

Pony Effect

By Grif



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In the year 1248, explorers on Luna discovered the remains of an ancient spacefaring civilization.

In the decades that followed, these mysterious artifacts revealed startling new technologies, enabling travel to the furthest stars.

The basis for this incredible technology was a force that controlled the very fabric of space and time. They called it the greatest discovery in pony history.

The civilizations of the galaxy call it...

MASS EFFECT

Chapter 1

[Unknown location]

“Well, what about your protégé, Twilight? Unicorn, but I don’t recognize her cutie mark.”

“Her talent is magic. Pure magic.”

“She has no friends, withdrawn and by all accounts, anti-social.” A short pause. “Is this the kind of pony we want protecting the galaxy?”

“Twilight is intelligent, smart and incredibly talented. Given time, she will learn the magic of friendship.”

“I defer to your judgment, sister,” the first voice reluctantly said.

“Do not worry, my dearest, I have absolute faith in my student.”

“I’ll make the call.”

[Canterlot System, Outer Space]

My dearest, most faithful student Twilight Sparkle,

You know I value your diligence and I trust you completely. But, you simply must get away from your books. A good student must also learn about the world by experience, not only through her reading. To this end, I’ve decided to assign you to the new ESV Normaredy as the second commanding officer on its’ maiden voyage to Appleloosa. I trust you will enjoy the experience.

*Your loving teacher,
Princess Celestia.*

Twilight let out a small sigh as she reread the letter for the twelfth time. If it

was such an honour, why did it feel like punishment instead? Had she not been the Princess's best student all these years? Granted, she didn't leave the palace for the past year, but she had been studying diligently about military tactics, strategies and all that. She rolled up the scroll and carefully stowed it in her saddle-packs, and returned to brooding on the events of the past few days.

Being the good student she was, she had immediately packed her bags after receiving the letter. The unicorn had set off for the nearest starport on Canterlot (which so happened to be Ponyville Intergalactic Starport). To the credit of the officials at PIS, they were already waiting for her when she arrived. With speed and efficiency she could scarcely credit the normally laid-back workers of the starport, she had been whisked through the terminal. Twilight was up and flying in the shuttle to the Normaredy in less than an hour after arrival.

"Approaching the ESV Normaredy, ma'am," the pilot's voice chimed over the speakers.

Momentarily distracted from her dark thoughts, Twilight glanced out of the window. She managed to get a glimpse of the ship she was about to serve on. It was... impressive. From the distance, Twilight's logical mind estimated it to be almost triple the length of the shuttle. It's streamlined shape reminded her of an eagle; with two wing-like structures attached to the main body of the craft. Just in the background, she could make out Luna, the small moon of Canterlot.

Twilight nodded. It should be impressive. It was the product of the first collaboration between turians and ponies in designing an entire new class of frigates. Years had been spent in the design of the ship, with emphasis on speed and stealth. True to its design, the prototype ship boasted the galaxy's first ever stealth system. The princess herself was said to have had a personal hand in the project. Billions of credits had been sunk into the project, and now the fruit of that labour was right before her eyes.

As the shuttle neared the frigate, she began to appreciate the finer details of the ship. The ship was painted in sleek white with alternating black strips. The name Normaredy SR-1 was clearly painted on the hull of the ship. The 'wings' that she noticed initially was actually the photon-thrusters of the ship.

Twilight sighed again, deciding it was time to put on her armour. It was uncomfortable, but this was a formal occasion, and she was supposed to look her best during her first time round. Or at least, that was what her books on ship protocols have to say on that. She carefully levitated the various pieces of her onyx armour out of her packs, and starting putting them on. Shoulder guards. Saddle-piece. Flank-piece. Leg armour. Each piece clinked into place with practiced ease.

At least she didn't need Spike anymore for this, having been subjected to countless sessions of training on just putting on her own armour. It was harder than one would think. She smirked slightly as she recalled the memories of the combat magic training course she had been put through.

It was supposed to be a tough affair, meant only for the most elite of combat magic users. Yet the Princess insisted Twilight take the course, reasoning it was only proper for her student to learn how to defend herself. Twilight had balked at first. It was, after all, a combat course. Ponies could get hurt. It was unpony-like. Military training was unpleasant at best. The very notion of combat made the bookish unicorn queasy. The Princess persisted. Eventually she caved, and enrolled in the course.

At first, it had been everything she feared. The instructors were harsh. Life was brutal, with long days and late nights. It wasn't uncommon for Twilight to stumble into bed, bone-weary and tired to the core. Yet, over the months, she began to enjoy it the challenge of it. Her affinity to magic was a boon. It had enabled her to easily cast spells where other unicorns stumbled.

However she rarely, if ever, socialised with her fellow candidates, preferring instead to spend long hours in the library on the theories of magic and combat. The other candidates labelled her as a recluse and loner. It suited her just fine.

In the end, she graduated with flying colours, easily outclassing the other candidates. Her marks in the final assessment were said to be the highest in the history of the military academy. As a reward for passing the course with the highest honour, she was allowed to wear the rank M7, one of the highest ranks for combat magic forces in the Equestrian Navy. It had been a proud day for her when the Princess herself appeared to present her with

the coveted insignia.

Since then, she went back to her former position as the protégé of Princess Celestia. Twilight merely considered her military rank as a formality and gave no further thought to it. The Princess herself did not press the issue. Until now.

“Initiating docking sequence with the Normaredy, ma’am. Please remain in your seats until we have fully docked,” the pilot’s voice chimed again, interrupting Twilight’s reminiscing.

Her purple eyes betraying a flash of annoyance, she nevertheless began to repack the odds and ends that fallen out from her pack while she was on board. Just as she finished, the shuttle shuddered, presumably having docked with the ship. The muted sounds of the shuttle engines went silent.

“We have docked with the Normaredy. Commander, please exit through the door indicated by the light,” the pilot calmly announced.

Twilight stretched her limbs, testing the feeling of her armour on her body. Satisfied that it was properly fitted, she gathered her saddlepacks and trotted slowly to the indicated exit. Twilight began tapping her hooves as she waited for the airlock to disengage.

With a hiss, the airlock doors slid open, revealing a marine pony in full dress uniform standing at attention. At the sight of Twilight, he saluted smartly.

“Welcome aboard the ESV Normaredy, commander.”

[Canterlot system, Outer Space]

The ESV Normaredy cruised through the vacuum of deep space, her anti-photon thrusters gently firing as she approached the mass relay in the system.

“The Ponytar Prime Relay is in range, initiating transmission sequence,” the ship’s pilot’s voice said crisply over the speakers.

“We’re connected. Calculating transit mass and destination,” the pilot’s voice announced again. “Relay is hot, acquiring approach vector. All stations, secure for transit.”

The twin engines of the ship began to fold and align themselves to prepare for FTL travel.

“Board is green. Approach run has begun.” A note of anticipation entered the pilot’s voice. “Hitting the relay in 3... 2... 1...”

The sleek black and white frigate aligned itself in parallel with the mass relay. A moment of silence. Then a burst of energy from the core of the relay struck the ship, propelling the ship instantly to faster than light speeds.

The ESV Normaredy accelerated out of the Canterlot system and disappeared into deep space with a flash.

[ESV Normaredy, Pilot cabin]

“A smooth transition. Your captain will be pleased,” the turian said flatly, before turning his back and walking away. The bipedal alien stood out amidst all the equine crew members in the ship; his dull grey skin and black armour contrasting sharply with the colourful coats of the ponies manning the ship.

“I hate that guy,” the pilot mumbled under her breath, as soon as she was sure the turian was out of earshot.

“Scootaloo! Nihilus gives you a compliment and you hate him? Such shocking manners,” the white unicorn sitting beside him admonished. The tag on her uniform identified her as Chief Engineer Rarity. A cutie mark of three diamonds could be seen beneath her uniform.

“I hope you don’t mess up that pretty mane of yours in the bath,” the brown pegasus retorted, her wings flaring in annoyance. “I jumped us halfway across the galaxy, aiming for a target that is the size of a pinhole. It’s not great; it’s incredible!” She waved her hooves about theatrically, to which Rarity just gave her a cold stare in response. The brown pegasus seemed

unperturbed by the show of disapproval.

Scotaloo glanced around for a moment to ensure the turian was not in earshot and whispered in a conspiratorial voice, “Besides I don’t like Spectres: they’re bad news. Call me paranoid.”

“Paranoid? More like rude,” Rarity said primly.

“I think you better watch what you’re saying,” the lavender unicorn standing behind the pilot finally spoke. She eyed the pilot critically for a moment before continuing. “The Council funded this project, with the explicit support of the Princess. They have a right to check up on their investment.”

Twilight’s thoughts wandered as she reconsidered her words. Spectres, formally known as Special Tactics and Reconnaissance unit, were the elite soldiers chosen by the Council themselves. They were supposed to be the right hand of the Council, enforcing the Council’s will where a fleet would not do. Given the importance of their job, they were given virtually unlimited powers and privileges at their disposal. The presence of Nihilus on the ship only meant the Council was taking their investment very seriously.

Scotaloo snorted. “That’s the official story. Only an idiot believes the official story.” Rarity gave the pilot another black look, apparently not liking the pilot’s rebellious attitude.

“You worry too much,” Twilight calmly replied. Her eyes, however, betrayed otherwise.

Before the pilot could reply, the commlink on her console chirped. “Joker, the Great & Powerful Trixie demands a status report.”

Scotaloo rolled her eyes at the use of her nickname but kept her voice professional. “We just cleared the mass relay, captain. Stealth systems engaged, everything looks solid.”

“Good, link us to the nearest comm buoy. I want the Equestrian Command to know every single glorious deed we’re about to do. Also, send that dolt of a commander over to me for a debriefing,” she ordered, her voice akin to a rich brat demanding sweets.

Scotaloo had to stifle a chuckle. The commander had heard every single word. She responded in a gleeful voice, "Captain, she's right here."

"Oh... then tell her!" The captain abruptly cut the link. The pilot looked disappointed, evidently expecting a more colourful reaction.

Twilight arched an eyebrow. "Joker?"

"Long story. Maybe I'll tell you about it later," the pilot said dismissively. She quickly steered the conversation to another topic. "Anyway, you heard the lady, commander. She doesn't like to be kept waiting," Scotaloo continued, noting the annoyed look on the Twilight's face. "Good luck."

"Thanks a lot, Scotaloo," the lavender pony said, a trace of sarcasm in her voice. She turned around and began making her way to the briefing room. *Great, now I'll have to face Trixie again.* Her brow furrowed as she considered the unpleasant thought.

As she trotted off, Twilight overheard the last scraps of conversation between Rarity and Scotaloo: "I don't know how you put up with that..."

The lavender unicorn strolled past the rows of workstations just behind the pilot's cabin, each crew member busy in their their assigned station. Occasionally, a pony would call out routine reports to the pilot's cabin, followed by acknowledgement by either the pilot or another crew. Twilight nodded at each crew member as she passed them, more out of protocol rather than any sense of friendship.

Finding herself reaching the CIC deck, she stopped to glance at the holographic starmap located right in the middle of the CIC. The three-dimensional holographic representation of the galaxy rotated slowly, a small blue dot indicating the Normaredy's current position. The starmap was overlooked by a small podium and surrounded by more workstations. All along the walls of the room, various switchboards and monitors flashed and beeped. A crew member had her head in one of the panels, effecting repairs of some sort. The smell of acrid smoke wafted to Twilight's nostrils as she trotted past.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the navigator and the ship's nurse chatting merrily in a corner. The latter was bent over in laughter, probably

in response to a joke. Twilight dredged up their names from the depths of her memory. Navigator Ditzzy Doo... and Nurse Cherilee. Twilight had not actually talked to them much, having spent most of her time in her cabin. Studying about the ship's design and function naturally.

Just behind the CIC was the briefing room. Two pegasi marine stood guard in front of the unassuming door. Their black armour shone as if they have just been polished, and the guns on their shoulders well-oiled. They saluted briefly with their wings as Twilight trotted past. She inclined her head in response, acknowledging their salute before trotting past and into the room beyond.

[ESV Normaredy, Briefing Room]

The spectre was standing in front of a monitor, watching a promotional video of Appleloosa. He turned as the lavender pony entered the room; the doors sliding shut smoothly behind her. The turian flicked the video off, and turned to address Twilight.

"Ah, Commander Sparkle, so good of you to join me. Good thing you got here first, it'll give us a chance to chat," he started conversationally, his voice inflection-less. His small, black eyes seemed to study the unicorn with great interest.

The commander stared in fascination, her first real chance to get a good look at one of the famed Spectres. The turian, like all others of his kind, had metallic plates covering his face. Elaborate white markings covered his facial metal platings. He wore black body armour; lined with red markings, apparently customized to his taste. A pistol hung comfortably from his right hip.

"What about?" the commander finally replied, a curious look in her purple eyes.

"I'm interested in this world we're going to... Appleloosa, right?" He pronounced the planet's name with care. "The pride of ponykind. Proof that ponies can establish colonies across the galaxy and protect them."

"I don't get what are you trying to say." The lavender pony feigned

ignorance, even as she knew all too well what the turian was trying to imply. Many alien species regarded the new pony race with suspicions. Not all were friendly.

“Ponies are newcomers to the galaxy, commander. Do you really think—”

“I think we are more than capable enough to protect our own. With the Great & Powerful Trixie in command, we have nothing to fear,” a haughty voice behind the commander broke into the conversation. Both the turian and commander turned to the source of the intrusion.

A slate blue unicorn trotted into the briefing room, an air of superiority preceding her every step. The mare was garbed in a gaudy blue uniform and a pointed hat resembling a wizard hat of legend, decorated with stars. Her blue eyes met the commander’s own set of purple eyes.

“Twilight Sparkle, we meet again.”

“Yes, captain, I am well aware of that,” Twilight replied, trying not to grit her teeth at the memory of her past encounters with Trixie in Canterlot, which included a certain Ursa Minor. *Why in the name of Equestria does it have to be her?* she thought rather gloomily. Although she had been forewarned of the presence of the captain since getting on the ship, meeting her face-to-face brought reality home like a bucketload of apples.

“Hmph, after our incident in Canterlot, I had hoped that I wouldn’t need to see your plebian face again. I still remember how you humiliated me.” Trixie’s face darkened for a moment, before being replaced by her characteristic smug look. “Fortunately for you, I am magnanimous enough to let old petty hatreds slide,” Trixie continued, clearly not meaning a single word. Her violet eyes dared Twilight to do something reckless.

Twilight did not rise up to the bait. Instead, she just glared at the captain sullenly, her anger obvious on her face.

A discreet cough interrupted the exchange.

“I think we should get the briefing started, don’t you think captain?” the turian suggested, his voice tempered with an undercurrent of menace. A taloned hand was already resting casually on his pistol. Clearly, the

Spectre was a being with little patience for fools.

“Y-y-yes, of course,” Trixie stammered uncharacteristically, the confidence in her voice lost. She tugged her uniform nervously with her hooves and took a deep breath. With a more professional voice, she continued, “The situation is this, commander. We have been assigned to a covert operation of transporting something off the colony. From initial reports of the research team on Appleloosa, it appears to be some sort of Prothean beacon.”

Twilight’s eyes widened as she digested the implications of the captain’s words. The Protheans were an advanced race that vanished 50,000 years ago. The mass relays and the Citadel itself were said to be built by the Prothean race. To this day, Prothean relics were some of the most sought-after items in the galaxy, the potential for technological advancement from studying such a relic literally priceless.

“Unfortunately Appleloosa is just a farming colony, and does not have the facility to deal with a discovery of this magnitude. We need to bring the relic back for proper study at the Citadel,” Trixie continued.

“This discovery would mean a great deal to all the council races, not just ponies,” Nihilus added.

“Nihilus is also here for another purpose, to evaluate you.” Trixie’s eyes were suddenly shifty.

“What? Whatever for?” Twilight narrowed her eyes at the captain’s choice of words. *The princess never mentioned anything about an evaluation.*

“Our dear Princess apparently nominated you to be the first pony candidate to join the Spectres.”

Twilight initial reaction was one of surprise. *The Princess... Spectres?* Then understanding dawned as she reconsidered the cryptic way her mentor had worded the letter to her. *My mentor wanted this to be a surprise. Princess Celestia sure knows how to keep a secret,* she thought happily, an involuntary smile broke on her face.

Trixie scowled. “Personally, I think she’s making a terrible mistake. But she’s the princess and I’m just a captain. Unfortunately.” Trixie’s voice left

no doubt on how she felt about this. Twilight managed to keep a straight face as she imagined the reaction of the captain on hearing news that her rival was about to be inducted into the Spectres. She pitied any crew member who had been within range of the captain's wrath.

"Nevertheless, you must realize the importance of this task. The Spectres represents the Council's power and authority. If a pony is accepted into the ranks of the Spectres, it shows how far ponykind has come," Trixie ground out the obviously rehearsed speech, her voice unconvincing.

"I look forward to working with a personal student of Princess Celestia." Nihilus offered a short bow. "I hope you do not disappoint your princess's decision to endorse your candidacy into the Spectres."

"I won't, Nihilus." Twilight's chest swelled with pride with the knowledge of her mentor's confidence in her. All her training, all the years of preparation, just for this. Suddenly the princess's intention was made clear. Twilight realised with a start that Princess Celestia probably planned for this years before she even took her in. *I guess being thousands of years old makes one take the long view.*

"Good, the sooner you're off my ship, the better," Trixie said disdainfully.

Nihilus continued, ignoring Trixie entirely. "You will be in charge of the ground team, commander. I will be there... to observe."

"Whenever you're ready," Twilight saluted the spectre smartly. The spectre nodded, his facial features betraying no hint of what he thought of the lavender pony.

Scotaloo's voice boomed over the intercom, interrupting their meeting. "Captain, we have a problem. Just intercepted a distress signal from Appleloosa."

"Well, play it on screen, Joker," Trixie snapped. Twilight and the turian spectre exchanged questioning looks. What could possibly be happening on Appleloosa?

"Aye aye," the pilot replied, a trace of annoyance in her voice.

The monitor in the briefing room flickered to life again, showing soldier ponies on a lush landscape. The sound of gunfire echoed erratically from the background. A soldier pony yelled into the camera, "We're under attack by an unknown enemy force, I repeat, we're under—" the soldier's voice was cut off with a grunt of pain as a stray shot hit his flank.

The view shook wildly as the camera fell to the ground, then righted itself as somepony else picked it up. An orange mare's face came into view. "We need evac now! I don't right care who's gettin' this, just send help..." Her voice trailed off as the camera swung around to catch a huge grayish ship coming down from the sky. Even from the low-quality of the feed, Twilight could make out a distinct insectoid shape to the ship. Red lightning trailed the ship as it began its descent towards the colony. "Sweet horseapples..." the orange mare whispered, before the transmission was abruptly cut. Static filled the viewscreen.

"Our mission just got a lot more complicated," Twilight observed.

Chapter 2

[ESV Normaredy, Appleloosa orbit]

The Normaredy was the only ship within a hundred thousand light years of Appleloosa that was considered even remotely close to battle ready. The next available reinforcements were hours away: even if the nearest battle groups were ready to depart at this very moment, it would still be too late to offer any form of meaningful help.

Given the circumstances, Nihilus decided to utilise the ship's experimental stealth system to its fullest. The Normaredy would insert him and a supporting squad covertly and attempt to retrieve the beacon, before the enemy ships surrounding the planet noticed them.

After some deliberation, the captain chose her chief engineer Rarity and a pegasus marine named Coryander to accompany Twilight down. Her best people she assured Twilight, which did not reassure her one bit. Nevertheless, she did not argue, since the Spectre himself had offered no opinion on the matter.

As was agreed upon, the Spectre had been dropped off first, somewhere to the north of the colony, with Twilight's squad making their way from the south as his backup. With Nihilus already had been dropped off, Twilight and her squad were standing ready to be deployed at the second drop point as agreed.

"Approaching second drop zone, commander," Scootaloo announced over the intercom.

"Alright, let's do this." Twilight glanced at her squad mates for one last time. Rarity was tugging at her armour, apparently deciding the crease on her otherwise immaculate armor was her nemesis of the day. Sensing Twilight's eyes were on her, she quickly stopped fidgeting and flashed a reassuring smile. The red coated pegasus marine just nodded, his wings slightly flaring in anticipation.

Satisfied her squad was ready, Twilight took a deep breath, and concentrated. The mass teleport spell was one of the more difficult combat spells for a unicorn to cast. However the mission called for a quick insertion into the combat zone, which the spell provided, and with the least theoretical risk compared to other options. She had practiced the same spell multiple times in Canterlot University. All in controlled environments, of course, but Twilight estimated she had an 86% chance of casting the spell successfully in this environment.

Her horn began to glow, a soft purple glow at first, gradually building in intensity. The ship's cargo bay faded away as Twilight focused on her spell; every incantation, every spark of energy, each iota of focus had to be precise; lest they could be transported straight into the earth! A white circle enveloped the group, illuminating the bay with unnatural light. Then with a clap of thunder and sound of rushing air, the group vanished into thin air.

[Outskirts of colony complex, Appleloosa]

Twilight sensed the change in the air around them. The smell of recycled ship air and motor oil no longer permeated her nostrils, replaced by the sweet scent of apples and good old earth. The air was subtly warmer, and a cool breeze blew over her mane.

Opening her eyes, she spied the rolling hills of Appleloosa, innumerable apple trees covering the landscape. The sky was a dusky red colour, with the Appleloosan sun shining steadily in the east. To the north, she could make out a plume of black smoke rising from distance—*The colony under attack*, Twilight guessed.

Taking a quick glance around, she was relieved that her squadmates appeared to have arrived in one piece as well. Doing a double take, Twilight noticed Rarity seemed wobbly on her feet. The engineer's face had a sickly green hue.

"Remind me never to volunteer for this again," Rarity said weakly, before gagging and disappearing behind a bush. Moments later, Twilight could hear the engineer retching. Coryander just shook his head and faced the commander.

“Your orders, ma’am?”

“Let’s wait till our chief engineer finds her bearings first,” Twilight said, before feeling a wave of nausea sweeping over her body as well. Feeling bile rising to her own throat as well, she quickly joined Rarity behind the bush.

For a few minutes, the sound of two ponies retching was the only sound echoing over the silent apple orchards. The two soon relived the contents of their lunch and trotted out sheepishly.

“Let us never speak of this again,” Rarity said.

Twilight chuckled. “Agreed. I guess I overdid it with the teleportation spell.” Her face became serious as her mind focused on the task at hand. “Alright soldiers, let’s move out,” Twilight ordered.

The squad slowly made their way across acres of orchards that covered the outskirts of Appleloosa. The apple trees seemed to have remained mostly intact, with only the occasional craters and fallen tree. Disturbingly though, they didn’t find anypony. Nor were there any indication of the enemy so far. Even the skies were silent. No birds, no insects, nothing.

“This place got hit hard, commander. Hostiles everywhere,” Nihilus reported over the radio. Sounds of gunfire could be heard in the background. The Spectre must have landed in a hot zone.

Twilight nodded. “Acknowledged. Moving to Point Alpha.” The lavender unicorn continued forward and cleared the orchards. Only a cluster of hills separated the squad from the outskirts of the colony now.

Spotting the entrance narrow rocky valley, she held up a hoof and halted. “Looks like a perfect place for an ambush,” she whispered over the radio. Twilight considered the situation for a moment, before waving the pegasus marine over. “Cory, fly up and scout for hostiles.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The red pegasus saluted crisply. Spreading his wings, Coryander took off gracefully. The pegasus began flying lazily above the valley. “No sign of hostiles. Looks like it’s - wait, I see something. Looks like...” A brief pause. “Drones! Unknown make... Oh gods, they spotted me!

Taking evasive manoeuvres!"

Twilight watched in horror as several drones rose up from their hidden positions amongst rocks around the valley. Sensing the pegasus, the drones tracked their target unerringly and opened fire. The pegasus began to circle back, zigzagging in a desperate attempt to evade the hail of bullets. All in vain, as his kinetic barriers failed under the onslaught. The pegasus seemed to jerk slightly as several bullets punctured his light armour, before plummeting to ground in the distance.

"Oh no..." Rarity said.

Twilight felt a primal rage grip her heart as the horror of the spectacle began to fade. "Let's teach these drones who they're messing with," she said, horn already glowing as she began levitating the rocks scattered around her. Rarity just stared at the distant horizon, her blue eyes taking on a blank look.

The drones finished sweeping the area around the obviously dead pegasus, and had begun flying back to their hiding places, apparently getting ready for a second ambush. They did not appear to notice the two ponies hiding behind the rocks at the mouth of the valley.

As the drones settled down one by one, abruptly one of drones erupted in a shower of electrical discharge. "You miserable pieces of scrap! Take this!" the white unicorn yelled with barely contained anger. Twilight momentarily gaped at the furious reaction of her companion. *She must be taking this pretty hard.*

The remaining drones whirled about and began to close in on the pair, gun barrels already tracking their new targets. Picking her targets carefully, Twilight began hurling the rocks she had levitated earlier at the oncoming drones. Several found their targets, damaging the drones and forcing some to crash on the ground. Another drone erupted in a merry explosion as Rarity overloaded its electrical systems.

Running out of rocks, Twilight switched to the twin assault rifles on her shoulders. A holographic HUD appeared over her right eye, helping her target the last drone, now trying to fly away from the ponies.

Steady... steady... FIRE!

The drone's kinetic barriers flared for a moment, as Twilight's bullets connected. A moment later, the drone's kinetic barriers failed, and exploded in a shower of sparks.

Silence reigned again.

"Chief Engineer, are you okay?" Twilight asked concern on her face. The white unicorn was slumped on her haunches, panting heavily. She must be exhausted by all that usage of magic, Twilight thought.

"I... I'm fine, darling. Just that... it's been so long since I lost a friend..." Tears brimmed in her blue eyes as the words tumbled out.

"It's okay, Chie— Rarity. I understand," Twilight said, hugging the white unicorn. Rarity hesitated at first, and then buried her head in Twilight's mane as she sobbed uncontrollably.

[Digsite, Appleloosa]

"Are you sure you're okay, Rarity?" asked Twilight.

"Yes, commander. I'm perfectly fine now. Just needed to get some emotion out of the way," replied Rarity, her eyes still somewhat red from the tears earlier. "Look, that must be the digsite." The white unicorn pointed ahead.

The digsite was a cluster of prefabricated habitation units arranged around a central depression, which Twilight guessed was the main dig site. Crates of various size were stacked haphazardly throughout the site. Heavy lifting equipment lay abandoned in a corner. As was becoming usual, no pony was around, nor a single pony body could be found. This was getting creepy. *Where are all the ponies if they're not dead?* The pair advanced on the encampment cautiously.

"They must be getting ready to move out when the attack began," the lavender unicorn observed, as she inspected the abandoned equipment. Before Rarity could answer, a Texan-accented voice called out from within.

“Who goes there? I swear if you’re one of them foalnapping zombies...”

The two ponies looked at each other in surprise. “A survivor!” they exclaimed together.

“Sweet mother of mercy, y’all are a sight for sore eyes.” An orange mare trotted out from the cover of the crates she hid, an assault rifle in her mouth. Her saddle-armour looked battered from multiple hits. Strangely though, she also wore a very unregulation stenton hat, which she seemed to have retained through the battles she must have endured.

The expression on the soldier pony’s freckled face was one of relief. As Twilight approached however, the orange mare’s eyes widened in surprise. Dropping the gun in her mouth, she yelled, “Look out, ma’am!” and pointed a hoof behind them.

Twilight whirled around to find a bipedal robot, with what appeared to be a flashlight for its head, leveling a rifle at them. The robot chattered in a sort of twittering language as it lined up its shot. Before Twilight could respond, she felt the shadow of a heavy object moving past her. The robot abruptly found itself pinned underneath a heavy crate that landed neatly on its torso. Taking advantage, Rarity stomped on the robot twice, making sure it stayed down.

Twilight glanced back to see the orange mare grinning, her back towards them. *That crate must have weighed a ton. That’s some powerful bucking*, Twilight thought.

“Applebuckin’. Good trainin’ for these here hindlegs,” the soldier pony answered, as if reading her thoughts. Her grin faded as she belatedly realised Twilight outranked her. “Gunnery Chief Applejack of the 302nd, ma’am!” Her hooves clicked together as she saluted smartly and stood stiffly at attention.

“At ease, gunnery chief,” Twilight replied formally, waving for the earth-pony to relax as well. She gave a reassuring smile. “Now, what in the name of Princess Celestia happened here?”

“It’s the geth, ma’am. They came out of nowhere and started shootin’ up the place.”

“Geth? You mean those flash-light head... things are geth?” Rarity said incredulously, pointing towards the still-warm robot. “I must say their fashion sense is horrible.”

“I thought the geth had not been seen since three hundred years ago,” Twilight said thoughtfully, recalling her history books on the Geth-Quarian War. A downright nasty example of rogue AI running amok; the quarians had created the geth with the intention of robotic work force. The geth inadvertently achieved sentience and rebelled against the quarians, forcing them to abandon their homeworlds. Remarkably, the geth had not bothered anypony else since they retreated behind the Perseus Veil. Until today anyway.

“That’s what them intelligence people say. Until they went offline anyhow,” Applejack answered with a shrug. Then in a darker tone, she continued, “I don’t rightly know what they are, how and why they came here. But I do know this: they just darn near murdered my entire squad. Who knows how many good folks already died.” The angry look in her green eyes betrayed the depths of her emotions. “I’m the only one left,” she continued in a softer voice.

“It’s okay, Gunnery Chief. We’re here to help,” Twilight said, laying a sympathetic hoof to the soldier’s shoulder.

“That’s not all,” Applejack said. She motioned the ponies to gather closer. Leaning closer, she almost whispered, “They got this spike thingamajig which turns ponies into... into—”

“Into what?” Rarity interrupted, clearly not amused by the secrecy.

Applejack threw up her hooves in frustration. “Hay if I know! Zombie ponies. Or something. It ain’t natural, I tell you. I been watching them. Those geth been at it the whole day.”

“Zombies?” Twilight arched an eyebrow at the term. “In this day and age? Really, Gunnery Chief, I expected better. Right, Rarity? Rarity?” She glanced at the white unicorn when she realised her companion was not answering.

Rarity was shaking on her hooves, her ears flattened in fear, apparently disturbed by the very idea. “Z-z-zombies...” she whispered.

Twilight planted a hoof in her face. “Chief Engineer Rarity, pull yourself together! There’s no such thing as zombies. It’s probably some kind of geth construct,” she said confidently. Rarity and Applejack both shot the commander a disbelieving look.

“Then how do you explain that?!” Rarity pointed to a shadowy figure behind Twilight.

“Explain wha...” Twilight’s voice trailed off she saw the shadow as well. “What the hay is that?” Twilight exclaimed, her eyes glued to the dark figure slowly shambling towards her. The commander could not make out any features on the advancing creature, save that it looked like a pony and had glowing blue eyes. All the same, it made her take an involuntary step back.

Applejack quickly stood on her hind legs and aimed the assault rifle she was carrying with her forehooves. “Stay back, you no-good zombies,” she warned, the barrel of her gun following each step the creature took.

Twilight blinked as she took in the strange way the orange mare was holding a gun. Almost like the bipedal aliens of the Citadel. Her train of thought derailed as the creature moaned again, sending a chill down her spine. She could almost smell the creature now, a strange mix of industrial fluids and decaying flesh.

The figure stumbled closer and into full view. It was a horrifying sight. The entire body was stripped down to its muscles, with wavy tubes protruding from the face and disappearing somewhere below the torso. Alongside the tubes, softly glowing blue lights running up and down the body. Even the hooves seemed to be deformed, sharpened on one end.

“That’s close enough,” Applejack said with finality, and fired her gun. The entire zombie-pony’s head disappeared in a hail of bullets. What remained of the zombie stumbled, before collapsing with a loud thud. A cascade of wails echoed from the digsite around them in response. The unnatural noise made their hair stand on end.

“Gunnery Chief, what was that?” Rarity asked, panic creeping into her

voice, her body trembling.

“Oh, Celestia’s skies, more zombies!” Twilight yelled, unaware that she adopted the term without further thought. More of the shambling creatures appeared from the all sides, some appearing from the prefabricated buildings, others shambled from places unseen.

The soldier just cocked her gun and smiled mirthlessly. “Gonna be a tough fight,” Applejack said, her voice radiating an unearthly calm. The ponies steeled themselves for the inevitable firefight.

The zombies charged.

“Well, that’s that, I suppose.” Twilight sighed with relief, having managed to survive the zombie assault relatively unscathed.

Rarity seemed to have overcome her fear of zombies remarkably quickly once the zombies closed in and acquitted herself well in the battle. That and the fact that one of zombie had inadvertently splashed some gunk onto her immaculately polished armour. It seemed to have triggered some sort of rage-switch. Twilight never knew a unicorn could buck a zombie that far, and she most certainly did not expect that from the fashion-obsessed unicorn. Applejack on the other hand...

“By the way, Gunnery Chief, where you’d learn to fire a gun like that?” Twilight asked casually.

Normally, military earth ponies mounted the guns on their shoulders on account of their lack of opposable thumbs that other bipedals have, and telekinesis that most unicorns are gifted with. Shoulder-mounted guns was the natural answer, even though it was considered somewhat unwieldy. Some unicorns, like her, mounted the guns on their shoulders so that they can concentrate their magic on other uses. Applejack however, was holding the gun like one of the bipedals of the Council races. Very strange indeed.

“Oh, this?” Applejack indicated her gun on the floor. Twilight nodded.

“Them salarians were testing a new omni-tool mod that lets us earth ponies

handle a gun like they do. See?" The orange mare demonstrated by picking up her gun with the help of her omni-tool on her fore-hooves. "Pretty sweet I'll say. I find I aim better this way." She swung her gun left and right theatrically, then lost her balance and fell on her rear.

"Eh heh heh, still need to work on standin' on mah hind legs though," Applejack said sheepishly, brushing a stray forelock out of her eyes.

"So long as you can shoot, I suppose," Twilight commented, rather dubiously. She figured she had time to study the curious tool in the Normaredy later. The Princess would be most interested in such a device...

"Come on girls, let's get moving. Applejack, where's the beacon?"

Applejack scratched her head. "I don't rightly know, commander. It was here when I left for my patrol. Reckon the science team moved it someplace."

Twilight was mildly disappointed by the news. "That's unfortunate. Alright, let's keep looking."

Nihilus' voice crackled over the radio. "Commander? Change of plans. There's a small spaceport up ahead. I want to check it out. I'll wait for you there."

Twilight nodded at the instruction. "You heard the Spectre, let's get to the spaceport."

[Spaceport, Appleloosa]

"Spaceport just ahead, ma'am," Applejack reported.

"Good, stay sharp girls," Twilight had her visor up, scanning for any signs of hostiles. They had already eliminated several geths and at least a dozen more of those zombie things along the way. Twilight still shuddered every time she encountered one of those things.

The spaceport was quite impressive for a colony world. Probably for moving all those apples and farm produce off-world for export. Twilight

couldn't help but compare the size of the colony's spaceport to the ones in Canterlot. Ponyville Intergalactic Starport alone was at least thrice the size of this starport, and it was considered one of the smallest starport on the planet.

Rarity let out a sudden gasp. "Up ahead, commander. I think I see something... is that Nihilus?" She pointed a hoof at the general direction of some sort of cargo storage facility. Twilight narrowed her eyes, following the direction of Rarity's hoof.

"Oh no..." Twilight began galloping ahead, her heart racing with dread.

"Well, he's dead as dead can be," Applejack remarked, checking the body of Nihilus over again. Rarity looked green, apparently not used to seeing a dead body up close. Twilight stood beside the dead turian, studying the corpse.

Nihilus was lying face down, in a pool of his blue blood. There appeared to be no sign of geth around, and nor any sign of battle. A single gunshot wound to the back of his head was all Twilight had to go on. His pistol remained holstered on his hip, another curious oddity.

"I don't understand, he told us to meet him here," Twilight said, a puzzled expression on her face.

"And someone got ta' him first, by the looks of it," Applejack replied.

A small thud echoed through the empty spaceport.

Twilight whirled to face the source of the noise, her horn glowing in anticipation. "Who's there?" Twilight called, gesturing for her squad to be ready. Applejack and Rarity leveled their weapons, their eyes darting in all directions.

A mewling sound. Then silence again.

"Sounds like another survivor," Rarity said. Her blue eyes scanned the deserted cargo bay again.

Twilight nodded to Applejack, who lowered her rifle, and then called out, "It's okay now, you can come out. We're here to help."

No response. The ponies glanced around uneasily, wary of an ambush.

"It's alright. We won't harm you," Twilight called out again.

A rustle from Twilight's left. Glancing at the direction of the noise, she was surprised to find a small white rabbit hopping out of the mess of containers just a few meters away. Twilight blinked again and looked more closely.

The white rabbit was clad in some sort of body armour, apparently cobbled from various bits and pieces of other armour. Carrying a shotgun twice his size. With an angry expression on his face.

"Would ya look at it? A rabbit carryin' a shotgun. Ain't you cute?" Applejack commented, to the obvious annoyance of the rabbit. Twilight and Rarity found themselves giggling at the sight.

The rabbit looked the three ponies up and down, and then signaled to somepony hiding behind the containers. He continued to stare at them warily, his shotgun aimed at the general direction of the ponies. Twilight had a feeling the rabbit was quite experienced with the weapon, despite its diminutive size.

A scared pony face poked out of the containers, relief spilling over on her face when she saw it was fellow ponies. The yellow pegasus slowly trotted out from the shadow of the container she was hiding. She had a wavy pink mane with a cutie mark of three butterflies on her flank. Her entire body was trembling from fear, and her wings were folded tight.

"Oh, thank you so much for rescuing me. My name is Fluttershy," she said in a soft voice. She flinched when the ponies trotted up to her, evidently still shocked from the ordeal.

"Pleased to be of service, ma'am," Twilight nodded, not sure of what to make of the heavily armed rabbit next to her. "Are you the only survivor?"

"Um... I think so. I didn't see anypony else when I hid there," the yellow

pegasus answered shyly. "Did you see anypony else, Angel?" Fluttershy asked, directing the question at the rabbit standing near her hooves. The rabbit shook his head.

Applejack swore in an unpony-like fashion. "Blasted geth, they musta killed everypony else they could lay their dirty little grubbin' hands on." She huffed and glaced around, apparently looking for a convenient geth to vent her anger on.

Meanwhile, Twilight's curiosity finally got the better of her. "Um, may I ask who is the rabbit?" she asked.

Fluttershy smiled, and rubbed the rabbit's head. "Oh, this is Angel. He kept me safe while those scary monsters were coming and shooting their big scary guns."

"Right, am I ta' expect this lil' rabbit can— Woah!" Applejack started, before suddenly finding herself floating in the air. A light blue shimmer surrounded the now-floating orange mare. Twilight blinked in astonishment and glanced the the rabbit. Angel was holding his paw out, as if channeling some great power.

"Angel has special powers... I think she got them after playing in one of those eezo containers," Fluttershy offered in a soft voice.

Twilight blinked in confusion. *Eezo, element zero? Why would...*

Then understanding dawned. "The rabbit is a biotic." Twilight stared in fascination at the little rabbit as she toyed with Applejack, sending her flying in various directions with a flick of her paw. "Amazing! I've never seen any animals with biotic abilities before. I mean, I read about them and the Council races have biotics but I've never seen any ponyfolk demonstrate any form of biotic ability yet." Not that ponyfolks needed biotics to begin with, since all ponies, regardless of type, have innate magical abilities. Citadel scientists have long documented the side effects of exposure to eezo, which included the fatal development of cancerous growths. However, in select individuals, like Angel's case, it led to a development of biotic potential. Something which the rabbit was using to great effect now.

"Wokay, you kin put me down now. I mean it! Stop flyin' me around,"

Applejack shouted, as the orange mare was made to do impossible acrobatics in the air.

“Angel, please stop. They’re friends.” Fluttershy nudged the rabbit gently with her muzzle. The rabbit shot an irritated expression at his master, but complied nevertheless. With the final wave of a paw, the orange mare found herself dropped into a pile of spare parts, landing with a huge crash and cry of pain.

“I’m okay!” Applejack called out from beneath the pile of junk after a moment.

Twilight stared at the rabbit for a moment, unsure of whether to laugh or be extremely wary of the biotic abilities of this unpredictable rabbit. Then she saw Fluttershy nuzzling the rabbit gently, which the rabbit reluctantly acknowledged. Angel seemed to notice he was being stared at and met her questioning gaze unflinchingly. Twilight sensed that under the gruff exterior, the rabbit was fiercely protective of his master. After a moment of hard stares, Angel nodded slightly. For some reason, Twilight knew the rabbit was indicating his acceptance of them as friends of his master. The unicorn smiled slightly and nodded back in reply, surprised on how verbose the rabbit was for somepony with no words.

Turning towards Rarity, she said, “Anyway, with Nihilus dead, we should—”

“I saw that turian before...” said Fluttershy softly, looking at Nihilus’ body.

“What?” Twilight exclaimed, as she whirled around and faced Fluttershy.

Fluttershy shrank back at the sudden outburst. “Oh... it’s nothing important really—”

“Tell me. It’s important!” Twilight shouted, eager to find out more about the incident. Fluttershy shrank back from the commander in response, fear evident in her aquamarine eyes.

The lavender pony realised she was scaring the pegasus and forced herself to calm down. Taking a deep breath, she started again, “Please tell me Fluttershy. It’s very important that we know what is going on.”

“Well... there’s this turian, Nihilus, he came here first. He looked scary, so I hid behind these containers.”

“Then I heard another voice speaking to the turian. It was another turian. Nihilus seem to recognize him, and called him Saren. He seemed to relax and turned his back. Then...then...”

“Yes, go on.”

“He did something terrible.” Fluttershy looked distressed, and began shuffling her hooves. Her rabbit companion seemed agitated and hopped around yellow pegasus.

“Who did something terrible?” Twilight asked patiently, gently coaxing the pegasus to continue her story.

“The one called Saren... he shot Nihilus in the back.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “He shot him, then he just walked away and left him to die.”

“It was horrible... I was afraid. I hid here ever since. It was so scary.” Fluttershy buried her hooves in her face, crying softly as the events of the past few hours overwhelmed her. Twilight stood back, unsure of what to do. Fortunately, Angel hopped towards the pegasus’ face and laid a tiny paw on her face, apparently trying to comfort his friend.

“Thank you, Angel,” she sniffed, visibly calming down.

“That no-good Saren fella’ is up to somethin’. Why would he go around murderin’ good folks in cold blood?” said Applejack.

“Fluttershy, where did this Saren go?” Twilight asked the yellow pegasus gently. Fluttershy shook her head. The unicorn stamped her hooves in frustration, the trail cold before they could even catch up to this turian who murdered the spectre.

“Commander, I think the rabbit knows where he went,” Rarity piped up, indicating the rabbit who was jumping agitatedly and pointing off in the distance.

Applejack followed the direction of the rabbit’s paw. Understanding began

to dawn in her eyes, "The cargo terminal... Commander, I reckon I know where that two-timing bastard went," Applejack said, breaking into a gallop towards the indicated building.

"Wait, what about the civilian?" Rarity called. "We can't very well leave her here."

"She'll just have to follow. The biotic rabbit might be helpful in a fight," Twilight answered, gesturing for Fluttershy to follow. The yellow pegasus mewled, clearly reluctant to follow them into the teeth of danger. The lavender unicorn trotted to her side and smiled reassuringly. "Fluttershy, we'll protect you. Just follow us closely and you'll be fine."

"Oh... okay," the pegasus answered timidly.

Twilight nodded. "Great. Let's go," she said, breaking into a gallop.

"W-w-wait!"

"The geth certainly isn't making it easy to reach Saren, wherever he is," Twilight remarked, as they cautiously stepped off the train that connected the northern and southern portion of the spaceport. The bodies of several geth littered the train compartments.

"Certainly not," Rarity agreed.

"Um... I'm sorry to interrupt... but what's that?" Fluttershy indicated a largish device the size of a postbox lying in one corner of the abandoned tram stop. An angry red light was blinking on a panel set on the top of the device, incomprehensible words scrolling past the screen.

The engineer gasped as she studied the mysterious device. "It's... it's a bomb." She looked the device over. "Ten kilotons by the looks of it. Enough to level the colony and then some."

"Can you disable the device?" Twilight asked worriedly.

"I can try. Looks like it's set to a five minute timer." Rarity checked her

omni-tool on her right forehoof. "Oh dear, I think there might be more of these bombs. I'm detecting the energy signature of three more similar devices in the area."

"Best get crackin'. I betcha those geth ain't happy to see us," Applejack said, pointing to a squad of advancing geth troopers.

"No need to thank me, ladies, I know I'm good," Rarity said with a hint of pride, as she adjusted the curls of her coif delicately.

"And Angel helped as well," Fluttershy added shyly, the white rabbit on her back gesturing madly, evidently annoyed he was forgotten. Twilight had to grin at the way the rabbit handled one of the bombs. Apparently using biotics to rip the detonator out was a perfectly acceptable way to disarm a nuclear bomb.

"Yes, thank you, Angel." Rarity smiled sweetly at the rabbit. The rabbit subsided, apparently mollified.

"Mebbe the geth was blowin' the base to destroy the beacon," Applejack mused.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure they didn't plant those bombs for fun," Twilight replied dryly.

The ponies rounded another building, finally reaching their destination: the spaceport special cargo storage. Twilight unlocked the metal gate with her magic and started pushing it to one side.

"What in the world is that?" Rarity exclaimed, as the gates opened.

The ponies approached the artifact, which was shaped like a stylized L. The base of the thing was covered with ancient hologlyphs which no pony was able to decipher. An antenna rose from the base of the machine and reached thirty feet above the ground. The whole beacon was crackling with energy.

"It wasn't doin' that when we dug it up," Applejack said. "Something musta

turned it on.”

“Saren has gone to a lot of trouble to keep it from our hands,” Twilight said, eyeing the beacon with keen interest.

She began trotting up to the beacon, examining the artifact more closely. The beacon seemed to glow brighter as Twilight wandered closer, though the unicorn pony was too preoccupied with other matters to notice. “Rarity, radio Scootaloo for pickup. We need to get this back to the ship. The scientists at the Citadel will be able to make more of this.”

“Commander, wait—” Fluttershy began.

A green burst of energy suddenly manifested at the tip of the antenna. It lashed out, and struck Twilight as she turned her head to answer Fluttershy. The blast knocked the lavender unicorn down, and caused the other ponies to take several steps back. Before she could recover, a stream of green energy arced towards Twilight and enveloped her body. Twilight eyes rolled upward as she was lifted into the air, the beacon’s unnatural energies filling her body.

“We’ve to do somethin’!” Applejack yelled, her hooves clattering as she rushed forward to shove the commander out of the way.

“Gunnery Chief! No! You don’t know what it will do.” Rarity tackled the orange mare as she neared the levitating figure of Twilight, the momentum of the unicorn causing both to crash into a pile of crates nearby and away from the twitching figure of the commander.

Twilight felt her consciousness being stretched hundreds of thousands of light years. Innumerable images flashed through pony’s mind as she struggled to make sense of it. A huge insectoid ship. Vistas of far away planets. Machinery. Screams of terror. Cries for help. Cities burning.

After what seemed to be an eternity, the visions began to disintegrate. Twilight found herself falling into dark, sweet oblivion...

Chapter 3

[ESV Normaredy, Medical Bay]

Twilight awoke with a start, her mind buried in a haze of fog. She was immediately assaulted by the thousands of tiny needles, each burrowing into her brain. Twilight laid her head back with a groan. She tried to open her eyes, but could only manage a sliver.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re awake, commander.” The melodic voice of Fluttershy filtered through her abused mind as she struggled to stay conscious.

“Commander, please relax. I’m going to give something to ease the pain,” the gentle voice of Nurse Cheerilee echoed faintly to her left. Twilight caught the sound of a trolley creaking, and then felt a dull pain on her left flank. The pain in her head receded somewhat, and she suddenly found opening her eyes less an effort than before.

The head of the shy yellow pegasus from Appleloosa slowly came into focus, a look of concern etched on her face. The pink head of Nurse Cheerilee bobbed behind the pegasi.

“Ugh, I felt like there are ten thousand buffaloes stampeding through my head.” Twilight sat up shakily and rubbed her temple with a hoof. As her mind slowly cleared, she began to recall her last coherent memories on Appleloosa. “Nurse, how long have I been out?”

“About one whole day, commander. You had us worried there,” the nurse replied primly.

“One day? How could I been knocked out for one whole day?!” Twilight all but shouted, sending Fluttershy hiding behind the another bed in the infirmary. The nurse seemed unperturbed and stood there tapping her hooves impatiently.

Suddenly aware that she had been yelling at the top of her voice, the

lavender unicorn covered her mouth with her hooves. Her expression softened as she noticed the pegasus cowering in the corner. “Uh, sorry, I shouldn’t have yelled like that—”

The sounds of galloping hooves interrupted Twilight’s apologies and the medibay was suddenly crowded by half a dozen ponies. “What in name of Red Delicious is happening—” Applejack stopped mid sentence as she saw Twilight sitting up. “Commander! Y’all look all better now. How’re ya doin’?”

“Like the morning after too much wine.” She shook her head to emphasise the point. “Gunnery Chief, report,” Twilight said in the most formal voice she could manage, taking refuge in routine.

“Well, after you were hit by that laser thingamajig, Rarity and I began arguin’ about what to do,” Applejack began. “Rarity here wanted to wait for backup. I would have knocked ya clean off if that mare didn’t tackle me. Luckily for us, darn thing blew up like them fireworks on Summer Sun Celebration after a minute or so. Y’all fell to the floor all clumsy-like and got knocked out cold. So we got ya back to the ship as soon as we could.”

“Great...” Twilight was already regretting ever waking up. “Any harm done?” she directed the question at the nurse.

“Physically you’re fine. Though I’ve detected some abnormal brain waves,” The nurse frowned. “And you were raving about... quite disturbing things during your sleep.”

“I saw... something. Not sure what I saw, but it was quite horrible,” Twilight said uncertainly, not sure whether it had been all a dream or something more sinister. She decided not to mention it to the crew for now, reasoning it would probably just be dismissed.

“Why wasn’t Trixie informed that the commander was awake?” a familiar voice drifted through the door. The medibay door slid open, revealing the irate figure of Captain Trixie. “I’m going to have to speak to the commander... *in private*,” she said, her tone making it clear it wasn’t a request.

The other ponies murmured but complied without objections. One by one, they filtered out the door, Applejack being the last one out. Twilight thought

she saw a sympathetic look on her face before the doors slid shut.

“Commander, you have got some explaining to do.” Her voice dripped ice. Twilight groaned, her headache redoubling at the captain’s words. She already had a bad feeling about this.

Trixie began without preamble. “You’ve got us into a very bad situation. Nihilus was killed. The geth attacking one of our colonies. A priceless Prothean artifact destroyed. All thanks to your incompetence.” Trixie whirled and pointed an accusing hoof at Twilight’s face.

Twilight’s jaw dropped at the captain’s words. *Surely she isn’t going to push all the blame to her?*

“Even worse, this Saren... appears to be leading the geth,” Trixie continued, her voice uncharacteristically serious. The floor rang with the clatter of her hooves as she paced the room.

“What can be so bad about a turian leading the geth?” Twilight asked innocently, not comprehending.

“My dear Twilight, it’s time you learn something about the wild galaxy that isn’t in your books. It is fortunate the Great & Powerful Trixie is leading this expedition, not you,” the slate-blue unicorn snapped, her pointed hat trembling slightly. Twilight flinched at the thinly veiled insult. “This turian, Saren Arterius, is a Spectre. One of the best. If he’s leading the geth... that means he gone rogue.”

“A Spectre, rogue?” Twilight had trouble grasping the concept. A rogue Spectre with all that power in his hands... Twilight shuddered involuntarily at the thought.

“Yes. Even the Great & Powerful Trixie cannot hope to stop an enemy like this. Not with an army of geth backing him. We must go to the Council for help.” The captain’s next words chilled the lavender unicorn to the bone. “And you are going to make yourself useful this time. Or else.”

[ESV Normaredy, Serpent Nebulae]

The ESV Normaredy snapped back into real space as they reached the Citadel Mass Relay Alpha-3. The sleek black and white ship cruised on its anti-photon thrusters towards the massive deep-space station. All around the station, ships of the Citadel Defense Fleet could be seen patrolling the perimeter. At the centre of it all, was the Destiny Ascension. The pride of the Citadel Fleet. The biggest dreadnought ever built, measuring thrice the size of the next biggest turian dreadnought.

“Citadel Control, this is the ESV Normaredy, requesting permission to dock.”

The frigate drew close and gracefully weaved past one of the dreadnoughts of the Citadel Defense Fleet. Compared to the massive warship, the Normaredy was akin to a fly. A well armed stealthy fly, but a fly nonetheless.

“Stand by for clearance, Normaredy.”

“Clearance granted, you may begin your approach. Transferring you to the Equestrian operator.”

On cue the ship banked sharply and began approaching one of the arms of the station. Various skyscrapers and buildings can be seen rising from the habitable areas, with small cutters and shuttles flitting back and forth between the buildings.

“Normaredy, this is Equestrian tower, please proceed to Docking Bay 337.”

The Normaredy eased into the docking bay assigned to it, passing through the invisible barrier keeping the atmosphere inside the bay. As the frigate settled into position, docking clamps at the side of the platform reached out and attached themselves securely to the hull of the ship.

“Welcome to the Citadel, commander.”

[Equestrian Ambassador Office, Citadel]

"This is an outrage! The geth attacks our colonies, and the Council opts to do nothing about it?" the mint green unicorn fumed. She scowled at the holograms of the Council at the console.

As has been tradition for millennia, the Council consisted of three members, one from each of the three major species that populated the council space: the asari, turians and salarians. Together, the three wielded enormous power and influence throughout Citadel space.

"The Traverse is not part of Council space, ambassador. We cannot interfere with the situation there," the salarian councilor answered. His wide amphibian eyes stared ahead at the ambassador unflinchingly. The ambassador did not reply immediately, and instead took to massaging her temples with a hoof.

While the exchange was taking place, the rest of the Normaredy crew were listening in silently on the exchange. The captain herself was standing just behind the ambassador with Twilight taking her place behind Trixie with Applejack. Fluttershy sat in a corner with her pet rabbit, watching the proceeding from afar. Rarity stood at the balcony, admiring the view of the wide open plazas that made up the Presidium below.

As they waited for the ambassador to reply, Applejack whispered to Twilight. "Ya know, I reckon I'll never git used to seeing them salarians. They look like walking frogs." The orange mare shrugged. "That blue one just looks plain wrong. I mean, they ain't even got coats, for Celestia's sake."

"Applejack! They're aliens, of course they look off to us. Besides, the salarians and asari are not to be made fun of," Twilight hissed back.

"Sorry ma'am, tellin' it just as how I see it." The orange mare was quickly silenced by a purple hoof to the mouth, as the ambassador spoke again.

Ambassador Lyra raised a placating hoof. "Fine. I will not dispute that. But what about Saren? You can't ignore a rogue Spectre."

"Citadel Security is investigating your charges against Saren. We will

discuss the C-Sec findings in the hearing. Not before,” the asari councilor said firmly. The holograms of the three council members faded away, the audience apparently over.

Ambassador Lyra shook her head at the now-silent console and turned to face Captain Trixie and the group behind her.

“Captain, I see you brought your crew with you,” the green unicorn commented.

Trixie’s reply was professional and polite. Most unlike her usual boisterous voice. “Yes, ambassador. I brought the ground team here in case you had any questions.” The slate blue unicorn waved a hoof vaguely towards Twilight. “This is the commander, feel free to grill her on her failure.”

The lavender unicorn scowled openly at the captain. *Even in front of the ambassador, she can’t resist a jab.* That’s just low. The ambassador glanced at Twilight, but otherwise said nothing.

“Hey, none of that was the commander’s fault,” Applejack interjected.

“Is that so, Gunnery Chief? The mission reports I read seem to indicate otherwise.” The ambassador raised an eyebrow at Applejack, her full attention now on the orange mare.

Applejack’s cheeks reddened under the scrutiny of the green unicorn, but she bravely persisted. “Nihilus was dead when we got there. Ain’t no way we could’ve stopped that. And the commander here didn’t destroy the beacon. Whole thing just lit up like a bonfire.”

“The beacon exploded after the commander fiddled with it,” Trixie said with narrowed eyes. “The Great & Powerful Trixie is not a fool. She knows all. Your commander was foolish enough to tamper with the device and cost us the beacon.”

“The commander didn’t even touch the darn thing. Anyhow, I reckon it coulda exploded anyway. No one knows fer sure. For all we know, the geth bobby-trapped the whole goshdurned thing.” Applejack argued, her freckled face shining with sincerity. “It could’ve been one of us who taken the hit instead of her.”

Twilight admired the honesty of the orange mare. Not many ponies would be brave enough to contradict both the ambassador and captain of a ship. The ambassador herself looked thoughtful.

“Odd, this does not match the mission reports I have read. In fact, these reports paint a very different picture. I will review them again later, *personally*.” Lyra shot an interrogating glance at Trixie, who strenuously avoided the the ambassador’s yellow eyes.

“In any case, this incident has most likely jeopardised your chances of Spectre candidacy. The mission on Appleloosa was meant to show you could get the job done. Instead, we have a dead Spectre and a destroyed beacon. The council might use this as an excuse to reject your candidacy.” Twilight’s blood froze at the ambassador’s words. *Rejected? But that... that means I failed the princess. No. This cannot be.* Twilight suddenly felt herself sinking into a black hole of depression.

Apparently noticing the shocked look on Twilight’s face, the ambassador softened her voice. “I’m sure the C-Sec investigation will come up with something to implicate Saren in this atrocity.”

“Yeah...” the lavender unicorn said, looking up at the ambassador with hope.

“Don’t worry, darling. We’ll be right there for you,” Rarity said, putting a comforting hoof on Twilight’s shoulder.

“Come with me, captain. There’s a few things we need to discuss... in private, before the hearing.” Lyra gestured to Trixie to follow her, levitating a couple of PDAs from her desk. “Commander, meet with us at the Citadel Tower. I’ll arrange for your clearance.”

With that, the green unicorn trotted out of the room, with Trixie in tow. Twilight stuck her tongue out at the departing captain as she turned her back.

“Come on girls, let’s get to the Citadel Tower.” Twilight sighed. This was going to be a long day.

[Council Tower, Citadel]

“Now Angel, remember, you’re not supposed to hurt anyone here. They’re all good guys,” Fluttershy said softly. The rabbit scowled at the warning, and folded his arms in protest.

“Yeah, we’re lucky that C-Sec didn’t just arrest us when she dumped that Hanar into the lake,” Twilight rolled her eyes. Not one hour in the Citadel and they had already almost managed to cause an inter-species relation disaster. “Lucky for us, the C-Sec constable seemed just as relieved that the Hanar stopped preaching after that. And the Hanar seemed reluctant to press the issue.”

“I do believe the hanar mentioned something about ‘not worthy enough to challenge this furry creature’s might’,” Rarity added in an amused tone.

The lift chimed melodically, and the doors slid open.

A wondrous sight greeted them. The council chamber was as large as a hangar bay, with the ceiling stretching at least 5 storey tall. The walls were opulently decorated, with cunningly placed foliage to give a sense of natural beauty to the room. Fountains placed along the middle of the room shot jets of water high into the air. The whole place reeked of grandeur, which Twilight suspected was precisely the point. Nothing like impressing a newcomer to the Citadel with their wealth and power.

Ahead, they saw two turians and, curiously, a sky-blue pony with rainbow coloured mane and tail in C-Sec uniforms standing about, apparently arguing.

“Saren’s hiding something! Give me more time. Stall them,” one of the turian spoke.

“Yeah!” the rainbow pony added unnecessarily.

“Stall the Council? Don’t be ridiculous! Your investigation is over, Garrus,” the other turian replied, making it clear the issue is closed. It was clear even to Twilight that this one was the higher-ranked one. Dismissing the other turian with a wave of his hand, he turned and walked away just as Twilight and her friends approached.

The turian who was referred as Garrus seemed to sense their approach and turned to face Twilight. He gave her a friendly nod. "Ah, you must be Commander Sparkle. Garrus Vakarian. I was the officer in charge of the C-Sec investigation into Saren." He waved a hand to the rainbow-coloured companion standing next to him. "And this is Rainbow Dash, my assistant. She was the pony liaison for this case." Dash gave a slight bow, but otherwise did not speak. Her magenta eyes studied the commander intently.

"Who was that turian anyway?" Twilight asked, curious.

"Oh, him? That was Executor Pallin, my superior. Very... by-the-book kind of guy, if you know what I mean," Garrus said.

"From the looks of things, you didn't find anything," Twilight said glumly, feeling her depression setting in again.

"Most of Saren's activities was classified. We couldn't find anything solid," Garrus said, shrugging. "And the Executor won't let us dig any further."

"I know he's up to something. I can feel it," Rainbow Dash said, rearing up and punching the air with her forehooves. "I bet he already covered up his tracks."

"Yes, Dash, I know. But our hands are tied," the turian said resignedly. "Good luck commander, maybe you can convince the Council." He gestured to his assistant. "Come on Dash, let's finish the paperwork for this one."

"Ugh, paperwork." The pegasus scowled briefly, before turning to face Twilight. "Nice meeting you, Commander. I heard you were quite the show on Appleloosa. Maybe you can show me some of your moves later."

"I doubt it," Twilight said softly, as the pair turned and strolled off.

The hearing was a formal affair. The three councilors stood on an elevated platform, facing Ambassador Lyra and Captain Trixie on the floor of the

chambers. Next to the councilors, a hologram of Saren Arterius hung in the air. Meanwhile, Twilight and her group stood respectfully behind the ambassador and captain.

“The geth attack is a matter of some concern. But there is nothing to indicate Saren was involved in any way,” the asari councilor said.

“The investigation by Citadel security turned up no evidence to support your charges of treason,” the turian councilor continued.

“An eyewitness saw him kill Nihilus in cold blood!” Ambassador Lyra countered.

“We’ve read the Appleloosa reports, ambassador. The testimony of one traumatized pegasus pony is hardly compelling proof,” the salarian councilor replied.

Fluttershy seemed taken aback by the salarian’s words. “B-b-but... I saw him...” she said softly. Unfortunately, no one else in the chamber paid any attention to her words.

“I resent these accusations. Nihilus was a fellow Spectre and a friend,” Saren said, with a calculated trace of regret. His voice was persuasive enough. Twilight could almost believe him, if not for Fluttershy’s testimony on Appleloosa.

“The Great & Powerful Trixie condemns this sham of a hearing. Saren is clearly guilty and Trixie demands he be stripped of his Spectre status.”

“Ah, Captain Trixie. Still the same blowhard as last time. I wonder, have any other magical bears run you out of town lately?” Trixie’s face reddened at the mention of that humiliating incident. Twilight had to stifle a laugh at the turian’s admittedly low jab. Apparently even the Spectres knew about *that* incident.

Saren turned his cold gaze on the lavender unicorn. “And you, Commander Sparkle. A personal student of Princess Celestia I hear. The one who got the beacon destroyed.”

Twilight felt a chill run down her spine as she sensed the turian’s eyes

drilling into her. She narrowed her eyes in response. “We don’t know how the beacon got destroyed. But you cannot deny that you were working with the geth.”

“Typical of ponies. Shifting the blame to—”

“WAIT!” a familiar voice shouted from across the chambers, followed by the sound of pattering footsteps that rang across the hall. Twilight frowned for a moment as she tried to place the voice in her memory. Then, it struck her.

“Spike?!”

The small purple dragon huffed and puffed as he reached the ponies assembled on the floor. Stopping a moment to catch his breath, the dragon produced a triangular device from his pockets. Placing it on the floor beside the ambassador, he activated the device.

The hologram of the familiar white alicorn with flowing multi-coloured mane appeared beside the ambassador.

“PRINCESS CELESTIA?!” the ponies exclaimed in unison.

Centuries of tradition reasserted themselves quickly, the ponies began kneeling before the regal visage. The three councilors looked bemused at the new development, and glanced at each other. Saren openly showed his irritation at the latest development.

“My apologies for being late. My messenger was stuck in traffic,” the regal voice of the princess spoke through the device, addressing the Council directly. The ponies discreetly got back to their feet as they watched the new exchange. Twilight idly wondered at the strength of the magical device used to project the princess’s image. It must have been a very powerful spell to be able to transmit her image all the way from Canterlot direct to the Citadel itself in real-time.

“Princess Celestia, you honour us with your presence,” the asari councilor greeted. “But I’m afraid not even your presence can change our minds. There is simply no hard evidence tying Saren with the geth.”

The princess flashed a smile. “Actually, I was hoping to request for

Equestria's own to look into Saren's activities instead. After all, the geth attack on one of my subject's colony world is a matter of national concern," the princess said diplomatically, her royal image betraying no hint of her actual feelings.

"C-Sec has already done a thorough investigation. I don't see a need to reopen the case," Saren said, obviously intent on wrapping up the matter.

"I respectfully disagree councilors. I'm not convinced that C-Sec was allowed to probe deep enough. I'm sure many of my subjects would agree. A second investigation from our side would go a long way to allay those suspicions. With oversight from C-Sec, of course." Princess Celestia was at her most charming, offering both carrot and stick.

"Councilors, I have already been investigated once. Do we really have the time and resources to throw away reopening dead-end cases while the threat of geth attacks loom?" Saren said.

"You no-good foalnapping tramp, you led the geth attack yerself!" Applejack shouted. She was quickly silenced by a hoof in the mouth by Twilight, who flashed a guilty smile at the rest.

"Agreed, we have far more pressing matters to deal with than this," the turian councilor said, apparently unfazed by the interruption. The asari councilor nodded in assent.

"Princess Celestia, Commander Sparkle, do you have anything to add?" the salarian councilor asked.

Twilight shook her head.

"I defer to your judgement then, councilors." Princess Celestia's voice sounded a little disappointed.

The three council members glanced at each other briefly, as if seeking confirmation. After a brief nod from both the salarian and the turian councilor, the asari councilor announced formally, "The Council found no evidence of any connection between Saren and the geth. Ambassador, your petition to have him disbarred from the Spectres is denied."

"I'm glad to see justice have been served," the hologram of Saren said smugly, before vanishing.

"This meeting is adjourned," the asari councilor announced with finality. Twilight watched as the councillors turned and disappeared from the dais.

Ambassador Lyra was crestfallen as she turned to face the ponies and the hologram of the princess. "My apologies, Your Highness. I wish I could have done more."

The image of Princess Celestia smiled at the ambassador's words. "Don't fret young one. I know a whitewash when I see one." The green unicorn bowed at the princess' words. "Now where's my dear student Twilight Sparkle?" The princess made a show of looking for her student, even if it was obvious she knew exactly where Twilight hid.

For her part, Twilight was trying her best to hide behind Applejack. On hearing her name, she yelped and jumped in surprise. "Y-y-yes princess?" she stammered. Twilight found herself being nudged forward towards the device. "I'm really sorry it came to this. I know that you had high hopes on me..." She cowered, expecting a rebuke... or something worse.

"Nonsense, Twilight Sparkle. Of all the ponies in the room, I know you better than anyone to know that you give nothing but your best." The princess's tone was genial, almost cheerful even.

Twilight could not describe the relief she felt at the princess's words. "I... Thank you Princess..." Glancing back at the now-empty platform where the Council had stood, she asked, "But what about Saren?"

"I have already alerted our colonies about the possibility of further geth attacks." The implications of the princess's words were not lost on Twilight. Putting the colonies on full alert meant that the entire Equestrian Navy was probably being mobilised as they spoke. "Apart from that, it is up to you, Twilight Sparkle, to prove his guilt. Something tells me, the answer can be found just on the station." The princess gave a cryptic smile.

"I don't understand, princess." Twilight's face was a mass of confusion.

"In time you will, Twilight Sparkle. Now I must go. The magic in this device

is wearing off. Do keep in touch with letters. You know what to do with Spike.” With that, the device gave a spluttering sound and the image vanished into thin air. Twilight stared into the empty space where the hologram was for just a moment longer, before turning to the diminutive purple dragon who was waiting patiently at the side of the device. She flashed a heartfelt smile at the dragon, and scooped him up with her forehooves.

“Well Spike, I guess it’s just like old times huh?” Twilight said as she hugged her fillyhood friend.

“Yeah, Twilight. Just like old times.” Spike replied, jumping on the lavender’s unicorn back.

“I don’t believe this. A personal audience with Princess Celestia and I don’t even get an honourable mention,” Trixie loudly complained.

As if on cue, Spike suddenly belched a gout of green flame, producing a letter. Catching it with her magic, Twilight unrolled the scroll and skimmed through it, before showing it to Trixie.

My dear student Twilight Sparkle,

Before I forget, please tell Captain Trixie I have concerns about her recent behavior and conduct both on Appleloosa and the Citadel. She is to withdraw herself from the investigation of Saren, pending further orders.

*Yours loving mentor,
Princess Celestia*

Trixie’s haughty look disappeared as she read the letter, her face paling visibly. The slate-blue unicorn quickly excused herself from the group, galloping with unnatural haste towards the lift. Twilight did not feel the least bit sorry about the captain’s turn of luck.

“Huh, I guess the princess knows about Trixie after all,” Twilight said with wonder.

“You really think the princess wouldn’t keep tabs on you, Twi? You are her best student after all. The most powerful unicorn under her study.”

“And you’re still my best assistant I ever had,” Twilight replied playfully, rubbing the spikes on his head. Spike blushed at the compliment. Her expression became serious. “Let’s go find this evidence,” she announced firmly.

“Right behind you, commander,” Applejack said.

“Let’s show this turian what we ponies can do,” Rarity declared.

“Um... Okay... Let’s go?” was all Fluttershy whispered.

Angel, unusually, hopped in front of Twilight and gave a thumbs up. Twilight had to smile at the gesture. With her head held high, she set off with her friends.

[The Wards, Citadel]

The 'arms' of the Citadel were known as the Wards. They were the residential centres of the Citadel, each essentially a self-contained city home to millions. It was in one of those cities that the ponies decided to have their meeting, as the bustling crowds should shield their activities from any prying eyes. Or so Twilight hoped.

“Okay, the ambassador gave us a contact... Jelly Punch, C-Sec. Spike, see if you can find out anything about him.”

“Right!” the dragon answered enthusiastically and started combing through the extranet through his PDA. A couple of minute of furious typing later, he exclaimed, “Done!”

“What have you found?” the lavender pony answered.

“Well, apparently he was fired from C-Sec. Drinking on the job. The file says that he likes to go to Chora’s Den, a gentlemen club, somewhere in the Wards.” Spike scratched his head as he puzzled over the name.

“What’s a gentlemen club?”

“Maybe it’s some kind of high-class lounge,” Rarity said, her eyes going

round at the prospect of finally visiting the Citadel's finer establishments. "This pony must have refined taste. Oh, I can already see the place. The glamour. The class. The refined culture..."

Twilight shook her head as Rarity continued, seemingly lost in her own fantasy. "Chora's Den it is then," Twilight said.

[Chora's Den, Citadel]

"Oh my. This is..." Rarity winced as they stood at the entrance of the 'gentlemen club', "... disappointing." She spat the last word out.

"I guess this is not what you hoped for, huh?" Spike asked, oblivious to her tone.

"No, it is not," Rarity answered flatly.

"Pheewwwwwwww. I seen bad apples in my time, but nothing as bad as this rotten apple," Applejack remarked as they entered the seedy bar. Loud, provocative music reverberated throughout the club, the smoky atmosphere giving it a distinct unfriendly look.

"Oh, this smoke is going to make my armour smell for days," Rarity complained.

Fortunately, finding their target was easy. A grey earth pony sitting in the corner was the only pony patron in the bar. Said pony was also nursing a huge cup of wine.

The group discreetly approached the grey pony. "Excuse me, Mr Jelly Punch?" asked Twilight politely.

"Who wants to know?" the grey pony turned a lazy eye on the commander and the group assembled behind her, not moving his muzzle from the cup of wine. He seemed distinctly bored. His ears flicked his sleek black mane apart.

"Hi there, my name is Twilight Sparkles. I'm the commander of the ship ESV Normaredy." Twilight replied, slightly thrown off balance by the

strange pony's mannerism.

"Oh, so you're that hotshot commander who got that Spectre killed?" Jelly Punch suddenly looked more interested. Twilight winced slightly. Apparently the news had already begun to spread. The ex-C-Sec pony turned his full attention on the commander. "Look pal, I don't know how I can help you here."

"We're looking for Garrus Vakarian."

"Oh, Garrus." The earth pony's voice hardened, and his jaw tightened. "One of the finest investigator for C-Sec. Also, the same turian who ratted me out and got me fired." He paused to take a big sip of his wine. "Yeah, I know where he is."

"Where?" Applejack interjected.

"Now wait just a horseapple minute. Why should I tell you ponies anything? What's in it for me?" the gray pony said smugly. Twilight noticed a bouncer standing nearby beginning to take a great deal of interest in them.

"Why you no-good son of a..." Applejack started, getting dangerously close to the gray pony. Before the orange mare did anything however, she noticed Twilight was gesturing her to stop. The orange mare backed down reluctantly. Twilight glanced at the bouncer and shook her head, indicating to the bouncer they won't cause any trouble. The bouncer seemed satisfied, and returned to watching the crowd.

Instead, Twilight nodded at the white rabbit riding on Fluttershy's back. Angel hopped off the pegasus and landed on to the table in a smooth arc. A shotgun magically appeared in his paws.

"Now what do you think you're..." His confident voice trailed off as he saw the shotgun in the rabbit's paws. No pony else in the bar appeared to have noticed. The rabbit shook his head as he saw the grey pony open his mouth to call for help. For added emphasis, Angel nudged his chest with the barrel of the weapon. Jelly Punch quickly took the hint and subsided, fear now evident in his green eyes.

"Tell us where Garrus is, or... we let the rabbit have fun with you." Twilight

flashed an evil grin, though she meant none of it. Angel nodded enthusiastically, mirroring Twilight's grin.

Fortunately, the grey pony didn't know any better. He gulped as his eyes flitted between the shotgun-wielding rabbit and Twilight. "Okay, okay. Just relax. Garrus, you say? He was sniffing around Dr. Sunny Day's clinic. It's near the Markets. Last I heard, he and his pony friend were going back there." He turned a nervous eye on the rabbit. "Can I drink in peace now?"

"Fine. Let her go Angel." Twilight said reluctantly. The shotgun in Angel's paws magically vanished, and he hopped back onto Fluttershy's back in one smooth motion.

"That's a good bunny," Fluttershy said softly, nuzzling the white rabbit fondly.

[Dr Sunny Day's Clinic, Citadel]

"I didn't tell anyone. I swear!" Dr Sunny Day wailed. The dark blue earth pony was surrounded by four turian thugs. One was grabbing her cream mane and waving his gun threateningly.

"Very smart of you, now if—" the turian thug stopped mid-sentence as he saw the door to the clinic sliding open. He grabbed the good doctor around the neck and pointed his gun to her face. Dr Day whimpered in fear.

"Who are you?" the thug shouted at the intruder.

"Name's Rainbow Dash, C-Sec. Looks like I got here just in the nick of time." The blue pegasus smiled cockily. *And not a moment to spare. Garrus was right, these thugs were serious*, Dash thought, as she recognised the military grade rifles they were carrying.

"Don't come any closer, or your pretty little doctor will lose more than just her pride," the thug sneered, as his clawed finger applied more pressure on his gun's trigger. The terror on the doctor's face intensified.

"Please... no," she whispered hoarsely.

“Hah, I can disarm all of you in ten seconds flat,” Dash said coolly, flipping her rainbow mane casually. The thugs failed to notice her wings were already flared, ready to fly. She’d have to time this very carefully. The thugs stood in a rough semi-circle around the doctor. If she took out the one holding the doctor first...

“Yeah, right. Prove it.” The thugs laughed at the prospect of the single pegasus pony overpowering four heavily armed thugs by herself.

Dash narrowed her eyes in response, and steeled her wings. She accelerated to a rainbow blur which enveloped the thug holding Dr Day hostage. The remaining thugs, taken by surprise by the bold move, hesitated at first. Only sheer reflex prompted them to fire wildly at the mini-cyclone surrounding the pair. The bullets all but missed the rainbow pegasus. Their weapons soon disappeared as well as the rainbow blur brushed past them in turn.

A full ten seconds later, Dash was back at the entrance of the clinic, the thugs’ weapons now collected neatly on her back. Dr Day also somehow managed stumble away from the thugs, and was now standing beside the C-Sec pony. She seemed disorientated but otherwise unharmed.

“Ten. Seconds. Flat,” Rainbow Dash announced matter-of-factly. The thugs just wordlessly gaped as they struggled to comprehend the situation, and their empty hands.

Right on cue, the clinic door opened again. Rainbow Dash turned to see Twilight and her friends staring at the scene in surprise, with Garrus in tow.

“Dash, I’m going to take these thugs back for questioning. Why don’t you assist Commander Sparkle here in the meantime?” Garrus suggested, as he handcuffed each thug. The four did not offer much resistance after being disarmed. One was mumbling how embarrassing it was to be outdone by a rainbow coloured pony, of all the things.

“Sure thing, Garrus. Catch you later,” Dash replied.

“Hey, save some for me later,” Garrus called as he led the captive thugs

out of the door.

“Only if you aren’t late,” Dash called back cheerfully, before the clinic door slid shut.

“Wow, you actually disarmed four armed beings alone?” Twilight asked, a note of admiration in her voice.

“Yep, I call it the Disarming-Rain-Bow-Smackdown.” Dash announced proudly. The other ponies giggled at the awkward made up name. The rainbow pegasus winced at the reaction. “Of course, it’s not final yet. I’m still thinking of a cooler name to go with it,” she hurriedly added, not fooling anypony. The ponies giggled even more at her reaction.

“Oh, thank you so much for saving me, Rainbow Dash,” Dr Sunny Day gushed, having finally managed to attract the pegasus attention.

“Well, yeah, that’s what I do,” Dash said a little haughtily, flipping her rainbow mane back.

“Why were they after you doctor?” Twilight quickly interjected, before the doctor could start professing her love and admiration of the C-Sec pony.

“They work for Fist. They wanted shut me up. To keep me from telling Garrus and Rainbow Dash here about the quarian,” the doctor explained.

“Quarian?” Twilight asked. Quarians were rarely seen in Citadel space, since the geth war. Most council races considered them something of a nuisance. Not to mention blaming them for creating the geth in the first place.

“A few days ago, a quarian came in here, seeking medical treatment. She’d been shot, but she wouldn’t tell who did it. By the looks of things, someone was after her,” Dr Sunny Day explained.

“What happened then?”

“She said she wanted to sell information. Something about geth. She plans to trade the information to the Shadow Broker in exchange for someplace safe to hide.”

“Shadow who?” Spike asked, confusion on his face evident.

“Shadow Broker. Somepony who deals in information trafficking,” Rainbow Dash helpfully supplied. “You can ask Garrus later if you want to know more.”

“I told her to find Fist. He’s an agent for the Shadow Broker,” the doctor continued.

“Well, not anymore. Garrus told me Fist now works for Saren,” Rainbow Dash said, shrugging. “Personally, I think he’s got a death wish. The Shadow Broker doesn’t like traitors.” Dash made a slicing motion with her right forehoof.

“Fist betrayed the Shadow Broker? Saren must have made quite the offer.” The doctor pony looked incredulous.

“Of course,” Twilight exclaimed, clicking her forehooves together. “The quarian must have something Saren wants. I bet it links Saren to the geth’s attack on Appleloosa.”

“In any case, we aren’t the only one after Fist. Remember when I said Fist has a death wish. Well, from what I heard, the Shadow Broker hired a krogan bounty hunter named Wrex to take him down,” Dash added.

“Aren’t krogans supposed to be... you know, big, mean and very bad news?” Spike asked worriedly.

“I ain’t scared of no krogan. Why, there’s five soldier ponies here...” Applejack did a double take as she realised what she said. “Okay, maybe not five soldier ponies. We’ve two soldier ponies, an engineer pony, a C-Sec pony and erm... a biotic rabbit on a pegasus. That gotta count for somethin’, right?”

“We’ll deal with it as it comes. Come on! We need to get to Fist before Wrex finds and deals with him. Permanently,” Twilight said.

[Chora's Den, Citadel]

The galloping group of ponies came to a screeching halt as they neared the seedy bar they entered earlier. Sounds of trombones, trumpets and drums emanated from the bar. Streamers and various party props could be seen littered around the entrance. The ponies looked at each other uncertainly.

"That sounds like..." Rarity began.

"... a party?!" Twilight finished the thought.

Rainbow Dash looked at the bar disbelievingly. "It can't be her... can it?" she thought out loud.

"Can't be who now?" Applejack asked, overhearing the exchange.

"Nothing. Just something I imagined. We better get in there and find out what the hay is going on," Dash replied firmly. Applejack eyed the rainbow pegasus suspiciously, but apparently decided to let the matter go for the moment.

"Agreed. Let's move girls. Be ready for anything," Twilight said.

They entered cautiously, wary of ambushes. The bar appeared to be curiously deserted now, except for the sound of the party music. Balloons could be seen all over the place, and a whole banquet of party treats were laid out on the bar. Various colours of blood could be seen splattered on the walls, with dead bodies littering the floor. The contrasting atmosphere was eerie to say the least.

"Hi!" a pink pony with fluffy pink mane suddenly popped up in front of Twilight. To her credit, Twilight merely jumped two feet back when the pony appeared, managing to land on all four hooves. The other ponies fared less well. Applejack ended up behind a table. Dash found herself on the ceiling. Upside down. With Fluttershy. Rarity dead fainted. Only Spike and Angel seemed unperturbed by the pink earth pony sudden appearance.

"Are you here for the party too?" she asked enthusiastically, not particularly directing the question at anypony.

“Err...” the ponies stammered.

“AWESOME! All those strange people ran off when the loud noises started. Silly turians, a party isn’t a party without anypony in it. Come on!” she bubbled as she took Twilight by her forehoof and began an impromptu polka dance. As if on cue, the music changed its rhythm to match the dance.

“Pinkie Pie! What are you doing?!” Rainbow Dash yelled over the music.

Twilight shot a questioning glance at Dash. Her face silently asked, You know this pony? Dash just flashed a guilty smile, and quickly looked away. Yes, she did indeed know of this particular pony. Pinkie was a well-known, if somewhat notorious pony for holding the best parties on the station. It was a mystery to C-Sec as to where she managed to find the required supplies every time she held one. Executor Pallin was on record claiming that ‘that pony is a menace to the station... and somehow manages to have a good time while at it.’ Rainbow wasn’t exactly sure why C-Sec considered her to be such a nuisance, though the number of times she had barged into official ambassadorial parties probably had something to do with it.

“Having a party, silly!” the earth pony answered back.

“In here? Are you insane? Why are you holding a party in here of all places in the Citadel?” Dash replied incredulously. Out of the corner of her eye, Dash saw Spike, Fluttershy and the rabbit dancing to the music as well. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. Applejack was in the midst of chowing down on a large cream pie. The pegasus winced slightly at the reaction of her compatriots. Do they not know the seriousness of the situation?

“Because that nice krogan said Fist wanted a party here. Being the party-pony around, of course it’s my job to organize the party,” Pinkie Pie said, as if stating the obvious.

“Wait, krogan? What’s his name?” Twilight managed to articulate, while being forced to dance with the hyperactive pink pony. She already had a sinking feeling in her gut that they were too late.

Pinkie Pie stopped dancing and looked uncertain for a moment as she

struggled to recall the name. "Um... Vex, Wax..." The pink pony began running through the different combination of names aloud. "Aha! His name was Wrex," she finally blurted out.

"Wrex?! Pinkie, he's a known *criminal* bounty hunter. He's not a nice person," Dash cried incredulously.

"Says you. Why, I know beneath all that Krogan bitterness, he's a nice, kind but grumpy old pony. I just know it," Pinkie replied confidently. Dash rolled her eyes at the reply.

"Oh look, there he is now." She pointed to an open door on one side of the bar, where Twilight could make out a krogan standing in the doorway. Around him lay the bodies of the guards and bouncer Twilight noticed on her previous visit.

The krogan was a big creature, like most of his species: almost twice the bulk of an average pony. His reptilian face bore a prominent facial scar just above his right eye. The red suit of heavy armour he was wearing seemed battered and worn.

Upon seeing Pinkie, he sheathed his shotgun and gave the party pony a grin. The krogan sauntered up to the ponies and clapped her on the back. "Good job Pinkie. I love your parties," the krogan said appreciatively. "Good distraction. Fist didn't even see me coming." He casually grabbed a bun and began chewing.

"Anything for you, Mister Wrex," the pink earth pony replied happily, apparently oblivious to the true meaning of his words.

Twilight put on a brave face as the krogan turned his attention on Twilight. Up close, the krogan seemed even scarier than what Twilight imagined. His whole body seemed ready to leap into battle in a moment notice. At least he didn't seem overtly hostile.

"So, Fist is dead?" Twilight grimaced as she digested the krogan's words.

"He's dead. I always fulfill my contracts," Wrex replied nonchalantly, licking the bits of bun remaining on his lips.

“Ugh, now how do we find out where that quarian went?” Twilight said with frustration. On the other hoof, at least they didn’t need to fight this big scary krogan.

“Don’t know, don’t care. All I care is that my business here is done.” The krogan then eyed Rainbow Dash. “Unless of course C-Sec wants to arrest me now?”

The rainbow pegasus seemed to wilt under the krogan’s menacing stare. “Err... I didn’t see anything,” Dash stammered. She gulped and smiled nervously as the krogan continued to glare at her.

After what seemed like hours, Wrex finally said, “Good. I’m glad we have an understanding.” The krogan cracked his wrists just to emphasise his point. Satisfied that Dash wasn’t going to do anything stupid, he casually walked out of the bar, leaving no hint of his presence behind. Dash stuck a tongue out at the receding figure of the krogan.

“Well, maybe Fist has a record or something that we can find to track down this quarian,” Rarity suggested.

“Of course. He might have stored the data on his secure computer.” Twilight frowned as she considered the potential difficulty of breaking into a modern secure computer. “Getting the data is going to be-”

“Found it!” Pinkie Pie waved a PDA above her head, somehow managing to get hold of one while the ponies were busy with Wrex.

“What? How?” Twilight asked disbelievingly.

“It’s under Q for quarian,” she replied patiently, as if it was obvious.

“I mean his personal computer, shouldn’t it be protected or something?” Twilight said.

“Oh, you just need to figure out the algorithm for generating standard Citadel 512-bit password, then figure out ciphers to match the one on his computer, bypass the built-in firewalls, decrypt the data streams and make sure that the security systems don’t lock you out at the same time. Easy peasy,” she counted off rapidly. The other ponies were slack-jawed, not

expecting such a level of technical expertise in the carefree pony.

“Well... let’s see it.” Twilight levitated the PDA from the earth pony’s mouth. She scanned the text briefly, “Says here he arranged a meeting with the quarian in a back alley in the Wards. His men have orders to kill the quarian and take her data. The meeting is about to start in...” Twilight brought up the current time on her visor, “...twenty minutes. If we hurry, we can still reach the quarian in time.”

“Well, what’re we waiting fer then?” Applejack said, already starting to gallop out of the bar. “Come on!”

“This looks fun. Can I come too?” Pinkie begged Twilight. “Please, please, please!” She knelt in front of Twilight theatrically, blocking Twilight from following the rest of the group, who were already disappearing out of the bar. For good measure, she made puppy eyes. Big round puppy eyes.

Twilight groaned. Those puppy eyes... were irresistible. “Fine, fine. Just don’t get in our way when the fighting starts.” The lavender unicorn already feared that the bubbly earth pony was going to get herself killed by some foolish stunt later.

“Okie dokie. I can take care of myself. Pinkie promise!” Pinkie did a complicated gesture, which ended with her sticking some imaginary thing in her eye. Then she galloped off to join the rest of the ponies.

“Twilight, are you sure about this? I mean, look at her,” Spike whispered. Twilight just gave a helpless shrug, and then galloped off to join her friends before they ran too far ahead.

[Alleyway, Citadel]

The ponies arrived at the alleyway early. No one was around yet. The alleyway was dark, and quite full of shadows. Plenty of places to hide... and ambush.

“What does a quarian look like anyhow?” Applejack wondered aloud.

“No one knows for sure. They usually wear an environmental suit over their

entire body whenever they are seen outside of their Migrant Fleet.” Twilight answered absent-mindedly, as she tried to come up with a plan to help this mysterious quarian. Fist’s files indicated there would be six thugs waiting for the quarian. The hitch was, they would only appear once the quarian was in sight.

“Migrant Fleet?” AJ echoed, clearly not comprehending.

“I’ll tell you all about them when we get back to the ship, okay?” Twilight replied in an exasperated voice. The constant stream of interruption wasn’t helping her think.

Twilight noticed the pink earth pony from earlier bouncing with excitement around in a corner. “Pinkie, are you sure you want to follow us? It is kind of dangerous after— ” Her words trailed off as she found herself being fixed with an uncompromising stare, seemingly staring down in her soul. Twilight felt herself shiver, as if the temperature suddenly dropped.

“Oh-kay, so you do want to follow us. Just checking.” The lavender pony flashed a guilty smile, not willing to risk her soul over that stare. She could hear Dash giggling behind her.

“The Pinkie Stare. Never fails,” Dash commented innocently. Twilight flashed a dirty look at the blue pegasus. Dash just gave a helpless shrug in reply.

Pinkie nodded happily, her mood abruptly swinging back to cheerful. “This is going to be so fun!” she exclaimed with barely contained excitement. Silence greeted her. She cocked her head in puzzlement, before discerning the reason.

The sounds of footsteps could be faintly heard, echoing from the other end of the alleyway.

“Somepony’s coming,” Applejack said, her ears perking up.

“Don’t tell me it’s that alien with that... that horrible suit?” Rarity gasped, pointing a hoof at a figure at the other end of the alleyway. The alien was clearly feminine, with a rather ornate environmental suit. She glanced around warily, apparently debating whether to enter the alleyway or not.

“Her suit design is atrocious. It’s a crime against fashionry!”

“Focus, Rarity,” Twilight reminded the white unicorn. Rarity winced at the prospect of letting this fashion disaster go uncorrected, but nodded. Twilight nodded to herself as the last pieces of her makeshift plans fell into place. All those late nights studying military ambushes finally paid off, Twilight thought with hidden relief.

“Okay, here’s the plan.” Twilight began sketching out her plan rapidly.
“Rarity, you’ll be...”

The quarian was cautious, and kept glancing behind her back. She had one hand on the pistol on her hip, obviously expecting trouble. Reaching a shadowy alcove in the alley, she fiddled with the omni-tool in her right arm. A moment later, six figures materialised from the shadows of the alcove: four turians and two salarians.

“Where’s the Shadow Broker? I thought Fist had arranged for us to meet here,” the quarian said in an impatient voice.

A turian, apparently the leader of the group, chuckled. “They’ll be here. Where’s the evidence?” he replied conversationally, holding his hand out.

“No way, the deal’s off.” The quarian began to walk away. The sound of weapons being drawn made her halt in her steps.

A discrete cough sounded at the end of the alley. “I think that’s close enough, gentlecolts,” Rarity said.

The turian leader seemed startled at the unexpected intrusion and raised his weapon to meet her. Two of his subordinates followed suit, while the remaining three kept their sights aimed at the quarian.

Rarity tut-tuted. “Now now, let’s not be hasty. I’m sure we can work this out peacefully.”

“Lady, I suggest you walk away now and you might just live,” the turian said menacingly, tightening the grip on his rifle.

“Guess again, darling.” Rarity said with a smirk. With a click of her hooves, her glowing horn abruptly flared with impossibly bright light. The thugs flailed helplessly as their eyes were blinded momentarily.

In that exact moment, two of the turian thugs tumbled to the floor, one kicked in the head by powerful hind legs, the other blasted senseless by an energy bolt. A rainbow blur suddenly flew through the other two thugs, leaving them disorientated and stripped of their weapons. One of the salarian thugs managed to raise his weapon, only to be slammed into the wall by a biotic field. The turian leader had just enough time to realise that his squad was down, before noticing a pink shadow in front of him.

“Boo!”

“Gah!” the turian leader stumbled back, dropping his rifle.

“Silly turian! You’re supposed to be scared!” the pink pony scolded, clearly having the time of her life.

In the middle of it all, the quarian stared at the spectacle, dumbfounded by the sudden help.

The ponies came out of the same shadows the group had been hiding not too long ago. Twilight gathered the fallen weapons with one swoop and floated them out of reach. The turian leader’s expression alternated between surprise and deep shame that his group was taken down so easily.

“Now then, as I was saying, are you very sure we cannot work out a more civilised manner to settle this dispute?”

As the last of the thugs were shuffled away by C-Sec constables; the ponies, Garrus and the quarian finally had the privacy to discuss their matter more openly. Garrus, as was rapidly becoming usual, was late to the party and was teased mercilessly by his partner. He seemed to take it in good spirits, however. “At least you didn’t kill anyone. Imagine the paperwork we’ll have to fill for manslaughter,” he joked.

“Thank you for rescuing me. But, who are you?” the quarian asked, in a distinctly accented voice.

Now that the danger had passed, Twilight studied the quarian more thoroughly. Like most race of the Citadel, she was bipedal, with three fingers on her hands as opposed to four. Her legs were bowed back significantly in contrast to most of the other bipedals of the Citadel. The quarian’s entire body was covered by her environmental suit, which seemed to be made of a sort of synthetic rubber. To top it all off, she wore a cloak on her headpiece. Twilight could not make out any facial features on the inside of the mask, save for two glowing eyes. It unsettled the unicorn a little.

After a moment of awkward silence, Twilight decided to play it safe. “My name is Commander Sparkle. I’m looking for evidence of Saren working with the geth.”

“Then I have the chance to repay you. But we need to go somewhere safe. Fist may have more thugs gunning for me.” The quarian glanced around nervously, evidently expecting another group of thugs to ambush her.

“Well, the ambassador office then. We’ll be quite safe there. Ambassador Lyra would want to see you anyway,” Rarity suggested.

“Good idea, let’s go before we cause any more trouble,” Twilight said.

Chapter 4

[Equestrian Embassy, Citadel]

“Well, looks like our dear commander has returned,” Ambassador Lyra welcomed. “And who are your new friends?” She waved a hoof to the gaggle of ponies and aliens that were standing behind the unicorn. Twilight stared blankly at the ambassador for a moment, before divining her meaning.

Twilight gestured at the pair of C-Sec agents with a forehoof. “This is Garrus and Rainbow Dash from C-Sec. They were the ones in charge of the C-Sec investigation into Saren.” Both gave a slight bow to the ambassador. Lyra nodded politely in reply, but otherwise said nothing.

“This is Pinkie Pie.” Twilight indicated the pink earth pony.

The pink pony half-bounced, half-trotted up to the ambassador and shook her hoof vigorously. “Hi!” she greeted brightly. The ambassador looked slightly uncomfortable shaking hooves with the hyperactive pony. To Lyra’s obvious relief, Pinkie soon disengaged her hoof and took her place behind Twilight.

“And the quarian is... I don’t think I got your name.” Twilight grimaced at her lapse of manners. Throughout their short journey to the embassy, she never thought to ask for the quarian’s name.

“Tali’Zorah nar Rayya,” the quarian said, saving Twilight the trouble.

“Tali’Zorah,” Twilight repeated, pronouncing the foreign name carefully. “She is the one who found the evidence against Saren.”

“Quite a diverse party you picked up, commander,” the mint green unicorn said, raising an eyebrow at Twilight. “Well, let’s see the evidence you collected then,”

Nodding, the quarian fiddled with her omni tool. A slightly metallic voice

filled the room.

“Appleloosa was a major victory. The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit.” Even though the voice was distorted, Twilight was able to recognise the speaker. The spectre, Saren Arterius.

“I think that most *definitely* proves who was behind the attack on Appleloosa,” Rarity said, folding her hooves together.

“Hah, I knew that sucker was guilty,” Rainbow Dash declared, fluttering her wings with excitement. Her face became thoughtful. “Hey, what do you think he means about the Conduit?” she asked, not unreasonably.

“No idea, Dash, I have never heard anything about a conduit. As far as I can recall, there’s nothing in my books about any of this,” answered Twilight, shrugging.

“Maybe it’s some sort of ancient Prothean machine...” Rainbow Dash speculated. Gears seemed to whirl in her mind as her imagination ran wild, all those years of trashy doomsday novels being finally put to good use. “...maybe it’s a super weapon! Some super awesome weapon that is so terrible, the Protheans hid it. Maybe... something that can smash planets!” Her words were met with gasps and murmurs.

Prothean technology was centuries, maybe even millennia, ahead of any technology Equestria currently had. The mass relays were one such piece of technology. No species were able to duplicate the mass relay thus far, even with centuries of careful study. It was not implausible the Protheans stashed away weapons of mass destruction that could obliterate planets.

Twilight turned to the dragon on her back, “Spike, load up as many materials as you can about the Protheans onto the Normaredy. We’re going to have a lot of reading to do.”

“Righto, Twilight.” Spike jumped off the lavender pony’s back and went to work at the ambassador’s computer terminal.

“This should be enough to convince the Council to strip Saren of his Spectre status,” the ambassador said with satisfaction. “Good job, commander. I see the Princess’ faith in you isn’t misplaced.”

Twilight's cheeks flared red at the compliment. It was nice to hear her abilities being appreciated for once. Aside from the princess of course, who always made it clear she valued Twilight highly.

"Wait, there's more," the quarian said. Every pair of eyes in the room swung back in her direction. She shifted uneasily at the sudden attention.

"More?" the ambassador asked, the frown creeping back onto her face.

The quarian nodded, and played back the recording again. Again, the familiar voice of Saren spoke, "Appleloosa was a major victory. The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

A harsh feminine voice then continued, "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers."

"I don't recognize that voice," the ambassador said thoughtfully. Neither did Twilight, or the rest of her crew for that matter.

"Who cares? We got our evidence; let's get this to the council now," Rainbow Dash said impatiently. The sky-blue pegasus flapped her wings impatiently and hovered above the quarian.

"Hold yer' horses a minute there, Dash. What in tarnation are the Reapers?" Applejack asked, scratching her head. "I've never heard of such critters before in my entire life."

"According to the memory core, the Reapers are some form of hyper-advanced machine race that existed 50,000 years ago," Tali explained, her faintly accented voice the only sound in the room. "The geth believe that the Reapers hunted the Protheans into extinction. Then they vanished. There has been no records of them since."

Twilight listened to the story intently. *Interesting, so if the Protheans were hunted into extinction then...* The unicorn gasped slightly, piecing together bits and pieces of the images that were seared into her brain on Appleloosa. They must have been showing her the genocide of the Prothean race by the Reapers! The beacon, it must be a warning of some sort. It was too bad she couldn't make head or tail of it. Maybe the Protheans encoded it in some sort of cipher or code. Fortunately for

Twilight, nopony else noticed the distant look on her face. Or that she wasn't even paying attention to the rest of the story.

The quarian continued her tale, "The geth revere the Reapers as gods, the pinnacle of non-organic life. They believe Saren knows how to bring the Reapers back." Tali looked expectantly at the ambassador, who was still deep in thought.

"So... this Reapers... are some kind of super robot alien... race that..." Dash gulped, her face visibly paled. "... exterminates all organic life?"

Tali nodded. "That's what they are. According to this memory core anyway." Silence descended as each pony processed the implications of the tale. Most looked distinctly uneasy. Fluttershy was already hiding under the coffee table, her body trembling with fear.

"The Council is going to *love* this," Ambassador Lyra finally said, a hoof rubbing her temple.

"Well, no matter what they think of the rest, those files still prove Saren is a traitor," Rarity pointed out.

"Good point," the ambassador acknowledged. She lapsed into deep thought for another moment, before making her decision. The mint green unicorn straightened her back and said, "Right, I'm going to go and arrange another meeting with the Council. Meet me at the Citadel Tower when I call. It might take some time though, the Council will not be happy to see me again." She began shuffling some papers around on her desk.

"Wait, where's Captain Trixie?" Twilight finally noticed the absence of the brash captain. The other ponies began looking around the room as well, apparently just realising her absence as well.

The ambassador didn't even glance back. "No idea. She left my office in a hurry to take care of some personal business. I haven't seen her since." With that, she cantered out of the office.

"Huh, she doesn't seem too concerned," Twilight said to nopony in particular. Well, if the ambassador was not concerned, then maybe she shouldn't either.

“Probably ‘cause that no-good blowhard wasn’t such a big loss,” Applejack remarked. The other ponies from the Normaredy snickered, having been subjected to the full force of the captain’s personality on the ship. Twilight however, said nothing. She had a feeling the captain might be trouble in the future.

“Commander? A word please,” the quarian piped up.

Twilight turned to face the quarian. “Yes, Tali?” she asked, a quizzical expression on her face.

“I want to come with you,” she said simply. Her tone made it clear it was not a request.

“Bwuh?” Twilight was suddenly at a loss for words. *Why is this quarian suddenly offering her help?*

“You heard me. Saren is a danger to an entire galaxy. What does it say about me if I turn my back on this? My Pilgrimage can wait.” The quarian’s glowing eyes glinted with determination behind her mask.

“Wait, Pilgrimage? Are you on some—” Spike started, obviously thinking of something else unrelated.

Tali facepalmed at the dragon’s question. “I’ll explain later,” she replied in a patient voice, cutting Spike off. Spike raised a claw to object, but one look at the quarian’s demeanour made him reconsider.

“We’re coming with you too!” Garrus and Dash said in unison. They looked at each other in surprise, before bursting into laughter.

“Great minds think alike eh, Dash?” Garrus said, winking at the blue pegasus.

“Yeah,” Rainbow Dash replied, beaming. “That Saren is so going down with the two of us on his case.” She air punched with her hooves.

“Wait, what? I didn’t say anything about—” Twilight began to object. She found her open mouth stuffed full with cupcakes instead. The unicorn

glared at the culprit; the party pony who somehow managed to balance a whole tray of cupcakes on one hoof.

“Aw, come on, commander! It’ll be super duper fun. We’ll have makeovers, parties, and kick lots and lots of bad guys flanks!” Pinkie said enthusiastically.

Twilight could only mumble an incoherent objection, desperately trying to chew past the mass of cupcakes in her mouth. Her purple eyes frantically indicated no.

Pinkie took that as a yes. “Yay!” she exclaimed.

Applejack and Dash exchanged high hooves. Fluttershy looked uncertainly at the unfolding scene, too timid to voice her objection that she was never part of this outfit to begin with.

“Um... whatever you want to do is fine...” she squeaked softly. On her back, Angel folded his arms and put on his trademark scowl. The rabbit clearly remained unamused at the fact that he was about to be dragged around the galaxy.

Twilight finally had the sense to spit out the pastries in her mouth. She looked at all the enthusiastic faces beaming at her with the sole exception of Fluttershy, and the quarian, whom she still could not read. Pinkie, in particular, was pulling out her puppy eyes again. Defeated, Twilight flattened her ears and sighed. “Fine, you guys can come.”

The resulting cheer deafened the lavender pony and echoed even across the Presidium.

[Presidium, Citadel]

“I guess we might as well explore the place while waiting for the ambassador’s call,” Twilight said. Only Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Dash and Garrus accompanied her. Fluttershy was off to visit the Presidium’s massive arboretum. Rarity was bubbling about going to a fabulous shopping mall in the Wards, and took off in a hurry. Spike stayed behind in the office to make arrangements for the newcomers on the ship. Tali was

content to stay with the dragon in the office where she felt safe.

The group were standing in the middle of the Presidium, on one of the many bridges overlooking the massive lake that stretched across the place. Unlike the Wards, the Presidium was considered one of the most exclusive places in the Citadel, being located in the center of the station. An artificial sky was projected overhead, complete with artificial illumination simulating the light of a star, giving the ponies the feeling of being on a planet instead of the deep space station. All around them, various dignitaries and alien beings passed by. It was a peaceful and serene place, all and all.

"Hmm, I wonder if there's any fish in them lakes." Applejack stared at the blue waters of the lake thoughtfully.

"I bet there're thousands of small little fishies in the lake. Wanna go take a look?" Pinkie Pie replied, holding up a snorkeling kit she somehow managed to dig up. The pink pony was already wearing her own kit.

Twilight was horrified at the prospect of two of her friends swimming in a lake in the middle of the most exclusive location on the Presidium. She quickly intervened. "No, Pinkie. There will be no swimming in the lakes." For good measure, she also levitated the snorkeling kit off Pinkie's hooves and out of reach.

Pinkie pouted at the restriction. "Awwwwwww...." she said glumly.

"Well, well, look who happened to stumble into my path again. The bright and aspiring commander," a very familiar voice called out from behind Twilight. Twilight turned to face the speaker with narrowed eyes.

"Trixie," she spat.

"*The Great & Powerful Trixie*. You would do well to remember the correct title," the blue mare said haughtily. She was now dressed in a more informal cloak, stars of every shape dotting the fabric. It seemed to match her pointed hat rather better than her captain's uniform.

Pinkie Pie half-hopped past Twilight to face Trixie. She pointed a hoof at her snout. "You! I know you. You're that meanie Twilight told me," she said, narrowing her blue eyes. Leaning closer, she half-whispered to Trixie, "I

have my eye on you.” The pink pony stared directly into the blue mare’s eyes. Trixie felt herself sweating as she tried to match the pink pony’s glare. She needed to distract this pink simpleton, fast. Remembering the party pony’s reputation, she tried a simple trick.

The captain hurriedly pointed in a random direction. “Oh look, is that a party?”

“Party? WHERE?” Pinkie exclaimed excitedly, breaking the stare and bouncing off in the direction of Trixie’s hoof. The pink pony disappeared out of sight before anypony else could stop her.

“Heh, simpletons. Too easy to manipulate.” Trixie said, her smug look hiding the apprehension she felt at the brief confrontation.

“What do want, Trixie?” Twilight asked, not amused by her behaviour.

“Nothing more than revenge, my dear Twilight Sparkle,” Trixie said with a flourish, and swirled her cloak. The bright gem on the clasp of her cloak glinted brightly.

“Behold!” Her horn lit up theatrically, fireworks spouting dramatically around her. Twilight could swear she heard fanfare amongst the exploding fireworks. The fireworks continued to pop across the bridge they were standing on, and black smoke started to envelop the bridge. Twilight and the other ponies coughed, their vision obscured. Trixie herself was no longer visible. Her maniacal laughter however could still be heard.

“Commander! Look out!” Dash suddenly shouted.

Twilight felt herself being shoved to one side by the blue pegasus. Lying on her flank, she heard a single gunshot. It was a trap. The smoke, the fireworks, they were a distraction. Trixie wanted to kill her! The mere thought of the captain turning traitor churned her stomach.

“Ambush! Put up your kinetic barriers!” Twilight called. She began casting a wind spell, hoping to dissipate the smoke.

“Wait, this isn’t part—” the confused voice of Trixie said, the loud pops of the fireworks going off fading. Before she could finish the sentence

however, gunfire erupted all around them. Twilight gritted her teeth as she felt a couple of bullets hitting her kinetic barriers. The wind spell she had casted was working, but the dense smoke cloud was taking time to clear.

“Ah can’t see them!” she heard Applejack yell over the sound of gunfire.

“Stay steady, the smoke is clearing.” Garrus called back, his assault rifle emitting a steady staccato. He was still firing blind though, so it was a futile gesture at best.

Bit by bit, the smoke began to dissipate. Twilight squinted through the gloom, and made out about half a dozen hazy figures on each side of the bridge. As the pall lifted, she saw that they were mostly turians and salarians, each heavily equipped with military-grade armour and assault rifles. Their armour were painted in a curious blue scheme. Mercenaries, if Twilight were any judge. At the sight of the smoke clearing, they stopped firing, apparently taken by surprise by the number of ponies on the bridge.

Twilight’s tactical mind quickly distilled the situation. The mercenaries choose their ambush well, having entrenched themselves on both the north and south end of the bridge, using the odd bench and the plaza’s delicate architecture as cover. On the other hoof, the ponies had been standing right in the middle of an open bridge, with no cover in sight, and no way to escape, save jumping into the lake. Unfortunately, jumping into the lake was not an option, since the mercs would probably just finish them off while they were flailing about in the water. They were trapped like a fish in a bowl.

Twilight glanced back at Trixie, who was still standing in the same spot. She wore a blinkered expression on her face, her jaw hanging loose. Her pointed hat lay on the floor besides her hooves.

“Fools, what are you waiting for? Finish them before the C-Sec arrives!” a krogan voice shouted. Startled into action, the mercenaries opened up with everything they got. It was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed and shredded to pieces by the bulletstorm. Already, Twilight noticed some of her friends’ kinetic barriers starting to fail.

The commander made a decision.

Her horn glowing brightly, Twilight began to reach deep into herself. The spell she was casting was a basic barrier spell, designed to temporarily block incoming projectiles. The power of the barrier was proportionate to the power of the unicorn casting the spell. An average unicorn could probably cast a barrier that lasted up to several seconds in a firefight, making the utility of this spell situational at best. Commander Sparkle was no ordinary unicorn. In seconds, she weaved a semi-circular magical energy barrier that covered one end of the group, shielding them temporarily from weapon fire coming from the north side of the bridge.

"I can't shield both end!" she called, her voice strained from the effort. The mercenaries seemed surprised by the move, but continued to pour fire into the barrier. One of the mercs took out a portable rocket launcher, apparently deciding the extra firepower was needed.

"Let Trixie show her magic," she heard Trixie say. Another pale blue barrier suddenly appeared on the other side of the small group, complementing Twilight's semi-circle. The barrier surrounding the group was now an impenetrable wall. Twilight blinked in confusion. No time to ponder the matter though. She needed to concentrate on keeping the barrier up. At least it bought them precious time to figure a plan out of this mess. The unicorn winced as a rocket impacted against the barrier.

"Got one in my sight," Dash said, the sniper rifle on her shoulder moving ever so slightly as she tracked her targets. The sound of her rifle's boom cut through the air. In the distance, a salarian merc crumpled to the ground. "Oh yeah! Got that one," she whooped.

"Don't get cocky Dash, they still outnumber us," Garrus reminded. As if to reinforce Garrus' words, a grenade landed right beside Dash, somehow managing to slip past the energy barriers.

"Oh horseapples!" Dash shouted, and frantically kicked the grenade away. The grenade sailed off the bridge and landed in the lake below with a splash.

"Where the hay is C-Sec? The Presidium is supposed to be the most secure place on the Citadel," Dash yelled.

"Damned if I know. Must be some emergency elsewhere on the Presidium."

Garrus replied.

[A short distance away]

“Freeze!” a turian C-Sec constable yelled. “We have you surrounded!” Two dozen more guns clicked as the C-Sec constables trained their weapons on their target.

“Okie-dokie-lokie,” the shadowy pony in the corner said, raising her hooves. The three salarians who were huddling in the corner quickly scuttled for the safety of the door. “These guys weren’t in the mood for a party anyway.” She trotted out cheerfully to the nearest policepony and held her hooves out.

The radio on the C-Sec captain crackled, “Captain, we have a firefight in the middle of the goddamn Presidium. Where are your men?”

“Sir? We’ve just arrested the pink pony like you ordered. Top priority.”

“Captain, I’m going to personally demote you for the error in judgement you just made. When I said I wanted Pinkie Pie arrested, I DID NOT MEAN FOR YOU ABANDON THE WHOLE PRESIDIUM TO ARREST HER. NOW GET BACK HERE AND CONTAIN THE SITUATION,” the voice on the other end snarled.

“Y-y-yes, sir!”

“I’m not sure how long I can keep up the barrier,” Twilight said weakly. The unicorn was panting slightly from exhaustion, though the glow of her horn remained steady.

“Trixie hopes you imbeciles have a better plan than us standing here getting shot at,” Trixie snapped, her voice betraying the effort she was putting in. Both unicorns still kept up the barrier against the hail of bullets being unleashed, but it was clear they weren’t going to last much longer.

“We’re workin’ on it.” Applejack replied, firing her weapon in short steady

bursts, keeping the merc's heads down as much as she could. Dash managed to snipe another merc who was unlucky enough to pop his head out at the wrong time.

The mercs were down to nine effectives, but they were entrenched on either side of the bridge. No signs of C-Sec yet. "Consarn' it. We can't break through either side of the bridge. We'll get shredded if we tried to run fer it."

"Dash, see if you can distract those mercs over there," Garrus suggested, pointing a clawed finger towards the south end of the bridge. "With your distraction, maybe we can take out the two hiding behind that railings."

"Right—" Dash narrowed her eyes as she spotted a small figure moving slowly up behind the mercs on the north side. "Is that Executor Pallin?" The Presidium was mostly empty by this time, so it was relatively easy to make out the turian from the distance.

"The Executor? In person?" Garrus squinted to see the small figure for himself. So it was. The C-Sec Executor in red and black combat armour was carrying a pistol, apparently intent on taking the mercs from behind. "What's he doing here?"

Dash shrugged. At this point, she was grateful any form of help to even care why. "His office is just next door remember? He must be the only C-Sec officer left in this part of the Presidium. At least he got them distracted." Dash pointed at one of the turian mercs, who crumpled to the floor as the Executor opened fire with his pistol. The group of mercs seemed to be surprised by the new threat in their rear and a few turned to face the new threat. The hail of fire on Twilight's side of the shield decreased correspondingly. "Let's charge them from this end and take them out. Only four left."

"As good a plan as any at this point. Commander, on the count of three, drop the shield." Garrus said. He was met with a weak nod from the lavender unicorn. "Applejack, Dash, get ready. Trixie, after we move, you drop the shield as well and run like hell for the nearest cover."

"Why is the Great & Powerful Trixie the last one to go?" Trixie hissed.

“Because we need you keep the other mercs off our backs while we take out those mercs on our side,” Garrus replied tersely. The turian was not in the mood for arguments. Mercifully, Trixie decided not to press the issue.

“On three. One,” Garrus slowly counted.

“Two.” Dash had her wings flared and ready to fly, while Applejack had her gun in her mouth, her entire body tensing in anticipation.

“Three!”

Twilight’s horn abruptly lost its glow and the purple barrier collapsed. Unhindered, bullets began to patter across the open surface of the bridge and onto the kinetic barriers of the four stranded on the bridge.

“Go, go, go!” Garrus yelled as he ran forward in a crouch to minimise his profile. He fired his rifle on full auto to keep the mercs’ heads down. His battered kinetic barriers took a few more hits. Fortunately, it managed to hold until he found a convenient bench to seek cover behind.

Applejack broke into a gallop towards the mercs, with Twilight following closely behind. Rainbow Dash flew up and away, perpendicular to the bridge in an attempt to distract some of the fire off the ponies on the ground. Her speed was the only thing that kept her safe from the heavy rain of weaponfire from the mercs.

Trixie maintained her side of the barrier for several more precious seconds. Sensing that her time was up, she let go of the spell. Quickly turning tail, she galloped as fast as she could after them, somehow managing to evade the hail of fire from the other end of the bridge.

Applejack managed to reach one of the entrenched mercs relatively unscathed and delivered a sound kick to his face. The turian was flung to the floor, unconscious. Taking his place, Applejack took the gun from her mouth and began firing on the mercs on the opposite side of the bridge.

Not far behind Applejack, Twilight found herself sheltering behind a row of square pots of plants. Sensing that her foe was on the other side of the plant, the unicorn took stock, the hundreds of different ways to take out an enemy behind cover flashing through her mind. In the end, she took the

most direct method. The unicorn kicked the plant pot with her hind legs, toppling the edifice. The merc scrambled away from the falling pot and out into the open. He was greeted with an energy blast from Twilight's horn, which knocked him all the way into the lake.

The last salarian merc still standing saw the his comrades being taken out by the ponies. He threw down his weapon and began running.

"Not so fast," Executor Pallin bellowed, the turian rising from his hidden position, his pistol raised. A single shot was all it took to bring down the fleeing mercenary.

At that exact moment, the blaring of sirens on the other end of the bridge signalled the arrival of the rest of the C-Sec officers. A brief but furious exchange of fire on the other end of the bridge erupted, before all went silent. Twilight could see the remaining mercs were raising their hands in surrender.

The battle lasted precisely five minutes and forty-three seconds.

[Equestrian Embassy, Citadel]

"As usual, the Great & Powerful Trixie saved the day," the blue mare blustered, as they walked through the door of the embassy. Twilight was too tired to argue with the captain, her energy sapped from maintaining the magical barrier that protected them in that fight.

The C-Sec had arrived metaphorically red-faced to round up any surviving mercs. Most quickly surrendered after seeing their hopeless situation. The krogan leader had chosen to charge half a dozen C-Sec officers armed to the teeth. He didn't survive the charge.

As the C-Sec contained the situation, Executor Pallin praised the commander for her resourcefulness in handling the ambush. The executor seemed relieved that she hadn't been killed: this would have raised a lot of awkward questions about the competency of C-Sec. He even released Pinkie Pie into her custody, provided Twilight keep the pink pony in line and 'off my goddamned station' as the executor so tactfully put.

“Wow, Twilight, that was some battle! We could see the whole thing from up here!” Spike gushed.

Tali nodded her suited head at the lavender unicorn. “Impressive work, commander. You took down a whole army of mercs gunning for you. Not many could have done that.”

Twilight flopped on the couch and glanced at the captain wearily. The blue mare looked disgustingly fresh, despite her earlier exertion. *Maybe Trixie does have some talent hidden behind all that bravado.*

“I thought you set us up when it first started,” Applejack said to Trixie. The soldier pony still glared at the captain with distrust.

“Please, Gunnery Chief. The Great & Powerful Trixie may be the greatest unicorn in Equestria, but she is also a decorated captain of the Equestrian Navy. Why would the Trixie betray her own country?” Trixie said, her face genuinely surprised.

“Um... because of how she humiliated ya in front of the princess?” Applejack hazarded. Trixie looked at the orange mare with a mixture of pity and condescension.

“Gunnery Chief, that was just a minor setback. Trixie fully expect the commander to slip up in some way and the princess will come begging for me to fix the problem. Why should Trixie work to hasten the inevitable?” the blue mare said, as if stating a fact of life. Twilight shook her head at the captain’s words. If not for her huge ego, she would have made a fine captain.

“Trixie, I don’t plan to fail. Not when the princess and all of Equestria is counting on me,” Twilight said dryly. Before she could continue, the embassy door slid open again with a hiss, revealing the worried figures of Rarity and Fluttershy (and Angel).

“Oh Twilight, I’m so glad you’re okay. We came as soon we got the word.” Rarity stopped as she noticed Trixie. “What is she doing here?” Rarity pointed an accusing forehoof at the captain.

“It’s alright, Rarity. Believe it or not, she helped us during the battle. I think

that should be enough reason, no?" Twilight answered, a wan smile on her face. She didn't like defending the captain, but she had to give credits where it was due.

"Err... of course, darling. Whatever you say," Rarity said, clearly not convinced.

Twilight tilted her head questioningly at the captain. "Anyway, if that ambush wasn't your idea, then what was your plan?"

Trixie smiled cryptically. "Twilight, you should know that a good magician never reveals her secrets."

"You mean this data disk I found in your satchel?" Pinkie said brightly, holding up the disk with a hoof. Trixie's smile faded and she quickly emptied her bags in search of her 'mysterious secret'. Not finding her prize, she turned disbelievingly at Pinkie.

"How did you—?" she spluttered, her confident voice gone. Twilight just giggled at Trixie's shocked appearance. By now, she was getting used to Pinkie picking up random items off the floor or somewhere equally improbable. Even if it was a little unsettling.

"Let me see that, Pinkie," Twilight said, levitating the disk towards herself. She examined the disk closely. It seemed to be an ordinary data disk except for some words scrawled in a corner. Squinting closely, she made out the words, 'Twilight's Private Moments'. Twilight felt her cheeks reddening with embarrassment. She turned to glare at the captain. "Trixie! Were you spying on me?" Twilight demanded.

Trixie shuffled her hooves guiltily, avoiding Twilight's gaze. Twilight shook her head. "Honestly Trixie, humiliating me with my own 'private moments' has to be a new low for you," Twilight admonished. A split second later, the unicorn regretted her hasty words, having inadvertently revealing out the contents of the disk. The other ponies stared at Twilight, wide-eyed. Even Tali and Garrus seemed more interested in the exchange.

"Private moments... huh?" Spike began. "I wonder if she recorded that time where—"

“Thank you very much, Spike, I’m sure *my friends* do not need to know the details,” Twilight quickly interjected, her face now bright red with embarrassment. For good measure, she shoved a handy sock into the purple dragon mouth, lest he found the temptation to tell too great. His mouth full, Spike resorted to glaring at Twilight sullenly.

“Darn, now you got me curious,” Applejack blurted. She gave a sheepish smile when the lavender unicorn turned her dark glare on her. “Okay, maybe not too curious,” she conceded hurriedly. Twilight could hear giggling behind her.

“I’ll be keeping this safe now,” she announced, quickly keeping the disk inside her satchel before the other ponies could assault her with more embarrassing questions. The very notion that she had been being spied on by the captain unnerved her. She’d have to make a through sweep of the ship later. Especially her room.

The radio in Twilight’s ear crackled. “Commander, you may come up to the Citadel Tower. The Council has agreed to see our new evidence.” A pause. “Also, you might want to brief me about that firefight in the Presidium.” The ambassador’s tone indicated she found the situation somewhat amusing. “Executor Pallin was quite furious about the lapse in security on the Presidium itself. Fortunately, I hear you acquitted yourself well.”

“Yes, ambassador, we survived that fight.” Twilight replied dryly. “We’ll be on our way. Sparkle out.” She turned to the quarian. “Tali, you’ll need to come with us. You’re a star witness now.”

[Citadel Tower, Citadel]

The second hearing took place very similarly to the first, with the notable absence of Saren himself. As was customary, the ambassador and captain stood on the podium facing the councilors, with the rest standing in a respectful distance behind. The chamber was now surrounded by a dozen C-Sec agents, apparently stationed after the breach of security in the Presidium.

The recording was played again, Saren’s voice reverberating throughout the chamber, followed by the unknown feminine voice.

“Here’s the proof you wanted,” Ambassador Lyra stated. She wore an impassive look on her face, apparently deciding not to be vindictive about finding the evidence. Twilight thought she was being generous, since the council had dismissed their claims so casually in the first place. Then again, she wasn’t a diplomat, and the subtle nuances of galactic politics were not her forte anyway.

The three councilors glanced at each other briefly, before the turian member moved to speak. “This evidence is irrefutable, ambassador. Saren will be stripped of his Spectre status and all efforts will be made to bring him to answer for his crimes.” The councillor seemed distinctly unhappy.

“I recognise that other voice, the one speaking with Saren. Matriarch Benezia,” the asari councillor said, a worried look on her face.

“Who?” Twilight spoke up.

“Matriarchs are powerful asari who entered the final stages of their lives. Revered for their wisdom and experience, they serve as guides and mentors to my people.”

“Well, this Benezia doesn’t sound very wise if she supports Saren,” Rarity remarked snidely.

“Wise or not, the matriarch is a powerful biotic and has many followers. She will make a powerful ally for Saren,” the asari councilor replied. Twilight nodded in agreement. The matriarch sounded like a powerful ally to have indeed.

“I’m more interested in this... Reapers. What do you know of them?” the salarian councilor directed the question at Twilight.

“Only what Tali was able to extract from the memory core. The Reapers were an ancient race of hyperadvanced machines. Then they vanished.” Twilight answered. “The geth believed the Reapers are gods, and Saren is the prophet that will insure their return.”

“We think the Conduit is key to bringing them back. Saren’s searching for it. That’s why he attacked Appleloosa,” Ambassador Lyra continued.

“Do you even know what the Conduit is?” the salarian ambassador asked skeptically, his large amphibian eyes flitting back and forth between Twilight and the ambassador.

“Well... no.” Twilight admitted. “But if Saren wants it, that’s bad right?”

“This is ridiculous. Saren wants to bring back the machines that wiped out all life in the galaxy? Impossible. It has to be.” the turian councillor said incredulously. “Where did the Reapers go? Why did they vanish? Why have we found no trace of their existence?” He narrowed his eyes at the commander. “If they were real, we’ve would found something by now.”

“But councillors—” Twilight started.

“I agree with my fellow councillor here. This is different. We all agree that he’s using the geth to search for the Conduit. We just don’t know really know why,” the asari councilor interjected.

“The Reapers is obviously a myth. A convenient lie to cover his true purpose. A legend he used to bend the geth to his will,” the salarian councillor said dismissively. It was obvious his mind was already made up.

“But the Reapers are real! They have wiped out civilisations before. Who’s to say—” Twilight argued, before the ambassador raised a hoof to silence her.

“Commander, I believe the Council has already made up their mind regarding this issue,” she said gently. The mint green unicorn shook her head slightly, indicating Twilight should not press the issue.

“But ambassador, if the Reapers really wiped out all organic life fifty thousands years ago, do you really want to chance Saren using the Conduit to bring them back?” Twilight shot back. The lavender unicorn had come too far to let this opportunity go past.

“Saren is a rogue agent on the run for his life. He no longer has the rights and resources of a Spectre,” the turian councilor pointed out. She could tell the ambassador... and the Council wasn’t buying her argument.

“I’m afraid that’s not good enough councilors,” Lyra said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Even if he doesn’t have the authority of Spectres anymore, he has had plenty of time to use his power to recruit supporters in the Terminus Systems. By now, he probably has a standing army of geth and a entire armada to back him up.” She paused fractionally. “The Council would have to send a fleet to root him out.”

“The Great & Powerful Trixie offers graciously to lead this fleet of ships to look for this Spectre. With the might of a Citadel fleet behind me, we can have this rogue in custody within the month and the geth broken, Trixie offered.

“We cannot just send a fleet to look for him. Our actions might spark a war against the Terminus systems,” the salarian councilor countered.

“You no-good alien cattle-rustler. Every time we ask for help, you turn us down,” yelled Applejack from behind. Again, she was promptly silenced by Twilight, who resorted to tying a piece of cloth around her snout.

“I have to agree with our freckled friend here, much I hate to admit it. The Council has not been very supportive of our cause thus far. The princess—” the ambassador said, before the asari councilor cut her off.

“Wait, there maybe another way. A solution that will not require fleets or armies.”

The turian councillor jerked his head towards his peer in alarm. “What?! No! It’s too soon. Pony-kind is not ready for the responsibilities that come from joining the Spectres,” the turian councillor objected with a wave of his hand.

“Princess Celestia personally picked the chosen candidate. I think she’s as ready as she can ever be,” Lyra said, waving a hoof over at the lavender unicorn, who was deep in thought.

“What?” Twilight blurted, a surprised look on her face. She quickly corrected herself, “I mean, yes, I’m ready!”

An enthusiastic voice spoke up from behind the ambassador. It was Pinkie Pie, hopping around in excitement. “Don’t you see? It’s a great idea! We can go together on grand adventures, chasing down the big bad meanie

Saren. The Citadel don't need to send ships, we get our very own pony Spectre and get to have grand parties wherever we want. Everypony's happy!"

The ambassador seemed surprised at the unexpected help, but she nodded and stared expectantly at the councillors. "I think she made her point very clear, councillors," Lyra said.

Again, the three members of the Council paused, and glanced at each other. After what seemed like a moment of silent deliberation, both the turian and salarian councillors nodded. Twilight thought the turian councilor seemed fractionally slower in giving his assent.

"Commander Sparkle," the asari councillor called. Twilight's ears perked up. "Step forward."

After a brief moment of hesitation, the unicorn trotted forward, the ambassador moving slightly to make room. She now stood at the edge of the podium, facing the three most powerful figures in the known space. The asari councilor looked directly into her purple eyes, unnerving the unicorn slightly. The chamber fell into a deathly silence, and Twilight could hear her heart beating. She felt dozens of eyes boring on her.

"It is the decision of the Council that you be granted all the powers and privileges of the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance Team branch of the Citadel," the asari councilor said in a formal tone.

Twilight felt her heart racing. This was the moment, the day the princess had been preparing for her for.

"Spectres are not trained, but chosen. Individuals forged in the fire of service and battle, those whose actions elevate them above the rank and file," the salarian councilor continued.

Her mind flashed back to the events of Appleloosa. The battles. The husks. The geth. Nihilus. Disarming the bombs in the colony. The battle on the Presidium.

"Spectres are an ideal, a symbol. The embodiment of courage, determination and self-reliance. They are the right hand of the Council,

instrument of our will,” the asari councilor said.

Twilight’s chest puffed. Deep down, she resolved not only to a symbol, but to the embodiment of everything ponykind should reach for. It would be what the princess expected of her. It was what Equestria would look to her as.

“Spectres bear a great burden. They are the protectors of the galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold,” the turian councillor finished.

As the turian councillor spoke, Twilight found her shoulders being weighed down by the enormity of her task. The turian councillor was right. It was her duty and responsibility to uphold galactic peace if she accepted. Ponykind... all Citadel races would be depending on her to keep the peace.

“This is a great achievement for ponykind, being the first Spectre, Commander Sparkle. Do you accept?” the asari councilor asked.

Twilight was at a momentary loss of words. So much was flying through her mind right now. The responsibility. The prestige. The pride. The privilege. It was overwhelming.

“Well, Commander?” the asari councillor pressed.

All the wild thoughts in mind suddenly crystallised into one single emotion. The lavender unicorn’s face beamed as she shouted a single word.

“YES!”

[Crew Deck, ESV Normaredy]

Spike rapped on the door to Twilight’s cabin and called, “Come on, Twilight. You been in there for a whole day already.”

A weary voice replied from behind the door. “Leave me alone Spike. My reputation is forever ruined.” Spike could hear the sound of somepony turning on the bed.

“Aw, come on Twi, it wasn’t so bad.” Spike tried to reassure her. The effect was spoiled by the sound of his two companions giggling. He waved for Garrus and Rarity to keep silent.

“Yeah right, Spike, you’re just saying that to cheer me up.”

“It’s true. I mean, sure, you did scream with joy when the Council made you a Spectre. But everypony will right?”

“Spike, you left out the part where I also shouted ‘Yes!’ continuously for five whole minute, while prancing about in front of the Council AND the ambassador like a foal, in front of a dozen camera who happened to film the moment. **It. Was. A. Disaster.**”

“But... Twilight... you looked... so cute—” Spike self-control failed and he began to burst out laughing as the memory of the incident surfaced. Unable to control himself, he fell to the floor laughing uncontrollably. Another groan emanated from behind the locked door.

“Spike, you horrible dragon! We should be cheering the commander up, not... laughing... at...” Rarity began to giggle as well. “... her... oh my stars, I can’t help it.” she said, her forehooves desperately covering her mouth.

Garrus gave a chuckle at the words of the white unicorn. “I’ll have to admit, commander, you do look pretty cute jumping about like that. And the extranet seems to agree.”

“Garrus! You’re not helping,” Rarity manage to blurt while giggling helplessly.

“I’m never coming out of this room again!” Twilight wailed.

“Oh, my sides hurt,” the purple dragon said, as he finally managed to control his laughter. “Anyway, Twilight, come on. You’re the first pony spectre ever. We should be celebrating,” he said in his most convincing voice. Which wasn’t much. “We even got you a present.”

“Yeah, Twilight, come on. Your present has already arrived. We ordered it specially from the Citadel,” Rainbow Dash called from the stairs.

“Oh...” the voice behind the door hesitated. “Fine.” The ponies and Garrus outside grinned at each other. Their trap was set.

“We’ll be waiting for you upstairs, darling,” Rarity called, as they made their way up the stairwell.

“Yes, yes, I’ll be right there,” Twilight called back. The lavender pony reluctantly got out of her bed and began brushing her mane, which got altogether tussled from her time in the room. Flicking a final strand of stray hair into place, she unlocked the door and trotted out.

The unicorn stopped in her tracks when she realised just how empty the crew deck was this time. Even during off-hours, there would be at least a couple of crew-members talking over a meal in the galley or taking a nap in the crew quarters. But now... nopony. Not even Ditzzy who would stop by the galley every so often for another helping from her muffin collection. Her ears perked up as made out some jaunty tune emanating from the stairs. *Strange, why would somepony play such a tune in the CIC?* she thought. Twilight began making her way up the stairwell, the tune getting louder with each step.

The moment the door slid open, she instantly knew.

“SURPRISE!”

The yell deafened Twilight, who stood staring in shock at the vastly changed room. The whole CIC was decked in party colours and decorations. The holographic map of the galaxy rotated brightly amidst the balloons and streamers that hung all around. Each workstation was somehow converted into makeshift tables for various party treats.

“Spectre commissioning party!” Pinkie Pie declared, taking Twilight by the hooves. The pink pony dragged the stunned commander around the room. “Do you like it, huh huh? After the totally awesome thing you did back in the Citadel, you looked sad. So I was like, Pinkie, what should you do? Then I thought, of course, this calls for a party! Parties always cheers ponies up!” The pink earth pony paused to take a deep breath, before continuing. “So then I bought all the party supplies on the Citadel and made everypony promise to keep it a secret because then it wouldn’t be a surprise...” the pink pony continued on her whirlwind exposition about how she organised

the party.

Twilight had to smile at the pink earth-pony's enthusiasm. She could tell she worked hard to decorate the ship and spring the surprise on her. And all her friends went along with it. Twilight glanced at each in turn. Applejack with a big grin on her freckled face. Rarity delicately trying to drink punch from a glass. Rainbow Dash chatting amicably with Tali. Fluttershy in one corner, terrified of attention, yet flashing a shy smile at Twilight. Spike riding on Garrus' shoulders, shouting excitedly.

"Thanks girls. I really appreciate it," she said sincerely, a wide smile on her face. Whatever hurdles Twilight would face on her mission, she knew she could count on her friends.

Intermission 1

[Equestrian Embassy, Citadel]

“Okay, Commander, now that you’re officially a Spectre, you’ll need a ship to get around in the Terminus Systems,” Lyra said, tapping her hoof thoughtfully. The green unicorn leaned back on her chair and clasped her hooves together. “Fortunately, the princess has already made arrangements.”

“Well, now that the commander will be getting her own ship, I’m sure the Navy has other plans for the Great & Power—” Trixie started impatiently, apparently eager to rid herself of Twilight as soon as possible.

“She’ll be taking the Normaredy, captain,” Lyra said, deadpan.

For a moment there, the fact did not register with the captain. She stared at the ambassador blankly. Then as realisation dawned, her jaw dropped.

“What?!”

“You heard correctly,” the ambassador replied, unfazed by the shocked look on the captain’s face. “Commander Sparkle will be reassigned as the captain of the Normaredy for the duration of her mission. In the meantime, you’ll be reassigned here to me, as my advisor.” Lyra wrinkled her nose slightly as she spoke. Twilight thought the green unicorn didn’t look all too happy about the situation either.

“But, but... my ship...”

“Captain, the princess’ decision is final,” Lyra said firmly. She glared at the captain, as if daring her to make more objections. Trixie worked her mouth like a goldfish, but no words came out.

Hearing no further protests, the green unicorn flashed a wan smile. “Good, I’m glad you approve, Captain.” The ambassador turned to face Twilight. “I have already transferred the appropriate clearance and command codes over to your assistant.”

“I’m honoured, Ambassador.” Being the captain of one of the most advanced warship in the galaxy? The princess was sure going out of her way to provide her with the best equipment available. She glanced at the former captain. Trixie seemed to have lapsed into a state of shock, her violet eyes vacantly staring at the wall.

“Cheer up, captain. Think of it as a promotion. Not every captain in the Navy gets to be the ambassador’s personal assistant after all.”

Trixie blinked at the lavender unicorn words. Her expression changed to that of dawning understanding, then confidence.

“Of course! The princess foresaw my special talents are more useful behind the front-lines.” She used a forehoof to flip her immaculate mane back. “The Great & Powerful Trixie shall not disappoint. The whole Citadel shall know the prowess of this captain. For it is I, the Great & Powerful Trixie!” Trixie reared on her hindlegs and struck a dramatic pose, fanfare and fireworks erupting behind her. Twilight coughed and spluttered as the smoke from the display blew into her face.

The ambassador remained impassive. “Well, ‘*Great & Powerful*’ Trixie, you might want to start by clearing up all these outstanding requisition forms that piled up in my office.” Lyra levitated over a dozen PDAs to the blue mare. “Then you can sort out this mess of...” Lyra went on to dictate over twenty different task for Trixie to do.

Twilight had to stifle a guffaw at the way Trixie scowled after Lyra was finished.

[The Wards, Citadel]

The Wards. A place for everypony needs, if you knew where to look. Which was why two ponies were on a shopping trip at this very moment.

“Now Fluttershy, you know Angel needs a new outfit. I won’t let her go into a fight with that horrible outfit of his,” Rarity said. She had to suppress a shudder at the fashion disaster that the bunny constituted. Angel was still wearing that makeshift armour she somehow fashioned together on

Appleloosa. The unicorn had no idea how the rabbit managed to incorporate a geth's chest piece into the armour, never mind how she built the whole thing to begin with.

"Um... okay Rarity." Fluttershy answered, glancing at Angel. The rabbit on her back was wearing his perpetual scowl, and looked at the crowds with bored eyes. "I'm sure we can find a pretty outfit for you Angel." she said softly to the rabbit. The scowl on Angel's face deepened.

"Ah, this shop looks promising. 'Levona's Fine Armoury'," Rarity said, clapping her hooves. "Come, Fluttershy. Let's get shopping done."

"Ugh! If I hear one more asari shopkeeper saying, 'I'm sorry miss, but we don't stock for small animals', I'm going to tear my mane out in frustration!" Rarity seethed. The white unicorn was especially distressed at her abject failure to help her friend to find the outfit he needed. For all the wonders of the Citadel, there was a surprising lack of choices in bunny outfits. Especially combat-ready ones.

Fluttershy lowered her head in response, her ears flattened. Really, this shopping trip was stressing her friend out more than even she was. The yellow pegasus scrapped up the courage to speak. "It's okay Rarity. There's really no need for Angel to get a new outfit. He looks fine just the way she is."

"Nonsense, darling. I won't take no for an answer. I'll get her a new outfit even it means I have to weld the outfit myself," Rarity answered firmly. What kind of fashionista she would be if she let the travesty that was Angel go uncorrected on her ship?

The pair trotted past another shop, this one fairly mundane in comparison to the ones they visited previously. The holographic sign was dimly lit and said simply, 'Harten's Odds and Ends: Everything You Ever Need.' The window was caked in grime, and obscured the shop's interior. Rarity didn't even give the shop a second glance, dismissing it as yet another run-down store.

"Canterlot-clan. Do you not wish to browse my wares?" a muffled voice

called out from the shop's darkened interior. The pair stopped at mid-trot and turned to face the speaker. It was a volus, standing by the door.

"No thanks, volus. I'm sure we can find our wares somewhere... more reputable." Rarity replied, a little unnerved by the volus' sudden appearance.

"I... overheard your little conversation. I might have something you can use." The short, stocky alien, slightly shorter than a pony, stepped out of the shadow of his store. The volus, like all of his kind, was dressed in a black, durable environmental suit, in a similar manner to quarians. The volus species evolved in a methane-based atmosphere, a rarity in the galaxy. In order to survive in the oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere most of the other Citadel races take for granted, they taken to wearing special environmental suits when off-planet.

"Really? In a dinky, run-down store?" Rarity waggled an eyebrow at the volus. Fluttershy just stared at the alien, wide-eyed. She never seen a volus before.

The volus merchant shrugged. "I specialises in wares which other shops find too exotic to stock. Unfortunately, that also means I don't get many... customers, as you might imagine." He waved a pudgy hand towards his shop.

"Still..." Rarity recalled her stellar lack of success so far in more reputable stores. And the equally unproductive time in the space mall. "Alright, we'll see what you have. No funny business, mind."

"Um, Rarity, I'm not so sure..." Fluttershy looked at the darkened store with worried eyes. Tales of evil criminals who kidnapped ponies to torture them and bake them into cupcakes danced in the back of her mind.

"Trust me, darling," Rarity reassured the pegasus, and flashed a smile. She began to follow the volus into the shop. After a moment's hesitation, Fluttershy made to follow her friend as well.

[C-Sec Shooting Range, Citadel]

Boom!

The loud crack of the rifle echoed across the deserted shooting range.

“Ha, nailed that one in the head,” Dash boasted, blowing the smoke off her rifle with satisfaction. Her chosen target sported a neat hole in the center of ‘head’. Glancing at her companion, she gave a cheeky grin. “Beat that, AJ.”

Applejack just grinned back, and loaded her battle rifle. She reared on her hind hooves and gripped her gun steadily. Seconds ticked by as she slowly sighted the target.

“Applejack, if you can’t—” Dash started, before a series of shots interrupted her words. A neat line of holes in the center of the ‘head’ of the target indicated where Applejack aim was. Dash’s jaw dropped at the sight.

“How did you—?” she spluttered.

“Rainbow Dash, you ain’t the only pony here who knows how to shoot. I been a soldierpony longer than all y’all been in C-Sec,” Applejack drawled lazily.

“Hmph. Well, I bet I can beat you in a real fight,” Dash replied, a jealous expression passing over her face.

“Now, now, Dash. You can’t be the best in everything you know,” Garrus called from behind. The turian was sitting relaxedly on a bench behind the ponies. His metallic face broke into a grin upon seeing the scowl the blue pegasus gave him. He ducked as a water bottle sailed over his head.

[Equestrian Embassy, Citadel]

“Ooh, ohh, Twilight, can I ask a question?” Pinkie Pie asked in a bright voice. She bounced excitedly as she spoke.

Twilight, who was trying to concentrate on reading her PDA on the couch,

sighed. "Yes, Pinkie what is it?"

"Great! Sp you see, there's this friend of mine. He loves to fight and stuff. He's also the bestest cook ever. Can he join us in the mission? Huh? Huh? We need all the help we can get right? Plea-a-a-e-se? He's the bestest friend of mine ever in the Citadel."

Twilight rolled her eyes in response. If what she knew of Pinkie's behaviour was any indication, this would be yet another stray pony she'd have to pick up and nurse during the mission. She also knew the pink pony would not leave her alone to her studies unless she agreed in some fashion. With a reluctant long-suffering sigh, the lavender pony nodded in agreement. "Just... let me see him before we go alright?" Hopefully, she can find some reason to keep her companion off the ship if he or she turned out to be as annoying as Pinkie was.

"Oh, he's waiting outside right now," Pinkie Pie replied happily. Before Twilight could reply, the sounds of a scuffle interrupted the conversation.

"Sir, this is the embassy of Equestria, you can't go in without an appointment," the guardpony outside was saying, apparently to the intruder.

"Out of my way, pipsqueak. I already have my appointment with a friend," a rough reptilian voice answered. One that Twilight recognised from Chora's Den. Her head snapped to Pinkie, who was grinning manically.

"Pinkie! Your friend is Wrex?!" Twilight demanded, already dreading the worst.

"Duh! He's my bestest of best friend. Why wouldn't we be?" Pinkie Pie answered, as if the very fact was obvious. Her blue eyes were sincere as far as Twilight could tell.

Twilight facehoofed. The pink earthpony was somehow the good friend of this dangerous mercenary bounty hunter. The burning question that was eating the lavender unicorn was, *How? How the hay she managed to gain the trust of a krogan?* The sounds of the scuffle escalating outside broke Twilight's chain of thought. She better let the krogan in before somepony got shot.

Stepping through the door, she was greeted with the sight of the familiar red-armoured krogan being dogpiled by three different guardsponies. Two were holding the krogan down, who in turn was apparently in the process of breaking the wings of the third guard. Thankfully, the krogan's sidearms were still sheathed behind his back. All four froze at the sound of Twilight's hooves clopping.

Twilight sighed. "Let him go, guards. He's with me." The guards glanced at each other, then at the commander. Realising that she was serious, they reluctantly let go of the krogan.

"Wrex, you can let go of his wings as well," Twilight added. The krogan blinked at the command, before releasing his hold on the guard's wings. The guardspony rubbed his wings gingerly and nodded his thanks.

The sound of galloping hooves behind Twilight was the only warning she got of Pinkie approaching, before being knocked to one side by the pink pony. The lively party pony jumped to hug Wrex, who reciprocated the gesture.

"Wrex! Silly krogan. You didn't have to muscle your way in."

"Well, I didn't like the way they're looking at me," Wrex said, and shot a glare at the guardsponies around them. The guards glared right back, no love lost between both sides.

Meanwhile, Twilight found herself knocked to the floor on her rump. She shook the stars out of her eyes, and turned to look at the mercenary. "I take it you're the one whom Pinkie mentioned?"

"Yes. I still owe a couple of favours for my pink friend here. Wrex always repays his debts," the krogan answered plainly.

Twilight let out another long-suffering sigh. "Since I probably won't get a say in the matter anyway, welcome aboard," Twilight said sardonically.

"I look forward to see you in battle... Commander." Wrex replied simply, an amused grin on his face. Twilight had an inkling the krogan knew just how persuasive Pinkie Pie can be. Somehow, that irked her a little.

“Oh thank you thank you thank you so much Twilight. It’s going to be so much fun with so many friends going together,” Pinkie said excitedly as she bounced around the lavender unicorn.

Twilight scowled at the pink ponies words. “Yeah, fun,” she said. Adding the krogan to the crew was certainly going to bring howls of complaints to her ears before long. Already she dreaded on how to explain to the princess of the wisdom of letting so many alien crew onboard one of the Navy’s most advanced warship.

Her letter to the princess was already a week overdue.

[Engineering Deck, ESV Normaredy]

“Wow, this ship is a marvel,” Tali said with a note of wonder in her voice. The quarian, along with Spike and Scootaloo, was standing before the Tantalus drive core in the ship’s Engineering deck. Outwardly the core looked like a ball of blue plasma suspended in mid-air, pulsating softly. Tendrils of energy reached out towards the containment pylons which spun slowly around the core itself.

“Yep, one of the most advanced ship in the galaxy,” Scootaloo proudly replied. She felt a thump on her head.

“Scootaloo! We’re not supposed to tell anyone that. Top secret and all that ya’know.” The dragon on the pegasus’ back admonished. He folded his arms in disapproval.

“Oh, come on! She’s going to be on the ship for the next three month or so. You really think she wouldn’t notice the technology in the place. For princesses’ sake, she’s a quarian,” Scootaloo replied hotly.

“I’m still standing right here,” the quarian’s voice broke into the conversation. The two looked at the suited alien sheepishly. “Your pilot is right by the way. There’s no way a quarian can miss the extra tech this ship has built in,” Tali added. “But you can trust me. I owe my life to your commander after all.”

Spike frowned and pondered the quarian's words. He wished Twilight was here right about now, she'd know what to do. Since she was not however, he'd have to make a decision now on her behalf. "Oh, fine. I hope Rarity doesn't mind you poking around."

"I'm sure I can work something out with her," the quarian replied in an amused tone of voice.

[The Wards, Citadel]

A ladylike shriek echoed from the interior of the dark, dusty shop.

"What in the name of Equestria is *this*?" Rarity cried in shock, as she surveyed the mountains of junk arrayed in front of her. "This... this is an outrage. It's not... even..." Rarity spluttered.

"I stock only the finest in exotic wares," the volus proudly waved his hand over the piles of indescribable debris.

Rarity's left eye twitched at the volus' words. How dare this ignorant lout lure her, a purveyor of the finest armour in the galaxy, to this... this... unseemly junkyard. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. *Focus, Rarity*. Fluttershy was counting on her to dress up her pet bunny. She already reassured Fluttershy about this flight of fancy, and she couldn't go back on her words now. The white unicorn glanced at the shy pegasus, who was staring wide-eyed at the amount of junk in the place. Yes, she must not fail her friend.

She looked over the (what was more properly termed) junk pile again, and an idea began to click in her mind. "So... how much for that?" she asked the volus slyly, pointing to a random piece of junk.

"Five credits."

Rarity's eyes gleamed. "Five, you say?"

"Yes. Five. In fact, every single item here is worth five credits," the volus replied cautiously. The alien suddenly seemed a lot more nervous.

“Very good,” Rarity replied, a cryptic smile on her face. The volus stared at the unicorn strangely, apparently expecting more resistance.

Closing her eyes, Rarity concentrated, and started casting a spell she had been practising for quite some time. Her horn lit up in a brilliant flash, momentarily lighting the whole shop with the power of a star, before subsiding.

Fluttershy rubbed her eyes in surprise, her vision momentarily blinded by the sudden show of magic. Then as the spots in her eyes faded, she began to notice glowing outlines of various objects within the junk piles. She saw Rarity grinning happily at the volus merchant.

“I think that worked out quite well, don’t you think Fluttershy?” Rarity said, a trail of various armour pieces and components floating behind.

“Umm.. yes.” Fluttershy hesitantly agreed. The yellow pegasus was not quite sure what to think of the whole incident. “Was that... another one of your spells?” she asked shyly.

“Of course darling. One I have been practising for quite some time but never got around to using. It’s main purpose is to locate salvagable quality components. I been meaning to use it as a way to salvage usable equipment off the battlefield.” Rarity proudly explained. “And I must say it worked *beautifully*.” Never before had she gotten such a bargain. Only a hundred credits for well over two dozen quality components. And of bunny size to boot. The engineer pony was sure the volus was steaming on the inside when she counted off the credits.

“Now... onward to the Normaredy. I got a bunny armour to put together!” Rarity said with a flourish.

[Engineering Deck, ESV Normaredy]

“So.. being a pegasus, why did you take a job as a ship pilot?” Tali asked nonchalantly. “I thought all pony pegasi would much rather fly than be cooped up in a ship.”

"Now don't you dare question my position. I got all the way here through on pure merit, my disease has nothing to do with it," Scootaloo replied with a defensive tone.

"Disease?" Spike blurted. He quickly covered his nose. "Are you contagious?"

"You mean you all don't know?" The pilot smacked her head with a forehoof. She glanced at the purple dragon. "And no, it's not contagious."

Tali shrugged. "I just joined the commander. I only know you're the ship's pilot." Spike, who was still covering his nose, nodded.

"Fair enough, I guess Twilight wouldn't know either, unless she been reading my files." Scootaloo glanced around shiftily for a moment, as if afraid to tell her tale to anypony else, before turning back to the two.

"I have Vroelik's disease. That means I have weak wings. I... I can't fly like other pegasi do," she admitted in a quiet voice.

"You can't? But then..." Spike was silenced by a well-timed glare from the pilot.

"When I was a filly on Canterlot, I used to admire other high flying pegasi. Incidentally, one of them was the Rainbow Dash. Boy, was I obsessed with her for some years. I collected posters, pictures, hay, even cardboard cutouts. I dreamt that, one day, I'll be like her. Soaring through the air, be the envy of everypony, you know."

The pilot could still remember the time she dreamt of flying. She was there, on an open field, lazing about. His mother was going to ground her afterwards for skipping school, but she didn't care. Then she saw it. A solid rainbow streak crossing the sky. Rainbow Dash. The fastest pegasus on Canterlot. "One day. I'll be just like her. One day," she whispered.

Her eyes teared up as she told her tale, the memories obviously painful. "But as I grew older, I found myself being left behind as more of my friends took to the skies. Soon... I was the only filly left in Flight School who still can't fly." Scootaloo turned away from the Tali, and trotted a few steps

towards the drive core. Putting her fore-hooves on the railing, she continued.

“And I had no idea why. Everytime I tried, my wings just wouldn’t take flight. I can’t even hover off the ground for more than a few minutes, and I get these weird pains in my wings after each try. Eventually they got a doctorpony to look at me.”

The doctorpony had summoned her to his room. She had no idea why. All she knew was there was something terribly wrong with her. Being a pegasus meant she was supposed to fly. But after five years of flight school, she hadn’t even manage to master basic flight. Scootaloo sighed as she neared the doctor’s room. The white door suddenly looked even more intimidating than before. Gulping, she rapped on the door nervously. “Come in,” came the doctor’s gruff voice. Scootaloo timidly entered the room and made to sit on the proffered chair. The elderly unicorn had a sympathetic look in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Miss Scootaloo. I have bad news.”

Minutes later, she came out of the room weeping openly. It was official. She would never ever fly. Not even modern medical technology could help her there. Now, she’d never fly like Rainbow Dash. Her life was ruined. Her dreams shattered. Scootaloo moped for the rest of day, not bothering to show up for class. She quit flight school the very next day.

“I was depressed for quite some time, moping about in my room. I bet I had my family worried for a time there. I even thought of suicide, as much as I shudder of the thought of taking one’s life today. Then one day, my parents brought me to see the official launch of the cruiser, ESV Fillydelphia, from the Stalliongrad Orbital Docks.”

Scootaloo pouted as the space elevator ascended. What was so good about watching a ship fly off anyway? Dozens of ship fly off into space everyday anyway. She knew her parents was trying to cheer her up, but Scootaloo was not looking forward to it.

Ding!

The elevator doors opened. “Come on Scoot, we’re just in time to see the show,” her mom said excitedly. Scootaloo found herself being nudged towards the crowd around the viewports. Somehow she managed to land a

spot that offered a spectacular view of the dreadnought.

It was a sight she would not forget. The sheer size of the ship. The excitement she felt watching the engines flare into life. The slight tremor as the ship engaged its' engines. The roar of the engines cheering as the ship slowly moved out of the dock. It was... exhilarating. A feeling she remembered from watching Dash fly by her all those years ago. Then it struck her. If she couldn't fly, then she damn well could learn how to fly one of these beauties.

She enrolled into Equestrian Institute for Space Pilots the next week.

Scotaloo turned back to face Tali and held out her forehooves. "And here I am. Years of hard work. Now I'm piloting the best ship in the galaxy. And it's awesome."

Tali was impressed. Not many would work so hard to overcome their disabilities and come out to achieve something much more. The pilot reminded her so much of the quarian struggle. "That's a... touching story Scotaloo. Although I have this one question."

"Yeah?"

"Why does Trixie insist on calling you 'Joker'?" Tali asked. She had heard the captain referring the pilot as 'Joker' a couple of times during their brief conversations together.

Scotaloo shrugged, and said nonchalantly, "Oh, it's just a pet name for her. She thinks I don't respect her enough and called me 'Joker' as revenge of some sort. I think. Hard to tell with that showmare."

[Briefing Room, ESV Normaredy]

"Alright, everypony, are you ready to leave the station?"

She was met with words of assents from all those assembled in the room. The lavender unicorn spied a raised yellow hoof. It was the shy pegasus.

"Yes, Fluttershy, what is it?"

“Um... Rarity made a custom suit of armour just for Angel. Maybe... she... can show it to you... if you don't mind.” Twilight thought the pegasus looked positively terrified at the fact she was speaking to so many ponies at once.

“Sure, Fluttershy. Let's see this new armour of hers.” Twilight flashed a reassuring smile, if only to calm the pegasus. Rarity looked at Fluttershy expectantly, a worried look in her blue eyes.

The other ponies waited with bated breath. Seconds turned into minutes as everypony looked at each other in awkward silence. Rarity bit her lower lips nervously as she glanced at the direction of Fluttershy.

After what seemed like an eternity, a soft voice broke the silence. “Come on, Angel. Don't be shy. I think you look pretty.” Pause. “It's okay Angel, I'm sure they won't laugh at you.” Another pause. “Pretty please? I'll even get you a carrot afterwards...” Yet another pause. “Thank you, Angel.” The yellow pegasus looked up towards the other ponies with a shy smile and stood aside to let her friend pass.

Twilight googled as the bunny hopped to the center of the room. The bunny was clad in some sort of custom black armour, complete with visor and comm set. Each piece seemed perfectly tailor made to fit the bunny perfectly. To top it off, it was decorated with glitter. Sparkling glitter.

“I... I think it looks wonderful,” Twilight finally manage to mouth. The other ponies mumbled their approvals and comments behind her. Rarity beamed at the praise, apparently overjoyed by the reception. Angel though, seemed unamused by all the attention he's getting.

Twilight made out another hoof from the crowd. “Yes, Dash, what is it?”

“Twilight! What the hay do you think you're doing letting that krogan onboard?” the boisterous mare thundered. Rainbow Dash hovered out from the crowd, and zoomed straight to Twilight's face. She pointed an accusing hoof at Twilight's snout. “He's a criminal for princesses' sake.”

“Dash, you can rest easy. The krogan promised not to break anypony limbs while under my command. At least, not without my permission,” Twilight replied, feeling a bead of sweat on her brow.

Rainbow Dash was not so easily reassured. “But Twilight! He’s a krogan. K-R-O-G-A-N. He kills ponies for a living.” Her last sentence caused a few to gasp in shock.

“Rainbow Dash, I know how to spell krogan. I also know he does not kills ponies for a living.” Twilight glanced at the floor for a moment. “Well, mostly anyway.” she admitted in a smaller voice.

“See, Twilight, we can’t just let—” the blue pegasus abruptly stopped when the briefing door slid open. Twilight saw the flash of fear in the blue pegasus eyes, though the pegasus betrayed no other hint of her unease. Only one pony could induce such a fear in Rainbow Dash...

“Sparkle, is there someplace I can stash my weapons? All the crew lockers are full.” Wrex’s voice behind her innocently inquired.

Twilight whirled around to face the krogan, the biggest grin she could muster plastered on her face. “Uh.. yes. You can try that spare room on the Engineering deck.”

“Thanks,” Wrex answered curtly, and stalked off. Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. Even though she had just defended the krogan, the mercenary still made her nervous. That was despite the number of times they already met after their introduction. Something about his casual attitude to killing bothered her.

“See, Twilight. I bet he’s just waiting for a chance to betray us.” The blue pegasus hovered indignantly in front of the unicorn, her forelegs crossed. “Why does he need all those weapons for?”

Twilight put a hoof to her head. She knew that she was losing the argument. Yet, she could not just kick the krogan off the ship after that promise to Pinkie. The lavender unicorn put on the sternest face she could muster. “Dash. Trust me. He’s with us on this mission. And that’s final.” Her voice brooked no other argument in the matter. Twilight fervently hoped she was not making a wrong decision.

“Oh...” The sky-blue pegasus looked like she was about to fire off more objections, before hanging her head in defeat. “Fine. I hope you know what

you're doing, Twi." Dash pouted and slowly flew back into the crowd.

"Well, anything else?" Twilight called. Another hoof. A party pink one this time. Twilight mentally groaned. "What is it this time, Pinkie?"

"I'm just thinking. Since we're going on a loo-o-o-o-n-n-n-g-g-g-g trip, shouldn't we stock up on party supplies. I would hate to throw parties with no supplies, because then we wouldn't have balloons. And with no balloons—"

Twilight put up a forehoof to stop Pinkie's rambling. "Pinkie, we're on a mission to stop a very dangerous criminal. We have no space to carry party supplies."

"But, Twilight—"

Twilight put a hoof to her brow. "No, Pinkie, I'll have to insist on this. No parties while we're on a mission."

Pinkie looked disappointed at the refusal, her lips set in a deep pout. Twilight began to wonder whether she had gone too far. Then, on a dime, pink pony brightened again. "Oh well! I bet I can improvise. Parties will be parties, so long I'm holding one!" Her blue eyes gleamed with determination.

Twilight sighed. *There's no putting down that pink force of nature.*

"Alright, if there's nothing else. Let's move out."

Chapter 5

[Briefing Room, ESV Normareddy]

A much smaller group convened at the briefing room this time around. After the somewhat unproductive meeting she had earlier with the ship's crew, Twilight felt it was better to limit the briefing about their mission to just her trusted friends and alien crew they picked up. She had no qualms including Tali and Garrus, since they were already neck deep in the whole matter, but the krogan was a dubious addition. Pinkie had insisted however, and Twilight relented after hours of badgering. At least she could rely on the mercenary's professionalism to an extent.

The familiar figures of the Ambassador Lyra and Captain Trixie appeared on the viewscreen, just as the last of her small group filed into the room. Twilight gave them one final glance, before addressing the ambassador.

"Good to see you again, Ambassador," Twilight greeted. Then spying the captain in the background, she continued with rather less enthusiasm, "And you too, Captain."

"Yes, Commander. I pray you settled into your new ship," Lyra replied affably. Trixie just gave a scowl at the camera, obviously unhappy with her current predicament.

"Now, I have a few leads for you to check out, courtesy of our intelligence services. First, we have sightings of geth off the planet of Poneria." Twilight frowned at the mention of the planet's name.

From what she could recall, Poneria was a frozen planet that served as a corporate haven. The whole planet was not subject to Equestria's laws by the simple fact that it was owned outright by corporate interest, a relic of ancient laws. Corporations was free to do whatever they wished on the planet, free from the scrutiny of Princess Celestia's guardsponies and the Citadel. Many intergalactic corporations were believed to use the facilities of Poneria for their less-ethical experiments. "Poneria authorities so far have denied the reports, but we have reason to believe the reports were

accurate.” Twilight snorted. Of course they would deny the news. No point losing potential investors to some geth scare.

The ambassador glanced down at her PDA. “We also lost contact with another colony in the Terminus Systems. Harnos.”

“What?” Applejack blurted, her face taking on a shocked expression. The name didn’t ring a bell with Twilight, however. If Twilight were to guess, it was yet another small colony that went mostly unnoticed by Equestria at large. Well, until the geth attack anyway.

The ambassador looked slightly irritated at being interrupted. “Yes, Harnos. Before we lost contact, they transmitted reports of contact with geth scouts. Then, nothing.”

“Twilight!” Applejack strode up to the lavender unicorn and pushed her snout in the commander’s face. “We have to get to Harnos, now!” Her freckled face wore a worried expression.

“Calm down, Applejack. What’s wrong?” Twilight queried, not flinching from the soldierpony’s sudden agitation.

“It’s... it’s mah little sister. Last I heard she was goin’ on some colony out in the Terminus Systems to open a new orchard for the Apple family. I... I think it’s Harnos.”

“You think?” Twilight had to arch an eyebrow over that sentence.

“Applebloom and I haven’t been exactly close. Not since that incident about her cutie mark,” the orange mare admitted. A guilty look flashed past her face.

Twilight heard a discreet cough by the ambassador from the viewscreen and whirled back to face her. “Apologies ambassador, my... friend believe one of her relative is currently on Harnos,” Twilight said. She gestured for the soldierpony to take her seat.

“Our condolences, but I’m afraid we won’t be able to help you from this end. The Council was adamant their fleet play no role in interfering with geth attacks in the Terminus Systems. There is one more lead...” The

ambassador paused, and glanced at Trixie. The captain quickly levitated another PDA for the mint green unicorn, again taking the opportunity to stick her tongue out at the ambassador after she turned her back. Studying the PDA briefly, she looked up towards the camera again.

“You remember Matriarch Benezia, yes? The asari whom we heard in that recording?”

“Yeah...” Twilight was not sure where was this conversation headed.

“Well it turns out she has a daughter, a scientist who specialises in Protheans. Dr. Liara T’Soni. Her last known location was somewhere in the Artemis Tau cluster. We have reports saying that she was exploring an archaeological dig site in on one of the uncharted worlds in that cluster. You will need to search the systems there.” Artemis Tau was considered to be a somewhat backwater cluster. If she calculated correctly, it’ll take weeks to search the cluster thoroughly, given that sheer numbers of uncharted planets in a system alone. Not a very exciting prospect.

The ambassador eyes stared directly into the screen, her expression turning grim. “Commander... Twilight, I cannot stress the importance of capturing Saren. Words of his actions have already reached the public. Many ponies are frightened by the prospect of a geth attack. The princess herself is having a hard time keeping order as it is. You must stop him. No matter the cost.”

Twilight was blinked at the sudden change in tone of the ambassador. She must be under a lot of pressure now. The lavender unicorn straightened her back and gazed back in the ambassador eyes. “And I will, ambassador. I will not fail the princess.”

Lyra’s eyes hovered on the commander for a moment, before nodding in approval. “Good. Now, I have a meeting to get to. Captain Trixie here can answer any other question you may have.” The ambassador gestured at the captain, then trotted off-screen. The slate blue mare shot another irritated look at the ambassador, before taking the ambassador’s place before the camera.

“Yay, I get to play Q-and-A with the obviously capable commander,” Trixie said sarcastically. Her bravado faded and the azure mare sighed as she

faced the screen. Her pointed hat drooped slightly. "How can the Great & Powerful Trixie help you?" she asked in a weary voice.

"You can start by giving me more intel on the colony on Harnos," Twilight said, smirking slightly. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Applejack perking up, her ears flicking with interest.

"Harnos..." Trixie juggled the PDAs levitating around her, before finding the one she wanted. "Let's see, Harnos. The entire planet used to be one giant Prothean city, though only ruins remain now. There were some infrastructure left intact, and the colonists there tried to build on whatever that remained. Contact was lost approximately a few days earlier, soon after they reported a geth attack."

An ancient planet filled with ancient ruins? Twilight thought it was strange somepony would even try to colonise the place. "All available data on the colony and planet will be uploaded to your ship's computer shortly."

"Right. Thanks Captain." Twilight flashed the blue mare a smile. It only seemed to infuriate the captain more though. Her scowl deepened for a moment before she composed herself into a neutral expression.

"Yeah, whatever. Is there anything else you wish to know from the Great & Powerful Trixie?" she asked, a trace of bitterness remaining in her voice. Twilight shook her head in reply. "Good, then Trixie wish you luck in your hunt." The azure unicorn terminated the connection with a glow of her horn.

"So... we're goin' to Harnos?" Applejack asked hopefully, as Twilight turned to face the rest of the group in the room.

"Yes," Twilight replied, a ghost of a smile on her lips. "I thought we're on a rescue mission?"

[Harnos, Orbit]

As the ship sailed through the upper atmosphere of the planet, Twilight marvelled at the towering skyscrapers reached up to touch the sky. Most were in various state of decay, but the towers still stood firm despite millenia of neglect. At various levels, she could make out skybridges which

linked each skyscraper to their neighbours. It was a strangely entrancing, if haunting sight. The lavender unicorn briefly wondered what the city was like when it was still teeming with life.

As her eyes trailed lower, she was met with a vast expanse of white. An almost-permanent cloud formation covered the planet below, giving the illusion of the skyscrapers floating in the sky. Twilight knew otherwise. The cloud layer was actually miles above the actual terrestrial ground. She recalled from her reading that the lower levels were not considered habitable, since the dust clouds from millennia of decay had practically fouled the atmosphere below. The lowest ground levels themselves were believed to be buried in dozens of metres of debris.

“Approaching the Harnos port, Commander,” Scootaloo reported. “No sign of geth so far.”

Twilight acknowledged the order and told her to take the ship in. She studied the skyscraper that was marked to be the port for the colony. Outwardly, it resembled the other skyscrapers, though it was easily one of the tallest around. It sported the sharp, yet graceful outlines that is common with all Prothean structures. Twilight knew that the colonists choose this spot because of the stability of the structure as well as easy access to a nearby water source courtesy of ancient Prothean aqueducts that ran throughout the planet.

The frigate slowly slid into the indicated opening in the tower. Twilight noted, with relief, the familiar implements of an automatic dock came into view just inside the tower’s open entrance. At least the geth hadn’t taken the docks yet.

She told the pilot to dock the ship and went off to prepare the ground team.

[Docks, Harnos]

“Standby shore party. Decontamination in progress.”

“Why do we’all have to go through this every single applebuckin’ time?” Applejack asked irritably. She pawed at her armour nervously again, the white colour standing in stark contrast with her orange coat.

“Well we could bringing nasty bacteria and stuff, which wouldn’t be good for the local ecosystem. But since the whole place was a city to begin with-” Pinkie began to blubber, before finding a purple hoof in her mouth. The soldierpony stared at the pink party pony blankly.

“What she means is that the process is necessary so that we don’t spread our germs about. It’s...” Twilight fished around for a simple word. “...bad,” she finished lamely.

“Well I don’t see how this helps nopony.” Applejack huffed in reply.

“Decontamination complete. Logged: Shore party is ashore. XO Ditzzy Doo has the deck.”

The airlock doors slid open with a hiss.

“Finally,” Applejack said impatiently. She began trotting ahead into the deserted docks.

Twilight was struck by the acrid smell in the air. It was as if somepony went and burnt rubber all over the place. The docks itself was a curious mixture of modern technology and ancient superstructure. Various docking machinery and crates lay abandoned on the crumbling concrete.

“Eww... the whole place smells funny.” Pinkie said as she put a hoof to her snout. “Needs more air fresheners.”

“Hey there!” Twilight heard a voice call out in the distance. A verdant green stallion with red mane stood in what appeared to be the ruined entrance to the docks. He had a gun strapped to his back. Twilight waved at the pony, relieved to see the first sign of life in this otherwise dead world. The stallion waved back and galloped towards the small group.

“Oh thank Celestia you came. I thought nopony would come after the geth started jamming our communications,” the stallion said with relief. “My name is High Fives.” Twilight glanced at his cutie mark. A pair of playing cards. The stallion must be some sort of gambler.

“Well, we’re here and ready to render any assistance-”

“Hold up. Is mah sister Applebloom here?” Applejack interjected, staring into the stallion’s maroon eyes.

High Fives seemed surprised. “You mean you’re that annoying filly’s sister? Oh yes. She’s over at the colony.” The stallion gestured at the door.

“Whatdaya mean by annoying?” Applejack pushed her snout against his, a dangerous expression on her face. The stallion grinned sheepishly.

“Well, pardon me ma’am, but your sister isn’t... exactly the best of ponies to get along with,” the stallion stammered, his eyes avoiding the earthpony’s gaze. Twilight put a hoof on her friend’s shoulder before things escalated further.

“Applejack, let him go. We’re here to help them, not start a fight,” the unicorn said.

Applejack glowered at the stallion for a little while longer, before subsiding. “Fine.”

“Anyhoof, the mayor would want to see you. I heard the geth are going to make another push soon,” the stallion gestured towards what Twilight presumed was the indicated exit.

The group of four began trotting forward, with High Fives leading the way. Twilight couldn’t shake the feeling they were being watched. As they walked through the deserted dock, the unicorn thought she heard sounds of debris being disturbed. Yet every time she stopped to listen, the sound was gone.

Just as the group approached the doorway, Twilight spotted a flicker of movement at the doorway. “Geth! They’re here!” High Five shouted, apparently noticing the same. The familiar bipedal robots with flashlight heads appeared at the doorway, their guns already raised.

Ambush! Twilight mind flashed.

“Get down!” High Fives yelled, and shoved the dumbstruck Applejack aside, only to be cut down by the withering fire the geth troopers

unleashed. Twilight dove behind a convenient pile of rubble and kept her head down as the bullets peppered her position. Applejack, momentarily stunned by the push, quickly crawled to a nearby pillar and started returning fire as best as she was able to.

Twilight heard a giggle behind her. She turned around to see Pinkie somehow holding a whole belt of grenades in her hooves and preparing to throw the whole unwieldy thing. "Fire in the hole!" she yelled excitedly, the belt sailing through the air and landing neatly in the center of the geth ambushers.

None of the geth survived the subsequent explosion.

"Oh no..." Applejack breathed, as she saw High Fives lay bleeding on the ground. "Somepony help him!" she cried, as the soldierpony rushed to stem the bleeding. Her hooves were stained red as she applied pressure on the wounds.

"Already there AJ." Twilight replied calmly, as she cantered over and started applying the medigel furiously over the wounds. The unicorn noticed Pinkie was staring at the scene with rounded eyes. "Pinkie! Get some proper health kits. Medigel can only do so much."

The pink pony seemed to recover her wits with her words. "Okie-dokie." She hopped off to the Normaredy's airlock. Twilight thought the hyperactive pony seemed unusually subdued by her normal standards, before her mind drifted back to the task at hand.

The party pony returned later with a few boxes of medkits... with the rest of the ground team in tow behind her. Twilight mentally groaned. Pinkie actually brought everypony else on the ship?

"Twilight! Are you alright?" she heard Rarity's voice call.

"Yes, I'm fine. Help me with this civilian," Twilight replied, as she levitated the medkits off Pinkie's hooves and began bandaging the injury. The stallion groaned in pain as he stirred. "Hush, lie still. We'll get you to the ship's medibay." Twilight said. The lavender pony injected analgesic for the pain and gestured for Tali and Garrus to carry the injured pony to the ship.

“The rest of you, push on to the colony. Hopefully this was just a scouting party and the geth’s main force haven’t hit them yet.”

[Lix’s Hope/Harnos]

Fortunately, Twilight was correct in her assessment of the geth’s plan of attack. The ground team just arrived in time when the geth’s main attack swarmed the colony compound. Despite a furious half-hour long battle, they managed to hold off the attack with little losses of their own.

“Lix’s Hope can’t thank you enough for your assistance.” the mayor of the colony spoke, a beige mare with grey mane and tail. Strangely, she was wearing a rather old-fashioned pair of glasses, which Twilight thought looked out of place with all the assortment of weapons on her back and flank.

The Lix’s Hope outpost was all that remained from the colony on Harnos. The geth overran the main colony complex located in the adjoining skyscraper in the initial wave. The Exo-Poni headquarters, the company funding this venture and located further out in another skyscraper, fell after a brief siege. The local pegasus weather control station was gone offline, and the survivors were unable to reestablish contact.

Lix’s Hope itself was just a small outpost, the size of the spaceport on Appleloosa. A malfunctioning Kowloon class freighter sat right in the middle of the outpost, with prefabricated hab units clustering around the damaged ship. Apparently the ship was undergoing repairs for months before the geth attack. The surviving colonists has taken to using the ship as shelter and to handle basic life support on the colony. They also barricaded the two entrances to the colony the best they could, and armed themselves with whatever weapon they scavenged from both their colony and off the geth. Twilight was impressed the colonists managed to hold out this long against incessant geth attacks.

“My pleasure, ma’am,” Twilight replied sincerely.

Days of being under siege have whittled down the colonist number to about forty out of the original three hundred working and living here. The mayor suspected there might be survivors hiding in the ruins outside the colony

complex, but the geth made it impossible to search for them.

"I hear High Fives is being treated on your ship. I would like to request he be transferred to our care as soon as he's stable," the mayor said. Twilight frowned at the strange request. The Normaredy had much better medical facilities than whatever they had here.

"But mayor, we'll be able to treat-"

"I'm sorry, Commander, but it is our custom to take care of our own." Seeing Twilight's frown, she added, "It's important for us. Surely you can understand?" the mayor half-pleaded, a hint of desperation in her eyes.

"I suppose I can't refuse," Twilight replied uncertainly, puzzled by the odd request.

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack called as she spotted her sister trudging past with a pair of heavy saddlebags on her back.

The tan filly with red mane and trademark red ribbon tied behind her mane stopped in her tracks, slowly turning around to look at Applejack.

"Sis?" she breathed. Then she started shaking her head slowly. "Naw, it can't be." She rubbed her eyes once. Twice. Trying to be rid of a speck that just won't go away. "It can't be," she repeated in a disbelieving voice.

"What? Ya'all don't recognise ya big sister?" Applejack replied, pasting a wide grin on her face and spreading her hooves wide.

The astonished expression turned into anger. "I thought I had seen the last of ya sorry face." The filly jabbed a hoof at her snout. "I told you not to look for me. You promised!"

The words stung Applejack like a solid bucking in the face. "But.. but... I thought..."

"Did ya really think you could show up like some hero in this here colony and then expect me to fall all over yer hooves?" The cruel words continued,

“I think it’s best if ya just leave me alone.” Apple Bloom turned away. “Now, if ya excuse me, I gotta help Apple Fritter with her apples,” she said without looking back. As Applejack stood there stunned, the filly stalked off without waiting for a reply.

“But...” her voice trailed off as she realised Apple Bloom had already gotten out of earshot. “Dangnabit, I will make it up to her, no matter what,” she muttered, already formulating another plan in her mind. She had already wasted five years moping about on Appleloosa, and she was not going to miss this golden chance to repair their relationship.

“And we need help with the re-establishing the water supply,” the technician pony rattled off, checking off her imaginary checklist.

“Uh huh.” Pinkie was busy scribbling in her notepad. Then, she innocently looked up. “So, what we need to do is chase away some varrens, get the water working again an-n-n-d-d-d-d..... pick up some power cells for the generator.”

“Sounds just about right.”

Pinkie Pie raised a hoof like a student in class. “Oh oh, can I ask something?” The ochre mare looked unsure, but nodded. “What is a varren?”

The technician seemed taken back by the question. “It’s... you know... well...this four-legged creature...”

“I think we’ll know if we come across one.” Rarity interjected before the technician embarrassed herself further.

“Come on Pinkie, let’s see what’s Twilight is doing.”

“So... what’s a salarian doing here on a pony colony?” Garrus asked, a curious tone in his voice.

The salarian named Ledra shrugged and replied, "I'm a merchant. I go wherever the profit takes me. Supplying a newly founded colony seemed like a profitable venture to me." He waved his hand at the crates around him, presumably his trade goods.

"Then why stay? A geth attack isn't exactly conducive to business." Tali folded her arms.

"After I landed, I couldn't find the heart to leave. Something about the colony made me want to stay," Ledra answered, his large amphibian eyes directed at the floor evasively.

"I... see." Tali replied, her tone clearly saying otherwise.

"Twilight. I have to talk to you," Rainbow Dash called. The sky-blue pegasus streaked across the outpost and hovered in front of the commander.

"Yes, Dash, what is it?" Twilight looked up from the PDA she was reading. She furrowed her brow as she took in the stern expression Dash was wearing.

"They said there might be survivors out there. Why the hay aren't we looking for them now?" the boisterous pegasus demanded.

Twilight sighed. It wasn't that she did not want to go looking for survivors, but she had to prioritise the colony's safety first. The mayor had steadfastly refused all offers to evacuate the colony. She was adamant they defend their livelihoods and not be chased off by mere synthetics.

Twilight had been charting the pattern of geth attacks on the outpost for the past week. Given that there was no sign of any geth dropships thus far, she inferred the geth have been moving on foot to reach the colony from their base somewhere on the planet. So far, all signs point to the geth using underground means reach the colony, probably somewhere beneath this outpost itself. Probably a tunnel network in the tower itself, odd as it sounds.

“Dash, we need to make sure these good citizens are safe first. We can't just go off looking for survivors without at least making sure they are able to defend themselves.”

Dash flapped her wings in frustration. “I know! But the survivors! They won't last long out there.” The sky-blue pegasus looked out to the skies. “And nopony heard any news of the weather control station since the attack.”

“Dash, I promise we'll get right on the it,” Twilight reassured. Dash looked a little mollified at her words.

“Pinkie promise?” she asked finally, folding her forelegs over her chest.

“Pinkie promise.”

“Hey... um... what are you doing? If you don't mind me asking...” Fluttershy shyly asked the earth pony tending to the console next to the damaged ship. The cream coloured mare with orange mane and tail looked at the pegasus in surprise.

“Me?” she queried. Fluttershy nodded slowly. “Well, I'm taking care of this ship here. Making sure it doesn't deteriorate further.” She chuckled nervously.

“But.. why?” Fluttershy innocently inquired.

“It's... it's important for the colony. Look, the mayor asked me to do it alright.” the earth pony said sharply, before narrowing her eyes in suspicion at the pegasus. “Why are you asking me this anyway?” Fluttershy took several steps back under the colonist's glare, her ears drooping in response.

“Uhh... nothing. Thanks for your time,” she quickly muttered, before scooting off at full speed. The yellow pegasus galloped past the few colonists that was staring at the exchange. Taking flight, she flew towards a hidden ledge overlooking the entire outpost.

“You're right, Angel. There's something under the ship,” the pegasus said

softly. Her aquamarine eyes warily watched the colonists below.

The rabbit just nodded, and frowned.

“Alright team. Listen up. Since the mayor made it clear they won’t evacuate, we do the second best thing. We take on the geth. There are three immediate problems the colony are facing,” Twilight announced, unrolling a map that detailed the colony and it’s immediate surrounding. She gestured for her companions to gather closer.

“Finally, some real action,” Wrex grumbled. Twilight pretended not to hear. The krogan was already moody enough as it were, without her getting on his case.

“First, we will have to split into three teams. Applejack, Tali and Wrex will be with me. We’ll be going straight to the Exo-Poni HQ to clear the geth there. We believe this is were the main geth force is stationed.” She pointed a hoof directly at the marked location.

“Us against an entire geth army? Sparkle, I like you already.” Wrex replied, grinning at the annoyed look Twilight gave him.

Twilight then shifted her hoof southward, towards a cloud legend in the middle of the map. “Rainbow Dash, Angel and Fluttershy will be scouting the weather station as well as the outer skybridges to see if there are any survivors left.” A nod from the sky-blue pegasus and customary whimper from Fluttershy.

“Rarity will lead the rest of you down the tunnels below the colony, in order to clear the geth and help restore power and water to the colony.” Rarity didn’t look pleased to be leading a team into an obviously filth-filled and dirt-ridden tunnel, but made no attempt to object.

“Any questions?”

Twilight was greeted with silence. She glanced at each member of her team, detecting no sign of objections on their faces. With the sole exception of Applejack, who seemed to be more interested in the distant Harnos

horizon.

“Applejack?” Twilight called. No response. Twilight tried again, in a louder voice. “Applejack!”

The orange mare jumped at the sound of Twilight’s voice. She whirled to face the slightly bemused unicorn, a sheepish look on her face. “Sorry, Twi... was thinking about something else.” An awkward silence followed.

“It’s Apple Bloom isn’t it?” Twilight finally said, letting out an exasperated sigh.

Applejack turned her head towards the soft glow of the Harnos horizon. “I need to make things right with Apple Bloom... I don’t think I’ll get a chance like this again.”

“Applejack, when I came here, I expected you to be able to put aside your feelings when I needed you to.”

“I know, Twi. I thought I could! But...” Applejack shook her head helplessly and pawed at the ground. “I haven’t seen hide and hair of Apple Bloom for so long... It just hit me ya know... I reckon I’ll never get this chance again...”

“Please, Twilight, this is important. For me...” Applejack pleaded. Just then the sight of her sister walking past the crashed freighter drew her eyes. The soldierpony glanced back at Twilight. “...for her.”

Twilight sighed, sensing she wouldn’t be able to convince her otherwise. Not without some forceful arguments that could very well destroy the fragile relationship they shared. “Very well. Stay here in the colony then. Keep them safe. Keep Apple Bloom safe.”

“Thanks, Twilight. You’ve no idea what it means to me.”

[Skybridges, Harnos]

Twilight’s team was off to a good start. They were not looking forward to the long walk to the Exo-Poni headquarter, with the map putting it at a good ten clicks from Lix’s Hope. Fortune as on their side however. As they were

crossing the first skybridge, they stumbled across what seemed to be an abandoned M-35 Mako, lying on its side in a crater.

“Why would the colonists abandon a perfectly good Mako in the middle of the road? It doesn’t make sense,” Tali said, as she inspected the mostly intact armoured personnel carrier left in the middle of the skybridge.

“Probably because of the geth,” Wrex commented sardonically. He watched as Twilight flipped the vehicle to an upright position, before clambering into the vehicle.

“Hey, the main cannon is still working,” Twilight called from the inside of the vehicle. The cannon mounted on the vehicle swiveled slightly as the unicorn fiddled with the controls. “Wow, the thing even has the latest optical targeting software,” she continued enthusiastically.

Tali whistled as she spotted why the vehicle was abandoned. A melted panel near the snout of the vehicle was the apparent cause. Carefully removing the panel, she was greeted with a mess of melted circuits and burning wires. “This might take awhile to fix,” she said.

The click of an assault rifle’s safety made the suited alien look up. “Then you better fix it quick. I don’t think we have much time. Incoming geth,” Wrex said, leveling his rifle. Tali followed his eyes towards the other end of the skybridge.

Three quadruped walkers with the characteristic flashlight-shaped head. Geth armoured support it seemed. Several red-armoured bipedal geth accompanied the walkers, clutching what appeared to be rocket launchers. Fortunately, they were still some distance away, and the walkers were slow, plodding slowly but steadily across the debris-ridden skybridge.

Twilight’s head poked out of the side doors of the vehicle. “Hey guys, what’s happening...” her voice trailed off as she noticed the oncoming geth. “Oh.” Her head disappeared back into the door. A moment later, the main cannon gun began swivelling to track the nearest walker.

“Good idea,” Wrex said, before turning to the quarian. “Better get started, we’ll try to hold them off as long as we can.” He hefted his rifle and took off towards the geth. The krogan bounded over towards the advancing geth,

firing as he went. One of the red-armoured geth went down in a flurry of accurate rifle fire.

A boom from the mass accelerator cannon resounded over the landscape. Tali knelt beside the damaged vehicle, and started work on the fried circuits, her hands a blur. The cannon boomed again, and the kinetic shields of one of the walker flared an angry red as the shell hit home. The geth started to return fire, though it was pretty ineffectual at such long range. Still, the stationary vehicle was a sitting duck and a few energy blast from the walkers slammed uncomfortably close to the stranded Mako.

Wrex popped out from cover to hurl a couple of grenades at the nearest geth. A stray rocket narrowly missed his head as he ducked back behind the wrecked vehicle he was hiding behind. The grenades took out another two of the rocket launcher armed geth with a satisfying explosion. Wrex grunted as he checked his grenade supply. He wasn't going to hold the geth walkers off with explosives anymore. Well, more challenge for him.

Another boom, and one of the walker finally went down, two of its legs ripped clean off by the massive projectile. The crippled walker fell heavily on its side, leaking a curious white fluid on the ground. The other walkers paused momentarily, as if stunned by the apparent death of their companion. Wrex took the opportunity to pepper the geth infantry with several bursts of rifle fire.

"Got it!" Tali yelled excitedly. "Commander, start the vehicle and let's get out of here." The quarian quickly shut the panel back in place and gestured to the krogan, who was still up ahead toying with the remaining geth. The krogan acknowledged her signal and began retreating slowly, using the debris on the skybridge to cover his retreat.

"Hurry up, Wrex! The Mako's kinetic barriers won't last much longer." Twilight's voice barked over the radio. The vehicle's energy barrier flared brightly as energy balls slammed home. The mercenary sprinted the last few meters to the vehicle and clambered hurriedly into waiting door. Twilight pushed a hoof on the accelerator and swung the vehicle around, narrowly evading another energy blast.

The team quickly drove back the way they came, with the geth in pursuit.

[Weather Control Station, Harnos]

The weather station, like all pegasi constructs was built out of a cloud formation. This particular one seemed to have been carved from a large cumulus cloud, with the ragged outline typical of that type. A lone cloud tower and scattered cloud buildings was visible from the distance.

The two pegasi approached the cloud formation cautiously, using the surrounding clouds to disguise their presence. Since the clouds in Harnos were not exactly healthy to breath in, the pegasi also wore their gas masks as a precaution.

“Rainbow, I don’t see anypony.” Fluttershy said softly, her voice slightly muffled owing to her mask.

“Me neither. Maybe the survivors hiding inside. Come on, we need to get closer.” The blue pegasus flapped her wings and increased her speed. Fluttershy glanced at the bunny hanging on to dear life on her back and gave Angel a knowing nod. Then she took after the rainbow trail Dash left.

[Tunnels, Harnos]

“Clear!” Garrus called, as the last of the geth troopers went down. The turian walked over and kicked the downed geth for good measure.

Rarity sighed with relief. The new monkey-like geth that went jumping around and firing out of unexpected corners was giving her a headache. Not only that, the damp and musty tunnel was hell on her precious armour. She was going to have to dry-clean the whole thing when the mission was done.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Pinkie playing with the geth’s flashlight head. “Wooooooooooo~! Fooooooooosh!” she playfully cried, as she swung the detached head around, apparently imagining it to be some sort of spacecraft. “Captain Geth, now intercepting enemy aircraft!”

“Pinkie! Put that head down and let’s go,” Rarity barked.

“Aww...” the pink earth pony pouted, and put the geth’s remains down. Then, she giggled. “I’ll come play with you later, Mr. Geth.” she said, before hopping off to join the rest of the squad.

Rarity unrolled the map of the tunnels again, trying to get her bearings in the maze of drab corridors and hallways that weaved beneath Lix’s Hope. Looking ahead, the unicorn thought she spotted a junction where the map indicated led to the gardens. “There, that must be where the varrens are nesting.”

“Right behind you Rarity,” Garrus replied.

“Pfftt... colts these days. Always expecting ladies to go first,” Rarity grumbled, as they reached the junction. The dirt-caked sign on the wall clearly indicated that the garden lay behind the door to the left.

Rarity blinked at the sign, not expecting to have arrived so soon. “That was easy. Let’s get this over with.” She lifted her submachine gun from its sheath and held it floating near her head. “On three.” She pressed against the side of the door and gestured for her companions to get into position. Garrus flattened himself on the other side, with Pinkie Pie hiding somewhere further out.

“One... two... three!” Garrus slammed the button that opened the door.

They were greeted with snarls and growls. Shadowy creatures about the size of ponies stood half-hidden amongst the dying apple trees. The varren.

Outwardly the varrens resembled dogs. Their silvery scales and reptilian eyes quickly disabused the notion that the two was even remotely related. Sharp teeth jutted out from their slavering jaws, their hungry eyes already locked on the trio who stumbled onto their nest.

Rarity froze on seeing the savage appearance of the varren. Oh, she had studied about them while in the academy, and had dismissed them as nothing but annoying vermin. Here, face-to-face with the real deal, she was forced to drastically change her opinion of the creatures. These weren’t annoying vermin, they were downright savage brutes!

The varrens slowly advanced on the trio, snarling as they went. Garrus and Rarity trained their weapons on the advancing creatures. Neither side was making any overt hostile moves just yet. Then a giggle broke the tense atmosphere. Rarity whipped her head around in surprise.

The first thing she noticed was that Pinkie was sitting on her haunches, giggling madly. The second thing she saw was that the pink earthpony's head was attached to a very large jaw. Filled with teeth. Which in turn was attached to a silvery, dog-like body. The varren's short limbs waved about uselessly as the pink pony continued to giggle.

"Pinkie Pie! Are you alright?" Rarity gasped.

"Yes, silly. Gummy here just wants to play!" Pinkie replied nonchalantly. She reached up and gently extracted the varren from her head. Putting the varren down on the floor beside her, she then took out a monocle and a top hat from her saddlebags and attached it lovingly to the varren. "There Gummy. You look all prettier." The varren blinked in surprise, but did not attempt to move.

"Um... Rarity, you might want to take a look at this," Garrus piped up behind the unicorn. She turned around again, to be faced with a curious sight. The turian was actually petting one of the creatures gently. The varren hissed in pleasure, its fins rising slightly in response. Apparently the varren Pinkie had somehow snagged was the alpha male. The other varrens dropped their aggressive posture and began barking hisses of approval at the trio.

She shook her head in resigned disbelief. That pink pony would never cease to amaze with her unorthodox ways. Besides, Rarity thought the varren looked adorably cute with the monocle and tophat on.

[Skybridges, Harnos]

"Well, we certainly showed those geth." Tali said approvingly. The interior of the Mako was cramped, and Tali was sitting awkwardly in one corner, just behind the driver's seat with the large bulk of Wrex occupying the other end. The krogan was slouched forward slightly, owing to the limited height of the sturdy vehicle.

“Yeah, hopefully we won’t run into anymore geth.” Twilight replied, driving past the derbis strewn skybridges carefully. “We should reach the Exo-Poni headquarters after...” Twilight brought up the map of the area on a separate viewscreen. “... this tower ahead, and taking Skybridge 22.”

The cabin was silent for a moment as they approached the indicated tower.

“I’m picking up radio signals.” Tali announced, as she worked the communication console she found on her side. “There’s someone out there.”

“...bzzt... somepony is coming... not...bzzt... geth...bzzt... friendly?....”

“I can’t get more of it, the geth must be jamming radio communications.”

“Can you get me a fix on their location?” Twilight queried.

Tali looked up from her console. “It’s... right ahead of us. In that tower ahead. That’s how we picked up the signal. We’re close enough to intercept the signals despite the geth jamming.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go rescue these survivors.”

[Weather Control Station, Harnos]

“Hello? Anypony here?” Dash called out. The sky-blue pegasus hovered near one of the cloud shacks. She turned around as Fluttershy flew up behind her.

“Nopony. Weird. There should be somepony around. The geth didn’t even touch the place.” Dash said, waving a hoof towards the abandoned weather station. It was spotless, saved for abandoned work equipment and sheets of paper lying about.

“Um... maybe we should take a look around...” Fluttershy suggested softly, as she glanced around nervously.

“Good idea. I’ll take the main tower. You and Angel search the outlying buildings.” Without waiting for a reply, Rainbow Dash took off in a blazing trail of rainbows towards the weather station cloud tower.

“O.. okay.” The yellow pegasus replied to breeze Dash left in her wake. She flew slowly towards the outlying buildings. Standing on her back, Angel already had her shotgun out and ready.

[Lix’s Hope, Harnos]

The soldier pony twiddled her hooves nervously as she waited for Apple Bloom to walk by. Would she even consider a gift? It was quite hard to actually scourge up something from the ship’s stores, considering it mainly consisted of military hardware. Fortunately, Spike had a little store of collectibles which he had hidden somewhere on the ships. He assured her that his prized sapphire was guaranteed to—in his words—steal the heart of any fillies. Applejack hoped he was right. Otherwise, she was going to have very strong words with the dragon. And her credits back.

After about an hour’s wait, her patience was finally rewarded with the appearance of the sister on the other side of the ship. “Listen here, Apple Bloom. I can explain things—” she began, fumbling for an excuse to bring out her surprise.

“Applejack! Why won’t ya just leave me alone? I’m happy here.” Apple Bloom said, refusing to even address her directly.

“But I want to—”

“Go. Away. Leave, before ya git into more trouble.” The filly huffed and turned her head away.

Applejack bent her head sadly and turned away from her sister.

As she trotted off, something about her words nagged her. Applejack frowned slightly as she replayed their short exchange in her mind. Why was Applebloom so adamant she leave? And what trouble?

[Skybridges, Harnos]

Unlike the tower which the colony occupied, this tower was fairly small in comparison. It was also in a pretty bad state, with most of the entrances blocked by collapsed debris.

Twilight parked the vehicle just outside the only entrance she could see. No point driving into an ambush. She involuntarily gagged as she exited the clean atmosphere of the vehicle. Twilight forgotten how bad Harnos was on the nose. She waved for her companion to join her at the large gate.

The first room past the gate was actually a large tunnel leading to the other side of the tower and the skybridge ahead. From their position at the entrance, Twilight could see a smaller hallway leading off the main tunnel.

"That way," she gestured. The trio made their way towards the egress, eyes on the outlook for any geth ambushes. Twilight sneaked a peek down the corridor. Empty. They trundled forward slowly along the hallway. As they walked, Twilight glanced at Tali questioningly, who was fiddling with her omni-tool. The quarian gestured down the corridor. Apparently the radio signals were originating somewhere ahead. Just as they rounded a sharp bend in the corridor, they blundered into a makeshift steel barricade. Which was bristling with guns.

"Stop right there!" a slightly panicked voice shouted. Ponies. They must be the survivors they were looking for. She could make out the outline of at least four ponies taking refuge just behind the barricades.

Twilight raised a hoof to stop her companion from firing. Judging by the panicked voice, one wrong move and they could trigger a firefight. "We're from Equestrian Navy. We're here to help," Twilight said slowly, clearly, so that the whoever behind the barricade would not miss a single word.

After a moment, an alabaster head peeked out. He seemed satisfied with what he saw and waved to somepony behind the barricades. He trotted out with a relived smile. "Finally, some help. Damned synthetics have been hitting what's left of us hard." Twilight studied the alabaster stallion. Black uniform. Exo-Poni armband on left foreleg. Standard shoulder-mounted assault rifles. He must be one of the surviving Exo-Poni private security force.

"I'm impressed to see you managed to hold out here." Twilight finally said.

The guard shook his head. "We wouldn't have lasted much longer on our own. Come now, the director would want to see you." He gestured for the trio to follow him.

"As you can see here, we're perfectly safe for the moment," the deep blue unicorn with a neatly cropped white mane and tail spoke. Twilight raised an eyebrow at the unicorn. The guards introduced him as the sole surviving ranked official on the planet, Director Jong. Two dozen ragged survivors are all that's left of the hundred-odd workforce of the Exo-Poni on Harnos.

"Director Jong, don't you want to get to Lix's Hope where it'll much safer?" Twilight asked curiously, arching an eyebrow. "You can't hide from the geth forever."

"We can't. The geth controls the skybridges, as you no doubt are aware. Besides, we stand a much better chance defending this spot." The director smiled nervously. All very logical answers, yet Twilight sensed it was not the complete truth.

"Fine. We'll take care of the geth problem then. The geth are holed up in your former headquarters, correct?"

"Yes," the director replied, clearly relieved at the change of topic. "Also, those are private properties. Remove the geth and nothing else," he added primly as if it was a matter of merely polishing up the building.

"You would think they would be more thankful to us for 'removing' the geth for them," Wrex said sardonically. Twilight shot him a we-are-not-going-to-steal-anything-that-is-not-bolted-down look. The krogan just shrugged in reply.

"Of course director. We're not looters." Twilight forced a smile to her face and trotted off towards their vehicle. Why was the director so reluctant to retreat to the outpost, where it was much safer?

Curiouser and curiouser.

[Tunnels, Harnos]

“Alright, that’s the last of the valves. The colony should be getting water now.” Garrus said, as he finished fiddling with the panel on the pipes. They have already travelled deep into the bowels of the tower and currently in the middle of a long tunnel, with pipes of various sizes running around them. A musty odour permeated the dank air.

“Marvellous, now all that’s left is-” Rarity let out a shriek and reared as a hiss sounded behind her. Then she realised what it was. Gummy.

“Pinkie Pie! Put your pet on a leash or something. I can’t abide a varren sneaking up to my flank every five minutes!”

“Okie-dokie.” Pinkie turned to the tame varren. “Bad Gummy! You should know better than to startle Rarity like that.” The varren seemed to blink slowly in response, before letting out another hiss. “Good boy!” she happily bubbled. Rarity was suddenly struck by a irresistible temptation to bonk her head with a hoof, but that wisely fought down that compulsion.

“As I was saying. We only need to collapse the tunnels ahead and the colony should be reasonably secure from future attacks.” Rarity continued. She brought out the map and put on her glasses. “Hm... there should be a nice spot just ahead to set up our explosives.”

“Wait... I spot someone...” Garrus knelt behind the pipes and scoped his rifle. “Is that... the pony we carried back to the Normaredy? What’s he doing here?” In the gloomy darkness of the tunnels, Rarity could barely make out the outline of the injured pony shuffling about.

Rarity shrugged. “Last I heard, he was recuperating back in the colony. The mayor insisted he be taken back for their care.” She brought her rifle out and zoomed in on the distant pony on the far end of the tunnel. The scoped view confirmed their suspicions. She let out a sigh. “Let’s get him back to the colony before the geth find him.”

The trio made their down the dimly lit tunnels, wary of any ambushes by hidden geth hoppers, as they taken to calling the agile monkey-like geth. Rarity approached the injured stallion and tapped him gently on the shoulder. She was very nearly bucked in the head as the startled stallion

reared.

“Brute! You almost kicked a lady in the head!” Rarity exclaimed, as she jumped back. High Fives looked alarmed as he spied the weapons aimed at him, then visibly calmed down as he recognised the trio.

“Oh hey... sorry about that...” the stallion said, wincing in pain as he said so. The wound in his chest was obviously not healed just yet. “What... what are you doing down here?”

“We’re here to stop the meanie-pants!” Pinkie replied enthusiastically.

“Oh... err... so you’re not going to bring me back to the colony?” he asked hopefully. Rarity shook her head.

“Because... you’re not... ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” the stallion continued, before moaning in pain. He held his forehooves tight against his head, his ears flattening. “You... are... not... going... to... control... owwwwwwwwwww.... me.” The stallion dropped to the ground, his eyes squeezed shut.

Garrus and Rarity exchanged questioning looks. The stallion clearly gone mad. Question was, how mad? And how dangerous?

“I... can’t come with you...” High Fives managed to choke out, as he lay twitching slightly on the floor. “It’s... hurts...” he moaned.

“I’m not sure if we can help him, Rarity. It’s obvious he doesn’t want to come with us.” Garrus observed.

“We can’t just leave him here. What if the meanie pants find him?” Pinkie protested.

“Pinkie, we still have think of the colony. Those geth will keep coming unless we seal those tunnels,” Rarity pointed out.

“Leaving a pony out here is so not cool... wait. I know!” The pink pony broke into a wide smile. “Gummy here can protect you.” She nuzzled the tame varren following behind her. “Won’t you Gummy?”

“Is... is that a varren?” High Fives eyes widened as he got a first proper look of Gummy.

“Don’t worry, Gummy here won’t bite,” Pinkie reassured. The varren bared its sharp teeth for the benefit of the stallion.

[Lix’s Hope, Harnos]

Applejack sat at her room, staring at the forgotten gift that she meant to give to her sister as a gesture of apology. How the hay was she supposed to apologise on the incident that brought her cutie mark to light? For that matter, she was still quite surprised Apple Bloom took it so hard. The filly had always looked forward to getting her cutie mark when she was younger...

The door to her room creaked open. “Applejack?”

“Apple Bloom!” the soldierpony exclaimed in surprise.

“Shhhhhh! You’ll wake the others,” the small filly said urgently, as she slid the door shut. “Applejack, you need to leave. Now! I ain’t fooling around when I said that earlier.”

“Now just what you mean by that-”

“No time to explain. You need to leave now!” Apple Bloom repeated, her yellow eyes glancing at the door nervously.

Applejack put her forehooves on the shoulder of her sister. “Applebloom! You’re mah sister. I can’t leave you here all alone,” she said with every bit of sincerity.

“Please Applejack—” Applebloom’s face suddenly contorted in pain. “... owwwww... it hurts so bad.” She put her hooves on her forehead and sunk to the floor, moaning in pain.

The soldierpony stared at her sister in shock.. She had never seen her sister in this state before. Applejack knelt at her sister’s side and tried to comfort her the best she could. “Apple Bloom! What’s gotten into ya?

What's happening?"

"It.... its.... arrggghhhhh... t-t-the... p-p-p-lant..." Applebloom's voice faltered as the intense pain wracked her body. Applejack winced at the pain the filly must be feeling.

"What plant? Tell me, Apple Bloom. What plant?" Applejack asked, cradling her sister's head gently. By now though, the filly was whimpering incoherently, too exhausted to answer Applejack's questions. The soldier pony mind was filled with burning questions and no answers.

"Come on Apple Bloom, we'll get ya back to the ship—"

The door suddenly chimed and slid open. Before she could react, the soldierpony found herself being surrounded by a dozen ponies—all from the colony. Her alarm bells went off as she saw everypony wielding some sort of makeshift weapons in their mouths. Standing at the head of the crowd was the mayor herself. "I'm sorry, Applejack. I really am," she said softly, before bringing down a broken pipe on the surprised mare.

Chapter 6

[Exo-Poni Headquarters, Harnos]

After another brief engagement with the geth outside the makeshift Exo-Poni bunker, Twilight and her companions managed to reach the Exo-Poni HQ without further complications. They stormed the building front door in a blaze of cannon fire with the Mako and pushed into the building on foot.

For most part, the geth seemed quite taken by surprise by the bold attack on their base. The squad managed to gun down several unsuspecting geth troopers before the alarm was even raised. Even after alerting the entire base, the team didn't slow down as they plowed through the defenses the remaining geth put up.

In an act of desperation, the geth enacted energy barriers throughout the building, sealing the team and any surviving geth in. To the horror of the team, the energy barrier was impervious to conventional weaponry. Nothing they had could break through. Furthermore, attempts to establish radio contact to the Normaredy and Lix's Hope had so far been futile. One small consolation they had was that the energy barrier probably took a lot of power and the power source had to be somewhere within the building. Or so they hoped.

"Shh... I think somepony is coming." Twilight held up a hoof as they approached the doorway to another research lab in a dimly lit corridor. The crunch of small pebbles under their feet echoed loudly in the silence.

"Okay, this one doesn't seem locked, going to open it now." Twilight punched the button on the panel.

Bang!

Fortunately for the lavender unicorn, she had ducked into cover upon hearing the shot. Tali and Wrex brought up their weapon in response, covering the pony who aimed a pistol shakily at the trio. "S-stay back. I know how to use this."

“Kid, put that gun down before you get hurt,” Wrex replied, his rifle aimed steadily at the pony’s head. Twilight quickly put a hoof to the krogan’s arm to stay his aim.

“We’re from the Equestria Navy. We’re here to help,” Twilight said, injecting a note of reassurance in her voice. The civilian looked warily at the trio for a moment, before dropping the pistol.

A profuse round of apologies and explanation later, the civilian, who was a scientist in the employ of Exo-Poni Corporation, tagged nervously behind the trio. Despite his obvious aversion to combat, Twilight thought the gray stallion held up pretty well considering the situation. Plus, he had access codes to every locked door in the building, barring the energy barrier. At least they wouldn’t have to blast their way through the doors now. She idly wondered how much property damage their little excursion had caused thus far.

“So, what do think the geth are after in Harnos?” Twilight asked, still keeping her eyes peeled for any roaming geth.

“I don’t know, there’s nothing particularly valuable on Harnos... unless they’re after the Thorian.” the scientist aptly named Deep Six replied. He shook his silver mane free of the dust that collected in copious amount.

“What’s a Thorian?” Tali quizzed curiously.

“It’s a plant species native to the planet.” The scientist looked around nervously before continuing. “The properties of the plant is... rather unique. Exo-Poni has been studying it for quite sometime.”

“Unique?” Something about the way the scientist answered the question triggered alarm bells in Twilight’s mind. She brought the group to a halt and glowered at the scientist. “Tell me about this Thorian. Now.”

It turned out the Thorian had been inadvertently discovered by a small group of surveyors just beneath Lix’s Hope some two years prior to the geth attack. The corporation found that the group was infected by some sort of organic spores which nopony could identify. Instead of evacuating the colony, the corporation had decided to isolate all infected personnel

there and observe the effect of the alien spores. Obviously this was done without knowledge of the inhabitants of the outpost.

Within a month, 80% of the colonists were infected. By the end of the year, everypony on the outpost had been infected with the spores. Outwardly, they showed no sign of behavioural change, save for an extreme reluctance to leave the colony. When taken for tests, the infected colonists were wracked with unexplained neurological pain and headaches. The Exo-Poni scientists had postulated that the Thorian was sentient, and in fact keeping the colonists as its thralls. It imposed its will via negative reinforcement, unleashing pain on the subject until it acquiesced to its will.

Twilight felt her eyes shrinking to pinpricks as the scientist continued his story. Were they already infected? No unexplained headaches and mysterious voices in my head so far. She glanced at her companions. Tali should be immune, with her environmental suit. The krogan might be susceptible, but he didn't show any signs either. Neither did the other ponies for that matter. Twilight took that as a good sign.

"You mean to say, you let those poor ponies get infected by an alien lifeform. And you told nopony about it?!" Twilight thundered, as she fought to keep her anger in check. Deep Six shrank back from the murderous looks the trio was giving him.

"I'll say we off him now and hightail it back to the colony," Wrex snarled, clicking the safety off his rifle. The stallion looked positively terrified now.

"Wait! Please, I don't want to die here. You could stop this madness. Kill the Thorian. That should set the colonists free," he cried desperately, shrinking from the krogan.

"Wouldn't the Thorian force the colonists to defend it?" Tali said thoughtfully.

"Yes... yes, that would be the expected reaction. But I have been working on the company's contingency plan to remove the plant should it ever pose a problem." Deep Six fumbled in his saddlepacks and produced a grenade mod in his mouth.

"This is a form of nerve gas-" the scientist began, before Twilight cut him

off.

“Nerve gas? We’re not going to poison innocent civilians here,” the lavender unicorn interjected harshly. Deep Six gulped and shook his head frantically.

“No! Nothing like that. See, the Thorian’s control over the colonists comes at a price. By now their neurological systems are so weakened, that even a harmless dose of neurotoxin will disable them. At least in theory.” He gave a nervous grin at the still-irate unicorn. Twilight stared at the earthpony scientist for good long while, thinking of her alternatives. They could probably knock the colonists out with blunt force, but the risks of doing so were high. Killing them were not an option obviously.

She nodded at the scientist slowly. “Fine. We’ll test your theory in action,” she said grudgingly, taking the mod from the scientist’s mouth and stowing it in her backpack. Deep Six looked relieved at her apparent acceptance.

“Now, all we need to do now is to find a way out of here...”

“Kee’lah.” Tali whispered, as they stood before the geth dropship which was attached the outer walls of the office. Tubes of various sizes snaked from the grey ship, disappearing into makeshift holes in the room.

“They’re using their own ship to power the energy barriers?!” Twilight said incredulously.

“We don’t have the firepower to bring that thing down,” Wrex said thoughtfully, as his eyes studied the ship.

Twilight groaned in despair. They made it all the way here, only to be foiled by a lack of high explosives. She began pacing around the room, searching for anything that might help them.

“Hey! There’s a blast door control here.” Tali was hunched over a console at the far end of the room. “Hm, the maintenance log here says that the blast doors will shut with enough force to shear steel under a certain amount of pressure.”

“Good idea, maybe we can-”

A loud explosion interrupted her speech. The compression blast from the explosion swept over the trio, knocking them off their feet.

Coughing from the smoke filling the room, she looked up to find the geth ship suddenly sprouting flames, a hole tore clean right through the ship. The geth ship creaked and groaned, as the supporting clamps failed and the tubes began snapping one by one. Finally, with one final groan, the whole ship fell off the building, into the cloudy mist below.

“How did the ship explode?” Twilight exclaimed, her eyes wide at the spectacle. Then she heard a familiar voice cut through the smoke.

“And Rainbow Dash saves the day again!”

[Weather Control Station, Harnos]

Just a few minutes before, Rainbow Dash wasn't so supremely confident of her ability to save the day. In fact, she was downright uncertain whether she would stay alive for next minute.

The weather station was completely deserted. Empty. Nada. Rainbow Dash had never heard of a weather station being completely abandoned before. Even if the geth did attack the place, the pegasus ponies stationed here would at least make a stand... wouldn't they? At any rate, the eerie silence and lack of ponies was starting to creep the sky-blue pegasus out. She began to take a hesitant step towards the open entrance.

A soft whimper behind Dash sent her flying to the roof.

“Dash, are you in there?” a soft voice called out.

Dash shook the stars out of her eyes and glanced irritably at the shy yellow pegasus who startled her so badly. “Fluttershy! Don't sneak up on ponies like that. You're going to give me a scare.” Well, she was unprepared, so it was totally not her fault.

"I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... maybe I should just stand here and um... wait for you to finish..." Fluttershy said slowly, her face turning away in embarrassment. Dash let out an irritated sigh and tried to hide her exasperated feelings.

"Let's try this again. Fluttershy, have you found anything?"

A whimper. Dash thought it wasn't possible for anypony to curl up in fear like that, but Fluttershy went ahead and did it anyway.

"Fluttershy! This is important," Dash pleaded.

Another whimper. Dash clenched her teeth in frustration. Sometimes Fluttershy can be too darned shy for her own good.

Angel apparently had the same thought as Dash and stomped her feet in an annoyed fashion on the pegasus' back. The bunny marched up to the pegasus' left ear and whispered a few words for her benefit. Fluttershy's eyes widened. "You wouldn't!" she cried. Angel just shook her head in reply. The pegasus sighed softly. "Alright, Angel bunny. Only for you."

She took a deep breath, before starting her tale. "We found some geth... bodies. But nopony else. Everypony seemed to have... disappeared."

Dash stamped her hooves on the ground. "That's what I thought. The geth must have foalnapped them." She gave her wings a strong flap and hovered in the air. "Come on Fluttershy, we need to search for other survivors at the skybridges-" A steadily increasing whine outside the building interrupted the rest of her speech.

"What the hay?" Dash exclaimed.

Bullets stitched through the cloud walls, peppering the whole room with indiscriminate fire. Angel instinctively put up a biotic barrier, shielding them from the rain of bullets temporarily.

"Come on, Fluttershy. We need to get out of here now!" The speedster grabbed Fluttershy and Angel by the hoof and dragged them out of the door in a rainbow blur. They rocketed out of the cloud tower.

They were met with a chilling sight. Dash had to slow down to avoid crashing head on into the geth dropship circling the tower. Her violet eyes widened in fear as the machine guns on the ship swivelled to track her.

“Fluttershy! Fly! Now! I’ll distract ‘em.” She dropped Fluttershy into the clouds below, hoping that the pegasus would regain her wits enough to fly off and raced off in a completely random direction.

Dash did every trick she remembered to throw off the geth dropship. Loop-de-loops. Corkscrew dance. Everything.

The geth ship followed her acrobatics unerringly, closing the gap steadily with every minute. Dash could feel a couple of bullets whizzing past as the geth ship closed in. Only one trick left up her metaphorical sleeve. The Sonic Rainboom. A feat, most pegasi thought impossible. A feat, she only managed to pull off once. A feat, she has been never been ever to replicate since.

Okay, Dash, you can do this. All you need to do is pull off the Sonic Rainboom again. That’ll knock the geth ship out handily enough. Hah, that sounds easy enough.

Her mind wandered back to all the failed attempts of her trying to recreate the Sonic Rainboom. Countless times of her crashing awkwardly back into the ground or some other object. Dash squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the failures in the past. She could do this. She’ll have to.

The sky-blue pegasus began increasing her speed again, angling her body downwards towards the clouds. She’ll need every bit of help gravity could provide. The geth ship followed her down, guns blazing. Dash could feel a few bullets hitting home now, but her kinetic barrier remained intact... barely.

Faster... faster.

She could feel the air heating up around her, and a glow began forming at the tip of her hooves.

Faster... faster. C’mon, faster. Dash clenched her teeth as she pushed herself harder than she ever did in years.

Silence.

For a fraction of a second there, the speedster thought she failed. She wasn't fast enough. She lost. Now, she was going to pay the price with her life.

Then she heard it. The roar of onrushing air being swept apart at sonic speed. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the familiar hues of a rainbow forming and spreading out in a circle behind. The Sonic Rainboom. She grinned wildly as she sped ahead.

"Yeaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!" she whooped as she did a corkscrew.

The geth ship wasn't so lucky. The Sonic Rainboom, if anything, was a manifestation of pure electromagnetic energy. The ship shook and went silent as the rainbow wave of energy washed over it, its systems apparently overloaded. The mass effect core of the ship however, kept it afloat.

Rainbow Dash did a wide 180 turn and hovered in front of the now silent ship, unsure of her next move. Then her radio crackled. The geth jamming must be gone. "Dash... a-are you there? *eep* P-p-please respond."

"Yeah, I'm here Fluttershy," she answered as insouciantly as possible, masking her relief that Fluttershy survived as well.

"Dash! Thank Celestia you're alright... What happened to the geth ship?... If you don't mind me asking," the pegasus' soft voice said.

"I disabled it, of course."

"Wow... you're a brave filly Dash." Fluttershy answered. After a brief pause, she continued. "Um... I found another of those geth ships..."

"What?! Get out of there!" Dash half-shouted into the radio frantically. If that silly filly got herself killed like that... Dash didn't have the heart to think further.

"It's... stuck to a building. It didn't notice me hiding above it..." came the shy reply.

“Oh...” Dash’s voice trailed off as a crazy idea sprung to life in her head. “Wait right there, I got a special delivery to make.”

[Exo-Poni Headquarters, Harnos]

“... Rainbow Dash, that’s both insane and brilliant, crashing the geth ships into each other like that.”

“Of course!” Dash said smugly, striking a heroic pose while hovering. “Wait, insane here means good right?”

Twilight giggled at her uncertain expression. “In this case, yes,” she reassured.

“You definitely got a quad there Dash, taking down two geth ships like that,” Wrex nodded with new-found respect. The rainbow-hued pegasus looked at the krogan blankly.

“What’s a quad?” Dash asked innocently. Twilight wasn’t so oblivious to the meaning though, and began to giggle uncontrollably. “What?” Dash asked, a confused look on her face.

Her radio crackled into life just then. “...this is the ESV Normaredy, calling for ground team. Please respond...” Twilight quickly sobered up and forced her mind back into reality.

Twilight put a hoof to her ear and cut into the channel. “This is Commander Sparkle. This is the ground team. We have disabled the geth jamming in the area.”

“Twilight?!” Scootaloo’s voice seemed relieved. “Thank Celestia you’re safe. Listen, something’s wrong. The entire colony gone crazy. They’re swarming the airlock and are trying to break into the ship.” Twilight winced. That was bad. And Applejack... Oh no.

“Scootaloo, get any remaining marines on that door and make sure they do not break through. Worse come to worst, you are authorised to take off and seek reinforcements.” She did not mention the fact that the entire ground

team would also be left stranded on the planet.

The pilot took the hint well enough. Her voice became grim. "Aye, Commander." She broke radio contact and turned towards the her companions.

"Okay, here's the plan. First, we need to stop by the Exo-Poni bunker and drop this scientist off." Twilight pointed a hoof at Deep Six, who staring wordlessly at the gap in the wall. "I have a few hard questions for the director himself." Her tone left no doubt what kind of question she would be asking.

[Tunnels, Harnos]

Rarity watched curiously as the pink earth pony bounced and twitched all over the crumbling concrete floor. The spectacle went on for a full minute before subsiding.

"Wow. That was a doozy alright," the pink earth pony said.

"What's a doozy?" Rarity asked, already frowning. So far, Pinkie hadn't done anything to jeopardise the mission, but her randomness was really starting to grate on her nerves.

"My Pinkie Sense. Something bad is happening to one of our friends," the pink pony said rather ominously.

"Nonsense Pinkie. They're quite capable of taking care of themselves," Rarity replied, dismissing the warning out of hand. "Now let's finish arming the explosives so we can get back to the colony... and to civilization."

"I warn you, they're super duper accurate," Pinkie said.

"All set," Garrus called from the distance.

"Right. Let's move." Rarity said, ignoring Pinkie's comment.

The trio took cover behind the corner in the hallway and detonated the explosives. The ancient tunnels collapsed spectacularly, leaving a giant

mess of debris blocking the tunnels. "That should put a crimp on the geth's plan," Garrus said with satisfaction.

"Weeeeeeee, let's go pick up Gummy." Pinkie Pie said, apparently already forgetting about her ominous warnings.

"Wait... where's High Fives?" Garrus said, scratching his head. The unstable colonist was missing from his spot in the tunnel. Looking around, they spotted the varren lying still in a corner.

"Oh no! He knocked out Gummy!" Pinkie exclaimed, as she rushed to her newfound pet.

A bullet whistled over their head. The trio turned to see High Five slowly walking them, a pistol in his mouth. "... must... protect... the colony..." the stallion slowly mumbled, as he shuffled towards them, apparently oblivious to his injuries now.

"Has he gone completely insane?" Rarity yelled, as she dodged another shot from the deranged colonist.

"Don't know, don't care," Garrus replied curtly. He sprinted towards the obviously deranged stallion. The deranged colonist tried to kick him, though his efforts was feeble, his injuries slowing him down. Garrus evaded the flailing hooves and gave him a solid thump on the head with the butt of his rifle. The colonist went down with a whimper and lay still.

The turian slung his rifle over his back and eyed the approaching ponies. "I got a bad feeling about this," he remarked. He arched his eyebrow as Pinkie began shaking and twitching again.

"Twitchy, twitch; twitchy, twitch! Something bad is happening at the colony!"

[Skybridges, Harnos]

The deep blue unicorn was standing before a partially destroyed window, apparently admiring the view of horizon. He turned towards the commander

with a smile as she was shown in by the guards. The director seemed unperturbed by the angry look on Twilight's face.

"Ah Commander Sparkle, you have returned. I presume you have-" Director Jong began, before being cut off by Twilight.

"You were lying about the colony," Twilight pointed an accusatory hoof at the director. "How could you leave all those ponies there to be infected?!"

The director looked surprised for a brief moment, before recovering gamely. He started to explain smoothly, "Ahhh.... see it was the collective decision of the company board to study the natural history of-"

"To hay with with your company!" Twilight all but shouted. Her eyes blazed with anger. "These are ordinary ponies. NORMAL PONIES. How could you?"

"I..." For once, the director seemed to be at a loss for words. He looked away, and pawed the ground nervously.

Twilight shook her head in disgust. "You... disappoint me, director. I hope you can live with your decision."

She glanced at the ponies who hung at the door of the room. "Come on girls, let's see if the nerve gas actually works. With luck we can disable the colonists without lethal force on our part." She turned and trotted off without so much a goodbye to the director.

"Come on, sis!" Applebloom cried, as she excited bounced up and down. "Ah got something to show to ya."

"This better be important Applebloom. Big MacIntosh wants me to take care of that patch of apple trees lickity split." Applejack replied, her freckled face wearing a not-so-well-disguised grin. The orange mare followed her enthusiastic sister in a darkened barn.

"Applebloom, this better not be one of ya pranks." the farmer pony warned as the filly disappeared from sight. "Applebloom?"

No answer.

“Applebloom?” the mare called out again, in a more worried voice. She spied a glint in the darkness and took several steps towards it. She can feel the darkness closing in around her. Her heart began to hammer rapidly in her chest.

Then she saw what the glint was.

A huge gaping jaw, filled with sharp teeth. The maw engulfed her.

[Unknown Location, Harnos]

Pain.

It was the first thing she felt as her senses started to return. Applejack could do nothing but lay still as she struggled to regain her wit. She tried to think back on her last coherent memory. Applebloom. Plant. Mayor swinging a lead pipe to her noggin. Oh. That was it.

As the pain in her head settled into a dull ache, Applejack tried opening her eyes. Nothing. The strip of cloth she felt over her face probably had something to do with it. She wriggled her legs. No dice. Bundles of rope-like material prevented her doing more than a twitch.

Frustrated, the mare tried to struggle violently against her restrains. The ropes remained secure despite her best efforts. Whoever did this knew their stuff. Then she heard the sound of approaching hooves.

“Now, now Applejack, don’t struggle. You’ll make it worse.” she heard a melodic voice sing. One of the colonists. Song Bird... or something. “The Thorian will make you understand. You will understand.” Her words took on the edge of a religious zealot.

Applejack felt terror building in her heart at her words. What the hay is the Thorian? And what were they planning to do to her? Where was Applebloom?

She hoped her friends knew of the colonists' insanity.

[Tunnels, Harnos]

Garrus grunted as he dragged the unconscious stallion on the floor. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and gave a questioning look at Rarity for the umpteenth time. "Rarity, I appreciate your concerns for this civilian, but he just tried to murder us. Do we really need to drag him back?"

"Garrus, we've been through this. I rather drag the crazy colt back than leave him to die here in the tunnels. At least we're reaching the outpost." She grimaced as she inspected her now-filthy hooves and armour. The trio approached the stairwell which led back to the outpost.

"Oh look! The colony has thrown a party to welcome us!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, as she bounced beside the white unicorn. "Wait, they didn't invite me to throw the party! No parties are complete without Pinkie's hoof on it." She pouted at the thought.

"What party? I only see..." Rarity narrowed her eyes as she saw the colonists emerging from the stairwell and taking what suspiciously seemed like defensive positions around the stairs. She stopped in her tracks, and gestured for her companions to do the same.

"Hey guys, look who we found-" Rarity called out, before being rudely interrupted by a sing-song voice.

"Protect the heart of colony! Kill the intruders!"

"What?" Bullets began to whiz around them. "Get to cover!" Rarity exclaimed as she dived into a pile of rocks nearby. At least the colonists' aim was even worse than the geth.

"Okay, so has the whole planet officially gone insane while we were snuffling about in a dank musty tunnel?" Garrus asked sardonically, as he flattened himself against a pillar. Rarity shot him a dark glare in response.

Rarity noticed Pinkie was still sitting on her haunches in the open. She promptly dragged her into the relative safety of the rock pile by the tail.

“Hey... this is no party! Those meanies are shooting at us!” Pinkie mused aloud as she put her hoof thoughtfully to her chin. Gummy waddled over towards the pair, also apparently oblivious to the hail of bullets being showered around them.

Rarity felt her eye twitching at the antics of her two companions. Here they were, under fire by insane civilians, and they’re still going on about parties. She began to wonder if she’ll ever make it out of the planet alive. The white unicorn certainly didn’t want to die here in a miserable wasteland. Not when there was still so much fashion to be done.

[Skybridges, Harnos]

Twilight herself wasn’t having much of a good time. The drive back to the outpost had been uneventful, but that was the extent of their good luck.

“What the hay is that?” Twilight asked as she spotted a green blob smack in the middle of the roadway. Rainbow Dash’s voice crackled over the radio. “I don’t know. Just run over it.”

“What? And risk the Mako? We don’t have wings you know.” Twilight answered, as she maneuvered the vehicle safely around the blob as best she could.

“Well, you’re going to have walk then,” Dash replied. “Take a look in front.”

Twilight frowned and focused the optical sight on the entrance to the skyscraper where Lix’s Hope was situated. The entire road was covered with dozens of green blobs. Some even seemed to be visibly growing. The unicorn groaned, and brought the vehicle to a halt just in front of the field of blobs on the roadway.

“Why are we stopping?” Tali asked, as the lavender unicorn opened the driver’s hatch.

“Mutant blobs blocking our way. We’ll need to go on foot.”

“Great. Is this something that plant of yours cooked up?” Wrex queried, as he followed the quarian out.

“Don’t know. But the thing looks organic. Plus it wasn’t there before. You make the connection,” Twilight replied a little sardonically. She looked up to Dash, who was hovering expectantly above the Mako. “Dash go on ahead. Scout the way for us.” The rainbow pegasus saluted smartly and zoomed off towards the outpost.

Twilight then turned her gaze on the nearest greenish blob of funk on the road. It seemed to be composed of an amorphous green organic material, with slime oozing slowly around it. As she watched the blob, she noticed the blob was steadily growing in size... and forming a disturbingly familiar shape.

“Get back, something’s happening,” Twilight shouted, as she took several steps back. “Tali, man the Mako’s gun, give us cover.” The quarian acknowledged the order and clambered back into the vehicle. Fluttershy landed on back of the armoured personnel carrier, staring at the blobs with wide eyes. Angel and Wrex already had their guns out, with Angel balancing her shotgun delicately on the krogan’s head.

The blobs steadily grew, and grew. And formed the unmistakable outline of a pony. The ‘face’ of the thing even had the vestiges of eyes, ears and mouth. The creature emitted an unearthly moan as the blob solidified, before turning its head unerringly towards the ponies standing near the Mako. The sequence was repeated all across the roadway, with the blobs turning into shambling caricatures of ponies.

“Okay... mutant plant zombies.” Twilight aimed her shoulder-mounted guns at the shambling abomination. No further words were needed. These were clearly hostile. The group opened fire, shredding the nearest plant zombies to their constituent goop. That was when they learned something potentially groundbreaking in the field of mutant plant zombie physiology.

Zombies could run. The whole roadway was suddenly filled with a heaving mass of bodies as the more and more plant zombies emerged from the blobs and began swarming towards the group.

“At least we had warning about the colonists going insane,” Twilight

remarked dryly as they took shelter behind yet another pile of rubble. Tali just nodded, and leaned out to spray the colonists with yet another burst of submachine gun fire to keep their heads down.

“Sparkle, if you’re going to use that nerve gas, you better do it before I actually start killing these amateurs,” Wrex called, the krogan sheltering behind a shattered vehicle wreck several paces ahead of her.

Twilight nodded, despite the krogan not being able to see doing so and more than likely to busy to care either. The lavender unicorn took the grenade mod out of her pack and affixed it to the grenade launcher module. Satisfied it’s fully functional, Twilight levitated the launcher and shot two disc-shaped grenades at the colonists taking shelter by the elevator. A cloud of gas erupted among the defenders, causing them to stagger and gasp for breath.

A few minutes of coughing and wheezing later, the lavender unicorn emerged from the pall to find the colonists all lying unconscious on the floor.

“Let’s go. We need to rescue Applejack and the others,” Twilight called, as she broke into a gallop towards the elevator. The unicorn prayed she wasn’t too late to rescue her friends.

[Lix’s Hope, Harnos]

The sound of explosions and gunfire rattling through the ground startled Applejack from her uneasy slumber. She lay quiet for a while, listening intently to the pattern of battle. It seems somepony was attacking the colony from the outside. But where?

The colonists were expecting them. And they had help. Dozens more of the plant zombies swarmed the team as they exited the elevator, along with some more of the possessed colonists. Luckily being civilians, they weren’t particularly skilled with their weapons, though a lucky shot would still put anypony out of comission. Also, Twilight’s insistence on non-lethal force on the colonists was severely crimping the tactical options of the team. They

had to resort to nerve gas grenades, or melee combat. The plant zombies were still open to lethal force, fortunately.

"I'm really sorry for this," Twilight apologised for the umpteenth time as she kicked another colonist unconscious.

"Twi, you can stop apologising you know. It's not like they can hear you," Dash called, as she swooped to smack a plant zombie right in the flank with her hindlegs. "Ewwww. These things are gross," she declared, as her hooves and armour was splattered with green gunk.

"Never mind those. You know you could still use your gun on them right?" Twilight said. She cut down a pair of zombies with rifle fire to further demonstrate her point. The speedster just pouted and zoomed off into the air again.

"Have you found Rarity and the team in the tunnels?" Twilight said into her radio.

"... Yes, Commander. *bzzt* Signal *kzzt* still bad here, but they're alive and well. *kzzt* We'll be *kzzt* joining you," the slightly scrambled voice of Tali responded.

"Well, that's one less worry. Now we need to find Applejack. Who knows what they might have done to her." Twilight wrinkled her brow in worry. She hoped she wasn't too late.

Applejack heard the sounds of a door sliding open. She tensed her body, for no reason other to spite her kidnappers if they tried to move her.

The blindfolds came off.

Applejack blinked at the sudden influx of light into her eyes, her vision unable to compensate after spending so long in absolute darkness.

"I'm sorry Applejack, but your friends left me with no choice."

The mayor. Applejack focused on the blurry image of the tan pony,

mentally willing her eyes to recover faster. She seemed to be holding something in her mouth. The shape resolved sharply into something black. Metallic.

A pistol.

Applejack's heart skipped a beat as she realised the murderous intention of the mayor. She began to struggle futilely against her bonds. Her eyes widened with fear as she saw the mayor readying the pistol. Where is Twilight? Where are her friends? Her friends would never leave her hanging... would they?

"I'm really, really sorry," the mayor repeated, her expression a sorrowful one.

Applejack squeezed her eyes shut. She hoped it would be a quick death.

clatter

Applejack peeked open an eye. The pistol lay on the floor, right in front of her. She turned to look up at the mayor, both eyes wide open again.

"No. I will not do this. I will not," the mayor suddenly declared. Her forehooves were clenched tightly on her head, her body twitching slightly with pain. Applejack eyes widened. Was the mayor fighting... whoever it was that was controlling her?

"Leave her alone!" a familiar voice shouted. Twilight!

The soldierpony heard a solid thump and the mayor suddenly crumpled to the floor. She could see Twilight standing over the unconscious body, relief evident on her face.

Applejack, despite the gags covering her mouth, began to smile. She knew she could count on her friends.

"I don't like none of this mind-controllin'... thingamajig," Applejack said, as she nuzzled the unconscious body of her sister. They found Applebloom

lying unconscious with a nasty bump on her head. Apparently the colonists decided that she was a liability of a sort. They laid her unconscious body, along with the other colonists, in the cargo hold of the damaged freighter in the outpost. For added security, Twilight got a couple of the pegasi marines from the ship to watch over the unconscious survivors.

“Neither do I. But that’s what they were under. Some form of mind-controlling spell. And the source is somewhere in this colony.”

“Twilight! We searched every inch of the outpost. There’s simply nothing else to be found.” Rarity responded primly.

Twilight felt a gentle tap on her shoulder. She turned to see Fluttershy shyly pointing towards the damaged freighter in the outpost.

“What about it Fluttershy?” Twilight asked, curious.

“Well... um... see Angel and I think that the colonists were hiding something under that ship. I stole a look at that console nearby.” She pointed to a workstation next to the ship. “I think that ship can be moved.”

“Huh. Let’s take a look then.”

The lavender unicorn trotted over to the controls and began scrolling through the screen. On first glance, it was mostly mundane stuff. Ship records. Power levels. Life support. Crane control. Personnel records. Wait, Crane control? Why would a crane control be attached to what seemed to be ostensibly a ship maintenance console. She looked up towards the ship. A pair of metal cable was attached around the midsection. Her eyes trailed upwards, and found the cables attached to a set of machinery that suspiciously looked like a crane. Duh. She wondered how she could have missed such an obvious clue. Hindsight was always all about the obvious.

“You’re right. There is a hidden control here.” She activated the crane.

Twilight jumped a little as the crane started with a loud splutter, before settling into a steady hum. The ship midsection began to lift, the seals connecting it to the other section breaking free easily. Interesting. They must have rigged the entire thing to be easily detached and closed when needed.

As the ship was lifted, Twilight saw what the colonists had been hiding. A small flight of stairs, leading downwards towards... somewhere. Probably the Thorian's lair.

"Okay, we just need to find this creature and determine what it... what it...." the quarian's voice trailed off as the group entered the large multi-storied chamber. Like most of the rooms in the area below the colony thus far, it was covered with debris and damaged beyond recognition. This particular chamber appeared to have suffered some sort of catastrophic structural failure though, as a large gaping hole opened right in the middle of the room. Light from Harnos' weak sun could be seen just peeking through the gap several stories above.

What drew Tali's attention was not the deep yawning pit however. It was what hung above it. A vaguely octopus-like green creature hung suspended by various tube-like protrusion into the walls surrounding it. The front of the creature tapered into an orifice that resembled a mouth, with tentacle-like appendages surrounding it. Clear liquid can be seen dripping from the opening.

"Kee'lah..." Tali breathed as she looked the creature up and down.

"How are we supposed to bring down that monstrosity?" Rarity said, staring at the creature with rounded eyes.

"We're going to need bigger guns," the krogan quipped.

"Shh, something's happening. Be ready." Twilight's horn glowed faintly as she readied her magic.

The creature suddenly heaved and shuddered, causing Twilight to take a step back. The 'mouth' suddenly bulged and a humonoid shape slid out of the opening and fell onto the ground on one knee. It was an asari, albeit with green skin instead of the usual blue hues the species had. She wore a skin-tight black bodysuit and seemed unarmed. Her blue eyes seemed unfocused, yet gleaming with alien intelligence.

The asari stood up and took several steps towards Twilight. She spoke in an eerie alien voice, her very words seemed to echo in Twilight's mind. "Invaders! Your every step is a transgression. A thousand feelers appraise you as meat, good only to dig or decompose."

"Well, that certainly clears things up," Dash remarked sardonically.

"I speak for the Old Growth, as I did for Saren. You are within and before the Thorian. It commands you to be in awe."

Twilight blinked in confusion. Saren was here before? That was news. Then she heard Applejack speak.

"You! You're the one who messed with mah sister's head. I don't right care who or what you are, but nopony messes with the Apple family," the soldier pony shouted.

"The Thorian is a piece of this world, extending across the land and back through the ages. You can no more kill it than cut the sky." The asari's eyes narrowed, her hands began to glow with a faint blue light.

"Your blood will feed the ground and new growth!" she boomed in a loud voice. The green skinned alien raised a hand and knocked everypony back.

Twilight felt an invisible hoof pick her up and fling her against the wall. Momentarily dazed, she heard gunfire erupting as her companions opened up. She saw the asari being flung off the edge of the pit by Angel's biotics. Her team was peppering the creature with gunfire, though the thick skin seemed impervious to their bullets. Then her blood chilled as something landed with a wet smack beside her. It was the green glop they found in the colonies. Twilight watched as more of the green blobs landed on the floor amongst the chaos and began to grow. They'll be overrun by plant zombies if they didn't make a move.

"We need to move, now!" Twilight shouted as she gave the growing blob next to her a swift stomp, smashing it to its constituent goo.

The lavender unicorn double-timed it to a nearby doorway, which led to a stairwell going to the next floor. She sighed with relief as the rest of team scrambled in after her, with Rarity and Garrus firing out the doorway to put

down more zombies.

“Now what? We can’t even scratch the darn thing.” Applejack said, in between gasps of breath.

Twilight took a quick peek outside, and her eyes strayed to the various appendages keeping the Thorian suspended over the chasm. An unlikely idea began to form in her mind.

Just maybe... She looked up to find one of the tube-like protrusion running above them.

“Wrex, how many grenades you got left?” The krogan held out three fingers. “Try strapping them to that tube above us.”

Wrex nodded in understanding, divining her intention. He primed the grenades, and gestured for everypony else to take cover. With one smooth motion, he let the grenades fly, the disc-shaped explosives embedded themselves into the tube.

A moment later, the tube exploded in a gory mess of green organic sludge and orange goo, splashing all the ponies in the room. An inhuman wail pierced through the air as Twilight cautiously peeked out and watched the plant shake and thrash.

“Yeech... at least we know that works. Girls, break out all your explosives. We’re going to need them...” She glanced at Pinkie who was holding out a large pink balloon with a hopeful expression in her eyes. The lavender unicorn sighed. “Yes, even your improvised party bombs.”

“Yay!”

In the end, it was just a matter of cutting off all the limbs of the plants, figuratively speaking. The Thorian spawned a dozen more of its asari clones and countless of its zombies in an attempt to drive the invaders off. It wasn’t to be.

One by one the tubes were inevitably blown off, sliced by magic or simply

weakened by gunfire before broken off by sheer brute force.

As the last stalks holding the Thorian aloft was broken, the creature let out another inhuman wail, akin to one dragging claws over a chalkboard. Twilight flattened her ears in response, grimacing at the sound. She watched in slow-motion as the creature fell heavily, bouncing off the edge of the pit, before disappearing into the abyss below.

“Good riddance to bad apples,” Rarity declared, as she trotted up to stand beside Twilight. “You think that’s the last we’ll see of it?”

“I doubt it,” Twilight answered grimly, as she stared at the silent abyss. Her radio chimed.

“Hey, Commander. I think you’ll want to see this,” Tali’s voice spoke.

“We found her in that thing.” Tali pointed to a partially torn open pod-like structure glued against the wall. An asari lay face down, unconscious in a pool of liquid below the pod. Disturbingly, she was also clad in the same black bodysuit as the asari clone who attacked them. Her skin colour was the normal blue though.

Twilight turned the asari over with a hoof, unsurprised that the asari had the same face as the clones did. Well, that explained a great deal on how the creature managed to clone an asari of all things in this desolate planet.

The asari’s eyes fluttered open. Twilight’s horn glowed in anticipation of trouble, but the asari just put a hand to her head and groaned.

“T-thank you for releasing me from the Thorian,” she said weakly. The blue-skinned alien sat up and eyed her rescuers.

“My name is Shia-la, and I serve...” Her brow furrowed for a moment, before she corrected herself. “I served Matriach Benezia,” she continued, her voice strangely calm. “When Benezia allied herself with Saren, so did I.”

“Why did you join her?” Garrus asked, folding his arms over his chest. The

turian was obviously unconvinced by her sudden about-turn.

"The matriach foresaw the influence Saren would have. She wanted to guide him down a gentler path. Unfortunately... Saren was compelling. She soon lost her way. We all did." A tinge of regret coloured her voice.

"Typical asari meddling. About time it bit you in the ass," Wrex snorted.

"I thought asari matriachs were among the most intelligent and powerful beings in the galaxy. How could one such as Benezia fall under his influence?" Twilight said, puzzled.

"Saren has a vessel. A giant warship unlike anything I ever seen. He calls it... Sovereign. It can dominate the minds of its followers; bend them to Saren's will. The process is subtle; it can take days, weeks. But in the end, it is absolute." She looked away. "Even the matriach couldn't resist such a powerful influence."

The asari stood up and began walking towards the partially destroyed pod. She fingered the soft material for a moment, before turning back to face Twilight. "I was a willing slave when Saren brought me here. He needed my biotics to communicate with the Thorian. I was given by Saren as part of the exchange for the Cipher."

"The what now?" Applejack said, a puzzled look on her face.

"The Cipher... it is difficult to explain in mere words. Think of it as cultural knowledge of the entire Prothean race. Their knowledge. Their experience. Their history. Their very existence. All which make up for their racial outlook."

"Why do you need such a thing?" Tali asked, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

"The beacon. It is filled with meanings that only a true Prothean mind can understand and interpret. The Cipher allows you to understand the subtle message interwoven in the visions."

"And Saren used it to decipher his version of the beacon's message!" Twilight cried, slapping her hooves together. "Of course. And he wanted to kill the Thorian to prevent me from obtaining this Cipher." The other ponies

looked at the unicorn in confusion.

“Correct. The Thorian, as you can see, was initially very pleased that you arrived. It saw you as a tool to defeat Saren’s treachery,” the asari elaborated, folding her hands over her chest. “Obviously, it underestimated your resolve once you turned against it as well.”

“I need that Cipher. Saren is out to bring back the Reapers. I know it.”

“Why would you be needing that now Twilight? Is there something you ain’t sharing with us? What’s this about a message in that beacon?” Applejack interjected, her eyes narrowing.

The lavender unicorn sighed. It probably wasn’t the best time to reveal the visions and nightmares she had ever since she touched the accursed beacon, but at the same time, she could not very well leave her friends out in the dark. The piercing stare that Applejack gave her probably helped as well.

“Look... there’s something I been meaning to tell.” Twilight started to describe her nightmare to her companions. Her visions of doom. The horror she felt as she watched every single image replay in her dreams, even if she could not understand the any of the visions.

“Woah... Twilight, why didn’t you tell us? We could have helped!” Rainbow Dash cried indignantly.

“I... I didn’t think it was important. Not until we first heard about the Reapers. Even then I thought it was best I kept this to myself.” Twilight looked away guiltily. “I don’t want you girls think I’m starting to go crazy.”

“Twilight, we’re your friends. Of course we believe you,” Rarity said.

“Ya really need to trust ya own friends more, Twilight.” Applejack remarked.

The lavender unicorn looked at the two with genuine appreciation, before hugging the white unicorn. “Thank you... for not doubting me.” she said in a muffled voice.

“So, commander, do you wish to learn the Cipher?” Shia’la finally piped up, after remaining silent throughout the exchange. Twilight detached herself from Rarity and glanced at the asari.

“Yes, please.” Twilight answered. A tiny voice in her mind told her it was a trap, the asari was just another of Saren’s minions waiting to kill her. She willed the voice to be silent.

“Very, well, step forward.”

“Try to relax commander. Slow deep breaths.” Twilight did as she was told, her heart hammering in her chest. The asari approached the lavender unicorn and put her hands between the unicorn’s head.

Twilight felt the world around her blurring as the asari recited what was clearly a memorised script.

“Reach out to grasp the threads that binds us, one to another.”

“We’re all connected, every living being united in a single glorious existence.”

“Open yourself to the universe, commander.”

“Embrace eternity!”

Twilight suddenly felt her mind being pulled in ten separate directions at once. Again, the sequence of imagery from the beacon flashed through her mind. This time however, there seemed to be an order to sequence of visions. Then... darkness.

“...ommander... re... ight... coman... Spark...”

Twilight slowly opened her eyes. The blurred outline of Rarity’s face came into view.

“Twilight! You’re alright! You were knocked out for a minute there.”

Twilight groaned in pain as she struggled to get up. "What... happened?"

"Shia'la happened, darling." Right. The asari who they rescued from the Thorian. "Though you seem perfectly fine now. What did she do to you?" Concern was etched on her face.

"I don't know... more weird dreams."

"I have given you the Cipher, just as I have given to Saren. The ancestral memories of the Protheans are a part of you now," the asari spoke from behind the white unicorn.

"Wow... so... do you know any secret Prothean stuff? Martial arts? Kung-fu? Super magic?!" Rainbow Dash said excitedly.

"Actually... I don't feel any different. Sorry Rainbow." Twilight answered, much to the disappointment of the sky-blue pegasus.

"This Cipher thing is lame." The rainbow speedster stomped the ground in annoyance, kicking up small puffs of dust.

"You have just been given the experience of the entire Prothean race. It'll take time for your mind to process such a wealth of information," Shia'la said.

"I guess so..."

"I am sorry if you have suffered, but it is the only way. In time, the Cipher will help you understand the visions from the beacon." Twilight nodded in reply. At the very least, it didn't seem to be doing her any harm.

"So... whatcha goin' to do, now what you're free from the Thorian?" Applejack asked.

"If you allow it, I would to stay with the colonists and help them rebuild. Think of it as penance... for my previous misdeeds."

"And how do we know you won't betray the colony to Saren again?" Garrus queried, not unreasonably.

“The Thorian... it broke whatever hold Saren had on me. And now you freed me from the creature, I have my own free will again.” She looked sorrowful for a moment. Twilight suddenly felt a pang of sympathy for the asari. Being subverted of her own free will, betrayed by her own master, and now probably alone on a hostile planet.

“I think the colonists could use all the help they can get,” Twilight said finally, flashing a warm smile at the Shia’la.

The asari returned the smile, grateful for the second chance. “Thank you, commander. May fortune smile upon you.”

[Docks, Harnos]

“... and the colony of Harnos can never thank you enough for all that you done here,” the mayor said formally. “Let’s give a round of applause to Commander Sparkle, hero of Lix’s Hope!”

A ragged cheer and stomping of hooves arose from the assembled ponies around the makeshift stage. Twilight waved at the crowd shyly, unused to the attention. The mayor turned to the commander. “I am sorry we cannot offer you any more. You are however welcome back any time.” Another round of applause. “And that concludes our little ceremony. Ponies, you may go back to assigned stations.”

The mayor waited till the crowd dispersed somewhat, before leading Twilight into a corner behind the stage. “I really cannot apologise enough for what we had done back in the colony. The Thorian... simply left us no choice.”

Twilight shook her head. “No need to apologise mayor. We understand. I hope your colony can rebuild from this disaster.”

The mayor gave a shrug. “I’m sure we can. Now with the geth gone, we’ll go right back to just being another backward outpost in the middle of nowhere. I wish you luck in your future endeavours.” The mayor tilted her head in goodbye and trotted off to join the other colonists on the way back to the outpost.

Twilight smiled at the departing beige mare for a moment. Then she started to make her way to the waiting airlock of the Normaredy. The lavender unicorn was eager to leave this desolate planet. Before she could reach the entrance, she heard another another voice call out to her.

“Commander, I must speak with you for a moment.”

Director Jong. She turned to face the deep blue unicorn, who cantered to a stop a few steps before the lavender unicorn. Twilight felt herself scowling at the director.

Wearing an apologetic look, the director spoke, “I truly regret the suffering that the policy of this company has caused to the Harnos’ colonists. It is only fair that I shall lobby for the company to continue their support of the colony... despite the number of questionable incidents that happened here.”

Twilight arched an eyebrow at the director’s apparent change of heart. It was a generous gesture by all accounts. Exo-Poni was a large well-known intergalactic corporation. Their continued support, both material and financial, would be invaluable to the survival of the fledgling colony. “We’ll see about that. I, for one, will only believe it when I see it.”

“Oh... you will. I do believe the colony has a bright future, now that the Thorian and geth are gone. Of course, it is unfortunate the geth destroyed the plant before we could study it further no?” The director’s eyes were twinkling as he spoke.

Twilight had to hide a smirk at his words. Despite his benevolent intentions, the director was still a political animal at the core. Well, Twilight was content to play along... for now. “Yes, director. What a shame that was.” She nodded formally as goodbye and entered the ship’s airlock.

[Lix’s Hope, Harnos]

The reconciliation was easier than either of the two thought. Giant, mind-controlling plants had a way of making such trivialities easier though. Apple Bloom woke up to find her mind finally clear and free again. Applejack was just happy to get her sister back, mind and all. That didn’t mean their reconciliations was free of emotions.

“Oh, it’s you again Applejack,” she greeted curtly as Applejack entered the makeshift hospital room. “What do ya want?” the filly asked plainly.

“Apple Bloom...” The soldierpony started in a weary voice. “Look, I’m sorry for the whole cutie mark thing. I thought you’d be happy—”

“Happy? Applejack! I don’t even know what my cutie mark mean! I still don’t!” The filly pulled the blanket to reveal her cutie mark... an upturned cardboard box. She glowered at Applejack. “That unicorn ya paid to reveal it done a mighty fine job indeed... now I don’t even know what my special talent in life is...” She seemed almost close to tears. “Do ya know how embarrassing it is to not be able to tell anypony what you’re good at?”

Applejack put a comforting hoof on her shoulder. “Listen here, Apple Bloom. I don’t rightly care what your cutie mark is, and neither should you. It only represents our special talent, not our destiny in life. Look at me, my cutie mark are three apples yet I’m here, running around to save the galaxy.”

“But—”

“Don’t you ‘but’ me, lil’ lady. So your cutie mark’s an empty box. Who cares? Important thing is, you live your life the way you want it. Not how you think your cutie mark wants it...” Applejack’s voice softened. “Apple Bloom, we all missed you when you ran away... We still do. Granny Smith nearly threw a fit when she found out...”

“I know... but—”

“No buts. You know we’ll always love you.” The tears in Apple Bloom’s eyes were practically flowing now. She rushed forward and locked the elder pony with a tight hug.

“I missed you so much!”

The two sisters, suitably reconciled, spent the rest of the day catching up on gossip and family news. Applejack was understandably reluctant to leave when the time came.

“Apple Bloom, I’m goin’ to miss ya.”

“Yes big sis. I know you’ll.” The two sisters locked each other in a tight embrace. “Just... don’t go off gettin’ yourself killed ya hear!” Applebloom said, through her sobs.

“I won’t Applebloom. I promise.”

“I’ll hold ya to that promise sis. I swear to Celestia I will!” Apple Bloom said fiercely, tears streaming down her cheeks. The elder sister could only smile at her reaction. That was the Apple Bloom she knew. Always promising the impossible.

[ESV Normaredy, Harnos Orbit]

“Spike, take a letter.”

“Right!” Spike magically produced an old-fashioned inkwell pot complete with parchment and quills. A tradition that has survived pony-kind transition to a galactic community.

Dear Princess Celestia,

I have successfully dealt with the geth problem on Harnos. Unfortunately, we could only mourn the loss of 60% of the colony’s population to the geth attack. The colony’s long term future has been assured by the Exo-Poni Company. I’m also happy to report that Applejack has reconciled with her sister, after years of estranged relationship. Strange how one can even find family in the most desolate corner of the galaxy.

As for the matter of Saren, I think we have obtained a vital piece of information regarding the Prothean beacon. It will take time however for me to process that information. In the meantime, we will began our search of Dr. Liara T’Soni in the Artemis Tau cluster.

Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle
Commander of the ESV Normaredy

The diminutive dragon wrote furiously on the parchment, before looking up. "That's it?" he inquired.

"That's it Spike. Send it."

The lavender unicorn looked out of the viewport at the planet below. She wondered idly if the Thorian was truly killed. Twilight certainly did not think so.

At least they were now one step closer to understanding Saren's true purpose.

Intermission 2

[Equestrian Embassy, Citadel]

“We’ve received your reports of your mission on Harnos. Good work with saving the colony,” the hologram of the asari councilor congratulated. Twilight nodded slightly, but remained stiffly at attention. It wouldn’t do for a Spectre to look smug... or at least that was what she thought. Nihilus never did manage to give her a crash course on Spectre decorum. She found herself actually missing the gruff turian.

“Hmph, if it wasn’t for the fact it was a pony colony, I doubt the commander would go to such pains to keep the colony alive,” the turian councilor sneered. Twilight felt an eye twitch at his words.

“I would do the same no matter whose colony it was. No pony deserves such a fate by the geth and the Thorian,” Twilight ground out, fighting to keep her tone neutral. She was markedly less successful with her face.

“A pity really, the Thorian. We may never see the likes of it again,” the salarian councillor commented.

“We await further news of your mission,” the asari councillor finished, before the images faded away.

Twilight turned away from the console to face the crew members who had assembled in the office. “Alright girls, we’ll be needing to stock up on supplies for our long trip to the Artermis Tau cluster, which might take quite some time. So, go ahead and enjoy yourself for the next few days.”

The assembled ponies gave a cheer and began to chat excitedly amongst themselves. The alien crew reactions were more subdued, though Twilight suspected they were just as eager to take a break off the mission.

“Wow, thanks Twilight!”

“Dash, you think we should head back to C-Sec HQ and see if they actually

missed us?”

“Nah, I’ll rather not face the Executor for skipping out like that. How about we hit the shooting range instead? I know I could pull a few favours to get us in unnoticed.”

“Um... I’m just going to visit the botanical gardens again... if that’s okay with you.”

“Fabulous. Now I can get all the proper materials needed to fabricate this new custom armour of mine. Speaking of which Twilight, you must simply let me take your measurements. You look dreadful in that battered onyx armour of yours...”

“I reckon I’ll go ahead and send a letter to Big MacIntosh. He’s probably worried sick and all about Apple Bloom.”

Twilight smiled as they chattered excitedly. Her? Well, she was planning on going to that nice spa in the Wards she heard so much about...

[The Wards, Citadel]

“Commander Sparkle! Commander Sparkle!”

Twilight blinked in surprise as she searched around amongst the busy crowd for the source of the voice calling her. The very fact that somepony recognised her was surprising, considering she had gone to great lengths to keep a low profile; though the news broadcast of her saving Harnos was a little hard to hide.

“Over here!”

The lavender unicorn finally spotted the one who called her. A turquoise green coated unicorn with pink fluffy mane and tail. She had yellow highlights running down her relatively unkempt mane. The unicorn was jumping frantically and waving at her. Her expression turned to joy as she saw Twilight glancing at her.

“Yes?” Twilight greeted, as she trotted up to the turquoise mare.

The unicorn squealed with glee. "It's really you! Commander Sparkle! Personal protege of the Princess herself." As she jumped around with excitement, Twilight could make out her cutie mark half hidden beneath saddle-dress; an open umbrella with little hearts around it.

"Do you mind if you sign this for me? It'll mean so much!" the unicorn gushed, taking out a piece of paper and a marker pen.

"Err... sure," Twilight replied, slightly puzzled at the request. Autographs? Now that's a little unexpected. The unicorn was expecting some request for help or something, judging by how ponies seemed to always come to her for help. She picked up the pen being offered and scrawled her signature on the paper.

"Oh, oh! And sign my bags as well," she added, turning sideways to display her saddle bags. She used her nuzzle to indicate an empty spot on the body of the bag. Twilight did as she asked and handed the pen and paper back. The unicorn scanned the signature carefully and squealed again.

"Thankyouthankyouthankyou. You're the greatest!" she gushed, replacing the signed autograph into her saddle bags with care.

"My pleasure," Twilight said, smiling at her reaction. It was a nice feeling to have a fan for once. It couldn't hurt to indulge her, right?

"I'm going to tell all my friends that I met the great Commander Sparkle! Squeee!" Dewdrop squealed and quickly dashed off, apparently eager to spread the news. Twilight stared at the disappearing filly, before shaking her head in bemused resignation.

Fillies these days.

[VR Training Course]

Applejack dived into the burnt out store as bullets stitched across the ruined sidewalk.

"Consarn' it... she's good," she muttered as she impatiently waited for her

gun to cool down. Her ears twitched as a sudden silence punctuated gunfire. She cautiously poked her head out, spying a glimmer in one of the towers overlooking the street.

Dash.

The orange mare quickly ducked below the window. Just in time too. Another shot rang out, it's sharper report distinguishing it from the previous shots.

She must have switched to her sniper rifle. How the hay am I supposed to move now? The soldier pony knew Dash was one of the best snipers she had seen, if not the best so far. The pegasus was probably waiting for her to make a mistake. Applejack decided to survey the interior of the store more thoroughly. Broken counters. Overturned tables. A small hole on the other side of the room...

Her ticket out of this mess.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Applejack began to edge her way across the room, flinching slightly at every burst of sniper fire. The earth pony reached the small hole after five minutes of agonising progress. Holding the butt of her rifle firmly with her mouth, she bucked the adjacent wall to make the opening wider. The wall easily crumbled in a fine cloud of dust. Applejack reflexively ducked another shot rang out, this time hitting disturbingly close to her position. Dash must have seen the cloud of dust.

After a moment of silence, the earth pony crawled out slowly out of the store, taking care to leave no sign of her departure. Applejack found herself in the alleyway behind the store, running parallel to the street in front. Cautiously leaning out of the corner, she was relieved to find the glimmer in the tower hadn't disappeared. Good, Dash probably didn't notice her escape. Flipping her gun's safety, she tucked it on her back and broke into a gallop down the alley.

Time for some payback.

Meanwhile, Rainbow Dash was having the time of her life. She got

Applejack pinned. She had the store's entrances covered. There was no way she'd escape this time. All she needed now was an accurate shot, though Applejack was proving frustratingly adept at dodging her sniper fire. No matter. It was only a matter of time before she slipped.

The rainbow mare adjusted her sniper scope slightly and settled down for a long wait at her elevated perch, satisfied in the knowledge that victory was within her grasp.

"Boom. Head shot," she heard Applejack's voice speak behind her.

How did-

Before she could move more than a muscle, she felt the familiar sensation of paint bullets impacting on the back of her head. Rainbow Dash froze in shock for a moment, before slamming her forehooves on the ground in frustration.

She lost... again!

The C-Sec agent turned as the combat simulation ended and the lights in the artificial arena came to life.

"I... lost!" Rainbow Dash repeated with disbelief.

"Aw, sugarcube, don't feel bad. You almost got me there," Applejack said, giving her a sympathetic smile, before adding with a smirk, "I'm just better."

"I hate losing..." Dash muttered, obviously not taking her third loss in a row well.

Applejack looked a little taken aback by her slightly venomous words.

"Come on Rainbow, it's all in good fun. Besides, we'll kick them alien flanks no problem at this rate."

"Yeah... whatever."

"Ah, Twilight, you have a private message from the princess. I thought I

should let you know.” Lyra said without looking up as Twilight walked into the office. “It’s Priority One, so you should take a look.”

Despite the casual way of which the ambassador delivered her little message, Twilight knew it was not a request. Priority One meant something extremely urgent had come up and probably involved national security. “Do you mind if I use the office for a moment?” Twilight asked, a million questions suddenly assaulting her mind.

“Not at all. I could use a break anyway.” The mint green unicorn got up from her chair and stretched her legs. She grabbed a PDA and whistled as she made her way out of the office. The commander waited till the door slid shut with a hiss before approaching the communication terminal. Her heart beating anxiously, she activated the control lectern.

An image of Princess Celestia appeared, regal as always. Twilight frowned as she saw the princess wearing a serious expression, her lips set in grim determination. Gone were the gentle smile she always wore for her subjects, the light-hearted twinkle in her eyes.

“My faithful student Twilight Sparkle. This is a Priority One message. It is imperative you share this with nopony else. This is... a delicate subject.”

The princess paused as she licked her lips, as if unsure of what to say next. Twilight’s frown deepened. She never seen the princess so... distraught before.

“As you may know, Princess Luna heads our branch of covert operations, better known as Manticore. It has come to my attention that my dear sister has went missing for at least a week now. True, she has gone missing for a longer periods than this in the past, but she had always gave a warning ahead of time before she did anything that required her extended attention. Last week, she had informed Manticore HQ that she would be going out to scout a suspected geth base in the Horsehead Nebulae. I was told this was supposed to be a routine recon mission, nothing more. Luna... never reported back. Not a single word since she departed.”

Twilight stiffened as she heard the princess’ words. The Princess of the Moon... missing? But how... how did one manage to kidnap or subdue a

demi-god?

The pleading voice of Princess Celestia disrupted that train of thoughts. “Please Twilight, find out where my sister gone, but do so discreetly. That means you are not allowed to detract from your current mission.”

Twilight blinked. That was a surprise. She half-expected the Princess to order her to drop everything and go chasing after Princess Luna. She was after all one half of Equestrian Royalty. Princess Celestia’s dearest sister.

“I have my reasons for this. From my sister’s notes, I suspect her disappearance is in some way connected to Saren and the Reapers. I think you would find clues to her whereabouts as you scour the galaxy for Saren.”

Twilight nodded. That seemed reasonable enough. She was well aware or at least suspected that she wasn’t the only agent at the Princesses’ disposal that was looking into Saren’s plan.

The princess’ voice dropped into a concerned tone. “Stay safe, my little pony. The galaxy has become a darker place.”

The hologram disappeared, leaving her to stare at thin air. The galaxy had just become a whole lot more darker indeed.

[C-Sec Academy, Citadel]

“Commander Sparkle? Commander Sparkle!”

Twilight frowned as she heard her name being called. It was the second time already in two days. She had no idea she was so famous. The unicorn noticed a slate-gray coated stallion pushing through a group of volus, a hovering camera in tow.

“Commander Sparkle?” the stallion repeated, a polite expression etched on her face. His slivery mane was neatly shaved and cropped, and a press card hung around his neck. A reporter. Twilight immediately became wary of the stallion. She never had to deal with the press before. Why now?

“Yes, speaking.”

“Ah, pleased to meet you. My name is Khal Al-Jilal from the Equestrian News Network. Would you mind answering a few questions?”

“That depends.”

“Ponies back home has heard a lot of wild stories about you, Commander. The Princess have been forthcoming either. I think the public deserves some answers. Straight from the horse’s mouth as some would say.”

Twilight pondered the matter for a moment. Surely it wouldn’t do anypony harm to give an interview right? She wouldn’t want wild rumours floating around back on Canterlot anyway.

“Very well.”

She flinched as the hovering camera next to the reporter suddenly lit up and shone a bright light into her face. Khal adjusted the camera a little and grinned at the commander.

“Commander Sparkle, for years now, ponies have been trying to earn the respect of the galactic community at large. With that in mind, what are your feelings at being the first pony Spectre?”

Well, easy enough question.

“Honoured of course. This is a great chance for pony-kind to prove their worth to the galactic community.”

“I see. Some believe without firm action on our part, the Council will continue to treat us like poor relations. Have the Council demanded that you put their interests above ours?”

“So far, no. I have great faith they will not ask me to make such a choice.”

“Huh, you seems to have believe in the Council a great deal. Very well. You have been given command of an advanced warship for your mission. Do you have anything to say about it?”

“I believe it is a great honour to be commanding such a warship. The Normaredy is the product of what our species can do if we work together, and I am proud to be commanding the fruits of such collaboration between our races.”

“Right. There have been some concerns in the Navy that such an advanced warship was being handed over to the Citadel instead of being rightfully used in our fleet. What do you think of this?”

“I... I suppose the Citadel had the right, they did invest a large sum of credits into the project.”

“But do you not think the Navy deserves a little more credit for their work? That ponies should be more independent from the Citadel? That we should look out for our interests more?” Khal pressed, an eager expression on his face.

“What?” Twilight blurted, registering a confused expression.

“Do you think the Citadel is right in demanding that we surrender our best assets to them in the name of ‘galactic peace’ and part of the price we pay for ‘membership’ to the Citadel?”

“I did not even-” Twilight took a deep breath to forestall herself from saying anything rash. She recomposed her thoughts and stared at Khal—who was grinning broadly—right in the eye. “You’re trying to get me to paint the Citadel in a bad light aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Commander. It was an honest question from an honest reporter,” Khal replied lazily.

Twilight gave the reporter a cold stare. It was slowly becoming evident that the interview was nothing more than a setup to get her to condemn the Citadel to please the xenophobic crowd back on Canterlot. Celestia knows, they were vocal enough when they heard about Equestria joining the Citadel. Many of them had believed Equestria was better off going it alone like the batarians did. The same crowd also advocated stronger measures against their batarian neighbours. Princess Celestia had bend over backwards just to appease the crowd, since they theoretically could make life very difficult for her in the Equestrian Parliament. Twilight imagined their

leaders had apoplexies when they heard the Normaredy was being palmed off to the Citadel after pony-kind spent years labouring on the project.

“This interview is over,” Twilight said, firing up her horn. The hovering camera suddenly seized up, and fell to the ground, sparking and smoking.

“What the- You mule! I’ll make sure everypony on Canterlot sees how you bullied an innocent reporter.” Khal shot the lavender unicorn a venomous look as he fell to his knees to piece together his precious camcorder.

“Feel free. Without evidence, you can’t prove anything. Have a good day, sir.” Twilight nodded her head curtly and stalked off, leaving the reporter to stew in her anger.

[Park, Presidium]

The botanical gardens of the Presidium boasted well over tens of thousands of different plants and animals from the various alien races of the Citadel. It was one of these gardens that Tali and Fluttershy decided to take a walk together. The yellow pegasus and quarian made an odd couple as they strolled along the permacrete path, surrounded by verdant foliage.

“So... Tali, what did you do before you... you know... came here?” Fluttershy shyly asked the quarian.

“Hm? Oh, I lived on the Migrant Fleet before I set out on my pilgrimage.”

“Oh, I heard you mention that... but what is it?”

“It’s... well... it’s like a rite of passage. You see, when my people reach maturity, we leave our birth ships and seek acceptance among a new crew.”

“What for?” Fluttershy asked innocently. Tali smiled beneath her mask, despite the fact that she was sure the pegasus wouldn’t be able to see her expression. There was something endearing about the way this pony asked questions.

“It’s necessary to maintain genetic diversity among the fleet. But no ship

wants to accept someone who would be a burden on them. So, to prove our worth, we embark on a journey. We set out alone, leaving the flotilla and our family and friends behind us. We only return when we find something of value we can bring back to the fleet.”

“That sounds dangerous...”

“Trust me, it isn’t. Otherwise our numbers would suffer as a result. Before we embark on our pilgrimage, we are given lessons on how to survive outside the flotilla. We’re also given gifts and additional implants to help us survive.”

“But what do you do when you return?”

“Oh, we present the captain of the ship of our choice with the gift. If he accepts, then we welcomed back as part of the new crew.”

“That sounds... nice.” Fluttershy glanced at the quarian questioningly for a moment before looking down shyly.

“Why... why do you hate the geth so much?” she quietly asked. “I know we met a lot of bad geth and all... but there’s good geth, right?” Tali had to force down the bitter retort she had ready. She forcibly reminded herself that this pony was by all accounts, innocent. It was evident that she didn’t know of the geth-quarian war, nor of the precarious situation the quarians as a species found themselves in at the moment.

Tali walked in silence for a brief moment, before speaking again. “You see, we quarians originally created the geth...” Tali began to recount the short version of how the quarians invented the geth to use as a mechanical labour force and the subsequent evolution of their intelligence. She told tales of bravery and horror as the Geth-Quarian War raged. How the quarian had taken to survive after their loss in the war. How they fled their homeworlds in despair and defeat. How they subsequently learned to survive and the creation of the Migrant Fleet as it is today.

A short distance away, Garrus and Rarity were watching the two conversing intently. “Frankly, I don’t know why you keep her around. She’s at best a hindrance in a real battle and would be downright painful to watch out for,” the turian remarked, watching the pale yellow pegasus bobbing her

head up and down.

“Hush now, you shouldn’t be questioning the commander’s decision.”

“Hey, our lives are on the line here. We should kindly remove her from the team while we can. Well, we could keep the bunny. Angel is one of the more powerful biotics I seen yet. She definitely can put a lot of asari to shame.”

Rarity sighed. Truth to be told, she had to agree with the turian. As much as she liked the company, Fluttershy was a little too inexperienced to be dragged around the galaxy like this. Sure she had no place to go after the incident on Appleloosa... but bringing her along on their mission? It made no particular sense. Maybe she’d need to talk to Twilight about this...

“You two should be ashamed for talking behind Fluttershy’s back like that!”

Garrus and Rarity nearly leapt off the park bench at the sound of Pinkie’s voice behind them.

“Pinkie Pie! You know how I detest you sneaking up on me!”

“No buts. Talking about friends like that is mean.” Pinkie insisted, folding her forelegs in disapproval.

“Fine, Pinkie, maybe we were wrong. But you have to admit Fluttershy is utterly unsuited to a mission of this nature. She’s... delicate.”

Pinkie pouted and shook her head vigorously. “Give her time... I’m sure she’ll be super duper bad-ass in no time! You’ll see!”

Garrus merely raised an eyebrow at her words. “Assuming she doesn’t get herself killed first.” The turian was rewarded with yet another Pinkie glare.

“Hey, Applejack!” Rainbow Dash called out, poking the napping solidier in the ribs.

Applejack grunted slightly at the touch and opened one eye. “Wha... what

in tarnation do ya want, Rainbow Dash?" the mare sleepily answered, annoyed at being disturbed during her nap. It was rare enough for her to get enough time for a nap, being a busy pony and all, and she valued every second she got to catch up with some sleep.

"I just got the greatest idea to settle the score between us once and for all!"

"Dash, have ya been hittin' them salt bars again? What's this tomfoolery about a score?"

"You see, you think you're the best soldier in the team..."

"Rainbow Dash... if you're still sore about me beating ya in combat training-"

"... And I think I am the best soldier. Let's settle this once and for all. A race around the Presidium. Today. Noon."

Applejack stared wordlessly at the rainbow-coloured speedster in astonishment for several moments. Rainbow Dash grinned nervously, hoping that Applejack would take the challenge. She would show her why she was named best speedster of the year four times in a row back on Cloudsdale City. This was one contest she was guaranteed not to lose. No sir. She would prove once and for all who was the best pony.

Then, Dash saw a grin spreading on Applejack's face. She tilted her stenton hat back and said, "Ya know what Rainbow Dash? You're on."

[The Wards, Citadel]

"Oh, oh! Commander Sparkle!"

Twilight found herself being accosted from the same fan from earlier. Her eyes bulged as she saw just how Dewdrop Dazzle changed since they last met. The turquoise unicorn now styled her mane and tail to match hers, right down to the single highlight that ran down the middle of her mane.

"You look my new look, Commander? I did it just so I could look more like the great Commander Sparkle!"

Twilight forced a plastic grin on her face and chuckled nervously. Surely Dewdrop meant it as a joke... right?

"It's... interesting..." Twilight replied, unsure of how to reply to that. She couldn't very well tell her off, as disturbed as she was by the filly's copy cat behaviour. "I think it's-" Twilight said slowly, fumbling for polite words to dissuade her.

"Oh, Commander, you're being too modest. This is totally manestyle of the year material. I even brought a camera to take a picture of both of us together! Come on, let's take a picture."

"I... err..."

"Cool! Wait here..." Dewdrop went off to approach a nearby salarian who was conversing with another of his species. After several moments of gesticulating and loud words, the salarian reluctantly nodded and followed the filly, camera in hand. Twilight thought he looked positively terrified of the filly.

"What did you tell him?"

"Oh nothing, just that I'll stalk him and his entire family if he didn't help me with this..."

"Wha-"

"Smile!"

Twilight turned just in time to catch the full glare of the camera flash full in the face. The unicorn staggered slightly as her vision blurred, spots dancing about in the front of her. She started rubbing her abused eyes gingerly in a vain attempt to clear those pesky spots.

"Thank you so much!"

She felt the filly embracing her in a tight hug. Twilight tried to object, to tell the filly this was unacceptable. Hero worship was fine and all, but this was taking it too far. Then the sounds of pattering footsteps told her it was too

late; she was gone.

“Wait!” Twilight shouted, finally recovering the use of her mouth. It was no use. She frowned as Dewdrop disappeared among the crowd.

Much as she liked having devoted fans, this was one step too far...

“... and we fled our homeworlds. It was fortunate the geth never pursued us beyond the Veil. So we have drifted through the stars since, always running. Looking for ways to get home...” Tali’s voice ended on a note of wistfulness.

“Um... I see...” Fluttershy said, visibly moved.

“But enough about the geth, how about you?”

“Me? Um... really, there’s nothing to talk about...”

“Surely you have something to share. I know, tell me about your life on Appleloosa. Sparkle mentioned that she found you hiding behind a crate in the docks. Did you work at the docks?”

“Um... okay...” Fluttershy took a deep breath before continuing.

“Yes, I was a dockworker there. But I had a special job there. You see, my special talent...” the yellow pegasus glanced at her cutie mark for a moment. “... is being able to make friends with animals. So Appleloosa, in addition to all those delicious apples we export, also sells some of the animals we raise as pets or for resettlement to other worlds.”

She looked down at the bench, seemingly studying the fake wood intently. “You see... my job is to make sure they stay happy and calm when the time came for them to move. Sometimes I exchange animals who don’t want to go. We don’t force anypony to actually leave. Angel here was one such bunny who refused to move.” Right on cue, the rabbit appeared and hopped on top of her head. He pointed to his mouth and made a chomping motion.

“Oh, you’re hungry? Hold on...” Fluttershy dug into her saddle bag and produced a carrot. Angel whisked the carrot off her mouth and began nibbling on the end eagerly.

“I see he’s grown attached to you,” Tali commented, amused.

“Oh yes... Angel seems to like me alot.” Tali noted with amusement that the rabbit stopped her impromptu meal for a moment to scowl at the pegasus behind her back.

“Anyway, that was what probably saved my life when the scary geth attacked. I was at the starport, talking to a family of beavers. At first, I hid myself as the shooting started. Then I remember all the poor defenseless animals out there. So I crept out and let animals out... then I found myself a new place to hide. You know the rest of the story...”

“Interesting. I suppose all you ponies have cutie marks? Sorry, I’m not very familiar with your culture.”

“Yes... we all get our cutie marks when-”

“There you are!” Applejack’s voice rang out. Both Fluttershy and Tali turned to look at the soldierpony and Rainbow Dash who was apparently hovering impatiently behind.

“Mind helping us with something?”

[Presidium, Citadel]

“Okay, girls! You know the rules. First one past the finish line here wins the race!” Pinkie Pie sang as she bounced around the two potential racers. Applejack and Rainbow Dash gave each other a knowing glance before positioning themselves on the hastily drawn line on the metal floor.

“That’s right, fillies and gentlecolts. Today Rainbow Dash and Applejack will race right here, right in the heart of the Citadel, to determine the who has the right to claim the coveted ‘Best Soldier in the Team’ award!” Spike announced into a mock microphone, a twig actually. His loud voice however, attracted a few curious passer-bys.

“... We have such an award?” Fluttershy whispered, her aquamarine eyes a reflection of her confusion.

“Nope, just play along,” Spike whispered back. “Hey, where’s Garrus?”

“Twilight wanted him for something. Something about a personal problem...”

“Huh, I guess he’ll be missing all the fun. His loss.”

Spike adjusted his ‘microphone’ and switched to his announcer persona. “Alright! Ladies, take your position!”

“Oy! What do you think you ponies are doing?” a turian voice demanded. Spike glanced towards the direction of the speaker and grimaced. It was a C-Sec constable. The dragon guessed their impromptu race was probably breaking a few dozen C-Sec regulations as they spoke. But then again... Rainbow Dash promised sapphires...

“Uh... right. I can explain this...” Spike hemmed and hawed, stalling the irate C-Sec constable.

“You better have a damn good explanation for this farce. The Presidium is not a public race course,” the constable said. He looked past the dragon and pointed at the two contestants. “Tell them to stop. Now.”

“Sure, sure. Let me just-”

Meanwhile, Pinkie was waving a chequered flag merrily in front of the pair.

“Ready. Set. Go!” she yelled.

The two contestants took off in a blur, with Rainbow Dash in particular leaving a rainbow-coloured trail behind. The small crowd that gathered whooped and cheered noisily.

“What the... Stop! Stop!” the constable yelled as the two sped past him, toppling a few potted plant and weaving past the Krogan Memorial Statue. The constable tried in vain to run after them, but found himself staring at

their dust trail as they disappeared over the horizon. He raised a hand to his earpiece.

“Constable Toruk here. We have a problem.”

Speed. That was what Rainbow Dash was built for. That was her advantage her entire life.

Yet for the purposes of this competition, she had her wings tied up with a rope. She very reluctantly agreed to the restriction; even she admitted that Applejack wouldn't be able to match her speed in the air. For all the handicaps she was saddled with, she managed to maintain a razor-thin lead on the soldier pony. For the moment. Applejack was pretty close behind though. She could hear the soldier pony galloping behind her.

Then she saw an insurmountable obstacle ahead. A group of various aliens blocking the bridge. She slowed down a little as she tried to push her way through the crowd.

“Coming through, coming through!”

“Heads up ya'all!” Applejack shouted as she rounded a pair of Hanar diplomats and gave a mighty leap over a group of startled volus merchants hawking their goods. She cleared the group handily and began opening up the distance by the time Dash managed to squeeze her way past a pair of asari.

Dash narrowed her eyes. Applejack in the lead! Again! The rainbow pegasus willed her legs to go faster and took off after the earth pony.

“Commander Sparkle! There you are!”

Twilight Sparkle was beginning to dread that voice. It seemed every time Dewdrop managed to find her, she would find some new way to creep her out.

“Hey since we’re best buddies and all, I was wondering...” her voice trailed off coyly as she looked at the commander expectantly.

“Wonder what?” Twilight snapped, her patience finally worn thin by her antics.

“Commander... maybe... you can let me join the Spectres! We could totally go on adventures together and stuff and things...”

Twilight held up a hoof.

“No.”

“What?!”

“You heard me, no. Spectres are not some game you play. This is real life and death.”

Dewdrop stared at Twilight in shock, as if not expecting for her hero to reject her request.

“But, all those things I did for you... you can’t make an exception? Just this once?” she pleaded, flattening her ears.

“No. I’m sorry.”

The turquoise look-alike stared at the commander for a long moment in silence before finally nodding her head. “Fine. I see what it is. You heroes are all the same. A little glory and it suddenly goes into your head. No time for the little people eh?”

Twilight shook her head. This filly was stubbornly misinterpreting everything she was trying to say. “No, it’s not like that—”

“Don’t bother. I know what you mean. I’ll prove it to you I can make it, you’ll see!” the turquoise pony turned to leave.

“Excuse me, but I believe it’s my cue to appear,” a smooth turian voice spoke behind Dewdrop. Garrus emerged from the shadows he was hiding and walked up to the pair. He placed a firm hand on the filly, stopping her

dead in her tracks.

“Wha-? What is this?” The unicorn whirled back to face Twilight. “You set me up didn’t you?”

“Actually, I’m not here to arrest you, although the commander here did have her fears.”

“Then you have no right to stop me!”

“Just answer a question of mine. Have you ever handled a gun before?” Garrus asked casually, gesturing at the pistol on his hip.

“Um... no. I’m sure it’s easy!” Dewdrop answered hotly.

“Uh huh. Have you ever felt a gun being pointed to your face before?” Before the filly could respond, Garrus had his pistol out and pointed discreetly at her chin.

“Garrus, enough.” Twilight said, putting a hoof on his hand to lower his aim. She turned to Dewdrop, who seemed to have turned two shades paler.

“Listen, being a Spectre is not all fun and games. Sometimes... sometimes we have to make sacrifices... do things we don’t like doing...” She paused fractionally, gathering her thoughts. “... maybe even make difficult choices.”

“But we’re doing it not for glory. Not for the killing. We’re doing it for ponies everywhere. Ponies like you. Equestria needs you. But not as a spectre. Go home, and be safe. For me. For us. It’s what I am fighting for.”

“I...”

“You better listen to the commander here. She certainly knows what she’s talking about.”

Dewdrop’s eyes flitted between Twilight and Garrus. Then the unicorn’s ears drooped and her gaze dropped to the floor. “... I guess... You’re right. I shouldn’t be out here... mom’s already worried sick,” she said in a smaller voice.

“Then go home to her. Now go on. Don’t let us keep you...” Twilight gave

the unicorn a little nudge on the flank. Dewdrop glanced at both Garrus and Twilight, before nodding reluctantly and started to trot off. Compared to the bubbly filly earlier, Dewdrop now seemed like a shadow of her old self. Deep down, Twilight wondered whether this was really better for her.

“Phew, I’m glad that was settled. I was starting to think she was a little unhinged...”

Before Garrus could respond, his radio chimed. The turian listened intently for a moment, before letting out a groan. “Rainbow Dash... you idiot...” he muttered under his breath before glancing at Twilight. The commander gave him an odd look.

“Let me guess, Rainbow Dash did something again?”

“Commander, you’re not going to like this...”

“Hah hah!” Rainbow Dash whooped as she tipped the statue over. Applejack, who was following closely behind, yelled loudly as she swerved to one side to avoid the falling edifice. The statue shattered with a loud crack. Fortuitously, no one was injured by the toppling structure.

“Why you no-good...” she shouted back at the pegasus.

“Fair’s fair!”

“Alright, enough’s enough. You’re going down, Rainbow Dash,” the soldier pony shouted back, jumping to snag the flying pegasus tail with her mouth. The speedster found herself being yanked back the sudden force and landed on the ground hard. She found herself staring at the dust trail of Applejack as she planted her snout into the artificial permacrete of the Presidium.

“Oh no you don’t!” Dash shouted, getting to all fours and taking off in a rainbow blur.

The two racers sped past the various monuments and landmarks of the Presidium, tipping various landmarks over and leaving bewildered

passersby behind. The race gradually descended into a mess of tackles, tail pulling, tripping one's feet and other dirty tricks as they neared the finish line.

"It's Rainbow Dash taking the lead... Now, it's Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Applejack. Rainbow Dash! It's too close to tell!"

A indistinct trail of clouds approached the finish line, the only visible sign that the racers was still in the fight. Pained grunts and shouts emanated from the dust cloud as the two tumbled over the final laps... and deposited the now bruised and thoroughly exhausted competitors onto the floor. The crowd whooped and cheered as the two turned as one to look at Pinkie. The same question shot out of their mouth.

"Who won?"

Pinkie made a show of fiddling with her PDA for dramatic pause before shouting, "It's a tie!"

"WHAT?!"

"Ahem."

The two turned as one to the source of the cough. A very angry looking Twilight, together with Executor Pallin with an equally venomous stare.

"You two have some explaining to do."

[CIC, ESV Normaredy]

"... I can't believe you two were foolhardy enough to hold a race in the Presidium of all places. We're already in enough trouble with C-Sec. If it weren't for the ambassador's pleas and my own status as Spectres, we would be unceremoniously serving jail time on a prison ship. Or worse."

"Sorry, Commander... I guess I got a lil' carried away."

"I totally won that race you know," Dash retorted smugly, still not completely in the program. She was rewarded with pinpoint glares from the rest of the

crew.

"I mean, sorry, shouldn't have done that," she quickly corrected, with a grimace. She convinced nopony however.

Twilight glared at the rainbow pegasus a little more before moving on.

"Since you two also so kindly inflicted approximately three million credits of damage to the Citadel, both of your pay will also be docked for a year. Be thankful the princess picked up the rest of the tab."

"A.... year? How am I supposed to afford that Wonderbolts show ticket now?!"

"Oh boy, Big Mac ain't going to be pleased hearing this."

"Maybe the both of you should have thought of the consequences before running off into the wind next time," Twilight answered sardonically. The two shuffled their hooves guiltily at her words. Rainbow Dash even sported a contrite look on her face, though she gamely recovered and put on her usual expression of smug satisfaction.

"Anyhow, since we had to cancel the rest of shore leave due to your antics, we might as well start our search for Dr. Liara T'Soni." The crew stiffened slightly at their commander's words. Play time was over. Here was the next phase of their quest.

"Ditzy, pass the coordinates of the cluster to Scootaloo. Let's get our doctor."

Chapter 7

[Pilot's Deck, ESV Normaredy]

"Remind me again, *why* are we wasting our time in this miserable excuse of a star system?"

The pilot answered the pointed question with an air of resignation, having been subjected to the exact same question a dozen times for the past week. "To find Dr. Liara T'Soni. Her university mentioned this was where she headed before she dropped out of radio contact," Scootaloo replied evenly, her eyes not moving from the numerous monitors on the pilot's console.

"Right. So *why* are we scanning this obviously lifeless hunk of rock?"

"Because she could be anywhere in this cluster. Which includes this barren planet which you just called a lifeless hunk of rock." The orange pegasus stopped her work for a moment and looked up at the white unicorn leaning grumpily over her seat. "Maybe if you fixed that shorted circuit board faster, we might have completed the scan long ago."

"Please, Scootaloo, you wound me." Rarity snorted and pouted at the pilot. "If it weren't for my meticulous work in triple-checking each subsystem, we might have missed that and the scan results would have been scrambled. We would have been stuck for weeks. You should be grateful that I am the chief engineer." It had become a daily ritual for the two to trade barbs every waking cycle, though the two were well aware both did not mean a single word.

Scootaloo only shrugged, before turning her attention back to her piloting duties. In a more conversation tone, she continued, "Think we'll get lucky this time?"

The engineer sighed. "To be honest, I'm not putting my hope on this." The search was taking its toll on everypony on the ship, especially after the forceful way they were shown the door at the Citadel.

Why, she hadn't had nearly enough time to finish the acquisition of the needed spare parts for the Normaredy. The ship had already burnt through two flux converters and she was down to her last spare. Clearly, the experimental nature of the warship hasn't helped one bit. Rarity was sure she had done enough to rewrite the entire maintenance manual that came with the ship. She would need to have a talk with the pony who wrote the useless waste of good paper. A very long talk indeed.

The unicorn's blue eyes fell on the view of the barren planet below them, the latest in the dozens they have scanned. The commander better find this doctor soon. Or things might just get very interesting...

[CIC Deck, ESV Normaredy]

"Right, next planet?" Twilight said, studying the map of the cluster being displayed in the center of the CIC.

The sound of a book being flipped through furiously filled the room. Stopping halfway through, Spike studied the page briefly and said, "Let's see. Name: Stirrum. Volcanic planet... from initial surveys—"

"Captain. I'm picking up an Equestrian signal," Scootaloo's voice crackled over the speakers, interrupting the report from Spike. "Looks like a colony."

Twilight looked up from map, suddenly very much more interested. "Weird. There was no records of a colony here. How big?" she said, her hooves working the keyboard to bring up a video feed of the planet.

"Hold on." A brief pause. "About 2,000 ponies. The colony of Nova Yakterinburg." A dull reddish planet replaced the galaxy map in the center of the CIC. Wisps of yellowish clouds drifted lazily across the surface, with visible lava pools and rivers snaking through the surface.

"Not exactly uncharted, isn't it?"

Spike snorted, waving the paper charts about roughly, a few pages fluttering to the floor. "It's been years since anypony updated these charts. I mean, c'mon, how could we still be using paper charts?"

“Captain, the colony is hailing us now.”

“Patch us through, Scootaloo. Let’s greet our hosts.”

“Turns out they were only setup last year... right after the yearly census update. Trust these ponies to be so inadvertent in their timing.” Twilight dryly explained, as the ground team made themselves comfortable in the briefing room.

Rainbow Dash hovered about in the room impatiently. “Yeah whatever. Let’s hear the good news already!”

“Please, Rainbow Dash, all things in due time. As I was about to say, I have spoken to the colony’s liason. He confirmed that there were several ancient ruins detected when they surveyed the planet in detail.” The white unicorn lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Prothean ruins.”

“The miners have also lost contact with a mining facility at the far end of the planet. Coincidentally, this one sits right next to one of the ruins,” Tali added.

Applejack whistled. “Ain’t no such thing as coincidence in this galaxy.”

“Geth?” Twilight directed the question at the pilot, who was listening in from her post on the Pilot’s Deck.

“No sign of them on the ship’s sensors, Captain. Though with so much thermal interference, it is hard to be certain for sure. As for the colony’s defense net? They might as well paint a big ‘Hit Me!’ sign to their colony. It barely covers a quarter of the planet’s surface. Certainly useless for our purposes,” Scootaloo replied, a tinge of derision lingering in her voice.

Twilight furrowed her brow as she pondered the matter. It was quite probable that the geth had caught wind of their mission and set out to silence the doctor before they could find her. Perhaps Saren was more tuned in to their mission than she thought. Which means they were running out of time. They’d need to go in hot and fast, and extract the doctor before

the geth could catch her.

“Scoot, prep the Mako. We go in with a hot insertion.”

The ESV Normaredy SR-1 was a small warship by the standards of traditional warships in space. However, the small size also meant that the warship could enter planetary atmosphere without risking a burn-up or worse: crashing into the planet. Taking that line of thought, the designers of Normaredy had helpfully designed the ship to be able to carry and deploy a single M35 Mako Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV) for the purpose of rapid deployment, consistent with its role as a stealth frigate. The Mako was built to be a tank, designed to withstand high drops, extremes of temperature and rough terrain. The battered but still working Mako that the commander had found on Harnos was only testament to that fact.

The idea was simple. The Normaredy (and eventually ships of the same class) was to literally drop the vehicle onto the location where it needed to be deployed. With the vehicle's sturdy construction, element zero core and micro-thrusters, it could be air-dropped at a relatively high height without endangering the crew. This helped minimise the exposure of the frigate to anti-aircraft fire and enable it to swiftly and stealthily drop ground teams at any location of their choosing.

Which was why Twilight was crammed into the Mako together with Garrus, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. If she thought the ride on Harnos was small enough with three ponies, then four was an absolute squeeze.

“Pinkie, do you think you can stop shoving your tail into my mouth?”

Twilight said grumpily, trying to her utmost best to keep the pink pony's tail from obscuring her view of the driver's console.

Pinkie let out a happy giggle. “But this is funnnnnnnnn!” The pink earth pony continued her obviously fantastic exploration of the interior of the Mako, her fluffy tail now wriggling in front of Twilight.

“Pinkie, I can't concentrate if you keep distracting me like this.”

“Fine!” The pink pony wriggled her legs about and maneuvered her body

onto the passenger seat proper in the driver's cabin. "Better?"

"Very much," Twilight muttered, thankful that she didn't need to breath in a maneful of pink hair anytime soon. She glanced back towards Garrus and Rainbow Dash and was met with similar relieved looks.

"Captain, approaching mining facility. Prepare for air-drop."

"Right."

"Airdrop in 5 seconds."

The entire vehicle shuddered as the cargo bay doors opened. Strong winds began to buffet the Mako, the windy roar slowly increasing in volume to a deafening cacophony. Twilight held the vehicle steady, motioning for her companions to brace for the inevitable drop.

"Mark."

A loud click resounded through the win as the clamps on the vehicles released. Twilight felt her stomach drop as she was suddenly pulled forward by the surge of gravity. Thank Celestia for seat-belts.

The Mako was in free-fall, at least for a brief moment.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" the pink pony beside her shouted with glee, giggling uncontrollably, apparently enjoying the thrill of the ride.

Moments later, the automated landing system kicked in, activating the element zero core and reducing their speed. Twilight began firing the mini-thrusters located at each end of the boxy vehicle, further slowing their descent. For what seemed like an eternity, the Mako hung in mid-air, the wind whistling past as the Mako continued to plummet under the pull of the planet's less-than-Canterlot gravity. The vehicle landed not so much with a loud whump that was more heard than felt, a testament to the vehicle's sturdy suspension system.

No pony moved for several seconds, apparently content to savour the fact that they actually survived the fall. Twilight was the first to recover from the shock. The unicorn glanced at her companions to make sure they were

unharmd. Pinkie seemed to be rather enjoying the whole affair, and began giggling again in glee. Garrus looked a little shaken, but otherwise composed. Rainbow Dash however, seemed to be looking a little on the green side, holding a forehoof to her lips.

“Dash, you alright?”

“Yeah... just need to—“ The rest of her words were lost as the rainbow speedster gagged and buried her face in a paper bag that she found conveniently tucked nearby. Garrus couldn’t help but snicker at the pegasus misfortune.

“Looks like someone couldn’t handle their dinner,” he teased Rainbow, grinning broadly. Before he could do more than chuckle, the turian was met with a solid hoof to his face. The turian fell back onto his seat with a yelp of surprise. Fortunately, before either descended into blows, the radio crackled with Scootaloo’s voice.

“Captain, we’ve detected some unusual activity in the mining shaft 23-B, a few clicks to the north of your position. You might want to check it out.”

“Thanks, Scootaloo. Heading over now,” Twilight replied, sobering up.

“Let’s go kick some bad guy flanks!” Pinkie bubbled enthusiastically.

[Mining Facility CJ-32, Stirrum]

Twilight made a mental note she would never ever visit this place ever again.

Stirrum was by all standards, a very desolate and bleak planet. A dark pall hung over the entire sky, Stirrum’s sun a faint orb of red. (Stirrum apparently did not have a local weather station yet.) The harsh glare of the open lava pools in the distance tinted the landscape with faint, red light. Black, volcanic rocks rose up on either side of the Mako as they traversed down the small valley they landed in. The only break in the desolate landscape was the pony-made tunnel ahead that Twilight knew linked the valley to the mining complex on the other side.

As Twilight steered the through the tunnels and out to the other side, she got a first glimpse of the so-called 'mining complex'. The 'mining complex' was actually a loose collection of buildings that was scattered all over the compound. Seemingly at random, circular portals half-hidden in the volcanic rocks marked the entrance to yet another mining shaft running deep underground. Metal pipes originated from those shafts, and ran haphazardly around the lava pools that dotted the site. From her limited perspective on the Mako, most of the pipes seemed to run in direction of a large building in on other side of the compound. Twilight guessed it must be this site's collection and processing facility.

[CIC Deck, ESV Normaredy]

Wrex frowned as he studied the numbers displayed on the console. "What do you mean the population count don't match up?"

"Nova Yakterinburg has 2,345 colonists. The colony reported a total of 2,379 colonists," Rarity explained patiently, her tone not unlike a schoolteacher giving the dolt of the class a lesson in Mathematics 101.

"That's um... three... fourty... darn these fancy mathematics. Anyhow, I reckon y'all mean the numbers don't add up?" Applejack said, doffing her hat.

"Precisely. Since Nova Yakterinburg is the only colony on the planet, where are the remaining thirty-four colonists?"

Wrex looked blankly at the white unicorn. "Dead?" he offered.

"Twilight..." Pinkie's voice was unusually serious. The earth pony pointed to a dark shape on the ground. More precisely, lots of dark shapes on the ground. Twilight stifled a gasp, bringing the vehicle to a dead-stop as she realised the full implications of just what the earth pony pointed out.

The dark shapes were bodies. Dead ponies in full environmental suits, scattered about on the ashen earth. Already, most of the bodies were covered in ash. A few vehicles, wrecked beyond repair, lay burning a short

distance away. Apparently the workers had tried to escape the facility when the alarm was raised. Judging from the remains, they didn't get very far. They seemed to have taken down a few geth with them, as was apparent by the broken remains of a few geth troopers scattered about.

"Oh those poor ponies..." Twilight heard Rainbow Dash mutter. A loud clomp resounded as the pegasus vented her frustration on the vehicle's reinforced windows. "I'm so going to kick their flanks for this." Her magenta eyes were locked onto the nearest body, whose faceplate was mercifully obscured by the black ash.

"We will, Dash. We will," the turian responded, putting a hand on his partner's shoulder. Twilight smiled a little at Garrus' words; she had an inkling Rainbow was taking this very personally. She turned to glance at Pinkie. The pink earth pony seemed to be staring out of her window with fascination, her expression a far cry from the usual jovial face she always wore. The lavender unicorn idly wondered what could the pink pony be thinking. Surely there was more to her than just parties. As she debated whether to probe the matter further, she noticed the earth pony stiffening.

"Twilight, incoming!"

The vehicle was suddenly rocked as a series of dull thuds resounded around them. Twilight snapped her head towards the onboard radar and cursed under her breath. At least four walkers and a few dozens troopers on foot. More were appearing out of nowhere, and closing in on the vehicle. The geth had planned their ambush well. Probably with radar dampening and jamming. Twilight accelerated ahead and pointed the Mako towards the large building she seen earlier. They would need the cover if they wanted to survive this.

"Twilight! What the hay?!"

"Geth ambush," Twilight shouted back, before turning to her pink companion. "Pinkie! Man the turret! The big ones first!" The thought that Pinkie might not be qualified for the job seemed to have slipped her mind.

Pinkie had a maniacal grin on her face. "Okie-dokie! Let's do this!" The party pony tapped a button on her console and was greeted with the cannon's targeting screen overlaying her viewscreen. She grasped the

joystick that popped up and began tracking the nearest walker that was blocking their path.

“What the hay are we supposed to do?” Rainbow Dash shouted.

“Hang on... and don’t throw up!”

“What?!” Whatever words Rainbow had in store after that was lost as she was flung to the floor by the vehicle’s violent momentum.

Twilight was taking the Mako through a hailstorm of weapon fire, thankful that the kinetic barriers on the vehicle were designed to weather just such a situation. But even the toughest shields would eventually fail under such pressure and the unicorn needed to even the odds soon. With another tight turn she weaved the vehicle in between two walkers who moved in to block her way and sent an unfortunate geth trooper flying into a nearby lava pool. Just as she cleared the obstacle, the Mako’s cannon boomed, and knocked the walker into the same lava pool.

Pinkie whooped with delight. “And that’s how I parrrrrrr-teeeehhhh!”

The vehicles wheels screeched as the Mako bounced onto the paved surface of the processing facility, with Twilight taking an immediate left turn towards the collection of small pre-fabricated buildings and pipes that were on the south side of the building. The sound of weapon fire slowly receded as they drew away from their ambushers. At least the walkers are slow, the unicorn thought, as she slowed the vehicle down. The huge metal pipes and buildings seemed to have brought them time and space, if only for a little while. She felt a hoof tap her shoulder.

The unicorn looked up to find Rainbow Dash’s eyes staring right in the face. The pegasus seemed agitated. “Twilight! Let us fight! We can take ‘em!” Rainbow Dash pleaded. The commander thought she heard a hint of desperation in her voice. That haunted look that she sported when they discovered the bodies earlier was back in her magenta eyes.

Garrus cleared his throat and weighted in his opinion as well. “Commander, we might be able to distract the foot soldiers so that you and the pink one here can concentrate on taking down the walkers.”

Another loud whump rocked the vehicle. Humming a jolly tune, Pinkie Pie spotted the source of the disturbance. She zoomed her targeting reticule on the offending target. A lone geth trooper standing on one of the balconies, calmly reloading his rocket launcher. A second later, the balcony and geth vanished in a merry explosion. Pinkie whooped again, and waved her hoof in excitement. "This is so much fun!"

Through all this, Twilight hemmed and hawed. She was leery of letting the two fight on foot: the geth walkers would cut them to pieces in the open. On the flip side, there was plenty of cover around. And she trusted them. Finally, the unicorn sighed. "Fine. Don't go engaging those geth walkers, you hear me?"

"Armatures! Those are geth *armatures*!" Pinkie corrected.

"Whatever, Pinkie."

The cocky grin was back on Dash's face. "Twilight, please. Me and Garrus can handle these amateurs no problem. Right, Garrus?"

"We'll be careful, Sparkle," Garrus said in a more guarded tone.

The two secured their helmets and weapons. As they moved to step out, they turned and gave Twilight a wink each, almost simultaneously. One could almost swear they choreographed that move. Then they darted out of the vehicle and out of sight, leaving only a rainbow trail. Twilight thoughts lingered briefly on the fact that the two were now alone, without backup. She shook her head clear of those morbid thoughts. She trusted them. That was enough.

Twilight accelerated as she cleared the pipes and out into open space again. From the yellow markings on the paved concrete, the unicorn deduced it was the local landing pad.

"Oh! Oh! More of those big spider-things!"

Twilight saw them alright. Another of those armoured walkers, slowly lumbering up to meet them. Odd, Twilight was sure she counted only four when she sped away from the ambush. None were in position to flank her over on this side.

Dropship. It has to be. That and they probably did all sort of wonky things to radar in the area. It's blinking with all sort of false signals. Something that'd have to be dealt with later. Twilight thought about radioing the Normandy for a moment, then decided against it. Geth probably jammed their communications anyway. A quick check on the comms confirmed her suspicions.

"Fire at will, Pinkie," Twilight calmly ordered, again, swerving the vehicle hard to the right to avoid another energy blast.

The cannon's roar and Pinkie's subsequent cheer answered her order. Twilight noted that Pinkie's shot was dead accurate, blowing clean through the kinetic barriers and the 'head' of the walker off. The geth slumped to the floor, its limbs flailing about as it seemed to lose control. The geth troopers who was escorting the walker scattered as the walker exploded in a giant fireball. They were slowly picked off by Twilight's hull mounted machine gun and Pinkie's accurate cannon fire. Soon, the field was clear of enemies and the commander slowly turned the Mako around towards the other side of the facility.

Garrus' voice crackled over the radio, his voice breaking up slightly. "Commander, *krzzt* Dash spotted two dropships ferrying reinforcements in. We might need backup." Sounds of gunfire echoed in the background as he spoke. The turian must be engaging the geth in the facility itself.

"Twilight! There's more coming every minute! I don't know how long we can hold them off." Rainbow Dash cut into the channel, her voice sounding slightly panicky.

Twilight reassessed her rapidly dwindling options. All seemed bad. "Alright. You two get the hay out of the facility, we'll cover you."

"Roger."

"Um, Twilight. I think we need to take care of those bad guys first."

"What bad— Oh sweet Celestia."

She brought the Mako to a complete stop, stunned by the sight. Facing

the Mako, and conveniently blocking her from reaching both Garrus and Dash, was an entire platoon of geth troopers, backed up by at least six walkers. It was a sobering sight. Even with the Mako, they were probably going to last all one minute before being blasted to atoms.

Pinkie giggled again. “Ooooooh— I think they want to play.” Twilight just nodded numbly, her body now on automatic drive. The Mako lurched as she threw the IFV straight into reverse, hoping to at least make herself a harder target to hit.

[Pilot’s Deck, ESV Normaredy]

“What’s that?” Scootaloo said, zooming in on a tiny dot that was flying under the ship. The image was slightly blurred due to the speed of the object, but the shape was familiar enough to anypony who studied grade school.

“Oh my, is... is that a d-d-dragon?” Fluttershy squeaked.

Scootaloo worked her keyboard, plotting the trajectory of the dragon on her console. The pilot gasped slightly. “It’s heading straight for Twilight’s position!”

“Why in the name of the Princess is there a dragon here of all places?”

“Ain’t dragons supposed to be fierce critters who don’t like ponies all that much?” A snort sounded from the far side of the room, where Spike had been busy. The purple dragon shot the soldier pony an unamused look. Applejack smiled sheepishly in response. “No offense, Spike.”

“Whatever its intentions are, we best warn Twilight about it.”

“Aye,” the pilot agreed. She punched a button and began broadcasting. “Commander, do you read me?” Static greeted the ponies. “Commander, do you read?” Scootaloo repeated.

“Sounds like we’re being jammed.”

“Geth. I knew it. Ain’t no such things as coincidences. Commander must

be in trouble. We gotta help her.”

“How exactly you want us to do that? We’re a spaceship, not some atmospheric craft. We’re sitting ducks if the geth deployed AA guns.”

“We could always use the GARDIAN lasers,” Tali suggested.

“But then we’ll have to take the Normandy to knife-fight range. The ship won’t be able to take that kind of stress in the atmosphere!” Scootaloo countered.

“Well goshdurn it, we have to do something!”

ROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR~!

Twilight knew that roar anywhere. After all, she had grown up hearing it on Canterlot. Thing was, she never thought to hear it here of all places.

A dragon’s roar.

What the hay is a dragon doing here? Twilight thought. She glanced again at the geth, suddenly realising amount of fire she had been receiving seemed to be tapering off. The formation of geth milled about uncertainly, their aim suddenly wavering. The unexpected noise must have thrown the group into confusion.

As Twilight watched, a dark shadow enveloped the geth who were still standing about. Before the geth could react, a group of geths abruptly vanished in a column of flame that erupted from the sky. True to their robotic nature, the geth did not panic. Instead, the remaining geth and armoured walkers turned as one and pointed their weapons skywards, firing their weapons in a steady staccato.

Another gout of flame erupted in the dense mass of geth, frying another dozen troopers. As the some of the walkers begin to catch fire and burn, the more agile geth began retreating for cover towards the processing facility. Never once the geth, faltered, or turned tail. The distinctly draconic shadow swooped overhead again, darkening the interior of the vehicle

momentarily. Another roar shook the unicorn's bones again. The geth's counter-fire seemed to have only succeeded in angering the dragon.

The last roar finally spurred Twilight into action. Seeing her chance in the chaos, the unicorn said, "Let's hit them while they're distracted."

"Okie!"

Rainbow Dash's frantic voice burst over the radio. "Twilight? What's going on?! What's that roar?"

"No time. Keep the geth busy."

"You better have a good reason, Twi!" the radio link ended with another burst of gunfire over at Dash's end.

The unicorn revved the IFV and accelerated into the dispersing group of geth, taking the full advantage of their confusion to run down several geth troopers. Instinctively, Twilight jinked the Mako to the left, narrowly avoiding yet another blast of dragon-fire that toasted the unfortunate geth walker that she bypassed. Beside her, Pinkie was firing the Mako's main cannon as fast as her aim would allow. Twilight ears' perked up as she noticed another whining noise cutting in amidst the roar of the cannon and general tumult of battle.

The shrill report of geth gunships.

Twilight's felt her ears drooping. A dragon might be a powerful being, but even it must bow to the superior firepower that a modern gunship could bring to the battle.

"Twilight, look!"

Twilight craned her neck in the direction of Pinkie's hoof, just in time to watch the dragon swoop towards the gunship, shrugging away the machine gun fire and evading the energy cannons with ease. The dragon opened its maw wide and let loose another gout of flame towards the port engine, charring the the entire section.

The creature gracefully flew above the now-crippled ship and grabbed the

sides of the gunship with its claws. With a mighty roar, the creature then flung it towards the ground as if it was nothing more than a toy. The ship fired its other remaining engine in a desperate attempt to correct its descent, to no avail.

The gunship hit the ground nose first, bouncing off the paved concrete once, twice, before coming to rest on the edge of the landing pad: all the while hemorrhaging bits and pieces from its interior. A brief moment of silence punctuated the landscape, as the ship lay smoking on the ground. Then, with a brilliant flash, the geth gunship exploded spectacularly, leaving nothing but a burning wreck. Twilight was briefly startled as a piece of metal debris landed with a thunk on the Mako.

The dragon hovered silently above the processing plant. Large leathery wings flapping slowly, its black scales dully reflecting the orange glow of the burning wreck. The dragon let out a roar, this time of victory, and made to land on the landing pad with a loud thump. The creature slowly waddled over to the wreck, apparently surveying its kill.

“Hey! Let’s go say thank you!”

Twilight stared at the pink earth pony in shock for a moment. “Are you insane? We don’t even know if he’s friendly or not.”

“Now that’s just mean. He helped us turn all these meanies into roasty roast! See?” Pinkie pointed at the charred remains of the geth on the landing pads. Not one geth was left standing, and what’s left of the geth force seemed to have retreated.

Twilight paused to reconsider her companion’s suggestion. True, the dragon had not overtly attacked her, and instead focused on the geth. But Twilight doubted it had anything to do with the dragon’s compassion. More like the fact that the geth had been shooting at the dragon and the Mako hadn’t.

The unicorn brought her six-wheeled IFV to a stop in front of the dragon, staring up at the magnificent being in awe. Oh, she had seen dragons back on Canterlot, usually far-off in the distance or during one of annual dragon ambassadorial meeting with the Princess. Being this close to one, and after that display of violence... was something else altogether. Dragons were

temperamental and reclusive creatures. Even after the unification of Equestrian Alliance, they kept mainly to their own kind. Ponies were either outright ignored, or treated with grudging respect. This respect was strained at best, kept in line only by the dragon's sense of honour. It was not unheard of for dragons to snap and go full out feral with very bloody results. These were usually quickly put down or exiled. Fortunately, these incidents were becoming increasingly rare as the dragons got used to the arrangement.

The vehicle shook a little as the dragon bent down to study the occupants more closely, apparently deciding that they were not hostile. Twilight flinched slightly as a small gout of flame licked the windows.

A deep, gruff voice emanated deep from within the dragon's chest. "You don't look like the invaders." The dragon lowered his snout further, his green reptilian eyes staring directly through the windows. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Whatchu' mean we can't see 'em?"

"That's just it. Soon after the dragon sped past, our sensors got scrambled as well. The geth must have noticed us and are actively jamming our scanners as well."

"Great. Can't this tub go any faster? We need to help Twilight now!"

"Applejack! We're already going a little past the engines' optimal capacity. Any more and we would end up with a dead engine instead," the chief engineer scolded, already looking a little frazzled by the stress.

"Whose brilliant idea was it again for us to be hiding out on the other side of the planet after we dropped them off?" Applejack said, clearly spoiling for an argument now.

"It wouldn't be much of a stealth mission if we hung around being obvious," Rarity said.

"Well, if we stayed behind, we wouldn't be in this fine pickle, wouldn't we?"

Tali cleared her throat discreetly. "Guys? Those geth fighters don't look too pleased to see us." The quarian pointed to half a dozen angry red dots on her monitor.

"Aw, horseapples," Scootaloo groaned.

"... so you mean you live here? All of your brood?" Twilight asked the dragon, straining her neck to look up at the dragon's face.

The ponies had been wary of the dragon at first, with Rainbow Dash in particular advocating explosive violence with the Mako. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. It had helped when Twilight tactfully pointed out that the dragon could probably crush all of them at a whim should it be angered. The dragon seemed amused by the whole argument.

"Ponies, you would do well to remember me as an Equestrian dragon first and foremost, and not some mangy feral," he had said. He then flashed Rainbow Dash a toothy grin and chuckled loudly when the pegasus quailed. Twilight decided then and there he liked the dragon.

The dragon had graciously offered to escort them to the mining shaft after a brief explanation. He seemed rather pleased with the offer of having the crew of the Normaredy help any remaining survivors of the geth attack. The ponies parked the Mako next to the mine shaft and stared at circular entrance that marked Mining Shaft 32-B. It was an amusing sight really. The dragon towered over the buildings and ponies, and had to look down just to talk with them. Compared to the huge beast, they were but gnats on a buffalo.

"Yes. My brethren are scattered all over the planet. We find it more comfortable to live in our own nests, rather than being forced to live communally back on Canterlot. Do you know how hard it is to find a decent nest on Flame Peak now?"

"Fascinating," Garrus said, studying the dragon with great interest. It was evidently the turian's first real look at an Equestrian dragon. "Why prompted you to move from Canterlot? It must have been hard."

“Our partriach opted to start our brood anew on a new planet. As I said before, Canterlot was getting a little too crowded for our taste. We were pretty excited actually. New place to visit, prospect of unlimited food. Trouble was, not many colonies were willing to accept us. It was fortunate that the colonists on Stirrum had kindly agreed to let us stay, so long we don’t consume all the precious gems they’re mining. In return, we’re obligated to help their defense of the various mining outposts the colony has set up.”

“Wow, that’s pretty generous of you.”

“I suppose it is a fair trade, considering the Terminus Systems are supposed to be contested. Besides, they let us roam free, something which we cannot do in Canterlot.” The dragon shrugged. “The colonists openly admitted they could not afford the cost of a decent defensive installation. At least not yet.” The black reptile glanced back at the processing plant they just left behind, the trail of smoke from the burning geth gunship still visible. The spikes on the dragon drooped visibly at the sight.

“This particular facility was supposed to be under my protection...” the dragon lamented. “I... I have failed. I should not have let my anger lure me away from my true duties. I should have known that flying machine was just a distraction to lure me away...” The dragon let out a fiery snort, evidently frustrated at his failure. The creature suddenly tilted his head upwards and let out a cry of anguish, deafening the ponies who was standing near him.

Twilight cringed at the sudden roar, covering her ears. For the longest moment, the dragon’s roar filled the landscape. As soon as the noise died down to a more acceptable level, the lavender unicorn lowered her hooves from her ears and cautiously asked, “Mr Dragon... are you okay?”

The dragon bent his head in apology. “I... I apologise for my lapse. Our brood do not take to failures kindly. There will be... repercussions for this.” Even from her awkward vantage below the dragon’s chin, Twilight could see the black reptile was troubled.

“Oh, cheer up Mr. Dragon! I’m sure the others will understand it was the geth that did this. They were pretty smart to lure you away.”

“Please, just Ordruk.” The dragon turned his gaze on the commander again. “I must commend you on your reckless driving back there. I could have just as easily smothered you in flames had you strayed even half a metre off course.”

“It’s the Commander Sparkle! Of course she’s awesome.”

Twilight just flushed bright red at the compliment. It wasn’t everyday one got praised by a dragon anyhow. She cleared her throat to break the awkward silence, and said, “I think we best get going. Dr. T’Soni is somewhere in that mine and the geth might already be searching down there.”

“I will stay here and keep any invaders off your back. You have my word.” Ordruk actually gave the four a short formal bow. “Now go. Do not tarry here.”

“Right. Dash, if you would do the honours?”

“Yeah! About time we got this show on the road.” The rainbow speedster sped off to open the metallic doors. Twilight smiled briefly at the tomcolt’s enthusiasm as she trotted off to follow her down.

“That’s some slick moves there, Scoots,” Applejack said, wiping perspiration off her brow.

“Thanks. Though I think we should be thanking those dragons for showing up as well.” The viewscreen panned over to the three dragon who had showed up to help. One of them waved at the ship.

Applejack chuckled. “Heh, yeah. Good to know them dragons are friendly. ‘Least we know Twilight’ll be getting some backup.”

“Remind me never to prank Spike again. I don’t think I want to know what he’ll do when he’s angry.” Scootaloo joked.

“Yeah! You better not!” Spike called from his station..

“Pilot, how far are we from Sparkle?” Wrex asked curtly, folding his arms over his chest plate.

“Twenty minutes out. Give or take a few.” Scootaloo shot the krogan a dark look. “It would be nice if you could call me by my name for once.”

The krogan just snorted, before turning his attention to the screen showing the dragons. He tapped his chin thoughtfully as the dragons flew off. “Hmm, I wonder if I can get one of those dragons as a pet. Sure will impress those weaklings back on Tuchanka. Maybe I could even feed them to the dragon.”

Rarity stared at the krogan with shock. “Wrex, you’re a horrible, horrible pony.”

“Lady, you don’t know the half of it,” the krogan replied nonchalantly.

“Why is it that I always get picked to navigate potentially hazardous underground tunnels?” Garrus remarked sardonically as they slowly descended down the dimly lit mining shaft. The long, straight, circular shaft was remarkable for its’ monotony.

“Technically, the tunnels on Harnos are above ground.”

“Semantics. It’s still dark, damp and dank; like this one.”

Pinkie bounced past the two, bubbling happily. “This place is spooooooky!” she declared, giggling rather happily. The bubbly earth pony began outpacing the group, jumping ahead into the darkness.

“Pinkie, wait!”

The party pony disappeared from sight, her head mounted light apparently not turned on.

“Great. Let’s go get her before she does something we all regret.”

“Pinkie Pie!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed exasperatedly. The trio picked up

their pace down the tubular tunnel. A few minutes of frantic galloping later, they reached the end of the shaft. An already open airlock marked the start of the mine proper, with the pink pony nowhere in sight. The crumpled remains of two geth troopers lay just behind the open portal.

The turian whistled as he inspected the nearest body. "She's efficient, I'll give her that. Straight through the head."

"Does she even have military training?" Twilight queried incredulously.

"From this? She would had to have some form of training. Then again, we don't know much about Pinkie before she suddenly appeared on the Citadel and started throwing parties randomly. A headache for the Executor that's for sure."

"Right... anyway, she can't be far ahead. That one is still sparking." The unicorn caught Rainbow by the tail as the pegasus tried to slip past. "And no, Rainbow, we need to stick together. Going off alone in this tunnel is dangerous."

"Phooey."

"Incredible..." Twilight breathed. The airlock had opened into a walkway that zigzagged through a grotto. What caught Twilight's attention was not the contents of the small cave, but rather what lay beyond in the large cavern.

At one end, a clearly artificial construction was protruding out of the cavern walls. It appeared to be part of a building that was buried under millennia of neglect. The smooth white walls appeared as immaculate as the day it had been built, with no sign of wear, unlike the Prothean ruins in Harnos. Twilight guessed the conditions of the cavern was more forgiving. Curiously there were also smooth oblong shaped openings set in the walls in regular intervals, forming a checkerboard pattern. Some sort of energy field was covering each opening. Any sign of the ruin's original purpose was long gone, buried under a millennium of geological upheaval.

Rainbow let out a whistle. "This place is old... wait, is that Pinkie?"

Twilight squinted at the direction of Rainbow's hoof. So it was. The pink earth pony was sitting on her haunches on the one of lower walkways, facing one of the oblong opening. She seemed to be focused on something on the inside.

"Let's go get her," Twilight said, gesturing at a nearby elevator shaft.

The trio heard the pink pony giggling as they approached her. They heard another voice speak as well. A female, though her voice seemed oddly distorted.

"... Ponies do not come here, you're hallucinating. And talking to yourself. Hah. Oh, goddess. I'm going to die here.."

Another giggle. "Silly filly. I'm real. See?" The pink pony wriggled a hoof at the direction of the barrier.

"You're unusually lucid for a hallucination. They usually don't claim to be real... or do they?"

"Pinkie, who are you talking to?" Twilight said as she trotted up to the mare.

"Her." Pinkie pointed at the energy field. The unicorn frowned slightly as she saw the object of Pinkie's attention. An asari, suspended in midair. Unlike the commando on Harnos, this asari was wearing civilian attire. A scientist by the looks of it. She seemed to be looking at the ponies with a mixture of fear, hope and incredulity all at the same time.

"More hallucinations? Oh, Liara. Your imagination certainly is active today."

"We're not hallucinations."

"I think she's playing a game!"

"I thought hallucinations don't usually talk back... or do they? Huh, I never had a hallucination before. I think."

Twilight dragged a hoof down her face. This was the doctor they were sent to rescue? She fought to keep her composure. "My name is Twilight Sparkle. I'm from the Special Recons and Tactics."

"A Spectre? Huh, that's good. What else will I conjure up? A protector figure. Yes. Perfect. Comforting. Well, I'll play along." At this point, the asari seemed to be reassuring herself of her tenuous grasp on her sanity.

"As you can see, I'm trapped here. If you're as real as you're claim, find me a way to get out of here."

"How in the world did you end up in there?" Garrus asked, not unreasonably.

"Ah yes, the figment of my imaginations want to retrace my steps: see if I can figure out where I went wrong." Twilight rolled her eyes at the asari's words. She was seriously starting to doubt the merits of her mission.

"I was exploring the ruins. When the geth showed up, I ran in here and activated the defenses, hoping the barrier curtains would protect me. But I must have hit I wasn't supposed to and now I'm trapped here." The asari seemed to break for a moment. "Please! You must get me out of here," she pleaded.

"Calm down. We'll figure a way out," Twilight said, trying to sound as reassuring as possible. Garrus shook his head and indicated to the unicorn he would be taking a long walk. A moment later, Dash joined her partner, apparently done trying to communicate with the obviously maddened scientist.

"Of course, what good would a hallucination be if it didn't offer false hope?" The asari sighed, clearly tired of the charade. "Listen, if you're real. Find some way past the barrier curtains. Find some way past the geth. Then use the control panel to release me." Twilight peered past the floating asari, spying a lectern just behind her. "If you're not real... leave me alone. I grow tired of talking to myself."

Twilight shook her head and turned towards Pinkie, who seemed to be content at making funny faces at the asari now. "Come on Pinkie. Leave

the poor girl alone for awhile.”

“Okie!” The pink earth pony got to her feet and bounced off to join Garrus and Rainbow Dash, who was looking around the cavern. The pair seemed to be studying something in the other end of the cavern.

“Hey Commander?”

“Yeah?”

“We might have a problem.” The turian jerked his head towards the group of geth troopers that emerged from the makeshift work camp in the far end of the cavern.

“Geth. Why are they so persistent?”

“‘Cause they’re big meanies! That’s why,” Pinkie answered in a matter-of-fact manner, bouncing about.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes at Pinkie’s answer. “Pinkie! This is serious. You saw what they did outside. Ponies are dying!”

Pinkie stopped bouncing right in front of the rainbow maned pegasus and fixed her with a stare. Her expression seemed to harden just a little. “I know Dashie. That’s why I’m fighting with Twilight here. Because I don’t want to see anypony hurt like this. No pony deserves a fate like this. No pony.” The joy seemed to drain out of the party pony as she spoke.

She glanced at Twilight, then at Garrus, her jaw set grimly. “I laugh because at the end of the day, everypony needs a break from tragedy. I laugh because somepony needs to be the one that can cheer everypony up. No matter how bad things can be, there’ll always be a light at the end of the tunnel. I want everypony to see that.”

Twilight’s jaw was literally hanging open by now. “... wow.”

“Besides!” The pink pony resumed her jovial persona. “Parties are fun!”

The unicorn was taken back by the sudden about-turn. "For the love of..." Twilight shook her head and smiled resignedly. "Pinkie Pie, you're so random."

"I aim to please."

"Look, I know this is a sentimental time and all, but we still have an asari to save." Dash jabbed a hoof at the floating scientist. "Already scouted the cavern. No way we're getting past that."

"Have you tried using your head? You always seem to solve problems with it."

"Harr harr Garrus. That was only one time. Besides, headbutting that salarian was worth it after the way he jerked us around."

"Guys, guys! We need to figure a way past the barrier curtains... maybe if we find the power source—"

"Hey! What does this machine do?" The pink pony sat in the controls of a large tractor-like machine, its' cylindrical business end pointed towards the one corner of the ruins' walls. Her hoof hovered a large red round button.

Twilight's eyes bulged as she saw Pinkie was about to activate what appeared to be a mining excavator. "Pinkie, wait!"

A loud roar erupted, brilliant flashes of angry red light searing the rock. As Twilight watched as the lasers began eating away at the rocks, horror building in her heart. The cavern began to rumble slightly as if the very earth itself was protesting against the abuse. *That pony is going to bring down the whole cavern with them!* Then understanding dawned as she realised where the excavating machine was pointed at. Straight at the underside of the building!

"Pinkie, you're brilliant," she yelled over the roar of the machine.

"What?"

"I SAID, IT'S BRILLIANT!"

“What? Hold on, let me turn this off.”

“WAIT!”

The machine powered down, stopping short of breaching the walls of the ruins. Twilight facehoofed, trying hard not to vent her frustration at the randomness of her companion.

“Yes, Twilight?”

“Ugh, never mind Pinkie.” If Twilight could plant her hoof any further into her face, she would have. Unfortunately, reality meant that she had to settle for a normal facehoof. Pinkie just gave a giggle and bounced off, apparently distracted with another toy.

Garrus jogged over to the rapidly cooling hole made by the excavator and examined it closely. The mining laser had eaten its way through the rock and left the section of wall exposed. “Commander, I think we can break through the wall. The mining laser seemed to have weakened it significantly at least.”

“Incoming!”

A rainbow blur flew past Twilight and headed straight for the weakened wall section. A loud thump and cloud of dust later, the skyblue pegasus lay on the ground, her magenta eyes spinning dizzily.

“Didth I breakth it...?”

The turian moved closer to the wall and tapped it with the butt of his rifle. “Nope.”

“You owe me a root beer for this, Garrus,” Dash said, slowly getting to her haunches. She began rubbing the back of her head, wincing slightly as she touched a sore spot.

The turian held his hands up helplessly. “Hey, not my fault your thick skull can’t break everything.”

Twilight tapped the two on the shoulders, and pointed at the wall. “Guys,

look.”

The two turned just in time to see the wall crumble on its own, without any further intervention. Immaculate white corridors lay just beyond the walls.

“Hah! Told you.”

“That proves nothing! It crumbled on it’s own!”

“Root beer float, please. Vanilla ice-cream. Thank you.”

“Not in a million years, Dash. You still owe me five credits for...”

Twilight shook her head slowly, trying to hide a crooked smile. “Come on guys, let’s keep moving,” she said, interrupting the light-hearted banter.

“Now I’m hallucinating that you’re inside the tower. I must be getting worse. Earlier I even imagined I heard thunder,” the asari intoned, closing her eyes.

Twilight had to resist a sudden mad impulse to just grab the asari by her shoulder and give her a good shake. “Doctor, we used the mining laser to bore through.” Twilight stated evenly.

“You bore through...” The asari gasped slightly, a look of relief washing over her blue features. “By the goddess, you— you’re real!”

“Of course we are, silly! Why won’t we be?”

“I- ah... I’m sorry. I thought you were a hallucination. I thought—”

“Yeah, yeah, we heard all your rants earlier. Don’t you worry, Rainbow Dash and his turian sidekick is on the case.

Garrus bopped the pegasus’ head with the butt of his rifle. “Turian sidekick?! Rainbow Dash, now that’s just low.”

“Please, just get me out of here, before more geth show up.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much on that part...” Garrus said, smirking, referring to the very big dragon currently sitting outside the mineshaft.

Twilight trotted over to the lectern she spotted earlier and studied the control. Various symbols of undecipherable script flashed past the unicorn’s eyes. But for all their alien-ness, there was a strange sense of familiarity there. Almost as if she had seen these symbols before, but had recently forgotten about them.

“There should be a flashing rune on the bottom end. I think that is the release key.”

The commander found the indicated key and activated it with a hoof. A loud wail suddenly pierced the air, making the lavender unicorn cringe a little. Fortunately, before any permanent hearing loss was incurred, the cacophony stopped as abruptly as it started. The asari who had been flailing about in mid air, suddenly dropped to the ground, only to land on Rainbow Dash’s back.

“Gotcha!”

“It wasn’t that much of a fall, you know,” Liara said dryly, picking herself off the pegasus and brushing off the nonexistent dust off her form-fitting attire.

“Hey, nice way of thanking your rescuers!” Dash huffed.

“Lay it off, Dash.”

Dash shot the turian another glare, before addressing Liara. “So, how are we getting back out?”

“The same way we came in? Duh?”

“There’s an elevator at the back of this ‘tower’. We can use it to get to the upper levels.” The asari indicated a circular room just behind the group. “At least I think it is.”

“You think?” Dash asked incredulously.

“Pretty sure.” The group followed the asari into the circular room. The lavender unicorn looked around the room, and belatedly found that the ceiling was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a long smooth shaft that led into the darkness above could be seen. At least this seemed to strengthen the doctor’s theory that this was an elevator of a sort.

Liara walked up to the lectern in the center of the room. “Here goes,” she said, activating the lectern. The entire floor shuddered for a moment, a gentle hum rising in the background as ancient machinery whirled into action. The platform began to rise, albeit slowly.

“Well, at least that’ll save us a walk.”

“So, Dr. T’Soni...”

The asari smiled at the use of the title. “Call me Liara, please.”

“Liara. Do you have any idea why the geth are after you?”

“I still cannot believe all this. Do you think Benezia is involved?” Twilight managed to keep a straight face as she heard Matriach Benezia’s name. So, Liara had some inkling about her mother’s involvement with Saren? This could be interesting.

“Saren is looking for something called the Conduit.”

“The Conduit? How did—” A loud rumble intervened. As the ponies looked around in surprise, the sounds of falling rocks rumbled deep beneath the caverns. Twilight herself was caught in a small shower of rocks. “These ruins are not stable. The mining laser must have triggered a seismic event!”

Rainbow Dash’s magenta eyes were wide with fear. “Wait, you mean we could be trapped in here?!” she shrieked.

“Sheesh Dash, calm down. We’re not trapped yet,” the turian replied.

Twilight trotted over to the lectern and peered at the controls. “Do you think you could speed this thing up?” she asked, looking up at the scientist.

“I’m afraid not. I am concerned that any further input on my part would only

derail our journey.”

The rest of the journey was made in strained silence, with the ponies glancing up fearfully every so often as another shower of dust fell. The rumbling slowly intensified, and the entire chamber was rumbling by the time they nearly reached the top.

“Great, let’s get out of here before—” Dash’s words died in her mouth as she noticed a krogan battlemaster, together with a squad of geth troopers walking up towards them. Twilight stiffened as she realised that they would have to go through them in order to escape this death trap.

“Heh, nice of you to break past the energy shield for us,” the krogan said, stopping at the door. The geth troopers filed in beside the krogan, their weapons already leveled.

“Do you really think this is the time?” Twilight asked, not unreasonably.

“The atmosphere is perfect for a life-and-death struggle.” The krogan motioned for his geth followers to move forward. “Kill them, spare the asari if you can. If not, doesn’t matter,” he ordered with a casual shrug.

“Get back!” Twilight’s horn suddenly lit up with a brilliant light, sending out a shock wave that pushed the krogan back and knocked over the geth troopers that were leveling their weapons.

Dash and Garrus immediately opened fire, taking down a couple of the geth troopers before they could recover. Pinkie surprised the nearest geth with a grenade shoved down its back, and hopping off merrily as the poor trooper exploded, taking out its comrades.

As the initial shock wore off, what geth troopers that were left started to open up with their weapons, their fire unfocused and ineffectual. Rainbow Dash sped across the chamber, bucking geth where she could, and sniping away the geth she couldn’t reach with commendable efficiency. Garrus just calmly stood his ground and continued cutting down his enemy.

As her squad was facing off the remaining geth, Twilight was holding off the enraged krogan, using her magic to weave a magical shield blocking his every shot. Maddened with rage, the krogan began to charge at the

lavender unicorn. Twilight concentrated again, and sent the krogan flying with a levitation field; smacking him right into a wall. The krogan fell heavily on the floor, apparently dazed.

“Come on! Let’s get out before the whole cavern collapses.” Twilight shouted, motioning for the group to hurry up. She reached a hoof to help Liara up and quickly galloped down the newly cleared path leading towards the mining shaft, with the good doctor and Garrus following closely behind.

“Pinkie Pie! Move!” Dash shouted desperately, dodging the rocks as they fell around her.

“Co-o-o-ming!” Pinkie replied in a sing-song voice, bouncing along without a trace of urgency. The rainbow pegasus scrunched her face at the thought of Pinkie being accidentally crushed by the falling rubble, flew back down towards the party pony and gave her a not-so-gentle shove toward the entrance.

“Hey! That tickles!” Pinkie giggled, but she didn’t resist to being helped along towards the now-partially obstructed mining shaft. Rainbow groaned as a pile of rocks collapsed right on top of the airlock, blocking the way completely. She continued on anyway, very much intent on digging herself out if that was what it took.

As they neared the airlock, the rocks obstructing their path suddenly blew apart. “Rainbow! Pinkie! Hurry up!” Twilight shouted, her voice slightly strained from the effort of keeping the cavern from collapsing completely.

Without a second thought, Rainbow shoved Pinkie inside through the newly-cleared airlock and dove inside after the party pony. Just as the rainbow speedster cleared the portal, the chamber behind them finally collapsed in one final huge rumble. The entire shaft lay eerily silent, save for heavy breathing of the two ponies who went through last.

“Jeez, Pinkie, you worry me sometimes.”

All she got for a response was another high-pitched giggle. “Oh Dashie. We still got out safe and sound right?”

“Girls? It’s not over yet.”

The ground shook again, this time more violently.

“Run!”

The group picked themselves off the floor and ran for their dear life towards the open portal at the far end. The rumbling beneath their hooves only intensified as they neared the entrance.

“Little ponies, we must go. The very earth itself is convulsing.” Twilight heard Ordrak bellow. Despite the prospect of imminent danger, she felt a small rush of relief. At least there wouldn’t any danger of geth ambushing the group as they staggered out. Not with the dragon around.

“Into the vehicle! Now!” Twilight shouted, urging the group forward. The tunnel wouldn’t be stable for long at the rate of the collapse.

Another huge rumble shook the entire mining shaft. A whole section of metal support on the ceiling began to buckle dangerously, screeching as each rivet failed. A few seconds later, the entire thing collapsed into the tunnel. Unfortunately for the hapless Garrus, the wreckage fell just as the turian tried to sprint past. Garrus grunted in pain as the debris knocked him down and pinned his legs, drawing the attention of his partner.

“GARRUS!” Dash shouted desperately. The pegasus zoomed over to the turian’s side and tried bucking the metal. To no avail. “Help! Somepony, help!” she cried, trying to pull the turian out.

Twilight cantered to a stop as she heard the cry and gasped softly as she saw the full extent of the new disaster. “Hold on, Garrus!” Her horn lit up brilliantly and she tried to lift the wreckage from the turian. “I... I can’t... lift it...” she cried, gritting her teeth.

“Allow me,” Liara said, kneeling beside the struggling unicorn. The asari held out her hand, just like Angel did back on Appleloosa. A shimmering blue field enveloped the metal wreckage, in addition to the soft purple glow of Twilight’s magic. Twilight felt her load lessen considerably and renewed the push. Slowly, but surely, the two began lifting the impossibly heavy metal wreckage from the turian’s trapped legs. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie pulled the C-Sec agent out as his legs were freed. As soon as the turian

was clear, Twilight released her hold on the wreckage and went to check on the turian.

“Come on, Garrus, you’re not dying until you get me that root beer!” Dash cried, hugging the turian with her forelegs.

The turian winced in pain as Pinkie and Twilight helped to lift the turian onto the pegasus’ back. “Heh, never one to forgo a debt eh, Dash?” he riposted weakly.

“You betcha, Garrus. Now let’s get out of here!” With Garrus secured on her back, the rainbow pegasus galloped up to catch up with the rest of the group who were already scrambling through the open portal of the mine shaft.

The gaggle of ponies, turian and asari emerged from the rumbling portal and sprinted towards the parked Mako. They tumbled into the vehicle in an disorganised heap without further delay. Ordrak was nowhere to be seen.

“We’re never going to make it!” Twilight shouted, as she engaged the Mako’s engine.

The lavender unicorn flinched as a dark shadow enveloped the cabin. It was Ordrak. “Who said you needed to drive?” the dragon’s voice boomed over the steadily increasing roar of moving earth in the background. A moment later, the vehicle shuddered as the sound of sharp claws grating against modern armour filled the cabin. Before the unicorn could question the dragon, Twilight felt herself being thrown back as the vehicle yawed to the left, her view of the ground abruptly replaced by the gloomy sky of Stirrum.

“Hang on!” Ordrak bellowed.

“Woah nelly, what in the name of golden apples is that?”

Tali’s fingers were literally flying over the console now, her screen filled with a constant stream of figures and data. “Seismic readings are off the chart! I think it’s a volcanic eruption. The mine must have been sitting on a

dormant volcano.”

“Scootaloo, turn this ship around at once! Do you know what molten ash can do to the ship’s delicate hull?!” Rarity cried, visions of the ship being irreparably scarred beyond repair filling her mind.

“Rarity, I have intention of frying ourselves on a volca—” The pilot paused briefly. “Jamming is gone! Switching to short-range scanners.”

The map in the CIC morphed to a 3-D representation of the processing facility and its surroundings.

Applejack whistled as the graphical display began to update. “That’s a lot of dead geth. Twilight been busy.”

“Look, the dragon is there as well. Along with the Captain’s signal. And the Mako!”

A dull roar shook the ship, and the whole room vibrated slightly from the sheer force of the explosion. “The volcano is erupting! They’ll never make it out in time!” Tali shouted.

“Girls...”

“Oh no! We can’t reach them without risking the ship as well!” Rarity said.

“Well, there must be something we can do!” Applejack argued.

“GIRLS!” Fluttershy shouted suddenly. The pegasus cowered when she realised she was suddenly the centre of attention in the room. “Um... look. The dragon... he’s doing something...” she squeaked, wings folded tight.

Everypony’s eyes swung to the viewscreen. “Looks like he’s lifting the Mako... well, bless that dragon’s golden heart, that critter is flyin’ em out!” The ponies watched in silence as the dragon gracefully flew upwards and away from the steadily disintegrating mine. The ship rocked slightly again as the newly born volcano sent another huge plume of smoke into the air.

“You ponies never cease to amaze me,” Wrex commented, a grudging tone of respect in his voice.

“It’s kinda what we do,” Applejack replied dryly. “Somepony hail that dragon!”

[Briefing Room, ESV Normaredy]

“Okay, girls, allow me to introduce Dr. Liara T’Soni. She’s one of the galaxy’s foremost experts on Protheans.”

A murmur of polite greetings cascaded around the small briefing room. Twilight smiled as she glanced at Garrus, who was sitting in his usual spot. The turian seemed to have come off relatively unscathed from that scare in the tunnels, which Twilight suspected had something to do with the turian’s unique physiology. Of course, his armour also mitigated most of the potential damage from the weight of the debris.

The asari nodded her head politely. “I must thank you all for rescuing me from that ruins. Goddess knows what would have happened had you not showed up.”

“Ya better be worth the trouble,” Applejack muttered. The earth pony earned a swift jab from Rarity.

“Applejack! Mind your manners,” the unicorn whispered harshly, before turning back to flash a big smile at the scientist. “It is our pleasure indeed Miss T’Soni... you are single, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Miss would do fine, although I would not mind you ponies calling me Liara. After all I am considered just a child in asari terms.”

Applejack looked the asari up and down with a confused expression. “Just how old are ya exactly?”

The asari looked thoughtful for a moment. “I am only a hundred and six years,” she finally answered.

“A hundred?! But ya look just as young as a filly out of grade school—” Another nudge in the ribs interrupted her rant yet again.

"I simply must apologise on behalf of my uneducated friend here. She clearly have not read up on asari's physiology." Rarity shot Applejack a piercing glare, as if she had just violated the sanctity of a holy shrine.

The asari chuckled. "A hundred years may seem like a long time for a short-lived species as yours. But among the asari I am barely considered more than a child." Liara paused, her gray eyes glancing briefly at Twilight. "Though even the longest lived matriarch are like a babe compared to your princess."

"What did Saren want with you anyway?" Dash piped up.

"Um, I hate to interrupt... but shouldn't we ask Miss T'Soni about the Conduit... if that's okay with you all."

"Fluttershy's right. Doctor, do you know anything about it?"

"Only that it is somehow connected to the Prothean extinction. That is my real area of expertise. I have spent the past fifty years trying to figure out what happened to them."

Applejack whistled. "Wow-wee. Fifty years studyin' this piece of dead history? Mighty dedicated of ya."

"What have you found?"

Liara seemed to relax more, apparently finding it comfortable to discuss something she was intimately familiar with. She slipped into a teacher-like voice. "What is interesting is what I did not turn up. There are remarkably little archaeological evidence of the Protheans, and even less and why they might have disappeared." She frowned a little. "It is almost as if someone did not want the mystery solved. It is like someone came along and cleansed the galaxy of clues. But here's the incredible part." The asari paused dramatically, clearly excited about the matter. "According to my findings, the Protheans are not the first galactic civilizations to mysteriously vanish. This cycle began long before them."

"Hang on jus' a cotton-pickin' minute! What ya mean them Protheans are not the first one to vanish? I thought they're the first aliens and stuff."

“Cycle? What cycle?”

“The galaxy is built on a cycle of extinction. Each time a great galactic civilization rises up, it is suddenly and violently cast down. Only ruins survive.” The ponies in the room were hanging on her every word at this point, even the normally hyperactive Pinkie Pie. “The Protheans rose up from a single world; their empire spanned the entire galaxy. Yet even they climbed on top on the remains of those who came before. Their greatest achievements, the Citadel and the Mass Relays, were based on those who came before them.” Her expression turned grim. “And then, like all the other forgotten civilization throughout galactic history, the Protheans disappeared.”

“I have dedicated my life to figuring out why.”

“Wow. That’s a lot to take in.” Twilight commented, shaking her head slowly.

“Do you think this has something to do with that awful Reapers you mentioned?” Rarity offered.

Fluttershy squeaked and cowered behind Wrex. “R-r-reapers?”

“Oh Fluttershy, stop hiding like that! They’re not here yet.”

“Get this pegasus off my back before my trigger finger gets itchy.” Fluttershy gave another loud squeak and disappeared behind Tali’s seat.

The turian frowned with disapproval. “Wrex, stop scaring the poor thing like that.” The two glared daggers at each other.

“What is this ‘Reapers’ you mentioned?”

“If I may, Commander?” Tali asked the lavender unicorn. Twilight nodded her approval. The quarian repeated her brief story of the Reapers and the geth. The asari scientist looked sceptical, but seemed to accept the quarian’s word at face value.

“Surely you have more proof than the damaged memory core of a geth unit?”

Twilight hesitated. Despite the fact that she already entrusted this secret to her friends and companions on this ship, she was still leery about sharing her visions with outsiders. Partly it was because the story was so fantastic, nopony would believe her. Or maybe she just didn't want to be called crazy. "I... there was this Prothean beacon on Appleloosa. It burned images in my mind... horrific images." Twilight shuddered a little as she recalled her nightmares. It was recurring less frequently, but the images were as vivid as ever. "They seemed to have a common theme. The destruction of the Prothean race. Apparently by a machine. Or a machine race."

"A becaon?" The asari's eyes widened. "Yes, that would make sense. But the beacons were not meant for pony physiology. I am surprised you are able to make any sense of it."

"Well... there's this nice asari lady who gave us the Cipher..." Fluttershy whispered from her hiding spot behind Tali.

Rainbow Dash snorted in amusement. "Oh yeah, that crazy asari who was eaten by the plant. Supposed to help Twilight here understand the visions or something. Personally, I think it's a load of hooey."

"Well, it did alter my perception a little. The images have cleared up a little, though I still can't make heads or tails of it."

"So... this was something another asari did to you?" The asari got to her feet. "Commander, with your permission I would like to try something." She stopped in surprise as Applejack moved to bar her way. The orange earth pony eyes narrowed.

"Hold on there, missy. Jus' what ya think ya gonna be doin' to Twilight here? I don't right see how yer asari mumbo jumbo can help us all here."

"Applejack, calm down. She's only trying to help."

"Have you lost ya marbles Twilight? Did you forget she's also the daughter of that no-good Benezia tramp?"

"AJ. She's not her. Besides, the geth were after her." Twilight looked straight into the brilliant green eyes of the soldierpony. "I think she might be

onto something. If there's anything that can help us stop Saren, I am willing to try it."

"Well, I still don't trust her..." Applejack glanced at Liara, then back at Twilight. "But if ya think she can be trusted..."

"I do, Applejack." Twilight nodded slightly at Liara. "I trust her." Applejack sighed and bowed her head in defeat, trotting back to her seat. The lavender unicorn gave the earth pony a grateful smile and turned her attention back to Liara. "What do you intend to do?"

"One of my kind have given you deeper understanding of the visions. But you still cannot put together the pieces." The asari held out her arms. "Like her, I can join my consciousness to yours. Maybe my knowledge of the Protheans will help clarify the visions."

"Okay..." Twilight gulped, not really keen on reliving the visions. "Let's do this then."

"Oh, this is going to be good!" Pinkie commented idly, munching on popcorns she procured from the galley. The pink pony seemed to not mind the black looks both Rarity and Tali directed at her.

The asari approached the unicorn, kneeling to bring them face to face. "Relax, Commander." Twilight felt the world slow as the asari locked her eyes with hers.

"Embrace eternity!"

The nightmares followed with a vengeance.

"...mander!"

Darkness. Pure darkness. Where was she again?

"Comma...!"

Twilight sensed that she was floating.

“Flut... git.. Cherilee now!”

The unicorn looked around with unseen eyes. Darkness. Why was it so dark? She shivered, even though there no cold. No warmth. Nothing at all.

“By all that’s... you... Liara?”

Liara. That sounded familiar. Asari... was it? The half-formed image of the asari flitted through.

“I... idea... mind... Prothean...”

Prothean.

The memories suddenly flooded back. The visions. The Reapers. The Protheans. Death. Burning cities. Barren wastelands. The eternal darkness around her faded away as her mind rebooted. The unicorn stirred, and began to open her eyes. A chatter of voice immediately assaulted her ears.

“Look! She’s awake!”

“Twilight! Are ya feelin’ better?”

“Sparkle, don’t you dare die on me now.”

The harsh glare of the lights in the briefing room blinded her for a moment. Twilight blinked rapidly for several moments, trying to ascertain her condition. It appeared she had fallen onto the metal floor, her snout and chin touching the cold metal. Her knees must have given way at some point, and she was currently lying belly-first on the floor. The lavender unicorn groaned, and put a hoof to her head.

“That... that was interesting...”

Rarity let out a shocked gasp. “Interesting?! My dear Twilight, you are never doing anything like this again. I absolutely forbid it!”

“Twi, did that asari scramble your brains as well?” Rainbow Dash’s tomcolt voice added.

The blue freckled face of Liara came into view. Her concerned expression seemed genuine, at least to Twilight's addled eyes. "Commander, how are you feeling? It appeared the visions have overwhelmed your pony mind for a moment there. You literally collapsed during our mind-meld."

Twilight shook her head stubbornly. "Never mind about me... What have you learned?"

"Nothing you don't already know. The beacon must be more damaged than you originally thought. The ones that you have are incomplete... fragments of the original message. I'm surprised you were able to make sense of it at all. It would have destroyed a lesser mind."

Twilight remained silent as she processed this new factoid. No wonder the visions were jumbled. But the horror she felt was real. Even if she didn't lose her mind in the initial process... she felt like pieces of sanity was still being chipped away each time she relived that memory. It was unpleasant.

The prim voice of Nurse Cheerilee cut through the voices of the briefing room. "Coming through!" Twilight could feel the nurse checking her pulse as well as scanning her with a portable medical scanner. The unicorn tried to get to her knees, but the artificial gravity proved too much. Or was it the nurse holding her down? Twilight wasn't quite sure, her senses still somewhat scrambled.

"Hm, Commander seem fine, if a little weak. Though next time I would appreciate it that you at least inform me before trying something like this." She felt a strong hoof grab her by the shoulder. "Come along now, you need to rest in the infirmary." The nursepony looked up. "You too, Dr T'Soni. You don't look too well."

The asari's voice seemed fatigued as well. "Y-yes. I think I need to lie down as well. Process all this information."

Twilight smiled weakly at the rest. "Sorry, everypony. Doctor's orders. Dismissed."

[Captain's Quarters, ESV Normaredy]

The lavender unicorn lay on her sparse bed, watching the stars lazily drift by through the oval window next to her bed. She turned one eye towards Spike, who was busy sorting out her report to the Council.

"Spike?"

"Mmhmm?" Spike muttered, not looking up from his perch on the workstation's chair.

"Do you think I'm going mad?"

Spike sighed in exasperation. "Twilight. You asked me that a dozen times now. No, you're not mad. We believe you when you say the beacons gave you nightmares. Get some sleep, Twi."

Twilight grunted slightly and turned her head towards the viewport, staring again into the deep void. Somehow, Spike's words rang hollow for her. She only hoped she could make sense of the whole thing in time. It was maddening to have these visions flitting about in her mind, ever-present, but out of reach.

Her morbid thoughts were interrupted as Spike suddenly gagged, holding a claw to his mouth. The diminutive dragon belched out a gout of green flame, an ancient scroll materialising in thin air. Twilight caught the scroll with her magic and studied the wax seal on the parchment.

"Oh, a message from the princess."

"Well, open it Twi."

The lavender unicorn unfurled the scroll and began reading. Her eyes gradually widened as she digested the contents of the letter.

My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,

It has come to the attention of my sources on Poneria that Matriarch Benezia was recently sighted in Port Heihen, the capital of the colony. Her motives are unknown at this time. It is imperative you act on this

information at once and glean what information you can from her about Saren... and my sister if possible.

Above all, stay safe, my little pony.

*Your loving teacher,
Princess Celestia*

Twilight reread the letter a few times more, blinking in disbelief. Finally, a real lead. A chance to trap Saren's second-in-command and unravel his plans.

"Spike. Get Scootaloo on the line. We're heading for Poneria."