

Stargate: Equestria Connection And Incursion

By Bosstone



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Chapter 1

“Open the gate!” Colonel Jack O’Neill bellowed. He had to; the din of battle filled the air, explosions tearing into the ground around him. He raised his P90, hopping back a few more steps as he took aim, firing into the treeline his team had just retreated from. Beside him, Teal’c leveled his staff, loosing a blast at a Jaffa showing his face. On his other side Major Carter held a pistol in both hands, taking shots of opportunity; it cracked as she took down another Jaffa.

Daniel Jackson, for his part, had raced down the side of the hill to the Stargate, ignoring the firefight entirely. He stumbled over a rock at the base of the hill in his haste, nearly colliding with the small Dial Home Device in front of the gate. With barely a pause to collect himself, he began stabbing at the keys on the device, frantically trying to dial Earth. The chevrons lit up, each one locking itself into place with more deliberation than O’Neill would really have preferred just then.

The gate finished locking in the fourth chevron just as Teal’c called out, “Glider!” A second later, the Goa’uld fighter skimmed over the tops of the trees and out into open air, its blasters firing in rapid succession at the SG-1 team. The three combatants dodged the shots cleanly, but Jackson, his attention on the gate, wasn’t so swift to move. The blast chewed a furrow in the ground at his feet, the shockwave throwing him forward against the DHD. O’Neill risked a quick glance behind him, but Jackson was already regaining his balance. The gate locked in the fifth chevron as O’Neill turned back to the fight.

The team reached the base of the Stargate, taking up crouching positions and firing into the mass of trees. The glider was moving fast; it would be some time before it could swing around for another volley, and the suppression fire the team was laying into the forest prevented the Jaffa from advancing for the moment. The Stargate continued its steady rhythm, the final two chevrons locking into place with satisfying sounds.

O’Neill let out a whoop as the Stargate flared to life, his fierce grin lit by the vortex. He waved furiously at the others, shouting, “Go! Go! Go!”

Teal’c and Carter turned to run up the steps, but Jackson hesitated. “Jack, I don’t think-”

“Don’t think! GO!”

Jackson grimaced, but sprinted up the steps with the rest of the team. One by one they vanished into the watery surface of the gate. O'Neill threw himself forward and into the gate, barely avoiding an energy blast that splashed against the stairs. The sound of battle ceased abruptly, and O'Neill traveled.

O'Neill found himself tumbling out of the Stargate, rolling along the floor until he fetched up against a body. "Sorry," he mumbled, shaking the grogginess from his head as he sat up.

"Quite all right, Colonel O'Neill," came Teal'c's steady voice from the gloom.

"Everyone okay?"

"Yes sir." "Ow. Yeah." "Indeed."

O'Neill peered around at the darkness as he collected himself. "This...isn't SGC," he finally concluded.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Jack." Daniel let out a grunt as he pushed a backpack off him to the floor and got to his feet. "That blast jostled me pretty good. I think I dialed the wrong number."

"Wait. You *knew* you weren't dialing Earth?"

"I *thought* I was dialing Earth," Jackson corrected. He found his glasses on the floor nearby and slid them back into place. "But when the blast knocked me off my feet, I accidentally hit a key without seeing it. It was in the right area, so I took a chance and kept dialing. If it was right, great. If it was a dead address, I wouldn't have lost much more time than it would have taken to start over again. And if it was a wrong address, well..." He shrugged. "Better anywhere else than there."

"All right, all right." O'Neill fumbled for a moment before producing a glow stick from a pocket. He snapped and shook it before holding it up. The sickly green chemical light fell across a large cubical room, the Stargate and DHD at one end. The light didn't reach to the other end of the room, but now that his eyes had had a chance to adjust O'Neill could see the faintest traces of moonlight outlining stairs going up. "Can you dial SGC from here? ...Hey. Daniel. You hear me?"

"I, uh... I've never seen these symbols before."

O'Neill looked over his shoulder. Jackson and Carter were hunched over the DHD, and they weren't moving. He grunted and moved to stand beside them, peering down. Deadpan, he offered, "I have." Both looked up to stare at him. "On a box of Lucky Charms."

Jackson shook his head and traced his fingers over the DHD keys. "Most Stargates use glyphs to represent constellations, and *most* of them

have a pretty recognizable set of stock symbols, usually with a few differences by location. But this...a heart? A rainbow? A *smiley face*?"

Carter gestured to one. "That sort of looks like Pegasus."

Jackson peered closer. "You're right. Looks more like a horse than a constellation, though."

"Maybe these represent constellations in this system?"

"In full color? With a little smiling cloud at the end of the rainbow?"

"So..." O'Neil didn't bother to keep the impatience out of his voice.

"What, you can't dial out?"

"We'd be dialing blind!" Jackson waved his hands helplessly at the cutesy pictographs. "I have no idea what these are supposed to represent and I don't know where to even start."

O'Neil exhaled, then nodded. "All right. There's some stairs leading out. Teal'c and I will recon. You two look for clues here."

Jackson glanced around the dimly lit but clearly empty room, then simply looked at O'Neill. Carter spoke up instead, her gaze traveling around the room. "There doesn't seem to be anything here but the gate, and it doesn't look like anyone but us has been in here in a long time."

"Look anyway," O'Neill snapped, then looked at Teal'c and jerked his head toward the stairs. The big man silently followed O'Neill up and out.

They emerged after a short climb into what looked like a ruined tower. The moonlight was brighter here, shining through gaps in the walls. Stairs led up around the inside of the tower, but large chunks were gone, making it impossible to climb to the top. Half the roof had caved in in any case, a pile of rubble blocking the only doorway out.

O'Neill bypassed the door entirely, walking out through a gaping hole in the wall right next to it. The night air was crisp and cool, a gentle breeze rustling the trees all around. They had walked into the courtyard of what looked like some kind of medieval castle. It was only barely recognizable; the forest was well on its way to reclaiming the old grounds. It could have been spooky, but instead there was only a sense of peaceful retirement about the place. O'Neill didn't trust it. "Anything on the old Teal'c radar?" he murmured.

"I do not sense anything hostile, Colonel O'Neill," came the reply. The Jaffa hesitated, then added, "It seems very...relaxing here."

"Yeah, well, this isn't the time for it," O'Neill muttered. "Let's get back inside and secure this position. We're not going anywhere until the sun's up."

The next night, they made camp once more in the abandoned tower just outside the gate room, leaning against the sturdiest walls. The moon hung high in the cloudless sky, large and full. Its light fell on the castle, reaching through the holes in the tower to settle around SG-1. O'Neill found the gentle light somehow reassuring, which unnerved him. He eyed the moon suspiciously, then turned back to Jackson who had been telling him...something. "Sorry, what?"

"I was just saying that there's nothing around here. No texts, no artifacts, no writing on the walls." Jackson shrugged. "It looks like your basic run-of-the-mill European castle, though without any of the fortifications. It's almost...well, like something out of a fairy tale or children's book. It was meant to look pretty and impressive, and that's about it. If anyone used to live here, they packed up and moved out long ago." He hesitated again, frowning in thought. "In fairy tales, usually castles like this are set pieces. Places where the climax of the story happens and the villain is faced down, and then they're never mentioned again. Like they never had a purpose but for that one meeting."

O'Neill stared at him blankly. "Interesting. I don't see how that helps us. But interesting." He cocked his head to the other brainiac. "Major?"

Carter could only shrug too. "Didn't have much more luck than Daniel, sir. The place was wiped clean, although..." She frowned. "A couple of rooms showed some disturbance in the dust. Very faint, but something happened here in the past year. There's a sculpture in what I think was the main hall that looks like it may have held something at one point, but the dust had been recently disturbed there, too."

"Any tracks?"

"It's...difficult to say. It looks like there was scuffling going on, but here and there I saw what looked like hoof marks. There were definitely horses here." She shook her head. "No footprints, though."

O'Neill nodded. "Teal'c?"

"I surveyed the surrounding area as you requested," the Jaffa rumbled. "I discovered a chasm to the north with a rope bridge leading across. Beyond that, I found nothing noteworthy."

O'Neill pursed his lips. "All right. The Jaffa haven't followed us yet, so I doubt they're going to. Tomorrow we go find civilization, or locals who can help. You know, standard procedure."

Jackson cocked a thumb at the door down to the gate room. "If this world was held by a Goa'uld, or someone with knowledge of Stargates, this place would be secured. None of them would let it just linger here all on its own. We might not be so lucky this time."

O'Neill made himself comfortable against the stone wall, the light of the moon as good as a blanket. "Come on, Daniel, you've been on enough missions to know better. There'll be a nearby group of locals who are somehow human. One of them will be 'guarding long-forgotten knowledge' or something like that. Probably oppressed by some thug they want us to get rid of. Hell, they'll probably speak English too." He covered a yawn with his fist, letting his eyes sink shut. "Teal'c, you're on first watch."

"Shouldn't we have found a village or something by now?" O'Neill complained as he vaulted a fallen log. After the team crossed the bridge the following morning, they had encountered nothing for the last hour but deep forest, thick with gnarled trees and overgrown vegetation.

Jackson began to speak, but Teal'c cut in first. "I hear water. Up ahead." The team hurried forward, eventually clearing the treeline. They came upon a small river, the water flowing steadily along.

As the others knelt on the bank to refill their canteens from the clear water, O'Neill paced a few steps along it. He froze, spotting a long, huge shadow slithering away from them underneath the river's surface.

"Ooookay, guys." He turned back to the others, waving a hand downriver. "We're going to follow the water that-away. Folks usually build towns along the river, right?"

"Yeeeeeah, probably," Jackson admitted, frowning at O'Neill. "But we're not going to cross?"

O'Neill shook his head firmly. "Occupado. Keep an eye out for a thin spot in case we need to."

Hours passed. At one point they did find a series of stepping stones across the river, but even after crossing they continued along the water. O'Neill was just about ready to call a break and re-evaluate their options when they spotted the edge of the forest. Open plains lay beyond the treeline, mountains and cliffs visible in the distance. It was a clean, lush plain, unmarred but for the ribbon of water running through it. And there was nothing O'Neill could see that indicated civilization. He thumped a nearby tree with the side of his fist in frustration, looking back at the other three. "Well, I'm out of ideas. You guys see *anything*? Trails, junk, arrowheads? Souvenir stands, gas stations?"

Teal'c and Jackson shook their heads. Carter began to, but froze, looking out into the plain. "Sir, something's coming."

Chapter 2

At Carter's warning, the team took cover behind a nearby hillock just inside the treeline, breaking out the binoculars. O'Neill could see two figures moving along the plains. They were maybe 50 yards away from the treeline and about half a mile away from the team's location. He raised the binoculars and the figures jumped into clear view. Two horses galloped along the plains, kicking up grass and dirt behind them as they ran.

O'Neill was not what you'd call an animal person; he couldn't have pinned down the breed of horse had his life depended on it. They looked like average horses, though, with brown coats and short manes of a deeper brown. One wore saddlebags over its flanks, and O'Neill could tell by the way they thumped against the horse's legs that they were full, and heavy too. The other horse had no bags, but on its flank was an oddly familiar symbol.

He lowered his binocs. "...Teal'c?"

The Jaffa answered, his voice even more guarded than usual. "Yes, Colonel O'Neill."

"You see the lead horse?"

"Yes, Colonel O'Neill."

"That's a Jaffa mark on its butt."

"Yes, Colonel O'Neill."

"Son of a bitch."

Jackson cut in. "What's that behind them...?"

O'Neill lifted the binocs again. Now that the horses were closer, more were visible behind them. Three more horses, except...these were not like the others. They were about half the size, and their coats and manes were far more varied in color. O'Neill lowered the binoculars again and rubbed at his eyes. "Tell me I didn't just see that."

Jackson murmured, still looking through his own binocs, "Depends. Did you see a horse wearing a hat, a unicorn, and a pegasus with a rainbow-colored mane?"

"Damn," O'Neill sighed. "I was *really* hoping I was hallucinating." With a shake of his head, he focused on the horses again. The three smaller ones were clearly in pursuit of the other two, and as he watched the winged horse leapt into the air, gaining height and speed. It angled itself, ready to dive at the Jaffa horses.

Before it could swoop down, two energy blasts roared through the air from above the SG-1 team, forcing the blue flier to abandon its dive. O'Neill spared a brief moment for approval; the horse broke to one side, rolling to dodge the blasts easily. Perhaps it had some dogfighting training. Or horsefighting, for that matter.

O'Neill firmly got a grip on his mental stability before it could run away giggling madly. He looked up just in time to see another horse fly into the open airspace from over the trees. This one was of the same size and color as the two Jaffa horses, but it was also winged, and...O'Neill groaned as he recognized two Goa'uld Ma'Tok staves, one fixed under each wing. He dropped the binocs entirely, letting them swing freely from his neck as he buried his face in his hands. "You have *got* to be kidding me!" he complained.

"Sir, shouldn't we do something?" Carter's voice was urgent. "The other horses don't have any weapons."

O'Neill grunted. "We don't know why they're chasing the Jaffa. For all we know the little horses could be piranha." He lifted his head and waved vaguely at his mouth in response to the blank looks the others gave him. "You know. With teeth. That eat meat."

It was Jackson's turn to speak up, his attention still on the pursuit. "I think the Jaffa have other horses with them. I see the bags moving, and...yeah, a hoof just stuck out. It looks pretty frantic."

O'Neill frowned, picking up his binocs again to peer through. "Fine. Teal'c, take out the glider horse." He paused for a moment before adding, "I can't believe I just said that."

With a wordless nod, the Jaffa hefted his own staff, leaning it against the hillock to stabilize it. The two flying horses dodged and looped about, and it was a dogfight, O'Neill could see now. The little blue one was proving to be more than a match for the larger one, but as time passed, the staff blasts got a little more accurate, making the blue horse work harder to dodge them. Teal'c sighted carefully; the dogfight was just outside the optimal range for the weapon. When he judged the moment to be right, he let fly with his own blast as the battle passed by the team's hiding spot.

Teal'c, who had once been Apophis's favored warrior and leader of his military might, proved true to his training and skill. The blast lanced through the air, smashing into the Jaffa horse's side just under its wing. It let out a hideous scream of pain and staggered through the air, tumbling to the ground with its one good wing flapping frantically. It crashed into the water of the river, sending up a mighty splash.

The blue pegasus looked startled by the sudden change in the situation, but recovered quickly. It wheeled around, lining itself up again, and dove with blinding speed onto the back of the laden horse. It pulled at the bags with its hooves and teeth, and after a tense moment the bags tumbled free of the Jaffa.

Both brown horses wheeled around at this, but the pursuers had the advantage of momentum; the behatted horse and the unicorn shot past the pegasus, both twisting around in midair to plant their hooves on the ground, lashing out at the Jaffa horses with their hind legs. The Jaffa were struck squarely, stumbling away and clearly in pain. One of them jerked its head at the other, and they jumped the river, retreating at a full gallop.

The smaller horses didn't give chase. They slowed to a halt, panting and watching the retreating figures. Then the behatted horse turned to look into the trees directly at SG-1's hiding spot. "All right. I know y'all are in there! Come on out!" The voice was strong and brassy, a note of command to it.

It was just one more shock on top of all the other shocks, and O'Neill only stared this time. Jackson coughed into a fist, managing to keep his face straight. "Well, Jack, you were right. The locals speak English."

O'Neill just shook his head. "Come on. Let's go say hi to Mr. Ed."

The team crested the hillock, moving out of the trees toward the horses. They could see now what the bags had held; three even smaller horses tumbled out as the pegasus pulled the flaps open. They shook themselves and crowded around the pegasus, their shrill happy voices carrying across the plain.

The cheering died away as the horses all laid eyes on SG-1. The younger horses let out cries of alarm and crowded behind the pegasus, peering out from behind its legs. The older ones narrowed their eyes, stances wary as they shifted to put themselves more solidly between the little ones and the humans.

O'Neill came to a halt several yards away from the group, holding up his empty hands. "We mean you no harm, we come in peace, yadda yadda. I'm Colonel Jack O'Neill. This is Major Samantha Carter, Daniel Jackson, and Teal'c." He gestured to each in turn before looking back to the one who'd spotted them.

Now that they were up close, he could see details much more clearly. The older horses all came up to his waist at their shoulders, the tops of their heads just barely clearing his belly. They had to look up at all of the humans, their eyes almost ridiculously large. The behatted one's mane was

pulled back into a ponytail, and O'Neill had to work to keep his face straight as the pun dropped into his head. The unicorn's coat was sleek white, its mane looking as if it had spent the morning at the hairstylist, though after the chase it was more bedraggled than it probably usually looked. The pegasus's mane was purely fantastical, striped in all colors of the rainbow and cropped ragged in a cut that managed to look tomboyish. All three appeared to have some kind of tattoos on their butts like the Jaffa horses; O'Neill would have thought them brands, but they were in full color.

He caught the pegasus's eye and allowed a swift but genuine grin. "Good flying, Rainbow."

He could not have caused more of a shock if he'd told them he was going to eat the little ones. All eyes and mouths widened in shock, and the pegasus darted at him before he could react, pressing its nose to his and glaring for all it was worth. "How did you know my name?" The voice was rough, but clearly female.

Teal'c and Carter hefted their weapons uncertainly, but O'Neill simply raised his eyebrows, meeting her stare for stare. Her eyes were huge, and despite the anger in them O'Neill had trouble looking away. "Lucky guess?" he ventured cautiously, then picked up confidence as he gestured to the blonde horse. "Don't tell me. I bet her name's Freckles."

Whatever answer Rainbow had been about to give was cut off in a short yelp. Freckles had gripped Rainbow's tail in her mouth and yanked her back to the ground. "Settle down, ace. They ain't here for a fight." Rainbow rubbed at her head with a hoof and stuck her tongue out at the other horse.

Carter stepped in quickly, getting a look from O'Neill but ignoring it. "That's right, we don't want a fight. We're just...well, a little surprised at seeing talking ponies."

Both of O'Neill's eyebrows shot up and he blinked at Carter. "Ponies? Seriously?"

"Well, yes sir. Ponies are smaller than-"

He held up a hand. "Lesson later. Intros now." He turned back to Freckles. "You know our names. How about yours?"

The ponies relaxed somewhat, and Freckles nodded. "Well, I can understand the surprise. Y'all are pretty new to us too." She smiled. "Name's Applejack. This here's Rarity," the white pony dipped her head with a genteel smile, "and Li'l Miss Feisty here is Rainbow Dash."

O'Neill tilted his head, spocking an eyebrow at the pegasus. "Again: seriously? That's your name? 'Rainbow Dash'?" Try as he might, he couldn't avoid the sarcasm that coated the pegasus's full name.

Applejack cocked her head at him. "What's wrong with it?"

Rainbow Dash cut in, glaring at him. "Yeah! You got somethin' to say, big guy?"

Carter nudged O'Neill in the ribs, and he stifled the snark he was about to unleash. He contented himself with putting on a too-serious expression, shaking his head. "Not at all...Rainbow Dash."

Applejack sighed. "Look, I think we mighta gotten off on the wrong hoof here." Her expression softened and she smiled up at them. "We wanna thank y'all for helpin' us. Those varmints were abductin' our little ones there. If'n ya hadn't come along, I hate to think what mighta happened."

O'Neill glanced at the others, then nodded, relenting a little. "It's...what we do."

Applejack looked over her shoulder, frowning into the distance. "I've never seen anypony like that before." She eyed the SG-1 team, the wary expression filtering back into her face. "Do y'all know who they are?"

O'Neill spread his hands. "I can honestly tell you I've never seen them before in my life, Freckles."

"Colonel O'Neill!"

The colonel's head whipped around as Teal'c spoke up. He looked toward the river where the Jaffa pegasus had landed and saw flickers of movement in the water: a weak splash of a wing. Teal'c was already on his way to the river's edge, and the rest of the humans and ponies followed quickly behind.

With O'Neill and Teal'c hauling on the body and Applejack gripping the weapon harness in her teeth and pulling backward, the three of them managed to get the pegasus back on dry land. The pegasus coughed up a gallon of water and managed a weak glare up at the group. "Epona will see you dead for this," he sneered. Then, his defiance made known, he slumped to the ground, eyes falling shut.

Carter knelt beside him, checking vitals. The injured area was burnt black, but a good portion of it was on the underside of the wing. "He's not dead," she finally announced, "but he needs a doctor."

"Or a vet."

Carter shot O'Neill a dirty look, then turned to the ponies. "Can you help?"

Rainbow Dash's face lit up in indignant fury, and she flew to a stop in front of Carter. "Help? Why should we help him? He tried to ponynap Scootaloo and the others!"

Carter didn't back down from the angry pony, giving her a stern glare. "Because he has *information*. If we just let him die, then we're no better off than we are now, and his friends might try to attack again. You got lucky today, but maybe next time will be different. We need him if we're to figure out what's going on."

Applejack and Rarity shared a look while Rainbow Dash fell to grumbling, hovering a short distance away. Rarity finally turned to smile at Carter. "Of course we can help. We'll take him back to Ponyville for treatment. You'll *all* have to come back with us, of course. We simply *must* know your story!"

Carter looked up at O'Neill. Jackson did too, barely able to hide a grin. "Well, here's your locals, Jack. Now we just need to find 'the one who guards long-lost knowledge.'" He threw a bit of his own sarcasm into the last sentence, arching an eyebrow at Jack.

Rarity's eyes lit up, and she beamed. "Oh, you must be referring to Twilight Sparkle!"

O'Neill only smiled smugly at Jackson.

Chapter 3

The team laid out a thermal blanket from Jackson's pack to transport the wounded horse, and they slid him onto it as carefully as they could. One thing O'Neill did know about horses was that they were heavy as all get-out, but to his surprise and relief the pegasus proved easy to shift.

When he said as much, Carter shrugged. "It stands to reason, sir. It would take some pretty huge wings to lift a normal horse. He probably has a lighter frame so he doesn't have to expend as much effort to fly."

Rainbow Dash hovered in the air above them, turning lazy rolls. "Oh yeah! I wouldn't be the fastest pegasus in Equestria if I had to carry around an earth pony's weight." She grinned mischievously down at Applejack. "Hear that, 'Freckles'? I'm tryin' t'say you're fa-"

"I *know* what yer tryin' ta say, Dash," Applejack huffed. "Why'd ya have to go and give her the idea to call me that, Colonel?" Rainbow just giggled and looped in the air over her friend.

Teal'c and Applejack did most of the heavy work hauling the Jaffa over the plains, both of them steady and tireless as they each took a corner of the blanket and pulled it smoothly over the grass during the long hike back to Ponyville.

Rarity took charge of the three little ones, although they seemed to pay her little mind. They clustered around Carter, who appeared to enjoy their company and chatted amiably with all of them. O'Neill picked up that their names were Apple Bloom, Sweetie Bell, and Scootaloo, and apparently they were sisters to the larger ponies. Beyond that, the chatter soon stopped making sense to him.

O'Neill tapped Jackson on the shoulder and they fell back a little way, letting the party walk ahead for several paces. "So," O'Neill asked quietly. "Epona?"

Jackson adjusted his glasses, resettling them more firmly on his face. "Bear in mind I don't have my resources with me, Jack, and my expertise is Egyptian." He cleared his throat as O'Neill made a rolling gesture with his hand. "Anyway, I do recall coming across the name in my studies. It's Gallo-Romanic in origin, and I believe she was the -"

O'Neill held up a hand. "Let me guess. God of horses."

Jackson frowned. "Sometimes I think you know more than you let on and you're just having fun at my expense."

"Of course not." O'Neill paused and thought about that. "Okay, sometimes. But," he waved a hand at the four-legged companions up ahead, "again, lucky guess."

Jackson nodded. "All the System Lords we've encountered so far have taken humans as slaves. They turned them into Jaffa and used them for their own private armies. If I had to guess, I'd say this Epona did the same thing but with horses. That's probably why they're intelligent and can talk; she modified them to be able to do so."

"What do you think about our new, uh, friends? Are they under Epona's control?"

Jackson shrugged. "Teal'c would probably know more about that than me. But," he nodded at their wounded prisoner, "that one looks nothing like the others. He's a full-grown horse with wings, and his buddies looked exactly like him. These are small, more colorful and..." He smiled a little. "They're...well, they're cute. Hard to imagine them being a threat."

O'Neill grunted. "That's the problem. They're cute. I don't *trust* cute. You never saw Gremlins? Or Child's Play?"

"I'm sure they're not that bad. Cultures that value their children the way these three did usually aren't, y'know, bloodthirsty or anything. Anyway, the horses *were* abducting the kids."

"Yeah. All right." O'Neill let out a long breath. "Another Goa'uld to take down. Great. You know, two days ago I got up, had a bowl of Froot Loops, and thought to myself, 'This'll be a nice, easy day. A routine survey on a new planet. Take some readings, get some fresh air, be home in time for American Idol.' Now here we are, on a completely different planet in System I-Don't-Even-Know-Where, up against a Goa'uld we weren't expecting to fight, and the only locals are freaking talking horses."

"Ponies."

"Whatever!" The others in the group looked over their shoulders at O'Neill with puzzled expressions. He managed a weak smile and a wave.

Daniel continued once the others had turned back to what they were doing. "Look, Jack, it's not like we knew there'd be a Jaffa camp on P5J-924. It didn't look like they'd been there that long."

"We didn't even get a chance to figure out which Goa'uld they're working for. Not that it matters, I swear every one of them is a cardboard cliché crook cut from a common cloth. And other words that begin with C."

Jackson blinked and looked briefly impressed. "Nice alliteration. Look, if it helps, I'm not so sure we've got a Goa'uld here. Remember what I said about the castle being deserted?"

O'Neill frowned. "Yeah?"

"No Goa'uld would have left a Stargate alone that long. That was probably Epona's own castle with the gate under her control, but for whatever reason she's gone now, and she's been gone a long time."

The colonel mulled that over. "Huh. Good point. But what about this guy and his buddies?" He nodded again to the captive.

"No idea, but I hope to figure that out."

"Plus how to get us home."

"Plus how to get us home," Jackson agreed.

Their conversation fell off as Rainbow Dash buzzed over to them. She floated in the air at O'Neill's shoulder, giving him an apologetic smile. "So, hey there, Colonel. Sorry about the way I acted before." She paused, frowning. "So what should I call you? Colonel, Jack, Colonel Jack, Colonel O'Neill?"

O'Neill glanced at Jackson, who just smiled and increased his pace to catch back up with Carter. O'Neill shook his head and looked back at Rainbow Dash, then straight ahead. "Jack's fine."

"Pleasure to meet you, Jack!" The pony beamed. "So Sam over there tells me you're with something called the *Air Force*!" She did a little flip in the air and hovered in front of him, somehow managing to float backward as he walked. "Is that anything like the Wonderbolts?" Her voice was hushed, eager, and Jack had trouble looking away from those huge eyes.

"The What-erbolts?"

"The Wonderbolts! Only the best flying team in Equestria!" She waved her hooves vigorously in the air, excitement written all over her face. "No pony can match them for speed and skill!" She paused, then gave him a sly look. "Unless yours is better."

"...Yeah. Something like that. I like to think I'm pretty good at it."

Rainbow Dash blinked as something occurred to her. She looked him up and down, zipping around him curiously. "But if you can fly, where's your wings?" She prodded at his back with one hoof.

He shrugged irritably, though the contact wasn't as hard as he'd expected. Hooves were supposed to be like one big toenail, right? This felt more like a stubby hand. "Do you...ponies...have planes? Trains? Automobiles?"

The pegasus took up a position by his shoulder again, considering. "Well, we have trains, and flying chariots. But the pegasi always have to do the actual flying."

"That's what a plane is." He groped for a simple explanation where he wouldn't have to chatter too much. "It's like a big mechanical thing that does the flying for me."

Rainbow Dash blew a raspberry, already bored. "Laame!" she declared, but gave him a bright smile. "But hey, we're cool, right? You don't have your plane, so if you need anypony to do your flying for you, just let me know!" She puffed out her chest proudly, striking a pose midair.

O'Neill cocked his head to consider her for a moment. "I'll keep that in mind," he said after a moment's thought, and smiled.

The plains eventually gave way to rolling hills, and the wild brush eventually began to be replaced by apple trees in the hundreds. "Welcome ta Sweet Apple Acres!" Applejack announced proudly. "This is my farm! Ponyville's just a little ways on down that road over there!" She let her corner of the blanket fall as she trotted over to one particularly productive tree. Turning around, she gave it a solid kick, causing a rain of apples to thud to the ground. "Help yourselves!"

The ponies let out cheers; it had been quite the long walk, after all. They all rushed over and nabbed one up, chomping them down with expressions of simple pleasure. O'Neill grabbed a couple, tossing one to each of his teammates. They all inspected the apples carefully, Jackson sniffing at his, before taking tentative bites.

Carter was the first to speak, staring at the fruit in her hand. "I'm...not sure I can ever eat an apple from the supermarket again." She took another large and juicy bite, eyes closing with pleasure.

"It's a lot better than eating roast bug," O'Neill agreed, swallowing his bite. "I just wish one of these days we'd visit a planet where the local dish was a honking big steak."

The ponies looked at each other, then to O'Neill. "What's steak?" Apple Bloom asked, tilting her head.

O'Neill stared at the suddenly obviously four-legged animals, then at Jackson, silently pleading for help. The linguist shrugged, then finally settled for answering them with, "A kind of dish we have back home."

There was an uncomfortable stretch of silence before Applejack cheerfully answered, "All righty then! Glad ya like the apples! Come on, we best get this feller into town before it's too late."

Chapter 4

The road between the apple farm and Ponyville was much shorter than Jack had feared, and the team stood atop the last hill, looking down into the small town. O'Neill glanced over at Jackson. "What was that you were saying about fairy tales back at the castle?"

Jackson shook his head. "Looks like Hans Christian Anderson on a sugar high. Seems peaceful, though. I really don't think any Goa'uld would allow their subjects to live like this."

As they surveyed the village, they could see movement through the streets. Ponies of all colors walked the roads, talking and laughing and shopping. It reminded O'Neill of some movie depictions of Old West towns. There wasn't a car in sight, and the roads certainly weren't paved.

One pony in particular stopped in its tracks, a little figure trailing along behind it so closely that it bumped into the pony's flank. The pony ignored it and began galloping toward the group, shouting something they could only dimly understand.

"Twilight!" The voices weren't simultaneous, but they all shouted the same thing as all the ponies in SG-1's company ran down the hill to meet the newcomer. They could see now it was another female -- "Are *all* of 'em girls?" O'Neill wondered to nobody in particular -- with a short-cropped mane and purple coat. Everyone piled on top of each other for a big group hug, the chatter little but white noise to O'Neill's ears. The little figure that had been walking with Twilight caught up, and all the humans stared intently at it; it was an honest-to-goodness *dragon*. "Okay," O'Neill muttered, "now I know I'm dreaming. This can't be reality. Somebody pinch me." He blinked and held up a finger at Teal'c, shooting him a warning look. The Jaffa paused in leaning over, looking back at him quizzically. "That's *just* an expression."

The ponies and dragon talked and hugged for a couple minutes, then the chatter quickly died off and the ponies all pulled back so Twilight could get a look at the humans. She tilted her head, then smiled brightly.

"Welcome to Ponyville." She thought a moment and added cheerfully, "And Equestria too, I guess! My name is Twilight Sparkle. Thank you for helping us."

Jackson spoke up. "N-not a problem at all! We're always, always glad to help." Though the scientist could be unnerved more easily than his

companions, the stammer in his voice still made O'Neill arch an eyebrow at him. Jackson looked back and shrugged helplessly.

Twilight paced over to the wounded Jaffa pegasus, looking him over carefully with a worried frown. "This is one of the ponies who stole Apple Bloom, Sweetie Bell, and Scootaloo?"

"Seems like it." O'Neill nodded his head at the pegasus's flank. "That's a Jaffa insignia. He was probably acting under orders from his god. *False* god," he corrected, glancing at Teal'c. The big man settled back on his heels, deigning not to answer.

The purple pony looked at the insignia, her frown deepening, and prodded it curiously with one hoof. She let out a shocked gasp and recoiled, looking back to the other ponies. "That's...not a cutie mark. That's metal embedded in his skin." She sat down heavily on the ground, a look of horror creeping over her face. "Somepony..." She looked away, and it wasn't until Applejack and Rarity came up to lean on her sides reassuringly that she was able to continue. "Somepony *scarred* him. They *cut* this into him."

Little gasps of horror arose from the fillies, and Rarity looked over her shoulder, then gave Twilight a worried look. "Let me take the poor dears back home. Those three have had a rough day today." Twilight only nodded. Rarity gave Twilight a reassuring nuzzle before gathering the girls up, chivvying them down the lane into the town.

Despite the gravity of the situation, O'Neill couldn't help looking at Carter and silently mouthing, *Cutie mark*? She shrugged and gave him a warning glare, and he subsided.

Teal'c knelt by Twilight in the spot Rarity had vacated. "I'm afraid so." She looked up at him, and he touched the golden insignia carved into his own forehead. "He is a servant of one named Epona, an evil alien posing as a god to this equine and his kin. The silver marks him as a lieutenant."

Twilight tilted her head, eyes wary but unable to move from Teal'c's forehead. "You're one of them," she whispered.

"*Was*." Teal'c's voice cracked like a whip, the sudden ferocity causing Twilight to step back a pace. "I serve the false gods no longer." He laid a hand on the horse's flank, covering the marking. "It is my duty in life to save as many of my Jaffa brethren as I may. To show them that their gods are pretenders and charlatans."

Applejack spoke up quietly, her voice steady. "This boy's hurt, sugarcube. We need to get him to the doc if he's gonna make it at all." Twilight nodded mutely, and Applejack cocked her head at Rainbow Dash.

The pegasus fluttered to the ground and quietly took up a corner of the blanket, and the two began to pull the Jaffa into town.

Twilight was silent for a time, long enough that O'Neill got uncomfortable enough to clear his throat. The sound jolted the pony out of her reverie, and she looked up at all four humans and gave them a sad little smile. "I'm terribly sorry. That was...a shock." She cleared her own throat, standing up. "I'd like to welcome you into Ponyville, but we have some things to talk about first." She smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, but you're all so...*new*. I'd like to know what I'm getting my fellow ponies into before I invite you into the town."

O'Neill shrugged and moved over to a nearby tree, settling down against it with a sigh. "Yeah, I was waiting for this." He gestured to Jackson and Carter, ceding control of the discussion to them before laying his head back against the tree.

Carter peered intently at Twilight. "Before you invite us in? What sort of authority do you have in Ponyville?"

The pony shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. The little dragon, who had been silent up until then, suddenly burst out with, "Why, she's only the greatest magician in Equestria! She saves this town from dangers *every day*, and there's nopony around who can beat her!"

"Spike!" Twilight's cheeks flushed a brighter purple as she hissed, "You're exaggerating!" She dragged a hoof through the dirt on the path, looking even more embarrassed.

"Aw, c'mon, Twilight, you know it's true! Princess Celestia would never have entrusted you with protecting Ponyville if she didn't have complete confidence in you!"

"*Spike!*" She bared her teeth at him in a fierce glare, and the little dragon finally relented. She huffed out a breath, deflating, before shooting a pleading look back to the humans. "I'm sorry, he gets so excited sometimes. He's still just a baby dragon. Yes, I am Princess Celestia's favored student, but that doesn't mean I *run* Ponyville. We *do* have a mayor."

Unfortunately for her, the little dragon wasn't about to be silenced that easily. "But the mayor doesn't *do* anything! Twilight's the one who gets everypony organized, she's the one who knows everything there is to know about everything, and everypony trusts her!" He pointed a finger at the humans, his chest puffed out proudly. "If she didn't want you in Ponyville, nopony would even talk to you!"

Twilight opened her mouth, then sighed, rolling her eyes. "I guess that's true. Well, some of it, anyway." She blinked once, then looked up at

Jackson who'd been staring at her with an amused smile throughout the whole exchange. It was her turn to stammer. "But I- I- this wasn't supposed to be about me!" She stamped a hoof impatiently. "Where are you from? Who *are* you?"

That particular set of questions required a lot of answering. Eventually all six were seated in the shade of the tree. Carter explained about the nature of the Stargates and the role Stargate Command and SG-1 played in the galaxy. Twilight's eyes were wide with wonder, and it took Carter a long time to run through the explanation due to all the questions the little pony asked. She bought into the notion pretty quickly, which was unusual for a newbie, and asked some mighty pertinent questions, some of which O'Neill hadn't thought to ask when he first signed up for SGC.

The discussion was eventually handed off to Jackson, who proceeded to explain about the Goa'uld. Their culture, their habit of enslaving entire planets, their pretension of godhood. How humans were bred as slaves but won their freedom, and how even now the Tau'ri, the humans from Earth, were liberating Jaffa from their masters. Teal'c helped with some of the details, his normally steady voice thick with passion and anger even as he spoke tersely. With some reluctance, Jackson went into his theory about Epona, and how the equines of Earth must have been transformed into the intelligent ponies of Equestria, how Epona must have made use of the Stargate on this planet.

And that, finally, led into SG-1's presence on Equestria. How they tumbled through the gate on a routine mission, and they lacked Earth's address so that they could return home. "You see, Twilight, usually when we find ourselves in this situation-

"You've been lost like this *before*?"

Jackson grimaced and nodded. "A few times. Usually when we're stranded, we look for repositories of knowledge. All Goa'uld or Jaffa civilization leaves some trace of itself behind, and we're usually able to find an address that leads us back, if not to Earth, then at least to a world we know." He rolled a hand in her direction, smiling a little. "Your friends told us you were the pony to talk to."

Twilight blushed again and nodded. "Wow. This is...a lot. I never expected to find life beyond Equestria, let alone so much of it! All that fighting could have been happening here..." She gave a little shudder. "I wouldn't want your job for anything." She stood up, shaking her mane out, and let out a long breath before smiling around at them. "I'd love to help. This is a part of Equestria's history I've never delved into before. Come on,

I'll take you to my library." She frowned pensively. "Although I've been studying a long time, and I've never run across *anything* like this..."

Jackson was on his feet quickly, with Carter close behind. "Lead the way, Twilight." The man grinned at the pony. "I've got something of a talent for research too."

The pony beamed back. "Oh yeah? Is that what your cutie mark shows?"

The smile on Jackson's face faltered, and he blushed a bit. "We, uh, don't have cutie marks. What *are* they, anyway?"

Twilight turned to the side and wagged her rear at him, showing the marking of a red star with five white stars around it. "Everypony gets their cutie mark when they discover what their special talent is. Mine's magic. I've been studying ever since I was a little filly."

They continued chatting in animated voices, discussing the non-obvious differences between ponies and humans, and began to head down the hill. O'Neill groaned and hauled himself to his feet. Between the comfort of the tree and the tedium of the lecture, he'd nearly fallen asleep. He ambled along behind the rest of the group, in no great hurry, hand resting idly on the butt of his rifle.

The group sauntered into the first town square, just inside the town limits. The effect was slow, but noticeable: all the ponies gradually stopped in their tracks, staring wide-eyed at the humans. Twilight Sparkle cleared her throat and took a couple more steps forward, smiling at the crowd. "Everypony, allow me to formally welcome Daniel, Sam, Teal'c, and Jack!" Her horn flashed four times, causing a brief but bright light to appear over each human as she spoke their name. "I know they look a little, um, *unusual*, but I can assure each and every one of you that they're friendly folk! I'd like you all to make them at home as much as you can!"

There was silence stretching out for a long, uncomfortable moment, then every pony in attendance resumed what they were doing, albeit with a few more glances at the humans. Twilight's gaze darted back and forth, then she turned back to SG-1 with a nervous laugh. "I'm sure they'll come around eventually," she said with forced cheerfulness. "But don't worry, everypony here really is quite friendly...once they get used to you."

O'Neill pursed his lips and nodded, a too-serious expression on his face. "Oh, absolutely," he agreed. "Not that we plan to be here any longer than necessary. Major, Daniel, you two go do your thing with Twilight. Teal'c and I are going to go set up a base camp."

“Base camp?” Jackson tilted his head with a puzzled frown, glancing between O’Neill and Twilight. “Well, I- I’m sure we can find some reasonable accommodations in town...”

“Daniel, have you looked at the houses here?” O’Neill stabbed a finger at the nearest one. “These ponies are half our size and the buildings are too. I guarantee you we’ll sleep better outside.”

Twilight nodded, smiling apologetically. “I’d love to help, but you humans *are* pretty big. The library’s going to be pretty cramped as it is, and I’m not sure it could fit all four of you asleep.” She shrugged a little. “Sorry.” Brightening, she added, “But it isn’t scheduled to rain for another week, so you don’t have anything to worry about!”

Jackson, Carter, and O’Neill all stared at the pony and seemed about to ask the same question, but Teal’c spoke up first. “Colonel O’Neill. If it is all right with you, I would like to go check on the prisoner.”

O’Neill considered that for a moment. “Fine with me,” he finally allowed. “If this place really is all sweetness and light, we should be safe enough to split up.” He looked around at the rest of his team. “Just check in every half hour, all right?”

With various affirmations, the team split. Carter tossed the backpack with the survey equipment to O’Neill, and she and Jackson followed Twilight. O’Neill could hear Carter ask, “*Scheduled* to rain?” before the trio walked out of earshot. Teal’c strode off in a seemingly random direction, causing a few ponies in his way to scatter. O’Neill did an about face, stepping off the path and heading for the light woods that bordered one side of Ponyville, hunting down a suitable space to lay down camp, and to enjoy some *blessed* pony-free time.

Chapter 5

As the day stretched into afternoon, O'Neill found himself without immediate work. He had found a suitable clearing, hidden away but not far from the town, relieving himself of the weight of his packs. It was Research Time, which meant the bookworms were beavering away, but all he could do was wait for more information.

Restless, he decided to take a chance with the ponies once more. He returned to Ponyville's streets, ambling along in a sort of half-patrol, half-wander. He certainly got more than his fair share of eyeballs from the locals, and while they didn't run and hide *per se*, conversation fell still as he approached and they gave him a wide berth. When he tried waving and greeting random ponies, they skittered away from him nervously. He had half the street to himself and a bubble of silence twice as big.

It really got on his nerves.

It took only a few minutes of this before his left eye developed a tic, and it wasn't too much longer that he veered off course without warning, heading straight for a random pony. The small crowd scampered away, all getting out of his path save the one brown-coated male O'Neill had targeted. The pony nervously backed up a step, but otherwise held his place, transfixed by the unsettling grin that now covered O'Neill's face.

"Hey, pal! Name's Jack O'Neill! What's yours?" His voice was perhaps louder than it needed to be, tinged with that same manic friendliness. He thrust a hand out, the motion just aggressive enough that the pony backed up another step, this time bumping into the wall of the building behind him. He shifted nervously, and O'Neill could see the marking on his hindquarters: a large golden hourglass.

The pony danced a step, but there was no getting away from the *very* friendly and *very* large human. "Uh. Who?"

"What?"

"What?"

That rictus of a smile stretched wider. "*Who. Are you?*"

"Oh. Um, yeah..."

"E-excuse me." The voice was barely a whisper, but it cut through the awkward tension like a knife. O'Neill started and looked down at his side. The yellow pony who had approached him silently as a breeze cringed away from his gaze. It only lasted a second before she recovered herself,

peering up at him with one large eye through a flowing pink mane. She couldn't meet his eye for long, blushing and glancing down at the ground. "Sorry," she squeaked. "But the patient is awake now...you know, if you wanted to come see him..." She shrank back a pace, ducking her head back even more until only the tip of her nose was visible through the mane. "I-if that's all right with you, I mean..."

Jack sighed and offered her a slight smile. Even his bone-deep cynicism couldn't hold up in the face of that innocent bashfulness. It was far too endearing. "Yeah, it's all right. C'mon, take me to him." The luckless colt saw his chance and darted away, disappearing round a corner.

She nodded slightly, and managed to de-panic enough to start down the street at a slow walk. When asked, she offered hesitantly that her name was Fluttershy, and Jack, never one for idle chatting, found himself coaxing a bit of small talk out of her as she led him to the infirmary. She liked flowers and animals and singing, and she was really very grateful that the SG-1 team had managed to rescue the fillies without hurting them, the little darlings. O'Neill kept up the idle chat, and Fluttershy grew a bit bolder as they walked. She noticed his attention on the buildings around them, and began shyly offering names of stores and points of interest.

"Ooh, and here's the library. Your friends are in there with Twilight Sparkle and Spike, aren't they?" O'Neill grunted, then sidled over to the window to peer inside and check up on things. It looked pretty much like any small library, so far as O'Neill knew. Books were everywhere, but the bookworms had at least managed to keep the piles mostly tidy. Carter stood with a book in hand, flipping through slowly, eyes flicking over the pages. She paced in front of a ladder, on which Spike stood. He searched through the shelves before pulling another book out, handing it to Carter who took it with a glance and murmured thanks. It took a second for O'Neill to find Jackson, but eventually he spotted the man sitting cross-legged against a wall next to a large stack of books. He held one up in front of him, flipping through it just as Carter was with hers.

O'Neill blinked. On Jackson's lap, the purple pony was curled up comfortably. She was almost too big for him; one hoof dangled lazily on one side of the man, a book resting open-faced on the floor on the other. Her horn glowed briefly, and the page flicked over. Jackson was holding his book with one hand, the other resting on Twilight Sparkle's back. Both shared the same contented smile.

The colonel blew out a breath and shot a look to Fluttershy. "Yeah. Yeah, they look mighty settled in. Come on." He tried to moderate the growl out of his voice on the last two words, but the little pony squeaked in

distress nonetheless. He began stalking down the road, each step an attempt to vent the growing annoyance he was feeling.

“Cupcakes! Cupcakescupcakescupcakes!” The shrill, cheerful voice grew louder as O’Neill and Fluttershy kept on the road toward the infirmary, and he could see activity near a brightly-colored building. A very *pink* pony was bouncing around in circles, a plate balanced neatly on her curly mane against all laws of physics. He slowed as he saw who she was bouncing around.

Teal’c stood there, motionless except for his gaze which tracked the pony. O’Neill had never known the big man to have a wide range of emotion, and he certainly wasn’t displaying much even now, but O’Neill could read the spoked eyebrow and wary expression on the Jaffa’s face. He was apprehensive...and if O’Neill didn’t know better, frightened as well.

The pink ball of energy didn’t even seem to notice. “C’mon, big guy!” she chirped happily. “They’re *good*! You gotta try one! You’re our guest, right?” She stopped bouncing for a moment, planting her feet on the ground and mock-glaring up at him. “It’s *bad manners* not to try it!”

If O’Neill’s cynicism had a hard time facing Fluttershy, Teal’c’s implacability couldn’t stand up to this pony. He let out a long sigh. “As you wish, Pinkamina Diane Pie. I will try a cupcake.”

The pony stopped and stared at Teal’c, her mouth gaping open comically wide. “How do you know my full name? Everypony just calls me Pinkie Pie!” She looked at O’Neill, eyes startled and huge, and he could only shrug.

“Don’t ask me. He’s just...like that.”

Before he could say anything further, Pinkie Pie’s gaze focused on him and she let out a loud and exaggerated gasp. Fluttershy’s expression turned a little panicky and she took a couple of quick steps away from O’Neill. She barely managed to avoid Pinkie Pie as the other pony darted over, bouncing around the human with dizzying speed. “You’re *Jack*! I saw you when you walked into town! Omigosh, do *you* want a cupcake?” She blurred to a stop in front of him, rising up on her hind legs to plant her forehooves on his belt, offering up the plate of cupcakes. O’Neill could only marvel that throughout all this, the plate had not wavered nor had any of the cupcakes even budged an inch.

He raised his hands defensively, waving her down. She complied after a moment, staring up at him with a blank smile and those unnervingly huge eyes. “Thanks. Really. But I think I’m overdosing on sugar already.”

She tilted her head quizzically for a moment before beaming. "Okie dokie smokie! If you're sure!"

"Teal'c, come on. Fluttershy here says the pris-" O'Neill glanced down at said pony, who looked shyly away. "Ah, the *patient* is awake. Let's go have a chat." He jerked a thumb at Pinkie, who had tossed the plate onto the ground and was happily devouring the rest of the cupcakes. "Before she breaks out into song or something. The way this place is rotting my teeth, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Without hesitation, Colonel O'Neill," Teal'c agreed, emphatic. They strode purposefully through the rest of the town, Fluttershy keeping pace between them.

"Did you even make it to the infirmary?" O'Neill asked.

"No. I met the Cutie Mark Crusaders again." Teal'c cocked an eyebrow at O'Neill's too-blank expression. "The three little ponies we rescued. It seemed impolite to ignore them, so I stopped to converse. When we parted ways..." he suppressed a minute shudder O'Neill almost missed. "*She* appeared." He gave O'Neill a direct look. "You were lucky you escaped so quickly."

"Pinkie Pie?" The soft voice drifted up from the ground, causing both men to blink; they had nearly forgotten about Fluttershy. She blushed as they turned their attentions to her, but continued, "She's always like that. She's really very nice and friendly, just a little, um..." Her voice dropped into even more of a whisper than usual as she said something that could possibly be construed as criticism of her friend, "...intense."

"So are serial killers," O'Neill muttered, and the trio continued on to the infirmary without further conversation.

The infirmary turned out to be a rather large open-air tent on the far side of town. Rows of little cots filled the space inside. It looked like any medic's tent, only sky blue rather than olive green. All the cots were empty save two; these had been pushed together to make a single bed for the Jaffa horse. The big stallion lay on his uninjured side, his breathing shallow but stable. A pulley had been rigged up to keep his injured wing extended, keeping the wound exposed so that the little nurse ponies could treat it.

One matronly nurse turned as the trio approached. Her eyes grew wide as she looked up at O'Neill and Teal'c, but she recovered enough to flash a brief smile at Fluttershy. "Thank you so much, my dear. I just didn't realize they'd be so...tall."

Fluttershy ducked her head and smiled. "It was my pleasure." She looked over to the horse, face growing sad. "Is there anything else I can do?"

The nurse gave her a tired smile. "I do appreciate it, but we have things well in hoof here. Run along, dearie, I shan't keep you any longer."

Fluttershy nodded, giving the patient one last look before smiling up to O'Neill and Teal'c. "Goodbye. It was very nice to meet you."

O'Neill gave her a little smile and a wave before moving gingerly into the tent. Teal'c followed close behind. The nurse stopped them before they got too far in, giving each a stern look in turn. "You can talk to him, but if you get him too excited or upset I'll have to ask you to leave. He must rest."

O'Neill held up his hands in silent acquiescence, and the two humans sat down on the tent's floor near the Jaffa's head. The horse eyed O'Neill silently, then huffed out a contemptuous snort and glanced at Teal'c. He began to dismiss Teal'c as he had Jack, but his head snapped back in a double-take. The nurses let out protests as the horse jerked and fumbled at the bed, trying to rise up. "First Prime!" His breathing quickly grew labored, and under the pain of his wound he was finally forced to subside. He stared at Teal'c, eyes wide and disbelieving.

The two men traded a look. Silently, O'Neill gestured with a flourish for Teal'c to proceed, which the Jaffa answered with a nod of thanks. O'Neill sat back, arms folded, to listen and watch.

Teal'c turned to the horse, meeting his eye squarely. "I am Teal'c of Chulak, Jaffa liaison to Stargate Command...and *former* First Prime of Apophis." His mouth twisted with contempt for the last, but he held the horse's gaze nonetheless. "We have many questions to ask of you. Let us start with your name."

The horse hesitated, unsure whether to be defiant or submissive. He finally blew out a sigh and settled back against the bed. "I am Brind'I. I serve my goddess Epona as leader of the Sky cohort."

"Brind'I. Why did you abduct children?"

Brind'I winced and had the grace to look ashamed. "It was not our plan. We were scouting in the woods outside the village when we stumbled on those three. My companions grabbed them to keep them from alerting others. And," he shrugged one shoulder, "eventual interrogation." He caught the dangerous gleam in O'Neill's eye and some measure of defiance and pride entered his demeanor again. "We would not have hurt them. We will do what we must to serve our goddess, but we are not needlessly cruel."

Teal'c continued in the same calm voice. "These ponies have never seen your like before. Where do you come from and why are you here now?"

The horse mulled that over, apparently deciding how much to share freely. He finally gave another shrug. "Epona ruled this world and we served Her. I do not claim to know the mind of my goddess, but I believe She saw Her time on this world approach an end. In preparation She sent my team into a deep sleep, to be awoken upon Her return. I cannot begin guess at how long it has been since that time, but we awoke two nights ago."

O'Neill sat up straight and shared another look with Teal'c. The Jaffa nodded, but neither spoke. Teal'c returned his attention to Brind'l. "Why were you scouting?"

"It is Epona's will that these lands be reclaimed in Her name." The nurses continued their ministrations and busywork, but they began casting worried glances at the horse, particularly as his voice grew in confidence. "And Her will be done. It *will* be done."

"How many companions went through the deep sleep with you?"

Brind'l chuckled softly, closing his eyes and resting his head back on the pillow. "I am not a fool, First Prime, nor a traitor. I will not say."

O'Neill leaned forward, looking thoughtful. "So...Brind'l. Since you woke up, has Epona actually..." he gestured vaguely with his hands, "...returned, yet?"

Brind'l flinched as though struck. He turned his face from both humans, what little energy he had draining steadily away. "I have said all I have to say." He fell silent, and did not seem inclined to say any more.

One more look passed between O'Neill and Teal'c, and they rose as one. Leaving the cover of the medical tent, they walked a pace toward the trees until they were sure they were out of earshot. "Two nights ago, he said," O'Neill murmured.

"Yes."

"That's when we came through the gate."

"Yes."

"Stop that. So what do you think about our new buddy?"

"You struck true, Colonel O'Neill. There is doubt in his mind." Teal'c looked over O'Neill's shoulder back to the tent. "He is uncertain, and he regrets kidnapping the fillies. I do not believe we will need to resort to interrogation." He thought for a moment, then nodded. "Permit me to stay with him overnight. I will reveal Epona's words for the Goa'uld lies they are. If I cannot convince him to give us intelligence, I can at least sow the seeds

of rebellion. These Jaffa may be horses, O'Neill, but they deserve to be as free as any other."

O'Neill smiled. "That's my little revolutionary. I was going to ask you to stay in any case. We need a guard on him in case he decides to make a run for it in the middle of the night." He clapped Teal'c on the forearm.

"Good luck. I'm heading back to base camp. Stay in touch."

Teal'c bowed his head. "Of course, Colonel O'Neill."

Chapter 6

O'Neill strode back through the town at an unhurried pace, ignoring the ponies who shied away from him this time. It didn't take very long before he heard a gentle clopping of hooves on the ground beside him. Glancing down, he murmured, "Hey there Freckles."

"Colonel," came the amiable reply. "If it ain't too much trouble, can I ask ya ta call me Applejack? AJ's fine too. I got to admit I don't like that nickname much." The brim of her hat hid her face from him, but her voice was steady and polite.

O'Neill waved a hand expansively. "Hey, I make fun of everyone. Why should I make an exception for you?"

"Cause I asked politely."

He pursed his lips, then puffed out a breath. "Fair enough, Applejack."

She tilted her head so he could see her smiling up at him. "Appreciate it, Colonel."

"Call me Jack. So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

She gave a shrug. "I'm on my way back to the farm. Pinkie Pie pulled me into Sugarcube Corner ta help her make cupcakes. That took up mosta my day."

"Ah. So you're responsible."

"Come again?"

"She tried to commit assault by cupcake earlier."

Applejack let out a small laugh. "She is a character, all right."

They walked along in silence for a minute or two before O'Neill casually asked, "So are we gonna have guards on us every night?"

She blinked up at him. "'Scuse me?"

"None of us have been left alone for more than a couple minutes in Ponyville. Fluttershy found me earlier, Pinkie Pie found Teal'c, and now you're escorting me back through town."

The pony tilted her head, frowning in puzzlement. "Yeah? So what?"

O'Neill shrugged. "So if I didn't know better, I'd say you don't trust us."

Applejack's face twisted up into a mixture of confusion and annoyance. "Well, aside from the fact we only jus' metcha today, we've been hangin' 'round ya because *we like ya*. It ain't a matter of trust, it's a matter of wantin' ta get ta know ya better."

He grunted. "But what about them?" He gestured at a random pony, who started in surprise at the attention before ducking down an alleyway. "See? You and your friends are the only ones who've spoken to us."

"And humans are all the same where you come from?" she shot back. "My friends and I have an easier time with new folk. That don't make other ponies here any worse, jus' different." She let out a huff of breath. "Guards indeed. Ain't no need to be so cynical, Jack."

"Try telling me not to breathe. That usually works better."

She snorted out a laugh. "All I'm sayin' is we're not out to getcha. An' I don't think you're out to get us." She bumped his leg with her flank, smiling up at him. "Relax, will ya?"

"No promises."

As they approached the large tree of the library, the door swung open and Carter stepped out into the street. She had to duck under the doorjamb to do so, and let out a long stretch before looking up and smiling. "Hey, Colonel, Applejack. Twilight Sparkle was right, it's a tight fit in there."

O'Neill stopped by Carter, but Applejack demurred. "I best be getting home. Y'all have a good night." With a smile for each of them, she continued on down the road.

The humans waved and watched her go, then Carter turned back to O'Neill. "So where did you set up camp? I could use some downtime." O'Neill pointed off into the distance, and she nodded. "I'll let Daniel know." She pulled the top half of the door back open, poking her head in as she relayed directions to Jackson. That done, the two began walking to camp.

"So did you find anything...juicy?"

Carter quirked an eyebrow at him and smiled. "Not really, no. The library is pretty fascinating, and I learned a lot about Equestria." She paused, then frowned thoughtfully. "But very little actual history. Most of it is collected applied knowledge, and what history there is only goes back a few hundred years." She pursed her lips, musing. "I did find an account stretching back about a thousand years, though, and Twilight filled me in on some of the details." She briefly outlined the story of the Mare in the Moon and how Celestia imprisoned her sister Luna there for a full millennium.

O'Neill cut in with a frown. "Celestia? The same one Twilight talked about? A thousand years ago?"

"I thought that was weird too. As far as Twilight knows, Celestia is immortal."

He grunted. The pair reached the campsite and began rooting around in their bags for personal items. O'Neill slipped a couple apples out of his pack and tossed one to Carter. "Think she could be a Goa'uld?"

Carter caught the apple casually with one hand. "Well, that's the interesting thing. Celestia imprisoned Luna for...well, turning evil, basically. As if she became a different person entirely...or pony, I guess." She took a bite of the apple and waved the hand that held it vaguely as she ate. "Then, last year this 'Nightmare Moon' character returned to Equestria and attempted to claim dominion. Twilight seemed a little reluctant to talk about it, so I didn't get all the details, but from what I understood she and her friends performed a kind of...I don't know, exorcism on this Nightmare Moon, freeing Luna and restoring her personality." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Sound familiar?"

O'Neill saw her eyebrow and raised a second. "Sure sounds like the egobugs to me."

"Exactly. It's possible Nightmare Moon was Epona trying to return to power. Or it could have been some other symbiotic creature entirely, but Goa'uld seems likely." She shrugged. "Either way, it sounds pretty likely that Epona is permanently dead or gone."

"That's the trouble with you optimists," O'Neill complained. "You're always being...optimistic."

Carter smiled at him and finished the apple, then began to unpack her surveying equipment. "Well, as long as we're here, I might as well take what readings I can. I didn't get a chance to collect any data on P5J-924, so this is better than going home empty-handed."

O'Neill lifted his apple in acknowledgement. "Have fun," he called after her in his usual deadpan. "Don't go too far."

It was well into evening when Jackson returned to camp. O'Neill had his P90 spread out in orderly disassembly before him on a blanket, methodically cleaning each piece. He glanced up at Daniel, a hint of disapproval in his voice. "You're late."

Jackson tossed his backpack into the cradle of a nearby tree's roots and settled down by the fire. He shrugged sheepishly. "I guess I lost track of time. Twilight Sparkle has an incredible library, and I swear she's read every book in it."

O'Neill began to reassemble the rifle, snapping pieces back together with slightly more force than necessary. "You didn't radio in. Carter and I were about to go look for you."

"...Ah. Right. Um...we sort of took the radio apart so I could show Twilight the fundamentals of radio communication." Jackson's contrite note brightened. "She was *really* interested and picked it up faster than most college students. And the fine control she has with that telekinesis is really

amazing! You'd think their object manipulation wouldn't be that hot considering they don't have, you know, fingers, but I don't think I could have done as good a job of reassembling it. And I'm starting to get a handle on the kind of forces she employs. They call it magic, but it seems more like a sort of extrasensory -"

Daniel might have continued on in that bubbly tone for some time had O'Neill not interrupted with a long-suffering sigh. "Did you figure out the gate symbols?"

"- right. Well...no. Twilight had her little dragon buddy send word to the capitol for some more books. We should have better luck tomorrow."

"You better. This whole thing is starting to remind me of Abydos." O'Neill fixed the other man with a hard-eyed stare. "We need to get out of here before you decide to fall in love and stay behind again."

A flush suffused Jackson's face, but he didn't retort. For a time, the only sound in the camp was the steady clacking of metal on metal as O'Neill finished putting the rifle back together. By then, the anger and embarrassment had left Jackson's face, replaced by an expression O'Neill recognized and feared: that faraway look of a theoretician with too much time on his hands. "If both participants are sapient beings, is it *really* besti-"

"Do *not* finish that sentence, Jackson." Silence fell again for several heartbeats, broken by O'Neill's audible shudder. "I'm going to sleep."

O'Neill awoke early the next morning to find two ponies standing over him. He didn't recognize them specifically, but their manner was clear enough. Their polished gold uniforms, square jaws, and no-nonsense expressions marked them as guards. No matter how many civilizations O'Neill met, no matter how bloodthirsty or mild-mannered they were, guards always looked grumpy and none too bright. Jackson would probably call it a universal constant or something.

The colonel sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "All right, boys, I'm up." He straightened to a sitting position, and the two guards took a couple of careful steps away. O'Neill rolled his eyes and covered a yawn with one hand, dragging his pack to him with the other. "Why the long faces?" Around the small camp, Jackson and Carter had already awoken and were busy cleaning themselves and the camp up.

One answered, his voice crisp and strong. "Her Royal Highness Princess Celestia demands your presence immediately. Come with us sir."

O'Neill shot the guard a bleary-eyed glare, less for the order than for missing the joke, then dismissed him entirely from his world. He dug around in his pack until he came up with a protein bar and flask of water.

Popping the top off the canteen, he took a long swig of water, then began to unwrap the protein bar. He tore the metallic wrapper down the seam, carefully peeling it away from the chocolate-flavoring-dipped nutrition stick.

The guards bore this in silence for all of ten seconds. Then the one who had spoken cleared his throat and advanced on O'Neill, his glare intensifying. "Sir, when Princess Celestia demands an audience, you will not keep her waiting."

O'Neill adjusted the half-opened wrapper until the protein bar looked nothing so much like a menacing figure with a huge, flared collar. Only then did he look up, giving each of the guards a flat, direct look. "You see him?" He waved the bar at Jackson, who looked up in bemusement. "He's died often enough to make a cat nervous. Carter over there?" Carter paused in repacking her bag as he pointed his breakfast at her. "She *blew up a sun*." The bar swiveled around until it pointed to himself. "Me? I've killed more gods than you'll ever meet." He jabbed the bar at the guard who had spoken, and the armored pony took a step back as though it were a weapon. "Royalty waits until I've had breakfast." His position made clear, he bit down on the bar, taking its head clean off.

The guard who had spoken scowled and snorted out a breath, but the other cleared his throat and gave him a pointed look. They both settled into silence as O'Neill deliberately chewed on the bar, closing his eyes and making a show of savoring each bite. Jackson shook his head and went back to his own belongings. "I wish you'd stop teasing the locals for once, Jack."

"Applejack asked me to stop being so cynical last night. That's two wishes that'll never come true." O'Neill finally finished off the rest of the bar, wadding up the packaging and stuffing it back into the pack. He took another drink from the canteen, then got to his feet with a groan. The ponies paced a step as he towered over them, but all he did was grab his tac vest and gun, getting everything slung in place. "All right, boys. Take me to your leader." He smiled a little over at Jackson. "You know, that *never* gets old." He got an eyeroll for his trouble, which just stretched the grin wider.

The group strode into town, the two guards flanking the three humans. As they approached the library, they could see a finely-wrought gold chariot sitting empty by the door, but nobody else. "Hey, Laurel, Hardy." Though the two ponies shared a look of confusion, they did glance back up at O'Neill. "Where's Teal'c?"

"Teal'c?"

“Yeah, our other team member? Tall, dark, way too serious?”

The two traded another look, then the speaker shrugged. “We only know of you three.”

O’Neill sighed and took a second to gather his patience. “All right, then he’s probably still down at the infirmary.” He looked between the two guards. “Go tell him to come back here. You can take his place guarding the prisoner.”

The talkative one bristled, glaring up at O’Neill. “We do not take orders from y-”

“Hey!” O’Neill’s voice barked out louder, authority ringing even in the single word. “Your ‘princess’ wants an audience with us. She doesn’t *get* it until my whole team is here.” He jabbed a finger at the ground in front of him for emphasis and stared down at the pony, eyes hard. “Now. Go. Find him.”

The two guards hesitated a heartbeat longer, then with sullen expressions they turned away from O’Neill and began trotting down the road.

Jackson sidled up behind O’Neill, voice pitched low. “Don’t you think you were being a little hard on them?”

O’Neill answered steadily enough, although impatience tinged his voice. “Daniel, when have I ever let pompous blowhards push us around?”

“I’m just saying you might want to be a little more careful. Judging by their armor and the fact they showed up with the princess, they’re probably royal guard. Their opinion of you might carry some weight.”

“Let you know when I care.”

Jackson traded a shrug with Carter, and the trio waited in silence for a minute. A thought occurred to O’Neill, and he turned to frown at Jackson. “Didn’t you say last night your pony friend sent for books?”

“Yeah.” The same frown was on Jackson’s face. “We were just going to continue our research today once a courier had sent the books along.”

“But now we have royalty coming to visit.” O’Neill arched an eyebrow. “Strike you as odd?”

They fell once more into thoughtful silence until a weary-looking Teal’c trudged up the road to them. “Good morning!” O’Neill called out in a too-cheerful voice. “Did you leave the twins to look after our new friend?”

Teal’c came to a halt in front of the trio and nodded gravely. “They were not happy about it. I made it clear that their options were limited.”

O’Neill nodded approvingly. “Good man. How did things go with the Japanese?”

All three stared at him. Even though Carter and Jackson were behind him, he could feel their eyes on him. Teal'c eventually gave voice to what all three were thinking, voice cautious. "To whom are you referring, O'Neill?"

The colonel twisted around, looking at all three with mild annoyance. "You know." He waved a hand vaguely in the air. "Jaffa. Ponies. Japonies. Japanese."

Other than a soft groan from Carter, the stark silence stretched on well into discomfort. Eventually O'Neill complained, "Well, that's what happens when I get woken up for no good reason." He cleared his throat and eyed Teal'c. "Brind'l. How did it go with Brind'l?"

Teal'c answered as though no horrific pun had actually been loosed on the world. "Quite well, Colonel. He still will not tell us anything about his comrades, but I do not think he intends to continue fighting in Epona's name."

"Well, that's something, anyway. One down, a bunch more to go." O'Neill jerked his head to the library door. "Let's go meet her Princessness."

Chapter 7

The library turned out to be rather crowded. All six adult ponies the team knew by name were there as well as Spike. Applejack, Rarity, and Fluttershy spoke amiably among themselves while Pinkie Pie bounced in a circle around them, chanting, "Whee! Party party party!" Rainbow Dash had found a nook above a bookshelf and was stretched out on her back, hooves tucked under her head, snoring lightly. Toward the far end of the room, Twilight Sparkle and Spike were talking quietly to a new face, one which brought the humans up short.

The regal mare sat at ease, head and shoulders taller than any of the ponies. A real horse, O'Neill supposed. Her coat was so pure white that it nearly glowed, and the flame-orange mark of the sun just barely visible on her flank *did* shine with its own light. Large wings tucked up carefully behind her back, and her mane flowed over her ears and down one side of her face to hang freely in the air, a pastel rainbow of colors that fluttered continuously in a non-existent breeze. Intricately-worked gold filigree encircled her neck and covered her hooves, and a bright golden tiara held the mane back from falling directly into her face, adding to the general shine coming off the horse.

She looked up from her conversation as the humans entered. Her eyes, canted slightly compared to the big round eyes of the smaller ponies, took in each of them in turn, her gaze more intense than any O'Neill had encountered since arriving on this planet, even Rainbow Dash's. After a moment, she sighed, a look of sadness spreading over her delicate features. "It's true, then. It is as I feared."

O'Neill's hand calmly settled on the grip of his P90. He flicked a glance over his shoulder at Teal'c, who had taken his staff in hand. The Jaffa gripped it tightly, but his gaze wavered uncertainly. "Teal'c," the colonel murmured. "Is she Goa'uld?" A moment of silence hung in the air, and an urgent note entered O'Neill's voice. "We kind of need to know now."

Princess Celestia met Teal'c's eyes, and they stared into each other for an interminable minute. All the ponies, including Dash who had woken up and was leaning out of the nook, stared at the humans, confused and a little frightened. For a time, the only movement was the gentle motion of Celestia's mane.

At long last, the tension drained out of the Jaffa, and he leaned tiredly on his staff. "No, Colonel. She does not carry a symbiote. She is...something else." The other humans relaxed visibly, as did the ponies...aside from one.

Twilight Sparkle stood up, facing the humans with a glare. "She is also standing right here and she is our princess!" she snapped, sounding nothing so much as a teacher rebuking unruly students. She reserved a special frown for Jackson. Her voice softened as she spoke to him, but she still sounded disappointed and more than a little hurt. "I assured Princess Celestia you would be more respectful than this. What's going on?"

Jackson reached up and scratched at his neck, face flushed with embarrassment. "This...wouldn't be the first time a Goa'uld had taken the ruler of a civilization." He smiled apologetically to Celestia. "We meant no offense, your Highness, just...being cautious."

Celestia bowed her head, a small, sad smile touching her lips. "I quite understand. Please, know that you're welcome in Equestria. Though to be frank, your arrival is an accident that should not have happened." She gestured at the floor in front of her. "Please, sit. We have much to discuss."

O'Neill looked around the spare room. "You know, you never realize how much you miss chairs until you don't have them." With a sigh and a mutter about gathering for story time, O'Neill settled down against one wall, one leg sticking straight out and the other bent at the knee with his arm resting on it. The rest gathered in a loose circle, Celestia on one side and O'Neill on the other. Applejack and Rainbow Dash settled in on either side of him as he sat down directly across from Celestia. Rainbow pressed in comfortably against O'Neill's leg and stuck her tongue out at Applejack, who gave the pegasus a flat-eyed stare in return. He gave them both a bemused look, but let it pass without comment.

Teal'c sat to O'Neill's left, adopting his usual cross-legged meditative pose. Pinkie Pie immediately flopped down on her back in front of him to his mild consternation, resting her head on his shins and beaming up at him upside-down. "Hiya big guy!" Fluttershy settled in directly between Teal'c and Jackson, unable to look up at either one, letting her hair fall to hide the blush. Rarity took a seat next to Carter on O'Neill's right, and Spike actually settled right into Carter's lap. She grinned down at him, then noticed O'Neill's eyes on her and gave him an unapologetic shrug. Twilight Sparkle looked from Celestia to Jackson, a look of uncertainty flashing across her face before she settled down primly between them.

Celestia smiled gently at Twilight, then around the assembled group. "Let's not waste time. If you have questions, please ask."

Jackson glanced at O'Neill, then leaned forward, elbows resting on his thighs. "To start with, Princess, um...I suppose we're curious why you're here." He squinted at her, light reflecting off his glasses. "Twilight only requested books."

The mare favored her student with an arched eyebrow and a smile. "She didn't tell you? All communication Spike sends goes directly to me. Naturally I read the letter first." Twilight blushed and ducked her head, smiling weakly.

Celestia sobered quickly. "There are two reasons I'm here. The legend of Epona and the Jaffa is so old that no written records of it exist. You could read every book in Canterlot and none would tell you of her. Only Luna and I remember. Second, you are here. The portal has been re-opened." She shook her head. "I'm very glad to meet you all, but by coming here you've put Equestria in danger."

O'Neill raised his hand, looking at the other humans. "Anyone else heard this before?" he asked dryly. Rainbow Dash snickered, more at the irreverent tone than the words themselves.

Jackson ignored the remark and frowned at Celestia. "How are you in danger?"

"By connecting the portal to other worlds once more, you've made it possible for Epona or somepony like her to find Equestria again."

Carter sat up straight, staring hard at the mare. "Connecting once more? You *disconnected* the Stargate from the network?"

Celestia smiled. "Let me start from the beginning. I haven't recounted this story to anypony but Luna in...oh, thousands of years. I begin to forget how long ago it was." She gave the ponies in the room a smile. "Twilight and her friends are something special and have earned the right to hear the story too." All the ponies sat up a little straighter, Twilight fairly glowing with pride and staring up at her teacher with stark admiration.

The room fell quiet as Celestia began to speak. "Equestria was not always watched over by ponykind. Long, long ago, it was a wild land, much like the Everfree Forest today. Creatures big and small roamed freely over the land." She bowed her head, horn beginning to glow with a warm, strong light. In the middle of the circle, an image appeared in midair. It showed a land that looked much like the land Ponyville now sat on, but without buildings. Creatures straight out of fantasy roamed through the tall grasses and trees. A many-headed serpent darted after a small terrified rabbit, and Fluttershy gasped in shock.

"Then...Epona arrived." The scene faded, replaced by a silhouette of a matronly human woman, framed by the great ring of the Stargate. "I do

not know whether the portal, the Stargate as you call it, was here first or whether she brought it here, but she used it to bring horses of all kinds to Equestria.” The image followed her words, the Stargate filling with its brilliant blue light and a stream of horses trotting through. “She wanted a planet to rule. She needed subjects. Slaves.”

Teal’c bowed his head. “Yes. Many of the Goa’uld did the same. We Jaffa became their thralls.” He tilted his head to Celestia, questioning. “But to a one they all used humans. ”

The princess shrugged her delicate shoulders. “To this day I don’t know why she chose us. But she did. She claimed to have granted us intelligence, and we worshiped her for it. We bent the world to her will and we loved her for it.” The wildlands returned to the image, only to fade into farms and small, dismal villages, tall horses tilling the earth and carting food and ore through the streets. “We were happy and the land was prosperous. This world has its own magic, and some of us learned to harness it for ourselves. We did not begrudge her the heavy taxes she laid on us, as we could keep just enough for ourselves.

“I was her most favored subject. She took me into her confidence, and I began to learn more than I ever wanted to know.” She let out a small sigh, closing her eyes. It took the gentle touch of a worried Twilight’s hoof on hers before she continued. “The food and materials she claimed as taxes were sent through the Stargate every day. Horses, too, were sent through, and they never returned. On one trip through the gate, I discovered why.”

The serene image faded, replaced by a war-torn plain. Fighting could be seen in the distance. In the foreground, a male horse carried a giant load of ore, far too heavy for even his strong back. He strained at the harness, and only then did O’Neill notice the Jaffa standing some distance away. The man unrolled a mean whip and cracked it at the horse, scoring a line across its back. It screamed in pain, eliciting gasps of sympathy from the ponies who stared up at the cruel image with wide, sorrowful eyes.

Celestia continued, her own dark eyes haunted. “Our lands were being stripped bare to feed armies and create tools of war. The Goa’uld, as you call them, fight almost constantly, but they never put themselves in harm’s way.” Teal’c growled in vicious agreement. “Epona was allied with another whose name I never learned. She supplied his army with material and...beasts of burden. Our friends and family were used cruelly and discarded, never to see Equestria again.” She shook her head. “What goddess could do that to her people?”

Teal'c leaned forward, eyes locked on Celestia's. When he spoke, his voice was confident and knowing. "You could not reconcile your worship with the vile crimes she committed. Doubts began to grow. You realized the truth; that she was no god, only a selfish and abusive outsider. You convinced others of the truth. When you had enough support, you turned on Epona." He lifted his chin. "You were her First Prime."

She met his own gaze steadily as he spoke, and nodded, smiling a little. "I see you know the tale well. My dear sister and I confronted Epona. We revealed her for the trickster she was, and we cast her out of Equestria." She shook her head. "Even then I could not bring myself to kill her. Even then, we only wanted peace. We banished her through the Stargate and sealed it behind her." The images vanished, the glow around her horn fading.

O'Neill added dryly, "And set yourself up as ruler in the process. Convenient."

Twilight Sparkle rose to her feet again, glaring daggers at O'Neill, but Celestia put a gentle hoof in front of her. "It's a fair question." She tilted her head, gazing at O'Neill serenely. "It was not what I would have wished. But by the time we discovered Epona's true nature, this world had already lost too much of its natural resources. The balance was lost. Since then, it has taken all of ponykind to keep the world from breaking down, both by magic or hard work. The ponies looked to me for guidance, and so Luna and I keep the world turning."

She smiled. "I try not to rule my little ponies much. They have always been free, and every day their strength and determination to keep Equestria vibrant and alive fills me with pride and joy." All the little ponies beamed up at her and bowed their heads in respect; all except Pinkie, who rolled about on the floor cheering. "Yay, we rock!"

O'Neill raised a hand in surrender, settling back against the wall. It was Carter's turn to lean forward. "You said you sealed the Stargate. *How* did you do that?"

Celestia gave her a small smile. "Magic, of course. It isn't really sealed so much as...out of phase with the rest of the worlds it links to."

The scientist frowned in thought for a moment before nodding. "Kind of like the switch on a train track."

"Exactly."

Carter let out a low whistle. "I didn't think it was possible to do that." She glanced around the room and down at Spike, grinning. "Then again, there's a lot on this world I never knew was possible." She ruffled his spines and he giggled appreciatively.

Twilight, who had been frowning in thought for the past few minutes, suddenly snapped her eyes open wide and stared at the humans. "Wait a second. So if Equestria's Stargate was closed off...then how *did* you get here?" Celestia gave her student an approving smile, then turned her attention to the humans as well.

"Yeah, Daniel," O'Neill drawled. "How *did* we get here?"

All eyes turned to Jackson, and he stammered for a second, looking very nonplussed. "Well, uh, I, I mean...I sort of...overrode the safety protocols on the gate on P5J-924." He scratched at the back of his neck, not quite meeting O'Neill's suddenly rather intense stare. "All of them."

O'Neill only continued staring. Carter gave Jackson a level look. "I thought we agreed we weren't doing that any more. Not since we nearly blew up K'Tau's star that way."

Jackson shrugged sheepishly. "I had to be sure I got a lock. Like I said when we came through, there was a good chance I was dialing Earth anyway." He absently rested his hand on Twilight's neck, running his fingers through her mane. "Besides, we came out of it all right, didn't we?" Twilight leaned into his hand, eyes drifting half-closed in pleasure...at least until she caught sight of Rainbow Dash grinning knowingly at her across the circle. The purple pony blushed furiously and pulled away from Jackson, trying hard to look innocent.

Celestia smiled sadly at Jackson. "I'm sure you did what was necessary. But now that you've forced the gate open, it's possible a Goa'uld or some other threat could find its way to Equestria." Her smile faded as she considered the possibility. "We must get you four back home before I seal the gate again."

Daniel frowned, glancing at O'Neill then back to Celestia. "Is that necessary? I mean, Earth has grown pretty powerful, and I'm sure SGC would be more than happy to ally with you. There are civilizations across the galaxy who fight off the Goa'uld threat and more alongside us."

The princess shook her head firmly. "I'm sure you do. But Equestria is peaceful and uninvolved. I'd like it to remain that way. We have enough on our hooves here without letting the whole galaxy in."

O'Neill clambered back to his feet, suddenly enough that Rainbow Dash fell over with a small yelp. He gave Celestia a bright smile, his tone brisk and businesslike. "Well, your Highness, it's your choice. You have a *lovely* world here, and I'd certainly hate to see anything bad happen to it. So if you'll just pop the gate open and send us back to Earth, we'll be on our way."

Rarity stood as well, her tail flicking nervously as she looked up at O'Neill. "But what about those *ruffians*? Surely those three weren't the only ones! You're not just going to leave us to them, are you?" Those large eyes focused on his, and though she looked worried she faced him squarely.

"She's right, Jack," Jackson agreed. "The Jaffa could cause some serious trouble for them, especially if they're in numbers and armed."

O'Neill cast about for an answer, and he waved a hand helplessly at Teal'c. "Didn't you say our new buddy had doubts about Epona?" The stoic nodded, and O'Neill turned back to Celestia, arms spread. "There you go! We send him back to the Jaffa, and when Epona doesn't show up, they all rebel. Poof, no more problem."

A dubious look crossed Carter's face, and she shook her head. "That might work, eventually. But it'll take a while, and in the meantime they could cause some real trouble. Are we just going to turn our backs and *hope* things fall out peacefully?" The ponies watched the argument in silence, twelve round attentive eyes tracking to each speaker in turn, concern on all their faces...all except Pinkie Pie, who had found a bucket of popcorn somewhere and was munching away with a fascinated expression.

The colonel shrugged and waved a hand behind him at Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash. "We teach them how to fight and defend themselves, then. Jaffa aren't *that* dangerous, and like we saw yesterday these girls have a mean kick."

Applejack tilted her head to one shoulder, frowning up at him. She spoke gently, shaking her head. "Ain't none of us fighters, Jack."

Rainbow Dash snorted. "Speak for yourself, I can take 'em all on."

The cowgirl shushed her friend, firing a quick glare at her before returning her attention to O'Neill. "All right, a couple of us are, but you saw the other ponies in the street. How're you gonna turn them into an army?" She gave a little shudder. "I wouldn't even want that anyway." The other ponies, aside from Dash, murmured their agreement.

Jackson leaned forward, peering up at O'Neill over the rim of his glasses. "We stepped through the Stargate, Jack. We triggered the Jaffa's release. We have a responsibility to clean up our mess before we leave. This is that thug we're supposed to help the locals with, remember?" He shrugged a bit. "And besides all that? We still don't have the address back to Earth. We can't dial out with that unique DHD, and even if we knew Earth's address using those symbols we still don't know the seventh symbol for Equestria." He leaned back heavily, a worried Twilight leaning against him gently.

O'Neill turned to Celestia. "You were Epona's First Prime." He spread his hands, pleading. "You know the code, right?"

Celestia gave him that same gentle smile. "Only Epona knew that. And I believe she knew that we would confront her. She had moved her library and everything of value to a secret location somewhere in Equestria. It's most likely the same place these Jaffa were held until they awoke."

The colonel stared at her, then let out a long, resigned sigh, lifting a hand to rub at the bridge of his nose. "Okay, I see where this is going." He took a step away, pacing a bit with his back to the group. "You'll open the gate for us, but to do that we need the code. To get the code, we need to find Epona's hideyhole. To find the hideyhole, we need to get the Jaffa to talk. To get the Jaffa to talk, we need to convince them to work with us. We can't just turn Brind'l loose and hope the Jaffa see the light on their own, because that might not happen, it'll take too long too long if it does, and they'll cause trouble in the meantime." He turned back to the group, who were to a person, pony, and dragon all watching him. "Does that about cover it?"

The princess flicked her pastel rainbow tail and arched an eyebrow at him, amused. "That about covers it," she agreed. "Colonel, as Applejack rightly said, my little ponies are not soldiers. You are." She bowed her head to him. "I ask this of you. Please, find a way to resolve this. Without violence, if possible. The Jaffa are living beings, too, and I would not be surprised to find old friends among them. I would not wish them harm."

O'Neill waved a hand. "Yeah, not surprised." He glared around at SG-1 and the ponies, but it was halfhearted at best and only drew giggles and knowing smiles. "Fine." His voice became clipped and businesslike once more. "If we're going to do this, then let's get to work. Major, I need an inventory of everything we have." He nodded to the ponies. "I need to know what kind of assets you have. Any possible weapons or defenses, or anything you can think of that might help." The ponies got to their feet, Pinkie fairly bouncing to hers, all looking up at him with bright smiles.

Celestia rose then, gently sliding her own voice in between O'Neill's orders. "You said you spoke to one of the Jaffa. Brind'l, was it? I would very much like to see him."

Teal'c got to his feet, giving O'Neill a questioning look. The colonel nodded, waving for him to join the princess. Celestia smiled to Teal'c and stretched out a wing to touch his shoulder lightly. Teal'c undid his tac vest, handing it and his staff formally to Jackson, then turned to Celestia and gestured to the door. The two left the library, leaving it a good deal less cramped.

Chapter 8

O'Neill watched the two former First Primes depart, then turned back to the group. "Rainbow Dash, front and center." He pointed to the space in front of him, raising an eyebrow at the blue pony.

Dash started in surprise, but darted over to him, hovering in place. She tilted her head at him, giving him a puzzled look. "What's up, chief?"

"That's Colonel to you." He folded his arms, eyeing her critically. "You said you're the fastest flier in Equestria?"

The little pony puffed out her chest, flashing him a challenging smile. "Darn right I am!"

"And just how brave are you?"

She snorted and shadowboxed the air in front of her, hooves darting out in a rapid series of punches. "I'll take *anypony* on! I'm not afraid of anything!"

"Good. Welcome to the Air Force, Captain Dash."

The pony froze mid-box. Her mouth fell open, her rose-colored eyes widening in surprise. "Omigosh omigosh! *Captain*? Seriously?" She let out a whoop and performed two quick little loops in the air, her friends beaming and congratulating her in the background.

O'Neill glanced at Jackson and Carter, who were both giving him very amused looks, before clearing his throat and turning back to Rainbow Dash. "Captain!" he barked.

Rainbow Dash froze midloop. She had probably meant to face O'Neill again, but as it was she blinked upside-down at her friends. She spun to face O'Neill and saluted, still upside-down. "Yessir!" The salute was crisp enough, but her smile stretched her face so wide it forced her eyes half-closed.

O'Neill really had to work hard to keep the smile off his own face. It wouldn't do for his image. He instead gave her his usual flat, steady look. "You get the title because you're also getting a very important, very dangerous mission. Do you think you can handle it?"

She finally got herself righted, narrowing her eyes at his challenge. "I can take anything you can dish out, buddy."

"That's *sir*, not *buddy*."

She blinked. "Oh. Uh. Right. Sir."

"You remember which direction the Jaffa were running yesterday?" At her confident nod, he continued. "Your mission is to fly that way and find their base of operations. I need to know everything you can discover: where they are, how many of them there are, the land between here and there. I need to know everything you can find out," he held up a finger, "*without* being spotted. Think you can do that?"

She gave him her usual half-lidded sly grin. "Easier done than said. You can count on me, boss!"

She began to dart past him for the open door, but found his hand pressing firmly against her chest, holding her in place even as her wings beat powerfully in anticipation of zooming out into the sky. She looked down at his hand, then back up at him in confusion. "One last thing, Dash," O'Neill went on. "You need a wingman."

She cocked her head, giving him a blank look. "A wing-what?"

He scowled. "A wing...pony. A partner. You need someone to watch your back out there in case everything goes to hell."

She frowned right back at him. "I can take care of myself! Letting somepony tag along is just gonna slow me down!" O'Neill only looked at her, his hand not budging from her path, and she found herself fidgeting under the steady stare. She broke the gaze first, glancing to the side and grumbling. "Awright, fine." She rolled her eyes dramatically. "I'll find somepony."

O'Neill nodded over her shoulder, indicating Fluttershy. "Interested?"

The timid little pony shrank back, and Rainbow Dash snorted derisively. "I like Fluttershy fine, but she's scared of her own shadow. Trust me, you don't want her along." In the background, Fluttershy wilted, eyes and ears downcast.

O'Neill found himself wanting to delegate like a parent instead of a commander; the two acted like siblings, one trying to ditch the other. He took a breath, then nodded. "All right, fine." He poked Rainbow Dash lightly in the chest. "Find someone who can watch your back, then go find the Jaffa. Got it?"

"Got it!" she returned cheerfully. O'Neill finally lowered his hand, and Rainbow Dash blew by him, darting out the door and into the open sky.

Carter shook her head at O'Neill. "Captain? Really?"

The colonel shrugged. "You'll see. Besides, it's not like I'll have to run it by Hammond." He turned to Twilight. "I need maps of the surrounding area. The land to the southeast, specifically."

The pony nodded and looked around the room, frowning in thought. "Ah!" With a smile, she concentrated on one particular bookshelf. Her horn

began to glow brightly for a second before a bound scroll popped out of one shelf, floating over to O'Neill.

He plucked the scroll out of the air and eyed it for a moment before giving Twilight the same look. He tossed the map to Carter, then pointed to Jackson, who was still holding Teal'c's gear. "Hey Daniel. Drop the staff." Jackson raised an eyebrow, then tossed the staff flat onto the floor. O'Neill turned to Twilight again, nodding to the staff. "Pick that up."

The little scholar developed a frown, and she gave him a severe look. "Would it kill you to say *please*, Colonel?"

"Probably."

Carter hid a smile while Jackson sighed. "Humor him, Twi? Please?"

Twilight snorted out a breath, but she turned her attention to the staff. She bowed her head, and her horn began to glow once more. After a moment's hesitation, the staff lifted off the floor, spinning around until it hung in the air vertically, a soft glow surrounding it.

"Good," O'Neill allowed. "Now push the center button."

She blinked at him, eyebrow cocked quizzically. "Um, hang on..." Her tongue stuck out a little in concentration, and the glow around both her horn and the staff intensified. With a sound of whirring servos, the top of the staff suddenly sprang open, the head splitting into quarters to reveal the hidden cannon. The movement was so sharp that Twilight squeaked in surprise and fell onto her rump, nearly dropping the staff entirely. She looked up at O'Neill, panting a little. "I can do a lot of the same thing at once, but a bunch of different things wears me out fast."

The colonel nodded thoughtfully and gestured for Twilight to put the staff down. She gratefully let the magic go, the staff clattering to the floor. He turned his attention to the other unicorn in the room and nodded to the staff. "Now you."

Rarity blinked up at him, then gave the staff a wary look. "As you wish, Colonel." She lowered her head, pointing her horn at the staff. Her horn lit up just as Twilight's had, but the staff lay motionless on the ground. The light redoubled on itself, and she began to give little grunts of effort, but the staff never so much as twitched. After half a minute of trying, she finally gave up, breathing even harder than Twilight. "I *am* sorry, Colonel. It's just...not *fabulous* enough."

O'Neill blinked. Twice. "What?"

Twilight stepped up beside Rarity, giving the colonel an apologetic shrug. "That's unicorn magic," she explained. "It only works on things that relate to a pony's talents. Rarity's talent is fashion, so if something's not fashionable..." she shrugged again.

Rarity sniffed. "And that *thing* is quite the monstrosity, let me assure you."

O'Neill let Rarity's comment pass, frowning instead at Twilight. "So...how did you...?"

"My talent is magic, so any magic I do tends to work," Twilight explained. She looked down at the staff, a touch apprehensively. "This is a weapon, right? Something meant to scare and hurt others." She shook her head, eyes closed. "I don't think there's a unicorn in Ponyville that could touch it with their magic."

O'Neill grunted. "There goes my idea of an army that can control things with their minds."

"Telekinetics," Carter supplied helpfully.

"Yeah, that." O'Neill surveyed the remaining two ponies. "No wings, no horns. Is it too much to hope that you shoot laser beams out of your eyes?"

Applejack only cocked her head at him, a look of pure confusion on her face. Pinkie Pie, though, fairly bubbled with laughter. "No, silly!" She bounded forward, and O'Neill got a sickly little feeling as she began to bounce and dance in a circle around him.

"Weeeeeell earth ponies are the best ponies
You'll know we aren't phonies

We can sing and dance and run all day
And keep on going come what may!"

The humans all stared, utterly shocked by the random outburst of song. O'Neill dimly noticed the other ponies letting out small groans and shaking their heads, but otherwise seeming completely unfazed. Pinkie Pie didn't notice any of it, spinning around on one hind leg and belting out what had to be a completely improvised song.

"I like to party from dusk to dawn
And it's so much fun you'll never yawn
Lots of apples Jack'll buck
Legs so strong you'll wanna -"

"WOAHKAY that's enough!" O'Neill's urgent voice rang out loudly enough to override the song, and Pinkie Pie let out a startled squeak, tumbling to the floor from where she'd stopped midleap. She pouted up at O'Neill, folding her forelimbs. "I was just getting to the good part, too," she grumped. On the other side of the room, the other ponies just shook their heads and facehooved in unison.

The colonel held out his hands to her, palms forward in a gesture of placation. "Please. For my sanity. Don't sing again."

An expression of heartbreaking sadness swept over the pink pony's face, and she looked up at him with tears in her eyes and a trembling lip. ...And before O'Neill could blink, the mood passed, and her face transformed into the beaming cheeriness she usually bore. "Okie dokie! But only 'cause you asked nicely, artichokie!"

Carter stood then, picking up Teal'c's staff. "Okay, kids!" she called out cheerfully, her voice a shade too loud for the room. "Let's head back to camp." She tossed the staff to O'Neill, and he managed to catch it without letting it fall. He shot her a grateful look for the change in subject.

Everyone gathered their things and began to leave the library, the small group flowing around O'Neill as he stood there, letting everyone leave first. The little dragon hopped up on Twilight's back, and her weight shifted to accommodate him as if they'd gone through the routine a thousand times before. Spike asked her, "Did Princess Celestia seem...I dunno, chatty today? I mean, she usually sends you some cryptic note and lets you figure it out for yourself, right?"

The pony shrugged. "She did have a lot more to say than usual. I don't know why, Spike. I guess this is just even bigger than usual." They passed through the doorway and O'Neill followed, shutting the door carefully behind him.

"Bigger than Nightmare Moon?" The skepticism in Spike's voice was frank. "Endless night is a pretty big thing."

"You heard her, Spike." Twilight's voice was quiet, and she sounded unsettled. "Equestria was nearly destroyed because of Epona's greed. Even if she is gone for good, we can't allow her influence to gain a foothold again."

O'Neill slung the staff across his shoulders lazily, ambling along beside the two. "Hey, we deal with this kinda thing at least once a week," he interjected, his tone lazily confident. "Nothing to worry about."

Twilight glanced up at him soberly. "I hope so, Colonel." She offered him a slight smile. "I still think you were kind of rude to Princess Celestia. But," she quickly added when he opened his mouth to protest, "she *did* put her trust in you to handle this." She lifted her chin, determination steeling her voice. "I want to help however I can."

"Trust me," he drawled. "It'll be a piece of cake."

Up ahead of them, Pinkie Pie's head shot up and she looked around wildly. "Did somepony say *cake*?! I *love* cake!" O'Neill groaned to himself and tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. Twilight giggled, and as Pinkie Pie began to bounce around in a circle, the group continued on the brief trek into the woods toward the campsite.

Chapter 9

The campsite wasn't much bigger than the first floor of the library, but O'Neill and Carter managed to clear out enough space to lay the map flat by piling all their gear on the other side of the clearing. This was just as well, as Jackson directed the ponies' efforts in unpacking and sorting SG-1's tactical assets.

Carter knelt in front of the map, head bowed over it. O'Neill mirrored her from the other side. "If I'm reading this right," she mused, her finger tracing down the parchment, "this is where we first encountered the ponies and the Jaffa." She paused at the intersection of the river and the edge of the Everfree Forest. "And they were running in...this direction." She swept her finger along in a rough parallel to the forest's edge along the plain, heading southeast.

"How can you tell?" O'Neill's skepticism was directed at the parchment, which to him looked less like a map and more like something out of the bad old days. "Here be dragons" would not have looked out of place on the small houses around a tree that marked Ponyville. Or "Here be a dragon," anyway.

Carter glanced up through her bangs at her commanding officer. She knew him well enough to guess at his thoughts, and her voice carried resigned amusement. "I know it's not satellite imagery, sir, but it's what we've got. At least it's relatively accurate and has the right perspective. The ponies may not have a great deal of technology, but they've been airborne far longer than we have."

O'Neill grunted, still unhappy but mollified for the moment. His mind's eye followed the imaginary line Carter had drawn out to a mountain range that ran vaguely southwest and northeast, bordering the wide plains and stretching into the forest itself. He tapped the general area with a finger. "They've got to be hiding somewhere here. Dash should have specifics for us when she gets back."

She quirked an eyebrow at him. "Captain Dash, you mean?" she teased.

"Hey, I'm going to need her. It's only fair." He shrugged, looking a little uncomfortable. "Besides, it's not going to hurt anything and you saw how happy it made her."

Carter made a noncommittal sound before returning her attention to the map. She looked further up the mountain range. "Huh. Look here." She touched on a spot in the range distinct from the generic mountain peaks. It looked like it might have been a mesa, large enough that one side of it went off the map. The side that was visible, however, had a deep circle cut into it.

O'Neill tilted his head, peering at the drawing. "A canyon?" he guessed. If the map was right, it opened out onto the plains, but that was the only entrance into the canyon. It gave the mesa a backwards C shape.

"Looks like." Carter mused on it. "If I had to guess, I'd say it was a volcanic caldera, but they're usually not so small." She shrugged, leaning back. "You told Dash to check the lay of the land, so maybe she'll be able to give more detail when she gets back."

The colonel remained hunched over the map, eyeing it speculatively. "Hey Daniel," he called without turning around. "Whatcha got so far?"

Rather than Jackson's voice, he heard Twilight pipe up instead. "Two Berettas, three Ma'Tok staves, three P90s, two, um, 'Zats'..." Her voice was entirely too cheerful as she rattled off the inventory, and O'Neill twisted around where he sat to stare at her blankly. The little pony was using her magic to hold up a lengthy parchment, eyes flicking down it as she read from it. "Eight flashbangs, eight fragmentation grenades, eight smoke grenades, four blocks of C4, and all the apples we can carry." She looked up after reading off all the weapons and, noting O'Neill's blank look, gave him a bright self-satisfied smile. "Organization's one of my specialties," she explained.

"Uh...huh." The colonel gave her a sidelong look. "...Apples."

Applejack sat up and puffed her chest out, smiling confidently. "Sweet Apple Acre apples pack a mean kick!" She stood up and turned around, looking over her shoulder. "Pinkie Pie, toss me a couple!" The pink pony snagged two apples in her mouth from a pile O'Neill hadn't noticed before, tossing them into the air toward Applejack with a cheer. Applejack kicked off the ground, keeping her balance on her forelegs, and as the apples came falling back to ground her hind legs lashed out in a quick one-two, sending the apples flying expertly past O'Neill's head to splatter against a tree trunk.

He ducked aside as they passed, watching them hit, then turned back to Applejack with his eyebrows raised. The pony only grinned at him. "We can turn 'em inta pies, too. Guaranteed ta stop a rampagin' buffalo at a hundred paces!"

O'Neill looked back at Carter. "...Pies."

The major just shrugged. "They're non-lethal. Frankly sir, it's a better option than any of our firearms."

O'Neill shook his head. "And you said that with a straight face. All right, fine." He nodded to Applejack. "Get as many baskets of apples as you can. We're going to need the ammo."

She smiled and saluted, mimicking Rainbow Dash's behavior earlier. "Yes sir. C'mon Pinkie, Rarity. The three of us can get a mountain of apples ready in no time flat!"

Rarity rose, but lifted a hoof and shied away from Applejack a bit nervously. "I'm not sure hard labor is the best use of..." She faltered at the flat unamused look Applejack gave her, and shook out her mane with a huff. "Oh, very well." Pinkie, naturally, sprang to her feet and starting bouncing off in the direction of the farm, singing,

"Ohhhhh, we're not chicken-clucking,
Piggy-mucking,
Ducky-ducking,
Feather-plucking,
Corn husk-shucking,
Soda-sucking,
Run-amoking,
Hockey-pucking,
Woodchuck-chucking,
We're just aaaaaapple-bucking!"

She kept singing, but by then had gratefully bounded out of earshot. Applejack shook her head and smiled at O'Neill, giving him a what-can-you-do shrug, before following Pinkie out of the camp with Rarity in tow.

O'Neill let himself fall backward, staring up through the tree canopy into the bright blue sky beyond. "Major," he groaned out as he rubbed at his eyes. "When we get back to SGC, remind me to see the doc for a diabetes test." He frowned up at the sky before demanding of nobody in particular, "And how did she avoid F?!"

"Mister O'Neill?"

"Mm?"

A face entered O'Neill's field of vision; Fluttershy stood over him, her upside-down face gazing down at him uncertainly. Her long hair fell over his face, and he idly noted the scent of grass and flowers in it. "All those things Twilight mentioned...they're weapons, right? They're meant to cause harm."

O'Neill frowned and sat up, shifting around until he faced Fluttershy. The pale yellow pony sat on her haunches, and though her hair fell to cover

one eye, the eye that he could see was looking at him directly; an unusual thing from the bashful girl. He scratched at his chin. "Well...yeah, pretty much."

She glanced away, and the words came out in a sudden rush. "Well, Princess Celestia asked you to take care of the Jaffa without hurting them, and you said you would so I know you will, but in that case I don't understand why we need Rainbow Dash to spy on them and why we need all the...the weapons." She tilted her head, and both green eyes focused on his in another unsettlingly intense gaze. "Couldn't we just go *talk* to them?"

Everyone paused in their work and looked to O'Neill. When he saw he wasn't going to get any help from Carter and Jackson, he let out a sigh and clasped his hands together in his lap. He explained patiently, "Fluttershy, these guys are Jaffa. They're military. The Goa'uld they serve gave them orders to take back Equestria by force." He waved a hand in the general direction he supposed the Jaffa to be. "To them, everyone on the planet is a potential enemy. They're gonna be thinking about fighting. If we just walked up to them, they'd either attack or capture us. And since any captive is going to try to convince the captor to let them go, they won't listen to us then. Their success in capturing us would just convince them they were stronger than us and that they can and should follow their orders."

He pointed to the stash of weaponry by Twilight and Jackson. "So what we have to do is capture *them*. We have to show them we're the stronger side, and that trying to take over Equestria is a *really* bad idea. Once we show them that, then they'll be willing to listen to us. Make sense?"

Fluttershy nodded slowly, but still looked troubled. O'Neill reached over, resting a hand gently on her back. She started to flinch at the touch, but settled underneath it, looking up at him with wide eyes. He gave her a reassuring smile. "Hey, don't worry. If everything goes well, nobody'll get hurt. I promise."

She fidgeted a moment, then returned his smile and gave his arm a quick nuzzle. "I should go help the other ponies bring in the apples." She looked over her shoulder. "Will you be all right, Twilight?"

The other pony smiled warmly at her friend. "Go on, we'll be fine here." Fluttershy beamed and trotted off, humming to herself. Twilight watched her go, then gave O'Neill a speculative look. "Do you really think we can do this? There's got to be at least a small army of Jaffa for them to even think about taking Equestria. They might force us to fight, and I don't see how we can win without anypony getting hurt."

O'Neill waved a hand dismissively. "You let me worry about that."

Carter glanced at her commander, then smiled at Twilight. "If he says he's going to do it, believe it. Colonel O'Neill hasn't led us wrong yet."

The colonel yawned lazily. "Stop. I'm blushing." He laid down again, resting his head against a tree, and tugged his cap down over his eyes. "If anyone needs me, I'll be thinking."

"Colonel!"

O'Neill lifted a hand to flick the cap up, blinking the sleep out of his eyes as he looked around for Carter. He spotted her on the other side of the clearing, and she pointed up at the sky. He twisted his head, peering up, and saw the silhouette of a pegasus with a ragged tail soaring high overhead. He put two fingers between his lips and let out a short, sharp whistle, and Rainbow Dash began to bank and fly down into the clearing. He sat up straighter, still keeping his back to the tree, and rubbed at one eye. "How long have I been out, Major?"

"Couple hours, sir. The other ponies haven't returned yet, and Jackson and Twilight took a rest too while I finished getting everything squared."

O'Neill glanced over to where Jackson lay, resting against a tree much as he had himself. Twilight Sparkle sprawled comfortably atop him. Both appeared to have been sleeping, but O'Neill's whistle must have woken them up. The pony's head lifted and she peered about, trying to get her bearing back while Jackson fumbled for his glasses.

The colonel didn't really have time to express his thoughts about the arrangement, as a second later Rainbow Dash darted into the clearing from above, spinning to dodge nimbly around several tree branches. With a sick feeling, O'Neill realized she was coming in much too fast...and she was coming right for him. She realized it too and tried to backpedal furiously, but there was too much momentum in her dive.

Unable to get out of the way, he instead reached out, arms wide, and she dove into them like a blue winged football. He managed to arrest much of her speed, but she still collided hard with his stomach, driving the air from his lungs. Wings flapped against his face, and with gasping splutters he eventually managed to get the tangle of limbs and wings sorted out. Rainbow shook her head woozily, eyes snapping back into focus, and she grinned nervously up at him. "Ah, heh heh. Hiya, boss. Didn't hurtcha, did I?"

O'Neill didn't answer right away, still trying to catch his breath, and for the moment he didn't think about letting her go, either. A part of him that

wasn't preoccupied with the pain and loss of air noted vaguely that she actually wasn't that uncomfortable; there were fewer hooves and sharp angles to poke him than he'd thought. After a moment longer he finally managed to draw breath enough to gasp, "Nah. I'm peachy." He lifted his arms from around her and leaned his head back against the tree. "Report, captain."

She stumbled off his lap onto the ground, stretching and sitting down on her haunches. She gave herself another shake and gave him a salute and a weary smile. "Mission accomplished, sir."

"Good job. Were you spotted?"

She shook her head confidently. "Never even caught a glimpse." She flashed him a brilliant smile, wings stretching out and flapping once. "I told ya I'm fast."

He eyed her for a moment, then asked, "And how fast is your partner?"

The question clearly confused her, and she tilted her head. "Huh?"

His voice gained a hard edge. "The pegasus to watch your back. The one I ordered you to find before leaving. Remember?"

She winced and glanced away, wings drooping guiltily. "...Oh. Right. That." Some measure of defiance returned to her expression, and she straightened to meet his eyes again. "But I did the job!"

The hard edge turned into an outright growl of anger. "What you *did*, 'Captain', was disobey a direct order! You took on an unnecessary risk that nearly cost us the mission! You could have been captured -"

"But I didn't g-"

O'Neill rode right over her protest as if she hadn't spoken, the officer's tirade gaining a full head of steam. "*You could have been captured*, jeopardizing the mission by not getting us the information we need to know and by handing the enemy a hostage to strengthen their position. A wingman minimizes that risk. You *never* enter hostile territory alone. And on top of all that, *I gave you an order*. I don't care how stupid you think it was, I am your commanding officer by both the Air Force and Celestia. If I can't trust you to obey my orders, then how can I trust you to command a team when the time comes?"

Dash couldn't meet his eyes during the rebuke, and he could see she was torn between guilt at her mistake and anger at the berating. On his last sentence, guilt won out and she wilted and didn't answer. He glanced past her to Carter and Jackson. The latter was just watching the chewing-out silently with Twilight, who looked worried for her friend, but Carter gave him a mild look and upraised eyebrow that spoke volumes.

O'Neill relented a little; Carter was right. Dash hadn't even been through boot camp and couldn't be expected to become a model officer in just one morning. He inhaled once to moderate his manner, then leaned forward and rested a hand on the back of her neck, pulling her forward to rest his forehead against hers. She still didn't meet his eyes, but didn't pull away from his touch. When he spoke, his voice was much gentler, if no less authoritative. "You're the best flier there is, Dash. I've got to have you in the air when the action starts, not locked up in a cell." He felt her relax a little, those huge violet eyes turning to look back into his. He ruffled her mane a little and sat back. "Are you with me?"

Rainbow Dash sat up straighter, the hurt slowly transforming back into her normal resolve and confidence. She took a deep breath, then gave him a salute. "Yes sir. It won't happen again, sir."

The colonel let out his own breath. "Good." He reached over and dragged the map in between himself and Dash. "Now, tell me everything you found out."

Carter came over to join them as Dash reported her findings. The pony pointed out the rough area on the map where the base was located, right where O'Neill guessed it would be. "It's in a tight little circle of cliffs," she explained. "Even from the air I almost didn't see it. There's a small passage leading out to the plains. There's a flat space out in front of the cave that I guess they're using as a training ground. I dunno if they were *all* out there, but a lot of them sure were."

"How many?" asked Carter.

Rainbow tapped her chin with a hoof, screwing up her face in thought. "Abouuuuuut forty of them, I think. There were like ten pegasi and the rest were earth ponies. Or horses. Whatever they are."

O'Neill frowned. "*That's* the force they were going to use to take the planet back? A whole forty Jaffa?"

Jackson spoke up as he and Twilight paced over to join the group. "From what you told us about your meeting with Brind'I, it sounds like he expected Epona to be leading them. Forty Jaffa plus a Goa'uld is a pretty significant force."

O'Neill grunted acknowledgement. Twilight spoke up next, frowning at Dash. "Just pegasi and earth ponies? Didn't you see any unicorns?"

"Nope." Dash sounded confident. "Not a horn in the bunch."

Jackson continued musing, eyes distant. "Well, from what Celestia told us, unicorns came about naturally. Epona didn't gift them the power. It could be that she couldn't control and thus couldn't trust the unicorns, especially after she got wind Celestia was coming for her."

“Good,” O’Neill grunted again, looking at Twilight. “That gives us an advantage.”

The pony tilted her head at him, then blinked. “What, me?”

“Ace in the hole,” he declared.

“Oh. Um.” She looked uncertain, then settled for a smile. “Cool.”

A rustle in the trees off to the side caught the small group’s attention, and they turned as one to see the rest of the ponies step back into the clearing. They all looked worn out and tired, but happy. Even Pinkie Pie only trotted along sedately. Applejack carried a pair of saddlebags on her back, steps steady as they always were. Fluttershy and Rarity both collapsed onto the ground as soon as they were in the clearing, eyes half-lidded in near sleep already.

Behind them, Teal’c emerged from the woods, carrying a very full basket of bright red apples. He stepped carefully over the two tired ponies and set the basket down, nodding to the group. “Greetings. I hope you don’t mind, Colonel O’Neill, I saw Applejack and the others at the the farm on my way back here and lent a hand.”

“Perfectly all right, Teal’c.” O’Neill frowned at the basket. “Is that...all of it?”

Applejack snorted, wriggling out of the saddlebags. “If that’s all of it, then you got alla Ponyville right here in this little spot, Colonel.” She opened the bags, revealing bottles. “Naw, we got an acre’s worth of apples bucked, and the baskets are all lined up an’ waitin’ for the word.” She pulled out a few of the bottles, and O’Neill could see now that it was apple juice. “I figgered y’all’d be needing lunch, though.”

“More apples,” O’Neill sighed. “All right. Before we break, Dash, is there anything you discovered that you haven’t told us yet?”

Rainbow Dash looked back to him and nodded, frowning. “I got close enough to hear a couple of them talking.” She took a breath to steady herself, then said, “They’re going to attack Ponyville tomorrow morning.”

A ripple of shock and concern went through the ponies; even Rarity and Fluttershy lifted their heads with a gasp. Carter fixed Dash’s gaze with her own intently. “Did they say how?”

She shook her head, rolling her eyes. “They seemed pretty confident it’d be a cakewalk. I don’t think the two who got away from us understood how you took Brind’l down, and they definitely don’t know about you guys.”

Carter looked back to O’Neill. “Full frontal charge?”

“Full frontal charge. That’ll make things simpler.” The colonel turned back to Dash. “One last thing. What can you tell me about this canyon?” He

pointed to the C-shaped landmark on the map he and Carter had discussed earlier.

Rainbow Dash peered at it and shrugged. "It's just what it looks like there. It's big and round and has just the one way in or out. There's a path leading up to the top around the outside, too. I saw it when I flew by on my way back here. It's not that far off from Ponyville, actually."

O'Neill nodded, frowning in thought. "Okay, folks, listen up." He raised his voice, and the clearing fell silent, all eyes on him. "Thirty minutes for lunch. Dash, I need you to round up as many fliers as you can find." He held up a finger. "Volunteers *only*. I need fliers who aren't afraid of danger. Think about the fight you had yesterday. There'll be ten Jaffa like that pegasus. You'll be in charge of the air team." Rainbow Dash saluted and O'Neill turned to Applejack. "I need you to round up as many earth ponies and unicorns as you can. We're going to need a ground team."

The pony frowned, giving O'Neill a skeptical look. "I toldja we're not soldiers, Jack. Now you're tryin' ta raise an army?"

"They'll be in less danger than the air team. I just need hooves on the ground and I need you in charge of them. Anyone willing is free to come along." Applejack nodded reluctantly, and the colonel continued. "SG-1 and Twilight Sparkle will come with me to the canyon." He peered up at the sky, frowning. "It's about noon. Meet back here in six hours. Don't bring your teams; I'll brief you tonight and you'll brief them tomorrow. Just tell them to meet up in the plains past Sweet Apple Acres at dawn. Got it?" There was a round of murmured affirmation. "All right then. Eat up. We got a long day ahead still."

Chapter 10

As it turned out, word had spread throughout Ponyville of the Jaffa. Between the gossip from the nurses at the infirmary and Princess Celestia's impromptu arrival in the village, the news raced through the village like wildfire. Though most of the ponies were sketchy on the details, they knew enough to recognize the threat to Ponyville and Equestria. To O'Neill's mild surprise, despite their skittishness when faced with humans, the ponies reacted with far more backbone than he'd expected to Rainbow Dash's and Applejack's recruiting requests.

As a result, the next morning nearly all the unicorns and earth ponies in Ponyville were gathered at the border between Sweet Apple Acres and the open plains beyond, with a veritable cloud of pegasi off to the side, sitting, hovering, or idly swooping around as they chatted among themselves. Dash hadn't just pulled in most of the Ponyville pegasi, but had made a trip up to the nearby floating city of Cloudsdale and called in a few favors among the fliers there. O'Neill idly reflected that if "the nearby floating city of Cloudsdale" was no longer enough to make him question his sanity, then he had been on this planet for just a little too long.

The ponies all still gave him nervous glances, but the presence of Applejack and Rainbow Dash seemed to reassure them. With the help of his two lieutenants, he split off two smaller groups of volunteers from both main groups and gave them their orders and weaponry. The ground special team was just returning from setting up the baskets of fruit, while O'Neill and Dash finished briefing the air special team on their job.

O'Neill hung the last smoke grenade around the neck of the final member of the air special team. The pegasus, a smallish mare with a grey coat, straight blonde hair, and a bubble mark on her rear, glanced down at her 'necklace' with minor apprehension. At least, O'Neill thought it was apprehension; her eyes were a bit off-kilter, and it made reading her expression hard.

"Don't worry, Ditz," Rainbow said cheerfully from O'Neill's side. "The way the colonel's got that rigged, it's foolproof. Even you won't have any trouble with it." The pony grinned nervously at Dash, or maybe at O'Neill; he couldn't be sure.

He shook his head and turned to Dash herself. The feisty pegasus was wearing the weapon harness taken from Brind'l; though it was a good

bit of weight, it settled on her shoulders easily enough and she didn't seem to have any trouble with it. He adjusted the straps, giving her one last check-over, and slid one of SG-1's walkie-talkies into a small holster rig at her side. "You know your job, right?"

Dash saluted and grinned wolfishly at him; a surprisingly predatory expression coming from a cute miniature horse. "Backwards and forwards, boss. Just give me the word."

O'Neill returned the grin briefly and ruffled her mane. "All right. Get your team into position." He glanced up at the sky. "Nice job on the cloud cover."

She snorted and waved a hoof dismissively. "Did you expect anything less?" She winked and turned to the pegasi loitering around. "All right, ponies, follow me!" With a little more cajoling, she got the attention of all the fliers. As one they lifted up into the air, the multitude of beating wings causing the air to stir around O'Neill. The air team followed their captain up into the sky, disappearing behind a rather large cloud they had moved into position the previous evening.

He watched them until they disappeared from sight, then turned to Applejack. He knelt in front of her, securing a second radio in a holster slung over her shoulder similar to Dash's. "You ready?" he asked quietly.

Applejack looked a lot less confident than Dash, and she glanced at the very large group of ponies she was supposed to be leading. She took a deep breath, turning back to O'Neill. "I think so. I jus' don't wanna see anypony get hurt."

He shook his head. "Stick to the plan. Follow my orders. You know what you're doing." He cocked his head to the dog sitting alertly next to Applejack. "Besides, you've got your backup."

A smile crossed the pony's face as she looked to her pet. "Ayep. These Jaffa ain't no cows, but I reckon me an' Winona'll do all right." Winona barked in happy doggy agreement.

O'Neill patted her shoulder and rose. "All right then. Get your ponies into position." Applejack nodded and took another deep breath before turning to the assembled ponies. She started calling out orders, and her voice rang clear as a bell; any hesitation and worry was absent. After a few minutes of coordination, she and Winona led the pack of ponies into the treeline of the Everfree Forest, heading to the preassigned position, well out of sight from the plains.

When the last pony vanished from his sight, O'Neill began heading for the canyon, visible in the near distance. It was only about a mile away

from his current position, and he fell into an easy jog. He raised his own radio to his mouth, clicking the Transmit button. "All positions, report in."

A giggle filtered through the speaker, followed by Rainbow Dash's voice. "Nice one, Colonel. You scared the hay out of Ditzy."

O'Neill growled. "Captain..."

Dash recognized the undercurrent of warning in the word and quickly turned professional. "I mean, air team ready and waiting, Colonel."

Applejack clicked on next. "Ground team ready."

"Canyon team in position, sir," came Major Carter's voice.

"All right. Air team, keep an eye out and report in when you see the Jaffa approaching." Rainbow radioed her affirmative, and O'Neill let the radio fall back against his vest as he neared the path that led up to the top of the canyon wall.

It was a tight path, barely big enough for one person, and it cut back and forth as it wound up the side of the mesa that surrounded the canyon. It really wasn't very tall, as mountains went, rising only about 150 feet or so. Its distinctive shape was what had drawn the mapmaker's notice rather than its size.

O'Neill emerged onto the flat top of the mesa on the north side, where the rest of SG-1 as well as Twilight Sparkle stood looking out over the plains. From here he could see into the canyon; the lush green of the plains faded to scrub grass and a couple of lonely-looking trees here and there. It was a wide open spot otherwise, with sheer walls and only the one way in or out. It was as good as he was going to get on short notice.

The others turned to him as he approached, giving him various murmured greetings. He nodded to Carter first. "Everything in place?"

She frowned, but nodded. "We're as ready as we can be up here. I'm not certain the C4 we brought is going to do the job, though."

O'Neill gave her a level look. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? After all, we've got so many options to choose from." The blatant sarcasm in his voice made Carter grimace, but she nodded. "Carter, Teal'c, you two stay on this side and be ready. Daniel, Twilight, you're with me. We need to get to the other side of the entrance before..." Rather than complete his sentence, he held up a hand and began counting off with his fingers. He held up one, then two, then three.

Right on cue, the radio snapped to life and Rainbow Dash's excited voice crackled through the speaker. "Colonel, they're on their way!"

O'Neill snorted. "I hate being right." He lifted the radio. "Copy that. Air team one, you're up. Team two, proceed when the sky is clear." He let the radio go and jerked his head at Jackson and the pony. "Other side. *Now.*"

He turned, intending to sprint along the inner rim of the canyon; the crevasse that permitted entrance into the canyon was not large, but it was still far too wide to leap across. Before he could take a step, however, a brilliant light flared behind him, and he found a soft pressure envelop his entire body. He began to struggle, but stopped when he twisted his head around and saw Twilight Sparkle working her magic, horn glowing a bright pale purple.

She bent her head, face twisted up in concentration, and both O'Neill and Jackson floated up into the air, gliding gently over the crevasse, and their feet touched earth mere seconds after O'Neill had given the order. When both had their feet planted, Twilight released the magic, letting out a pent-up breath. She took another couple of steadying breaths and her horn began to glow again, the intensity ramping up sharply, a bright white glow at the very tip of her horn...

...and with a sudden pop, she vanished from sight, reappearing half a second later next to the two humans. She staggered as the light vanished, and Jackson knelt to steady her against him. All four humans stared openly at her, and as she caught her breath she smiled wearily. "Done."

Jackson, Carter, and even Teal'c all looked impressed by the unicorn's ability. O'Neill only grunted. "Don't wear yourself out too soon. We still need you." He paused a beat, then added, "Good work." He pulled his binoculars from his tac vest and turned to the outer rim of the mesa, getting as close as he could to the approaching herd of Jaffa. A moment later the other two joined him, and Jackson put an open bag at Twilight's feet.

Raising the binoculars, he could see the mass of brown and grey bodies thundering along the plain. A small cloud of dust arose, clods of grass and dirt flying through the air as a hundred and twenty hooves beat the ground. Above the herd of grounded horses, the remainder of the winged horse squadron flew in formation. Five pegasi kept pace over the main herd in a flying wedge, while two pairs maintained a mobile patrol, keeping an eye out for ambushes.

Despite the care the Jaffa took, they didn't manage to fly high enough. As they passed under the cloud cover Dash's team had set up, a pair of energy blasts broke through the underside of the central cloud, lancing through the air directly in front of the lead pegasi and striking the earth well ahead of the ground horses. A moment later Rainbow Dash emerged, diving fast toward the formations. She was followed by her own wedge of ponies, the total formation over thirty strong.

The Jaffa fliers let out calls of alarm and broke, pulling hard to one side as Dash let two more blasts fly, again shooting harmlessly past the

horses. Having secured the Jaffa's attention, the ponies pulled out of their dive, banking to the east and flying over the mountains, splitting into several smaller groups as they did. The Jaffa pegasi reformed quickly, tearing after their attackers, and soon staff blasts began to fill the air.

Twilight winced at O'Neill's side, concern in her face and voice. "Oohh, I hope they'll be okay. Rainbow's a great flier, but she can be so cocky..."

"She knows to be careful," the colonel assured her. The herd was becoming more and more visible as it thundered ahead without its aerial escort, their path at an angle away from the canyon, heading toward Ponyville. "She did her job." He nodded up to the sky. "Look."

With the Jaffa pegasi gone, there was nothing to impede the second air team. They appeared from the cloud cover, high and behind the herd, and as one they began a steep dive, aiming for a point well ahead of the Jaffa. This team was much smaller, and each one carried a grenade tied around their necks. O'Neill could make out Ditzzy taking up the rear, straining hard to keep up with the others.

He clicked the radio on again. "Ground team, get moving." No sooner had he given the order than the divebombers swooped low over the ground in front of the herd, each one yanking their grenade off the tied cord with both hooves. The cord had been wound through the pin of each grenade, and O'Neill silently began to count out the seconds as the grenades cooked. "...Three, four drop them dropthemnow..."

To his relief, they all did, letting the grenades fall to earth a split second before they exploded. Giant billowing clouds of smoke erupted from the canisters, and soon the Jaffa herd found themselves facing one giant smokescreen. The air team banked away and soared toward the mountains to join the rest of their squadron against the Jaffa pegasi. "Light 'em up!" O'Neill barked.

Twilight sucked in a sharp breath and glared down at the open bag in front of her. Once more, she focused her magic, light streaming forth from her horn. Four flashbangs rose out of the bag, and with a grunt of effort, she yanked the pin on all four, one after the other. With a toss of her head, she directed the cooking grenades out onto the plains, throwing them into the quickly expanding smoke cloud farther and more accurately than any of the humans possibly could. Her aim was true, and as they disappeared she released her hold on them, slumping to the ground in exhaustion.

The lead Jaffa horses let out surprised yells and screams as the smoke appeared, but they had worked up so much momentum that it was difficult to simply stop. Even if they could, the horses behind them were still

plowing ahead at full speed, their situational awareness hampered by the press of bodies. To stop now would mean getting trampled.

With little option before them, the Jaffa plunged into the cloud of smoke. At the same time, Twilight's flashbangs flew into the smoke just as Applejack emerged from the forest, running perpendicular to the Jaffa's charge. She galloped ahead at full speed, and her own herd of ponies, half the size but twice the number of the Jaffa, followed close on her heels. A small team split off, led by a huge red stallion nearly as tall as one of the Jaffa, heading for the line of apple baskets that even now most of the Jaffa herd were running past and hadn't spotted.

O'Neill watched intently through his binoculars as several things happened all at once, or at least near enough as to make no difference: the Jaffa herd plunged through the smokescreen, over half the horses already gone from sight in the mist. Twilight's flashbangs lit off in rapid succession, erupting in a cacophony of light and sound all around the herd, very much like cannon fire. As they did, the second team of ground ponies began to buck, kicking the apples into the herd's flanks. Some broke as they struck horses, while others bounced off ribs and hindquarters. Cries of shock, surprise, and distress began to arise from the herd, only to degenerate into mass coughing and choking.

It was in this state of panic and confusion that the Jaffa began to emerge from the smoke cloud. Their forward momentum had slowed, but not by much, and they ran in staggered disarray, slowly trying to get their bearings back. They didn't have much time for it, though, as Applejack's own herd bore down on them.

She cut across their path, her own heading toward the canyon, and the Jaffa started in surprise and began to turn away from her. There were too many ponies to cut through, and the barrage of apples was pelting them from the west, so in desperation the lead Jaffa turned with Applejack to run alongside her, away from the main attack. Winona kept pace with Applejack, bouncing and dodging around the pounding hooves of the Jaffa, snapping her jaws at their ankles and barking wildly to keep them moving forward. Applejack's herd streamed out behind her, and as more and more Jaffa emerged from the smoke, it was all they could do to follow their forward brethren, shying away from the ponies that cut off their path to Ponyville.

The Jaffa horse in the lead shook his head, trying to get his wits back together. He saw the opening to the canyon that Applejack was herding him toward, and to O'Neill's surprise he actually picked up speed. Presumably he saw it as a potential escape, especially as the crevasse

was narrow enough that Applejack would need to break off. As the Jaffa began to enter the canyon, Applejack did indeed break off, leading the ground team north and away from the crevasse. The Jaffa continued running into the canyon, the rearmost of them still trusting to the judgment of the leaders.

As the last of the horses passed through into the canyon, O'Neill shot a hand toward the other side of the crevasse and roared, "*NOW!*" Carter held the detonator in her hand, and all four humans atop the canyon walls ran away from the crevasse, Jackson carrying the exhausted Twilight in his arms, as Carter punched the big red button.

The C4, which had been molded into the deepest cracks SG-1 could find in the crevasse walls, went off with a thunderous roar, the dirt and rock exploding on both sides and sending up a dust cloud nearly as thick as the smokescreen. The ground rumbled and thrashed with the explosion, sending the SG-1 team to their knees for safety. The horses within the canyon screamed in terror and ran for the opposite side, scrabbling about and looking for any escape.

When the dust settled, there was no more crevasse. The rock had settled into a massive pile that filled the space to about halfway up the rock wall. Pebbles and stones skittered down the rubble, and though it looked like the horses might still be able to climb out that way, they weren't going to do so easily.

O'Neill stood, shaking his head to try to clear the ringing in his ears. He pointed at Carter and Teal'c, then down to the Jaffa milling about in confusion. They nodded, Teal'c unslinging his staff and Carter pulling a Zat gun from a holster. They advanced to the lip of the canyon, training their weapons down at the horses.

Jackson said something, but had to repeat it twice over before O'Neill's ears cleared enough to understand him. "They don't have any staff harnesses," the scientist pointed out.

O'Neill shrugged. "Lucky us. Guess they saved them all for the fliers." He frowned and turned, peering up at the sky. "Speaking of which..."

After a few moments of searching the sky, they finally spotted the first pegasi flying back to the canyon. Pairs of ponies flanked captive Jaffa. None were wearing their harnesses, but O'Neill could see a few ponies who'd somehow managed to put them on midflight rather than just throwing them to the ground. The ponies let out cheers as they saw the trapped Jaffa, and directed their prisoners down into the canyon. The horse pegasi glided down sullenly to join their earthbound brethren, kept in the canyon by the steadily increasing guard of ponies.

Not all the ponies got away clean, O'Neill saw. Some of the fliers weren't escorting Jaffa, but wounded comrades sporting burn marks or other small wounds. Small wounds was all they were, though, and he could see even before Rainbow Dash flew down to his side that all the ponies that had gone up had come back down safely again.

The ponies wearing harnesses took up position around the canyon rim, while the others collected on the southern side with O'Neill. On the northern side, Applejack appeared at the top of the path leading down, followed closely by Winona and the rest of the ground team. They all filtered onto the canyon walls, cheering and chattering happily among themselves.

Twilight wasn't cheering, though. She frowned down at the horses within the canyon, then back up at O'Neill. "I...can't believe that worked," she admitted. "Spooking them like that? You said they were military. Shouldn't they have, I dunno, maintained discipline or something?"

The colonel scratched at the back of his neck and shared a look with Jackson. "I didn't say they were *good* military." He shrugged. "Anyway, I'm not about to question when a plan actually goes right for a change."

O'Neill unslung his P90, holding it casually in both hands. He walked to the edge of the canyon, staring down at the Jaffa. They were all breathing hard, but their panic had settled into a generally nervous unease. The cheering and chatter of the ponies -- there were so many that they fairly well carpeted the curved wall of the canyon -- eventually began to die down as they took notice of the human. Slowly, the Jaffa's attention was drawn horse by horse up to him as well.

He glanced around at all the silent horses, looking a bit uncomfortable, but cleared his throat. "Hey down there," he called. "Anyone hurt?" There was no response from the Jaffa; they simply stared up at him in dwindling panic and rising frustration and anger. He scowled at the lack of response. "I'll take that as a no. Look, which one of you is the commander?" He waved a hand, vaguely indicating all the horses. "I mean, you kind of...you all look alike."

Silence fell for several more seconds, until a sturdy-looking grey stallion stepped forward. O'Neill could just barely make out the mark of Epona that had been permanently tattooed on his flank in silver. The horse glared up at the human, and the deep-chested rumble of his voice rang off the walls. "I am An'dal, leader of the Ground cohort. What is it you want?"

O'Neill squatted down, resting his firearm casually against one knee. "You might have noticed you're a little trapped, An'dal. I've got a great firing position from up here, we've recovered half your staves, and I've got a

horde of little ponies up here who are more than a little upset you were planning to attack their friendly little town. Let's talk terms."

The horse bridled. "You may have us cornered, but we will not negotiate! We fight for our goddess Epona and to rescue our captive brother!" There was a rumble of agreement among the horses, more for the latter than for the former it seemed.

The colonel opened his mouth to respond, but movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He glanced up, squinting into the distance, then looked back down to An'dal. "Hold that thought for just a moment."

The ponies swiftly cleared a landing spot as the two pegasi O'Neill had seen touched down gracefully atop the canyon. The ponies bowed to Princess Celestia as she strode past them to the rim of the canyon, nearly opposite of O'Neill once more. Brind'l tucked his wings in gingerly, one of them still wrapped in white bandaging as he stayed in step beside her.

The Jaffa turned as the two horses approached, and O'Neill could feel the rising tension and defiance that had been filling the canyon dissipate almost immediately. An'dal's voice filled the canyon once more. "Brind'l! *First Prime!*" As one, the horses snapped to attention, standing straight and staring up at the two horses, specifically at Celestia, in wide-eyed amazement.

Brind'l spoke, shaking his head. "An'dal, Celestia is no longer First Prime. She has not been for thousands of years. There is no goddess to be First Prime to."

Each sentence Brind'l spoke sent larger and larger shocks through every one of the horses within the canyon, and cries of "Blasphemy!" arose from several. Brind'l snorted and stamped his hooves, voice rising over theirs. "Then where is she?" The horses fell silent, and he continued, "Epona *lied* to us, brothers! She is no more a god than you or me! She tricked us, used us, and sold us off as slaves! We have all lost family to her 'tithes' and 'sacrifices', and for what? To be sent into a thousand-year sleep, awakening in a world we hardly even know as our own, our families long since passed!"

He bowed his head in mute sorrow, then looked to the regal mare standing quietly beside him. "But it isn't a bad world. Princess Celestia has seen to that. The ponies here are free from the oppression and cruelty of a false god. They live their lives happily and in peace." He turned back to face An'dal. "Let us do the same."

The horses fell to muttering among themselves, but none openly rejected Brind'l's heresy this time. Celestia straightened, fanning her wings

out to their full length to draw their attention to her once more. "My friends, I don't ask you to renounce Epona right this instant." She smiled a little. "It would hardly be fair given your present situation. But my little ponies are not your enemies, and goddess or not, Epona has no control over Equestria any more. I ask you to stand down and cease hostilities. In return, I will be glad to grant you a plot of land to raise a new town, where you can live as free Equestrians. I've missed you, my friends. Let us live together in peace once more."

The horses stared among themselves, and a group of them formed around An'dal, conferring quietly. After a minute he stepped forward again. "And if we choose not to?"

O'Neill spoke up, causing the horses to twist around and look over their shoulders. "Then you go on a one-way trip through the gate to a planet I choose." His smile lacked anything like humor. "Trust me. This is the better deal."

Chapter 11

In the end, the Jaffa to a horse all decided to stay in Equestria. They gave their pledges of good conduct to Celestia, though Rainbow Dash couldn't help shouting out, "An' we're *keepin'* the staves, so don't you get any funny ideas!"

It took some time to get all the horses out of the canyon, but Teal'c threw down a rope and helped haul each earth horse up and over the rockslide. The pegasi flew out easily enough, although they gave the winged ponies a cautious look as the did so. Rainbow Dash looked more than a little pleased with herself as one horse with a black eye flinched away from her.

When the last of the Jaffa made his way carefully down the slippery slope of the rockslide, the entire horde of ponies and horses turned toward Ponyville, where those injured in the brief battle could be tended to. Several winged ponies flew back into the mountains to try to salvage some of the staves that had fallen during the air battle. Celestia's chariot arrived, and she and An'dal boarded together, much to the dismay of the guards who had to do the flying for both full-sized horses. They flew off, presumably to show An'dal where he could build the new Jaffa settlement.

SG-1 traveled south with Brind'l, heading toward the Jaffa's until-recently hidden base. Though he and Teal'c talked quietly, conversation was light during the march through the plains and into the mountains.

Brind'l led them through the mountain pass and out into the clearing Rainbow Dash had described. It was a large grassy patch of land surrounded on all sides by towering mountains, rising nearly vertically into the air. At the far end of the clearing stood a wide, circular entrance to a cave, torches illuminating the rock wall just inside. On either side of the cave's entrance stood two earth horses, both wearing the Ma'Tok staff harnesses.

They stiffened as they saw the humans, reaching for the triggers, but Brind'l stepped forward quickly. "Stand down. The fighting's over. Let them pass."

The guards gave each other a confused look, but nodded slowly. "Of course, Sky leader." They relaxed their stances and stepped forward as Brind'l approached them, talking quietly.

O'Neill strode past the horses blithely, the rest of his team in tow. They made their way down a curved, sloping tunnel wide enough for two of the horses to stand abreast. They emerged into a surprisingly large antechamber, hallways running off from each wall. The place was well lit given the age, though dust lay thick on everything but for the paths the Jaffa had trod in recent days.

O'Neill unslung his P90; the halls appeared to be empty, but there was no sense in being caught unaware. "All right," he said as he turned to his team. "Carter, Teal'c." He pointed down one hall. "Daniel, you're with me." The team nodded and split, heading in separate directions.

They checked room after room. Several were filled with artifacts and gaudy objects; the Goa'uld hoarded like dragons, but with less taste. Daniel would stop and peer in, then shake his head and move on. It wasn't until the very end of the hallway that Daniel's steps quickened, taking him into a room that appeared to have an ancient computer terminal covered in glyphs, as well as Goa'uld writing over all the walls. "This is it!" he said with no small amount of relief. "Give me some time to translate the writing."

"No problem. Do your thing." O'Neill paused by the doorway and raised the radio to his mouth, clicking it on. "Major, find anything?"

Carter's voice filtered back. "Yes sir, it looks like the armory, but it's been cleaned out. The Jaffa took everything they had."

"All right. Keep searching the base. Daniel found something, so we're sitting tight." Carter acknowledged the order, and O'Neill let the radio go.

Silence fell for a time while Daniel worked. O'Neill paced the room, looking at the glyphs on the walls. He didn't understand what any of them meant, but he'd had to pass the time like this before.

He'd completed one ambling circuit of the room when Daniel spoke. "Jack?" His tone was hesitant, and he didn't look up.

O'Neill glanced over. "Something wrong?"

Daniel paused for a moment, then said with rather more speed than usual, "You know I don't want to sleep with Twilight, right?"

Jack was suddenly very glad Daniel wasn't facing him. He bit down on the first five retorts that came to mind, and opted instead for a dry, "Never said you did."

Daniel let out a sigh and paused in his work, reaching up to rub at his mouth. "It's just...I feel happy here, Jack. Content. Even more so when I'm with Twi. It's not...it's not *that* kind of thing, it's just..." He waved a hand in frustration. "I don't know. Companionship, I guess. We like being in each other's company. Just being around her and the other ponies makes me happy. And there's so much interesting stuff here to learn. I mean, the

magic alone is incredible. I'll be honest, I'm starting to hate the thought of leaving." He twitched his head to the side as if to look over his shoulder at O'Neill, and O'Neill could see that his face was beet red. It had cost him to make that admission, particularly given their conversation at the campfire. "If Celestia wanted to ally with Earth, it wouldn't be an issue. As it is..."

O'Neill let out a long breath and rubbed at his face with one hand. "Look, Daniel, it's not like I don't know what you're talking about. I'm feeling it too. That kind of worries me, but there it is." His voice firmed. "But I have a duty I'm not going to abandon. If you want to walk away from SG-1, that's your choice. But consider what you'll be leaving behind. You won't ever get to explore new worlds again, new cultures. Earth still has enemies out there. Can you just leave them to prey on peaceful worlds? *Worlds*, Daniel, not just Equestria." He paused for a moment, letting out a heavy breath before walking up beside Daniel. "And you'd be leaving your friends behind. The ponies value friendship a lot. I've seen it in everything they do. Do you think Twilight's gonna want you to abandon your friends for her?"

Jackson stared at the terminal in front of him pensively. "I don't know," he finally sighed.

O'Neill was silent for a beat before dropping a hand on Jackson's shoulder. "Well. Whatever you decide, I'll support you. You've earned that."

Jackson let out a long, shaky breath and nodded. O'Neill stepped away, and the linguist turned back to the terminal, resuming his work. They didn't speak again, but the atmosphere lacked tension.

Eventually Carter and Teal'c came down the corridor to them. "We checked the rest of the base," Carter reported. "There's not much here other than in those rooms we passed. Celestia's probably going to want to reclaim all that."

"Fine by me," O'Neill said. "We can't take it with us anyway."

Jackson let out a satisfied sound then, straightening from the terminal. "Found it." He stepped aside so they could see and called up the symbol. It was angular, in the familiar style of the Stargate glyphs, and comprised what appeared to be two diamonds and a triangle, though one edge was missing from each shape.

They frowned at it for a long moment before Carter brightened. "Wings and a horn," she said, smiling. "I guess the Ancients knew something Epona didn't."

They left the base. Brind'l and the guards were gone, the staves the guards had held lying on the ground. Teal'c hefted them over his shoulder, and SG-1 left for Ponyville.

When SG-1 finally returned to their camp in late afternoon, they found Twilight, her friends, and Princess Celestia there. Their gear had all been packed away neatly and loaded up onto a cart beside Applejack, along with the recovered weaponry the Jaffa had carried. The ponies all let out cheers as the humans entered the clearing, with Pinkie Pie throwing confetti into the air and blowing on one of those little rolled paper noisemakers. "It's time for a party!" she shouted, waving her stubby little hooves in the air, and the ponies all agreed enthusiastically.

Princess Celestia smiled, but shook her head. "I'm afraid we must be going. Our friends need to go home." The young ponies let out sounds of disappointment that would have been heartbreaking had O'Neill had a heart, which he very firmly reminded himself he did not. The princess laughed quietly. "You can all come along and say goodbye, of course."

Teal'c dropped his own staves back into the cart and helped Applejack slide into the harness. Twilight picked up Spike and settled him on her back, and despite SG-1's weariness from the constant travel that day they set out for the old ruined castle.

Thankfully, Celestia knew the way, and the trip was much shorter than the humans' first day in Equestria. The sun was just beginning to set as they reached the ruins, Luna's moon starting its nightly sweep over the sky. The bridge proved to be a little tricky as the cart rumbled over it, but it held steady.

Soon enough all the humans and ponies stood in the large gate room. Someone had added lamps to the corners of the room, providing just enough light to see by. They stood in front of the giant Stargate for a moment, the ponies staring up at it with wide eyes.

Twilight spoke first, voice awed. "This is a door between worlds. Amazing." She looked up, frowning up at her mentor. "Are you sure it has to be closed? We could do so much with it."

Celestia shook her head, and her voice, though gentle, brooked no dissent. "We can use it, certainly. But it isn't secure. There are so many beings out there who can use it too. Equestria isn't ready for that." Twilight sighed and nodded.

The princess turned to face the Stargate, lifting her chin regally as she drew her focus and will upon the great gate. Her horn began to glow, softly at first, but swiftly increasing in brightness. The light, O'Neill realized, was pure sunlight. The horn lit the room as though they were not underground and it was not dusk, but high noon in the middle of summer. The light kept on growing, intensifying, and soon everyone in the room had to turn away or be blinded. There was nothing in the room *but* light now,

warm and white and all-encompassing, as though they were in the very middle of the sun.

The instant the light became so intense that it turned agonizing, it faded. In less than a second, the light from Celestia's horn vanished, leaving only the dim glow of the lamps in the corners. Everyone spent a moment blinking the glare out of their eyes, and when they could see again, Celestia stood where she had been, though her shoulders and head sagged a little with what must have been a monumental effort to re-align the gate with the network.

Jackson removed his glasses and rubbed at his eyes, groaning a little with the pain, but quickly enough put them back and moved to the DHD with Carter. "The symbols have changed!" he reported. "I recognize these!"

"Great," O'Neill muttered. "So turn it on already."

Rather than answering, Jackson began to dial. The chevrons on the gate lit up, clamping into place as he entered the sequence for Earth's address. O'Neill glanced at Celestia and the ponies. "Ladies, step to the side here, please."

They did, and as Jackson triumphantly entered the seventh symbol for Equestria, the Stargate flared to life, the familiar vortex bursting out of the watery portal. All the ponies yelped in surprise, skittering behind O'Neill and staring in pure awe. Pinkie Pie whispered, "It's so *pretty*..."

O'Neill immediately pulled out his GDO. Garage Door Opener. Gotta love the techies. He glanced aside at Carter and muttered, "Here goes," and punched in his code.

A moment later his radio crackled to life. "SG-1, this is SGC. Do you copy? SG-1, this is SGC." It was General Hammond, and O'Neill never thought he'd be so happy to hear the old man's voice.

He raised the radio to his mouth. "SGC, this is O'Neill," he replied. "Sorry about the delay getting home." His voice turned dry. "I knew we should've taken that left turn at Albuquerque."

It was as good as a password. "Good to hear you again, Colonel. Do not enter the gate yet," Hammond warned. "We disabled your code after two days. We're dropping the iris now." A brief pause, and then, "Iris is down. Come on home and tell us all about it."

"Roger that."

O'Neill let the radio settle back, and the humans all turned to face the ponies. The two groups stood wordlessly like that for a moment, then the ponies let out cries and rushed the humans. Three knelt to meet them; Pinkie Pie dove into Teal'c's arms, wailing, "I wanted to throw you a paaaartyyyy!"

This time, the big man did not look apprehensive as he hugged her. "Then you must have one in my name when you return home." She sniffed, eyes wide, and nodded vigorously at him with a broad smile.

Spike leapt into Carter's arms and she squeezed the little dragon tight, ruffling his spines. Rarity approached her, smiling. "If you ever do find your way back here, my dear, we will be so happy to see you again." Spike flushed as he saw Rarity and wriggled out of Carter's arms, trying to put on a serious adult face as the women spoke quietly to each other.

Daniel, naturally, knelt to catch Twilight, and the two hugged fiercely, unashamedly, speaking in whispers too low for O'Neill to catch. The little pony squeezed her eyes shut, a tear glistening on her cheek as she shook her head in response to his words.

O'Neill remained standing through all this, determined not to get swept away by emotion. He got swept away instead by a cyan bullet that shot up from the ground to strike his chest, and he found feathery wings and short hooves wrapped around his neck. "You really gotta go, Colonel?" Rainbow Dash asked, trying to sound gruff and failing miserably.

He lifted his hands, paused, then gave her a quick, tight hug before gently pulling her away. "Yeah, kid. It's time." He gave her another swift smile. "You did a great job today." She beamed as she hovered in place, and a thought struck him. He reached for his neck, sliding fingers under the chain necklace that held his dog tags. He'd been wearing them so long he'd nearly forgotten about them, but he pulled them off now and looped the chain over her head.

The tags clinked as they settled around her neck. She looked down at them for a moment, squinting at the tiny writing, then sucked in a sharp breath and looked back up to him with a wide smile. She came to attention midair, saluting smartly. He returned it.

"Well, Jack," came a voice from below. "This is goodbye, I guess." Applejack tilted her head, smiling sadly up at him. Fluttershy stood next to her, looking up at him shyly.

He let out a quiet sigh and gave in, kneeling to let them embrace him. They crowded into his arms, though due to maturity and shyness both were a good bit more reserved than Dash had been, and stepped away after a quick goodbye.

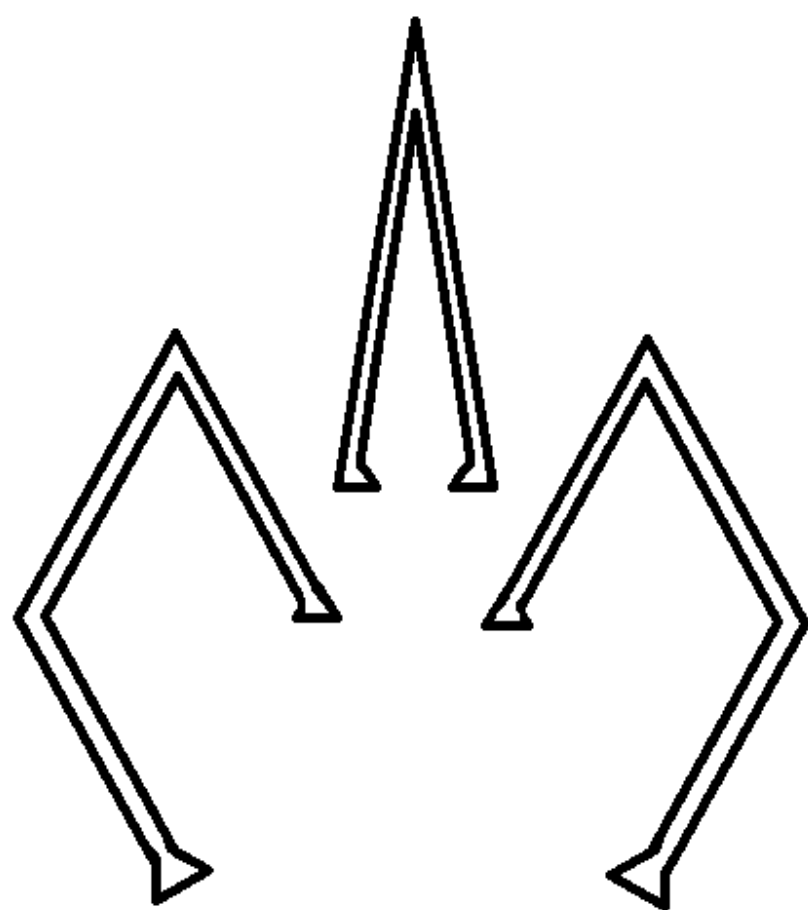
Celestia spoke up gently. "All right, my little ponies. It's time." Reluctantly, the ponies moved away from the humans, and O'Neill noticed a red flower tucked behind Twilight's ear. He shot Daniel a look, but the other man just shrugged and smiled a little.

“Well, your Princessness,” O’Neill drawled, “I wanna thank you for your help. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find us.” Celestia only smiled and nodded.

With that, SG-1 turned. O’Neill glanced aside at his teammates. “If you want to change your minds, now’s the time.” Carter and Jackson shook their heads mutely. Teal’c, on the other hand, said, “Undomesticated equines could not remove me from your side, Colonel O’Neill.”

O’Neill eyed the Jaffa. “Funny.” With that, the team began to move up the ramp, approaching the coruscating light of the Stargate. The ponies shouted out their goodbyes, but the humans kept moving forward. It was easier that way.

One by one, they all entered the portal. Jackson didn’t even hesitate as he plunged through. O’Neill stepped up to it last. He gratefully sank into the gate, stepping off the world of Equestria.



Epilogue

The door to the library opened, and Twilight Sparkle stepped wearily through, kicking it shut behind her. It had been a very long day, both physically and emotionally draining. Pinkie Pie would surely be throwing a party tomorrow in honor of their new friends, here and gone so quickly, but for now all Twilight wanted to do was rest and maybe mope a little. She felt she'd earned it, after what Colonel O'Neill and Princess Celestia had put her through.

She got Spike settled into bed first. The little guy had fallen asleep halfway back to Ponyville, snoozing gently on her back. It was just as well; she didn't trust herself to talk even to him right now. She missed Daniel terribly already, and the thought of him sent a sharp pang of loneliness coursing through her. She squeezed her eyes shut until it faded, letting out a small pained sigh as it did.

The soft covers on her own bed looked very attractive, but there was one small thing to take care of first. She padded to the table where a small, empty vase sat. A little bit of magic lifted a nearby pitcher of water, filling the vase. To her surprise, even that short burst of effort left her panting; she *must* be weary if even that was difficult. She quickly set the pitcher down, taking several deep breaths before focusing on the flower in her hair.

She bit her lip, gathering her focus slowly. It was even smaller than the pitcher, but she still had a hard time taking hold of it. She eventually managed it, and the little flower floated gently off her ear. She held it in front of her, studying it curiously as she hadn't had time before now to do so. It was certainly pretty, but somewhat unusual: a flat flower with seven wide, red petals. Daniel said he'd picked it on the way back to Ponyville after the battle.

At the thought of his name, the same pang shot through her again, and this time, with her focusing so on her magic, it triggered a sharp headache as well. She flinched at the pain, her concentration breaking. The flower tumbled to the floor in front of her, and she let out a small cry. "Please don't be ruined please don't be ruined," she whispered fervently, leaning down to pick it up with her mouth...and paused.

The flower had fallen upside down, the short stem poking up. When her face neared it, she noticed something nearly obscured by the dim lighting of the library. On the underside of each broad petal, there was a

marking drawn in black. She had *seen* these markings before, briefly; when Celestia had temporarily opened the Stargate. The cutie mark pictographs on the gate had transformed into these weird little symbols she now saw before her.

She stared blankly for several seconds. Then all at once, the meaning hit her, and she had to blink the sudden tears away. She didn't fight the wide grin that accompanied them, though. "Daniel, you clever, *clever* man," she giggled softly, and went to get a blank parchment and quill.

~Incursion~

Chapter 1

Every pony in Equestria knew that the Everfree Forest could be a dangerous place. Animals of all kinds, some not even known to the ponies, lurked within the trees, and on particularly dark and unpleasant nights the plants themselves seemed to move with evil intent.

Certainly, as Twilight Sparkle plunged headlong through the dark forest, the trees reached out for her, their dry branches blocking her path no matter which way she turned. The sharp ends whipped against her sides and face, a couple striking hard enough to draw lines of blood. Even when they didn't, they scored her purple hide sharply enough to promise welts tomorrow.

Except for a few gasped cries at particularly savage slashes, Twilight Sparkle ignored them entirely. She had to keep moving. If she didn't, she wouldn't have to worry about what happened tomorrow. She dove through the grasping branches with reckless abandon, spurred by the sounds she could still hear far behind her.

Though she was far from a woodspany, she had been in the Everfree Forest a few times and was able to keep the sounds she made to a minimum despite the desperate pace. Hooves landed on soft grass where possible rather than dry twigs. Her small frame let her push through the branches that clawed at her without breaking them, and brush offered paths that she could slip through with only the bare whisper of leaves.

The creatures that pursued her did not bother with such subtlety. The racket they made was monstrous, their enormous forms breaking through the branches that reached ineffectually for them. The forest was filled with the crackling reports of shattered wood and hiss of trampled leaves, punctuated occasionally by the roar of her pursuers' fury as they unleashed it in her direction or at innocent creatures startled out of their homes. Their

location was obvious to every creature in the forest, and it was just as obvious that they did not care. Twilight *ran*.

A large tree root loomed up ahead, the thick wood nearly as tall as Twilight herself. She timed her steps, gathered her legs underneath, and leaped clear over the root, her outstretched hooves just barely clearing it.

As she landed, Twilight broke through the dense foliage and found herself barrelling toward the river that cut the forest in half. She yelped in surprise, hooves skittering along the dirt of the riverbank as she fought to come to a halt. She came within a foot of stumbling straight into the water before she regained control, leaving shallow trenches of dug earth in her wake.

Twilight's chest heaved with exertion as she stared helplessly around in the hope an idea might be waiting there for her. Absolutely nothing sprang to attention; she would just have to brave the current and hope that she had enough lead on her pursuers to make it across.

She would be an awfully easy target if they found her in the middle of the river.

Twilight paced to the edge of the river, swallowing nervously as she eyed the dark waters. There was simply no more time to be indecisive. Nothing for it, then. She trotted back several paces to get a good running start and took a deep, steadying breath.

Digging her hooves into the soft dirt, she propelled herself forward, galloping to the very edge of the river. She tensed, ready to leap...and a deep shadow raced up to the surface of the water, breaking it and sending a wave of water in all directions.

The surprise caught Twilight flat-footed and she stumbled with a cry, planting her face in the ground. She shook her head hard to clear it and regained her feet as swiftly as she could, eyes darting up to see what had blocked her way...and her gaze kept going up, forcing her to crane her neck and dance back several steps to get a proper look.

An enormous serpent stood there in the river, his slender body rising high into the air. Purple scales glowed with a gentle iridescence in the moonlight, water sleeting off them effortlessly. A mane of fiery orange hair

topped his head in sharp contrast to his scales, and despite the water it looked sleek and voluminous, clearly lovingly cared for. A curious moustache capped the end of his long, square jaws; though one side was the same color as his hair, the other was a curling deep purple.

In other, less dire circumstances, Twilight might have agreed with her friend Rarity that the serpent looked simply fabulous. After all, Rarity had donated her lovely tail to fix that moustache not so long ago.

As it was, Twilight just let out a breathless laugh of relief. "Steven!"

The serpent broke out into a wide smile, craning his neck down to get a better look at the dwarfed pony. "Well if it isn't little Twilight Sparkle!" Despite the serpent's size and potential intimidation factor – which, admittedly, was somewhat hampered by the expertly styled hair – his voice was smooth and gentlemanly. He dipped into a sweeping, courtly bow. "It's been quite a *while* since you and your friends came to visit me! How *is* that wonderful pony Rarity doing?"

The relief in Twilight's expression faded as Steven chattered on. "Steven..."

"You know, I still haven't had a chance to thank her for the *fabulous* scarf she gave me for the holidays!" Steven ran a hand down his chest to demonstrate, though the complete lack of a chill in the air meant he was going without.

"Steven."

"It was so thoughtful of her! You know, the waters really do get so *cold* in the winter time..."

"Steven!"

"And the design is simply to *die* for!"

"STEVEN!" Twilight couldn't keep the frustration from her voice, surprising herself with the volume. She darted a nervous glance over her shoulder, eyes flicking back and forth into the forest behind her.

Luckily, it managed to startle Steven as well, and he blinked down at her, a hand to his chest. "Dear me. No need to shout."

Twilight winced and turned her attention back to him, looking briefly ashamed. She hated to be rude to such a friendly creature, but right now...

"Steven, I'd really love to stay and chat with you, but there's no time! I'm being chased, and I need your help!"

Steven Magnet reared back in surprise, his eyes wide. "Chased? By whom, dear girl?" Even as he spoke, he cocked his head, apparently only now hearing the sounds of pursuit in the near distance.

Twilight shook her head, expression strained. "No time," she repeated. "It's bad. Please!"

Steven glanced over her head toward the source of the noise. His expression firmed as he appeared to come to a decision, and nodded sharply. "Naturally, my dear! Anything for a lady!" With that, his tail rose out of the water and rested on the bank beside the pony.

Twilight leaped up, but had to crouch low to keep her balance as he lifted her into the air. As he swung her out over the water to the far bank, he continued, "I shall face these ruffians and drive them back! It is the least I can do as a gentleserpent and friend!"

Twilight shot him a grateful smile as she bounded down onto the safety of the far bank, but worry quickly replaced it as a roar erupted from the forest very near the river. "Please be careful!" she called up to him. "They're very dangerous!"

Steven waved a dismissive hand. "Don't you worry about me, dear Twilight! Now go! They shall not pass!"

The pony bit her lip, but there was little she could do. She had to regain her lead as quickly as she could. With a last worried look up at the serpent, she turned from the river and bolted into the thick brush of the forest once more.

A bare minute later, as Twilight wound her way through the ever-thickening trees, the entire forest shook with a vast, leonine roar of challenge. The pony squeaked in surprise and nearly planted her face in the ground again as she tripped over a tree root.

She pulled herself back up, stumbling as swiftly as she could back into her frantic pace, but threw a wide-eyed look over her shoulder. Was that

Steven? It sounded nothing like him, but it had to be. Hope surged in her breast; perhaps the dandy serpent really could drive her pursuers away.

Twilight barely had time to vault a fallen tree before that hope splintered. Several roars, which had sounded loud before but were now high-pitched and short in comparison to Steven, rang out in rapid succession. There was another earth-shuddering bellow from Steven, but at this distance she couldn't tell if it was a battle cry or a sound of pain.

Silence fell. For several tense minutes, the only sounds she could hear were those of her own passage as well as her thudding heartbeat. She galloped along, ears straining and flicking to try to hear something, anything. When they finally caught the all-too-familiar sounds of her pursuers, she let out an involuntary cry, heart sinking to the pit of her stomach. She squeezed her eyes shut for a minute to push away the tears.

Her sense of friendship told her to turn around to help Steven. Forget the consequences. She nearly did, her steps becoming uncertain as she thought about it. But...as much as she wished she could help him, this run through the forest was bigger than either of them. If she stopped now, so many more would get hurt. The only way to put things right was ahead, not behind.

The forest stretched out endlessly in front of her, brush and trees giving way to trees and brush. Twilight's chest began to burn with the effort, her breath coming in ragged, gulping gasps. She knew the tricks to doing well in a race, but that was only friendly competition. Pacing oneself just wasn't an option here, and though the young bookworm had been more active in the past year than ever before, she was no athlete. The stitch in her side hurt with a steadily building fury, and she wanted nothing more than to find a cool spot to curl up in and sleep for the next two days. She huffed out a determined snort, pushing those thoughts away, and pressed on.

An eternity of pain and fear later, Twilight's hooves thudded along open ground as the dense growth of the forest parted without warning. Ahead she saw her goal, at long last: the ruined castle of the sister princesses. It lay on the other side of a deep chasm, but a sturdy rope bridge lay just ahead of her. Twilight gasped out another desperate laugh of relief and

found a small bit of extra speed, her tired hooves carrying her over the bridge and to the other side.

As she reached the other side, she slowed, looking back over her shoulder at the bridge and the stone blocks to which it was tied. Maybe she could untie it. That would certainly slow them down. But the bridge had seen plenty of use since she had first come to Ponyville, and the rope was strong and secure. She couldn't cut it with hoof or horn, and untying it would take too much time and effort. She was already so weary from her run through the forest, and she would need every last drop of strength in the castle. She let out a hiss of frustration and turned to trot into the ruins. The time Steven bought her would have to be enough.

It didn't take long to find the doorway she sought. A tower on the edge of the castle remained standing, though time had caused the roof and patches of the walls to crumble away, leaving gaping holes through which moonlight ran. She stepped through one of those now, the tower entrance blocked by a pile of rubble, and trotted to the deep shadows at the far edge of the barren room. Had she not already been here once before, she wouldn't have found it at all. Perhaps that would delay the pursuers even more. A pony could hope.

Twilight found the open doorway within the shadows, itself a gaping hole leading into complete blackness. She paused, staring into that darkness, then took a deep breath and concentrated on her horn. It lit up swiftly, a gentle glow emanating from the tip and pushing the shadows away. It revealed a stairway leading down into the gloom. Needing to see those steps was the reason she had called light, and certainly *not* because that blackness looked creepy and foreboding. Not at all. She swallowed once, then steeled herself and trod down the stairs as swiftly as she dared.

The flight wasn't long, and she quickly found herself in a wide room, her soft unicorn's light spreading out in a circular pool around her. It illuminated the lichen-covered stone beneath her hooves, worn smooth over the ages and covered with a fine layer of dust. Ahead of her, a small pedestal rose from the stone floor, squat and circular. Beyond that, the pool of light faded, but there was just enough to make out the presence of another shape at the far end of the room. Twilight stepped forward cautiously, and the light fell across the object in the dark. It was a giant ring of dark stone.

The ring stood on end, its circular curves stretching high overhead. Six or seven sufficiently acrobatic ponies could stand on each others' backs and walk through the ring without trouble. Seven markers lined the ring, each sculpted into the shape of a chevron in hard angles. Between the markers, simple carvings decorated the ring: while the outer ring bore normal decorative lines, the inner ring was marked with a series of pictographs, each one looking very much like a pony's cutie mark.

At a glance, Twilight could make out a lightning bolt, a bushel of apples, and a cluster of stars very much like the ones that graced her own flank. The entire ring sat nestled within a dais, a series of shallow steps leading up, inviting her to walk through. The entire construct was just a worked piece of stone, she knew, but it still gave off an aura of infinite serenity and patience. It had stood here for countless millennia, and would stand for countless more.

Twilight glanced at the pedestal that stood very close to her now. She could see the same cutie mark symbols arrayed in rings around it as well. They looked natural to her, but this was not an unfamiliar device. Other symbols, alien ones, should be there. And she had only seen the spell that would retrieve them performed once before. She huffed out a breath, squaring her shoulders. "All right," she said to herself, putting more confidence behind the words than she really felt. "Let's do this."

She planted her feet firmly on the stone and lowered her head, pointing her horn toward the ring. Her simple light faded, stranding the room in total blackness, but only for a brief second. As soon as it vanished, it reappeared, far stronger than the gentle light before. Infused within that bright glow was more powerful magic, and she sent it questing out to touch the ring. She felt...nothing. It stood there, implacable and unyielding as a rock.

Gritting her teeth and trying to ignore the weariness in her limbs and the pain of her self-inflicted wounds, Twilight poured more will into her magic. The glow about her horn intensified, and the walls and ceiling of the room lit up as brightly as the stone floor, each as bare and timeworn as the next. Still she could not feel the energy she knew must be within the ring.

Twilight took a deep breath and thrust her horn forward. She wasn't sure how much magic the spell needed, but it had strained even Princess

Celestia's abilities when Twilight saw her perform it. Twilight would never dare to compare her own talents to her mentor's, but the princess wasn't here now -- the stray thought nearly made Twilight's will buckle, but she kept herself steady -- while Twilight was. She would have to be enough.

The surge of determination coursed through the young pony's body, flowing up into her horn with a fierce intensity. The light around the horn burst into overglow, the room suddenly as bright as daytime. Twilight's eyes were squeezed hard in furious concentration, every inch of her being directed through her horn toward the ancient stone ring.

And suddenly, she felt it. A tiny trace of power flowed out from the pedestal in front of her toward the ring, only barely detectable even with the flood of magic Twilight needed to even see it. The ring soaked up that power steadily, running it in an endless loop. Twilight could feel where a connection to something beyond the ring should exist, but there was none. The ring was an island, disconnected from the network it should reside on. Celestia had said it was 'out of phase', like the switch on a train track...

There! The network did lay beyond the ring, but barely noticeable. It was as if Twilight could only see it by looking out of the corner of her mind's eye. Tricky, but she understood now what she had to do. Her horn glowed ever more intensely, painfully bright even through her tightly-closed eyelids. She shaped her magic appropriately. It was oddly simple, really, requiring more brute force than finesse, but dear Celestia did it need a whole lot of force! Sweat dripped down her forehead, rolling down to her chin in rivulets, but she paid it barely any mind. She finally settled her magic against the lines of energy snaking through the ring and, for lack of a better word, *shoved*.

Nothing in the physical world moved, but she could feel the energy somehow shift, twisting and redirecting itself in ways that made her head spin if she tried to follow it. She tenaciously kept up the pressure with the force of her magic, and she felt the energies begin to ponderously align with those beyond the ring.

Between one second and the next, the slow, heavy weight of the energy sped up. With a sudden jolt, the two ends of the link snapped together, sending out a thunderous resonance that did not touch the room but instead ran straight down her horn and through her tired body. She let out a cry and collapsed to the ground, legs splayed awkwardly about her. The

light of her horn vanished abruptly, taking the magic with it. The room fell into blackness once more.

Twilight groaned, shifting listlessly on the ground. Forget sleeping for the next two days; she was ready to sleep for a month. The ringing in her body slowly eased, and with its departure her awareness of her surroundings returned. She tried to ignore it, wanting instead to just lay there and rest. Just for fifteen minutes or so. But a sound from outside caught her attention, and her blood ran cold as she recognized shouting. They were in the ruins!

Panic lent her strength, and she wobbled back onto her hooves. It took more effort this time, but she called forth her unicorn's light once more. It was the soft glow it had been before, but she winced at the light and squinted through it to the pedestal. There were no more rainbows, no more cupcakes. Instead, a completely alien script covered its keys, harsh and angular designs that only vaguely appeared to be pictures. Her eyes darted over the myriad pictographs frantically, searching for familiar ones. She had studied the symbols given to her constantly, burning them into her memory for just such a night as this one. In her fear and weariness, she almost couldn't remember what she was looking for.

She lifted her hooves onto the pedestal and took a slow, steady breath. Trying to move quickly wouldn't help if it got her nowhere. Focusing inward, she sorted through her memory until seven particular symbols stood out in her mind. Holding the images there, she scanned the pedestal methodically, firmly ignoring the sound of movement outside getting nearer. The symbols finally began to make sense to her, and in short order she found the ones she needed. She jabbed at them with her hoof, and one by one, the keys she pressed as well as the chevrons on the great ring lit up with a dull but steady light.

As she entered the last symbol in the sequence, the sounds of footsteps approached. They were on the stairs. Twilight struck the dome in the middle of the pedestal to activate it, and the Stargate awoke.

Brilliant blue-white light surged from the inside of the stone ring, rushing to fill the void within the circle. As the light met itself, it expanded, pouring out into the room in a powerful vortex that looked nothing so much like a sideways spout of water. Twilight flinched away, shielding her eyes from

the intensity of the light. But as quickly as it flooded the room, the light stabilized, pulling back into a flat surface. The roar that had accompanied the surge of energy died away, and all that was left appeared to be a placid pool of water, the surface rippling gently in some unknown wind.

The stillness that followed the activation of the gate was short-lived. A deep voice roared from behind her, shouting out words in a guttural language Twilight did not understand, but the tone of the command was clear enough: *Halt!* Twilight whirled around, eyes wide, as three humans made their way down the steps and into the gate room.

At least, two of them looked human. The two figures on the sides wore black and grey armor, flexible material covering where the metal plates did not to allow for ease of movement while maintaining protection. Supple, decorative leather covered the armor on their upper chests and shoulders, giving them an imposing ceremonial look. Their heads were the only visible parts of their body, the hair shaved down to stubble and black makeup ringing their eyes. On their foreheads, the shape of a horse's head in profile stood out visibly.

The creature in the center looked very much like the others. Two legs, two arms, same armor. But rather than a human's head, the armor seamlessly rose up into a sleek black neck, the metal segmented like an insect's carapace. Atop the neck was the head of not a pony, but a full-sized horse, and an evil one at that. Eyes glowed a fiery red, sharply contrasting against the black metal, and the horse's lips were pulled back in a fixed contemptuous sneer.

There was one more similarity. All three carried battle staves. As they entered the room, they leveled said staves at Twilight. The bulbous end on the center figure's staff split and pulled back, revealing a blaster muzzle. He shouted something again, his voice deep and amplified, made all the more menacing by the echo within the chamber.

The pony didn't wait around to see what would happen. She knew all too well. She drew back and spun on her rear hooves, launching herself toward the Stargate. The figure loosed a blast of energy which flew through the air, but Twilight was just quick enough and it splashed harmlessly into the stone at her feet. The horse cursed and shouted, and all three opened fire.

If Twilight had been any less tired, she would have tried to dodge. As it was, she just tried to outrun the blasts. It shouldn't have worked, but the sort-of humans didn't lead their shots well, and she was a small, dim target. The blasts exploded behind and around her, but none struck home.

As she ran for the gate, she clenched her jaw and poured her remaining strength into one last spell. Once more, her horn shone brightly, and as she raced up the steps toward the coruscating blue light, the spell coalesced in her mind. She threw herself at the Stargate, but just before her outstretched horn touched the light, she released the spell, vanishing with a burst and sparkle of light. Everything went black.

When Twilight came back to herself, she was in midair and falling forward. She tumbled into the ground, but it wasn't stone any longer. Metal clanged noisily as her hooves slammed onto it and she staggered forward, just barely keeping her balance. Light seared into her eyes, the lit room blinding after the relative dark. Alarms were wailing all around, red lights flashing in time to the ear-splitting cacophony.

A series of metallic clacks in front of her cut through the noise, and her attention was drawn to several humans ringed around the base of the ramp she stood on. Nearly all of them had guns pointed at her, and by their posture and expressions were about a second away from opening fire. She tried to stay as still as she possibly could. Behind her, she heard two loud thumps, but didn't dare turn to see what made them.

"Hold your fire!"

The voice cracked through the air as one of the humans raised his hand as a signal to the others. Those with guns didn't lower them, but did relax enough that Twilight could too. She turned her attention to the one who'd spoken, who was standing with three others at the base of the ramp.

He was a reasonably tall man -- though all humans were tall to her -- with stark, weatherworn features, and though she had been too distracted by the noise and light and rather lethal weaponry pointed at her to notice faces among all the green uniforms, she recognized him now. She also recognized the shorter woman standing beside him, as well as the tall dark-

skinned man on his other side who was settling his own battle staff back to rest on the ground. She knew them, and relief flooded her at the sight of them, but she was already looking to the fourth person in the group.

The man, younger than the others but looking no less confident in his camo and tactical gear, stepped forward from where he stood by his tall friend, peering through his glasses at her. "Twilight?"

The pony's face split into a wide but weary smile. "Daniel!" She tried to take a step toward him, but her legs had evidently decided to stop working without her permission. She fell forward, the slope of the ramp carrying her into a tumble.

She might have continued that undignified and fairly painful slide to the bottom, but Daniel Jackson reached her in two quick strides, kneeling to catch her in his arms. "Easy there, Twilight. I've got you."

Twilight smiled dizzily up at him. "Okie dokie lokie." With that, she relaxed for the first time all night, slumping against him into unconsciousness. The world went blissfully black and quiet.

Chapter 2

Being the best of the best of the Stargate program, SG-1 was used to getting the risky missions. Even routine survey trips could hold surprises that, after so many years, ceased to be surprising. Sometimes the inhabitants of a world disagreed -- violently -- with SG-1's presence on their land. Sometimes a seemingly-innocent scientist turned out to have a well-intentioned but flawed scheme that would threaten the entire sector. Sometimes a planet thought to be uninhabited held a Jaffa encampment, forcing a retreat through the Stargate that dumped SG-1 on a planet of cute, happy, intelligent ponies. If there was a way to derail a routine mission, they'd seen it.

Even so, few missions were derailed while standing in front of the Stargate before Command even had a chance to dial out.

After Twilight Sparkle's unexpected appearance and subsequent collapse in the gate room, Daniel had scooped her up and fairly bolted out of the gate room. The rest of the team had to double-time it to avoid getting locked out of the elevator to the infirmary level. Now, they watched through the window as Doctor Fraiser tended to Twilight within.

General Hammond turned away from the window to face the team. Three turned their attention to Hammond, while Daniel continued watching the doctor work with calm but worried eyes.

"So," began the general in a conversational tone. None of them missed the dangerous glint in his eye. "Would someone like to tell me exactly how that horse--"

"Pony, sir," O'Neill, who never cared much for danger, corrected helpfully.

Hammond shot him a sharp glare, and O'Neill shut up. "-how that *Equestrian* got past our iris?"

O'Neill kept silent and tried to appear as if he were wise for doing so. Carter spoke up instead. "Teleportation, sir. If you'll remember, we covered

it in our debriefing after we came back from Equestria. Twilight Sparkle, that pony in there," she nodded at the window, "showed an ability to teleport over short distances. When she appeared in the gate room, she was several meters in front of the gate itself." She shrugged. "We already know radio signals can pass through the gate. It's how our GDOs communicate with SGC. I don't know the exact method by which she teleports, but temporarily converting to some form of energy would amount to the same thing as a radio wave."

Hammond grunted. "Yes, I remember your report, Major. Is this a common ability?"

"Not so far as we saw, General. We weren't on planet for long, but I got the impression Twilight's abilities were pretty unusual."

The general shook his head. "I hope you're right. I do not like the idea of a race that can get past the iris without our permission. The Tollans were able to and the Goa'uld very nearly invaded Earth by exploiting it." He eyed each team member in turn, though only Carter and Teal'c were looking directly at him. "Even if the Equestrians are as peaceful and friendly as your report suggested, they still present a risk. Particularly since your report also suggests that they are behind us on the technology curve and as such are more vulnerable."

Teal'c spoke, his rumbling voice calm and neutral as always. "I must point out, General Hammond, that the ponies were strong enough to throw off the rule of a Goa'uld once before."

"Yes, they did," Hammond responded impatiently. "They caught one lesser System Lord who was not expecting a revolt by surprise. You all know just as well as I do just how much trouble the Goa'uld can cause when they're expecting hostile resistance."

Daniel stirred, and the conversation fell silent as Doctor Fraiser stepped out of the infirmary room. She sighed. "General, I want it on the record that I'm a doctor, not a vet."

O'Neill tilted his head, peering at Fraiser. "How long have you been waiting to use that line?"

Fraiser only arched an eyebrow at him in reply. Hammond ignored O'Neill entirely. "Duly noted, Doctor. Now what can you tell us?"

The doctor folded her arms. "Her injuries are far less severe than her fainting implied. Mostly several minor scratches and some bruising. The worst injury I found is a bump on her head, but the swelling has already begun to fade. I don't know anything about Equestrian physiology and only a little about horses in general, but I checked out what I could and everything seems nominal. She's in no danger that I can tell. Really, it looks like she collapsed from simple sheer exhaustion. I've cleaned and bandaged her wounds, but beyond that there's not much more I can do." She shrugged a bit. "Right now, all she really needs is rest. Once she wakes up and I can finish checking her over, she's free to go."

"Thank you, Doctor." Fraiser acknowledged the general's dismissal, disappearing back into the infirmary. Hammond nodded sharply once to SG-1. "Your current mission is postponed until further notice. You're the only humans our visitor has had contact with. I'd much rather not deal with an alien with her kinds of abilities being confused and frightened in a strange place."

O'Neill looked disappointed. "And I was really looking forward to exploring Desert Planet Number...what are we up to now?"

Teal'c gravely answered, "Forty-seven, Colonel O'Neill."

"Thank you. I'm sure going to miss Desert Planet Number 47."

Hammond gave the two an unamused look, then turned and strode off down the hallway. Daniel went to the infirmary door and had his hand on the handle when Carter spoke up, sounding amused. "You really think she needs someone to watch over her when Doctor Fraiser told us she was just sleeping?"

Daniel shrugged. "I think the general's right. I think it'd be bad if she woke up without a friendly face around. Besides, even if you only needed first aid and sleep, wouldn't you want someone looking after you?"

Carter smiled and lifted her hands in acquiescence. O'Neill waved a hand. "Knock yourself out. Just let us know when she wakes up."

Daniel smiled a little and nodded, opening the door and disappearing inside the infirmary. The other members of SG-1 wandered off down the hallway to enjoy their downtime while they could.

Twilight awoke slowly, blinking sleep out of her eyes. She lay in bed and stared groggily up at the white ceiling for several heartbeats, luxuriating in that drifting, mellow state of awareness that lay somewhere between a dream and wakefulness. She felt sore but rested, like she'd helped Applejack out on the farm the day before.

Well, whatever she'd done, it felt so good to just lay in bed. Five more minutes, then. She pulled the white covers tighter around herself and snuggled down into the deliciously soft pillow.

Wait. White ceiling? White covers?

With the realization that she wasn't back home in Ponyville, her memories came rushing back into her like a freight train. Panicked, she shot up into a sitting position. That brought pain with it, but she paid it little mind. She looked around wildly, seeing the room but not really comprehending it. The last thing she'd seen before waking up here was... "Daniel?!" The word rasped in her too-dry throat.

"Easy, easy, Twilight. I'm here. Just relax." She turned to find Daniel sitting at the edge of the bed, one hand reaching to her shoulder to steady her. He looked like he'd just woken up too, with mussed hair and no glasses on his face.

She did relax after a moment, leaning against his arm for support as she sorted through the events of the night before. "...So I..." A fit of coughing cut her off.

Daniel leaned over and grabbed a glass of water off the small table by the bed. He held it up to her, and she saw a straw already in it. "Here. Drink slowly."

She tried, though the water was gone all too quickly anyway. She shifted until she could sit up on the bed properly, wincing as sore muscles began

to complain here and there. She noticed several bandages covering her sides, the tape pulling a little as she moved. "So I did it? I guess I'm on Earth, huh?"

Daniel leaned back in his seat and grinned, spreading a hand out to either side. "Welcome to Stargate Command, buried underneath Cheyenne Mountain in beautiful Colorado."

"Huh." The pony frowned. "I...have no idea where that is."

"Exactly, which is why I'm telling you. They're big on secrets around here." Daniel picked up his glasses, sliding them back onto his face and stifling a yawn. He studied her for a moment, grinning. "I don't think I saw you with your hair frizzed out like that back in Equestria."

Twilight blinked, her cheeks coloring. One hoof lifted to brush ineffectually at her hair. "Um, yeah. Bedhead. Sorry."

"Don't be. It looks good on you."

The pony blushed harder and smiled weakly at the compliment. A thought distracted her as she felt her mane and she asked, "How long *have* I been asleep?"

Daniel frowned at that and pulled his sleeve back, checking his watch. "It's been...16 hours. I guess you really needed your sleep."

Twilight's eyes widened. "Sixteen...? No! Oh, no! Oh no oh no!" The words kept repeating themselves as she pushed at the covers, trying to climb down off the bed. "I have to go! I didn't mean to be gone so long!"

"Woah, woah!" Daniel caught her around the chest, her hooves flailing ineffectually at the air in frustration. "Twilight, slow down! Think!" Gradually, the pony's panic died, and she looked up at him with worried eyes. He ran a hand over her back, trying to offer some comfort. "Look, I know something bad's happened, but you've got to approach it rationally. Is anything planned to happen soon?"

Twilight bit her lip and tried to think. Finally, she had to shake her head. "Not...that I can think of."

Daniel spread his hands. "So either it's already happened, or it hasn't happened yet and we've got time. We want to help, but there's no sense rushing around like headless chickens."

Twilight's ears drooped and she sighed, nodding. "Right. But...we can't waste time. I thought I'd be back in Equestria in an hour or something."

Doctor Fraiser entered then, pushing the privacy curtain aside. "I see the patient's awake." She pursed her lips. "More like heard. Are you getting her riled up, Doctor Jackson?"

Daniel stood up. "Uh, Twilight, this is Doctor Fraiser. She needs to check you over, then you should be okay to leave. Right Doctor?"

Fraiser smiled at Twilight, though a little tentative. "Right. It shouldn't take long." She sighed, looking at Daniel. "I've treated aliens before. Even the non-human ones. But..."

"She's a talking pony. I know. It takes a little getting used to." He looked back to Twilight, who bristled a little at the cavalier description. "I'll be right outside, Twilight. I need to let Colonel O'Neill know you're awake anyway." She nodded shortly and he left, stepping out into the hallway.

Doctor Fraiser's smile warmed. "Twilight, is it? I just need to take a few tests and make sure you're unharmed. It won't hurt and won't take too long." Twilight essayed a smile in return and the doctor settled in.

Daniel stood up as Twilight swung the infirmary door open, the doorknob glowing lightly with her magic. She looked considerably better. All the bandages had been removed, though there were still faint lines marking where the branches had scored her. Her hair was neat and straight once more; Doctor Fraiser must have found a brush for her. She gave him a brief smile and they started down the hallway together.

"So Doctor Fraiser told me she's the Chief Medical Officer," Twilight remarked as they walked. "You've got quite a few doctors and nurses here, right?"

Daniel nodded. "Enough medical staff to look after the whole base. Why do you ask?"

They rounded a corner, and Twilight shrugged. "Shouldn't the Chief Anything be too busy to deal with first aid? I wasn't hurt that bad."

"Offworlders get special treatment. Call it a courtesy."

They reached the elevator and Daniel hit the button. After a short wait, the doors opened to reveal Colonel O'Neill and a young soldier Daniel had seen once or twice around the base before. O'Neill simply lifted his head in greeting, but the soldier stared at Twilight a little wide-eyed as she and Daniel stepped inside.

The pony didn't seem to notice, instead smiling up at O'Neill. "Hello again Colonel."

"Twilight. You're looking awake."

The smile faded, and she bit her lip. "Yeah. Daniel said I was out of it for a while. I hope there's still time to save everypony."

Daniel's eyebrows climbed, and he looked to O'Neill. "Everypony?" he echoed.

O'Neill shook his head. "Save it for the briefing room." He gave Daniel a mildly disgusted look. "I know why she says it, but don't you start in with that 'everypony' stuff too."

The doors opened and the two men and pony stepped out. O'Neill paused and held his hand against the elevator door, preventing it from closing behind him. He met the soldier's eyes. "Relax, Corporal. You act like you never seen a talking pony before."

The corporal blinked at O'Neill, then shook himself and offered a quick salute. O'Neill waved him off and let the doors close. He turned to find Twilight glaring up at him, and for once Daniel wasn't spared the ire either.

"Why do you all keep calling me a 'talking pony'?" she demanded, stomping a hoof down on the floor.

O'Neill started walking, and Twilight had to trot to keep pace with him. "Well, it's accurate." The pony snorted in response, annoyed.

Daniel fell into step on the other side of Twilight. "It's not meant to be an insult, Twi. Not everyone at SGC goes offworld, and most of the offworlders who do show up here are either humans or humanoid. You're the first, uh..." he shrugged. "Well, the first equinoid they've seen."

Twilight cocked her head, giving him a skeptical look. "*Equinoid?*"

Daniel waved a hand. "Sure. A being with equine characteristics. Anyway, it gives them a handle on the situation." He smiled briefly. "Sorry, I didn't realize it bothered you that much."

The pony huffed out another breath, rolling her eyes. "I feel like a lab specimen," she muttered.

The trio walked into the briefing room. Carter and Teal'c were there already, sitting in their usual seats on either side of the table. General Hammond stood at the far end of the table, hands gripping the back of the chair in front of him.

Hammond waved them in. "About time you two showed up." He turned his attention to Twilight and gave her a polite nod. "Miss Sparkle, glad to see you back on your feet. Welcome to Earth. My name is General Hammond. I am the commanding officer in charge of Stargate Command." He motioned to the chair at the other end of the table. "Doctor Jackson tells me you're feeling pressed for time, so why don't we get right down to business? Tell us why you're here."

Daniel held the chair out for Twilight, and she hopped into it, settling down on her haunches. He and O'Neill took their own seats, as did General Hammond. The pony looked around the table, trading quick greetings with Carter and Teal'c.

As the humans watched her silently, any good mood she had began to slip away. She let out a long breath, placing her hooves on the table. "Right." She stared at her hooves intently before speaking, apparently deciding how to begin. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"Epona has returned."

Everyone sat up straight, staring hard at Twilight. Teal'c growled a curse under his breath. O'Neill glanced at him. "I hear you."

Daniel leaned forward. "You're certain?"

Twilight bit her lip. "I never saw her for myself, but what I did see convinced me of it."

General Hammond settled back in his chair. "I think you'd better give us the whole story, Miss Sparkle. Tell us everything you know."

Twilight nodded, but fell silent for a long minute as she gathered her thoughts. Finally, she said, "It began about a day ago." She paused, then said with a touch of frustration, "No, I guess it'd be almost two now, wouldn't it?"

Shaking her head, she continued. "Spike and I were in Canterlot -- that's our capital," she explained on seeing their puzzled expressions. She gave them a bleak half-smile. "You didn't hang around long enough to get to know us very well. Canterlot's where Princess Celestia and Princess Luna live. It's where I used to live before moving to Ponyville. I still have a library there, though most of my books are in Ponyville now. I'd gone to visit Princess Celestia, but when the attack came she was dealing with some administrative issues. I was in my library, catching up on some studying..."

"Spiii-iiiike!" Twilight trotted through the library, letting out a huff of annoyance. "Now where *is* that dragon?" The library was in some disarray; several books were stacked in sloppy piles on the floor, and though she hadn't had a chance to look at the shelved books she was certain many of them weren't alphabetically ordered.

The door bumped open and Spike staggered in, his entire upper body hidden by the wavering tower of books that reached above his spiny head. He managed to avoid tripping over any other books, though, and found a clear spot to set down the new stack. "Whew!" He turned to Twilight,

leaning against the books and wiping his forehead with the back of an arm. "This place is kind of a mess, Twilight."

The pony rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I noticed." She sighed helplessly as she stared around her. "I *told* Princess Celestia anypony was welcome to use the library as long as they *didn't* harm the books."

"Well, you can't say they haven't listened," Spike replied cheerfully. He picked up a couple of books, peering at the titles to compare them. "Everything looks like it's still in great shape. It's just the organization that took a beating." He slid the books he held onto two seemingly-random spots on two different shelves. "But don't worry, we'll have this place cleaned up before dinner!"

Twilight gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks, Spike. Say, you haven't found *Perilous Parrots of the Peleponys Peninsula* yet, have you?"

Spike frowned and dug into a pile, eventually coming up with a book. "Is *Huffy Hawks of Hornduras* close enough?"

"No," she called over her shoulder. She wrapped a couple books in magic, floating them up to peer at each before setting them aside.

"*Feisty Falcons of Fillydelphia?*"

"No."

"*Edgy Eagles of the Everfree Forest?*"

Twilight shook her head irritably. "No!" She paused, adding, "But keep that around for later. Come on, Spike, you haven't let me down before!"

"I haven't had to go running all over Canterlot to retrieve your books before!" Spike finished putting away the stack he'd brought in and stretched forcefully before heading for the door. "I'll make one more round and see if I can find any more. A few ponies weren't home when I called, but they might be in now. And don't worry, I'll keep an eye out for *Parrots*."

"Thanks, Spike," Twilight called after him. She turned back to the books as he shut the door, huffing out a breath that blew her bangs up for a moment. "I guess I'll keep cleaning up in he-"

The only warning she got was a brilliant flash of light outside the large picture window. She barely had time to register it before tremors shook the tower, sending her staggering. The air filled with the roar of stressed stone and metal, and clouds of debris were visible outside. Dimly, she could hear the sounds of ponies shouting and screaming far below.

Another flash rang the tower's bells again, and Twilight lost her footing. She tripped over a small pile of books and fell, sprawling on the floor between two larger stacks. She heard Spike call her name outside the door; the little dragon sounded terrified. Before she could answer or even move, the tower shook again, two violent tremors in rapid succession rippling up the stonework.

The bookshelf nearest Twilight was mostly empty in the bottom two-thirds, but the upper third was packed full of books. The top-heavy shelf wobbled with the shuddering, and on the last strike it overbalanced. The shelf fell with a sickening grace down toward Twilight, who could only look up in confusion and horror, one hoof raised to shield her face.

As the bookshelf fell, so did the books, sliding out one by one to pile on and around Twilight. One particularly heavy tome fell corner-down, striking her just above one ear. Pain-filled stars burst through her head, and everything fell away into blackness.

(Twilight lifted a hoof to gingerly touch the fading bump, wincing. "I just realized how many times I've been knocked unconscious in the last few days. I'm surprised Doctor Fraiser didn't find anything else wrong with me.")

She cleared her throat, folding her hooves on the briefing table once more. "In any case, I don't know how long I was out. But when I came to...")

"Twilight! Twi! Twilight Sparkle, *please* wake up!"

Dimly, Twilight woke to the sound of Spike calling her name. She peered around through squinted eyes until she found a purple and green blur

standing in front of her. It had a claw on her shoulder and was shaking her roughly.

She raised her head, smiling dizzily. "M'right here, Spike...thought y'were gonna go get more books..."

Spike threw himself at her, hugging her around the neck. "You're awake! You scared me half to death, Twi." He backed away and grabbed her forehooves, tugging insistently. "C'mon, help me get you out of here!"

Twilight blinked owlshly at him, then twisted her neck. She winced at a sudden stab of pain, but fought it off as her senses slowly returned to her. She could see now why he was pulling; she was buried under a mound of books that had covered her when the bookshelf fell. The shelf itself would have come down on top of her, but the stacks that had already been on the floor propped it up, keeping it a few inches above her head.

"Okay...okay, Spike, hang on." She concentrated, settling her magic on the books around her. She gently shoved them away, and with a little difficulty was able to crawl out from under the shelf.

Twilight wobbled for a second, then settled her feet more firmly on the floor. She looked up as her vision cleared and gasped, staring out the window.

Smoke rose from the main halls of Canterlot in the near distance; thick, billowing clouds that looked like they might have been from fires. Though she could see some wreckage, there was far less of it than the tremors earlier had suggested. Come to think of it, the tower was still standing, too, which was a good sign.

But more important than the buildings themselves was the scene playing out before them. On the Canterlot grounds sat a giant...*thing*. She might have thought it another building but for the fact it had not been there before. It hunkered down on the grass, looking nothing so much like a giant, angular beetle, its slate grey color and sleek shape at odds with the cheerful white architecture around it. A small window sat where its head might be, which was the only indication it wasn't an actual creature. That, and the large opening at the foot of the thing, which had a ramp leading up...

...on which stood ponies. Their colorful forms stood out against the grey backdrop of the ramp. They trod up into the beetle in pairs, every one of them hanging their heads low and looking despondent. They were watched over by two enormous figures standing guard at the head of the ramp and at intervals along the lines of ponies, which stretched out a little distance onto the grass before the beetle. The figures looked human, but had black equine heads that gleamed in the sunlight. Each of them carried a staff.

Twilight knew those staves. She could recognize the weapons for what they were. When they first met, Daniel Jackson and his friends had told her they were of Jaffa make. These must be Jaffa, then: the kind Daniel knew, not the horses who mounted a swiftly-aborted attack on Ponyville so many months ago.

She flicked her eyes down along the line, and froze. The scene had been distressing enough, seeing the ponies herded into the beetle, but what she saw at the end made her blood run cold.

Princess Celestia stood there, following the ponies in front of her. Her wings were tucked back against her sides, a thin metal band wrapping around them to prevent her from extending them. Shackles graced her slender legs, keeping her from taking more than short, prim steps. Two Jaffa kept pace on either side, holding staves pointed directly at the princess. No, Twilight realized, not staves. These were shorter and thicker, but their purpose was not immediately obvious. The princess was not broken, though; her mane and tail flowed in the wind and she held her head straight and proud as she always had, though her expression was a mask of grave sadness.

Twilight took all this in in the space of two seconds. She choked out a cry, not turning from the window. "Spike? What's...what happening?"

"Equestria is under attack." The voice was decidedly *not* Spike's. It was feminine and young, but confident and melodious. Twilight had not heard that voice often, but she recognized it and spun around in surprise.

Princess Luna strode into Twilight's library, framed by the open door at her back. Though the mare was a fair bit shorter than her sister Celestia, she looked no less imposing. She moved with perfectly confident grace, wings tucking back smoothly as she approached Twilight and Spike. Her

expression was a calm mask, but Twilight saw her eyes flick to the terrible scene outside, a small wince crossing her features.

Twilight offered a hesitant bow. "Princess Luna, what are you doing here? What's going on?"

Luna turned her full attention back to Twilight, her face smoothing over into neutrality once more. "I'm getting you out of here. Canterlot isn't safe any more." She began to trot to the windows encircling the library, checking out each one warily.

Twilight followed, frowning. "Out? But we have to go help! Princess Celestia-"

"I know." The words cracked like a whip, cutting Twilight off. The princess did not turn to face Twilight, still making the rounds. "Shall we three attack those guards? I counted at least ten of them, all armed. How long do you think we would last?"

Twilight's frown deepened. "But...you're *Princess Luna*. I know how strong you and Princess Celestia both are. Surely we could..."

This time, Luna did not interrupt, but turned from her search to give Twilight a steady, piercing look until the younger pony's voice trailed away. "Do you truly think that Celestia would not act if she could? Do you think she would allow her -- our -- subjects to be taken prisoner if she were capable of preventing it?"

Twilight didn't have an answer, and Luna shook her head. "No more questions. Not now. Either we leave now or we are captured." She nodded out one small window. "They're coming this way."

Twilight's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. "All right. How do we get out?"

Luna trotted past Twilight, heading for the door. "Veils."

Twilight blinked. "But I don't know how to turn myself invisible!"

The princess stopped and looked over her shoulder at Twilight, mild surprise on her face. "You don't? What *has* Celestia been teaching you?" She waved a hoof before Twilight could answer. "No, don't answer."

The unicorn bristled. "Well, why don't *you* teach me?" she asked, a hint of acid in her voice.

This earned her a skeptical look. "You think we have time for a lesson now?"

Twilight waved her own hoof at Luna, showing more confidence than she really felt at the moment. "You demonstrate, I'll follow."

Luna considered her for a moment more, then nodded. "You get one shot. If you can't, grab my tail and I'll cover all three of us." With that, Luna's horn began to glow a deep purple, darker than her own hide, as she drew her magic together. She shaped the magic carefully, giving Twilight time to draw in her own magic and watch Luna work. After a few seconds of concentration, there was a brief flare and Luna vanished from sight.

Twilight's eyes narrowed. "Spike, get on my back." The dragon obeyed as Twilight focused on the new spell, tongue sticking out between her lips in concentration as she tried to copy Luna. It took twice as long as Luna's had, but finally it coalesced into a satisfying bright flash. The world dimmed as the veil bent light around her, but there was still more than enough to see her surroundings.

Spike shifted on her back. "Cooool."

Luna's voice drifted from where the princess had stood before, pleasant surprise warming it. "Well done, Twilight. I see why Tia likes you."

Twilight blushed at the praise, but before she could speak the sound of footsteps on the landing outside could be heard. Luna hissed, "The shed on the far side of the transport ship! Meet me there!" Then there was no more opportunity to talk as the doorway darkened.

Two Jaffa strode into the library, staves held at the ready. As with the guards below, these two bore equine heads, and the red eyes stared coldly at the disheveled room. One barked a command to the other in a language

Twilight didn't recognize, and they spread out, circling the room on either side. They pushed book stacks aside with their staves as they walked, checking for any place a pony might be hiding. They didn't see the ponies standing in the middle of the library at all.

The door was left wide open, and Twilight began to ease her way toward it. She placed her hooves carefully, stepping lightly and trying to avoid slipping on any books. She hoped Luna was doing the same, otherwise she'd find herself bumping into the princess's tail end quickly. Who knew what would happen to the veil then?

It took an aching long time to reach the door, and Twilight was treated to the infuriating sight of the Jaffa knocking over the few books and statues in the library that *hadn't* already been on the floor. It took every ounce of effort not to whirl on them and give them a piece of her mind. Spike resettled himself carefully on Twilight's back and hugged her neck, maybe guessing at what she was thinking. She felt her anger ebb away under that reassuring touch.

Eventually, the pair reached the door, and though they kept their steps careful they were able to quicken their pace once outside. They made it down the stairs and onto the ground, taking a short breather underneath.

Spike whispered in Twilight's ear. "Luna said transport ship. You think she means the big beetle?"

Twilight shrugged, careful not to disturb Spike. "It must be. What else is there? Besides, I think I know the shed she meant." She eased around the stairs, trying to peer through the gloom of the veil. "Easiest way is to go behind the ship, I think. Long way around, but it gets us the furthest from the guards."

Spike let out a sigh. "It's your show, Twi."

Twilight moved away from the tower at a steady trot. The grass muffled her hooves nicely, but if she moved any faster she could feel the veil slipping away from her. Maybe with practice she could stay perfectly invisible at a full gallop, but right now it was all she could do just to keep it around them both.

Twilight kept to the cover of Canterlot buildings to aid her concealment. She wasn't sure how well bright sunlight could penetrate the veil, but she certainly didn't want to take the chance. It treated her to a less-than-pleasant look at the damage the attack had caused. There were no toppled buildings, surprisingly, but many were cracked, and at least one tower's parapet had shattered and fallen to the ground in a crumbled heap. Twilight only thanked her lucky stars she saw no ponies among the wreckage.

Halfway around the transport ship, Twilight lurked in a tower's shadow for a moment and prepared to dart for the safety of the next building. As she stepped out into the open, Spike hissed in her ear and pulled hard on her mane. The pony bit down on a yelp and halted in place. She turned to glare at Spike, and in doing so saw the reason he'd brought her up short.

Two more Jaffa strode between the two buildings, heading directly for them.

Twilight froze, pouring everything she had into the veil. If she lost her grip on it now, they were done for. The two could only watch as the Jaffa bore down on them, apparently heading for the ship. Ten feet...five feet...three feet...two, one...

...and the two walked right around Twilight. One passed so close in front of her that she could have touched its leg with her horn. The other passed behind her, and she felt the wind of its passage stir her tail.

The two continued toward the ship a way and Twilight was almost ready to breathe a sigh of relief when the one who'd walked behind her stopped, turning to stare directly at her. She caught her breath, eyes wide and staring back into those evil red points of light.

The other walked on for a pace or two before realizing its partner had stopped. It turned and growled something, but didn't appear to notice Twilight, only looking at its partner. The first one responded, but didn't look away from Twilight. She didn't understand them, but could imagine the conversation well enough: *What is it? I don't know, but I felt something there.*

The tableau held for what seemed like an interminable amount of time to Twilight. Then a light smattering of dust drifted down into her field of vision

from above, the breeze blowing it into her face. She wrinkled her nose, sudden panic racing through her brain, as well as a brush of irritation. If something as cliché as a *sneeze* gave her away, she might as well hang it up right now.

Something about the way the dust interacted with the veil caused the attentive Jaffa to take a step forward, its posture suddenly wary and even more certain there was something there. Its partner, however, took better note of its surroundings. It shouted a warning and reached out with a hand, jerking its partner back just as a sudden crack of broken stone pierced the air and several tons of balcony plummeted to the earth.

Debris and dust fell in an earth-shuddering pile not two feet away from Twilight and Spike, and the pony gave up any thought of holding still. She threw herself backward, just barely clearing the ground as a particularly large chunk of stone slammed into the ground where she had just been standing.

She slumped to the ground, still holding onto the veil for all she was worth, trying to figure out how to silently gasp in a breath and not start choking on the dust that filled the area between her and the Jaffa. She settled for burying her face in the grass, which cut the dust just enough to let her take several steady breaths.

As the debris settled into a heap, she could hear shouting from the two Jaffa. They stayed where they were, apparently arguing with each other, until a booming voice from nearer the ship called out to them. The argument cut off abruptly, and from what Twilight could hear they were moving away from the rubble.

The pony got to her feet and checked over her shoulder. "Spike?" she whispered.

"That was way too close," he hissed. "Can we just get out of here?"

"Don't have to tell me twice," she murmured, pulling herself to her hooves.

She wasted no more time in crossing the field, and soon found the shed she was looking for without further incident. It was a small, unassuming little building set where the Canterlot gardeners stored their tools and other

equipment. It was within sight of the transport ship, but Twilight could see that none of the guards were looking its way as she approached. The shed's door was slightly ajar, and she nudged it aside as delicately as she could before slipping inside.

The shed was dark, only a trickle of light seeping in from the door and a small window at the back. She wound her way through the rakes and shovels and seed bags, but the space wasn't very big and it was empty of any ponies. She called out softly, "Princess Luna?"

"About time you two got here." The voice came from directly beside Twilight, and she nearly jumped out of her skin in surprise. The veil dropped away and there was Luna, amusement written all over her face at the sound of Twilight's yelp and stumble.

Twilight finally released her hold on her own veil, letting the magic fall away. As she did, the shed brightened up significantly, and the trickle of dim light became a warm glow that gave the shed a more comfortable, friendly look. "Not funny," she grumped at Luna.

"I beg to differ," the princess said, a sparkle in her eye. "Come, let's not waste any more time." She put action to words by walking to the very back of the shed where a space on the floor had been kept clear of any tools or bags. She lowered her horn and began to work another spell through it. She didn't slow the spell down for Twilight's sake, and it completed swiftly. A seam appeared in the floor and it popped open slightly; a trap door. Luna held it open with one hoof. "We're going down."

Twilight found stairs under the door and, after a moment's hesitation, started down them carefully. The narrow passageway was slightly steeper than she'd like, with stone walls and not a single light to be found. The stairs stretched into blackness.

She bit her lip, but Luna was right behind her. She called up her unicorn's light, a soft blue-white glow that spread through the passage out to a gratifying distance, and walked down far enough that Luna could follow her and close the door.

They began walking down the stairs, which curled around in a wide circle. "What is this, Princess?" Twilight asked.

"I thought it was obvious," came Luna's reply. She sounded a good deal more relaxed now that the immediate danger was past.

Twilight snorted lightly. "Yes, it's a secret passage. But...where does it go? Why is it here? I spent most of my life in Canterlot and I never knew about this!"

Luna sighed. "My sister is a wonderful pony. She guides with a gentle hoof, trusting in everypony to do what is right." Her voice turned a little wry. "I prefer to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. This is one such preparation. The tunnel will come out at the base of the cliff, and from there it is a short run into the forest and away from seeking eyes. I sent every pony I could reach this way. There were far fewer than I would have hoped, I'm afraid."

Twilight was silent for a time. "Princess Luna...please tell me what happened. You seem to know what's going on."

It took several minutes for Luna to respond. "Canterlot was struck by fire from the sky."

"That's...poetic."

"But accurate enough. Bolts of energy, each one powerful enough to tear apart anything it struck. We weren't the only ones, either. Manehattan and Fillydelphia were both attacked as well." She sighed. "I fear for them."

A chill ran across Twilight's spine. "Ponyville! Was Ponyville hit?"

"No, it wasn't. Our attackers were concerned with subduing the biggest cities from orbit." Twilight's relief was short-lived as Luna continued in a clinical tone. "I expect they'll sweep through the smaller towns like Ponyville and Appleloosa on foot."

"After attacking us from orbit, their ground troops landed and began rounding up everypony they could find. And they came for Tia and me specifically." The detachment bled away into anger and bitterness at the last.

Spike, who was turned around so he could see Luna, leaned forward. "Um, Princess...how *did* you escape?"

Luna nickered out a laugh, still with that twinge of bitterness. "I have been home for over a year now, and still those pompous aristocrats won't talk to me. Tia must meet with them alone and listen to their troubles that are troubling for nopony but themselves. Then she meets with me and we talk about any important issues that came up." The bitterness left her voice, replaced by undisguised warmth. "My sister and I understand each other better now that...than we used to. When she said she wanted us to rule together, she meant it and I am forever grateful to her." She sighed. "But she can't control anypony else, and they are skittish as newborn foals around me."

Twilight and Spike both remained silent as Luna talked. It was clear that despite the trouble Equestria was facing that set her on edge, she was enjoying the chance to talk to somepony other than Celestia.

The princess cleared her throat, apparently realizing she was drifting. "But as to your question. I was resting in my chambers. Our attackers went straight for the great hall where Tia was receiving the noble foals. I saw them enter the hall from my window." She shook her head, soft hair whispering against the stone. "If I went to Tia's aid, we would both be captured right now. She would have wanted me to instead save every pony I could. Especially you, Twilight Sparkle. So I did my best to do just that."

Twilight blushed a little at that. "Oh. Thank you, Princess." She frowned, and when she spoke next she couldn't keep the worry out of her voice and didn't really try. "What will happen to Princess Celestia and the captured ponies?"

"There, I think, we don't have to worry too much. Our attackers can be deadly, but they tend not to kill out of hand. The ponies will either be imprisoned or put to work. Tia is probably the safest of us all right now."

Twilight blinked, incredulous. "Imprisonment? *Slave labor*? Forgive me, Princess, but that sounds like plenty to worry about!"

Luna remained placid. "As long as there is life, there is hope. I don't intend to let them remain prisoners for long, Twilight."

Twilight just shook her head. "I believe you, Princess. I just hope we can." She asked the next a little hesitantly. "Those soldiers...were who I think they were, weren't they?"

"Jaffa." The word came out flat and more than a little cold, confirming Twilight's fear. "And if their armor is anything to go by, then...Epona is leading them."

Twilight shivered. "I remember the story Princess Celestia told us. She's really back?"

"Perhaps it's another who shares her obsession with horses. But I know of no other who wants Tia and me alive."

On that note, the trio fell silent as they made their way down the rest of the stairs. Eventually, the tunnel led them out to the base of the cliff, just as Luna had said. They made the short run into the woods without being spotted, and only then did they stop for a rest.

"Princess, how safe are the Canterlot ponies?" Twilight was sitting on her haunches next to a tree with Spike snoozing lightly on the ground beside her.

Luna tilted her head from where she sat in mirror to Twilight. "Safe enough. No pony knew the location until I sent them through the passage, so the Jaffa can't get the location from those they captured."

Twilight peered at her. "I have to admit I'm surprised at how many bases you've covered, Princess."

Luna flicked a wing in idle dismissal, but she smiled. "Please, Twilight. I'm not as young as I look. I've had time to think about all this."

"Right. I guess it's easy to forget that." Twilight stood, stretching her limbs out. "If you don't mind then, Princess, I want to get back to Ponyville as quickly as I can. I need to make sure my friends are safe." She nudged Spike gently and he woke, rubbing his eyes.

Luna rose too, stretching out her wings before folding them back. "Very well. The safehouse isn't too far from Ponyville in any case. But we'll need to start forming plans on how to rescue those captured. I think Tia will be safe, but time is not on our side."

Spike climbed up onto Twilight's back, and she nodded. "All right, Princess. Let's not waste time, then."

The journey from Canterlot to Ponyville by air normally took about 30 minutes. Walking along the road, just shy of two hours. But forging a path through the only-partially-tamed forests and hills between Canterlot and Ponyville while avoiding random but frequent patrols? That required the better part of a day.

Twilight and Luna spent most of that time discussing their options. They couldn't start working on solid plans until they knew what resources they could call on. Naturally, the topic of the original Jaffa horses and SG-1 came up. Twilight demurred at first, but Luna eventually got the full story out of her. Luna of course knew about the Stargate and what had happened the last time it was activated, but only from Celestia's perspective. She seemed very interested to know what Twilight had to say about it.

Twilight concluded the tale with a hesitant, "And...I think I know how to contact them."

Luna paused from where she had been able to push through a particularly thick bush. She turned wide eyes on Twilight. "How..." She put two and two together and her eyes narrowed, lips splitting into a conspiratorial grin. "You *watched* Tia open and close the gate, didn't you."

Twilight couldn't meet her eyes, but she smiled weakly and nodded. "Yeah. I think I can do it."

Luna stared a second longer, then let out a wicked little laugh and shook her head. "I hope my dear sister knew what she was doing when she took you under her wing. You are going to be quite the hoofful."

Before she could say anything further, there was a crack of leaves and twigs somewhere ahead of them. All three immediately crouched down

behind the brush Luna had been about to go through. They each found an opening in the leaves and peered through.

A Jaffa patrol had come into view. One horsehead and two humans were walking in their direction, all holding readied staves. They looked alert, but did not move as though they'd heard anything unusual. There was nowhere for the ponies to run; any movement would make noise enough to attract the Jaffa's attention, and the light from attempting another veil would draw them just as quickly.

There was only one way out Twilight could see. She motioned close to both her friends -- she felt she could count Luna among that number now -- and whispered as softly as she could. "Spike, please stay with the Princess. When I run, give them a minute to chase me. You two go on into Ponyville and then to the safehouse."

Spike began to protest, but Luna touched his shoulder with a gentle hoof and he quieted, though still looking none too happy. Twilight gave him a reassuring smile. "I know what I'm doing. I think. I'll return with help as soon as I can."

She glanced back in the patrol's direction, took a steadying breath, then burst from the brush, racing past the patrol as fast as her four legs would carry her. She shrieked, high and loud, the sound filled with all the fright she could load into it. The Jaffa were caught off-guard, and it took a second of them watching her go before the horsehead barked out a command to the others. With that, all three took off after Twilight, chasing her into the Everfree Forest and away from Luna and Spike.

"And they chased me," Twilight finished, still looking down at her hooves. "They even fought their way through a friend who put himself in their way to try to slow them down. The Jaffa were at the gate when I teleported through. But they couldn't stop me, and...well, here I am." She gave the humans around the table a tentative smile.

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Colonel O'Neill turned in his chair to look at General Hammond. "So when do we go?"

Twilight gave a start at that, and she turned puzzled eyes to Daniel. He raised his own eyebrows and shrugged, but smiled. Though O'Neill had been instrumental in stopping the attack on Ponyville before it began last time, he had gone about his business with a bad grace, at least in Twilight's eyes. That he was the first to speak up in her favor was a welcome surprise.

Twilight's rising hope began to fade as Hammond held up a hand to O'Neill. "One thing at a time, Colonel." He folded his hands on the table, fixing Twilight with a steady gaze. "The most immediate thing I want to know is how the devil did you know Earth's address?"

Four pairs of eyes -- two human, one Jaffa, and one pony -- silently turned to look at Daniel. He looked around, blinking a couple times before turning to Hammond. "It was a precaution. At the time, I didn't know Equestria's address, so after Celestia locked their gate I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to find it again. I figured there was a better chance we'd re-establish a connection if one of the ponies knew our address."

Hammond frowned at Daniel. "And this wasn't in your debriefing report," he spread his hands, "why, exactly?"

Daniel shrugged and scratched at his neck. "I, uh. I figured it wouldn't come up." Carter snorted at that.

Hammond grunted. "All right. Let me see if I understand the situation properly. This Goa'uld Epona used to control the planet two or three thousand years ago. Two beings who are somehow still alive today chased her off-planet; this Celestia and Luna who led the Equestrians from that point on. Now the Goa'uld is back, and she has an army of Jaffa which she's using to capture every intelligent being she can." Twilight nodded mutely, sinking down lower into her chair.

"She intends to subjugate the planet and make Celestia watch." Teal'c turned steady eyes on Hammond. "We cannot permit this, General."

O'Neill jumped back in. "Teal'c's right. And even setting aside the fact that kicking Goa'uld ass is our general policy, you said it yourself earlier, General. If the Goa'uld could enslave these guys, they could use them

against us. I know I'd give a lot to have winged magical allies, and I sure wouldn't want them for enemies."

The briefing room fell silent as General Hammond considered the situation. Finally, he allowed, "I can see a few good reasons for kicking the Goa'uld off the planet." He leaned forward, catching Twilight's eyes directly. "But I don't much appreciate your Princess Celestia slamming the door on us the last time. I'm sure she had her reasons, but if I send my people to aid yours, then I expect something in return."

Twilight's ears folded back and she wilted a bit. "I'm not sure I can promise anything, General..."

Hammond sat back, waving his hand. "I just want to meet her. When all's said and done, she can come here for a visit. We'll extend every courtesy to her. You have my word on that."

"I can't tell Princess Celestia what to do," the pony sighed, "but I'll try."

"Thank you." Hammond looked to O'Neill. "I'm placing SG-3 and SG-5 under your command for this mission, Colonel. If the Jaffa army is as large as it sounds, you'll need the support. Some of their members are on leave, so it will take a few hours to recall them. In the meantime, Major Carter, your report said we do not know Equestria's address, correct?"

"Correct, sir. We couldn't find the right address before because it would have reported as a dead link. Twilight, how likely is it someone might shut off your gate?"

The pony frowned in thought. "Princess Celestia could, but she's...she's captured. Maybe Princess Luna, but she's counting on me to come back. I don't think anypony else knows about the Stargate or can close it."

Hammond nodded. "Then it's your job to find the right address before the other SG teams are ready, Major."

"Yes sir." Carter shuffled the papers in front of her, finding the one she was looking for. "I have Daniel's notes on possible combinations. I'll get started on that right away."

Daniel leaned forward and offered, "I'll see what I can research on Epona. So far she sounds like a standard Goa'uld, but there may be clues to her character."

Hammond nodded assent to that, then looked down the table at each member of SG-1 in turn. "Get prepped, folks. I doubt Epona's going to agree to a diplomatic solution. Dismissed."

"What *is* this thing?"

Twilight sat on a chair in Daniel's office. She was having some difficulty with the swiveling 'feature'. She had to plant her hooves on the desk to keep from sending the annoying thing into a dizzying spin.

The chair wasn't what she had asked about, though. She sat in front of a lit screen with some kind of controls on the desk before her. The screen was currently filled with what amounted to an encyclopedia entry on Epona as goddess of some people called the Celts. Or the Romans. It was a little confusing.

Daniel was seated at the other end of the table. A few books sat stacked in a pile before him, and he flipped through an open one. "It's a computer," he replied without looking up. "Sort of a compact, interactive database. Books, pictures, video, audio, it's all on there."

She cast a skeptical look at him, then back to the computer. "Really. Sure you don't want to trade?" Daniel blinked at her, and she added, "I *am* interested in it, but I don't think we've got time to teach me new stuff. It might be better if I looked through the books instead." Her face twisted in a brief grimace. "And all I can think about right now is getting back to Equestria. This waiting is driving me a little crazy."

Daniel set his book aside and got up, kneeling next to Twilight's chair. He slid an arm around her and she leaned into him gratefully. "We'll free them all, Twi," he murmured, leaning his forehead carefully against hers. "I promise."

A faint smile touched her lips and she leaned harder against him, but squeaked in surprise when the motion sent the chair rolling and spinning

away from Daniel. He caught her by reflex, and she ended up pressed against his chest in a tight hug.

Daniel eyed the chair for a moment, then the pony in his arms. "All right. You take the books."

She actually giggled at that, but pushed gently away from him until he loosened his grip enough to let her slide down to the floor. "I appreciate that, but to be honest I'm not even sure what we're looking for."

Daniel got up and retrieved the chair, pulling it back to the computer. "Just information on Epona. She was on Earth long enough to establish herself in the pantheon of gods in one of our ancient civilizations. A lot of Goa'uld and a couple other races were like that. Sometimes there's a clue in the history as to their personalities, things they'd be likely to do."

He frowned at the computer and took one of the controls in hand, and the text scrolled along, occasionally showing a picture of pottery or art.

"Unfortunately there's not a lot on her. She was venerated by the ancient Celts as the goddess of horses, and the Romans picked it up when their empire spread to the Celts."

Twilight frowned, peering at the screen over the lip of the desk.

"Venerated? But...I mean, you remember Princess Celestia's story. She worked us ponies hard and even sold some of us into slavery. That doesn't sound like somepony to worship."

"You have to understand, Twi, they presented themselves as such. The first Goa'uld we ever encountered was one of the worst, and he was the head of an entire pantheon. We see hostile aliens bent on domination, but people who don't know the truth see beings with great power who can be pleased or displeased, so you better do what you can to please them."

"The other thing is that on Earth, horses *are* worked hard." He sounded a bit uncomfortable as he said, "They're...slaves, really. They're not intelligent creatures, but simple beasts of burden. They were vital to human colonization in ancient times all the way up until we developed machine transportation. They carried loads, pulled wagons and plows, and carried riders. Still do in some areas of the world."

"Don't get me wrong," he added on seeing her disgusted expression, "horses have always been treated well. Epona was a big deal back in those days because horses helped keep humans alive. But they've always been servants." He grinned down at her. "Maybe I'll introduce you to an Earth horse someday. It'd be an education."

Twilight snorted lightly. "Yeah, I can imagine." She shook her head. "But that doesn't really tell us anything, does it?"

Daniel shrugged. "Not much, but some. Epona considers horses to be servants." He pulled up a crudely drawn picture of a human standing between two horses. He pointed to their necks, and Twilight could see a collar around each. "Servants may be treated poorly and worked hard, but they're rarely killed. As long as the ponies keep their heads down until we're ready to move, I doubt Epona will hurt them."

"Yeah...Luna said that, Teal'c, and now you. My *head* believes you all, but the rest of me..." She sighed and slumped in place, leaning on his leg. She felt his hand rest between her ears and closed her eyes.

There was a knock at the door. Without waiting for a response from Daniel, it swung open to reveal O'Neill and Teal'c. O'Neill jerked a thumb down the hall. "Come on. Everyone else is suited up. It's time to go."

One more Twilight stood in the gate room surrounded by humans. At least this time they weren't pointing any weapons at her.

Ten men she didn't know stood in a line against the back wall, all facing the Stargate. Each was loaded down with the gear Twilight had come to associate with the SG teams, their tac vests laden with grenades and a boxy little gun each -- a P90, she recalled. The two men in the center wore the golden leaves of Majors. Not that Twilight had been *told* this, but they matched Major Carter's insignia. One was a solid looking black man who looked as if he could take Teal'c in a fair fight, and the other almost looked like a younger version of O'Neill.

In front of the troops with their backs to the gate stood SG-1. Twilight stood in the middle between O'Neill and Daniel, with Teal'c and Carter flanking them. Twilight certainly didn't miss the surreptitious glances the men were

throwing her way, but SG-1 ignored them as they finished prepping for departure.

O'Neill finished fiddling with his gear, sliding his green cap over his hair. "All right, folks, introduction time. Twilight Sparkle, this is Major Warren and Major Altman. They lead SG-3 and SG-5." He pointed to each man and team in turn as he named them. The two Majors eyed Twilight, but nodded respectfully all the same. "Boys, this is Twilight Sparkle, the Equestrian ambassador to Earth." His voice was completely deadpan, but Daniel lifted a hand to his mouth to hide a sudden grin.

Now that they'd been introduced, every one of the men gathered stared more openly at Twilight, who flicked a glance up at O'Neill, then rolled her eyes. She directed her most stunning smile at the SG teams, grinning until her eyes were closed in adorable little half moons. "Hi! I'm a talking pony!" she chirped. Daniel started coughing and had to wave away a concerned Teal'c.

"That she is," O'Neill agreed cheerfully. "Equestria's full of 'em, gentlemen, so you'll get used to it. I've already briefed Majors Warren and Altman, but here's the short version: we go through that gate and secure the surrounding ruins. Once that's done, SG-5 will hold the Stargate and maintain communication with SGC. SG-3 will accompany SG-1 to the Goa'uld's location. We blow her sky high, break the Jaffa hold on the local population, free the princess if she's not in another castle, and return home. Any questions?"

One of the SG-3 team members couldn't help himself. "Princess, sir?"

O'Neill nodded impatiently. "Long flowing hair, golden tiara, four long pretty legs. You know, standard princess."

To his credit, the man only blinked, then grinned and saluted O'Neill. Twilight couldn't help looking a little scandalized at the description of her mentor, but pushed it away. O'Neill was easier to understand the longer she hung around him, which was probably just as well.

O'Neill looked around. "No more questions? All right, Major Carter."

Carter took a step forward, checking a handheld device before looking up at the assembly. "It took a little work, but we were able to isolate Equestria's address. We sent a MALP through about 30 minutes ago and it didn't detect anyone on the other side. But it's been collecting data ever since the gate closed, so once we've established connection I'll need to review the log before we head through." She glanced back at O'Neill, who raised a hand and waved up to the control center.

There was motion behind the glass, though Twilight could barely see from her vantage point. She frowned and cocked her head, looking around the room. "Shouldn't there be another pedestal here?" she asked Daniel. He only pointed to the Stargate, turning around to face it. She followed his example.

For a moment, nothing happened. Twilight was just about to ask Daniel again when the room lit up with spinning lights, a warning alarm going off somewhere high overhead. The inner ring of the Stargate began to *spin*, and Twilight danced back in surprise. It rotated until apparently it found the first symbol for Equestria's address, then the top chevron shifted and clicked into place. A booming voice drowned out the klaxons: "Chevron one encoded!"

Daniel commented, speaking as clearly as he could to cut through the mounting noise. "We never had a DHD pedestal for our gate. We have to dial out...a little differently."

Twilight could only settle back on her haunches and nod, staring up at the Stargate. Everyone around her gave off an air of boredom; they'd seen this a hundred times or more. She couldn't help it, though. The graceful movement of the ring was almost mesmerizing.

Daniel knelt beside her. Despite the general noise of the announcements and klaxons, she could hear his voice quite well. "If you're ever stuck without a DHD to dial out on, you can turn the gate on by hand. ...Well, hoof. It's hard, but possible." He paused as the announcer called out chevron four, then pointed up. "See all the metal attachments around the gate? It's spinning the whole thing manually." Twilight could only nod, eyes beginning to make out the details as he pointed to them.

The seventh chevron eventually snapped into place, the disembodied voice from the control center chanting, "Chevron seven locked!" Once more she was treated to a rush of blue-white energy that poured out of the gate, nearly reaching the end of the ramp where they stood before withdrawing back into the event horizon.

Major Carter was already working at her device, scanning through reports of activity from the MALP. Eventually she looked up to O'Neill. "No signs of movement in the last 30 minutes. Looks clean."

O'Neill waved behind him. "All right. SG-5, take point. SG-3, follow us in." SG-1 made room for the first team. They started forward, unslinging their P90s as they strode up the ramp toward the shimmering gate. Major Altman was the first one through, his team following close behind. The gate made gentle sounds as the horizon closed over the back of each.

Once SG-5 was fully through, Teal'c hefted his staff and started forward, Daniel following close behind. Twilight stayed near him, hooves striking the metal ramp with a clatter on each step. She slowed as she approached the gate, though Daniel strode right through without hesitation. It looked so much like water. She took a deep breath and held it, plunging through the gate with her eyes closed, and consciousness temporarily left her for the fourth time since the trouble began.

The world came rushing back to Twilight, and once more she found herself back in the dim little room underneath the castle ruins. She staggered as she stepped out of the Stargate and had to keep moving; Major Carter was right behind her.

SG-5 hadn't had time to get lights set up yet, but they'd clicked on little lights attached to their firearms, and those bright beams of light swept around the room, illuminating it well enough. It was late afternoon here, and the stairway at the far end was lit with a warm orange light.

The rest of SG-1 came through, followed shortly by SG-3. SG-5 moved up the stairs, moving furtively as they reached the top. O'Neill followed, as did the rest of SG-1.

Twilight followed Daniel out, and a sense of unease began to grow. She peered around as the soldiers spread out. "I feel like somepony should be here. It's so quiet, though."

Daniel stepped over the rubble that half-blocked the way out of the ruined tower. "We heard a couple of noises when you came through our Stargate. That was probably your pursuers hitting the iris."

Teal'c stood on Twilight's other side, peering out into the forest. "If so, they are no longer a concern."

Twilight frowned. "A couple? Yeah, I heard two thumps too." She looked up at Daniel sharply. "But there were three chasing me."

Right on cue, one of the SG-5 soldiers furthest away from the tower left out a shout and a chatter of gunfire, then stumbled into a retreat. Flashes of light tore into the ground at his feet; a whole *lot* of flashes. The combined force sent a gout of earth and cobble exploding into the air.

From both corners of the wall on which the tower stood, a battalion of Jaffa emerged. Horseheads and bare-headed foot soldiers alike poured out into the small open section of ground, their battle staves leveled at the humans. The SG soldiers raised their guns, but the Jaffa had been waiting and ready. They had the advantage of surprise, and even if SG-3 had been outside as well, they would still have outnumbered the humans.

The Jaffa lined up in a semi-circle, trapping the humans against the wall of the tower. Twilight looked about frantically, but there were no holes in the enemy ranks. At least one staff was pointed directly at each human, and most had two. Twilight got three trained on her, and she shrank back against the wall.

The standoff held for several tense seconds, Jaffa and humans equally not daring to speak or breathe. Finally, one horsehead in the middle of the ring barked out a command in a sharp, alien language. Teal'c tensed, but O'Neill only cocked his head quizzically. The Jaffa spat again, and this time it was understandable. "Drop your weapons!"

O'Neill peered around at the Jaffa, then cursed under his breath. "Do it," he ordered, and threw his own P90 to the ground with a clatter. SG-5 and SG-

1 followed suit, though Teal'c hesitated long enough to get a couple more staves pointed at him. With visible reluctance, he tossed his own staff to the ground in disgust.

Still the Jaffa did not move. O'Neill held his hands above his head, but leaned his head to one side. "Teal'c? What's going on?"

Before the ex-Jaffa could answer, they heard footsteps ringing on the few cobblestones that still poked through the grass elsewhere in the ruins. It was a steady, unhurried pace, but it grew louder with each step. After half a minute, the footsteps vanished as the walker stepped onto grass, and a bare second later another Jaffa appeared from around the wall.

This one wore a horse's head like the others, but as it strode behind the line of Jaffa Twilight could make out glints of golden trim, shining bright in the afternoon sun. It accented the deadly curves of the horse's neck and shoulders, and ran down the nose in a long thin stripe.

The newcomer walked at that same unhurried pace, not bothering to look at the humans until it reached the center of the firing line. Then it turned, and the horseheads on each side bunched in tighter to allow passage. The Jaffa stepped inside the ring, its own staff held straight with the butt planted firmly in the ground. Deep red eyes swept the small yard, taking in every captive there. Twilight had to fight to keep from flinching as that gaze settled on her for a moment.

The Jaffa's gaze turned to Teal'c and froze, staring silently for a long minute. The big man stared back, his expression neutral but for a tensing in his jawline. Slowly, the Jaffa reached up and pressed a button at the base of its metal neck Twilight hadn't noticed before.

The transformation was swift and, at least for the pony, unexpected. She stared as the horse head began to shift and retract, panels disengaging and sliding into each other, the entire thing folding in on itself and pulling back into the collar that rested around the Jaffa's neck, revealing a simple human's face. So the horseheads *were* humanoid after all.

This particular Jaffa was a woman, though it was somewhat hard to tell. Her head was shaved, much as Teal'c's was, and her blocky jaw lent her an air of granite strength not normally afforded to women or mares. On her

forehead sat the mark Twilight had seen before; that of a horse's head in profile. Unlike the others, however, this one was etched into her skin in gold.

Twilight's eyed widened, and she looked up to Teal'c, whose own forehead bore a golden mark as well, though of a different design. The man growled something out in the Jaffa tongue, a spitting remark that made the Jaffa smirk, though it made the soldiers around her tense up.

The woman stared around again at the captured humans, then turned her mocking gaze back to Teal'c. In clear, accented English, she spoke clearly enough for the entire yard to hear, and the sneer in her tone was unmistakable. "Welcome, First Prime of Apophis. I am First Prime Sh'vak. You are in Epona's domain now."

Chapter 3

Soaring high overhead, the birds of the Everfree Forest enjoyed an excellent view of the land. The forest itself spread out for miles in all directions, the lush green canopy broken only by a winding river that ran from the dragon-haunted mountains in the west to the lush plains in the east. Besides the river, the only other large break in the canopy was the ruins of the princess sisters' ancient castle.

Settled close to another mountain range, the ruins had been hidden from landbound creatures for the past thousand years, and only in the past few had they been rediscovered. Even so, creatures on the wing were rarely treated to so much activity as what was happening this afternoon.

A small group of two-footed creatures stood in front a broken-down tower set into an inside corner of the castle wall. A quarter-circle of other two-footed beings, these recognizable as the foe who had been running roughshod over this part of the world for the last two days, kept them penned in. The two groups were standing still now, but the promise of sudden action hung thick in the air.

Sh'vak, First Prime of Epona, swaggered forward another couple of steps. Though she didn't exactly smile, the gleam in her eye was that of a tigress who wants to have a little fun with her cornered prey. She fairly purred as she spoke, the words thick with mockery. "Well, 'First Prime'? Have you nothing to say?"

O'Neill glanced over to Teal'c, who shifted his weight a little at being addressed. Though the big man still held his hands behind his head, O'Neill knew him well enough to see that he was on the verge of violence. Sh'vak seemed to know it, too; she stayed well out of lunging range, though her posture never changed.

"You know very well I am not that person any longer." Teal'c managed to keep his voice level, but it sounded as tightly restrained as his body.

"Indeed." Sh'vak laughed, though her eyes glinted with a harsh light. "The infamous traitor. True Jaffa tell horror stories about you to their children, you know. You and your band of Tau'ri marauders." She swept her gaze over the humans, naked contempt showing. She paused when she saw Twilight Sparkle, and flashed the pony a much too toothy smile. "Ah, yes, and the animal who got away." Twilight eased back from that look, ears flattening in distress. Sh'vak continued, her voice quiet and deadly. "You killed two of my soldiers, little animal. They followed you through the Chappa'ai and never returned. It will be a pleasure to be the one to bring you *all* down."

O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Oh *please*." Sh'vak's attention snapped to him, and he continued. "Look, lady, if all you're gonna do is make empty death threats, could you come back later? We've got a lot to do." He glanced nonchalantly over his shoulder toward the tower. The soldiers outside had all moved away from the opening, leaving a clear field between the gate room entrance and the Jaffa. He turned back to Sh'vak, shrugging. "We *might* be able to squeeze you in tomorrow morning."

A hiss escaped Sh'vak's lips, her eyes blazing. "Empty? Fool, you have nowhere to run! At my command, you, the traitor, the animal, and every one of your men will be struck down. You had best beg for your life if you wish to live long enough to meet the goddess."

"Honestly, Carter," O'Neill complained, "is there some evil overlord's guide to boasting that gets passed around? I swear we've heard this exact rant three times in the past month."

"Just about, sir." Carter, for her part, was significantly more wary of the Jaffa and didn't take her eyes off Sh'vak, but still answered casually enough.

Sh'vak settled back on her heels, and much of the tense anger drained away. "Foolish children," she sneered, though it held as much pity as contempt now. "You think you're going to bluff your way out of this. Epona already owns this planet. The animals' traitorous leader is under her control. She is nothing more than Epona's plaything now."

Twilight's eyes widened, and the angle of her ears twisted to flatten in outrage rather than fear. "Princess Celestia is *no pony's* plaything, you

evil...evil *witch!*" She took a step forward, but stopped as three staves trained on her, their ends pulled back to reveal the humming blaster muzzles.

"Princess," Sh'vak scoffed, glaring at Twilight. "What is that to a goddess?" She swept her staff in a sudden, irritated slash. "Enough of this. You may enjoy meaningless banter, Tau'ri," she pointed at O'Neill, "but this is quickly getting tiresome."

Daniel snorted. "If that was true you'd have just gunned us down. You had us dead to rights, but *you* wanted to gloat."

A wicked smile crossed Sh'vak's lips. "True enough. Let it be done, then." She tapped the button at her neck again and the horse's head reformed over hers, red eyes glaring once more. She raised her arm high in the air and shouted a command in the Goa'uld language, her voice distorted and amplified by the mask.

Seconds passed. Nobody moved. Despite Sh'vak's irritation, she was clearly enjoying holding the fates of so many people in her hands and was milking it for all it was worth. The shadows of birds wheeling overhead passed along the ground silently, sending Jaffa and humans alike flickering for brief instants. When the First Prime felt she'd let the silence linger long enough, she cried out, "*Mol kek!*" Her arm began to fall...

...and all hell broke loose.

The air split with the thunder of leonine roars. There were so many that it was impossible to tell what direction they were coming from until the flickering shadows pulled together into one solid shape. Forms flashed down from the sky, moving at incredible speed as they darted in and out of the Jaffa firing line. Where they passed, Jaffa soldiers simply vanished, carried off by the brown and white streaks.

With the din of the roars filling everyone's ears and the firing line being torn down, the chatter of gunfire from behind O'Neill went nearly unnoticed. Sparks flew from the armor of several Jaffa, and they jerked and twitched before falling limply to the ground, staves falling from their hands.

O'Neill wasted no time in taking advantage of the surprise, trusting the others to follow suit. He dove prone to the ground, snatching up his P90, and started picking his own targets. Bullets began to fill the air as the rest of the SG soldiers joined the fight. The ripsaw snarls of gunfire added to the high-pitched whine of battle staves firing wildly amidst the furious roars, creating one giant painful cacophony.

A shadow fell across his sight, and he looked up to see Sh'vak nearly on top him, holding her staff high over her head. Though her mask's expression couldn't change, her posture told him she was mad as hell. She brought the staff swinging down, the heavy butt end arcing toward his head like a hammer to a ripe melon.

O'Neill flung himself to one side, rolling onto his back. The staff missed him by inches, slamming into the earth just beside his ear. He stared up at the furious First Prime, standing upside down in his field of view, but something drew his eye up to the sky beyond her.

On first glance, it looked like an eagle: beak, feathers, outstretched claws, the usual. But the beak was open, and O'Neill realized that *it* was roaring, as were the others with it. Though it was diving straight at Sh'vak, he could see its tail whipping about behind it; a lion's tufted tail rather than an eagle's. The beast looked terribly familiar, but Daniel was a little too busy to supply him with a name just now.

Sh'vak froze, noticing his gaze shifting off her. It saved her life. She spun around into a crouch, staff sweeping up in a fluid motion to meet the oncoming talons. The butt of the staff smacked hard into one outstretched claw, causing the creature's roar to shift into a pained screech. It banked away, aborting its attack.

The First Prime's head whipped back and forth, noticing more of the creatures lining up for a run at her. She looked down at O'Neill, then back up at the sky, snarling out a curse. Dismissing him from her attention, she took off running toward the edge of the wall from which she had first appeared, two of the beasts in hot pursuit.

O'Neill lifted himself onto one elbow to watch her go, then shifted his grip on the P90 and turned back to the battle. Between the surprise attack and the loss of their leader, the Jaffa stood little chance. They fought

tenaciously, but the battle was loud, brutal, and short. O'Neill raised his weapon and squeezed the trigger, a spray of sparks dancing off the armor of the last Jaffa standing.

Only one other Jaffa in sight was still moving, and he was clenched in the grip of one of the beasts. It carried the Jaffa beyond the cliff that separated the ruins from the rest of the forest, then unceremoniously pitched him into the abyss. He dropped out of sight, but not out of earshot; in the sudden silence, his scream could be heard a long way down, mercifully fading away before reaching the bottom. O'Neill winced in sympathy for the Jaffa, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

The whine of engines filled the air as the sound of gunfire died away, and O'Neill checked over his shoulder to see a glider lifting into the air over the walls of the ruins. The small fighter craft hovered in the air for a moment, the heat of its engines and the late afternoon sun causing its forward-swept wings to shimmer in his sight.

The two creatures that had been pursuing Sh'vak grappled the fighter, clawing ineffectually at the armored wings and cockpit. It hung in the air for another couple of heartbeats as if to taunt their efforts, then its engines flared to life, propelling it away from the ruins at speed. Knocked senseless by the sudden departure, the creatures spun in midair, freefalling for a bare second before regaining their wings.

The silence that fell over the small courtyard didn't last long. As the humans began to pick themselves up from the ground, checking over themselves and their squad mates, the air filled with the sound of every beast in the vicinity crying out another roar. The timbre had changed, though; where before it was a cry of challenge, now it was one of victory.

One by one, they came back to the clearing. They settled down in a ragged formation around where the Jaffa had stood, though their collective posture was not so much threatening as strutting. They fell into raucous chatter among themselves, and though the speech was difficult to follow, O'Neill recognized warriors talking excitedly about a finished battle.

Daniel edged over from where he had been standing, coming in close to murmur to O'Neill. As if in answer to an unspoken question, he said, "I think

they're griffons." O'Neill nodded in acknowledgement, but held up his hand for silence.

The two that had chased after Sh'vak sailed back into the clearing, their wings spread wide. One settled onto the ground between two of its packmates, while the other swooped in to land in front of the humans. This one was notably larger than the others, and though its wings beat gently as it lowered itself to earth, the sheer volume of air they pushed sent dust and pebbles scattering past the humans' feet. It favored one claw, and O'Neill recognized it for the one who tried to divebomb Sh'vak.

The griffon puffed out its chest, shooting the humans a haughty, smug look. It opened its beak, but the banter from the other griffons rose up in volume. It clacked its beak shut, expression twisting into an annoyed grimace, then spun around. It opened its mouth, and a rough but recognizably female voice barked out, "HEY! SHADDAP! YOU MOOKS ARE RUININ' MY COOL!" The rest of the griffons obediently fell silent, though a chuckle or two filtered out of the crowd.

The lead griffon turned back, shaking out her ruffled feathers with an annoyed huff. "As I was *going* to say, *you* lot," she sneered, jabbing a talon at O'Neill, "just got saved by the one, the only-"

"*Gilda*?" O'Neill turned to find Twilight picking her way out of the rubble from within the tower where she had taken cover when the fighting began. SG-3 followed close behind her, the last member of which was just stepping out of the doorway to the gate room. The pony gave the griffon a puzzled look. "That is you, right?"

Ignoring the interplay for the moment, O'Neill raised a hand. "Nice shooting, Carl." Major Warren tipped off a casual salute, touching the muzzle of his P90 to his cap.

A full-throated roar burst from Gilda, shaking the ground around her. O'Neill spun back around to find the griffon's talons scoring the ground, drawing a claw back as if she meant to charge. "Listen to me! I. Saved. Your. BUTTS," she snarled, spitting out each word. "YOU OWE ME!"

Puzzled silence greeted the infuriated griffon. Finally Carter frowned, asking, "How do you figure?"

Gilda sneered, tossing her head back. "You saw her. She was just about to throw the signal to kill you all before we interrupted."

"It would not have happened," Teal'c assured her. "The Jaffa sprung the trap too early. SG-3 was still inside the gate room and had clear lines of fire."

"But thank you for your help," Daniel added brightly. He glanced over at the rest of SG-1. "I doubt we would have come out of it so cleanly otherwise."

The griffon stared at all of them in turn, even Major Warren, who hefted his P90 and grinned. Finally she let out a huff and rolled her eyes, easing back into a more relaxed crouch. Ignoring the humans for the moment, she rolled her eyes toward Twilight and grinned, self-composure returning along with casual arrogance. "Well, well. If it isn't Dorkus Magicus! How's the flip-flop doing?" She raised her injured claw to inspect it, eyes half-lidded. "Pretend I care or something."

Twilight stiffened at the insult narrowing her eyes at the griffon. Her voice came out icy but polite, putting a definite emphasis on the first two words. "*Rainbow Dash* is well. Thank you for inquiring."

Gilda made a rude noise, flipping her claw in idle dismissal. Whatever she had been able to say cut off in a sudden twinge of pain that showed in her expression, and Major Carter stepped into the conversational gap quickly. "How did you find us here...Gilda, was it?"

A purely baffled look crossed Gilda's face and she tilted her head to stare blankly at Carter. Finally she said, with much-too-exaggerated patience, "I wasn't looking for *you*. I've been hunting that psycho ever since she came down with her troops and started shooting the place up. I couldn't care less what happens to lame-o ponies, but it's only a matter of time before she goes after the griffons too. Figured I'd nip it in the bud."

She grinned wickedly. "Besides, we don't often get to hunt...interesting prey. The only reason we didn't take *you* all down too is because you don't look like them. Different uniforms and all that." She paused, then flicked an idle glance at Teal'c. "He kinda does, but whatever." Her sly grin returned. "Anyway, if we took you out, then who'd owe us a solid?"

Carter folded her arms, giving the bird a skeptical frown. "We didn't ask for your help. You gave it freely. What makes you think we owe you anything?"

Gilda considered Carter for a moment before launching herself into the air toward the woman. Carter tensed and the soldiers around her swung their weapons up, but Gilda slowed to a hover directly in front of Carter's face. She sidled in close, beak nearly touching nose, and slid a companionable arm around the woman's shoulders. She purred quietly, favoring Carter with a wicked smile. "Right now, cupcake, that solid is the only thing keeping me and my pack from hunting *you* for sport, too." She reached up with her free claw, lightly trailing one talon along Carter's bare neck up to her chin. "Now, what do you say to that?"

For an answer, Gilda got a flat, even stare. "This." And Carter pulled the trigger on the zat gun held at her hip.

Though the soldiers of the SGC preferred their P90s for general purpose work, through various encounters with the Jaffa and Goa'uld they had acquired more exotic weaponry. The zat'nik'tel, or zat gun, was one such. A compact weapon no bigger than a pistol, the zat gun was favored both for the low profile and its unique property of stunning with the first shot. It took two shots in succession to actually kill a creature. Major Carter only needed the one.

The little serpentine weapon spat out a flash of blue light that struck Gilda square in the belly. Electricity coursed visibly over the griffon and she flapped drunkenly away from Carter, shock written all over her beak. Her wings locked up, and she tumbled to the ground on her back, one wing trapped underneath.

The pack leaped to their feet, eyes suddenly sharp and alert and dangerous, and all of them fixed on Carter. Before they could move, O'Neill snapped his hand up in a halt command. When all eagle eyes were on him, he silently pointed to Gilda. After a moment, she twitched a leg, and let out a long, slow exhalation. "Owwwwwwwwwwww..."

The pack relaxed. Slightly. They didn't appear to have murder on the mind any more, at least. O'Neill strode over to the limp griffon, kneeling next to her. "We'll think about it," he assured her blithely. He looked up and waved

the other griffons over. "Give her an hour or two, she'll be flying and cussing like normal again. In the meantime..." His voice hardened. "Get the hell out of here. And take her with you. Teach her some manners while you're at it."

The two closest griffons shared a look, then started forward, their eyes never leaving O'Neill. They paused for a second as metal clicked and several soldiers shifted their weapons, then darted forward and dragged Gilda back into their midst. The dust stirred once more as every wing in the group began to beat, lifting the griffons off the ground as one. They spiraled around the courtyard briefly, then took off into the air, one of the griffons carrying Gilda on its back.

The humans watched them leave in silence until the last griffon disappeared over the treetops. O'Neill tilted his head toward Daniel without looking at him. "So what are they, exactly?"

"Mythical animals," Daniel supplied promptly. "Half eagle, half lion. Either Greek or Egyptian, there's some controversy over that."

O'Neill frowned. "What, like in that wizard book?"

"No, that was a hippogriff. Half eagle, half *horse*. Said to be the spawn of a griffon and mare."

Twilight, who had been staring at the ground where the Jaffa lay, blinked and looked up. "What?" She made a face. "Gross doesn't even begin to describe that."

Daniel cocked his head. "Since when did you start reading that series, Jack?"

O'Neill favored Daniel with a cryptic look. "There's a lot you don't know about me." With that, he spun around, nodding toward Major Warren. "Change of plans. Carl, your squad is to stay behind and help SG-5 defend this spot. SG-1 goes in alone."

Warren frowned at that. "Sir, you said we were to accompany you to the Goa'uld. You'll need us for fire support and demo."

"That was before we got made." O'Neill jerked his thumb behind him, indicating the world in general. "The First Prime escaped. Epona probably already knows we're here and that the Stargate's active again. And I trust that griffon about as far as I can kick her. I need you here to make sure we don't lose our only way home."

The frown on Warren's face deepened, but he nodded. He glanced over to one of his soldiers who was carrying a thick bandolier of C4 thrown over his chest. The man pulled the bandolier off, tossing it to O'Neill. As O'Neill passed it to Teal'c, Warren asked, "How are you going to get to the Goa'uld by yourselves?"

"Hey. It's us." O'Neill slung his P90 back into its strap, letting it hang freely. "Just make sure we've got someplace to come back to. Get on the radio and inform Hammond of the situation, then get yourselves dug in." He paused, then added, "See if you can get him to send any backup."

"Sir? Hammond told us we were all he had available."

O'Neill shook his head. "Not men. Maybe some of the big guns he keeps locked up in the armory. We never have big guns around when we need 'em, and right now we need 'em."

Warren's face split into a sudden, wide grin. "Yes sir. We'll have this place locked down tight." The two men traded a salute, then Warren turned to the rest of the soldiers. "Get these bodies clear, then start digging in." He headed off to confer with Major Altman, leaving SG-1 and Twilight alone.

Twilight stepped forward, eyes taking in the aftermath of the battle. Though the griffons had carried away most of the Jaffa, there were still a fair share of casualties lying about. Her ears folded down and she took a step back, looking up at Daniel. "Is...it going to be like this? All the way to Epona?"

Daniel was silent for a long moment, his face neutral. Finally he let out a sigh. "Maybe. It's a last resort, but these people mean to kill us, Twi. Your people are to be enslaved, so they have a bit of safety, but they're going to want to stop *us*. Permanently. Sh'vak doesn't seem like the kind to let go of grudges easily."

She let her eyes fall to the ground at her feet, still unhappy. "Last time you were here everyone came out of it alive."

Teal'c answered as he checked his gear, settling the bandolier across his broad shoulder. "Last time we were here, we faced no more than 40 horses confused and fresh out of cryosleep whom Celestia had asked us not to kill."

"Teal'c's right," O'Neill confirmed. "We had the advantage last time. Now there's an entire army, and they've been actively swallowing Epona's propaganda for who knows how long. We're not pulling any punches this time. Can't afford to."

Twilight nodded, taking a deep breath. "All right. So, where are we going?"

O'Neill opened his mouth...then closed it again.

Carter eyed him, a warning note in her voice. "Sir, you *do* know where to find Epona, right?"

O'Neill looked at everyone in turn, momentarily at a loss for words. Finally, he said, "Think I should have asked Sh'vak nicely?" Carter rolled her eyes, and he added defensively, "Look, she's probably in a big spaceship that landed somewhere. We just gotta find it."

Daniel frowned. "It would help if we had a place to start."

"Fine. You see any pyramids around?"

Twilight's ears perked up, and she looked up between Daniel and O'Neill before the former could retort. "What about the safehouse? Princess Luna won't have been sitting still. Maybe she has some information we can use." She shrugged, some of the unhappiness creeping back in. "At the very least, I need to make sure my friends are safe."

The two men traded a look, and Carter nodded. "Sounds as likely a place to start as any," she agreed.

O'Neill started toward the bridge, waving them along. "Let's get moving, then."

As the sun began to dip into the horizon, casting lengthy shadows over the land, SG-1 marched in single file from the castle ruins with Twilight in their midst. They crossed into the forest proper over the bridge, which Twilight was now heartily glad she had not cut. It had only been last night she'd made that choice, but it already felt like a week.

She refused to look down into the chasm as they passed over it, not wanting to chance spotting the griffons' talonwork. Her imagination was filling in a mental image easily enough in any case, and it was rather less than pleasant. She tried to distract herself by watching Daniel walk in front of her. It...worked surprisingly well.

The humans tended to wear clothes as a matter of course which hid most of their bodies, but hints and outlines came through anyway as motion shifted and pulled the clothing tight. She found she could follow the tensing of muscles within his haunches as he strode forward in that odd rolling gait bipedal creatures needed to walk properly. It was really sort of mesmerizing in its exoticism.

"Where is Rainbow Dash, anyhow?" The question startled Twilight out of her reverie, and she glanced guiltily back over her shoulder toward O'Neill.

He wasn't looking at her, though it was hard to tell with those sunglasses on, but her cheeks darkened anyway. Now that her, ah, focus was broken, she took note of their surroundings. They'd passed the bridge some time ago and were heading along the path back to Ponyville she'd become familiar with over the last several months. It bore signs of last night's pursuit; here and there broken branches lay on the ground, with noticeable scorch marks from the Jaffa staves darkening the ground and occasional tree. It certainly made the path easier to follow.

She gave her head a small shake. "Sorry, Colonel, what was that?"

"Rainbow Dash," he repeated. "Gilda asked after her, but you didn't say much. How's she doing?"

"Oh." Twilight frowned, looking ahead. And not at Daniel this time. "Like I said, I was in Canterlot. I don't know what's happened to anyone in Pony..." She blinked, then smacked her forehead with a hoof. "I totally forgot!

Rainbow Dash isn't in Ponyville. She took off last week for Appleloosa. She wanted to go visit her buffalo friend Little Strongheart, plus it was Braeburn's birthday but Applejack couldn't leave the farm to give him a present, so she took it with her." Her mouth snapped closed as she realized she was rambling. In all the excitement, if a pony could call it that, she'd forgotten some of the simpler, happier stuff, and it came back to her as she talked.

There was silence for a moment, then O'Neill said slowly, "Sooooo... she's not in the area."

Twilight shook her head. "Maybe she returned while I was in Canterlot, but Appleloosa is very far away, at least half a day's travel. It's in the middle of the desert."

Ahead of her, Carter and Daniel exchanged a look. Daniel mused, "So so far we've found ponies, dragons, griffons, and now you tell us there's buffalo?"

"Yep." Twilight tilted her head, looking up at him. "Why do you ask?"

Daniel reached up to scratch the back of his neck. "I'm just starting to wonder how many intelligent species live on this world."

The pony smiled. "Didn't you wonder why the ponies in Ponyville were only uneasy around you and didn't run screaming for the hills? We're used to different creatures, though some of us more than others." She shrugged, stepping around a tree root. "Equestria itself is only that part of the world ponies live in. It's a big place, but the world is bigger still."

Carter made a low noise of understanding. "And all this time we've been calling the *planet* Equestria. What do you call it?"

Twilight blinked. "Uh...Equestria?" She grinned weakly. "I mean, the Princesses do control the sun and moon, so it's only fair, right? I haven't really traveled far out of pony lands anyway."

The group fell silent as they approached a fallen tree that lay across the path. One end of the trunk was charred black, as was the stump to the side of the path. Twilight frowned. "Do the Jaffa always leave this much

destruction behind them?" As she spoke, she drew her will into her horn, wrapping both it and the entirety of the tree trunk in the familiar blue glow of her magic.

Teal'c folded his arms, eyeing the tree disapprovingly. "The Jaffa are efficient and loyal soldiers who follow orders. They do not normally go out of their way to destroy or kill anything that has not been identified as a threat." His voice took on a tinge of disgust. "I believe this may be Sh'vak's influence. She appeared to have...impulse control issues."

The tree lifted off the ground slowly, and Twilight guided it into the woods off to the side. She let go of the tree, and it landed heavily on the ground with a shudder of leaves. "It makes me worry for the other ponies. Everypony's been telling me they'll be safe, but if that...woman...is leading the soldiers..." Daniel rested a hand on her head, and she trailed off in a quiet sigh.

With the tree out of the way, they could see the river lying not far ahead. Between the sight and Twilight's concern for her friends, another memory dropped into her mind like a lead weight. "Steven!" she cried, breaking into a sprinting gallop. She heard Daniel and the others shouting for her as they hurried to keep up, but her attention was entirely on the riverbank ahead.

Steven Magnet wasn't there, but Twilight only allowed herself a small breath of relief. She paced up and down at the water's edge, peering around for some sign of Steven. She found it as the humans approached, jabbing her hoof at a rust-colored spread in the sand. "There! Oh, no, they *did* hurt him!" She looked up at them, eyes a little too wide. "Please, we have to find him! I have to know if he's okay!"

Teal'c planted his staff in the sand. "We have little time, Colonel O'Neill. Sh'vak already has the advantage over us in preparing her defenses."

Twilight turned to face O'Neill, ears wilting. "Colonel, Steven is my friend. He helped me escape the Jaffa, and he didn't have to. He's hurt because of me and maybe worse. Could you leave someone like that behind?"

O'Neill's jaw tightened and he glanced aside at Daniel for a second. After a moment's silence, he said, "We don't even know where Epona is, Teal'c. We're going to have to reach this safehouse and speak to Luna before we

even know where to go, much less figure out a plan of attack. That's more than enough time for Sh'vak to do whatever it is she's going to do, if she hasn't already. At this point, I think another hour or two won't hurt." He gestured to Twilight, a touch uncomfortably. "And...she's right. I wouldn't leave someone behind. It's not right to ask her to."

Teal'c nodded slowly. "Very well, then."

Twilight let out a breath in relief. "Thank you, Colonel, Teal'c."

"Colonel, over here!" Carter was several yards downriver, studying the ground during the conversation. The others joined her, and she pointed. "The trail of blood leads this way, but it stops after another ten yards."

Twilight frowned, then nodded. "He must have gone all the way into the water."

Carter exchanged a look with O'Neill before asking, "Isn't Steven another pony? Why would he jump in the water if he's injured?"

The pony tilted her head up quizzically. "What? Oh, no, he's not a pony!" She laughed. "He's a river serpent."

"...Oh." Carter blinked. "Okay then."

Daniel pulled out a small notepad and made a tick mark before tucking it back into his vest. "That makes five species we know about." He started down the river in the direction Carter had indicated. "At least it should make finding him easy, right?"

The sun had very nearly disappeared below the horizon, casting the forest into deep shadow, when SG-1 saw light ahead through the trees. It flickered and danced, suggesting a fire, and the light spilled out from the trees onto the flat sandy bank.

The humans all fell silent, their steps slowing, and after a moment's hesitation Twilight copied them. The five figures prowled forward, half-crouched and wary of their footing. SG-1 readied their weapons, their movements small and sure in order to keep from making too much noise.

They eased through the trees just beside the riverbank where they wouldn't be spotted as easily, creeping up until Teal'c in the lead could get a good look through the foliage. All of them crouched down, remaining still and silent while the Jaffa eased himself forward, peering around the trunk of a large tree.

After a moment, he settled back, whispering, "It is a small cove. There is a fire on the bank. A large beast I presume to be Steven Magnet is lying half in, half out of the water. There is also what appears to be a pony, as well."

Twilight blinked, suddenly attentive. "Let me see," she whispered back, and crawled through the brush carefully to peer around the same tree.

Indeed, it was a small clearing with a pool branching off from the river. Steven lay curled up in the middle of the pool, his upper body stretched out on the sandy bank. A bright, cheerful fire crackled and popped between Twilight and Steven, illuminating the serpent well. She could see his shoulder and side were bound in soft cloth bandages, both showing spots of blood despite the thick wrapping. Despite that, he appeared to be snoozing peacefully, breath whistling through his teeth with each snore.

Motion drew Twilight's attention, and she noticed a dark shape moving not far from her spot. It was indeed a pony shape, but on this side of the fire it was little more than a silhouette. Its back was misshapen and lumpy, as though it were carrying a bag. Despite that, it was a very familiar silhouette.

The figure walked over to stand next to Steven's head, which brought it more clearly into the light. She reached behind to pull the sack off her back with her teeth, revealing dark stripes and a spiral cutie mark. She placed a hoof on Steven's neck and gently nudged him, speaking in a low, warm voice. "My friend, it is time for you to wake, so that your medicine you can take."

Relief and joy flooded Twilight and the pony bounded out of the trees without a second thought. "Zecora! Steven!"

Zecora the zebra whirled in place, eyes wide in shock. "Who would dare to trespass there?" Twilight trotted into the light of the fire, beaming wide at Zecora, and the zebra relaxed visibly, her own smile blossoming. "It's only my dear friend Twilight! Dear child, you gave me such a fright!"

Behind her, Steven blinked groggy eyes open. "Ooh, what's going on?" He raised his head a little, peering about, then broke into a broad smile. "Oh, Twilight, it's you! Thank heavens, I feared the worst!"

Twilight darted around the fire to embrace her two friends. "I'm so glad to see you both! I was so worried about you, Steven."

The serpent shifted his arm, wincing as he did, to lightly pat Twilight's mane. "And I was simply *distraught* over you, my dear! I'm so glad I was able to help you get away."

A rustle in the trees caused both zebra and serpent to look up, and Zecora's smile faded into a glare as SG-1 emerged from the trees to stand on the far side of the fire. She pushed Twilight back, and Steven wrapped a protective arm about the pony as she did. "Twilight, you must get out of sight!" Zecora stepped forward, legs spread in an aggressive posture. She lifted her head, eyes hard and unafraid as she stared the humans down. "I warn you, intruders: I *will* fight!"

At the harsh words, Teal'c hefted his staff and Carter raised her zat gun, faces turning grim. Daniel's eyes widened in shock and he put a hand over Carter's, pushing the zat down to point at the ground. O'Neill pulled Teal'c's staff up, preventing the Jaffa from pointing it at Zecora. "Take it easy!" O'Neill snapped. "There's no need for that."

Twilight began to panic, pushing at Steven's arm until the serpent let out a yelp of pain and drew away, looking hurt. She paid him little mind for the moment, dashing forward. "Stop! Stop!" She skidded to a halt in front of Zecora, staring hard at the zebra. "They're *friends*." Giving Teal'c and Carter a hard look, she added, "We're *all* friends. Now stop this at once!"

Zecora did not back down from her stance, but her eyes flicked to Twilight. "After I found Steven hurt, and to his wounds attended, the creatures he described to me were like these you've befriended."

O'Neill sighed and looked over to Teal'c. "Is this what it's like for you? Getting mistaken for the enemy?"

Teal'c eyed Zecora, then settled his staff back on the ground. "All the time."

Daniel stepped forward as Carter holstered her weapon. He spread his empty hands. "Zecora, we're not here to harm anyone. We're friends of Twilight, and we're here to help drive away the intruders."

After a beat of consideration, Zecora exhaled slowly through her nose, relaxing into a less confrontational stance. "If Twilight Sparkle vouches for you, then I will accept what you say as true." She inclined her head politely. "You are welcome to my fire, but of your names I must inquire."

Twilight let out a sigh of relief and smiled at Zecora. "Of course. Zecora, Steven, this is Colonel O'Neill, Major Carter, Teal'c, and Daniel Jackson. They're an exploration team called SG-1. SG-1, this is Zecora, who lives here in the Everfree Forest and is wonderfully knowledgeable about all sorts of things, and Steven Magnet, who as I said helped me escape the Jaffa." Everyone nodded and politely waved to each other as Twilight made the introductions, the humans seating themselves in a half-circle around the fire.

Twilight beamed at the serpent. "I don't know what you did, Steven, but you delayed them long enough for me to contact SG-1. I can't thank you enough."

Steven waved a thin hand dismissively. "Oh, please don't, my dear. I only startled the ruffians for a few seconds, then they *shot* me! *Twice!*" He nodded to the bandages, looking forlorn. "My beautiful scales saved me, but I had to swim for my life before they could do worse." He sighed dramatically. "I'm just...glad that it was enough."

Zecora moved to Steven's side, plucking gently at the bandages and peeling them off. "Last night I discovered Steven, and naturally I could not leave him. My skills alone were insufficient, but fortunately I have an assistant." The bandage on Steven's side fell away, revealing a raw, red patch marring the gleaming scales.

Twilight frowned. "An assistant? But I thought you lived alone?" The enigmatic smile she got from Zecora was rewarded with an unamused snort.

Not two seconds later, the brush at the edge of the cove began to rustle. The humans tensed, but rather than a squad of angry Jaffa, a rabbit -- carrying a basket of herbs over his head -- hopped out from the bushes.

"Oh, Zecora! I found those herbs you wanted!" The soft, cheerful voice followed the rabbit out, and a pastel yellow pony with long pink hair pushed her way quietly through the brush. She froze when she saw that Zecora wasn't alone, tilting her head to let her hair fall protectively over her face. "Um..."

Major Carter broke out into a smile first. "Hey, Fluttershy. Remember us?"

Fluttershy blinked, eyes wide as she recognized the humans. A smile graced her gentle face and she trotted forward. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't think we'd ever see you all again." She blushed. "Not that I'm not happy to see you. Hello, everyone."

Zecora took the basket off Fluttershy's back, and the rabbit set his down beside it. "Ah, yes, these are the perfect hue. Thank you Fluttershy, these will certainly do! It will take just two shakes, and you will see how much this makes!"

As the zebra pulled out her cauldron and equipment, Twilight turned to Fluttershy, giving her an affectionate nuzzle. "I'm so glad to see you! Are the others out here too?"

Fluttershy's smile faded. "N-no." She glanced away, another blush coloring her cheeks.

Twilight tilted her head. "No? Then how did you come to be out here by yourself?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "Oh, but I'm not out here by myself! I have Angel with me! We were on the edge of the forest when...something shot out of the air. I think I saw it head toward Canterlot, but I couldn't see that far. It made an awful lot of noise." She gave a dainty little shiver. "Angel was so startled that he took off running into the forest, and of course I couldn't just let him go by himself. Who *knows* what would have happened? When I found him, I found Zecora, too. We were just about to go back home when this..." Her chatter slowed until it stopped in a scared little

squeak, and she drew back into herself. Angel glared at her and thumped a foot on the ground impatiently. He certainly didn't look the type to startle easily.

Twilight edged forward, as did SG-1. "This...what?" She tried a reassuring smile, reaching out a hoof. "It's okay, Fluttershy, you're safe now. What did you see?" Fluttershy pressed in tight against Twilight, but would not or could not answer.

"As fire in the sky portended, a demon from the stars descended." Zecora had gotten her cauldron over the fire and was grinding the herbs with a mortar and pestle. She had set the pestle aside for the moment to speak. "A wicked thing of steel and gold that made my very blood run cold." She picked up the pestle in her teeth again, working it deftly.

"A Ha'tak mothership." Excitement and confidence threaded Carter's voice. "It has to be. Epona attacked the larger cities from orbit, then launched her transport ships as she landed her ship." She turned back to Zecora and Fluttershy, who shrank a touch from the intensity of Carter's expression. "Do you remember where it came down?"

"Um..." Fluttershy's fear receded slightly as she thought, then pointed with a hoof toward the northeast. "It was hard to tell at first, but when it disappeared beyond the treetops we were looking in that direction." Zecora continued to work the pestle, but pointed her own hoof at Fluttershy in silent confirmation. The pony gave a small shudder. "It was so *big*..."

Twilight hugged her friend again. "What do you think, Colonel?"

"I think Luna can wait." O'Neill stood, as did the rest of SG-1. "We hit them now."

Twilight frowned. "In the middle of the night?"

"That is the best time to strike," Teal'c confirmed. "The guards will be less alert. It will offset Sh'vak's warning."

Carter, though, looked less than confident. "Sir, wouldn't it be better if we went to see Luna first? We could use all the intelligence we can get. Like

you said earlier, is an hour or two really going to make that much difference?"

"No reason to delay now." O'Neill's own voice was bedrock certain. "By the time we get to the ship, it'll be the perfect time to hit it. We can get with Luna afterward about cleaning up the Jaffa forces on the ground, but we've taken out motherships before. We dealt with Apophis, we can deal with Epona."

A long breath escaped Carter, and though she still looked uncertain, she nodded. "I'm with you, sir."

Daniel walked over to Twilight and Fluttershy and knelt. "There's no need for either of you to come if you don't want to. We could use your help, though."

Twilight blinked, then glared at Daniel. "Well of *course* I'm coming with you! How could you think otherwise?"

He grinned. "Just checking." His smile faded to something gentler as he turned to the other pony. "Fluttershy?"

"Uh...um, do...do you *really* need me along?" Fluttershy couldn't meet Daniel's eyes, scratching timidly at the ground with one hoof.

Twilight shook her head. "You should stay here, Fluttershy. It's probably the safest place you *can* be right now. Zecora will look after you and Angel until we get back."

Zecora dumped the crushed herbs into the cauldron, then gave Fluttershy a warm smile. "Stay with me here, and there is nothing to fear." Her voice turned wry. "We will tend to Steven's wounds and leave the fighting for *these* loons."

Fluttershy nodded, but still looked worried. "We'll wait here until you return. ...Please return."

Twilight smiled warmly. "Of course we will." She turned to Zecora and gave her a small but respectful bow. "And thank you, Zecora, for looking after them."

The zebra calmly stirred the boiling water within the cauldron. "Nonsense, my pony friend. I always have a hoof to lend." She peered into the cauldron, then dipped a ladle into it, blowing gently on the hot mixture. "You must drink this. Open wide." The serpent eyed the ladle dubiously, and she frowned sternly at him. "Steven, there is nowhere to hide."

Steven sighed and waved gingerly to Twilight and SG-1. "Good luck, and do be careful." He opened his jaws wide and allowed Zecora to pour the medicine into his mouth. He hissed at the heat, but swallowed it quickly before making a disgusted face.

Twilight giggled as she and Daniel rose to rejoin the others. Silently, the squad made their way back to the river and in the direction Fluttershy had given them.

"I don't get it," O'Neill muttered, peering through his binoculars. "Why *there*?"

Night had fallen in full by the time SG-1 reached the treeline, far to the northeast of the cove. Keeping behind the cover of trees and brush, they each looked through their binoculars out over the plain. Though the forest was so dark they had to use flashlights to make their way, the moon hung bright and heavy over the open sky, bathing the plains in a soft glow. It did an excellent job of illuminating the enormous Goa'uld ship that had settled on the world like a tick.

It was easy to see why Fluttershy had been frightened; if you didn't know what you were looking at, the Ha'tak motherships were monstrosities. The core of the ship was simple enough: a golden pyramid dotted with windows and entrances to bays. Surrounding it, however, was a strange hexagonal ovoid web of dulled metal, providing a platform for the ship's weaponry and giving it a sinister, organic appearance.

O'Neill continued, "I mean, okay. This one decided to play with horses instead of humans. I get it. She's a few gliders short of a squadron. But she's got her pick of all those mountains, including the ones over the secret base. The damn things are *made* for sitting on mountains. So why there?"

The mothership had settled within the mountain range across the plains, but Epona had not chosen an actual mountain for her landing site. Instead, the ship had touched down on the walls of the very canyon SG-1 had employed on their last visit here to capture and subdue the squad of horse Jaffa. The canyon could more correctly be called a hollow mesa: a low, flat-topped hill with a deep circular crevasse cut out in the middle, forming a large, nearly-circular C when seen from above.

The ship had settled gently atop the great broad walls, one face of the pyramid crossing over the wide mouth of the canyon entrance to form a lintel. The great bulk of the ship shrouded the actual canyon from the light of the moon, but artificial lighting within could still be seen. As they watched, a glider patrol returned to the ship, sailing into the bay entrance at the bottom of the pyramid, and more Jaffa emerged from the entrance to the canyon to relieve the ones currently standing guard on the ground.

Carter didn't take her eyes away from the sight, but replied, "Sir, didn't you think it was odd at the time that a geological formation should be so perfectly formed?"

"Yeah," O'Neill replied off-handedly. "But at the time I thought a lot about this planet was odd. Still do." He glanced aside at their companion. "No offense, Twilight."

Carter continued, "It's not a square shape, so it doesn't fit the base of the ship perfectly, but the whole mesa is clearly just big enough to support its weight, and the dimensions are about right. Other than the shape, sir, it really does look like the mesa was made for a ship that size."

"Epona's returned to her old throne," Daniel murmured. "She can see for miles in every direction. That's where she used to rule." Twilight let out a small shiver; the quiet, absent-minded tone of Daniel's voice had lent the words an ominous edge.

O'Neill finally lowered his binoculars and turned his back to the ship, resting it against a tree. "All right, folks. The plan hasn't changed." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "We need to get in there to plant charges, take out the boss, and get Celestia and any other prisoners out." Glancing around, he added, "I'm open to suggestions."