[Briefing Room, ESV Normaredy]

A much smaller group convened at the briefing room this time around. After the somewhat unproductive meeting she had earlier with the ship's crew, Twilight felt it was better to limit the briefing about their mission to just her trusted friends and alien crew they picked up. She had no qualms including Tali and Garrus, since they were already neck deep in the whole matter, but the krogan was a dubious addition. Pinkie had insisted however, and Twilight relented after hours of badgering. At least she could rely on the mercenary's professionalism to an extent.

The familiar figures of the Ambassador Lyra and Captain Trixie appeared on the viewscreen, just as the last of her small group filed into the room. Twilight gave them one final glance, before addressing the ambassador. "Good to see you again, Ambassador," Twilight greeted. Then spying the captain in the background, she continued with rather less enthusiasm, "And you too, Captain."

"Yes, Commander. I pray you settled into your new ship," Lyra replied affably. Trixie just scowled at the camera, obviously unhappy with her current predicament.

"Now, I have a few leads for you to check out, courtesy of our intelligence services. First, we have sightings of geth off the planet of Poneria." Twilight frowned at the mention of the planet's name.

From what she could recall, Poneria was a frozen planet that served as a corporate haven. The whole planet was not subject to Equestria's laws by the simple fact that it was owned outright by corporate interest, a relic of ancient laws. Corporations were free to do whatever they wished on the planet, free from the scrutiny of Princess Celestia's guardsponies and the Citadel. Many intergalactic corporations were believed to use the facilities of Poneria for their less-than-ethical experiments. "Ponerian authorities so far have denied the reports, but we have reason to believe the reports were accurate." Twilight snorted. Of course they would deny the news. No point losing potential investors to some geth scare.

The ambassador glanced down at her PDA. "We also lost contact with another colony in the Terminus Systems. Harnos."

"What?" Applejack blurted, a shocked expression colouring her face. The name didn't ring a bell with Twilight, however. If Twilight were to guess, it was yet another small colony that went mostly unnoticed by Equestria at large. Well, until the geth attack anyway.

The ambassador looked slightly irritated at being interrupted. "Yes, Harnos. Before we lost contact, they transmitted reports of contact with geth scouts. Then, nothing."

"Twilight!" Applejack strode up to Twilight and pushed her snout in the commander's face. "We have to get to Harnos, now!" Her freckled face wore a worried expression.

“Calm down, Applejack. What’s wrong?” Twilight queried, not flinching from the soldierpony’s sudden agitation.

“It’s... it’s mah little sister. Last I heard she was goin’ on some colony out in the Terminus Systems to open a new orchard for the Apple family. I... I think it’s Harnos.”

“You think?” Twilight had to arch an eyebrow over that sentence.

“Applebloom and I haven’t been exactly close. Not since that incident about her cutie mark,” Applejack admitted. A guilty look flashed past her face. “But she did mention the name of the colony a few times during her last letter... a year ago.”

Twilight heard a discreet cough by the ambassador from the viewscreen and whirled back to face her. “Apologies ambassador, my... friend believe one of her relative is currently on Harnos,” Twilight said. She gestured for the soldierpony to take her seat.

“Our condolences, but I’m afraid we won’t be able to help you from this end. The Council was adamant their fleet play no role in interfering with geth attacks in the Terminus Systems. There is one more lead...” The ambassador paused, and glanced at Trixie. The captain quickly levitated another PDA for the Lyra, again taking the opportunity to stick her tongue out at the ambassador after she turned her back. Studying the PDA briefly, she looked up towards the camera again.

“You remember Matriarch Benezia, yes? The asari whom we heard in that recording?”

“Yeah...” Twilight was not sure where was this conversation headed.

“Well it turns out she has a daughter, a scientist who specialises in Protheans. Dr. Liara T’Soni. Her last known location was somewhere in the Artemis Tau cluster. We have reports saying that she was exploring an archaeological dig site in on one of the uncharted worlds in that cluster. You will need to search the systems there.” Artemis Tau was considered to be a somewhat backwater cluster. If she calculated correctly, it’ll take weeks to search the cluster thoroughly, given that sheer numbers of uncharted planets in a system alone. Not a very exciting prospect.

The ambassador eyes stared directly into the screen, her expression turning grim. “Commander... Twilight, I cannot stress the importance of capturing Saren. Words of his actions have already reached the public. Many ponies are frightened by the prospect of a geth attack. The princess herself is having a hard time keeping order as it is. *You must stop him. No matter the cost.*”

Twilight was blinked at the sudden change in tone of the ambassador. She must be under a lot of pressure now. The lavender unicorn straightened her back and gazed back in the ambassador eyes. “And I will, ambassador. I will not fail the princess.”

Lyra's eyes hovered on the commander for a moment, before nodding in approval. "Good. Now, I have a meeting to get to. Captain Trixie here can answer any other question you may have." The ambassador gestured at the captain, then trotted off-screen. The slate blue mare shot another irritated look at the ambassador, before taking the ambassador's place before the camera.

"Yay, I get to play Q-and-A with the obviously capable commander," Trixie said sarcastically. Her bravado faded and Trixie sighed as she took per place at the screen. Her pointed hat drooped slightly. "How can the Great & Powerful Trixie help you?" she asked in a weary voice.

"You can start by giving me more intel on the colony on Harnos," Twilight said, smirking slightly. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Applejack perking up, her ears flicking with interest.

"Harnos..." Trixie juggled the PDAs levitating around her, before finding the one she wanted. "Let's see, Harnos. The entire planet used to be one giant Prothean city, though only ruins remain now. There were some infrastructure left intact, and the colonists there tried to build on whatever that remained. Contact was lost approximately a few days earlier, soon after they reported a geth attack."

An ancient planet filled with ancient ruins? Twilight thought it was strange somepony would even try to colonise the place. "All available data on the colony and planet will be uploaded to your ship's computer shortly."

"Right. Thanks Captain." Twilight flashed the blue mare a smile. It only seemed to infuriate the captain more though. Her scowl deepened for a moment before she composed herself into a neutral expression.

"Yeah, whatever. Is there anything else you wish to know from the Great & Powerful Trixie?" she asked, a trace of bitterness remaining in her voice. Twilight shook her head in reply. "Good, then Trixie wishes you luck in your hunt." Trixie terminated the connection with a glow of her horn.

"So... we're goin' to Harnos?" Applejack asked hopefully, as Twilight turned to face the rest of the group in the room.

"Yes," Twilight replied, a ghost of a smile on her lips. "I thought we're on a rescue mission?"

[Harnos, Orbit]

As the ship sailed through the upper atmosphere of the planet, Twilight marvelled at the towering skyscarpers reached up to touch the sky. Most were in various state of decay, but the towers still stood firm despite millenia of neglect. At various levels, she could make out skybridges which linked each skyscraper to their neighbours. It was a strangely entrancing, if

haunting sight. Twilight briefly wondered what the city was like when it was still teeming with life.

As her eyes trailed lower, she was met with a vast expanse of white. An almost-permanent cloud formation covered the planet below, giving the illusion of the skyscrapers floating in the sky. Twilight knew otherwise. The cloud layer was actually miles above the actual terrestrial ground. She recalled from her reading that the lower levels were not considered habitable, since the dust clouds from millllenia of decay had practically fouled the atmosphere below. The lowest ground levels themselves were believed to be buried in dozens of metres of debris.

“Approaching the Harnos port, Commander,” Scootaloo reported. “No sign of geth so far.”

Twilight acknowledged the order and told her to take the ship in. She studied the skyscraper that was marked to be the port for the colony. Outwardly, it resembled the other skyscrapers, though it was easily one of the tallest around. It sported the sharp, yet graceful outlines that were common with all Prothean structures. Twilight knew that the colonists choose this spot because of the stability of the structure as well as easy access to a nearby water source, courtesy of ancient Prothean aqueducts that ran throughout the planet.

The frigate slowly slid into the indicated opening in the tower. Twilight noted, with relief, the familiar implements of an automatic dock came into view just inside the tower’s open entrance. More importantly, there was a distinct lack of geth troopers rising out from the shadows to greet them. At least that meant the geth hadn’t taken the docks yet.

She told the pilot to dock the ship and went off to prepare the ground team.

[Docks, Harnos]

“Standby shore party. Decontamination in progress.”

“Why do we’all have to go through this every single applebuckin’ time?” Applejack asked irritably, She pawed at her armour nervously again, the white colour standing in stark contrast with her orange coat.

“Well we could bringing nasty bacteria and stuff, which wouldn’t be good for the local ecosystem. But since the whole place was a city to begin with—” Pinkie began to blubber, before finding a purple hoof in her mouth. Applejack just stared at the Pinkie blankly.

“What she means is that the process is necessary so that we don’t spread our germs about. It’s...” Twilight fished around for a simple word. “...bad,” she finished lamely.

“Well I don’t see how this helps nopony,” Applejack huffed in reply.

“Decontamination complete. Logged: Shore party is ashore. XO Ditzy Doo has the deck.”

The airlock doors slid open with a hiss.

“Finally,” Applejack said impatiently. She began trotting ahead into the deserted docks.

Twilight was struck by the acrid smell in the air. It was as if somepony went and burnt rubber right here on the docks. The docks itself was a curious mixture of modern technology and ancient superstructure. Various docking machinery and crates lay abandoned on the crumbling concrete.

“Eww... the whole place smells funny,” Pinkie said as she put a hoof to her snout. “Needs more air fresheners.”

“Hey there!” a voice called out in the distance. A verdant green stallion with red mane stood in what appeared to be the ruined entrance to the docks. He had a gun strapped to his back. Twilight waved at the pony, relieved to see the first sign of life in this otherwise dead world. The stallion waved back and galloped towards the small group.

“Oh thank Celestia you came. I thought nopony would come after the geth started jamming our communications,” the stallion said with relief. “My name is High Fives.” Twilight glanced at his cutie mark. A pair of playing cards. The stallion must be some sort of gambler by profession.

“Well, we’re here and ready to render any assistance—”

“Hold up. Is mah sister Applebloom here?” Applejack interjected, staring into the stallion’s maroon eyes.

High Fives seemed surprised. “You mean you’re that annoying filly’s sister? Oh yes. She’s over at the colony.” The stallion gestured at the door.

“Whatdaya mean by annoying?” Applejack pushed her snout against his, a dangerous expression on her face. The stallion grinned sheepishly.

“Well, pardon me, ma’am, but your sister isn’t... exactly the best of ponies to get along with,” the stallion stammered, his eyes avoiding the earthpony’s gaze. Twilight put a hoof on her friend’s shoulder before things escalated further.

“Applejack, let him go. We’re here to help them, not start a fight,” the unicorn said.

Applejack glowered at the stallion for a little while longer, before subsiding. “Fine.”

“Anyhoof, the mayor would want to see you. I heard the geth are going to make another push soon,” the stallion gestured towards what Twilight presumed was the indicated exit.

The group of four began trotting forward, with High Fives leading the way. Twilight couldn't shake the feeling they were being watched. As they walked through the deserted dock, the unicorn thought she heard sounds of debris being disturbed. Yet every time she stopped to listen, the sound was gone.

Just as the group approached the doorway, Twilight spotted a flicker of movement at the doorway. "Geth! They're here!" High Five shouted, apparently noticing the same. The familiar bipedal robots with flashlight heads appeared at the doorway, their guns already raised.

Ambush! Twilight mind flashed.

"Get down!" High Fives yelled, and shoved the dumbstruck Applejack aside, only to be cut down by the whithering fire the geth troopers unleashed. Twilight dove behind a convenient pile of rubble and kept her head down as the bullets peppered her position. Applejack, momentarily stunned by the push, quickly crawled to a nearby pillar and started returning fire as best as she was able to.

Twilight heard a giggle behind her. She turned around to see Pinkie somehow holding a whole belt of grenades in her hooves and preparing to throw the whole unwieldy thing. "Fire in the hole!" she yelled excitedly, the belt sailing through the air and landing neatly in the center of the geth ambushers.

None of the geth survived the subsequent explosion.

"Oh no..." Applejack breathed, as she saw High Fives lay bleeding on the ground. "Somepony help him!" she cried, as the soldierpony rushed to stem the bleeding. Her hooves was stained red as she applied pressure on the wounds.

"Already there AJ." Twilight replied calmly, as she cantered over and started applying the medigel furiously over the wounds. The unicorn noticed Pinkie was staring at the scene with rounded eyes. "Pinkie! Get some proper health kits. Medigel can only do so much."

The pink pony seemed to recover her wits with her words. "Okie-dokie." She hopped off to the Normaredy's airlock. Twilight thought the hyperactive pony seemed unusually subdued by her normal standards, before her mind drifted back to the task at hand.

The party pony returned later with a few boxes of medkits... with the rest of the ground team in tow behind her. Twilight mentally groaned. Pinkie actually brought everypony else on the ship?

"Twilight! Are you alright?" she heard Rarity's voice call.

"Yes, I'm fine. Help me with this civilian," Twilight replied, as she levitated the medkits off

Pinkie's hooves and began bandaging the injury. The stallion groaned in pain as he stirred. "Hush, lie still. We'll get you to the ship's medibay," Twilight said. She injected analgesic for the pain and gestured for Tali and Garrus to carry the injured pony to the ship. "The rest of you, push on to the colony. Hopefully this was just a scouting party and the geth's main force haven't hit them yet."

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[Lix's Hope/Harnos]

Fortunately, Twilight was correct in her assessment of the geth's plan of attack. The ground team just arrived in time when the geth's main attack swarmed the colony compound. Despite a furious half-hour long battle, they managed to hold off the attack with little losses of their own.

"Lix's Hope can't thank you enough for your assistance," the mayor of the colony spoke, a beige mare with grey mane and tail. Strangely, she was wearing a rather old-fashioned pair of glasses, which Twilight thought looked out of place with all the assortment of weapons on her back and flank.

The Lix's Hope outpost was all that remained from the colony on Harnos. The geth overran the main colony complex located in the adjoining skyscraper in the initial wave. The Exo-Poni headquarters, the company funding this venture and located further out in another skyscraper, fell after a brief siege. The local pegasus weather control station had also gone offline, and the survivors were unable to reestablish contact.

Lix's Hope itself was just a small outpost, the size of the spaceport on Appleloosa. A malfunctioning Kowloon class freighter sat right in the middle of the outpost, with prefabricated hab units clustering around the damaged ship. Apparently the ship was undergoing repairs for months before the geth attack. The surviving colonists has taken to using the ship as shelter and to handle basic life support on the colony. They also barricaded the two entrances to the colony the best they could, and armed themselves with whatever weapon they scavenged from both the remains of their colony and off the geth. Twilight was impressed the colonists managed to hold out this long against incessant geth attacks.

"My pleasure, ma'am," Twilight replied sincerely.

Days of being under siege have whittled down the colonist number to about fourty out of the original three hundred working and living here. The mayor suspected there might be survivors hiding in the ruins outside the colony complex, but the geth made it impossible to search for them.

"I hear High Fives is being treated on your ship. I would like to request he be transferred to our care as soon as he's stable," the mayor said. Twilight frowned at the strange request. The

Normaredy had much better medical facilities than whatever they had here.

“But mayor, we’ll be able to treat—”

“I’m sorry, Commander, but it is our custom to take care of our own.” Seeing Twilight’s frown, she added, “It’s important for us. Surely you can understand?” the mayor half-pleaded, a hint of desperation in her eyes.

“I suppose I can’t refuse,” Twilight replied uncertainly, puzzled by the odd request.

***

“Apple Bloom!” Applejack called as she spotted her sister trudging past with a pair of heavy saddlebags on her back.

The tan filly with red mane and trademark red ribbon tied behind her mane stopped in her tracks, slowly turning around to look at Applejack.

“Sis?” she breathed. Then she started shaking her head slowly. “Naw, it can’t be.” She rubbed her eyes once. Twice. Trying to be rid of a speck that just won’t go away. “It can’t be,” she repeated in a disbelieving voice.

“What? Ya’all don’t recognise ya big sister?” Applejack replied, pasting a wide grin on her face and spreading her hooves wide.

The astonished expression turned into anger. “I thought I had seen the last of ya sorry face.” The filly jabbed a hoof at her snout. “I told you not to look for me. You promised!”

The words stung Applejack like a solid bucking in the face. “But.. but... I thought...”

“Did ya really think you could show up like some hero in this here colony and then expect me to fall all over yer hooves?” The cruel words continued. “I think it’s best if ya just leave me alone.” Apple Bloom turned away. “Now, if ya excuse me, I gotta help Apple Fritter with her apples,” she said without looking back. As Applejack stood there stunned, the filly stalked off without waiting for a reply.

“But...” her voice trailed off as she realised Apple Bloom had already gotten out of earshot. “Dangnabit, I’ll make it up to her, no matter what,” she muttered, already formulating another plan in her mind. She had already wasted five years moping about on Appleloosa, and she was not going to miss this golden chance to repair their relationship.

***

“And we need help with the re-establishing the water supply,” the technician pony rattled off, checking off her imaginary checklist.

“Uh huh.” Pinkie was busy scribbling in her notepad. Then, she innocently looked up. “So, what we need to do is chase away some varrens, get the water working again an-n-n-d-d-d-d..... pick up some power cells for the generator.”

“Sounds just about right.”

Pinkie Pie raised a hoof like a student in class. “Oh oh, can I ask something?” The ochre mare looked unsure, but nodded. “What is a varren?”

The technician seemed taken back by the question. “It’s... you know... well...this four-legged creature...”

“I think we’ll know if we come across one.” Rarity interjected before the technician embarrassed herself further.

“Come on Pinkie, let’s see what’s Twilight is doing.”

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“So, what’s a salarian doing here on a pony colony?” Garrus asked.

The salarian named Ledra shrugged and replied, “I’m a merchant. I go wherever the profit takes me. Supplying a newly founded colony seemed like a profitable venture to me.” He waved his hand at the crates around him, presumably his trade goods.

“Then why stay? A geth attack isn’t exactly conducive to business.” Tali folded her arms.

“After I landed, I couldn’t find the heart to leave. Something about the colony made me want to stay,” Ledra answered, his large amphibian eyes directed at the floor evasively.

“I... see.” Tali replied, her tone clearly saying otherwise.

***

“Twilight. I have to talk to you,” Rainbow Dash called. She streaked across the outpost and hovered in front of the commander.

“Yes, Dash, what is it?” Twilight looked up from the PDA she was reading. She furrowed her brow as she took in the stern expression Dash was wearing.

“They said there might be survivors out there. Why the hay aren’t we looking for them *now*?” the boisterous pegasus demanded.

Twilight sighed. It wasn’t that she did not want to go looking for survivors, but she had to prioritise the colony’s safety first. The mayor had steadfastly refused all offers to evacuate the colony. She was adamant they defend their livelihoods and not be chased off by mere synthetics. Twilight gave up after her last attempt ended up in a shouting match.

So instead, Twilight had been charting the pattern of geth attacks on the outpost for the past week. Given that there was no sign of any geth dropships thus far, she inferred the geth have been moving on foot to reach the colony from their base somewhere on the planet. So far, all signs point to the geth using underground means reach the colony, probably somewhere beneath this outpost itself. Probably a tunnel network in the tower itself, odd as it sounds.

“Dash, we need to make sure these good citizens are safe first. We can’t just go off looking for survivors without at least making sure they are able to defend themselves.”

Dash flapped her wings in frustration. “I know! But the survivors! They won’t last long out there.” The sky-blue pegasus looked out to the skies. “And nopony heard any news of the weather control station since the attack.”

“Dash, I promise we’ll get right on it,” Twilight reassured. Dash looked a little mollified at her words.

“Pinkie promise?” she asked finally, folding her forelegs over her chest.

“Pinkie promise.”

***

“Hey... um... what are you doing? If you don’t mind me asking...” Fluttershy shyly asked the earth pony tending to the console next to the damaged ship. The cream coloured mare with orange mane and tail looked at the pegasus in surprise.

“Me?” she queried. Fluttershy nodded slowly. “Well, I’m taking care of this ship here. Making sure it doesn’t deteriorate further.” She chuckled nervously.

“But.. why?” Fluttershy innocently inquired.

“It’s... it’s important for the colony. Look, the mayor asked me to do it alright.” the earth pony said sharply, before narrowing her eyes in suspicion at the pegasus. “Why are you asking me this anyway?” Fluttershy took several steps back under the colonist’s glare, her ears drooping in response.

“Uhh... nothing. Thanks for your time,” she quickly muttered, before scooting off at full speed. Fluttershy galloped past the few colonists that was staring at the exchange. Taking flight, she flew towards a hidden ledge overlooking the entire outpost.

“You’re right, Angel. There’s something under the ship,” the pegasus said softly. Her aquamarine eyes warily watched the colonists below.

The rabbit just nodded, and frowned.

***

“Alright team. Listen up. Since the mayor made it clear they won’t evacuate, we do the second best thing. We take on the geth. There are three immediate problems the colony are facing,” Twilight announced, unrolling a map that detailed the colony and it’s immediate surrounding. She gestured for her companions to gather closer.

“Finally, some real action,” Wrex grumbled. Twilight pretended not to hear. The krogan was already moody enough as it were, without her getting on his case.

“First, we will have to split into three teams. Applejack, Tali and Wrex will be with me. We’ll be going straight to the Exo-Poni HQ to clear the geth there. We believe this is were the main geth force is stationed.” She pointed a hoof directly at the marked location.

“Us against an entire geth army? Sparkle, I like you already,” Wrex replied, grinning at the annoyed look Twilight gave him.

Twilight then shifted her hoof southward, towards a cloud legend in the middle of the map. “Rainbow Dash, Angel and Fluttershy will be scouting the weather station as well as the outer skybridges to see if there are any survivors left.” A nod from the Dash and customary whimper from Fluttershy.

“Rarity will lead the rest of you down the tunnels below the colony, in order to clear the geth and help restore power and water to the colony.” Rarity didn’t look pleased to be leading a team into an obviously filth-filled and dirt-ridden tunnel, but made no attempt to object.

“Any questions?”

Twilight was greeted with silence. She glanced at each member of her team, detecting no sign of objections on their faces. With the sole exception of Applejack, who seemed to be more interested in the distant Harnos horizon.

“Applejack?” Twilight called. No response. Twilight tried again, in a louder voice. “Applejack!”

The orange mare jumped at the sound of Twilight's voice. She whirled to face the slightly bemused unicorn, a sheepish look on her face. "Sorry, Twi... was thinking about something else." An awkward silence followed.

"It's Apple Bloom isn't it?" Twilight finally said, letting out an exasperated sigh.

Applejack turned her head towards the soft glow of the Harnos horizon. "I need to make things right with Apple Bloom... I don't think I'll get a chance like this again."

"Applejack, when I came here, I expected you to be able to put aside your feelings when I needed you to."

"I know, Twi. I thought I could! But..." Applejack shook her head helplessly and pawed at the ground. "I haven't seen hide and hair of Apple Bloom for so long... It just hit me ya know... I reckon I'll never get this chance again..."

"Please, Twilight, this is important. For me..." Applejack pleaded. As she spoke, the sight of her sister walking past the crashed freighter drew her eyes. The soldierpony watched as Apple Bloom disappear into the ship, before looking back at Twilight. "...for her."

Twilight sighed, sensing she wouldn't be able to convince her otherwise. Not without some forceful arguments that could very well destroy the fragile relationship they shared. "Very well. Stay here in the colony then. Keep them safe. Keep Apple Bloom safe."

"Thanks, Twilight. You've no idea what it means to me."

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[Skybridges, Harnos]

Twilight's team was off to a good start. They were not looking forward to the long walk to the Exo-Poni headquarter, with the map putting it at a good ten clicks from Lix's Hope. Fortune was on their side however. As they were crossing the first skybridge, they stumbled across what seemed to be an abandoned M-35 Mako, lying on its side in a crater.

"Why would the colonists abandon a perfectly good Mako in the middle of the road? It doesn't make sense," Tali said, as she inspected the mostly intact armoured personnel carrier left in the middle of the skybridge.

"Probably because of the geth," Wrex commented sardonically. He watched as Twilight flipped the vehicle to an upright position, before clambering into the vehicle.

“Hey, the main cannon is still working,” Twilight called from the inside of the vehicle. The cannon mounted on the vehicle swiveled slightly as the unicorn fiddled with the controls. “Wow, the thing even has the latest optical targeting software,” she continued enthusiastically.

Tali whistled as she spotted why the vehicle was abandoned. A melted panel near the snout of the vehicle was the apparent cause. Carefully removing the panel, she was greeted with a mess of melted circuits and burning wires. “This might take awhile to fix,” she said.

The click of an assault rifle’s safety made the suited alien look up. “Then you better fix it quick. I don’t think we have much time. Incoming geth,” Wrex said, leveling his rifle. Tali followed his eyes towards the other end of the skybridge.

Three quadruped walkers with the characteristic flashlight-shaped head. Geth armoured support it seemed. Several red-armoured bipedal geth accompanied the walkers, clutching what appeared to be rocket launchers. Fortunately, they were still some distance away, and the walkers were slow, plodding slowly but steadily across the debris-ridden skybridge.

Twilight’s head poked out of the side doors of the vehicle. “Hey guys, what’s happening...” her voice trailed off as she noticed the oncoming geth. “Oh.” Her head disappeared back into the door. A moment later, the main cannon gun began swivelling to track the nearest walker.

“Good idea,” Wrex said, before turning to the quarian. “Better get started, we’ll try to hold them off as long as we can.” He hefted his rifle and took off towards the geth. The krogan bounded over towards the advancing geth, firing as he went. One of the red-armoured geth went down in a flurry of accurate rifle fire.

A boom from the mass accelerator cannon resounded over the landscape. Tali knelt beside the damaged vehicle, and started work on the fried circuits, her hands a blur. The cannon boomed again, and the kinetic shields of one of the walker flared an angry red as the shell hit home. The geth started to return fire, though it was pretty ineffectual at such long range. Still, the stationary vehicle was a sitting duck and a few energy blast from the walkers slammed uncomfortably close to the stranded Mako.

Wrex popped out from cover to hurl a couple of grenades at the nearest geth. A stray rocket narrowly missed his head as he ducked back behind the wrecked vehicle he was hiding behind. The grenades took out another two of the rocket launcher armed geth with a satisfying explosion. Wrex grunted as he checked his grenade supply. He wasn’t going to hold the geth walkers off with explosives anymore. Well, more challenge for him.

Another boom, and one of the walker finally went down, two of its legs ripped clean off by the massive projectile. The crippled walker fell heavily on its side, leaking a curious white fluid on the ground. The other walkers paused momentarily, as if stunned by the apparent death of their companion. Wrex took the opportunity to pepper the geth infantry with several bursts of rifle fire.

“Got it!” Tali yelled excitedly. “Commander, start the vehicle and let’s get out of here.” The quarian quickly shut the panel back in place and gestured to the krogan, who was still up ahead toying with the remaining geth. The krogan acknowledged her signal and began retreating slowly, using the debris on the skybridge to cover his retreat.

“Hurry up, Wrex! The Mako’s kinetic barriers won’t last much longer.” Twilight’s voice barked over the radio. The vehicle’s energy barrier flared brightly as energy balls slammed home. The mercenary sprinted the last few meters to the vehicle and clambered hurriedly into waiting door. Twilight pushed a hoof on the accelerator and swung the vehicle around, narrowly evading another energy blast.

The team quickly drove back the way they came, with the geth in pursuit.

***

[Weather Control Station, Harnos]

The weather station, like all pegasi constructs was built out of a cloud formation. This particular one seemed to have been carved from a large cumulus cloud, with the ragged outline typical of that type. A lone cloud tower and scattered cloud buildings was visible from the distance.

The two pegasi approached the cloud formation cautiously, using the surrounding clouds to disguise their presence. Since the clouds in Harnos were not exactly healthy to breath in, the pegasi also wore their gas masks as a precaution.

“Rainbow, I don’t see anypony,” Fluttershy said softly, her voice slightly muffled owing to her mask.

“Me neither. Maybe the survivors hiding inside. Come on, we need to get closer.” The blue pegasus flapped her wings and increased her speed. Fluttershy glanced at the bunny hanging on to dear life on her back and gave Angel a knowing nod. Then she took after the rainbow trail Dash left.

***

[Tunnels, Harnos]

“Clear!” Garrus called, as the last of the geth troopers went down. The turian walked over and kicked the downed geth for good measure.

Rarity sighed with relief. The new monkey-like geth that went jumping around and firing out of unexpected corners was giving her a headache. Not only that, the damp and musty tunnel was

absolutely atrocious on her precious armour. She was going to have to dry-clean the whole thing when the mission was done.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Pinkie playing with the geth's flashlight head. "Wooooooooo~! Fooooooosh!" she playfully cried, as she swung the detached head around, apparently imagining it to be some sort of spacecraft. "Captain Geth, now intercepting enemy aircraft!"

"Pinkie! Put that head down and let's go," Rarity barked.

"Aww..." the pink earth pony pouted, and put the geth's remains down. Then, she giggled. "I'll come play with you later, Mr. Geth," she said, before hopping off to join the rest of the squad.

Rarity unrolled the map of the tunnels again, trying to get her bearings in the maze of drab corridors and hallways that weaved beneath Lix's Hope. Looking ahead, the unicorn thought she spotted a junction where the map indicated led to the gardens. "There, that must be where the varrens are nesting."

"Right behind you Rarity," Garrus replied.

"Pfftt... colts these days. Always expecting ladies to go first," Rarity grumbled, as they reached the junction. The dirt-caked sign on the wall clearly indicated that the garden lay behind the door to the left.

Rarity blinked at the sign, not expecting to have arrived so soon. "That was easy. Let's get this over with." She lifted her submachine gun from its sheath and held it floating near her head. "On three." She pressed against the side of the door and gestured for her companions to get into position. Garrus flattened himself on the other side, with Pinkie Pie hiding somewhere further out.

"One... two... three!" Garrus slammed the button that opened the door.

They were greeted with snarls and growls. Shadowy creatures about the size of ponies stood half-hidden amongst the dying apple trees. The varren.

Outwardly the varrens resembled dogs. Their silvery scales and reptilian eyes quickly disabused the notion that the two was even remotely related. Sharp teeth jutted out from their slavering jaws, their hungry eyes already locked on the trio who stumbled onto their nest.

Rarity froze on seeing the savage appearance of the varren. Oh, she had studied about them while in the academy, and had dismissed them as nothing but annoying vermin. Here, face-to-face with the real deal, she was forced to drastically change her opinion of the creatures. These weren't annoying vermin, they were downright savage brutes!

The varrens slowly advanced on the trio, snarling as they went. Garrus and Rarity trained their weapons on the advancing creatures. Neither side was making any overt hostile moves just yet. Then a giggle broke the tense atmosphere. Rarity whipped her head around in surprise.

The first thing she noticed was that Pinkie was sitting on her haunches, giggling madly. The second thing she saw was that the pink earthpony's head was attached to a very large jaw. Filled with teeth. Which in turn was attached to a silvery, dog-like body. The varren's short limbs waved about uselessly as the pink pony continued to giggle.

"Pinkie Pie! Are you alright?" Rarity gasped.

"Yes, silly. Gummy here just wants to play!" Pinkie replied nonchalantly. She reached up and gently extracted the varren from her head. Putting the varren down on the floor beside her, she then took out a monocle and a top hat from her saddlepacks and attached it lovingly to the varren. "There, Gummy. You look all prettier." The varren blinked in surprise, but did not attempt to move.

"Um... Rarity, you might want to take a look at this," Garrus piped up behind the unicorn. She turned around again, to be faced with a curious sight. The turian was actually petting one the creatures gently. The varren hissed in pleasure, its fins rising slightly in response. Apparently the varren Pinkie had somehow snagged was the alpha male. The other varrens dropped their aggressive posture and began barking hisses of approval at the trio.

She shook her head in resigned disbelief. Pinkie would never cease to amaze with her unorthodox ways. Besides, Rarity thought the varren looked adorably cute with the monocole and tophat on.

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[Skybridges, Harnos]

"Well, we certainly showed those geth," Tali said approvingly. The interior of the Mako was cramped, and Tali was sitting awkwardly in one corner, just behind the driver's seat with the large bulk of Wrex occupying the other end. The krogan was slouched forward slightly, owing to the limited height of the sturdy vehicle.

"Yeah, hopefully we won't run into anymore geth," Twilight replied, driving past the derbis strewn skybridges carefully. "We should reach the Exo-Poni headquarters after..." Twilight brought up the map of the area on a separate viewscreen. "... this tower ahead, and taking Skybridge 22." The cabin was silent for a moment as they approached the indicated tower.

"I'm picking up radio signals," Tali announced, as she worked the communication console on her

side. “There’s someone out there.”

“...*bzzt*... somepony is coming... not...*bzzt*... geth...*bzzt*... friendly?....”

“I can’t get more of it, the geth must be jamming radio communications.”

“Can you get me a fix on their location?” Twilight queried.

Tali looked up from her console. “It’s... right ahead of us. In that tower ahead. That’s how we picked up the signal. We must be close enough to intercept the signals despite the geth jamming.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go rescue these survivors.”

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[Weather Control Station, Harnos]

“Hello? Anypony here?” Dash called out. The sky-blue pegasus hovered near one of the cloud shacks. She turned around as Fluttershy flew up behind her.

“Nopony. Weird. There should be somepony around. The geth didn’t even touch the place.” Dash said, waving a hoof towards the abandoned weather station. It was spotless, saved for abandoned work equipment and sheets of paper lying about.

“Um... maybe we should take a look around...” Fluttershy suggested softly, as she glanced around nervously.

“Good idea. I’ll take the main tower. You and Angel search the outlying buildings.” Without waiting for a reply, Rainbow Dash took off in a blazing trail of rainbows towards the weather station cloud tower.

“O-Okay.” The yellow pegasus replied to breeze Dash left in her wake. She flew slowly towards the outlying buildings. Standing on her back, Angel already had his shotgun out and ready.

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[Lix’s Hope, Harnos]

Applejack twiddled her hooves nervously as she waited for Apple Bloom to walk by. Would she even consider a gift? It was quite hard to actually scourge up something from the ship’s stores, considering it mainly consisted of military hardware. Fortunately, Spike had a little store of collectibles which he had smuggled onboard on the ship. He assured her that his prized

sapphire was guaranteed to—in his words—steal the heart of any fillies. Applejack hoped he was right. Otherwise, she was going to have very strong words with the dragon. And her credits back.

After about an hour's wait, her patience was finally rewarded with the appearance of the sister on the other side of the ship. "Listen here, Apple Bloom. I can explain things—" she began, fumbling for an excuse to bring out her surprise.

"Applejack! Why won't ya just leave me alone? I'm happy here." Apple Bloom said, refusing to even address her directly.

"But I want to—"

"Go. Away. Leave, before ya git into more trouble." The filly huffed and turned her head away.

Applejack bent her head sadly and turned away from her sister.

As she trotted off, something about her words nagged her. Applejack frowned slightly as she replayed their short exchange in her mind. Why was Applebloom so adamant she leave? And what trouble?

***

[Skybridges, Harnos]

Unlike the tower which the colony occupied, this tower was fairly small in comparison. It was also in a pretty bad state, with most of the entrances blocked by collapsed debris.

Twilight parked the vehicle just outside the only entrance she could see. No point driving into an ambush. She involuntarily gagged as she exited the clean atmosphere of the vehicle. Twilight almost forgotten how bad Harnos was on the nose. She waved for her companion to join her at the large gate.

The first room past the gate was actually a large tunnel leading to the other side of the tower and the skybridge ahead. From their position at the entrance, Twilight could see a smaller hallway leading off the main tunnel.

"That way," she gestured. The trio made their way towards the egress, eyes on the outlook for any geth ambushes. Twilight sneaked a peek down the corridor. Empty. They trundled forward slowly along the hallway. As they walked, Twilight glanced at Tali questioningly, who was fiddling with her omni-tool. The quarian gestured down the corridor. Apparently the radio signals were originating somewhere ahead. Just as they rounded a sharp bend in the corridor, they blundered into a makeshift steel barricade. Which was bristling with guns.

“Stop right there!” a slightly panicked voice shouted. Ponies. They must be the survivors they were looking for. She could make out the outline of at least four ponies taking refuge just behind the barricades.

Twilight raised a hoof to stop her companion from firing. Judging by the panicked voice, one wrong move and they could trigger a firefight. “We’re from Equestrian Navy. We’re here to help,” Twilight said slowly, clearly, so that the whoever behind the barricade would not miss a single word.

After a moment, an alabaster head peeked out. He seemed satisfied with what he saw and waved to somepony behind the barricades. He trotted out with a relived smile. “Finally, some help. Damned synthetics have been hitting what’s left of us hard.” Twilight studied the alabaster stallion. Black uniform. Exo-Poni armband on left foreleg. Standard shoulder-mounted assault rifles. He must be one of the surviving Exo-Poni private security force.

“I’m impressed to see you managed to hold out here,” Twilight finally said. The guard shook his head. “We wouldn’t have lasted much longer on our own. Come now, the director would want to see you.” He gestured for the trio to follow him.

***

“As you can see here, we’re perfectly safe for the moment,” the deep blue unicorn with a neatly cropped white mane and tail spoke. Twilight raised an eyebrow at the unicorn. The guards introduced him as the sole surviving ranked official on the planet, Director Jong. Two dozen ragged survivors are all that’s left of the hundred-odd workforce of the Exo-Poni on Harnos.

“Director Jong, don’t you want to get to Lix’s Hope where it’ll much safer?” Twilight asked curiously, arching an eyebrow. “You can’t hide from the geth forever.”

“We can’t. The geth controls the skybridges, as you no doubt are aware. Besides, we stand a much better chance defending this spot.” The director smiled nervously, his sepia eyes flitting through the three armed outsiders. All very logical answers, yet Twilight sensed it was not the complete truth.

“Fine. We’ll take care of the geth problem then. The geth are holed up in your former headquarters, correct?”

“Yes,” the director replied, clearly relived at the change of topic. “Also, those are private properties. Remove the geth and nothing else,” he added primly as if it was a matter of merely polishing up the building.

“You would think they would be more thankful to us for ‘removing’ the geth for them,” Wrex said

sardonically. Twilight shot him a *we-are-not-going-to-steal-anything-that-is-not-bolted-down* look. The krogan just shrugged in reply.

“Of course, director. We’re not looters.” Twilight forced a smile to her face and trotted off towards their vehicle. Why was the director so reluctant to retreat to the outpost, where it was much safer?

Curiouser and curiouser.

***

[Tunnels, Harnos]

“Alright, that’s the last of the valves. The colony should be getting water now,” Garrus said, as he finished fiddling with the panel on the pipes. They have already travelled deep into the bowels of the tower and currently in the middle of a long tunnel, with pipes of various sizes running around them. A musty odour permeated the dank air.

“Marvellous, now all that’s left is—” Rarity let out a shriek and reared as a hiss sounded behind her. Then she realised what it was. Gummy.

“Pinkie Pie! Put your pet on a leash or something. I can’t abide a varren sneaking up to my flank every five minutes!”

“Okie-dokie.” Pinkie turned to the tame varren. “Bad Gummy! You should know better than to startle Rarity like that.” The varren seemed to blink slowly in response, before letting out another hiss. “Good boy!” she happily bubbled. Rarity was suddenly struck by a irresistible temptation to slap Pinkie’s head with a hoof, but wisely fought down that compulsion.

“As I was saying. We only need to collapse the tunnels ahead and the colony should be reasonably secure from future attacks.” Rarity continued. She brought out the map and put on her glasses. “Hm, there should be a nice spot just ahead to set up our explosives.”

“Wait, I spy someone...” Garrus knelt behind the pipes and scoped his rifle. “Is that... the pony we carried back to the Normaredy? What’s he doing here?” In the gloomy darkness of the tunnels, Rarity could barely make out the outline of the injured pony shuffling about.

Rarity shrugged. “Last I heard, he was recuperating back in the colony. The mayor insisted he be taken back for their care.” She brought her rifle out and zoomed in on the distant pony on the far end of the tunnel. The scoped view confirmed Garrus’ find. She let out a sigh. “Let’s get him back to the colony before the geth find him.”

The trio made their down the dimly lit tunnels, wary of any ambushes by geth hoppers, as they

taken to calling the agile monkey-like geth. Rarity approached the injured stallion and tapped him gently on the shoulder. She was very nearly bucked in the head as the startled pony reared.

“Brute! You almost kicked a lady in the head!” Rarity exclaimed, as she jumped back. High Fives looked alarmed as he spied the weapons aimed at him, then visibly calmed down as he recognised the trio.

“Oh hey again... sorry about that,” High Fives said, wincing in pain as he spoke. The wound in his chest obviously had not healed just yet. “What... what are you doing down here?”

“We’re here to stop the meanie mean meanie-pants!” Pinkie replied enthusiastically.

“Oh... err... so you’re not going to bring me back to the colony?” he asked hopefully. Rarity shook her head.

“Because... you’re not... ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” High Fives continued, before moaning in pain. He held his forehooves tight against his head, his ears flattening. “You... are... not... going... to... control... owwwwwwwwww.... me.” The stallion dropped to the ground, his eyes squeezed shut.

Garrus and Rarity exchanged questioning looks. The civilian clearly gone mad. Question was, how mad? And how dangerous?

“I... can’t come with you...” High Fives managed to choke out, as he lay twitching slightly on the floor. “It’s... hurts...” he moaned.

“I’m not sure if we can help him, Rarity. It’s obvious he doesn’t want to come with us.” Garrus observed.

“We can’t just leave him here. What if the meanie pants find him?” Pinkie protested.

“Pinkie, we still have think of the colony. Those geth will keep coming unless we seal those tunnels,” Rarity pointed out.

“Leaving a pony out here is so not cool... wait, I know!” Pinkie broke into a wide smile. “Gummy here can protect you.” She nuzzled the tame varren following behind her. “Won’t you Gummy?”

“Is... is that a varren?” High Fives eyes widened as he got a first proper look of Gummy.

“Don’t worry, Gummy here won’t bite,” Pinkie reassured. The varren bared its sharp teeth for the benefit of the stallion.

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[Lix's Hope, Harnos]

Applejack sat at her room, staring at the forgotten gift that she meant to give to her sister as a gesture of apology. How the hay was she supposed to apologise on the incident that brought her cutie mark to light? For that matter, she was still quite surprised Apple Bloom took it so hard. The filly had always looked forward to getting her cutie mark when she was younger...

The door to her room creaked open. "Applejack?"

"Apple Bloom!" Applejack exclaimed in surprise.

"Shhhhhh! You'll wake the others," Apple Bloom said urgently, as she slid the door shut. "Applejack, you need to leave. Now! I ain't fooling around when I said that earlier."

"Now just what you mean by that—"

"No time to explain. You need to leave now!" Apple Bloom repeated, her yellow eyes glancing at the door nervously.

Applejack put her forehooves on the shoulder of her sister. "Applebloom! You're mah sister. I can't leave you here all alone," she said with every bit of sincerity.

"Please Applejack—" Applebloom's face suddenly contorted in pain. "... owwwwww... it hurts so bad." She put her hooves on her forehead and sunk to the floor, moaning in pain.

The soldierpony stared at her sister in shock.. She had never seen her sister in this state before. Applejack knelt at her sister's side and tried to comfort her the best she could. "Apple Bloom! What's gotten into ya? What's happening?"

"It.... its.... arrggghhhhh... t-t-the... p-p-p-lant..." Applebloom's voice faltered as the intense pain wracked her body. Applejack winced at the pain the filly must be feeling.

"What plant? Tell me, Apple Bloom. What plant?" Applejack asked, cradling her sister's head gently. By now though, the filly was whimpering incoherently, too exhausted to answer Applejack's questions. The soldier pony mind was filled with burning questions and no answers.

"Come on Apple Bloom, we'll get ya back to the ship—"

The door suddenly chimed and slid open. Before she could react, the soldierpony found herself being surrounded by a dozen ponies—all from the colony. Her alarm bells went off as she saw everypony wielding some sort of makeshift weapons in their mouths. Standing at the head of the

crowd was the mayor herself. “I’m sorry, Applejack. I really am,” she said softly, before bringing down a broken pipe on the surprised mare.