

“O.N.I.”

CoffeeGrunt

The Office of Naval Intelligence was a strange place to make a career. Here the fashion to function ratio was much more lenient than mainstream military architecture. Gone was utilitarian corridors and grey metal decking every surface, the employees at O.N.I. enjoyed modern facilities, top of the range even. The main lobby was a gargantuan hall, painted in soft, cream shades. Steel and glass walkways criss-crossed the ceiling as ponies went about their daily jobs on the various levels of the Hive facility. The floor was glass, with lighting panels underneath. It gave Rarity the impression of walking on the sun's surface.

It had been controversial when she had enlisted to serve; being an Intelligence Officer wasn't her first career choice. No, how could one make a career choice on a job that was utterly hushed from the public it recruited? She had started in Boot Camp, excelling at recon but ultimately failing to even point a pistol straight. The recoil was simply *too much* on those things, and it gave her such awful cramps in her deltoids, she could already feel the skin starting to wrinkle there. Thankfully the drill sergeant had noted her affinity for subtlety, and suggested her as a recruit to ONI's Section One. Known in the business as “the ones that are actually spies.” Rarity never talked to a pony from the other sections, not even hushed rumours were discussed amongst colleagues. ONI was a place of constant vigilance, security cameras decked every room, guardsponies stood in every corner and doorway, watching, their safeties were never on.

It was true that Rarity had noticed more than one pony experiencing a, “termination of employment.” What happened? No pony with a brain asked. The lobby bustled with a hundred ponies going about their business, yet was silent as they passed through to the mysterious corridors and rooms of the Hive. Rarity herself pushed through the crowd, weaving past ponies to get to her destination. She had a career making appointment to keep, and it would not do at all to keep Admiral Luna waiting.

She eventually reached the room, in the Command section of the base. To think the entire beating heart and leadership of the UESC was right here under Canterlot. Not that it made it vulnerable, the facility was a mile underground, and the intervening space between it and the streets above were weaved with enough reinforcements to withstand a direct nuclear strike. Fashion and function perfectly married, if only the same could be said of the rest of the UESC. Rarity appraised the guards outside the Admiral's office, and allowed herself to be subjected to the mandatory security checks. Her badge, irises, hoofprints and even blood were sampled and analysed by the attendant AI in seconds. She checked out, obviously as expected, and continued as the two stallions opened the doors for her.

Luna's room was the polar opposite to the rest of the facility. While the attempt had been to make the interior of the Hive not feel that it was underground, Luna seemed to embrace this ideal. Indirect lighting was bounced into the room from slits in the walls. A large, curved desk sat

in the exact centre. Black marble to match the midnight blue carpet Rarity now walked upon. The walls themselves were also glossy black, not too overwhelming, but enough to give them an obsidian-like allure in the lighting. The room was well-decorated in its own right, Rarity had to admit.

The Admiral stood from her desk, motioning with a hoof at the guards behind Rarity to leave them. Rarity snapped off a salute - one never forgot her manners - and took the seat that Luna offered with an extended hoof. It was sat directly in front of her on the opposing side of her desk. Right in the centre of her attention.

The Admiral once again took her seat and cleared her throat. "Well now we have the formalities of security considered, how was your mission, was it successful? I trust you managed to evade detection?"

Rarity nodded curtly. "Neither side was aware of my presence, to my knowledge at least. The mission was very successful. Though, I'm afraid you'll find by the data, your sister's was less so. The fleet suffered considerable losses."

Luna raised an eyebrow in concern, and Rarity floated the tiny chip from out of her pocket and onto the desk. It was essentially a small, square piece of metal with a circular, glass window on the front. It was in this window that electricity arced with the knowledge held in it. Luna caught the chip in her own magic and carried it to her holo-pedestal. She inserted it into the slot and at once the pedestal burst into smoke and flames with a brilliant flash.

Rarity raised a hoof to her mouth in shock. The data might have gotten slightly corrupted in transit, but this was just unheard of, and breaking the Admiral's own computer terminal! She slowly began to realise the situation as the now obviously simulated smoke disappeared, and in its place stood a holographic form. It was a unicorn pony with a brilliant, azure coat and a flowing, silver mane. It was decked in a matching outfit comprised of a purple cloak and hat. It regarded Rarity with a haughty expression before turning to Luna.

"Trixie is aware that you have inserted a data drive into her forward port. She imagines you'd like her to decrypt it for you?"

Luna nodded. "It is your purpose, Trixie. Now please, get to it. I need these recordings as soon as possible." She turned to Rarity. "Did you gather any other readings?"

Rarity jumped slightly in her seat. "Ah yes! Forgot to mention, silly oversight. I managed to collect radiation scans on the enemy weapons as they were firing, as well as several studies into the shield technology. I couldn't make mane nor tail of them, but I'm sure your scientists can surmise something."

Luna leaned back more casually, flicking a hoof at the data terminal as Trixie reappeared.

"You've decrypted it? Excellent. Now find the scans of the enemy weaponry and send them to the team in Section Three immediately. We need to begin work on counter measures at once."

"Section...Three ma'am? Aren't you going to-?"

Luna raised a hoof, cutting Rarity off mid-sentence. "While I applaud your efforts in gathering

this intel, I'm afraid what is done with it is, naturally, top-secret. You have done your part Rarity, now it is for other ponies to continue this particular line of work."

"Thank you ma'am. My apologies. I'm sure you have the best knowledge of keeping our colonies safe."

Luna's expression turned almost wistful. "That I hope I do Rarity. I'm sure as part of Section One you remember the report on the UESC's integrity?"

Rarity gulped, remembering the damning review. "Yes. They gave it twenty years before collapse."

"I have begun to watch the recordings on my glasses here. I personally think this enemy will easily halve that estimate. However the public must not know. And that, is why I'm promoting you, Rarity." She stood up from her seat and walked round to the front of the desk. "You were a fashion designer, were you not?"

"Why yes, but in the end I wanted to help my fellow pony."

"Excellent. So you have an eye for art." Luna tapped the holopad. "Trixie, duplicate the data on the drive to your local cache."

Trixie reappeared, holding a casual leaning stance despite the lack of support. Though considering she was a hologram, gravity was something she never had to consider. "Already done." She gave a condescending smile to Rarity. "Enjoy your promotion, ma'am."

Rarity smiled and nodded back, while Trixie flickered off the terminal, her form dissolving back into nothingness.

"About...said promotion." Luna levitated the data drive back into Rarity's pocket. "You'll be moving to another section. Section Two, to be specific. I'd like you to help run the new propaganda campaign. I need vibrant, eye-catching posters depicting ponykind's struggle against the aliens. But a *victorious* one. The public cannot find out how dire the situation is. I need not explain this to you, I imagine?"

Rarity stood up straight. Excitement welled at the prospect of getting some *creativity* in her job rather than sitting in orbit watching things for the sake of intelligence, (which was a job that ironically required no intelligence in her eyes.) While the job seemed fairly underhoofed, Rarity did not doubt she could bring her flair to the advertising and have those stallions signing up by the ship-load.

"You need not ma'am! I'll happily accept the opportunity to serve."

"Excellent!" Luna snapped an obligatory smile, and extended a hoof. Rarity took it and gave a firm shake. "Your first assignment, is to make a press release of this footage you gathered. It must seem like a hard-won, heroic victory. But, not a defeat in *any* measure. I have faith in your initiative, Rarity. Report to me when you have completed your work, and we can begin the next advertising campaign for the recruitment offices."

Rarity once more extended her heartfelt thanks and took her leave. Ideas brimmed in her head and she almost burst out in mad laughter in the centre of the lobby with her excitement. Many ponies' curious looks and the slight raising of an armed foreleg in her direction nulled her excitement, and she took her ideas to the new office she had been promoted to.

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"Alright rookie, grit your teeth. This one's gunna sting a little."

Dash braced herself as the nozzle was wedged under her armour plating. She'd injured her diaphragm in the plasma strike, and while it wasn't life-threatening now, it was hindering her breathing a bit. Her teeth gritted as the biofoam poured out of the nozzle and expanded. A combination of a local anaesthetic, antiseptics and tissue-regenerator. A benevolent combination of chemicals that made Dash feel like a thousand ants were crawling on the wound. After a moment the sensation and pain passed, and her chest went numb. The biofoam would be broken down by her body in a few hours, but her wound would have more-or-less healed by then.

Sharps set the canister down and waved a hoof in front of her eyes. "Still with us there rookie? I could get you a lollipop now if you'd like."

Dash made to cuff the colt, but her foreleg didn't reach. Sharps laughed, removing his helmet. His face was revealed for the first time to Dash, dark grey coat with a dark brown, almost black mane. His eyes were auburn, and sparkled with a mischievous glint.

"C'mon sarge, let's help the ol' warmare to her hooves. Gave us quite the fright passing out when we slipped out of the system there, Dash." With him on one side, and the sarge on the other, they extended a foreleg under her shoulders and brought her, wobbling, to her hooves. "Lucky you've got them hollow pegasus bones there rook, I don't think the ol' Sarge expected much more exercise today." He shot a glance at the sarge, who grunted.

"I ain't cut out for this no more Sharps. Besides, dragging your sorry, pessimistic rump out of the rubble took all my strength." He gave Sharps his own rendition of a jesting smile, and let Dash stand on her own hooves without support. She wavered slightly, but regained her posture. Needless to say, sparking out on a slipspace exit was embarrassing for her.

"I...I'm okay. Just a little nausea was all..right!?"

"Yeh, yeh sure. Nausea." Sharps nodded in a pretense of understanding.

"I hope I get a transfer from you guys, you're really gettin' on my wings."

"Lucky we didn't get on your lungs eh Rook?"

"Also, c'mon Sharps. I took out a super, alien, death-tank of doom, can we cut the Rookie stuff?" Sharps' face became deathly serious. "It's Rookie or Twinklewings. Pick one."

Dash sighed. "Rookie. I'm going to my quarters."

"Hey, we didn't pull you from your *totally voluntary* sleep there for nothing. The Admiral needs us to give her a briefing on what happened planet-side."

Dash gulped, her face turning from sky blue to almost off-white. "Alright. Shouldn't be too bad, eh?"

Celestia sat at the end of the long, conference table. Before her in the closest three seats were what remained of the 1st and 33rd ODSTs. Three ponies from a force of around twenty. Ground forces had suffered even more than her own navy had. The room was dimly lit, Twilight had damaged the reactor by overcharging it to allow the slipspace drive to charge faster. It had been a necessary action to make sure the ship could escape in time, but now it meant they had to

sacrifice less important areas for the sake of keeping the slipspace drive running. The *Everfree* was well and truly limping back home to Equestria.

Celestia relaxed her posture for the first time since slipping into the Harvest system. She tried not to let her weariness show, however.

"At ease filly and gentlecolts. We've all had a trying day."

The few collected survivors sighed and relaxed in their chairs, Dash had been holding her breath. Why, she didn't know. It wasn't like Celestia would throw her into slipspace because she was one of the few survivors.

"Now, I requested your immediate attention, despite the rest you all obviously need, because I need your accounts of the battle. Any detail you remember about the enemy could be critical, and it's best to gather it while it's fresh in your minds."

Dash licked her lips. "Well, I saw some of the little ones up close. They seem to be used kinda like grunts, they're not too smart and their weapons don't fire as fast as the other ones."

"They also have no shields, and a backpack filled with some sort of flammable gas, smelt like methane." Sharps cut in.

"Mhm. Twilight are you getting this down?" Celestia turned to the pedestal at her side as her AI's form appeared.

"Yes ma'am. I managed to recover the files from Private Dash's vidcorder in her helmet array."

She waved a hoof at the table, and the hologram in the center showed a three-dimensional mockup of the creature. "A primate, these 'grunts' appear to need the gas in their tanks to breath. A potential weak spot?"

Sharps waved his hoof at the hologram. "No point, our fire cuts through their armour easily, even SMG rounds. They're less grunts and more cannon fodder for the other, bigger guys."

Twilight nodded and flicked her hoof again. A hologram of the towering beast that had attacked the squad, and killed Midnight, appeared. The details were visceral, even the saliva spraying from its mandibles was visible.

"These're the smart guys, field commanders. They're more elite than the grunts. Their weapons seem to fire much faster, and hit harder. They've got the strength of a fair, few ponies. I've been in the corps for years ma'am, ain't seen nothing snap a pony's neck like that thing did to Midnight." The sergeant had leaned forward, glaring the alien hologram in the eyes.

"So we have multiple species, or perhaps these grunts are an infant form of the elites?"

Twilight shook her head. "Negative ma'am. Biology is far too differentiated. These elites are reptilian, the others are primates. There are no known creatures that can metamorphosise that significantly."

"So these are two species in union?" The image before Celestia flicked to a squad, one tall Elite surrounded by five Grunts, an arm outstretched with its mandibles wide, bellowing an order.

"Although slavery seems more accurate. I doubt the Grunts willingly allow themselves to be cannon fodder." She turned to Dash, confronting her directly. "What about the vehicle you encountered?"

Dash cleared her throat in an attempt to remove the dryness invading it. "It was large, about as wide and deep as a scorpion, but slightly taller. It had two big fins up front and smaller ones

behind, it didn't drive on the ground but kinda hovered over it." This piece of information elicited a sparkle of intrigue in Celestia's eye. "It sloped up to the main weapon, a kinda...flower-petal layout of glowing plates. It squeezed them together to fire these big balls of white light the size of a pony. I managed to dodge one but I still felt the heat from it even then." The image of the tank appeared as she spoke, a ball of light welling in the petals she had just described.

Celestia nodded. "Their ground vehicles have plasma weapons...and anti-gravity technology. Fascinating. It is a real pity none of you were able to gather weaponry samples." She stood from her chair, rising up above the holograms of the aliens. "Though your actions are more than commendable, you succeeded in your mission even as I failed you in orbit. I'm folding you into my own ODST squadrons. They're on a covert op at the moment, but will be re-docking with us when we reach Equestria. I'm sure you'll all be an excellent addition to their ranks, I'm sorry for the comrades you lost on Harvest and aboard the *Tempest*."

The sarge looked down at the table, eyes locked onto the glare of the hologram emitters. "They were good ponies...good friends ma'am. We'll make 'em proud." He levelled his gaze at the snarling Elite in the hologram. "And make them pay a hundredfold."

Celestia smiled at the old stallion's heart. Fire like that is what kept a pony alive. She could use a survivor like him. "For now, you all may rest. I myself am leaving the slipspace navigation to Twilight and plan to enjoy a nap before I enter cryosleep. I never do feel it's quite the same thing."

The serviceponies took their leave, Dash planned on stealing one of the absent ODST's bunks for a while. Every limb from her legs to her wings ached, and all she wanted was to curl up and doze away her thoughts. In the end, she managed to act on this wish, and the grey of the *Everfree*'s interior melted away as she fell unconscious.

Twilight turned to Celestia, her posture now a mess as all pretense of leadership fell from her. "Ma'am? Are you okay?"

Celestia jolted upright. Lost in her own daymares. "It's nothing, Twilight. Keep the course, I just need sleep. I'll consult with Luna once we arrive, we need to formulate a plan, my gut tells me Harvest is only the start, and ponykind needs to start galloping to keep up with our new enemy." Twilight nodded and flickered away, confiding herself to the ship's mainframe. It would take two months to reach Equestria, and unlike the ponies aboard the *Everfree*, she didn't have the ability to shut herself off. Doing so would cause the ship to simply fall out of slipspace at a random point in normal space, potentially in orbit around a black hole or inside a star, in theory.

So Twilight kept her slipspace calculators running, while she monitored the crew. It was intriguing to see the way ponies differed in their reactions to battle. Some were silent, hiding in a corner of the cafeteria behind a bottle of alcoholic liquor, others grouped together, sharing jests and smiles, as masks to cover the fear Twilight could see. Ponykind was truly remarkable in its chaotic diversity. How in all the galaxy it would ever defeat the enemy force it had found itself against, she didn't know. She decided to run a thorough calculation routine, it kept her busy for two weeks until it yielded the answer. Ponykind would lose by her estimates, depending on how

large the enemy fleet is. However there were many variables that would likely appear, and not even Twilight's near-infinite capacity for knowledge could predict what ponykind would develop to save its own existence.

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The surface of Harvest was cooling now, the fires and magma receding to wintry ice as Thel'Vadamee watched from his warship. The ponies had fallen swiftly under his assault, and the planet was burnt in mere days. He pitied this race, it had found itself an insurmountable enemy in the Covenant, and he would lead his fleets into glorious battle to annihilate every one of them. The door behind him emitted a low, ethereal chime and opened as a figure glided in. It was hunched over, aging skin hung from it's frame yet its eyes glinted with youthful joy at the first of many conquests. He was robed in regal reds and gold, and behind him extended his crown, wide and flanged, it seemed like two horns of pure gold reaching out of his back. Thel'Vadamee fell to one knee in respect for the noble Hierarch, newly instated to lead his Covenant in this new Age of Reclamation, the verminous creatures that stole their lord's worlds would soon fall by the million.

The Hierarch halted his throne, being both a mark of his status and his method of mobility. It hovered above the shimmering violet floor like a delicate petal in the wind. He raised an arm to the kneeling Elite. "You may rise, Vadamee. You have brought great honour to our Covenant." Vadamee rose, towering above the Hierarch in stature, yet subservient in action. "My thanks noble Hierarch Truth. Their militia was easily scattered, and they fled to their other worlds in the wake of our fury."

Truth toyed with his chin thoughtfully, stroking the hanging piece of skin trademark to his species. "Excellent. We will deal with the others in time, loyal warrior. For now we celebrate the beginning of a glorious conquest. This plague will trespass against our lords no more." Vadamee nodded slowly in agreement. "We will find their worlds, burn their towns, and slay every last creature down to the mewling infants."

Truth smiled. "Your fervour has lead this fleet well, but I am to understand the *Divine Ablution* was lost, however?"

This elicited a tension in the Elite's muscles. "Yes. They led a fleet to retake this world, but thirteen of their ships fell for one of our own. The ponies will be easily slaughtered, though the Shipmaster was lost with his flagship."

The Hierarch waved a hand in a dismissive motion. "No matter, his sacrifice has furthered our Great Journey. I am sure that someone of your ability will make an excellent replacement."

Vadamee's heart surged with elation and exhilaration. He once more fell to one knee, bowing his head to the floor. "It would be nothing less of the highest honour to lead your fleets, noble Hierarch."

Truth smiled and nodded to the once more kneeling Elite. "Arise, Shipmaster Thel'Vadamee. May you lead our fleets to many glorious victories."

Vadamee rose once more, curling his right hand into a fist and placing it over his heart. "The

enemy will see swift defeat at the hands of our Covenant. By your will, noble Hierarch, it shall be done.”