

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Five: Intermission

Shadows played across the massive expanse of the dining room floor, seeping into the corners and blanketing the walls. A series of dim lights, flickering in and out softly, did little beyond casting a faint glow across the central table. A solid black tablecloth covered the table, obscuring it in the darkness and giving the illusion that the rows of thin, wax candles floated in their golden holders. Plates, bowls, glasses, forks and spoons; the table was set for several dozen. This morning, as with every morning, it seated just one.

Silvertongue lifted a large berry to his mouth from a near-empty bowl, his fork steady and firm. He eyed it for consistency and color before eating it whole. For several seconds, he savored the bite, whisking the berry around in his mouth before swallowing. He pushed the empty bowl away and levitated over a plate filled with a great mound of the same berries, dripping in their own juices and topping a small stack of pancakes.

Magmaberries were his favorite, and as such made up the majority of his diet. The name was for a variety of factors that the berries had: the nature of their juicy interiors; their rich color, a deep, burnt red with bright orange and yellow splotches of which no two berries ever had the same pattern; and, their extremely spicy flavor, with a savory-sweet aftertaste. They were packed full with enough nutrition that, were one able to afford them, it was possible, even recommendable, to live entirely on them alone.

Magmaberries were also, like any berry, capable of being made into just about anything: they went well on their own as snacks, but were best frozen or deep-fried; they worked well as toppings or stuffing for pancakes, waffles, or any other baked goods, where the sugary sweetness helped overpower the heat; they even made delicious syrups, sauces, and dips, especially when roasted or blended.

As Silvertongue took a sip from his glass, he delighted in his favorite purpose for them: they were used for the best wines in the entire world. The flavor was so strong that it overpowered the alcohol content almost entirely. This only came through an excruciating process, substantially more dangerous than just picking the berries themselves.

The Redblade Mountains, a range of everlastingly active volcanoes just southwest of the Gate, were the only home to these berries, which required extreme heat to grow and even *more* extreme temperatures to flourish. The best crops grew right at the edges of dried lava pools and at the volcanic craters, and they needed to be pulped immediately after plucking, while their juices were still hot and bubbling like the magma from which they took their name. The fermenting process needed to begin within an hour afterwards, thus necessitating quick travel in a wildly dangerous landscape.

But, a properly-made bottle of the finest magmaberry wine was like sipping emotion itself, or so the enthusiasts would claim. It was as if it had been fermented with ecstasy and pleasure, agony and sorrow, and all the best and worst feelings and sensations one pony could ever hope to experience in one lifetime, let alone two or more. All of it, flavored to match the tastes of the pony drinking it. If you were sad, the wine could send you into a deep depression; if you were happy, it would fill you with an ecstatic elation.

Silvertongue enjoyed his remaining breakfast one piece at a time, thoroughly scanning the morning's data report as he ate. Then, he felt another presence in the room with him. He did not shift from his position nor did he look up from his report or his breakfast. He simply levitated his napkin to his lips and dabbed three times.

He swallowed his mouthful of food. "Ah, Shadowstep. You have returned from your errands, though with a bit of a delay, I notice. I expected your arrival hours ago, when you wouldn't be interrupting my breakfast. I do hope you have some good news for me."

"Apologies, milord." Shadowstep nervously bowed from the darkness, though only his eyes could be seen in the shadows. "Getting the information you requested took longer than I planned. But oh, milord, you will not *believe* the things I learned about our six little targets."

Silvertongue gave a slight nod. "Deliver your report, Shadowstep."

Shadowstep approached. As he did, he took a tiny device from his ear and inserted it into a socket near the table's electronic display. Silvertongue noted that Shadowstep looked like he had been in quite a scuffle: his uniform had several burn marks and tears, and the young stallion's face and wings and been nicked and bruised in several places.

The device that Shadowstep had inserted glowed a dull blue. Multiple notices and alerts flickered across the screen. Shadowstep batted them away with swipes of his hoof, and nervously chuckled.

"Apologies milord. It seems I haven't updated my software just yet."

Silvertongue continued to stare blankly ahead. "Do hurry up, Shadowstep." He lazily floated another berry from his plate to his lips and took a bite.

Shadowstep pressed his hoof to the screen several more times, and at last his report opened up. It appeared as a black box with neon green text strewn about, and highly-detailed full-color images in the margins. Silvertongue gazed upon it, his eyes darting across as he began to read along. He noted that each section was divided neatly and everything tidily organized, just as he expected of any of his subordinates. He inwardly chuckled at the irony that he preferred everything neat and organized, yet the city he ruled was as disorganized as possible.

Each of the six ponies from the prior evening's report had their own section with a wide multitude of notes; Twilight Sparkle's and Applejack's were noticeably shorter, though not so much so that it was a negative. There was more information here than Silvertongue had initially asked for, or expected. Shadowstep could be forgiven for being a little tardy.

Silvertongue mused as he perused the individual report sections one by one. "Hmm... I see you spared no expense gathering intel on their personalities. That may be advantageous in the future. A commendable effort, Shadowstep."

"Th-thank you sir!" Shadowstep seemed to swell with confidence and pride, puffing out his chest. "I interviewed the NPPD officer that was on the forms. Disguised myself as a CIA agent, and she didn't suspect a thing. She answered every question and went into rather excruciating detail about them all. I couldn't get their documentation forms, but got enough info from her directly to lead me to them."

Silvertongue narrowed his eyes without removing them from the screen. "I certainly hope you were more thorough than that. If the CIA catches wind of this, the Committee may become involved."

He knew full well that the Committee would stymie his efforts just by merely being anywhere within a hundred miles of the situation. The damned fools would draw too much attention, alert too many ponies, and probably actively involve themselves with these six mares, making it that much more difficult to continue with his own efforts covertly.

Shadowstep snapped to attention. "Of course, milord! I took care of her real neat and tidy-like. Killing her was easy, I just waited until she was about to... *get-off*." He snickered at the double-entendre, even if the meaning was lost to his employer. "No pony will have seen her leave the building, or *not* leave, for that matter. Had to get creative with the clean-up though. To avoid suspicion and all that. She didn't have family, and had only one friend on the force itself that might be a concern, but he's ever-so-conveniently these six's parole officer, so I can easily deal with him *directly*, if need be."

"Very good, very good." Silvertongue's eyes gleamed as he came to the second page of the report, which had the image of a minty green unicorn mare upon it, labeled *Chronomancer*. "Ah, now *here* is the information I was after."

Shadowstep pointed triumphantly at the photo. "Yes, sir! I spied this pony trailing those six mares, and followed her as ordered."

Silvertongue mused silently as he now perused the substance Shadowstep had obtained from the Chronomancer's discussion. He was most pleased in seeing for himself in text and image that his theory had not only been correct, but that it was turning out better than he had

imagined. These weren't just any old *average* ponies.

"Intriguing... such fascinating information." Silvertongue highlighted one section of the text. "Here. You mention that she was speaking with another?"

"Yes, milord. She was talking with another Chronomancer from what I could gather, from the home dimension of those six mares. I didn't get much else out of it other than what they said, and I don't really know what to make of it. It's not my forte."

Shadowstep gave a half-hearted shrug, and helped himself to one of the berries off of a nearby plate. Silvertongue glowered at him as he went to place it in his mouth. He reconsidered, giving Silvertongue a nervous smile and replacing the berry to its original position.

Silvertongue read more of the report, growing more curious about the mentioned Elements of Harmony, the six mares that wielded and represented them, and how the world they originated from worked. It seemed familiar, similar enough to his own world's workings that he could quickly grasp the concepts.

Silvertongue glanced over at Shadowstep and gave the pegasus a quick once-over. "Judging from your appearance, you engaged the Chronomancer directly. What happened to your status as a master assassin, Shadowstep? Did you drop it?"

Shadowstep rubbed the back of his head. "The other Chronomancer, Turner I think his name was, spotted me from the other end of the video feed. Stupid girl has excellent reflexes."

Silvertongue narrowed his eyes, and took another large bite of a magmaberry. "Did you ensure she would no longer be an obstacle, as I requested?"

Shadowstep hesitated for a mere second, not even long enough for a less-observant pony to notice. But, it was enough for Silvertongue to notice, and the silver-coated unicorn's glare intensified, speaking many volumes of disappointment.

"That would be a 'no', then?"

Shadowstep gulped, and nodded. "N-no sir, I could not confirm the kill. I dropped her from a few hundred feet above the city, but I couldn't find the body. I'd like to believe she's dead, but I know better than that. I don't know how she did it. It wasn't teleport magic."

Silvertongue leaned back in his chair and placed his hooves together, continuing to stare at Shadowstep with a fierce scowl. "So. You are unsure if she still lives and breathes, and thus is going to be an ever-persistent thorn in my side, *or* if she *is* dead, and we are just being overly cautious. A waste of time and effort. I do so hate wasting time and effort, Shadowstep."

Shadowstep took half a step back. "M-my apologies sir, I—"

Silvertongue raised a hoof to silence the pegasus. "At the very least, you're not stupid enough to assume she's dead without the proof. You do not disappoint in that regard. I *am* displeased that the Chronomancer still has the possibility of being alive, especially since she will likely try to carry out this plan of hers much more abruptly. You've forced her hoof too quickly."

Silvertongue's horn flashed and Shadowstep found himself yanked across the table, sending plates and bowls of food flying every which way. Silvertongue sneered at Shadowstep as the latter came face-to-face with him.

"But—" Silvertongue released his hold, dropping Shadowstep onto the table with a thump. "That might work to my advantage."

Shadowstep hesitantly raised his head to look at his employer. "S-sir?"

"Normally, such a display of incompetence would earn my wrath," Silvertongue said. "However, the rest of the information you have obtained has put me in rather high spirits. You went above and beyond my orders in that regard, and I believe I will find it most helpful in the near future."

Shadowstep gulped. "Oh... yes, of course sir."

Silvertongue leaned back in his chair again and tapped his hooves together. "I need to begin preparations for the next stage of developments. In the meantime, I will grant you a very *rare* opportunity. A second chance. Stop that Chronomancer, and do *not* let these mares leave the city. Do I make myself clear?"

"C-crystal, milord."

"And one more thing, Shadowstep." Silvertongue glared at Shadowstep again, causing the pegasus to back off the table. "I rarely grant second chances. I do *not* grant third ones. Understand?"

"Y-yes, milord."

"Leave me," Silvertongue dismissed with a half-hearted wave of a hoof. "I require privacy. Contact me again when the situation has improved."

"Yes, milord." Shadowstep nodded, and backed away into the darkness of the room, where he vanished without a trace.

Silvertongue sighed lightly to himself as he perused the report more thoroughly. There

was something in all this information that struck him as awfully peculiar. These six mares contained enough magic within them to shift the balance. It was unsettling. It was also unimportant for the time being. What was important now, was alerting Nihila to the developments, and devising plans for what to do about the situation. He focused his mind and let his essence waft out about him, an aura of magic that would serve as a beacon for his Goddess and draw her to him like a moth to a flame.

"You summoned me, my Warden?"

Nihila's voice came cool and crisp into his mind, flooding his thoughts with a soothing sensation. He shuddered at the way her essence filled him. Elation and curiosity were not emotions he was used to her feeling.

"Milady, I bear news regarding those creatures I discovered."

Her spirit sparked with pleasure, sending a shiver down his spine. *"Ah, you flatter me with your efficiency. I am eager to hear how they pertain to the situation."*

Silvertongue began to read off information from Shadowstep's report. Every time certain strings of words were used, different sensations flooded his soul as Nihila's essence fluctuated in reaction to their meanings. The thought that another world would soon be in its death throes pleased her, filled her with joyful anticipation that made Silvertongue's entire being feel her pleasure. He was in ecstasy, and only maintained a calm and controlled demeanor because of years of posturing and proper etiquette.

The knowledge that these six, these wielders of the Elements of Harmony, were responsible for the imbalance that was beginning to manifest in this world made Nihila rather displeased. That word in particular, *Harmony*, filled Nihila with so much loathing that it worried even Silvertongue for a brief moment, not for his own sake, but for hers.

But, it also piqued her curiosity. The longer these six remained in this world, the more the imbalance would tilt in Harmonia's favor. While it would be only a minuscule proportion, it was the the *principle* that mattered. The Chronomancer had not picked up on the imbalance in her own world just yet. It was minuscule to her. But, Nihila could sense it. Nihila's initial thoughts were simply to have the six destroyed immediately and be done with it.

But, Silvertongue's own thoughts disagreed.

Her voice hissed into his heart. *"My Warden, tell me, were you in these six mares' place, to what lengths would you go to return home?"*

He raised an eyebrow. "Me, milady?" A most curious question for her to ask, since she had a full understanding of his mind and soul. A test, then. "You know well by now the lengths to

which I will go to accomplish any goal I have set in mind. I have always been ambitious. Were I in their place, nothing in this world, or the next, or the in-between could possibly stop me.”

“I do know well the extent of your drive, my Warden. And, I believe they would agree with you, in that regard.” She coolly flittered through his mind, picking apart his thoughts. *“The Chronomancer plans to see Harmonia, does she? She thinks my... counterpart will grant them passage and return them home?”*

“So it would seem. It is certainly within her power if she knew the methods, which I’m certain the Chronomancer does. Certainly within yours, as well, milady.” Silvertongue laughed when Nihila’s spark ignited. “I suspect that you do not wish to utilize that might for their benefit, naturally. We can deal with a little imbalance for a time, and simply let their world be destroyed before we deal with them. I’d consider it an experiment. Let us see what the effects of full-blown dark magicks have upon a world with no way to stop the flow. Your own attempt so many years ago was stymied, remember?”

Nihila’s spark flared again. *“Hold your tongue, my Warden, lest—”*

Silvertongue laughed again. “I tease, of course, milady. The Chronomancer will take them to Harmonia, that much we know. And without intervention, she may just yet succeed. We cannot just allow them to roam free.”

Nihila’s voice became soothing again and melted into him. *“Perhaps we can convince them that their new ally is misleading them? Convince them that perhaps Harmonia is not as benevolent as she seems?”*

Silvertongue looked over the report again in an attempt to see if Nihila’s idea had merit. His eyes brightened when he made a completely different connection. It was brilliant, and it made him all the more thankful for Shadowstep’s thorough investigation. This would not prove difficult, at least not conceptually.

“Turning them against Harmonia will not be an easy task, milady,” he explained. “She shares their qualities in a great many ways, and we both know full well that she will do what she can to help them once they meet her. Perhaps, instead, we *corrupt* them?”

“Corrupted, my Warden?” Her voice floated through his mind like a cloud, soft and innocuous. *“An unorthodox plan. I cannot corrupt them quite the same as I have done in the past with others.”*

Silvertongue grinned. It was a smug grin, hinting at a darker intention than she had guessed. “Ah, but milady, perhaps *you* won’t need to corrupt them, at least not personally. Perhaps somepony *else* could accomplish such a task.”

“You, my Warden?” She laughed, her voice echoing like thunder in his head. “I did not think you liked to dirty your hooves with menial labor anymore. You always preferred to command from afar and manipulate your pawns.”

“Precisely, milady.” He grinned wider and leaned contentedly back into his chair. “I am not in the position to carry out such an errand anyway. While I have a simple understanding of their personalities, there are a great many things I lack that I would need to corrupt them adequately, to make them truly believe *my* words over those of their new ally who is promising them a way home. I do not have an intimate knowledge of their psyches, their hearts’ desires, their hopes and dreams, or the qualities of their souls. I do not know how deeply connected they are amongst themselves, nor do I know which particular buttons to push to elicit my desired reactions. And further, I do not even know which of them exemplifies which *Element*, apart from Twilight Sparkle. Though, I may be able to fathom a guess to a few, another failing of the Chronomancer’s ability, unless she is merely not speaking her mind. No, I do not believe I am qualified to corrupt them.”

“You have a plan in mind already, my Warden?”

Nihila felt her way through his thoughts. His plan wafted through his mind, and she picked it apart and understood it as if it had been her own. She was elated to find her Warden was such a resourceful thinker, but then again he always had been.

“Ah, you are a most devious schemer. If we cannot corrupt them directly, perhaps we can do so indirectly. A brilliant idea.”

“I thank you, milady, for your praise.” He smiled, feeling a tear come to his left eye as the sensations of warm pride filled his heart. “I shall begin my task immediately. Should that accursed Chronomancer still be alive, I will need to work quickly to complete this plan, before she renders it difficult to accomplish covertly. If the Chronomancer *has* perished, then we may merely need to adjust our plans slightly. This is a satisfactory foundation, regardless of the circumstances, wouldn’t you agree?”

Nihila’s voice cooed, giving Silvertongue a feeling of warmth. *“I will leave you to your work, my Warden. Call to me again when you are ready, and I will assist you with the final phase. Until then, I must monitor the Belt of Tranquility and continue my observations of their effect on the balance there.”*

“Aye, milady. I thank you for your blessings.”

He felt Nihila’s essence leave his mind and spirit. He shook off the feeling of emptiness, a sensation he would never grow accustomed to no matter how many times over how many years he had experienced it. Once his mind was at ease and his wits were gathered, he clicked a button on the table, turning on the intercom.

“Shroud.”

“Yes, *milord?*”

“I need you to make a few calls.”

The little box that sat upon the den table of room eighty-four and five was a peculiar device. Flathoof had called it a “Teevee”, or something to that effect. It was quite alien to the Ponyville natives, capable of displaying images in the same way the movie projectors back at home did. Twilight had spent a great deal of time trying to discern the origin of the magic that made the device run, and even now sat glued to the rear of the device, rather than the front.

“-just pay shipping and handling. And if you call now—”

Click.

“-Oy’ll keelhaul ya, ya scurvy dog! Oy’ve got—”

Click.

“-terrible news, Mister and Misses Fudge. Your son is—”

Click.

“-pregnant?! How can you be pregnant, we never even—”

Click.

“-made a scrumptious cake! Best of all, decorating cakes is—”

Click.

“Heeeyyy, I was watching that...” Pinkie Pie said, her eyes as big as dinner plates.

Flathoof leaned to the side to keep her from snagging the remote back. “We can watch your cooking program later, Miss Pie. It’s almost eight o’clock, and I need to watch the news.”

“Awww...”

The couch in their den was much too small for all of them to sit on, so Rainbow Dash,

Applejack, and Pinkie Pie sat on the floor in front, letting Fluttershy and Rarity use the couch proper. Flathoof continued to stand off to the side. He'd arrived about an hour earlier that morning, waking most of them up to get them started on their day. Rarity had made several complaints about interrupting her beauty sleep, none of which were paid any heed to.

With another click, the image upon the Teevee changed again. A delightfully engaging jingle played over a background displaying many sweeping vistas of New Pandemonium City. Bright, shiny gold text that reflected light that wasn't actually there, floated swiftly down from the upper corner of the screen. It twisted through the center to surround a circular silver emblem that had zoomed in from the background, bearing a large, glittering number one.

"You are watching Channel One Eyewitness News in the Morning. With Daybreak—"

The text was swept off the screen to reveal the moving image of a unicorn stallion with a lustrous golden coat and a short, tidy, bright blue mane. He wore a fancy brown double-breasted dress suit, with a matching tie. The stallion was giving a broad, rehearsed grin to the audience that gleamed in an unseen spotlight. His name was highlighted in bright bronze letters in the lower corner of the screen.

"-and Butter Pecan in the studio—"

The image of a white earth pony mare replaced that of Daybreak. Her curly, cream-colored mane matched the color of her own sleek dress suit, though she wore no tie. She gave a broad grin to the audience as well, and proudly crossed her hooves in front of her chest.

"Featuring Meteorologist, Clarity, with the weather—"

Now, a dull brown pegasus mare replaced the image of Butter Pecan. She kept her shiny black mane in a neat, slicked-back style, and wore a dusty blue jacket with a matching bow tie. She just stared ahead, no smile upon her face at all.

"Stalwart, with sports—"

A burly, sky blue earth pony with a brown mane kept in a short crewcut appeared next. His dark blue sports coat was stretched to its limit to fit his physique. He didn't so much smile at the audience as give them an assured, confident nod.

"And Skyline with the traffic—"

A lithe pegasus stallion appeared next, sea green in color with a whitish-green mane styled back in a ponytail. He wore a decorated red flight jacket and a pair of matching goggles. He gave the screen a brisk salute, snapping to attention as he did so.

“Hey, that pony’s got *style*”, Rainbow Dash said, nudging Pinkie in the side. “He might be almost as cool as *me*.”

“This... is Channel One Eyewitness News in the Morning.”

The image shifted to show the first two ponies, Daybreak and Butter Pecan, sitting behind a desk and shuffling papers in front of them.

“Good morning everypony,” said Daybreak, light gleaming off his smile. *“Today’s top stories—”* As he started to speak, his image shifted slightly to the left. Beside him, the tiny image of a red cross appeared. *“Hoof Rot season, already? New Pandemonium Medical reports a rise in cases of the serious disease early this year, and are recommending action be taken by every citizen to prevent the spread.”*

The image next to him changed into that of a great inferno towering over several buildings. *“Also, yesterday’s major fire in the northeast Outer District has still not been contained by New Pandemonium Fire Brigade, and is beginning to spread further outwards in the district. Authorities are worried it may soon spread into Mid-East and Mid-North if efforts to stop it fail.”*

The image beside him shifted away, leaving just Daybreak again in the center of the screen. *“First though, here’s your weekly weather forecast with Clarity.”*

Flathoof snorted. “Seriously? Get to the news about the fire! Nopony wants to hear about the damned weather right now!”

The image panned over to the pegasus mare, Clarity, who was standing in front of a large green screen that quickly flickered to reveal a map of the city with lots of colored splotches plastered across it. The map was perfectly circular, ironically organized into very precise Districts. In the center was the Inner District, the smallest of the three major divisions. Just beyond that and covering roughly twice the area were the Mid Districts. They saw theirs, Mid-South, was covered in the least of the colors, excepting the Inner Districts. The Outer District covered double the area of the Mid Districts, and was divided into two sections: the Outer District itself, and the much smaller area in the south labeled *Gate District*.

Clarity lazily pointed out a bunch of the splotches of color, and as she traced her hoof along the map, the image slowly changed to reflect the movement of the colors. She didn’t seem particularly fascinated with her job.

“Weather forecast for this week,” she said in a steady monotone. *“Smog today, smog tomorrow, more smog the day after that. Smog all week folks, nothing new. Temperatures are staying steady in the mid-80’s, though citizens in Mid-East and Mid-North may notice temperature spikes as that big fire starts moving towards them. I recommend turning on your air-conditioning.”*

She yawned, then pointed to a big red cloud over Mid-West. *"Citizens of Mid-West are advised not to go outside without protective gear for the next three days, starting tonight. All signs point to a freak acid rain storm. Weather teams from Mid-South and the Inner Districts will attempt to divert it, but are not expecting to be able to do much except contain it."*

She yawned again. *"That's all for the weather, but we'll be back for a second look at the end of today's reports. Back to you, Daybreak."*

"Thanks Clarity." Daybreak beamed, his teeth shining bright as ever, and turned to his other side. The image shifted with him. *"Now over to Skyline with the morning's traffic report. Skyline?"*

Now, the image switched from in the studio to that of the pegasus stallion, Skyline. It stayed steady behind him as he flew through a few smog layers above a particularly busy area of the city, where other pegasi were busy dodging one another for seemingly no reason at all. They all seemed to be constraining themselves between two lines of floating, bright green lights that wound through the taller buildings. There was a blue line in between the two green ones, with pegasi on one side flying north, while those on the other side were flying south. The two halves were further divided into fourths by white lines, and these were the ones that the pegasi constrained themselves to the most.

The northbound side was where the trouble came in. Two of the three lines of white were instead flashing red, and no pegasi were flying between them.

"Thanks, Daybreak. As you can see, for all you pegasi out there it might be a good idea to steer clear of Northbound Air Intercity Thirteen. There is some heavy congestion this morning caused by a malfunction in the two of the three Guiding Lines. Traffic Control estimates a three-to-four hour delay for repairs. I'd recommend taking Ground Intercity Thirteen instead if you're headed for Mid-North, and either Air Intercity Twelve or Fourteen if you're headed anywhere else."

The image shifted downwards towards the city streets, which looked just as congested with all the pegasi above swooping down to take the street level. *"To all of our unicorn and earth pony pedestrians down there, please be on the lookout for wayward pegasi taking illegal highway exits. NPPD units are already en route to try and direct the flow of traffic, and estimated arrival time is in one hour. Now back to you in the studio."*

"Thank you, Skyline. We'll be back to you for an update shortly." Daybreak smiled brightly and turned to his left, towards the mare sitting beside him. *"Now to Butter Pecan with our top story of the day. Pecan?"*

Butter Pecan spoke in a cheerful, though focused tone as the image shifted to her.

“Good morning everypony. Today’s top story! Hoof Rot Season is striking our fair city early this year, and there have already been numerous reports of it spreading quickly through the Outer District areas. Doctors are recommending immunization measures be taken as soon as possible. We have more from our correspondent at Central General, Hotwire.”

The image shifted from the studio again, this time to a young unicorn stallion standing in a pristine white hallway, holding a microphone with his magic. His coat was a shiny purple, his mane a neatly-combed orange with red streaks. He sported a gold jacket and a matching tie.

To his left stood another unicorn, this one with an off-white coat. His olive green mane and tail spiked out and stood at attention, and from their luster it was apparent he used a great deal of product to keep them so straight. His eyes were obscured by his large lab goggles, and he wore a brownish-white lab coat that draped all around his form.

“Thank you, Butter Pecan,” Hotwire said. “I’m here at Central General where the reports of Hoof Rot being on the rise early this season were first discovered. With me is the Committee-Approved Chief of Medicine here at Central General, Doctor Blutsauger.”

The white unicorn nodded with a soft smile as his name was mentioned.

Hotwire turned, hovering his microphone over for the other unicorn to use. *“Doctor, tell us a little more about what exactly you’ve discovered.”*

The white unicorn coughed into his hoof and adjusted his goggles, then spoke into the microphone. *“Ja, vell, for zee past few hours vee have been gettink calls from our clinics in zee Outer District about zese Hoof Rot incidents. Typically, Hoof Rot is a late Vinter, early Spring illness, und ponies would have plenty of time to get zeir annual immunization shots, if zey haven’t already. But, if Hoof Rot vere to begin spreadink early, before most of zee city got zeir immunizations?”* The doctor then turned dramatically towards the screen. *“Vee’d be lookink at... an epidemic.”* He then turned back to Hotwire. *“Zat was good, ja?”*

Hotwire coughed, his eyes darting back and forth between the screen and the doctor. He tilted the microphone back towards himself. *“What sorts of actions are being taken to prevent such an occurrence?”* Then, he tilted it back towards Blutsauger.

Blutsauger crossed his hooves in front of his chest and nodded firmly. *“I have spoken vis zee Committee directly, und shown zem mein research. Zey agree vis me zat it would be better to practice caution, zan to risk toyink vis zee lives of our citizens. I believe your studio vill be gettink zeir issued mandate soon.”*

Hotwire raised an eyebrow. *“Mandate, doctor?”*

“Ja ja, I know zere are many ponies in zee city zat do not listen to medical reports or

even vatch zee news, und so I requested zee Committee take responsibility to ensure zat all zee ponies in zee city take action to prevent zis possible catastrophe.” Blutsauger turned towards the screen again and pointed at it, wagging his hoof in shame. *“Immunization shots are free to all ponies vis valid identification, und all of our clinics are open twenty-four hours a day. Zere really is no excuse.”*

“I see.” Hotwire lifted a small pamphlet from his jacket pocket and glanced at it briefly, then turned back to the doctor. *“For those at home, what are the symptoms of Hoof Rot, so they may know which ponies to avoid to prevent infection?”*

Blutsauger adjusted his goggles again. *“Ja, of course. Hoof Rot comes in stages, und luckily vee are only in zee first stage of zee disease’s run. Zee first stage sufferers of Hoof Rot vill have tiny green splotches or varts on zeir hooves; unicorns may also have similar blemishes on zeir horns, as zey are similarly affected. If a pony is in zee secondary stage, zen zeir hooves vill be completely green. Hoof Rot is highly contagious. Do not touch anypony zat shows zee symptoms, do not let zem breaze on you, do not interact with zem! Zis is important!”*

Hotwire nodded. *“Thank you for your time, doctor.”*

Blutsauger smiled back and waved towards the screen. *“Alvays a pleasure to do a service for zis great city.”*

Hotwire turned towards the screen and stepped away from Blutsauger. *“This has been Hotwire reporting for Channel One. Now back to you in the studio.”*

The image returned to the studio view, where Butter Pecan was shuffling a paper she had just been given.

“Thank you, Hotwire, and thank you Doctor Blutsauger. As noted in the report, we have just received the Committee’s Mandate.” She lifted the paper she’d been given and began to read. *“Issued one hour ago this morning, the Committee has issued an order that all citizens without up-to-date Hoof Rot immunization records in the past thirty days are to report to their nearest New Pandemonium Medical Clinic as soon as possible. They have also issued that anypony that does not get their immunization shots within the next twenty-four hours is subject to forced admission by order of the New Pandemonium Police Department. This mandate will be aired on all stations within the next fifteen minutes, and throughout the rest of the day in hourly intervals. It will also be broadcast every ten minutes on the public broadcast system.”*

She immediately brightened and turned to her right. *“Now back to Daybreak for our next top story. Daybreak?”*

“Thank you, Butt—”

Click.

“Awww what?” Pinkie wailed, grabbing the screen. “I thought you wanted to hear about the fire?”

“Bigger news just came up,” Flathoof said. He sighed and adjusted his cap. “One thing after another. Come on then ladies, you heard the... lady.”

Applejack got to her hooves and started to follow Flathoof towards the door. “Already? We have all day, don’t we? What’s the big rush?”

“If I’d known about this report, I would’ve had all of you at Central General an hour ago when the Mandate was issued. I swear, I’m always the last to know these things.” He adjusted his cap. “It’s like this. The closest Clinic to us, Central General, is the busiest Clinic in the entire Mid-District collection. I’m certain ponies are already starting to make their way there. I’d really like to get this done before too long, and the longer we wait, the longer we’ll *have* to wait. So, let’s get moving. Hop to it.”

Twilight stood up and followed after Flathoof and Applejack. “You heard him, girls, let’s get going. Chop chop.”

Rainbow groaned. “Awww... but they were about to get to sports. I want to see if they have a Skyball league here.”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Rainbow Dash, why do you have to be so *argumentative*?”

Fluttershy frowned. “Oh dear... here we go again...”

Twilight stamped a hoof. “Girls! Really, this is neither the time nor place for this sort of thing.”

Both Rainbow and Rarity grunted. “But—”

Applejack stepped in and pushed Rarity and Rainbow apart. They both turned their looks of disapproval towards her instead. “Y’all heard Twilight, let’s just get this over with. No more fussin’ around. I reckon it won’t take that long, an’ we can get back home an’ start gettin’ to work on more important things. If y’all wanna argue, do it later.”

Rainbow sighed. “I just wanted to see if they had a Skyball league. Geez, sports was next anyway. It couldn’t have taken that long...”

“That can wait for later, this is *important*. Do *you* want to get Hoof Rot?” Twilight asked.

“Well, no, but I mean, it’s not that big of a deal. Pfft, we have that stuff back home too, they’re making it sound like it’s super serious and—”

“That’s because *maybe*, don’t you think, it *is* a serious illness over here?” Twilight tutted. “It might not be that big of a deal back home, true. Just get some bed rest and drink some medicinal teas, eat plenty of foods, and you’ll be healthy in no time. But here, they’re making it sound like it could be *deadly*. Multiple stages? Warts? Hoof Rot back home doesn’t work like that. It just makes you smell for a bit.”

Flathoof blinked and scratched his head. “You all must have it pretty lucky wherever you’re from to have Hoof Rot be treated like a common cold.”

“Even then, it *is* a most dreadful little illness.” Rarity shuddered. “Oh my, I remember having it once as a little filly. It made my hooves smell just *awful* for a whole week. Since then, I’ve taken *great* care to watch my health and avoid catching it again. It would drive away business!”

“Ooh, Hoof Rot stories!” Pinkie giggled, patting Rarity on the shoulder. “Why, I remember when me and my sisters all had it at the same time. They had to declare our rock farm a Class Five Smelly Zone! It was *really* hard to try and throw parties in all that stink, and it was just the three of us so we really couldn’t get any supplies or anything! Mom and Pop couldn’t come anywhere near us, and it was really awful. I didn’t like it all that much. But I mean, you’d have to be a *crazy* pony to actually *like* having Hoof Rot.”

Rainbow held her hooves up in defeat. “Fine, fine, I didn’t mean to sound like I didn’t want to get this done at all. I was just wondering what the dang rush was for, geez. No need to bite my head off.”

“You’d have to be crazy to eat pony heads too,” Pinkie said.

Twilight stamped a hoof again. “Girls, please, can we just get going? I’d like to get this done as soon as possible. Right, Captain Flathoof?”

“Right.” Flathoof sighed and nodded. He looked at the clock face on the nearby wall. “We’re probably already running a little late. Come along, everypony.”

The Central General Clinic was shorter than the nearby buildings by a fair margin, nowhere near as tall as Southeast Point. It wasn’t particularly wide either, not like Twilight and Applejack had described Central Database Holdings. It was still very big, to be sure. Flathoof explained that it had a very large underground portion where they performed the more serious

treatments in order to avoid contamination from any smog residue. The building was a dirty white, with large red crosses adorning many of its features. A particularly large one was plastered just above the doors at the front. The doors were large enough to let a few dozen ponies in and out of the entrance at once, likely to accommodate room for stretchers, beds, or other equipment. The cross above the door was emblazoned with bright golden letters reading out the name of the building.

“See? I told you it’d be crowded,” Flathoof said as they entered the sliding quad doors to the building.

Twilight Sparkle and her friends’ jaws collectively dropped at the sight of so many ponies in a tightly-packed space. A line of ponies stretched down the long hallway ahead of them and all the way around the corner in the distance. A little signpost at the end of the line by the door read:

Hoof Rot Immunizations
Approximate Wait Time:
15:00

“Fifteen *hours!*?” Twilight exclaimed.

“Whoa nelly...” Applejack removed her hat and fanned herself with it. “Golly, we’re gonna be here all dang day.”

The ticker clicked, and the numbers on the bottom changed.

“Fifteen hours and thirty minutes!” Rarity began breathing heavily and fanning herself with a hoof. “Oh my, having to stand in line with all these ponies, for *that* long? Heavens, this is simply unacceptable!”

The ponies at the end of the line just ahead had apparently anticipated the wait time, and like many others ahead of them had brought cushions to sit on, and little bags of snacks and drinks. Rainbow Dash wished she had brought a book. She related the line to those she’d waited in to get tickets to Wonderbolts shows. But fifteen *hours*? Even the Wonderbolts weren’t *that* popular.

“Geez, you weren’t kidding,” Rainbow said. She scuffed her hoof on the floor and gave everypony an apologetic look. “Sorry I held us up. If I’d known—”

“It wouldn’t have made much difference,” Flathoof said. “Maybe saved fifteen or twenty minutes, I don’t know.”

He adjusted his cap and straightened his uniform. “Listen, you six go ahead and get in

line. I'll see if I can find something out from the nurse station. I might not be Lockwood, but maybe I can try and get us some sort of a... I dunno, *something*."

Flathoof trotted away from the six mares as they took up positions in line. He rang a bell at the nurse station when he got there. A white pegasus mare came out of the nearby room, clad in a white uniform and a little cap with a red cross.

"Can I help you... officer?" she asked.

Flathoof gave a bright smile and removed his cap. "Yes. Well, maybe. I'm the parole officer for those six mares over there." He turned and pointed at his parolees. "I was wondering if there was anything you could do to maybe help me get their shots a little sooner?"

The nurse narrowed her eyes and frowned. "You're kidding... right? You want me to try and skip six mares ahead of a fifteen hour line? You must be out of your mind."

Flathoof continued to smile as he tugged his collar. "Eh heh. I... I know it sounds a little selfish, but they're new in the city and don't even have last year's shots. I'm worried something—"

The nurse sighed and calmly placed both hooves on the counter. "Look, as much as I'm *sure* that's the case, I simply can't just break protocol and skip them all ahead. This place is a zoo already. Can you imagine the kind of chaos that skipping a few mares ahead of the line would cause? If you think you can hold off a riot all by yourself, then feel free to convince me otherwise."

Flathoof sighed. "Well, it was worth a try. Thanks for your time."

He dejectedly walked away and returned to the other mares. "Sorry ladies, no luck. I'm sure Lockwood might've been able to do something. Knowing him he probably knows half the staff here. We'll just have to tough it out."

"Aw geez." Rainbow crossed her hooves in front of her chest and slumped against the wall. "This is gonna be so boring. I knew I should've brought a book. I could probably finish the newest Daring Do adventure before we're even done."

"Aw, take it easy sugarcube." Applejack chuckled, patting Rainbow on the shoulder. "At least we all got company, yeah?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Um... m-maybe we should think of something to... to t-talk about? To pass the... um... time?" Fluttershy said from her hiding place behind Rarity. "I mean... if... if you want to..."

Pinkie started bouncing. "Ooh! Ooh! We should play a game!" She then stopped, and glanced around the room. "Okay, I spy, with my little eye, something white!"

"Is it *me*?" Rarity asked, her mouth curled in a confident smirk.

Pinkie shook her head rapidly. "Nnnnope!"

Rarity frowned. "Well... hmph. She usually *always* picks me with that color."

"Is it... um... the... nurse's gown?" Fluttershy asked, peeking out from behind Rarity.

"Nnnnope!"

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Is it the floor?"

"Pfft, what? The floor is *clearly* beige, Dashie," Pinkie said. She then put on her best Rarity impression. "I mean, *really*, Rainbow Dash? I know *Rarity's* the fashion expert here and all, but you can't tell the difference between *beige* and *white*?"

"Well, it *used* to be white." Rainbow scuffed at a tile, revealing how much dirt was caked on it. "If they ever *cleaned* it, it might be."

Rarity laughed and nudged Rainbow. "I never thought I'd hear that sort of thing from *you*."

"C'mon you guys, you gotta keep tryin'!" Pinkie shouted. "Something white!"

Twilight hummed and tapped her chin. "The lights, maybe?"

"Nnnnope!"

"The... *ceilin*'?" Applejack asked.

Pinkie put her hooves on her hips and gave the others an impatient glare. "You guys are terrible! Come on! Something *white*!"

"We give up!" Rainbow exclaimed, waving her hooves around in the air. "Come on, Pinkie, everything *here* is nearly white! It's a hospital! *What did you pick?!*"

Pinkie sharply pointed at Flathoof.

"Uh..." He shied away from her accusing hoof.

Her hoof scrolled down his face, to his chest, to his badge, then to tiny, *white* writing upon it. The NPPD motto. *It's a Living*.

"Oh for the love of—" Twilight groaned, throwing her hooves into the air. "We can't even *read* that from here, Pinkie!"

Rarity fumed. "I thought it was a reflection of the light! Really, Pinkie Pie? *Really?*"

"Hey, come on, I'm just trying to pass the time," Pinkie said. She pointed at the signpost, which they still hadn't even passed yet. "See?"

15:25

"Ugh. *Moving on*." Rainbow turned to Twilight. "Hey, I know what we can talk about! Twilight, how did last night go? Find out anything about getting—" She remembered Flathoof was just half a yard away. "A... job? Yes. Getting a job."

"Well, the Chief Librarian said I was more than qualified for the position and wants me to go back... tonight." Twilight put a hoof to her mouth. "Oh dear. How am I going to go in for an interview if I'm standing in line waiting for a shot? Do you think he'd understand?"

Flathoof nodded. "For a Committee Mandate, I'm sure he'd make an exception. Heck, if it were my guess, he might even be in this same line here, assuming he lives in Central Plaza."

Rainbow nudged Twilight softly. "Did you find anything *else* out, Twilight?" In a hushed whisper, she added, "Y'know, anything *important?*"

Twilight blinked for a moment, then her face lit up. "Right. Well no, I couldn't find out anything I was hoping to. I didn't have much time to do my research, sadly. I'd planned on spending all of today there and trying to find out some more but—"

"Excuse me, officer?"

The nurse had come over specifically to speak to them.

Flathoof hadn't noticed her walking over and was taken a little by surprise. "Oh, yes?"

"It would seem there was a misunderstanding," she said, her smile small and apologetic. "You said your parolees were new citizens, right? Well maybe there *is* something I can do for you then."

"Oh?" Flathoof asked. He hopped to attention. "Oh! That's good news. Great news!"

“Now, since they’re new citizens and all that, they’re going to have to go through a routine physical and get some bloodwork done,” she explained. “Nothing special. We only have one doctor on staff that can do this right now, that’s why I didn’t think of it before. But you’re in luck! Our Chief of Medicine had to be here early today to be interviewed for the news report. I’ve already spoken with his secretary and she says he’s agreeing to do it. Though, not without resistance.”

“Doctor Blutsauger?” Flathoof blinked and scratched his head. “The Chief of Medicine is going to give my parolees a standard medical exam? Isn’t that a bit beneath his station?”

“Yes, typically. But the Hospital Board would want him to do it anyway, since...” She leaned in a little and hushed her voice. “We get tax breaks whenever new citizens get fresh medical records, kinda like the NPPD does, yeah? Every little bit helps, if you catch my drift.”

He just nodded and smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate this, Nurse...?”

“Tenderheart,” she said. “And don’t thank me, I’m just doing my job. To tell the truth, this might put me in good graces with the Board. We *have* been a little short on funding lately. All these free immunizations are expensive, and we had to call in extra staff members to see that the line moved as quickly as possible, as well as monitor our actual patients and the like. Pfft. If the actual *doctors* were showing up at a decent hour, this line would be half as long.”

“Right...”

Tenderheart handed Flathoof a card. “Here, give this to his secretary and tell her I sent you. She’ll admit your parolees no problem. She’s expecting you. Take the elevator—” She pointed down another hallway perpendicular to the one they were already standing in. “Up to the eighth floor. Take a right, down the hall until you reach the big wooden door on your right side, just before you turn the corner at the end. That’s Doctor Blutsauger’s office.”

Flathoof nodded and took the card. “Thank you again, Nurse Tenderheart. Come on, ladies. We’re in luck.”

“Thank *goodness*,” Twilight said. “Hopefully this won’t take quite as long, right?”

“It shouldn’t.” Flathoof shook his head as he led them towards the elevators, “Well, the examination part at least. Those don’t take very long at all. Either way it’s *not* going to take fifteen hours. I dunno, maybe thirty minutes for each of you? Longer than just getting a shot, but hey, we don’t have to wait in line, right?”

“Well *that’s* a relief,” Rainbow said.

The elevators at Central General were much larger than those at NPPD Central Station, so nopony had to be squished next to anypony else. This elevator even played music as they waited, a cheery tune that was easy to hum along to, or in Pinkie's case, bounce along to. The elevator dinged as it reached each new floor. When it dinged a seventh time, the door opened and they disembarked.

The eighth floor was *nice*. The lobby had been a filthy white, clean enough to be passable, but not really sterile or hygienic. This felt more like a high-rise office building, like it didn't even belong in a hospital. The floor was carpeted, and the walls and ceiling were a pristine white. They traveled down the hall to the right-hand side, just before the corner, to a big door made of a blackened wood. It was marked with a gold placard that read *Dr. Blutsauger, MD - Chief of Medicine*.

Upon entering, they saw the secretary they were to contact, a unicorn mare with a dull blue coat and curly white hair. She was busy filling out some paperwork when they walked in, and hardly noticed them until Flathoof stepped up to her and coughed.

"Can I help you?" she asked without looking up from her work.

Flathoof set the business card he'd been given onto her desk. "We were sent up here from Nurse Tenderheart to see Doctor Blutsauger. Something about getting—"

The secretary lifted the card with her magic and floated it in front of her. "Ah, right, I got her message a few minutes ago. You should count yourselves lucky that Doctor Blutsauger is even *here* this early, but what can you do when we have a possible epidemic on our hooves, hmm? These six mares are the patients then? May I see their identifications?"

The six all hastily fumbled through their outfits to find where they'd stored their ID cards, then presented them.

The secretary looked over each carefully and entered their information into her computer station. "Hmm, they don't have any medical records on file, as you said. They just got into the city yesterday afternoon, did they? And already they're getting medical records taken care of and everything?" She beamed at the mares. "Good for you! It's not often we see new ponies take such quick action. Wait here, I'll inform the doctor you've arrived."

Flathoof nodded. "Thank you."

She left the room, exiting through the large door behind her. Flathoof breathed a sigh of relief, as did everypony else.

"This is going pretty smoothly," Twilight said, taking a seat in one of the office's comfy-looking chairs. "I was worried when we first got here that everypony was going to be

unhelpful and rude, like the first few we met. It's nice to see there are other ponies around here that are like you and Mister Lockwood."

Rainbow grunted and took a seat next to Pinkie. "This all seems a little fishy, if you ask me."

"Aw, c'mon Dashie, everypony's gotta get lucky sometimes, right?" She threw her foreleg around Rainbow's shoulder, and got a faraway look in her eyes. "Why, I remember when I was just a little twinkie Pinkie, growing up on my family's rock farm. One day, I saw a moving rock and got really scared because, hey, rocks don't move on their own! But it turned out it wasn't a rock, it was a rock *lobster!* Mom and Pop were super excited, because those are worth so much money to rich ponies as pets! So we sold it, and then we decided to take a vacation at the beach with the bits we made, and everypony got matching towels, and—"

Rainbow leaned over to Rarity. "What the hay is a rock lobster?"

"-so we were headed there, and we saw a sign on the road that said fifteen miles to the—"

Rarity shook her head and shrugged. "Never heard of one. Fluttershy? Do you know, dear?"

"-and it was set way back in the middle of a field, which seems like a really weird place to put a place called the Love Shack, but I dunno, I guess everypony likes their privacy every now and then, right? So yeah, it was just a funky old shack, and—"

Fluttershy tapped her hooves together. "Um... well, they're little critters that use r-rocks for their homes. K-kind of... like a shell. But... um... they typically don't live where Pinkie Pie lived. They live by the ocean... usually under docks..."

"-so we took it hip to hip, rocking through the wilderness, which was really fun! Mom and Pop never liked to dance much, except at my parties, so it was really neat to see than having such a good time. I told 'em, 'Mom, Pop, you gotta roam if you want to, even without wings or wheels or—"

"So what the hay was one doing on her farm?" Rainbow turned to Pinkie. "Pinks! Your story doesn't make any sense!"

"-and it had pink air, which I thought was *super* cool, 'cause I'm pink and stuff, and I thought maybe the air would taste different, but it didn't really, so I was kinda disappointed. All the trees were red though, which was weird. I thought maybe they were like, licorice or something, but nope! So then—"

Flathoof put a hoof to his face and groaned. "I swear, if I have to hear one more of these crazy stories—"

Their attentions were diverted away from Pinkie's bizarre tale when the large double doors opened and the secretary reappeared.

"Doctor Blutsauger will see you now," the secretary said. "One at a time," she quickly added when all six mares took a step forward.

"And, he insists on doing it alphabetically. That means you're first, Miss..." She glanced at her computer screen again. "Applejack?"

"Ah... well, okay I guess," Applejack said as she trotted forward and past the secretary. "Wish me luck, girls."

Applejack jumped at the sound of the big doors snapping closed behind her. With a gulp, she looked around the new room she found herself in. Doctor Blutsauger's office was, to put it lightly, fancy. The walls were richly decorated with all sorts of unique, exotic décor, all of it with an eerie medical feel. The lavish carpet felt oddly comfortable under her hooves, like walking on crisp, freshly-cut grass. There were no windows, and she actually preferred it that way, since the big city was still unsettling to her.

The massive wall of degrees and qualifications eased Applejack's trepidation. Doctor Blutsauger was clearly a highly-decorated expert in his field. Rather, fields, given the amount of degrees on the wall. She didn't know any of the many different specializations that were listed, though. There were degrees for Cardiology, Hematology, and a few others, none of which she knew the nature of nor really cared to know, truth be told.

Along one of the walls was a display of jars filled with a transparent, greenish liquid, as well as something else. Applejack had never paid much attention in school during biology lessons, but she figured the objects in those jars were *organs*. Certainly now Applejack was less at ease, and wondered how Doctor Blutsauger expected a wall full of pony organs to really soothe anypony that came in here.

The Doctor himself soon exited from the side room.

He smiled broadly when the mare caught his eye. "Ah, Miss Applejack, ja? Vunderbar! Let's get zis ordeal over vis. I did not expect to be comink in today to give physicals und do zee Hoof Rot shots meinsel, but business is business. Follow me, please."

He gestured behind him towards the room he'd just left. Applejack followed, and came

into a sterile white room with a large table in the center. The walls were lined with various medical implements.

“Let’s take care of a few measurements first. Step over to zee device here please.” He gestured to a machine that Applejack thought looked similar to a scale. She stepped on it, and he came over and began adjusting knobs and levers on the panel. “Now zen, I understand you are from Utopia, ja? Did you take a physical over zere any time recently?”

Applejack thought for a moment, and remembered a doctor’s visit she’d taken a little while before all of this to see about a cramp in one of her forelegs. “Yeah, some few months ago, I think. I don’t rightly remember exactly when it was.”

Blutsauger continued to adjust the scale as he talked. “Do you remember any of zee measurements you vere given?”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “My... measurements?”

He waved a hoof in a gesture for her to continue. “Ja, your height, veight, zings like zat? I’d like to have zem for comparison, in case zere is a large difference in zee numbers. It helps to see if you’ve grown or shrunk in figure, ja? To learn if perhaps zere is somezing in your daily routine or diet zat may be affectink you.”

“Ah, okay.” Applejack nodded, and tapped a hoof to her temple in thought. She came up blank. “Uh... I don’t rightly remember. I ain’t that good with numbers, see, and—”

“Fine fine, it’s no big issue,” he dismissed. “Vee can vorry about zat zee next time you have one, and see how vell you adjust to changink livink conditions. Let’s see. Ah, height is one hundred und forty-one, slightly above-average, very good. You are a tall one, ja! Veight is four hundred und twenty-seven, also above-average—”

Applejack turned her head and glared at him. “Well that’s a bit rude, doc. Y’all sayin’ I’m fat?”

Doctor Blutsauger blinked. A second later, he laughed. Loudly. “Ach, goodness no... ha! Ha ha!” He took a kerchief from his coat pocket and wiped it under one of his goggles. “Fat! Zat is a new one. I vill have to remember it for zee next Doctors’ Ball. Anyvay, nein, you have some tone as vell, so I suspect zee extra veight is all muscular. You are a vork pony, ja? Understandable, given your height. You must do a lot of physical labor, und quite often? From Utopia... hmm. Construction maybe, or a farm pony, perhaps?”

Applejack blinked and nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. Good guess, doc.”

“Ach, I make it mein business to know mein patients on a personal level, ja? Helps make

zem feel at ease, since many patients feel uncomfortable vis a few of zee procedures.” He tugged the collar of his lab coat and licked his lips. “Now zen, for zee next procedure, I am goink to need you to... strip.”

“Bonjour. Est-ce que votre réfrigérateur marche? Alors, vous feriez mieux d’aller l’attraper!”

Blutsauger pulled back several inches and looked at his stethoscope carefully.

No, there wasn’t any dirt or dust on it. He leaned in again.

“おはようございます！ クレージーホースインザモーニングへ ようこそ！ 僕は アンカーマン クレージーホースです！”

His stethoscope shifted.

“This is your captain speaking, we are currently on our final approach to—”

He kept himself calm; Pinkie only smiled. He coughed, and gave her a relaxed, though quizzical, look of concern.

Pinkie’s grin got wider. “Problem, doc?”

“Vill... you... stop... movink... please...?” Blutsauger gasped. “You are... makink... zis... so much... harder... zan it needs... to be...”

“C’mom doc, you gotta try harder than that,” Rainbow said. “Or am I too fast for you? I’m not just a fast flier, y’know. I gotta be fast all over.”

“You are not supposed to *dodge* zee hammer,” he panted as he lifted it once more. Again he swung it down, again he missed as, again, she moved her leg out of the way.

Rainbow crossed her hooves over her chest. “Well that’s dumb, how is it supposed to test my reflexes if I just let you hit me?”

Blutsauger sighed and wiped his brow with his kerchief. “I zought... I vas *done* vis dealink vis zings like zis...”

“Ouch!”

“Zere vee go, all done.” Blutsauger nodded as he used his magic to flick the tip of the needle. “Mmm... zis is somezing I have not done in a long time,” he chuckled. “Bloodvork is such a pleasure. Ah... sometimes I vish I had not gotten zis promotion, ja? It is always zee little zings you miss zee most.”

“Right.” Twilight grimaced as she felt him apply the tiny bandage to the injection area. “So... are we all done here for today? With everything? Please tell me that’s the last of it.”

“Mmmm? Oh, ja, zat vill be all,” Blutsauger dismissed. “Tell mein secretary you are all done, und she vill send zee tax papervork to your place of residence. Und she vill give you a lollipop too, I zink, for being such a trooper,” he added with a wide smile.

“Oh... right...” Twilight gulped. “Um... thank you, Doctor Blutsauger.”

Twilight sighed in discontent and left the office. Her friends were all in the entryway waiting for her, wearing varied looks of displeasure or bewilderment at the experiences they’d just gone through. Well, doctor’s visits were certainly *different* here in this new world, that much Twilight knew was for certain.

It was good to be back at Southeast Point. Not too many hours had passed, but it was still closing in on mid-afternoon as Twilight, her friends, and Flathoof ascended the stairs to their apartment. Every time she traversed these stairs, Twilight felt she was becoming more and more accustomed to the climb, and she hoped the others felt as she did. Plus, having a good night’s rest, stopping for a little lunch on the way home, and not having to deal with a lot of stress thanks to getting sucked into another world, allowed them a lot more energy for it. Even Rarity barely complained as they made the climb.

It came as a surprise to find Lockwood waiting at the top of the stairs for them, pacing back and forth outside their open door. He looked calm, but impatient. His jacket was off, leaving him in just a plain white shirt.

“Lockwood?” Flathoof pushed ahead of the girls and approached his friend. “I didn’t expect you until later tonight.”

Lockwood greeted them with his bright smile. “Oh, there you all are. Must’ve been going in for those immunization shots, hmm? Right right, of course you were, silly of me to even ask. How was it? The line wasn’t too long, I hope?”

“Fifteen hours and thirty minutes,” Twilight said, sighing heavily. “When we got there, it was *packed*. I’ve never seen such a crowd in one place before, and I’ve seen an awful lot of crowds.”

Lockwood raised an eyebrow. “Fifteen hours? Really? You’re all back awfully early, then.”

“Yeah, we got some help from a nurse there,” Flathoof said. “A Nurse Tenderheart, to be precise. Friend of yours? Maybe she recognized me or something. I figured you might have had something to do with it, maybe called in a favor knowing we’d be there?”

“Tenderheart? No, the name doesn’t sound familiar. I do know one doctor there, though.”

Flathoof smiled and nodded. “Ah, there we go. It wouldn’t be Doctor Blutsauger, would it?”

Lockwood chuckled. “The Chief of Medicine? Oh, Flathoof, I think you overestimate me. I know a lot of ponies, but that’s a *little* beyond my reach when social circles are concerned. I had nothing to do with this at all.”

Flathoof hummed and scratched his head. “Well that’s odd. I guess that nurse or secretary was just really nice then. Shame. I could’ve gotten some information for you. You’d probably like to meet somepony like that.” He shook his head, then pointed at Lockwood. “Anyway, I know you didn’t come up here just to make conversation. Well, maybe you would, but that doesn’t look like why you’re here. What’s going on, pal?”

“Ah, yes, right. It would seem our new friends here have a visitor.”

Twilight, her friends, Lockwood, and Flathoof entered the apartment.

A minty green unicorn mare was resting on their couch, using Lockwood’s jacket as a pillow. She looked as if she had been through Tartarus and back again in the past day. Her body was covered in small cuts and bruises, many of which had clearly not really healed properly. Some of the worst ones were on her face, particularly a few nasty cuts around her muzzle, and a deep gash along the bridge of her nose. At least her cutie mark was still recognizable, a plain-looking silver stopwatch, even if it too had some shallow cuts. Her beige sweater vest was torn, her bow tie was half-missing and the other half was frazzled and dirty, and the white shirt underneath was stained with blood and dirt. Her sky blue mane and tail drooped with sweat and smelled of smog.

She did not look well.

“She came looking for you about an hour ago, she said,” Lockwood whispered. “When

she found you all weren't home, she came downstairs and asked for me. I offered her some medical aid, but she insisted there wasn't time for that, and that we come up here and wait for you. I at least got her to lay down and be patient. Poor girl. And now look at me, pacing in her stead." He shook his head and put a hoof to the bridge of his nose. "Ah, I'm getting off track again. She said she was a friend of yours, and—"

"You trusted her, just like that?" Flathoof asked, pointing angrily at her. "Lockwood, look at her, she—"

Lockwood held up a hoof. "She looks like she's not exactly a reputable pony, I know. But, I listened to her talk. You know me. Judging character is my thing. There's no malice there, my friend. She looks like she's been through a lot getting here, so I thought it would be right to see to her request."

Twilight stepped forward first, determined not to continue arguing about who this pony was. She had claimed to be their friend, but Twilight had never seen her before in her life. Well, that wasn't true. She looked familiar, but it must not have been a particularly long or pleasant meeting if she could not recall it too clearly. Either way, there would be time to deal with those sorts of details later. Now, all that she wanted was an explanation.

"Who are you?" Twilight asked, simply and firmly. "Why were you looking for us?"

"Hmm?" The mare shook off her half-sleep. "Oh! You're here. Finally." She smiled, though it was a pained expression. "Relax, Twilight Sparkle—"

"And how do you know my name?"

The mare sat up straight and coughed into her hoof. "I know a lot more than that about you six, actually. But don't worry, I am not your enemy. Quite the opposite, in fact. If you'll forgive my mild theatrics, I've always wanted to do stuff like this," she said, laughing. She lifted a hoof into the air dramatically. "My name is Tick Tock, and I am here to help *send you home*."