

The Thessalonica Legacy

By Dashukta



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Chapter 1

The Valexa Situation

*South of the Sivry River
Valexa, Capellan March, Federated Suns
2 November 3068*

Ramirez pushed again on the throttle control. He knew it wouldn't go any farther forward, not without sacrificing maneuverability. And that would be suicide among these trees dotting the ridge.

Valexa's pale blue-tinged sun was starting to creep higher in the East, casting long shadows across the granite ridge Ramirez's *Valkyrie* BattleMech was navigating. The dawn brought mixed blessings. They'd be able to make better time, but the growing light meant they were running out of time. He glanced at his sensors display, floating in his vision thanks to his neurohelmet's holographic display, as his 30-ton 'Mech nimbly sidestepped a fallen log. All clear. Just himself and Din's gangly, bird-like *Osiris*.

"Ya' still with me, Din?" Ramirez was worried. Normally, Sargent Din Geremek's OSR-3D *Osiris* would easily outpace his VLK-QD1 *Valkyrie*, but an unlucky hit from that Capellan *Vindicator*—the same *Vindicator* that had killed the Lieutenant—had severed myomers and smashed actuators all through the left leg of Din's 'Mech, slowing him down and giving the warmachine a pronounced limp.

That was the trade-off. The *Osiris* was fast, with a combat speed nearing 130 KPH, and carried a blistering array of lasers and short-range missiles, but paid for it with a tendency to overheat and thin armor. By contrast, Ramirez's *Valkyrie*, though massing the same, was over 40 KPH slower but had thicker armor and more powerful jumpjets.

Din's voice sounded in Ramirez's ear, "Right behind you, sir." He could hear the strain in the young man's voice. Ramirez smiled weakly. He could understand his lancemate's fear. Din was fresh out of the academy, barely

in his 20s, his face still cratered with adolescent acne. This past week had been his first true combat experience.

Ramirez was young, too, only a few years older than the academy grad now following him through Valexa's wilds. Though, unlike his younger compatriot, Sgt. Brandon Ramirez had seen combat, serving with his *Valkyrie* as part of a recon lance against Steiner-loyal forces during the closing stages of the FedCom Civil War. Now, running through the backwoods of Valexa, he was in his element. Moving fast, using the terrain to control line-of-sight, he knew how to do this. He knew these woods and hills intimately. Even before he joined the Militia and became a MechWarrior, he'd hiked these very hills. Now on the run, he drew on every ounce of his knowledge. So far, it had been enough to keep the two of them alive. Even so, he could feel cool sweat beading on his bare arms and legs and he couldn't shake that sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

On his holographic display, Ramirez watched the *Osiris* step out from behind a rock outcrop. Its armor was blackened and scorched all up and down the left side. A dried crust of green coolant stained the red-on-green striped paint around the gaping wounds where autocannon shells had shattered ferro-fiborous composite armor. The boxy short-range missile launcher making the left "arm" had been torn open and dangled uselessly from a handful of myomer bundles.

"Alright, stay close. We're almost to the end of the ridge. Then it's across the Sivry River, and a clear run to the pass." Ramirez paused, and then asked the question he'd been dreading since they shook that patrol. "How are your jumpjets?" With the leg damage, Din would never be able to ford the river. They would have to rely on the *Osiris*' jumpjets to launch the 'Mech over the rushing waters.

"Right are fine. Left side jets, I've got... one out and one in the yellow. I'm down to 90 meters."

Ramirez nodded, though he knew Din couldn't see the gesture "All right, stay to the ridge and keep your speed up." He realized they had been whispering, as if afraid of being heard. They had been using encrypted tight-band directional radio and laser-links to talk to each other. Completely secure, of course. Still, instincts die hard.

As the minutes ticked by, Ramirez began to relax a little. Perhaps those Capellan 'Mechs hadn't followed them, after all. If so, it would be the first thing to go right since they left on this mad dash to reach Valexa's Bimini Mountains. Hell, it'd be the first thing to go right since the Chancellor's troops arrived in system.

They'd been expecting an attack, of course. The March Militias had been mobilized as soon as the Federated Suns began their push into Capellan territory last June, re-liberating St. Ives and penetrating all the way to the worlds of Hexare, Imalda, and Glasgow—only one hyperspace jump away from the Capellan capital world of Sian.

Then things got strange. The news reports said a warship appeared over Sian and bombarded the Forbidden City. Chancellor Sun-Tsu Liao was missing, feared dead. What's more, the Capellans claimed the warship that launched the attack belonged to the Federated Suns.

Preposterous, of course. Everyone in the AFFS knew it could not have been one of theirs, not with most of the navy struggling to break the Word of Blake blockade on New Avalon. Of course, that would not assuage their ancient enemies. When *Sang-jiang-jun* Zahn, acting for the missing Chancellor Liao, launched a massive counterattack that sent the AFFS regular troops reeling, the militias were brought to full readiness.

When the counterattack became a counter-invasion, militia troops on Valexa knew trouble was coming. When Capellan troops landed on Algot and Halloran V, they knew it would be coming soon.

Still, when the attack did come, it was much faster and much more vicious than any could have predicted. Appearing at a pirate point, two full regiments of BattleMechs supported by another of heavy armor and some seven squadrons of aerospace fighters descended on the Militia's single 'Mech regiment and still understrength armor and aerospace support. Almost as surprising as the speed of the attack was the units involved: 2nd McCarron's Armored Cavalry and Warrior House *Daidachi*, some of the most elite troops in the entire Capellan Confederation Armed Forces.

And then there were the 'Mechs painted all black. No one in the Militia could tell how many there were; at least a battalion, certainly. Whoever they were, they always seemed to show up in the wrong place. Their

equipment was top-notch. Their pilots were ruthless. The rumor was, they were the Death Commandos—the Chancellor’s personal special forces ‘storm troopers’.

The Valexa March Militia was not a green unit. The regiment had seen heavy fighting in the FedCom Civil War. They were tried, battle-hardened troops, even if they had recently taken on a number of new recruits to replenish their ranks. Even so, they were easily outmatched by the elite Capellan shock troops. The Militia Aerospace squadrons were swept aside in a matter of minutes. The spaceport was seized in hours. While Lieutenant-General Delittle led 1st and 3rd Battalions in a counterattack to reclaim the Goa Heights, a lightning-fast combat drop by elements from House *Daidachi*’s 2nd Battalion flanked the Militia, destroyed their repair facilities, raided their stockpiles, and cut them off from retreat.

Ramirez and Din had avoided that disaster, but just barely. Lieutenant Waldeve had led her lance—herself, Ramirez, Din, and Jayn Ricco—to intercept a Capellan recon lance spotted trying to sneak around 3rd Battalion’s right flank. They ended up fighting a running battle leading away from the main force, taking full advantage of their local knowledge of the terrain. During the skirmish, Ramirez actually managed to drop a *Raven*, one of the Confederation’s prized electronic-warfare scouts. The rest of the Capellan probe slipped away, but by that time the main Militia force had already been lost.

Now, broken and scattered, the Valexa March Militia was on the verge of collapse. Lieutenant-General Bolan’s infantry brigade had managed to hold the port city of Smithson and some of the more remote facilities in the Bimini Mountains, but without immediate help the planet would be lost. They needed the AFFS to send either reinforcements and supplies for a protracted resistance, or to withdraw the surviving Militia armored units off-planet to regroup, rearm, and reinforce defenses deeper in FedSuns territory and allow a surrender—if only temporarily—of the planet. They needed to get a message out, but with the invaders controlling both the spaceport and the capital of Valexa City with its ComStar-run HPG station, how were they to get their request for aid and their intelligence of Capellan strength and disposition to AFFS command?

There was one option, but it was risky. Though the invaders had captured the main spaceport, there was a subsidiary airfield large enough

to serve as a runway for a small DropShip on a plateau in the Bimini Mountains. So far, Bolan's infantry brigade had managed to keep it in Militia hands, possibly because the invaders had made no indication they were aware of its existence. At this remote field was a *Leopard*-class DropShip, the *Felicity Klimkosky*. This DropShip had been returning from ferrying a strike lance from 2nd Battalion to a defensive firebase in the northern deserts when the invasion came. Her captain had put the ship down at the Bimini Mountain base to avoid Capellan aerospace patrols, and as such had been one of the few DropShips in Militia possession to avoid destruction.

There was also a JumpShip waiting at the Nadir Jump Point. Most of the Militia's JumpShips were off aiding other branches of the Capellan March Militia in their rapid retreat from the Confederation onslaught. One, though, the *Scout*-class ship *Silvertongue*, had been undergoing routine maintenance to its K-F boom. As such, it was still in-system and could ferry the *Felicity Klimkosky* to wherever they needed to go. Naturally, the idea of simply radioing the *Silvertongue* and having them leave to take the message directly had come up, but quickly dismissed as the transmission could be easily traced, and with the large amount of ECM jamming the Capellans were using, the message might not get through in the first place. That jamming also led to problems contacting the *Felicity Klimkosky*. The Militia had managed to get simple messages through to the defenders in the mountains alerting them of the plan, but it had been deemed vital to get what intelligence on the Capellan forces as they could off planet as well. Such a transmission posed similar problems as radioing the JumpShip. That meant the intelligence would have to be delivered by hand. And that meant someone would have to get through Capellan lines and reach the DropShip waiting in the mountains.

And that was why Ramirez and Din were running for their lives through the lightly-wooded hills south of the Sivry River trying to make it to the Upland Pass. The higher-ups had debated long and hard on who to send. A VTOL could get there quickly, but the Militia had none left operational. A fast-moving hovercraft would be thwarted by the forested hills and high mountain passes, and any other vehicle wouldn't be able to make it across the Sivry without a bridge—which were all under enemy control. An infantry unit could make it, but would take much too long. In the end, only a BattleMech was deemed capable of making the journey.

There were precious few 'Mechs to spare, and most of the handful left in working order were heavily damaged in the fighting. Lieutenant Waldeve's pursuit lance, being fast, light BattleMechs in full fighting condition, were tasked with the job. Each of their four 'Mechs carried a copy of the vital intelligence, and each of the four MechWarriors was briefed on where to go, what to say, and who to say it to. So long as at least one of them got out, there was hope of relief from the rest of the AFFS.

The operation began well enough. A diversionary raid by the remnants of Carlisle's Armor Battalion in the early hours of the morning allowed Waldeve's lance to slip through enemy lines and begin their run to the Pass. The first hour barely saw any Capellan patrols.

Then, they ran into that Assault Lance.

They had been following a river valley as it wound through a narrow gorge. When they rounded a bend, there they were, painted in the colors of the 2nd McCarron's Armored Cavalry and partially hidden in the trees, waiting for them. A massive *Yu Huang* and *Cerberus*, a new type of *Marauder* Ramirez had never seen before, and the runt of the pack, a 45-ton *Vindicator*. Any one of these 'Mechs would be a deadly opponent for them. The *Yu Huang* and *Cerberus* each weighed as much as three of their own 'Mechs put together and each devoted more mass to weapon systems than Ramirez's *Valkyrie* weighed in total.

Poor Ricco was on point. A flash of silver, and a hypersonic gauss rifle slug from the *Cerberus* ripped his *Assassin's* torso nearly in half. Then, a bright flash from a particle projection cannon and his 'Mech disintegrated in a brilliant fireball as his own ammunition destroyed his 'Mech from the inside out. Ramirez looked for Ricco to eject, but saw nothing.

Ramirez's *Valkyrie* and Din's *Osiris* had jumpjets, allowing them to leap clear of the gorge and into the relative safety of the woods. The Lieutenant wasn't so lucky. Her *Wolfhound* could be deadly if given room to run, but did not have jumpjets. She would have to either run the gauntlet or climb the ravine walls. Ramirez and Din ducked in and out of the woods to try and give the Lieutenant covering fire, but she was pinned down under the assault 'Mechs' massive guns. Unable to help, Ramirez watched in horror as the *Yu Huang's* massive autocannon blasted armor from *Wolfhound's* chest and sent the 'Mech sprawling across the ravine floor. The *Vindicator*,

fast and nimble, swept in and cut the *Wolfhound's* leg off with its particle cannon, then with a swift movement, drove its armored foot down on the stricken 'Mech's head.

Then the assault lance moved to chase down himself and Din. They ran, trying to break line-of-sight. The *Marauder* and *Cerberus* fell behind quickly, but the *Vindicator* and *Yu Huang*, each with jumpjets of their own, pursued them relentlessly. At one point, Din got caught in the open between a couple stands of trees, and was rewarded with massive blasts from the *Yu Huang's* heavy autocannon and the *Vindicator's* particle cannon for his trouble. Somehow, the rookie pilot had managed to keep his machine upright and moving. It was shortly after that they lost contact. Ramirez still wasn't sure if they gave the Capellans the slip, or if they let them go.

That had been several hours ago, only shortly after midnight. Ramirez still anxiously watched his sensors display, but now he was starting to think they just might have made it after all. They were nearing the river, and the mountains were just beyond. Then it was just a nice, mountain hike, which would be made much easier and faster by their jumpjets, and then...

"ECM jamming to the southwest!" Din's voice cut in. He had fallen behind again and was limping to join Ramirez at the base of the ridge.

Ramirez looked at his own sensors, but didn't see anything to indicate jamming. But then, he was farther along the ridge than Din was by nearly half a kilometer. If the jamming bubble was at the extreme of Din's range he might not be able to detect it yet anyway.

"Keep an eye on it. Hopefully it's just a patrol and they'll miss us. Stay low and in the trees."

They kept moving to the north, but now his anxiety was growing. The enemy was out there, and they were close. That ECM bubble could mean anything. All combat units had sophisticated ECM which flooded any battlefield, and a bevy of sensors to try and power through it. Some combat vehicles and 'Mechs went a step above and mounted the powerful Guardian ECM. When everyone's ECM was screaming at the top of their lungs, the Guardian went and screamed louder. Anything within a Guardian's effective radius was hidden from all but line-of-sight sensors.

That bubble could be a lowly scout car, or it could be an elite BattleMech company. They could tell which direction the jamming was coming from, but they wouldn't know what was in it until it came into view, and that was a dangerous situation.

The jamming bubble grew closer. Ramirez's computer was noting its presence now, too. He wanted to get to the other side of the ridge and put a hundred meters of solid rock between him and any sensors anyone in that bubble was packing, but that would mean exposing himself while he crossed the ridge. And using jumpjets now would definitely draw attention.

Superheated air cracked as a perfectly straight line of leaves and branches suddenly flashed with an incandescent light. The laser beam had passed dangerously close to Din's lagging 'Mech. The young MechWarrior cursed. Whatever was in that bubble was shooting at them, and it had a large-class laser.

"Move closer to the ridge, Din. Try to keep as many trees between you and them as possible."

"I see one, sir!" Din responded. "I can't get a lock on it, and it's not showing up on anything but optical."

Ramirez swore to himself then keyed his radio "Stealth armor. The Cappies are mounting it on some of their newer 'Mechs. Makes 'em damned hard to hit at range."

The ultimate in ECM, Capellan stealth armor used everything from special heat baffles to the latest radar absorbent materials to make a 'Mech almost as invisible to sensors as possible. Most effective at long ranges, it was expensive to produce and difficult to maintain. Only the best line troops fielded stealth units.

The air cracked again as another laser beam lanced through it. This one passed harmlessly behind the two Militia 'Mechs. Ramirez still couldn't see their assailant, and Din was claiming he had broken line-of-sight prior to the shot. For several minutes more they ducked along the base of the ridge. Every now and then, another beam would lance out from their assailant, sometimes in their vicinity, sometimes not. Ramirez was

beginning to wonder what this Cappie's game was. Why was he firing blindly?

The granite ridge drew lower to the ground then disappeared altogether. Before them lay a broad clearing, then shallow hill dotted with a light sprinkling of tall trees. And immediately beyond, Ramirez could see the grey ribbon of the Sivry. Almost there, just another 400 meters or so. Their 'Mechs could cross that distance in a matter of seconds, easily.

Another laser beam cracked behind them. The growing unease in Ramirez's mind finally boiled over. Something definitely wasn't right. He felt like that stealthed 'Mech was herding them, trying to flush them out of their cover in the woods.

He pulled back on the throttle. His *Valkyrie* slowed its run, coming to a stop at the edge of the woods. Din was still a hundred meters behind, and the mysterious assailant off somewhere to the left, still shrouded in its ECM bubble.

Cautiously, he eased his 'Mech backwards as Din came up next to him.

"What's wrong, Sir?"

"I don't like the looks of this, Din. I'm going to take a quick look around." With that, he slammed his throttle forward again and pressed down on the right foot pedal. The *Valkyrie* turned on its heel and dashed back into the woods, the hand at the end of the left arm automatically rising up to bat a tree branch out of the way.

He guided his 'Mech up onto the granite rise, giving him a commanding view of the area. He was met by the crack of another laser beam sizzling right over his 'Mech's left shoulder. There was the offender. He thumbed his control stick and activated the zoom on his display. The distant 'Mech was magnified in his vision. He recognized it instantly; the backwards-canted legs, the stubby torso and forward-jutting cockpit. A Hellespont Industries *Sha Yu*. Indeed, now that he could see it, his *Valkyrie*'s computer handily identified it as a SYU-2B.

Only the one, though. The ECM bubble did not seem to be hiding anyone else. That was fine by him, at 40 tons, that *Sha Yu* was dangerous enough. In addition to its advanced armor, the Capellan 'Mech mounted four lasers—two Martell Extended-Range Large and two Diverse Optics Extended-Range Mediums. More than enough firepower to reduce his 'Mech to scrap.

He could fight it. Even with the difficulties of penetrating the stealth armor's ECM, he could hit it. His *Valkyrie*'s LRM launcher had a slight range advantage on the Martell lasers, and with the stealth armor running, the *Sha Yu* wouldn't be able to fire more than one of them at a time without overheating. He would miss a lot, though. A quick glance at his weapons indicator put the idea of a fight out of his mind. His *Valkyrie* carried 16 reloads for its Valiant Arbalest LRM 15 Missile Pack. He'd expended 11 of them in the battle with the assault lance, leaving him only five shots.

No, better to try and outrun it. He turned again and sent his 'Mech crashing back down the ridge. As he did so, the low morning sun glinted off something in the woods on the hill by the river.

Ambush. The word jumped to his mind. That *Sha Yu* had been herding them, and now his friends were waiting to blast them apart as they dashed for the river.

They did have one option. They could run to the east and cross the river farther down. So long as that *Sha Yu* pilot kept his stealth armor active, his firepower was effectively halved, and they might have a chance to slip away.

As if in response to his plan, his sensors beeped a warning. New sensor trace. The pilot of the *Sha Yu* had deactivated his stealth armor, and was charging their position.

So much for that. They needed as much distance between them and that 'Mech as possible. The *Sha Yu* didn't have jumpjets, so if they could get across the river, it would at least slow him down.

"Din! Run! Northeast! Go!" Branches snapped as the 30-ton behemoth plowed its way through. They had to get across the river. There were still the unknowns in those woods, but he'd just have to hope they could slip

around them by avoiding the run straight towards the banks and instead trying to swing around to the east.

The *Valkyrie* tore into the clearing just behind Din's *Osiris*, graceful in comparison to its battered companion. Ramirez swung more to the east, trying to avoid the woods on the hill. He hoped Din would follow suit. The *Sha Yu* was still somewhere back beyond the woods along the rise, out of sight. The river grew closer. They were going to make it!

Ramirez's sensors beeped again to alert him of the new contacts. A quartet of *Po*-class heavy tanks broke out from beneath their camouflage netting.

Ramirez saw Din turn to meet this new threat. He yelled for his lancemate to stop and break off the attack. But, the young MechWarrior was trained to fight, and had been indoctrinated that the BattleMech was the king of the battlefield. As the lead tank broke free of the light woods, a stream of high-explosive shells erupted from its Class 10 autocannon with a rumbling roar. Magnesium flashes danced across Din's *Osiris* as ablative armor was torn asunder. The right leg buckled as the hip actuator was blown apart, pitching the hapless 'Mech forward and to the ground.

Ramirez only let out a frustrated grunt as he twitched his control stick and slammed on the left foot pedal. The *Valkyrie* twisted at the waist and pirouetted to the left, left arm extended for balance. He could see his 'Mech's right arm, ending in the stubby muzzle of an ER Medium laser, rising to take aim with his reticule. He thumbed the targeting circuit then waited, counting the heartbeats until the reticle flashed gold, and pulled the trigger.

Fifteen sets of armored doors slid open on fifteen cylinders arranged in a cluster occupying much of the left side of the *Valkyrie*'s torso. With a faint puff of smoke, fifteen missiles rocketed forth in rapid succession and arced up high into the dawn sky. Individual missiles could be easily foiled by ECM, dodged, or shot down. As such, weapon designers had long ago learned that swarms of small missiles launched en masse were of much more use on the modern battlefield. Ramirez's VLK-QD1 carried 240 individual missiles, each weighing less than a mere nine kilograms, which it launched in flights of 15 at a time. Individually, each missile was not much

of a threat to modern ablative armor. When taken all together, they could wear down even the heaviest defenses.

The LRMs homed in on the Artemis IV targeting beam from the *Valkyrie*, racing down to shatter armor along the tank's flank. Moments later, the sound of the staccato explosions filtered through Ramirez's cockpit, loud even at this distance. Triggering the zoom on his display, he watched in satisfaction as the tank's treads sloughed off and the vehicle ground to a halt. With another twitch of his fingers on the control stick, a bright light, bright as a welding torch, flared up as Ramirez's laser scribed a black furrow across the stricken tank's side. Normally, the *Po*'s armor would have been more than enough to withstand that onslaught, but Ramirez was aiming for where he had specifically watched his missiles strike. A gout of flame ripped the tank apart.

The other tanks, however, had already cleared the woods. Din was still on the ground. His *Osiris* floped around, trying to maneuver its busted legs underneath it, propping itself up as well as it could on its stubby weapons pod of an arm. The autocannons of the next two tanks caught him dead-on. One ripped into the already savaged left side, cracking the fusion engine. The second stream hit the *Osiris* right in the center and stitched upwards, shattering the cockpit. Flashes of light showed out as cool morning air rushed into the superheated reactor while the 'Mech collapsed in a heap.

Now Ramirez was alone. Against three tanks and a medium-class BattleMech still charging around the rise, he knew there was no chance.

"Sorry, Din." He whispered, and stomped hard on both foot pedals at once. The jumpjets mounted on his 'Mech's legs and rear torso let off with a whine which quickly built to a roar. The 'Mech lifted heavily into the air, his neurohelmet reading his impulses to help keep the machine stable. He set fly one last salvo of LRMs at one of the tanks, but did not bother to see whether they hit or not. He let the jets of superheated air carry him up and over the churning river. Once he reached the other side, he cut the jets and hit the ground running. Autocannon shells whizzed past, but with speed and a couple more jumps, he put a several low hills between him and his foes. Pointing his 'Mech north, he ran as fast as he could towards the mountains looming above him.

Chapter 2

Comic Books and Aliens

A crisp autumn breeze blew through the boughs of the giant tree. Gold and orange leaves rustled dryly as ancient branches creaked and swayed. One orange leaf lost its grip and tumbled free, dancing in the late afternoon sun. It swooped and dived and eventually came to rest on the page of a book lying open on a balcony built into the side of the tree's fat trunk.

A faint twinkling light appeared around the leaf, quickly growing to a subdued purple aura. The leaf lifted off the page and moved steadily and deliberately—as if it had been plucked by an invisible hand—away from the book. The aura vanished as a gust of wind swept the offending leaf away. The same gust rustled the pages of the book, threatening to send them cascading wildly. A small lavender hoof quickly stamped down on the pages, holding them in place.

Twilight Sparkle was sitting on the floor of the balcony of the town library which doubled as her home. She rested on her belly with her legs demurely tucked beneath her. Well, except for the forelimb she was using to keep the pages of her book from blowing over. She glowered at the uncooperative weather as she waited for the gust to die down, tilting her head so the breeze wouldn't blow her indigo hair into her eyes. Carefully removing her hoof, she turned her attention again to the pages.

The book was lavishly illustrated in that particular Equestrian style. Each page had a pair of rectangular panels, each filled with an elaborate and intricate illustration. The words of the book were not immediately noticeable, being woven like a thread around and through each image. Actually reading a book like this was an art in itself. Not all books were like this, of course. Most had neat, organized text arranged in neat lines and arrayed into paragraphs. This book was of an older, almost forgotten, style where picture and text bled together so the words became the pictures and the pictures became the paragraphs.

Twilight Sparkle was not reading the words. She had read them before, of course. She had read this very book many times over. One could say

she knew it by heart. No, what held her attention today were the pictures themselves. She had been making her way through several books of this type of all genres; spell books; books of myths and legends; books of prophecy; books of nursery rhymes; history books; science books; story books; books on animals and books on plants; books on weather and books on agriculture. Books illustrated in the archaic style and ones with just simple pictures. The only consistent variable is that all the books HAD pictures. She had been scrutinizing pictures for days. She had noticed something when perusing an old book of magical theory and now a hypothesis was forming. She was now pouring over every illustration she could get her hooves on looking for evidence.

The illustration that held her attention now was a pastoral scene. A flock of colorful ponies frolicked in a verdant field beneath a bright blue sky. A stylized sun set forth long golden rays piercing wispy curlicue clouds while birds perched in the full, green trees. Twilight's large, purple eyes drank in every detail. She focused particularly where a sizable group of ponies were preparing for a festival. The text weaving throughout indicated the Summer Sun Celebration marking the longest day of the year. The ponies in the picture were erecting a variety of pavilions, grandstands, and banners. A small town, little more than a cluster of tiny huts and a fenced-off pasture, sat on a low hill by a winding stream behind the celebration preparations. And in the distance, clear in the background, was the unmistakable silhouette of the castle at Canterlot cantilevered out from the side of its mountain. For a moment, Twilight mused if the little town in the picture might depict Ponyville, the very town which had been her home for the past year. The geography seemed to match, at least. But, then, it could have been half a dozen small towns scattered across the valleys between Canterlot and the Everfree Forest—Maresville, Buckingham, Trotsworth... She put the idea out of her mind. Trivialities of geography were not her current objective, though she did make a mental note to investigate the possibility in the future.

The little unicorn furrowed her brow. A purple aura, a match of the one that had surrounded the leaf, engulfed the horn on her head. A second aura sprung up around the book. The pages flipped rapidly before coming to rest at another set of images later in the book. Twilight focused intently on one of the images on this page, but only for a minute. With another glow, she flipped back to her original image of study. With a frown, she sent the pages flipping back the other way, then back, then back again. With an

exasperated sigh, she turned to a new page entirely and began pouring over a new image.

She was so engrossed with her survey, she failed to notice when a sky blue form swept down from clouds and alighted on the railing of her balcony. The new arrival swished her rainbow hued tail and dropped what appeared to be a pamphlet from her mouth.

“Hey, Twilight.”

The lavender unicorn did not make any indication she had heard her friend. The blue pegasus cocked her head.

“Hey, Twilight?”

Again, the unicorn did not look up. If anything, she seemed to peer even closer at her book. Her visitor rolled her eyes with a huff. Spreading her wings, she hopped up from the balcony and fluttered over to the oblivious bookworm. Hovering with her face just inches away, she inhaled deeply.

“Twilight!” she yelled, as sharply and suddenly as she could muster. Twilight leapt into the air and tumbled backwards with a startled cry. Seeing her friend in such a state, the little pegasus laughed.

“Rainbow Dash! You startled me!” Twilight stammered, eyes wide. She extricated herself from the rather undignified heap she had landed in and dusted herself off. For her part, Rainbow Dash was still laughing, forelimbs crossed over her belly and tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She hadn’t expected such a strong—and hilarious—reaction from her bookish friend, and she was relishing the moment.

“Yeah, yeah. Ha ha. Very funny.” Twilight screwed up her face.

Seeing her friend’s displeasure, Rainbow Dash regained her composure, wiping a tear from her eye with a hoof. “Heh. Sorry, ‘bout that Twilight. But you were just so wrapped up in that book.”

Twilight’s face softened. “I take it you didn’t stop by just to interrupt my studies and watch me jump out of my skin?”

“Oh, yeah!” With a flap, the pegasus swooped over to where she had dropped her cargo and with a flick kicked it up into the air then caught it, balancing it on her back. “Is Spike around? I wanted to return his comic book.”

“Spike? Yeah, he should be downstairs.” She nodded to the door behind her, “Go on in.”

“Thanks, Twilight,” Rainbow Dash trotted past through the arch that was more window than door and into the library, “Oh, and sorry about scaring ‘ya.”

Twilight smiled and settled back into her previous orientation. Rainbow had left the door to the balcony hanging open. Twilight didn’t mind. It was a lovely autumn day, and maybe the old library could use airing out of some of its stuffiness. She levitated her book back into place and flipped to the proper page.

She was just starting to lose herself in the tangled intricacies of a lovely illustration of a harvest, picking up right where she left off, when her consciousness was suddenly yanked out of its reverie by a bout of laughter from somewhere within the library.

She gave a small smile and went back to her book. Or at least, she tried to. She found her curiosity wandering away from the page and off down to where her friends were. With a huff, she tried to focus on her study, but another bout of laughter wafting up from below preempted her.

Twilight groaned and tried to focus even harder. Now she could hear voices chattering away, too distant to be distinct but unmistakably happy and excited.

She gave up. There was no use in fighting it anymore. Her interest had been completely stolen away. She knew she wasn’t going to be doing any more studying this afternoon. Her horn glowed again as she calmly closed the book and stood up making another mental note of which page she was on. The book floated effortlessly in the air above and in front of her as she entered the tree.

The main portion of the library was downstairs, at the base of the tree. This upstairs portion doubled as additional collections and Twilight's private quarters. Little more than a sitting area, bookshelves carved into the warm wood of the tree were filled to overflowing with books. Only a few personal effects indicated this area was more than just another room of the library. Her writing desk stood off to one side beneath a window, buried in scrolls and even more books. The fireplace sat empty awaiting the winter chill. Her bed sat in a small loft above the sitting area accessed by a steep staircase, surrounded by even more overflowing shelves. Spike's bed, little more than a box, sat on the floor by the foot of the bed. Potted flowers and painted organic motifs of stylized leaves, branches, and stars combined with the tree's natural grace to give the room a warm, welcoming look.

Twilight dropped the book on her writing desk and turned to make sure the door to the balcony had latched properly behind her. Satisfied, she trotted down through the round aperture set in the wall and down the stairs to the library proper.

The main library was done up in the same style as Twilight's quarters. The long staircase decorated with small, pink hearts arced around the edge of the large main room, more overstuffed shelves carved into the wood beneath.

Twilight expected to see Rainbow Dash and Spike—and indeed she did. Rainbow hovered in the air by the central reading table with its carved wooden horsehead statue, muscular wings slowly beating. Spike's stout scaly purple and green body sat on a pillow off to the side, comically short legs outstretched. They were conversing animatedly, presumably about the comic book. Who twilight did not expect to see was the strongly-built pony with the orange coat and unruly blond mane and tail tied back loosely, a trio of apples on her flank, well-worn saddlebags over her back, and a battered old cowboy hat on her head.

"Applejack? I didn't take you for a comic book fan." Twilight greeted the countrified newcomer with a warm smile.

"Howdy, Twi." Applejack trotted over to meet Twilight at the base of the stairs, "Nah, I just walked in on these here two chatterboxes. Actually, I came here lookin' for y'all." She said in her rustic twang.

“Oh?” Twilight raised her brow “What’s up?”

“Well, you know the annual Runnin’ of the Leaves is comin’ up here in a couple of weeks, right?”

“Of course.” Twilight had only been in town for one Running of the Leaves event so far. The annual festival and hoof-race was responsible for the dropping of all the leaves from the trees around Ponyville, signaling that the Fall would soon be ending and Winter fast approaching.

“Well, you know how I’ve been named one of the official organizers this year?” Applejack said with a measure of pride.

“No, I hadn’t. Congratulations! That’s quite an honor.” Twilight paused, “But, isn’t that rather time-consuming?”

Applejack waved a hoof “Nah. Applebuck Season is already done and over with, and most of the other harvests are already in, or will be soon enough.” She reached into her saddlebag and withdrew a rolled poster, which she spread on the floor. “Actually, I wanted to know if it’d be alright to hang one of these here posters outside the library.”

Twilight peered down at the poster. It was a simple affair, a rather attractive stylization of the race with the time and location for the start of the festivities written in formal pictograms. “Of course it is. Here, let me lend you a hoof.”

“Thank ya’ kindly, Twilight.” The orange pony stooped to pluck the poster from the ground and turned toward the front door.

Twilight followed her out, leaving Rainbow and Spike inside still comparing notes. Like on many of the buildings in Ponyville, the red painted door was arched and split in two, top and bottom. A large painted representation of a candlestick, symbolic of the purpose of the building-in-a-tree decorated the top half. Twilight levitated the poster away from Applejack and held it in place next to the door with her magic. Applejack rustled around in her saddlebag and extracted a box of nails. Gingerly holding one in her teeth, she pressed it through the poster and into the bark. She returned to her bag and drew out a hammer, holding the wooden

handle sideways with her mouth. Before she could swing to tool, the nail slipped out and tumbled to the ground.

“Aw, shoot.” She dropped the hammer and plucked the nail up in her teeth again. She pressed it back into place and quickly went for the hammer, but the nail fell out before she could even get her mouth around the handle.

“Gosh darn it!” she moved to pick the nail up again.

“Here, let me help,” said Twilight. She pinned the poster in place with a forehoof and concentrated on the nail. It glowed with her characteristic purple light and lifted up to the poster. She held it in place while Applejack swung her neck to drive the head of the hammer onto the nail, sinking it partially into the thick bark. Twilight plucked another nail from the box and held it in place for Applejack and together they finished tacking down the poster.

As she returned the hammer to her bag, Applejack noticed her unicorn friend had barely taken her eyes off of it.

“What’s the matter, Twi? Never seen a hammer before?” the yellow pony smirked.

“What? Oh, no, I was just... thinking about something.” Twilight shook her head “It’s not important.”

They returned to the interior of the library. Spike and Rainbow were digging through a box of Spike’s comic books. Or rather, Spike was digging while Rainbow hovered over his shoulder. The stubby little dragon appeared to be searching for something in particular.

“So, will y’all be runnin’ in the race again this year, Twi?” Applejack asked as they entered.

“Oh, I, uh. I hadn’t thought about it.” Intrigued by the event, Twilight had run in the race the last time it was held, much to the amusement of Applejack and Rainbow Dash, her more athletic friends. After trailing the entire length, she had sprinted ahead at the very end to finish a respectable fifth. Though she had found it enjoyable enough—mostly for the opportunity

to enjoy the weather and the fall scenery—she was content to just watch from the sidelines this year.

“Aw, Twilight, ya’ gotta race again!” Rainbow floated over to meet them, “A.J. and I still owe you for beatin’ us last year.”

Twilight felt her cheeks flush. “I’ll think about it,” she said carefully. “Meanwhile, I hope you two have still learned your lesson from last year?” The only reason she had beaten the two of them last time was thanks to the two hot-headed mares’ ‘friendly’ competition which had devolved into an all-out wrestling match by the time they crawled across the finish line in last place.

The two ponies shared a look.

“I don’t think y’all have to worry ‘bout that. I learned my lesson,” Applejack drawled.

“Yeah. B’sides, this year I’m gonna win outright.” Rainbow struck an aggressive pose, rainbow-hued lightning bolt clearly displayed on her flank. Applejack shot her a look, and then shook her head. Rainbow was an incorrigible boaster, and there was no sense in arguing with her.

Over by the stairs, Spike let out a triumphant whoop, “Ah HA! Found it!” He held aloft a tattered comic book and ran over to where the ponies were standing by the door “Here’s the one I was telling you about, Dash.”

“Oh, Awesome!” Rainbow let out an excited squeal “I can’t wait, it sounds so cool!”

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorites.” The little dragon said “Just... be careful with it, will you? It’s... my favorite, and I don’t want it...”

“Ah, no sweat, Spike. I’ll take good care of it.”

“What’s got you two so excited?” Twilight’s curiosity had gotten the better of her. She trotted over to look at the tattered booklet and read the title “*The Adventures of Orion Nebula, Spacepony Extraordinaire?*” she read.

“Volume 3: Orion versus the Martian Menace!” Spike finished.

“Oh, I remember this. You had me read it to you when you were little, er, littler. Isn’t this the one with the...”

“Don’t spoil it for Rainbow Dash!” Spike interrupted “Besides, I seem to remember you didn’t like it” he scowled.

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it,” Twilight shot back defensively, “I only said the astronomy was very inaccurate.”

Spike began counting off on his fingers “And that the Martians were silly, and that the spaceship was unrealistic, and that the plot was predictable, and that...”

“Ok, ok. You’ve made your point,” Twilight’s head drooped. “I’m sorry, Spike. I didn’t know you took it so seriously.”

“Well...” Spike tapped a clawed finger on his chin mischievously “You *could* make it up to me by taking me out to eat for supper instead of cooking in tonight.”

Twilight looked at him knowingly “Spike, did you not finish your chores?”

Applejack took the opportunity to interject into the conversation “Aw, shucks. I could go for some grub. What say we all go finish hangin’ up these here posters and then go get somethin’ to eat?”

The proposal was agreeable to all.

“Look, all I’m saying is, why do aliens always have to look like ponies?”

“I’m sorry, I still don’t follow.” Now Applejack was totally lost.

The four of them were enjoying the fading evening on the patio of one of the restaurants off the town green. The sun, now a deep blood red, was just beginning to sink behind the low green-clad mountains far to the west,

deep within the Everfree Forest. Everything had taken on the golden glow of an autumn twilight as long shadows slowly crept along. Most of Ponyville's businesses were clustered around the town green which formed a grassy ring around the massive town hall or along one of the couple spoke-like major thoroughfares extending out.

They had quickly finished with hanging the advertisements around the town and had settled on this small bistro more on Applejack's suggestion that she owed it to the owner. They had ordered from a tall, slender waiter with a slicked-back mane and had dined leisurely. Spike, of course, tried to order gemstones for his meal. He knew perfectly well no restaurant in town served minerals as food, but he liked to rub it in.

Their conversation had drifted back to Twilight's apparent dislike of Spike's comic book (though she maintained she did not dislike it, per se, just found the inconsistencies jarring). This had led to a discussion of fantasy and fictional literature in general, mostly with Twilight trying to explain what put her off about the genera. "It's not that I don't like them," she explained, "I've read several. I thoroughly enjoy many. I just think it is wise to keep one's hooves on the ground and remember what is real and what's make-believe."

Now, she was trying to explain her problems with space aliens.

She sighed "I mean, look at almost every depiction of a space alien out there. Books, plays, pictures, comics. In almost each and every one of them, the aliens look like ponies. Maybe with bumpy foreheads or strange patterns, but still ponies."

"Ok..." Applejack nodded.

"Now, why would a creature from another planet necessarily look anything like a pony? They would live in different conditions—different gravity, different plants, if there are plants on their planet at all, different atmosphere. There is no reason they should look just like we do." Twilight continued.

"Well, what would you prefer they look like, then?" Rainbow Dash was getting bored with the discussion. She thought she had known better than to get Twilight rolling on anything regarding literature or science. Or magic.

Or history. Or a half-dozen other topics. She liked Twilight, but sometimes that pony just took things so literally.

Twilight shrugged “I dunnoh. Something imaginative. A leathery blob with a beak for a mouth and tentacles instead of limbs. Something with a long neck and big head with a heart that you can see glowing in its chest. If aliens exist, they probably would look like nothing we could imagine.”

“Oh! How about something like a giant bear, but it walks straight up on two legs and has really long hair!” The exercise in creativity was perking Rainbow up.

Twilight laughed “Yeah, you’ve got it. Something more creative than a bald pony with little beady eyes.”

“What about, like, a giant insect thing with a long head and a big, toothy mouth? And inside that is *another* toothy mouth?” added Spike.

“Eww. Sounds awful” Applejack made a face.

“Sounds *awesome!*” countered Rainbow.

“I’m not sure how that would work, but you see what I mean? It doesn’t have to look anything like a pony,” said Twilight with an air of finality.

The sky darkened to a deep indigo as the sun dipped below the horizon. Twinkling stars began to peak out like tiny, sparkling grains of sand on a velvet cloth. The four friends sat sharing in the silence of the evening.

It was Applejack who finally broke the silence.

“Do y’all think they’re out there? The aliens, I mean?”

They were all silent for a moment more.

“Maybe,” Twilight said finally. “We know there are other planets and moons in the solar system. And if each star is another sun in itself, then it stands to reason they might have planets of their own.”

“The better question is if they’ve ever visited us” Rainbow Dash grinned.

Applejack swallowed nervously, Spike's toothy monster in her mind's eye, “Really? Y’all really think there might be aliens *here*?”

“Oh, yeah!” added Spike, “Haven’t you heard the stories? Flying saucers and alien abductions?”

“A-Ab-Abductions?”

Rainbow couldn’t let the opportunity pass “Oh, yeah. Abductions.” She crouched low and stalked around the table, “They say the aliens fly up in their spaceship all quiet-like. Then, you see a bright light... And they lift you up into their spaceship! Then they strap you down and hook you up to all sorts of weird machines...” Applejack’s eyes were wide. She was nearly shaking.

“Oh, now you’re just being silly!” Twilight interjected. “Don’t listen to them, Applejack. There is no evidence that any aliens have ever visited Equestria. Or that they even exist in the first place.”

“That’s just what *they* want you to think!” Spike piped in.

“They?” asked Twilight.

“You know, Them. The aliens.”

Twilight chuckled shook her head, “Oh, Spike.”

Night was coming fast. They all took their leave of each other and went their separate ways. Twilight would stay up a little later, she decided. She still wanted to finish studying that book.

As Applejack made her way back to her family’s apple orchard on the outskirts of town, she couldn’t help but glance around nervously. She didn’t want to admit it, but Spike and Rainbow had gotten to her. Horrible monsters dropping out of the skies and snatching ponies and hooking them

up to machines that did who-knows-what? The very idea gave her the willies. Or maybe it was the idea of being stolen away from her home and family she found disagreeable. And now, out here in the gathering darkness, every rustle in the bushes, every creak of a branch, and every shadow of a passing cloud became a lurking terror.

“Ah, horse-apples,” she whispered to herself. “There’s nothin’ out there, Applejack. You’re just bein’ a silly-filly.” She steeled herself and held her head high. She tried to tell herself time and again there was nothing to be frightened of. Still, she had never been so relieved to spy the soft glow from the barn windows.

If she had happened to look up as she trotted through the gate to Sweet Apple Acres, she might have noticed a small flash of light just within the darkened disc of the waxing autumn moon, as if a small star had suddenly burst to life and then just as quickly disappeared. Instead, the curious event went almost completely unnoticed to the residents of the small town.

Chapter 3

The *Silvertongue*

Nadir Jump Point
Valexia, Capellan March, Federated Suns
9 November 3068

The klaxon sounded again, counting down to the impending hyperspace jump.

Ramirez closed his eyes against another wave of nausea. He hated the sensation of weightlessness. Space travel didn't bother him in general, but most of his time in space had been spent on DropShips burning into and out of star systems, when their massive engines provided a semblance of gravity through raw acceleration. It was during the transition times— orbiting a planet, at mid-journey when the DropShip flipped over to begin its long deceleration, or when docked with a JumpShip—when he experienced the floating sensation of microgravity that he hated. He always felt sick and disoriented, like his stomach was doing flip-flops.

He steadied himself against the railing of the elevator cart. His companion in the car smirked.

“Haven't gotten your space-legs, huh ground-pounders?” Edgar Tartaglia, captain of the *Felicity Klimkosky*, smiled through his bristly blond mustache as he held himself in place with a simple handstrap, his long, lanky legs bent so the tips of his toes just brushed the floor of the open cart. Lights in the walls of the well-lit shaft glinted off his bald head. Ramirez gave the tall, thin man a weak half-smile. Somehow he felt the DropShip captain was being rather cavalier about the whole situation. Their third companion, a large, muscular mountain of a man with close-cropped almond hair and a scarred face that seemed to be stuck in a permanent scowl just grunted. He seemed to be adjusting to the lack of orientation better than Ramirez, but only just.

Ramirez had managed to rendezvous with the *Felicity Klimkosky* at the hidden base in the mountains shortly after midday. The *Leopard*-class

DropShip had begun its takeoff run almost before Ramirez's BattleMech had finished being loaded. It had taken almost a week at just over a 1 g burn to reach the *Silvertongue* waiting at the Nadir Standard Jump Point clear beyond the plane of the solar system, far, far beneath the south pole of Valexa.

They were traveling with a minimum complement. Normally, a *Leopard* carried a crew of nine in addition to pilots and technical teams for four BattleMechs and two Aerospace fighters. On the run from Valexa, the passenger quarters of the DropShip had seemed oddly empty. With no other pilots and no technical teams aboard the normally cramped quarters were surprisingly spacious and surprisingly lonely. The technical teams would all be needed for the guerilla campaign against the Capellan occupiers, leaving only a small squad of seven volunteer infantry, led by the large man sharing the elevator cart, in their place. Ramirez normally would have occupied the long journey by helping his chief tech repair and rearm his *Valkyrie*, but with no spare parts and no ammunition aboard, all he could do was clean his 'Mech of Valexa's dirt and grime. He felt guilty about not being back there, not standing with the Militia, adding his 'Mech's firepower to the fray. Still, he knew his duty. He knew his orders. He told himself he was still playing a vital role.

But each time, he kept seeing Din's smashed *Osiris* and the gaping hole where the cockpit should have been.

The *Felicity Klimkosky* now sat like an odd, angular wart midway along the *Silvertongue*'s slender fuselage. He had initially been surprised when Captain Tartaglia asked him to accompany him over to the *Silvertongue*. Now that he thought about it, he realized it made sense. As the lynchpin of the operation, if he could make contact with the necessary channels as soon after arriving at their destination as possible, their mission would be completed that much sooner. Ramirez also had to admit to himself he was excited. He had always ridden out hyperspace jumps in the past in his bunk aboard DropShips. To watch a jump from the bridge where things actually happened? How could he pass it up?

The elevator cart ran the length of the JumpShip, next to the massive jacket that housed the K-F boom. The *Scout* was small as JumpShips went, less than 275 meters from end to end. Its small size meant it could only carry a single DropShip with it through hyperspace, but made it ideal

for exploration and quick raids into enemy territory. They were now in the bulbous forward section of the ship which housed the crew quarters, medical bay, galley, and way at the tip, the bridge. The decks were laid out perpendicular to the length of the ship so that it was built like a skyscraper hanging in space, with the bridge on the topmost “floor”. Reaching the top of the shaft, the cart jolted to a stop. Tartaglia reached out his hand to the smooth metal door and it slid open at his touch.

The bridge was nothing like how Ramirez had imagined it. Without having to deal with the constraints of gravity, the bridge seemed to defy all attempts at logic and order. Command stations, with crewmembers strapped into padded chairs, were positioned all around the bridge at odd angles so that some were upside down or sideways compared to others. Only the bulkhead beneath him and the long, window “skylight” above gave any clue to which direction had been nominally declared “up.”

Even the activity surprised him. Ramirez had expected a flurry of activity with crewmembers shouting out reports and orders. He expected excitement and an electric energy in the air. Instead, the mood was much subdued. Only the soft hum of computers and the life support system filled his ears, and when crew members did speak, it was just as calm and soft. There was no excitement, only routine.

Seeing their entry, a small woman with black hair pulled back into a tight bun, light tinges of grey just showing at her temples, unstrapped herself from a console that seemed to be almost floating at the center of the tangle. She pushed herself to the aft bulkhead and clomped in her magnetic boots to greet her new arrivals.

“Edgar! Pleasure to have you back aboard the *Silvertongue*.” She smiled, wrinkles showing around the corners of her eyes and mouth as she extended a hand to the tall officer.

“Satenig. Pleasure to see you again.” He grasped her hand warmly, and then turned towards the two men floating behind him. “Captain, may I introduce Sergeant Brandon Ramirez and Leftenant Dieter Ling both of the Valexa March Militia. Sergeant, Leftenant, this is Captain Satenig Mawsley.”

Ramirez came to a smart salute "Pleasure to meet 'ya, Captain. Thank you for inviting us aboard." Ling saluted, but said nothing, not even cracking his permanently affixed frown.

Mawsley ignored the sour Lieutenant and looked directly at Ramirez. A young man, tanned skin, middling height, his dusky brown hair tied back in a short ponytail and his temples shaved clean in the style popular among MechWarriors, he had the distinct feeling she was sizing him up. "So, you're the reason for our little fool's errand, eh?"

Ramirez stammered for an answer, but the Captain just waved her hand.

"Well, the K-F field is forming nicely, and we'll be making the jump to Almach in a matter of moments." She kicked off the floor and floated back to her console. "We'll be arriving at the Zenith Jump Point. There's a recharging station there, so we should be able to get in contact with the AFFS or MIIO or whoever you need to talk to pretty quick." She slipped into the seat and drew the harness straps over her shoulders. "And now, gentlemen, if you'd be so kind as to strap yourselves in?" She gestured to a bank of chairs along the aft bulkhead facing towards the ceiling, harness straps floating loose.

As they were strapping themselves into their seats, Ramirez turned to Tartaglia.

"Can I ask you a question, sir?" he asked softly.

The tall officer cocked his head "What is it?" He loosened one of the shoulder straps.

Ramirez waved a hand towards the complicated mess of consoles in front of them "Why are all the seats all..." he struggled to find the right word.

Tartaglia smiled "You mean why are the bridge consoles all twisted around at weird angles like that? It does look kind of odd, doesn't it." he nodded to the complicated tangle, "Watch their heads."

Ramirez looked again. The personnel of the bridge crew were all intently watching the banks of displays at each of their stations. They talked softly to each other, and often communicated simply with quick gestures and glances. Watching their heads as instructed, he realized they were all clustered together. Any one crew member need only glance up, left, or right to meet the eyes of any other crew member, always a short distance away, always an easy distance across which to communicate. And Captain Mawsley was in the center, able to see and be seen by all. Ramirez let out an "Ah!"

"You see it now?" Tartaglia said softly. Ramirez nodded, and the Captain continued. "Without having to worry about gravity and which-end-is-up, some JumpShip bridges have gotten a little... experimental... in their layouts. The idea behind this setup is to facilitate communication between stations."

Above them, armored shutters slid shut across the windows, cutting off their view of the stars beyond.

Far beneath where the *Silvertongue's* bridge crew performed their oft-rehearsed routine, a shimmering, almost translucent figure pulled quickly at the service ladder rungs running beside the track of the elevator cart. The chameleon-like sneaksuit wasn't strictly necessary. All the JumpShip's crew should be up in the bulbous fore compartment, not down here with the mess of machinery. Still, just in case some technician had decided to stay behind, better to play it safe and avoid being spotted.

Already, time was running out. The jump process had already been initiated. It wasn't the jump that had the clandestine figure worried, it was more the complication of being caught down here should everything else go as designed. No, it was better to be far away from the engineering section when the K-F drive reached peak charge. Better to be back where the sneaksuit could be safely hidden away and a plausible alibi established.

Reaching the landing for the DropShip docking collar, the figure offered up a silent prayer the way in was clear. To come so close, failure now would just be embarrassing. Moving quickly, the figure slipped through an open hatch.

As the K-F field built in intensity, the *Silvertongue* and the *Felicity Klimkosky* were enveloped in a harsh light. Inside the vessels, time seemed to stretch on, though only a few minutes could have passed. On the bridge, Captain Mawsley acknowledged a series of all-clears from her subordinates. The JumpShip was prepared to make the jump through hyperspace. At this point, the process was entirely automatic. Only the failsafe systems could prevent the journey now. In an instant, the ship would disappear from the space around Valexa and instantly re-appear 28 light-years away above the Almach system, deeper in Federated Suns territory.

Far to the stern, deep in the engineering section, a small sensor noted the electrical charge being dumped into the K-F boom reach a particular level. At this point, the sensor sent a small charge to a block of C8 plastic explosive tucked up between the K-F Initiator and a bulkhead for a helium seal. The small bomb exploded with a sharp crack that sent a shudder through the entire structure of the ship. On the bridge, subdued voices turned to panic as warning lights flared across console displays.

The bomb had not been intended to destroy, but to cripple. The intent had only been to knock out the K-F Drive Initiator and prevent the JumpShip from entering hyperspace in the first place. It should have worked. The failsafe systems should have activated and the K-F field dissipated. Instead, the field wavered, flickered, and then rapidly built again. The *Silvertongue* disappeared in a bright flash.

Aboard the JumpShip, only moments had passed. Warning klaxons blared as warning lights flashed. All their sensors and computers indicated that the jump had taken place, but something still did not sit right. Something had certainly gone wrong. Captain Mawsley barked out orders, trying to call upon her crew's experience to stave off panic.

The helmsman activated the navigational sensors. It would take at least half a minute for the computer to scan the stars and constellations to determine their location. In the meantime, Mawsley ordered the armored shutters on the windows opened. She unstrapped from her console and pushed off, floating up to the ceiling. She knew it wouldn't help to determine

their position or their situation. It was more psychological than anything. She steadied herself with a hand on the frame of the long window.

Her face turned pale as she muttered a curse under her breath. She turned to face the tangle of crew and computers beneath her “Flight control! Get your sensors online, and calculate an orbital burn!” The helmsman hesitated, processing the strange order, then acknowledged.

Tartaglia noticed the tinge of panic in the other Captain’s voice. He unstrapped from his seat and pushed off to join his counterpart by the large window. He expected, perhaps, to see the distant glint of starlight off a Capellan warship awaiting their arrival. What he saw instead sent ice through his veins. There, surrounded by the faint points of stars, was a planet. A shining blue and green jewel, half shrouded in shadow and swirled with white clouds.

“Impossible” he whispered.

A hyperspace jump could only be performed between regions of space with suitably low gravity. Too close to a star’s massive gravity well and the K-F field would fail to form. Normally, JumpShips operated from points high above or below the orbital plane; far enough out that the star’s pull didn’t disrupt the field. It was possible to jump to a point closer in by aiming for transient Lagrangian points where the gravities of planets and moons served to counteract and neutralize the star’s gravitational pull. Such jumps required precise knowledge of the target starsystem and careful planning. Yet, somehow, the *Silvertongue* seemed to have found such a point nestled some 60,000 kilometers above a silvery grey moon, around which they were now orbiting, and the beautiful green and blue planet. It would have been a feat any JumpShip navigator would have been proud of—if it had only been done on purpose.

Mawsley shook her head. What they had just done was impossible, *should* have been impossible. And yet, there before her, hovering on her holographic display, was undeniable proof. It was a lovely planet, with large seas and lush continents. What’s more, where the land lay in the shadow on the darkened side, there were the unmistakable twinkling lights of inhabited settlements. They were very faint, they had almost missed them if

not for computerized image analysis and a sharp-eyed bridge officer. There was only one thing those points of light could mean: civilization. Wherever in the galaxy they were, there were people down there, and where there were people there was hope of rescue and repair.

“Is it Almach?” Tartaglia asked over her shoulder.

The navigation officer shook her head “Almach doesn’t have a large moon like this, and has more surface water.”

“Then where are we?”

Mawsley answered for her subordinate “Navigational sensors are having trouble getting a fix. In the meantime, I’m more concerned about the damage to my ship.”

The ship’s technician team had been combing through the engineering section for the source of the shudder they had all felt—the shudder they all suspected as the culprit behind their misjump. So far they hadn’t found any damage to the drive itself—news which was most welcome—but a helium seal had broken, pouring supercooled helium out from around the K-F boom. The drive would be inoperable at least until the seal could be repaired and the helium coolant replaced.

The communications officer, a nervous young man, requested to speak. Normally on edge, their current predicament had him even more flustered. His words tumbled over each other, “We’ve been, uh, broadcasting a distress signal for a while now, but, um.” He paused, unsure how to continue. Mawsley tried to calm him down, entreating him to breathe and relax. Squeezing his eyes shut, he forced himself to enunciate, “I’ve been scanning for chatter on all channels to try and get an idea of where we are.”

“Very good,” Mawsley prompted him.

“Well, you see, I’m not picking up anything. No comms of any kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that, ma’am. No radio, no HPG pulses, nothing. This system sounds completely empty.”

“Are we not receiving?”

The young man shook his head, “No, comms are fine. I ran the diagnostic five times, and we’re picking up the proper background radiation. There’s nothing out there.”

Mawsley looked again at the faint twinkling lights on the planet’s nightward side. “Well, *someone’s* down there.”

Tartaglia scratched at his mustache, “A lot of systems are pretty backwater. If we’re somewhere in the Periphery or the Davion Outback, there’s probably not a lot of chatter to start with.”

Mawsley nodded, “Those lights are awfully faint. Those settlements are probably pretty small.” She turned to face the lanky DropShip captain floating behind her, “What do you say, Edgar? Care to take your little boat down and take a look for me?”

Tartaglia smiled “Sounds fine to me. Care to join us? Stretch your legs dirt-side?”

Mawsley shook her head, “No, my crew needs to stay up here and repair the *Silvertongue*.” She noted the concern on his face “Don’t worry, we have supplies to last several months, and I’ll send someone with you to explain what we need to finish repairs.”

Tartaglia nodded. “We’ll de-couple immediately.” He stared at the holographic representation of the planet hovering before him. Where in Kerensky’s name were they?

Chapter 4

Hammers and Teacups

Another gust of wind swept the hat clean off of Rarity's head. The little unicorn yelped in surprise and leapt, just snatching the brim with her teeth. Her horn sparked and the hat lifted to settle back on top of her head.

She checked her reflection in a store window. With another sparkling glow, she adjusted the angle of the somewhat extravagant headpiece. She also took the opportunity to tuck back a stray lock of luxuriant royal purple hair. She struck a pose and checked herself over. Mane styled just perfectly with the proper bounce. Tail with just the right corkscrew curl. Pale grey coat—so pale unfashionable ponies would mistake it for a snowy white—perfectly brushed and groomed. Blue eyes closed just enough to be alluring but not sultry. Mouth with just the right amount of pout. Silk scarf perfectly complementing the trio of blue diamonds on her flank. “Ah, Rarity, you are a vision,” she said proudly to herself, then glanced around to make sure no other ponies had heard her, lest they think her vain.

She hummed to herself as she rounded the corner from the avenue which housed her boutique to the one running past the library and off to the west. The top half of the door to library was hanging open, a poster for what must have been the Running of the Leaves tacked to the side. As she neared the giant tree, she heard a cry from within, unmistakably the voice of her friend Twilight. Forgetting her ladylike dignity, Rarity galloped as fast as she could. She burst through the door, a frantic look on her face.

“Twilight! Are you alright? I heard you yell, and...” she stopped short, and her expression turned to one of puzzlement “Darling, whatever are you doing?”

It was obvious Twilight's cry was not one of pain or danger, but one of frustration. Open books covered the floor of the library. The little lavender unicorn had arranged them in long, messy rows several books deep and separated only by the narrowest of paths. She was hopping from row to row and book to book, calling out notes and observations. Spike sat on the staircase, a parchment in one hand and a quill pen in the other, trying to

keep up with her fusillade. She stopped when she heard Rarity, eliciting a relieved sigh from Spike.

“Oh, hello, Rarity,” she looked around her sheepishly “Sorry about that. I’m just a little... frustrated is all.”

Rarity cautiously stepped into the library, looking quizzically at the nearest of the books, “I can see that.” She looked at the closest book; the page was covered in an elaborate illustration, “What are you doing?”

“Humph. Making a mess, if you ask me.” Spike grumped from the stairs.

Twilight ignored him “I noticed something a few days ago and I’m trying to pin down the timing.” Rarity just raised a brow. “Here, let me show you.”

Twilight trotted over to the first row of books, and pointed with a hoof “I’ve arranged the books in chronological order. Or rather, I’ve arranged the pictures in them in order from when they were first drawn, since most of these are reproductions.” She trotted the length of the row, “Oldest on the left, counting up to most recent on the right.” She reached the end of the row. “This first row focuses on tools,” she moved to the next row, “This one architecture,” she continued down the library, “This one fashion, and this one farming.”

“What about ones that fit more than one row? Or multiple illustrations in the same book?” asked Rarity.

“That’s what she was yelling about.” Added Spike from the back of the room, crossing his arms.

Twilight’s cheeks flushed “Yeah, I’m getting a little frustrated trying to sort them all out.”

Rarity stepped down the row Twilight had indicated showed fashion, looking down at the colorful pages. She couldn’t see what had her friend so worked up. “And, why are you doing this?”

Twilight nodded for her to follow “Here, it’s most obvious with the architecture” Rarity followed to the first row of books. Twilight pointed with a hoof “Look at the buildings in this picture”

Rarity looked down at the page Twilight indicated. It was a reproduction, obviously, but of a very, very old picture. It was a night scene, with ponies sleeping soundly, some curled up under the stars in a fenced-off pasture, others in simple round-roofed huts. It was pretty, but Rarity didn’t see anything odd about it.

Twilight trotted to the other end of the row and indicated another book, “Now, look at this one”

Rarity did as instructed. The art style of this illustration was much more contemporary, with a more realistic sense of scale and depth-of-field. It showed a village not unlike Ponyville, with multi-story timber-framed houses. A mixture of thatched and shingled roofs hung low over windows greyed over to represent glass. “They look different,” she said finally.

Twilight narrowed her eyes “Exactly.”

Rarity shook her head, “But darling, why would that be surprising? These pictures were probably drawn hundreds of years apart. Wouldn’t changes like this be expected?”

Twilight moved back down towards the middle of the row, “Yes, of course. But it’s not the *styles* that have me confused, it’s the *timing*.” She pulled a couple out of the line and pointed to the spot where she removed them. “Like I said, these are arranged chronologically, and right *here* something happens.” She stepped to the left, “Before this point, all the houses—and I mean *all* the houses—are these little huts. The only complex buildings are large castles like Canterlot. What’s more, ponies are just as likely to be living completely outside as they are in a house.” She moved to the other side of the gap, “But, over here, all the villages are made of modern buildings. Here, look.”

The two books Twilight had removed lofted across the room and hovered in front of Rarity. Indeed, though both images were drawn in the same style, one showed ponies in little huts, and the other in houses that would have been recent additions to Ponyville.

Twilight whisked the books away and returned them to their places in the line, "And that's not all." She hopped over the books to the next narrow pathway between the books, "All these rows show the same thing. Simple and rustic before, then suddenly fully modern." She was growing excited, "And in each case, the change is sudden. And it always seems to happen at the same *time*."

She looked triumphantly at Rarity, who just stared. "Meaning?" Rarity waved her hoof.

Twilight gave an exasperated sigh. "Alright, another example." She hopped to the fashion row. "What if I told you the earliest clothes worn by ponies were *only* worn at important ceremonies, and only consisted of simple robes?" Rarity allowed the assumption "And then, suddenly, clothes become more common. Fashion, as you know it, appears almost overnight with top hats and dresses and saddles. And they appear at the same time buildings and houses start to look more modern."

A glimmer of understanding clicked in Rarity's mind. "So, something happened, then?" Twilight nodded. "What was it?"

Twilight closed her eyes. Her head drooped, "I have no idea."

Rarity smiled sweetly, "Well, I think you need to take a break. That's what I do when I'm stuck for an answer. Just step back, take a deep breath, and clear your mind, as it were." She picked her way through the forest of books to stand next to her friend "Tell you what; I was just heading over to Fluttershy's cottage for tea. Why don't you join me? It will take your mind off of things."

Twilight hesitated, "Oh, I dunnoh. I really should..."

"Tut-tut-tut, I will not take no for an answer!" she nudged Twilight towards the door "Now, come along."

"Yes, please! Take a break!" Spike called after them. He looked across the covered floor and sighed "I suppose you want me to clean this up?"

Twilight glanced back at her scaly assistant, "Actually, just go ahead and leave them out. We'll pick up where we left off when I get back."

Spike scampered up the stairs before she could change her mind.

From the outside, Fluttershy's cozy little cottage looked more like a hill than a house. Only the haphazardly spaced windows and the tall, skinny chimney gave a clue to the grassy lump's true design. It sat squat next to a little brook and was surrounded by a tidy garden overflowing with greens and flowers, now starting to fade with winter approaching, and a simple wood-rail fence. Countless birdhouses and animal hutches seemed to be tucked into every available nook and cranny. It was set away from Ponyville near the edge of the Everfree Forest, so that only the tops of the tallest buildings in town were visible above the rolling hills. It was secluded, but that suited its resident just fine.

She was in the garden now, a pretty yellow pegasus with a long, pink mane and tale. She was shy and soft-spoken. Her fondness for animals had resulted in her being the de-facto caretaker around Ponyville, seeing they had sufficient shelter and food. Toward her animals, she was doting and motherly. Around other ponies, though, she was quiet, nervous, and withdrawn. Only her handful of friends knew how to bring her out of her shell.

She was just setting a steaming teakettle on a little table in her garden when Rarity and Twilight crossed the little bridge over the brook. With a flutter, she met the two unicorns at the little garden gate, pushing it open.

"Fluttershy, darling, so sorry we're late. I hope you don't mind I invited Twilight to join us?" Rarity swept into the garden.

Twilight followed "Hello, Fluttershy. I... I hope I'm not imposing, am I?"

Fluttershy smiled demurely and shook her head "Oh, no. Angel-bunny saw you coming, so I set an extra place for you." She shut the gate and slowly flapped over to the table.

They sat and talked and enjoyed the crisp autumn weather. Or rather, Rarity talked while Fluttershy and Twilight listened, offering the occasional observation or encouragement. Fluttershy had brewed a tea from herbs in her garden, and its aroma filled the air, both sweet and soothing. Rarity and Twilight levitated the delicate teacups and saucers to their mouths and sipped. Their pegasus friend carefully gripped the rim of the porcelain cup with her teeth and tilted her head ever-so-slightly back while balancing the saucer on a hoof.

Rarity was just finishing a story involving the most recent escapades of her little sister, apparently the mischievous little filly and her friends had made quite a mess of the bolt of cloth Rarity had loaned them in an attempt to make their own hot air balloon, when Fluttershy noticed Twilight staring intently at her teacup.

“Twilight? Are you alright? Is... is your tea alright?” she asked softly.

“Hmm?” Twilight looked up, “Oh, no. The tea is wonderful, Fluttershy. I was just... thinking.”

Rarity peered over the rim of her own teacup “Don’t tell me teacups suddenly appeared all at once, too.”

Fluttershy looked confused. The unicorns hadn’t told her about Twilight’s escapades in the library. Twilight smiled and shook her head.

“Oh, no. I don’t know about that,” she paused “But I guess it might be related. Somehow.”

“Well, go on. Get it off your chest,” Rarity prompted.

Twilight held the cup aloft with a glow, turning it around in the air. “You ever wonder what this little curly-cue on the side of the cup is for?”

Fluttershy looked curiously at the floating teacup “I guess I never thought about it,” she looked at Twilight, “What is it?”

“I don’t know. It looks like the one on the teakettle, and you use that one to hold the kettle when pouring the tea.”

"I always assumed it was for holding the cup when the tea was too hot" Rarity added.

"Then why is it up-and-down? If it was for holding a hot cup, wouldn't it be easier if it was side-to-side?"

Rarity sputtered. She didn't like being corrected. Fluttershy bit her lip. She hated even the slightest possibility of an argument.

"Perhaps it's just decorative?" she offered, quickly. That explanation satisfied Rarity, to whom style was second-nature. It did mean the teacups stylistically matched the kettle. Twilight sighed and agreed that was the most logical explanation. Relieved that no argument was forthcoming, even if one hadn't been likely in the first place, Fluttershy took the opportunity to change the subject.

"So, Twilight, how about you tell me all about your problem at the library?" Catching a concerned look from Rarity, she cowered. That look told her she may have just made a big mistake.

Rarity whispered to Fluttershy under her breath "I brought her here to get her mind off that."

Fluttershy blushed "Oh? Oh... really? Um... I'm sorry, I... I didn't mean... um..."

Twilight had heard every word. "It's alright. I've been thinking about it this whole time. But, thanks anyway, Rarity."

She launched into as best a description of her findings as she could muster. She described how she had first noticed the discrepancies in her books and how she spent days pouring over every illustration she could get her hooves on. She described the apparent sudden appearance and stagnation of pony architecture and technology. Rarity objected vociferously to the idea of stagnation in the realm of fashion.

"Ok, perhaps 'stagnation' is too strong a word." Twilight allowed, "Fads and trends come and go. There are definite regional styles. But you have to admit, the *basics* are there, and they show up all at once. The change on either side of the, um, event are much more drastic than *anything* since."

Fluttershy listened patiently, trying to absorb Twilight's meandering account. She had trouble following some of the terminology, but felt she was getting the gist of it.

"So, um, how long ago did this, uh, 'change' happen?" she asked, finally.

Twilight shrugged, "Near as I can tell? About six hundred years ago, or so. It was after Nightmare Moon was banished, I know that much."

Rarity nearly spit out her tea, "Six *hundred* years?" She was incredulous.

"Goodness!" Fluttershy's big eyes grew impossibly wider.

Twilight just nodded. "And that's not all. Remember the teacup? Well, since I've started looking, I've noticed a lot of little things like that, things that just seem a little... odd... you know? Almost like they weren't made with ponies in mind."

"What do you mean 'not made with ponies in mind'? Who else would they be made for?"

"I don't know. I just said it seemed odd." She thought a moment, "But they're all little things, like hammers and nails."

"Hammers and nails?" Rarity asked.

"Uh-huh. Don't you think it's odd that when we want to drive a nail, we hold the hammer in our mouth and swing our neck like this?" she pantomimed swinging her head like she had seen Applejack do the previous day. "It's a good way to hurt yourself. Spike can use his hands to hold a hammer. Somehow that seems a lot more... natural, you know?"

Fluttershy nodded with understanding, but Rarity just looked confused. Being a unicorn, she had always relied on her magic to do most tasks requiring a measure of dexterity.

Twilight looked to her friends wondering if any of them could offer any insights or sudden epiphanies. They just looked back with a mixture of wonder and puzzlement. She suddenly felt very much drained. Her shoulders drooped. "I dunnoh. I feel like there's something there, but I just can't. I just... *can't*."

Fluttershy put on her most soothing face, "Oh, you'll figure it out, Twilight. You're the smartest pony I know. If any pony could figure it out, it's you."

That night, Twilight was alone on the topmost balcony of the library tree. Perched high atop the tree, with only the topmost bough above her head, she put her eye to her telescope. With a faint glow, the tube tilted ever so slightly and the focus knob turned.

She was fed up with her illustration study. Hours more of searching through pictures had gotten her no closer to understanding the nature of what she was seeing. She was stuck. She needed a breakthrough, some inspiration from an unexpected source if she was going to make any more headway. But for now, she was tired of it all. She didn't want to think about it anymore, so she'd come up here. Stargazing was a hobby that always made her feel better about things. The cool caress of the night air, the pale glow of moonlight, and the faint twinkle of distant stars always seemed like the perfect recipe to unwind.

She took her eye away from the telescope and took in the whole night sky. She traced the ghostly arch of the milky way, and counted the stars on Orion's belt. She was just thinking of where next to direct her telescope when something caught her eye.

High in the southern sky was a star she had never seen before. No, it wasn't twinkling. Could it be a planet? No. With surprise, she realized the point of light was moving, and fast. A shooting star then? No, it didn't leave a trail, and it didn't disappear like a meteorite would have. It couldn't be a comet, there was no tail.

Whatever it was, already the mystery light had moved several degrees, passing several stars and forcing her to turn her head to keep it in view.

She thought for a moment to call for Spike to fetch her astronomy books, but he was long since asleep and she dared not take her eyes off the speck. She wondered if Owllicious was around. The owl occasionally served as her nocturnal assistant when she was up late, but the bird had proved unreliable and she hadn't seen him in weeks. Almost prancing in place with anticipation, she watched the speck intently until it finally disappeared below the horizon far to the southwest. In a flash, she was down the stairs hunting for her books.

The trials of earlier that day were gone from her mind. She had a new mystery to solve now. She had never seen a phenomenon like that in the night sky before. She couldn't even recall having read about such a happening. Working by candlelight, she pulled her usual astronomy book from the shelf and began pouring through it with abandon. Not finding anything there, she cast it aside and grabbed another.

When she exhausted all her astronomy books, she moved on to astrology. When those failed, she searched out books on ancient prophesy and legends. As she was no longer focusing exclusively on illustrations, her pool of books was rather large.

Spike found her later that morning, sleeping soundly atop a pile of open books. She had finally passed out of sheer exhaustion.

Chapter 5

Half-Twitchy-Sort-Of-Not-A-Twitch

Thrusters on the *Felicity Klimkosky's* bow fired, summersaulting the blocky ship end-over-end, positioning the large engines directly forward along the line of travel. The DropShip was in low orbit and preparing for its reentry burn. In the conference room, situated just below the bridge, Lieutenant Dieter Ling held onto a railing and watched the holographic map floating above the center of the oblong table.

The burly infantryman had gathered his six volunteers plus the MechWarrior Ramirez and whatever of the DropShip's crew he could find that were not directly involved with flying the ship and gathered them together for an impromptu briefing. Dr. Langley was there, too, from the *Silvertongue*. Her long, red hair floated wildly about her head. Ling wondered at the JumpShip captain's decision to send her chief medical officer instead of a tech or some junior deck officer. Captain Tartaglia was joining them via a video intercom on the wall.

The Lieutenant was not in a particularly good mood. He was an organized man with a plotting nature. His reputation for organization and ruthless efficiency had earned him high marks, and even a couple of medals, in his career. He had insisted on accompanying the mission not because he thought it was a good idea—he didn't—but because, if the higher-ups deemed this foolish escapade worthwhile, then Blake's blood, he was going to make sure it was done *right*. He had formulated countless plans and contingencies in his mind for every conceivable scenario the expedition might have faced. Everything had been planned, and he had a plan for everything. Everything, except a misjump to on an unknown planet in an unknown part of what he could only assume was still the Inner Sphere.

He crossed his muscular arms, trying to stand as straight as he could, straining his feet in the soft fabric loops on the floor—not an easy feat for one not comfortable with microgravity, “We’re still not sure what’s down there, so I shouldn’t have to tell you to be ready for anything.” Falling back

on his training, he had decided to treat their situation like a reconnaissance raid deep behind enemy lines.

“Sergeant Ramirez,” he addressed the tanned MechWarrior, “I want you and your ‘Mech out the door as soon as the wheels stop rolling. Establish a perimeter and scout the immediate area.” The MechWarrior nodded. In general, Ling didn’t think too highly of MechWarriors. To him, they were brash, self-important braggarts with egos too big for their heads. His first impression of Ramirez had been the same, but the 20-something seemed to have a level head on his shoulders. Still, the Lieutenant was not about to let the Sergeant forget who was in charge once there was dirt under their feet again.

“They’re telling me we’re looking at normal atmospheric pressure, mostly nitrogen and oxygen. Looks breathable, but there’s no telling what nasty traces there are until we’re planetside. No one steps out the airlock without an envirosuit until either I or Dr. Langley says otherwise. Understood?” there was a round of mumbled affirmatives.

“Our priority will be to make contact with the locals. If those lights we saw from orbit really are small settlements, then we are somewhere in explored space. That’s good news, ‘cause it means we can send for help.” He paused for effect “But, we still don’t know where we are, and a bunch of armed Davion soldiers walking into a village in the middle of the Draconis Combine, or Free Worlds League, or Capellan Confederation is sure to raise some eyebrows. As such, until we can determine where we are, discretion is the word of the day.”

The rest of the briefing was mostly details of protocol. The meeting adjourned when Captain Tartaglia informed them they were ready to begin the deceleration burn. Everyone scrambled to their assigned places; infantry to their quarters, techs to their jumpseats. On the gantry cradling his 12-meter tall BattleMech, Ramirez stripped off his fatigues down to his undershirt and boxer shorts. It could get quite hot in a ‘Mech’s cockpit, so most MechWarriors wore comparatively little. He strapped the holster for his sidearm to his right thigh and double-checked the gun, an expensive but sleek laser pistol. He pulled on his coolant vest, wrinkling his nose at the smell of dried sweat, and crawled into the cramped cockpit of his ‘Mech. Settling into the seat, he hooked the coolant vest leads into the connection points and secured them with a quick twist. Reaching up to the

small shelf behind and above him, he drew down the heavy neurohelmet over his head, feeling the padded rim pushing down on his shoulders. He began the pre-startup sequence, relying more on muscle memory than conscious effort. Outside, the bay technician decoupled the umbilical lines, then left the bay and made for his own jumpseat. Releasing his 'Mech from the bowels of the ship would be controlled from the bridge.

Massive engines flared to life, throwing out huge flares of superheated plasma, bleeding off forward momentum and sending the DropShip lower into the thin upper atmosphere. Thrusters fired to bring the nose around again. Leading edges began to glow orange as the massive ship plunged through the thickening air.

On the bridge, Tartaglia could feel his body growing heavier. This was the part he loved the most. Even if the computer was technically in control, the raw power and inherent danger of an atmospheric entry charmed him like nothing else could. This is where a ship showed its true character. Even a *Leopard*, which had all the aerodynamic qualities of a brick, came alive during atmospheric entry. He particularly loved this *Leopard*. He had served on other DropShips as a young officer, other *Leopards*, a *Gazelle*, even a *Union* at one point. The *Felicity Klimkosky* was the first ship he truly loved, though. He loved it enough, when the AFFS navy wanted to retire her, he took out a loan and purchased her outright. This was *his* ship now, he was just loaning it to the military.

The ship began a series of broad S-turns, shedding off airspeed. A spheroid, like a *Union* or *Mule*, could use its massive engines to take off and land vertically. Aerodynes like the *Leopard*, however, came in like a giant, unstable airplane and needed a runway. Most DropShips needed a prepared spaceport to land safely. However, the *Leopard* was a military craft, built with lightning-fast raiding in mind. Any suitably flat patch of ground would do.

He hoped they'd found one. His pilot, a talented young man now strapped into the seat in front of him, had plotted a course to bring them down in what looked to be a relatively tree-free stretch of a broad river valley deep in a large forest. The highest concentration of lights they had seen in their orbits of the planet lied just to the east, beyond the trees and a line of steep, craggy hills. He initially wanted to try and land closer, but Ling had convinced him there was no sense in startling the inhabitants. In the

end, he agreed. The farther landing point would allow them to get to the surface somewhat stealthily. For this situation, a secure LZ was more important than a convenient one.

The massive vessel touched down heavily, thrusters firing again with a roar to bring it to a stop as quickly as possible. Giant banks of wheels dug into the soft soil, carving deep furrows. The few stray trees in the barreling behemoth's path were shattered to splinters and ground into the mud beneath. Almost before the ship came to a stop, one of the massive doors on the flank slid open and Ramirez's green-and-red striped VLK-QD1 *Valkyrie* leapt out, weapons at the ready. The 'Mech charged off, sweeping out and away from the DropShip, sensors straining for any sign of trouble. Though it stood almost as tall as the trees surrounding them, the humanoid war machine was still dwarfed by the DropShip's armored sides, towering nearly twice the *Valkrie*'s height. From his vantage point in the bridge, Tartaglia could look out across the canopy of the forest to the east until the hills rose up to swallow the horizon. Flocks of birds swarmed across and above the treetops, fleeing the thunderous commotion of the large vessel's arrival. Beyond, the orange disc of the sun was just beginning to peak above the treetops and chase away the pink haze of dawn.

Pinkie Pie bounced merrily out the door of Sugarcube Corners, the confectionary where she lived and worked with her hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Cake. The sky was only beginning to lose its deep indigo as the rays of Celestia's sun were just peaking above the distant mountains. Most of Ponyville was still asleep. The streets lay empty as stores sat darkened and windows shuttered.

Her tail twitched. She stopped mid-bounce and stared at her tail for a long moment, pondering. Not so much a twitch as a half-twitch. Kind of a half-twitchy-sort-of-not-a-twitch, she decided. She often got little niggling feelings when things were about to happen. She called it her pinkie-sense, and it had come in handy more than once. She wondered what this twitch meant. Normally, a twitch in her tail meant that something was about to fall. But this was only a half-twitch. Did something start to fall and then stop? Maybe something had fallen and yet not fallen, like it had fallen on purpose? She held her breath and concentrated. Sometimes, she could glean a little more meaning out of her twitches, discerning more precise

timing and locations for her predictions. She hummed thoughtfully, but no further clarification was forthcoming. Oh well.

Whatever it was, it could wait. Right now she had catering to arrange. As the trio of balloons on her flank would attest, Pinkie Pie was Ponyville's star party pony. She thrived on other's happiness, and discovered at an early age that at parties, it was difficult for any but the grouchiest of ponies not to have a good time. Most ponies considered her flighty and often nonsensical or hyperactive. Or, as her best friend Rainbow Dash would say, "So random". Even so, most ponies were willing to overlook her eccentricities in light of her phenomenal party planning skills. For as every pony knew, there was no party like a Pinkie Pie planned party.

Today she was planning a surprise party. It was Carrot Top's birthday, and her friends had asked Pinkie to organize the event. So, while Daisy and Rose kept Carrot busy around town, Pinkie would spend the day with last-minute preparations and the evening wrangling Ponyville's denizens into their hiding places within the birthday filly's living room.

She had a lot to do, so an early start was essential. Much of the ponies she needed to speak to weren't awake yet—even the ponies that had commissioned her wouldn't be awake at this hour. She headed first for the only pony on her list she knew she could count on to be up this early, the hard-working Applejack. She hummed a happy tune as she crested a hill and the big red barn of Sweet Apple Acres came into view. Sure enough, she could see movement among the surrounding apple trees. Drawing closer, she could see that it wasn't the shape of Applejack, but of her elder brother, Big Macintosh. Of course, how could she have missed that large yoke seemingly permanently affixed around his neck? Not to mention Macintosh was bright red, not orange, and much bigger than Applejack, and also a boy pony, not a girl pony. Pinkie slowed her pace and scanned the orchards for Applejack, but didn't see her anywhere. Perhaps Big Macintosh would know her whereabouts. She adjusted her course, then seeing that the large red stallion hadn't noticed her approach she smiled slyly. This was an opportunity to practice her *other* unique talent: sneaking.

Sinking into the grass, she disappeared. The large red pony was completely oblivious of her approach until she suddenly popped out directly in front of his nose from amongst the boughs of an apple tree with a high-pitched "Hiya!"

The big farm pony snorted in surprise, then seeing it was only Pinkie Pie, sighed and went back to his work. The harvest was over, and the trees free of their fruit. It was time to check the trees over for winter, remove dead branches, and plot out next year's planting. With nary a word, he plodded off to the next tree in line, idly wondering how a pony could climb a tree before dismissing it as Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie dropped out of the tree with an unceremonious thud, and quick as a flash was bouncing along side Macintosh. He had reacted stoically, as usual, so now she took it as a challenge to get him to smile, or laugh, or at least react with more than a surprised snort.

"Hiya, Big Macintosh! Hey! I've always wondered, do they call ya' 'Big Macintosh' 'cause you're big? Or is 'Big' really-truly-actually your name? Huh? Huh? Huh?"

Big Macintosh was a pony of few words. His philosophy was to think long and talk short. He turned his head to stare at his tormentor for a long moment before answering. "It's mah real name," he said finally.

"Well..." Pinkie drew out with an animated tap of her chin with a forehoof, "Has it *a/ways* been your name? 'Cause I don't think you were always big. I mean' you're big now, of course. Oh, boy, are you big now! You're the biggest pony I know! Well, except for Princess Celestia, but she's more tall than just big. But you weren't always big, I bet. I bet you were rather small especially when you were an itty-bitty baby Big Macintosh. So were you named Big Macintosh when you were an itty-bitty-tiny-winey baby or were you called Little Macintosh then and your name changed to Big Macintosh when you got big?"

Big Macintosh's jaw hung slack as he tried to follow the tumble of words spilling out of the pink filly's mouth. Realizing she had stopped, he shook his sunkissed blond mane and regained his composure. "Always been named Big Macintosh" was his concise reply.

Pinkie looked ready to launch into another cascade of words. Seeing this, Big Macintosh headed her off. "Miss, I reckon you didn't just come here to ask me about mah name?"

Pinkie paused, then brightened as she recalled her original reason for her visit, “Oh yeah!” she said brightly, “Have you seen Applejack? I need to make sure she’s all set for tonight.”

Big Macintosh nodded towards the large barn “I reckon AJ’s in the apple cellar.”

Pinkie took this as a hint to take her leave. She thanked the big red farmer and pranced off to the barn in search of her friend.

Sure enough, she found Applejack in the apple cellar beneath the barn. In the cool, dry darkness they discussed food for the upcoming party. Sugarcube Corners would provide the cake, of course, and Sweet Apple Acres certain other comestibles. Apples, and baked goods made from apples, were—naturally—the Apple family’s specialty. With the details of times and meeting places arranged, Pinkie left her friend to her work and skipped off to continue her errands.

With her first item done and the morning still just barely begun, Pinkie Pie decided to take the scenic route, skirting around the town. Her path took her near Fluttershy’s little cottage near the outskirts of the Everfree Forest. Pinkie was surprised to spot the little yellow pegasus, head slightly drooped, walking back up the hill from the brook that ran past her house. Overcome with curiosity, Pinkie bounded up to her. She didn’t sneak this time as she knew Fluttershy was a bit of a scaredy-cat and also very sensitive. The pegasus greeted her warmly, stifling a yawn. Pinkie noticed her eyes were bloodshot and baggy. Worried about her friend’s welfare, she inquired if she was alright

“Oh, I’m fine, Pinkie.” She yawned again, “The birds just woke me up early is all. A whole flock of them came swarming out of the Everfree Forest before the sun was fully up.” Her already quiet voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, “Something in there must have really spooked them.”

Pinkie’s thoughts immediately turned to pinkie-sense and that morning’s odd half-twitch. Could it be that she had sensed whatever it was that had spooked the birds? She asked if the birds had said what it was that had scared them.

Fluttershy cocked her head curiously, “Most birds aren’t really that good at *speaking*, Pinkie, at least not like we do.”

“What about parrots?”

“Oh, uh. They more mimic. But anyway, from what I can tell, there was a really big noise deep in the forest.”

“Big noise? Like what? Like a ‘Boom!’ or a ‘Crash!’ or a ‘Wheeeeeew-BLAM!’ or a ...” she continued with a litany of noises, dancing around in a wild pantomime of each. Fluttershy giggled at her antics, but said she didn’t know what sort of sound it was, as she hadn’t heard it herself.

After joining Fluttershy for a late breakfast, and reminding her of the upcoming evening’s celebration, Pinkie Pie continued on her party planning mission. By the time she made it back into town, the denizens of Ponyville has stirred, and the town square and market were filled with ponies—earth, pegasi, and unicorns in a rainbow of colors.

As the sun climbed higher in the azure sky, Pinkie managed to quickly finish her errands and return to Sugarcube Corners to finalize baking and begin organizing decorations. Throwing herself into her preparations, her mind kept wandering back to that odd tail half-twitch and Fluttershy’s birds. She knew they were connected, somehow. She kept waiting for another tail twitch so she could discern more, but none came, although, as the day wore on, she did begin to notice a niggling feeling in her left forehoof. Sort of like a pinch mixed with an itch. She knew it was her pinkie-sense again, but it was a pinkie-sense twitch she hadn’t felt before. She tried to compare it to other feelings she had in her repertoire. A pinchy knee usually meant something scary was about to happen. An itchy nose meant watch out for angry bees. This achey-itchy-pinchy hoof didn’t really fit any of them. It wasn’t like the full-body ‘something totally unexpected you’d never expect to happen is going to happen’ shiver, either. Did that mean someone did expect whatever it was? She had a strong feeling that whatever it meant, it was related to her half-twitchy-sort-of-not-a-twitch and the noise in the forest. The feeling seemed to be growing, too. She decided whatever it signified was moving, and getting closer.

Chapter 6

Moonlight Reconnaissance

Ramirez held on to the rollcage as his patrol partner accelerated their all-terrain vehicle up the embankment. The internal-combustion engine whined as oversize tires struggled for purchase. His other hand clenched around the Federated Long Rifle in his lap. The vehicle fishtailed as they crested the embankment and narrowly avoided a fallen log.

“Geeze, Liz, take it easy!”

From the driver’s seat, Corporal Virat gave him a sideways smile. “Aw, too rough for ya’ ‘Mech-jock?” Her slanted blue eyes sparkled as she teased him. She was only a hair shorter than Ramirez, with wide cheekbones and curly black hair. Her rich, almost ebony, skin accentuated her large, brilliantly white teeth, especially in the dim light of the forest floor. Despite her dark complexion, her features belied the extensive genetic mingling that had occurred in the centuries since mankind spread out to the stars.

“Just be careful. I’d rather stay in one piece.” Ramirez shot back in Cantonese, the most common language in their corner of the Inner Sphere after English.

“Guess you’re not used to being outside of your tin suit,” she grinned at him. Good-natured ribbing between infantry and MechWarriors was a time-honored tradition.

All in all, he was in a good mood. The autumn colors of this forest were spectacular and the weather was delightfully crisp. This was definitely a colony world, he decided. These trees were all Terran species; oak, elm, birch, larch. Obviously Earthling birds flitted in the trees. He spotted several jays and finches among the branches. They were making too much noise to spot many other animals, but he swore he had seen the tail end of a snake disappear into the undergrowth.

Ramirez had left his BattleMech at the LZ, in the shadow of the *Felicity Klimkosky*. He had scouted the immediate area, but the thick canopy of the forest had slowed his progress to a crawl. Lieutenant Ling had elected to continue the mission on foot and in their small collection of light vehicles. Leaving only himself and one volunteer at the LZ to act as a communications hub, he broke up the remaining five infantry and Ramirez into two-man teams, which fanned out into the forest, working their way east. The objective was to make contact with any settlements and determine which planet they were on.

They had quickly dispensed with the cumbersome envirosuits. This planet seemed particularly suited to Terran life. Atmospheric pressure and content resembled a pre-industrial Terra. Even the surface gravity was essentially equivalent to Terra at approximately 1 g. With all this variety of Terran plants and animals, it was obvious this planet had been subject to extensive terraforming, probably many centuries ago. With the large moon and wide seas, this world might as well have been Terra, though a pre-industrial version.

Not all the life here was of Earth origin; there was that fuzzy insect-like thing that tried to eat all of Ackermann's ration bars before he squashed it with a boot, and one of the other scout teams had reported seeing what they claimed looked like a branth soaring high overhead. If that was the case, the presence of the large, winged flying dragon-like creatures would narrow their location down to only a handful of worlds in the Free Worlds League; the Duchy of Andurien to be more precise. That would place them an impossible 300-or-so light years from their home on Valexa, ten times the maximum single jump distance capable by modern JumpShips.

The lack of radio traffic was worrisome. The Duchy of Andurien's 25 systems were all well-populated. So, for now, they were still at a loss for their location.

Free of the embankment, the two camouflage-clad Davion soldiers stumbled upon what appeared to be a narrow path cutting through the underbrush. The Corporal turned onto the path and gunned the throttle. What luck! At this pace, they'd reach the suspected settlements in no time.

In front of them, a small shape darted across the path. Liz yelled out in surprise and slammed on the brakes and tried to swerve to avoid the

creature. Ramirez only caught a glimpse of a long, green body, leathery bat-like wings, and a small white head before it disappeared into the bushes. The ATV lost traction on the fallen leaves and slid sideways off the path and into a ravine.

“Son of a bitch!” Liz slammed her fists on the steering wheel.

“I thought you said you could drive.”

“Shut up.”

Neither of them was hurt, so they crawled out to inspect the damage. It didn't appear too bad at first, but the crash had bent the front axle and the nose was wedged tight between some rocks. They could get it out and probably repair it, but with just the two of them it would be a long and difficult process. While Ramirez was pondering if they could use the winch to raise the nose clear of the rocks, Liz began transferring everything she could from the vehicle into their already overstuffed packs and pockets. She dropped one heavy pack on the ground next to the MechWarrior.

“C'mon, Sarge. Looks like we're hoofin' it from here.”

Ramirez slipped the straps over his shoulders and retrieved his borrowed rifle and combat helmet. He scrambled after Liz up the shallow ravine and back onto the path. Together, they hiked off, leaving their stricken vehicle behind.

The pathway made for easy going. They walked mostly in silence, listening to the rustle of the wind in the leaves and the twitter of birds. With less noise, they spotted more animals, including rabbits and squirrels and a few neither of them could identify. None of the animals seemed particularly alarmed at their presence, and some watched them with what looked like curiosity. They radioed their status back to the Lieutenant at the DropShip periodically, but otherwise their trek was largely uneventful.

As the sun was going down, the forest suddenly ended. The two travellers stopped short, taken aback at this sudden change of scenery. The forest border was almost perfectly straight, as if some giant invisible hand had scribed a line across the landscape. In front of them lay rolling hills blanketed in luxurious green grass and punctuated with low-growing

bushes and small stands of trees, vibrant in their orange and gold autumn attire. Snowcapped mountain peaks lay not too distant, almost glowing in the light of the sun rapidly sinking behind the western woods.

Liz pointed towards a spot above the hills, "Is that smoke?"

Sure enough, rising above the crests of the hills were a series of pale blue wisps of smoke, languidly drifting in the soft breeze. In a flash, the Corporal had shrugged off her pack and scrambled up the nearest tree. Ramirez alternated between watching her clambering through the branches and gazing at the distant smoke. Above his head, Liz let out a triumphant whoop "Sarge! Get on the horn. There's a whole village out there!"

Moonlight imparted a silver hue to the grassy hills. Stars filled the inky black sky in a multitude of tiny fires. Ramirez and Liz ignored the stellar tableau above their heads as they slipped silently through the grass. The Lieutenant had ordered them to recon the village before attempting to make contact. He was still worried about a backlash should they not be in Davion territory. On their bellies, the two scouts peeked over the top of a hill towards the village below.

Ramirez sighed. This was no good. It was too dark, and even though the visor on his combat helmet could see in thermal IR he couldn't make out anything besides the shapes of the buildings and the lay of the land. No flags, no propaganda posters. Just a cluster of quaint little buildings and the soft glow of a handful of lights.

Beside him, Corporal Virat spoke softly, her voice picked up by her helmet's integral microphone and transmitted into Ramirez's ear. "Damn. I can't see anything. Should we try that hill to the south? Or how about that barn over there?" she pointed off to where the roof of a large barn poked up above a low rise.

Ramirez was impatient. He rose to a crouch and slipped quickly down the face of the hill.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

He glanced back up the hill and whispered, knowing his own microphone would make him easily heard by his partner “I’m getting a closer look.”

“Leftenant said over-watch”

“He *said* find out where we are. Maybe a store sign or something will give us a clue.” He didn’t wait for Liz’s reaction, and hopped a low picket fence. Behind him, Liz swore under her breath and slipped quietly down the hill.

Moving in a low crouch, the two Davion militiamen ducked from cover to cover, advancing unseen up to the outskirts of the little village. Peering carefully around corners, they made their way slowly through the streets, slinking under eaves and through alleys.

It was a pretty little village, with timber-framed buildings and thatched roofs. It was picturesque, almost like a postcard. They slipped around what looked to be a town square and a large, circular building Ramirez assumed was the central government building. The streets were totally deserted. Not a soul stirred aside from the two of them.

Something about the town tugged at Ramirez, making him uneasy beyond what he would expect from clandestinely sneaking around a strange village at night. Everything seemed a little too perfect. No peeling paint or apparent disrepair on any of the buildings. The doors on the buildings all seemed a little too short and wide, so that a normal height person would have to duck or risk hitting their head. The signs were most odd. Shops and buildings were identified not by words but by a picture denoting their function—a sudsy bar of soap on the side of a market cart so short it would have only come up to his mid-thigh, an open book denoting a bookstore. Ramirez wondered at what sort of store would be represented by a picture of an old-timey writing quill and an opulent sofa. A handful of signs, particularly on those buildings which appeared to offer services, had silhouettes of horses or equestrian-related paraphernalia like horseshoes or saddles.

“Huh, that’s weird.” Liz nudged his shoulder to get his attention, “Switch to IR”

Ramirez complied with a couple of well-timed eye-points and blinks. The silvery moonlit world melted away to a cavalcade of colors. The residual heat from the day was translated by his helmet's computer and fed to his visor. He looked around confused, wondering what Liz wanted to show him.

"Look at the tracks" she whispered.

Faint heat traces from footprints crisscrossed the ground. He looked closer at a nearby set, glowing faintly against the cooler dirt. The individual prints were small crescents, like a diminutive horseshoe. So what? Someone had lead an animal through town, perhaps a small pony.

"Lots of hoofprints, but no footprints" Liz swept her hand across the patch of ground before them "At least I don't see any."

Ramirez shrugged. He didn't have an answer. There could be a dozen reasons for a herd of animal prints and no human prints. He switched his visor back to visible light, which he preferred. As they passed out of the town square, he felt the rhythmic thump of music.

It was the only building in town in which lights burned brightly in the windows, casting angular yellow shapes on the ground. From within, Ramirez and Liz could hear muffled music and what could only be laughter. Ramirez's curiosity got the better of him. If he could peer in at that party, maybe some clue of the dress, or language, or décor would give them the information they needed. There was a decorative row of rose bushes along the front of the house, to the side of the door and beneath a windowsill. On his belly, Ramirez wriggled into the narrow space between the thorny bushes and the wall. He set his Federated Long Rifle on the mulch and carefully reached his arms up to grasp the windowsill, moving his legs under him. His ears strained to hear the laughter inside, trying to judge distance and disposition.

The door flung open, throwing a long, yellow shaft of light across the road. Ramirez instinctively dropped to the ground, trying to make himself as small as possible behind the roses. He hoped Liz, somewhere in the shadows behind him, was similarly out of sight. He could hear them talking at the doorway, but he could not place the language. It barely sounded human, more of a melodious sing-song, like a babbling brook tumbling over

gravel mixed with high, sugary richness. There was more laughter and Ramirez could see the shadows of the speakers moving back and forth in the light cast from the open doorway.

One of the sources of the voices stepped out of the doorway. Ramirez blinked in disbelief and stared through the thorny branches, forcing himself to breath shallowly, though his heart was pounding in his ears. It wasn't a person at all, but a small, purple quadruped. It looked sort of like a miniature horse, with a compact body, and a big, round head with large, purple eyes. The four legs ended in broad hooves, and it had a mane and tail like a horse, though of a dark indigo and each with a pink streak running through. From its forehead protruded a short, spiraled horn, giving the entire creature the distinct look of a diminutive unicorn of ancient mythology. As it turned, he could see a large tattoo of a pink six-pointed star with six more white points interspersed and surrounded by a halo of five white six-pointed stars occupying the entire haunch. With a start, he realized the creature was smiling and *speaking*. The language he had heard was coming from it.

The creature was joined by several others, all chattering to each other in that same sugary-sweet tongue. There was an orange one with a long yellow mane and tail and what looked to all the world like a cowboy hat perched on top of its head. A sky-blue one with a brilliant rainbow-hued mane stretched and folded a pair of feathered wings as it chatted with a snowy white unicorn with luxuriant purple hair. Another winged one stood off to the side, yellow face mostly hidden behind a long pink mane. A light pink one with a bushy magenta mane alternated between bouncing excitedly and staring curiously at its left forehoof.

He watched as another creature joined the sextuplet of diminutive equines. It had a round body covered with purple scales accented with green spines and a very reptilian appearance. Unlike the others, it walked erect on a pair of stubby little legs. It reached up with a clawed hand and climbed onto the back of the purple unicorn creature. Reaching its perch, the lizard-creature stretched and yawned.

Ramirez was transfixed. Were these pets? But they were talking. Or were they? It sure sounded like a language. It sounded like a whole conversation, in fact. And they were certainly laughing. They were beginning to walk away now. He was fighting the urge to push some of the

branches out of the way to get a better look, when he realized the pink one hadn't moved away with the others. Instead, it was standing stock-still and staring. Staring *straight at him*. His breath caught in his throat, and he felt as if his heart would burst out of his chest.

The pink horse-thing lowered its head and took one tentative step forward, staring at the rose bushes with large, inquisitive blue eyes. He willed himself to be as still as possible. Perhaps the creature hadn't actually seen him yet. A call from down the road caused the creature to perk up its ears and turn. It answered in a high-pitched voice and trotted off to join the group of others, casting glances over its shoulder as it went.

As soon as it was out of sight, Ramirez closed his eyes and slumped fully to the ground. That was close. Too close. A touch on his leg nearly caused him to jump out of his skin. Turning, he saw Liz tugging on his hem. He couldn't see her eyes though her visor, but her cheeks looked pale. She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder. Nodding in agreement, Ramirez backed out of the flowerbed and together, they slipped away quickly and as quietly as they could from the house. Glancing back, Ramirez saw another group of the colorful creatures trot merrily out of the door and into the night.

They crept in silence until the canopy of the trees closed in over them. Liz was the first to break the silence with a stream of expletives. "Blake's blood that was close. That was too close. What the hell were you thinking? You almost blew our cover!"

"Did you see them? They sounded like they were talking."

Liz sunk against a tree and smiled, "Yeah. That was pretty cool." Her tone turned serious again, "But we still haven't finished our objective. We still don't know where we are."

Ramirez sighed. He knew he had been reckless. He tried to salvage what pride he could. "Maybe when the sun comes up we can get a glimpse of the people. Maybe that will help us out. Or maybe by then the *Silvertongue's* nav computer will have gotten a fix."

Liz shook her head, "Sir," her voice dropped to a whisper, "I think those *were* the people."

Chapter 7

First Contact

Spike dug his claws into the doorframe and glared up at the purple unicorn. "You've gone through every book in this library *twice*, Twilight. And I am *not* putting them all back again, no way, no how."

Twilight tried to push her way past the obstinate dragon and out of her living quarters, "But, Spike! I have to find out what 'Visitation of Thessalonica' means. It's the key to the whole mystery!"

Spike strained against her attempts to move him "Ugh. I don't care! You've already looked in every book in the library. If there were any other mention, you would have seen it already!"

Twilight stopped pushing and sunk to the floor. Spike was right. She'd poured through every book in the library in the past couple of days, first with her little art history study then with her frantic search for any mention of the strange wandering star. If the strange words appeared anywhere else in any of her books, it would be in a book she had already read, and she had no recollection of ever seeing such a phrase before.

She sighed deeply, "You're right, Spike." She hung her head, dejected, "so *now* what do I do?"

Spike released his death-grip on the doorframe and shrugged, "You could ask somepony."

Now there was an idea. She thought for a moment, then gave an exasperated sigh, "But who would I ask? No pony else in this town knows much about astronomical phenomena. And most don't know much lore beyond their local history."

"So, ask someone outside of Ponyville."

"Who? The only pony I know well enough to ask outside of Ponyville is the Prin..." she froze as the epiphany hit her "The Princess! I can ask the

Princess!" she thumped her forehead with her hoof. "Of course! She's ruled over Equestria since, well, forever. She probably knows exactly what it means. And..." she smiled smugly, "I *am* her most prized student. Spike! Take a letter."

"With pleasure." Spike retrieved a quill and parchment from the writing desk and stood ready to take dictation. Twilight cleared her throat.

"*Dearest Princess Celestia,*" she began, Spike scribbled furiously as she paced the room,

"I wish to report that two nights ago, while stargazing I spotted a strange light in the southern sky. It looked sort of like a planet, but moved very quickly from east to west like a meteorite, but did not leave a tail. Regrettably, I have exhausted the resources of the Ponyville library in my attempt to explain this phenomenon."

"Hang on," called Spike, "Phena—Phenom—?" Twilight sighed and spelled it for him, then continued with her dictation.

"In fact, in all of my books I have found exactly one reference to an event that even remotely matches my observation. On page 257 of Stardust Sprinkle's Systematic Guide to Stellar Spectacles, it states, Quote: 'the first observance coincided with the Visitation of Thessalonica.' What is the 'Visitation of Thessalonica' and how does it relate to the wandering star?"

Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle"

She watched Spike mouth the last few words to himself as she waited for the quill to stop moving, "Did you get all that, Spike?"

"Uh huh. Would you like me to send it now?" he asked, rolling the parchment into a scroll and tying it with a ribbon.

He walked to the window and pushed it open. Holding the scroll in one hand he inhaled deeply and blew a gout of green flame. The parchment disintegrated in his hand and a sparkling wisp of smoke whisked up and

away. He turned to find Twilight staring at him expectantly. She kept looking at him for a long moment.

"What?" She only reacted by biting her lower lip. Spike shuffled his feet. He was growing increasingly uncomfortable under her gaze, "Do I have something in my teeth?"

Finally, Twilight spoke, "Well?"

"Well what?"

She prodded his belly with a hoof, "Anything yet?"

Spike groaned, "For goodness sakes, Twilight! Princess Celestia doesn't always respond to your letters *immediately*. Have some patience."

As if on cue, his stomach rumbled and he belched loudly. Green flame swirled and materialized into a levitating parchment scroll with a muted poof.

"Ah, I knew the Princess would respond promptly." She trotted to the center of the room.

Spike plucked the letter from the air and undid the ribbon. He cleared his throat theatrically before reading,

"My most faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,

I thank you for informing me of the strange phenomenon in the sky. I had not heard of such a light appearing in quite some time. I promise I will look into it.

I regret to inform you that it is unlikely you will find any further reference to the Thessalonica. Suffice it to say, the visitation refers to a diplomatic incident many centuries ago.

*Your mentor,
Princess Celestia"*

Twilight looked distraught. "That's it?"

Spike looked over the letter once more, 'That's it.'

Twilight was almost frantic, "That's IT?!" she repeated, "That can't be it! She must have said more than that." Her horn glowed as she snatched the letter out of Spike's clawed hand. She scanned it quickly, then gave a frustrated cry, "Ugh! This doesn't tell me *anything*!" the parchment crumpled into a ball and flew to a corner of the room with a burst of purple haze.

The wall in Captain Mawsley's private quarters danced with colorful swirls and waves. The translucent holographic light show reacted subtly to sound, changing pattern and color. Normally, the JumpShip captain found it soothing, but right now it was just distracting.

"Computer, external feed." She called out. The light dissolved into a panoramic starscape, channeling the ship's external sensors. The silver moon hung large in the scene, washing out the nearby stars. Over the horizon, the blue-green planet was just rising. She could see the computer had selected a view off the aft quarter of the ship, as much of the sky was obscured by the immense, foil-thin sail which spread out behind the ship like a parachute, gathering solar energy and feeding it into the K-F drive capacitors. Mawsley clenched her jaw. No, this was even worse. All it did was remind her of their predicament. "Computer, normal lighting." The starscape and moon faded away, replaced by a steady, soft white glow.

She turned back to the vidscreen mounted on her small, necessarily tidy desk. "I know you've run the diagnostic five times already, Kelly. The nav computer is having trouble getting a lock for a reason. I don't care how deep in the Periphery we are, it should at least be returning partial matches. Take the computer apart circuit-by-circuit if you have to. Get Jimmy in Tech to help you, if you need. Just get me a reading."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll see what I can do. Bridge out." The vidscreen winked off with a chime.

She wanted to throw something. She grabbed a writing stylus and flung it as hard as she could against the wall. It bounced off the bulkhead and floor then floated lazily up towards the ceiling in the microgravity of

orbit. She pinched the bridge of her nose and, pushing off, let herself float free.

The clomp of magnetic boots and a knock at the door brought her back to the present.

The door slid open to reveal the *Silvertongue's* chief tech. She recognized his pudgy build, the goggles pushed up on his forehead, and his prosthetic bionic eye. The welcoming smile on Mawsley's face died with the look on his. He stepped over the threshold and cast his eyes around suspiciously. "Are you alone, Captain?" he asked.

"Yes. Close the door behind you." He did and strode over to the small woman. "What is it, Jean-Jacques?" He held out his hand, showing a burnt tangle of plastic and wires. "What's this?"

The technician responded in a low whisper, "I found this while repairing the burst helium seal. It's a detonator. Or what's left of one." Mawsley recoiled from the burnt mass. "I ran it through a scanalyzer. There's C8 residue. And judging from the extent of the damage, I'd say about half a block."

She looked up at him in horror, staring into his good eye. "Are you saying... Are you saying we were..." she couldn't bring herself to say the terrible word.

He nodded. Sabotage. Someone had planted a bomb on their ship, *her* ship. Rage welled up inside her. She wanted to scream, but she fought the urge. She tried to show no emotion, but she could still feel her face tightening. "Could that be what caused out misjump?" she asked, quietly.

Jean-Jacques shrugged. "The blast was right next to the Initiator. So, yes? Maybe? I dunnoh. You know I'm not that hot with hyperspace physics, Satenig."

She let the informality slide. This man had been with her almost since the beginning of her career. If any person on the *Silvertongue* had the right to use her first name, it was him.

There was still one more question; the all-important one. Who had placed the bomb?

“It must have been placed sometime between undergoing maintenance back at Valexa and the misjump.” Jean-Jacques mused, “I oversaw the maintenance of that compartment myself, and I didn’t find it during my post-inspection. So unless someone slipped it in while I wasn’t looking, it must have been placed sometime between when the Valexa maintenance crews left and we made our jump.”

“Do you think someone from the VMM crew could have planted it during their work in that section?”

The chief tech shook his head “Like I said, I inspected all their work myself after they left.”

“So that leaves us two options.” Mawsley counter off on her fingers, “One: someone from the maintenance team planted the bomb” she held up a hand to cut off his protest “I know, I know. You checked it over, but it *is* possible you missed it. I know you don’t like it, but we have to accept the possibility. And two: the culprit is still with us.”

“There’s one more thing,” he added, “You know how the hatches to the aft section are kept locked for everyone except the techs? Well, I found evidence of tampering with the hatch leading from the lift shaft. The faceplate on the keypad was scratched and one of the screws is partially stripped.”

“So that likely rules out anyone in Tech.”

“They all have alibis, anyway. I was with them all in the forward compartment, and I know no one went aft until after the jump.”

“And it couldn’t have been any of the bridge crew, because I was there. Who’s left?”

“Doc Langley and the medi-techs Berriman and Ciccolella. Gavin and his boys in mess. That’s about it. Did anyone come over from the DropShip?”

“Just Edgar, the MechWarrior, and that grumpy Leftenant, and they came straight from the collar to the bridge.” She was thinking hard, trying to think if any of her close-nit crew would have it in them to try and damage the ship. “Alright. Check the locks and electronic logs leading in and out of the crew compartment. And check the ones leading from the docking collar, too.”

“You think one of Edgar’s could have planted it?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to think it’s more likely than it being one of our own. I trust Tartaglia. He’s a good man, and he’s not the suicidal type to plant a bomb on a JumpShip he’s riding piggyback on.”

“I’ll get right on it.” The tech turned to leave.

“Oh, and Jean-Jacques? Be discrete about this, would you? I don’t want the scuttlebutt getting ahold of this.”

Applejack liked running the family market stall, she really did. She liked playing the role of salespony and interacting with all sorts of other ponies. The break from tiring farm labor was welcome, too. It’s just that, she got tired of being the only member of the Apple family that seemed to end up running it. Granny Smith was too old to keep up with it anymore. Big Macintosh always seemed to disappear whenever the cart rolled out—even though she’d still spot him in town later. Apple Bloom was too young, and judging by her performance last time she tried to help out, a little too... enthusiastic.

“*Pssst!*” she didn’t hear it at first. “*Pssst! Applejack!*” A frantic whisper. She looked around for the source. A pink hoof waved to her from behind a store sign, followed by the unmistakable magenta-maned head of Pinkie Pie. “*Applejack! Come here!*” she whispered not exactly quietly.

Applejack looked back at her applecart. It would be alright to leave it unattended for just a minute, wouldn’t it? She trotted over to where the pink pony was hiding, “What’s the matter, Sugarcube?”

“My pinkie-sense! Twitchy-twitchy-itchy-pinchy-itch!” she said frantically, pushing her left forehoof into Applejack’s face. Her face told the farm pony that she expected her to already know what she was talking about.

“I’m sorry, come again?”

Pinkie didn’t miss a beat, “My hoof! My hoof, it’s all itchy-pinchy. Something’s here! I felt it! I saw it!”

Applejack just stared at her friend, not comprehending. Pinkie bounced excitedly, “Come on, come on come on!” she shot off, turning only to see if Applejack was following.

Applejack looked longingly back at her applecart. When Pinkie was like this, there were only two options: ignore her or just go with it. Given the track record of her pinkie-sense, the second was likely the safer option. She caught up with Pinkie outside of Carrot Top’s house. She was about to ask why they were here when Pinkie disappeared head-first into the rosebushes lining the front below the window. A moment later, her head poked up above the branches, calling for Applejack to follow.

Applejack trotted up to the bushes, wondering how Pinkie was avoiding the thorns. She gingerly pushed her head through, wincing as the thorns grabbed at her mane. Pinkie was pointing excitedly at a spot near window where the mulch had been brushed away. In the soft soil she saw a strange shape. It was long and somewhat oval shaped; slightly wider at one end than the other and narrower in the middle. Most striking was the texture of the depression, all knobby and bumpy, but very angular and precise.

“See? See? Something was here! I knew it! That’s its hoofprint—er—no, pawprint? Whaddaya’ call it when it’s not a hoof and not really a paw?”

“Paw? That don’t look like no pawprint I’ve ever seen, Pinkie. You sure ‘bout that?”

“Of course, Silly-McSiller-son. What else could I have seen leaving Carrot’s party last night?”

“Wait, you’re saying something was hidin’ in the bushes when we were leavin’ last night?”

Pinkie rolled her eyes, “Well, DUH!”

Applejack felt a knot form in her stomach, “What was it?”

Pinkie leaned close and whispered, “Dunnoh. I didn’t get a good look. But whatever it was, it made that big noise in the Everfree Forest.”

Applejack was finding herself equal parts uneasy and confused, “What noise in the forest?”

“Oh, you don’t know? Fluttershy said there was a big noise in the forest that scared all the birds. Something fell—well, sort of fell but didn’t fall, and whatever was in what fell is now here in Ponyville!”

The image of toothy-jawed aliens, bright lights, and strange machines came unbidden to Applejack’s mind. She tried to put it out of her head. After all, Twilight had said aliens probably had never been in Equestria. But, then, she *hadn’t* said aliens *didn’t* exist, and had even seemed to imply they were possible. No, it couldn’t be that. Much more likely it was just some sort of weird creature from the depths of the Everfree Forest. No pony was really sure what lurked in that awful place.

“Have ya’ shown Twilight this? Maybe she’d be able to find it in one of her books? She is the resident brainiac, after all.”

“I was going to tell Twilight and Rarity and Rainbow and Fluttershy and Spike, but I found you first.”

Applejack backed out of the rosebush, glancing around to make sure her odd behavior hadn’t drawn attention, “Uh huh. Well, ya’ showed me, but I’m still not sure exactly why.”

With a leap, Pinkie cleared the bushes and landed next to her, “I just wanted to tell you to keep your eyes out for anything weird. And now I’ve told you! Hah!” Humming a tune, the pink pony trotted off, leaving a rather befuddled Applejack behind.

“How do they keep those waterfalls so coherent all the way down?”

“I dunnoh. This whole place is like some sort of freakin’ fairytale.” Ramirez passed the binoculars back to Corporal Virat. They were lying side by side on the backside of a hill under a holly bush. They had traded their combat helmets for floppy field caps which covered their heads and necks. Liz would have felt more comfortable with a camouflage drape or a ghillie suit, but as they didn’t have any, their camouflage fatigues would have to suffice. They weren’t ideal. Colored for the mountains and forests of Valexa, their greens and tans stood out more than she would have liked against this deep green grass.

They had spent the entire morning lying almost motionless beneath this bush. They had taken turns with their only pair of rangefinding binoculars, observing the village below and mapping what they could see of the valley. They’d identified several buildings and outlying farms. Some, like that large tree near the middle of the town and the purple-and-pink building that looked sort of like a carousel, still had them at a loss, as did the white colonnaded building on the outskirts of the town that almost looked to be constructed out of clouds.

In the daylight, the demarcation between forest and these rolling hills was even more extreme. The organic tangle of tree trunks and undergrowth in the woods had felt familiar, normal. It could have been any other forest on most any other Inner Sphere “garden planet” in the late autumn. Out here, though, things were very different. They had expected differences in temperature and humidity, but out here it almost seemed to be a different season. While the trees in the forest had mostly lost their leaves in preparation for the coming winter, the ones here still hung to their leaves tenaciously, despite being the same species. Everything here seemed strangely ordered, almost as if every inch were carefully manicured and zealously maintained. Under the shining sun, the village, no, the entire valley looked to them to be near indescribably idyllic. It was almost a dream made manifest, complete with a fairytale castle with towering spires cantilevered off the flank of a distant mountain surrounded by majestic waterfalls.

They could see the denizens of the town through the binoculars. At first, they had watched for the telltale silhouette of a human, but every inhabitant they saw was one of those horse-like quadrupeds.

Ramirez's mind was wandering. He couldn't get the sound of their voices out of his head. "Is there a protocol for a first contact scenario with aliens?" he thought out loud.

Liz took a long time to answer, though she knew the question was more rhetorical. "Not that I know of. Maybe ComStar's Explorer Corps has one, but we sure don't."

In the over 900 years since the K-F drive had first allowed mankind to spread to the stars, and after extensive exploration and colonization of the more than 2,000 star systems of the Inner Sphere and untold more in the Periphery beyond, mankind had never once come across intelligent alien life. There had been aliens, of course; microorganisms on almost every planet, photosynthetic plant-like organisms, even animal life that filled ecological niches analogous to fish, reptiles, birds. Some had even been domesticated, like the Odessan Raxx or the dragon-like Branths of Lopez. Some alien animals could be clever, like the highly dangerous and venomous Nolan on the Steiner world of Engadine or the Alcor Bush Apes, but never to anyone's knowledge had any human explorers come across anything resembling civilization. Not even xeno-paleontological evidence. As far as anyone could tell, mankind was alone as the sole technologically-advanced creature in the universe.

Until now.

"So, what do we do when they spot us?" Liz mused.

"Treat it like an unexpected visit on a backwater world? Work out a translation and tell 'em we just need some repairs and we'll be on our way." It wasn't much of a plan, and he knew it.

Ramirez shifted in place and tried to stretch his aching legs and groaned, "Mother of Kerensky, how do you mudsloggers *do* this for hours on end?" Lying here all day had made him very glad he had never been part of an infantry scout unit or sniper team.

Liz shot him a look out of the corner of her eye, "How do you 'Mech-jocks manage sitting on your ass in your tin cans all the time?"

He grinned, "I've got a mini-fridge behind the command seat."

She raised an eyebrow at him, "You do not."

He only smiled in response, letting his joke run its course. Looking back to the valley, he pointed at a spot in the sky, "There goes another one."

Liz trained the binoculars on the point he indicated. Sure enough, a lone puffy white cumulus cloud was trundling across the sky, against the prevailing winds. "Yup, and there's another of those little winged pegasuses pushing it. How do they do that?"

They watched the cloud move purposefully across the sky. Two more little specs rose up from the ground and swooped towards another cloudbank on the other side of town. The clouds evaporated one by one as the specks ducked and dived.

"Is it pegasuses or pegasi?" Liz asked.

"Pegasi, I think. Unless it's like 'moose' where they're the same."

"What's a 'moose'?"

A cyan streak raced through the autumn sky, trailing a faint rainbow afterimage. Rainbow Dash stretched her wings as far as she could. She savored the feeling of the wind rushing through her mane and over her feathers. Nothing in the world was better than flying, except perhaps flying fast. Or doing aerial stunts. Or better yet, aerial stunts *while* flying fast.

With a hungry grin, she twitched her wings, sending her into a dizzying series of spins, loops, twists, and dives. She raced low, letting the long grass tickle her tummy as she swept up fallen leaves and seeds in her wake. She rocketed up high, climbing above the puffy clouds, then twisted around and dove back down again. She was cruising along the edge of the

valley, near the border of the Everfree Forest, out where nopony would be around to interrupt her. This was one of her favorite places to fly. No distractions, no responsibilities, no worries. She came here often after she was done with her Weather Patrol duties to think and blow off steam.

Today, she was thinking about aliens. She'd already finished the comic book Spike had leant her. He was right, it was totally awesome. She loved the idea of soaring through the stars, exploring strange planets and battling it out with vicious aliens and their ray guns. She'd probably never actually do it herself, of course. It was more the thought of it. After all, she wouldn't even venture into the Everfree Forest by herself, and that was right here, practically in her back yard. She put up a brave front, she had a reputation to think of, but that place still gave her the creeps. Even being this close to it sometimes gave her the willies, especially when clouds roiled up and blew around all on their own with no pegasus ponies around. That just didn't seem *natural*.

But then again, would aliens and their worlds be as unnatural as the Everfree? Twilight had said if they existed, aliens probably didn't look anything like ponies. But griffins didn't look anything like ponies, and they did fine controlling the weather in the distant lands where they were more common than ponies. Besides, Twilight didn't know everything.

She almost missed it, a different colored smudge beside a holly bush near the top of a hill. She thought it was a pile of leaves or a patch of dirt at first. She wouldn't have paid it any mind at all, except she had seen it move. She swooped down and hovered lightly, almost close enough to touch the thing. She saw now that it was alive, and what's more, there were two of them. Two odd-looking creatures sprawled out beneath the bush. Their coloring was an odd green and brown that made them sort of hard to focus on, except for what she assumed were feet, which were solid tan and the pads were covered with odd knobs and ridges. She wondered why they didn't react to her presence until she realized they were facing away from her.

Intrigued, she fluttered closer. She could smell them. She couldn't place it, but it smelled a little like cooking spices, sweat, and dirt. They didn't smell particularly good. She could also hear them, making low noises to each other. They were definitely talking, one would gesture or make a noise, and the other would respond. She strained her ears, but she couldn't

make out the language. It sounded more like a series of grunts and groans than words.

One of them had an object lying next to it. She fluttered as close as she dared without alerting the creature to her presence. It was a long tube with a handle and various other bits sticking off. It looked familiar. Its identity hit her like a stray lightning bolt. She had seen something very similar in Spike's comic book. A ray gun.

Aliens. Could they be aliens? Twilight *had* said they'd look like nothing she could imagine, and these weird sprawled shapes *certainly* fit that bill.

She wanted to squeal in delight. Aliens! Real, live aliens! Right here in Equestria! And *she* had found them. She should tell somepony of course. But who? Twilight, of course, but she was clear back at the library. The aliens might be gone by the time she managed to drag that bookworm all the way out here, and then she'd get lectured on having wasted her time and how she must have let her imagination get the better of her.

Fluttershy's place was nearby. She was good with all sorts of creatures. She may be meek, but she'd reduced a giant dragon to tears! *And* stared down a cockatrice while it was turning her to stone. If anyone could handle a pair of potentially dangerous creatures, Fluttershy could. Slipping away from the two oblivious things, she raced off. She only hoped Fluttershy was home.

She found Fluttershy tending to her flock of chickens. The little yellow pegasus was a bit taken aback by the sudden appearance of her blue friend. Rainbow pleaded with her to come quick, as she'd found a pair of strange creatures near the edge of the forest. She purposefully avoided the word 'alien' lest she scare the jumpy ball of nerves before she could get her to come along.

Fluttershy acquiesced to her friend's excited pleas and together they flapped off. Or rather, Rainbow shot ahead while Fluttershy flew low and slow and comfortably close to the ground.

"Come ON, Fluttershy! Pick up the pace! They'll be gone by the time we get there!"

“Uh. O-oh, o-okay,” Fluttershy flapped a little harder with a grunt of effort. Her speed increased, but her altitude did not. Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. How could a pegasus be this afraid of heights?

The two creatures were lying right where Rainbow had left them. She and Fluttershy touched down lightly and slowly crept forward.

“See? I told you” Dash whispered, barely audible above the faint rustle of the breeze, a volume no pony thought her capable of. Fluttershy just stood still.

Dash was getting impatient. She wanted to confront these aliens. She wanted to be as brave as Orion Nebula, Spacepony Extraordinaire. Now that she had a friend beside her, she crept forward and gently rapt on one protruding foot with her hoof.

“Blake’s blood!” Ramirez yelled in surprise and jumped up. He tumbled forward, landing in a heap. Something had grabbed his foot, and it scared him half to death. Liz, the experienced infantrywoman, rolled up to her knee. She flicked off the safety on her Federated Long Rifle as she brought the sights up to her eye as fast as a blink.

Fluttershy squeaked and froze in place. “The ray gun!” Dash shouted as she fell to the ground, covering her head with her hooves.

Ramirez scrambled to his hands and knees. He found himself face to face with two of the little pony things. He recognized them immediately as two of the ones he saw from the rosebushes; the blue one with the multicolored mane and the yellow one hiding behind long, pink hair. He also saw Corporal Virat, rifle leveled and struggling to control her breathing. Time seemed to drag on.

Fluttershy had been stunned by the sudden reaction of the monsters. They looked horrible, with flat faces and long arms that ended in hands. She saw their protruding noses and large, white teeth. She also saw the beady, white eyes. Eyes which were filled with fear.

They were afraid. The monsters were afraid. Afraid of them. Afraid of her. She had dealt with many animals, and prided herself on her ability to commune with them on a level beyond most ponies. Malice she knew was

always dangerous. Anger could be quelled. Fear was easy. She could deal with fear.

“It’s ok.” She stepped forward slowly, keeping her head low. She tried to make her voice as soothing as possible. She focused on the one with the weird stick. She knew that one was more dangerous right now. “Shhh. It’s ok. Everything will be alright. We won’t hurt you.”

Ramirez watched in amazement as the pink-haired one stepped forward. It made a series of soft cooing noises. Its wide, expressive eyes and indeed its very essence exuded compassion. It was trying to communicate. Was it trying to calm them? He nearly burst out laughing at the absurdity. This dainty little creature was trying to sooth them like they were a pair of frightened kittens. It was so naïve, so sweet, and so innocent, his heart melted at the sight. In the corner of his eye, he saw Liz relax. She lowered the weapon, and slowly placed it on the ground. Trembling, she extended an arm, palm forward and fingers splayed, towards the yellow and pink miniature pegasus.

The pegasus smiled and Ramirez could almost taste sugar in his mouth. It leaned forward gently and pressed its muzzle against Liz’s outstretched hand.

The blue one, seeing this turn of events, leapt up. It shot over to Ramirez and started chattering at an impossible pace, obviously excited.

“Omigosh! Omigosh! Omigosh! Are you aliens? Are you really aliens? Where are you from? Do you have a spaceship? Do you have ray guns? Are you Martians?”

Ramirez stared at the excited ball of blue fur and feathers, trying to comprehend. Finally it stopped and stared at him expectantly with big, ruby red eyes.

“First contact, sir. What are we going to do?” Liz muttered to him under her breath. This was it. This was something mankind had never experienced before. He and Liz were the first humans to come in contact with an alien race. What happened now, what he said now would be the stuff of legend. Like the first words when man landed on the moon or New Earth.

He cleared his throat and spread his arms wide, "Take us to your leader!"

Liz's head snapped around and she raised a very curious eyebrow, "Seriously? Universe-changing moment and we open with the oldest cliché ever?"

Chapter 8

Neurolinguistic Psychotransmutation

The two aliens stood up. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy looked up at them in amazement. They were tall and thin with a long torso perched precariously on a pair of equally long legs. Fluttershy realized she barely even came up to the waist of the one closest to her, the one she had allowed to touch her. It towered over her, peering down with narrow blue eyes.

Now that her initial fear had passed, she could see that her and Rainbow's first impressions of the creatures had been quite wrong. They didn't sprawl on the ground, but stood tall. She wondered how they could balance like that with their bodies so far from the ground. Spike stood much the same way, but he was small and his legs short. The only creatures she had seen which even remotely resembled their gait were the diamond dogs, but even they walked more hunched over. Their forelimbs dangled at their sides, terminating in broad hands with five slender fingers. She noted gratefully that the fingers did not end in claws. A small, round head balanced on their broad shoulders.

What they had taken for green and tan pelts she could see were actually clothes. They were made of multiple pieces and seemed to be covered with straps and pockets and pouches. The clothes covered their entire bodies except their heads and hands. The areas not covered by the fabric appeared to be completely hairless, except the tops of their heads. The skin of the one closest to her was a deep, dark brown, almost black, while the other's was a lighter color more akin to the ruddy shade of a chestnut. They wore broad-brimmed floppy hats, but when one swept theirs off, she could see they had manes. They wore them short, but the chestnut one even had its tied back.

They weren't so bad, she decided. They did have pleasant enough faces, in their own way. Their eyes were expressive and their teeth were not sharp and pointy. The odd protruding noses and round, floppy ears lent them a rather comical appearance, even. They looked a little bit like some sort of giant monkey, and those were generally friendly.

She tried talking to them again. She asked their names and where they were from, but they just stared at her or talked to each other in their odd language. The darker one knelt down and spoke directly to her. It made its noises slowly and deliberately while gesturing with an arm. Fluttershy realized it was trying to talk back to her. It was obviously trying to indicate who or what it was and ask the same of her.

She turned to Rainbow Dash, "Do you have any idea what it's saying?" she asked

Rainbow Dash shook her head. As she did, Fluttershy noticed the kneeling alien had said something to its companion, who responded by shaking its head as well.

"Hmm, hang on," she turned back to the creature. She smiled, and was pleased to see the creature smile back. She focused on its eyes, seeing the corners tug. She furrowed her brow and snorted, stamping a foot. The creature coked its head and raised an eyebrow. Confusion? Amusement? She ran through several other emotions, watching the face of the creature the whole time. After a while, it seemed to grasp her intent and started playing along.

"What are you doing?" Rainbow interrupted. Fluttershy glanced quickly at the chestnut alien, and was pleased to see the same look of confusion on its face as on her friend's.

"Oh, well. Their facial expressions are the same as ours! You can read their intents and feelings just like a pony or other animal."

"No way!" Rainbow turned to the aliens and made a face. The aliens snorted and stifled a laugh "Oh, awesome! Can we talk to them now?"

Fluttershy looked worried, "I, uh. I can try." She faced the alien and pointed with her hoof to the holly bush. "Bush!" she enunciated, "Bush!" The dark alien looked confused, but then the chestnut one stepped forward, pointed at the bush, and made one of its grunting noises.

Fluttershy looked around for another object. She pointed her hoof to an elm tree not too distant. "Tree!" The alien pointed to the tree and made

another, different, but still indecipherable sound. Encouraged, Fluttershy nipped off some blades of grass, then letting them fall from her lips and expressed the word. The dark alien now reached down and plucked some blades with its fingers, grunting out its word for the same.

“Aw, this is gonna take *forever*.” Rainbow Dash sulked. She sat down hard on her haunches and let her wings droop.

“You could start writing down the sounds they make for different words. I think that’s what that one is doing.” Fluttershy nodded towards the darker alien. It has extracted what looked very much to be a pad and pencil, though there didn’t seem to be any paper, and appeared to be writing. The action, seeing that pen pinched between the creature’s fingers, reminded her of Twilight’s rant about how many tools seemed to be made more for use with hands, not mouths. “Rainbow,” she said slowly, “Maybe we should go get Twilight?”

“Hey, yeah! Maybe she knows a translation spell or something!” Rainbow leapt into the air. That wasn’t the logic she had been pursuing, but Fluttershy had to admit her friend’s reasoning was sound. Rainbow suddenly looked very concerned, “But, we can’t leave them here, and there’s no way we could sneak them into town.”

Fluttershy bit her lip. She was timid by nature. Bravery did not come naturally. “Y-you go, Rainbow. I-I’ll s-stay here.”

“Are you sure about that, Fluttershy? I don’t want to leave you in danger. Maybe I should stay and you should go.”

Fluttershy shook her head, “I’ll be fine. I don’t think they’ll hurt me. Besides, you’re much faster than me.”

Rainbow Dash tried to protest, but Fluttershy’s mind was made up. With a promise to return with Twilight as fast as she could, she shot off into the deep blue sky.

Ramirez watched the blue race off at an impossible speed. “Now where do you suppose she’s going?”

“She?” Liz looked up from the noteputer on which she was recording the sounds the little yellow pegasus was making and annotating equivalent words.

Ramirez shrugged, “I dunnoh. They seem sort of... feminine to me.”

“I can see that. Especially this one.” Liz indicated the yellow creature with its large, blue-green eyes and long lashes. She turned to look at Ramirez, “Shouldn’t we be radioing Command about this?”

“Not quite yet” he replied, “I want to figure out their motivations first. Maybe see if we can find the people.”

“I keep telling you, sir. I think these *are* the people.”

“Someone built those houses and that castle, Corporal, and I have trouble believing it was a bunch of alien horses.”

Rainbow Dash took the turn in through the library window a *little* too tight, and the landing a *little* too fast. She skidded into the bookshelves with a thud. Books tumbled off the shelves and buried her in an avalanche of paper. She poked her head up out of the pile to see an irate purple scaly face glaring back at her. Spike had just finished organizing the Library following Twilight’s research escapades, and he was not thrilled with even part of it being undone so quickly. Behind the irate dragon, Twilight Sparkle and Pinkie Pie looked on in shock.

Normally, Rainbow would have coughed out some sort of apology or excuse, but this time, in her urgency, she elected to forgo her usual habit.

“Twilight!” she panted as she scrambled from the pile, “Come quick! We found...” she tried to catch her breath, “We found... Do you have a... Come on!”

“Dash! Calm down. What’s going on? What is it?” Twilight placed a hoof on Rainbow’s shoulder, trying to calm her.

“No time. Come on, before they leave!” Rainbow headed for the door.

“Before *who* leaves, Dashie?” Pinkie Pie chirped up.

“The aliens! Now come *on!*” Rainbow veritably shouted, she was starting to get frustrated. There was a moment of silence as the two ponies and the dragon stared at her. Twilight and Spike burst into riotous laughter, but Pinkie remained still and silent.

“Oh, really?” Twilight mocked, “Aliens, huh? Dash, did you really think I’d fall for that?”

“Ha ha! Yeah! You usually put more effort into your pranks, Rainbow. I mean, I know *Orion Nebula* is a great comic book and all, but you usually at least *try* to be original.”

Rainbow stamped her hoof, “It’s *not* a joke! I really found something, and I really need some sort of spell to translate what it’s saying.” She could feel the tears starting to well up.

“Well, *I* want to see.” Pinkie Pie stepped to Rainbow’s side, “I didn’t get to finish telling you about the footprint in Carrot Top’s flowerbed, Twilight. Maybe this will answer *my* mystery.”

Twilight rolled her eyes, “Ok, fine. We’ll go see your ‘alien’. You coming, Spike?”

“Nah, I’ll give this one a pass.” He eyed the newly created mess.

“Don’t forget a translation spell,” called Rainbow, already halfway out the door.

Twilight chuckled, “Oh, yeah. Can’t forget that.” She hadn’t yet dropped the mocking tone, “Spike, could you fetch me...”

“Way ahead of you, Twilight.” He stuffed a book in her saddlebag then lifted it over her back.

“Thank you, number one assistant.” And with that, Twilight trotted out of the library in pursuit of Rainbow and Pinkie. Already they were making

best speed down the village street. She found herself having to run very hard to keep pace.

“Blue one’s back. And looks like she brought a friend.” Ramirez normally would have felt threatened by an increase in number of strange animals, but he found himself unable to feel threatened by such creatures as these.

“Uh huh. Damn these things learn fast.” Liz didn’t even look up from the ground where she and the yellow pegasus, in their ongoing attempts at communication, had moved on from naming random objects to numbers. They had laid out piles of twigs, berries, and leaves and were taking turns demonstrating counting. Already, she had learned the ponies had a concept for zero.

Ramirez saw that following the cyan pegasus was the pink bushy-maned pony from the previous night. The same one that appeared to be staring right at him in the bushes. “How... How smart do you think they are?” he asked, a little nervous.

Again, Liz didn’t look up, “I’m no expert on these things, but this one? If we could talk the same language, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were just as smart as us.”

Ramirez watched as the pegasus and the pink pony crested the hill, followed a short while later by the lavender unicorn which had been the first of these creatures he had seen. It was sweating and breathing heavily from a hard run. It wasn’t paying attention to anything but its own physical discomfort as it reached the top of the hill. When it looked up and saw the two humans, its jaw dropped.

The blue one fluttered over to the awestruck unicorn and began talking. From the look on its face, the pegasus appeared smug. Ramirez guessed the unicorn either hadn’t been adequately briefed prior to arrival, or had not believed what waited on the hill when told.

The unicorn regained its composure and following a short and heated discussion, turned and addressed him. He smiled in response and

somewhat colorfully stated that he had no idea what the little pony was saying. The unicorn tried a couple more times, and then ducked its head into a satchel hanging across its back. Ramirez was surprised when the head retracted with a book held in its teeth. With a short declaration, he managed to pull Liz's attention away from her linguistic attempts. The unicorn set the book on the ground. A book. They had books. Not only were these ponies smart, they had artifacts and possibly literature.

A pale purple light shone out around the unicorn's horn. The air around it glowed like fog illuminated by a lightbulb. A similar but fainter light seemed to originate from the book at the unicorn's feet. With a rustling, the book opened and pages flipped by rapidly. He would have blamed it on the breeze, but no breeze was blowing. The pages stopped turning abruptly, then flipped back the other way for a few pages, and then stopped.

The unicorn read the page intently. He could see its eyes moving back and forth across the page. "Top to bottom, left to right," Liz whispered next to him, "Interesting."

The little lavender pony looked up at them and said something incomprehensible. Ramirez felt a knot form in his stomach. Something was about to happen, but he didn't know what. The pony spread her hooves and took a solid stance. It grunted and its horn began to glow again.

"What is it doing?" Liz whispered in his ear.

The glow grew brighter. She grimaced, whatever she was doing seemed to require a lot of effort. The glow grew in intensity until a bright white flash exploded outward. Ramirez felt a weak shockwave hit his body and his ears were filled with a shrill whine. The noise died away, replaced by a dull ringing.

"There, I think that did it" said a voice. Ramirez shook his head, disoriented. He looked around for where the voice had come from.

"Hello." The little lavender unicorn stepped forward. Ramirez and Liz both stared open-mouthed. The unicorn raised its head and puffed out its chest in a very proud manner, "My name is Twilight Sparkle, and these are my friends, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie." She motioned

towards each pony in turn. "If I guess correctly, you can understand me now?"

The two humans just nodded. Twilight Sparkle smiled, pleased with herself. Ramirez realized the ponies were all looking at them expectantly. "Uh," he tried to find his tongue, "Uh. We come in peace?"

"Oh, good *lord*." Liz huffed.

"Hey, I didn't hear *you* saying anything, Corporal," he shot back under his breath. "What, Hey!"

The pink pony had shot forward and grabbed ahold of Ramirez's foot with its front hooves. It yanked up hard, nearly toppling him over. It stared intently at the sole of his boot then leapt back with a high-pitched whoop "I KNEW it! I KNEW it! I knew I saw you hiding in Carrot Top's rosebushes! But why were you hiding in the rosebushes? Oh! Were you playing hide-and-seek? I love hide-and-seek! Though it's certainly more fun if everypony who's playing knows they're playing..." she was yanked away by Twilight Sparkle who had grabbed her tail in her mouth.

Rainbow took this as her cue and swooped up close, "Omigosh! Are you really aliens? Like, outer-space aliens? Twilight didn't believe me, but I..." Twilight yanked her away from the towering creatures by her tail as well.

"Yes, well, I'm sure there'll be plenty of time for questions, and I'm sure you have plenty of your own. But first things first: who are you... and what are you?" Twilight directed at Ramirez and Liz

Ramirez snapped up straight with a click of his heels, "I am Sargent Brandon Ramirez of the Valexa March Militia, Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. This is my compatriot, Corporal Elizabeth Virat. As for what we are, we are... uh... humans."

"Sarge-gent Bra—Brah—um? Twilight struggled over the words.

Ramirez smiled, "Sargent is my rank. I usually go by Ramirez."

Twilight tried to duplicate the pronunciation. He enunciated each syllable for her. She then turned her attention to Liz. At first she called her 'Eliza-beak,' matching the name of one of Fluttershy's chickens.

"You can just call me 'Liz'," she grinned.

"Well, Ramirez and Liz, on behalf of myself and my friends, welcome to Equestria. Now, what brings you to our land?"

"I am afraid it was an accident. Our JumpShip suffered a misjump and a busted helium seal. As soon as we can repair, we'll be on our way," Ramirez said matter-of-factly.

"Jump ship? What's that?" Pinkie Pie piped in. She was picturing a sailing ship bouncing across the landscape.

Liz answered for her tongue-tied superior, "A word we use for our space ship." She was finding she was better at simplifying concepts than the MechWarrior, "We're... lost."

"YES! They *are* aliens! I *told* you, Twilight!" Rainbow pumped a hoof in the air.

"Hmph," Twilight frowned. She wasn't about to admit they were visitors from outer space. "How do I know you're not just pulling our legs? What proof do you have you're from outer space?"

Ramirez just stammered. He was no longer sure just what was going on. Liz, however, was just reaching her stride.

"Would you like to see our ship? It's in orbit around your moon right now. Do you have a telescope?"

"Yes..." Twilight said slowly.

"Then wait for nightfall and watch the lit face of the moon. You'll see our ship as a shadow passing across." She gestured with her finger to illustrate the movement of the *Silvertongue's* shadow.

Twilight remained silent for a long moment. The other ponies watched her intently. "Alright," she said icily, "we'll wait for nightfall and then we'll see."

Liz got the distinct impression this little ringleader didn't quite trust them yet. She couldn't blame her. She wasn't certain how much they should divulge to their diminutive hosts, either.

As for Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, they couldn't contain themselves any longer. Ramirez and Liz found themselves on the receiving end of a furious fusillade of questions. The humans responded in kind, answering what questions they were comfortable with and firing back with questions of their own.

Finally, Ramirez realized he had not asked one of the most obvious questions. He turned to Twilight Sparkle, "Pardon my asking, but how is it that we are able to understand each other?"

Liz looked at him quizzically, "You know, I was going to ask why you've been talking entirely in Cantonese. And why your accent has gotten better."

Twilight looked at him as if he had just asked a very silly question. "It's a basic subconscious neurolinguistic psychotransmutation translation spell," she said dismissively, "As long as you're in a certain, but fairly wide, radius of me, your linguistic centers will automatically and subconsciously translate any speech into the language you are most comfortable with." She saw the looks of confusion and disbelief on the humans' faces and sighed.

Her horn glowed and the book lifted off the ground and floated into her saddlebag. The humans gasped. "How did you DO that?" Ramirez asked frantically.

"Huh? Do what?" the tall creature pointed at her saddlebag with a long finger. "Honestly, haven't you ever seen magic before?"

The two humans turned to each other. "New hypothesis," said Ramirez, "We're dreaming. Or I'm dreaming."

“Oh! Oh! Maybe I’m dreaming, too! But I’m awake. And you’re awake! At least I think we’re awake. Unless we’re daydreaming. But when I daydream it doesn’t affect everypony around me. *Ooh*, you must be a *really* good dreamer!”

“Yeah, why do you say you’re dreaming?” asked Rainbow Dash

“Because there’s no such thing as magic,” Ramirez said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Twilight clenched her jaw. “Of course there’s magic!” she yelled angrily. She was about to launch into one of her tirades. Magic and its effects were something that ponies—and especially unicorns—used and relied on every day! How dare this creature just waltz in and casually declare it didn’t exist. That would be like saying that air and water didn’t exist.

Liz saw the anger welling up in Twilight. She also saw Ramirez about to shoot back with what she was sure they would regret later. “He means there’s no magic where we come from,” she quickly interjected.

Twilight couldn’t conceive of such a place. A world without magic? How could anything survive?

Twilight wanted to keep the two humans close at hand. Despite her misgivings, she was intensely curious. Of course she couldn’t take the two humans to Ponyville. The townspenies initial distrust of Zecora the zebra suggested they would probably react with panic should the creatures be found in town. However, the thought of somehow restraining or imprisoning the visitors never even crossed her mind. There was also the problem that the male, Ramirez, had indicated there were more of them still in the Everfree Forest. She knew that if one of her friends had been restrained in some way the rest of them would do anything to free them. It had happened before. It had happened just a few months ago with Rarity, in fact. With an unknown number of additional humans out there (he had refused to say exactly how many were in his group, which Twilight found a little suspicious), she didn’t want to do anything that could be considered hostile.

In the end she only had their word the two would not leave before she could return with her telescope. She wanted to confirm Liz's claim of a spaceship orbiting the moon. The other ponies had stayed on the hill with the humans while she fetched the instrument. Bursting into the library, she startled Spike, who had been napping. She dropped her saddlebag and ran upstairs to gather her telescope with barely a word.

Spike was waiting for her when she returned downstairs. He was curious about how well Rainbow had pulled off her prank. Twilight replied that she wasn't sure it was a prank.

Spikes eyes grew wide, "What? You mean she really found," he gulped, "a-alien?"

"I'm not convinced they are aliens. I think they're most likely some sort of strange creature from the deep in the Everfree. Even if they do claim they have a spaceship orbiting the moon."

"Shouldn't we warn the Princess?" asked Spike, climbing onto Twilight's back

Twilight considered, "For a couple of strange creatures from the Everfree? I don't think there's anything to warn about."

"But what if they really are..."

"If they really are from outer space, *then* we'll alert the Princess." Twilight pushed open the front door to the library. It was still hours until nightfall, but she wanted to be ready.

"So, what are you eating?" Rainbow Dash sniffed curiously at the little bag from which Ramirez was spooning some sort of mush, "It smells weird."

Ramirez had sat down to eat while Corporal Virat radioed the DropShip. He had pulled a field ration packet from the backpacks they had retrieved from their temporary campsite and prepared the food with water

from his canteen. Ramirez swallowed the lukewarm mixture and looked at the package.

“The label says Sarna-style Vindaloo. I’m pretty sure it’s just reconstituted quillar proteins.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a bio-engineered grain crop,” he swallowed another spoonful, “It’s really common where we come from.”

“Can I try it?”

Ramirez pondered carefully. Incompatible biochemistries were a leading cause of extinctions among indigenous life. He didn’t want to accidentally poison their hosts. Still, this food was mostly simple carbohydrates and some denatured proteins, stuff that was really common even in extraterrestrial metabolisms. And with so much Terran life around, it was unlikely these ponies would react poorly to food he himself could digest just fine.

“Yeah, sure.” He held out a spoonful of the lumpy brown mush. Rainbow Dash sniffed at it then took a tiny nibble. Her eyes went wide and she leapt back.

“Ugh! Yech! Blech!” Ramirez chuckled at her comical reaction, “Yuck! How do you eat that stuff?”

Liz came tromping down from the top of the hill where she had been using the radio. “Orders are to stay put, Sarge. Tartaglia and Ling are comin’ out from the *Felicity*, and bringing the doc. The Lieutenant’s ordered the other teams to rendezvous at the DropShip.”

Ramirez nodded, “Alright. You did tell him what to expect, yes?”

“I did, but I’m not sure he believed me. I mean, talking magical ponies? I think he’s bringing the doc out specifically to give us both psych evaluations.” She was only half-joking.

Chapter 9

Pinkie Pie's Welcome to Equestria Picnic

The night was clear, perfect for stargazing. The waxing gibbous moon hung high in the starry sky, its silvery face marred by dark mares. Twilight set up her telescope beside the holly bush at the crest of the hill, her horn glowing faintly in the darkness.

Ramirez flicked on the safety on his laser pistol. Spike and Rainbow Dash had begged to see the "ray gun" in action. Not wanting to draw undue attention from gunshots, or waste precious ammunition for the visually impressive Federated Long Rifles, Ramirez had finally acquiesced to show them the laser pistol. They had been initially disappointed the weapon was nearly silent and didn't project a visible beam, but watching the empty ration packets, piles of dry leaves, and any other disposable objects they could get their claws or hooves on flare, melt, or burn had kept them delightfully entertained. Even Pinkie Pie had gotten in on the act, helping to stamp out the small fires when they didn't immediately go out.

"I still don't get this whole magic thing," he said, "Is it some sort of technology you're using to manipulate things remotely, or..."

"No," Twilight replied, "no technology. It's entirely unaided." She was growing more tolerant of Ramirez's skepticism. She had been thinking about Pinkie Pie and her pinkie-sense. That was something she didn't believe existed when first confronted with it. Even still she couldn't completely explain it. She had decided to be tolerant of the humans' initial disbelief.

"Think of it like this. Magic infuses everything in the world. Ponies are able to tap into that magic and control it to alter reality." She began aligning the telescope with the moon.

"So that's how pegasi are able to push clouds around?"

“Yes. Every pony has some innate magical ability. Pegasi and earth ponies use theirs passively, but unicorns like me can use our horns to manipulate magical fields directly.”

Ramirez furrowed his brow, “That still sounds too out-there supernatural to me.”

“Well, you have science where you come from. Just think of it as a branch of science like physics or chemistry. Only it’s an aspect of the universe you haven’t been able to observe before.”

Her explanation wasn’t sufficient to Ramirez’s mind, but he decided to let it go. He could see the effects of Twilight’s magic clear enough. Whether it was the result of some mystical force or some hyper-advanced technology that would put the Star League and the Clans to shame, he would sort it out later. He decided to just accept the existence of magic as a conditional given and move on.

Twilight turned to her telescope, “OK, so where’s this spaceship of yours?”

All the crowd on the hill—human, dragon, and pony—drew close. Only Fluttershy had not stayed, citing that she needed to get back and check on a blue jay with a cough. Ramirez deferred to Liz. This was her gamble, so he decided to let her handle it.

“Train your telescope on the edge of the moon near the equator. The ship is pretty small, but they should have their sail out, which is a bit bigger. Watch for a small speck moving fast from one side to the other. Its orbiting once about every two hours,” she checked a chronometer attached to her combat vest, “I think they should be passing by soon.”

Twilight peered through her telescope and made some fine adjustments. Liz stepped back to Ramirez and cursed under her breath

“I completely forgot about the size of the ship. Unless that’s one hell of a telescope, there’s no way she’d spot it at this range,” she whispered.

Barely a minute passed before Twilight looked up from the eyepiece. She looked thoughtfully at the sky.

“Hmm, maybe if I...” she grunted with effort as light burst forth from her horn. A rustle of wind swept up from the valley. Ramirez and Liz looked on in amazement as the moon seemed to grow larger in the sky.

Twilight went back to the eyepiece, “Ah, that’s better.” She adjusted the aim, “Is the sail supposed to look like a parachute?”

“Um, yeah.” Liz silently mouthed to Ramirez, “How in the hell?”

“Then it looks like you were telling the truth. You really do have a spaceship orbiting the moon.” She stepped aside to let the others see, “I’m... I’m totally blown away by this. I didn’t think it *possible*.”

“Frankly I’m still having trouble believing it myself.” Ramirez peered through the eyepiece. Sure enough, there silhouetted against the whitish-grey of the moon was the curve of the solar sail. It was still small in the view, but it was obviously not of the moon, and it was moving. “How did you do this?”

“Hmm? Oh, uh. Atmospheric lensing spell. It’s pretty advanced, and honestly not that useful for astronomical observation. It tends to distort around the edges and...” Twilight replied absentmindedly “But, listen to me. I’m talking to real, live *aliens* and I’m just carrying on. Oh, I have so many questions! How did your ship get here? How did you get from your ship to here?”

“Oh, you Silly McSilly-son. They’ll be plenty of time for questions at the Welcome to Equestria Party tomorrow!” Pinkie Pie interrupted, “Oh it will be great! We’ll have cake, and pies, and we’ll play games, and we’ll all shout ‘Welcome to Equestria!’ And I’ve even got a song in the works!”

“Oh, here we go again.” Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes.

“Pinkie...” Twilight tried to interject, but the party pony had already launched into her song.

*“Oh, welcome visitors from far away!
We all welcome you here today!
So let us all dance and play,*

As we..."

"Pinkie!" Twilight finally managed to interrupt, "I'm sorry, but no. No parties."

"Aw, why not?" confusion and disappointment played on her face.

"Because I don't want to start a panic in Ponyville. In fact, it would be better if none of us mentioned this to anypony else for the time being."

"Twilight's right," Ramirez added, "we should keep a low profile. At least until our ranking officer arrives and we contact your central government."

"Okey-dokey-lokie," Pinkie replied, crestfallen. She was so looking forward to a party.

"My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,

I must confess your letter quite vexes me. I was worried such an event would occur following your report of the wandering light first observed nearly five and a half centuries ago. The speed and proximity to Ponyville has me worried.

My dear Twilight, I must stress the importance on minimizing the humans' interaction with pony society at large. If at all possible, do not let them enter the town. Finding a secure, indoor location to hide them would be even better. I would suggest your home in the library as ideal, if not for its centralized location within Ponyville. You will have to use your own judgment.

I will not warn you against contact with these humans. I know you are curious by nature and in fact, I encourage you to learn as much about them and their society as possible. You very well may find it an enlightening experience. But, please, exercise caution. The danger of these creatures cannot be overstated.

I apologize for being brief, but I promise all shall be explained in due time. I am tied up in state functions, but will venture to Ponyville as soon as I possibly can. Please do me the honor of acting as my official ambassador until that time.

*Your mentor,
Princess Celestia*

Spike yawned as he finished reading the letter. He was still grumpy Twilight had woken him up so early. Why couldn't she have remembered to send the note to the Princess last night, and not when the sun had risen?

"Wait, read that first paragraph again." Twilight closed her eyes tight, thinking. Spike groaned but obeyed. Twilight's ears perked up and her eyes shone bright, "The Visitation of Thessalonica!" she shouted.

"Oh, not this again."

"Don't you see, Spike? *'I was worried such an event would occur following your report of the wandering light'*," she repeated, "Somehow the wandering light in the sky is related to the arrival of the aliens. Don't you see what this means?"

"All I see is my blankie. Hello, blankie," mumbled Spike, trying to curl up in his bed. Twilight gently nudged him out of it with her hoof.

"It means," she said conspiratorially, "they've been here before."

Spike resisted the nudging and clung tenaciously to his pillow. Twilight picked up the dropped letter and read it again.

"Oh my," she read the first paragraph for a third time, "...first observed nearly five and a half centuries ago... But that could coincide with... Oh, dear."

"Sweetie Belle, put that down!" Rarity's little sister was trying to 'help' again. Rarity's horn glowed as she plucked the bolt of fabric from the little filly. "Now, you're late for school. Get your saddlebags, and don't forget your scarf. Rainbow Dash said it was going to be chilly today."

Sweetie Belle looked up at her big sister with big, pale green eyes, "But Scootaloo is out of town with her parents, and Apple Bloom got

grounded for trying to use Granny Smith's walker for a giant slingshot and beaming Caramel in the head with an apple. How else am I supposed to find my cutie mark without the rest of the Crusaders?"

"Well, maybe you'll find it at school," Rarity tied a silk scarf around her little sister's neck and kissed the top of her head. "If you don't hurry, you're going to be late. Now, shoo!" she playfully swatted the little filly out the door.

Sweetie Belle scampered off down the lane, calling out a greeting to Pinkie Pie as she passed.

"Pinkie Pie, what *are* you doing?" called Rarity. The pink pony was trotting along with a punchbowl holding an assortment of empty glasses balanced on her head, party hats hanging from their elastic bands around her ears, her saddlebags filled to bursting with more party paraphernalia than Rarity cared to guess.

"Oh, hey, Rarity! I was just on my way to see if you had any streamers. Gummy likes to use them as bedding, so I'm all out."

"Streamers?" Rarity repeated, only half-hearing. She was more enthralled by an enormous bundle of helium balloons tied around Pinkie's midsection which almost seemed to be lifting her partially off the ground.

"Yeah! I need 'em for the welcome picnic for the aliens! Oops, I wasn't supposed to tell you that."

"Aliens?" Rarity balked, "Why darling, I do believe you've cracked."

"Nuh-uh. Dashie and Fluttershy found 'em on the edge of the Everfree Forest. Even Twilight says they really truly are from another world way, way, way far away!"

"Did she now?" Rarity gave a smile bordering on the baleful, "Now this I've *got* to see."

"Uh huh. She also said no parties, but I think she meant no BIG parties where everyone comes because she wants to keep them secret. But I

figure that doesn't mean no *little* parties. You know, just for those who've already met the aliens."

"So tell me, Pinkie, where are these, ahem, so-called aliens?"

Fluttershy met Applejack at her little garden gate. The orange workhorse had hitched herself to a wooden cart loaded down with apples and a variety of baked goods, most of them also apple-based.

"There ya' go, Fluttershy, just as ya' wanted." She unhitched herself from the wagon, "Heh. Last time ya' ordered this much food from me, it was on account of them dern parasprite pests. What 'cha want this lot for?"

Fluttershy pawed at the ground with a hoof and didn't meet Applejack's gaze, "Well, it's not really for me. Not really. It's just that, well... They've been so nice, and... their food smells just awful, and I just wanted to do something... nice. To welcome them. So, um..."

"What in the hay are you talkin' about girl? Whose food smells what now?"

Fluttershy looked startled and blushed, "Oh! Oh, I.. I'm really not supposed to say. It's... sort of a secret."

A big grin spread across Applejack's face, "Oh, I get 'cha," She nudged Fluttershy with a teasing elbow, "So, ah, who's the lucky colt then, huh?"

Fluttershy's pale yellow face turned bright scarlet, "Oh, no! It's nothing like that! Not at all!"

"Some new animal friend, then?" she looked askance at her friend, "Ain't nothin' gonna' cause no trouble, is it?"

"Well, sort of. I mean, no? Um."

"Maybe ya' had better show me."

The bags under Captain Edgar Tartaglia's eyes were wide and purple. He had barely slept, what with the early morning drive through the forest and especially the troubling news from the *Silvertongue*. He had spent hours going through every person on the *Felicity Klimkosky* in his mind, trying to think of anything suspicious. He knew who the saboteur couldn't be. He didn't want to believe it could be one of his crew, but none of them were above suspicion.

He would have ordered a surprise inspection and search of the entire ship, as well as questioning of all crew and passengers, but he couldn't possibly while away from the ship. It would have to wait until he got back. Maybe then he could have Lieutenant Ling and Sargent Ramirez help in the investigations. They both had himself as an alibi, and both had a vested interest in seeing their mission completed.

He hated having to wait. All it would do would give the villain time to eliminate evidence or slip away entirely. But right now, repairs to the *Silvertongue* came first. Without an operational K-F drive, there was no chance of ever completing their mission. No chance of ever returning home.

"The rendezvous point is just ahead, sir. Top of that hill, next to that bush." Ramirez pointed between the trees.

They were six-strong now. The lanky Tartaglia, the gruff Ling, and the fiery-haired Dr. Langley were all clad in their olive green dress uniforms. The doctor had topped hers with her ever-present long, white lab coat. Ramirez and Liz Virat still wore their battledress, though they had removed their helmets and combat vests. The sixth member of their party, a short, stocky, pugnacious Private by the name of Ackermann brought up the rear. He had served as Ling's aide during the scouting operations and driver during their foray into the woods to meet up with Ramirez and Virat, and had been uncharacteristically taciturn of late.

As they walked, Ramirez and Liz tried to brief them on the society they had found. Tartaglia found the tale fantastic, and not in the least believable. The thought that these two professional soldiers were somehow pulling one over on him made his mood even more sour.

Twilight found that Pinkie Pie already had the picnic blanket set up before she returned to the hill. She was dismayed to see Rarity there as well, trying to coax Rainbow Dash to let her comb her mane. This was getting out of hoof.

"I thought I said no parties," she hissed.

"It's not a party, it's a picnic, silly," pronounced Pinkie Pie from where she was pouring a fruity purple punch into the bowl.

"And the streamers and balloons on the holly bush?"

Pinkie pranced past with her head held high, "Gives it a little bit of pizazz, dontcha' think?"

Twilight closed her eyes and counted silently to herself. It was bad enough Pinkie Pie had brought Rarity along. "Can we at least try to be subtle?" she asked nopony in particular.

"Well, boy-howdy! Ya' didn't tell me there was a whole party goin' on here!"

Twilight turned to the new voice. She found herself facing a blushing Fluttershy standing next to an all-smiles Applejack hitched to a small cart full of food. "Oh, for goodness sakes," she groaned, "Can't anypony here keep a secret?"

"So where's this new critter friend Fluttershy's got?" Applejack unhitched and looked around, "It ain't another one of them parasprite things, is it?"

"Oh, you haven't heard?" Rarity added haughtily, "Rainbow and Fluttershy found a space alien."

Applejack's face went white. She tried to speak, tried to come up with an excuse to leave, but her tongue failed her. All she could do was stammer.

Rarity just smiled slyly, “Oh come now, you don’t *really* think they found a space alien, do you?” she laughed.

“We really did find an alien! Two of them, in fact,” Rainbow protested, “They’re really cool, and... Hey? Where are Ramirez and Liz, anyway?”

For an awful moment, Twilight’s breath caught in her throat. Had they gone? Had they returned to their spaceship above the moon? She hoped they hadn’t wandered into Ponyville—the one thing Princess Celestia had warned her not to let happen.

“There they are!” Pinkie pointed to the edge of the woods where a small group of tall creatures was stepping into the sunlight, “Huh. Weren’t they just two before?”

Twilight felt very nervous. She could guess the lead two were the two she was familiar with, but they had been joined by four *more* humans. She could see them more clearly as they grew closer. She could recognize Liz’s sable skin and Ramirez’s ponytail, and they were indeed in the lead. A tall, thin male with a bald head and bushy pale yellow mustache walked next to a female (judging from Liz and Ramirez’s descriptions of sexual dimorphism in their species) with a wild flame-red mane and a long, white coat and an immense male with huge arms and broad shoulders. A shorter, stouter male with a helmet and strange goggles that covered his eyes slunk behind. She felt a lump form in her throat. Two humans she thought she could probably deal with, but six?

Applejack stood rooted to the ground. She barely moved; she barely breathed. She willed her muscles to move, but they stubbornly refused. She hadn’t told anypony, but after Rainbow Dash and Spike had told her about stories of alien abductions, she had nightmares about being snatched away by aliens in a spaceship. She had consoled herself that aliens weren’t real, that they couldn’t possibly be in Equestria. To see those tall, slender things walk out of the forest was like watching her nightmare come to life. She could feel the icy talons of panic clawing at her chest. How could her friends be so calm? Rainbow and Pinkie looked positively ecstatic, even. Only Twilight looked the least bit nervous.

“You mean to tell me you wear clothes *all* the time?” Rarity shook her head in disbelief.

“Pretty much.” Dr. Langley was sitting on the ground, drinking punch from a small glass in one hand and nibbling from an apple fritter in the other.

“My, my. One would think your fashion industry would be *spectacular*, what with the demand. But why do you all wear such drab colors? I’ll admit *your* outfit and the two, um, officers you called them? Your clothes are well-cut allowing for your, uh, *unusual* body shapes, I suppose. But they all look the same! And I must say, they’re not the most flattering. And don’t even get me started on *those* three,” she waved a hoof towards the three enlisted men in their camouflage, “The style is *atrocious*, and the pattern much too busy. If they were to stand next to a tree, you’d hardly even see them!”

Langley chuckled, “That’s sort of the point.”

Twilight was more concerned with how the doctor was holding her punch glass. She had one long finger slipped through the loop on the side and was casually and easily lifting it to her lips. For some reason, it just looked so natural, almost like the glass was specifically designed with her anatomy in mind. Even when one of the humans refilled their glass with the ladle, they did so easily by gripping the long handle—a term that was taking on new meaning to the lavender unicorn.

“You should have seen Liz writing earlier,” Fluttershy whispered in her ear, noticing the look on her face, “she was pinching the pencil—at least it looked sort of like a pencil—between her fingers. She wrote by just wiggling them.”

Twilight just nodded in acknowledgement. She found herself wondering how they would use a hammer.

Ling had originally not wanted to believe that they had stumbled upon an extraterrestrial civilization, but had come to grips admirably quick once Twilight cast her translation spell and he found they could talk. He moved away from the group, motioning for Ramirez and Tartaglia to follow.

"We're wasting our time," he hissed, trying to keep his voice down. "While we're sitting here playing picnic with a bunch of pretty ponies, the *Silvertongue's* still sitting up there with a busted K-F drive, the Capellans are running rampant over Valexa, and we *still* don't know where we are."

"I agree," said Tartaglia. He turned to Ramirez, "I don't see what purpose this serves. Yes, they're very cute and quite smart, and very talkative, I'll give you that. But I don't see how they can help us. Do they even have any heavy industry?"

"I don't think so. They're more of an early-industrial agrarian society. Still, they can do quite a lot with what little technology they've got. And besides," he pointed at the balloons Pinkie Pie had brought, "I think they *might* just have something we do need."

"But how do we get it?" Ling crossed his arms, "Bring out the BattleMech and scare them into submission? We do hold the technological advantage."

Captain Tartaglia patted the muscular man on the back, "Are you groundpounders always so violent? We could always try diplomacy. Maybe trade some supplies or offer some low technology as compensation, like an internal combustion engine or something."

Twilight politely coughed to get their attention, "Excuse me, sirs?" Tartaglia had a moment of panic they had been overheard. If they were going to attempt to bargain for what they needed, he didn't want to give away any of his hand early. But the little unicorn made no indication she had heard a word they had said.

"Excuse me," she started, "But I do seem to have sort of a dilemma. You see, as Princess Celestia's official ambassador to you and your people, I wish to extend our hospitality to our esteemed visitors."

Tartaglia felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Now was when he expected their hosts to impart conditions.

Twilight continued, "I would normally offer my library as a suitable location to house official state visitors, but, um. You see, uh." She had been rehearsing this little speech in her head since that morning, "Well, the

ponies of Ponyville have never encountered any of your kind before, and I fear if they saw you it might cause a panic, and..."

"So you want our help in sneaking us into town?" Tartaglia knew this was a ploy to contain their movements, but somehow he couldn't fathom any maliciousness from these innocent little creatures. "I think we can manage that."

Ling turned away from Twilight and whispered harshly in Tartaglia's ear, "Sir, with all due respect, I don't like this."

Tartaglia whispered back, "I think we can afford to play along for now, Dieter." His next words were directed to Twilight, "I take it you have a plan?"

The plan the ponies devised was unnecessarily complex. It was clear to the military-minded humans they had precious little experience planning what would be considered a covert operation. So while the athletic Rainbow Dash performed an impromptu airshow on the opposite edge of town, with the excitable Pinkie Pie acting the roll of a carnival barker, the others slipped in from the opposite side. Twilight, Rarity, Fluttershy and now largely recovered Applejack each towed a wooden cart scrounged from Sweet Apple Acres or Fluttershy's little cottage. Each cart was draped with fabric to hide the cargo within. Spike stood as tall as he could on top of the lead cart, acting as lookout. Following them, ducking from shadow to shadow, the two humans most experienced with stealth, Liz and Ackermann, tried their best to stay out of sight.

The road past the Library was empty except for them. In the distance they could hear cheering. Rainbow Dash must have been putting on one heck of a show. They stashed the carts beside the enormous tree and the four remaining humans slipped out from beneath the fabric covers. They wanted to stop and gawk at the quaint little town, but with a furtive glance around them, Twilight quickly herded them in through the red door. One by one the humans ducked through the entryway followed quickly by the ponies. Twilight locked the door tightly behind her then led the way from the foyer into the library proper.

“Ah, wonderful. I knew you would find a way to slip in unnoticed. And in broad daylight, too! Very admirable, indeed.”

Eyes went wide and jaws dropped open. Standing in the center of the library was the very vision of grace and beauty. A pony, certainly, but very different than the humans had encountered thus far. She stood tall and slender, easily able to look any of them in the eye. She was almost blindingly white offset by the burnished and jeweled ceremonial regalia on her chest and forelegs. Broad, feathered wings were held aloft and the long, elegant horn on her forehead sparkled faintly. Her mane and tail didn't appear to be so much hair, as light; a shimmering, sparkling pastel rainbow which flowed and billowed even though there was no wind. She almost seemed to be radiating a light all her own.

Her countenance and bearing radiated a confidence and authority none of the humans had ever seen before, not even in the most powerful and seasoned leaders. Bright, piercing eyes of a soft pink perfectly accenting her billowing mane seemed to peer through them, into their very souls. This was a powerful creature indeed, in every sense of the word.

“Princess Celestia!” Twilight called in disbelief. She was torn on whether to run to her beloved mentor or burst into tears.

From behind the magnificent vision stepped another pony. She was smaller than the regal beauty, but still taller than the others. Her deep indigo coat was complemented by a deep purple breastplate and a lighter blue mane, from behind which jewel-green eyes looked out curiously.

“And Princess Luna?” Twilight was now quite flustered, “But, why? How?”

Princess Celestia smiled sweetly at her pupil, “I wrote that I would be arriving as soon as I could. And you'll find that very few doors are closed to the Princesses of Equestria. But now,” her eyes flashed to the sextet of humans, “I believe we have other matters to attend to.”

Chapter 10

Princess Celestia

Princess Celestia stepped forward as she addressed her subjects. Her movements were deliberate and graceful, and highly calculated.

“My dear little ponies,” she adopted a sweet motherly tone, “Would you mind so terribly as to wait outside? I wish to speak to our guests privately.” The ponies bowed and nodded, then turned for the door. “Please, stay, Twilight Sparkle. I wish for my ambassador to be present at this meeting. And you, too, Spike. We may have need of a scribe.”

Twilight’s heart skipped a beat, but she turned and trotted to the side of the Princess. Spike ran to fetch a quill and paper, just in case, then took his place beside Twilight. The humans found themselves alone on one side of the room facing the Equestrian delegation.

The Princess raised her head high and spoke in a clear, strong voice, “I am Princess Celestia. Along with my sister, Princess Luna, We rule over all of the lands of Equestria and ensure peace and harmony for all Our subjects. *You* are interlopers in Our kingdom. Who speaks for you?”

The bald-headed man with the bushy mustache stepped forward, “I am Captain Edgar Tartaglia of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. I command the Federated Suns DropShip *Felicity Klimkosky* attached to the Valexa March Militia. I speak for Princess-Regent Yvonne Steiner-Davion and all mankind.” His knees felt weak, but he forced himself to stand tall. He didn’t really have the authority to speak on behalf of House Davion and the government of the FedSuns he knew, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

Princess Celestia raised her brow, “Yvonne Steiner-Davion? So, does Joseph Cameron no longer sit on the throne of the Terran Hegemony?”

Shock flashed across Tartaglia’s face, “Joseph Cameron?” He thought hard, trying to recall the name, “But he was assassinated in 2549. That was over five hundred years ago!”

Celestia hummed knowingly, "Assassinated, hmm. What a shame. And tell me, what has become of the Terran Hegemony?"

Tartaglia was confused. This was all ancient history as far as they were all concerned. "The Hegemony was disbanded following the collapse of the Star League in the 2780s."

"Accompanied by much suffering and strife, I presume?"

The Succession Wars had been fought for centuries. They were some of the most destructive wars in human history. Countless planets had been ravaged and numberless lives lost. In the darkest days, technology and manufacturing capacity had been so savaged, the future of mankind as a spacefaring species was seriously in doubt. Though the LosTech, the slang term for high technology lost since the glory days of the Star League, had mostly been recovered and even surpassed in recent decades, in many ways the Succession Wars were still being fought.

"Yes," Tartaglia replied simply. He took the opportunity of Celestia's pause to ask a question of his own, "If I may ask, Your Majesty, how is it you know of our ancient history?"

"Is it not obvious? Your kind has visited our land before." Celestia peered down her nose at him, her tone turned ominous, "Although, I must say, the last time your kind did not make themselves particularly welcome."

"What?! But when? How?" the exclamation came from Corporal Liz Virat. Remembering her place, she snapped her mouth shut but kept her eyes wide.

"I think Twilight Sparkle might be able to answer that." Celestia turned to her prized student.

It took a moment for Twilight to find herself, "About 550 years ago, or thereabouts, pony astronomers observed a strange light moving through the sky. It is said it coincided with the 'Visitation of Thessalonica.' I observed a similar light shortly before your arrival outside Ponyville." She looked to Princess Celestia for encouragement, "I suspect, the moving light

may have been an orbiting spaceship, and that it was named the *Thessalonica*.”

Celestia nodded, pleased with her student’s deduction, “Indeed it was. It was precisely 534 years ago the *Thessalonica* landed near what is now Fillydelphia. I remember because it was two months past the 466th anniversary of Nightmare Moon’s banishment.” She smiled sadly at Princess Luna who bit her lip and looked away. “The occupants of that vessel were traders from the Terran Hegemony based out of Epsilon Indi. They claimed their ship suffered a ‘miss jump’ and were stranded. Now, I ask you, Captain Edgar Tartaglia of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns, what brings you here to our kingdom?”

Tartaglia’s veins felt as if they were filled with ice, “We, ah. Our JumpShip suffered a misjump and our K-F drive suffered damage in the event,” he said weakly.

“I see.” Celestia glared at the humans. The air seemed to crackle and each one of them was gripped with gnawing fear in the pit of their stomachs, “The humans on the *Thessalonica* were quite friendly at first. I allowed them to freely interact with my subjects.” Her eyes narrowed, “They proved themselves to be quite... disruptive.”

Tartaglia swallowed hard. He was on the defensive and he didn’t like it. He wanted to apologize. He wanted to promise that they wouldn’t cause any problems, promise that *they* would be different. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

“You humans bring with you discord. You are divisive and warlike. Violence, vice, and greed follow you wherever you go. Did you know some of your predecessors attempted to *steal* some of my subjects? Keep them as *pets*? Do you know what they did then? They fought amongst themselves. Humans killed one another on *my* land and among *my* people!” Celestia’s pink eyes flashed and the air seemed to grow unbearably warm. Twilight was terrified; she had never seen Celestia like this before. She had always been the picture of compassion and understanding. To see her like this filled her with dread.

“Equestria is harmony, Captain Edgar Tartaglia. Equestria is order. We are in tune with nature. We control nature. The very winds and rains obey

our every whim. The sun shines and the moon rises because we will it.” She was standing nose-to-nose with the tall Captain. The whiskers under his nose quivered as his chest heaved. She continued, “Humans are agents of chaos. You come from a place where nature is not organized, where magic does not infuse the very essence of the universe. You bring this chaos with you with your grievances and your wars. You and the world you come from represent everything Equestria stands against.”

All of a sudden, the fiery goddess of the sun subsided. Her fierce countenance melted to one of amiable friendship, a warm smile graced her lovely face. The fear gripping the human’s innards subsided, replaced by a warm glow of the summer sun.

“Still, you’re not *all* bad. You are a creative, industrious, and inquisitive people. I learned much from you. You value friendship, honesty, and virtue. Your art is lovely and you’ve provided some wonderful seeds for our glorious civilization. For all the trouble your kind caused, Equestria is better for it, as I believe my sister will attest.” She paused, but Tartaglia felt it was not his turn to speak.

“I do believe it would be best,” she concluded, “that you, your people, and your ship depart from Equestria as soon as feasible. To speed you on your way, I shall provide what assistance I can. So tell me, what do you require?”

Tartaglia was silent for a long while. He was still digesting what he had heard. All of them were. He couldn’t argue. Human history was rife with suffering and death. Most school history books read as much as a tabulation of wars as a listing of social change, if not more.

“I’m told the damage to the K-F drive is minimal,” he said at last. “There are a handful of simple metal parts we would need fabricated, mostly bolts and a covering plate. Some wires. The main thing would be helium.”

“Helium?” the Princess asked, almost amused

“Yes, your highness. We require a...significant volume of liquefied helium to cool the boom so we can enter hyperspace.” He waved a hand

towards the white-coat clad woman behind him, “Dr. Langley has the specifications.”

“Is that all?” Celestia asked, “Just some metal parts and a quantity of helium?”

“Well, honestly, no. We do still have one more problem,” he rubbed the back of his neck with his hand.

“And that would be?”

“We... don’t know exactly where we are. Even with an operational K-F drive, we wouldn’t know how to get home.”

“I see,” said Princess Celestia, “Well, I am afraid I cannot help you there, but I do know where you might find answers. You see, after I requested the *Thessalonica* leave Equestria, they settled far away on the southern continent. I do not know all that befell them, but I do know where they settled.”

Now there was a lucky break. Star League and Hegemony technology was renowned for being extremely tough. If they could find a data crystal or a memory core they may find some information on where they were. And if they could find out where they were, they could work out how to get back.

“And now if you’ll excuse me, I wish to speak to my ambassador. You may wait upstairs. I regret that I cannot allow you to leave the Library, but do not fret. You are in no danger and will come to no harm. If it flatters you, this temporary confinement is more for the safety of my subjects than for yours. Spike, if you could please accompany them, you can transcribe the doctor’s list of required parts.”

Without a word, the six humans and the diminutive dragon moved slowly up the stairs and into Twilight’s personal quarters. The door shut behind them, propelled at distance by Celestia.

Microgravity always made repairs more difficult. Jean-Jacques had disassembled the entire navigation computer, had run diagnostics on each

and every component, and had found nothing wrong. Captain Mawsley held on to a restraining strap on the bridge of the *Silvertongue* as she watched her chief technician install the final piece and reconnect the power supplies. The bridge was empty except for herself, Jean-Jacques as the helmsman strapped into his console.

“Here goes nothing,” the helmsman said as they keyed in the commands. A tense half-minute passes as they awaited the results. “Looks like it’s working flawlessly,” he said, watching diagnostic lines scroll by on his holographic display.

The computer finished its search of the surrounding stars. It matched known constellations to an immense database to calculate their position with pinpoint accuracy. At the helmsman’s command, it also factored in solar system data they had been collecting while the navigation computer was offline. The results printed out on the display.

Mawsley’s heart sank. It was the same impossible result they had been getting.

“The computer is working perfectly. The stars match exactly. Even the positions of the moon and the other planets match precisely *for this exact date*. There’s no question about it, Captain. That *is* our location.” Jean-Jacques words were not what she wanted to hear.

“But it just can’t be,” she clenched her eyes shut, willing the display to change. “Look out that window. Look at that planet. There is no possible way *that* is Terra.”

The technician remained unmoved, his good eye completely emotionless, “And yet, it is. It may not look it, but somehow that *is* Earth.”

As soon as the humans were tucked away out of sight, Princess Celestia let out a relieved sigh. She folded her majestic wings neatly at her side, their imposing psychological effect no longer needed.

“Well done, Twilight Sparkle. I don’t know of any other pony that would have managed to convince six human military to not only voluntarily submit

to confinement, but also sneak them into town completely undetected.” She smiled warmly at her pupil, the pride unmistakable in her soft eyes. “Maybe I should name you my permanent ambassador.”

Twilight rushed forward and buried her face in her mentor’s shoulder. The Princess dropped her head and nuzzled her student, draping a long, slender foreleg across her quaking shoulders.

“Oh, Princess, I’m so sorry!” Twilight sobbed. She tried to choke back the tears which were welling in her eyes, but some managed to squeeze through and moisten her face and, to her embarrassment, the Princess’s shoulder.

“Why whatever for, child?” the living goddess easily adopted the tone of a caring mother comforting a small child.

“I didn’t know they were so dangerous!” she buried her face deeper into the crux of Celestia’s neck. “If I had known, I would never have invited them here. I wouldn’t...I wouldn’t have spent so much time around them! I would have kept the others away!” the tears were flowing more freely now. She hated for her teacher and sovereign to see her like this, blubbering like a little filly.

Princess Celestia seemed completely unperturbed by the display. She cooed and soothed her student. Her horn barely glowing, she retrieved a paper handkerchief from a box thoughtfully kept near the tragedy and romance section of the library. She dabbed Twilight’s eyes and dried her tears with infinite tenderness.

“Now, I’m afraid I do have one further task for you, my faithful student,” Celestia said, her tone becoming more serious. “I wish for you to learn as much as you possibly can about these humans.”

Twilight was quite taken aback, “What? But you said they were dangerous!”

Celestia nodded, “Indeed I did, and they can be, especially if they feel threatened or if they have something to gain. Everything I said to them was true, and I believe they know it. But,” she looked up at her sister, “learning from them has proven most fruitful in the past.”

"I think I understand," said Twilight softly, "You're talking about the, the...changes that occurred in art and architecture and such. That's what I'd been studying before I saw the light in the sky."

Celestia looked genuinely surprised, "Why, Twilight Sparkle! You really are a brilliant little pony! I didn't realize anypony in the last few centuries had ever noticed that. Yes, indeed, the arrival of the humans did precipitate some rather radical changes in pony civilization."

Twilight felt the rush of a mystery solved. She had started to suspect as much after the Princess's last letter, but to have it confirmed made her little heart swell with pride at having figured it out. But even as she reveled in this small victory of academia, her head swam with more questions, only a small fraction of which tumbled forth into a fervent articulation.

Princess Celestia gently shushed the animated little bookworm. "The ponies were created to act as the agents of order in the world," she intoned, "and it's a job they do very well. Among all the benefits of their purpose, ponies for the most part enjoy a happy, largely care-free existence. Within the borders of Equestria, they generally do not have to worry about such things as predators or wars. There hasn't been a standing army in Equestria in a millennium. Most ponies alive today probably barely even know what a 'soldier' is. I believe your report to me on the border incident in Apple-loosa indicated the skirmish was fought largely with pies?"

Twilight chuckled at the memory. It was fortunate nopony was hurt, or no bison for that matter. She was also grateful a peaceful and amiable solution had been found.

"My point is," Celestia continued, "my subjects are content. Contentment makes for happy lives, but it does not breed ingenuity. Oh there have been wonderfully visionary ponies over the years, but their talents mostly lie with art or magic. Occasionally there's an inventor or an innovator, but they're usually concerned with convenience.

"But the human world is quite different. Their world has never seen *true* long-term peace and stability. They are never content, so they *constantly*

invent and innovate. With no magic, they rely on technology to do everything from sending a letter long distances to creating beautiful art.”

Twilight absorbed every word the Princess told her. She begged Celestia to continue, “So that explains why pony architecture and art styles and such would stay relatively consistent for long periods of time, but I still don’t see how the humans factor in to the sudden change?”

“If there is one thing ponies do well, its mimic those they admire. When the *Thessalonica* landed, the ponies were enraptured with the occupants. You may have seen some of this among your friends in their interactions with this bunch of humans.”

Twilight thought. Her friends did seem to be very tolerant of the humans. Well, except for Applejack, who did seem genuinely afraid. “Is it some sort of spell? Some magical connection?” she asked.

“No, no spell. It’s not really anything intrinsic to the humans, either. It has more to do with pony nature. Ponies are an inquisitive lot themselves. When they find something that fascinates them, they tend to focus on it intently. This is rather esoteric magical theory, but it is related to how cutie marks work.”

Twilight looked at her own flank and the pink-and-white cutie mark adorning it. Every pony gained his or her cutie mark upon finding something that could be considered their life’s calling. For some it was a something concrete, like a musical instrument or a special talent. For others it was more abstract, more of a philosophy or personality trait that sparked their cutie mark. Most ponies thought that cutie marks were pre-ordained, and that one had to find what set them apart from everypony else to discover it. But if it was related more to what fascinated them, then maybe what cutie mark appeared could be variable given upbringing. Was a particular cutie mark part of a pony’s nature from foaling, or could a particular mark be obtained via nurturing the foal in a certain environment? Twilight cut off that line of thought. She couldn’t afford any distractions right now, but she did make a mental note to pick that investigation up later.

Princess Celestia continued her history lesson, “The ponies copied much of what they saw in the humans. Much of the tools we use, the styles of our architecture, even certain aspects of how we grow our food were

borrowed directly from the humans.” Twilight thought of the hammer and how that awkward tool would fit perfectly in a human hand. “Even the names of many of our towns are actually puns on human words. Fillydelphia, Manehattan, even Canterlot.”

Twilight asked what they were puns of. Though Celestia told her, she did confess she only knew that they were names of human cities, except for Camelot which she personally chose to mimic due to its status as the mythical seat of power of a great king.

“I must say, I do believe the change has been for the better.” The soft voice belonged to Princess Luna, who had finally decided to speak. Nightmare Moon had been banished a thousand years ago, long before the arrival of the *Thessalonica*. Poor Luna must have suffered quite the culture shock. The little blue Princess continued, “It’s so much more exciting now! So many new things. Fans and carriages and ovens. The food tastes better and populations are so much higher!”

Princess Celestia gave her little sister a loving nuzzle, “Indeed. In fact, I wanted to send these humans off post-haste. It was Luna here who argued we should try and learn more from them. Maybe carefully select certain aspects of their culture and technology to introduce to society. An introduction of controlled chaos, if you will. These humans have had an additional five hundred years. Who knows what further wonders they have developed.”

She then outlined her plan to Twilight. They would hold the helium the humans requested as collateral on the condition that Twilight travel with them when they venture off to find the remains of the *Thessalonica*, as Celestia was certain they would. She would serve as the Official Royal Liaison and Ambassador, and would attempt to learn as much about their society as she could. Upon her safe return, the helium would be delivered to the humans, and the two peoples would go their separate ways.

“There is one last question I have, Princess,” Twilight hesitated, not knowing if she should continue, “Why, if the arrival of humans in the *Thessalonica* was so influential, is there almost no mention of them in any book I could find?”

Princess Celestia's eyes fell. "That would be my doing," she said apologetically, "After one of them murdered another and I requested they leave Equestria, I sort of flew off the handle. I was so angry, I had every mention of humans and their arrival expunged from all the records. It took a great deal of effort and some very powerful spells. With some judicious effort, within a couple generations, they had been almost entirely forgotten. Though it does seem I missed one reference. *Stardust Sprinkle's Systematic Guide to Stellar Spectacles* was it?" Twilight's heart skipped a beat, but Celestia just smiled wryly, "I think I'll let that one slide, though."

Spike couldn't understand all the words the humans, and especially Private Ackermann, were using, but he had a feeling they would come in very useful for annoying the hell out of Twilight later. And getting his mouth washed out with soap. He tried to ignore them and focus on what the redheaded doctor was dictating to him.

Ackermann tried the door to the balcony for the umpteenth time. Once again, it was stuck tight. He cursed and cursed again. He paced the floor like a caged wildcat, stalking up to each window in turn. He tried each one again and again, always finding them closed fast, and always eliciting another expletive.

"This is bullshit. They can't keep us locked up like this. They're a bunch of goddamned horses. They're animals! We're people! We should be locking them up!"

"Give it a rest, Ackermann," called an exasperated Ling from the corner where he propped himself up, trying to catch up on lost sleep.

Ackermann ignored the officer, "This isn't right. This isn't natural. I can't believe we just walked in and let them lock us up!"

"If we're locked up, then why did they let us keep our weapons?" Corporal Virat asked without looking up. She had tried a couple books, but found the text indecipherable. She was now curled up on Twilight's bed casually flipping through a book of pictures. She was admiring a pretty illustration of a pastoral scene. Stylistically, it was lavish, but flat, lacking much in the way of perspective. It reminded her of a holo vid she had seen

once of an illumination from an ancient Terran manuscript dating from back when knights rode out from castles on mighty steeds. There were no humans in this picture, of course. A group of ponies looked to be getting ready for a party while in the midground sat a small village of tiny huts by a small river, and in the background loomed the unmistakable outline of the cantilevered fairytale castle in the mountains. She idly wondered if the village was meant to be the one they were currently in.

"It's 'cause they're too stupid to know any better, that's why," Ackermann ranted, "We should be the rightful rulers of this place. Those animals should bow to us. With what we have, we could be living like kings in a week!"

"I hope you're not referring to my *Valkyrie* in your assessment," Ramirez crossed his arms as he stood against the wall. "There's no way I'd let you use *my* 'Mech to start a holy war against these people's—yes I said people—living goddess."

"She's not a goddess," Ackermann said with a dismissive wave of his hand "She's got them all duped with that whole raising the sun routine. She's just a con-artist like all the other politicians." Tartaglia raised an eyebrow at this declaration.

"Even so, she's the center of their government and spirituality..."

Ackermann's face went dark, "Don't you dare talk to me about spirituality," he hissed.

"Oh, give it a rest, Ackermann!" called Liz from her spot on the bed, "Not everything is about religion. Hell, I'm Buddhist, the Leftenant's Jewish, Ramirez is... uh...What are ya', Sarge?"

"My family's New Avalon Catholic," Ramirez said, not actually answering the question.

"There ya' go. And we all get along just fine without getting up in each other's faces about whose view of the universe is the right one all the time. These ponies have their own worldview, let's let them have it and not start some damn holy war," she returned to the picturebook, "It's not like we don't have one of those on our hands already thanks to those damn robe-

wearin' Word of Blake fanatics." She had lost family in the ComStar splinter group's surprise attack on New Avalon—a battle that was ongoing nearly a year later, and a distant cousin in the bombardment of the Lyran capitol on Tharkad. She held a very personal grudge against the Blakists and their weird technology-idolizing spirituality. Given half a chance, she would gladly march against them and their holy war against all the Inner Sphere.

The Corporal's contribution ended, Ackerman changed tack in his rant, "And what about none of these little horsey-people knowing about humans, huh? If we've been here before, what happened to them? *She* must have killed 'em all, otherwise they'd still be running this place."

"Shut up, Ackermann." Tartaglia said what they were all thinking. They had grown weary of his tirade.

"Though she did have one good idea. I say after we take over, we round up these little bastards and sell them as pets. Can you imagine what those rich snobs would pay for one of them on Argyle, or Kestrel, or hell even Coventry and Tharkad!"

"Shut up, Ackermann." Tartaglia intoned again.

"Of course that's assuming we get off the rock to begin with, what with us walking right into this trap and all..."

"Goddamnit, Ackerman, SHUT UP!" Tartaglia leapt to his feet.

"Why should I listen to you? *You* lead us into this mess in the first..."

The Captain towered over the insubordinate Private and poked him hard in the chest with a long, bony finger. "You *will* listen to me because I am your commanding officer!" his face and bald head turning a bright shade of purple, "We are closer to getting off this rock and back home now than we have been at any time since we wound up here, and I'm not about to have some rocks-for-brains militiaman screw it all up! Now sit down, and SHUT. UP."

Private Ackermann looked as if he were about to say something he would regret, then closed his mouth and walked determinedly to a corner of the room. Grumbling under his breath, he slumped heavily against the wall.

There was a knock and Twilight Sparkle trotted up the stairs and into the room. "Captain Tartaglia?" she said in as professional and important a voice as she could muster, "If I could have a word with you in private, I would like to discuss arrangements for our journey to the southern continent."

Chapter 11

The Voyage South

The Everfree Forest was a dark and forbidding place to the ponies. It was said it didn't operate under the same rules as Equestria. Whereas in Equestria, the ponies were integrated into nearly every aspect of nature, from guiding migrations and directing rainfall to changing the very seasons, the Everfree seemed to get along fine without them. Clouds formed, blew, and rained and animals foraged and hunted completely unaided. It was a scary, unnatural place filled with strange monsters and horrors beyond imagination. Only the bravest of ponies ever even *thought* of venturing beyond its borders.

Rainbow Dash felt as if the trees of the Everfree were closing in on her. She would never admit she was scared, even just a little bit, but she edged closer to Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie just the same. Fluttershy for her part cowered against Corporal Virat's leg. She had picked next to who she saw as the toughest and strongest of their little party as the safest spot to be, and she stuck there like glue.

Liz reached down and gave the little pegasus a reassuring scratch behind the ears. She didn't understand why the ponies were acting so spooked. Nothing the ponies had told them about the Everfree had seemed in the least bit odd. What they described was just the way the world worked, the way the entire universe worked. She *could* understand the tales of strange monsters and terrifying creatures just waiting to gobble up unsuspecting ponies—after all, hadn't mankind told similar stories? Didn't they still about the unknown reaches of the Deep Periphery, far beyond the civilized realm of the Inner Sphere?

They were strung out across the forest now. Liz could barely see Ramirez and Dr. Langley through the trees ahead of them. She knew that Twilight, Spike, Applejack, and Rarity would be with them. They had stopped for lunch, it seemed, probably waiting on Liz and the other three ponies bringing up the rear. She couldn't hear the jeep carrying the other humans ahead of them anymore. No matter, they would meet up with them again at the *Felicity Klimkosky*.

Pinkie Pie seemed to be taking the journey through the forest rather well, Liz mused. Perhaps it was because the hyperactive little pony had apparently decided to fill the journey with near-infinite small-talk. Liz was happy to oblige, if only to satisfy her own curiosity. So as they walked, they talked at length about holidays, festivals, and traditions. Pinkie Pie was enthralled that the humans had so many holidays and wondered how they managed to celebrate them all and still get their work done—even the premier party pony knew there were limits to how much celebrating could be done before food started to run low and messes needed to be cleaned up. Liz tried to explain that different religious groups and nations celebrated different sets of holidays, but trying to get across the nature of such a variegated and fragmented society as the whole of human civilization to a pony who had only ever truly known one overarching society was difficult at best.

Pinkie Pie gasped and froze. Her knee was pinching.

The diamond dog could smell food. It sniffed at the air and licked a long tongue over its protruding canines. Its large torso and massive arms were covered in coarse brown hair over which it wore a crude iron cuirass. An iron helmet sat low on its brow, all but covering its beady eyes with their slit-like pupils. He stalked through the forest, walking silently on three paws—two back and one forward. It walked with its body erect, but its heavy forearms were so long it was effectively a quadruped. In its other forepaw it gripped the wooden shaft of a long spear tipped with a wicked iron point.

Diamond dogs were tribal, living in large social groups ruled over by the strongest, or cleverest, of the pack. Packs were very territorial and often skirmished with rivals for access to prime mining grounds. Most at home underground, they dug elaborate subterranean tunnel networks in their search for gemstones, to which they applied an almost mystical importance. Gemstones were the favored food of dragons, and dragons were as living gods to the dogs. A pack that could acquire a large stash of tribute gemstones was a powerful pack indeed.

There wasn't much food underground, so frequent expeditions to the surface to hunt and gather were a necessity. It wasn't prestigious work, though, and was often relegated to the lowest in the pack's pecking order. Having failed to return with anything of substance on more than one occasion, this particular diamond dog was demoralized, desperate, and hungry. He had been reprimanded frequently and denied food repeatedly. One more failure would certainly result in his being expelled from the pack, or finding him included in the next dragon offering. Dragons preferred gemstones, but they weren't particularly picky eaters.

The smell of food grew stronger. Cooked food. Not much in the Everfree cooked their food. Ponies cooked some of their food, but it was rare to find ponies this far in the forest. Ponies were easy to scare, but could be tricky. He had heard stories from another pack that had kidnapped one only to release her shortly afterwards with most of their gemstone stash.

But still, cooked food! The smell infested his nostrils and made his mouth water. If he could somehow get ahold of that food, the luxury would certainly improve his standing in the pack. Maybe he could scare away the owner and claim the food for himself.

He could see the source of the smell now. They were ponies, all right. Three of the little things, one of them wearing a funny hat. They had lots of food, he saw. Lots of food ripe for the taking, once he scared them away. Did pony make for good eating? He didn't know if any dogs had ever tried it. The smell was driving him ravenous.

Movement behind the ponies drew his attention. Something else was there, too. Tall and thin, its green coloring helping it to blend in to its surroundings. It walked over and stood by a tree close to where he was hiding. The diamond dog almost reassessed its plan, but decided in its hunger-addled state that with those scrawny arms, that other creature couldn't be any more of a threat than the ponies it traveled with.

Twilight was glad, and rather comforted, that her friends had all assented to accompany her in her journey with the humans. Spike had been a necessity, of course, as her most immediate link to Princess

Celestia. She didn't think she could have kept Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie from coming even if she wanted to, what with the chance for adventure. The others had been more squeamish, but in the end, they couldn't say no to their friend. It also helped that Princess Celestia had subtly hinted to them that Twilight would greatly appreciate the shoulders to lean on.

They had stopped for lunch by the banks of a little creek running through the undergrowth. While Applejack passed out fresh apples and some pre-made sandwiches from her saddlebags, Rarity used an evergreen branch to sweep the ground clear of dust and Spike laid out a picnic blanket with the help of Dr. Langley. While the others busied themselves with meal preparations, Ramirez availed himself of the creek, taking the opportunity to refill their canteens with water filtered through a small, handheld pump. Feeling grungy after days in the field, he had stripped of his combat vest and shirt and splashed the cool water over his bare torso.

"Hey, I thought you said humans didn't have cutie marks," Twilight motioned towards Ramirez's arm and shoulder. She had been interrogating him on Inner Sphere history and politics, and the sudden change in topic caught him off guard. He looked down and held out his arm for inspection. An intricate tattoo of dark bluish-black geometric shapes wrapped around and down and extended halfway down to his wrist. The central design, a sword and skull, he had gotten one drunken night at the Academy with the rest of his training cadre. He had never been very fond of it, and later had it integrated with a series of other tattoos, resulting in the geometric mess now adorning his arm.

"Remember when I asked you if your cutie marks were tattoos? Well, this is a tattoo." He briefly explained the process as he pulled on his shirt and combat vest, hiding the design. Rarity thought it was too gaudy, but asked about the symbolism just to be polite.

Dr. Langley took the opportunity to try and get through to Applejack. The farm pony had never truly warmed up to the humans and had been taciturn the entire trip.

"You know, my grandparents own a farm back on Valexa. Wheat and quillar, mostly, but they do have a small apple orchard."

Applejack wasn't in the mood to talk to the aliens. She still didn't trust them. They were nice enough, but perhaps they were *too* nice. She smiled weakly and politely nodded.

"I spent a lot of time there as a girl," Dr. Langley continued. She'd taken off her white jacket as too cumbersome for a trek through the woods. Despite the hardships of the field, her olive green uniform somehow stayed crisp and clean. "I don't remember their apples even holding a candle to yours, though."

"Thank ya' kindly," Applejack said quietly, looking at her hooves.

Dr. Langley paced to the trunk of a tree. She attempted to keep up the conversation. She figured if she could get the pony talking it would loosen her up, "So what all varieties of apple do you grow on your..."

With a bloodcurdling howl, the beast burst from the undergrowth nearly on top of Dr. Langley. A massive paw scythed through the air, the claws missing by a breath. Narrow eyes flashed out from beneath the brim of its metal helmet. With a startled yell, she tumbled backwards in a heap. Applejack leapt to her feet and yelled a warning. Behind her, Twilight and Rarity shrieked in terror and surprise. She ducked as the creature thrust its long spear in her direction. She turned and kicked, but the beast dodged the attack and lunged forward howling. The work pony scampered backwards as the iron-clad monster swiped at her. She tripped on the picnic blanket and fell as it tangled around her hooves. She looked up in terror as the monster towered over her. She could see the wild hunger in its eyes. All she could think about was her family.

The sharp crack of gunshots fired in rapid succession echoed off the trees and rolled away across the hills. The monster fell forwards, face down in the leaves. Ramirez stalked forward quickly, knees slightly bent. He kept the sights of a Federated Long Rifle trained on the prone figure.

Applejack struggled free of the blanket and stood staring at the fallen beast with her mouth open, not comprehending. Her ears rang from the sudden loud noise. Dr. Langley scrambled to her feet and drew her sidearm, dry leaves sticking to her clothes and hair. She held her pistol out in front of her awkwardly, keeping it trained nervously on the bushes surrounding them.

"Sweet mother of Kerensky, what *is* that thing?" adrenaline pumped through her veins. She kept changing her mind which bush to point her gun at.

Ramirez kicked the body over with a heavy boot. The thing lay still, unblinking eyes staring at the clouds above. Three small, neat holes punched straight through its metal breastplate oozed deep red blood.

"What happened? Is everyone alright?" Liz came running, her own rifle already at her shoulder and the other ponies in hot pursuit. She saw the slain beast and cursed, "Nice shooting, Sarge."

"A diamond dog? One of *those* ruffians?" Rarity turned her nose up at the creature, "Hmm, it looks different from the ones that abducted me to find gems for them. Must be from a different pack. Poor thing looks half-starved to death. But whatever did you *do* to the wretch, darling?"

Fluttershy sobbed, struggling to hold back tears. Rainbow Dash crept forward carefully and peered at the stricken diamond dog, "Hey, is he... Is he *dead*?"

"Dead." Twilight repeated the word as it worked its way slowly through her brain, "Dead? DEAD?!" She tore her gaze from the diamond dog and fixed it squarely on Ramirez. Terror filled her eyes, "You...You *killed* it!" The fear turned to fury, "You KILLED IT!"

Ramirez stepped towards her, putting up a pleading hand, "Hey, look..."

"No!" she yelled, "No! Don't you come near me," she planted her hooves solidly on the ground, the venom in her voice froze Ramirez in his tracks, "Don't you even talk to me, you... you MONSTER!"

"Hey, that thing attacked *us*!" he jabbed a finger in the direction of the corpse.

"You killed it! You didn't even give it a thought, you just *killed* it!" Tears streamed down her cheeks, "Celestia was right, you're violent and

dangerous. You don't think. You don't think of *anything*. You just kill and you don't think!"

"Now hold on just a minute, Twi!" Applejack appeared between the unicorn and the human, facing her friend, "He's right. That diamond dog attacked us, and I think it meant to hurt us. Shoot, if he hadn't done what he did, I'd probably be a goner right now."

"But he killed it!" Twilight stamped her hoof.

"I know he did, Twi. And I'm not sayin' killin's right or nothing', but I am sayin' he done saved my life." She turned to give Ramirez a sideways smile, "Can't say I agree with his methods, but I'd say I'd rather have this than it be the other way around."

Liz elected to bury the diamond dog in a shallow grave while Dr. Langley and Ramirez had a long, involved talk with Twilight and Applejack. Fluttershy sat demurely, listening to the discussion while the image-conscious Rarity plucked the leaves from Dr. Langley's hair then, unbidden, began pleating it into an elaborate updo. Wanting to feel useful, Rainbow Dash and Spike stood a comical sentry duty, watching if their slain assailant had any friends.

"Have you killed before?" Twilight asked the humans.

Dr. Langley shrugged, "I've killed chickens on my grandparents' farm. And I've had patients who...died under my care. The chickens were easier."

"Why did you kill the chickens?" Fluttershy squeaked, more than a little perturbed.

"We ate them."

"Oh... well... that's alright then, I guess," Fluttershy seemed relieved, which puzzled Twilight and Applejack.

"Ya' seem rather calm about that, sugarcube," observed Applejack.

"Well," came the reply, "animals eat other animals all the time. Otters eat fish, owls eat mice. Really, girls, don't you know about the food chain? Anyway, humans are omnivores, they eat plants and meat. If they were killing the chickens to eat them, then that's just part of the food chain." She quirked an eyebrow and gave a surprisingly sly grin, "Besides, it's not like we're totally innocent. We *do* use eggs in baking."

"What about you, Ramirez?" Twilight prompted.

"Yes, I've killed." Ramirez said softly, "More often than I'd have liked. It's never easy, and it never gets easier, but in combat and they're shooting at you...sometimes you just..." His eyes glazed over as he stared unblinking into the mid-distance. "Hitting a tank or a 'Mech is comparatively easy, you know? You can kind of...forget that there's someone else inside. You can tell yourself they got out alright." He idly played with a twig, systematically breaking it into smaller and smaller pieces, "When they're shooting at you, it's easy enough. You tell yourself it's you or them. Your friends are the worst, though."

"You killed your *friends*?" balked Fluttershy.

The statement brought the MechWarrior halfway out of his trance, "I didn't kill him myself, if that's what you're asking, but I got him killed all the same. I knew there was an ambush in those trees. I knew he'd never make it with that busted leg actuator, but I told him to run into that field anyway." He'd never commanded a lance of his own before the battle on Valexa. Leading Din Geremek in the run for the mountains following the disaster in the ravine was his first taste of real command. His demeanor began to crack as he relived those moments on the banks of the Sivry River. His vision blurred with hot tears, "We should have gone over the ridge. We should have hooked to the east. Blake's blood, he was just a kid. God, he was just a *kid*." He threw the twig fragments away and buried his face in his hands.

Princess Celestia had tried to explain to Twilight about armies and wars. It had all sounded so distant, so foreign to her. What sort of terrible place did these humans come from where they had to fight and kill each other? Where they had to watch their friends die? How did they bear it? She struggled to formulate the question, but Applejack beat her to it.

“Is it always like that? Is it always fightin’ and killin’ where you come from?”

Ramirez smiled weakly, “Not always. Most people go their entire lives without ever seeing combat or having to fight for their lives.” He straightened his back and thrust out his chest, “People like us,” he indicated himself and his fellow humans, “We’re Militia. We’re volunteers. We fight so that everyone else *can* live their lives in peace, so they don’t have to worry about the bigger bully coming to steal their stuff and hurt them.”

“But why do you have to fight each other?” Twilight asked, “Why can’t all the humans get along peacefully? Solve their disagreements without violence?”

“That’s the question now, isn’t it?” he said with a grin.

Chapter 12

The Spaceship in the Woods

The saboteur suspected their handiwork aboard the *Silvertongue* had been discovered as soon as Captain Tartaglia returned to the DropShip. The Captain had ordered every single person to drop what they were doing and assemble outside the ship. The infantry teams still patrolled the perimeter, but the spacer crew found themselves with nothing to do. They milled around aimlessly and asked each other if any of them knew what was going on. None could say, so their discussions slowly migrated to rumors of beasts spotted in the forest—fire-breathing dragons, lions with scorpion tails, and some sort of lizard with a bird's head. Some tried to apply names from mythology, others insisted they must be more mundane. The bridge crew had heard rumors of talking horses and unicorns, which Private Ackermann was able to confirm, though he was disinclined to talk at length about them.

Aboard the DropShip, Tartaglia sat dumbfounded on the bridge. He and Ling had been part-way through a desperate two-man search for evidence of the saboteur when an encoded message arrived from the JumpShip high above. Mawsley had kept the message short and simple:

*Nav computer repaired. Location confirmed as Terra.
God help us all.*

The news had hit him like a punch to the gut. He had never been to Terra, the vast majority of the population hadn't, but like everyone he had heard stories of its verdant plains, broad oceans, and tall mountains. The Inner Sphere was filled with spectacular worlds, but none was held quite as dearly as the cradle of humanity.

But Terra was a world of billions. Vast cities dotted nearly every landmass and its skies were filled with satellites and suborbital transports. Untouched by the ravages of the Succession Wars, it was the most industrialized planet in the entirety of the Inner Sphere. Its factories churned out weapons, machines, and luxuries at a breakneck pace, fed with raw materials by Mars and mining colonies beyond. If this was Terra,

where were the cities? Where were the factories and the HPG stations? Where were the bases on the moon, the cities on Mars, and the shipyards around Titan?

Yet he knew it had to be true. Somehow, he had always known. But how was it possible? There had been laboratory experiments of K-F hyperspace jumps that seemed to go awry. The theory was that jumps farther than 30 light years should be possible, but none had ever been successfully accomplished. What's more, there were rumors that ships mounted with experimental booms had disappeared from the universe entirely, only to appear at their scheduled jump points much, much later. One rumor spoke of a Star League-era experimental vessel that reappeared at the end of its super-long jump hundreds of years later.

Could that have happened to them? Had they somehow undergone a super-misjump and been stuck in hyperspace for centuries, or longer? How long would they have to be gone to see the changes they did out there? Millions of years? Tens of millions? Shouldn't there still be ruins around, especially on the moon or in orbit?

He'd heard scientists talk of parallel universes. Maybe they'd somehow left their own universe and appeared over some parallel earth, one where humans didn't exist and ponies ruled the planet? That flew in the face of everything he knew of Kearney-Fuchida physics.

But none of this got them any closer to getting them home. That is, if they could go home.

Leftenant Ling broke their long silence, "So, what do we do?"

Tartaglia sighed deeply. He felt drained, "I don't know." They were silent for a moment, "Do you think we have enough personnel for a colony?"

"Don't even *think* like that!" Ling's ferocity snapped Tartaglia out of his musings, "You're an officer, goddamnit! Look at your shoulder."

Tartaglia glanced at his shoulder and the red and yellow sword-on-sunburst crest of the Federated Suns sewn on his uniform. "We're Davion military!" Ling said pointedly, "It's our duty to our country to do everything

we can to get home. More than that,” he pointed to a patch on his own uniform of a flaming red torch on a green and yellow shield with a banner that read *Duty Honor Loyalty*, “We’re Valexa March Militia. We owe it to our friends, our family, our *planet* to get back.”

“And if we can’t get back?” Tartaglia asked quietly.

“I said don’t even think about that,” the muscular man stood, his blond head held high, “Now let’s go catch that bastard who tried to blow us up.”

If the Everfree Forest was bad in the daylight, it was even worse at night. After their run-in with the diamond dog, even the humans were on edge, insisting they stick together. One rifle armed human would always lead and one would follow, their deadly guns cradled in their arms. Dr. Langley walked in the middle, constantly scanning to their left and right even as she talked with Applejack, who had finally begun to open up to their otherworldly visitors. They did not run across any other dangerous beasts, but the occasional rustle in the bushes or distant animalistic cry kept them from stopping. They were all exhausted. Only the two earth ponies with their incredible, possibly magical, endurance showed no signs of wearying. They wanted to sleep, to find a nice place to camp for the night, but fear drove them onward.

The near-full moon had reached its zenith and begun its slow decent when Liz heard the rumblings of machinery. Her spirits lifted and her pace quickened as she spied the glow of artificial lights through the trees. She whooped and broke out into a jog, calling out to the sentries she knew would be ahead. Surprised at her behavior, and not wanting to be left behind, Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy took off after her while the others scrambled to catch up.

As they approached the break in the trees, Liz and the three ponies were suddenly bathed in an intense white light. Fluttershy and Rarity clamped their eyes shut, turning their faces from the harsh glare, each with a surprised squeak. Applejack cowered beneath her cowboy hat, fears of alien abduction once again boiling forth. Liz shielded her eyes with an arm and shouted at the light. A voice called back, challenging them in a threatening tone.

Liz responded with a yell of her own, answering the challenge, “Goddamnit, Quigley, get that spotlight out of my eyes!” The spotlight swung away, plunging them back into darkness. The voice sounded apologetic as another human stepped into view, silhouetted against the glow behind him.

The remainder of their party caught up with them at a run, and all at once they left the cover of the trees.

“Oh, my stars...” Rarity gasped. The other ponies were dumbstruck by the sight that greeted them.

They were close enough that it was impossible to view it all at once. Twilight thought it was a cliff at first, then noticed the angular shape and that it appeared to be made of metal painted a similar green as the uniform Dr. Langley wore next to her, though it appeared more of a ghostly grey in the moonlight. She figured she should try and find the words to describe the immense object, but all that came to mind was “big.” Indeed it was big, as if a giant chariot or more accurately from the shape, an impossibly large brick, had dropped from the sky and came to rest here. If not for the darkness, surely this, this, what was this? A building? A vehicle? Whatever it was, it surely would be visible above the treetops for miles. Bright white floodlights illuminated the ground surrounding where nearly a dozen humans milled about like ants in the shadow of a giant.

“Ooh, is that your spaceship?” cooed Pinkie Pie

“That it is. That’s the *Leopard*-class military aerodyne DropShip, the *Felicity Klimkosky*.” Dr. Langley said with a sweep of her hand.

“But it’s so...It’s so...” Twilight stammered, “Big.”

“Well, it has to carry a crew of nine, plus four MechWarriors, two Aerospace pilots, six technical teams of one Tech and usually six astechs each, with food, water, and supplies for all of them. Not to mention four BattleMechs, two Aerospace fighters, spare parts and ammunition for an extended campaign for each, and enough fuel to get to and from the JumpShip,” Ramirez listed off, enjoying the look of befuddlement on the unicorn’s face.

“And all that is in there now?” asked Applejack.

“Well, not right now. We’re running light. No tech teams, no aerospace, and just one MechWarrior.” Ramirez answered.

The ponies walked in awe towards the giant starship, ignoring the gawps and stares from the bevy of humans at its base. They couldn’t imagine how something so big would ever be able to move, much less fly. If it was made of cloud, then maybe, but metal? A mountain might as well lift from the ground and fly through the air.

“Oh, wow! What is *that*?” Rainbow Dash swooped excitedly towards a large figure standing near an open bay door of the DropShip. It too was large, though not on the same scale as the green mass behind it. Even though it was dwarfed by the DropShip, it still stood easily as tall as a tree. It looked to Dash to resemble a giant human, with two long legs and two arms. It was made of metal, though, with large angular plates covering its entire body like a metal skin. The shins were fat and the round head sat low on the broad shoulders. A series of small fins extended from the back of the head and shoulders, looking almost like decorative feathers. It was painted head to toe in dark green covered with red stripes like an oddly-colored tiger. The arms lay ramrod straight at its sides, the left ending in a splayed metal hand, and the right in a stubby cone. The giant had no eyes, but instead a shielded visor of black reminding Rainbow almost of tinted sunglasses. Though it stood unmoving in the floodlights, Rainbow almost expected it to start moving at any second.

Ramirez smiled broadly, the largest smile the ponies had seen from him yet. He strode up and patted the giant on the shin, just below the painted insignia of the Militia. It was the highest point he could reach as the titan towered more than five times his height above him.

“This,” he said affectionately, “is my BattleMech. She’s a Corean Enterprises VLK-QD1 *Valkyrie* Light BattleMech, and she’s all mine.” He launched into a listing of the ‘Mechs qualities, knowing full well the words meant nothing to his audience but sounding like an exceedingly proud parent, “She masses 30 tons, and got an Omni 150 Extra-Light Fusion powerplant giving her a top speed of 86 kilometers per hour in combat. Thrust-Master Model L jumpjets give her a 150 meter jump, and she’s protected by six tons of StarGuard-three armor.” The ponies looked at him

blankly, as did the humans for that matter, but he plowed on heedless, “She’s got a Defiance Model-twelve Extended Range laser in the right arm and a Valiant Arbalest LRM-15 Missile Pack tied to a Sync Tracker 40 Targeting Computer with Artemis-four fire-control system.” He gave the shin another loving pat.

“So...it’s a... girl?” Rarity tapped her chin with a hoof. She had barely followed him up to ‘she’s all mine’, and suspected the others hadn’t fared much better, “What’s her, um. What’s her name?”

Ramirez looked a little puzzled, “Well, it’s not alive, of course. It’s just kind of a long-standing tradition to call a vehicle ‘she’. I’m not really sure why.” He looked up at the giant weapon of war, “As for a name, I’ve never gotten around to it. A lot of MechWarriors will name their rides. I just never could come up with one I was happy with.”

“Oh, well, if they all have names then she’s gotta have a name too!” Pinkie Pie squealed, “I know if I didn’t have a name and all the other giant robots had names I’d feel left out. Ooh! Let’s give her a name right now! How about, uh... Big Stompy! Or, no, Thunderfeet! Or how ‘bout Brown-eyed Susan, no, wait, that’s a flower. Hmm, do we want descriptive or ironic?”

Ramirez’s communicator crackled to life and the voice of Lieutenant Dieter Ling sounded in his ear, “Ramirez! Get the doc and get in here. And keep it quiet.”

“We’re running out of time. There’s just too much of the ship to cover and not enough of us to cover it.” Ling was getting disgruntled. He and Tartaglia had spent hours combing through the ship for any clue as to the identity of whoever had sabotaged the *Silvertongue*. They knew from the report from Captain Mawsley and her chief Tech that the saboteur had planted the bomb sometime between when Tartaglia, Ramirez, and Ling had left for the bridge and when the jump took place, and that the culprit had to have come from aboard the *Felicity Klimkosky*.

It was late, they were tired, and they had searched precious little of the ship. Now with four of them it would go a little faster, but every moment

they kept the crew outside was another moment their culprit might realize what they were up to. They didn't know who, they didn't know why, and they didn't know if they would strike again.

"Leftenant, might I suggest we bring on additional personnel to make the search go faster?" Dr. Langley asked, politely standing at-ease.

"Who? We can't trust anyone. The only people who are above suspicion for the crime are right here," he motioned to the four of them standing in the central corridor from the 'Mech bays.

"With all due respect, sir, I can think of six more who are above suspicion," Langley said with a sly smile. Ling raised an eyebrow.

The inside of the human's starship was depressingly grey. Whatever wasn't grey was covered in warning labels or yellow-and-black striped caution tape. The metal floors clacked dreadfully under their hooves and the lighting gave everything an eerie off-color pallor. The atmosphere felt stale and stagnant, but worst was the smell. Sharp and acrid, like a sweaty saddletrap that had been dipped in a bucket of axle grease, Twilight decided. She knew Rarity would be indignant at the decorating. She was probably just waiting for an excuse to call it a crime against interior decorating or something.

Leftenant Ling swung open a round-cornered doorway exposing a broad room with three sets of bunk beds with crisply folded linens and thin mattresses set against one wall and a bank of lockers on the other. He moved down the corridor and opened another door to another room identical to the first, then another. Twilight wondered about the purpose of the railways set in the wall and floor. It looked like the bunks could be swiveled to either stand upright, as they were, or to lay down perpendicular to the floor. She wondered why they would need to rotate like that.

"We'll start you off here in the Tech bunks," Ling was saying, "Look everywhere you can think of, anywhere someone might hide something."

"Just what, exactly, are we looking for again?" Applejack asked.

“Anything that looks suspicious. Anything that looks like it doesn’t belong or that someone is trying to hide it.”

“Like this?” Pinkie Pie pulled a thin paper magazine out from beneath a mattress. She flung it on top of the bunk. “Huh, that’s weird.”

Fluttershy peered at the open page over Pinkie’s shoulder and turned a bright crimson, “Oh! Oh dear. Um... I’d say *that* still works the same way.”

Ling lunged forward and snatched the magazine, crumpling it up in his large hands, “Whose bunk is this? Damnit, Quigley! I’ve told him about this.” He hid the magazine behind his back, his cheeks flushed. “Anything *e/se* that looks like someone is hiding it,” he said quickly.

“What about this?” Pinkie Pie had managed to open one of the storage lockers. A greyish-black suit draped across her. She held the sleeves up with her hooves.

Ling’s eyes went wide. The report from the *Silvertongue* had indicated the saboteur may be well supplied, but a sneaksuit?

“Where did you find that?” he asked slowly.

“I’m telling you, Sir. I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Liz Virat twisted her wrists in the handcuffs, “I’d never sabotage a ship! Hell, I didn’t even know the *Silvertongue* was sabotaged!”

“And yet the materials were found in your storage locker. The locker you say no one but you has been in since we first boarded.” Ling tapped his fingers on the materials they had found in the locker, a block and a half of C8 plastic explosives, three detonators, and the sneaksuit. “This sneaksuit’s pretty high-dollar equipment. Who’re you working for, Virat? The Capellans?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sir. That stuff isn’t mine! I’ve never seen it before in my life!”

“You will be confined until such time as we can turn you over to the authorities,” he motioned for a pair of her fellow Militia soldiers to lead her off to the bunkroom they had turned into a makeshift cell.

Chapter 13

Above the Sky

It had already been late when they arrived at the DropShip. The ponies were exhausted long before they had been roped into the search for the saboteur, so when the search was over so shortly, they were quite relieved. The humans had put them up for the night in one of the Technician bunkrooms, identical to the one the infantry team occupied where Pinkie Pie had found the sneaksuit. Even though the sky would almost certainly be turning pink outside with the approaching dawn, the excitement of the day made it very hard to sleep. But sleep they eventually did, and soundly.

“Oh. My. Gosh. Can you believe we’re on a real live actual *spaceship*?” Rainbow Dash squealed for the twelfth time in almost as many minutes. Pinkie Pie squealed in response and the two launched into another series of excited exchanges. Twilight groaned and blinked through blurry eyes. The clock on the wall indicated that several hours had passed, but she still had no idea how early it was. Or late. All she knew is she wasn’t fully awake yet. Neither was Spike, curled up next to her on the narrow mattress. She also knew Spike was a covers-hog. She tried to stretch without disturbing the slumbering dragon beside her.

“Ugh. What I wouldn’t give for a proper mattress. I barely slept a wink!” complained Rarity.

“Heh heh. Your snoring would say otherwise” Rainbow cracked back.

“I do NOT snore!” Rarity thrust an indignant nose in the air, “Oh, but I do wish I had my night mask. My eyes must be positively puffy.” Twilight couldn’t see Rarity from her bunk, but was sure the fastidious unicorn’s eyes looked no puffier than usual.

“Will y’all keep it down?” Applejack’s voice floated down from the bunk above her, “I think Twi and Fluttershy are still trying to sleep.”

“I’m awake,” Fluttershy’s small voice came from the other end of the room, as far from the door as possible.

Twilight sighed heavily, "I'm up, too." Her horn sparked and the manual control for the lights slid up. Banks of recessed lighting glowed to life, exposing the bunkroom in all its dingy glory.

"Yay! Now we're all awake! Do you think they'll serve breakfast? Ooh, do you think we could have waffles?" Pinkie Pie nearly fell out of her top-tier bunk.

The ponies began to fuss about in their morning rituals. Rainbow Dash zipped off to the small toilet facility, or as Ling and Ramirez had called it, the 'head' for reasons Twilight found totally unsatisfactory at the back of the bunkroom. Applejack retrieved her bags from a storage locker and began digging through for some breakfast. Rarity felt she needed to explain to Pinkie Pie that they were not staying in what could be considered classy accommodations, and did so to great length until interrupted by Rainbow.

"Hey, Rarity? Could you lend me a hoof here? I wanted to take a shower and I'm having trouble with these knobs," the brash pegasus asked sheepishly.

Rarity faked surprise, "My, my! Rainbow Dash wishing to *bathe*? What is this world coming to?"

"Oh, ha-ha. Will you help me or not"

"Fine, fine," Rarity didn't even rise from her bed. Her horn sparked and the sound of running water wafted in from the 'head.'

"Thanks, I—AAH! AAH! COLD! TOO COLD!"

Rarity gave an evil smile and her horn glowed again. She giggled to herself as Rainbow called out "Not funny!"

Applejack tossed apples to them all from her saddlebags to serve as breakfast. As they ate, their conversation naturally revolved around their current situation. They asked Twilight to explain again the purpose of their journey to the southern continent, which she tried to explain as best as she could. They wondered then how the journey would take place, if someone

would come and fetch them from their bunkroom, and of course, they discussed the news of a saboteur.

"I just can't believe Liz would do something so awful!" Fluttershy had taken a liking to the Corporal, "She seems like such a nice person, even if she does use a lot of words she really shouldn't."

"I feel bad that I got her in trouble by finding those funny pajamas," chirped Pinkie.

Applejack interjected, "Ya' can't blame yourself for that, Pinkie Pie. You did what you was asked to do." She looked a little sad, "Though I must say, it don't look good for Liz, do it?"

"My bits are on that Ackermann guy," Rainbow shook water from her mane, "He's such a grouch, and Twilight said she heard him yelling all sorts of stuff back in the library."

"He's a grouchy meany-pants!" Pinkie punctuated her remark by rapping her hoof on the bedframe.

"Bein' a sourpuss don't make ya' a villain, though." Applejack said calmly, "If we want to help Liz, we're gonna have to find more evidence that she did not plant that bomb. Maybe we can get back in that bunkroom if we ask the Leftenant."

"What do you think they'll do to her?" asked Fluttershy softly, afraid of the answer.

The sudden buzz of a klaxon and a flashing amber yellow light precluded any further discussion. The ponies looked up in surprise and even the still-slumbering Spike shot awake. A voice they did not recognize echoed throughout the room and the corridors, seeming to come from everywhere at once.

"ALL HANDS MAKE FINAL LAUNCH PREPARATIONS. ALL HANDS MAKE FINAL LAUNCH PREPARATIONS."

The klaxon wailed again and the message repeated, then the ponies were plunged into silence.

“What in the hey was that racket all about?” Applejack asked, trying to get the ringing out of her ears.

“Lunch preparations? Is it lunchtime already?” Pinkie Pie looked confused.

“Not lunch preparations, Pinkie, *launch* preparations,” Twilight corrected. “I think that means they’re getting ready to take-off.”

“Oh Awesome!” Rainbow Dash was giddy with anticipation.

There was a knock and the door and Ramirez and Ling entered, politely asking if the ladies were in a state to receive visitors.

“Well, ladies, we’re all loaded up and getting ready to take-off. If you don’t mind, we’d like to reset your cabin for the burn.” Ramirez said matter-of-factly.

As the ponies and Spike stood aside, Ramirez and Ling released a series of catches on the bunks. They then pulled the frames out from the wall. One by one they laid each bunkframe down on the floor and reactivated the catches. They then pulled out a tangle of long straps that had been tucked under each mattress.

“Why are you laying them on the ground?” Rainbow asked.

Ramirez answered her while he worked, “Couple reasons. When we’re flying to or from a JumpShip, the nose of the ship becomes ‘up’ and the engines become ‘down,’ so *this* wall becomes the ceiling and *that* wall becomes the floor. The furniture all rotates on these tracks so we don’t have to sleep and sit sideways during a long trip.”

“That makes sense,” said Pinkie Pie. Twilight had to agree, but the others just looked quizzical.

Ramirez continued, “But as for why we’re doing this now, our jumpseats aren’t really built for pony anatomy. So instead, you’ll ride out the launch strapped to your bunks. It’ll be a little awkward at first, but once the g-forces build up, it’ll be fine. Now I’ll explain what’s going to happen during the launch.”

They felt more than heard the rumbling emanating from far away at the rear of the ship. The ponies were each secured tightly to their bunks, hanging awkwardly against the straps. The klaxon sounded again, the voice counting down to the launch now just moments away. Excitement ran high, tinged with nerves and adrenaline. Rarity breathed hard, trying not to show signs of unladylike panic. Rainbow Dash grinned, counting along with the booming voice. Ling had already left to ride out the flight with his infantry squad leaving Ramirez alone with the ponies.

“That’s final call. I’d better get strapped in.” he said.

“Wait! What about Spike?” Twilight called frantically. The little dragon still stood by the bedframes, a little miffed he’d been forgotten.

Ramirez walked to the aft wall and pulled on a handhold. A panel folded down then hinged in the middle forming a narrow, padded jumpseat built into the wall, “Don’t worry, I didn’t forget about Spike. Come here, buddy.”

He locked the seat into place then sat down, adjusting the straps over his shoulders. Spike trundled over, not quite sure what to expect until Ramirez plucked him up and sat the purple dragon down on his lap. The MechWarrior passed the lap belt around himself and Spike and tightened the shoulder straps so they passed over the dragon’s slender shoulders as well.

The rumble built to a roar as the *Felicity Klimkosky*’s massive engines flared to their full power. In the bunkroom, everything shook with a horrible violence. Rainbow Dash felt as though her teeth were about to jump out of her skull. This was so exciting. They were actually aboard a spaceship and it was actually taking off!

At first there was no sense of motion, just a slight pressure pushing her belly into the mattress. The rumbling continued for what seemed like forever, but couldn’t have been more than a few minutes. She felt herself getting pushed harder and harder into the mattress and her body growing heavier and heavier, like when she was flying fast and pulling out of a dive.

She tried to look around to see how her friends were handling the ride, but found that her head had grown too heavy to lift.

All of a sudden, the rumbling changed its sound, growing less intense. Her body was thrown forward and the straps cut into her back. Ramirez yelled out something, presumably an explanation of what was happening, but it was lost as the roar of the engines started afresh and she was once again shoved into the mattress.

Eventually, the roar died away, becoming first a growl, then the distant rumble of thunder before disappearing entirely. The pressure forcing her into the mattress died away, too. In fact, it died away completely. She felt funny, like her heart and stomach were trying to come up through her throat. She recognized that sensation, she felt it when diving steeply towards the ground.

The klaxon fired one short burst, at which point Ramirez unbuckled the harness holding him and Spike to the jumpseat. He gave Spike a little shove, sending the dragon tumbling slowly through the air. Spike squealed in surprise as he found himself suspended in midair.

“Aah! Aah! What’s going on? Twilight! Help!” He twisted and turned and flailed his arms, grabbing for purchase that was nowhere to be found.

Ramirez moved quickly, releasing the straps restraining the ponies.

“Whee!” Pinkie Pie launched into a tumbling cartwheel, ricocheting off the wall.

“Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!” Fluttershy frantically kicked her legs in the air as she floated off the bunk.

Twilight wrapped her forelimbs around the bunkframe. Her horn sparked and Spike floated easily towards her surrounded in a sparkling glow. He grasped the frame with his arms, holding on as if for dear life

“We’re weightless, Spike! I think we might be in orbit!” she said excitedly. She carefully let go.

“You mean we’re in space? Yes! Awesome!” Rainbow Dash flapped her wings, but with no force counteracting the movement, she found herself tumbling back-first. “Woa-WOAH!” she crashed into Applejack sending them both head-over-heels across the room. The pegasus apologized profusely, but Applejack just laughed. They floated in a tangle, narrowly missing Pinkie Pie who was now pretending to be swimming.

“This is fun!” the pink pony giggled. “Are you OK, Rarity? You look a little green.”

“Oh, I feel sick,” the elegant unicorn groaned, clamping her eyes shut.

Ramirez pushed off and floated over to Rarity. He offered her a waxed paper bag from a small stash in a pocket of his fatigues, “Yeah, motion sickness is really common in micrograv conditions. It always happens to me, too. Here, if you feel you need to vomit, use this.”

Rarity wanted to take the bag, but she dare not let go and she feared that even the small amount of concentration necessary to use her magic to take it would send her over the edge. It didn’t help when Ramirez suddenly grabbed a second bag and held it quickly to his mouth and retched grotesquely. In the end, she just smiled weakly, “Thank you, darling. I’ll… take it when I need it.”

Applejack managed to extract herself from Rainbow’s tangle of limbs, “Sure is fun, but how is this even possible? What’s ‘micrograv’?”

“Micro-gravity. It means very little gravity. Here, like this,” Twilight retrieved an apple from the storage locker and tried to explain orbital mechanics, using the apple to represent the planet and an appleseed as the satellite, “See, normally things fall straight down, but the world is round like a ball. If you move sideways fast enough, you end up falling around the planet instead of towards the planet.”

“We’re *falling*?” Fluttershy was not entirely comfortable with the proposition. Twilight tried to calm her nervous friend, but her explanation tended more on the technical than what Fluttershy truly needed right then.

The announcement system chirped and the voice of Captain Tartaglia boomed through the ship, "Sargent Ramirez to the bridge, please. Ramirez to the bridge. And please bring our passengers."

It took them several minutes to convince Rarity to let go of the bedframe, and several more to get everyone through the corridor. Spike adapted quickly to maneuvering through the ship not by floating but by grasping the copious railings and handholds and pulling himself along. He was pleased with himself that the humans he saw, including Ramirez, were navigating the same way. Lacking hands, Twilight and Applejack hooked their hooves around the handrails and tried pulling themselves along like that. Rainbow Dash continued to insist on using her wings, to mixed success, while Fluttershy took a page from Pinkie Pie and pushed off of the walls. The slow float pleased her, and she found she could control her movements by turning her body and twitching her wings. Rarity just curled herself into a pitiful little ball and let Ramirez push her along.

Tartaglia was alone with the pilot on the *Felicity Klimkosky's* small bridge when the ponies came tumbling through the door. He was pleased to see they were enjoying themselves, with the possible exception of Rarity who looked like she was about to throw-up. The pilot looked up from his display in surprise when an excited Pinkie Pie suddenly thrust her head into his field of vision.

"Hi! What's your name? My name's Pinkie Pie. Why are you still strapped down in that seat? Don't you want to float around? It's so fun to float around. I wonder if this is what it's like to be a pegasus pony?" she shot off through the air, "Hey, Dashie? Is this what it's like to be a pegasus?"

The pilot looked to Tartaglia with a very critical look on his face, "No offence, sir, your ship and all, but why are there a bunch of animals on my flight deck?"

"Animals!" Rarity shot forward with newfound energy, "Well, I never! I'll have you know, you uncouth..." she floated right up into the man's face prepared to give him a severe dressing-down, but found him staring back uncomprehending, "Uh...You can't understand what I'm saying, can you?"

Twilight answered from the back of the room where she was peering curiously at the blinking computers "I haven't cast a translation spell on him. The spell works by translating what you hear in your head, not by actually changing what people say."

"Oh, really?" Rarity prepared a tirade even more scathing that she would have otherwise, but was preempted by Captain Tartaglia.

"If you're quite finished harassing my crew, I have a special treat for you girls," he waved for them to join him by the thick armored windows.

Spike humped, "Tsch. Typical."

"And you, you crazy lizard. Get your tail up here," Tartaglia grinned. Spike feigned offense and followed the ponies up to where the Captain was indicating.

When they had first entered the bridge, Twilight had not noticed the line of windows. From the back of the room they just appeared to be black panels on the wall above the computers and crew stations. She did not know what to expect when she joined her friends next to Tartaglia. As she drew near, she saw that the black panels were actually windows, and what was beyond the windows took her breath away. In fact, all of the ponies were struck speechless by the magnificent spectacle before their eyes.

Stars filled the sky, more stars than she could imagine. She looked for familiar constellations, but the numberless swarm of new lights overwhelmed her. Most of them were faint, barely registering in her eyes, but they were there all the same. She suddenly felt very, very small but at the same time peaceful. Stargazing always made her feel part of something bigger, but this was on a different scale entirely.

It was dark below them, though. No stars shined in the bottom quarter of her view as if someone had pulled a velvet blanket across the sky. Separating the two regions was a long impossibly thin curve of silvery white, fading out to either end. She let out a little involuntary sigh as she realized she was looking at the horizon, and the vast black expanse below was the world draped in the veil of night.

“You girls made it just in time,” Tartaglia whispered behind them, “We should be coming up on sunrise right... about... now.”

His timing was a little off, but not by much. The glow grew brighter and bluer in color, extending out to reveal more of the curve. With each passing moment the thin crescent grew in intensity. All at once, the sun burst forth from the horizon. It was brilliant white and its light washed out the surrounding stars, even though the sky stayed an inky black. As the fiercely burning orb rapidly rose higher, the light crept out towards them, revealing the face of the world below as the light inexorably pushed back the darkness as if peeling away the skin of a fruit. Broad wisps of clouds reflected bright yellow in the morning light above steel-grey seas. Awed by the sight, the ponies let out a collective gasp.

“Ooh, I wish my cutie mark was poetry related,” Fluttershy barely even whispered. Twilight nodded in silent agreement, unable to formulate words of her own.

The curve of the horizon was now sheathed in a pale blue glow. She could see brown and green land now beneath them, barely distinguishable from the now deep blue water. The clouds were racing past beneath them in a dazzling array of shapes and patterns and sizes. She knew they had to be very high up. She knew they had to be moving very, very, fast.

“Why isn’t the sky blue?” asked Applejack, “The sun’s up, but it’s still dark up there.”

“We’re *above* the sky, AJ. We’re in *space*!” answered Rainbow Dash in reverent tones, “Hey, just how high off the ground are we?” She spoke without taking her eyes from the world rolling past below.

“About 170 kilometers up, give or take. We’re orbiting once about every 90 minutes. We should be passing over the suspected *Thessalonica* site in two orbits—we didn’t have good scans of that area, and we’ll need them to plot a landing point. Once we pick an LZ, we’ll de-orbit and go take a look.” He paused, “So you girls will have some time to play around. These are the only windows on the ship, so you’re free to make use of the bridge and the conference room below. Just try to stay out of the way of my crew,” he indicated the pilot intently watching his display.

They didn't leave the bridge. The lure of the windows and the wonders beyond was much too strong to even consider leaving the room. Even as they played, every now and then, they would stop and stare out the windows. Mostly, their gaze would fall on the world below. More than once, a game of three-dimensional tag or a floating race across the room or a demonstration of zero-g dancing would be put on hiatus as the desolate beauty stole their attention once again.

"Hey, Twilight? How big is the world?" Rainbow Dash asked suddenly, after watching a coastline swing past beneath them.

Twilight thought, trying to recall the figure, "You mean diameter or circumference?"

"Like, how far is it around?"

"Uh. A bit less than 25 thousand miles, depending on how you measure. Why?" she asked, though she thought she already knew where Dash's mind was headed.

"So if we're travelling almost 25 thousand miles every hour and a half, that's what? About 17 thousand miles an hour?"

"Well, not quite, our altitude adds some distance and..."

"Ballpark." Rainbow interrupted.

"Then yes. That's about right."

"You know what that means?" Rainbow asked with a grin, "We're the fastest ponies EVER!"

Twilight humored her friend, "And the highest-flying. And probably the first to circle the entire globe."

Applejack joined the conversation, "Though does it really count, considerin' we ain't exactly doin' it unassisted?"

Rainbow Dash rubbed her chin "Hmm. You're right. I wonder if they have a spacesuit I could use."

Tartaglia interrupted their discussion, "I'm sorry, girls, but we've selected an LZ and are ready to begin the de-orbit burn. Sargent Ramirez will take you back to your bunkroom."

The girls and Spike let out a collective groan. "Do we really have to go back? Isn't there some way we could stay here?" Rainbow pleaded.

"We'll be really quiet. We won't make a peep!" added Fluttershy.

Tartaglia hesitated, "Uh, you really should be strapped in. It can get a bit bumpy."

"What about the jumpseats? Can't we at least *try* to see if they'd fit us?" asked Twilight.

With a little fussing, the ponies were finagled into a row of seats lining the back of the small bridge. They sat on their haunches, their lower legs dangling off the edge of the seat and their backs held against the backrest by the harness. They wrapped their forelimbs around the shoulder straps. It was not exactly comfortable, but they accepted it without complaining. Spike sat in the lap of a rather bemused weapons officer who had joined them along with the rest of the normal bridge crew. He tried to ask which buttons fired the laser cannons he was sure the ship must have, but all the human heard was a series of growls and squeaks.

Twilight tried to listen to the crew as they went about their various jobs. She could tell everything was very organized. Everyone had a specific job, and everything was carefully orchestrated. She was able to catch a few words, but on the whole she could barely follow what was going on.

She did, however, feel the sudden thud of the thrusters realigning the vessel's attitude, though she didn't understand what it was. She also felt the rumble of the engines when they fired to slow the ship down and begin reentry.

For several minutes, the blackness outside the windows was replaced by a bright orange glow. Afraid that something was wrong, she yelled out to the Captain.

“Don’t worry, that’s normal. That’s super-heated plasma from the friction of us moving so fast through the atmosphere,” he replied.

“Oh! Like a meteorite?”

“Yeah, only we don’t burn up,” he gave her a sideways smile.

She could feel her limbs and head growing progressively heavier as they slowed down. The glow outside the windows eventually gave way to a clear blue sky. The ride did indeed grow quite bumpy, and the deeper they plunged into the atmosphere, the bumpier it got.

When they touched down, it was with a heavy thud that nearly knocked her teeth out. So violent was the shaking as they skidded to a stop, that she was quite grateful when it finally stopped, their velocity spent. Relieved, she let out a heavy sigh.

“Let’s do that AGAIN!” yelled Pinkie Pie. Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy were less than thrilled with that prospect.

The pilot spoke to Tartaglia, “The suspect site is about fifteen clicks out bearing two-one-niner. The near-IR scan looks pretty interesting. I think you’ll like this.”

Chapter 14

The *Thessalonica* Site

The *Felicity Klimkosky* had landed on a broad, low mesa indistinguishable among a dozen just like it scattered across a dry savanna. Scraggly, thorny trees dotted the dry, yellow grass extending off to the horizon, all the way to a line of volcanic mountains barely visible on the horizon. A broad river cloaked in a ribbon of green snaked through the grassy plains, passing near the base of the LZ. Dark storm clouds built on the distant horizon, which Rainbow Dash eyed nervously.

The ponies watched as a half-dozen of the DropShip crew, with the aid of the five Militia infantry, unpacked several small vehicles from palates lowered from the ship's cargo bay. Rainbow Dash and Twilight were most interested in the bulky robotic exoskeleton worn by one of the crewmen and Ramirez's *Valkyrie* which performed the necessary heavy lifting.

The jeeps and all-terrain vehicles would be used to transport the expedition, consisting of the infantry squad, Tartaglia, Dr. Langley, and Ramirez, as well as the Equestrians, to what they were calling the *Thessalonica* site, the unseen area down the river and around the next mesa. Meanwhile, a second fleet of vehicles would be used by the DropShip crew to retrieve fresh water from the river to refill the ship's reserves. Only part of this water would actually be used for the crew. Most would be broken down into its constituent hydrogen for use as fuel for the fusion torch engines and oxygen for the life-support systems. Or as the pilot had put it, "H for burnin' and O for breathin'."

Meanwhile, Spike and Pinkie Pie were more enthralled by the workers themselves. As they went about their duties, one of them had started singing. It had started as little more than a hum, and Spike had missed the first couple lines, but in short order someone else had picked up the melody. From there it spread like wildfire until the entire dozen workers, and even Dieter Ling overseeing the operation, were singing the increasingly bawdy and violent lyrics. When they got to the refrain, they didn't so much sing as all shouted at the top of their lungs,

It seems that old man Liao's come a-lookin' for a fight! We'll send the bastards straight to hell! We'll Show 'em the Militia's might!

As his crew sang, Edgar Tartaglia disappeared around the angular nose of the *Leopard* DropShip. He stood hidden from the others; he didn't want to participate in the song. His eyes scanned the arid grasslands, but his mind was elsewhere.

"You seem worried, Captain," Tartaglia looked down to see Twilight Sparkle's big violet eyes peering up at him.

"You could say that," he looked around to make sure they were quite out of earshot, "Can you keep a secret?" He felt he needed to tell someone of his concerns. He still felt a little weird treating these diminutive creatures as more than clever animals, but he couldn't talk to any of his crew. Besides, this little unicorn had shown herself to have a sharp mind, and she did have the ear of the local government. If he could tell anyone, he could tell her.

"Of course," she smiled, "Strictest confidence."

"Good. If any of this gets out, it could be devastating to morale," Tartaglia took a deep breath. He knew as an officer he shouldn't be voicing these concerns, but then as ranking officer, it was ultimately his call, "I've been in touch with our JumpShip, the *Silvertongue*. I've received some...troubling news."

"Repairs going to be more difficult than you thought?" Twilight cocked her head.

"No, nothing that simple. They've finally gotten the navigation computer working properly and gotten a fix on our location."

"But, that's great!" her brief smile faded when she saw the grim look on his face, "Isn't it?"

"It's Terra," his voice tinged with despair.

Twilight hadn't quite followed his train of thought, but she was determined to try and help any way she could, "What about Terra? Did the, uh, Word of Blake do something bad, or uh, worse?"

Tartaglia shook his head, "No," he swept a hand across the landscape, "This. This is Terra. We're *on* Terra."

"The human homeworld? But, I don't understand. How can that be?"

"I don't understand it either. But everything fits. The constellations, the other planets, even the moon. It's like our world and every trace of humanity in the solar system just disappeared and was replaced by yours."

"That's... Wow."

"Yeah. Wow. Now you see why I don't want this news getting out. Finding out they might never get home, that they might not even have a home to get back to? It would be..."

"Awful," Twilight stared off at nothing in particular. She couldn't imagine being torn away from her home, her family, and her friends, and then being told she could never see them again. She shuddered.

The song ended as the unloading was completed. The vehicles were loaded and the BattleMech powered down. Reemerging from their hiding spot around the front of the vessel, Tartaglia and Twilight Sparkle rejoined the rest of their expedition.

"Almost ready to go, sir," Lieutenant Ling gave a jaunty salute, "My team is loading the last of the supplies now."

Applejack kicked a rock with her hoof, "This ground sure is funny. It's almost like somepony paved it over at one point."

Dr. Langley bent over and examined one of the greyish rocks. She hefted a chunk in her hand, "What the hell? Sir, this is ferrocete." She tossed the rock to Tartaglia.

He peered at it closely. It was unmistakably that reinforced concrete mixture used so frequently in large-scale construction throughout the Inner

Sphere. For the first time, he truly looked at the plateau they had set down on. Chunks of ferrocrete lay everywhere. Applejack was right, this area had been paved over at one point, but now the pavement lay cracked and crumbled. Plants, mostly hardy grasses, had invaded the cracks and hid what he now saw to be ferrocrete extending for several kilometers along the plateau in a long, narrow strip.

“What in the hell?” Tartaglia repeated.

The ferrocrete extended farther than just the ancient runway. They quickly discovered a narrow road winding down from the top of the plateau and around in the direction they needed to go. The pavement of the road was broken and buckled. More than once they ran across patches where it simply didn't exist anymore, washed away by the shifting river, buried by falling talus, or just simply gone. Even where the road hadn't been completely destroyed it was often little more than a strip of broken cobbles.

“So, what do y'all think we're gonna find?” Applejack was riding in the back seat of the middle jeep wedged in between Dr. Langley and Rarity. Rarity let out a little squeal as the jeep bounced heavily through a small ravine. Applejack thought her friend looked ridiculous with her delicate silk scarf around her neck and over her head and her large sunglasses, but knew enough to keep her mouth shut lest she unleash the floodgates of fashion advice.

“I don't know,” the doctor replied, “I was thinking we'd be lucky just to find traces of an old landing site, or if we're lucky the *Thessalonica* itself. But this road has me confused.”

“All this dust is going to play havoc with my mane. Haven't they been getting enough rainfall here? And these plants are growing so *chaotic*. And what is that salty smell?” Rarity's comments may have sounded like complaints, but Applejack had learned to recognize her elegant friend's manner of expressing nervous worry.

“I reckon we're pretty far from Equestria, but it is awfully dry. Hey, Doc? Can we use your communicator-thingy and ask Twilight?”

Langley pulled out the headset for her military communicator and slipped it over Applejack's ears, "You remember how to do it?" The orange pony nodded and called out the appropriate protocols.

"Twilight here. Go ahead AJ."

"Hey, Twi? We've been wonderin' why it looks so... wild... here. Over."

"We're really far from Equestria now. We're probably the only ponies for thousands of miles. You could say we're really, *really* deep in the Everfree. Oh, um. Over."

"And what's with that odd smell? Over."

"That salty smell? That's the ocean, I think. We're really close to the shoreline. Oh, yeah, over."

"Will someone get those critters off the horn?" they didn't recognize the voice, it must have been one of the four from the infantry team who had not received Twilight's translation spell.

"Thanks, Twi. Over n' out." Applejack said quickly and shook the headset off.

In the lead jeep, Twilight flushed pink. Tartaglia turned around from the front seat to look at her, "Don't worry about it. You were using it on my authority."

Ling in the driver's seat tugged on the Captain's sleeve to draw his attention to something in front of them. The Lieutenant brought the jeep to a stop as they rounded the base of the mesa and their destination came fully into view. The land came to an abrupt end along a sandy shore, replaced by the deep blue blanket of the sea. An ancient lava flow extended to form a breakwater for what had once been a lagoon, but had long since been mostly filled in with silt and sand.

On what had been the shore of this natural harbor sat the broken and crumbling wharfs and quays of what had been a small fishing port, now stranded high and dry. Landward to these docks sat the ruins of an old

military installation with large earthen ramparts and surrounding this was what could only be described as a small city.

The centuries had not been kind to the settlement. Most of the outlying buildings were little more than the ghosts of old walls and most were partially covered in sediment and plant growth. One edge of the old town had been completely wiped out, swept away by a previous meander of the large river. The once gigantic ramparts able to hide BattleMechs had been worn down to mere grass-covered berms, though still impressively tall by human standards.

“Blake’s blood,” Tartaglia muttered, “How did this get here?”

They slowly made their way through the grass-choked streets of the ruined city. They peeked into what had once been old warehouses and tenements. The centuries had stolen away most of the clues as to the inhabitants, but occasionally they would spy an odd broken piece of computer hardware or some rusted industrial machinery.

“So, you think this was a human settlement?” Rarity asked, peering over her stylish sunglasses.

“No doubt about it,” Dr. Langley waved her hand towards some of the more intact buildings, “I was a bit of a history buff as a teen. This is characteristically 26th-century architecture, late Age of War or earliest Star League.”

“And the people from the *Thessalonica* built all this?” Rarity asked with awe.

Dr. Langley shook her head, “No way in hell. Princess Celestia said the *Thessalonica* claimed to be a merchant ship. Most of those are set up to carry a lot of cargo with a minimum crew. Figure maybe a dozen or two, plus another dozen or so for the JumpShip. Even if the JumpShip carried other DropShips you’d be looking at maybe a few hundred people at *most*. This town is big enough for several *thousand*.” She pointed ahead to the military base towards which they were moving, “And there’s no way one merchant DropShip brought along with it all the equipment and materials to

build all this plus a full-on military installation and the soldiers to run it. No. This wasn't a bunch of marooned refugees, this was a concerted effort."

They figured the best place to look for clues as to the nature of this abandoned city was the military installation. Within the ramparts of the old fort the buildings were in much better repair. Even after centuries of neglect, the highly reinforced ferrocrete construction designed to withstand heavy weapons fire had held together. The weathered grey central headquarters sat with its thick blast doors still sealed shut. Even the massive doors to the attached 'Mech hangar stood intact. Only the outlying buildings—the barracks and mess, mostly—had been worn away.

"If there's one thing the Hegemony and the Star League knew how to do, it was build things to last," mused Ling as he stood admiring the thick structure.

"Are there a lot of these sorts of buildings where you come from?" asked Rarity, "I must say, the style does leave something to be desired."

"It may not look pretty, but that heavy construction is how this old building has managed to last so long. But to answer your question, yes. Star League buildings are incredibly tough. Nearly every major city in the Inner Sphere, hell, almost every planet, has a good number of League-era buildings still in use."

"And not just buildings," chimed in Ramirez, "but their hardware was tough-as-nails, too. There are still computers, factories, space stations, JumpShips, hell even BattleMechs that are still in frequent use centuries after they were built."

"What about your *Valkyrie*?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"Nah, my 'Mech's new. Only about a year old. But the *Chameleon* I trained in at Academy was built shortly before the Amaris Coupe and the fall of the Star League. Which really says something about its toughness, considering all the abuse we put it through."

“But what that means for us,” continued Ling, “is that if we could just get in there, there’s a good chance we might find some working LosTech.”

“What’s ‘loss tech’?” asked Dash, confused at the colloquialism.

“The Succession Wars devastated industrial capacity across the Inner Sphere. LosTech refers to technologies that they had in the Star League that we can’t build anymore. It can be quite valuable.”

“Get those c-bill signs out of your eyes, Ling,” Captain Tartaglia jested as he joined them, returning from his survey of the headquarters complex, “This isn’t a LosTech treasure hunt. We need a way in, and this place is locked up tighter than a Castle Brian.”

“We have that block and a half of C8.” Ling suggested.

“Wouldn’t make a dent, and we need it for evidence.”

“I could try to open a door with my magic, but I’d have to know how the locks work,” offered Twilight.

“The doors aren’t so much locked as corroded shut,” he found the unicorn’s constant attempts to help endearing.

“I could probably do it, then, but only if you can get it started.” Twilight said confidently.

“Well, then we’re back to square one.”

“Twilight, how big or heavy an object can you move?” Ramirez asked, an idea forming.

“Pretty big. Especially if I don’t have to move it far. Why?”

Thunderous footfalls reverberated through the ground. The rhythmic thudding couldn’t be so much heard as felt as the *Valkyrie* appeared in the aperture in the rampart and strode easily across the broken pavement of

the courtyard. Humans and ponies stood aside as the humanoid war machine maneuvered up to the large hangar doors.

Ramirez keyed the external speaker, "Stand clear. Twilight, be ready." She shouted an ok, though she wasn't sure if he could hear her.

Ramirez flipped a toggle switch and dropped his targeting reticule over the seam where the two doors came together. He pulled the trigger, using his neurohelmet feedback and the touch sensors on the control stick to communicate the nuance of the requested action to the 'Mech's computer. The *Valkyrie* drew back its left arm and balled its metal fist. With a resounding crash, it drove the fist hard into the edge of the door. Ramirez squeezed the trigger again and the 'Mech landed another heavy punch on the obstinate hangar door, then another and another. The metal began to bend and crack as the armored fist drove home again and again. Eventually, the metal bent inward enough to open a small hole. With a different set of commands, Ramirez ordered the 'Mech to extend its hand into the hole and grip the thick metal. Metal shrieked as the 30-ton machine pulled on the door with all its might. Working the right arm into the gap as well to act as a lever, he managed to widen the gap, but the door as a whole barely budged.

Twilight took this as her cue and grunted with effort as a powerful glow erupted from her horn. The door began to sparkle with a faint purple light as she dug her hooves into the ground. The rails the door would normally run along were totally shot, so together the 'Mech and unicorn pulled outwards. Slowly the door bent as sweat formed on Twilight's brow. Metal began to tear away around the old rails and all at once the door broke free. Pulling it clear of the newly created aperture, they let it fall to the ground with a heavy thud which kicked up copious amounts of dust.

With the door down, the armored BattleMech lead the way into the hangar, followed by the infantry team with weapons ready. They knew they wouldn't need them, but better safe than sorry. At the call of "all clear," the rest of the expedition followed into the dimly-lit interior.

The hangar was empty. No BattleMechs stood in the bays, no lifting equipment or repair gantries either. Only some animal nests, a small colony of bats, and a thick layer of dust in which they left shuffled footprints.

“Respirators on, everyone,” Dr. Langley called out as they entered. Fumbling in the dim light, everyone pulled breathing masks over their noses and mouths, even Spike and the ponies who wore borrowed masks modified for their use by Rarity’s magic.

The door leading from the hangar into the interior of the headquarters itself proved less problematic. Even through their masks they could smell the dank, musty air. Rarity and Twilight used the glow of their horns to help illuminate the way while the humans shone flashlights through doorways and into side passages. It was not an expansive complex, mostly just offices and meeting rooms. When they came to a dark stairway, they split into two teams. While one headed up the stairs to seek out the control room near the top of the structure, the other headed down into the depths in search of the main computer room or the archives. The control room was a loss. It had totally been stripped bare so that not even a scrap of circuitry, or even a desk, remained.

It was Pinkie Pie who found the archive room down in the headquarters’ sub-basement. It was a smallish room with a desk for the long-absent clerk and rack after rack filled with data disks.

“Perfect,” said Captain Tartaglia, “Now let’s get to work.”

They set up camp outside the headquarters complex, in the shadow of the remaining hangar door. Ramirez kept his BattleMech in stand-by so they could tap the electrical power from its fusion reactor using the connectors hidden behind armored panels on the back of the leg below the jumpjet exhaust ports. Using power packs recharged from the ‘Mech’s near limitless supply of energy, man-portable spotlights illuminated the musty old corridors with their harsh white light.

The eerie old structure gave Fluttershy the willies, even with the now-ample lighting. The empty rooms and bare walls always seemed to be closing in on her. Maybe with some furniture and some pictures on the walls and a fresh coat of paint it might be livable, but probably still depressing. She decided she did not want to venture inside again unless absolutely necessary, and took to exploring the seashore instead. She found lots of new animals, hermit crabs and shore birds and even some

little fish in a tide pool. Having never been to the ocean before, she was thrilled with all the new little creatures.

Rainbow Dash spent most of her time going through the outlying village. This was an entire alien settlement, and she wanted to explore every inch of it. She also wanted to see if she could find any worthwhile artifacts as a souvenir. She fancied finding an old discarded laser pistol of her very own—it didn't even have to work—but she wasn't picky. She knew from Twilight that archaeological sites were rife with discarded objects from former inhabitants. She had found some old food containers and other garbage, but there was very little of that even. It was almost like the entire town had been stripped bare, just like the headquarters building.

As for the other ponies, they mostly hung around the campsite. Applejack set herself up as a sort of de facto quartermaster, working with Dr. Langley and the Lieutenant to ration food and supplies. Rarity took it upon herself to clear as much of the dust and other offensive material from the hangar and passageways leading to the archive room. She also tried to make herself useful by working with Rainbow (when she could get ahold of the restless pegasus) to pump fresh air into the interior of the building. By the next morning, she had managed to make it so they no longer needed to wear their respirators when inside the stale old building. Pinkie Pie split her time helping out anywhere she could, though mostly she acted as a safety buddy for Dash and Fluttershy, keeping an eye on them when they were away from the safety of camp.

As an officer who rose through the ranks, Ling was well aware of the problems inherent with idle soldiers. In attempts to keep his enlisted subordinates busy, he sent them on short expeditions to scavenge food from the surroundings, hunt for artifacts with Rainbow Dash, or simply patrol the area. He was most pleased with his idea to have them investigate whether the old power generators could be repaired, until Quigley informed him there were no power generators—they had also been long since removed.

Meanwhile, in the bowels of the headquarters building, Tartaglia and Twilight tore into the archives with abandon. Using a pair of noteputers, they were making short work of cataloging the data disks by content and moved on to analyzing them for whatever data they could. Experienced with the nuances of running a library, organization, and working with

Twilight, Spike proved invaluable by labeling and reorganizing the disks once the Captain or Twilight told him what was on them. He had figured Twilight would be almost impossible to remove from the archive room once he found out what the room was. He was a little surprised at the Captain's enthusiasm, but chalked it up to the human being closer than ever to a possible way home. The little dragon also took it on himself also to make sure the two obsessive personalities took time to eat and rest.

It had originally been planned that the infantry team would rotate through the archive room to help with the investigations down there, but the plan was abandoned for two reasons. For starters, the first couple sent down ended up stepping on the toes of the well-oiled machine of Tartaglia, Twilight, and Spike, and second, Ling didn't entirely trust all of his team.

Their third day at the *Thessalonica* site dawned grey and drizzly. Rainbow Dash waged a single-pony war against the spring showers, but for every cloud she dispersed, another quickly condensed to take its place. These clouds were strange. They were high and thin, not like the ones in Equestria. Eventually, she gave up and let the uncontrolled weather go about its business. Taking shelter from the rain in the hangar, she expected to find the rest of the expedition lounging around or maybe having a meal. What she found was an argument.

"You saw what that purple one did with that door. Can you imagine using that sort of technology on the battlefield? Throwing 'Mechs and tanks around like toys!" it was one of the others from the infantry team, a sturdy blond woman with a pointed chin. Rainbow Dash tried to remember her name, Harris was it?

"She has a name, you know," Ramirez glowered, "And what you're suggesting is entirely out of the question."

"What's going on?" Rainbow Dash sidled up next to Rarity and Applejack, who were watching the proceedings.

"Oh, those three came up to Dr. Langley and Ramirez and asked if they could speak freely. Next thing you know they go off on this awful tirade about *us*."

“Us?” Rainbow asked incredulously.

Rarity nodded, “Mmmhmm. They were apparently, oh what would you say, Applejack? Confused by our part in this expedition.”

Harris hadn’t quite finished her protestation, “We can’t let such a potential boon for the Fed Suns just slip by!” she shot back, “Ackermann said that...”

“I don’t give a vrikk’s backside what Ackermann said,” snapped Ramirez, “They’re a *civilization*, not a resource.”

Rainbow Dash snorted, “Hmph. I should have known that stinker Ackermann was behind this.”

“And another thing, why are you calling it magic? I didn’t take you for the supernatural type, Sargent,” losing on one front, Harris had decided to redirect.

“I call it magic because that’s what they call it. You’re right, I don’t go in for the supernatural, it’s part of why I’m an atheist. Whether they’re doing it by some really advanced technology or biologically tapping into some undiscovered force or whatever is beside the point. Yeah, I would love to get my hands on however they do it, but we can’t just take it from them.” The debate then turned philosophical, arguing the relative merits of espionage, Machiavellian politics, and all-out consequentialism.

“Consarn-it! I hate this not bein’ able to stick up for ourselves!” Applejack stamped her hoof, “Why couldn’t Twi have just charmed them all with that fancy translatin’ spell of hers?”

“I just don’t get why you and the officers are all gaga over a bunch of animals,” a lanky young man Rainbow knew was Private Quigley chimed in, “Yeah, they’re cute, but you’re acting like you’re actually talking to them.”

“Damn it, Quigley!” Ramirez had had enough, “Haven’t you been paying attention? We *are* talking to them. I’m sorry you can’t understand their language, but they talk just the same.”

“They have cities, Quigley. Whole cities,” Dr. Langley rose to the defense, “They’re not just a bunch of animals. They have an advanced and complex civilization and they’re damn smart. For all intents and purposes they’re people, and they deserve the same respect we would give any other person. What’s more, this is their planet. I think we can agree it would be a good idea to stay on the good side of the locals.”

Chapter 15

A Voice from the Past

Despite Rarity's best efforts, dust still clung to the storage racks and filled the dim corners of the cramped archive room. The portable spotlights colored everything an unnatural blue-grey and cast harsh shadows across the walls. There was no way to tell what time of day it was, or even how much time had passed. Their only clue came when Spike would appear bearing canteens and ration packs or a demand to take a break.

When she stopped and looked around, the room gave Twilight the creeps. She knew she was being silly; there was nothing to fear from the bare walls and deep black shadows. No ghosts haunted the corridors, only cobwebs and dust. She figured the best way to take her mind off the looming shadows was to lose herself in her research. So, she did. It wasn't difficult to do, picking through the records of an alien civilization held a certain inescapable allure.

"So, if any one of these disks could probably hold all the information in this entire archive and then some, why didn't they just put everything on one disk?" she asked while swapping out disks on her borrowed noteputer. The small computer beeped and she levitated a stylus across the screen to issue her commands.

"They probably did. They probably had a central memory core, but took it with them with everything else when this place was abandoned. This is just the backup archives." Tartaglia was working from the old clerk's desk.

"Still, why are there so many disks? It's like they put every type of form for every week on a separate disk."

"Exactly," the Captain looked up, "Weekly backups of any new data from each department. By putting them on separate disks, the clerk could turn over a hardcopy of only exactly the forms requested without accidentally giving out some file he wasn't supposed to. Besides, data crystal disks are cheap. Especially so back when this base was active."

Twilight looked back at the noteputer screen, "These look like more shipping manifests. Uh, year 2548, 3rd month, that's... March, right?" Tartaglia nodded and Twilight moved the disk to the appropriate pile. She still couldn't read the human language except for a handful of words. However, she had quickly learned to recognize several different types of form and could identify and read the dates printed on them.

"Why do you think they left this all behind?" Twilight looked up from her noteputer.

Tartaglia shrugged, "Maybe they forgot about it? Maybe they left it expecting to come back later? I really don't know. I'm just glad they did."

Working so closely with the little unicorn had given the Captain an all-new perspective on the ponies, or at least this particular pony. She was smart, and a little socially awkward, which he found endearing. He found her easy to talk to. She was curious and asked a lot of questions—particularly regarding history and society. The parallels between their cultures were amazing. More than once, Tartaglia forgot that he *wasn't* talking to a fellow human. As they worked their way through the archives, he had begun treating her like he would a skilled company clerk or technical analyst.

"Damnit." Twilight's breath caught in her throat as soon as she heard the curse slip past her lips. Her head shot up, mortified at her gaffe.

Tartaglia just laughed, "I think you've been hanging around me too much, Miss Sparkle."

Even so, her cheeks flushed pink, "This one won't open," she trotted over to the desk and levitated out the noteputer for the Captain to see. He took it from her and peered at the screen.

"This is a holorecording," he said, "It needs a Tri-Vid player to run. Here, let me try something." He ejected the disk and inserted it into his own noteputer. He moved the stylus rapidly over the screen, diving into the nuts and bolts of the system. "Almost. Good thing we still use similar architectures. There!" He set the noteputer down on the desk and tapped the screen with a finger, "I can't run Tri-Vid on this noteputer, but I did manage to extract the audio. Let's see what we've got."

The small speaker in the noteputer sounded tinny, and the echo from the barren walls didn't help. But, when he pressed the screen, the unmistakable sound of a woman's voice, clearly enunciated if a little nasally, issued forth,

"Personal log, Colonel Lucile Guillaume, commanding officer, New Alamo Research Facility. 27th of January, 2549 Terran Standard. It was hot today. The summers here can be pretty brutal. Reminded the patrols to pack extra water and gave a little speech about avoiding heatstroke. I thought about pulling the patrols in today, it's not like there's really any reason for them to be out there. Still, orders are orders, and if one of the Houses, like the Steiners or Kuritas or Davions figured out how to make the jump, they could be all over us before the alarms sounded.

Another JumpShip arrived today, Merchant class. No DropShips, just a pair of orbital shuttles. It used to be we were receiving one at least every month. Today's marks the first arrival we've had since April. I don't know. Maybe the JumpShip captains object to the jump protocol to get here, or maybe we just don't rate high enough to the Hegemony Central Intelligence Bureau anymore. There's grumblings among the scientists. They're afraid the HCIB is going to pull the plug on us.

Got another one asking why the northern continent is off-limits. Air traffic controller at the spaceport this time. I gave him the standard line. It bugs me that I don't even know why the higher-ups don't want us up there. I know that's where the Thessalonica originally went down. Something must have really had them spooked.

I think that's enough for today."

The recording beeped to signal its completion. Silence once again filled the room; a silence that now seemed all the more profound. Neither of them spoke. They didn't have to. Twilight dashed over to the shelf where she had found that data disk and began pulling several more, which she tossed over to Tartaglia. He stuffed another into his noteputer and repeated the process. Again, the woman's nasally voice filled the room. They listened to it carefully—a short missive on water rationing and worrying about repair parts—then ejected it and stuck in another. After the fourth or fifth, they stopped listening to them all the way through. Tartaglia would extract the audio, play the recording up through the date, then move on to the next while Twilight laid the disks out on the floor in chronological order.

Once they had found every holorecording they could, they started with the earliest recording, dated the 8th of August 2546, and listened.

The New Alamo Research Facility was founded by the Terran Hegemony Central Intelligence Bureau as a top-secret laboratory for the development of alternative military technologies. It was hoped that the 'unique nature' of the world, by which Twilight was able to discern they meant the presence of magic, plus the rather unconventional manner of traveling to the world would make it an ideal hidden location from which to pursue a plethora of secret projects. In the four years the facility was operational, teams worked on genetic engineering, terraforming, and weapons systems deemed too confidential to be undertaken anywhere else.

Scientists assigned to one of the facility's projects would live at the site and bring their families. A small number of colonists were brought on as well to lend the base a measure of self-sustenance. The location of the facility was considered of the utmost secrecy. Even the people living there were told they were on a planet 'in the vicinity of Carver V.' No mail was allowed off the planet unless special permission was granted, and then only after passing under the heavy scrutiny of the censors. Only the commanding officer and a handful of scientists actively studying the Kearny-Fuchida physics behind the phenomenon that brought them here knew the truth, and they were under very strict orders to keep their mouths shut. Even the JumpShip captains were carefully screened by HCIB and operated only under the watchful eye of operatives.

Then, on September 18th, 2549 Director-General Joseph Cameron was assassinated by a rogue Marine Corps Captain and member of a cabal of soldiers dissatisfied with the Director-General's policies. His brother, Ian Cameron took over as leader of the Terran Hegemony and put down a revolt by those same dissatisfied soldiers which had occupied the ancient city of Geneva. This was history Captain Tartaglia knew well. Ian Cameron would go on to found the Star League and be the first to hold the title First Lord.

This new Director-General either had little knowledge of the secret research facility, or deemed the expense too great, or simply felt it was

superfluous. In any case, the facility was shut down in early 2550. All equipment was removed and the colonists scattered across Hegemony space. The last entry in Colonel Guillaume's log was dated 6 June, 2550, as she looked out across a ghost town, preparing to board the last DropShip off planet.

The pilot of the *Felicity Klimkosky* looked up as the door to the bridge slid open. He did not smile, nor really show any emotion at all, as the dark-skinned woman strode across the floor and slid into one of the empty crew stations.

"Were you spotted?" he asked quietly. They were alone, but he still felt the need to keep his voice down.

Corporal Liz Virat was more cavalier in her attitude, "Of course not. Everyone else is either off the ship or down in engineering. I know I'm not supposed to be found outside of my 'cell'."

"Did you find anything?"

Liz nodded, "In addition to the docking collar airlock, there's also evidence of tampering with bulkheads five and fourteen leading to the Tech barracks and my storage locker."

"We're running out of time, Corporal. We've already been here what? Three? Four days? The expedition team could be back at any moment."

Liz pinched the bridge of her nose, "I know, I know. But at least we know it's one of the infantry team now."

"Or someone is trying to frame the infantry team," the pilot countered.

Liz cocked her head, "I don't think so. If that were the case, we would see more tampering to other locks around the ship. Whoever this guy is, he's a really sloppy lockpick."

That revelation did not exactly put the pilot at ease, "Any idea who?"

“Well, we know it wasn’t the Lieutenant. That leaves Quigley, Ackermann, Harris, and Nao. Quigley’s an idiot, but I can’t see him pulling something like this. Ackermann’s usually really friendly, though he’s been in a really bad mood recently. He’s really outspoken anti-Capellan. I don’t know that much about his personal life, though. Nao was decorated for valor for his service during the civil war, if that means anything. And Harris is my best friend. She’s no Liao sympathizer.”

“And all four of them have each other plus you as alibis...”

“Not really. How else do you think the Lieutenant and Captain made my ‘arrest’ plausible?” she wiggled her fingers to indicate quotation marks, “None of them have a rock-solid alibi for the time in question.”

“And so they’re all suspects. And all of them are out with the Captain at the site.” Liz responded to his statements with a grim nod. “This is bad,” Liz nodded again, “Do you think Ling’s little ruse of appearing to fall for the frame-job will work?”

Liz stood and moved for the door, “I don’t know. But, somehow, I doubt it.”

“So, was the *Thessalonica* ever actually here?” Ramirez was doing his best to absorb Tartaglia and Twilight’s rapid-fire lecture. He stood between Ling and Dr. Langley, with Rarity, Applejack, and Rainbow Dash at their feet. Spike sat on the old clerk’s desk, and Twilight and Tartaglia stood across from them. They had been unable to convince Fluttershy to venture beyond the hangar, so she had stayed behind with the rest of the infantry team and Pinkie Pie to keep her company.

Twilight answered for the two of them, “Here at this site, probably not. As far as the commanding officer’s logs let on, the *Thessalonica* left Equestria directly. It was a second ship, the *Jeremy Sanborn*, that followed up on their report and sited this colony.”

“A secret research facility,” Ling shook his head in disbelief, “It’s too bad they didn’t leave any of their research behind.”

Rarity changed the topic, “But if the *Thessalonica* left and other ships came later—a lot of other ships by the sound of it—then that means the *Silvertongue* can leave, too.”

“Indeed it does,” Captain Tartaglia confirmed, “Unfortunately, it’s a little more complicated than a simple jump, and we’ve been unable to find a written version of the protocol.”

“But it can be done?” asked Applejack.

“Yes,” Twilight replied, “Fortunately, we managed to piece together enough of the protocol that the Captain thinks they might be able to make a go of it. It’s still a bit of a longshot, though.”

“That’s actually why I asked you down here,” Tartaglia addressed the three other humans, “I want my officers, and NCO, to know the details, just in case.” He turned to the unicorn, “Twilight, care to do the honors?”

Twilight stepped up to the desk and cleared her throat, “Now, I’m not totally clear on some of the terminology or how your K-F drive works, but I can explain what you need to do. You see, the *Thessalonica* was brought here originally by a ‘misjump’ on its JumpShip, the *Due Diligence*. This misjump coincided with an explosion in the engineering section.”

“Sounds familiar,” grumbled Ling.

Twilight ignored him, “On an off-chance, the chief engineer of the *Due Diligence* set off a second explosion when they attempted to jump away from Equestria. Apparently, it worked because within a year, the Hegemony Central Intelligence Bureau managed to duplicate the *Due Diligence*’s jump by setting off a small explosion in the engineering section.”

“So, all we have to do to get home is set another bomb?” Ramirez asked, “Seems simple enough. What’s the catch?”

“The bomb has to be small so as not to actually cause any damage and it has to go off at exactly the right time to induce a...variance, I think they called it, in the jump initiator. The timing has to be perfect to the microsecond, and even then eight out of ten times the jump is either aborted or goes along without a misjump.”

“But when it does work, it always goes between Equestria and Valexa?” Ling was following easily.

“Not Valexa necessarily. They mention jumps mostly from Ningpo, Kansu, and New Hessen.”

“Those are all within two jumps of Valexa. Just a little coreward and antispinward of us,” Dr. Langley chimed in. Twilight didn’t know exactly what she meant by those terms, but she could guess.

“Any idea how this whole things works?” Ling raised a questioning finger.

Tartaglia answered, “I don’t think even the crack brains the Hegemony had working on it even figured it out. Right now, I don’t really care *how* it works, just that it does. And we’ve got it right here.” He pulled a small data disk from his pocket, “All we have to do now is get this disk to the *Silvertongue*. This, plus a little of that C8 we found, and we just might get back home. I’m telling you this so that from this point on out, any one of us can complete this objective.”

“That’s all very interesting,” a new voice called from the doorway. They turned to see the stocky frame of Private Ackermann blocking the doorway. He brandished a large pistol in one hand and extended the other toward the group, “I’ll be taking that data disk now.”

“I was wondering when you’d make your move, you coward.” Tartaglia growled, “I was half-expecting you to just kill outright.”

“What makes you think I’m not going to?” Ackermann waved his pistol. “Believe me, I’d love to just finish you off, but I’d much rather make it back to the Inner Sphere, and the ability to return here to this world would prove most beneficial to my masters. So I’ll be taking the disk now.”

“The Capellans paying you well for this, Ackermann?” Ling’s hand drifted towards his sidearm.

“Leave those hands where I can see them,” Ackermann leveled the gun at Ling. He sniffed, “As if House Liao knew anything about any of this.

I'm not with the Capellans, you short-sited dolt. We're much more powerful than those fools, than any of the so-called great houses. But none of that will matter to any of you very shortly."

"And just how do you plan on covering this up?" Ling crossed his arms and scowled.

Ackermann just smiled, "Oh, don't you worry about that. These old buildings are so unstable. Prone to collapse at the most inopportune times." He added sarcastically, "Oh, poor Captain Tartaglia. Buried in a freak cave-in with the others. How tragic. Good thing I managed to recover the protocol to get away from this Blake-forsaken rock. And then my masters can return here, bring those obstinate ponies to heel, and bring forth a new and glorious dawn for humanity."

"Masters? New dawn for humanity?" Dr. Langley cocked her head, "You're with the Word of Blake, aren't you?"

Ackermann mimed a slow clap, "Congratulations, give the lady a prize. But, like I said, it won't matter to you very shortly. Now if you'll just give me the data disk, I'll make this quick then be on my way with the ponies."

"Excuse *me*?" Rarity thrust an indignant nose in the air, "We will *not* be going anywhere with *you*, you ruffian."

"Fair enough. I only really need one of you." He pointed the pistol squarely at the incensed unicorn who stood her ground defiantly, staring directly into his eyes.

Movement in the corner of his eye caught Ackermann's attention. Ramirez had managed to slip around to the side and launch a surprise attack. He lunged, smacking Ackermann's gun hand to the side and driving a knee into his stomach. As he struck, Ackermann's finger tightened and the gun discharged with a loud bang and flash of light. Winded and doubled over by the attack, the Private tried to strike back, but Applejack leapt forward and planted her back hooves squarely into his chest, sending him sprawling across the cold floor. Ramirez seized the initiative and grabbed Ackermann's collar, heaving him up before driving an angry fist into his face. Enraged, the MechWarrior raised his arm to strike again.

“Stop!” Twilight’s clear voice rang out. Her ears still rang from the sound of the gunshot. She was disoriented, but she planted her hooves as solidly as she could, “Do *not* hurt him! Take him prisoner, but *don’t* hurt him!”

Ramirez stared at her for a moment then released his grip on the sputtering Blakist and stood up, “Ok,” he nodded, “Anyone have some handcuffs or... Oh, shit, Doc!” Dr. Langley was clutching her arm where the bullet had passed just below the shoulder. Blood soaked through her fingers as she slumped weakly to her knees.

He shouldn’t have let go. In a flash, Ackermann was to his feet. In one quick move, he snatched a cylinder from his vest and tossed it into the room as he bolted down the corridor.

“Grenade!” shouted Ling as he flung himself to the ground behind the heavy desk. As he dove, he grabbed hold of Rainbow and Applejack and smothered them to the floor. Tartaglia grabbed Dr. Langey while Twilight looked on confused. Rarity followed suit and dove to the floor, but as she did so her horn sparked and she sent the offending object skittering out through the doorway and down the hall. It exploded harmlessly, spraying shrapnel into the ferrocrete walls. If the gunshot was loud, this was deafening.

Twilight couldn’t hear anything for several long seconds. She stood in a daze as a heavy dust wafted in to the small room from the doorway. Around her, her friends and the humans picked themselves up and checked themselves and each other over. Twilight found herself looking into the face of Ramirez. His lips moved, but she couldn’t hear him. Eventually, she made out as if from far away that he was asking if she was all right. She could tell from the rushing ringing in her ears her hearing was returning.

Rainbow Dash shook the dust from her mane, “I knew he was no good! Let’s get him!” She took off at a shot but found herself stopped short by Applejack who grabbed her multicolored tail in her mouth.

“Hold on there, partner,” Applejack said through a mouthful of hair, “Langley’s hurt. We gotta help her first.”

Dr. Langley propped herself up against the desk, "I'll be fine, you go."

"You sure, Doc?" Tartaglia looked her in the eyes as he placed a reassuring hand on her good shoulder.

She winced, "Yeah. I can patch myself up. I don't think it's bad. You go get that bastard."

Rainbow Dash was already halfway out the door, "Let's go, let's go!" Rarity and Twilight leapt up after her, followed by Ramirez, Ling, and, after one last look at Langley, Tartaglia.

Applejack stayed behind, "I'm gonna stay and help the Doc. Spike, ya' think ya' could lend me a hoof, or erm, claw?"

Spike looked between the others running off in pursuit of the man who just tried to kill them and the wounded doctor. "Ok," he said, running to Applejack's side, "What do you need?"

Dr. Langley motioned with her head to her bag, "First cut the fabric so I can get a look. There's scissors in my bag, side pocket." Applejack fetched the bag and Spike dug out the scissors and carefully cut the sleeve away from Langley's arm.

"Oh, that's a lot of blood," the dragon was feeling woozy.

Dr. Langley peered down at the wound, "Looks like it wasn't deep. Just went through the muscle. That's good. You'll need to keep me from going into shock. There's medipatches and stimpatches in the main pocket right on top." Applejack pulled the foil-wrapped patches from the bag and gave them to Spike who ripped the packages open and stuck the adhesive to Dr. Langley's skin. She sighed as the medication took effect, easing her pain.

"Alright, what's next?" asked Applejack.

The sound of the explosion filtering up from below told the three Militia Privates that something wasn't right. Grabbing their rifles, Harris and Nao dashed into the interior of the heavy ferrocrete structure with a worried

Pinkie Pie close at their heels. Slower off the mark, Quigley decided to hang back and cover the entrance until he received orders. Fluttershy managed to make it as far as the door leading from the dusty hangar into the headquarters before her nerves got the better of her.

“P-Pinkie Pie?” she called out in a quavering voice after her friend who had already disappeared into the gloom. She sat herself down in the doorway and listened. Frantic shouts met her ears, making her even more nervous.

Harris, Nao, and Pinkie had made it to the top of the stairwell when they were met by a dark form barreling towards them up the stairs.

“Hey, Ackermann! What’s going on? What was that...” Private Nao was in the lead when Ackermann reached them. He heard a faint hum as the stocky man slashed a vibroblade at him as he passed. Shocked, Nao leapt back as he felt a warm sting across his collarbone and chin. Not quite comprehending, he slumped against the wall and stared at the splash of red blood on the grey wall.

Ackermann swept past the stricken infantryman and lashed out towards Harris with his humming blade. Harris was surprised, of course, but managed to spot the danger coming. She yelled in surprised as she raised her rifle to block the blow. The vibroblade cut deep into the plastic and composites. She wrenched the rifle to the side, twisting the blade out of her assailant’s grasp. The weapon clattered to the floor as Ackermann scurried away down the corridor. Harris was about to give chase when a groan from Nao drew her attention.

“Ow. What the hell is his problem?” the wounded man said, touching gingerly at his face.

Harris cursed and knelt down by her comrade. She peeled the torn and blood-soaked fabric away from his collar to inspect the wound, “You alright?” she asked.

Nao winced and shakily rose to his feet, “I think so. Yeah.” Only the tip of the vibroblade had nicked him, laying open the skin over his collarbone and up his cheek but nothing else. He would be alright, but right now the wound was bleeding profusely.

Pinkie Pie was rooted to the spot. The sudden violence scared her, and for once she didn't know what to do. She found all she could do was stare at the bright red blood staining Nao's face and uniform.

Harris turned to face the little pony as she extracted a medipatch and bandage from a pocket, "Hey, pink one. What was your name? Pink Cake? Pink Pie? You can understand me right?" Pinkie Pie snapped out of her daze and nodded, "Good. Go get the doc..." she was interrupted by a cacophony from the stairs as Rainbow Dash, Twilight, and Rarity tumbled up the stairs followed closely by the Captain, Lieutenant and Sargent.

Ling stooped to check on Nao's wounds, "Doc's downstairs. Go help her out." Nao looked quizzical at his choice of words, but gave a weak salute and moved off down the stairs.

Harris grabbed Ling's arm, "Sir? What's going on?"

Before he could answer, Quigley appeared around the corner, "What in Blake's name is going on? Ackermann just grabbed that yellow pony and ran off in a jeep!"

Twilight stopped cold. He'd taken Fluttershy? She felt hot rage boiling up inside her at the same time the blood drained from her face.

Chapter 16

Pursuit

Pinkie Pie galloped as fast as she could. Her hooves clattered on the hard floor as she burst into the hanger. That meanie Ackermann was nowhere to be seen. How dare he try and hurt the others! How dare he ponynap her friend! Poor Fluttershy, she must be terrified. As soon as Quigley had said the traitor had run past him, Pinkie had taken off to check on her timid friend. And when he said Ackermann had taken Fluttershy, she ran even faster, cursing herself for leaving.

She skidded to a stop as she passed out of the hangar and into the sunlight. The rain of that morning had stopped and the sun had burned the clouds away. She could hear the engine of the jeep close by, probably just on the other side of the ramparts. She needed to get high to see, and she needed a way to catch them fast.

Her eyes fell on the BattleMech kneeling beside the fallen door. That might work. It was tall and Ramirez seemed proud of how fast it could go. There was a chain ladder dangling from the back of its head and she knew Ramirez had said something about leaving the reactor in low-power mode.

She scrambled up the chain ladder, hooking her front limbs over one rung while pushing off with her back hooves. It wasn't much different from climbing a tree, she told herself. The inside of the head wasn't large. There was a small space between the hatch at the back of the head and a metal chair. She wriggled her way around the chair and found herself standing on a firm cushion facing a dizzying array of buttons and small glowing screens below and around a wide, tinted window.

She looked around dismayed. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea. The little pink pony took a deep breath and focused. Ok, whole bunch of buttons, a couple thingies to either side that looked movable, and below a pair of pedals. Maybe the pedals made the legs move, like a bicycle? It was worth a shot. She scooted down on the seat and stretched out with a hind hoof. She gingerly pressed at the pedal. She shot bolt upright when a woman's voice boomed out from everywhere and nowhere.

"Security clearance needed"

"Oh, um. Hello," a surprised Pinkie said to the voice, "My name's Pinkie Pie. You must be the robot. I'd call you by your name, but I know you don't have one. I tried to think of one for you. I know you must feel left out without a name. I know I would. But, um, my friend just got ponynaped and I need to go save her, so if you could stand up and run after her that would really help. Um, hello? Miss robot lady? Helooo?"

"Maybe you'd better let me handle this," Pinkie Pie jumped as Ramirez climbed into the cockpit and pulled the hatch closed after him. He'd already stripped off his fatigues to his grey undershirt and camouflage green pants and was wrestling with his cooling vest. As the door sealed shut, Pinkie could hear the chatter of the chain ladder being wound up outside.

"Okey-dokey-lokie," she wriggled out of the seat on one side as the MechWarrior squeezed past on the other. Reaching back, Ramirez flipped down a small metal frame with webbing stretched across. Pinkie could see straps for a harness dangling from the wall above.

"There's a seat there if you need," he said as he settled into the command chair and began strapping himself in. BattleMech cockpits were small, but almost every design managed to fit a space behind the seat. It was cramped, but provided a 'Mech with just enough space to carry a second person, such as an observer or a rescued comrade. Pinkie looked at the little foldout seat, but decided she'd much rather see where they were going. She clamored up on to the back of the command seat and wrapped her limbs as well as she could around the frame so she could peer over Ramirez's shoulder. In almost any other 'Mech she would have had a more difficult time. The command seat on most 'Mechs was a bulky ejector seat in case a hasty exit was necessary. The designers of the VLK-QD1, however, had incorporated a full-head ejection system. Instead of just jettisoning the pilot clear, the entire armored head assembly would detach and rocket off. As such, the command chair was thinner and smaller in the *Valkyrie*, making Pinkie's job of hanging on that much easier.

Ramirez settled the neurohelmet over his head and pressed a short series of buttons. The 'Mech lurched as it stood up and Pinkie squeezed harder to keep from losing her perch. Outside the window she saw the

ground drop away. The woman's voice sounded again as Pinkie looked around for the source,

"Weapons online. Sensors online. All systems nominal." The voice was precise and cold.

Ramirez slammed the throttle forward and Pinkie Pie squeaked in surprise as the BattleMech took off at a run. He pressed lightly at the foot pedals, maneuvering around the outbuildings and charged straight for the old rampart. As he neared, he stomped down on both pedals at once. The jumpjets erupted with flame and sent them into a low arc up and over the earthen berm. Pinkie Pie squealed with delight at the rush of the sudden flight. The 'Mech's hips and knees flexed to absorb the impact of their heavy landing on the far side of the rampart.

"Utica-six, Utica-six, this is Saber-one-three, Saber-one-three. In pursuit bearing one-three-five. Over." He was using their call signs from back on Valexa. Pinkie Pie couldn't hear a response, but Ramirez nodded his head, "Saber-one acknowledges. Out." he turned to glance back at Pinkie Pie, "Alright, Pinkie, if you're gonna ride with me you're gonna have to make yourself useful." He pressed a button next to a glass screen and suddenly the entire area between dashboard and roof and wrapping all the way around to either side was filled with a holographic representation of the outside. To Pinkie Pie, it was almost like the surrounding walls had peeled back and they were now sitting in the open air, except she could still faintly see the tinted window beyond the display if she tried. Along the top of the display, a band showed a panoramic view of their entire surroundings compressed into a 120 degree arc.

"Ooh," she cooed, "That's *cool*."

Ramirez usually preferred to use the holographic display built in to his neurohelmet, but he figured an extra set of eyes would be helpful, "All these buildings are playing havoc with the sensors. I need you to keep your eyes peeled for them."

"There they are over there!" she pointed at a dust plume disappearing around a corner, "Hang on, Fluttershy! We're coming!"

Dieter Ling burst from the hangar at a sprint, grim determination on his face and a laser pistol in his hand. Ackermann was gone, but he could hear the internal combustion engine of a jeep receding into the town. He cursed to himself as he took stock of his surroundings and holstered his sidearm. Two of their open-top jeeps were left sitting in the courtyard before the hangar. He didn't see Sargent Ramirez, who he knew had gotten ahead of him. He wondered where the MechWarrior was until the BattleMech stood up and took off at a run.

A blue streak raced past him and arced high up into the sky, "There! They're right there..." the rest of her words were drowned out by the roar of the *Valkyrie's* jumpjets. Realizing she couldn't be heard over the noise, the pegasus swooped back down and hovered just over Ling's head, "Come on! We can still catch them!"

"How?" Twilight asked as she skittered to a stop behind them. Ling turned to see Rarity, Tartaglia, Harris, and Quigley there, too.

The communicators the humans carried crackled to life with Ramirez's call from the cockpit of his 'Mech. Tartaglia would normally answer to the call sign Utica-6-actual. Instead of answering, the DropShip captain turned to Ling.

"I defer to you, Lieutenant. Ground-ops are your area." He threw the infantry officer a quick salute.

Ling returned the salute as he pulled out his communicator's headset, "Saber-one-three, this is Razor-six-actual. I read your pursuit. Keep on him, we'll try and box him in. Switch comms to following..." True to form, he already had a plan. Once he finished with Ramirez, he immediately started barking out orders, "Captain, Harris, Twilight: that jeep. Head out and right. Quigley and Rarity, you're with me, we'll take the left. Sweep around and box him in." Twilight and Rarity stood stunned for a moment then ran off to their assigned transports. "Rainbow Dash!" Ling bellowed.

"Yes, Sir!" Rainbow swept down and landed in front of him with a sloppy but energetic salute.

Ling slipped off his headset and pulled out his communicator, "I want you up top," he strung a fabric lanyard through the communicator and hung it around Dash's neck, "Get up high and call out directions. Try to get us ahead of him." He set the headset over the pegasus's ears and adjusted the microphone so it was next to her mouth.

"I'm on it!" Rainbow Dash rocketed off into the sky.

Fluttershy slid across the back seat of the jeep as her captor took a sharp turn. She squirmed against the cable binding her legs and wings. Ackermann had bound her quickly but securely. She whimpered and begged him to let her go.

Ackermann swore and yelled at his captive to shut up. He'd already lost too much time. Attacking Harris and Nao at the stairs had been a mistake, he knew. He'd left at least one of them alive in addition to that fool Quigley. Now they'd certainly be after him. And judging from that BattleMech on his tail, his grenade had somehow failed in its intended purpose as well.

He'd almost tripped over the little yellow pegasus as he emerged from the interior of the headquarters building. She had been nearly catatonic with fear, so grabbing her and tying her up with the only suitable cable he could find, an insulated cable they had been using to charge their powerpacks from the BattleMech's fusion reactor, had been easy. But it still had taken precious time. He had gambled everything on his appearance in the archive room, and now everything was unraveling.

"You let me go right this instant!" Fluttershy had stopped her whimpering. Drawing on every ounce of resolve she had, she fixed her captor with a withering look. Being famously timid, she was not much of a fighter. She had no great strength or skill or powerful magic to draw on in dangerous situations such as this. But, having spent most of her life among and caring for animals had endued her with a power all her own. When she put her mind to it, she could put on a convincingly commanding presence. At the top of her form she could subdue even an angry dragon. Her friends called it 'the stare,' but she knew that putting forth an authoritative façade and not backing down was all it really was.

She demanded that he listen to her, that he stop the jeep and surrender. There was one problem, though. 'The stare' worked best when she could look her adversary in the eyes. The eyes were the whole secret. Without the nonverbal cues all she had was her voice, and try as she might, Ackermann simply would not look at her.

"Shut up! Shut up or I *will* kill you!" he yelled. He looked all around him trying to keep tabs on his pursuers, but refused to look at his captive. "Blake's blood, it's worse than driving with my mother," he grumbled under his breath.

"Can't you go any faster? They're getting away!" the pink pony yelled.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Pinkie. I have to be careful on these turns." Ramirez stomped down on the foot pedals again, sending the *Valkyrie* leaping over the ruins of an ancient warehouse. He found himself on one of the main thoroughfares through the small city.

"There they are!" Pinkie Pie thrust a hoof towards the display. Ahead of them and receding fast was the jeep. Even at this distance, they could see Fluttershy's light pink tail and mane fluttering in the breeze over the back seat. The avenue was perfectly straight and clear, and both Ramirez and Pinkie Pie could see the jeep had a straight shot out of the city.

"Stop them! Stop them!" Pinkie Pie was veritably bouncing with the thrill of the chase. Ramirez bit his lip. His 'Mech would never be able to catch up with the jeep on this flat, hard tarmac. He knew the other two jeeps were still behind him somewhere, probably barely beyond the ramparts by now. Maybe if he had a faster 'Mech like a *Wolfhound* or a *Locust* he'd stand a chance of running them down. What he needed was a roadblock to slow the jeep and give him and his allies a chance to catch up.

With a flick of his thumb he brought his Arbalest LRM launcher on-line. He swept the targeting reticule up well ahead of the fleeing vehicle. There, that old tenement would do nicely. He squeezed the trigger and sent a flight of fifteen warheads arcing high into the sky.

“Ooh, fireworks!” Pinkie’s attention was stolen away by the sight. The missiles plunged back down to earth, swerving slightly as they homed in on the targeting beam. They slammed into the side of the crumbling building, sending out large plumes of dust. “Aww,” Pinkie had been expecting colorful bursts in the air. Ramirez for his part held his breath, hoping against hope that those missiles did the job. He whooped as the building began to collapse, spilling debris into the road and blocking the jeep’s path.

The jeep screeched to a stop then suddenly reversed down the road towards them. Ramirez charged the ‘Mech forwards as the jeep dove down a side street and out of view. Nearing the corner, he depressed the foot pedals to turn the ‘Mech down the new path. In his haste, he turned a little too sharply and the *Valkyrie*’s large metal feet lost traction on the slick tarmac. Ramirez cursed as he fought to keep the ‘Mech upright. The heavy gyroscopes in the torso screamed in protest as thirty tons of metal crashed to the ground. The BattleMech landed hard on its left arm. Ablative armor designed to defend against high-energy projectiles, lasers, and particle beams buckled and snapped. In the cockpit, Pinkie Pie lost her grip on the command chair and slammed into the cockpit wall with a grunt.

“You alright, Pinkie?” Ramirez asked as he fought to get the ‘Mech back on its feet.

“Oh course, silly. It’ll take more than *that* to slow Pinkie Pie down.” She clamored back to her perch behind Ramirez’s command chair, ignoring her aching ribs. “That didn’t hurt the robot lady, did it?”

A wireframe rendition of the *Valkyrie* flashed up on the display. The left arm glowed yellow and a red symbol flashed by the elbow. Ramirez cursed, “Busted the lower arm actuator.” The damage display disappeared and Ramirez cursed again and more vehemently. His ‘Mech was back on its feet, but they’d lost sight of the fleeing jeep. “This is Saber-one-three. I’ve lost them,” he called over the radio as he switched on the cockpit speakers so his passenger could listen in.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got your back, Saber. He’s around to the right and a block and a half down.”

“Dashie?” Pinkie Pie checked the panorama along the top of the display for her friend, “Where are you?”

“Right above you, Pinkie Pie. And you owe me one for getting to ride in that ‘Mech before me. Now hurry up and go three blocks straight ahead.”

Rarity struggled to maintain her balance on the back seat of the jeep as Quigley gunned the throttle around a turn. She lamented that she didn’t have enough time to grab a scarf from her saddlebags to keep her mane from getting wind-whipped. No sense in crying over spilt milk, though. She’d just have to deal with it like a lady. She strained to hear the communicator Ling had relinquished from the driver.

“A roadblock? Genius! Dash, see if you can loop us around in front of them,” he turned to face Rarity, “Can you toss stuff around like Twilight can?”

“What? You mean with my magic?” she was a little flustered, “Well, yes. I can’t do big objects like her, but I can move little ones.”

“Good enough,” he replied then returned to the communicator, holding it out towards the elegant unicorn so she could hear too, “Do you read me, Twilight?”

Twilight’s voice sounded odd coming from the strange box, “I read you.”

“Ok, I need you to try and make roadblocks. Grab concrete chunks, I-beams, anything. Just throw as much debris as you can to try and block every side street you pass. Can you handle that?”

“I think so. I’ll try,” came the response over the communicator.

Rarity was less certain, “Wha-what? I don’t-I don’t know,”

“It’s easy, Rarity. It’ll be just like levitating any other objects. You just have to concentrate.” Twilight tried to encourage her friend.

As they neared the first intersection, Rarity quickly scanned the area for anything she could grab. The crumbling infrastructure gave her plenty to

work with. Chewing her lip in intense concentration, her horn glowed as she grabbed metal beams and ferrocrete slabs and arranged them to block off the intersection. As they passed, she kept finagling with the placement of her obstacles.

“Good job. Now here comes the next one,” Ling called from the front seat.

“But I haven’t finished with this one yet!” she protested.

“No time. Do this one!” She obeyed the order and repeated the effort as they approached the next side road. As she worked, Ling gave her more direction, “They don’t have to be pretty. Just throw as much stuff in there as you can. Right now, quantity is its own quality.”

She had to fight her perfectionist nature, but as they passed the second intersection Rarity began throwing as much debris as she could haphazardly across the road. Ling praised her efforts and directed her to the next intersection.

From her vantage point high in the sky, Rainbow Dash could watch the entire chase unfold. Speaking into the microphone, she called out directions to try and surround the jeep carrying Ackermann and Fluttershy. To help the others keep track, she cruised directly above the fleeing jeep high up so that the others could see her.

Ramirez’s missile barrage had forced Ackermann to retreat back into the smaller side streets deep in the small city. He now seemed to be wandering aimlessly as he looped and doubled back through an industrial park. Rainbow Dash wondered what he was up to until she realized he was trying to throw off his pursuers, unaware he was being watched from above. Taking advantage of this tactical blunder, she ordered the BattleMech to keep going and get between him and the closest edge of the city.

To either side, Twilight and Rarity’s jeeps raced along, trying to get ahead of their quarry. In their wake, chunks of pavement, segments of wall, metal beams, and all sorts of debris from the crumbling city spilled out and

arranged into roughshod barricades blocking off roads as they went. On Rarity's side, the debris formed thin, ragged lines while Twilight almost seemed to be bringing down entire buildings.

As soon as the two jeeps passed the neighborhood in which Ackermann was looping around, she ordered them to turn towards each other and complete the trap. As she did, Ackermann found his way to a major thoroughfare and made a break for it.

"Hurry, he's headed right for you!" she yelled. They had him in a triangle, but if the jeeps didn't hurry, he'd slip past before they could get the roadblock up. For the second time, they needed to slow him down or he would get away. Rainbow Dash fought off a wave of panic. She called again for them to hurry, but knew it wouldn't do any good. She thought fast, trying to come up with a solution. Taking a deep breath, she rolled over into a spiraling dive. Using the speed gained from the dive, she raced perpendicular to Ackermann's line of travel. Bursting out onto the main thoroughfare, she banked hard and zoomed fast and low over the jeep. As she flashed past, she caught glimpses of the pair of faces, one with big blue eyes blazing, the other bloodied and swollen and both looking up in surprise.

Ackermann didn't brake, but he did swerve violently. The maneuver bled just enough speed that the two other jeeps were able to beat him to the intersection. Grey dust billowed as the two unicorns tore the surrounding buildings to shreds and spilled the debris across the road behind them. Behind him, the *Valkyrie* burst through the middle of a building shoulder-first, cutting off his escape. Panicked, Ackermann screeched the pilfered jeep to a halt, roughly grabbed his hostage, and ducked through the door of an old office building.

Quigley and Harris brought their vehicles up next to the abandoned jeep while Ramirez brought his 'Mech up behind. In a flash, the soldiers were out of their seats and taking cover behind the metal bodies. Rarity collapsed on her seat, exhausted from the effort, and Rainbow Dash alighted on the *Valkyrie's* shoulder, looking like a tiny blue parrot.

"Now what?" the blue pegasus called down from her perch. She couldn't see Pinkie Pie waving to her through the darkly-tinted viewport.

"He won't hurt her as long as he thinks he has a bargaining chip," Ling responded, "So now we try to convince him to surrender."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Twilight alighted from the jeep and strode straight for the building. The exercise that had worn out Rarity had only warmed her up, and the violence had gotten her good and mad.

"What are you doing? Get back here!" Ling yelled after her. She looked back at him over her shoulder.

"That's *my* friend in there, and I want her back. *Now.*" To Ling, it almost looked like her violet eyes were glowing an incandescent white. A bright aura erupted from her horn and the front façade of the building exploded outwards forming a ragged, circular hole and revealing a very surprised Ackermann holding a broad-bladed combat knife in one hand and the scruff of Fluttershy's neck in the other.

"You!" bellowed Twilight. The air crackled and small debris around her hooves began to levitate, swept up in the magical tide. "How *dare* you hurt Fluttershy? How *dare* you try to kill us, you...you..." she inhaled sharply, "BASTARD!" she yelled, borrowing the human expletive. Before he could react, Ackermann felt himself lifted bodily into the air and the knife torn from his grasp. The cable binding Fluttershy sloughed off and coiled itself tightly around him like a python. His eye that wasn't swollen shut from Ramirez's fist was fixed on the knife which floated in midair and pointed menacingly at his throat.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't use this knife on you right now," she growled at him, "Huh?" he gasped as the cable constricted tighter. "I've heard about your Word of Blake; how you sow chaos everywhere and attack and kill everyone. They told me what you did to Tharkad and Outreach. You want to exploit us. Turn us into weapons for your wars. Well, how's it feel to be on the receiving end of that weapon, huh?" The cable drew tighter and the knife inched closer.

Twilight felt a hand on the back of her neck. "Not like this, Twilight," Captain Tartaglia kept his voice low but firm, "Don't hurt him. Not like this."

"Why shouldn't I? After what he's done?"

“You don’t want this on your hands. If you do this, there’s no going back. You can never go back. Besides,” he leaned closer, “shouldn’t we ask him *why*?”

Indignant anger still flooded through her, “But he hurt Fluttershy.”

“I’m alright,” the soft voice barely registered, “Twilgiht, I’m alright.” Fluttershy carefully approached her friend.

Twilight looked at Fluttershy and met her gaze. She gave a tired sigh and her eyes lost their glow. The air no longer crackled and the knife dropped to the ground.

Chapter 17

Separate Ways

They hauled the defeated Blakist back to the headquarters building where they interrogated him in the middle of the old hangar. Under Twilight's withering glare, he broke readily. With no fight left in him, he told them everything; how he infiltrated the Militia with orders to ensure Capellan success so they would quickly move on to the next planet and leave the conquered worlds ripe for conquest by the expanding Blake Protectorate; how he planted the bomb on the *Silvertongue* to prevent them from leaving and prolonging the fight and how he tried to frame Corporal Virat; how he tried to sow discord among the crew, and finally how he had planned to make his escape.

Though he told them everything they wanted to know, he remained unrepentant. He was convinced that his actions had been noble and just. He knew his cause was right with the fervor of a true believer. The Word was the true light in the universe, he said. No matter what happened to him, nothing would stand in the way of the Master and his plans for the Inner Sphere.

"What's going to happen to him?" Twilight had calmed down and was now showing more characteristic concern for the prisoner. She and Captain Tartaglia were strolling around the courtyard.

"We'll take him with us. He'll be put before a military tribunal on charges of assault, attempted murder, espionage, and treason. A formality after his confession. MI5 will put him through...harsh interrogations. In the end, he'll be executed." Tartaglia showed little emotion.

"After all that, you're still just going to kill him?"

Tartaglia raised an eyebrow, "A little while ago you were prepared to slit his throat."

Twilight winced, the memory of her actions burned her conscious. She didn't want to think herself capable of that. "It just... it just seems so... barbaric. Isn't there some other way?"

"The other way is I use my authority as commanding officer and have him shot as a spy right now."

"So, you're going to kill him either way?" sadness crept into her voice, "Couldn't we try something else?"

Tartaglia stopped and looked down at the lavender unicorn. He raised a quizzical eyebrow, "What do you have in mind?"

The ponies were disgusted at the litany of names Corporal Virat called Ackermann, even if they didn't understand most of them. She had joined them at the headquarters shortly after Ackermann had been captured. The ponies were thrilled to see her again, especially Fluttershy who was very grateful she had nothing to do with the sabotage.

"You'd best be glad the Captain and Twilight took pity on you, you damn toaster-worshiper," she growled while loosening the bonds on Ackermann's wrists, "If I'd been there, I'd have let her stab you, then shot you for good measure after cutting off your..."

"That's enough, Corporal," Ling cut her off. They were standing as a group on the edge of the plateau on which the ancient spaceport was built. The *Felicity Klimkosky* loomed behind them, fully loaded, fueled, and ready to go. It only awaited the last few passengers.

Removing the cable, Liz shoved the hapless Blakist roughly down the edge of the plateau. He tumbled and rolled down the slope, cloaked in a cloud of yellow dust. Sliding to a stop, he looked back up at them, confused.

"Gonna get pretty loud real soon. I'd *recommend* you start hoofin' it" Ling yelled down after him. Ackermann yelled various obscenities back up at them, but they fell on deaf ears as they turned and walked away towards the DropShip.

"I can't say I'm exactly a fan of this plan, Miss Sparkle," Captain Tartaglia fell in next to the unicorn, "dropping a man in the middle of the wilderness with no food, no supplies, not even a knife? Shooting him would be merciful in comparison."

Twilight looked up at him, "At least we're giving him a chance. Out here he can try to make a go of it, and he's removed from your world permanently." She'd been trying all day to rationalize her plan to herself, "Just think of it as banishment."

"And if he does survive, then you've got a hostile running around on *your* world with an ax to grind."

Twilight smiled weakly, "He's thousands of miles, or uh, kilometers, away and on an entire separate continent. I think we'll be fine."

They did not enter orbit for their return to Equestria. Since they knew the route, had good maps of the landing zone, and had plenty of fuel, the DropShip made a straight run of it. Flying high and fast, they were back on the ground in the span of a few hours.

The *Felicity Klimkosky* landed on the same broad river floodplain on which it had originally touched down on its arrival deep in the Everfree Forest, almost on top of their old landing site. It seemed they had barely arrived before a fleet of chariots descended from the sky pulled by burly pegasi in burnished armor. Spike had of course sent a message to Princess Celestia announcing their impending arrival back in Equestria and the charioteers had been dispatched on her orders to deliver the promised helium and fabricated parts. Once the goods were loaded in the DropShip's cargo bay, the Equestrian guards would escort Twilight and her friends safely back to their homes in Ponyville.

Outside of one of the *Felicity Klimkosky's* four 'Mech bays, the humans and the ponies said their final goodbyes. Applejack admonished Dr. Langley to keep her wound clean while the doctor thanked the farm pony once again for her help and fidgeted with her makeshift sling. Fluttershy was still too shy to directly approach any of her new friends to say

goodbye, so Liz joked with her about their initial attempts to communicate. The shy pegasus thought fondly back to their time next to the holly bush; it seemed so long ago.

Rainbow Dash was a little bummed she hadn't managed to acquire a souvenir from the old Human settlement. With a sharp tug, Ramirez ripped the Valexa March Militia patch from the shoulder of his fatigues.

"I can always get another one," he said, tossing her the embroidered piece of fabric for which she thanked him profusely.

This touched off a miniature swap-meet of sorts in which Equestrians and Humans exchanged a variety of small, innocuous artifacts. In reality they were trinkets—patches, handkerchiefs, scarfs, some unused first aid supplies—but to the recipients they were sentimental treasures; a link across time and space.

"It is a shame you have to leave so soon," Twilight was taking one last stroll with Tartaglia around the DropShip. "I enjoyed learning of your world—or worlds rather. I'd like to be able to see your universe sometime."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Tartaglia replied, "There's no way I could guarantee your safety, even from my own government."

Twilight nodded, "I know. It does worry me that the link between our universes seems so...easy to cross. If there are others like Ackermann out there, or even only half as bad, I'm afraid of what would happen if any of them ever stumbled across us here."

"Captain Mawsley and I will destroy our logs of our trip here. Unless the crew leaks some rumors, with any luck the secret of the way between our two worlds will die with us." He paused, "Fortunately, it seems everyone aside from Ling, myself, and a handful on the JumpShip are still unaware of the relationship between Equestria and Terra. I intend for it to stay that way."

The chariots were halfway back to Ponyville when Pinkie Pie called out for them to look back the way they came. With mouths agape and eyes wide, they stood in the backs of their transports and watched as the flaming dart of the *Felicity Klimkosky* rose higher and higher into the evening sky.

Ramirez set the paintbrush down on the lip of the can and stepped back on the narrow maintenance gantry. The color still wasn't quite right, but it would have to do for now. He had raided the desert camo supplies first, but not finding what he wanted there he had resorted to mixing his own with some primer and some red for the VMM's characteristic tiger-stripping. He wanted to start on the outlining, but a look at the chronometer told him there wasn't enough time. The *Felicity Klimkosky's* massive engines accelerated them at 1 g, imparting a sensation of normal gravity on the crew within. Shortly, though, the engines would cut off and they would be thrown back into microgravity during their docking with the *Silvertongue*.

He sealed the paint can and wrapped a sheet of thin plastic around the brush. Picking them both up, he took one last look at his handiwork. Across the right chest of his *Valkyrie* he had scrawled in a flowery script of bright pink,

'PINKIE PIE'

"Not bad, Mech-jock," he glanced down below him to see Liz gazing back up, "Some white outlining would really make it pop."

"She's got a name now," he said, patting the warmachine affectionately before activating the lift controls to lower him to the deck floor.

"I see that," Liz smirked, "Though I still think you should have gone with 'Big Stompy'."

Ramirez chuckled, "Nah, I think I like this better." He headed off to wash out the brush before the paint dried, "What's up, Corporal?"

"Captain wants you to accompany him to the bridge of the *Silvertongue* again," she jabbed a thumb over her shoulder and bit her lower lip.

"Figured as much," he noticed her expression, "I take it that's not all, is it."

She look around quickly to make sure they were alone, then leaned in conspiratorially, "Look," she whispered, "The Militia's gone. Done for. I know it, you know it. We all know it. We'll complete our mission, but it will all be a moot point. There's no way the AFFS doesn't know about the invasion by now. If they haven't sent help yet, it's not coming."

"What's your point?" he asked her, not quite sure where she was going with this.

"With the Militia gone, they're going to give us the option of reassignment. Stick us with another unit. But, see the others and I have been talking. We're going to buy out." Her voice dropped lower, "Ling has a friend, used to be a Hauptmann in the Lyran Guards. He's setting up a mercenary outfit on Galatea. The Lieutenant is willing to sponsor us; put in a good word. Harris, Nao, Quigley, and I are all going soon as we can. You in?"

Ramirez stood for a long moment. This was not a decision to take lightly. She was right, of course, by now the Militia would be declared a loss and the survivors either disbanded or assigned to other units. Life as a mercenary could be risky, romantic, and with some luck quite lucrative.

"I'll... have to think about it," he said finally.

"Scootaloo, slow down!" Sweetie Belle cried out as she and Apple Bloom ran after the tiny orange pegasus filly. She shivered and pulled her scarf tighter around her neck. She didn't understand it, but somehow it felt colder here under the trees of the Everfree Forest than back in Ponyville. This was no place for them and she knew it. If Rarity knew she was out here, she'd certainly be grounded for...well, forever.

Scootaloo huffed and beat her little wings impatiently, "Come on, Crusaders! Don't you *want* to go to Zecora's?" Nothing seemed to daunt the little spitfire, not even the perils of the Everfree.

"Well, yeah, but...why couldn't we have waited for Miss Twilight to take us, or Miss Fluttershy?" Apple Bloom asked in her rustic drawl, "B'sides, don't 'cha remember what happened the *last* time we came in here?" She

shuddered. If Fluttershy hadn't shown up when she did, that cockatrice would have made short work of the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

"Well, if we get to Zecora's *quickly* we won't be out here long enough to run into anything, now will we?" Losing her patience, the little pegasus increased her lead on her friends, her wild purple mane disappearing around a bend.

As they followed the little path through the trees, Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom huddled closer together. Every little rustle of wind or snap of a twig set them on edge. How could Scootaloo be so calm, even relishing the danger?

Thinking it might take their mind off things, Apple Bloom tried to strike up a conversation with the diminutive unicorn, "So, has your big sis told 'ya anythin' about where they all went to the other week? 'Cause I ain't got nuthin' out of Applejack. Every time I ask her 'bout it, she shuts up tighter than one of Granny's girdles."

Sweetie Belle shook her head, "Nuh uh. Sis won't tell me anything, either. I caught her doodling dress designs the other day, but they look to be for some weird monkey-thing, not ponies."

"Monkey-things?" Apple Bloom mulled it over, "Did 'ya happen to snitch one of them drawin's? I'd like to see one of them monkey-things."

"No, I didn't think about it," the hoot of an owl made her cower in fear.

From down the path, Scootaloo called out for them, "Hey, girls! Come look at this!"

They ran to catch up with their friend, but when they reached the spot, she had disappeared. Another call drew their attention over the side of the road and down a shallow ravine. Scootaloo was there standing on top of a strange metal contraption.

"What in tarnation is that thing?" wondered Apple Bloom out loud. It looked like some sort of weird chariot or carriage, but made of metal painted mottled green and brown and with big, rubber wheels. There were a pair of padded seats sitting side-by-side under a tubular metal framework

and a strange wheel mounted in front of one confirming that it was obviously a conveyance of some sort, but looking all around it, they couldn't see anywhere for a pony to hitch up to pull it. From the fallen leaves, it looked like it had been sitting out here for several days or even weeks.

"Looks like it slid down here off the trail," observed Sweetie Belle, motioning to a line of deep gouges in the soft soil extending from the wheels up to the top of the ravine.

"And it got wedged into this rock somethin' fierce," added Apple Bloom.

Scotaloo sat herself down on one of the padded seats, "Hey, look, there's some pedals down there," She hooked a forehoof through the wheel to steady herself as she reached down to press one of the pedals. When she put her weight on it, the wheel moved unexpectedly.

Apple Bloom squealed in surprise "When you moved that thing there, the wheels moved!"

Scotaloo released the steering wheel like it would bite her and stared at it intently, "Hey, there's a button here." She reached out with a forehoof and gingerly touched the rubberized button next to the steering column. The starter motor whirled to life sending all three fillies tumbling back over themselves, screaming.

"M-maybe we should tell somepony?" Sweetie Belle suggested, gathering herself up. Her friends nodded in agreement, their expedition to Zecora's forest cottage now totally forgotten.

"Owww!" Twilight winced as she stretched out her leg. She had decided to take part in the Running of the Leaves yesterday, and her leg muscles ached something fierce. What was keeping Spike with that ointment? "Spike? Where are you?"

"I'm right here, geeze," the little dragon trundled up the stairs and into her bedroom with the tube of greasy ointment. Twilight's horn glowed as she snatched the tube from his hands and began smearing the concoction

across her flank and legs. "Serves you right for pushing yourself like that," Spike huffed.

"Well, I couldn't finish lower than I did last year. Applejack and Rainbow Dash would have teased me to no end." The cream went to work almost immediately, soothing her overtaxed muscles.

"That's what you said yesterday, too," he rolled his eyes, "Just don't expect me to get you a sympathy card."

"And you said *that* yesterday, too" she snarked.

She hobbled from her bed down the stairs to the balcony where she had moved her best telescope from the platform on the top of the library. Or really, Spike had moved it with much grumbling. Her legs were too sore to make the ascent, but she wasn't going to let that put a damper on her stargazing. She plopped down heavily on a cushion and adjusted the telescope, pointing it towards where she knew the constellation Orion would be once the sun finished setting and the night truly began.

The moon was low in the sky, and her gaze lingered there. She wondered about their visitors, mentally comparing the timetable the Captain had described to her with the time that had passed since the *Felicity Klimkosky's* departure.

It wasn't very bright, and it didn't last more than a minute at most. She watched as the light built in intensity then suddenly winked out. It was something she had never seen before; probably something no living pony had ever seen. For once, though, she did not run for her books. She had a pretty good idea exactly what this phenomenon was.

She closed her eyes as she levitated a blank parchment and quill over from the desk. She had been thinking long and hard about this letter, and still wasn't quite sure she was happy with it. Setting the parchment down in front of her, she began to write.

Dear Princess Celestia,

I can now confirm that the human starship, the Silvertongue, has successfully departed from our world and, hopefully, our very universe. I

have just observed a flash of light consistent with Captain Tartaglia's description of a hyperspace jump emanating from the space between us and the moon. Judging from their proposed timetable, it appears the jump occurred more or less on schedule. Though I will miss my conversations with the Captain, I do genuinely hope I will never see him again, as that would be the best confirmation of his safe return home as I could hope for.

I know it was not part of my duties as your temporary ambassador, but I did learn some valuable lessons about friendship from this adventure. I have learned that people from very different cultures can find common ground and even become very good friends. I have also found that, in times of trouble, you can draw on all your friends both old and new to see you through and that you can trust in all your friends to help in their own special ways. Lastly, I have learned that compassion defines greatness, and that even when dealing with somepony who is well and truly beyond all redemption, if we can still show compassion to rise above their level, it will rub off on our friends and lift us all up.

Finally, I wish to inform you that it appears we have succeeded in minimizing cultural and technological bleed-over from the Human visit. I have inspected the 'souvenirs' my friends and I kept from our visitors, and they all appear to be quite innocuous. Only some scant human lettering would raise any eyebrows to a casual observer, and nopony would be able to read it anyway. All in all, it appears our attempts to confine our knowledge for the time being has been successful.

*Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle*

She rolled the parchment and bound it with a ribbon, "Spike, could you please send this?"

Spike trundled over from where he had been finishing up some last-minute organizing before heading off to bed. He took the scroll and with a puff of his breath sent it on its way. Twilight noticed as he went back to his duties that he was humming to himself, but she couldn't quite place the tune. She realized he had started mumbling the lines to himself just in time to hear the lyric "*We'll send the bastards straight to hell...*"

"Spike!" she whipped her head around, "Language!"

"What? Sorry." He stopped singing but continued humming the ditty.

Shaking her head, Twilight turned back to her telescope, only to be interrupted by a frantic clatter coming from downstairs.

“Miss Twilight! Miss Twilight!” she recognized the voice of Apple Bloom, Applejack’s little sister. Sure enough, before she could even fully rise from her cushion the little yellow filly came tumbling up the stairs followed closely by her friends Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo.

“My little ponies? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be home and in bed?”

Without hesitating, Apple Bloom launched into a rapid-fire litany, barely even pausing between her words, “We were on our way to Zecora’s ‘cause we thought she could help us get our cutie marks but please, please, *please* don’t tell anyone that ‘cause we’d get in trouble for goin’ into the Everfree but we found this weird thing and it looks like a carriage but there’s no way to hitch up to it and it has parts that move other parts and it made this loud roaring sound like it was alive and we came straight to you ‘cause your real smart and you’d probably know what it was and...” her breath finally gave out.

Twilight blinked trying to process the excited filly’s barrage, “Ok, wait a second here. Was this thing green with rubber tires and what looks like seats?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?” asked Scootaloo.

Twilight’s mind reeled. Across the room Spike was still humming the Militia ditty. She gave a frustrated sigh. She could tell tomorrow was going to be a long day.

Spike looked up from his chores, “Should I get you another scroll?”

Epilogue

Twilight Sparkle couldn't hide her surprise at the turnout. She had expected a small crowd and perhaps some reporters from the more major newspapers. Instead, the rail yard had taken on a carnival-like atmosphere with banners and flags and crowds of ponies everywhere. It seemed as if half the countryside had turned out to watch the exhibition race. She stared in awe at the grandstands flanking the starting line, filled to capacity and with hundreds more ponies swarming the surrounding grounds. She was even surprised to see how many ponies had already taken sides in the competition, displaying colorful banners and slogans cheering on their chosen teams.

"Looks like an even split," Spike said from his perch on her back. He had been attempting to count the banners supporting either side in the competition. Twilight said nothing, but nodded in agreement.

She passed through the cordon set up by the overtaxed guards with a nod to the guard closest to her. Stepping gingerly over the rails, she moved around to get a clear view of the two large, steel locomotives standing silent at the starting line. She had always found the word "locomotive" funny, as the machine really did nothing of the sort. No doubt the flywheels did help ease the burden for the pull-team once up to speed, but it really did not provide much pulling power of its own. Ultimately, the "locomotive" served as little more than a portable water tank and rest car for the pullers.

One of the locomotives had its pull-team hitched to the front. Big, strong stallions blessed with near supernatural strength and endurance. Their checkered hats and blue bandannas identified them as from the Palomino Royale Line, famous across Equestria for their ability. Twilight politely introduced herself and wished them luck as they limbered up for their run.

But it was the second locomotive which truly held Twilight's attention. At first glance, it looked identical to the other, only lacking the team of burly ponies. What was special about this locomotive, however, was on the *inside*. The rest cots and heavy flywheel had been stripped away and the

massive water tank refitted into a fuel tank for the real star of today's exhibition—a prototype internal-combustion engine, the first such machine ever made by ponies. Today was to be its public debut.

It was to be a two-part race, taking part over two separate days. Today was the sprint—an all-out race to the finish over a quarter-mile length of track set up here, at the Trottingham Rail Yards. Tomorrow would be the endurance race, when both teams would run the Trottingham to Hoofington line, well-known for being long and grueling.

Twilight stepped around behind the steel beast with its newfangled heart and peered into the cabin. The smell of sweat and engine grease stung her nostrils and brought forth a wave of what she could only describe as nostalgia. She shut her eyes and swallowed against a lump in her throat. Looking again, she could make out the forms of two ponies within the small cabin.

“How’s it looking, Torque?” she called out, trying to sound as chipper as she could.

A grey pony with a short-cropped dark blue mane and tail pushed his safety goggles up on his forehead as he looked up at their visitor, “Honestly, could be better, Miss Sparkle,” he replied, shaking his head. “We’re having trouble with the gearing, which is costing us power at low speed, and there’s an oil leak I’m still trying to pin down.”

Twilight, nodded, “Well, I’m sure you’ll get it sorted out, Mr. Wrench.” The engine had been reverse-engineered from the *Felicity Klimkosky’s* abandoned all-terrain vehicle—though that bit of information was still a closely-guarded secret. Building it had been a difficult process which had taxed the limits of pony engineering. Admittedly, the prototype was not as refined or powerful as the original human machine, but it was a start.

The second occupant, a large stallion recently retired from pulling trains himself, sneered, “It’s loud. It’s dirty and smelly. The heat roasts you alive, and it feels like the whole locomotive is going to shake itself apart. And I don’t take too kindly to sitting behind a giant tank full of gallons and gallons of highly-flammable alcohol.”

The grey mechanic grinned and slapped the big stallion on the back, "Don't worry, Caboose, I won't let it us blow up."

Twilight stifled a small giggle, "Well, I'll let you two get back to work. Good luck today." With that, she ducked out of the cabin. She crossed the rail yard to where a raised dais draped in finery had been set up under an opulent banner. Without pausing, she scaled the steps and took her place respectfully beside and behind Princess Celestia. She exchanged pleasantries with the two princesses then busied herself trying to spot her friends in the crowd. She knew where they should have been as they had all arrived together earlier that day. She finally spotted Rainbow Dash and Applejack among the stands, vigorously waving homemade banners supporting opposite teams.

"Well, Miss Sparkle, today's the big day," Twilight looked around to discover Princess Luna had left her designated place to talk with her, "How's our team looking? Do you think we can win today?"

"Honestly? I doubt it," Twilight looked a little sheepish, "I think the Palomino Royale boys have got us beat in the sprint, and they'll definitely be faster off the line," She held her head defiantly high, "We'll whip 'em in the run tomorrow, though!"

Luna grinned, "You hear that, sis? We're going to whip your team tomorrow!"

Celestia cast a jesting glance back at her younger sister, "Oh really? Care to increase our wager then?"

"Can I get in on that action?" chimed in Spike.

"Spike!" Twilight looked aghast at her assistant, but the princesses just chuckled.

"My sister thinks we're moving too quickly with this new human technology," Princess Luna whispered in Twilight's ear, "Speaking of which, did I tell you we're starting field trials on the first pony-portable radios next month?"

Princess Luna had embraced the opportunity the abandoned human vehicle had provided. She had personally organized its recovery and detailed dissection. She had also instituted the dissemination of its technological secrets and commissioned the duplication of its key components. Today's race was as much a testament to her will as it was the technology itself.

Princess Celestia turned to fully face them, "You'll also be interested to know, Twilight Sparkle, that I've instituted a procedure to avoid any more *surprise visits* reaching Equestria unannounced. The implication that the jump between our worlds can be done at-will poses a serious threat to our security."

"You don't think they actually will return, do you sister?" Luna's voice was tinged with both wonder and trepidation.

Twilight's heart skipped a beat. She had enjoyed her time with the humans, and she especially missed her long talks with Captain Tartaglia. She wished she could see them again, if only to make sure they were all OK. The Inner Sphere sounded like a dangerous place compared to Equestria, and the passengers of the *Felicity Klimkosky* were military at war. It was hard for her to imagine a more dangerous occupation.

"I hope not," Celestia dropped her voice, "We were lucky. Considering Twilight's reports on the status of the Inner Sphere from her discussions with the humans, if any others do come through to our world, we cannot be guaranteed they will be as... amiable... as *most* of these last ones were. And frankly, the fact they were able to operate an entire city for several years right under our very noses has me vexed, especially since they have now rediscovered the secret of moving between our worlds."

Twilight trusted that Tartaglia had been true to his word and destroyed all record of their ever having been in Equestria. It was possible another JumpShip might stumble across them accidentally, of course. After all, both the *Due Diligence* and the *Silvertongue* had arrived by accident. Even if Tartaglia and Mawsley erased their logs, the New Alamo Research Facility was still there. There very well could still be some reference to that secret Hegemony base somewhere in the Inner Sphere. It couldn't have dropped entirely out of history. But still...

“Somewhere in the vicinity of Carver V...” Twilight didn’t quite realize she was thinking out loud.

“Hmm?” Celestia glanced down at her pupil.

“I doubt we’ll have to worry about a purposeful return, your highness,” Twilight stated matter-of-factly, “From what I was able to gather, I think the secret of our existence is safe.”

An electric buzz shot through the crowd. The announcer had called the contestants to the starting line. The stallions of the pull-team took their places and dug their hooves in, ready to run. The other locomotive sat silent for a moment, then shook as the reverse-engineered engine roared to life. The crowd gasped as the alien sound reverberated through the air. It was almost as if the locomotive had come to life

“Care to do the honors, dear sister?” Celestia motioned for Luna to step forward.

The midnight blue princess replaced her sister at the head of the dais and raised one elegant hoof in the air. The crowd drew silent as she held it there for a moment, only the menacing growl of the engine could be heard. In one swift stroke she dropped her hoof.

Hooves thundered and metal shrieked to the accompaniment of the roaring crowd. The stallions strained at their harnesses as the engine belched out shimmering hot exhaust. The dueling locomotives inched away from the starting line and inexorably began building up speed. True to Twilight’s prediction, the pony-pulled locomotive immediately leapt out to an early lead as both thundered down the line.

The Thessalonica Legacy Glossary & Author's Notes

Glossary of Terminology

Many, if not most, BattleTech novels include a short supplement at the end that includes a glossary of terms specific to the BattleTech universe. Hopefully, if I did my job correctly, such a glossary is not strictly needed. However, I have included one here for completeness.

Autocannon: a rapid-firing, autoloading weapon which fires streams of high-speed, high-explosive, armor-piercing shells.

BattleMech: Generally humanoid robotic walking tanks; the premier weapons of war in the BattleTech universe. Standing between 10 and 15 meters tall and massing between 20 and 100 tons, they are powered by a small fusion engine and artificial “muscles” called myomers. They are piloted by a single person, the MechWarrior. Often abbreviated as ‘Mech.

ComStar: Private semi-mystical organization which controls interstellar communications by owning and controlling the hyperpulse generator communications network. The Word of Blake is a splinter group of ComStar which follows a more fanatical quasi-religious path.

Inner Sphere: Region of interstellar space centered around Earth and extending out to the borders of the Successor States. Comprises over 2000 inhabited star systems in a radius of approximately 450-550 light years from Earth. Everything beyond the borders of the Inner Sphere is termed the Periphery.

LosTech: portmanteau of “lost technology,” generally refers to technology and artifacts for which the knowledge of manufacture has been lost.

LRM: abbreviation for “Long Range Missile,” an indirect-fire missile weapon with a high-explosive warhead. LRMs fire salvos of 5, 10, 15, or 20 missiles at a time depending on the launcher.

Star League: Founded in 2571 as an attempt to unify the major states of the Inner Sphere, the Star League flourished for almost 200 years before its collapse at the onset of the Succession Wars. The League is generally considered a “golden age” of technological advancement.

Successor States: The five main star empires which rule the Inner Sphere. They are: the Capellan Confederation (House Liao), and the Draconis Combine (House Kurita), the Federated Suns (House Davion), the Free Worlds League (House Marik), and the Lyran Alliance (House Steiner).

Technical Readout

Another common feature of many BattleTech novels is a small collection of artwork depicting vehicles which play prominent roles in the story.

VLK-QD1 Valkyrie: http://www.sarna.net/wiki/images/d/da/Vlk-qd1_valkyrie.jpg

Leopard DropShip: <http://www.sarna.net/wiki/images/2/2b/Leopard.gif>

Scout JumpShip: <http://www.sarna.net/wiki/images/4/49/Scout.gif>

OSR-3D Osiris: <http://www.sarna.net/wiki/images/1/17/Osiris.jpg>

SYU-2B Sha Yu: http://www.sarna.net/wiki/images/7/7f/Shu_Yu.gif

Po Heavy Tank: <http://www.sarna.net/wiki/images/6/66/Po.jpg>

Edit 7/9/11

I've been asked about information on the planet Valexa. Unfortunately, such information does not seem to exist in any BattleTech publications. The only concrete information is its location (X:122.67 Y:-88.15). The only other information available regards the Valexa March Militia (1 'Mech regiment, 2 Aerospace Wings, 1 vehicle regiment, and 6 infantry regiments as of 3062, according to "Field Manual: Federated Suns").

Author's Notes Ahead

Notice: Contains Spoilers

Author's Notes

Thank you for reading *The Thessalonica Legacy*. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. This document is not part of the story, but is instead intended to serve as supplemental material.

I wish to thank my wife, "ikrits," who read every word, served as my proofreader and editor, and encouraged me to pursue this little project.

For more information of BattleTech and the BattleTech universe, please visit <http://www.classicbattletech.com>. I am not affiliated, I just really like the game and universe and will take any opportunity to plug it.

So, here's the part where I get to wax lyrical about inspirations, the process of writing this fic, and all that jazz. Naturally, the nature of this discussion lends itself to spoilers, so if you don't like those, fair warning. I'm not going to run this part through my editor/wife, so some typos and odd sentences will likely slip through.

I intend for this to be a "living document" of sorts; if I get feedback that amounts to "frequently asked questions," I'll store my answers here for posterity.

What really got me started on this was actually the 300-word story challenge at Equestria Daily. I had never written a fanfic before (I'd toyed with the idea, but always blew it off as something I'd never get around to). A story in 300-words, though, seemed feasible. So I gave it a shot, and it turned out alright, if I do say so myself.

That broke the floodgates. Within a week, I had a basic outline and the first chapter written. From there, it just sort of... grew.

I never really expected for this to turn into a novel (Really. The final word count is ~66 thousand).

So, why BattleTech? I mean, it's not exactly a pop-culture sci-fi phenomenon like Warhammer40K or Star Wars or Star Trek (speaking of

which, where's all the Star Trek/MLP crossovers? Get on it people!). Two reasons: 1) BattleTech is the game which introduced me to wargaming way back in the halcyon days of 1999, and remains my all-time favorite, so for me the choice was a no-brainer. And, 2.) the BattleTech fictional universe is massive, giving that half of the crossover an incredible amount of freedom.

So, I knew I wanted to do a BattleTech/MLP:FIM crossover, so the next decision was what sort of crossover. I seriously considered doing a straight-up retelling of the old '90s BattleTech cartoon with the *Friendship is Magic* cast standing in for the characters (Rainbow Dash as Kylee, Spike as the tactical officer. Twilight would have been the logical choice for Adam "Information is Ammunition" Steiner). But, I had been playing with the idea of exploring the obvious human influence on Pony culture in the show. So, that's where the idea of doing a humans-in-Equestria story came from.

When setting out the story and background, I knew I wanted to impose a few constraints

- I wanted to minimize the number of humans involved. An early idea involved a pitched 'Mech battle on the outskirts of Ponyville between the hero mercenary unit and a Word of Blake taskforce following intricate political machinations where both sides were trying to court Celestia's favor. That idea was quickly scrapped. It just didn't feel right. So, I picked the *Scout*—the smallest JumpShip, and the *Leopard*—one of the smaller DropShips and then didn't fill it all the way.
- No grimdarking. Like the epic 'Mech battle, it just didn't feel right. I decided to allow some grimdark elements to highlight cultural differences, but tried to keep it as much on the human side as possible.
- There had to be a way back. I didn't want the humans stuck in Equestria forever. Like the whole minimizing their number thing, I didn't want the humans to be too disruptive. I admit the solution for returning to the Inner Sphere was contrived; but then, the whole darn thing is contrived.

So, that's my thoughts for now. As I muse more and receive feedback, I'll likely flesh this whole section out more. Feel free to check back later.