lumbers out of a nearby garage. A few workers grab hold of the hose and hook it into a port

on the side of the ship. After the connection is made the tanker hums to life as it begins pumping in fresh coolant.

As the workers continue with their jobs the boarding ramp on the ship lowers. A purple unicorn appears trotting down the ramp, her mane and tail bounce lightly with every clop of her hooves. She is followed closely by her hovering orb-bot companion.

"Great landing, Spike!" The purple unicorn says to the orb-bot with a smile.

"Thanks, Twilight, but the ship does most of the work." Spike says as he bobs happily at Twilight's side.

The overall clad stallion trots over to the pair with an angry look on his face, "Twilight Sparkle! I should have known! Only you would land a piece of junk like that in my nice clean docking bay."

"Too bad the same can't be said about your clothes." Spike says while hovering above the two ponies.

"Spike!" Twilight scolds.

"Well, it's true, just look at them."

The stallion grunts, "A real stallion enjoys getting dirty at work. All you robots and all these newfangled machines have made most Ponies go soft."

"We know, Greasy." Twilight says while rolling her eyes. "You've told us all this before. Anyway, looks like you've taken on a few more employees since we were last here."

Greasy grunts again, "Buncha slackers is what they are. Wouldn't know hard work if it came up and kicked them in the flank."

Suddenly a young colt trots up to them, "Mr. Slacks! Something's wrong with the coolant tanker!"

"Let me guess." Greasy responds. "All lights are green but no more coolant is being pumped into the ship."

"That's exactly right." The colt looks surprised. "How did you know?"

Greasy gives Twilight a bored look and then tilts his head back towards the colt, "Did you check the gauges?"

"Gauges?"

Suddenly Greasy looks irritated, "Yeah, the gauges. You know, those little glass circles on the sides with the needles in them."

The colt looks at Twilight and then back at Greasy with a confused and worried look on his face, "Uhhhh..."

"Oh, for crying...the tanker is empty!" The stallion yells while stomping a hoof. "Refill it and get back to work! And stop wasting my time with stupid problems or your gunna have to find yourself a new job! Is that understood!?"

The colt's ears droop and he lowers his head, "Yes...yes Mr. Slacks, right away." He gallops off back towards the tanker.

Greasy turns back to Twilight, "You see what I have to deal with here? Buncha idiots."

"Don't you think you were a little hard on him?" Spike asks while bobbing around the stallion.

Greasy attempts to follow Spike with his eyes but finds it to be a challenge, "Wouldn't expect a machine to understand. If the kid doesn't learn then he has no chance. If he's lucky he may grow up to become half the hard working stallion I am."

"Yeah, and be just as unlikable, too."

Taken aback by the comment, Greasy gives Spike a very angry look.

Twilight grins widely and chuckles nervously, "And that's our cue to leave." She aims her horn at Spike and it begins to glow. Suddenly a faint purple hued light surrounds Spike.

"Hey!" Spike shouts in surprise as an unseen force pulls him out of the air and into a pocket on Twilight's flight jacket.

"So long, Greasy Slacks!" Twilight yells as she gallops out of the docking bay.

With an angry look still firmly etched into his face, Greasy watches as the unicorn boards an elevator and disappears behind its doors. Greasy's expression softens as he seems lost in thought for a moment. Then he looks down and gives a sigh. He raises his head and gazes around as if searching for something. He spots the colt he yelled at before. His expression changes to a more light hearted one as he trots over to see if he can lend a hoof.

Twilight exits the elevator at ground level and finds herself in a bustling business district. Not much has changed since her last visit to Canter 107. It's still the most beautiful city-planet she has ever been on. And rightfully so. It boasts the cleanest air and clearest skies in the Equestrian System. The royal family as well as all the other Alicorns currently call this planet their home. Across from Twilight far in the distance one can see the amazing structure of Canter Palace rise up above all the other buildings. It almost seems to touch the clouds.

Canter 107 is as busy a place as ever. All about brightly colored Ponies of all different races and shapes and sizes go about their lives. Browsing the shops, talking with friends, trading goods, taking jobs, or just strolling about. Twilight even notices a few bipedal species from the Outer Systems among the crowds.

Twilight takes a deep breathe, letting the clean filtered air fill her lungs. She holds her breath as she gazes up at the beautiful blue sky. Dotting the sky are ships of all different types. Hover cabs transporting fares, small freighters transporting goods, way up a cruiser can even be seen slowly making its way across the sky. Twilight's lungs expel and she trots into the crowd. She bobs and weaves her way through until she finds what she is looking for. An empty cab waits quietly near a bakery shoppe. She dives into the vacant passenger seat of the cab as the door glides shut.

The Unicorn driver turns his head back at her, "Where to, lady?"

"Canter Palace, please." Twilight politely responds.

"You got it."

The cab lifts up above the crowded streets and zips off in the direction of the palace.

The driver guides the cab calmly through the air, "It's been real hectic at the palace recently."

Twilight arches her brow, "Really, why is that?"

"You kidding?" The driver says while glancing back in the rearview mirror. "You really haven't heard?"

"I've been off world and I have to admit that I haven't read any holo-news recently." Twilight responds.

"You young ones." The driver says with a light shake of his head. "Anyway, Selene is gone."

"Gone?"

"Yup, just up and vanished."

"That's impossible." Twilight says while shaking her head.

"May be but it is gone. The Princess Celestia just got back about three days ago and reported that not a trace of that old prison world was to be found."

"What about, Princess Luna?"

"They don't know. It's presumed that whatever took the planet also took the Princess as well as all the other inmates."

"But what in the galaxy could take an entire planet?" Twilight asks quietly as she puts a hoof to her chin and thinks.

"Be darned if I know but maybe you can ask about it yourself. Provided you can get anywhere near The Princess Celestia that is."

The rest of the cab ride goes on in silence as Twilight's brain shifts into overdrive. However, no matter how many theories and ideas she formulates she just can't come up with anything that could make an entire planet disappear. It's a mystery. Or a cover-up. No, couldn't be. The royal family has never been dishonest with the citizens of Canter 107 before.

Unless maybe now there is a reason for it. Twilight will have to see Celestia about this.

"That'll be 32 bits, please." The driver says. "Just insert your bit card into the receiver slot on the back of my seat."

Twilight removes a thin device from her jacket and inserts it into a slot on the back of the driver's seat. Her bit card gives a confirmation beep. Twilight pulls it out and slides it back into her pocket.

"Thanks much!" The driver calls out as Twilight hops out of the cab. "Good luck finding your answers!"

The passenger door on the cab glides shut and the cab lifts off. It heads back toward the business district.

Twilight Sparkle finds herself standing before the front gates of the immense structure that is Canter Palace. The gates are quite intimidating in their sheer beauty and size. Made of solid gold they tower above the purple Unicorn and shine brilliantly in the midday sun.

Adorned in royal armor, two fit Pegasus guards stand on each side of the gates. They are like statues as they gaze off into the distance. While they seem to be completely ignoring Twilight, she knows they are more than well aware of her presence.

Twilight takes a few seconds to mentally prepare to introduce herself to the guards. Satisfied with what she is going to say she trots forward. Her hooves clomp loudly over the smooth marble that covers the grounds outside the gates. However, she only makes it a few feet when she notices the guards' eyes are suddenly and uncharacteristically looking up and watching something. Twilight hears wings flapping followed closely by the sound of hooves touching down on the marble floor.

"Twilight Sparkle, my faithful student."

Twilight's eyes go wide at the sound of the incredibly familiar voice. She quickly spins around. Before her, Princess Celestia stands tall. The Pinkish White Alicorn Princess is dressed in her usual royal garb complete with brilliant gold tiara, necklace, and golden shoes covering her hooves. Her brightly colored mane and tail flow through the air even though there is no real wind to speak of.

"Princess!" Twilight shouts with joy.

About to rush forward, Twilight stops herself, lowers her head and bends her front knees to bow before the Princess instead.

"Oh, Twilight, you don't have to bow for me," The Princess says with a smile. "But thank you for the gesture."

Twilight Sparkle straightens herself back up. Princess Celestia walks up to her and gives her a motherly nuzzle. Twilight nuzzles back.

Despite the Princess' apparent familiarity with the young purple Unicorn the two guards keep a close eye on the both of them. However, they can't help but smile a bit at the loving site before them.

They finish nuzzling. Twilight backs up so she can get a good look at the much taller Alicorn Princess. It's been over a standard Canter 107 year since they last saw each other and as usual Princess Celestia is unchanged. She still looks as young as she did when she first took Twilight under her wings and began to teach her about magic and the wonders of knowledge.

"How did you know I was here, Princess?" Twilight asks.

Celestia looks out towards the docking bay, "I saw your ship coming in for a landing. I decided to stay out on the balcony above and keep an eye out just in case you decided to stop by," The Princess looks back at Twilight. "And here you are. I hear Mr. Slacks loves it when freighters that are over 120 years old land at his docking station. I'm sure he was absolutely thrilled to see you."

"Oh, yes, he was simply jumping for joy." Twilight says sarcastically and rolls her eyes.

The two share a friendly giggle.

"How's Spike?" The Princess asks. "Is he still on your ship?"

"Oh, he's..."

Before Twilight can finish a front pocket on her jacket begins rustling and a muffled voice comes from inside. Princess Celestia leans in close. Suddenly Spike wiggles free and hovers into the air.

"Spike?" The Princess says while straightening back up.

"Twilight stuffed me in there." Spike accuses as he bobs around the Princess.

"It was for his own good," Twilight defends. "Greasy looked like he was going to use him for field goal practice."

"Trouble keeping your voice simulator muted again, huh, Spike?" Celestia asks while giving the orb-bot a smile.

"He was being mean to somepony and I was just being honest." Spike says.

"Honesty is an admirable quality, Spike, but please be careful on how and when you use it." The Princess says.

"I'll be more careful, Princess." Spike says.

"Speaking of honesty, Princess," Twilight says. "I didn't just come to visit. I would also like to ask about something."

"Oh?" The Princess says.

"I heard about Selene."

"Oh, that," The Princess says. "Come, join me inside and I'll do my best to fill you in. And then you can tell me all about the adventures you've had as a space trucker in the past year."

Twilight nods and the three of them walk toward the gates to the Palace. As they walk the Princess aims her horn at the gates. Her horn suddenly glows bright. The immense gates slowly open, allowing the group to enter. Then the gates slowly close behind them.

Hours later the gates reopen and out walks Twilight and the Princess as Spike hovers along with them.

The Princess was happy to hear all about what Twilight learned and experienced in the past year as she traveled about the systems delivering goods and meeting new Ponies and others. She was equally happy to hear that despite magic being made almost obsolete by technology, Twilight was still making an effort to practice magic in her spare time.

Unfortunately, Twilight is left wanting as the information the Princess shared about Selene is rather lackluster. All the Princess claims to know is that planet Selene has vanished, her sister along with it. She will continue to search for answers but with all that is happening across the Equestrian system finding the time to travel off world is becoming more and more difficult. An increase in pirate activity. A new terrorist group calling themselves; "The Shadow Bolts". As well as the increasing unrest in the neighboring and outer systems are making it difficult for the Alicorns, especially with the King and Queen still missing.

Twilight is amazed at how well Princess Celestia is handling it all. If she had that much pressure placed on her shoulders along with the disappearance of pretty much her whole family she would probably spend most of her time curled up in a corner somewhere rocking back and forth.

The group comes to a stop just outside the gates as the immense golden doors slowly close.

The Princess gazes back out towards the docking bay, "Have you had that impressive freighter for over two years already?"

Princess Celestia was the only one Twilight ever knew who didn't poke fun at the Owllovisious.

"Two years, one month, and three days." Twilight answers.

"I remember when you first had it brought to the Palace workshop," The Princess says while still gazing out towards the docking bay. "You and Spike worked so hard to get it running."

"And the Aquadria power core almost went thermal when we first powered everything up." Spike bluntly adds.

Twilight looks down and blushes with embarrassment, "Thanks to the Palace engineers I didn't lose the Owlowsious and they're responsible for why it runs as well as it does now."

"Well, the important thing is that you tried," Princess Celestia says while giving Twilight a comforting smile. 'You know you could have always just asked for help."

Twilight looks up at her and smiles back, "Thanks, Princess and I know."

"Speaking of getting help, have you gotten yourself a crew yet?" Celestia Asks.

"I'm fine, Princess, I don't need a crew." Twilight says.

"But traveling the stars all by yourself?"

"I have Spike." Twilight says as Spike bobs about appreciatively.

"Yes, you certainly do," The Princess says while giving Spike a smile. "But crew mates can be an amazing source of strength and knowledge especially if they also become your friends. And one can always do with more friends."

"I'm fine, Princess, really." Twilight says.

Princess Celestia's smile fades and she looks a bit sad, "Are you planning on picking up any jobs before you leave, Twilight?"

"Yes, in fact, when I got back to the business district I was going to check out the holo-boards." Twilight responds.

"Well if that's the case, I checked the holo-boards out earlier and I noticed a few jobs you may be interested in," The Princess says. "Asteroid Uro is willing to pay quite well for any liquid oxygen and a small outer planet named Vera in the Horsehead Nebula is currently suffering a famine and would pay just as well for any foodstuffs."

Twilight is surprised. Why would the Princess be checking out the holo-boards?

"Thank you, Princess," Twilight says. "I'll take them both on."

The Princess smiles proudly at Twilight, "I knew you would."

Suddenly the same cab that brought Twilight to the palace touches down right next to the group. It's passenger door glides open.

"I called ahead." The Princess says.

Twilight and Celestia exchange another friendly nuzzle. Then Twilight and Spike say goodbye to the Princess as they get into the cab and head back to The Owlhouse.

Chapter Two

3.14

"Holo-boards, h-boards, or just HBs are common abbreviations used by space truckers, mercenaries, and bounty hunters to refer to holographic imaging boards where one can acquire jobs and assignments. HBs are commonly found in places known as Hubs. Hubs are commonly found in docking stations. For more information on Hubs please see Chapter 6. HBs tend to be sub-space capable granting even the most isolated of planetoids and systems the ability to post job offerings throughout their system as well as multiple other systems with haste and ease."

*- "Space Jobs for Dummies. A Reference Guide for the Rest of Us."
Chapter 2*

"PIE!"

"Pinkie Pie!"

Dressed in the standard garb of a mechanic complete with work belt and multi-pocketed overalls, the pink, curly haired Earth Pony is seated on her haunches on the floor of her workshop. Spread out before her and resting on a towel is an assortment of tools. She looks up from them and glances across the room at a door. The door is decorated with three floating party balloons. The same image that appeared on her flank so many years ago. She smiles at it.

"PIE!"

Pinkie Pie cringes at the sound. Her boss is angry again. Very angry. His shouting grows louder as he draws closer and closer to the door that leads to her workshop. While she doesn't know exactly what the problem is this time, she does know what the final outcome will be. She glances around herself. Glances at all the tools, equipment, and other commodities she was given when she acquired her current job. She glances to her right at the large garage door that would be opened so she could bring in parts

and even some of the smaller ships to work on. She feels sad for a moment knowing that while it would be opened again someday it won't be by her.

Over the past few months, Pinkie has grown quite fond of her current job. Fixing and upgrading ships and parts pays her well. Well enough to easily support herself and still have enough left over to throw her fellow employees frequent unbirthdays parties. Whether they like it or not.

Pinkie looks back down at her tools and continues cleaning them. Her time with them is nigh and she's going to enjoy her last few moments with them. Pinkie's tools are her best friends. They don't yell at her or call her names. She keeps them clean and properly configured and they thank her by doing what she needs them to do. They aren't very good at partying though. Pinkie hums happily as she continues to make the tools shine.

Suddenly the workshop door explodes inward, nearly ripping off the hinges. Appearing in the doorway is a large, bulky Earth Pony who looks as if he is on the verge of having a heart attack. He wears a large work belt and some heavy duty work-clothes. His brow is damp with sweat and his breathing is heavy. Rage flares in his eyes as they settle on the pink Pony before him.

"PIE!" He screams.

Pinkie Pie looks up at her boss and smiles, "Yes, Bossy?"

"Didn't you hear me yelling for you?"

"I think everyone on the clock heard you, Bossy."

"Then why didn't you come to me or say anything, Pinkie?" Bossy says through clenched teeth.

"Silly, I knew you would find me." Pinkie says cheerfully.

"You...knew...I..." Bossy stammers.

Bossy slams his eyes shut. He exhales and takes a deep breathe, trying to calm himself. He quietly counts to ten as Pinkie Pie continues to cast a friendly smile at him.

Bossy slowly opens his eyes, "Let me start again."

Pinkie continues to cast Bossy a friendly smile.

"You're at least remotely aware of my three strike rule, correct? Pinkie?"

Pinkie lightly nods her head, "Uh huh."

"Well this is your fifth strike, Pie. I've given you two extra strikes and I don't do that too often. I had hoped you would at least try to control yourself but it appears you just couldn't be bothered."

"Is this about last week's explosion?" Pinkie inquires.

"Partly, but mostly it's about Prince Blue Blood's personal cruiser and the job you did on it's drive two days ago."

"Is there a problem?" Pinkie asks, tilting her head to one side.

"When the Prince activates his hyper jump and ends up three systems farther than he intended, yeah, that's a problem."

"I thought he said he liked them fast." Pinkie says.

"Actually I think when he said that he was referring to how he prefers his mares." Bossy shakes his head, "Anyway, that's not the point. The point is that the Prince was one of our most high profile and most high paying clients."

"Was?" Pinkie asks.

"Yes, Pinkie, was," Bossy says, "He actually made a point to inform me that he would be giving his business to 'Pimp My Ship' from now on." Bossy sighs, "Pinkie, you're one of the fastest workers I have and I can't deny your genius but the problem with that is I have four other hardworking geniuses here who don't blow things up on a weekly basis, or cause a client's legs to become numb for a week, or send a prince into one of the most dangerous systems in the galaxy. I'm sorry, Miss Pie, but it's time for you to leave."

"I know," Pinkie says, her expression fading into a frown. "Thank you for the few months you've given me."

"Thank you for cleaning your workshop and tools," Bossy says. "It will be that much easier for me when I give them to someone else."

"Can I keep my work clothes?" Pinkie asks.

"Sure, you can keep those," Bossy replies. "Goodbye, Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie Pie stands up, "Let's go, Gummy!"

Suddenly a rustling noise is heard coming from a workbench behind Pinkie. The top middle drawer shoots out and crashes to the floor right beside her. An orb-bot rises from the drawer.

The orb-bot's base color is green and it has two large purple circles painted on it making it look as if it has eyes. A part of the orb-bot opens to reveal two rows of shiny pink metal making the orb-bot appear as if it has a mouth filled with toothless gums.

The orb-bot gums down on one of Pinkie's ears and holds on as Pinkie happily trots past Bossy and out of the workshop. With brow arched, Bossy watches Pinkie as she heads down the hall past the other workshops and disappears around a corner. Bossy looks back at the clean, Pinkie-less workshop. He smiles. Then his smile fades into a frown.

Bossy must admit that a small part of him will miss the bubbly pink Earth Pony and her random parties. However, a very large part of him will be happy to be without her random accidents.

Bossy looks over at the workbench that Gummy was taking up residence in. His gaze shifts to the top of the workbench where a coffee maker rests next to a stack of festive looking paper cups. Bossy licks his lips. He could really go for a nice hot cup.

Just then, as if reading Bossy's mind, a green light on the coffee maker clicks on. Pinkie must have it on a timer. Smiling, Bossy trots over and is about to take a paper cup off the stack when the coffee maker suddenly begins making a high pitched whining noise. Bossy's eyes go wide and he slowly begins to back away. Coffee suddenly begins erupting from the coffee maker with such force that it launches the machine into the air where it hits the ceiling and breaks into pieces. Bossy closes his eyes and ducks his head as chunks of metal, plastic, and copious amounts of badly brewed coffee rains down. Thankfully the coffee is only lukewarm.

As the caffeinated rain comes to an end, Bossy slowly opens his eyes and straightens up. He is soaked. He looks around himself. Coffee is splattered everywhere. Bits of plastic and metal are all over the workshop. Bossy takes a deep breathe, "PINKIE PIE!"

A short time later, Pinkie finds herself laying on a bench alongside a street that leads to a docking station. She lays on her back with her legs in the air and her head draping off of one side of the bench. Gummy hovers above her and appears to be staring blankly at a building across the street. Ponies and other sentients of all types trot and walk past the pink Pony but most seem too occupied to take notice.

Pinkie looks up at the sky and notices a few Pegasus Ponies flying above.

"I wonder why there seems to be less and less of them lately?" Pinkie asks as she watches the Pegasi idle in place for a bit and then fly off. "What do you think, Gummy?"

Gummy doesn't respond.

Pinkie lets her head sag back down.

"I wish I got to stick around and see if my new coffee delivery system worked." Pinkie says.

Gummy continues his staring contest with the building across the street.

"What do we do now, Gummy?" Pinkie sighs. "I guess we could always look for work outside the capital."

Detecting Pinkie's declining attitude, Gummy hovers down and snuggles into the large pocket on the front of her overalls.

"Thanks, Gummy," Pinkie says with a smile. "At least we have each other."

Pinkie's smile doesn't last long and soon fades into a depressed frown. She sighs heavily and closes her eyes.

"Most sentients count to ten or sing quietly when they find themselves to be sad or upset, Pinkamena. However, I want YOU to recite Pi when you find yourself feeling similar emotions. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Doctor," Pinkie says aloud. "I understand."

Pinkie takes a deep breathe and begins, "Three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine three two three eight four six two six four three three eight three..."

"Can't we stay a little longer, Twilight?"

Spike is currently using a small claw extended from his underside to carry a large bag of old hardcover books and other items. He does his best to keep up with his trotting companion as he follows her down the busy street towards the docking station.

"No time, Spike, we have a ton to do," Twilight responds. "We have to visit the Hub and register for those jobs the Princess mentioned. Then while in transit I'm going to use the info-disks we picked up to catch up on current events. I also have to see if I can't find out anything about Selene and Princess Luna on the e-books I have in the O 42's electronic library."

"And what about the old books you're having me carry?" Spike asks as he narrowly avoids a collision with somepony. "Any reason why we can't split the load?"

"Oh, those are for my collection," Twilight says. "Real books in such good condition are hard to come by." Twilight adds, ignoring Spike's later question.

"But, Twilight, we haven't been here in nearly a year," Spike protests. "Imagine all the interesting Ponies we could meet even if we only stay for an extra hour or two."

"Spike..."

Twilight cuts her response short as she quickly becomes distracted by a pink Earth Pony dressed like a mechanic and laying on a bench alongside the street with her legs in the air and her head draped off of one side. Seeing a pony lying down in such a ridiculous manner isn't something one would see everyday. Actually, now that Twilight thinks about it, she distinctly remembers seeing a turquoise coated Unicorn Pony sitting in a rather ridiculous (as well as uncomfortable looking) position on that same bench over a year ago when she last visited Canter 107.

Twilight stops dead in her tracks as she notices that the pink Pony appears to be talking to herself, however, due to the distance and the crowds Twilight can't quite make out what she is saying.

"Whoa!" Spike shouts as he barely stops in time, narrowly avoiding slamming into Twilight's flank, "Why'd you stop? Did you change your mind?"

"Is she OK?" Twilight asks.

Spike follows Twilight's gaze, "I dunno. I thought you said we have 'a ton' to do, Twi."

"One second..." Twilight says as she trots over to the Pink pony.

As Twilight draws closer she begins to hear what the curly haired Earth Pony is saying. She seems to be just randomly rattling off numbers. No. Not randomly...

Twilight approaches the pink Pony's head and looks down at her as Spike hovers up above them.

"...zero five three..."

"Is that Pi?" Twilight asks.

The pink Pony stops reciting the mathematical constant and nods, "Uh huh...oh!"

The Earth Pony's eyes shoot open. She looks up at the purple unicorn standing over her. A huge smile forms on the Pink Pony's face.

She rolls off the bench, lands on her hooves in a crouch and then immediately begins bouncing in place.

"Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie!" She chimes, giving Twilight her best 'Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie' smile.

"Uh, hi, Pinkie Pie," Twilight says as she follows the bouncing Pony with her eyes. "What place were you up to?"

"278th!" Pinkie says, still bouncing.

"Wow, that's impressive, Pinkie Pie." Twilight says.

"So, what's your name?" Pinkie asks.

"Oh, my name is Twilight Sparkle."

Pinkie stops bouncing and tilts her head to one side, "Twilight Sparkle? That's a funny name."

"Err, OK, well, I have to go now." Twilight says, eyeing Pinkie cautiously.

Twilight begins to turn away.

"Where are you going?" Pinkie asks cheerfully.

Twilight looks back at Pinkie, "I'm headed towards Mr. Slacks' docking station."

"Mr. Slacks? I used to work for him. He doesn't like explosions too much."

"I would imagine not." Twilight says.

"So, you have a ship?" Pinkie asks.

"Err, yes?" Twilight says as she wonders if she should just ignore Pinkie and make a run for it.

Pinkie Pie starts bouncing again, "What is it!? What is it!?"

"It's an Avio 42..."

Suddenly Pinkie stops bouncing, gasps loudly, and jets off down the street leaving Twilight with a look of shock on her face.

Twilight composes herself and looks up at Spike, "Well, that certainly was interesting."

Chapter Three

Welcome to Sweet O2 Acres!

"Warp Gates. Developed during more peaceful times, Warp Gates, as they have come to be known as, were a joint project between Alicorns and Humans. They are immense, beautiful looking, super structures that are commonly cylindrical in shape and can generate immense amounts of energy. Interlinked and sub-space capable, the gates are equipped with star maps that update every few seconds."

"A ship will be suspended in the center of a Warp Gate. An area commonly referred to as a Warp Field. The gate will adjust to align with the chosen destination. Then, depending on the distance, the gate will generate a certain amount of energy and then use that energy to propel the ship into hyperspace. The amount of energy used determines how long the ship stays in hyperspace. Warp Gates are incredibly accurate and can safely send a ship right outside of a planet's orbit."

"With personal jump drives demanding outrageous prices to both purchase and maintain, Warp Gates function as a usually safe form of quick travel at a reasonable price. To further bring down prices, all Warp Gates are now manned by mostly self aware computer systems. Most of which have developed rather quirky personalities."

- "Warp Gates, How Do They Work?" Intro

The O 42 heads away from Canter 107. The laser drives leave behind a thin trail of ozone as they propel the ship through the cold, weightlessness of space. The freighter is currently on a direct course with Canter 107's designated Warp Gate.

From the O 42's cockpit, Twilight Sparkle gazes out at the huge ring of technology before her. Spike is hooked into the main controls where he does his usual job of piloting the old freighter. Twilight squints her eyes as she notices that there is a smaller ship already in the center of the Warp Gate.

"Spike, enhance, please." Twilight says, without taking her eyes off the gate.

"Sure thing, Twi." Spike responds.

A screen appears on the side of the O 42's cockpit window. On the screen, in real time, is a greatly enhanced image of the Warp Gate and the ship in the center of it.

Twilight devotes her full attention to the screen. Her wait isn't long as the gate slowly adjusts the direction it is facing. The perimeter of the gate begins to glow. Starting at the top and working it's way around, the bright blue light acts almost like a countdown. The light meets back up with the area it started at. The Warp Gate's glow greatly intensifies. If not for the screen's dampening abilities Twilight would surely have to shield her eyes. Suddenly the ship in the center of the gate transforms into a brilliant beam of bright blue light. The light fades. The ship is gone.

Twilight exhales. She was holding her breathe the whole time, "That never gets old." She looks to Spike, "Spike, where's the closest oxygen farm?"

"According to the Star Maps, the closest oxygen farm is Sweet O2 Acres located in an asteroid cluster just off of Pony V," Spike says. "I'm sending a transport request now."

"Thank you, Spike," Twilight replies. "Let me know when the gate responds."

"Sure thing, Twi."

Twilight turns away from the pint-sized pilot and turns around. The O 42's cockpit is of a decent size. It contains all the essentials. A star map display, a small entertainment area, seats for the crew, and the main control board. Twilight trots over and stops at a small, circular table. The top of the table is decorated with a black and white checkered pattern. On the side is a small control panel. The bag Spike was carrying earlier is now resting rather peacefully on the table. Twilight notices that the bag also seems to be missing a bit of its contents, particularly the hard cover books she picked up back on Canter 107.

"Spike..." Twilight begins.

Taking the initiative, Spike answers Twilight's question before she can ask it, "On the shelves in your quarters and alphabetized like you asked, Twi."

"Thank you, Spike, I'll take a look at them later."

It's just then that Twilight realizes she had been too distracted and never got a good look at the titles of the books. She turns her head and looks back at Spike.

"Err, Spike, what were the names of the books? Do you remember?"

"Not really," Spike answers. "One was about the elements and the other was something about nightmares."

Twilight becomes disappointed, "Oh, I already have a number of books about those very topics. Why do so many have to write about the same things?"

"Well those ones don't seem as old as some of the others you have and for some reason they are pretty well decorated," Spike says. "Maybe they have info that your other books, and maybe even your e-books don't."

Twilight turns back to the bag on the table, "I hope so."

Twilight closes her eyes and concentrates. Her horn begins to glow. The bag becomes surrounded in a purple hued aura. Twilight opens her eyes. The bag floats gracefully into the air and opens. Surrounded by the same purple aura, the info-disks inside fly out. One after the other in a maneuver that almost appears choreographed. All seven of them land on the table, side by side, arranged in a line from oldest news to newest news. The now empty bag compresses and neatly folds up into a small square. Then it floats down and lands on the table above the info-disks.

"Where to begin?" Twilight asks herself as she examines each disk. "Starting with most recent seems like the best approach."

Twilight uses her magic to lift one of the info-disks. She carries it over and inserts it into a slot on the main control panel.

Twilight steps back as a holographic newspaper suddenly materializes before her. "Canter Daily News, Issue 278, A.B. 1001" reads the front page. Twilight slides a hoof across the front page and the

newspaper opens up. "Prince Blue Blood Takes An Unexpected Trip", reads the headline of an article. Twilight continues reading.

"Uh, Twi, I know you don't like to skip around in what you're reading but maybe you should use the search options." Spike suggests.

"Right..." Twilight says without taking her eyes from the article. "Search."

A friendly female voice speaks from the control panel, "Please enter or speak search parameters."

"Planet Selene, Princess Luna, end." Twilight says.

"Accepted!" The voice says triumphantly. "Three articles found."

The holographic paper closes and then splits into three pages. Twilight raises a hoof and taps the first page. It enlarges and comes forward while the other two pages shrink and fall behind.

Twilight quickly glances through each article. The first mentions Luna, how it's been over a thousand years since her banishment, and how no one interviewed claims to even remember the exact cause for said banishment. The next briefly mentions Celestia's trip to check on planet Selene. While the third, a science article, seems focused on the temporal rift right outside of Selene. In other words, nothing that can aid Twilight.

Twilight lightly shakes her head and sighs, "Nothing."

"Really?" Spike asks.

"Well, nothing that I don't already know." Twilight adds.

Twilight closes her eyes and lightly raps a hoof on her forehead, "Hmmm..."

"Thought of something?" Spike asks.

"Maybe..." Twilight answers. "Search."

"Please enter or speak search parameters."

"Major Occurrences, end" Twilight says.

"Accepted! Five articles found."

Like before the holographic paper closes and then splits up. This time into five pages.

Before Twilight can examine the pages a friendly jingle comes from the main control panel.

"Twi, it's the Warp Gate, finally," Spike says. "I swear these gates keep getting more and more lazier."

Twilight flashes a questioning look at Spike.

"More and more lazy." Twilight says.

"Huh?" Spike says.

"It's 'more lazy'," Twilight says. "'More lazier' is redundant."

"Oh, OK, anyway, the Gate has accepted our transport request and is waiting for us to enter it's warp field."

Twilight looks back to the hologram, "Great, while you do that I'll continue looking through these articles."

"No prob, Twi." Spike says.

Out of the five presented to her one of the articles really stands out for some reason. Perhaps it's the animation loop that goes along with it. Twilight swears she has seen that Unicorn before. She taps the article and it enlarges, giving her a better view. It's the same Unicorn that she saw sitting on that bench over a year ago. Standing alongside the Unicorn is an Earth Pony. The pair of Ponies appear in good spirits even as an important looking Earth Pony who keeps his mane short and wears a rather unique tie scolds them.

Twilight quietly reads the headline to herself, "Lyra and Bon Bon do it Again." Twilight quickly glances over the article. Her eyes go wide.

"Spike, listen to this." Twilight says.

"You found something?" Spike asks.

Twilight begins, "Trouble Consultants, Lyra and Bon Bon continue to live up to their reputation. While on a discreet mission to apprehend a vicious escapee, Lyra and Bon Bon ran into some resistance at the asteroid mining facility the criminal was taking refuge in. As usual the pair emerged victorious as they apprehended their mark but not before causing a small explosion. An explosion that soon created a chain reaction that obliterated the entire mining facility which was located just off of Stalliongradus."

"Stalliongradus, a planet located near the edge of Equestria space, just can't seem to catch a break as the loss of this mining facility will undoubtedly cause a further dip in the planet's economy. Just a standard Canterlot 107 week prior to this incident, Stalliongradus' designated Warp Gate vanished without a trace and has still not been heard from. It is not believed that the large industry based planet could ever fully recover from these losses."

"Chief Gooley, Lyra and Bon Bon's supervisor, ensured us that the pair would be disciplined accordingly but also went on to commend them both for apprehending a known psychopath who will now return to serving his twelve consecutive life sentences in The Gulag, a rather brutal prison that coincidentally also happens to be located on Stalliongradus..."

"Do you think it's connected." Spike asks.

"Some of the newer Warp Gates can make hyper space jumps but..." Twilight trails off. She stares off into space and puts a hoof to her chin, "Hold on."

Twilight uses her magic to extract the info-disk from the control panel. The holographic newspaper vanishes. Twilight then lifts one of the other disks from the table and swaps it with the other one.

Like before a holographic newspaper materializes. "Canter Daily News, Issue 272, A.B. 1001" reads the front page.

"Search." Twilight says.

"Please enter or speak search parameters."

"Stalliongradus' Warp Gate, end." Twilight says.

"Accepted! One article found."

A single page appears and enlarges automatically. It's headline reads, "Runaway Warp Gate?"

Twilight reads aloud, "We all know the horror stories of the elusive ghost ship, the Dreadnought 3. Every old human scientist you come across will swear that the fabled Titan research station actually exists. Treasure hunters still search for the C.O.R. in hopes of banking off of it's supposed gift of immortality. As foals we've been told to play nice and eat our oatmeal or Nightmare Moon will get us. Now we can add the strange case of the vanishing Warp Gate to the list of mysteries and myths that circle around our galaxy."

"At approximately 13:23 A.M., Standard Canter 107 time, Stalliongradus, a large primarily industry based planet majoring in medical supplies and bionic enhancements reported that it's designated Warp Gate had suddenly vanished."

"When reached for comment, current CEO of Warp Gate Enterprises, a human named C. Johnson, has informed us that he had not issued any orders to have the gate moved and is just as stumped as the rest of us. He is supposedly looking into the matter. The Warp Gate itself reportedly sent no distress signals or warnings which goes against it's rather strict programming."

"Without the Warp Gate, reps from Stalliongradus fear that business will sharply decline. However, the well-known and ingenious Dr. Kabello Zaks, head of Z Industries, the greatest and certainly largest medical research and development facility known, ensures us that not only are all his ships hyper jump capable but that he is planning on greatly increasing his workforce. The famous and well loved Doctor has also petitioned Warp Gate Enterprises for a new, better Warp Gate that he will fund out of his own very deep pockets..."

"So we have someone or something stealing small planetoids and Warp Gates." Twilight says quietly as she extracts the info-disk from the control panel and floats it back over onto the table.

"You don't think it's Galacticus do you?" Spike asks nervously.

Twilight looks at Spike and raises her brow, "Who?"

"Galacticus!" Spike cries. "He ate Selene and then decided to have a Warp Gate snack! They do look a little like donuts."

"Spike, I think I need to cut back on how many comics I buy for you."

"So, you don't think it's Galacticus?"

"I'm sure no one ate Selene or the gate." Twilight assures.

Spike makes an audible sigh of relief, "Good."

Twilight lightly shakes her head but smiles none the less.

"Hmm, isn't there a temporal rift right outside of Selene?" Spike asks. "Could that have done it?"

"That was one of the first theories I considered back in the cab," Twilight says. "But, the driver didn't mention the rift."

"Why would that matter?" Spike asks.

"Spike, if Selene was sucked into the rift Ponies' reactions would have been much different," Twilight explains. "Right now Luna and Selene are considered missing. If they were taken into the rift they would be considered dead. Anything that has entered a rift and has actually come back out has never done so in one piece. Also, the rift is heavily monitored by satellites and the patrol ships that guard Selene. If the rift grew in size or intensity it would have been detected. Princess Celestia has also informed me that the disappearance wasn't caused by the rift."

"When did she say that?" Spike asks.

"When we were trotting through the Royal Botanical Gardens," Twilight answers. "I think Philomena was chasing you around at the time."

"That darn Phoenix," Spike grumbles. "I'm not a toy."

Twilight gives a light chuckle.

"But wouldn't the rift mess with anything that came close to Selene?" Spike asks.

Twilight points a hoof at Spike, "Exactly, which only adds to the mystery. The rift greatly slows down the passage of time for anything that comes too close."

"So, whoever or whatever is responsible must have done it at a distance." Spike says.

"Yes!" Twilight shouts excitedly. Then, as realization dawns, her mood suddenly reverses. Her ears sag and she looks down at the floor, "But how? The Princess did mention that the readings from the satellites showed the rift was weaker than usual but, once again, how and why?"

"Sorry, Twi," Spike says. "I got nothing."

Twilight mumbles, "Haven't got anything..." Then she looks up at Spike, "It's OK, Spike, the Princess will figure it out."

"You're giving up?"

Twilight looks hurt, "I'm not giving up!" Her usually determined mood quickly makes a comeback, "I'm simply hoping that in the off chance that I don't come up with something then the Princess will, that's all."

"Oh, we're here!" Spike says.

Twilight looks out the cockpit window as the O 42 slows and then stops directly in the center of the Warp Gate.

A friendly jingle chimes and an overly excited female voice follows, "Welcome Avio 42 captain, Twilight Sparkle, I am ever so pleased to have you inside me!"

"It always creeps me out when she says that." Spike whispers.

"Spike, shhh." Twilight scolds.

"Did you know that Warp Gates in the Canadia System are square?" The Warp Gate says. "Weird, huh?" Without waiting for a response the Warp Gate continues, "Anyway, Pony V, eh? I can think of much better places that I could send you but it is your call. Now, I need to read off some warnings for you to carefully consider before you go." The Warp Gate whispers the next sentence, "This is my favorite part." Then it goes back to using its normal voice, "If, under the extremely rare chance that you arrive

at your destination and find that not all of you is there, DON'T PANIC, the rest of you should arrive shortly...we hope. Please do not scream at the top of your lungs as you enter hyperspace. Exploding heads have been reported. If, under the nearly impossible chance that I send you way off track and you end up in an uncharted system, DON'T FLIP YOUR MANURE! Simply put your head between your legs and pray (if you believe in that sort of thing). After all, there is always at least a .0000000002% chance that something friendly and non-cannibalistic will find you. One final note: C. Johnson the current CEO of Warp Gate Enterprises has issued an alert to all space travelers. If you happen upon a larger than average orb-bot lost in space who seems very happy about his current predicament please be aware that an award is being offered for his return. Simply inform your nearest friendly Warp Gate and present the untampered with and undamaged orb-bot and the reward will be added to your account. Any questions or concerns before I charge your account and send you off, Avio 42 captain, Twilight Sparkle?"

"Um, no, we're ready." Twilight says, lightly shaking her head.

"Excellent!" The Warp Gate's voice chimes. "Any comments can be posted to our message boards. Where we promise to do our very best to pretend to care. Goodbye, Avio 42 captain, Twilight Sparkle, enjoy Pony V! I hope to see you again and preferably in one piece."

Finally the Warp Gate goes silent. The massive ring redirects and begins to charge. Like the ship before, the Owlowsious soon becomes an intense beam of light as the Warp Gate sends it into hyperspace. The light fades and the freighter is gone.

The O 42 comes out of hyperspace right in front of a large space faring billboard that reads, "Welcome To Pony V! The Place To Be If You Have Two Knees!"

Twilight looks out at the billboard and raises her brow, "That's...really corny."

"Not to mention a bit speciesist." Spike points out. "I mean, what if you're a Cephalopod?"

Twilight chuckles, "Spike, while I understand where you're coming from I really doubt any creature from the Plectronocerida System would ever venture this far."

A friendly jingle sounds from the main control panel.

"We're getting an audio/video message," Spike informs. "I'll patch it through."

"OK, Spike, go ahead." Twilight says.

A screen appears on the side of cockpit window showing an image of Pony V.

A friendly voice soon follows, "Welcome, traveler, to Pony V. We hope you will enjoy your stay."

The on screen image fades. A moving image of a very large, brightly colored structure that looks as if it's made out of various candies and baked goods appears.

"Looking to see the sights?" The voice says. "Why not visit Mr. and Mrs. Cake's Sugar Cube Emporium? This multi-level megastructure was built with two goals in mind; to raise your mood and pleasure your taste buds. Take a ride on the brand new indoor licorice roller coaster. This super sized roller coaster is over 4,000 feet long and is made entirely out of various types of licorice! Please don't eat any part of the roller coaster..."

"Um, excuse me." Twilight interrupts. "We actually aren't planning on landing here. We're on our way towards Sweet O2 Acres."

"Ah, I see." The voice says, sounding disappointed. "Safe travels then. Goodbye, traveler and if you change your mind you know where to find us."

"Thank you." Twilight says. "Goodbye."

The screen quickly shrinks away as the transmission ends.

"Alright, let's get going." Twilight says.

"Aye, aye, Captain Twi." Spike replies.

The O 42's engines glow to life as Spike guides the freighter away from Pony V. Twilight looks through the cockpit window and peers out at the beautiful planet as they make their way past.

Suddenly the ship's engines shut down. The lights flicker. Then they go out all together.

"What was that?" Twilight asks as she illuminates her horn, casting a purple hued light around the cockpit. "Spike!?"

"Don't worry, Twi." Spike reassures. "It's just a power flux. It's happened before. Everything will come back on in a second."

"When has THIS happened before?" Twilight asks as she glances around frantically.

"Once when you were off ship and I think it once happened when you were sleeping." Spike says.

Twilight gives Spike an upset look, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was worth getting you worked up over." Spike answers. "Like I said, it's happened before. I figured it comes with the territory. What with the ship being so old. Soon everything will come back on, you'll see."

As if on cue the ship's lights flicker and come back on. The engines whirr back to life and once again begin propelling the O 42 past Pony V.

"See, told you." Spike says.

Twilight's horn stops glowing, "Even so maybe we should land on..."

Before Twilight can finish she is interrupted by a rather disturbing message from the main controls, "Life support deactivated."

"What!?" Twilight yells. "Spike!?"

"Now...that's a new one." Spike says nervously.

"You stay here, Spike, I have an e-book in my library that can help!" Twilight says as she turns and is about to gallop off towards her quarters.

"Wait!" Spike yells.

Twilight stops short and looks back at Spike, "What? Why?"

"Life support online."

"That's why." Spike says. "Let me run a check. Hmmm...this is very weird but very cool at the same time."

Twilight trots over to Spike, "What?" She asks impatiently.

"Not only did life support come back but it's running better than before." Spike says. "Someone rewrote the algo...algor...algoritims..."

"Algorithms." Twilight says.

"Yeah, those," Spike says. "The ship rebooted itself and then started them."

"But who could do that?" Twilight asks.

"Probably one of Greasy's guys," Spike says. "It is his job to make sure the ship is space worthy. He probably thought he'd do us a favor but then just forgot to tell us."

"He did seem very distracted when we got back." Twilight points out. "Like he was desperately trying to find something."

"Or somepony." Spike adds. "I heard him say: 'Look everywhere! She's a master of disguise!'."

"We should still land on Pony V and get it checked out." Twilight says.

"Eh." Spike responds.

"Eh?"

"Yeah, Pony V is really more of a leisure spot and farming planet," Spike says. "According to my info, Sweet O2 Acres has a very capable mechanic on staff."

"Really?" Twilight asks.

"Yeah, his name is Big Macintosh."

On their way to the asteroid cluster a friendly sounding Earth Pony named Applejack made contact with Twilight and Spike. She granted them permission to land and opened the docking bay doors.

The O 42 eases into the huge docking bay that leads to Sweet O2 Acres. As the freighter touches down two enormous glass doors slide shut behind it. The docking bay pressurizes, fresh air rushing in to replace the vacuum. A set of large double doors across from the ship open and in trots a lone figure sporting a Stetson and an odd looking suit covering everywhere except her head. A patch of a trio of apples emblazon the flank of the suit. The figure stops before the Owlowsious and jerks her head back in an attempt to throw her blonde mane out of her vision. She waits patiently.

The O 42's boarding ramp descends and out trots Twilight Sparkle with Spike hovering close behind.

"Oh, hello." Twilight says as she notices the blonde maned, orange coated Earth Pony standing before her.

The Pony quickly comes forward and gives Twilight the hoof shaking of a lifetime, "Howdy, there! Twilight Spackle, was it? Welcome to Sweet O2 Acres! Ah've only ever seen an Avio 42 once before. By the way, name's Applejack but most just call me AJ!" She let's go of Twilight's hoof and stands back with a big old smile on her face.

Twilight still shakes from the overly anxious greeting, "Thaaank yooou. And it's Twiiiiiight Sparkllle." Twilight shakes her head and composes herself. Now if only she can get her insides to stop shaking as well.

"Sorry, Twilight Sparkllle," Applejack jokes. "Welcome ta the Apple family's oxygen farm." She motions over to the large windows that make up the walls of the docking bay. A blue glow flows in through the windows.

Overcome with curiosity, Twilight trots over to the windows. Applejack watches as she goes. Twilight's eyes go wide and her jaw drops as she gazes out at the beautiful site before her.

Spike hovers up to Applejack, "Hi, AJ!"

Applejack looks back at Spike and gives him a friendly smile, "Howdy, there, y'all must be Spike. Ah'd shake your hoof but I see you ain't gots none."

"We've never been to an oxygen farm before," Spike explains. "And this docking station is huge." Spike looks around in an exaggerated fashion.

"Really now?" Applejack says. "Now that's a right shame. Genium trees are shure a sight." She trots over to Twilight with Spike following. "We normally handle government contracts here. They tend to use these big ol' freighters. S'why the docking bay has to be so gold durn big."

Spike and Applejack join Twilight in looking out the windows. Before them are enormous glass domes which are all connected by corridors made of the same material the domes are. Each dome has what seems like miles and miles of trees growing inside them. However, unlike normal trees these ones glow a brilliant blue, have no leaves and have what appears to be crystal blue orbs hanging from their branches.

"Oh, wow..." Spike says.

Twilight closes her mouth as she gets over her initial shock, "They're all so amazing. The pictures in the books I have don't do them any justice."

"Thank you, kindly," AJ says. "Since this is your first time here and all how's about I give y'all a little tour and a little bit o' history."

As Applejack explains she leads Twilight and Spike out of the docking bay and through the corridors that lead out onto the Genium tree orchards. She explains that they use the larger asteroids for the trees and they mine the smaller ones for ores and any oxygen that might be inside. The domes and docking station windows aren't made of glass but a very thick polycarbonate material just incase some of the smaller asteroids make it past the farm's defense systems, while supplying an excellent view of the asteroid cluster.

Twilight listens in fascination while Applejack explains how Genium trees function. How the rare trees where genetically altered millennia ago by Alicorns and Humans to live and grow in sub-zero temperatures. They use less carbon dioxide and supply more oxygen than normal trees. Due to the low temperature the trees excrete liquid oxygen. The liquid O2 then

gathers in orbs due to the zero gravity. With the aid of special suits, Applejack and her family will go out onto the fields and buck the trees. This shakes the orbs of oxygen loose so they rise up and gathering machines can swoop in and collect the errant liquid O2.

AJ proudly tells how her big brother, Big Macintosh, a Hoovard Engineering grad, set up the delivery system beneath the surface of the asteroid. The system supplies the roots of the trees with a steady supply of nutrients and carbon dioxide while keeping the mix warm enough so that it doesn't freeze.

The Apple family used to all be Apple farmers until AJ's grandmother, Granny Smith, decided to expand the business to farming oxygen as well. So now AJ's cousin Braeburn takes care of the apple orchards on Pony V. Applejack, her brother, grandmother, and little sister take care of the O2 farm.

"It's all so amazing." Twilight says with sparkles of fascination in her eyes.

"Yeah, amazingly boring..." Spike snarks.

"Spike!" Twilight scolds.

Spike yawns loudly.

"Sorry about him, AJ." Twilight apologizes on Spike's behalf. "He has a short attention span."

Applejack chuckles, "It's fine, Twilight. Dontcha worry none about it."

Twilight looks out at one of the Genium fields and notices another Earth Pony wearing a suit similar to AJ's but with a helmet covering her head and a patch of an apple pie on her flank.

"Who's that?" Twilight inquires.

Applejack looks at the suited pony, "Oh, tha's just Granny Smith."

"Your grandmother helps with bucking the trees?"

"Yeah, she's a pistol," Applejack says. "She's up there in years but she can still buck with the rest of em. Course the bionic implants help a lot."

The trio watch as Granny Smith takes aim at a tree and bucks. However, due to her being several feet away she misses it outright.

Applejack looks at Twilight out of the corner of her eye and smiles nervously, "Heh, now all's we need is ta get'er the implants that'll fix'er depth perception."

Applejack reaches a hoof up and presses a button on the collar of her suit, "Granny, back up a couple o' feet there, will ya?"

Granny Smith takes the suggestion to heart and backs up. Her next buck sends a group of oxygen orbs scattering off the tree.

"Here comes Winona." AJ says as a large, yet surprisingly friendly looking machine comes swooping down to gather the oxygen.

The way Winona flies around the orbs makes it appear as if she's corralling them together. The orbs of liquid O2 eventually all join together into one large ball. Winona then proceeds to ingest the ball and flies back up where she keeps a lookout for more free floating liquid O2.

Spike chuckles, "She acts like a sheep dog."

"An' who says she ain't?" AJ says.

Suddenly Applejack's collar emits a short alarm. AJ looks up and around until she spots a small asteroid in the distance splitting in half rather violently. Twilight and Spike follow AJ's gaze and watch as the two halves of the asteroid drift apart.

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack yells angrily. She presses her collar, "Apple Bloom, Ah told you ta wait until I got back!"

The voice of a young filly with an accent similar to Applejack's comes through the collar, "But what if my Cutie Mark is an asteroid splittin' in half!?"

"And what if your Cutie Mark is my hoof bopping you on the head!?" AJ shoots back.

"That would be awesome!" Spike declares.

Both Twilight and Applejack raise an eyebrow and shoot Spike a look.

"Uh, I mean the splitting asteroid...not the abuse." Spike says nervously.

"Right..." Applejack presses her collar, "Big Macintosh will you get up there an' make shure Apple Bloom doesn't destroy anythin' else, please."

A calm voice comes through the collar, "Eeyup."

Applejack closes her eyes, exhales and inhales. Then redirects her attention back to Twilight, "What say we get back ta business, shall we?"

"Sure." Twilight responds.

"So, just lookin' for a refill?"

"No, I'm making a delivery to a developing asteroid," Twilight says. "So, I'm looking to fill my cargo area."

Applejack gives Twilight a surprised look, "Really now? Ah didn't think there where anymore'a you types out there."

"My types?"

"Yeah, you bleedin' heart types," AJ says. "Wit all them pirates out there most'a you space truckin' types only go for the high profit stuff, like them core diamonds, an' weaponry, an' stuff along them lines."

"Oh, well, I..." Twilight stammers.

"Shucks, I didn't mean nuthin' by it," AJ says. "Ta tell ya the honest truth, it's good ta know there are still some o' you types out there. So, how much we talkin'?"

"About 250 long tons." Twilight says.

"Alrighty then!" AJ says. "Ya got your own MULEs?"

"Yes, two of them." Twilight responds.

"Good. Cuz ya know ah'd have ta charge ya extra to use ours."

"Twilight..." Spike whispers.

Twilight looks up at Spike. Then her eyes go wide as she remembers something.

Twilight looks back at AJ, "Oh, and do you think your brother could take a look at my ship. We were having some trouble on our way here."

"Shure thing," AJ says. "Ah'll get Big Macintosh ta take a look while we load you up. A'course ya do know that ah'll have ta charge ya extra if he needs ta fix anythin'."

"Err, of course." Twilight says worriedly.

A rather large Earth Pony with an orange mane and a crimson coat slowly leaves the Owlowsious, heading down the ships boarding ramp. He looks rather bored and wears a suit similar to AJ's. He has a patch of a green apple sliced in half on his flank.

Twilight notices the large Pony out of the corner of her eye, turns away from her conversation with Spike and Applejack and gallops over to Big Macintosh. Spike does his best to keep up while AJ follows at a less enthusiastic pace.

"Is everything alright?" Twilight asks.

"Eeyup."

"The life support system is fine?"

"Eeyup."

"Is there anything to worry about?"

"Eeyup."

"What!?" Spike interjects.

Applejack catches up as Twilight is about to scold her little hovering friend yet again but she doesn't get the chance.

"Dunno if you two know this but your ship is kinda haunted." Big Macintosh says.

"Big Macintosh!" AJ scolds. "Dontcha be fillin' their heads with none of that foolishness. I dunno what crazy clubs ya were part'a in that fancy schmancy school'a yours but this ain't the place, ya hear?"

Big Macintosh calmly turns to his little sister, "Now, AJ, there is plenty of substantial evidence that rightly supports the existence of the paranormal, especially with the number a' Empaths on the rise."

Applejack lowers her ears and narrows her eyes at her brother. She glares at him like this for a bit as Twilight and Spike watch uncomfortably. Suddenly Applejack turns to Twilight and gives her an weird smile, "Your ship is fine an' your liquid oxygen is all loaded. Y'all come back now ya hear?"

Twilight smiles and nods nervously. Then she and Spike head up the boarding ramp and into the O 42. Applejack and Big Macintosh trot out of the docking bay, the large double doors close behind them. The freighter's boarding ramp closes. The air is sucked out of the docking bay. The large glass doors above slide open. The O 42's engines burst to life. It lifts off and departs.

Outside the docking bay, Applejack is still very much upset with her brother, "What in tarnation are y'all tryin' ta do ta me? Shure, she weren't the biggest spender but every customer is a customer! Ah can't have Apple Bloom disobeying instructions and you spouting off nonsense about ghosts!"

"AJ, it ain't nonsense," Big Macintosh says. "Ah swear to you, ah heard singing coming from the air ducts. Also felt at times like ah was being watched but every time ah turned around there was nuthin' there."

Chapter Three.Five

The Good Doctor

"Selene. The Prison world. This moon sized planetoid is the site of the largest and most advanced prison ever built by Ponykind. The prison covers the entire surface of Selene and even extends far below the surface of it as well. It was built to house the worst criminals and psychopaths around."

"The prison was at 51% capacity when a temporal rift opened right in Selene's orbit. Due to the dangerous nature of such rifts all personnel were evacuated and replaced with machines and partially self-aware computer systems. The inmates were left alone. While in close proximity to Selene the rift was not close enough to engulf the prison world. It did, however greatly slow down the passage of time on the planetoid."

"Despite the effects the rift had on Selene, the prison was still chosen as the site to ban Princess Luna after her failed rebellion against the other Alicorns including her family. While the details of her rebellion are sketchy at best, Princess Celestia felt that Selene was the only prison capable of holding her."

"Nearly one thousand years have passed in the Eques System since her banishment. To this day the rift remains heavily monitored and still effects Selene. In the one thousand standard Canter 107 years that passed in the Eques System only two and a half years passed on Selene."

- "The Eques System and It's Planets" - A.B. 1000 edition.

Bossy McPants sits behind his rather organized desk in his equally organized office looking through a datapad that lists all of his customers. Customers he figures he now has a much higher chance of keeping with Pinkie Pie gone.

Suddenly there is a heavy knock on his office door. Bossy looks up as the door opens in a surprisingly elegant manner. Bossy's eyes widen as an incredibly beautiful almost statuesque human woman glides into his office. She almost seems to flow as she moves, as if she doesn't weigh anything. She wears a sleeveless, ivory colored gown that appears to have been custom made just for her. Bossy's jaw drops.

The woman nods her head respectfully at Bossy. He closes his mouth and involuntarily nods back as if hypnotized. Then the woman stands aside, making room for someone to follow.

A tall, short haired human man wearing round impenetrable sunglasses strolls into the office. The man quickly surveys his surroundings and then looks at Bossy and places a hand on his chest, "Greetings and salutations, I am Doctor Zaks. I can only assume that I am speaking to a Mr. McPants. Am I correct in my assumption?" The man folds his arms behind his back as he awaits a response.

Bossy looks away from the woman and gives the man his attention. He doesn't look like any doctor Bossy has ever seen. Definitely isn't dressed like one either. Looks more like an eccentric scientist from some ancient movie or video game. The goatee definitely doesn't help. Bossy nods at The Doctor, "Bossy McPants, that'd be me." Realization suddenly dawns on Bossy, "Did you say, Doctor Zaks? As in, Doctor Kabello Zaks?"

"Indeed." The Doctor politely responds.

"Oh, krunk," Bossy quickly stands up, "Err...I mean, my apologies Doctor Zaks. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Doctor Zaks thrusts an arm outward with the palm of his hand facing Bossy, "Please, Mr. McPants, don't get up. This won't take long." The Doctor makes exaggerated hand gestures as he speaks, "I'm looking for someone very dear to me. Someone who I believe is in your employ. Her name is Pinkamena and it is very important that I find her."

"Pinkamena?" Bossy asks.

"Yes, I read in the e-paper this morning that one of your employees recently worked on an engine in a ship belonging to a Prince Blueblood.

This prince described her as 'some pink Earth Pony'. I read that the engine propelled his ship far further than it should have. Not just any pony could do that but my dear pink coated, magenta maned, Pinkamena could."

Bossy's eyes light up, "Oh, you mean Pinkie Pie."

Doctor Zaks tilts his head, "Pinkie Pie?" He places a hand on his chin, "I knew she would change her name but 'Pinkie Pie'?" He looks to the woman he came with, "How droll."

The woman nods, "I will do a quick network search, Doctor." Every word she speaks sounds just as beautiful and elegant as she looks.

"Very good, Mira," Doctor Zaks says. He turns back to Bossy. "Now, Mr. McPants, if you would kindly tell me which workshop in this establishment belongs to 'Pinkie Pie'." The Doctor makes finger quotes as he says Pinkamena's current name.

"Uh, none of them." Bossy says nervously.

"Pardon me?"

"He fired her." Mira says.

Doctor Zaks looks at Mira, "What? When?"

"Earlier today," Bossy says as Zaks looks back at him. "The incident with the Prince was the last straw. Don't get me wrong, I know she's very smart but she's also way too accident prone. For the sake of my business I had to let her go."

At first the Doctor doesn't even move. He just stands there looking right at Bossy. Then he folds his hands in front of himself as if he's praying and takes a breathe, "I see. Well then if you would just kindly tell me where she lives then I will be out of your unkempt mane and you can go back to whatever it is that you do."

There's something about the way The Doctor spoke his last sentence and the way Mira has been staring at him that sends shivers up Bossy's spine. Bossy gulps audibly, "I don't know where she lives. I've only ever

seen her here. If she wasn't around and I needed to contact her or pay her then I communicated everything through her orb-bot."

"I see," Zaks says with a light nod. "Surely you can tell me something. How about where I can find the Prince and what he plans on doing with the ship."

Bossy looks relieved, "Now that I can tell you. He has a private hanger near the Palace. He made a point to tell me that he has the ship scheduled to be disassembled." Bossy looks at a clock on his desk, "If you want to see the ship, you have about an hour before it becomes spare parts."

Doctor Zaks pushes up his glasses with a middle finger as a creepy smile inches across his face, "You Ponies truly are fools aren't you?"

"Excuse me?" Bossy says.

"First you tell me that you fired the most intelligent mare you will ever see in your entire pathetic life," Doctor Zaks says. "Albeit, the mental locks I've put in her mind would keep her from accessing her full potential but she should have still been able to easily outperform any other Pony. Then you tell me that rather than studying it or experimenting this 'Prince' is simply going to destroy the fastest ship to ever exist." Doctor Zaks takes a deep breathe and calms himself, "I truly don't see any reason why you or this 'Prince' should be allowed to live."

Suddenly, Mira's crimson eyes light up with excitement as she turns to the Doctor, "Oh, may I, Doctor, please?"

Doctor Zaks turns to Mira, "Sorry, Mira, my dear, but too many sentients have seen me enter this place. If Mr. McPants suddenly disappeared questions would be asked. We'd also have to kill everypony who works here and while it would undoubtedly be fun, it would only make a bigger mess."

"Oh, shoot." Mira says as she stomps the floor with a foot.

"Mira, how long was Pinkamena employed here?"

"About two months, Doctor."

Doctor Zaks puts his hand on his chin and thinks for a moment, "Erase this Pony's memory. Three months just to be safe. Oh, and make it as unpleasant as possible."

"With pleasure, Doctor."

Mira turns back to Bossy and smiles pleasantly. She brings up her left hand and extends her index finger and pinkie. Bossy watches in horror as the skin on her two fingers folds away to reveal some kind of glowing blue nodes. Mira begins to strut over to Bossy.

"What do you think you're doing!?" Bossy yells as he backs away. "Get away from me!"

"Now, now, Mr. McPants this will only hurt for a few moments." Zaks says.

In one inhumanly quick motion Mira lunges forward, reaches across the desk, and grabs Bossy's muzzle with her right hand. She easily lifts the struggling Earth Pony off the floor. While struggling, Bossy kicks his desk and suddenly it isn't so organized anymore. Bossy's screams are muffled as Mira brings her fingers to his forehead.

Zaks gives Bossy a creepily pleasant smile and a polite wave goodbye, "Goodbye, Mr. McPants. Have an excellent day."

Doctor Zaks and Mira walk side by side as they make their way into the bay of a docking station. Mira's steps are completely silent as she walks very politely with her arms down and her hands folded together in front of her. Doctor Zaks strolls confidently with his arms folded behind his back and his head held high. The duo draw the attention of a number of station hands. Human's are not a common sight on Canter 107 and in fact are not very numerous throughout the Eques System. Doctor Zaks is one of the few humans who's place of residence is on Stalliongradus.

Doctor Zaks comes to a halt as he surveys his surroundings. He takes note of a control room over to one side of the docking bay and it's conveniently opened doorway. Mira stops at the Doctor's side, "Mira?"

"According to the information I managed to gather, 'Pinkie Pie' had a number of jobs all across this planet," Mira says. "This is the closest one to her latest. According to the records I managed to hack into she worked for Mr. McPants' cousin, a Mr. Slacks."

"Excellent."

Mira looks at Doctor Zaks and gives him a concerned look, "Doctor, please pardon me for asking, but, shouldn't we be going after the engine?"

"Recovering Pinkamena takes precedent over everything else, my dear," Zaks calmly replies. "If we find her than we don't need the engine at all. This docking station is much closer. It's also a safe bet that if Pinkamena decided to leave Canter 107 then she would come here. Besides we still have plenty of time before the engine is foolishly dismantled."

"Understood, Doctor." Mira says with a polite nod.

A rugged Earth Pony wearing dirty overalls and a hat trots over to the duo, "Can I help you guys?"

Doctor Zaks turns his head towards the Earth Pony, "Only if you are Mr. Slacks."

"That's me, guy." Greasy says.

"Excellent!" Zaks says. "I am Doctor Kabello Zaks." He motions to his assistant, "My beautiful companion here is Mira."

Greasy nods at the Doctor, "Doc. Thought I recognized you." Then he turns to Mira and nods, "Ma'am."

Mira politely smiles and nods back.

"I would be tickled pink if you could answer a few questions for me." Zaks says.

Greasy makes a face, "Ugh, please don't say 'pink'. Anyway, Doctor Zaks, it's good to finally meet you but I gotta ask. Someone like you didn't really come all this way to just ask a few questions, did ya?"

"Well, yes and no," Zaks says. "I'm looking for somepony and your answers to my questions may very well help me find my little lost Pinkamena."

"Pinkamena?" Greasy asks. "Oh no. You don't mean Pinkie Pie, do you?"

Doctor Zaks brings a hand up and extends his index finger, "One and the same." He folds his arm back behind his back, "Any information you can give me would be greatly appreciated."

"Unfortunately there isn't much I can give ya," Greasy says. "I never seen anypony score as high as her on an I.Q. test. A hard worker too for the most part. Very goofy Pony. Really liked throwing parties for me and my crew. She was real good at her job but sometimes she just wouldn't leave well enough alone and thats when the trouble would start. You ever heard of The Queen Gaia?"

"The royal flagship named after Princess Celestia's mother?" Zaks says. "Yes, I heard it was destroyed in a rather cataclysmic accident and was replaced by the greatly superior, Queen Gaia 2."

"Oh, I tell ya, cataclysmic is the word," Greasy says. "The palace docking bay was under renovations so the royal navy's ships were sent to other docking stations around the capital. I was so proud to have the Queen Gaia dock here. Ship was ginormous. Checking and cleaning everything took forever. When we were done I gathered everypony together to congratulate them. Pinkie Pie took longer than the others to join up. She didn't tell me that she was fiddling with the ship's programs and engines. When the renovations at the palace docking station were complete we started her up and we figured we'd just sit back and let the auto pilot do the rest. Ship rose out of the docking station, stopped way up in the air, and then split in half. The engines and a large portion of the rear

of the ship vanished into thin air. Lucky it was so high up, gave everypony a chance to get to cover. No pony was aboard and thankfully no pony was hurt. Caused a lot of structural damage though. Pinkie kept telling us that the engines went somewhere, she just couldn't concentrate for some reason and didn't get the numbers right. The Princess proved her generosity by forgiving us and writing the whole thing off as a freak accident. Still I fired Pinkie right after. Ever since I've been trying my hardest to restore my station's rep."

"I'm sorry to hear all this," Zaks says. "Pinkamena can be very unpredictable."

"Yeah, but you know it's funny, Doc," Greasy says bringing a hoof to his chin. "That filly was a real motor mouth. Hard to get her to shut up. She never mentioned you."

Doctor Zaks nods lightly, "Understandable. You see, she was a patient of mine. Then she escaped."

Greasy raises his brow, "That explains a lot actually. So she really is crazy?"

"Absolutely bonkers," Zaks says. "So you see why I need to find her. Can you help me? A comment you made earlier tells me that you may have seen her recently."

"Seen and heard," Greasy says. "Me and my crew searched everywhere but that one can be a master of disguise. We didn't find any trace of her here in the station. We think she may have stowed away on a ship that was docked here earlier but we didn't get to warn the pilot before it took off."

"Can you tell me about the ship and the pilot and where they were headed?" Zaks asks.

"Didn't say where they were headed," Greasy says. "And sorry, doc, but I can't tell you about the pilot or ship. Client records are confidential. If it gets out that I released info on one ship then no sentient will want to dock here. I'm sure you can see how that would be bad for business."

"Of course, of course." Zaks says. Then the Doctor turns and looks at Mira. She looks back. Doctor Zaks looks at the control room for a second and then back at Greasy. "Mr. Slacks, as I was strolling into your station I couldn't help but notice how well run and organized it seems to be. As I'm sure you are aware, I have a number of docking stations that my company uses to ship it's goods. I would greatly appreciate a tour and any tips you may be able to offer, if you can spare me the time, of course."

Greasy is a bit taken aback by the sudden change in subject matter but is nonetheless flattered, "Uh, sure, Doc, I have a few minutes. Where would you like to start?"

Doctor Zaks looks around, "How about way over there." He points at five large tanks behind Greasy and against the far wall.

Greasy turns around, "You mean the coolant tanks?"

"Yes, yes," Zaks says excitedly and walks off towards the tanks. "What type of coolant do you use?"

Greasy trots after the Doctor, "Uh, we use your basic liquid nitrogen mixed with acesulfame potassium..."

The two leave Mira behind. She brings her right hand to hang at her side. A part of the wrist separates and her hand drops off and lands soundlessly on the floor. The fingers on the hand act as legs as it skitters it's way over to the control room. The Ponies scattered about are too busy with their work to notice the small device. Mira's hand enters the empty control room and uses a chair to jump up onto the control panel. The tip of the middle finger folds away to reveal a universal interface node. It plugs in.

A short time later the hand disconnects, hops down off the control panel, and makes it's way out of the control room and back to it's owner. Mira kneels down a bit and extends her stub. The hand uses it's fingers to jump up and reattaches itself. Mira messages her wrist and stares off into space for a few seconds then she looks over at Doctor Zaks.

Greasy is continuing his tour as the Doctor continues to pretend to be interested. In reality he doesn't need a tour. He knows how to run a docking station at maximum efficiency and he knows how all this equipment works.

He actually considers it all to be very outdated. He suddenly feels a burning on the back of his neck. He looks back at Mira. She notices and then smiles and nods.

"Good girl..."

Doctor Zaks and Mira casually make their way through the elaborate and overly decorated hall that leads to Prince Blueblood's private hanger. Large portraits of the Prince in different poses and doing different activities are neatly arranged along the walls. Two royal guards trot along either side of the duo, acting as their escorts.

"Now Mira, we mustn't waste too much time," Zaks whispers. "We must be straightforward and *blunt*. I'm sure Madame Moon is beginning to miss us."

"Yes, doctor, I will be very *blunt* indeed." Mira says.

The group come upon a large set of golden double doors. One of the guards trots over to a control panel on the wall. A holographic numeric pad projects from the panel. The guard raises a hoof and enters a long code. The doors hiss and slowly slide open.

The group enters the large, eloquent hanger. In the center of the hanger rests a sleek and beautiful ship. Standing to one side of the ship are three Earth Ponies dressed like mechanics and one Unicorn Stallion who is currently giving them instructions. The Unicorn's style of dress makes him easily identifiable. Arranged behind the mechanics is a large amount of tools of various types along with a large deactivated engineering droid. One of the guards escorting Zaks and Mira trots ahead.

"Pardon me, Prince Blueblood, but you have some very important guests." The guard says as he bows before the Prince.

The Prince turns around, "Really? And who might they be?"

Before the guard can answer Doctor Zaks quickly steps forward and throws his arms in the air, "So you're the grand fool who's about to destroy the fastest ship to ever exist! A true pleasure to meet you!"

Everypony present is caught completely off guard by the Doctor's exclamation. Before anypony can respond Mira sticks her arms straight out in front of her. Portions of her forearms shift and fold as laser weapons rise from inside. In the blink of an eye she aims and fires. Electrically charged balls of energy cut through the air. The two guards are hit, get knocked off their hooves and fall unconscious as electric sparks surge across their bodies. Prince Blueblood does what comes natural for him and ducks down with his front legs folded over his head. This makes the mechanics easy targets and Mira takes full advantage, dropping each one of them the same way she did the guards.

For a second the hanger is silent. Then a sound occurs and continues. Prince Blueblood is shaking nervously. He opens his eyes and looks up to see Doctor Zaks clapping politely.

Mira turns to Doctor Zaks, "Blunt enough, Doctor?" She asks as her forearms return to normal.

The Doctor simply raises his still clapping hands towards her and gives her a smile. Then Doctor Zaks stops clapping and looks down at Prince Blueblood. His smile oozes into a disgusted frown.

"Who are you?" The Prince's voice comes out as a barely audible whisper. "I demand that you tell me..." The Prince gulps audibly, "...who you are?"

An eerie smile creeps across the Doctor's face. He reaches a hand up and raises his glasses up onto his forehead, revealing his eyes with their yellow, slitted irises.

"Impossible...you're a human..." The Prince stammers. "You, can't be a..."

Doctor Zaks' smile widens as he interrupts the Prince, "Please, allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste..."