

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter One: Inception

To my most faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,

Surely by now you have begun to sense the strange magical force coming from the Everfree Forest. At first I suspected it was nothing more than some of my more ambitious subjects, practicing their spells in a place where they could use their full power without fear of harming others. But now, the energy levels there are beginning to approach or possibly surpass even that of the Element of Magic. You, my most treasured pupil. Further complicating things is the nature of the magic itself. It feels somewhat chaotic in essence but I am not completely sure, so I cannot precisely determine just how much of a threat it may be. I regret being unable to look into this personally.

I must ask for a favor from you and your friends, the wielders of the Elements of Harmony, as I have done on many an occasion in the past, and it is with a heavy heart that I must do so once again. I wish for you to travel into Everfree, and uncover the source of this strange anomaly. If the Elements of Harmony are indeed required, inform me so that I may retrieve them from Canterlot Tower for you. If they are not required, and if at all possible, I give you permission to do something about it as well, but please do not put yourself in any undue danger for my sake. If you feel it is beyond your ability, please, just return home and contact me. I will handle the rest. I have the utmost confidence in you, my faithful student.

*Yours sincerely,
Princess Celestia*

Twilight Sparkle hummed as she finished dictating the letter. "Well, everypony, what do you think? Are you all up to the task?"

She stopped pacing back and forth on her rug and turned to her friends, who had all gathered together in her library to discuss the situation. Fluttershy and Rarity sat together to the side, whispering to each other in anxious tones; Rainbow Dash lounged lazily on the nearby sofa while Pinkie Pie bounced in place beside her; Applejack stood dutifully near Twilight, scratching her head and visibly pondering what to do about the letter.

Twilight felt an odd mix of anxiety and pride as she rolled the letter's contents around in her mind. Princess Celestia's tasks were always a joy to complete, but they were typically very straightforward and intuitive, or at the very least contained useful clues. This new task laid before Twilight and her friends was pretty much mud.

"I reckon if the Princess needs our help, it's our job to do so, ain't it?" Applejack said, replacing her hat. "As users o' Elements of Harmony an' whatnot? If this were somethin'

anypony else could do, she wouldn't've asked us."

"Well put, Applejack." Twilight walked over to the nearby bookshelf and pulled out the familiar copy of *The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide*, and immediately set to flipping through it. "Let's see... the Princess mentioned the magic feeling 'chaotic'. That sounds familiar. Hmm... chaotic... chaotic..."

Rarity jerked her head up sharply, causing Fluttershy to squeak in alarm. "Twilight, you don't think this has anything to do with Discord, do you?" she asked. "I'd really rather not go through all *that* again."

"Chaotic... Discord. Hmm... you might be on the right track, Rarity," Twilight said, pulling her nose out of the book. "Still, I'm certain if the Princess knew that this was somehow related to Discord, she would've mentioned that specifically. It must be something else. But what?"

"How do you know for sure it's not, though? This really *could* be dopey ol' Discord, trying to escape or something." Rainbow Dash yawned and crossed her hooves behind her head. "Maybe he learned his lesson, and this time he isn't blowing his cover with a bunch of cotton candy clouds and exploding corn and stuff."

"A possibility. Still, if it *isn't* Discord..." Twilight tapped her chin. "Changelings, maybe? I didn't think they'd try anything again so soon. No... this doesn't seem the type of thing they'd be involved with. King Sombra? No... it's unlikely he'd come all the way down here to the heart of the Princess's power." She sighed, out of ideas. "Perhaps this is some *new* threat to the kingdom. That just makes me *more* uneasy."

Pinkie Pie hopped over to Twilight's side and proceeded to bounce around in tight circles, accidentally shoving Applejack away in the process. "What are we arguing about *what* it is for?! This is a call to adventure! To excitement! Ooh ooh! Like the time when we had to go throw that cursed ring in a volcano! Or when we had to go looking for the seven pieces of the evil wizard's soul to destroy them! Or when the Princess asked us to find that Golden Fleece! Or—"

Twilight sighed and stuck a hoof out, causing Pinkie to run into it and stop moving. "Pinkie Pie, I don't recall *any* of those things. At all. In fact, those sound made-up."

Pinkie rubbed her nose, then instantly perked up again. "Oh... well maybe I just *read* those stories and imagined they were staring *us*... but it sounds the same! Epic adventures, starring the greatest heroines in all Equestria! Doesn't that sound neat? That *is* what we're doing, isn't it?"

"We're just going to investigate a strange magic disturbance, Pinkie," Twilight said. "It shouldn't take us more than a few hours to look into things, maybe a little longer if I think we can

fix it without involving the Princess or the Elements of Harmony. It's all right next door in the Everfree Forest, not on the other side of the world or anything. This isn't an 'epic adventure'. It's a little job."

"Aw phooey." Pinkie pouted and swung her forelegs down in dejection. "I'll never get that Vorpall Sword..."

"Riiight..." Twilight lifted her book back level with her nose. "Well, if it's not Discord, and it's not Changelings, what could it possibly be?"

"Anomalous magic with a chaotic nature... hmph. Is that all the information we have to work off of here, darling?" Rarity tapped her chin. "I should think that the Princess would have given you more information than this."

"All I know about it is what's in this letter," Twilight said. With a faint glow of her horn, she added, "And, what *little* I can sense about it from this distance. I can't get a really solid feel of *what* it is, but I at least know *where* it is. We should get moving though. The longer it's there, the more likely it's going to cause some damage or attract curiosity. We shouldn't need supplies, since it's only a few hours away. So if everypony's ready?"

"Do... do we really *all* need to go?" Fluttershy gulped and began to nervously inch towards the door. "I mean... it doesn't sound *too* dangerous... but... well, you know... if you don't need me I'll just—"

"The Princess insisted we all go. She mentioned our Elements of Harmony." Twilight gave Fluttershy a reassuring glance. "Perhaps she thinks that our Elements may prove useful? I wouldn't want to find out they *are* necessary and not have one of them along with us. You should at least come to investigate with us, just in case."

"R-right... I guess then... if that's what you want..."

"Well then, let's get going!" Twilight stamped her hoof and grabbed her handy map of the Everfree Forest from the nearby desk. "This shouldn't be too hard, and if it looks like it is, we can just contact the Princess and everything'll be just fine. No problem at all."

"This... *might* be a problem..." Twilight gulped. "Oh dear."

The giant circular vortex of flowing energy encompassed the vast majority of the tiny clearing, roughly a mile from Zecora's home. Rivers of golden magic, each wrapped in bands of green or blue, streamed their way through a vast, ethereal void. The deep expanse of black and purple was pin pricked with glowing white stars, all faintly twinkling in and out of existence. No

matter what direction they looked at it from, the same view followed: total chaos.

"This is inexplicably bizarre," Twilight said. "I've never seen anything like this. I'm going to need to run some calculations, try and figure out exactly what it is I'm seeing here." She lit up her horn and set to work.

Pinkie pulled a camera out of her mane and snapped a few pictures, giggling between clicks. "Neat! I bet I can sell this to the National Equinerer! They *dig* juicy supernatural stuff like this!"

"It certainly *is* a most intriguing sight," Rarity cooed. "It's so... *beautiful*. Why, I'm getting all sorts of inspiration for some new outfits for when we get home! Hmm... though the colors will be *dreadfully* hard to manage. I wonder if—" She trailed off, muttering to herself about things that none of the others understood.

"What in tarnation *is* this here thing, though?" Applejack circled around the anomaly. "If y'all ask me, it looks kinda like a... window? A window into... *somethin'*. What's all that weird stuff on th' other side? Magic?"

"It doesn't look very inviting..." Fluttershy gulped from behind the nearest boulder she could find. "All that magic... it looks... *scary*..."

"A window, filled with magic. An astute observation, and it brings to mind descriptions of strange phenomena I've read about before. If anything, this thing is a 'portal'." Twilight frowned and dimmed her horn. "Whatever this portal is, *it's* what's causing the magical disturbances. Rarity, I'm sure at this distance you can feel the magical radiation too?"

"Beg pardon? Oh! Y-yes, of course darling." Rarity skewed her eyes and nodded in understanding. "It's making my horn feel... *tingly*. Not really in a *bad* way, just... strange. I feel like my magic is being amplified, or altered, or something, but it doesn't feel *dangerous*. Where do you think it leads? Just into that void there? Heavens, that doesn't look at *all* pleasant."

"I don't know where it goes exactly, but I'm not too eager to find out, either," Twilight said. "I'm going to close it off with a sealing spell, nothing fancy. I can't really tell *what* kind of energy this thing is made of, but I think I can handle it by myself. Everypony should probably stand back, though."

Pinkie groaned. "Awww. Do you *have* to? I was thinking of setting up a booth and charging admission! 'Come see the mystery window into the WORRRRLD OF TOMORROW!' Five bits to look, ten bits for pictures, twenty bits to stick your hoof in! And I'd have a banner and sign posts and a concession stand right over there and—"

"I doubt it's a portal into the *future* Pinkie Pie," Rainbow said, rolling her eyes. "That's

science-fiction junk. This is *magic*. It's completely different stuff, right Twi?"

"Girls, please," Twilight said, as she channeled her magic through her horn. "I need to focus. This might not seem too difficult, but one little errant calculation and I might *break* the portal, instead of sealing it. I don't know how much damage that might cause to the surrounding area... or to *us*, and I'd rather not find out."

A soft purple glow formed on Twilight's horn as she concentrated. She grit her teeth and hardened her expression as the magic took shape. After a few seconds of focus, a brilliant flash, followed by the blinding light of a sealing spell backed by all the magic Twilight could muster, shot from her horn. The shining bolt of magic struck the portal and engulfed it in a deep lavender glow. Slowly, the portal began to shrink.

"See? No problem at all," Twilight said, smiling and sticking her nose in the air. "It's all in the—"

The portal exploded outwards, destroying the seal in a blinding flash of purple and blue and knocking everypony to the ground.

Before, it bathed the clearing in a dull grey glow. Now, it brimmed with a prismatic sheen that coated the entire area in the full color spectrum and then some. With startling speed, the anomaly steadily began devouring the surrounding area with an increasingly more powerful gravity field that had sprung up from nowhere. Everything it touched was yanked towards the portal's surface and into the void beyond. Dirt. Twigs. Boulders. Ponies.

"Who-ho-hooaa!" Pinkie shouted as she, the closest, began to get sucked in. She tried to gallop out of the field, but the portal's pull was too strong, and despite what was clearly her best effort, she inched towards it. "Ahhh! I don't want to see the future yet! Heeelp!"

"Hang on Pinks!" Rainbow charged forward and grabbed Pinkie's hooves. She beat her wings in an attempt to force herself backwards. For a moment, it worked, but as soon as she had any headway, the portal increased its suction, pulling the two hapless ponies in. "Oh... not good!"

"Hold on!" Applejack snagged Rainbow's tail in her mouth. "I gotcha, sugarcube, just hang on!"

Applejack dug her hooves into the ground as she tugged against the pull of the portal. Slowly, but surely, the gap between Pinkie and the surface of the portal widened, causing Rainbow to sigh in relief.

"Phew... thanks AJ," Rainbow said.

The portal pulsed. Applejack's hooves cut grooves into the dirt as she was once again yanked forward by gravity.

Applejack tripped and lost her footing. "Aw, *horseapples!*"

"Rarity to the rescue! I've got you, darling!" Rarity grabbed Applejack's tail in her magic and started tugging.

"Oh my goodness... oh my goodness!" Fluttershy exclaimed as she attempted to help by grabbing Rarity's tail with her mouth. "Oh... I just *knew* this was a bad idea!"

"Girls! Hang on!" Twilight used her magic to grab Fluttershy, pulling her as hard as she could outwards and away from the portal's grip.

The ponies all breathed a sigh of relief as the group slowly exited the grip of the field. Twilight was thankfully far enough out of its pull to concentrate fully on her spell and getting her friends out, rather than worrying about getting sucked in herself.

The portal quivered, and absorbed Twilight's spell. Its gravity doubled in strength.

Twilight's jaw fell. "Oh by Celestia, you've got be kidding—"

The portal pulsed with light, and in the process, sucked Pinkie past its inner rim. Rainbow was unable to keep her grip without the risk of getting pulled in too, but she loyally held firm to Pinkie. She gave a panicked shout as she too began sliding forward into the portal. The two opened their eyes and looked into the abyss that awaited them. From up close, the rivers of gold resembled pure energy, not liquid or vapor, glowing all the colors of the rainbow. It would've been a beautiful sight were it not threatening to suck all the ponies into it.

"*Consarnit!*" Applejack blurted as she too fell into the vortex.

Rarity panicked. In a futile attempt to strengthen her grip, she wrapped her magic completely around Applejack, but that only seemed to fuel the portal's energy field. She followed Applejack into the portal against her will.

"Waaahaahaha!"

Fluttershy whimpered as she was pulled along by Rarity's tail and into the darkness. "Oh d-d-d-dear..."

Only Twilight's magic prevented the five ponies from falling into the abyss. The portal fed upon this energy, sucking it into the abyss like thousands of fireflies drifting down on a breeze, adding to the splendor of the magical rivers below.

Twilight tugged as hard as she could, but her friends were too far into the field to get out without risking serious injury to her steadily depleting magic force. For a fleeting second, she thought that if she stopped trying to save them, maybe she could get away. Maybe she could find Princess Celestia and let her know what happened, and *she* could help. Twilight dashed those thoughts aside and stood firm, and with a fierce pull that made her horn sputter and fire off errant sparks into the wind, Fluttershy's tail lifted back out of the portal's rim.

“Almost... there...”

Using all the magic she could muster, she heaved upwards, digging her hooves into the dirt and grass beneath her as her horn blazed with magic. More of Fluttershy appeared. A purple tail, followed by a panicked Rarity, emerged from the portal.

“Just a... little more...”

She locked her jaw, making it ache - there was Applejack! The pain in her horn was bordering on unbearable, and it was glowing with such intense fury and firing off so much rampant magic that she worried about a possible explosion. She could *just* see Rainbow's tail.

The portal pulsed once more.

“*Oh come on!*”

Twilight could handle no more. With a weak flicker, the light of her horn died out. With a final, powerful pulse of energy, the portal ripped the six ponies down into the abyss. Aside from the magical fluctuations of the vortex, the clearing was silent.

A dirt brown earth pony with a chocolate-colored mane galloped towards the Everfree Forest, cursing to himself the entire time. His pace was brisk and erratic, as if fleeing a predator. He was exhausted and not able to run as fast as he would like. His breath was heavy as he swung his gaze around in a panic.

He chanced a glance behind him after he cleared a small hill, then said to himself, “Blast it, she's still following me! Of all the bloody annoying—”

“Heeey! Wait up!” A wall-eyed gray pegasus trailed behind him in the air, saddled with a pair of drooping saddlebags and carrying a brown package in her hooves. “Come on, I've been trying to give you this package all day! Stop running away!”

“It's not mine!” he shouted back. “Sod off!”

"But Mister Turner, I—"

"*Doctor!*"

"But *Doctor* Turner, I—"

"It's not my package! It's *not* my package! I didn't order anything from the Muffin of the Month Club! *It's not mine!*"

She'd been at his tail the entire day, quite literally since he had awoken. That had been a rather disturbing experience. Ever since then she'd been enough of a distraction that it was beginning to affect him more than just mentally. It had taken him a great deal of effort to get far enough ahead of her that she couldn't barricade his path and attempt to get him to sign for a delivery that wasn't his no matter how much she insisted it was.

"It's not?" She blinked, one eye at a time. "Why didn't you say so *before*?"

"I *did* say so before! At least a full *hundred* times, you bleedin' featherbrain!"

"Heeey, that's not very nice! Fine! I won't give you your package then, if that's the way you want to act! *Jerk!*" she said, sticking out her tongue.

"It's *not* mine!" But, the pegasus was already fluttering off. "Blast it all, bleeding mailponies... fantastic, now I'm late, and now I'm talking to myself. I do hope that portal hasn't caused any damage..."

Time Turner came to the clearing where he detected the space/time distortion, and as he caught sight of the pulsing portal his face became an incredible scowl.

"Oh brilliant. *Brilliant*. Somepony has been tampering with this portal, and now it's just gone all sorts of haywire. Doesn't anypony these days know how to just *walk away* from really strange fields of magic that can tear you apart at the molecular level? Honestly! Blast it all, if I hadn't been late none of this would've happened. Ugh... when I get my hooves on that bloody mailpony..."

He pulled a plain-looking silver stopwatch out of his saddlebag, then carefully balanced it in both hooves as he sat on the ground. With a click on the top, the portal stopped churning, its magical energies frozen in place. He wound the watch counterclockwise, and the portal shrunk bit by bit with every turn until he got it down to a manageable size, safe from any errant gravitational forces.

Satisfied that the rift was safe to observe, he approached it, with his watch held between

himself and the portal. The watch began to glow a bright neon green, and now instead of displaying a clock face on the front, it displayed a set of wavelengths, numbers, and a tiny list of objects that had been sucked into the portal. Time Turner was glad the list seemed small at first. Animals could sense Void magic pretty well and typically tried to avoid it, so it was usually only stationary objects that got caught up, or poor critters that happened to be right in precisely the wrong spot the tear appeared in when it manifested.

"Let's see... tree, rabbit, badger, mushroom, snake, rock, yadda yadda yadda. Phew, nothing too—" His face contorted in concern. "Oh *bugger*, looks like some ponies *did* get sucked in. *Fantastic*. Six of them as well! This just keeps getting better and better. That will *not* be, in the least, an easy situation to patch up." Time Turner sighed. "Well, not much I can do for them from this end, sadly. Better find out where they ended up..."

Twilight Sparkle and her friends screeched through the ethereal flow of the strange void they had fallen into, desperately seeking a way out and coming up short. They found that they could not directly control their path through physical force, and were merely drawn along by the currents of magic as they flowed around them. Twilight discovered she could use her magic to steer them, but wasn't sure if they'd fall *off* the river if she tried to steer them out of it. Considering that "off the river" meant "into a bleak, endless abyss where no light shone forth", she felt it really wasn't worth testing that theory.

They had managed to huddle together, clinging to one another in desperation. Wherever they ended up, they were confident that at the very least they'd end up there together.

"Hey guys, look up ahead!" Pinkie pointed further up the river. "Betcha never seen a river do *that*!"

The others followed Pinkie's outstretched hoof and instantly noticed it: the river cascaded upwards. And, to top it off, the flow veered back into a loop that ended in a sharp downward spiral. Twilight was immediately reminded of the roller-coaster she and her friends went on during their visit to the new amusement park outside of Fillydelphia. She also remembered not being able to walk straight for nearly an hour afterwards.

"Aw horseapples..." Applejack gulped and gripped her hat tightly.

"This won't end well, I can feel it." Rainbow clung tightly to Pinkie. "Normally this would be no biggie, but normally I'm in control!"

"Hang on, everypony!" Twilight shouted.

Pinkie cheered and lifted her hooves in the air. "Yaaay! Everypony put your hooves up!"

It's so much more fun!"

They hit the bend and soared up and through the magical field. At the apex of the climb, they flipped backwards along the river, and they found themselves falling upside down at a breakneck speed through the rest of the flowing aether.

"Aaahhh!"

"Wheee!"

The magic careened off the side, slowing the riders down enough for them to collect their wits, and their lunch. Applejack seemed almost tempted to remove her hat, but decided against it and replaced it upon her head. Rainbow didn't seem too much worse for wear, but was clearly not eager for a repeat performance.

Pinkie giggled and snorted into her hoof. "One more time! Let's go again! That was so much fun!"

"Oh I think I'm going to be ill," Rarity mumbled, holding her stomach. "Yes... definitely going to be ill... oh dear..."

Fluttershy trembled in a terrified panic, clinging desperately to Twilight's legs, while Twilight in turn was holding onto Applejack for dear life. This would be no time to fall overboard and become separated.

As they bounded through the river of magic, Twilight looked out alongside and saw other windows zooming past. Each appeared to vent out into other worlds, though most of them went by too quickly to make anything out. One thing was for certain though: if she and her friends wanted to escape, they'd have to get into one. Twilight only hoped whichever one they picked led back home. Using her magic to latch onto another fork in the river's path, she and her friends found themselves flowing directly towards a tiny ripple in the distance, barely large enough for them to fit through and growing smaller as they got closer. Wherever it led, Twilight thought, it had to be better than here.

"Oof!"

"Eep!"

"Ah!"

"Ow!"

"Ugh!"

"Wheee! Let's do that again! Can we, can we? Huh huh huh?"

The ponies dropped unceremoniously out of the aether and into a pile of garbage. Above them, the portal slowly faded away until it disappeared with a faint hiss.

"Ohhh... my aching head." Twilight coughed as she warily got to her hooves and looked around herself for her friends. "Is everypony okay? Where are you, girls?"

"Over here!" Rarity called from nearby. "I'm alright, darling. I think I landed on something, though."

"Yeah, that'd be me," muttered Applejack. She shifted herself out from under Rarity, sending the unicorn sliding down the pile of trash to the concrete below.

They cleared themselves out of the garbage, Twilight being the last to get to solid ground. She peeled a damp newspaper off of her flank, and glanced at the front page headline:

"SMOG LEVELS REACH RECORD HIGH!"

"Well that's.... wait, 'smog'? Huh?" Twilight blinked in confusion and flipped the paper over, searching for the "smog". Finding nothing out of the ordinary, she glanced upwards. Her pupils shrunk in alarm. "Oh dear."

The others in the group followed Twilight's gaze skyward, and their jaws dropped.

A dark haze filled the few parts of the sky that could be seen through the crisscross of clotheslines and metal railings. Buildings covered in strange, unrecognizable metal colored in dull shades of brown, gray, red, and black, reached for the light above, their tips disappearing into the smog. The bright glow of the city filtered in through the occasional gap in the skyscrapers, contrasting with the relative darkness of the alley.

"Pfh, see Dashie, *told* you it went to the future," Pinkie said. "This is just like that movie where the stallion drove a car really fast and ended up in... no wait, he ended up in the past. Um... hey Dashie, which movie was it where the pony goes to the future?"

"The hay if I know. You're the movie buff around here, not me," Rainbow said. She shook her head in disgust. "I'm stickin' with my opinion though. I still don't think this is future, Pinkie, at least not *our* future... I hope."

Fluttershy poked her head out from behind Rarity, who was busy shaking garbage out of her mane. "W-w-where... *are* we?"

"I don't suppose anypony has any theories as to where we are?" Twilight asked.

Pinkie raised a hoof into the air.

"*Other* than Pinkie Pie? It's obvious where we're *not* at least."

"Not a clue." Applejack stepped forward and adjusted her hat carefully. "Reminds me of Manehattan though, just... grittier and a whole heck of a lot bigger. Golly, even *I'll* admit this place needs a bit of sprucin' up, though. I couldn't imagine livin' 'round all this here *junk*."

Applejack swept her hoof around, emphasizing the grime and garbage that littered the alley surrounding them: broken bottles leaking oddly colored fluids; scraps of rusted metal; shards of old, discolored cement. The one remaining wheel of an old, tattered stroller squeaked as it spun haltingly in the foul smelling breeze.

Speaking of which.

"Oh *my*." Rarity covered her nose and waved a hoof in front of her face. "It smells like somepony's been burning... *something* out here, too. Who burns garbage, *really*? Ugh... how horrible."

Fluttershy shuddered and huddled in closer to Rarity and Applejack. "It's so... *dirty*... I don't like this new place..."

"Aw don't be silly! It's always fun to be in a new place!" Pinkie laughed and threw a big hug around Fluttershy, causing the pegasus to yelp in surprise. "Oh, just *think* of all the new ponies! Ooh, ooh, I bet I could throw a *million* new parties! Oh *gumdrops*, but I don't know where there's any party supply stores around here. Can we look for one of those? Ooh! And I'm *starving*! We need to find a sweet shop or an ice cream parlor or a bakery or *something*! I need three hundred cc's of chocolate and sugar, stat!"

"Pinkie, we've got more important things to worry about than if there's enough balloons for a party," Rainbow said. She dejectedly looked skyward again and shook her head. "Ugh... Rarity's right though, this place is a dump. Look at all that. Don't they have any kind of weather patrol here? You can barely even *see* the sky!"

A murky orange, not like a sunrise or sunset, but rather a menacing glare, showed itself through the sparse breaks in the smog layer. It churned with an angry agenda, seething back and forth like a stormy sea.

Fluttershy sniffed and shuffled her hooves. "Oh... I do hope the little birdies up there are okay... if there even *are* any..."

Rarity coughed and continued to wave her hoof in front of her nose. "Heavens, let's just get out of this *dreadful* little alleyway and into the streets, at the very least. Perhaps if we ask around, we can find out where we are?"

As they rounded the corner, they could see neon lights adorning large billboards, advertising goods and services they'd never heard of. Something called "Dolor" was prominent on most of them, with each billboard advertising a different color. The closest one had a slogan reading: *"Introducing new Dolor Black! Great for a meal, or even a snack! It's hip, it's cool, it's not wack! Better than White, it's Dolor Black!"*

Down at street level, a chaotic stream of ponies swarmed along the busy street. Higher above, a good hundred yards up, oddly straight formations of pegasi flew, orderly avoiding each other despite their sheer number. Rainbow and Twilight each shook their heads in disbelief. There were enough pegasi in the sky alone that Cloudsdale's population paled in comparison. How many ponies could possibly be in this city?

Twilight moved ahead, seeking out a pony that hopefully wouldn't be distracted too much by their own tasks. She found a dark blue pegasus mare that was taking the ground route, likely to avoid the heavy air traffic high above, wearing a bright green jacket adorned with the same image as her cutie mark, a white cup with a big, red scoop of shaved ice.

Twilight cleared her throat and introduced herself. "Um... excuse me, but—"

"Yeah, what do you wa-aah!?" The pegasus leaped back in surprise mid-turn and nervously scooted away in obvious panic. "G-get away from me! Help! Police! Poliice!"

She flew off in a rush, leaving Twilight stunned and confused. Had she said something wrong? Did she startle her? Was it her breath? She didn't think she smelled funny, even if they *had* all landed in garbage earlier. And even so, police? What would warrant that?

Rainbow came over and patted Twilight on the shoulder, while glaring upwards at the retreating pegasus. "Well what the hay was that about? Rude much?"

"Hmm..." Twilight tapped a hoof to her chin. "Very peculiar. Was it something I said?"

"Ya didn't even get ta say anythin', sugarcube," Applejack said. She shifted her hat forward a little. "I already don't like this place. Ain't got no sense for welcomin' visitors."

Rarity brushed a hoof through her mane. "Let's try another pony. Hmmm... aha!" She pointed her hoof across the busy street. "There, that dashing unicorn." Twilight made to start towards him, until Rarity coughed rather too loudly. "Ahem. Perhaps we should let *me* do the talking? A little *charm* goes a long way. Leave it to Rarity, dear."

She trotted over to the stallion, a reddish-black unicorn wearing a tuxedo vest and a matching tie. He was busy reading a newspaper as he waited beneath a sign with the word *bus* written on it in big, bold letters. Rarity fluffed her mane and tail, checked her coat, and brushed

off any traces of dirt or grime she could see. Seemingly satisfied that she looked her very finest, she cleared her throat and introduced herself in a rather sultry tone..

"Pardon me, my good sir. So sorry to interrupt, but my friends and I seem to be in a bit of a bind." She gave her very best pout and fluttered her eyelashes. "Would you be so kind as to—"

"Ugh... get away from me," the stallion said, scowling. "Have you no shame at all?"

"I *beg* your *pardon*?" Rarity exclaimed. "Oh! Of all the ways to greet a lady! Well, I never! You should be... ashamed of yourself? Hello? Are you ignoring me now? *Hmph!*"

She decided, perhaps wisely, not to pursue the matter any further. With a huff, she returned to the others, disgruntled and slightly dejected.

"Any luck?" Twilight asked, despite knowing the answer.

"Not at all. That stallion *clearly* has some *grave* vision issues." Rarity snorted and double-checked that she was totally clean. "No manners amongst these ponies, none at all. You'd think someone dressed so dapper would be a *little* more courteous. Even... ugh... *Prince Blueblood* at least had the decency to *act* polite at first."

"Aw, don't get discouraged, sugarcube." Applejack patted Rarity on the shoulder. "Maybe the stallions 'round these parts just ain't affected by that patented Rarity charm?"

"Yeah, maybe you're just not his type," Rainbow said.

Pinkie bounced up and down excitedly, pushing the three out of her way to address Twilight. "Ooh! Can I try next? Huh? Can I? Oh please oh please?"

"I don't know Pinkie," Twilight said, hesitating. "I mean... Rarity and I couldn't get any answers, what makes—"

Pinkie held her hooves together in a pleading gesture, sank to her knees, and forced her eyes to widen and fill with tears.

Twilight stared for just a minute, her mouth curling into a nervous smile. She balked. "Fine..."

Pinkie immediately leapt back to her hooves. "Yaaay! You'll see, I'll get some answers! Sherlock Pie is on the case!"

She began scouring the nearby crowd, then snapped her hoof towards an off-white earth

pony with a curly orange mane. She wore a simple blue blouse.

“Aha! My first suspect!”

The pony in question was focused on fumbling with something in one of her saddlebags, so she didn't notice Pinkie's approach.

“Hi!” Pinkie had somehow had made the statement from the interior of a nearby ponyhole cover.

“Ahh!” The other pony jumped, not seeing where the source of the voice came from. “W-w-who's there?!”

“Hey now, no need to get all jittery. I just wanna ask you some questions,” Pinkie said from the far side of a nearby lamppost. A lamppost that happened to be no more than six inches thick.

The other mare nervously twirled in a circle, trying to find the source of the voice. “W-who's there? Show yourself!”

Pinkie's head popped out from inside of a covered trash can. “I just want to know where we are!”

The profoundly disturbed mare curled up into a tight ball, her eyes darting around in panic as she stroked her tail with a hoof. “Oh no... this is just like that one dream! Make it stop...”

“You're not being very helpful you know,” Pinkie whispered into the white pony's ear, leaning in from out of one of her saddlebags.

“AAAHHH!!”

The mare leaped into the air and shot off down the street in a cloud of dust, leaving Pinkie to tumble around in the air before landing in a heap on the ground.

“Pinkie, how was *that* supposed to help?” Rainbow asked as Pinkie bounded back over with a pleased grin on her face. “You scared that pony half to death!”

“Aww, no way Dashie. I can't *scare* anypony! Scaring isn't my thing. She was just surprised is all! Glad to see everything still works, though. I was worried that maybe being a totally new place would ruin all my fun!” Pinkie shrugged. “It's okay, she probably wouldn't have helped either. I just wanted to make sure I was still me!”

“Pinks... you... you are so random...” Rainbow sighed and patted Pinkie's shoulder.

The group continued their fruitless trek through the city streets. Every so often, they would try to ask any passing strangers, but they were always greeted with one the same three reactions: a scream followed by mad dash in the opposite direction, a cold shoulder, or perhaps worst of all, absolutely nothing. Eventually, even these three responses died down and were replaced by a new and slightly unsettling response: open staring.

Now that they were in a much busier part of the street, it was becoming difficult for the group to not be the center of attention. Ponies with young colts or fillies present shielded their children's eyes. A few odd ponies ran off, away from the offending mares. Others pointed in earnest, and either muttered amongst themselves or chuckled at the sight. The six mares of Ponyville shrunk a little under the judging gazes of everypony in their immediate vicinity.

"Does anypony else feel as if, well, *everypony* else is watching us?" Twilight asked.

"Why're they all starin' at us?" Applejack whispered back. "We don't look *that* outta place, do we?"

"It's giving me the creeps though, that's for sure," said Rainbow. She sneered in the direction of a pair of large earth pony stallions that were pointing in their direction with wide smiles on their faces. "I don't trust these ponies. Something's up."

Rarity huffed at a random catcall from nearby, and shot a sharp glare in the sound's direction. She defensively moved herself in front of Fluttershy to protect the pegasus from the gazes of as many ponies as she could. "For once, I'm with Rainbow Dash. There's something rather *unscrupulous* going on here. I'm used to attracting a lot of attention, but this is ridiculous!"

Twilight shook her head. "I don't know, but I- oof!"

As Twilight rounded the nearby corner, she slammed into another pony that had been doing the same thing going the opposite way.

"Owww..." Twilight groaned.

"Twilight! Y'all okay?" Applejack rushed over to Twilight and immediately began helping her up.

"Yeah... I'm fine," Twilight said. "Thanks."

"Oi! Watch where you're walking!" said the other pony.

She was a mint green unicorn with a sky blue mane and magenta eyes. A beige sweater vest over a white, long-sleeved shirt and a tiny blue bow tie covered her upper torso, leaving her

cutie mark, a plain-looking silver stopwatch with actual ticking hands, exposed. She gasped, and hurriedly lifted a stopwatch identical to the one on her cutie mark off the ground that had been knocked aside when she'd bumped into Twilight. She carefully scrutinized it for damage, and after a brief moment of examination, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Twilight said. "We're all in an awful hurry. Oh! Maybe you can help—"

The other pony snorted and brusquely swept right past Twilight and her friends. "I don't have time to be buggering about with a bunch of... *nudists!* I'm *late!* Bloody tourists."

"Sheesh." Rainbow sneered in the departing pony's direction. "Somepony's got their tail in a knot."

"You okay there, Twi?" Applejack asked. "Y'all look like ya seen a ghost."

Twilight's eyes shot open in realization. That pony had just called them something. It was a word she hadn't heard used before in conversation, but she did know its definition.

Nudists.

As she looked around at the crowd of ponies surrounding them, she noticed something she hadn't really taken notice of before: *all* of the ponies were wearing clothes. Except, of course, for her and her friends.

"Oh dear..." Twilight's face turned a bright pink as she nervously shifted in place. "Girls... perhaps we should try and find someplace a little less public to discuss our situation?"

"Whatever for, darling?" Rarity asked. "I know these ponies so far have been rather rude, but—"

Twilight hurriedly whispered her discovery to the others.

Rarity's face turned brighter pink than Twilight's, and she frantically began to look about for something to cover herself. "Good heavens! Scandalous! Oh goodness, I *knew* I should've packed... well, *something!*" She grabbed a nearby newspaper with her magic and hastily set about trying to mold it into something wearable.

"What're we gonna do, Twi?" Applejack asked. She removed her hat and started trying to use it to cover up what she could.

Twilight gulped. "I... I don't know. C'mon, before we get into any... trouble..."

Twilight's worry turned to panic as a siren roared to life off in the distance. It was close enough to a fire alarm that she knew it meant trouble, but given the reactions they'd been getting she had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't firefighters coming this way.

"Aw man, beat it! It's the fuzz!" Rainbow grabbed Pinkie and tried to fly off, but was caught by Twilight's magic.

"Hold on, Rainbow," Twilight said. "Running away isn't going to help us any."

Within moments, the six ponies found themselves surrounded by police ponies—pegasi, unicorns, and earth ponies alike—all dressed in neat black uniforms and sporting bright gold badges.

Fluttershy crowded herself into the center of her group of friends. "Oh... d-d-dear..."

"Halt! New Pandemonium City Police! You are under arrest!" called one unicorn, a white stallion, who was levitating a megaphone in front of him.

With a flashy wave of a hoof he signalled to a few of the other officers to move in. The six Ponyville mares were soon surrounded by a few earth ponies menacingly wielding their batons with their mouths, and a pair of unicorns that levitated what appeared to be hoofcuffs.

Twilight sighed and stepped forward, offering her hooves in surrender.

"Twilight..." Applejack murmured.

"We should just cooperate," Twilight said, turning to her friends. "I wouldn't want this to get disagreeable. Besides, they're authority figures here. Police? They can help us..." She gulped. "Right?"