

Policy Update

Effective immediately, all foreign citizens must present an Equestrian pony at the point of entry.

Noncompliance necessitates rejection. Attached are supplements EQ-1, FR-N2, and PK3, which contain instructions on how to service the new regulations.

Glory to Artiztrotzia!

“Glory to Artiztrotzia,” I muttered, repeating the glories on autopilot.

I took a deep breath and set the paper back on my desk. Sure enough, lying there was a manila folder containing three more documents. The first dealt with protocol, while the second contained instructions for interrogating the ponies. The last page was a reference sheet showing what to expect from an Equestrian ID card. Really? I didn't even know they made those. They looked as official as any other passport or badge, oddly human-like for little fuzzy things. How in the world did they manage to make those without hands? Sucker some poor sap into doing it for them? Probably.

Except...

From what little I knew, the ponies' home world was a terrible place to be. Things were really crazy all the time and there were rumors of dangerous beasts that constantly threatened their puny towns and cities, plus they had useless guards to

boot. Such a vapid attempt at civilization by those cute but clueless herd animals hadn't really worked out all that well for them. No wonder so many of them were fleeing for our world. They were probably enamored by our well-grounded sanity—actual civilization—that they'd never known they'd been missing.

While their coming here was probably inevitable, I was glad that those silly 'magical' portals opened up about as far from Ariztrotzia as one could get. I say 'magic' with jest, as magic is complete and total charlatan bunk. There was obviously some science reason behind it like the alignment of a parallel universe or something but I inspected papers at a border crossing. I had neither the time nor the expertise to set the record straight, though it rankled me so.

Frowning, I peeked through an old, rusted barred window at the border, and sure enough a long line of people stretched from here to the next country. Intermixed with the crowd was a healthy smattering of small, colorful, pastel ponies, like somebody sneezed a rainbow in the dirt.

Well, there wasn't much I could do except arrange my desk and prepare for a busy day. Along with the papers, I'd also been given new green ink pads for approvals, which was odd, since I hadn't been close to running out. Management wasn't

usually proactive like that. The old ones were missing though, so maybe they dried out overnight or something.

Ponies, huh? Of all the things from Equestria they could have let in, why the ponies? Why now? And why force people to bring them? This sudden policy shift was bizarre, but it wasn't my place to question orders, only to follow them. Hopefully, no trouble would come of this.

A horn sounded followed by a clank and metal scraping on dirt as the guards opened the outer gate. After a brief pat down, they let the first person through. He came alone, a small man with brown skin and greasy black hair. He presented his papers without comment, dropping a passport and visitation request form on the counter. There was a window between us with a hole cut in the bottom that was large enough to reach through.

The man's name was Abdul Raj, from the country of Sabtahath, and his paperwork was in order, except...

I glanced at EQ-1. It still had that crisp, unstained, new-regulation sheen. "Show me your pony, please," I said in a flat, droll, tone.

“Watt?” He replied in broken English, and his eyes widened and darted around. The waiting area was pale, gray, and bare. The only decorations were an Artiztrotzian flag and a sorely

outdated instruction sheet. A lot of lines were crossed out on the latter with new words scribbled in the margins. The sharp-eyed red eagle on the flag must get a kick out of watching people bend over backwards in a futile attempt to comply with our ever-changing rules, speaking of which...

“The rules have changed effective today. All non-Artiztrotzians must present an Equestrian pony or forfeit visitation privileges.”

“I... no idea... know not.” His face fell and he shuffled in place, as if hoping that perhaps he’d heard wrong.

I felt sorry for him. I really did, but I had a job to do. “I’m sorry but I cannot permit entry without a pony.”

“Please! Can you me exception? Bad they funny smell! No touch.”

What? Was he asking me to make an exception because ponies smelled weird? What kind of excuse was that? Sighing, I stamped a rejection notice on his paperwork and handed it back as his answer. Morosely, he shuffled out the way he came.

The next person to enter was a portly lady with long, white hair draped loosely over her shoulders. She wore a thick green sweater and was accompanied by a yellowish pony with

equally long pink hair. I had to blink twice, because the pony also had feathered wings. PK3 did list ‘pegasus’ as one of three possible pony races. It was a shock to see one, though.

The creature huddled low to the ground, trotting swiftly to stay at the heels of the taller woman. It was about the size of a large dog, far smaller than a real horse, or even a normal pony. Well, as little as it was, its wide, blue eyes made it look like a child.

“Papers, please,” I said as the woman approached my booth. She produced the usual items, a passport and visitation form. A cursory glance showed no problems. The lady’s name was Mia Romero, and she was from Harkerstonia, quite a long trip from the south. Not a bad place if you happen to like oranges, but don’t buy the juice. Despite the rumors, it’s all made from concentrate, just like everywhere else.

Leaning up to the window, I pointed down at the yellow fluff pile trying to make itself invisible behind her legs. “Could your pony please step in the booth here? I need to ask it a few questions.”

Upon being addressed, the feathered fluff jerked, and its wide eyes stared up at me. “M-me?” it squeaked in a voice as soft as pillows.

“It’s fine, dear,” Mia said and reached down to give the little pony a light push. “Go on.”

“Oh. O-okay.” After some hesitation, it left the relative safety of Mrs. Romero’s legs to scamper into a small interrogation booth that had been set up specifically for this purpose. That room used to contain a body scanner, but after cultists kept breaking it¹ they did away with it entirely. Now the room had been repurposed, gutted to the bare minimum to allow separation of pony and human for questioning. The only furnishings were a creaky wooden bench and a rusted folding card table. The pony took a seat and its teeth chattered nervously. A problematic fluorescent light popped and flickered, giving off a high, annoying buzz. I wished they’d get that fixed.

While I stared, it folded a wing in front of its face as if to shy away and hide. Timid little thing. I wanted to comfort it, but it wasn’t my job to make critters comfortable. Best to do this by the book. I turned to FR-N2 and cleared my throat. “May I see your ID, please?” I asked.

The yellowish pony nodded and shuffled. It folded its wings back to its side and plopped a small plastic card on the creaky metal table. My window to this side room was smaller, but the hole cut in the bottom was still big enough to reach through. I did so and grabbed the card. This pony’s name was Fluttershy, and she was 19, born in Cloudsdale. Huh. That city was listed in PK3, along with a number of other locations that sounded

like horse puns. See what I mean about a lack of civilization? Equestrians did nothing but horse around.

Wasn't nineteen pretty old for a pony, though? She looked young, but it was hard to tell with animals. The sheet did say it could go much higher, so maybe this breed was long-lived. Regardless, I had some questioning to do.

“What is the purpose of your visit?”

“M-my, what?” she stuttered, barely audible over the faint buzz of the failing fluorescent light.

“Why are you visiting Artiztrotzia?” I clarified.

“Oh. B-because, grandma...” her voice got even softer and she said something else that was unintelligible. “N-not my grandmother, b-but...”

“Mi abuela is celebrating her fiftieth anniversary this week,” Mia said.

“Congratulations, that's quite an achievement,” I said, and looked at the paperwork. That did match what they'd put down. I also peeked around the corner of the window and sighed. The interrogation booth would work a lot better if the door had been closed. Then again, ponies don't have hands. This was poorly thought out.

“Not really,” the woman went on, “It's the anniversary of her divorce.”

I ignored her and asked Fluttershy, “How long are you staying?”

“Three weeks,” Mia said. I frowned.

“I was asking her.” I pointed at the pony, who simply nodded.

It still checked out, even if the wrong one had answered.

Well, they both could, but I was supposed to ask the colorful equine first. This next question was definitely for the tiny horse, though.

“What does your—” I hesitated, as this was a strange term

“—‘cutie mark’ mean?” The picture on her ID showed three pink moth things, which matched the tattoos on her hind legs.

“Oh! That. Um. I...” she squeaked her voice was so soft.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t quite hear that.”

“I like animals.”

I blinked. But wasn’t she herself an animal? I guessed she meant other animals. That wasn’t the type of answer I expected, as her cutie mark appeared to be some kind of tattoo branding. Who’d do that to a pony? I did only need a terse blurb for the official records, though, and ‘likes animals’ was sufficient. I could have pressed her for a better answer, but decided not to bother. If someone put pink moths on my legs I wouldn’t want to talk about them either.

“And you’re here of your own free will? You aren’t being coerced or threatened or anything like that?”

Fluttershy shook her head. “No. W-well, no. Mia asked and I said I would. I don’t plan on actually visiting her grandma, though. She sounds kinda cranky. I think I’d rather see the botanical gardens. Um, i-if that’s okay with you...”

Oh, right. Of course they wouldn’t actually stick together after crossing the border. Well, nothing said they had to, at least not in what I was given. That was yet more proof that this whole arrangement was nonsensical. What were the higher-ups thinking?

The poor thing was so tense that she looked about ready to break. I nodded to let her know it was fine, and she seemed to relax in her seat. Thankfully, her answers were adequate, so all that was left was to stamp the... wait... EQ-1 wanted me to do what?

“Miss, would you mind stepping over by the window please?” I asked in the most soothing voice I could muster.

“Um, o-okay...” The little butterscotch pegasus stepped off the creaky, wooden bench and walked around the small table to stand by the window. Her head barely reached the counter when she strained her neck to look up at me.

“That’s good. Hold still.” Before she could slink away, I inked my rubber stamp and gently pressed it against her

forehead. This left the word ‘approved’ stamped in green. Her eyes crossed, as if trying to read through her skull. I suppressed a laugh at how utterly silly she looked. I was a professional, after all.

“That’s all,” I said, “You’re free to go.”

She practically scampered off while I gathered up the other papers to return to the lady waiting by the main window.

“And don’t forget your ID,” I said, placing it back on the table. Fluttershy halted, looked back, and swept it away with a wing. Huh. Those things were pretty versatile.

Well, with everything taken care of, they went on their way.

“Cause no trouble,” I said after them. No sooner did they step out than the next pair was let in. Such was the nature of this job, one endless string of persons after the next.

Since I was more familiar with the process, this time went faster. The man was a fellow called Frank Urtfurt from Kassafla, while the pony was an ‘earth’ pony called Caramel from Trottingham. I asked about the ‘earth’ thing because while he was a light tan, he didn’t look all that earthy.

Apparently, that was just the name they used for ponies who were neither unicorns nor pegasai. There were no problems with the paperwork, and he seemed happy enough to go

along, so I stamped him and told him to be on his way. I hadn't expected him to take issue with that.

“Hey! What was that for?” He snorted and glared at me. I felt guilty holding the rubber stamp in my hand, and set it back on the counter out of sight.

“Just think of it like getting your hand stamped at the amusement park,” I said.

“I don't have hands.”

I felt pretty stupid.

In this line of work, you tend to get a feel for things over time, a sense of how things will go just by looking at a person. The next entrant's manner of walking was sleazy. He looked like trouble from head to foot. He was a tall, pale-skinned fellow with oily black hair and a long, curly mustache which he probably inherited from his mother. But more to the point he was carrying, yes, carrying a pony in his arms, and it looked none too happy about that.

The pony was a lavender hue, with deep blue hair streaked with red and pink, not that the colors really meant anything. Typically, bright colors were nature's warning labels. I wondered if they were poisonous. It really wouldn't surprise me.

Anyway, this poor creature was held awkwardly on its back with a wing crumpled up in the man's grip. That had to be uncomfortable, if not downright painful. Its violet eyes were wide in shock, and its legs twitched, as if wondering if it should kick this guy in the head. My vote would be 'yes.'

"H-hey!" it yelled. "Put me down!"

There was a fwump as he dropped the creature at his feet. I winced at the hollow clunk when its head hit the concrete floor. He hadn't even bothered to flip it right side up first. I wondered if I should detain him, but hesitated. Was there any policy against abusing a pony? My paperwork didn't mention that. Regardless, the animal shuffled and got back on its feet, so I guess it couldn't have been hurt too much.

The man stuffed a hand in his jacket and pulled out a crumpled wad of papers which he slapped on the counter.

"Consarn those last minute rule changes. I should have been the first one in line!"

Uh-huh. I kept an eye on the pony while loudly uncrumpling his more formal and rarely seen pursuant of visitation request form. His mistreatment of the document along with sloppy handwriting made it difficult to read. He tapped his foot and glared, staring down at me with his arms folded together.

"Well, get on with it! I'm a very important person and I'm

already late for a critical meeting. Every second we waste here is costing me more money than you see in a year.”

Ugh. I hated this type. If he was really as rich and self-important as he claimed, he could cause a lot of trouble by complaining to my manager, but I still had to be careful, as it could also be an act. I got burned once by a guy who was smuggling pickled pigeon hearts. I let him through five times before finally catching on, and now an entire species is extinct because of me.

“Hurry up, will you? I don’t have all day!” he whined.

I gave up on trying to decipher the chicken scratches and glanced at the purplish equine that was groaning and rubbing its head. FR-N2 forbids kidnapping, which he probably did.

“Pony, please step in here,” I said, pointing at the open door to the interrogation booth.

“Humph. Don’t bother with that when it’s faster if she answers her questions right here,” the sleazy man said. He reached for the pony’s tail but his eyes jerked open and he wobbled, as if thrown off-balance. His hand came to a dead stop, which really confused me. It pressed against some reddish sparkles? The lighting in here must be really bad.

Stomping into the plain, dirty side room, the pony nursed a bump on its head and, oh. This one had a horn too. Weird.

“Er, the door—”

It slammed shut, and I blinked. I hadn’t even seen the animal kick it.

“This is all a waste of time!” the man yelled, smacking a fist on the counter. “Do you have any idea who I am!?”

Well... I did have his passport, which was actually legible. He was Arbery Jack, from Tolkein. He couldn’t get much closer to nowhereville if he tried. That place had jungles so thick it was rumored to be swarming with orcs².

I shuttered the main window for privacy while I turned to address the pony. The metal curtain clanged when he pounded on and yelled at it. I sighed. At least the sounds were muffled.

“What is even going on?” this purplish pony asked.

Honestly, I didn’t know. “You’re at the border crossing for Artiztrotzia. We recently implemented a policy which requires visitors to bring a pony with them.”

“I knew that much,” it grumbled, rubbing its head again. Its mane was ruffled and disheveled and it forewent the creaky wooden bench in favor of standing and fluffing out its wings. A few feathers came off and fluttered to the bare floor. “I was wondering why.”

“I’m not paid enough to know the answer to that question.”

The pony groaned at my response.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask a few questions. May I please see your ID?”

“Yeah, sure. Why not?” It twisted its head around and rooted in its mane. When it swung its head back, it reached up and spat the plastic rectangle on the counter.

Her name was Twilight Sparkle, a unicorn mare from Canterlot. Unicorn? Huh. I guessed some unicorns had wings. I handed it back. “What is the reason for your visit?”

“Me? I wasn’t planning on visiting at all!”

“I meant him.” I thumbed a finger at the closed window. The man was still making a racket, demanding service with ever-increasing threats.

“I have no idea. I was minding my own business when he grabbed me out of nowhere and hauled me in here.”

“So you didn’t come of your own free will?”

“Of course not!”

I nodded, reaching for the denial stamp. But then again, she’d already been clonked on the head once. She probably wouldn’t appreciate it a second time, even if it was in the procedure. Hmm. I could skip it just this once.

“Do you think he’s trying to smuggle anything?” I asked on a hunch.

Twilight's left eye twitched and her face scrunched up, as if lost in thought. She then turned to leave, pushing the door open on her way out.

“Finally!” Arbery yelled. “Now give me my papers so we can be on our—”

In one fluid motion, Twilight twisted around and bucked him right in the chest. She might be a little pony but that still had to hurt. He went down, floored in an instant. She then swatted his chest, snapping brass buttons off of his sharp, fancy suit as she pried it open. Biting into silky, fancy lining, she tore a section free, peeling the clothing apart. Inside were dozens of little plastic bags each holding a strange, blue, exotic flower.

“Oh look. Poison joke.” She stood on him, glaring down at his face. “Hey, moron, if you're going to smuggle Equestrian flora, then maybe you shouldn't grab somepony who knows exactly what it smells like.”

Equestrian flora? That was definitely on the controlled substances list! I called the guards immediately and they marched in to restrain him.

“You can't do this to me! I have diplomatic immunity!” He yelled as they cuffed him, and yelled even more as they dragged him off to the gaol. “*Lord Sauron himself will hear about this!*”

Lord Sauron will probably want to invest in earplugs, then. I rolled my eyes. Some people.

“Ugh my head,” Twilight rubbed herself again, nursing a purplish bruise, well, more purple than she was already. “I need a good book and some strong tea. I wonder how Rarity’s doing with her new shop in Roslia?” she muttered before wandering out herself.

Those blue flowers didn’t look like much, but the guards collecting the evidence wore bright yellow hazard suits. Poison Joke? Yeesh. I was glad we stopped this rackety-Jack. Stuff from Equestria could seriously mess a person up, even if it only had a modest impact on ponies. Most countries, Artistrotzia included, outright banned everything Equestrian outside of a few carefully controlled substances. Heck, even ponies had been banned here until today. It makes the change all the more puzzling.

A dark hooded figure slipped in, with his face covered in bandage wrappings. Alarmed, I glanced about, but the guards hadn’t returned yet.

“Beware the ponies, for they are nowhere near as innocent as they seem,” the figure hissed in a grating voice, like a labored whisper barely louder than a squeaky hinge.

“What do you want?” I asked.

The man deftly placed a small, black piece of paper folded into a triangle on the counter. Drawn on it was a white, hexagonal eye. “If you truly value your country, you must reject any of these ponies who approach your border. No exceptions.”

Unfolding the sheet, I read four names: Celestia, Luna, Mi Amore Cadenza, and... Twilight Sparkle was on it too? That clueless pony who didn't even want to be here? Wow. The conspiracy nuts were really grasping at straws this time.

“Beware, for Roslia has already fallen.”

When I looked up, the man had already slunk out. I sighed and set the black paper off to the side. I'd have to dispose of it later. The guards tended to get unhappy if I kept material evidence of conspiracies against the state in my work area.

Conspiracies aside, processing the next pair went smoothly. I liked it when things went smoothly. The pony even stood still long enough for me to stamp its head without smearing. Well, on the second try. Boy can those fuzzy little things frown.

“So, Artiztrotzia's finally decided to join the modern world,” a man with a sharp, blue tie commented after I handed his paperwork back. According to his passport, he was from Harkerstonia. I think that country neighbors Roslia to the

south. They aren't really known for much, but they do have an aggressive student exchange program.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, mostly being polite.

“Ponies are all the rage these days. Their magic can work all kinds of miracles, from improving crops to curing disease and even controlling the weather. Any country without ponies is falling behind.”

I scoffed. “Everything you said is ridiculous. Magic isn't real. Ponies are just animals and carry more diseases than they cure, and nothing can control the weather.”

“You're the one who's not real,” snarked the pony, a cream-hued one with curly hair that couldn't decide if it wanted to be pink or blue. What was her name again? Bonnet? Bonnie? Bon Bon? Something like that. She had a nasal voice. Kinda annoying.

The man frowned at his pony but smiled at me. “Ha. Yeah. I was a skeptic at first too, but then I saw some pegasai move clouds around. Life really hasn't been the same since.”

I rolled my eyes around as far as they would go. “Seriously? Do you have any idea just how big clouds are? You're telling me that something about half the size of a dog can push around something as large as a mountain?”

“Well... It does take more than one.” The man scratched the back of his head. "Magic's easiest to see from unicorns, but even the earth ponies have their own special talent, area of expertise, that they can work miracles in."

“Wait a minute.” Bon Bon stepped up to my window, standing on her hind legs to peer over the counter. “Is that why you asked about my cutie mark? So your government can create a record of what it is that every pony does? You’d better not think you can control us, because if that’s what you’re planning then you’ll regret it.”

“I’m not...” I had no idea why that question was on the paperwork. It seemed stupid to me. Plus, I didn’t have time to waste arguing with either of them about obvious things. Some people were just so dumb. They never got the right idea not even if the answer was right in front of their face. Bon Bon's glare was unnerving. “Just go on, please, and cause no trouble.”

The next lady to enter the checkpoint was accompanied by not one, not two, but three little ponies, and they were *little*.

“We’re going to get our cutie marks in border crossing!”

“Cutie Mark Crusader border crossers, yay!”

Uh, that... that was not going to happen. They were way under the age limit. Adult ponies only. Well, they needed an adult pony. There wasn't one.

Oddly, they were actually quite thrilled when I gave them matching 'rejected' cutie marks, playing along with their game and putting the stamp on their thighs instead of their heads. That worked out fine for me because their heads were too small to stamp anyway.

Apparently cutie marks were something that ponies got when they grew up? That made sense, I guess. If skin was tattooed while it was still growing, the ink would stretch and distort. Ponies had such strange customs. It didn't explain why these kids went searching for them, though, but kids would be kids, even if they were ponies.

They laughed and prodded the red marks, smearing the ink and practically trampling each other as they scampered off to their next adventure. The lady was less thrilled, who also had to leave because her ponies had been rejected.

That was the way things went sometimes, but there wasn't much I could do about it except shrug and wish her better luck next time.

Glory to Artiztrotzia!

As the day went on, an orange pony walked in, accompanied by a scruffy fellow who'd apparently never heard of soap. Ugh, gross. His tattered green shirt had holes in the seams, plus many stains... I wrinkled my nose. They didn't pay me enough to smell these people.

I took his papers and glanced through them. Johnberg Johnny John Johnson from Haarthwood. What a name.

"Pony, please," I said, pointing at the interrogation booth.

The orange pony seemed to get the idea, stepping in and hopping on the creaky wooden bench. It sat up, flopping its front legs on the rusty metal card table, and staring at me with wide, green eyes. The awful lights popped and flickered, and the buzzing came back as they dimmed, then slowly got brighter.

Her name was Applejack, and she had cute white freckles and a wide, brown hat much like a cowboy's except that it was small enough to fit on her head. She also spoke with a light drawl, something I found odd. It wasn't common to hear multiple accents from the same country. How big was Equestria, anyway? She answered my questions plainly, but her expression changed when I got to the one for her.

"Oh yeah, my cutie mark. Now that's a hoot!" Her eyes twinkled with a broad grin sweeping across her face. Uh oh. She promptly launched into a lengthy yarn about her life as a

tiny filly, journeying into the world, seeking herself in a towering city, and this was taking too long. I felt like I'd mistakenly wandered into the old lady aisle at the grocery store and asked about bingo night.

I held up a hand, motioning her to stop. "Um, I guess you were cute and all, a tiny button filly with freckles as darn as honey on a web or something, but what in the world do three red apples have to do with living with oranges in a city of manes and hats?" It didn't really help that her story made no sense.

"Manehatten, and I was gettin' to that if ya'd let me finish. Now, where was I...?"

I glowered, and she skipped to the end where she discovered that 'home is where the family is.' Quite proud of herself, she leaned back and grinned, almost radiating inner warmth.

That was a nice sentiment, but it wasn't going in the tiny blank box on my form. "I still don't know what that has to do with apples."

"Weren't ya listening? I said it was about my home and my family."

"What home? What family?"

She sighed, blowing at her hat and flipping her tied, blonde mane over her other shoulder. “I live on an apple farm and my family is the Apple family.”

Oh. That made a lot more sense. I put down ‘likes apples.’ Ugh. I could have guessed that without having to waste so much time. My form had a lot more blank spots and I facepalmed. I’d forgotten something important. “Sorry. I should have asked for this earlier. Can I see your ID?”

“Sure, sugarcube, I got it right, um...” She fished in her hat, then picked it up, stared at the bottom, and shook it. Nothing came out. “It was in here this morning.”

I felt a pang. No ID. No entry. “I’m sorry, little pony, but I can’t permit entry without an ID. Are you sure you didn’t drop it?”

She hopped down and looked around the floor, even lifting the table to get better light. The floor was gritty, only partially swept. There was no sign of the lost card anywhere. “Corn it all! I bet that varmint Rainbow Dash took it. She loves pullin’ pranks like this.”

If so, that was rather mean. “Is this Rainbow Dash in line behind you?” I asked.

“No. She said she didn’t want to bother with the checkpoint so she flew on ahead. She was going to meet me at the church

with the big clock, but I guess that's not going to happen now." Applejack snorted, sounding much like an actual horse. No. It wasn't. I filled out an illegal crossing report to pass off to border patrol.

"Do ya think ya could send a message that I won't be there?" Applejack asked.

"Sure," I said. She seemed happy about that. Of course, that was a lie. Rainbow Dash would definitely get a message, but it would be more like 'Get out of our country, ye flea-bitten vagrant! Avast ye to the checkpoint, or don't embark at all!' Sometimes, I liked to imagine that our border patrol consisted of pirates.³

Since she was close enough, I went ahead and stamped the rejection notice on Applejack's forehead, and told her to leave the way she came in. The look on her face was priceless, and she tugged her hat low to cover up the red mark.

I asked the John-whatever circus about the missing ID card. He held up his hands and shook his head. "It wasn't me," he muttered.

Be that as it may, he still had to leave. While it was a shame to reject the cute pony, it was almost worth it to see that slob go too. It was too bad I didn't get paid for rejecting people.

The next pair to come in looked rather silly, as the pony had chosen to wear what looked like a violet blanket and a cowl. Was that some kind of weird pony dress-up? A girl rounded out the pair, well, young woman. She wasn't much better off, wearing a tacky blue and gold plaid skirt and a red shirt with the letters 'FU' printed in green. Given the color scheme, that was probably Finest University. I'd bet anything that she was from Harkerstonia.

"Papers, please," I said.

She nodded, handing them over, while the pony kept a paranoid vigil at her feet. The cowl didn't completely cover the animal's face, and I could see tan fur with a gray mane. This gray wasn't an elderly gray, but a fluid spectrum of shades. Its eyes were a bright rose, so bright they almost flickered with an inner fire. It peered around, ears flicking at every sound and gazing at everything with intense scrutiny. I felt my skin crawl. The checkpoint was so drab and lifeless that I seriously wondered what could possibly warrant such examination.

I was right about the girl being from Harkerstonia, but the pony had my attention. "And you are?" I asked, pointing down at it.

"A. K. Yearling, world famous author. Well, my world, not yours."

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded. Something was off. This pony had the stance of a soldier, not a bookworm. “Mind stepping in here please?” I pointed at the rundown booth with the faulty light. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“With all due respect, no. I’ll answer your questions right here,” Yearling said without moving an inch.

“Isn’t this exciting? We’re studying together,” the girl said, holding her hands together. I checked her passport and her name was Likk Ay, typical Harkerstonian.

FR-N2 didn’t say what to do if the pony wasn’t cooperative, so I shrugged. The booth didn’t really help much, anyway. “Okay, that’s fine,” I said, addressing Yearling. “May I see your ID please?”

She reached in her blanket thing and rummaged around. Snagging something with her teeth, she reared up and spat it on my counter top. When I picked it up, I held the edges that weren’t slimy. The colors seemed off, so I checked it against PK-3.

“This is missing the official watermark,” I said, handing it back.

Her fiery eyes widened and for a moment she lost her composure. “You noticed that—uh,” she chuckled wanly she saw the scowl on my face. “Sorry. My library card looks so much like a real ID that sometimes I get them confused. Here.

Try this one.” After fishing around again, she spat a different plastic rectangle on the counter.

Library card, huh? As far as excuses for a fake ID go, that was pretty lame. I was supposed to give ponies leniency, though, so I didn’t order her detained. It would be kind of silly to arrest an animal, anyway. The new card looked okay except... “It says here your name is Daring Do.”

The mare cringed and she glanced up at Likk, who raised an eyebrow. **“Oh. Well... A. K. Yearling is really a pseudonym. I use it for my writing. Daring Do is my given name, but please don’t go spreading that around.”** That last part she hissed in a loud whisper.

Honestly, I wasn’t getting a good vibe from her. People who hid their names generally had a history to hide from. It was off-putting to see that behavior from a cute, fuzzy pony, but the rule still applied. I was also at a loss. “Miss, because of the discrepancy, I need to confirm your identity. For people, humans, that means taking fingerprints and comparing them to official records, but, um...”

Yearling, Do, whoever she was, rolled her eyes as if dealing with a difficult toddler. **“The best way to confirm a pony’s identity is to check their cutie mark,”** she said. She also pulled off her cover. Beneath the loose blanket was a tight, green shirt with lots of pockets. She also had a white pith helmet

under the cowl. On her thigh was... She also raised her wing, and it made me wonder why a pony with wings would cover them up with clothing. Her cutie mark was a symbol that resembled a compass, and it did match the ID. FR-3 suggested the marks would be unique, so this was probably a good enough test.

I nodded, making a note for the records. It also got me thinking.

So cutie marks doubled as permanent identification, huh? It brought to mind those maximum security prisons where inmates had bar codes tattooed on their necks. Equestria was supposedly open and free, but if they did something like *that* to their entire populace, well, ‘authoritarian’ would be putting it mildly. No wonder so many ponies left home for our world.

“That checks out,” I said, nodding. “Can you tell me what your cutie mark means?”

“What? Why do you want to know that?”

“It’s on my form.” I mean, duh. Why else would I ask?

She glanced around, as if checking for exits, and glared back at me. “That’s a deeply personal question, and it’s extremely rude to ask.”

“Only to you.” I scoffed. “Some other ponies won’t shut up about it.”

“I think it looks cute,” Likk Ay said. The pony just glared, refusing to answer.

“Never mind,” I muttered. I’d just make something up. I put down ‘Likes compasses.’ Good enough for government work. Next on the list was—hold up. Her place of birth didn’t match any Equestrian city listed in FR-2. “Can you tell me where the Mewyan Ruins are located in Equestria?”

“Those? They’re part of the wild lands outside the borders. Why do you want to know?”

“So you’re not actually a citizen of Equestria?” I asked, pointing that out on her ID.

“Technically no, but I am a pony.” Daring Do shrugged. “That’s never been a problem before.”

Well, it was now. After that stunt with the false ID and fake name, I was glad to have an excuse to kick her out. I put on a stern face and reached for the rejection stamp.

“Wait, so what’s wrong?” The girl asked.

Wow. I’d almost forgotten she was there. My stony expression dropped. I wasn’t happy to kick her out too, but entrants had to be processed in pairs. “I’m sorry but as it turns out, Daring Do here is not, actually, a genuine Equestrian pony.”

“So, what, is she a cheap knockoff then?”

“Hey!” The pony snorted and stomped on the ground, making a loud crack on the cement floor. “If your paperwork says ‘Equestrian pony,’ then it obviously means intelligent ponies like myself, as opposed to those brain dead critters you have.”

“Hey yourself. I’m the one who—” was drafted “—is paid to do this for a living, and I say that ‘Equestrian ponies’ specifically refers to citizens of Equestria.” Inking the stamp, I reached out to mark her forehead.

She dodged with uncanny grace, smacking my hand in a flurry of feathers. I lost my grip, and the rubber stamp clattered and bounced on the bare cement, leaving light rejection marks on the floor before wobbling to a stop. Like a sleuth, this pony bent down to sniff it and also licked the rubber part, tasting the red ink. “No. That’s just regular ink,” she mumbled to herself. “But I could have sworn I smelled something like catnip. That’s usually a bad sign.”

“Would you mind giving that back?” I asked.

“Fine.” Snagging it with her teeth, she picked it up and tossed it on the counter. “I can see myself out without that. You’re making a big mistake, though. I’ve heard rumors of strange happenings around here. If something were to happen to your country, you’d wish I was here.”

Ugh. More conspiracy nonsense. That was bad enough from people. I didn't need it from little ponies too. "Just go," I said, pointing her out the way she came.

She took the time to put her clothing back on before stomping off.⁴ Likk Ay hovered, leaning back and forth on each foot.

"So, um..."

"That means you too, sorry." I gathered up the papers to hand back to her.

"Darn it," she pouted. "Now I'll never complete my thesis on the effects of snail racing in differing political climates."⁵

Three rejections in a row was disappointing, but after a rules change they did tend to spike. I was thinking about all the glories I wasn't earning when the next pair walked in. The pony had a cream hue and a curly pink mane. I still couldn't tell what gender they were without looking at an ID, but most of them had been mares thus far.

Peeking at the line zigzagging across the boarder, I spotted, well, more ponies. What was I expecting? Some were bigger than others, so I guessed stallions were out there too.

Anyway, a man accompanied this pony. He had a charming smile, rough stubble beard, and a ruffled green shirt. He presented his paperwork, and included the pony's ID too. I

didn't even have to ask. I nodded, looking at the neat and meticulous paperwork. It was always nice when people went that extra distance to help me out. It made things go much smoother.

The man's name was Nuirn Hert, and he was from Roslia while the pony's name was Twikleshine, another unicorn from Canterlot, albeit without wings this time. Everything seemed to be going smoothly with the pony cooperating and answering all my questions, but, she had on some odd sunglasses with tinted red lenses, and her lips kept curling up and flattening out while she was looking at me, like she was suppressing something.

I did eventually ask about them, but only after I'd stamped her approval and was gathering up the paperwork for them to be on their way.

“Oh these?” She lifted her head so I could see them better.

“They're novelty shipping goggles. Just about everypony in Roslia has a pair these days, courtesy of the princess. Try it on. It's a lot of fun.”

Roslia had a princess now? But weren't they a democracy? Then again, a lot of celebrities liked using titles even if it wasn't appropriate. It made them feel special or something.

This pony tossed, er, the goggles kinda twinkled, moving slowly through the air. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. Stuff just didn't float. They'd definitely been tossed.

Frowning, I stared at them. They seemed harmless enough, so I shrugged and put them on. Sure enough, the drab, gray interior of the checkpoint took on a rosy hue, and the lenses weren't perfect so some parts were distorted like looking in a funhouse mirror. This was all fun and amusing for about six seconds, then it felt like a headache was setting in.

That's when things got weird. The oddities of the lenses seemed to highlight parts of the pony's visage that I hadn't noticed before, like her long eyelashes, a cute dimple on her cheek, and the softness of her lips. For a pony, she was a thing of beauty.

That realization disturbed me so much that I looked up, only to see just how dashing and winsome Mr. Hert was. His rugged beard belied a firmness of jaw, he had a long scar over his left eyebrow, and his shirt, despite being whole and affixed properly, seemed about ready to fall off.

The glasses even highlighted sensual curves on the Atriztrotzian eagle, even though it consisted entirely of sharp angles and straight lines.

Disturbed to my very core, I ripped the glasses from my face and slapped them on the counter. “What did you say these things were again?”

“Shipping goggles. They’re made from real Equestrian carnal ruby.”

“Wait. *Equestrian* stuff?”

She nodded. I cringed. And things had been going so well.

“I’m sorry but Equestrian materials are not permitted in Artiztrotzia. If you wish to enter, you must surrender them here.”

“Oh.” She frowned, wrinkling the ‘approved’ stamp on her forehead. Without those goggles she just looked silly. Equestrian stuff was weird. “I guess... I’ll leave it if I *have* to.”

“I’ll be glad to be rid of them,” Hert said. I nodded, echoing the sentiment.

I filled out a forfeiture form and gave them their papers back so they could be on their way. It was a just a single item, surrendered willingly, and they had no prior offense, so the fine was waived. I probably could have charged them with smuggling if I really wanted to, but it looked like an honest mistake and it was the pony, not the man. EQ-1 did

specifically state that ponies should be given leniency when appropriate, as they would be less familiar with our customs.

Before Hert left, he glanced back and said, “Please be kind to my wife, she’s just behind me.”

I returned his smile, albeit wanly. Do people really think I’m mean? I just follow the rules.

Of course, my hopes for another quick and easy approval were dashed when Mrs. Hert entered alone. Auugh. No wonder he asked me to be nice. To him, ‘nice’ meant ignoring the rules, which I did to my peril. *Be kind, they say. Dig yourself a nice plot of earth and we’ll give you a stone to remember you by, they say.*

People had no idea what they were asking when they wanted me to make exceptions and then they got all offended and acted like I’m the monster when I don’t move heaven and earth—

“Aw, don’t be such a grumpy face.”

I nearly jumped out of my seat. The voice came from behind, *inside* the booth. Twisting around, I spotted a *very* pink pony with a wide grin sitting on the floor behind me. “How did you get in here?” I blurted, in a harsh, grating voice.

“Where does anyone come from? Aren’t we all just stardust floating in the endless sea of the cosmos?” This pile of pinkness with wild red poofy hair leaned back, staring at the ceiling with its big, blue eyes. I loomed over it, glaring down. “Oh. Maybe you mean me, specifically?” It chuckled. “Well, when two ponies love each other very much—”

“My papers,” the lady said, setting her documents on the counter. I ignored her to admonish the pony.

“Get out! This area is restricted! You can’t be in here.” I pointed at the door which was clearly marked ‘employees only’ on the other side. I’d have to remember to lock that.

“Aww, but I like it here.” The pony’s ears drooped, and it made wide puppy-eyes that shimmered in the steady florescent glow of my work area.

“No. Leave.” I stood up to pull the door open.

When I did, the crazy pile of floof hopped onto my seat.

“What about this particular spot? Is this restricted too?”

My eyes widened. I’d seen a lot of brazen things in my time, but that just took the cake. “Hey! Get off of that!” I yelled, and lunged for the pink beast.

“Or this spot?” It jumped out of reach, landing on the counter top and scattering a pile of blank forms. “Or this one?”

My chair got in the way, and I couldn't grab it before it hopped off and ran under my desk. "No! No spots! You can't be in here at all!"

"Oh? But what about in here?" My cabinet drawer burst open in a flying shower of pencils, ink pads, rubber stamps, paper forms, and confetti. After having knocked everything else out, the pink pony slid to a stop, popping its head out and swinging its forelegs high in the air and grinning madly, as if finishing up a grand performance.

"That is enough!" This time I caught it, grabbing it by the middle and yanking it out of my desk. Ugh. It was heavier than it looked, and it giggled the whole time I staggered back to the door and tossed it out.

Slamming the exit, I latched and barred it, and breathed a heavy sigh. My work area was an epic disaster, with stuff scattered everywhere. It was going to be a pain to clean this up. I reached down, picking up a spiral-shaped twist of yellow paper. Where had the confetti even come from? I didn't keep any in my desk.

The pony had also been warm and soft, with a thin layer of fuzz that made it silky to the touch. I briefly entertained the notion of getting one for a pet, but the talking thing would make it awkward, plus—A pink snout poked itself over the

edge of the counter as the pony sniffed my window—I'd prefer one that wasn't crazy.

“Pony, would you please step in here?” I asked, pointing at the bland interrogation closet.

“Okay, dokey!” It yelled and bounced over. Watching a horse do a four-legged hop was, well, not something I'd ever expected to see.

I got right to the point, asking for an ID as soon as it hopped up on the—sigh—table. Wobbly and creaky, the thin, rusted surface bent and shook under the little pony's weight.

“Here you go,” it said, passing over a card.

I half expected it to be a playing card scribbled on with crayon, but it was a real, Equestrian ID. Her name was Pinkamena Diane Pie, from Ponyville. Nothing seemed unusual; even the cutie mark checked out.

“So, Pinkamena—”

“Just call me Pinkie Pie.”

“Right, Pinkie—” more like pink-splosion “—why are you two visiting Artiztrotzia?”

“Muffins!”

“Muffins?” I frowned.

“Yeppers, muffins.”

Turning to the other window, I asked the lady if she knew what Pinkie meant by ‘muffins.’

“Oh, that.” A hint of rose touched her cheeks. “It’s what I call my husband.”

I nodded. That made sense. After all, I had just let him through. I then made the mistake of asking Pinkie about her cutie mark, and she launched into this elaborate tale about dueling party cannons and rubber chickens and cheesy sandwiches which made no sense whatsoever. She was quite animated, hopping up and waving and spinning around and the best part came when the table collapsed under her weight. “Just like how it actually happened,” she said.

I put down ‘likes balloons.’

“And you came here of your own free will?”

“Oh yeah! I totally came here to free Willy!” She hopped up, wiped flakes of rust off her side and pumped a hoof into the air. “No more shall the Willies of the world suffer from the oppression of those who would restrain them! We must all stand tall and do our part to make sure that the Willies are wild and roam free!”

I groaned, rubbing my temple. “Why are you so annoying?”

“Because its fun! *Duh.*” She rolled her blue eyes as if this were obvious. “Are you having fun today? You should try it. It’s fun!”

There was an inherent simplicity to that kind of logic. I gave her a light smile. “Pinkie, my idea of ‘fun’ is the satisfaction I get from a job well done. Not only do I get to see the happy smiles of those permitted past the border, but I also do my part to keep my country safe.”

“Wow! That is so profound!”

“Um, It’s really not. Now would you—”

That’s when she burst into song⁶. I groaned, burying my face in my hands. I didn’t care how catchy the tune was. This pony was just something else, and while I wasn’t too fond of her, there wasn’t anything specifically disqualifying, either, not even the random hats she kept pulling out as props. Thus, when Pinkie rounded close to the window I stamped the approval mark on her forehead, well almost. She was wearing a bandanna when I hit her and the mark vanished as soon as she tucked it away. Bleah. It wasn’t worth the effort to catch her and stamp her properly.

Regardless, I gave the woman her papers back so that she and her crazy pony could be on their way.

Just when I thought I was done, a red light flashed on my desk followed by a sharp, whistle-like buzz. My heart sank

with shame and trepidation. This only happened when I messed up. A screeching and grinding soon followed, with an ancient dot-matrix printer spitting out a cold, back and white citation.

Nngh. I let that woman through with an expired passport, and now I had to pay for it through my teeth. I grabbed the fine and crumpled it in my fist, feeling a flash of fury. It was all that stupid pony's fault! She distracted me so much that I never even looked at the woman's papers, let alone check them.

I sighed, letting my anger pass with a sour heart and a weight on my shoulders. No. It was my fault. I've dealt with distractions before, and should have known better. The sad thing was that I probably would have let her through anyway, even despite the error. I wasn't heartless and didn't like separating families. It was just hard to explain to my kids why they had to go hungry because I decided to be nice to a stranger. By making a mistake, that choice had been taken away, and that's what hurt me the most.

I had to do better, to bring glories to my family, and glory to my country.

There wasn't anything else I could do except keep my chin up and keep on going. Hmm. Ponies did count towards my total, so I might, just might, be able to make enough money to

make up for this. I'd need things to go well with minimal rejections and no more mistakes. I couldn't afford another one, literally.

Artiztrotzia is small, but we're fiercely patriotic. People often asked why I put up with the labor lottery, long working hours every day of the week, crumbling infrastructure, poor pay, and the answer is simple: because I love my country.

Though I had to spend my lunch break reorganizing and fixing what that pony had broken, I did so proudly. Before ponies popped up, our unglorious neighbors got embroiled in a bitter dispute. Violence broke out and spilled through the region as they dragged many nations into the conflict, but not Artiztrotzia. We kept our chins up and stayed clean while everyone else rolled in mud. A large part of that was due to careful control of our borders, rules set in place by our glorious lawcrafters and enforced by checkpoint inspectors like myself.

While I sorted the papers and stacked them back in their piles, I couldn't help but remember one such incident not so long ago. A sharply dressed, fancy man with a charcoal top hat approached me with he called a 'mutual problem,' namely, that I was overworked, under appreciated, and not paid nearly enough for the job I was assigned to, while he had too much

money burning holes in his pockets and some boxes of ‘perfectly reasonable’ goods which needed to pass the border. To solve all problems, he was willing to pass that money to me so long as I let my standards lapse and let his boxes slip through without inspection.

To seal the deal, he offered an ingot of pure gold and grinned so wide that it looked like his grin was going to pop off his face. It was a tempting offer, I do admit, but he made a grave miscalculation. There was no glory in betraying one’s country, and we call our money ‘glories’ for a reason. I bet he still has that same, stupid grin frozen on his face, scaring rats in the local gaol.

The mess wasn't so bad that it took the whole lunch break to clean up. I still had time to for a few quick bites from my sandwich of cheese and pickles. That was a local favorite made from a recipe created by a real Artiztrotzian chef.

While munching, my eye caught the black slip of paper, which I’d left off to the side while cleaning up. I wasn't really sure what to make of the ponies yet. They seemed cute and harmless, mostly, but odd things happened when they were around, and that problematic one was very much so. It was a challenge to be sure, but nothing I couldn't deal with if I was careful. My country depended on me, and in return, it would watch my back. The sharp-edged, red-hued Artiztrotzian

eagle was said to watch over us all, and I believed it. I got misty-eyed just thinking about how my country would always be there for me.

Glory to Artiztrotzia!

After lunch, I had catching up to do if I wanted to be paid today. I'd already let my country down once, and vowed not to do so again. So while I worked fast, I worked carefully, as best I could manage.

Fortunately, the next three entries went smoothly. The people were from Ghazasthan, Ankh-Hooey, and Mordor, all of whom were boring and dull as rocks, without any endearing or memorable qualities. The ponies were each stallions, and more interesting.

The first one... I had to shake my head. Who names their kid 'Filthy,' anyway? I knew pony names were weird, but really. Was there some kind of mix up at hospital, where the mom was like, 'oh man, this baby is filthy,' when they hadn't, like, washed him yet, and the doctor misunderstood and put that on the birth certificate, and then they couldn't change it because ponies were stupid or something? He insisted I call him Mr. Rich, like that was much better. His whole story was 'rich.'

The second pony I reprimanded for flying in the vestibule, definitely not something I'd ever expected to see. Given the

small wingspan to body size ratio, these pegasai shouldn't be able to do anything more than a controlled glide type of thing, like flying squirrels, but not only could Thunderlane actually fly, he hovered off the ground too. Either pegasai weighed only a few ounces, or there were some other forces at work than just aeronautics. I could just imagine tiny bumblebee scientists publishing little bee papers explaining why pegasai couldn't fly. Sadly, pegasai IDs list 'wingpower' instead of weight, so I'll never know.

And the last one, heh. For a guy called 'Fancy Pants,' he wore everything *except* pants. While I know that ponies don't normally wear clothing, when they do, it kinda draws attention to the parts that are missing. Fancy indeed. At least he was a swell chap, even if he did get miffed when I stamped his forehead. I wish I knew why I had to do that. 'It's the rules,' just got me one upturned nose and loud stomp out the exit.

My good streak came to an end when an unshaven man with baggy, bloodshot eyes, greasy, dirty black hair, and a rank odor of sweat ran in, alone, and with no papers. "Please!" he begged, clapping his hands together and kneeling before me. "You have to let me in! The ponies are after me. Artiztrotzia is the only place I'll be safe."

His clothes, while ragged and soiled, had once been rich finery. His hands were dirty but not calloused, and he bore no scars. I felt sorry for him, and while I couldn't grant his request, at least not as he hoped, I could at least hear him out. "You wish to seek asylum?"

"Yes! Please, you must help me!"

I sighed deeply, and fished in my cabinet for the asylum forms. It'd been a long time since I'd had to dust those off. Artiztrotzia had a reputation on that front, and for good reason. We were a 'detain first, ask questions later' kinda country. I was already going above and beyond just by finding the paperwork.

"What is your name?"

"Sinv Looper."

"Where are you from?"

"Roslia."

"Why are you seeking asylum?"

"It's the ponies, man! They're everywhere, and the way they look at me, it just sends shivers down my spine. They're out to get me. I just know it!"

"Whoa, stop." I held my hand up and shook my head. "You can't seek asylum for being looked at funny."

“No! You don’t understand! They all have these red glasses and they stare so long and hard and stretch their necks, and kinda drool, and oh gods is it creepy!” His cheeks were flush and he glanced about wildly, sweat dribbling down his chin. Red glasses? The shipping goggles? They were creepy, yes, but seemed harmless. “I think you misunderstand. I’ve seen a pair of those goggles and they’re just novelty toys that distort what you’re looking at.”

“There’s more to it than that!”

I sighed while the man grabbed his hair, pulling it back to keep the untrimmed locks from falling in front of his eyes. Of course there’d be more. There always was. “Go on.”

“It wasn’t so bad at first, just a few ponies here and there. It was disturbing the way they’d look at people with their large, childish eyes, but they kept to the streets and the parks, and could be avoided if I was careful. But then one day they took over, practically without warning. Suddenly they were everywhere! Moving into neighborhoods, putting up sparkling houses of crystalline glass, and staring into your soul with those evil, red, lenses.”

“I hardly think that—”

“You weren’t there, man. You don’t know what they’re like, what they did. Those neighborhoods used to be good places, full of genteel and posh folks, who’d never give up their

expensive homes, not for the state, not for anyone, and definitely not for livestock!”

“Um...”

“Ponies are like the evil Fae of legends, snatching folk from their homes, forcing them into hard labor in their evil fairy land from which there is no return, taking over their homes and smiling, plotting, grinning, staring into your soul to let you know that you’re next. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

Not hardly. “I think they just bought the houses. Ponies aren’t barred from owning property that I know of, and if Roslia lifted the ban on Equestrian goods then it’s not surprising that many would get wealthy and move into upscale neighborhoods.”

“You say that like you didn’t see the House of Parliament torn down and a giant, sparkling, crystal palace spring up in its place overnight.”

“What?” I blinked. I kinda wish I kept up more on foreign events, but newspapers were expensive. I usually only glanced at the headlines while walking to work.

He laughed, with a hollow, empty, wracking of his frame. His eyes were sullen and there was no light within them. “Gone. All gone. Our nation vanished overnight, replaced by some

horrid pink thing with too many colors.” He went deadly silent, staring at the ceiling.

I was incredulous. If ponies were really all that bad then there was no way that Artiztrotzia would let them in... right?

“It wasn’t long after that I got a knock on my door,” Sinv said. “It was a horror I’ll never forget. A shiny blue pony with skin so glassy that you could see straight through it announced that it was my new neighbor and offered a tray of chocolate cookies.” He shuddered.

“Cookies?” I asked, drumming my fingers on the counter. I debated whether to send him straight to detention or give him a chance to leave on his own. First glass houses and now glass ponies? He couldn’t even keep his story straight, and glass ponies didn’t exist. The whole thing was preposterous. He had to be insane.

“Deadly poison! I was certain of it. How else could it have dispatched the old residents so easily? I slammed the door in its face and was so shaken and rattled that I boarded up all my windows and doors. I could still hear them, clip-clopping in the streets as they walked by. The sound was driving me crazy. It was only a matter of time before they made another attempt on my life. I fled. I ran and never looked back. Please, you have to let me in! Artiztrotzia has the strongest borders of any country in the world and I know that you’ll

never let those ponies take over. It's the only place I know I'll be safe."

With his final, heartfelt plea, I wavered. Setting down my pen, I took pity on him.

"Sir, it's not too late to turn around and walk back out the way you came. If you insist on seeking asylum here, I'll tell you exactly what will happen. First, you'll be detained for a minimum of three months before your case is even heard. Given what you've told me, I can't see a judge granting your stay. We in Artiztrotzia hate people who cause trouble, and consider making a false asylum claim to be a serious offense. In the Forever Sea, there's a gyre full of floating garbage, and in that garbage is a boat, and on that boat are seventy-six six foot by six foot steel cages. You can leave a free man right now, but if you insist on seeking asylum, you can bet your butt you'll be on that boat."

"Well, ponies can't swim, right?" He grinned.

Ugh. My heart sank. I hated to do it, but I hit the buzzer to summon the guards. I had no choice really. I'd given him a chance, and he refused to take it. I'd wasted too much time already and he was holding up the line. At least he had the paperwork I'd filled out to support his case. If he really was insane then he might not be punished quite so severely.

He still grinned even when escorted out. “Glory to Artiztrotzia.”

It was creepy when he said it.

Misguided refugees aside, my afternoon was still going well, and I was on track to pay off that fine. Thus I was in good spirits when the next pair entered. A tall woman with dyed green hair and a silky black shirt strode in. It was a rather peculiar style that had holes in it. She was accompanied by an orange pony wearing a familiar fun-sized cowboy hat. Wait. Was that Applejack again? According to EQ-1, the guards weren't supposed to allow a pony with a rejection stamp past the front gates.

I leaned over to get a better look, and sure enough the pony's forehead was spotless and clean. Dang. I wondered what kind of soap she used, because the last time I splattered ink on my hands that stuff stained so bad that it lingered for a week. Of course, that was the old green ink. This new stuff I got today was even worse given how well it clung to fuzzy skin. It smelled like mothy catnip too, while the red ink was more like turpentine.

Hmm, catnip. Didn't one of the ponies say something about that? It probably wasn't important.

“Papers, please,” I said, as the woman stopped at the counter and stared at the sloppy instruction sheets, eyes furrowed and dark.

“Which papers?” She asked, as if the answer to her question wasn’t literally right in front of her face.

Ugh. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with snark right now. “Foreigners will need to present a valid passport, entry request form, and pony, while Artiztrotzian citizens need only present a valid ID,” I said in the dullest, flattest voice I could muster.

“Yeah, yeah, I got your papers right here.” For some unfathomable reason, she fished them out of her *hair*. I wanted to ask, but held my tongue. It wasn’t important so long as they were valid.

Her name was Kilana Mutt from Ghazasthan, and she was quite odd for one of them. The women there were typically quite secular and devout. It was unusual enough to see one without the iconic straw veil, but to have dyed green hair too would either make her a blasphemer or an outcast. That wasn’t a problem here, of course, so long as her papers were valid, and they seemed to be.

The picture was slightly off, though. While the photo also had green hair, some black roots were visible, but not on the

woman before me. The dye job must have been very recent. But the eyes...

“Miss, the woman on this ID has brown eyes, but yours are green.” I handed it back to her.

She scowled, huffed, and glared at the photo. She muttered something about humans being tricky, which made no sense, and handed it back. “You’re mistaken. They’re exactly the same as mine.”

I frowned, ready to reject her outright, but her eyes were indeed brown. I did a double-take and rubbed my own eyes. “Oh. Sorry. For a moment there I thought...” There was a pop and one of the lights flickered. “The lighting here is really bad.” That had to be it. Eyes don’t just change color on their own.

“Well, if that’s all there is, then I really should be going,” Kilana said.

“Not quite.” I pointed at her pony. “Applejack, would you mind stepping in here please?”

The pony’s eyes widened, but she did as I asked, trotting in and hopping on top of the dilapidated wooden bench. “How’d ya know my name?”

“Hmm? You were here earlier this morning.”

“I was? Oh. Of course I was. Heh-heh. I just didn’t think I’d see ya again what with the dozens of people working here.”

Her eyes darted back and forth and she scrunched up her muzzle.

“Ha. More like should be dozens. Given how long the line always is, they could really do with expanding this place. Sadly, I am the only checkpoint inspector here. Do you have your ID this time?”

“Yep. I totally have my ID. One that belongs only to me, and to no pony else.” She said that, but she didn’t actually move.

“I definitely didn’t steal it.”

“I need to see it, please,” I said, scowling. Was this little orange pony trying to set a record for acting as suspicious as possible?

There was a shuffle and I caught the woman trying to squeeze her arm through the gap in the other window. She was reaching for my stamps. “Hey! Stop that!” She jerked out before I could slap her, and I promptly pulled down the metal shutters which clanged into place.

“Ugh. The nerve of some people,” I said before pivoting back to the pony, who’d placed her ID on the dented, wobbly table. Well, I could see it, at least. I wasn’t in a mood for more shenanigans so I opened that window enough to reach out and grab it, aware of the irony. Her card was a real Equestrian ID

and it definitely belonged to Applejack. “I guess you finally found it.”

“Pfft. I didn’t need to find it. I’ve had it all along.”

Riiight. I rolled my eyes. “I guess you already know what I’m going to ask, since you’ve been here before.”

“Eeyep.”

I waited a bit longer, but she said nothing more. “Why are you and miss Mutt visiting Artiztrotzia?”

“Miss Mutt? Is that really the name she took?” Applejack laughed so hard she nearly fell off the bench.

I couldn’t help but grin. “Yeah, between her and that Johnny fellow, you really know how to pick ‘em.” I then blinked.

“Wait. What do you mean by ‘took?’ ”

“Uh, well, we were, um, playin’ Scrabbray, yeah. Scrabbray, so we took turns passing ‘Gallop,’ and raked in wheat and wool for our roads, then hit a Ponzee tile that sank the battleship where four bottles connected and we took new names from an Ponija board.” She then scrunched up her muzzle again.

Seriously? That was a giant load of literal nonsense. She hadn’t been nearly this obtuse this morning. I was going to pester her for a straight answer, but scowled when I noticed

what was actually written on the visitation request form. The paper crumpled in my grip. Who even notarized this?

With a clattering, I pulled the metal curtain back up and turned towards Kilana Mutt. “Hey! You can’t put down ‘Conquest’ as a reason for visiting Artiztrotzia!”

The woman’s lips curled up and she stared down at me with her brown eyes. “That’s the name of the band I’m joining, of course. You don’t think I’m actually planning to overthrow your entire country all by my little lonesome, do you?”

“Well, no.” That did sound silly. “But a band? You don’t have an instrument.”

“I sing, of course.”

“Well, I guess that checks out.” I added a note to clarify things.

“You want to hear? I’m glad you asked,” she said, twirling a finger in the air.

“But I didn’t—” That’s when she broke into song⁷. I cringed, wincing internally. Slamming the heavy metal shutters made me feel better, but I could still hear her through the open door to the interrogation booth. Was I going to have to put up ‘no singing’ signs? This was twice in one day. Who even does that?

Turning back to Applejack, I asked, “How long do you plan to—” Kilana started cackling. “Can you please shut that door?”

She hopped down and with a slap of her blond tail, slammed it shut. That was an odd way to use a tail, but I did appreciate the relative silence, aside from the irritating hissing of the fluorescent lights.

“Right, so I was asking...” As she returned to the creaky wooden bench, I got a good view of the tattoo on her flank. “Why does your cutie mark have green apples when this ID card shows red ones?” I was confused. Weren’t they red this morning? I couldn’t remember. Green apples were more common, and they did match her eye color, which was usually the case, so they were probably green. Everything else was identical. This was obviously the same pony.

I mean, the only other option would be if some kind of creature existed that could exactly copy a pony's appearance, but why get everything else right but leave one obvious, important detail wrong? It didn't make sense, and no such doppelgangers existed anyway.

Applejack cringed so hard she bared her teeth. She rubbed the side of her freckled cheek. “Oh that? Uh... That’s because... The camera was colorblind.”

I facepalmed. Now I'd heard everything. "Camera's can't be colorblind. That would make them black and white, or if the colors were wrong, they'd be wrong consistently and not just in one specific spot."

"Oh, uh, what I meant to say is that my cutie mark, it, uh, it changed."

"It changed?" I sighed.

"Yep!" Standing up, Applejack stretched herself out on top of the creaky wooden bench. One of the lights popped and sizzled and the hum got worse. "Ponies' cutie marks change all the time, and even during the day depending on what mood they're in."

"Really."

"Uh-huh. Why just yesterday, my good friend Fluttershy had her cutie mark change. Ya see, she had some pink butterfly things because of how she loved to torment animals, but one greasy, double-stacked bloated blasphemous burger from McBurgerface later, and zam! The experience was so profound it completely changed her world view. With a pop and bling, she lost her old cutie mark and gained a new pair of crossed drumsticks, on account of how much she now loves deep fried tasty animals."

What in the world was this orange charlatan trying to pull? Everything she'd said so far was complete and utter hooley.

“That’s preposterous. I met Fluttershy this morning, and she definitely still has those pink things, plus she didn’t really strike me as the type to torment other animals, let alone eat them. Aren’t you guys supposed to be vegetarians?”

“Oh hardly. We have meat parades all the time. And what’re ye getting’ off, thinking ya know Fluttershy better than I do? Us two are real close pals. In fact, we grew up together in Cloudsdale.”

“This ID says you’re from Ponyville.”

“Well, that’s because it, uh... Cloudsdale had been buried under Ponyville until recently. They found it when they were digging a well.” Applejack’s ever-familiar scrunched muzzle was becoming a sore sight in my eyes. There was so much wrong with that statement that I didn’t even know where to begin.

Enough was enough. It was time for the rejection stamp.

“Okay. We’re done. Please step over here to get your ID back.”

She hopped off the bench and walked over, oblivious to my ulterior motive. I had to admit that I got some satisfaction out of tricking her; the look on her face as I stamped her forehead was priceless. Her skull sounded different. It went ‘clonk,’ like I’d just stamped a block of wood.

“What the hay?”

I ignored the pony to open the shutters again and inform Kilana Mutt that she should take her pony and leave. At first an aura of smugness wrapped her face in a flush grin, but when she opened the door and spotted the rejection stamp, darkness roiled down from her eyes to yank her lips into a scowl.

“I think there’s something wrong with this pony,” I said. “If you wish to enter, you’ll need to find a different one.”

“Augh! Useless minion! How could you have possibly messed this up!?” The green-haired woman was so angry that she was practically spitting venom, and I could have sworn that for a second there that her eyes were green again.

“No no. Everything went fine,” Applejack said, putting on a wide grin. “In fact, we’re approved to go. Isn’t that great? Artiztrotzia is, uh, this way,” she said, pointing back the way they’d come in. “Race ya!” She darted off in full gallop.

“Get back here and get what’s coming to you, you termite-infested hunk of rotting slime mold!” The woman ran after her, glaring with such focus that her brow wrinkled with fury.

Well... that was a thing that certainly happened. I filled out an incident report and passed it to the guards. Having been rejected twice in one day, Applejack was going on a watch list for extra scrutiny if she ever showed up again. She seemed

nice enough this morning, but turned out to be a real piece of work. You just never know with some people.

The lateness of the hour surprised me, as that fruitless encounter wasted far more time than I was happy with. I prepared my desk, shuffling the papers so that EQ-1, FR-N2, and PK3 were on hand for easy reference. That black slip with pony names poked out and I frowned. So far I'd still only seen the one, but fate had a way of throwing things my way.

Well, even if I did meet another one, I'd just do what I always do and let them in if the papers were good, and reject them if not. Even with the weirdness in Roslia, I still didn't believe that ponies could be a threat. They didn't even have hands. Why should I be worried about something that could be foiled by a doorknob? That conspiracy was just paranoid nonsense.

When the guards let in the next pair, I just about did a double-take. The pony was huge, a giant white winged unicorn with a long horn which stretched out far further than any other by a wide margin. Well, okay, it wasn't *huge* huge, more like the size of a regular pony, but that was still much bigger than all the rest, and it was the first one who could see over the counter without having to stand on its hind legs. It was also decked out with gold-plated regalia including hoof plates, a

fancy bib, and even a crown. The real kicker though was its multi-hued mane and tail of soft pastel colors that waved in the air seemingly of their own accord. How was that even possible? Were there tiny fans somewhere to keep a constant breeze going? Regardless, this was one pimped-out horse.

“My ID, sir,” a man said, handing over a plastic card.

Yikes. I’d been so focused on the pony that I hadn’t noticed him. I took the card, feeling a bit flustered with embarrassment. His name was Sunh Loonh, a rosy-faced gentleman wearing a white headband and a sweaty tie-dyed shirt. He was the first Artiztrotzian that I’d seen all day. “Hey, welcome back.”

“Hmm, yes. It’s good to be home, I guess.” He fidgeted, tugging at his tight shirt which clung to his skin.

“You guess? You don’t sound too enthused.”

“Oh, well,” He glanced at the pony by his side briefly before snapping his attention back at me. “It’s just that in my travels I’ve seen such wondrous sights. Places that are colorful, exciting, lively, advanced, friendly, and even musical. Artiztrotzia is just lifeless and backwards by comparison.”

While he spoke, I checked the issuance of the card since it was close to the expiration date. His photo was old, showing a bit more red hair on his noggin, but otherwise checked out. He also gained several pounds though I couldn’t tell how

many because the scale was out of order. I debated patting him down to check for contraband, but with how tight his shirt clung it was clear that nothing was under it, plus, all that sweat... ew, no thanks.

“If you’d been living in the motherland instead of traveling about you’d know that Artiztrotzia is anything but lifeless. While I do admit that our ways can seem backwards compared to the outside world, that is because we are a proud people and like it that way. Why change what’s already perfect?”

He scoffed, and so did the horse. There was a crumpling noise, and I frowned. It was chewing on something. Its long horn also seemed to glow, as if illuminated by the bright sun instead of the faltering fluorescent tubes. I found that peculiar, but this thing was already bizarre to begin with. I pointed at the creature. “You know, you don’t have to bring a pony. That rule only applies to foreigners.”

“Yes. I know that, but I’ve grown rather fond of her. I don’t suppose you’d let me bring her anyway?” he asked.

‘Her,’ huh? Given the pony’s size I’d have guessed a stallion. He looked at me expectantly.

“Uh...” I was at a loss. My forms didn’t offer much guidance for this situation. On the one hand, an Artiztrotzian citizen got an automatic pass. On the other hand, EQ-1 said I had to

check the pony before allowing admission, though it also said that if there was a problem then both would have to be rejected, and I couldn't very well reject a native of my own country.

That was the problem with new regulations; they were often written in haste and wound up incomplete, contradictory, or confusing. These problems would be fixed in time, but until then I'd have to make choices on my own. It'd be easier to decide if I knew what this pony thing was all about, but I still didn't have a clue.

"That's fine, I guess..." I nodded. In the end, I opted to err on the side of speeding things up and getting paid more glories. A little personal indulgence on my part wasn't going to destroy the nation.

"Thanks, I appreciate it." The man grinned, taking his ID back. He waited patiently for me to stamp an entry permit, but somehow both my stamp and green ink pad went missing. I must have knocked them against the wall or something, but didn't have time to hunt for them. I scowled as I had to dig extras out of my disorganized, confetti-infested desk. The regal, white pony also grinned, in a bemused, smug fashion. The expression troubled me, but it was only a fleeting glance and I felt better once the document was handed off and they turned to leave.

“Glory to Artiztrotzia!” I said to their retreating backsides. Sunh Loonh said nothing as he shuffled off.

“It’s rude not to return the glories,” I said. “I can still have you detained, you know.”

“Glory to Artiztrotzia,” he muttered, while the pony snorted like it was some kind of joke.

Pah. The bling-horse could think what she wanted, but in Artiztrotzia we didn’t do it any other way. That man should have known better. Ah well. Now that he was back home, he’d have plenty of time to get used to it again.

When I turned back to my desk, I noticed something else. The black paper with the pony names on it was missing too. I knew for a fact it was just there. I looked around, and checked under the desk too, but saw neither that nor my missing supplies. That was quite peculiar. Stuff didn’t just float off on its own.

Well, I had extra stamps for a reason, and as for the paper, if I couldn’t find it, then the guards couldn’t, either. I never wanted it in the first place, so it wasn’t worth worrying about, even if it was odd.

Speaking of things worth worrying about, I had to reject the next three in a row because the humans didn’t have their

paperwork in order. One bright bulb didn't even have any papers. I don't know what he was thinking, but a border checkpoint to a foreign country is simply not the proper place to apply for a passport. I mean, really.

The ponies were rather irate that they had to bear the rejection marks on their foreheads, but orders were orders and I had to follow them even if they were lame. Keeping people out is part of my job, even if they hate it and it doesn't help me get paid. Come to think of it, the ponies I'd approved didn't complain about being stamped nearly as vociferously, even though it was basically the same thing. I guess being rejected just rubbed ponies the wrong way.

Thus, I was worrying about red ink and my bottom line when the next one walked in. First came the pony, a rather shiny blue-hued one with some kind of excessive hair styling that made its red mane terribly stiff and sparkly. A metallic band seemed to hold it in place, along with a matching ring around the base of its tail.

Next came... the guard shut the gate. Huh. Nobody else was coming. It was just the pony. I frowned, glancing at my paperwork. What was I supposed to do now?

“Uh, hi there. I'm Sapphire Rose.”

“Papers, please,” I said, basically an automatic response to any greeting.

This pony fished in its mane to pull out two documents, and reared up on its hind legs to spit them onto my counter. In the light, the sheen of its hide seemed to reflect in facets like a gemstone, and its rosy eyes had hexagonal white floaters as it stared up at me. Whatever it'd done to its mane and tail must have been done to its coat as well. That was some serious dedication to pony grooming.

It also occurred to me that this shiny animal probably had more net worth than I did. I bit my lip as I stared at the documents it'd given me. "This is a Roslian passport," I said.

"Um, yeah. I'm a Roslian citizen."

I scratched my head, then flipped the passport open. It had all the right markings, the hologram was correct, and even the security stripe was valid. It just had a picture of a pony and an image of her cutie mark where the fingerprints would normally be. "Huh." The issuance date was quite recent, yesterday, in fact. The other form was a standard visitation request form. It appeared like she was approaching me like a foreigner normally would, at least before this pony stuff started, but it also meant she was missing something important. "Do you have a pony?"

"What?"

"Did you bring a pony?"

“Uh...” She blinked, then put on a huge grin. “That would be me.”

I facepalmed. “Oh. Right. Sorry, it’s been a long day.”

“Tell me about it. It’s been a long line.”

Heh. True that. No matter how many I processed, it never seemed to end. Hmm... if she was the pony, I’d have to follow FR-N2. “Do you have an Equestrian ID?” I asked.

“No. I turned it over to the immigration officials when I got my Roslian citizenship. I didn’t think I’d need it anymore.”

She frowned, which was kinda silly the way her blue lips reflected the light in a glassy sheen.

“Ah. No, that’s fine.” I said, and made a note. Her passport had all the information I needed, anyway, except for her pony race. She was obviously an earth pony, so I put that down without asking. Her cutie mark was some kind of glassy flower, not that I cared. It felt awkward asking about that, anyway. I put down ‘likes macaroni.’ Meh. Close enough.

She didn’t have any trouble answering my questions about her reason for visiting and the duration of her stay, not that I expected any. Everything seemed to check out, but I hesitated. This pony speaking for herself was such an odd concept that I wanted to double-check my instructions. Maybe I’d missed something.

“How did you become a citizen, anyway?” I asked. “You aren’t even human.”

“Oh. That.” She cringed and leaned back, briefly baring her pearly white teeth. “It wasn’t easy, I’ll tell you that. When I applied, they laughed at me and told me to go back to prance in my pretty pony pastures.” She shuddered. “Like I’d want to live in a place that gets attacked by giant monsters every other month. I kept at it, without much luck, but that all changed when Cadance won the election.”

“Mmm-hmm,” I muttered. Nothing had changed since I last read my instructions, so there wasn’t anything holding me back from approving her. The name ‘Cadance’ didn’t hold any meaning to me. That missing black slip of paper did have the name ‘Cadenza’ on it, but that was obviously a different person, as Cadenza would have to be a pony. “I take it Cadance is sympathetic to ponies?”

“Ha! Is she ever.” This little glassy mare chuckled, with rosy spots on her cheeks that almost matched her hair. “There was quite a bit of hullabaloo at first as some nasty people felt like *human* rights shouldn’t be given to ponies, but Cadance came through on her campaign promise to give everyone in the country their own pair of shipping goggles, among other things, and now nobody really cares. I wish I could have

brought my pair, but I don't think they're legal outside of Roslia yet.”

“Not here at least. I've already had to confiscate one pair.” At this point I was just wasting both of our time, so I stopped stalling and got back to work.

I stamped the paperwork to hand back to her, then glanced at EQ-1 and stamped her forehead when she reared up to take them. Her head went ‘clonk.’ Clonk? I reached out and tapped her. Tink. Tink. Tink.

She grunted while she tucked the papers away and snapped back at me. “Do you mind?” she snarled.

“Uh, sorry.” I leaned back in my chair, holding both hands up. “Enjoy your stay in Artiztrotzia, and please, cause no trouble.”

“Wasn't planning to,” she muttered as she stomped out.

I scratched my head. What in the world does a pony have to do to itself to get its skin to go 'tink tink tink?'

There was only a minute left on the clock, and I debated closing up right then. That thought was fleeting, as I signaled to let the next pair in. Even if it meant extending my already-long day, I could suffer a little longer if it meant being paid a little more.

In came a strapping young fellow with a plaid green shirt and a 'Fowlers' bowling bat cap. He glanced with some trepidation over his shoulder, and was followed by another of the big ponies.

Navy blue in color, and donned in silver regalia much like the prior white one's gold, it carried itself with long strides to march past the human and approach my window first. Also like the one before, its hair seemed to shimmer on its own, waving in an invisible breeze. The darker blue mane and tail were also peppered with pinpoints of light. It reminded me of a Praisemas8 decoration I saw in a store window, where an eagle perch was adorned with tiny, sparkling lights. It was just fiber optics, though, with a colored wheel spinning over a light hidden in the tree's base. I wondered if it would be rude to ask where the light was hidden in the pony's mane.

"You shall allow my passage," it said, wrinkling its brow and glaring straight at me.

"Whoa. Hold your horses—"

"Hold my *what?*" Its blue eyes widened.

Hmm, perhaps, that wasn't the best choice of words. "I mean wait your turn," I said. I leaned and pointed to the man who'd shuffled off to the side. "Sir, may I see your papers, please?"

With a wary eye turned towards the big pony, he shuffled up and leaned over to pass me his documents.

The big pony ruffled its wings. “What is the meaning of this? I was clearly the first one here.”

“Sorry, but it’s the procedure,” I said, checking the papers as quickly as I could. He was Bob Bob Bobbity from Haarthwood, the Bobmeister. I chuckled. Man, between him and the Johnny circus, remind me never to be born in Haarthwood.

“Are you laughing at me?”

I blinked. “Huh? No...” I sure wasn’t winning any points with this impatient blue one, not that I needed any but things often went better if they were amicable. Maybe sharing a funny story would help. “I was thinking about something funny that my youngest did. See, he was on the phone with a pollster, and said, ‘Boot Hoops9, because they make me throw up when I eat them.’ I asked what the question was and he said, ‘What breakfast cereal is the most fun to eat?’ ”

Bobmeister laughed, but the pony gave me a rather flat deadpan. “I think that you should stop daydreaming and do your job.”

I sighed. Some people just had no sense of humor, ponies included it seemed. Pointing at the interrogation booth, I said, “Please step in here. I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Fine, but make it quick.”

Believe me, I wasn't going to make it any longer than it had to be. As this was my last questioning for the day, I double-checked the list to ensure that I made no mistakes. "May I see your ID, please?"

The winged, blue unicorn made no obvious movement aside from pushing the sad and splintery bench into the corner so it'd have more room to stand. Somehow, its ID came to my counter all on its own. It was almost like it floated on a bed of sparkles. "Uh..." I hesitated to touch it, prodding it with the tip of a pencil. "Is this thing magnetic or something?"

What I got was the largest rolling of eyes I'd ever seen.

The card didn't do anything else, so I guessed it was safe to pick up. Her name was Luna, and, uh... "Well that's wrong. This thing says you're an alicorn."

"No. It's not wrong." Her eyes went flat.

"Yes it is. That's not a possible pony race. You can only be an earth pony, unicorn, or pegasus."

She stomped up to my window and snorted into the glass, leaving rings of condensation around her nostrils that slowly faded. "I would think that I know what I am better than some clueless half-bit human stuck in a run-down shack who stamps papers all day."

Ouch. Burned. I just nodded and made a note that ‘alicorn’ was a special term for ponies who had wavy manes. I didn’t even need to ask. I figured that out all on my own. Ha! And she called me ‘clueless.’ I also put down ‘Loves Boot Hoops —*Nom smack smack bleeargh!*’ for her cutie mark thing, because, why not? That crescent shape was sort of like a boot heel, and the blobby part was kind of like a *bleeargh*. It fit. “Why does your Bobbity-Bob-Bob friend here want to visit Artiztrotzia?” I asked.

“Who?”

I thumbed a finger toward my other window where the Haarthwoodian was waiting patiently.

“Oh, him.” Luna rolled her eyes. “I have no reason to concern myself with the whims of you creatures.”

Us creatures? I frowned, dog-earing the form as a reminder to interview the Bobmeister, if it got that far. That seemed unlikely given that her ID badge had more oddities than just a nonexistent race. For one, with the wings I would have expected her to be as light as a feather, but her listed weight was closer to two hundred pounds. “Wow. You weigh a lot more than I thought you would.”

That earned me a derisive snort, once again fogging the glass.

“I am *not* fat.”

I tried to keep a straight face, as the wrinkles on her brow from pony anger made her look silly. “Well, if you don’t know what Bob’s up to, then I need to ask why you want to visit Artiztrotzia yourself.”

“If you must know, I plan to keep an eye on my sister to keep her out of trouble,” Luna said. “Trouble is something you dislike here is it not?”

“Not at all. Cause no trouble,” I muttered. “Your sister wouldn’t happen to be large, white, and blinged out like a vapid drag queen, would she?”

“Your choice of words is peculiar, but essentially yes.”

Ugh. This day just wasn’t getting any better. I groaned, rubbing my temple. That was the pony I’d let pass without checking. I must admit that I was tempted to take Luna at her word, but I still had misgivings. I didn’t really trust this self-important blue horse. “Can you explain why your name appeared on a list given to me by a conspiracy nut of ponies not to admit?”

“They know?” she mumbled in a soft voice, then blinked and shook her head. “I mean, why would I know anything about a nutcase conspiracy?” For full effect, she put on a wide grin.

Riiight, and I’m a winged unicorn. Nobody shows that many teeth unless they’re they’re up to something. “I think you’re lying. I bet you want to cause trouble, not prevent it.”

Her grin vanished like a bubble had been burst. She snorted.

“I don’t see why my sister should have all the fun by herself.”

Well, that certainly sounded like a confession. I reached for the rejection stamp, but hesitated. Denying entry when paperwork was in order could get me in trouble, even if I suspected them. That was a problem. I needed proof, not a hunch. I still wanted the pay too, and besides, these were horses. What trouble could they actually get into? Chew up somebody’s garden?

While I pondered, I rubbed at a smudge on Luna’s ID card, but it didn’t come off. It looked like it was actually printed there, a short dash in front of her birth date. “No way. That can’t be right.”

“What is it now?” Luna moaned.

“It looks like you have a negative number for your birth date.”

“I was born before the founding of Equestria. What of it?” she asked, giving me a dangerous glare.

I stared blankly at the card, which had been issued millennia later. How old would that make her, exactly? The numbers didn’t click in my head, but it was at least four digits long.

“Wow. You’re, like, really, really old.”

She hissed, narrowing her eyes to slits and folding back her ears. **“Do you have a problem with that?”**

Yep. I most certainly did. That was *way* past the age limit, by, like, two orders of magnitude. I took advantage of how close she was to the window to stamp the rejection on her forehead. Getting clonked caught her off-guard. She staggered back a bit, eyes crossing as she looked up. It was so silly when they did that.

“Hey! *What for was that!?*” she yelled.

The Bobbity Bobmeister opened the door to the poorly-lit interrogation booth, presumably because of the yelling. One of the lights popped and hissed, flickering erratically. The red stamp on Luna’s forehead was plainly visible, though, and his face fell when he saw it. **“Oh no. What’s wrong?”**

I sighed. “I’m sorry, sir, but your pony is expired.”

“Expired!? I’ll show you expired!” The irate horsey reared up, spreading her wings wide. There was a sharp flash, a peal like thunder, and all the lights blew out all at once. A clattering of glass shards rained down, and sparks fizzled in the now empty sockets. The acrid smell of burnt electronics hung in the air.

With the overhead lights dead, the darkness of late evening enveloped the room. There was still light, though, as the pony’s horn emanated a pale blue glow. It reminded me of

those chemical glow sticks that people sometimes carried on ghost walks.

This pony huffed, keeping a deep snarl on her lips.

“Wow,” I said. “You must be pretty upset that your big dramatic moment was ruined when those stupid lights finally blew out.”

The glow on her horn fizzled and she promptly facehoofed. Shaking her head, she wandered out, with the Bob being following suit.

A horn blew, marking the end of the long day. It was just as well, because I wouldn't be able to process any more papers in the dark, anyway. The line dispersed, with people dragging their feet as they left. Even though I had to reject the last two, I still thought that I'd come out ahead. That was until I locked up on my way out.

The red light flashed, and with a buzz, the horrible dot-matrix printer spat out another slip. I felt like I'd been punched. Had I messed up again? I was so certain about rejecting those two. Maybe I was wrong?

No. The citation wasn't about them. This time, it was for the 'improper removal of office supplies.' My pockets were empty! I hadn't—

No. It wasn't me. I crumpled up the notice into a little ball and slammed it on the ground. That stupid pink pony must have buggered off with something after she'd broken into my office. Augh! Why had I not thought to pat her down?

The fine was only two glories, but these things added up. I got paid nothing today. Nothing!

Growling, I slammed the door on my way out, startling the guards. Today wasn't my worst day, not by a long shot, but it was not one of my better ones, either. I had enough leftover rice for tonight, so my family wouldn't starve, even if we had to eat light. I'd just have to do better and make up for it tomorrow. If the kids complained, they could eat the box.

The ponies, though, I still wasn't sure what to make of them. They acted like tiny people, but it was hard to take them seriously with their bright colors and cute little fuzzy faces. Things got... weird when they were around, and many things happened which I didn't have a good explanation for. Perhaps there was a grain of truth to the conspiracy nonsense, after all. I hoped nothing bad would come of this.

On the next morning, there was a large commotion in the streets. Far more people were out and about than usual, with large groups surrounding street corners where vendors hawked the daily news. The hubbub was highly irregular, and

it reminded me of the bad old days when hostilities stoked by neighboring countries stirred up trouble on a near regular basis.

I was curious, but didn't want to waste money I didn't have, so I just brewed up a dilute blend of coffee from used grounds and took a cup with me. I was certain that I'd get new orders again and wanted to arrive early enough to prepare for the day.

Something was wrong when I got to work. The tall metal flagpole, bearer of the proud Artiztrotzian Eagle, was bare. Guards were huddled around the base, where two of them were folding up the flag. They all had solemn faces, deep with equal parts sadness and reverence.

“What's going on?” I asked. “Did somebody vandalize the flag again?”

“Haven't you heard?” One of them replied. His eyes were downcast, and the others looked away.

“Heard what?” I took a sip before my lousy coffee got cold.

“We're not Artiztrotzia anymore. We're Celestrotzia now.”

Pffft! I nearly choked I spat my coffee out so hard. “*What?*”

“Some of those ponies we let through yesterday took over the country last night. It's all everyone's talking about.”

“What? Why? *How?*” I staggered, rubbing my temple. Nothing made sense anymore. Artiztrozia was as solid as a rock. It couldn’t be gone, not just like that... could it?

They shrugged. None of them knew, but I knew who did. Tearing away, I ran back down the street, heart caught in my throat. Joining the throng of people, I yelled and cut in line. Six entire iotas of glory was a ripoff for a newspaper, but I really needed to know what happened.

The headlines were a jumble as I staggered off, staring blankly at the mass of bold-faced words before me. The picture in the center was like a slug to the gut, as it showed the same smug grin on that large white pony that I saw yesterday. I never even vetted her! I could have kept her out of my country if I’d only done my job right.

With a sinking feeling, I leaned against a tree, then slid down the rough bark as I flipped to the back page. A week from next Tuesday, the banks would open, and I could exchange my iotas and glories for the new currency: pretty and shiny bits. By proclamation of our new ponylord, Sundays would henceforth be twice as long as all other days, and be reserved for fun, happy stuff like singing, dancing, and stuffing your face with cake. Moondays would be half as long and be reserved for stinky, boring stuff, like taking out the trash or wearing dirty socks on your ears.

Ugh I just... I couldn't believe it. My world was swimming in a sea of inane stupidity.

The people around me were so shocked that they looked like fish out of water. There were so many cries and gasps that it sounded like it too. It was as if a colorful sheen was cast over reality, an illusion. It couldn't possibly be real, but, somehow, it was. The illusion was made of Teflon, and it was sweeping us away.

I flipped back to the front page. I had to know what happened. I had to.

Spontaneous Song and Dance Overtakes the Halls of Parchment

Late afternoon while the Halls were in session, a small pink pony jumped down from the visitor balcony, then burst into song and dance. At first there was much confusion, as guards attempted to remove the tiny, equine troublemaker, but they instead joined in. It soon became apparent that the disturbance was not going to stop and by the end of the evening, everyone in the building was part of Pinkie Pie's 'Approve Everything' party.

Working together in musical harmony, lawcrafters from every isle unanimously approved a dizzying number of writs. Inscribed into law were multiple revisions of the same edicts, several blank pages, a

napkin, a chair, somebody's shirt, and even a kitchen sink. Of course, the most consequential... [cont. pg. 4]

The photo that went with the story showed Pinkie Pie rearing up with her mouth wide open and forelegs stretched in the air high above her head. The humans surrounding her had oddly similar poses, and each one had 'approved' stamped in green on their forehead. Almost out of the frame, the big white one with the battery-powered mane stood behind everyone with a stupid, smug grin on her chompers. An inkpad and rubber stamp floated in the air next to her. They seemed to shine with a pale, yellow glow that matched the lighting by her horn.

Wait, so bling queen stole my stuff, and not the hyper pink one? How did that even happen? She never entered my office, and stuff didn't just—I looked at the hovering objects in the photo again—float off on its own. I facepalmed. I should never have been so quick to dismiss magic. Well, the ponies might be too ignorant to explain what they do with science, but I'm the dumb one for not expecting tricks that look like magic.

And speaking of tricks, everyone in the picture had the same, wide, toothy grin. They put something Equestrian in the green ink, didn't they? Something meant to tame the little, wild beasts. The ponies I'd stamped acted more docile and

subservient, but on humans... I gritted my teeth. I never stamped the white one, and the pink one escaped my effort.

What else had gone wrong?

What Were They Thinking?

There was little consensus, but each lawcrafter had their own reasons for disbanding our government, so the ponies could make Celestrotzia. “I have no idea if ponies will be any good at writing laws or not, but they sure look cute doing it,” now ex-lawcrafter Hibble was quoted as saying when asked about why he voted himself out of a job. [cont. pg. 3]

Hibble? Wasn't that the idiot who once advocated digging a moat around our country, even though we're already surrounded by mountains? If he was in on this, we were doomed.

Eagle Mansion Demolished

The executive building was torn down yesterday to make room for the new Rulership Ranch, where free-range Princess Celestia and her herd of ponyfellows... [cont. pg. 2]

Our most iconic building! How could they!

Ponies Appoint Celestia as Leader, Our New Ponylord

Hastily assembled, the small gathering of little ponies unanimously selected the one called Princess Celestia

as their leader, presumably because she was the tallest. As acting ponylord, Celestia then joined our ex-Reverend Lawmaster, Aberry Yoon for a ceremonial... [cont. pg. 5]

My heart stuck in my throat, as the main picture showed bling queen standing next to Yoon in her formal, red, eagle gown. Our ex-ruler grinned like a maniac while tearing up *the original* constitution! They got it out of the sealed underground vault and removed the lamination and everything. The ponies were working on their own constitution, of course, but that picture showed them gnawing on crayons. *Crayons!*

Unable to stomach any more, I folded up the newspaper and dragged myself to my feet. Like a fetid zombie, I shuffled back to work, stinking up the air with my foul thoughts. Forget brains, because the world didn't seem to have any.

With a squeak, squeak, the guards were raising the new flag, and it was... an embarrassment, to say the least. They'd taken a poorly-angled photo of our new ponylord, Princess Celestia, slapped it on a dull, blue background and slapped that on the flag. Ugh. In the picture, she wore that smug grin, her cheeks were flush and puffed out, her tongue was sticking out, and she had a banana stuck in her left ear¹⁰. The way her head was tilted, she seemed to be looking at the sky, even though she was looking down her nose.

With a clunk, it came to a stop at the top, flapping in a light breeze. The guards stood there, silent, staring.

“Glory to—” one started to say.

“We don’t say glory anymore,” another corrected.

“We don’t?”

“No.”

No more glory? That was—that was just plain wrong. The ponies had gone too far! I gnashed my teeth, clutching the door handle to my office so hard that my knuckles turned white.

“It’s radiance now.”

“Oh.”

I didn’t stick around to see if they said their radiance-es. Ugh. That was stupid to even say.

My desk awaited empty, with no new orders despite the rather sudden regime change, or more likely, because of it. Our pony overlords were too busy worrying about cake and dirty socks to care about useful things like proper and functioning borders. In theory, I could continue on as if nothing had happened, but something did happen. Everything was ruined.

The worst part of it all was that this mess was my fault. I was the one who let these horrid things into my country, and they ruined it. I’d messed up so bad that I physically hurt, with my

heart aching the most. They'd even replaced the flag in the hall, so instead of the Artiztrozian eagle watching over me, it was the smug grin on that stupid pony.

I beat my fist against the desk, causing everything to rattle. I couldn't stand it! There was no way I could get through the whole day without screaming and storming out and never coming back.

Staring at the rubber stamps on the counter, I felt like I had two options. One, I could reject everything that happened, gather my family, and flee. I'd hate to go, as Artiztrozia had been my everything, but Artiztrozia was no more.

Two, I could accept things as they were, and learn to love my new pony overlords. I didn't... I couldn't... They were stupid, but they overthrew the government with a song and dance number. Who knew what they were truly capable of? They weren't just here, either. All countries had them now. Where would I even go? Roslia? Pah!

Oh the heck with it. Popping open a tin cover, the scent of catnip tickled my nose.

With a clonk, I stamped myself on the forehead.

My worries melted away, and my nerves relaxed. So what if ponies had taken over? They were cute. They deserved it.

Wheee! I spun in my chair, laughing gaily. I felt the urge to sing and dance, but all I knew was the Artiztrotzian anthem, and that wasn't appropriate. Ha! Who cared about that anymore? Standing up, I grinned, winked, and gave the new flag a thumbs-up. I thought it was terrible before, but not now. It made sense now. I couldn't explain it; it just did. Heck, even covfefe made sense11!

“Radiance to Celestrotzia!” I bellowed, enjoying the feel of the words rolling off my lips. “I'm ready now! Open the gates! Let the masses pour forth, and show me those ponies, please!”

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1. Specifically, it was the Cult of Breaking Stuff. They had a book on better cult names, but they broke it.
 2. The rumors were false, of course, because nobody lived in the jungle. The place was so wet and swampy that quicksand was common and the mosquitoes were so thick they could skeletonize a moose in under a minute.
 3. Of course, had they been actual pirates, Rainbow Dash could have [serenaded them with a song](#). Sadly, Artiztrotzia's boarder patrol agents were not that awesome.
 4. *Daring Do and the Back of the Line* was not the most popular book in her series.

5.This was less of a study on the snails themselves, and more of one regarding people's reactions to racing snails in public places. So, not quite as asinine as it sounds, just, mostly so.¹²

6.Pinkie's song went like this:

Stamp a smile on your face.

Go stamp go!

Giggle giggle.

Do a little dance in place.

Stamp stamp stamp!

Dance dance dance!

Stamp a smile on your face.

Grin right up!

Jiggle Jiggle.

Do a little dance in place.

Stamp stamp stamp!

Dance dance dance!

Well, you get the idea.

7.It went like this:

“Not to be a bore but the swarm is at your door;
and they're pouring in and your hope is wearing thin.
Surrounded everywhere now malaise is in the air

and you're tackled hard and put under heavy guard and you're done for, done for!"

It went on like that for several stanzas and between every verse was an unhealthy amount of cackling. No wonder 'Conquest' was the name of the band.

8. Praisemas was a holiday centered around the Artiztrotzian eagle. A handcrafted wooden figure would be placed on a perch, typically a flag or a tree. Patriotic decorations would then be placed in its view. For weeks, people would shout glories and give offerings, trying to outdo each other with the loudest of praises. If pleased, the eagle would then take flight on Praisemas Eve, bringing presents to those who brought the most glory to their country.
9. About two hundred years ago, an extreme drought caused a famine so severe that Artiztrotzia lost nearly a fifth of its population. People went so hungry that they literally ate their boots. Naturally, of course, this dark period in Artiztrotzia's past had to be commemorated with state-sponsored breakfast cereal. Now things like heels, toes, soles, laces and tread come in fruity flavors.
10. The pomegranate she'd put in her other ear fell out before the picture was taken.

11. Other things that made sense included sniffing dry paint, going *b-b-b-b-b* with your lips pursed, and triangles.

12. Unless you happened to bet on snail #4, of course. Despite the large size and the flame decals, snail #6 will only let you down when it matters the most.13

13. No. I am not bitter.