



Rescue Mission

By Polecat

"Lieutenant, report."

The rock shaped alien slowly turned to face her. Its "head" swiveled in a manner she'd long grown used to, the near featureless gray slab facing her.

"Cap'n, we received a distress call in sector thirteen," the alien stated, its deep gravelly voice telepathically sounding in her mind. That distinctive "voice" always made her think of the Lieutenant as a stallion, even if he was technically sex-less. The alien was unable to fit into a uniform, his body consisting entirely of a jumble of gray rocks in an approximation of a pony form held together by magic and life energy, and instead wore a sash around his midsection to hold his rank insignia in place, "As per your standin' orders, I set a course for the sector at maximum warp."

"Very good," she answered curtly, and her eyes swept over the bridge, taking in what ponies (and aliens) were on duty at the time. At the center console, right before the wide view-screen, was Lieutenant Rock on the navigation, his name mostly a convenience due to how utterly unpronounceable his name was by any other species than his own. Next to him, manning the helm, sat Ensign Dusty, a filly with a washed out grey coat and pure white mane that did nothing but remind her of a dust-bunny one might find under the couch. Over her dull coat she wore the standard issue uniform of the Equestrian Federation, a black jumpsuit with a wide belt and a large colorful swatch at the neck and down the back. Still, Dusty was a good helms-pony, with a great deal of promise. She'd go far in the Equestrian Federation, the Captain thought.

"Communications..." she said as she turned to face the glittering black eyes of the bear-like communications expert.

"Yes, Captain?" the soft brown female alien asked, her coal black eyes not blinking as she regarded the pony in turn. The Captain could almost see her reflection in the bear-like alien's eyes.

"Have you notified the Federation of the distress call?"

"Of course, Captain," the alien enthused, waving a foreleg... fore-ARM the Captain corrected herself.

"Did they respond?"

"Only that we are the closest available vessel," the bear-like alien seemed to purr, her voice soft and flowing, "The Equestrian Federation said they would send additional vessels if we needed them."

"Hopefully that won't be necessary, Lieutenant Ursa," she noted, giving the bear a reassuring smile before turning away.

"Captain, a word of warning --"

The purple unicorn jumped almost straight up, startled by the stallion's sudden appearance at her shoulder, her pale gold mane flaring wildly as she clutched her fore-hooves to her chest to calm her wildly beating heart. She heard a few snickers, but a harsh glare about the gun-metal gray bridge silenced them.

"My apologies, Captain..."

"Commander..." she wheezed as she rounded to face the white stallion standing just behind her. His coat looked ragged, almost patchwork, and his fire red mane and tail were styled in an approximation of dreadlocks that bounced animatedly with his motions. "You really shouldn't sneak up on me like that. I mean, how in Equestria can a Stallion as big as you so SNEAKY?!?"

The patchwork pony ignored the question, instead continuing in his deep monotone voice, "A word of warning, Captain. Sector Thirteen is not a good place for ponies to visit. It has been quarantined by the Federation..."

"How bad are we talking, Commander Patch?" she asked, using a hoof to smooth down her unruly blonde mane.

"The sector was abandoned two years ago," the stallion continued, stepping around the Captain and to a nearby console. He tapped at the candy-colored buttons, scrolling through options until he brought up a screen. Data scrolled by too fast for the lavender unicorn to read as the

Commander continued, "The first settlements and colonies were established approximately five years ago. Two years later, all contact ceased. A nearby vessel was contacted, and it found only the remnants of a settlement that appeared abandoned for far more years than would have been possible."

"Some sort of attack?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It does not seem likely, Captain, at least not in the conventional sense," the stallion said, "The team sent to discover what happened to the colonists soon reported medical problems shortly there-after. They seemed to have been exposed to some sort of unknown virus. They were quarantined, and the sickness cured in time, but scientists discovered an unknown virus in the process."

"A virus?" she asked, frowning, "How can a virus cause decay in un-living objects?"

"Unknown, Captain," the stallion answered, "However, the virus was dubbed 'Cootie', a humorous reference to the childhood malady."

The purple unicorn looked at her commander with a hard eye, "Are you suggesting that the sector we're going into was quarantined because of COOTIES?!?"

"That is correct, Captain."

"You can defeat Cooties with simple soap and water..."

"Not these, Captain."

"This is a joke, right?"

"Captain, when have I ever joked?"

The mare's mouth opened to respond, and then just hung there, her voice catching in her throat. After a moment she closed her mouth with an audible click, she then turned and poked a hoof at her security pony, a strong and solid green mare with a mottled brown mane.

"Set yellow alert, Lieutenant Fern," she ordered, and then stepped around the perimeter of the bridge, listening to her hooves ring on the metal floor. Her gaze rested on the brushed metal flooring while her mind whirled and digested this information, before her head snapped up and she stabbed a hoof at a nearby comms panel.

"Medical, this is the Bridge."

"Medical," came the curt reply, "Lieutenant Commander Sawbones here."

"Bones..." the unicorn said slowly, "is medical equipped to treat Cooties?"

"Cooties?"

"Cooties."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I assure you, I'm not," she sighed.

The doctor grumbled, "What, you never heard of soap and water?"

"That won't work in this case, Doctor."

"Is this some sort of joke?" the doctor demanded, "Because I have patients to-"

"We received a distress call in Sector Thirteen," she told the doctor bluntly, "I need you to find the proper decontamination procedures for this peculiar brand of Space Cooties, as well as potential symptoms so we know what signs to look for. There is a good chance that the ponies we're responding to are infected."

"Alright, Captain," the doctor said grudgingly, "I'll get right on it."

The Captain relaxed visibly, "Thank you Bones, I knew I could count on you."

"Yeah yeah..."

"Captain," Ensign Dusty called from her post, "We're about the cross into Sector Thirteen."

"Slow to warp three, ensign," she ordered, "Keep us on a straight heading. No pony has been in this sector for two years; let's not stir up any trouble if we can help it."

"Aye aye, Captain," the ensign answered, and used her hoof to slowly pull back a lever, "Slowing to warp three."

"Lieutenant Fern, set scanners to maximum, and raise the shields. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Aye aye, Captain," she responded crisply. The Captain turned to face the view-screen, her gaze narrowing as she stared into the advancing star field before her. She could feel it... something was wrong. She wasn't sure what, yet, but she had that itch at the back of her mane, and she'd learned to trust her intuition.

"Navigation," she said, and looked to the rocky approximation of a pony. Only the swivel of the rock-like approximation of his head told her that he was listening, "How long before we reach our destination."

"At present speed, 'bout three minutes," the rock answered telepathically.

"Captain, long range sensors are picking up something," Lieutenant Fern interrupted.

"On screen," the lavender unicorn ordered, and moved to stand behind the helm/navigation console, her eyes fixed on the screen and the streaked stars it had been showing. With a few adjustments, the view shifted to magnify a section, enlarging it to fill the screen. The bridge fell silent as every pony (and alien) stared at the image.

"What am I looking at, Commander?" she asked over her shoulder, keeping her eyes fixed on the screen before her. The enhanced image only filled a small section in the center of the screen, but she could see an odd

green form wrapped (or perhaps tangled) with something gray and white in an incongruous combination of shapes.

"I believe we found the source of the distress call, Captain," the patchwork pony answered simply.

"You are being more vague than usual, Commander Patch."

"The nature of the creature is in question, Captain. I am attempting to analyze it now," the stallion answered, drawing the unicorn's gaze away from the spectacle on the screen. She saw him only cast only the occasional glance at the main viewscreen, instead focusing intensely on his own series of displays, "However, I can confirm that we are viewing the fate of another Equestrian Federation ship."

"Lieutenant Ursa, contact the Federation and see if they have lost contact with any ships in this sector recently..."

"Yes Captain," the bear-like alien answered smoothly, her voice like dripping honey as she began to send the message. The Captain turned back to the viewscreen, her eyes narrowing.

"Commander, can we get any identification on that ship?"

"Negative, Captain," he answered, "We are too far away to receive any sort of signal, but I can confirm that it is the source of the distress signal. I have also established what the creature is, Captain. It appears to be a giant Cootie."

The mare's jaw dropped and she looked at her Commander with wide eyes, "THAT is a Cootie?!? Isn't it a little... big to infect a pony?"

"Aye, Captain, it is," the stallion answered, "I am at a loss to explain this discrepancy."

The mare turned back to the screen, her eyes narrowing as she scrutinized the giant green bug that looked oddly like a cross between a dragonfly without wings, and an armored spider. Eight legs gripped the other ship flawlessly, each leg covered in hard green chitin, and a huge sectioned tail rising up behind it.

"Ensign, slow to one quarter impulse power," she ordered the helm, "I don't want to startle it, at least not yet. Lieutenant Fern, set red alert and start charging the laser emitters and loading the torpedoes. If we have to fight this... thing, I want to hit it hard and fast."

"I am not sure attempting to battle it would be a wise course of action, Captain," the Commander advised.

"Me neither, Commander," the unicorn agreed as she brushed a bit of unruly blonde mane from her face with a hoof, "But I'd rather be ready for a fight and not have to buck than be caught unprepared if we need to."

"A prudent decision, Captain," the stallion noted.

"See if you can find me a weakness, Commander," she instructed, "I'm not sure our lasers can punch through that armor."

"Cap'n," the psychic voice of the Navigator interrupted, "I think it's noticed us."

The unicorn quickly looked up at the screen, watching as the monstrous bug began to uncurl its legs from the other ship, standing upright upon it. For the first time, she was able to see the sleek design of the other ship, the triangular "head" with a flattened tube linked to the underside of it. A pair of struts arched out over the back half of the tube, supporting a pair of long thin tubes that acted as the warp engines for the ship. The entire effect gave the ship a long and sleek appearance, but the design was immediately recognized by the Captain and her crew.

"That's a science vessel!" the Captain cried, "Lieutenant Fern, zoom in on the ship registration!"

With a sickening lurch, the view on the screen zoomed forward, showing the partially obscured name and number of the stricken ship. The numbers were ruined by what appeared to be rust and a massive dent from where the monstrous bug had put one of its legs; but the name was still clear and easily read...

"The ESS Twilight," the Captain considered, "Lieutenant Ursa?"

"I just got word back now, Captain," the bear-like alien answered, "The newly commissioned ESS Twilight was analyzing a nearby colony in sector twelve for a suspected Cootie infestation, and attempting to discover if the Cooties had somehow crossed the quarantine zone. They have been out of radio contact for approximately one week."

"Newly commissioned?" Ensign Dusty cried, "But, it looks like it's ready to be retired! Look at all that rust..."

"We must be seeing the effects of the Cootie's degradation abilities," Commander Patch put in, wandering away from his station to look curiously himself.

"Captain, the Cootie seems to be doing something!" Lieutenant Fern called out. The viewscreen pulled back to show the creature once more, and indeed the gigantic bug was facing them, its enormous tail raised over its back like a scorpion. However, instead of a stinger, a line of some sort seemed to extend from the tip, arrowing through space towards them.

"Shields to maximum!" the Captain cried, "All Hooves, brace for impact!"

The ponies (and aliens) quickly gripped nearby consoles with their hooves as the line impacted the shields. The Captain could see the shields glow a furious magenta as they struggled against the attack. The ship tilted and shuddered at the impact, throwing the ponies from their places as they struggled to hold on. The Captain barely maintained her grip as Lieutenant Ursa fell into her, and Ensign Dusty rolled across the floor in an almost comical manner.

"Damage report!" the Captain cried out as the worst of the shuddering seemed to pass, the odd line from the creature's tail floating before the viewscreen, the tip singed and burned.

"Shields are at critical levels!" Lieutenant Fern called from her station, having managed to hold on. Only Lieutenant Rock seemed unfazed by the turbulence, having only barely shifted while the rest of them were

tossed about.

"Ensign! Ensign?" the unicorn looked around frantically for her helms-pony, only to find the mare in one corner and wedged under one of the consoles. She rushed over to help the Ensign climb out and steady her.

"I'm... alright... Captain," the unsteady mare insisted, shaking her head in a futile attempt to clear it.

"No you're not," the unicorn frowned, "Get your flank to sick-bay." Turning away from the Ensign, she rushed to the helm, "Time to see if I remember all that flight training from the Academy..." She started stabbing at the buttons with her hoof, her horn glowing a soft purple as she magically gripped the speed lever, "Hold on every-pony!" she cried, as she slammed it forward.

Fortunately, every pony (and alien) did hold on, and the ship groaned with the sudden stresses of going from low speed to maximum impulse power. The ship began to roll slowly as the Captain forced it to accelerate towards, and below, the disabled ship.

"Captain, we cannot take another hit," the Commander called.

"Tell me something I don't know!" she yelled back, gritting her teeth as she could almost feel how close the two ships were passing.

"That line was not an energy attack," the stallion continued, taking her sarcasm as an order, "It was a web, like that of a spider. It was attempting to drag us in."

"Looks like Cooties are a bit tougher than we expected!" she grunted, and the entire ship lurched drunkenly, almost sending everypony hurtling across the deck. Lieutenant Ursa fell into the Captain again, but her attention was riveted on the viewscreen and the controls before her.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Fern cried, "Shields are down, that last blow... it hit us with one of its legs!"

"We're retreating," the Captain hissed through clenched teeth, "Lieutenant Rock, give me an escape vector, we are NOT equipped to handle this!"

"Aye aye, Cap'n," the telepathic rock answered. Suddenly the entire bridge was filled with a horrendous screeching, and all the ponies (and aliens) were thrown forward against their consoles. The lights flickered as everything seemed to screech and groan about them, sending the Captain collapsing to the floor, Lieutenant Ursa somehow falling into her again.

"C-captain?" a shaky voice asked.

"I'm here..." she answered, nudging the bear-like alien off her as she shakily got to her hooves, "What happened?"

"Another line, Captain," the Commander supplied, "It has latched on the starboard engine."

She looked at him cross-eyed for a moment, "Which side is starboard again?"

"It is dragging us back to it Captain," the Commander finished.

"This is bad," the Captain groaned.

"Captain, I have a Priority One transmission coming in on your private channel," the shaken Lieutenant Ursa said, now back at her station. All at once it seemed as if the bridge went completely silent, save for the Captain swallowing nervously.

"What... what does it say?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"It says, and I quote, 'get your flank home, it's time for dinner'," the bear-like alien answered softly, "It's from the Admiral."

"Lieutenant Rock, you handle the Cootie," the Captain said simply, "Commander, you're with me; we have another mission that cannot be put off."

"Cap'n, I'm not sure"

"Look, just blow the old ship up; there are no survivors on it," she told the Lieutenant crossly, "That will kill the Cootie."

"Uh... iff'n you... says so, Cap'n," the rocky approximation of a pony answered telepathically.

"Lieutenant Rock, you have the command. Lieutenant Fern, emergency teleport for myself and Commander Patch, priority one," the Captain plowed ahead.

"Yes Captain," she answered, and pressed a few buttons on her panel, and a tingling light washed over the Captain. The purple mare closed her eyes, letting the tingling wash over her from nose to tail tip.

When she opened her eyes, the steel grey of the space-ship was gone, as was the viewscreen, and the Cootie, and even her crew. The small lavender filly was sitting in an old cardboard box, easily large enough to fit a full grown pony inside, surrounded by a few toys and seemingly random items. A stack of three rocks sat in the front right corner of the box, and behind her a potted fern she'd found somewhere. A stuffed bear rested against her side, while a white patchwork pony doll with braided red yarn for its mane and tail sat on her tail.

"Dinky!" a voice called again, "It's dinner time! Get your flank in here!"

The filly's horn glowed purple as she jumped out of the box, careful to avoid the large dust-bunny she'd found under the couch, and the patchwork pony levitated out behind her. It hovered along behind the running filly until it landed on her back, the filly dashing from the park she was playing in, through the darkening twilight towards her home.

"Dinky!"

"I'm here Mommy!" she called, hurtling through the gate, her horn glowing as she slammed it shut behind her.

"There you are, Muffin" the slate-gray pegasus laughed as her daughter ran up the path to the door of their small house, catching her in a warm hug, "Where were you?"

"I was playing with Patches!" she giggled happily, and her mother smiled as the little filly levitated the toy off her back. The pegasus caught the doll agilely with her mouth and set it on a nearby table.

"Oh? And what were you playing?"

"Space Rangers!!" she cried happily and bounced on the doorstep, "I was Captain of the Starship Alicorn, and we were investigating a distress call and..."

"Sounds like you were having fun," the elder pony giggled.

"Uh huh! An' we were attacked by a GIANT Space Cootie!"

"A space cootie?"

"A GIANT space cootie!"

"Oh, I'm sorry muffin," the pegasus giggled, "a GIANT space cootie."

"Yup!" the filly grinned, then suddenly looked uncertain, "You did say Cooties wash off with soap and water, right?"

"Yes, Muffin, I did," she teased, "It's not like they hurt anypony anyway."

"But this was a GIANT Cootie, so it could!"

"Okay, Dinky, that's enough. space Cootie or no, you need to get inside and wash up. It's time for dinner," the mare smiled.

"Yes Mommy!" the filly cried, and dashed through the door.

"You, Mister Patch, keep my daughter safe from Cooties, understand?" she ordered the doll, nudging it lovingly with her nose, "Just

like you kept me safe from them when I was a filly. Goddess, she has such an imagination..."

"I'm done!"

"You are not, young filly!" the mother argued, "I didn't hear any water running."

"Awww... Captain's don't have to wash up."

"Admiral Mommy outranks you, Muffin. Now get washed up..."

The shadow of night covered the box in dim light, and the nearby lanterns of the town and the full moon overhead painted it in stark relief. If one looked, they would barely make out the words "ESS Alicorn" scribbled on the side of a cardboard box with a pink magic marker. Inside this box a series of seemingly random items rested. Perhaps they were waiting for the filly to come back, for their adventures to continue...

Into this darkness a single figure crept closer, its shadow falling across the box. The pony who cast this shadow seemed to be a shadow herself, her normally bright colors gray and flat, lifeless and without imagination... or perhaps cursed with too much imagination.

Blue eyes searched the contents of the box, partially hidden by the flat magenta mane that fell across her face. A pink hoof reached forward, tipping the box just slightly, and searched until it came upon the trio of stacked rocks.

"ROCKY!!" the mare cried, pulling the rocks into an embrace, as if welcoming an old friend, "I finally found you! I was so worried when I couldn't find you!"

"Harrumph!" the pink mare emoted for the rocks in a voice not quite her own, "You abandoned us for those pony friends o' yours, so I went and found me a NEW friend."

"Oh Rocky, I would never abandon you, not even for them..." she answered, setting the trio of rocks onto her back, "I even have a 'welcome back' party ready for you."

"I'd rather not..."

"Madame LeFlour will be there," the pink mare winked knowingly.

"Well... I'm willin' to let bygones be bygones," Rocky answered, "Besides, after that adventure, I could stand to relax a little."

"Adventure?" the pony looked confused.

"Of course," the rock chuckled, "A lovely little adventure into space. I'm the ship's navigator! The Cap'n will need my help when she comes back..."

"Don't worry, I'll have you back in plenty of time for your departure," the pink pony giggled, and began to trot away, the trio of rocks somehow staying perfectly balanced on her back ...

The sun shined down over Ponyville, the skies completely clear of all but the smallest of errant clouds. The birds flitted about, winging their way through the warm autumn sun, before the crisp cold of the winter could intrude and send them fleeing to the south. Yet all the filly could do was look longingly out the window, barely hearing the lecture from her schoolteacher as she impatiently waited for the day to be over with.

The lavender unicorn heaved another sigh, her eyes wandering over the simple classroom with the rows of carved wooden desks all sitting before the teacher's heavy oak desk and the ugly green blackboard. She had been ignoring the mulberry coated pony standing at the head of the class, probably a bad idea given her penchant for giving out tests, but she just couldn't focus today. School was just so DULL!!

"Okay class," the teacher, Cheerilee, said with a smile, "I'll let you out a few minutes early for the weekend. But remember, you have to read the first three chapters of the book I handed out at the start of class. There

will be a quiz first thing Monday, so I WILL know who did or did not read it. Now get out there, it's a beautiful afternoon..."

No filly or colt needed to be told twice, as the room exploded in activity and voices clamoring for attention. A crush of small pony bodies wedged into the open doorway, trying hard to be the first to make it out and into the freedom of the weekend away from school. Dinky was no different, only wanting out and away from the school.

The lavender unicorn ran as fast as she could away from the playground, where the majority of the young ponies were congregating. She had her own place to go, and her own adventures in mind, she just needed the rest of her crew. She yanked open her saddlebags to draw out the patchwork form of her favorite doll, draping it over her back as she ducked around a pair of ponies. She barely even noticed the lush green grass and the buildings of the small town about her as she ducked down an alley between the gingerbread-like Sugar Cube Corner and the nearby shop for couches and quills. She burst through a familiar bush, ignoring the indignant cries from the squirrel she startled, as she dashed to the edge of the park. She could see the fountain statue from where she was, but it was over the hill and far removed from her location. Instead, she was in a normally quiet grove just off the main park itself, nestled under a trio of trees that dampened almost all the sound coming from the main areas of the park, and thankfully also dampened her own voice getting back to them. She sometimes got carried away.

It only took a moment's search to find her box, the ESS Alicorn, nestled between two bushes. She gently brushed a few bugs off it, and was just floating her doll into it when she heard voices behind her.

"I told you it's a good spot, none of those immature ponies will find us here."

Dinky frowned; she recognized that voice.

"I can't believe you'd drag me out to some place as... common as this Silver Spoon. I mean really..." a second voice complained (or was that whining?). Dinky's spirits dropped as she realized the duo were headed her general direction and, even if they somehow didn't find her, were sure to

hear her playing.

"Have a little faith, Diamond," the other voice chuckled, "No pony will find us-"

Of course, luck would have it that the pair would break through the clearing and come face to face with the only other occupant there, a lavender unicorn filly with a blonde mane and a patchwork doll levitating in her magic grasp next to her.

"No pony will find it, eh?" Diamond Tiara mocked, the pink pony wrinkling her nose at the sight of the "common" pony before her, "As usual, you messed up again."

The gray filly with her frowned hard, her eyes darting behind the frames of her glasses. Then they landed on the lavender filly, "What are YOU doing here?" she demanded.

"It's quiet back here, so I like to come here and play," Dinky answered truthfully.

"What, like with that ratty doll?" the gray pony shot back, "Look at that toy Diamond, it looks like a rat trying to pretend it's a pony."

"Why anypony would play with something so ugly, I don't know," the pink filly answered, "It looks like it came from some sort of bargain bin."

"Mommy said it'd been in the family for generations..." Dinky added.

"Oh, so it's WORSE than a bargain bin find, it's a hand-me-down!" the gray filly crowed.

The pink filly ducked her head forward and grabbed the pony toy from Dinky's magic, flipping it over her foreleg to examine, ignoring Dinky's cry of anger. Diamond Tiara made a series of faces at the toy before throwing it to the ground.

"Your mother must hate you to give you such an awful toy," the pink filly concluded.

"You leave Patches alone!" Dinky yelled, dashing forward and standing protectively over her doll.

"Or what?" Silver Spoon asked derisively, nose to nose with Dinky, "You'll tell your mommy on us? Oh wait, not like SHE would be much help."

"My father says she's too stupid to hold down a job," Diamond Tiara sniffed, "Daddy says she's too dumb to be on the weather team, and too clumsy to work with the movers, so they made her mail pony out of pity."

"You take that back!" Dinky shouted angrily.

"Come on, Silver Spoon, let's get some sweets and head home," the pink filly grumbled, "All this outdoor stuff is making my mane itch, and I'm afraid her stupidity might be catching."

"Yeah, this dumb little filly isn't worth our time," the other filly agreed, kicking the toy doll derisively before moving to follow her friend. Dinky watched where they went for minutes after they disappeared, still seething over the insults. She KNEW she shouldn't let them get to her, but talking about Mommy like that, not to mention Patches....

When the duo didn't poke their nose back around the trees for several minutes, she began to relax. In a quick motion, she ducked down to check on her doll and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw it was a just little dirty and had a mark from where he'd been kicked. Otherwise the doll seemed completely unharmed. With a relieved sigh, she lowered the toy into her box, and then closed her eyes. She loved this part... it was like jumping into a cool lake in the middle of the summer.

The filly flexed all four legs, hopping vertically before landing squarely in her box...

Dinky opened her eyes, and smiled when she saw the familiar steel halls of the ESS Alicorn about her. For a moment she relaxed, letting the worries of school and bullies wash away from her... only to remember Patches. With a half vocalized cry, she dashed around the corner, and down all too similar corridors. She unerringly made a handful of turns, and dashed through an auto-magic door that swished open for her.

"BONES!" she cried, "How is Commander Patch?!?"

An old unicorn stallion turned to regard her, leveling his steely blue eyes at her, "And hello to you too Captain."

"Bones..."

"Oh he's fine," the old unicorn scoffed, shaking his graying mane from his face, "He's half-stuffy, and his attackers didn't even break his skin. The worst he got was a few bruises. I'm doing a few checks to make sure he's right as rain, since he never comes by for his medical exams... like a certain Captain I know."

"I keep telling you, no needles!" she fussed, and then slipped around the doctor to the nearby bed that Commander Patch lay upon, seemingly relaxed and none the worse for wear.

"Hello Captain," the half-alien pony said when he saw her, "I do hope I didn't worry you unnecessarily."

"You did fine, Commander," she sniffled, smiling at him, "Thank you for protecting me. Seems bullies are universal, no matter what species they may be."

"I wouldn't let them hurt the Captain," he answered with a rare shadow of a smile, "It isn't like I can't take anything they dish out."

"I just wish you'd fight back sometimes."

"There's no need, Captain. They cannot hurt me, as even my most grievous wounds can be healed with a simple needle and thread, and perhaps an infusion of stuffing."

"This is all touching," the doctor growled, "but I'm done with you, Commander. Get out, and take your stuffing with you."

"Your bedside manner is impeccable, as always, Doctor."

"Commander?" the mare blinked, unable to stifle a giggle, "Was that a joke?"

"No, Captain," the half-stuffy pony answered smoothly, "It was sarcasm."

"I don't care what it was," the doctor informed them, "I want it out of my sickbay."

"Before I go, how is Ensign Dusty?" the Captain asked.

"She was just disoriented," the old unicorn provided, "She banged her head pretty hard. I kept her overnight for observation, but she's been cleared to return to duty. Given her attitude, I'd bet she's already up on the bridge."

She clapped a hoof on the old doctor's shoulder, "Thanks Bones," she offered and nuzzled his cheek before trotting out of sickbay, leaving the grumbling doctor behind her.

The trip from sickbay to the bridge was short, and the pair of ponies moved silently through the hallways to the lift. When the lift came to a stop, the Commander was the first through, leaving Captain Dinky to follow him through.

"Lieutenant Rock, what's the situation?" she called out to her navigator as she entered the bridge. However, for the first time she could remember, she was answered with only silence.

"Lieutenant Rock?" she asked, and found his station empty, the Navigation terminal completely unmanned.

"C-captain?" the honey smooth voice of the bear-like alien interjected, "Lieutenant Rock has been missing since late yesterday."

"I... I see." The Captain answered, her voice trembling, "What happened?"

"We don't know, Captain," she answered nervously.

"We have reports of an infiltration of an unknown entity onto the ship," Lieutenant Fern cut in, "Lieutenant Rock was the only victim, and as

such I am forced to conclude that it was some sort of personal vendetta against the navigator."

The Captain stared straight ahead, not answering for several long minutes, only hearing the soft mutters of her crew as they grew steadily more concerned.

"Captain?" Commander Patch asked softly, reaching a hoof to her shoulder.

"Commander, you're with me," she snapped, her eyes looking to the rest of the crew, "Lieutenant Fern, you have the command. Ensign Dusty? You have some navigation training; I want you to establish an orbit around this planet. I'm going to hope that our Navigator was taken to the planet below and the rock-napper has not had a chance to move him."

"Where are we going Captain?" the Commander asked.

"We're going down to find out where our Navigator is," she answered with a growl, "and I will buck any-pony or alien that tries to stop me from bringing him home."

"Well, this looks idill... idiel... quiet, doesn't it Commander?"

The little purple filly barely poked her nose out of the bush as she watched a mint green unicorn and cream colored mare saunter past her position, chatting amiably with each other about food and music.

"Aye, Captain," she answered for the doll perched on her back in a faux deep voice, "Very peaceful. We cannot assume any individual pony present will know the whereabouts of our wayward navigator."

"What kind of conditions could have allowed these ponies to grow so large?" she asked wonderingly.

"Low gravity," she had the doll answer, "Less pressure downwards means they are able to grow taller."

"Huh, I never thought about that before..." she mused, rubbing her chin before pulling her head back into the bush. A cardboard tube pushed through the leaves where her head had been, which slowly swept from side to side.

"Sensors aren't picking up anything..." she grumbled, "I am not looking forward to doing this the old fashioned way. It might take far too long to try and get the information or location we need from the locals.

"More to the point, Captain, Gran-ites are rare; these ponies may not even recognize the significance of what they have seen," the doll answered.

"How long before the Admiral calls us back?" the filly asked softly.

"We have several hours."

"Then let's not waste any more time..." the filly grumbled, and leapt out from the bush, trailing a small shower of little green leaves as she stalked forward. She kept to the edge of the crowd, not saying a word, but her eyes intense as they tried to drink in every nuance going on around her. She would not miss anything, she would find her navigator, and she would-

"Hey there!" a chipper voice called from right behind her, and the lavender filly leapt straight up into the air, her blonde mane flaring every which way.

"GYAH!!! Are you TRYING to give me a heart attack?!?" she cried, whirling on the pony who had shocked her.

"S-sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," the white unicorn filly answered, "Oh! You dropped your doll."

"Huh? Oh! Thanks," she smiled and picked the old doll up and hugged it, "This is Mister Patches..."

"He's... uh... Nice?" the unicorn filly said uncertainly, "I like his... mane?"

Dinky gave a giggle, "Don't worry about it. He's old, and I know it. But according to Mommy, he's been in the family for years, passed down from generation to generation. I've had him forever."

"Awww, that's sweet," the filly offered with a smile, "Oh, I'm Sweetie Belle. I think we're in class together."

"I think so," the filly giggled, "I'm Dinky."

"Are you looking for something?" the filly asked, and Dinky had to resist the urge to look back at the Commander even as she settled him on her back. Even without him saying a word, she could feel him urging her to ask.

"Well, it'll sound kinda weird, but..." she struggled with how to put it, "The other day I was using some rocks when I was playing. They weren't anything special but... somepony took 'em. I'm trying to find them."

"Can't you just pick up any dumb old rock?"

"Maybe, but... well these were kinda special to me," Dinky hedged nervously.

"Oh... uh... Sorry. I don't think I can help you," Sweetie Belle shrugged

Dinky smiled, "Hey, no worries, right? It was a long shot anyway..."

"What's a 'long shot'?"

"I dunno," the lavender filly admitted, "It's just something Mommy always says when referring to something she was hoping for, but wasn't likely to happen."

"Ooooooohh," Sweetie Belle grinned. She was about to say something more, but she heard somepony call her name. The white unicorn turned to face the approaching orange pegasus filly as she came skidding to a stop on her scooter beside them.

"C'mon Sweetie Belle, we need to get back to the Clubhouse," the violently violet maned pegasus filly told her friend.

"What about sweets, Scootaloo? Pinkie Pie said we could get some for our meeting..."

"She's actin' weird," Scootaloo answered, making a face, "She's talking to rocks and lint and even some sack of flour. It's kinda creepy."

"Awwww, I wanted some cinnamon buns..." Sweetie Belle whined then heaved a gigantic sigh, "Oh well. Seeya later Dinky!"

The lavender filly didn't seem to even notice the two fillies leave; her eyes were riveted on the gingerbread façade of Sugar Cube Corner. It had dual reputations in Ponyville, one for being the best bakery in Ponyville (not that it had much competition), and another for being the home of the hyperactive party pony Pinkie Pie.

"I presume you heard, Captain?" Commander Patches asked softly

"I heard Commander," she answered softly, "But I'm not sure we're equipped to handle this. This enemy is a far larger threat than any we've ever faced before... worse, she could tell the Admiral on me!"

"Steady, Captain," the doll 'answered' her, "Remember why we are doing this."

"To save Lieutenant Rock," she sucked in a breath, "Best navigator in the Equestrian Federation Fleet, and my friend."

"Then what are you waiting for?" the Commander asked.

"For my knees to stop shaking..."

"I expected more difficulty from the guards."

Dinky scoffed at her doll before answering him, "The Cakes hardly qualify as security, Commander. Plus, Pinkie Pie seems to get a lot of

visitors. I'm just surprised she doesn't have a door to her room that's outside of the store..."

"A design flaw, to be sure," the stuffed pony 'answered', "Of course it is possible they simply trust this Pinkie Pie completely."

Dinky frowned as she reached the top of the stairs; the only obstacle left was the glaringly pink wooden door before her, "You make it sound like she's pulling the wool over their eyes, Commander."

"She may very well be," he answered, "If she is the kidnapper of Lieutenant Rock, then it stands to reason that she is a far greater threat than the Cake's suspect."

She frowned at the thought, and sidled forward, her stomach low to the floor as she crept up to the closed door, trying to be quiet on the creaky wooden floor. Every time a board moaned or sighed under her hoof, she would freeze in place, her ears swiveling wildly as she tried to listen for any approaching pony. Finally she made it to the door in question, unmolested by anything other than the paranoia her mind. She made a shushing motion to her doll, and then leaned close to put an ear against the lower edge of the door.

"...oui!" some managed to catch of some female voice with an outrageous foreign accent, "We would love more tea, Mademoiselle Pie."

"I do say," a stuffy voice with a strange high class accent said afterwards, "You really should try these cupcakes, Madame LeFlour. They are quite superb!"

The first voice answered with a giggle, "Oh Sir Lintcelot, we must watch our weight, non?"

"I gotta say, Miss Pie, you really outdid yourself," a third voice answered, causing Dinky to look suddenly at her doll, her eyes widening as she recognized the gravelly tone, "But you really should take it easy and enjoy the party."

"That's Lieutenant Rock!" Dinky whispered to her Commander, who nodded quickly and answered with a shushing motion of his own as a new voice began to speak.

"Oh Rocky, how sweet of you to think so," came a perky voice that sounded oddly forced, "But I'm the hostess. I can't relax until ALL my guests are happy!"

"This is worse than we thought," Dinky fussed softly, trying to think, "Lieutenant Rock hasn't just been pony... er... rock-napped, but he's being forced into a tea party!"

"Lieutenant Rock was never one for such pastimes," the Commander agreed, "Last I heard, he didn't even drink tea."

"We have to save him... but how?"

"Hello?" the perky voice asked from inside the room, and Dinky quickly covered her mouth with both hooves, "Is somepony out there?" Dinky pondered backing down the stairs and trying to hide when she felt her Commander nudge her, motioning her forward with his hooves.

"Um... Hello?" she called in return, feeling stupid at her sudden inability to figure out what to say.

The door suddenly yanked open and framed the pretty perky party pony, Pinkie Pie. The suddenness of the motion caused Dinky to yelp and jump back from the doorway, her eyes meeting the piercing blue ones as they gazed down at her. The pony was an oddly flat shade of pink, with her mane falling in flattened waves of magenta about her head. In that instant she realized something was wrong...

Unable to help herself, Dinky leaned slightly to one side to look around the pink mare and into the room behind her. It was decked out for a party, with multi-colored streamers hanging everywhere, a riot of colorful balloons scattered about, and even a banner or two that read incongruous things. In fact, the only one that made sense to Dinky was the one declaring "Welcome Back, Rocky!" A table towards the center of the room was covered in a colorful tablecloth, and piled with so many types of cakes and pastries and cupcakes that Dinky's mouth began to water. Forcing her eyes away from the mounds of food, she glanced at the guests...

Dinky understood exactly what Scootaloo meant when she said Pinkie Pie was acting weird as she scanned the four seats about the table

and her guests. One was a drooping bag of flour; another was a massive ball of lint with a conical party-hat somehow wedged onto it; and a third...

"Lieutenant Rock!" Dinky cried.

"Louie who?" Pinkie asked, looking behind her.

"Oh dear," the rock answered, though whether it was Pinkie or Dinky who voiced it for him neither pony knew.

"Rocky..." Pinkie started in a sweet tone that poorly disguised an undercurrent of anger that Dinky could all but feel, "Was there something you weren't telling me?"

"Madam Pinkie, how could you..." the pink pony vocalized for the lint ball, only to be subjected to a hard glare from the party pony.

"I DID say the Cap'n would need me back," the trio of rocks piled atop each other answered, "I didn't think she'd come lookin' for me!"

"Lieutenant Rock, I was worried about you!" Dinky cried, stepping into the room, "I thought you'd been rock-napped!"

"Oh heck, I'm sorry Cap'n. I didn't mean to worry-"

"Now see here!" Pinkie snapped, "Rocky is MY friend!"

"But..." Dinky started, her eyes wide.

"Miss Pie, please," the rock tried again.

"First my friends abandon me, and now some filly is trying to take my new friends from me?!?" the pony cried, heedless of the interruption, "No! No no no no NO!!"

"Commander?" Dinky asked the doll on her back, her eyes wide.

"This is bad, Captain," the doll 'answered', shaking his head, "This pony seems to have formed an attachment to Lieutenant Rock. My suggestion is we remove him from the premises and 'haul tail'."

"Bad idea, Commander," she hissed softly, "She could just report me to the Admiral."

"Sides," the rock cut in, "I won't abandon Miss Pie."

"You do realize I can HEAR you, right?!?" the pink pony cried, "I will not let you... huh?"

"I said," the rock pile said, "I won't abandon you, Miss Pie."

"Oh Rocky!!" Pinkie cried, and swept up the rocks in a warm hug, "I knew you wouldn't leave me!"

"Lieutenant Rock... you would abandon your duties?" the filly asked softly, wiping at her nose angrily. She would NOT cry... she wouldn't cry... she wouldn't...

"Of course not, Cap'n," the rock-pile answered from within Pinkie's embrace, "But Miss Pie is hurting, an' she needs the support of her friends. If it means I gotta be gone from my duties to the Federation, then so be it. I'll stand proudly at my court martial."

"But... what about me?" Dinky asked softly.

"Cap'n, I ain't abandonin' you," he answered kindly, "But I cannot abandon Miss Pie either."

"I see..." the lavender filly answered softly, her head lowering.

"Captain..." the doll on her back started softly.

"I know what I have to do, Commander," she answered the doll in a soft voice.

"I'm sorry, Captain," the doll answered.

"No, Commander, there is only one pony at fault here," she answered resolutely.

"Cap'n, you can't mean-" Rocky cried.

"I concur, Captain," the doll seemed to nod, "We must enact a rescue..."

"You can't have him!" Pinkie shouted over all of them.

"NO!" Dinky cried, her young voice drowning out the others. Her eyes swept over each one, as if daring each to speak, before she reached the table and pulled off a napkin. She hunted around for a crayon as well, earning a curious look from Pinkie as the filly began to scribble on the napkin. With a sense of finality, she slapped the scribbled upon napkin against the rock-pile.

"Lieutenant Rock," she stated formally, "From this day forward you will be excused from duty as needed to assist in any party activities with one Pinkie Pie. This is effective immediately, and signed by myself. I will enter it into the formal record upon returning to the ship."

"C-Cap'n!" the rock cried, "Thank you. You dunno what this means to me..."

"No, Lieutenant, I don't," she answered, and then nodded to Pinkie, who was watching the filly warily from her position hugging the rock-pile possessively, "But I can clearly see what you mean to her. She needs you Lieutenant, and I would be a bad pony if I did not recognize that. You are my friend, Lieutenant Rock, and it is selfish of me to think I could keep you to myself. I can see no reason that your wisdom and friendship cannot be shared."

"Captain, are you sure that is a wise course of action?" Commander Patch asked.

"No, Commander, but it's the RIGHT course of action," she answered softly, "Admiral Mommy always says that the right thing to do isn't always the easiest. This is the hardest thing to do that I can think of... but it feels right."

"Understood, Captain."

"Thank you for understandin', Cap'n," the rock pile answered,

"Lieutenant, I'll see you on the ship whenever you're finished."

"Aye aye, Cap'n," the rocks answered, still held by Pinkie, who was watching the filly with wide blue eyes. Dinky offered her a smile, and turned away, started to walk towards the door. The filly didn't look back as she heard the other members of the party begin to almost all talk at once. Sure, she realized that, like she was doing with her doll, that the pink pony was talking for them, but...

Dinky stopped dead right as she was at the door, her eyes widening, "That's it!"

"Captain?" the Commander asked.

Dinky just smiled and turned to face the party again. Pinkie's back was to her, as she went through all sorts of contortions to nudge each of the "guests" in turn as they "spoke", each one talking hurriedly and excitedly to "Rocky", even the Pink pony getting in her own comments. But Dinky understood this... she did the exact same thing herself in that little box she dubbed a starship.

She trotted up to an empty place at the table, her horn glowing as she sat her doll at an empty place setting across the table from her.

"Cap'n?" Lieutenant Rock/Rocky asked, being the first to notice.

Dinky just smiled, "I'm not expected back on the ship for a little while," she answered, "And I thought maybe I could help Miss Pinkie celebrate your return."

Pinkie blinked at that, her eyes widening, "You... you want to help?"

"Certainly," she answered with a broad smile, "So does Commander... er... Mister Patches. I mean, we couldn't leave without at least trying some of your famous cupcakes."

"Well... I suppose I do feel a little peckish," the doll said, Dinky using her magic to animate him while she faked his voice, mimicking how Pinkie was doing the same for the other "guests".

The pink mare's smile was so broad it threatened to split her face apart, and she vanished in a streak of pink and magenta, only to return seconds later with a heaping tray of cupcakes of every color of the rainbow.

"Dig in!"

Rainbow Dash yawned and stretched out on her cloud.

Today had been awesome. She'd gotten in several hours of practice, the weather team was totally on the ball for a few totally clear sunny days before the first of the winter storms were scheduled, and Princess Celestia had blessed everypony with some late season warmth. It was a wonderful, perfect, lazy day.

"Almost feel bad I had to ditch Pinkie to work today," she yawned, "We finished earlier than I expected."

Just as she was about to drift off, a peal of laughter below caught her ears... no, make that two peals of laughter, one smaller and lighter than the other one. Curious, Rainbow Dash stuck her head over the edge of the cloud to see what was going on. However, what met her eyes defied description...

She was used to Pinkie Pie being random, but this took the cake. She'd cut leg holes in a large cardboard box, stuck the flaps out like wings, and had taken a crayon to the side to write "ESS Pinkie" on the box. Further, inside the box a teddy bear, a silly patchwork doll, a trio of rocks she recognized (and filled her with dread), and a potted fern all nestled against the pink pony's body. On Pinkie's back a lavender unicorn filly perched, her hooves wrapped in Pinkie's mane as the party pony dashed about Ponyville wildly.

"Approach vector confirmed, Captain," the filly cried in a fake gravelly voice.

"Good job Lieutenant!" the filly cried in a more natural voice, "Captain Pie, the Navigator's plotted the course, and we're set for our supply run!"

"Okie Dokie Lokie!" the pink mare cried, and turned sharply, causing the filly to cry out with a laugh again as she held on to the dashing Pinkie, "Destination in sight, Sugar Cube Corner for resupply of cupcake provisions!"

"Captain," the pink mare called in different, made up, voice, "I'm showing a lot of turbulence along this route."

"Roger that, Lieutenant Fern," the filly cried, "Captain Pinkie, can you adjust course?"

"We're going too fast!" she cried.

"But we're heading right for the..." Dinky started, and then cried, "Hard to starboard!!"

Pinkie looked back over her shoulder at the filly without stopping, "Which way is starboard?"

"Just TURN!!" the filly shouted, and threw her hooves up over her head as Pinkie Pie crashed into a massive bush. The pair cried out as they tumbled end over end before coming out the other side.

"Captain Pinkie..." Dinky said in a shaky voice, "Damage report."

"Minimal damage, Captain Dinky," the party pony answered, shaking her head, "Just some..."

"Captain?" Dinky asked, and paused in her own examinations to look at the older mare. To her surprise, Pinkie was carefully examining a part of her mane, lifting a hoof to nudge it closer to her face. It took Dinky a moment to notice, but nestled in the tangled mass that was Pinkie's mane, was a brown burr stuck in place. Dinky's eyes widened, and she quickly started searching herself, finding burrs stuck in her own mane and tail. After a moment of panicked inspection, the two met eye to eye.

"Oh no..." Pinkie started.

"This is bad..." Dinky answered.

"But how could...?"

"It must be..."

"CLING-ONS!!!" the pair shrieked in unison. Pinkie immediately began to run in circles, shrieking like her tail was on fire about a "Sneak

attack" while the filly started screaming about "Red Alert" and "All hooves to battle stations" and other such nonsense.

Rainbow Dash watched it all unfold before covering her head with both hooves, "As if one wasn't enough..."

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## The End of Rescue Mission

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