



Stardust

Written by [Arad](#)

- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
- Twilight Sparkle
- Discord
- Dark
- Gore
- Crossover
- Human

Description

Isolated from her friends and taken prisoner in the middle of a war, Twilight must deal with the very real dangers of being perceived as an enemy as well as the nightmares of her arrival on 'Earth'. Can she overcome her own fears and the fears of her captors? Will the wayward unicorn's assistance be a boon or a curse to the 'humans?' Most importantly, will she ever find her way home?

"In short, it's a story of friendship and plasma rifles, with the emphasis on the friendship. The characters are well written, the XCOM setting is fleshed out very well, and the story is compelling. If you love XCOM, you'll love the story, but even if you've never heard of it, it's more than worth giving the first 3 chapters a read.

There's excellent action later on, but the real strength lies in the collision between the friendly and naive world of Twilight Sparkle and the desperate world of humans fighting a losing war for survival and willing to do anything to turn the tide."

--Arzoo

(XCOM/FiM crossover)

(Cover art commissioned by a friend and created by the magnificent [FoxInShadow!](#))

(Original cover art by the amazing Carnelian can be viewed [here!](#))

(Gore tag for blood and some violence)

(Many thanks to the studios OminousTen, Arzoo, xXFluttershyForeverXx and finally Setokaiva for giving my rambles a once-over)

(Now with it's own [TV Tropes page!](#) Get to tropin' folks!)

Table of Contents

- [First Contact](#)
- [Containment](#)
- [Stardust Supplemental Files \(Pt. 1\)](#)
- [The Lab](#)
- [Stardust Supplemental Files \(Pt. 2\)](#)
- [The Volunteers](#)
- [Stardust Supplemental Files \(Pt. 3\)](#)
- [Friends](#)
- [Silent Rain](#)
- [Meanwhile... \(Pt. 1\)](#)
- [Consequences](#)
- [What If?](#)
- [Stardust Supplemental Files \(Pt. 4\)](#)
- [Monsters](#)
- [Decisions](#)
- [Consensus](#)
- [Reason](#)
- [Meanwhile... \(Pt 2\)](#)
- [Stardust Supplemental Files \(Pt. 5\)](#)
- [Breakthrough](#)
- [Gangplank](#)
- [The Deal](#)
- [Stardust Supplemental Files \(Pt. 6\)](#)
- [Avoidance](#)
- [Resolve](#)
- [Gate of Babylon](#)
- [Gifts \(Pt. 1\)](#)
- [Gifts \(Pt. 2\)](#)
- [Lessons](#)
- [Viking](#)
- [Meanwhile... \(Pt. 3\)](#)
- [Visitor](#)
- [Ashes and Temples](#)
- [Kaleidoscope](#)
- [Second Contact](#)
- [Coming Soon](#)

First Contact

Being made of stone left little to do but go insane...or plan. Discord had done quite a bit of both in the previous millennia, and after finding himself once again petrified he resumed his plotting. While his more mundane senses couldn't tell him about his surroundings, he had others to assist him. Celestia, his nemesis and companion for thousands of years, approached his frozen form along with the more muted and mundane minds of her guards. Then he was moving...somewhere. The development was unexpected so soon but not unanticipated, especially when the presence of the Elements appeared nearby. Had his face not been made of stone, Discord might have grinned. *Oh Celestia, you are so easy to anticipate.*

A few moments passed before the avatar of chaos felt the elements of harmony begin to crack his stone prison. As Discord broke free he screamed to the heavens for his emancipation...and followed his cry with with a fit of laughter.

"Reform me? Reform ME!?" Discord spoke between guffaws, "And who does she think can do it?" A quick glance to the yellow Pegasus was all Discord needed for confirmation. "Fluttershy?" He fell to the ground in laughter. The six elements surrounded Discord while Twilight stepped forward.

Before Twilight could speak, Discord shot upward and looked down upon her. "Oh yes, I know, I know." His lions paw started to mimic a mouth speaking, and Twilight's voice came from it, "Righteous indignation, threats to use the elements, blah blah blah."

"I haven't lived as long as I have without being able to see the writing on the wall, my dears." Discord continued as he walked backwards. One mismatched claw pointed at the wall that appeared behind him.

"It says...fourth?" Twilight said, arching an eyebrow as she surveyed the word written there. She recoiled in surprise when Pinkie Pie's head burst from the center of the wall.

"It doesn't matter which wall you put up, Discord! I will break it down if you start being mean again!" Pinkie declared loudly, and the whole wall tumbled down around her.

Discord shrugged and looked over his shoulder. "I knew I shouldn't have used that wall! Pinkie knows its fatal weakness." Both Pinkie and Twilight started to interrupt, but Discord shushed the two of them. "This situation can only end in two ways, I'll either become a lawn ornament again, or I'll 'reform' myself. The only real wild card is how I am reformed... So, Twilight, care to make a wager?"

"You and your precious friends all know in your heart of hearts that friendship can conquer all. I am still not convinced." Discord leaned backwards in a chair that instantly appeared behind him. His manic eyes were now hidden behind orange-shaded glasses, and his now white-gloved paws/claws were steepled before his face. "These are the terms: Convince me, irrefutably, that friendship is the strongest power in the universe, and I will willingly submit to Celestia's authority."

Twilight looked to the other elements before nodding and turning back to Discord. "I accept your challenge, Discord." The avatar of chaos grinned and snapped his fingers. A cardboard cutout of Twilight fell face first onto the ground where she once stood.

"What did you do to Twilight!?" The other elements screamed in disbelief.

Discord only grinned and inspected his gloved paws, "Sent her off to win or lose our wager of course. If friendship is as powerful as she says, then she will have no problems returning here and proving me wrong." He leaned forward and gave a grin that was all teeth. "I sent her someplace where hostility is first, second and third nature. Someplace where the unknown is an enemy to be destroyed. Someplace where friendship *certainly* isn't magic..."

The screams and the sounds of fire nearby were the first indications that Twilight wasn't in Ponyville anymore. It was a long few moments before her other senses returned to her, smoke quickly filling her lungs as she tried to take a breath. The unicorn coughed as she tried to stand. Gone was the familiar feeling of grass and soil, replaced instead with smooth stone beneath her hooves.

"Ugh, girls? What happened?" Twilight slowly opened her eyes to see just what was going on, and she could only gasp. Gone were the comforting fields of grass outside Ponyville. The ground was perfectly level and entirely stone, and the blockish buildings surrounded her on three sides were ablaze. As her senses recovered further, Twilight's analytical mind continued to take note of the details of her surroundings, including two metal boxes that she now found herself between.

Twilight's ears perked up upon hearing voices beyond the boxes, and she cautiously peeked around the corner to see the source. On the other side of the clearing a trio of figures emerged from between the

buildings. All three were bipeds, two taller ones and a smaller one clinging as tightly as it could. The largest one shouted and turned back the way it came while the other two continued to run.

Twilight tracked the pair as they ran before turning back to the first figure, just in time to see it die. Something with far too many claws and legs scuttled out from the darkness between the buildings and pounced with a welter of crimson blood. Both of the two remaining figures screamed, and in the blink of an eye the monster crossed the distance and knocked the pair down. Only one screaming voice remained now, only to be abruptly terminated in a flurry of blood and claws.

Twilight knew about death. She knew about predators and how they killed in the wild. Her studies were manifold and varied, and one of the brief subjects she had touched on was natural sciences. She could rationally understand what had just happened, and may have been able to accept it as a fact of how the world worked had she read it in a book.

But it didn't happen in a book; three lives had just ended violently before her at the claws of something she could only describe as a monster. Her eyes dilated to pin-pricks and she began to hyperventilate loudly, which drew the attention of the murderous monster away from its latest victim. It dropped the tiny body and whirled around to advance upon Twilight with a howl.

"Stay...away. Stay away!" Twilight whispered to the thing, but it scuttled toward her on blade-like legs. Its glowing eyes fixed upon her, and a pair of claw tipped and gore stained arms reached forward as it moved with frightening speed. The unicorn's horror transformed into mortal fear as she tapped her magic and screamed, "STAY AWAY!"

The spell she intended to cast was a telekinetic press to slow or stop the monster's advance. Its lightest form would have felt like a wet blanket being thrown over its target, the stronger incantations being enough to bring a hearty earth stallion to the ground until it wore off. But Twilight's talent was raw magic, and her natural abilities were enhanced by the fear of a violent death so close at hand.

A massive telekinetic force fell upon the monster, crushing it flat and spraying yellow ichor in all directions as well as cratering the stone beneath it. The crushed body, or what was left of it, twitched once before going still. Whatever hypnotic hold that held Twilight in place broke and she scrambled backwards before falling back on her flank. Her eyes remained locked on the corpse of the monster, and the same thought kept repeating through her mind: *I didn't mean to hurt it, I didn't mean to hurt it; I didn't mean to hurt it...*

Tears began to well up in her eyes as a shadow fell over her. She had just enough time to register another biped standing behind her before the whole world went dark.

16:45, 04/02/15, Washington, D.C.

"Fowler, Harris, the last Chryssalid is down," Corporal Matt Harris reported through the comms as he stepped over the stunned x-ray to survey what was left of the bug. He holstered the ARC thrower and pistol and brought his rifle to cover the rather thoroughly crushed Chryssalid while he looked to the corpses of the three civilians. "Signal recovery for my location, I have a live capture."

"Copy, Harris. Excellent work," The reply came through his helmet comms, "confirm capture type?"

The corporal turned back to the stunned and slightly twitching x-ray before shaking his head slightly, "A... unicorn, sir?"

OPERATION HAMMERHEAD: COMPLETE
ALIEN TERROR MISSION HALTED
CIVILIAN LOSSES MINIMAL
STRIKE-1 REPORTS 0 KIA, 2 WIA

RECOVERY TEAM INVENTORY:
(Documented by LT Fujikawa)
PLASMA WEAPON FRAGMENTS (15 total)
SECTOID CORPSES (5 total)
THIN MAN CORPSES (3 total)
CHRYSSALID CORPSES (3 total)
UNICORN LIVE CAPTURE
OPERATION EVALUATION: EXCELLENT

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

[ARC Thrower](#): A non-lethal sidearm designed to incapacitate aliens for capture using high-voltage electrical current.

[Chryssalid](#): Indiscriminate alien terror weapons employed known for their ferocity and speed.

Recovery Teams: Bodies, weapons and live captures are collected by the relief teams deployed to an operation area as soon as it is feasible to do so. Collected materials are used for research to further understand physiology and technology of alien invaders.

Containment

ATTACK ON CAPITOL THWARTED, ALIEN PRESENCE CONFIRMED BY MULTIPLE WITNESSES
DESPITE DENIALS BY POLS.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS DESCRIBE UNIDENTIFIED ARMED FORCES BATTLING ALIENS IN
WASHINGTON DC; RETRIEVING BODIES OF ALIENS. GOVT SPOKESMAN DENIES REPORTS AS
CONSPIRACY THEORIES.

18:02, 04/02/15, XCOM HQ, Underground Hangar

Commander Bradford met the Skylanders the moment they landed, a tablet in his hand with the mission data readily available. As soon as the ramps hit the deck, the underground hangar exploded into motion as maintenance crews boiled out of the pits to tend to the transports. The medical team met the squad as it disembarked from the Skylanders, and the commander was pleased to see that they were mostly intact.

Corporal Harris, Sergeant Dryzinski and Lieutenant Fowler all were untouched, and Private Jenkins' armor was scorched by no less than four near misses. Jenkins' helmet was in her hands, warped from a fifth near miss that almost decapitated her. Judging by her silly grin, she was unharmed. Privates Lee and Anderson suffered the most; both had taken bad hits from the invaders and weren't able to make it out of the Skylander under their own power. After a cursory check on the first four, the medical team stormed up the ramp to check on the remainder.

Bradford stood with his hands behind his back and his tablet held behind him, his gaze locked onto Harris until the corporal noticed the attention and made his way over. Harris snapped a quick salute, which Bradford returned with equal crispness. "At ease, and great work out there corporal. Doctor Vahlen conveys her thanks as well for the live capture."

"Thank you, sir," Harris afforded himself a tired smile as he turned to regard the second Skylander's ramp descend and the recovery team began unloading what it had collected from the capitol. The 'unicorn' was sealed inside a metal container and was slowly being lifted from the cargo bay for transport to containment for interrogation. "I am regretting the name choice, though."

Bradford smiled at that and chuckled, "No time for regrets, corporal. It's part of the official record now." The naming convention adopted by the XCOM organization was rather simple: He who spots it, names it. 'Floaters' and 'thin men' were labeled for obvious reasons, the former for being flight capable and the latter for being thin as a rail. 'Sectoids' and 'Chryssalids' came from horror movies with similar monsters. 'Unicorn' seemed a little too warm and fuzzy considering what they were up against. *Of course, looks can be deceiving*, Bradford thought as he presented the tablet to the corporal.

"I've been reviewing the footage from your armor cam, but I'd like to hear exactly what happened from you..."

Transcript of security footage, Alien Containment, XCOM HQ

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

Person(s) identified within footage:

Dr. Moira Vahlen (V)- Lead Researcher

Dr. Joel Mills (M) - Assistant Researcher, Xenobiology

Dr. Kim Ngo (N) - Assistant Researcher, Behavioral Sciences

Subject 05 'Unicorn' (U)

TIMESTAMP: 18:20, 04/02/15

(V) -- "This subject is an interesting break from the previous conventions seen with other alien troops, despite their lack of consistency."

--"Specimens encountered thus far have had very specific roles in mind, infiltration, rapid movement, even indiscriminate terror weapons. All are uniformly violent, obviously bred for combat and closest Earth analogs are reptilian or insect-based organisms."

--"This subject differs from those conventions at least physically, as we are unable to determine behavioral patterns until the subject wakes. Its physical appearance is quite colorful, with the majority of its body

covered in lavender hair—“

(M) - “Coat, Doctor.”

(V) - “...the creature’s coat appears to be lavender, while the creature appears to sport both a tail and...”

(M) - “Mane, Doctor.”

(V) - “...mane of a darker hue. Three noteworthy features include what appears to be a complex pattern appearing on both sides of the subject’s posterior...”

(M) - “Flank, Doctor.”

(V) - “Doctor Mills, may I ask why we are using revised terminology for discussing this subject?”

(M) - “Given the specimen’s similarity to equine analogs, I felt that terms for those particular animals would be more accurate than previous verbiage.”

(V) - “...Very astute, doctor. I understand you grew up around such animals? Perhaps you would like to continue the physical assessment, given your familiarity with the terminology and biology.”

(M) - “My pleasure.”

****Dr. Vahlen steps back to allow Dr. Mills to study Subject 05 through the glass****

(M) - “Continuing Doctor Vahlen’s summation, the subject has a very distinct and complex pattern on each flank. As far as the naked eye can tell, they’re identical and aren’t the result of branding or tattoos. Again, with the naked eye it appears the pattern is part of its coat, though chemical analysis can tell if it is natural or dye. Doctor Ngo, speculation on its meaning?”

****Dr. Ngo steps forward to survey the mark on Subject 05, and compares it with pictures on her tablet****

(N) - “Rank or proficiency of a given skill set, first guess. Perhaps the number of ‘stars’ indicates its place in the alien hierarchy... I doubt that since this mark appears to be unique to this specimen. Second guess would be identification of sorts.”

(M) - “Thank you for your input. On the subject of colors, the subject’s tail and mane both have streaks of different shades of purple that are uniform from the root all the way to the tip, almost like what you see the kids have these days. Without chemical analysis we can only speculate on its origins.

-- “The other major physiological trait is a six inch horn protruding from the specimen’s forehead, conical with a slight spiral. This likely led to the strike team designating this as a...unicorn.”

****All three doctors share a grin****

**** Subject 05 shows signs of regaining consciousness ****

(V) - “Ah, it seems our guest is finally recovering from the Arc Thrower bolt in the field. I am surprised it hasn’t recovered sooner, even Sectoids revived quickly and had to be...further subdued.”

**** Subject 05 awakens fully and stands unsteadily. It turns in a circle to survey its holding cell before turning to face the assembled doctors ****

(N) - “Your previous assessment is proving correct regarding aggressive tendencies, Moira. Everything else we’ve put in the cell would be bouncing off the walls by now. Large, expressive eyes...almost human-like affect. Rather curious indeed.”

**** Subject 05 taps the glass enclosure with one limb ****

(U) - [unintelligible]

(N) - “Fascinating...I wonder if it can understand us.”

(M) - “I’m just glad it isn’t screaming bloody murder like the floaters.”

(V) - “We aren’t here to stare at it or let it do the same to us. Now that the subject is awake we can begin the interrogation.”

**** Doctor Vahlen activates the controls to Subject 05’s cell. Interrogation assemblies emerge from their housings in the walls. Subject 05 notices the assemblies as they unfold and reach towards it. Subject 05 becomes extremely agitated and begins to strike the glass ****

(U) - [unintelligible]

(N) - "I...don't think I need to be here for this."

** Dr Ngo turns to leave, Drs Vahlen and Mills remain. Dr Mills shifts from foot to foot and looks away from the cell. Subject 05's attacks against the glass become frantic as the assembly armatures power up and come within reach. **

(M) - "Can we turn the audio off?"

(V) - "...as you wish, Doctor. Wait, what's it—"

** Subject 05's horn glows white and vanishes from within the cell. Security cameras reacquire Subject 05 within the lab itself, behind Drs Vahlen and Mills. **

Public Address System - "Security breach, Alien Containment lab. Initiating lock-down procedures, security detail has been notified."

(U) - [unintelligible]

(M) - "Oh shit, it's loose!"

(V) - "Get out, now!"

Twilight woke with the most thorough body ache she had ever experienced in addition to a horn-splitting headache. She slowly opened her eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. Wherever she was, it was painfully white, which didn't help her headache at all. For a brief moment the unicorn wondered if she was in Cloudsdale, but the impossibly hard floor ruled that out.

Slowly but surely Twilight got her hooves beneath her and slowly opened her eyes. The stark white walls greeted her as things began to focus around her. She turned in place and found one wall was made entirely of glass, and three bipeds were looking at her with clinical detachment.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" Twilight asked as she tapped a hoof on the glass. She saw the mouth of one move, and the other replied. The third maintained an icy-cold stare at Twilight and interrupted the others. With one digit (akin to a dragon's claw but far more lengthy and slender) the third prodded something on the desk on the other side of the glass.

A series of loud metal clanks sounded behind Twilight, and she turned to see two metal limbs unfold and point towards her and extend two hoof-like objects. Both began to glow and crackle with energy as they moved forward, and Twilight knew that they would hurt her *badly* if they came too close.

"Please let me out!" Twilight yelled as she pounded on the glass frantically. She met the eyes of one of the bipeds, who turned and walked away. "Please let me out! PLEASE!" The unicorn screamed, not daring to look behind her. Another of the bipeds turned away, while the third maintained that icy stare. She could feel those two hooves almost upon her flank, and the fight or flight instinct kicked in. Despite her headache, she pulled all the magic she could to her to lash out against the arms reaching towards her *and the magic came down, crushing the bug flat against the stone and spraying yellow blood everywhere*. Twilight reeled from the memory and found she was unable to attack. With so much magic gathered and waiting to be spent, the second instinct took over: *flight*.

Teleporting was an order of magnitude more strenuous than the telekinetics Twilight had in mind, and she felt as though her horn was on fire as she recovered from it even though it was only out of the cell and into the next room and on top of one of the desks. The strain of the teleport combined with the stress of the day so far plus an unfortunately placed stack of papers caused Twilight to trip and upend the desk, scattering its contents everywhere. "Owowowow!"

Unfortunately for the beleaguered unicorn, a disembodied voice and sirens began to shout from all directions, and the bipeds sprinted for the only exit to the room. The first ducked to avoid the rapidly closing door which reminded Twilight uncomfortably of closing jaws while the last had to dive through. The moment the door closed, the blaring sirens and lights winked out and Twilight found herself in complete darkness, which did little to help her state of mind.

One stumble later and crash of office supplies later convinced the haggard unicorn to stop and take a deep breath. "Okay, Twilight, let's take this nice and slow. One hoof at a time," she muttered to herself, and the first step caused something fragile to *crunch* under her hoof. "Great."

Several long moments passed in the dark while Twilight simply breathed in and out. As her heart rate returned to normal the throbbing pain in her horn gradually subsided. Once it had gone down to a more ignorable level, the unicorn cast a simple light spell to chase away the darkness. The room once again became visible, the white walls dyed violet by Twilight's magic, and she was quick to notice she was in the epicenter of various trinkets and baubles she couldn't recognize and a blizzard of papers scattered

about. One desk was on its side while the other was knocked out of alignment with the rest in the row.

In spite of all the unanswered questions she had and the horrors her sheltered mind had experienced so recently, the sight of such a mess around her suddenly seemed much more important. It. Needed. To. Be. **Organized.**

A simple act of brute force telekinesis righted the upended desk and moved the other back into alignment, while more finesse scooped up all the debris on the floor. Twilight did not know what any of the objects did but she organized them by size and shape on one of the now empty desk anyway. The language printed on the paper wasn't anything the unicorn knew so she was unable to organize that in any meaningful way, so she elected to stack it on the table as well. So obsessively perfect was the stack that a casual observer might mistake it for a solid block. Somewhere along the way Twilight began to hum the tune to Winter Wrap-up, and she found she didn't want to stop as she continued.

With the list of things to organize rapidly diminishing, Twilight's gaze fell upon the object she had accidentally crushed. It was a small thing, made of a light-weight material she had never seen before that was unfortunately smashed to shards. In the epicenter of the shards was a hollow tube filled with a black liquid...ink! The moment the familiar smell reached her snout she gave a delighted squeal and scooped up all the remains of the crushed object and whisked it over to the desk.

Further analysis of the plastic tube showed that it ended in a metal tip with a ball embedded in it, and drawing the ball-tip across a surface pulled the ink out in an even amount. "That's...genius! Why didn't I think of this earlier? It's a quill and an ink well in one!" Investigation of the shards matched one of the many objects now neatly organized on the desk, which she plucked from its place with her telekinetics.

She scrutinized every detail and started to disassemble it, but was interrupted as the lights came back on and the door began to open. Twilight was gone from the desk in the blink of an eye, peeking out from under another desk to spy upon whatever nightmare was coming for her.

The XCOM facility was staffed with the best and brightest minds on Earth, and its soldiers were poached from the best armed forces from around the globe. The training of every person in the organization was determined by their specialty but every person, from the commanding officer down to the cooks, received a course on what to do in the event of invasion by hostile forces...or containment failure of a live capture.

Commander Bradford was silently pleased at the rapid deployment of the base's soldiers. Every intersection and all access points he had come across thus far were covered by a rifleman in a bulletproof vest, though the clothes under the armor varied wildly. Most were on-rotation and in their casual uniforms while a few others were in exercise sweats and sleepwear. A couple of unlucky souls were soaked to the bone and in wet clothes, having obviously been interrupted while in the shower. If it inconvenienced them in any way, they hid it well as Bradford passed. None of the soldiers saluted him or did more than give him a nod as he passed, which was also a good sign. If an X-Ray was loose, no one wanted to be anything less than one hundred percent ready.

Bradford rounded the corner and entered the corridor heading towards Containment and again was impressed by the level of quick-thinking his soldiers possessed. The four uninjured soldiers from the mission earlier in the day were covering the door from various angles and all were still in their full combat armor. Jenkins covered the door to Containment from the open doorway of the engineering workshop next door with her shotgun while Harris knelt in the opposite doorway which led to the base's powerplant. Dryzinski lay prone in the hallway with his LMG on its bipod while Fowler knelt beside him. Fowler was the first to notice Bradford's approach, and after giving the Dryzinski a tap on the shoulder she rose to speak with the commander.

"We got here within 30 seconds of the alert; there's been no activity since. The doctors are in the workshop, and Shen is patching surveillance feeds there as well." With the situation summarized, the lieutenant resumed her previous position beside the machine gunner and trained her rifle on the door and Bradford headed into the workshop. The three researchers were huddled together, and Shen tapped away at a computer terminal.

"Doctors, what happened?" Bradford asked sternly once it became apparent that none were injured enough for his interrogation to wait. "Alert was for containment breach but there is no way for the cell to be opened from the inside. Did it break out?"

Doctor Ngo shrugged and stepped to the side, uncomfortable under the baleful gaze of the commander. Doctor Vahlen however, rose to the occasion despite looking pale as a ghost. "The subject revived and we were beginning the interrogation procedure. The subject began to resist, much like the others we have 'hosted' before it. There was a flash of light from within the cell, and then it was outside the cell. The cell wasn't broken as far as I could surmise but I will admit my concern at that point was to escape the lab and avoid being imprisoned with the creature."

Bradford looked to Doctor Mills, who had just opened his mouth to add his own account when Shen interrupted, "Security footage has been routed to this terminal. Footage of the event is playing...now." All those in attendance huddled around the monitor, and events played out just as Vahlen described. A flash of light too brilliant for the cameras to record engulfed the 'unicorn', and a corresponding flash of light appeared in the lab itself. The creature floundered on top of a desk and scattered its contents as well as knocking it over before diving for cover behind another desk.

A long moment of silence passed between the doctors and the commander before he remembered the tablet in his hand with the combat data from the mission the unicorn was retrieved from. He flew through the reports and casualty lists and settled on several still images from the armor camera of Corporal Harris.

"Harris, Bradford. Any activity?"

"No, sir. No activity from the door since we got here," came the quick reply. "Problems?"

"Still determining that. Meet me in the workshop, ASAP."

Only a few moments passed before the corporal tabbed his way over to the huddled group with his helmet in one hand, looking a bit unsure of himself. "Sir?"

Bradford motioned for the corporal to view the footage of the escape, then the still photo on the tablet, which depicted the unicorn backpedaling furiously with the same light present ahead of it. "Corporal, what happened in this picture? Did it do the same thing that we saw in the lab?"

Harris looked even less sure of himself and cleared his throat. "When I ran into the x-ray in the parking lot it was backing away from one of the Chryssalids, and the bug looked hell bent on tearing it to pieces."

Doctor Ngo scoffed and cut in. "Chryssalids might attack indiscriminately but they completely ignore the other invaders and only target humans. Are you sure about what you saw, Corporal?" The doctor's doubt was quickly quieted by Bradford's baleful glare for interrupting and the soldiers flat 'are you serious?' look.

"The x-ray started screaming and there was this flash," The corporal tapped the tablet where the light dominated the frame, "...and the bug was down. I hit the x-ray with the arc thrower and that was end-op."

"If the Chryssalid was attacking the subject, and the subject attacked it...the implications are interesting indeed." Doctor Vahlen crossed her arms and rubbed a hand across her chin as she studied the footage. "Corporal, when you say, 'the bug was down,' I assume it was killed. Were you able to determine how? I can only speculate based on this picture alone but it looks like a burst of directed energy but no weapons or fragments were found near the capture."

"Well, it was more crushed than burned," Was all Harris could say before Shen came to the rescue with a tablet of his own.

"Rather thoroughly crushed, indeed." Shen said, uploading a new picture to the tablet of the recovery team cleaning up the mess in the shallow crater that once was the parking lot. "From what I understand, they had to use shovels, vacuum pumps and several liquid-proof bags to retrieve all of it. Also, if anyone's curious, I have current surveillance footage available."

Without another word, the video on the computer console jumped to the darkened lab. Another button press and the darkened room took on the greenish tint of night-vision. The escaped specimen stood in the center of the room, its eyes closed and looking serene. After a long moment, it leaned its head back and the monitor image turned bright white. The night-vision filter clicked off and revealed an orb of light hovering over the unicorn, who was now surveying its surroundings with undisguised curiosity.

Its gaze fell upon the mess it had created during the escape, and everyone observing the video could see its left eye and ear twitch. A moment later and the pale purple light appeared around the unicorn's horn and the toppled desk flipped over and scooted back into place. All the scattered writing utensils, papers and other office supplies became swept up into a tornado around the unicorn before settling into orderly lines and stacks on desk.

"That's...telekinesis! On that scale and with that degree of control, that's inc—" Vahlen gasped, but was interrupted with a word from Shen as he upped the volume as high as the console could go. It was faint but humming could be heard, the same strings of notes repeating over and over again while the unicorn's head bobbed slightly to the beat. Apart from the sounds of the console the workshop was silent as a tomb; the observers were completely mesmerized by the sight.

"Unbelievable." Doctor Ngo was the first to break the silence. "That sounds like a song. Songs imply creativity, culture even! This is nothing like any of the others we've encountered." Before she could continue, the melody terminated with a squeak as the unicorn bent down to examine a crushed ball-point

pen on the floor.

"Command Actual, Strike One," Came Lieutenant Fowler's voice in Bradford's ear, "Strike Three and Five are in position, as soon as Harris rejoins us we can assault the lab."

"Copy that, Strike One." Bradford replied, and then turned to the observers around him. "Strike teams are in position, just waiting on you, Harris. Rejoin your squad and wait for my order."

As the corporal nodded and turned to leave, Shen intervened, "Commander, there is an alternative I would like to suggest. I think we should try and talk to it."

Vahlen's strangled protest was cut off by Bradford's clipped response, "Why?"

"As much as I hate using the term since it seems to be used every day here, this" Shen indicated to the console, "is unprecedented in the history of this project. We've seen too many inconsistencies with this subject to simply assume its hostility or allegiance with the invaders. Perhaps it was a prisoner or even an abductee from another world the invaders have attacked. Perhaps its arrival is a complete coincidence. These are questions an 'interrogation' cannot answer, and I'd at least like to ask before resorting to those methods."

A long moment of silence fell upon the workshop as Bradford turned away and cupped his chin in his hand. The commander wordlessly turned back to the group and drew his sidearm, then presented it grip-first to the chief engineer. "You can make the attempt, Doctor. If you feel threatened in any way or if I call for a breach, you get down and stay down. One of the soldiers outside will provide you with comms gear to keep in touch."

Shen nodded wordlessly and gingerly took the pistol. He checked the safety and the clip before pocketing it inside his jacket and heading towards the hallway.

"Strike teams, Command. Hold positions, a volunteer will be entering the lab to attempt contact with the subject. Strike One, the volunteer will need comms gear so make sure some are ready."

"Sir, with all due respect that sounds like suicide," Fowler's voice sounded incredulous.

"The situation is still developing, Lieutenant. Make sure all teams are prepared to breach."

With every step Dr. Charles Shen took, he had to resist the urge to turn back and let the strike teams attack. Shen wasn't a soldier, he wasn't even a young man anymore. And he had just volunteered to go into what was for all intents and purposes a vault with a potentially hostile alien life form. He hadn't joined the project to risk his life like this.

And the moment that thought hit him, he felt ashamed for even considering it. *Men less than half my age were risking their lives... They would risk their lives without hesitation, and being significantly younger than me, they would likely fare better in a fight if it came to that. So why did I volunteer?* Another step and another moment of introspection passed, and Shen found the answer wasn't as easy as he had thought.

The aging engineer blinked as he found himself standing in front of the door to Containment, and over a dozen heavily armed soldiers with too-young faces watched him eagerly. He looked down to the headset in his hands and chastised himself for allowing his inner thoughts to cloud his perception so much.

As Shen brought the headset to his ear, the soldier with battered armor and a shotgun leaned forward and gave a conspiratorial grin, "So, when are they going to be standard issue?" When the engineer gave the soldier a questioning look, she continued, "Those brass balls you've got. When will they be standard issue?"

"Stow it, Jenkins, or I'll stow it for you!" Came a hissed order from another soldier farther down the stack, even as a ripple of amusement passed through all those in earshot.

"Now, now, kid. Standard procedure applies," Shen said as he input the command override to release the door from lockdown. "Prototypes must be properly field tested before mass production may begin." An even bigger ripple of tension-diffusing chuckles passed through the soldiers, and the shotgun-wielding kid grew a smile that nearly took in her ears. The engineer returned the smile with one of his own and tapped his headset. "Door is unlocking in five seconds..."

Twilight didn't dare move from her hiding spot under the desk as she heard the door close again. The odd tempo of bipedal steps could be heard approaching the row of desks, slow and deliberate. The steps

stopped a short distance away, and then a few more odd sounds that she couldn't quite recognize hit her ears. Something metal hitting the desk, and a squeak that sounded suspiciously like one of Twilight's chairs down in her library basement.

The unicorn had almost plucked up the courage to peek around the corner of the desk when whatever-it-was spoke. To the common pony it might have sounded like nonsense or gibberish but Twilight was able to differentiate the syllables as well as an upward inflection at the end. She didn't understand a word of it but it *sounded* like a question.

Again the string of syllables hit her ears and Twilight became almost certain it was a question. If whatever was in the lab was asking questions and not acting nearly as scary as everything else had been, then she'd consider it a hoof in the right direction. Slowly, she scooted towards the edge of the desk and peeked around the corner and laid her eyes upon the other creature in the room.

It was a biped much like the others she had seen, though this was the first time she could take the time to study their appearance without being in mortal danger. It was clothed quite thoroughly, the only exposed portions being its claws and its nearly hairless head. What hair was present was stark white, and Twilight could see glasses perched on its narrow nose. The nose itself protruded from its relatively flat but wrinkled face.

The clothes were mostly earthen colors, an olive green jacket over a white shirt and red tie, and brown pants and boots. A tag with a miniature picture of the creature hung from its jacket collar and was littered with more of the writing that Twilight couldn't understand.

Twilight was able to take all this in with just a moment's observation, and unfortunately the creature was alert enough to spot the unicorn. It turned to face her and its eyes widened. The eyes themselves were quite small by her standards but they were far more intelligent than the glowing orbs from that bug thing *that crunched beneath her magic and sprayed blood everywhere*. The unicorn winced and ducked back behind the desk. *Oh Celestia*, she thought as she began to panic, *I killed that thing...Fluttershy would never forgive me. Maybe that's why they put me in that room, maybe that's where they keep murderers.*

Before Twilight's guilty thoughts could spiral further, more sounds came from the creature; another question and moving something. Another peek revealed it was sitting in a chair, and a second chair was pulled out from a desk and stood empty before it. When it spotted her attempt at surveillance, it smiled and waved one of its claws toward the chair. The intent was obvious now, an invitation.

The unicorn drew a ragged breath, then crawled out from under the desk and stood. Her eyes darted to the creature again, then around the room quickly. Recent events hadn't inspired trust in Twilight, but she was at her heart a herd creature and the company of *somepony* was better than being all alone in such a strange place. She slowly strode toward the chair and hopped into it before turning back towards the creature.

It spoke again, another question then waited for a response.

"I...I don't understand you. Can you understand me?" Twilight tried, and the creature did a good job of mimicking her confused expression. "Wait...I might have a spell that can help." Twilight leaned her head forward to point her horn at the creature and dredged up the translation spell she had learned years ago. Being the personal student of Celestia had exposed the unicorn to many cultures and complex languages, and the translation spell was the staple of modern Equestrian diplomacy.

As the spell cast, Twilight opened her eyes and started to ask a question when she noticed the creature's posture had changed. It was now leaning awkwardly back in its chair and had a metal tool in its claws and pointed in her direction. "Can you understand me now?" She tried timidly, hoping against hope that her spell had worked.

The metal tool wavered slightly and the creature's expression morphed to curiosity. With one claw it waved over its shoulder to the seemingly empty air while the tool remained in the other. "I can understand you now—"

The moment Twilight heard those words, the flood gates opened. "Can you please help me? I don't know where I am and everything is so scary here and I didn't mean to hurt the bug thing I swear! I'm so sorry!" Twilight fixed the creature with a pleading look, begging for any kind of assurance or forgiveness or anything to give her stability in the ocean of uncertainty she now found herself in.

The creature's voice was calm and the comforting smile returned to its face. "Calm down, take a deep breath, and take things slowly. My name is Charles Shen, do you have a name? Where are you from?" The creature, 'Charles', appeared to relax as he waited for Twilight's answer.

She took Charles' advice and took in a deep breath, then let it out again before replying, "My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I was born in Canterlot, the capitol of Equestria." A moment of silence reigned between the two but just before Twilight was about to pose a question of her own, Charles seized the

initiative.

“‘Twilight Sparkle’, that’s an interesting name. Did you get the name because of those marks?” Charles indicated towards her cutie mark, and the unicorn shook her head.

“My parents gave me the name. My cutie mark comes from my special talent, which is magic!” *That crushed the bug with a sickening crunch and spray of blood.* Twilight tried to maintain a smile but wasn’t very successful.

If Charles noticed her discomfort, he (*the voice sounds male*, Twilight thought absently) didn’t mention it. “The mark is for your special skill, and that skill is magic...” He looked over his shoulder at the empty room before turning back to Twilight. “Was that how you got out of there?” He indicated toward the glass-enclosed room that the unicorn woke up in, and she nodded in response.

“I’m so sorry if I scared your friends who were here earlier...but the things in that room were scary and I panicked. I didn’t want to hurt them so I teleported out.” Twilight bit her lip before pleading, “Please don’t make me go back in there! Please!”

Charles leaned back and swallowed audibly, “You were scared and you teleported out because of it...I can understand that it’s scary to wake up someplace that you don’t recognize. You used magic to ‘teleport’?”

“Yes! It’s a rather complex spell so most unicorns choose to learn things that help with their special talents.” Twilight dredged up her encyclopedic knowledge of spells and special talents she knew of, but clamped down on it. *It’s not polite to talk just about myself and my interests*, Twilight chastised herself. “What’s your special talent?”

The question seemed to surprise Charles, if the expressions of his kind were anything like hers. His eyes widened at the question as he scratched his jaw with one digit and looked to the side. “Well, my special talent would be engineering and construction. I design and build things for a living.”

The unicorn clopped her hooves together and smiled brightly at the declaration. “You invent things? That’s amazing! Did you invent this?” A quick pull of telekinesis lofted the crushed writing instrument as well as an undamaged one into the air between the two. “My assistant and I both write quite often but it was always so inconvenient using inkwells. These quills with ink inside are simply genius!”

“Ah, I’m afraid I didn’t invent the ballpoint pen. It’s been around for...well, longer than I can remember.” Charles replied with a slight chuckle and a smile, though his eyes never left the floating objects in front of him. “You mentioned that you had an assistant? Where is he? Or she?”

“My assistant is back in P—” And just as the word was about to leave her mouth, the reality of Twilight’s situation came rushing back to her. “Spike is back home with my friends. I do hope they’re alright. I hope I can see them again.” All of Twilight’s cheer vanished as she bowed her head and levitated the writing utensils back to their proper positions on the table beside her.

A long moment of silence passed between the two before Charles asked, “I can’t imagine what it would be like to find myself in your situation right now. I take it that you did not find yourself here willingly? Do you know how you arrived here?”

“Discord.” Twilight growled, and her depression heated into anger.

“Discord?” He asked, and again he glanced over his shoulder.

“Discord, avatar of chaos and nemesis to...” Twilight stopped mid-explanation as she gave Charles a wary look, “Why are you repeating everything I say? And why are you looking over your shoulder?”

Charles blinked, then closed his eyes and sighed. He looked back up to Twilight and tapped the device that was nestled in his right ear that reached towards his mouth. “Twilight, I have several very curious friends who are outside the room who want to know what we’re discussing. Whatever trick you did to allow us to communicate isn’t affecting them. They can hear what I say through this device, and I can hear them through it as well.”

Dozens of questions popped up about the thing in Charles’ ear, but the more pressing concern nagged at Twilight. “I-I wouldn’t mind meeting your friends. I’ll do my best to answer any question they have. Will they be joining us?”

“I’m afraid not, Twilight,” Charles said with a gentle shake of his head, “You’ve come at an unfortunate time for my people. Right now we’re very...suspicious of ‘newcomers’. You’re the first one we’ve encountered that hasn’t been actively violent and there’s some debate as to how to handle this situation.”

He switched the metal tool from one claw to the other, and then placed it on the table beside him. Charles was about to continue but a rather embarrassing rumble from Twilight’s stomach interrupted him. “I...

don't suppose you have anything to eat? I don't know how long it's been since I last ate." Twilight admitted, looking to the side in embarrassment. *Think of something simple that any culture would have to eat! Think think think...ah!* "Do you have... toast?"

"Toast? I think I can manage that," Charles rose from his seat and pocketed the metal tool from the table beside him. Twilight started to get up from her seat but stopped when he turned to face her again. "I'm afraid I'll need you to wait here, Twilight. As I said, I have several very curious friends outside, but they are also very scared. They want to know all about you but they aren't ready to see you face to face quite yet. So please, just wait right here and I'll be back with something to eat."

"Oh...okay." The unicorn replied as she sank back into the chair. Her eyes never left Charles as he made his way to the door and whispered into the thing attached to his ear. The door opened and her only friend in this strange place stepped through. As the door sealed shut, Twilight caught sight of several hulking shapes in the corridor beyond. *I'm not so certain I want to know what he meant by 'curious' and 'suspicious'.*

Complete silence reigned as Bradford and the assembled scientists watched the camera feed as Shen walked through the now deserted containment lab. The scientists were wide-eyed and probably imagining a scenario akin to a horror movie involving the untimely demise of the elderly engineer, but Bradford was too seasoned a campaigner to give in to his imagination in that fashion.

Shen's eyes fell upon the meticulously organized desk before walking to the next desk in line. One hand placed the borrowed pistol on the desk while the other pulled out the chair for him to sit on. "Can you hear me?" Shen asked to the apparently empty room. When no reaction made itself apparent, the engineer asked the question again.

"There," Bradford declared as his keen eyes spotted the movement at the far end of the row of desks. "Shen, Bradford. One o'clock relative your position, last desk of the row." The moment Shen turned in the indicated direction the shape ducked back down out of view.

"Please, come out," Shen asked politely as he pulled another chair from a neighboring desk to sit in front of him. "I just want to ask you some questions. Can you come out, please?"

"This is ridiculous," Dr. Vahlen whispered, her tone acidic, "Shen shouldn't be in there, we should just seal Containment and cut the air supplies..." Any further recommendations were lost as the specimen again peeked over the desk towards the engineer, then slowly emerged from its hiding place to sit in the offered chair.

"Can you understand me?" Shen asked slowly, and the specimen tilted its head to the side and spoke in reply. The alien language seemed to snap Dr. Ngo out of the hypnotism the scene elicited, and she scrambled for a pen and paper.

Just as she started scribbling notes on the closest piece of paper, the specimen leaned forward and a flare of light struck Shen. The doctors recoiled instinctively from the flash, while Bradford swore and switched to the tactical frequency. "Strike One, b—"

"Wait, wait!" Dr. Ngo objected, and pointed furiously at the video. Shen appeared unharmed and waving at the camera positioned behind him.

"I can understand you now—" Shen started, and was quickly cut off by the specimen. A torrent of incomprehensible gibberish came from the creature sitting in front of the engineer. Dr Ngo manipulated the settings on the monitor and the display zoomed in on the specimen's face as it talked. Fear was plainly apparent in the specimen's expression. Fear and desperation.

"Mother of God..." Dr Ngo whispered as she began to take notes as quickly as she could. "Is this recording? I'll need every second of footage—" The scientist cut herself short when the specimen's unbroken chain of speech stopped and Shen asked a question, and received a more calm and controlled response.

"They're communicating! But...how?" Dr Ngo gasped.

"Nevermind the how! Start asking questions!" Dr Mills scrambled for the radio on the desk before firing off a series of questions to Shen's earpiece. Dr Ngo soon joined in.

"What do the marks mean? How did you escape the cell? Magic...is it serious? What does the horn do? Is it male or female...or neither? Is that telekinesis? Can it write? What's the language look like? What is 'Discord'? Is it a force, a being, related to 'magic'?"

Dr Vahlen and Commander Bradford both remained behind the two excited scientists fired questions

through the radio and Shen tried his best to ask them as part of the conversation while repeating the answers back to his audience. "Don't have any questions, Moira?"

Dr Vahlen, who had been staring at the close-up video of the subject while it talked, jerked in surprise and looked to the commander. "I...there are no words." Her eyes lingered for just a moment on Bradford, who kept his blank gaze on the monitor.

The subject stopped mid-sentence and its tone changed. It leaned back and its large eyes narrowed slightly as it asked a question, and Shen did his best to gently explain the surveillance of the room and the dozen armed men waiting outside the door. The subject's posture went from suspicious to nervous as it asked another question, to which Shen replied, then headed towards the security door. The subject remained in its chair and craned its neck to look out the door as Shen left Containment.

"Toast? It's hungry and it wants...toast." Both scientists by the display looked to each other and a quick debate began as to the implications. Vahlen and Bradford ignored them in favor of giving Shen the once-over as he walked into engineering with a smile on his face.

"That went about as well as I could have hoped," Shen let out a long-held breath as he walked over to his desk and pulled open a drawer and began to retrieve a loaf of bread, a bottle of honey and a plate. He started to head out of engineering towards the civilian break area but stopped when he noticed the doubtful looks both Vahlen and Bradford were giving him. "She said she was hungry and she wanted toast. I'm going to make some for her."

"You can't be serious!" Vahlen growled, "Your curiosity has been entertained but the security of the project is at risk as long as its allowed to roam free inside Containment. Commander, you should order the breach and subdue the subject."

Before Bradford could reply, Shen spoke again. "I am serious, and I am more certain than ever that the 'subject' has nothing to do with the invaders." The engineer's voice hardened as he retrieved a tablet computer from his desk and motioned for Vahlen and Bradford to follow him. "We can discuss this on the way."

The trio left the workshop and made its way towards the civilian break area. The corridors were deserted save for the soldiers at the intersections, and the break room was completely empty. Shen loaded the toaster then turned back to the other two in the room.

"Perhaps you would like to explain the reasoning for your conclusion, Charles?" Bradford asked evenly.

"I don't know how much you could hear from the surveillance, but the subject, 'Twilight' is nothing but a scared little girl who has no idea where she is." Shen sighed and leaned against the counter beside the toaster. "She was eager to answer any questions I had, and if her body language or facial expressions are anything like humans, then I have no doubts that she isn't a threat so long as she feels safe."

"The **specimen** is not human," Vahlen said acidly, "And every second we waste entertaining this fantasy is another second that gives the specimen an opportunity to decipher the information still in Containment or escape into the facility proper."

"The greatest mystery Twilight found in Containment was the ball-point pen," Shen shot back, his tone equally sharp, "Wherever she's from still uses quills and inkwells as the primary method of writing. Does that sound like the average level of technological sophistication we've seen from the invaders? And I am certain Twilight will stay exactly where she is until I return because I asked her to, but if she feels threatened then Containment will not be able to hold her."

Bradford raised an eyebrow as Vahlen choked on her hasty reply. Shen tapped his tablet and handed it to Vahlen before continuing. "When I saw the pictures of the Chryssalid that Twilight killed, I started running some numbers to try and theorize the amount of force needed to do the damage done to the surrounding area."

Vahlen grew pale and passed the tablet to Bradford, who gave the equations and Newton measurements an appraising eye. "I see a rather large number, Charles, but I'm afraid I'm not certain how that translates into physical force."

"That's higher than the impact tolerance for the cell in Containment..." Vahlen whispered, obviously shaken at the danger she had unwittingly found herself in less than an hour earlier.

"That's higher than the impact tolerance for the door leading to Containment," Shen added with a nervous smile. "With that amount of force combined with the telekinetic control we witnessed earlier, I have serious doubts on the effectiveness of projectile weapons against Twilight. Quite simply, if she wanted to harm us then I've seen very little evidence that we could stop her with conventional methods."

The frank assessment seemed to shake Vahlen further, but Bradford's military mind appreciated the blunt

statement. "I sense you've got some sort of plan to keep that from happening?"

"That's rather simple, we give her what she wants."

"And what would that be?" Vahlen asked after recovering enough to muster some sarcasm.

"Toast." Shen answered, and right on cue the toaster popped up.

Again the door opened to containment and Shen stepped through, though his hands were filled the odds-and-ends for the impromptu meal: A plate with two slices of still warm toast and a small bottle of honey balanced on it in one hand, while the other held a bottle of water and a plastic cup.

Twilight was right where the engineer had left her, sitting in the office chair and eyeing what appeared to be a dismantled ballpoint pen. The various components clattered onto the mostly clear desk top as her concentration was interrupted and the alien made a mad scramble with her forelegs to try and keep any of the parts from tumbling to the floor. Once she appeared satisfied that none of the parts were going to escape her cordon, she turned to Shen and gave a sheepish smile. The smile turned into near-naked hunger as her eyes locked on to the plate and its contents.

"I can certainly appreciate toast as a snack," Shen said as he emptied his hands onto the desk by his chair and then sat. "I like to put honey on mine, so I felt it would be polite to offer it to you." Twilight's eyes widened even further with...gratitude? Worship? *This kind of attention makes me feel like I'm bringing Christmas presents for the grandkids...* Shen hid his discomfort at the attention and dropped a bit of honey on both slices of toast before sliding the plate over toward the unicorn.

In the blink of an eye one slice of toast flew off the plate and into Twilight's mouth, and a moment later the second slice followed the first. The engineer had barely finished pouring water into the cup before that was telekinetically yanked from his hands. The water was gulped down with almost alarming speed before the cup was returned to the table. "Thank you, Charles." The alien said after a long moment, a grateful smile on her face again.

"Glad I could help," The engineer replied, then tapped his earpiece to adjust the volume to a more tolerable level as the scientists next door began to pepper him with more questions to ask. "My friends were very curious about how we can understand each other now. Can you explain what you did? Was it 'magic'?"

"Exactly!" The alien replied eagerly with a quick nod, "The Translation spell was one of the many innovations pioneered by Star Swirl the Bearded during his career, and allowed for the first time easy communications between Equestria and its neighboring nations like the Griffon clans and the Zebra herds, as well as some of the more exotic travelers like dragons. Diplomatic relations became much more sophisticated as complex treaties could be negotiated without a translator's assistance. Some theorized that Starswirl the Bearded learned of the spell by analyzing the assimilation patterns of the changelings but..." Twilight stopped, then brought her face to her hoof and sighed, "That wasn't what you asked."

"The underlying theory of Translation spells have been lost to antiquity, but it's commonly believed that it translates concepts a person attempts to illustrate by spoken words into the words that the other party can understand. The word you may use for an object or concept like 'table'..." Twilight indicated to the desk beside her, "...will differ from my word for the object, but we are both discussing the same thing. The spell simply bridges the gap."

"That's quite extraordinary, Twilight." Shen said after waiting a moment to see if the long-winded unicorn had anything else to add. "My friends outside were worried that you had done something that allowed you to view my mind or what I was thinking."

The alien's expression became doubtful. "Looking into the minds of others is dangerous in the extreme. Everything I've studied has indicated that the mind of another intelligent being is so fundamentally different from our own minds that the psyche of both risk damage if they come into contact. The only pony I know of who could do something like that would be Princess Luna, but she only deals with dreams of those that sleep and not their minds directly. Well, Discord does something similar, too, but he's crazy."

The engineer smiled as he took in the explanations Twilight had given him. *Spells? Griffons? Dragons? The scientists will pronounce me crazy or their heads will explode once I get this conversation down on paper.* "That's very relieving to hear."

"What did it say?" "Nevermind that, ask it if it knows anything about the invaders!" "It's clear that they're unrelated, their physiologies are too divergent to be manufactured by the same creator. How does it achieve telekinesis? Mental willpower, invisible appendages?" "What about the mane and tail! Those colors can't be natural. Do they have significant meaning?" Shen's earpiece was filled with a flood of questions from the scientists and he had to suppress the urge to turn it off to cut out the noise.

"Forgive me if this assumption is incorrect, but are you a teacher? You seem...well-versed on certain topics." Shen asked carefully, and had to tolerate Dr Mills' squawk in protest and Dr Ngo's gleeful cheer at the question's nature.

"I'm not; I'm actually Princess Celestia's personal student as well as a librarian. I study all the time to keep my grades at their absolute best for the princess. She says I should take it easy sometimes but I think that's her way of testing my resolve!"

"Librarian and student, and you are the pupil of Princess 'Celestia'?" Shen asked out loud, and the alien nodded in a too-human manner. "You also mentioned a Princess Luna. Are they both daughters of the current ruler? Or is 'princess' an elected or appointed position?"

Twilight's head leaned to the side in apparent confusion. "Princess Celestia and Princess Luna rule together. They have their appointed nobles to help manage the country but they are the rulers of Equestria. Celestia ruled by herself for a thousand years before Luna returned and was redeemed. I was so glad for both of them when that happened, sisters shouldn't fight like they did."

"They're over a thousand years old? Is that normal? How old are you?" Shen blurted out in disbelief, and the two scientists in his earpiece suddenly found their positions reversed.

"I'm only twenty, but I'm also not an alicorn. The lifespan of a single alicorn can last for...well, millennia." Twilight closed her eyes and Shen could see them moving beneath her eyelids for a long moment. "Recorded history tends to get fuzzy prior to about five thousand years ago, when a 'Lady Solaria' was mentioned as the ruling alicorn of her age."

"Alicorns...a winged unicorn?" Shen asked as he raked his mind for everything he knew about the term.

Again Twilight nodded and smiled. "Yes! While they are most notably recognized for both wings and horn, they are also blessed with extremely powerful magic and long lives. I'm above average for a unicorn in terms of magical power, but the princesses are far beyond what I could ever hope to accomplish. Celestia and Luna raise the sun and moon as easily as I can lift this." And with that, the disassembled pen components lifted from the table and began to reassemble. With the parts once again combined into a whole, the pen aligned itself vertically and the plunger at the top of the pen clicked dully. Twilight's expression became frustrated as the plunger rose and fell several times with only dull clicks to accompany it. "Why? Why won't you click like the others?"

"Ah, may I?" Shen asked gently and held out a hand towards the pen. The writing utensil obediently levitated toward him and dropped into his palm. *I half expected it to be warm or something*, Shen thought absently as he unscrewed the pen at the midsection and extracted the various parts from inside. "Twilight, I have been meaning to ask...where do you think you are?"

The specimen, who had been watching his hands like a hawk, looked up and met his gaze for just a moment before glancing away. "I don't know. I've been trying to figure that out, but I'm afraid I just don't know. If I could see a map, I think I could pin down just how far away Discord sent me."

Shen didn't immediately reply. His hands kept busy with the pen components as he corrected the problem and reassembled it. He stood and offered it to Twilight, then walked past her towards one of the diagnostic screens mounted on the wall. In less than a minute the monitor flicked on and a slowly spinning model of the planet Earth appeared.

"Oh, that's amazing! How does that work? Illusion spell? Or-or..." Twilight started but fell silent as her eyes scanned the globe once, twice, and three times. "It's not there. Equestria isn't there. Where am I? I don't know... I don't know." Her eyes remained locked on the spinning globe but she began to tremble as her voice died away.

"Now now, we can answer that question later. All that matters is that you're safe, for now." Shen said quietly as he once more resumed his seat. The engineer kept himself from cursing out loud as Twilight looked down and squeezed her eyes shut and tried to blink away tears.

"A lot has happened to you, so it might be best to call it a night for now. How does that sound?" Shen suggested gently, and had to restrain his fatherly instincts to give the alien a comforting pat on the back. "I'm going to go outside now to have a word with my friends. If you want to talk to me, just say something or wave to that corner." With that, Shen slowly turned to leave. He had almost made it to the door when a single word stopped him.

"Paper," Twilight said quietly, "I-I need paper. I have to write a letter."

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

XCOM: Abbreviation for Extraterrestrial Combat Unit, a multinational paramilitary group created and operated outside of public oversight or control tasked with the safety of the planet Earth.

Alien Interrogation: An invasive surgical process involving probes inserted into the captured alien's brain and translating electrical impulses into images and other useful data. After the captured alien expires, its body is autopsied for to elicit any further breakthroughs.

Home Base: The primary operation center for the XCOM organization is in a classified location, primarily underground to maintain operational security. It consists of multiple underground levels to both house the personnel in the organization as well as their work areas with a minimum number of surface facilities.

Stardust Supplemental Files (Pt. 1)

PRESIDENT ADDRESSES NATION AFTER ALIEN ATTACKS, ISSUES ORDERS FOR MOBILIZATION OF ALL NATIONAL GUARD REGIMENTS NATIONWIDE.

UN SECURITY COUNCIL CONVENES TO DISCUSS GLOBAL CONCERNS AFTER ATTACK ON US CAPITOL. COUNCIL CHAIRMAN CONCLUDES MEETING, 'APPROPRIATE ACTIONS ALREADY BEING TAKEN.'

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Attached notes by: Dr. Kim Ngo

"This is the translated document written by 'Twilight Sparkle', the alien specimen captured during operation HAMMERHEAD (link redirects to HAMMERHEAD mission files, authorization required) by XCOM personnel. The document is in the form of personal correspondence between subject 'Sparkle' and another entity known as 'Princess Celestia.' Summaries of the relationship between subject 'Sparkle' and 'Princess Celestia' can be found in this section of the Stardust files. (links redirect to STARDUST/GOVT/VIP and STARDUST/SPARKLE/REL, authorization required)"

Translation Start:

"Dear Princess Celestia,

I don't know if you'll ever get to read this, but I feel it's my duty to record what has happened. If I can find a way back to Equestria(1) then I hope this can explain.

After you had returned to Canterlot(1), the Elements and I freed Discord(2) but I'm afraid I fell for one of his tricks. I know you said that Fluttershy(2) would be the most capable of reforming him, but he challenged me with a bet. If I won, he'd reform. If I lost, he would turn back to stone. I was so confident that I could win the bet since it was directly related to my studies on magic and friendship(4) but now I fear it was just a trick that I fell for.

The moment I agreed, Discord sent me someplace far away. As of this writing I am still unsure of just how far, but I suspect I may be on another world entirely. I'm afraid it isn't a peaceful place like Equestria is. The moment I arrived, I saw three of the local inhabitants die to a monster. When the monster found me, I —[the following section is crossed out thoroughly and could not be translated]

When I woke up, I found myself in a laboratory. After some surprises and confusion, I was able to speak with one of the locals who called himself 'Charles Shen'. In hindsight I should have asked what Charles and the others call themselves, since they certainly aren't ponies(3). They're bipedal, mostly hairless and have forelimbs that end in claw-like appendages much like Spike's(2). Judging from what I've seen in my short time here, they are tool-users and are extremely clever. I am actually writing this letter with an invention Charles called the 'ballpoint pen,' which is a quill with an inkwell inside. Genius, I know!

Charles also described his people briefly, and it sounds like they're very much alone. They are very suspicious of strangers because they've been attacked so much. I can't think of any reason why anypony would be so mean, especially to a race as clever as Charles'. Charles himself is very curious and asked me several questions on a variety of subjects. I think he also asked questions on behalf of others who weren't in the room; he described a tool he wore that allowed him to speak and listen to others too far away to hear!

I hope I get to see Charles tomorrow, he's the only friend I have until I get back home.

I'll keep writing these letters, though I have no way of delivering them at this time without Spike. I think it will be a good way to record how things progress. In the mean time, I'll do what I can to help Charles and his friends. I'm the first pony they've ever met, so I'll do my best to leave a good impression.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle"

(1)- The location names described are 'best guess' translations according to subject 'Sparkle'. The translations were initially completed by subject 'Sparkle' herself through nonconventional means. A detailed explanation of subject 'Sparkle's' translation method can be found here (link redirects to STARDUST/SPARKLE/ABILITIES, authorization required), and a list of locations and a map transcribed by subject 'Sparkle' can be found here (link redirects to STARDUST/EQUIS, authorization required)

(2)- As above, the names of other beings are 'best guess' translations using 'Sparkle's' method. A list of all current beings described by subject 'Sparkle' can be reviewed here. (link redirects to STARDUST/POI, authorization required) Illustrations by subject 'Sparkle' are available for nearly all entries.

(3)- The self-identified race that subject 'Sparkle' belongs to, which is further divided into four sub-groups. The species name itself is another 'best guess' translation. A rather exhaustive list of every intelligent and non-intelligent race can be found in these two locations. (links redirect to STARDUST/SPECIES/SAPIENT and STARDUST/SPECIES/NONSAPIENT, authorization required). Illustrations by subject 'Sparkle' are available for the majority of entries.

(4)- Subject 'Sparkle' has repeatedly referenced the 'power of friendship' and other similar concepts repeatedly. While entirely speculation, it is theorized that subject 'Sparkle's' species is passively telepathic and gains strength or cohesion in numbers. Without a larger sample size this only remains speculation.

RESEARCH REPORT

Codename: Avalon

Project Goal: Interrogate 'Unicorn' retrieved during Operation Hammerhead, 04/02/2015

Project Status: SUSPENDED (04/02/2015)

Attached notes by: Dr. Moira Vahlen

Interrogation of the subject commenced upon its regaining consciousness, but the subject was able to escape its cell through unconventional means. Standard containment procedure was set in place, but before the security team could subdue the subject, Dr Charles Shen was able to contact and establish communications with the subject. The means of communications between Shen and the subject is currently unknown but he reports that the subject is not hostile and very cooperative. Based on that statement and other evidence, Avalon is suspended, and Stardust will take its place to research this apparently willing subject and its abilities.

Personal notes:

I can appreciate how exciting this is, but Shen should go play with his toys in engineering and mind his own business. The research and interrogation of alien subjects is the purview of my team, and he overstepped his bounds by volunteering to interact with the subject. On THAT note, I swear that old man has a death wish for even volunteering in the first place. Entering an area alone with an alien with unknown capabilities was foolish in the extreme. Even an unarmed Sectoid is dangerous due to its mental powers, and the subject...this 'Twilight' has proven to have powers that are an order of magnitude more dangerous than the diminutive aliens that first attacked in Europe.

It is more frustrating that Shen suggested modifying the nearly-completed science lab to house 'Twilight' as well as conduct future research on it. Drs Ngo and Mills were instantly enamored with the idea, much to my aggravation. Yes, I believe Shen's evaluation of the specimen's powers being too great for current facilities to contain. I am also forced to agree with Shen's assessment that if the specimen were hostile then it would result in significant bloodshed attempting to subdue it by force. 'A more subtle approach,' is what Shen said.

I may be opposed to the idea of an alien in the XCOM facility that's not in Containment, but I would be lying if I didn't at least acknowledge the potential benefits that this might provide. The specimen has demonstrated a mastery of an ability capable of effects commonly known as 'telekinesis,' 'translation,' illumination and 'teleportation.' I'm quite certain that there's a more rational explanation than what it told Shen. His initial translation after first contact was 'magic' and I nearly hit him with my tablet. There has to be a more rational explanation, and I will be the one to find it.

I don't think I'll ever tell the others this, but I am a little bit excited at the prospect of Stardust. It's not every day that a scientist can meet a being that can violate the laws of physics at the wave of a hand, or horn in this case. Well, not without risking life and limb in the process these days. Kim is ecstatic about the prospect of speaking with the subject and learning about an entirely alien culture. Joel has been grinning like an idiot after Shen's disclosure at the myriad of sapient life from its home world. So long as they maintain the necessary work in other projects, I see no reason to dampen their enthusiasm. Yet.

During Shen's debriefing and medical scans, I also took note of the subject's nature as a self-described academic and had asked him several questions and was very curious in general. I've left standing

instructions for Stardust personnel to answer any questions the subject poses so long as they're comfortable with it and it doesn't jeopardize the safety of the project or this world in general.

My chief concern (out of the myriad of concerns brought up by Stardust) is the means in which the specimen can understand us, and what she did to allow Shen to understand her. His translated explanation involved the bridging of concepts between two separate languages, but I am still convinced that this ability may be misused to pull information from a person's mind. I've instituted mandatory daily screenings for both physical and psychological changes for anyone that spends time with the subject.

The others may be all for it but I will NOT let this 'translation spell' be cast upon me.

CONSTRUCTION REPORT

Construction/Modification: Science Lab

Construction Goal: Convert B3F Science Lab for the purposes of Project Stardust

Estimated completion: 12 Hrs.

Attached notes by: Dr. Charles Shen

After debriefing with the commander and the other doctors, it was decided that Containment was not going to be adequate for holding the new specimen for long periods of time. Containment was designed with short-term holding in mind, and it's apparent that our new guest will be with us for a bit longer than anticipated. The lab was nearly complete when this situation presented itself; all that was missing was some electrical and plumbing work plus the interior walls and testing equipment. Some simple modification to the original blueprints will allow us to create something akin to secure living quarters for the specimen as well as ample testing space for its many talents. The most challenging portion of the modification is going to be the acquisition and fabrication of the monitoring equipment that the science team has requested. They've given new definition to the word 'thorough.'

Personal notes:

I don't know if simple words can describe what happened today.

To meet and speak with an intelligent being from another world... the mind can barely grasp the monumental importance of this moment for humanity. My only regret, which isn't much of a regret at all, is that this will likely be classified for hundreds of years.

The alien itself was not at all what I was expecting to encounter. After the monstrous horror of the invaders, seeing something the size of a large dog look up at you with fear and hope in its eyes is jarring to say the least. She (I'm guessing it's a she due to tone of voice) called herself 'Twilight Sparkle' and appears to have found herself in the middle of our war with the invaders quite by accident. She's a student and a librarian and has a tendency to be extremely verbose in her explanations. I also saw a hint of the obsessive-compulsive as well, though I'm no psychologist. I just have my impressions as a father to go off of.

Quite simply, it was shocking how human Twilight's mannerisms were. Of course the science team didn't care much about my personal impressions on her personality or body language, they were more concerned about the content of our discussions. Doctor Mills looked like a kid in on Christmas when I started talking about griffons and dragons, and Moira had a homicidal look in her eye when I tried to elaborate on the 'magic' that Twilight had described.

The fabricators are currently making all the necessary equipment for the Stardust lab now, current estimates put completion time at between ten to twelve hours. I still can't believe David agreed...well, scratch that, I can. He's always been reasonable when we make suggestions if our logic is sound. I still remember his rather vocal displeasure at Moira's request for live captures, but he still agreed to it.

I've also been appointed the de facto contact for Twilight, at least for the moment. I'm pleased to report that thus far I have been cleared of any immediate suspicion of mental tampering by Medical, along with daily check-ups planned for the future. While it's inconvenient, I completely agree with the necessity of such precautions. I would be mighty surprised if any evidence was found of tampering with my mind, but I suppose mind control is supposed to be undetectable by the victim until it's too late to resist.

On that somewhat disturbing note, I have to keep reminding myself that despite Twilight's innocent appearance and intellectual mannerisms, she is still an alien capable of projecting enough physical force to destroy any holding cell we currently have with her mind if the mood strikes her. Perhaps there is some form of mental manipulation in play here, designed to encourage comfort and understanding around our new guest. It's quite a bit more benign than the horrific mind control we're used to seeing if that turns out to be true, but still a concern nonetheless. Again, those security protocols sound like a wise precaution.

I can tell the science team is excited despite the risks. About ten minutes after Stardust received its

impromptu approval, Kim gave me an entire stack of paperwork for universal arithmetic and insisted I give it to our guest as soon as she's moved to the new lab, to gauge her grasp of mathematics and other concepts. Since she wasn't privy to most of our conversation I think that the good doctor will be rather pleasantly surprised. I think Mills and Ngo are both pleased as punch to have someone to actually talk to, rather than poking dead bodies and guessing at the meanings of markings.

As for my plans, I'm curious if her translation spell can be extended to written works. She mentioned her inability to read the paperwork abandoned in Containment, but she never explicitly said she tried to translate it. I imagine if I were to bring her a book, she'd find some way to read it. I guess I'm not so different from the science team; I just had to find something interesting to experiment with.

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

Divisions: The XCOM organization is divided into three primary branches; Research, Engineering, and Operations. Research is responsible for all technological breakthroughs as well as housing and interrogation of alien specimens. Engineering is responsible for the fabrication and maintenance of all base equipment as well as refining designs produced by Research. Operations consists of the soldiers and pilots who actively participate in combat operations against alien incursions. The XCOM Operations Commander, David Bradford, is overall commander of the facility as well.

The Lab

AMATEUR FOOTAGE OF ALIENS CAPTURED BY MILITARY FORCES DEBUNKED BY GOVT EXPERT; CITES LIKELIHOOD OF TAMPERING WITH VIDEO FOOTAGE. "SINCE WHEN DO THE ALIENS USE UNICORNS?"

SENATOR GOLEMAN DEMANDS OFFICIAL INVESTIGATION OF UNIDENTIFIED ARMED FORCES FIGHTING ALIEN INVADERS. "NO UNIT MARKINGS MEANS NO ACCOUNTABILITY, I WON'T ALLOW SUCH ACTIONS IN MY COUNTRY!"

06:33, 04/03/2015, CONTAINMENT

The two hatches inside Twilight's cell opened with a clank-hiss, and limbs wreathed with crackling energy reached toward her. She tried to back away but found her back pressed against the wall of her cell. Again the fight or flight instinct took hold and she pushed as hard as she could...

...and nearly fell out of her chair as she jerked awake. After blinking several times in rapid succession, Twilight's surroundings resolved themselves. *If only this all was a bad dream and I woke up at home*, she thought regretfully before setting her eyes on the cell she had last woken up in. *It could be worse, though.*

Twilight's attention was quickly snatched by the *hiss-clank* of the door to the room sliding shut and Charles making his way towards her. His clothes were the same as the last time she saw him, or at least were too similar for Twilight to tell the difference, and his expression and posture was a bit more relaxed as well.

"Good morning, Twilight." Charles said with a gentle smile. "I can't imagine you slept very well at the desk like that. Goodness knows I never can." Twilight blinked and followed where his gaze indicated, the large metal desk with a sheet of paper and scrawling writing upon it right where her head had apparently been resting.

"ARGH!" Twilight screamed and furiously began rubbing the sides of her face. "I fell asleep while I was writing! The letter is probably all smudged by now and I'll have to rewrite it! And I have ink all over my face!"

"Twilight."

"That takes days of scrubbing to get out of my coat! Plus I don't want to look like some silly filly that had her face drawn on because she fell asleep on top of wet ink. Never again, I swore!"

"Twilight."

"Plus I'm sure Princess Celestia would want me to make a good impression with you and your friends since I'm the first pony you've ever met, and how can I do that with GRAFFITI ON MY FACE!?"

"Twilight!" Charles hadn't raised his voice but it did have a touch of steel in it, and he had stepped within easy reach of her during her panic attack. It wasn't until then that Twilight realized just how tall Charles was, and she felt a moment of fear before seeing the smile on his face as he looked from her to the sheet of paper. "Twilight, look at the letter. Do you see any smears or smudges?"

Twilight took a deep breath and let it out, and she felt her panic subside enough for reason to take hold. She looked at her letter to Celestia and could find no trace of the imagined blemishes her mind had conjured. She blinked then looked back to Charles, and the light clicked on in her head as she deduced the cause for that. "The ink...it's fast drying?"

Charles smiled and nodded. "Exactly. The inks we use for writing these days dry within seconds under normal conditions. I suspect that isn't the case for the inks you use where you're from?"

"It takes a bit longer than that for our ink to dry...so there isn't any on my face?" Twilight looked up at Charles for any sign of deception or other indicators of anything less than honesty. He shook his head and smiled guilelessly, and the unicorn let out a sigh of relief. "I still feel like I could use a shower or a good day at the spa."

After a moment's hesitation and an odd look, Charles spoke up. "That's actually why I came to see you today. Twilight, the planet I showed you on the screen last night is my world, and I took from your reaction that you couldn't find your homeland there?" The wording was gentle and slow, and it all but confirmed the theory Twilight had developed before apparently faceplanting on the desk from exhaustion.

"My homeland wasn't there, and none of the land masses matched either. Does that mean I'm on another planet?" Again Twilight fixed Charles with her eyes for any sign of deception.

"That is a likely assumption. It must be a shocking thing to realize, and there isn't much I can do for you other than offer hospitality with my friends until..." Charles hesitated as he searched for the right words. "Well, until things calm down, at least. If you are feeling up for it, Twilight, I can take you to a place we've prepared for you to stay. Some of my friends are waiting there and they've probably got a hundred questions to ask you."

Another world...that means he's an alien, Twilight first thought when her theory was confirmed, but her growing alarm was quickly soothed by Charles' offer. "Thank you. That sounds like a very generous offer, but I wouldn't want to impose..."

"Oh, I must insist! I'm certain the scientists would never let me hear the end of it if they couldn't get their questions answered." Again Charles smiled and another fear of Twilight's was put to rest. "You're welcome to stay for as long as necessary, though my friends and I would greatly appreciate you answering any questions we have or helping out with special projects."

"I'll gladly help any way I can!" Twilight agreed instantly as she hopped down from the chair and stretched. "I have a lot of questions about your people too! I think I have enough to write a book just on what I've seen so far. I feel silly for not asking this earlier; what do your people call themselves?"

Charles turned and headed toward the door and Twilight moved to follow. He raised an eyebrow as Twilight used her telekinesis to roll her letter up and fasten it closed with paperclips from the desk before joining him. "Well...as a species, we call ourselves humans. As for my race, I'm Chinese."

"There's a dif...oh! Like how pegasi, unicorns and earth ponies are different races of the same species. How many races of humans are there?" The question seemed to render Charles speechless as they approached the door.

"Pegasi, unicorns and earth ponies?" the human asked, a look of disbelief quite clear on his face, "*Earth* ponies? Twilight, do you know the name of our planet?"

Twilight arched an eyebrow in return at the emphasis in his words and the following question, then shook her head slowly. "Earth. Our planet's name is Earth. It's a little shocking to hear the word used to describe a race of people that's never been here."

Twilight opened her mouth to reply, then closed it to consider her reply. "I think this might be another instance of the translation spell bridging the gap in our languages. The word I'm using without the context of species means 'ground' or 'world', which might explain why it's being interpreted as 'earth'. The reason earth ponies are given the name is because their talents and magics tend to be more related to the world itself, like pegasi magic is related to the sky."

"Ah, I see. The scientists will likely ask you about that once we reach our destination, and I imagine they'll have several more questions after that." Charles said with a slow nod. He began to prod a small section of the door with one extended digit too quickly for Twilight to follow. "And to answer your question, there are dozens of races of humans and dozens of variations on each. Most of the differences are usually related to physical characteristics like skin tone, eye and hair color and facial structure."

Without warning, the door began to slide open with a clank-hiss, revealing a corridor beyond. The corridor beyond appeared to be an intersection leading to other rooms but two of the hallways were blocked with what appeared to be metal shutters with bright red lettering on them. With two of the paths blocked, only one remained unobstructed. The human stepped out into the hallway and beckoned for Twilight to follow.

Twilight moved to follow but hesitated when she saw that they were no longer alone. Two more humans were in the corridor. They wore thick segmented vests and rather scary full-face helmets, and wrapped around their waists and legs were an impressive amount of pockets and pouches. One carried a large metal tool in its claws that looked like a metal box with two pipes sprouting from the end. The other carried two smaller tools, one that looked almost exactly like the one that Charles had when they first met, while the other looked like a silvery hammer with prongs protruding from the head. The second tool looked familiar but Twilight couldn't put her hoof on just why that was, so rather than dither any longer she stepped outside to stand beside Charles.

"Are these your friends, too?" She asked hesitantly, and Charles gave a nod in response.

"I suppose they are. This is Corporal Harris..." The human indicated to the twin-tool user, who nodded slightly but otherwise didn't respond, "...and this is Private Jenkins. They'll be joining us on our short walk to the quarters we've arranged for you."

"They look like guards," Twilight admitted as she shied away from the faceless masks. The two humans

turned slightly towards each other but didn't otherwise speak, and the unicorn had to wonder if they were speaking but not in a way she could hear or understand.

"Oh, no, they're hall monitors," Charles explained, and his smile took on a mischievous bent. "I imagine when you were in school that there were adults who patrolled the halls to make sure no one misbehaved, right? They're here to keep me from running in the halls and potentially causing accidents."

Again the two other humans shared a look but remained silent. "Oh, I see. That makes sense." Twilight tried to sound convinced, while silently trying to quash her suspicions of being lied to and why. Rather than dwell on that, she changed the subject. "I have also been meaning to ask, what do you call those? They aren't claws..."

"Hm? Oh, we call them 'hands'. We're one of the few species on the planet that has them. Well, hands with thumbs. It has been argued that our success as a species is because of..." Charles started to go into his own explanation, and Twilight only half listened. She tried to pay attention but her mind kept drifting to the human with the silver tool. She absently looked over her shoulder and saw that both of the new humans were following. And that was all that was needed for the last piece of the puzzle to fall into place.

Buildings burned around her.

Three humans dead across the clearing.

The bug crushed in front of her.

The shadow falling over her.

She looks over her shoulder and sees another human in armor and pointing the silver tool at her.

A flash of pain, then darkness.

She awakes in a giant glass jar surrounded by humans with unfriendly faces.

The walls of the jar open up and the limbs reach towards her...

"Twilight?" Charles asked, but she didn't hear him. Her eyes had dilated to pinpricks and her breathing came in quick gasps. "Twilight? Twilight, listen to me. Take a deep breath and look at me. Step back, corporal, you're making her panic!"

The human with the silver tool muttered something she couldn't understand and stepped back slowly. The other human had its metal tool leveled at her and was stepping to the side. Charles was somewhere close by and speaking in calm but increasingly alarmed tones. Twilight heard none of it; her mind was consumed with one all-consuming conclusion. She had to escape.

Without a word, she bolted. Applejack and Rainbow Dash might have been impressed with the amount of speed she was able to attain in so short a distance if she hadn't run straight into a wall and went out like a light.

Twilight woke with what was becoming an increasingly familiar headache, but at least she was a nice soft bed with an icepack on the goose-egg growing on her head. Her eyes slowly opened to reveal beige walls and a soothing yellow light on the ceiling, and her recovering panic calmed just a bit. *I'm not in that... place again. But where am I now?*

The unicorn slowly lifted her head to survey her new surroundings. Her bed was in the corner of a rather spacious room, with a ceiling at least three times her height looming above. In another corner of the room was a small walled-off section with a drain set in the center and what was unmistakably a showerhead built into the wall, and just outside that was a stack of folded beige towels. Twilight's eyes drifted further to a desk and chair similar to the room she had previously been in, and the only things present on the desktop was a stack of papers as well as several writing utensils. She recognized a few as the pen she had used yesterday, but there were several others with different colors that were new to her. Directly above the desk and dominating most of the wall was a giant mirror that would have cost tens of thousands of bits back home.

The familiar sound of a page turning pulled Twilight's attention from the mirror to the table in the far corner of the room. It was square and un-ornamented with four simple chairs around it. The familiar form of Charles sat in one chair with a worn paperback book in his hands. He looked up to see Twilight staring back at him and gave her a gentle, if somewhat tired smile. She tried to sink back into her covers and disappear but there was no chance of that now. Charles stood and lifted one of the chairs and brought it beside the bed. For the longest time he simply sat and fiddled with the old book in his hands.

"How are you feeling? You took a rather painful hit back there." Charles asked tentatively, and when no reply was pending he continued on. "I'm sorry for scaring you back there, Twilight. I don't mean to scare you any further, but I feel you should know the whole truth about the situation we are in. Humans, I mean."

There was a long moment of silence he collected his thoughts. "Some time ago, humanity came under attack by forces from outside of our world. These attacks were brutal and without mercy. The invaders would abduct or kill anyone they came across, and my friends and I gathered together to protect our world. That's our group's only goal: To protect humanity from invaders from outside our world. This has always meant defeating everything non-human through force of arms, and 'interrogating' the survivors for any useful information...until now.

"Twilight, you are the first and only intelligent non-human we have encountered that hasn't actively sought to hurt us, which has left us all in uncharted waters. There are some who feel you should be treated no differently from the invaders, but they are in the minority. Others are extremely curious and eager to learn from you, and I am one of them."

The unicorn listened and recognized a lot of the explanation he had given earlier, and was perceptive enough to realize how much of the explanation was sugar coated.

"Am I a prisoner?" Twilight asked, and wasn't quite successful in keeping the fear out of her voice.

"You're our guest, for now. Your safety is a concern we have to consider, in addition to our own." The human set the battered book on the bed, then pulled his glasses off and wiped his face with one palm. Despite his smiles he looked very old at that moment. "Twilight, just on what you've told me I get the impression that your culture is extremely tolerant, but have you personally come across something or someone different that didn't fit in?"

"Well, yes." The unicorn replied. *It's hard to forget how Ponyville reacted when Zecora came to visit.* "Everyone was afraid until we got to know her."

Charles' smile became a little less forced now that he had a similar experience to build on, "That's part of the problem we humans have. When we are afraid, we lash out at the cause."

"I think I understand. I have a friend who often had to help injured animals, and she was always adamant she'd be notified if one were found rather than trying to help it ourselves. She said the survival instinct can make the kindest animal into a monster," Twilight blinked, then hastily added, "Not that I'm comparing your people to monsters or animals!"

Charles waved a hand to dismiss any offense. "That was the example I was stumbling for. We humans aren't so evolved that we no longer have such instincts, and as much as I would hate to admit it the world is simply too afraid for you to wander it safely."

"You seem quite certain that your race would act that way, but you don't seem to be afraid." Twilight observed.

"I *was* afraid when I first saw you. I grew up in a time of great fear, so I might be a bit more aware of the ability it has to inspire rash actions," the human replied. He pinched the bridge of his nose and gave a small chuckle before continuing. "I hope I'm not making you afraid, Twilight. Humanity as a race is capable of great and terrible things in equal amounts; I'm just trying to make sure you understand why you have to stay here for now."

"Tell me about it." The unicorn said after a long moment.

"About what?"

"Humanity."

Charles opened and closed his mouth several times before scratching his chin and finally speaking, "I could probably talk for years on 'humanity.'" A genuine smile crossed his face and he continued, "I told you that I designed and built things, yes? How about I tell you the exact moment I knew that was what I wanted to do?"

Twilight nodded eagerly, so Charles continued. "Humanity is a 'tool user' race; we shape the world around us with the tools we create. When I was just a kid, we achieved what many consider to be the greatest accomplishment in our history. We left our planet and landed on the moon."

And with that, a thousand questions exploded in Twilight's mind and she had to force herself to not interrupt as Charles continued his story. Within a minute, all of the worries of the last day that hounded the unicorn were quickly buried under more and more questions. Buried, but not dispelled.

10:45, 04/03/2015, STARDUST LABS

The door to Twilight's living area opened and closed as Shen left the unicorn to explore her new living arrangements. Her quarters took up half of the newly christened 'Stardust Labs', the other half was dedicated to observation and eventual experiments with Twilight's participation; an eventuality that appeared much more likely after Shen's enthusiastic if somewhat longwinded discussion with the unicorn.

Immediately next door to the quarters was a second room designed specifically for observing Twilight, and it contained all the monitoring equipment as well as being on the opposite end of the one-way mirror. The rest of the lab was sparse and empty, and Shen gave it only a cursory glance as he immediately turned from Twilight's door towards Observation.

Three people were inside; Doctors Vahlen, Mills and Ngo were watching through the mirror and various monitors. Several had filters that altered the image to try and learn the secret to Twilight's 'magic'. Judging by Moira's increasingly perturbed expression, she wasn't getting the information she wanted.

"Everything working alright?" The engineer asked cautiously, and got a blank stare in return from the lead scientist.

"I know you're as thorough as they come, Charles, but I have to ask. Did you test the equipment before installation?" This time it was Shen's turn to level a flat look, and Vahlen continued a bit more defensively, "The equipment is picking up nothing abnormal. Nothing! Sure, the standard cameras are picking up the anomalies around the subject's horn and whatever it manipulates, but our eyes can do that just as well."

Shen spared a glance to the monitors and saw Twilight using her telekinesis to sort through the variety of objects provided on the desktop of her 'workspace'. True to the lead scientist's word, only the basic camera was picking up the visual portion of the telekinetic effect.

"I was expecting something to show up, but there simply is nothing showing up to hint as to how it's doing that. No background radiation, no energy spikes, no abnormal thermal emissions. *NOTHING!* One would think that the violation of the established laws of physics would leave some sort of measurable evidence." She continued to grumble while watching the monitors.

"Perhaps she's producing a form of energy not native to this world, and we are thus unable to detect it? Or perhaps she's able to access existing energies that we are unaware of because we ourselves are not able to access them? Either way, I imagine Twilight would tell you exactly how she does it and in great detail. She says her 'magic' is her chosen field of study, wherever she's from," Charles explained, and took a small amount of guilty pleasure in watching the lead scientist's face sour when he addressed the unicorn as 'she' and by name rather than 'the subject' and 'it.'

"My questions will wait; I still haven't exhausted every theory yet. And the others are far more eager to lock themselves in the room with the alien." Moira's expression soured even further as she looked towards the other researchers. Kim Ngo and Joel Mills were having a quiet but somewhat heated debate before realizing that their discussion was no longer just amongst themselves.

"Time to make a decision," Kim said with a note of finality.

"Indeed," Joel replied grimly.

Both scientists raised a fist and shook it three times in tandem. Joel's hand spread out into an open palm, while Kim's index and middle finger shot out in a 'V'.

"Yes!" Kim punched the air gleefully.

"That's a fluke! Two out of three!" Joel growled, and the two started shaking their fists again.

"I...hope I won't be needed to translate. I have my work to attend to back in Engineering for now, but I'd be more than willing to help later tomorrow." Charles said after tearing his eyes from the spectacle of two professional adults making an important decision with a schoolyard game.

At this point, Moira was studiously ignoring her colleagues. "That should not be a problem. Whoever wins their 'game' has volunteered to translate if the subject is able to replicate the effect on them. I also suspect that the winner of the game gets the first opportunity for questions in their chosen field. While we're on the subject, it is required that you head to Medical again before resuming your duties. We cannot afford another incident like Europe."

"I understand. The security of the project is paramount." Shen agreed.

"I've spoken with Commander Bradford on this, and if you show no immediate negative signs after the

check-up today, he'll see about providing us with some volunteers to ease the burden of translating day to day. Once that happens, I imagine you could return to engineering full time and not have to worry about this any further." Moira's stare was now upon him, and Shen knew exactly what she was getting at.

"I still have my breaks and off-duty time, and it's really no trouble for me. I suspect that Twilight would enjoy some conversations as well, she legitimately seems to want to make friends."

Moira's eyes narrowed and looked away. "Perhaps it's time 'Twilight' learned that we don't always get what we want."

18:00, 04/03/2015, BRIEFING ROOM

"So why are we here again?" Lana Jenkins asked Matt, and it took every ounce of self-restraint he had not to tell her to shut it. "Is it because you scared the crap out of Shen's furry friend? I suppose that's an accomplishment every soldier should be proud of, 'scare the life out of helpless animals'. What's next, puppy kicking?"

"Private, need I remind you of the definition of *classified*?" Matt ground out, and glanced towards the only other person in the room. Paul Dryzinski, the often distant heavy weapons specialist, had his arms crossed over his chest and chin down as he leaned back in his chair, apparently taking the opportunity to take a nap in the relative calm before the storm. *It's a pity I can't do the same*, Matt thought as the chatterbox next to him started up again.

"Oh come on. It's just you, me and Dee here, and Dee is dead to the world right now." Lana soldiered on, and asked, "What do you think that was? It sure as hell isn't from Earth, but I'm pretty sure it had nothing to do with the bad guys. And did you see those big eyes? Christ, I don't think I could pull the trigger on something that cute."

"Yeah..." Matt replied absently, and thought back to the first time he saw those eyes looking up at him.

Matt crept up to the corner of the delivery truck and peeked around the corner. An alien he had never seen before was doing its best to sneak further into the parking lot, though its footfalls left much to be desired in the way of stealth. With practiced hands he slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew the Arc thrower and his pistol, then rounded the corner to stun the alien...and saw the three civilians get shredded by the berserk Chryssalid charging from the alleyway.

Before Matt could let loose the string of profanity that immediately came to mind, the Chryssalid bolted towards his hiding place. There was no room to run, and no time to switch back to his rifle. The bug would be on him in seconds...and the new alien screamed. A flash blinded the soldier and the ground buckled beneath his feet, and with a few blinks his eyes recovered enough to survey the unpleasant stain and chunky bits where the charging bug had been.

The new alien was sitting down and facing the rather impressive crater, and the soldier saw his chance. Three quick steps forward brought him within easy range of the Arc thrower, which he leveled at it. With a thrill of horror he saw it start to turn towards him and he pulled the trigger. Had he hesitated for just a moment he would have been paralyzed by those wide and impossibly purple eyes, filled with horror and unshed tears—

A sharp elbow to his side snapped him back to the present, and Lana's sly, "Oh, is that so?" made him realize that perhaps he should be paying attention.

Before either could reply, the door to the briefing room opened to reveal Lieutenant Fowler, followed by Commander Bradford. Both Lana and Matt shot up and saluted, and both gave a somewhat surprised sideways glance at Paul, who had beaten them both to the salute. The two officers returned the salute and the soldiers resumed their seats and waited for whatever was to come.

"First up, I want to thank Strike One for its stellar performance during the mission yesterday as well as the subsequent events at the base. Harris's live capture is also providing an interesting opportunity for XCOM, and the scientists pass along their thanks."

Before Matt could pose the question, Bradford continued to speak. "Lee and Anderson are both out of immediate danger and are in recovery. The conservative estimate is two weeks before they can rejoin active duty. They'll have some impressive scars and some valuable experience from the encounter."

When no further questions made themselves obvious, Bradford stepped forward and gave each of the junior soldiers a meaningful look. "You've all thus far made me proud and you've done your duties brilliantly. Because of this you are being given the first opportunity to volunteer for a special task. I cannot go into details as to what that task is specifically, but I can tell you that time invested in this task will earn combat pay. The task itself is more oriented towards testing and intelligence gathering than

combat, and it will likely be outside your training and comfort zone. Anyone who does not wish to participate may leave the room and resume normal duties. Two volunteers would be preferred."

A long moment of silence passed before Lana spoke, "You had me at combat pay."

All eyes fell to Matt, and he had a sinking feeling as to who the second 'volunteer' would end up being.

07:04, 04/04/2015, B3F EAST CORRIDOR

Charles Shen's smile was broad and genuine as he approached the Stardust lab. Two guards stood at the entrance to the lab, and both eyed him warily as he approached. The engineer felt a small degree of amusement when the nostrils of both guards flared as they caught the scent of the coffee in his hand.

"Good morning boys. I didn't realize you'd be here this morning. If you're working tomorrow I'll bring a thermos." Shen said affably to the pair, and a small bit of gratitude appeared on their faces. "Or stop by the commons after you're relieved. The boys in engineering have got coffee that could burn a hole in concrete. One sip of that and you'll be up for days." That earned a smirk from both guards, and the engineer returned it as the door opened and he proceeded inside.

Both Kim and Joel were in attendance inside the lab, and both looked more than a little worried. "Problems?" Shen asked as he approached. Both scientists looked up, then to each other, then back to the engineer.

"Well...now that you're here, hopefully not." Kim said, with more than a little uncertainty in her voice. Shen arched an eyebrow but said nothing, so Kim continued. "Doctor Mills had the opportunity to speak with Twilight yesterday and learned a great deal about the races of her world."

It didn't take a mind reader to see a small amount of annoyance in the explanation, and Shen had to hide a chuckle. Looks like Joel managed to pull a reversal in their little game.

"During their session, Doctor Mills asked if Twilight would be able to provide illustrations for the subjects they had discussed, and she agreed. She's been doing that ever since. She's been providing drawings for Doctor Mills for the last nineteen hours, and hasn't slept in the last twenty four." Kim's expression alternated between worry and a glare at her colleague. "Joel has tried to talk her into taking a break but she has *insisted* on continuing until she's cataloged everything. We were hoping you could have a word with her."

"I'll...see what I can do."

Without another word, the engineer headed towards the door to Twilight's quarters while the scientists broke off towards observation. The door opened to reveal a blizzard of papers scattered about with a myriad of colorful and exotic shapes upon them. Shen carefully picked his steps through the scattered debris to make his way to Twilight at her desk.

"Oh, hi Charles! I met one of your friends yesterday, his name is Joel Mills. He had lots of questions about Equestria and ponies and griffons and dragons and zebras and changelings and..." Twilight rattled off without looking up, and paused to take a deep breath. The moment she did though, her head turned slowly towards Shen like something out of a horror film. Her mane was a mess and her eyes had a slightly manic quality to them. "Is...that...*coffee*?"

Before the engineer could reply there was a flash of light and BAM, Twilight was right in front of him. The force of displaced air sent the accumulated papers on the ground flying about and nearly muffled the sound of Twilight's now-forgotten writing utensil clattering onto her desktop. "You brought me COFFEE? Oh Charles you're the best po--, no, best human ever! Coffee is just what I need to finish these illustrations for Joel! At this rate I should only need one more day to finish all my drawings."

"Twilight."

"I think Joel was having a hard time understanding some of the species I mentioned. He really tried his best but sometimes I think having a visual guide to go off of when discussing something new is the best way to go. New species, new concepts, new everything!"

"Twilight."

"At first I was really worried that I couldn't help or be useful but I'm glad I can help Joel so much. He mentioned another friend who was going to be visiting me today so I absolutely have to get his work done and if I don't then Joel's work will have to wait or this new friend's work will have to wait. I don't want anyone to wait!"

"Twilight!"

The sharp word interrupted the blabbering unicorn, and the manic look gave way to just a bit of worry. Shen merely smiled and pulled his trump card.

"Twilight, as a librarian I'm sure you wouldn't pass up on the chance to read a classic book from my world? It's fiction for young adults but it has been read by millions of people in the last decade or so. Joel thought you might like to read it while he reviews what you've done so far." The engineer produced a battered paperback and presented it to the unicorn.

Her eyes widened even further as she took in the faded and tattered cover before looking back up to Shen. "YES!" Twilight shouted and the worn book flew from Shen's hands. "Wait, NO! No I would not pass up on the opportunity. Thank you, Charles! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" With that manic gleam in her eyes again she started to head towards her desk but stopped when Charles spoke again.

"I never find my desk a very comfortable place to read, I usually read on the bed."

"You're perfectly right! You are really clever, Charles! Are all humans as clever as you? You sure do seem to know a lot about a lot..." The unicorn diverted her path towards the bed and hopped up, and in less than ten seconds flat was out like a light. The book fell beside her on the bed as her magic disappeared, and Shen gave a knowing smile to the one-way mirror.

Just as Charles set his coffee on the desk and started to clean up the flurry of papers about him, the door opened and a thoroughly stunned pair of scientists quietly walked in. "That was genius." Was all Joel could say as he also started to help with the clean-up. The trio worked in silence to gather up the assorted pictures, and the engineer could only marvel at the colors and detail that went into each picture. In his hands was a picture of another of Twilight's species, a white unicorn with an immaculately styled purple mane and a look that seemed to convey amusement. The lower right corner of the illustration was a set of three diamonds that matched the pattern on the illustration's flank.

"Don't worry about sorting them quite yet, I'll get to that. I seem to have underestimated our new colleague when I asked for some pictures. I won't make that mistake again." Joel chuckled as he added to his own stack of papers. He spared a quick glance to Kim, who had been clearing the papers around the bed but now stood transfixed at the sight of the sleeping unicorn.

"If this wasn't ten kinds of classified and likely to earn me a life sentence, I would totally take a picture and send it to my nieces. They'd love me forever." She whispered before shaking her head and started to pick up the pace of her own collection. Both Charles and Joel chuckled at that, as neither could disagree that the sight before them was probably the most adorable thing they had seen in all the months of horrible bloodshed and hard work at XCOM.

14:23, 04/04/2013, STARDUST LAB

Twilight slaved away at her desk, trying to complete another assignment she had been given. Nothing else mattered. NOTHING.

"Twilight," the unicorn heard Spike's voice from behind her, "Twilight, you're forgetting something. You're forgetting something really important." Twilight looked over her shoulder to ask Spike to elaborate but instead of the plump baby dragon she saw an enormous insect with blade-like legs scuttling towards her. In the blink of a lavender eye it was upon her and reaching toward her with gore-stained claws.

"It's not safe here, Twilight," the monster said in Spike's voice before being crushed into a pile of twitching limbs and blood. "Why would you do that, Twilight?" Spike asked, and Twilight looked down to see the broken body of her assistant giving her a betrayed look. "I thought we were friends."

She tried to recoil, to scream in horror at what she'd done... and her eyes shot open. Spike's crushed body was gone, but her surroundings were still unfamiliar. The bed, the mirror, the desk... everything slowly came back to Twilight as she went over recent events. I was drawing for Joel, then Charles visited and gave me a book, then... Twilight's gaze fell upon the worn paperback sitting beside her on the bed and she connected the dots. Oh... clever, Charles. Very clever.

Twilight's annoyance at her work being interrupted and the horror of her nightmare was quickly displaced by a grudging acknowledgement that she had probably overdone it. *Moderation, you silly filly, moderation. Just because you can go days without sleep doesn't mean you should. The humans must think I'm some kind of crazy workaholic now.* The unicorn felt another bout of irrational panic coming on, but clamped down on it quickly. She took a deep breath and let it out, then looked around her room.

The clutter she vaguely remembered was gone. All her scattered illustrations were stacked neatly on the desk along with a fresh set of pens and colored pencils, as well as a bowl of various fruits with a paper

underneath it. The paper was a hand-written note in human, along with a crude drawing she recognized as Joel with one arm extended and its hand balled into a fist and the thumb extended upwards. Twilight had no idea what the gesture meant but the cartoonish grin on the drawing's face seemed to indicate something positive.

Twilight's eyes drifted to the fruit bowl and settled on the grapes. One levitated out of the bowl and into her mouth as she hopped into her chair. She had just started to try and decipher the written note left for her when the door chimed and opened and two humans entered.

"Good afternoon, Twilight," Joel said with a relieved smile. "I hope you slept well. Is it...normal for your kind to work so long before sleeping?" Just like yesterday the human wore a white lab coat and ID tag, and underneath he wore a similar set of clothes as Charles; earthen colored and with a red tie. Also like Charles he was mostly hairless, though he supported a larger amount of graying hair on his head. The glasses perched on his nose were a different style than the other humans as well. The new human in the room said something that Twilight couldn't understand, and the unicorn's eyes scrutinized this new arrival.

It was a bit shorter than Joel and had a significant amount of jet black hair on its head, and the facial structure and skin tone was different. The newcomer was more slender at the shoulders as well. *Was this what Charles meant by different races? Or is this one female?* Twilight wondered absently before bringing her attention back to the conversation.

"Well, not exactly. Most ponies have a more typical schedule, work during the day and rest at night. When I get working on a project I tend to go a bit overboard, though. My friends are trying to get me to take things a little more easily but sometimes I forget," Twilight gave a self-deprecating laugh and tapped her head with a hoof. "I hope what I finished was able to help you, Joel."

"I'm glad to hear it, what you've drawn has been most helpful so far. I took the opportunity to scan all of them for the database and I'm currently in the process of adding all my notes from yesterday as well. I must say I never thought in my professional career that I'd ever talk about unicorns with a unicorn," Joel quickly replied with a smile that was just a little unbalanced.

Despite herself, Twilight had to ask, "And why's that?"

Before the scientist could reply, the newcomer coughed and cleared her throat while giving Joel a pointed look. "Ah, I'm afraid that was rather rude of me," Joel apologized to the newcomer before turning back. "This is Doctor Kim Ngo, one of my colleagues. As I mentioned yesterday my field is xenobiology, and Kim's is behavioral sciences. She has some things she'd like to discuss with you today. I'm here as an interpreter."

"Interpreter? Why? It's no problem for me to use the translation spell on her."

"I'm afraid it is a problem for us. Or it might be a problem. We don't know yet." Joel fumbled with his words before taking a deep breath and collecting himself. "I can understand the convenience of such an ability, but until we are one hundred percent certain that it doesn't have any negative effect on us we felt it best to limit exposure."

Twilight's expression twisted with just a bit of worry. "Translation spells have been used for millennia back home, I can't think of anypony ever being hurt by it."

"I completely agree with you, Twilight, but these abilities you have, this 'magic' is completely new to humans. From what you've told Charles and I, it sounds like magic is everywhere and in everything, so your bodies and systems are likely accustomed to its presence. As far as we know, this is the first exposure humanity has had to magic, ever. Until we know how our bodies react to exposure in the long term, limits seem prudent. I hope you understand."

"I hadn't really thought of that," Twilight admitted doubtfully before something in his explanation caught her attention. "But there's no way you haven't been exposed to magic. The magic field is everywhere and in everything back home, and it's present here as well. Granted, it's very stale and stiff like it hasn't been used in ages. I suppose the best analogy I could come up with would be like the air in an old house that hasn't been opened or used in years. Stale." Twilight scrunched her face up at the explanation. *How do you describe the feeling of magic to somepony who can't use it?*

"I think I understand, I'm sure Moira will have plenty of questions about that tomorrow," Joel replied after a long moment of taking notes of the discussion. Before Twilight could ask, the scientist continued, "Oh, Moira hasn't visited yet. She's very thorough in her preparations and wants to know everything she possibly can before meeting with you. For now, Kim would like to ask you some questions. Is that alright?"

"That sounds fine. Do you mind if I take notes?" As the question was asked, a small stack of papers and a pen detached themselves from their orderly places on the desk and came to rest in front of Twilight.

Joel arched an eyebrow and shared a look with Kim, "Take notes? Why?"

"There are a few reasons, actually. I'm the first pony to ever leave my world, so if I ever get back I'd like detailed records of everything I've seen. I could write at least two full books on just what I've seen so far!" Joel's expression became uneasy at that, while Kim started to look sour at being left out of the conversation. Twilight soldiered on, "I would also like to learn your language. I didn't realize that it was uncomfortable for you, and it was a bit insensitive of me to assume you would be alright with it because it was convenient for me."

Kim asked a question, to which Joel replied, "She wants to learn English." Kim's eyes widened at that as she replied, and the male scientist turned back to Twilight.

"If that's something you'd like to pursue, we may be able to provide some tools to help," Joel offered, to which Twilight readily agreed. "Glad to hear it. Now, I'm afraid Kim has waited patiently to ask her questions so perhaps it's time for us to change subjects, yes?"

Twilight had expected similar questions that Joel had asked earlier, but was pleasantly surprised to find the subjects were more about pony culture and government as well as history. Both scientists had spent a minute talking back and forth after Twilight had explained cutie marks and how everypony gets one. Several of the illustrations proved useful at this point, especially the ones of her friends and the princesses.

"...the marks for this one are balloons, but you mentioned she was a baker?" Joel said after taking the picture of Pinkie Pie, "I'm not sure we understand the connection between balloons and baking."

"Pinkie Pie's talent is parties and event organization, and she often provides the catering for her own events. It's not uncommon for a pony to develop skills to support their special talents. Rarity, for example, has the capacity to detect the gemstones she uses to create her special outfits." Twilight indicated to the drawing of the fabulous mare, before bringing her hoof back to indicate to herself, "My special talent is magic, and I imagine I wouldn't be nearly as successful at it if I wasn't capable of memorizing the arcane formulae for the spells."

Joel relayed Twilight's explanation to Kim, who scribbled half a page of notes before pointing at the drawings of Celestia, Luna and Cadance. "These three, the 'alicorns'," he asked, stumbling over the last word, "Their marks are a star, crescent moon and a heart. What do they mean?"

"Princess Celestia and Princess Luna's marks represent their powers over the sun and the moon. They use their magic to raise them every day and night," Twilight explained with a smile. Joel relayed the translation with a smile of his own that looked just a bit condescending, which Kim returned after writing only two lines. "This is Princess Cadance, she was my foalsitter and now she's married to my brother. Her power is of the heart, and can inspire the best in anypony she sees."

After translating that message, Joel asked, "'Power of the heart' sounds rather abstract, can you give us an example of how that works?"

"Well, when we were younger there was a couple fighting in the street, and she used her magic to get them to stop fighting and be friends again. When King Sombra attacked the Crystal Empire, she used her magic to give everypony the hope and happiness they needed to resist him. Sombra's power was drawn from despair and fear and Cadance's magic inspired the exact opposite in his intended victims, which bought us enough time to end his threat for good."

Joel relayed Twilight's explanation word for word to Kim, who began to scribble notes until the end of the page and started on the next one. The female scientist fired off a volley of questions to which Joel started to reply to before he stopped and gave a somewhat abashed smile to Twilight.

"Ah, excuse us one moment," Joel said quickly and the pair stood and headed towards the other side of the room and started whispering back and forth rapidly. Kim took at least a page of notes in addition to what she had previously. Just as Twilight was about to raise a question, the pair turned and resumed their seats at the table.

"So sorry for that, Twilight," Joel apologized, "Kim had some theories to run by me really quick. So, uh..." The male scientist floundered before Kim fired off a question which he relayed, "You mentioned the mark appears when an adolescent discovers their talent. Can you explain the process in a bit more detail?"

Twilight did well to hide her suspicion at the subject change but she answered it nonetheless. "Well, foals go through school learning the basics that they'll need in adulthood. As they grow up they often find that they enjoy certain activities or find some skills come quite naturally. Once they realize these skills, the mark appears! There's a trio of little fillies I know who have some very good skills but they haven't realized that what they already do is what they're best at."

Just as Twilight was about to continue, the door chimed and opened to reveal another human which

Twilight quickly recognized as a male as his stature was more similar to Charles and Joel than Kim. Unlike the previous humans she had seen, this one wore a short-sleeved and nearly skin-tight shirt colored tan and olive and with an emblem on the front. His pants were loose and festooned with pockets and were a greenish tint that didn't match well with his tan boots.

What was most eye-catching was the expression on the human's face and posture. One arm was reaching for the door panel to open the door and apparently remained frozen in place along with the rest of his body. His jaw was slack, brown eyes were wide as they locked on to Twilight, and his pale hairless skin was white as a sheet. For nearly five seconds the strange scene remained unchanged with Twilight and the doctors looking at the newcomer and the newcomer staring back.

A voice came from behind the newcomer, and its owner appeared at his side. This one was female, with black hair tied back and bright blue eyes that widened just like the first. The surprise quickly turned a mischievous smile but any further response was cut off by the door sliding back into place.

What was that about? Twilight thought.

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

Headlines: A strict media black-out preventing communication is placed over the XCOM facility to prevent potential leaks, however Cmdr David Bradford has access to a news ticker in his office with headlines that may be relevant to the project or the alien invaders.

Helmets: Standard kit for XCOM field operatives includes a full-face helmet designed to provide secure comms in the field for soldiers as well as tactical information on the fly in addition to hiding their identities and ethnicity to outsiders.

Stardust Supplemental Files (Pt. 2)

UFO SIGHTINGS CAUSE PANIC OVER LONDON, ALL AIR TRAFFIC OVER UK HALTED OR DIVERTED AS RAF SCRAMBLES FIGHTERS. NO CASUALTIES OR LANDINGS REPORTED, INQUIRIES TO GOV'T OFFICIALS ON UFOS REMAIN UNANSWERED.

POLICE REPORT AT LEAST SEVEN DEAD IN SHOOTOUT WITH MILITIA GROUP IN TEXAS AFTER HIGH SPEED CHASE AND WEEK-LONG SIEGE. CAPTURED MILITIA MEMBERS STATED THE REASON FOR RESISTANCE WAS THE BELIEF THAT THE GOV'T WAS UNDER CONTROL OF INVADERS.

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

PROJECTID: Stardust
PROJECTDIV: Xenobiology
DIVLEAD: Dr. Joel Mills

Attached files: Transcript of interview with 'Twilight', images provided by 'Twilight', Personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 13:00, 04/03/2015

Today marked the first official day for Stardust, and the study of the curious specimen captured during an attack by the invaders. So many surprises today, not to mention the project nearly meeting a tragic end before the subject even got to the labs.

The subject calls herself 'Twilight Sparkle', and is most definitely the most unique creature I've ever had the pleasure of speaking with to date. I'll leave the behavioral and cultural analysis to the esteemed Dr. Ngo, since my questions more revolved around the extreme biodiversity that Charles Shen hinted at during their first conversations.

Twilight's species, rather humorously translated as 'ponies' is divided into three primary races, with a fourth type that is so exceedingly rare that I wouldn't bother mentioning them if not for the fascinating traits Twilight described. Apparently her entire species can perform what Twilight calls 'magic', though they differ radically.

The first of the three races is titled 'Earth Pony.' I questioned Twilight about the name, her answers can be found in the transcript, and aren't relevant to these notes. This race is apparently the closest to native equine analogs and is well known for its robust stature and connection to nature. Twilight describes this physical trait and connection as their 'magic' as it allows them to successfully work and farm more than the other races. I'll have to ask Kim to clarify if this makes 'earth ponies' akin to medieval serfs or the equivalent.

The second of the three races are aptly named 'Pegasus'. They sport wings and the capacity for flight. Twilight described their 'magic' as connected to the sky and apparently the weather, which they control. When I questioned the process, Twilight went into an extremely detailed and thorough explanation of the process. I did the best I could to document every word, but Twilight talks rather quickly and is extremely long-winded when she has a subject to talk about. I'll warn Kim and Moira about that.

The third of the races is the 'Unicorn', of which Twilight is a member. Key distinguishing feature is the 'horn' protruding from the forehead, and allows for far more direct uses of 'magic' than the other two races. The other two races have passive abilities related to their physiology, such as strength, and speed, or manipulating their immediate surroundings. Unicorns are able to use their 'magic' at will for various effects that no doubt have several prominent physicists rolling in their graves. Telekinetics, light generation, even teleportation through solid surfaces. The discovery of THAT little ability caused quite a stir back in Containment. Even my interview with Twilight was possible only because of her apparent ability to translate through 'magic.'

Moira will likely have a more systematic way of documenting each of these applications, as she is rather keen on finding out just how it's done.

The last of the pony races are what Twilight called 'Alicorns'. Only three exist as far as Twilight is aware, and they share physical characteristics of both pegasi and unicorns, with both wings and horn. They also have significantly longer lifespans, the eldest of the three being well over a thousand years old. Their

'magic' capabilities sound flat-out impossible. The elder apparently uses her powers to force the system's sun to orbit the planet. Yes, I know how that sounds. Then I remember that I'm talking to a unicorn about magic. I was about to take it down as hyperbolic exaggeration or perhaps even a religious belief, but apparently Twilight is a close friend to the elder, having studied under her for years as well as writing letters weekly to her. I'll forward my notes and transcript to Kim on the subject, cultural studies are more her department than mine.

Twilight brought up dozens of other species, some sapient and others not. Quite frankly I'm shocked by the degree of bio-diversity on her world, not to mention its apparent similarity to existing Earth species as well as myths and legends. Flora also shows significant similarities. Case in point, the urban center that Twilight resides in is next to an apple farm. Yes, apples. As perplexing as that is, what really held my interest was a species that Twilight only touched upon briefly. The name she provided for them was apt: Changelings.

Twilight describes Changelings as something akin to a predator with a unique method of hunting and feeding on its prey. They are apparently capable of flawless physical impersonation of other life forms of similar size, and they feed upon their prey's emotions. The mechanics of such a creature are simply fascinating to consider. Until the secrets of 'magic' are further explained it seems their method of camouflage will have to remain a mystery, but I've already devised several working theories on their method of feeding. That the race is empathic (if not completely telepathic) is almost a prerequisite, but why feed on emotions? I suspect that it isn't their primary food source but an energy source or even to make up a deficiency of their own. Perhaps a brain defect prevents them from having emotions that other races possess, and the only way to experience them is to leech them from another. Following that train of thought, emotions might be considered something like a narcotic; a highly addictive one at that.

I attempted to ask further questions on the nature of Changelings and Twilight became extremely uncomfortable with the subject. Perhaps she was the victim of one? Regardless, I moved away from the topic by asking her to provide illustrations for what we discussed so far. She was thrilled with the opportunity and set off immediately to start. She is nothing if not enthusiastic.

UPDATE: 08:45, 04/04/2015

I may have underestimated Twilight's dedication. Kim and I entered the lab expecting Twilight to be asleep or snacking on some of the fruits we left in her quarters, but she was still at her desk. A quick review of the observation footage confirmed she had been sitting at her desk since our interview, and had been churning out hand-drawn (hoof-drawn? Magic-drawn?) illustrations of every species we discussed, as well as two or three examples for the major ones. I attempted conversation and Twilight promised to be finished soon. I tried to impress upon her the need for sleep and was soundly rebuked for my suggestion.

Her exact words were, "Sleep is for B-minus ponies. I'm an A-plus pony."

Thankfully Charles arrived and performed some rather impressive parental jujitsu and got Twilight to sleep. Kim, Charles and I gathered up the drawings, which I'm now scanning into the Stardust database. I also pitched the idea of having Dr. Frank McKendric in medical read into the project to evaluate Twilight. After this little episode, Charles shared his own suspicions about potential mental health issues with our newest colleague. Charles speculated (after stating several times that he wasn't an expert) that she might also benefit from having some friends that aren't strictly related to the Stardust program. I find myself agreeing just a bit.

Charles also shared a somewhat disturbing thought; that Twilight's appearance as we perceive it is not natural. He posited the theory that Twilight's species may be engineered either deliberately or through natural selection to engender comfort and friendliness to whomever she meets. The other, and to be honest far more disturbing theory is that she passively or actively generates a telepathic effect to encourage these feelings around her. I nearly turned down that theory without even hearing Shen through but stopped myself. Maybe there is a telepathic element here that's wearing down my guard around this alien. I think I might need to see Frank after this; maybe I'm just being paranoid.

Also, I recommended Shen and Kim keep this little theory to themselves until other evidence appears. If Moira suspects anything of the sort she'll probably grill Shen into building her a little remote control robot so she can participate in the experiments while being safely ensconced in a lead-lined bunker on the other end of the facility. Perhaps she should see Frank, too; her cold hatred of the aliens is quite pathological.

And on a related note, Bradford was able to acquire a pair of volunteers from the ranks to help alleviate some of the translation duties for Charles and I. On a more pragmatic note, having more people under the effects of the 'translation' spell can better determine if there are any negative side effects. Charles came back clean from his initial check-up and so did I, but a single day with the spell upon us isn't significant. Doubling the sample size will increase the likelihood of catching any sort of long-term side effects. I'll discreetly ask them to take records of their perceptions of Twilight, to see if those change over time

through mental manipulation or not.

UPDATE: 13:10, 04/04/2015

The initial theory on the translation spell has been debunked. I first thought it was two-way communication between Twilight and the person she casts it on. I can now confirm that two people under the effects of the spell can perfectly understand each other regardless of the language they speak and without Twilight being present. Charles spent his entire lunch speaking Chinese, while I replied with my rather rusty Canadian French. I'm quite sure the other staff in the breakroom thought we were insane.

Twilight is still sleeping off the all-nighter and all the pictures she completed are scanned. I'll drop the originals back in her quarters. It'd be a shame for her not to keep them; each one is a work of art.

I'll also be giving Kim a quick briefing on what to expect once Twilight wakes back up. Per Moira's instructions, Kim is not to have the translation spell cast on her so I'll be acting as interpreter until the volunteers arrive. I do hope either Charles or I get the opportunity to brief the volunteers. It would be rather unpleasant for them to walk into the lab unprepared.

UPDATE: 15:45, 04/04/2015

Called it.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Behavioral Studies

DIVLEAD: Dr. Kim Ngo

Attached files: Transcript of interview with 'Twilight', image links to xenobiology resources, personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 08:05, 04/04/2015

Perhaps it is best that Joel won our little duel. I was initially thrilled at the way things turned out once it was clear that bloodshed wasn't going to occur. Screw the war, screw the aliens, I was going to talk to a unicorn. Suddenly I was six years old again and nothing else mattered. I let slip a comment about Twilight's appearance while we were cleaning up the aftermath of her all-nighter and that brought up Shen's suspicions of passive mental manipulations around her.

That subject brought this little girl back to reality. Shen's theory involved what he called 'trust inducement', which sounds just a bit scary when considering the implications. Sure, today we think she's adorable. Next week it's hugs. A month from now we're setting the XCOM facility to self destruct in the name of our new furry overlord.

With that thought firmly in mind, having Joel as an interpreter for our discussion doesn't sound nearly as inconvenient as I once thought. Sorry, Joel. Your sacrifice will be remembered. Take heart that it is all for science!

Twilight seems down for the count, at least for now. I'll set the monitoring equipment to notify Joel and I if she leaves her bed. Joel is still slaving over the scanner with those drawings but I've nothing to do here until the unicorn wakes back up. Guess I'll have to head on over to the [REDACTED] labs to try and translate the meaning behind the markings found on the less interesting specimens retrieved from the last mission.

UPDATE: 16:00, 04/04/2015

The purple unicorn just took the paranoia and dialed it up to eleven without even trying. Or she was trying and she's got the most innocent face while she does it, which would be scarier.

After Shen's brief description of the meaning behind Twilight's flank marks, I decided to direct the interview in that direction after going over some basic questions with her. It turns out the flank marks translate into 'cutie marks' (dear God, just writing that takes me back to my little girl years), and are a mark of a personality type or skills that the bearer possesses. The translations vary from rather obvious, where an hour-glass mark denotes a talent for all things 'timey-wimey' (her words) to the abstract, where a Pegasus with butterflies as her mark deals with animals.

Apparently, these marks manifest during their formative years when their children realize what they want to do. What it sounds like is a perfectly implemented form of social control. Shortage in crop production? Increase farm-related cutie marks in the kids by five percent. Going to war? Swords and shields for all the

fillies and colts. I didn't voice this belief to Twilight, but I think Joel picked up on my suspicion. From what I could tell from Twilight's body language and tone, I don't think this possibility even entered her mind. She seems absolutely one-hundred percent certain that this system of career determination is the best thing in the world.

The second subject that Twilight brought up was the Princesses. The first and second, Celestia and Luna, have superstitious religious hocus pocus attributed to them. Moving the sun and moon? Right.

The third, Cadance, has me just a bit worried if the descriptions are accurate. Twilight describes her power as being 'of the heart', as in she can manipulate the moods of those she targets. Two people fighting are pacified enough to stop. The other example she gave involved extending her power over a wide area, smallest size speculated as city size, largest would be a small nation. In this example Cadance's powers were used to inspire resistance to an invading force attacking the nation.

In this Joel and I are agreed. What tool is better for a despot than a trusted family member who can quell or inflame the passions of the populace at will? For lack of a better term this sounds like something just shy of wide-area mind control. The subjects aren't controlled, per se, their emotions are merely compelled to change. Damn scary.

Another thing that Twilight mentioned was her family's apparently close relationship with the ruling aristocracy on her country and world. Her 'foalsitter' (her words) was Cadance growing up. Cadance is now married to Twilight's brother, Shining Armor, who holds a high position in the military structure. Her personal teacher is Celestia herself and exchanged correspondence with her weekly.

God only knows what kind of stress Twilight went through with that kind of family dynamic growing up.

We were going to continue our discussion when Joel just about fumbled the ball. I had to feed him a question about the cutie mark process to keep things moving. Twilight was in giving us some anecdotal evidence when two of Bradford's meatheads (the volunteers) stumbled into Twilight's residence within the lab.

We probably should put a sign out front warning folks not to enter without an escort.

Shen showed up shortly after we met the soldiers outside with the stack of math papers I gave him two days ago. They were intended for Twilight yesterday, but I guess things just slipped through the cracks with all this excitement. The engineer gave the two soldiers a quick briefing before heading into the residence with them. Right now they're making small talk of no importance from what I can tell.

Shen's more comfortable than anyone has any right to be when in the room with Twilight, especially with those suspicions of his. The female soldier, Jenkins I think, looks like she's the one who gets to deliver the punch line to the joke of the century. The male soldier, Harris, looks like he's on his way to an ulcer. Or a heart attack.

Twilight, naturally, is all cute and disarming smiles. I've noticed her ears are a fully integral part of her expression system, I wonder if they're warm like kitty ears. I bet she'd let me scratch them if I ---

Damn it. Going to see Doc McKendrick now.

END LOG

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

Subdivisions: As scientists and experts are often specialized into very specific fields, so too are their workloads. The Research division is divided into several subdivisions based on need and workload. Each expert maintains his own files and submits them to their subdivision leader, who then submits them to the division leader, Dr. Moira Vahlen.

The Volunteers

RIOTS OCCUR IN BRAZIL AFTER GOVT FORCES USE AIR STRIKES AGAINST INVADER FORCES IN POP CENTERS. GENERALS CLEARED OF WRONG-DOING BUT UN INVESTIGATION STILL UNDERWAY.

US PRESIDENT VISITS FIRST CONTACT MEMORIAL DEDICATED TO LIVES LOST WHEN INVADERS FIRST DISCOVERED. NAMES ON THE MEMORIAL INCLUDE PEOPLE KILLED DURING ATTACK, PEOPLE STILL MISSING, AND PEOPLE KILLED DURING RIOTS AS GOVT RESPONDED.

15:30, 04/04/2015, B3F EAST CORRIDOR

Matt Harris and Lana Jenkins made their way down the corridor wordlessly, and Matt couldn't help but feel a small amount of foreboding at the two guards at their destination. Both guards wore combat vests and caps rather than the heavy combat armor and full-face helmets that the Strike teams wore in the field. Neither guard had a weapon larger than a sidearm, but Matt could see the distinctive shapes of Arc Throwers on their belts.

Guards stationed at the entrance are protected and armed but not full kit, and the Arc Throwers are a non-lethal option... Matt assessed quickly as the distance closed between the two volunteers and the guards, *Bradford did say intelligence gathering would be involved. Captured civvy? Captured collaborator? Why would we be needed to volunteer for that? There are interrogation experts more capable than us for that kind of work.*

"Corporal," Matt addressed the guard by the ID scanner with a nod. A swipe of his security badge confirmed his clearance, and the guard gave him a wary eye to confirm that the badge he possessed actually belonged to him. After getting a nod from the corporal, Matt headed inside while the process was repeated for Lana.

"Corporal Harris and Private Jenkins reporting..." He started, but his introduction drifted off when he found the lab without anyone inside it. Lana stepped into the lab behind him and the door whisked shut, leaving the two soldiers alone. "Didn't Bradford say someone would be meeting us here to give us the details?"

"Yep, he did," Lana agreed as she walked a bit further into the lab.

With their guide apparently missing and without any immediate direction, Matt's curiosity got the better of him and he started to walk around the lab. A line of desks could be found along the wall from the entrance to the corner, all of which were clean and locked. The computers were all locked as well. *Excellent precautions, no one wants to be responsible for a security breach because they left a folder on their desk labeled 'TOP SECRET' in bold red letters.*

Matt's eyes scanned the set of items lined up along the perpendicular wall past the desks and saw more of the standard lab materials; recording equipment, a sixty-inch monitor hanging from the wall and a desk with a half dozen reams of paper alongside an impressive display of pens and pencils. The most curious item was a glass-door refrigerator filled with fruits, vegetables and assorted greens. *Captive must be a health nut. Or the scientists are. Or both.* Matt thought idly as his scan reached the other side of the room.

Another unremarkable and mostly unadorned wall crossed the room, and terminated in a set of doors. One door had a red light above the control panel, while the second had a green light. Lana had ceased her drifting and was looking between the two.

"So...green means go, right?" Lana asked as she gave Matt a leading look.

Matt knew that look from long and painful experience, and all he could do was sigh and head over to the door. *Best get it over with, or we'll not get anywhere,* the soldier thought with a sigh as he prodded the door controls.

The door opened and Matt quickly recognized the doctors from the containment breach earlier...and the alien from the hallway and the parking lot the day before. Time slowed to a crawl as his mind sped up in reaction to the danger. *No rifle, no pistol, no Arc Thrower, no armor, no grenades. Alien capable of projecting lethal force at range, likelihood of survival is minimal if attacked,* Matt's mind quickly evaluated the less than ideal situation he had stumbled into. The possibility of neutralizing the alien with his bare hands briefly entered his mind but was pushed out by the still-fresh memories of a pulverized Chryssalid twitching on the pavement. Retreat seemed increasingly a suitable action.

And without a word or action taken on either side, the door slid closed. Just before Matt could exit the lab

and alert the guards he heard a sound he had come to dread: Lana laughing.

"Oh I didn't see this coming!" Lana grinned, all teeth, "'Intelligence gathering?' 'Out of our comfort zone?' Oh this is just brilliant."

"Zip it, Jenkins!" Matt crisply ordered and headed towards the exit, only to be stopped in his tracks by a rather harried-looking Shen coming through the door. He had obviously been running as his face was flushed and his breath was labored, and a sheaf of papers was under one arm.

"Ray! Are you here to introduce us to your furry friend?" Lana asked quickly before anyone else could respond, eliciting a stunned look from Shen and an aggravated look from Matt.

The distraction was only momentary as Matt assessed the new development. An evaluating eye swept over the engineer, and the soldier's gaze narrowed. "Shen, what are you doing here?" Matt asked, though he was getting a sneaking suspicion as to the answer.

Shen's expression went from confusion to abashed embarrassment. "Ah, well, I was originally supposed to meet you here for your briefing, but I forgot some homework," Shen explained as he lifted the papers from under his arm before turning to Lana, "And I suppose you're right, I am here for introductions. But before I get to that I have to ask. Where did you hear that name?"

Before Lana could reply, the door leading to the alien's room whisked open and the two scientists joined the growing group in the lab. The male scientist opened his mouth to speak but was promptly cut off by Matt.

"What the hell are you two thinking?" The soldier fumed, "You both were inside the same room as a captured alien without guards or even a weapon. What would you have done if it turned hostile?"

Shen came to the scientists' rescue with his calm reasoning, "Corporal, your concern is appreciated but misplaced. This one is different, as you are no doubt aware. She is intelligent, peaceful and quite curious. The only way there would be any danger is if she feels threatened."

"And then we're all just an unpleasant stain on the floor," Matt replied, and his mind briefly jumped back to that burning parking lot and the crushed Chryssalid, "I don't need to remind you people that the thing in that room can smash any of us into paste with just its mind."

"Wait, it can do that?" Lana asked warily, but was promptly ignored.

"Corporal, the situation where she was found is rather different than where we are now. I can guarantee you that so long as you don't raise your voice and stay an arm's length away, you will be perfectly safe," Shen explained patiently. "She has been very respectful and even helpful once we explained our situation."

"Question!" Lana jumped into the conversation rather forcefully the moment Shen stopped to take a breath, "If your furry friend is being all helpful, then why are we needed? Matt and I are soldiers, not scientists. What can we do that the researchers can't?"

"Mainly translate for the science team. Doctor Vahlen has decreed that only a limited number of her science team be exposed to our guest's abilities, so volunteers were requested. I can't be here every day to help translate, and Joel has other projects that demand his time."

Matt nearly walked out of the lab the moment he heard the phrase 'exposed to our guest's abilities'. Only one thing stopped him, though, or rather one person. *Lana is showing no signs of second thoughts, and I just know that if I walk out, it'll take ten minutes for the entire base to hear that I ran away from a little purple unicorn, no matter how highly classified this lab is.* His gaze flicked to Lana, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat. *Oh, I'll get you for forcing me into this.*

"I can understand your reservations, corporal. All I can say is relax and just talk to our guest like you would talk to another human being, and you just might be surprised." The male scientist said, having finally found an opening in the conversation. "I know I certainly was."

Matt could only growl and run a hand over his face. "Alright, fine. But I swear the moment it decides to start killing people I reserve the right to say, 'I told you so.'"

"If you're holding out hope of saying that, then I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed in the long run," Shen replied with a smile. "I think it's time we made our introductions, shall we? Doctor Mills and Ngo you may be familiar with, they're two of the researchers with this project."

The two scientists nodded, and the two soldiers returned the courtesy when Shen continued, "...and these are our two volunteers, Corporal Harris and Private Jenkins. Assuming they take well to our new friend, they'll be assisting with the translation workload in the future."

The doubtful expression on Matt's face didn't desist until Shen gave him a gentle pat on the shoulder. "Try to relax, son. You're not going in there alone, and all you have to do is talk to her. Seriously, you'll probably look back at this moment and have a good laugh at how tense you are now." On that note, Shen led the soldiers over to the door and prodded the door controls.

15:40, 04/04/2015, STARDUST LAB

When Joel and Kim stood to leave, Twilight began to review her notes. Already she had begun to organize the chapters and sections of the book she would eventually write on the humans and everything she had learned thus far. *Nothing like a nice project to take your mind off of things...* she thought, and was almost able to suppress a wince as she subconsciously thought of what she was trying to forget.

She had just started to add further notes to her papers when the door opened and Charles entered the room followed by the two strangers she had seen through the door. "Good afternoon, Twilight. How was your nap?" He asked with a knowing smile on his face.

"It was quite refreshing, thank you for asking," Twilight replied, forcing herself to not feel annoyed at his somewhat triumphant smirk. *He wouldn't have had to trick me into it if I had used a bit of moderation and common sense. Silly filly.* "It was probably for the best, I tend to go a little overboard sometimes."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Charles nodded as he took the far seat at the table. The other humans followed suit and gave Twilight further insight on her human hosts. Unlike Charles, the scientists or those scary guards she had seen, these two humans wore light shirts with sleeves that barely went half-way from their shoulders to their elbows. Without the baggy lab coats and multiple layers Twilight could get a better picture of their builds. Both were powerfully built as far as she could tell, with their exposed and hairless arms showing well-defined muscles but that was where most of the similarity ended.

The female was seated across the table from Twilight and was more slender about the shoulders and arms, and had jet black hair like Kim's tied back behind her head. Her bright blue eyes locked on to Twilight in such a way that reminded her uncomfortably of the expressions she saw during the whole 'Smarty Pants' debacle back in Ponyville. Combined with her grin and those blue eyes, Twilight almost half expected Pinkie Pie to jump out of the human's mouth, and the human was simply a suit used in one of her pranks.

The last human took the east to Twilight's right and was a bit larger than the others she had seen. Powerfully built and wide at the shoulders, he kept his brown eyes straight forward and didn't wander anywhere near Twilight's position at the table. His face was also studiously blank and his posture ramrod straight. All of this reminded the unicorn of Shining Armor while he was on duty.

"So, who are your friends?" Twilight asked leadingly after bringing her gaze back to him.

"Ah, yes, my friends," Charles said, and pointed to each of the humans in turn, "This is Lana and Matt. They're going to be helping out around the lab. Specifically they'll be helping with translation duties if you can reproduce the spell on them."

"Joel mentioned that there were concerns of negative side effects from my spells. If that turns out to be true I'd feel really bad about hurting anyone—I mean, anybody." Twilight replied reluctantly, "Are you sure? Are they sure?"

"We are aware, but I'm afraid I can't be here as much as needed to translate, and Joel has his own responsibilities apart from this lab. These two will help translate for as long as necessary," Charles said, with that comforting smile on his face again.

"Well, all right..." Twilight agreed, and closed her eyes to cast the spell. Slowly she opened her eyes again and asked, "Did it work?"

Before either of the men could reply, Lana exploded, "Oh my God you are so adorable. How did you get your hair like that? I tried to dye my hair like that when I was thirteen but it turned into a mess. Oh, your tail matches, too? Seriously, how do you do that without fingers? And ho—"

"Lana," Charles interrupted slowly, "One question at a time."

"Oh, boo. I didn't think you'd be the killjoy here, Ray."

Twilight made a note of the unfamiliar name as well as Charles' reaction to it. His smile became just a bit thinner and more forced. Rather than let the tension build any further, Twilight intervened, "It's no problem, Charles. I actually have a friend who tends to talk fast. And to answer your question, these are my natural colors. It's been this way as far back as I can remember."

"Oh you are kidding me, right?" Lana asked, "That is so unfair. I would have given anything to have had hair like that growing up..." Her envious statement drifted off as she looked to Matt. Charles was also looking to the other man at the table with a leading expression. The increasingly uncomfortable silence began to build before Matt finally spared a glance toward Twilight and asked his question.

"Why are you on our planet?"

The question was a good one, but it was the tone that gave Twilight pause. *Why is he so hostile?* Twilight thought, and had to resist sinking away from that glare. *You know the answer, silly filly. Charles did say that his people lash out at what they're afraid of...* The unicorn struggled to find an answer she was comfortable with giving when Lana came to the rescue.

"If we're going to sit around and talk, why not make things interesting?" Lana asked as she produced a small box from within the many pockets on leggings. The design on the box was blue with white lettering, with a red symbol in the center that looked like an upside down heart with a triangle attached to it. As fascinating as the box was, what was inside was even more so. Lana's slender fingers pulled a sizeable stack of rectangular cards from within the box, and each had an intricate design similar to some of the ancient illuminated books Twilight had seen at the Canterlot library. Lana flipped over a few of the cards to show peculiar symbols and patterns, and Twilight made the connection.

"Oh, those are playing cards of some kind, right?" Twilight asked, and was rewarded with a large grin and a nod from Lana. "I'm afraid I don't know any rules for human games, though..."

"Don't worry! The rules for this game are simple. My mom called this game a 'conversation game,' it is simple enough to let people talk. I'll get into the rules in a second; I just want to go over the cards now." Lana flipped over a few more cards, most were bare save for a few symbols arranged in patterns. The few exceptions were beautifully illustrated pictures of humans in elaborate clothes. "These are the number cards, their value can be determined by the number in the corner or the number of symbols on the card themselves."

Twilight's eyes scanned the exposed cards, quickly identifying the two with hearts, the five with diamonds, and the eight and ten of other symbols. "What do the symbols mean?" Twilight asked as she noticed more cards with the upside-down-heart-and-triangle symbol, as well as a new symbol that looked almost like a clover with three leaves.

"We'll get to that later! You've seen most of the number cards going from one to ten, but now we have the face cards." Lana indicated toward the human-bearing cards, "There are three face cards for each symbol; jack, queen and king. They've all got unique appearances, but the best way to tell them apart is the letter in the corner." She pointed to each of the cards the first with a small hook, the second with a circle and slash mark in the corner and the third looking like a cross that had been flattened on one side so two of the arms went straight up and down. "Now there's one of each of these cards for every symbol in the deck. There are four symbols total, which gives us..."

"Fifty-two cards total," Twilight finished before looking up.

"That's right!" Lana chirped. "Now for this game we shuffle the deck and then deal the cards to the players. The game's name is called 'Liars Cards' and the goal is to drop cards face down in the pile in the center, counting up from one to ten, then jack, queen and king. Once King is reached, the count resets to one."

"I think I understand, but the odds of any one player having enough of each card to add the right one for each turn is..." Twilight started until the connection with the game's name occurred, "Oh, you're supposed to drop cards even if you don't have the needed number? That's why it's called 'Liars Cards', right?"

"Right again! But here's the catch, if you suspect that someone is lying you call them on it! If they are lying, they pick up the entire stack. If they're not lying, then you have to pick up the entire stack," Lana further explained. "What makes this a conversation game is that the person who turns out right in one of these accusations gets to pick the topic to discuss until another accusation is made. So, Twilight, would you like to play a game?"

17:00, 04/04/2015, STARDUST LAB

Matt, Lana and Charles learned something new over the course of their game of Liars Cards: Twilight was a terrible liar. The first few rounds were typical of a game of Liars Cards with everyone dropping one or two cards before Twilight's turn came around and it was painfully apparent that what she had dropped was not the card that was needed.

Lana called her out on it and Twilight's stack of cards doubled. There was a brief flurry of cards as

Twilight used her telekinesis to rearrange all the cards in the correct order before the game could continue. It was at this point that the humans learned something else: Twilight had impeccable memory.

"Liar!" Twilight chirped with an apologetic smile before Matt could even reach for a junk card to throw on the stack. "What was it like growing up here? Do you have families you keep in touch with?"

"One two," Lana said, dropping a card on the recently cleared table, "And I certainly do! Six brothers and my mom are all back home living the normal life. I talk to them and visit whenever I can, which unfortunately isn't very often these days."

"Two threes," Shen added to the pile before continuing on the conversation, "I'm afraid I'm an only child, and my wife passed about ten years ago. My kids...well, I don't get to speak with them as much as I'd like to anymore."

Before the suddenly depressing topic could drag down the conversation, Twilight plucked two cards from her collection and placed them on top of the stack. "Two fours! My mom and dad still live in the capitol, and my older brother is out with his wife helping the Crystal Empire get back on its hooves. He and I write from time to time, but I always prefer to talk face to face."

Silence fell as it came around to Matt's turn. "Three fives," He stated flatly before placing the trio of cards on the stack, "Standard family here, mom and dad, younger sister and grandparents passed a while back."

"Two sixes, and it wasn't too bad growing up. Things were a bit tight for us money-wise back home, so I joined the navy as soon as I graduated and I've been sending money back home ever since. With what I can send back, things are a bit easier for mom and the boys, especially since the bosses here pay top dollar for my skills."

'You had me at combat pay' she said, Matt absently remembered from the briefing. I wonder what happened—

"You mentioned your mom, but what about your dad? Doesn't he help?" Twilight asked, approaching the subject Matt had been considering with all the subtlety of a HEAT missile.

Lana's smile became just a bit strained before replying, "He's no longer with us."

"One seven," Shen interrupted before anyone else could elaborate on that, "And I grew up in the sixties and seventies. It was a scary time back then, there was the constant threat of the world being destroyed by the people on the other side of the ocean. Of course, there were some amazing times also, like seeing the astronauts land on the moon. I'll never forget that."

"I imagine you'll never forget when you first heard about indoor plumbing and electricity, right?" Lana said, her smile back to what it once was.

"Hey now, no jokes will be tolerated about my old age from you meddling kids." Shen chuckled as he further played into Lana's joke.

A moment of silence reigned as all eyes went to Twilight, who had yet to place any cards on the table. *She needs to conquer that hesitation if she's ever going to win the game. At least she's not muttering to herself like she did in the beginning,* Matt surmised before speaking up, "Might want to pick up the stack already if you don't have the cards, Twilight. And I think we have a right to know at this point. Why are you here on our planet?"

Matt could see the warning glance from both Shen and Lana, but neither tried to change the subject. Twilight herself seemed surprised by the question as though she had completely forgotten about it, before scooping up the cards in the center of the table. There was a long moment of silence as she organized her newly acquired cards before she spoke.

"I didn't come here by choice. Well, that's not right. I did make a choice, but I didn't ever expect that this would be the result," Twilight said as soon as her cards were all in order. "My friends and I were given a mission to reform one of the biggest threats to Equestria or send him back to his stone prison if he refused. His name is Discord, and he's the embodiment of pure chaos. When we freed him from his prison and gave him the option to reform or return to stone, he offered to make a deal. I suspect that the deal was simply a trick because once I agreed, I found myself here. Without my help, there's no way to return Discord to stone, so he's probably doing terrible things to my home right now."

"When you say 'return to stone', what do you mean, exactly?" Of all the questions that came to Matt after that explanation, the one he asked made him the most curious. He also took the opportunity to drop a pair of cards on the table that most certainly were not eights.

"We turn him to stone. Petrification is the only way to hold Discord in place, more mundane prisons

simply can't hold him." Twilight explained which elicited a trio of blank looks in response.

"Making a deal and not getting what you were expecting? That kinda sounds a bit like the devil to me. If you believe in that sort of thing, I mean." Lana said cautiously as she dropped a card of her own on the table.

"What's a 'devil'?" Twilight asked as she looked over her cards to Lana, who suddenly cringed under their scrutiny.

"The most popular depiction of the devil comes from the Christian religion, though many religions have had similar concepts over the many years Humanity has been around," Shen explained, drawing attention to him as he continued. "Among other things, the devil is said to rule over Hell, a place where evil people's souls go when they die so they may be punished for their wickedness. The devil also has a reputation for coming to Earth personally or through his agents to make deals with mortals. The devil claims to grant any wish, and the price for that wish is the person's soul. Of course, the majority of wishes turn out to be tricks that turn out bad in the long run..."

"Have you met him?" Twilight asked sincerely, which again earned a blank look from the humans around the table.

"Met who? The *devil*?" Shen blurted out before he could contain his disbelief, "Ah, no I haven't. I don't think I have, at least. Though I suppose that brings up another subject I had been meaning to ask about. Human religions are all about our beliefs which have no physical proof beyond the belief itself, and as science matured over the years many of the things we attributed to 'God' turned out to have perfectly logical explanations. When a philosopher posited the theory that our planet orbited the sun rather than the other way around, he was treated harshly because people at the time thought he was attacking God and their beliefs. Of course, now we know he was right bu—"

"Wait wait, your planet orbits your sun? Why? How? Who controls that?" Twilight interrupted, and it was her turn to have a look of disbelief.

"Uh, well, again there are religions that believe there's an intelligence controlling everything, but science over the years has studied the movement of the planets in this system to figure out how everything works. I studied it at one time, but I'm afraid that I'd need to bring up some materials on the subject since I'm not confident I'd remember everything accurately." Shen scratched his chin and threw a card on the table. "Also, it's your turn."

"Wh—bu—That's..." Twilight sputtered, and her eyes unfocused slightly before snapping back into onto Shen with an increasing amount of alarm, "That would be nearly impossible! Without a guiding influence to hold the sun at the right distance for life to flourish, or the resources to allow life to develop, or someone to ward off disasters from the sky like meteors or other planets... the odds of all that coming together without help is so insignificant I can't even calculate it! Oh Celestia, what if something happens now?" Twilight started to ramble as though the realization that there was no divine protection would herald disaster until Shen intervened.

"Twilight!" He interrupted forcefully, which brought the unicorn back to her senses, "Twilight, I can certainly understand how that revelation might be a bit of a shock to you, I'll see about getting some written material explaining the math on how planets orbit. What I can tell you now is that the planet has been around for billions of years, and nothing bad has happened yet."

"Except for the dinosaurs," Lana quibbled, which earned her a dark look from Shen.

And the invaders, Matt thought darkly, but was tactful enough not to run his mouth.

"We've also got telescopes and satellites that tell us if anything is coming that might potentially be a threat. I do agree that the odds of our little world developing on its own are quite astronomical, but we beat the odds to get here and we're doing everything we can to improve our odds," Shen explained further, and paused to let Twilight collect her thoughts.

"I suppose that makes sense," Twilight said after a long moment before looking back to Shen, "You mentioned you had books on the subject? I think I really need to see them at some point. I can get a better grip on all this if I can read about it."

"I'm certain something can be arranged. Now I'm afraid it's your turn. I think we're at Jacks now."

Twilight plucked a pair of cards from her collection and placed them on the table before Shen continued his previous thought.

"Well, ah, I guess we got sidetracked a bit. The main reason I brought up religion is because a lot of what you're explaining to us sounds quite a bit like our definition of religion; using supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. But you've also said that you interact with these all-powerful figures on a daily

basis, which flies in the face of most religions we have here on Earth.”

Matt dropped another pair of cards on the table and kept his eyes on the alien before he spoke, “There are people who claim to talk to the gods they worship, but the vast majority of them are whack jobs looking for justification for doing something terrible to their fellow men.”

“I...think I see what you mean,” Twilight said hesitantly, “If your system isn’t under direct control by somepony you can speak to, then I suppose my descriptions of Celestia and Luna might seem a bit unbelievable. The princesses may be the rulers of Equestria and have more power than anypony but they’re also extremely kind and forgiving, and they aren’t perfect or omnipotent. They both have their... quirks.”

“Oh? And one king, by the by,” Lana asked as she contributed her own card to the pile.

“Well, Princess Luna’s a bit socially awkward and has a tendency to talk really really loud. Apparently that’s how the princesses talked a thousand years ago. And Princess Celestia is amazing to everyone she meets but has a reputation for teasing people but it’s not true, she would never do something like that. Probably.”

“That sounds like a strangely specific denial, Twilight. Do you know why she would have that reputation?” Shen said, and put three cards down on the pile.

“Well, not personally,” Twilight said before closing her eyes and placing a hoof on her face, “Wait, that’s wrong. Part of my responsibilities as Princess Celestia’s student was writing her weekly letters on the progress I had made, and one week I had forgotten about the letter and had nothing to write. I spent the entire day getting more and more stressed because I couldn’t find anything to write. Every time I looked up at the sun to see how much time I had, it would tick like the hand of a clock and I’d get even *more* stressed. Now that I think about it, she probably deserves that reputation.”

“This ‘Princess Celestia’ controls the *sun*? And she’d screw around with the orbit to mess with someone’s head?” Matt asked, not even bothering to mask his disbelief. “That’s downright diabolical.”

“I disagree, that’s downright *hilarious*!” Lana grin nearly took in her ears before continuing, “Come on, think about it, folks! You find yourself with god-like power, what would you do with it? After everything else, I mean. Smite thine enemies, help your friends... what else is there to do after that besides toy with the little people and their little lives?”

“She doesn’t *toy with our lives*, she was trying to teach me a lesson,” Twilight snapped as she dropped another card on the table. “I had a tendency to take little things too seriously, and I’ll admit that I went a little overboard trying to find something to write about. I think that was her way of trying to let me know she was watching.”

“And she let you know she was watching by giving you a very visible reminder that your deadline was approaching? Diabolical,” Matt said as he reached for another card while keeping an eye on the increasingly flustered unicorn.

“She isn’t diabolical!” Twilight protested while fixing Matt with a withering glare. The effect wasn’t nearly as intimidating as she clearly hoped it would be, “And you have no twos. Pick up the cards.”

She also needs to learn that her memory can’t account for everything, Matt thought as he grinned and flipped over the card in his hand to show her the two of spades. “Afraid you’re wrong there, Twilight.”

“How do you have a two? That’s not possible!” Twilight complained as she gathered up the amassed cards on the table, including two that Matt produced. “I’ve been keeping track of what everyone has and you should not have any twos!”

“I think the answer will make itself apparent when you sort out your new cards, Twilight,” Shen said with a small grin on his face. That grin soon spread to Lana and Matt as Twilight’s mouth dropped open at the cards she now possessed.

“None of these cards are right! Have you all been throwing random numbers on the pile while we were talking?” Twilight asked as her purple eyes swept across the other players. Shen and Matt glanced away but Lana grinned all the wider.

“Nope, I didn’t put random stuff on the table, every choice was deliberate,” The female soldier’s smile turned devious, “I had managed to work out a pattern for your calling the cards so I just made it a point to cater to that expectation until I could unload enough of my junk cards to bring victory into sight. At this point I have one of each card and I suspect the others are the same so victory is assured.”

Twilight opened and closed her mouth several times to try and rebut that assertion but found nothing. “Oh I’ll get you next game. Next game!” The unicorn declared triumphantly and all the cards around the

table were lifted by Twilight's telekinesis, including the cards still being held by the players. The cards flew about in a blizzard before forming into a neat stack and dropping in front of Lana. "Deal the cards!"

"I'm afraid that will have to wait, at least for now Twilight." Shen said after checking his wristwatch. "I've got to head down to engineering to make sure that the kids aren't about to blow the base up, and I think the doctors wanted to have a word with you two before too long." At Shen's prompting, Lana and Matt checked their own watches and nodded.

"Sorry, Twily, but Ray's right. Next time you'll have your revenge," Lana promised with a smile and a wave. Matt afforded the unicorn a half smile before following Lana to the door.

"Don't run off, kids. I'll need to speak with you in just a bit," Shen said before turning back to Twilight and offering her a stack of papers, "I've got something for you to work on when you have free time. It is not homework, and there is no due date. Just work on it when you have a free moment."

"Thanks, Charles. I learned my lesson last time, no going overboard. What is it?" Twilight lifted the papers from Shen's grasp while giving them a once-over, "Oh, it's math? I love math! I'm assuming the first page is a number translation guide... oh, base ten will make this interesting. Thanks again!"

"No problem. I'll see you soon, Twilight," Charles replied before turning to the two soldiers and leading them out to the lab testing area. The door whisked open and doctor Mills nodded to each of them as they exited the lab before he headed in with a tablet computer and a stylus. Any conversation they might have had was cut off when the door whisked shut behind them.

"Well, that went about as well as I had hoped it could. So, kids, there's some homework for the two of you. I'm afraid you're going to need to write a brief summary of your impressions with Twilight, as well as anything odd you experienced during your time in there. The due date for that is tomorrow morning." Shen gave each a smile and a pat on the shoulder. "Don't forget your medical screenings as soon as you leave."

"Does the nearly irresistible impulse to hug the alien count?" Lana asked, and if Matt greatly regretted his lack of a camera at that moment.

Damn it, if I had a picture of her looking like a six year old girl at her birthday I could blackmail her into behaving properly, the male soldier lamented before he realized Shen was looking to him for a response. "No irresistible impulses here, though I have to admit you were right. After talking with her for an hour it's hard to imagine being afraid of her."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. Now I'll be expecting both of you here tomorrow morning to help with Vahlen's testing. I suspect Twilight will need as many friendly faces as she can get around her." Shen nodded to Matt and Lana.

Sensing the dismissal, the two soldiers turned to leave but Shen's hand fell on Lana's shoulder to hold her in place. "Not so fast, young lady. You and I are going to have a discussion about where you heard that name."

Suddenly free from his tormenter, Matt smiled and waved as he turned to leave. Lana shot him a parting glance that he recognized as *I'm going to get you for this*. Matt felt it was worth the risk as the door closed behind him.

07:00, 04/05/2015, STARDUST LAB

Twilight woke in her bed feeling the best she had since her arrival on Earth. No nightmares chased her from her sleep this morning, which made her quite optimistic for the day. Twilight stretched and yawned widely before nearly tripping and falling out of bed when her front hooves got caught in the sheets. She quickly righted herself and gave the offending sheets a glare.

No! Not going to let that get to me! Today is going to be a good day, Twilight resolved right then, and made herself smile as she made her bed and ran a hoof over the comforter to smooth it out. *Today I'll meet 'Vahlen' who wants to run tests on my magic. That won't be for a little bit, at least.*

Twilight turned to face the room and the smile became sincere as she surveyed the changes that had been made since the previous day. After the card game, Joel had come in with a few more things for her. Specifically, something he called a 'tablet computer' with a program for teaching his language, and a small roll of adhesive tape. With the tape, Twilight had adorned a significant portion of the walls with the pictures she had drawn of her friends and the princesses, as well as the other ponies she knew.

Like the day before, a bowl of fresh fruits sat on her desk beside the tablet and the stack of math papers that Shen had delivered but were set aside in favor of the tablet computer Joel had provided. *It's tempting*

to keep using the tablet but I should probably let it rest for now, Twilight decided before hopping up into her chair and levitating a pen over to the math paperwork.

She had memorized the translation key for the numbers when Charles first handed it to her, and Twilight was pleased that she was starting to recognize the numbers in the key with the numbers from the card game as well as the numbers from the language program. The pen began to fly over the paper, and the first sheet was done in just over two minutes. The second proved a little harder, but if there was anything Twilight enjoyed it was an academic challenge.

The second sheet was finished in short order and was quickly moved to the 'done' pile, and Twilight took a moment to dig a bit in the basket of food until she settled on a carrot that somehow got buried near the bottom. She had just started to nibble on it before starting the third sheet when the door opened for Charles and Lana to enter.

"Good morning!" Twilight said cheerfully, and both returned the greeting. Shen was opened his mouth to speak but Lana beat him to it.

"Quick, before we get started! If you ever are eating a carrot and Joel or Kim visit you must ask them, 'what's up doc', alright? Trust me, it'll be awesome," There was that grin again, the one that would give Pinkie Pie a run for her bits. Charles' reaction was quite different; Twilight could hear a slight groan as he covered his face with one of his hands.

"Back on topic, Doctor Vahlen will be joining us today for some tests. The tests in question won't be in this lab, though. Matt, Lana and I will take you over to Medical, where there's a machine that allows us to scan your body so we can learn how it works without having to do anything invasive. Vahlen's current theory about your magic has to do with how your horn integrates with your brain, and the machine will hopefully capture something that our eyes have missed."

Twilight blinked at the explanation before considering. "So... it's an X-ray?"

"Ah, yes, I suppose it is. It's something similar. While the machine runs it will take several images of your brain to map where the activity centers are, and I suspect you'll need to use some simple magic in the process to see if that changes anything," Charles scratched his chin while giving Twilight an evaluating look. "I'm surprised you know what an X-ray is, that requires a bit of technological development I didn't know you had."

"Technology? We use magic for it," Twilight replied.

"Ah, I suppose that makes sense," Charles chuckled at something before taking a look at her work on the math sheets. "Very impressive, Twilight. I also heard from Joel that you're interested in learning our language and he provided you with some learning material? That's very ambitious. Have you had a chance to go over that material yet?"

"Yep!" Twilight chirped, "I was able to go through the entire character set as well as the basic numbers, and I think I've worked out a bit of the sentence structure. In terms of structure the languages aren't too different, but you use your letters to form the words which can also be broken into syllables. My written language uses specific symbols for the syllables themselves, so that's a bit of a hurdle to get used to."

"I'm glad to hear you aren't easily discouraged," Charles said with an approving smile, "Most people I know only learn one language through their whole lives, you know."

"And most of them don't speak good, either," Lana added with a grin.

"There's something wrong with what you just said but I can't put my hoof on it," Twilight said as she arched an eyebrow, "Regardless, after talking with Joel and Kim yesterday I realized it was a little insensitive of me to force my translation magic on humans when they might not be comfortable with it, so I'm hoping I can do away with it entirely to make everybody more comfortable."

Twilight turned to the desk and levitated a use-worn paperback book to the center of the desk, which elicited a small look of shock from Charles. "I also want to read the book you lent to me in its own language, since literary translation spells tend to make mistakes. I'm reasonably certain that the title of this book is not 'Furry Pot-Maker and the Unicorn Rock' so I'll just have to content myself with my imagination until I can read it in the printed language."

The moment Twilight mentioned the translated name; Lana slapped a hand over her mouth and closed her eyes. Her shoulders began to convulse and she nearly doubled over. "Fu... Furry Po—" was all she could manage before having to leave the room. The soldier's released laughter abruptly terminated as the door shut behind her.

Again Charles chuckled before looking to Twilight again, "The correct translation is 'Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone'. I think Lana found your translation to be rather humorous, though come to think of it,

she's young enough to have read the books when they were new and she was young. I imagine you'll have to let us know what you think of them once you are able to finally read them."

"I'd love to be able to talk about the books once I can read them...wait, books? Plural? How many are there?"

"Well, in this series there are seven. 'Sorcerer's Stone' was just book one. I believe I have the rest of the series lying around if you would like to borrow them." Charles again gave his comforting smile, and Twilight thanked Luna's lucky stars that the first human she spoke to was him.

"I would really enjoy that. I bet I could translate them into my language so that when I get home my people could enjoy them, too!" Twilight returned Charles' smile before setting her eyes on the book. "There's always more room in my library for good books, and if you say this is a good one then I have no doubt that it's great."

Charles' smile faltered somewhat as he asked, "Twilight, don't you think you might overwork yourself? The work with the doctors will be a bit demanding not to mention the math work you've been given as well as trying to learn a new language. Perhaps you should take things one at a time instead of trying to do everything at once?"

"Oh, don't worry Charles, I'm an excellent multitasker. Plus a busy mind doesn't wander into dark places," The unicorn replied, though her tone fell a bit as she finished her thought.

"I suppose I can agree with that. I know from experience how tempting it is to throw one's self into work to try and avoid the problems you'd rather not think about," Charles added after a long moment, "On that note, I imagine Vahlen is in the lab now and waiting for us. Perhaps we shouldn't keep her waiting, yes?"

Twilight nodded and hopped out of her chair to follow Charles and he headed towards the door. Despite the somewhat depressing turn the conversation had taken Twilight couldn't help but feel optimistic. *They want to know about magic! Who better than I to teach them about it? I suppose I should start small since they don't know anything about it,* Twilight decided quickly and started designing a structured seminar on magic specifically for the magically ignorant in mind.

The door opened to reveal the lab testing area as well as the majority of friends she had made already. Matt and Lana were off to the side talking quietly, while Joel and Kim were off to the other side talking with someone new. The new human was female and a bit shorter than the other humans Twilight had met thus far and was dressed in the same labcoat and suit outfit that the scientists wore. It looked as though the brown hair on top of her head might be quite long if it were ever allowed to escape the tight binding holding most of it behind her head.

What was most striking about this new arrival was her expression though; a narrow-eyed and pitiless glare that spoke of clinical detachment at best...or hatred at worst. What surprised Twilight more was that it was a glare she recognized.

"Please let me out!" Twilight yelled as she pounded on the glass frantically. She met the eyes of one of the bipeds, who turned and walked away. "Please let me out! PLEASE!" The unicorn screamed, not daring to look behind her. Another of the bipeds turned away, while the third maintained that icy stare.

"Twilight? What's wrong?" Charles asked, but his voice sounded distant.

"N-nothing. Nothing is wrong," Twilight lied as she tried to quell the horror rising within her as she realized that this 'Vahlen' she would be working with was the one who had nearly killed her while her *new friends* had done nothing to stop Vahlen.

Perhaps today isn't going to be such a good day after all.

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

Civilian 'guests': The possibility of civilians being hosted or detained by the XCOM project is not unexpected. Civilian assets with valuable information are housed on site for their safety until such time as it is safe for their return to their countries of origin. High value assets or unwilling assets are kept under guard until it is determined that no further information can be gathered from them or they are no longer a threat to the XCOM project.

Base Security: Primarily implemented to ensure proper security clearances are enforced in addition to acting as a quick reaction force in the event of attack or containment failure, they are lightly armed and armored.

Stardust Supplemental Files (Pt. 3)

VATICAN ISSUES STATEMENT ASKING FOR PRAYERS FOR ALL THOSE AFFECTED BY ATTACKS BY INVADERS, ASKS ALL CONGREGATIONS TO OPEN DOORS TO THOSE DISPLACED BY ATTACKS. "GOD JUDGES US NOT BY THE WRATH WE HAVE FOR OUR ENEMIES, BUT BY THE COMPASSION FOR OUR FELLOW MAN."

HOMELESS MAN ARRESTED IN SAN FRANCISCO FOUND IN POSSESSION OF ALIEN ARTIFACTS SCAVENGED FROM ATTACK ON CITY DISAPPEARS FROM CUSTODY; ALL EVIDENCE GATHERED FOUND MISSING FROM EVIDENCE LOCKER; PD COMPUTER SYSTEMS WIPED CLEAN; PD STATION FOUND ABANDONED NEXT DAY BY ARRIVING OFFICERS.

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PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Xenobiology

DIVLEAD: Dr. Joel Mills

Attached Files: Analysis reports of tissue, blood and hair samples from 'Twilight', Medical Imaging footage (various) of 'Twilight', personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 17:00 04/05/2015

Today we made arrangements for Twilight to be taken to Medical one floor up to use the scanning equipment there not to mention procure physical samples. Quite frankly I've been dying to see how her body operates as compared to the invaders or even our own physiologies. After all, there's only so much we can tell with just the naked eye and the plethora of monitoring equipment in the lab.

From the trip to Medical we were able to determine the following:

1. Twilight is warm-blooded and mammalian in nature, with the vast majority of her physiology extremely similar to Earth organisms.
 - a. Side note: This was discovered earlier but also is worth mentioning; Twilight's species are herbivores and are completely comfortable eating fruits and vegetables provided with no difficulty.
 - b. Side note 2: Twilight is not only able to consume and gain nutrients from our fruits and vegetables, but she recognizes them from her own homeworld. Considering the mammalian nature of Twilight and the similarity in described plant life, we may have a case of parallel evolution on a planetary scale.
 - c. Side note 3: Twilight has also ascribed a desire for coffee whenever any is brought into the habitat. Requests were denied and coffee in the Stardust labs has been banned until further notice.
2. The key distinguishing feature of Twilight's skeletal structure (horn) is comprised of bone and hollow and has a significant amount of circulatory activity. It is quite apparent that this horn doesn't serve the same function physically as the horns of earth animals; it's not meant to withstand impacts.
3. Scans of Twilight's brain show that its Encephalization quotient is roughly equivalent to humans.
 - a. Further scans of Twilight's brain, especially during the 'magic' tests showed something startling. The frontal lobe (or perhaps even a new lobe entirely? Oh the possibilities) extends partially into the horn and lit up like a light on the imaging systems during the magic tests. The theory is that this section of the brain directly accesses and/or interfaces with whatever energy is used for her magic.
 - b. Visual footage of Twilight using her magic also confirms that her horn does give off light during magic use, and the target for her magic also receives a similar aura. Anecdotal accounts provided by Twilight seem to indicate that the color of this light depends upon the user, in Twilight's case it is bright magenta.
 - c. Further notes on Twilight's magical abilities can be described in Dr. Vahlen's DEPTLEAD notes.
4. Analysis of Twilight's blood indicates it is functionally identical to blood from terrestrial analogs. It's even red. Analysis systems are still working on DNA structures to see if it bears any similarities to ours.

5. Hair samples are almost identical in makeup as human hair, being comprised of keratin.

a. The colors of her mane, coat, and flank marks are all inexplicably natural as far as the machines can tell.

6. Imaging of her muscle structure shows that she is likely capable of feats of physicality that would only be possible to only the most fit of humans. I note this specifically because Twilight describes herself as an academic and not physically oriented in her profession.

a. The 'Earth Pony' subspecies described in earlier notes must be significantly stronger if Twilight's descriptions are accurate, even without any of the described magical abilities.

7. Other systems in Twilight's body appear to have similar functions as earth equivalents. Heart, lungs, kidneys, everything.

The mountains of data used to come up with this summary are attached with the notes.

On a more personal note, today did not go quite as expected. In the previous days, Twilight has always been extremely eager for every one of our discussions. There was an equal amount of give and take as she both asked and answered questions (all answers were within the established security restrictions, and Twilight did not push any subject after she was informed of the restrictions).

Today, however, she was withdrawn and skittish. Her answers were short and clipped, and she stuck to Shen and the two volunteers more often than not. Kim noticed this behavior as well, and took this as further evidence of the herd mentality of Twilight's culture. The only question now is what may have triggered our (Kim and I) exclusion from the 'herd'.

Furthermore, I was in observation and was able to overhear Shen's initial explanation of today's plans as well as everyone in attendance and she seemed to have no adverse reaction to it until after we gathered to head to medical.

Perhaps it's the technology angle? After all, a culture without the need for technology might be intimidated by mundane devices that can replicate their natural abilities. Twilight was extremely hesitant to participate in the medical imaging procedures until Shen volunteered to use them first. I suppose we all should be thankful for Shen's presence, he always seems to know exactly what to say to calm any anxiety.

Perhaps it was the thought of leaving the lab? From what we know of Twilight's arrival and time here on Earth, it has ranged from unpleasant to downright life threatening except for within the lab itself. First the Chryssalid attack, which would be enough to unhinge anyone, then ending up in Containment.

Oh, hell.

UPDATE: 08:25, 04/06/2015

I spoke with Frank and at his suggestion I reviewed all previous recorded contacts with Twilight and I think I found our answer. Kim, Vahlen and I were all present shortly before Twilight's escape, and its likely seeing all of us together brought that memory back for Twilight. Shen obviously didn't take part in that little fiasco, and the two volunteers had their helmets on until their official introduction, so that's why I suspect Twilight considers them 'safe.'

I know she is just doing her job but Vahlen's effect on Twilight is extremely inconvenient. That ice queen is also doing nothing to adjust her attitude to accommodate Twilight. Seriously, would it kill her to crack a smile once and awhile, or maybe answer a question or two?

Looks like our job just got a little bit more complicated. At least we can count on the presence of Shen and the volunteers to placate Twilight if necessary. On that subject, Shen and Vahlen are getting increasingly terse in their exchanges. If it were anyone but Vahlen I'd say something to try and diffuse the tension but I value my life too much.

I'll bring up that animosity during my next check-up with Frank, maybe he can suggest something to help those two resist the impulse to strangle each other. The XCOM project doesn't exactly have an HR department for this sort of thing, so I hope it doesn't come to that.

In light of the developing situation, Frank has also been read into the program and will be observing Twilight over the next few days. I'm hoping he will be able to give us some guidance on how to diffuse the tension with Twilight, not to mention around the lab.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Supplemental
DIVLEAD: Dr. Frank McKendrick
Attached Files: Personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 09:30, 04/06/2015

There's times where this job erodes the soul. I get young men and women coming into my office and they tell me about how their best friend was burned alive, or they had to shoot him to pieces because one of those damned monsters got inside his head or implanted by the bugs. They come to me to relieve the burdens this damned war gives them. It's all I can do for them, and it kills me a little every time to see them so broken in their heads and hearts.

There's times where this job erodes the soul, and for once I'm pleasantly surprised that this isn't one of them. This all started a couple of days ago when I was informed I would be needing to perform evaluations on Dr. Shen from engineering as well as several new people. Parameters for evaluation involved not only stress factors but also mental tampering.

I was initially intrigued since the vast majority of my visitors are soldiers returning from missions or from recurring issues, but I was also well aware that asking too many questions might put me in a terrible predicament. After discussing things with doctors Ngo, Mills, and Shen, it was felt that my assistance may be needed with the project itself and I was given permission to view the subject of the project.

Imagine my surprise when the subject of the project was a little purple unicorn with big eyes and highlighted hair. I suppose that makes sense of the concerns of the doctors. They had worried about passive mind control to induce trust, but after viewing the subject I think we can safely rule that out. After the descriptions of what the doctors were feeling combined with this appearance, I think it's just a natural human reaction to what we see as a cute furry animal. There's a reason why cats rule the internet.

I didn't speak with the subject but I observed her during an animated discussion with doctor Shen. I did notice some of the signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder that Shen had hinted at. The desk supplies are all stacked and ordered in exact spacing, the bed is immaculately made and I've seen the pictures arranged in her room organized in a very specific pattern. Pictures lining her desk were described as her closest friends, the pictures of her rulers are above the desk, and radiating out from there are the remainders sorted by species and further sorted by color and sex if applicable.

During observation Kim and Joel also described what sounds like the onset of PTSD. Prior to her arrival on Earth it seems 'Twilight' lived a simple life as a librarian. Within her first six hours of arriving on our planet she was nearly killed by a chrysalid and then dissected by Vahlen. The first part alone would give any civilian a good start towards an anxiety disorder, but I suspect waking up in front of Vahlen and not being human would only make things so much worse.

As to her current behavior to the volunteers and the science team, I'm afraid I can only speculate. Based on evidence gathered so far, it is a reasonable assumption that Twilight's species social structures are herd-based, probably a relic of their more primitive days. Herds mean safety and companionship, being cut off from the herd means isolation and danger. Her initial friendliness towards everyone is likely a subconscious attempt to establish a substitute herd for comfort and safety. I have little doubt that seeing Joel and Kim with Vahlen caused their expulsion from her little herd. The question now is how can this be rectified?

On the subject of Vahlen, I should stop by and see how she's doing. She's been missing her scheduled appointments for about two weeks now and I am starting to worry that the stress of her position and the attack on Cologne is effecting her judgement. Kim and Joel have both described her as increasingly... agitated.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Stardust
PROJECTDIV: Physics
DIVLEAD: Dr. Moira Vahlen
Attached Files: Visual footage of subject performing abilities, Medical Imaging footage (various) of subject, personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 17:00, 04/05/2015

With testing procedures limited to non-invasive methods, I made the decision to move the subject to Medical for the advanced imaging equipment present there. While it would have been plausible to have

this equipment moved to the Stardust lab, it would have to be done one piece at a time as the lab simply doesn't have the room for all the imaging equipment to be run simultaneously.

I also wanted to see how the subject reacted after being removed from its habitat for most of the day. Anxiety and hesitation were clearly present. Good. The subject needs to realize that it isn't here for comfort or enjoyment or to make friends. The sole reason for its continued existence is to provide us with information to help us save our world.

The others who have come into contact with the subject may also need to be reminded of this fact also. The subject is not a pet, nor a friend, or a mascot, or the grandchild you never had. It is an alien from another world with capacities beyond what we can measure and motivations the human mind cannot fathom. I'll be speaking with doctor McKendrick to watch the others for excessive attachment to the specimen. There will come a time when 'Twilight' is no longer useful to this project, and will be discarded just like anything else.

Medical imaging technology has revealed a great deal about the internal structure of the subject as well as confirmed one theory of mine while disproving others. I had expected to find a similar brain structure to the Sectoid specimens detailed from project [REDACTED], with enhanced synaptic activity as well as implants to further enhance this activity. What was found was a brain completely devoid of any surgical activity or alteration; instead was an entire neural section comprised of synapses even further enhanced than the Sectoid samples previously captured. This neural section also extends partially into the subject's horn, which I now theorize works as a natural projector for these abilities in place of implants.

The implications are disturbing: The invaders have to genetically engineer troops and install implants in them to get the abnormal abilities we've witnessed, but we've now stumbled across a species that not only has these abilities naturally but with an order of magnitude greater effect and control.

On that note, the monitoring arrays continue to fail to detect anything anomalous when the subject uses its abilities. Regardless, we will begin cataloging the various abilities of the subject starting tomorrow, and the subject is going to attempt to explain the mechanics as well. I expect nothing more than a more flowery version of, "a wizard did it."

END LOG

PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Physics

DIVLEAD: Dr. Moira Vahlen

Attached Files: Footage of multiple subject abilities, transcripts translated by Dr. Mills, personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 17:00, 04/13/2015

Attached to this update is a list of abilities demonstrated by the subject, their effects, as well as known limitations as discovered over the past week. A brief description of global ability mechanics is summarized below. For the full (and exhaustive) explanation, please view Dr. Mills' transcripts.

The activation and utilization of subject's abilities is a three step process.

1. Energy gathering. The subject describes this step as gathering energy from the 'Field'(1) to power the chosen ability. An appropriate amount must be gathered or the intended ability may not activate or may misfire.
2. Ability formulation. The subject shapes the raw energy to create the desired effect. Improper formulation may result in ability failure or misfire.
3. Ability activation. The subject chooses an object or location for the ability to target, and activates the ability. If the object or location is outside the scope of steps 2 or 1, then the intended effect may not occur or may have significantly increased effect.

(1) Attempts to detect this 'Field' have all failed just as all other detection equipment has failed to detect anything being amiss during ability usage.

Restrictions on ability usage appear to be divided into two categories.

1. Power capacity. The ability to access the 'Field' is described in similar fashion that muscles correlate to physical strength. Practicing the use of complex and varied abilities increases the amount of power the specimen can draw on, but there are high and low peaks in this capacity. The low peak is the maximum that can be drawn after lapsing in ability usage, the high peak is the maximum that can be drawn while participating in exercises. Attempts to use abilities without the minimum required power capacity may

result in ability failure, misfire, or death.

2. Ability Formulae. Each ability has a corresponding formulae that must be conceptualized in the subject's mind in order to shape the energy into its most useable and efficient form. Without the formulae, the results may vary or fail entirely.

a. Subject also noted that this does not apply in certain cases. For instance, her entire subspecies (unicorn) possesses telekinesis from a very early age and do not require study to use it, though study and practice does improve fine control and scope of use.

b. Abilities related to the 'special talents' (See Dr. Ngo's notes) discovered in adolescence are also significantly easier to activate and control even if it may be beyond that specimen's abilities comparatively.

Summary of abilities tested listed below.

1. Telekinesis (TK), the direct influence of the mind on the physical world without contacting the affected targets.

a. Line of sight is required to activate the ability but not to maintain it.

b. Activation is nearly instantaneous.

c. Subjects held with TK appear to be weightless but still retain their mass. Objects with significant mass take effort to be physically moved through the air, but the only resistance the object encounters is air resistance.

i. Inversely, if the subject specifies, an object can be held in place and resist all attempts to move it. (Video example of Cpl Matt Harris attempting to push a quarter and failing) Attempts to move objects held in this manner were restricted to what was located within the lab, more thorough testing may need to be attempted in the hangar where sufficient power can be applied without risk to personnel or the lab.

d. Subject is able to apply TK to multiple objects while still maintaining fine control. Object used in this test was a deck of bicycle playing cards shuffled and then thrown into the air. Subject was able to apply telekinesis to every card within .5 seconds, and was able to sort the deck numerically and by suit within five seconds before replacing it in its box.

e. Complex objects can be manipulated simultaneously, though the number of items that can be simultaneously manipulated drops off as the complexity of these items increases.

f. Object weight appears to have little effect on the speed at which TK is applied, though again object weights were somewhat limited due to the size constraints of the lab. Weights tested ranged from 1g to 250kg.

2. Teleportation (TP), the transfer between two points without traversing the physical space between them.

a. This ability is primarily restricted by line of sight, but vivid memories of locations can be used as target locations.

b. Activation for short-distance jumps is approximately .5 to 1 second.

c. The amount of energy required for transport is directly related to the distance travelled and the amount of matter being transported.

i. The subject used this specific justification for not simply using TP to go home. The subject was not certain of the distance between Earth and her planet and would not be able to judge the energy required.

d. TP travel is instantaneous between two points and can go through solid matter so long as line of sight is present or the requisite memory of the area is available.

e. TP may affect the subject or other items or other beings. Items teleported in experiments included the following: The subject, two pens, a chair, various fruits and vegetables, and Pvt. Jenkins.

f. There is currently no way to prevent TP, aside from restricting the subject's movement to prevent visualization of new areas to TP to.

g. If the above information is correct, then the being that used TP on the subject to send her to earth must have three things at its disposal:

i. Knowledge of the distance between Earth and its place of origin

ii. Knowledge of Earth-specific locations to use TP

iii. Staggering amounts of energy to draw upon to complete the TP

3. Light Generation (LG), the creation of light without a detectable source.

a. Line of sight is required to activate this ability but not required to maintain it.

b. Activation is nearly instantaneous.

c. Visually the ability appears to create a ball of soft lavender light approximately the size of a baseball.

d. LG can be manipulated to create several light sources, move them at will, or attach them to surfaces where they can be moved without further input from the subject.

e. LG generates neither heat nor any other detectable effect other than the corresponding increase in candles.

f. Attempts to touch the light source result in no change or noticeable side effects on volunteers.

4. Translation (Tn), providing the ability for communication across language barriers.

a. This ability is restricted to line of sight with the subject, and may only be cast on sapient beings capable of language.

b. Activation is approximately 1 to 2 seconds. Activation time has decreased after every subsequent usage. Subject attributes this as regaining familiarity with the ability.

c. Subjects under the effect of this ability can almost flawlessly understand anything spoken by other subjects under the effect. This has been tested and confirmed with all currently affected by this ability.

d. Although appearing benign in its mechanics, caution is recommended for anyone thinking of participating with this ability, as the mechanics are unknown and may result in mental tampering.

e. There exists a variation of this ability that can be used on written works but is significantly less accurate.

5. Transformation (Trn), the ability to flawlessly change matter from one form to another.

a. This ability is restricted to line of sight with the subject.

b. Activation varies depending upon the complexity of the Trn.

c. Tests thus far have been transforming simple objects into other simple objects, and require extensive knowledge of the end result to be transformed.

d. Tests included transforming fruits and vegetables into other fruits and vegetables. Testing the results of these experiments showed them to be edible and nearly identical to earth equivalents.

i. Pvt. Jenkins consumed an apple (formerly a pear) and commented as follows, "Is this how all your apples taste like where you're from? That's amazing!"

ii. Pvt. Jenkins has yet to experience any ill side effects.

e. Trn appears to last as long as the spell is channeled by the subject.

f. Attempts to test on live specimens were refused by the subject.

6. Crush (Cr), the application of raw physical force against a target.

a. Demonstration of this ability was requested but the subject refused to comply. Repeated requests resulted in the subject becoming non-compliant. Testing was halted for the day as the subject retreated to her habitat after repeated requests. What information can be gained about this ability is from interviews with Cpl Matt Harris, and armor cam footage from operation Hammerhead.

b. Reasonable assumption is that it requires line of sight like previous abilities.

c. Activation time in video is nearly instantaneous, though speculation is that this may have been an accelerated activation due to the prospect of death so close at hand.

d. The degree of force projected is staggering, and is higher than the impact tolerance of any structure we can currently create.

e. We'll come back to test this once the subject has become more compliant.

The subject has hinted at several other abilities that stretch the imagination, some of which she is capable of while others are produced by artifacts found on her world. Some are believable, wearable artifacts designed to increase abilities but others... others I refuse to believe. A pool capable of creating perfect copies of anyone who looks into it? Time travel?

The only thing that is preventing me from writing all of this off as the ravings of a lunatic is the fact that this creature so easily violates so many of the established laws of reality that we thought were set in stone. I had to take the video footage from the Trn experiments to Frank to confirm that it wasn't some sort of mass hallucination.

And throughout all of these experiments we weren't able to find anything as to how it's accomplished. My eyes are witnessing these violations of science, and in the case of the Trn experiments there's physical evidence of it happening. How? HOW?

Further experiments will commence as soon as the subject has become more compliant.

END LOG

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

Testing Procedures: Testing procedures are largely left to the divisions involved, so long as the testing does not endanger the XCOM facility or its security, but must be approved by their respective division leaders before proceeding.

Psychological Services: As the participants in the XCOM project are isolated from the outside world as well as tasked with difficult tasks in a stressful environment, psychological checkups are regularly done for all personnel and an open-door policy stands for anyone with concerns.

Friends

GUN AND AMMUNITION SHORTAGES REPORTED ACROSS CONTINENTAL US AS WORRIES RISE OVER INVADER THREATS DESPITE ALERT STATUS OF NATIONAL GUARD FORCES; MANY STATES NOW TRAINING POLICE FORCES WITH MILITARY WEAPONS AND TACTICS TO CALM PUBLIC FEARS

NASA REPORTS OUTWARD-DIRECTED DETECTION SATELLITES NOW DESTROYED BY INVADERS, COMMENTS THAT OTHER SATELLITES REMAIN UNATTACKED. MILITARY SOURCES SPECULATE OTHER SATELLITES MAY BE MONITORED BY ALIENS

08:45, 04/15/2015, BARRACKS REC ROOM

Jesus Christ, where did they get half this crap? Lana Jenkins wondered as she plowed into the faded and sometimes crumpled boxes containing board games and various distractions designed to 'entertain' the troops when not on duty. *I should just scoop everything out of here and pick what I want, then cram everything back in. God knows there's no logical storage system right now.*

The sound of a male voice clearing his throat caused Lana to jerk and bang her head on the top of the storage container she had crawled into. "Damn it, if that's you, Matt, then you are a dead man. And if you're staring at my rear your death will be slow and painful," she threatened as she continued her archaeological excavation of the neglected board games.

"This is not Matt, and I am not staring at your rear," Matt's voice replied with a hint of amusement coloring his tone. "I am curious, though. Why are you digging through all that crap? I don't think I've ever seen any of those things ever used."

Lana started to explain, but instead extricated herself from the storage container to deliver her response. "Actually, I was looking for something fun for our short friend," the female soldier explained and tried to force a smile as she ran her apparently dust-covered hands on her pants. "You know she's been having a hard time lately, and I don't think cards will cut it." *I don't know if Twily would like being referred to as 'our short friend' in public, but secrecy rules are rules they threatened to enforce...*

"That is true," Matt agreed, and a look of concern colored his features, "The doctors seem at a loss as to what to do. I don't know what's making our short friend act the way she is now, I can't recall my sister behaving anything like this when we were growing up, but then again all her problems were solved with a pint of ice cream, a sappy movie and a good night's sleep."

"Say..."

"No, they wouldn't allow ice cream, and our short friend doesn't understand enough of our languages to understand any movie we might play. As to the sleep, well..." Again concern was apparent on Matt's face. "Apparently she hasn't had much of that in a week."

A sly grin began to spread on Lana's face as she began to open up all the boxes she had unearthed, "Maybe it's delayed culture shock? She probably finally realized that she's the only... ah, *short person* around here and likely won't be able to go back home any time soon. She's probably feeling alone and vulnerable...waiting for some strapping stallion on this strange world to come and whisk her away in his muscular arms. That's all she needs to sleep well is to know someone is there to protect her."

Matt arched an eyebrow as Lana elaborated on her idea and ended it with a wink at him. "Wh—Oh, bite me, Jenkins."

"I'm not interested but she might if you ask nicely," Lana replied without missing a beat, and was rewarded with a crude hand gesture in response. "I'm sure the scientists would be all for it if you told them it was for SCIENCE!"

"Do you have any serious suggestions?"

"Yep, I do," Lana answered as she peered into one box and then gave a triumphant grin. "She needs a distraction from whatever is bothering her, and you know how distracting I can be." The female soldier was rewarded with the disbelieving stare she was accustomed to. "Believe it or not, I can be tactful, too."

"I have a hard time believing you and 'tact' have a relationship beyond one chasing the other out of the room," Matt said as he maintained his flat look, which gradually morphed into worry again. "I suppose we should be glad Vahlen's got something else to occupy her time for the moment."

"On that note, the next time we're on leave I'm buying the boys and girls of Strike Two a round of drinks."

Bringing in three of the bad guys alive is nothing to scoff at, plus it gets Vahlen off our short friend's back," Lana said, and Matt could only nod in agreement. "Seriously, she needs to take a pill, or drink, or get laid or something. I thought scientists were supposed to be thrilled when they find questions they can't easily answer."

"I thought scientists were smart enough not to try and browbeat a test subject that could reduce her to a red stain and an unpleasant memory with a thought," Matt muttered, and Lana could only agree with that assessment.

When the stand-down order had been given after Strike Two's successful mission, Lana and Matt had headed back down to the Stardust labs to squeeze a bit more combat pay out of the remaining hours of the day. *Well, at least that's why I went down there*, Lana thought, *God knows why Matt goes down there as much as I do*. When they had reached the lab, what they found was shocking.

Vahlen was nowhere to be found, but Ngo, Mills and Shen were present. Both of the scientists were pale and wide-eyed, while Shen was *livid*. The former was odd but the latter was earth-shattering. Charles Shen was considered by most of the base to be the equivalent to XCOM's Santa Claus, always smiling and giving toys to all the boys and girls. For the soldiers this meant state-of-the-art armor, weapons and kit, for the scientists that meant any equipment necessary for experiments and the labspace to house it when necessary, for the engineers it was a steady stream of new and challenging projects. To see him wearing anything but a smile on his face was jarring.

The two soldiers found out why as Shen showed them the recording of the events from testing.

As with previous experiments that the soldiers had been present for, the lab's main testing area was empty save for a wide platform in the center along with some sort of fruit sitting atop it. Twilight was in attendance, as well as Shen and the scientists. Vahlen had given a rather frigid set of commands that Shen translated. When Twilight replied with a hesitant refusal, Vahlen became noticeably more irritated. Again she gave her commands while jabbing a finger at Twilight and then at the unfortunate fruit. Again Vahlen issued her commands, and Twilight shook her head while looking like a kicked puppy.

Vahlen's response was to turn on the monitor nearby and pull up the video recording from Matt's armor cam, specifically the exact moment that Twilight crushed the enemy attacking her. The look of horror at the recording of the Chryssalid was apparent on Twilight's face, and she visibly winced when it died. Her shoulders shook as she tried to contain a sob before turning to Shen and muttering something, to which Shen translated her refusal to repeat the act. Vahlen's response was not constructive to the situation.

Upon hearing the refusal, Vahlen had stalked over to the unicorn to tower over her before again giving the orders. Twilight had broken out into tears but still refused, and Shen moved to intervene. Before he could, Vahlen pointed at the paused recording and barked her orders. Twilight's tears turned into hysterics as she backed herself into a corner and covered her ears and eyes with her forelimbs. At this point Shen stepped between Vahlen and the terrified unicorn and pointed to the exit, and his expression brooked no argument. Ngo and Mills, both of which were present but too horrified by the scene to act until then, moved to Shen and agreed.

The decision was made for all parties when Twilight vanished in a flash of light, only to reappear inside her habitat. She buried herself under the blankets and pillows of her bed and her sobbing was still audible through the recordings. For the day the only person who had been able to coax her out of bed was Shen, and no testing had been attempted since.

Lana shook herself out of the memory and showed the box she had to Matt. "I have a plan, it involves some nice stress-free games and some girl talk to keep her mind off of what happened with the ice queen."

Matt nodded his approval before his own mischievous grin appeared, "Girl talk, you say? I assume that means you'll be translating for Kim, then?"

"Screw you, man," came Lana's response, though she was grateful for the diffusion of the tension present after the shift in conversation. "So, you coming with or you bugging out?"

"Not right away, I'm afraid," Matt said with a helpless shrug, "I'm afraid I have another checkup with the doctors before I can visit. Maybe in an hour or so?"

"Sounds good."

09:01, 04/15/2015, STARDUST LABS

Lana stepped into the Stardust labs and immediately noted Kim and Joel sitting at their desks, obviously killing time. "If Vahlen had caught you two like this, she'd likely slate you two for visits to the business

end of Interrogation,” She said, but if her words had any impact there was no sign. Both scientists brushed off her first comment and rose from their chairs.

“Lana, we’re so glad you could make it. Twilight has been...well,” Joel started before drifting off and glancing at Kim.

“We’re really starting to worry about her health,” The female scientist explained as she chewed her lip. “Her sleep patterns have become increasingly erratic since the testing with Vahlen began, and after the last test she hasn’t been able to sleep for more than an hour. Joel has been listening to her as she sleeps and some of her mumbling is a little...disturbing.”

The smile faded from Lana’s face at that. “Has Shen been up here recently?”

“No, and I’m afraid I don’t know when he will be. He’s been in the Foundry since yesterday working on a new project,” Kim replied after a long moment. “We’ve requested his presence but it won’t be until later today at the earliest. Please, can you talk to her? She isn’t talking to us any more either.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Lana agreed as she headed towards the doors to Twilight’s habitat. True to their description, Twilight wasn’t in bed but at her desk with her head down and apparently asleep with the tablet computer’s translation software obediently waiting for a response from the unicorn. She twitched slightly and mumbled but otherwise didn’t react as Lana made her way over to the table and chairs. She quietly placed the box on the table before making her way over to Twilight.

“Twily, hey Twily. Are you feeling up for company?” Lana asked quietly, and placed one hand on Twilight’s back to wake her as gently as possible.

The moment her fingers made contact, Twilight jerked awake and shoved away from the desk before teleporting to the other side of the room. “No! I won’t do it—” Twilight shrieked as she tried to look in all directions at once for some unseen threat. Her eyes were wild and bloodshot, not to mention her mane was a frazzled mess. Her eyes fell upon Lana and immediately regained some semblance of calm and control. “Oh, ah, Lana, good afternoon? I didn’t see you come in.”

“Don’t worry yourself about it, Twilight,” The soldier replied slowly while still giving the unicorn a wary look, “How are you feeling?”

“How am I feeling? I’m feeling fine! No need to worry! So what are we going to play today? Can’t play liars cards, not enough people. Black Jack? Solitaire? Poker?” Twilight replied and continued without giving Lana a chance to reply before teleporting over to the table to inspect the box. “This is new! I think I recognize the letters from my ‘English’ studies. J-E-N-G-A? What’s that?”

Lana went with the flow of the somewhat erratic conversation and joined Twilight by the table, “That’s right! Jenga is the name of this game, I felt like bringing something new for us to try if you don’t mind.” Twilight nodded eagerly and took her seat as Lana did the same and dumped the contents of the box and onto the table. “We stack the blocks into a tower, and then the players take turns removing blocks from the lower section of the tower and then stacking them on the top of the tower. The game continues for as long as the tower stands.”

“So it’s a building game? Sounds fun!” Twilight nodded and grabbed all the blocks and stacked them as they appeared on the front of the box, “Who goes first?”

“I think I will,” Lana said as she reached for the first piece.

09:59, 04/15/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight managed to coax another block out from the center of the increasingly unstable tower and then lowered it into position at the top before looking to Lana. “I am starting to think the end might be approaching for this tower, Lana.”

“You may be right,” Lana agreed, and made a grab for one of the lower blocks. Naturally the tower came crashing down around her hands, and she let out an exaggerated sigh. *What always made my brothers feel better was a few wins under their belts*, Lana thought to herself as she saw Twilight grin and reset the tower, *they never figured out I was losing on purpose, but that’s beside the point*.

“I think it’s your turn to start,” Lana said, and Twilight made the first move, “Twilight, how are you feeling, really? The doctors are really worried because you aren’t talking to them anymore.” When Twilight hesitated but didn’t change the subject, Lana pressed the issue, “C’mon, you can tell me. We’re friends, let me help you work this out.”

There was a long pause before the flood gates opened. “They were there! In that horrible room! I was so

scared and wanted out and they did nothing. Nothing! I-I could have died and all they did was watch. How can I trust somepony like that?" Twilight's explanation abruptly stopped and she clamped her mouth shut and she looked away.

Lana's response was long in coming. "That is horrible, Twilight, and it must have been terrifying for you. They must have seemed like monsters to you," Twilight nodded weakly at that summary, and Lana continued carefully. "When you were in school, did you ever do a dissection? On a plant or something?"

Twilight again nodded, "Of course. It's how we learn how the natural world works, and how we learn how to make potions and remedies with the various plant extracts."

"What would you do if you just picked a new undiscovered plant to use in an experiment only to find that the plant could talk and had a personality and was just like you? How would that make you feel?"

"Well, I'd feel like a monster. If it was just like a person then I'd feel just terrible about the experiment I had planned."

"And how would you think the plant would feel?" Lana asked, and she fixed Twilight with a gentle smile.

"Probably terrified. What does... oh," Twilight said before she realized the real meaning behind the example.

"Mhm," Lana nodded as she moved a block to the top of the tower, "And Kim and Joel feel terrible for what happened. They do want to be friends as well as put all those uncomfortable memories behind you and them. Besides, I'm certain Kim and Joel would help you with your language stuff. Having someone without the translation trick on them would definitely help."

Twilight dithered on her answer for a long moment as she plucked a block from the middle of the tower and set it on top. "Okay, I guess..." She said though she didn't sound convinced quite yet, "And what about Vahlen? She's..."

Ah, crap, Lana thought as the subject turned to Vahlen. *How does one justify that kind of behavior?*

"Well, Vahlen's... well, she has been studying how the world works for most of her life. She is quite good at understanding how everything comes together in the world. Your magic is something that she has never seen before, and it defies a significant portion of what she understands about the world," Lana stumbled on her explanation as continued, "And, well... you know all the machinery and devices you see around here? Every single one of them is designed to detect something. Heat, radiation, tons of different stuff; your magic isn't showing up on any of them, and that's making Vahlen a little frustrated. I'm sorry that she's taking that frustration out on you."

Twilight nodded slowly before replying, "I think I can understand. I kinda had something similar happen with a friend."

"Oh?" Lana prompted, and she thanked her lucky stars that Twilight was able to inadvertently rescue the soldier from her own explanation. She quickly plucked a block towards the bottom and placed it on top and waited for Twilight to continue.

"I have a friend back home who would get little feelings that she could use to predict what was going to happen," Twilight started as she moved a block to the top. "I may have gone a little overboard trying to figure out how she does it. She was an earth pony, after all, there is no way she could have any sort of magic to determine the future... and yet she does. Repeatedly."

"That would be a mighty useful skill to have," Lana smiled as she moved a block of her own, "Knowing what's coming, I mean. Let me guess, she speaks in cryptic riddles or everyone assumes she's crazy?"

"'Crazy' is a bit of a harsh word..."

"Say no more," Lana said, finally glad to have addressed the elephant in the room, so to speak. Twilight had just started to telekinetically probe some of the lower blocks to pry one loose, when Lana moved onto the next stage of her plan. *She's finally let out what's been bothering her... now to give her something new and maybe better to bother her,* Lana thought, and suppressed a grin. *I am so going to hell for this.*

"So, Twilight, you've told us all about your friends and family and everyone you know, but there hasn't been any mention of a 'significant other.' I imagine you've got a line of stallions waiting around the block to be your coltfriend." Twilight's reaction was delicious, her telekinesis flinging a block out from the tower and causing a premature collapse. "Is that the right term, 'coltfriend?' Or is it 'studfriend?'" Twilight was sputtering now and blushing terribly, and Lana had to fight to keep her face straight.

"Coltfriend!" Twilight shouted, having finally managed to form a coherent response, "The term is 'coltfriend', or 'marefriend' if the other is a mare, or 'special somepony' as a non-gender specific title.

And no, I don't have a coltfriend back home."

"Ah, I see," Lana said, and she really did understand what Twilight meant. It didn't mean she'd let it go at that. "So how many 'marefriends' do you have, then? I bet that one right there keeps you up all night." Lana pointed to the row of pictures, specifically the rainbow-haired Pegasus with the devilish grin.

"I DO NOT HAVE MAREFRIENDS!" Twilight sputtered, again blushing furiously.

"There's no need to be embarrassed, Twily," Lana started to say but the unicorn cut her off.

"I'm not embarrassed! How did we get to talking about this?" Twilight said as she tried and failed to set the tower up again before giving Lana a flustered look, "How about you? Who's your coltfriend? Matt? Joel?"

Oh, I know that look, Twily, Lana smirked inwardly, *I'm afraid you won't be able to turn this around on me, dear.* "Nope, wrong on both counts. Don't have a special someone, the men aren't really my type." Lana replied with a wolfish grin, and Twilight's reaction was simply perfect.

"The men? Oh... OH! Well, uh, that's nice?" Twilight struggled to laugh off her surprise.

"You're not one of those folks who frowns upon such relationships, are you?" The soldier said light-heartedly and with a smile, but she couldn't help but wonder if Twilight's answer would disappoint her.

"N-no, I have complete respect for the preferences of everypony!" The unicorn quickly replied, and then her voice took on that narrator quality that Lana was becoming quite familiar with whenever she started quoting facts. "Such relationships are actually common in Equestria, considering the proportion of stallion to mare population is approximately a thirty/seventy split. Inter-species relationships are less common but not unheard of with the other races that live around the pony lands. Close to the borders you could likely see several ponies in relationships with buffalo, zebra, or even griffons."

Again Lana had to suppress a grin as all the pieces began to come together. "Ponies and other species, you say?" The soldier said, and gave Twilight just enough of an evaluating eye for her to blush under the scrutiny before continuing, "Don't worry, dear. I like 'em a bit taller and with fingers. You wouldn't believe what fingers can do." Lana had thought about going on but Twilight's blush might have caused her to catch fire, so she switched to the next phase.

"That's actually good news for Matt. He thinks you're cute, he told me himself," Lana remarked offhandedly while still keeping an eye on Twilight's reaction. *He didn't actually say it, but he did agree with me when I said it. Close enough.*

"W-w-w-" Twilight began to sputter as Lana's words registered, and just at that moment the door opened to reveal Matt.

"Sorry for the wait, doctors held me back for some extra tests..." Matt explained as he stepped into Twilight's habitat. He halted as he finally noticed the barely contained laughter on Lana's face, and the wide-eyed shock on Twilight's. "...what's with the weird looks?"

"W-w-w-" Was all that Twilight could manage before going into a dead faint.

10:20, 04/15/2015, STARDUST LABS

Matt let out a breath as the two scientists returned to the Stardust lab testing area from the habitat with relief and smiles on their faces. "Is she alright?"

Interesting response, Matt... Lana thought to herself, *perhaps I was a little closer to the mark than I thought.*

"Preliminary diagnosis is exhaustion due to sleep deprivation and stress, her heartbeat and temperature both appear to be within recorded norms now, and she appears to be asleep," Joel reported, "Despite the dramatic event, this might be good for her. If she can manage to rest without interruption, I have every belief that she'll be on the road to recovery from the past... troubles. We want to give her at least six hours before disturbing her, so I'm afraid you aren't needed any longer at the moment. Sorry for the wasted trip."

"Wasn't wasted at all, it was all according to plan," Was all that Lana said, and started to head to the door with Matt, but a clean getaway wasn't in the cards for her.

"A moment before you go, Lana. We still need to discuss the discoveries your conversation elicited," Joel spoke up, and Lana fixed her most frustrated expression she could fake on her face.

"I'll see you later, Jenkins," Matt waved with a grin as he left the lab.

Smile now, my plan has only just begun, Lana returned Matt's grin in her mind as she turned back to the scientists, "Well then, what did you want to discuss?"

"First things first, what the hell did you think you were doing in there? Twilight looked about ready to have a heart attack before she passed out!" Joel barked as soon as the door to the labs closed. "Not to mention the content of your little chat. Vahlen would have had an aneurism on the spot if she were in observation."

"What was I thinking? That was quite simple, really," Lana said with a smile as she let Joel's angry words slide off of her. "Twilight is lacking two things right now: Stability, and hope. Whatever stability Twilight had here was dramatically weakened after her trip to Medical, and what was left was undermined quite thoroughly by Vahlen since then. By letting her vent to me, we were able to get the issues out in the open, and I suspect she'll be a little less guarded around you two. Vahlen... well, that's up to Vahlen."

"As for the second thing, I think Twilight knows her chances of making it home aren't the best and she's trying to avoid dwelling on that. She admitted during the teleport testing that she has no way of getting herself home, which leaves whatever powers that be in her home finding her and bringing her back. Judging from that Discord character she keeps mentioning, I suspect anyone powerful enough to bring her back will be tied up dealing with him. Either way, Twilight's looking at a long time here on Earth as the only member of her species. What does she have to realistically hope for while she's here at XCOM besides the same rooms and corridors she's seen already? Giving her the hope that she can find companionship here might make her stay a little less stressful in the long run, I think. And if she's obsessing about what she thinks is a crush on her, she's less likely to obsess about Vahlen's next test."

"That's... quite insightful," Kim commented after a long moment, though she was buried in the notes she had taken from the conversation.

"Does Matt know about this?" Joel asked with an arched eyebrow.

Lana answered with her trademark grin, "Oh, I think this will be more exciting if it's a surprise, don't you?" Her grin widened as Joel face-palmed at the response.

"I am quite impressed with the conversation itself; you've revealed some interesting cultural cues during the course of your discussion," Joel finally said, which caused Lana to give him a questioning look, "She commented that her culture has no taboos when it comes to relationships with those of the same sex or even outside their species. It honestly sounded like she was quoting a history book when she was explaining it, so I suspect this has been the norm for some time. Compare with our own culture; how long was it considered a crime to marry a person of another race, let alone the same sex?"

"Aha, point taken," Lana nodded, her expression thoughtful.

"Thank you again for stopping by," Joel said before turning back to Kim to review the notes from the morning's events. Sensing the dismissal, Lana turned to leave.

"'Girl talk', huh?" Matt's voice said flatly the moment Lana stepped out of the lab. The voice's owner leaned against the corridor wall a few meters past the door, and his expression was flat suspicion. "Your 'girl talk' appears to have a corrosive effect on the mind."

Lana's only response was to grin.

17:34, 04/15/2015, STARDUST LABS

Charles entered the Stardust Labs with a smile on his face despite the fatigue that was there. The lab's testing area was empty, so the engineer made his way over to Twilight's habitat to see if the unicorn was faring any better since the last time they spoke.

When the door opened to reveal Kim, Joel and Twilight sitting around the table, Charles had to act quickly to school his features. *Twilight looks a bit better... I wonder what changed.* "Evening, kids, sorry for the delay in coming back here. The boys and girls down at engineering needed a hand with something."

"Hi Charles!" Twilight said with a hoof-wave and a smile, "Were you inventing something new?"

A remote-operated mobile heavy weapons platform designed to help minimize the risks to the boys in the field... "Oh, not really inventing anything new, just helping update something old to help out. You might be surprised how often old concepts are discarded when all they need is a revision and an update to make them current," Shen summarized quickly, "What are you kids up to?"

"Joel and Kim are helping me with English pronunciation. Lana was right, having someone to talk to that doesn't have the spell cast on them really helps!" Twilight said as she indicated towards Kim, who turned

to Shen and nodded.

"She's made more progress than you can imagine, Shen. She's had access to the language programs for a little over a week and has passed all of our expectations," Kim reported before giving Joel a meaningful glance, "One of the volunteers stopped in and spoke with Twilight this morning and was able to smooth things out regarding the... incident when she first arrived and more recent events."

Shen was perceptive enough to realize that the second part of Kim's explanation was worded in such a way as to prevent Twilight from connecting the dots as to the contents of her comments, and his suspicion was confirmed when Joel's translation neglected the second part entirely. "That's great!" The engineer sincerely replied as he pulled up a chair at the table and sat. "And how's reading comprehension?"

"All the letters, most of the punctuation usage, and sentence structure I think I have down," Twilight answered eagerly, "We're working on vocabulary and verbs now. Your language is really frustrating when it comes to words with multiple meanings and usages. Nouns that can be verbs, plural and singular forms, tense and so on. To be honest, it's..."

"Challenging?" Shen provided when Twilight hesitated, and her response was not what he anticipated.

"Fun! I'm learning a language no pony has ever heard before, and I'm really looking forward to talking with everyone without needing magic to do it. Oh, that reminds me," Twilight turned towards the desk and levitated a stack of papers onto the table, "The math work you gave me is done! Sorry it took as long as it did to finish it."

Shen grinned and reached for the papers, "There's no need to apologize, Twilight. I told you there was no due date, after all." He had just started to go over the math work when Kim's watch beeped.

"Ah, looks like our time is up," She said as she looked to Joel, "We've got to give some face time down at... ah, 'guest quarters' or the boss will be in a foul mood."

"I'm afraid Kim's right; our time is up for today. Sorry, Twilight," Joel apologized as he rose from his place at the table, "We'll be back tomorrow, alright?" The unicorn nodded in acknowledgement and the two scientists headed for the door, leaving Shen alone with her.

A long moment passed before the engineer finally spoke, "I'm glad you seem to be feeling better and that you're speaking with Kim and Joel again. We were all really worried after what happened during the last test with doctor Vahlen. Kim and Joel were especially worried because you weren't talking to them anymore as things got worse."

Twilight's smile became a little strained as she formed her response. "I'm sorry to make you all worry. Lana stopped by this morning and we had a nice talk while playing a new game. She helped me gain a little bit of perspective on their point of view, even Vahlen's point of view. I can understand why they've done what they've done, but it still is scary when I remember that it was done to me."

Oh, Vahlen, this little girl is giving you another chance. I wouldn't, Shen thought to himself, but kept his anger from appearing on his face. "That's very forgiving of you."

A long moment passed and Twilight chewed her lip before starting tentatively, "Charles, if testing goes well, do you think I could maybe... go outside?" When Shen's expression morphed into surprise at the request, Twilight quickly backtracked, "O-only if it's convenient, and it doesn't have to be right away or anything. I don't want you to go to any trouble or anything. In fact, forget I even asked." The unicorn quickly tried to laugh off her request unconvincingly.

"I'll see what I can do for you," Shen promised with the best confident smile he could fake before changing the subject, "You mentioned Lana stopped by for a chat? I didn't take her for much of a conversationalist, but it seems I was wrong."

"She was really good at putting things into perspective," Twilight said with a nod, "Lana helped me look at this situation from another angle, and after I spoke with Kim and Joel about it we were able to move forward. I haven't had a chance to speak with Vahlen yet but I'm confident we can patch things up and start over."

If only it was that simple, Shen lamented, but again kept it from showing on his face. "I certainly hope things work out that way. I had been meaning to ask, did you get some sleep? You're looking a bit more refreshed than the last time I saw you."

"I did, actually," Twilight said before blushing slightly and looking to the side, "That's actually a little embarrassing. Lana started talking about—"

And just then, the door to the habitat opened. "Hey, I see Twi—" Matt said with a smile but was promptly cut off.

-- NOTHING! Nothing at all!" Twilight abruptly terminated her thought and proverbially buried her nose in the translation tablet while pointedly not looking towards the door or Shen. The blush on her face was steadily becoming more and more obvious as she quickly sputtered, "Well, I have lots of work to do, no time to talk! Best get to it!"

Shen looked from Twilight to Matt, then back again. *That's a new development. During testing the scientists weren't cut out so thoroughly from personal conversations*, the engineer thought, and he couldn't help but notice the glances Twilight kept stealing in Matt's direction after several moments passed.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Twilight, we should probably call it an early night tonight," Shen said as he attempted to stifle a yawn. "I'll see you tomorrow, Twilight." With that, he headed towards the door and motioned for Matt to follow. The moment the door closed behind them, Shen turned to Matt and asked, "What was that all about?"

"Hell if I know. Prior to this morning everything was perfectly normal. I came in and she had some sort of episode, the only person who spoke to her prior to that was Lana," Matt replied, clearly as perplexed about the situation as Shen was about the situation. "Both the scientists were observing and they would have stepped in if their conversation was too mind-warping, I'd think."

"Hmm," Was all that Shen could say as he rubbed his chin, "I'll ask Lana the next time I see her exactly what they talked about. But for now, I'm afraid I have to go call in a favor."

18:02, 04/15/2015, OFFICE OF CMDR DAVID BRADFORD

David once again looked over the plethora of research material that the Stardust project had produced, from text files to pictures to personal notes. He had initially just glossed over the reports like he had all the other technical reports coming from interrogations and autopsies, having learned how to pick up the important parts from a scientific wall of text early on in his career. But now that he was taking the time to actually read them and learn about the curious guest XCOM now hosted, and a curious kernel of regret had taken root in him as he considered the choice before him.

"I can't authorize it, Charles," the commander said, "The security of this facility's location is paramount, and I cannot in good conscience allow this creature to view landmarks or terrain that might give away our current location, not to mention the hazards of trying to contain it if it decides to fight once it does get on the surface. I still agree completely with you that the diplomatic approach is best but we can't risk the facility, at least not now."

Shen sighed but nodded to concede the point, "I understand, David. If that does change in the future, I imagine Twilight would be extremely thankful."

David arched an eyebrow at the use of the alien's given name. "I'm going through the personal notes attached to the project as well as Frank's summary as well. 'Twilight's' nature is rather shocking to say the least. If she is being honest, then there is peaceful and intelligent life in the universe," He said before rubbing his eyes with one hand, and he suddenly looked much older and weary than at the start of the conversation. "And it just happened to end up here at the least convenient time for first contact."

"It's an unfortunate series of events, but I am still glad to have met her. Everyone else would say the same if you were to ask," Shen commented as he stood and started to head towards the door.

"Does that also include doctor Vahlen?" David asked, and Shen's hesitation answered the question for him. "I've also reviewed the video footage from the testing she's performed so far. I'll be having a word with her regarding her 'technique' in handling the subject, God only knows what she was thinking during that last test. I'm afraid she does have a point with her suspicions, though. If it wasn't for Frank giving you and the others a clean bill of health, and Medical showing no signs of mental tampering, I would be highly suspicious of the behavior of all personnel involved with Stardust right now."

Shen's response was steady and even. "I know I don't have any hard proof for my belief, but I am convinced that Twilight is no threat to XCOM, and she will become an asset for us as soon as Vahlen can unlock the secrets of her 'magic.'"

It was David's turn to concede the point. "That's what my gut is telling me. Vahlen has had a week's worth of testing various abilities, has she made any progress determining how it's done?"

"Well, she would be better equipped to share any discoveries that she has made," The engineer said doubtfully, and David was perceptive enough to read between the lines.

"I have no doubt that I'll be the first to know the moment there's a breakthrough," David said with a tone of finality. "Is there anything else?"

Shen hesitated before finally posing his idea, "I understand that going outside is not possible, but I may have an alternative in mind."

"I'm listening."

02:35, 04/16/2015, STARDUST LABS

"Testing period begins...now!"

Immediately Twilight's telekinesis grabbed a pen from the desk and started to fill out the math equations at an increasingly frantic pace. She had gotten past the first three problems when a hand slammed down on the table in front of her.

"That's not good enough! Do it again!" The voice shouted, and Twilight looked up to see Vahlen's icy stare look down at her...from four different angles. Vahlen's head sat atop four serpentine necks of a hydra and the hand now on her desk was a claw. The claw pulled back to reveal the crushed corpse of a giant insect that twitched and leaked yellow blood. "Do it again! Again! Again!" The many Vahlens screamed, and the claw came down on the insect repeatedly with a sickening crunch each time.

Twilight tried to recoil from the bloody mess that was now on her desk, only to find her retreat blocked as someone stood behind her. She looked back in a panic and saw nothing, but when she looked back the shape of a human stood between her and the Vahlen hydra. The human, Matt, looked over his shoulder and said, "Twilight, can you hear me?"

It was Charles' voice that asked the question, and for some reason it was very comforting.

"Twilight," Matt-with-Charles-Voice said, this time more insistently, "You need to wake up, I've got something to show you."

Twilight jerked awake as she felt a hand tap her back. She blinked her eyes several times before finally focusing on Charles in the dim light of the Habitat. "Charles? Ugh... good morning? How early is it?"

"Oh, it's very early," The engineer confirmed, and the more that Twilight focused the more she recognized the signs of fatigue that Charles was showing. "If you're feeling up to it, I've got something I'd like to show you."

"I suppose..." Twilight agreed with a stretch and a yawn before hopping out of bed and heading towards the door out of the habitat. Joel was waiting in the lab's testing area, as was Lana and Matt. The last human snapped Twilight right out of her fatigue and flooded her mind with questions. Oh sweet Celestia what do I say? What do I do? I know there's TONS of books back at the library about how to act when somepony says they like somepony else but I don't have them here! What do I do? WhatdoIdo? WhatdoIdo? WhatdoIdo? WhatdoIdo?

Twilight's internal dilemma was interrupted by Charles pulling ahead and addressing the group, "We're all here, now it's time to move quickly." The entire group made their way towards the lab's exit, and only Twilight hung back.

"Where are we going?" She asked, and all eyes fell to Charles for an explanation.

"I'm afraid we can't go outside right now, but I've worked out someplace where we can go that I know you'll enjoy. But we have to be quick," Charles explained and motioned for Twilight to follow, which she did after a brief moment of hesitation.

Unlike the previous excursions from the lab, which were taken slowly and casually, the humans were moving at a brisk walk and in some sort of formation. Matt walked ahead of the group and looked down each intersection before motioning for the group to move forward, while Lana made up the tail end of the group. Thus far they were the only humans Twilight had seen, and the dimly lit hallways seemed rather lonely because of it.

After a dizzying array of corners, intersections and staircases, the group came to a wide metal door with a word Twilight had never seen written on it before. She had started to work out the letters when Charles turned to her.

"All right, Twilight, we'll have to be quick in here. Matt will head in first and signal, and then we can go in. Do not leave my side once we're in there, even for a moment, alright?" The engineer explained seriously, and he didn't release her gaze until she nodded. With her understanding confirmed, Charles gave the signal and the door opened before them.

Twilight didn't get much chance to see inside before Matt slipped through the doorway and gave things a

quick scan. After a long moment he waved his hand and the group followed him into the room.

This isn't a room, it's a cavern, Twilight thought as she craned her neck to look around the monstrous place she now found herself in. The floor was alternating cement and metal that was quite different from the Labs she had grown to call home, and the metal plates were often filled with checker-box holes to reveal dark pits beneath them that seemed to go on as far as her eye could see. The majority of the room was dark, though the lights illuminated most of the floor and some of the massive alcoves in the walls and along the floor. Several ominous metal shapes that looked like birds of prey lurked in the shadows, and Twilight found herself drifting towards the center of her group without even thinking of it.

"Twilight, look up." Charles suggested, and as she did a rumble could be heard overhead. Lights appeared to reveal a massive door directly above their heads, which split open to reveal the night sky. Twilight's eyes widened as all the lights in the cavern winked out, so the only part of her sight that wasn't pitch black was the portal opening to the night's sky.

A long moment passed as she simply stared out into the night trying to memorize the stars and constellations she saw.

Her concentration was broken as she noticed the temperature had begun to drop in the cavern and a flood of new smells hit her nose. The odors of the cavern were foreign to her, most reminded her of the smoke and oil smells common around the massive train station in Canterlot, but what she now smelled was a hint of clean, unspoiled air along with trees and grass.

"Thank you, Charles," Twilight said after taking in several deep breaths to try and hold on to the scents of the outdoors for as long as possible, "I really needed this." The engineer simply smiled and nodded in response.

The moment stretched on for perhaps a minute longer until all the lights snapped back on and a klaxon blared from all directions. Before Twilight could ask what was going on, she spotted a new shape walking towards the group at a brisk pace. It was a male human wearing the same earthen colors as Charles, Lana and Matt, though he wore a vest over a white collared-shirt and tie. His dark brown mane was cut extremely short, and Twilight recognized one of the long distance conversation devices perched in one ear. His eyes met the unicorn's and for one brief moment Twilight was certain she was looking into the eyes of a dragon. *Confidence without arrogance, command without tyranny, certainty of one's decisions*, Twilight saw all these traits in the brief moment their eyes met, while at the same time she felt herself being evaluated and found... insufficient. Then the moment passed as eye contact broke, and Twilight let out a breath she didn't know she was holding.

Charles met him half way and after some tense conversation the newcomer turned away and headed to a door on the opposite side of the cavern.

"We're going to have to cut this short, something important has come up. We have to get back to the lab *now*," Charles answered the unspoken question with a degree of urgency, "This place is about to be flooded with people that wouldn't react well to our presence."

The unicorn had thought to ask just what was going on but Charles' tone told her that now wasn't the time to delay. "Okay! Back to the lab!" She said, and with the ease born from many hours of practice teleported the entire group back to Twilight's habitat in the blink of one purple eye.

Lana was the first to recover but the others reeled from the experience at teleportation. Matt was white as a sheet as he let out a huff of held breath, while Charles and Joel stumbled as they regained their balance. "Ah, Twilight, a bit of warning next time," Was all that Charles said as he placed a hand on the nearby bulkhead to steady himself.

"Sorry...you said we needed to get back, so I thought quicker would be best," Twilight apologized, but Shen waved it away.

"No need to apologize, Twilight, just keep that in mind for the future," Charles replied before turning to Lana and Matt. "You two should head to the armory, Bradford is taking a council transmission right now and that likely means a priority mission."

Both the soldiers nodded and turned to leave before Twilight stopped them. "Wait, wait! A mission? Is it going to be... dangerous?"

Matt and Lana exchanged a look before the female soldier replied, "It might be, Twily. Don't worry though, we're the best at what we do. And Matt's not too bad either."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Matt replied while giving her a flat look.

The soldiers turned to leave but Twilight again stopped them. "Wait! I...I can do something to help." She closed her eyes and dredged up the mountains of spells she knew before settling on one of the newest

ones in her repertoire. She gathered the necessary energy and cast it on both soldiers before opening her eyes again. "There, it's done."

"So, what does it do?" Lana asked as she looked at her hands as though they might start glowing.

"If it works out right, nopony will notice anything," Twilight said cryptically before waving a hoof at them as they turned to leave, "Good luck!"

"Twilight?" Charles asked, but Twilight couldn't sacrifice her concentration any longer. She had to put everything into maintaining the spell on them, the lives of her friends depended on it.

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Implementations:

Recreational Activities: In the present day and age, recreational activities almost always involve connectivity to the internet. With the XCOM facility in a communications blackout for all but senior level personnel, more mundane entertainment needed to be arranged. Naturally, it was almost completely ignored.

Open Door: Commander David Bradford has an open-door policy with his senior-level civilian personnel. As the leaders of all three branches of XCOM have little in the way of peers, this allows them to socialize with their counterparts in the other branches in an environment outside the scrutiny of their subordinates.

Silent Rain

UFOS SIGHTED OVER CHINA INTERCEPTED BY AIRCRAFT OF UNKNOWN MAKE OR MODEL AND SHOT DOWN IN WILDERNESS; CRASH SITE FOUND ABANDONED BUT SIGNS OF FIGHTING NEARBY APPARENT, SOURCES IN CHINESE GOVT SAY

STRING OF SUSPECTED ALIEN ABDUCTIONS IN FRANCE ENDS AS GIGN RAIDS WILDERNESS COMPOUND; SUSPECTS APPREHENDED AT SCENE CLAIM INVADERS CONTROLLED THEIR ACTIONS; INSANITY PLEAS EXPECTED DURING TRIAL.

02:40, 04/16/2015, SKYRANGER HANGAR

David Bradford had never been one to consider lurking, but the longer he waited at the far side of the hangar the more he felt the term applied. He stood ramrod straight out of force of habit and perfectly still beside the door leading the command center with his eyes locked on the door leading to the access stairwell. And, as if summoned by the sheer stubbornness of his stare, the door opened and Harris briskly walked in and surveyed the now empty hangar before signaling to the door, and the others moved in behind him, including the current source of Bradford's more recent headaches.

The video footage doesn't do it justice, Bradford thought to himself as the group moved towards the center of the room. Even from across the hangar he could see curiosity on its face. Curiosity and fear. When the hangar doors opened it looked up to the starry skies with unabashed wonder before looking to Shen and saying something. Shen smiled and nodded but remained silent.

"Commander Bradford, there is an incoming Council transmission," Came a voice from Bradford's headset, and for a brief moment he was sorely tempted to groan and cover his face with his palm. *Of all the times for the Council to call...*

"Understood, inform them that I'll take their transmission in my office in five minutes. Raise the alert level of the base and scramble Strike One, Strike Two and Strike Four," Bradford crisply ordered through his headset and started making his way toward the group in the hangar. The lights all came on at the same time as the alert klaxon sounded. The alien in their midst jerked and its ears folded back from the sound, though one ear twitched in Bradford's direction. A moment later those purple eyes were upon him, and Bradford met that gaze with one of his own.

David wasn't unfamiliar with the concept of the stare-down, and was perfectly willing to deliver one if necessary... which wouldn't be this case. Within a second of eye contact the alien visibly withered under his glare but still maintained eye contact, and then the moment passed as Shen met Bradford half-way.

"Shen, get everyone back to the lab. Council transmission is incoming, and you know what that means." Bradford reported crisply before doing an about face and heading towards the hangar exit. He had gotten a half a dozen steps when a loud *crack* of displaced air sounded behind him. A glance behind him revealed that he was now alone in the hangar. He tapped his headset and asked, "Location on Charles Shen?"

A moment of silence passed before the reply came, "Chief Engineer Charles Shen is currently in the Stardust Labs, B3F."

Teleportation...right, he remembered from the Vahlen's research notes as he ascended the stairs to his office. *Something tells me this mission is going to get a lot more interesting than usual.*

02:43, 04/16/2015, B3F CORRIDOR

"Matt..." Lana started as the pair sprinted through the corridors.

"I know, Lana," Matt replied as they rounded a corner and caught sight of the stairwell leading up into the barracks, "We have to let Fowler know about the situation."

"And how would you explain the situation? 'So sorry, can't go with you on the mission because a pretty purple unicorn cast an unknown spell on us'? She'll smack both of us if we tell her the truth and Bradford will smack us again for telling the truth about what happened," Lana said, and her tone was missing her usual snark.

Damn it, she's right. And there's no time to come up with a plausible alternative. Damn it, Matt thought to himself. "All right, command decision. When we get to the armory, just follow my lead. If there's any

trouble it's on me and not you."

Lana didn't reply to that, and Matt couldn't look over his shoulder to see her expression as they hit the stairwell and bound up it three steps at a time. A quick exit from the stairwell and a few more turns brought the tardy pair to the Armory, and they were greeted by the bustle of nearly a score of soldiers getting their kit sorted for the mission. Unfortunately, Matt and Lana's absence was not unnoticed.

"I swear to God I'm going to put my boot up both their asses the next time I see them," Fowler seethed as she plucked her rifle from the armory locker and proceeded to the depository to retrieve magazines for both it and her pistol, "Muster call is absolute, anyone who misses that gets on my personal shit list."

Matt braced himself for the verbal thrashing as he stepped up to Fowler, but she pointedly ignored him and continued to rant, "In case you knuckle-draggers hadn't noticed, I'm in a bad mood, and the only thing that will get me out of that bad mood is the unlikely possibility that all of Strike One is miraculously on the Skyranger at the start of the operation."

Command decision time. If we don't suit up and meet them at the Skyranger, Strike One will be under-strength for whatever the mission is. If we join them they'll be full strength but we'll have to risk whatever Twilight's spell was, Matt's mind began to crunch the best and worst case scenarios, and made a decision.

"Lana, prep our armor and kit, I'll gather our guns and ammo," Matt hissed at Lana, and when she started to object, he turned back, "This is on me, just do it!"

Strike Two stacked up and filed out of the armory, followed by Strike Four, and through hours and hours of practice, Lana and Matt were able to get their kits together and join the end of the stack as Strike One departed for the hangar. Not one member of Strike One acknowledged their presence as they tabbed towards the Skyrangers. *It seems we're persona-non-grata because of our late arrival...ah, there will be hell to pay when we get back.*

The crew chiefs for the three Skyrangers waved each team to their respective ride, Strike Four would launch first, followed by Strike Two, then Strike One. Matt and Lana were the last in the stack to enter the Skyranger but Fowler stood at the base of the ramp and glared towards the hangar entrance. The crew chief for the Skyranger ran up the ramp and began to check and recheck all the harnesses for the boarded members, but stopped just before he got to Lana and Matt and turned to the lieutenant on the ramp.

"Sir, we're leaving in ten seconds! Get inside now!"

Fowler turned and headed back inside the Skyranger, her displeasure clearly apparent on her face.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Lana asked tentatively, and Matt sucked in his breath. *Please don't think she's being sarcastic. Please...*

The reaction from both Strike One and the crew chief was not what Matt expected. The soldiers sitting beside Lana and Matt would have jumped out of their seats if they weren't harnessed, while everyone else whipped around to stare at the two like they had just materialized out of thin air. The crew chief was the first to respond by checking their harnesses and heading back to the front of the craft, though he gave both soldiers a dubious expression while he did so. Fowler's reaction was to simply give the two a flat look before taking her seat and strapping into the harness.

As the ramp closed and the Skyranger taxied to the launch pad, Matt gave Lana a silent look. *What the hell was that about?*

Lana's only response was to shrug.

02:50, 04/16/2015, MISSION CONTROL

Bradford looked up at the massive holographic globe as he structured the briefing for the soldiers in his mind. *I hate that we don't have more time to collect intel or brief the soldiers more than we do, every mission feels like I'm throwing them into danger blind.*

The globe continued to lazily spin and Asia came to face the commander. His eyes quickly fell upon Hong Kong and again he had to resist the uneasy feeling the mission was giving him. He had always felt uneasy with the missions that XCOM routinely handled, but this particular assignment was making his insides roil.

The door to the Armory opened and the first of the strike teams made their way across the command center towards the hangar. *That's Strike Two, McKenna, Briand, Holiday, Beecham, Roland, Enderton and*

with *Uther in command*. Bradford nodded to the team and wished them luck as they passed, and the second team entered Mission Control. *Strike Four, Halverson, Buettner, Green, Thacker, Amada, Rodriguez, Alvarez, and Payne in command*. Again, Bradford nodded to this team and wished them luck.

Another eight soldiers filed out from the armory, and Bradford repeated the process with them. *Strike One, Dryzinski, Anderson, Lee, Potter, Henderson, with Fowler in command*. The door to the hangar closed behind them and Bradford turned back to the spinning globe, though he couldn't quite keep the doubt off his face this time. It feels like I'm missing something. Something important.

"Bradford, Shen," The engineer's voice filtered into Bradford's ear, sounding tired and a little concerned.

"Bradford here, I read you. Did you manage to finish the production model remote weapons in time?"

"Ah, yes, I did," Came Shen's reply, "Three of the new Shivs should be ready for the mission, and I hope they'll prove useful. I had one question regarding the mission though... did Corporal Harris or Private Jenkins join the mission?"

"I didn't see them, no," Bradford admitted, and that flare of doubt spiked uncomfortably. *Why feel doubt now? It's too early in the mission for that.* "Were there any problems back at the lab?"

"Ah, no 'problems' so to speak. It can wait until the mission is over. Good luck, commander." And with that, the line closed and Bradford turned back to the globe just as the Skyrays launched and headed west.

The communications officer prompted Bradford and he switched his headset to the command channel. "Our mission area is in a suburb of Hong Kong. We've received intelligence that an organized crime syndicate has been offering an alien artifact for sale on the black market, and the source of this intelligence has managed to procure this artifact and is offering it to us instead. Intelligence on the device itself isn't complete but it was certain that it is intact and in working order, so retrieval of the device is our top priority."

On cue, the communications officer brought up the map of the suburban area for the operation. A large cemetery with a neighboring temple, some single-story buildings on the road nearby, and an empty parking lot filled the monitor in front of Bradford, and he began to relay his instructions to both the Strike teams and the Skyrays, "Big Sky, you will deliver Strike One to the parking lot. King Fisher, Ominous, you will remain in a holding pattern in the event that the extraction gets complicated. Strike One, your civilian contact can be found near the temple beside the graveyard. The alien artifact is priority but retrieval of the civilian is an optional objective. There is also the possibility of interference from the criminal element, so don't assume any human present is civilian or friendly. Good luck, Command out."

06:25, 04/16/2015, HONG KONG

The Skyray roared over the graveyard with its VTOL engines before coming to a rolling landing in the parking lot. The ramp dropped to the asphalt and Strike One boiled out of the aircraft and sprinted for the nearest cover in the barren parking lot. "Big Sky, Strike One Actual, we're clear." Fowler reported.

"Solid copy, Strike One. Command, Big Sky. Strike One is on the ground, we are assuming overwatch now," Big Sky reported as its VTOL engines flared as it lifted off and disappeared into the evening sky. With their eyes in the sky now firmly established, Strike One moved from cover and headed towards the graveyard entrance. "Strike One, Big Sky. Thermal imaging puts one human male outside the temple, looks like that might be your guy."

"Copy, Big Sky," Fowler said, and called for a halt as they approached the entrance to the cemetery. "All right, I want no chances taken on this. Three and Four," She indicated to Potter and Henderson, the two marksmen in the squad, "I want you two on that building and covering the street and as much of the cemetery as you can. Yes, I know the damned trees will be in your way but we shouldn't be out of sight for more than a minute. Seven, eight; I want you two camped out to cover the entrance of the cemetery. We absolutely cannot get bottled up here if it comes down to a fight." Lana and Matt nodded at their assignment.

"The rest of you are on me. Let's get this guy and get out. No muss, no fuss." With all orders given, Strike One split up. The marksmen dashed across the deserted street and scrambled up the fire escape to the roof of the store across the street. "One, three. We are in position, no contacts."

Matt and Lana chose a position just inside the graveyard, along an elevated walkway that would give them a good line of sight on the entrance, limited line of sight on the street running beside the cemetery, and plenty of cover to go with it. "One, seven. We've got the entrance covered."

"One copies. ETA on the objective is two minutes."

06:30, 04/16/2015, MISSION CONTROL

Bradford watched the visual feeds from Big Sky like a hawk as Strike One split to cover the graveyard. It was a sensible move, especially with the risks involved in the mission. Considering the lack of hostiles so far, moving the entire squad was less important than securing their exfiltration route. *Despite the potential incident that occurred in the hangar, this mission is going smoothly. Too smoothly.* Again his instincts prodded at him that something was going to go wrong, or already had and he had missed it.

"Strike Two Three, Command. Check your two o'clock." Bradford said, and the marksman complied. While uncommon, it wasn't unheard of for Bradford to issue orders to the soldiers in the field in the event of emergency or new objectives, and they had learned to trust his instincts. *Still, it's best to keep my hands off most of the time, the unit leaders don't need me micromanaging their men for them...*

"Copy Command," Potter confirmed, and his armor cam showed a long and deserted street. "Looks all clear... Strike that, I have four contacts moving in two-by-two formation towards the graveyard entrance. They look human, small arms, no armor and black suits. Big Sky, can you confirm?"

"Strike One, Big Sky, confirmed four human contacts heading towards you."

"Copy, Big Sky. Three, keep eyes on those targets but hold your fire. Seven, Eight, get into position and take them out silently if you please."

"Solid copy, one. Jenkins, on me." Seven said, and both he and Jenkins moved to a better vantage point to ambush the would-be ambushers.

Wait... Jenkins? Bradford thought with a start and a chill ran down his spine as he recalled the events from earlier in the evening, I saw all the strike teams go to the Skyrays and I did not see those two in the group. *Fowler, Dryzinski, Potter, Henderson, Anderson, Lee. Six names...eight soldiers. I distinctly remember eight soldiers leaving the armory. Shen specifically asked if I saw them and I know I didn't. What the hell. What the HELL.* David Bradford was as detail-oriented as commanders came, and he was absolutely certain that he had recognized six of Strike One's soldiers, but eight had left the armory. *Something big is going on here...*

Again, Bradford's instincts screamed at him and he turned back to see Harris and Jenkins ambush the four would-be ambushers. The humans moved from door frames to alleyways across the street from the cemetery, and they regrouped inside an alleyway outside of the sniper's view but still within the all-seeing view of Big Sky. That view twitched further down the alleyway to catch a pair of fast moving shapes sprinting towards the human interlopers, with the thermal cameras it appeared as nothing more than a blur. The humans were quick enough on the uptake to turn their guns and fire, but their pistols were no match for the monsters approaching them.

"This is One, I hear shots fired! Who's shooting?"

"One, Seven. Confirmed Chryssalids engaging civilian targets! Eight, use your frag!"

At this point all four of the black-suited humans had died gruesomely, and the Chryssalids had begun to hunch over the corpses. Before they could, one of the soldiers lofted a grenade into the gory pile and reduced everything to meat. The Chryssalids survived however and began to stumble and limp away to new targets, only to be chased down and dispatched with shotgun blasts.

Bradford had seen enough. "Big Sky, Command. Start thermal scans in and around the temple, starting with neighboring blocks. Ominous and King Fisher, deploy your packages and prepare for close air support. Strike One, Command. Get that asset and get out of there, now."

A chorus of acknowledgements flooded the radio, and Bradford turned away and switched channels. "Get Charles Shen on the line *right now.*"

06:33, 04/16/2015, HONG KONG

Matt flicked his rifle over to full auto as he covered the alleyway that the Chryssalids came from. Lana pumped another shotgun blast into each of the Chryssalids before giving the mutilated humans a quick look to make sure none of them would rise again. "These guys are down for the count." Lana reported as she sprinted across the street and back into cover beside Harris.

"Strike One, Big Sky," Their observer started, and the hurried tone and raised voice didn't mean anything good, "You have multiple contacts moving in on your location. Thin Men, Chryssalids and Floaters. Recommend exfiltration immediately."

"Oscar mike with the civilian--, wait, weapons free!" Fowler shouted through the comms, and the staccato reports from rifles could be heard in the distance. Instantly the radio exploded with contact reports and gunfire.

"On me, Jenkins!" Harris shouted as he sprinted back to the elevated position they had prepared earlier. Two loud reports came from across the street, and the two snipers reported kills over the comms. Harris and Jenkins slid into cover and began to search for targets, when the radio crackled again.

"Command, Strike One Two, Anita Fowler is KIA," Sergeant Dryzimski shouted between machine gun bursts. "ETA to extraction is one min—" Dryzimski's report dissolved into a horrible coughing sound that most of the strike teams were becoming uncomfortably familiar with. "I've been poisoned."

"Seven, Four! Three and I can watch the entrance. You and Eight reinforce the others." Before Matt could confirm the new orders, Henderson interrupted with a shout, "Seven, xrays on your back!"

Before either Harris or Jenkins could so much as react, a Chryssalid bounded up the street-side wall into their elevated position, barely ten feet from their position and between the two soldiers. A thousand painful deaths ran through Matt's mind as he got that too-close look at the alien monster. He had quite recently seen how fast they could run, and kill. *Lana's shotgun could probably stop it, my rifle might on full auto but neither of us can bring our weapons to bear before one of us dies.* Matt thought, and a flood of anger filled him at that.

Matt's anger at the situation turned into shock as the Chryssalid sped up...and leapt off the elevated walkway and into the graveyard without so much as looking at either soldier. A second Chryssalid leapt up near where the first had and scuttled along the path and passed by Lana close enough for her to touch it, but completely ignored the two soldiers as the previous one did.

A second passed which seemed to stretch on into eternity before a trio of Thin Men added themselves to the mix, taking cover positions along side Matt and Lana as though they weren't even there. *Will wonder what the hell is going on later, for now deal with the Thin Men. Can't use guns, they'll cough up poison, but...*

With practiced ease, Matt let the rifle hang from its sling and whipped out the Arc Thrower. Two trigger pulls later and two of the Thin Men were down without so much as a fight. He turned to look at Lana only to see her flip her shotgun over into a barrel hold and execute a beautiful golf swing that connected with the last Thin Man's face and sent it tumbling over the railing and onto the lower level. She flipped the shotgun around again and caught it by the stock, then went sprinting after the Chryssalid further down the path.

"Shot wide, damn it!" Potter shouted through the comms. "Seven, I've got no angle on the bug. Tag him or flush him out."

Matt holstered the Arc Thrower and raised his rifle as he spotted the Chryssalid in question. It was hunkered down behind a dividing wall and one of the giant trees just inside the cemetery, likely lying in wait to ambush the retreating squad members or to hide from the sniper, or both. Doesn't matter either way, he thought grimly and lined up his shot and fired a burst. The first shot sank into the bug's lower torso, the second clipped one of its arms while the third connected squarely where one of its legs attached to the body. Not expecting the attack, the Chryssalid squealed and stumbled out of its hiding spot, only for its head to explode a moment later.

"Seven, you're clear! Move up and we'll cover you."

"On it!" Matt shouted as he vaulted the railing and dropped down to the lower level, stopping only to put a pair of bullets into the Thin Man Lana had punted before moving to the gravestones for cover. The staccato reports of rifle fire were almost constant now. "Two, Seven. Status?"

"Two's out, this is Six! We'll be at the exit shortly." And just as he predicted, the remaining squad mates appeared. Lee and Anderson were retreating in good order, while a third figure had Dryzimski's unconscious form over his shoulders. The third figure was a Chinese man with a shock of white hair and goatee and a rather vicious-looking scar on the side of his face. He also wore the same black outfit that the hostile humans had worn.

So that's our civvie, Matt thought, and was mildly impressed that he was carrying the unconscious soldier rather than bolting and getting himself killed. He also was aware enough to move during covering fire. *Smart man.*

Matt's evaluation of the civilian was cut short when he spotted another Chryssalid bound out from a row of tall gravestones and sprint towards the retreating soldiers. He tried to line up a shot but this Chryssalid was either smart or lucky as it weaved between the gravestones and kept the retreating soldiers between itself and Matt. Lee saw the Chryssalid approach and began to panic as he switched to full auto and began to hose down the bug, but it wasn't enough. One clawed hand slapped the rifle aside

while the second tore out his throat. A gurgle came through the radio as Lee fell, and the bug stood over the dying soldier to commit one of the most horrifying things any human had ever witnessed: egg implantation.

Or it would have if a shotgun blast didn't tear a wide chunk out of its chest and knock it to the side. It turned to search for this new threat only to get a second shotgun blast in the face. The corpse began to spasm, and Lana put one more shotgun blast into it. "Command, Strike One Eight. Private Donald Lee, KIA." She reported before sprinting to the rest of the group.

"Damn it, Lana, stick to cover!" Matt yelled as he turned to suppress a pair of Thin Men who appeared behind a tree to the group's right. Surprisingly, the Thin Men didn't fire a shot in her direction, instead directing their fire at Anderson and the civilian. One fell from a body shot by Matt, while the second was crowned by one of the snipers.

Lana assumed Lee's place in covering the retreat as best she could with her shotgun while Matt continued to take shots with his rifle from his position at the gate. Anderson, Jenkins and the civilian regrouped for one last push, when the worst of all possible scenarios occurred. It was purely by chance that Matt saw the flicker of movement as the Floater ascended above them, and a thrill of horror went through him as he saw it toss a grenade.

Matt's eyes traced the trajectory of the grenade and realized it was going to land between the retreating soldiers and himself. Lana must have noticed it too as the group started to sprint towards the gate. Despite the increased speed, there was no way that any of them would survive the blast.

No! I will not let this happen again! Matt's mind screamed as he leapt from cover. He moved without conscious thought as he charged for where he expected the grenade to land. The grenade landed and bounced once, at just the right height for Matt to turn his sprint into one massive kick. His boot connected with the grenade just as the retreating soldiers passed him by. Had it been something other than a grenade, it would have been an absolutely beautiful kick.

Unfortunately, it was a grenade, and it detonated just under a second after the kick, knocking Matt off his feet. *Oh hell that's going to hurt in the morning,* he thought as he rolled over and staggered to his feet as he rubbed his chest with his free hand. *It feels like I just got kicked in the chest.*

Henderson had reached the gate and was taking pot shots at targets somewhere behind Matt as he staggered through and turned to provide his own covering fire, and hesitated. "Jenkins, get the civvie and Dryzimski to the extraction! We'll buy you time." Matt's tone brooked no argument, and Lana offered none as she pushed the civilian into action.

"Command, Strike One Seven, objective is approaching the extraction zone but we are in danger of being overrun. Requesting close air support, danger close!" Matt shouted into his comms as he raised his rifle and fired off a trio of shots at the pack of aliens rushing their position. The dreaded sound of his magazine running empty was offset by the chorus of replies through the radio.

"Big Sky copies, we are at extraction and retrieving the objective shortly,"

"Ominous copies, fire mission danger close ten seconds."

"King Fisher copies, station keeping over the extraction zone."

"Strike Four is engaging enemy reinforcements! Strike Two, can you assist?"

"Strike Two is ten seconds from the graveyard, we'll try and intercept! SHIV support is en route!"

The empty clip clattered to the cement and Matt brought a new one into place before signaling for Henderson to retreat. He then sprinted across the street and towards the parking lot. He had just rounded the corner of the block in time to see Big Sky land in the parking lot and a SHIV roll out followed by the Skyranger's crew chief with a rifle. Lana kept herself behind the civilian and Dryzimski's unconscious form until he was safely inside before sprinting back toward the fight. The SHIV quickly outpaced her and began to rattle off shots at distant targets. A second SHIV zipped out from a nearby alley and joined in the firefight, followed by the leading elements of Strike Two. They waved the surviving elements of Strike One forward as they provided covering fire.

The rattling fire of the SHIV was quickly drowned out by a second Skyranger as it roared over the parking lot on its VTOL engines, and its blunt nose turned towards the oncoming horde behind Matt. "King Fisher on station, tally ho." A gout of fire erupted from the Skyranger's nose, followed by a visible spray of spent shell casings raining down to the street. Matt could feel a few of them bounce off his helmet and armor as he sprinted towards Big Sky.

C'mon, you're almost there, Matt told himself as the distance closed, but with every step his legs and arms felt more and more like lead blocks. To make things worse each breath caused a spike of pain in his

chest. His free hand rubbed his chest and it came away wet, and Matt spared a glance down at his palm. "Oh," was all he was able to say before collapsing to the pavement.

"Shit, Harris is down!" Matt heard someone say, though they sounded far away, "Come on, we're at the Skyranger, Matt. Stay with me, stay with me!" He tried, he really tried to stay with whoever was talking, but it seemed like a much better idea to go to sleep.

OPERATION SILENT RAIN: COMPLETE
ALIEN ARTIFACT ACQUIRED
CIVILIAN ASSET ACQUIRED
STRIKE-1 REPORTS 2 KIA, 3 WIA
STRIKE-2 REPORTS 0 KIA, 1 WIA
STRIKE-4 REPORTS 0 KIA, 2 WIA

RECOVERY TEAM INVENTORY:
(Documented by Lt Payne)
LIGHT PLASMA RIFLE (2 total)
PLASMA WEAPON FRAGMENTS
THIN MAN CORPSES (32 total)
FLOATER CORPSES (12 total)
CHRYSSALID CORPSES (7 total)
THIN MAN CAPTURE (2 total)
OPERATION EVALUATION: GOOD

Author's Notes:

Supplemental Information:

The Council: A multinational organization that funds and directs the XCOM project in its strategic goals. While mostly uninvolved with the day-to-day operations of XCOM, their contributions ensure the smooth operations of the organization. Among their duties involves providing the vast majority of the income that keeps the organization running, scouting and procuring new personnel as well as managing political fall-out from operations. Any request forwarded by the council is expected to be treated as the highest priority.

Skyrangers: Skyrangers are supersonic troop and cargo carriers with stealth and VTOL capability to enable deployment of XCOM personnel anywhere in the world in a short amount of time with a minimal amount of exposure to local civilian or military personnel. Once troops are deployed, Skyrangers provide overwatch for the operation and close air support if necessary.

Operational Doctrine: XCOM deploys troops in the field via Skyrangers in squads of 6 to 8 soldiers. Squad callsign is 'Strike' followed by number. Deployed Strike teams number from 1 to 9, and in the unlikely event that more than nine squads are deployed, letters are used for the 10th squad and onward. Squad makeup can be tailored to the operation but standard squad makeup consists of four riflemen and four specialists. Specialist roles include (but are not limited to) heavy weapons, marksmen and demolitions experts.

SHIV: Super Heavy Infantry Vehicle. A remote control weapons platform designed to provide fire support for field operations. Armed with a machine gun and armor plate, it is capable of providing significant amounts of firepower to any squad without putting the soldiers of the squad at risk. SHIVs are also designed as a 'hard counter' to aliens with the potential for mind control or mental attacks.

Chryssalid Implantation: While the appearance and bloodthirsty behavior of Chryssalids is reason enough to fear them, it's their method of reproduction that inspires terror in the most hardened soldier. Chryssalids implant an egg in critically wounded or freshly killed victims that assumes control of their body while leeching nutrients from their bodies. Within fifteen seconds of implantation the victim becomes hostile to other human beings and will attempt violence against anyone who comes near. Within forty five seconds the implanted egg has matured into a juvenile Chryssalid which then violently erupts from the body of the victim.

Thin Man: The 'Thin Man' is an alien infiltrator designed to mimic the appearance of a caucasian human male wearing a blue suit and gold-rimmed glasses. Eyewitnesses to infiltration often describe feeling uneasy around Thin Men, that they felt something was 'off' about them but were not able to place the source of that unease. Upon discovery of their nature, Thin Men display extreme acrobatic ability combined with a tremendous vertical leap

which allows them to seek the high ground in almost every battle. Their most loathed ability is tied to their reptilian nature; they carry within them a liquid poison that becomes an aerosol upon contact with the open air. Thus far this poison penetrates all forms of air filtration and proves fatal within hours if not treated immediately.

Meanwhile... (Pt. 1)

Meanwhile...

Luna stood vigilant on her balcony, as she had every night from dusk until dawn with her green eyes slowly and methodically scanning the heavens. Her sentinels stood silent in the dark corners of her quarters with a degree of alertness surpassed only by Luna herself. *They acquitted themselves well to the circumstances, such loyalty is not unappreciated*, she thought to herself. *If only we were all so strong.*

Luna had been made aware of Celestia's plan to reform Discord those many days ago, though she had not agreed with it. But in the end it was her decision to make, and Luna didn't begrudge Celestia's choice when it went against her recommendation. The princess of the night had retired for the day and had managed to sleep blissfully for several hours before the effects of a powerful spell brushed against her senses enough to wake her. About an hour later her head had nearly exploded as another spell was cast from within the castle.

Luna was wise enough to realize that something was amiss, and immediately galloped to the court chamber to ascertain just what was happening. The court itself was nearing riot conditions upon her arrival, and the fear was clearly apparent on every face there. The petitioners were screaming questions and crying out while the guards maintained order. The royal guard themselves were too disciplined to show it, but fear was in their eyes as well.

Celestia's Solar Throne had been obliterated, the ornate golden throne and furnishing melted into a pile of slag at the head of the chamber. Several of the banners hanging behind the throne burned and smoldered, and some of the guards themselves looked thoroughly singed. Strangely enough, the one thing that caught Luna's attention was a half-burnt letter in danger of being trampled by the panicking petitioners. She had telekinetically yanked the scrap of paper off the floor, and her eyes widened as she saw the first three words.

Twilight is gone.

Luna did not have the time to inquire of the origin of the letter before the sun plummeted from the sky, only for it to reappear on the eastern horizon a moment later. The Solar Court descended into pure panic before a shout from Luna drew the attention of the room. And just as order was on the precipice of being restored, Celestia returned.

The sound of her teleport was an order of magnitude louder than Cloudsdale's loudest thunder clap, and it accompanied a wave of heat and physical force that knocked everypony off their hooves. Luna was the first to recover, and what she saw filled her with a degree of dread she had felt only once before. The power of Celestia's teleport had ignited the red carpet leading up to her throne, as well as cracking the marble floors beneath her hooves. Each hoofstep thundered all the more loudly for the silence that now filled the court as the petitioners and guards alike saw what Luna dreaded.

Celestia wasn't angry, nor was she livid. Such words paled in comparison to the expression on her face and the emotion in her eyes. She was *wrathful*, and magical energy radiated from her like flames from the sun itself. No pony present had ever seen Celestia in such a state. No pony except Luna.

"Captain," Celestia boomed as she approached her guard contingent, "The Solar Court is adjourned. Muster your troops and return here in ten minutes for your briefing. Do not be late." The guard captain, a unicorn with enough bulky muscle to put most earth ponies to shame, rapidly agreed and galloped away with almost indecent haste. The rest of the room remained paralyzed in horror at the spectacle before the Princess of the Sun swept her godlike glare across them. Without saying a word, the order had been given: get out.

"Luna, we have much to discuss. Prepare yourself," Celestia ordered, and the two princesses vanished in a burst of golden light to discuss matters of grave importance that were not meant to be heard by lesser ears. That was the public story, anyway.

The sound of her chamber doors opening brought Luna back to the present, and she silently chastised herself for allowing her mind to wander to the past. Thankfully she hadn't lost her place in the night sky, and she had to force herself not to turn and address the new arrival. A faint whisper filled the chamber followed by the sounds of hooves as two of her sentinels intercepted the interloper. "Princess Luna has asked not to be disturbed," they hissed in hushed tones.

"Stand down," Luna ordered without looking back, "I have been expecting this one." The sentinels wordlessly returned to their roosts and the clip-clop of hooves approached Luna before stopping a respectful distance behind her. "You'll have to forgive me for not addressing you face to face, per se, Shining Armor. I'm afraid I cannot afford to allow my current activities to be interrupted."

"I understand, Your Highness," Shining Armor replied, "Princess Cadance and I arrived in the capitol only recently. She is speaking to the Lunar Court now, so I felt it best to report to you personally."

"Your haste is appreciated. I can understand that this is an inconvenience for both of you to return so suddenly during your efforts to help the Crystal Empire." Luna nodded, though her eyes remained locked onto whatever distant point she was surveying while delaying the inevitable.

"We were happy to help in any way we could, though we are concerned. Some of the rumors we've been hearing recently have been conflicted, and Twily hasn't written me back yet," Shining said, and his questioning tone continued, "I am also glad for any excuse to travel with my wife but I'm not certain I should be here when I could be helping the Crystal Empire prepare for the Equestria Games."

"I'm afraid recent events do concern you, though indirectly." Luna explained, before swallowing to clear her nervousness, "Sentinels, disperse." Without a word or moment's hesitation, the Sentinels took wing and vanished into the night's sky to leave Luna and Shining Armor alone. "Brace yourself, what you are about to hear may be shocking."

And so Luna began to retell the tale that Celestia had told her. Discord was to be reformed, and was left in the hooves of the Elements of Harmony. The plan had gone awry when Twilight fell for a trick and vanished. This caused a brief bout of outrage from Shining, but he clamped down on his outburst to allow Luna to continue.

After receiving a hurried letter from Spike and the girls, Celestia had 'departed' Canterlot to investigate just what had happened, only to return and muster the guards and assign a garrison to Ponyville before sequestering herself in her quarters to 'resume the search for Twilight during the daytime hours' while Luna continued the search at night.

A long moment passed as Shining mulled over the explanation. Luna had just started to panic under the possibility that he hadn't accepted her retelling of events but was saved by his next question, "And where is Discord? I haven't heard anything about him breaking loose, and Twily said he was never one for being subtle."

Luna let out a breath she didn't know she was holding before continuing her explanation. "Celestia's quick action ensured Discord's containment near Ponyville. Without all the Elements I'm afraid he can no longer be petrified in stone, but Celestia devised a clever prison to contain him, and the garrison at Ponyville will ensure the prison will not be met with outside interference. He...refuses to reveal Twilight's location, or return her to Equestria. He has insisted to this day that she remains unharmed, and as far as my sister and I can determine he is correct."

The unicorn let out a relieved breath; Luna suspected it was more about the confirmation of his sister's continued existence than the containment of Discord. "Twily's safe, wherever she is. Have you been able to find her? Any trace, any lead at all?"

"Celestia continues to search every inch of Equestria that her sun can see, and I search the night skies. As I said, we can still feel her presence. She still lives, though she is very far away."

"How far away?" Shining asked, disbelief coloring his voice now, "Where could Discord have sent her that the sun can't reach it?"

Luna considered for a long moment before answering with a question of her own. "Shining, what is Equestria?"

"It's our nation."

"And what is our nation when combined with our neighbors, and their neighbors, and the lands beyond them, and the oceans in between?"

This answer came less quickly, "The total of all the nations, lands and oceans make our world."

Luna nodded again without moving her eyes. "And what of the moon and the sun? What is there when they are all combined?" When the answer wasn't apparently, Luna smiled and answered herself, "The astronomers call it a 'solar system'. Tell me, Shining Armor, do you feel that this arrangement of stars, moons, worlds, continents, oceans and nations is unique? That out of all the lights in my night sky, ours is the only one with a star with a world nearby? That our world is the only one with creatures that think and live as we do?"

"...oh." Was Shining's only response after a long moment, and Luna had no doubt that he was now looking up at the stars with newfound wonder and appreciation. "So she's out there, somewhere. How do you know she's alright? What if Discord sent her somewhere filled with savages and monsters? What if—"

"Shining Armor," Luna didn't shout, but for the command in her voice she could have screamed the

words. Instantly the unicorn fell silent and Luna could feel his eyes on her, and she struggled inwardly as to what she could say to calm him. "Shining, did I ever tell you how I met Twilight? My dear sweet sister decided the time for my grand introduction to the modern world would be on the holiday celebrating my... darker days," Luna could hear Shining's groan of comprehension as the implication for Celestia's motivation became clear.

Rather than dwell on that, Luna continued, "I arrived in Ponyville to find the celebration already underway, and my attempts to ingratiate myself with the populace were met with apprehension. You were captain of the guard at the castle at the time, you no doubt are aware of the behavior of the staff. My return was... less than welcomed." The looks of fear she had inspired in her servants still filled her with guilt, but the next part of the story made Luna smile, "Only one pony in Ponyville spoke to me of her own free will, and that was your sister. She helped me more than I dared hope, Shining, and she and I would share the occasional letter of social and scientific nature."

Shining's chuckle was heartfelt, "That does sound like Twilight. I hope she didn't bother you too much, Princess."

"No, no!" Luna interrupted, and she nearly looked down to Shining Armor but stopped herself, "I worry that if anyone was a bother, it was me. You may not realize this, but she was the first friend I had made after returning from the moon; the first friend I have had in a thousand years. I won't argue that Celestia has been wonderful but there was always the nature of our previous parting that hung over us; that we had each done terrible things to the other. So much history, so many wounds."

"But Twilight, dear Twilight, cared not a whit for that terrible past. She cared about me, personally. Not the monster I was, not the royalty I am now, just... me." A long moment of silence passed and Luna had to resist facehoofing after unloading that many personal thoughts onto Shining Armor. "Forgive me, without Twilight it seems you must bear the brunt of my personal quandaries."

"It's alright, Princess," Shining said, and Luna felt that she could believe him, "Believe it or not, I have a bit of experience dealing with the personal problems of princesses."

They both shared a chuckle at that before silence fell between them again. "Shining, the reason I share this is because I want you to know why I am searching. I am obligated to search in order to thwart Discord's plot; I am compelled to search because Twilight is my sister's student; I will *never* stop searching because she is my friend."

"Thank you, Princess," Shining replied sincerely before turning towards the doors he entered from, "I know for certain that if you are searching, then she will undoubtedly be found."

"Indeed. One last thing, Shining. What we've discussed here, all of it, is to be kept confidential. While I could tolerate any embarrassment about my personal revelations, the nature of Twilight's disappearance as well as Discord's return are considered secrets of the state and would cause a panic if publicly known. You may tell Cadance, as she will be working in our stead for public affairs, but no others."

"I understand," came the reply, before the door opened and shut.

The moment her privacy was returned, Luna let out a ragged sigh and chastised herself for the number of lies she had just told. *When one does not tell the whole truth, it is surely as malicious as a lie.*

Upon Celestia's return, she had teleported herself and Luna into her private chambers. There, the wrathful persona the Princess of the Sun had shown had dissolved into something that had unsettled Luna more than a wrathful Celestia: she began to weep. The erratic movement of the sun had been Celestia sweeping the entire planet for any sign of Twilight, and had come up empty. She had then given Luna the orders for the troops mustering, and their new duties in Ponyville before teleporting her back to the court and hadn't been seen in public since. She even refused to speak with Luna despite repeated attempts to talk since the incident. Despite Celestia's shocking polar attitude switch and the news of Twilight's disappearance, what was probably the most disturbing was Discord himself.

The rampant mayhem that was expected from the avatar of chaos never manifested. Discord was found atop the same hill he had been left on, sitting in a throne of his own conjuration with his paws steeped before him. He had not moved an inch when Luna appeared and questioned, then threatened him. He had not moved an inch when the garrison arrived. He had not moved an inch when Luna had conjured his holding cell around him, nor when the unicorn arcanists inscribed the runes to make the prison permanent. Discord had only responded once when Luna had asked, "What are you waiting for?"

His reply was simple but cryptic, and it haunted Luna's every waking moment since.

"I'm waiting for Twilight to fulfill her end of the bargain."

Consequences

ALIEN ATTACK NEAR HONG KONG THWARTED BY UNIDENTIFIED MILITARY ORGANIZATION;
WITNESSES REPORT HIGHLY ORGANIZED AND HEAVILY ARMED SOLDIERS BATTLING INVADERS;
ALL TRACE OF SOLDIERS GONE WHEN CHINESE MILITARY ARRIVED ON SCENE

AMATEUR PHOTOS OF REMOTE WEAPON PLATFORMS AND ARMED VTOL AIRCRAFT WITH STEALTH
CHARACTERISTICS FUEL SPECULATION OF AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT WITH UNIDENTIFIED
MILITARY ORGANIZATION COUNTERING ALIENS; WHITE HOUSE DENIES ALLEGATIONS

"Helfen sie..."

The words rasped through the radio like those of a mournful ghost, and while he couldn't speak for the rest of Strike One, Matt thought it was creepy as hell.

"Command, Strike One. We've got chatter on the channels, please advise," Captain Donnelly quickly reported as he took cover near an overturned van and signaled for the rest of the team to do so. "My German's a little rusty but I think someone is saying, 'help me.'"

"Copy that, Strike One. Infiltration of GSG communications networks puts the source of the transmissions inside a nearby warehouse, about twenty meters north of your current position," Commander Bradford's voice replied after a long moment. "If whoever is on the other end of that transmission survived the helicopter crash then they may have valuable intel."

Matt could see Donnelly's helmet nod, "Strike One copies. We're splitting into fire teams. Five and up, patrol the perimeter of the block and look for survivors or hostiles. Everyone else is on me. We're heading for the warehouse." A chorus of acknowledgements rang through the Strike One squad channel and the eight soldiers split into two groups of four. Matt didn't spare any attention to the second fireteam as he formed up behind the Captain and the others to leapfrog towards the warehouse at the end of the street.

"Helfen sie..."

"Whoever that is, they're definitely asking for help. They might be injured," Rommel translated, and he subconsciously patted one of his belt pouches for his first aid gear.

Donnelly nodded again and motioned towards the door. "Command, Strike One. We are breaching the warehouse now." With that, Hale slowly opened the door and stalked into the room with her shotgun levelled. Rommel and Donnelly followed with their rifles up and Matt brought up the rear.

In contrast to the destruction and bodies outside, the warehouse was completely untouched, with boxes and palettes of products stacked in neat, orderly rows. The only thing out of order was the shoddy lighting conditions indoors, where every other overhead light seemed to be flickering or entirely dark. It was a good approximation of hell for just about any soldier, with multiple lines of sight from deep within the darkened warehouse and little cover nearby the door that Strike One hustled through.

Despite Murphy's Law, the soldiers were able to make it to the first row of palettes near the loading dock and take cover without incident. A long moment passed before Donnelly motioned for the team to move ahead, only for everyone to freeze as they heard those words again.

"Helfen sie..."

The words were heard in stereo, through the radio in Matt's ear as well as hearing the speaker himself. A shuffled footstep echoed in the warehouse, followed by what sounded like metal scraping on the concrete. All eyes turned in the direction of the sound.

"Contact, center aisle," Hale reported crisply, and the shape of a human in tactical gear could be seen staggering towards them in the flickering light of the aisle. He leaned heavily on the row of palettes beside him with each step and his head drooped, and Matt could make out the distinctive shape of a pump action shotgun dangling from one hand with its muzzle dragging on the ground while the other held a grenade.

"Rommel, get him into cover. We'll cover you," Donnelly ordered.

"Grenzschutzgruppe freundschaftsspiele!" Rommel called out in German before slowly rising from cover with both hands raised. He let his rifle dangle from its strap as he slowly produced his first aid kit with the universal red cross symbol clearly emblazoned on it. "Legen Sie Waffen auf dem Boden, und wir können ihnen helfen, wenn Sie verletzt sind."

"Helfen sie..." The GSG soldier moaned, and he stopped his advance but didn't drop his weapons. Rommel stepped out from behind the palette while keeping the first aid kit clearly displayed as he approached.

"There's no obvious injuries, though his slurred speech and lack of balance might be due to concussion," Rommel summarised quickly as the distance closed before turning back to the GSG soldier. "Mach dir Keine Sorgen, hier sind Verstärkungen. Warum gehst du nicht senken Sie Ihre Waffen und wir können Sie fixiert up? Ja?"

The GSG soldier slowly raised his head to look squarely at Rommel, and for a second the light above him stayed on before flickering out again. The GSG soldier's eyes were rolled up into the back of his head, and the blood vessels around his head were swollen to the point of being visible from Matt's current position. Also visible in that brief moment was a thin tendril of violet energy from the back of his head further down the aisle to a gray humanoid the size of a small child with big black eyes and no discernible mouth.

"Tote mich!" The GSG soldier screamed as his shotgun jerked upward and fired into Rommel's chest, and everything happened at once.

"DROP IT! DROP YOUR WEAPON!" Hale screamed as she rose from cover and levelled her shotgun at the GSG soldier.

"Command, Strike One!" Donnely yelled in the comms, "GSG survivor is hostile! Rommel's down!"

"Xray spotted end of the aisle!" Matt shouted as he rose from cover and drew a bead on it with his rifle.

"Gott verzeih mir..." The GSG soldier wailed and both the shotgun and grenade clattered onto the concrete. The lever from the grenade clattered to the ground beside it a second later. The grenade detonated and the GSG soldier was reduced to meat. Rommel fared no better as the blast caught him as well.

Before any of the surviving soldiers could respond, bolts of green energy began to light up the warehouse. Lines of fire crisscrossed the length of the warehouse, as well as from the aisles on either side, pinning Strike One's survivors perfectly.

"Harris! Flank the X-rays now or we're dead! Go now, we'll cover you!" Donnely suited action to words and began to spray lead down the aisle in the direction of their attackers, and Matt didn't waste the opportunity. He was up and sprinting towards one of the wall-side aisles, and he felt a thrill of horror as an alien began to round the corner he was heading for.

Unfortunately for the alien, Matt's reaction time was quicker. A running kick directly to the alien's featureless face sent it sprawling to the floor where it was quickly dispatched with a quick rifle burst. He rounded the corner and caught sight of another alien caught out of cover. A quick double tap brought that down, and Matt continued his flanking maneuver.

"Command, Strike One. Hale is down! We need reinforcements n—" Donnely's report terminated abruptly with a burst of static, and Matt suddenly found himself very alone.

He caught sight of another alien as he rounded the corner and raised his rifle to fire a burst, and that movement saved his life. A burst of green energy came in from an unexpected angle directly at his upper chest, and his rifle took the blast and melted into uselessness in his hands. The blast caused Matt to stumble as he halted his trajectory and fell back into cover. His pistol came out reflexively and put three shots into the head of the alien that nearly killed him.

The brief moment of reprieve didn't last as Matt heard movement and found himself looking at the blank face of another alien that had crawled on top of the cover he now hid behind. One thin limb pointed towards him, and a device on its arm began to glow green with energy. That was as far as it got as Matt put a round in its left eye. Like a puppet with its strings cut, the alien tumbled from its perch and smacked wetly in front of the surviving soldier. A second shot was fired, then a third, fourth, and fifth and a dozen more times into the dead alien. The only sound that rivaled the volume of those shots was Matt's screaming as he tried to scramble away while keeping his sidearm on target.

The gun clicked dry and Matt thumbed the magazine release, and his shaky hands fumbled with a new magazine. He heard the shouts of the remaining members of Strike One storming into the building. "Jesus... Command, Strike One Five. Captain Donnely, Sergeant Rommel and Corporal Hale are KIA. Fan out and look for Harris. Harris, you in here?"

"I'm here..." Matt tried to say, but his voice was dry and weak. "I'm here..."

08:05, 04/19/2015, MEDICAL

"I'm here," Matt mumbled as he tried to rise, but he found his entire body too weak to comply. He attempted to sit up but a stabbing pain in his chest and side stopped him and he fell back into bed. Wait, bed?

Slowly Matt cracked his eyes open and was rewarded by a splitting headache from the white walls he now recognized as the patient's rest area of XCOM's medical wing. After several slow blinks the pain in the back of his head reduced to something he could ignore before opening his eyes again and looking around.

The bed Matt now occupied was at the far end of the room, and a small knot of soldiers gathered around one of the beds near the entrance. He recognized Anderson, Potter and Henderson sitting around the bed, and an unhealthy-looking Dryzinski lay in the bed with an oxygen mask covering his mouth and nose. As the others' backs were turned towards him, it was Dryzinski who first noticed Matt stirring and raised one shaky hand to point in his direction.

"Well well, rise and shine, buttercup!" Henderson shouted from across the room and rose. Anderson and Potter stood up to follow Henderson over to Matt, the latter falling behind on a pair of crutches. Henderson stopped at the foot of Matt's bed and crossed his arms in an attempt to mimic Bradford. "Playing the hero will get you killed, and XCOM doesn't need heroes."

Matt chuckled at the imitation, and immediately regretted it as his chest immediately flared up again. He did manage a smile at Henderson and the other two soldiers, though he arched an eyebrow as he caught sight of Potter's leg cast. "What happened to you?" Matt asked as he raked his memories for when the sniper might have been hurt.

"Drop kicked a Chryssalid," Potter said with a shrug, as though that explained everything.

"Bullshit. You tripped and fell down the last flight of steps on the fire escape," Henderson corrected, "I had to drag you and your broken leg back to the Skyranger." Potter's response was a crude hand gesture and a grin.

"You doing all right over there, D?" Matt asked as loud as he could, and the heavy weapons specialist gave a weak thumbs-up and a nod. *Don't want Dryzinski to feel left out...come to think of it, why the hell did they put me all the way over here?* "I'm assuming since we're back, the mission was successful?"

All three soldiers nodded, and Henderson spoke again, "That's correct. Delivered the civvie and the crap he was carrying to Bradford the moment we landed." He opened his mouth to continue but quickly aborted the sentence with an uneasy expression.

"Is that it?" Anderson said as he made his way over to the desk beside Matt. Sitting on the desk was a small glass jar, with a warped piece of metal sitting in it. "Scuttlebutt says they actually pulled this out of your back armor plates. It cut your chest armor and you like butter. A centimeter higher or lower and it might have ricocheted around your ribcage and torn you up pretty bad. Damn lucky. If you hadn't done it, I'd be dead. Jenkins, Dryzinski and the civilian, too."

Matt nodded wordlessly to accept his thanks before addressing the subject they had all been avoiding. "Fowler and Lee?"

"They've been added to the wall," Potter said solemnly, "The other teams had some minor wounds, but no casualties."

Again morbid silence fell over the group, and Matt noticed one rather noteworthy person was missing. "Where's Lana? I imagine she'd be either here with you guys or wounded and here anyways."

Henderson's face became pained, and the two other soldiers shared his expression. "I haven't seen her since the end of the operation," He said slowly as he fixed Matt with a serious look. "Bradford had her report to the briefing room the moment we landed. I'm afraid I have to ask, what the hell did you two do? Bradford's always met us at the landing pads but this time he was powered with the wrath of an angry god."

"What?"

"Seriously," Potter added nervously. "You know Bradford's famous for his glares, but this one felt like it could melt rock. Then the doctors and scientists started asking us questions over the past few days about you two. Really weird shit. Speaking of weird, how'd you and Lana pull that Houdini act in the Skyranger before we embarked?"

All eyes turned to Matt, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to recall the events preceding the mission. The Skyranger? *Before that we were in the armory and everyone ignored us, then there was the run through the corridors from the Stardust lab, then the teleport from the Skyranger hangar. He rubbed his eyes as he tried to concentrate. I know I'm forgetting something. I know it. Oh. Oh crap.*

Before any other questions could be raised, the door to Medical slid open to reveal Bradford in all his terrible glory, followed by a significantly less intimidating Vahlen. Henderson, Anderson and Potter stood at attention and stepped aside, although Potter wobbled in place slightly as he tried to keep his crutches out of the way. Bradford and Vahlen walked past all three without as much as a glance. "I need to speak with Corporal Harris privately," was all he said as he turned his baleful glare upon the bedridden soldier. The remaining members of Strike One beat a hasty retreat and a worried look over their shoulders before Vahlen pulled a privacy curtain around his bed.

"Corporal. Explain to me exactly what happened before the operation in Hong Kong," Bradford ordered as he maintained his glare.

Matt closed his eyes and collected enough of his thoughts before answering, "Prior to the start of the operation, Private Jenkins and I assisted with escorting our guest to the location in question," He started, and deliberately kept the details vague. *Dryzinski's on the other side of the room but he's still got ears.* "After the alert was raised, we... made our way back to the guest quarters. Before we could leave for the armory, the guest... ah..."

For the briefest of moments, Bradford's glare left Matt to glance at Vahlen. The scientist nodded after looking at the tablet in her hands, and suddenly the glare was back on him.

"Just so we're clear. After leaving guest quarters with potentially detrimental effects on yourself and Private Jenkins, you proceeded to the armory and took part in the operation? Without knowing if those effects would risk your life or the lives of your teammates, or the security of the operation?" Bradford's voice was quiet and even, and was all the more terrifying for it.

"Yes sir," Matt replied with the only acceptable answer.

"Explain yourself. Now."

"Private Jenkins and I entered the armory, and I made the call to take part in the operation. Jenkins followed my orders. I felt that the greater risk was sending Strike One short-handed," The words came easily, and Matt had a sinking feeling that every word was another nail in the coffin of his career.

"And during the operation in question, you two eluded the notice of the aliens in combat several times, accounted for a quarter of the confirmed kills, two live captures and ensured the completion of the mission and the survival of your teammates by putting yourself in direct and immediate danger." Bradford further added, and Matt did well to hide his confusion.

The commander turned away from both Vahlen and Matt and crossed his arms in front of him before nodding and turning back. "For your actions before the operation, you are suspended from combat operations. You will assist doctor Vahlen with the documentation of the effect that was placed upon yourself and Lana, and any testing she deems fit to run. Once this is documented to Vahlen's satisfaction, you may return for active combat operations."

Just as the punishment began to sink in, Bradford continued, "For your quick thinking and risking your life to ensure the success of the operation and the survival of your fellow soldiers without hesitation, I am promoting you to sergeant, effective upon your return to active duty." And just as that news registered in Matt's mind, the commander finished, "If you threaten the integrity of an operation in this manner again, you'll spend the rest of this war in a cell." Without another word Bradford turned and walked out with Vahlen fast on his heels, leaving a thoroughly bewildered soldier behind.

09:10, 04/19/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight Sparkle was worried. It had been three days since Matt and Lana left for whatever their jobs entailed, and she hadn't seen them since. Charles had stopped by several hours after the two had left to inform her that they were alright and the spell was no longer needed, and she hadn't seen him since, either. Kim and Joel were conspicuously absent, also. She hadn't seen another human for almost two days, and that contributed greatly to her worries.

Twilight stepped over to her desk, where a fresh collection of food awaited her. Each morning the basket was refilled while she slept, since it was always full in the morning. *I'm going to stay up tonight and ask just what's going on,* she resolved as she eyed the other items on her desk. On one side there was the tablet she was using to learn the English language, while on the other was the book that Charles had given her.

After waffling for a few moments, Twilight settled on the book. The book's condition wasn't the best, its paperback nature making it more susceptible to the wear and tear it no doubt suffered through hard use. With a gentle application of telekinesis she pulled the ragged cover open and arched an eyebrow as a block of text was on the open cover that appeared to be hand written. The text itself was the mostly

recognizable lettering she was becoming familiar with, in large block letters that made them easily readable.

"Dear Ellie," Twilight muttered to herself as she started reading, "When you're old enough I hope you'll learn to love reading as much as I do. Written words when strung together have magic to them that can create worlds and heroes the likes of which we have never seen. Virtually anything can happen with every turn of the page. Hold on to that wonder and you'll go far. Grandpa Ray."

She reread the text again before shrugging. *Ray... I'll ask Charles who Ellie is the next time I see him.* The next page flipped over but before she could continue, the door chimed and opened. Shen and Joel appeared through the doorway and offered Twilight a smile and a wave that seemed just a little bit forced.

"Good morning, Twilight. I'm sorry to have taken so long to get back to you," Charles apologized as he took a seat at the table. Joel took the seat beside him and looked equally apologetic as Twilight left the book back at her desk and headed towards her seat at the table. "Things have been rather hectic lately. How have you been since we last spoke?"

"Well," Twilight started but hesitation prevented her from immediately gushing about what was on her mind, "Matt and Lana haven't stopped by... No one has stopped by at all. What's going on?"

"Ah, I actually have some news regarding that. Matt and Lana are both safe, but the mission did not go as planned. Lana's helping answer the questions that the mission brought up, and Matt is currently recovering in Medical--"

"What! Matt got hurt? Did the spell not work?" Twilight interrupted. "I-I was certain I got it right! The power feed was constant and uninterrupted, the spell activation didn't seem to have any of the adverse effects that are normally seen when a spell fails. What happened? Please, what happened!?"

Charles looked over to Joel for a long moment before replying, "Matt's fine, he just got hurt helping one of his friends during the mission. He's recovering well now, and should be along to visit within the next few days. We were actually hoping to ask you about the spell you cast. Can you talk about it?"

"Certainly," Twilight agreed after breathing a sigh of relief, "It's a spell I created myself after witnessing an artifact that produced a similar result. Pinkie Pie thought I should name it the 'Background Pony' spell, but I personally like 'Wallflower' myself. It's designed to make something appear unimportant. Anypony who views something that's under the effects of the spell will not see it as anything important, and they will not remember seeing it either if they recall the time that they saw it. ...What? Was it something I said?"

As Twilight continued her explanation Charles gave Joel a pointed look, who was busy writing down everything he could. When her explanation ended, Twilight could see Charles swallow before speaking. "That's rather interesting, Twilight. You mentioned there was something where you're from that produces this effect naturally?"

"Yep! It was...it..." Twilight brought a hoof to her face, "I think the artifact might have affected my memory of it. I remember it was blue, but for my life I can't remember anything else about it. Oh, that's going to bug me. Anyway! The artifact's owner called it a 'perception filter', and it was designed to make it unnoticeable. It actually sounded like the exact opposite of another spell I have and I thought it would be an interesting challenge to make a spell that mimics the effects of the perception filter."

"Oh? There's a spell that does the opposite?"

"Yes! It's called the 'Want-It, Need-It' spell." Twilight's explanation started out eager but wilted as the name of the spell came up. *Oh Celestia, why did I bring that up? Please don't ask about it, please don't ask about it, please don't-*

"And what does that one do?"

Twilight had to suppress and embarrassed groan, "It makes its target more noticeable and desirable to anypony who views it. C-can we not talk about it, please?" Charles and Joel shared another look at that, before looking back to Twilight silently, "Okay, fine! I may have used it once when I was desperate to solve a problem to write about for Princess Celestia! I mentioned that I write to her once a week explaining what I had learned and the problems that I solved? I couldn't find a problem before the deadline so I decided to make a problem. It was stupid of me, and I haven't used the spell since. Now can we please talk about something else?"

Joel was still scribbling away as he took his notes, so Charles took the hint. "You mentioned an artifact? Are those very common in your home? Artifacts, I mean."

"Well, yes and no," Twilight started, and she couldn't help, but smile as the subject turned to something

she was not only comfortable discussing but was well-versed in. "I've studied quite a few magical items, and I've come across several as well. The Elements of Harmony are the ones I'm most familiar with..."

09:15, 04/19/2015, STARDUST LABS

"...And now they're talking about magical items from where Twilight's from," Lana translated before looking to the others in Observation. Kim was by far the least intimidating presence as she sat at one of the monitoring stations to record not only Twilight's conversation but Lana's translation as well. Vahlen was beside her and taking her own notes as she observed. The most oppressive presence in the room was Bradford, who was glaring through the one-way mirror with enough intensity that Lana half expected a hole to start melting in the glass itself.

A long moment of silence passed between the occupants of Observation before Bradford spoke up. "I expect a report within a week. Moira, I'm assigning you Jenkins full time to assist with testing. Harris will join you as soon as Medical clears him. I want to know every last strength and shortcoming of this ability by the end of the month, as well as the details you can manage to gain from this other ability that it mentioned."

"It will be done, commander."

"One last thing," Bradford turned to face Vahlen directly, and Lana couldn't help but look away from the look he was giving her. Vahlen weathered it far better; she withered only slightly under that glare. "This subject has responded to positive reinforcement and social engagement over professional distance and orders."

Lana could see Vahlen's eyebrow twitch, and the grip on her tablet tightened to the point where her knuckles were white. "What are you proposing?" She asked through gritted teeth.

"I am proposing that you treat the subject with a modicum of respect," Bradford answered levelly. While the two were speaking in a cordial if somewhat forced manner, Lana couldn't help but imagine a clash of two giant titans as the two monumental willpowers tried to overpower the other. "Be polite, and if it refuses to perform a task you ask of it, do not press the issue."

"Your suggestions are appreciated, but..."

"These are not suggestions," Bradford interrupted, and his tone of voice became tight and clipped.

"The practices and testing procedures of the science team are wholly at my discretion--" Vahlen replied tersely but withered even further as Bradford's glare took on a whole new level of wrath.

"Unless those practices directly threaten the safety of this facility or the XCOM project, which is my purview," Bradford's voice hadn't raised a decibel but to Lana's ears he might as well have been screaming. "I've reviewed the footage from your testing procedures, and your behavior with the last round of testing was wholly unacceptable. I am starting to doubt your professional detachment, doctor."

"Detachment!? You question me when Shen—"

"Shen's presence during testing is likely the only reason you are alive. He has been a calming influence on the subject since its capture, and he was also the first to realize the potential threat it poses if it feels endangered. Tell me, doctor, what do you feel would have happened during your last test if Shen had not been there? Are you confident in the countermeasures you have developed thus far to contain the subject if it feels threatened enough to act violently? Are you confident in our current capacity to defend ourselves from it if such violence were to occur?"

Vahlen's jaw clenched, and the hand not clutching her tablet balled into a fist and began to shake slightly as Bradford continued to scowl at her. "I understand, commander," She ground out as she broke eye contact to look away.

Bradford's glare held for just a moment longer before nodding, "I want that report in one week, and a comprehensive report on all your findings by the end of the month. And I do not want to hear about any more problems from this project. *Am I clear?*"

For a brief moment, that glare fell upon Lana and she had to resist the impulse to suck in a breath through her teeth. And then the moment was gone as Bradford turned and walked out of observation without another word. Vahlen continued to tremble with restrained anger before stalking out of Observation as well. The moment the door slid shut; Lana heard a gasp, and turned to see that Kim was as white as a sheet.

"Dear God, that was painful just to be around. I imagine Doctor Vahlen is going to be rather terse for the

next few days," Kim predicted, and Lana could only nod her head in agreement. "Perhaps I'll lay low in one of the other labs until things cool off. Say hello to Twilight for me!" And with that, Kim beat a hasty retreat from the lab as well, leaving Lana alone. With nowhere else to go, she left Observation and rounded the corner to Twilight's habitat.

"Lana!" Twilight greeted with a wide grin and a waved hoof, "I was so worried after you left! I haven't heard from Matt or Charles or you or anyone! How did it go? Charles said Matt got hurt but he's alright now, is that true? Where have you been?"

"Hey, Twily, a thousand apologies for my absence!" Lana smiled and shrugged sheepishly. *No sense in making her feel guilty about my stay in the brig until Bradford sorted out this whole spell nonsense...* "But I'm back. Matt got a little banged up, but he'll be by as soon as he can."

Lana pulled up a seat at the table and wrung her hands before continuing. "We're both really glad that you're willing to help us, Twilight. I want to be clear on that. But I also have to be clear that it can't happen again. It worked out this time, but we can't have you using your abilities on us in potentially dangerous situations, especially without warning before hand."

"What? Why?" Twilight looked crestfallen at the refusal of her help.

"Twilight, do you remember the first time I brought Kim to visit?" Joel asked quietly, and Twilight turned to nod.

Twilight opened her mouth to agree but caught herself, then looked down. "I'm sorry," was all she could manage.

"Now now, Lana's right. We're all glad you're so willing to help, but the rules must be followed for everyone's safety," Shen said gently. He paused for just a minute before continuing, "Would you be up for testing this spell of yours tonight or tomorrow? I imagine since it's so new you might like to test its boundaries in a controlled environment."

"I'd like that a lot!" Twilight agreed immediately.

Lana smiled as the touchy situation resolved itself and fished in one of her pockets for the item she was looking for. "Well now, who's up for a game of cards?"

08:30, 04/21/2015, BARRACKS

I do not belong here, Shaojie Zhang thought to himself as he walked the barracks corridors towards the mess hall. Other soldiers nodded to him in greeting but their suspicion was palpable. *They do not trust me or my motives. I do not blame them.* The soldiers he had met were respectful but terse every time that he had spoken with them, and he understood that his actions on the battlefield were the only reason they were even speaking to him at all.

Gossip was the only thing in the universe that travelled faster than the speed of light, and it had made the rounds that the last mission had resulted in two of their friends getting killed. It had also spread just as quickly that the mission objective was offered by a member of a known criminal organization to XCOM, and his price was safe haven from his former colleagues.

They think I am a thief, a traitor, and a criminal. That I bought my safety with the lives of their friends. He grimaced as he retrieved a bottle of water from the dispensary and headed towards one of the isolated tables on the edge of the mess hall. *I will earn their trust, through blood and sweat if I must.* Zhang mused as he considered the other rumor that was making the rounds. Shaojie Zhang had carried one of his saviors across his back and to safety, and that had earned him enough respect to offer his services to his new hosts.

And so the former criminal found himself wearing the uniform of his hosts and eating in their common areas rather than by himself in a comfortable if somewhat restrictive cell that he imagined other civilian collaborators found themselves in after they had been 'procured' by XCOM. He had sworn off all ties to his former life and gone through a significant amount of medical and skills testing before they had accepted his offer, and now the hardest part was upon him.

"Oi, loner!" A female voice interrupted Zhang's musings, and he turned to see one of the few soldiers who had accepted his presence more easily than any of the others, "You shouldn't go sit by yourself. It's damn depressing."

"Good morning, Miss Jenkins. I think it's wise that I introduce myself slowly due to the unusual method of my recruitment," Zhang smiled pleasantly as Lana Jenkins slid into the seat in front of him. A second soldier followed behind her, this one in a wheelchair. "Ah, is this another of your friends?"

"Friend might be stretching it," The newcomer said flatly and was rewarded with a wadded-up napkin to the face. He snatched the napkin before it tumbled out of his reach but held off on his retaliation until he could introduce himself, "Matt Harris. You might not recognize me, but we actually met during your... 'recruitment.' I must say I tip my hat to you for what you did." The hand not holding the napkin reached forward in an offered handshake.

Zhang introduced himself in return and gave Matt's hand a quick shake before replying. "I was merely doing what I could at the time," He accepted Matt's compliments humbly. "And I must admit that I do not recall seeing you specifically during the fighting. Those full-face helmets cover your facial features but I've always been a good judge of height and body type even through armor. Were you one of the snipers?"

"No, the reason you don't remember him is because he 'wasn't there,'" Lana interrupted, and she waved her hand ominously through the air. Naturally, the moment her attention was diverted the napkin came hurdling towards her head, which she unsuccessfully dodged.

"Don't listen to her, man," Matt said with a sympathetic smile on his face, "She's full of crap and if you spend too much time with her she might rub off on you."

"I may have come to that conclusion already," Zhang agreed with a ghost of a smile, and suddenly it was his turn to avoid the napkin projectile. "Please forgive me if I'm prying, but how were you injured? I recall one of the snipers with a broken leg, and your heavy weapons expert was unfortunate enough to get caught in some of the alien poison. I don't recall seeing you get injured."

"Oh, ah, I did something stupid with an alien grenade. Piece of shrapnel pierced my armor and messed up one of my lungs. Doctors called it 'pneumothorax', I think," Matt summarized after a long moment, and when Zhang's eyes fell to the wheelchair he elaborated. "Ah, yeah. The chair. The doctors pronounced me on the road to recovery but they don't want me walking around and straining myself just yet. And if I black out it's a bit harder to get hurt while in one of these than walking around."

"It seems a wise precaution," Zhang agreed with a nod.

"I hope I can get out of this silly chair soon, though. Makes me feel like an invalid."

"That's 'cause you are one," Lana supplied helpfully.

"Oh bite me, Jenkins."

Whatever retort she may have supplied was interrupted by their watches beeping. Both looked down at their watches and sighed. The synchronous movements and reactions caused Zhang to raise an eyebrow, but he quickly schooled his features into careful neutrality as both looked up at him.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid we've got to bail. Prior obligations and all that. Helping the scientists run some tests." Jenkins said with an apologetic smile. "We won't be around for the rest of the day. Good luck!"

With that, the unlikely pair walked and wheeled out of the mess hall and leaving Zhang to his own thoughts. Acting on impulse, he flagged down a soldier walking by, another that he recognized from the mission he had taken part in.

"Excuse me, do you know anything about what they are taking part in?" Zhang asked the soldier, Anderson if memory served him well, as he indicated to Jenkins and Harris as they left.

"Hm? Oh those two. They volunteered for some special assignment about two weeks ago. Just about all their free time they spend working on whatever it is they're volunteering for."

"Is that so?" Zhang asked rhetorically as he again considered what would be necessary to earn the respect of his peers at XCOM.

What If?

((This chapter is a parody and isn't intended to be taken as a serious part of the Stardust canon. Enjoy!))

"Um...h-hello? Is there anypony there? Rainbow Dash? T-Twilight? Anypony?" Fluttershy asked timidly as she inched forward. Gone were the rolling fields surrounding Ponyville, as were the comforting sounds of chirping birds, chattering squirrels and babbling brooks. All of the comforting signs of nature Fluttershy had come to love were gone; replaced with metal, stone, smoke and fire. There were no signs of life as far as she could see, and it unsettled her greatly.

The timid Pegasus had just cleared a pair of metal boxes and began to inch into a clearing just as three creatures appeared on the other side of the stone clearing between two of the large brick buildings. *Bipedal, binocular vision, digigrade appendages*, Fluttershy's eye for animals easily cataloged the traits of the creatures that had entered her sight. The larger one waved and shouted, and the middle-sized one scooped up the smallest and began to run. *Oh my, a family group? These two must be caretakers for the foal. But why would they be running?*

Bursting from the shadows that the trio had just vacated came a monster, and Fluttershy's eyes fell upon it just as they had the bipeds. *Quadriped, insect-like physiology, extremely fast*, she quickly summarized, and her eyes widened as she saw the unfolding events before her. The largest tried to backpedal but kept himself between the new arrival and the other two bipeds, while the insect dashed towards the trio with claws raised. The larger biped tripped and fell backwards, and the other two cried out in fear as the insect closed in for the kill. *Predator species.*

"Hold it right there, mister!" Fluttershy shouted as she fixed the insect with the Stare. All eyes turned toward Fluttershy and had this not been a life or death situation she would have shrunk away from the attention. Not now though, what she had just seen made her blood boil. "What do you think you are doing? Chasing down these poor innocent creatures?"

The scene of impending violence froze before the Pegasus as she trotted forward. The insect and the now-prone biped remained frozen in place. The expression on the insect's face was hard to interpret but the biped was clearly frightened for himself and the others it was protecting. "There there, everything is alright now," Fluttershy comforted as she stroked the biped's head gently with a hoof. It seemed frozen in place much like a scared rabbit, and made no effort to run until prompted to. "Go on, shoo. Make sure that foal of yours is safe."

Fluttershy gave it a comforting smile as it crawled and then ran away before whipping around to face the insect again, "DID I SAY YOU COULD MOVE?" The insect had begun to creep forward and reach with the two digigrade limbs attached to its torso but when it found itself under Fluttershy's Stare again it froze in place. "You think you can chase innocent creatures just because you can? Did you not see it had a foal? Did you not see how scared it was? You should be ashamed of yourself!"

With each word Fluttershy took a step forward and the insect took a step back. With each step it lowered itself closer to the stone they stood upon, and was now using its clawed limbs to shield its face from the terrible Stare. When its back claws bumped into one of the metal boxes in the clearing which prevented further retreats, it began to whine piteously. Fluttershy wasn't finished though, she was just getting started.

"AND YOU!" She screamed as she whipped around again to face another biped standing behind her. Unlike the previous bipeds this one wore some form of armor and had nearly managed to catch Fluttershy off guard with a strange silver tool it held in its arms. It froze in place; even its full-face helmet couldn't protect it against the Stare. "You think you can sneak up on me? You are WRONG, mister! In case you couldn't tell I am in a very bad mood and I'm not going to tolerate mean-spirited pranks while I'm teaching Mister Bugs here a lesson. Now DON'T MOVE until I get back so I can scold you properly."

"You can't escape your punishment, Mister Bugs!" Fluttershy turned around to face the insect again, which was trying to skulk away while the Pegasus was distracted, "Now, you are going to take me to your parents and we are going to have a long talk about what is appropriate behavior." The insect froze in place, which prompted Fluttershy to scream, "DID I STUTTER? TAKE ME TO YOUR FAMILY NOW."

The insect wailed and bolted down the alley with Fluttershy trotting after it, leaving the frozen biped behind.

16:52, 04/02/2015, WASHINGTON D.C.

Lana Jenkins led the stack with her shotgun raised. Lieutenant Fowler was right behind her as she swept

the fire escapes and windows with her rifle, while Dryzinski covered the other end of the alley with his LMG. The trio grouped up at the mouth of the alleyway and then fanned out to sweep the parking lot where Matt was apparently at.

"Harris, this is Jenkins," Lana called through the radio, "Where are you, man? Command has your signal as green but you're not responding. Where the hell are you?" Her question was answered as she rounded a delivery van and she spotted the missing soldier. He stood as still as a statue with his arms raised in a firing position with the pistol in one hand and the ARC thrower in the other, and he appeared to be unharmed.

"Fowler, Jenkins; I found him!" She said as she rushed forward. Jenkins' shotgun was still raised as she swept the rest of the parking lot before turning to face Harris. "Jesus, man, you had us worried. Harris? Yo Harris, anyone home?" Lana snapped her fingers a couple of times in front of the other soldier's faceplate and got no reaction. Without any other alternatives she slung her shotgun and pulled Harris's helmet off.

The male soldier's face was white as a sheet and his eyes were wide and unblinking. "I can't move, she said not to move. I can't move, she told me not to move..." Was all he could mutter between clenched teeth.

12:01, 08/01/2015, SITUATION ROOM

Bradford stood at attention as he faced the giant video monitor. The spinning XCOM logo vanished and was replaced with the silhouette of the Council Representative. A moment of silence passed between the two before the XCOM commander moved ahead with his summary for the past month.

"Data summaries for the month of July have been transmitted for Council review, as well as all the collected reports on all operations that have taken—"

"Commander," The Council Representative interrupted. His voice was like gravel and nearly impossible to judge, but with the interruption Bradford could notice several hints of tension in the man before he continued, "Your efforts and the efforts of your men thus far are to be commended. However, this council has determined that your efforts are no longer necessary. New circumstances have come to light regarding the nature of our alien... guests, and it is the feeling of this council that the fate of humanity might better be served through cooperation and understanding in the interests of peace and... harmony. While the XCOM project served admirably in its role as guardian against aggression, this council agrees that an organization with such intentions in mind would prove detrimental to the future of humanity. Effective immediately, XCOM will cease all activities, its armed forces will disband and its weapons will be disarmed. Goodbye, commander."

Without another word, the Council Representative reached forward and pressed a button on his console to end the transmission, leaving a stunned Bradford alone in the Situation Room.

12:04, 08/01/2015, UNKNOWN LOCATION

The Council Representative gritted his teeth as he lifted his finger from the disconnect button and turned to glare at the other occupant of the chamber he was in. He didn't say a word but continued to glare in spite of those gentle blue eyes and timid smile.

"There there, that wasn't so hard now was it?" It said, "We all want to be friends now so there's no need for anyone to be mean anymore." It hopped down from the chair it sat in and headed to the door. The door opened as she approached, revealing the helmeted and robed figure of an Ethereal. One of its four arms held the door open, the second held a small bag with a trio of marks that matched the marks on Its rear legs, the third held an umbrella while the forth carried a leash. The other end of the leash was attached to the collar on a cowering Chryssalid.

"Thank you, Mister E. You're such a gentlecolt for holding my things while I was in a meeting. Did Mister Bugs cause you any trouble while he I was in there?" Any more of the conversation was cut off as the door closed behind It.

17:00, 08/01/2015

At precisely 5:00PM, every Television, mobile device, and computer received the same transmission.

"Um, good evening everypony!" The yellow and pink figure said with a shy and disarming smile, "I know

you all have been very scared recently with all the terrible things that have happened lately, but I'm here to tell you that it won't happen again! I've had a chance to talk with the Ethereal leaders as well as all your presidents, kings and prime ministers. We all agree that it's best if we all let the past stay in the past and be friends instead. So, I hope to get along with each and every one of you. Oh, and please remember, we're all friends now and resistance will not be tolerated!"

The message ended on a cheery note, but the smile of the yellow and pink figure was to become feared by any who resisted her 'friendship'. The rule of Fluttershy the Terrible had just begun.

Author's Notes:

In celebration of 250 thumbs up, I wrote this little bonus chapter. It's a bit of a parody, is not meant to be taken seriously, and is in no way part of the Stardust canon. :P

Stardust Supplemental Files (Pt. 4)

UN DIPLOMATS SCRAMBLE FOR PEACEFUL RESOLUTION TO ALLEGED US INCURSION IN HONG KONG DURING ALIEN ATTACK. US PRESIDENT, PENTAGON DENY ALLEGATIONS; CITE NATURE OF AIRCRAFT AND WEAPONS USED DO NOT MATCH ANY CURRENTLY CATALOGED PROFILES.

YOUTUBE TEMPORARILY TAKEN DOWN AFTER VIDEO UPLOADS OF ALIENS SURPASS ADMINISTRATOR CAPABILITY TO TAKE DOWN VIDEOS DUE TO GOVT ORDERS. VIDEO FOOTAGE ENTERS TOP TEN MOST VIEWED IN LESS THAN A WEEK.

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Xenobiology/Behavioral Studies

DIVLEAD: Dr. Joel Mills, Dr. Kim Ngo

Attached Files: Transcript of interview with 'Twilight', image links to xenobiology sources, images provided by 'Twilight', personal notes by DIVLEAD(Mills), supplemental notes by DIVLEAD(Ngo).

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 08:00, 04/22/2013

After the somewhat startling revelations Twilight has brought to our attention, I made an offhanded comment based on something she mentioned: Artifacts from her world. This discussion came up and was discussed during Pvt. Jenkins' card games and was strictly informal. Twilight provided illustrations of the artifacts in question later in the day and they have been uploaded as well. While it's impossible for us at this time to verify the plausibility of these artifacts it does give us some cultural cues about Twilight's world as well as some more information as to the entity known as 'Discord'.

Listed below are the notes I have taken on some of the artifacts we discussed, as well as notes and speculation added by Dr. Kim Ngo during her interview. As this is entirely theoretical and lacking any practical applications, Dr. Moira Vahlen has declined to add her own comments.

The first of the major artifacts Twilight mentioned were what she dubbed the 'Elements of Harmony.' The artifacts are a set of six items that when worn and activated within close proximity are capable of significant effects. While some of the stories attributed to these Elements are more fanciful than others, Twilight confirmed they are the only things capable of imprisoning Discord.

(Ngo Supplemental)

The Elements described by Twilight and documented by Dr. Mills also seem to have significant social connotations as they require a close interpersonal relationship between each of the 'element bearers' as well as what might be considered 'virtues' in human society. These virtues are Honesty, Loyalty, Laughter, Kindness, Generosity and Magic. Below is a list of the six current element bearers as well as the virtue they represent. Pictures provided earlier by Twilight have also been linked for visual reference.

I've also included a bit of the relationship dynamics since they play a big key in the operation of the Elements.

(And yes, I did ask Joel to confirm these names with Twilight. They are apparently a product of her translation spell. I'm not making these up!)

Honesty - Twilight named the bearer of Honesty as 'Applejack', who is a produce farmer living on the outskirts of 'Ponyville'. An 'earth' type pony of considerable strength and stamina, well-known for being 'fair-hooved' and honest with friends, family and visitors so long as they themselves are friendly. Has an enormous extended family with members in almost every major section of 'Equestria', and considers close friends as family as well. She is also described as being somewhat stubborn in certain situations. She has a friendly rivalry with the Element of Loyalty, and an ongoing bout of teasing with the element of Generosity. Identifying mark is three red apples.

Loyalty - Pegasus type named 'Rainbow Dash', a 'weatherpony' tasked with regulating the weather around Ponyville. She lives in a house made of clouds and can manipulate it at will to suit her needs. She is athletic, competitive and well known for her speed. She is currently the only known Pegasus currently capable of performing a 'sonic rainboom'. She is also currently a member of the 'Wonderbolts', which is

described as something akin to a mix between a professional air stunt team and an elite branch of the military. Although hostile to those she perceives as threats, she is extremely loyal to those who earn her respect. She has a friendly rivalry with the Element of Honesty (mostly revolving around physical contests), she is a close childhood friend to the Element of Kindness, and frequently pulls pranks on others with the aid of the Element of Laughter. Identifying mark (aside from the crazy hair) is a cloud with a rainbow/lightning bolt.

Laughter – The element of Laughter is nicknamed ‘Pinkie Pie’, though that is not her formal name. She is described as –extremely– high strung and cheerful, which may or may not be linked to the improbable amount of sugar described as part of her regular diet. Reading between the lines, she might also be described as a bit of a busy-body in that she knows every pony living in or around Ponyville and goes out of her way to make sure her comprehensive knowledge stays complete. She is also described as having abilities that are beyond what a specimen of her race should be capable of, including something bordering on teleportation, item conjuration and precognition. She also has a tendency to allude to events that no one is familiar with or speak to persons who are not present. Again, reading between the lines this seems to imply some sort of mental illness, but Twilight was reluctant to confirm any such thing. As mentioned previously, she knows every resident of Ponyville but is especially close to the Element of Loyalty in her perpetration of pranks on the populace. Identifying mark is three balloons.

Kindness – The name ‘Fluttershy’ seems rather prophetic for this Pegasus. Physically weaker than others of her race combined with hinted bullying when she was a child has turned her into a bit of a recluse around strangers, and more comfortable in the presence of the animals she cares for. Not only does she care for local wildlife when it is needed, she also cares for any domesticated animals living in Ponyville. She possesses an ability described as ‘The Stare’, which she uses on misbehaving animals or others of her species if suitably angry. While reluctant to go into specifics, Twilight’s description of the ability seems to indicate ‘The Stare’ is capable of inducing paralyzing fear in its target not to mention making it more susceptible to suggestion and commands. She is a childhood friend of the Element of Loyalty, as well as a close friend of the element of Generosity. Identifying mark is a trio of butterflies.

Generosity – I find it just a little ironic that the name for this element is ‘Rarity’, but then again it might just be my human cynicism getting in the way. She is a unicorn type who is a tailor of fine goods and formal wear for Ponyville. She is also talented at finding gemstones, as well. She considers herself ‘high class’ in appearance, speech and behavior. She also basks in the attention of others. When I started to subtly probe for further signs of potential narcissism, I was soundly rebuked with several stories of her willingness to sacrifice for others. She also has some friendly antagonism with the element of Honesty, in that she considers AJ to be a backwards hillbilly while AJ considers Rarity to be a snooty fancy-pants. She is also close friends with the element of Kindness. Identifying mark is three diamonds.

Magic – The element bearer of Magic is none other than Twilight herself. She is friends with all of the other elements as well as acquainted with a large portion of Ponyville due to her status as the town’s librarian. She also claims to be the personal student of Princess Celestia and a close friend to Princess Luna, the apparently nigh-immortal co-rulers of her country. Her brother is also highly placed in the military and is married to Princess Cadance, who rules a fiefdom neighboring their nation. I think I may have mentioned earlier that Frank would have some interesting comments on the stresses of such a highly-placed set of friends, and just about everyone in the Stardust project has had a chance to witness some of Twilight’s neurosis. But for all her faults, she is studious and dedicated to learning, and has impressive memory recall. She also greatly attributes her capacity for magic to her studious nature. Her identifying mark is a large starburst surrounded by five smaller starbursts.

What makes things interesting between the elements and their bearers is that they all seem to be related. Through coincidence, far-sighted precognition, or ‘fate’, the physical manifestations of the elements (described as jewelry, like necklaces) are directly linked to the identifying marks of the bearer who wields them. As the Elements themselves are over a thousand years old, for them to be crafted to match the marks of their bearers a thousand years in advance is extremely improbable. However unlikely, that leaves only two other options: That the identifying marks for the elements were predetermined and that the lives of these six individuals were engineered to become the new bearers, or the physical manifestations of the elements themselves change their appearance to best match their new bearers.

There is also the functional nature of the Elements when activated to consider. Each of the physical manifestations of the elements by themselves are nonfunctional, a simple trinket to be worn. Also, even if they are together but the element bearers are not appropriate, they will not function. However, if the proper conditions are met then they can be activated and directed to great effect. According to Twilight, the elements were used a millennia prior to banish Luna to the moon, and before that they were used to petrify Discord. More recently they were used to re-petrify the escaped Discord, then break him free in an attempt to reform him. I didn’t voice it, but I have to question the decision to let this ‘Discord’ free. If he’s as bad as described I’d let him stay a garden gnome forever, but I’m getting off topic.

Just prior to the second petrification, Discord was able to prevent the elements from being used on him successfully by corrupting the bearers of the elements themselves. When asked about the nature of this ‘corruption’, she explained it as being forced into the opposite of their true nature. Generosity became

greed, kindness became cruelty and so forth. After a brief explanation on the process (Twilight was understandably leery about recounting the tale), it seems that the ability is unique to Discord as he attacks the victim's beliefs verbally until they question themselves, though he can simply force the change on his victim if he so chooses. The process was only reversed through the use of some of Twilight's magic to achieve something akin to a cognitive reset to before the attack by Discord. While Discord himself is a fascinating topic, he isn't the main issue at hand.

Since the elements respond only to those with certain virtues, and only if the bearers are close to one another, which lends some rather interesting evidence to the theory that Twilight's race is passively psychic or empathic as a whole. It would make sense that they would make tools to take advantage of something they consider to be a part of their natural physiology and psychology. After all, we humans make just about everything we have based on the assumption that the user will have thumbs. It's so basic to our nature that we never even consider a user who uses things in a different manner. (Granted there are exceptions in that case for handicapped people)

When I was positing this theory to Joel, he brought up one of the many species Twilight had mentioned during one of the first interviews: Changelings. Shapeshifters and emotional vampires do fit the picture that Twilight is painting for us. Twilight has mentioned repeatedly that friendship and certain emotions have special power in her home, so it wouldn't seem too far-fetched for a parasitic organism to develop specifically to leech that power. Joel also mentioned that Twilight was extremely reluctant to speak further on Changelings and speculated that it may be due to a bad personal experience with one. If so, I hope she comes to trust us enough to eventually talk to us about it.

(End Supplemental)

The second artifact Twilight mentioned was something called the 'Alicorn Amulet.' She describes it as a triangular necklace with a ruby in its center, with stylized wings and a horned head along the top, and it is stated to be able to enhance the magical powers of its wearer at the gradual cost of their sanity. It cannot be removed by anyone other than the person who wears it.

(Ngo Supplemental)

While we only have Twilight's personal experience to go on, I suspect the amulet somehow interacts with the 'horn lobe' (for lack of a better term) section of the unicorn brain to allow for much greater power draw and control, which eventually causes mental degradation. To be honest the thing sounds like one of the cursed items you'd find in video games these days.

(End Supplemental)

The third artifact that came up was called the 'Crystal Heart'. The name is an accurate description of the artifact, and it is kept at the center of the Crystal Empire. It is described as the emotional focus of the residents of that particular region, and the region itself was subjugated by 'Sombra' when he managed to take and hide the crystal himself. Sombra was eventually defeated when the heart was recovered and used by Princess Cadance.

(Ngo Supplemental)

And here we have some more evidence to support the theories that have been cooking. If the powers of emotions that this species has could be focused into a container like this Crystal Heart, perhaps supercharged with a little help from Cadance, then I imagine it would be quite the trump card. Especially when a political rival like this Sombra decides to encroach on your territories.

Cadance is appearing to be more and more the biggest threat out of all three of the princesses described, especially with this Crystal Heart.

Another thing to consider is that Princess Cadance's identifying mark bears a strikingly similar appearance to the Crystal Heart itself. Like the Elements, such a thing cannot be coincidence.

(End Supplemental)

The last artifact Twilight mentioned that I felt should be recorded in these notes is a quartet of items called 'Clover Leaves', allegedly wielded by a unicorn leader known as 'Clover the Clever' during a time of civil war between the three major races of Twilight's species. While I wouldn't normally rank this necessary to be included in these notes since the total information on these items isn't very complete, what Twilight did say caught my attention.

Apparently the Clover Leaves were created using a mineral known as 'Arcanite', which is noteworthy for being able to amplify or store the effects of the 'magic' cast upon it. Its usage was banned after the resolution of the civil war and all stockpiles of the element were destroyed as well as a sign of peace towards the other races. Apparently during the civil war unicorn soldiers were dramatically outnumbered by their 'earth' counterparts, and they lacked the weather control and speed of the pegasi, so Arcanite-

enhanced unicorns became equivalent to super soldiers.

As there's no way of knowing just what element 'Arcanite' is in terms of Earth standards, I've brought the subject up with Dr. Vahlen and we've agreed that further testing should be attempted with a variety of elements to see if this 'Arcanite' ends up being something we can use. If we could use that with Twilight to create some sort of wearable gear to mimic the effects of her 'wallflower' spell, I'm quite certain our operational casualties would be significantly reduced. Hell, if it's something ridiculously abundant like aluminum and is permanent when cast, we could line the XCOM facility with it and maybe get to go outside more often.

Attached to this entry is a more detailed list and description of artifacts mentioned by Twilight, as well as illustrations for most of those described.

In the end I think this might have turned out for the best, despite the verbal lashing just about everyone got from Bradford. Here's hoping we have a breakthrough soon for all our sakes and Twilight most of all.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Physics

DIVLEAD: Dr. Moira Vahlen

Attached Files: Visual footage of subject performing newly discovered abilities, personal notes by DIVLEAD.

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 17:00, 04/28/2015

After the events of Operation Silent Rain, the subject was discovered to possess more abilities than we were previously led to believe. Moreover, these abilities are capable of altering perception of objects and people which is approaching dangerous ground in terms of alien capabilities. The moment these abilities became known, I ordered a complete review of security footage of the Stardust Labs as well as the entire XCOM facility. There has been no indication of the subject using its abilities to escape the confines of its habitat thus far, but this subject has a reputation for achieving things without leaving proof behind.

Testing of the subject was delayed mainly to properly gather evidence on the ability in question as well as to test the artifact retrieved during Silent Rain.

1. The subject calls the ability 'Wallflower', and like the name implies it renders the target unnoticeable.

a. Line of sight is required to activate the ability but not maintain it

b. The ability can be maintained so long as the power source (the subject) remains active. If not actively maintained, the effect begins to wear off within an hour, and within three it is no longer present

c. Targets under the effect of this ability cannot be specifically noticed by observers. Conditions and exceptions have been noted:

i. If an observer can see the target while the ability is being cast, then they are not affected by it.

ii. If an observer is able to see several similar objects where only one is affected, the presence of the affected target may be noticed but specifics the affected object cannot be distinguished or identified within the group. Cmdr. Bradford first reported this phenomenon, and it was reproduced in lab conditions with Pvt Jenkins.

iii. If the target brings attention deliberately toward itself through speaking or touching an observer, the effect is broken. Sounds not specifically recognizable as originating from the target are an exception and aren't heard at all. (Tests included identification by voice, as well as clapping and other various sources of noise)

iv. Sense of smell is not affected by this ability, and if the smell is strong enough or easily identified, the ability may fail.

v. Observers viewing the affected targets through an electronic medium such as a camera are not affected by the ability.

vi. All tested electronic security devices thus far have also not been affected by the ability. Methods tested include security cameras, motion sensors, laser sensors, retinal scanners and fingerprint scanners.

1. This will need to be retested if we can capture Floater specimens alive. As Floaters have extensive

mechanical replacements for their eyes, it cannot be guaranteed that this ability will work against them.

d. Observers tested immediately after or during the effects of these tests showed no abnormal brain activity, nor have any of those exposed to the ability during Operation Silent Rain reported any signs of trouble or behavior changes.

2. The subject's second ability was entitled 'Want It, Need It', and is the inverse of Wallflower in that it makes the target extremely noticeable.

a. Line of sight is required to activate the ability. No maintenance is required as the spell itself is designed with a variable duration.

b. Targets under the effects of this ability are extremely noticeable to observers. Observers also feel compelled to take the object in question, and keep it from others.

i. Observers in this testing were mice, as the subject refused to use the ability where humans might be affected.

ii. Regardless of if the observer is watching the target before or after the ability is used, all test subjects have shown the same effects.

iii. All other objects will be ignored in favor of the targeted object.

iv. Observers viewing the targeted object through an electronic medium such as a camera are not affected by the ability.

c. Testing of this ability has ceased due to new guidelines instituted to ensure the... comfort of the subject.

Larger scale testing is planned to resume for the 'Wallflower' ability, and we will attempt to revisit the other ability if possible.

At this point I would like to put a personal thought in writing: I told you so! This is clearly mental manipulation in some form! If perceptions can be altered with abilities such as this, then what else can be altered? I've reviewed both Dr. Mills and Dr. Ngo's notes and Twilight herself admits there is precedent for mind control in everything but name. A ruler that can manipulate emotions? An entity that can force behavioral changes? This 'Twilight' is either ridiculously naïve to believe these abilities are as benign as she describes, or she is covering something up. The subject herself can manipulate the perceptions of those around her at will; these recent abilities further verify my belief that this project is becoming a danger to XCOM for as long as it is allowed to continue.

However, I have been overruled and testing will continue until significant breakthroughs are achieved or we're all dead at the 'hooves' of this monster and its allies; or killing each other at its behest.

On the subject of breakthroughs, testing is also planned using various materials to try and find an earth equivalent to the 'Arcanite' material described by the subject. If we are able to make a breakthrough with this line of testing, we may be able to use this specimen's abilities to benefit the XCOM project. If it is also capable of being stored artificially we may have better results when it comes to detecting and measuring the power itself. If we can finally make some progress, the subject may no longer be necessary to continue our research.

Another comment mentioned by Joel was to discuss the practical applications for this ability if we are able to reproduce it artificially. His suggestion for using it as part of our soldiers' standard equipment is a practical choice but not very imaginative. The Super Heavy Infantry Vehicles (or SHIVs as Shen calls them) performed admirably on their first mission but all three were damaged severely by the end, and may not be available for further deployment for another two weeks. If this 'Wallflower' could be applied to the SHIVs then it would make up for its most glaring weakness: A lack of subtlety. A SHIV controlled by a skilled operator can perform impressive feats that would be far too dangerous for a human to complete, but the noise that the vehicle generates combined with its relatively high profile shape makes it far too clumsy to be used on missions where discretion is necessary.

The second application that immediately comes to mind would be using this ability on our Strykers. While they already use stealth characteristics and heat baffling to evade most conventional detection methods, they are still VTOL aircraft that often land in highly populated urban environments. This, unfortunately, leads to pictures and video of both the Strykers and our troops in the field and gives our organization attention that it most certainly doesn't want. If this ability could be used on the Strykers we could produce the first aircraft truly capable of the 'stealth' trait and it would greatly reduce the visibility of our operations as a whole.

This could also be applied to our interceptors, which I suspect would drastically improve their kills and survivability in the field against the vastly superior alien craft.

Of course, all of these possibilities rely on our ability to crack the secrets that the subject is hiding. We're close. I can feel it.

And since the subject has decided to be so helpful, I've made arrangements for it to assist with an experiment using other resources obtained during Operation Silent Rain. The subject's demonstrated abilities can be used to revisit lines of research that were previously thought dead or nonviable.

If the subject's reluctance to display its new abilities prevents a breakthrough in that field, then we will use its already displayed abilities to make progress in others.

END LOG

Monsters

ALIEN ABDUCTION NOT RULED OUT AS BRAZILIAN POLICE FORCES DISCOVER THE HOMES OF SEVERAL GOVT OFFICIALS ABANDONED WITH SIGNS OF STRUGGLE PRESENT. LACK OF OFFICIAL STATEMENT FROM GOVT BLAMED FOR INCREASE IN TENSION AMONG CITIZENS.

IN RARE PUBLIC APPEARANCE, JAPANESE EMPEROR ASKS FOR ORDER AND PEACE AMID TENSIONS BORN FROM RECENTLY RESOLVED US/CHINA DIPLOMATIC INCIDENT. PUBLIC POLLING STILL SHOWS GREAT AMOUNTS OF CONCERN WITH RECENT ATTACKS IN CHINA AND AROUND THE WORLD.

09:30, 04/29/2015, STARDUST LABS

"Just what exactly do you have in mind for 'larger scale testing'?" Shen asked with an arched eyebrow as he regarded the others in the testing area of the Stardust lab, "Nothing dangerous, I hope?" A somewhat frigid-looking Vahlen sat at her desk scrolling through mountains of test data taken previously, while a grinning Jenkins shrugged. Twilight was the last one in the room and was content to graze on a salad bowl while the new testing plan was laid out.

"Well, we've done just about all the testing we can here in the lab, right? Just about every combination possible was tested on the rodents, and even with Matt and me," Lana explained as she looked to each of the others in the room, "I'm merely suggesting we up the scale a bit."

Vahlen's attention was finally diverted from her tablet as Jenkins finished her thought. "That is true. We have yet to run any sort of stress test on this 'Wallflower' ability to determine if its effectiveness is hindered in any way based on the number of potential observers or if it has any detrimental effects on the ability's source..." As she finished her thought she gave Twilight a pensive look.

Shen translated for Vahlen, and Twilight was already nodding. "I'm happy to help! What exactly are the conditions for testing today?" Even as she explained this, a small square of plastic wrap levitated from the desk Twilight was eating from and snugly wrapped itself around the bowl before the bowl itself flew over to the cooler in the corner. The cooler snapped open and shut like a monster gobbling up the bowl. All this occurred without Twilight so much as looking over her shoulder.

"I will never get tired of seeing you do that, Twily. I thought you had to see the stuff you were using your magic on?" Lana asked with a grin.

Twilight smiled in response and scratched one ear with a hoof before replying, "If I'm familiar with what's around me I can move the objects around by memory. I can reorganize and reshell the library back home in about half a minute without having to look at most of the books but I also am pretty familiar with the layout of the library."

"Moving stuff by memory; that's impressive! How many books do you have in your library?" Lana asked, and she pointedly ignored the now hawk-like intensity Vahlen was now paying to this conversation.

"Oh, about five hundred or so. So what's the experiment today going to be?" Twilight asked, and her enthusiasm became mixed with trepidation as she caught the look both Shen and Jenkins were giving her, as well as Vahlen's eyes jumping between all three. "...What? Was it something I said?"

"Oh, nothing! Nothing!" Lana quickly waved off her suspicion and started talking again before Vahlen could raise a huff about what was just said. "So, like I said, I have a plan for our tests today. You hit me with the Wallflower and I go take a walk around the base. Shen can do his voodoo on the computers so Vahlen can keep track of where I go and if anyone notices my movements. Shen can also keep you company, and if you have any problems maintaining the spell he'll be there to record it. Matt should be by soon to help also." As she finished her explanation she gave Twilight a wink, and was rewarded with a blush from the unicorn. *I am so going to hell for this*, Lana mused, *but she's just so cute when she's like that.*

"I foresee only one problem with this proposed test," Vahlen spoke up, and all eyes turned to her, "It would be suitable for stress-testing the ability but I'm afraid you alone would not be able to test the effectiveness in this environment." She leaned back and placed one finger on her chin as she continued, "Specifically, Lana wandering the base isn't an uncommon enough occurrence for others she may come across to warrant their attention regardless of this ability being cast on her."

"That's very true. Which is why I'm afraid I'm going to need to borrow Shen's tie and a lab coat," Lana elaborated with her grin. As with her interaction with Twilight, she got the reactions she was expecting

from both Shen and Vahlen. The former arched an eyebrow while the latter fixed her with a flat stare. "Trust me guys, I have a plan."

After five minutes of creatively arranging the labcoat and tie and turning on her radio headset, Lana turned to her audience and asked, "So, how do I look?"

Vahlen's response was a disbelieving shake of her head. Shen's was a barely contained smirk. Twilight simply replied, "You look ridiculous," before breaking down into giggles.

"Great! That's just what I was going for! Got all the tech voodoo ready to go?" Shen responded with a nod and a thumbs up. "All right, Twily! Hit me with the good stuff!"

"All right, here goes!" Twilight declared and her horn flashed. "It's cast. Good luck!"

With that, Lana gave the thumbs up before turning and heading towards the door. She had almost reached it when the door slid open and she was forced to quickstep aside to avoid running into Matt. The other soldier entered the lab with a wave and didn't so much as react when he passed by Lana. Sensing the opportunity, Lana hopped through the open door to begin the test.

The two guards outside the lab didn't so much as blink an eye or glance in her direction as she walked down the hallway. Lana turned and waved, then jumped up and down and received a similar lack of reaction. *Now it's time to see just how much I can get away with.*

09:45, 04/29/2015, MISSION CONTROL

David Bradford took a brief moment to enjoy the relative calm sight of the holographic globe hovering in the center of Mission Control. No contacts were currently detected, no operations were underway and no emergencies immediately demanded his attention. The highest priority task on Bradford's list at this point was reviewing and approving the report to be sent to the Council in less than forty-eight hours.

After action reports and operations summaries were par for the course as well as the monthly casualty list and new recruitment reports. Of the latter list, the most noteworthy edition was one Shaojie Zhang. As with many 'assets' acquired during XCOM's operations, Zhang was 'offered' residence and protection for the foreseeable future. Zhang's counter proposal was surprising. Not content to simply sit in a cell, he had offered his expertise as a soldier to XCOM.

Some proficiency with firearms was to be expected, but his degree of skill is...surprising, Bradford mused as he reviewed the Chinese man's test results. His past affiliations are still cause for concern, but if he's sincere then he'll become a very valuable field operative. Small arms proficiency is top notch as well as his physical conditioning. What I wasn't expecting was his familiarity with both long rifles and explosives.

Once the scope of his skills was known, Zhang was offered a spot in XCOM officially with a marksman designation with specialty training in demolitions. From what David had heard from his unit leaders his reception among the other soldiers was somewhat frigid, but the men and women from Strike One had quickly adopted him. Zhang had also gone out of his way to volunteer for just about everything he could, including the other noteworthy part of Bradford's end-of-month report: Stardust.

Since Bradford's visit to the labs, no further problems had presented themselves. As promised, Doctor Vahlen had forwarded her reports and updated others where necessary to account for all the new testing that had occurred, and was acting less hostile towards the subject of her studies. 'Cold and prickly' was the most commonly used phrase to describe her now as opposed to 'acidic and venomous'. *Not exactly the best development but still an improvement.*

The less confrontational approach had made XCOM's guest more pliable and willing to demonstrate her abilities within the parameters set by Vahlen. The first tests had confirmed 'wallflower' was unable to affect digital recordings, and to Bradford's immense but unspoken relief there was no indication that the ability had been abused to escape its habitat. Testing the inverse ability was never completed, and from the reports Bradford could only agree with that decision. If the account described by the subject could be trusted, the only time the 'want-it need-it' ability was used it resulted in a riot over a ragdoll.

Despite being unable to fully test the latter ability, David considered it a net gain overall. Since the incident with Stardust, he had made a point of reviewing not only the official reports but the personal notes of the associated scientists in the project. Having a somewhat less sanitized version of the official reports had proved enlightening, as the scientists tended to only submit what they could prove or observe. The testing to locate 'Arcanite' as a first step for artificially recreating observed abilities would no doubt make the Council *extremely* interested.

On the other hand, Bradford had also taken note of the descriptions of the creature that had dropped Twilight on Earth. The capabilities attributed to 'Discord' were disturbing, but the one that bothered

Bradford was its ability to send living beings instantly to Earth. If the limitations of teleportation were accurate then Discord must have staggering amounts of power combined with current knowledge of Earth. The first was a concern for another day, but the second was more immediate. Knowledge that the Earth was under observation from one alien power was alarming once revealed, but the possibility of another only made it worse.

Speaking of making things worse... Bradford thought as he repressed a sigh and the impulse to pinch the bridge of his nose. The vast majority of abilities that Twilight herself could perform at will and upon request were no doubt going to become the focus of the Council the moment they got their hands on the reports. Equally disconcerting was her nature. After months of dealing with monstrosities like floaters and chryssalids, having an alien that acted more like a cheery intern or college student that looked like something from a kid's picture book seemed simply preposterous.

This is getting me nowhere. This time Bradford couldn't suppress the urge to rub his forehead before he moved the Stardust research files into his to-do bin and moved on to something that made more sense.

Vahlen's report on the artifact retrieved per the Council's request was as thorough as he had come to expect. Her initial conclusions speculated it as some sort of beacon or communications device, one that was thankfully deactivated at the moment. Attached to her findings was Zhang's own account of how his former employer discovered it and how he had come to possess it.

The Council's information stated that the artifact had been the subject of a black market auction, but Zhang's report had put a much different light on events. No auction had taken place; a buyer had contacted the criminals directly and offered them an enormous amount of money to retrieve it. Zhang had been the one given this task, and either out of loyalty to his world or out of self preservation he had contacted members of the PLA-SOF who then in turn contacted XCOM.

It was good that he had, we likely would have come in heavy to retrieve it... Bradford thought, his mind drifting to the plans XCOM had in place of the event that they would have to fight other humans.

He blinked and frowned after allowing himself to be distracted, and his gaze drifted towards the exit leading to the barracks. *Something's coming*, his gut told him. The more he ignored the feeling the more important it seemed. *Something's coming.*

Bradford locked his tablet and placed it on his desk before heading to the exit. A few of the command personnel looked up as he passed, but he ignored them. *Whatever is coming is on the other side of that door...* He crossed his arms as he approached the door and simply stared at it, as though the door would yield its secrets if he glared long enough. And, just like magic, the door opened to reveal... nothing. *No, not nothing. Something's here.*

"What do you think you're doing?" Bradford asked levelly, and was rewarded with a yelp from that 'something.' Jenkins stood just on the other side of the door to Mission Control after seemingly appearing from thin air. She wore a science team labcoat across her back with the sleeves tied around her neck like an impromptu cape, while a tie was wrapped around her forehead like a bandana. The extra slack of the tie was centered on her forehead and was looped and tucked back into the tie itself which draped itself down the middle of her face. Lastly, and probably the most normal addition to this bizarre outfit was a radio earpiece perched in one ear. A long moment passed as Bradford's stare turned into a glare while Lana became white as a sheet.

The staredown was broken with a message from Bradford's own headset. "Commander Bradford, Doctor Moira Vahlen would like to speak with you."

"Put her through."

"Commander, Private Jenkins is assisting us with testing in the Stardust Labs. We've been following her progress through the base with the security systems and have been taking notes on the effectiveness of recent discoveries. Her current... attire is part of that test," Moira explained quickly, and Bradford arched an eyebrow. Before he could speak, Moira continued, "Thus far you are the only one who's reacted to Jenkins' passing in any way. What gave her presence away?"

"Nothing did, I was just acting on a hunch," Bradford replied.

"Ah, I see," Came the response, though its tone suggested the opposite, "Could you please send Private Jenkins back to the Stardust Labs? We have collected enough data for this particular test."

"Will do," Bradford maintained his glare on Jenkins for a moment longer before addressing her directly, "Doctor Vahlen wants you back at the lab."

"Yes sir!" Jenkins said, and retreated with almost indecent haste.

10:00, 04/29/2015, STARDUST LABS

"Welcome back!" Twilight smiled at Lana as she reentered the lab, though her smile faded as she saw the look on Lana's face. "Are you all right?"

The female soldier blinked and tried to smile back, "Oh no, don't worry about me. I just about had a heart attack when I saw Bradford on the other side of the door waiting for me. I swear he can see around corners without having to look."

"I have to admit, I enjoyed the sight of you sweating under that glare," Matt said with a smirk, "Serves you right after all the crap I have to put up with around you."

"It sounds almost like you're afraid of him," Twilight asked quietly, and was awarded with waved hands from both Matt and Lana to disregard her concerns but the expressions on their faces told another story. "Is he really that scary?"

"Well, it's not so much that he is scary, it's just those eyes of his," Matt explained slowly as he chose every word. "Hell, I don't know how to explain it. If he's in the right mood and you've earned his attention then it feels like those eyes of his could crush you on the spot. Plus he has an uncanny way of knowing when things are going on. Jenkins, remember what happened last time we were out and about?"

Out and about? Twilight thought to herself and was just about to ask but she stopped herself. *There's that look. They talk about things and give that look and then they never explain what they were talking about...*

"Oh I remember. Scuttlebutt says he did something similar with Strike Three and Six during their last operation, too," Lana grumbled before untying the coat sleeves from around her neck and returning the tie to Shen. "It's getting to the point where folks think he's some kind of fortune teller. I wouldn't go that far myself but that man has a knack for spotting trouble that is downright useful."

Of all the questions this conversation was raising, what Twilight finally asked seemed trivial. "Who's 'Scuttlebutt?'"

"Oh, it's slang for gossip. Rumors. You know what I mean," Lana answered with a grin, "You know the only thing faster than light is a juicy rumor. Not literally, mind you, but we humans have a tendency to spread rumors and gossip as a pastime. You might even call it requisite behavior for us ladies."

"How would you know what's requisite behavior for ladies?" Matt asked with a poorly repressed smirk, "Did someone give you a list for you not to follow?" Lana's response was a glare and a gesture that Twilight had been seeing with increasing regularity between the two. Before the banter could continue further, the door to the Lab opened. Charles and Vahlen rounded the corner of the privacy wall with large boxes in their arms.

"Do either of you need any help?" Twilight asked, and was rewarded with a somewhat strained look from Charles and a wordless shake of the head. Another few steps and both boxes were deposited on the table in the center of the lab. "What's in the boxes?"

"Testing materials," Charles answered as he retrieved several smaller boxes and arranged them on the table. "I had to make some withdrawals from Engineering to get some of these metals, while others had to be scavenged from the surface. I'm also afraid I can't stay to assist as I'm needed down in Engineering. I've numbered the individual samples along with the checklist. I'll also admit that some of the samples are of...dubious quality so I'll see about getting some better samples in the next few days." Charles gave his familiar smile and passed the clipboard to Vahlen before turning to leave.

"Let's see, first up is plain and simple iron," Matt picked up the first box in front of him and opened it before dumping it out on the table. A small metal bar clanged on the table and rolled towards the edge before being raised into the air with Twilight's telekinesis, "So, anything? How can you tell if it's close to this 'Arcanite'?"

"To be honest I don't quite know," Twilight said as she floated the bar closer for her to inspect. It was completely straight down its length and lacked any of the toolmarks, though a number was inscribed on one end. "It's been...well, millennia at least since Arcanite was used. The books I've read tended to have very conflicting descriptions as to just what Arcanite looked like, but all of them agreed that it produces an immediate and noticeable reaction when it comes into contact with spells. Contact with the ambient energy of the magical field is not enough, it apparently requires the structured and directed intent of spellcraft to produce the reaction."

"Do we have any idea just what the reaction is that we're expecting?" Lana asked with just a hint of concern. The woman gently plucked the iron bar out of the air and dropped it into its box as Matt unboxed the next sample. "It would be rather inconvenient if the reaction was something like an explosion."

"I don't think that would happen, or it'd be too dangerous to use," Twilight shook her head as she grabbed the next item being offered. "While not exactly concrete evidence, Clover the Clever describes in his journal a stronghold he had built into the cave complex of a nearby mountain with crystals and stones that glowed when he cast an illumination spell to investigate it. Shortly after that entry was the first mention of his Clover Leaves which are confirmed Arcanite artifacts. So that leads me to believe it will glow if we get a match!"

The second sample proved equally mundane and Twilight passed it off to Lana to be boxed again. The third sample appeared to be metal also, though it was a twisted ball of scrap instead of a rod or block like the other two were. "Ah, Shen got this one from outside, it looks like," Matt guessed as he offered it to Twilight.

A quick telekinetic grab brought it directly in front of Twilight to inspect. She was just about to pass it along to Lana when she saw a flicker of movement inside the twisted ball. Her curiosity won out and she brought it right up to her face to peer inside just in time for *claw tipped and gore stained limbs to reach out toward her with frightening speed.*

Matt was in the process of unboxing the next sample when two things happened in rapid succession. The first was the whistle of something moving very fast through the air close enough for Matt to feel its passing; followed by a BANG. The second was Twilight screaming.

"STAY AWAY!"

Twilight was backpedaling as quickly as she could before her flank collided with the wall behind her, and a look of unrestrained horror and fear on her face. Matt's gaze quickly shifted to the floor where he spotted what was quite possibly the biggest spider he had ever seen. Suddenly bereft of hiding spots in a very bright room, the spider began to scuttle towards the closest shelter: Twilight.

The look on Twilight's face morphed from horror into desperation as the bug zipped across the floor towards her. Her horn glowed with a dangerous amount of magic before she disappeared in a flash. Lana was already on the move as she slammed the open end of the box down on the would-be intruder.

"Little bastard is quick, and it'd sure as hell scare the shit out of me if it jumped right into my eye like that," Lana grumbled before looking at Matt. "You alright?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?" Matt asked with an arched eyebrow. Lana pointed to the wall behind him and he turned to see the last sample embedded a good two inches into the wall. He looked back to where Twilight had previously been and put two and two together. *Jesus Christ she almost took my head off with that.*

"Perhaps one of you should check on Twilight?" Vahlen unexpectedly suggested as she strode over to the new wall decoration and prodded it with the stylus from her datapad. "She seems... unstable."

"Perhaps you should go, Matt? I've got to get this trespasser transported to secure holding," Lana suggested, and Matt narrowed his eyes at that. *I know that tone, she's planning something.*

Any further suspicion was derailed as he caught sight of the spider crawling up the desk beside Lana despite the fact that she hadn't moved the box since she had first contained it. "Jenkins, you suck at guard duty." He pointed behind her and was rewarded with another string of profanity as the female soldier turned to find the spider six inches from her face. Rather than stay and enjoy the sight of Lana repeatedly slamming the box on the wall while the spider desperately evaded, Matt decided to bite the bullet and headed towards Twilight's habitat.

The lighting in the habitat was on its lowest setting, but Matt could easily make out Twilight's form huddled on the bed, wrapped in blankets and shaking slightly. The gentle sounds of sobbing could be heard, and Matt hesitated. *The last time she was like this was after Vahlen's initial testing and only Shen could get through to her. But he's not here and I am, so...* "Twilight? Are you okay?"

Matt half expected no response at all or commands to leave her alone as before, but when the response came it surprised him. "No. No I'm not."

A long moment of silence passed before Matt made his way over to the bed and sat at its foot while Twilight scooted to the head of the bed while wrapping herself up in the blankets and giving her the appearance of a caterpillar. "Do you want to talk about it?" He asked gently.

"It...it was just like before," Twilight answered hesitantly, "Those legs, and it coming toward me...I-I--"

Ah, I get it now, Matt thought as the pieces came together. *Damned spider gave her flashbacks with the Chrysalid.* "I understand, Twilight. You've been through some really scary things, and it takes time for

those memories to fade. I don't have any special trick for making those memories go away besides time. My best recommendation would be to take a nap and maybe we can talk about it later tonight if you're up for it?"

Twilight's head emerged from the covers and turned to face Matt and he had to resist the impulse to look away. Her eyes were wide and filled with tears and guilt, and she nearly screamed, "That won't make it better! When I first found myself on Earth, I panicked and I...I..." The next word seemed to catch in her throat but as soon as it was free the flood opened, "I killed someone, and I almost did it again to that little spider! Princess Celestia has never had to kill anyone, ever, but I have! I'm a murderer, a *monster*, and time won't make that go away!" With those last words Twilight fell silent but she continued to stare at Matt as though she was expecting him to condemn her.

Matt couldn't hold her gaze any longer and he looked away. Twilight began to sob silently as the moment stretched on for several minutes.

"Twilight, I don't think I ever told you this but I was a soldier in my country's army before I came to work here. I signed up because of family tradition and all that. Dad was in the army, his dad was and so on," Matt paused to check on Twilight. The occasional shake of her shoulders passed through her but her eyes were once again on him. "Signed up right out of high school and went through boot like it was nothing. Was high on all the puffedup talk the recruiters gave me. Serve your country. Dad's approval didn't hurt either; he was pleased as punch when I made the decision."

"The moment we got out of boot, we got shipped out to the desert to help one of our allies there get their crap in order. There was some sort of regime change where the old guard didn't take kindly to being replaced and was doing its best to make everyone's life hell because of it. They even got some religious leader to declare the new government as not approved by their god and instigated a revolt. Army got sent in to try and capture the troublemakers so that peace could be restored."

Matt leaned forward and dropped his elbows onto his knees and clasped his hands before his face as he dredged up more of the story. "So me and my buddies get thrown into this mess in the desert, each and every one of us is expecting to be big damn heroes and save the day for this little corner of the world. We get a message that one of the ringleaders of the rebellion is holed up in this little town in the heart of the rebel lines. So we head into the town quietly to try and get this guy before he can raise the alarm and escape. No muss, no fuss."

"I was in the tail position covering our rear so no one could sneak up on us, when I see someone come out of one of the buildings behind us with a weapon," Matt paused to take a deep breath and tried to swallow the lump that had made its way into the back of his throat. "It was a kid, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. No older than my sister back home; really skinny and underfed, too, but carrying a gun that could have killed me or any of my friends. I stayed in cover and prayed that he would just turn and go back into the house and live another day."

"But that stupid kid saw us and raised his gun, and I shot him. Triple tap, center mass and he was dead before he hit the ground," A gasp from Twilight gave Matt a moment of pause and he closed his eyes. "I never wanted to kill that kid. Never. But he had been told the devil was coming to town and it was his duty to defend it. Once he saw us, someone was going to die. It could have been me, it could have been my friends. Or I could choose for it to be him. There isn't a day that goes by where I don't remember that scared look in that kid's eyes, or how close he came to shooting us. I regret that he had to be shot; no kid should die that young, but..."

Matt took another long breath and looked to Twilight and tried to force a comforting smile, "Had I not shot him, I would be dead. My friends would be dead. And that's the only reason I shot him. I did it to defend myself and others. When we first found you, Twilight, you were defending yourself from imminent death and that thing you killed would have killed more people afterward. I know it will be hard, but every time you feel guilty about what you've done I want you to try and remember all the lives you saved because of it. Starting with your life."

Matt's brotherly instincts took over and one hand reached over to pat Twilight on the shoulders, and Twilight's reaction was unexpected. She half-launched, half stumbled out of her blankets and latched on to the soldier in a hug and began sobbing again while mumbling apologies over and over again into his chest.

WhatdoIdo? WhatdoIdo? Matt's mind screamed at him as he suppressed a manly yelp as well as the urge to flail at the unexpected contact. Stardust policy regarding physical contact with Twilight had been strict: None unless invited by Twilight and even then only if you were comfortable with it. He tried to scoot out of her grasp but she clung all the tighter to him. *I can't just push her away or she'll have another breakdown... rargh, whatdoIdo?* With escape no longer an option, he hesitantly patted her on the shoulders.

And just then, the door to the habitat opened.

"I finally got that little son of a--," Lana started, and she waved a small glass jar with the spider in it. The female soldier froze though as she fully comprehended the scene before her. A grin slowly appeared and extended from ear to ear before she finally spoke, "Pardon the interruption. Please continue." With that, she turned and walked out of the habitat.

10:30, 04/29/2015, B3F CORRIDOR

"You know it's so sweet how you two ended up together. You tased her, kept her prisoner with a secret military organization, then got to know each other better. It's the classic love story," Lana said whimsically as she followed Matt down the corridor.

Matt had to resist the urge to facepalm.

11:07, 04/29/2015, MESS HALL

"You should really see this as a positive endorsement of your character, Matt," Lana continued despite the mashed potatoes ' desperate attempts to keep coherent speech from leaving her mouth. "All the guys out there say they care about a woman's mind but how often do they mean it? It's all about the body in the end but not for you, eh?"

Matt ignored her as best he could and finished his meal.

12:45, 04/29/2015, REC ROOM

"...or maybe you aren't such a good guy after all? Perhaps you no longer consider us mundane women a challenge to woo anymore?" Lana's grin became impish, "You see a girl who's one of a kind and you just have to sweep her off her... feet. Am I right?"

Matt snapped the book he had been reading shut and left the room with Lana hot on his heels.

13:30, 04/29/2015, FIRING RANGE

"You know, I bet we could arrange for some *private* time for the two of you. Vahlen might disapprove because she isn't getting any but I'm sure the others wouldn't mind as long as you tell them it's for science! Besides, a girl's got needs she needs satisfied." Lana's grin had grown to Cheshire cat levels as she loaded bullets into her pistol clip. "Say, how do you think she likes it? I bet—"

Any further words she might have said were drowned out as Matt raised his pistol with almost indecent haste and fired.

BAM

BAM

"—likes it when you—"

BAM

BAM

"—with your hands down—"

BAM

BAM

BAM

BAM

"—though you might need to tape something on the door. There's no doorknob so socks are out."

13:50, 04/29/2015, PT LOCKERS

Matt stopped in front of the men's locker room and turned to glare at Lana, who was still following him with her Cheshire cat grin. "I've got physical therapy and a checkup with the doctors to make sure that I'm one hundred percent. If you follow me in there I swear to god I will drop you."

Lana let out a theatrical exaggerated sigh before shrugging. "Fiiiiine. Enjoy your brief respite!" With those parting words she headed back down the hallway.

The moment the door closed behind him Matt let out a sigh of relief. The silence of the locker room was immediately having a positive effect on his sanity as he headed towards his locker. One hand pulled the door open while the other began to strip off his shirt but he stopped as he caught sight of what was pinned to the inside door of the locker.

A three-sheet picture of Twilight laying on her bed and looking back at the picture taker was hanging on the door in pin-up style, complete with suggestive-looking eyes captured no doubt with a high-speed camera mid-blink. Written down at the bottom in black ink were the words, "For my strapping stallion! - Twilight Sparkle."

"JENKINS!" Matt screamed as he slammed the locker shut and stormed out of the locker room.

13:52, 04/29/2015, REC ROOM

"Oh hey, that was quick!" Lana grinned at Matt as she saw him enter the Rec Room. "Did they not give you the green light?" Lana gasped dramatically before adding, "Don't tell me that your wound has made you impotent! Why, that would be a crushing—"

"Jenkins, *what the hell do you think you're doing!?*" Matt ground out as quietly as he could. Despite his best efforts to keep the conversation private, the other off-duty soldiers in the room were paying more than a little attention to the pair especially after Lana spoke. "Follow me, now."

Lana's further jokes were cut off as she followed Matt out into the relatively empty corridor. "Jesus, man, what's the deal? Did they seriously say you were impo—"

"You know what the deal is. Now I can stomach your little pranks and harassment, but putting pictures of highly classified material in the locker room as part of your pranks is too much. What if others had been in the room when I had opened the door?" Lana opened her mouth to say something but quickly shut it to restrain whatever response she was generating. "And do you know why Twilight reacted the way she did? Did you even care to consider it?"

"...Because spiders are creepy as hell, especially when one jumps in your face?"

"That spider gave her a flashback of the Chryssalid that nearly killed her during her first five minutes on Earth, and she was breaking down because she nearly killed the spider because of it," Matt hissed quickly. "Think about it, you lackwit! Everything where she's from talks and has family, and when she killed the Chryssalid she thought that she was murdering someone's father or brother or son. It's ridiculous to you and me but she believes she did something completely unforgivable. Do you remember that feeling? Your first kill? Or are you actually a sociopath? Honestly your behavior makes me wonder."

Lana's expression sobered as Matt continued his quiet rant, and she looked away and replied quietly, "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Oh, hell no, you don't get to pull that crap."

"...It was with a shotgun and I was twelve. He was trying to kill my mom."

Oh...hell. Lana's equally quiet reply doused the anger Matt was feeling instantly. *I know I'm going to regret asking, but...* "Where was your dad?"

Lana smiled again but there was none of the joy or mischief usually found in it as she replied, "Who do you think I was shooting at?"

A long moment passed between the two as the conversation atrophied and died, but Lana rallied first. "Okay, you win, I'll stop bugging you about this for now. Deal?"

"Deal," Matt agreed and turned back towards the locker rooms. He had almost rounded the corner before Jenkins got the last shot in.

"Our truce doesn't mean I can't tease her about it, though!"

Twilight had taken Matt's advice and slept for a while after he had left. Admitting to what she had done combined with Matt's own admissions had left her drained and sleep claimed her quickly. Despite the content of their conversation, Twilight was able to sleep soundly and without the nightmares that had plagued her.

And just as Matt had predicted, she woke up feeling much better. The lingering guilt she had been feeling about the event was still present but she forced herself to go over the events again in her head and address just what had happened. *That thing killed three humans, one of which was a child. Then it tried to kill me! I was defending myself...but I killed it! Eye for an eye punishment went out at the end of Solaria's reign, because it killed doesn't mean it deserved to be killed. But...it would have kept killing unless it was stopped. People's lives were saved...*

NO! Twilight shook her head vigorously as she clamped down on that line of thought. *Coming up with good reasons to kill opens up opportunities for bad reasons to kill. Death can never be justified. I just hope it can be forgiven.* Thoughts of Celestia's or even Fluttershy's reactions came to mind, and she immediately cringed at that.

Wordlessly she rose and walked over to the desk and brought a sheet of paper and pen to bear. *Even if I can never send it I need to write a letter explaining everything that happened. Maybe, somehow Celestia will receive it and forgive me.*

Before the pen could come in contact with the paper, the door to her habitat opened to reveal Charles and Joel. "Good evening, Twilight, I hope we haven't interrupted you."

"Oh no, no interruption! What's up? It's a bit late for your usual visits I think." Twilight asked as she turned to face the two men after setting the pen down on the paper.

"It is a bit late, but there's an experiment that we would like your help with," Joel explained, "It's actually for a line of research that we had no luck with in the past, but with your help I'm confident we can make a breakthrough on this. So, are you up for it?"

"I'll do my best!" Twilight nodded and hopped off her chair to follow the two men out. "So, what will I be helping with?" She asked after a slight moment of hesitation when both men exited the lab and motioned for her to follow. To her surprise both Matt and Lana were waiting outside also except they now wore what appeared to be heavy vests and hats combined with a belt filled with little gadgets. Matt strode forward to the head of their little group while Lana stayed back in the tail position in a similar manner as their visit to the cavern several days earlier.

"It's something only you can help us with, Twilight. I'm afraid I can't elaborate any further until we get to our destination. I'm sorry." Joel apologized, "I can tell you that the ability we'll need your help with is one you've used several times in the past, and if this pans out then it might save lives in the long run."

The possibility of saving lives caught Twilight's attention immediately, and she latched onto it. "Oh, okay! If it helps then I'm happy to do anything I can." I just wish he could tell me what I'll be doing...

Any further speculation was interrupted by Charles leaning down and whispering, "Twilight, I've also been meaning to apologize about what happened to you in the lab. The engineers were a little lax when they were checking what they picked up. Trust me, it won't happen again."

"Thank you, Charles, but you don't need to apologize. I just... overreacted a bit." The unicorn grinned sheepishly and looked up to the engineer, "I would greatly appreciate no further surprises like that, though. I don't think my heart can take it."

"Speaking of which, I also wanted to apologize for not being there to help after that incident. I understand Matt did a good job in helping smooth things over?"

"He did. We talked about some things that have been bothering me and then—" *I hugged him* "Nothing happened! Nope! Nothing at all!" Just as Twilight started to feel relaxed and recovered from the day's events, she realized just what she had done. To Matt. The human who thought she was cute.

"What's that, Twily? I didn't quite catch that last part. Care to repeat it?" Lana heckled from behind, and Twilight whipped around with a glare and a glowing horn. Anything else the female soldier might have said could no longer be heard. Her mouth moved but no sound came forth, a fact that she noticed very quickly. Lana began to stomp her feet and clap her hands and no further sound could be heard.

"Did you just *mute* Lana?" Matt asked from the head of the formation as he looked over his shoulder.

"Well, I suppose I did. It's a sound dampening spell, no sound that originates from within the vicinity of the spell can be heard outside of it." Twilight explained quickly.

"And can she hear us?"

"She should..."

"You hear that, Lana? I've finally found a way to shut you up!" Lana's response, naturally, was the gesture that Twilight was becoming all too familiar with. "You're amazing, Twilight. Has anyone told you that recently?"

"Um...not recently," Twilight admitted as she looked to the side and tried to force her face to not get so red. The realization that she was failing badly caused her to divert attention by changing the subject, "What does that gesture mean? The one that Lana keeps using?"

This time it was Matt's turn to look sheepish. "It, ah, it means 'I am extremely displeased with you or your behavior'." He shrugged after signaling the group to cross the next intersection. "It's something that's subject to interpretation."

Twilight was just about to ask just what kind of interpretations when they approached another door. *This looks familiar... but all these doors and hallways look familiar.*

The group stopped by the door and Charles turned to Twilight with a comforting smile. "The experiment will be in the next room. We'll all be in there with you, but if you feel uneasy or want to quit just let one of us know and we can go back to your room."

"Okay..." Twilight agreed, and her anxiety increased just a bit as Joel turned and pressed a button on the door to open it. The room beyond had several rows of desk, but the centerpiece of the room was a giant illuminated section on the far side of the room, with a curved glass divider keeping it separated from the rest. *Like a prison cell...* Twilight sucked in a breath as she remembered the room, that room where this whole series of events started.

Charles was right beside Twilight as he noticed her reaction, "You won't be going back in the cell, Twilight, I guarantee it. There's something we need your help with inside the room though, and we'll be with you the whole way. Are you still up for it?"

Twilight gulped and seriously considered going back, but the expectant looks from both Charles and Joel stopped her. She once again looked into the room and took note of Kim and Vahlen as well. Kim waved at the group as they loitered at the door, while Vahlen's expression was rather neutral. "I'm alright. I can do this."

"I'm very glad to hear that. Let's head on in, then," Charles nodded as he rose to lead the group in. The door closed behind them and Twilight once again looked at the illuminated cell she had woke up in, and she gasped. She had missed him the first time around, but now that she was closer she could see a human male standing in the center of the cell. He was tall, or at least he looked tall from this distance, and was extremely thin. He was clothed in a blue business suit and a red tie, and wore gold-framed circular-lens sunglasses that hid his eyes.

As the group approached closer, Twilight couldn't help but revise her opinion. If the humans she had seen were average then the person in the cell was far too thin to be healthy or anatomically possible, plus his limbs seemed to have incorrect proportions as well. Lastly, creeping up along the neckline of the suit's shirt was what appeared to be scales.

"What's he doing in there?" Twilight asked timidly.

"Twilight, this is one of the invaders that threatens our world. It was created specifically to blend in with other humans and spread fear wherever it goes," Joel started to explain, but caught himself as he heard Twilight speak.

"Changeling," The unicorn gasped and she took a step back, "It's a changeling?"

"Not quite, at least not in the manner you've described. This one was created specifically to look like us and it cannot assume any other form. What makes this one unique is that it appears to have the capacity for vocal communication, whereas the other invaders appear to communicate using telepathy or other methods." Joel explained before drawing in a breath and posing the question, "Twilight, can you cast your translation spell on this creature so that we can try to speak with it?"

Twilight couldn't help but gulp in apprehension as she eyed the fake human standing in the cell before her. So far it hadn't even moved from its ramrod straight posture or so much as glanced in any direction other than straight forward. *Is this what the humans are fighting against?* She asked herself, *if I can help them speak to it then maybe all this fighting can end!*

"Yes, I can do this!" Twilight said, more certain than ever that it was the right thing to do. The humans around her stepped aside and she cast her translation magic upon the fake human in the cell.

A few moments passed before Joel stepped directly in front of the cell and asked loudly, "Can you hear me? Do you understand me now?"

The fake human slowly reached up and plucked the glasses from its face to reveal vertical pupils and yellow reptilian eyes. Those eyes didn't spare a moment's attention on Joel, or Charles or any others. Those eyes focused entirely on Twilight. Again Joel asked a question and again it was ignored. Joel's repeated attempts at communication were ignored, so Twilight asked, "Um...hello?"

"DIE!"

The moment the first syllable left her mouth, the fake human screamed and shot forward and punched the glass. Its face curled into a snarl and it screamed again, "DIE!" It continued to punch the glass and the bones in its hand snapped with a sickening crunch.

The injuries didn't stop it from screaming further threats and mutilating its fists against the glass before Charles shouted, "Close the shutters, now!" Joel hastily complied and segmented sheets of metal fell into place around the glass cage to hide the fake human from view. The last thing Twilight saw were those reptilian eyes glaring furiously at her before they too disappeared.

"Wh-why would he say that? Why would he do that?" Twilight looked to Charles, then Joel, then the others. "Why? Why would anyone say that to anyone else?" *Why? How could anypony wish for such harm to come to others?* Twilight asked herself as no answers came from the others. The thought that a being could wish so much harm on others simply for seeing them was too much for her to fathom.

"I don't know, Twilight. I wish I did, but I don't know."

Decisions

UFO SPOTTED NEAR SUEZ CANAL MET WITH OVERWHELMING RESPONSE BY EGYPTIAN MILITARY; SOURCES REPORT DOZENS OF AIRCRAFT LAUNCHING TO PURSUE UFO WHILE GROUND FORCES SCRAMBLE TO PROTECT ASSETS IN AREA.

TRAGEDY STRIKES IN MIDWEST USA AS BOY SCOUT TROOP OUT ON CAMPING EXPEDITION DOES NOT RETURN AT EXPECTED TIME. SEARCH OF THE WILDERNESS NEARBY REVEALS CAMPSITE FOR THE TROOP BUT NO SIGN OF SCOUT MASTERS OR SCOUTS. NO SIGNS OF FOUL PLAY OR STRUGGLE WERE FOUND, AND THE SEARCH IS ONGOING.

08:00, 04/30/2015, STARDUST LABS

Begin Log

The experiment with the captured 'Thin Man' specimen did not go as planned but what was revealed may still prove valuable. Twilight's ability to provide reliable translation without the use of interrogation techniques has uncovered rather strong evidence that there can be no peaceful option with these invaders. It was a vain hope held by some that this conflict might have been resolved once the ability to communicate was established, but the Thin Man's reaction to our attempts was met with unexpected agitation.

To be specific, the usual behavior of previously acquired and interrogated Thin Men is one of apathy. They stand still and straight and do not move or react to outside stimuli until the interrogation's invasive phase begins. Struggles are a natural reaction at this point but once the brain is sufficiently disconnected from its locomotive sections this ceases to be a problem.

We were expecting a similar reaction during the translation experiments. At worst what was expected was the calm indifference to the outside world and simply ignoring these attempts. At best we were hoping to open a dialog with it to discuss just what the invaders were after, and perhaps instigate more 'traditional' interrogation methods.

What happened could not have been anticipated. Upon attempted conversation, the thin man began to strike the walls of its cell while screaming death threats. After mutilating its hands against the glass it then proceeded to resort to other forms of violence. The specimen expired two hours later due to severe cranial trauma. Twilight was removed from the Containment environment as she was clearly showing signs of distress at witnessing such behavior.

While this is also purely speculation and without enough evidence to be meaningful, Dr Mills reported that his attempts at communicating were completely ignored by the specimen, and it only began to react violently after Twilight spoke. He also indicated that the majority of the specimen's attention was fixed on her the moment her translation ability was used. The possibilities of this reaction are interesting to consider.

I must admit this does provide some more evidence to the theory that Twilight is not affiliated with the invaders. As observed immediately after capture, her physical traits are completely at odds with anything in the captured specimens of the invaders. Her behavior thus far has been shocking to say the least. She is eager to please, easily embarrassed and has proven a willing well of information regarding most of her abilities as well as her people. If it wasn't for her appearance, I would think that she was human.

End Log

Moirah Vahlen caught herself with the words she had been typing. She had to resist the impulse to scoff as she reviewed what she had written. *She is not human.* Vahlen repeated the words in her mind like a mantra as she scoured the previous paragraph and removed every reference of Twilight's name as well as any other identifying pronouns and replaced them with 'it'. *I must remain objective.*

She took a brief moment to look up and see the current progress of testing. Dr Ngo and Dr Mills were going through the pile of testing materials left behind by Shen, which thus far had not produced any breakthroughs besides Twilight demonstrating a new ability.

"Coppah!" Twilight chirped as she plucked a large bundle of uninsulated copper wiring from Ngo's hands.

"Ah, not quite but very close," Mills said with a smile as he took the apparently non-reactive copper wiring and placed it back in the box. He checked a box on the checklist before turning to Ngo, "Have her try it again."

"Copper. Cah, per," the female scientist repeated as she stretched out the word's syllables.

"Copper...copper!" Twilight repeated, then again with a cheer once she recognized the approval on the doctors' faces. Her smile morphed into curiosity when she noticed Vahlen's attention on her, and she asked a question in her language to Mills.

"Ah, I'll ask," Mills then turned and asked, "Doctor Vahlen, Twilight would like to know if you'll be taking part in the testing today?"

Moirra mentally reprimanded herself for nearly smiling back at Twilight as she replied, "No, I will not. Recent events need to be recorded for the monthly summary. Please forward your results to me once testing is complete." Twilight clearly recognized the word 'no' and her face fell just a bit until the next item was offered to her.

"Titanium. Tie, tay, nee, um." Ngo sounded the word out for her as she held a small metal wafer out for her to magic into the air.

Twilight successfully sounded the word out and grinned widely at her success, and Moirra turned back to her work. She closed the file on the previous night's events before opening the file describing the unicorn's abilities.

Begin Log

Twilight has also begun to display an extreme capacity for learning during her stay at the Stardust Labs. In addition to completing a series of universal math problems ranging from basic arithmetic all the way up to complex trigonometry and calculus in the span of a few days and without a calculator, she has gained the capacity to read the English language. After less than a month she's already reading and writing at a high elementary school level, and I suspect by the end of the week she'll be more proficient with English than the majority of American high schoolers. Her stated motivation for learning our language is out of consideration for our concerns regarding her magic.

During the initial startup of the Stardust project it was impressed upon Twilight that her magic might be harmful to us until it could be suitably tested, and this was substantially correct. The true reason for that caution was to ensure that the translation was not some form of mind control or tampering. Regardless of the real reason for the restriction, Twilight agreed to our demands and I am told she immediately apologized for not considering our feelings on the matter.

End Log

Again Moirra stopped and reviewed her text. *Not human*, she repeated her mantra again as she went through the text to depersonalize it as she did the previous report. *I **must** remain detached. I cannot let my judgment be compromised.*

The trio at the table had moved on to a new test sample, complete with naming of the element ("Soh-dee-um!") when Vahlen reached into her pocket and produced a personal voice recorder. She absently plugged a pair of earbuds into it and then slipped them into her ears before hitting the play button. Only one audio file existed on the recorder, and it set her in the right frame of mind to finish the reports with the clinical detachment that used to come so naturally to her.

"Hallo, bei Vahlen zuhause. Wer is da?"

"Ich bins, Tante Moirra... ist das die kleine Erika, die ich da höre?"

"Tante M! Es ist ewig her seitdem ich das letzte Mal von dir gehört habe! Papa sagt, dass du ganz wichtiges Zeug machst um die Welt zu retten! Ist das echt wahr?"

"Ja, ich denke das ist wahr, mein Liebes. Ist dein Vater zuhause? Ich würde gerne mit ihm sprechen."

"Sicher, dauert nur 'ne Sekunde. Papa! Da ist Tante Moirra am Telefon!"

08:00, 04/30/2015, MESS HALL

Silence hung over the table that Matt and Lana shared as they both worked half-heartedly on their breakfasts. Lana prodded her pancakes with her fork idly before finally speaking. "Hey, how do you think our short friend is doing?"

"Better, last I heard. Shen had a word with her after we left and managed to calm her down," Matt answered as he speared a piece of pancake with a fork and swallowed it with hardly any chewing. "I have

to say I certainly wasn't expecting that kind of reaction from our *other* guest. What kind of guy loses his shit when someone says hello?"

"The kind you triple tap and then kick in the head for good measure?" Came Lana's deadpan reply.

"I won't argue with that," Matt chuckled and nodded as he downed another bite of pancakes. "I suppose it's good to know in the long run that our other guest was never looking for a peaceful option. And I swear if you make some joke about job security I'll smack you."

Lana had a mouthful of pancakes at this point and was about to start speaking before stopping to swallow her food. "Speaking of job security, I suppose congratulations are in order, sergeant. Vahlen gave us the green light to return to active duty, and I hear the doctors gave you the go-ahead also. What I want to know is where *my* promotion is? I was the one who had to chase down a Chryssalid like the damned police."

"Perhaps it's something to do with your rampant misuse of XCOM assets for your pranks?"

"Oi, I thought we were past that, Casanova," Lana's smirk turned into a flat glare before switching again to her trademark smirk as she looked behind Matt, "Ah, Zhang! Care to join us?"

"That was my intention, yes," came the polite reply as the Chinese man pulled out a chair beside Matt and sat. His breakfast was a simple bagel and a glass of water. This raised the eyebrows of the other soldiers at the table. He tore off a bite's worth of the bagel with his fingers and popped it in his mouth before he finally noticed the amount of attention he had garnered from his neighbors. "Old habits tend to die hard."

"That's a rather Spartan breakfast, is that part of your habits too?" Lana asked with an inquisitive look.

Zhang tore off a bit of the bagel and took another bite before replying, "I suppose it is, yes."

"Speaking of habits, I imagine I'm not the only one who's curious about your background," Matt asked as soon as he sensed the opportunity. "I don't mean who you were working for just before joining us, I meant where you got your original training. Civilians don't carry soldiers across their backs. Civilians don't stick to cover until suppressing fire can be provided."

Zhang's eyes narrowed as Matt continued his evaluation, before he shrugged. "You are very perceptive, sergeant. What would you like to know?"

The moment Zhang spoke the rank; Matt was already waving his hand. "Ranks are mostly relaxed when we're not deployed; just call me Matt, or Harris. So—"

"Or Casanova," Lana added, and she earned a brief glare before Matt returned to the topic at hand.

"So," Matt repeated to regain the initiative, "Where did you get your training? If you don't want to share that's fine. I was in the US Army prior to working at XCOM." He looked leadingly to Lana, who was in the process of jamming a forkful of pancakes in her mouth.

"Thrr Brr," She tried to explain but the pancakes provided a sufficient blockade to prevent any understandable words through. She quickly swallowed and tried again, "Seabees. US Navy, attached to the Public Works Department."

Zhang nodded his understanding but Matt didn't. "Seabees? How the hell does a navy engineer end up as part of a combat unit fighting aliens?" He asked as he made no attempt to mask his disbelief.

"It happens when that navy engineer is attached to a domestic naval installation that came under attack by the invaders and she defended herself with extreme prejudice. I'm assuming that attracted the attention of XCOM, so here I am." With her explanation complete, Lana's eyes turned back to Zhang.

Zhang ate another bite of bagel as he considered his words. "I was a part of my country's Special Operations Forces running counter-terrorism and anti-piracy operations. My time with them was cut short due to an injury that they felt I couldn't recover from. I did recover, but by then my spot was filled and I had to find employment... elsewhere."

"Ah, ha. Say no more," Lana said, before immediately contradicting herself, "So, any interesting operations while you were with them?"

The question was initially answered with a skeptical look before Zhang finally replied, "I did take part in the anti-piracy operation directed by the UN back in 2008."

"I remember that! What was that like?"

"Boring," the immediate answer was rewarded with a snort from Lana, "We have much better luck with surgical strikes when targeting pirates, not sitting on a warship. Would you attack a convoy of ships in

your little speedboat when there's a legitimate warship nearby?"

"That's true enough, I suppose, though you can't always account for stupid. Back in the desert we were escorting a supply convoy when suddenly this guy comes out waving an axe like he means business," Matt started to explain. "But since we're in trucks and he's on foot he starts getting left in the dust screaming curses and waving that axe."

"So what did you do?" Zhang asked as he took another bite.

Matt's response was to grin. "Nothing. He tripped and fell face first onto the pavement and knocked himself out. Never saw that loon again." The punch-line got Lana grinning and the ghost of a smile with Zhang. "Seriously though, it would seem a bit more logical to make something like Q-ships and mix them in with the usual pirate bait rather than put all your forces in something the pirates will avoid."

"You seem to be operating under the misunderstanding that those in command know what they're doing." Zhang said as he tore off another bite. "Our presence there was just a publicity stunt in the end. Show the world we care rather than putting troops in position to do actual work."

"Bleh, politics," Lana frowned, but before she could continue her watch beeped. So did Matt's, and surprisingly so did Zhang's. "Oh nuts, Matt and I gotta get ready for his hot date—"

"Jenkins..."

"—and it sounds like you have plans too, Zhang? I suppose we'll meet up at the firing range or for lunch?"

"Actually," Zhang answered thoughtfully as he finished his bagel, "I'll be joining you. I've expressed my desire to serve this organization as best I can, so I've volunteered to assist with the Stardust Project. Commander Bradford contacted me with the approval just this morning... what?"

Zhang's pride in his announcement was lost as he noticed the look that both Matt and Lana now shared.

"What?"

08:30, 04/30/2015, CORRIDOR B3F

Shaojie Zhang was never one to doubt himself. The closest he had come thus far had been the discussion he had with Commander Bradford as to his intentions for volunteering. To call that conversation comfortable would be...inaccurate.

The chat he now found himself nominally participating in with Lana and Matt was giving him... pause.

"Are you sure you want to volunteer for this, man? This isn't the work you're thinking of, I guarantee it," Matt explained quickly, and Lana was quick to nod. "Seriously man, no one will think less of you for choosing something else to occupy your time."

"I hold myself to this standard for a reason. You were willing to continue your volunteer work despite your injury, Matt. What would that make me if I didn't volunteer for the same while being perfectly healthy?" Zhang asked rhetorically.

"Sane?" Lana replied quietly but was silenced when Matt elbowed her in the side. She turned to glare at Matt before she cut him off, "Seriously, he doesn't have such noble and lofty goals. He's volunteering because he's chasing a hot piece of tail at the lab."

"Jenkins..."

Zhang didn't respond to that bit of news beyond an almost imperceptible narrowing of the eyes. *Americans, always mixing business with... personal pursuits*, he thought and he felt his respect for the soldier drop just a notch. "I was under the impression that such socialization was frowned upon," the Chinese soldier added after choosing his words carefully.

"I'm not volunteering because I'm 'chasing a hot piece of tail', and as far as I know there's no rules on fraternization so long as it doesn't affect security or the effectiveness of the base and its personnel," Matt huffed as he glared at Lana.

Lana's grin became predatory as she latched on to Matt's statement, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much? And you checked the rulebook beforehand to cover your bases? I think she's rubbing off on youuuuuu~"

"I read the regulations when I joined XCOM, and there is nothing going on!"

This conversation is ridiculous, was the only conclusion that Zhang could come to, and some form of his displeasure must have been recognizable on his face as Lana was quick to notice.

"Ladies love a man with scars, but they hate it when they scowl, Zhang," She stated, and it was more difficult than Zhang cared to admit to not scowl further, "I imagine Matt's thankful. I doubt she'll be your type so there's no competition for him to worry about."

"And you presume to know my preferences?" Zhang asked coolly as he masked his irritation. Lana's flippancy was novel when they were first introduced but that novelty was starting to wear thin.

"Well, you don't strike me as the kind that likes them short, hairy and ho—"

"JENKINS!" Matt snapped, "Seriously, what the hell happened to the deal we made yesterday? The one where you agreed to stop this crap?"

"It expired this morning when you brought my pranks up. Seriously, you should be thankful. I never gave my brothers five minutes of peace and I gave you almost an entire day," Lana grinned impishly. "Seriously, the only way to make me stop now is to admit the inevitable and profess your feelings for her, or I will never stop hounding you about it."

Matt's response was to simply facepalm as they turned the corner to the Stardust labs. Both guards framing the doorway gave Zhang a wary look after sparing less than a second of attention on Matt or Lana. The other two soldiers stopped and gave Zhang a serious look that quite contrasted their previous joking tones.

"Okay this is it. Last chance to turn back. What you see in there can't be unseen, and you absolutely cannot talk about it with anyone who isn't part of the project. Still want in?" Matt asked seriously, and Zhang looked to Lana to see the serious expression mirrored on her face as well.

"Yes, I am certain." Zhang nodded, and he drank deeply of the significantly more professional atmosphere that he now found himself in.

"...all right then. Now I do have to warn you. There's someone in there that isn't like us. Treat her like you would a little sister –" Matt started but was interrupted by Lana.

"Or girlfriend, if she really is your type. Matt needs a rival to get himself in gear." And just like that, the professional atmosphere was gone.

"—and you shouldn't have any problems." Matt finished with a flat glare at Lana, who simply ignored it. "So, are you ready?"

Zhang nodded and the trio resumed their walk towards the door. Matt and Lana's badges were swiped through the card reader without much fanfare, but the guards went the whole nine yards to confirm that the third was authorized to be there. *I should be used to such suspicions by now*, he thought to himself, though he didn't dwell on it as the door opened and they entered.

The door opened to reveal a small entry room cordoned off from the next area with a plastic curtain to block easy viewing further into the lab while the door was open. Muffled speech could be heard, though it didn't become clear until Matt pulled back the curtain and stepped inside.

"Ah-loo-mee-nom!" Came a young and accented feminine voice from further in the lab, and Zhang arched an eyebrow.

That voice is far too young to be a scientist or engineer. Perhaps a civilian? He clenched his teeth as another possibility came to him, *Perhaps it's a child that was exposed to the invaders in such a way that needs to be studied. If so that would be... tragic.*

"Good morning, Twilight!" Both Matt and Lana said as they stepped past the plastic curtain. A string of language Zhang had never heard before answered them, which only increased his curiosity. He stepped through the curtain after the other two soldiers... and froze.

The lab he now found himself in was dominated by a large table lined with boxes and odd bits of metal and wiring. Two scientists sat on either side of the table as they opened and emptied the boxes and offered the contents to... *something*. It sat at the head of the table and was varying shades of purple. Its body was a lighter shade while the hair on top of its head was a much darker color but with a pink highlight running down the middle. Also perched in the middle of her forehead and poking through her hair was a horn the same color as the rest of its body.

"Hallo!" It said in accented English as it waved an arm...leg...limb at him and smiled. Its eyes were purple as well and looked at Zhang with unabashed curiosity. The doctor to its right, a short Korean woman, offered a block of some material to it

"Palladium, Pah-lay-dee-um," The doctor repeated, and it instantly copied her. The block of Palladium then appeared to float out of that doctor's hand and hover over to the other doctor, who checked a piece of paper on his clipboard before placing the mineral block into an empty box.

"Twilight, we have a new friend who will be visiting us for a while. His name is Shaojie Zhang," Matt introduced Zhang to it, but he barely registered the words. "Zhang, this is Twilight Sparkle. She's... an unaffiliated third party to XCOM's current conflict. No, she isn't human. Yes, she's a unicorn, that's magic she's using, and you'll have to forgive her English. She's trying very hard."

The other scientist at the table turned to give Zhang an appraising eye. This one was a man in his late forties with gray hair and a slight grin on his face, "Oh dear, I know that look. You had the same look on your face when you first came here, Matt. He doesn't believe what he's seeing. I'm Doctor Joel Mills, and my colleague is Kim Ngo. You just missed Moira Vahlen, she's the research department lead. You'll recognize her the moment the temperature in the room drops ten degrees."

"H-Hallo..." It—no, 'Twilight Sparkle' said a little bit less confidently as she seemed to recognize the amount of scrutiny that was now being directed her way and was trying to escape it by crouching low and dropping her horse-like ears.

Of all the things Shaojie Zhang was expecting to find when he volunteered...this was not it.

It was taking more and more of Twilight's willpower not to hide under the table with the degree of attention Shaojie Zhang was levying against her. *Why doesn't he say anything?* The look on the newcomer's face was something between shock and wide-eyed horror, and the longer it went on the more uncomfortable she felt.

"Perhaps you can take a quick break from testing all that junk to try a new card game?" Lana said with a winning grin as she produced her deck of cards, and Twilight thanked her lucky stars for that. "It's a three person game I would play back home. Since Shaojie hasn't played it yet and he looks like he needs some time to recover from introductions, how about Twily, Matt and I play the first game, then he can decide if he wants to join us."

"Good! Yes!" Twilight blurted out in English, happy with any excuse to get the focus off of her. She tapped her telekinesis and straightened up the table in a small tornado of boxes and bits of metal before hopping off her chair.

"Uh, Twilight, what..." Joel started to ask, but Twilight cut him off.

"Oh don't worry! I reboxed all the samples in the boxes they came from then stacked the ones we've already tested near the door while the untested samples are stacked by the table! I'll go and get things set up!" And another burst of magical power teleported Twilight into her habitat, where she gave the entire room a quick once-over to confirm that everything was neat and in order before she realized her mistake. "Wait...I didn't speak English to Joel! Bad Twilight! You get in a hurry and you make mistakes!"

Before she could berate herself any further the door opened and her friends walked in, followed by a very stunned-looking Zhang. His eyes swept the room and widened further when he reached her growing wall of art.

Rather than dwell on the newcomer's actions, Twilight teleported herself into her favorite chair and looked to Lana and dredged up what she could in English. "What is the game?" She managed to ask.

"It's a game called Traps," Lana said with a smile, and she deliberately took the seat across from Twilight.

Which means Matt has to sit next to me, the only empty seats are to my left and right. Twilight realized, and Lana's smile turned into a grin as she no doubt understood that Twilight had come to that exact conclusion. *I would so banish you to the moon right now. TO THE MOON.*

"Unlike previous games, this is all about speed and reaction time and the rules are simple. We divide the deck into thirds and we each start throwing cards down by going counter-clockwise. You alternate colors, red and black. Suits don't matter." Lana explained as she began to shuffle the deck.

Matt took his seat to Twilight's left before asking, "So, you start with red, then I have to throw down a black card? Then Twilight is red, then you're black, then I'm red, and so on? Sounds simple enough."

"Ah, but there's a catch," Lana corrected, "If you don't have the color you need, you have to pick up the stack. If you put down the wrong color, you pick up the stack. If you hesitate too long, you pick up the stack. And here's the tricky part. If two cards of the same number are dropped in a row, the order of our turns is reversed. So if, say, you throw down a six, then Twily throws down a six, then I throw down any card, I have to pick up the stack because it wasn't my turn. And if you didn't catch the two sixes and don't

place a card, you have to pick up the stack. Sounds good?"

"Sounds good!" Twilight agreed, again forcing herself to use English. Her eyes watched the cards as they flew out of Lana's hands in sequence until all the cards were divided.

"All right...let's go!"

11:30, 04/30/2015, STARDUST LABS

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"Sonovabitch," Lana grumbled as she jumped the gun and threw a card down after a pair of twos. She collected her new stack of cards, and play resumed.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"Crap," This time it was Matt who grumbled due to similar circumstances.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

"I win!" Twilight cheered as her last card hit the table, leaving a stunned Matt and Lana holding the rest of the deck.

"Well, crap," Lana said with a huff, "I was hoping to get at least one win out of this but it seems it was not meant to be." She looked over to Zhang, who had been hovering near the door while observing their game. "Hey Zhang! Want to be cut into a game of Liars Cards? It'll be fuuuuuun."

Zhang didn't immediately answer. During the course of the game of Traps he had slowly walked the length of Twilight's room to scrutinize every one of her drawings before moving to lurk near the door as he watched the furious card game reach its inevitable conclusion. With Lana, Jenkins and Twilight all looking expectantly towards him, he finally relented and stepped forward. The moment he started moving Lana scrambled over to the other chair beside Twilight, leaving the only vacant spot where she had been.

Zhang raised an eyebrow at her sudden seating change but didn't raise the question. "This 'Liars Cards' is the same game we played a couple of days ago, yes?"

"Indeed it is, good sir, and everyone here knows the rules. But I'll let you in on a secret." Lana leaned forward and grinned, "Twily cheats."

"What!? No! No cheating!" Twilight objected in somewhat broken English. It seemed that whenever she consciously attempted to use English the translation spell didn't make an effort to convert the meaning, which led to some hilarious discussions until the unicorn got fed up and started speaking in her own language and thus resuming translation.

"It's true, she counts cards," Matt said with a grin, and Twilight whipped around to give him a pout. "So the secret to winning is to cheat more."

"I was under the impression that this game was all about cheating and not getting caught," Zhang said tentatively, and his eyes remained glued to Twilight as though she were some sort of monster that might jump over the table and attempt to eat his face.

"That's exactly it!" Lana grinned and gave a thumbs-up to Zhang. "It's not cheating unless you get caught!" Her hands became a blur as she dealt the cards to the four players. "Since this is a conversation game, why don't we choose an easy topic? What was school like for all of you? Also, one ace," She dropped a card and looked to Zhang.

"School was...typical. Nothing unusual at all. Two twos," Zhang said slowly as he dropped a pair of cards on the table.

"One three," Matt started, though his answer came after a moment's hesitation at Zhang's non-answer, "I had the pleasure of growing up in the Midwest, with absolutely nothing to do except get drunk and high and in trouble. When the army recruiters came around he actually smiled and patted me on the back when I told him that I didn't have a criminal record for alcohol, drugs or grand theft."

"Grand theft? What's there to steal in the Midwest?" Lana asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Well, farmers would leave their tractors in the fields a lot of the time, and the troublemakers I grew up with thought it was quite a thrill to steal them," Matt elaborated, and upon seeing Lana's screwed-up expression he continued, "Hey, don't ask me to explain what the meatheads were thinking. It was the Midwest, *there was nothing else to do.*"

"One four!" Twilight declared in English the moment Matt finished. "School is fun! I'm good at school."

"And what about your school friends?" Matt asked after spotting the pattern of discussion being broken.

The unicorn's expression became strained just a bit before she added, "Didn't have school friends. Too much studying to do. I had family, Cadance too. That was enough."

"Two fives," Lana dropped the cards on the table to save Twilight from having to discuss that any further. "I was all kinds of trouble in school, though only for my brothers. Had to keep them all in line and out of real trouble. Plus no one bothered me too much because they knew my rowdy mob would tear them to pieces if they caused any trouble to 'Big Sis'."

"One six, and I wasn't aware of your family situation," Zhang added as he opened up just a bit, "I was an only child so things were rather quiet back home."

"One seven. I just had a sister to deal with, though she was a lot of trouble. Of course once she started growing up she realized she needed her big brother to scare off unwanted attention. Never had so much fun in my life when I'd come home on leave just to hunt down and give a stern lecture to the boys who wouldn't take no for an answer," Matt's smile became somewhat sanguine; "I can be quite intimidating if I want to be."

Twilight was in the process of dropping her card when Lana hijacked the conversation, "You mentioned you had a big brother, Twily?" When the unicorn nodded, the female soldier grinned, "So, did you ever need him to chase off any ill-mannered colts who decided to pursue you beyond what was considered socially acceptable?"

"No." Came the flat reply followed by an equally flat glare from Twilight, though she was blushing slightly. *I don't know where you're going with this but I don't like it*, the look said.

Too bad! Lana's smile replied.

"So he had to chase off ill-mannered mares inst—" And like a switch being flipped, Lana's words cut off. She kept talking but no further sounds could be heard.

"Thank you, Twily," Matt said with a theatrically exaggerated sigh while unintentionally using her nickname. "I just wish you were around all the time so you could do that whenever she opens her mouth."

Twilight's response was to hide her face behind her cards and wait for Zhang to speak next.

13:00, 04/30/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight let out a sigh of relief as Matt, Zhang and most importantly Lana left her habitat.

One of these days... straight to the moon, Lana! Twilight thought and her sigh became a huff. *Still...*

Lana had given Twilight a lot to think about and in between testing Twilight coincidentally had a lot of time to think. Every time Lana talked she poked at those thoughts and made Twilight think even more. It was horribly embarrassing every time but she always felt a little better afterward.

Twilight's good mood was interrupted when the door opened to reveal Joel walking in with her English language tablet under one arm and a smile on his face. "I've got something special for you, Twilight. We were actually waiting until your English proficiency was high enough, and we've agreed that now is the perfect time."

"Oh? What is it? A book? I'm afraid I still need to finish the book Charles gave me."

"Oh, this is like a book," Joel said with a smile as he flipped the tablet out from under his arm and turned it on. The familiar image on the tablet's 'desktop' appeared, as well as some new icons that she had never seen before. "We've updated the tablet with a limited connection to something we call the 'internet'. The internet is a place where just about any information can be found."

Twilight must have betrayed her excitement at the prospect, so Joel smiled and continued, "Don't get your hopes up too much, as I said there are significant restrictions in place. The internet is a place filled with information but not all information is meant for everyone. If you come across something that tells you it can't be accessed then I'd recommend you ask one of us about it or move on to another subject. Alright?"

"I suppose that's understandable," Twilight agreed after a long moment. "So how do I use it?"

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

Personal Notes: (Dr. Kim Ngo)

The resources provided for Twilight's language learning program were provided at the behest of Dr Shen in order to placate Twilight, though I admit I was extremely curious as to her capacity for learning a new language from an entirely new world. When it became apparent that her interest in our language was more than just a polite gesture and a serious attempt, further plans were made to accommodate this hunger for knowledge. I pitched the idea of limited internet access for Twilight to Dr Mills and he agreed tentatively, pending Moira's approval. I was able to pitch the idea successfully to Dr. Vahlen by stating that we might learn more about Twilight based on what she researches when she thinks she isn't being observed. Using that logic, Vahlen agreed and Twilight was given limited access to the internet. Below is the search history for April 30th.

After consulting with Dr. Hagane, the following criteria were flagged as restricted:

- *The harm and slaughter of quadrupeds.
- *Depictions of warfare and suffering.
- *Social and political issues.
- *Detailed explanations of technology.
- *Examination of military procedures.
- *Religious materials.
- *Historical matters that fulfill any of the previous criteria.
- *Sex.

The following criteria were flagged as restricted per Dr. Vahlen's request:

- *Detailed Maps and Geography of the Earth
- *Search attempts to locate the Solar System or other locations in the Milky Way

EDIT:

Just reviewed the surveillance footage of the time she was searching. The last text string was apparently input when she face-planted on the tablet. Can't say I blame the poor girl.

End Notes

INTERNET SEARCH HISTORY FOR TWILIGHT SPARKLE (04/30/2013)

New Search:

- >>Earth Moon
- >>Earth Moon Images
- >>Earth Moon landings
- >> Youtube Video footage of moon landings
- >>Bookmarked previous search results
- >>Space Race
- >>Sputnik
- >>Cold War (RESTRICTED TOPIC)

Search Closed

New Search:

- >>Earth Star System
- >>Solar System
- >>Sol
- >>Solar System Planets
- >>Youtube documentary on Solar System Creation
- >>Milky Way
- >>Solar System Location in Milky Way
- (SEARCH TERMINATED, SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY)

Search Closed

New Search:

- >>Religions
- >>Christianity (RESTRICTED TOPIC)
- >>Christianity Devil (RESTRICTED TOPIC)
- >>Christianity God (RESTRICTED TOPIC)
- >>Popular Depictions of the Devil
- >>Youtube audio of Charlie Daniels 'Devil Went Down to Georgia'
- >>Deals with the Devil
- >>Faust
- >>Bookmarked previous search results
- >>Bible (RESTRICTED TOPIC)

Search Closed

New Search:

- >>Invaders (RESTRICTED TOPIC)
- >>Alien Invaders (RESTRICTED TOPIC)

New Search:

- >>Music
- >>Good Music
- >>Youtube audio of Pachelbel's Canon in D
- >>Bookmarked previous search results
- >>Youtube audio of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata
- >>Bookmarked previous search results
- >>Youtube audio of Wagner's Flight of the Valkyries
- >>Bookmarked previous search results
- >>Fun music
- >>Youtube audio of Super Affection
- >>Bookmarked previous search results
- >>Music Genres
- >>Musical Theater
- >>Bookmarked previous search results

Search Closed

New Search:

>>Magic
>>Popular Depictions of Magic
>>Harry Potter (Aborted Search)
>>Magical Creatures
>>Unicorn
>>Pegasus
>>Alicorn
>>Dragon
>>Earth Pony
>>Ponies
>>Horse
>>Horse Breeds
>>Famous Horses

Search Closed

New Search:

(NO SEARCH SUBMITTED, KEY LOG ENABLED)

>>Human Relationships (DELETED)
(5.6 seconds idle)
>>Human Attrac (DELETED)
(7.2 seconds idle)
>>How to (DELETED)
(2 seconds idle)
>>pjIOSDJFodijpVIOSJDPivjpIOSDjvpjisjvpIdjvois (DELETED)

Search Closed

23:55, 04/30/2015, SITUATION ROOM

David Bradford paced in front of the monitor as he waited for the Council transmission. He wasn't a person who was prone to anxiety, but the events of this month would either make or break him. *Capturing an intact alien device, capturing a non-hostile alien that isn't affiliated with the invaders, several successful missions, relatively few casualties... and housing an alien within the base that resulted in a serious security breach with no meaningful breakthroughs to show for it.*

Bradford allowed himself a moment of weakness while in the privacy of the Situation Room as he grumbled and pinched the bridge of his nose. *What's the worst that could happen, they could fire me?* He thought sarcastically. *More likely stuffed in a cell for the duration of the war or a bullet to the head to make things easy.*

He stopped his pacing and turned to face the monitor, and it turned on with a hum. The backlit silhouette of the Council Representative slowly came into focus in the same position and posture he was always in: sitting ramrod straight in front of a desk with his hands clasped before him. Bradford knew what he was going to say before the words even left his mouth.

"Good evening, Commander," The Representative started with his instantly recognizable gravelly voice, *"The Council has reviewed your performance thus far and they are extremely impressed with your results, and that is not a comment that this Council makes lightly. As such, additional assets and funding are being made available to you. Use them wisely."*

"Thank you, sir," Bradford said graciously, and he waited for the elephant to march into the room.

"The Council has also taken extreme interest in the subject of the Stardust Project. Are these reports... accurate?"

"Yes sir, they are," Bradford nodded before continuing, "The subject of the Stardust Project was captured during Operation Hammerhead, and is a willing participant in the testing currently under way in Stardust."

A long moment of silence passed as the Council Representative read something on his desk. *"I also see that despite this willingness to cooperate, no breakthroughs have been made in unraveling the mechanics of its abilities. It also demonstrates new abilities at will despite the research team's efforts to catalog its*

every capability with the 'soft' approach."

It took a significant amount of effort for Bradford not to grimace. *A blind and deaf man could tell where this conversation is heading.* "That is correct, sir. Due to the unprecedented nature of this creature, we felt it best to earn its cooperation with a gentle approach as opposed to our traditional methods. Testing is still ongoing that may lead to a breakthrough on replicating its abilities."

The Council Representative remained respectfully silent as Bradford explained before he gave his orders, *"The Council understands and approves of the actions taken thus far with this subject, but it is also felt that more drastic measures need to be taken. We also agree that this specimen is far too valuable to undergo an interrogation by Doctor Vahlen. A special holding facility has been prepared in the Argentina facility that can resist the amount of force this subject can project, and experts are being acquired to... question this subject more thoroughly while leaving little lasting physical damage.*

"As always, we will respect your authority in this matter. If you feel the approach and measures currently in place are sufficient, then we will support that decision. If you feel no more meaningful discoveries can be made or discoveries are not apparent in the future, we strongly encourage you take this option."

"I understand. I will need to consult with the research team for their opinions," Bradford replied after choosing his words carefully enough not to paint himself into a corner.

"Good luck, commander. And remember, we will be watching."

Consensus

23:28, 04/30/2015, UNKNOWN LOCATION

The room was dark and almost devoid of furniture, save for an almost featureless desk and chair. The room might have been mistaken for a long-forgotten office or storage room were it not for the lack of dust combined with the well-dressed man who stepped into the room. Out of long-ingrained habit he sat in the seat after straightening his tie. His posture was ramrod straight as he pressed a seemingly random spot on the desk before tapping in front of him as though he had a keyboard.

The wall across from the desk flickered as power fed into a monitor hidden in the darkness. Text began to scrawl as the system powered up.

```
>>SYSTEM ACTIVATION
>>LOGIN/PASSWORD REQUIRED
>>"0"
>>"*****"
>>USER AUTHENTICATED
>>ESTABLISHING SECURE CONNECTION
>>SECURE CONNECTION ESTABLISHED
>>0 IS NOW IN ATTENDANCE
>>CURRENT ATTENDANCE INCLUDES 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16
>>ALL MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE
```

"Good evening, gentlemen," The man known as Zero said to the empty room, and his speech appeared as text on the monitor. "You all have had time to review the reports compiled by Commander David Bradford. We will now discuss—"

Before he was even finished speaking, a line of text appeared that was followed with a synthetic voice. More lines of text and synthetic voices began to join in as the conversation began to spiral out of control.

2: Are these reports a joke? This Stardust project is housing an alien captive? A cooperative alien captive at that?

5: That appears to be the case.

3: I can't believe Bradford's allowing it. He's compromising the security of the XCOM facility in North America. We cannot afford to have our efforts threatened from within at this time.

10: Vahlen's reports show suspicious activity from numerous personnel who have come into contact with the specimen. A significant portion of the base personnel might be compromised.

```
>>16 has called for a vote: ENABLE 'BLANK SLATE' PROTOCOL, NA FACILITY
>>Yes votes: 5 total, No votes: 8 total, 4 Abstain.
>>Proposal rejected
```

11: You can't be so short-sighted. For the first time we have a living, breathing alien specimen that's willing to cooperate without physical persuasion. The benefits of such an asset are unknowable.

1: Its motivations are completely unknowable as well. What proof do we have that it isn't an infiltrator designed by the invaders for the expressed purpose of gaining our trust? They've proven they are capable and willing to tailor-make forces to fit their environment.

9: You're forgetting that the infiltrators we've been seeing thus far have been somewhat less than convincing. This 'Twilight' has none of the tell-tale signs of deliberate engineering that the Thin Men have displayed. Look at the Medical Imaging data. No surgery scars, no redundant or obsolete organ structures, and no implants. It appears to be a product of natural evolution wherever it's from.

16: Are you seriously trying to argue that somewhere in the universe there's a world filled with brightly-colored unicorns?

15: Look at the art assets uploaded from the project. I think unicorns are the tip of the iceberg. Gryphons? Dragons? Hydras?

13: It's all evidence that this thing is an invader tailored to cater to our preconceptions. There's irrefutable proof that the invaders have been studying us for a significant amount of time. How else could it know about such mythical creatures from our culture?

5: You seem to be discounting the possibility that Twilight isn't the first visitor from her world to ours.

3: So the explanation of all our myths is aliens?

5: You know what I mean. Don't be pedantic.

7: Perhaps we should come back to this subject, as we're getting nowhere. What we should be discussing is the capabilities the creature has displayed. I don't believe it's 'magic' for one second, but what it can do at will is disconcerting.

3: I've read the reports. I'm not happy that the only thing keeping it in place is something as mercurial as a good mood.

10: I concur. Its telekinetic capabilities could render all projectile weapons useless against it. Where are we on reverse engineering the invaders' plasma weapons?

11: Nowhere near finished. Current timelines put the earliest working prototypes at least two months from now. ARC Throwers seem to be the best option, though there's the problem with range.

13: Range is the least of our concerns considering Twilight's ability to teleport as well as render itself invisible to the naked eye. I'm struggling to understand why it doesn't just walk out at any time.

2: Or fight its way out. The armor cameras quite clearly show how it dispatched a Chryssalid with rather excessive force. What's stopping it from simply blasting its way out to the surface?

11: I still can't believe how intentionally ignorant you all are being. Read the logs and the audio, and spend five minutes looking at the video footage. That thing is desperate for approval and companionship. So long as it is provided, I suspect Twilight will stay and obey orders.

13: I know what the damned logs say, but we cannot know what it is thinking for certain. It is not human and there's no way to guarantee it thinks in the same manner we do or holds the values we do. Attempting to project human values onto it is foolhardy at best.

1: I concur.

15: The logs do mention the virtues of her people. Kindness, generosity, loyalty, laughter and honesty; do those sound like anything the invaders hold dear?

1: It's too good to be true.

3: Agreed. An alien that is all sunshine and rainbows shows up out of the blue while we are facing the possibility of extinction at the hands of other invaders. There's no such thing as coincidences that big.

5: She did not come here by accident. An entity called 'Discord' sent her to us against her will.

6: I did notice that, and it greatly worries me. If the reports on the limitations of teleportation are accurate, then Discord knows about Earth. What I don't understand is why he would send Twilight here.

4: Self-preservation. Twilight's own reports, if they can be trusted, describe Discord being given an ultimatum to surrender peacefully or be annihilated by whatever the 'Elements of Harmony' are. The Elements can't work without Twilight's active participation, so by removing her from the equation he's ensured his continued existence for the time being.

3: So you're saying it's not the destination that matters, but her place of origin? That she ended up here was just another coincidence? Why not just teleport her into a star, or deep space?

15: Twilight's reports describe Discord as... not a stable individual. It might be twisted about like a ball of twine, but I imagine he must have had some logical reason for sending the unicorn here. Perhaps he didn't know we were at war?

5: Or perhaps he did.

11: I can't help but notice that everyone is pointedly avoiding the other superpower that Twilight has mentioned personal contact with. This 'Celestia' that she mentions--

13: Are we seriously taking religious devotion into consideration? You can't go two steps outside these days without someone claiming they've spoken to their god. And how many kids write letters to Santa Claus with the sincere belief that there's an obese toy maker at the North Pole who reads them?

7: Your sarcasm is not constructive in this matter.

16: Enough. This speculation is pointless as the only evidence we have comes from an alien. Without independent verification we cannot act on it. Agreed?

1: Agreed.

3: Agreed.

5: Agreed.

4: Agreed.

10: Yes.

11: Agreed.

16: This creature has provided a veritable flood of information that cannot be verified, and I suspect that it is holding back. There have been a handful of occasions where it has refused to comply with Vahlen's testing procedures, as well. The gentle approach has produced no results that XCOM can use in the field so more severe methods of question may be necessary.

5: You're wrong. The successful acquisition of alien assets during Silent Rain could be attributed to the creature willingly using her abilities to assist the two volunteers she interacts with.

13: Abilities that she had not displayed when asked to describe her capabilities. Abilities that alter the perceptions of everyone around her. That sounds dangerously close to mind-altering powers. She also used this ability without consent being given. What else has she done while the science personnel weren't looking?

15: Others have mentioned it as a weapon against Twilight in these proceedings but it's a sword that cuts both ways. She is not human and does not think like we do, and none of you can deny the desperation for approval she shows when she's around the volunteers. Where she is from, asking for such help would likely never have been considered since it's so readily given.

13: Again, what other abilities has she been using without the knowledge of the science team, all to 'help'?

1: We're getting off track. It was mentioned earlier that alternative methods of interrogation were being considered?

13: Why are we considering alternative interrogation at all? Just give the thing to Vahlen and let her perform her usual procedures.

16: I'll have to disagree with that recommendation. This creature is one of a kind, and Vahlen has a tendency to expend her subjects after operations. As enlightening as that interrogation and subsequent autopsy would be, it would waste the potential here.

13: What exactly are you proposing? Stop beating around the bush.

16: The Vault containment facility is nearing completion in Argentina. Its highest security cells were designed with the likelihood of capturing alien command elements intact. The primary holding cell operates like an elevator car. Any sign of breach and the cell drops into the Copahue lava vein while the elevator shaft is demolished with sequential charges. Should the creature attempt to force the doors, it would drop and burn. Regarding teleportation, known restrictions involve line of sight combined with knowledge of the distance between points. Should the subject be sedated and deprived of sensory input in transit, I'm confident potential teleports could be curtailed.

1: These seem like reasonable countermeasures.

16: In addition, professionals can be acquired to coax more information out of the creature while preserving its physical condition.

13: Coax more information? Just come out and say you intend to torture it. I hear it's a specialty in South America to be proficient in such things without leaving a mark on your victims.

16: Aren't we a little past the point of being ethically squeamish? We've done far worse to these invaders and there was far less objection.

5: What's wrong about this is that this creature is willingly cooperating with us and will continue to cooperate so long as we're reasonable.

10: Until it decides it doesn't want to cooperate any more. I would rather be prepared to throw it into a deep dark hole the moment that happens rather than hope it doesn't come to pass.

11: I can't seriously believe that this is being considered. The first friendly alien we've ever met and we're debating how best to torture it.

1: We're here to ensure the survival of humanity by any means necessary. If you cannot put humanity's needs over those of an alien then perhaps your replacement will need to be contacted.

"Enough."

Instantly the debate died as the Zero spoke.

"I will be the first to admit that this creature presents a problem. It might not be a problem that XCOM anticipated, but it is a problem it will need to deal with. Preparation of the Vault will continue. Experts to staff the facility will be contacted, however this will remain as a contingency for the worst case scenario."

A long moment of silence passed before a response was apparent.

16: I can sense a 'but' coming.

"Commander David Bradford's judgement thus far has been exemplary in both his tactical acumen as well as his management priorities. As it was his decision to house the creature in the manner it now finds itself in which has elicited all the information we have thus far, I recommend the final decision be his. The question now is, 'Does this Council continue to trust the Commander's judgement?'"

>>0 has called for a vote

>>Yes votes: 17 total, No votes: 0 total, 0 Abstain.

>>Proposal Accepted.

"Excellent. If there are no further matters to discuss, this Council is now adjourned." One by one the other Councilmen disconnected.

Zero tapped his desk as he too disconnected from the conference. He tapped another place on his desk and clasped his hands before him.

"Good evening, Commander."

Reason

MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS SOMBRE IN AFTERMATH OF ALIEN ATTACKS NEAR LONDON. QUEEN ELIZABETH MAKES APPEARANCE TO THANK BRITISH PEOPLE FOR THEIR STRENGTH. "WHATEVER LIFE THROWS AT US, OUR INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES WILL BE ALL THE STRONGER FOR WORKING TOGETHER AND SHARING THE LOAD."

CONSPIRACY THEORIST FAMOUS FOR FIRST PREDICTING ALIEN INVASION FOUND DEAD IN RURAL FRANCE TWO DAYS AFTER BEING REPORTED MISSING FROM HIS HOME IN OREGON. NO OFFICIAL STATEMENT HAS BEEN MADE REGARDING CAUSE OF DEATH BUT SOURCES IN MEDICAL OFFICE REPORT SIGNS OF SIGNIFICANT SURGICAL PROCEDURES ON HIS BRAIN WITHIN THE LAST 24 HOURS.

07:45, 05/01/2015, STARDUST LABS

The stylus flew across Twilight's tablet as she skimmed what was quickly becoming a massive list of new things to search for. Every answer she found seemed to lead to a dozen more questions. *I will need to ask Charles some questions the next time I see him, though... there's a lot of things that the tablet won't let me see*, she thought to herself. She was quick to tamp down on any suspicion she had as to why. *I shouldn't assume why that is. I'll just ask Charles when I see him.*

The [soothing sounds of piano chords](#) came from the tablet as her playlist advanced, and Twilight couldn't resist closing her eyes and simply listening. *It's beautiful. Why would anyone—anything want to hurt people who were capable of making something like this?* Twilight's thoughts drifted to the Thin Man and how he had reacted to her simply saying hello. *Why would he do that?* No matter how hard Twilight tried to approach his behavior, she simply couldn't accept such violence as being justifiable.

Almost as though it was anticipating her mood, the piano piece she had been listening to ended and [another one started](#). Twilight loved this piece as much as the previous one but the chords led her mind down darker paths. She quickly switched to her playlist and advanced to [the next song](#) and her mood instantly brightened. *Rainbow Dash would love this one*, Twilight nodded along with the beat as the song picked up. *They say the main instrumental was with a guitar, but I've never heard one quite like that one.*

Any further music listening was interrupted as the door to Twilight's habitat opened and Charles walked in with his customary smile and greeting, "Good morning, Twilight. How are you feeling this morning?"

"I'm doing great! Joel visited me yesterday and did something to the tablet so I could access something called the 'internet'! It's got answers for just about everything I have thought to ask it!" Twilight gushed, and her good mood was clearly infectious as Charles' own grin grew in response.

"I'm very glad to hear that, Twilight. Though I should warn you not to trust everything you find there. You'll find as much opinion as fact, so always be sure to double check your research before running off with an idea," He warned as he took a seat at Twilight's table.

"You don't have to tell me twice! It's standard research procedure to not accept any claim as fact unless it can be verified after all," Twilight agreed, though she hesitated. "Um... Joel also mentioned that certain topics were restricted and I would need to ask someone about them if I wanted to know more. Can I ask you some questions?"

Charles nodded in response. "I'll do my best to answer any questions you may have, though there will be some that I can't answer, and others that I might not know the answer to. Just keep that in mind."

"Great!" Twilight cheered and telekinetically pulled a stack of papers from her desk over to the table along with a pen, "I've made a list of things to ask! I'm also afraid I'll need to use the translation spell just a bit longer. I don't think my English is good enough for some of these questions."

The human gave the stack of papers a somewhat dubious look before asking, "Are those all questions you had from searching the internet? Just how long were you searching?"

"Oh...about eight hours or so. These aren't all questions pertaining to my internet searches. A fair portion of them are further questions based on theorized answers that the original questions would yield, followed by another set of questions, plus room for anything else I can think of while we talk... what? What is it?"

"Sorry, Twilight, I just forgot how enthusiastic you could be," Charles scratched his chin and gave Twilight a shrug. "So, what's the first question?"

"Well, my first question came from when I was searching for information about when your people went to the moon. I even got to see it for myself at a place called 'Youtube'!" The unicorn rapidly explained, and was again rewarded with one of Charles' smiles, but his smile dissipated before her eyes as her question came about. "I wanted to do some research on that time in your history and something called a 'cold war' was mentioned. What's a cold war? I think my people had one, but what little I was able to learn doesn't match what I know..."

Charles schooled his features carefully and for just a moment Twilight regretted asking about it, but the human rallied and cleared his throat. "I suppose a little bit of history is in order. About sixty years ago there were two great nations in the world, who found themselves opposed against each other. Both sides had grown so powerful that they began to fear for the fate of the world if a fighting war were to ever break out between them, so they resorted to less... overt ways to try and beat each other. Economics and allies and so forth." The human seemed to stumble towards the end of his explanation before he asked a question of his own, "I'm surprised your people would have a cold war. From everything you've mentioned, it seems out of character."

"Oh, it was thousands of years ago, before the reign of the Alicorns," Twilight said casually, "The three tribes warred with each other, which attracted the Windigos that froze the land. So long as they continued fighting, the Windigos chased them and brought the winter as well. The Windigos were only defeated when the three tribes stopped fighting and worked together."

"Banding together to fight a common enemy? I suppose I can understand the sentiment," Charles commented distantly before he regained his focus. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to distract you from your questions. I'm assuming you have others?"

"Don't apologize, Charles, you can ask me anything you want. It's not fair for me to ask all the questions, after all. And yes, I do have some more topics to discuss." Twilight quickly checked off several things on the first page before shuffling it to the bottom of the stack. "During our first card game we had a discussion about the 'devil' and you mentioned it being a figure in the Christian religion. I was able to find dozens of religions besides Christianity, and several versions of Christianity as well. Why is that?"

"Er...well," Charles said as he glanced away. "I don't know if I'm the best person to talk about that subject. Religion is a lot of different things to a lot of different people. If you were to ask ten different people you would likely get ten different answers. That's probably why there's so many. I'm afraid I'm not qualified to answer more detailed questions than that. Sorry, Twilight."

Twilight nodded slightly, not disappointed by the answer. "I understand. From what I was able to find it seems to be a rather personal—"

The question was interrupted as the door to the habitat opened to reveal a stone-faced Doctor Vahlen. Her entire posture was stiff and tense, like Fluttershy had been before Twilight had befriended her, though there was nothing like demure shyness in the scientist's eyes. There was something... colder in its place.

"Doctor Shen," Vahlen started as she walked into the room to stand before Charles, "I thank you for your service to this project thus far, but it is no longer necessary."

"What? Why?" The note of surprise in the engineer's voice was alarming as he stood to face Vahlen directly. Gone was the fatherly approval Twilight normally saw in him or even the unease he had displayed just a moment earlier. He didn't look at the unicorn but she could see that something had set him on edge.

"The lack of meaningful breakthroughs has earned the enmity of the Council. This lack of results combined with the security breaches in the past and the likelihood of security breaches in the future is forcing me to recommend termination of the Stardust project. All research material and specimens are to be prepared for transfer to a secure holding facility. As I said, your services are no longer needed."

Any ghost of the smile of Charles face was banished. "You cannot be serious. We've only scratched the surface of what we can learn from Twilight. I can't believe you would throw away such an opportunity."

"And I cannot believe you would allow yourself to become so attached to an alien test subject. You're letting your personal losses cloud your judgement. I know why you're doing this, I knew the moment you gave her the book." Vahlen's response was colder than anything Twilight had ever heard her say, and it gave her the slightest of chills even though it wasn't being said to her.

Charles gritted his teeth and his expression turned into a glare. "Don't go there, Moira. Don't."

"This creature is not your daughter or Ellie, and I understand that it might be therapeutic for you to act like it is. But it is not, and if you find yourself distressed by my words then you have only yourself to blame, *Raymond*." Vahlen spat her reply, and her cold expression began to heat as well.

"You're one to talk!" Charles nearly shouted back as he finally lost his patience. The harsh words, volume and tone caused Twilight to jerk backwards. "You accuse me of letting my personal feelings get in the way when I know exactly what you do every morning to get yourself angry enough to commit all the casual atrocities you do. Don't think for a moment I don't know. You came to me to get the call recordings, remember?"

"Bradford will support me on this," Vahlen bit out each word as though she was restraining the impulse to scream them. The hand holding her tablet had gone white while her other hand shook at her side.

"The hell he will! And I doubt Erika or Klein would—"

SMACK!

Vahlen's free hand flew through the air and slapped Charles across the face with a sharp retort. Any pretense at cool detachment crumbled as Vahlen screamed back, "DON'T YOU DARE BRING THEM INTO THIS!"

"Stop!" Twilight said as loud as she could muster in English. *I have no idea what is about but I have to stop this! I have to!* "Please stop fighting! Friends shouldn't fight. You shouldn't!" She could feel her lips quivering and her vision blurred. "Please stop fighting..." The last words were chased by a soft sob, but Twilight rallied and looked to the pair.

Charles had staggered back a step with one hand over the spot Vahlen had struck. His eyes were filled with a mixture of anger and shame as he regained his footing and looked to the scientist. Twilight did as well, and what she saw did not bring her any comfort.

The anger of the moment was gone, as well as the cool demeanor the scientist had cultivated for the majority of the time Twilight had seen her. Her eyes were wide and locked on Twilight and her face had grown very pale. Both of her arms had crossed in front of her with the tablet against her chest like some sort of shield. Her head began to shake in some form of unspoken denial as she took a step backward. She took another step backwards, then turned and strode through the habitat door.

"I'm...sorry you had to see that, Twilight." Charles said with a note of sincere apology in his voice. "I'm sorry, Twilight, but I don't think I'll be able to answer any more questions."

"I'm not worried about questions, I'm worried about you!" Twilight abandoned her chair and planted herself directly in front of Charles. "Does that hurt? Why would she hit you? And what was that argument about?"

"I'm fine, Twilight. I really am." Charles forced a smile and tried to go around the unicorn, but she moved to further block his path.

"Why did she call you 'Raymond'? And who's Ellie? I saw both of those names in the book you gave me. Talk to me, Charles! Please!"

The engineer's smile faltered and died completely as he heard those two names again, and he sank heavily into his chair. He covered his face with his hands for a minute before he finally replied.

"Twilight... I... I'm sorry. If I tell you, you must promise to never bring it up ever again, alright?"

Twilight merely nodded in response and took her seat again. "I don't mean to pry, but I could tell that what she said hurt you. If you don't want to talk about it then you don't have to. I just want to help."

"I know you want to help, Twilight. That's the only reason I'm even considering telling you. It's... a hard story for me to share." Charles pulled his hands away from his face and Twilight couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for the sheer amount of despair written on his face. "I had a daughter named Marie. She used to call me Papa Ray or Rayman when she was younger because she thought it was funnier than Raymond. You two would have gotten along so well. She was brilliant at mathematics and languages. She always said that math was the most important language in the world because one plus one is always two no matter what language you speak."

Charles slipped his glasses off his face and placed them on the table before continuing, "She grew up and met a brilliant young man and they got married. As a father I couldn't have been more proud. My little girl all grown up, you know? When she called me to say that her own child was on the way, I could have burst. They named her Ellie, and I expect she would have been just as bright and beautiful as my daughter.

"They're not with me anymore. What I mean to say is... they died." Charles closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I never got to know Ellie, and that's a regret I'll take with me to the grave. However I think she would have been a lot like you, and she would have liked you too. Vahlen's right in the end, I suppose."

Twilight's eyes widened as he finished his story. "I'm sorry, Charles. I'm so sorry."

"That's... alright, Twilight," Charles said as he slowly stood and placed the glasses back on his head. Twilight started to rise as well but stopped when the human waved her down. "All I ask is that you never mention this to anyone or use that name again. I'm afraid that I'm going to have to go now to call in a favor, and give a few out as well."

Without another word Charles left the habitat, leaving Twilight behind to worry about her very first human friend.

08:45, 05/01/2015, OFFICE OF CMDR BRADFORD

David Bradford started on his fifth cup of coffee of the day as he continued to review the slurry of emails the research teams were sending his way. Immediately following his meeting with the Council he had sent a message to the Stardust researchers asking for their recommendations on the future of the project. One of Ngo's people had replied with almost indecent haste, and the steady trickle of further messages had kept Bradford from heading to bed.

He had left to grab breakfast just over an hour earlier and upon his return there had been two messages received during his absence. The first he had expected but the second most certainly was not.

"Enter," Bradford said absently almost before he heard the first knock. He looked up to see a somewhat sheepish-looking Shen push the door open and close it behind him. His discretion wasn't out of the ordinary, but the ice pack he now held against his face certainly was. "Are you alright, Charles?"

"Oh, I've had better days," Shen said with a self-deprecating chuckle as he took a seat in front of Bradford's desk. "Was working on one of the SHIVs and the turret actuator had a little episode. Turret assembly swung around and clocked me. It'll bruise a bit but I've had worse."

"I...see," Bradford said after a long moment, then dropped the issue. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I had a little chat with Moira, and it seems the fate of the Stardust project is in doubt. I know I have no official say over research projects, but I cannot stress enough that shutting down that project will be a terrible mistake," Charles spoke evenly and fixed Bradford with a look. "From my position as chief engineer, I feel that with Twilight's cooperation we can eventually master a power that surpasses anything we could achieve by ourselves, or even the invaders. And...if Twilight's safety cannot be assured without the Stardust Project, then I am afraid I can no longer work here."

The last statement caught Bradford's attention, as did the conviction it was delivered with. "I understand, Charles, and I thank you for coming to me with your recommendation. It seems that Dr. Vahlen's revised recommendation will suit all parties in this matter."

Shen had just started to wind up what was likely an impassioned plea but the words died as he realized just what Bradford had said. "I don't think I understand. Just what did Moira recommend?"

"That the Stardust Project continues as it has." Of all the things Bradford could have said, he greatly suspected that was the last thing Shen expected him to say.

"Ah, well. It seems I was a little premature in coming here then. I must have misunderstood Moira during our conversation," Charles said with a stunned look on his face. "Well, I'd best get back to it. Let me know if you need anything, David." The aging engineer then turned and left the office, leaving Bradford alone with what was quite possibly the two most conflicting messages he had ever received.

FROM: Cmdr. David Bradford
TO: Stardust Personnel
DATE: 05/01/2015, 00:15
SUBJECT: Recommendations

The Council has expressed concerns regarding the current progress of the Stardust project, and have suggested more direct methods of working with the subject of the project at a more secure location. Before I make my decision I would like feedback from all researchers involved.

Cmdr. David Bradford

FROM: Dr. Moira Vahlen
TO: Cmdr. David Bradford
DATE: 05/01/2015, 07:50
SUBJECT: RE: Recommendations

There are no current projections for substantive breakthroughs for the Stardust project as both the abilities it demonstrates defy all forms of detection, and the specimen itself has refused to comply with all of our instructions in demonstrating its abilities. The specimen has also shown new abilities on an almost daily basis without concern for the targets of these abilities despite being told not to do so.

Furthermore, the specimen is providing a significant distraction for the research personnel involved. Significant amounts of time are spent conversing with the specimen which amounts to little more than gossip when they could be directed to more fruitful endeavors such as decrypting the alien flight computers or interrogation of fresh specimens retrieved from the field.

In summary, at this time I recommend that the Stardust program be terminated and the specimen transferred to the new location for processing as it is providing little benefit to XCOM as a whole at this time.

Dr. Moira Vahlen

FROM: Dr. Moira Vahlen
TO: Cmdr. David Bradford
DATE: 05/01/2015, 08:42
SUBJECT: RE: Recommendations

I have reviewed previous research material and have reconsidered my previous position. As I am certain that the other researchers have come to their recommendations with opinions and emotion to guide them, I feel it is my duty to provide a recommendation based on reason: A threat assessment.

- 1.) The subject, Twilight Sparkle, is a creature capable of things that we cannot reproduce naturally or artificially. While I have no doubts that the facility the subject would be sent to would be extremely secure by our standards, I have little faith it could hold her for long. Removing her from the environment she is comfortable in will no doubt agitate her, and if she feels threatened enough to defend herself then a significant loss of life and resources is extremely likely.
- 2.) Twilight Sparkle's method of arrival on Earth highlights several serious concerns, especially when combined with her familial and professional relations in the upper echelons of her world's government. Considering her brother's high placement in the military and married into nobility, her childhood friend who is part of the nobility, her status as personal student of the current ruler and her status as a paragon of her people, it is far more logical to prepare for when her people find her, not if.
- 3.) Should the previous point come to pass and Twilight is damaged or dead, the best case we could hope for would be a second front opening up in this invasion where the standard enemy infantry possesses more physical strength and speed than Chryssalids, more nimble flight than Floaters, and far more terrifying and effective mental powers than the Sectoids. The amount of time humanity could hold in such a conflict would be significantly reduced.
- 4.) The worst case that could come to pass would be that if Twilight's reports on her mentor are accurate. Princess Celestia is described as a multi-millennia ruler of her world that is capable of moving the star in her system with nothing but her powers. If this ruler were to appear on Earth and find her protégé damaged or dead, there is absolutely nothing XCOM could do to prevent Celestia from hurling the Earth into the sun if she so chose.
- 5.) If the forces of Twilight's world appear on Earth and find her healthy and well-cared-for, we may have a powerful ally.

At this time I recommend the Stardust project be continued for the foreseeable future. The risks in altering the current program far outweigh any potential benefits that might be gained from harsher interrogation methods.

Dr. Moira Vahlen

17:56, 05/01/2015, SENIOR STAFF QUARTERS

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>>SECURE TERMINAL
>>LOGIN/PASSWORD REQUIRED
>>m.vahlen65345
>>*****
>>USER AUTHENTICATED
>>GOOD EVENING, DOCTOR VAHLEN
```

>>C:/USERS/M.VAHLEN/AUDIO/CALLS
>>RUN FILE: LASTCALL.MP3
>>FILE INFO: RECORDED PHONE CALL
>>WOULD YOU LIKE A TRANSCRIPT OF THE CALL?
>>Y
>>CALL DIALOG TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN TO ENGLISH
>>THREE (3) IDENTIFIED VOICES: Dr. Moira Vahlen (MV), Klein Vahlen (KV), Erika Vahlen (EV)

(EV)--"Hello, this is the Vahlen residence. Who is calling?"
(MV)--"It's Aunt Moira... is that little Erika I hear?"
(EV)--"Auntie M! It's been forever since we heard from you! Dad says you're doing big stuff to save the world! Is that true?"
(MV)--"Yes, I suppose it is, dear. Is your dad home? I would like to speak with him."
(EV)--"Sure, one second. Daddy! It's aunt Moira on the phone!"
(KV)--(background) "Don't yell in the house, dear. The phone is cordless, just bring it to me... Yes? That you, Moira?"
(MV)--"Yes, it is. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time?"
(KV)--"Oh it's no trouble. I know your job is a bit strict about contact so I understand you have to call when they say you can."
(MV)--"When you say it like that you make me feel like the villain."
(KV)--"You know what I mean. Don't be obtuse." (laughter)
[Background voice (BV) detected, synthetic in nature]—"Sodium."
(MV)--"Oh dear, obtuse is a large word. Keep working on your vocabulary and I might admit being related to you."
(KV)--"It was on my word-a-day calendar, sister dear. We all know you sucked up all the smart genes in the family gene pool."
(MV)--"Oh I don't know about that. Erika's math scores on her most recent tests are two grade levels higher than where she's currently at. I suspect with a little help she'll be taking algebra before she reaches middle school. All she needs now is a good tutor in the sciences and she'll be fine."
(BV)--"Aluminum."
(KV)--"I'll admit, she does her father proud...wait, how do you know about her school scores? The finals aren't supposed to be released until next week."
(MV)--"Well...you know I've got friends from university working in Germany. I contacted them and they asked politely for a sneak peak."
(KV)--"Moira..."
(MV)--"Is it wrong for an aunt to be curious about the academic performance of her dear niece?"
(BV)--"Titanium."
(KV)--"I think it's wrong when you break the law in doing so. Bribery or extortion?"
(MV)--"Extortion is such an ugly word."
(KV)--"Moira..."
(MV)--"I'm sorry, Klein, but I worry for Erika."
(KV)--"Moira, that's my job. I'm her father. You're her aunt. You're supposed to spoil her rotten during visits and nothing more."
(BV)--"Palladium."
(MV)--"Oh bah, that's nonsense. I want to be involved as much as I can."
(KV)--"Then why don't you have a kid of your own? You know mom always wanted you to settle down and raise a family of your own."
(MV)--"You know the answer to that. My career is too important right now, and besides—" (KV)--"—there's no man out there who's an intellectual match for you?"
(MV)--"Yes, that."
(KV)--"Why don't you just adopt, then? Or, hell, get a pet or something. Seriously, before you took your new job the neighbors were starting rumors that I was being unfaithful to my wife because some strange woman kept coming by."
(MV)--"Well, you are the sort."
(BV)--"Hydrogen."
(KV)--"Sister dear, don't be obtuse again. Every time you visited to see Erika the neighbors gossiped. You know I hate gossip. Seriously though, have you even considered adoption?"
(MV)--"We both know that would be a bad idea in the long run. With my career I don't have the time to adequately raise a child. But I can do everything possible to help Erika become everything she wants to."
(KV)--"Speaking of which, thank you so much for buying her that keyboard. She's always loved music, but adding a special setting where the keys are replaced with elements has gotten her a little more interested in the sciences. It's just..."
(BV)--"Helium."
(MV)--"Yes?"
(KV)--"You know what I'm going to say. The moment you have kids, I'm buying them a big snare

drum.”
 (MV)—“Speaking of, have you given any consideration to my previous offer?”
 (KV)—“No, Moira. I’m her father and I’ll provide for her myself.”
 (MV)—“But—”
 (KV)—“No buts, Moira. I’ll admit I don’t think I’ll ever make as much as you do, but this is my family and I will provide for it. I thank you for your offer and I will also thank you for never bringing it up again.”
 (EV)—(background) “Daddy? Are you two fighting?”
 (KV)—“No, dear. Go back to your keyboard.”
 (EV)—(background) “You should stop fighting! You’re family! Family shouldn’t fight!”
 (KV)—“Dear, we’re not fighting. I promise, sweetie. Go back to your keyboard.”
 (EV)—(background) “Not until you both apologize.”
 (KV)—“Well there’s no arguing with that. Moira, I’m sorry for getting angry with you.”
 (MV)—“And I apologize for being so insistant.”
 (EV)—(background) “There, all better!”
 (KV)—“...are we good then, Moira?”
 (MV)—“I guess so. I won’t press the matter again, but if you need anything, you give me a call and I’ll do everything I can.”
 (KV)—“You’ll be the first...what in god’s name is that?”
 (MV)—“Hm? What’s wrong?”
 (KV)—“There are shooting stars, but they’re huge...”
 [phone audio cuts out for 1.7 seconds due to audio overload]
 (MV)—“Klein! Klein! Can you hear me?”
 (KV)—“I’m here, Moira. Something crashed down the street...it looks like metal.” [Door opens and closes]
 (MV)—“Klein, what are you doing? Get back in the house, now!”
 (KV)—“I’m still on the stoop, there’s nothing to worry about. Though the thing is starting to spew green smoke. It’s...the smoke isn’t moving with the wind. What’s it—”
 (MV)—“Klein? KLEIN!”
 [9.4 seconds pass]
 (EV)—“Aunt Moira?”
 (MV)—“Erika? Oh thank God. Where are you now?”
 (EV)—“By the front door. Daddy went outside and now there’s all this green smoke and he hasn’t come back in. Should I go looking for him?”
 (MV)—“NO. Erika, daddy’s fine. I need you to listen very carefully, okay? I need you to lock all the doors and windows in the house, then go and hide in the cupboard underneath the staircase.”
 (EV)—“What? Why? And where’s daddy? If I lock the doors then he can’t get back in.”
 (MV)—“Erika, listen to me! Your dad is fine but you need to lock all the doors right now and make sure all the windows are closed. You have to do this now!”
 (EV)—“O-okay.”
 [10.7 seconds pass]
 (EV)—“All the doors are locked, and the windows too. What’s going on? This is starting to scare me...”
 (MV)—“Don’t be scared, Erika. You’re a big girl and you’re doing a great job so far. Can you make it back downstairs to the cupboard?”
 (EV)—“Yes, I can. What’s going on, Moira?”
 (MV)—“I’ll explain later, just get to the cupboard.”
 (EV)—“I’m almost there...huh, there’s someone knocking at the door. Maybe it’s daddy!”
 (MV)—“ERIKA, THAT IS NOT YOUR FATHER. RUN NOW!”
 (EV)—“What’s...it’s breaking down the door! It’s a monster! Ohnonono, help me!”
 [Sounds of wood splintering]
 [Unknown sound]
 [Sound recognition using current information... sound recognized: Chryssalid]
 (EV)—“Help me! DADDY HELP—”
 (MV)—“Erika! ...Erika?”

>>END AUDIO PLAYBACK

Moira Vahlen dropped her head into her hands and wept.

02:35, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight awoke with a start.

She had been dreaming of...something. It wasn’t a nightmare, at least not the one she usually had. *Ugh, I just wish I could consistently get a decent night’s sleep.* The unicorn stretched and shuffled out of bed

towards her sink. She began to fill her cup with water as she lazily looked around the room. Her eyes traced the darkened forms of her friends, then the princesses, then the drawings of Equestrian wildlife. *I really miss home.*

I feel sorry for Charles. And Matt. These are good people...but I want to go home, Twilight absently rubbed her eyes and tried not to dwell on what both men had told her in the last few days. *Tomorrow I'll ask if I can start doing research into how to get home.*

With her now full glass of water Twilight shuffled over towards her desk for some late night internet browsing when she stopped and looked to the side. A figure was sitting at her guest table, silent and unmoving. Twilight's reaction was quite natural.

"EEP!" She yelped and the glass of water clattered to the floor. At the same time a telekinetic jab pressed into the light switch hard enough to push the switch and its fixture a quarter inch into the wall. The lights flicked on and as Twilight's eyes adjusted she could better make out the features of this mystery person.

It was female, and clad in loose and baggy green clothes similar to what Matt and Lana wore but without all the pockets and pouches. Her brown hair was also loose and hung almost to her shoulders. Her face was a terrible mess, with red puffy eyes and an enflamed nose that betrayed a significant amount of crying recently, and she held a tablet in front of her chest and behind her crossed arms like a shield or piece of armor.

The last mannerism was what finally caused Twilight to recognize her late night visitor. "D-doctor Vahlen? Uh... can I h-help you?" Vahlen's worn eyes fell upon Twilight and the unicorn couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for whatever she was going through. There was anguish in those eyes. Suspicion too. And desperation.

"Or did you want to talk about something?" Twilight ventured awkwardly as she used telekinesis to pull the water off the floor and drop it down the sink drain before she shuffled slowly over to the desk.

"Are you real?" Vahlen asked after a long moment of simply staring at the unicorn. "I mean, is this what you really are? Just a lost little girl? Nothing more?"

"W-well, I don't think I'm little. I'm no foal. But I am lost so I guess that's pretty much accurate. Why?" Twilight replied as she kept her eyes on the human. With every word the scientist seemed to cringe and cling more tightly to the tablet between her arms.

"I..." Vahlen swallowed before her next words came out in a flood. "I wanted to hate you. I want to hate you so much! You're not human, you came here uninvited and people are dying every day because of the invaders and we still don't know why! Every single day more people die. I can't carry a gun or fly a plane but I can tear their bodies to pieces to know how they think and live. It's *what I do*. It's *all I can do!*"

Twilight's eyes had gone wide as Vahlen continued to rant but she remained silent.

"It was so easy to justify it. They killed so many, they killed my little Eri... so it was easy to hate them. To do unspeakable things to them. I could have gone on and saved humanity by taking the aliens' secrets from their flesh and minds by force. But then you come along! You... you..."

"I'm sorry," Twilight apologized, though she had no idea why. It just felt right to do so. "I don't know what I've done wrong but if you tell me then I can do better! Or do you need me to do more? What do you wa—"

"STOP." Vahlen shrieked, and her head drooped as she began to sob. "How can you be like that? So willing to apologize to me? I'm a monster, I've done terrible things to the invaders. To you. How can you be so... *nice*? To everyone? To me? Why?"

"Everyone deserves another chance," Twilight said solemnly. A long moment of silence passed while Twilight simply sat as Vahlen's shoulders slowly stopped shaking. "Are you alright?"

The scientist slowly rose and turned away from Twilight. After placing her tablet on the table she gathered up her hair in a practiced motion and clipped it in place before turning back. "Thank you for this discussion, Twilight. It was extremely enlightening for me. I will have to ask you to keep the content of this discussion private."

Twilight was already nodding before the request was complete. "I understand..." *Charles asked the same thing.* "I don't want to sound demanding but the next time you see Charles, could you please apologize to him? Friends shouldn't fight like that."

Vahlen's face was a study in shock at the words, but she quickly composed herself and nodded. "I will as soon as I see him. Now I'm afraid I've...wait, what's that?"

Twilight blinked and looked up to see what appeared to be a small black cloud no larger than her hoof appearing above the table that she sat at. Before anyone could speak or act, the cloud coughed green flames and out spat a large bundle of rolled scrolls on faded yellow parchment. Each one was wrapped in a red ribbon and clasped with a small brass clip with a very familiar design.

“What!?” Vahlen exclaimed, and her earlier mood nearly vanished with the surprise, “Where did these come from? Did you do this?”

“No, I didn’t do this,” Twilight replied as she used her telekinesis to grab the first wrapped scroll and opened it. The letter began to shake in the air and the unicorn continued, “And these are from my friends.”

Meanwhile... (Pt 2)

Meanwhile...

"I swear, you three come here just to give me more work to do," Spike said with as much responsible authority as he could muster. Which, in reality, wasn't much since the three fillies he was attempting to scold were about as old as he was.

"We're sorry, Spike!" Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle and Applebloom apologized in unison. Only Applebloom had the self-consciousness to look guilty at the mess that was now scattered around the library. She was also the only one who offered to ever help clean up. "Do you need any help?"

"No, girls, I think I can handle this myself. It's past your bedtimes, so you three should head home," Spike said with a sigh, having no wish to repeat the 'Cutie Mark Crusaders Librarians' incident. "Thanks for stopping by!"

The three fillies zoomed out of the library after saying their goodbyes, leaving Spike with the piles of books that they had been plowing through. *History of Map Making and Cartography in Equestria*, Spike read the title of the first book he saw, and he quickly realized that all of the books were similar in nature. *I wonder what it was this week? Explorers? Cartographers? Probably something to do with Daring Do.*

The week prior, the three Cutie Mark Crusaders had spent the afternoon in the library to get 'adventuring' cutie marks, though Sweetie Belle insisted it was 'archaeology'. How they intended to do this was by reading every Daring Do book available, and leave them strewn about the library as though they intended to set up a literature scavenger hunt for Spike. The week prior to that they decided they wanted to be authors and were determined to read every book in the library to find out the best ways to write...until they gave up and got started on the Daring Do books.

They know something's wrong with Twilight. I doubt they know what, but they know something. Spike sighed again as he began to gather up the scattered literature for sorting and replacement on the shelves, but the sigh was a content one. *All the girls are trying to help in their own ways.*

After the chaotic day where Twilight disappeared and the few tumultuous days afterward, Spike had fallen into a routine. With the librarian gone, it fell to him to keep the library in the condition that Twilight left it. One day turned into two. Two turned into three. Three days turned into a week, and still no sign of Twilight but Spike kept things going as well as he could.

After the first week, the other Elements began to visit the library on a regular basis. Rainbow Dash would spend an entire afternoon sprawled out somewhere while giving a running commentary on the adventures of Daring Do, and Spike would often sit and listen when work permitted a break. Fluttershy visited almost daily to check on Owlicious and to have a cup of tea with Spike. Applejack and Pinkie Pie would also visit to drop off baked goods and snacks for him as well as chat about their respective businesses.

And Rarity, his sweet Rarity had insisted on taking him out on one of the weekend days to try out a new series of clothes she was developing. Spike felt guilty that he didn't pay more attention to all the fashion and tailoring terms and trends she talked about, but it was so hard to concentrate on anything but basking in her presence. The one time he asked why he was being used as a model (after STRENUOUSLY asserting that it was no problem), Rarity had simply replied, "Pinkie Pie said clothes with your body type would be in high demand soon, and we all know what to do when Pinkie dear gets a feeling!"

They think I'll be lonely without Twilight, Spike thought absently as he stacked the books and began to lug them over to the shelves. *They're right. I don't know if I've ever been away from Twilight so long. The girls are amazing for going out of their way to visit and spend time with me... but Twilight doesn't have anypony wherever she is. I hope she's alright.*

The books were lifted one by one to their appropriate slots on the shelf. Every move was careful and precise. Everything had to be perfect if Twilight came back. *WHEN she comes back*. Spike corrected himself, and he felt a little bit horrified that he would ever consider the possibility that he would never see her again. The little librarian was saved from further thoughts haunting him by a sudden knock at the door.

"Sorry, we're closed for the night!" Spike yelled, and he hoped whoever was knocking heard. Apparently they didn't because the knocking continued to hammer. "Jeepers, what's so important this late?" Spike descended the latter and reached for the door knob to see just who was hammering on the door.

Unfortunately for Spike his timing was terrible, and the door flew open to smash the poor dragon into the wall. "SPIKE! SPIKE! I had an amazing idea!" The intruder shouted, and he knew immediately who the intruder was.

"Pinkie Pie..." Spike tried not to growl as he slid the door closed and gave the pink earth pony a flat stare. "You know it's past business hours, right? Can't your amazing idea wait?"

"No it can't!" Came the immediate response.

"Seriously, Pinkie. Come ba—" Spike started to say, but was interrupted when a red-frosted cupcake was jammed into his mouth. *Sweet Celestia...did she use crushed inferno rubies in the frosting? And with her special sauce, too!? It's like a party in my mouth, and everyone is on fire.*

"Hush now, Spikey! Pinkie Pie has to share her amazing idea!" She smiled widely before turning away to begin her story. "So I was thinking about Twilight and how lonely she might be! After all, we're her friends and we're not with her! Not to assume that Twilight can't make friends wherever she is. That'd be silly! Maybe lonely is the wrong word.... Homesick? That sounds about right. So I thought that maybe it would be nice for us to let Twilight know that we haven't forgotten about her!"

Spike tried to follow Pinkie Pie's rambling but he was quite certain he would be breathing literal fire from that cupcake she had given him. Being a fire breathing dragon made him naturally resistant to heat and spicy foods, but whatever Pinkie had given him felt like he'd bitten off a piece of the sun.

"So, that got me thinking! How can we let Twilight know that we're still thinking about her? Then it hit me! A package! Ditzzy was flying overhead while I was daydreaming and dumped her mail bags all over. Then I realized we could send her letters! But we can't use the regular mail. Ditzzy's good but I don't think she's *that* good. Then I remembered that we have a super special magic dragon who can send letters directly to ponies!"

"You want me to try and dragonfire a letter to her?" Spike said as soon as he had recovered enough feeling in his mouth and tongue to speak. "Well...now I feel dumb for not thinking of that earlier. But you heard from Princess Luna, she isn't anywhere in Equestria and I don't know if I can send messages further than that."

"That's why I sent a letter to Princess Luna asking for her help! The response should be coming right about..."

BURP

"Now!"

A letter conjured itself from the dragonflame Spike emitted, and it fell to the floor in front of him. He picked it up cautiously but stopped when he read the seal. "Do not open until the Elements are present." And just as he finished the sentence, a knock came from the door.

"Girls! So glad you could make it!" Pinkie squealed as she threw the door open and invited more visitors inside. Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash all walked in with already-written letters in tow.

"Huh... well that's rather good timing, Pinkie." Spike said slowly as he broke the seal on Luna's letter and began to read to the assembled ponies.

"To my faithful friend Spike,

Pinkie Pie contacted me regarding the possibility of using your dragonfire to send a message to Twilight, wherever she may be. As you are no doubt more aware than any of us, your dragonfire isn't limited in the same manner as our magics. Your dragonfire sends messages not through mundane magical means that are limited by manipulation of the Field and the abilities of the caster, but purely through your familiarity with the destination and its recipient.

Because of this I feel that Pinkie Pie's idea holds a great deal of merit. While the Elements and I are close friends to Twilight, she is like a sister to you and if any dragon could send the messages successfully, then it would be you. I am also making all necessary preparations to aid you, with the Elements help. I've attached a teleportation enchantment to this letter, and by the time you finish reading it you will all be in my Observatory in Canterlot.'

Spike stopped reading the letter at that point to look up, and Ponyville was gone. The little librarian and the Elements now found themselves on a vast balcony overlooking Canterlot and the crystal clear night's sky directly above them. Princess Luna was also on the balcony, as were Shining Armor and Cadance. The latter two smiled and waved but Luna kept her emerald eyes on the sky above her.

"I am glad you all could gather on such short notice," Luna stated warmly, though it was a little disconcerting that she didn't make eye contact to greet them. "I feel that Pinkie Pie's plan has merit, and it may hasten our discovery of Twilight if I can follow where the letters travel." Several cheers came from the Elements, and Luna waited for them to die down before she continued. "I cannot guarantee it will be successful, but I will try. And I know that Pinkie Pie's original plan included your letters, but I felt it would

be wise to inform Shining Armor of the attempt. Both he and Cadance have prepared a letter.. Celestia and I have letters as well."

Shining Armor levitated a scroll wrapped with a ribbon and clipped tight with a Crystal Heart seal, while Luna levitated a pair of letters clipped with Solar and Lunar seals respectively. The trio of letters floated over to Spike, while the Elements approached to give him their letters as well.

"Wait!" Spike cried as he looked to each of the ponies in the room. "I...I don't have a letter. I don't have quills or paper. Can I—" Before he could even finish the question, Pinkie Pie somehow produced all the necessary writing tools from her curly mane, including an ink well that somehow didn't dye her mane black in the process. Spike nodded his thanks and began to write. Several minutes passed as he scratched out the message he wanted to share with Twilight before rolling it up and adding it to the stack of letters the others had already written.

"Prepare yourselves," Luna stated simply and she brought her back hoof to clomp down on the stone balcony. Instantly lines began to carve themselves into the stone. The lines resolved into a massive circle with several circles around its perimeter and one in the center. Symbols became apparent in each of the circles, and it became readily apparent that each one corresponded to the ponies assembled. The stone under Luna's hooves took the shape of the crescent moon, the next five circles showed balloons, butterflies, diamonds, apples, and Rainbow Dash's lightning bolt. The last two spots were emblazoned with Shining Armor's sparkle shield and Cadance's crystal heart. The circle in the center displayed a stylized flame. Each of the assembled ponies took their spots around the perimeter of the array, while Spike carried the letters to the center.

"This array will focus all of your memories to assist Spike. I need each and every one of you to close your eyes and remember Twilight. Remember your most cherished memory of her. Hold onto that memory as tightly as you can!" Luna instructed, and all save the Princess closed their eyes.

Spike closed his eyes as well and tried to dredge up his favorite memory of Twilight. Thousands of memories and moments came to him, little things and big victories for the pair and all the days of hard work at the library. *I can't choose just one memory, they're all my favorites...* So he held onto each and every one and took a deep breath... and blew.

Stardust Supplemental Files (Pt. 5)

PHOTOGRAPHS OF UNMARKED FIGHTER CRAFT FLYING OVER DENVER RAISE QUESTIONS OVER INTERNAL SECURITY IN USA. SENATOR GOLEMAN ISSUES STATEMENT, "THERE IS A VAST CONSPIRACY AT WORK AND I SWEAR THAT I WILL PUT A STOP TO IT. UNIDENTIFIED MILITARY ORGANIZATIONS ARE JUST ANOTHER SIGN THAT THIS COUNTRY IS ONLY A FEW SHORT STEPS FROM TYRANNY."

RIOTS STRIKE ARGENTINA AS DOZENS OF FAMILIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY REPORT FAMILY MEMBERS MISSING. NO SIGNS OF STRUGGLE OR ALIEN ATTACKS WERE FOUND AT ANY OF THE RESIDENCES OF THE MISSING PERSONS, AND THE ONLY KNOWN CONNECTION BETWEEN THE MAJORITY OF THOSE REPORTED MISSING IS BACKGROUND IN CONSTRUCTION AND ENGINEERING.

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PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: All

DIVLEAD: Dr. Moira Vahlen, Dr. Joel Mills, D.r Kim Ngo, Dr. Frank McKendrick

Attached files: Original and translated copies of personal correspondence received by Twilight on 05/02/2015, analysis of materials received, links to XENOBIOLOGY assets, personal notes by DIVLEAD(Ngo), supplemental notes by DIVLEAD(Vahlen, Mills, McKendrick)

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 04:12, 05/02/2015

Twilight just got some mail from home.

If this is ever reviewed without the context of all the Stardust notes, I'll explain just how unlikely that last statement is. Twilight is being held in a secure lab several stories below ground and is kept under constant surveillance. Nothing enters or leaves the lab without one of the research division leads approving it, and nothing enters or leaves the base without Bradford doing the same.

So imagine my surprise when Dr. Vahlen pages all Stardust staff at freaking three in the morning to report some sort of breakthrough. My first thought that went through my head was that Twilight was literally breaking through the lab. As in, with her mind. Tearing the walls asunder. Bull in a china shop. Wait, unicorn in a china shop? Ugh, it's too early in the morning, can't think straight. Don't laugh at me, you try being clever this early.

ANYWAY, Joel and I shuffled our way down to the lab to find Moira in a similar state. Twilight, however, was wide awake but looked on the verge of tears because of what was in front of her. Nine honest-to-god scrolls had somehow made it from her homeworld to her in this accursed vault containing personal correspondence from her friends and family. The exact contents of these messages will be uploaded as soon as possible, since our primary concern right now is how the hell they got here in the first place.

Reviewing the surveillance footage of the habitat shows some sort of distortion appearing in the habitat approximately two feet in front of Twilight. This distortion appears to be a cloud of black smoke that combusts into flames. The footage cuts out for a second but when it recovers Twilight is sifting through the pile of scrolls that inexplicably appeared there.

(Vahlen Supplemental)

The phenomenon that deposited this correspondence into Twilight's possession is accurately captured by the surveillance devices.

Twilight herself describes the event as being generated through a side effect of 'dragonfire'. The description is literal, as Twilight describes fire-breathing sentient reptiles native to her homeworld that can, if certain conditions are met, send small objects instantly across long distances so long as it is familiar with the receiver or destination. Unlike 'teleportation', there is no requirement for knowledge of the distance between points or energy gathering.

This is both more and less alarming than standard teleportation. On the one hand, the creature that sent the messages is capable of sending other things that may (intentionally or otherwise) threaten the safety

of the facility and we have no way of preventing it from reaching Twilight, or at the very least analyzing it before it reaches her. On the other hand, the arrival of these messages does not mean Earth's position has been pinpointed by another alien power...yet.

(End Supplemental)

(Mills Supplemental)

I can't believe Moira's asking me to speculate on the biology of a creature I've never seen that breathes fire to send messages across the universe. Every time I try to form a coherent thought on the subject, I keep thinking 'there be dragons here' before thinking about some of the cheesy movies coming out of Hollywood on the subject.

Dear God I need coffee.

(End Supplemental)

I'll be working with Twilight to get translations of the letters recorded. This will also give our translation algorithms a chance to flex their muscles now that they've got more material to work with.

UPDATE: 08:15, 05/02/2015

The letters have been translated and attached below, along with my own comments on the contents. After translation of a few of the letters I called Frank over to see if he could do any sort of handwriting analysis (I know they don't have hands so shush). His notes have been attached as well.

Also, for the sake of completeness, I've placed links to the corresponding drawings of each letter's author that Twilight drew back in April.

(Vahlen Supplemental)

Preliminary material analysis is complete on all the letters. What they all share in common is described below, while exceptional materials are described before each of the attached translations.

Paper - The paper itself appears to be constructed in the similar manner as ancient Papyrus. Pulped plant fibres compose the body of these letters, though more detailed information will become apparent after more thorough analysis is finished.

Ink - The standard ink used for the majority of the letters appears to be little more than water mixed with graphite and an as-yet unidentified thickening agent.

Ribbon - The ribbons used all appear to be silk and dyed red with an as-yet unidentified organic dye. Each length of ribbon is approximately 12 inches in length.

Clip - A clip was in place on each of the letters to secure the ribbon in place and ensure the scrolls stayed closed. The clip itself is brass, but the emblem appearing on the clip varies wildly. The majority of the emblems are also made of brass. They are approximately the size of a quarter in diameter, while being a half-inch thick. Stamped on the top of each is what appears to be a horseshoe.

(End Supplemental)

The letters detailed below are listed in the order that Twilight opened them. Once we expressed our interest in their contents she was more than willing to read them to us so they could be translated.

(UPDATE: As of the end of the day, 05/02/2015, the translations so far appear to be accurate based on what the algorithm calculates. The last letter continues to defy reasonable explanation.)

The first letter is identified as being written by 'Applejack' and begins below.

Howdy(1) Twilight!

I hope this letter finds you well. We've all been worried sick about you since Discord pulled his trick and sent you wherever you are now. Before I say anything else I want you to know that each and every one of us is doing everything we can to find you, or to make sure everything is just the way you left it when you get back.

There's been no official announcement about Discord or your disappearance, but we were specifically told that if anyone asks where you are, then we're supposed to say you're on a mission abroad to help save Equestria.

I know I'm just a simple pony, but I'm bright enough to realize that explanation is two bits⁽²⁾ short of being a flat out lie. There's just enough truth in it that I can tell it and still be believable, but it still makes me feel right guilty. The worst part is telling Applebloom⁽³⁾, since she can read me like an open book but she doesn't know when not to pry like Big Mac⁽³⁾. In the end she thinks you're out being a secret agent for the princesses or something, and I figure that's less terrible than the truth.

Now don't you go worrying about that down talk from me, Sugarcube⁽⁴⁾. I am still myself, and Discord never got the chance to cause any mischief. You just concentrate all your worrying and use it yourself to get home. I know that you will make it back to us. I don't lie, remember?

Your Friend, Applejack

(1) - Yes, Howdy. Direct translation from Twilight.

(2) - Bits are apparently the form of currency in Twilight's nation if not the world. She describes them as something akin to the gold coinage used about a century past.

(3) - Applebloom and Big Macintosh, siblings of Applejack.

(4) - A term of endearment that Applejack has for her friends.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

I never thought I'd be brought in to discuss the hand-writing of alien creatures.

The writing in this letter is, as far as I can tell, extremely rough. To draw a comparison, the characters when compared to the other letters (excepting Rainbow Dash's letter) appear rigid and block-like. Either Applejack doesn't write much, didn't receive proper writing education, or it might just be a quirk of being forced to write with her mouth.

The pressure to the paper combined with the letter slant can be used as a good indication of emotional state as we go through the letter. The paragraph starting with 'There's been no official announcement' starts to see slanted lettering and increased pressure on the paper, which would seem to support the content of the letter and the writer's distaste for half-truths.

Kim says this particular entity is a paragon of the virtue 'honesty.' Perhaps it's not a choice for her but a compulsion?

(End Supplemental)

The second letter is from 'Rainbow Dash.'

Hey there, Egghead⁽¹⁾.

Discord must have sent you preeeeetty⁽²⁾ far away if it's taking you this long to come back, right? Like across the universe or something. Oh, have you seen any aliens? Cause that would be so cool, unless they're mean. In that case I'd have to come find you and kick their flanks. Of course you'd probably bore them all to death with a lecture on friendship before I got there⁽³⁾.

I know you've got more important things to worry about, but I just wanted to let you know the Equestria Games⁽⁴⁾ are on hold. Celestia's been locked up in Canterlot looking for you since this whole thing happened and everypony in the world didn't want to start the games without her in the opening ceremony. I was thinking once you get back, we could all go make sure the Crystal Empire gets to host the games this time. They really need a break to go their way to get them back on their hooves after that whole Sombra thing.

I've also wrapped up one of our group pictures in this letter, and I expect you to bring it back! It's one of my favorites, but I figure you could borrow it for now. I swear, Egghead, when you get back and don't immediately give the picture back I'm going to follow you around with a rain cloud for a week, and buck the normal weather schedule!⁽⁵⁾

I -will- see you soon.

RD(6)

(1) - Yes, Egghead. This translation is apparently originally derogatory in nature but it's used more as a

term of endearment towards Twilight.

(2) - Yes, the word is stretched out like that in the original text, complete with an obnoxious amount of repeated letters.

(3) - Without context it might seem like the author of this letter is rather abrasive. Frank has some feedback regarding why this may be.

(4) - The 'Equestria Games' are described as an analog to the Olympics here on Earth.

(5) - Rainbow Dash is the weather team leader for the area that Twilight lived in back home. As mentioned in previous research notes, Pegasi have the capacity for weather control. Apparently she isn't exaggerating when she said she could follow someone around with a raincloud.

(6) -- The letter is signed with initials rather than full name.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

The writing in this one could only be described as sloppy. While the letter written by Applejack had problems, there was clearly an effort to make it legible. This letter, however, is a scrawling mess. The lines of text aren't straight by any definition of the word, and the size of the lettering tends to vary wildly along with the spacing between words and letters.

After reviewing the content of the letter, I have to also comment on the character of the letter itself. Just based on the wording combined with information provided by Twilight, the abrasive wording is actually a subconscious attempt at self-sabotage or a way to reassure herself that her friends are as loyal to her as she is to them. She is purportedly a paragon of the virtue 'loyalty' so she is expected to be so with her friends, but I suspect she's painfully aware that her peers aren't held to that standard.

Without meeting the subject in person I can only speculate, but she strikes me as one who covers up her own fear and insecurity with her boasting and showmanship. If my suspicions are correct, that holding the status of paragon may act as a compulsion to that virtue, it would only compound the issue.

(End Supplemental)

(Vahlen Supplemental)

The picture included with this document appears to be made of the same papyrus-like paper that the letter is written on. It is a photo rather than a hand drawn sketch, but thus far analysis has been unable to determine how the picture was captured on the paper without any of the chemicals we use for our pictures.

The subjects of the picture itself are Twilight and the five friends who sent her letters. The background appears to be a town square with one to two story buildings in the background. No technology higher than our mid nineteenth century is visible in the picture.

Twilight's explanation involved the use of magic, which I'm afraid doesn't tell us much at this point.

(End Supplemental)

The third letter is from 'Fluttershy'.

Hello Twilight,

I am so sorry that this happened to you. Had I spoken up when Discord was freed, things might have gone differently. This shouldn't have happened, you should still be here and that mean old Discord should be locked in stone. The hill where we freed Discord has been turned into a small castle by Princess Luna to hold Discord, and a lot of the local animals are really upset that the open field isn't there anymore.

Not that I'm criticizing Princess Luna's decision!(1) She did what was necessary to keep us all safe and to keep Discord locked up until the Elements are reunited and we can punish Discord for good. I don't want to sound mean, but Discord has gone too far this time. I just hope you come back soon so everything can go back to the way things were before.

Since you're probably curious, I've been stopping by the Library to check on Owlicious(2) and Spike. They've been getting along quite well, I suspect they came to an agreement in your absence. Spike is doing an admirable job keeping things running, though he has refused to take the title of librarian for himself. He's waiting for you to come back so we can pick up where we left off. We all are.

I hope you're doing well, wherever you are. Please don't ever doubt that we're still looking for

you. We will find you and bring you home safely.

Always your friend,
Fluttershy

-
- (1) - The overly apologetic tone of the letter seems to fit with the character described by Twilight, though honestly she sounds like a bit of a doormat.
(2) - Twilight's pet owl and second assistant at the library that she works at, apparently.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

The writing here displayed exceptional penmanship, despite it being done with her mouth. While I couldn't make heads or tails of the characters, I could tell that the person who wrote this is careful about every word they wrote.

And with that in mind, combined with information gleaned from Twilight, I'd tentatively diagnose Fluttershy with avoidant personality disorder. Her social phobias, extremely limited group of friends, overly kind and forgiving affect as well as her preference of the company of animals rather than peers that she isn't friends with all seem to indicate this. From what I understand she was the victim of bullying at a young age, and is extremely attached to Rainbow Dash as a longtime (and likely only) childhood friend.

This would suggest a bit of a symbiotic relationship between the two. Rainbow Dash needs Fluttershy because her childhood experiences ensure that the latter will always stay loyal to the former. Fluttershy needs Rainbow Dash because the latter is so forgiving of the former's perceived shortcomings and failings.

(End Supplemental)

Next is 'Rarity's' letter.

Twilight,

I cannot express in words how worried I am for you, darling. You just disappeared from the field right in front of Discord and I nearly died of fright. Princess Luna assures us that you're alright, and I feel deep down that she's correct, but at the same time I can't help but worry for you.

I'm not the only one who's worried. All the girls were rather distraught after the events that took you from us, and especially poor Spike. I suppose that should be expected, since you're like a sister to him, or perhaps even a mother. You've raised him for most of his life, it's only natural for him to be so concerned.

I suspect that he has been preventing his worries from consuming him by throwing himself into work at the Library. While I normally approve of such hard work and dedication, it is quite clear that his current state prevents him from taking any sort of a break. As such, I've taken it upon myself to borrow him on occasion to help me with one of my little projects. At least that's what I tell him. It is partially true I must admit, but it's more to get him out into the fresh air on a somewhat regular basis and have some fun.

I'm afraid I can't help him the way that the others do other than give him my time, and I am more than willing to give as much as he needs and more until you come back to us. And you will come back to us. Celestia as my witness(1), I will see you reunited even if I have to wring Discord's neck to achieve it.

Please, darling, come back soon.

Rarity

-
- (1) - In the context of this letter this seems like an oath to a religious figure in the way that we are familiar with, but Twilight continues to insist that Celestia isn't the subject of religious devotion.

(McKendric Supplemental)

At first I was convinced this was going to be a case of manipulative narcissism, where Rarity's generosity

was used to indebt people to her if they wanted her gifts or not, but after looking at the letter and reading the transcript I'm forced to revisit my initial opinion.

The script is beautifully rendered in flowing formal characters that almost look like calligraphy, and combined with the vocabulary and sentence structure I'm assuming she is cultured and had a healthy upbringing. Again, all these evaluations are done purely through second-hand stories and these limited written materials, but this one gives me the impression that she's well-adjusted and gives none of the warning flags that some of the others have given me.

(End Supplemental)

The next letter that was discussed is from 'Spike', the dragon who is Twilight's librarian assistant and, presumably, the one who transported the letters to Twilight.

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

I miss you a lot. It feels like it's been a lifetime since the last time I saw you. I knew it was a bad idea to let Discord free. And now you're all alone somewhere where we can't help you. I know it's going to be hard, but I don't want you to worry about me, okay? I know you will anyway because you're nice like that, but I want you to know right now that the Library will be exactly the way you left it.

The girls have all been amazing to me, also. They've all been helping out in their own ways. Plus I'm getting to spend time with Rarity which is always a plus(1). But I'd rather have you back, Twilight! You're family! I wish you were back home and everything went back to the way it was before, you know?

I really hope this letter reaches you. Luna said she would try to track the letter as it's sent to try and find you(2), but I honestly don't know if that will work. The letter travels instantly to whomever I send it to. Then again, this is Luna we're talking about. If anypony could do it, it would be her. Well, her or you.

I will ask if we can send more letters later(3). If she was able to follow this one even for a bit then it might give her a better idea on where to look. If we send more she might learn more!

Wherever you are, just hold on a little bit longer, okay?

Your Number One Assistant,
Spike

(1) - After speaking with Twilight, it was shared that Spike has romantic intentions for Rarity, though the age difference makes such a relationship unlikely. The species difference is for the most part a non-issue, as Twilight mentioned in a previous discussion with Pvt. Jenkins.

(2) - This raises a troubling point, as we are in no condition at this time to entertain visitors from an apparently peaceful third party in the middle of our war.

(3) - If we can further document these occurrences as they happen, we might gain a better understanding of how this 'dragonfire' works. The natural downside is that every message sent would be one message closer to Earth's location being compromised.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

It should be apparent to most readers and observers of this material that the person who wrote this is a juvenile. He's clearly attached to Twilight.

(End Supplemental)

The next letter comes from Shining Armor and Cadance, Twilight's brother and sister-in-law, who also now rules a neighboring nation to Twilight's. As Cadance's described powers are something we are quite concerned with, this letter has been earmarked for further scrutiny to try and glean any character tells that might aid us in future interactions.

Also, the icon affixed to this letter wasn't the brass horseshoe, but what appears to be a flawless diamond cut into the shape of a heart.

Dear Twily,

If the introduction didn't give it away, this is your brother writing. Luna invited Cadance and me to help out around Canterlot while she and Celestia continue to search for you, and she also explained what happened with Discord.

I want to say that I'm not worried one bit. You're the one who faced down Nightmare Moon, and an Ursa Minor, plus Chrysalis and the Changelings(1) and Discord not once but TWICE. Your mastery of magic is unrivaled and I am certain that you'll find a way back to us.

I'm afraid I've never been that good of a liar. Twily, I've dedicated my life to protecting the Princesses and everypony under them, and especially you. It makes my blood boil that this happened to you even though it was the Princesses' decision in the end and from what I hear I couldn't have prevented it even if I had been there.

It also terrifies me that this is something that I can't fix like a big brother should; that I can't protect you from whatever things you see there. If there was the slightest chance of success I'd rally the Guard and march through Tartarus(2) to find you. I wouldn't have to order them, either. You might not know it but every Guardspony knows you, by reputation at the minimum. You've helped save Equestria countless times before and every last one of them would volunteer to scour the stars and the darkness in between to find you again. I know what you're doing right now, Twily, you're shrugging bashfully and saying something like, "It was nothing."(3) Don't. You're a true hero to all of us, and to me as well.

I think I'm going to turn the letter over to dear Cadance before I further destroy my strong big brother image any further.

Twilight, I know we do our usual greeting whenever we converse but I would forgive you if you did not this time. I imagine you would look rather silly doing 'a little shake' to a letter. I hope I managed to make you smile, as I'm afraid that's all I can do with just a letter.

I can scarcely imagine what you might be going through right now, but I can feel your heart, Twilight. It's faint and it's far away, but I can still feel you. I don't think I can sense where you are with my power(4), but it fills me with joy to know that wherever you are you've found some degree of comfort, if not happiness. I hope the knowledge that we continue to search for you adds to the happiness in your heart as well.

And I'm not quite certain, but I could have sworn I felt something tugging on your heartstrings recently. I obviously don't know the circumstances but I'm overjoyed that someone that isn't a book has found at least a small amount of space in your heart. To see such a thing blossoming in someone I know so well is a beautiful thing, Twilight. Perhaps when you return you and I can go spend a day at the spa and you can tell me all about him (or her)!(5)

Also, don't forget your breathing exercises.(6) I know how worked up you can get when you're all excited. No pony likes a hysterical mare! And don't grumble and scowl, no pony likes a grump either.(7) Though you are rather cute when you're embarrassed. (8)

Oh, and don't worry about Shiny. I haven't told him a thing. I imagine if I did his brotherly indignation would somehow bridge the gap of space and time just so he could threaten bodily injury on your special somepony. He's just a wee bit overprotective, but you know that already.

Oh dear, I'm rambling now, aren't I? I suppose I should close things up before I have to fetch another piece of paper. My strongest advice to you Twilight is to cherish the things that bring you joy wherever you are, and remember that we will find you no matter what. Never forget that, alright?

Sincerely yours,
Shining Armor
Captain of the Guard
Prince of the Crystal Empire

Mi Amore Cadenza(9)
Princess of the Crystal Empire
Guardian of the Crystal Heart

(1) - Twilight has mentioned the Changelings in passing but has never elaborated on her experience with them. If there was some sort of invasion then that might explain her reluctance to discuss it. Perhaps with

this letter we can better frame our questions to approach it more gently.

(2) - Tartarus, according to Twilight, is a prison where only the truly evil are kept. As we can neither confirm or refute this, or their measure of 'evil', this explanation will have to suffice.

(3) - She was doing just that as she read the letter.

(4) - This raises a major security concern, especially considering the potential fate Twilight might face were she transferred to a less hospitable holding location. If this is accurate, Cadance can detect Twilight's emotional state regardless of the distance. If she were abused in any way then any first contact with Twilight's people would no doubt be colored in such a way that peaceful cooperation would be impossible.

(5) - Bloody hell. What started as something akin to a non-malicious prank by Jenkins to get Twilight's mind off of Vahlen's aggressive testing procedures seems to have blossomed into a ticking time bomb. If this is accurate then there's some truth to Jenkins' ribbing Twilight, and Harris still doesn't know about it. We've got to get this straightened out before it goes on any further. I do not want to see what Twilight would do when she finds out none of it was real after she decides to act on it.

(6) - Immediately after reading this, Twilight performed said breathing exercise. It appears to be a simple breath-in, breath-out exercise that takes approximately five seconds per cycle to complete.

(7) - She was grumbling and scowling after reading that.

(8) - She is!

(9) - This is apparently Cadance's full name, as 'Cadance' is just a nickname.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

As this is a two part letter for two separate persons, the evaluation here will be broken up accordingly.

Shining Armor appears to be honest throughout his writing. Judging by spacing, precision and paper pressure when he was getting to his fears, he is being completely honest about his worry for Twilight. For all of Twilight's peculiarities and quirks, her brother seems to be well-adjusted.

Princess Cadance is definitely not what I was expecting. From the materials that Kim and Joel provided me, I was expecting something akin to a chessmaster with powers of emotion bordering on mind control. I see no indications of such a manipulator in either how the text was written or the content of the letter itself. She seems about as benign as a meddling but welcome friend, which, if you read between the lines of Twilight's descriptions, that's exactly how she seems.

Of course, Kim and Joel have a very valid point. Those with power have a tendency to use it to get what they want. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that Cadance acts this way to someone she truly cares about while keeping the common folk under an iron boot. I don't get that feeling from the letter but it's just a letter. For all we know she had someone else dictate it for her and this isn't her handwriting.

(End Supplemental)

The next letter is believed to be from Princess Celestia. This assumption is based on the icon attached to the clip, which is that of a many-pointed star and is made entirely of pure gold. Twilight also asserts that it is her handwriting.

I am so sorry.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

So much is said in those four little words. So much more is said in the words that didn't make it onto the page.

The writing style was slanted and almost mashed together with very little letter or word spacing.

Combine this with the chemical analysis of the paper sheet that found traces of what appeared to be tears only adds evidence to the theory. Further evidence is provided by the paper pressure. Analysis shows that other papers were stacked on top of this one and were written upon before this final sheet was chosen for the letter. As we did not want to show too many of our tricks to Twilight, we kept all of this information confidential.

What this tells me is that Celestia is devastated by what happened and is likely still in an extremely fragile emotional state. If Twilight's reports are accurate as to her power, I imagine if Cadance were to report the unicorn's heart dying out, then Celestia might just show up in our system and toss the Earth out of orbit to let all of humanity freeze.

We'll have to tread lightly. Very lightly.

(End Supplemental)

The next letter is written by 'Luna', and is marked with a clip icon that consists of a pitch-black circular base made of an as-yet unidentified metal, with a crescent-moon in the center that is made of white marble.

To Twilight Sparkle,

I pray that this letter reaches you in good health, as we all fear for your safety even now. Cadance assures us that you are well wherever you are, and Discord also asserts your safety as well(1), though I don't trust him; not one bit.

Discord has been contained, at least for now.(2) A prison has been constructed and staffed outside of Ponyville with the expressed purpose of preventing his escape as well as protecting the secret of his freedom from the public. It is an imperfect solution, I will grant you, but it's the only solution that we have.

Please do not criticize yourself over the events that have transpired, Twilight. No one could have predicted Discord's actions, and no one blames you for attempting to complete Discord's challenge and save your friends the trouble. It is simply more evidence of your bravery and willingness to volunteer in my eyes, no matter what the results.

I continue to search the skies for any sign of your presence, though I fear it will be a long and arduous process. When Pinkie Pie contacted me with the idea of sending you a message through dragonfire, I must admit I felt quite foolish for not thinking of it first. Thousands of years of wisdom and the best suggestion I get is from Pinkie Pie of all ponies.

I will attempt to track this message and the others that are sent to get a better fix on your current position. If I am able to find your current location, I will have another message sent beforehand before I come to collect you. Worry not, dear Twilight. I will be coming to collect you as soon as I can(3).

Until then, stay strong my friend.

Princess Luna
Lady Lunar
Guardian of the Night
Your loyal friend

(1) - This is a rather disconcerting piece of information. We had been under the impression that Twilight had been, for lack of a better phrase, dumped here and forgotten so Discord could do whatever he does without fear of reprisal. That he was actively monitoring Twilight's health and relaying it to her rulers (and combined with the fact that he could, in theory, take her back there at any time, or send more of her people to her location) is even more distressing.

(2) - If Discord has been contained then that likely means that all available resources are being directed to find Twilight. It might be best to plan on when they find her, rather than if.

(3) - Perhaps we should gather the Stardust team and Bradford together to actually iron out a first contact scenario that doesn't involve copious amounts of guns? This is clearly a statement of intent and I'd rather not piss off the pseudo-deity when she comes to claim the friend she's lost.

(McKendrick Supplemental)

This one was quite possibly the least informative set of handwriting samples I can imagine. It's beautiful script and handwriting, I'll grant you that, but there's so little variance in any of the traditional handwriting markers that there's no way to tell what she was thinking as she wrote it. Character and word spacing is completely uniform throughout the entire letter, and the characters themselves are so exact that I almost mistook it for typeface.

The only conclusion I can grasp is that whomever wrote this has been writing for a very long time, and they have a very good grasp on keeping their emotions from bleeding into their work.

(End Supplemental)

This last letter is written by 'Pinkie Pie', and like the first few letters has the standard clip icon.

Also, I have no idea how she managed it, but I looked away just as Twilight opened the letter and when I looked back there were several baked goods on her table. Twilight explained that they were included in the scroll and that they were for us. How does one include frosted cupcakes in a SCROLL without getting frosting everywhere? And how did she know the exact number of people involved in the Stardust project, as well as our preferences?

(Vahlen Supplemental)

I was watching in the observation room when she opened the letter. I saw it with my own two eyes and I have no idea what happened. It was like looking at an M. C. Escher painting in motion.

(End Supplemental)

Regardless, Twilight's starting the letter now.

Dear Twilight Sparkle,

ELERIUM.

Sincerely,
Pinkie Pie!

Breakthrough

((AUTHOR'S WARNING: This chapter contains extremely strong and offensive language.))

ISRAELI DOCTORS PLAGUED WITH ACCUSATIONS OF USING SAMPLES TAKEN FROM INVADERS IN THEIR GROUNDBREAKING TREATMENT TO CURE ALZHEIMERS DISEASE. "THE TREATMENT CAN ERADICATE THIS DISEASE, WHAT DOES IT MATTER HOW WE CAME BY THE CURE?"

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN AN UPROAR AS POPULAR NEWS OUTLETS DISCOVER PATTERN TO DISAPPEARANCES IN SOUTH AMERICA NOT UNIQUE TO THAT AREA. DOZENS OF SPECIALISTS IN THE FIELDS OF ENGINEERING, CONSTRUCTION AND SCIENCES DISAPPEARED IN SIMILAR CASES IN NORTH AMERICA, EUROPE AND ASIA.

08:20, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

"...sincerely, Pinkie Pie." Twilight finished the last letter, before tilting her head to the side as she looked at the unfamiliar word that composed the body. "Eh-leer-ee-um... Ah-lar-ay-um? Huh, why would Pinkie Pie write some nonsense word in her letter? I was expecting regarding the Cake twins or..." She trailed off when she noticed the bald-faced shock on Kim's face. "What?"

"Elerium? That's what it says? *Elerium*?" Kim started, but before anyone could answer the door to the habitat shot open to reveal a rather more harried than usual Vahlen.

"You cannot be serious," She stated, as though her simply stating it would make it true. "Kim, did you mention Elerium before now at all?" Her somewhat manic glare fell upon Kim, who couldn't help but cringe slightly.

"No, I haven't. The translation software is working on the phonetic characters of the letter and they seem to spell out the syllables for Elerium." Kim replied quickly and she turned her tablet around for Moira to see. "I don't know how this 'Pinkie Pie' did it, but there it is."

Vahlen's face soured as she glanced over the tablet. "How is not the only concern. What does it mean?"

"Uh... what's Elerium?" Twilight's hesitant question wasn't even acknowledged.

"W-well, I heard from Doctor Shaw that testing is beginning today for the Elerium samples retrieved from the last mission. Perhaps it's referencing that?" The seated scientist tried hopefully as she shrank back into her chair to escape the other scientist's glare.

"How could she possibly know about Elerium testing that we haven't even begun testing yet? Or that we possess Elerium at all? Twilight isn't familiar with it so I find it extremely unlikely that this 'Pinkie Pie' would know anything more." Vahlen looked away and ran a hand across her face. "How?"

"How did she know the number of snacks to send to us?" Kim added with a longing look to a pumpkin cupcake with white frosting. "Or what our preferences are? I'm not sure how that's possible."

The look on Moira's face was more than enough to tell Twilight just where the conversation was heading, so Twilight did her best to prevent it. "Pinkie Pie does a lot of unbelievable things. I nearly went insane trying to disprove her abilities, but I learned in the end it's best to just accept them." Kim shrugged but didn't take her eyes off the cupcake in question. Moira's expression calmed somewhat but it was clear the questions still ate at her. "So, what's Elerium?"

Moira and Kim shared a look but before either could explain, the door to the habitat slid open to reveal Joel. Like Kim and Moira, fatigue was clearly apparent on his face though he seemed to be recovering due to the half-eaten donut in his left hand. "This is the best donut I have ever had," He said through the mouthful he was savoring.

"I gave you explicit instructions not to eat these until proper testing could be completed!" Moira fumed, though her anger petered out when Joel handed her a tablet.

"So far as the machines can tell it's all natural ingredients, with no toxins, chemicals or other potentially harmful ingredients," he sprayed crumbs in Moira's general direction as he explained, which earned him another disapproving glare. "Plus I'm running on fumes. None of us has had breakfast yet, and since Cee Oh Eff Eff Ee Ee is banned from the labs then I'll have to make due with a sugar pick-me-up. The crash is going to be murder, but right now I feel amazing."

"Uh...you know I can spell in English now, right? Why is coffee banned?" Twilight asked with an arched

eyebrow, and Joel nearly choked on his donut. "Nevermind, we're getting off topic. What is Elerium again?"

Joel's coughing worsened at that question but was ignored as Moira cleared her throat. "Elerium is a crystalline metal that generates specific phenomena when bombarded with certain particles. It is not native to our world." Twilight's eyes widened as the gravity of the revelation became apparent. "Studying the invaders' equipment and craft shows that they use Elerium in almost every instance of their technology."

"I suppose with that context, Pinkie's letter does seem rather ominous," Twilight muttered, and she looked back down at the offending paperwork. "But it still leaves the question of why she would write it in the first place."

"Perhaps it wasn't the Elerium testing she was referring to, but the 'arcanite' testing with Twilight?" Kim said off-handedly, "Really, it's about the only thing we haven't tested yet that isn't hazardous."

Moira turned and gave a quick nod at the suggestion, then headed for the habitat door. "I'll be heading to storage to retrieve a sample suitable for testing. Kim, prepare all the recording and observation equipment in the main testing area. If this test is going to yield results, I want it properly documented since we don't have enough Elerium to waste on do-overs." She took one step out of the door before hesitating and turning back to the table. In one quick move she scooped up a jelly donut and gave both scientists a withering glare that screamed 'Not one word from either of you,' before she finally exited the habitat.

Transcript of video footage, Stardust Labs, XCOM HQ

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

Person(s) identified within footage:

Dr. Moira Vahlen (V) - Lead Researcher

Dr. Kim Ngo (N) - Assistant Researcher, Behavioral Sciences

Subject 'Twilight Sparkle' (TS)

TIMESTAMP: 08:45, 05/02/2015

Footage starts with testing area of Stardust Labs, with (V) standing to the left of the 2 sq ft. elevated platform in the center of the room. (TS) stands opposite of the platform, (N) stands to the side against the wall. A small chunk of orange material rests in the center of the table

(V) - "Today's test was instigated by the extraordinary circumstances revealed earlier this morning, and deviates somewhat from standard procedure due to those circumstances. Prior materials testing involved simple manipulation via the telekinesis ability to determine the likelihood of a material being the previously described 'Arcanite' that was discussed with Twilight Sparkle."

-- "'Arcanite' is described as an element that reacts to the specific skills that Twilight's species possess, and we hope that if a terrestrial equivalent can be discovered, we may be able to gain a better understanding of how her powers operate."

-- "Previous testing had covered over ninety percent of terrestrial elements that were not of harmful nature, which has thus far produced no results."

-- "The element being tested today is Elerium, E-115. This element is not native to Earth, but is used extensively in alien technology for propulsion and energy generation, as well as some of the implants found in the recovered bodies of the invaders."

-- "Miss Sparkle, would you please explain what is expected from this testing?"

(TS) - "Anecdotal accounts of Arcanite describe the reaction as emitting visible light when in the presence of spellcraft; that is, magical energy that has been collected and shaped into defined purpose rather than ambient energy that can be found everywhere."

-- "However, Arcanite has not been available for testing in thousands of years, so the written accounts of Clover the Clever are the only evidence available."

(V) - "Very good. Light generation is the expected reaction, but several sets of measuring and recording equipment has been set up to document any possible emission that could be generated. Miss Sparkle, I will initiate a count-down, then please begin your testing."

** (TS) nods and closes her eyes to concentrate.

(V) - "In five, four, three, two, one—"

08:40, 05/02/2015, MESS HALL

Shaojie Zhang took his bagel to one of the farthest tables in the mess hall and took his seat with a little more urgency than he usually displayed. Any hope that he would have a peaceful breakfast was lost when Lana and Matt sat down next to him a few moments later.

"Hey, Zhang... haven't seen you in a while. I also hear you haven't been back to the Stardust labs since your last visit," Lana said with a rather forced smile. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were avoiding us."

"What Lana means to say is that we're concerned," Matt added after a moment, and his look of concern was much more sincere. His voice dropped in volume as he continued. "How are you doing since your last visit? I know it's a lot to take in..."

"I am fine," Zhang replied curtly as he tore off the first bite of his bagel.

A moment of silence fell over the table before Matt's expression hardened. "Yes, I'm quite certain that you are. But you have questions and concerns. I think a blind man could see that in you now. So, talk. No judgment here."

Zhang worked his way past a second bite before answering quietly. "I find myself struggling with the concept of a 'guest' like that being kept alive in this place. Is it not our stated mission to defend the Earth against such... things? And I can barely comprehend how you and the science personnel can be so comfortable around it."

"Very valid concerns, and I will admit it's a bit of a shock," Matt agreed. "It is one hundred percent accurate that she isn't like us. But I can guarantee that she isn't with our enemies, either. As far as we can tell, she's a completely unaffiliated third party that got dumped into this mess on accident. She is actually quite friendly once you get to know her."

"You speak as though she were a person—"

"That's because she *is* a person." Matt interrupted, and his eyes narrowed at the cool look Zhang returned to him. "You might not believe it now, but she's just as much a person as you or I. She reads books, she enjoys music and she likes to play cards. And I need not remind you that we humans have a disconcerting habit of applying the term 'people' unevenly. I'm also sure I don't need to bring up the war America had a hundred and fifty years ago because of that."

"I do not appreciate having my stance equated to those of slavers," Zhang replied evenly, though he looked away as he said it. "It is still disconcerting that your primary purpose in this organization is to kill the inhuman, when you spend your free time socializing with one."

"There's a misconception there, we aren't killing the invaders because they aren't human. We're killing them because they're trying to kill us first. If our short friend's people had contacted us first, then I honestly doubt that XCOM would exist in this form." Lana added, and both men fell silent at the insightful comment.

When Shaojie didn't immediately respond, Matt said, "So, what are your plans now? You can join us with our visit today...or not. I said it before and I meant it, if you don't think you're up for this then there's no hard feelings."

Before Zhang could reply, all three soldiers nearly jumped out of their chairs when Doctor Mills dropped a metal case on the table with a loud BANG. "Morning, kids. I brought gifts!" He announced cheerily and in blatant disregard for the heavy mood around the table. His hands worked on opening the locks on the rather ominous metal carrying case that had, among other things, biohazard and 'top secret' markings plastered all over it. All three soldiers recoiled slightly as Joel opened the side panel of the case to reveal... food. The doctor pulled out three small dishes and left them on the edge of the table.

"Gifts from Stardust. From what I hear you all should know what goes where," Joel said as he pulled up a chair. "Mine was a frosted donut."

"Oh dear god I think I just got diabetes from looking at that," Lana's gaze locked onto what appeared to be a solid block of chocolate on the center plate before she pulled it over to her seat.

Matt's reaction was somewhat less enthusiastic but nonetheless pleased. "Ah, this brings me back. I haven't had one of these since I was eight years old," He said with no small amount of nostalgia as he reached for what appeared to be a pair of chocolate chip cookies with what appeared to be vanilla frosting sandwiched between them.

Zhang could only give a skeptical look to the final plate which had a simple bagel on it. "It seems you know our tastes well, Doctor Mills. May I ask what the occasion is?" He asked as he pulled a bite out of this new bagel and dropped it into his mouth. His eyes immediately widened as he processed both the texture and flavor of the bite, and he allowed himself just a moment of weakness to savor it before swallowing.

"And judging by that expression, it seems the cook has a one hundred percent success rate. I wonder how she managed that." Joel said as he cupped one chin in his hand as he observed all three soldiers as they devoured their gifts. "To answer your question, mister Zhang, there was no special occasion as far as I'm aware beyond the fact that your diminutive colleague received some communication from home."

It took several moments for the soldiers to process just what Joel said before they realized the implications. Surprisingly, Lana was the first to respond, "Comms? Seriously? How'd that happen?"

"I'm not certain this would be the best place to describe the events in detail. Why don't you all head down to the labs once you're finished and we can explain there?" The scientist smiled and closed up his carrying case before rising from his chair to leave.

"Well, that was rather nice of him," Lana said with a shrug. "Though what he said about the cook makes me wo—"

BANG

The chair that Joel had vacated moments earlier flew up and into the ceiling where it exploded into pieces, and a half second later alarms began to blare. Both Lana and Zhang jumped backward with enough force to send their chairs tumbling behind them. Matt attempted the same but his chair had refused to be so cooperative and he ended up toppling backwards over the stubborn chair.

"Sonofabitch, what the hell was that!?" He yelled as he scrambled to his feet to see just what had happened. The rest of the mess hall was also on its feet and crowding towards the scene. For all the noise and violence of the chair's eruption, the only sign that anything was amiss was what appeared to be a ragged hole in the floor under where the chair had been as well as a corresponding one in the ceiling above them.

The shock of the moment quickly faded and everyone in the mess hall began to boil out of the room to their alert stations. Only one person hesitated, and Matt's eyes immediately locked on to him.

Joel stood near the exit like a puppet without a puppeteer with a blank expression, and he appeared to be mumbling the same words over and over again.

Oh crap.

09:00, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

"I-I-I think I may have not understood the events of Clover the Clever's written d-discovery of Arcanite," Twilight stuttered in English. A glass of water clattered between her hooves as she tried to take a drink. Kim sat close to the shaking unicorn and kept one hand ready to catch the glass if it fell.

And from behind the one-way mirror, Commander Bradford stood with his arms crossed as he watched Twilight come down from her panic attack. Vahlen and Joel stood beside him as they silently watched the scene unfold.

"Clover's notes say that Arcanite glowed w-when he cast his illumination spell. Rather than simply glowing in the presence of spellcraft, I t-think this test shows the Arcanite was reacting sympathetically to the spell that was cast to amplify the light of the spell," Twilight took another gulp before continuing, "When I used telekinesis to lift the Elerium, it sympathized with the spell and amplified the effects exponentially. *I am so sorry I didn't think of that possibility. What can I—*"

Bradford tapped a button to mute the audio from the habitat as he turned to face Vahlen. "Is that accurate?" His trademark glare fell upon the doctor as he asked the question.

"Correct," Moira replied crisply, and for a moment he wondered if his glare was losing his effect until he realized the look in her eyes. *She's made a breakthrough.*

Doctor Vahlen stepped up to the computer beside Bradford brought up several files before turning back to the Commander, "Approximately seven hours ago, Twilight received written correspondence from her people using an unknown means of delivery. While the method of delivery is an issue all its own, one particular letter indicated that Elerium was the material Twilight identified as 'Arcanite.' I authorized testing on an Elerium sample and these...unforeseen consequences occurred. The results are

inconvenient, but they are also quite promising.”

“Quite promising, doctor?” Bradford scowled, and his eyebrow twitched. “Your little test just lobbed a fist sized chunk of Elerium through several stories of reinforced concrete and steel with enough momentum left over to achieve escape velocity. I just got a report from mission control stating that one of the North American satellites registered a micro-meteorite impact but the trajectory of the projectile came from *our location*.”

Vahlen blanched at the full report of the damage and Bradford turned back to the little unicorn. He covered his face with one hand and rubbed his eyes. “It’s lucky that no one got hurt. Maybe if our luck holds, that chunk of Elerium will punch a hole in an invader hiding in the void.”

Once again Bradford turned to Vahlen. “Until Shen and the engineers complete the repairs, I recommend postponing further testing. I also want reports for any practical applications this testing yields.”

“It will be done, Commander,” Vahlen replied as Bradford walked past her and out the door.

09:05, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

“Damn, what kind of muzzle velocity do you think’s needed to get this kind of armor penetration?” Lana asked as she looked at the new ventilation in the lab. “That’s like… bunker buster material right there.”

“I don’t think it’s muzzle velocity so much as power. Plus with her magic I’m not certain that our standards of firepower apply.” Matt crossed his arms and surveyed the damage beside her. Zhang silently hung back near the door though he was no doubt as shocked as the other soldiers.

“I bet Twilight’s a gibbering mess after this. You were there when she had the freakout with the spider.” Matt muttered as he looked toward the door to the habitat.

“Oh I was, and you were there too. Perhaps you should go in and comfort her?” Lana asked innocently, and was rewarded with a glare that was decidedly acidic. “Seriously, we should probably check on her, she could probably use a friendly face or three about now.”

“I heard there was an alert—oh my,” Shen said as he entered the lab and caught sight of the hole in the ceiling. The moment passed, however and the job took over. He pulled a small camera from his jumper and started snapping pictures of the damage. “Well, we seem to be lucky this morning. I’m not seeing any electrical or piping damage on this floor, though I’ll have to check the other floors to determine if that’s the case for all the damage. Perhaps you kids should go see Twilight.”

“I…think I’ll stay and assist Doctor Shen,” Zhang spoke up, and both Lana and Matt shared a look before heading into the Habitat.

Kim and Twilight sat on the bed and were talking quietly, but both looked up and smiled at the new arrivals. “I’m glad you both could make it on such short notice,” Kim stood and said quickly. “As you’ve no doubt heard, testing did not go quite as planned. Please tell me you brought your cards.”

Lana grinned and produced her deck of cards out of one of her pockets. “Never leave home without them. So, how ‘bout it, Twily? I’m up for a nice relaxing game of Liar’s cards. You in, Kim?”

“Sure, sounds like fun.” The scientist said with a nod as she took a seat at the habitat’s guest table.

Lana slipped into a seat beside her and gave Twilight and Matt an enigmatic grin. Twilight’s response was a glare back at Lana as she took her seat, which left the last seat for Matt to occupy. *I wonder what that look’s about...* he thought as Lana began to deal the cards.

“All right, so what’s the topic now?” Lana asked as she looked over the table. “I’ve been choosing the topics lately so I figure you folks might like a chance to decide.”

“We’ve talked about our families a bit but I don’t think I heard about any of your parents. I’d like to hear about that if that’s alright,” Twilight asked with a smile. Both Matt and Kim nodded immediately, and Lana followed after just a second’s hesitation.

“All right, Twily chose the topic so she starts first.”

“Well, my mom and dad were very hard workers, though I didn’t get to see them as often as I’d like. My dad’s job was keeping street lamps going during the nights in Canterlot, so he usually slept during the day. Mom’s an author, which meant I would see a lot or a little of her depending on her deadlines. Also, one ace.”

“Oh, so that’s where you get it,” Lana said with a knowing smile. “Mom writes books, kid becomes

bookish. Also, one two." Her smile became a grin as Twilight scowled at her assessment.

"My parents were very... conservative," Kim said as she rearranged her cards. "They owned a supermarket, of all things, and I'm certain they wanted me to inherit the family business once they retired. They were most displeased by my career choice, but they certainly didn't turn down my offer to buy them a country home in Montana to live out their retirement. Oh, ah, two threes."

"Dad was in the Army, but retired to help take care of me and my sister. He served for ten years before he resigned. Mom was a catering manager for a local restaurant and dining hall, I ended up working part time at the restaurant until I graduated and enlisted," Matt explained, then picked a six and threw it onto the stack, "One four."

"Liar!" Lana called immediately, and Matt's reply was a burst of sotto voce profanity.

"It sounds like all of your parents worked really hard...but, I don't think you mentioned yours, Lana?" Twilight placed a pair of cards on the table before turning to the female soldier.

"Well..." Lana started with a somewhat pained expression as she dropped a card on the table. She gave Matt a pleading look.

Fortunately, he was saved from having to change the subject as the light flicked on in Twilight's head. "Oh...uh, you mentioned you just had your mom. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to bring up something that would make you uncomfortable."

"You have nothing to feel sorry for, Twily. My dad was there for a while, but I don't remember what he did. Then it was just mom and me holding the family together. She did lots of jobs to make ends meet until I was old enough to enlist. All the money I make goes straight home to help mom and my brothers out."

"That's very dedicated of you, Lana," Kim said sincerely as she put down a card of her own. "I certainly hope your current position allows you to make enough to help."

Lana's gaze fell upon Kim as though she were searching for some sign of pity or condescension, but was unable to find any so she simply smiled. "Thanks."

"Come to think of it, some of your brothers are likely getting old enough to graduate, right?" Matt picked two cards and dropped them on the table while mirroring Kim's sympathetic look. "My sister's approaching the end of high school, and she's being an insufferable lump about it. She has no idea what she wants to do."

"She still hasn't found out her talent? Tell her not to give up! I know three little fillies that can certainly sympathise." Twilight smiled and put two cards down before she reached with her hooves to try and take another sip of water by holding her cup in her hooves.

"...why don't you use your magic for that? Using hooves seems rather inconvenient. You're using your magic on the cards after all," Lana asked as she gave the attempt a doubtful look.

"Well... I know it sounds silly, but every time I think I should, I get this horrible feeling that the glass is going to punch a hole in the wall or hurt someone," Twilight took a sip before continuing, "And I don't think it's possible to hurt people with playing cards."

"I suppose that's true... unless you're Gambit." The female soldier scratched her chin with her free hand before yelping and almost doubling over before turning to give Matt a withering glare.

"Better be more careful where you swing your legs, Lana, you're liable to bang them against the table legs," Matt said to explain away her reaction to his shin kick. *We don't need Twilight afraid that she can kill people with any little thing. She'd turn into a basket case,* Matt thought and he prayed his return glare conveyed the message.

"Hey Matt, why don't you be a pal and refill Twilight's water? She's almost out," Lana suggested through clenched teeth as she glanced toward the unicorn.

Twilight looked from Lana to Matt, then back again so quickly that he briefly worried she'd strain her neck. "Oh, uh, that's not necessary, really! Well...thank you." She finally surrendered the cup while looking away. The behavior caused him to arch an eyebrow before he took the cup and headed towards the sink.

Lana's teasing must really be getting to Twilight, Matt thought as the glass slowly filled with cold water. *I know it must be embarrassing to get such harassment every time we're together. I'll have to convince her to stop being such a pest.* Matt turned back to the table and set the glass down beside Twilight. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second before she looked away again and started fidgeting.

Oh.

Oh no.

Lana's pained grin morphed into a smile befitting a Cheshire cat.

"...Lana, can I talk to you for a moment? Outside? Now?" Matt stated as much as asked, and he followed the female soldier out of the habitat and into the main testing area. Zhang was gone, but Charles was still surveying the damage to the ceiling.

"Lana, what's going on with Twilight?" He asked bluntly, which caused Shen to glance their way.

"Oh, she's going through the pains of youth," Lana replied with a dreamy tone, but she dropped it when she saw the look on Matt's face. "...you didn't know? Are you serious? Man I knew you were dense but I can't believe you're just picking up on it now."

"Oh God," Matt muttered as he turned away and covered his face with his palm, "Oh dear God how do I handle this?"

This time Shen definitely took note of the conversation, and he moved to join the two soldiers. "What's going on? You look rather troubled, Matt."

Matt turned to try and explain, but no words came to him.

"Matt's just a little shocked because he realized Twily has a liiiiiittle crush on him," Lana explained, and she laughed while looking away.

"What?" Shen said flatly, "Are you serious? Oh my, this has the potential to turn out badly... How exactly did this happen? Do either of you know?"

"Oh, well, you know, a girl meets a boy and then something magical hap—"

"Bullshit!" Matt interrupted, "You did something, didn't you? You told her something or pulled some kind of prank, or you're working some kind of goddamn plan of yours. I know that look, Lana. What did you do? What. Did. You. Do."

"Is that true, Jenkins?" Shen said, and his normally jovial expression and tone vanished. The anger wasn't as easily identified as Matt's; there was no indication beyond his clenched jaw and the narrowing of his eyes. "Are you using Twilight like that?"

The remains of Lana's good mood withered and died as she looked away. "You remember how Twilight was after her first round of testing with Vahlen? How scared she was? She was an inch from doing something rash that would have gotten someone hurt. An inch. All I did was give her something to hope for."

At this point Shen's expression darkened further and Matt threw his hands up and turned away.

"She had no hope! None! When I gave her something to hope for she started to turn around, you all noticed it!" Lana quickly explained, and were Matt not so angry he might have noticed the note of desperation in her tone. "I thought I'd give her that little bit of hope until she found something else to hold on to. Then Matt starts acting like he knows what's going on and it adds fuel to the fire. I honestly thought you knew and you were okay with it."

"WHY IN GOD'S NAME WOULD I BE OKAY WITH THIS?" Matt whipped around and screamed. "Jesus Christ, Lana! Do you know how badly this could end up?" Any further ranting dissolved into incoherent growling as he turned away and took a swipe at the empty air before turning back.

"I am very disappointed in you, Lana," Shen said evenly. "This is far beyond tolerable for a prank. Giving someone in Twilight's situation such false hopes will only end badly."

"...a false hope is better than no hope," Lana said quietly as she looked down and clenched her jaw.

That was the last straw for Matt, "I seriously cannot believe you are still trying to justify this! Seriously, are you so fucked up in the head that you think what you did was right?"

"Yes, I am," Lana growled from behind her gritted teeth. "I have been there. I know you think I don't give a shit about anything, and to be honest, I don't care anymore. I have been there. The place everyone ends up when they've lost all hope. I know what it's like to have my happy little life destroyed by a monster that has absolute power over me. I know what it's like to realize that I'm inches away from a death that I can't do a goddamn thing about. So, if you please, keep your high and mighty preaching to yourself. Especially when I didn't see you complaining when I was dragging your sorry ass out of the dumps, Harris."

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember Strike One? The *original* Strike One?" Lana's grin became vindictive when Matt recoiled as though he had been physically struck. "Yeah, now you're starting to realize it. You, the lone survivor when the rest of your squad got wiped out. Who kept you from dwelling on that fact? Who? Yeah, that's right. Before you complete your holy inquisition to burn me at the stake, I want you to realize that I'm not doing this shit purely for my own amusement. Now you go do what you have to and what happens afterward is your own damn fault."

Matt spared a look to Shen, and when he looked back Jenkins was gone and the Stardust Labs door was starting to slide shut.

10:30, 05/02/2015, FITNESS CENTER

Lana had wandered for nearly an hour before she finally strode into the soldiers' fitness center and gym. To the vast majority of XCOM personnel she appeared to be her perfectly cheerful self. No one thought to question her as she strode to the locker room and came out with her workout sweats and combat gloves on as she made her way to the punching bags.

She did pause, however, when she caught sight of a clump of soldiers gathered near the mats, she detoured to see what the fuss was about.

The fuss was over six and a half feet of Russian muscle and pride, and it was asserting both on the rather less impressive private from Strike Two. Lacking a good six inches and at least fifty pounds, the unfortunate private limped out of the ring with a pained expression.

"BAH! Come on, do not tell me that none of you elite soldiers can take me down? At least little Holiday had the guts to try!" The Russian monster yelled, and the crowd groaned and started to disperse...so Lana stepped up.

"Oh, you look like fun. I'd like to give it a shot," Lana shouted as she wormed her way towards the mats.

"What's this? Little girl wants a challenge?" The Russian monster laughed, though it quickly died down once he realized that the onlookers had gone completely quiet. "Well then, I'll go easy on you. It would be terrible if I broke you too badly to go on missions, yes?" The monster grinned as he noticed bets were being made in the crowd, though his grin faltered once he overheard the majority of the bets were concerning how long he would last.

Lana grinned all the wider and added a bit of sweetness to it. "Oh my, that's very generous of you. Please go easy on me, okay?" With her sickeningly sweet grin still on her face she walked over to the gear rack and retrieved a set of headgear before assuming her place opposite of the monster.

"Jenkins, Jenkins..." A voice came from the crowd, and the newly promoted Lieutenant Paul Dryzimski padded over to the female soldier. "Jenkins, what's wrong? I know that look."

"Why, whatever do you mean?" Lana asked in reply, and Paul blanched as the grin came to face him completely.

Rather than press the issue, Paul backed off then turned to the monster. "Do svidaniya," he said simply as he patted the monster on the shoulder and then stepped out of the ring.

"All right, kids, you know the drill. No broken bones, no injuries that puts anyone out of the lineup for missions. That clear?" The referee, Lieutenant Fujikawa, said as she looked from the monster to Lana.

"Yeppers!" Lana said and she began to bounce up and down on her feet. With nearly a foot less height and combined with that silly grin, she looked like a little kid when compared to her opponent. *That's the look I'm going for...*

Fujikawa gave the female soldier a flat look before blowing a short blast with her whistle. Two seconds later the Russian monster was out of the ring and struggling to breathe, and Lana was still bouncing and grinning.

The bouncing, of course, was a feint. The monster expected a high blow to the head or shoulders, but Lana had timed her landing with her legs bent when the whistle blew, and she sprang straight forward. Right closed fist executed a perfect diaphragm strike, left palm heel strike to the sternum caused him to stumble backward. Left foot hooked behind monster's right leg, exacerbating stumble. Monster recovers footing but is now outside fighting area on mats.

Point to Lana.

"Fucking dyke," The monster wheezed as he stepped back into the ring.

The grin disappeared.

A hand nearly as big as Lana's entire head swooped down and slapped her with enough force to cause her to fall to the ground.

"FUCKING DYKE! HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?" The monster screamed at her. She tried to straighten but the monster backhanded her with a closed fist. Pain exploded around her eye and Lana fell to the ground.

"D-dad, I was just joking. It was a joke!" a young voice tried to explain.

Stay quiet, Bill, it's not your fault. Let big sis Lana deal with this. She pleaded silently, and she cringed as she heard flesh connect and the boy cry out.

"Don't you lie to me, boy!" The monster growled, "I bet you get that from your mother. She's corrupting you. You come home with stories about this thing chasing other girls and then you try to cover it up? The fucking dyke is too far gone, she's not going to shame this family anymore."

A boot sped into her chest and Lana felt something break inside of her. The pain was too great...all she could do was curl up into a ball and wait for the pain to stop.

"Danny, stop, you'll kill her!" Her mother cried, and she too was silenced by the monster.

"DID I SAY YOU COULD SPEAK?" The monster roared at her before an unsettling calm fell over the scene. "I bet you two were in on it together, right? What better way to ruin my life than to have little Lana be a carpet muncher, right? I won't tolerate any dykes in my house." The monster's voice drew close to Lana, and she cringed preemptively against the blow she knew was coming.

"DANNY, STOP."

The sound of flesh striking, followed by a crash and glass breaking, and silent sobs.

"This is my house, bitch! I've had enough of you two questioning my authority and corrupting my sons." Heavy footsteps moved away, followed by keys jingling and a lock opening. A squeaky door wailed as it was thrown open. Only one door in the house makes that noise. The gun cabinet.

"Bitches and dykes," The monster muttered over the sound of two shotgun shells getting loaded into the breach. "It's about time I use you two to set a positive example for the boys. Deviants will not be tolerated. Back talk will not be tolerated." The click of the breach closing fills the room.

"Danny, don't!"

"Daddy, stop!"

A struggle started, and Lana does her best to rise and make her move. She had only one chance.

"GODDAMN IT, BOY. You get out of my way or God help me I will shoot you too." Lana's eye had swollen to the point that she could no longer see what was going on to her side, but she still winced in sympathy as she heard the dull thud of a rifle stock striking someone repeatedly.

"Danny...Danny, you don't have to do this," Her mother pleaded, "Just put the gun down and we can talk ab—"

"Talk? TALK? That's all you ever do is talk!" The monster yelled, "Talk talk talk, all day and night. I'm sure you talked Lana into the life of sin she's now in, and you're going to try and talk me into forgiving her. Well haven't you heard the good news sweetheart? GOD FORGIVES BUT I SURE AS HELL DON'T."

BANG.

The monster's back, once was powerful and muscled, disappeared in a cloud of blood and pulverized meat. He toppled forward wordlessly; dead before he landed on the floor.

Lana looked down the barrel of the shotgun she had retrieved from the locker. She couldn't hold it steady and it dropped to the floor.

"Point to Jenkins, that's the end of the match!"

Lana found herself being pulled back and her vision snapped back into focus. The monster...the Russian monster lay on the mat before her with his arms up to try and defend his already bloody face. Several welts were already clearly visible along his arms, chest and abdomen, but the most noticeable features

were on his face.

His lip was cut and bleeding and a massive welt was developing along the left side of his face...but the most striking change was the fear in his eyes. Not the fear of pain or injury. Fear of her.

"Jesus, Jenkins. You looked like you were going to murder him with your bare hands," Paul whispered once Lana had gotten back up to her feet. "Seriously, what's wrong with you?"

"Him."

A new challenger had entered the ring, who was just securing his own combat gloves and headgear while giving Lana his own level stare.

"I should have known you'd be here," Matt said grimly.

Lana stepped away from the Lieutenant and reentered the ring with a grin that was less warm and sweet than cold and shark-like. "And I'm glad you found me. To be perfectly honest I've wanted this to happen for a long time."

"And I've wanted to smack you just about every time you open your mouth these days.." Matt replied, and he didn't even attempt to smile back.

Lana began to bounce on her feet as she answered back. "Well then, someone is going to be rather disappointed by the end of this match."

"Yeah, the one who'll be disappointed is back at the Stardust Lab."

The grin disappeared again. "I'm not wrong. Nothing you say or do will change what I know is right." Lana stopped her bouncing and widened her stance, and her eyes began to narrow. Matt mirrored her movements, and the entire room held its breath—

"STRIKE ONE, ASSEMBLE FOR DEPLOYMENT. STRIKE TWO, ASSEMBLE FOR DEPLOYMENT. STRIKE THREE—"

The public announcement system drowned out the collective groan of the onlookers but they didn't let their disappointment slow them down as they flooded towards the ready room.

Paul gave both Matt and Lana something not quite severe enough to be a glare. "Ready room you two. Now. Whatever this is, it can wait."

Neither soldier acknowledged the order but both stepped back and turned to follow.

10:35, 05/02/2015, ENGINEERING

The engineers and workers toiling away in the workshop had been with Charles Shen long enough to know that if he wasn't smiling then it would be best to stay out of his way. Such was the case when Charles stormed into the workshop that his normally friendly coworkers and subordinates hunched down or otherwise lowered their profiles to avoid attracting his wrath.

"Crowley, Hamill! Testing in one of the science labs resulted in damage to the facility that we need to repair now. Drop what you're doing and follow me." Shen barked without even looking at the two men he called. The two luckless engineers literally dropped what they were doing and ran to catch up with Shen's long strides. "Where's Zhang?"

"Here, sir." Zhang reported from somewhere behind Shen as though he had materialized out of thin air.

"Good." Shen stated as they headed towards the storage rooms. "The testing misfire didn't damage any complex components such as electrical or networking, it's mainly structural damage that will need to be repaired. I expect these repairs to be completed within—"

Shen stopped in his tracks as his head whipped around to the storage room dedicated to holding alien materials. A soft glow could be seen emanating from the door's viewport. The engineer took a turn right for the door and swiped his access badge across the lock reader before pushing the door open.

Dozens of crates filled with various curios which included weapon fragments retrieved in the field to complete computer systems torn from crashed UFOs lined the shelves, but sitting on the center table was a small box-like device covered in alien lettering that glowed with enough light to illuminate it's section of the room. Shen scowled at the device as he approached, before turning back to the door and yelling, "WHICH ONE OF YOU MEATHEADS LEFT AN ALIEN DEVICE ACTIVATED IN STORAGE!?"

"...that's the beacon I delivered to you in Hong Kong..." Zhang muttered under his breath.

"Uh...sir?" Hamill said tentatively, which brought the wrath of the usually cheerful engineer upon him. "The power switch we found is set to the 'off' position."

Shen turned back to the device and just like the engineer had said, the power switch that had been identified was set in the off position. There was no cabling to power the device...the Elerium battery had been removed as well, and yet it was now active.

"New plan. You two prep the beacon for transport. I need to talk to Bradford n--."

"Shen, Bradford." The comms headset around Shen's neck buzzed, and he brought it up to his ear with a perplexed look.

"Ah... This is Shen..."

10:45, 05/02/2015, BRIEFING ROOM

Six full strike teams complete with full kit packed themselves into the briefing room as Bradford entered. Immediately the chatter died and the briefing began without preamble.

"Approximately fifteen minutes ago, satellite detection discovered alien craft entering our atmosphere. Four scout-class saucers and a fifth ship that's bigger than anything previously encountered. Current heading is this base's current position." Bradford said as a flurry of images appeared on the screen behind him. As he finished his first statement, the room collectively sucked in its breath.

"Doctor Shen reports that salvage thought to be a beacon spontaneously activated at approximately the same time. The leading theory is that this beacon is drawing the enemies to us, so the operation has two objectives. The first objective will be carried out by Strike One. This mission will be to deliver the now-active alien beacon to a cargo train waiting in a yard near this urban center, then engage the train's locomotive to draw the battleship's formation away from both this base and population centers. Sergeant Harris, Private Jenkins, you two will be in charge of carrying and deploying the beacon. I am authorizing the use of Wallflower equipment for this operation, so please retrieve it. The beacon will be waiting for you."

Matt and Lana wordlessly separated from the mob of soldiers and headed towards the exit.

"The second part of the operation will be detailed in the Skyrangers while the first part is underway. Dismissed."

10:55, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight's game of solitaire was going horribly. After Lana and Matt left the game prematurely, Kim had taught Twilight a game she could play all by herself. With solitaire, she could kill time when there was nothing to do between testing or visits, Kim said. It's a fun way to pass the time, Kim said.

This game... Twilight stared at the predicament she now found herself in, and she had to resist the urge to flip the table over in frustration. For the third time, she found herself with no options to reveal more cards or add to existing stacks. Which meant the game was lost.

Breathe in...breathe out.

Twilight was just about to reshuffle the cards when the door to her habitat opened and in came a rather stressed-looking Matt and Lana. Both were now wearing bulky segmented vests and a plethora of tools and gadgets around their belts, including a silvery pronged hammer that made her distinctly uncomfortable. There also appeared to be full-face helmets in their hands. Matt in particular appeared to have a large backpack slung over his shoulders.

Both of her friends also had several bits of English language written on their clothes, on the front of each was spelled H-A-R-R-I-S and J-E-N-K-I-N-S. Something about those words...

"Twily, I hate to just drop in and make demands..." Lana said quickly, "...but we need a really big favor. Can you cast Wallflower on us?"

"What? Why? I-I thought I wasn't supposed to use that anymore. I don't want to get either of you in trouble..." Twilight started, but the impatient looks the two gave each other caused her to pause. "There's something terrible going on, isn't there?"

"I'm...afraid so, Twilight. We need to go out and stop it from happening, but in order to do that we need Wallflower," Matt explained quickly. "We need it now, time is of the essence."

"Okay..." Twilight murmured, and she cast the spell on them. "It's done. Good luck!"

"Thanks!" Lana chirped.

"Thanks, Twilight," Matt agreed, and they both turned to leave the habitat as they slipped their helmets on. "Harris here. Jenkins and I are en route to the hangar. ETA is five minutes."

Twilight might have waved goodbye but she was too distracted as the pieces fell into place in her mind.

Twilight moved to follow but hesitated when she saw they were no longer alone. Two more humans were in the corridor. They wore thick segmented vests and rather scary full-face helmets, and wrapped around their waists and legs were an impressive amount of pockets and pouches. One carried a large metal tool in its claws that looked like a metal box with two pipes sprouting from the end. The other carried two smaller tools, one that looked almost exactly like the one that Charles had when they first met, while the other looked like a silvery hammer with prongs protruding from the head. The second tool looked familiar but Twilight couldn't put her hoof on just why that was, so rather than dither any longer she stepped outside to stand beside Charles.

"Are these your friends too?" She asked hesitantly, and Charles gave a nod in response.

*"I suppose they are. This is Corporal **Harris**..." The human indicated to the twin-tool user, who nodded slightly but otherwise didn't respond, "...and this is Private **Jenkins**. They'll be joining us on our short walk to the quarters we've arranged for you."*

*Matt looked to Twilight sympathetically and said, "When **we** first found you, Twilight, you were defending yourself from imminent death and that thing you killed would have killed more people afterward."*

Buildings burned around her.

Three humans dead across the clearing.

The bug crushed in front of her.

The shadow falling over her.

She looks over her shoulder and sees another human in armor and pointing the silver tool at her.

A flash of pain, then darkness.

She awakes in a giant glass jar surrounded by humans with unfriendly faces.

The walls of the jar open up and the limbs reach towards her...

Twilight swallowed and tried to breathe in and out as she grappled with the realization that Matt, her friend, had been the one who had brought her here in the first place.

Gangplank

BREAKING NEWS: POLICE AND MILITARY FORCES IN NORTHERN UNITED STATES AND SOUTHERN CANADA ARE REPORTED MOVING TO ALERT STATUS. BOTH CIVILIAN AND MILITARY AUTHORITIES REFUSE TO COMMENT DESPITE MOUNTING EVIDENCE OF TROUBLE ON THE HORIZON.

BREAKING NEWS: GOVERNOR OF NORTH DAKOTA ISSUES STATEWIDE REQUEST FOR RESIDENTS TO STAY IN THEIR HOMES AND BUSINESSES AS METEORS SPOTTED EARLIER IN THE DAY ARE POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS ALIEN CRAFT. "STAY AWAY FROM YOUR DOORS AND WINDOWS. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO TRAVEL. STAY HIDDEN, STAY SAFE, AND MAY GOD HAVE MERCY ON US ALL."

11:27, 05/02/2015, SKYRANGER BIG SKY

Click.

"Estimated time of arrival at the train yard is approximately ten minutes," Bradford's voice came from the head of the Skyranger's passenger compartment. A rough overhead image of the yard layout appeared, along with an animated arrow indicating Strike One's insertion point, and the train a short distance away was highlighted as well.

Click.

"The fourth car in the train is an empty cargo container. Harris will deploy the beacon within the car, then Strike One will proceed to the engine and start the train, then regroup with Big Sky to rejoin the other Skyrangers for the second part of the operation. If this mission is successful the alien attack force will be diverted to the west and away from population centers."

Click.

"From there, interceptor squadrons will make an opening in the battleship's formation to allow the Skyrangers to approach the ship to engage in boarding action. Data on the ship is still being compiled. Once a more complete picture is gathered, a method of assault will be devised to board and disable the ship."

Click.

"Good luck."

The monitor in the passenger cabin winked out and left Strike One in almost total silence.

Click.

The only sound that could be heard was the slow and deliberate clicks of Lana's shotgun as she loaded shells one by one. The tension between her and Matt was almost palpable, and the rest of the team could sense it. They all had their helmets on that hid their expressions but it was also apparent that the two soldiers were wordlessly glaring at each other.

"All right, kids," Lieutenant Dryzimski said, "You heard the boss. Harris and Jenkins on delivery, the rest of you lot are on overwatch. This is going to be clean and by the book. We're all professionals and we're going to work. Leave your personal crap here the moment the ramp drops. Clear?"

"Clear, sir!" Strike One replied in unison, though everyone involved knew exactly who he was referring to.

Silence fell and the tension returned, before Henderson asked, "So, what's 'Wallflower' equipment? Doesn't sound like the kind of alphabet soup name that comes out of the Foundry. What's it do?"

Matt sucked in his breath before he caught himself, and the only sign that the question startled Lana was a brief pause in her robotic loading movements. "I'm afraid it's mostly classified, but I can tell you it's a sophisticated camouflage system." Matt explained after considering his options. "I don't know how it works, sorry."

Henderson seemed satisfied by the answer and Matt let out a held breath in relief, until Anderson asked another uncomfortable question, "Something's been bugging me for a while. You remember that thing you captured last month? The unicorn thing?" Harris had to resist jerking his head around to glare at the marksman, and Lana nearly fumbled the shotgun shell in her hands. Zhang's response was the most subtle, his hands tensed before relaxing back to their more peaceful state on his legs.

If Anderson noticed the signs, he didn't bother stopping to acknowledging them. "It's been a month since the capture and we've not heard one word about it. And wasn't it responsible for the scare down in Containment? I mean, we usually receive a summary of the research team's new findings, even if the summary is 'shoot it here.' What's the holdup?"

"I'm a little curious about it, too..." Potter spoke up, though he flinched noticeably when Lana's helmeted head turned to face him.

"What makes you think we know?" Lana asked slowly.

"Nothing really, nothing!" Anderson backtracked quickly. "I just thought it was strange is all. I spoke with some of the guys in the other teams and none of them have seen any unicorns in their missions. Some of them even thought it was a joke! I went to prove what we found during the mission and every mention of the thing is gone from the AARs, even the preliminary stuff that was written up as we got back. There's no trace."

Jesus Christ, just shut up and stop looking, you idiots, Matt would have screamed, but was saved by an unexpected ally.

"Before you spend such time pondering why such information is not available, perhaps you should consider the consequences of such a search," Zhang commented with the tone of a teacher addressing a student. "We work for an organization that prizes its anonymity above all. If such an organization hides such information, it is no doubt to preserve that anonymity, and it would not take kindly to someone who takes it upon themselves to uncover that which they purposefully hid."

"You...have a point," Anderson nodded as he sank back into his seat.

"Unicorns? You're jerking my leg, right?" The newest addition to Strike One, a rookie named Halverson, said with a laugh. "Are all you on some kind of organized campaign to pull my leg? First there was a flock of guys from Strike Six who were trying to convince me their Sergeant could bend spoons with his mind and now unicorns? Come on. I don't have naïve tattooed on my ass."

Any further conversation was cut off when Big Sky's voice filled the passenger cabin. "Strike One, prepare for landing in ten seconds. Landing zone appears to be clear of hostiles."

"Alright, cut the chit chat and get ready!" Dryzinski shouted and the team rose to their feet and grasped the handholds to steady themselves as they turned to the exit ramp. The grated metal descended to reveal row after row of tracks and seemingly abandoned train cars before slowly coming to a stop, and the soldiers boiled down the ramp like a flood. Jenkins and Harris sped out and into cover and the rest were close behind.

"Big Sky, Strike One Actual. We're clear." The Lieutenant reported before propping his machine gun up to cover the cargo-laden expanse between their current location and the train in question. "Harris, Jenkins, double time! We'll take up positions around the train."

"Solid copy, Strike One." The Skyranger's VTOL engines flared as it lifted off. "Command, Big Sky. Strike One is on site and we are assuming overwa—EVADE! Strike One, be advised, enemy aircraft is en route to your position!"

Harris and Jenkins were already halfway to their target when Big Sky's frenzied report came across the comms, and Matt had just enough time to look over his shoulder to see one of the invader's ominous saucers zoom overhead and stop almost immediately over their position. "Jenkins, SHIFT IT!" He screamed as a series of blue flashes appeared along the underside of its hull.

Flashes of blue began to appear around the two sprinting soldiers and for a brief moment Matt thought he was going to be vaporized by plasma fire...until he saw shapes begin to resolve themselves within the light. They were huge hulking monsters with vaguely human shapes. As the blue light disappeared their forms became more clear, with heavyset green armor and massive plasma rifles. The flesh of their faces was an angry pinkish red, and in place of a nose and face there was a horrid amalgamation of flesh and metal. Their angry yellow eyes quickly took in their surroundings... and completely ignored both Matt and Lana in favor of the other soldiers in Strike One.

The rattling reports of gunfire echoed behind the two as they completely abandoned any pretense of cautious movement in favor of a dead sprint towards their objective. Harris made the open cargo car first and rolled inside, while Jenkins was right behind. He didn't waste a single moment in tearing the bag off his back and emptying its contents onto the floor as Jenkins pressed herself against the door to intercept any interlopers.

The beacon was a cylinder roughly the size of a Pringles can, with an almost smooth and featureless surface save for the series of lights glowing severely along its side. Also included in the bag was a pair of brackets that Harris quickly fit around the ends of the beacon before he retrieved the last item in the bag:

A nailgun. The search for an inconspicuous place to stash the beacon was mercifully quick; he selected a bare section of wood pallette between two massive boxes at the end of the car and brought the nailgun to bear on the brackets while trying to ignore the ongoing battle outside and in the radio.

"Command, Strike One! New enemy contact is heavy infantry. Designation is Muton." "Jesus, they're coming right for us!" "Don't bunch up, they're trying to flank us!" "Body shots are not effective, go for the headshots!" "Anderson, Halverson, covering fire! Frag out!" "Ohshit, enemy close air support, heads down no--" "SHIT, Henderson's gone! He's--" "Command, Strike One! We are pinned down by enemy CAS, requesting interceptors on our location!" "Solid copy, Strike One. Skull is inbound."

The last nail sank into the wood pallette and secured the beacon in place, and Harris tossed the nailgun as he turned to stack up behind Lana. One quick tap on her shoulder was the signal she needed to dismount the car and rejoin the fray. The once tranquil rail yard had devolved into a warzone, with several overturned rail cars now scattered in the area. The scattered reports of gunfire from Strike One echoed from across the way and were quickly answered by the whoosh of enemy plasma fire as well as the roar of ship-grade plasma from the saucer still loitering above the zone.

The saucer continued to casually dispense fiery green death upon Strike One's position before the angle of its shots swept upward to fire on something at a higher elevation. The entire saucer then jerked to the side to narrowly dodge a missile heading straight for it, followed by the lightning-fast form of an Interceptor as it screamed over the combat zone. The saucer angled slightly and fired as the Interceptor passed, then moved in pursuit. No sooner had the saucer left its position than two more Interceptors appeared in pursuit of it.

"Strike One, enemy air assets are occupied. Good luck, Skull Actual out."

"One one, this is Harris! Beacon is planted! We can sweep around behind the enemies and flank them in thirty seconds." Matt shouted into the comms as he made to follow his own suggestion but the response cut him off.

"Negative. Get to the engine and get the train running. We can hold the xrays here but you have to get that train moving now, Sergeant!"

"...Copy that. Good luck, Harris out." With his orders clear, he turned and ran towards the head of the train with Jenkins in tow. What felt like an eternity passed as the pair sprinted past a dozen cargo cars before finally reaching the engine. Harris mounted the cab and flung the door open while Jenkins fell into the shadow of the engine itself for cover.

What Matt feared would be an insurmountable wall of instrumentation and controls turned out to be significantly well-documented, including numbered controls to activate the engine and release the throttle. Just as he was following the steps, Jenkins' voice came through the comms.

"One one, second wave of enemy reinforcements from the saucer... thin men approaching your position dressed as civvies! No suits, mixed civilian clothes."

Matt couldn't resist the impulse to look out the cab window for a moment at the report, and he did see what appeared to be a half-dozen men charging through the rail yard in what appeared to be an assortment of coveralls, sweats and police uniforms. A pair of them leapt onto the cab and Matt had to resist the impulse to duck as he heard their footfalls on the roof above him. He flipped a few levers and the train lurched into movement just as the soldier headed for the door.

"Big Sky, can you intercept?"

"Big Sky is en route. Harris, Jenkins, recommend you keep your heads down. Tally ho."

Harris had just exited the cab in time to catch the Skyranger's idling profile as well as the meter-long gout of flame sprout from its chin. A trio of the thin men that tried to return fire simply evaporated in a cloud of reptilian ichor and poisonous clouds. The two running along the top of the train dismounted on the other side, while the third on the ground dove and rolled underneath it for cover.

Big Sky's appetite would not be so easily thwarted. The VTOL engines in its wings vectored and it slid sideways to bring the other side of the train into view. The chin gun roared again for half a second before the pilot finally reported his success. "Thin men are neutralised, resuming overwatch."

"One one, Harris. Train is moving, we're on our way back to your position." Harris dismounted the train and tapped Jenkins on the shoulder before the two sprinted back to the firefight still taking place back in the train yard. One of the big green brutes was down in the center of the yard, with dozens of pock marks, scrapes and burns along its armor and a neat hole drilled in his forehead. One stood behind an overturned rail car nearby and fired shots downrange at distant targets, while two more skirted along the side of the rail car in an attempt to flank.

No instructions needed to be given as Matt raised his rifle and began to fire shots at the first Muton while Jenkins took off to chase the two flankers. Matt's target flinched from the shots taken at it before it turned and leveled its plasma rifle, just in time to catch a shot in the left eye. Rather than simply fall to the ground dead, the thing screamed and charged forward while waving its rifle like a club. Fear lent Matt wings as he dove to the side, and as he rolled over to bring his own weapon to bear he saw the Muton continue running blindly forward while swinging its rifle before stumbling and falling to the ground, dead. He scrambled to his feet to assist Lana...but stopped.

The two Mutons she had chased had stopped to stack up in an eerily similar fashion to XCOM's standard procedure, and Lana came in right behind the tail position and leveled the shotgun at almost point blank range with the second Muton's face. One trigger pull reduced its head to meat, and Jenkins simply racked her shotgun and turned to the next one and repeated the process.

"Command, Strike One. The package has been delivered successfully and all targets have been neutralised," Lieutenant Dryzinski reported as he rose from cover with his machine gun. "Donald Henderson is KIA."

"Copy that, Strike One. Regroup for extraction with Big Sky."

12:01, 05/02/2015, MISSION CONTROL

"Copy that, Strike One. Regroup for extraction with Big Sky," Bradford ordered through the radio, and he had to resist the urge to let out a breath he did not know he was holding. *First half of the operation complete with only one casualty...unfortunate but acceptable.*

"Command, Big Sky. Strike One is retrieved. We're oscar mike to the rally point," The pilot reported but before Bradford could reply, a second report cut him off.

"Command, Skull Actual. Tango one has disengaged and is returning to the rail yard... strike that, Tango one has fired on the train!"

"What?" Bradford growled as his eyes jumped to the gun cameras of the interceptors. The saucer was indeed firing plasma on the length of the train and it was soon a smoldering wreck from one end to the other. A moment later the saucer itself was struck with a trio of missiles as the interceptors caught up with it, and it fell to the earth like a stone.

"Sir, the battleship and its remaining escorts have resumed course towards the city!" One of the control room technicians shouted, and the main monitor switched to the satellite view to confirm the report. The rectangular ship was indeed correcting its course towards the nearest population center, and its three remaining escorts remained in position around it like pickets around an aircraft carrier.

"Signal the national guard to begin their assault, we have to delay them at all costs." Bradford said decisively before swithing channels. "Command to all Strike teams. The decoy operation has failed and the battleship has altered its course to head towards the nearby city. As our current air capabilities would not be able to destroy it before it approaches the city, it is now imperative that we board and disable the battleship before it reaches the city or thousands of people will die."

Bradford tapped a few fingers on his tablet and the display in front of him turned into a 3D model of the battleship and several spots became highlighted as the image was fed to the soldiers.

"Analysis shows the majority of its weapons are concentrated in the forward and ventral surfaces of the battleship. In addition, there appears to be personnel access points and firing positions along the dorsal surface which leads our analysts to believe it is designed for bombardment and area suppression and has little in the way of integrated weapon systems to repel attacking aircraft. Interceptors will engage and eliminate the escorts providing close support to the battleships, which will allow the Skyangers to deploy the Strike teams on their designated locations."

"King Fisher, Big Sky; you are to deploy your teams to the aft section of the ship near the access point there, and Strike One and Two will attempt to disable the engines. Ominous, Domino; you are to deploy your teams to the central section, and Strike Three and Four will secure any access points going from the fore and aft sections of the ship as well as provide support fore or aft if necessary. Harbinger, Crimson; you are to deploy your teams to the forward section, where Strike Five and Six can secure the bridge and any command assets there."

"All units, commence operation." Bradford finished with as much confidence as he could muster in his voice.

"Skull Actual, solid copy." "Diamond Actual, copy." "Ghost Actual, solid copy." The Interceptor squadrons reported as they peeled off and charged toward the alien formation.

"King Fisher, acknowledged." "Big Sky, solid copy." "Ominious, message recieved." "Crimson, understood." "Harbinger, copy." "Domino, solid copy." The Skyranger pilots all turned in tight formation in the wake of the interceptors.

"Strike One, solid copy." "Strike Two, solid copy." "Strike Three, message recieved." "Strike Four, copy." "Strike Five, solid copy." "Strike Six, copy." The Strike team leaders closed their links as they readied their soldiers for battle.

"Sir..." one of the mission control personnel spoke with a guilt-riddled voice, "Air Guard is pulling back, they've suffered over seventy five percent casualties."

"They've done all they can, now it's our turn," Bradford replied, and he crossed his arms to project more strength than he felt. *God forgive me...so many of them are going to die.*

The command display began to dissolve into anarchy as the two forces met.

The saucers and the battleship's limited broadside weapons opened up on the approaching Interceptors with stuttering green lines of plasma fire, while the Interceptors responded in kind with flocks of missiles. One saucer failed to avoid a missile in time which staggered it long enough for the majority of missiles to follow, and it exploded spectacularly. One Interceptor lost a wing to plasma and spiraled out of control towards the ground, while another took a volley and broke up in mid-air. A split second later the Interceptor squadrons were past the invaders and split into three separate formations to begin a second, staggered attack run.

As the second attack run began, the Skyranger formation began its descent towards the battleship. The six transports split up into pairs for their assigned sectors, and they began evasive maneuvers as scattered fire came from the two remaining saucers. One of the Skyrangers in the central formation took a blast of plasma in one of the VTOL engines and a second to the cockpit. The now flaming hulk sank out of the central formation and disappeared from sight with its doomed and helpless cargo still inside.

All Bradford could do was simply watch as they died.

"Brace for evasive action, we're approaching the battleship now." came the command over the passenger cabin intercom, and the remaining members of Strike One grasped their harnesses. Lana rocked forward and back with the momentum of the Skyranger as it twisted and turned to avoid whatever danger was going on outside, and she pointedly didn't look at the now empty seat in the passenger cabin.

I should say something... anything! Lana wracked her mind for some sort of pithy comment to alleviate the mortal fear that now filled the room, but her eyes settled on Matt and his helmeted gaze was still directed at her and her mood instantly soured. *Goddamn it, Matt, why couldn't you have just played along?*

Any further thoughts on the situation back at the base disappeared as the Skyranger's ramp cracked open to flood the compartment with the roar of the wind as well as the sounds of the conflict outside. When the muted purple hue of the alien battleship came rushing up to the ramp, Lana hit the quick release on her harness and ran down the ramp. Matt was right behind her, followed by the rest of Strike One. Big Sky never came to a full stop, and the moment the last soldier made it down the ramp it was already ascending.

Strike Two boiled out of King Fisher in a similar manner nearby, and Lana could see further down the hull another Skyranger depositing a strike team in the midsection of the battleship. She was just about to turn and make her mad dash to what appeared to be an access hatch in the aft section when she noticed flashes of silver. Three silver disks detached themselves from the hull and unfolded into shapes that reminded the shotgunner of the spiny fish she had seen at the zoo when she was young. Two pairs of 'fins' jutted out from their sides as well as a whip-like segmented tail from their aft sections gave them a predatory look, and they zoomed toward the Skyranger in the central section like sharks scenting blood.

Before Lana could call out a warning, bright gold lines of fire spat from the disks toward the Skyranger. The pilot's reaction time was stellar as the VTOL engines roared to lift it out of danger, but a line of fire raked across the cockpit and its ascent quickly became uncontrolled. It began to spiral out of control directly towards the aft section of the battleship.

"Get down!" Lana yelled as she hit the deck, and Strike One complied. Strike Two must have noticed the attack and they dropped as well. The out-of-control Skyranger roared over their heads and collided with the aft deck with a horrible screech of twisted metal before coming to a halt just past the now impact-opened hatch.

The three disks followed their target's descent and began to zip toward the aft section to finish off their prey, but the dull roar of an aircraft's chin guns erupted and the first disk broke apart in a hail of bullets

and tracers. The two remaining disks made nearly ninety-degree turns to address the loitering Skyranger that had opened fire, which promptly cut its VTOL and engaged its primary engines to break away with the two disks in hot pursuit.

With the immediate threats no longer present, the two aft Strike teams rose and sprinted towards the hatch while keeping a wary eye on the Skyranger wreck just beyond... until the ramp dropped with a clang and two bloody figures shuffled out.

"Strike Two, head inside! We'll assess the survivors and follow you in!" Dryzimski shouted to the other team leader before heading over to the pair as they stumbled towards them.

"Crew Chief Eric Ehlers, and copilot Monica Levans... we're the only survivors," The first reported, a man in the lighter flight armor with a cracked helmet and a rifle reported. The second was a short woman, and despite her dark skin and hair appeared as pale as a ghost.

Dryzimsky and Halverson moved to help the pair towards the hatch. "Are either of you injured, what's your status?"

"I may have cracked a rib, but I'm no dead weight, sir," Eric said with a grimace as he straightened.

Monica's response took a moment longer before she drew her pistol from her holster. "I'm one hundred percent, sir. T-the blood's not mine," She finally reported, though she looked rather nauseous as she finished her report.

"Good, you're with us for the duration. It's not safe to leave you here," Dryzimski told them both, and he didn't wait for their acknowledgement before starting his run back to the hatch. "Command, Strike One. We've linked up with survivors from the crashed Skyranger and are moving to link up with Strike Two."

"Double-time it, Lieutenant. Strike Two is experiencing heavy resistance in the engine room."

"You heard the man, *shift it!*"

The trail Strike Two left for the other team to follow wasn't subtle. Spent shell casings littered the corridors as well as the plasma-burned corpse of one of their soldiers and several bullet-riddled bodies of sectoids.

Muzzle flashes could be seen further down the corridor, and Strike One picked up the pace with its two extra members in tow.

"Strike Two, Strike One. We're approaching from your six, what's the situation?"

"Situation is fucked!" Came the not so welcome reply, "Engine room layout is an outer elevated ring with what looks like consoles and controls in a lower level in the center of the room. We are pinned by heavy infantry on the opposite side of the elevated ring, and we've got little bastards trying to flank us. Hit the suppressing position and my boys can take the little shits without any problems."

"Solid copy! Harris, Jenkins. No bullshit, will your Wallflower equipment get you close enough to flush or kill the mutons?"

"It will," Lana said quickly, and Matt simply nodded.

"Get to it, then. Strike One will advance into the room and take cover to secure Two's flanks. Ehlers, Levans, I want you two providing covering fire from the door. Move!" Dryzimski ordered, and Strike One flooded into the room. Lana sprinted around the outer ring and Matt's footfalls were close behind her. The pair of soldiers caught sight of a trio of mutons firing plasma back at the doorway and hadn't paid a single moment's attention to either soldier as they rounded the corner.

You can't see me, I'm invisible. You can't see me, I'm invisible. Lana repeated over and over again in her head as she raised her shotgun and approached her first target. As with the mutons back in the train yard, these were all heavily armored save for their eyes and forehead, which might have proven a problem if Matt and Lana hadn't a way to walk up to point blank range.

The first muton's head exploded with a shotgun blast while the second took three precise taps to the head from Matt's rifle. The third turned to see its brethren drop to the deck and it let out a bone-rattling roar and charged out of cover. Lana had to quickstep out of its way to avoid the blind charge, and she unloaded a shotgun blast into its armored back as it ran past. The blast itself did little damage beyond causing it to trip and stumble. Not one to let the opportunity pass her by, Lana racked her shotgun and unloaded a shot into the Muton's mostly unarmored right elbow.

She racked the shotgun one more time and moved to take the killshot, but she caught sight of Matt

drawing his ARC Thrower. Lana stepped back as the Muton tried to rise, only for it to drop like a puppet with its strings cut as Matt brought the ARC thrower to its face and pulled the trigger.

"Command, Strike One. Engine room is now secure."

"Solid copy, Strike One. Strike Five and Six have secured the forward sections of the ship, but Strike Three is in danger of being overrun. Rally your squad and reinforce them. Strike Five will attempt to reinforce from the forward section."

"And Strike Four?" The moment the question was asked, Lana wished she could snatch it out of the air and throw it away.

"Strike Four's insertion on the objective was not successful."

"... Copy that, Strike One Actual out." Dryzimski hung his head before turning back to the room. "Strike One, form up. We've got a job to do. Ehlers, Levans, stay here and reinforce Strike Two."

"Yes, sir," Both airmen reported, and Lana agreed with the order. Strike Two had been through a meatgrinder. One soldier died in the corridor to the engine room while two more died in the ensuing firefight. Three of the survivors were wounded to the point where they couldn't move under their own power.

The survivors of Strike One formed up and began to filter through the corridors towards the central section.

Lana held a fist up to call a halt as she glanced around a corner. "I see a body... looks like one of ours."

After confirming no movement down the hallway, Lana snaked around the corner and quickstepped to the body. She stepped past the grizzly sight to cover the hallway beyond when one of the soldiers following her reported, "He's from Strike Three. I...I don't think I can identify the body."

"Command, Strike One. We're almost to the central section, we've found the remains of one of Strike Three. Status of the rest of the squad?"

"Strike Three has gone silent," Bradford reported over the radio, and frustration was apparent in his normally unwavering voice. "If survivors can be found, retrieve them. Otherwise, your new objective is to link up with Strike Five to secure the central section."

"Copy that, Strike One out." Dryzimski closed the comm and motioned wordlessly for the team to move on. No more drill-sergeant inspired words of confidence followed the command.

The corridor abruptly ended with an entrance to an elevated walkway above a large cargo bay or hangar. Signs of battle were everywhere, with burn marks of plasma on virtually every surface in the room, as well as spent shell casings and bodies both alien and human. Anderson and Zhang took up overwatch positions on the elevated walkway as the rest of Strike One descended to check for survivors.

"Command, we've located Strike Three in the central section. There are no survivors." Dryzimski reported dully through the comms.

"Copy that, Strike One. Hold your positions and wait for Strike Five. They should be there soo—JENKINS FALL BACK NOW!" Bradford's haggard tone switched to a harsh order in an instant and Lana froze. She was mere feet away from one of the large glowing doors leading toward the forward section of the ship, and before she could step more than one legspan backward a flat silvery disk pushed through the energy door.

A glowing orb swept across the outer edge of the disk and locked on to Lana just as the disk began to spin and unfold. She tried to raise her shotgun to get a shot off but the segmented tail unfolded mid-spin. Its wickedly bladed tip struck her just beneath the her left shoulder with enough force to send her flying into the opposite bulkhead. Pain exploded all across her back and chest as she felt something break within her. Lana's vision blurred and for a brief moment the only connection she had to the events around her was the screaming over the radio and the staccato reports of gunfire.

"Jenkins is down!" "Command, Strike One, we have a disk inside the central section!" "Jesus that thing is fast." "Reloading!" "Halverson, Harris, try and flank it and make it turn! I'll deploy HEAT as soon as it does!" "On it!" "Yes s—hrk." "Halverson's down!" "Potter, get back to cover NOW." "Command, we need Strike Five here now!"

Lana slowly opened her eyes to see that the visor of her helmet was cracked. She reached up to pull it off her head, but her left arm refused to obey her commands. With a burst of sotto voice profanity she tore

the helmet off her head and dropped it beside her before her eyes focused on something lying on the floor a few feet from where she sat.

It was her left arm.

Well, crap. Was all she could think before she tore her eyes off the spectacle of her own severed limb to see the state of the rest of the room.

One of the snipers, Lana couldn't tell which, was dragging the limp form of another soldier into cover. Potter's legs were a bloody mess but he attempted to drag himself back into cover only to be shot in passing by the disk as it tracked its targets. Matt had somehow made it to the other side of the room and rattled off a handful of shots before the disk snapped in his direction. At that moment, Dryzimski rose from cover with his rocket launcher primed and ready.

The rocket launched with the speed of a lance thrown by an angry god, but the disk was even faster as it turned and fired at the approaching projectile. The rocket detonated mid-air and the disk emerged from the cloud of fire and debris to begin chewing up the lieutenant's cover as he ducked back down.

Lana wracked her mind for something to say as she shakily drew her pistol and started to aim. *'Comedy is defiance. It's a snort of contempt in the face of fear and anxiety. And it's the laughter that allows hope to creep back on the inhale.'* She remembered the quote from somewhere, and she thought it would be appropriate last words as her finger tightened on the trigger. Yet, for all the eloquence of her thoughts, what she wheezed was somewhat less so.

"Goddamn alien frisbees."

Close enough.

BAM

The one bullet pinged ineffectually off the side profile of the disk, but the reaction was immediate. The disk rotated to face her at ridiculous speeds with an audible hum. Time seemed to slow as she saw the inline barrels of the disk's weapons turn to face her... and a rocket connected squarely with the now-exposed profile of the disk. What was left of the disk spun off to the opposite corner of the hangar where it sputtered, twitched and died.

New shapes, familiar shapes appeared in the hangar. Lana let the pistol drop to the deck and she let out a sigh. *My only regret is not getting to beat the shit out of Harris,* she thought with a smirk, *Why didn't you just play along?* She closed her eyes and willed the pain to go away.

OPERATION GANGPLANK: COMPLETE
ALIEN CRAFT (SCOUT) DESTROYED (4 total)
ALIEN CRAFT (BATTLESHIP) CAPTURED
XCOM FACILITY LOCATION SECURE
ATTACK ON CIVILIAN POPULATION AVERTED

STRIKE-1 REPORTS 4 KIA, 1 WIA
STRIKE-2 REPORTS 3 KIA, 4 WIA
STRIKE-3 NO SURVIVORS, 8 KIA
STRIKE-4 NO SURVIVORS, 8 KIA
STRIKE-5 REPORTS 1 KIA, 3 WIA
STRIKE-6 REPORTS 0 KIA, 2 WIA

SKULL SQUADRON REPORTS 3 INTERCEPTORS UNDAMAGED, 1 DESTROYED, 1 DAMAGED (0 PILOT CASUALTIES)
DIAMOND SQUADRON REPORTS 4 INTERCEPTORS UNDAMAGED, 1 DESTROYED, 1 DAMAGED (1 PILOT CASUALTY)
GHOST SQUADRON REPORTS 2 INTERCEPTORS UNDAMAGED, 2 DESTROYED, 2 DAMAGED (2 PILOT CASUALTIES)

SKYRANGER BIG SKY, LIGHT DAMAGE, NO CREW CASUALTIES
SKYRANGER KING FISHER, NO DAMAGE, NO CREW CASUALTIES
SKYRANGER DOMINO, DESTROYED, 4 CREW CASUALTIES
SKYRANGER OMINOUS, DESTROYED, 2 CREW CASUALTIES
SKYRANGER HARBINGER, NO DAMAGE, NO CREW CASUALTIES
SKYRANGER CRIMSON, LIGHT DAMAGE, NO CREW CASUALTIES

RECOVERY TEAM INVENTORY:
(Documented by Lt Dryzimski)

PLASMA RIFLE (1 total)
MUTON LIVE CAPTURE (1 total)
PLASMA WEAPON FRAGMENTS
SECTOID CORPSES (62 total)
MUTON CORPSES (20 total)
THIN MAN CORPSES (6 total)
CYBERDISK WRECKS (12 total)
ELERIUM (1000kg+)
UFO ELECTRONICS (Various)
UFO POWER SOURCES (10 total)
UFO FUSION WEAPONS (2 total)

OPERATION EVALUATION: ACCEPTABLE

The Deal

BREAKING NEWS: NATIONAL GUARD AND POLICE FORCES REPORTED PATROLLING CITIES IN NORTH DAKOTA WHILE SETTING ROAD BLOCKS TO PREVENT TRAVEL OUT OF URBAN CENTERS. ATTEMPTS TO QUESTION SOLDIERS REGARDING THE NATURE OF THEIR ORDERS RESULTS IN IMMEDIATE ARREST AND DETAINMENT BY ALL WHO APPROACH.

BREAKING NEWS: OBSERVERS OUTSIDE AIR PORTS REPORT DRASTICALLY REDUCED NUMBERS OF AIR GUARD AIRCRAFT RETURNING TO BASE. AIRCRAFT SPOTTED ARE REPORTED TO SHOW SIGNS OF DAMAGE AND RECENT CONFLICT. FEDERAL AND STATE AUTHORITIES FOR THE GUARD UNITS IN QUESTION REFUSED COMMENT.

13:10, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight sat on her bed with her eyes closed as she maintained her concentration on the Wallflower spell. Since her first attempt at using the spell she had become much more familiar with the amount of energy needed to maintain the effect, and she was able to further refine it after the testing that was done on it. All these improvements meant less concentration was needed to maintain the affect, which meant that she could let her mind wander if she wanted it to or not.

Why would Matt lie like that? Why would he say... Twilight caught herself as she realized Matt had never actually said anything about his part in her capture. It wasn't so much a direct lie as a lie of omission. *Why wouldn't he say anything about that day? Is he hiding it because he feels guilty? Or some other reason?*

For the third time since the revelation became known to her, Twilight reviewed everything that had happened since she had arrived. There had been questions, so many questions about herself, her people, her world, and her abilities; and now that she had time to consider she realized that her own questions in response were steered toward personal anecdotes or non-answers that didn't really tell her what she wanted to know.

Charles said that I was a guest and that I could help answer questions, but the more I think about it the more it seems like I'm doing all the talking. Why are some things blocked on the 'internet' they let me use? And why won't they let me leave more often? Why... Twilight's mind continued to ask question after question to try and make sense of the situation she now found herself in. *Did Matt not tell the truth because he thought that would ruin his chances...with me?*

That last thought started to snowball in Twilight's mind even as she considered it. *Wait wait wait, Lana said Matt felt that way, but what if he felt that way the first time he saw me. Then he took me here to... to...*

Ponyville's library held a variety of books in both fiction and nonfiction, and Twilight was always proud of the fact that she had read almost every single one from cover to cover. Not only could she locate almost every book by memory but she could also give a synopsis and recommendation for them as well. The few exceptions to her comprehensive knowledge were a series of books that her mother had donated when Twilight had been installed as the librarian there. Twilight hadn't understood the note that was included with the books (*"I know you go to books for help, dear, so I hope these will help you find someone nice to bring home every once and a while. Just remember it's much more fun with a partner!"*) Until she had started reading them.

To say that some of the situations that the mares and stallions found themselves in over the course of the books weren't suitable for polite conversation, or general consumption at a public library, was an understatement. Twilight's embarrassment about the content of the books had morphed into horror when she realized the penname of the author was the same one her mother wrote with. She promptly boxed up every last one and hid them away where nopony would ever find them while she did her best to scrub the contents of the one book she did read from her mind.

Unfortunately for Twilight, the contents of the book were coming back to her now. *A dungeon, a prisoner and a sympathetic guard? Is this how human relationships normally work!? Oh no no no no—* The door to her living quarters opened and Twilight recoiled in horror at the sound instinctually.

Rather than something from her horror-fuelled imagination what the door revealed was Doctor Vahlen. She looked marginally more refreshed since the last time Twilight saw her as well as wearing her usual suit and lab coat, and her tablet was tucked under one arm. "Good afternoon, Twilight. I have some good news from... Twilight? What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Nothing's wrong. What's the good news?" Twilight said quickly while she plastered a hasty smile on her face. *Don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it.*

If Vahlen noticed Twilight's anxiety she didn't address it as she answered, "Matt and Lana's operation is complete, so you can cease the ability you have cast upon them. And I was hoping you might be able to assist me with reviewing some material from another project. Our recent tests have made me review previous information and I was hoping your expertise on certain subjects might provide new insight."

"Sure, I'd be happy to help!" Twilight answered immediately as she hopped off the bed. Her next question came after a few moments hesitation, "Are Matt and Lana alright? And mister Zhang, too?"

Vahlen's gaze fell down and to the side. "I'm afraid I do not know. I'm sure the moment they get back they'll come to visit and let you know themselves." She stepped into the room and took a seat at the table before placing her tablet on the table. "If you would please have a seat, we can get started. These pictures are magnified to a significant degree, and they show what appears to be circuitry made out of Elerium. Traditional circuitry uses electricity that flows down certain paths to create specific results, but we have thus far been unable to find the purpose behind this circuitry since Elerium cannot conduct Electricity as well as other more common elements."

Twilight hopped up into the chair and looked down at the picture displayed on the tablet. It was grainy and in black and white, but she was able to make out the lines of 'circuitry'. The picture began to scroll to reveal more, and Twilight gasped. "This is amazing! It looks like the spell matrix needed to gather energy from the Field! Most unicorns do this instinctually, but Starswirl the Bearded was able to codify virtually every spell during his time and document spell matrices like this one."

"So, this circuitry is used to artificially reproduce the effects of your spells?" Vahlen quickly asked, and Twilight might have been a little concerned about the hunger in the scientist's eyes if she wasn't so surprised by the picture in front of her.

"Well, I don't know. Most basic magic can be done instinctively with enough practice, and more difficult spells often require an aria or incantation for a unicorn to use. Only the highest level magic practitioners use the actual matrix of a spell to get the desired effects. Spell matrices allow for much greater fine control and precision than an aria, but it's often too complex for the average unicorn to use. This right here is the first step in the spell casting process, where the energy is gathered to be used." Twilight looked down at the picture again before looking back to Vahlen. "Where did you find this? It's simply amazing that someone was able to make something like this!"

Vahlen's eagerness halted as she looked away. Twilight could see her swallow before clearing her throat. "This sample of circuitry was retrieved from an implant found inside the bodies of the invaders that attacked us several months ago," Vahlen said slowly and she tapped the tablet. The picture shifted to what appeared to be an X-Ray image of the head of a creature Twilight had never seen before, and three white dots in close proximity were highlighted and labeled. Before she could dwell on that particular bit of knowledge, Vahlen tapped one of the dots on the image and another image appeared. "Can you tell me what this one does?"

"Well... this one looks like a receiver of some sort. It doesn't specify the place of origin for whatever it's receiving, but it seems like it would be getting something. Possibly a signal or a message or even the effects of another spell? Sorry, but this one is entirely unfamiliar to me."

"Ah, I see," Vahlen's enthusiasm dropped just a shade but it didn't stop her from switching to the next picture with almost indecent haste, "And this one?"

"This is..." Twilight started to say, but her eyes widened with horror as the image scrolled to show the complete circuit. "This is an abomination. This matrix is specifically designed for attacking the mind of a target by supplanting its free will. This is... this is an abuse of magic that would warrant banishment and exile were it even attempted back home." Her horror morphed into disgust and outrage. "This abuse of power should not be tolerated!"

"Ah, I see," Vahlen said. She paused to collect her thoughts before addressing Twilight again. "I know this must come as a shock to you, Twilight. To see something that you clearly hold dear to you misused in such a way. The abilities that these implants give our enemies have always been something that we have been unable to combat since we did not understand even the basic rules that governed them. That is, until you arrived. Twilight, can you help us find a way to fight these monsters?"

The last comment snapped Twilight out of her moral outrage. *They need my help. If what Matt and Lana and Zhang go out to fight every day has these... things implanted in them, then they need my help to fight it. They have no knowledge of magic or the matrices so they have no way to defend against it or utilize it for themselves. But is it right for me to help them make things that will hurt other living creatures?* The memory of the alien screaming death threats against her came to mind, as did Vahlen's admission of losing family she clearly cherished. With those memories so fresh, Twilight made her decision.

"I'll do it. If it's to help you and your people survive, then you have a deal. What do you need?"

"Nothing too drastic at the moment, Twilight," Vahlen said with a genuine smile, "Since these 'spell matrices' are a new thing for us, I'd like to create something simple that can be used as a proof of concept that these Elerium circuits can be created to do what we want."

Twilight nodded, "I think I have just the thing in mind."

15:00, 05/02/2015, BRIEFING ROOM

"... and thirty-three fatalities reported across all branches of operation, as well as twelve wounded across all branches. Of the twelve wounded, ten are expected to recover enough to be used in future operations." Paul Dryzinski finished his summary before looking up at Bradford.

"Thank you, Lieutenant, you may be seated," Bradford said, and he gave each of the squad leaders a look while not sparing a glance to the two empty seats in the debriefing room. "We lost a lot of good men and women today, but we gave the aliens a bloody nose that they'll not forget for a long time. We showed them that not only can we destroy the ships they send to Earth, but we can steal them right out from under them. And we also saved a major urban center from being attacked as well as maintaining the secrecy of this base."

"I know it doesn't feel like it, but this was a victory. Inform your squads they've earned a bit of rest and I'll make arrangements for the mess hall to prepare something extra for them," Bradford added. "Are there any questions? No? Dismissed." With that, Bradford turned to leave.

"Sir? Permission to speak freely?" Bradford recognized Uther, the Strike Two team leader, speak up. The commander turned to see all four commanders were standing but none had moved from their seats.

A united front? They must all want to have Uther's concerns addressed. "Granted."

"Thank you, sir. I...I lost half my squad today taking over the engine room of the battleship. Privates Enderton and Johnson, and Sergeant Beecham all died bravely, and Corporal Holiday will never walk again after the hit he took. Strike Three died to a man defending the central section of the ship and accounted for dozens of kills before they were overwhelmed." Uther swallowed and took a deep breath.

"They all served valiantly, and their sacrifices won't be forgotten, Lieutenant. And requests for reinforcements have been filed that will bring both Strike One and Two up to full strength. Assistant Squad Leaders from Strike Seven and Ten have been chosen to lead the reconstituted Strike Three and Four as soon as the reinforcements arrive as well." Bradford said solemnly, but he stopped when he saw Uther's knuckles go white around the tablet he held at his side.

"But they wouldn't need to be replaced if they had been given the proper tools." Uther started, and Bradford could see the monumental effort he was making to not yell. "Three of my boys were dead when Strike One came to reinforce us in the engine room, and Harris and Jenkins just walk right up to the entrenched position and shot the aliens in the back without a single shot fired against them."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I think Uther's right," Dryzinski added. "During the first part of the operation, Sergeant Harris and Private Jenkins didn't have a single shot fired at them despite being in close proximity to the enemy infantry on several occasions. The only reason I can think that they were so completely ignored is the 'Wallflower' equipment they were given prior to the mission, and it's because of that that we succeeded in our objectives."

"Exactly. With all due respect, we could have suffered significantly fewer casualties in this mission had this 'Wallflower' equipment been more widely dispersed among the troops. I understand that the testing process for new equipment must be completed before mass production and dispersal may begin, but if it is working well enough to be used in the field by two soldiers then why isn't it being used by more?"

"Because it isn't working well enough," Bradford replied sternly. "The equipment used by Private Jenkins failed at a critical moment which resulted in her injury in the field, and Harris's equipment failed shortly after. The technology itself is extremely temperamental and I only authorized its deployment with those two soldiers because they are extremely familiar with its use due to their volunteer work. Until it is completely developed I cannot authorize mass deployment."

Lying to protect my subordinates, Bradford thought distastefully, but he kept the emotion from appearing on his face. If they knew the source of the 'equipment' I doubt they'd be so keen to have it on them when they go out on the field. Then again, if they knew the source was still alive and in the base, they'd start to have doubts. After this mission our morale can't take that kind of hit. "As soon as it becomes available, Strike teams will get the new equipment."

"Understood, sir," Uther replied as he and the others turned to leave, except for Dryzimski.

"Any further questions, Lieutenant?" Bradford asked, and an eyebrow rose an increment when he noticed just how pale Paul had become.

"Ah, no sir. Just thinking that I should go see the rest of my squad," The lieutenant answered, and beat a hasty retreat in the wake of his colleagues.

Bradford didn't say a word as the last man left the room, nor did he voice the nagging suspicion that he wasn't the only person in the room who had been telling lies.

16:46, 05/02/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight stretched before pushing herself away from her desk to head towards her sink. *I didn't think Vahlen would have been so enthusiastic about creating a simple device to detect magic. I originally suggested it as a safe option rather than something flashy, but I didn't think she'd want exactly that.* Twilight thought as she somewhat clumsily filled the glass up by the sink.

Her attempt to fill the glass wasn't helped when the door to her quarters came open unexpectedly. Twilight whipped around expecting to see Matt or Lana, but instead she saw Joel enter along with another person she had never seen before that gave her pause. This newcomer was a giant, standing nearly a head taller than Joel, as well as being far broader at the shoulder and waist as well. A significant amount of hair sprouted from his face as well, running down the sides of his face and along his jaw line as well as framing what was probably his only welcoming feature: A warm smile.

"Good afternoon, Twilight," Joel said, and he nodded to the man beside him. "This is Frank McKendrick. He's a doctor here at the base that would like to have a word with you."

"Hello, Twilight. May I call you Twilight, or do you prefer something else since we have just been introduced?" Frank asked politely and with an accent that Twilight had never heard before. The accent, combined with the polite speech and disarming smile, caused her to adjust her opinion of the man. *He's like one of Fluttershy's bears. Big and scary unless you're a friend.*

"Twilight's fine, I suppose. Do you prefer Frank?" Twilight asked as she walked towards her table and hopped up onto her seat. When Frank nodded, she continued, "What kind of doctor are you?"

"I help anyone who has problems that can't be fixed with a bandage, medicine or time," Frank replied cryptically as he took the seat opposite of Twilight. "Ah, you'll have to forgive my little quirks. I know everyone on base so I don't get to give my mysterious explanation that often. I help maintain the mental health of all the base personnel."

"Mental health? Is that such a common problem with humans that you need doctors specifically for that?" Twilight asked, and no sooner had the last word left her mouth did she realize what she was implying. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that! I don't think you're all crazy I swear!"

Frank's response was a rumbling chuckle. "My professors would always jokingly say 'there's no such thing as sanity, only degrees of disorder.' I think that's a verbose way of describing job security, but that's another of my little quirks. It was actually because of my work that I was hoping to talk to you for a little bit today."

Twilight head-tilted in response. "Why me?"

"Professional curiosity, officially. Unofficially you're just about the only thing the research team talks about, plus Mr. Harris and Ms. Jenkins too."

What? They're talking about me? What are they saying!? Twilight wanted to scream, but she restrained herself. "Professional curiosity? I'm not certain how I fit in with that."

"Human personalities develop mostly from the accumulation of their experiences over the course of their lives. On our world we are the only sapient race so my field is strictly restricted to other humans... normally. When I heard about your existence, I must admit I wanted to talk to you as soon as I could to see just how similar we are mentally." Frank clasped his hands in front of him and leaned forward. "Do you mind if we talk for a bit?"

"Sure, I suppose I don't mind. I did need a break from Vahlen's project, so this works out." Twilight explained, "So what did you want to talk about?"

"Well, I was speaking with Joel here, and I was very interested in the schools that you mentioned. Before becoming Celestia's personal student, did you attend a public school with others your age?" Frank asked

as he pulled out a small pad of paper and a pen to write.

"Technically, no. I did a lot of self-study on magic after seeing Celestia raise the sun, and my parents enrolled me in Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns," Twilight explained with a smile of her own as she remembered that moment. "I wasn't really a part of the normal student body since I was taken as Celestia's personal student immediately after the entrance exams."

"That's rather impressive! You must have performed quite well during the exams to gain the notice of the headmistress of the school." Frank smiled widely as he scribbled a bit in the notepad.

"I probably did a little too well, if that's possible. The test was to hatch a dragon egg using magic. I managed to hatch the dragon... and make it grow fifty feet tall... and levitated the judges... and turned my parents into potted plants." Twilight's explanation started out strong but the longer she continued the weaker her voice became.

"That's... impressive." Frank said after a long moment of silence and scribbling in his notes. Before he could elaborate further, Twilight interrupted.

"It wasn't! During the initial test I couldn't do anything. I was so scared of the judges and letting my parents down that I couldn't even form a proper spell to attempt!" Twilight rattled off quickly. "I had given up but got startled during the test and started pulling *too much power*. Levitating the judges and turning my parents into plants was a result of the excess power escaping my control! If Princess Celestia hadn't been there to stop me, I could have *died*."

"Aha, I see. Can you tell me about Celestia?"

Twilight cleared her throat and explained, "She's Princess of Equestria, who is responsible for raising the sun in the sky each day."

"Mhm, I'm sure that's what it says in all the books back home," The doctor replied with a nod. Twilight gave him a suspicious look so he continued, "I'm certain you could tell me all about her history and what she's capable of doing and what her duties currently are. But you've known her personally for years, yes? What's she like as a person? Or pony, if you prefer."

The question actually gave Twilight pause. "She's kind... but she's also just a bit distant. She's lived for over a thousand years so I suspect she's aware of the fact that I'll come and go in the blink of her eyes. Despite that, she still cares about me, and about everyone. Though the letter she sent has me worried that she's blaming herself for me ending up here. She really shouldn't, it was my own mistake that got me here."

"That mistake being the bet you made with...Discord, was it?" The doctor looked to Joel, who nodded. "Why was it your mistake?"

"Because Celestia told us that Fluttershy would be the best one to reform Discord. And Discord must have known it, too, otherwise he wouldn't have offered the bet. And now that I'm gone the Elements can't be used against him! Luna said he was imprisoned but nothing can hold him for long except for petrification, and that can't be done without the Elements..." Twilight began to worry over her tail before looking to Frank. His smile was still in place.

"It's not your mistake to want to do everything you can for your teacher, especially since it's quite apparent that you greatly value her respect. It's Discord's fault for taking advantage of your willingness to please." Frank explained gently, "And... I hate to impose, but I'm really a fan of all the art you've produced so far, but I don't think I've seen a picture of Discord yet. Do you have something drawn already for him? Or might I ask you to draw him now?"

"Well, I don't see why not," Twilight stopped worrying over her tail and levitated a set of pencils and a blank sheet of paper over to the desk. Immediately the pencils went to work on the paper to outline Discord's serpentine form, the mismatched limbs and crazed expression. The entire process took less than thirty seconds before she presented it to the two humans in the room.

"Well, I think I can safely say that's no product of natural evolution," Joel said after a long moment.

"Discord is apparently a being of magical origins. His exact creation is something of a myth, but the leading theory is that he is the manifestation of negative emotions on the magical field. Discord hasn't made a point of correcting or confirming the theory, and neither has Celestia so it'll stay just that for now." Twilight said with a shrug.

"Interesting... do you mind if I ask what he's like? I would understand if it is an uncomfortable sub—"

"He's crazy," Twilight replied flatly. Both Frank and Joel chuckled at the immediate response, so Twilight elaborated. "He has power, *loads* of power as well as the capacity to use it at any time. Anyone else who

uses magic needs specific spells, aria and matrices to create the effects they desire but Discord doesn't need them. He can simply *manifest his will* upon the world by directly manipulating the field. It's his erratic nature that makes him such a threat; it's also his weakness. Were he to participate in an orthodox duel he could likely overpower everyone that he goes up against, but he doesn't because he prefers to toy with anypony nearby."

"I... also may have heard that he was petrified for a thousand years? If he was conscious during that time but without the ability to move or use his senses then I think that would have a corrosive effect on his sanity," Frank said after a long moment. "It's just a theory. Most humans can't stand sensory deprivation for long without negative side effects."

"I never thought of it that way," Twilight trailed off as she considered that bit of information. *What if Discord hadn't always been that way? What if his thousand years of stone made him what he is now? If that's the case, then what was he like before?* "Even if that were the case, I don't think I could forgive him very easily for what he did to my friends."

"Ah, I do believe I heard about this as well. It sounds like you value your friends back home very highly."

"I do," Twilight nodded. "They're the best friends I've ever had, and they are always able to help me when I come to them with a problem. I just wish they'd come to me now." The unicorn finished her thought with what she hoped was a sincere sounding laugh.

"I'm sure they will find you soon. And...may I ask about your friends that you've made here? What can you tell me about them?" The doctor ended his question with a flip of his notepad to start a fresh sheet of paper.

"Well, I suppose things got off to a rough start..." *The twitching corpse of the giant insect she murdered; the harrowing escape from her cell; the testing of her abilities...* "But once I got to know everyone, things started to get better." *Matt regretting the blood on his hands; Charles losing his family; Vahlen's shocking admission to Twilight.* The memories of the past month came back to the unicorn as she continued to explain. Her most recent revelations prompted her next question.

"Where are Lana and Matt? They left in a hurry and no one seems to have an answer as to when they'll be back." Twilight asked as calmly as she could. *The last time they left like this, Matt got hurt really badly and no one told me anything until he came to visit. I need to ask Matt if it really was him that brought me here... and why. And why he hid it from me.*

Twilight wasn't so far lost in her own thoughts that she missed the look that Frank and Joel exchanged before the doctor answered, "They're still on their way back to us. If I see them I'll send them to you as quickly as I can."

"Thank you."

Frank nodded before changing subjects. "Apologies for going off on a tangent like that. I did have a couple of other questions though. You mentioned your former caretaker is now married to your brother? I imagine that must have been a very happy day for you."

"Well, to be honest, I was pretty mad when I first heard..."

17:30, 05/02/2015, MESS HALL

Matt grabbed a biscuit from the food lines and headed towards the usual tables that Strike One sat at. His eyes absently swept across what now appeared to be a barren and abandoned mess hall. So many empty chairs. *Yesterday this place was packed.* The tables usually taken by Strike Three and Four were all empty, and he could remember the groups of soldiers huddled over their dishes and wolfing it down like it was their last meal.

Their last meal.

Matt reached his usual spot and pulled the chair out before sitting down. His gaze travelled down the table to the seats that the rest of the team usually sat at. *The rest of the team. They're dead. Again. And I'm not. Again. They should be here. I shouldn't.* The moment the thoughts sprung up in his head, he growled and tore a bite out of the plain biscuit. *Don't think about it, don't think about it...*

"It's times like these that we should seek the company of our comrades," Matt heard Zhang speak behind him. The Chinese soldier had abandoned his isolated spot in favor of joining the other soldier at Strike One's table. "After suffering such losses, our greatest enemy is often our own mind."

"You talk like you've had this happen before," Matt spoke evenly.

"I have on occasion, and while you say little I can see that you have before at least once." Zhang replied, and Matt stopped mid bite to give the other man something not quite harsh enough to be considered a glare. "I do not pass judgment nor do I accuse. They say that opportunity knocks politely while fate uses a battering ram. For whatever reason we have survived up until now to achieve something, and our past colleagues played their parts in getting us here. It would be a disservice to their sacrifices to not acknowledge this."

"No disrespect intended, but I don't think I'd enjoy dying so another person could fulfill their fate. It would make me feel cheated."

"Would you not?" Zhang retorted with an arch look. "I was under the impression that American soldiers valued their camaraderie quite highly. Your services are rife with soldiers who throw themselves on grenades to save their fellows, or carry the wounded across hellish battlefields without a thought of just running away. Is that information not accurate, then?"

Had the table not been between them, Matt would have broken Zhang's face for that. But the impeding furniture was blocking his assault, and it gave him just enough time to realize the meaning behind the words.

"Some of the most valuable lessons are the harshest. You and I bear the burdens of the survivor. We have to continue knowing that others died while in battle beside us. Not because of us. We did not kill them, the enemy did. Unless you were negligent in your duties, and I am certain you were not, then trying to blame yourself is incorrect." Zhang finished and took a bite of his own meal, which appeared to be some form of mystery meat patty with watery gravy on top.

"...I keep expecting Lana to just show up and make some stupid comment that I can be annoyed about," Matt admitted after a long silence.

Zhang nodded as he set his fork down. He steepled his fingers in front of his face before he spoke, "I witnessed Ms. Jenkins' final shot to distract the disk that was attacking us. Such marksmanship in spite of her injuries and the likelihood of death was... unanticipated from her. I have never been more proud to admit I was wrong about the character and discipline of another person."

"Yeah..." Matt agreed quietly as he remembered the final moments of the fight on the battleship. Lana's pistol shot was fired just as Strike Five had boiled into the other side of the hangar. The disk turned just in time to catch a rocket from the new arrivals dead center on its broad side which destroyed it. *If Lana hadn't survived as long as she had then ended up in that exact spot to make the shot...more people would have died.* Matt's face soured as he considered his next thought. *Fate my ass; that was goddamn pure stubbornness and skill, two things Lana has in spades.*

Had.

A third food tray coming down on the table interrupted Matt's train of thought as Lieutenant Dryzimski pulled up a seat at the table.

"Gentlemen, there's something we need to discuss," He said seriously as he began to pick at his own mystery meat patty, "And by discuss I mean I will just talk to myself and you two will listen. If anything I say is wrong feel free to say I'm full of shit. If I'm right, then don't say anything at all. That way everyone has plausible deniability. Deal?"

Before Matt or Zhang could respond, Dryzimski started up again. "The other squad leaders and I had a discussion regarding the Wallflower gear that was used during the last mission as to what it might be and why we might not have wider access to it. It seems mighty useful considering it allowed you and Lana to bag six of those Mutons without so much as a scratch, and one of them being a live capture! When we brought the subject up with Bradford he mentioned that they weren't seeing widespread deployment yet due to the technical issues that resulted in Lana getting clipped by the disk. He also mentioned you two were chosen to use it today because you were most familiar with it due to your volunteer work. As things stand right now, the only thing both of you volunteered for was the Stardust project, which started just under a month ago."

Matt wasn't one for premonitions but he had a sinking feeling as to where this conversation was heading.

"And speaking of things that happened a month ago, I recall Matt captured a new alien during a terror mission that took place in D.C. All records of this capture have been scrubbed or redacted from all the official records including our AARs of the event. Lana was also extremely defensive when asked about this alien, and I also recall you two tensing up the moment Anderson brought the subject up. I'll note that Zhang has also been introduced to the Stardust project.

"So, that makes me wonder that perhaps the alien that was captured last month is producing the Wallflower equipment in some way for the Stardust project? It's alive, isn't it?"

"You're right," Zhang said, and both of the other soldiers turned to look at him with surprise in their eyes before he continued, "You are full of it." His hands were relaxed and his expression was cool as a cucumber.

"Uh huh," Dryzinski agreed after a long moment, but the suspicion in his eyes remained.

Before any further discussion could present itself, others began to enter the mess hall. Strike Five and Six were easily recognizable, followed by the thoroughly mauled Strike Two. Surprisingly, the Skyranger crews could be seen in the mix as well as the interceptor pilots, whose unofficial policy was separation from the 'gropes' as much as possible.

When they all began to pile into the tables without regard for units or divisions, the Strike Two team leader waved to the trio. "There are no units tonight, get over here." He said with a tired smile, and after a few shared looks the survivors of Strike One rose to join the packed tables.

As the last of the mixed group finally sat, the newly promoted Captain Fujikawa stood and motioned for silence. "I have no grand speeches to give save for stating the obvious. Yesterday we were individual teams, crews, and squadrons. Tomorrow we will be individual teams, crews and squadrons. Tonight, though we all share two things: We've all lost friends and teammates, and we all gave the aliens one hell of a fight. So, before the FNGs get here let's enjoy one night where we don't have to babysit. To the old guard and those that came before."

She raised her glass of water and everyone at the tables did so as well.

Matt downed his water, but his thoughts were still on the one person who wasn't in attendance that would have loved it.

17:30, 05/02/2015, MEDICAL

"This is Doctor Benson. Pronounced time of death is 5:30:49 PM for Lana T. Jenkins." A voice said, dull disappointment in its voice.

Well, crap.

"Cause of death is shock brought on by blood loss from violent amputation of the left arm below the shoulder." The voice maintained its monotone tenor.

No shit, really? I hadn't noticed. Did you go to school for seven years to learn how to state the obvious?

"Let's move on to the next one." Resignation this time.

Fucking quitter. I swear to God I'm going to haunt your ass.

Silence.

The beeps and wails of medical machines stopped, and the footfalls of doctors and nurses were gone as well.

...I hope the suits weren't full of shit when they were describing death benefits. I'm so sorry Mom, I hope they pay up. I hope...

"Hope," A new voice said, and its tone was that of someone who knew the punchline to the universe's greatest joke and just couldn't wait to tell it. "Hope is food and water to a hungry and thirsty soul as much as food and water sates a needy body. But you're well aware of this, Lana Jenkins."

Oh goody, I've got a talker. Let me guess, he talks to the corpses before he does... other things to the corpses.

"Why, I would never take advantage of someone like that without their permission. I guess I'll just have to disarm you with my witty repertoire first. "

Oh, and he thinks he's clever, too. The moment I get up we're going to see how you like a good disarming.

"But you can't get up right now. I'd offer you a hand but I think we're a bit past that now.

I get it now. This is hell. Hell is a half-assed necrophilic standup comedian. Sure didn't see that one coming.

"Oh bah, this isn't hell you silly goose, but you're about one second from finding out if it exists."

You make it sound as if I were, y'know, not gonna die. Which is kinda improbable at this point.

"Improbable, yes, but not impossible. And even if it was impossible, I'd still make it happen. I have this insufferable nag who follows me around and tells me what I can't do, so I just have this irresistible urge to just do whatever she says I shouldn't—

Oh boy, here we go. Would you be telling this story to someone who could just walk away?

"...touché."

So then, if this isn't hell then what are you? Crossroads demon or perhaps the devil himself? What's the deal? Sell my soul for my life? Maybe sweeten the pot by offering my arm back? Keep in mind if you give me a severed arm back I'll beat you with the soggy end.

"Your soul? Why would I take that from you?" The voice seemed to recoil in horror at the mere notion of it. "The soul of a living creature is the purest spark of creativity and change in the universe. It is change, it is hope, it is the drive that every little living thing needs to motivate themselves to get up in the morning and take on the world, or at least their horrible commute and coworkers. Why would I take that from anyone?"

Because you're the devil and that's your thing?

"Well, I am a handsome devil, but I don't think that's what you mean. But that's beside the point. I've been watching you, Lana Jenkins, and you've managed to impress me. That is not something that happens very often."

Oh? Why's that?

"Let's just say that I feel sympathetic for anyone who chooses to stand with their principles in the face of opposition from all sides."

Now I know I'm dead. Or hallucinating. Hey, if I'm hallucinating, what's it going to take to make you get me a beer? Cause it's been ages since I've had a nice cold--

"Oh Lana, you should stop resisting you know. I can read your heart like an open book. Granted, not your real heart that's dead as a door nail, but the heart of your soul. You gave a bit of hope to someone in their darkest hour. I am here to return the favor."

...Bullshit. So this is poetic justice? Tempt me with a second chance because I told a lie to give someone hope? If that's the case you can take your deal and shove it up--

"Shhh, hush now. We've spoken long enough and my jailers might start to suspect my prison isn't as thorough as they thought if they were to check in on me and see that I'm no longer there. As I said, you have impressed me, Lana dear, and you have shown that you are willing to put the needs of others ahead of your own even if it could get you killed. I will return your life to you but on one condition."

"Stay Twilight's friend."

SNAP

Beep.

"And remember, *I will be watching.*" The voice was but a whisper in her ear, nearly drowned out by the sounds of the emergency room suddenly coming back in a rush.

Beep beep.

"Doctor? DOCTOR! She's showing a heart beat!"

"What? You're kidding... son of a bitch. What are you doing, MOVE!"

Stardust Supplemental Files (Pt. 6)

ROADBLOCKS IN NORTH DAKOTA LIFTED OVERNIGHT WITHOUT NOTIFICATION OR EXPLANATION FROM STATE OR FEDERAL AUTHORITIES. LOCAL SALVAGE YARD EMPLOYEE TED STEFFENS REPORTS WRECKAGE OF MASSIVE ALIEN CRAFT SPOTTED IN COUNTRYSIDE OUTSIDE CAPITOL: "THING'S BEEN PICKED CLEANER THAN A WALLET ON THE SOUTH SIDE. NOTHING LEFT BUT A SKELETON."

NORTH DAKOTA GOVERNOR PRESSED FOR ANSWERS BY INCREASINGLY ANGRY PUBLIC AS NO OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT OF CASUALTIES WITHIN THE NATIONAL GUARD IS MADE BUT MULTIPLE FAMILIES REPORT RECEIVING NOTIFICATIONS OF FAMILY MEMBERS KILLED IN ACTION.

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

PROJECTID: Stardust

PROJECTDIV: Physics

DIVLEAD: Dr. Moira Vahlen

Attached files: Transcript of discussion regarding implants with Twilight Sparkle, images of implants extracted during Project [REDACTED], Blueprints of Elerium 'circuits' created by Twilight Sparkle, Schematic of Thaumaturgical Energy Detector (TED), Recorded Data from TED, Personal Notes by DIVLEAD.

NEW RECORD: 08:40, 05/03/2015

After the unexpected communication received from Twilight's homeworld, it is believed that Elerium may in fact be the 'Arcanite' we have sought to locate in an attempt to replicate her abilities. I've secured a sample approximately 1kg in weight with around 85% pure Elerium. The imperfect ratio comes from the nature of recovery of the sample at the crash site of an alien craft. Origins of the sample are believed to be part of the power source of the craft, but such speculation is irrelevant at this point.

Testing will begin shortly.

UPDATE: 9:10, 05/03/2015

Testing is complete but the results were not what we anticipated. Indeed they are far more promising than previously anticipated. We have confirmed Elerium as an analog to the 'Arcanite' described by Twilight, or at least is sufficiently close enough that the effects are similar if not enhanced.

After studying the video footage of the test, I've come up with a hypothesis as to the exact behavior of Elerium in response to Twilight's abilities. Initial hypothesis was that it would simply glow while in the presence of her abilities, so the test was to expose the sample to her telekinesis by raising the sample approximately one foot in the air. Using previous footage as examples, the anticipated velocity of this was going to be 2ft per second.

While my numbers are only rough estimates based on the time stamps and footage from the security cameras on several floors of the XCOM base, what actually occurred was an upward velocity 15 times greater at the minimum. Further comparison of the timestamps shows that Twilight's spell was broken the moment the sample broke through the ceiling of the Stardust lab (illumination on her horn disappearing), but the corresponding illumination of the sample persisted as it exited the top floor of the facility.

The implications of this result are two-fold: At a minimum, Elerium dramatically increases the effect of any spell cast upon it. However, the continuation of the effect beyond its channeled duration was not anticipated either. Perhaps the effect isn't the only trait that's enhanced but also the duration of the ability, or perhaps the spell itself becomes self-sustaining when cast directly upon Elerium? This will require further testing to confirm. I foresee no problems convincing Twilight to participate in testing with her illumination ability in a more secure environment that won't risk the safety of the rest of the facility.

The second fact this brings up is that Twilight's magic can be used to hurl a projectile through reinforced solid surfaces without spalling so long as the effect is maintained on the projectile itself. By all rights the Elerium should have shattered into a thousand pieces after passing through the first level of the base, but it remained intact through several floors and the report from the situation room seems to imply it stayed intact as it left Earth's orbit. If we can find a way to recreate the spellcasting process, we may be able to

create a weapon system that renders all conventional armor systems moot with projectiles as mundane as pencils.

On a personal note, I hope Commander Bradford is right. It would be quite pleasant to hear that our little experiment knocked an invader out of the sky purely by accident.

This testing also brings up a -very- important point for XCOM and any future relations with Twilight's people. With the confirmation that Elerium is Arcanite or at least closely related to it, it also confirms that her homeworld is (or was) rich in the mineral. If contact is established formally, I strongly recommend an agreement be reached to secure a steady source of Elerium from them rather than having to rely upon imperfect and often damaged salvage from alien craft.

I'll have to remember to send a message to Commander Bradford asking for clarification on the potential first contact scenarios that don't involve the invaders. As unlikely as that sounded a month ago, we cannot dismiss the likelihood of it happening now, especially when an extremely valuable resource could be gained by establishing good relations early on.

It might also be good to reiterate that if such relations were spoiled due to hostility, we might face an entirely new invasion force using Elerium in a manner that puts the current invaders to shame.

On that note, it suddenly seems a bit more believable if not plausible that Twilight's rulers are capable of moving their corresponding celestial bodies if they have access to the 'Arcanite boosters' described by her. Her drawings of both Celestia and Luna depict them wearing a crown and collar that might fill that role. If crafted specifically to enhance their abilities then it doesn't seem so far fetched.

Twilight will need some time to recover from today's testing, plus the lab itself will need to undergo repairs for the damage incurred. Bradford was not pleased with the damage but I feel that this breakthrough was worth it. And I'm quite certain he will as well once we're able to convert this into something we can use in the field.

UPDATED: 15:00, 05/02/2015

During the operation alert, I took the time to review some of the information retrieved from other projects, and on a whim I reviewed some of the implants recovered from Sectoids and more specifically the 'Sectoid Commander' recovered during the earliest operations undertaken by us. The use and meaning of the implants were only speculated due to obvious reasons, but upon reviewing the files I noted that the contents of the implants were extremely delicate and complex patterns resembling circuitry composed of Elerium.

After the discoveries that Twilight helped us uncover, combined with the location of the implants in the Sectoids, brains I started to suspect that she might be able to provide insight into the nature or exact function of the implants.

I was right.

The first implant, labeled (A), is used to gather the energy that Twilight uses from the 'Field' to power her abilities. The possibilities of this are extremely tantalizing. If this circuitry can be refined, increased in scale and retrofitted into the base, we may find the base's power concerns a non-issue. Depending on the scale of power generated, this might completely eliminate the energy crisis that our world was facing prior to the invaders.

I was at first worried that this would violate another one of our cherished laws of the universe, namely the conservation of energy, but Twilight described the field's mechanics suitably though it still rankles me greatly that she's referencing an entire branch of science we're completely ignorant of. The energy of the Field is returned to it as it is used by her abilities. The energy is never truly consumed, merely borrowed and converted, then returned to the Field.

The only weakness I can see in creating a power generator with this methodology is that we will require a 'jump start' from Twilight before it can become self sustaining. If I'm right, once one Elerium generator is running, it can jump-start further generators, or perhaps even charge batteries of a fashion with this 'Field Energy'. I imagine if we're to replicate these powers artificially and in the field, we'll need portable power supplies.

I suspect that this revelation will be the most beneficial for mankind in the long run.

The second implant (B) was described by Twilight as a form of receiver. While I didn't openly speculate as to what it was receiving, I have strong suspicions that it's tied to the nature of the third implant, especially since this second implant is found in virtually all invaders found thus far.

The third implant (C) was met with gratifying horror from Twilight. Her description of its intended use is the offensive projection of the user's will upon a target. This is seen as a high crime amongst Twilight's

people, which goes a long way to dispel any lingering doubts I harbored regarding her nature. Either she is a very good liar, or she is completely sincere in her disgust regarding such abilities. But I digress.

Twilight's confirmation of this ability certainly accounts for the behavior of certain soldiers found in one of XCOM's earliest operations, where they opened fire on our troops to precede the invaders starting their own attack. I also suspect there's a more sinister application when combined with the second implant. With the second implant I suspect the third can be used to remotely access the senses of the receiver, as well as communicate or even assume direct control.

I may contact Engineering to see if we can arrange for the glass in the Containment cells to be one-way mirrors if there's any possibility of invader commanders looking through the eyes of the captives at us.

After Twilight's reaction to the third implant plus her understanding of the basic mechanics of all three, I took the initiative and pitched the idea that she assist us in creating our own devices to ostensibly defend ourselves against the invaders. Once we can ascertain the basic concepts of how to fabricate our own imitations of her abilities, we can come up with more complex applications or even start creating our own effects.

From what I've heard regarding the Strike Teams, they could really use help levelling the playing field against the invaders. I intend to give them more than that. If decoding Twilight's abilities is the key to saving human lives, then I will do everything possible to learn from Twilight.

I've delegated the task of analyzing the artifacts retrieved from the alien ships to my subordinates that aren't associated with the Stardust Project. They are all capable with the various debris the invaders leave behind, but my time is more wisely spent on Stardust now.

UPDATED: 09:02, 05/03/2015

Another discovery has presented itself that is just as unexpected as all the others Twilight has warranted. But some explanation is in order to adequately describe just what was discovered and how.

Twilight finished the blueprints of an Elerium circuit that would be designed specifically to detect the energies of the Field that she manipulates for her spells. These designs were delivered to Engineering where they were worked into an existing detection device, specifically an audio/visual/thermal recorder, where the thermal display was adapted to interpret the information generated from Twilight's design.

Initial testing proved the concept almost immediately, as the 'thermal' component of the device quickly detected a bloom radiating from the location of the Stardust lab with a bright spot that could only be Twilight Sparkle. I decided to take readings from various locations within the base to determine if the base structures themselves in any way shielded Twilight's signature, and I discovered what appears to be an effect of the field on the world itself.

While switching from Thermal to visual mode on the detection device, I noticed that the closer a location is in proximity to the Stardust lab, the colors of the area appear to brighten. In contrast, the further the location is from the lab, the less the color changes. There is no change in illumination but the colors are noticeably *richer*, especially when compared with security footage of the exact same areas one month prior. I've shown the images to both Dr. Ngo and Dr. Mills and both noticed the color changes in the footage before I specifically mentioned it. Neither of them have an idea as to how this is possible, and I find myself straining to come up with a plausible hypothesis.

This isn't alteration of perception, as Twilight has indicated the 'Wallflower' power is capable of. Security footage taken and time-lapsed for the month clearly shows the gradual change to the areas around Stardust, and its gradual spread from there to the rest of the base.

The only hypothesis, the *only* cause I can think of is Twilight due to the timing as well as the corresponding readings that the detection device is now showing us. Twilight has mentioned repeatedly that prior to her arrival, the 'Field' was stiff and inflexible due to lack of use and that with repeated access it would become more easily accessed and used. Could the 'Field' be passively affecting the properties of the world without Twilight's input? Could this also affect the people that are on the base itself?

I've sent requests for increased screening to Medical to watch for any sort of trends with all personnel that report for their checkups. If there is any sort of side effect, I would imagine those closest to Twilight would have seen some sort of reaction before hand.

UPDATE: 17:00, 05/03/2015

After the meeting with Commander Bradford, I have taken it upon myself to call in favors with some of my former colleagues that now work at SETI and politely requested any information they had regarding any solar systems with unusual behavior. For security's sake, I gave them several sets of parameters to look for, all under the pretense of trying to locate the invader's homeworld.

The true reason for the request is to locate Twilight's home, as all parties at the meeting agreed it would be a far stronger position to possess if we know as much as we can before the inevitable first contact between us and this new power. For all of Twilight's assertions of the benevolence of her teacher, we all agreed that it is simply too risky to trust just her account of her country's (or world's?) ruler.

As soon as SETI sends their initial findings to us for review, we'll begin scanning the systems in question with the detection device Twilight provided us. Dr. Shen feels that he can create a scanner that can be attached to one of our satellites launching later this month that might be able to detect her homeworld in the same manner the hand held device detects Twilight's presence.

I've never been mistaken for an optimist, but I get the feeling that this will be the first real positive the Earth has to look forward to for centuries to come.

Assuming it's ever declassified enough for the public to be aware of it.

END LOG

WARNING: Access to this file is RESTRICTED to personnel with TOP SECRET clearance or above. Attempts to access this file without authorization will be reviewed and be grounds for TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION. Distribution of this file may only be done with authorization from Cmdr. David Bradford, failure to provide authorization will result in TERMINATION AND/OR PROSECUTION.

PROJECTID: Stardust
PROJECTDIV: Supplemental
DIVLEAD: Dr. Frank McKendrick
Attached files: Personal Notes by DIVLEAD

NEW RECORD: 18:40, 05/02/2015

I was able to have my first real conversation with Twilight Sparkle this afternoon, and she is everything I both feared and hoped for. All other observations are validated and need no further detailed discussion. She is extremely intelligent and detail-oriented to the point of obsession, as well as having a creative and dedicated mind. She also has several problems that, while exacerbated by her time here on Earth, were originally started in her childhood.

As observed on multiple occasions, Twilight has shown a reluctance to use certain abilities for various reasons. It was initially believed that this was due to the traumatic nature of her arrival and the subsequent violence she participated in, but her 'acceptance' as the student of Princess Celestia is the true cause in my opinion. She was lauded for her abilities when they first manifested, but during that manifestation she lost control of her powers and could have quite easily injured or killed not only herself but her parents and innocent bystanders as well.

Combine this near-catastrophic accident with the suddenly added pressure of being the personal student of the god-figure of your world and you get a pressure cooker. Like her work and her space, her use of abilities is exact and precise and she isn't satisfied with anything less than perfection for long. Any perceived failure on her part is a catastrophic blow to her confidence, so great care must be taken not to give the impression of criticism when she uses her abilities.

She also displays a significant degree of naivety when it comes to the nature of military operations. I didn't directly question her on her thoughts on XCOM, but I did ask her about her brother's duties as part of her nation's military. She couldn't elaborate on the specifics of his duties beyond simple protection, which leads me to believe that either her homeland hasn't seen war in ages, or she was kept in the dark. To clarify, she -is- aware of the concepts of war and all that entails, but she seems completely certain that no such violence is possible so long as both her teacher and her brother are able to prevent it.

On a related note, Twilight also holds extremely strong beliefs when it comes to the act of killing. She believes under no circumstance can it be justified, and she backed this by stating that not even Celestia had executed anyone in the thousand years of her reign, not even her sister when she staged a coup to try and take the throne for herself not once but twice.

Because of these two traits, I strongly recommend that any discussions regarding the offensive applications of Twilight's abilities NOT be discussed while in her presence. I fully expect her to endorse and assist with any efforts for us to create purely defensive or utilitarian applications of her abilities, but once she realizes her gifts are being used to kill, her most likely reactions will be horror or outrage at best. At worst she may begin to see us as a threat and try to defend herself accordingly. Such an outcome would be costly for all sides.

Lastly, Twilight is extremely attached to the friends she has made amongst the Stardust personnel. She asked several times about the well-being of both Matt Harris and Lana Jenkins, which I did my best to

avoid answering. At the time of this writing, Ms. Jenkins is in stable but critical condition down in medical, and was declared dead before miraculously coming back to life.

Twilight is aware of the concept of death and dying, so I strongly feel that if either Mr. Harris or Ms. Jenkins were to die during the course of their duties then Twilight could become self-destructive if she feels that she could have saved them in any way. Ms. Jenkins' injuries will prevent her from being killed in action assuming she pulls through, but there still is the very real risk of the worst happening to Mr. Harris in the field. I am also more inclined to assume the worst case scenario should Mr. Harris fall in battle due to Twilight's attachment to him specifically. I tried to probe the nature of this attachment but Twilight became evasive and changed the subject repeatedly, which only makes me more worried.

While I cannot recommend his removal from duty rotation after the losses the last operation incurred, I cannot stress enough the risk of Mr. Harris being deployed in the field as his injury or death would make Twilight significantly more difficult to handle.

I would also strongly encourage Lana's initial visit to Twilight after her recovery be monitored as well as accompanied by Mr. Shen and Mr. Harris at the minimum. Seeing her friend maimed in such a way will likely provoke a strong reaction.

END LOG

EDIT: Stardust may be your project but Twilight is still technically my patient, and the exact content of our conversation is confidential. I can give you my impressions but I'm not handing over the transcripts, Moira.

EDIT2: Dr. Joel Mills observed the conversation we had to ensure no sensitive topics were discussed or any security breaches took place. Proper procedure was followed to the letter.

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PROJECTID: Stardust
PROJECTDIV: Xenobiology
DIVLEAD: Dr. Joel Mills
Attached files: Personal notes by DIVLEAD

NEW RECORD: 18:00, 05/02/2015

I am so glad I volunteered to be Frank's wingman for his meeting with Twilight. That big hairy genius was able to wrestle out of Twilight one of the subjects I have been -dying- to know about since our first interview: The Changelings.

To review, Twilight had previously shown a significant amount of reluctance in discussing the Changelings beyond the basics, and when in-depth questions were asked she expressed discomfort and the subject was dropped. Due to their nature as emotional leeches I immediately suspected a bad personal experience with one such changeling because of her reluctance. I was only partially correct.

Twilight first encountered the Changelings during her brother's wedding. Unlike my previous theory that Twilight was a victim of the changelings, it seems her brother (Shining Armor) was the target instead. The Changeling known as 'Chrysalis' kidnapped and then assumed the identity of Cadance, Shining's fiancée. Chrysalis then used her position to fatally undermine the capital's defenses to allow a force of changelings into the city.

The changelings were repelled once the real Cadance was freed and reunited with Shining Armor. The method of repulsion was rather unique, at least if I'm reading between the lines correctly. As mentioned previously, Cadance draws her power from emotions and can manipulate them as well while Shining Armor's power appears to be a mastery of various shield and barrier spells. Again, reading between the lines, upon Cadance's arrival, her power increased exponentially due to Shining Armor's emotions toward her, and she then fed the excess power back into him. The bubble shield he created expanded out from the chamber they were in to encompass the entire city while hurling every changeling out.

It didn't feel tactful to mention, but I wonder if changelings that were indoors were crushed between the walls and the spell as it expanded...

Regardless, this confirms most of my theories. Chrysalis, at the height of her power while she was leeching the emotions of Shining Armor, was able to direct enough power to defeat Celestia in a power struggle. Twilight was quite descriptive in the colossal amount of power that was used by both sides of

the fight, but I personally suspect that Celestia was holding back. If she is truly as strict with her 'no kill' policy as Twilight says, she was likely watching out for the safety of the innocents in the room as much as Chrysalis.

Oh, and apparently Luna slept through the whole thing. She must be a VERY heavy sleeper. Or cast some variation of Twilight's silence spell as she slept.

Aside from sating my curiosity regarding the changelings, this also brings up two very interesting points: One, the princesses are not omnipotent, as Cadance was kidnapped (though she's a lesser princess apparently) and the deception wasn't revealed even while in the presence of Celestia herself.

The second point is that, at least in this one anecdotal example, Celestia did not resort to fatal levels of violence even if it would have saved herself from defeat during the fight. Such a story, if it is true, goes a long way to calming my fears at least that XCOM is bringing the wrath of an angry god against all humanity for harming a single hair on Twilight's head. While I have no doubt that she COULD be pushed that far, it is reassuring to know that she won't hurl us into the sun because we didn't have sweets for Twilight.

I hope.

END LOG

FROM: Cmdr David Bradford
TO: Strike Team Leaders
DATE: 05/06/2015, 08:00
SUBJECT: New Targets

Effective immediately, when Strike teams encounter undocumented or unknown aliens, the following guidelines are to be followed:

- 1.) Do not fire upon them unless aggressive action is taken against humans (XCOM or others) by the subject.
- 2.) If the subject attempts to approach Strike team personnel in a non-hostile manner, retreat unless otherwise ordered.
- 3.) If subjects engage or are engaged by known invader aliens in combat, all Strike team personnel are to report immediately and then assume overwatch until other orders are received or the conditions of 1 or 2 are fulfilled.
- 4.) If subjects are seen working in concert or cooperating with known invader aliens, normal rules of engagement and reporting apply.
- 5.) All sightings are to be forwarded immediately to Cmdr David Bradford and Dr. Moira Vahlen for analysis.

As always, consider your number one priority is the mission and the safety of your squads; but if any new or unusual aliens are spotted that fit the above profile, check your targets and tread carefully.

If there are any questions, my office is open.

Cmdr. David Bradford.

Avoidance

NEW ZEALAND DECLARES MARTIAL LAW AFTER RIOTS BREAK OUT DURING EVACUATION OF AUCKLAND. CAUSE OF THE RIOTS DETERMINED TO BE SEVERAL FALSE REPORTS OF ALIENS HIDING WITHIN THE REFUGEES, WHICH RESULTED IN SEVERAL DEATHS BEFORE MILITARY AND POLICE INTERVENTION

TABLOIDS REPORT DISAPPEARANCE OF ELDERLY RETIREE AS EVIDENCE OF GOVERNMENT CONSPIRACY. SOURCES CITE RETIREE'S SELF-DESCRIBED BACKGROUND WITH GOVT AGENCIES AS WELL AS NUMEROUS MENTIONS OF 'OUTSIDERS' AND 'ETHEREALS,' BUT CLAIMS ARE DISMISSED BY MAJOR NEWS OUTLETS AS RAMBLINGS OF A SENILE OLD MAN.

09:02, 05/06/2015, BARRACKS

"They're late," Matt heard Lieutenant Dryzinski mutter under his breath, as he and the rest of the more experienced soldiers waited for the expected arrival of new recruits.

"They might be poached from the best military outfits in the world, but they're all going to be new here," Matt offered solemnly, and he did his best to match the lieutenant's stare. "Plus, they're going to be from several different outfits and countries, so I suspect there's going to be a bit of confusion until everyone's on the same level."

Paul's look eventually melted into something far more tired than Matt had ever seen on the other man's face. "You're right, of course. I should thank you, by the way. After the others... passed, both you and Zhang have really gone above and beyond. You're going to be second in command in the squad, so I'll need to rely on you to help herd the cats that are being sent our way, both on and off the battlefield."

"I'm doing my duty, sir," Matt said with a nod as he accepted the praise and responsibility gracefully, though his expression became pained. "I just wish that..."

"Say no more," Paul interrupted with a pat on the shoulder and his tired look. "I know exactly what you mean. I spoke with the doctors this morning, they say Lana might be up for visitors later today. You up for seeing her as soon as the FNGs are all sorted out?"

"I'm not certain I would trust the group without one of us to supervise their adjustment to base life, sir." Matt replied with an arched eyebrow.

Paul's response wasn't what Matt anticipated, "That's why I asked if *you* were up for visiting her. I'm sure with Zhang around we can manage the kids while you check in on Lana. I... won't ask about what happened between you two before the operation but you really should resolve that with her if you can. In this line of work you leave something important for later, and you might find that there isn't a 'later' to address it."

"...understood, sir."

He's right, Matt had to agree, especially after the news of Lana's condition reached the survivors of Strike One. *She's survived against all odds, but she's out of Strike One with her injury. We don't know what will happen to her as soon as she's healthy enough to move... but in all likelihood she'll be moved to a place where she can recover. Someplace other than here.*

"Glad to hear it," Paul said, before something resembling a smirk crawled onto his face. "And from what the doctors told me, the first thing she said when she regained consciousness was to ask if she got promoted. Imagine her dismay when her posthumous two rank promotion was knocked down to just one rank when she failed to stay dead."

Matt couldn't help but chuckle. "I might think we were terrible people for joking about such a thing, but something tells me that she'd approve. Hell, she probably told you to mention it, right?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that assertion."

"Ah, well, at least she finally managed to escape the rank of private. If it weren't for her damned pranks she'd be a sergeant at least by now. I suppose the betting pool will need to be awarded now. I'm sure the others..." *They're dead.* "...well, the others would be happy for her."

Sympathy briefly crossed Paul's face before it was chased away by a more troubled expression. "For all the trouble she gave us, she will be missed. There is... also something else I wanted to ask you about before the new folks get here. The other squad leaders and I received new orders from Commander

Bradford that I'd like your opinion on."

"Sure thing. What exactly were the orders?" Matt asked, and a small degree of trepidation crept up on him as he noticed Paul take a moment to collect his thoughts.

"The orders detailed a change in SOP for aliens outside the already identified profiles," Paul explained in a quiet enough tone that was almost drowned-out by the din of the barracks, "Reading between the lines, it seems to imply that there are aliens that are not allied with the invaders... and that they might not be hostile to us."

Damn your curiosity, Paul, Matt thought furiously as he struggled to keep something resembling a poker face in place. *Damn it.*

"When I spoke with you and Zhang after the operation, I was just talking out loud about some things but now I'm really starting to wonder," Paul crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall while pointedly not looking directly at his subordinate. "That... *thing* in Stardust. It isn't with the invaders, is it? It's neutral, or cooperating. And it has friends that might be coming, right?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny..."

"*Sooksin*," Paul swore as he brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "That makes things complicated, doesn't it? Bad luck, too. Wanders into a shooting war between us and the terrors from the void, that's damn brilliant. I suppose the only good luck was that you used the ARC thrower instead of the rifle, yes?"

With every word that the lieutenant spoke, Matt found it harder and harder to maintain his poker face. *Damn it man, just drop it!*

"Just...tell me one thing if nothing else, okay?" Paul said after a long moment. "Is it for real? Is it honestly something not related to the invaders? I wouldn't push so hard for this without a reason, and whatever you say stays with me, Matt. The reason I'm pushing this is that after the last mission the other squad leaders have voiced some concerns about the risks that these orders will bring to the teams. We're all here to do our duty or die trying, but you were there when Vahlen came up with her mad scientist plan to use glorified tasers to capture the aliens alive. You remember how folks reacted."

"I was there. I volunteered, as you may recall."

"You did, and you've got serious brass for doing so. But you saw how the others reacted when the orders came down. None of the team leaders liked forcing anyone into taking that kind of risk," The lieutenant let out a sigh as he again pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not asking you to divulge the secrets of the lab. I just need to know that these orders won't be putting Strike One in harm's way without good reason."

Matt found himself mirroring Paul's posture as he considered his words. *The fact that he's talking this much is proof that this is bothering him a lot. What did dad say about sergeants? Lieutenants might drive the car, but sergeants carry the map. Without guidance and support the whole squad is lost.*

"I cannot divulge the nature of any captives that may or may not be in XCOM's possession at this time," Matt said slowly while he emphasized each word, "Nor can I speculate upon the possibility of third parties that are unaffiliated to the current conflict attempting to retrieve said captive of dubious provenance. Lastly, cooperative captives are the purview of Doctor Moira Vahlen and all requests should be forwarded to her for review."

Paul looked over to Matt for the first time since the conversation started and simply stared before resuming his previous pose. "Thanks," he said simply as he mulled over the answers.

Matt merely nodded but any further conversation was interrupted as the massive double doors on the other side of the room opened and a rather varied group of soldiers trundled through and into the barracks common area.

"All right, listen up!" Fujikawa boomed as she hopped up onto a bench to gather the attention of all the soldiers assembled in the room.

For all her skill at command, she's still five foot two with combat boots on, Matt thought as he looked over the crop of new recruits. *Average height of the new folks is over five ten... she needs all the help she can get.*

"I'm sure you all are eager to get into the swing of things here, but before that happens you'll be assigned to the Strike teams. Lieutenant Paul Dryzimski leads Strike One. If you hear your name, you're with Strike One." Paul stepped forward to make himself obvious as the captain produced a clipboard and began to rattle off a series of names in quick succession. "Bapela, Neema! Blake, Holly! Burns, Clara! Carlock,

Patrick! Finch, Jack! Sachs, Robert! Suzuki, Kaori! Yamazaki, Kaito! That's it for Strike One, next is..."

Matt tuned out the the captain's voice as he surveyed the pack of recruits that now approached. Three pairs appeared to sort themselves in the newcomers, while the last two remained separated from the rest. *Probably national loyalties or armed services branches. Hell, they might have made friends while on the plane ride here.*

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, if you'll follow me," Paul motioned over his shoulder and turned toward one of the exits leading out of the Barracks central area. It was only after the last of the new recruits passed that Matt turned to follow. The collection of soldiers followed the lieutenant as he made a few turns before they came to a stop in the bunk room normally used by Strike One and Two.

"Have a seat," Paul instructed, and the group situated themselves on bunks, benches and the occasional chair around the room. Matt, however, leaned against the bunk and remained standing.

"Now, I'm all quite certain you were given the speech about saving the world from the horrors from beyond the stars, so I'll spare you from having to listen to it again," Paul said as he turned around to address the group. "You all are the best of your respective branches of service, and you distinguished yourselves in various ways that attracted this organization's attention. A significant amount of trust has been placed in each of you and I expect you all to perform like the professionals I know you are. That means your best performance on the field, and your best behavior when not on duty. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Came the somewhat uneven reply, and Matt could see Paul was sorely tempted to make them repeat it.

"Now then, some introductions are in order. Give your name, former branch of service and why you're here, if you please. In case you may have forgotten, I'm Lieutenant Dryzinski and I lead Strike One. Former Spetsnaz, and I was part of the team that led an assault on a landed alien craft detected inside the Chernobyl ruins. Captured it, too, before both the craft and I were swept up into the organization." Paul stopped before pointing at one of the rookies, a man in his early thirties with tanned skin with brown hair and eyes. "You're next."

"Patrick Carlock, sir. Retired United States Army engineer. Worked as a pipeline engineer in the 697th before resigning my commission. I got recruited after I found a series of sabotage attempts on domestic water supplies in the continental United States. I was going to be taken in for questioning on just what I found when the invaders decided they didn't want me answering those questions, I guess," The man gave a self-deprecating chuckle before continuing. "I didn't want to be dead weight, so I volunteered for this."

Paul's smile was genuine. "You might not remember, but I was part of the team that retrieved you. You'll be a worthy addition to the team." The lieutenant's gaze fell upon the next person in line, a woman with dark skin and a shaved head. "You're next."

The introductions went on for the rest of the rookies. The dark skinned woman named Neema Bapela was a survivor of a terror mission launched against the military base she was stationed at in her country. Both Kaito Yamazaki and Kaori Suzuki gained XCOM's attention after they both racked up a respectable number of kills during an attempted abduction mission in rural Japan. Jack Finch and Clara Burns were poached from Britain's Special Air Service after they defused an alien bomb set to incinerate most of Cardiff. Holly Blake was picked up after being reported MIA during an attack that obliterated an American base in Iraq, only for her to make her presence known to the relief forces after running out of ammo sniping the invaders.

"And you, sir, are the last." Paul said as he turned to face the last new addition. He looked old for a soldier, with skin that looked like tanned leather and a garish set of scars across his jaw and neck that would give Zhang something to compare with.

"Robert Sachs, formerly with the Australian Tactical Assault Group," The man introduced with a gravelly voice that was produced either from a lifetime of cigarettes or the injury that left the scars on his neck and jawline. "And I think I was recruited because I took down one of those creepy bugs like any good Australian would." A moment of silence passed before he elaborated, "With a knife."

"I call bullshit, why would you draw a knife on one of those things?" Kaito blurted out, and his disbelief was mirrored on just about everyone's faces.

Robert replied without missing a beat, "I was out of ammo and I bloody well wasn't going to use my teeth."

"Is that something you Australians do regularly? Take a knife to the demonic spiders that rain down from the sky? I bet that's where you got your scars, right?" Carlock asked with the beginnings of a smirk spreading across his face.

Again, Robert's reply came without hesitation, "You been to Australia lately? Damned demonic spiders are

par for the course. As for the scars, you should see the other guy." A long moment of silence passed between the assembled soldiers before a slow smile began to creep onto the Australian's face as he began to laugh.

"I was reloading when the bloody bug jumped me. Nearly took my jaw off with one claw. I had just enough time to draw my knife and stick it in the soft parts before it could finish me off. I think it was trying to turn me into one of them at the time so it let its guard down. Didn't turn down the lucky break so I stuck him and twisted until he stopped moving."

Paul shared a smile with the scarred man, "Well, just so long as you're willing to use guns while with us instead of knifing every alien to death, I think I can live with that explanation." The lieutenant's gaze turned to Matt, and he realized it was now his turn to introduce himself.

"I'm Sergeant Matt Harris, formerly--"

"The Butcher," Jack Finch interrupted, "Oh, I knew I recognized you. You were part of that botched US Army hit squad that was sent to track down Al'Massani in Iraq. Shot some kid and set off the civil war there. From what I hear they're still burning you in effigy in that part of the world."

Matt's eyes narrowed slowly as he fixed the Brit with a stare, "The kid had a weapon and the intent to use it. I had to defend myself and my squad."

"Mhm, yep, I heard you use that excuse on the news. What's funny is that your squad got themselves mostly killed without yo--"

"Mister Finch," Paul hissed as he entered the conversation with all the subtlety of a battering ram, "Sergeant Harris is my second in command and I trust his judgments and decisions as though they were my own. If he says his actions were justified then *they were*. Moreover, I am more willing to accept the account of someone who *was there* over the opinion of some rear echelon desk jockey or television celebrity. I would also think that as a fellow soldier you would do the same."

Jack's moral superiority and confidence faltered as the logic of Paul's words hit him, but Matt was too far lost in his own memories to notice.

"Now, this goes for all of you," Paul said as he fixed each and every one of the soldiers with a stare to emphasize the seriousness of his words. "Each and every one of you thinks you're a badass, and you were before you got here. But you are *nothing* by yourselves. The aliens are coordinated and cunning to a degree that we cannot match without creating cohesive groups of our own. Our strength and survival depends upon our ability to *become a cohesive group*. From this moment on, I will not tolerate anything that undermines that goal. Am I clear?"

"Yes sir." Came the ragged response.

Paul's eyebrow twitched. "What was that?"

"Yes sir!"

"Very good. Now that we've finished with that little bit of unpleasantness, there is one more introduction to make." Paul looked just past Matt's shoulder and gave a nod.

Matt turned to see that Zhang had seemingly materialized out of thin air behind and to his right, and the sergeant had to resist the urge to jump at the realization.

"My name is Shaojie Zhang. My background is with the PLASOF, but it was my civilian work that attracted the attention of this organization. I was recruited shortly thereafter."

"What civilian work, exactly?" One of the recruits asked, a note of eagerness to put the previous subject out of mind clear in his voice.

"Acquisitions," Zhang explained with a cool smirk. "During a job I found myself in possession of something the aliens left behind, so I delivered it to XCOM instead of my employer at the time. As I was no longer employed afterward I offered my services then, and here I am now."

"Thanks, Zhang," Paul said with a nod before he turned back to the recruits. "You were all told this during your recruitment, but I feel it bears repeating. While this conflict continues we are under a communications black-out, which means no signals in or out of the base. Operational security is paramount but it also puts all of us currently here rather firmly in the dark as to what's going on outside. So, before we get completely settled in I'd like to know just how things are going in the world."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room before Sachs spoke up. "It's a goddamn mess out there. While I was in recovery I heard that New Zealand's gone silent, and Australia's getting flooded with

refugees that escaped the island. From what they say the entire country has lost its mind. News is trying to spin it but once the dust settles heads are going to roll."

"I'm... afraid I have to agree," Carlock added. "There isn't panic in the streets yet, but there's been at least a dozen sabotage attempts on major installations all across the US. The waterworks sabotage that I was able to stop with XCOM's help would have destroyed a significant portion of our water treatment capacity east of the Mississippi. With the 'suspicious' bridge collapses that happened back in February, it isn't a stretch of the imagination to see a systematic attack on infrastructure that we are barely holding back."

Kaito and Kaori shared a look before the former added his own information. "I am afraid to admit it, but Japan is likely one disaster from anarchy. Everyone is polite and acts as though nothing is wrong but you can see it in their eyes. They are scared."

"My family is on extended vacation in Okinawa since they were worried about another attack on the capital," Kaori gave a worried look as she explained. "From what I hear, just about everyone who can afford to is leaving the cities for the countryside. If people don't feel safe in the cities then things are going to grind to a halt."

"Sounds like a properly British thing to do," Finch spoke, having regained his voice after Paul's lecture. "Alien invasion? Keep calm and drink some tea until it goes away." He gave a self-deprecating chuckle before looking back on the group. "People are afraid to leave their homes. The royal family shows up every once and a while to ask for calm and composure, but everyone knows Parliament and the prime minister are squirreled away in a bunker somewhere while they leave the rest of the country to burn."

"Goddamn politicians," Sachs growled as he perfectly summarized Finch's explanation.

With each report, Matt's expression fell bit by bit and he couldn't help but notice the news having the same effect on Paul. *It's worse than I thought. I hope my family is alright...*

"Ah, well, thanks for answering my question even though it wasn't quite the answer I was hoping for." The lieutenant said after a long moment. "You're all in the right place to make a difference against the invaders. You may have taken part in defensive operations where you were, but here you'll have a chance to strike back against the aliens. While you all get your bunks sorted, I'll regale you all on the tale of how we boarded and captured an alien ship mid-flight."

The last comment spawned several doubtful responses and laughs as the group began to disperse. Paul caught Matt's eye and then looked pointedly to the door.

I guess its time to bite the bullet.

10:30, 05/06/2015, MEDICAL

After checking in with the doctors, Matt stepped into the recovery wing as quietly as he could. Aside from the chorus of beeps and other noises from the medical machines, the room was completely silent. A half-dozen occupants filled beds that lined the walls, while doctors occasionally checked in before heading back out of the room.

Matt walked past the rows of beds before finally stopping at the last one in the row and dragging his eyes up to get a good look at its occupant. Lana slept soundly, and the strain of the last week's ordeal was plain on even her sleeping face. Her skin was almost devoid of any color, and her hair was spread messily around the pillow behind her like a ragged black cloud. The most dramatic feature, though, was the blank space where her left arm should have been, and the bandaged stump just below her shoulder.

As much as Matt tried he couldn't tear his eyes away from the sight, and he subconsciously clenched and unclenched his left hand as though to reassure himself it was still there. For nearly a minute Matt stood there watching Lana's sleeping form before he quietly turned to leave. He didn't get more than five steps before a weak voice halted him in his place.

"Oh hey, about time you showed up."

Realizing his quiet escape was no longer possible, Matt turned back to Lana's bed and took a seat in one of the chairs beside it. "Paul mentioned you were well enough to take some visitors today. I heard you were recovering well enough considering... your injury."

"It hurts like a bitch, even though it's not there. The doctors tell me that's normal, though," Lana explained with a wince. "They are pretty good though. They tell me I might be up and about within another couple of days with physical therapy. I don't know what the recovery time for this kind of thing would be in a normal hospital but it sounds rather fast, don't you think?"

"I'm... inclined to agree with you. Have they told you about where you'll be going once you've recovered?" Matt asked, leaning forward with a sympathetic look. His elbows fell to his knees as he clasped his hands and rested his chin on his thumbs.

Lana managed a weak smile and an abbreviated shrug followed by another wince. "Well, nothing concrete yet. I asked if I could stay on to help with Stardust and anything else I could help with and they said they would get back to me. It's a better answer than telling me no right off the bat."

"I... suppose so. Both Paul and I missed having you around to get the new folks adjusted to life here. If they find a way to keep you around the base then I hope you don't mind getting in touch with Paul to see how you can lend a--" and just then, Matt realized exactly what he was going to say. Judging from Lana's smirk, she did too. "--hand."

"If you need any help with the *hand jobs* with the newbies, I'll do everything I can to *pitch in*."

Matt closed his eyes and brought his hands up to cover his face, but that couldn't save him from what was coming.

"Heck, I've even got some good *hand-me-down* kit some of the kids could use, assuming they don't mind gear that's *secondhand*."

Matt had to resist the impulse to groan.

"You tell Paul to just say the word and I'm his *right-hand woman*. You gotta have a *firm hand* when dealing with the new folks or they'll learn they can just walk right over you."

"I was going to apologize for my comment but then I remembered you're a horrible person." Matt muttered, and he could hear a grin enter Lana's voice.

"You come in here with all your *backhanded* comments and you accuse me of being a horrible person? Need I remind you that I already owe you an ass-kicking, and I can do it with *one arm tied behind my back*. And besides...I've...oh bah I've got nothing else."

"You spent the last few days thinking of all those terrible jokes, didn't you?"

Lana's response was a ghost of her usual grin. "Oh no, just the last few hours."

"Glad to hear you haven't changed," Matt finally admitted with a chuckle that they both shared. The good mood of the moment didn't last though.

Lana's voice dropped somewhat as she asked, "Have you seen *her* yet? Since the mission, I mean?"

"No. I haven't," Matt said as he again assumed his hands-clasped pose with his elbows on his knees. "Paul's tapped me for second in command of Strike One. With that responsibility combined with preparations for the fresh recruits, I simply haven't had any time to--"

"You're avoiding her."

"...yeah, that's right," The guilty admission came after a long moment of silence, and Matt had to let out a frustrated sigh before he continued. "I have no earthly idea on how I'm supposed to handle this situation. I think I'd sooner take on a Chryssalid with a knife than try to disarm the cluster that's just waiting to blow up at the lab. One of the rookies claims he did that, by the way. Took on a Chryssalid with a knife I mean."

"You're shitting me," The animated response was tempered by another wince. "Next thing you're going to tell me is that he did it while wearing nothing above the belt except a mustache and a cowboy hat...wait, don't change the subject!"

"I was serious earlier, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do to fix this," Matt started to shout, but quickly stopped as soon as he saw the dirty looks the doctors were leveling at him. "How exactly am I supposed to dissuade her from her assumptions about me in such a way that doesn't have her destroying the base in the process as part of a tantrum?"

"And why are you asking me this?" Lana asked doubtfully, and it was her turn to sigh as she caught the glare Matt fixed her with. "Well, I see three options that you could attempt. The first would be the best, the second would be risky in the long term, and the third would be risky in the short term."

"And what are those options exactly?"

"Well, the first option is that you just play along until she goes back home or we're all dead," Lana explained glibly, but her good cheer withered as Matt's glare rematerialized. "The second option would be to find some excuse to never go back to Stardust and hope that she doesn't tear the base apart to find out

just why she hasn't seen you. The third option would be to come clean and risk whatever reaction she has to the news."

"I wasn't kidding earlier... I think the knife and the Chryssalid scenario is much more desirable than this mess."

"What's the worst she could do? Besides the whole 'reduce you to a fine red mist' thing if she's upset?"

Matt's first response was a groan, "You're not helping. And I don't even know how to approach the subject." He turned back to Lana and gave her an evil smile. "I should just wheel your ass into Stardust and have you explain it to her. I'm pretty sure she'll be less likely to react violently if the person explaining is already wounded. And if she does, well, justice is served."

"My my, what an *underhanded* scheme you've concocted."

"Don't start with that again," Matt ordered quickly before dropping his chin into his hands. "I just haven't had much experience with this particular issue. I tend to be on the *receiving* end of the break-ups and they rarely seem to work out well."

"The term 'break-up' implies that you are already a couple," Lana observed slyly, but she quickly backpedaled when Matt stood and grabbed the handrails at the foot of her bed. "Okay okay okay, fine. Honesty is your best policy, or even a creative white lie if you keep it simple."

"Jenkins, a 'creative white lie' was what got us into this mess in the first place."

"Technically no, what I did was not tell the whole truth but that's just splitting hairs at this point. Just... I don't know. Tell her that the job comes first, or something. Or that you have an arranged marriage and it would never work out. Hey, don't give me that look, I'm trying to help, here." Lana again tried to shrug and winced for the effort. "I really don't know what to do."

"I just don't want to hurt her. I still remember my sister's letters when she got rejected by the first boy she liked. She was devastated for months afterward, plus I had to track down the little bastard and give him a 'harsh talking-to' about his behavior."

"And now you're worried about her brother doing the same to you? Not to mention the fact that she's family to royalty, you know. Personal student to her god and what have you."

Matt's groan was muffled as he dropped his face into his hands again. "You're really not helping."

"I get what you mean, I really do. She's got that little spark that tells her that everything can go right in the world with enough hard work and determination and she's *certain* that everything will turn out right in the end. She's terribly naïve, but you don't want to be the one to take that little bit of hope she has from her." After Matt's silent nod, Lana closed her eyes and let out a sigh. "Alright. If you don't think you can do it, then I will as soon as I can. Just try not to freak out too much when you go see her, alright? And I mean *when* you see her, not *if*. I want you to go stop by to say hello right after you leave here."

"Alright, alright. What should I tell her about you?" Matt asked, and a genuine note of concern entered his voice.

"Tell her the truth," Lana replied quickly. "I got banged up during the mission. But don't say a word about how, though. Better she thinks that I did something dumb than it was a mistake of hers. She strikes me as the kind of person who lets any kind of failure haunt her."

Matt again cast a wary eye over the extent of Lana's injuries. "And when she finds out that you're a little more than just 'banged up?'"

"I'll burn that bridge when I get to it. Now go, she's been waiting long enough." With that, Lana waved her remaining hand towards the door to shoo Matt away.

As he exited Medical, Matt caught sight of a familiar but unwelcome sight. Jack Finch leaned against the corridor wall opposite of the entrance to Medical, with his arms crossed and his head down in thought. Before he could simply turn and leave the newcomer to whatever he was doing, the Englishman brought his head up and raised one hand in greeting.

"Ah, Sergeant Harris, I hoped I could get a word in," Jack said as he fell into step behind Matt.

"I'm a busy man, mister Finch. I heard there's an innocent little girl down on the third floor and she isn't going to shoot herself in the heart, now is she?" Matt said flatly as he marched down the corridor towards the main elevator.

"Ah, yes, about that. I'm afraid I have a tendency to run off at the mouth if I'm not careful. Just ask Clara. I just talk, and..." Jack started to ramble before Matt interrupted.

"You've gone over your one word limit, mister Finch," Matt stated in the same flat tone as they reached the elevator and started to descend. He could see the Englishman sigh quietly while running a hand through his hair in a motion that seemed habitual rather than a conscious action.

"Sorry, alright? Didn't mean to put you on the spot. It was rather thick of me to bring it up without knowing all the facts. How can I make it up to you?" Jack finished his apology sincerely while looking to Matt for some reply.

An uncomfortably long moment of silence passed through the elevator car as it descended. As the doors opened, Matt turned to Jack and quickly spoke, "I'll accept your apology provisionally, but you must agree to my terms. At some point in the future I will ask you to do something. It might not make sense at the time and it might even be something you would do by yourself, but when I tell you to do it you cannot refuse. Understood? Good."

"But what--" Jack started to say but he was cut off as Matt stepped back and the elevator doors separated the two.

I don't know if I'll ever call him on that request but it might be good to let him live in fear for a bit, Matt thought to himself before turning away from the elevator to head to the Stardust labs.

11:27, 05/06/2015, STARDUST LAB

The door to Twilight's habitat hissed open to reveal the unicorn and doctor Vahlen scouring what appeared to be a series of magnified schematics and circuits. Both were in a very animated conversation while pointing at various pictures until they caught sight of the soldier's entrance.

When did that happen? Matt wondered as his eyes jumped from Twilight to Vahlen. *Last I heard Vahlen wasn't nearly this enthusiastic...*

"Ah, Sergeant, Twilight was just asking about you," Vahlen said as she looked up, and Matt couldn't help but notice Twilight's ensuing glare that the good doctor was oblivious to. "We were just about to take a break."

"Good timing on my part, I suppose," Matt answered as he tried to muster up a smile.

"Indeed," Vahlen agreed before turning back to Twilight. "I'll be sending our findings down to Shen for review and we'll see if we can get a working prototype going in the next few days, yes? We may need you to assist once construction is complete."

"I'll be ready to help when it's done," Twilight replied with a smile and a nod, which Vahlen returned.

Vahlen's behavior took several moments to fully process in Matt's mind and he had to resist the unconscious impulse to jaw drop as she turned to leave. *When did this happen?* Before Matt could recover, Vahlen had already passed him and exited the habitat.

Which left him alone with Twilight.

"So, Twilight..." Matt started, but he stopped mid-sentence when he saw the annoyed glare she was levelling at him.

"Where were you? Both you and Lana appear and then disappear after asking for Wallflower then I don't see either of you for days? And everyone's avoiding the subject when I ask about where you two were. I was worried sick!" Twilight fumed. "Everyone always got this weird expression when I asked, too. I know they're hiding something from me. Why didn't you come see me the moment you got back?"

Matt had to resist temptation to take a step back from the force of the rant, "Things were busy and I couldn't find the time to--"

"Couldn't find the time? You couldn't find five minutes to stop by and say, 'Hello, Twilight, I'm fine'? And where's Lana? I haven't seen her either!" Twilight's rant hadn't quite escalated into shouting but it was almost there.

"Lana got...hurt, Twilight. She's been in Medical since we got back. She's... she got hurt in a real bad way," Matt said quietly as he walked over to the one of the chairs at Twilight's table. "A lot of people got hurt. I'm sorry for not coming by sooner, but with so many... injured, any healthy bodies were needed to help with what they couldn't."

Twilight's righteous indignation deflated into concern and guilt as she listened to Matt's explanation. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions... It's just..." Her remorseful tone switched to near panic in the span of a single word. "Lana got hurt? How? Wallflower should have kept anything from seeing her!"

Did the spell fail?" The last question did not need to be asked, *'Is this my fault?'*

"I don't know the details, I'm afraid," Matt lied as he looked to the side, but quickly recovered. "I did just come from Medical and Lana said that it was her fault she got hurt. Wallflower worked as well as we expected while we were out. As soon as you see her you can ask her yourself."

Twilight opened and closed her mouth before simply settling on a wordless nod.

A long and increasingly awkward silence began to stretch out between the two before Matt broke the silence, "What were you and doctor Vahlen working on?"

"Teleporters, I think," Twilight said before motioning towards the piles of pictures with one hoof. "The pictures here are of the inner workings of a device that works like a teleporter from what she described. The Elerium circuitry isn't complete, though, as there are a few variables missing like the location and distance, but Vahlen got really excited and said something about 'computers providing target information'... or something."

"Aha, I see," Matt nodded. *She's probably found some way to weaponize it. She did say that she was sending something down to Shen.* "So she's been a little nicer lately? When did that happen?"

"Well, we had a talk and we came to an understanding a while ago," Twilight said cryptically before continuing, "But we've got our differences worked out now. I think she's much more enthusiastic because of the Elerium testing, and I'm just happy I can do more to help."

"What exactly are you doing with Elerium?" Matt asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Well, apparently we can use it to reproduce certain spell effects," Twilight said, and she took a deep breath that Matt was becoming increasingly familiar with. "Elerium has the capacity to draw, channel or store energy from the Field much like I can with my horn, and if it is manipulated in very specific ways it can create replicas of some of the spells I can do. I've already helped Moira build a little box that lets her detect my magic, and I've also helped make blueprints so that we can try to artificially reproduce the Wallflower spell with a similar device."

"And how did that go?" Matt asked while he controlled his growing interest in the subject. *Artificially reproducing Wallflower? If they can do that and find some way to--*

"They lost the prototype."

"They lost--" Matt's train of thought was interrupted as he comprehended Twilight's statement, and he turned an aghast look towards the unicorn to find a barely-suppressed smirk. Matt couldn't help but chuckle and Twilight ceased to hide her own humor. "Oh, that's pretty funny. Lana's rubbing off on you, I think. Don't tell Lana about your little development though. She's a terrible prankster and I'd hate to give her the ability to perpetrate her pranks while being virtually invisible."

As the subject of Lana entered the conversation the awkward silence returned.

Damn it man, it's now or never! You charge into gunfire and abominations from beyond the sky for a living. An uncomfortable conversation is nothing compared to that! Matt shouted at himself to rally his willpower.

Except if you handle it wrong she'll turn you into hamburger, a dark voice muttered in the back of his mind, and he took a split second to imagine the owner of that voice getting strangled.

"Twilight, I've been meaning to talk to you about something. The last few times Lana's been here she's been teasing you about something, and I think we need to talk abo--" Matt started tentatively but was cut off mid-sentence.

"It's too soon!" Twilight yelped.

"What's--"

"I'm so sorry but it's just too soon for me! I know I'm a bit of a late bloomer and I'll be the first to admit I mostly avoid things like relationships, after all it wasn't too long ago that I didn't even have real friends! Plus mom keeps sending me these *books* and Cadance keeps asking me if I have found my special somepony but I've always had so much work to do and stuff like that can always wait until later! I think you're an amazing human Matt but I'm just not ready for a relationship right now with all this stress that's going on and I really value our friendship so I hope we can just stay friends for now? That might change in the future but I just need time to think about..." Twilight blurted out the flood of words but eventually ran out of breath and had to stop to take in a large gasp of air and look fearfully at Matt.

"Well... that's exactly what I was thinking about, Twilight," Matt said slowly. "We all need time to consider

the future, and with what's going on right now in the world it might be best to put such pursuits off for now, right?"

"I'm so glad you agree," Twilight finally let out her held breath with relief, "...can we stay friends, though? At least for now?"

"That's perfectly fine, Twilight," The soldier agreed as he stood to leave. "I'm afraid I have to go now, Twilight. I wasn't exaggerating when I said there was a lot of work to do with so many people gone."

"I understand. And...thanks for understanding."

Matt stepped out of the habitat to find Shen and Mills loitering under the recently patched roof in the center of the Stardust testing area while Vahlen was nowhere to be seen.

"Well... how'd it go?" Shen asked gently.

Matt finally let out the breath he had been holding as he finally answered, "I think I've been friend zoned."

All three men briefly chuckled and turned to leave the lab, and Matt tried not to think about why those words bothered him so much.

Resolve

A SERIES OF BREAK-INS AT CITY MORGUES IN CENTRAL NORTH DAKOTA ARE NOW CONSIDERED PART OF A WIDER PATTERN AFTER ALL BODIES TAKEN WERE CONFIRMED RETRIEVED FROM AIRCRAFT DESTROYED DURING BATTLE WITH ALIEN FORCES.

SENATOR GOLEMAN ISSUED STATEMENT OF CONDEMNATION FOR NORTH DAKOTA GOVERNOR AFTER HIS RESIGNATION, "MY ONLY REGRET IS THAT CHARGES CAN'T BE LEVIED AGAINST HIM. TOO MANY BRAVE YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN LOST THEIR LIVES BECAUSE OF HIS POOR DECISIONS."

08:30, 05/07/2015, STARDUST LABS

Twilight hummed to herself as she flipped another page in her book. It was the same one that Charles had given her all those weeks earlier, and with recent events she found little time to actually sit down and read it.

Wands for magic? She asked herself as the main character of the book found himself thrust into a world of magic he hadn't know existed. *I suppose that might make sense. If humans don't have horns to control magic they'd need some sort of focus for spell casting. But... why unicorn hair?* Twilight gave her tail a speculative look before shrugging and turning back to the book. *My hair certainly isn't magical. Perhaps unicorns are different here.*

Twilight continued to read through the book at a leisurely pace of five pages per minute, give or take a page, while only taking breaks to check the tablet for the definition of a term or phrase she didn't quite understand. When she tried to look up the names of cities and countries mentioned the tablet still refused to display any information, though when she searched for Hogwarts she found a plethora of information. She had to quickly avert her eyes and fumble for the back button to avoid any dreaded spoilers for the story.

The book itself was amazingly fun to read and she found herself literally on the edge of her seat as the human boy found himself inside a forest that sounded a bit too much like the Everfree forest in an attempt to locate and help, of all things, a wounded unicorn. Suspense turned to despair and despair turned into horror as the unicorn's fate was revealed.

Twilight had to restrain herself from recoiling from the book. *It's okay, Twilight, it's a book. It's fiction, right? RIGHT?* She asked herself repeatedly as she tried to control her breathing. *But the book says that magic users keep themselves secret from the rest of the world, and the Field's condition when I first came here did imply that there are magic users somewhere. They can't really think that drinking unicorn blood keeps people alive, right?*

The unicorn's mind reeled as another thought occurred to her. *It doesn't matter if it's true or not, only if they think it is! They know nothing about magic so who's to say if they have irrational beliefs like that! Before Starswirl approached the mysteries of our world in a logical manner, we thought that just about everything was superstitious like that.*

Twilight, focus! The book is fiction! The front cover says so! Twilight took a deep breath and let it out. *The author's just using this as something for shock value. That's it. Something horrific to illustrate the monstrous nature of that... thing.* Twilight's frayed nerves weren't helped when the door to her room shot open to reveal Doctor Vahlen.

"Good morning, Twilight. Is... something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong," Twilight replied as she settled back into her chair. "I just wish there was a doorbell or a chime or something. It's always a little... abrupt when people show up. I enjoy visitors, but a little bit of warning would be nice, I think."

Moira looked back at the door speculatively before giving a small shrug and turning back to Twilight. "I'll bring it up with Charles. I'm certain he could arrange something."

"Thank you. Oh, have you talked to him lately? Has he gotten any work done with the teleporter mechanisms we ironed out yesterday?" Twilight asked eagerly. "I've been really curious about the kinds of things he can make ever since we first spoke! Have you seen anything he's made?"

"I have not had a chance to speak with Charles yet, but I did forward our work to him to work with. As for things he's made, we're actually in one example of his work right now," Moira gestured around the room before continuing. "This laboratory's default layout was based on a modular design originally created by

Charles, and the configuration you're in now was custom built to house you and the work relating to you. He's also assisted with weapons and armor designs, as well as helping produce practical applications for any alien technology we capture."

Twilight's appreciation for Charles went up as Moira explained just how much the elderly engineer had created. "That's impressive! Craftspories back home tend to focus on a single trade or profession so being able to do so well with so many things is really amazing! Can I go see where he works at some point?"

"Perhaps," Moira answered after a moment's hesitation, before she produced a bundle of what appeared to be scrolls from under one arm. "Would you be up for looking at some new pictures with me today? Its from something that our own scientists have had a hard time with."

"Sure!" Twilight nodded as she pushed away from her work desk and headed to her guest table. Before she looked at the now unfurled pictures and diagram, she mustered her courage and spoke again, "Moira, I've been meaning to ask something for a little while... I'm really glad I was able to meet you and everyone else, and I've learned so much while I was here but if its not too much trouble do you think that I might be able to start looking for my home?"

Moira quirked an eyebrow and held Twilight's gaze for a moment before looking to the table. "We have started searching for your home system based on what information we have gathered thus far. I'm afraid we haven't found any matches yet."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not at this time, though if something comes up we will ask you immediately."

"Fair enough. So, what are the pictures from, do you know?"

Moira laid out the first scroll as she took her seat at the table. She took a moment to collect her thoughts before she finally spoke, "The pictures are part of a... device our soldiers encountered in the field. It moves on its own without an apparent pilot or controller nearby. Its movements were far too natural to be a completely automated device, at least as far as we understand them. There are several theories as to how it works, but given the degree of Elerium circuitry in its wreckage we were hoping you might be able to shed some light on things."

Twilight nodded eagerly as she looked down at the myriad of almost indecipherable pictures before her. "Well... it looks like the circuits are used to animate something, though the degree of circuitry is very thorough. I might even go so far as to say once it's activated, whatever this is could move around and make decisions all on its own! I remember in some history books where unicorns created similar things with arcanite before the material was banned and destroyed. Do you have any pictures or... ah, 'videos' of it? I'd love to see what it looks like in motion."

Moira's response was subtle, but Twilight noticed it; the fingers around her tablet tightened, and her neutral expression became just a little bit strained. "I believe I can arrange that," she said as she tapped several places on her tablet before placing it on the table in front of Twilight.

A still image was displayed on the center of the tablet, and it appeared to be an almost picturesque scene of a nearly cloudless blue sky meeting green plains on the horizon. If not for the riot of strange symbols and seemingly random numbers and letters scattered all across the picture, it would have fit in as a landscape picture one might see in a doctor's office. Moira tapped the tablet's surface again and Twilight was enraptured as the picture turned out to be a video.

The picture tilted and turned like the view of a bird in flight, and the serene landscape was replaced by a large rectangular object that seemingly hung in mid-air while a pair of saucer shapes hovered nearby. Twilight was just about to ask about the lack of sound when a flash of green erupted from one of the saucer shapes and Twilight gasped as the projectile connected with something moving almost too fast to see, which exploded spectacularly.

And as quickly as the explosion appeared it was gone from the picture, and her eyes fell upon several humans running along the top of the rectangle towards the edge of the tablet screen. On the other side of the screen was a new object that had settled on the surface of the rectangle, and a small ramp could be seen at the tail end of the object as several other tiny figures ran out from it.

That looks like... Twilight wracked her memories as her eyes fell upon the shape that the humans were running from, and she eventually remembered just where she had seen it before

The majority of the room was dark, though the lights illuminated most of the floor and some of the massive alcoves in the walls and along the floor. Several ominous metal shapes that looked like birds of prey lurked in the shadows, and Twilight found herself drifting towards the center of her group without even thinking of it.

Twilight was so fixated on the little figures as they ran that she gasped again as a thin, golden line jumped out and cut across the front section of the object that the humans had just left. It spun out of control and disappeared from the screen, and Twilight's gaze fell upon what the screen was now centered on.

They look like fish... Twilight found herself thinking as the three silvery objects turned and raced towards the right side of the screen. She found herself leaning in to get a better view of the distant subjects, but any further observation was interrupted by a stuttering yellow line that spat from somewhere beneath the screen's view point. The line connected with the leading silver fish and it fell to the ground in pieces. The two that remained turned to face the screen before Moira tapped the screen to stop the video.

"We call them 'Cyberdisks'," Moira explained as she pointed at the two silver fish in the frozen image. "They appear to be fully automated and mechanical, though some of their mechanisms mimic the systems of organic life forms so there is still some debate as to if it actually is a machine or some new form of life that we've never encountered before. We were hoping that the Elerium circuits in its body might yield some insights as to how such a creature could exist."

"From what I've seen, the circuitry appears to give it the power to move about on its own, though I'd really like to see more of how it moves," Twilight said, before she gave a sheepish smile. "I'm afraid this picture here is a little small so I couldn't make out much. I'd like to see one up close if I could." Moira's response to the seemingly innocent request gave the unicorn pause.

The human looked at Twilight with a blank expression before she blinked and looked to the side. "There is one other video of the Cyberdisks at closer range, but the footage is not like this one. It is... disturbing, but it's the only other footage we have of the disks in action. I would not blame you if you did not wish to see it."

Disturbing? What does she mean by that? Twilight thought to herself but the train of thought quickly aborted itself. *They need my help and I can survive watching something uncomfortable to help out.* She nodded and steeled herself before answering, "I want to see it."

"Very well," Moira said as she tapped the tablet several more times before placing it back on the table. One more tap and the video started.

This video was mostly devoid of the seemingly random numbers and symbols the other video had, and it took Twilight a moment to realize the view was over the shoulders of one of the humans; possibly one of the tiny shapes she had seen earlier. Before Twilight could study the image, the view swiveled over to a massive doorway that appeared to be blocked by a wall of blue light. Another human was beside the door and was attempting to step away when something emerged from the light.

It was a flat disk with seams running along its flat top, and a glowing light was centered along the outer edge. That light swept to the side to face the soldier barely a body-length away before the disk itself began to spin and unfold. A segmented tail detached itself from the outer edge of the disk before the view fell behind a pillar. The disk reappeared on the screen as the view emerged from behind its hiding place, and Twilight got her first good look at the Cyberdisk.

Her earlier impression on its fish-like movement came back to her as she saw it dart through the air. The fin-like protrusions on either side of its thin body flared and folded as it jinked left and right, and its tail trailed behind it like a nightmarish party streamer. A line of golden light shot out from the disk to somewhere beyond the screen's view, and for the briefest moment the view turned to follow the beam.

Another human was at the end of the beam, and Twilight's breath caught in her throat as she saw the unmistakable color of blood before the view jumped back to the disk. Its thin profile was now facing the screen and Twilight had to squint as a flash of gold shot almost directly at the screen itself.

Moira tapped the screen to pause the video before she finally spoke. "I'm afraid the video ends here, I hope it is enough to satisfy you. Any help you can provide to unlock its secrets or develop a countermeasure would be extremely appreciated."

"I'll see what I can do," Twilight replied as she continued to stare at the the screen and the golden light that dominated the frozen video.

10:45, 05/07/2015, STARDUST LABS

I promised that I would help, Twilight thought as she rubbed a hoof against the side of her head as she stared down at the diagrams that Moira had left her. Her gaze then drifted to the small piles of half-drawn spell ideas, then to the bank sheet in front of her. *I just don't know what I can **do**.*

As a purely theoretical exercise I would love to try and find something to counter golems, but my friends

don't have the time to wait for me to think of something! Twilight berated herself and began to rub both sides of her head with her hooves for several minutes. When she opened her eyes she saw that her wandering thoughts had transferred to the pen and then onto her paper. The first doodle was a terrible caricature of a Cyberdisk. The second was a stick-figure Twilight zapping the Cyberdisk with a beam helpfully labelled 'MAGIC'. The third picture was of a Cyberdisk-shaped pancake, complete with syrup.

"That is so not helpful," Twilight moaned, and her face met the desk with a dull thunk. She was saved from her unproductive moping by a visitor as the door whisked open.

"Hello!" The unicorn greeted energetically, though the word nearly caught in her throat when she saw that the person visiting her wasn't Shen, the scientists or any of the friends she wanted to see. *Don't be like that, Twilight. Friends shouldn't have favorites.* "How are you doing, Mr. Zhang?"

"I am well, thank you for asking," He replied politely, and Twilight had to force herself not to stare at the scar running along the side of his face. "Mister Harris sends his apologies. He is currently unable to visit due to his duties, but he asked that I visit in his place."

Twilight tried to smile but the placid look on Zhang's face was making the hair on her back stand on end. "That was thoughtful of him. I know he's been very busy so I don't blame him for not having the time to come and visit. I have Lana's cards if you'd like to play a game. I was needing a break anyway."

"I wasn't aware you still had her cards, so I brought something new," Zhang answered as he raised a box before moving to Twilight's guest table. "It's a game called 'Dominoes'. Have you heard of it?"

"No, I haven't. How do you play?" Twilight asked as she pushed away from her desk to join Zhang. *Why does he make me feel uneasy? I shouldn't feel this way, he's Matt and Lana's friend. Mine too... right?* "Is it a card game or something else like Jenga?"

Zhang shook his head as he opened the box to reveal several small white tiles marked with several dots. "Something else, in fact. A game of Dominoes involves the players taking turns placing the pieces so that similar number of dots are touching. A piece with six dots must be touching another domino with six dots. We play until one of us has no more pieces, or cannot place another piece."

"Sounds fun!" Twilight said enthusiastically, and she smiled at Zhang.

Zhang's response was a complete lack of response. He didn't smile back at her and his eyes were unreadable. Without another word he emptied the box on the table and shuffled the pieces, then took several for himself. "I'll place the first piece," he said, and placed a domino face up on the board.

The pair went back and forth and the single piece blossomed into a growing pattern of pieces as the game went on.

Come on, Twilight, think of something to say or ask! This is just getting awkward. "So... do you play Dominoes very often?" Twilight asked hopefully.

"Not so much any more. My parents and I would play when I was younger," Zhang replied. He had started with a warm tone, but chilled quickly and his expression darkened slightly as he finished.

Twilight phrased her next question carefully, "Do you not play with them anymore?"

"No," came the clipped response.

"Can I ask why?" Twilight asked timidly, before backpedaling, "I don't mean to pry or anything. It's just that it seems sad that you found something you like to do with your parents and you don't get the chance to anymore."

"Distance and occupational hazards," Zhang replied after a long moment.

"Occupational hazards?"

"When one is in the business of acquiring things that are not for sale, it is natural to attract enemies. Those enemies are not above applying pressure to family members to get what they want or as an act of revenge."

*Acquiring things that aren't for sale? He's a **thief**?* Twilight had to struggle not to gape at the man.

"That's... nice, I guess. Um, do you know when Matt or Lana might be coming?" *Smooth subject change, Twilight.*

"Miss Jenkins' injuries were quite severe, so I do not know when or if she would be able to visit. Mister Harris's schedule is significantly tighter for the moment due to his new duties," Zhang said. His tone still remained neutral but Twilight couldn't help but detect a small amount of annoyance in his voice.

"Ah, I see," Twilight tried not to sound disappointed, or desperate for other visitors. "When Matt and I spoke yesterday he did mention he had a lot to do because some people got hurt. I hope they get better." *Wait... I tell Matt that I'm not ready for a relationship right now and he suddenly starts sending someone else to visit? What if he really wasn't okay with it? What if he doesn't want to be friends anymore and and he just couldn't say it to--*

"And did he mention the people that died?"

Twilight's panicked train of thought halted. "Died?" She whispered as she turned her wide-eyed stare on Zhang. "People died?"

The soldier didn't look up from his dominoes but he began to speak. "Jack Anderson, Donald Henderson, Kevin Halverson, Holly Beecham, Aaron Enderton, Mitch Johnson, Mary Payne, Josh Halverson, Kenley Buettner, Brad Green, Richard Thacker, Kaguya Amada, Rosa Rodriguez, Simon Alvarez, Johannes Brunnik, Anna Gulobeva, Anton Bakker, Laura Harper, Ibrahim Ghaffar, Yaron Daham, Ernesto Soto, Hao Cheng, Jessica Wright."

At first Twilight didn't understand what he was saying but after a few seconds realization finally dawned on her. *They're names. How many people died? Oh Celestia, so many names.* For a brief moment Twilight recalled her reaction to the book before mentally reprimanding herself. *You stupid foal! How can you compare what happened in a book to this? This is real!*

"Those are the deaths that resulted from the last mission. There are dozens if not hundreds more from prior operations, and likely thousands from other military organizations around the world," Zhang explained, and Twilight could hardly wrap her head around the horrible truth. The door to her habitat opened and someone spoke, but she was too lost in her own thoughts to even look up and acknowledge the newcomer, or say goodbye to Zhang as he left.

*They're dying. The humans are out there dying while I'm sitting here reading books and playing games. How could you be so stupid, Twilight? All you care about is getting home to be with your friends when these people are **dying**. I shouldn't be wasting time like this. I am Celestia's personal student and an expert on magic. I will not waste any more time until I can give them something that can help.*

Twilight pushed away from the table and marched back to her desk. "I won't let it happen again. I won't."

"Won't let what happen, Twily?"

11:00, 05/07/2015, STARDUST LABS

"Zhang, what the *hell* do you think you are doing?" Joel asked as his expression waffled between anger and worry as soon as the door to Twilight's habitat slid shut. "We have been very careful to control what Twilight knows about the external world, and having her naivete shattered so casually might render her uncooperative or worse!"

Zhang waited patiently for the doctor to finish his rant. Before he could reply the door to Observation opened and Vahlen appeared.

"He is doing what I asked, Doctor Mills," Vahlen answered for Zhang, and the male scientist turned to glare silently at her. "Twilight has been very sheltered thus far but she has always been extremely motivated when it comes to protecting her friends. I felt that if we allow her to come to the conclusion that her friends are in danger without her best efforts, she will be more willing and able to provide them. I tried to approach the subject this morning but was not successful, so I asked Mister Zhang to step in. What his method lacked in finesse it more than made up for with directness."

"You put her through that because you wanted results more quickly?" Joel asked incredulously.

"To put it simply, yes," Vahlen explained slowly, though it was quickly becoming apparent that she was losing her patience. "We need to develop countermeasures to the aliens and their technology, and while we might be able to rely on the practical applications of laser technology in a few weeks, or even the invader's plasma technology in a few months, we have the potential to create something much more quickly that could save lives. We all know what's at stake, and now Twilight does, too."

When Joel continued to glare, Vahlen's expression softened, "It's not a perfect solution, Joel. I'll be the first to admit that. All Twilight now knows is that the stakes for our fight are life and death. I suspect no further prompting will be necessary. With any luck, this will motivate her sufficiently so as to spare her any further trauma."

Joel's glare softened somewhat before he let out a sigh, "I understand your reasoning, Moira, even if I don't like it."

"Very good," Vahlen replied before turning back to the observation room. The door was just about to close when the senior scientist shouted, "*Scheiße!*" Both Joel and Zhang stepped into the room to see just what had caused the outburst.

Twilight sat in the center of the room with a horrified expression on her face, and immediately across from her was Lana leaning unsteadily on a crutch under her one remaining arm.

10:51, 05/07/2015, MEDICAL

You can't see me, I'm invisible.

Lana had to stop herself from whispering the words to herself as she took several wobbly steps out from her bed to grab a crutch from beside Holiday's bed. The other soldier was asleep despite the daytime hour from either fatigue or medication and didn't notice Lana as she brought the crutch under her arm and began to stagger to the exit.

You can't see me, I'm invisible.

Lana repeated her mantra as she approached the doctor that was seated by the exit. He was hunched forward over his desk and was in the process of losing a game of Solitaire as the wounded soldier passed him and walked out the doors. He didn't even look up to acknowledge or stop her exit from the medical wing.

I've got to find Twilight. Knowing Matt, he probably chickened out so I'll have to set things straight. Lana thought as she wobbled her way towards the main elevator going down. She was just able to stagger into it as the doors closed, and no one questioned her as she got out on the third floor. *I just hope the guards let me pass. I don't have my ID badge on me, but they should recognize my face, right?*

Lana shuffled her way down the hallways until the door to Stardust came in sight. Neither guard reacted as she rounded the corner, which she took as a good sign. *They know me by name, I spent every available second down here. That's one hurdle I won't have to knock down.* She had just about reached the door when Joel passed her and spoke with the guards. They obligingly opened the door and Lana followed him in.

Well that's a bit rude, she thought as she saw Joel head towards the observation room without so much as a hello to her. *Doesn't matter, the goal is almost in sight.* Lana headed towards the habitat door, only to flatten herself against the wall to avoid Joel as he rushed out of observation and into the habitat. He turned around after a quiet word to whomever was inside, and to her surprise Zhang followed him out. Sensing her opportunity, Lana mustered as much speed as she could and slipped into the habitat before the door closed.

Lana found Twilight sitting at her table with an in-progress game of dominoes before her, and the expression on her face made Lana die just a little bit inside. *What happened? Oh, if Zhang said something to make Twily sad I'm going to kick his ass,* she thought. *What I've got to say won't be much better for her. Pot, meet kettle.*

Before Lana could speak up though, something akin to steel entered Twilight's gaze as she pushed away from the table. "I won't let it happen again. I won't." She declared as she walked over to her desk.

"Won't let what happen, Twily?" Lana asked tentatively, and was rewarded with a bright-eyed smile as Twilight turned to face her.

The expression lasted only for a second as her eyes inevitably drifted to where her left arm used to be. The bandages and what was left of her arm were hidden in the baggy sweater they had given Lana to wear, but the sleeve itself was folded up which made her lack of limb rather obvious. Twilight's happy expression dissolved into wide-eyed horror.

"Lana... what happened? Are you alright?" Twilight started to ask, but Lana interrupted her.

"I'm fine, Twily. Well, as fine as I can be," Lana said as she sank into one of the chairs at the table. "I got just a bit banged up, is all. I'll survive. I get tired a bit more easily though, so you'll have to forgive me if I'm not the life of the party."

"That's not important! How did this happen?" Twilight asked desperately, and Lana could see the unspoken question: *Is this my fault?*

"I did something dumb," Lana answered gently, "Your spell worked as well as we've come to expect, Twilight. It worked so well that some of my friends said they want it, too. I hear that you're going to make some gear that will help with that, right?"

"Did your friends die?" Twilight asked quietly, and Lana flinched at the unexpected question.

"A lot were hurt..."

"Don't lie!" Twilight commanded, and her lavender eyes were filled with anger and tears as she stared at Lana. "I'm not a little foal. I-I can handle the truth. Just tell me!"

Lana held Twilight's gaze for a long moment before looking away without saying a word, which elicited a quiet sob from the unicorn. "It's not your fault, Twilight. We all volunteered for this, and I'm quite certain that the ones who didn't make it back would think that it was a worthy sacrifice. We put ourselves in harm's way to protect people. Occasionally we get hurt. Occasionally we... die." Lana's speech died out as she looked back to Twilight. Her gaze still had equal parts horror and anger, and that small degree of steel as well.

"No."

The denial gave Lana a moment of pause. "No?"

"I won't let this happen again. I *will not*. I'll think of something to help. I can't fix this but I can *make it better*," Twilight ground out the words and she closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, Lana nearly recoiled but found that she could not. Both Twilight's eyes and horn glowed and Lana felt a gentle but firm force grip her right shoulder and wrist. "Twilight, what--" Lana started to ask before the force around her wrist lifted her arm out to her side. The glowing eyes crawled along the length of her arm, and Lana again tried to recoil. *What the hell is she doing? And those eyes!*

Twilight's glowing gaze briefly traversed to what remained of her left arm, and then just as quickly as the sensation began it was gone and Lana was released from the hold. Twilight turned away and marched toward her desk without another word. Her telekinesis grabbed dozens of blank sheets of paper as well as several pens. Everything previously on her desk was swept off and the unicorn began to draw at a frantic pace.

"Twilight, what are you doing?" Lana finally asked.

"I'm sorry but I can't talk any more today. I can't fix this but I can make it better. Just please trust me, okay?" Twilight answered quickly, and she didn't spare so much as a glance over her shoulder.

Sensing the dismissal, Lana got the crutch under her arm again and hobbled over to the exit. The door hissed open to reveal Matt with his arms crossed before him while performing a decent impressing of Bradford's baleful glare.

"How the *hell* did you get out of Medical?" He asked as the door closed behind Lana.

That is a really good question. "Uh...a cardboard box and good timing?"

19:20, 05/07/2015, STARDUST LABS

"It seems you have the results you wanted, Moira. The risks that you took though, they have me concerned," Frank said as he scratched his beard idly while watching Twilight through Observation's one-way mirror. "I believe I made myself quite clear when I said that Twilight would likely not react positively to what she learned today."

"I had intended to introduce the topic gradually to emphasize-" Moira started to explain, but Frank cut her off

"Without consulting me? I'll sing your praises day and night for your work with physics and Elerium, but you really should have come to me before laying all this on Twilight in one day."

"Not all of this was planned, Frank," Moira said tersely. "I had initially introduced some of the combat footage to Twilight when she began asking questions about what the soldiers encountered. Don't give me that look, the sound files were muted and I ensured they weren't graphic. Due to Matt's rapport with Twilight I had intended him to approach the subject, but he was not available. Shaojie was available and he performed admirably, though he was rather blunt about it."

"And Jenkins?" Frank again turned his all-knowing gaze to the scientist.

"I resent the implication! I had no idea she was approved to even leave Medical yet, let alone pay us a visit. And I did read your evaluation on Twilight and I agreed that seeing Lana in her current condition would have been traumatic, perhaps irreparably so," Moira huffed indignantly.

"That's interesting... very interesting indeed. Do you know why that's interesting, Moira?" Frank asked leadingly, and the scientist's flat look told him to simply get on with it. "Miss Jenkins was not cleared to leave Medical. She walked past the doctor on duty without so much as a glance her way. She then rode a crowded elevator and entered the lab by walking through the door after Joel was cleared by the guards. I've spoken with the doctor on duty, some of the people from the elevator car, and Joel. None of them recalled seeing her at any point during her trip here, but the security cameras caught it plain as day."

Moira's eyes widened as Frank continued his explanation. *That can't be right. He's describing the effects of Wallflower, but Twilight ceased casting it the moment the operation was completed. She needs line of sight to cast it, so how could she do that? She seemed legitimately surprised when Lana showed up. This doesn't make sense at all.*

"I don't have any rational explanation as to how that could happen," Moira finally said truthfully.

"Mhm, I'm afraid I don't either," Frank said as he turned back to Twilight.

The unicorn was furiously scribbling away on a sheet of paper, drawing what appeared to be complex patterns and lines that thus far had defied explanation. The overhead cameras had caught little bits of whatever it was she was creating but had been unable to capture the finished product before the paper was rolled up and snapped shut with a rubber band. Several scrolls already littered the floor of her habitat and Twilight showed no sign of slowing down.

"Well, she certainly is driven, isn't she? Do you have any idea what she's doing?"

"No, I am afraid not," Moira chewed nervously on her lip before continuing, "I've tried approaching her to inquire about her activities, and so has Matt. I'm afraid neither of us got much more in the way of answers beyond what Lana reported. Paraphrased, she says 'she won't let this happen again,' and 'she'll make things better.' It's always variations of those two phrases. We may need to bring Charles up here if she's going to have another episode like the one she had last month."

"Episode last month?"

"Joel asked her to provide pictures for some of the species of her home world. Twilight took it upon herself to catalog a significant portion of the species on her world. Kim and Joel tell me she worked for nineteen hours before Shen convinced her to rest."

"Is that so?"

Moira nodded wordlessly and the two turned back to observe Twilight. She finished the page she was on and snapped it shut, then pushed off from the desk and closed her eyes. Both Frank and Moira gasped as her eyes snapped open to reveal glowing orbs in place of her normal lavender eyes. She slowly began to scan her surroundings before locking onto something below her.

"Aha, there you are," She said with a smile, and her horn flashed. When the light dissipated, all the scrolls were gone.

19:23, 05/07/2015, THE FOUNDRY

FOUNDRY REPORT

PROJECTID: Fragarach

TYPE: Interceptor Weapon System

DESCRIPTION: Long-Range Instantaneous Ordinance Delivery

ROLE: Air to Air Anti-Ship

Attached Files: Research materials provided by Project Stardust, prototype blueprints of system, initial testing results of prototype, personal notes by Chief Engineer Charles Shen

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 19:25, 05/07/2015

The Fragarach weapon system (or 'Frag Launcher' as it's now called by the engineering staff) is the first major weapon development that was born from the study and deconstruction of alien technology, specifically from the wreckage of scout craft that were shot down in a previous mission. These scout craft used short-range teleportation devices to quickly transport troops from the ship to the planet's surface quickly and without needing to land. After consulting with several experts in the Stardust Labs, we have used the principles of this teleportation system to create an ordinance delivery system that will hopefully give our interceptors the punch they need to deal with ships of the class encountered during Gangplank.

Previously encountered alien craft have often had the advantage of maneuverability. They are often able to simply evade conventional missiles when encountered individually, which has led to the somewhat wasteful 'mass firing' tactic currently employed by our interceptor squadrons. A scout or observer class craft may evade one or two missiles but they seem incapable of dodging more than that in a very short time period. The strategy is effective, but still wasteful and requires a significant number of interceptors to achieve. The larger-class ships, like the one encountered in Gangplank, are unable to dodge these missiles but are extremely heavily armored, and often deploy groups of Cyberdisks to act as a close-in weapon system that is more than capable of picking off incoming missiles or attacking craft.

The Fragarach weapon system, when fully refined, should be able to counter both problems. The weapon system can lock on to an enemy craft and then teleport a warhead inside its hull instantly, which bypasses both the armor and agility defenses. As the system makes solid fuel, maneuvering surfaces or guidance irrelevant for the warhead, this also opens up new options as to the nature of the warheads being teleported.

The current problems encountered with the system are tied to the initial stages of weapon activation. Our targeting and computer systems are able to easily lock on and calculate the destination for the warhead, but due to the time required to charge the teleporter a significant amount of time is required while the lock is maintained. Attempts to 'pre-heat' the teleporter were only partially successful, as the inner workings of the prototype run the risk of overheating and malfunctioning if not fired when full charge is reached. As the lock needs to be maintained until the Frag launcher is completely charged, a significant amount of skill and luck is needed for pilots attempting to use this for smaller craft.

Several misfires were also reported during testing where both the target and the launcher were moving dramatically, whereas if the target location is moving in a more sedated fashion then the likelihood of successful launch is dramatically increased.

The second issue encountered has been the power source. Initial testing was completed using a salvaged Elerium power source from a destroyed alien craft, and its output was difficult to manage because of that. It is the hope of the engineering team that Stardust will produce a power generation system small enough to be carried in the Interceptors or some method of storing the energy is developed instead.

Currently there's no foreseeable fix for the first problem with the weapon system but we expect a solution to the second problem within the week

END LOG

Charles Shen rubbed his face before he saved his work and pushed away from his desk. An idle glance towards the clock in his office confirmed it was long past his normal quitting time. *The time sure does fly these days*, he mused to himself as he rose from his chair and headed for the door.

He closed and locked his office door behind him, but as he turned to leave one of the other engineers appeared from one of the other offices. "Ah, mister Shen. Working late too?"

"Afraid so, Bobby," Charles said affably as he turned to regard the younger engineer. "So much to do, and there aren't enough hours in the day to do them, yes?"

Bobby chuckled and nodded his head. "Oh, I'll agree with you there. Still, we're making history so it'll all be worth it in the end, right?"

"Indeed it will be, son. It's getting a bit late though, how about we head up to the mess and grab a bite?"

"That sounds good..." Bobby started to agree, but his face scrunched up in consternation then surprise when a flash of light erupted between the pair. As the light dissipated, a scroll appeared and dropped to the ground. In the span of a second, dozens of flashes followed with dozens of scrolls.

"Bobby, I'm afraid our night has just begun," Charles said as he opened a scroll at random and began to survey the writing on it. "Wake the others, bribe them with coffee if you have to. And don't breathe a word of what you've just seen to anyone. "

Gate of Babylon

RIOT ERUPTS AT FUNERAL SERVICE OF NATIONAL GUARD MEMBER SLAIN IN MAY 2ND BATTLE IN NORTH DAKOTA WHEN UNINVITED MAN INTERRUPTS EULIGY TO ADVOCATE SURRENDER TO ALIENS. MAN QUOTED AS SAYING, "THIS IS THE FATE OF THOSE WHO RESIST ASCENDANCE! THE ETHEREAL ONES ONLY ACCEPT THE WILLING!"

BRIDGE COLLAPSES IN IOWA AND MISSOURI NOW POSITIVELY CONFIRMED AS FOUL PLAY, ENGINEERS REPORT. CHIEF INVESTIGATOR DISMISSES ASSERTION THAT ALIENS WERE INVOLVED. "ON SITE INVESTIGATIONS SHOWED SIGNS OF C4 AND REMOTE DETONATORS. IF THE ALIENS WANTED THOSE BRIDGES THEY WOULD HAVE JUST BLASTED THEM."

FOUNDRY REPORT

PROJECTID: Gate of Babylon

TYPE: Various

ROLE: Various

DESCRIPTION: Analysis and Practical Application of Theoretical Designs Provided By Stardust

RELATED PROJECTS: Fragarach, Kaleidoscope, Ea, Gae Bolg, Excalibur, Rho Aias, Medusa, Enkidu, Zabaniya, Mjolnir

Attached Files: Personal Notes by Chief Engineer Charles Shen, Images of Research Material provided by Stardust

Personal Notes follow:

NEW RECORD: 21:12, 05/07/2015

After the recent series of breakthroughs sent to the Foundry from Stardust, I made the decision to create a 'parent project' to ensure the easy access and review of all ongoing projects that have thus far been inspired by those breakthroughs. The roles of the child projects are manifold but all involve the precise application of Elerium Circuits (EC) that was first discovered by the previously mentioned research team.

The materials we received were for dozens of EC patterns that create very specific effects when combined with the end result of the Ea project. Patterns thus far identified have included telekinesis, teleportation, x-ray, animation, and near invisibility. The author of the research material also included several ways to modify the EC patterns to allow signal input or feedback to ensure adequate control, or in the worst case, a safety cut-off.

The child projects under Gate of Babylon are the following, and may be updated as further developments present themselves:

- 1.) Fragarach - Prototype Interceptor Weapon System using EC Teleportation
- 2.) Kaleidoscope - Mass Teleporter using EC Teleportation
- 3.) Ea - Elerium-Based Power Generation and Storage System using EC Energy Generation
- 4.) Gae Bolg - Prototype Infantry Weapon System using EC Telekinesis
- 5.) Excalibur - Prototype Infantry Ordinance Delivery System using EC Telekinesis
- 6.) Rho Aias - Prototype Infantry Personal Defense System using EC Shield
- 7.) Medusa - SCOPE Enhancement using EC X-Ray
- 8.) Enkidu - Prototype Non-Lethal Anti-Personnel Device using EC Animation
- 9.) Zabaniya - Prototype Infantry Armor System using EC Wallflower
- 10.) Mjolnir - Prototype Remote Control Interface using implants based on those recovered from Project [REDACTED] and EC Animation

The engineering team has quite high hopes, especially since the ideas previously listed were theorized with just an hour to look at the research material. We suspect further developments will become apparent as we continue to categorize all that was sent to us.

On a more personal note I should also explain that naming conventions going forward are going to be a bit more deliberate. When the scope of the discoveries became apparent, one of the younger engineers started making suggestions. 'Gate of Babylon' was in reference to an ancient Sumerian king who hoarded great riches and legendary weapons in a massive vault, and it seemed appropriate. The automated name generator in our computers came up with 'Exploding Face', so I chose to go with the former over the latter.

I also hope the scientist responsible for the breakthroughs in the Stardust labs knows what she's doing. A note was enclosed with the research material that has me a little worried, so I'll have to remember to bring it up with her when we go about activating the Ea project for the first time. I just hope that she

doesn't come to regret this in the long term. It would be a terrible shame if she got into trouble for arming third world nations with her knowledge, after all.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Kaleidoscope
TYPE: Base Structure
ROLE: Rapid Transportation
DESCRIPTION: Mass Teleportation Chamber using EC Teleport

NEW RECORD: 22:00, 05/07/2015

A logical extension of the Fragarach project is the use of teleportation to transport equipment and troops to distant locations quickly and without the risks associated with their transit through conventional means. Alien craft have demonstrated the capacity for teleporting living beings safely, and the nature of the expert in the Stardust lab seems to indicate that such methods of travel are viable over extreme distances as well.

Kaleidoscope is purely in the theoretical stage at this point, as significant amounts of Elerium will be needed to construct the chamber. While we likely have enough on hand to begin construction and likely finish it as well, it would leave our stores of the precious element depleted to a dangerous degree. Another complication is that Kaleidoscope would require the Ea project to be completed and running successfully due to the unique mechanics of EC technology.

Due to these two concerns, Kaleidoscope is being assessed as low priority until more Elerium can be secured and Ea is up and running.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Ea
TYPE: Base Structure
ROLE: Power Production
DESCRIPTION: Elerium-Based Power Generator and Battery Systems

NEW RECORD: 08:00, 05/03/2015

Interestingly enough, this development was born from the basic design of an implant found in some of the most diminutive of the invaders. Apparently when Elerium is crafted into a very specific pattern it is able to generate energy that can then be converted into mechanical or electrical power; or even more exotic forms if the rumors are to be believed.

The only weakness we were able to find in the theory is that the circuits will overheat if they are used to channel this power for too long. If they overheat, they burn and are rendered useless. As such, we've devised a method to create several smaller circuits that rotate in and out of use to allow proper cooling and recovery while the other circuits are engaged.

Another hurdle that we'll need to overcome is that we will likely need the specialist from the Stardust lab to be present during activation due to the unique nature of the technology. As there are some security concerns with this particular specialist, arrangements will have to be made so the specialist can assist without interference from personnel that aren't aware of the details of the Stardust Project.

Estimated building time for this structure is approximately nine days.

UPDATED: 23:02, 05/07/2015

Due to the new breakthroughs from the Stardust Labs, this project has been attached to the Gates of Babylon parent project, and the scope of the project has been expanded.

Recent breakthroughs have revealed a way to store the unique energy generated by Ea in its raw form without converting it into more conventional electrical energy. This unique energy can be used to power some of the more exotic developments that are now in development, including the end result of the Fragarach weapon system already in testing. The batteries as designed should be reusable, but they do use Elerium in their construction so if they are to be made for infantry-scale devices we will have to be clear that any spent batteries should be kept for recharging.

Prototypes will be fabricated for the first version of batteries as soon as Ea is operational. Estimates on completion are approximately a week from now, and we foresee no problems other than any that might

come from the initial startup of the generator. As the Ea project is required for almost all projects in Gate of Babylon, a smooth start-up is becoming an increasingly high priority.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Gae Bolg

TYPE: Infantry Weapon System, Interceptor Weapon System

ROLE: Assault Rifle, Sniper Rifle, Pistol, Air to Air Anti-Ship

DESCRIPTION: Projectile Weapon System Using EC Telekinesis, (Updated:12:10, 05/08/2013) EC Telekinetic Weapon System.

NEW RECORD: 06:30, 05/08/2015

Gae Bolg was described as a spear that, once thrown would never fail to pierce the heart of its target. A rather apt description for the weapon system we're hoping to create.

As some of the engineering staff are aware, the damage to the base originating from the Stardust Labs could be considered the original proof of concept for this weapon. It is believed that a projectile thrown with the telekinetic effect created by specific EC circuitry can attain a level of armor penetration that is unheard of in infantry-scale weapons. As the projectile in the proof of concept test penetrated several levels of steel and concrete without spalling despite being a very brittle material, it is believed that so long as the telekinetic effect is maintained the projectile itself will not deform in any way despite what it hits. We will also not be using Elerium projectiles, as we suspect they may be too effective. For this test a significantly less rare copper slug will be used for the initial test.

The theories behind the EC telekinetics are rather simple to the point where they might be described as programming with cause and effect. For this particular test, the EC will be the following when it is activated:

Move the copper slug(A) from the firing chamber(B) at a velocity of 900 m/s(C) for 1000m(D) past the starting point. The variables in the EC programming are (A) the projectile, (B) the starting point, (C) the velocity and (D) the destination or distance.

As the Ea generator or batteries aren't available yet, we'll be using the salvaged Elerium generator from the Fragarach test to power the prototype. Initial testing will take place inside one of the surface warehouses rather than in the base's subterranean sections. If the weapon critically fails (or critically succeeds) I'd rather not have to patch several walls that are perforated as a result.

UPDATE: 12:10, 05/08/2015

The first testing of Gae Bolg is complete, and the results were unanticipated. We may have unintentionally created a far more effective weapon due to a programming error. But before those unanticipated results can be shared, some explanation is required to describe just where the programming error occurred and how it altered the weapon.

There were initially some valid concerns regarding power consumption if the projectile's dimensions weren't described in the initial programming, so some last minute changes were made before the first test. The intended projectile dimensions were that of a cylinder, two inches long with a half-inch diameter. Once the modifications were made we test fired the weapon.

The anticipated result was that the copper slug would penetrate several prefabricated cement walls so we could gauge the degree of penetration as well as the amount of power needed for consistent results. What actually occurred was that a half-inch diameter hole was punched out of every one of the walls between the weapon and the ending point 1000m away before the copper slug left the weapon.

When I say 'punched', I mean literally. Six walls were installed for the test and placed at two-foot intervals perpendicularly, and six half-inch diameter cement cylinders were found scattered at the end of the firing range along with the copper slug. High-speed cameras show that all six walls were perforated at the exact moment of activation and the six cement cylinders could be seen flying out of their respective points of origin.

The source of this error was in the programming. The intention was to program the specifics of the projectile being shot, and the diameter was set correctly however the length was for whatever reason set as the same range as the distance/destination. The end result was that everything in a half inch diameter cylinder one kilometer long was pushed one kilometer away from the weapon instantly.

Thus far the only downside was the staggering power requirement for the shot. The one shot caused our salvaged Elerium Generator to burn out, which will unfortunately curtail any further testing until Ea is fully operational.

The following are the future plans for the Gae Bolg project, including current issues with the system, future development plans, and other miscellaneous information.

- 1.) Use of solid projectiles is scrapped for Gae Bolg, as the current system has proven far more effective without them.
 - a. Specialty munitions launched with a similar system will be explored with the Excalibur project.
- 2.) Range-finding equipment will be developed and integrated into the firing mechanism. As the current theory is that the power supply was burned due to the range and degree of penetration in the initial test, if the attack range can be restrained to something like 'target range+1.5m' the penetrating power can still be useful while not destroying energy supplies.
- 3.) Recording devices were able to calculate the amount of heat generated in the circuits by the shot, and we have reached the conclusion that the safest sustained rate of fire is 40rpm which makes it unsuitable for the role of light machine gun but satisfactory for other roles.
 - a. Rapid fire rates could be pushed to nearly 400rpm but the estimates show the gun would burn out after 6 seconds of sustained firing. The option for burst fire is there, but full auto may have to be scrapped.
- 4.) Due to the exceedingly strong performance of the initial test shot, I recommend halting production on all laser weaponry other than the multi-lasers. The Multi-lasers (or heavy lasers as the other engineers call them) can maintain the rates of fire that the Gae Bolg system cannot without the heating issues, so production will continue until such a time that the heat issues come under control.
- 5.) As the weapon affects all points from origin to destination instantly and the unique nature of the damage it does, it is felt that this would make an excellent counterpart to the Fragarach weapon system currently in development for Interceptors. While the Fragarach is capable of delivering explosive ordinance instantly to a target, Gae Bolg can deliver damage the moment a trigger is pulled rather than having to worry about a lengthy warm-up time.
 - a. Even though Gae Bolg does relatively little damage, a hull puncture produced by the weapon would render the smaller invader ships incapable of returning to space as the smaller ships do not have the internal bulkheads and airlocks to prevent decompression. It is unknown just how effective their 'energy door' technology is and if they can seal breaches of this nature so we'll just have to hope for the best and be sure to analyze every bit of information the Interceptors get us while in the field.

Once the first batch of these weapons are completed and provided to the Strike teams, we'll finally be able to more effectively counter some of the heavier aliens that are being fielded against us as well as the new mechanized units.

One thing does have me concerned, though. Stardust has confirmed that Elerium reacts in various ways when it comes into contact with exotic forms of energy. The 'Cyberdisk' wrecks we've found have had a significant amount of Elerium Circuitry of their own. What will happen when the telekinetic effect of our weapons connects with the Elerium Circuitry of the Cyberdisks? I'd be excited for the answer if only our boys didn't have to get in harm's way to get it.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Excalibur
TYPE: Infantry Weapon System
ROLE: Shotgun/Grenade Launcher
DESCRIPTION: Specialized Projectile Weapon System using EC Telekinesis

NEW RECORD: 08:00, 05/09/2015

Excalibur was originally a secondary project to Gae Bolg, but recent changes in the nature of that project necessitated the split.

The theory for the Excalibur weapon system is still sound: A projectile launched with EC Telekinesis will penetrate all forms of resistance so long as the power source for EC is maintained. The projectile under its effects will also resist (as far as we are able to determine at this time) all damage and spalling that results from impacts with objects. As a result we feel that we can create infantry-portable breaching weapons capable of penetrating the walls of structures or even the hulls of the alien ships with little to no risk to the soldiers.

As the first test of the Gae Bolg weapon taught us, a range finder will be essential for the proper operation of the weapon without burning the energy supplies. To penetrate barriers, the 'range' portion of the EC would be set to 'target range + 2 meters' to ensure adequate penetration into the target area, though testing may see that number adjusted.

Another use for the range finder may be for the opposite. As projectiles are held in their launched state until the EC Telekinesis is removed, our engineers theorized that we could create a sabot projectile containing flechettes or ball bearings. The moment the EC effect dissipates, the sabot would deploy and disperse the payload.

I suggested the payload of the projectile be comprised of the alien alloys that we recover from the alien ships, as their durability would make them extremely destructive when moving at sufficient velocities. The main reason we haven't used alien alloys for projectiles in the past is specifically because of that durability: they would often destroy the barrels of test weapons we produced to launch them.

Designs are already on the drawing board for the initial Excalibur prototypes and their projectiles, but we won't be able to test it until the Ea project is complete.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Rho Aias
TYPE: Infantry Equipment
ROLE: Personal Defense
DESCRIPTION: Modular Shield System using EC Shield

NEW RECORD: 09:52, 05/09/15

The Rho Aias system is something that we hope will dramatically increase the survivability of our troops in the field. The initial research material describes a barrier created with the exotic energy source created by the Ea project that can interdict various hostile or harmful attacks. It is uncertain as to the exact nature of 'hostile or harmful attacks' as we cannot test yet, but the research materials seem to indicate that projectiles and harmful amounts of energy (like lasers or plasma in theory) would be blocked.

The initial EC design was for a dome shield around the point of origin that would protect from every direction, but modifications have been planned to turn this into a directional shield to conserve energy as well as enhance the durability of the shield itself. Prevailing theory is that if all the energy is concentrated into a forward-facing shield rather than dispersed in a dome, it can block more incoming fire.

The other engineers are a bit stymied as to just how Rho Aias will block the incoming projectiles, or even if it can. After all, bullets, lasers and plasma (and now Gae Bolg) all operate under radically different rules for how they deliver harm to their targets. I have faith that the final product will work as intended, though. The expert working with Stardust is quite thorough and I suspect she would have put the most work into this particular development to save lives.

Designs for Rho Aias are mainly forearm-mounted, and if the EC code is programmed correctly will project a shield approximately five feet tall and three feet wide. The size may change once the power draw is measured. As to the appearance and opacity of the shield we can only speculate as we will need to wait for the Ea project to produce batteries before testing may begin.

UPDATE: 10:12, 05/09/2015

Further analysis may have unraveled the strengths and limitations of Rho Aias when it comes to what it stops exactly.

The 'Shield' portion of the EC diagram has seven distinct parts. These parts describe just what is protected by the Rho Aias system. The parts include kinetic, temperature extremes (heat and cold separately), as well as several effects that are produced by EC devices. Kinetic damage as well as heat extremes pretty well covers anything our troops could theoretically encounter in the field, but it seems the Stardust specialist is being very thorough. I don't think we'll have to worry about forceful transformation or 'Discord' but it's nice to know she's thought of everything.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Medusa
TYPE: SCOPE Enhancement
ROLE: Target Acquisition
DESCRIPTION: SCOPE Upgrade for Target Acquisition in Low/No Visibility conditions using EC X-Ray

NEW RECORD: 11:10, 05/09/2015

Medusa is likely going to be the simplest of the projects to come from Gate of Babylon. One of the EC diagrams provided by Stardust was for an effect that can best be described as 'X-Ray'; the ability to see through solid matter to parts beyond. The EC pattern is quite easy to interpret and allows for inputs for zoom and an easy output to any electronic display.

I imagine this when combined with the planned sniper variant of the Gae Bolg weapon system will be a

rather fearsome combination.

Unfortunately, like most of the other projects it depends upon Ea's completion so no further developments can be made until an adequate power supply can be secured.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Enkidu

TYPE: Infantry Equipment

ROLE: Non-Lethal Anti-Personnel

DESCRIPTION: Self-Propelled Guided Munition for High-Value Target Capture using Various EC techniques

NEW RECORD: 10:30, 05/09/2015

Enkidu is another product of the Foundry that I suspect will make the research teams and the Strike teams very happy, as it provides a slightly less risky alternative to the ARC thrower for capturing live targets.

Rough drafts of Enkidu place the device at approximately the size of a softball and contain four distinct parts: EC Telekinesis for locomotion after initial deployment, EC Animation for target acquisition, a power cell provided by Ea, and a high-voltage discharge system similar to the ARC thrower.

Enkidu is deployed in much the same manner as a grenade by simply tossing it. As soon as the device leaves the soldier's hand it activates its EC Animation program, which starts to scan along its trajectory for specific targets. We believe we can get very specific as to what will trigger the second stage, but for now the condition is simply 'not human' until we can get testing prototypes going. As soon as a target matching EC Animation's criteria is discovered, it feeds information into EC Telekinesis to propel Enkidu directly at the target. The moment contact is made, the internal ARC thrower will discharge and hopefully subdue the target.

While Enkidu may be used in a similar manner as a grenade, we should also emphasize that it is reusable and also contains valuable Elerium, so recovery after use is paramount.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Zabaniya

TYPE: Infantry Armor System, Skyranger Upgrade

ROLE: Camouflage

DESCRIPTION: Limited Visual Stealth System using EC Wallflower

NEW RECORD: 10:30, 05/10/2015

The Zabaniya project caused quite a stir with the engineering staff once the nature of the Elerium Circuits was revealed, and I can't say I blame them. I know I'm going to regret putting it down in writing, but invisibility is the stuff of science fiction and a large portion of the engineering staff was willing to shelf this project completely because of it.

When the seriousness of their concerns became apparent, I pulled some strings and had the armor camera footage from Gangplank and Silent Rain shown for the staff. Both Sgt. Harris and Cpl. Jenkins had access to Wallflower prototypes with them during both missions due to their involvement with the Stardust project and provided ample evidence of the effectiveness of the system.

The one weakness that we could verify from that footage was that it was completely ineffective against the Cyberdisk once it appeared. I consulted with Moira Vahlen and she was able to confirm that Wallflower does not affect electronic equipment (and by extension Cyberdisks) in any way. When I asked if the Stardust specialist was aware of the weakness, Moira informed me that she was not. After Wallflower was initially developed it was felt that keeping that little bit of information secret would be a good way to maintain base security. I don't think we can tell the specialist now about the weakness as she would likely blame herself for the deficiency in her invention especially after the catastrophic injury suffered by Cpl. Jenkins while using Wallflower.

As there is no way to modify the schemata of the Elerium Circuitry without the specialist's aid, we will be moving forward with the designs we currently have while making it perfectly clear what the weaknesses are to anyone who uses it.

Testing can be completed once the Ea project is complete, and current plans are to integrate the fruits of

the Zabaniya project into the most recent armor designs that are in production. The newly produced 'Carapace' armor has shown some resistance to plasma weaponry and will aid in soldier survivability and has ample room for the Zabaniya and its required power supply to be added for even more versatility. Once these 'Chameleon' armor sets are distributed, I hope to see far less casualties after each mission.

Another use for Zabaniya is on our Skylanders. The Skylanders have stealth characteristics to allow them to avoid most conventional radar and detection systems, but they are still vulnerable to the old fashioned mark one eyeball. XCOM has received some rather high profile attention when it's been forced to operate in urban areas, since the Skylander's are not too subtle when they land and take off. It's unknown just how effective this will be with the degree of noise and other physical disturbances that a VTOL craft makes when close to the ground, but it is worth pursuing if we can stay off the front page of newspapers in doing so, not to mention avoiding the attention of invader ground forces as well. They have proven to be quite effective as close air support; heaven knows how effective they'll be when they're invisible to most enemies we face.

As with the previous projects, this depends on Ea's successful completion before further progress can be made.

END LOG

PROJECTID: Mjolnir

TYPE: Infantry Equipment

ROLE: Remote Control Interface

DESCRIPTION: Precision Guidance and Control of Devices powered by EC Animation

NEW RECORD: 07:42, 05/11/2015

I have pitched the Mjolnir system to the engineering team as a remote control system used to operate machinery and devices that are powered specifically with EC Animation. If the degree of control and the articulation of the devices aren't exaggerated then we'll start to see some very interesting developments in the field of robotics.

To elaborate, there are three discreet parts in the Mjolnir system. The first and second are implants similar to those found in the invaders while the third is a device that is under the effects of EC Animation. The first implant will interface with the user's mind to provide power akin to a micro-scale Ea generator to power the second implant, which broadcasts the user's intent to EC Animation for direction. EC Animation also draws power from the first implant which should, in theory, provide more than enough power to move on its own.

Unlike previous research materials provided by Stardust which were diagrams and explanations of various EC phenomena, the materials for Mjolnir also included detailed plans for the proof of concept for the project. Specifically, it involves the creation of a prosthetic limb for Lana Jenkins, who lost her left arm during Gangplank. In addition to the EC Animation diagrams, a detailed blueprint of the prosthetic itself was included along with a side-by-side comparison of the bone and muscle structure of a human arm. Where the Stardust specialist got something like that I have no idea.

Also included was a list of suggested materials and construction methods for the prosthetic itself. I'll be the first to admit the Stardust specialist is an unrivaled genius in her chosen field but she's quite lacking in others. Most of her suggested materials aren't going to be feasible due to weight or durability concerns, and the arm itself lacks anything that will actually cause the arm to move besides EC Animation. No hydraulics. No cables. There isn't even a single inch of wiring. The conventional engineer in me thinks this is going to end up as so much dead weight.

Of course, this specialist has pulled off impossible things in the past. I'm confident that when this is completed we'll see something extraordinary.

I don't want to think about the aftermath if it doesn't work. I had to sanitize the original blueprints as they had a personal letter to me from the Stardust specialist that makes me worry about her mental state if this turns out to be anything but a total success.

UPDATE: 12:02, 05/11/2015

After securing Lana's consent to the operation, we began fabrication of both the custom implants as well as the prosthetic. Fabrication is expected to be completed by the end of the day and the operation is scheduled for tomorrow for installation. We'll hopefully have our answer to this question by noon tomorrow.

If it does work, it opens up some possibilities for some of our more offensively aligned technologies. If there is insignificant or no time lag then I imagine we might be able to create a second generation of

interceptors that do not risk the expertise and lives of our pilots in the field. SHIVs may also become far more nimble in the field if it is an extension of its controller's body rather than its current method of control.

The possibilities are quite enticing, but I don't know if I like what it will cost us. While these technologies will make our lives much easier and less risky I can't think of a single healthy person who would volunteer to get these implants. And I'm also greatly worried about the specialist in Stardust, and what motivated her to share all this information with us so suddenly. The Ea project generator is nearing completion; I'll try to approach the subject gently when I see her there. I hope she's not overworking herself.

END LOG

Gifts (Pt. 1)

AMATEUR ASTRONOMERS IN NORTHERN UNITED STATES REPORT SPECTACULAR AURORA BOREALIS IN THE NIGHT'S SKY WHICH Baffles PROFESSIONAL ASTRONOMERS. VIDEO PROOF PROVIDED CONFIRMED AS AUTHENTIC ONLY ADDS TO MYSTERY AS PHENOMENON NORMALLY ASSOCIATED WITH FAR NORTH CAN BE SEEN OVER DAKOTAS.

DEA AND FBI LAUNCH FULL SCALE INVESTIGATION INTO THE MASSACRE OF FIELD OPERATIONS TEAM THAT RAIDED DRUG DEN IN SOUTHERN ARIZONA. SOURCES CLOSE TO INVESTIGATION HAD LITTLE INFORMATION TO GIVE BUT ALL WERE ABLE TO CONFIRM THAT THE AGENTS BODIES SHOWED NO SIGNS OF BULLET WOUNDS BUT HIGH HEAT BURNS.

01:01, 05/13/2015, STARDUST LABS

"All right, do we all know our roles?" Charles Shen asked as the door to the Stardust labs closed behind him. The engineer's gaze first went to Matt, who was beginning to look a tad ragged but was otherwise alert and ready. When Matt gave Shen a nod, his gaze shifted to Zhang who did the same. Both of the soldiers were in their base security vests and were standing at attention more out of habit than deliberate choice.

The last person in the room was Frank McKendrick, who was looking far too chipper for the late hour. "We'll be walking to one of the new Foundry projects, yes? I also understand you're going to take the opportunity to talk with Twilight, and I assume you want me here to observe as we travel?"

"Correct. Twilight's presence is required for the first-time activation of the Ea project, and I felt it would be a good excuse to get her away from her work and just talk," Shen said before rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "She puts in longer hours than me or my men, and I think she could use a nice walk to hopefully relax away from her work."

"That's understandable. I expect when she finds sufficient motivation she wouldn't let a little thing like fatigue or breaks interrupt her work. Moira told me about Twilight's work binge last month." Frank caught Shen's wince and gave a shrug and a smile while scratching his beard. "From what I understand she's exercising a little bit of moderation now, but your point still stands. She could probably use a bit of exercise anyway rather than being stuck in that lab all day every day. I'm planning to put a bug in Bradford's ear about taking Twilight up to one of the surface buildings somewhat regularly for exercise."

Shen scratched his own chin and was just about to voice his own support when Matt beat him to it, "That sounds like a great idea, though we'll have to keep her indoors during the day, at least. Doesn't one of the cargo elevators link directly to one of the hangars on the surface? That might give her enough room to stretch her legs while keeping her away from prying eyes."

A smile spread on Shen's face and he nodded, "I was actually thinking of something similar. Once the Ea project is running we'll be able to test a lot of the toys that Twilight has inspired. She would likely enjoy seeing the fruits of her labor in action as well as spending some time away from her habitat."

"Would any of those 'toys' cause Twilight to regret her cooperation?" Frank said leadingly as he fixed Shen with a flat stare. "You and Matt know just how strongly she holds her convictions. It's those convictions that motivated her to even share these secrets with us. I don't want to find out how she'd react if she found out just how *creative* we can be with our inventions."

"Nothing objectionable will be shown, I can assure you," Shen said with as much confidence he could fake. *Lies of omission are still lies*, he reprimanded himself before continuing, "From the materials we've seen so far she's put a great deal of work into several defensive systems so I figured that would interest her the most."

"Sorry, Charles. I didn't mean to imply that you would do anything unwise," Frank smiled and shrugged to dispel the heavy mood that was encroaching on the conversation. "After Vahlen's little stunt, I feel it necessary to make certain that caution is exercised." A glance to Zhang brought all attention to the quiet soldier, who merely shrugged.

"I did what was necessary," he said simply.

Matt's unhappy look became quite sharp, but Shen stepped in before he could snap at the other soldier, "I'm certain you did what you were asked, and we're all glad the end result has produced such positive results. But the past is in the past, so let's move on."

"Speaking of asking for it, where's Vahlen? I would think she'd want to be here for this," Matt commented

as he looked to the door to the lab.

Shen's placating look took on a note of worry. "She's in Medical observing Lana's surgery. We're hoping she'll be out of surgery by the morning and we'll be able to see if Twilight's invention will work."

"I would recommend not mentioning Lana's procedure until after we know it works," Frank said and he again scratched his beard. "It will be much easier in the long run to come to her with a successful end result once rather than several failures and then a success."

"I agree. So, any other concerns before we wake Twilight?" Shen again looked to the three men in the room before heading to Twilight's habitat and pressing a small button above the door's access panel. A muted chime could be heard on the opposite side of the door, and the group waited for nearly a minute before Matt stepped into Observation.

"She's out like a light, but she made it into bed this time. Should we really wake her?" Matt asked; a note of concern plain in his voice as he stepped back out.

"I'm afraid it's necessary. Wait here, I'll wake her." Shen tapped the door controls and made his way into the darkened room. The room wasn't pitch black, as the overhead light was still on but dimmed enough for comfortable sleeping. The engineer had spent enough time in Twilight's habitat to not bump into anything, but he still squinted and took small steps as he made his way to the bed.

Twilight was half-covered in her comforter and had her forelegs wrapped around her pillow like an impromptu stuffed animal. Shen began to reach toward Twilight to tap her on the shoulder but her entire body shuttered before he could. She clutched the pillow closer to her body and whispered, "I'm sorry."

Shen's outstretched hand balled into a fist as he straightened. *It's us who should be sorry, Twilight, the engineer thought bitterly. There's a special place in hell just for what we've done to you... for what we're doing to you. Some of us are more culpable than others, but I'm just as guilty for not doing more to stop it. I hope you'll forgive me once this war is over. I hope that one day you'll understand that it needed to be done.*

"Twilight? Twilight, it's Charles," Shen said gently, and the unicorn began to stir from her slumber. "I hate to wake you up this early, but I've got something I need your help with."

"Buh... wha? Charles? What's going on?" Twilight asked before turning a bleary-eyed look at Shen. "What do you need help with this late at night?"

"It's the final touch on one of the ideas that you've shared with us. We need your help to get it running. Do you think you can help us out with that?" Shen asked, again with his gentle tone and was rewarded with the sight of Twilight's posture and ears perking up.

"I'd love to! Just give me a minute to wake up," Twilight readily agreed, and as Shen stood and turned to the door he could see the unicorn stretch in a catlike manner before yawning widely. "What are we working on today?"

"It's actually something your work has inspired, Twilight," Shen began to explain, and was rewarded with an eager smile. "You might have deduced this by now so forgive me if I'm rehashing what you already know, but most of our technology runs off of electricity. Do you know what that is?"

Twilight's nod was eager, "There are some electrical devices in Equestria, though they don't get much development beyond the occasional earth pony pursuing inventions for the sake of inventions. Magic has made it a bit less of a priority in terms of research or practical applications."

"Aha, I see. And do you know how electricity is made?"

"There's a dam near my home that makes some electricity by harnessing the power of the river. I'm afraid I don't know the specifics; I just skimmed the information on how it works. Since I came here I tried to do some research on it with the internet but it's been a bit frustrating. I found out about Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla as well as several other interesting people, but any search on how electricity is currently made resulted in a blocked search." Twilight's eagerness became clouded a bit with frustration as she finished her explanation.

"The mechanics of its creation are a bit complicated, but the one thing they all have in common is that they gather energy from somewhere. In the case of your dam they are using the energy of the river as it flows. Other methods involve capturing the power of the wind or even the warmth of the sun to create electricity." Shen smiled as he elaborated, and he could almost see the gears turning in Twilight's head as they exited the habitat and entered the lab's testing area. "Other methods involve burning combustible materials like coal and then using the heat produced to create the electricity."

Twilight spoke a quick greeting to the three men waiting for them in the lab before turning back to Shen.

"That's pretty interesting! Though I don't know why I-- wait, you're going to use an Elerium Circuit to draw the power necessary to create electricity, aren't you?" Shen couldn't help but grin as he saw the light of the recent discovery in Twilight's expression.

"Correct, but it's more than that. We're also going to try and create batteries that might store the energy from the Elerium Circuits so that smaller devices might use them. Some of your ideas won't work without an adequate power source, but with the batteries we hope to get around that."

Matt led the group out of the lab with a cautious glance, and then took his position at the head of the group about thirty feet down the corridor. Shen and Frank walked beside Twilight as they exited the lab, and Zhang fell in behind the group some distance back. Twilight looked at the formation before turning back to Shen.

"I've been meaning to ask for a little while, why is it that when we go anywhere we move like this?" She asked warily as her gaze fell upon Matt, who was currently holding at the next intersection and looking both ways.

"The reason is the same as why we often move at night. Most of the staff is done for the day and sleeping, which means there's less likelihood of running into someone who isn't familiar with you. Matt is making sure that the corridors are clear ahead of us while Zhang is making sure that no one is coming up behind us," Shen explained. Upon seeing Twilight's questioning look, he further elaborated, "I'm afraid most humans aren't quite ready to meet you, Twilight, and until they're ready they'd likely just be scared."

Twilight's expression fell a bit at that, and silence quickly overpowered the conversation as they made their way to a staircase that took them to a lower level.

Like the previous floor, the corridors were completely empty. Shen found himself lowering his voice subconsciously as he heard his voice echo down the silent hallway. "Twilight, I've also been meaning to talk to you about the message you sent to me last week."

The unicorn looked down before blurting out a torrent of words. "I didn't know things were so bad! I thought that maybe-- it doesn't matter what I thought. I was sitting up in my comfortable room reading books and thinking of how to find my way home when all of you are putting yourselves at risk. I can't do much but I want you to know I'll do everything I can."

Frank's answer was so softly spoken that Shen almost missed it. "It's not your fault. It sounds like you're blaming yourself, but you really shouldn't."

"If I don't, then who will?"

Frank caught Shen's eye, and the engineer spoke next. "Once we're done here we can all get a good night's sleep. In the morning, Matt and I are going to run some tests using the first generation of inventions that you inspired. If you're up for it, we'd love for you to come by and see how things turned out. You are the inspiration for it all, so I'd love to get feedback from you before things go into production."

Twilight's expression rose and her ears perked up as she looked to Shen. "That sounds like fun."

Matt stopped at the door to the Ea reactor and Shen opened the door with a swipe of his badge and the group filed into the next room. Rather than being a proper room like one of the engineering workshops or the science labs, the other side of the door opened into another hallway running parallel to the main corridor. A small staircase and a door were at the end of the hallway to the left, where Shen led the group. This last door opened up into a control room with dozens of computer monitors as well as a window looking out over another chamber.

The center of the chamber was dominated by a massive cylinder, and around the perimeter was a series of smaller cylinders that were laced from end to end with Elerium circuits in mind-boggling patterns. Masses of cables could be seen sprouting from both ends of the central cylinder which disappeared under the grated floor and ceiling.

"That's... that's really clever, Charles!" Twilight said as her eyes fell upon the collection of cylinders around the central section. "I'm assuming the smaller arrays work in tandem to create more power than one larger array? Or was there some sort of safety concern that was addressed by using this arrangement? Or perhaps the redundancy allows for backups in the event of failure? Or..." The unicorn began to trail off with more and more theories before Shen stopped her.

"Our first testing indicated the arrays generated heat when powered, so a rotation system was developed to allow for continuous power generation while allowing a minimum of half the circuits to stay deactivated to cool," Shen explained with a smile. "I suppose you could say it's a combination of safety concerns alongside the anticipated lifespan of the generator itself."

"That makes sense. So when do we get to turn it on?" Twilight asked with a note of eagerness that made the engineer's smile morph into a grin.

"Oh, we'll be turning it on in just a moment. We'll actually need you to exercise your gifts to start it, but before we get to that I'll need to warn you. There will be other humans in the room on the other side of this glass. They won't be able to see us but they'll be able to hear us, so I'll need you to be very quiet once the testing starts, okay?" When Twilight nodded, Shen continued, "When I give the startup command I want you to channel your magic into the cylinder closest to us, okay?"

"I understand, I think. Can I ask why?" The unicorn asked as she threw a curious look at the generator.

"You certainly can. I dare say you should never stop asking why," Shen replied with a chuckle, and when Twilight turned that curious look back at him he shrugged. "Sorry, I'll explain that a little bit later. As to why we need you, the generator can't start on its own. Once we get it started, it should be self-sustaining."

Twilight nodded, and Shen brought his radio headset up to his ears and turned it on. "All right, gentlemen. Report to the Ea reactor and let's get started."

Several moments of silence passed before a handful of bleary-eyed engineers shuffled into the generator's main chamber. Most assumed positions at computer consoles situated around the room but one turned toward Shen in the control booth and gave a thumbs-up. "We're all set, more or less. Ready when you are."

"Right then. Our initial startup target is twenty percent of maximum theoretical power. If we can reach that we'll go from there. Begin startup sequence... now!" Shen said, and turned to Twilight who obligingly looked to the cylinder nearest the window before closing her eyes. The patterns of Elerium lit up along the surface of the cylinder and a bass hum filled the chamber. "Startup appears to be successful and the system is registering a power flow. Congratulations, folks, we've just made history."

Twilight cut off her channeling to look at the generator and her eyes widened as the Elerium from the second and then third cylinders began to light up. "How much electricity is it making?"

The engineer held up one finger to his mouth to signal for silence before turning on the intercom from the control booth to the generator's main room. "How is the electrical output when compared to our conventional generators?" Shen asked.

"Still climbing. Generator's just passed one hundred percent output for the regular generators. One hundred twenty percent. Two hundred fifty percent. Five hundred and thirty percent. Is it supposed to be doing this?" One of the engineers finished with a small note of alarm.

A beeping signal came from one of the consoles which prompted another engineer to run over to it. "Temperature for the modules is increasing dramatically. At this rate they'll burn out before their cooling cycles start!"

"Fuck the generator, the temperature in the *chamber* is increasing!" Another engineer reported quickly as he looked over his shoulder at the cylinders around the generator was gradually beginning to glow red. The bass rumbling from the generator had also begun to rattle the window to the control booth.

"Charles?" Twilight asked, and he could see the unicorn give him a worried look out of the corner of his eye.

"Reduce the power to ten percent!" Shen shouted as his hands flew over the controls available to him. A chorus of acknowledgements answered him, followed by a series of increasingly alarmed updates. "Reduce the power to one percent and prepare for emergency cooling!"

One of Shen's hands threw back the glass shield over a large red button and his hand hovered over it as he looked through the window at the generator. The window's vibration gradually lowered and then ceased, and the casings around the generator appeared to cool as well. Shen let out a very brief sigh of relief before sinking back into his chair.

"Heat is returning back to acceptable levels, and the power is leveling out at just over eight hundred percent of standard generator output," an engineer said as he ran from one monitor to another. "I think we're stable."

"Good work, gentlemen. I'll hang around the control booth to make sure these levels are maintained, you kids go get some rest. I expect one of you to relieve me in the morning," Shen said, which elicited a chuckle from the engineers as they gathered to exit the chamber. When the last engineer disappeared behind the door, Shen turned to Twilight and the others. "I'll be staying here to supervise for the rest of the night. You should get Twilight back to her room and then get some rest yourselves. We've got a busy day tomorrow."

"Okay! I'll see you in the morning!" Twilight said, her good cheer fast returning now that the unexpected excitement of the generator startup was finished. She followed Matt and Zhang out of the room while Frank stayed behind.

When the door closed behind the trio, Shen let out a ragged breath he didn't know he had been holding as he slid the glass shield back over the red button. His hands noticeably shook despite his best efforts to prevent it.

"Charles, what exactly is involved with 'emergency cooling?'" Frank asked as he set his eyes upon the engineer.

"The chamber would be flooded with liquid nitrogen to prevent the generator from melting down until it could be ejected or the base evacuated." The fates of those inside the chamber didn't require elaboration.

"You're serious? What about other failsafes? Surely there's a cut-off or something that could deactivate the reactor safely!" Frank's wide-eyed stare was fixed upon Shen before he stole a glance into the now calm reactor.

"The reactor, once started, is self-sustaining. It cannot be deactivated now barring physical damage to the Elerium Circuitry, the Elerium itself wearing down to nothing, or catastrophic melt-down. As to what the melt-down would entail, we don't quite know. The reactor might just overheat and melt. Or it might crack the planet in half," Shen explained before reaching under his desk to produce a bottle of liquor and a glass. "I had hoped this might be a good way to toast our success, but the mood doesn't seem quite right."

The engineer unscrewed the cap and poured himself a measure of the alcohol in the glass to offer to Frank when the doctor stepped forward and snatched the bottle from him. "May God have mercy on our souls," he said as he took a long swig straight from the bottle before slamming it down on the table.

May God have mercy, indeed, Shen agreed as he watched the doctor exit the control booth.

08:33, 05/13/2015, MEDICAL

Lana woke with what was quite possibly the most epic headache she had ever had in her short life.

Mother of God, I need an ice pack or aspirin. Or both, she thought as she tried to open her eyes. She regretted the decision almost immediately as the blindingly white walls of Medical greeted her. After several repeated attempts to open her eyes she was finally successful. Two figures approached her on either side of the bed. One was easily recognizable as Vahlen, while the other was a male doctor that she couldn't quite place.

"Good morning, Lana. How are you feeling?" Vahlen asked, and Lana's headache prevented her from taking note of the scientist's enforced good cheer.

"Like shit, actually. It didn't work, did it?" Lana stated as much as asked as she rubbed her eyes with her right hand as she tried to sit up. Hands from both Vahlen and the doctor slipped behind her back to help her get upright.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Vahlen offered as she waved to the body-length mirror that was set beside the bed.

Lana's stare became wide-eyed as she caught sight of the image in the mirror. The marred stump she had expected to see just beneath her left shoulder was gone. In its place was something out of a comic book or Hollywood movie. The arm appeared to be metal and lacked any of the exposed wiring or machinery she was expecting but was sleek and smooth. The soldier willed her left arm to move, and it complied. The metal hand rose in front of her face before turning around before her eyes. The palm was made up of several segmented plates and was covered in what appeared to be textured rubber or heavy duty cloth. The last two segments of each finger and the last segment of the thumb were similarly covered. She rubbed her right hand over the artificial palm and found that the material gave just a bit under pressure while providing a no-skid surface as well.

"That's..." Lana started to say as each of the digits folded and extended without so much as a click, hiss or squeak. The fingers clenched into a fist and then released before she continued, "That's impressive." Dozens of questions popped up in her head but they were all derailed when she looked back in the mirror. "I thought you were going to shave me bald for the implant thingies?"

"Yes, well..." Vahlen started before floundering until the doctor came to her rescue.

"The installation procedure turned out to be not nearly as invasive as we initially thought. Apart from the installation of the hardware onto your arm, there should be no significant scarring, or shaving your head."

The doctor reported quickly and with a smile.

"I think we're past the point where I'm worried about scars, doc," Lana quibbled as her humor returned, though her trademark smile hadn't quite made it all the way to her face. *I know that guy from somewhere...ugh, where have I heard that voice?* "I don't suppose you have any aspirin or an icepack? I've got a killer headache."

Vahlen and the mysterious doctor shared another look before he spoke again, "You have a headache? What about your arm? Er, your left arm, I mean?" When Lana looked down and shrugged, he continued, "Well, it's possible the painkillers are wearing off. Here's another dose." The doctor produced a small packet of pills which he handed to the soldier alongside a glass of water. "These should keep you covered during the day. Once you're able to stand you should be good to leave Medical, but you'll be restricted to off-duty tasks. No heavy lifting and no strenuous labor until we're certain that the prosthetic works with optimum efficiency. Now, do you have any other questions, miss Jenkins?"

Upon hearing the doctor speak her name, the pieces came together. "I remember you now!" Lana exclaimed with a mischievous grin, "You pronounced me dead!"

"Yes, well, I'm glad that didn't turn out to be the case," The freshly identified Doctor Benson said sheepishly.

"Now, I'm not someone who tells other people to do their jobs but I think you might have jumped the gun with that pronouncement. Never know when someone will just pop up and prove you wrong." Another memory stirred in Lana's mind but was promptly crushed by another spike of pain entering her head.

When the doctor didn't immediately reply, Lana continued, "The moment you said, 'let's move on to the next one,' I swore I was going to haunt you to the grave but it seems like you lucked out of that, doctor." Had Lana's headache not been so severe she might have noticed the look of blank-faced confusion on the doctor's face or the forced non-expression on Vahlen's.

She slowly rose to her feet before taking an experimental step or two. Now confident in her balance, she turned back to the others. "Do you mind if I borrow a coat until I get back to the barracks? I'd rather not walk around the base looking like the Terminator."

The doctor nodded dully as he retrieved a coat and presented it to the soldier.

Lana nodded her thanks as she slipped the coat on and slipped her hands into the pockets before shuffling out of medical. As with the dozens of other little things she missed, her headache prevented her from noticing the lit operating room next door and its dozens of unused instruments, or the pair of penny-sized objects covered in Elerium on a tray next to them.

11:00, 05/13/2015, WAREHOUSE S2

Matt's combat boots sounded as loud as rifle reports as he walked to the equipment display. A long table with several gadgets and firearms was set along the far wall, and down the length of the hangar was a series of concrete barriers and target dummies. The only other feature in the barren warehouse interior was the elevator entrance that he had just left.

Shen appeared from behind one of the tables with a tablet in his hands and a haggard look on his face, though he smiled when he noted the soldier's approach. "Wearing the new Chameleon armor, then?" He stated as much as asked. "Opinions?"

"Regarding its exotic functionality, I think we'll have to wait to test that," Matt answered, and Shen nodded before gesturing for Matt to continue, "I don't know if I'm a fan of plated armor like this. I'm used to Kevlar vests and ballistic fibres which have a bit of flexibility to them. I'm assuming the material choices were made for heat resistance?"

"Correct," Shen as he tapped the tablet several times. "As the vast majority of aliens use plasma weaponry, it is our hope that the armor plating will better absorb and dissipate heat and improve survivability. Grazes and near misses should be significantly less deadly, and the armor should hold up against a direct hit. I wouldn't recommend more than one, though."

"Every little bit helps. So, what do we have on display?" Matt asked as he eyed the gadgets on the table, and the two rifle-like objects specifically.

"A little bit of everything, but I figure we should start with the big things first," Shen explained as he moved to the rifles. "The first is the standard laser assault rifle that was slated for mass production before other breakthroughs came to light. The second is a rifle created from the information that Twilight has given us. Placeholder name for the moment is 'GB rifle.' The armor penetration is... substantial."

"You said the laser rifle was meant for mass production, as in past tense. Why?"

Shen's expression became less certain as he answered the question. "The first test of the GB rifle was far more successful than we ever thought, even to the point where the laser rifles might not be needed. I've had both brought up for testing today so you might give your impressions. After all, it's you and your friends that will end up using these so I'd value your opinion on the matter."

Matt arched an eyebrow at the explanation before he looked at the pair of rifles. Both were lying on their sides with their magazines sitting beside them. The laser was a boxy thing with collapsed stock and what appeared to be cooling surfaces both above and below the barrel. A black hand-grip was mounted just in front of where the magazine attached to the rifle. The magazine itself looked like a miniature car battery with its rectangular shape and coloring.

With practiced hands Matt scooped up the rifle and slid the battery into place. The rifle hummed as soon as the battery slid into its slot, and a small readout lit up just above the collapsible stock. While inspecting the readout he could see an integrated laser sight tracing along the ground, which he quickly discovered was part of the iron sights along the weapon's barrel. With a shrug he stepped over to the firing range and extended the rifle's stock before assuming the classic rifleman stance and slipping his trigger finger inside the guard.

An angry beam of red light flashed out from the barrel instantly to the distant target, leaving a blackened pock-mark on it. Three more trigger pulls sent three lines of coherent light down range with similar results. Matt thumbed the fire selector to full auto and then pulled the trigger and was rewarded with a stuttering line of laser fire almost entirely on target. After a two second burst he released the trigger and hit the safety on the gun before checking the readout on the back of the rifle.

"The readout should give an indication of weapon heat as well as remaining shots in the battery," Shen provided helpfully while giving Matt an expectant look.

"Aha," Matt said as he detached the battery and headed back to the table. "That's an interesting rifle, I'll give it that. No kick means accuracy can be maintained with sustained firing, though the positioning of the forward grip makes things a bit awkward. It also felt like two thirds of the weight of the rifle went into the battery. Considering the battery size and weight it might be a bit uncomfortable to carry around for long periods of time. The readout is also a bit vague regarding how much charge is left. I'd estimate about forty or fifty shots total per battery?"

"Forty," Shen confirmed as he continued to take notes on his tablet.

"I also understand the barrel can't have attachments due to cooling, but it might benefit from having a rail on the top. As it stands now there's no place for a scope or anything else beyond what it comes with." Matt set the rifle on the table and crossed his arms before continuing, "Other than those issues I don't have any complaints. Good rate of fire, decent magazine size. The only question now is 'how does it fare against the enemy?'"

"Perfectly valid points," Shen agreed as he finished his notes before indicating the other rifle. "Care to give the GB rifle a try?"

Matt nodded and turned his attention to the second firearm on the table. The first impression the rifle gave him was of the French FAMAS, but without the upper hand guard or exposed barrel and muzzle brake. A vertical hand grip was mounted on a rail a couple of inches behind the business end, while the port for the magazine was located in the butt stock. A rail mount ran along the top of the rifle where a large scope sat, and a small wire could be seen linking to the forward grip where a series of small buttons resided. The magazine was modest in size and appearance, with dimensions no larger than an average paperback novel.

"I'm assuming the bullpup design was chosen because of the nature of the weapon?" Matt asked as he loaded the magazine and resumed his place on the firing line.

"Correct. With no shell casings or trigger assemblies to worry about, it was felt that this design might make the GB rifle practical as an urban fighting weapon. With most of your fighting taking place in cities it seemed a wise choice," Shen explained, and Matt had to raise an eyebrow when the engineer offered him ear protection. "Trust me, you'll need them."

"What do the forward controls do? They look like they link to the scope. Zoom, maybe?" Matt gave the blank buttons a speculative look as he brought the ear protection up to his head but not quite around his ears.

The engineer's expression turned into a grin. "X-ray. Center button activates the view mode, front button zooms in, back button zooms out."

X-ray, huh? Matt thought to himself before bringing the rifle up to his shoulder and sighting down the

scope. A button press turned the crystal-clear image of the far target into something better associated with bad television reception. The entire scope was filled with white noise, while the outline of his target was silhouetted like a shadow in the center. Pressing the forward button caused that silhouette to disappear, only for another to appear in roughly the same place and smaller in size. Before he could fiddle with the controls any longer there was an audible click and the scope flipped back to its standard view.

"Ah, that's unfortunate," Shen said with a frown as he added more notes to his tablet. "We were hoping the battery for X-Ray would last longer. What was that, fifteen seconds?"

"Ten."

"Ah, well. Unfortunate, but we'll make adjustments to hopefully extend that time for future models. Go ahead and take your shots." Shen said with a shrug before finally slipping his own ear protection over his ears.

Matt did the same as he thumbed the safety off and lined up the shot.

CRACK

The sound of a bull whip reached Matt's ears through his protection, which wasn't surprising. What was surprising was the sudden feeling of the wind on his back the moment the trigger was pulled and the bright purple beam that leapt from the rifle. He was just about to ask Shen about it before he caught the results of his shot through the scope. A hole was cleanly punched through the target he fired at, and he had to suppress the urge to whistle. Without any further hesitation he flipped the rifle to full auto and pressed the trigger.

After less than half a second of rapid whip-cracks and wind, the gun was dry.

"What was that, ten shots?" Matt asked as he brought the rifle back to the desk. "It seems a bit light especially if you plan on using the full auto option. Still, just look at that penetration."

"We were also hoping for a bit more power out of the batteries we had developed for this tech," Shen answered with a sour look as he tapped at his tablet. "Do you have any other feedback on the rifle?"

"It's a solid design, though the shallow ammunition limit takes it out of the running as an assault rifle. Perhaps a designated marksman rifle or an anti-armor option that isn't a rocket launcher? It certainly would be nice to have at least one rifleman in the squad with one of these to take out some of the heavy stuff we've been running into. I am curious though. What does 'GB' stand for? And where's all that wind coming from with each shot?"

"GB is actually a reference to the project name that spawned the weapon in the first place. I admit it isn't a slick acronym like SHIV. I'll see if the boys down in engineering can come up with something better. As to the wind, that's—"

Before Shen could explain further, the elevator to the warehouse let out a chipper ding before the doors opened. Zhang, Twilight and Lana stepped out into the spacious area, and the latter waved to Matt and Shen with her *left hand*. The female soldier wore a hooded sweatshirt and gloves that obscured the prosthetic, and if Matt had to remind himself that it wasn't her flesh and blood arm.

Matt placed the rifle behind him before turning back to face the new arrivals. "Good morning. Have we recovered from our late night activities?"

"Some more than others, I think," Lana answered cryptically as she rubbed her eyes with her right hand. "Had a headache since I woke up after the operation, and the pills they give me aren't worth a damn." When she removed her hand to see the looks of concern from Twilight, Shen and Matt, she waved their concerns away. "Oh don't mind me I'm certain it will pass. So, what has the mad scientist labs come up with for us to see?"

"I resent the implication, Lana! I'm an *engineer*, not a scientist!" Shen's grin was contagious as he waved the group over to the table. "You've already seen two of our breakthroughs today, Twilight. The first was the generator you helped with, and the second is... well, Lana's arm. I'm happy to report the former is stable and operational."

"The arm's great as far as I can tell, so far. Full range of motion with no annoying machinery noises I was expecting. Makes me feel just a little heavy to the left, though I think that's because I was getting used to having a bit less weight there." Lana explained as she brought her left hand up. It quickly clenched and unclenched before performing a rapid series of hand signs that Matt quickly recognized as squad signals. "I'm hoping they'll give me the green light to rejoin Strike One once everyone's satisfied I won't be a liability."

"I'm glad it's working out so well, but wouldn't you prefer to stay here where it's safer?" Twilight asked

with a look that would have made most puppies green with envy.

"To be perfectly honest, I would," Lana answered after an uncomfortable delay. "I'm not too keen on having something like this happen again, but if I don't go out there then someone else will have to go instead. And then if they get hurt, then I don't think I could live with myself."

"Which is where our inventions come in and will hopefully save lives," Shen harpooned the somber mood and attempted to drag it to a more upbeat place by changing the subject. "Matt, Lana? Perhaps you would like to test the Rho Aias system?"

The two soldiers turned to follow Shen to the end of the table where a few apparently random devices sat. One such device was a glove with what appeared to be metal links running along the fingers to the tips as well as a bundle of wires that led to another device mounted on two straps. "The Rho Aias system was adapted from Twilight's 'Shield' spell. It's--"

"Question!" Lana interrupted Shen's explanation. "What is 'Rho Aias?' Sounds like a goofy mythology reference."

"You would be correct. 'Rho Aias' is a reference to the shield used by Ajax, and was the only shield capable of deflecting a spear thrown by the Trojan hero Hector. Now, the shield spell was originally designed as a spherical barrier around the caster that carried seven layers of protection, but we--".

"What are the seven layers?" Lana interrupted again as she picked up what appeared to be a perfectly ordinary and mundane baseball.

Rather than show any annoyance at the interruptions, Shen turned towards the only magical expert in the room. "Twilight, perhaps you would like to answer that question?"

"The seven layers are designed to counter the seven most typical forms of magical assault," Twilight recited as though from a book. "Physical attack, mental attack, heat, cold, telekinetics, transformation and teleportation." Twilight hesitated before adding sheepishly, "Clover the Clever also developed an 'absolute defense' that prevented the caster from taking any harm, but the energy requirements for it are beyond even me."

"What you've done is quite thorough! I have to ask, why does it block teleportation?" Shen asked with an arched eyebrow.

Twilight's expression fell just a bit but before she could answer Lana jumped into the conversation again. "I imagine it's just like any other spell. The target doesn't necessarily have to be willing, so you make a defense to block it, right? Now, let me guess. You want me to hurl this baseball at Matt once he gets the shield going to see if it blocks it, right?"

"Correct. Matt, there should be some instructions along the palm of the glove for activating and deactivating the shield."

Matt removed the gloves he had been wearing before slipping on the glove attached to the device. Once his hand was snugly inside he began to strap the device to his forearm. As the engineer had said, instructions were printed on the palm of the glove. Pinkie to trigger finger were numbered one through four while the thumb was number five. Matt curled each digit in sequence before finally bringing his thumb into his clenched fist.

A chime or whistle came from the device and a transparent oval of purple energy sprouted from his arm much like a medieval shield. "Well, that's interesting," he commented as he ran his right hand along the inside of the energy shield. "There's no texture or resistance to it, but my hand definitely can't push through it. It feels like polished glass, almost." His gaze focused away from the shield before him to Lana as she tossed the ball up into the air and caught it again. The moment she saw she had Matt's attention she smiled, and she threw the ball up again... and caught it with her left hand. "Lana, what are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm just thinking we could do more than just test the shield, I think. My arm needs a bit of 'stress testing' or so they tell me. What better way to test the robot arm than with a wee bit of fast ball pitching?" Lana explained innocently before cocking the arm back and hurling the ball with all her might.

The moment the ball left Lana's hand time seemed to slow for Matt. *Jesus Christ she put her arm into the throw. I suppose I should be thankful I'm wearing armor and she didn't aim for my face,* he thought before mentally reprimanding himself as he realized the ball had crossed half the distance in the time it took him to process that idle thought. *Armor tactics! Sloped armor deflects kinetic force of projectiles away from the target...*

Matt had just enough time to lean back and extend his shield arm before the ball reached him. The upper portion of the shield leaned back with him, and the baseball was deflected with a sound not unlike a gong

being struck. The sound that followed was the ball impacting on the far wall of the warehouse several hundred feet away.

"It worked!" Twilight cheered, and all eyes fell on her.

"Was there any doubt?" Matt asked evenly as he divided his attention between glaring at Lana and smiling at Twilight.

"Technically, no," Twilight waffled before elaborating, "I have these spells memorized and can perform almost every one flawlessly, but this process of artificially reproducing the effects is something entirely new. Enchantments back home operate under completely different principles, so I'm afraid a lot of this is best guess until we iron out the exact mechanics. I'm glad it worked so well though!"

"I am, too. We'll need to do some more strenuous testing to see how much damage the shield can take before collapsing. We can leave that for later, though." Shen explained as he set the tablet down on the table behind him. "For now, we thought you might like to spend some time outside your room and maybe stretch your legs."

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea," Twilight agreed as she finally took in the amount of empty space in the warehouse she was now in. "This will give me enough space for some proper magical exercise too!" The moment she finished her statement she vanished in a flash of lavender light before reappearing some distance away in the warehouse. Another flash and she was all the way at the opposite end. Three more flashes and she had reached the other corners of the warehouse before one final flash teleported her back to the group.

"Ugh, I knew I should have been practicing more," she said as she rubbed her head with one hoof. "Took way too much energy and too much time per teleport. Plus the Field here is giving me a headache."

"Oh I know that feeling, Twily," Lana said sympathetically. Twilight gave the soldier an appreciative smile before it finally fell. The unicorn started to speak but the soldier cut her off. "No no no, save your pity, Twilight. Save your guilt, too. You gave me a chance to be whole again, or at least as whole as someone can get after an injury like I had. And there was nothing you could have done to prevent this from happening, apart from predicting the future."

Matt was only half paying attention to the conversation behind him as he helped Shen box up some of the things from the table, and he would have continued to help had his divided attention not caught Twilight's reply.

"Thank you for that, Lana. And you're right. I can't just sit around on my flank anymore. Maybe this is why Discord sent me here? Lana? Lana, what's wrong?"

Matt glanced over his shoulder to see the female soldier staring blankly at the far wall with a wide-eyed and pale expression. "Oi, Lana! Did they take out too much of your brain when they were installing the arm?" He heckled before waiting for the usual response.

Lana looked dully over to Matt before blinking and rubbing her eyes with her forehead. "Right, something like that. I'm sorry but I think I'm going to head back down. See if I can twist the arms of those doctors for some aspirin." With that, she turned and headed back towards the elevator. Her right hand remained over her eyes while her left fumbled for the elevator call switch. The elevator doors opened to admit her before hiding her from sight as they closed again.

"Matt, is Lana going to be alright?" Twilight asked as she fixed him with those wide purple eyes.

"I'm sure she is. She's probably just tired," Matt said as smoothly as he could. He kept his gaze firmly on the elevator to avoid having to lie directly to Twilight's face.

14:25, 05/13/2015, OFFICE OF CMDR BRADFORD

For the first time in a very long while, David Bradford allowed himself to smile. It was a worn smile, barely more than a quirk at the corners of his mouth, but it was there.

At last we have something to level the playing field just a bit, Bradford thought to himself and the smile grew just a fraction more. Lasers, improved armor, new Interceptor and Skyranger weaponry, plus those new armor piercing rifles Shen produced. We'll have to be careful not to get overconfident.

A knock on the door interrupted Bradford's increasingly optimistic reading which left him with a brief scowl. He closed the report and turned to the door. "Enter."

A brief moment passed before the door opened and a rather stressed-looking Lana Jenkins stepped into

the office and saluted. Bradford returned the salute before motioning toward the chairs in front of his desk. "Good afternoon, corporal. I haven't quite made it to the reports on your operation this morning, but seeing as how you're up and about and seemingly whole I take it that it was a success?"

"Yes, sir, it was," Lana reported stiffly, and she kept her gaze locked on Bradford's nameplate on his desk. "I've got full range of motion and I'm hoping that a few days worth of good tests will allow me to return to Strike One."

Oh, now it makes sense.

"I certainly appreciate your eagerness to return to the field operations, corporal, but the final decision will be up to the doctors if you pass the wellness tests," Bradford explained gently and with his best comforting expression. "Even if you don't get approved for active duty, you're going to be the key to giving a lot of wounded veterans more fulfilling lives once this war is over."

When Lana's expression didn't change after that explanation, Bradford arched an eyebrow. *Perhaps I misunderstood her concern.* "Of course, if you aren't cleared for field operations then I'm certain we can find a place for you here for the duration of this conflict. You have a background with the Seabees, after all. I'm confident Engineering would find a use for you."

"Thank you for your consideration, sir, but I have another concern I wanted to bring up," Lana said evenly as she finally worked up the courage to drag her eyes up to meet Bradford's. "On the battleship where I got hurt, you called out a warning."

"I recall that, yes. It's unfortunate that you had to suffer such an injury but it could have been far worse."

Lana gritted her teeth and began to rub her eyes with her right hand, and Bradford arched an eyebrow at the unexpected response. *Anger or pain?*

"Sir, do you recall when you called out your warning?" Lana asked through her clenched teeth.

Bradford arched an eyebrow before choosing his answer carefully, "I saw the cyberdisk emerge from the doorway and sent my warning immediately."

"No, sir. No you didn't."

"I beg your pardon?" Bradford's expression was incredulous at Lana's statement, but before he could speak any further she continued.

"I remember what happened just before I was hurt, but I'm perfectly willing to admit the possibility that I am not remembering things correctly. Almost died, you know?" Lana laughed before letting her right hand fall from her face to slap on the armrest. The expression on her face was pain as well as something few subordinates rarely directed at Bradford: anger. "So I went down to the archives and pulled up the armor camera logs as well as the transmission logs. I correlated the time stamps with my own armor cam as well as three others. You sent your warning *before* the cyberdisk came through the door."

"What are you implying, corporal?" Bradford asked evenly.

"I have no idea!" Lana said quickly, "I have a pile of evidence and personal experience that seems to tell me that you somehow predicted the Cyberdisk was going to come through that door before it happened, yet my common sense is telling me such a thing is impossible and my gut is telling me you wouldn't hold something back if you saw these things coming. But..."

"What are you implying, corporal?" Bradford repeated.

"How did you know I was outside your door?"

Bradford's mounting impatience melted into confusion. "I heard you knock."

"But I *didn't*. I was *about to* knock when you invited me in!"

Bradford slowly leaned forward and painted a sympathetic expression on his face as he clasped his hands in front of him. "Corporal Jenkins, you suffered a terrible injury and nearly died as a result. Many who survive such an event find they need someone or something to blame afterward..."

"YOU THINK I'M MAKING THIS UP!?" Lana snapped, and the wood armrest under her left arm began to groan dangerously.

"Control your volume and your tone with me, corporal," Gone was the mask of sympathy and in its place was the glare that had made Bradford infamous. The one sentence he spoke filled the room more than Lana's shouts even though it wasn't a decibel louder than his usual speaking voice. He was just about to speak again when his earpiece clicked.

"Commander Bradford, an alien craft has been spotted entering our atmosphere."

"Command, Bradford. Raise the alert status of the base and scramble Strike Five and Six. Skylanders Crimson and Harbinger are to carry them. Skull Squadron will intercept." Bradford ordered quickly as he rose from his desk. He tuned out the confused reply from Command as he glared down at Lana. "Corporal Jenkins, this discussion is over. Report to Medical, immediately."

Lana rose and saluted crisply before stalking out of the office. The moment the door closed behind her, Bradford slipped his headset off his ears to rub his temples before replacing it and heading to the door himself. *This job won't let me go a single day without a headache.*

Gifts (Pt. 2)

MEDAL OF HONOR AWARDED POSTHUMOUSLY TO OFF-DUTY MARINES THAT GAVE THEIR LIVES TO SAVE CIVILIANS DURING ALIEN ATTACK ON DC IN APRIL. SENATOR GOLEMAN OFFERED CONDOLENCES TO SURVIVING FAMILY MEMBERS DURING PRESS CONFERENCE AFTER EVENT.

ECONOMISTS ARE BAFFLED AT THE COLLAPSE OF PMC ORGANIZATIONS IN THE WAKE OF ALIEN ATTACKS. ALL SIGNS POINTED TO BOOM IN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANY CONTRACTS AFTER ALIEN ATTACKS BECAME WIDESPREAD BUT BIG NAME COMPANIES ARE TIGHTENING THEIR BELTS, CITING 'UNEXPECTED SHORTAGE OF EXPERIENCED OPERATORS'.

14:29, 05/13/2015, BARRACKS

Matt stepped into the barracks lobby and gave it a quick scan before walking towards a small knot of soldiers playing pool at one of the tables. He stopped and waited for one of the players to take his shot before he stepped forward and got their attention. "Gentlemen, have any of you seen Jenkins come through here?"

Blank stares and shrugs were the initial response Matt got and he had to resist the urge to facepalm as he realized the reason why. *They're all new, of course they don't know Jenkins yet.* "Woman, black hair, blue eyes, wearing a hooded sweater and gloves? Probably looked tired or stressed out?"

"Aha, yeah! I saw her. Headed for Bradford's office last I saw," one of the rookies said while nodding to the staircase heading to the upper level of the barracks. "She looked rather stressed." A sideways glance at the other player at the table was followed by a grin. "She was also wearing Strike casual clothes but I don't recall seeing her during the introductions. I'm not the only one who would remember a looker like her if we met before..."

"You're not her type. Thank you for your help, gentlemen," Matt explained briskly before heading towards the staircase. He had made it halfway up the stairs before the intercom buzzed a message for Strike teams to assemble. As he turned to descend the stairs to head to the ready room, the door to Bradford's office slid open to reveal Lana.

Lana's expression went from disgruntled to nuclear the moment her eyes fell upon Matt. "Oh that's just fucking perfect," she laughed bitterly. "Let me guess, you're here to escort the crazy person back to Medical? He'd naturally send you to do it."

"What are you talking about?" Matt asked as Lana stomped down the stairs towards him. "I came looking for you after you flaked out during testing. We were a bit concerned about your headache. Why were you talking with Bradford?"

Lana's stomping stopped and she began to rub her eyes with her right hand. "Ah, sorry Matt. I didn't mean to unload on you like that. Things have been a little stressful today; I guess I'm letting it get to me." Matt turned to follow Lana as she descended the stairs. She stopped and turned to Matt before they reached the bottom of the stairs. "You'll have to forgive me if this is a ridiculous question, Matt. Have... have you done anything unusual lately?"

"Define unusual," Matt said with a smirk as he gave her an opening to lighten the mood.

A slight smile graced Lana's face as she continued, "Unusual. Like spoon bending or fortune telling." The slight smile grew into the mischievous smirk that was her iconic look. "Or, you know, *riding the pony* if you know what I mean."

"No, no and *hell* no," Matt snapped, though his smile undermined any sort of displeasure it might have conveyed. The pair reached the bottom of the stairs where a steady flow of soldiers headed from the various barracks facility to the armory. "We're on alert. If you're feeling better once we stand down, can you tell me what went on with Bradford?"

"I'll see what I can manage, Sergeant. Good luck," Lana gave an abbreviated wave before Matt lost sight of her in the crowd.

14:40, 05/13/2015, SITUATION ROOM

Commander Bradford strode into the Situation Room and immediately looked to the holographic globe hovering in the center of the room. His eyes immediately centered on a red dot that hovered lazily over

northern Canada as well as a quartet of green dots speeding steadily towards it.

"Command, Skull Actual. Estimated five minutes to engagement range," The radio in Bradford's ear reported, and several screens activate around the projected globe showing the nose cameras of the interceptors. "Three, arm your frag launcher and attempt lock on enemy craft. Two and Four, arm your lances and prepare for engagement." A chorus of acknowledgements followed the orders and a small square appeared in the center of all four screens.

"What's the status on Crimson and Harbinger?" Bradford asked as he turned to one technicians manning the nearest station and was quick enough to catch the wary gazes of every person he could see before they all simultaneously looked away.

Before Bradford could ponder the significance of the unusual attention, one of the techs spoke up. "Skyrangers are ten minutes behind Skull."

"And the Strike teams?"

"Outfitted with Carapace armor and a mix of projectile, laser and LANC rifles that Shen had sent up from the Foundry," The technician reported.

"Excellent," Bradford said with a nod before manipulating the controls before him to enlarge the footage coming from the fighters. He ignored the scattered numbers and symbols and focused on the third screen which showed a second box that slowly began to fill the first one on the screen. Just as the first square was nearly filled it jumped to the side and the second square struggled to keep up.

"Wanker!" Skull Three swore over the radio and the two squares began to chase themselves around the screen. "Skull One, frag launcher isn't likely at this point. He's onto me and he isn't cooperating."

"Copy, Three. Four, get his attention."

The fourth screen tilted as Skull Four banked out of formation and dove to gain speed before nosing up to approach the alien craft. A tiny black speck appeared in the center of the screen as the alien craft finally entered visual range before jerking to the side as bolts of plasma began to streak towards the Interceptor.

"Whenever you're ready, One."

The first and second screens, which had shown nothing but the open sky for a few minutes as they ascended turned back to earth and began to accelerate. The targeting square appeared over the alien craft as it made nearly ninety degree turns to evade the Interceptors. Bright purple lines of energy leapt towards the alien ship and connected with seemingly no effect until a second and third bolt impacted and the alien craft began to wobble and lose altitude. A fourth shot impacted with the aft section and any semblance of controlled flight was lost as the alien craft dropped like a rock.

"Command Actual, Skull One. Confirmed kill on alien craft, uploading crash location now. Advise Strike teams that civilians may be in the area. I'm seeing movement from the crash site, survivors are confirmed."

Bradford couldn't hide his smirk at the performance of both his pilots and their new weapons and had just opened up his mouth to congratulate them when Skull Four interrupted him.

"Whenever you're ready, One."

What? Bradford thought as he blinked and rubbed his eyes before focusing on the screens again. Both the first and second screens showed the Skull One and Two beginning their dives on the target, as well as the four strikes that knocked the invader ship out of the sky. He found himself whispering the squadron leader's own words as he reported the kill and the crash location.

A long moment passed before Bradford finally spoke. "Copy, Skull One. Remain on station and observe the crash site. Strike Five, Strike Six, an alien patrol ship was successfully intercepted in rural Canada. You have two objectives to complete. The first is the live capture of the 'Outsider' alien controlling the craft. Doctor Vahlen feels that the ARC throwers and ARC grenades will destabilize their bodies enough for them to revert back to their crystalline form. The second objective is the elimination of all alien forces that survived the crash. Interceptors report civilians in the area so check your targets. Good luck."

To anyone else in the room the commander's briefing was no different from any of the others he had given to the Strike teams. David Bradford was a pillar of confidence and solidarity in the face of horrendous losses and monstrous enemies. To show anything but that same steely resolve would undermine his every effort thus far, and so it took every ounce of his discipline to not show the growing worry that had taken root in his mind.

What was that? I did not imagine that, he asked himself for the fifth time in as many minutes. While in the

process of his sixth repetition of the thought the conversation with Jenkins came back to him. *No. No, that's not possible. That is not possible.* Any further contemplation on the subject was interrupted by reports from the Skylanders.

"Command, Crimson, Strike Five has been delivered. Assuming overwatch."

"Command, Harbinger, Strike Six is deployed. Assuming overwatch. Strike Teams, thermal scans can't penetrate the crashed ship's hull but they do show several thermal signatures in the nearby structure. System can't confirm civilian or alien at this time."

If all other explanations are ruled out, then any remaining explanations must be true. The idle thought pushed all others out of Bradford's mind as he now scanned the myriad of armor cameras as well as the overhead views being provided by the Skylanders. He slowly pulled in a long breath through his nose before concentrating on the screens.

"Understood. Strike Five will secure the crash site."

"Strike Six will sweep the house for survivors."

Strike Six leapfrogged from cover to cover as they made their way to the farmhouse. A ditch led to a parked tractor and trailer, which then led to a fence followed by a rusted out pair of cars. Fujikawa led the team to the exterior garage next to the house, and her armor camera fixed on a dark stain on the dusty driveway along with a discarded object in the center.

"Command, Six Actual. Looks like a blood stain and a discarded shotgun. Drag pattern is heading into the house." A laser rifle entered the frame and pointed towards the door. "Jackson! You take team two around the back. I'll take team one through the front."

"Copy that." Half the armor cameras for Strike Six began to bob as they sprinted for the house, though they all uniformly froze as they approached. "Captain, I hear screaming. There are civilians inside!"

"Double time it, soldier!" All of Strike Six burst into action as the first half stacked up by the front door while the second half piled up on the back door. Just as two of the cameras faced their respective doors two things happened.

Jackson's camera swept to a shattered window beside the back door, then to the ground beside him and the tear-drop shaped object that now sat by his feet. "GRENA-" was all he could manage before four of the armor cameras burst into static.

Fujikawa arched one foot to kick in the front door when the door itself flew off its hinges at her and blasted her off her feet. The three other cameras of her fire team all snapped to the massive red monster that charged out of the doorway, but none of them fired as it turned to face them with an impromptu shield in its left hand: The limp body of a child in blood-soaked clothes.

That moment of hesitation was all that the red monster needed to close the distance to attack. A vicious backhand sent one soldier flying into the side of the house with a sickening crunch. Foot-long claws emerged from its forearm armor that gutted the second soldier like a fish. The last soldier snapped out of his paralysis and tried to run only to be knocked off his feet as a second monster blasted through the wall beside him. Any further attempts at escape were cut short as a red boot came down on the soldier's skull.

"Command, I need fire support danger close on my position now! NOW GODDAMN IT NOW!" Fujikawa screamed as the first monster stomped toward her as she extricated herself from the door that had pinned her. The monster was massive, even bigger than the Mutons that had been encountered in the Gangplank mission and completely covered from head to toe in heavy red armor. It dropped the lifeless little body it carried in its left hand and reached forward to pull the one surviving member of Strike Six up. The massive claws surged forward and Fujikawa's vital signs fluctuated before flat-lining.

The Skylanders would not let the deaths of Strike Six go unanswered.

"Crimson on station. Crowley, light those fuckers up!"

"Harbinger, tally ho!"

The nose-mounted heavy lasers stitched across the two red-armored mutons. The first second of sustained fire saw their armor melt as they tried to seek cover. The next second of fire caused them to explode as the liquids in their bodies vaporized. The third second of fire reduced them both to little more than melted pools of slag.

"Command, Crimson. Strike Six is KIA. There are heat signatures still inside- Strike Five, confirmed plasma fire on your position originating from the house!"

Streaks of green plasma leapt from the shattered windows and ruined doorway at Strike Five who hastily repositioned themselves to engage the survivors from the house ambush. The staccato reports of rifle fire were punctuated with the *zip zip* of the laser rifles and the *crack* of the one lance rifle in the squad's possession as they began to advance on the house.

None of the Strike Five soldiers had their eyes on the crashed ship in the field near the house so they missed the arrival of their mission's primary objective. Two Outsiders emerged from the ship and immediately opened fire on the Strike teams with their near perfect flanking position. Unlike the other aliens encountered thus far, the Outsiders were almost human in their proportions and vague appearance though their forms flickered with each step like an image from a projector near death.

Two soldiers died almost immediately as the rapid fire plasma shots hammered them from behind and Strike Five's discipline began to falter. The orderly advance on the house broke down as the soldiers scrambled for any cover they could-

"Understood. Strike Five will secure the crash site."

Bradford barely heard the words as his legs nearly gave out from under him. A white hot spike of pain unlike anything he had ever experienced in his life exploded within his skull and sought to rob him of his consciousness. His hands slapped onto the console before him as he leaned forward heavily and he let out the breath he didn't know he had been holding. He dragged his gaze up to the armor cameras again.

"Strike Six will sweep the house for survivors."

His vision was awash with blurs and blind spots but Bradford could see Strike Six approaching the house exactly as he had already seen. Fujikawa's camera caught sight of the blood patch and the discarded shotgun and the laser rifle rose into frame.

"Jackson! You take team two around the back. I'll-"

"Negative, Strike Six, do not approach the house. Take up positions to cover the front entrance and prepare to fire on hostiles as they emerge," Bradford kept his tone as neutral as always but he felt every set of eyes in the situation room upon him. Almost every face was wide-eyed and pale but none spoke a word. "Crimson, Harbinger, fire on the house."

"Uh... copy that. Firing position in five seconds." Hesitation was obvious in the reply from one of the Skylanders.

Fujikawa's response was frantic, "Sir, I hear screaming from the house! We have to-"

"They'll be dead before you reach the door. *Fire now!*"

The Skylanders reached their firing positions and just as their heavy lasers began to incinerate the house the front door flew off its hinges. The red-armored muton burst through with its human shield leading the way while the second burst through the wall beside the door. Both charged towards Strike Six's position.

"Big red thing, five rounds rapid!" Fujikawa barked and the collection of lasers, lances and conventional firearms opened up on the two targets. One fell from sustained fire though it continued to crawl forward before finally expiring. The other led with its human shield, and anyone observing the video could tell the poor soul held in its massive hand was dead but Strike Six's hesitation was all the opportunity that was needed.

One soldier was blasted off his feet with a backhand while another was bowled over and trampled in the rush. The muton turned and hurled its meat shield at two others before turning--and catching a lance beam squarely in its helmeted face. It collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Command, Crimson, I have Mutons exiting the back of the house, moving to engage now."

Bradford didn't bother to acknowledge the report before shifting his focus. "Strike Five, hostiles are present inside the ship. Two Outsiders are on their way to you."

"Copy that Command. Eyes on target. Kasim, use the ARC grenade!"

The two Outsiders charged out of the crashed ship and into the well-prepared sights of Strike Five. The two aliens dove into cover while the XCOM soldiers moved to get into better position. When one of the Outsiders rose to fire on the soldiers as they moved, Kasim rose and hurled the appropriately named 'stun grenade.'

The softball-sized projectile flew with the speed and surety of a fastball thrown by a major league pitcher, and its intended target was the head of the now exposed Outsider. The Outsider's reaction speed was remarkable as it leaned out of the projectile's path and it sailed past. Unfortunately for the Outsider the

near miss was still close enough for the device to activate. The stun grenade made a ninety degree turn mid-air, smacked the Outsider on the face, and let loose an electric discharge. A screeching scream cut across the field and the alien's body flickered and disappeared into an orange crystal which dropped onto the ground.

The second outsider didn't so much as spare a glance towards its fallen comrade as it continued to fire. Several sections of its body dissolved from bullet and laser hits only to reform themselves. When the volume of fire increased it ducked down and shuffled to a new firing position--only to find an XCOM soldier with an ARC thrower waiting for him. Its screams echoed across the field as its body dissolved in an orange flash while leaving a crystal behind.

"Command, confirm capture of two HVTs."

"Command, Harbinger. Thermal scans show no other hostiles in the area."

"Excellent work," Bradford congratulated over the radio as he finally straightened enough to resemble his usual calm self. "Begin recovery operations and return to base. Stand down from alert status."

With his final orders given, Bradford turned and left the room without a word to any of the pale-faced and wide-eyed personnel in the situation room.

14:40, 05/13/2015, ARMORY

Strike One and Two were on standby while Five and Six deployed to deal with whatever situation had cropped up. In theory this allowed for rapid deployment of more forces to existing situations or to new developments that happened simultaneously. In practice it led to groups of soldiers being locked up in a little room for potentially hours on end.

Paul, Matt, and Shaojie were pillars of calm, while the rest of Strike One was all nervous energy and jitters. The notable exception was Robert Sachs, who appeared to have propped himself up in a corner of the armory with his chin down on his chest in apparent sleep. Matt couldn't help chuckle at that before looking over to Strike Two and note their similar state. *Wherever Five and Six are, I wish them luck. We need a win after what happened with the battleship.*

Matt's thoughts inevitably drifted to Lana's questions before the alert as he tuned out the buzz of conversation. *What did she mean, 'unusual'? Spoon bending and fortune telling? That sounds like magic.* He scoffed at the thought but the questions still nagged at him. *Why would she ask something like that? We both know that Twilight is the only one who can do magic.*

His eyes widened as he considered the implications. *Spoon bending, wasn't there a rumor about Strike Six having someone that could do that? I thought it was bullshit parlor tricks to scam folks out of money at the local bar or the usual crap that soldiers tell each other. What if Lana's somehow managed to do magic?* The intent of her question finally struck home and Matt's eyes widened. *If she's capable of doing that, then does that mean she thinks I can?* Another thought struck Matt that drained a bit of color from his face. *What if I've been doing it already?*

I can't think of anything abnormal, except... Matt clasped his hands before his face as he struggled to remember the exact series of events that led up to Shaojie's recruitment. A floater had thrown a grenade that had bounced just right for Matt to kick away from Lana and the others. The alien grenades were notorious for their unpredictable trajectories after bouncing due to their unusual shape. That might be attributed to luck, but...

The moments leading up to that bounce seemed to stretch for ages. There was also the moment when those Chryssalids came within spitting distance of us. Matt sucked in a breath as he connected the dots. *There was also the first time we met in the lab as well as when I used the ARC thrower in the field. Then there was that shield test with Lana just a few hours ago.*

Matt absently pulled a pencil from one of his hip pockets and set it on the bench in front of him before setting his gaze on it. *Was that magic, or... or something not natural in all those moments? I certainly remember times in the past where time felt like it slowed down but those moments certainly felt pronounced. If that's true, shouldn't I be able to do something like Twilight? Telekinesis or something?*

For several long moments Matt simply stared at the pencil as it sat on the bench in front of him. He threw his willpower against it in every way he could imagine and was rewarded with absolutely no movement or reactions in any way. He did nearly jump out of his skin when Shaojie tapped his shoulder.

"Sergeant, the alert has been lifted and we're no longer on stand-by," The Chinese man stated, and the glance from the pencil back to him asked the unspoken question.

"Ah, thanks Zhang," Matt said before turning to glare at the pencil where it sat. *Fuck it*, he thought as he threw up his hands in frustration and turned to start storing his armor and gear. He had finally turned to face the lockers to catch the slack-jawed look of astonishment from Paul as he looked up to the ceiling. Matt followed the leading gaze to the ceiling and the pencil that was now embedded in it.

15:02, 05/13/2015, OFFICE OF DR FRANK MCKENDRICK

Bradford didn't consider himself a rude person unless out of necessity, but there were some times where politeness and courtesy took a back seat to the needs of the moment. It was with those needs in mind that he pushed his way past the secretary and into Frank's office without so much as a knock.

Frank was currently hunched over his desk with a pot of coffee beside him while rubbing his temples. He gave one of his trademark smiles to the commander even though it turned into a wince as Bradford turned to close the door behind him rather forcefully. "David, it's always a pleasure when you come to visit. I understand the mission went well?" His smile faltered somewhat as Bradford stalked over to the chair in front of his desk and sank heavily into it. "You don't seem well. Is everything alright?"

A long moment of silence passed before Bradford finally sat up and rubbed his temples. "Frank, I'm going to be blunt here. Something is going on and I don't have a rational way of explaining it. I don't think I can explain it so it might be best to just show you." Several more moments of silence passed between the two before Frank opened his mouth to speak but Bradford cut him off. "Doctor, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Doctor Vahlen is here to see the commander. She says it's urgent."

Frank's expression became perplexed until the phone on his desk buzzed and the secretary's voice came from it. "Doctor, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Doctor Vahlen is here to see the commander. She says it's urgent."

"Send her in," Frank said through the phone while keeping his now thoroughly confused gaze on Bradford.

The door opened and Moira stepped in before closing the door behind her. She gave a passing nod to Frank before turning back to Bradford. "Commander, I've made--"

"Commander, I've made a startling discovery regarding Corporal Jenkins," Bradford spoke over Moira, which caused the latter to stop and stare blankly. "While making the initial brain scans before the proposed operation to install her new prosthetic I discovered unusual synaptic activity."

The scientist opened and closed her mouth several times before giving a confused glance at Frank, who simply returned it. She slowly reached for the tablet under her arm and was just about to speak when Bradford again preempted her.

"Such synaptic activity has been encountered twice before. The first was from live sectoid specimens recovered in the field. The second was from Twilight Sparkle. Given the abnormal phenomenon that is generated by both of the previous examples, we may be seeing the first human being capable of reproducing their abilities." Bradford motioned to the tablet and Moira brought a series of pictures up depicting several brain scans.

"When these brain scans confirmed the activity was present in Corporal Jenkins' brain, I decided to run a scan with the TED device that was created to detect the unique energy created by Twilight. The TED was able to confirm that Miss Jenkins was now channeling energy in a way very similar to Twilight, as well as projecting a 'ghost limb' of energy where her left arm should have been." Moira wordlessly scrolled the pictures to the TED readings while giving the commander an incredulous look. "When this was discovered I recommended the installation of the prosthetic limb be done first. My theory was proven correct; Jenkins is able to control the prosthetic device without the power or control implants."

Silence reigned as both the scientist and the doctor looked to each other, then Bradford. Frank started to speak but the commander maintained his uncanny predictions. "I don't know, and I can't stop it either. There has never been anything as vivid. I've always had hunches and feelings about what may happen in a given situation, but they were nothing more than that. This... this foresight didn't start until just before the operation." He looked up at Moira before she could ask her question. "Frank? I'm sorry for interrupting, but I think I'm losing my mind."

Before either the scientist could answer, the door to the office flew open and Matt Harris stumbled in. He started to speak the doctor's name but, upon seeing both Vahlen and Bradford in the room, couldn't get past the first letter.

"I don't know this is happening, but I know someone who might." Bradford said as he rose from his seat.

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind Charles and her and the familiar sights of the lab testing area greeted her. What was initially planned as a trip for exercise and some testing for a couple of hours ended up taking the entire afternoon after some form of emergency presented itself.

Zhang disappeared down the elevator, but was replaced by Joel and Kim who helped her with precision magic control. The two scientists brought with them what looked like a small cart that moved on segmented tracks rather than wheels and sported a turret mount with something they referred to as a 'baseball pitching machine' on it. A series of boards with bulls-eye targets were set up and Twilight planted herself amongst them.

After asking Twilight repeatedly if she was ready, the scientists activated the pitching machine and balls began to fly at the targets. The unicorn could have easily plucked the balls out of the air with telekinesis, but that wasn't the point of this exercise. A small circular shield appeared before each baseball and stopped them dead. Twilight and the scientists repeated the exercises over the course of the afternoon before she started to get creative with ways to block the baseballs. They finally stopped when a well-intentioned test involving portals resulted in Kim and Joel diving for cover as a hail of baseballs was flung back at them.

Twilight had apologized profusely to both scientists while she helped them clean up the mess she had made before Charles returned. The engineer had then escorted Twilight back to the lab where they had both pointedly avoided the subject that was on both of their minds.

"Thanks for taking me to the practice area today, Charles. I really needed to exercise especially if I'm going to help more." Twilight said with a contented sigh, though her happy mood wilted when she saw the look on the engineer's face.

"Twilight-"

"No! I can't just sit around anymore! If my friends are out there risking their lives," Twilight's glare was filled with something bordering on legitimate anger that surprised even her as she continued to rant. "I-if they're risking their lives then I can make sure they come back! I don't know if I could-" *Broken insect-like limbs twitched in the pile of ichor and shattered chitin*, "-hurt anything but I can keep any of my friends from getting hurt."

Charles tried to smile and speak but Twilight cut him off with a slammed hoof. "NO! These things are using magic or something like it against all of you, and there is no pony better equipped to counter them. No living Equestrian knows more about the arcane arts other than the princesses, and I am the *Element of Magic*. I am not boasting when I say I will not let this happen again if I go with them."

"Twilight," Charles said quietly as he knelt to look her in the eye. "Twilight, I can see you feel very strongly about this. Some of the tools you helped us build have already saved lives, and I have great expectations for what we'll be able to make together. I speak for everyone when I say your place isn't in the field but here."

"That's it? You don't want to risk losing me because I might stop inventing things? Is that all I am here!? I'm a convenient source of inventions?" Twilight snapped, though her brain quickly caught up with her mouth and she looked away regretfully. "I'm sorry, Charles. I shouldn't have said that."

Had she not looked away she might have seen the guilty look that crossed Charles' face before he spoke. "I won't deny that what we've been able to make has been incredible, but I can guarantee that's not the only reason I'm recommending this to you." He remained silent until Twilight looked up at him. "Twilight, you mentioned your brother was a guard. He no doubt went through months of training before he was ever deployed, right?"

When Twilight nodded, Charles continued, "If guard training is anything like the training from our soldiers then it's as much about honing instinct as well as honing the body. A physically fit soldier is going to last longer in a fight than a physically fit civilian simply because their training gives them the control not to do something rash that could get themselves or others hurt."

She opened her mouth to protest but stopped when the logic hit her. *He's right. I have more magical capacity and capability than any other unicorn, but I can still lose control.* The memory of the thing she killed when she first arrived on earth rose to haunt her like a ghost. *Shining Armor doesn't have the hundreds of spells I do but he wouldn't have panicked. He wouldn't have killed his attacker.*

"I've no doubts that you're extremely talented, Twilight. But I think your talents would be best utilized here. Moira is extremely skilled at interpreting the information we get from the invaders, and you know I'm quite skilled at building things. Matt, Lana and Shaojie are all excellent soldiers. We all have our parts to play."

The late-night conversation with Moira came to mind, and Twilight bowed her head as she saw the logic in it. *"I can't carry a gun or fly a plane but I can tear their bodies to pieces to know how they think and live,"* Vahlen had screamed, *"It's what I do. It's all I can do!"* "I guess you have a point," she said as she backed down on the issue.

Relief was clear on Charles' face as he stood and motioned towards the habitat door. "Your willingness to volunteer does you credit. I'm confident we'll find some way for you to help without you going into the field."

Twilight followed the human into her habitat though she nearly bumped into Charles when he stopped unexpectedly. "What's wrong, why did you stop?" She asked before peeking around him. Another human was in the room looking at the pictures arranged along the wall beside her desk, and Twilight recognized him instantly.

Confidence without arrogance, command without tyranny, certainty of one's decisions.

"Charles, I need to have a word with Miss Sparkle," the newcomer said as he turned from the pictures on the wall to face Twilight and again she felt as though she was being measured and found insufficient.

Twilight looked to the engineer and found him looking back at her with an apologetic expression. "Don't worry, Twilight. I'll be close by, and I'll visit once you're done." And with that, Twilight found herself alone with the human with dragon's eyes.

"Do you know who I am?" He asked evenly, and Twilight had to muster her willpower not to sink low to the ground as she shook her head in response. "I'm the commander of this organization, and I oversee all combat operations as well as provide direction for research and development. I have some very specific questions I need to ask you, and I expect concise answers. Lives may depend upon the answers you give me."

Twilight could only nod in response.

"Good. You had spoken earlier about the 'Field' that you draw energy from to utilize your powers, and you also stated that the 'Field' was in a rigid state from disuse, correct?" A nod. "You also stated that because the 'Field' wasn't frozen then it indicated the presence of others who could use the field, correct?" Another nod. "With that information, would it be a reasonable assumption that some humans are capable of similar powers as yours prior to your arrival?"

What are these questions for? Twilight dearly wanted to ask, but she couldn't find her voice so she simply nodded.

The human nodded as well before continuing. "You have also stated that increased 'Field' activity makes it less rigid and easier to access, correct?" Another nod. "Would it be possible for human beings who previously had no abilities suddenly generate them after the 'Field' is made more accessible?"

Twilight started to nod even as she considered the implications. "Your theory is sound, but Charles said —"

"Yes or no," the human commanded and Twilight found herself nodding rapidly even as her explanation died in her throat. "You've also reported that prolonged or repeated use of powers will produce headaches, but with continuous use and practice they are lessened, correct?" Another nod. "One last question. Using the techniques and technology you have worked on with Charles, can you create a device or implement that can block a person from using these powers?"

Twilight opened her mouth to start what would be a long-winded explanation but stopped when she caught the human's stare. "I'll talk with Charles and see what we can do."

"Excellent. I'll expect a prototype by the end of the week," the human said with a nod of his own before turning and walking out of the habitat.

19:00, 05/13/2015, BRIEFING ROOM

Bradford stood at attention at the head of the room while the Strike team leaders and their subordinates filtered into the room. Matt Harris and Lana Jenkins sat behind and to the side of the commander and looked rather uncomfortable. On the commander's other side sat Frank McKendrick and Moira Vahlen who appeared equally uncomfortable.

Ten Strike team leaders and their subordinates all filled the seats facing Bradford except for Paul Dryzimski. As his second in command was behind the commander, the Strike One leader sat alone. Bradford took a moment to glare at the Strike One team leader while he was too distracted to notice.

You'll be my troublemaker. Damn your curiosity.

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," Bradford said, and all the quiet chatter died down to complete and total silence. "I will keep this meeting brief. First, I would like to thank Captain Fujikawa and Lieutenant Weiss for their teams' stellar performance during today's mission. The live captures are being handled even now by the science team and we're expecting a breakthrough soon."

A brief round of congratulations came from the other team leaders, but both Fujikawa and Weiss were tight-lipped as they watched the commander.

"The purpose of this meeting is to inform you all of the recently discovered potential that our soldiers might begin to show. These signs may be subtle, or they might not. Things to look out for might be rumors of abilities that are far beyond what a normal human would be capable of. Faster than normal reaction speeds, strength beyond normal or even things as obviously abnormal as telekinesis should be reported to me, Frank McKendrick or Moira Vahlen immediately."

"What about seeing the future?" Fujikawa asked humorlessly, and neither she nor Weiss took their eyes off Bradford.

"You are correct, captain. That is another potential ability to watch out for," Bradford said even though he knew it wouldn't change the point she was trying to make.

"You're one of them, aren't you? Someone with 'potential'?"

"Yes, I am," Bradford confirmed and the room collectively sucked in its breath. "I have the capacity to predict future events with a high degree of accuracy." Bradford glared at Fujikawa before speaking again, "No, the predictions aren't foolproof." The glare shifted to Strike Two's team leader. "No, I'm not reading your minds." The glare shifted to Dryzimski. "Yes, others are already showing signs of similar abilities. Sergeant?"

Matt answered the summons and moved forward to stand beside the commander. With one hand he reached out and opened his closed fist palm up. The object in his hand, a simple coin, began to rise slowly into the air. His face twisted from the effort and the coin began to sag and drop. Matt's now shaking hands fumbled for the coin and it slipped from his grasp... only to be caught by Bradford who didn't so much as look to the side during the whole display.

"Thank you, Sergeant, you may take your seat," he stated before taking a slow breath. Other than the sound of the air entering and leaving his lungs the room was silent as a tomb. "Our experts believe that these 'gifts' might be honed through practice and study to give our soldiers a greater edge against the invaders. Anything that your teams are capable of that is beyond the normal should be reported immediately for evaluation. Another sign to watch out for is chronic and persistent headaches. Are there any questions?" Bradford ended his briefing with a question but his tone sounded more like a statement than anything, and his glare fell upon Dryzimski before he had risen from his seat.

"Sir, if you are capable of predicting future events as you say, then you'll know what I'm going to ask," Paul said as he weathered Bradford's glare. "You also probably know what will happen if you don't answer my questions."

"Sit down, Lieutenant."

"With all due respect--"

"*Sit down, Lieutenant,*" Bradford repeated the command sharply, and Dryzimski replied with a tight-lipped expression. "Everything you will see and hear beyond this point is to be considered classified, and sharing this information will be considered an act of treason and will be treated as such. To answer Lieutenant Dryzimski's first question, the exact factors that contribute to the development of these abilities is still unknown but all known cases thus far have been exposed to another person who possesses these abilities. To answer your second question, the original 'source' of these abilities is currently in our possession and is assisting XCOM in the defense of this world. To answer your third question, no. This source is not human."

"An alien was captured during the terror mission that Strike One averted in Washington DC in early April. Since its capture it has cooperated with our requests as well as providing substantial amounts of information about its world and species. It is *not* allied with the invaders that we are currently fighting, and has gone to great lengths to assist us once it became aware of the threats we face."

Bradford's glare finally released Dryzimski before raking across the room to settle on Uther, the Strike Two leader. "Yes, this creature is the 'source' of the abilities that we are just beginning to manifest, and it is a master of dozens of them. All of the humans we know of that are displaying signs of these gifts have been exposed to this creature and its powers, and the extension of this theory is that when these 'gifted' humans use their abilities then other gifted humans may become apparent."

Then it was Weiss's turn to wither under the glare. "The headaches are an early sign of the gift and aren't a symptom of neurological problems. The source states that the mental capacity for these gifts is like a muscle in that repeated exercise improves flexibility and control. The headaches will eventually fade." Bradford's hand twitched as he had to resist the impulse to rub his temples.

A murmur rippled through the room, but quickly silenced when Bradford held up a hand while turning his gaze back to Fujikawa. "The alien is unlike anything we have ever encountered." The hand he raised held a remote which he activated. The large wall-sized monitor flickered on behind him to reveal what was clearly security footage of living quarters. Twilight sat at her desk and was singing along to a song about the periodic table while sketching a diagram of some sort with telekinesis. Another button press froze the video.

"Now, are there any *other* questions?"

Lessons

WATERS OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC QUICKLY GAINING REPUTATION RIVALING THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE AS SEVERAL PLANES ENTER THE AREA AND DISAPPEAR WITHOUT A TRACE. WHEN QUESTIONED, NATO SPOKESMEN NEITHER CONFIRMED NOR DENIED THE POSSIBILITY OF ALIEN INVOLVEMENT.

AMATEUR ASTRONOMERS LOSE PUBLIC FACE WHEN REPORTS OF WELL-DOCUMENTED STARS MOVING IN THE SKY COULD NOT BE PROVEN. VIDEO EVIDENCE OF SUCH CELESTIAL MOVEMENT DEBUNKED AS THE WORK OF FAULTY CAMERA LENSES OR HEAT EMISSIONS FROM NEARBY PLANES.

08:00, 05/15/2015, MESS HALL

I don't think I've ever felt this isolated, Matt mused to himself as he poked at his scrambled eggs while glancing at Lana. One second of eye contact was all he needed to confirm his suspicion that she felt the same. *Then again, we were warned.*

Since Bradford's meeting with the Strike team leaders, both Lana and Matt had recieved rather frigid treatment from the other soldiers in varying degrees. The rookies of Strike One were none the wiser, and all welcomed the unexpected return of Jenkins back in the active lineup. Lieutenant Dryzinski had put just a bit of professional distance from the two soldiers even though he had already been aware of most of the earthshaking developments. Similar reactions were apparent with the other team leaders and a corresponding amount of cold shoulder could now be found from anyone outside of Strike One or the Stardust project.

Bradford had told them that these events were going to occur. Both soldiers were too shocked by recent revelations to protest.

I suppose we've been taking the world-shattering developments acceptably, though some are coping better than others, Matt thought sourly as he spared a glance towards Zhang, who had also been rather frigid to both Lana and Matt. *He's always been a bit cold and distant but he's brought things to a new level. All we did was try to explain the possibility that he might have the same 'gifts' as the rest of us...* A burst of laughter from further down Strike One's table shook Matt from his troubles, and he turned to see the rest of the team participating in what was becoming something of a new tradition for Strike One.

"So, me and the boys have been playing hide and go seek with the innies through this shanty town, when we think we've got them pinned," Robert Sachs explained as he maneuvered his fork through the maze of hashbrowns on his plate. "Lieutenant gives the order to flush them with grenades and we'd hose them down with bullets. Brilliant idea, right?"

Most of the group nodded, but Jack Finch interjected, "Let me guess, things didn't go as planned?"

Sachs grinned sincerely though the expression was a bit gruesome when combined with the scars on his jaw and neck, "Bright lad, catching the pattern. Rule number one is that nothing goes as planned. So, like I said, brilliant idea! So brilliant that the innies decided to do the same thing. I pull my pin and step out of cover to toss, and I see one of the bloody terrorists doing the same thing. We eye each other and the most awkward second in the history of TAG came and went."

"So what then?" Lana asked, eager to be involved in the good mood of the group. She wagged her gloved hands towards the group to motion for them to continue.

"Well, after we stared at each other like FNGs caught with our pants down I tossed my grenade right at him. And the bloody wanker tried to do the same thing to me. Both grenades connected in mid air and dropped between us like a pair of stones. I dove back into cover and that poor clod wasn't quite fast enough." Sachs finished his story and was rewarded with knowing grins and a few chuckles.

"I'm sorry but I call bullshit," Jack said while shaking his head.

"It's one of the many benefits of old age, son," Sachs replied with a grin. "You tend to see a lot of unbelievable stuff over the years."

Matt speared a bite's worth of his eggs before waving the impaled food at the Australian. "Oh trust me, you'll see some unbelievable stuff working here. It's a pity that we'll probably die of old age before any of it is declassified."

"I suspect that old age will not be a concern for any of us," Zhang said as he finished the last bite of his

bagel and left the table.

The mood of the table dipped for just a moment before Sachs laughed. It was a raspy thing that somehow managed to inspire smiles as well as sympathetic wincing from everyone within earshot. "You say death by old age, I say challenge accepted."

I should try and talk with Zhang and smooth out whatever is causing him problems. He's never been this abrasive. Matt thought as he watched the departing soldier's back. As Zhang disappeared through the door, Dryzimski entered and caught sight of Matt and Lana and made his way to where they sat.

"Matt, Lana, could you both follow me please?" the lieutenant asked as he approached the table. The rest of the table fell silent as all eyes fell on the pair. Dryzimski looked up and gave a reassuring smile to the group. "Don't worry, kids. Just getting the old gang all together for a chat is all."

With suspicion sufficiently deflected, the lieutenant looked to the two soldiers in question and they rose to follow without a word. They exited the mess hall and went through a series of corridors and staircases with only silence passing between them. Matt caught Lana's eye and shook his head when she started to ask a question. Dryzimski stopped at a door, and motioned for the two soldiers to step through.

Several other soldiers were inside the room sitting on chairs along the walls. *It's all the Strike leaders,* Matt tamped down on the uneasy feeling that the realization inspired in him. His eyes quickly noted Captain Fujikawa from Strike Six, Captain Jarvis from Strike Eight, as well as a half dozen lieutenants plus Dryzimski. All of them held expressions ranging from glares to suspicion to disinterest. Just as predicted.

The door slid shut and Captain Fujikawa finally broke the silence. "I suspect you realize why we're meeting like this."

Matt nodded and as much as he tried he couldn't force himself to look to Lana. His eyes were locked forward and his posture was ramrod straight. *The last time I was in a room like this things didn't end well.*

"We were all at Bradford's briefing, so we know you've been... *exposed* to the alien—"

"Stop wasting time," Lieutenant Kato spat while he alternated his glare between Matt and Lana, "What I want to know is how long we've been keeping an alien alive and in the base. I sure as hell know that I'm not risking my neck or Strike Seven so some furry freak can live here like we're a hotel. We're here to--"

"Thank you for voicing your opinion," Fujikawa started but Kato simply talked over her.

"—kill every last one of these aliens."

"*Thank you*, Lieutenant, that will be all," Fujikawa spat before turning back to the two soldiers in question. "I'll be blunt. We all had some concerns that were brought up after the briefing with Bradford. We are hoping that you will be able to assist us in laying these concerns to rest."

"I'm not certain how much we can discuss, captain," Matt said slowly but his head jerked to the side when Lana stepped forward.

"Ah, I think I see where this is going," She said in a tone that Matt unfortunately recognized. "You want to know what we know. Well here's the long and short of it. The alien is just a scared little girl who found herself far away from home. It's as simple as that."

Looks went between each of the Strike leaders before Uther of Strike Two scoffed and asked, "You can't be serious."

"I certainly am. She wants to help us and I, for one, believe her. Matt does too."

Matt aborted all attempts to get Lana's attention as all eyes simultaneously settled on him. "I am forced to agree. She's just a naive kid who loves books and learning and helping her friends."

"You *cannot* be serious!" Weiss shouted. "It is an *alien*. These things are our enemies because they are trying to *kill us all*. Do I need to show you the armor camera shots of one of them using the body of a child as a shield to remind you what we're up against? I'm not sure I can trust someone to watch my back that's so comfortable around an alien."

"Is that so?" Lana ground out and this time Matt did turn to look at her. She pulled the glove off her left hand before jerking the zipper open for her jacket. In one fluid motion she tore off her jacket and brought her prosthetic arm forward for all to see. Dryzimski had been aware of the prosthetic but this was the first time the rest of the teams had laid eyes upon it. Some recoiled while others simply stared but the silence was universal for all of them.

"You all see this? This wonder of human engineering? *She designed it*. If it wasn't for that alien, I'd be a damned cripple for the rest of my life. You know those ARC grenades you used?" Lana asked while pointing an accusatory metal finger at Weiss, "She helped with those. Your shiny new lance rifles? It was her. Would one of the aliens we're fighting have helped us with any of that?" A long moment of silence passed while Lana simply glared at the assembled room.

"Thank you, Corporal, for voicing your views," Fujikawa said diplomatically, and Matt could see Lana clench her jaw to stave off whatever response she was going to spit. "We are simply trying to ascertain the risks of exposing our soldiers to this creature. One five second video clip that might have been chosen specifically to disarm any concern does little to put our minds at ease." A murmur of assent passed through the assembled leaders though Dryzimski remained silent.

"Commander Bradford described the source of your 'gifts' as exposure to the alien, but what exactly does *exposure* entail?" Captain Jarvis asked slowly, "I'm all for any advantage we can get against the aliens but I don't know if the troops could be persuaded to participate if such exposure is... uncomfortable." The last word came after a moment of hesitation and gesturing with his hands to indicate something rather unpleasant.

"Gentlemen," Matt said after clearing his throat, "I think there's a way to satisfy your concerns adequately."

10:07, 05/15/2015, STARDUST LAB

[This song](#)... Twilight thought as she gave another glance at the tablet that was blaring at her. *I love it. Equestrian sciences are aware of a lot of elements but some of these are completely new to me! I hope they don't mind me taking a bit of a break to take notes on some of the elements that we haven't yet discovered yet. Though I'll have to ask Charles about some of these.*

Twilight looked back from the tablet to the paperwork in front of her, which included a sketch of the humans 'Periodic Table of Elements', and a corresponding graph of the physical elements that she was aware of from Equestria. She had been able to match about a third of the elements with ones she was familiar with as she continued her research by researching the common usages of each element. A small collection of sketches was also slowly piling up as she recalled each of the materials that she tested at the start of the month in the search for Arcanite.

The pleasant ping of the door bell interrupted her concentration, but after a moment's consideration she shrugged and pushed away from the desk. *I could probably use a break*. A quick tap of her tablet paused the music before she called out, "Come in!"

The door opened and Matt stepped through with a smile. "Good morning, Twilight, how are you this morning?"

"I'm fine, but I should be asking you the same!" Twilight replied quickly. "Are things getting any easier for you? And how's Lana doing? Have the headaches gotten better?"

"I'm adjusting. I just needed time to get used to things, I guess," Matt nodded before heading towards the table and sitting down. "Lana's getting better too. I'm pretty sure she'll be by later today to say hello. What are you up to now?"

"Taking a break! I finished the rough draft for a special project last night so I sent that off to Charles before starting some research on the elements," Twilight looked the desk and pulled several items over to the guest table with her telekinesis. "I'm familiar with some of them but there are others that I've never heard of. I was planning to wait and ask Charles about some of them but now that you're here could I ask you some questions?"

"Well, I don't--"

"Great! The material I was able to access was limited to several common elements like carbon and iron but there's several ones that are completely new to me and I can't seem to get much information on the others," Twilight stopped mid-explanation when she saw the doubtful look on Matt's face. "What?"

"Twilight, let me just stop you right there. Science wasn't my best subject in school, so I'm afraid you might have to wait for Charles," Matt said, and he gave a helpless chuckle when Twilight pouted. His humor eventually gave way to a serious expression. "I did have something I wanted to ask you about, though. Well, more like show you."

"And what would that be?" Twilight asked with an arched eyebrow. *Where's this coming from?* He looks worried, she couldn't help but observe when he pulled out a small coin from one of his pockets. Twilight's eyes went from the coin to Matt's face as he held the coin in the flat of his palm. She opened her mouth to

ask another question when the coin began to quiver, then rise slowly out of his hand. It hovered uncertainly before dropping back into his palm.

"I can't get much more than that out of light objects. Apparently I have more control while in combat, as well as other abilities—"

"WHAT?" Twilight nearly screamed as her eyes darted between Matt's face and the coin. "That's magic! You never said you could do magic! How are you doing that without a horn for projection? Do you use some kind of focus or an aria? You mentioned other abilities? What else can you do? How do you do it?" The questions came tumbling out in rapid succession as Twilight tried to digest this newest development. Dozens of theories vied for supremacy in her mind like a gigantic battle royale.

"Uh, Twilight?"

Matt's hesitant question snapped Twilight out of her rampant theorizing. *Wait, when did Matt get so close?* She asked herself, only to realize in her zeal for answers she had hopped up onto the table was currently looming precariously over Matt. The human had leaned back in the chair in an attempt to buy himself room and was looking decidedly nervous with Twilight being so close and showing no signs of halting her advance.

The *snap* of teleportation was almost deafening in her ears as she retreated as quickly as she could back to her seat. "Sorry! It's just so unexpected—wait, what I meant was I didn't think this was possible! Do you know how you're doing it? Tell me everything! Is this happening with anyone else?" Again the questions were posed in rapid succession as Twilight tried to not think about how close the two of them had just been.

"Well, as to how I'm doing it, I really don't know. I was honestly hoping you might be able to help me out with that. As for others I know of at least two. Lana's been showing signs of having abilities, and Commander Bradford has as well," Matt said with a light smile.

"Commander Bradford? As in the 'Commander' of this place?" Twilight blurted out quickly, and when Matt nodded her mind again was overrun with questions. *When he asked me all those questions earlier, he was really asking about if his friends could use magic! And if Lana has the ability then the headaches she was having are likely due to exertion.* As she reviewed the conversation she had with the Commander a disturbing thought came to mind. *He asked if I could design a device to block magical abilities. I just assumed they would be used against those things that want to hurt everyone, but what if I was wrong?*

"We were hoping that you might be able to show us how to use these abilities more efficiently and there may be others who may join us. So, do you think you can teach us how to use magic?"

All nervousness flew from Twilight and a wide grin spread across her face. "Think I can? I *know* I can! I've been studying it for most of my life so I'm the most qualified to do it! You mentioned there might be others? Do you know how many will be joining us?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid," Matt shrugged, "It'll be Lana and me for certain but I won't know the exact number for a few days. Well, I hate to just drop in and dump all this on you and then leave again, but I'm afraid my schedule is rather tight today. Sorry."

"Oh, no worries!" Twilight lied just a little, "We all have our parts to play, right?"

10:20, 05/15/2015, STARDUST LABS

Matt exited Twilight's habitat and out of the lab entirely before turning down the corridor to his right. He passed several other personnel in the hallway before ascending a staircase to the briefing rooms in the barracks. Matt didn't bother knocking as he pushed into the room to reveal the Strike team leaders all clustered around a monitor. His view was blocked but he didn't have to look to know what it showed. An increasingly familiar song about the periodic table of elements was blaring from its speakers.

"Gentlemen, I trust that your concerns about the nature of our guest have been addressed?" Matt asked the assembled officers, but not a one reacted to the question. The only movement came from Lana, who gave him a nod and thumbs up. "Well then, if there are no other concerns..." Again, no response was apparent as all seemed enraptured with the monitor and what was shown in it. He waited a moment longer before turning and heading back out of the briefing room.

"Have their concerns been addressed?"

Matt had just stepped out of the briefing room before he heard the question, and he nearly jumped out of his skin to see the person asking it was none other than Bradford. "I believe so, sir. Things progressed just as you predicted. I don't know if this will smooth out all of their problems with this but I think the big

ones are out of the way.”

“Very good,” Bradford said as he turned to leave, though he stopped when Matt asked another question.

“Did you really predict this happening, sir?” Matt asked uncertainly, “I mean, did your foresight allow you to see this confrontation between Lana, myself and the Strike leaders?”

“No, it didn’t,” Bradford answered without turning around. “I’ve been in various commands long enough to anticipate how subordinates react in certain situations. I could order them to participate in this program and not give them any reason. I could not answer any of their questions and they would still have followed my orders. But they would have doubts. If I told them exactly what you did, they would worry I was holding something back or only showing what I wanted them to see. I suspect they said as much, right?” Before Matt could agree, Bradford continued, “Good work, Sergeant. I’ll be expecting a report from you once your lessons begin on how to control your gift.”

“Understood, sir.”

12:34, 05/15/2015, EA REACTOR

“Status updates, gentlemen,” Shen announced through the public address system in the reactor’s control booth. A half dozen engineers scrambled around one of the reactor cylinders and were busy attaching what appeared to be a large ring around the outer edge of the cylinder’s base. A long moment passed while the engineers continued their frenzied pace before all of them took a step back from the reactor.

One engineer turned to the control booth and tapped his headset. “Installation is complete on cylinder five. Five’s startup is scheduled for approximately fifteen seconds from now.”

“Very good. Testing will begin ten seconds after cylinder startup. Please clear the chamber.”

The engineers complied, and a few joined Shen in the control booth. All showed signs of nervousness as the reactor cylinder in question began to power up. “Ten, nine, eight,” Shen counted down as he reached for a button on the freshly installed console beside the main control kiosk in the control room. “Three, two, one.” The elderly engineer held his breath and pressed the button.

The ring around the reactor cylinder flashed and the glow of energized Elerium vanished instantly. After checking and double checking the readings from his console, Shen allowed himself to grin as he turned to the other engineers. “Congratulations, gentlemen. The test was completely successful. Report to the foundry to assist with fabrication of the other devices. Thanks again for all your hard work.”

The assembled workers nodded and turned to exit the control booth, but they all stepped aside when the door opened to reveal Commander Bradford.

“Charles, I hear you have good news for me,” He stated as much as asked as he stepped into the room, and he didn’t so much as spare a glance to the other engineers as they took the chance to leave.

“Ah, yes,” Shen said with a smile as he indicated towards the reactor on the other side of the viewing glass. “We completed small scale testing on the Rule Breaker project earlier this morning as a proof of concept, and we have just successfully tested a large scale version with the Ea reactor. At the very least, we now have a reliable way of shutting down the reactor that won’t involve the unnecessary loss of Elerium or the lives of engineers.”

“How does it work?” Bradford asked.

“Twilight was very verbose on that subject. The device, when activated, interrupts the collection of energy from the field. Any spellwork currently being channeled is interrupted, and any further attempts to cast spells are negated. Specifically, the device hijacks the energy that is being gathered for the spell and simply returns it to the field unused so long as the device is active.”

“And the wearable versions I requested?”

“Ah, yes,” Shen nodded while looking uncomfortable. He reached under the console and retrieved a suitcase. As he placed the case on the table and opened it, he explained, “These are the current prototypes that are meant to be worn. Activation and deactivation is achieved by depressing the button on the side. The principles are the s—what are you doing?” Shen’s explanation was interrupted when Bradford walked up and slipped one of the watch-like devices around his left wrist. “We haven’t begun testing with living specimens yet!”

Before any further objection could be registered, Bradford tapped the button on the device and let out a long, drawn-out sigh. Shen held his breath and looked from the device to Bradford’s face, and for the first

time noticed several signs of fatigue. His face was pale, and bags were showing under his eyes. When his sigh finally reached its end and he reopened his eyes, Shen could see they were bloodshot and drooping.

"Are you all right?"

Bradford focused dully on Shen before replying a moment later. "Fine. I'm fine. Keep up the good work." Without another word he turned and left the control booth.

08:25, 05/20/2015, BARRACKS

"Are you sure about this?" Lana asked with a hint of uncertainty as she stood beside Matt in the commons area of the Barracks. "Perhaps it would be better to introduce them slowly to some of this information rather than dumping it all on them at once?"

"I'm afraid Bradford thinks otherwise, and I'm inclined to agree. It's best for the ones who are showing signs of the gift to be caught early and trained rather than having them stumble upon it when they might not be prepared for the consequences," Matt answered quickly. "I suppose we should be thankful the first class is going to be only five, including us. I can barely imagine what it'd be like having to manage dozens of soldiers who aren't aware of what they're getting into. Once Vahlen gets the testing equipment done we might have that many."

"I just hope they play nice, or I might have to take them down to the PT room for some hand-to-hand training instead," Lana grinned wickedly.

"I don't think Bradford would appreciate you breaking soldiers before they've had a chance to go out and fight, Lana," Matt said with a chuckle. "Still, I don't think there will be a problem. Once they get over their initial shock I think they'll come around. We did. So did Zhang, after a while."

"Speaking of Zhang, do you know what's been eating him lately? I haven't seen him crack a smile in... well, ever, but his scowl is more pronounced. You would think he'd be happier with the possibilities of having superpowers, y'know?" Lana sighed dramatically. "I guess there's no pleasing some people."

Matt couldn't resist a chuckle at the dour man's expense, though any further conversation was halted when three other soldiers entered the commons and made their way to Matt and Lana. The most noticeable of the pack was a square-jawed and buzz-cut monster of a man with at least six and a half feet of pure muscle. The second was a Hispanic man of average height and build. The third was Captain Fujikawa herself.

Ah, they're all from Strike Six. Matt realized once he recognized the diminutive captain. "So glad you all could make it," Matt said affably to the newcomers while motioning for them to follow. "If you'll follow me to the cargo elevators, we'll get started. Captain Fujikawa knows a bit about why you're here, but I expect you two don't."

Both of the men shook their heads, so Matt continued, "I don't know the exact mechanics of it, but both of you have shown the potential for certain extraordinary abilities, and we are now going to speak with an expert who will teach us how to better harness these abilities." The group went through several corridors before finally stopping at the elevators on the far side of the barracks complex. "I do have to warn you though, what you see during training cannot be discussed with anyone that is not part of this group. So, if you have any doubts or second thoughts, now is the time to back out."

The elevator door opened and no one showed signs of bowing out, so the sergeant motioned for the group to enter the elevator. Once all the soldiers were inside he entered as well and pushed the button for the surface.

"Who exactly is this 'expert'? And what abilities are we talking about?" One of the soldiers asked.

"I'm afraid I don't want to spoil the surprise as to what we'll be learning, Mister Rodriguez," Matt said after glancing momentarily at the soldier's name badge. "The expert is also quite unique. She's..."

"She's a little girl that comes up to about your waist," Lana interrupted with a smile. "She's also extremely sensitive, so be sure to be on your best behavior."

"...right, that. She's very young, and despite her outward appearance she's just like us on the inside. Please keep that in mind when introductions are made." Matt finished diplomatically, and he could see out of the corner of his eye that Lana was smiling serenely but her fists were clenching and unclenching in time with her breath.

The next question was asked by the giant, who spoke with a Russian accent whose ID tag said 'Y Romalov'. "Why do we have this child? From what I understand any survivors we rescue are returned to

their countries once they are cleared for it.”

“That question will answer itself shortly,” Matt answered with a smile as the elevator reached the surface. “Before you judge this expert too harshly, I’d like you to keep in mind that this expert has been helping us for almost as long as she’s been here.”

“Oh ye of little faith,” Rodriguez said with a chuckle to try and relieve the growing tension in the elevator. “We might be soldiers, but we’re not monsters. I don’t think anyone here would do anything to bully a kid. It’s not like she’s an alien, right?”

Matt could only grin at the other soldier’s poor choice of words as the elevator doors opened to reveal the mostly empty warehouse. The eyes of the soldiers were immediately drawn to two twenty-foot cargo containers that appeared to be suspended mid-air in fields of purple energy. Two of the soldiers in the elevator car weren’t shocked by the sight, one was forewarned but still surprised, while the last two could only stand and gape.

“You may lower the containers, Twilight,” Vahlen’s voice could be heard from the side. “Total combined weight of the two fully loaded containers was over a hundred tons. Do you not feel any strain?”

Here it comes, Matt thought as the attention of the newcomers whipped to the side to see Doctor Vahlen and Twilight standing to the side.

Twilight smiled energetically though Matt could see some signs of effort as the two containers lowered back down onto the concrete, “Just a bit. Simple lifting isn’t too hard, though as weight increases so does the energy required.”

“Do you know your maximum potential lift weight?” Vahlen asked curiously before her gaze flicked up to catch sight of the soldiers entering the warehouse. “Ah, it seems our guests have arrived. My questions can wait until later.”

“Good morning, Twilight,” Both Matt and Lana said in unison, and they couldn’t help but smile at the synchronicity as well as the smile Twilight returned to them.

“Good morning! I hope you two are ready to learn because I’m really excited about teaching! Though I am a little worried about how I’m supposed to teach you if you don’t have much practice in doing magic already. Most unicorns have a basic grasp of how to form and channel spells before they start to specialize but...oh, I didn’t see your friends there!” Twilight said as she craned her neck around Matt and Lana to catch sight of the three humans that had frozen near the elevator. “Hello! My name is Twilight... Sparkle...”

Matt glanced back to see the three soldiers frozen near the elevator and he could almost read exactly what was going through their minds. Both Rodriguez and the Russian had their knees slightly bent with their right feet back, and their right hands were grasping at their hips in an attempt to draw side arms that weren’t there. Fujikawa stood ramrod straight and her arms forcefully at her sides, but Matt could see the muscles in her right arm tensing in a subconscious reaction similar to the other two soldiers.

Don’t stop smiling, Twilight. Matt thought as he saw that she recognized the variations of panic that the new humans were displaying, “Ah, yes, I suppose introductions are in order. These are some of our friends that might have the same potential that we do. The first is Captain Yumiko Fujikawa, next is Mister Rodriguez and last is Mister Romalov.”

“Hello!” Twilight tried again in a valiant effort to stay upbeat in the face of the newcomers who were finally realizing just what situation they were now in. “My name is Twilight Sparkle, and I’m here to teach you all about magic. I’ve been studying the subject my entire life and I’m simply thrilled that I have the opportunity to share my expertise with you all! I honestly can’t say what you’ll be able to do after our classes, but I can’t wait to see what happens!”

Twilight’s smile became positively beatific as she finished her speech and took a breath, “Now, Matt has shown me a little bit of what he can do but I don’t know what the rest of you are capable of. Who wants to share first?”

Nearly a minute’s worth of silence passed before one of the newcomers was able to respond.

“What?”

11:57, 05/20/2015, WAREHOUSE S2

Well, that went better than expected, Lana thought with a grin as she saw Twilight coaching the humans in exercises that were designed to provide focus for spellcasting.

"You're doing great so far, Matt!" Twilight encouraged with a smile, "However I think the lack of power is coming from a lack of focus. Not that you're scatterbrained or anything, you're just having trouble focusing on drawing and maintaining your power. You also need to unlearn some of your concepts about the world around you. I suspect you're having trouble visualizing what you want to happen because your brain is telling you it can't happen. The biggest hurdle in casting a new spell for me has always been altering my concept of what is and isn't possible."

"So, basically, you're saying that there is no spoon?" Lana asked, and her grin grew when Matt face-palmed and Twilight arched an eyebrow.

"Quiet, you," Matt grumbled, "Come to think of it, why don't you show off your abilities some more and disappear?"

"Oh I intend to get some mileage out of it once the headaches go away, but not beforehand," Lana retorted while rubbing her forehead with her right hand. *It's great that we found out how my ability works, but it blows that my head feels like it's going to explode when I use the ability.* She looked down at the segmented metal plates that made up her left hand as she weighed the benefits with the cost. *If some headaches are the cost of being whole, then it's worth it.*

"Lana mentioned repeating a phrase to channel her abilities. Perhaps you should think of a similar word or words to repeat. As you repeat the words, think only about the coin lifting out of your palm. Do not think about gravity; you have the capacity to ignore it. Do not think of what can't be. Think of what you want to happen and it will be," Twilight's voice was almost hypnotic as she explained the concepts to Matt, and his breathing slowed. The coin began to rise out of the palm of his hand, followed by a second and a third. All three hovered steadily above his face for over a minute with no signs of stopping.

"That's great!" Twilight again heaped praise on Matt. "Keep at it, and see if you can lift any more. I just need to go give the others some help." She gave her best smile before turning toward the Russian who was glaring at the coin in his hand like it had just insulted his mother.

The Russian, who had eventually given his first name as Yuri, hadn't shown any obvious powers like Lana or Matt yet, much to his and Twilight's consternation. Vahlen had added fuel to that fire by bringing the little detector device over to show that he was lit up like a light bulb, which meant he had some sort of power.

Both Rodriguez and Fujikawa had shown some promise with telekinesis, but were quickly losing heart after barely being able to levitate more than a single coin. Despite their difficulties, Twilight was there to celebrate every success and was gradually wearing down the suspicion that was clearly apparent after their initial introductions.

Not that there was any doubt about that, Lana thought with a grin. *Those smiles of hers are infectious. There really should be a law against being that cute.*

"Good job!" Twilight celebrated with one of her sugary sweet smiles and a clop of her hooves. Rodriguez had just managed to lift the quarter for ten straight seconds before it began to wobble and fall.

"Ah, thanks," The soldier replied before looking away from the uncomfortable amount of praise. "Doesn't feel like much when we saw you lifting shipping containers that weigh tons."

"I wasn't always able to do that. There were times I struggled to lift a single piece of paper, and it took me lots of practice to get even that down!" Twilight encouraged with another one of her winning smiles.

"Hey, Matt!" Lana shouted, "Want to try something new?"

Lana's shout broke his concentration and the three coins he had been levitating clattered onto the cement. "And what would that be?" He asked suspiciously as he reached down to collect what he dropped.

"Think of it as target practice and reaction time training," Lana said as she produced her deck of cards and showed it to him. Her grin increased when Matt did nothing but raise an eyebrow in response. She unboxed the cards and shuffled the deck before looking back to Matt. "Are you ready?"

"Fire when ready," Matt answered, but before he had even finished his response the first card was flying through the air in a tumbling trajectory that would have carried the card over Matt's right shoulder, if it hadn't stopped in the air in front of him. "Good job! How many can you stop?" Lana grinned mischievously before hurling a second and third card at him.

Strain began to show on Matt's face as more and more cards halted in midair. "Stop, Lana. Stop. I said STOP." The cards shivered in midair and the last one thrown halted before whistling back at Lana. She jerked her head to the side to avoid taking it right in the face but the edge of the card cut the flesh above her cheek bone like a ripe tomato.

"Son of a bitch!" Lana said as she brought her right hand up to cover the cut as she stumbled back, and her eyes briefly traced the card's trajectory to find it embedded in the side of the shipping container that was behind her. Her alarmed gaze switched back to a now clearly horrified Matt who had all but forgotten about the cards that were now littering the floor around him.

"Jesus! Lana, are you alright?" Matt asked as he quickly stepped forward even as Lana attempted to wave him off. "I didn't mean for that to happen. Let's go down to Medical and get that cleaned up."

Twilight and the other humans had noticed the events as they progressed, and the unicorn had stepped forward the moment Lana had cried out. "It might be best to call it a day for now. Before you all go I want to point out that we got lucky just now," Twilight locked eyes with each of the humans in the warehouse, and Lana saw a side of her that was entirely new: The stern teacher. "It can be used to do many amazing things, but it can also be misused. Someone who isn't trained properly, or someone who doesn't take it seriously might accidentally get themselves or others hurt. So, please be very careful when you're using your magic in the future."

"Sorry, Twily. It was dumb of me. Won't happen again," Lana apologized sincerely. *Damn, I didn't think a little teasing would have nearly taken my head off.*

Matt also appeared equally horrified. "I'll be more careful too."

"Good. Respect for magic is probably the most important thing I can teach you at this point. If you don't know what you can do or you don't have sufficient control, you might do something that will haunt you for the rest of your life." Twilight said, and her gaze fell as she finished her warning.

"If we're done, I'll head down to medical and see what they can do for me," Lana winced as she pulled her hand away from her face and saw it drenched with her own blood.

"Ah, before we go, there's something we need to take with us," Matt said as he motioned towards the table along the far wall and the suitcase that sat there. He opened it up and scooped its contents up before returning to the group with an uneasy smile. "Twilight's concerns about safety are valid, and in order to prevent unintentional accidents before we're able to control our powers, we'll each be wearing one of these."

Matt handed an item to each of the humans present while keeping the last for himself. They appeared to be simple wristwatches though a small bit of Elerium could be seen set into the wristbands of each. "The button on the side activates the device and should block spellcasting while active. As I mentioned earlier, this will prevent accidents as well as help with the headaches that are typical of mental exertion. Tap the button on the side to activate it, and then tap it again to deactivate it."

"Sounds simple enough," Lana said as she slipped the watch around her right wrist and tapped the button. Immediately the low-grade headache that had been plaguing her for days lessened, and her left arm went dead. "What? *Oh come on,*" she whined before she realized that without her left hand she couldn't turn the watch off. "Someone want to lend me a hand? I promise I'll return it in like-new condition."

Matt arched an eyebrow before chuckling at her request. Twilight was a bit less hesitant to laugh, at least until the other humans smiled as well. "I take it that the arm and the blocker aren't compatible, then?"

"Apparently not," Lana sighed. "I guess I'm going to have to live with the headaches until they go down. They're better than being a one-armed invalid."

Matt gingerly tapped the button on her watch, and life was again restored to her left arm. He spared a glance over to the opening elevator doors that revealed Shen and Zhang. "You should go down to Medical. We'll get Twily back to the lab."

"I'm sorry you got hurt, Lana," Twilight apologized while looking sheepish. "I wasn't paying enough attention and I let something slip by. It won't happen again."

Lana was quick to cut her off before she apologized any further. "No, Twily, I did something dumb. I'll consider this paying the piper for my mistake. I'll see you later then."

"Bye!" Twilight said with a hoof wave as Lana and the three members of Strike Six made their way to the elevator.

12:20, 05/20/2015, WAREHOUSE S2

Zhang stopped some distance from Twilight and merely waited while Charles continued to walk forward to talk with the unicorn. *Works for me,* Twilight thought before mentally slapping herself. *Bad Twilight,*

bad! You shouldn't think so terribly of others.

"Hello, Charles!" The unicorn said with a grin and a hoof wave.

"Good afternoon, Twilight. Matt, how are the suppressors working?" Charles asked while indicating toward the new watch on Matt's wrist.

Matt gave the new accessory a wary eye before shrugging. "So far so good, I guess. I never got the headaches like Lana had so I can't really tell if it's working all that well."

"We had a bit of an accident but it really drove the point home about safety. I'm not really comfortable with devices that block magic like that but I suppose it's necessary until proper control can be achieved," Twilight said.

Matt arched an eyebrow before asking, "Well, I suppose that would make sense. If you lost your magic it'd be like any of us losing our hands. Is that something that happens often back home? Unicorns losing their magic, I mean?"

"No, it isn't," Twilight shook her head as she spoke in grave tones. "Magical sealing is something only done in very special circumstances. If a unicorn isn't capable of controlling their magic and presents a danger to others, then they have their powers suppressed until such time that they can control them. If the unicorn is intentionally and repeatedly harming others with his magic then the same is applied, though the mere threat of such a punishment is enough to dissuade the few criminals we have from repeating." Twilight fell into step beside Matt and Shen before picking up Zhang and stepping into the recently returned elevator.

"What was the accident that happened, by the way?" Shen asked as the elevator began to descend.

"Oh, I almost took off Lana's face with a playing card," Matt explained while rubbing the back of his head. Upon seeing the look on Charles' face he elaborated, "Telekinesis, I think?"

"Matt's picking up on how to use his powers very quickly!" Twilight was more than willing to heap praise where it was due. "He's quite the natural." It was Matt's turn this time to grin sheepishly and look away.

Any further conversation was interrupted when the elevator doors slid open to reveal the empty corridor that Twilight was becoming increasingly familiar with. Twilight obediently waited in the elevator as Matt and Charles looked out of the elevator car and down the hallways. They were apparently clear as they both exited the car to ensure their passing would go unnoticed.

Which left Twilight alone with Zhang.

"It must be nice to have such fun with your friends," Zhang stated coolly, and there was a tone of disapproval in his voice.

"Anything you do with friends can be fun," Twilight replied quickly, "Even if it's work; it can be fun with the right people."

"Even if they're out risking their lives while you sit safely in here with the power to end any conflict you participate in?"

The words hit Twilight like a physical blow, especially after her recent conversations with Charles on the matter. "I don't want to stay here! I wanted to go out and help everyone! I even asked Charles if I could go out and keep you all safe when you're in danger but he explained that it would be a bad idea."

"You volunteered?" Zhang whispered but Twilight didn't hear the words.

"I thought I could help, but Charles pointed out that I don't have the training to be a soldier and I might get someone hurt. I *killed* someone by accident because I was scared when I first came to Earth. Charles is right; I might be able to protect you all. I might also get everyone hurt, too."

Zhang was silent and Twilight couldn't bring herself to look at him by the time Charles and Matt returned. He was quiet for their entire walk back to the Stardust Labs.

Zhang watched Matt, Shen and Twilight enter the lab but he did not follow.

A dishonorable display, to simply assume such a thing, Zhang chided himself as he played the conversation back in his head. If one had accused me of cowardice in such a way, I would have struck him.

Zhang looked down at his clenched fist and let the anger bleed out of him. He slowly opened his fist to

see his palm with four small cuts in the skin where his finger nails had dug in, then the bones and blood beneath the skin, then the bundles of wires running through the floor—

He blinked and rubbed his temples. *I must be imagining things*, Zhang thought before turning and marching towards the staircases that led up to the barracks.

20:01, 05/20/2015, STARDUST LABS

"I think she's going to love it," Matt said as he eyed the DVD in Shen's hands. "Either that or she'll spend the entire movie talking about how it doesn't live up to the source material."

"I think if we explain the difficulties of movie adaptations, she will forgive any inconsistencies," The engineer replied. "I checked the book last time we visited; she's almost finished with Sorcerer's Stone. If she's finished by now we could probably watch it now."

Lana's grin nearly took in her ears. She had just opened her mouth to speak when she was interrupted.

"STRIKE ONE, ASSEMBLE FOR DEPLOYMENT. STRIKE SIX, ASSEMBLE FOR DEPLOYMENT. ALL STRIKE TEAMS ON STANDBY."

"Oh come on!" Lana complained before looking to Matt and Shen and grumbled, "Doesn't it seem like the aliens have the worst timing for these sorts of things?" Both men chuckled at the complaints before heading towards the door. "Shen, buddy, you'd better wait to give that to Twilight until we get back, alright? If I miss out on Twily smiles because you jumped the gun I will be very upset!"

"Go, go. I'll wait until you get back," Shen said as the group parted ways.

The two soldiers double-timed it to the armory where they donned their Carapace and Chameleon armor. Lana's armor in particular was modified to not interfere with her prosthetic, which was bare and uncovered. Their weapons were also new, with Matt picking one of the new lance rifles and an ARC grenade in addition to his ARC thrower while Lana was issued an Excalibur instead of her favored shotgun.

"Do we know what the mission is, Dee?" Lana asked the Lieutenant as she collected a handful of projectiles and power packs for her weapon. "We seem to be going in awfully heavy."

"Don't know, Bradford said heavy so heavy we shall go," Paul replied with an uncertain shrug before securing the last of his gear. "All right, gentlemen. Form up and proceed to briefing."

Strike One suited action to words with Strike Six immediately behind them. They found Bradford in the briefing room staring at a projection of the north Atlantic with a red triangle icon hovering over Iceland. The moment the doors closed behind the soldiers, Bradford turned around and did something that no one had ever seen him do.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have located the planet-side base of operations for the invaders. Now we take the fight to them," Bradford said, and he *grinned*.

Viking

SENATOR FRANK BEACHAM FOUND ASSASSINATED IN HIS VACATION HOME AFTER WEEK-LONG TOUR RECRUITING FOR THE ARMED FORCES. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS REFUSED TO COMMENT ON THE NATURE OF HIS DEATH BUT LOCAL SECURITY CAMERAS NEAR HIS RESIDENCE SHOW A HELICOPTER HOVERING OVER THE ESTATE AT THE ESTIMATED TIME OF DEATH.

WIKILEAKS CONTINUES TO BE THE FOCAL POINT OF CONTROVERSY AS MULTIPLE GOVERNMENTS WORLDWIDE THREATEN TO BLOCK THE WHISTLEBLOWER WEBSITE AFTER MEMOS ABOUT 'EXTRATERRESTRIAL COMBAT UNIT' ARE LEAKED. JULIAN ASSANGE WAS UNAVAILABLE FOR COMMENT.

23:52, 05/20/2015, SKYRANGER BIG SKY

The more things change, the more they stay the same, Matt thought to himself as he surveyed the other members of Strike One. *Just add the background noise of a Black Hawk and I might have thought I was back in the Army again.* The brief feeling of nostalgia was gone in an instant, but Matt allowed himself to enjoy it nonetheless.

Lieutenant Dryzimski was scrolling through pages of information on a tablet computer, no doubt checking and double checking the the force estimates for what the soldiers would be facing once they reached the alien base. He also spared glances toward his conventional light machine gun and the heavy laser that Jack Finch held beside him.

The British soldier was completely oblivious to the attention, and was apparently doing his best to lose his shirt to the little pocket poker game he had brought with him. He had been muttering an almost unbroken string of what Matt could only assume was profanity as he continued to lose more and more virtual money to the electronic time waster.

Robert Sachs, however, was the picture of serenity as he demonstrated the time-honored soldier's tradition of sleeping at the drop of a hat. His arms were crossed and his chin rested on his chest, which rose and fell slowly. The only other noteworthy features of the seasoned campaigner was the worn but well-cared for G36 beside him and a knife strapped to his chest. The sergeant tried not to think of having to resort to using such methods to fight the aliens as he turned to the two Japanese recruits.

Kaito Yamazaki and Kaori Suzuki were at first glance having a conversation with very short and clipped sentences in their native language. Their expressions during the course of the conversation ranged from consternation to triumph from the very start. It had taken Matt nearly half an hour to realize that when one spoke they matched the syllable of their word to the last syllable the other had spoken. Judging by how often Kaori was abusing the syllable 'ko', she was quite the old hand at whatever game they were playing.

Zhang sat towards the front of the Skyranger doing what Lana had dubbed as his 'statue impression.' His eyes were closed and his hands were clasped serenely in his lap. His chest rose and fell just as slowly as Sachs but unlike the Australian his posture was ramrod straight even in repose. A scoped LANC sat at his side instead of his usual sniper rifle in light of where the operation was going to be taking them.

Speaking of Lana... Matt thought as he brought his eyes around to survey the last member of Strike One. Lana somehow managed to appear relaxed despite the cramped quarters of the Skyranger with her legs stretched out. In her hands was a beaten paperback book with near microscopic text from what Matt could see. The torn cover read *Structural Engineering Methods* by R Shen.

"What?" Lana asked with a smirk when she noticed Matt's attention. "Going to make a joke about how you're surprised I can read?" Her smirk grew just a bit when Matt recoiled from the supposed accusation. "I didn't sign as infantry like you when you joined up, Matt. I built things prior to joining XCOM. Once we finish up this little alien mess I'll have to find meaningful employment. Oh, sure, I could sign on with a PMC but I'd rather get into something less dangerous."

Before the discussion could continue any further, the crew chief entered the troop compartment and held one hand up. "Five minutes until landing! Message from Command is inbound." The crew chief turned and tapped the monitor towards the front of the compartment.

Bradford appeared with a somewhat harried expression which immediately set Strike One on edge. "Strike Teams, you will be entering the airspace near the alien base shortly. Our satellite scans have revealed a heat bloom at the base of the mountains in the target zone, but further scans were unable to penetrate the mountain to get a layout of the base. Enemy forces at the base are unknown, so your

primary objective is to infiltrate the base and gather any intelligence you can without being detected. If it's feasible to neutralize the enemy personnel on site to capture the base, then you have the green light to proceed. If it's not possible, then it's believed sabotage of the base's power systems will result in the facility's destruction."

The commander's expression hardened as he leaned forward, "In the event of mission failure, Interceptor squadrons will deploy Fragarach weapon systems to destroy the base. The aliens are also jamming all communications near the base, so you will *not* have long range comms until the base is captured or destroyed," The implication was clear, they would be on their own. "Good luck. Command Ou--" The screen burst into static before the crew chief turned it off.

"Well, that's ominous," Lana said with a smirk as she began to load the gun on her lap. It bore a superficial resemblance to the LANC but was somewhat larger. A slot for an Ea power cell could be found in the butt stock much like the rifle, but forward of the trigger guard rested another slot. Matt's unspoken question was answered when Lana slid an equally oversized magazine into the forward slot before loading an Ea power cell into the rear.

"Now, now, kids," Dryzimski spoke up, "Just because Command isn't here to watch over us doesn't mean anything. Some good old fashioned soldiering is what will get things done today."

Matt caught the lieutenant's eye and asked a question without saying a word. Dryzimski's glance away was all the answer the sergeant needed. *No comms means Bradford won't be able to help with that freaky power of his*, Matt winced as he finished thought. *Commander Bradford's always been good at his job, but if he uses... whatever he does too much then the soldiers will elevate him to omnipotent status.*

"Thirty seconds!" The crew chief announced as he walked toward the ramp at the back of the Skyranger. "Closest landing zone is a small valley approximately half a mile from the suspected enemy installation. You'll have to leg it from the landing zone to the base."

"Why aren't we landing closer? I was under the impression the new Chameleon systems would block detection," Dryzimski asked as he pocketed his tablet and brought his LMG onto his lap.

"Stealth systems are currently engaged, but enemy surface patrols were detected around the perimeter. If we deliver you to the base's doorstep then the Chameleon system won't have enough power to cover us as we leave and the op would be blown," The crew chief answered quickly before turning back to the passenger compartment. "Ten seconds! Good luck and give them hell!" One hand slapped the ramp controls to reveal the pre-dawn gloom.

The soldiers of Strike One released their harnesses and reached for their handholds as they turned to face the ramp. They stumbled slightly as the Skyranger set down before flooding down the ramp in a rush and crouching behind the myriad of rocks that littered the terrain.

"Big Sky, Strike One. We're on the ground," Dryzimski reported as he glanced over to the looming shape of another Skyranger deploying troops.

"Crimson, Strike Six. We're clear," the report came from Fujikawa, and both craft began to rise back into the sky.

"Solid copy, Strike teams," Matt heard Big Sky reply and even at such a short distance he could hear static and interference on the line. "We'll await your signal for recovery. Good luck." And with that farewell the two aircraft disappeared into the night. The low light amplification in Matt's helmet allowed him to watch the Skyrangers ascent as well as the approach of Strike Six.

Without a word between them the two teams formed up and headed east.

00:10, 05/21/2015, Hörgársveit

The early morning air carried a chill that, while unpleasant, wasn't unwelcome.

Anything to maintain focus, Zhang thought as he surveyed the mostly barren terrain of the valley around him. The route the Strike teams had taken from the landing zone had been purposefully meandering to stay within the low depressions and shallow valleys to avoid the patrols that the Skyrangers had reported. The potential for aliens to be lurking in the dark without the Skyrangers' overwatch was causing no small amount of tension in the group.

Zhang, however, was a pillar of calm at the head of the group. His position as point man assumed a great deal of risk and his unshaken composure was rubbing off on the men and women behind him. He hoped it was, at least.

Despite Zhang's attempts to maintain his laser-like focus, the complete lack of action was giving his mind room to wander. *Have I been misunderstanding the situation?* He thought as his mind drifted back to the last conversation he had with *Twilight*. *I had thought the worst of her for what I thought was her choice. I always thought I was an excellent judge of character, but this mistake...* Zhang bit down on that train of thought. *Doubt is the enemy, but denial is no better. When we return, I shall speak with the others to resolve this conflict.*

Any further internal debate was cut off when he caught sight of two hunched shapes at the mouth of a cave entrance. Zhang froze and raised his fist to halt the other soldiers, but before he could give any more hand signals he blinked and found a rocky outcropping directly ahead. With practiced ease he crept up to the outcropping and glanced around the corner.

Two sectoids lurked amongst the rocks outside of a sizeable cave entrance. Zhang's initial incredulity at the thought of openly posting such guards was quickly smothered by the realization that the diminutive alien's death-like stillness combined with their gray skins resulted in almost perfect camouflage to an untrained eye in the rocky terrain. Zhang's eyes were far from untrained, and any thoughts he might have spent wondering how he had originally seen the two sentries were better invested in preparing for blood to be shed.

A flash of hand signs relayed the news back to the soldiers behind him. A few moments later he heard two move out of position and stalk into the hills. Several more minutes passed before Zhang caught sight of the two soldiers as they crept up to the two sentries from opposite sides.

The first yanked his target off the ground with one arm around the neck while his other arm brought a combat knife precisely into one of the sectoid's massive eyes. The blade sank in to the hilt and the alien died with hardly a struggle. The second soldier's attack caused Zhang to raise an eyebrow.

The soldier's left arm came up before chopping down like an axe onto the crown of the second alien. The alien dropped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. The soldier kept a pistol trained on the incapacitated alien before giving the all clear signal so the others could approach.

With the sentries taken care of, the Strike teams bolted up the hill and into the shelter of the cave the aliens were guarding. Zhang couldn't help but notice the 'incapacitated' alien now sported what was most certainly a fatal indentation where the soldier had struck it.

"Ugh, I knew I should have worn a glove," Zhang heard a rather annoyed whisper from the depths of the cave. "Seemed like such a good idea at the time, but now I've got alien bits mixed into the joints. Blegh, that stinks." The owner of the voice was quickly revealed to be Lana as she trained her weapon on what appeared to be a doorway set into the end of the cave.

"It's your own bloody fault. You were given a knife for a reason," Sachs, the other soldier, grumbled back before taking note of the new arrivals. "Sentries were taken down without a peep and no sirens either. I think we still have surprise on our side."

"Excellent," Captain Fujikawa replied with a nod. "Once we get inside, Strike Six will handle the power plant. Strike One will handle the capture assignment. I'm feeling keen for an abduction of my own." The helmets masked any facial expressions but Zhang didn't have to strain himself to imagine feral grins on most of the soldiers present. "I'm also interested in any computers they have here, as well. If this is the aliens base of operations then they've got to have information on where they're taking all the abductees at the very least. But first things first, we need to open that door."

The soldiers assembled near the door and Fujikawa reached out with one hand to brush against it. Unlike the doorways found in the alien ships which were shimmering energy fields that dissipated when approached, this was for all intents and purposes a metal wall built into the stone with a small indentation within the wall to mark the entrance. No buttons or control mechanisms were present anywhere in sight, and Zhang found himself reaching for his demolition charges before the door *whooshed* open of its own accord.

Fujikawa hopped backward and trained her rifle on the open doorway while letting loose a burst of sotto-voce profanity. Ten long seconds passed before the captain or any of the soldiers relaxed enough to speak. "Well, that was easy. We'll regroup here in thirty minutes. Radio silence until power can be shut down. Good luck, gentlemen." With that, Fujikawa raised her rifle and led Strike Six into the unknown.

"You heard the lady, we have a job to do," Dryzimski said, and Strike One formed up to follow them in. Zhang was in the tail position this time, and he kept a wary eye on the door before the group rounded a corner and it fell out of sight.

Strike One swept through the base like a murderous ghost. Alien encounters were few and far between and were almost entirely Sectoids. A significant portion of them weren't even armed or paying any

attention to anything other than the wildly complex computer screens at their work stations. The operation was going just a bit too well for Matt to be comfortable with it.

Where are their heavies? Or thin men at least? The longer we go with just fighting Sectoids the more convinced I am that this is all a setup, Matt couldn't help but worry as he watched Lana and Sachs perform their fifth consecutive double takedown of unsuspecting Sectoids. *They aren't even using Chameleon equipment and the aliens are just letting themselves get slaughtered.*

As the last Sectoid corpse fell to the floor, Strike One formed up and headed towards the next room. Matt and Lana took their positions on either side of the door before quickstepping around the corner with their weapons raised. The room was larger than the corridors and kiosks that they had swept through previously with an elevated platform in the center. Four Sectoids occupied the platform but didn't spare so much as a glance towards the approaching humans. Their eyes were fixated on the device in the center of the platform and the myriad of colors that filled the air above it.

Not one to miss the opportunity, Matt began to creep up behind one of the aliens with his pistol and knife in hand. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Lana, Sachs and Zhang mirroring his steps. And like a well-oiled machine all four dispatched their targets. Sachs and Zhang performed the eye stab takedown while Matt elected to slip his own knife into his target's back.

Lana dispatched her target with what was becoming a rather infamous maneuver. As before her left arm raised above her head before whipping down to strike the back of the Sectoid's head. A crunch not unlike the sound of a pumpkin being smashed was the only sound the alien made before slumping to the floor with a skull fracture shaped like the edge of Lana's metal hand.

With all four aliens dead, the soldiers switched back to their rifles and began to make their way to the next door, but not before Finch took a moment to study the alien light show. "Is this what the aliens do for fun?"

"At least they're not reading bad fanfiction on the internet," Kaito remarked off-handedly as he walked past, and Finch turned and made a gesture at the Japanese man's back.

"Are you going to just stand there and argue that there aren't any--" The Englishman started to argue until he caught sight of Dryzimski pointing one finger at him. "Right, sir. Sorry, sir," he mumbled before falling into line.

The next room appeared to be storage or a loading area packed full crates, and the sheer incongruity of it struck Matt like a blow to the face. The crates were wood, and covered with numerals and English lettering and wouldn't look out of place in any of the countless shipping warehouses that littered the Earth. At least three dozen identical crates filled the room, with the majority lining the walls while others sat on pallets on the floor. The question on everyone's mind remained unspoken until Strike One reached the end of the warehouse to confirm they were alone.

"Finch, Suzuki, Yamazaki, Sachs, secure the entrances," Dryzimski ordered before turning to the nearest crate on the floor. "Jenkins, pry one of these open. I want to know just what they are shipping."

"Aye aye," Jenkins said as she let her weapon dangle from its strap. She drove her left hand into the wood just beneath the lid and lifted. The lid came loose with a squeal of protest from the nails, and Lana didn't hesitate to look inside. "What do you think? Bomb? Power source?"

"I have no idea. Matt, get over here," Dryzimski said, and Matt joined the pair in gazing into the crate. Nestled inside the crate's packing material was what appeared to be a metal container shaped vaguely like a cube. Seams ran along the top and outer edges of the cube and wafts of golden light could be seen leaking out of them.

"Sounds like a job for Vahlen," Matt said with a helpless shrug, "I have no idea what they could be."

"Right then, form up and on to the next room," Dryzimski ordered and the team quickly suited action to words. The next room was much like the first but rather than a wall at the far end the room opened up into a far larger chamber. Strike One filtered through the boxes until they had line of sight into the larger room. "What the fuck?" Dryzimski asked with a great amount of feeling, and Matt could only agree with the sentiment.

The larger room was a hangar, and the floor was littered with all sorts of debris and devices that Matt had come to expect from such facilities. The hangar itself wasn't the source of confusion; the single craft that rested on the far side of the hangar was. The familiar shape of a Skyranger sat with its wings folded and loading ramp down. Several figures could be seen pushing crates into the cargo bay... several human shapes. Around a dozen and a half could be seen, men and women in their late twenties to early thirties with most wearing slacks, ties and vests. The remaining few were wearing an outfit that anyone in the Strike teams could recognize instantly: XCOM first generation tactical armor and helmets. Just over half were armed with weapons Matt had never seen before.

"Strike One, Strike Six Actual, do you copy?" Matt heard through the radio, and he nearly jumped out of surprise. *Why is Fujikawa transmitting? I thought we agreed radio silence...*

Dryzimski signaled for Strike One to take cover before responding, "Strike One copies."

"We've found what they're doing to the abductees. Some of them anyway," Another warning flag rose in Matt's head as he took note of the captain's tone. Something had scared her, *badly*. "There's bodies; hundreds of them. Mutilated after some kind of surgical operation. We found where they're doing it, too."

"Six Actual, do you need backup?" The lieutenant asked patiently.

He's hearing exactly what I'm hearing but he wants to know why she's using the damned radio, Matt thought as he peaked over the crates at the humans on the other side of the hangar. They were continuing their work but one had stopped and pressed a hand to his ear in the classic position of someone receiving a radio message.

"Negative, One. We found a survivor. He... *he ripped Rodriguez's head off with his bare hands,*" Fujikawa blurted out in a rush, "If you see humans, keep your guard up. They might look like us but they aren't human anymore! They are not--"

Anything else the captain might have said was lost as two things happened. Dryzimski took the opportunity to look over the box at the humans on the other side of the hangar, and one of the humans on the other side of the hangar took the opportunity to open fire. A blood red beam of coherent light crossed the distance instantly and connected squarely with Dryzimski's faceplate. Time seemed to slow as the beam vaporized everything that it hit, and Matt could only watch in horror as Dryzimski's corpse fell backward onto the floor.

"Weapons free, open fire!" Matt shouted as he brought his LANC up and fired a quick snap shot at the closest enemy he could see. The rest of Strike One opened up as well in a frenzied rush to score a kill.

The moment the sniper's shot rang out, a similar shout could be heard on the other end of the hangar, "Intruders in the loading bay! Flank them!" The humans on the other side of the hangar immediately snapped into action and dispersed with an enviable degree of professionalism. For the first five seconds both sides traded fire before the enemy humans made their move.

The volume of fire increased from the other side of the hangar, and Matt had to duck down to avoid being incinerated under the torrent of laser fire but not before he caught sight of two humans sprinting out from cover and *leaping thirty feet* upwards and onto the catwalks above the hangar. *How the hell did they do that?* Matt gaped before having to press himself further into cover to avoid fire from this new angle.

"Finch! Rocket the catwalks! Covering fire!" Matt shouted as he suited action to words and began to pepper the unloaded crates with LANC fire before falling back into cover to reload. The satisfying sound of an explosion followed by screams was the only indication that Matt needed to know the Englishman had hit home.

Less welcoming was the reply he heard shouted from the opposition. "Rocket their position, now!"

Matt couldn't restrain himself from letting loose a string of profanity as he rose to try and shoot whoever was going to rocket their position. Unfortunately the enemy was faster and Matt could only watch helplessly as the missile flew from its launcher towards Strike One's position.

No. No no no no NO, Matt screamed in his mind as he watched the rocket cross the distance. *They're all going to die again and there's NOTHING I CAN DO.*

Do not think of what can't be. Think of what you want to happen and it will be.

STOP!

The faintest of golden auras caught the rocket and it stopped dead in its tracks as though it had hit a brick wall. It crumpled and detonated prematurely, but the searing spike of pain in Matt's head prevented him from doing anything other than falling back into cover. "Jenkins, Sachs; flank them using your Chameleon gear. We'll cover you!" He growled through clenched teeth while he suited action to words.

A chorus of affirmatives greeted him though he winced when Kaori stepped out from cover and caught a blast in the face just as Dryzimski had. Zhang jerked to the side at the last moment and a line of laser fire creased the right side of his helmet. A surprisingly thorough string of Chinese epithets could be heard as he ripped his helmet off, closed his eyes and fired his LANC.

Zhang's connected with a piece of cover on the opposite end of the hangar and was immediately followed by one of the humans falling over with a neat hole drilled in his head. Again Zhang fired with similar results before being forced back into cover.

Did he just... Matt started to ask himself but was brought out of his thoughts by a laser shot square in the chest. The chest plate held, but was cherry red as he fell back into cover. *Priorities, genius, priorities!*

"Strike Six, this is One Actual! I have assumed command and we are engaging with hostile human forces! We need reinforcement now!" Matt shouted into the radio as he rose to take shots at the hostile humans. The IFF tag for Lana was bolting towards the right flank of the enemies while Sachs had taken cover behind the Skyranger just as the power supply for his Chameleon gear ran dry.

The grizzled veteran began to take single shots from his new position but quickly found himself in danger of being flanked himself. Two of the suit-wearing humans leapt atop the Skyranger from the opposite side and dropped down behind Sachs. The man's instincts were keen as he ducked and stepped backward to avoid the swipe of one soldier while bringing his rifle to bear. His G36 opened up on full auto and unloaded into the second soldier's chest and stomach. Unfortunately Sachs' luck ran out as the second soldier was on him. One gloved fist connected with the soldier's helmeted head and sent him into the side of the Skyranger where he dropped like a puppet with its strings cut. The enemy human raised one boot and brought it over Sachs' head, but the killing blow was halted by a flurry of heavy laser fire from Finch.

The second enemy, the one that had taken a two second full auto burst in the chest from Sachs, slowly began to rise despite the massive amount of blood coating his chest. *Stay dead!* Matt thought as he lined up a head shot on the recovering enemy, and he put three shots into the stubborn enemy before he was certain he'd stay down.

Matt caught sight of two more things farther in the hangar. Time slowed as he caught sight of a sniper leveling a long rifle directly at him. His helmet lacked any sort of zoom function but in his mind he could almost see the sniper's eye in the scope as he lined up the perfect shot. That shot would never come as the second thing that Matt saw was Lana's IFF tackling the man to the ground.

"One Actual, Strike Six is nearby. I think we'll be coming into the hangar from your right, watch your fire," Fujikawa said, and Matt could only grin in response.

"Copy that, Strike Six. Be advised that the enemy has lasers and explosives!" Matt quickly updated the other strike team as he saw them enter the hangar. Two soldiers were immediately cut down by a torrent of laser fire before they could get into cover and Matt cursed before shouting, "Strike One, advance!"

Matt burst out of cover and made a bee line for the Skyranger. Several others fell in beside him, and he glanced over his shoulder to confirm just who had made it. *Finch, Zhang... Where's Kaito?* Matt's gaze retraced their steps before settling on a mangled corpse halfway between their starting point and the Skyranger. *Oh.* "Finch, I want you on this corner providing covering fire. Do not let them flank Strike Six. Zhang, you're with me."

A pair of confirmations came from the two as Matt rounded the corner with his LANC raised and with Zhang close on his heels. The high pitched pulsing whine of the heavy laser drowned out all other noise as the pair advanced into the miniature maze of crates and moving equipment at the base of the Skyranger's ramp.

The pair came across a full squad of the enemy humans that were in the process of suppressing and flanking the newly arrived Strike Six. Matt and Zhang were quick to return the favor. Their first two shots were perfect crowns on the two rearmost soldiers. The second and third enemies fell to double taps in the back. Matt was just about to move onto his third target when a hidden enemy leapt the box beside him and landed within arm's reach to his side.

Matt's mind snapped back to his close combat training as he saw his enemy draw a knife and swing it at him.

Option one, step back and shoot the target.

Matt quickstepped backwards to avoid the first knife blow while raising his LANC. He got one shot off before the rifle was ripped from his hands by a viciously fast swing.

Option two, use secondary weapons to gain the advantage.

Without missing a beat he snatched the ARC grenade from his belt and hurled it at his enemy while smoothly drawing his pistol. The human caught the grenade in midair and tossed it aside even as it discharged into him, all the while continuing his advance on Matt in spite of the pistol fire.

Option three, advance and gain control.

Just as his pistol clicked empty Matt ducked under another wild knife swing and leapt forward in an impromptu shoulder check on the now off-balance enemy. He staggered backward, his once pristine vest and slacks now pockmarked with bullet holes and blood. In spite of all his injuries he stood and charged right into the ARC thrower Matt drew at point blank range which caused him to stumble again.

The human screamed in outrage and slowly got to his feet again while Matt hastily reloaded his pistol, only for the upper half of the man's body to disappear in a spray of gore and a BANG.

Always remember, the person who wins hand to hand combat is generally the one who has friends with guns.

Lana stepped over the remains as she swept the remaining bodies for any sign of movement. "Check the bodies," she said grimly, "They don't stay dead for long unless you're... *thorough*."

Matt watched her go before letting out a long ragged breath he didn't know he had been holding. Bodies, human bodies littered the hangar. While most were wearing the curious business formal suits that the enemies wore, a great deal too many were wearing XCOM Carapace and Chameleon armor.

It didn't take long for Matt to find the rifle he lost during his hand to hand fight, though the hit that had knocked it out of his hands apparently had enough force to crack the case around the Elerium Circuitry of the barrel. Just as he was about to lament the loss of his weapon, the familiar sound of Australian-accented profanity drew his attention.

"Ugh, son of a *bitch*," Sachs said with as much enthusiasm as could be expected. He rolled over and slipped his helmet off of his head. The face plate of his helmet was cracked down the center and his nose was broken and bleeding profusely. Sachs rolled over again and tried to rise but slipped and fell back to the deck.

"Don't try to get up, you've probably had a concussion," Matt said as he hustled over to the injured soldier. He gave the older soldier a hand propping himself up against the Skyranger before asking, "Do you think you can supervise the wounded while we secure the base?"

"Don't you patronize me, sergeant," Sachs growled, "I might not be able to walk I can still shoot a gun. Drag me in the direction you want and I'll keep anything from getting through."

"I've no doubts," Matt forced a smile before his eyes settled on the G36. "I may need to borrow your rifle. Mine was damaged in the fight."

"Damned Americans don't know how to keep your kit," The Australian muttered even as he fished through his pockets and offered up two full magazines while drawing his sidearm. "You bend that rifle and I'll bend *you*."

Matt maintained his forced smile as he ejected the spent magazine and replaced it with one of the full ones. "It's a promise, then." He gave the other soldier a tap on the shoulder and rose to join the others but a shout caught his attention.

"Got a live one!" Lana shouted, and Matt wasn't the only one who ran towards the shout. Finch and Zhang were hot on his heels as well as Fujikawa and a giant that could only be Yuri. They found Lana standing about ten feet away from a man who was dragging himself towards the closest exit in the hangar. A blood trail marked his path, and a significant amount of blood continued to leak from what remained of his legs.

Matt was a heartbeat away from performing a battlefield interrogation when the wounded man finally noticed the attention he was receiving. One hand pulled a syringe from his belt and held it high before jabbing it into his neck. Matt hadn't been the only one who tried to rush forward to stop the suicide, and he wasn't the only one to notice the grenade in the wounded man's hand that fell free as the last bits of life left him. The blast was deafening and reduced any recognizable part of the man's body to little more than a stain on the floor.

"Any injuries?" Matt asked before making his way to Fujikawa. The captain had sunk to the ground with blood seeping out from under the armor of her leg. "Don't move! I think the shrapnel is still in your leg."

"Just my luck, that's what this is. Get me over to the other wounded and I'll keep things going here. It's up to you now to secure the base, kid," Fujikawa ordered, and Matt had to resist the urge to scoff instinctually about being called a kid by someone shorter than his little sister. "Yuri will join you, but I'm afraid that's all I can offer. Good luck."

The sweep of the base was mercifully short as the remaining uninjured soldiers steamrolled the opposition. A paltry half dozen sectoids and only three plasma pistols between them were the only enemies they found, and they did little to curb the bloodlust that the survivors had. Only one room remained and all the soldiers took the time to reload.

Lana's Excalibur gave a pleasant hum as she fitted a new Elerium battery into the butt stock, and she switched the magazine out for one that was topped off. Zhang's LANC hummed in harmony with Lana's

weapon. Finch's heavy laser beeped as he loaded his last power pack and powered the assault weapon up. Yuri's and Matt's conventional rifles both gave satisfying clicks as fresh magazines were loaded.

"All right, we haven't run into a control room yet so by process of elimination I think this is it. If there are command assets inside I want suppressing fire only while Lana and I close to ARC thrower range. I'm not leaving without a head for my wall," Matt explained grimly, and each of the soldiers nodded as he gave each a meaningful look.

As one they charged through the door, now that any chance at stealth had flown.

The room was indeed the control center for the base, with the walls lined with computer consoles and various holographic displays. And at the far side of the room was a Sectoid standing in front of a massive beacon. It whipped around to face the humans and they were assaulted with feelings of trespass, of invasion. The word was screamed in their minds: *INTERLOPERS!*

Matt, Lana and Zhang continued their charge, but Finch and Yuri staggered and fell behind before taking cover and laying down suppression fire. Zhang took up a firing position at a console towards the center of the room and began to take precise shots towards the Sectoid commander with the intent of forcing it out of cover. Lana broke left and drew her ARC thrower as Matt broke right and drew his own.

Finch's heavy laser opened up on their target's last position and Matt rushed around the corner and brought his ARC thrower to bear in a practiced motion. His finger began to squeeze the trigger just as those horrid alien eyes fell upon him. Instantly a million voices began to scream at him and it took every ounce of his will to hold onto his sanity.

No no no no no! How could your kind have progressed so far? You can't, you can't, you can't! Impossible! Understanding of Elerium comes from exposure but the Design has limited such exposure! Makes no sense, no sense, no sense! And this one, this one, it shows signs of the gift! The gift! THE GIFT! The species shows signs of developing the gift but none should be this strong yet. The Design allows for all contingencies but this is not anticipated! Not anticipated! Wait... this Gift isn't true, it is the echo of another. Another, another with the Gift! Tell us who it is. Tell us, tell us, TELL US!

Matt struggled with all his might but it took the invaders less than a fraction of a second to pluck from his mind what he wanted to keep secret. The image of a little lavender unicorn was brought to the front of his mind, and it was devoured by the voices.

It is...the Apex. The Apex! THE APEX! This one has access to it, this one could secure it. It will serve us well—

And just like a light being switched off, the voices stopped and Matt fell backward as he frantically backpedaled. His eyes locked onto the now-twitching Sectoid and he had to force himself not to draw his sidearm and shoot it until he ran out of ammo. He nearly lashed out violently when he felt a tap on his shoulder, and he turned to see Lana staring at him with a concerned expression.

"You alright?" She asked, and her voice sounded as though it were at the end of a tunnel.

"No, not now," Matt said shakily. *They know about Twilight now for certain. Dear God, I hope I didn't just get her killed.*

OPERATION VIKING: COMPLETE
ALIEN BASE OF OPERATION CAPTURED
ALIEN COMMAND ASSET CAPTURED
ALIEN BEACON CAPTURED

STRIKE-1 REPORTS 3 KIA, 2 WIA
STRIKE-6 REPORTS 4 KIA, 3 WIA

RECOVERY TEAM INVENTORY:
(Documented by Lt Weiss)
PLASMA PISTOL (1 total)
SECTOID COMMANDER LIVE CAPTURE (1 total)
PLASMA WEAPON FRAGMENTS
SECTOID CORPSES (22 total)
MODIFIED HUMAN CORPSES (24 total)
LASER RIFLES (X/lt pattern) (4 total)
HEAVY LASERS (X/lt pattern) (1 total)
LASER SNIPER RIFLE (X/lt pattern) (2 total)
SKYRANGER (1 total)
MELD CONTAINERS (20 total)

ALIEN SURGERY (10 total)
ALIEN STASIS TANK (30 total)
ALIEN ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM (1 total)
UFO ELECTRONICS (Various)

Meanwhile... (Pt. 3)

Meanwhile...

For the most part, Ponyville had remained unchanged over the last two months. The salesponies shouted their advertisements in the town square during the day and slept soundly in their beds at night. The farmers worked their fields around the town and visited occasionally for the odd necessity they needed to keep their crops healthy and fruitful. In all actuality, only two things had changed in Ponyville.

The first was the absence of the town librarian, Twilight Sparkle. At first there was a bit of commotion as to the why and the how, but once Luna made the announcement that Celestia's prized student was travelling abroad to avert some new threat, things calmed down. It had taken less than a week before the townsfolk stopped asking Spike and the Elements questions about how Twilight was doing after they realized that there were no answers to be had.

The second change was the construction and staffing of what Luna had named 'Harmony Keep' on a hill just outside of Ponyville. As with the disappearance of Twilight, such a change in Ponyville was met with concern due to its suddenness. Luna had explained this away by citing that many threats had first made themselves known in Ponyville before spreading elsewhere, and a constant presence of the guards would deter trouble before it truly manifested. At first the townspoonies were skeptical of the necessity, until they realized the amount of business that it would bring.

The vast majority of soldiers that would be stationed there took it as something akin to a paid vacation, as well. The hours were easy and their duties light, and Ponyville was filled with folks that were more than willing to show their appreciation to ponies in uniform. For a small percentage of the guards, however, the posting was not to be taken so lightly.

The keep consisted of four stone walls with walkways and turrets on the four corners, and a brief gatehouse to control entrance and exit. A large courtyard dominated most of the space in the keep where drills and muster could be held for the guards stationed there. Next to the yard was the barracks, mess hall and storage areas for weapons, gear and supplies. All in all the keep was what one might expect for a small garrison to occupy.

With all the hustle and bustle of the keep and its occupants it would be easy to miss the small stone structure at the northern corner of the keep, and the quartet of guards that seemingly never moved from their posts except when the shift changed. Unknown to all but themselves, these were Celestia's Solar Guard and were tasked with the true purpose of the keep.

Within the small stone structure four more guards, all experienced unicorn battle magi, stood at constant attention around what looked like a massive block of pure black stone. Unlike the guards outside the structure who faced outward to spot trespassers, these four unicorns faced inwards towards the black stone looking for any sign of change or movement.

And for the last two months, nothing had changed. Nothing that they could detect, at least. The block of ebony stone wasn't solid. Within the stone there was a small room and within that room sat Discord. And once Discord was absolutely certain he was not being directly observed, he grinned.

Ah, humans, he mused, so quick to judge. So quick to punish. Discord's mind drifted back to the first few hours of Twilight's time on Earth and that critical moment where the humans could give her a chance or not. The stern one in the room wanted a solution to the Twilight problem. The spiteful one wanted the Twilight problem catalogued like a dissected frog. The old one...the old one was the one who would give Discord what he wanted. He had nearly tapped the old one's mind to switch his certainty with curiosity, his suspicion with trust when Discord received his first surprise: The old man spoke and was willing to give Twilight a chance.

The development shocked Discord, pleasantly so, which wasn't something the avatar of chaos was able to experience often over the past millennia. And so he had distanced himself from the little scene while contenting himself with simply watching Twilight's little herd grow through her own merits. Then the cheerful one went and got herself killed and threatened to ruin everything, and Discord had to intervene.

Any further attempts to assist Twilight were curtailed when the spiteful one made her little machine that could see magical energy. It was child's play for Discord to view the events on Earth while keeping his presence hidden from everyone, but direct action would likely get himself caught or at least suspected.

Speaking of being suspected... Discord's grin faltered as he felt Celestia's magical signature approach his cell. *She hasn't visited since this whole thing started. I can guess why she's coming by now. Has my touch made you so sentimental, Celestia?*

The stone wall before Discord's conjured throne split open to reveal the white alicorn in all her terrible glory. She stalked into the cell and stopped before giving Discord the most frigid glare he had ever experienced.

"Your Majesty, I must protest! You shouldn't be this close! You shouldn't even be h—" One of the unicorn guards shouted as loud as he dared but his concerns were cut off when the stone wall closed behind Celestia.

"Well, welcome to my humble home, Celestia," Discord greeted affably and with a toothy grin, "I don't have much to offer in the way of hospitality, but I'll do what I can." Instantly a teapot and cup appeared beside Discord and a small stream of piping hot liquid leapt into the cup without the pot so much as moving. "Ever had Earl Grey, my dear? It comes highly recommended from a friend, though he'd deny up and down that we were so close." He smiled a toothy grin and the cup floated over to her.

"Bring her back," Celestia commanded, and the cup of tea shot back at Discord like an arrow.

Discord didn't so much as bat an eye as the scalding hot tea flew at him. A portal opened up an inch from his face and closed immediately after the tea disappeared into it. "I'm afraid I can't do that, my dear. Her task is not yet complete," the sing-song reply was intended purely to aggravate, and it was successful.

"Bring. Her. Back."

"Oh my, my! Someone's getting a little huffy!" Discord grinned again. "Besides, it's not like you haven't done the exact same thing to your precious Twilight when it served your own ends."

"You sent her away to deny the use of the Elements!" Celestia declared with absolute certainty, "And with her gone you can no longer be--"

"If my goal was to break up the Elements, I'd have killed her or turned her to stone like *somepony I could mention*," Discord interrupted before looking to the side to scratch his chin, "Come to think of it, there once was somepony who did that all the time. What was her name again?"

"*DISCORD*," Celestia snapped, and she brought one hoof down to emphasize her point. The black stone cracked beneath the impact. "I have *never* done anything as cruel as you have to Twilight. I would never!"

"I see your mouth moving but all I hear is, 'I'm a hypocrite!'" Discord snarked with Celestia's own voice coming from his mouth before sighing and waving a hand at her, "Are you honestly going to deny that you banished Twilight from the environment she felt safe in to make allies against a foe you could not combat yourself?" He gave the words just a moment to sink in before he continued, "I'll give you a hint: *The Summer Sun Celebration*."

Celestia's barely contained rage fizzled visibly as she made the connection. "Twilight needed friends! She shouldn't have spent so much time in the library!"

"Mhm, yes, she did need friends, I won't argue that." Discord's gaze narrowed. "And what about all the other lonely ponies out there? I don't see you going out of your way to put them in friendly environments. Oh, you might say it was for Twilight's own benefit, but you sent her to save Equestria from your dear sister."

"And...you sent Twilight away for the same reason? Impossible! The Elements can handle any threat to Equestria!"

Discord's first response was a snort of laughter. "Need I remind you of the weaknesses of the Elements? They're bound to the six mares who wield them. I thought I might wake you up to the dangers of losing the Element Bearers when I first broke out, but I didn't anticipate Twilight or you being quite so resourceful in reversing my tender touch. After all, you've had a thousand years to try and reverse the first time I used the power and I'm not seeing any progress there!"

He thought to let loose a braying bit of laughter but the look on Celestia's face stopped him. "I was also kind enough not to kill them, in case you forgot."

"The Bearers are far more formidable and resourceful than you give them credit for," Celestia ground out through clenched teeth.

"I'll grant you that," Discord said with a shrug of his mismatched shoulders. "Of course, there's also the other flaw in the operation of the Elements that you've quite understandably neglected." The alicorn's anger cooled somewhat and she replied with an arched eyebrow, so he continued, "The Elements operate on the principle of ordered systems. They restored your sister to sanity after a thousand years of Arcanite addiction because that was the natural order of things. They petrified me twice because, let's admit it, Order and I don't get along."

"I fail to see the weakness, Discord. You play at serious discussion when in reality you say nothing at all."

"You want serious? *Fine*. Do you think yours is the only system of order in the universe?" Discord's voice lost all of its jovial tone as he steepled his paws in front of his face. Before Celestia could reply, the stone behind Discord began to crack and crumble to reveal Equestria in flames. "There are things in the dark, Celestia. Things that would devour this little system of Order that you've created on this world. And they have just as much chaos in them as you once did. The Elements *will* fail against them because they perfectly adhere to their own system of Order."

The burning terrain cleared to reveal monsters that had never been seen before in Equestria. Gouts of green flame rained down from giant metal ships in the sky, and the cities all across the globe burned. Equestrians, Griffons, Zebra... all races were herded into massive factories and were processed. Any resistance was ended brutally and swiftly. And by the end, the metal ships left Equestria as a burned-out husk devoid of life.

"There is no free will for these things. There is no creativity. No thought. No chance. No life. No hope. No souls. They are an abomination in my eyes, and I cannot stop them from devouring this world. Not on my own," Discord finished as he continued to stare at Celestia even as horrific scenes played out around him.

"Then release me and I will deal with them myself!" Celestia commanded, and Discord did not miss the small note of concern in her eyes at the scenes around her.

"And what then? Oh sure, we might thwart one apocalypse on this world, but then who would stop the next?" Discord asked, and with a snap of his fingers the scenes of fire and death were replaced with a mockery of the Solar Court. Dozens of ponies as well as guards lining the walls but none moved, or spoke or even breathed in their petrified state. At the head of the room was a pedestal made of petrified ponies with a marble throne upon it, and upon that throne sat a pale blue alicorn with a mane and tail not unlike a blizzard of snowflakes. The alicorn surveyed her silent kingdom and laughed.

"One tyranny leads to slavery and extinction. The other is *cold, unfeeling stone*," Discord summarized before snapping his fingers and banishing the horrifying predictions. "Which is why it's a good thing I'm exploring other options. Twily's helping us avoid both of those bad ends. Really, you should be thanking me!"

Celestia was silent for a long moment as she simply stared at Discord. A mortal observer might have thought the Alicorn was simply a statue from how still she was, but Discord had spent far too much time with Celestia to miss the subtle signs of emotion flickering across her face.

"If there was such a threat, then why didn't you just tell us? Tell me?" Celestia asked slowly.

"What's this? An honest question bereft of accusation of threat? You're making this old heart ache with nostalgia," Discord clutched his heart dramatically and hunched forward like an elderly creature before turning his gaze to the Alicorn. "I'll pay you the courtesy of answering your honest question with one of my own: Would you have believed me if I told you?" The question caused Celestia to wince, and Discord chose not to prey on the moment of weakness.

"You have my attention now, Discord," Celestia recovered quickly before offering Discord an olive branch. "If this threat is so dire then I will assist you in defeating it, but you must bring Twilight back."

Discord arched an eyebrow before throwing his head back and laughing. "Oh you thought I was doing this to convince you to help me? Oh that's just precious," he giggled before sighing and waving a hand. "Oh don't get all huffy again. I know that when the time comes I need not ask for you to defend this world and its people. I'm happy to say that you've learned to cherish the lives of your people over the past thousand years, even if I had to force you to."

Discord snapped his fingers and the stone cell disappeared only to be replaced with the desolate landscape of the moon while a blue and green globe hovered amidst the void. He waited for Celestia's eyes to widen as she realized the planet in the sky wasn't Equestria before continuing. "As I said before, there are things in the dark. Terrifying, heartwarming, revolting, reassuring, monstrous, courageous things. And in one tiny corner of the vast universe is a world filled with people not like you or me or any of your little ponies. The defining trait of these people isn't magic or honesty or kindness, however, it's sheer stubborn-minded determination! They don't look at the impossible and lament, they scratch their chins and bang their heads against the impossible until it becomes possible!"

"I fail to see how that is a virtue..." Celestia answered with a smirk.

Discord's only response was to pull out a small box with a grille and two buttons on the front. He arched an eyebrow at the alicorn before pressing one of the buttons.

"Four forward, four forward. Move it to the right a little," The box said, though its voice was clouded with crackling background noise. Any further speech from the box was missed as Celestia nearly ducked by

reflex when a shadow crossed over her.

Her gaze rose to the stars to see a curious sight. A metal vehicle of some kind soared serenely through the star-filled sky before slowly descending onto the moon's surface on a small set of stubby legs.

The box beeped and another voice came from the box. "We copy, you're down, Eagle." A second voice answered the first. "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." "Roger, Tranquility, we've got you on the ground. We've got a bunch of guys about to turn blue but we're breathing again. Thanks a lot."

A hatch opened up on the side of the vehicle and a figure emerged. It was bipedal but the entirety of its features were hidden beneath a massive white suit and backpack, and its head was covered by what looked like a mirrored fish bowl. It clumsily descended the latter on one of the vehicles' legs before taking its first steps on the moon. "That's one small step for a man, and one giant leap for mankind." The box crackled one last time before Discord tapped the second button to silence it.

"Do you not comprehend the significance of this?" Discord threw his hands up when Celestia appeared less than impressed. "These people, these humans found a way to leave their home world and set foot on their moon without magic! They saw something that their instincts and common sense said was impossible, then they threw out their instincts and common sense and went to the moon! *Without magic*, or anyone to guide them along their path to progress. No one like you *or* me, Celestia. They did this all on their own because they are all alone in the dark against everything that seeks to snuff them out. Twilight is with them now."

"You sent Twilight to them? Why? To help them fight whatever darkness is about to assail them?" Celestia asked evenly, and her tone was drenched in disbelief.

"Prepare them? It's a bit too late for that, the darkness is already upon them," Discord replied darkly, and he raised one paw.

SNAP.

The moonscape disappeared and was replaced with a sun-soaked cityscape with smooth paved roads and several towers of glass and steel surrounded by several more modest buildings. Any sense of wonder that the beautiful city might have had was marred by several black plumes of smoke that dotted the horizons. Any sense of wonder was dispelled completely by the screams.

Several creatures, humans in light clothing were fleeing in droves towards an impromptu barricade where several more humans waited. These new humans could only be soldiers based on their armor and uniforms, though their weapons were black boxes and tubes. As the lightly clothed humans fled behind the barricade, the soldiers advanced to cover their retreat.

Monsters appeared from the alleys around the barricade. Massive insects scuttled forward on blade-like legs and orange glowing eyes locked onto the humans hungrily. Their howls filled the air and they charged after their retreating prey.

"Go, go! Don't stop running!" One of the soldiers shouted as he spread his stance and raised his weapon towards the closest of the monsters. A rapid burst of *BANGs* followed by a gout of fire erupted from the weapon in his hands and the monster staggered and fell. The human switched to his second target before the first stopped moving and that one fell to the ground as well after a staccato burst from his weapon. He began to back up and pull a curved box from a pocket on his belt just as a similar box fell from the weapon in his hand.

And just as the box hit the ground, a second story window shattered and a third monster leapt from the window and charged. Warming shouts and weapons fire filled the street but the monster charged the soldier and swiped with both of its claws. One claw knocked the helmet off the human's head while the second cut a horrid gash across his face and jaw. As the human fell the monster's jaws shot forward but stopped dead when the human jammed a knife into its serrated maw and twisted before extracting the blade.

SNAP.

The scene shifted to a building where nearly a dozen humans in black uniforms and armor fired their weapons out of doorways and windows at unseen enemies. In the center of the room sat a massive pylon that glowed green and slowly pulsed faster and faster as two humans worked furiously at the pylon's base.

"No pressure, milady. Take your time. Not like all of Cardiff is at stake," One of the humans said cheerfully as he sorted through the rats nest of wires on one side of the pylon.

"Shut it, Finch!" the other human snapped, and she gave a panicked look at the pylon as its pulsations increased in frequency. "DAMN IT!" She screamed while grabbing a wire and pulled. The pylon winked

out and for a few brief moments neither soldier moved. When the pylon's flickering did not return both humans shared wide grins before being interrupted by a bolt of green fire that struck the wall behind them.

SNAP.

"Helfen sei..."

Four soldiers in tan body armor leveled their weapons on a fifth that staggered out of the darkness of a warehouse aisle. One of the soldiers stepped forward with a first aid kit only to be shot the moment he got within arm's reach. The shooter screamed pitifully and exploded a second later and the whole warehouse erupted into chaos as lances of green fire were met by the booming reports of the humans weapons.

Two of the humans died in rapid succession which left only one. A near miss destroyed the human's weapon but he quickly drew a second one and dispatched his attackers while screaming profanity as he tried to back away. A second group of humans entered the warehouse just as the survivor collapsed.

SNAP.

The darkened warehouse was replaced with an empty warehouse where Twilight Sparkle spoke with several humans with every sign of enjoyment. She spent time with one human in particular and gave him several words of encouragement, and moments later a coin began to levitate out of his hand and into the air. Twilight gave one of her winning smiles and clopped her hooves together in approval.

Celestia's face was a study in shock, and tears rimmed her eyes as she saw the image of her prized student. "You... you actually sent Twilight to help them? You said they were all alone in the dark..."

"Help *them*?" Discord scoffed at the notion. "Heavens no! Why would they need help? Had I not sent Twilight there would have likely been more deaths, but the human race would have persevered the same way it always has; by making the impossible possible."

"Then why!?" Celestia screamed as she finally snapped, "Why would you put Twilight in so much danger?"

"Because they are alone in the dark, and they need not be." Discord steepled his paws before his face and looked at the Alicorn meaningfully. "You should know why by now, Twilight's been writing to you on the subject for close to two years now. The humans have a saying, 'the enemy of my enemy is a friend,' and they need to realize that they have friends in faraway places if they're ever going to help us." Discord finished somberly before his eyes lit up. "Plus they have the *best* toys."

One paw reached behind him to produce a curious device covered in buttons and knobs. One button press and a knob push and a little metal cart zipped out from behind his throne. It was gray and sat on squat tracks for a low base of gravity, which was the only thing that kept it from toppling over onto its side from the top-heavy turret mounted on it. The little cart skidded to a halt and the little turret twisted to the side to face Celestia. An insect like buzzing issued from the turret, and a hail of projectiles no larger than grains of sand flew out at the Alicorn only to be stopped dead a foot from her. With its initial assault defeated it rotated on its tracks and attempted to ram one of her hooves, only for said hoof to raise and crush it flat.

Discord recoiled in mock horror. "You see? This is why we never get along, Celestia. You break all my things." He let out a mock sigh before tossing the device in his lap over his shoulder. For a brief second a portal opened up to reveal a unicorn guard drenched in tea just long enough for his discarded device to pass through. A shout of warning and the start of an explosion was cut off as the portal disappeared.

Celestia arched an eyebrow at Discord's antics before looking down at the little thing she had crushed. "Promise me that she'll be alright. Promise me that she'll come out of this unharmed. *Please!*"

"I cannot."

Celestia glared at Discord and brought one hoof down on the stone in front of her to further flatten the toy. "Then bring her back. Now."

"I cannot. We made a deal, and there's only one way she may return to Equestria. I cannot interfere," Discord refused as he continued to stare at Celestia over his steepled paws. "Have faith in your student, Celestia. After all, she is far more formidable and resourceful than you give her credit for."

The anger slowly bled from Celestia's face as her own words were used against her. "Princess Cadance can feel Twilight's heart, wherever she is. If that heart goes out, I will return and erase you from existence even if I am destroyed in the process. Pray that she does return, Discord," Celestia said sharply before turning back to the stone wall which parted before her.

"If she does not return, then we shall all soon cease to be, Celestia," Discord whispered as the cell wall slammed shut.

A long moment of silence passed before the avatar of chaos finally spoke again. "You are rather daring, to sneak in as Celestia was making her exit. Invisibility implies a certain degree of mastery of spellcraft... or infiltration. Which is it, hmmm?"

Moments passed before a brown unicorn mare shimmered into visibility in one of the far corners of Discord's cell. Her mane, coat and eyes were all brown and her cutie mark was a daisy, while her expression was that of dour disinterest. She blinked and for just a moment her eyes were replaced with bright green before a second blink reset them. She stepped forward and bowed before Discord before speaking, "I am but a messenger for my lady, great one. Queen Chrysalis congratulates you on your successful banishment of Twilight Sparkle. You have struck a mighty blow against Celestia and her regime, and as such my queen wishes to offer her assistance in any endeavor you may undertake against the tyranny of the Sun."

"Oh my, what a generous proposal!" Discord said and he clapped his paws with glee. "I don't suppose I could speak with Chrysalis now? Ever since her own attempted plot in Canterlot I've just been dying to let her in on a secret. Can you...y'know, connect me to her?"

The fake mare closed her eyes and spoke, "You speak to Chrysalis now, Lord Discord." The mare opened her now vividly green eyes to look up at Discord--only for them to go wide with sanity-bleeding terror. Her jaw hung wide and every impulse screamed to flee the horror before her.

A hundred, a thousand, a million eyes stared down at the changeling. Pony eyes, gryphon eyes, changeling eyes, fish eyes, insect eyes, and eyes beyond all description stared into her very soul. A smile, a gaping maw filled with a billion teeth from a billion different sources smiled. "*My dear Chryssy,*" A thousand voices said simultaneously as the impossibly toothy grin only grew, "*I haven't forgotten what you tried to do to Celestia!*" Before the changeling could do so much as flinch from the implications, a thousand limbs rushed forward. Tentacles, claws, paws, hooves, pincers, and a thousand other limbs that defied explanation engulfed the changeling.

The stone wall split open and the unicorn magi rushed in with spells ready to identify the source of the screaming. They found a bland unicorn mare trying to press herself through the opposite wall of the cell while screaming her voice into disuse while Discord did nothing but sit upon his throne and grin innocently.

"Discord! Who is this? What did you do to her?" The arch magi accused while the other guards dragged the hysterical mare to safety.

"How should I know? It wasn't me who let a *perfectly normal unicorn* into my cell. Perhaps you should be replaced with someone more competent," Discord snarked, and he gave a finger wave to the screaming former changeling just as the wall closed shut.

Visitor

US AIRBASES OVERSEAS NEARLY DESERTED AS AIRMEN ABROAD ARE REDEPLOYED TO BOLSTER NATIONAL GUARD CASUALTIES SUFFERED DURING ALIEN ASSAULT THAT WAS REPELLED EARLIER IN THE MONTH. SENATOR GOLEMAN PUBLICLY SUPPORTED THE REASSIGNMENT IN A RECENT PRESS RELEASE: "IT'S THESE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN WE RELY UPON, NOT GLORIFIED VIGILANTES."

DISGRACED AMATEUR ASTRONOMERS WHO REPORTED 'MOVING STARS' IN THE SKY ARE VINDICATED AS SIMILAR REPORTS ARE VERIFIED BY HUNDREDS OF STARGAZERS IN NORTH AMERICA LAST NIGHT. PROFESSIONAL ASTRONOMERS ARE IN VARIOUS STATES OF DENIAL AND DISBELIEF AS MORE EVIDENCE PILES UP TO SUPPORT THE PHENOMENA.

08:32, 05/22/2013, MEDICAL

Matt exited the barracks' medical section with a stunned look on his face before turning to the mess hall. He idly remembered passing base personnel in the corridors, but what snapped him out of his daze was a figure bumping into his shoulder as he passed.

"Ah, my apologies," the other person said affably as Matt turned to get a good look at him. He was tall and wearing a well-tailored business suit and tie and carried a suitcase in his left hand. His hair was far too long for military standard and was too well-styled to be a regular on the base. Wire-framed glasses sat on his nose and partially hid grey eyes while his smile was wide enough to seem sincere without being creepy. All told the man was perfectly forgettable and wouldn't have seemed out of place in an average civilian office.

But XCOM's barracks wasn't an office, and Matt turned to challenge the man when he caught sight of the security badge clipped to the breast pocket of his jacket. Before he could scrutinize it any further, a hand fell onto his shoulder, which startled him enough to nearly jump out of his skin.

"Yo, Matt!" Lana greeted with a smirk, though it faded when she noticed the reaction from Matt. "What's wrong? You're not usually this jumpy."

"I was just..." Matt started to answer as he turned back to the man who had bumped into him to find that he had vanished. "Nevermind, sorry."

"That is understandable," Zhang said politely as he hovered behind Lana's shoulder. "Perhaps we should converse in the mess hall. If we speak here we may impede traffic." The Chinese man stepped to the side to allow a pair of scientists and an engineer to make their way to the elevator at the end of the corridor.

"Sounds like a plan. So, what did the doctors say?" Lana turned and headed towards the mess hall while the two men fell in behind her. "The aliens didn't screw with your head, did they? You've never been this twitchy after a mission, and you didn't even get shot or lacerated much!"

The trio entered the mess and sat at an unoccupied table a reasonable distance from the nearest group. When both Zhang and Lana remained silent, Matt finally explained. "Preliminary tests confirm there are no signs of mental tampering, but they mentioned there was lingering damage from... something. I don't know what, I'm no doctor. They said that it would work itself out in time. It shouldn't affect my performance."

"Pardon me for saying so, but I would think that would be good news. Your expression seems more appropriate for someone who's just been diagnosed with a terminal condition," Zhang observed as he clasped his hands on the table before them.

"I've also just spoken with Commander Bradford, and after reviewing all the information available and assuming I pass the rest of the tests today, I will be promoted to Lieutenant and assume command of Strike One," Matt answered.

"I would think that would be cause for celebration rather than trepidation." Zhang's normally neutral expression lifted into the ghost of a smile while Lana's was almost enough to take in her ears before it halted.

Lana's smile slowly shrank before she asked, "You're thinking about the others, aren't you? Dryzimski and Fowler?" The small smile on Zhang's face faded as well as Lana continued, "It's an unfortunate fact that we have to live with, working here. People get hurt, or die. Someone needs to replace them. You've got your head on straight and Strike One trusts you. Who else could do it?"

"You... have a point," Matt admitted, though in his mind he disagreed. *Who else could do it? Dryzimski and Fowler, and Captain Donnelly before them. They could command, I'm just good at surviving.*

With her point made, Lana's smile became a mischievous smirk. "Though, when we put it that way, you might consider the diagnosis of 'Lieutenant' to be a terminal condi--" Anything else Lana might have said was lost as her jaw clamped shut to suppress a grunt of pain. She turned to glare daggers at Zhang, who continued to sit serenely as though nothing had happened.

"Perhaps another subject would be better for discussion?" Zhang offered while continuing to ignore Lana. "The nature of the enemies we encountered were surprising, to say the least. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Indeed, I never expected to run into folks like them, ever," Lana admitted as she turned back to Matt. "Seriously, that stuff they were doing isn't natural. The sniper I took down? I had to cave in his skull just to make him stay down. Not natural, I tell you."

"You can say that again. One LANC shot to the chest, two ARC charges and a handful of pistol shots weren't enough to take down one I fought. He'd have likely had me if you hadn't stepped in, Lana," Matt added as he replayed that particular fight in his head. "Speaking of which, opinions on the Excalibur? I haven't had a chance to try it on the range yet. Does it measure up to your old shotgun?"

"Thing's heavy as sin but it packs a punch. Clip is a bit more convenient than the shotgun. No kick, either, which took a bit of getting used to. I honestly wouldn't think I was even shooting a real gun if it weren't for the bloody bits that show up in the folks I shot," Lana explained with as much enthusiasm as could be expected.

"I felt the same regarding the LANC rifle. For all the power it has it simply feels like a toy. Mr. Shen mentioned having completed a few sniper variants that he offered for testing on the range. I may spend some time acquainting myself with it later today," Zhang added, though he arched an eyebrow when he noticed the amount of scrutiny Matt was giving him. "What?"

"You shut your eyes during the firefight and got two head shots on enemies in cover," Matt stated as he leaned forward and lowered his voice, and Lana looked at Zhang as well. "Once might have been a lucky fluke, but twice with such precision is a matter of skill. How did you do it?"

"I do not know," Zhang answered after a long pause. He looked down at his palm and stared before blinking and looking away. "I do not know, but I think the cause may be related to our friend in Stardust."

"The Gift, then? I suppose congratulations are in order." Lana gave Zhang a hard slap on the back. "The next class is set up for tomorrow at noon, and I'm sure the teacher would be happy to see another familiar face. Come to think of it, we're going to be having a movie night tonight down at Stardust. Just about everyone who knows about the project is invited."

Zhang's first reply was to nod but as Lana elaborated he hesitated. "I will decline the invitation for the event tonight, though I appreciate the offer. I would not want to spoil the atmosphere with my presence."

"What are you talking about?"

"I have not been as good a friend as I should have been, and I wish to reconcile that inadequacy formally. Were I to make my apologies this evening it would leave a negative tone for the rest of the night. It would be best to make amends tomorrow, I think," Zhang explained, and when silence came back to him he elaborated, "I made several hasty and incorrect assumptions regarding the nature of our friend in the Stardust Labs which I used as an excuse to behave poorly. I hope this will be resolved tomorrow before the meeting."

"Well, good enough I suppose," Matt said before looking at his watch. "I'm afraid I've got to get back to Medical for another round of tests but I should be done by lunch. When's the movie start?"

"About five or so," Lana replied.

Matt nodded and stepped away from the table. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

12:02, 05/22/2015, MEDICAL

BEGIN LOG

Gift Analysis for Cmdr David Bradford

Foresight -- the ability to predict or the action of predicting what will happen or be needed in the future.

Strengths of ability are obvious; events can be predicted with a significant amount of certainty within a certain timeframe.

Weaknesses of ability include debilitating head pain that correlates in severity to the amount of events predicted by Foresight. While Foresight can predict events that may occur, once this information is acted on then following events may change in ways not anticipated by Foresight. This weakness may be bypassed by short (1-3 seconds) usages of Foresight, but repeated use of the ability in this manner has a negative effect on perception of events as they occur in real time. Practice or repeated use may lessen this weakness.

Further weakness is that events predicted by Foresight must be within sensory range of Cmdr Bradford. This weakness may be bypassed through the use of radio and video information, but without such assistance then Foresight is limited to events within his sight or hearing.

Current maximum amount of time Foresight may be used to predict: 32 seconds from start before pain prevents further usage. Speculated practice may extend this timeframe.

END LOG

David Bradford grumbled as he reviewed the report he had cobbled together from his impressions of his surprising ability. *It looks like a disorganized mess. I should probably contact Doctor Vahlen, she's more able to write reports like this, though it would have to be kept secret. I don't want this to get around the base. Not that there's much danger of that. The other gifted soldiers are doing a remarkable job of keeping their abilities secret.*

Bradford's fingers hovered over his tablet computers save keys as he gave his rambling report another review. *All the other gifted soldiers have already been documented; I just have to submit this mess to make it official.* Rather than dither any longer he tapped the keys to save his work and was rewarded with an error message.

Alert: This file is currently in use in another location. (Office of Cmdr David Bradford) Would you like to save as a new file?

Bradford blinked as he finished reading the error message before tucking the tablet under his arm and marching out of Medical. Soldiers, scientists and engineers alike parted before him without so much as a word requesting them to do so, and he knew why. He was hiding the thunder and he was letting it show. He rounded a corner and passed briefly through the Barracks before ascending the staircase to the upper level where his office was located. Without stopping he swiped his badge past the terminal and stormed into the office.

"Ah, the illustrious Commander Bradford," A voice could be heard from behind the desk that dominated the room, and Bradford's number one glare fell upon the man sitting behind it. He was quite possibly the blandest person Bradford had ever seen, with brown hair and grey eyes behind expensive-looking wireframe glasses. "You may call me Mister Vide. I must say I've been quite a fan of yours since this undertaking started." The man, Vide, stood and rounded the desk before offering a placating smile and an offered hand. Bradford returned neither.

"What are you doing in my office?" Bradford asked, his voice carefully controlled as he glared at Vide.

He was just about to call for a security detail when Vide's smile became less placating and more self-deprecating. His offered hand came up to scratch the back of his head and he asked sheepishly, "After Operation Viking's preliminary reports, the Council wanted an immediate update on all recent developments. They made the arrangements with security to allow me access... did the message not reach you? Oh dear, this is awkward."

"You haven't answered my question. Why are you in *my* office?"

"As I mentioned earlier, the Council has become *extremely* interested in the developments that have been made since your last report. You might say they're a bit like kids on Christmas eve, they want to know everything that's happened now rather than wait until the end of month report," Vide explained clumsily. "As such I've been empowered to gather this information for them. As I understand it, several soldiers amongst the Strike Teams have begun to show superhuman abilities. Lana Jenkins, Matt Harris, Yumiko Fujikawa, Yuri Romalov, and the late Raymond Rodriguez, if I'm not mistaken? Have any of the base's support personnel begun to show any signs of similar abilities?"

Bradford's glare released their hold on Vide's eyes to glance down at his security badge. The badge itself appeared legitimate to the naked eye and the badge's color coding indicated command level access. *Still... there is something wrong with this,* he thought before turning his gaze back to Vide's face. "Unknown. Testing is not yet complete for the base personnel so I cannot answer that question accurately at this time," Bradford reported without a second's hesitation. *It's technically true, I haven't finished testing my ability to satisfy my curiosity.* "A report will be compiled at the end of the month for the

Council detailing everyone who possesses the Gift on the base.”

“Ah, I understand completely,” Vide nodded before turning back to Bradford’s desk to retrieve a suitcase. “You are doing excellent work, and I hope you continue it until the XCOM project reaches its end,” He said with another affable smile as he reached the exit to the office. As the door slid open he stepped through before turning around and straightening his glasses. “Remember, I will be watching.”

“Security, this is Bradford. Do you have clearance requests for any individuals named ‘Vide’?” Bradford asked as he brought a hand up to his headset.

“I have a record of the highest security authorization and clearance for a visitor by that name, sir. The request was submitted and approved last night. The authorization gives Vide *carte blanche* authority to go where he chooses without escort.”

Bradford turned to the computer on his desk and pulled up his notifications, and found one regarding VIP clearance matching the man's description. *I could have sworn I checked my messages last night.*

“Understood, thanks for checking. Keep an eye on our visitor and inform me if there's any problems. Bradford out.”

16:32, 05/22/2015, THE FOUNDRY

Charles Shen raked his eyes across the table before him as he drank in the technological marvels that were captured in the last mission. Several weapons positively identified as lasers of similar output to XCOM’s own were arrayed.

The first few examples appeared to be closer to the traditional ballistic rifles with a clearly identifiable butt stock, pistol grip, magazine and a trio of tactical rails mounted on either side and beneath the barrel. The profile of the weapon was significantly slimmer than the boxy laser rifles that XCOM had produced, which led to a correspondingly lower total weight. The magazine-shaped batteries for the rifle carried ten less shots approximately but were half the size and weight.

To Charles Shen, it was much more than a captured enemy weapon. It was a personal challenge.

Anything you can do, I can do better, Charles remembered the singsong taunt with a grimace. *And to think I was proud of the lasers we had developed. The SAW version of their lasers has a similar size and weight as our rifles but maintains the ammo capacity and weight of our heavy lasers.*

Any further musing by the aging engineer was interrupted when two others approached the tables with two of the captured lasers in their hands. They placed the weapons at the end of the table before turning to the Chief Engineer. “It’s as bad as we thought, boss,” the first said with a worried expression. “Nearly identical energy output, but the guns are just... better. Whoever made these things wasn’t just a good engineer; he’s an excellent gunsmith too.”

“Then we should be thankful we were able to capture these before we saw wide distribution,” Charles said with the best smile he could fake. “Treat them like any enemy weapon we’ve encountered thus far. Strip one of each down and catalog every piece. The enemy might be trying to tell us that they’re better at this than we are, but I’d like to show them that they’re wrong.”

“Understood, sir. I should have all three torn down by tomorrow night, and barring any problems we should be able to integrate their advancements into our own weapons within a week,” The other engineer reported before picking up several items from the table and setting them on the cart beside him.

“Good. I hope you can hold down the fort until tomorrow. I’m afraid I have a prior obligation that I’ll need to attend to this evening,” Charles said as he stepped away from the table.

The engineer beside the cart gave a short laugh and shooed the older man away with a wave of his hands. “Go, old man. Take a night off for once. We’ll keep things under control.”

Charles quickly nodded his thanks and beat a hasty exit from the Foundry’s main work area but not before stopping into his office to pick up an unlabelled DVD case and a portable projector. He gave one quick wave as he exited the Foundry before turning towards the Stardust labs. *Twilight said she loved the book so I know she’ll like the movie.* Charles’ confidence slipped just a tad. *Well, unless she’s one of those literature purists. Still, I think it’ll be good for everyone involved if we take it easy just a little bit every once and a while.*

It wasn’t long before he reached the Stardust labs, where the only delay was a quick inspection of the DVD case and the movie inside. Neither guard commented but both arched an eyebrow when they saw the movie title. The two guards resumed their posts and Charles made his way into the lab’s testing area.

Most of the personnel who were involved with Stardust were in attendance. Matt and Lana were flanking Twilight, who appeared to be in high spirits, while Joel Mills and Kim Ngo stood opposite beside the central table. All those gathered smiled and waved at Charles as he entered the room

"Ah, apologies for my tardiness, I hope I didn't keep you all waiting?" He said as he gave each person a nod. "Is this everyone? Will Frank, Shaojie or Moira be joining us?"

"Frank and Shaojie are both busy tonight, I spoke with both of them this afternoon," Matt answered. "They did say they would make it to your class tomorrow, Twilight." A warm grin spread on his face when Twilight's initial disappointment was reversed at the news.

"Doctor Vahlen expresses her regrets at being unable to attend. From what I understand she's still going through some of the *stuff* that was recovered recently," Kim reported, and the emphasis she placed on the word 'stuff' was enough to indicate just what she was doing for those who were familiar with Vahlen's usual duties.

"What stuff?" Twilight asked guilelessly, and Kim stuttered several times as she attempted to come up with a plausible explanation.

"Oh, just a few odds and ends that the aliens may have left behind," Charles explained quickly. *Like the Sectoid that was captured...* "I'm sure if she finds something interesting she'll bring it down to share with you tomorrow."

"Maybe one of you could go ask her to join us and take the night off? I get the feeling she works really hard and doesn't really take any time to relax," Twilight offered, and was rewarded with incredulous looks from the humans around her. "What? Oh come on! I overworked myself once! I've gotten a lot better than I used to be, and I think it might be fun to have everyone together."

"Perhaps another time, then? You're right though, Vahlen is very dedicated to her work," Charles agreed before continuing, "What she's doing now though is very important work. Once things calm down we'll see about getting another night together like this."

"Speaking of which, what exactly is the plan tonight? Giant card game? I don't think we've gone over any games yet for so many people," Twilight said as she looked over the five humans in the room.

"We'll actually be doing something different. You've had a chance to see videos that were posted through the tablet you were given, yes?" Charles asked, and when Twilight nodded he continued. "It's a common practice for us humans to gather to watch videos like those, except these videos are a bit longer and usually tell a story. And I think you'll enjoy it. Just about everyone here has seen it already I think."

"Saw it in theatres when I was...thirteen I think. Sister was seven. Both of us got hooked on the books after that." Matt confirmed with a smirk.

"Same here," Lana nodded and her expression turned nostalgic, "Me and the brothers all crammed into the theater at seven in the morning the day after it came out. I worked part time at the theater and the manager there gave us a discount showing before the theater opened up."

"Took the kids to it about six times," Joel smiled widely. "I could probably quote whole sections of the movie to you from memory."

"I haven't seen it yet," Kim added when all eyes fell on her. "Don't look at me like I'm some sort of cultural luddite! I was in the middle of my thesis project and didn't have enough time to sleep, let alone see a movie. How 'bout we all go watch the movie now rather than poke fun at the poor college kid I used to be, okay?"

Chuckles and smiles were had by all as they filed into Twilight's habitat. Twilight situated herself on the bed while Lana and Matt took seats at the table beside the bed. Joel and Kim pulled the remaining chairs out from under the table and situated them on the opposite side of the bed. Charles busied himself with setting up the projector and feeding the disk into its corresponding slot in the projector.

With the projector powering up, he quickly dragged the chair out from Twilight's work desk and brought it to rest beside Matt at the table. "Ah, I'll get the lights," He said before heading to the light switch by the door. His fingers almost made it to the light switch before a beep issued from his jacket pocket.

I should have known, Charles thought, and he resisted the urge to rub his eyes with his hands. "Ah, one of the engineers is trying to contact me. It's probably an emergency so I don't know when I'll be back. Feel free to go on without me." He reported as he dimmed the lights and hit the door controls to exit the habitat. The doors stayed open just long enough for Charles to catch the look of wonder on Twilight's face when the projector revealed an owl sitting on a street sign that read 'Privet Dr.'

"This is Shen," Charles reported cheerfully as he brought the headset from his pocket to his head, "And

for your sake the base had better be about to self destruct.”

“Sir, there’s a man in the Foundry and he’s not an engineer,” The voice on the other end of the line reported quickly, and his hurried tone indicated the seriousness of the subject. “His security badge has proper clearance but he’s accessing files on just about everything! Do you know anything about this?”

“No, I don’t. I’ll be there in just a moment,” Charles grumbled as he closed the line and retraced his steps back to the Foundry. Just like the engineer had reported, a man in a well-tailored business suit was sitting at the main terminal of the Foundry while showing every sign of being enthralled by what he saw on the monitor. Several engineers continued their work nearby, and all of them appeared to be watching the suited man out of the corner of their eyes.

“Ah! Doctor Raymond Charles Shen!” The man exclaimed as he looked over his shoulder to see the new arrival. “I’ve read all the books you authored on next generation structural engineering and I must say you are simply a genius in your field. You may call me Mr. Vide,” The man introduced himself with the mannerisms of a gushing graduate student while offering his hand to shake.

“You’ll have to forgive me, Mr. Vide, but this is a restricted section of the base and—” Charles said slowly while he shook Vide’s hand. His grip was strong and his hands calloused, but before Charles could learn any more from the contact the handshake was gone and the visitor interrupted.

“Oh, yes. Here I was in a hurry to gush about my appreciation of your work that I didn’t finish my introduction. I’ve been sent here by the Council to gather some preliminary information prior to the end of month report,” Vide explained quickly while he straightened his glasses. “Some of your breakthroughs will quite literally change the world, and I’m not exaggerating when I say so.”

“Advancement without responsibility will bring only ruin, Mr. Vide. It’s our duty to control what we discover until the world is ready for it,” Charles explained quietly as he did his best to avoid showing his aggravation on his face. *I had enough of gushing flattery back when I taught classes. I just wish he would get to the point.*

Vide nodded quickly while clasping his hands behind his back. “Oh I agree completely! For instance, the LANC class weapons that you’ve developed just this month! I can scarcely imagine the amount of death and destruction that might be caused if they were to fall into the wrong hands. Is it true that a shot fired by a LANC can penetrate all currently used armor materials?”

“That’s correct—”

“Scary!” Vide interrupted, and his happy expression faltered just a bit. “I suppose it’s a good thing that the ammunition can only be created by an Ea class generator? And to start the Ea generator you either need pre-charged batteries or the ‘specialist’ from the Stardust project, right? That specialist must be a genius to have come up with so many brilliant inventions! My engineer heart just about gave out when I heard about practical energy shields and teleportation devices! Is it true that once you complete the Kaleidoscope project you’ll be able to teleport to distant locations?”

Charles tried to interrupt the motor mouth but the other man just talked right over him. “I must say, though, the Rule Breaker project is what I find myself most impressed by. Having devices that could stop the aliens from using their mental abilities would prove to be quite the advantage if further refined! You are quite the asset to this organization, and it pains me that I cannot simply stay here and talk shop with you for days on end. Council business sadly has priority.”

Before any further conversation could be had, Vide walked to the exit and tapped the door controls with one hand while straightening his glasses with the other. “Keep up the good work, Raymond,” He said with a smile before he disappeared behind the closing doors.

Charles took a moment to rub his eyes before taking one step towards the exit before one of the other engineers flagged him down with a question, then another, and another. *So much for the movie. Sorry, Twilight.*

19:05, 05/22/2015, CONTAINMENT

“The raid perpetrated on the alien facility has provided us with four avenues of research that will hopefully provide us with an edge over the aliens should they choose to escalate their plans from skirmishes and abductions into full scale war,” Moira Vahlen dictated into her tablet as she perused the files on everything that had been gathered thus far.

She chose the first file, which included several autopsies of the humans found at the base. “The first breakthrough is the appearance of what appears to be a hostile human faction operating in concert with the aliens here on Earth. Examinations of their brains show very little damage that results from the aliens

attempts at mind control, which leads me to believe that the aliens may have found a less destructive way to assault the minds of humans, or these humans chose to willingly join the aliens with no mental persuasion necessary.”

Traitors, Vahlen thought venomously before clearing her throat to continue dictating. “In addition to the hostile humans found during the operation, hundreds of human corpses were found at a disposal site with numerous signs of surgical scarring on their bodies. These surgeries indicate a clear progression in the aliens’ understanding of human physiology as well as their attempts to augment it. I think it would be safe to assume that the hostile humans that were encountered were the final product of the aliens attempts to create such augments.

“Skeletal and muscle structure both appear to be reinforced to allow for much greater strength and endurance than a human being of similar stature. Attached armor camera footage shows several feats of strength and athleticism that simply should not be possible. Numerous alterations are also present in their blood, organs and nervous systems which accounts for a near perfect pain tolerance and ability to withstand normally fatal wounds. The nervous system and brain structure also seem to indicate the potential for dramatically enhanced reaction times.”

Vahlen tapped her tablet to attach two more files to her notes. “Several of these enhancements show similar methods of manipulation in the ‘Muton’ and ‘Berserker’ specimens. It was previously unknown how the aliens were capable of such thorough genetic enhancement for their troops, but the second discovery may have unlocked the secret behind it. A substance that has been dubbed as ‘Meld’ was recovered from the alien base, and it appears to be comprised of—”

A soft ping sound came from the tablet followed by a small mailbox icon in the corner of the tablet’s display. “Stop recording,” Vahlen commanded before tapping the mailbox to read the message she had been sent.

FROM: Dr. Hongou Marazuki
TO: Dr. Moira Vahlen
DATE: 05/22/2015, 19:10
SUBJECT: FOUND IT!!!!!!

Doctor Vahlen, I do believe we’ve had a breakthrough.

The other astronomers and I have been working night and day using the parameters you provided to us to try and locate the invaders’ home system. The archetype systems you outlined for us narrowed down the potential systems to just under a dozen, and when we fired up that new ‘TED’ device on one of the satellites we were able to narrow it down to just one.

The system designated as Omega Centauri was considered a curiosity prior to the invaders arrival due to the wild oscillations of its orbit. Prior to your request it was simply assumed that the star was orbiting a black hole and might actually no longer exist due to the number of light years away it is from us. After the TED system showed a positive reaction to the star, we did a more in-depth analysis and were able to confirm the presence of a planet within the system.

The star is orbiting the planet.

Don’t ask me how because I don’t have the faintest idea. I’ve run the numbers ten different times. I’ve had the others run the numbers and we all get the same result. The star is orbiting the planet. If this wasn’t quite possibly the invaders’ home planet, I’d be inflicting this find upon the scientific community as we speak. A star orbiting a planet! Just thinking about it gives me a headache.

I hope this helps you out, Moira, and I hope it leads to the end of the war. Hell, if you find some way to send a nuke over to their planet then give me a heads-up. I want to leave a message on the bloody thing before it gets sent away.

Attached to this email is the encrypted coordinates of the system and the planet itself. Let me know if you need any further information.

Thanks!

Dr. Hongou Marazuki

Vahlen simply stared at the message before rereading it two more times. *I had almost forgotten about it. I had contacted Marazuki to search for Twilight’s home world under the guise of finding the invaders origin. But we found it. Her home world. If I tell her then she’ll likely wish to be returned home as quickly as she can. If I don’t, then...*

A trilling scream cut through Containment, and Vahlen looked over her shoulder to see the captured

Sectoid strapped to a surgical table with its limbs spread wide. Two robotic arms were in the process of inserting metal probes into its skull even as it struggled against the restraints. Again the Sectoid screamed and Vahlen looked back down at the email.

You're a monster, Moira Vahlen, she told herself, and she could find no grounds to argue the point. Twilight calls you a friend and helps you without asking for anything in return after all that you've done to her. You? You're going to deny her the possibility of returning home just so you don't have to work hard for your reality-shattering breakthroughs. You're no friend, you're a monster.

Vahlen clenched her jaw and stood up before turning to exit Containment. "I am stepping out for a moment. Proceed with the operation as planned, though if the Rule Breaker restraints fail you are to purge the specimen immediately. Understood?" She said to the nearest scientist before heading to the exit.

The door opened and Vahlen nearly ran face first into a man wearing a business suit. He had one hand out to press the door controls but he quickly retracted it upon seeing Vahlen standing in the doorway. A flash of emotions went across his face before it settled on surprise and then unease when another alien scream came from Containment before the doors closed behind Vahlen. "Doctor Moira Vahlen, I presume? My name is Mr. Vide and I am here on behalf of the Council. I don't suppose I could have a few moments of your time?"

The introduction as well as the man's slick appearance made Vahlen's eye twitch with irritation. "Only if you can talk and walk. My time is valuable, 'Vide', and I don't have much of it to waste on the type of redundancy that you're asking for. The Council can review all of my findings at the end of the month, but if you have questions, ask them now."

Vahlen turned and began to power walk away from Containment and towards the Stardust labs, and Vide had to rush to catch up despite having a significant stride advantage. "Thank you, and I appreciate you taking the time. The last two months have generated quite a few amazing developments, have they not?" Vide asked affably, though the attempt at friendliness was lost on Vahlen. "All of these developments seem to have come from the 'specialist' located in the Stardust Labs. The specialist must be quite the genius, yes?" Still no response. "Considering a significant amount of those developments are for devices that use Elerium in creative ways I have to wonder if the specialist isn't somehow related to the aliens."

"Cut to the chase, Vide. What do you want?"

"Just a moment's time with this specialist, is all," Vide answered, and Vahlen turned to face the man when he made the request. The smile he had was warm and disarming, and it gave Vahlen the chills.

"Follow me and we'll see what can be arranged," She said after a long moment. The two passed through the corridors in silence before finally coming to a stop at the Stardust Labs. Both the guards nodded to Vahlen before turning to eye Vide, and she could only smirk at what was going to happen next. "Guards, detain this man!"

"I beg your pardon?" Vide asked, sounding shocked as the guards tensed and drew their side arms.

"Did you choose the name 'Vide'? The French word for *blank*? You would have gotten further if you said your name were 'Doe' or 'Smith,'" Vahlen explained.

"I'm not certain why that makes..." Vide started but Vahlen cut him off.

"When I first saw you, you were about to enter Containment without my authorization. I don't care if you're sent by the Council or if you're one of the Council yourself. When you enter the Science wings you're entering my domain, and God himself needs permission from me to enter Containment regardless of their clearance. Now you will wait here until a security detail can be arranged to escort you to a cell, where you will enjoy our hospitality for the indefinite future," Vahlen finished with a vindictive smirk.

The door to Stardust opened and she stepped through, and the last she saw of 'Vide' was his disarming smile and raised hands as the two Security personnel reached for him.

Shaojie Zhang had just finished his evening workout when he nearly bumped into Captain Fujikawa and Yuri Romalov from Strike Six. Both greeted Zhang with a smile and a wave, though Fujikawa's wave was rather awkward due to the crutches under her arms.

"Hey, Shao! Have you seen Matt or Lana?" Fujikawa asked. "Yuri and I were asked to meet in the briefing room in about two minutes and they're supposed to meet us there."

"I'm afraid they're currently engaged in other activities at the Stardust Labs if memory serves. May I ask why you're meeting here?"

Yuri supplied the answer, “Met with a suit who claimed to have further questions regarding our part in the base assault. Said Council may have special mission for us.” The big man simply shrugged as though it really didn’t matter.

“First rule of the Army, you do something well enough then you’re rewarded with more of the same. Come on, Yuri, I don’t want to be late,” Fujikawa said with an exaggerated sigh before opening the briefing room door and heading inside.

Zhang watched them enter and almost turned to leave but something caught his eye in the room. *A suitcase...not suspicious but the placement? Standing vertically on a chair in the corner of the room with the broad side facing the middle of the room. That reminds me...* The suspicions wouldn’t go away so he simply closed his eyes and looked again.

Zhang’s service with the Chinese Special Forces was the proudest time in his life where he honed his skills as a sniper to rival any other marksman in the world. When his departure from the armed forces was all but guaranteed he sought alternative employment which led to his eventual career as a thief and assassin with the Triads. When he closed his eyes and looked back into the room and *into* the briefcase, he saw one of the Triad’s favorite methods of assassination.

“Get out!” Zhang shouted as he stepped into the doorway of the briefing room while leveling an accusatory finger at the suitcase. “There’s a bomb!”

There was the briefest moments of hesitation as the two soldiers processed what Zhang said before they both turned and bolted toward the door. Fujikawa’s crutches were not built for speed however and with all the chairs in the way she quickly fell behind.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK!” Fujikawa screamed in rapid succession when one chair leg caught her crutches and threatened to tumble her to the floor. She would have fallen if Yuri hadn’t scooped her up and threw her over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes and flew through the door. Zhang hit the door controls and the room was sealed shut.

A moment passed and nothing happened other than a small collection of soldiers who came running at the Zhang’s shout.

“Zhang, I appreciate the warning, but are you sure—”

BANG!

The door bent slightly outward and a jet of flame blasted through the cracks in the breached door, and all the soldiers in the hallway were blasted off their feet.

Vahlen made her way to her console and dropped her tablet off before picking up her comms headset. Before she could activate it though, the door to the Labs opened again.

“Now then, Doctor Vahlen, I think I would like to see the Stardust specialist if you have a free moment,” Vide said with his affable smile that was completely at odds with the two bodies that he dragged into the lab and dropped onto the floor. One security guard’s head was twisted at an impossible angle while the other clutched at his throat and struggled for a breath that would never come. The affable smile remained on Vide’s face even as he brought his heel down violently on the back of the dying man’s neck before pulling the guard’s sidearm and pointing it at Vahlen.

We should have done this weeks ago, Matt couldn’t help but think as he glanced at Twilight then back at the movie. She acted exactly like my sister did throughout the whole movie, scene for scene. *Well, maybe with less talking.*

Just as Shen had predicted, Twilight had appeared to love every moment of the movie though she had shown some understandable discomfort when the scene in the forest with the slain unicorn was shown. There had been a brief moment where they had to pause the movie to reassure Twilight that no one in the room wanted to drink her blood, but other than that things had proceeded smoothly.

The movie’s confrontation had come and gone, and now the house cup was about to be assigned. Even in the low light Matt could see Twilight’s eyes sparkling with anticipation in what she no doubt knew what was going to happen.

Having that anticipation interrupted by the door to the habitat opening was annoying to say the least, and Matt turned to give an annoyed look at whoever decided to destroy the moment.

"ALARM!" Vahlen screamed before falling forward in an uncontrolled tumble, and time froze as Matt caught sight of the figure standing behind her.

It was the man he had run into earlier in the day, complete with his disarming smile and business suit but in his hands was what Matt instantly recognized as a nine millimeter standard issue sidearm pointed in their direction. He could see the finger tighten around the trigger and the lazily-spinning bullet exit the barrel.

STOP!

The faint golden glow caught the bullet and stopped it in place, and Matt was rewarded with a spike of pain in his forehead. Not that it would have mattered. This man had fired a gun at him and his friends, and that made Matt *angry*.

STRIKE!

The bullet reversed direction and flew back at the shooter's left eye just as quickly as it left the barrel, and to Matt's utter disbelief he saw the man's eyes lock on the bullet before dodging it entirely like a Hollywood action movie hero. Even as he leaned out of the way he brought the sidearm up to fire again, but was forced to leap back as Twilight's table flew through the room at the doorway.

It collided with a metallic *BANG*, but before it had even fallen to the ground Lana had crossed the distance and planted a flying left-handed punch into the center of the table. The center third of the table was pulverized and the shooter was showered with the debris from the strike. Another shot rang out that clipped Lana's left shoulder before she was onto him. Rather than struggle for the gun he allowed it to be knocked aside while he drew a knife with his left hand. The smile on his face grew as he saw Lana's eyes lock onto the blade, and he lofted it into the air.

Lana's eyes followed the weapon as it arced upwards into the air, and she was completely blindsided by a wicked right cross. The blow struck her across the face and sent her sprawling, which allowed the intruder the time to catch the lofted knife in his left hand behind his back. The knife quickly switched hands and swept in a lateral cut to halt Matt's charge as he rushed past Lana.

Matt stopped just short of getting sliced by the intruder's attack and quickly found himself on the defensive as he sidestepped another knife blow only to catch a left-handed palm strike to his rib cage. Even as his eyes watered and he staggered backwards, Matt came to a dawning realization and he smiled at the intruder. The knife came up but the killing blow hesitated as he no doubt came to the same realization.

They had both taken their eyes off Lana.

First, a hand-print appeared around the man's right forearm followed by the muffled crack of bone. Second, his right shin bent forty-five degrees in an entirely wrong direction. Third, a crease showed up on the man's suit between his neck and shoulder followed by the *SNAP* of his collar bone breaking. Last, he flew through the air before coming to a stop on his stomach with his right arm twisted viciously behind him and the broken bones in his forearm giving him a second elbow.

"Don't. Move." The words seemingly came from thin air, and Lana appeared above the man with one knee planted firmly on his back. She had the man's broken arm pinned beneath her knee as she felt what pockets she could from that position for any other weapons.

What started out as a scream of pain devolved into unbalanced laughter from the intruder. "Mister Harris and Miss Jenkins, I presume? You live up to your reputations. It is a tragedy that it will not matter one bit in the end. You cannot stop Ascension. The aliens will succeed."

"Matt?" Came a tiny question from the habitat, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Twilight's horrified expression. The door to the habitat attempted to close but the debris from the table blocked it.

She saw everything, Matt realized, and he followed her wide-eyed gaze to the dead security guards beside the now thoroughly beaten intruder. "Twilight, don't look. Just... just stay right there, okay?" He asked as gently as he could before retrieving the knife that the intruder had dropped.

"And you!" the intruder spat at Twilight, "You think you are helping humanity but you aren't! You're keeping us from our true destiny! If you really wanted to help you would *KILL YOURSELF!*" Anything else the intruder was going to say was lost when Lana grabbed him by the scalp and slammed his head into the metal floor twice in rapid succession. A low moan escaped the intruder's lips, which resulted in a third strike.

Matt winced as he heard Twilight's distress at the violence, but he couldn't spare the time to worry about that at the moment. *Now where's the pistol?* He thought before turning to see the other figure in the room. *Oh shit.*

"You...you are helping the aliens? You are HELPING THEM!?" Vahlen screamed as she raised the discarded sidearm towards the intruder. Her breath came in short gasps and her eyes had contracted to pinpricks. Her hands and the sidearm shook as she struggled to keep the intruder in her sights, and Lana looked about a second away from simply standing and letting her take the shot.

"Moir, we've got him," Matt said as loud as he dared so as not to startle Vahlen. "If you kill him now then we'll never learn just how far things go. He's far more valuable to us as a living subject." He took another step towards Vahlen and when she lowered the gun he snatched it from her grasp and stepped back. Because of his quick retreat he wasn't able to prevent her from planting a running kick into the side of the man's head.

"In der Hölle sollst du brennen!" Vahlen screamed and she cocked her foot back for another kick before Matt stepped forward to restrain her. He dropped the knife and kicked it away so he could wrap one arm around Vahlen to carry her into the habitat. The moment his arm wrapped around her the scientist went limp and began to weep in German.

"Matt..." Twilight tried again, "He's... he's hurt really bad." Her eyes were still locked on the intruder though she kept stealing glances towards the two dead guards.

"Twilight, that man was going to *kill us all*," Matt explained bluntly as he all but dropped Vahlen in the chair he had been sitting in just a few moments earlier. "I know you don't like seeing people hurt but it was either him or us, and both Lana and I would do it again if it meant protecting our friends. Please... just stay there with the doctors and we'll handle this. I promise I'll be back." With that, he turned away and kicked the debris from the door so it could finally close behind him.

Neither Joel nor Kim had moved an inch since the fight had started.

I can't worry about her, Matt reminded himself as he approached one of the dead guards and lifted the radio. "Command Actual, this is Harris, do you copy?"

Any response was overwhelmed by the sound of gunfire.

Maybe I'm just being paranoid, Bradford told himself for the tenth time as he surveyed the holographic globe in the center of the situation room. *Maybe it's a psychological thing. I know I have the capacity to see the future if I turn the Rule Breaker off, so maybe I'm worrying that disaster is around every corner if I can't predict it?* He had to resist the urge to chuckle at that train of thought. *Humans have soldiered just fine even without fortune tellers holding their hands.*

"Command, Security," Bradford's radio buzzed, "Our internal monitoring just went down. None of the internal security measures are responding to my commands. I'm blind and deaf."

"Commander!" one of the techs shouted from the control pit. A confused look was clear on his face as he looked to Bradford and reported, "The Skyranger hangar doors are opening! Automated control is locked out!"

"Sir! There's a report of an explosion in one of the barracks briefing rooms, no casualties reported and the fire is under control!" A second tech jumped up and shouted.

"Set alert status to red! Scramble the interceptor squadrons and bring all Strike teams on standby! And get the National Guard airborne!" Bradford shouted quickly before tapping the button on his wrist to turn off his suppressor.

A shot rang out and the nine millimeter slug entered the back of Bradford's skull.

Bradford ducked down just a second before the shot rang out and he felt the bullet kiss his scalp as it passed. He twisted to the left and turned to face the shooter, who anticipated the move and fired a second shot through his heart.

Bradford ducked down just a second before the shot rang out and he felt the bullet kiss his scalp as it passed. He twisted to the right to avoid the second shot and charged forward to wrestle the gun from the shooter's grasp. The now disarmed shooter fell backwards and Bradford brought the sidearm up to cover him.

"What did you do?" Bradford shouted even as his mind burned with thousands of possible outcomes. "Tell me!"

The shooter didn't answer or move or react in any way than to stare blankly at the person he had just tried to kill.

“Commander! I have multiple hostile contacts inbound on the base’s location...mother of God,” One of the techs said before standing up and looking at the globe. One red spot appeared over North America, then two, then six, then a dozen with at least two of comparable size to the ship captured during the Gangplank operation.

Bradford knocked out his would-be assassin with a strike from the pistol before tapping his headset to access the base’s intercom. “All personnel, this is not a drill. Enemy forces are inbound. All Strike Team personnel are to report for imminent defense. All Interceptor crews report to your fighters. All non-essential personnel are confined to quarters or current location. Good luck.”

“Sir, shouldn’t you remain in the situation room?” One of the techs shouted over the chaos that was now erupting. No sooner had the last word left the tech’s mouth than the globe flickered and died.

“I know where I’ll need to be,” Was all Bradford said as he made his way to the Armory.

Ashes and Temples

BREAKING NEWS: NATION HOLDS ITS BREATH AS NATIONAL EMERGENCY DECLARED AND ALL AIR TRAFFIC IS HALTED OVER NORTHERN UNITED STATES AND SOUTHERN CANADA. OBSERVERS AT MAJOR AIR BASES REPORT MASSIVE MOBILIZATION OF NATIONAL GUARD FORCES. NO COMMENT FROM GOVERNMENT LEADS MANY TO ASSUME THE WORST.

BREAKING NEWS: NORTH DAKOTA BRACES FOR REPEAT OF ALIEN ATTACK EARLIER IN THE MONTH AS MULTIPLE UFOS ARE SPOTTED ENTERING THE ATMOSPHERE. EARLY PREDICTIONS ON UFO HEADING SHOWS NO POPULATION CENTERS AS THEIR DESTINATION, PROMPTING A DECLARATION OF EMERGENCY IN CANADA.

19:10, 05/22/2015, STARDUST LABS

The door to the Stardust lab shot open and Security personnel rushed in like a blue-armored flood. Assault rifles swept the lab's testing area before locking on to Matt, Lana and the subdued intruder. A pair of the soldiers produced zip ties and a head bag to secure the prisoner while another checked on the two guard corpses that the intruder had produced.

"Lieutenant Harris, Corporal Jenkins? Sergeant Kimbley," One of the security officers introduced himself as he marched to face the two soldiers. If he noticed Matt's wince at the mention of his new rank he didn't bring it up. "Commander Bradford wants you at the armory now; we'll drop you off while we escort the prisoner to holding... unless there were any injuries? And where are the doctors? We were informed that Moira Vahlen was also present during the incident." The security sergeant gave Lana a sideways glance as she held an ice pack to the severe bruise on the side of her face.

Lana waved her ice pack at the closed door to the habitat. "Vahlen and her team are... securing some sensitive materials. And don't worry about me, you should see the other guy," she forced a grin as Kimbley glanced back at the state of the intruder. "We know our way to the armory so—"

"No, ma'am," Kimbley turned back to the pair. "The security network has been sabotaged and we're under orders to detain anyone who's in the corridors without an escort until we can confirm the internal security of the base." When the sergeant spotted the now thoroughly trussed prisoner being hauled up into a carrying position, he tapped his headset. "Command, Stardust Labs are secure. Harris and Jenkins are unharmed and the prisoner is in custody. ETA is two minutes." The hand fell from the headset as Kimbley turned to head towards the exit. "Enfield, Erwin, Medvedev! You three will escort Harris and Jenkins to the Armory, and then deposit the prisoner before returning here. Command wants this lab guarded for the duration of the attack."

One of the security members mentioned hoisted the prisoner onto his shoulders in a fireman carry while the other two motioned for Harris and Jenkins to follow. "Good luck!" Kimbley shouted as the security personnel began to take defensive positions in the hallway around the Stardust Lab entrance.

The briefing room was packed with both Strike and Security squad leaders as Bradford emerged at the head of the room. "Gentlemen, I need not emphasize the seriousness of the situation," He stated, and a truer statement couldn't be found. Bradford was clad in combat armor and had a LANC rifle slung over his shoulder with a degree of familiarity that was firmly at odds with the fact that no one in XCOM had ever seen him in action. They were familiar with Officer Bradford, and what they saw before them was something entirely new.

The monitor behind Bradford lit up to display the apparent geography of the surface around the XCOM base, which was then flooded with red arrows and dots followed by several images of the alien craft. "The alien task force is a dozen ships total. Two battleship class ships, four small scout class ships, four large scout class ships, plus two new ships of unidentified class. The first is speculated to be a troop ship. The second appears to be a different class of the scout ships we've previously encountered. Estimated time of engagement is ten minutes. Skull Squadron has launched and is waiting to engage. Ghost Squadron is six minutes from launch. Diamond Squadron's estimated launch time is twelve minutes. National Guard air forces are mustering and should be able to reach our location within thirty minutes. National Guard ground forces will be longer than that."

Bradford hated the looks that were now on every soldier's face. Gone were the jitters of an impending operation. Gone were the fear and the uncertainty. In its place was... fatalism. Calm settled over every soldier in the room as they came to the same realization: They were all going to die. The only question now was how long it would take.

The display behind Bradford changed to a schematic of the XCOM base where several areas became highlighted. "Several potential entrance points have been highlighted. The first and most critical point is the Skyranger hangar. The first exit from the hangar leads to the situation room. I want Strike Five, Three and Two entrenched to prevent a breakout there. Strike Four, Seven and Eight will assume positions at the other exit from the hangar to secure the access stairwells and the elevators there."

The display view changed to a second set of elevator shafts connected to the surface buildings. "The aliens will likely destroy any surface structures they see once the assault begins but some structures do have cargo elevators that lead down into the base. Strike Nine, Strike Ten; it's your job to ensure they stay secure. If the shafts cannot be held then you are authorized to destroy them. If it's apparent the shafts are destroyed in the assault, you will be redeployed to assist the other points of contact." Bradford caught sight of Harris as he squeezed into the room. "As both Strike One and Six are under strength and Fujikawa is still in recovery, they will form an ad hoc squad under Lieutenant Harris and will support Nine and Ten. Base security will join the defense as soon as possible but they are currently going room by room to confirm the security of on base personnel."

"Why are they doing that, sir?" Lieutenant Weiss of Strike Five asked.

"Internal security systems have been compromised, a bomb was placed in one of the briefing rooms and an infiltrator killed two security officers before being subdued by force. A human infiltrator," Bradford answered bluntly and the mood of the room switched from stone-faced fatalism to jaws-clenched anger.

"Define 'subdued'," Captain Jarvis spoke next.

"Corporal Jenkins assisted with the capture," Harris answered before Bradford could. "Assisted with extreme prejudice."

"Focus, people!" Bradford barked to bring attention back to the front of the room. "We now have eight minutes before contact is made. Get to your assigned posts and prepare for defense. SHIV support will meet you at the specified locations. Move out!"

The squad leaders vacated the briefing room and Bradford slipped in behind Weiss as he gathered up Strike Five. The situation room had been transformed from the bustling nerve center of the XCOM operation into a well-prepared kill zone with overlapping fields of fire and metal barricades for easy cover for the two-dozen soldiers. A quartet of heavily armored SHIVs were also spaced about the room with their heavy lasers trained on the doors.

Bradford found his place at one of the center barricades and made a point of ignoring the looks the soldiers were giving him. "Ghost Actual, Command. Launch status?" He asked as he brought his LANC rifle up and slid a power pack in place.

"Command, Ghost Actual. Ghost Squadron is airborne and en route to the rally point. Diamond's crews were ahead of schedule, anticipated launch for them is approximately three minutes."

Bradford checked his watch. Three minutes... that gets them in the air just under the gun. He checked the timer before scratching his chin and looking about the room. Soldiers checked and rechecked their weapons and gear to resist the urge to watch their own timers, and more than a few had laid out their spare ammunition or other pieces of miscellaneous equipment for easy access.

"Command, Engineering," Shen's voice spoke through Bradford's headset. "SHIV deployment is complete, and all deployed SHIVs have been upgraded with heavy-duty Rho Aias shields. They should be able to withstand significantly greater degrees of punishment than the Mark One SHIV."

"Very good, Engineering. What's the word on the security systems?"

"Unknown at this point, Commander," The engineer's tone turned apologetic, "It might be safe to assume that the invaders will make contact before internal security is restored."

"Command, Diamond Actual. We are airborne and en route to the rally point."

"Understood, Diamond. You are free to engage with Ghost and Skull as soon as you link up. Target priorities are the troop carrier and the battleships. If they cannot be destroyed then delay them at all costs until reinforcements arrive. Good luck Diamond, Command out." Bradford gave another glance at the timer on his wrist.

Thirty seconds, in theory... it's now or never, he thought as his hand hesitated over the suppressor around his wrist. That hesitation lasted for a handful of seconds before he turned it off. Instantly his mind was flooded with images of gunfire, blood and death and his ears were filled with panicked reports from the defenders. Bradford mustered every scrap of his not inconsiderable willpower and attempted to make sense of the chaos for as long as he could before he turned the suppressor back on.

"Command to all combat personnel teams, contact is imminent. Expect Mutons, Berzerkers, Chryssalids and Sectoids, and at least one enemy type with shielding. Shielded enemies are priority targets and are heavily armed. Gold-armored Mutons will be fielding heavy weapons and alien rocket launchers. Security personnel are to regroup and defend their designated points. The ventilation systems will be compromised shortly and stealth troops will attempt to infiltrate behind our lines. Call out any new enemy types the moment they're encountered." The rapid-fire instructions were met with a full second of dead air before the other team leaders acknowledged them.

"Roland, Harms, Summers! I want rocket launchers ready to fire on the doors the moment they go down," Bradford barked to the three soldiers in questions as he pointed to the primary, secondary and upper level doors that lead into the hangar. "LANC and laser weapons are to prioritize shielded targets first. Good luck, gentlemen," Bradford finished as shimmering energy shields appeared in front of the deployed SHIVs. "Contact in three, two, one..."

"Is this shit for real?" Jack Finch asked as Bradford laid out just what they would be fighting. "How does he know this? How does he know any of it? How the fuck—"

"Finch, zip it and listen to the man!" Lana snapped at Finch before Matt could.

"Copy that, Command," Matt said reflexively as Bradford finished his briefing. "Finch, get your rocket ready for the elevator doors if they open or come down. Jenkins, Zhang, you're both on high value targets, including whatever 'shielded targets' may make themselves apparent." With little else to do at that point, Matt loaded and checked his own LANC rifle before taking cover behind one of the metal barricades.

Strike One had been given the duty of protecting one of the secondary cargo elevators, the exact same elevator that Twilight had used to go to the surface with the rest of the Stardust personnel earlier in the month. It wasn't hard for Matt to remember Twilight's expression when she first entered the warehouse on the surface for the first time...

Any further memories were interrupted when the energy shields on the two SHIVs assigned to Strike One snapped online. Matt leveled his rifle at the elevator doors and did his best to not let his imagination get the best of him as to what was going to come storming through the door.

"Harris, Zhang. They're on the other side of the door. There's something with them that I can't see though." Finch's helmeted head was mostly hidden behind his shouldered rocket launcher, but Matt could clearly see the top of it turn to look at Zhang before going back to the door.

The center of the elevator doors began to glow with heat. It started as a dull red before quickly becoming white hot. It had just started to melt when Zhang let loose a single shot with his LANC into the door. A second passed before the door exploded violently.

"Weapons free!"

Finch's reaction time was sharp as a tack. His rocket entered the now gaping hole in the wall and exploded. It was quickly followed by a barrage of laser, LANC and ballistic weapons fire. The SHIVs opened up with their heavy lasers and Matt could feel the sudden increase in air temperature through his clothes and armor.

So when a shape could be seen charging out of the elevator shaft and through the dozens of shots fired, Matt could scarcely wrap his mind around it. Time stopped just long enough for him to get a glimpse at what could only have marched out of a science fiction novel. It was a massive metal monstrosity, and it would have topped twelve feet in height if it were to extend its reverse-jointed legs to the fullest. Its arms appeared as little more than stubby armatures carrying two of the largest plasma cannons that Matt had ever seen. And its entire body was wrapped in a shimmering blue shield. Laser shots ricocheted off the shield at odd angles, while the purple LANC beams simply disappeared into it and Matt could swear he saw the mashed remains of bullets accumulating in its general vicinity.

And just as quickly as the moment had frozen in time, it was gone, and the alien walker charged into the room with its cannons blazing. Matt had to resist the urge to swear as a massive plasma bolt struck the metal barricade he was using for cover. That one shot had turned the majority of the barricade white hot, another would cause it to melt entirely.

The others fared little better. Bapela was reduced to burning ashes from a shot to the chest, while Carver from Strike Six disappeared in a volley of green fire as his cover disintegrated. Yuki, another stray from Strike Six, learned too late of the walker's charge as it vaulted over her barricade and sent her flying across the room with a backhanded swipe of one of its plasma cannons. The walker continued its charge with Matt directly in its path. The last shot of his LANC rifle was absorbed into the shield, which left Matt only one desperate choice.

"STOP!" Matt shouted as he thrust one hand forward, and the walker did indeed stop for just a moment. A faint gold aura appeared before clashing with the walker's shields, and it appeared to hesitate before pushing through the aura. One of the plasma cannons rose to swat Matt aside just as easily as it had Yuki, but the blow never came.

Both SHIV turrets had tracked the walker as it charged, but one rotated on its tracks and sped up to ram it. What the impromptu attack lacked in elegance it more than made up for in effectiveness, as the SHIV's heavy chassis connected with the walker's legs and knocked it off its feet. The walker slammed into the wall as it fell, and before it could rise the SHIV had pinned it in place. The heavy laser turret panned down and unloaded at point blank range. The walker struggled against the dead weight pinning it against the wall, but the shield fell, and the lasers began to strike home.

"Command, Strike One. Shielded enemy contacts are mechanized... Sectoids. Mechtoids," Matt reported as the SHIV backed away from the now thoroughly mangled mechanical body and no less mangled Sectoid pilot. Once confident the Mechtoid was well and truly dead he turned to the elevator shaft and his jaw dropped.

While the Mechtoid had survived the barrage due to whatever technology had powered its shield, but the others in the shaft hadn't fared as well. At least two gold-armored Mutons were in bloody heaps, while the rest of the shaft was littered with the scorched remains of at least a half-dozen Chryssalids.

"One of the gold ones was preparing a rocket, I think," Zhang provided as he reloaded his LANC rifle. "I shot the launcher through the door."

Before any other discussion could be had, Bradford cut in through the radio. "Strike One, Command! Disable or destroy the elevator shaft and proceed to B3F east corridor immediately. The enemy's primary objective is located there and we cannot let them acquire it." The sounds of gunfire and explosions in the background weren't nearly as alarming as the orders that were given.

"What about—"

"Strike Nine is KIA, Strike Ten has detonated their elevator shaft and retreated back to the Barracks. You need to get to B3F *now*, Lieutenant! The aliens want what's there and if they get it there's nothing that will stop them from shelling the base. Get there NOW."

"Carlock, Blake, Finch, Burns! Do what you can to disable the shaft then head to B3F east. Jenkins, Zhang, Romalov, on me!" Matt ordered quickly before turning and running to one of the access staircases at full tilt.

The night had been going so well.

Most of Twilight's human friends had gotten together to watch a movie, and her disappointment at having Charles leave so early due to his work was quickly overwhelmed as she realized just what the movie was about.

Twilight had reacted uncomfortably when the Dursleys had shown their neglect of Harry, but Lana gave her a chipper smile and said that not all human families were like what was shown in the movie. She had also had trouble watching the Dursleys breakdown from the torrent of mail that had been sent to Harry, but also because she saw just a little bit of her own irrationality in some of their behavior.

The depiction of the Hogwarts train in the book was nothing compared to seeing it in motion. She had been expecting something akin to the trains she was familiar with from Equestria. While both were steam engines, the colors and styles of both the engine and the train cars were dark and earthy colors which gave it, and by extension the trip to the school, far greater presence in Twilight's mind than the brightly colored train that ran between Ponyville and Canterlot.

Hogwarts itself looked dark and ominous enough to give Twilight uncomfortable memories of her face to face confrontation with Nightmare Moon, but that was quickly dispelled once the inside was shown. It was simply *amazing*.

Amazing, that was the only word she could use to describe the movie as it unfolded. Sure, Twilight had problems with the fact that some parts were removed and certain dialog was truncated, but those problems were insignificant in comparison to the wonder the movie gave her. She had asked at least a dozen times how something was done without magic before Joel had paused the movie to attempt to explain how it was done with computers

That wonder had been replaced with a small degree of horror when she laid eyes upon the scene with the slain unicorn, and it only grew when He Who Must Not Be Named made his appearance and met his subsequent demise. In the context of the book she understood that both he and the man that had been

carrying him were both irredeemably evil and would likely never reform themselves, but death...

Twilight had pushed those concerns aside to finish watching the movie, when the door had opened and everything had happened at once and no matter how much she tried she couldn't sort out exactly what had happened.

A human she had never seen had entered the lab behind Moira. His smile was warm and welcoming even as he pointed something directly at Twilight. A bang loud enough to hurt Twilight's ears filled the room shortly before Lana upended the table and hurled it at the door. The table was wider than the door frame and collided with it but it provided less than a moment's hindrance as Lana had practically flown through the table at the man.

When the man had struck Lana and she fell, Twilight had started to rise to do something to help but she froze when she saw Lana's face. Twilight had been so used to her smiles and teasing and the Pinkie Pie quality of her eyes. What she saw on Lana's face as she struggled to get back up was an emotion Twilight could not comprehend or describe.

In less than ten seconds, Lana had turned and pummeled the man who had struck her. The crack of breaking bones only added to the horror of the scene as Twilight saw the man's arm, collar bone and shin broken so viciously and thoroughly. As Lana pinned the man to the ground beneath her, Twilight caught sight of two other humans lying in the lab. Both wore the uniforms that she had seen both Matt and Lana wearing on other occasions, and both were clearly dead.

"Matt?" Twilight asked as she tried to process just what she was seeing. *Matt can explain this. He has to know what's going on... right?* She tore her eyes from the bodies to give a pleading look to her friend, but her apprehension grew when she saw the same emotion on his face as Lana's. It was for just a moment, but it was there.

The injured human had screamed something at her, but whatever he had said was lost to Twilight as she again tried to make the pieces fit in the scene she now found herself. The dull thunk of the man's head hitting the floor jarred Twilight, and that look on Lana's face further added to the disconnect that the unicorn was feeling.

How... how did things turn out like this? Where's Lana's smile? Where's Matt's confident smirk? And what is Moira doing? Twilight asked herself as Moira kicked the prone human in the face before being dragged back into the habitat by Matt. "Matt. He's... he's hurt really bad." Twilight started to say but she was cut off when he turned to face her.

"Twilight, that man was going to kill us all," Matt snapped as he released Vahlen. "I know you don't like seeing people hurt, but it was either him or us, and both Lana and I would do it again if it meant protecting our friends. Please... just stay there with the doctors and we'll handle this. I promise I'll be back." And with that he turned and walked out of the habitat, but not before clearing the debris of the destroyed table from the doorway.

Who are these people and what did they do with my friends? Twilight asked herself. For several moments she did nothing but sit and try to put the pieces together. Matt and Lana had been good friends, though Lana's teasing made things difficult and Matt's intentions towards her brought a whole heap of stress she never knew she had to deal with. But both of them were good people, good friends. They were nice. Nice people weren't capable of hurting others so badly, right? But Matt and Lana had, and Moira had attacked him while he was restrained. None of her friends back home had done anything like that, and even with all her time in Canterlot she had never seen that... look on any guard's face.

"Twilight?"

The question nearly caused her to jump with surprise. Kim was now sitting on the bed beside Twilight with a sincerely concerned look on her face, and it took every ounce of the unicorn's willpower to resist the urge to break down on the spot.

"How could they do that? They always seemed so nice and friendly but they hurt that man without hesitating for a second!" Twilight blurted after several long moments. "They just attacked him! I-I know he attacked first but it all happened so suddenly..."

Kim sat and listened as Twilight unloaded all of the problems and questions she had onto the doctor before finally replying. "I'm afraid I don't know the psychology of it, Frank would be better able to give you an answer on that, but I think I know the answer. Soldiers like Matt and Lana have to make split-second decisions for their jobs. Any hesitation might cost someone their life. As to how they act around you normally, I can guarantee you that's how they really are. What you saw just now was a...ah, a disconnect of sorts. When they do what they have to do for their jobs, they have to separate themselves from it. If they didn't, well, I imagine it would get to them over time. It gets to everyone eventually."

The image of Shining Armor came to Twilight as Kim explained. *Could Shining have been hiding*

something like that inside him? He's always been my BBBFF! But I didn't see him for nearly two years after I moved to Ponyville and he never said what he did with the guard while we were apart. Twilight absently hopped off her bed and made her way over to the desk. She plucked the picture of her brother off the wall and stared at it. Were you hiding that look from me, Shining? Did you not want to scare me? Did you ever have to kill anyone?

"Well, I don't know about any of you but I'm thirsty. I know there's some water in the other room, who wants some?" Joel asked with forced joviality as he headed to the habitat's entrance.

"Doctor Mills," Moira spoke her first words since Matt had left her in his chair. "My tablet is at my workstation in the lab, could you please retrieve it for me when you return?" As she asked the question, Moira rose from her chair to stand beside Twilight. After a moment's hesitation she crouched down to meet Twilight eye to eye and she smiled. The expression was so out of place with the serious and cool demeanor that Twilight had grown accustomed to, especially after what had just happened. "Twilight, I may have some good news for you." She started, but anything else she might have said was lost when Joel pushed the button to open the door.

The moment the door opened a roar filled the room and Twilight froze. Joel's horrified expression turned to the open door and he stumbled backwards. He tried to raise his arms to defend himself but the action proved futile under the weight of the monster's charge. An aborted scream was all he could offer as Twilight's nightmare tore him to pieces.

A shimmering patch of air stepped through the doorway and past the monster still mutilating Joel before coming into focus. It was shaped like the humans in that it was bipedal and had hands, but that was where any resemblance ended. It was massive and clad in midnight black armor, and its face was hidden behind a helmet and a faceplate of black glass. In its hands was something like the tools that the Matt and the other soldiers, and it leveled the tool at Kim.

"Nononono!" Kim screamed as she tried to push herself away from the door, but a bolt of green fire shot from the giant's weapon. It connected with her chest and everything above her waist was reduced to ash.

"*Nein!*" Moira screamed as she rose, and she scooped up the chair beside her to swing it like a club. Her attack was interrupted when the black-armored giant stepped forward and swept her aside with a backhand. Moira was lifted off her feet by the blow and she crashed head-first into the mirror that adorned one wall of Twilight's habitat. A spider web of cracks blossomed from the impact, and the doctor slumped limply to the ground. The giant spared her no further attention as he turned and reached for Twilight.

"Shift it!" Matt shouted as he dashed down the staircase and entered one of the side B3F corridors. Throwing caution to the wind he sprinted down the side corridor and rounded the corner to catch sight of the main B3F corridor. The entrance to the Stardust lab was a charnel pit. Even from a distance Matt could tell there weren't any survivors, and with the lab's door ripped out of its frame and lying amongst the bodies there was no doubt as to where the aliens were.

Before Matt could get any further, a massive spike of pain drove down into his skull and caused him to trip and fall, and the clatter of armor and weapons behind told that the soldiers behind him had suffered similar fates. A scream echoed down the corridor and for a brief moment Matt thought it was his own. He ripped the helmet off of his head and brought his left hand up to his temple before staggering back to his feet. The scream hadn't been his, but he could feel the pain, despair, frustration in it; and rage.

Matt staggered back to his feet and raised his rifle towards the direction of Stardust as he approached the doorway. He caught Lana, Zhang and Romalov out of the corner of his eye before he rounded the corner and entered the lab and stormed into the habitat.

"Mother of God," Lana stated breathily as they caught sight of what remained of Kim and Joel, and Vahlen's battered body beneath the mirror.

"Command, Strike One. Hostiles have breached the Stardust lab. Kim Ngo, Joel Mills and Moira Vahlen are all KIA. Primary objective is gone," Matt reported harshly as he walked towards the farthest corner of the room.

A long moment of silence passed before Bradford responded. "Copy, Strike One. Begin sweeping the level and reacquire the objective. We cannot let it fall into enemy hands."

"Negative, sir. The aliens do not have the objective," Matt said as he turned away from the far corner of the habitat and the hoofmarks that appeared to be melted into the floor. Instead his gaze turned to eye the Muton and Chryssalid that still occupied the room after being turned into stone. "The objective is loose, and God have mercy on anyone that gets in her way." He was just about to turn and exit the lab when a hand grasped his ankle.

"Fucking shit!" Matt spat as he leapt back and brought his LANC to cover Vahlen's body, only to see her bloody face looking up at him. "Command, Moira Vahlen survived the attack but appears to be in critical condition. We need medical here immediately!"

Just as Matt crouched down to try and help Vahlen, a report from another squad leapt into his ear.

"Command, Sec Two! New enemy type; Unicorn! Ballistic weapons are not effective! I say again—"

When asked what had happened later, Twilight could honestly say she had no memory beyond a few brief words her friends had said to her, and a single thought.

It was either him or us.

It could have been me, it could have been my friends. Or I could choose for it to be him.

Any hesitation might cost someone their life.

Twilight had hesitated. She had let her fear prevent her from acting, and because of that her friends had died. They had died because of her. She may not have directly caused their deaths, but she had the power to save them. But she hadn't.

It would not happen again. She was going to stop them all.

It was not a promise, because promises could be broken. It was not a prediction, because predictions could be wrong. It was a statement of intent, and Twilight would make that intent manifest upon the world. Gone was the socially awkward magical scholar. Gone was the nervous and lost little girl. In her place was a nexus of magical power that now had only one reason for existing.

She had failed her friends, and she wasn't going to fail any others. She was going to *stop them all*.

The crack of displaced air was the only warning that Security Two had that they had been flanked.

Lieutenant Joe Martinez was the first to lay eyes upon the new threat. Unlike all the previous aliens that XCOM had encountered, with their plasma weapons and heavy armor, this enemy appeared nothing more than a quadrupedal shadow with a horn sprouting from its forehead wrapped in lavender flames, and it was advancing calmly on Sec Two's position.

"We're flanked! Unicorn!" Joe shouted as he brought his assault rifle around to fire but in a flash and CRACK, it vanished, only to reappear in the midst of the pack of Sectoids that the security team had been previously engaging. A wave of purple energy pulsed from the unicorn and the Sectoids were petrified where they stood.

"Command, Sec Two!" Martinez shouted into the comms as he opened fire on the unicorn, and the rest of the team joined him. Chips and pock marks appeared on the Sectoid statues, and a few bullets were on target but simply *evaporated* the moment they reached the lavender flames around the unicorn. "New enemy type; Unicorn! Ballistic weapons are not effective! I say again—"

It registered the attack and turned its glowing eyes on the security team before sweeping downward and the unicorn vanishing in a flash of light.

Recovered security footage revealed the unicorn's destination as one level lower and on the other side of the base. A pack of Chryssalids were in the process of trying to force open a ventilation shaft when they caught sight of the newcomer. They barely had a moment to start charging before they too were turned to stone.

Security Team Three and the walking wounded from Medical spotted the unicorn next. The soldiers had just ducked for cover as a golden-armored Muton fired the equivalent of a rocket towards their position. The glowing green projectile zipped down the corridor and detonated directly above the defenders, but the explosion was quickly surrounded and snuffed out by flickering purple flames. The telltale crack of teleportation could be heard as the unicorn appeared beside the Muton and reduced him to statuary.

Captain Fujikawa is recorded as repeatedly giving the order to security personnel not engage the unicorn before it teleported away.

The tail elements of Strike One encountered the unicorn next as they attempted to link up with their lead elements before being pinned down by invaders. Three Mutons were instantly petrified, but the shielded Mechtoid appeared to be unaffected. It let loose a barrage of plasma at the unicorn as it charged.

The unicorn turned its head like a turret acquiring a target, and the vault door to Containment flew at it as though the reinforced concrete and steel walls it had rested in were little more than wet cardboard. Both the door and the Mechtoid flew through four interior walls before colliding with the bedrock around the base's outer wall.

Similar reports from a dozen other locations from around the base were reported before the unicorn encountered leading elements of Strike One in the Skyranger hangar.

"Twilight!" The word reached her ears, and it sounded familiar. The voice sounded familiar too, and brought up comforting and... happy memories.

"Twilight!" Again the word was heard... no, not a word, a name. Her name. Her name was Twilight. And his name was...

"Matt," Twilight said, and the power she had been channeling faded. Her horn ached, her brain ached and her entire body felt as though it had been through a marathon. She caught sight of Matt, and for just a moment she forgot how she had gotten to her current location. "Matt!" Twilight sobbed as a sudden wave of despair hit her, and she didn't know why. What was she forgetting?

Bloody claws.

Ashes on a bed.

Blood dripping down a cracked mirror.

"Matt..." Tears flowed freely down Twilight's face as she remembered. "*They killed everyone!*" The power she had channeled came back to the surface and she was once again engulfed in lavender flames. The tears instantly evaporated from her now glowing eyes, and she turned to look up at the open doors above her. "I will not let them hurt anyone else. I will NOT."

Twilight teleported directly upwards and into the sky as she surveyed the chaos around her. Human flying machines tried valiantly to assault the formation of alien ships, but were driven off again and again by waves of green fire. Another group of human flying machines was attempting a massed attack from the opposite direction and was suffering greatly for their efforts.

One of the alien ships had landed, and swarms of aliens were marching out and towards the burning surface buildings and the gaping doorway that Twilight had just teleported through. Among the aliens were a trio of squat metal machines that were taking shots at the human flying machines with beams of crimson energy or volleys of what looked like fireworks. Twilight's glowing eyes scanned every inch of the machines, and when she found no life within them, she struck.

The first had no way of defending itself as Twilight teleported inside of it. The resulting displacement split the machine in half, and Twilight walked out of the rubble and set her eyes on the other two. Telekinesis grabbed hold of every single part of the second machine, from the largest armor plate to the smallest rivet, and *pulled*. The machine flew apart at the seams and each part dropped shortly afterward.

The third machine turned to face Twilight before vanishing in a flash of lavender light. The unicorn didn't pay any mind to the mighty *crash* that sounded behind several moments later as the machine came crashing down to earth.

The ground troops all turned to fire on Twilight, and she responded in kind with a rolling wave of magical energy that left an army of statues in its wake. She was nearly ready to search for new targets when one of the alien ships fired on her. The ship-class plasma blast struck Twilight dead on and was dispersed by her lavender flames, but the heat had managed to partially penetrate the defense and catch her attention.

"Go away." Lavender energy enveloped the entire UFO and sent it flying out of formation to collide dead center with the first of the massive ships hovering in the sky. It passed cleanly through and clipped the forward section of the next ship in formation before disappearing over the horizon.

With her attention now upwards, Twilight's eyes caught sight of another alien ship. She wasn't trained enough to differentiate between class or type but her eyes still caught the massive amount of magical energy emanating from one of the ship's crew. The magic was both flowing to the crew member in question from some distant location as well as filtering downward to all the aliens Twilight had not yet petrified.

Twilight blinked and teleported herself into the ship to deal with whatever was on the ship, but she wasn't fast enough when she laid eyes on her target.

It was tall and extremely thin, with the entirety of its body hidden beneath a crimson robe. Any facial

features it might have had were hidden behind a silver helmet that turned to face Twilight the moment she appeared. Twilight was a moment away from petrifying the robed figure just like all the others, but then it spoke.

The defense that Twilight had been channeling was absolute. Any attack levied against her would be met with an equal amount of energy to negate it. Only an attack of sufficient power to completely overwhelm Twilight's energy capacity could even hope pierce the absolute defense.

Her target spoke with the weight of a million minds behind it.

The Apex...

Twilight screamed as she felt her mind being overwhelmed by those two simple words. Her defenses flickered and died, and she had to struggle to stay on her hooves. Her struggles were in vain and she collapsed.

The Gift in this one surpasses all others. Yes, it will succeed where we failed.

Twilight tried desperately to stand, or to retreat, or use her magic or even kick at the robed thing before her as it approached. She felt *it* in her mind, observing every moment of her life and dissecting each one in painfully slow sequence. Four arms emerged from beneath its robe and began to reach for her.

Ascendance will soo— The voices in Twilight's head cut off instantly as a beam of purple light shot through the ship's floor and landed dead center in the alien's helmet before passing out the back side and into the ship's ceiling.

With the voices and pressure now out of her mind, Twilight was able to muster enough energy to teleport one last time.

It wasn't her best teleport, and she ended up falling a dozen feet through the air to the ground. She struggled to her hooves as she saw Matt and several others rushing towards her. Twilight tried to call out his name but her voice was gone so she settled on running to meet him. Her body and horn ached from the strain of everything that had happened and simply begged to lie down and rest but she continued her run.

BANG

A look of horror appeared on Matt's face before he raised his weapon to point at something off to Twilight's left. "DROP IT! DROP YOUR FUCKING WEAPON OR YOU'RE DEAD!" He screamed, and the others behind Matt raised their weapons and pointed them in the same direction.

Twilight turned to see another human standing behind her and to her left. His uniform was different from anything she had seen yet, with an olive-green body suit and a harness around his torso that was covered with straps and pouches and a curious patch that had the title, "132D Fighter Wing." In his hands was a weapon similar to what she had seen nearly used on her back in the Stardust lab, and a trail of smoke was coming from the barrel. What was most striking was the look of fear on his face. Not of Matt or any of the others. Fear of her.

Twilight opened her mouth to speak but a burning pain in her side stopped her. *Am I...oh.* Twilight thought her perspective suddenly turned sideways and she collapsed to the ground. Her vision swam as she saw Zhang and Lana disarm the new human, who still seemed in a state of shock at what he had done. And despite what he had done, Twilight couldn't blame him. She still remembered what Charles told her.

When we are afraid, we lash out at the cause.

OPERATION ASHES AND TEMPLES: COMPLETE

Kaleidoscope

08:00, 05/24/2015, BRIEFING ROOM, XCOM BETA SITE

The atmosphere that permeated the briefing room was grave as Bradford entered and walked towards the head of the table. Only a handful of other figures were present, and he gave them each a look as he reached his destination.

Charles Shen looked about ready to collapse from exhaustion, if the bags under his eyes and his drooping expression were anything to go on. He took a long drink from his coffee cup as Bradford met his gaze, and he did his best to look attentive. The second was the recently promoted Major Yumiko Fujikawa who was now in command of the Strike teams. Last was Captain Brett Weaver, Skull Squadron's leader and most senior of the surviving Interceptor pilots.

All that's missing now is Vahlen, Bradford mused before he caught himself and suppressed a wince. *She's better off in Medical.*

"Gentlemen, we're all busy so we'll have to be brief," He said without preamble. "Charles, your report."

"All potential resources from the alpha site have been moved and installed at our current facility. Ea is now up and running successfully and producing more than enough power for the base," Charles produced a tablet computer and tapped several icons on it to send the information to Bradford's tablet. "In addition, the crews have stripped all of the crashed and destroyed ships for anything useful. Ten minutes past midnight, demolitions charges were activated to destroy the alpha site and anything that could not be recovered from the alien ships."

"Good. Brett?"

"We're down to just over fifty percent strength for all our Interceptor squadrons. I'm going to recommend folding Ghost into Diamond until we can get replacement craft and pilots. It could have been much worse, though. Had they kept their formation throughout the whole fight it would have been a much closer thing, even with the National Guard's intervention," the pilot summarized with an almost vacant expression.

"Yumiko?"

"Sixty percent casualties amongst the Strike teams, and closer to seventy five with the security teams," She reported, and her voice was hollow as she scrolled through the list of deaths. "We've got perhaps three effective Strike teams at the moment, and they will likely need to be promoted and dispersed amongst the new recruits when they arrive. It will be a few weeks at the minimum before the new Strike teams will be in any condition I'm comfortable with to deploy."

Before any further could be discussed, the door to the briefing room swung open violently to reveal Moira Vahlen, a stressed medical orderly and an apologetic-looking security officer.

"I don't need your help, nursemaid!" Vahlen spat at the medical orderly, who trailed behind the scientist with a wheelchair. Vahlen herself hobbled towards the table with a cane in her right hand and a tablet in her left. The seriousness of her expression was only enhanced by the black and blue bruises that still covered the places of her face that weren't bandaged, and a neck brace was wrapped around her neck. A long moment of silence passed as Moira stopped at the table and simply waited. Annoyance grew on her face before she turned back to the medical orderly and screamed, "Get out!"

Bradford dismissed the orderly with a nod before fixing Moira with a serious expression. "You should be in recovery. If it's something important then have one of your subordinates—"

"Twilight Sparkle is dying," Vahlen interrupted as she hobbled over to the video monitor at the far end of the table. The screen flickered to life and with a few pressed keys several medical diagrams of the unicorn appeared. "The bullet was extracted safely, but the shot pierced one of her lungs. She has also lost a significant amount of blood. While the threat of internal bleeding is no longer present we lack any way of providing a transfusion. She is also not responding to any of the treatments we have tried to—"

"Wait, what? You're trying to save one of *them*? For God's sake, why?" Brett asked with no small degree of skepticism, and was rewarded with Vahlen's imperious glare.

"Thank you for your opinion, blunt instrument. If I require you to speak then I shall ask you to," She said coolly before turning back to the monitor and pointing at one of the pictures with her cane.

"Now just wait one minute—"

Vahlen whipped around to face the pilot and brought her cane down on the hardwood table with a BANG.

"She saved my life! Now shut up or get out if you don't have anything productive to add."

Any further arguing died instantly when Bradford cleared his throat. "Continue, doctor." His tone was the same as always but his expression made it clear that he was a moment away from ordering Vahlen back to medical.

"The treatments we use on a regular basis to accelerate healing is having no effect on Twilight, and with the blood loss her body is struggling to even function. She hasn't woken from her coma since her recovery in the field and I fear she never will," Vahlen paused before continuing. "The most likely causes of this condition are tied to... recent events. The strain of the abilities she displayed may have permanently damaged her ability to access what she called the 'Field.' I scanned her with the TED and found barely a tenth of the power she was drawing passively during the first recording earlier this month.

"The second possible cause is our change in location. Early transcripts with Twilight's conversations with Charles described the Field as hard to access due to disuse but over her time with Stardust it became easier to access." Vahlen's voice cracked, but she rallied quickly. "If her physiology is tied to her access of the Field, then the alpha site is likely the only place on Earth where she could recover from her weakened state."

"And that's no longer an option," Shen added as he closed his eyes.

"How much time does she have?" Bradford asked as he looked over the medical images on the monitor.

"A week? Maybe more, maybe less. Barring a miracle there's simply no way she'll survive in our care." Vahlen stated bluntly before tapping several times on her tablet. "Charles, our current stockpile of Elerium is now well stocked, correct?"

"At the moment, yes," The engineer blinked before rubbing his eyes. "I don't have the exact numbers but the recovery teams were able to retrieve a significant amount from storage at the alien base as well as from the downed alien craft at the alpha site. Why?"

Vahlen's initial response was to smirk and tap her tablet. Both Bradford and Shen's tablets pinged twice to report new messages. She didn't wait for them to even finish opening the messages before continuing. "I received a very interesting message from one of my colleagues shortly before the attack, and I feel that it may prove useful when combined with one of the projects created with Twilight's help. Charles, do you have enough resources to proceed with Kaleidoscope?"

A long moment passed as the engineer's sleep-deprived mind connected the dots to what Vahlen was suggesting, and then his eyes lit up. "The boys would need...twenty-four hours minimum to finish construction, and that's if they drop everything they're doing and devote one hundred percent of their time to it. If Kaleidoscope's charging cycle is similar to Fragarach, it would need..." Charles closed his eyes for a handful of seconds before opening them again, "Forty-eight hours before it could successfully activate. I should head down and get things started now. I'll also need to create some type of portable device for the return trip..."

"Wait," Bradford said which resulted in a tight-lipped glare from Vahlen and a kicked-puppy look from Shen. "I'm looking at the design schematics and the email from Marazuki and I think I know what you're planning, but what are the risks with Kaleidoscope?"

"The only risk would be to the volunteers, and I fully intend to test with a SHIV before anything else," Shen explained before looking to Vahlen.

The scientist attempted to stand straighter and fix Bradford with her most severe glare, but the effect of the glare was lessened when she swayed slightly before leaning heavily on her cane. "The risks are far greater if we do nothing. The moment she dies, her people will know about it. I do not want to be the one to explain why one of our weapons was the cause."

For nearly a minute the room was silent as Bradford crossed his arms and looked away. "Do it," he ordered as he turned back to face the others. "I want to be notified the moment it's finished and before the first test is attempted."

"Will do," Shen said as he turned to leave, but he hesitated when Vahlen's limping became pronounced before she sank into the wheelchair with a wince. "Moir, do you want to go back to Medical?"

"Yes, please," she answered before adding quietly, "Thank you."

Bradford watched as Shen pushed Vahlen's wheelchair out the room before he continued. "What's the status of the saboteurs that were captured during the defense? And Vide?"

Fujikawa's expression became tight-lipped. "About that..."

09:27, 05/27/2015, MEDICAL, BETA SITE

“Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won’t they?” said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. ‘When they hear what you did this year?’” Matt read from the faded paperback in his hands. “‘Proud?’ said Harry. ‘Are you crazy? All those times I could’ve died, and I didn’t manage it? They’ll be furious...’ And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world.”

The book closed in Matt’s hands and he forced himself to look to his side. Twilight lay in the bed on her side, and the only sign of life were her shallow breaths and the soft beeping of the machines around her. Her mane was an unkempt mess and her lavender coat was stained with dried sweat. A swath of bandages wrapped her barrel, which rose and fell with each breath. Her eyes were squeezed shut which gave her a pained expression even while asleep. For a long moment Matt simply stared at her before he closed his eyes and replayed the events of the bloody base defense in his mind.

“Harris, this is Finch! Bloody unicorn just disappeared after squashing a Mechtoid like a bug—“ Matt heard the report but it was no longer his main concern as Twilight appeared in the heart of the hangar. The lavender flames that engulfed the unicorn lashed out at the nearest aliens and turned them to solid stone.

A pair of Mechtoids that had been laying down suppressing fire against the humans turned and charged Twilight. Their volleys of plasma fire disappeared into the lavender flames and Twilight didn’t respond to the attack until one got close enough to swing one of the plasma cannons at her. The blue shields around the first Mechtoid flared as it met the lavender flames before they flickered out entirely. A moment later the entire robotic alien was nothing more than a statue.

The second Mechtoid stopped just short of making the same mistake its predecessor did by stopping a dozen feet from Twilight, and leveling its plasma cannons to fire. The shots went wild when the petrified Mechtoid was highlighted in with Twilight’s energy and slammed into the second robotic alien. Twilight turned to face the new threat and the statue slammed into the still active Mechtoid again and again until its shields dispersed and it too was petrified.

A few more moments of frantic fighting ensued as the humans flooded into the suddenly enemy free hangar. A significant number of the soldiers were leveling their weapons at Twilight, but no shots rang out as Bradford’s shouts to hold fire were obeyed. Matt waved down the nearest soldiers and stepped forward. He kept his weapon pointed towards the ground as he shouted, “Twilight! Twilight!”

Twilight’s head turned and the lavender flames disappeared. Her legs threatened to buckle beneath her as she sobbed Matt’s name. “They killed everyone!” She screamed before he could approach, and she vanished in a flash.

“Get to the surface!” Bradford ordered, and Matt did a double-take when he saw that the commander had fallen to his knees and held his head in his hands. “The black ship! Shoot the black ship...”

The urgency in his voice was obvious so Matt turned towards the surface access tunnel with Zhang and the rest of Strike One following close behind.

The surface was complete and total chaos, with the burning wreckage of a handful of several ships and over a dozen human fighter craft providing a small degree of illumination in the evening hours. The petrified aliens were everywhere, but Twilight wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“Black ship... Twilight’s on board,” Zhang reported, and Matt turned to see the sniper assume a shooter’s stance and aim into the roaring dogfight with his LANC. A thumb press disabled the weapon’s range and power safeties and he pulled the trigger. A single shot flew from the rifle and struck the underside of the ship.

The effect was immediate as the formation of alien ships lost cohesion and began to fall apart. The careful screen of scout ships that prevented the Interceptors and National Guard craft from approaching with their attack runs began to branch off in pursuit of individual targets and were promptly annihilated by Interceptors. With their defensive screen disappearing, the battleships attempted to ascend. The ship with a gaping hole in its midsection suffered a series of internal explosions and dropped like a stone, but the other continued to ascend to disappear into the night with a half dozen smaller ships in its wake.

Matt’s attention was elsewhere when Twilight appeared some distance away. Her teleport dumped her to the ground, where she struggled to stand. Matt poured on the speed to link up with her, and she stumbled forward to do her best to meet him halfway.

BANG

One of the doctors in another section of the medical wing dropped what sounded like a metal tray, which shook Matt from his attempts to find out just what he could have done better. He looked over to Twilight only to see that he had reached over to place one hand on Twilight's head with his index finger rubbing one of her ears while he had been thinking. He yanked the hand away the moment he realized what he was doing and stood. *God damn it, man. She isn't some dog you hit with your car.* Matt turned on his heel to leave but the one thing that could stop him happened.

"Matt..."

The word was quiet and weak, but it froze Matt in place where he stood. He looked back to see one of Twilight's eyes were opened just a bit and it was locked on him.

"Hey, Twily. I'm sorry if I woke you," Matt said quickly as he pulled up his chair and resumed his seat. "You've had us scared for a little while. How are you feeling?"

"Tired and hurt," Twilight replied with a great deal of effort. "Sorry... I didn't want to scare anyone." Tears began to leak from her eyes and into the pillow her head rested on. "They killed everyone. Kim, Joel and Moira are dead because I did nothing."

"Moira's alive, and it's all thanks to you, Twily. We all saw what you did, and you saved a lot of people," Matt explained quickly, and he tried to force a smile. "Noone blames you for what you did. I'm pretty sure there are quite a few people who would thank you if they could."

"What I did?"

The question was so unexpected that Matt nearly stumbled over the answer. "You... you saved everyone, Twilight. You showed up and drove the aliens back."

A moment of silence passed between the two before Twilight spoke again. "Matt?" The inquiry was softly spoken but he was quick to acknowledge it with a nod. "Could you...scratch my ears, please?"

Matt raised the same hand he had previously placed on Twilight's head but this time it hovered indecisively over her before gently settling where it once was. He had to resist the urge to pull away as he felt her push into his palm once the contact was made. The pressure stopped soon after as she drifted back to sleep. Matt wasn't certain how long they held that position before the silence was broken.

The door to Twilight's room opened to reveal Lana. She silently stepped in to the room and closed the door behind her before standing beside the bed. "Commander Bradford wants to see you. Did you finish the book?" Her gaze drifted from the book on the table beside them to Matt's hand and Twilight's closed eyes. She stayed silent but raised one eyebrow at the arrangement.

"She was awake earlier, but I think it took a lot out of her. And yes, I finished the book," Matt answered quietly as he rose. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"No, sorry. Just that you needed to see him immediately. Go, I'll take over," Lana said as she produced a book of her own and began to read. "Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways..." She started before the door closed behind Matt.

He gave a brief nod to both the security guards that flanked the door before turning and making his way out of the medical wing. Unfamiliar corridors greeted him but the directions to Bradford's office were clear and less than five minutes later he found himself standing at attention in front of the commander's desk.

"Glad you could make it on such short notice, Lieutenant," Bradford said with a degree of sympathy as he looked up from his tablet. "It is last minute, but there's a mission I need Strike One to undertake. Due to the unique nature of this mission, I cannot order you to do it. I can only ask you to volunteer, and I suspect you will." Bradford offered the tablet to Matt.

"Sir, with all due respect I don't think that's such a good idea right now," Matt started to say, but he stopped when Bradford merely pointed at the tablet and waited. He took the hint and began to scroll through the mission description and details. "Are you serious?" Matt blurted out before he could stop himself.

"Completely," Bradford answered. "I've reserved one of the briefing rooms for you this afternoon. And while it's against standard operating procedure, I imagine Major Fujikawa and Private Romalov would like to attend the briefing as well. I expect to have a list of volunteers for the operation by tomorrow morning. The operation will commence the day after."

"Yes, sir," Matt said as he turned and exited the office. *Bradford's right, I'd volunteer for this in a heartbeat.*

18:00, 05/27/2015, BRIEFING ROOM, BETA SITE

"So why are we here again?" Lana asked to the room in general, and was rewarded with several blank stares in her direction. The surviving members of Strike One were all present, the recently recovered Robert Sachs sat beside Zhang at the end of the row, and both appeared to be sleeping. To Lana's left, Jack Finch, Patrick Carlock, Holly Blake and Clara Burns gave each other doubtful looks. In the next row Captain Fujikawa and Yuri Romalov sat with equally confused expressions.

"You don't know? You are the most senior member of Strike One in the room," Finch asked before turning behind him, "Do you know anything about this, sir?"

"I'm afraid not," Fujikawa answered with a shrug. "All I know is that this meeting was arranged by the Commander, so it must be important."

The door to the briefing room opened and Commander Bradford stepped in with Matt following behind. The room's occupants rose and saluted, Zhang and Sachs included, and all resumed their seats as the salutes were returned. "At ease. You all have been gathered for a very important operation that will commence shortly. Participation is strictly voluntary, but what you learn in this room is considered classified at the highest levels and any leak will result in..." Bradford drifted off and a look of consternation appeared on his face. "Lieutenant, you will have to continue the briefing."

Surprise was obvious on Matt's face as he took Bradford's place at the front of the room. Just as he started to speak, the intercom buzzed. "Commander to the situation room." Before the request had finished, he had already exited the briefing room.

Matt cleared his throat to regain the initiative. "I won't repeat the commander's warning. We all know the disclosure penalties by now. Everyone in this room took part in the defense of the old base five days ago, and I'm certain everyone here either saw or heard of the 'Unicorn' that was encountered as well." Matt produced a remote control and the wall monitor behind him flickered to life, and several pictures of the base defense appeared as well as several pictures taken from Matt's own armor camera back in April. "During the final moments of the operation she was wounded, and is now in critical condition which could fail at any moment."

What's going on, Matt? Lana asked silently, and both she and Zhang shared a glance.

"Our mission will be to return this creature to its home world," Matt answered Lana's unspoken question, and he paused to let the statement sink in.

"Why?" Finch blurted out.

"I'm more interested in the how," Sachs answered with an arched eyebrow. "Unless that thing came from the moon, I have to wonder how we'll get there."

"To answer the first question," Matt spoke as he raised his hands to motion for silence. "She isn't affiliated with the invaders in any way, and she did not originate from whatever world or worlds they come from. She's also *highly* placed within the ruling power structure of her world with both personal and professional ties to at least two of her species that have exponentially greater capabilities. These beings are also aware of her presence if not her current location, and they would know the moment she dies. I should also point out that the cause of her current condition is from being shot by one of our weapons." Matt didn't continue but the implication was clear.

"Where is the lackwit who shot her? I remember security taking him off our hands and haven't heard anything since." Lana stated.

"I don't know, and it's not relevant at this juncture," Matt shrugged. "To answer the second question, Charles Shen in engineering has created a teleportation device that is capable of sending anyone who uses it to a different location." The monitor pictures switched to a massive chamber with an elevated circular platform and a corresponding circular pad above it. "Initial test involved sending a SHIV to the alien world, where it would begin recording its surroundings before activating its homer beacon to return here. The SHIV returned successfully and with video evidence to confirm the location was correct."

"Can we see the video the SHIV took?" Fujikawa asked.

"It's... still undergoing review. Sorry." The reaction was well-hidden but Lana knew Matt well enough to recognize that he deliberately dodged the question. "I am now asking for volunteers to assist me with this operation. A minimum of three is preferred for a half squad, or seven for a full squad in addition to me."

Lana was already rising from her chair before Matt had finished his explanation, and she was pleasantly surprised to see Zhang follow shortly afterward. A glance behind her revealed that Romalov was standing

as well, though Fujikawa looked conflicted.

"I can't volunteer," the major said with sincere regret. "I'm currently the highest ranking Strike team officer, and I can't be away until things settle down. I can wish you luck though."

A moment passed before Sachs slowly rose to his feet and a grin crept onto his face. Burns, Blake and Carlock followed shortly afterward. Finch was the last to stand, but the hesitation that was once on his face was gone.

08:50, 05/29/2015, KALEIDOSCOPE CHAMBER

"Twily, we've got a surprise for you," Matt heard Lana said as she walked alongside the stretcher that the unicorn now rested in. "Just hang on for a little bit longer, okay?" Zhang led the column and held the front portion of the stretcher while Romalov carried the rear portion, and Lana and Matt walked along each side of the stretcher as they ascended the ramp to the massive plateau in the center of the room.

The rest of the volunteers had already assembled on the plateau and were in full armor and with a variety of rifle weaponry. Over half were carrying projectile weapons with several clips wrapped in blue or red tape, while Finch, Blake and Jenkins carried laser rifles. Several flash bang and smoke grenades were also seen on every one of the soldiers. Matt himself carried a flare gun in place of his usual sidearm.

Burns was in the process of double-checking both her and Finchs gear as Finch checked their weapons. Blake and Carlock huddled together over a tablet to review the mission information one last time. Sachs stood as still as a statue awaiting orders. All of them paused to look as Twilight was carried onto the teleporter.

"Five minutes, gentlemen," Shen called from the control booth.

"All right, listen up!" Matt said as he let his rifle dangle from its shoulder strap as he pulled up his own tablet. "I know we went over all of this earlier, but it bears repeating. The first teleportation test sent the SHIV to a field just outside of a rural population center. This is not intended to be a first contact scenario with these people. We'll approach the outskirts of the town and deploy flares to gather their attention. Once we're confident she's been noticed, we'll fall back to the teleport homer and be on our way back home," Matt summarized while pointing over his shoulder at the cylindrical device mounted on a tripod in the center of the platform.

"You're all professionals so I know its overkill for saying so, but you are not to engage the locals in any way. If they approach, then you fall back. If they are hostile then warning shots or rubber bullets," He continued as he tapped the blue-taped magazine on his rifle.

"What about hostile wildlife, sir?" Sachs queried as he held up his own tablet that showed one of Twilight's drawings. "Some of those things from the briefing seem rather... exotic."

"Warning shots, then live ammo as needed. Any other questions?"

"How do we know the locals will take care of her when they see her?" Finch asked while stealing glances towards Twilight.

"She's a national hero to them. Someone will know her on sight. Anything else?"

"One minute!" Shen's voice boomed from the intercom. The lights in the chamber dimmed slightly and an intricate pattern of circuitry began to glow on the platform beneath them as well as above them.

"Places, people!" Matt shouted, and the soldiers all scattered to various positions around the perimeter of the platform. Matt, Lana and Zhang formed an inner ring, with Twilight taking the last point. A digital clock on the far wall began to count the seconds until the teleporter activated. Thirty. Twenty. Ten. Five. When the count reached two, Matt sucked in a breath and closed his eyes...

CRACK

...and immediately doubled over as he fought the urge to vomit his breakfast onto the floor. He ripped his helmet off his head and took several deep breaths before things settled down enough for him to rise and look over the rest of Strike One.

They had fared no better than Matt as a good portion of them were now doubled over and showing varying degrees of illness. "Sound off! Everyone all right?" He asked as he turned his gaze to his surroundings. "Ah, crap."

What he expected to see were the pastoral fields surrounding the sleepy little town that the SHIV had recorded, but instead they found themselves inside some sort of ruin. What was likely a regal red carpet

was now a decayed and faded rag beneath their feet which led up a small flight of stairs where two thrones sat. Tapestries hung from the wall behind each throne with a clear sun and moon theme in both symbolism and coloration but like the carpet they suffered the ravages of time. At the opposite end of the carpeted walkway were double doors, one of which had fallen from its frame to expose a small glimpse of the scenery beyond the bleak stone walls. Shattered mirrors and stained glass windows lined those walls as well. Matt's gaze drifted upwards to the vaulted ceiling and took note of several holes in the ceiling that revealed the night's sky.

Once the soldiers had recovered enough to stand, Matt spoke up. "Insertion is off target, I can say for certain this is not our intended destination." A burst of sotto-voce profanity rippled through the soldiers. "We need to get the lay of the land to see if we're near any other population centers. Zhang, Blake, Burns; see if you can find an upper level vantage point and report any landmarks. Romalov, Sachs, Finch, I want you two to stay here and guard the teleport homer and her," Matt pointed to the stretcher and the device set up beside her. "Lana, Carlock, Romalov, you're with me. We're going to take a look outside. Short range comms are still active so shout if you see anything."

The group broke up and Matt slipped his helmet back on before stepping outside. *Well, that was quick.* "Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we have our identifying landmark," he said as he caught sight of a massive mountain that sat all by its lonesome with nothing but plains as far as the eye could see. A castle was perched precariously along the side of the mountain, and dozens of sparkling lights could be seen surrounding its base. Any other details were obscured as cloud cover blotted out the moon as it sank on the western horizon, while the eastern horizon had just begun to brighten. *It's twilight... no, it's the dawn.*

"Well, hot damn, look at that castle," Lana said, and Matt could hear the grin in her voice. "I'm so taking the armor camera footage to Charles when we get back. I'll bet twenty bucks that his response involves the word, 'Impossible.'"

"Focus!" Matt hissed before addressing the squad. "We're heading back to pick up the package. There should be a village on the other side of the woods where we can get her help. Romalov! You and me are on stretcher duty. Zhang, Blake, Burns, Sachs; stay here and hold down the fort. Everyone else is moving out."

Matt and Romalov lifted the stretcher with ease and the group set off. After crossing a shaky rope bridge and passing through the thick of the forest, the group finally broke through to a clearing. Some time had passed as the night sky was already brightening with the approaching dawn. They put a good fifty feet between themselves and the forest before Matt called for them to halt.

"All right, watch for any movement. If you see any locals, call them out as you see them," Matt said as he lowered the stretcher to the ground before shrugging the pack from his shoulders and placing it beside the unconscious unicorn. "Twily, I don't know if you can hear me or not. You're going to be home and with your friends really soon. I even brought your stuff from the lab." When Twilight didn't respond, he reached forward to rub her head but hesitated. The hand retracted and fell on the flare gun at his hip, which he drew and loaded.

Matt had raised the flare gun to fire it when he felt the warmth of the sun upon him as it broke the horizon. It was such a natural phenomena that it took him a moment to realize that he was feeling it through his armor.

"Goddamn, who turned on the spotlight?" Lana cursed as she raised a hand to supplement the already significant shielding built into her helmet.

"Sir, I have movement. Something just launched from the castle." Carlock had a pair of binoculars pointed in the direction indicated, and it took a moment's worth of squinting for Matt to identify just what he had spotted. "Confirmed the white princess is incoming, and she looks pissed."

"Uh... sir? I think now would be a good time to leg it," Finch suggested as he edged his way back towards the tree line.

Sweat was starting to form on Matt's forehead as he made his decision. "Move it, people! Double time it back to the ruins!" He ordered as he turned and ran full tilt into the woods. He had almost entered the tree line when he looked over his shoulder to see the princess's descent. Her landing was followed by a wave of heat and a flash of golden light, and Matt looked back to the path he was now cutting in between the trees. A shout and a battle cry could be heard behind him and the sound of many hooves as well.

"Carlock, Jenkins! Flashbangs!" Matt shouted, and the two soldiers in the lead of the retreat both turned and hurled their grenades behind them.

"Don't stop running, and don't look back!" Lana yelled as she suited action to words. The two grenades detonated on the path behind them, and the sounds of what was likely profanity and metal clattering could be heard in the distance.

"Zhang, Harris! Get the teleport homer prepped, we're coming in hot. Are the ruins secured?"

"For the moment," Zhang replied with a degree of calm that was at odds with the current situation. "I don't mean to alarm anyone, but I believe Luna is circling the forest with a flock of pegasi guards. The rope bridge and the clearing in front of the ruins may present a challenge."

Goddamn it, more complications. What else could possibly go wrong? Matt fumed silently before continuing. "Zhang, keep an eye on their air support. If we activate the Chameleon armor just as we break the tree line, we might be able to lose them. What's the time on the teleport homer?"

"Ten minutes."

We'll be there in thirty seconds, and our pursuit in little more than that unless we can lose them. Damn it. "Get it started, we'll be there momentarily," Matt shouted as he caught sight of the rope bridge. "Do not engage and stay out of sight. Chameleon armor now!"

Matt immediately lost sight of the other soldiers running through the forest, but their electronic ICC tags still popped up on his helmet visor. Jenkins and Carlock were the first to run full tilt over the bridge and both dropped on the other side while drawing their knives. Romalov and Finch crossed next and Matt was the last to reach the other side. The moment his feet touched solid ground, both Carlock and Jenkins severed the ropes and let the bridge fall into the chasm below.

Matt had made it nearly three quarters of the way between the gorge and was starting to feel just a little bit better about his odds when a shout louder than the voice of god hit him with something bordering on concussive force. He stumbled but quickly recovered as he bolted through the door and the others headed towards the beacon in the center of the call. Matt caught sight of the others as they crouched in cover, and the damnable counter on the teleport homer reading 9:34. He had just enough time to turn back to the door when several things happened simultaneously.

The remaining door flew off its hinges and shot towards the retreating humans and the teleport beacon, and Luna stood on the other side in all her terrible glory while surrounded by at least a dozen armored Equestrians that dwarfed Twilight in both size and bulk. The moment the door flew off its hinges the guards began to charge. A trio of Pegasi wearing blue and gold descended from one of the holes in the ceiling like birds of prey. Finch tripped and fell but twisted onto his back to fire his laser rifle at the stampede that was bearing down on him, while Blake fired hers at one of the descending Pegasi.

In the moment it took Matt to wonder why he was able to pick up so much occurring at one time, he found his answer. Time had frozen and the scene was locked on that single moment. Several seconds passed in Matt's mind as the time freeze stretched far longer than anything he had ever experienced before, until something happened.

A whistle filled the now-silent scene, and the sounds of uneven steps followed it. A creature unlike anything Matt had ever seen stepped into view and made its way to the door suspended halfway between the retreating humans and their attackers. It was tall, or long, and its serpentine body twisted and coiled in random directions as it surveyed the scene around it. Every part of its body was mismatched, with a cloven hoof, a talon, a lion's paw and a reptilian claw, plus a bat and bird wing composed its limbs and two wildly different horns sat atop its head. It extended its lion paw and touched the door, and in a flash of light the door was replaced with... bananas.

The mish-mash creature casually peeled and ate each one before tossing them over his shoulder at random, though when he finished the last one he stopped and pushed it a half inch to the right with his cloven hoof.

He then strode over to Finch and pinched the laser bolt that had just emerged from the barrel and snapped it off like a twig before grabbing the soldier's foot and hefting his frozen form up and onto his shoulder like a club. The creature began to pick at his teeth with the lasbolt and it slowly turned a sickly green color as he walked out of Matt's line of sight before appearing from the other side of his vision beside Blake and with out Finch. His now free hand grasped the laser bolt that was a few feet from connecting with one of the pegasi and bent it as easily as a paper clip while turning just as green as the first. He then turned to the lead Pegasi and placed one claw on its leading hoof and shoved. The pegasi began to spin in place like a top as Discord turned back towards the humans.

The unknown creature picked up each of the humans as though there were lawn ornaments and deposited them all around the teleport homer before he extended one finger to the homer itself. The number dropped from nine and a half minutes to three seconds.

Matt watched as the creature surveyed his work before giving his teeth one final rake with his captured laser bolt. He turned back to the humans and giggled before tossing the laser bolt over his shoulder and snapping his fingers.

The scene dissolved into chaos.

The charging Equestrians hit the carpet of banana peels and fell with a clatter of armor and shouted profanity but not before launching no less than three peels directly into Luna's face. The princess herself let out what was likely a very unladylike curse of her own as she stumbled backward from the unexpected projectiles. The leading Pegasus stopped its spinning and collided mid-air with the second one in the formation. The third changed direction at the last moment to avoid the bent laser beam before dodging again as the beam reflected off a broken mirror shard and back into the room. The beam that Discord had tossed over his shoulder leapt into action and narrowly missed the now desperately evading Pegasus before reflecting back into the room like the first had. Dozens of reflections filled the room with green laser fire before one ill-timed dodge caused the last pegasus to crash into the apparently very dizzy flight leader. Both laser bolts made one final reflection before striking the stain glass windows on opposite sides of the room and exiting the ruins entirely.

Any further mayhem was cut off as the teleport homer activated and sent the humans back to Earth.

The room was dark and almost devoid of furniture, save for an almost featureless desk and chair. The room might have been mistaken for a long-forgotten office or storage room were it not for the lack of dust combined with the well dressed man who stepped into the room. Out of long-ingrained habit he sat in the seat after straightening his tie. His posture was ramrod straight as he pressed a seemingly random spot on the desk before tapping in front of him as though he had a keyboard. The wall across from the desk flickered as power fed into a monitor hidden in the darkness. Text began to scrawl as the system powered up.

```
>>SYSTEM ACTIVATION
>>LOGIN/PASSWORD REQUIRED
>>"0"
>>"*****"
>>USER AUTHENTICATED
>>ESTABLISHING SECURE CONNECTION
>>SECURE CONNECTION ESTABLISHED
>>0 IS NOW IN ATTENDANCE
>>CURRENT ATTENDANCE INCLUDES 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16
>>ALL MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE
```

0: "Good evening, gentlemen. The reports of this month's extraordinary events have been forwarded to all relevant parties, which will now be discussed. Once each topic is discussed satisfactorily we will move on to the next. There will not be a repeat of last month's meeting."

A long moment of silence passed before Zero continued.

0: "The first and most pressing topic on the agenda involves the human collaborators that were found in the alien base that was captured and the likelihood of their involvement in the subsequent infiltration and sabotage of the North American 'alpha site.'"

1: "The preliminary reports from Doctor Vahlen are mostly complete, and I'm willing to forgive the state of those reports after what she endured. The reports detail wide-spread genetic modification and enhancement among the human corpses that were recovered at the alien base. The vast majority of the corpses has been positively linked to abductees from around the globe just as Vahlen suspected, and I agree with her assumption that the aliens were using the abductees as lab rats to perfect their modifications and implants before applying them to the collaborators."

5: "Some of the things Vahlen and the Strike teams have reported seems beyond what could be achieved without total replacement of organs or tissues. How could they create such things from the ground up? Vahlen mentions 'Meld', but--"

1: "Vahlen's report on the Meld substance that was recovered from the base was incomplete but the Meld itself is apparently composed of billions of nano-machines that I speculate could do the work that we saw on the traitors."

2: "It's intriguing to consider what we could do with our own troops once such a substance could be mastered, but..."

4: "I'm much more interested in Charles Shen's suggestion of using the Meld substance as a means of fabricating microscopic circuitry and machinery. With the other breakthroughs that were found this month, he feels he can create a mechanized device that can mimic the human body to a degree that we've only seen in science fiction or video games. The arm that was created for one of the Strike team operators is the proof of concept."

13: "Speaking of breakthroughs, we need to talk about the Stardust proj--"

>>13 has been muted by 0.

0: "That subject will be discussed at a later time as will the Meld substance. The current topic now is the nature of the human collaborators and the humans captured at the alpha site."

>>13 has been unmuted by 0.

13: "Well, with that in mind, the surviving prisoners that were captured and secured all show signs of damage we associate with mind control. This brings up an unsettling possibility, that the aliens are able to project their mental powers from a much greater distance than we thought possible."

16: "Wasn't Vahlen in the process of interrogating one of their commanders when the base came under attack? Is it possible there was a security breach that allowed it to escape and take control of the base personnel?"

13: "No. Vahlen's report is incomplete regarding the 'Sectoid Commander', but the 'Rule Breaker' device prevented it from using any of its abilities once it had been secured, and the captive was purged as per standard policy the moment the base came under attack."

1: "And what of 'Vide'? Do we have any news on his current location? His body wasn't found among the dead after the battle, and the nature of the containment cell he was escorted to seems to indicate he either had help to escape or whatever freakish implants the alien gave him allowed him to heal several broken bones in the span of minutes."

>>1 now displaying VideCell.jpg

1: "As you can see, all three security guards are dead. One from a broken neck, the other from a crushed throat and the third appears to have died by violent manual tracheostomy."

11: "What do you mean by 'manual tracheostomy'?"

1: "His throat was ripped out by hand. Vide or his compatriots left a message in blood on the wall as well. 'We will be watching.' I can only assume this is meant as a threat towards XCOM to undermine their efforts."

0: "As much as I would like to believe it is a coincidence, we are all too careful to make such an assumption. Those were my exact words at the end of my discussion with Commander Bradford at the end of April. This message is directed at the Council as much as XCOM. Given the likelihood of communications being compromised, I ordered and implemented new security procedures to combat future leaks."

1: "I'm also in the process of trying to find just where Vide came from. The electronic trail that authorized his entrance into the base as well as the email that Bradford found that morning both lead virtually nowhere. Whoever is responsible for this is very cautious."

0: "Very good. Continue your investigation to locate the origins of this infiltrator and forward them immediately to Commander Bradford. XCOM's primary objective of protecting all human life is now rescinded, and any action up to and including lethal force is now authorized against Vide and any who aid him. The next subject is the Meld substance that was recovered, and the potential it provides to us."

2: "As much as I would love to see our soldiers go toe to toe with these traitors using Meld to enhance their bodies, I'm afraid I would have to withdraw my recommendation of using it in this manner. With biological changes we just don't know how it will effect our soldiers without the aliens expertise in this field, and we can't risk the soldiers we currently have experimenting."

4: "I recommend going forward with Shen's suggestion. The risks to personnel both in the short and long term seem significantly less than experimenting on our own soldiers."

>>0 has called for a vote: PROCEED WITH DR. CHARLES SHEN'S SUGGESTED USE OF MELD

>>Yes votes: 17 total, No votes: 0 total, 0 Abstain

>>Proposal Accepted.

0: "Excellent. The next order of business involves the creation and use of the Kaleidoscope chamber to return the subject of the Stardust project to its place of origin."

11: "If I may, there is something I wanted to discuss in relation to this topic: Twilight Sparkle's participation in the defense of the alpha site."

0: "Very well, proceed."

11: "I won't go through the report word for word, but I think the events of the base defense quite clearly show the consequences we might have brought on ourselves had certain decisions been made at the start

of the month. Aside from the 'Mechtoids' and their shields, I was not able to find one instance of an enemy being able to mount a modicum of defense against her powers, and even the Mechtoids didn't last long once she set her eyes upon them."

13: "So, what you're saying is, 'I told you so'?"

11: "You said it, not me."

0: "Personal comments are not to be brought up in this meeting."

11: "My point is, Twilight Sparkle described herself as in the top one percent of her species. Assuming she isn't astronomically ahead of the rest of her race in a manner similar to how she describes the princesses, we might have found an untapped resource for the war."

13: "I feel inclined to remind you at this point that she was shot and nearly killed by a human before she was returned to her home world, and the after action reports clearly indicate hostile intent upon her return. Part of me is surprised we aren't getting flooded with reports of these 'Equestrians' appearing across the globe demanding blood."

2: "On a related note, where is our wayward guardsman? From what I understand he was swept up by the Strike teams and thrown into a cell."

1: "Captain Vic Spiegel is currently enjoying our hospitality while we evaluate his usefulness to the XCOM project. He is officially listed as missing in action, presumed dead when his F-16 was shot down during the fight. I've made quite certain that he is informed of the foolishness of his actions."

16: "So what did we learn from the mission to 'Equestria'? Surely the armor camera footage has been gone over with a fine toothed comb and every particle of dirt from their boot treads has been examined."

1: "To use Vahlen's exact words, 'remarkably earth-like.' Not to cut you off but what I am more concerned with is the state of the SHIV that came back after the first test. A Mark One SHIV spent exactly ten minutes on that world and came back with... well, the official report says, "one cone-shaped party hat affixed atop the main camera by rubber band, six party blowers stuffed in the gatling gun's barrels, approximately two pounds of shredded paper confetti and a... cupcake on top of one of the treads."

13: "Wait, what? I glossed over the initial test reports. Is the SHIV's recording of its trip attached to the report?"

1: "Yeah, it is. I have no idea what happened. One minute the camera is panning across the night-time terrain, then the next the camera is covered by the party hat. A few seconds later the teleport homer finished charging and it was back in the Kaleidoscope chamber. I keep trying to come up with a logical explanation and I fail."

15: "I viewed the video footage also and I'm stumped, but one thing that did not show up in the video that we need to discuss: Discord."

5: "Discord? The meddler that sent Twilight here in the first place? He never shows up in either the SHIV or armor camera footage."

15: "You're right, he didn't, but in the base psychologist's notes there was specific mention of an event in which an entity matching Discord's description appeared and made several changes to the area just before the teleport homer's activation. If you go to the indicated timestamp in Lieutenant Harris's armor camera, there's the charging Equestrians and a door flying at the camera. The next? Bananas and green laser beams everywhere."

2: "Never in my life did I think I'd hear that phrase in this meeting."

15: "I'll admit to thinking the same thing, but we aren't addressing the bigger question: Why would Discord do that? Why would he help the Strike team escape? The argument could be made that he did it simply to thwart the efforts of the established government in an embarrassing way, but there's no such thing as coincidences this big. He sent Twilight to us. He also helped the Strike teams flee. Why? What could he possibly have to gain from those two actions? Previous reports would have led me to believe he would have actively hindered Twilight's return to her home."

1: "Such speculation I'm afraid isn't going to do much good at this point without more information, though the surviving Stardust team members might have insight into that question. I would also suggest that a review be made of all video footage that has been taken since early April. If there's any inconsistencies it might be another case of his interference."

7: "What if he's been interfering for longer than that? How do we know he hasn't been interfering for ages?"

13: "Since no one asked, I feel I should especially since we're getting a bit off topic. Did Commander Bradford make the right decision in expending resources to create the Kaleidoscope chamber on such short notice, then use it to give away our one and only unicorn specimen? Such a fate would be unfortunate, but just imagine what we could have learned from her after her passing."

1: "I do admit we could have learned much, but the risks would have been great, perhaps fatally so. They were able to send communication to Twilight through unknown means, and one specific communication mentioned an awareness of her current conditions."

13: "I am... inclined to agree, but I felt the question had to be asked."

1: "So, are we in agreement that Commander Bradford's decision was the correct one? Any who disagree may now present their case."

0: "It is my opinion that Commander Bradford's quick decision was in the best interests of the XCOM project, and while it may not have yielded any immediate benefit it did prevent potential conflict from a third party. As the subject of the Stardust project is no longer available for study, I recommend its immediate closure. A new project will take its place to cultivate and expand the abilities of any XCOM personnel who show signs of the Gift. Are there any questions?"

0: "This Council is now adjourned."

One by one the Councilmen disconnected, and Zero followed suit. The moment the disconnect message appeared on the screen, he tapped another place on his desk before clasping his hands before him.

"Good evening, Commander."

Second Contact

"Thank you all for your attendance today," Shining Armor addressed the assembled officers that filled the seats that lined the walls of the circular chamber before turning and bowing respectfully toward the only pony that wasn't a guard. "Princess Luna, thank you for finding the time to participate in this meeting. It is my hope that having every available perspective will provide insight into recent events."

Luna returned the bow with a nod of her head. "It is my pleasure, captain. My sister sends her regrets, as she did not wish to leave Twilight's side, though she may still make an appearance."

"A sentiment I can sympathize with," Shining straightened before turning to the first guardspony in the group. "Sergeant Tower Shield, step forward and share your perspective of the event."

The indicated guard, a brown earth pony with a tower shield on his flank, stepped forward and stood in the exact center of the room. The moment he stopped, the lights in the room darkened before the walls disappeared and were replaced by an illusion of the early morning setting of the guard barracks. Several guards populated the scene in various stages of their muster activities. A blinding flash of light and an earsplitting crack filled the barracks and Celestia appeared in all her terrible glory which brought every guardpony to attention.

"Sergeant, prepare for teleportation and deployment. You have one minute," She commanded before turning and starting a second spell. When the sergeant opened his mouth to speak, Celestia aimed a glare at him that caused all the observers, Luna included, to wince and look away. "There is no time for your questions, Twilight Sparkle's life is at stake." The moment she was finished, Celestia vanished in the same manner she arrived.

"Move it, colts! Cotton, retrieve your field kit first, we'll help you with your armor once you have it," Shield barked, and a pale yellow unicorn with a cotton ball cutie mark rushed out of sight. "Headwind! Notify Captain Armor and the other princesses of the situation. Go now!" A charcoal Pegasus spread his wings and launched himself out of the barracks with blinding speed. The rest of the guards had already flung their lockers open and were suiting up with their armor. The unicorn medic returned with her saddle bags returned and was practically swarmed by the now fully armored guards as they secured her armor.

"Formation!" Shield shouted, and the guards assembled into a three by three formation with the sergeant front and center and the medic in the middle. Traces of golden light appeared around their formation and the guards widened their stances. "Brace for teleport!"

Light as brilliant as the sun filled the sergeant's eyes before vanishing to reveal the rolling hills around Ponyville and the somewhat ominous tree line that marked the beginning of the Everfree forest. Celestia stood protectively over the unconscious form of Twilight Sparkle while glaring at several bipedal figures that were making for the forest.

"HALT!" Shield and several of the other guards shouted, but the retreating figures didn't slow down in the least. "After them! Don't let them escape!"

The guards lurched into a gallop just as the last fleeing figure disappeared between the trees, though they were quickly reacquired almost as soon as the guards passed the treeline. The guards were almost upon the tail elements of their target when Shield said, "Stop." The scene froze and the sergeant turned to face the observers. "Shortly after this, my team and I were disabled through unknown means. Every one of my guards reported the same experience: Blinding white light that lasted for several moments, combined with a bang loud enough to cause temporary hearing loss and disorientation until Cotton had recovered enough to administer recovery spells. By this time, we lost contact with our objective."

The sergeant turned back to the frozen scene behind him and one section of the scene grew in prominence until it dominated the entire room. The center of the room now showed a black cylinder with a series of holes in its outer shell. "We believe this was the cause of both the light and sound. We recovered debris from the scene and our engineers are still trying to determine how it functions. They are certain that it's a single-use disposable device, though, which makes sense if they were using it to cover their retreat."

"Sergeant," Shining spoke up when the moment presented itself. "What motivated you to pursue these creatures? I do not ask because I doubt your judgment but I am simply curious as to why you did what you did."

Shield nodded and turned back to the scene, which rewound until the moment when he had shouted for them to halt. The scene then focused on the retreating subjects. "The first is their appearance. All of the creatures we witnessed wore full suits of armor with similar markings. This implies an armed

organization much like the Solar Guard or Luna's Sentinels. The armor appears well-fitted and covers what we all assume to be their vital areas, which gives evidence that who or whatever they are, they are well supplied. They are also fleeing from Princess Celestia and blatantly ignored the order to halt."

The sergeant hesitated before resuming his summary. "These creatures are also nothing like anything I'm familiar with, and I've had the chance to serve in several positions around the country as well as working diplomatic security for the embassies in both the Gryphon Empire as well as the Zebra Union. They have a passing resemblance to Minotaurs and Diamond dogs in that they walk upright, but even with their armor it's obvious they aren't related." The scene split and the image of a mangy Diamond Dog in a worn leather vest followed by the imposing figure of a Minotaur in black plate armor appeared alongside the mysterious creature to make the sergeant's point.

"Lastly, I would point out where they appeared. The location was south of Ponyville and within a few minutes trot from where the Elements of Harmony live and a couple of days from Canterlot itself. These unknowns penetrated the borders of our country before they were discovered. This leads me to believe they are either very good at hiding or they have some means of blocking the senses of both the princesses, who have searched for her continuously since Twilight Sparkle's disappearance." The last point drew uncomfortable shuffles from the observers as they shared glances.

Or they weren't anywhere we would think to look, Luna thought to herself as she caught Shining Armor's eye and gave him a knowing look. *I do not blame the good sergeant's assumptions of these creatures. Only Shining Armor and I know their true origins.* The princess only half listened as the sergeant continued to elaborate on his decision as well as his speculation on the creatures they had encountered as she allowed her mind to wander. It wasn't without purpose though, as her mind hopped from dream to dream until she settled on the dreams of her first friend.

The moment she entered the dream, Luna immediately pulled herself back and hid herself from Twilight once she realized the contents of the dream were clearly precious to the unicorn. Twilight was tucked into a bed with bandages wrapped around her barrel in much the same way they had been when she was found and her eyes struggled to stay open as she watched the creature sitting beside her bed. It only took a moment for Luna to realize that it was likely the same kind of creature that she herself had seen when Twilight had been returned, without the armor or helmet. The greatest surprise for the princess though was the tender emotions that flowed from Twilight like waves on a beach as the creature reached out to place one hand on her head and rub one of her ears.

"Your Highness!"

The shout snapped Luna from her dream gazing back to her physical body and she had to suppress a bout of embarrassed panic if the room had been waiting on her to reply. She breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed that all eyes were not on her but the entrance to the chamber, and Celestia as she entered.

"I must apologize for interrupting the meeting so abruptly," She said politely as she made her way to the center of the chamber. "I must also apologize for the events that this meeting has convened to discuss." Celestia motioned for the sergeant to return to his seat as she assumed his place at the center of the chamber. Once the murmurs had died down, the scene outside of Everfree was replaced by a city that looked strikingly similar to Manehattan with glass towers and paved roads.

"They are called 'humans'," Celestia said solemnly as the scene played out behind her. Everypony, Luna included, leaned forward eagerly as several 'humans' appeared, then recoiled as a pair of spider-like monsters chased the humans as they fled. "I've read the Sergeant's report, and his presumptions are mostly correct. The humans are well organized and well supplied. They have to be because they are at war."

"War?" Tower Shield blurted out unintentionally as the first of the spiders was cut down by one of the human soldiers that just appeared. "Where is there war in Equestria? I know the Gryphon Empire has its little skirmishes with themselves and the occasional face off with the Minotaurs but it never amounts to anything! And I have never seen any of these 'humans' before, or those things either." Several heads nodded in agreement though Shining Armor did no more than shoot Luna a questioning look.

"There is no war on *Equestria*," Celestia emphasized the last word. "Other worlds are not as blessed with peace as ours." A moment passed as she let that statement sink in.

"How long have you known this?" Luna asked, and she immediately regretted the question, especially in front of the guards when her sister hid a wince.

"I was only recently provided this information, and it came from an unreliable source. I did not wish to share it until I was absolutely certain it would be accurate," She replied. "I am afraid I have very little information about the conflict itself, or the enemies that oppose them beyond their intent to destroy the humans. When I had obtained this information, I was also informed that Twilight was assisting them in their resistance."

Any further discussion was interrupted when the door to the chamber opened again. An on-duty guard trotted to Celestia's side and bowed quickly before whispering to the princess before turning and leaving the chamber.

"Captain Song, you may continue this meeting in our absence. I am afraid both Captain Armor and my sister will be leaving with me," Celestia said as she nodded towards a large olive green earth pony stallion. "It seems Twilight Sparkle has woken up."

It took several moments before Twilight found the motivation to open her eyes as she struggled to hold on to whatever she had been dreaming about. The content of the dream escaped her, but for whatever reason it made her feel... happy.

She slowly opened her eyes and expected to see one of her human friends beside her bed. She vaguely remembered Matt, Lana and Charles reading to her, and her brief conversation with Matt, so she was surprised and a little disappointed when she saw that she was alone. Her eyes finally focused on more than her immediate surroundings and it took her a moment to realize that she was no longer in the room that had been her home for the past two months. Polished marble walls led to an arched ceiling above her, and several tasteful landscape paintings lined the walls that she could see. A cool breeze from the open window beside her pulled her attention to the side, and her eyes widened as she recognized the city outside the window.

I'm home.

Before the enormity of that realization could be fully grasped, the door to Twilight's room flew open and all of her friends flooded in despite the protests of the doctor. "Be careful! She's likely very tired and still needs to rest!" he shouted, though any further warnings were stopped when all three princesses and Shining Armor passed him at a slightly more restrained pace.

I'm home... I'm really home, Twilight realized and she felt the dam break within her. "I-I was so scared I wouldn't see any of you again!" She choked back a sob as Spike hopped up onto the bed. Before the little dragon could say a word, Twilight pulled him forward into a tight hug while the rest of the elements followed suit.

"Glad to finally have ya back, Twilight," Applejack said with a smile.

"Indeed, though I have to warn you that Sweetie Belle and her friends will have a thousand questions for you when you return to Ponyville," Rarity added. "They let their imaginations get away from them so don't be surprised if they ask you about dueling Windigos while riding a dragon."

"What DID you do?" Rainbow Dash asked next. "Because it would be so *awesome* if you were out fighting and beating all of the monsters Discord can think up! Tell us all about it!"

"I..." Twilight started but the explanation died in her throat. *I can't tell them about those...things.* Her gaze drifted to the princesses and her brother. "I'll tell you about it later, but I need to talk to the princesses and Shining Armor. Alone." The request was followed with a moment of dead silence as the other elements shared a look. "I'm sorry, but it's important."

"No worries, Twilight!" Pinkie Pie said cheerfully, "We'll be nearby when you're done explaining everything to the princesses!" The pink pony then wrapped the other elements and Spike in an impossibly huge hug and bolted out of the room, leaving Celestia, Luna, Cadance and Shining behind.

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you found your way back to us, Twilight," Celestia said with a warm tone. There was a flash of golden light and a worn book appeared beside her, which she presented to the unicorn. "I was going through my library and when I saw this book I thought it would be a perfect 'get well soon' present. It's Starswirl's book of unfinished spells, which will no doubt challenge you more than ever."

Twilight took the book in her hooves and gave its cover a longing look before setting it aside.

"Twilight, what's wrong? You can tell us," Cadance asked gently as she moved to the side of the bed and placed one hoof on hers.

That simple comforting contact broke down Twilight's last effort to maintain her composure, and she broke down into tears as she told them everything that had happened over the past two months.

14:32, 07/30/2015, BARRACKS

"So, how do I look?" Matt asked as he turned to face Lana and Zhang.

"Acceptable, sir," Zhang answered. "If your intent is to leave an impression then you will undoubtedly succeed."

"Indeedy. Going to go with the whole 'show and tell, you could be as awesome as me' routine?" Lana asked.

"It's worked in the past, why mess with a winning formula?" Matt laughed. "Let's go meet the new recruits."

The march to the briefing room was uneventful, and the door opened quickly enough for the trio to catch the tail end of the conversations of the room's occupants. Those conversations died down the moment they entered, and Matt knew it was only partially because of his rank. Zhang and Lana were both in their casual clothing but Matt was clad in the latest generation body armor produced by the Foundry specifically for him and the soldiers under his command.

It was matte black and completely covered every inch of his body from his feet up to his jaw line, and the only other color that was present was a single purple stripe going down the arms of the armor. An emblem with the same purple and black color scheme was also on his shoulders, a point-down pentagon with a purple starburst in the center and the words 'Mente Materia' at the top.

"At ease," Matt said as he stood at the head of the room. All eyes were on him now. "Some of you have been here for a while and know who I am," He nodded to a man in the back row with Interceptor pilot markings on his uniform who looked decidedly uncomfortable, "For those of you who are new, I am Captain Matt Harris and I am in charge of the cultivation, training and deployment of 'gifted' assets in the field. With me are Lieutenant Shaojie Zhang and Sergeant Lana Jenkins. Every one of you is here because you've tested positive for the potential for extraordinary abilities."

A pair of hands shot up from two of the new recruits, but Matt motioned for them to lower them. "You all undoubtedly have some questions as to what this entails. I will be more than happy to answer any questions you have but I think I will be able to answer most of them with a small demonstration. On your feet, we're moving out." The group rose and quickly fell into line without further prompting.

The column of soldiers filed out of the briefing room and marched at a brisk pace down the hallway and the staircase to the lower level beyond. Engineers and science personnel nodded to Matt as he passed, and he greeted the guards to his left as he passed the sealed door to the Kaleidoscope chamber. While Matt had gone out of his way to avoid looking at the forgotten chamber, he could see out of the corner of his eye that both Lana and Zhang had turned to watch the door as they passed.

The group rounded a corner before passing through a door at the end of the corridor. The room beyond was pitch black save for the single light above the exit. Matt waited for the entire group to enter the room and the door to close before he continued.

"Now then, you all are no doubt wondering what I meant by 'extraordinary abilities'," Matt explained as he nodded to Lana, who turned on the main lights for the room. They clicked on and revealed that unlike the other rooms in the underground base, the room they were now in was massive. The size of the room was almost wholly ignored though as the recruits caught sight of the room's contents.

Dozens if not over a hundred statues were packed into the room, each one an almost lifelike depiction of one of the aliens that XCOM was now fighting. Sectoids, Chryssalids, Mutons, and even a few towering Mechtoids could be seen which caused a brief moment of shuffling as the recruits tried to get a better look.

Matt smiled at the recruits reactions and took a moment to retrieve a trio of tungsten projectiles from his belt before slipping his helmet on. "The abilities that you might manifest can be any number of things. For some, it is subtle. It could be greater reaction time than what should be possible. For others it is quite obvious." Matt watched as the three projectiles in his palm were highlighted by the helmet's HUD, and he felt the slightest bit of pressure on his mind as they began to rise up to his eye level while wrapped in a gold aura. He then turned to the nearest statues which the HUD also highlighted.

Strike.

All three projectiles shot forward and connected with the three chosen targets, which shattered as though they had been hit with a sledge hammer.

"With training and practice, you'll be able to refine your gifts into something that the aliens will grow to fear. The only limits you will face are the ones you impose upon yourselves," Matt explained as he removed his helmet and turned back to the wide-eyed recruits. *Now to really drop a bombshell.* "With enough practice it's entirely possible to rewrite the fabric of reality, or come close to it. Every one of the statues in this room was a flesh and blood invader before they encountered an individual that had

mastered her gift.”

“Where is this person now?” A female recruit named Annette Durand asked after a long moment of silence.

“She is no longer with us, but she was the one who first taught me how to control my gift.”

“What was she like?”

When Matt hesitated with the response, Lana spoke up. “She was a little girl, no taller than your waist. Cute as a button and with the most beautiful hair you can imagine. Loved books and card games too.” The image Lana had painted for the group was clearly unexpected judging by the blank stares the group now showed, which caused Lana to grin even more.

“Everyone is to report to the Mente Materia lab at 0800 sharp tomorrow to begin training,” Matt said once he was certain everyone had recovered from the recent revelations. “In the event that your gift manifests itself into something you can control, you’ll be reassigned under my command. You are dismissed.”

The group slowly turned to leave as Matt looked back at the shattered debris that he had created. The golden aura touched each piece and deposited them into a box nearby. “I’ll admit, it never gets old breaking one of these things to pieces but I don’t think I’ll ever reach her level of control,” Matt said as he turned to his two subordinates.

Before either could respond, the intercom pinged with an announcement. “CAPTAIN HARRIS, LIEUTENANT ZHANG, SERGEANT JENKINS, CHARLES SHEN AND MOIRA VAHLEN, PLEASE REPORT TO THE KALEIDOSCOPE CHAMBER.”

“Kaleidoscope? Why the hell do they want us to go there?” Lana arched an eyebrow as she turned to leave the storage room with Zhang and Matt close behind. “Hasn’t the thing been broken since June?”

“That’s what I heard,” Matt answered with an equally confused tone. “They tried to send a drone or something to Mars or the moon and the whole thing burned out, or so I was told. Standing around and speculating is pointless though. I’m sure there will be an explanation as soon as we get there.”

Matt and his subordinates retraced their steps back to the Kaleidoscope chamber door only to stop short as they caught sight of Commander Bradford standing in front of the door with his arms crossed. At the opposite end of the hallway, Shen and Moira appeared, with the first appearing confused and the second appearing annoyed.

Both Matt and Moira started to ask why they were summoned when Bradford raised one hand to silence them both. He pulled his thumb into his palm, then his little finger, then his ring finger. The last two fingers closed into a fist just before an alert blared through the intercom.

“WARNING. KALEIDOSCOPE EXTERNAL ACTIVATION DETECTED. ALL STRIKE TEAMS MOVE TO ALERT STATUS. ALL SECURITY TEAMS REPORT TO KALEIDOSCOPE CHAMBER.”

“Sir?” Matt asked, but if Bradford heard the inquiry he ignored it. A full minute passed and the Base Security boiled into the corridor with a variety of laser, LANC and newly created plasma weapons aimed at the door.

“Get to cover!” One of the security team leaders shouted as he and his men stacked up against the door frame. “We’ll be breaching in ten seconds. Commander, I recommend you step back.”

“Security teams will hold their positions and wait outside the chamber. Do not enter unless specifically ordered to do so. Understood?” Bradford fixed the security team leader with a glare until he nodded. “Charles, open the door.” The engineer stepped forward and tapped several buttons on the door’s control panel, and it slid open. Without a moment’s hesitation, Bradford walked through the door and the others followed close behind.

The Kaleidoscope chamber was in the same state that Matt remembered, with bundles of thick cables providing a plethora of trip hazards along the floor. The abandoned monitoring and control station was dark and covered with a thin layer of dust. The majority of the room was obscured by the low lighting in the room but the platform in the center was brightly illuminated from several overhead lights, which allowed him to get a good look at just what had entered the base without invitation.

Four Equestrians stood on the platform, and all four turned to face the humans as they entered the room. Two of the Equestrians were pegasi with bat wings and dark armor, while the third was a unicorn with a blue mane and a no-nonsense expression. The last figure towered over both, with both horn and wings and a mane that looked like a starry midnight sky.

Fuck me sideways, it's Luna and Shining Armor, Matt recognized the princess from the harrowing chase two months earlier, and Twilight's brother from her drawings. His eyes lingered on the unicorn and more specifically the quartet of blade-like weapons that hung at his sides, then to Bradford who approached the platform. *Well, at least one of us isn't surprised.*

"I am Commander David Bradford, it is an honor for you to visit us, Princess Luna," Bradford said formally and with a slight bow.

Emerald green eyes studied Bradford and the humans that stood behind him before a warm smile stretched across her face. "The honor is ours, Commander. On behalf of myself and my sister and all of Equestria, I thank you for taking care of Twilight while she was lost to us. We are in your debt," Luna spoke, and she bowed to Bradford in return. "I believe an apology is in order as well. Due to a... miscommunication and several assumptions made in the heat of the moment, we did not welcome your soldiers with the hospitality they deserved when they returned Twilight to us."

"Mistakes happen. No one was hurt, that's all that matters," Bradford accepted the apology gracefully.

A moment of silence passed before Matt blurted out the question that had been sitting in the back of his mind since then. "How is she? Twilight I mean."

"Princess Twilight recovered quickly from her wounds and has taken her rightful place at my sister's side," Luna explained as she looked at Matt. "Mister Harris I presume? Twilight speaks well of you, and often. She dearly wanted to join me for the trip back to Earth but was unable to. She sends all of you her warmest regards."

SLUUUUUUUUUUUUURP.

Matt, and everyone else in the room, turned to see just what had caused the obnoxious sound. Sitting in a movie theater chair that hadn't been there just a moment before was the mish-mash creature that had save Matt and Strike One from the 'miscommunication' on Equestria. In its right claw was a massive soft drink cup complete with a bendy straw while in its left there was a bucket of popcorn. 3D glasses reminiscent of the sixties hid the majority of his manic eyes though the orbs were simply too big to be hidden behind them. To top off the absurd scene, he wore a black t-shirt with the XCOM emblem on it, with the words 'That's' and 'Baby!' before and after the emblem.

"Don't mind me, keep talking like I'm not even here," The newcomer said before stuffing far too much popcorn into his mouth.

"Discord... you should not be here," Luna said evenly, and all warmth was gone from her tone and expression.

"Of course I should! Do you know how hard it was to arrange this meeting?" Discord asked before grinning innocently at the princess.

"You did nothing of the sort. It was Twilight's efforts both here and at home that led to this. You had no part in it," Luna answered.

"I know, and it was *boring*!" Discord exclaimed before throwing his hands, and by extension his drink and popcorn into the air. "I had to sit and watch as Twilight wore down the humans with her adorkable charms." A tiny figurine of Twilight appeared in one of his hands.

"Oh help me! I'm too cute to be left all alone!" The little figurine said.

Another figurine appeared in Discord's other appendage that looked disturbingly like Matt appeared next, complete with a caricature of his voice. "Have no fear, little one! I'll be your friend!"

"Ha ha! Mine is an evil laugh, for I am evil!" A third figurine appeared, wearing a suit and tie. It walked forward under its own power only for a fourth figurine resembling Lana to rip one of his arms out of its socket and club him over the head with it.

"And that was how Twilight learned that her friends needed all the help they could get, and all I did was watch from the sidelines, most of the time anyway," Discord summarized as he grinned at the little Lana figurine as she continued to dismember the figurine Vide. "Why shouldn't I be a part of this meeting? Hmm? Besides, we all know that you and Bradford would exchange polite niceties for an hour before you get to the real reason for your visit.

A snap of his digits caused Discord to vanish, only to reappear behind Luna wearing the outfit that Shen generally wore to work, complete with an ID badge with the creature's face on it. The rest of the Equestrians were dressed in similar clothes, with Shining Armor mirroring Commander Bradford, the two batponies wearing XCOM armor, and Princess Luna in a lab coat similar to Vahlen's.

"So, are we part of the team now? Do we get call signs?" Discord asked, this time from behind the humans, which cause them to jump and turn around.

"Discord, I don't think you appreciate the gravity of this situation," Luna interrupted.

"Your mane understands the gravity of the situation," Discord snarked back, and a tiny black hole appeared in the center of her mane which began to swallow the twinkling stars one by one.

"*DISCORD*," Luna snapped, "My command carries my sister's authority. You will not harass or impede the humans in any way, nor will you harass or impede any of our kind that comes to this planet. You are to leave this place and never return. This order is absolute."

"Oh come on!" the outraged reply filled the room. "Well, fine then. Be that way, see if I care!" Discord snapped his fingers and vanished, as well as all trace of his ever having been in the room.

Luna spent a long moment staring at the place Discord had been before letting out a sigh. "I must apologize for his behavior. He likes to test the boundaries of his reformation, but he should trouble you no longer. He was correct, though. Because of your actions, Twilight is alive and well and while that debt can never be fully repaid, we came here to offer any assistance you would require."

"The offer is greatly appreciated, and we will accept your people's aid for as long as it's offered," Bradford nodded, and the pair began to converse on just what that aid would entail.

Matt did his best to try and overhear their discussion but was forced to redirect his attention when he caught Shining Armor approaching him and he managed to get a better look at the quartet of blades at his sides. They appeared identical save for the vine-like engraving and clover leaf motif.

"Mister Harris?" the unicorn asked, drawing Matt's attention away from the weapons. "I'm Twilight's brother and I feel I owe you a personal debt for what you did for my sister while she was here. Princess Luna wasn't lying, she speaks very highly of you," The unicorn said with a slight bow.

"It was my pleasure," Matt answered, "Did she teach you our language? I don't recall the translation spell being cast on us."

"Ah, no, I'm afraid not. I'm not nearly the genius she is," Shining admitted with a grin before pointing at the necklace that was mostly hidden under his uniform. "She did make devices for us that translate automatically, which is why we can talk now." Shining gave Matt an evaluating eye before continuing, "I also understand you helped Twilight get through some very tough times. Such shared experiences always make people close."

"I suppose that's true..."

"Just how *close*, exactly?" Shining asked as his eyes narrowed, and Matt had to resist the urge to facepalm or groan.

Silly Woona, you're way too easy to manipulate, Discord thought as he watched the scene unfold beneath him. The humans would get their allies for the battles yet to come, which would in turn convince them to aid Equestria when it was in need. Even Luna's commands had fit into his plans. With the right amount of antagonism she had hastily issued her commands without thinking them through. He had no intention of interfering with the humans or the ponies helping them, and when she banished him from 'this place', he simply left the room and would never return to it. *If she wanted me to leave Earth then she should have been more specific*. Discord grinned and steepled his fingers before him.

All according to plan.

Coming Soon

Click

A dark and quiet room is flooded with faint light as a video monitor turns on to reveal the silhouette of a man. A bright light shines behind him that hides his features from view. He clasps his hands before him and speaks in a grave tone.

“Hello, commander. Your performance in your position as the leader of XCOM has been an astounding success thus far. The alien invaders are being matched and beaten by our forces at every turn with the help of unexpected allies. While the war continues, Earth has begun to recover and it is thanks to your efforts.”

Scene opens to a video feed of armored human soldiers along with a Pegasus and Unicorn sprinting down the ramp of a Skyranger and into a massive parking lot where the burning wreck of an invader craft lies.

Scene changes to a set of wooden double doors. The doors open to reveal a scarred Asian man wearing a black suit, earwig and sunglasses. The man scans the room and noting the dozens of middle-aged men and women in formalwear before stepping aside to reveal a uniformed unicorn with a blue mane and white coat and an equally business-like expression.

“However, the successes we have experienced may have been at the expense of nations not directly affiliated with the Council. Recent intelligence suggests the invaders have shifted their war efforts to a [new front](#).”

Scene reveals a lavender Alicorn sitting in front of a massive pile of books and scrolls. She scribbles happily away before freezing in place. Her eyes go wide as she turns to the open balcony door to look out to the setting sun.

Scene changes a darkened night sky surrounding a city made of clouds. None of the city’s sleeping residents are awake or alert enough to notice several stars fall from the sky until they resolve themselves into menacing metal shapes with points of glowing green fire pointed at the city.

Scene changes to a standoff in a half-destroyed hedge garden. A thin, tall figure in white robes and wearing a metal helmet that completely covers its head is flanked by two massive bipedal figures in red body armor. The red-armored giants level massive guns towards the force opposing them; a pure white Alicorn standing over the unconscious form of another of her kind.

“Our allies have reported widespread attacks on their homeland, and they are ill-equipped to defend themselves against this enemy. This ally has proven to be an invaluable asset to this organization, and so the Council has elected to render all necessary aid for this ally as well as deny the aliens the opportunity to turn these allies against us.”

“The operatives you send to complete this mission will have access to the greatest technological breakthroughs this organization has developed. Agents with... special skills will be made available to assist in field operations.”

Scene changes rapidly between several human soldiers equipping themselves with heavy armor and loading several rifles as well as other pieces of equipment.

Scene cuts to an object falling from high in the sky. Several smoke grenades detach from it as it falls into a deserted alleyway now completely obscured by smoke. The electric whine of a gatling gun is immediately followed by an ear-splitting buzz as a twelve foot tall MEC sprints out of the smoke with its gun blazing.

Scene reveals the burning remains of a small town with two invader ships hovering nearby and with several hulking armored aliens firing bolts of green fire at the wooden buildings. Their attention shifts as a lone unarmored human in a military uniform teleports into the town square. The aliens turn and fire at the human but the plasma bolts simply vanish before they can connect with their target. The human’s unbalanced laughter can be heard cutting across the square as he raises his left hand and points upward. Dozens, then hundreds of portals appear behind the human and a wall of green plasma flies back at the aliens.

“The operative you place in command must also be skilled in diplomacy as other allies may join or refuse our cause based on our actions.”

*Scene shows two large double doors open to reveal a round table around which several species sit. Minotaur, Zebra, Buffalo are easily identified and are clearly skeptical of the human entering the room.

Two Alicorns, one pink and the other midnight blue, nod and smile at the new arrival.*

*Scene cuts to what appears to be a bed chamber and a mismatched serpentine body made up of several different animal parts looking away from the viewer. The uneven yellow eyes are horrified at the sight before them. He slowly turns around the room darkens. A voice devoid of all humor asks, "You will give me what I want, or I will take it from you. And I can assure you *I won't be gentle.*"*

A robed and helmeted form stands rail straight as a wall of black chitin churns around it. Slowly the insect-like creatures part to reveal a far taller member of the same species with emerald green eyes. Those eyes survey the alien figure before their owner states with amusement, "Welcome to my parlor said the spider to the fly."

"Maintaining the alliance must be given the utmost importance, as the invaders have also begun to escalate their prosecution of this war. There have also been reports of... collaborators in their midst. If these rumors are true, commander, you are authorized to neutralize them with extreme prejudice."

Scene shows a massive darkened hallway with an Earth pony trotting further into the darkness. A Unicorn guard notices this and follows. When it becomes apparent the Earth pony is heading further and further into the darkness, the guard takes a deep breath to speak. Whatever he planned to say was lost as tentacles wrap around his barrel and neck and drag him off into the darkness. The Earth pony looks back with its yellow reptilian eyes before resuming its course.

Scene cuts to a battle in progress between humans, Equestrians and the aliens. An alien ship hovers over the battlefield just long enough to teleport reinforcements to assist. Among them is what appears to be an intricately detailed metal coffin hovering a few feet off the ground. Several objects break away from the outer hull of the coffin and fly through the air like missiles to acquire new targets. Each of the objects spits a line of plasma fire and several targets are cut down instantly.

Scene shows what appears to be an occupied Equestrian city before focus centers on a boarded-up building. Several lean ponies of various races huddle around a fire to keep warm. Just as they are about to drift to sleep the door flies off its hinges and a dozen humans wearing business suits and masks storm in with weapons trained on the now fearful Equestrians. The last man walks slowly into the room and adjusts the glasses on his bland face before smiling at the cowering ponies. Without a word, he turns and walks back out

Scene again shows the outside of the building and the flashes and sounds of gunfire can be heard.

"Your mission will have three primary objectives. One, ensure the survival of the ruling government of Equestria."

Several rapid-fire scenes of a midnight blue Alicorn and over a dozen pegasi and bat ponies locked in air combat with dozens of horrifically mutilated aliens that appear to be a little more than a flesh-and blood head mounted atop a metal torso and arms with rockets attached.

Several rapid-fire scenes of a pure white Alicorn stepping towards a robed and helmeted alien. Warm, almost fiery energy comes off the Alicorn, though with each step it is replaced with freezing cold that snap freezes the burning scene around her. In those split seconds the white Alicorn transforms into an icy blue before snapping back.

"Two, locate and eliminate the primary base of operations of the human traitors working for the clandestine organization known as Exalt."

Scene cuts to several humans wearing suits and ties setting up a hasty defensive line in front of a set of large wooden double-doors. When the double-doors crack and crumble the humans begin to fire into the darkness, only for each one to be silenced by a shiny projectile flying too fast for the eye to track. When the last human falls, a tan-coated unicorn steps out from the darkness of the hallway and uses his telekinesis to extract a coin from one of the bodies before looking back down the hallway. Other shapes, both Equestrian and human begin flooding the now secure room.

"Three, counter any and all possible alien operations; and if the opportunity presents itself, strike against their command structure to disrupt their forces."

Final scene cuts to a cathedral-like chamber with a massive window looking out into a pitch-black starfield. At the far end of the room stands a gold-robed figure with an intricately detailed mask and helmet that turns to regard combined force of humans and Equestrians.

Your gifts are unparalleled and your forms are flawless. Your kind has the potential to overcome what lies ahead,* The words echo around the cathedral chamber from no discernible source as the robed figure reaches upward with four arms. *Come, children. Ascension awaits!

"Good luck, commander. And remember, we will be watching."

