

Equestria Hockey League

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Season 1

Chapter 1

A New Team

One cold, winter afternoon, Princess Celestia was sitting on her royal throne bored with no royal duties left to be performed for the rest of the day. Seeing the glistening, white snow gently falling outside, she devised a plan to create some outdoor winter fun for her subjects in Canterlot. As Princess Celestia looked out upon the palace, she noticed she had a prime piece of property to use for this plan. The royal pond was currently barren and closed off for the winter. Using her magic, Princess Celestia refilled the pond with water and then froze it, leaving a sparkling sheet of ice. Soon after, the Canterlot ponies began to visit the palace to skate on the royal pond.

One day in the heart of the winter season, a visiting pony from a land far away brought some curious equipment with him to the royal pond. He brought a bundle of large wooden sticks, two netting apparatus, and a single black rounded stone. The visitor then explained to the Canterlot civilians that a game can be played with the things he brought. He called the game "hockey", and began demonstrating how to play. It did not take long for the ponies to pick up on the visitor's game and soon all of Canterlot would come to the royal pond to play in and watch hockey games, including Princess Celestia herself.

As the years went on, more improvements to the game were had, including the emergence of talented ponies that practiced and studied the game most of their lives. Also, some ponies created safety padding and equipment to protect the players from harm. Princess Celestia enjoyed watching the evolution of this physical, yet elegant sport and wanted to share this honorable game with all of Equestria. She requested that an organized league be formed so that hockey can be played and enjoyed by

all ponies far and wide. The league was named the Equestria Hockey League, or EHL, for short. Originally, five teams from five cities participated in the league: the Canterlot Equestrians, the Cloudsdale Red Wings, the Appleloosa Black Apples, the Manehattan Rangers, and the Fillydelphia Flyers. The champion of this league would win the coveted Celestia Cup and each pony would have their names engraved on the large, silver trophy for years to come.

"And thus the Equestria Hockey League was born," said Twilight Sparkle as she closed her book *The Origins of the EHL*. Twilight used her magic to levitate the book back in its place on the dusty bookshelf. She then looked out the window and saw a sparkling, white winter landscape blanketing Ponyville. While she preferred to stay indoors, she saw many ponies laughing and having fun playing in the snow. There were raucous snowball fights, ponies building towering snowhorses, and elegant ice skating. Twilight sighed and searched for another book when Spike rushed into the main room.

"Hey Twilight, wanna go play outside?"

"No thanks, Spike. I want to read some more. There's a few books here I haven't been able to get to yet."

"But it'll be fun! We could throw snowballs at each other and go skiing!"

"I told you I have too many books to read still," as Twilight magically lifted different books off the shelf and bringing them closer to see what they contained.

"Aww, alright," Spike said dejectedly. "I'll go see if any of the others want to play."

Spike put on his puffy winter gear and left the treehouse. Twilight found a new book to read and immediately began studying it. Outside, Spike went around town to recruit his friends to play with him. Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Applejack, and Fluttershy followed Spike back to the treehouse and they all began having fun in the snow as Twilight kept to her book. As she went to turn to a new chapter, Twilight heard a knock at the door. She went to the door and opened it to find no one there. Suddenly, a big, wet snowball hit her in the face. Spike and Rainbow Dash began laughing

uncontrollably as Twilight frustratingly brushed the snow off her now dampened face.

"Nice throw, Spike! That was awesome!" exclaimed Rainbow as she gave Spike a hoof bump.

"Haha, gotcha, Twilight!" Spike laughed.

Pinkie Pie bounced up and down in excitement. "Come join us, Twilight! We're having oodles of fun!"

"I say it is very delightful out here in the snow, darling. You can wear those trendy new boots I made you!" said Rarity, fluttering her eyes and whipping her scarf around her neck.

"Sorry, girls, but I have too much reading to do right now," Twilight said. A book quickly flew over to cover Twilight's face from her friends. She furiously began flipping pages to pretend she was very busy.

Applejack took a determined step closer towards Twilight's doorway and pushed the book down out of Twilight's face. "Twilight Sparkle, you've been sittin' in your house readin' all day. It's good ta' get some fresh air and work out yer muscles! Come out and join us."

"Pinkie Pie is going to teach us how to ice skate better. It would be fun if you come and skate with us...if that's okay with you," Fluttershy said softly, looking down at her hooves and giving the snow a tiny kick.

Twilight saw that her friends all had a hopeful look on their face that she would join them. She quickly tried coming up with another excuse, "But you saw me last year during the Winter Wrap Up. I did horribly at skating. See?" Twilight galloped to her room to retrieve her skates. The other ponies peered into the house with confusion. Twilight returned to her doorway with skates on. She purposely wobbled her legs and fell over flat in an exaggerated thud. "Hehehe, I told you. I'm not good. Now see ya!" Twilight slammed the door but Pinkie Pie popped in to block it.

"That's okay, Twilight! We all had to learn sometime. Now that we don't have the Winter Wrap Up to worry about right now, I can teach you better!" said Pinkie.

"I'm sorry, girls. Maybe some other day," Twilight said while guilt started to weigh heavy inside her mind.

Defeated in their attempt to coax Twilight out to play, everyone sadly turned away to resume their winter activities. Suddenly, Spike felt a rumble in his stomach. He let out a loud, fiery burp which meant a scroll had arrived from Princess Celestia. Twilight stepped out from her home as the ponies turned their attention toward Spike. Spike unfurled the scroll and began to read it aloud:

"Ahem. To My Most Faithful Student Twilight Sparkle,

Although you have been very dedicated and thorough with your studies thus far, I am afraid you will spend too much time studying and not be able to enjoy the winter season while it is still here. I have not told you this, but my favorite winter activity is to watch the ponies play hockey. I have requested that the Equestria Hockey League grant Ponyville an expansion team. Your assignment is to gather up a team of ponies to play for the Ponyville Golden Leafs. I shall be expecting a report at the end of the season. Although the weather in the winter is not as fair as other seasons, it shall be enjoyed just the same. Enjoy the winter and have fun with your friends. I look forward to seeing you play against the Canterlot Equestrians soon. Good luck to your team.

*Your Royal Princess,
Princess Celestia"*

Twilight looked up to the sky in despair. "Hockey?!? I can't play hockey, let alone skate! Ugh!"

"All the more reason for you to join us! Don't worry, Twilight. We're gonna make you the meanest, leanest, ice skating, hockey playing pony around!" Pinkie said confidently as she put her front leg around Twilight.

Twilight's face turned from despair to apprehension. "You...you really think so?"

"Darn tootin', sugarcube," Applejack said with a warm smile.

"Ugh, fine. Let's go, girls."

Twilight's friends let out a "yay!" as Twilight finally agreed to join them for some fun and skating. "But before we go, let me go grab my books about skating and the EHL."

Before Twilight could turn around to grab her books, everyone yelled out "TWILIGHT!" which promptly stopped her in her tracks.

Twilight turned around with a slight grin, "Okay, okay. We'll go now."

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They all arrived at the frozen Ponyville Pond with their skates. Pinkie Pie started skating immediately. Rainbow Dash was next to join her on the ice. She zoomed past Pinkie and started showing off her speed, carving up the solid ice like a knife. Applejack and Spike joined in on the skating action next. Applejack had some trouble at first with her legs shaking but eventually she found her balance and was striding strong. Spike was having fun switching between his skates and his tail to skate, posing each time to hopefully catch Rarity's eye. Rarity off on the bank finally gathered up the courage to put on a pair of old, worn out skates. She delicately tip-hoofed onto the ice as if she was avoiding tiny piles of dirt. Pinkie skated over to help Rarity out and soon Rarity was skating along with everyone. Fluttershy was greatly enjoying herself on the ice. With a couple of her bird friends flying close by, she was gliding with the breeze, eyes closed and in tune with the nature around her. Twilight looked upon her friends and nervously approached the ice. She was taking deep breaths and talking to herself trying to build up courage.

"Your turn, Twilight! We're ready to help you out!" Pinkie yelled from the center of the rink, noticing Twilight's hesitation.

"Oh, alright. Here it goes," sighed Twilight.

Twilight gingerly stepped out onto the ice. Her legs wobbled and shook as she tried her hardest to keep her balance. Twilight was slowly dispelling her fear until she hit a jagged scratch in the ice and began to fall. She closed her eyes and braced for impact but she didn't feel anything at all. Twilight

opened her eyes in shock to find herself gliding around the ice, the wind blowing through her mane. She began to cheer for herself until she looked back to see it was Pinkie pushing her along.

"Ready to go by yourself?" Pinkie asked.

Twilight instantly began to panic "Oh no no no no no..."

"Go!"

Pinkie thrust Twilight towards the center of the ice. Twilight frantically moved her legs to keep balance, hoping any combination of movement would keep her upright. In her moment of panic, Twilight forgot that she could use her magic to help guide her. She quickly channeled her focus to her horn. It began to glow a brilliant shade of purple and soon she was skating as gracefully as any pony has ever seen. Twilight giggled with confidence as she was finally skating without fear. The next test would be to skate without any magical help, but there would be time for that over the next few days. For now, Twilight felt like she was conquering the ice and was perfectly content for the day.

As for the others, they were skating around and chasing one another, laughing and having a good time. Pinkie Pie was the best skater, followed closely by Rainbow Dash. Applejack was doing a great job at maintaining her balance and skating faster. Fluttershy had no issues at all for she was very light and delicate, like a figure skater. Rarity had insecurities at first but as the day went on, she gained confidence and was skating up to par with the others.

After an hour of more skating fun, Twilight and friends went back to the treehouse to rest. Sitting and laying around exhausted and sore from all the skating they did, it was a good time to start discussing how to go about forming the team. Twilight gathered her friends in front of the fireplace and ignited it, allowing warm comfort to fall upon them.

"So, girls. Anyone know anything about hockey? I read a little about it today, but has anypony actually played it?"

Applejack chimed in eagerly. "Well, I haven't played, but I reckon Big Macintosh has. I think I remember goin' to a couple of his games back in

the day."

Twilight's anticipation from hearing Applejack's answer deflated into disappointment. She picked her smile back up and asked again. "Anypony else?"

"Um...I have," said Fluttershy, looking away from her friends, almost as if she were ashamed.

Everyone turned toward her in surprise. Rainbow Dash bursted out laughing and landed on her back, "You played hockey, Fluttershy? That's a good one!"

Fluttershy picked up her head to face her friends. "It's true. When I was young, my parents tried putting in me all sorts of different sports so I could meet new ponies and be less shy. I only played for a few days. I didn't do too well because I was afraid of getting hit with the puck."

"That explains why you were skatin' so well today. I didn't know you could move on the ice like that," said Applejack as she gave Fluttershy a nod.

Fluttershy's mouth formed a tiny smile. "Oh yes. I love skating. I like twirling with the birds and gliding with the bunnies."

Impatiently, Twilight spoke back up. "Getting back to hockey, it appears we don't have too much experience collectively. I'll study more about it tonight and tomorrow we can try to figure out more stuff."

Rainbow jumped out of her resting position. "Well, we can come up with other things right now, like our numbers. I want to be number 20!"

The other ponies paused for a moment to think which number they would want. Pinkie was the first to hop up.

"Ooh, ooh, I want to be number 33! It's fun to say! Thirty-three! Thirty-three!" said Pinkie, jumping around the room and nearly knocking over everything in sight.

Applejack stood up. "I think I wanna be number 88. It just sounds like a strong number y'know?"

"I want to be number 9 because it's so elegant. I can then be 'dressed to the nines' as they say!" Rarity said with a laugh as she stood up regally.

Fluttershy extended her wings and floated up. "I'd like to be number zero please. Zero is a nice and quiet number."

"I guess I'll be number 42 then. For some reason I just enjoy that number," Twilight proclaimed. "Now that we have our numbers, we can have our uniforms made. Rarity, could you make us some jerseys? We're the Ponyville Golden Leafs. I trust you can make us something great."

Rarity nodded her head. "I'll get right on it!"

Twilight magically floated her hockey books to her friends. "As for everypony else, let's try to learn all we can about hockey and the EHL. I'll do some studying tonight on my own so I can start assembling the team. Let's meet again tomorrow for some more skating practice. Sound good?" asked Twilight.

Each pony nodded, accepting their homework assignment for the evening by taking one of Twilight's books. The group broke off for home and Twilight spent the rest of her night learning about hockey and the many intricacies involved. She fell asleep, face down in her hockey book, and began to dream about playing alongside her friends and winning the Celestia Cup.

She could see it all now. The final horn echoing throughout the corners of the arena. The downpour of gold and blue confetti and streamers raining from the rafters. The immense cheering from the Ponyville Golden Leafs' faithful. Twilight saw herself celebrating and hugging all her teammates as the presentation stage was being assembled on the ice. Princess Celestia looked down upon the celebration from her royal suite, beaming with delight that her student had won hockey's greatest prize. More cheering would erupt from the crowd when two colts wearing unblemished, white saddles carried the Celestia Cup onto the stage. Not too far behind the Cup would be Gary Bettpony, the EHL Commissioner, in a snazzy business suit looking as cheerful as ever. Twilight saw all her friends motioning to her to go onto the stage to retrieve the Cup for them. Gary Bettpony would begin his speech, but would be drowned out from all the yells and cheers coming

from the crowd. He then presented the Celestia Cup to Twilight, in all of its towering, shining silver glory. The last image Twilight would see in her dream would be her holding the Celestia Cup high above her head as her friends gathered around her in victorious bliss.

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When the morning arrived, Twilight immediately bounced out of bed and went back to her book to study, feeling inspired by her dream. After a few hours of intense reading, she set up a chalkboard to begin assigning positions to her friends. Spike diligently watched Twilight try to piece together a suitable lineup that played to each of her friends' strengths. Twilight levitated the chalk and began to write on the rough, green board.

"Now, Spike. The center position is for the pony who has skill and speed. The center pushes the puck up the ice and tries to make the best play. I think Rainbow Dash would be the best for center, don't you agree?"

"Yeah, sure!" he said with much interest while sitting upon a stack of books.

"Both the left wing and the right wing are primarily for shooting. They also have to race after the puck once it goes into the offensive zone and try to get it and keep it away from the other team. Rarity would make for a good shooter because she is so precise and has great attention to detail. I bet her accuracy is fantastic. Applejack could be on the other wing because she's strong enough to take the puck away from anypony who tries."

Spike scratched his head in confusion and interrupted Twilight. "So you're putting an earth pony and a unicorn pony on positions that need wings?"

"Haha, no, that's not how it works. That's just a name. The sides of the hockey rink are called the wings. Now for defense, it looks like it will be Fluttershy and I. Defense takes great patience and knowledge, to know when to anticipate the opponent's moves and when to attack. I know we'll be weak at first but maybe our offense will be good enough to where we can screw up a little bit and still win. And finally, that leaves Pinkie Pie to be goalie. She's got some...uncanny flexibility and agility. Plus she's pretty soft so the puck won't hurt her too badly."

Twilight put the chalk down and Spike sprung up from his seat. "Sounds

great! So...where am I playing?"

Twilight looked around her muddled, messy chalkboard quickly. When she realized that there were no more positions open for Spike, she quickly tried thinking of a new role for him to have. "You can be our equipment manager! Yeah, we'll need someone who is super organized and able to fix things. It's a very important job. Hehe." Twilight nervously let out a laugh, hoping Spike wouldn't be discouraged by not playing.

"All right! You can count on me, Twilight!" Spike gave Twilight a small salute and then ran off to start finding hockey gear.

Twilight wiped a cold sweat from her forehead. "Whew, that was close. I thought for sure he would be upset he wasn't on the team."

As agreed upon last night, Twilight and Spike left to meet their friends at the pond again for more skating practice. Today, Twilight set a goal for herself to skate on her own without any help from magic. Spike stumbled behind, trying to carry an overstuffed bag full of the hockey equipment he found. When they arrived at Ponyville Pond, everypony was already there and skating on the fresh, glistening sheet of ice. Twilight greeted them and Spike handed out the gear so that they could start playing while Twilight practiced her skating. Before practicing, Twilight briefly explained each position and their responsibilities. No pony quite understood what she meant right away, showing that they blew off the studying assignment Twilight had given them the night before. Undeterred, Twilight had them start playing anyways.

Immediately, Rainbow Dash was excelling at the sport. She was (figuratively) flying on the ice, scooping the puck up from whoever had it and taking it quickly to the net. Even though Rainbow was playing skillfully, she did not care to pass much. Applejack began to show off her muscle as she was able to take the puck away from Rainbow whenever she was able to get close enough. That was not often, though, as Applejack was too slow on skates to chase anyone. Rarity didn't go after the puck, but she was skating better. When Rarity got the puck to shoot, she slapped the puck on net. Rarity's shot weakly flew through the air, but she was able to pinpoint perfectly where she wanted it to go. Fluttershy, as expected, was too afraid to go after the puck. She was, however, able to anticipate when the puck was coming at her, to which she promptly moved out of the way for fear of

getting hurt. Pinkie Pie was doing a decent job being goalie. She glided across the net quickly and made some incredible moves to keep the puck out of the net but sometimes she was caught out of position and was a little overexcited getting in on the play.

Twilight caught glimpses of her friends playing while she was off on her own skating. She saw that each one of them had the raw ability within them to be great, but they need time and more practice before they can begin competing. As for reaching her goal, Twilight was skating without any magic. She wasn't fast, but she was happy to be stable and not falling...much.

Twilight felt she had skated enough on her own without magic so she decided to join in on the game her friends had already started. Despite her early apprehension, Twilight was beginning to enjoy being out in the winter cold. She enjoyed the wind caressing her coat as she glided on the ice. She enjoyed watching plumes of cold fog billow out from her nostrils. She enjoyed hearing the scrape of the skate blades upon the icy pond. She was feeling more comfortable being outside as the seconds turned into minutes and the minutes turned into hours. Normally Twilight would miss reading her books next to the warming glow of the fire, but seeing her friends having fun in the winter tundra encouraged her even more to develop her hockey team.

The rest of the ponies were having fun practicing hockey. Their hard work was displayed in the sweat that rolled down their manes and faces. Happiness and fun was evidenced in the many giggles and laughs that rang out into the brisk, winter air throughout the day. Twilight and friends were in the right frame of mind for a successful hockey team, but now they had to add talent and skill into the mix. Twilight was about to introduce some new knowledge about the sport to her friends when she noticed the sky was quickly turning into dusk. The grey clouds made way for night sky and it was time to leave the pond.

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After another day at the rink, Twilight and friends were tired and found themselves back at the treehouse to talk about their team. Once again, the ponies sat around the fireplace, warming up from the long day outside. A haunting aroma of hot chocolate filled the air of the treehouse as the night's

discussion began.

Twilight looked up from her mug. "How did everyone do?"

"It was so much fun! I was like this, and this, and this!" as Pinkie demonstrated every slick save she made, inciting a shrill laugh from her friends.

Rainbow sat up to boast. "It was awesome. I was so fast and no one could stop me!"

"Well that's good to hear," Twilight responded while taking a sip of her hot chocolate.

"How was your skating practice, Twilight?" Rarity asked.

"It went pretty well. I didn't have to use magic! But I haven't gained any speed yet."

Applejack gave Twilight an encouraging look. "Don't worry 'bout that, Twi. You'll get faster in time."

"Yeah! You've only skated for two days. You were doing much better than I did my second day of skating!" Pinkie said while clapping her hooves.

Twilight smiled. "Thanks, girls. Hey Rarity, how's the work coming on our jerseys?"

"I stayed up all night putting the finishing touches on them. I think they're quite darling!"

Rarity levitated a cardboard box over to her. She opened the box and lifted up a jersey. The jersey was made from clean wool and had a distinct royal blue color. Emblazoned on the front was a leaf made out of bright, golden thread. In bold blue letters on the leaf, "Ponyville Golden Leafs" shimmered in the light. Rarity turned the jersey around to show the ornate stitching of the name and number on the back. The jersey read "RARITY 9" in more golden thread. Everyone looked at the jersey in awe and cheered Rarity for her work.

"That looks amazing, Rarity!" Twilight said with a big smile and her eyes enlarged in wonder.

Rarity put on a smug face. "Thank you, thank you. These were so fun to make. I think I might make more of these to sell at the boutique! You know, once we start playing and we gain adoring fans!"

Rarity proceeded to gave each pony their jersey. Instantly, they all admired their jersey, feeling its plush softness against their cheeks. Before long, each pony had their sweater on and were playing around. Hearing the commotion, Spike ran into the room.

"Hey guys, what's going on?"

"Oh, hi Spike. Rarity just gave everyone their jersey!" as Twilight puffed out her body to show off her jersey.

"Neat! Where's mine?" Spike asked as he dove into the box to find one for himself.

Twilight walked over to Rarity and whispered in her ear.

"Ah, I do believe I have something in there for you, Spike," said Rarity.

While Spike was inside the box, Rarity used her magic to quickly put together a shirt that said "Equipment Manager" in sparkling yellow gems on the front. When Spike got out of the box empty handed, Rarity presented him the shirt. Spike fell in love with it and put it on.

For the rest of the evening, Twilight explained more in-depth what each pony's position and responsibility was, now that they had played a little bit during the day. Twilight looked to Rainbow Dash as she explained the center position and the need for quickness and adept puck handling. Rainbow looked back with a determined smirk and gave a slight, confident nod each time Twilight listed another quality of a good center. Twilight went on to explain the left and right wing positions, stating that they are the shooters and retrievers of the puck. Rarity's ears perked up when Twilight explained how shooting requires precision and finesse. Applejack gave an excited snort when Twilight emphasized the strength and toughness needed to retrieve the puck. Twilight moved onto the defense, to which she

explained the need for anticipation, patience, and knowledge. Since those qualities were softer and less physically imposing than the others, Fluttershy was appearing more calm about being a defender. Finally, Twilight explained how being a goalie requires agility, flexibility, and focus. Pinkie Pie was too busy making bubbles in her hot chocolate to listen to Twilight until Rainbow Dash nudged her in the side. Pinkie then shot up at full attention and hung onto Twilight's every word.

"And that's a summary on each position. Any questions?" asked Twilight.

"Nope. It's all good. I can't wait to get back on the ice and amaze you all with my blazing speed! I'm going to be best center ever!" Rainbow said with great confidence, her wings flapping wildly.

"We'll see 'bout that, Dashie. We're gonna need to practice a lot more if we wanna be ready for the season," Applejack responded as she flashed Rainbow a serious look.

Twilight nodded toward Applejack and spoke up. "Well, according to the book I've been reading, before the season begins, each team hosts training camp. During training camp, everyone practices really hard and they begin to learn certain plays and strategies."

"Oh, camping? I just detest camping. Being out in the wilderness makes you all dirty and icky," cried Rarity as she stuck her tongue out in disgust.

Pinkie Pie hopped about like crazy. "Oh boy! Camping will be fun! I'll bring my camp party supplies! There'll be ghost stories and s'mores and a scavenger hunt!"

"And tons of cute little creatures to play with!" happily squeaked Fluttershy.

Twilight raised her voice "Girls! It's not that kind of camp. We won't be going anywhere. We're just dedicating our whole days to practicing and getting better as a team."

"Oh, I suppose that will be nice too," said Fluttershy in a deflated tone.

Applejack sprung up to her hooves. "Well I cain't wait! I'm ready to put in some hard work, learnin' some plays and tricks n' all."

"Let's do this!" yelled Rainbow Dash, pumping her front hooves in the air.

Twilight then put her hoof in the middle of her friends. "Then it's settled. Next week, it'll be the Ponyville Golden Leafs' first training camp!"

Every pony followed suit and put their hoof in. On three, they all yelled "GO TEAM!"

Chapter 2

Training Camp

The radiant sun rose on a new winter day. A rooster crowing in the distance awoke Twilight Sparkle from her slumber. This day marked the beginning of the Ponyville Golden Leafs' training camp. Twilight slowly got out of bed and prepared herself for the long, physical day ahead. Spike also gradually came to life and helped Twilight gather up all the items and equipment they needed for camp. With jerseys, sticks, pads, skates, and nets in tow, Twilight and Spike set out for Ponyville Pond.

Upon arriving at the pond, Twilight saw her friends arriving one by one. Rainbow Dash was half asleep, using a fluffy, white cloud to help move her towards the pond while Applejack followed behind stepping slower than a snail. Fluttershy daintily fluttered down the path while Rarity, with sleeping mask still on, used her magic to move herself along. To no one's surprise, Pinkie Pie hopped past all of them, skipping along as if she had been awake for several hours. Once all the ponies reached the pond, Twilight came up with an idea to get everyone to wake up.

With eyes half open, Twilight yawned through her opening remarks.

"Thanks for getting here so early, girls. *Yawn* Before we start we need to wake up and get our legs moving. I say we get our skates on and do some laps around the pond. What do you say?"

"Hmm...nah. I don't need to skate. Just give me a few more minutes," said Rainbow as she plopped back down onto her cloud bed.

"Couldn't you just use your magic to wake us up, dear?" asked Rarity with a small whine in her voice. "It's bad enough I won't be getting all my beauty sleep in this morning!"

Twilight yawned again. "No, Rarity, we have to do this the correct way. Plus my magic isn't quite so good this early in the morning either. Now let's on our skates and get going!"

"Right... *yawn* ...behind ya', Twi," snorted Applejack as she struggled to get her skates on.

Pinkie was hopping about and brushing up against every pony. "Yay! This is going to be fun! Who wants to race? Last pony in is a rotten dragon egg!"

"Hey! I take offense to that!" piped up Spike.

"Hehe, sorry Spike. Now come on everypony!" as Pinkie immediately began to skate around the pond.

Rainbow Dash's ears slightly perked up at the sound of Pinkie's challenge. She lifted her sleepy head to see Pinkie gliding around the ice like a tranquil breeze. Never backing down from a challenge, Rainbow sprung up off her cloud, quickly put her skates on, and caught up to Pinkie. It took a couple more minutes, but soon all six ponies and Spike were on the fresh sheet of ice, moving about and waking up.

After the wake up skate was finished, Twilight used her magic to construct boards around the pond to set up the rink. Since Twilight had been studying hockey and the EHL extensively over the past few days, she made the boards to look like ones that would appear in a real EHL arena. She even added fake advertising to the boards. To support her friends and encourage them, she put each of their names on the boards along with their cutie mark and a message. "Applejack Attack!", "Dashing Deke!", "Rarity Wrister!", "Fluttershy Fun!", and "Pinkie Power!" shone in bright colors around the rink.

As the boards were coming together, the rest of the Golden Leafs put on their equipment. Each pony proudly put on their new, stunning royal blue Golden Leafs jersey. The gold fabric in the logo, numbers, and nameplates reflected in the growing sunlight. Almost instantly, Ponyville Pond was transformed from a lifeless ice floor into a colorful, sparkling hockey rink. Twilight finished her construction, put her gear on and re-grouped with the others.

Twilight led everyone in a handful of stretching and conditioning drills that she also had picked up on from her studies. There were stretches for every part, some parts the ponies didn't even know they had. Tiny creaks and groans emanated from each pony as they loosened their muscles. From their head down to their hooves, each player worked out the morning kinks. Now that the ponies were stretched, loose, and ready to play, Twilight began to teach her teammates some basic plays and strategies.

With a shiny whistle hanging from her neck, Twilight skated back in forth in front of her team. She levitated a small chalkboard near them to draw the play she was about to teach. "Alright, listen up, girls. The first play I am going to teach you is called the 'dump and chase' method. It's when a forward shoots the puck into the corner boards of the offensive zone and chases after it and tries to get it before the defense can get to it. Meanwhile, the other forwards set up their positions in the zone and wait for a pass. Any questions?"

Rainbow raised her hoof. "So we have the puck then we get rid of it? That sounds lame."

"Well, yes, but if you get the puck before the defense, that gives you a good opportunity to be ready for the next play."

"Lame!" Rainbow blurted out unimpressed.

Twilight narrowed her eyes at Rainbow as Rainbow shot back a disapproving stare. Slightly annoyed, Twilight continued on.

"Anyways, to practice this, Applejack, you're going to move the puck up the right side and shoot it into the zone. Rainbow, you're going to chase after it and try to get it before Fluttershy does. Rarity, while those two are doing that, you're going to stand behind the net and try to get open for the pass along the boards from Rainbow. Fluttershy and I will be the defense and try to stop you guys. Everypony got it?"

"Umm...Twilight...can you be the one who tries to get the puck before Rainbow? I'm afraid she'll hurt me," squeaked Fluttershy as she pointed toward Rainbow.

But Twilight didn't hear her over the blowing of her whistle. Fluttershy let out a squeak and nervously skated to her position in the zone as did the others. Once everyone was set, Twilight blew the whistle again to start, piercing the cold, morning air.

Applejack began the play and shot the puck into the corner. Rainbow swiftly zoomed in after the puck while Rarity and Applejack followed in behind, going to their designated positions inside the zone. Fluttershy hesitantly skated over toward the puck on the corner board as Rainbow was closing in. Right before Fluttershy reached the puck, Rainbow swooped in nabbed it, causing Fluttershy to let out a frightened squeal. The gust from Rainbow's swoop made Fluttershy furiously spin like a uncontrollable top. Fluttershy fell to the ice in a daze as Rainbow cut across to the front of the net, passing by a wide open Applejack. Rainbow gave Applejack a pompous wink as she passed, leaving Applejack puzzled. Rainbow wound up for a shot. The puck sailed along the ice with a faint rainbow streak behind it. Pinkie tried positioning herself to stop the shot but the puck pounded the back of the net with such a force. A tiny, magical goal light flickered above the net as Rainbow went into her celebration. Rainbow glided on one knee and did hoof pumps in the air. When she was finished, she turned around to see her teammates staring back slightly peeved.

"What? I did what we planned! Applejack shot the puck in, then I went and got it and scored!" said Rainbow defiantly.

Applejack spit her stick out and approached Rainbow. "You cain't do everythin' by yourself, Rainbow. You gotta pass it too! I was wide open n' everythin'!"

"Not to mention you basically spun Fluttershy right out of her skates," chimed in Twilight. As Twilight said this, Fluttershy finally stood up from being on the ice. Trembling, she took one step and once again found herself spinning out and hitting the unforgiving ice. Rarity swiftly skated over to help her disoriented friend. Rainbow's eyes softened and she winced watching Fluttershy struggle. Rainbow looked away and muttered, "Fine, I'm sorry."

They ran through the play again, this time with Rainbow's cooperation. Twilight took her turn to try to win the puck from Rainbow. Twilight closed in

on Rainbow much quicker than Fluttershy did and gave Rainbow a slight push when they met at the boards. Twilight was able to poke at the bouncing puck a little, but Rainbow deftly passed it out along the boards towards Rarity. Rarity went to pick up the puck and her face lit up as she finally had control. She circled around to the side of the net and was ready to wind up for a shot. She took a long look at Pinkie, frantically searching for a good hole to aim the puck at. As she was about to shoot, Fluttershy floated by and took the puck away. Rarity's cheeks turned red in frustration and she stomped her hooves.

"Fluttershy! Did you not see I was about to shoot? I had my aim perfectly placed then you came in and ruined it!"

Fluttershy cowered a little bit in front of Rarity. "Oh, I'm very sorry, Rarity. I didn't know you were going to shoot. I would have let you. I'm sorry."

Twilight came over to them loudly blowing her whistle. "No, Fluttershy you did the right thing. Rarity, you have to shoot the puck sooner. There's no time to line up your shot that long. In the game, everything has got to be done much quicker."

Rarity skated behind Twilight and whined, "Buuuttt Twiiiiiiiiight!!!"

Twilight spun around to face Rarity. "No buts. Do your best to aim quicker next time."

Rarity gave Twilight a big pout as everyone went back to start the play over. The puck was fired into the corner and once again, Rainbow blazed after it. Twilight met Rainbow at the boards and did a better job at poking and prying at the puck. Applejack, sensing that Rainbow was having trouble, skated in to help. Applejack rumbled toward the scrum in the corner and barreled Rainbow over like a freight train. Applejack stepped over Rainbow and powered the puck away from Twilight. After recovering from her slight daze, Rainbow flared her nostrils and angrily skated over to Applejack in a huff.

"Hey! What's the big idea?"

Applejack stood her ground. "I saw you were havin' some trouble in the corner so I came in ta' help."

"Well you didn't have to knock me over!" yelled Rainbow as she got closer to Applejack's face.

"Well, maybe if you were doin' your job I wouldn't a have to come in to save your flank!"

Rainbow and Applejack went nose to nose until Twilight skated in between, relentlessly chirping her whistle, and broke them apart.

"Girls! Cool it! We're supposed to be teammates and having fun learning about hockey. Not getting in each other's faces. Now let's try it again from the top." Applejack and Rainbow gave each other a sneer before going back to their starting positions.

They ran the play again. Rainbow got the puck on the boards in the corner as Twilight rushed over. This time, Twilight got the best of Rainbow and stole the puck. Twilight broke towards the other end of the ice with the puck on her stick. She was able to glide past Applejack and was off to a breakaway. Twilight saw nothing but the empty net on the other side. She began to feel giddy about her opportunity and giggled to herself as she saw the net getting bigger and bigger. Suddenly, a pink blur caught Twilight's eye and threw off her focus.

"Hey Twilight! Whatcha doin'?"

Twilight frantically looked to each side of her. "Pinkie?!"

As Twilight looked forward, she was surprised to find Pinkie Pie skating backwards in front of her. "It looks like you're on a breakaway! Isn't it exciting? Don't forget to shoot and score!"

"Huh?" the confused Twilight blurted. Pinkie glided out of Twilight's way.

Twilight broke out of her daze and looked up to see that she had already flew past the net. Twilight was now on a collision course with the boards. She used her magic to quickly turn the boards into a wall of plushy pillows. Twilight hit the pillows with a loud thud and sent feathers flying. Pinkie giggled and hopped all the way back down the ice back to her net. Twilight got up spitting feathers out of her mouth. She fixed the boards then skated

to the other end puffing in a bit of anger.

"Pinkie!! You're supposed to be the goalie! You're not allowed to get out of your net! I almost got crushed!" shouted Twilight, skating up to Pinkie's net.

Pinkie flipped her goalie mask up. "Hehe, sorry Twilight. It's just I was getting bored and wanted to join in on the fun!"

Twilight groaned and skated to center ice. The rest of the team followed suit. Twilight told her teammates that for the next half hour that they will just play a simple open ice scrimmage.

The puck dropped and each pony did their best to remember what they've learned while also trying out their own play styles. Rarity went to work on her accuracy and release time. She levitated a bucket of pucks towards her and spread them all out in front. With Pinkie ready, Rarity fired each puck one by one on net. Pinkie reacted to each shot, moving back and forth, to and fro, trying her best to block Rarity's shots. Each shot that hit Pinkie in the pads elicited a small giggle from her, as if she was being tickled upon impact. Rarity ramped up her focus and zeroed in on the top right corner. She slapped the next puck and it zipped right into the corner. Then to the top left corner. The bottom right corner. Finally the bottom left corner. Rarity sniped in four goals in a row to which she let out a "Wahaha!" in delight.

Twilight went off to the corner to test out her hoof-eye coordination. She kept passing the puck off the boards to herself, stopping the puck with her stick then flicking it at the boards again. The "clunk clunk clunk" of the puck hitting the boards overpowered the other noises in the rink as Twilight picked up her pace.

Rainbow had set up pylons on the other side of the ice, away from her friends. She practiced handling the puck while weaving in and out of the bright orange barriers. To show off, Rainbow let off a rainbow streak behind her as she flew through the course and then cheered loudly when she scored on the empty net. Applejack looked over towards Rainbow and rolled her eyes.

Outside the rink, Fluttershy was pre-occupied with playing with a family of adorable snow bunnies. She nervously looked back toward the busy rink every few minutes to make sure she wouldn't get in trouble for being out of

practice. As Fluttershy played with the critters, one of the pucks Rarity shot ricocheted past her head and left a smoking crater in the snow surrounding her. Fluttershy frantically flew back to the ice acting innocent like she never left.

Applejack decided that she wanted to work on her checking. She thought to herself that the strongest pony able to take a hit from her would be Rainbow Dash. She looked down towards Rainbow's end of the ice and watched Rainbow skate for a bit. Rainbow collected the puck behind the empty net and started sprinting toward center ice, rushing past all the pylons. Off on the right wing, Applejack started anticipating Rainbow's strides. With her legs chugging along, Applejack began to charge towards the center. As Rainbow drew closer, Applejack lined up her victim. Rainbow took one stride past the center line when **WHAM!** Applejack laid out Rainbow with a devastating hip check that knocked off most of Rainbow's padding.

Rainbow took a while to get up while Applejack and the others quickly gathered around her. Everyone but Applejack showed concern for Rainbow. Applejack smirked, knowing that Rainbow would be okay. Rainbow saw stars circling around her head, but shook them off. She looked at her friends who were staring back at her intently, except for Applejack who still wore her smirk. Rainbow got to her hooves, and with raging flames in her eyes, made a beeline straight for Applejack. The two ponies began to scuffle, rolling around on the ice, wrestling and pulling on each other's manes with their skates. Ice shavings and hair flew as a collection of legs and skates clashed about. Twilight and Rarity tried to break up the fight but ended up getting knocked around themselves. Fluttershy started to become upset and frightened. She tried raising her voice to get them all to stop.

"Girls...please stop fighting....this isn't what teamwork is about."

But Applejack and Rainbow ignored her and kept on with their tussle.

"Please...put an end to this."

Ignored again and the scuffle quickly approaching her, Fluttershy reached deep into her tiny well of rage and took in a deep breath.

"GIRLS!! STOP THIS FIGHTING RIGHT NOW!"

Applejack and Rainbow stopped immediately with eyes wide open and mouths agape. They quickly got up, looking at Fluttershy as if they just saw a frightening ghost.

"Oh, I'm sorry I had to raise my voice like that, but I had no choice," said Fluttershy in her normal, soft tone. "You were fighting and not being good teammates, and most importantly not being good friends."

Applejack and Rainbow looked down at their hooves in shame.

"Fluttershy's right. Ah'm sorry, Rainbow. I didn't mean to hit ya' so hard," said Applejack extending her hoof to Rainbow.

Rainbow looked at Applejack and extended her hoof back. "I forgive you. And I'm sorry I haven't been a team player and passing the puck."

The friends completed their apologies with a hoof shake. "Apology accepted, sugarcube."

Now that the tension had been relieved, the ponies settled down and took a break on the ice. A voice emerged from the edge of the pond. The ponies looked over to see Spike running over to them.

"Guys! I just received a letter! Check it out!"

Twilight opened the scroll and began to read it aloud to her friends:

"Dear Ponyville Golden Leafs,

I hope that your training camp is going well. I also hope that you are enjoying your time playing together and learning the great game of hockey while also learning about teamwork and being team players. May the rest of your training be fruitful and I anticipate your first game.

*Your Royal Highness,
Princess Celestia"*

Twilight disintegrated the letter and spoke up to her team with a clear look

of disappointment on her face.

"Why are we fighting each other like this? The Princess is expecting us to be learning about the power of teamwork and here we are acting like a bunch of stubborn mules. This isn't what being on a team is all about. We're supposed to help each other, whether its passing the puck more, or covering for a teammate when they are caught out of position. We may be hockey players, but first and foremost, we're friends. This is not how friends behave. Let's take a lunch break and then get back on the ice to have some fun. I know we have the ability to become a really great team. I have confidence in each and every one of you ponies. The Princess would not have requested a team be made just for us if she didn't believe in us. Now let's practice like a real team."

Each pony listened intently to Twilight's speech and nodded in agreement. Twilight and company skated off the ice to enjoy a brief lunch break.

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Twenty minutes later, after their lunch break was completed, the Ponyville Golden Leafs took the ice to resume their training camp. Rarity, Twilight, Pinkie, and Fluttershy skated around the rink, laughing and racing each other. Applejack and Rainbow Dash sat in opposite penalty boxes, looking onward with guilt. Twilight skated over to the boxes and let them out.

"Even though you two made up and apologized, a little time in the penalty box couldn't hurt. Now I hope you girls learned your lesson. I also don't want you to find yourselves in the box too often once we really start to play."

Still embarrassed, Applejack looked up at Twilight. "We're sorry, Twi."

Rainbow looked up as well, "Yeah, we got a little carried away. Plus sitting for two minutes in a tiny glass box is borrrring."

Twilight smiled at her friends. "Good. Let's go back to practice, shall we?"

The girls started a new series of offense versus defense scrimmaging. It was Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Rarity versus Twilight, Fluttershy, and Pinkie. The puck dropped and practice was back on. The puck bounced

back and forth between both squads for while, staying even. There came an instance where Fluttershy was caught too far up on the play and it allowed Applejack and Rainbow Dash a 2-on-1 opportunity with only Twilight between them. Rainbow passed the puck as AJ crossed the blue line. As Twilight drifted toward her, Applejack slapped the puck back to Rainbow who trailed a little bit behind. Twilight quickly twisted over to go after Rainbow. Sensing Twilight was closing in and the angle to the net was sharpening, Rainbow snapped the puck back to AJ who was now off to Pinkie's side, wide open. With great focus, AJ received the pass and redirected it into the wide open net before Pinkie could dive across to try to stop it. Applejack and Rainbow ran into each other behind the net and hugged to celebrate the goal. Rarity joined them and the goal light spun above Pinkie.

"That was awesome!" shouted Rainbow, pounding on Applejack's helmet playfully.

"Darn tootin' it was! Great pass, Rainbow!"

Rarity gave her own tap to Applejack's helmet. "That finish at the end of the play was simply divine!"

Applejack blushed, "Aww, shucks. Ain't nothin'."

Fluttershy and Twilight were glad to see Applejack and Rainbow's teamwork on that play, but they did not want to allow another goal on defense. They took the offensive and skated down the ice with the puck. Rainbow caught up to them and swiped the puck away from Fluttershy with little effort. Twilight sprinted back hard to prevent Rainbow's breakaway. Rarity put her head down and skated hard to be up on the play as well. Twilight nudged Rainbow a bit but Rainbow held steady. Rainbow quickly looked over to see Rarity waiting near the faceoff circle, quickly slapping her stick on the ice to signal she was open. Rainbow shuffled the pass toward Rarity. As she saw the puck coming towards her, Rarity took a glance at the net and picked the top right corner. The puck landed on her stick and in one fluid motion, Rarity flicked the puck straight into the corner she picked, beating Pinkie and scoring a goal. Rarity leaped up with great joy and laughed as Applejack and Rainbow skated over to her to celebrate. A loud cheer also erupted from the bench where Spike was jumping and hollering for Rarity's goal. As the celebration approached the benches,

Rarity looked over and gave Spike a wink which instantly made him melt.

The play was back on and once again, the offense was clicking on all cylinders. Applejack and Rainbow had another 2-on-1 opportunity. It was just Twilight back on defense again as Fluttershy was knocked around and dazed near center ice. Rainbow and AJ went to execute the play that scored them their first goal. Twilight, learning from the first time, stayed in the middle between the two forwards. Rainbow passed off to Applejack and sprinted toward the net. Applejack went to pass it back to the blazing Rainbow when Twilight stepped up into the passing lane and intercepted the puck. Twilight shoved the puck up to Fluttershy who was now back on her hooves. Fluttershy had a huge smile on her face when she took the puck down to the empty net to score for the defense. Twilight and Fluttershy met at center ice to cheer for their goal. Pinkie hopped all the way from the net to join them. As a little dig, Twilight used her magic to make their goal light larger and brighter. Rainbow and Applejack jokingly stuck their tongues out at the celebrating defense.

The ponies started over at center ice and the puck dropped. Rarity moved in fast to seize the puck and skated with her squad toward Pinkie. Fluttershy and Twilight stayed close to Applejack and Rainbow Dash respectively, leaving Rarity to take the puck in herself. Rarity came in closer to Pinkie and let off a sailing shot. Pinkie stared at the puck quickly coming at her and let out a fierce growl. Out of pure reaction, Pinkie raised her glove hoof to snatch the puck out of the air. Pinkie began hopping around and dancing that she made the brilliant save. Twilight and Fluttershy happily danced with her a bit before Rarity and Applejack joined in for fun.

After the dancing stopped, Pinkie gave the puck to Twilight who skated it down towards the other end. Applejack caught up to Twilight and muscled her off the puck. AJ took the puck back to her side of the ice and gave it up to Rainbow who came in towards the net. Fluttershy was starting to get nervous, but remembered Twilight's speech before lunch about having the ability within her. Rainbow wound up for a shot and let it go. Fluttershy closed her eyes, clenched her teeth, and threw herself in front of Rainbow's shot. The puck struck Fluttershy in the wing and bounced off into the corner. Everyone let out a cheer for Fluttershy and rushed to help her up. Fluttershy slowly got to her hooves, with her wing twitching, and gave them a big smile. Rainbow gave her a high hoof while everypony shared a few

laughs.

The ponies scrimmaged some more and gradually meshed as a team. Applejack and Rainbow Dash laid the foundation for a beautiful give-and-go connection, a one-two punch. Rarity started to develop picture perfect aim. Twilight began to gain awareness and made better decisions while on defense. Pinkie Pie focused in on the play better and set herself up in the correct positions and angles to make saves. Fluttershy was growing in courage and was more willing to sacrifice her body to block shots. Each pony made significant strides during training camp and it showed. They were working together as a team, and more importantly, they were having fun.

Practice eventually came to an end. Twilight deconstructed the rink she built, dismantling the boards and poofing them out of sight. The air grew colder and the winter wind howled as everyone helped pack up. The sun fizzled out over the horizon and ushered in the night. The Ponyville Golden Leafs, exhausted and dripping in sweat, weakly started their journey back into town.

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The Ponyville Golden Leafs' training camp officially came to a close and with great success. Everypony freshened up and returned to Twilight's house, resting and icing their hooves and wings. They were talking and having fun, excited for the many games of hockey that were in front of them.

Still bubbly and energized, Pinkie spoke. "Today was so much fun! I can't wait to play some more! And I can't wait for the after parties after each game too!"

Applejack perked up. "Yeah, we were really good at the end there. Passin' and shootin' like a real team."

"We were great! Applejack and I are going to be the 'Terrible Twosome', the 'Dangerous Duo'! Back and forth! We shoot, we score!" Rainbow said as she flew around the room, acting out a two-on-one play.

Rarity glanced at Rainbow and spoke up. "Ahem!"

"Oh yeah, and you too Rarity. Heh heh," said Rainbow sheepishly.

"Well I was very pleased with my accuracy today. I'll be able to score from anywhere and I'll look ravishing while doing so," Rarity smugly replied while puffing her mane with her hoof.

Fluttershy extended her shot-blocking wing in front of her friends. "I stopped the puck! Once. It hurt, but I did it!"

"Yeah, that was great! See? You can do it when you put your mind to it, Fluttershy," Twilight said smiling.

Rainbow Dash interrupted, "And that was an awesome save you made, Pinkie Pie! I've never seen you move so quick."

"I know! The puck was coming in so fast, it was like 'rawwwrr!' then I stared back at it like 'grrrrr!' and I snatched it!" Pinkie then re-enacted her save.

Spike suddenly bustled into the room with his stomach rumbling. "I think I've got another letter coming."

One fiery burp later, a new scroll popped out. Twilight took the scroll and read it to everyone.

"From the Offices of the Equestria Hockey League:

Dear Ponyville Golden Leafs,

Enclosed in this scroll is your season schedule. Please be prepared to participate and good luck in the upcoming season.

*Best regards,
Gary Bettpony
EHL Commissioner"*

Twilight then opened another scroll and enlarged it for her friends to see.

Game 1 - Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Manehattan Rangers
Game 2 - Ponyville Golden Leafs vs. Cloudsdale Red Wings
Game 3 - Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Appleloosa Black Apples
Game 4 - Ponyville Golden Leafs vs. Fillydelphia Flyers
Game 5 - Ponyville Golden Leafs vs. Canterlot Equestrians
Game 6 - Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Fillydelphia Flyers
Game 7 - Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Cloudsdale Red Wings
Game 8 - Ponyville Golden Leafs vs. Appleloosa Black Apples
Game 9 - Ponyville Golden Leafs vs. Manehattan Rangers
Game 10 - Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Canterlot Equestrians

All seven in the room looked at the last line with great interest. Their final game of the season would be in Canterlot against the Equestrians. Twilight grinned as she figured in her mind that the Princess had some influence over the scheduling.

The Ponyville Golden Leafs enjoyed their training camp and felt confident they had learned enough to have a fighting chance to win. They knew that as long as they used the power of teamwork and had fun, no team could get in their way. They were about to begin their journey toward the Celestia Cup and becoming Equestria Hockey League Champions.

Chapter 3

Inaugural Debut

Giant buildings shadowing every inch of the ground. Crowded streets teeming with rushing carts and carriages. Delicious smells of various shops filling the daytime air. This was Manehattan, the site of the Ponyville Golden Leafs' first EHL game that evening. Twilight Sparkle and her team of rag-tag ponies all looked up, down, and around, admiring their urban surrounding with great wonder. Of the ponies, Rarity was the one most excited by the atmosphere, squealing and gushing over every high-class fashion boutique they passed. Pinkie Pie hopped with an extra spring in her step towards the many bakeries and eateries down the main street. Spike rode along as Twilight Sparkle's brain rushed with flowing questions and curiosity as she encountered things she had never seen before: traffic posts, street performers, and giant billboards. Rainbow Dash found herself feeling comfortable and at peace among the hustle and bustle of the streets around her. Fluttershy quietly stuck close to her friends, not too amused by the overwhelming activity; that was until they later arrived at Central Park, home to over thousands of nature's creatures. Finally, Applejack trotted along with the group slowly, feeling a twinge of nervousness towards the city life currently surrounding her. The Ponyville Golden Leafs explored Manehattan and saw its many sights as time drew closer to their first game.

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Twilight and friends walked a few blocks towards the arena. Turning the corner, the ponies stopped dead in their tracks. Ominously towering before them was the famed Maredison Square Garden, showered in bright spotlights held by hovering pegasi while lines of ponies on the ground filed inside. A tidal wave of anxiousness and trepidation washed over the Golden Leafs as they stared down their center stage for the evening.

Twilight shook her head to break her stare and led her friends toward the team entrance.

Once inside, the Golden Leafs began to feel their nervousness creeping ever closer as they trotted through the many twists and turns of the hallway leading toward their locker room. With the locker room entrance in sight, Twilight suddenly heard a familiar voice cackling down another hallway. Intrigued, Twilight and company followed the voice until they arrived at a small lobby. There, loosening up and kicking a ball around the corridor were the Manehattan Rangers. From left to right, the Golden Leafs locked eyes with their opponents: Lyra, Octavia, Vinyl Scratch, Sapphire Shores, and the owner of the voice they had heard, The Great and Powerful Trixie. The Rangers abruptly stopped their ritual when they noticed the Golden Leafs entering the room. One by one, an arrogant smirk emerged on the Rangers' faces. With a playful chuckle, Trixie sauntered toward Twilight.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here, Rangers. It appears that the intermission entertainment has arrived," Trixie said smugly. Each Ranger let out a sinister laugh as Trixie continued.

"I didn't know the EHL gave out teams to just everypony. What do you losers want?"

Rainbow Dash quickly flew up to Trixie and growled in her face. Twilight restrained her with magic. Rainbow struggled to break free from Twilight's hold. "Let me go! Let me at her!" But Twilight kept her bound tight. She approached Trixie with a strong step.

"We're here to play hockey and to kick your self-righteous flanks," said Twilight, nostrils slightly flared.

"I'd like to see you try!" hissed Trixie back.

It was Rarity's turn to step towards Trixie. "Oh, we will take you on! You and all your prissy little teammates!"

During the tense interaction, Pinkie Pie slowly counted all the ponies in the room. She narrowed her eyes as she realized there were only five Rangers present.

"Hey, where's your sixth player?" interrupted Pinkie.

Trixie pointed toward the Rangers locker room. "Our goalie is currently putting her equipment on. She's the newest addition to our great and powerful team. As if you're going to score any goals on her."

Applejack let out a snort and faced her teammates. "Let's go girls before we let Trixie and her team get into our heads. We got preparations n' things to do."

While they turned to leave, the Rangers' goalie entered the corridor. A sweet, young voice cut through the chilly air.

"RARITY??"

Rarity quickly turned around and before her stood her filly sister, Sweetie Belle. Sweetie Belle's eyes illuminated as she was overjoyed to see her sister. Rarity's jaw dropped in shock.

"S...S...Sweetie Belle! Wh...what are you doing here? And why do you have that ridiculous goalie gear on?"

Sweetie Belle leaped toward Rarity. "Didn't mom and dad tell you? I got drafted by the Manehattan Rangers! I'm gonna try to get my cutie mark by being a goalie!"

Rarity, still in shock, tried to gather her wits and gave Sweetie Belle an awkward hug. "Aren't you a little too young to be playing in this league? It's going to be dangerous out there. You're going to get hurt!"

Trixie stepped in between the sisters. "Young Sweetie Belle here has been learning about how to be an excellent goaltender. She's quick and agile enough to make saves for us. But then again, she shouldn't have too much of a problem tonight considering you losers are all weak!"

Sweetie Belle snuggled up next to her sister. "See you on the ice, Rarity!" Sweetie Belle happily scampered off toward the Rangers locker room along with the rest of her team. Rarity stood perfectly stiff, still piecing together the past few minutes in her mind. Twilight put a leg around Rarity and directed her and the rest of the Golden Leafs toward their locker room.

Inside their locker room, Spike was putting the finishing touches on their locker stalls. Hanging from each hook was the team's away jerseys, an immaculate white sweater with the golden thread of the Golden Leafs' logo shining in the light. Slightly annoyed from their encounter with the Rangers, the Golden Leafs marched to their respective stalls and put their equipment on. Rarity was still talking to herself, greatly concerned for her sister's involvement in the game. Piece by piece, the Golden Leafs resembled true hockey players: pads, shorts, socks, jerseys, skates, then helmets. With the growing murmur of the crowd echoing through the hallway, the smell of the many concession foods permeating the air, and the chill of the ice seeping into the room, Twilight Sparkle stood tall in front of her team.

"Listen up, girls. Tonight, we take our first real step out on that ice. I know that nerves are high right now and there's butterflies in our stomachs." Fluttershy let out a gasp and reached for her stomach in panic. Rainbow Dash laughed at Fluttershy but Twilight yelled out.

"Focus! Now, let's think back to our training camp. Remember when we started playing together as a team and had fun? Let's repeat that tonight. Let's execute on what we worked on and most importantly, let's enjoy ourselves out there. Stage fright can easily be worked through. Let's make small, clean passes to get our confidence up and then do what we do best. Now everypony put a skate in."

Twilight put her skate-covered hoof in the middle of her friends. Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Spike followed. Twilight pushed the pile of skates in front of her toward the floor. "Team on three. Ready? One...two...three..."

"TEAM!" each pony and Spike shouted as they raised their skates toward the sky.

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Focused and ready to go with hockey sticks in mouth, the Ponyville Golden Leafs stepped out into the hallway proudly. They lined up in order by position at the door that led out onto the ice. They could hear the crowd now loudly rumbling, awaiting the arrival of the two teams. Random shouts and horns rang out through the rafters. Twilight looked up at the arena roof

to see majestic blue banners of former Rangers championship glory hanging from a beam, floating calmly high above the rink. Rainbow Dash was feeding off the energy of the crowd, wings extended and shaking. Applejack and Rarity stood with stoic expressions, patiently waiting to get on the ice. Fluttershy was slightly trembling, occasionally dropping her stick out of nervousness. Pinkie Pie was bouncing about, practicing save moves and pressing her face against the glass to look at the whole scene. Suddenly, all the lights went out in the arena. Spotlights flashed open and began circling around the ice. The crowd let out a roar when a deep voice boomed from a megaphone.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, welcome to Maredison Square Garden! Where tonight, the Ponyville Golden Leafs take on YOURRR MANEHATTAAAANNN RAAAANGERRRRSSSS!!"

Another roar exploded from the arena as fog slowly rolled in over the ice surface.

"First, a warm Manehattan welcome for the visiting Ponyville Golden Leafs."

A chorus of booing and hissing was directed toward the spotlight shining on the open door where Twilight and her friends stood. Each pony took a big gulp as they anxiously awaited their introduction.

"Starting at center, number 20, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash skated out toward center ice. She started skating in circles fast enough to start a rainbow cyclone. The Rangers fans let their displeasure known and kept booing Rainbow Dash who then flew around angrily shaking her skates at the crowd.

"At left wing, number 9, Rarity."

Rarity gracefully skated out onto the ice and did a pirouette to which she was greeted with jeers. Rarity was saddened by the throng of boos thrown at her and sulked toward Rainbow.

"At right wing, number 88, Applejack."

Applejack swiftly skated out. She did a hard lap around the rink and ended up next to her teammates.

"The defense, number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight gently skated out. She had an uneasy smile on her face as she skated toward the others.

"Also on defense, number 0, Fluttershy."

The spotlight returned to the opened door. There was a long pause and still no sign of Fluttershy stepping out onto the ice. Ponies in the crowd turned toward each other and shrugged. As soon as the spotlight left the doorway, Fluttershy quickly stepped out and braced herself up against the boards. Inching around the boards, Fluttershy wanted to make a break for her friends but the spotlight caught her. Fluttershy sprung up into the air in fright when the light shined upon her and she bolted toward Twilight. Twilight had to catch her which incited a large laugh from the audience.

"And starting in goal, number 33, Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie Pie hopped onto the ice, in full goalie garb, and proceeded to skate backwards toward the rest of the team. When she arrived, Pinkie faced the wrong direction until Rainbow had to tap her on the helmet. Pinkie spun around the right way and let out a giggle.

*"And now the starting lineup for YOUR MANEHATTAAANNN
RAAAANGERRRSSS! Starting at center, number 15, OCTAAAVIAAA!"*

Octavia skated out, holding her front skates together and shaking them in self-celebration as she was showered with cheers. She lined up across from Rainbow Dash and arrogantly blew her a kiss. Rainbow shot back a mean look with a growl.

"At left wing, number 10, LYRAAAA!!!"

Lyra was next to emerge out onto the ice. She spun in circles all the way to her spot in the line. When she stopped, she was directly facing Applejack to whom she gave a little wave. Applejack rolled her eyes unimpressed.

"At right wing, number 66, VIIINYLLL SCRAAATCH! "

Scratch made her way out to the ice and put one skate up to her ear and the other out in front as if she was spinning a record on the turntable much to the delight of the crowd. She lined up across from Rarity and lowered her glasses to give Rarity a wink.

"Starting on defense, number 5, SAPPHIIIIREEEE SHOOOOOREEESSS!!!"

Sapphire had a microphone hooked up around her ear and began to sing one of her hit songs as she skated over toward her team. The crowd ate it up and hollered for her. Sapphire ended up across from Fluttershy and struck a pose. Fluttershy couldn't do anything but let out a squeak back.

"The other defensepony, your captain, number 4, THE GRRRREAT AND POWERFULLLLL TRIIIIXIIIIIEEEE!!!"

As soon as the announcer finished, a plume of smoke puffed out at center ice. Out of nowhere, fireworks exploded around the arena. When the smoke settled, there stood Trixie, raising her front legs and playing to the crowd. They responded back with an even louder eruption of cheers.

"Finally, starting in goal, making her Manehattan Rangers debut, number 30, SWEEETIEEEE BELLEEEE!!!"

Sweetie Belle skated out with a giant happy-go-lucky smile on her face beaming through the facemask. She made her way over to her teammates and gave Rarity a big wave. A concerned visage flushed Rarity's face as she gave a tiny wave back to her sister.

Now that introductions were done, the noise in the arena settled down and

the lights came back up. Each team skated off toward their ends of the rink, doing small laps and stretching out. Twilight motioned to her teammates to meet her at the net. The Golden Leafs converged onto the crease around Pinkie. Twilight gave a nod to each pony.

"Alright girls. Remember what I talked about in the locker room. We ready to do this?"

Pinkie pulled her mask down over her face. "Yes sir, Twilight, sir. Grrrr!" Rainbow Dash gave a small salute with one of her skates. Applejack was next to go around to each teammate and give them a slight headbutt. Rarity, still a bit nerved, could only produce a tiny grin. Slightly afraid, Fluttershy looked down at her skates and only looked up when Twilight tapped her on the helmet.

On the other end, Trixie was giving her squad a talk. Eyes affixed, each Ranger paid great attention to their captain. When finished, Trixie lifted her head to raise her stick in the air. The rest followed suit and together they slammed their sticks on the ice.

Each team drifted toward center ice, where the head referee stood with puck in mouth. Ponyville and Manehattan got into face-off position, ready to take each other on.

The referee raised his skate toward each goalie, asking if they were ready. Pinkie and Sweetie Belle both raised their goalie stick back. With one nod, the referee released the puck.

Game on.

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The Rangers dominated play early on, placing pressure on the Golden Leafs' defense and peppering Pinkie with shots from all angles. Pinkie was up to task and made every save so far. Ponyville was able to break Manehattan's stride a few times, but quickly found themselves back in their own zone. After a deflection off into the corner, Octavia chased after the puck. Applejack quickly closed in and pushed Octavia to the boards, trying to push the puck away. Octavia swept the puck along to boards towards the blue line where Sapphire collected the pass. Applejack turned toward Sapphire and charged hard. Sapphire saw Lyra opened and pass the puck

off. Applejack still zeroed in on Sapphire and delivered a brutal check. Immediately the referee lifted his skate with whistle ready. Rainbow glided around Lyra to take the puck away but the whistle tweeted loudly.

The referee approached Applejack. "88, you're going to the box. Interference."

"Aww shoot," said Applejack as she made her way toward the penalty box.

Before the play started back up, Twilight rallied her teammates together.

"Okay, I read that on the penalty kill, the best strategy is to just shoot the puck all the way to the other end so the other team has to waste time retrieving it."

Rainbow jumped in, "Why don't we try to score?"

"There's no time for arguing, just do it!" yelled Twilight shaking her head.

Play resumed and two minutes later, the Golden Leafs killed their first penalty by doing what Twilight had told them.

With Applejack back on, Ponyville maintained control of the puck. Rainbow led the play most of the time, gliding in and letting off shots. Since Rainbow didn't take time to aim high, each shot was low enough for Sweetie Belle to block it. Each time Rainbow took the puck in and shot, Rarity and Applejack grew more annoyed as their teammate didn't care to pass to them.

Manhattan began to recognize Rainbow's one-pony efforts and began to double team her. When Rainbow would receive the puck, two Rangers swarmed to her to steal the puck away. During one of these double teams, Rainbow desperately tried passing the puck off but it was stolen by Vinyl Scratch. Scratch headed down toward the Ponyville zone. Applejack skated up to her and stuck her stick out. Scratch's front skate caught Applejack's stick and she hit the ice like a ton of bricks. The referee quickly gathered up his whistle and blew it sharply. "Number 88, two minutes, tripping!"

Applejack, angry at herself for committing another penalty, returned to the penalty box. She whipped her stick at the bench which caught the attention of the ponies sitting around the penalty box, prompting them to taunt and

tease her.

Twilight nodded to her penalty killing unit to repeat their strategy. Puck dropped and Rainbow won the faceoff back to Fluttershy. Fluttershy wound up to fire the puck down the ice but she was too weak. Trixie intercepted the puck at the blue line and passed to Scratch who had circled near the faceoff circle. Twilight stepped toward her and was able to get the puck away but Scratch won it back. Scratch caught Lyra sprinting toward the net on the other wing out of the corner of her eye. With a swift flick, the puck flew across the front of the net. Lyra let the puck rest on her stick blade for only a second before she pounded it into the net. Instantly the goal horn cried throughout the arena and the goal light flickered furiously as the Rangers mobbed Lyra in the corner. The crowd erupted into cheers as the Golden Leafs looked down in disappointment.

"GOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAALLLLLLLLL!! 1-0 MANEHATTAAAANN!! Her first of the season, number 10, LYRAAA!! Assisted by number 66, Vinyl Scratch. Lyra from Vinyl Scratch at 6:10 in the first period."

Rainbow slammed her stick on the ice in frustration as Applejack sheepishly exited the penalty box. Both teams met at center ice for the faceoff. Play was on again and Manehattan skated with confidence having struck first blood. A few back-and-forth bursts later, Rainbow ended up with the puck down the middle. Trixie and Sapphire closed in on Rainbow who was now in the Ranger zone, heading toward their net. Rarity followed behind and tapped her stick on the ice to signal she was open. But it was too late as Trixie stole the puck from Rainbow and pushed it up to Octavia who was waiting at center ice. Octavia just had Fluttershy left in her way. Octavia went directly at Fluttershy to which Fluttershy froze up petrified. Octavia glided around Fluttershy and ripped a shot toward Pinkie. Pinkie jumped to catch it but misjudged the puck's height. The net shook as it absorbed the puck's force. Once again the horn roared out and the crowd leapt to their hooves.

"GOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAALLLLLLLLL!! 2-0 MANEHATTAAAANN!! Her first of the season, number 15, OCTAAVIAAA!! Assisted by number 4, The Great and Powerful Trixie. Octavia from The Great and Powerful Trixie at 8:45 in the first period."

Fluttershy broke out of her frozen state to her teammates looking at her concerned, except Rainbow who only showed a look of frustration. Fluttershy looked away from Rainbow who gave her a sneer. Applejack clunked Rainbow on the helmet to get her to calm down.

There was only 1:15 left in the period when Manehattan scored their second goal as EHL periods only go for ten minutes. Play resumed but neither team had a significant scoring chance. As the clock ticked down to zero, the crowd's cheering grew louder in support of their Rangers. The arena horn blew to signal the end of the 1st period. The Rangers met at Sweetie Belle and shared helmet taps with each other while the Golden Leafs sadly skated off the ice and into their locker room.

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The locker room was quiet as a library as each player kept to herself. Spike went to each pony to blow fire on their skates for sharpening. No longer being able to keep quiet, Pinkie Pie hopped up and put a smile on.

"Come on everypony! It's not so bad. At least we're playing hockey together as friends!"

Everyone lifted their head to look at Pinkie. Pinkie paused to think and came up with an idea.

"I know what will get our spirits back, a song!"

Rainbow let out an audible groan as Twilight sat up. "I don't think a song is..."

*"When I was a little filly and the sun was going dooooooown,
Playing hockey was so fun, having to leave made me froooown."*

Applejack interrupted, "Sorry Pinkie, but a song isn't soundin' so good right now. Besides I think we already heard that one."

Pinkie bounced around and made funny faces at each one of her

teammates, determined to get her friends to laugh and lighten up. No pony seemed to crack which left Pinkie a little disappointed. Suddenly, Twilight's face twitched and out came a giggle. She had finally cracked. Applejack then chuckled a bit while Twilight's giggle broke out into full scale laughter. Rarity and Fluttershy's faces formed a smile and soon they joined in on the laughter. Rainbow still sat at her stall with a frown and legs folded. Her teammates all turned to her in their laughing fit and wanted her to join in. Rainbow looked at each one of them and eventually cracked a smile, but it quickly turned back into a frown. Rainbow flew up and put her helmet back on.

"Let's get back out there. We need to score."

Her teammates trailed behind, still laughing and feeling ten times more relaxed. Both teams returned to the ice for the start of the 2nd period.

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After a brief skate, the teams lined up for the puck drop. The game resumed and Ponyville took control early. The Golden Leafs were passing quicker and crisper and finally had their legs under them thanks to Pinkie's intermission laughing session. Rarity, Rainbow, and Applejack each recorded a shot but were stopped by Sweetie Belle. The puck wound up along the side boards where Trixie and Twilight met to battle for it. They both gave each other a shove as the puck flopped about their skates. Twilight touched the puck but felt a strange pulse repelling her back. Confused by the pulse, Twilight let her guard down and was tossed about. Trixie skated on with the puck quickly. Twilight looked at Trixie and noticed something peculiar. Trixie's horn had been glowing and had a tiny aura emanating from it.

"She's using magic! That's illegal!" Twilight cried to the referee. The referee shrugged and skated on to catch up with the developing play.

Trixie brought the puck into the Ponyville zone and slapped it around the boards. Twilight made it back on defense and received a pass from Applejack who had stolen it. Trixie was closest to Twilight and started veering towards her. With a faint glow on her horn, Trixie lifted her head which made Twilight trip as if she was lassoed. The referee caught Trixie's little cheat and blew the whistle. "Manhattan, number 4. Two minutes for

tripping, and another two minutes for magic use."

Trixie got in the referee's face. "I wasn't using magic! You can't prove it!" The referee didn't have any of it and directed her toward the penalty box. Trixie sat down on the bench in a huff.

It was time for Ponyville's first power play. During training camp, Twilight taught her friends the box method where each skater sets up on a different part of the zone and passes back and forth until a shooting opportunity opens. The puck dropped and Ponyville gained control right away. Rarity and Applejack stood on each side of the net near the boards while Twilight and Fluttershy stood stationed along the blue line. Rainbow was the rover who tried keeping the puck alive and finding a teammate to pass to. The Golden Leafs got a few shots off but Sweetie Belle jumped and pounced on each one. The Rangers cleared the puck down the ice every chance they had. With the first two minutes of Trixie's penalty over, Rainbow re-grouped behind Pinkie and brought the puck up. She passed it to Applejack who was waiting on the right wing. Applejack brought the puck in and drew both Lyra and Sapphire towards her. Twilight, sensing that the Rangers defense was bunching up on Applejack, started sprinting to her spot on the blue line. Twilight tapped her stick on the ice which Applejack heard and quickly passed back. Twilight reared her head back for the shot as the puck trickled toward her. In a strong swing, Twilight shot on net. The puck sailed high toward the right corner. Sweetie Belle jumped but was still too short for the save. The puck pounded the back of the net and rattled around behind the beaten Rangers goalie. A goal light illuminated above the net and Twilight jumped in joy.

"Ponyville goal, her first of the season, scored by number 42, Twilight Sparkle. Assisted by number 88, Applejack, and number 20, Rainbow Dash. Twilight Sparkle from Applejack and Rainbow Dash at 5:33 in the second period."

The Golden Leafs smothered Twilight and celebrated their first goal as a team. Twilight received a round of helmet bumps as Trixie skated out from the penalty box hissing at her. Twilight winked at Trixie which made Trixie more infuriated.

Play resumed and Ponyville was back on the attack. Feeling more

confident from their first goal, the Golden Leafs sent a barrage of pucks toward Sweetie Belle. Although her teammates were determined, Rarity became concerned about their shot assault on her sister. At one point, Rainbow passed the puck to Rarity who had an open shot. Rarity closed her eyes in apprehension and shot toward the net. The puck flew up and over the boards, way off target. Rainbow skated over to Rarity.

"What what that all about?" asked Rainbow sternly.

"Oh, I can't stand to hurt Sweetie Belle! I've always looked out for her and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I harmed her!" cried Rarity.

Rainbow gave Rarity an encouraging nudge. "She'll be okay. She's held up good so far."

Rarity looked over to Sweetie Belle who was moving side to side in the crease with a big smile. Rarity eased up and let out a sigh. The puck was dropped and Ponyville regained control. Rarity stood behind the net as Rainbow tried dancing around the Ranger defense. Rainbow passed the puck to Rarity. Dodging a swipe attempt by Sapphire, Rarity quickly spun to the front of the net for a wrap around. Sweetie Belle got caught up in her padding and stumbled, leaving the net wide open. Rarity let out an excited laugh and nudged the puck in. Rarity's teammates swarmed to her as the goal light reappeared.

"Goal. Her first of the season, number 9, Rarity. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash, and number 42, Twilight Sparkle. Rarity from Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle at 7:29 of the second period."

Rainbow nodded to Rarity. "See? That wasn't so bad."

The game was now tied 2-2. Ponyville rode a 2nd period surge to get back in the game. For the last 2:31 of the period, Manehattan tried answering the Ponyville rally but Pinkie denied them. The final horn eventually rang out. The crowd sat nearly quiet, not too enthused by Manehattan's efforts in the 2nd period. Ponyville skated off to their locker room with shining smiles.

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Back in the locker room, the mood was much more improved than it was during the 1st intermission. Everyone was gleefully chatting and preparing for the 3rd. Spike fixed up all their equipment and soon Ponyville was back out on the ice.

In the Manehattan locker room, Trixie was giving her teammates an earful.

"That was a pathetic excuse of an effort! Why are we tied with an expansion team? Please, somepony tell me why."

No one answered to Trixie. Sweetie Belle started to become frightened and shook a little in her gear.

Trixie kicked open the door and walked toward the ice. The rest of the Rangers followed their angered captain out.

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The 3rd period began and the puck traveled from end to end, with neither team showing an advantage. Rainbow Dash stepped up her game and was zooming all over the ice. When Trixie went to pass to Sapphire along the blue line, Rainbow glided through in to intercept it. Rainbow had a breakaway and sped toward the net. Sweetie Belle skated up a bit to cut down the angle. Rainbow fiddled the puck from side to side hoping to cross up Sweetie Belle. As Sweetie Belle skated backwards into the net, she caught a scratch in the ice and fell. A large, open net was the only thing that stood in Rainbow's path. Rainbow's pride overcame her and she started thinking about which celebration she was going to perform. Rainbow pushed the puck toward the net but it skipped wide. She blew past the wide open net in shock and tried to get the puck back but to no avail. When play stopped, Rainbow threw her helmet against the glass in anger.

A few minutes later, Manehattan took over the tempo of the game. They blasted shots on Pinkie but Pinkie stopped them all. Ponyville had one good series on offense where Rarity had a shot swiped out of mid air by her sister goalie. The puck was behind the net where Applejack and Octavia battled for it. The puck bounced free toward the blue line. Twilight skated up to get the puck but missed, leaving Vinyl Scratch and Trixie alone with Fluttershy for a 2-on-1 break. Fluttershy tried staying between

the two Rangers but found herself getting closer to Trixie. Seeing Fluttershy coming toward her, Trixie nodded to Vinyl Scratch. Vinyl Scratch headed to the net and Trixie approached Fluttershy. Trixie's horn sparked again and before Fluttershy knew it she was spinning out of control. Trixie let out a laugh and passed off to Vinyl Scratch who one-timed the puck in past Pinkie. The goal light spun furiously and the horn filled the air. The Rangers' faithful stood up and cheered as Trixie hugged Vinyl Scratch behind the net.

"GOOOOOOAAAAALLLLLL!! 3-2 MANEHATTAAANNN!! Her first of the season, number 66, VINYL SCRAATCH! Assisted by number 4, The Great and Powerful Trixie. Vinyl Scratch from The Great and Powerful Trixie at 8:03 in the third period."

Twilight noticed Trixie's horn glowing during the play and rushed over to the referee.

"Did you see that? Trixie used her magic to spin out Fluttershy! The Rangers cheated!"

The referee shook his head. "Sorry, Twilight. I didn't see anything. The goal stands."

Rainbow joined Twilight in protest. "What do you mean you didn't see it? Princess Celestia could see it from Canterlot it was that obvious!"

"If I hear another word, you're both getting penalties," snorted the ref.

Twilight lightened up and led Rainbow back toward Applejack and Rarity who were tending to Fluttershy. When Fluttershy realized what had happened, tears welled up in her eyes.

"Oh, I'm so sorry everyone. I let you down and allowed them to score. It's all my fault."

Twilight consoled Fluttershy with a hug. "No, it's not your fault. Trixie cheated and used her magic to make you lose control."

Fluttershy's eyes cleared up when she saw her friends weren't upset at her.

Trixie skated up to the Golden Leafs and laughed.

"I told you losers that you weren't going to win!"

The Golden Leafs stared back with a renewed fire in their eyes. Twilight looked at the clock and saw there was only 1:57 left. She called a timeout and approached Pinkie.

"Pinkie, get your goalie stuff off and grab a regular stick. We're pulling you for a sixth skater."

"Okie dokie lokie, Twilight!"

Pinkie Pie met Spike over at the bench and he helped remove her goalie pads. A few seconds later, Pinkie was lined up and ready to go for the faceoff. The puck dropped and the clock began its countdown. Twilight had the puck and entered the Manehattan zone. Frantically, Rainbow Dash tried to deke her way to the net, but was stopped. She passed off to Rarity who wound up for a shot but saw Vinyl Scratch diving at her. Rarity pulled the puck back and passed to Fluttershy on the blue line who then shuffled it over to Twilight. Only 40 seconds remained now as the crowd grew louder. Pinkie Pie stood in front of Sweetie Belle, blocking her sight. Applejack skated toward the center where Twilight passed the puck. Applejack fired a shot but it flew wide. The puck ricocheted off the glass and landed between Twilight and Fluttershy. 20 seconds left. Twilight reached for the puck with all her might but in flash Octavia took the puck. Octavia glided through center ice and put away the empty net goal. The crowd gave one final cheer as the Rangers celebrated with Octavia at center ice.

"GOOOOOOAAAAALLLLL!! 4-2 MANEHATTAN!! Her second of the season, number 15, OCTAAVIAAAA!! Octavia unassisted at 9:50 in the third period."

The Ponyville Golden Leafs collectively sulked, as if a balloon was popped and lost all its air. They reset for one final faceoff at the center. The final seconds ticked away, 0:03...0:02...0:01...0:00. The final horn roared as Manehattan won their first game of the season. Streamers rained from the ceiling as Rangers fans whooped wildly for their victorious team. The

Manehattan Rangers gathered around their goalie to congratulate her for a job well done. On the other end, a slight somberness hung in the air over the losing team. One by one, drenched in sweat and worn down, the Golden Leafs drifted toward their locker room. Twilight was the last one off the ice as the Rangers took their celebration to center ice. Before Twilight left, Trixie skated toward her. Trixie skated to a halt which sprayed ice flakes into Twilight's face.

"See you later, losers!"

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Twilight sighed and walked to the locker room. Her friends were nearly finished with undressing when she walked in. Even though they experienced defeat in their first game, not one pony appeared too down. Fluttershy was having a laugh with Pinkie Pie while Rarity helped Applejack re-style her mane. Twilight was surprised at their upbeat display.

"Hey, girls. I hope you aren't bummed out."

Applejack stood up, "Nah, we're not too beat up 'bout it. As far as I'm concerned, we had that game won if it weren't fer Trixie's cheatin'."

"After Pinkie made us laugh, I had a lot more fun," said Fluttershy as she nudged Pinkie.

Rainbow flapped her wings up. "Yeah, even though we lost, we still kicked some flank in the second period. We were doing good then."

Twilight smiled. "Well I'm glad you all took some positives out of this game. This was just the first game too. We have nine left to win."

"This was just the first step toward fabulosity. We can only learn and grow from each game. Even though we might lose, we will still be the most stylish team in the EHL. I mean, did you see the jerseys Manehattan had? Bleh!" Rarity stuck her tongue out in disgust.

The ponies laughed as they finished up in the locker room. Using magic, Twilight cleaned their equipment and bundled it all up for Spike to fire-blow it back to Ponyville. Outside the arena, a carriage awaited to take them

home. Twilight and friends gave Manehattan one final look before closing the carriage and heading off for Ponyville.

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When the Golden Leafs returned to Ponyville late at night, Twilight had them all outside her treehouse. Sleepiness settled in as half of her friends couldn't keep their eyes open. Twilight let out a yawn herself before speaking.

"So, let's take a few days off then meet at Ponyville Pond for practice. We've got the Cloudsdale Red Wings coming here at the end of the week. In the days off, I'll do some scouting on them."

Pinkie giggled, "Oh boy! We get to play in front of all our friends! It'll be so exciting!"

"Pinkie dear, how do you still energy this late at night?" Rarity lazily asked.

Pinkie Pie smiled proudly. "I don't know, Rarity. I don't know."

Everypony had a laugh and then went home for the evening. The Ponyville Golden Leafs experienced their first loss but they were not deterred. They saw positive signs in their performance that they can build on in the future. The coming week would be an exciting one as they get to play in front of their fellow Ponyvillians for the first time. One little setback won't dampen these ponies' spirits.

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Three Stars for Ponyville @ Manehattan

**Octavia (MHN)*

***The Great and Powerful Trixie (MHN)*

**** Twilight Sparkle (PGL)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Fillydelphia 3, CANTERLOT 1

Appleloosa 2, CLOUDSDALE 0

Chapter 4

Home Opener

Two days had passed since the Ponyville Golden Leafs returned home from their tough loss to the Manehattan Rangers. During those days off, Twilight and her friends rested and completed their usual chores and jobs. On the third day, the Golden Leafs met for practice at Ponyville Pond. Instead of constructing the boards and glass on the ice, Twilight had Spike only bring two nets, the sticks, and the girls' practice uniforms. Right on time, the remaining Golden Leafs arrived to the rink. Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie joined Twilight at the edge of the rink. The ponies shivered as they changed into their pads. A cold wind blew fiercely as grey clouds hung low over the pond in the afternoon. Twilight looked around for Applejack but there were no signs of her.

"Hey girls, did any of you hear from Applejack?" asked Twilight

Fluttershy shook her head as she laced up her skates. "No, none of us has. I hope she is alright."

Suddenly over the hillside, a loud shout erupted. "AAAAAH'M A COMINNN'!!" Each pony turned toward the direction of the voice and there galloping in a hurry was Applejack. Not too far behind, Big Macintosh and Apple Bloom slowly made their way toward the rink, cloud puffs of frigid air billowing from their nostrils. Applejack caught up to the group and quickly changed into her practice uniform.

"Sorry I'm late everypony...we were just doin'...some winter cleanin'...in the barn and...lost track a'time," said Applejack, huffing a breath in between words.

Twilight, in full gear, stepped out onto the ice. "That's okay, Applejack. We weren't ready to start anyways."

"Hope y'all don't mind Big Macintosh and Apple Bloom watchin' us skate."

Pinkie Pie clasped her last goalie pad strap and flipped her mask down. "Ooh goodie! We'll have real fans cheering us on today!" As Pinkie said this, Big Mac and Apple Bloom reached the edge of the pond.

"H-h-howdy everyone. S-s-sure is a cold one today. Eeyup." said Big Mac with his teeth chattering.

Apple Bloom jumped out from behind her brother and greeted the Golden Leafs one by one. "Howdy Twilight, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Fluttershy! I'm excited to watch y'all practice! Especially you Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie gave Apple Bloom a big smile from behind her facemask. "Thanks Apple Bloom! I won't let you down!"

The Golden Leafs all stepped out onto the ice for practice. After a few laps around the pond, they stopped in the center to stretch. Once stretching was over, Twilight addressed the team.

"For today's practice, we're going to work on being tougher. Manehattan was knocking us all over the ice and we couldn't hold our ground."

Rainbow, smirking, raised her hoof. "You mean we couldn't hold our ice."

Twilight snapped back, "I know what I said! Anyways, we're going to work on our toughness. Everyone is going to have the opportunity to give out and receive checks."

"What will our banking have anything to do with being tougher, dear?" Rarity asked.

Twilight put her hoof to her face. "No! Checking is when you hit the other player. The thing Applejack did to Rainbow Dash during training camp that started that little fight."

"Hehe, yeah. I remember," said Applejack as she looked over at Rainbow. Rainbow shot back a snort.

Fluttershy was next to raise her hoof. "Umm...Twilight, does that mean I'm going to get hit."

"Yes, Fluttershy. I'm sorry but it will be for your own good if you want to make it through this season alive. You're an easy target out there for the other teams. Don't worry, we'll help you."

Fluttershy looked down and sighed. "Okay. If it will help the team, I'll do it."

"Great. To do this drill, we'll all be on the ice with our sticks as if we're in a real game. I'll blow my whistle and shout out someone's name. Everyone whose name wasn't called goes over and tries to check the person I did call out. Got it?"

Applejack and Rainbow Dash stood side by side and nodded excitedly. Rarity gave her helmet and mane one final check to make sure they were tidy. Fluttershy wobbled in her skates and her wings shook nervously. Pinkie Pie skated up to Applejack and gave her a big chest bump before heading over to Apple Bloom to teach her some goaltending skills.

TwEEEEEEEEEEEEet "Applejack! Go!"

Immediately, Applejack skated off toward the other end of the pond with Big Macintosh cheering her on. Rainbow Dash stayed hot on Applejack's trail trying to catch her. Fluttershy, Rarity, and Twilight remained far away, choosing to wait for Applejack to approach them before striking. Applejack laughed at Rainbow Dash as she skated down toward the center. Rainbow, recognizing she wasn't going to land a good hit trailing directly behind Applejack, started veering off to the left of Applejack and skated faster to create an angle. Applejack quickly looked to the right and noticed Rainbow was no longer behind her. When Applejack turned back to the front, she heard a yell. "Incoming!" Rainbow Dash blazed toward her from the left side and slammed her flank into Applejack's. Applejack stumbled in her skates but didn't fall. After landing the hit, Rainbow was repelled back and she fell on her behind. Applejack laughed and kept on skating. Rarity, Twilight, and Fluttershy were ready to attack. All three began converging onto Applejack. Applejack saw their tactic and lowered her head. Rarity, Twilight, and Fluttershy closed in but with ramming speed, Applejack bowled over all three, leaving them splattered along the ice. Rainbow busted out laughing as Applejack kept skating with a big grin on her face.

Twilight slowly got up and blew her whistle.

TwEEEEEEet "Rainbow Dash....go. Ugh."

Rainbow Dash's laughter quickly turned into stoic determination as she began skating away from everyone. Applejack still carried momentum from her skating and was coming in fast. Rainbow kicked up her pace a notch and glided away from the rapidly approaching Applejack. Rainbow got away and curled around the edge of the pond. Rarity and Fluttershy were back up and weakly gave chase as well. Applejack changed her stride and began to cut down Rainbow's angle. Rainbow saw this and skated faster. Applejack drew closer and prepared for a crush. In a flash, Applejack sprung toward Rainbow. Seeing Applejack flying at her, Rainbow gritted her teeth and powered her legs onward. She blasted ahead, avoiding Applejack's attempt. Applejack looked back and saw she missed her hit. Applejack crash landed into a mound of snow head first with just her back legs showing and kicking. As Big Macintosh walked over to his fallen sister, Rainbow came toward Rarity and Fluttershy. Fluttershy closed her eyes and threw herself toward Rainbow but she also missed and landed hard on the ice. Rarity was next in the line and, like Fluttershy, threw herself toward Rainbow. Rainbow zoomed off to the side and dodged Rarity as well. Rarity landed next to Fluttershy and they helped each other up. Rainbow came to a halt to see most of her teammates sprawled out along the ice. She laughed as Twilight reached for the whistle.

TwEEEEEEEEEEEEEEet "Rarity! Go!"

Rarity let out a gasp and started stumbling to get away from everyone. She was a slower skater so Applejack, now recovered, and Rainbow quickly approached. Applejack ended up beside Rarity and was ready to hit. Rarity, out of instinct and self-defense, nudged her head over and poked Applejack in the forehead with her horn. Applejack stopped to tend to the bruising poke as Rainbow closed in on Rarity. Rarity leaped in fright when she saw Rainbow approaching and tried skating faster. Rainbow was now beside Rarity and went to hit. With a growl, Rarity quickly turned to Rainbow's side and bit her in the wing. Rainbow let out a yelp in pain. Seeing Rarity's mean streak striding right towards her, Fluttershy jumped out of the way with a squeak. Rarity kept growling like a dog, daring anyone to come at her. Twilight sighed at the current failure of the drill and blew the whistle again.

TwEEEEEEEEet "Twilight Sparkle! I mean, me! Go!"

With whistle still in mouth, Twilight started sprinting away. Rarity, still skating hard, changed direction and aimed for Twilight. Twilight noticed Rarity closing in and came to a hard stop, sending Rarity flying right past. Applejack approached next and was picking up speed. Twilight, quickly figuring out velocities and angles in her head, decided to go head on toward Applejack. Right as they were going to collide, Twilight swiftly spun out of Applejack's path, with Applejack's momentum sending her right past. Off on the side, Fluttershy was talking to herself, trying to gather up the courage to deliver a big hit. Seeing this, Twilight turned and skated toward her. Fluttershy noticed Twilight approaching so she stomped her hoof down and began skating at her. Twilight let up on her speed and began to brace herself. Fluttershy came up to Twilight's side, closed her eyes, and **SLAM!** Twilight fell to the ice in a heap. Fluttershy re-opened her eyes and noticed she was still standing, having delivered her first hit. She jumped in joy and cheered for herself until she noticed Twilight in trouble. Immediately, Fluttershy raced over and tended to her victim.

"Oh Twilight! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hit you so hard! Oh, please forgive me."

Twilight got up with a loopy smile on her face. "It's okay, Fluttershy. Just give me a minute to compose myself. That was a doozy of a hit."

Fluttershy smiled back. "Thanks, Twilight."

Applejack and Rainbow came up to them swiftly. "I reckon that hit was bigger than the one I gave Dashie. Good work, Fluttershy!"

"Yeah, that was awesome!" Rainbow chimed in.

Twilight, still feeling weak, gathered up the team. Pinkie Pie came back from practicing with Apple Bloom and joined the discussion.

"Well, that drill didn't go as I planned, but we learned some things. We learned that Applejack is solid as a house." Applejack chuckled and flexed her leg to show off her muscle. "We saw that Rainbow is too fast for anyone to catch."

"You got that right!" yelled Rainbow confidently. Twilight weakly grinned and went on.

"We learned that Rarity has a nasty streak inside her."

Rarity laughed and ran her skate down her mane in a brush-like motion. "Haha, well I have to everything I can to keep my mane and uniform looking ravishing and perfect. If it means I need to play dirty, I'll play dirty."

"Well, if you have to, don't get caught. We can't afford unnecessary penalties. And finally, we learned Fluttershy can dish out a big hit if she believes in herself."

"Oh, I will from now on. I'll try to hit my absolute hardest!" Fluttershy said smiling.

"Good. Let's use what we learned today for our game against Cloudsdale tomorrow. I haven't done my research on them yet, but I will do that tonight and give you all a scouting report in the locker room. Let's rest up and be back here for our home opener!"

The Golden Leafs all put a skate in and on three yelled "TEAM!" Spike arrived to gather up all the equipment and each pony went off toward home. Before leaving the pond, Twilight talked to Spike.

"Spike, take a letter please."

Spike pulled out a scroll and quill and waited for Twilight's next words.

"Dear Princess Celestia,

Tomorrow is the Ponyville Golden Leafs' home opener. Right now Ponyville Pond is just an empty ice rink. If you could help us build a brand new arena on the pond, we would greatly appreciate it.

*Your faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle"*

In a green flame, Spike blew the scroll into the air. Almost instantly, Spike belched out a response scroll. He unrolled it and began reading to Twilight.

"Dear Twilight,

The EHL offices have informed me of your plight earlier this week. I am sending out Canterlot's finest crew of carpenter and masonry colts. Ponyville will have their arena done in a blink of an eye. I also was told of your first loss to Manehattan. Don't give up and always remember to have fun with your friends. Good luck in your home opener.

*Your Royal Highness,
Princess Celestia"*

Relieved by the Princess' words, Twilight and Spike headed for home. Back at the treehouse, Twilight pulled out her EHL media guide and began studying up on the Golden Leafs' next opponent, the Cloudsdale Red Wings. A few hours of reading later, Twilight sleepily closed her books and trotted off to bed, excited for tomorrow's big day for the Golden Leafs franchise.

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The next morning, Twilight woke up early because she couldn't control her excitement for the game. She remembered what Princess Celestia had said and she raced off toward Ponyville Pond, hoping to see a hockey arena in its place. As she galloped closer toward the pond, she saw the top of the cylindrical arena peering up over the horizon and growing taller. With each stride, Twilight's smile grew wider. She stopped right in front of the tall arena that sat before her. It was a shining, blue-bricked arena with golden ornaments and accents lining the roof and sides. In large golden letters above the front entrance, "Ponyville Pond" flashed in the rising sunlight. Twilight squealed with delight and walked inside. The concourse was covered in royal blue banners and linens with the Golden Leafs' logo emblazoned on each one. Concession stands and souvenir booths lined the walls, empty but ready to be filled with delicious arena fare and collectible items later in the evening. Twilight's eyes stayed wide open in amazement as she walked about the new arena. When she walked past an opening to the arena seats, she stopped dead in her tracks. Below her, she

saw the whitest, freshest sheet of ice her eyes ever saw. The red and blue lines on the ice vibrantly gleamed under the arena lights. The Ponyville Golden Leafs logo glistened and shone at center ice. Twilight looked all around, slowly taking in the magnificent scene before her.

"Pretty nice arena, huh?"

Twilight jumped a bit at the unexpected voice. She took a few seconds to calm herself down.

"Yeah, this arena is amazing!" she said as she turned toward her visitor. Suddenly, Twilight's face went from ghostly white back to its illustrious purple color as her visitor was Princess Celestia, smiling warmly upon Twilight with her mane floating.

Overjoyed, Twilight beamed like a lighthouse at her mentor.
"PRINCESS?!? What are you doing here?"

With a laugh, Princess Celestia stood alongside her student. "Why Twilight, I shoved the responsibility of managing a hockey team upon you and Ponyville. The least I could do is watch your home opener is person."

"Oh, this will be great! I have to run and tell the girls that the Princess is here!" Twilight yelled while jumping in a circle.

The tip of Princess Celestia's mane went up to Twilight's lips. "Shhh, let's keep it our little secret until tonight. I don't want your team to be distracted before your big game."

Twilight nodded excessively and gave the Princess a hug. Princess Celestia stepped out of the arena and onto her royal chariot. In a flash, she was gone. Twilight's excitement doubled and she began to shake at the thought of the Princess being at their home opener later that evening. She left the arena and went back to the treehouse to prepare for the night.

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Two hours before game time, the Golden Leafs met at Twilight's house. Together, side by side, they walked toward their new arena. Twilight did a good job containing her knowledge of the arena and Princess Celestia's

presence so that her friends could share the same reaction she had. Just as Twilight did, the others saw the top of the arena as they approached. With anxiousness quickly building, the Golden Leafs broke into a gallop toward their arena. Twilight didn't run forward with her friends, but chose to hang behind to view their reactions. Applejack and Rainbow Dash jumped and gave each other high fives while Rarity and Fluttershy stood completely still in admiration. Pinkie Pie danced around her friends, taking in the delicious smells that were filtering out from inside. Twilight reached them and directed them all toward their locker room.

On their walk to the locker room, the giggles and squeals of the Golden Leafs rang out down the hall. The ponies trotted back and forth, inspecting and admiring each new thing they passed. As a nice touch, the wall containing the locker room entrance was adorned with each pony's cutie mark in golden paint. When the team saw their golden marks on the wall, they each yelled and ran up to hug it. After a few extra seconds of adoration, the team finally entered the locker room. There, each pony had their own stall made out of finished oak. The blue carpeting was plush and inviting. A large Golden Leafs logo was stitched and placed boldly in the center of the room. Hanging from golden hooks were their royal blue home uniforms Rarity had made. The ponies quickly put their gear on, their excitement level going through the roof.

Once dressed, Twilight stood in front of her teammates.

"Okay girls. Here's what we need to know about the Cloudsdale Red Wings. They play a quick-paced game. They like controlling the puck and they have a great defense. They made the Celestia Cup Finals last year so they're still very good. We'll need to be on our best if we want to stand a chance. As for their lineup, here's who they have. Rainbow, at center is Spitfire. She's very crafty and has great hooves."

Rainbow let out a fangirl-like squeal. "Oh my gosh! I'm playing across from Spitfire of the Wonderbolts?!? This is going to be awesome! I can show off my speed to Spitfire and the Wonderbolts will have to accept me!"

"Don't get too excited, Rainbow. Tonight they're Red Wings, not Wonderbolts. Rarity, their right wing is Soarin. He's pretty solid and strong. He'll stand in front of Pinkie a lot and try to block her view."

Rainbow interrupted again with another squeal. "Soarin plays for them too?!? Even more awesome! Two of the Wonderbolts playing against me tonight. This is too cool!"

Twilight brushed off Rainbow's star-struck squealing and continued on. "Applejack, their left wing is Gilda. She'll play you pretty tough. You match up well with her."

At the sound of Gilda's name, Pinkie Pie sat up with a slight smile on her face. "Ooooh, Gilda's back! I hope she remembered that party I threw for her! We had so much fun that day. You think she'll remember me? Do ya?"

"I'll do whatever I can to keep her in line, Twi," a determined Applejack said.

"On defense, they have Pucks. He's one of the oldest and best defenseponies in the league. He's very good. The other defensepony is Ditzzy Doo. She's pretty...unusual to say the least. The forwards will have to find a way to outwork them while Fluttershy and I try to shut down Cloudsdale's forwards."

Pinkie Pie got up from her stall. "Who's their goalie, Twilight?"

"I'm not sure. The book I read said it was some goalie named Domarenick Horsek, but he's been retired for ages now. I guess we'll have to find out when we get out there."

Applejack leaped up. "Let's go git 'em, girls! Who's ready for a darn good home opener?"

The Golden Leafs met at the center and put a hoof in. Twilight was last and gave some last words. "Let's remember what we practiced and have fun tonight. Tough and fun on three!"

One...two...three..."TOUGH AND FUN!" shouted each player as their skates were raised to the sky. They exited the locker room and headed out to the hallway to wait for their introduction. On the other side of the ice, they saw the Red Wings stretching and loosening up behind their entrance door. From the hallway, the Golden Leafs heard a loud buzz bellowing out from the crowd. The murmur of all the Ponyvillians grew louder as the

countdown clock ticked down toward zero. The Golden Leafs looked all over their home arena, down to each nook and cranny. A calming peace fell upon each of them as they quickly grew accustomed to their home arena. The lights dimmed which drew a loud cheer from the crowd. Spotlights illuminated on the ice and affixed themselves to an upper balcony. A familiar voice echoed out to each corner, ready to announce the lineups and the surprise guest.

"Filles and gentlecolts, welcome to Ponyville Pond for the Ponyville Golden Leafs' home opener!! My name is Spike, the official super cool announcing dragon for the Ponyville Golden Leafs! Sit back, relax, and get ready to cheer on your Golden Leafs as they take on the visiting Cloudsdale Red Wings!"

Loud booing came at the sound of the Red Wings name. There was a small smattering of cheers as a handful of pegasi ponies came down from Cloudsdale for the game proudly wearing their Red Wings jerseys. Spike continued his announcing duties.

"Since this is Ponyville's home opener, we have a special guest in our midst tonight. All the way from Canterlot, your benevolent leader and friend, Princess Celestia!!"

This time the whole arena cheered together in unison as Princess Celestia stepped out onto the balcony, flanked by her royal guards. She waved to everyone in attendance and took her seat. Down in the hallway, Twilight saw all her friends' faces light up in surprise when the Princess' name was called. Their anxiousness reached a fever pitch and they were now itching to get out on the ice.

"Now the starting lineup for the Cloudsdale Red Wings. At center, number 13, famed member of the Wonderbolts, it's Spitfire! At left wing, number 44, Gilda! At right wing, number 96, also a famed member of the Wonderbolts, it's Soarin! On defense, number 5, Pucks! Also on defense, number...question mark-exclamation point...whatever, it's Ditzzy Doo!"

Each member of the Red Wings flew out from their entrance door briskly as

their name was called. They landed along the blue line as they awaited the announcement of their goalie.

"Starting in goal for Cloudsdale, rookie goalie number 35, it's Scootaloo!"

Out from the door skated out Scootaloo. Her tiny wings flapped happily as she skated toward her teammates. She ended up inside her goal crease and scooted from side to side, chipping up the ice for traction.

Princess Celestia applauded as the spotlights circled around the arena. The lights then fell upon the Golden Leafs' door. Spike started up again.

"And now, for the PONYVILLE GOLDEN LEAFS! At center, number 20, your town weatherpony and friend, it's RAINBOW DASH! At left wing, number 9, the most beautiful pony in the arena and the owner of the Carousel Boutique, it's the fair and lovely RARITY! On the right wing, number 88, the hard-working, apple-bucking, Sweet Apple Acres-running reliable pony pal, it's APPLEJACK! On defense, number 42, my best friend and Ponyville's resident egghead, it's TWILIGHT SPARKLE! Also on defense, number 0, beloved by ponies and creatures alike, the 'Stare Master' FLUTTERSHY!"

The Golden Leafs skated out onto the ice with their introduction. With a more modest entrance this time around, they took the time to revel in the downpour of cheers that came from their fans and fellow city dwellers. They lined up across from the Red Wings and stared them down. The Red Wings did not look back. They instead were looking down at the ice with a quiet focus. However, Scootaloo looked up to see Rainbow Dash standing across the ice. In a flash, Scootaloo skated all the way to Rainbow and stared up at her with a happy smile.

"Oh hey Rainbow Dash! I can't wait to see you skate circles around everyone. You're going to be the best!"

Rainbow looked back at Scootaloo with a smug expression. "Yes, yes, you're right, kid. I will be the best! See you in the game."

Scotaloo propelled herself back to the net and bounced around with delight.

"And in net, number 33, the party pony with the power of perfecting desserts, it's PINKIE PIE!"

Pinkie skated out and hopped to her place in net. She skipped around the net to cheers. The light flickered back on and the teams circled around in their zones. The teams drifted toward the center circle. The referee goes through the usual goalie check and readies the puck.

With the drop of the puck, Ponyville's home opener was underway.

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The first few minutes of the 1st period went back and forth as each team battled their nerves and committed a couple turnovers. After the 8 minute mark, the Red Wings gained control of the puck and didn't let go. Every ten seconds or so, Gilda, Spitfire, and Soarin ripped shots on net. Pinkie found herself bouncing back and forth, up and down to make saves. Pucks and Ditzzy also had a few shots along the point which Pinkie blocked. Ponyville could not get the puck away from Cloudsdale. Even after Applejack placed a check on Gilda and won the puck, Ditzzy glided up and slammed Applejack right back. Shot after shot, Ponyville scrambled to gather the puck and get some offense going. It took nearly three minutes before Ponyville finally had possession in the Cloudsdale zone. The Golden Leafs still did not get a shot off though as Pucks pressured Rainbow into making a bad pass toward Rarity which Soarin swooped up. Back the other way, Cloudsdale ran a play which saw Spitfire receiving the puck behind the net. Both Soarin and Gilda streaked toward the net from the wings. By doing that, Fluttershy and Twilight closed in on the crease in front of Pinkie to stay with the Red Wing forwards. This left Ditzzy open up the middle to which Spitfire passed her the puck and Ditzzy let off a rocket shot through a crowd of skaters. Ponyville was lucky as Ditzzy's shot deflected off a leg and bounced out of harm's way.

With four minutes left in the period, the Ponyville zone resembled more of a shooting gallery with each Red Wing getting two shots off. Pinkie once again stood tall and made brilliant saves to keep the game scoreless. On

the other end, Scootaloo sat in front of her net daydreaming about playing alongside Rainbow Dash. She faced zero shots and it appeared to stay that way as Cloudsdale kept possession. Around the 2 minute mark, Ponyville finally caught a break and had the puck for a 2-on-1 rush. Rainbow and Applejack were pushing toward the net with Pucks back on defense. Rainbow looked for an opening to pass over to Applejack but Pucks closed in and cut her off. Rainbow gave the puck away and back came Cloudsdale. Gilda took the puck down to the corner behind Pinkie. She was met by Twilight who tried playing tough to get the puck away. Gilda powered out and passed to Spitfire who grabbed it at the faceoff circle. Fluttershy glided over to cut Spitfire off but Spitfire lightly flicked the puck between Fluttershy's legs and blazed around her to get it back. Rarity reached her stick out to poke at Spitfire but Spitfire quickly lifted the puck up onto her stick blade and jumped over Rarity's stick. Spitfire set the puck back down on the ice and fired a shot. Pinkie kept her eye on the puck the entire time and was able to glove it for a great save. The crowd applauded Pinkie for the save and Spitfire for her amazing puck handling display. Ten seconds remained in the period and to no one's surprise, the Red Wings had the puck and had two more shots on Pinkie.

A horn blew throughout the arena for the end of the 1st period. It was all Cloudsdale in that period even though the score didn't reflect it. The Ponyville crowd cheered both teams off the ice. One by one the Golden Leafs walked to their locker room.

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They all reached their stalls except for Pinkie. As soon as she stepped into the room, Pinkie collapsed in an exhausted daze. She dragged herself to her spot and unwrapped a special energy cupcake. She gulped it down and soon she was back to her bouncy self. She spoke up to everyone in the room.

"Whew! I am so tired! That was a crazy period! I was over there and over there, and here and there and here and there. Wowee."

Twilight looked over to her. "Sorry we let so many shots on you, Pinkie. You did a great job out there."

"Cloudsdale is playin' tighter than a square apple in a round box. We cain't

get through 'em!" exclaimed Applejack.

"I know that period was rough, but I think I realized something," said Twilight. "Cloudsdale's forwards didn't try to check us too often. They are more concerned with skating and having the puck."

Rainbow blew her mane out of her face. "Well duh, they have two of the Wonderbolts on their team! Of course they're going to skate fast. It's not rocket science."

"So then we'll take them off their game...by getting tough. Just like in practice. Let's rock their worlds. They seem like a finesse team so if we show them a little toughness, they're bound to fold," Twilight said with a stern look toward Rainbow.

Rainbow jumped out her of stall. "Now you're talking!"

"Let's do it then. Let's get physical!"

Twilight nodded to her teammates who nodded back with a grin.

The Golden Leafs marched back out onto the ice for the 2nd period. Cloudsdale also made their way back onto the ice ready for the new period.

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With another puck drop, the 2nd period began. Ponyville started to execute their strategy. Each time a Cloudsdale skater touched the puck, a Golden Leaf was right there to deliver a hit. Just as Cloudsdale racked up shots in the 1st, Ponyville was racking up hits in the 2nd. Since Ponyville was hitting more, they had the puck more. Applejack snapped Ponyville's first shot on net but Scootaloo jumped up to grab it. During the play stoppage, Scootaloo held up the puck in her glove and called out to Rainbow Dash to show her. Rainbow didn't smile but gave a little approving nod.

Cloudsdale won the next faceoff and had the puck in the Ponyville zone. Spitfire passed off to Soarin along the boards. With Rarity coming in quick to hit, Soarin rushed a pass to Ditzzy on the blue line. Sensing the weak pass, Rainbow Dash zoomed up to intercept it. Rainbow blasted off for a breakaway. Scootaloo strained to see who was coming towards her. When

she noticed it was Rainbow Dash, she giggled and hopped up and down with excitement. Scootaloo skated up out of the crease to meet up with Rainbow.

"Hey Rainbow Dash! That was an awesome interception! Can you teach me how to do that?"

Rainbow smiled as she blew right by Scootaloo. "Sure thing, kiddo!" she muttered through the stick in her mouth.

With a wide open net, Rainbow slammed the puck in the net. The fans jumped to their hooves and a cheer exploded out along with the siren of the goal horn. The rest of the Golden Leafs skated down to celebrate Rainbow's goal. Scootaloo glided over to join in but a frustrated Gilda grabbed Scootaloo's jersey with her beak and dropped Scootaloo back in the net.

"GOAL! 1-0 PONYVILLE! Scoring her first goal of the season, number 20, RAINBOW DASH!"

Play resumed and Spitfire won the faceoff away from Rainbow. Spitfire kept the puck and brought it over the blue line. Twilight and Fluttershy came together in the middle to block Spitfire's path but she deked to the right to get Fluttershy off stride then pulled the puck back and deked left to get through Twilight. With just Pinkie in front of her, Spitfire twirled a shot toward the upper left corner. Pinkie quickly tried to raise her blocker hoof but it was too late. Just like that, Cloudsdale tied the game 1-1. Spitfire skated toward center ice toward her awaiting teammates for celebratory headbutts. The goal light flickered and the crowd sat in stunned silence about what they just saw.

"Goal for Cloudsdale. Her first of the season, Spitfire!"

The Golden Leafs drifted back to center ice in shock of Spitfire's amazing skill. They shook out of their trance and play was back on. Reviving their strategy, the Golden Leafs kept hitting and had the puck more but couldn't get another goal. The 2nd period quickly came to close and the crowd gave the Golden Leafs an encouraging yell as they exited the ice.

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Back in the locker room, Twilight and company were energetic and pleased with the period. They had plenty of hits and kept the puck mostly out of their zone to which Pinkie was grateful.

Twilight cooled down and addressed the team.

"Now that's more like it! We were great! The hitting was strong and we had the lead for once. Good work, girls!"

"And I'm not as tired as I was last period!" piped up Pinkie.

Rainbow flew up into the air eagerly. "Did you all see my goal? I flew up, charging like a Wonderbolt, I stole the puck, blew past the little orange squirt, and pounded it in the net!"

"That was amazing, Rainbow Dash. You skated so fast and did so well," said Fluttershy as she put her helmet back on.

Twilight spoke back up. "Now remember, we were in this same situation last game with Manehattan. Don't let up on the toughness and get some quality shots on net. At least we won't have a cheater to deal with. We can do this!"

The one minute warning horn blasted throughout the arena and the Golden Leafs trotted back to the ice.

Over in the Red Wings locker room, Spitfire pepped up her team by telling them to fight fire with fire; to match Ponyville's physicality and hit back. The Red Wings accepted the mission and made their way back to the ice.

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The final period began and neither team budged for the other. The hockey game felt more like a table tennis match, with one team having the puck, getting hit, then the other team claiming the puck, getting hit, and so on. Rarity had the puck in the Ponyville zone until she was hit by Soarin. Soarin took the puck and was immediately slammed by Rainbow. As soon as Rainbow turned up the ice, Gilda was there to lay a check on Rainbow.

Gilda took the puck and before she could move, Applejack glided in with a hit. With each check, the crowd cheered louder, letting both teams know their toughness was being appreciated.

The Golden Leafs finally put an end to the hitting party and had the puck on offense. Applejack shot the puck around the boards to Rarity who was waiting on the other wing. Rarity brought the puck toward the net where she was pressured by Ditzzy. Rarity saw Rainbow sprinting at the net and quickly slipped a pass that direction. Rainbow got the puck and flicked a shot on net but it skipped wide, eliciting an "Ooooooh" from the fans.

Cloudsdale came back the other way and dumped the puck into the Ponyville corner. Fluttershy went after the puck but was nervous she was vulnerable. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Gilda charging in hard toward her. As Gilda closed in, Fluttershy braced herself and pounced away from the corner toward the brutish griffin. Gilda's eyes enlarged in shock when Fluttershy flew at her. WHAM! Crushed by a devastating check, Gilda flew back and hit the ice hard. The crowd erupted as Fluttershy quickly gathered herself to get the puck again. She passed it over to Twilight who passed it up and out of the zone.

Only 3 minutes remained when Rarity received Twilight's pass. She brought the puck in but found no one open. Unsure of what to do, Rarity skated in and tried to shoot. Pucks came by and poked the puck away before Rarity could get the shot off. A little frustrated, Rarity bolted after Pucks and geared up for a hit. However, Pucks had just passed the puck off to Soarin who entered the zone. Rarity kept on her path and delivered a board rattling hit to the Cloudsdale defensepony. The referee saw this and raised his hoof for a delayed penalty. Twilight stole the puck from Soarin which caused the whistle to blow.

TwEEEEEEEEet "Penalty, Ponyville number 9. Two minutes for boarding."

Rarity skated up to the referee and began to plead her case.

"Oh, you surely don't mean that, do you darling? I mean, a fine looking gentlecolt such as yourself just couldn't have the heart to throw little ol' me into the penalty box right?"

The referee stared back unamused. "Save it, lady. It's two minutes."

"Hmph!" Rarity pouted all the way to the box. The Ponyville fans booed as the Golden Leafs were about to embark on a very crucial penalty kill with just over two minutes left in a tie game.

The puck dropped and Cloudsdale's power play began. Cloudsdale had a similar strategy to Ponyville, with each skater staying in a certain area and passing back and forth among themselves until a shooting opportunity presented itself. The Red Wings' passing was crisp and right on the stick tape. Gilda passed to Pucks, Pucks to Ditzzy, Ditzzy to Soarin, Soarin to Spitfire behind the net, Spitfire back to Soarin, Soarin to Ditzzy, Ditzzy to Pucks along the blue line. The Golden Leafs moved from side to side along with the Red Wings' passing. When it appeared a Red Wing was going to shoot, Applejack or Rainbow dove in front to block. Rarity's penalty was down to one minute left and Cloudsdale still did not have a shot. Pucks faked a shot and passed back over to Ditzzy. Ditzzy passed to Soarin who was along the boards. Soarin passed back to Ditzzy and quickly moved in to block Pinkie's view. Ditzzy reared back for a shot, forcing Applejack to dive for a block. Ditzzy pulled back and passed to Pucks. Seeing a lane to the net, Pucks fired a swift shot. Soarin tried positioning his stick to redirect the shot but missed. The puck drilled Pinkie in the chest and bounced in front of Twilight. Twilight quickly shot the puck down the ice to kill the last few seconds of the penalty.

As Rarity stepped out of the box, the Ponyville crowd rang out in loud applause for the clutch penalty kill. The Golden Leafs fed off the energy and skated harder as the clock reached the final minute. Spitfire collected the puck behind Scootaloo and carried it up through center. She dumped it toward the corner to which Soarin gave chase. Twilight and Rarity bunched up there to get the puck before Soarin came swooping in. Twilight knocked the puck around the boards to Fluttershy. Fluttershy tried passing over to Rainbow but Spitfire brushed by to intercept. Spitfire deked around Twilight who had retreated back to the net. Pinkie stepped up to take Spitfire head on. Spitfire blasted a rifle straight toward the five hole. Pinkie collapsed her legs to block the shot and swept it over to Applejack on the side. Applejack quickly brought the puck up with 10 seconds left. She got over the blue line and halted. Rainbow speeded down the center to catch up. Applejack snapped a pass toward the net for Rainbow to pick up.

0:07...0:06...Rainbow saw the puck and reached out to touch it.

0:05...0:04...the puck landed on Rainbow's stick blade.

0:03...0:02...0:01...Right as the potential game-winning shot was flung, Ditzzy Doo appeared out from nowhere and landed a helmet-rocking check on Rainbow. 0:00.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt

The puck sailed off into the corner with Rainbow drifting lifelessly toward the boards. She hit the boards hard with a thud as the period horn blew and the Ponyville faithful gasped at the final play. The referees and the Golden Leafs rushed over to the fallen pony. Rainbow opened her eyes and slowly worked her way back to her hooves. Receiving a standing ovation, even from Princess Celestia herself, Rainbow was helped toward the locker room by her friends.

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In the locker room, an EHL doctor checked over Rainbow as the rest of the team started to freak out about playing in overtime.

After shining a light in her eyes and checking her heart rate, the doctor gave Rainbow the nod of approval and left. Twilight tried calming down her team as Rainbow held an ice pack to her head.

"Girls, settle down. Overtime isn't any different than a regular period."

Rarity stepped up to Twilight. "Don't you know what 'sudden death' means? If Cloudsdale scores, we lose! I don't want to lose in front of the Princess! She'll go back to Canterlot and tell all her subjects about how poorly we did and we'll be the laughingstock of the EHL!"

"Snap out of it!" yelled Twilight as she clunked Rarity on the helmet.
"Everything will be fine. And think of it this way, if we score, we win!"

"'S-s-sudden death'? That sounds s-s-scary," said Fluttershy trembling.

Applejack stood up and faced her teammates. "It's just an expression y'all. We need ta' stop our worryin' and go back to playin' hockey. We got this."

Pinkie bounced up and flipped her mask down. "I'm ready to go, Twilight! I'm not afraid of suddenly dying!"

Twilight let out a groan while Rainbow tossed the ice pack aside and put her equipment back on.

"Everypony shut it! We're going back out there and winning."

Unprepared for Rainbow's outburst, the locker room grew silent. Twilight nodded and the Golden Leafs trotted back toward the ice.

===

Back on the ice, the clock only read 5 minutes as usual with overtime. Cloudsdale skated around their end and then met at the net to go over their strategy. Ponyville approached the center circle, already knowing what they needed to do: score first.

The puck dropped and the overtime period began. Rainbow won the faceoff and passed it back to Twilight. Twilight skated up and dumped the puck into the corner. Applejack rushed in after it as Pucks also charged for it. Applejack got there first and had to keep it away from Pucks' stick. Rainbow stuck to the boards behind Applejack and tapped her stick to let her know she was open. Applejack heard the tapping and flicked the puck behind her along the boards. Rainbow retrieved it and tried darting in and out of the Red Wings skaters. Soarin dove into Rainbow's path but she hopped over. Gilda was next to drift toward Rainbow but as Gilda went to deliver a hit, Rainbow skated harder and ducked low, causing Gilda to miss. The only defender left in Rainbow's way was Ditzzy. Rainbow held the puck off to her right hoping Ditzzy would bite. Ditzzy saw the puck and poked for it, just as Rainbow wanted. Rainbow quickly pulled the puck back in toward her skates and moved it to the left, completely faking out Ditzzy. Rainbow now had an open path to the net. Scootaloo, now determined to deny her idol a game-winning goal, stood ready. Rainbow reared back her head to shoot.

Out from the corner, an orange and yellow blur flew in like a mystical wind to take away Rainbow's puck. It was Spitfire and she was now off to the races. Twilight and Fluttershy scrambled back to cut Spitfire off. Spitfire was coming in on the left wing. Twilight dove across but Spitfire held up and waited for Twilight to slide by. Fluttershy then came across and tried to land a check on the Cloudsdale center. Spitfire fought back and was now

flank to flank with Fluttershy. Both players were heading at Pinkie's net at full speed. With one final nudge, Spitfire veered Fluttershy away and poked the puck to Pinkie's left. Pinkie dove left but Spitfire had already snapped her stick back. Lifting her back hoof in the air, Spitfire performed a picture perfect hoof drag and blasted the puck into the now wide open net. All together, the Golden Leafs' hearts sank as the puck rattled around the goal and the goal light illuminated. A giant groan rung out from the crowd as Spitfire threw herself at the boards in celebration.

"Goal by Spitfire! Cloudsdale wins in overtime 2-1!"

The remaining Red Wings dashed toward Spitfire, throwing the sticks and gloves in the air in jubilation. The Golden Leafs could only look down in disbelief and disappointment. Cloudsdale finished their celebration and skated off the ice. Still drifting sadly around the ice, Twilight and friends eventually went toward the door. Despite the heartbreaking loss, the Ponyville faithful cheered their home team off the ice, impressed by their valiant effort. Encouraged by the support, the Golden Leafs' frowns turned into very faint smiles. They finally trotted off the ice and headed back to their locker room.

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In the locker room, the mood was silent once again. No one said a word as they undressed, still feeling the bitter disappointment of defeat. After a few minutes of wrangling up their items and cleaning up, the silence was finally broken. Not by a Golden Leaf, but by two Red Wings. Spitfire and Soarin walked in and faced the Ponyville squad. Spitfire walked up to Twilight and extended her hoof for a hoofshake.

"Soarin and I just wanted to come in and compliment you girls on a game well played. No one's pushed our team to the limit like you did tonight."

Twilight accepted Spitfire's hoofshake.

"Thank you. It really means a lot."

Soarin stepped in. "Don't get too down on yourselves. Keep it up and soon you guys will be regular contenders. We mean it."

The rest of the Golden Leafs smiled upon receiving this praise. Rainbow Dash was still sulking at her stall, upset about the loss.

Spitfire approached Rainbow with a smile. "Hey Rainbow, you had some pretty cool moves out there. Since we're still going to be in town tomorrow, you wanna hang out and show us around?"

Rainbow looked up at Spitfire and her icy frown melted to a big grin. "You bet! I'll see you tomorrow."

Spitfire and Soarin said goodbye to the Golden Leafs and left. Twilight was about to speak to her team when Spike ran into the room with a scroll. Twilight opened it and read it aloud.

"Dear Ponyville Golden Leafs,

I am very proud with your performance this evening. You showed passion and heart down on the ice. Most importantly, it appeared you were having fun. Do not let this loss dampen your spirits. I am confident you will reach greatness someday. I wish I could have visited you after the game but I had to return to Canterlot on official royal business. I greatly look forward to seeing you play in Canterlot soon.

*Your Royal Highness,
Princess Celestia"*

Twilight looked up from the scroll to see her friends' faces. They looked much more upbeat and encouraged from the Wonderbolts' visit and the Princess Celestia's letter. Spike packed up the equipment and the Golden Leafs headed back to Twilight's treehouse.

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Back at the treehouse, the girls were chatting and even sharing a few laughs. Spike lit the fireplace and each pony curled up in front of the fire to rest and to heal their sores. Twilight made hot chocolate with Pinkie Pie's help and handed them out. Twilight glanced at the schedule and saw their next game was in Appleloosa.

"Hey Applejack, do you think you could let your family in Appleloosa know we're coming? We're going to need to take a train there and we'll need a place to stay for the night. It would be very much appreciated."

"No problem, Twi. I'll send a message out to Braeburn and see what he can do. I'm lookin' forward to goin' back there to see him and Bloomberg again."

"Great." Twilight then spoke up for every pony to hear. "Okay girls. Tonight, we took another step towards winning. We had a lead and took the game to overtime. I'm proud of every one of you. With a little bit more practice and hard work, I'm sure we can get over the hump and win a game."

Pinkie giggled. "Silly Twilight. We're ponies! We don't have humps! Camels have humps!"

The others laughed at Pinkie and Twilight's exchange. After the laughs settled, Twilight continued.

"Our next game is in Appleloosa against the Black Apples. Applejack is going to work on getting us a ride there. Let's take a few days off then it's off to Appleloosa!"

"Yeah!" her friends shouted.

Even though Ponyville suffered another loss, the Golden Leafs gained valuable crunch time experience and held their first lead. Their effort was praised throughout Ponyville the following days. Ponyville citizens expressed their excitement for future Golden Leafs games whenever they saw one of the players roaming about the town. Seeing the excitement spreading through town gave Twilight and friends added confidence and a will to work harder so their fans could eventually witness a win. For now though, it was time to travel to Appleloosa to take on a new opponent.

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Three Stars for Cloudsdale @ Ponyville

** Spitfire (CRW)*

*** Pinkie Pie (PGL)*

**** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

MANEHATTAN 3, Fillydelphia 2

APPLELOOSA 3, Canterlot 0

EHL Standings (W-L)

Appleloosa 2-0

Manehattan 2-0

Cloudsdale 1-1

Fillydelphia 1-1

Canterlot 0-2

Ponyville 0-2

Chapter 5

Shootout at the Appleloosa Corral

CHOOOOOOOO CHOOOOOOOOOOOO

The westward train chuggled along at great speed toward Appleloosa. The landscape gradually transformed from the white, winter wonderland of Ponyville to the brown, dry desert of the Western lands. On board the train were the Ponyville Golden Leafs, awaiting their arrival at their next opponent's city. In the lodging car, Twilight, Spike, and friends sat around bored with not much else to do.

"Ugh, it's so boring on this train. I knew I should've brought my books," said Twilight with a sigh.

"I know what we can do! We can braid each other's manes. It would be soooo fabulous!" Rarity exclaimed.

Rainbow Dash stuck out her tongue in disgust. "I think I'd rather watch paint dry than do that frilly girly stuff."

"Ah'm with Rainbow on that one," said Applejack. Rainbow then gave Applejack a hoof bump.

Pinkie Pie bounced up and down from her seat bubbling with excitement. "Ooh! How about another game? Let's play 'I Spy'! I'll go first. I spy with my little eye something pink!"

In monotone unison and with glazed eyes, everyone answered, "Fluttershy's mane."

"Nopey dopey! Guess again!"

"Your mane."

"Noooooooooooo. Guess agaaaain!" said Pinkie in a musical tone while her smile widened more.

Still unenthused, everyone guessed together, "The streak in Twilight's mane."

"Right! How did you all know?"

"Because you've only said that for the seventh time already! There's only like three things in this train car that are pink!" snapped Rainbow Dash.

Twilight's magic conjured up a muzzle that clamped itself onto Rainbow's mouth. "Calm down, Rainbow. She was just trying to help cure the boredom. There's got to be other cars on this train with something to do. Let's go explore!"

"B...but I like it here, Twilight. This cushion is so soft and warm," said Fluttershy with a mix of hesitation and laziness in her voice. Spike let out a giant yawn and plopped himself down on a bed. "I agree with Fluttershy. It's fine right here. I think I'm going to get some shut eye. Hauling everypony's equipment is tough work."

"That's fine, Spike. Everypony else, let's go. Exploring is better than doing nothing."

Fluttershy reluctantly rose from her comfortable seat and joined her friends in walking to the other train cars. They trotted through the dining car, the luggage car, the freezer car, and ended up in another lodging car. Disappointed in what they had found, the girls turned back around. Suddenly, a loud thump came from the door leading to the next car. Twilight and friends whizzed back around to see what might have caused the noise. Twilight slowly slid the door open while the others looked on. When the door was fully open, flashing lights and loud ringing and buzzing noises erupted at them. Before them was the gaming car, filled with various arcade games and fun activities. There was whack-a-parasprite machine, skee-ball, a ring toss, and a basketball toss. Sensing that their boredom

was now destroyed, each pony rushed into the car with a squeal. Everypony hopped from machine to machine, playing with each other and laughing. In between the merriment, Twilight noticed a peculiar game off in the corner. When she approached, she saw that it was a shooting game. Plenty of colorful targets hung lifeless while a toy gun lay at her hooves. Twilight pressed a big red button on the near wall and the game came to life. The targets moved about in random directions while lights flashed in distraction. Twilight's horn glowed and soon the gun was hovering up to her eye, firing at the targets. The other ponies saw Twilight's game and walked over to watch. When the round was over, Rainbow shoved Twilight out of the way and took over.

"Haha! Yes! Now this is a real game. Take that! And that!" yelled Rainbow as she shot.

Applejack's eyes lit up as Rainbow knocked down a flurry of targets. "Yee-haw! I call next after Dash!"

"No, I'm going next after Rainbow. I was here first!" said Rarity as she bumped Applejack with her flank.

"Oh no you ain't! I called it!"

Twilight stepped in between them. "Girls! There's plenty of time for everypony to play. We're nowhere near Appleloosa yet."

When Rainbow finished, Applejack rushed up to take the gun from her. Rarity pushed the button to begin and used her magic to claim the gun. Applejack let out an angry snort as Rarity began her round. Rarity, with her knack for precision and detail, knocked out every target in succession. Her friends cheered louder for each target she busted. Rainbow was the most impressed and flew around Rarity as she finished.

"That was so cool, Rarity! Betcha you can't do it again!"

Rarity let out a laugh. "Oh Rainbow, darling, I can beat this game with my eyes closed."

Rarity pushed the button to restart the game. With her eyes closed, she began to miss. Sensing she wasn't hitting anything, Rarity clenched her

teeth and tried focusing harder. Rainbow was laughing as Rarity finished up her round with only a couple successful hits.

"Haha! Told ya you couldn't do it again. Allow me."

Rainbow took the gun and started her round also with eyes closed. Rainbow shot wildly, and by pure chance, she hit all the targets. Rarity's mouth dropped in shock and the others cheered for Rainbow's perfect round. When Rainbow opened her eyes, she turned toward Rarity and stuck her tongue out. Redness flashed across Rarity's face and she tore the gun away from Rainbow.

"What luck! That wasn't skill! I'm the better shot."

Rainbow got in Rarity's face. "Oh yeah? Well I wasn't the pony who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn!"

While Rainbow and Rarity continued their spat, Twilight began crafting an idea. She remembered passing a freezer car on the way to the arcade. She then thought of a way to hold a practice on the train. When it all came together, she separated Rarity and Rainbow and announced to her friends.

"I just thought of a great idea! Remember that freezer car we walked through? I can turn it into a miniature rink and we could practice. Since we're all enjoying the shooting game, how about we have shooting practice with our sticks and pucks?"

Pinkie Pie looked back at Twilight in disappointment. "Awww, but we were starting to have so much fun here!"

"Those two weren't," said Twilight as she pointed over to Rainbow and Rarity who were still wrestling the gun away from each other.

Having enough of their quarrel, Twilight poofed the gun away so that neither Rainbow nor Rarity could have it. She told them of the new plan and they complied. Twilight led her friends to the freezer car where she changed the floor into ice and teleported everyone's sticks from their luggage.

Using the targets from the shooting game, Twilight had them magically

affixed to the walls of the freezer car and made them randomly appear and fade quickly. She gave each of her friends their stick, a puck, and a section of the car to shoot at. Not before long, each pony was facing a wall and firing away at the magically moving targets. When a target was hit, a number appeared on the wall indicating that pony's hit count.

During the shooting practice, Rainbow occasionally glanced over at Rarity's score. Each time she looked, Rarity's number had increased by five or six. Rarity had 35 while Rainbow was at a measly 14. Not wanting to be shown up, Rainbow increased her output. She shot quicker and wildly, hoping to catch up to Rarity. When her wildness wasn't helping her score out, Rainbow flew over and stole Fluttershy's puck. With two pucks, Rainbow shot even faster. Everyone but Rarity stopped to watch Rainbow's determined display. Finally, Rainbow was getting some hits and her score started to inflate drastically. 14 quickly turned into 32 and she was hot on Rarity's trail. Rarity noticed everyone had stopped to watch Rainbow. When she saw Rainbow's score rocketing, Rarity stole Applejack's puck and began firing off wild shots of her own. Both sides of the freezer car were rattling from the multitude of shots it was absorbing. Both Rarity and Rainbow's scores were climbing up into the 40s, then the 50s, then 60s and so on.

After a few more minutes, Rarity and Rainbow was getting visibly weak. They were panting and letting out a grunt with each shot. Tied up at 99-99, both ponies tried their hardest to hit the next target. The targets flashed and faded on the wall in front of them. Simultaneously, Rarity and Rainbow reared back for a shot. Rainbow slapped the puck swiftly without thinking while Rarity waited for the right moment to shoot. Both pucks were in the air, zooming at a fading target. In a one-two flash, Rainbow and Rarity both hit a target and their scores illuminated to show 100-100. Both shooters started celebrating until they noticed the other's celebration. Once again, Rarity and Rainbow were nose to nose.

"I scored first! I won! You were too slow I'm afraid," said Rarity through her teeth.

Rainbow pushed her nose into Rarity's. "Me? Slow? I don't even know what slow is. I scored first! I won!"

"We'll see what the others think. They saw it."

Applejack, Twilight, Fluttershy, and Pinkie turned to each other in confusion, trying to come to an agreement as to who won.

Twilight spoke first. "I don't know you two. It was awfully close. Wouldn't you just be okay with tying?"

"NO! NO TYING!" yelled Rarity and Rainbow Dash together.

"I couldn't tell neither. Both of ya shot so fast, it was hard to keep track," said Applejack with an uneasy chuckle and her hoof behind her head.

Rarity walked up to Fluttershy and snuggled up next to her with a smile. "Fluttershy, be a dear and tell everyone I won."

"Um...uh...I-I don't know, Rarity."

Rainbow swooped in and pulled Fluttershy away from Rarity. "No, tell them I won! Come on, Fluttershy. We're friends. Pegasi stick together!"

"Well...um...Rainbow."

Twilight stepped in to save Fluttershy. "Enough! It ends in a tie. You're both good shooters. Besides, we are a team. It's not about who's better than the other. It's about being good together."

Pinkie put down her popcorn she had been randomly eating during the dispute. "Twilight's right! Besides, I think Rainbow won. But it's okay. Let's go back to the games!"

Rainbow flew over to Pinkie and gave her a thank you hug. Rarity stomped over to them and tried to get Pinkie to change her mind. When more arguing broke out, the freezer car door exploded open and in stepped the train conductor.

"JUST WHAT IN EQUESTRIA IS GOIN' ON IN HERE?"

The arguing ceased immediately and quickly the girls hid behind Twilight. Twilight stammered before answering the angry conductor's question.

"We're very sorry, sir. We were just practicing our shooting for our big game against Appleloosa."

The conductor still looked upon Twilight and friends with ignited eyes. "Well no more shootin' in here! You better hope I don't find any major dents in these walls! You're lucky we arrived in Appleloosa. Now 'git!"

Swiftly, the Golden Leafs exited the freezer car while offering their apologies to the conductor. They returned to the lodging car to grab Spike and their things. After boarding off the train, the girls walked about the station, looking for a familiar face. Off in the distance, a yellow pony in a brown hat and vest started charging toward the group. When the pony reached them, everyone recognized who it was and was happy to see him. It was Applejack's cousin Braeburn. He gave Applejack a hug and shook hooves with the others.

"Well hooooowdy, everypony! Welcome back to AAAAAaaaaAAAAAppleloosa!"

"Howdy right back at ya, Braeburn. How y'all doin'? asked Applejack.

"Doin' mighty fine, cousin. Now who's ready to head into town?"

Applejack and company happily agreed and they were off on their way.

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Strutting into town, Braeburn began talking up his plans for the evening.

"Sorry I can't hang 'round with you folks too long. I have a game to play tonight. I'm on the Appleloosa Black Apples, the best team in the Equestria Hockey League!"

Everyone gave a slight snicker as Applejack answered back. "Oh yeah? That's pretty great. Say, do you reckon who y'all are playin' tonight?"

Braeburn gave Applejack a large, smug-filled smirk. "We're playin' some poor expansion team who just started in the league. The somethin' Golden Lakes, or Golden Leafs, whatever. All's I know is that we're gonna kick their flanks."

The Golden Leafs all laughed at Braeburn's oblivious remarks except for Rainbow Dash who narrowed her eyes in slight irritation. Before Rainbow could correct Braeburn, Applejack put her hoof up to Rainbow's mouth to calm her down and to get her to play along.

"So why did y'all come to Appleloosa anyways?" Braeburn asked.

Twilight answered him. "Oh you know, for a little vacation and to get away from the snow."

"And to visit ol' Bloomberg. I've been wonderin' how he's been getting' along here in Appleloosa," Applejack said.

"He's been great. He's also playin' with me tonight."

Everyone stopped in their tracks and stared at Braeburn completely puzzled. Seeing the confusion glaring back at him, Braeburn continued.

"He's our startin' goalie. Boy howdy, he's one sturdy tree! Almost nothin' gets past him. We don't let too many shots get to him in the first place neither. Chief Thunderhooves and Sheriff Silverstar run a pretty tight defense I'll tell you what."

The Golden Leafs broke out of their confusion and smiled slyly to each other as Braeburn was unknowingly handing them a full on scouting report on his team.

Rarity walked next to Braeburn and batted her eyes. "Please, *do* tell us more! We're just *dying* to learn about the great Appleloosa Black Apples!"

"Aww shucks. Well, if y'all really want to know."

Before Braeburn could reveal more inside information, the clock tower in the center of town struck, echoing out into the mountains in the distance.

"Oh shoot, it's gettin' close to game time! I gotta run. Hey, maybe y'all should come watch me! It'll be a real hoedown tonight when we wreck the new team!"

Applejack stepped up to her cousin. "Oh, I have a feelin' we'll be there," she said with a wink to her teammates who smiled back.

"Great! See y'all later then!" yelled Braeburn as he raced off.

After he had left, the Golden Leafs and Spike looked at each other and cracked up with laughter. They settled down and continued their walk through the city, discussing the valuable information Braeburn had given them. After walking a few blocks, they saw a large building looming ahead where a throng of Appleloosans were gathering in front. Upon a closer look, the Golden Leafs saw it was indeed the Black Apples' arena, the U-Neighted Center. With a strategic advantage in their possession, they confidently strolled into the team entrance and made their way to their locker room.

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When the Golden Leafs entered their locker room, they saw that their locker stalls were shut and had a bunch of tiny little circles sticking on them. The circles were targets Twilight had Spike install. When her teammates were questioning what was on their lockers, Twilight explained.

"Those circles are targets. I wanted to drill it into your heads that our accuracy needs to be top notch if we want to win. In order to get to your uniforms, you need to hit each target with something. A puck, a hoof, a marshmallow. Anything!"

Thrilled for a new game, Pinkie Pie leaped toward her locker and started slamming her hooves all over, trying to hit her targets. She did so successfully and was already putting on her pads. The others made it to their respective lockers and did the same. All the stalls were soon unlocked and the Golden Leafs were in uniform. Twilight reviewed with her team what Braeburn had told them and together they came up with a strategy: to find a way past the Appleloosa defense and fire away. With their strategy set and game time approaching, they filed out of the locker room and headed out to the rink.

The U-Neighted Center provided a much different atmosphere than Maredison Square Garden or Ponyville Pond. The scene resembled an old western saloon, with Black Apples fans hollering and throwing items around

without restraint. The rowdiness made the arena a loud, unbearable asylum. When it was time for the Golden Leafs' introduction, the girls had to dart around to duck objects thrown at them. The Black Apples' introduction resulted in more yelling and gunshots being fired in the air. A stagecoach rolled its way onto the ice and came to a stop. The door was kicked open and a carpet unfurled for the incoming Black Apples players. *"Now put yer hooves together for the wildest, rootin'-tootinest team in the whole E-H-L! Heeeere's your AAAAAaaaaaAAAAPPLELOOSA BLACK APPLES!! First, playin' left wing, number 16, APPLE FRITTER! Playin' at center, number 7, LITTLEEE STRONGHEART! At right wing, number 2, BRAAAAEBURRRRRN!! On defense, number 40, CHIEEEEF THUNDERHOOVES! Also on defense, the cap'n, number 11, SHERIIIIIIFF SIIIIILLLLVERSTARRRR!! Finally, in goal, number 30, BLOOOOOOMBERG!!"*

The Black Apples stepped out of the stagecoach when their name was called and skated around the ice. When Bloomberg was called, a hoist lowered Bloomberg down in front of the net. Braeburn looked over to the Golden Leafs' lineup and nearly fell over when he saw his cousin Applejack and friends. He skated up to them, barely containing his laughter.

"Wait! You're tellin' me y'all are the Ponyville Golden Leafs? What a riot! I was lookin' forward to this game already but now I'm even more excited to whoop some flank. Have a good one gals!"

It was now the Golden Leafs started to become a bit miffed at Braeburn's arrogance. They kept to their end of the ice and skated around until the referee was ready to drop the puck. Eventually, both teams drifted to center for the opening faceoff. After Pinkie Pie signaled she was ready, the puck dropped and the Golden Leafs' third game was underway.

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Appleloosa controlled the puck early using a combination of adept passing and aggressive back-checking. Ponyville had a tough time getting the puck through the neutral zone because the stiff defense of Chief and Sheriff. They were either stepping up to either steal possession or block an outlet pass. After a few missed shots and a couple of saves by Pinkie, the Golden Leafs brought the puck into the Black Apples zone for the first time.

Appleloosa stuck close to their pony, knowing that they could not afford to give up open shots on their inanimate goalie. At the 6 minute mark, Rainbow had the puck behind the net. Rarity and Applejack tried shaking their defenders loose for a pass but nothing was working. Chief closed in fast on Rainbow as she scrambled to find an open teammate. Seeing that all the passing lanes were closed, Rainbow skated to the side boards where Chief followed her and pinned her. Braeburn also closed in to get the puck away. Squeezed along the boards with Appleloosa fans tapping on the glass furiously, Rainbow whipped the puck between her legs, hoping it would find a teammate. Rarity saw the trickling puck coming from the boards and tried her hardest to get to it. Apple Fritter nudged her a bit as they battled toward the floating puck. Rarity got in one last shove to break away and gained control of the puck. She gave a quick glance to the goal to see Bloomberg guarding nearly every inch of netting. Despite the small holes, Rarity slammed a shot toward the stout tree goalie. The puck glanced off Bloomberg's trunk and ricocheted just enough to catch the left post and re-direct into the net. Rarity jumped with joy as Rainbow escaped from the boards to celebrate with her. The remaining Golden Leafs joined in as the Appleloosans booed mercilessly and threw bottles toward the ice. Luckily a magical barrier had formed at the beginning of the game, bouncing the debris back to its thrower.

"Goal Ponyville. Scored by number 9, Rarity. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash, and number 0, Fluttershy."

For just the second time this season, Ponyville held the lead. Excited with their quick goal, the girls quickly set into faceoff formation with eagerness. Braeburn, standing side by side with Applejack, kept up his talk.

"Well whooooop-de-doo. Y'all think that scares us? We'll be back, jus' you wait."

"Then put yer money with yer mouth is, cousin," snorted Applejack in reply.

The puck dropped and play was back underway. With four minutes left in the period, Appleloosa tried pressuring the Ponyville defense. Apple Fritter had the puck on the left wing and shot it around the boards behind the net to Strongheart. Strongheart cycled it on around the boards to Braeburn. With Rarity on him and poking at the puck, Braeburn did a quick step to the

right and curled back left, spinning away from the boards and passing Rarity. In the slot, Braeburn wound up to shoot. As the puck flew off his stick blade, Fluttershy dove right in front and blocked it. The puck skipped off to the side where Rainbow picked it up and carried it out of the Golden Leaf zone.

With the massive frame of Chief and the agility of Sheriff in front of her, Rainbow decided to speed up and split the defenders. Chief and Sheriff pinched together to cut off Rainbow but her momentum carried all three of them forward. Zooming in on Bloomberg, Rainbow released a shot. The puck hit Bloomberg straight on and bounced back to strike Rainbow in the visor. Knocked for a loop, Rainbow gave up on the play and Appleloosa brought the puck back. Apple Fritter held the puck on the wing as she waited for Sheriff to pass the blue line. She passed it toward the blue line, allowing Sheriff to step into a one-time shot. Strongheart had parked herself in front of Pinkie and lifted her stick to deflect, but she missed the angle, deflecting the puck wide. With only six seconds left to go, Fluttershy tried firing a shot all the way down the ice. The puck appeared to be on its way past Bloomberg on the lower left corner but time expired. The net budged slightly as the puck hit the back of it, but the horn had already sounded.

Down at the end of the 1st period 1-0, the Appleloosa fan base voiced their displeasure and tried again to throw objects toward the Golden Leafs. Like before, the objects bounced off the barrier and Twilight and friends entered their locker room with the lead.

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In the locker room, the air was filled with gleeful chatter as everypony was fixing up their equipment. Applejack sat up and addressed her friends.

"Can y'all believe Braeburn? He still thinks his team is gon' win. He's a funny one."

Pinkie Pie giggled. "Yeah, he's pretty silly alright. He told us all about his team not even knowing we were the Golden Leafs! I mean, even I know not to do that!"

"Does anyone else feel a bit dirty? Like we're cheating?" Twilight asked

with a tinge of guilt in her voice.

Rainbow flew up to her. "No way! It's not like we pressured him into talking. We're fine!"

"Yeah, you're right. Alright team, let's stick to our plan and have a good second period!"

The Golden Leafs left their locker room and made it back out onto the ice. Appleloosa was already skating and waiting for them to arrive so they could start the 2nd.

===

Play was back on and Rainbow won the faceoff for her team. Twilight took the puck and passed it to Applejack who stood at the blue line. Applejack skated in to the corner and passed back to Fluttershy who now stood where Applejack was. With Strongheart charging at her, Fluttershy panicked and let off a wild shot. The puck hit Bloomberg and appeared to be headed to Sheriff but Rainbow sniffed out the angle and intercepted the rebound. Rainbow passed it right back to Fluttershy along the blue line who now had an open lane. Fluttershy took in a quick breath and shot. The puck skidded along the ice toward the lower right corner. With Apple Fritter on her, Applejack worked her way to the front of the net in case of a rebound. Unaware of the shot, Apple Fritter skated backwards into the crease trying to cover Applejack. Fluttershy's shot knocked against Fritter's skate and wound up in the net past Bloomberg. Applejack started cheering as she watched the puck slide in and dashed toward Fluttershy. Even though the goal light spun furiously, the Appleloosans booed heavily, and her teammates closed in and smothered her, it took Fluttershy a few seconds to register what just happened. When it finally clicked, Fluttershy flew up into the air and squealed for herself. Frustrated by the weak goal that just went in, Chief Thunderhooves rammed the boards to send a message.

"Goal Ponyville. Scored by number 0, Fluttershy. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash."

Twilight had to corral the happily bucking Fluttershy so that the referee could drop the puck. When play resumed, Ponyville had the puck again.

Rarity controlled the puck in the Appleloosa zone. She was on the left faceoff circle looking for an open teammate. Rainbow zipped in and out but she was still covered. Behind the net, Chief saw Rarity's stalling and pawed his hoof onto the ice to indicate an upcoming charge. As Rarity struggled to pass the puck off, Chief began his thunderous stride. With Rarity locked in his crosshairs, Chief Thunderhooves flattened Rarity with check fit for a steamroller. Rarity groaned in pain as her teammates tended to her and the referee blew the whistle.

"Appleloosa number 40. Two minutes for charging."

The crowd cheered with loud applause at the hit but then soured into booing and hissing when the referee made the penalty announcement. Chief Thunderhooves chuckled as he entered the penalty box. Seeing Rarity sprawled out upon the ice awoke something within Fluttershy. Her eyes began to spark and her nostrils flared. She slowly turned toward the Black Apples penalty box where Chief was still laughing and giving hoof bumps through the glass to the fans sitting around him. Fluttershy was appalled by Chief's lack of concern and remorse for his hit.

Under her breath, Fluttershy whispered "How dare you...you're next."

Braeburn skated up to Applejack to pitch in his two cents. "Whew nelly! That was a big ol' hit wasn't it? Hope your friend is alright. If y'all don't watch yerselves it might be you on that ice next."

"Would you just get on outta here?" snapped Applejack.

Braeburn gave out a laugh as he skated away. The referee called the teams together for the faceoff. Rainbow won the faceoff and it came to Twilight. Twilight shuffled the puck back and forth in front of her as the power play unit set up in their usual spots. Once her teammates were set, she passed to Rarity on the left who shoveled it to Rainbow behind the net. Sheriff and Braeburn started to close in but Rainbow noticed and pushed it to Applejack on the right wing. Applejack stepped in toward Apple Fritter in front of her and faked a shot. Fritter hit the ice to block but Applejack pulled back, skated to the side and let a shot rip. The shot was off target and deflected off of Bloomberg. The long rebound slid out of the reach of Strongheart and was back to Twilight. Behind the net, Rainbow broke away from Sheriff and circled to the front of the crease. Seeing Rainbow's move,

Twilight quickly fired the puck to her. Gliding toward the left side of the net, Rainbow picked up the puck. With a short flick of the stick, Rainbow snapped the puck past Bloomberg for a power play goal. The crowd erupted with more disdainful hollering as Chief Thunderhooves exited the penalty box. The Golden Leafs tapped Rainbow on the helmet and reset at center ice.

"Goal Ponyville. Scored by number 20, Rainbow Dash. Assisted by number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

At the faceoff, Fluttershy locked her sight onto Chief. She didn't look at anything else when play resumed. Ponyville won the faceoff again and brought it in on offense. Rarity received a pass from Twilight and shot but Sheriff jumped to block it into the corner. Appleloosa took control and brought it up and into the Ponyville zone. Fluttershy skated backwards, still following Chief Thunderhooves' every stride. Braeburn took the puck down into the corner where he was met by Applejack. They tussled and pushed in the corner, fighting for the puck. Strongheart swooped in and poked the puck free toward the blue line. Sheriff received the puck and passed it along the line to Chief. It was payback time. With the fire still in her eyes, Fluttershy bolted full speed at the giant buffalo.

"THIS IS FOR WHAT YOU DID TO RARITY!"

Chief looked up to see Fluttershy charging at him which caused him to pause in disbelief. Fluttershy roared out a war cry as she flew elbow first into Chief. **SLAM!** The Appleloosa defender was smashed into the boards. The force of the hit and the mass of Chief Thunderhooves caused the glass to give in and shatter. Chief spilled out onto the ponies sitting in the first row as broken glass rained down after. The fans instantly stood up and collectively let out a large gasp as they witnessed the most brutal check they've seen so far. Fluttershy proudly strode away from the boards with a smirk on her face. The other 9 skaters stared at Fluttershy with their jaws dropped. Fluttershy hummed a sweet tune to herself as she voluntarily entered the penalty box. The referee made his announcement.

"Uh...Ponyville number 0. Two minutes for boarding?"

Fans sitting around the Ponyville penalty box angrily shook their fists at

Fluttershy who kept her eyes closed and her smile beaming. Applejack was the one to skate up to Braeburn.

"How do y'all like them apples?" she said with a grin.

Braeburn shot an angry look right back. "That was a darn dirty hit, Applejack. Y'all know that. Shame on y'all."

"Dirty schmirty. We're still winnin'. Take that back to yer farm and buck it!"

Still irritated, Braeburn got into Applejack's face. "At least my farm ain't a rundown dump."

Applejack's eyes expanded in shock then quickly narrowed and her grin flipped into gritted teeth. "What...did...you...just...say?"

Seeing that he struck a nerve, Braeburn smiled. "You heard me. A rundown dump. 'Tis a shame Granny Smith let the place get so bad. Maybe she should retire and sell it off to ponies who are actually good at apple gathering!"

"Oh, you little rascal!"

Before Applejack could do anything, the referee skated in between them and sent them to the faceoff circle.

The Appleloosa power play began and Sheriff had the puck at the blue line. Down a defender, Applejack took over Fluttershy's spot on the penalty kill. Sheriff faked a shot and passed to Braeburn down in the corner. With Rarity pressing toward him, Braeburn passed to Apple Fritter who was barreling down the center. The puck found its way through a forest of skates and sticks onto Apple Fritter's blade. Fritter shifted to the right to which Pinkie leaned but Fritter then shifted back to the left to complete the deke. With an open net, Apple Fritter slapped the puck in. The goal horn exploded throughout the rafters and the Appleloosans finally had a reason to cheer. "Chelsea Flanker" by The Foaltellis magically played in the arena as the Black Apples celebrated their power play goal.

"GOOOOOOAAAALLLL! Scored by number 17, APPLEEEEE FRITTERRRRR!! Assisted by number 2, BRAEBURRRRRNNNN!! And number 11, SHERIIIIFFF SIIIIILVERSTARRRRR!!"

Fluttershy left the penalty box feeling calm and relaxed. Her friends were still shocked at her rageful check and were afraid to talk to her. Fluttershy laughed at them and assured them she was feeling better.

With only thirty seconds left in the period, the puck bounced back and forth between the two teams with no shots being fired. When the second period ended, a heavy amount of insults were hurled toward the exiting Golden Leafs. They ignored the crowd's yells and headed for the locker room.

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During the 2nd intermission, Rainbow Dash sat next to Fluttershy and gushed about her hit on Chief. Fluttershy kept smiling and basked in Rainbow's praise. Meanwhile, Applejack stewed angrily at her stall. She briskly reapplied tape to her stick as she grumbled to herself over Braeburn's comments. Twilight noticed Applejack's mood and tried talking to her.

"Is everything okay, Applejack?"

Applejack kept to her taping, not looking at Twilight once. "Sure ain't. That Braeburn's insultin' my family and runnin' his mouth. He's gon' get his next period. You can count on it."

Finished with their rest, the Golden Leafs were back out on the ice for the 3rd period.

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The 3rd period began with a flurry of physicality. Appleloosa and Ponyville exchanged hits trying to gain control of the puck. In the Ponyville zone, Apple Fritter passed the puck to Strongheart but Twilight intercepted. Twilight quickly pushed it to Applejack who was now part of a three-on-two with Rarity and Rainbow. Applejack crossed the blue line on her wing and passed to Rainbow. Sheriff lined up a check on Rainbow but she had

already passed to Rarity on the left wing. Rarity was waiting for the pass and ripped a one-timer. She focused the shot up into the top left corner where it whizzed past Bloomberg's trunk and into the net. Rarity once again jumped with exuberance for her second goal of the evening. She and Rainbow laughed together as they realized their shooting practice earlier that day had helped them greatly now.

"Goal Ponyville. Scored by number 9, Rarity. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash and number 88, Applejack."

The Golden Leafs were now running away with the game. On the ensuing faceoff, Strongheart won the faceoff but the puck ended up skipping over to Fluttershy. Fluttershy passed it over to Applejack who took the puck into the Appleloosa zone. Applejack hammered a shot from the faceoff circle which bounced in off of Bloomberg. The Golden Leafs once again celebrated another goal with tons of cheer and laughter. The Appleloosan crowd moaned and ponies began filing for the exits. Only a small smattering of Black Apples fans stayed for the current 5-1 blowout.

"Goal Ponyville. Scored by number 88, Applejack. Assisted by number 0, Fluttershy."

Greatly disgruntled by the developments of the game, Braeburn growled and formulated a plan in his head. When play resumed, Ponyville had the puck again. Rarity had the puck on the left faceoff circle and passed it to Rainbow behind the net. Rainbow saw Applejack open for a second and passed it over. Applejack retrieved the puck and skated into the slot. While Applejack wound up for a shot, Braeburn snuck up behind her and landed a devastating elbow to the back of her head. Applejack fell forward in hit her face on the ice with a thud. The referee relentlessly blew his whistle as Applejack's friends gathered around her.

Applejack got back to her hooves and shook out of a short daze. Immediately she bolted over to Braeburn.

"Oh you wanna throw down, Braeburn? LET'S THROW DOWN!"

"BRING IT!"

Applejack and Braeburn shook off their front leg skates and helmets and began circling each other. The small Appleloosa crowd stood up and cheered for the fight that was starting. Applejack and Braeburn kept circling each other, with each pony occasionally drifting in to try a move. When Applejack moved in again, she was able to grab a hold of Braeburn's collar and began wailing away. Braeburn punched back and the Apple fight was officially begun. Applejack landed two right hooks but Braeburn fought back and landed a stiff shot to Applejack's cheek. They then locked legs and twisted side to side, trying to gain leverage. In a flash, Applejack built up her strength and powered Braeburn to the ice. The referee skated in to separate the fighters. Applejack skated off to the Golden Leafs' locker room to heavy booing and hissing while Braeburn slowly drifted off toward the Black Apples' locker room.

Applejack's teammates were not sure what just happened and didn't know what to do next. Twilight, Rarity, and Fluttershy expressed their concern over Applejack while Rainbow was giddy and overexcited over the whole ordeal. With only a few minutes left, time played out and Ponyville notched another goal. Rainbow had the puck and deked out both Chief and Sheriff. Not extremely confident about her shot, she kicked the puck back to Twilight who waited at the blue line to fire a shot. The puck glanced off Bloomberg and pounded the back of the net. Twilight hopped about happily as she struck the final blow of the tension filled game.

The puck dropped again and for the Golden Leafs, it was now a waiting game.

0:03

0:02

0:01

0:00

BZZZZZZT

When the clock struck 0:00 and the final buzzer rung out, the Golden Leafs whipped their skates and sticks up into the air in pure bliss. The skaters

dashed toward their net and mobbed Pinkie Pie to celebrate their very first victory. The leftover Black Apples fans booed and left the arena as the Black Apples skated toward their locker room with their heads hanging in disappointment. Each Golden Leaf shared a hug and a headbutt before making their way to the locker room.

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Upon entering the locker room, the Golden Leafs' whooping and laughing quickly halted. Braeburn and Applejack were in the center of the room facing each other. The team suddenly grew concerned and stepped in.

Twilight rushed up to the two Apple kin. "Oh no, not again! Please stop fighting! The game's over now. There's no need for violence."

Braeburn and Applejack looked at Twilight and shared a laugh.

"It's okay, sugarcube. We just had a tiny scuffle on the ice out there. We talked and made up while y'all finished up."

Braeburn put his leg around Applejack. "Even though we might argue and fight, at the end of the day we're still family."

Twilight and the others let out a sigh of relief. Braeburn apologized to Applejack and her team for his actions earlier and congratulated them on their first win on his way out. After Braeburn left, Pinkie Pie retrieved seven bottles of cream soda and handed them out to her teammates and Spike. They knocked their bottles together while Twilight started a toast.

"To the Ponyville Golden Leafs! May tonight be the first of many more victories to come! To good friends, teamwork, and having fun!"

"Here here!" everyone shouted as they clanged bottles. Pinkie shook hers up and popped the cork to spray it at everyone. Rarity did the same and soon all seven of them were laughing and splashing each other with cream soda. Twilight and friends cleaned themselves and the locker room up before leaving the U-Neighted Center.

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The girls and Spike boarded the last train to Ponyville late into the night. The train rumbled on toward home as the Golden Leafs slept and replayed the night's victorious game in their dreams. When everyone awoke from their exhausted but peaceful slumber, the morning sun was waiting to greet them. After drowsily grabbing their belongings, the Golden Leafs trudged out from the Ponyville station. Even though it was the morning, Twilight and company couldn't believe what they saw before their eyes.

With congratulatory signs and banners, a large number of Ponyvillians gathered at the train station to welcome their hockey heroes back home. Ponies cheered and hollered as the Golden Leafs thanked each and every one of their fans with hoofshakes and autographs. The warm reception brushed the fires of confidence and pride within Twilight and her friends. With their hockey future shining brighter than ever, they happily trotted to Twilight's treehouse to go over the week's schedule.

When everyone reached the treehouse, a strange basket was sitting on the doorstep. Twilight curiously picked it up and inspected it. Pinkie Pie noticed a note tag hanging from the handle and alerted Twilight. Twilight snapped the tag off and read it.

"Dear Ponyville Golden Leafs,

Congratulations on your first win last night. Enjoy it now while you still can. See you losers in six weeks.

*Love,
The Great and Powerful Trixie"*

In the basket were six small bouquets of bright golden flowers. Rarity's eyes sparkled at the shining plants and gladly took one. Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy quickly grabbed theirs and admired their smell and color. Twilight was skeptical at first but eventually accepted the gift.

"I wonder why Trixie went through the trouble to send us this," said Twilight thinking out loud.

"Who cares, darling? These flowers are just divine!" replied Rarity.

Twilight took a closer look at the flowers and gave them a quick smell. "I don't know, something about this just doesn't feel right."

"Whatever. I'm just glad to be home and I can get some more sleep," piped up Rainbow.

As Rainbow went to fly away, Twilight grabbed her by the tail. "Don't leave just yet, we need to plan for practice and our next game. We have the Fillydelphia Flyers coming here next."

After the girls discussed their schedule for the week, they each departed for their respective homes. Twilight placed her golden flowers in a vase and set the vase on the table in the common room. Still exhausted from playing and the traveling, Twilight and Spike went upstairs and resumed their sleep.

The Ponyville Golden Leafs finally crossed their first hurdle, winning an EHL game. Twilight and her friends were able to experience the joy and satisfaction that comes with victory and now having tasted it, they would begin thirsting for more. With hard work and perseverance, the victory of the previous night will certainly not be the last.

Back in the common room, a cold breeze blew in through a slightly opened window. The wind brushed against the golden flowers and gently rustled them. Large golden flakes peeled away from the plant and fell to the table. Patches of light blue peered through the chipped golden façade. After another breeze swirled through the room, the flowers that were once a brilliant shade of gold were now a shade of blue. A familiar, treacherous shade of blue.

Poison Joke.

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Three Stars from Ponyville @ Appleloosa

** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

*** Fluttershy (PGL)*

**** Pinkie Pie (PGL)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Canterlot 5, MANEHATTAN 3

Cloudsdale 4, FILLYDELPHIA 1

EHL Standings (W-L)

Appleloosa 2-1

Cloudsdale 2-1

Manehattan 2-1

Fillydelphia 1-2

Canterlot 1-2

Ponyville 1-2

Chapter 6

Legion of Bloom

Twenty-four hours removed from the Ponyville Golden Leafs' first victory over the Appleloosa Black Apples, Twilight Sparkle awoke to begin a new day. Twilight slinked to the side of the bed and put all her hooves to the floor. After a big yawn and stretch, she made her way down the stairs a bit dazed. With eyes half shut, Twilight landed in the common room and surveyed the area. She saw some books lying askew on shelves, the curtains ruffled and swaying in the morning breeze, and a pile of golden flakes on the table. Unmotivated to clean up her living room, Twilight turned around to head back upstairs when a cold splash of fear sent a shockwave throughout her body. She ran to the table and saw the dangerous poison joke plant swaying innocently as if it was mocking her. Twilight's mind began to spin like a top as she inspected the golden flakes, panicking about what joke might have befallen her this time. Twilight ran upstairs to the mirror to check her horn. Looking at her reflection, Twilight didn't notice anything peculiar or different. She let out a sigh of relief until boisterous knocking on the door downstairs grabbed her attention. Upon opening the door, Applejack, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie leapt into the treehouse and mobbed Twilight, sending them all falling to the floor with a thud. After getting up, the ponies began to panic.

"I knew it! I just *knew* it! Trixie would never be that kind to send us flowers! Oh what a wretched trick!" cried Rarity.

Rainbow flew up into the air "You didn't know anything, Rarity! Twilight was

the one who thought it was suspicious! What are we going to do? WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DOOOO?!?"

"Oh no! What's happened to us this time? I hope I didn't lose my ability to talk! It would just horrible if I couldn't talk again! I remember last time when we were infected by the poison joke. It was sooooo bad! My tongue was all puffy and blue and I couldn't say anything!" shrieked Pinkie.

"Pinkie! You are talking! Calm down!" yelled Twilight.

Hoping to ease everybody's nerves, Applejack chimed in. "Well this time I ain't tiny. From the looks of it, it seems we ain't affected. Rainbow's wings are fine, Pinkie can talk, Rarity's mane is still the same, and Twilight's horn isn't floppin' around."

Everyone took a deep breath of relaxation at Applejack's assessment. Twilight walked over to her bookshelf to begin looking for her copy of *Supernaturals: Natural Remedies and Cure-Alls that are Simply Super*. "Perhaps Applejack is right girls. Maybe the poison joke didn't work this time."

Fluttershy nestled herself down onto a pillow. "We will be alright girls. Now let's all quiet down and enjoy a nice rest," she said in her normal, soft voice.

"NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!"

Fluttershy flew up and squeaked in fright as Twilight flung books from her book shelves. "It's not here! I can't find my book!"

The others gasped and quickly re-entered panic mode. Before the craziness got out of hand, Twilight stopped her searching and addressed her friends.

"As of right now, we don't know if the poison joke has affected us or not. I say we all relax and let's have our practice after lunch as scheduled."

Applejack shook her head in agreement. "I agree. Maybe we missed the bullet and nothin' will come over us."

Rarity, Pinkie, and Rainbow nodded hesitantly, although still showing signs of nervousness and fright. Twilight used her magic to dispense of the poison joke plant and sent her friends along their way.

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It was practice time as the Golden Leafs met up at Ponyville Pond. Afraid of the poison joke's effects, each pony slowly put on their uniforms and gingerly stepped out onto the ice. When it appeared nothing harmful or unfortunate was going to happen, the girls let out a sigh of relief and begun their practice routine. After taking their normal skating laps and going through their stretches, Twilight spoke up.

"Okay Golden Leafs. Our next opponent is the Fillydelphia Flyers. They're known for being a skilled, but dirty team. We have to be sharp and poised if we're going to win. They have a set of very talented twins who we'll need to keep in check; Caramela and Caramelo, the two wingers."

Rainbow raised her hoof. Annoyed by this, Twilight promptly interrupted. "Rainbow, why is it that you're ALWAYS the first pony to raise her hoof after I go over something? Can't you just listen to what I have to say and accept it?"

"Oh, I wasn't going to say anything. I was just stretching some more."

Twilight face-hoofed and continued on. "So today we're going to practice defensive assignments and covering the opponent. Using my magic, I'll have these pony-sized mannequins play like the Flyers do and we'll go from there. Any questions?" Twilight directed an intense stare at Rainbow. Rainbow pretended to raise her hoof but stopped and shook her head no.

With a blow of the whistle, Twilight's mannequins appeared out of thin air and began to skate like real players. The puck dropped in front of the center dummy and play was on. Without waiting, Rainbow Dash flew at her opposing player. When she came in closer, her wings suddenly sprang up and redirected her away causing her to miss the dummy.

Rainbow screeched to a stop and turned around toward her teammates. "What? What just happened?"

"Your wings popped out and forced you away!" gasped Rarity.

The fake opponent passed the puck to the left wing dummy which stood in front of Applejack. Sensing a good opportunity for a check, Applejack started her stride. Even though Applejack's legs were moving, she was skating slower than a snail. She clenched her teeth and tried powering her legs more but didn't move any faster.

"Now what in tarnation?! I cain't move at all! My legs are churnin' but I ain't burnin'!"

"It's the poison joke! We're dooooooomed!" yelled Pinkie from out her goalie mask.

With uneasiness growing inside her, Twilight naively tried to dismiss it. "Uhh maybe her skates are just dull?"

The right wing mannequin zipped across the middle of the zone and passed off to the left wing dummy. Rarity attempted to skate closer but as soon as she took her first step, her legs gave out from under her and she tripped face first. Rarity slowly got up and cried.

"Oh it's no use! We *are* infected! I don't know what happened to my legs! We're ruined!"

Again, Twilight tried to dismiss it. "Oh Rarity, you were just clumsy. Get back up and you'll be fine."

Now standing, Rarity tried a few quick strides but quickly tumbled back down to the ice. She remained sprawled out on the ice and began weeping.

The left wing dummy passed over to the center dummy who was behind the net. Fluttershy quickly turned around to go cover the puck holder. As Fluttershy skated toward the center dummy, her helmet expanded in size and blocked her sight. Fluttershy screamed as she kept skating blindly toward the back of the net. The center dummy dodged the incoming Fluttershy and passed the puck around the boards. Visually impaired, Fluttershy rammed into the side post of the net and knocked Pinkie over. Pinkie helped Fluttershy up and turned to Twilight.

"Now do you believe Twilight? Now do you believe that...we're dooooooooooomed?!"

"Uhh maybe her helmet straps need to be tightened? I'll get Spike right on that."

"TWILIGHT!" everypony yelled.

Twilight stammered to defend her notion. "But we don't know if Pinkie or I are infected yet. We could get by with a few of you having equipment issues."

By this time, the puck was back on the stick of the left wing dummy. The dummy wound up for a shot but the erratically skating Rainbow was able to swoop by and alter the shot. The puck weakly skidded along the ice and ended up on Twilight's stick. As Twilight shot the puck away, her stick nearly crumbled inside her mouth. The wooden stick softened into rubber and flopped at the puck. Twilight looked down in disbelief at the center dummy picked up the puck and took it to the net. The mannequin flicked a quick shot right at Pinkie. She stuck her glove out for the save but couldn't catch it. Like a slippery bar of soap, the puck squirted out of Pinkie's glove and landed next to her. The right wing dummy was waiting there at the doorstep to put in the rebound. With that goal, all the Golden Leafs turned to Twilight with a mix of despair and irritation on their faces.

Twilight sighed in defeat. "I guess we are infected by the poison joke. But how are we going to get a cure in time? We play Fillydelphia tonight!"

"We gotta go to Zecora's! She knows how to fix us up. We gotta go now if we wanna be ready in time!" said Applejack as she began taking off her uniform.

Quickly following Applejack's lead, the Golden Leafs rushed off to the locker room to change before heading out toward the Everfree Forest.

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Swiftly galloping through the Everfree Forest, the Golden Leafs arrived at Zecora's house. More panic swept over them as they saw there was no light shining from inside.

"Look at the door! A note!" said Pinkie anxiously.

Twilight ran up to the door to read the note.

"If it is help that you seek, I'll be back in about a week. I am off to Canterlot with my latest remedy invention. To present and sell at the Equestria Pharmaceutical Convention."

- Zecora

Immediately Rarity and Rainbow hugged each other in a panic. "We're doooooomed!"

"Hey! That's my line!" yelled Pinkie.

The ponies began arguing and freaking out. Twilight tried to get in between to calm her friends down but was drowned out by their anguish and sorrow. With horn glowing, Twilight shut her friends' mouths like zippers.

"We don't need Zecora! I think I still remember the recipe from last time. Let's go back to the treehouse, make the remedy, then we'll be on our way."

Staring at Twilight, the others closed their eyes to show calmness. As soon as Twilight unzipped their mouths open, everypony was back to arguing and yelling. Not affording to waste any more time, Twilight galloped off to which the others followed.

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Back at the treehouse, Twilight furiously whipped together the remedy with Spike's help. The other ponies were sleeping around the living room thanks to a much needed lullaby sung by Fluttershy when they arrived. Spike's tiny arms weren't enough to swirl the potion so Twilight nudged him aside to take over.

"Sorry, Spike. I've got to get this remedy done quickly. Oh I hope I remembered the right ingredients and amounts!"

"What about your copy of the Supernaturals book?"

"I don't know what happened to it. I looked everywhere and couldn't find it."

"Did you try asking Aloe and Lotus at the spa?"

Completely forgetting the spa ponies had asked for Zecora's recipe, Twilight smacked herself with her hoof. "No, but there's no time now. I have to finish this!"

"You know you could've asked Apple Bloom too, she went and gathered the ingredients for Zecora."

Twilight spun the stirring stick faster. "You're not helping Spike!"

"I just calls it hows I sees it Twilight," said Spike in a fake tough guy voice as he walked away.

A few more twirls and the remedy was done. Twilight jumped inside the pot. She paused to wait for it to kick in but remembered it would be back on the ice where they would notice if it worked. One by one, Twilight rushed around the living room waking up the others and getting them to bathe in their share of the remedy. After drying off, the Golden Leafs left for Ponyville Pond.

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While walking toward the players' entrance, the Golden Leafs noticed a crowd of ponies standing around a booth in front of the arena. Upon further inspection, they saw the same golden flowers that had arrived in Trixie's gift basket. With a gasp and an angry growl, the Golden Leafs trotted up to the booth. It was a flower shop selling various plants, including roses, lilies, daisies, and the golden flowers. Rarity and Twilight used their magic to pull the golden flowers off the cart and beat them against the ground. The ponies around the cart fled in shock as the Golden Leafs thwarted the new batch of golden plants. Before Twilight and company could leave, three voices erupted from a distance and grew louder.

"What's the big idea?"

"Yeah! What are you doing with our flowers?"

"Get out of here you meanies!"

It was the Flower Sisters; Rose, Lily, and Daisy. They galloped up to the Golden Leafs in a huff. Rarity walked up to them and pointed to the golden flowers.

"These flowers of yours contain poison joke! They look gold, but it chips off to reveal its true self!"

"How dare you! We would never sell poison joke!" said Rose with a scowl.

"Oh yeah? We'll see about that!" yelled Rainbow as she flew up to Rose.

Lily walked to the beaten golden flowers and picked it up by her teeth. She approached the Golden Leafs and spit them out toward them, to which the Leafs repelled in fright.

"See? We told you. They're just our special species of golden flowers our grandmother taught us how to grow. You owe us big time!" squealed Daisy.

Rainbow turned her attention to Daisy. "We don't owe you anything! You-"

Twilight yanked Rainbow by the tail to bring her down. With extreme guilt, Twilight apologized to the Flower Sisters.

"We're deeply sorry ladies. It's just that we were given a bouquet of those golden flowers which turned out to be poison joke. Because of the poison joke, we can't play hockey very well. We're sorry to have destroyed your work and we'll pay you back."

"We don't want your money!" said Rose. "We'll see you out on the ice!"

Turning their noses up into the air, the Flower Sisters closed up their cart and walked to the visitor's entrance to the arena.

The Golden Leafs watched on as their opponents entered the arena. Out of nowhere, Apple Bloom appeared and happily skipped in behind the Flower

Sisters. Applejack saw her little sister and was immediately confused and concerned.

"What in tarnation...APPLE BLOOM! Y'all get back here...ya'hear!"

Apple Bloom didn't hear her sister's call and continued inside. Applejack tried yelling again but it was no use. The Golden Leafs reached their entrance and made their way to the locker room.

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Inside the locker room, the Golden Leafs were finishing putting on their gear. An aura of uncertainty and hesitation filled the air as the girls wondered if Twilight's potion was going to rid them of their hockey-related ailments. Fluttershy checked her helmet inside and out for any funny business. She put it on like normal and it fit perfectly. The two minute warning horn buzzed inside the arena, prompting Twilight to address her team.

"Alright girls. We won't know if the poison joke still affects us until we step out on that ice. If there's still some lingering misfortune, then try as hard as you can to overcome your issue. We'll have to learn to play through this adversity."

Rainbow began to raise her hoof until she remembered what Twilight told her at practice. Instead, she just blurted out. "What's adversity?"

"A disadvantage! Now let's get out there and do our best!"

Somewhat inspired but mostly apprehensive, the Golden Leafs took to the ice.

===

The Ponyville fans were much more vocal and supportive for the second home game since the Golden Leafs were coming off their first victory. A loud "GO LEAFS GO!" chant broke out as the lights went down and the introductions began. Spike introduced the Fillydelphia Flyers first.

The forwards for Fillydelphia from left wing to center to right wing were #33

Caramela, #14 Rose, and #22 Caramelo. Fillydelphia's defense consisted of the remaining Flower Sisters, #3 Daisy and #20 Lily. Their goalie, the third and final Cutie Mark Crusader the Golden Leafs will have faced, was #32 Apple Bloom. Hoping to not only to earn her cutie mark but to prove herself to Applejack, Apple Bloom prepped inside the crease with a purpose. She was more focused and determined than her fellow Crusaders during their performances against the Golden Leafs.

Quickly following the Flyers' emergence onto the ice were the Golden Leafs' introductions. Spike repeated his script from the home opener to lead each Golden Leaf onto the ice. The fans roared louder as each skater was announced. Applejack looked toward the Flyers' end to see Apple Bloom hopping around the crease, practicing her save maneuvers. Applejack swiftly skated down to her with slightly angry visage.

"Apple Bloom! You take off them goalie pads right now you hear me?!"

"I cain't Applejack! I'm the Flyers' goalie! I've been playin' for them for a few games now!"

"Then how come I ain't seen you leave the farm?"

"Ya know all them visits to Aunt and Uncle Orange's that Granny Smith and Big Macintosh have been tellin' you about? Hehe."

"What the hay? Granny and Mac haven't told me anythin'."

Before Applejack could go on, the referee skated over to direct Applejack back to the Ponyville side of the ice. Apple Bloom lifted up her mask and gave Applejack a wink and stuck out her tongue. Both teams set up at the faceoff circle to begin. With the Flower Sisters' anger from the pre-game altercation, Applejack's confusion toward Apple Bloom, and the looming uncertainty about the effectiveness of Twilight's poison joke remedy, the puck dropped to begin the game.

===

Fillydelphia won the opening faceoff and the Golden Leafs retreated back into their zone, afraid to challenge the Flyer forwards in fear of the poison joke. Daisy passed to Caramelo who took it into the offensive end.

Caramelo whipped the puck around the boards to Caramela who was waiting for it. The Golden Leafs collapsed into their penalty kill set-up, allowing the Flyers to pass back and forth and around. Tired of sitting back and letting the Flyers buzz around them, Twilight stepped over to battle Caramela for the puck. After a few pokes and jabs, Twilight won control of the puck and attempted to pass. As Twilight nudged her head to pass, her stick softened up again. The now rubber stick flopped and only pushed the puck a few feet forward. Lily noticed Twilight's struggle and stepped up to steal the puck back. Lily zipped a pass over to Caramelo on the right wing. Caramelo stalled as his sister circled around Fluttershy and broke open in the slot. Caramelo flicked a pass to the center where Caramela one-timed it on net. The puck was too quick for Pinkie as it clanged the bottom of the crossbar and ended up in the net. The Caramel twins met behind the net to celebrate while the Golden Leafs drifted toward Twilight in frustration.

"Fillydelphia goal scored by number 33 Caramela! Assisted by number 22 Caramelo and number 20 Lily."

"Ugh! The potion didn't work! Great job Twilight!" Rainbow sneered.

Applejack tapped Rainbow on the helmet. "Chill out Rainbow. I didn't see y'all try to help!"

"We're doooooooooomed!" yelled Pinkie from the crease.

Twilight looked away from her teammates. "I'm sorry everypony. I thought I remembered enough of the recipe. If we lose, I'll take the blame."

"It's okay, dear. We're a team so if we lose, it will be all our faults. Especially Rainbow's," said Rarity as she skated up to Twilight to console her.

Rainbow stepped toward Rarity with nostrils flared. "Hey!"

The referee approached the girls and directed them to center ice for the faceoff. Fillydelphia had the puck once again and entered the Ponyville zone. Rose carried the puck in through the neutral zone and looked for an open teammate. Rainbow was done being hesitant and skated over to try to steal the puck. As Rainbow approached, Rose skated toward the right

boards. Rose passed the puck back to the blue line to Daisy which made Rainbow change her direction. However, Rainbow's wings popped out and kept her drifting toward Rose. Both Rainbow and Rose yelled as they crashed into the glass together. The referee blazed over with whistle chirping. The Ponyville crowd began booing as the referee made the penalty announcement.

"Ponyville number 20, two minutes for interference."

Frustrated, Rainbow pushed Rose off of her and skated to the penalty box. The Fillydelphia power play soon began and they peppered shots on Pinkie. Due to Pinkie's slippery pads, the puck squirted back to Fillydelphia after each attempt. Caramela had the puck on the left wing boards looking to make a play. Fluttershy skated toward her but quickly lost sight as her helmet dropped over her face. Caramela stepped aside as Fluttershy crashed into the boards and passed it over to Daisy on the blue line. Daisy slapped a shot on net, through the Golden Leafs' box. As the puck flew toward the net, Rose peeled around from behind the net to the center and tipped the puck in flight. Pinkie shifted across the crease but didn't plan on the redirection. The puck pounded the back of the net for the Fillydelphia power play goal.

"Fillydelphia power play goal scored by number 14, Rose! Assisted by number 33 Caramelo and number 3 Daisy!"

A chorus of booing rung out into the arena air as the Flyers converged upon Rose to cheer for their goal. Twilight received another angry glare from Rainbow who exited the penalty box. Twilight could only look down in response.

Play was back on and finally Ponyville had the puck. Despite her floppy stick, Twilight was able to push the puck to Rarity on the left wing. Rarity entered the zone and tried with all her might to stay balanced and skate down into the corner. It was to no avail as Lily skated around and poked the puck away. As Rarity began to give chase, she fell forward and caught Lily's back skate, causing her to fall. The referee held his hoof up and blew the whistle when Rainbow touched the puck. Rarity got up from the ice and stumbled toward the penalty box while pouting.

"Ponyville number 9, two minutes for tripping."

The other Golden Leafs threw up their front legs in frustration as they found themselves back on the penalty kill. Fillydelphia won the faceoff and went back to work passing around the Golden Leafs' formation. Daisy passed along the blue line to Lily who passed off to Caramela on the left wing. Caramela cycled behind the net where Twilight skated to cut her off. Caramela skated side by side with Twilight behind the net toward the corner. Rose bolted through the center and tapped her stick for Caramella. Caramela scooted the puck between her legs toward Rose who was open to Pinkie's right. Fluttershy approached her but was blinded again, skating wildly toward the net. Seeing Fluttershy coming up on Rose, Caramelo sprinted to the other side of the net and called for the puck. Rose flicked it through the crease, out and away from Pinkie's poke check attempt. The puck arrived right to Caramelo who slammed it in. It was now becoming a familiar sight; the Flyers celebrating a goal, a Golden Leaf dejectedly exiting the penalty box, and the crowd voicing their displeasure.

"Fillydelphia power play goal, scored by number 33, Caramelo! Assisted by number 14, Rose, and number 22, Caramela!"

The Golden Leafs were quickly becoming discouraged. They sadly drifted over for a new faceoff and lost it again. Luckily, there were only a few seconds left in the period. The final horn for the first period sounded like temporary relief for Ponyville as they were outscored, outshot, and outskilled the 1st period.

Amidst heavy booing, the Golden Leafs retreated to their locker room.

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Back in the locker room, the mood was grim and deflating. Each pony kept to themselves, especially Twilight who was feeling the weight of guilt and failure pushing upon her shoulders. Seeing the gloomy disposition of her teammates, Applejack decided to take over the pep talk.

"We need ta' stop feelin' sorry for ourselves and get back ta' business. Sure it ain't lookin' pretty out there right now but we still have the talent to get back in this thing! We just need to focus harder to overcome the poison

joke. I want each and every one of y'all to stand up, look me in the eye, and promise me your best effort this period!"

Applejack stood in front of Rainbow. Rainbow stared back unenthused and stuck her tongue out. Applejack narrowed her eyes and delivered a headbutt to her friend. Rainbow reeled from the hit and promised Applejack her best effort. Going down the line, the rest of the Golden Leafs made their promise. Twilight stood up and flashed a smile.

"Thanks, Applejack."

"No problem, Twi. We'll get through this."

With their mood a little less dour, the Golden Leafs trotted out for the 2nd period.

===

The 2nd period started much better for the Golden Leafs. Rainbow won the faceoff to Fluttershy who passed to Applejack entering the zone. Applejack, despite her slow skating, endured a check and kept control of the puck. She went down into the corner with Caramela right on her. Rainbow darted back and forth toward them and grabbed the puck. Rainbow's wings pushed her in all different directions which threw off the Fillydelphia defense. Rainbow was able to fire off Ponyville's first shot which was caught by a leaping Apple Bloom. Apple Bloom gave the puck off to Rose who skated up the center. Rarity veered over to challenge Rose and was stumbling along beside her. As Rarity poked at the puck, her legs gave out. She was able to dive away from Rose without touching her. Rose noticed Rarity's fall and fell herself, acting like she was tripped. The referee blew the whistle and skated over toward the two fallen ponies.

"Fillydelphia, number 14, two minutes for embellishment."

The Ponyville crowd cheered as Rose angrily stood up and argued the call. The referee pointed toward the penalty box and Rose skated to it, still arguing. The Golden Leafs caught a break and were about to begin their first power play of the evening. Rainbow won the ensuing faceoff and pushed it to Twilight. Twilight quickly got to her spot along the blue line and passed over to Fluttershy before her stick turned to mush. Fluttershy

watched as her teammates struggled to get to their positions so she fired at the net. Rainbow's wings propelled her into the path of the flying puck. Without noticing the puck, Rainbow's skate deflected it up into the corner of the net where Apple Bloom was too short to jump up and reach. The goal horn blared out and the goal light flickered catching Rainbow off guard. She jumped when she realized the goal and was quickly mobbed by her teammates.

"GOOOOAAALLL!! On the power play, number 20, Rainbow Dash! Assisted by number 0, Fluttershy, and number 42, Twilight Sparkle!"

Ponyville was finally on the board and their fans gave out a rare cheer. Rose stormed out of the penalty box as the teams drifted in for the faceoff. Fillydelphia won the faceoff and were in Ponyville's zone. After a few shots on Pinkie, Fluttershy was able to shoot the puck out to Rainbow. Fillydelphia ramped up their physicality and were soon hitting any Golden Leaf who even sniffed the puck. This new strategy overwhelmed Ponyville because they did not have the power or the control to hit back due to the poison joke. Fillydelphia had the puck back in the Golden Leaf zone and were firing away.

With nearly a minute left in the 2nd period, a shot on Pinkie ricocheted all the way down the center of the ice. Applejack had a head start and tried skating after it. Soon both teams were on her tail trying to get the puck. Rose caught up to Applejack and sneakily dug a knee into her side, knocking Applejack off track. Applejack spun into the boards while Rose sprinted back toward the Ponyville zone. Rose was able to deke out Fluttershy and danced around Twilight and her flopping stick. With a head fake, Rose caught Pinkie out of position and drilled the puck into the top left corner for the unassisted goal.

"Goal Fillydelphia! Scored unassisted by number 14, Rose!"

All the momentum the Golden Leafs had built up with their power play goal quickly disintegrated. Now down 4-1, they waited for the last fifteen seconds of the 2nd period to run out so they could regroup one last time.

On cue, the horn sounded and a groan rang out from the Golden Leafs

faithful. It was time to get back to the drawing board and figure out a way to rise above the poison joke and the Flyers.

===

Twilight and friends gathered together to devise a strategy that would help them get back into the game.

"How about we whip up some baked bads and send them over to their locker room? I love baking! Applejack, you can help me again!" Pinkie suggested.

Twilight dismissed Pinkie's idea. "Nah, that's not going to work. How about we play bad on purpose so it counteracts with the poison joke? Thus, we'll be good again!"

As the Golden Leafs strategized, the doors to the locker room burst open. A brown hooded pony rushed into the room with a bottle hanging from her neck. With a flip of her hood, the pony was revealed to be a zebra. Zecora had returned and was panting with exhaustion. The Golden Leafs' eyes lit up in extreme delight as they ran to meet her.

"A cry I heard, from you pony folk, about the troubles you received from the poison joke. I was made aware by your dragon friend, so I left to put your strife to an end."

Twilight smiled at Spike and gave him a playful nudge. Zecora distributed her remedy out to everypony as she continued on. The Golden Leafs chugged down the potion and were immediately energized.

"Do you like it? My new medicine drink? It works faster than you can blink. Off I'll go with no need to thank. Now get out there and kick some flank!"

In unison, Twilight and friends shouted their thanks to the departing Zecora. They stood up with immense confidence bubbling up inside them. Anxious, they galloped to the rink for the start of the 3rd period.

===

Fillydelphia and Ponyville met at center ice for the faceoff. Rainbow and

Rose tied up each other with the puck at their hooves. Applejack, in a full, swift stride, swept up the puck and took it into the Fillydelphia zone. Rainbow sprinted straight down the center, wings staying in place. Applejack sniped the pass through Caramela's legs onto Rainbow's stick. Rainbow dangled around a diving Lily and entered the crease. Rainbow skidded to stop, spraying ice flakes into Apple Bloom's mask. Apple Bloom let out a "HEY!" as Rainbow pounded the puck in the net for a very quick goal.

"GOOOAAALLL! Scored by number 20, Rainbow Dash! Assisted by number 88, Applejack!"

Rainbow glided around the net, wildly celebrating as she was no longer under the annoying hold of the poison joke. The crowd sprung to life and cheered the latest goal as the Golden Leafs celebrated at center ice. A loud "GO LEAFS GO!" chant broke out again as the teams lined up for the faceoff. Rainbow won the puck and kicked it to Fluttershy. Fluttershy, able to see clearly, passed the puck to Rarity along the boards. Rarity skated down toward the net but was cut off by Daisy. Rarity spun back around and saw Twilight open at the blue line. Rarity slapped the puck to Twilight who waited for a play to develop. Applejack, who was covered behind the net by Caramela, quickly dashed to the faceoff circle. Twilight snapped a pass to Applejack. With a hard slap, Applejack fired on net. Apple Bloom reached her glove hoof up to catch it, but the force of the shot propelled her into the net. In pain, Apple Bloom dropped the puck inside the net for another Ponyville goal.

Louder cheers exploded from the stands as Ponyville fought back to a 4-3 deficit. Applejack greeted her teammates and exchanged helmet bumps as the goal horn overpowered the crowd. In the Fillydelphia net, Apple Bloom shook her glove off and was holding her hoof with tears welling up in her eyes. Applejack saw this and briskly skated over to her.

Apple Bloom looked up at Applejack and stopped her sniffing. "That didn't hurt! That was...nothin'!"

Applejack smiled down at Apple Bloom and planted a kiss on her injured hoof. "It'll feel better now."

"Thanks, sis," said Apple Bloom with a smile and her tears rolling away.

"GOOOAAAALLL!! Scored by number 88, Applejack! Assisted by number 42, Twilight Sparkle! And number 9, the beautiful and elegant Rarity!"

Applejack regrouped with her team and awaited the faceoff. Now a one goal game, the buzz returned to the atmosphere. The flurry of quick goals revived the crowd and now there were yelling and chanting. The puck dropped again and Fillydelphia finally pushed the puck into the Ponyville end. With the puck dumped into the corner, Twilight went after it and arrived before Rose. They fought along the boards until Twilight kicked it free along the boards toward Rarity. Rarity grabbed the puck and headed up the ice. Afraid of another Golden Leafs rush, Caramelo skated in toward Rarity. Leading with his knee, Caramelo landed a crushing hit. Rarity fell to the ice in a heap. Caramelo quickly skated off but was caught by the referee.

"Fillydelphia penalty, number 33, two minutes for roughing!"

The crowd cheered wildly as Caramelo sheepishly entered the penalty box. The fans sitting around the box taunted the Flyers right winger as the Golden Leafs began a very crucial power play. Rainbow won the puck to Twilight who passed to Fluttershy while the others got into position. Fluttershy passed to Rarity on the left wing who passed the Rainbow behind the net. Rainbow passed back to Rarity who swung it over to Twilight. Twilight wound up to shoot, but Rose dove to knock it away with her stick. Rose quickly got up and took the puck for a shorthanded breakaway. Pinkie skated up to cut down Rose's angle. With Rose closing in and Pinkie drifting back, the crowd stood up to watch. Rose tried a deke but Pinkie stayed still. Running out of room, Rose fired a shot toward the top corner. Pinkie raised her blocker hoof and knocked the puck off to the corner. A loud cheer exploded after Pinkie's save as Twilight retrieved the puck. Another "GO LEAFS GO!" chant echoed to the rafters as Twilight carried the puck down the center herself. Seeing the Flyers defense sagging back deep in their zone, Twilight stepped over the blue line and fired a shot with all her strength. Like a bullet, the puck zinged off the bottom edge of the crossbar and landed in behind Apple Bloom who turned around in disbelief.

"POWER PLAY GOOOOOAAAAALLLL!! Scored by number 42, Twilight Sparkle! Assisted by number 33, Pinkie Pie!

Twilight was bowled over by her friends in the corner as the arena hit a fever pitch. The Golden Leafs valiantly fought back to force a 4-4 tie. Caramelo slammed his stick on the ice upon leaving the box and broke it. The "GO LEAFS GO!" chant was louder than ever as both teams reset at center ice for the faceoff. Only one minute remained. Fillydelphia all wore a scowl and gnashed their teeth in determination to take the lead back. The puck dropped and Fillydelphia took control. Daisy dumped the puck into the corner and Rose chased after it with fury. Fluttershy drifted toward the puck but Rose thundered in to take it. Caramela circled along the left wing boards but was covered closely by Rarity. Thirty seconds left. Rose fought off Fluttershy and was met by Applejack. Applejack pried and poked at the puck but Rose was resilient. Finally, Rose passed the puck along the right wing boards to Lily who was at the blue line. Twenty seconds left. Following the play, Rainbow quickly changed her direction and went after Lily. Lily reared her head back for a big shot. Seeing this, Rainbow sprung forward with a dive. As Lily's stick came down on the puck, Rainbow's diving stick pushed the puck out of the way, bouncing it off the boards into the neutral zone in front of the Ponyville bench. Ten seconds left. Lily followed through with her shot but had no puck left to shoot. Rainbow jumped to her skates and bolted for the puck. With time running down, Rainbow picked up the puck and was off on a breakaway. The entire arena rose to their hooves and yelled wildly as Rainbow carried the puck over the Fillydelphia blue line with seven seconds left. Apple Bloom skated out a bit while Rainbow zoomed in.

0:06

Rainbow arched her path along the left boards, creating a wide angle. Apple Bloom retreated back to the crease and hugged the left post.

0:05

Rainbow started her cut in toward the crease. The crowd's cheering morphed into a deafening yell as Apple Bloom took in a giant gulp.

0:04

Coming in on the crease, Rainbow held the puck against the ice with the tip of her stick. Apple Bloom jumped forward to try to poke check it away.

0:03

Quickly snapping back her neck, Rainbow tucked the puck in toward her skates as Apple Bloom was left hanging out to dry, sprawled out in the crease.

0:02

With a wide open net in front of her, Rainbow focused in and fired the puck.

0:01

"SCOOOORRREEEEE!! SCOOOORRREEEEE!! PONYVILLE SCORES WITH TIME EXPIRING!! PONYVILLE WINS!! PONYVILLE WINS!!

Like an explosion, Ponyville Pond erupted with a yell that could carry out all the way to Canterlot. Rainbow Dash spread her wings and flew around the perimeter of the rink, squealing in absolute joy. The other Golden Leafs excitedly skated under her, waiting for her to land. With her wings getting tired, Rainbow hovered down to the ice surface where she was immediately engulfed by her teammates. Many of the fans who wore hats that evening threw them onto the ice for Rainbow Dash's hat trick. Fireworks exploded around the scoreboard as streamers and hats rained from the sky.

On the other end of the ice, the Flyers all snapped their sticks in half and tossed them into the bench arena. Not wanting to watch the celebration, they stormed off to their locker room. The Golden Leafs laughed as they peeled themselves up from their pony pile. They waved to their fans as they skated off toward the locker room.

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Back in the locker room, the celebration continued. Pinkie Pie pulled out balloons, party hats, kazoos, and a cake from her stall. After disposing of their sweat-filled uniforms, the Golden Leafs partied and danced the night

away.

During the party, Apple Bloom walked in. She ran up to Applejack and gave her a hug. Then Apple Bloom motioned for Applejack to lend her an ear. Apple Bloom proceeded to whisper something to her sister, something important enough to make Applejack yell "WHAT?!" and cut off the party music.

Applejack turned to her friends with urgency in her voice. "Y'all wanna hear what Apple Bloom just told me?"

"What? What's wrong Applejack?" asked Twilight cautiously.

"Accordin' to Apple Bloom, it WAS those danged Flower Sisters who sent the poison joke to us! Apple Bloom said they were upset the poison joke didn't make us lose tonight."

Twilight stepped toward the Apple filly. "Is that right, Apple Bloom?"

"Yes it is, Twilight. They wrote Trixie's name on the card to throw y'all off their trail. I didn't know 'bout it 'til they argued with each other after the game was over."

"A-ha! I just *knew* it was them! They acted soooo innocent too. I saw right through their little disguise," Rarity said proudly as Rainbow rolled her eyes.

Twilight chimed in. "Well it doesn't matter now. We won and they can't take that away from us. Goes to show you that cheaters never win in the end. We'll just have to keep that in mind when we go to Fillydelphia. Thanks for telling us, Apple Bloom."

"Sure thing, Twilight! Hey! Maybe I got my truth-telling cutie mark!" said Apple Bloom as she checked her flank. The Golden Leafs laughed and cleaned up the locker room.

===

When Twilight and friends exited the arena, a small throng of fans were waiting for them and cheered when they emerged from the door. Many pictures were taken and autographs were signed. Rarity noticed a few

ponies wearing Golden Leafs jerseys which made a wide smile appear on her face. After spending some time with their fans, the Golden Leafs departed for Twilight's house.

At the house, Twilight debriefed them on when their next practice would be and on their next opponent, the Canterlot Equestrians. Twilight stressed the importance of playing Canterlot and how they're Princess Celestia's favorite team and that Princess Luna is their starting center. Exhausted, but cheerful, the Golden Leafs broke for the evening and went home.

The night was a very thrilling and successful one. The Golden Leafs overcame multiple hurdles to gain their first home victory and their first ever winning streak. Their teamwork and determination shone through adversity and allowed them to win together. With their confidence swelling and momentum growing behind them, the Golden Leafs would now turn their focus toward their next opponent, Equestria's team.

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Three Stars from Fillydelphia @ Ponyville

** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

*** Rose (FIL)*

**** Twilight Sparkle (PGL)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

APPLELOOSA 2, Manehattan 0

CLOUDSDALE 2, Canterlot 1

EHL Standings

Appleloosa 3-1

Cloudsdale 3-1

Manehattan 2-2

Ponyville 2-2

Fillydelphia 1-3

Canterlot 1-3

Chapter 7

Royal Treatment

The following day after the Golden Leafs' exhilarating victory over the Fillydelphia Flyers, Ponyville buzzed with excitement and fervor despite the freezing temperatures. More and more Golden Leafs signs, merchandise, and other various trinkets were cropping up in each house and shop. Sugarcube Corner began selling Golden Leafs cupcakes, each pastry depicting the team's logo in delicious icing. Applejack, Apple Bloom, and Big Macintosh painted their apple selling cart to reflect the Golden Leafs' royal blue and gold colors. Rarity spent her days off stitching up Golden Leafs jerseys, hats, saddles, and even dresses, to sell at the Carousel Boutique. Golden Leafs fever was sweeping through Ponyville and Twilight and company couldn't have been more proud.

Enjoying her day off, Twilight lounged in front of the fireplace. She was reading a new book, calmly flipping through the pages. As she turned to the next page, a loud knock came at the door. Not wanting to leave her cozy spot, Twilight took her time finishing up the current page. Another loud knock came impatiently which finally moved Twilight to her feet. As she approached the rattling door, it unexpectedly flew open, almost hitting Twilight in the face. Loud trumpets rang throughout the treehouse as two royal guards stepped in.

"Now presenting her royal highness, Princess Luna!"

The guards turned to the side and backed away from the doorway, creating an open aisle. Stepping into the treehouse was Equestria's other princess

and starting center for the Canterlot Equestriens, Princess Luna. Luna playfully shooed the guards away and closed the door after they left. Twilight was greatly puzzled at Luna's arrival but gave a slight bow in respect.

"P-Princess Luna, what brings you here to Ponyville so early? Isn't the next game a few days away?"

Luna motioned for Twilight to stand back up and let out a charming giggle. "Oh Twilight Sparkle, my sister told me you would be a little confused. That's why she wrote this note for me to bring to you!"

Luna made a scroll appear and drifted it over to Twilight. The scroll opened and Twilight began to read.

"To My Faithful Student Twilight Sparkle,

Please excuse my sister Princess Luna for arriving in Ponyville early for the big Canterlot versus Ponyville game this week. She begged me to allow her a short vacation in Ponyville so that she could visit the town and meet the Ponyvillians properly. Therefore, I am assigning the Golden Leafs to watch over and entertain Princess Luna during her stay and to show her the many wonders Ponyville has to offer. I am greatly looking forward to your game versus Canterlot as I will be watching your game through magical telecast. Good luck.

*Your Royal Highness,
Princess Celestia"*

Luna rolled up the scroll and poofed it away. She then stared at Twilight with an anxious grin, waiting in anticipation for something to start. Still confused, Twilight stared back at Luna with a contorted, uneasy smile of her own. After several seconds of awkward silence and staring, Twilight finally spoke.

"Sooooo, Princess Luna. Since you're in Ponyville now, what would you like to do?"

Luna looked down and poked at the floor with indecisiveness.

"I don't knooooow. What do you want to do?"

"Well, for one, you can meet my friends. They haven't had the chance to be properly introduced to you. Does that sound like a good plan?"

Luna shyly lifted her head and looked at Twilight.

"I don't knooooow. I guess that would be okay."

Twilight kept up her uneasy smile. "Okay then. Let's go meet the rest of the girls."

With a plan in place, Twilight and Luna fled from the treehouse and trotted into town. The Golden Leafs had scheduled a practice for that day and agreed to meet in front of the arena. Twilight thought that now would be a good opportunity for the girls to meet Luna. She led the princess toward Ponyville Pond where the others were already waiting. Twilight's friends began waving and yelling to her until they noticed another pony walking beside her. Their yells and waves stopped as Twilight and her guest came closer. When Twilight and Luna arrived, Luna was hiding behind Twilight. The rest of the Golden Leafs stared in confusion as Twilight greeted them.

"Hey girls! Ready for a fun, tough practice?"

Applejack pointed to Twilight's tail. "Umm, who's that hidin' behind ya?"

Twilight looked back to see Luna slightly hiding and playing coy. Twilight swiftly shifted off to the side to reveal her guest.

"Everypony, allow me to formally introduce you to Princess Luna. She arrived into Ponyville early so she could enjoy the town."

Luna slowly stood up from her hiding position and approached the Golden Leafs. The girls put a smile on their faces and cordially introduced themselves to Luna with a bow.

Applejack propped back up and grabbed Luna's hoof, shaking it violently. "Howdy there, Princess! The name's Applejack. Nice to officially make your acquaintance."

Luna could only let out a laugh as she was tossed about by the hoofshake. Pinkie Pie was next and jumped at Luna. "Pleased to meet you Princess Luna! Do you like parties? I love to party! There was this one time I threw a party for all of Ponyville and everyone showed up wearing a hat and I was like what a great idea! So we all threw our hats on the ground and danced around them and had so much fun! And there was this other time-

Pinkie kept spouting off as Rarity pushed her aside to get to Luna. Rarity gave Luna an elegant curtsy and began her introduction. "How wonderful it is to finally meet the other esteemed princess. My name is Rarity, the most regal pony here in Ponyville. I do hope you find my quaint little town a fabulous place to visit."

Rainbow Dash flew down in between Luna and Rarity, cutting Rarity off. "YOUR town? Puh-leeze. My name's Rainbow Dash! I'm the fastest flyer around here! If you want to spend time with a cool pony, I'm your gal!"

Luna shook Rainbow's hand and looked at the others. She noticed Fluttershy standing in the back by herself. Luna parted the Golden Leafs and approached Fluttershy. Fluttershy, nervous in front of royalty, started to bow but slipped on her hooves and fell to the ground. Luna helped her up with a smile. Fluttershy completed her bow and finally gathered up the courage to look at Luna.

"Oh I'm so sorry, Princess. I didn't mean to fall. My name is Fluttershy. You have a beautiful mane and coat. Please enjoy your time here."

Luna turned to the girls. "It's nice to meet all of you finally. I'm sorry about all the trouble I caused with the ruining of the Summer Sun Celebration and the battle inside the ruins."

"Ah, that stuff's ancient history now. You're a welcomed guest as far as Ah'm concerned," said Applejack.

"Thank you. So, what do you all want to do?" asked Luna.

The Golden Leafs looked at her and laughed. Pinkie hopped up to Luna. "We're going to practice, silly! We have a big game this week against Canterlot!"

Luna's smile faded into a look of disappointment. Recalling Celestia's letter and not wanting to upset either princess, Twilight butted in. "Well, we don't have to start right away. Hehe. How about we give Luna a tour of Ponyville? Show her all the shops and houses and Sweet Apple Acres. Doesn't that sound fun?"

Rainbow, Applejack, and Rarity gave Twilight an unenthused, blank look. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy perked up and were excited by the idea. Luna also perked up and regained her happy grin. Twilight saw the mixture of emotions among her friends and started walking towards town. "We'll do a quick tour of the town and be back here to practice in no time!" With three groans, three cheers, and one paranoid tour guide, the Golden Leafs and Princess Luna began their small journey.

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The gang first arrived at Sugarcube Corner. Pinkie Pie took over Twilight's role and energetically showed Luna every nook and cranny, even down to the nails in the floor boards.

"Isn't this place just neat and delicious?" asked Pinkie.

"Oh it's nice and sweet here. Say, do you have any cupcakes? Celly won't let me have any. When she does, it's these yucky, fancy organic cupcakes that the royal bakers make. They taste horrible," said Luna sticking out her tongue in disgust.

Pinkie hopped toward the kitchen. "You bet your crown we do! Follow me!"

Pinkie led Luna to the kitchen to whip up a quick batch. At the counter, Applejack, Rainbow, and Rarity were audibly making their boredom known with sighing, eye rolling, and hoof tapping. Twilight saw this and tried convincing them of her plan.

"Look, we'll show the princess two more places then we'll go practice, okay? I know this isn't what we planned but I can't disappoint both Princess Luna and Celestia. They're both counting on me."

Applejack and Rarity warmed up a little to Twilight's plea but Rainbow was

still a bit annoyed.

"We understand, Twi. It's just that we wanna get as much practice in as possible so we're ready to take on them Canterlot folk," said Applejack.

Rarity nodded with Applejack's remark. "I delayed all my design projects today because I knew we were practicing. But, if this will please Princess Celestia, then it is quite alright with me, Twilight."

Rainbow rolled her eyes again then spoke up. "I don't see why WE'RE the ones who have to do this. Why couldn't Princess Luna get dumped onto someone else's-"

Rainbow cut herself off because Luna and Pinkie had come back from the kitchen.

"I mean, we're SO glad to have Princess Luna here to keep us company and to have some awesome fun with us. Heh heh," said Rainbow with an overemphatic, fake smile.

Luna smiled back and gave each Golden Leaf a cupcake she had made. Twilight and friends gulped their snack down, complimenting the princess for a job well done. They then turned toward the exit but were stopped by Luna.

"That's just the appetizer! I'm going to treat you ponies to a royal lunch because you've been so kind and welcoming!"

Pinkie Pie squealed in delight. "Oooh! Let me help! Let me help!"

"Me too, please!" said Fluttershy excitedly.

Rainbow let out a frustrated grunt while Applejack and Rarity turned to Twilight with desperation on their faces. Twilight let out a sigh herself but quickly propped up a smile. Through her teeth, Twilight replied, "What a great idea, Luna! We'll wait right here."

Luna, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy returned to the kitchen to prepare more food. About ten minutes later, they emerged with a whole buffet full of tasty food. Luna used her magic to dress a nearby table and presented the food

with decorative platters and dishes. The Golden Leafs' mouths watered and were amazed by Luna's display.

Luna sat at the head of the table and tapped a spoon to a glass. "By royal decree from Princess Luna of Equestria..... DIG IN!"

The ponies voraciously gulped down every bit of food that was made. Before long, everyone was so full they couldn't budge from their spots. Twilight looked at the clock then turned to Luna.

"Well, that was certainly a delightful meal. How about we head over to Ponyville Pond and have our practice?"

Luna looked down in sorrow. With a feeble voice and tears gathering in her eyes, Luna looked at Twilight. "But I was hoping we could have a party. Celestia never lets me have any parties."

Twilight looked to her friends who frantically shook their heads and waved their hooves no. Paranoid about what wrath she might incur if she failed the princess, Twilight blurted out without thinking.

"Sure! We'll have a party! Pinkie Pie, will you do the honors?"

"Okie dokie lokie, Twilight! One cr-AAA-zy party coming right up!"

Frustrated with another deviation from their plans, Rainbow, Applejack, and Rarity threw their hooves to the air with a sigh. Luna sparked straight back up and was clapping her hooves while squealing with laughter. Pinkie Pie joined Luna in her squealing as the others covered their ears. Soon after, Pinkie busted out balloons, streamers, a cake, and a record player and the party began. Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Luna danced in the center of the room while Applejack, Rarity, Rainbow, and Twilight stood around the table.

Rainbow walked over to Applejack and Rarity and whispered something into both their ears. Twilight narrowed her eyes and tried listening in. Applejack and Rarity's faces shifted from confusion to surprise to irritation as Rainbow whispered on. Frustrated by the secrecy right in front of her, Twilight yelled.

"What are you three talking about?!?"

"Rainbow brought up a great point, dear. What if Luna is trying to stall us on purpose so we don't practice? Maybe Luna is a saboteur sent by the Equestrians to mess us up!" exclaimed Rarity.

Twilight rolled her eyes and stomped towards Rainbow who backed down. "Princess Luna is just a normal pony just like you and me. She's allowed to have a vacation and a little fun just as we can. She is NOT a saboteur."

Applejack stood between the angered Twilight and Rainbow. "I don't know, Twi. All this waitin' around and doin' nothin' is really cuttin' in on our plans. I'm startin' to agree with Rainbow here."

At first Twilight was disappointed in Applejack but her disappointment quickly flared back into anger. She stomped her hooves down hard, causing Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow to cower.

"Fine, if you three think this is all some crazy, elaborate scheme to interfere with our practicing, then just go. The rest of us will meet you at the arena later."

Applejack stepped toward Twilight with concern. "But, Twi."

Rainbow walked over to Applejack and turned her toward the door. "Let's go. Maybe Little Miss Princess Pal here will wake up and realize we were right. Come on, we'll practice without them."

"Fine! We'll see you later!" yelled Twilight as she mockingly waved the three party poopers goodbye.

Fluttershy saw the group leaving and approached Twilight confused. "Where are they going, Twilight?"

Twilight danced angrily, stomping with each step. "Oh, they were just being downers and left for practice. We'll party on without them."

"Oh, I see. When are we going to practice?" asked Fluttershy nervously.

Twilight's anger level lowered and she let out a sigh. "I don't know, Fluttershy. Hopefully soon."

Luna danced and bounced all over the room, clearly enjoying herself. Pinkie started to feel tired as she couldn't keep up with Luna's dancing.

"Oh...you're...good...you're...real...good," panted Pinkie.

"Thanks! I guess I have like crazy limitless energy seeing as I have to take care of the moon and stuff."

Pinkie crawled over to Twilight on all fours. "Save...me...Twilight!"

Twilight magically stopped the record player and approached the princess.

"Okay, Luna. We really have to go practice now. We'll clean up here and then we'll take you back to my treehouse-"

Luna began sobbing uncontrollably, interrupting Twilight. Twilight, Pinkie, and Fluttershy all sunk with concern and tried consoling Luna. Luna's sobbing exploded into a river of tears.

"You ponies don't understand! You don't know what it's like being a princess! I'm not allowed to do anything I want! It takes so much energy to move the moon and when I'm done, I'm forced to attend stuffy, boring royal ceremonies and meetings. I can't play with my sister because she never has time for me. I don't like being a princess anymoreee!"

Guilt and paranoia poured over Twilight and she panicked trying to think of a way to stop Luna's crying. "Okay, okay. There's no need to cry." Twilight looked around the room trying to get an idea of what to do. She saw a pillow resting against a chair and it clicked in her head.

"How about we have a sleepover next?"

Luna's crying slowly reduced to sniffing. She looked up at Twilight. "R-r-really? Can we?"

"Sure we can! The party doesn't have to stop now!" exclaimed Pinkie who recovered from her fatigue.

"We can tell stories and give each other makeovers. It will be lovely and

nice," said Fluttershy in a very comforting voice.

The crying came to a full stop. Luna rose to her hooves and flashed a faint smile. Twilight, Pinkie, and Fluttershy let out a giant sigh of relief. They all proceed to clean up and when they were finished, they headed over to the treehouse.

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With the sun lowering as they arrived at the treehouse, Luna vanished to quickly raise the moon. In an instant, the sun fell and the moon was up and glowing. Luna swiftly returned with her pajamas on, ready for the sleepover to which the others dropped their jaws in shock. Luna giggled and happily skipped inside.

Twilight, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Princess Luna began their sleepover and had fun doing so. They told stories, played games, roasted marshmallows, and gave each other makeovers. After a long night of laughter and fun, the sleepover came to an abrupt halt as Luna was the first to crash asleep on the sofa. The remaining Golden Leaf moved her to a bed and went to asleep as well.

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The following day, Twilight, Pinkie, and Fluttershy awoke to find Luna missing from her sleeping spot. In her place was a note. Twilight read the note.

"Dear Twilight Sparkle, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy,

Thank you very much for the fun party and sleepover! It was a total blast! I'm excited to see you on the ice tonight when we, the Canterlot Equestriens, whoop your tails! Goodbye for now!

*Love,
Luney :)*

Finally relieved of the arduous task of entertaining Princess Luna, Twilight and her friends felt a weight lifted from their shoulders. They hung around

the treehouse until it was finally time to head over to Ponyville Pond for the game.

As they drew closer to the arena, Twilight, Pinkie Pie, and Fluttershy heard a loud rumble. When they came over the hill, they saw a mass of ponies pushing their way through the arena doors, anxious for the game. Their faces lit up with excitement and they quickly galloped to the players' entrance and onward to the locker room.

Inside the locker room, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, and Rarity had already arrived and were in uniform waiting. When the remaining Golden Leafs showed up, Rainbow leapt up and began to boss Twilight around.

"Oh look girls, look who finally showed up! Why, how nice of you to join us Twilight, Pinkie, and Fluttershy!"

Twilight started growling but was interrupted by Applejack. "Settle down you two, we need ta' be savin' our energy for Canterlot tonight, not wastin' it on each other. What we're y'all up to after we left anyways?"

Pinkie skipped to her locker and began putting her pads on. "Well we we're partying then Twilight made the princess cry. Luna had a breakdown and started telling us how she never gets to do anything. It was so sad! But Twilight thought up an idea real quick and we ended up having a super fun sleepover!"

"How exciting," said Rainbow with a sarcastic tone.

Rarity sat up and spoke to the group. "The important thing is that we're all back together again. Now Twilight, darling, what is the scoop on the Equestriens?"

Twilight looked away with guilt. "I don't know. We spent so much time with Princess Luna, I didn't get a chance to scout the Equestriens out."

"Ohhh, whaaaat a shooooock," said Rainbow mockingly. Twilight quickly looked back up and growled at Rainbow. They went nose to nose until Applejack broke them up again.

"Well, there ain't much to go on, so I guess we'll just have to go with the

basics tonight."

"I'm going to do what I PRACTICED yesterday," said Rainbow, emphasizing the word practice for Twilight's benefit.

Twilight let out a snarky snort and grinned at Rainbow. "Right, we'll see how that works out."

Applejack had to step in again. "ENOUGH you two! Geez Apple Louise. Stop yer bickerin' and let's play some hockey, alright?"

Twilight and Rainbow turned away from each other with a "hmph!" as the other Golden Leafs gritted their teeth nervously.

The Golden Leafs filed out of the locker room and headed to the ice with Rainbow in front and Twilight staying far away in the rear.

The Ponyville crowd was buzzing louder than ever, anxiously awaiting their Golden Leafs' arrival and hoping for another thrilling win. The lights dimmed and spotlights circled the ice. Every pony in the arena stood with a cheer except for a small collection of Canterlot ponies who sat in the upper deck. The Canterlot ponies were of higher society and calmly sipped on tea as crazed Golden Leafs fans flailed around them.

The doors leading to the ice opened and Spike began his introduction of the Equestrians.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, I present to you the opponent for the evening, hailing all the way from the capitol of Canterlot and the owners of the most Celestia Cup Championships in EHL history, it's the Canterlot Equestriens!"

A large throng of boos rang out as the small sample of Canterlot ponies quietly engaged in soft golf claps. A red carpet rolled out onto the ice and camera flashes appeared out of nowhere.

"Starting at center, number 25, Your Royal Highness Princess Luna! At left wing, number 1, it's Prince Blueblood! At right wing, number 77, Hoity Toity! On defense, number 5, Moondancer! The other defensepony, number 55,

Photo Finish! And finally, the captain, starting in goal and wearing number 29, it's Pony Joe!"

The crowd's noise level remained the same except the Golden Leafs fans changed their booing to cheering as it was time to announce the hometown team. Spike went through the usual introductions but this time fireworks exploded after each pony was called. The arena lights flickered back on and both teams circled around their ends of the rink. From across the ice, Luna yelled to catch Twilight's attention.

"Yoohooo! Twilight! Thanks again!"

Twilight cracked an uneasy smile and gave a small wave back. The referee emerged from the bench area with the puck, ready to go. Both teams lined up for the opening faceoff and soon the puck was dropped.

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Game number five was underway and started out with a bang, a bang of the boards and glass that is. Using their pent up frustration from the locker room, Rainbow and Twilight punished any Equestrian who came near them. Within the first two minutes, Ponyville had racked up five hits. Luna had the puck behind the net in the Canterlot zone and carried it up through the center. She slapped it down into the corner where Hoity chased after it. Fluttershy and Rarity ganged up on him in the corner with Rarity trying to poke the puck away. Hoity kicked the puck along the boards to Blueblood who took it away from the opposite corner. Before Blueblood could pass the puck off, Applejack cruised in and landed a bone-rattling hit on the prince. Play continued on but Blueblood got up and immediately skated over to the referee.

"Dear sir, did you just see what that brutish earth pony did to me? She completely ruffled my perfectly groomed coat and mane! I demand you punish her at once!"

The referee ignored Blueblood and kept watching the play. Photo Finish now had the puck on the blue line, looking for a teammate to get open. Blueblood jumped back in on the play and called for the puck. Photo skipped the puck over to him but Fluttershy closed in. As soon as

Blueblood received the puck, Fluttershy gently floated through and nudged him off stride. Instantly, as if he was in a trance, the referee raised his hoof and blew the whistle when the puck landed in Pinkie's glove.

"Penalty Ponyville, number 0, two minutes for roughing."

The Ponyville crowd soured and yelled at the referee as Fluttershy drifted toward the box, upset and frightened that she committed a penalty. The Golden Leafs slammed their sticks down in protest but the referee wouldn't have any of it. Blueblood laughed under his breath as the teams set up for the faceoff.

Luna won the faceoff back to Moondancer who waited patiently on the blue line for her team to get organized. The Golden Leafs skated into their usual penalty killing box formation and moved with the puck. Moondancer passed to Photo who flung it to Hoity in the corner. Photo zipped toward the net for Hoity to pass it back on the give-and-go but the pass slipped right through. Rainbow zoomed up to intercept the puck and was off on a shorthanded breakaway. The crowd stood up for Rainbow's attempt while Pony Joe stayed put inside the crease. Reliving the game-winning goal from the last game, Rainbow lost focus and rumbled toward the net. Pony Joe braced himself and forcefully thrust his stick at Rainbow. He lodged the puck away and Rainbow skated on, confused she didn't have the puck anymore. The crowd let out a disappointing groan and soon Canterlot was back on offense. One minute remained in the Equestriens' power play. Moondancer held the puck on the blue line as Luna, Blueblood, and Hoity buzzed around the net. Applejack and Rarity began to drift toward Moondancer to apply pressure. Seeing this, Moondancer wound up and fired a shot toward the net. With the puck in the air, Luna shifted her grip on the stick to the edge of the handle and braced for a redirection. Moondancer's shot glanced off the bottom of Luna's floating stick blade and flew through Pinkie's five-hole. The goal light illuminated as the crowd commenced their booing.

"Canterlot power play goal, scored by number 25, Princess Luna! Assisted by number 5, Moondancer!"

Fluttershy sadly exited the penalty box as the Equestriens finished up their goal celebration. Fluttershy received reassuring taps from her teammates

before they reset at center ice for a new faceoff.

The rest of the period featured back and forth shooting for both teams. The Golden Leafs also kept hitting much to Canterlot's chagrin. Rarity checked Photo Finish which elicited an accent-filled rant to the referee. After Applejack gave Hoity a shove down in the corner, he too was in the referee's ear about the violent hitting. By the end of the period, each Equestrien except Luna and Pony Joe had something to say to the referee about the Golden Leafs' physicality. Luckily Ponyville escaped the period without another penalty, but still faced a 1-0 deficit. Both teams skated to their locker rooms while the arena lost its loud, energetic buzz.

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Back in the locker room, the Golden Leafs vented their frustrations about Canterlot's whining.

"I just cain't believe those Equestriens. Bunch a' cryfillies they are," said Applejack.

Rarity let out a quick chortle. "Please Applejack, what they did was *nowhere* close to whining."

"Ha, you would know about that," chimed in Rainbow.

"Oh, ha ha," said Rarity in fake laughter.

"Well, we can't play them close because the referee might call a penalty on us. I mean if he called a penalty on nice, kind Fluttershy here, who knows what we could get!" cried Twilight as Fluttershy quietly nodded in agreement.

Twilight and friends tried to quickly come up with a new plan for the 2nd period before the starting horn began. It was too late as the teams were called back to the ice to begin the next period.

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The 2nd period began and Ponyville nervously avoided the Canterlot skaters for fear of being penalized. Canterlot took advantage of the

situation and played rougher on both sides of the ice. There was a set-up in the Equestriens zone where Rainbow and Applejack were going to attempt a give-and-go. After Applejack passed off the puck, she was forced into the glass by a Blueblood check, clearly a boarding penalty but it was not called. Right when Rainbow received the pass, she too was nudged and eventually tripped by Moondancer, which again was not called. The Ponyvillians around the arena began voicing their displeasure toward the referee for swallowing the whistle.

Back on the other end, Blueblood was up with Luna while only Twilight, Fluttershy, and Rarity were back on defense. Remembering her spoiled evening at the Grand Galloping Gala, Rarity ignited a fire within her and started hounding Blueblood. She stayed on him closely and snuck in an elbow and nudge every chance she got. After more jostling along the boards, Blueblood had enough of the jabs and bumped Rarity in the flank. Rarity's eyes flashed red as she whipped around and slapped Blueblood in the face with her stick. Blueblood fell to the ice and acted as if he had just been beaten to a pulp. The referee immediately raised his hoof and chirped the whistle incessantly.

"Ponyville penalty, number 9, four minutes for high sticking!"

Rarity briskly skated up to the referee. "*FOUR* minutes? Are you crazy? I barely touched him!"

"Lock her away! Lock her away I say! She has desecrated my perfect, unblemished face!" yelled Prince Blueblood from the ice.

Rarity skated at Blueblood and skidded to stop, spraying him with ice flakes. Blueblood cried in melodramatic agony as the referee skated over to grab Rarity. She then let out a frustrated grunt on her way to the penalty box. The crowd booed louder as Ponyville was set to embark on a four minute penalty kill, their longest of the season so far.

Twilight gathered up her penalty kill unit to go over a plan. Blueblood was finally back up on his skates and set up for the faceoff. The puck dropped and the Canterlot power play began. Canterlot flung the puck all over the zone cleanly, snapping passes to each other. Photo had the puck at the point and fired on net which Pinkie stopped. She couldn't hold onto it and the rebound bounced back to Hoity at the faceoff circle. After a few more

passes and shots on net, Ponyville finally grabbed the puck and shot it down the ice. Canterlot retreated to retrieve the puck and came right back. Two minutes remained in Rarity's penalty. Moondancer passed off to Luna who was on the left wing boards. She tried cutting toward the center but was surrounded by Rainbow and Twilight. Luna noticed Blueblood open on the other wing and passed it off. Applejack read the play and intercepted the pass, flinging it down to the other side.

Thirty seconds remained on the power play now and the crowd started to grow louder in their cheering for the Golden Leafs' penalty kill. Photo Finish had the puck at the point again and skated into the slot to draw a double team from Applejack and Rainbow. Blueblood replaced her spot on the point and slapped his stick for Photo to pass back. With the puck going back to Blueblood, Hoity charged to the front of the net to screen Pinkie. While Photo obstructed Applejack and Rainbow, the center was left open for Blueblood to skate into and fire a shot. The puck was shot like a bullet and came in on the net. Hoity jumped out of the puck's path but Pinkie managed to see the shot and quickly knocked it down. However, she allowed another rebound and Hoity was there on the doorstep to push it on home.

The Golden Leafs lowered their heads and the crowd uttered a giant groan as the Equestriens expanded their lead to 2-0 after another power play goal. Rarity exited the penalty box still miffed about her penalty.

"Canterlot power play goal, scored by number 77, Hoity Toity. Assisted by number 1, Prince Blueblood, and number 55, Photo Finish!"

Play resumed with the Golden Leafs in a deeper hole. With only a minute left in the period, they managed to fire off a few shots but Pony Joe came up strong in net for Canterlot. The final 2nd period horn blew and Ponyville lazily drifted off the ice, frustrated and confused about how to play against the Equestriens.

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Upon entering the room, Rainbow whipped her helmet at her stall in frustration. The other Golden Leafs shared their own unique ways of venting, although none were as violent as Rainbow's. While mulling over a

way to break through Canterlot and their stranglehold on the game's tempo, Rarity came up with an idea.

"I know what we must do. We must fight fire with fire! If Canterlot can whine their way through this game..." Rarity then flipped her helmet off to cover her face. She pulled it down to reveal an extremely distraught pouty face. "...whyyyy caaaaan't weeeeeeeee?"

The others liked this idea except for Twilight. "I don't know, Rarity. Wouldn't you rather win through hard work and being the better team?"

Rarity condescendingly laughed off Twilight's remark. "Oh Twilight dear, hard work has gotten us nowhere tonight. If we want to win, we...must...whine!"

Twilight gave up on the disagreement and reluctantly complied. The Golden Leafs freshened up and headed back out for the 3rd period.

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The 3rd period began and Ponyville had the puck in the Canterlot zone. Applejack held the puck at the right faceoff circle, covered closely by Blueblood. As she turned toward the boards to spin away from the defense, Applejack was crushed by a Luna check and Canterlot skated away with the puck. On her way back down the ice, Applejack went over to the referee and tried her shot at whining, something she never did nor knew how to do.

"Owwwww, what A vicious hiiiiit. The PRINCESS is a maaaaaniac out there! I was ALMOST killed, owwwww." Applejack's feeble attempt at whining didn't resonate with the referee who skated along with the play.

Canterlot was back in the Ponyville zone. Blueblood had the puck and skated down to the corner with it. Twilight met him and poked away at the puck. Feeling his personal space encroached upon, Blueblood wildly bucked away with the puck, knocking Twilight over in the process. Now open, Blueblood ripped a shot on Pinkie but she caught it for a save. When the whistle blew, Twilight tried her chance at whining.

"Oh whaaaaaat a nasty plaaaaayyyy! Prince Blueblood is such a

monsterrrrrr! I demand you do something about this at once!"

The referee was too busy picking up the puck up from Pinkie to care about Twilight's complaint. Twilight let out a groan when she realized her whine didn't work. Luna won the ensuing faceoff back to Photo but she whiffed on a quick shot and was chased down by Rarity. Rarity pinned Photo to the boards, prying away at the puck. Fluttershy skated out of position to help Rarity out. Fluttershy was able to free the puck but was immediately bowled over by Luna who had come over to help her teammate. Fluttershy gently stood back up and drifted over to the referee.

"Umm...I was hit tooooooo hard...um...please give Canterlot a penalty...if that's okay with...you."

Once again, a Golden Leafs' cry went unheard as play continued on. Hoity now had the puck and carried it into the Ponyville zone. He deked around Rarity and passed it off to Blueblood on the wing. Back in her spot, Fluttershy drifted in for a hit but Blueblood was too solid and he easily brushed Fluttershy away. Blueblood passed to Moondancer at the point. Moondancer was challenged by Rainbow and ended up giving away the puck. Rainbow was quickly caught by Luna who fought for the puck back. Seeing Rainbow and Luna tangled along the short boards, Blueblood set his aim for Rainbow and bolted away. Luna heard the rumbling coming toward her and peeled away leaving Rainbow open for a beating. Blueblood closed in and smacked Rainbow into the empty bench. Rainbow yelled as she flipped head over hooves over the boards. The crowd gasped at the hit but their gasp quickly changed into cheers as the referee finally had his hoof raised for a Canterlot penalty.

"Canterlot penalty, number 1, two minutes for charging."

Prince Blueblood protested to the referee but he was tuned out for once. Rarity received a helmet bump from her friends for her advice as Ponyville began their first power play of the evening. Rainbow was back and shaking out of her daze as she took the faceoff. However Luna won the faceoff back to Moondancer who shot it down toward Pinkie. Pinkie skated up to play the puck to Applejack. Applejack brought the puck in as the Golden Leafs set up their power play formation. The Golden Leafs worked their strategy to perfection, passing quickly and firing away shots. Not in the strategy, however, was a poised goaltender who blocked and denied every

shot Ponyville threw at him. Pony Joe calmly brushed away every power play shot he faced. With just a few seconds left on the power play, Rainbow had the puck and tried deking her way through the Canterlot defense. She broke through the middle and got to the crease but was met by Pony Joe who executed another perfectly placed poke check to knock the puck away.

Blueblood scampered out of the penalty box while the crowd's anticipatory cheering dissipated into silence as Canterlot regained control of the game. Canterlot infiltrated the Ponyville zone and opened up a flurry of shots on Pinkie. She stopped them all but was growing tired. After finally holding onto a shot, play was halted and Pinkie caught a quick breath. Before play resumed, Moondancer skated over to Twilight.

"You know, I still haven't forgiven you for missing out on my birthday party! Then again, we all had a great time without you. You would've made it nerdy anyways. When you moved to Ponyville, Canterlot became much cooler."

Twilight tried brushing off Moondancer's words and waited for the puck to drop. Luna won the faceoff back to Photo who swung it along the blue line to Moondancer who had just gotten to her position. After allowing Moondancer's words to creep into her mind, Twilight angrily dashed toward the point. Moondancer saw Twilight coming at her and decided to skate toward the net. Twilight went to line up a hit but Moondancer forced herself to stumble. Twilight let up on her hit attempt and stopped when the referee skated over with the penalty call.

"Ponyville penalty, number 42, two minutes for tripping!"

Down 2-0 with only three minutes left and the Golden Leafs taking on their third penalty kill of the evening, the crowd began heading for the exits. Twilight let out a defeated groan as she entered her temporary glass prison. On the very next faceoff, the Equestriens made quick work of their power play. Luna won the faceoff back to Moondancer who instantly fired on net since Ponyville was not in position yet. Pinkie's glove was too slow and the shot clanged the top right corner. Moondancer was mobbed by her teammates while Twilight left the box just as quickly as she entered it.

"Canterlot power play goal, scored by number 5, Moondancer! Assisted by number 25, Princess Luna!"

The remaining Golden Leafs fans booed before making their exit. The last two and a half minutes were spent with Ponyville trying to shoot their way back into the game but Pony Joe came up strong again.

When time expired, the score read Canterlot 3, Ponyville 0. The Golden Leafs were shutout for the first time this season in a game where nothing went right. The Equestriens met at center ice to celebrate their win as Ponyville solemnly floated away to the locker room.

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The locker room was silent as Twilight and friends undressed and cleaned up. Rainbow was rough on her equipment as she forcefully slammed and pounded on her locker. No one was in the mood to talk. Rainbow occasionally shot irritated glances toward Twilight, insinuating that it was Twilight's fault they weren't prepared tonight. Twilight caught one of Rainbow's glances and sent an annoyed glance right back. Before long, Rainbow and Twilight were nose to nose again, just like in the pregame. They yelled at each other while Applejack and Rarity tried defusing the situation.

"It's YOUR fault we didn't win! You spent too much time playing with the princess, who, may I remind you, was the ENEMY tonight! And you didn't coach us like you should!"

"Well if you think you're so great, why don't you try reading up on the other team?! Or is the great Rainbow Dash too dumb to pick up a book once in a while?"

"Why you!"

Before Rainbow and Twilight clashed, Spike and Princess Luna entered the room. Spike was holding a scroll while Luna walked up to Twilight smiling.

"I dropped by to thank all of you again for your hospitality and for welcoming me to Ponyville. I had a really great time and I hope to play with

you all again real soon!"

The Golden Leafs, save for Twilight and Rainbow, appreciated Luna's thanks although their faces didn't reflect it. Twilight was relieved on the inside that neither Princess Luna nor Celestia was going to be upset, but she still locked eyes with Rainbow.

After Princess Luna left, Spike brought the scroll to the team's attention and read it aloud.

"From the Offices of the Equestria Hockey League,

Since the first half of the season is now complete, the EHL has named their all-star selections. This is a great honor and we congratulate you on this prestigious distinction.

The all-star selections for the Ponyville Golden Leafs are:

#20 Rainbow Dash

#42 Twilight Sparkle

Once again, congratulations on the selection and good luck in the second half of the season.

Sincerely,

Gary Bettpony

EHL Commissioner"

Upon hearing Spike's news that they were all-stars, Rainbow and Twilight broke out of their struggle and both looked away from each other in embarrassment. The other Golden Leafs began cheering for their all-star teammates as Twilight and Rainbow faced each other again. Twilight extended her hoof in peace.

"I'm sorry Rainbow, I got carried away with taking care of Princess Luna and I should've had us more prepared tonight."

Rainbow accepted Twilight's peace offering and shook her hoof. "No, I'm sorry. I overreacted and I acted like a real mule. I'm the one who should be

sorry."

They embraced in a hug as the others looked on with a relieved smile. Suddenly, an odd smell permeated the locker room air. It was a pungent, perfume-like smell which caused everyone to cover their noses. With the smell becoming unbearable, the Golden Leafs ran out to find the source. When they noticed it was coming from outside the arena, they rushed forward, hoping to remove the stinging odor. When the ponies came upon the source, they gasped in shock.

Before them lying on the ground was a stuffed pony doll wearing a Golden Leafs jersey. The doll was battered and torn up, with cotton poking out from its stitches and tears. Driven through the center of the doll was a single stalk of poison joke. The smell was emanating from the dangerous flower. Twilight used her magic to make it disappear and to waft away the stench.

The Golden Leafs' eyes enflamed when they realized who had left this message. They all turned to each other and sternly shouted.

"Fillydelphia."

Three Stars from Canterlot @ Ponyville

** Pony Joe (CTL)*

*** Princess Luna (CTL)*

**** Moondancer (CTL)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Manhattan 3, CLOUDSDALE 2 (OT)

Completed Yesterday

APPLELOOSA 4, Fillydelphia 1

EHL Standings

Appleloosa 4-1

Manhattan 3-2

Cloudsdale 3-2
Canterlot 2-3
Ponyville 2-3
Fillydelphia 1-4

Chapter 8

Broad Street Bullies

The day of the next Golden Leafs game, Twilight and Spike met their friends at the carriage station to board their ride to nearby Fillydelphia. During the week, the Golden Leafs met twice for practice. The first practice was spent working on special teams, especially the penalty kill as they allowed three power play goals against Canterlot. The second practice was spent working on their toughness and checking so that their bodies could handle the second-half grind. Both practices were lively and hard-hitting as the Golden Leafs turned their irritation for the Flyers into physical energy. After the poison joke package and the ominous doll message left for them, the Golden Leafs were anxious to meet the Flyers back out on the ice so that they get their hooves on them.

Aboard the carriage, Twilight reviewed the first game against Fillydelphia and refreshed her friends on the Flyers' playing style. Rainbow Dash ignored the scouting session and devised new ways to dangle and deke the puck when she would have it. Applejack imagined in her head vicious checks and hits she could hand out to the annoying Flyers players. Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Spike listened but did not process the overload of information Twilight tended to give. Two hours of talking and traveling later, the carriage arrived in front of the Flyers' home arena in Fillydelphia, the Welsh Fargo Center. When the Golden Leafs stepped out, a vile odor collided with their nostrils. The smell of the city was overbearing for Rarity who collapsed into Applejack's forelegs. Luckily the visitor's entrance to the arena lay right before them. Not wasting any time, the ponies marched into

the building and straight to their locker room.

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Inside the locker room, Spike helped each pony get their equipment on. The Golden Leafs went around the room expressing their dislike for the Fillydelphia Flyers.

"Oooh I can't wait to give those *wretched* Flyers a piece of my mind! Who are they to intimidate us?" said Rarity sternly.

Rainbow looked to Rarity and nodded with her. "Yeah, I mean, they're in LAST place. They're losers! They don't have any right to try to scare us!"

"Them Flyers ain't gonna know what hit them tonight I'll tell ya what!" shouted Applejack with energy in her voice.

"Now girls, let's not forget why we're here. Let's focus on winning tonight. We need to be calm, cool, and collected. We need to be poised," begged Twilight as she noticed her teammates' tempers rising.

"Boooringgg!" yelled Pinkie Pie. "Let's get rough! Let's get tough! Let's go crazy!"

Pinkie bounced all over the room growling and making funny angry faces at her teammates before Fluttershy spoke up. "Um...I agree with Twilight, we should..."

Rainbow trotted over to Fluttershy. "We should what? Fillydelphia are nothing but jerks and I bet they're not going to be nice tonight. You're going to have to be tough Fluttershy or else the Flyers are going to wipe you all over the ice!"

Fluttershy squeaked in fright as Twilight brushed Rainbow away. "Chill out Rainbow, Fluttershy knows how it'll go tonight. She'll be ready, won't you Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy closed her eyes and quietly nodded.

Applejack jumped up from her stall and started walking toward the door.

"Ah'm so excited to get on out there and start hittin'! I cain't wait! Let's go right now!"

Twilight grabbed her by the tail. "Wait, Applejack! I haven't given the usual pregame talk yet!"

"Phooey on the talk, Twi, we know what we need ta' do, right Golden Leafs?!"

"Yeah!" shouted Rainbow, Rarity, and Pinkie. Twilight and Fluttershy looked at their teammates with apprehension.

With a sigh, Twilight motioned to the door and the Golden Leafs filed out toward the rink full of anxious vitality.

As they approached the rink, the hallway expanded to allow room for the zamboni mules and their ice plows. Across the opening, also filing out of their locker room were the Flyers. Glass partitions encased the two teams' paths to the ice. The Flyers noticed the Golden Leafs and began furiously pounding on their partition to get the Golden Leafs' attention. Rainbow, Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie responded by doing the same on their end. Twilight and Fluttershy kept looking ahead, not wanting to get involved. Apple Bloom was the only Flyer on the other side not participating in the pregame intimidation game.

When the one minute warning horn blared throughout the Welsh Fargo Center, the doors to the rink opened and the referee and EHL officials quickly skated over to direct both teams away from each other. Growls, snarls, and mean faces shot back and forth between the Flyers and Golden Leafs. The Welsh Fargo Center roared with vulgar Flyers fans yelling obscenities and throwing all sorts of items. The atmosphere inside the arena could be described as a packed barrel of gunpowder, just waiting for the right spark for it to explode. Tonight was no place for a young filly as bad blood boiled between these two teams.

After the Golden Leafs and Flyers were introduced, the Flyers' announcer had special news to share.

"Fillydelphia Fans! We have a special guest with us tonight! Please give a Fillydelphia welcome to Equestria Hockey League Commissioner, Gary Bettpony!"

"BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" exploded the Flyers faithful as Gary Bettpony took his seat in one of the suites high above the crowd. Security ponies blocked incoming debris from hitting the unpopular commissioner.

Extra referees were brought in to officiate the game and they kept a close eye on both teams' warm-ups, ready to diffuse a possible scuffle. The head referee grabbed the puck and called for the opening faceoff. Apple Bloom and Pinkie Pie raised their glove hooves to signal their readiness. The puck dropped and the first game of the second half of the season was underway.

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As expected, the opening minutes were filled with intense, physical checking. It appeared as if the teams were less focused on winning and were more determined to dismantle their opposition. Ponyville delivered clean hits while Fillydelphia got dirty. When Rainbow had the puck along the boards in the defensive zone, Caramelo came in with a check leading with his knee, digging it right into Rainbow's wing. Rainbow let out a pained howl and she flicked the puck away. The puck trickled off to Rarity who brought it through the neutral zone. Caramela quickly skated up beside her and shoved her toward the boards. When they crashed up against the glass, Caramela gave Rarity a quick jarring headbutt out of a referee's sight. Rarity lost focus and ultimately the puck as Fillydelphia brought it back down to the Ponyville zone.

Twilight skated up to delay Caramela's stride so Caramela passed the puck over to Rose on the right faceoff circle. Rose wound up to shoot but Applejack came in with a crushing hit which sent Rose tumbling into the boards. Applejack grabbed the puck and headed the other way down the ice. Rarity and Fluttershy joined in on the three-on-two rush. Applejack brought it in over the blue line and veered off to the right boards. With Lily drawing in, Applejack snapped the puck across the zone to Rarity on the left faceoff circle. Daisy skated over to Rarity to block her path to the net. Fluttershy stepped over the blue line and was open. Rarity saw Fluttershy in the corner of her eye and passed it back. Fluttershy skated up to the pass and slapped a shot straight onto the net. The puck rose to the top corner, out of Apple Bloom's leaping catch. The puck hit the back of the net

and the goal light spun. Rarity and Applejack bombarded Fluttershy as she started celebrating.

"Goal Ponyville, scored by number 0, Fluttershy. Assisted by number 9 Rarity, and number 88, Applejack."

The crowd raged with booing and more vulgarness as the rest of the Golden Leafs gave Fluttershy a congratulatory tap. Fillydelphia growled as they awaited the next puck drop. Play was back on and so was the physicality. The Golden Leafs were smashed by a Flyer whenever they touched the puck. Fillydelphia kept control in the Ponyville zone for two minutes and were able to get off a few shots but were denied by Pinkie. Twilight had the puck and nearly avoided a Caramelo hip check. She carried the puck up the ice and passed to Rainbow who stood at the blue line. Rainbow flew in and raced to the back of the net with Rose covering her closely. Rainbow kept having to skate through and found herself braced up against the corner boards as Rose and Caramela fought her for the puck. Caramela and Rose snuck in cheap shots and nudges as Rainbow held steady. Rarity made her way to the faceoff circle closest to Rainbow and slapped her stick. Rainbow heard the slaps and kicked the puck between her legs out of the corner. Rarity wound up as the puck came to her and fired off a one-timer. The puck shot like a bullet from a sniper rifle into the bottom left corner, too fast for Apple Bloom to block. The crowd roared again with an angry yell as Rarity laughed in delight for her goal. Rarity's teammates met her at center ice to celebrate.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 9, Rarity. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash, and number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

Upset with allowing another goal, Fillydelphia huddled at the net before the next faceoff. Ponyville looked on, trying to figure out what dirty scheme the Flyers would come up with. Fortunately, only twenty seconds remained on the clock for the first period. The puck dropped and no further action occurred. The Flyers fan base voiced their displeasure as both teams drifted to their locker rooms. The Golden Leafs held a 2-0 lead, clearly more focused on winning than the Flyers for the time being.

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In the locker room, Rainbow and Rarity rested ice packs on their various bruises as they were hit the most during the period. The Golden Leafs were happy with their lead but were irritated by Fillydelphia's dirty shots. Rainbow was the first to speak while holding an ice pack to her wing.

"We were totally right. Fillydelphia is playing dirtier than a diamond dog tonight. We need to take it to them next period!"

"Ah'm ready to get dirty if you are, Rainbow," said Applejack.

Rainbow grinned at her line mate. "Let's do it A.J.!"

Twilight interjected with concern. "No. We will not stoop to their level. We only have a narrow lead. Fillydelphia just needs one goal to get right back in this game. We need to keep calm, no matter what the Flyers are doing to us."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Way to be a party pooper, Twilight."

"Trust me Rainbow. We will feel much better when we're the more mature ponies and the better team than if we won by being as dirty as the Flyers are."

Fluttershy and Rarity acceptingly nodded at Twilight's declaration while Rainbow and Applejack shot each other a wink, keeping to their pact.

"Now let's go back out there and play poised and mature!" shouted Twilight.

The Golden Leafs got up from their stalls and returned to the ice for the second period.

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When the puck dropped for the second period, each Flyers skater stuck to their Ponyville counterpart and stayed close. Just like the first period, when a Golden Leaf touched the puck, a Flyer was right there with a hit. This time though, Applejack and Rainbow Dash fought back. When Rose had the puck in the corner and battling off Twilight, Rainbow swiftly barreled into the scrum and knocked Rose down with strong force. With Rose out of the

picture, Twilight took the free puck and led a rush down to the Flyers' zone. The Golden Leafs fired off a few shots on offense but Apple Bloom was able to stop them.

Back in the Ponyville zone, Caramelo had the puck on the right wing boards. Applejack saw him stalling so she began striding in. Caramelo couldn't find an open teammate as Applejack drew closer. Seeing a charging Golden Leaf coming at him, Caramelo began skating toward the corner. Applejack followed him and was soon flank to flank with him. Applejack slammed Caramelo into the corner and fought for the puck. Cleverly blocking the referee's sight with her body, Applejack quickly bit Caramelo in the ear. Caramelo yelped in pain as Applejack was able to pry the puck loose and take it down the ice.

Applejack carried the puck in and dumped it around the boards to Rarity on the other wing. An enraged Caramelo was back on the play and went to hit Applejack but Applejack was ready. She absorbed the blow and sent Caramelo to the ice with a thud. She stuck her tongue out to the fallen Flyer as she jumped back in on the play. Rarity passed the puck to the point where Fluttershy received it. With Rose coming in on her fast, Fluttershy passed over to Twilight along the blue line. Twilight saw an open lane to the net quickly closing in with the Flyers defense so she reared her head back for a quick shot. Twilight's shot skidded along the ice and bounced up. Apple Bloom did not expect the puck's awkward bounce and was caught out of position. The puck pounded the back of the net for another Ponyville goal. Twilight jumped in the air when she scored and was met by her friends. The crowd awoke from their bored lull to furiously boo at the celebratory Golden Leafs.

"Goal Ponyville, scored by number 42, Twilight Sparkle. Assisted by number 0, Fluttershy, and number 9, Rarity."

Frustrated with their 3-0 deficit, Fillydelphia threw their sticks to the ice and to the boards. Ponyville returned to center ice and waited for the faceoff. When play came back underway, Fillydelphia no longer cared about the puck, they just wanted to hit. Rainbow won the faceoff back to Fluttershy and was immediately bowled over by Rose. Rose kept the pain train chugging along toward Fluttershy but Fluttershy was able to pass away in time. Applejack had the puck now but was also immediately hit by

Caramelo. The Flyers took the puck into the Ponyville zone and dumped it to the corner. Twilight chased after it but Caramela was right there with a forceful nudge to win the puck away. When Caramela circled out of the corner toward the right faceoff circle, Rarity was there to skillfully poke the puck off her stick. The puck skipped over to Daisy at the point. Before the puck came to Daisy though, Applejack crashed into her to intercept the puck. The crowd booed as they thought Applejack interfered but play continued. Applejack had a breakaway entering the Fillydelphia zone. Applejack smiled at her baby sister in the net and shook her right shoulder for a fake. Completely biting on the shoulder shimmy, Apple Bloom dove to her left, leaving the net wide open. Applejack shifted left and blasted the puck in. Flyers fans' booing doubled in volume as Applejack celebrated another Ponyville goal. Her teammates raced up to embrace her along the boards.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 88, Applejack. Assisted by number 9, Rarity."

Ponyville had taken a 4-0 lead and weren't looking back. Only twenty seconds now remained in the second period. Fillydelphia won the faceoff and Lily dumped the puck into the Ponyville corner. Fluttershy went after it but Caramelo was right on her tail to try to pry it away. Fluttershy was able to keep the puck at her skates despite the prodding stick of the Flyers' right winger. As time ran down, Caramelo hit Fluttershy in the back of the hind leg with his stick. Fluttershy fell to her knees up against the boards. The second period horn sounded but something unforgiveable was about to unfold. With Fluttershy still prone on the ice against the boards, Rose continued charging toward the corner. The Golden Leafs all turned to Fluttershy and yelled to her as Rose sprung to attack. **WHAM!** Rose drove Fluttershy's face into the boards, cracking Fluttershy's visor along with forcefully pounding her nose into the solid, unyielding boards.

Fluttershy crumpled to the ice with an ear-piercing squeal. Like a lightning strike, Rainbow Dash bolted straight for Rose and threw her skates off ready for a fight. Before Rainbow could get a hoof on her, Rose was shielded by the referee who saw the attack developing. Fluttershy slowly got up and was crying, giant specks of blood dripping from her nose onto the ice. The EHL training staff rushed out onto the ice with a towel to clean

up the mess and to escort the now distraught Fluttershy to the locker room. The other Golden Leafs fiercely threw down their sticks and were about to confront the Flyers until the other officials cut them off and sent them to their respective locker rooms.

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When Twilight and friends arrived in the locker room, Fluttershy was being treated by a doctor. She had cotton stuffed up her nose, still leaking a tiny stream of blood. Fluttershy quietly let tears roll down her eyes as Spike tried fixing her visor.

The other Golden Leafs looked at Fluttershy with great concern. The doctor finished up his work and gave Fluttershy clearance to continue playing. Twilight trotted up to her hurt friend.

"Fluttershy, are you okay?"

Fluttershy tried to sniffle but was stuffed up with cotton. She could only quietly shake her head no. By this point, Rainbow Dash and Applejack were intensely scowling and beating down everything in sight out of pure rage for what happened at the end of the period. They angrily grumbled to themselves, letting some words slip out that would not normally pass through their lips. Twilight, Rarity, and Pinkie tended to Fluttershy. After consoling her friend and convincing her to play the rest of the game, Twilight rallied the troops.

"Golden Leafs. What we just witnessed was a violation of everything the sport of hockey stands for, much less the Equestria Hockey League. To let a vulnerable, defenseless player get mercilessly pounded into the boards is not only a cowardly attack on our pride and morals, but they hurt our friend! We will NOT stand here and let their dirty deed go UNPUNISHED! Forget being the better pony and being mature. We will treat Fillydelphia the same way they have treated us! Now let's go get them."

Fired up, Rainbow and Applejack gave a salute to Twilight and then gave each other a fierce headbutt with a war cry. Fluttershy gently wiped the remaining blood away and dried her eyes before going back out on the ice. The Golden Leafs marched to the ice for the 3rd period with great focus and with a purpose.

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The Fillydelphia crowd whooped and hollered during the entire intermission, clearly pleased with the period-ending shenanigans that occurred. The Golden Leafs methodically skated to their positions for the faceoff, all wearing intense stoic expressions on their faces. The Flyers made their way to the faceoff circle with snarky, twisted smiles on theirs. The tension on the ice could be cut with a knife. With the crowd buzzing and the Golden Leafs churning internally with vengeful rage, the referee was ready to drop the puck for the 3rd period.

"Welcome back from the break. Gary Horne here alongside my partner Filly Clement to call all the third period action."

"Gary, this third period is shaping up to be an intense one after the events that unfolded at the end of the second. I expect the Golden Leafs to come out with very high energy. That was a very disgusting way to end a period and I bet some words were said in the locker room."

"We shall see soon enough what becomes of this third period. The referee is ready as both teams enter the faceoff circle. With the drop of the puck, the third period is underway! Rose wins the faceoff back to Lily. Lily fires the puck into the Ponyville zone as the Flyers give chase. Caramela zips into the corner with Twilight Sparkle right on her. They jostle for position to win the puck. Caramela breaks free from the defense and passes to twin brother Caramelo along the left wing boards. The Flyers zip around the Golden Leaf zone to get open. Caramelo bides his time waiting for a teammate to get open. The Ponyville defense is beginning to close in. Here comes the Ponyville center, Rainbow Dash to pressure the Fillydelphia forward. Oh boy, that Rainbow Dash is picking up major speed."

CRASH!

"Rainbow Dash glides in and lands a HUGE check on Caramelo! Caramelo quickly gets to his feet and throws his skates off! He's looking for a fight! Rainbow Dash appears to be accepting the invitation AND HERE THEY GOOOO! Rainbow Dash and Caramelo are squaring off along the boards!! They're trading heavy blows but it looks like-**OHHH MYYY!! APPLEJACK HAS SPEARED ROSE TO THE ICE AND NOW SHE'S WAILING AWAY!!**

ROSE IS COWERING LIKE A TURTLE AS APPLEJACK IS POUNDING ON THE FLYERS' CENTER!! The Ponyville right winger is extracting revenge for the vicious hit on her teammate from the last period! The crowd is crazily eating this up as there are two fights simultaneously rumbling- **NOW THE OTHERS ARE GETTING IN ON THE ACTION TOO!!** **CARAMELA IS TANGLED UP WITH RARITY AND HERE COME THE GOALIES! PINKIE PIE AND APPLE BLOOM ARE MEETING AT CENTER ICE!....**but they're not fighting. They are trading chest bumps and the young Apple Bloom is holding her ground on the much bigger and puffier Pinkie Pie! **BUT NOW DAISY IS SQUARING OFF WITH TWILIGHT SPARKLE!! KICKS AND PUNCHES ARE BEING THROWN ALL OVER! AN OLD-FASHIONED LINE BRAWL HAS ERUPTED HERE AT THE WELSH FARGO CENTER!! PANDEMONIUM AND ANARCHY ARE RULING NOW AS THIS ARENA IS BLOWING UP!!**

The referee and officials scampered around trying to separate each individual fight. The crowd's cheering brought the arena to deafening levels. After some last minute tugging and pulling, each team was separated and was being held to their respective ends of the ice. The Golden Leafs' fighters had their jerseys ruffled and their pads askew. Rainbow and Applejack defiantly shook their hooves to the crowd and then gave each other a hoof bump. Twilight and Rarity smiled proudly as they hugged Fluttershy.

The head referee was now in the penalty box, listening to instructions over a set of earphones from the scorer's table. After a minute of conversation, the referee stepped back out onto the ice. He faced the crowd to make an announcement.

"This game is now postponed. Ponyville wins four to zero. Both teams please proceed to your respective locker rooms."

Booing exploded from the fans as they were not happy with the referee's decree. The Golden Leafs tapped each other on the head in celebration for their win before heading off the ice to heavy booing and debris being thrown at them. Rainbow laughed and threw some of the garbage back into the stands as she exited. The Golden Leafs made their way back to the locker room, proud of their defense of their pride and their friend.

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In the locker room, Twilight and company were amped up from the brawl. Adrenaline was still rushing through their veins as they shared headbutts and hoof bumps. However, their energy dropped off immediately when the EHL Commissioner, Gary Bettpony, stormed into the room.

"WHAT IN CELESTIA'S NAME WERE YOU THINKING OUT THERE?!? Never before has the EHL seen such complete disregard for sportsmanship! This will never happen again, do you hear me? I am fining your team ten thousand bits and who's number eighty-eight?"

Applejack cautiously raised her hoof. "I am, sir."

"I saw what you did out there, little missy! You turned a small scuffle into an all out war. I am suspending you for your next game! You are not to travel with your team either!"

Commissioner Bettpony angrily turned and left before the Golden Leafs could protest. Applejack suddenly felt a huge weight fall upon her, the weight of guilt. Twilight tried consoling her now suspended friend but Applejack didn't want any of it. It felt as if the air was taken out of the room as the Golden Leafs quietly cleaned up and packed their things.

With a furious mob of Flyers fans waiting outside the arena, a team of security ponies cleared a path for Twilight and friends to enter their carriage back to Ponyville.

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In the carriage ride home, the Golden Leafs tried to figure out what to do for their next game. Applejack silently stared down at the floor in disbelief at her suspension.

"What are we going to do without Applejack?" asked Rainbow.

Twilight sighed as she ran a million ideas through her head. "I don't know. We can't play with only four skaters."

"How about we hold an audition? We have all the ponies in Ponyville try out and then we have a giant party after!" Pinkie suggested with glee.

Twilight paused to mull over Pinkie's idea. "That could work. But then we would need to teach them how to play forward very quickly. There's not much time before our next game in Cloudsdale."

Fluttershy, with her nose still packaged with cotton, spoke up for the first time since the hit. "How about Spike? He's been with us all along and watched all of our games."

Spike was fast asleep on the carriage floor. Twilight looked at him and started warming up to the idea. "That's not a bad idea, Fluttershy. He's seen us practice and was always with me when I was studying everything about the sport. I'll send a message to the EHL offices in the morning."

The Golden Leafs' carriage rolled on until it finally arrived in Ponyville in the middle of the night. Twilight tucked Spike into bed before going over the schedule with her friends. Twilight would message the EHL the next morning and they would practice a few days later. A trip to Cloudsdale was looming at the end of the week for a date with the Red Wings. The girls also pondered how they would all be able to step hoof in Cloudsdale since only two of them were pegasus ponies. The Golden Leafs shared goodbyes and parted toward their respective homes.

The Golden Leafs stepped into unfamiliar territory by physically fighting with their opponent. However, this small slip of character did not concern them as they fought with the purpose of defending a hurt friend. Lost in the tension-filled brawl was the fact the Golden Leafs won their third game. The second half of the regular season started with a big bang and will only grow from here on out.

Three Stars from Ponyville @ Fillydelphia

**Rarity (PGL)*

*** Pinkie Pie (PGL)*

**** Twilight Sparkle (PGL)*

EHL Transactions

8/24/11 – Manehattan Rangers release D Sapphire Shores, purchase

contract of D Bon-Bon

8/29/11 – Fillydelphia Flyers C Rose suspended one game

8/29/11 – Fillydelphia Flyers fined 10,000 bits for actions detrimental to the spirit of the Equestria Hockey League

8/29/11 – Ponyville Golden Leafs RW Applejack suspended one game

8/29/11 – Ponyville Golden Leafs fined 10,000 bits for actions detrimental to the spirit of the Equestria Hockey League

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Appleloosa 3, MANEHATTAN 1

CANTERLOT 1, Cloudsdale 0

EHL Standings

Appleloosa 5-1

Manehattan 3-3

Cloudsdale 3-3

Canterlot 3-3

Ponyville 3-3

Fillydelphia 1-5

Chapter 8.5

All-Star Adventure

It was day one of EHL All-Star Weekend. Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash were excited to leave Ponyville behind for a small vacation and to mingle with the greatest the EHL had to offer. Since all the festivities were being held in Canterlot this year, Twilight and Rainbow were transported by a royal chariot to the capitol city. When their chariot landed, they were met by EHL Commissioner Gary Bettpony and the rest of the EHL executives. The royal palace was adorned in multiple banners and decorations. Each EHL team had their logo emblazoned on a banner as well as a magical floating portrait of their all-star selections. Twilight and Rainbow squealed excitedly when they saw their massive photo shot floating above the Golden Leafs' banner. As the all-star Golden Leafs trotted on toward the palace, a trumpet fanfare from the royal guards blared out, announcing their arrival.

As they approached the royal chambers, Twilight and Rainbow noticed that the other all-stars had arrived and were talking amongst themselves. From the Appleloosa Black Apples, Sheriff Silverstar and Braeburn, from the Canterlot Equestriens, Pony Joe and Prince Blueblood, from the Cloudsdale Red Wings, Spitfire, Pucks, and Soarin, and from the Manehattan Rangers, Lyra and The Great and Powerful Trixie. When Rainbow saw Spitfire and Soarin, she bolted away from Twilight and tried joining in their conversation. Twilight kept to herself in the back of the crowd until Trixie turned around to notice her. Almost immediately, Trixie began laughing out loud, drawing the attention of all the all-stars.

"Hahaha! No way! Please don't tell me the EHL thought *YOU* were an all-star?"

"Hello, Trixie," said Twilight through her clenched teeth.

"Why are you here, Twilight Sparkle? Did they need more janitor mules for the big weekend?"

"No, Trixie. The EHL thought I was good enough to be here. It must be because I'm such a great leader and defensepony."

"Don't make me laugh any harder than I already am, Sparkle. Are there any other loser Golden Leafs here too?"

By this time, Rainbow Dash had rejoined Twilight's side and was getting annoyed with Trixie's trash talk. "I'm right here! You got something to say, Trixie?"

Trixie rolled her eyes at Rainbow and went on. "Oh great, the talking rainbow is here as well. No matter, I won't let you losers spoil my fantastic all-star weekend."

"You better hope I don't spoil your face!" snapped Rainbow.

Trixie growled and went nose to nose with Rainbow. "How rude!"

Suddenly a blast of trumpets rang out to stop the verbal showdown. A royal guard appeared on the platform with a scroll levitating in front of him. He cleared his voice and announced to all the creatures in attendance.

"Welcome to the EHL All-Star Weekend here in Canterlot! Now presenting the royal highnesses, Princess Luna and Princess Celestia!"

The audience applauded as Princess Celestia and Princess Luna emerged from a curtain and trotted up on the platform toward the all-stars. Luna was smiling brightly as Celestia had a warm, welcoming glow about her. Twilight's mouth hung open in happiness as she waited to hear her mentor's words. Trixie looked over at Twilight and mockingly imitated her star-struck stare.

"Good afternoon Equestria Hockey League all-stars! You all should be very proud that you were recognized among the league as elite players! My sister Luna and I welcome you to Canterlot and we hope you enjoy your weekend here. I shall now give the platform to Gary Bettpony to review the weekend's activities. Mr. Commissioner?"

The all-stars sarcastically clapped off-rhythm as the Commissioner took over the floor.

"Thank you, your majesty. As you all know, tonight is the All-Star Skills Competition. We will be having three events. First, the participants for the fastest skater competition are: Spitfire from Cloudsdale, Soarin from Cloudsdale, and Rainbow Dash from Ponyville."

Spitfire and Soarin gave each other a hoof bump while Rainbow squealed again in pure glee. The Commissioner continued with his announcement.

"The second event is the hardest shot competition. The participants for that event are: Braeburn from Appleloosa, Lyra from Manehattan, and Prince Blueblood from Canterlot. Finally, the last event is the accuracy competition. The participants for that event are: Silverstar from Appleloosa, Trixie from Manehattan, and Twilight Sparkle from Ponyville."

Trixie bursted out laughing again as Twilight's heart sank in fright. Twilight began imagining herself on the ice with everyone staring at her when it was time for the competition. She imagined missing every target in the net and the crowd relentlessly laughing at her. Twilight shook as the announcement was wrapping up.

"Last but not least, I would like to bring the Princesses back to the stage to begin picking their teams for the All-Star Game tomorrow."

Celestia and Luna returned and stood at opposite ends of the platform with a pile of goodies at their hooves. Each princess also had their teams' all-star game jerseys ready to be given out. Celestia's team would be wearing bright orange jerseys with the EHL logo placed inside her sun cutie mark. Luna's team would be wearing cool purple jerseys with the EHL logo placed inside the crescent opening of her moon cutie mark. The all-stars gave out oohs and ahhs when the princesses showed off their jerseys in

front of them. Once the noise settled, the team selection was underway. Twilight crossed her hooves that Princess Celestia would choose her while Rainbow Dash crossed hers so that she could play alongside the Wonderbolts.

"With my pick for the center position, I, Princess Celestia, choose...Spitfire of Cloudsdale!"

"Then for my pick at center, I, Princess Luna, choose...Rainbow Dash of Ponyville!"

Rainbow slumped with disappointment at first but then realized she would be going head to head with Spitfire once again. Thrilled by this new competitive opportunity, Rainbow perked herself back up and proudly strolled to the stage to collect her Team Luna jersey.

"Now for the left wing, I, Princess Celestia, choose...Lyra of Manehattan!"

"I, Princess Luna, choose for left wing...my nephew, Prince Blueblood of Canterlot!"

Lyra and Blueblood were next to trot up to the platform to retrieve their jerseys. Rainbow waved to Twilight from the platform and then waved to Soarin in hopes he would be picked for her team next.

"For the right wing position, I, Princess Celestia, choose...Braeburn of Appleloosa!"

"Then I, Princess Luna, choose...Soarin of Cloudsdale!"

Braeburn let out a "yeehaw!" and Soarin flew up to the platform after their names were called. As soon as Soarin put his Team Luna jersey on, Rainbow rushed over to him and began talking non-stop about how well they were going to play together on the same line.

Now it was time for the defensive selections. Twilight closed her eyes and began muttering to herself "Please let Princess Celestia pick me, please let Princess Celestia pick me!"

"For defense, I, Princess Celestia, choose...Pucks of Cloudsdale! I must

also share that this shall be Pucks' last All-Star Game as he has stated he will be retiring at the end of the season. Let us give him a round of applause for his amazing eleventh all-star selection!"

The all-stars applauded Pucks as he bashfully trotted up to the stage to receive his Team Celestia jersey. His jersey also had the captain's "C" on it as he was now appointed the team captain for tomorrow's game.

"For my defense, I, Princess Luna, select...Trixie of Manehattan!"

Trixie stuck her tongue out at Twilight before heading for the stage. Twilight did not care because she was sure she was going to be picked next by Princess Celestia.

"The other defensepony for my team, I, Princess Celestia, choose...Sheriff Silverstar of Appleloosa!"

Like a vicious hammer, Twilight's hopes were smashed. She fell to the floor in despair as Sheriff Silverstar went up for his jersey. Twilight didn't want to be there anymore. She already was anxious about being in the accuracy competition and now she would not be playing on her mentor's team.

"For my other defensepony, and designated team captain for tomorrow, I, Princess Luna, select, Twilight Sparkle from Ponyville!"

Twilight slowly lifted herself up until she heard the words "team captain." When she looked up and saw the bright, glowing "C" from her Team Luna jersey, Twilight tossed away her sadness and trotted up to the stage. She put her jersey on and was greeted by her soon-to-be teammates, except Trixie. Princess Celestia looked at Twilight and gave her a small wink, showing she had planned this all along. Twilight smiled back and stood proudly with Team Luna as the goaltenders were finally picked.

"Finally, the goaltender for my team, Team Celestia, shall be...Pony Joe of Canterlot!"

"And my goalie, I, Princess Luna, choose...Bloomberg of Appleloosa!"

Pony Joe went to the stage to join his team while Team Luna looked all over for their tree teammate. Suddenly, a crane crashed through the wall,

hoisting Bloomberg high above the room.

"Sorry Princess Celestia! We'll have this fixed up in no time!" yelled the crane operator.

The all-stars stood back in fear for an angry Celestia, but the Princess gave out a soft laugh and magically repaired the wall herself. "There shall be no need for fixing now. Carry on, operator!"

Everypony let out a sigh of relief and were then given the instructions for the night's All-Star Competition. The princesses departed and each team were shown to their sleeping quarters for the weekend. Twilight and Rainbow's room was covered in Golden Leaf's royal blue and gold. Rainbow rambled on to Twilight about how excited she was for the skating competition tonight and how she was going to play against Spitfire the next day and how Soarin was going to be her right winger. Twilight only nodded, preoccupied with her anxiety for the accuracy competition that evening. Rainbow noticed Twilight's shortness with her answers and tried calming her.

"What's got your tail in a knot today? Aren't you excited to be back in Canterlot?"

Twilight sighed. "Yes, I'm glad to be back home but I'm afraid of embarrassing myself tonight at the Skills Competition. I don't want to make a fool out of myself in front of everypony! I'm afraid I'll miss every target."

"No worries, Twilight. You're going to be the best shooter out there! I've seen your shots and they're pretty darn close to perfect! When it's your turn, just pretend you're all by yourself back at Ponyville Pond."

"But what about Trixie?"

"Forget that saddle sore. She's going to be too busy worrying about how magical and phony she looks. Bleh. You can take her, no problem!"

"Thanks, Rainbow."

"Don't mention it. Now come on, we have to get to the arena!"

Twilight and Rainbow left their room and headed down to the chariot line where they boarded a chariot for the Celestia Centre, home of the Canterlot Equestriens.

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When they arrived at the Celestia Centre, Twilight and Rainbow were escorted to the Team Luna locker room. Prince Blueblood, Soarin, and Trixie were already at their respective stalls getting ready. Twilight and Rainbow were shown their stalls. In their stalls were their royal blue Golden Leafs home jerseys, gently hanging from hooks and shining brighter than usual. On the left shoulder of their sweaters was a patch depicting the All-Star Game's logo. The two Golden Leafs put their gear on and waited with the rest of Team Luna for their cue to head to the ice.

The inside of the Celestia Centre was a vibrant collection of colors and logos. All six teams had ample amounts of their colors glowing about the arena. The Celestia Centre was about 85% full of cheering ponies. They cheered loudly for each all-star's introduction, with especially loud cheers for Prince Blueblood and Pony Joe, the hometown Equestrien all-star selections. After the introductions were complete, the competition participants broke away towards their respective events while the others either sat in the benches or on the ice to spectate.

The first event was the fastest skater competition. Cones were placed around the entire rink, a few feet from the boards to outline the track. Spitfire and Soarin tightened up their skate laces and pressed down their red Cloudsdale jerseys as Rainbow Dash stepped up to the starting line ready to race. Spitfire and Soarin joined Rainbow at the line and all three coiled into starting position.

TwEEEEEEEEEEt

When the whistle blew, the three racers were off in a giant red and blue blur. The first lap of three was a close one and each pony jockeyed for the lead. They all turned together and crossed the line for the start of the second lap, nearly matching each other in stride. Three turns of neck and neck and neck closeness later, the skaters crossed the line for the final lap. Spitfire and Rainbow tried mustering up extra strength and were soon breaking ahead from Soarin. Spitfire and Rainbow skated side by side as

they crossed center ice and were heading into the final two turns. With the finish line quickly approaching, Rainbow skated lower and stretched her neck out. Spitfire saw this and followed suit. Around the final turn they came, each pony taking a slim lead then being overtaken by the other. They rumbled toward the finish line as the spectators stood up for the finish. In a large blur, both ponies crossed the finish line and a bright camera flash lit up the ice. The crowd exploded with a loud cheer as Spitfire and Rainbow were met by their teammates to celebrate a race well done. When the photo developed, the photographer handed it to the emcee for the evening.

"The race result is in! In a photo finish, and I don't mean the Equestrians' defensepony, the winner, by a nose, is...RAINBOW DASH OF PONYVILLE!"

The crowd cheered again as Rainbow leapt up in celebration. The emcee skated over to place a medal around Rainbow's neck. Twilight applauded for her fellow Golden Leaf as Rainbow received hoofshakes from both Spitfire and Soarin for a great race. When Twilight was done cheering, her anxiety ramped back up as it was getting closer to time for the accuracy competition. But first it was time for the hardest shot. Braeburn, Lyra, and Blueblood drifted toward the net to await their event. As Twilight nervously looked upon the hardest shot competition, Trixie sat down next to her.

"Hope you're ready to lose, Twilight Flopple! I've been practicing my shot accuracy all week because I knew I was going to be chosen for this event. I'll do you a favor though. I'll shoot so well, everyone will pay attention to me and they won't even care about your pathetic attempts. I'm going to give them a show!"

Twilight kept looking on, not giving Trixie one ounce of attention. Trixie saw her words weren't getting through and stood up to leave. Trixie let out a snort before skating away to get ready for the accuracy competition. Braeburn won the hardest shot competition and was given his medal as the crowd once again erupted with cheers. Finally, it came time for the accuracy event. Twilight shook as she stood up and skated over toward Trixie and Silverstar. Rainbow skated by to give Twilight some last minute words of encouragement and also to show off her fastest skater medal. Twilight focused in and just wanted the event to be over.

First to shoot was Trixie. Soarin and Spitfire stood at the sides of the net each with a pile of pucks to pass to the shooters. In the net were four targets placed in the corners. The goal was to hit all four targets without missing in the fastest time. Trixie added some flair to her attempt by making her stick shoot sparklers from the ends. With the shooter and passers ready, the whistle blew.

Tweeeeeeeeet

Trixie hit her first shot into the top left target. The next shot drilled the top right target as well. When the next pass came, Trixie one-timed it into the lower left corner to become three for three. With one last target glowing in the bottom right corner, Trixie began to get cocky. When the next pass came, Trixie flicked her stick. The puck flew at the bottom right corner but just narrowly missed the target, hitting the post instead. Trixie's eyes expanded in disbelief and let out a frustrated growl. When the next pass came, Trixie tightened up her grip and let the shot fly. Once again, she missed the target and became angrier. Finally, on the next pass, Trixie fired the puck into the bottom right target, finishing up at 4 for 6.

Twilight's uneasiness faded a tiny bit after seeing Trixie struggle to finish, but she still shook in her skates. Twilight took her place at the shooter's spot and cautiously waited for the whistle.

Tweeeeeeeeeeeeet

Twilight was startled by the whistle and let out a yelp as the first pass came to her. Twilight closed her eyes and shot the puck on net. Although she didn't see it, the first shot busted the bottom right corner, eliciting a cheer from the crowd. Hearing the crowd, Twilight reopened her eyes and saw she was 1 for 1. She smiled as the next pass came toward her. She wound back and shot again, this time cracking the bottom left target. Her confidence rocketed upward as the third pass came. Twilight focused in on the top left target and shot. The puck blazed in on target and obliterated it. Twilight was now 3 for 3 and was ready to go 4 for 4. The fourth pass came in from Soarin and Twilight wound up. When Twilight unleashed her shot, Trixie's horn glowed and she put a spell on the puck. Twilight's shot flew toward the top right target but suddenly stopped and fell to the ice. Twilight was dumbfounded but already had the next pass coming at her. She focused again and quickly flung the puck into the final target, busting it up.

Trixie stomped her skate down as Twilight finished 4 for 5.

The crowd cheered Twilight's effort and she skated away feeling like a weight was lifted from her shoulders. Trixie stomped about in frustration as Silverstar took his turn to shoot. The Appleloosa defense pony went 4 for 4 and won the event. It did not matter to Twilight as she bested Trixie and her anxiety was now gone.

The Skills Competition ended with a declaration from Gary Bettpony.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, as is tradition, I will now announce the host of next season's All-Star Weekend! Without further ado, next year's All-Star Weekend shall take place in..."

The royal band started a drumroll as the Commissioner stretched his neck back up to the microphone.

"Ponyville!"

Twilight and Rainbow began celebrating as the crowd applauded. The other all-stars, except Trixie, smiled at the two Golden Leafs and then headed for the locker rooms.

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The following day was the All-Star Game. Team Celestia and Team Luna arrived at the Celestia Centre to prepare for the star-studded event. Twilight, with the captain's 'C' on her jersey, addressed her team while Pucks did the same in the Team Celestia locker room. Before long, both teams were introduced out in front of the sellout crowd. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna took their place in the royal suite high above the ice and the All-Star Game was underway.

Since the all-star game de-emphasized hitting, the game jumped out to a fast start. Team Celestia took an early 1-0 lead when Spitfire dangled through the Luna defense for a highlight reel goal. Team Luna quickly answered back when Rainbow Dash countered with an equally impressive goal of her own, tying it up at 1-1. Team Luna was back on the offensive and scored on a bang-bang passing play where Blueblood and Rainbow traded passes and then ended with Trixie sniping a shot in from the blue

line. The 2-1 Team Luna lead did not last long as Lyra and Spitfire were up on the two-on-one after a big check by Braeburn on Rainbow. Lyra notched the goal and the game was tied again at 2-2. The 1st period ended that way and the crowd showed their appreciation for the all-stars' entertaining performance.

In the 2nd period, Team Celestia regained the lead when Pucks received a pass along the blue line from Silverstar and fired it on net. Braeburn skated through the crease to tip the shot past the immobile Bloomberg for the go ahead goal. Down 3-2, Team Luna fought back and tied the game up with a deflection by Soarin off a Twilight shot. With the game tied 3-3, Team Celestia bolted down and played tighter defense. They pressured Team Luna into committing turnovers which turned into two more goals by Spitfire and Braeburn for Team Celestia to take a 5-3 lead. Pucks added another goal from the point to extend Team Celestia's lead to 6-3. At the end of the second period, Team Luna found themselves down by three goals. With bragging rights and pride on the line, Twilight pepped up her team and got them ready for the 3rd period.

The 3rd period got off to a hot start as Team Luna chipped away at their deficit with a Rainbow goal from Twilight. The Golden Leaf connection made the score 6-4 as Team Celestia started playing more conservatively. Team Luna did not let up and was soon back on the scoring end when Blueblood muscled to the net and poked the puck in past his Equestrian teammate Pony Joe to cut the Team Celestia lead to 6-5. With the score closer, the defense on both teams stepped up. A little amount of shots were fired as Team Celestia tried to hold onto their lead. With two minutes left, Soarin was on a breakaway with Spitfire close to catching him. Rainbow flew up quickly and nudged Spitfire away to allow Soarin to complete his break. With a deke, Soarin beat Pony Joe and tied the game up for Team Luna, 6-6. Only minute remained and the crowd grew louder with excitement. Team Celestia won the faceoff and deployed a keep away strategy. The clock wound down and Team Celestia kept looking for their opportune shot. Lyra passed to a raging Spitfire who cut through the center. Twilight dove at the Team Celestia center and poke checked the puck off to the side where Soarin took it up with Rainbow. Rainbow and Soarin passed back and forth with only Pucks between them. Soarin knew his Red Wing teammate's weakness and rushed to Pucks' weak side, the left side. Rainbow skillfully threaded the puck between Pucks' legs to Soarin on the other side to one-time the game-winning goal into the net.

Time expired and Team Luna won 7-6. The Celestia Centre was rocking with cheers and music as Princess Luna came down to the ice to present winner's medals to her team. Soarin was the All-Star Game MVP and was given a small trophy for the feat.

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After the celebration was over, both teams cleaned up in the locker room and headed back to the palace for a banquet dinner that evening. After the dinner was over, Twilight and Rainbow packed their things and returned to Ponyville with their all-star jerseys and medals in tow. Although they arrived back late, Twilight and Rainbow entered Twilight's house and were met by a surprise party. Pinkie Pie, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Spike decorated the house and waited all day for their all-star teammates to return. The Golden Leafs were reunited again and they partied for the rest of the evening.

Chapter 9

Wingin' It

The following day after the Ponyville Golden Leafs' tension-packed, fight-filled victory over the Fillydelphia Flyers, Twilight Sparkle had administrative duties to perform. Earlier that morning, the other Golden Leafs stopped by to donate their share of the team's 10,000 bit fine to the EHL. Applejack offered to pay more than her share for she was still feeling guilty about receiving a suspension and putting the team in a tough spot. Twilight sent the fine payment along with a message asking if Spike could substitute for Applejack in the Golden Leafs' lineup for their next game at Cloudsdale.

Twilight nervously paced inside the treehouse, waiting for the EHL's response. Spike was casually lounging in a chair near the fireplace, reading a superhero comic. Twilight periodically looked over at Spike to see if he had belched a new message. Feeling small vibrations from Twilight's pacing, Spike peered up over his comic to see what her problem was.

"What are you so nervous about, Twilight? It's just a letter."

"It's not *just a letter*, Spike, this is a very crucial response that could change everything for this week! If you are not allowed to play for Applejack, then we're going to have to hold emergency auditions, then we'll have to pick someone, then we'll have to teach them, then that totally cuts down my scouting and review time for Cloudsdale. UGH! Why haven't they responded yet?!"

Spike slowly closed his comic and hopped up from his chair. "I'm sure everything's going to be okay, Twilight. They're probably just busy sorting out everything from last night. I mean you guys did make a pretty big mess of things."

Twilight's nervousness turned into irritation. "You're not helping!"

Spike let out a yawn and scratched his stomach. "I'm going to go take a nap. I'll let you know if anything pops up."

Twilight tossed herself at Spike's feet. "No! I need you to stay awake so I can get the EHL's response! Please?"

Spike sighed. "Alright, but as soon as it comes, I'm going to sleep-*BURP*"

Almost right on cue, Spike belched out a scroll. Twilight leapt up from the floor and nabbed it quickly. Anxious to read the response, she fumbled her hooves trying to open the seal. She gave up on opening the scroll manually used her magic to unroll the EHL's message.

"From the Offices of the Equestria Hockey League:

Dear Ponyville Golden Leafs:

Your fine payment of 10,000 bits has been accepted and processed. Also, enclosed in this message is a one-game contract to sign Spike, who has been declared eligible to play by the EHLPA (Equestria Hockey League Players' Association). Please send back the signed contract within the next two hours to allow for delivery and processing time. Thank you.

Signed,

Coltin Campbell

Executive Vice President & Director of Hockey Operations"

Twilight happily detached the one-game contract from the main letter and levitated it over to Spike along with a quill. Twilight smiled desperately at Spike, expecting him to sign the contract and to be on their way. Spike looked at Twilight and then swiftly glanced over the terms on the contract.

He clutched the quill and went to sign. Before the ink hit the paper, he looked up at Twilight one last time with a playful grin. Twilight responded with a look of confusion. Spike proceeded to chuckle and put the quill down.

"No way! I have some demands first."

Twilight's confusion was blown away by anger. "WHAT?! What demands? What are you talking about?"

"Well, I feel like I haven't been properly thanked for all my hard work so far this season. I'm always at the rink early setting up the locker room, missing out on all the fun stuff you ponies do before the game. I'm always spending the whole intermission fixing pads and skates and taping sticks. And finally, when we're playing at home, I have to do the announcing on top of the equipment stuff too."

Spike's words sunk in for Twilight and she began to feel guilty that the team had not recognized his hard work. She calmed herself down and started to apologize.

"I'm sorry, Spike. I'm sorry we haven't shown our thanks and appreciation for everything you've done for us so far. You have been working hard and I certainly appreciate it. What are these demands of yours? I'll do whatever I can to fulfill them."

"That's more like it! Now, before I sign this contract, I want you to promise me that I will receive double, no, triple the amount of gems for meals! A growing dragon's gotta eat, you know."

"Alright, I promise. Now go ahead and sign that contract please!"

"I'm not finished. My second demand is that I get to sleep in until whenever I want. It's winter, Twilight! There's no reason to be up at dawn. I mean, seriously. Are you an old mare?"

"Ha ha," sarcastically laughed Twilight. "Fine, you will receive triple the amount of gems and I'll let you sleep in. Now hand over that signed contract!"

Twilight reached for the contract but Spike pulled it away. He cleared his throat and announced another demand. "Lastly, I want a kiss from Rarity."

Twilight slapped her hoof on her forehead at Spike's ridiculous request. "Spike! What does any of this have to do with hockey?"

"Nuh uh, Twilight. No kiss, no signing. Do you want to forfeit your game against Cloudsdale?"

Twilight grunted out of frustration and sent out a horn-transmitted message to Rarity to call her back over to the treehouse. Nearly ten minutes later, a knock came at the door. Twilight rushed to open it and let Rarity in. Rarity was wearing her best winter saddle with matching scarf, her mane glistening from the icy winter wind. She was bewildered as to why Twilight called her over.

"Hello Twilight, dear. What can I help you with?"

"Well, Rarity, Spike here has a demand that he wants fulfilled before he signs the one-game contract."

"Ah ha! What do you desire, Spike? A new pair of gloves? A sweater perhaps? Maybe some tiny winter boots for your tiny feet?"

Twilight leaned over to whisper in Rarity's ear the actual demand. Rarity laughed heartily while Spike sprayed his mouth with mint spray and slicked his scales back.

"That shall be no problem at all, Twilight. I must say I am quite flattered. Come here you little romantic dragon you." Rarity winked at Twilight mischievously before advancing toward Spike.

Spike giggled and clapped his hands as Rarity approached. Twilight blankly stared on, unable to process what exactly was unfolding in front of her eyes. Rarity leaned in toward Spike as Spike went to his tip toes, lips puckered and eyes closed. With Spike's eyes closed, Rarity magically teleported her pet cat Opal to her. Spike kissed Opal on the nose and Opal was quickly teleported back home before the tricked dragon could open his eyes. Twilight tried holding in her laughter but was busting at the seams. Rarity opened her eyes, pretending to have received the kiss while Spike

melted with bliss, not knowing what his lips really touched. Twilight, still holding in her laughter, trotted over and shook Spike out of his love trance.

"Ready to sign that contract now?"

Spike grabbed the quill and began to sign the paper. "Sure thing, ladies!"

The contract was finally signed and Spike fired it away to the EHL offices. Rarity and Twilight shared another wink and a laugh. With Spike now officially a part of the Golden Leafs roster, the team proceeded with their scheduled practice the next day.

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The next day came and the Golden Leafs met at Ponyville Pond for practice. Instead of being in the locker room beforehand to prep the girls' equipment, Spike happily strolled alongside Twilight into the arena. Earlier in the day, Applejack took the liberty of grabbing the teams' equipment and was now at the arena doing Spike's usual job of preparing for practice. Twilight and Spike greeted Applejack as they entered the locker room.

"Hello Applejack! Thanks for coming today to take over for Spike and to teach him. It's too bad you can't come with us to Cloudsdale for the game though."

"It's okay, Twilight. While y'all are gone I'ma go around Ponyville and shovel some snow with Big Macintosh's plow. I had ta' take quite a bit out of the farm's funds to help pay the fine so I'm gonna try to make some money back."

"Yeah, that was certainly big of you to pitch in more than your share."

"Well, I am puttin' the team in a sticky situation. It's the least I could do," said Applejack as she lassoed over a box of new hockey gear. "Here ya go, Spike! A set of baby dragon-sized pads."

Spike's eyes lit up with delight. He dove head-first into the box. "Thanks Applejack!"

As Spike and Twilight dressed, Rarity, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, and

Pinkie Pie showed up together. Spike gave Rarity a wave to which she blew back a kiss, causing Twilight to bottle up her laughter again from the day before. The Golden Leafs put on their equipment and were soon out on the ice for practice.

Twilight led the team through some skating and stretching drills before it was time to talk strategy. Stressing that their passes had been weak and lackadaisical lately, each skater teamed up with another to practice passing. Off in the other end of the ice, Applejack was talking to Spike, lecturing him on the duties and responsibilities of the right wing. Spike pretended to listen but already knew what Applejack was telling him.

When the passing drills were over, the Golden Leafs had another mini-scrimmage with the magical dummy players used before. Without a hitch, the Golden Leafs were buzzing around and passing with ease. It appeared Spike had seamlessly taken over Applejack's role in terms of passing and shooting. The Golden Leafs were still lacking a strong, checking forward however. With each successful series on offense, Spike's ego began to inflate. His cockiness moved him to start taking plays off and lazily drift along the play. Twilight noticed Spike's diminishing effort and blew her whistle.

"Spike? What happened to you? You're not even skating anymore."

"I'm fine, Twilight! Did you see how many goals we've scored? These fake ponies are certainly looking like dummies now."

Twilight paused for a moment to think of a way to motivate Spike to work harder. When an echo reverberated throughout the cavernous, empty arena, a light bulb clicked over Twilight's head.

"Well Spike, if you don't want to play hard. I know someone who will."

"Oh yeah? Who's that?"

"Oh, you know. A particularly helpful creature whom I can have fly here in no time. You know. Owlowsious."

Spike immediately straightened up and began skating swiftly around the ice. "No way! I don't want that owl coming here! I'm ready to go again. Drop

the puck!"

Twilight smiled when her motivational tactic worked and started the play once again. After an hour of scrimmaging, the practice came to a close. The Golden Leafs trotted off to the locker room and cleaned up.

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When Twilight and friends were walking away from the arena, a yellow and greyish blur flew past them, nearly bowling them over. It was the Cloudsdale defensepony Ditzzy Doo performing her day job. She crashed down to Ponyville while delivering a package from the EHL.

"I brought you your muffin delivery!" said the walleyed pony.

Twilight accepted the box. "Uhh, thank you? But we didn't order any muffins. We didn't order anything."

"These muffins are compliments of the Equestria Hockey League. Use them wisely!"

Before any more questions could be asked, Ditzzy Doo flew back toward Cloudsdale.

Twilight backed her friends away and slowly opened the box with her magic, fearing for a prank. It was not a prank, but a box full of winged skates. Along with the skates was a note.

"These winged skates will allow your team to fully function and perform in Cloudsdale. They are charmed with a lifting spell to help you travel into the city as well. Please return these skates when you are back on the ground."

- Equestria Hockey League"

Fluttershy, Rarity, Twilight, and Pinkie Pie grabbed the skates and tried them on instantly. Fluttershy and Rarity admired the skates for their tiny, adorable wings while Rainbow Dash was unimpressed and loudly boasted that her wings were bigger and better. Twilight counted the pairs and saw that only four were included, enough for the wingless members of the team.

Fluttershy became saddened when she realized she would have to wear her normal skates. Twilight used her magic to create a pair of tiny wings for Fluttershy's skates, making Fluttershy squeal for their cuteness. With their transportation to Cloudsdale literally falling into their laps, the Golden Leafs planned out their game day schedule and departed for the evening.

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Game day arrived and the new edition of the Golden Leafs met at the treehouse before departing for Cloudsdale. Applejack also came over, with her snow shovel, to see her friends off. Twilight, Pinkie, Rarity, and Spike put on their winged skates and were led by Rainbow and Fluttershy up towards Cloudsdale. The Golden Leafs waved goodbye to Applejack on the ground as she quickly shrank out of sight. The tiny wings on the skates flapped furiously to propel the non-pegasus ponies onward. The flight did not last long however because Cloudsdale was rapidly coming into view. With excitement, Rainbow Dash bolted on ahead and Fluttershy stayed back to direct her friends. Before long, the Golden Leafs reached the cloudy shoreline of the floating city and were walking toward Foal Louis Arena, home of the Cloudsdale Red Wings.

The Golden Leafs' arrival and hovering into the city turned many heads as they swaggered through the main streets. As they closed in on the arena, the city was glowing red, reflecting the colors of their hockey team. Many pegasi wearing their Red Wings jerseys yelled out to the Golden Leafs as they continued on their path. Foal Louis Arena grew before them and they saw the visitor's entrance in sight. Also in sight were four older ponies, two stallions and two mares, standing outside the entrance doors. One couple had faded rainbow manes while the other couple had pink manes with tiny grey streaks running throughout.

"Mommy?! Daddy?!" shrieked Fluttershy. Fluttershy's wings sprung open and she flew into her parents' waiting forelegs with glee.

"Oh come here pumpkin! We've missed you so much!" said Fluttershy's mother. Fluttershy's dad trotted around and planted a kiss upon his daughter's forehead.

Rainbow Dash unenergetically floated over toward her parents. "Hey mom. Dad."

Mr. Dash, in his stocky stance, stood tall and emotionless while the trim and slender Mrs. Dash smothered her daughter with a hug. "Hello Rainbow! It's so wonderful to see you!" Mr. Dash put his muscled up leg around his daughter's neck and broke out of his robotic state by giving Rainbow a noogie and messing her mane. "Welcome back kiddo!"

Embarrassed, Rainbow tried escaping her father's clutches as the Fluttershies continued hugging and nuzzling. The other Golden Leafs fondly watched on as the parental reunion calmed. Finally, Fluttershy flew over to her friends and introduced them.

"Mom, dad, these are our friends! Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, and Spike!"

The Dashes and Fluttershies exchanged pleasantries with their daughters' friends and then came together.

"When we heard that the Golden Leafs were playing the Red Wings tonight, we knew we had to come down to the arena to see our girls," said Mrs. Dash.

"We are so proud that our girls are big time hockey stars! Isn't that right?" exclaimed Mr. Dash as he nudged Fluttershy's dad in the wing. "Oh yes, we are very proud. We're also grateful you're not hurt...hockey is a rough sport."

Fluttershy tried easing her father's concerns. "Oh yes, I've been taking care of myself. Right girls?"

Fluttershy winked to her friends. The Golden Leafs and Spike looked to each other and shook their heads yes which made the Fluttershies relieved.

Mrs. Dash trotted up and licked her hoof, wiping a smudge from Rainbow's face. "Dashie dear, your brothers are also coming to watch you tonight. You better play hard or you'll never hear the end of it!"

Rainbow groaned as she brushed her mother's hoof away. "Ugh! Why are those blockheads coming? I thought they were busy working at the weather

factory?"

"Oh you know your brothers. They love to watch their little sister compete. You're the last one in the family to be playing in any sport, kiddo. My football days are over, your mother's track and field career is toast, and both your brothers had to quit their football careers to work," said the Dash patriarch. "The family legacy is on your shoulders now."

"Oh, awesome," said Rainbow Dash with sarcasm.

Mrs. Fluttershy stepped toward the Golden Leafs with a warm smile. "Well, we should let you go so you can prepare for your big game. We'll be cheering for you! Normally we are big Red Wings fans but I think we can make an exception tonight."

"Thanks! We won't let you down!" replied Twilight as the Dashes and Fluttershies gave their daughters one more set of hugs and kisses.

"Alright kids. Have fun out there! Play hard!" yelled Mr. Dash as he escorted his wife and the Fluttershies toward the arena entrance.

"Bye mommy! Bye daddy!" shouted Fluttershy as Rainbow rolled her eyes and weakly waved at her parents.

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As the Golden Leafs began their march into the arena, Rarity hovered next to Rainbow and poked fun at her. "Awww, does widdle Dashie miss her famiwy?"

"No! They're so embarrassing! There's a reason why I spend most of my time in Ponyville," said Rainbow as she pushed Rarity away.

"I'm just curious, what do your parents do Fluttershy?" asked Twilight.

Fluttershy lifted her head proudly. "Oh, my dad is a Cloudsdale city accountant while my mom is an elementary teacher. They're just so gentle and nice."

By this time, the Golden Leafs entered the arena and were steps away

from their locker room. Walking down the hallway, Twilight and company passed many murals and paintings depicting the grand history of the Red Wings franchise. Eleven Celestia Cups along with some Red Wings players of old lined the walls in bright silver and red paint. At the end of the hallway was the visitor's locker room. The Golden Leafs entered the room and immediately started dressing. Fluttershy sung a happy tune to herself while Rainbow mumbled through her teeth as they readied. Once every Golden Leaf was fully dressed, Twilight addressed her team.

"Alright team. Let's remember what we did in practice and take it to the Red Wings! They're an agile team so we're going to need our legs out there tonight. We also need to watch for Spitfire. She's currently the highest scorer in the league so we will need to cover her closer than ever. Are we ready?"

"Ready as chocolate frosted cupcakes on a windowsill in a rain storm!" yelled Pinkie.

Everyone but Pinkie shrugged with puzzlement. Twilight took a while to find words to say. "Uhh, oookay. I'll take that as a yes. Now let's go!"

One by one the Golden Leafs marched out of the locker room in their sparkling white road jerseys, ready to try for their fourth victory.

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Foal Louis Arena, named for the famous pony boxer Foal Louis, was rocking with Red Wings fans. A sea of red blanketed the bleachers, causing the Golden Leafs to gaze around the arena in awe. High in the rafters were many banners of the Red Wings' achievements including: their eleven Celestia Cup banners, a number of Princess' Trophy banners for having the best regular season record, and the retired numbers of former greats including the greatest Red Wings captain of all time, Steve Yzermare. Also hanging up in the rafters was a giant stuffed purple octopus. Spike pointed it out and the Golden Leafs debated about why such a silly thing was up there. Fluttershy spotted her parents with Rainbow's family in the stands and waved to them. The Fluttershies and Mrs. Dash waved back while Mr. Dash nodded with a grin. Rainbow's brothers tried yelling out to their sister but Rainbow didn't look, keeping her focus towards the ice.

A horn blared out and the doors to the rink opened, letting both teams out onto the ice. The crowd stood up and applauded as their Red Wings flew out onto the ice in their home reds, led by Spitfire. Both teams skated circles around their ends as the countdown clock wound down to zero. In the Golden Leafs' end, Spike and the non-pegasus skaters were showing a tiny bit of difficulty in their skating, being thrown off by their winged skates.

The clock reached zero and another horn rang out. The referee grabbed a puck and drifted toward the center faceoff circle where the Red Wings' logo glistened with the word "HOCKEYCLOUD" imposed over it in sparkling black paint. The Golden Leafs and the Red Wings met at the circle ready to begin. Scootaloo and Pinkie Pie raised their gloves and the puck was dropped to start game number seven of the regular season.

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Right away, Cloudsdale controlled the puck in the Ponyville zone. Twilight, Rarity, and Spike were still getting the hang of their special skates while Rainbow and Fluttershy were able to play normally. The Red Wings zipped the puck to each other and fired when they had an open lane. Pinkie held steady early and stopped three shots. When play resumed, the Golden Leafs finally won control and carried the puck down to the Cloudsdale end. Their control was short-lived as Gilda muscled Spike off the puck and took it back into the Ponyville zone. Gilda moved the puck down into the corner where she was met by Twilight. Twilight tried getting her stick on the puck but Gilda's massive frame kept Twilight at bay. Ditzzy called for the puck at the blue line and Gilda pushed it to her. Ditzzy faked a shot which caused Rainbow to hit the ice for a block. With Rainbow down, Spitfire peeled around Spike in the right faceoff circle and was now open. Ditzzy shoveled the puck to Spitfire who barreled straight on net. Pinkie prepped herself for Spitfire's attempt. Spitfire nudged her head up toward the top left corner but slapped the puck down to the bottom right, fooling Pinkie. The puck clanged around the back of the net while the Red Wings' goal horn bellowed out. Wings fans jumped from their seats to cheer and Spitfire was met by her teammates.

*"Red Wings GOOOAAALLL scored by number 13, SPITFIIIIREEEE!
Assisted by Ditzzy Doo! And number 44, Gilda!"*

Right after Spitfire's goal, Rainbow made the mistake of glancing over at her family. Mr. Dash shook his head in disappointment while Rainbow's brothers laughed at the Golden Leafs' misfortune. Rainbow adjusted her helmet strap and tightened her bite on her stick. She made a beeline for the center circle, wanting for play to resume quickly to rectify this early deficit. Play was back on and Rainbow won the faceoff back to Twilight. Twilight dumped it into the Cloudsdale zone where Rarity chased after it. Rarity was nudged into the glass by Soarin. Impatient with Rarity's play along the boards, Rainbow swooped in and grabbed the puck from her teammate. Rainbow barreled right toward Pucks and overpowered the veteran defensepony. Rainbow fired a shot right straight at Scootaloo in net. Fearing the bullet of a shot coming at her, Scootaloo dodged out of the way and the puck slammed the back of the net forcefully. The goal light flickered and the crowd groaned. Rainbow celebrated behind the net with her teammates coming over to tap her on the helmet.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 20, Rainbow Dash. Assisted by number 9, Rarity, and number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

This time Dash's family was beaming with delight at Rainbow's goal. Rainbow eased up but was still eager to resume play. The puck dropped but this time Cloudsdale gained control. Soarin took the puck into the Ponyville zone, covered by Spike. Spike did a good job pressuring Soarin and forced him into the corner. Pucks came in closer along the boards to give Soarin an outlet. Soarin passed the puck out from the corner to Pucks, causing Spike to back off Soarin and start pressuring Pucks. However, Spike's shift allowed Soarin to crash the net unopposed since Fluttershy was too preoccupied watching Spitfire. With Spike closing in, Pucks fired on net. Pinkie lined herself up with the shot but Soarin skillfully deflected the puck downward. The puck bounced off the ice and flew in through Pinkie's five-hole. The goal horn shouted out again and a roar came from the sea of Red Wings faithful.

"Red Wings GOOOAAALLL scored by number 96, SOARIIIN! Assisted by number 5, Pucks!"

Rainbow slammed her stick down on the ice in frustration as Cloudsdale reclaimed the lead 2-1. Fluttershy glanced over to her parents who had a pained look on their faces as the Golden Leafs let in another goal. Fluttershy looked down and slowly drifted to the faceoff circle where Rainbow was already waiting. Rainbow won the ensuing faceoff back to Fluttershy who tried skating it up through the neutral zone. Rainbow saw Spitfire coming in on Fluttershy so she doubled back to take the puck away and control it herself. Rainbow tried crashing the net but Pucks and Ditzzy double-teamed her. Seeing the puck sitting still at Rainbow's skates, Fluttershy sneakily skated up and fired a shot from between Rainbow's legs. Being screened by the wall her defense put up, Scootaloo wasn't ready for the shot as it clanged the left side post and ricocheted into the net. Rainbow turned around in shock and saw a smiling Fluttershy as Ponyville's goal light shone again. Rainbow hugged her teammate as the other Golden Leafs skated in to celebrate.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 0, Fluttershy. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash."

Fluttershy skated to the boards in front of her parents and softly tapped on the glass. Her parents reached over the ponies sitting in the first row below them and put their hooves up to the glass where their daughter's skate was. Mr. Dash gave Fluttershy's dad a hearty pat on the back which nearly knocked him to the floor. With two minutes remaining in the first period, the referee called both teams to the center for the next faceoff.

The Golden Leafs had control of the puck again and were able to fire off a few more low shots but were denied by Scootaloo. Cloudsdale regrouped and carried the puck into the Ponyville zone for the final minute. Ditzzy had the puck on the blue line until she dumped it into the corner for Gilda. Gilda fought off Twilight and Rarity as they attempted to pin her on the boards. Spitfire swooped by to free the puck but missed. Gilda gathered up her strength to power out of Twilight and Rarity's hold and swung the puck back to Ditzzy. Ditzzy shoved it to Pucks who then dumped it to the other corner for Soarin. Spike jumped up into the passing lane and intercepted the puck. He wobbled in his winged skates and was caught by Spitfire who swiftly came up over him to steal the puck back. Spitfire drew in Twilight and Fluttershy in the slot as they tried to break Spitfire's stride. Ditzzy lined up behind Spitfire and slapped her stick on the ice. Spitfire passed behind

herself while Ditzzy wound up for a one-timer. Rarity dove to try to poke the puck away but Ditzzy ripped off the one-time shot. Ditzzy's shot was too fast for Pinkie who missed with her glove hoof. The crowd erupted with a yell as the Red Wings celebrated their third goal of the evening. A handful of muffins were thrown onto the ice and were swept up by the ice crew mules. Ditzzy quickly skated over and picked one up, eating the celebratory muffin in a single chomp.

"Red Wings GOOOAAAALLL scored by DIITZY DOOOO! Assisted by number 13, Spitfire!"

The latest Red Wings goal was a tough one to swallow as only ten seconds remained in the period. The Golden Leafs won the faceoff and waited out the end of the period, back down in a 3-2 hole. The period horn blared and the Cloudsdale crowd applauded their team off the ice. The Golden Leafs looked down as they skated off toward their locker room.

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Rainbow Dash nervously paced inside the locker room. She began questioning herself in her mind about how to carry on. Does she try to carry the team? She would make her family proud but on the other hand she would be showing up the Wonderbolts in their own arena. Twilight tried standing in front of the team but was knocked over by Rainbow's pacing. Twilight grabbed Rainbow by the cheeks and tried shaking her out of her overanalyzing state. Rainbow's eyes rattled around and she appeared to calm down. As soon as Twilight let go, Rainbow started up pacing again and couldn't be stopped.

"Rainbow, you look loco in the coco right now! Why are you pretending to be a train?" asked Pinkie.

"Because I have to do well in front of my family or else I'll be disgracing the Dash family name! But if I do well, I'll be outshining Spitfire and Soarin and they'll get upset and never invite me to become a Wonderbolt! And I miss Applejack!...No offense, Spike."

Spike munched down on an intermission gem snack. He replied with his mouth full, "None taken. I'm just doin' this for the gems and the sleep."

Twilight snagged Spike's snack from his hand and turned toward Rainbow. "Well you need to calm down if we're going to take back control of this game! We need everypony, and Spike, to focus! Forget who's sitting in the stands. Just worry about the Red Wings and beating them. Got it?"

Rarity, Spike, Fluttershy, and Pinkie nodded but Rainbow still continued pacing back and forth. Twilight directed her team back out onto the ice and had to use her head to nudge Rainbow out the door.

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The second period jumped out to a quick start, much like the first. Ponyville controlled the puck despite Rainbow's erratic play. Twilight had the puck and fired a quick shot on net but it was blocked by Pucks. The rebound came back to Spike on the right wing. Soarin skated over to cut down Spike but Spike flung the puck toward the center in desperation. Watching the play developing, Rainbow scurried toward the loose puck and shot right away, not even aiming at the net. The Golden Leafs caught a break as Rainbow's shot hit Ditzzy in the helmet and re-directed into the net between Scootaloo's blocker and pad. Rainbow didn't realize she scored at first and frantically searched for the puck behind the net until her teammates mobbed her. It then clicked in her head that she scored and she pumped her hoof in the air. Her family applauded which helped ease Rainbow a tiny bit. She then looked over to Spitfire and Soarin who were now wearing a determined scowl, re-igniting Rainbow's worries.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 20, Rainbow Dash. Assisted by number 2, Spike, and number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

The game was moving at a frantic pace. When the puck dropped, Cloudsdale deviated from their usual finesse play and began getting physical hoping to slow the Golden Leafs down. Spike was the recipient of many checks as the Red Wings were bigger and stronger than him. Twilight deftly avoided the Red Wing forwards as she carried the puck into the Cloudsdale zone. Fluttershy stayed on the blue line and received the puck. She drifted over toward the boards as her teammates battled for position. Remembering Fluttershy's massive hit on her in Ponyville, Gilda

charged at her with a vengeance. Fluttershy saw Gilda coming and braced herself since there was nowhere to go. Gilda followed through with her hit and splattered Fluttershy into the glass. Fluttershy's parents gasped in horror as they saw their daughter fall to the ice. Mr. Fluttershy went to yell but his wife beat him to the punch and was raging from her seat.

"HOW DARE YOU HIT MY DAUGHTER! I'M COMING DOWN THERE TO TEACH YOU A LESSON!"

The referee saw the hit and raised his hoof for the penalty. Mrs. Dash tried holding back Mrs. Fluttershy as Fluttershy was helped up by her teammates. Rainbow couldn't help but laugh at the scene. She tapped Fluttershy on the helmet. "Hah! So that's where you get your rare outbursts from." Fluttershy shot back a small grin and nodded. The Cloudsdale crowd booed as Gilda entered the penalty box, receiving two minutes for boarding.

The Ponyville power play started off cold as Cloudsdale kept up their hitting and forced turnovers. After a dump down the ice, Rarity went to retrieve the puck from Pinkie. Rarity went to pass to Twilight who stood at the blue line but Spitfire nudged Twilight and intercepted the puck. Reacting quickly, Twilight poked her stick out to steal the puck away from Spitfire back to Rarity. Rarity carried the puck in herself and halted at the left faceoff circle. Rainbow glided behind the net but was shadowed by Soarin. With Pucks deciding to apply pressure, Rarity faked a shot to make the Cloudsdale penalty kill bunch up to block. Rarity passed to Twilight who reared her head back for a shot. The puck flew off Twilight's stick and was closing in on Scootaloo. Scootaloo tried to get her glove up in time but the puck was too fast. The goal light flickered and Twilight began her celebration. Boos and groans poured down from the crowd as Gilda angrily slammed the penalty box door behind her during her exit.

"Ponyville power play goal, scored by number 42, Twilight Sparkle. Assisted by number 9, Rarity."

The Golden Leafs claimed their first lead of the evening and were pleased with their effort this period. Before play resumed, Twilight stressed to her team that it would be very big to score another goal before the second period ended, like the Red Wings did in the first period. Rainbow Dash

agreed although in the back of her mind she was still conflicted about notching another goal at the Wonderbolts' expense.

The puck dropped and the last 40 seconds ticked away. Spitfire won the faceoff back to Ditzzy who passed back up to Gilda. Gilda fired the puck into the Ponyville zone but Pinkie came out of the net to stop it. Pinkie blasted the puck along the boards where Soarin stepped in to intercept. Rainbow caught Soarin by surprise and picked the puck up. With time quickly running out, Rainbow ramped up her speed and bolted through the neutral zone. Pucks backpeddled to keep up but Rainbow was too fast. Scootaloo skated up to cut down the angle. With both Scootaloo and Pucks encroaching upon her, Rainbow flicked the puck backwards hoping a teammate would be there. In fact there was, as Rarity trailed behind and stepped into a slapshot. Rarity sniped the puck into the upper corner for a backbreaking goal with little time remaining in the period. Rainbow spun around to greet Rarity and the other Golden Leafs closed in to share their delight.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 9, Rarity. Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash."

Ponyville jumped to a 5-3 lead right before the second period came to a close. Their spirits were much more upbeat and they grinned their way back to the locker room while the Red Wings left the rink to booing.

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Despite holding a sizeable lead, Rainbow resumed her nervous pacing from the first intermission, this time lamenting the Wonderbolts' impression of her and worrying about running up the score. Twilight was getting annoyed with Rainbow's selfishness and was about to confront her but Fluttershy interjected. While Rainbow rambled to herself, Fluttershy trotted up and stood in Rainbow's path. She grabbed Rainbow's face and applied her patented stare. Rainbow stopped muttering and fixed her eyes upon Fluttershy's. Rainbow then backed away quietly and sat down at her stall. Twilight thanked Fluttershy and spoke up.

"Remember team, we had the lead against Cloudsdale before but we lost

it. We cannot let up! We will need to be as sharp as ever if we want to close out this game. Pass clean, shoot hard, and be smart. Let's win this thing!"

"Yeah!" shouted Pinkie, Rarity, Spike, and Fluttershy. Rainbow kept quiet and robotically marched out of the room along with her team.

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The third period was set to begin as both teams met at the center circle. The Red Wings did not show any signs of distress even though they faced a 5-3 deficit. The puck dropped and the third period began. Cloudsdale won the faceoff and proceeded to dominate the opening minutes of the period, working hard to chip away at the Golden Leafs' lead. They cycled the puck amongst each other and fought hard for position. Soarin held the puck behind the net and called out a play. The other Red Wings buzzed all over the zone, confusing the Ponyville defense. Soarin fired the puck to the blue line to Ditzzy. Gilda muscled her way to the left faceoff circle to receive Ditzzy's pass. At the other faceoff circle, Spitfire broke away from Fluttershy and crashed the net. Gilda zipped the puck to the front of the crease where Pinkie leaped forward to grab the puck. However, Spitfire zoomed in and took the puck on her stick before it reached Pinkie. Spitfire had a wide open net and pounded a shot in, cutting the Golden Leafs' lead to 1 and reviving the home crowd.

*"Red Wings GOOOAAALLL scored by number 13, SPIIIITFIIIIREEEE!
Assisted by number 44, Gilda, and Ditzzy Doo!"*

Doubt began to creep into the Golden Leafs' minds as Cloudsdale came roaring back with a bang-bang play. Twilight repeated her intermission message to her teammates as they geared up for another faceoff. When play resumed, Ponyville deployed a keep-away strategy in hopes of killing time and cooling off Cloudsdale momentum. The Red Wings glided in and reapplied their checking to each Golden Leaf who touched the puck. When Spike ended up with the puck in the neutral zone, Spitfire quickly closed in with great speed. Spike began to freak out and scrambled to make a play. Right when Spitfire went to hit him, Spike blew fire out of self-defense. The flames charred Spitfire's jersey and she fell to the ice to cool off. The referee blew the whistle to call a penalty. The Cloudsdale crowd was fully back into the action as the referee proclaimed a two minute penalty to

Spike for torching.

Twilight debated whether to call a timeout or not, but saw there was too much time left. Spike made his way to the penalty box. Being short, his eyes barely peered above the boards as he could only helplessly watch. Twilight quickly gathered up her friends to calm them down before embarking on a very crucial penalty kill. With the special team units set, the puck dropped. Spitfire won the faceoff back to Pucks who contained the puck at his skates back to the blue line. Soarin immediately skated into Pinkie's crease and began to screen her. Pinkie had trouble looking around Soarin's body and occasionally gave him a playful slap on the rear with her stick. Pucks went to shoot but faked, psyching out Rainbow. Rarity then tried her luck to win the puck away but Pucks was able to glide around her. With Soarin screening, Pucks fired on net. Fluttershy dove to block the shot but Soarin reached his stick out in front of Fluttershy for a deflection. The puck barely nicked the blade of Soarin's stick and changed direction. Pinkie saw the deflection and moved over to block it. The puck came in low and fast and tucked itself right between her blocker and pad for the game-tying goal. The crowd flew up out of their seats and yelled as Cloudsdale forced a 5-5 tie. Soarin flew to Pucks to celebrate as the other Red Wings came together to share a modest celebration as their work was not yet done.

"Red Wings POWER PLAY GOOOAAALLL! Scored by number 96, SOARIINN! Assisted by number 5, Pucks!"

There was a minute and a half left now. Twilight decided to call timeout to regroup the Golden Leafs. Pinkie was shaking while Fluttershy and Rarity looked uneasy. Spike had a glazed look in his eyes as well. Before Twilight could speak, Rainbow took over.

"Give me the puck. I'm putting this team on my back."

Pinkie snorted a giggle. "We all won't be able to fit on your back silly!"

Rainbow narrowed her stare and repeated her words slowly. "I'm putting the team on my back."

Pinkie saw Rainbow's seriousness and stopped giggling. Twilight knew better than to mess with Rainbow right now so she kept quiet. The referee

called over both teams for the faceoff. Rainbow and Spitfire crouched low for the faceoff and battled when the puck dropped. Rainbow wrestled the puck away back to Twilight. Twilight immediately gave the puck back to Rainbow who took off. She tried going straight in on the net, but Pucks blocked her path. Instead of passing off, Rainbow kept control and continued on to the back of the net. Gilda stepped up to knock Rainbow off stride but Rainbow held steady. Ditzzy came over and tried to double-team Rainbow along with Gilda but Rainbow somehow squeezed through both of them and made a hard cut toward the net. Scootaloo shook nervously as Rainbow came in fast. Right as Rainbow went to shoot, Spitfire was there to miraculously snatch the puck away. Rainbow fell from her follow through and collided with Scootaloo and the post.

Spitfire had the puck and was blazing up the ice. Twilight and Fluttershy tried to backpeddle but Spitfire blew right past them. Red Wings fans anxiously flew up into the air as Pinkie prepared herself for the breakaway. Shades of the Golden Leafs' home opener flashed in everyone's mind as Spitfire closed in on goal. Spitfire was slightly gliding from left to right. She moved the puck up then pulled it back in, pushed it back up, then pulled it back in again as she kept shifting to the right. Pinkie bit the first fake and hesitated in moving over. When the puck came back in toward her stick the second time, Spitfire shot up into the corner. Pinkie was too late in recovering and the puck zinged into the net. Foal Louis Arena exploded with a yell as Spitfire lost balance and crashed into the corner. The goal horn sounded louder than ever as the Red Wings skated down and smothered Spitfire along the boards. The Golden Leafs all fell to the ice in disbelief as Spitfire obliterated their hopes a second time this season. The Red Wings finished up their celebration as Ponyville struggled to make it to the faceoff circle. Only thirty seconds remained and by winning the faceoff, Cloudsdale played keep-away to run out the clock and to snatch the victory away from Ponyville.

The arena was bursting with noise as the Red Wings triumphantly exited the rink to cheers and fireworks exploding. The Golden Leafs were downtrodden and distraught as they stood in place, not moving at all. In the stands, Fluttershy's parents and Rainbow's family gave the Golden Leafs a proud round of applause in hopes of cheering them up. It was no use as Twilight and friends sadly floated toward the locker room.

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The Golden Leaf locker room resembled a mortuary. No one could bring themselves to talk as they silently cleaned up. When they were packed up and ready to leave, Twilight led her friends toward the arena exit. Outside the arena doors, the Dashes and the Fluttershies waited for the Golden Leafs' emergence. Fluttershy started sniffing up upon seeing her parents and she flew to them. They consoled her as Rainbow scowled and stomped toward her family. Rainbow's brothers were going to mess with her until their mother gave them a very stern look. Instead, they patted their sister on the back as their father came over to hug Rainbow.

"Well you can't win 'em all kiddo. We're still very proud of you."

Rainbow softened up and was able to crack the tiniest of smiles as her family embraced her. Fluttershy had stopped sniffing and was feeling much better as her teammates began missing their own families. Rainbow and Fluttershy said their goodbyes and soon the Golden Leafs were flying back down to Ponyville. The silence gradually bloomed into talking as Twilight and company arrived at the treehouse, although their hearts were still heavy. Not wanting to do anything hockey related, everyone agreed to reconnect a couple days later. With another devastating loss to Cloudsdale and with a 3-4 record, the Golden Leafs parted for the evening.

The Golden Leafs crashed down from their emotional high from their previous game against Fillydelphia thanks to a clutch, veteran Cloudsdale team. The next challenge now for Twilight's team will be to avoid dwelling on this disappointing loss and to keep moving forward. Will the Golden Leafs have the resolve to forget the past? Or will this loss linger in their heads?

Three Stars from Ponyville @ Cloudsdale

** Spitfire (CRW)*

*** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

**** Soarin (CRW)*

EHL Transactions

9/2/11 – Ponyville Golden Leafs sign free agent RW Spike to a 1-game contract

9/4/11 – Ponyville Golden Leafs RW Applejack returns from suspension for next game vs. Appleloosa

9/2/11 – Fillydelphia Flyers sign free agent C Colgate to a 1-game contract

9/4/11 – Fillydelphia Flyers C Rose returns from suspension for next game at Cloudsdale

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Manhattan 3, FILLYDELPHIA 2

CANTERLOT 2, Appleloosa 1

EHL Standings (with Projected Playoff Seedings: 1 & 2 byes, 3 vs. 6, 4 vs. 5)

(1) Appleloosa 5-2

(2) Manhattan 4-3

(3) Cloudsdale 4-3

(4) Canterlot 4-3

(5) Ponyville 3-4

(6) Fillydelphia 1-6

Chapter 10

One Rotten Apple...

The Ponyville Golden Leafs' next contest versus the visiting Appleloosa Black Apples was rapidly approaching. Still reeling from their third period collapse in Cloudsdale, Twilight and her friends did not meet once for practice. Depression and lethargy were lingering like a bad illness as the Golden Leafs finally scavenged up enough energy to meet the night before game day to scout the Black Apples. As Twilight prepared her review notes, Spike and the others were calmly chatting away. No pony dared to say a peep about hockey and they all cautiously covered a variety of other topics. Twilight closed her scouting journal and was ready to inform her team. Everypony kept to their conversations, ignoring Twilight standing before them. Twilight had to clear her throat loudly to receive the Golden Leafs' attention.

"Ahem! Thanks for showing up tonight. I know it's been a rough week, but if we gather up enough information on Appleloosa and review what went well our first game against them, then we can forget all about Cloudsdale. We'll be back to our winning ways in no time!"

"That's great Twilight dear. But if you don't mind me asking, what is there to review?" asked Rarity.

Rainbow Dash was casually lounging on the sofa when she chimed in. "Yeah. I mean, we totally destroyed them! They've only lost twice and we're

one of those losses. We've got this in the bag."

"Yep, cain't argue with them facts, Twi," contributed Applejack.

Twilight was a little taken aback by her friends' overconfident words. "But that was early in the season. Who knows what Appleloosa has changed since then! They could have a new playing style, new plays, maybe a new player. We need to study them if we want to have an edge!"

Rainbow, Rarity, and Applejack blankly looked back at Twilight, showing their boredom. Fluttershy was next to voice her opinion. "I hope Chief Thunderhooves isn't still playing for them. I bet he remembers that hit I gave him. Oh my, he'll probably want revenge! I'm doomed! *squeak*"

"You'll be fine, Fluttershy. It was so long ago he's probably forgotten about it," said Twilight reassuringly.

"But what if you're wrong, Twilight. What if I really am done for?"

Twilight was about to provide a rebuttal but Pinkie Pie jumped in. "Don't worry Fluttershy! If that big, bad bully buffalo comes near you, you bet we'll be right there to knock his socks off!"

Rainbow began laughing. "Haha Pinkie, buffaloes don't wear socks!...Or do they?"

"I believe they have to during a game, it is EHL uniform code," said Rarity.

"How 'bout shoes? Do they wear shoes?" asked Applejack eagerly.

Rarity paused for a moment. "I think that would be most uncomfortable considering the shoe would not provide proper support for hooves."

Rarity, Applejack, Rainbow, and Pinkie Pie stirred up a debate while Fluttershy listened intently. Twilight began to turn red with frustration as the tangent about buffalo footwear had taken over her scouting session. She yelled to bring everyone back together.

"ENOUGH! We need to focus on how to beat Appleloosa if we want to win!"

Rainbow smugly let out a snort. "Get the puck. Shoot it around a dumb tree. Score. Win. Done. Can we go now?"

"Hey! Bloomberg ain't dumb! He was a part of my family!" yelled Applejack.

"Oh Applejack, that is simply *ridiculous*. How could a tree be part of a pony's family? It's not even a living creature!" chimed Rarity.

Applejack stood up to defend her tree friend. "Well he just was! I cain't explain it. We took care of him and he took care of us by givin' us healthy apples."

"I'd...like to be a tree," said Fluttershy softly.

Pinkie sat up quickly as if an idea popped in her head. "If Fluttershy is a tree, can I be a gazebo? I would be so large and beautiful that everypony would be able to host giant parties! Oooh! They can use Fluttershy to build me!"

Fluttershy squealed in fright as Rainbow began cracking up with laughter at Pinkie's remark. Everypony carried on the conversation and the silly talk continued. Twilight gave up on getting her friends to focus and just sat in front of them with a very disgruntled look on her face. The conversation carried on into the late hours of the evening before the Golden Leafs grew tired and departed for bed. Although the depression of the Cloudsdale loss appeared to have dissipated, nothing of real merit was discussed in regards to Appleloosa. Twilight began to worry that her team's lack of focus and urgency will become a major hindrance when it's time to drop the puck. She went to bed mentally exhausted and irritable, hoping her mood would improve in the morning.

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Twilight woke up the next morning still annoyed and with anxiety growing for the night's game. In hopes of easing her concern, she tried convincing herself that maybe the team will be focused and ready to listen in the locker room. Twilight spent the afternoon completing and then took off for Ponyville Pond with Spike. She was the first of her friends to arrive. The hollowness of the locker room made her feel uneasy and enflamed her anxiety. With full uniform on, Twilight paced while waiting for the rest of the

Golden Leafs to arrive. Finally with only a small amount of time left before introductions, the remainder of the Golden Leafs nonchalantly strolled into the locker room. They all stopped to watch Twilight pace the floor but Twilight stopped when she noticed them.

"Would any of you care to explain why you're so late? We're going onto the ice in five minutes! I won't have time to give the usual pre-game speech!"

Rainbow brushed Twilight off as she and the others trotted over to their stalls to get dressed. "Relax Miss Bossyhooves, we're here now aren't we? We don't need your boring speech tonight anyways. We know what we're doing."

Twilight's anxiety converted into frustration. "No we don't! We WOULD be ready if we scouted Appleloosa last night but NOOOOOOO. You all had to go on and on about SILLY things!"

Twilight's complaint fell on deaf ears as her friends were too busy putting their uniforms on. Twilight stomped her skates down on the floor when she realized no one heard her. As Twilight attempted to vent her ever expanding anger, the one-minute warning horn blared throughout the arena. Twilight instead let out a boisterous grunt and trotted out of the locker room defeated, her carefree teammates trailing behind.

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It was another hockey night in Ponyville. Throngs of Golden Leafs fans occupied Ponyville Pond and were buzzing with anticipation. Even though the Golden Leafs' season was inconsistent thus far, the fan support continued to steadily grow as more ponies took notice to Twilight and friends' accomplishments. After the usual pregame pageantry and introductions, both teams were on the ice and warming up. Appleloosa was getting in some final shooting practice as Bloomberg was being magically lowered into place by the ice crew with help from some unicorn ponies. The Golden Leafs were not moving as fast as the Black Apples, listlessly floating around their end of the ice. Twilight was the only player not going through the motions and she skated circles around all her friends.

The referee grabbed the game puck and headed for center ice. Both teams came together and set themselves for the faceoff. Applejack and Braeburn

stood beside each other and gave each other playful jabs with their sticks and knees. The ref checked with Pinkie Pie for her ready signal. Pinkie waved to the referee enthusiastically and immediately after, the *clack* of the puck hitting the ice echoed out into the arena.

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Little Strongheart won the opening faceoff and helped Appleloosa begin a very long, sustained offensive series in the Ponyville zone. The Black Apples were able to get off five shots before the Golden Leafs had their first touch of the puck. After another Appleloosa shot on net, Pinkie pushed the puck to Twilight who passed it up to Applejack. Applejack didn't move any faster and soon she was met at the half boards by Apple Fritter. Rainbow was slow in getting to the tangled Apple kin and watched as Fritter poked the puck back toward the Appleloosa end where Sheriff took control. Sheriff brought the puck into the Ponyville zone unopposed because the Golden Leafs sagged back on defense. The Black Apples zigged and zagged all over the zone, shifting positions and getting open. Sheriff held the puck at the blue line while Braeburn cycled out from behind the net. Sheriff fired the puck through the Golden Leafs' defense and placed it perfectly onto Braeburn's stick on the side of the goal. Braeburn immediately shot on net while Pinkie shifted over and hugged her left post. It was no use as Braeburn deftly aimed the puck at the other post, clanging it in the goal at just the right angle. The goal light spun and the Ponyville crowd began booing.

"Appleloosa goal scored by number 2, Braeburn! Assisted by number 11, Sheriff Silverstar, and number 16, Apple Fritter!"

Twilight angrily looked away from the Black Apples' celebration and skated up to her goaltender.

"What was that Pinkie? Did you even try to stop it?"

"Sure as sugar Twilight! It was a neat goal, wasn't it? It helped that the puck totally went through the defense."

Twilight twitched at Pinkie's last sentence. "Excuse me? What did you just say?"

Pinkie began to back down into her net. "It was a nice goal because the puck went through the defense?"

"Are you saying it's my fault they scored? How could it be my fault? I'm not the goalie here! You are!"

Before Pinkie could defend herself, the referee broke up the conversation so play could resume at center ice.

Twilight growled as she waited for the faceoff. Once again, Appleloosa won the draw and controlled the puck on the offense. Chief Thunderhooves dumped the puck into the corner and Fritter raced in to fetch it. Rainbow met Fritter at the corner but did not exert enough effort to try and win the puck. Fritter easily broke out of the corner and passed it to Sheriff at the point. Sheriff shoveled it over to Chief who then pushed it onto Braeburn in the other corner. Strongheart skated up the center of the zone and was open for a pass. Braeburn slapped it toward her but Rainbow sniffed the play out and intercepted the pass. Rainbow took her sweet old time skating it up the ice. Had she skated at full energy, she would've easily had a breakaway but Braeburn caught her and stole the puck back. While Braeburn brought the puck in the zone, Strongheart repeated her stride to the net. This time Braeburn fed it to Strongheart cleanly and she rifled the puck on net. The puck zinged past Pinkie's blocker hoof and into the back of the netting. Appleloosa celebrated their second goal of the evening much to the chagrin of the Ponyville fans and Twilight.

"Appleloosa goal scored by number 7, Little Strongheart! Assisted by number 2, Braeburn!"

Twilight stormed over to Rainbow. Rainbow attempted to skate away but Twilight cut her off.

"What kind of effort was that? You had a clear breakaway but you moved too slow and lost a scoring opportunity!"

Rainbow rolled her eyes at Twilight. "Whatever. We still have two periods and their goalie is an inanimate object. We still have this."

"We don't have anything! We don't have a shot! We don't have a faceoff win! We don't have a chance!" shouted Twilight furiously.

By this time, Applejack, Rarity, and Fluttershy were in on the conversation and awkwardly stood before Twilight's ridicule of Rainbow. Ignoring Twilight's rambling, Rainbow drifted toward the center faceoff circle with Twilight following behind closely, continuously calling out her lack of effort.

Play resumed and the rest of the period carried out as Appleloosa took a 2-0 lead into the first intermission, not allowing a single shot on their net that period. Golden Leafs fans were silent and apathetically watched as an irritated Twilight led the way back to the locker room.

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The Golden Leafs each sat their respective stall except Twilight who was thrashing about until it came time to talk.

"That was the worst period I've ever seen! The practice dummies would've done a better job than what I saw out there! What do you all have to say for yourselves?"

No one stepped up to take the floor. Applejack was feeling more uneasy with each passing second but couldn't bring together words to say. Rainbow stared down at the carpet in a daydreaming state. Rarity was levitating a mirror in front of her and was fussing with her mane. Pinkie was busy gulping down an intermission cupcake while Fluttershy hid in the hallway after being yelled at by Twilight. Twilight impatiently tapped her hoof on the floor, waiting for one of her friends to claim responsibility. The locker room remained eerily silent. Finally the sound of the one-minute warning horn broke the awkward atmosphere and Twilight had no use but to let the team go back out on the ice. Not a single word was said nor was any adjustment made.

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The second period was underway as it began just like the first. Appleloosa won the faceoff and kept it in the Golden Leafs' zone. Little Strongheart had the puck on the right wing boards where Applejack came in to apply pressure. Strongheart flung the puck around the back of the net to Apple

Fritter who now had it on the left wing. Fritter passed to Chief on the blue line and he charged towards the net. Fluttershy, fearing for Chief's revenge and her life, jumped out of the way, leaving Pinkie high and dry. Chief Thunderhooves barreled into the crease and pounded the puck almost through Pinkie's body and into the net for another Black Apples goal. Chief rammed into the boards in celebration as the Black Apples came together.

"Appleloosa goal scored by number 40, Chief Thunderhooves! Assisted by number 16, Apple Fritter, and number 7, Little Strongheart!"

Fluttershy was still trembling on the ice with her skates shielding her eyes. Twilight skated to Fluttershy and looked down upon her with disgust. Fluttershy looked up and was relieved when she saw it was just Twilight. Fluttershy got up and was about to skate away until Twilight started to spout off.

"Fluttershy! Why did you move out of the way? You gave them an open shot!"

Fluttershy began trembling again. "Um, I didn't want to get hurt by Chief Thunderhooves. He was skating at me so fast."

"That's no excuse! You have to be braver! Now we're down by three goals! Ugh!"

"I'm...sorry," squeaked Fluttershy as she fought back tears.

Applejack saw Twilight's talk with Fluttershy and came over to direct Twilight away from Fluttershy. Twilight brushed Applejack's skates off of her and went to her spot for the faceoff.

Rainbow finally won a faceoff and Ponyville brought the puck into the Appleloosa zone for just the second time in the entire game. Twilight dumped the puck in and had Applejack chase after it. Applejack was hit hard into the boards by Sheriff and they tussled for the puck. Rainbow swept by and poked the puck out of the scrum and now had it. Rainbow curved to face the net and shoot, but Chief stormed over and laid her out with a violent hit. Rainbow crashed into the boards as the home crowd gasped. Sheriff grabbed the loose puck and found a streaking Apple Fritter

heading up ice. With a brilliant pass over center ice, Apple Fritter was in all alone on Pinkie. The crowd stood up to watch the breakaway attempt. Pinkie skated out a bit as Fritter closed in. Apple Fritter arrogantly pointed her right forehoof to the top right corner then snapped the puck on net. Sure enough, the puck clanged in over Pinkie's shoulder in the top right corner for the fourth Appleloosa goal of the evening. Immense booing showered down from the stands as the Black Apples were in celebration once again.

"Appleloosa goal scored by number 16, Apple Fritter! Assisted by number 11, Sheriff Silverstar!"

Twilight furiously snapped her stick with her magic and lit it on fire, prompting Spike to rush down from the announcer's booth to hand her a new one. Twilight was tired of trying to get through to her friends' heads and vowed to take over the game herself.

"If they don't want to win, fine. I'll do everything myself. I don't need them. I'll bring us back and then I'll be the big hero. Not Rainbow or Applejack or anypony!"

The faceoff at center ice was won by Appleloosa and somehow Strongheart split the defense and was quickly off on a breakaway from the faceoff. Twilight, desperate to stop Appleloosa's rout, stuck her stick out and caught Strongheart's skate. Strongheart tripped and crashed into Pinkie as they both got caught in the net. The referee blew his whistle and hurriedly skated to the net and pointed his hoof at the goal.

"Penalty shot awarded to Appleloosa!"

Twilight immediately went up to the referee to protest. "WHAT? A penalty shot? She wasn't even going to shoot!"

"Keep moving, Sparkle. I'm not going to hear it," replied the ref.

Pinkie helped Strongheart up and adjusted her padding as the referee set the puck up for the penalty shot. Strongheart skated to the blue line as both teams watched from the opposite sides. With a blow of the whistle, Little Strongheart was off on her penalty shot. She tapped the puck side to side

as she came up to the crease. Not knowing which way to move, Pinkie stayed still and squared with the shooter. With a quick flick, Strongheart aimed straight at the five-hole. Pinkie was late in squeezing her pads together and the puck bumped the back of the net. Pinkie toppled over as Appleloosa now scored their fifth goal of the game. Pinkie was beginning to feel unhappy and her bright pink coat was starting to darken.

"Appleloosa goal scored on the penalty shot by number 7, Little Strongheart!"

The Golden Leafs turned to Twilight to give her a taste of her own medicine.

"Oh nice tripping there, Twilight. The penalty shot wouldn't have happened if you didn't get burned off the faceoff!" shouted Rainbow.

"Yeah Twi, what a mighty foolish thing ta' do," said Applejack.

Rarity smiled at Rainbow and Applejack and pitched in as well. "Oh now we're *never* going to get back into this game. Good going, Twilight!"

Twilight was bewildered that her friends had the nerve to blame her for the latest goal when they have been playing poorly the whole game. Twilight tried to defend herself but her rage turned her words into indistinguishable gibberish. Fluttershy began to giggle at Twilight's verbal struggle but stopped immediately when Twilight turned around to face her. Twilight gave up trying to speak and skated to the faceoff circle.

The rest of the second period featured more possession by Appleloosa and they let the clock run out on the second period. The Golden Leafs' faithful loudly voiced their displeasure and began filing for the exits. Twilight bolted for the locker room while her teammates lazily lagged behind.

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Twilight waited for her friends to walk through the door so she could lay into them again for a horrendous second period. She waited and waited but there was no sign of her team. She whipped her head around the corner to look into the hallway. Off in the distance, she saw the tip of Fluttershy's tail

sticking out from a parallel hallway. The other Golden Leafs met to talk about Twilight's sour mood and came up with a plan to get her to lighten up. Twilight angrily stomped down the hallway, making her near presence known. The Golden Leafs ceased their discussion and quickly turned to start walking toward the locker room. When they ran into Twilight, they all acted oblivious and were talking about how they were just about to go inside their locker room. Twilight saw through their poorly veiled plan and trotted to the ice alone, clearly disappointed, angry, and hurt by her friends' behavior.

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Ponyville Pond was almost empty because a good majority of the fans left after the second period. Appleloosa's dominance also carried over into the third period. Braeburn made an amazing defensive play to steal the puck from Rainbow and went coast to coast for an unassisted goal, making it 6-0 Appleloosa. Pinkie Pie was showing frustration and was deviating away from her happy-go-lucky self. The next series when Appleloosa was on offense, Apple Fritter had the puck along the left wing boards and was cutting toward the net. Apple Fritter passed the puck to the point but kept skating toward Pinkie and the crease to screen. Pinkie Pie sprung out from the net and decked Apple Fritter to the ice. The referee rushed over to call the interference penalty on the rapidly deflating Pinkie Pie. Since goalies cannot serve penalties, the referee asked the Golden Leafs who should serve the penalty for Pinkie. Almost as if it was rehearsed, everyone shouted "Twilight!" except for Twilight of course. Twilight's jaw dropped as the referee brushed her toward the penalty box to sit for the next two minutes.

The Golden Leafs slacked off on the penalty kill and allowed another Appleloosa goal while Twilight stewed in the penalty box. The game was clearly in hand and the remaining handful of Golden Leafs fans booed before leaving. The final horn sounded like sweet release to the Golden Leafs who just wanted to go home. The victorious Appleloosa Black Apples met at Bloomberg and tapped their sticks against the tree. Ponyville was about to head toward the locker room but Twilight blocked the door, keeping her team in the rink as Appleloosa exited. With Ponyville Pond emptied, she yelled up to Spike in the announcing booth.

"Spike! Keep the lights on! We're going to be here for a while!"

The other Golden Leafs all had a puzzled look on their face for what Twilight has planned for them.

Twilight took off her helmet and nudged her stick aside. "Well, if you didn't want to work during the game, we're going to work after the game. I want everypony to line up along the red line. We're going to skate until our legs break off. When I blow the whistle, skate to the blue line and back, then to the center line and back, then to the other blue line and back. We will continue to skate until you take this game seriously and want to work hard."

Twilight's friends shot her an angry look and floated over to the red line to line up. Twilight skated to center ice and faced them with whistle at the ready.

TwEEEEEEEEEEet

Twilight blew her whistle but nothing happened. Her friends stood still at the line and plopped down on the ice in defiance. Twilight's anger flared up and she bolted toward her friends.

"Oh, I see how it's going to be. Do you all want to be kicked off this team? I can find some ponies who would jump at the chance to play."

Rainbow and Applejack stood up together and Rainbow shouted back at Twilight.

"No, I don't want to be kicked off the team because I QUIT! This isn't a team! This is Twilight being a complete mule because she has a hard horn for the Princess and will do anything to not disappoint her. You've been a bossy pain all night. You single-hoofedly made this stink and not fun anymore. Anypony who wants to join me come on. We'll leave Miss Egghead all alone."

Rainbow flew through the door leading to the locker room. Applejack began skating toward the exit as well. "I quit too! Rainbow's right. This ain't fun anymore. It's bad enough we keep losin' but it doesn't help gettin' yelled at neither."

Twilight was miffed but didn't show it. She brushed them off and remained

cold. "Fine. We don't need sore flanks like you! We'll be just fine, right girls?"

Rarity and Pinkie Pie scowled at Twilight while Fluttershy was quivering in fright. Rarity was next to stand up and skate toward the exit, whipping her mane into Twilight's face as she drifted past. Pinkie Pie, who was now completely dark and her mane straightened out, also stood up and quietly left the ice.

"Oh yeah, go on and leave! You two hardly ever contribute to the team anyways! You never want to play physical Rarity and you're a sieve Pinkie!"

Twilight watched as Rarity and Pinkie left. She turned toward Fluttershy, causing Fluttershy to fly up and let out a frightened yelp. Before Twilight could speak again, Fluttershy closed her eyes and flew away from the rink. Twilight was left all alone with her team deserting her. Spike began to turn the lights off in Ponyville Pond. Only a single spotlight shone on Twilight who fell to the ice in lonely despair.

Three Stars from Appleloosa @ Ponyville

** Braeburn (APP)*

*** Apple Fritter (APP)*

**** Bloomberg (APP)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

CANTERLOT 5, Manehattan 2

CLOUDSDALE 4, Fillydelphia 0

EHL Standings (with Projected Playoff Seedings: 1 & 2 byes, 3 vs. 6, 4 vs. 5)

(1) Appleloosa 6-2

(2) Cloudsdale 5-3

(3) Canterlot 5-3

(4) Manehattan 4-4

(5) Ponyville 3-5

(6) Fillydelphia 1-7

Chapter 11

For Whom the Belle Tolls

Another "X" marked on the calendar to begin another day of loneliness for Twilight Sparkle. She sighed loudly as she glanced at the current day's square and saw the words "weekly practice" in bold red letters. Twilight lazily began to ready herself for the long day, dragging herself to the mirror to brush her mane. Spike rustled out of his sleep and yawned his way up and out of his bed. Even while rubbing his eyes, Spike could see Twilight's distress. He let out one last yawn and stretched out his tiny limbs.

"Well somepony looks down in the dumps. What's wrong Twilight?"

Twilight looked away from the mirror and down at her hooves. "I don't know Spike. Ever since the Appleloosa game, I've been feeling incredibly lonely and a bit guilty."

Spike walked up next to Twilight and began fussing with his scales in the mirror beside her.

"Lonely I can understand, but guilty? The girls weren't listening to you and they quit on the team. Why are you the one feeling guilty?"

Twilight walked over to her dresser where she grabbed her winter saddle and scarf. "Because Spike, even though they were less than cooperative, I wasn't being a good leader. I'll admit, I lost my cool and I yelled at them while I wasn't performing my best and I blamed them for the bad game. We were all to blame, as a team. A good leader knows when it's the right time

to push their teammates' buttons and which buttons to push. We moped too much about the Cloudsdale loss, including myself. A good leader would have encouraged their team to shake the loss off and turn their focus to the next game right away, not waiting until the night before. "

"I guess. So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to the girls' homes and apologizing for my actions. There's no time to be standoffish and spiteful. We have two games left against teams we lost to already. The playoffs are coming soon and we need to build momentum going into them. Oh I hope the girls will hear me out!"

"I hope so, for the Golden Leafs' sake, more importantly, Ponyville's sake. The fans love you guys."

"Well I'm going to head out now. Our usual practice time is getting closer."

"Good luck, Twilight."

Twilight trotted down the stairs to the main floor. Before she could open the door, the mail slot opened and a newspaper was pushed into the house. Twilight levitated the newspaper and quickly flipped through it. When she reached the sports section, a headline caught her eye.

"RANGERS' CAPTAIN FLINGS SCATHING REMARKS AT PONYVILLE"

Twilight dissected the sports page to find the whole article. When she found it, she began to read intently.

"When discussing the Manehattan Rangers' next opponent, the Ponyville Golden Leafs, Rangers' captain, The Great and Powerful Trixie, didn't pull any punches.

'The Ponyville Golden Leafs have been an utter disgrace not only to the Equestria Hockey League, but to the sport of hockey. It amazes me how they truly believe they are a legitimate team. I mean, did you see their latest games? They completely embarrassed the league with their barbaric attack on Fillydelphia, they completely choked away a win in Cloudsdale, then they followed up with a vomit-inducing effort against Appleloosa. You know what I think? I think they are the beneficiaries of favoritism. Yes, you

can quote The Great and Powerful Trixie on that. Princess Celestia personally requested Ponyville be granted a team. Why? Because she is the mastermind behind the EHL while Commissioner Bettpony is merely a figurehead. The EHL was just fine before the Golden Leafs came along. They are giving the other teams a bad rap, including The Great and Powerful Trixie's perfectly flawless team, the Manehattan Rangers. I, The Great and Powerful Trixie, along with my teammates, will show Equestria once and for all that the Golden Leafs do not belong in this league and should be disbanded immediately.

When asked why Manehattan is 4-4 even though The Great and Powerful Trixie called her team perfectly flawless, Trixie quickly chased our interviewer from the room. It should make for an interesting evening in Ponyville when these two teams meet on the ice. How will the Golden Leafs respond? We shall find out in two nights."

Twilight's blood gradually came to a boil as she read Trixie's remarks. She was now more determined than ever to gather up the girls and put the other night's meltdown behind her. Twilight tucked the article into her scarf and galloped off toward Sugarcube Corner.

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With snow gently falling from a dull, grey sky, Twilight reached Sugarcube Corner in a hurry. Twilight approached the counter where Mrs. Cake was placing the finishing touches on a cake.

"Hello Mrs. Cake, is Pinkie home?"

"Why hello Twilight Sparkle! I believe she is." Mrs. Cake went over to the stairs and yelled up into the top floor. "Pinkie dear! You have a visitor!"

Excited scuffling shook the ceiling and Pinkie emerged from the stairs.

"Oh boy! A visitor! Who is it?" As Pinkie walked down, she noticed her visitor was Twilight. Pinkie's face soured from an anticipatory smile to a dour frown. "Oh, it's Twilight. Back to call me mean names again? I don't even know what a sieve is, but I bet it's not tasty!"

Twilight tried to crack an inviting smile but her guilt sank back in. "Pinkie, I came here to apologize for how I acted and what I said the other night. I

wasn't being a good leader or a good friend. You're not a sieve. You are a fine goalie and your positive attitude always brightens up the locker room. I hope you can forgive me and we can get back to practicing like a fun team again."

Pinkie took in Twilight's apology but didn't respond. She stared at Twilight silently, causing Twilight to feel more anxious and uneasy. After more awkward seconds passed, Twilight pulled out the article from her scarf and duplicated it with magic. She drifted the copy over to Pinkie and sadly turned to leave. Pinkie received the article and began to read it. After quickly skimming the paper, Pinkie yelled out, "Wait, Twilight!" but Twilight had already moved onto the next house.

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Next stop was the Carousel Boutique. Twilight knocked on the door and began rehearsing her apology to Rarity in her head. Rarity peered out the window to see who it was. When she saw it was Twilight, Rarity quickly closed the curtains out of sight. Twilight could hear a conversation inside the home but was puzzled and becoming more downtrodden when the door wouldn't open. Letting out a sigh, Twilight turned to leave when the door finally opened. Hearing the creak of the door propelled Twilight back around with relief. The relief was quickly washed away with disappointment as it was Sweetie Belle who answered. Sweetie Belle looked up at Twilight with her large, green eyes and smiled.

"Hiya, Twilight! How are you doing?"

"Oh hello, Sweetie Belle. Is Rarity home? I have something to need to tell her."

Whispering emerged off from Sweetie Belle's side, "Don't tell her I'm here! Tell her I'm delivering an order of dresses!"

"Umm...Rarity isn't home right now. Can I leave a message?"

Twilight heard the whispering and was slightly irked, but she remembered the article and refocused on setting things straight. Talking louder than her usual tone, Twilight began her apology knowing Rarity was listening. "Tell Rarity that I came by to apologize for my actions and my words the other

night. I wasn't a good leader or a good friend. Rarity has a great shot and she did spend a lot of time putting together out uniforms. I hope she will still show up for practice today. Also could you give her this?"

Twilight handed another copy of the article to Sweetie Belle. Forgetting she was covering for her sister, Sweetie Belle started to give the article to Rarity but Rarity put her hooves up to block her from doing so. Sweetie Belle looked back to Twilight and grinned. "Sure thing, Twilight. I'll give this to Rarity. See you in a few days for the game!"

"Thanks, Sweetie Belle," said the apologetic Golden Leafs captain as she turned to move on. Sweetie Belle closed the door and gave Rarity the article. Rarity read over it and turned red with anger. Her face returned to being flush when she recalled Twilight's apology. Hoping to catch her friend, Rarity quickly ripped the door open and saw Twilight in the distance. She tried to yell out, "Twilight darling!" but like Pinkie, Rarity was too late.

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With time running out until practice was supposed to begin, Twilight galloped to Sweet Apple Acres. As she drew near, Twilight noticed Big Macintosh plowing away snow from the barn. Looking around, there was no sign of Applejack anywhere. Twilight ran up to Big Macintosh with urgency.

"Hello Big Macintosh, is Applejack around?"

"No, ma'am. She's been trottin' around Ponyville helpin' plow some snow. She's been feelin' mighty rotten the past couple'a days, talkin' down to herself and feelin' ashamed about somethin'."

Twilight found a bit of solace in Big Mac's words and was encouraged that at least one of her friends was feeling as bad as she had been. "Well, if she comes back soon, could you tell her that I stopped by to apologize for what I did during and after the game the other night? Also could you give her this article? I'd appreciate it."

"Eeyup, no problem, Miss Sparkle."

"Thank you. Hey, Applejack told us before the season started that you used to play hockey. Is that true?"

"Eeyup, sure did. I reckon I was a mighty solid forward when I was a young colt. I ain't played in ages but I do miss it."

Twilight began formulating an idea in her head. "I think I might have a way to get you back into the sport. Expect another visit from me in the near future."

"Sure thing. Y'all take care now. Get the Golden Leafs back together."

Twilight smiled. "I'll try. Thank you."

Big Macintosh resumed his snow plowing as Twilight sprinted toward her final reconciliation destination, Fluttershy's cottage.

===

At the cottage, Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash were hanging out and grooming each others' wings. When Twilight was close enough, she looked through the window and was very thrilled to see her remaining apologies could be completed in one swoop. Twilight quickly knocked on the door to which Fluttershy answered. Twilight greeted Fluttershy with a smile while Fluttershy leaned away in fright.

"Aw Fluttershy, please hear me out. I came to apologize for the other night. No need to be afraid of me. I promise I won't yell at you like I did. I'm sorry."

Fluttershy relaxed and smiled. "Oh Twilight, I'm sorry too for leaving. I was just so scared. I didn't mean to leave you all alone. Could you forgive me?"

A rewarding warmth blanketed Twilight as she smiled back. "Yes, Fluttershy. I forgive you. Ready to get back to practice?"

Before Fluttershy could respond, Rainbow flew to the doorway. When she saw Twilight, Rainbow immediately turned away from Twilight and crossed her forelegs. "What do YOU want?"

"Rainbow, I'm here to apologize for the Appleloosa game. I was wrong to single you out in front of the team during the first period and then to yell at everyone throughout the game. I wasn't being a good leader or a good

friend."

"You're darn right you weren't! I've been a workhorse for this team and yet I get thrown under the cart when it wasn't my fault."

Twilight began to feel guilty again and tried to give a rebuttal when Rainbow slammed the door on her. Instead of being upset, Twilight sighed to herself. "I probably deserved that. I guess I'll be practicing by myself today."

Twilight slipped the last copy of the article under Fluttershy's door and sadly started off on her trek toward Ponyville Pond. Back inside the cottage, Fluttershy was not pleased with Rainbow's behavior and applied her patented stare. Rainbow freaked out and rushed to get back to Twilight to properly apologize but Twilight was already gone in the distance. Rainbow noticed the article lying on the floor and picked it up to read. Rainbow became infuriated as she read the article and shredded it to pieces when she finished, startling Fluttershy.

===

Ponyville Pond was hollow and somber as a lonely Twilight put on her practice uniform and took to the ice. The echo of her skates cutting the ice and the puck smacking the boards made Twilight feel like she was playing inside a black hole devoid of all life. As Twilight skated around and shot on the empty net, she noticed that there was additional noise coming out from somewhere as it didn't match up with the things she was doing. As the noises grew louder, Twilight's hopes shot upwards that it was her friends returning to her and accepting her apology. She waited anxiously for the rabble of voices to come to the rink. Twilight's enlarged, anxious eyes shifted into concerned, apprehensive ones as it was not her friends at the rink, but the Manehattan Rangers. Trixie was in the front of the pack with Lyra, Octavia, Vinyl Scratch, and Bon Bon closely following behind her. The Rangers stepped out onto the ice and began encircling Twilight. They all came to a stop, spraying Twilight with ice chips from every angle. They all let out a laugh as Trixie skated up to Twilight.

"Hello loser! Remember us? Where's your lame team? Did they all abandon you and leave you all alone? I don't blame them. If I played for you, I'd abandon ship too since you spread lameness to everything you

do!"

Twilight gnashed her teeth and was ready to stand up to Trixie.

"I'm not afraid of you, Trixie. I suggest you get out of here before I humiliate you with my magic in front of your team."

Trixie laughed off Twilight's threat. "Oh please, Twilight. Don't try to be all tough and heroic. You're outnumbered five to one. We're taking over this ice for our practice and there's nothing you can do to stop us!"

As Trixie said this, the other four Rangers closed in on Twilight, causing Twilight to back herself into the corner boards with nowhere to run. Suddenly, Lyra and Octavia sandwiched Twilight and began pushing her around from side to side. They thrust her at Vinyl Scratch who proceeded to whip her tail in Twilight's face. During the bullying, Trixie was near the benches, planting a tiny spying device on the boards that viewed the entire rink.

Twilight was dazed by Scratch's tail whipping and it was made worse by a helmet-to-helmet headbutt by Bon Bon. When she reclaimed her focus, Twilight found herself pinned to the glass by the Rangers. Back from her mischievous scheme, Trixie closed in with her skate blade held up. Lyra tore Twilight's helmet from her head and held out a large chunk of Twilight's mane for Trixie to cut off. Octavia was holding Twilight's tail out as well as Trixie began laughing maniacally. Right as Trixie was about to touch Twilight's hair, a lasso flew right above her head and came down around her to constrict her. Trixie was dragged to the opposite end of the ice as the other Rangers released Twilight to save their captain. The wide zamboni doors opened and Trixie yelled out, about to become swallowed up by the darkness. Twilight looked on in shock as the Rangers flailed into the darkness after their captured captain. Raucous rustling and shouting emanated from the mysterious zamboni area as a struggle continued. Suddenly, all five Rangers were spat back out onto the ice tied up in a giant pony bundle. Stepping out from darkness were the Golden Leafs, showing up in the nick of time to help out their best friend. Twilight shot up like a rocket and happily dashed off toward her friends.

"You girls did show up! You have no idea how relieved I am."

Applejack drifted forward to speak. "After I heard how you came 'round to apologize today, me and the girls got together and we discussed how childish we were all bein' before and durin' the Appleloosa game. You had every right to be angry with us and for that, we apologize to you, sugarcube."

"We behaved like absolute *mules*, dear. We're ready to focus and do whatever it takes to perform as a team!" said Rarity.

Twilight had the world's largest smile and was happy the ugly episode was appearing to be behind them.

"As for you jokers, you better believe we're telling the EHL about this!" shouted Rainbow into Trixie's ear. Trixie and the Rangers tried shouting but they were muffled by the ropes constricting their mouths.

Fluttershy began shoving the bundle of Rangers toward the opened doors. "We'll find a nice, quiet place for these meanies and then we can get back to practicing and being a team again."

Pinkie bounced around, playfully slapping the Rangers' helmets like a set of bongo drums as they were being removed from the ice, their growls and grunts failing to break through. After the Rangers were taken care of, the Golden Leafs held their first practice back together. Twilight taught a new play which the Golden Leafs' ran to near perfection by the end. The play would see the Golden Leafs set up in a pentagon formation with Rainbow behind the net, Rarity and Applejack at their respective faceoff circles, and Fluttershy and Twilight at the points on the blue line. Rainbow would control the puck and quickly pass to either Rarity or Applejack who would then immediately pass it back to the point where Fluttershy and Twilight switch places and receive the pass on the cross and fire away.

During the practice, Trixie frantically tried using her magic to free herself and her team. By time the Rangers were finally free, the Golden Leafs' practice was over and they had left the arena. Although her team was wrangled up and thwarted by Twilight and company, Trixie was not terribly upset as she had spied on the entire practice and knew the Golden Leafs' new trick. Trixie relayed the information to her team and they left the arena, prepared to gain revenge for their humiliation at the Golden Leafs' hooves.

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Game night arrived and Ponyville Pond was sold out for the final home game of the regular season. A sea of royal blue covered the arena as nearly every pony in attendance was now sporting a Golden Leafs' jersey. In celebration of the final home game, white pom-poms were given away and the sea of royal blue became a polka-dotted spectacle of royal blue and white. Golden Leafs fans cheered and waited anxiously for their team to get back to their winning ways, unaware of the turmoil that had befallen their team during the week.

In the locker room, the Golden Leafs were finished getting dressed and were aware and ready for Manehattan's revenge. In the visitor's locker room, Trixie furiously marched in front of her team and riled them up with more scathing words about Twilight and the Golden Leafs. It was time for the teams to hit the ice as the one minute horn sounded. The Golden Leafs made it to the ice first which prompted a loud eruption of cheering. The cheering switched to equally loud booing when the Rangers stepped into the rink. The Rangers, cold and calculating, stuck to their side of the rink and skated around while Ponyville did the same. Sweetie Belle and Pinkie Pie slid from side to side in their creases to chip up the ice for traction as the referee grabbed the game puck. Rainbow bent over and skidded to a stop at the faceoff dot while Octavia met her head on. With both goalies ready and the Rangers and Golden Leafs prepared for the faceoff, the puck dropped on the home finale.

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Octavia won the opening draw and flung it back to the newest Ranger, Bon Bon, who dumped it into the Ponyville zone. Manehattan chased after the puck and maintained control for a decent chunk of time. Twilight directed the defense and was calling out instructions and things she noticed the Rangers were doing. Manehattan kept passing out of the Golden Leafs' reach, trying to find a window to shoot through. Their passing got quicker and soon they were getting their shooting opportunities. Pinkie faced five shots and stopped them all, holding onto the fifth one for a break in the play. Twilight gathered up her team and told them that as soon as they finally break into the Rangers' zone, run the play they practiced. With the faceoff off to Pinkie's right, Rainbow won the draw and Ponyville skated up the ice for their first offensive series.

Applejack dumped the puck into the corner with Rainbow flying through to retrieve it. Rainbow swooped past Trixie and had the puck behind the net as her teammates got set into their positions. Trixie looked back to see the Golden Leafs' formation and knew it was their new play. Trixie peeled away from Rainbow and sprinted toward the middle, waiting for the next pass. Rainbow handed the puck off to Rarity on the left faceoff circle as Twilight and Fluttershy switched places along the blue line. As Rarity flicked her stick to pass to Twilight, Trixie jumped up into the passing lane and intercepted Rarity's feed. Twilight and Fluttershy stumbled a bit trying to turn quickly to give chase to the streaking Trixie. Trixie was all alone for a breakaway and Pinkie skated up to cut down the angle. Trixie drifted to the right but suddenly snapped a long slap shot to the top left corner. Pinkie was caught off-guard by Trixie's misdirection and the puck slammed up into the net. Trixie began her arrogant laughter as the Ponyville crowd booed.

"Manhattan goal, scored by number 4, Trixie."

Trixie broke away from her teammates' goal celebration to yell up to Spike.

"THAT'S THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE, YOU LITTLE PIPSQUEAK!"

"Geez sorry. Manhattan goal, scored by number 4, The Great and Powerful Trixie."

The Golden Leafs gathered around Twilight and were in shock of what just happened.

"That was just bad luck. There's no way Trixie knew what we were going to do, right?" asked Rainbow.

"An absolute fluke I say!" shouted Rarity

Twilight looked over at the Rangers, then up to the clock to see two minutes left in the period, and then back to her teammates. "Next time we're on offense, let's run it again. We'll just have to pass faster."

Play resumed and Rainbow won the faceoff back to Fluttershy who passed over to Twilight to dump it into the Rangers' zone. Rainbow once again flew in after it as the others reclaimed their positions. This time, Octavia and Vinyl Scratch were in on the play. With Rainbow stalling behind the net with the puck, Trixie made a beeline for the back of the net to apply pressure. Octavia and Scratch shaded near Rarity and Applejack. With Trixie coming after her, Rainbow felt rushed and bounced the puck over to Rarity. Scratch stepped in front of Rarity to steal the puck away as Octavia broke for center ice, splitting Twilight and Fluttershy. Scratch spun around quickly to feed the puck up to the breaking Octavia. The puck was just out of Fluttershy's stick reach and it landed on Octavia's stick. Pinkie had to skate up again as she faced her second consecutive breakaway. Octavia turned her body so she was skating backwards into Pinkie. Pinkie was thrown off and completely unaware what was coming next. Octavia motioned that she would turn from her right side, making Pinkie shade right, but instead Octavia turned back around from her left side. With a mostly open net, Octavia blasted the puck in to give Manehattan their second goal. The goal light flickered and Scratch was the first to meet Octavia at the boards to celebrate once more.

"Manehattan goal, scored by number 15, Octavia, assisted by number 66, Vinyl Scratch."

Dumbfounded again, the Golden Leafs drifted toward each other with groans and moans pouring down on them from their impatient fans. Not much time remained in the period, so Twilight waited for the first intermission to address this alarming violation of their game plan. Play resumed but the rest of the period ran out unexcitedly. Both teams headed to their locker rooms to assess their first period performances.

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During the intermission, Twilight furiously flipped through her sketches and notes on the Golden Leafs' new play, hoping to find a reason for why it failed twice. When she couldn't figure out the problem, she tossed all the paper aside and spoke to her team.

"Alright, so our play didn't work. We'll just have to leave it alone for now. Any suggestions on how to attack the second period?"

Applejack sat up quickly. "Let's just hit 'em! It's 'bout time somepony knock 'em off their high horse. After what they were doin' to Twilight at practice, they need a good whuppin'!"

"I'm all for that!" shouted Rainbow.

Rarity, remembering Twilight's complaint from the previous game that she wasn't physical enough, echoed her teammates' sentiments. "Agreed! Let's take out those ruffians!"

Twilight at first was surprised by Rarity's remark but grinned with approval. Fluttershy meanwhile was getting antsy and fired up by her teammates' plan. She walked up to the doorway and cleared her throat to get the girls' attention.

"Ahem, girls, do you know what time it is?"

Confused by Fluttershy's question, they all shrugged back. Fluttershy raised one of her legs to look at it as if she was wearing a watch. She then lifted up her head to yell, "IT'S CLOBBERIN' TIIIMEEEEE!"

The Golden Leafs leapt to their hooves with great excitement and Fluttershy emphatically led them out of the locker room and back to the ice.

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Both teams were back on the ice and the Golden Leafs were skating with swagger, despite their 2-0 deficit. Manehattan was puzzled as to why Ponyville were appearing so confident. Trixie banded her team together to get them to refocus. Each Golden Leaf nodded to the other as they set up for the faceoff. The puck dropped and the second period was underway.

Octavia won the faceoff but was immediately trucked over by Rainbow. Rainbow kept chugging on toward Bon Bon who fired the puck into the Ponyville zone in fear of getting hit. The referee held his hoof up as Twilight skated down to touch the puck for icing. Trixie gave Bon Bon a disappointed scowl as the faceoff moved to Sweetie Belle's right. Rainbow won the faceoff back to Fluttershy who moved the puck back toward the blue line. Applejack stepped around Scratch and was open in the slot,

receiving a pass from Fluttershy. Applejack was trying to cut to the crease but was sandwiched between Scratch and Bon Bon. Rarity blew past Lyra's cover and set up behind Applejack, tapping her stick frantically. Applejack passed the puck off to Rarity and continued off to the corner to clear the lane to the net. With the slot empty of bodies, Rarity fired on her little sister. Rarity pinpointed her shot just high enough to zip past Sweetie's glove hoof. The puck clanged the bottom edge of the crossbar and settled in the net. The Ponyville crowd was awoken and emitted a loud cheer as the goal horn sounded.

"Ponyville goal! Scored by number 9, RARITY! Assisted by number 88, Applejack! And number 0, Fluttershy!"

The Golden Leafs' goal salutation was a short one as they still had unfinished business, down by one. They reset for the center ice faceoff as the Rangers broke from their huddle. The puck dropped and Manehattan took back over. The Rangers' offensive series was cut short by a Rainbow Dash pass interception. Rainbow broke toward the Rangers' net with only Bon Bon skating back to challenge her. Bon Bon squared up with Rainbow and waited for her to make the first move. Rainbow narrowed her eyes and focused in on making a sick move. Rainbow held the puck over to Bon Bon's left and Bon Bon skated up to steal it. When Bon Bon reached her neck out with her stick to steal, Rainbow squeezed the puck through Bon Bon's legs and quickly shifted to Bon Bon's right. Bon Bon was caught by surprise and got twisted up, falling to the ice while Rainbow approached the crease. Rainbow curled the puck off her stick and rifled it through Sweetie Belle's five-hole. The goal horn sounded again and the Ponyvillians jumped to their hooves to cheer Rainbow as she jumped and crashed back-first into the boards in joy. The Golden Leafs rushed down to Manehattan's end to congratulate Rainbow with the home crowd pumping their pom-poms in the air like a pulsating wave.

"Ponyville goal! Scored by number 20, RAINBOW DASH!"

Visibly upset with their depleted lead, Trixie skated over and clunked Bon Bon on the helmet which prompted Lyra to push Trixie away from her friend. The Golden Leafs looked on in satisfaction as they were now in the Rangers' heads.

Three minutes remained in the period and Twilight and friends were determined to grab the lead before intermission. When the puck dropped, the Golden Leafs infiltrated the Rangers' zone and shuffled the puck around like a pinball machine. Their crisp, fast passing mixed up and confused the Manehattan defense and opened up a multitude of lanes to the net. Rarity had the puck on the left wing boards and was being pressured by Lyra. Bon Bon came in for the double team but Rarity kicked the puck along the boards to Rainbow in the corner. Bon Bon turned to go after Rainbow and Octavia began to close in to help. Seeing an open slot developing in front of her, Twilight stepped up into it, furiously slapping her stick. Rainbow heard the noise behind her and kicked the puck in that direction. Down on one knee, Twilight one-timed the puck right past Sweetie Belle's blocker. Ponyville Pond erupted with celebration again as Twilight was playfully pushed down to the ice by her teammates in elation.

"Ponyville GOAAALLL! Scored by number 42, Twilight Sparkle! Assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash! And number 9, Rarity!"

The arena kept rocking with cheering and pom-pom pumping as the final minute of the second period ticked away. When the period horn sounded, the crowd volume peaked again as the Golden Leafs left the ice with a 3-2 lead.

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The Golden Leafs' locker room was the most festive it had been in ages. Twilight and company proudly traded hoof and chest bumps as they decided to stick to their plan of hitting everything in sight.

Off in the Rangers' locker room, Trixie stewed in the corner and tried scheming up a devious plan. She recalled in their previous meeting against Ponyville back in Manehattan that Rarity was greatly distressed when Sweetie Belle was shot on. Trixie emerged from her evil planning session and addressed the Rangers.

"Oh Sweetie Belle, could you be a dear and go grab me a bottle of water to drink?"

"Sure thing, captain!" squeaked the young filly as she shuffled off into the hallway in her goalie gear. Trixie made sure Sweetie Belle was out of hearing range before sharing her plot with the others.

"Alright Rangers, I know how we're going to win this game. I'm going to place a spell on Sweetie Belle so that whenever Ponyville tries to take a shot on her, she'll start howling in pain. We will play every pony extremely tight on defense except her sister, Rarity. Leave Rarity open. With Sweetie Belle in immense pain, Rarity won't have the heart to shoot. We'll control the puck and steal the victory back! Mwahahaha!"

The Rangers joined in on Trixie's laughing when Sweetie Belle waddled back into the locker room. The laughter stopped as Sweetie handed over the bottled water.

"Aww, did I miss a funny joke?"

Sweetie's teammates looked to each other and kept laughing under their breaths. Trixie answered Sweetie Belle's question.

"Uhh, yeah, you did. It was a good one. Great joke Scratchy!"

Vinyl Scratch flashed a wide grin along with the other Rangers. With the final period close to starting, Sweetie Belle led the Rangers back toward the ice, unaware of Trixie's magic beginning to work itself into her.

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Ponyville Pond kept on rocking during the second intermission and they greeted their Golden Leafs back to the ice. The Rangers snaked their way back onto the rink with slimy grins on their faces. Sweetie Belle bounced all the way down to her net and got ready for the period. The teams met at center ice for the faceoff.

Trixie's evil plan couldn't start just yet because the Rangers held the puck in the Golden Leafs' zone. Lyra had the puck in the corner where Rarity pushed her against the glass, trying to poke the puck away. Octavia joined in the scrum and pushed Rarity away. Lyra passed the puck to the blue line to Bon Bon who dumped it right back to the same corner to Octavia who was now alone. While waiting for a teammate to get open, Octavia lost

focus and had the puck swiped out from under her skates by Rainbow. Rarity began breaking down the ice and called for the puck. Rainbow zinged the puck down to Rarity, just out of Bon Bon's reach. Rarity passed center ice and was on a breakaway. Pain began to ripple throughout Sweetie Belle's body. As Rarity came closer, Sweetie Belle couldn't endure the pain anymore and she ripped her mask off, howling in agony. Rarity completely stopped her stride, dropped her stick, and rushed over to Sweetie. The whistle blew to stop play as Rarity tended to her sister.

"What's wrong, Sweetie? Are you hurt? Tell big sister where you're hurting. I'll make it all better!"

Because play was now stopped, the pain inside Sweetie Belle quickly dissipated. Sweetie Belle was confused and didn't know what to tell Rarity.

"I don't know. It felt like my horn and my whole body was on fire but it's stopped. I'm not hurt anymore!"

Rarity eased up. "Whew, that's a relief. If you feel hurt again, tell me and we'll help you."

"Okay!"

Trixie was pleased that her plan helped prevent a breakaway attempt as the Rangers readied for the next faceoff in their own zone. Twilight skated over to Rarity to check if everything was okay. Rarity shook her head yes with a relieved look on her face. The puck dropped to resume play and Manehattan took control back over.

In the Ponyville end, the Rangers tried working the puck around but the Golden Leafs kept to their hitting strategy, knocking around every Manehattan puck handler. Octavia had the puck on the right wing boards with Fluttershy and Applejack closing in on her. Rainbow was spying over, looking to intercept a possible pass. Octavia kicked the puck down into the corner where Scratch took over control. Rainbow decided to make a move and sprinted toward Scratch. Scratch noticed Rainbow and pushed the puck back to Octavia in a panic. Rainbow finished her check on Scratch as Octavia curved toward the net with Fluttershy on her. Octavia passed off to Bon Bon at the blue line who blindly ripped a shot on net. The puck glanced off Pinkie and landed off to the right side of the net. Lyra was in the right

place at the right time and cleaned up the lucky rebound to tie the game up at 3 each. Lyra was mobbed by Trixie and the Rangers as Pinkie pulled out and ate a cupcake from her bottle and the Golden Leafs smacked their sticks to the ice in frustration.

"Manhattan goal, scored by number 10, Lyra. Assisted by number 20, Bon Bon, and number 15, Octavia."

The raucous noise level was shot down to silence as it became a brand new game with five minutes remaining in the period. Rainbow won the ensuing faceoff and the Golden Leafs pushed the puck into the Manhattan end. In accordance with their new strategy, the Rangers defended each Golden Leaf, except Rarity, very closely. Rainbow was double-teamed as she tried to move the puck around. Somehow the puck squirted out to Rarity who had it on the left wing. Rarity turned to face the net and wound up for a shot. Immediately, a swell of pain flowed through Sweetie Belle and she began to yell out from behind her mask, "OWWWWWW!" Rarity stopped again to care for Sweetie but Octavia swooped in to steal the puck. With the Rangers heading back down the other way, Sweetie's yelling stopped and she reverted back to normal. Twilight saw the entire situation from the blue line and noticed a small glow out of the corner of her eye. When Sweetie Belle began her screams, Trixie's horn had the faintest of aura around it which caught Twilight's attention. Before Twilight could link it together, she was sprinting back on defense to break up Manhattan's rush.

The Golden Leafs recovered and played strong defense, denying Manhattan any room to shoot as the period ticked down to two minutes left. The play stopped after Pinkie held onto a save. With time to think, Twilight quickly pieced together what she saw with Trixie and Sweetie Belle. She was about to tell Rarity but couldn't since the referee had already begun to drop the puck for the next faceoff. Play was back on and Ponyville grabbed the puck and began their trek down the ice. Applejack carried the puck in over the blue line but was closely followed by Scratch. Applejack worked the puck all the way to the corner where Scratch pushed her against the boards. Rainbow tried to swoop in to swipe the puck away but Trixie and Bon Bon were right on her flank. Rainbow missed and Applejack had to try to head back toward the blue line. Twilight called for the puck from Applejack and received it with a minute and twenty seconds

left. Twilight was immediately pressured by Lyra and had no choice but to zip the puck over to a wide open Rarity. Trixie saw the puck heading toward Rarity and began imposing her spell early. The pain returned within Sweetie Belle and she began writhing in agony in the crease. Rarity now had the puck and completely froze. Rainbow and Applejack yelled out "SHOOT!" but Rarity stood petrified as Sweetie Belle couldn't hold it in any longer and was screaming once again. Trixie swooped by and took the puck away with Scratch heading up ice.

"Say goodnight, losers!" smugly proclaimed Trixie as she pushed the puck up to Scratch who had a two-on-one with Lyra and only Fluttershy back on defense. Rarity dashed toward her sister who was fine again. At the other end, Scratch and Lyra approached Pinkie and Fluttershy while the others sprinted to catch up. Scratch faked a pass to Lyra which caused Fluttershy to stutter and get beat. Vinyl Scratch stayed wide on the wing and fired at the net, totally missing it wide. However, it was not a missed shot, but a strategic bounce pass off the back boards. The puck angled off and landed right onto Lyra's stick on the other side of Pinkie. Lyra nudged the puck right past Pinkie's outstretched kick save and the Rangers stole the lead with only thirty seconds left. An immense groan bellowed out from the crowd as Lyra was tackled into the corner by her teammates.

"Manhattan goal, scored by number 10, Lyra. Assisted by number 66, Vinyl Scratch, and number 4, The Great and Powerful Trixie."

Many of the Golden Leafs faithful stood up and began marching toward the exits as Twilight called a timeout to get Pinkie out of her goalie gear to be an extra attacker.

During the timeout, Twilight informed Rarity of what she figured out.

"Sweetie Belle isn't in any real pain!"

Rarity was shocked by Twilight's words and was about to get in her face but Twilight continued. "I noticed that whenever you were about to shoot, Trixie's horn had a glow around it, and right away Sweetie Belle began her screaming. It must be Trixie who's hurting her!"

"OH, SHE'S GOING TO GET IT!" yelled Rarity. Rarity broke away to chase

after Trixie before Twilight hustled to block her.

"No, we'll take care of Trixie after the game is over. There's thirty seconds left. We'll make Trixie pay, I promise."

The referee skated by to tell Twilight to wrap it up as the play was about to resume again. Pinkie was out of her goalie pads and was ready to help the final rush. The puck dropped at center ice but Manehattan won the draw. They played keep away, not allowing Ponyville to come close to touching the puck as time ran out. When the final horn sounded to signal the end of the game, Twilight immediately took off her helmet and used her magic to freeze Trixie in mid-stride. Trixie began to struggle but wasn't moving.

"Hey! What's going on here!?"

Before her teammates could help her, the other Rangers were corralled and were being held against the boards by the other Golden Leafs. With Trixie unable to move and teed up, Rarity began charging from the opposite end of the ice. Rarity angrily gained speed and locked in on Trixie who was frantically panicking. "YOU DO NOT HARM MY SWEETIE BELLE!" yelled Rarity before gritting her teeth and readying her pounce. Trixie let out an exasperated yell as Rarity uncoiled and flew like a missile toward her, with Twilight releasing the magical bind. **SLAM!** Trixie was hurled across the ice and skidded to a crashing halt into the boards. Twilight and Rarity skated up to Trixie and looked down upon her as she was now the one writhing and wincing in pain.

"YEAH! HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT?!" yelled Rarity in Trixie's face.

Twilight had to keep Rarity from going off the deep end. Holding Rarity away, Twilight turned back to the trembling Trixie. "We're reporting you to the EHL right away! How low do you have to stoop in order to win? How could you hurt your own teammate? And a young filly at that! I hope you learned your lesson!"

Trixie didn't respond and she was curled up into the fetal position. Rarity skated up to the other Rangers and roared at them fiercely. Horrified, the Rangers kept themselves pinned to the boards as Applejack, Rainbow, Pinkie, and Fluttershy released them from their clutches. The Golden Leafs skated backwards, keeping their eyes locked with the Rangers as they

went toward the exit. Rarity grabbed Sweetie Belle and directed her to the Golden Leafs' locker room. When Rarity was finally off the ice, the Rangers rushed over to help their captain up. Trixie had trouble regaining her balance and wiped out onto the ice again.

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In the locker room, Fluttershy and Pinkie tried to calm Rarity down while Twilight wrote out a letter to the EHL offices about the Rangers' actions not only that night, but during the practice the other day. Included in the scroll was the spy device Trixie had planted in the boards. Applejack noticed it during the big confrontation after the game and took it with her into the locker room. Twilight examined the device and deduced it was some sort of camera. She hoped there would be visual evidence for the EHL to see to help their case. Spike came down from the announcing booth and fired the scroll away. Applejack and Rainbow went over to praise Rarity for her vicious hit as she was now relaxed. Sweetie Belle had trouble taking her pads off but was helped by Pinkie. With a fiery belch, Spike spit out a response scroll from the EHL.

"From the Offices of the Equestria Hockey League:

Based on your accusations and the device you sent, the EHL has decided to launch a full investigation on the Manehattan Rangers on the charges of tampering and illegal use of magic. We request the Ponyville Golden Leafs' presence at a trial hearing at EHL Headquarters in Canterlot next week on this matter. This should be more than accommodating since the Golden Leafs' final regular season game is against the Canterlot Equestriens in Canterlot.

EHL Board of Discipline"

The Golden Leafs were pleased with the EHL's response and were excited to bring Manehattan to justice. Even though they had lost their third straight game, the team was too preoccupied with Sweetie Belle's safety to care about their record. The team was back together and united once again for a new, minor cause along with the original goal, to battle for the Celestia Cup while having fun as a team. Twilight and friends had officially hit rock bottom but were now on their way back up the mountain. Will they be able

to build some momentum in one last regular season game before the playoffs arrive?

To Be Continued

Three Stars from Manehattan @ Ponyville

** Vinyl Scratch (MHN)*

*** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

**** The Great and Powerful Trixie (MHN)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Cloudsdale 1, APPLELOOSA 0

FILLYDELPHIA 3, Canterlot 2

EHL Standings (with Projected Playoff Seedings, 1 & 2 byes, 3 vs. 6, 4 vs. 5)

(1) Cloudsdale 6-3

(2) Appleloosa 6-3

(3) Manehattan 5-4

(4) Canterlot 5-4

(5) Ponyville 3-6

(6) Fillydelphia 2-7

Chapter 12

Season Wrap-Up

Off to Canterlot were the Ponyville Golden Leafs on a sunny, yet chilly winter morning. Inside the carriage, Twilight and company, accompanied by Sweetie Belle, eagerly chattered about things to do once they arrived in the capitol city. Rarity was the most excited of the ponies as she bounced from window to window, trying to observe Canterlot's splendor.

"Ooh we absolutely *MUST* visit Hoity Toity's fashion studio. It's been ages since I've seen him last!"

Applejack yanked Rarity away from the window. "Hold yer horses there, Rarity. We need ta' see Canterlot's famous golden apple trees! I'ma take an apple home and plant its seeds at the farm!"

"Pfft, golden apples, schmolden schmapples. I'm going to find the headquarters of the royal air guard and check out their awesome military stuff and maybe learn a new trick!" said Rainbow Dash with an excited squeak in her voice.

Fluttershy tried pushing Rainbow out of the way to the window but her gentle nudge was no use. Fluttershy instead moved her head all about to look over Rainbow. "I'm going to re-introduce myself to all the cute, little winter critters. I hope they can forgive me and see that I am really kind."

"I'm going to throw a BIG snowball fight for all of Canterlot! We can build snowponies, go sledding, and maybe sing our favorite winter songs!" squealed Pinkie Pie as she forcefully bumped both Fluttershy and Rainbow away from the window, knocking them into Twilight's lap.

Twilight warmly smiled at her friends' anxiousness to explore her hometown, but she was first concerned about the trial at EHL Headquarters scheduled for that afternoon. "I can't wait to show you girls around Canterlot. We really didn't get to see a whole lot when we were here for the Grand Galloping Gala. Luckily our game against the Equestriens isn't for a couple days so we have plenty of time to explore! But before we get too excited, we have the hearing at the EHL offices to deal with. We have to see what will happen to Sweetie Belle here." Twilight gave Sweetie Belle a pat on the head.

"The EHL better make the right decision about those *despicable* Rangers! I bet you Trixie will try to weasel her way out of it! She's such a snake in the grass!" exclaimed Rarity.

"But I thought she was a weasel? You can't be both a weasel AND a snake!" asked Pinkie somewhat facetiously as Fluttershy pondered what a weasel-snake would look like.

Applejack interjected. "I don't know, Rarity. I reckon the Commissioner ain't gonna be too happy 'bout seein' us again."

"Yeah, because you went all crazy on Rose! Even though you got suspended, that was so cool!" said Rainbow as she extended her hoof to Applejack for a hoof bump to which Applejack obliged.

Twilight sat up to speak. "We will be ready no matter what the EHL decides to hand down. Let's get through this hearing then focus on the Equestriens. It'll be our last chance to start building momentum for the playoffs."

"Okie dokie, Twilight! I can't wait to party with Princess Luna again! She knows how to PARTY!" said Pinkie as she danced in the center of the carriage. Pinkie stumbled over toward a slumbering Spike on the floor and accidentally stepped on his tail. Spike was jolted from his sleep in pain, unaware of what happened.

"OUCH! Wha-what was that?"

"Oh, sorry Spike! I didn't see where I was dancing! I hope I didn't hurt your tail too bad!"

Spike sucked on his tail to help ease the pain but had to quickly release it when a fiery burp rumbled out a scroll. Twilight opened the scroll to read it to everypony.

"My Dearest Student Twilight Sparkle,

You and the Ponyville Golden Leafs are cordially invited for a royal banquet on the eve of your match against the Canterlot Equestriens. Princess Luna and I are very excited to see you again. Good luck and I shall see you soon.

*Your Royal Highness,
Princess Celestia"*

Twilight's unbridled glee made her heart race. The other Golden Leafs also bounced about the carriage with giddiness as they were looked forward to their first royal feast. However, as the carriage approached EHL Headquarters, the excitement in the air gradually calmed down into seriousness for there was business to settle first.

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The carriage came to an abrupt stop, flinging Fluttershy, Pinkie, Spike, and Rainbow to the opposite side into Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, and Sweetie Belle. Slightly dazed, the Golden Leafs brushed themselves off and exited their vehicle. The EHL Headquarters was a short, but wide building that stretched back pretty far. The pathway to the front doors contained a fountain shut down for the winter. The fountain featured the statue of a pony in full hockey gear. Upon passing the fountain, Twilight glanced over at the plaque at the front of the fountain and saw the name "Hayne Gretzky". The ponies entered the main doors and walked into a bustling lobby full of business ponies. A lush, black carpeted mat extended from the doors to the main reception desk. The logos of the six EHL teams glowed on the walls leading up to the junction of hallways. Twilight and friends trotted over a giant EHL logo emblazoned on the mat in bright orange fabric

as they slowly strolled into the league offices. They approached the reception desk where a secretary unicorn was leisurely talking on the phone while using magic on an emery board to file her hoof.

Twilight approached the desk and cleared her throat to get the secretary's attention. "Ahem. Excuse me. We are the Ponyville Golden Leafs and we are here for the hearing scheduled for today."

The secretary continued on with her phone conversation, not giving Twilight one inkling of notice. Twilight cleared her throat louder and tried again. "AHEM! Excuse me ma'am, but we are the Ponyville Golden Leafs and we're here for the hearing."

In a very uninspiring, monotone voice, the secretary moved the phone away from her ear and mouth. "If you need service, please ring the bell." The Golden Leafs blankly stared on as the secretary placed the phone back on her ear to listen. Twilight located the bell at the far end of the desk and strongly pushed down on the button, making the ring loud enough to startle the secretary. The secretary put the phone down and angrily turned to face Twilight.

"What can I help you with, ma'am?"

"We're here for the scheduled hearing today," said Twilight sternly.

"Very well, I'll let the Board of Discipline know you're here." The secretary picked the phone back up and pushed a button. "Hello? The Manehattan Rangers are here for their punishment."

Twilight and friends smacked their faces with their hooves. Twilight spoke back up, "No! We're the Ponyville Golden Leafs!"

"Oh, I mean the Ponyville Golden Leafs are here. Okay. I'll send them in," said the unhelpful receptionist. With the phone back on the receiver, the secretary pointed toward a long corridor and robotically instructed the Golden Leafs. "The conference room is down that hallway, the first door on the left. Thank you for visiting the Equestria Hockey League and have a nice day."

Twilight led her team to the corridor and saw a sign pointing to the

conference room they were told to arrive at. When the Golden Leafs entered the room, there was no sign of anypony. On one side of the room was a long, rectangular table with space for six ponies to stand while the other side contained a much longer table. At the head of the room, facing the two long tables, was a platform containing a podium in the center with chairs on each side. On the longer table sat a microphone and a nameplate that read "Ponyville Golden Leafs". Twilight and company stood at their table while Sweetie Belle found a chair in the very back of the room to sit on. As the Golden Leafs got settled into their spots, the conference room doors reopened. Three briefcase-toting stallions in suits pompously trotted in, led by commissioner Gary Bettpony. The EHL officials took their spots at the platform with Commissioner Bettpony standing at the podium. Commissioner Bettpony retrieved his notes and smacked a gavel onto the podium for no particular reason but to feel important.

"Order! Order! This hearing is now in session. Where are the Manehattan Rangers?"

The Golden Leafs looked around and shrugged their shoulders at the Commish. Suddenly, the conference room doors flung open and in sauntered the Manehattan Rangers with Trixie at the head of the pack. Rarity leapt over the table at Trixie but was held back by Twilight and Rainbow with the Commissioner's gavel loudly smacking on the podium. The Rangers took their spot at the opposing table and made faces at the Golden Leafs. The Golden Leafs kept looking ahead, not wanting to give Trixie's crew any further attention. With both teams now present, the hearing began.

Commissioner Bettpony glanced over the papers in front of him and then addressed the Rangers. "Trixie, your team is being accused of tampering and illegal use of magic. As captain, how do you plead?"

Trixie tossed her mane back and smugly declared, "Not guilty, Mr. Commissioner!"

"OH BIG SURPRISE!" yelled Rarity, which elicited more gavel pounding.

"This is your first and only warning, Ponyville. Do not speak out of turn!"

Rarity was going to yell some more but Twilight used magic to zipper her

lips up. Rainbow held Rarity down as she struggled to mumble angrily behind her zipped lips. The hearing continued on.

"Now, Manehattan. We received Ponyville's grievance along with a recording device. After our league technicians reviewed the device in question, we saw some very demonstrative actions by you and your team. Care to defend yourselves?"

The Rangers all looked to Trixie who stood up and put her front hooves on the table. "Your honor, I assure you that the recording device you received was not ours. We arrived at Ponyville the morning of the game, therefore we could not have the time to plant it. It must be Ponyville's device so that they can spy on visiting teams' practices!"

Twilight immediately jumped up to interrupt. "That is an awful lie, Mr. Commissioner! The device must have clearly shown Trixie and her team bullying me during a practice! I saw her plant it with my own eyes!"

The Commissioner turned his attention toward Twilight. "There was no such footage as the device began recording at the start of the game. We did not see this 'bullying' you speak of."

Trixie looked to Twilight and stuck her tongue out. Twilight pleaded her case again. "Well, even though there wasn't footage of the Rangers' bullying, I still saw Trixie place it on the boards! We learned a new play at that practice and during the game, when we went to execute it, Trixie was able to recognize our play and had a breakaway goal as well as an assist on a second goal!"

"That's because you and your team are losers and can't pass the puck!" shouted Trixie. Irritated, the Golden Leafs began to yell back at Trixie while the Rangers fired back with insults.

The commissioner slammed the gavel once again to stop the noise. "Enough! This hearing is going nowhere with a bunch of hearsay and shouting going back and forth. I'll just cut to the chase. Manehattan, after reviewing the footage, we saw that Trixie's horn was glowing for a significant portion of time which prompted your goalie to delay the game in pain. The use of magic during a game is illegal and is subject to strict penalties. Furthermore, placing your own teammate in physical pain, albeit

not subject to the EHL rulebook, is still a violation of a high standard of morals we, the EHL, try to adhere to. As commissioner, I hereby declare your penalty for these infractions to be..."

Gary Bettpony then pulled out a magic 8-ball from his briefcase and shook it. Both teams had a great deal of confusion on their faces as they couldn't believe that is how their league determines penalties.

The commissioner put the 8-ball away. "Just kidding. Anyways, Manehattan Rangers, you are officially fined 50,000 bits for tampering as we believe you did plant the device based on Ms. Sparkle's light defense. Also, the previous game, which did result in a victory for Manehattan, is now hereby forfeited. Ponyville will be recognized as the winner of that game."

The Rangers all put their hooves up on the table in protest with Trixie beginning to yell at the commissioner. Twilight and friends sat back and enjoyed hearing the rest of the ruling. With the shouting from the Rangers growing louder, Commissioner Bettpony slammed the gavel and raised his voice. "Furthermore, the contract of Sweetie Belle as a member of the Manehattan Rangers is now TERMINATED and will be granted to the Ponyville Golden Leafs!"

Sweetie Belle jumped out from her chair and ran up to Rarity. She received a big hug from her sister as well as happy pats on the head from her new teammates. Enraged, Trixie slammed her hooves on the table.

"THIS IS A TRAVESTY! YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO MY TEAM!"

The commissioner flashed a self-righteous grin. "Oh, that reminds me. I also read what you had to say in that newspaper interview, young lady! You think I'm a puppet for Princess Celestia do ya? You know, I was going to let you off easy but you since you reminded me of that scathing article...you are placed under severe probation! From now on, any shenanigans from you will be grounds for BANISHMENT FROM THE LEAGUE! How do like that?"

Trixie's jaw dropped in absolute shock as the Golden Leafs pointed and laughed at Trixie's reaction to the commissioner's decree. Trixie desperately tried to backpedal in defense.

"B-but that interview was taken out of context! I didn't mean that!"

As Gary Bettpony and his associates were trotting off to leave, he turned back toward Trixie to give one final remark. "YOU GET NOTHING! YOU LOSE! GOOD DAY MADAM!"

Trixie angrily stomped in place as her teammates tried to calm her down. The Rangers stormed out of the room while Twilight and friends mockingly waved goodbye to them. The Golden Leafs exchanged celebratory hugs and hoof bumps for their favorable ruling and the Rangers' misfortune. Rarity let Sweetie Belle ride on her back as the Golden Leafs exited the conference room in complete satisfaction.

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With their administrative duties out of the way, the Golden Leafs spent the rest of their afternoon in Canterlot exploring the city with Twilight as their tour guide. Each pony got to do what they had planned on the ride over. Rarity visited Hoity Toity, Applejack saw and picked a golden apple, Fluttershy played with a handful of critters, Rainbow Dash saw the royal air guard's compound, and Pinkie Pie started a snowball fight with her friends and some unfortunate passers-by. Tired from the day's fun-filled events, the Golden Leafs arrived at Twilight's home.

Afraid of being embarrassed by her parents, Twilight quickly introduced her friends to them then hurriedly pushed them down into the basement where their slumber party would be held. Each time her parents tried to come downstairs to provide snacks or games, Twilight met them at the steps and prevented them from coming down any further.

The rest of the evening was spent chatting and playing fun games. Giggling and shouting echoed throughout the basement as the team bonded over conversation and a tiny bit of scouting of the Equestriens at Twilight's behest. Spike and Sweetie Belle were the first ones to fall asleep, but soon the rest of the ponies followed to close out the long day.

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The next morning, Twilight was the first to wake up and she prepared a giant breakfast for her team. The Golden Leafs enjoyed the delicious

breakfast and readied themselves for the day's activities. The plan was for the team to run through a brief practice at the Celestia Centre before arriving for their royal banquet at the palace in the evening. With stomachs full, the Golden Leafs set out for another packed day.

At the Celestia Centre, the Golden Leafs worked on their agility and skating. Twilight introduced new skating drills to help her teammates change direction quickly since the Equestriens were known for their quick, sneaky plays as evidenced in the first meeting in Ponyville. The Golden Leafs also worked on their penalty killing as they allowed three power play goals to the Equestriens last time. Both Pinkie and Sweetie Belle took reps as goalie, taking on shots. Rarity was hesitant on shooting at her little sister but eventually became comfortable enough to participate fully. Rarity quietly vowed to herself that if Sweetie Belle goes in net during a game, that she would do whatever it takes to play better defense and prevent shots from being taken. The practice ended short, but it was effective, which pleased Twilight. After the ponies and Spike freshened up, they left the arena to head for the royal palace.

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A royal chariot pulled up to Twilight's home to transport the Golden Leafs to the palace. Twilight and friends piled into the chariot anxiously, pushing and pulling each other out of the way to hop aboard. Once the dust settled, the chariot was off and away. It did not take long for the girls and Spike to arrive at the palace. Once everypony stepped out of the chariot, they were in awe once again seeing as it was their first return since the Gala. The palace was adorned with amazing winter ornaments. Giant crystal snowflakes and powder blue banners and tapestries hung from the towers. A line of trumpet unicorns stood along the main drag into the palace courtyard. They began sounding the horns as Twilight and her friends trotted their way toward the palace.

Coming up on the main hall, Pinkie Pie looked over to the left where the dining hall was. As soon as she saw the giant spread of food, Pinkie galloped over and was about to dive in. Twilight froze Pinkie with her magic and brought her back to the group. Pinkie was able to stick her tongue out to grab a bread roll before getting yanked back and was furiously munching on it. Twilight led the group up to the main hall where they passed by colorful stained glass windows depicting various moments of Equestrian history including their triumph over Nightmare Moon. The Golden Leafs

were confused when neither princess was in sight. Suddenly, in a puff of purple smoke, both Princess Celestia and Luna stood before them, standing tall and proud. The Golden Leafs bowed to the princesses and awaited their greeting.

Princess Celestia trotted forward toward Twilight and company. "Rise Ponyville Golden Leafs for you have played admirably thus far this season. It is great to see you all once again!"

"It's great to see you too, Princess Celestia, Princess Luna!" exclaimed Twilight.

Luna smiled back as Celestia began to lead everypony toward the dining hall. "Now that we're all together, shall we eat?"

"Yes ma'am!" yelled Pinkie as she blew right past Celestia and started pigging out on all the food. Embarrassed, Twilight tried to wrangle up Pinkie but the princesses laughed at the scene. The other Golden Leafs took their places at the table along with Celestia and Luna, digging into the large feast as well.

After everypony stuffed their faces, the royal waiters cleared the table and brought out dessert. Before the Golden Leafs could take a bite, Princess Celestia stood from her throne to address them. Pinkie gulped her dessert in one bite and was nudged in the side by Twilight to pay attention.

"I hope you all enjoyed the food we've prepared tonight. Before this banquet is over, I have something to show you."

Princess Celestia turned around to whistle a short, lovely tune. Almost immediately, two doors flung open behind her and two ponies trotted into the room. The two ponies were carrying a large, blue trunk, carefully bringing it over to the table while wearing white gloves on their hooves. The usher-like ponies unlatched the locks on the trunk and opened it. A bright, silvery glow emerged from the trunk as the Golden Leafs' eyes widened. Standing tall on the table before the Golden Leafs was the elusive Celestia Cup. The Golden Leafs gathered around it and looked upon it with great admiration. Rainbow Dash went to touch it but was met with a slap on the hoof by Twilight.

"It's...it's more beautiful than I ever imagined it would be," said the awestruck Twilight.

"Shiiiiinyyyy!" said Pinkie as she wobbled back and forth to see her reflection shrink and grow in the Cup.

"Amazing! Fabulous! Amazingly fabulous! I must have this for my boutique!" shouted Rarity.

"It would be so fun to show this off to Apple Bloom and Scootaloo! Maybe I'll get a Celestia Cup cutie mark!" yelped Sweetie Belle as she jumped up and down to get a better view.

Applejack carefully scanned the trophy from base to top. "I reckon I could sell a lot of apples with this big ol' hunk of metal sittin' on the cart. It's so cool lookin'!"

"It's nice," said Fluttershy softly as she imagined using the bowl of the Cup to give all the little birdies a bath.

Rainbow went to sneak another touch onto the Cup but was spotted by Twilight who threatened another slap. "If I have the Celestia Cup then the Wonderbolts will HAVE to let me in! They'll be so jealous!"

"If you continue to work together as a team and learn the power of teamwork and friendship, then this radiant trophy could be all yours," said Princess Celestia with a delightful grin.

"We'll do our best, Princess!" shouted Twilight.

"Yeah!" responded the other Golden Leafs.

The Cup keepers placed the Cup back into its case and took it from the dining hall. With the evening growing longer, the Golden Leafs were ready to head back to Twilight's house. Princess Celestia and Luna waved goodbye to Twilight and friends as they boarded the chariot back to Twilight's home where they retired to bed immediately upon arrival.

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Dawn broke on the day of the final regular season game. The Golden Leafs lounged around the Sparkle residence until it was time to depart to the Celestia Centre. With the surprising visit from the Celestia Cup the previous night still fresh in their minds, Twilight and her crew were more focused than they have ever been before a game. After exchanging goodbyes with Twilight's parents, the Golden Leafs set out to wrap-up their inaugural regular season.

As the girls and Spike approached the arena, a surprising, yet encouraging sight appeared before them. Outside the arena doors, not only were there a throng of Equestriens fans waiting to enter, but there was also a large contingent of Ponyvillians. They traveled to Canterlot to support the Golden Leafs and were making their presence known with cheers and yells. At the front of the Golden Leafs' fan cavalcade was a large blue banner that said "GO LEAFS GO" in shining gold silk. The small sea of ponies sporting blue jerseys blended in with the red of the Equestriens' fans as they made their way toward the entrance. The Golden Leafs all felt a wave of warmth ignite inside them and their focus doubled as a result. Twilight and friends trotted proudly toward the visitor's entrance and found their way to the locker room to get dressed.

In the locker room, the Golden Leafs' determination was palpable as each pony prepared for the game with a quiet seriousness. Sweetie Belle donned a Golden Leafs jersey for the first time, dressing at the stall between Rarity and Pinkie Pie. When the Golden Leafs were dressed and ready to go, Twilight stood in front of her team for the pre-game speech.

"Tonight we face our last chance to build momentum for the playoffs. We also face a team that already beat us already this season. We know Canterlot's game and how they like to get in the referee's ear. Tonight, we won't put ourselves in a position for the Equestriens' to even think that have a case. We saw on the walk in that there are a large number of our fans who traveled at this way to come watch us play. They are sacrificing their time, energy, and business to close up Ponyville and come to Canterlot. We shall not let them down! Let's do this for them! Let's get a win and take a strong step forward toward the playoffs! Hooves in, play smart on three!"

"One...two...three...PLAY SMART!" yelled the Golden Leafs.

The warning horn sounded and Twilight led the charge out from the locker

room toward the rink.

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When the Golden Leafs reached the rink and stepped onto the ice, the electric atmosphere of the Celestia Centre poured over them. The arena was split fifty-fifty in Ponyville royal blue and Canterlot red. Dueling chants of "GO LEAFS GO!" and "LET'S GO 'QUESTS!" brought the arena volume to unprecedented levels. Some surly Ponyville fans and Canterlot fans began to talk smack to each other but were calmed down by their peers. Both the Equestriens and the Golden Leafs skated around their ends, waiting for the introductions. Sweetie Belle and Pinkie Pie stretched off to the side and helped each other with warming up before Sweetie retreated to the bench to watch the game. The lights dimmed for the introductions which sparked the crowd back up again.

The Golden Leafs' introduction was bland and succinct while the Equestriens had a lavish ceremony complete with royal guards providing a fanfare. The Equestriens' roster had no changes as they were the same team who defeated Ponyville four games back in a 3-0 shutout. The Golden Leafs couldn't crack the scoreboard last time but they were poised and ready to start this game with a loud, visiting fan base rallying behind them.

With introductions over, the referee grabbed the puck and brought both teams into the center circle. Ponyville's road whites glowed under the arena lighting while the Equestriens' home reds boldly stood out. Rainbow and Luna leaned forward for the faceoff and gritted their teeth. The referee checked both Pony Joe and Pinkie Pie and slammed the puck down to start the final contest.

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The game started out with Ponyville dominance as they kept the puck in the offensive zone. Each pass was sharp and clean and the Golden Leafs did well to get open for shots. Despite the early onslaught of offense, Pony Joe denied each attempt and had racked up six saves before Canterlot could take control of the puck. Canterlot tried to answer back with some offense but had a couple passing miscues, allowing Ponyville to reclaim control. With the puck back in the Equestriens' zone, Twilight called to run their new play from the previous week. Rainbow took the puck deep behind

the Canterlot net with Moondancer right on her. Rarity, Applejack, Fluttershy, and Twilight took their positions just in time for Rainbow to pass. Applejack received Rainbow's pass as Twilight and Fluttershy exchanged positions. With Twilight drifting sideways, Applejack pushed the puck towards her, out of Hoity Toity's reach. With the puck coming at her, Twilight wound up for the one-timer. Rainbow escaped Moondancer's tight coverage and parked herself right in Pony Joe's way. Twilight whipped the shot on net as Rainbow hunkered down in the crease. Pony Joe stretched around Rainbow to get an eye on the shot but couldn't find it. With the puck coming in on net, Rainbow tipped her stick ever so slightly to deflect it. The puck glanced off Rainbow's stick and into the bottom corner of the net. Half of the arena jumped with a yell as the goal light spun and Rainbow skated toward her teammates in jubilation.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 20, Rainbow Dash, assisted by number 42 Twilight Sparkle, and number 88, Applejack."

The "GO LEAFS GO" chant broke out again as the Golden Leafs finished their celebration and headed back to the faceoff circle. Luna skated by Pony Joe to give him an encouraging tap on the pads before making her way to the center to square off against Rainbow. Ponyville finally put a goal up on the Equestriens and wasn't about to stop. After some back and forth offensive series by both teams, Ponyville had the puck back in the Canterlot end. Applejack dumped the puck into the corner with Rainbow giving chase. Rainbow reached the puck but was surrounded by Photo Finish and Hoity Toity. Rainbow held her ground but eventually succumbed to the prodding and poking of the Equestriens. Photo grabbed the puck and swept around the back of her own net to fire the puck off the boards. Fluttershy braced herself against the glass to keep the puck in and immediately passed to Rarity near the front of the net. The Equestriens' defense collapsed on Rarity, prompting her to pass back to Fluttershy at the point. Fluttershy had an open lane to the net and fired off a shot. Pony Joe followed the puck until Rainbow once again skated through the crease to block his view. The puck pounded the top corner of the net without any movement from the screened Canterlot goalie. Fluttershy and Rarity embraced as the goal light was illuminated for Ponyville once more. The other Golden Leafs joined in the group hug as a mixture of cheers and boos emerged from the audience.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 0, Fluttershy, assisted by number 9, Rarity.

With a minute remaining in the period, Ponyville rested on their laurels and were sluggish coming off the ensuing faceoff. Canterlot, increasing their focus, surged into the Ponyville end and attempted to at least get on the scoreboard before the break. Luna had the puck on the left wing boards and passed it to Hoity before Applejack could ram her. Hoity wanted to pass to Blueblood on the other wing but the path was blocked by Twilight on defense. Photo glided behind the net and called for the puck, receiving it. Luna bolted toward the crease but Rainbow was on her tight. Blueblood stepped into Rainbow's path, causing her to skate away to avoid the collision, leaving Luna open between the defense. Photo snapped the puck to Luna who spun around Fluttershy to claim it and then flicked it on net. The puck was tucked in right under Pinkie's glove hoof and Canterlot was on the board. A goal horn loudly bellowed throughout the arena as the red-clad Equestriens faithful finally had a reason to cheer.

"CANTERLOT GOOOOAAALLL! Scored by number 25, YOUR ROYAL HIGHNESS, PRINCESS LUNAAAAA! Assisted by number 55, PHOTOOOO FINISH! And number 77, HOITY TOITYYYY!

The Equestriens finished their celebration as the Golden Leafs reassured Pinkie that it was going to be okay. The final thirty seconds of the period ran out with no further scoring. Both fan bases cheered their teams off the ice as the teams marched off to the locker rooms for the intermission.

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The intermission went by quickly as both teams made it back to the ice for the next frame. The Golden Leafs were pleased with the first period but were a little distraught about their let-up in the last minute. Their determination was still high as they briskly skated around before the second period started. The referee stood at center ice and called both teams over for the faceoff. The "GO LEAFS GO" and "LET'S GO 'QUESTS" chants fired back up as the puck dropped.

Neither team held the puck for very long, only being able to pass a few times before they either fired a shot or were stopped by the defense. Canterlot began checking more, hoping that their newfound physicality would help them tie the score up. Remembering the uneven amount of calls against them from the first meeting, Ponyville decided to match Canterlot's checking with finesse and speed. Four minutes of exciting back and forth hockey quickly passed, raising the crowd's buzz with each series of shots.

Ponyville had fired eight shots to Canterlot's twelve and found themselves back in their own zone on defense. Blueblood had the puck in the left corner and was hounded by Rarity and Twilight. Blueblood kicked the puck around the back boards to the other corner where Luna took over while battling off Fluttershy and Applejack. With Hoity coming into the scrum to help out Luna, Moondancer shifted over along the blue line. The puck squirted out of the corner right to Moondancer's stick. With the Golden Leafs' defense all shifted toward the right wing, Moondancer saw Blueblood open on the opposite side and zinged the puck right over. Blueblood settled the wobbly pass before firing on net. Pinkie took too long sliding over and the puck flew past her kick save. The goal horn sounded again for Canterlot as Prince Blueblood danced toward the corner while roses littered the ice. The Equestriens came over to celebrate and the arena was rocking again with the red half jumping up and down.

"CANTERLOT GOOOOAAALLL! Scored by number 1, PRRRRRRINCE BLUEEEEEBLOOD! Assisted by number 5, MOOOOOONDANCERRRR!

Twilight regrouped her team and calmed them all down by sticking to the game plan. She then set their focus to getting a goal before the intermission like Canterlot had done the previous period. With this mission in mind, the Golden Leafs set up for the faceoff. Canterlot won the draw and pinned the puck in the Ponyville end as time ticked down. Rainbow ramped up her speed and stole the puck from an unsuspecting Blueblood. Rainbow and Applejack sprinted the other way with an odd-pony rush. Rainbow passed to Applejack who faked the pass back to stall Moondancer. Applejack fired at the goal but Pony Joe gloved it and immediately set it down to pass off. Princess Luna was all alone cherry picking at center ice when she received the pass. She came into the Ponyville zone for a breakaway as Pinkie skated up to cut down the angle.

Rainbow kicked into a top gear to get back on the play. As Luna went to shoot, Rainbow dove and poked the puck off Luna's stick, eliciting an "awww" from the home crowd. The second period horn sounded off; however, the action was not over. The poke from Rainbow knocked Luna off-balance and soon she was skidding on the ice. Pinkie tried dodging out of the way when Luna barreled into her, knocking both her and the net over. The crowd gasped as both Luna and Pinkie were slow to get up. Eventually, Luna was up on her skates which received applause from the Equestriens' fans. Pinkie quickly took her mask off and clutched her left knee, wincing in pain as her teammates rushed over to check on her. Twilight tried asking what was wrong but Pinkie howled back. Applejack and Rainbow helped raise Pinkie to her good leg and they carried her off toward the locker room with the bad leg daintily hovering over the ice.

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The EHL physician carefully took Pinkie's pad off and surveyed the injury. Pinkie sadly chomped on a muffin as the physician performed the "drawer" test to make sure no ligaments were torn. When the check-up was over, the physician trotted over to Twilight to inform her of the prognosis.

"I believe it is only a mild knee sprain. Some ice should help reduce some of the swelling but I'm afraid she won't be able to play out the rest of the game."

"Thanks, doctor," said Twilight in disappointment for her friend.

Twilight then addressed the team. "Well the doctor said that Pinkie can't play the rest of the game. It's a mild knee sprain."

"Awwwww! But I was having so much fun! What a bummer," said Pinkie as she finished her muffin.

Sweetie Belle realized that she would have to go in for the injured Pinkie, causing her to bounce up and down anxiously.

"Hey Twilight! Twilight! I can play for Pinkie Pie!"

Twilight smiled at Sweetie Belle's excitement and nodded. "Yes, you have to go in. I hope you're ready!"

Sweetie put her mask on and growled. "Yes sir!"

Rarity had a concerned look on her face and grabbed Sweetie by the shoulders. "Are you sure, Sweetie Belle? You haven't properly stretched. I don't know what I would do if you harmed yourself!"

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes and pushed Rarity away. "I'll be fine, sis! It's not like this is my first game. I can do this."

Rarity looked deeply into her sister's eyes and saw that she was indeed ready. Rarity sighed and let go. "Alright, I believe you dear."

Applejack and Rainbow walked up to Rarity. Applejack nudged Rarity. "If it makes ya feel any better, we'll do our best ta' help out on defense so that way Canterlot cain't get too many shots off."

"Yeah! We'll be smothering them like Fluttershy on a cute bunny!" exclaimed Rainbow as Fluttershy happily imagined petting a bunny.

Twilight stepped over and put her hoof in. "Alright, let's tighten up the defense and hold Canterlot to as little shots as possible! Defense on three."

"One...two...three...DEFENSE!"

Twilight moved aside for Sweetie Belle to lead her new team out back onto the ice for the final period.

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When the Golden Leafs took to the ice, the ponies in the crowd noticed a much small goalie skating to the net. A murmur fell over the crowd as Sweetie Belle happily skated back and forth to chip up the crease. Before lining up for the faceoff, Rainbow skated by Rarity to give her a nudge on the helmet as Rarity was nervously watching her sister prepare. With the crowd perking back up in their cheers, the puck dropped for the final period.

True to their strategy, Ponyville played Canterlot extremely close and forced turnovers when Canterlot had the puck. Ponyville did not aggressively set up offensive plays, deciding rather to play passive and

move the puck around methodically. With two minutes already melted from the clock, Canterlot recognized Ponyville's keep-away scheme and reverted back to their physical game. The Golden Leafs tried to hold onto the puck, but Canterlot's increased hitting eventually won them possession. The Equestriens blazed into the Ponyville zone and were ready to test the young Sweetie Belle. Luna entered in the zone with the puck, firing it off to the corner for Hoity Toity to pick it up. Hoity moved it along the boards back to the blue line before Applejack could hit him. Photo Finish held the puck for a moment before passing over to Moondancer. Blueblood took the opportunity to plop himself in front of Sweetie Belle, completely blocking her sight. Rainbow saw Blueblood's screen and quickly flew over to nudge him away as Moondancer fired off a shot. Blueblood tried to get back to the crease but was held off by Rainbow, allowing Sweetie Belle to see the shot and come up with the big save. The Ponyville fans cheered as the play stopped. Sweetie yelled her thanks to Rainbow who responded with a tap on the pads.

On the faceoff, Luna won it back to Photo Finish who immediately passed it to Hoity who peeled away from the faceoff toward the side of the net. Fluttershy was slow to cover Hoity as he ripped off a shot. Sweetie Belle slid over and leapt into the air to grab the puck, drawing another loud cheer from the Golden Leafs fans in attendance. Hoity slammed his stick on the ice in frustration as the two teams set up for another faceoff. Three minutes remained and Sweetie Belle was making a wonderful stand in net. The Celestia Centre was loud again as the dueling chants were lobbied back and forth about the arena. On the faceoff, Rainbow won it back to Twilight who led the Ponyville break toward Canterlot's zone. Twilight passed to Applejack who carried the puck past the blue line. Instead of pushing the puck into the corner, Applejack tried to deke around Photo Finish to rip off a shot. Photo matched Applejack's stride and blocked the shot attempt. The puck ricocheted off Pony Joe's pad and came out toward the center where Rainbow swiftly dove in to retrieve it. However, Moondancer was able to come over and push Rainbow away from the net. Rainbow circled around, looking for somepony to pass to. Rarity was open for a split second so Rainbow let a pass off. Prince Blueblood stepped in front of Rarity and intercepted the puck, pushing it up to Luna who had another breakaway. The entire crowd jumped to their hooves to watch the latest breakaway attempt. Applejack and Twilight skated as hard as they could to get back but Luna was closing in. Sweetie Belle patiently readied herself as Luna went to deke. Luna reared her head back for a shot, but it was a fake. Luna

quickly brought her stick back down to push the puck over to the side. Sweetie Belle didn't bite on the fake and followed the puck. Running out of space, Luna flicked the shot on net. Sweetie Belle dove toward the post and gloved the puck!

The pro-Leafs crowd roared as Sweetie Belle dropped the puck and passed it to Applejack with a minute and a half left. Most of the Equestrians were too far into the Ponyville zone to get back, giving Applejack and Rainbow Dash a two-on-one break with just Photo Finish on defense. Applejack crossed the blue line simultaneously with Rainbow as Photo stayed between them. Applejack lifted her stick to shoot, causing Photo to desperately dive toward her. With Photo sprawled out on the ice, Applejack quickly pulled her stick down and passed over to the wide open Rainbow. Pony Joe followed the pass and was squared up with Rainbow now as she was almost in the crease. Instead of finding a hole to thread the puck through, Rainbow passed back to Applejack on the other side. Applejack zoomed in like a missile and one-timed the puck into the goal past a diving Pony Joe. Applejack jumped into the boards with Golden Leafs fans smacking the glass as Rainbow tackled her to the ice. Half of the Celestia Centre was whipped into a frenzy as the Golden Leafs piled into the corner in celebration.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 88, Applejack, assisted by number 20, Rainbow Dash, and number 30, Sweetie Belle."

Only forty seconds remained as a giant "GO LEAFS GO" chant filled the air. Canterlot called timeout to pull Pony Joe for an extra skater. The Golden Leafs were anxious to resume play and to ride out the final seconds. Equestrians fans cheered to encourage their team to score a tying goal, bringing the arena to deafening levels. With the teams set, the referee dropped the puck. Rainbow skillfully outmuscled Luna off the puck and won the puck back to Twilight who took the puck deep behind her own net. The Canterlot forwards pressed on hard to get to Twilight but Twilight fired the puck around the boards. Rainbow grabbed the puck and was immediately met with a check by Blueblood. Twenty seconds left. Blueblood took the puck away from Rainbow and passed to Moondancer on the blue line. Rarity came up to pressure Moondancer but she passed it along to Photo. Ten seconds left. Both Pony Joe and Prince Blueblood crashed the crease and parked themselves in front of Sweetie Belle.

Fluttershy and Twilight tried their best to push the screeners out of the way but they were not strong enough. Five seconds left. Photo lifted her head back for the shot and fired away. The puck flew like a bullet in on the crease. Both Pony Joe and Blueblood jumped to avoid blocking their own teammate's shot. As time expired, Sweetie Belle caught a tiny glimpse of the puck and shifted over. The puck drilled her in the chest and bounced off the corner. The final horn sounded and the Golden Leafs were victorious.

Golden Leafs fans yelled and shouted as the Canterlot fans groaned and grumbled their way toward the exits. After the Equestriens skated off the ice in disappointment, the Golden Leafs swarmed their goalie and lifted Sweetie Belle up on their hooves for her heroic performance. Sweetie Belle giggled while Rarity had a small well of proud tears collecting in the corner of her eyes. The Golden Leafs placed Sweetie down before stepping off the ice to an enormous cheer from their fans.

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Pinkie had a party set up in the locker room for her teammates when they arrived from their triumphant victory. After undressing and cleaning up, Twilight and her team partied with dancing and music in the locker room. When Spike finished bundling up all the equipment, he received a scroll. He returned to the party to hand the scroll over to Twilight. The music stopped as Twilight went to read the scroll aloud.

"From the Offices of the EHL:

Congratulations on the completion of your inaugural regular season. Based on the final standings, you will begin the Celestia Cup Playoffs at home in Ponyville as the #4 seed. The first round is a best-of-3 series with games one and three in Ponyville. Your opponent will be the Manehattan Rangers. Good luck."

Upon hearing their opponent will be the Rangers, the Golden Leafs all formed a sly smile on their faces. The smiles gave way to laughter as they would worry about the Rangers later. There was more partying to be had. When the arena crew finally forced the Golden Leafs out of the locker room, Twilight and friends were met by their loyal fans that were still in Canterlot. The Golden Leafs signed autographs and took pictures before

boarding their carriage back to Ponyville along with their fans.

The Golden Leafs achieved the momentum they set out to obtain. Their hopes for a long playoff run were looking brighter now that they pulled out a gritty win and are facing a shaky first-round opponent with a star player on probation. After taking in a glimpse of the Celestia Cup during their stay in Canterlot, Twilight and friends were determined to see it again, but this time getting to raise it over their heads.

Three Stars for Ponyville @ Canterlot

** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

*** Applejack (PGL)*

**** Sweetie Belle (PGL)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

FILLYDELPHIA 3, Appleloosa 1

Cloudsdale 6, MANEHATTAN 0

Final EHL Standings

z-Cloudsdale 7-3

y-Appleloosa 6-4

Canterlot 5-5

Ponyville 5-5

Manehattan 4-6

Fillydelphia 3-7

z = clinched Princess' Trophy

y = clinched first round bye

EHL Transactions

9/19/11 – Ponyville Golden Leafs receive the contract to Sweetie Belle (G) from Manehattan Rangers

9/19/11 – Manehattan Rangers sign free agent Doctor Whooves (G)

9/19/11 – Ponyville Golden Leafs sign free agents Big Macintosh (LW) and Spike (RW) to playoff roster

EHL Playoff Schedule

(3) Canterlot vs. (6) Fillydelphia

(Series tied 0-0)

Game 1: @ Canterlot

Game 2: @ Fillydelphia

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Canterlot

(4) Ponyville vs. (5) Manehattan

(Series tied 0-0)

Game 1: @ Ponyville

Game 2: @ Manehattan

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Ponyville

Chapter 13

Quarterfinals, Game 1

Playoffs fever swept through Ponyville like a voracious hurricane. Golden Leafs decorations and ornaments adorned nearly every house and shop. The streets were lined with blue banners and gold lighting. Ponyville Pond was the place to be during the week as Ponyvillians lined up at the box office daily to purchase their playoffs tickets.

While there was great excitement and buzz outside Ponyville Pond, there was great focus and determination inside the arena as the Golden Leafs practiced for their first game. On one end of the rink, the starters, led by Twilight, ran through some new forechecking drills. Twilight theorized that the Golden Leafs can pressure the Rangers into giving up more turnovers in their own end. More turnovers would then lead to more scoring opportunities for the forwards. On the other side of the rink, the Golden Leafs' latest acquisitions, Big Macintosh and Spike, brushed up on certain sections the team's strategy guide. Twilight gave Mac the penalty killing chapter and Spike the general offense and defense chapters. Sweetie Belle was in net while the magical practice dummies took shots on her.

During the study session, Spike nudged Big Mac to get his attention.

"Psst, hey Big Mac, I have an idea!"

Big Mac looked up from his pages at Spike. "And what's that, Spike?"

"You know, since we're special skaters for the playoffs, how about we give ourselves a cool nickname? I was thinking something along the lines of 'The Sparkplugs' or 'Two Smooth Dudes'."

"I reckon that would be mighty nice. How's about the 'Black Aces'? Try that one on fer size."

Spike paused to mull the suggestion over. "You know, that's not bad! It's edgy, mysterious, just like us!"

"Eeyup."

"Awesome! How about we toss these books and get to playing, huh?"

Just like that, Spike and Mac threw their guides aside and replaced two of the dummies in the play in their end. On the other side, Twilight demonstrated to the girls what she learned through her studies on forechecking. The drill involved more magical moving dummies carrying the puck out from behind Pinkie and the Golden Leafs applying pressure to try to steal away the puck before the dummies get to center ice. Rainbow and Applejack excelled at the drill because of their speed and strength respectively. Rainbow harassed the puck handling dummy while Applejack came in hard on the dummy that received the pass from Rainbow's dummy. Rarity tried the drill but was found to be out of position too often as the dummies passed right by her.

After going through the forechecking drill a good number of times, Twilight called everyone together at center ice.

"Okay everypony! For the rest of practice, we're going to have a little fun by having a shootout. Sweetie Belle, you'll swap in for Pinkie every other shooter since Pinkie's knee is still a little sore. As for the others, the order will go: Applejack, Big Macintosh, Rarity, Fluttershy, Spike, me, then Rainbow Dash. Sound good?"

"NO!" cried a voice from the entrance to the rink. Surprised, everyone turned around the face the direction of the voice. Emerging from the shadows were the Manehattan Rangers. One by one, they stepped onto the ice and slowly skated toward the Golden Leafs. Having the advantage in the numbers game, Twilight confidently skated around her group to face

the Rangers head on. The Rangers kept a good distance away from the Golden Leafs. They quietly parted in the middle, revealing a bitter, reserved Trixie. Trixie looked around the arena carefully to make sure there wasn't an EHL camera watching her every move. She then skated up to Twilight, looking Twilight straight in the eye and clenching her teeth.

"We would like to practice now, please."

Twilight basked in the presence of the disgruntled Trixie and smugly replied. "No. You will have this risk when we say you can!"

The Golden Leafs all flashed arrogant grins as Trixie looked down to the ice with irritation. The Rangers began to turn toward the exit. "Alright then. We'll wait."

Rainbow skated up to Twilight and whispered in her ear. "You know Twilight, maybe we should end practice now. We don't want to show them anything we've been working on."

Twilight's heart wanted to stick it to the Rangers and make them wait for their practice time, but her brain took over and convinced her that Rainbow was right. Twilight sighed and spoke back up to Trixie.

"Fine, you can practice now. You're just lucky we're feeling generous today."

The Rangers quickly turned back around and Trixie looked up with a begrudging frown. "Thanks, losers."

Twilight directed the Golden Leafs toward the locker room. Before stepping off the ice, Twilight turned back toward Trixie and her crew. "And don't forget Trixie. Don't do something you'll regret. You never know when the EHL is watching!"

Twilight laughed as she finally departed. Frustrated that she couldn't do anything, Trixie angrily slammed her stick on the ice.

Game day arrived in the blink of an eye and the Golden Leafs couldn't have

been more excited. Each pony woke up early because their anticipation wouldn't allow them to sleep soundly. Ponyville was excited too as nearly every denizen was wearing a Golden Leafs jersey throughout the day while going about their business. Twilight called her team together to the treehouse a couple hours before it was time to go to the arena. Everyone was jittery and couldn't sit still as anxiety bubbled inside them. Time was becoming a cruel temptress, slowly slouching forward. Unable to take the waiting any longer, the Golden Leafs decided to head for Ponyville Pond.

As the Golden Leafs walked closer toward Ponyville Pond, they were met by playoffs fever. The streets were lined with jam-packed merchandise booths. Various smells of delicious foods swirled about the cold air. Loud rock music was booming and grew louder closer to the arena. An army of rowdy Golden Leafs fans milled about, visiting the assortment of booths while waiting for the doors to open. Twilight and company were overwhelmed by the scene which piqued their excitement even more. They proudly galloped toward the players' entrance before they could be spotted by their horde of fans.

In the now less spacious locker room, the Golden Leafs got dressed at their respective stalls. Big Mac, Spike, and Sweetie Belle each had a makeshift locker, a chair with their gear on it. When fully dressed with plenty of time left before hitting the ice, each player was either fidgeting in their stall or pacing the floor. Twilight wrapped her mind around what she was going to say for the usual pre-game pep talk.

"Okay team. Tonight is the night that begins a whole new season. Everything we've learned in the regular season will all come together now. The team in that other locker room is going to want to win just as badly as we want to. We can't just match their intensity, we have to exceed it. If they hit us, we hit back harder. If they skate fast, we skate faster. If they play smart, we play smarter. I know we have the talent and the teamwork to succeed. Now, we're going to treat each series like a war, and each game a battle. Tonight's our first battle. Tonight is when we trot out onto the battlefield. We can land the first punch. Our fans are going to be fired up, rocking, and ready to go. They're going to be in the trenches with us, for better or for worse. We're going to do whatever we can to win not for ourselves, but for each other! Now, I'm ready to fight but I'm going to need

confirmation from you all. Are you ready to fight, Applejack?"

"Ah'm ready to fight, Twilight!"

"Are you ready to fight, Rainbow Dash?"

"I'M READY, TWILIGHT!"

"Are you ready to fight, Rarity?"

"Bring. It. On!"

"Are you ready to fight, Fluttershy?"

"Let's do this!"

"Are you ready to fight, Pinkie Pie?"

"RAAAAWRRRRR!"

"GOLDEN LEAFS, ARE WE READY TO FIGHT?!?"

"WE'RE READY TO FIGHT!"

All together, the Golden Leafs leapt up from their stalls and huddled together in the center of the room. They all began to quietly mutter "Leafs...Leafs...Leafs" while clanging their skates together. Their muttering turned into chanting, becoming louder and faster. "Leafs...Leafs...Leafs! Leafs! LEAFS! LEAFS! LEAFS! YEEEEEEAAAHHHHH!"

Twilight broke from the huddle to trot to the doors. With a forceful push, Twilight blasted the doors open to the hallway with a yell. "LET'S GOOOOOOOO!"

Her teammates responded with raucous howling while fiercely marching out of the locker room. The Golden Leafs' yells and growls continued during their trek toward the rink as the crowd's cheering was becoming more audible. Twilight's team reached the light at the end of the hallway and took a step over the threshold. Awaiting them was an endless sea of royal blue wrapped around the bleachers. Every pony in the stands was

covered from head to hoof in blue and they pumped blue pom-poms. It was an intimidating "Blue Out" orchestrated by the fans. With each second of the pre-game countdown clock ticking away, the noise level raised another decibel. When the clock reached zero, the lights went out and an eruption of cheers rang out to the rafters.

A single spotlight shone over the Rangers' doorway. Suddenly, the voice of Mr. Cake (taking over announcing duties for Spike) came over the speakers.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, welcome to game one of the quarterfinals of the CELESTIA CUP PLAYOFFS! First, a warm welcome for the Manehattan Rangers!"

"BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"At left wing, number 10, Lyra. At center, number 15, Octavia. On right wing, number 66, Vinyl Scratch. On defense, number 20, Bon Bon. Also on defense, the captain, number 4, Trixie."

"BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"And starting in net, number 32, Doctor Whooves."

The spotlight flicked off as the Rangers skated around their end of the ice as a magical fog began to roll in over the Ponyville side. A video projected onto the fog, depicting the many highlights of the Golden Leafs' regular season. The crowd erupted with cheers when they saw Rainbow's time-expiring goal against Fillydelphia, Applejack's fight with Braeburn in Appleloosa, and Fluttershy's monster check on Gilda from the home opener. The highlight reel ended with Rainbow mixing it up with Caramelo and Applejack's spearing of Rose to ignite the Fillydelphia brawl, resulting in the roof almost blowing off from the crowd's yelling. The fog dissipated and spotlights began to roam around the ice. The opening riff to "Thunderstruck" by NeighC/DC echoed out as Mr. Cake resumed his announcing.

"And now, it's time to introduce your PONYVIIIILLE GOOOOLDEN LEAFS!! Starting at left wing, number 9, RARITYYYY! At center, number 20, RAAAAAINBOW DAAASH! At right wing, number 88, APPEEEEEJAAACK! On defense, number 0, FLUTTERRRRRSHYYYYY! And number 42, THE CAPTAIN, TWILIIIIIGHT SPAAARRRKLEEEEE! Starting in net, the goalie, number 33, PINKIEEEEE PIIIIIEEEE!!

The Golden Leafs' starters hit the ice running and skated swiftly around the end of the ice while the fans sustained their explosive cheering. Big Mac, Spike, and Sweetie Belle found their way to the bench to sit while the Rangers' playoff roster newcomers, Blues and Orange Jr., made it to their bench. The lights came back up and the referees came out onto the ice. After another minute of skating, it was time for the teams to line up for the opening faceoff. The referee held the puck at the center dot while Rainbow and Octavia leaned forward to get ready. After a quick check with Dr. Whooves and Pinkie Pie, the referee slammed the puck down and game one of the Celestia Cup Playoff Quarterfinals was underway in Ponyville.

With the "GO LEAFS GO" chant reverberating overhead, Rainbow won the faceoff and Ponyville started their offense. The offense was slow to move the puck around and was pressured by the Rangers' defense the entire way. The Golden Leafs tried to get an open lane to the net but were smothered by the Manehattan pressure. After a few broken passes, Manehattan controlled the puck and took it down the ice. Back in their defensive end, the Golden Leafs played a little bit of a zone defense. This opened up the ice for the Rangers to move and pass the puck. Bon Bon held the puck at the point with Rainbow coming up quick on her. Losing time to make a play, Bon Bon frantically passed over to Octavia along the boards. Rarity and Twilight converged on Octavia to get the puck. Octavia held the defense off as she looked for an outlet to pass to. With the puck held up along the boards, Lyra skated up toward the blue line and away from Fluttershy, cruising down the center and slapping her stick. Octavia whipped the pass between her legs right onto Lyra's stick near the front of the crease. Before Fluttershy could get in on the play, Lyra instantly flicked the puck in the top corner, right above Pinkie's blocker. The puck hit the net and the goal light flashed, hushing the Ponyville crowd.

"Manehattan goal scored by number 10, Lyra. Assisted by number 15, Octavia, and number 20, Bon Bon."

The Rangers finished up their celebration and headed for the center circle where the Golden Leafs were already waiting. Ponyville started out a bit sluggish and awestruck despite the rousing pre-game speech. Play was back on with seven minutes left in the first period. Manehattan won the draw and the Rangers were back in the Ponyville end. Twilight told the team to kick up the pressure on defense and not allow so many passes. The adjustment worked as the Golden Leafs held the Rangers to only one shot and soon had the puck back on offense. In the Rangers' end, Rainbow tried to work her way to the crease but was shut off by Trixie. Rainbow and the rest of the Golden Leafs moved the puck better but were only able to fire off two shots, both of which were stopped by Dr. Whooves.

With three minutes now remaining in the first period, Manehattan forced a Ponyville turnover and took the puck back. Rainbow and Applejack stayed in the zone to forecheck and Rainbow was able to catch Octavia off guard. Octavia forced a pass out toward center ice that was stolen by Applejack. Rainbow skated hard to get back onside and came in on the rush. Applejack faked the pass to Rainbow and ripped a shot on Dr. Whooves. The puck zinged right by his glove but it just grazed the post, ricocheting the puck off to the corner. A large "awww" rumbled out from the crowd as Manehattan had the puck again.

Vinyl Scratch dumped the puck to the corner and rushed after it herself. Fluttershy came over to claim the puck but Scratch closed in hard, pushing Fluttershy to the glass. Applejack was coming over to help but Scratch squeezed out from the corner with the puck. She skated through Fluttershy and Applejack while Trixie shifted to the center of the blue line. Seeing Trixie open, Scratch pushed the puck to her and skated through Pinkie's crease. Trixie fired a shot on net before Rainbow could dive to block it. Pinkie was mixed up from the screen and didn't see the puck until it was sailing right next to her shoulder and into the net. Another large groan rung out from the Ponyvillians as Trixie slid on one knee in celebration, pretending her stick was a rifle and "shooting" down the Golden Leafs' defense. Twilight and friends took exception to Trixie's celebration and skated over to the Rangers' huddle. The referees came over to separate the two teams and to set them up for the faceoff.

"Manhattan goal, scored by number 4, Trixie. Assisted by number 66, Vinyl Scratch."

The rest of period included a flurry of desperate offense from the Golden Leafs but they could not crack the Rangers' goalie. When the period ending horn struck, the Golden Leafs were given a small, quiet round of applause to help encourage them before heading off to the locker room.

In the locker room, the Golden Leafs were just as jumpy and jittery as they were before the game. To get her team to calm down and loosen up, Twilight had Pinkie bring in the record player and start dancing. At first the team was confused but they loosened up and danced as well. Rainbow and Applejack resisted but eventually they gave in and soon the whole locker room was calmed down. Twilight stood in front of her team to give them instructions for the next period.

"Alright, now that we shook the butterflies out of our stomachs, let's get back to basics. That was a slow period. We got too caught up in the atmosphere and the hype. So this period, we're going to go back to what's worked for us against the Rangers in the past: hitting. Let's pound some Rangers to the ice and get the crowd back into the game!"

The Golden Leafs accepted Twilight's adjustment idea and marched toward the ice for the second period.

Facing a 2-0 deficit heading into the second period, the Golden Leafs refocused and were set to resume play. When the period resumed, their hitting mission began without a hitch. The Golden Leafs scrapped for every loose puck and were smashing Rangers into the boards nearly every second. Even Fluttershy and Rarity contributed with big checks on the Rangers' forwards. With each hit, the crowd perked back up a little bit. Even though they were more physical, the Golden Leafs still weren't able to generate any offense. Manhattan had the puck in the Ponyville end and were looking to add to their lead. Vinyl Scratch held the puck on the right wing boards. Applejack saw Scratch was vulnerable and came in for the

check. Just as Scratch gave up the puck, Applejack led with her foreleg knee and drilled the Rangers' winger into the glass. The crowd let out a cheer but it quickly turned into booing as the referee lifted his hoof for the penalty.

"Ponyville number 88, two minutes for roughing."

Applejack sadly drifted over to the penalty box and took her seat. Needing a huge penalty kill, Twilight had Big Macintosh swap in for Rarity for a bigger body and more aggressiveness. The puck dropped to the left of Pinkie and the Rangers' power play began. Twilight, Fluttershy, and Big Mac stayed in a box formation while Rainbow attempted to pressure the puck. The Rangers stayed along the perimeter, trying to pass their way to an open shot. The Golden Leafs shifted with each pass as Rainbow buzzed around. Finally, Rainbow's pressure forced a Rangers giveaway and she dumped it down to the other end. When the Rangers came back into the Ponyville zone, Big Mac caught Lyra in his crosshairs and laid out a big hit along the boards. He then fought off Octavia and Bon Bon to carry the puck deep into the Manhattan end. With only forty seconds left in the Rangers power play, Big Mac was followed into the corner. He bolted himself down, keeping the puck between his skates and the boards so the Rangers couldn't get to it. The crowd's cheers grew louder as Big Mac was able to hold the puck for the entire forty seconds, killing the penalty with his immovable solidity.

Applejack was back on the ice to cheers as the momentum was very gradually creeping back to Ponyville's side. Big Macintosh was given a nice round of applause for his effort on the penalty kill as Rarity stepped back out onto the ice for offense. Rainbow had the puck behind the net and saw Rarity coming into the zone from the bench. Rainbow tried to peel off toward the left wing boards to pass to Rarity but was dragged down by Bon Bon's stick. Immediately the referee raised his hoof and blew the whistle when Dr. Whooves held onto a save. The arena was getting louder as Bon Bon made her way to the penalty box. Twilight grouped up her power play unit to go over their plan.

Rainbow won the faceoff back to Fluttershy as both the Rangers and Golden Leafs assumed their positions in the zone. Fluttershy passed over to Twilight who gave it to Rarity on the left boards. Rarity passed back to Twilight as Rainbow zigged and zagged in and out of the crease and slot to

get open. Rainbow finally got open off near the right faceoff circle which Twilight zinged a pass over. The Rangers closed in quickly so Rainbow passed right back to Twilight as Rarity cut in front of her. Twilight one-timed the puck over to Rarity who was now squared up straight with the net between her and Fluttershy. Rarity picked a spot and rifled the puck on net. Dr. Whooves lifted his glove hoof up but it was no use. The goal horn rung out and the Golden Leafs were finally on the board. Rarity was engulfed by her teammates and the arena was rocking once more.

"Ponyville POWER PLAY GOOOOAL! Scored by number 9, RAAAARITY! Assisted by number 42, TWILIGHT SPARKLE! And number 20, RAINBOW DASH!"

The blue pom-poms were pumping again as the teams came together for the faceoff. Rainbow won the draw with only a minute left in the period. Twilight passed to Rarity who dumped it in for Applejack. Applejack got to the corner and quickly pushed the puck along to Fluttershy who came up on the boards to take the pass. Fluttershy passed to Twilight who quickly passed it over to Rarity. Rainbow cut in front of the crease through the Rangers' defense to screen the goalie. Rarity fired off the shot but it came onto Rainbow's stick. Bon Bon and Trixie sandwiched Rainbow before she could put it on net. With the puck lying at Rainbow's skates, Applejack hustled to come up behind and shoot the puck. Ponyville Pond stood up to watch as the puck clanged off the post again and came to the Rangers. They iced the puck down to Pinkie as the second period came to a close.

The Manehattan lead was cut down to one goal and the Golden Leafs faithful were on their hooves and revved up. Momentum was swinging back Ponyville's way as they went off to the locker room with their confidence recharged.

Ponyville's mood was much more improved as they felt they were on the verge of taking the game back over. Twilight was back in front of her squad with new instructions.

"Alright everypony."

Spike cleared his throat loudly to interrupt Twilight.

"...and Spike. We're almost back in this game! Now, let's keep up the hitting and let's take our forechecking up a notch. Rainbow, Applejack, can you apply some pressure?"

Applejack stood up, "Sure can do, Twi!"

"Aww yeah, you bet!" exclaimed Rainbow as she saluted then gave Applejack a hoof bump.

"Good, now, let's also fire off as many shots as we can. Doctor Whooves isn't entirely battle tested so let's give him everything we've got! More shots mean more rebounds and more opportunities. Let's tie this game up then take the lead! Hooves in, pressure on three."

"One...two...three...PRESSURE!"

Both teams hit the ice and the atmosphere was electric as the third period was about to start. The Golden Leafs and Rangers were ready to start up their battle again, setting up for the faceoff with serious demeanors all around. The referee skated in and dropped the puck for the final period.

Rainbow won the faceoff and the Golden Leafs brought the puck in. They fended off the Rangers and tried shooting whenever they had a chance. Most of the shots missed or hit off a defender, but Doctor Whooves made a couple good saves as well. The faceoff was to the left of the Rangers' goalie which Rainbow won again. Fluttershy had the puck and was being targeted by a charging Octavia. Startled by Octavia's rush, Fluttershy tensed up and gave up the puck. Before Octavia could burst off to a breakaway, Fluttershy desperately stuck her stick out to drag Octavia down. The referee raised his hoof as Twilight came over to touch the puck to stop play. Fluttershy skated off to the penalty box embarrassed by her giveaway and penalty. Big Macintosh came back on the ice for Rarity to help kill off another penalty.

"Ponyville, number 0, two minutes for hooking."

With the faceoff deep in the Ponyville end, Rainbow continued her faceoff dominance and won the puck to Twilight who fired the puck down to the Rangers' end. Rainbow and Applejack skated up to apply some pressure while Big Mac and Twilight stayed home. Trixie retrieved the puck and carried it up the middle. Applejack came up to apply pressure while Rainbow tried spying and determining which passing lane Trixie would go to. Vinyl Scratch came back up in front of the Ponyville bench to give Trixie an outlet. Rainbow saw Scratch out of the corner of her eye and blazed over. Trixie saw Scratch open and fired it toward her just before Applejack delivered a hard, open ice check. With the puck coming in faster than expected, Rainbow leapt at Scratch for a giant hit before the puck got to them. The referee's hoof flew up into the air and the crowd erupted with boos. Twilight touched the puck again to stop play. Rainbow got into the referee's face to protest the call but was escorted over to the penalty box.

"Ponyville, number 20, two minutes for interference."

The crowd booed the referee's announcement as Rainbow whacked her stick on the glass in front of her, scaring Fluttershy. The Golden Leafs were now facing a daunting 5-on-3 penalty kill. Twilight, Big Mac, and Applejack were the only ones left on the ice to take on the tall task. The crowd went back to cheering their penalty kill unit on as play resumed. Big Mac took the faceoff due to his previous experience back in the day. Octavia won the draw and the Rangers set up their play. The Golden Leafs set up in a triangle in front of Pinkie, with Twilight and Big Mac on the back two points and Applejack up front. 1:34 remained in Fluttershy's original penalty as the Rangers passed all around the perimeter to set up a shot. The Golden Leafs stayed tight to their triangle, making sure not to screen Pinkie. Trixie had the puck at the point and reared back for a shot. Applejack dropped to a knee in Trixie's path, forcing Trixie to pull back and pass off. The puck went over to Scratch at the right boards where she was met by Big Mac much to her surprise. Big Mac forced Scratch against the boards and furiously poked and prodded at the puck. Octavia and Bon Bon came in to help as well as Applejack. Five skaters were in a large scrum at the boards fighting for the puck while Fluttershy's penalty was down to thirty seconds. Applejack was able to finally poke the puck free but it wrapped around the boards behind Pinkie. Twilight and Lyra were in a race to get to the puck which Twilight won. Trixie skated up from the point to cut down the angle on Twilight, but Twilight was able to flip the puck all the way down to Manehattan's end.

The final ten seconds of Fluttershy's penalty melted away and she jumped back onto the ice to a tremendous cheer from the crowd. Rainbow's penalty only had thirty seconds left on it as the Rangers regrouped for a power play push. The Golden Leafs' formation went back to the usual box with Big Mac joining Applejack in the front line and Fluttershy next to Twilight. Bon Bon shot the puck into the corner for Scratch. Fluttershy came over to challenge her but Octavia swooped by to take the puck. Ten seconds left in Rainbow's penalty as the arena was ready to erupt. Octavia passed to Trixie at the point who rapidly fired a shot. Pinkie saw the shot all the way and kicked it away for a big save. Twilight rushed to the corner while Dr. Whooves slammed his stick on the ice to inform his team of the expiring penalty. With Rainbow's penalty reaching 0:00, the arena hit deafening levels. Twilight fired the puck toward the penalty box. The Rangers were slow to react and Rainbow stepped onto the ice to pick up the puck for a breakaway. Everyone jumped to their hooves to watch as Rainbow closed in on the Manehattan goalie. Rainbow deked once, twice, then backhanded it to Whooves' glove side. The puck just missed and flew over the crossbar, inciting a loud groan from the crowd. Trixie raced back and picked up the puck, but Rainbow stayed with her rebound. With Rainbow pushing upon her, Trixie anxiously flung the puck upward. The puck sailed over the glass just before the blue line. The crowd cheered again as the referee came over to take Trixie off to the penalty box.

"What? What are you doing? I didn't do anything!!!"

"Manehattan, number 4, two minutes for delay of game."

Trixie continued her protest even after the penalty box door slammed on her. Golden Leafs fans were screaming their lungs out as the Golden Leafs were about to embark on their second power play with only three minutes left in regulation. Rarity came back on for Big Mac as Twilight gathered her team to talk about the advantage. The referee called the teams over for the faceoff to the left of Dr. Whooves. This time Octavia won the faceoff to Bon Bon who fired it down to Pinkie.

Pinkie skated up to pass the puck back up to Applejack who carried it into the zone. Applejack continued down the right boards with it and passed it back to Fluttershy at the blue line. Fluttershy passed back to Applejack who then pushed it behind the net to Rainbow. Rainbow stalled as Bon Bon

came in to challenge her. Rainbow skated forward to pass it to Twilight at the point. Twilight looked for a shooting lane but it was clogged with Rangers. Twilight shuffled the puck over to Fluttershy but she didn't have an open lane either. Rarity was engaged in a position battle with Lyra at the left faceoff circle and called for the puck. Fluttershy flung the puck to Rarity. Lyra came around to poke at the puck but Rarity used her backside to keep Lyra away. Twilight moved toward the center and wanted the puck. Rarity skipped the puck over to Twilight. Thirty seconds remained in the power play as Twilight passed over to Fluttershy as she couldn't shoot again. Rarity broke free again and Fluttershy spotted her for the pass. Applejack crashed to the crease as Rarity spun around and ripped off a shot. Rarity's shot was way off target but Applejack stretched her neck out to try to tip the shot back in on net. The puck grazed Applejack's stick blade and snuck in between the post and Whooves' pad. The puck rattled around the net and in one synchronized motion, the sea of blue all jumped into the air with a piercing yell. Applejack was mobbed by her teammates and Trixie angrily stormed out of the penalty box, yelling at her team.

"PONYVILLE POOOOWER PLAY GOOOOAL! Scored by number 88, APPLLEEJAAACK! Assisted by number 9, RARITY! And number 0, FLUTTERSHYYYY!"

Ponyville Pond was rocking again now that the game was deadlocked at 2-2. Only a minute remained in regulation as both teams wanted to put the game away for good. Rainbow won the draw and led the rush into the Manehattan zone with the crowd cheering them on. The Golden Leafs couldn't get a shot off and back came the Rangers. Manehattan tried to run a play but it was broken up by Twilight. The puck pinballed back and forth in the neutral zone as time ticked all the way down to 0:00.

Golden Leafs fans were going bonkers as their team valiantly fought back to force overtime. Twilight's crew proudly trotted off the ice to prepare for the overtime session.

Nervous energy mixed with adrenaline coursed through the Golden Leafs' veins as they refreshed for overtime. Twilight reminded everyone that overtime was a full period and sudden death. Luckily, they were in a good

share of close games throughout the regular season so inexperience wasn't a disadvantage. No pep talk was needed as the girls, Big Mac, and Spike all understood what was needed to be done. The Golden Leafs marched out of the locker room with their heads held high and their anxiousness growing. They were greeted with a hero's welcome from the crowd when they emerged back out on the ice. Manehattan made their way back to the ice as well, angrily skating around their side with booing and heckling pouring down upon them. The intermission clock struck zero and the horn sounded for the start of overtime. Every pony remained standing as the potential final period was about to start.

The puck dropped and Octavia and Rainbow fought for the puck at the center dot. The puck finally squirted loose to Manehattan and they came down to start their offense. The Golden Leafs played the Rangers tight and begun checking hard right away. Each hit was met with a raucous cheer of approval by the crowd as Manehattan struggled to fire a shot away. Twilight had the puck and was ready to carry it down the ice. Twilight looked up to pass but saw that the Rangers were forechecking hard in the neutral zone. Twilight was distracted for a bit, prompting Octavia to rush in hard on her. Twilight scrambled to pass, whiffing on the puck. Octavia scooped up the puck and quickly entered the Ponyville zone. Twilight hustled back to chase Octavia down and stuck her stick out to get the puck. Octavia's skate caught Twilight's blade and she tumbled down to the ice. A large gasp rang out to the rafters as the referee signaled another penalty. Twilight got up from the ice and was about to cry because of the predicament she was putting her team in.

"Ponyville, number 42, two minutes for tripping."

Applejack and Rainbow skated by the penalty box to encourage their friend.

"Don't worry, Twi. We're gonna kill this penalty off lickety split!"

"It'll be okay. We'll pick you up and get you back out here!"

Twilight smiled slightly as the door closed on her. "Thanks, girls."

Rarity went over to the bench for Big Macintosh while Rainbow and Applejack huddled the team together. The crowd perked back up to rally on the penalty kill unit. Rainbow settled down at the faceoff dot to Pinkie's left and Octavia came in to meet her. The referee stalled before dropping the puck which was quickly taken by Octavia. Trixie took control as the Rangers set up their power play formation. Rainbow and Applejack nodded to each other and immediately rushed toward Trixie. Trixie let out a gasp when she saw the two Leafs rumbling toward her. She fumbled the puck and finally passed it away. The puck flew right past Lyra's stick and onto Big Mac's. Instead of flinging the puck down the rink, Big Mac saw Rainbow breaking for the blue line and he landed a beautiful pass to her. Trixie and Bon Bon were already retreating back on defense as Rainbow grabbed the puck just past the blue line.

Rainbow was ready to take both Rangers head on as she glided toward the center dot. Trixie was now flank to flank on Rainbow's left, leaning in to try to take the puck back. Rainbow quickly held up and moved the puck between Trixie's legs toward the center. The move made Trixie lose her stick but she stayed with Rainbow. Slowly rising to their hooves were the anxious fans as the play unfolded before them. Rainbow was now directly in front of Whooves with space quickly running out. Trixie motored in from Rainbow's left to try and knock her off balance. Rainbow saw Trixie and brilliantly pushed the puck over to the right, hesitating to let Trixie fly right by her. Rainbow was now all alone as she closed in on net. Dr. Whooves began to dive for a poke check while Rainbow shifted back left with the puck on her backhand. Rainbow ripped the shot while the arena held its breath. The puck floated right over Dr. Whooves' sprawled out body and into the back of the net!

Ponyville Pond exploded with a giant blast of cheers and ecstasy. Rainbow threw herself into the glass and was immediately smothered by all the Golden Leafs in the corner. The goal horn bellowed out, fireworks popped overhead, and blue pom-poms littered the ice.

"PONYVILLE GAME WINNING SHORTHOOVED GOAL SCORED BY NUMBER 20, RAAAAAAAINBOOOOOW DAAAAASH!"

Devastated and upset, the Rangers quickly shuffled off the ice and into their locker room. The Golden Leafs pony pile broke apart and happily

drifted across the ice to deafening cheers from their loyal fans. Helmets and sticks tossed and scattered all over the rink were picked up by the Golden Leafs on their way to the locker room. Rainbow and her teammates waved to the fans before stepping off and trotting away from the ongoing celebration.

The partying and merriment spilled over into the locker room as the Golden Leafs undressed with big smiles all around. Pinkie brought out the usual party equipment for the team after they finished cleaning up. The Golden Leafs laughed and partied late into the evening with Rainbow as the pony of the hour. When it was finally time to go home, Twilight addressed her team once more.

"What an amazing game everypony! We'll enjoy this win tonight. Seize this moment and remember it because we want to feel this again a couple more times. Enjoy the win tonight and let's get back to business in a few days when we practice before heading off to Manehattan for game two. We fought hard and we never gave up! We believed in each other and we drew strength from that belief. Everyone did their part tonight and it was amazing. Good work, enjoy tonight, and we'll get back to business soon to FINISH OFF THE RANGERS!"

"Yeah!" responded the others.

Twilight and friends' first ever playoff game could not have ended any better. They endured a sluggish start and overcame an early deficit to send the crowd home happy. Even though the first battle was won, the war was yet to be over. The Golden Leafs will have to refocus and prepare once again to hopefully deliver the killshot to Manehattan's season. Home ice was defended as winning on the road will prove to be difficult. It is up to Twilight and friends to press onward, using their friendship and teamwork to ascend to the next round.

Three stars from Manehattan @ Ponyville

** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

*** Rarity (PGL)*

**** The Great and Powerful Trixie (MHN)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

CANTERLOT 4, Fillydelphia 1 (Canterlot leads 1-0)

EHL Playoffs

(3) Canterlot vs. (6) Fillydelphia

(CTL leads 1-0)

Game 1: CANTERLOT 4, Fillydelphia 1

Game 2: @ Fillydelphia

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Canterlot

(4) Ponyville vs. (5) Manehattan

(PGL leads 1-0)

Game 1: PONYVILLE 3, Manehattan 2 (OT)

Game 2: @ Manehattan

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Ponyville

Chapter 14

Quarterfinals, Game 2

"Come onnnn! Where is it? I scheduled us to leave at four! It's already going on five!" shouted an exasperated Twilight Sparkle. In front of their mountain of hockey bags, the Ponyville Golden Leafs stood waiting for their carriage to Manehattan. Twilight nervously paced about while each of her friends followed her with their eyes.

"Don't pace yourself too hard, dear. You don't want to get tired before the game, do you? Come stand here and relax," said Rarity as she shooed away Applejack to make room.

Applejack shot Rarity a quick, stern look before moving over. "Rarity's right, Twi. We need to conserve all the energy we can if we wanna be sharp for tonight. Energy savin' is mighty important, ain't it big brother?"

"Eeyup. That's the truth alright."

Twilight stopped her pacing but instead directed her nervousness into rapidly tapping her hoof. "But if we're late for the game, they might make us forfeit! I don't want to give Trixie and the Rangers the satisfaction of a free win!"

"You got that right. If Manehattan wants to win, they're going to have to go through us!" exclaimed Rainbow as she flew up into the air.

Pinkie hopped over to Twilight and gave her a pat on the back. "How about we sing a song while we wait? I love waiting songs! I'll start. One hundred

bottles of soda on the wall! One hundred bottles of soda! Take one down, pass it around..."

As the others rolled their eyes at Pinkie, Fluttershy noticed a large carriage rolling toward them. "Look everyone. It's here."

The stretch carriage slowly inched its way up to the Golden Leafs. When the four driver stallions were in sight, Twilight began to ramble off her frustrations. "I'm sorry but I requested for this carriage to be here at four. What took so long?!"

Maxie, the leader of the drivers, answered the ranting Twilight. "We're awfully sorry, ma'am. There was a snow bank blocking the major road into town here. We'll do our best to get you all to Manehattan as fast as we can."

The co-leader, Crossfade, unhooked himself from his harness to pack away the Golden Leafs' equipment. When the Golden Leafs were all settled into the carriage, Maxie and Crossfade took their driving hats off to reveal unicorn horns. Their horns began to glow and were emitting a message.

"Calling Trixie and Scratch. Come in Trixie and Scratch. The leafs are in the mulcher. I repeat, the leafs are in the mulcher."

With the message sent, Maxie and Crossfade put their hats back on and signaled for their team to start pulling.

The Golden Leafs discussed strategy and reviewed their game one performance at length, with no one paying attention to the amount of time it was taking to arrive in Manehattan. Applejack happened to glance out the window to see a large clock tower and saw it was now 7:00.

"Uh, Twilight. What time is our game supposed to be?"

"It starts at seven thirty, so we should be in the locker room at seven. Why?"

"Uh, because it's already seven."

Twilight jolted out of her seat. "IT'S ALREADY SEVEN?!?" She then furiously tapped on the glass directly behind the drivers. One of the back drivers opened it, not expecting the anger that was about to emerge.

"EXCUSE ME! We needed to be at Maredison Square Garden AT SEVEN! Are we even in Manehattan?"

Maxie turned his neck around to answer. "Where did you say you needed to be?"

"MAREDISON SQUARE GARDEN!"

Maxie looked over to Crossfade who gave a small nod and grin. "Oh, we thought you meant Maredison CIRCLE Garden. Our apologies."

Even more infuriated, Twilight used her magic to bring the whole carriage to a screeching halt. She told everyone to jump out and to grab their bags. Once the whole team was out, Twilight released the drivers from her magical hold.

"We'll walk there ourselves! Don't expect to get paid for this either!"

Twilight put Spike and their bags on her back and led the charge into Manehattan as the Golden Leafs quickly followed behind. With the Golden Leafs galloping off into the distance, Maxie and Crossfade sparked their horns back up to alert their sisters.

"Trixie and Scratch, Trixie and Scratch. The Leafs are on their way to the arena. We tried to hold them as long as we could but the purple one used her magic to stop us. Abort mission, abort mission. Raking time is now."

With a passing clock reading 7:25, the Golden Leafs had to pick up their gallop in order to make it to the arena on time. Manehattanites on the street jumped and dove out of the Golden Leafs' way as they were quickly closing in on their destination. Taking one last turn, Maredison Square Garden loomed ahead, giving Twilight and friends an adrenaline-filled kick. Arena workers scrambled to open up the doors to let the Golden Leafs in. Twilight

shouted to the team to go to the locker room while she finds the EHL officials. Still galloping down the hallway, Twilight saw another clock reading 7:29. The bright lights of the rink surface glowed ahead and she could hear the sounds of Rangers' fans growing louder. The Rangers were already done with their introductions and were now standing near center ice hoping for a forfeit. Suddenly, Twilight leaped out onto the ice and slid all the way to the head referee who was standing near the penalty boxes. Rangers fans gasped and began booing when they saw Twilight dive out. Now at the referee's hooves, Twilight quickly stood up and faced him.

"We're here! Ponyville's here! We don't need to forfeit!"

By this time, Trixie's face was bright red and she steamed on over to Twilight and the ref.

"NO! They were late! That should make us the winners!"

The referee looked at Twilight and then at Trixie. Without saying a word, he skated out to center ice and faced the crowd for an announcement.

"This game will be played as scheduled. Ponyville will be given five minutes to prepare."

An immense outpour of boos and jeers flowed down toward the ice as Twilight scampered off toward the locker room with a giant look of relief on her face. Trixie stomped her hooves and shouted at Vinyl Scratch for their unsuccessful plan.

Twilight burst into the locker room panting and heaving, exhaustingly falling down to the floor with a thud. The others were all dressed and ready to go so they quickly attended to their captain. Rainbow brought over a bottle of water while Rarity helped unpack Twilight's bag. Twilight caught her breath and tried to calmly put her equipment on.

"We don't have much time...the referee only gave us...five minutes. What about...the pre-game talk?"

"Already taken care of!" said Rainbow proudly.

Rarity pointed her hoof at Rainbow. "Yes, and it was much louder than the usual ones. I do believe my ears are still ringing after Rainbow's *rousing* speech."

When Twilight put on her last skate, the warning horn roared throughout the arena. The Golden Leafs trotted out and hit the rink to a chorus of boos from the impatient Rangers fan base. The Golden Leafs skated around their end for a bit, looking a bit worn down and slow. Spike, Big Mac, and Sweetie Belle took their places at the bench while both teams set up for the opening faceoff. After the usual goalie check, the referee dropped the puck on game two.

The Rangers came out fast and physical right off the opening draw while the Golden Leafs struggled to find their legs early. Manehattan was able to keep the puck inside the Ponyville zone for a good minute, putting four shots on Pinkie. One tactic used by the Rangers was quite unusual and frustrating for Twilight's crew. Replaced at the point by Lyra, Trixie parked herself in the crease and screened Pinkie face to face. Pinkie had to shift over and stretch around to see the play while Trixie stared her dead in the eyes and ran her mouth with trash talk. Trixie then flailed her stick all over trying to distract Pinkie while her team tried to fire off shots. Luckily for the Leafs, the Rangers' shots were wide.

Finally gaining control of the puck, Ponyville tried to generate offense but their movements were too slow. Manehattan stole the puck and came back down the ice. Trixie reclaimed her spot in front of Pinkie and was back to her annoying tactic. Seeing Pinkie distressed, Rainbow flew over to bulldoze Trixie to the ice. Rainbow let out a chuckle as she passed but the referee had flung his hoof into the air. The whistle tweeted as soon as Ponyville touched the puck, drawing a cheer from the crowd.

"Ponyville, number 20, two minutes for interference."

Rainbow begrudgingly entered the box with Rangers' fans pounding the glass around her for attention. With the Leafs on the early penalty kill, Big Mac substituted in for Rarity. The faceoff was to the right of Pinkie and Big Mac matched up with Octavia. Octavia won the draw and kicked it back to

Bon Bon. The Rangers set up their power play formation while the Leafs did the same. Undeterred from the crushing hit, Trixie was back in front of Pinkie. Twilight skated up to Trixie and tried pushing her out of the way. Bon Bon had the puck at the left point while Twilight and Trixie battled in the crease. Bon Bon saw Lyra open in the corner and passed it off. When Lyra received the puck, Bon Bon broke for the front of the net for a give-and-go. Big Mac went after Lyra, prompting her to pass back to the streaking Bon Bon. On the other side of Pinkie, Octavia parked herself on the backdoor, out of Fluttershy's sight. When Bon Bon received the puck, Twilight left Trixie and Fluttershy moved over to stop her. Seeing Octavia wide open, Bon Bon passed to her. Pinkie couldn't see the pass and was late shifting over while losing her stick. Octavia settled the bouncy pass as Pinkie quickly skated out of the net to cut her path off. With skillful puck handling, Octavia shimmied around Pinkie's kicked out pad and slipped the puck in, giving Manehattan an early 1-0 lead. The crowd cheered with the goal light spinning and the goal horn blasting.

"Manhattan POWER PLAY GOOOOAL, scored by number 14, OCTAAAVIAAAA! Assisted by number 10, LYRAAAA! And number 20, BON BONNN!"

Rainbow slammed her stick on the door before exiting the penalty box. Trixie skated by to let out a laugh to get on Rainbow's nerves some more. Play resumed with Rarity back on the ice for Big Macintosh. Rainbow focused on winning the faceoff and got it, knocking it to Fluttershy. Fluttershy passed up to Applejack who dumped it into the corner for Rainbow to chase down. Trixie got to the puck and immediately whipped it around the boards before Rainbow could hit her again. Bon Bon got caught in the opposite corner by Rarity who was working hard to get the puck. With a lucky poke, Rarity won the puck and passed back to Twilight at the blue line. Before Lyra could close in on her, Twilight whipped the puck over to Fluttershy. Applejack crashed the top of the crease and was pushing and shoving away Bon Bon right on top of Dr. Whooves. Since Octavia was coming in quickly with pressure, Fluttershy frantically fired toward the net. Applejack got an extra shove off Bon Bon before moving over to put her stick on the flying puck. The puck nicked the stick blade and bounced in right through Dr. Whooves' five-hole. The goal light illuminated and a groan rang out from the crowd. Applejack happily pointed her skate at Fluttershy before coming in for a celebratory hug.

"Ponyville goal, scored by number 88, Applejack. Assisted by number 0, Fluttershy, and number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

The Golden Leafs finished their celebration and set back up for the faceoff. Three minutes were left in the period as the tempered crowd quietly watched along. The next two minutes featured unproductive back-and-forth play since both teams had difficulty generating offense. With the final minute of the period counting down, the Rangers dumped the puck into the Ponyville end. Vinyl Scratch retrieved the puck with Twilight and Rarity coming in to double team her. Scratch kept her legs moving and peeled back toward the blue line. Once again, Octavia skated up behind Fluttershy and was on the doorstep. Scratch zinged a backhanded pass right through Rainbow's legs to Octavia who one-timed the puck through Pinkie's five-hole. The arena jumped with a cheer as the Rangers celebrated in the corner for another goal.

"GOOOOOAAAALLL! Her second of the night, scored by number 14, OCTAAAVIAAAA! Assisted by number 66, VINYL SCRAAATCH!"

Fluttershy pouted in disappointment for having allowed two goals behind her. Twilight came over to pat her on the back for reassurance. The final thirty seconds of the period ran out with no more notable plays. The Rangers were given a rousing ovation as both teams went off for the intermission.

In the locker room, the Leafs were not feeling terribly down, but rather annoyed with Trixie's antics in the first period.

"Who does that stinkin' unicorn think she is waving her stick all over like that? I oughta knock her over again!" said Rainbow.

Twilight, Rarity, and Sweetie Belle gave Rainbow an offended glare before Twilight responded. "But we can't afford for you to get another penalty. We have to be more forceful with Trixie but without crossing the line. Fluttershy and I can't do it or else we'll be blocking Pinkie's view even worse. Pinkie, you're going to have to knock Trixie away yourself. The referees are more

forgiving toward goalies who protect their crease."

"But Twilight, I just can't knock Trixie down. That's what a meanie would do!"

Twilight paused to think of an explanation that would make Pinkie more accepting to the idea. "Well, pretend that you and Trixie are playing a game of tag. Whenever she's in the crease, you're it. When you push her out the crease, then she's it. Sound fun?"

"Okie dokie, Twilight!"

"Alright, let's work on tightening up our passes and give Rainbow the puck more. I noticed we were looking pretty slow that period but Rainbow glided around with no problem. We're not out of this yet! Let's work on tying this up, okay? Hooves in, team on three."

"One...two...three...TEAM!"

Both teams returned to the ice to cheers although they were mainly directed toward the Rangers. A loud "Here we go, Rangers, here we go!" chant swirled around the crowd as the second period faceoff was ready to drop. Rainbow won the faceoff and the Leafs tried their first attempt at tying the game up. Sticking with the strategy, Applejack passed the puck to Rainbow who was behind the net. Trixie and Bon Bon closed in to apply pressure, leaving Rainbow nowhere to turn. Rainbow tried to pass off to either wing but the play was sniffed out by Octavia, intercepting the pass.

Back the other way came the Rangers with a full head of steam. The Leafs' defense held steady and prevented an odd-pony rush. The puck flew around and pinballed all over the Ponyville end. The Leafs won the possession battle and were coming back the other way. Rainbow controlled the puck and tried to dance her way through the Manehattan defense. Rainbow was able to get to the crease before Dr. Whooves placed a timely poke check to knock the puck away. Trixie picked up the loose puck and passed up to Octavia who was now entering the Ponyville end again. Octavia was going to wait for her team to catch up but Twilight moved up to challenge her. Octavia was forced to fire the puck around the boards.

Fluttershy slowly skated to the boards to pick up the puck but was bowled over by a rumbling Vinyl Scratch. Trixie motored from the center ice to the top of the crease. Being face to face with Trixie once more, Pinkie remembered Twilight's idea. With the play going on in the zone, Pinkie gave Trixie a hard, yet playful push. Trixie growled and came back for more. Pinkie and Trixie engaged in a shoving match while Octavia received a pass from Bon Bon down in the corner. With Pinkie distracted, Octavia whipped a shot from a sharp angle. The puck deflected off Pinkie's skate and into the net for the hat trick goal. Pinkie looked behind her in disbelief as hats flew onto the ice during the Rangers celebration.

"Manhattan HAT TRICK GOOOOAAAALLLL! Scored by number 14, OCTAAAIVIAAA! Assisted by number 20, BON BONNN!"

Twilight rushed over to the referee to voice her displeasure.

"Didn't you see Trixie pushing our goalie around? Shouldn't that be interference?!?"

"Look Sparkle, your goalie initiated the contact. It's a clean play as far as I'm concerned."

"B-but"

"Move along, the issue is done."

Twilight let out an annoyed grunt as she skated back toward her team. They gathered around her to find out what the referee said and were upset with the outcome. The referee called for the next faceoff and both teams were set. Rainbow won the draw and the Leafs tried once more to fight back with a goal. Rangers fans were getting rowdy as Ponyville tried to work on offense. The Leafs were only able to get off two shots, both of which were saved easily.

The Rangers came back down the ice and had a stranglehold on possession for the entirety of the period. The Rangers racked up eight more shots in three minutes to Ponyville's one. Ponyville had great difficulty snatching the puck away and then holding it on offense. At the end of the second period, the Rangers' faithful were amped up and cheering their

team off the ice. Twilight's crew was visibly frustrated with their lack of production as they slowly drifted off the ice toward their locker room.

The Golden Leafs needed to readjust their strategy if they wanted to climb out of their 3-1 hole. In the locker room, each pony quietly vented their frustrations by roughly re-taping their sticks and stomping about the room. Twilight stood up and faced her team.

"We're letting the Rangers get in our heads tonight. Between Trixie's screening and Octavia putting in goals from every angle, we have to fight back. It's my fault for not suggesting this earlier but let's push these ponies around. Let's show them we're not afraid of them. We need to get in their faces and make them shake in their skates when we come at them. Time to get down and dirty! Let's get 'em!"

"Darn tootin'! No holdin' back now!" shouted Applejack.

Rarity put the finishing touches on her stick tape. "I'll get down, but not dirty. A classy unicorn such as myself would *never* defile myself with filth. I prefer to rattle some heads with the cleanest of hits!"

"Whatever works!" replied Rainbow.

"Let's do it!" squeaked Fluttershy.

And with that, the Golden Leafs trotted out of their locker room and back out onto the ice for the final frame.

The third and final period was about to get underway with both squads gallivanting about the ice. Maredison Square Garden was electric over the Rangers' 3-1 lead heading into the last ten minutes. Music and cheers filled the air as the puck dropped to continue play.

Rainbow won the draw and the Leafs entered the Manehattan zone. After a couple passes and some very physical scrums along the boards, the Leafs were able to fire off a couple shots on Dr. Whooves but to no avail.

Manehattan had the puck and tried moving up the ice but their progress was impeded by the Golden Leafs' hitting. When the Rangers finally entered the Ponyville zone, Trixie dumped the puck into the right corner. Fluttershy and Vinyl Scratch scrapped for the puck but neither were budging. Applejack came in to scrap as well and repeatedly nudged Scratch in the back. After zero progress with the puck was being shown, the referee blew the whistle to stop play. Scratch turned around and pushed Applejack back, drawing Applejack's ire. Soon after, they were tangling up, drawing an "Oooooooh" from the crowd. A referee came over to break them up as both the Leafs and Rangers came in to keep the other in check. No penalties were handed out and the faceoff moved to Pinkie's left.

Octavia won the faceoff to Trixie who pulled the puck back to the blue line. Octavia skated behind the net to draw Rainbow away from the middle. Trixie passed to Scratch at the right wing boards who had a small amount of time before Applejack came in with a hit. Octavia saw Scratch's predicament and quickly sprinted to the center of the zone. Before Applejack flew in with a monster hit, Scratch flung the puck to Octavia. She now had a wide open lane to Pinkie. Octavia snapped a shot right over Pinkie's blocker and into the top left corner for her fourth goal of the night. The crowd jumped to their hooves with raucous cheer as Octavia was smothered by her teammates. Rainbow slammed her stick on the ice in anger because she was outthustled.

"Manehattan GOOOALLL! Her FOURTH of the evening, number 14, OCTAAAVIAAAA! Assisted by number 66, VINYL SCRAAATCH! And number 4, THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIIIXIEEEE!"

Rainbow growled the entire time before the next faceoff. When the puck dropped, Rainbow jumped on top of Octavia and held her down to the ice to get the puck. The puck stayed at center ice as all the Leafs and Rangers converged upon it. With the play going nowhere, the referee blew the whistle. Octavia powered out of Rainbow's hold and they tussled until the ref could pull them apart. The Rangers' lead plus the playoff atmosphere plus the Leafs' desperation were adding up to a very chippy affair. Once again no penalties were called and the faceoff remained at center ice. South of the center dot, Lyra and Rarity were nudging each other for position before the puck drop. Lyra jabbed the butt end of her stick into

Rarity's chest while Rarity slashed Lyra's legs with her stick. The ref looked up to see the small scrum and skated over to break them apart. The puck finally dropped and the Golden Leafs had control.

Twilight got the puck and carried it into the zone herself, looking for a quick shot. When all the shooting lanes were closed up, Trixie stepped out of position to charge at Twilight. As soon as Twilight let go of the puck, Trixie landed a huge check on her. Twilight fell to the ice with Trixie still looming over her with the most arrogant of grins on her face. Even though the play was already back in the Ponyville end, Twilight jumped up and pushed Trixie to the ice. Trixie landed with a thud but quickly sprung back up to her hooves. The play was blown dead as a referee sprinted over to break up this latest skirmish. Trixie and Twilight jabbed each other with their sticks and horns before they were finally separated. Having enough of these scrums, the referee warned both sides.

"If this nonsense goes on any longer, I'm going to give out penalties. Tell your teams to watch themselves."

Trixie and Twilight returned to their squads but didn't relay the message. Two minutes were all that were remaining in game two. With play back on, the Leafs and Rangers kept up their hitting between the whistles, each team trying to gain a physical edge over the other. Since the game was quickly getting out of hand in terms of the score, the Leafs and Rangers turned their attention into sending a message for game three.

Maredison Square Garden was shaking from the eruption of cheers by the Manehattan crowd. The faceoff was to Pinkie's left as the crowd anxiously waited for the final seconds to tick by. Octavia won the draw back to Bon Bon who ripped off a final shot. Pinkie gloved the save as the final horn rang out. Octavia didn't get the memo because she crashed the net and toppled over Pinkie. Immediately, Rainbow jumped over Octavia's back to protect her goaltender. Like a short fuse on a stick of dynamite, the Golden Leafs' crease rapidly turned into a mosh pit of Rangers and Leafs pulling and pushing each other. With the arena blowing up with yells and cheers, some parting shots and nasty words were exchanged before the officials were finally able to restore order.

Twilight's crew angrily marched off the ice as the Rangers skated down to their goalie to celebrate the crucial game two victory. Octavia was given an

explosive ovation as she stepped out of the rink along with her teammates.

The Golden Leafs' locker room was heated and tense. The starters sneered and voiced their not-so-nice opinions of the Rangers. After they were all undressed and clean, Twilight stood in front of the team.

"As captain, I will take full responsibility for the loss tonight. It was my fault we didn't get here on time and that caused us to start off slow. I'll be the first to admit I didn't play my best game tonight. I promise that I will have us ready for game three. I'll do my best to make sure we still have a season after game three."

Applejack stood up to comment. "No, Twi. I'll take some blame too. I didn't play my best tonight either."

"Count me in too. We all let the Rangers get in our heads. They got in my head the worst," said Rainbow.

Rarity was next to join in. "I agree, I did not play up to my fabulous caliber tonight. I shall not let it happen again."

"Um, I could've done better too. I let Octavia get two goals right behind me. I'm sorry," said Fluttershy softly.

"Me too, girls. We're all in this together! We can win this!" squealed Pinkie.

Big Macintosh stepped up. "Eeyup, keep workin' together and this team can go far."

"Yeah, you guys are too talented and tough to let a lame team like the Rangers get the best of you!" said Spike.

"With teamwork and friendship, there's nothing we can't do!" squeaked Sweetie Belle.

Twilight had a huge smile on her face from the unity being shown before her. "It's settled! We'll work together and we'll end the Rangers' season back at home!"

Applejack walked up to Twilight and shouted to the team, "Hooves in, team on three everypony!"

"One...two...three...TEAM!"

Three Stars of Ponyville @ Manehattan

** Octavia (MHN)*

*** Doctor Whooves (MHN)*

**** Bon Bon (MHN)*

Other Scores Around the EHL (Home Team in CAPS)

Canterlot 4, FILLYDELPHIA 2 (Canterlot wins series 2-0)

EHL Playoff Schedule

Quarterfinals

(4)Ponyville vs. (5) Manehattan

(Series tied 1-1)

Game 1: PONYVILLE 3, Manehattan 2 (OT)

Game 2: MANEHATTAN 4, Ponyville 1

Game 3: @ Ponyville

(3) Canterlot vs. (6) Fillydelphia

(Canterlot wins 2-0)

Game 1: CANTERLOT 4, Fillydelphia 1

Game 2: Canterlot 4, FILLYDELPHIA 2

Semifinals

(1) Cloudsdale vs. (4)Ponyville/(5)Manehattan

(Series tied 0-0)

Game 1: @ Cloudsdale

Game 2: @ Ponyville/Manehattan

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Cloudsdale

(2) Appleloosa vs. (3) Canterlot

(Series tied 0-0)

Game 1: @ Appleloosa

Game 2: @ Canterlot

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Appleloosa

Chapter 15

Quarterfinals, Game 3

On the eve of the most important game of their young careers, Twilight Sparkle and the Ponyville Golden Leafs were putting the finishing touches on what could potentially be their last practice. The main objective was to pound the Rangers with physicality and to stifle them with tight defense. Toward the end of practice, Rarity began to feel a throbbing pain in her hooves. She skated off to the side boards and plopped herself down to take her front skates off. Concerned, Twilight rushed over to see what was wrong.

"What's wrong, Rarity? Are you hurt?"

"Oh Twilight, I shouldn't have done it. I thought I was going to be okay! I had no idea it would come back to haunt me so!"

Twilight was greatly confused. "Just what are you talking about?"

"Well I received an extremely important order for twenty hockey jersey dresses. I would have declined but the money was just too good to turn down. The dresses were very intricate and they put my poor hooves through torture! I hoped that my hooves would recover in the morning but they were still sore much to my dismay. Oh Twilight, I'm ever so sorry! And in *excruciating* pain, but still sorry!"

By this time, the rest of the team had skated over to listen to Rarity's plight. Rainbow was not enthused with Rarity's decision. "What?!? You KNEW we had a very important game coming up! What were you thinki-"

Applejack clunked Rainbow on the helmet to get her to hush up. Rarity's face flushed with guilt before she lit up with an idea. "I know just the thing that will fix this problem. Why not let Big Macintosh start in my place? He's been next to unstoppable when he's on the ice. I am perfectly willing to sit this next game out for us to have the best chance at winning."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Rarity? You've played every game so far and this could be our last game this year."

Rarity hesitantly looked at her bruised hooves and then up at her friends. "Yes, Twilight. I will do whatever is best for the team. If that means I must sit out, then sit out I shall."

Twilight then turned to Big Macintosh. "Do you feel you can take over for Rarity?"

In his steely cool demeanor, Big Macintosh let out a snort and nodded. "Yes ma'am. I'm ready. Sure as sugar."

"Then it's settled. Big Macintosh will fill in for Rarity. Now we can really bring the pain to the Rangers!"

While the Golden Leafs congratulated Big Macintosh on his promotion, Twilight used her magic to bring out bandages and she wrapped Rarity's hooves. With practice over, the Golden Leafs retreated into the locker room to freshen up and to go about the rest of their day.

Later in the evening, the Golden Leafs were requested to arrive at Sugarcube Corner for a pep rally of sorts hosted by their fan club. When Twilight and friends entered the bakery, they were enthusiastically greeted by forty of their biggest fans. The Golden Leafs were treated like celebrities as everyone wanted either a picture with them or an autograph. There were Golden Leafs cakes and cupcakes, royal blue and gold streamers and balloons, and a giant poster decorated and signed by every member of the Leafs' fan club. Twilight and company were overwhelmed and deeply moved by this display of fandom. Near the end of the event, the Golden Leafs all sat at the front of the room like a panel. Unbeknownst to them,

they were about to learn about how much they've impacted their fair town.

The fan club president stood in front of the panel and addressed the team. "We are very grateful that you could enjoy this wonderful evening with us tonight. We love the Golden Leafs and we appreciate all the hard work and effort you have displayed over the long season. Before you go into battle tomorrow night to keep the season alive, we have a few fan club members here who want to share something with you."

The Golden Leafs looked at each other and shrugged as a stout, older stallion made his way toward them. He was wearing a "Dash #20" jersey and took his hat off to talk to the team.

"Hello team. My name is Gerry and I just wanted to tell you how much the Golden Leafs have given me the motivation to wake up every morning. I have been unemployed for several months now with no light at the end of the tunnel. Every day I would sink lower into debt with numerous bills and rent payments. I almost lost everything but I kept fighting on because you guys keep fighting. I've watched every one of your games and the way you ponies play bring a smile to my face. Whether it's Rainbow's puck skills, Applejack's big checks, or Pinkie's timely saves, I have been proud to call myself a Golden Leafs fan. Those Fillydelphia games changed my life when you came back from that big score to win at the buzzer. When I saw you give everything you had to get back and win that game, it sparked something within me. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and I went out to find work."

The stallion's voice began to crack and tears were starting to well up in his eye. "Now, I am proud to stand before you all tonight and say that I've been working for a month now and I am pulling myself out of the hole. I saw that you never give up so I never give up. Thank you for inspiring my life and go Leafs."

Applause filled the room as a few of the girls were about to cry themselves from the story. Rainbow called Gerry back up to the table and signed her name right on the front of his jersey for him. More applause rang out as a teenage colt was next to share his feelings.

"WOOOOOO!! Golden Leafs rule! You guys kick flank! Destroy the Rangers WOOOOO!!!"

Laughter and applause cropped back up as the colt ran up to Applejack for a hoof bump. Applejack stood up and happily obliged, making the colt squeal on the way back to his seat.

Next, a mother and her daughter stepped up to the Golden Leafs. The filly was shy but her mother pushed her forward to talk. "I want to thank you for being good role models and because you are girls who play hockey tough, I started to play hockey myself. I'm not very good but someday I hope to be a Golden Leaf too."

A loud "Awwww" rang out along with applause as the filly trotted up toward the team. The Golden Leafs walked around the table to take a group picture with the young girl and all gave her a hug.

Seeing that the night was getting late, Twilight took center stage and stood before the large gathering. Moved by the fans' care and support, Twilight's voice quivered as she addressed the club. "Thank you all for coming and for supporting us not only tonight but over the entire season. We didn't know that we meant so much to all of you. Tonight was a very touching and memorable experience that we will always remember and treasure. We will do our very best tomorrow night to take care of business. We will be a team you can be proud of. Thank you again and goodnight!"

Twilight and the team waved goodbye as they left. The Leafs fan club raucously pounded their hooves on the tables to a "Go Leafs Go!" chant. The Golden Leafs retired to bed early with their souls illuminated by the inspiring stories they heard throughout the night. Twilight and her crew increased their focus and determination so that they would not disappoint their resilient fans.

After a full night of sleep, dawn cracked on game day; the day where the Ponyville Golden Leafs could either extend their season or could have their dreams come to a crashing end to an emerging bitter rival. In order to keep everyone calm and loose, Twilight arranged for the team to spend the afternoon and watch movies at the treehouse. A couple of side-splitting comedies later, the time had come for the gang to march down to their battlefield where they would close out their war. The fanfare leading to the

arena began as soon as Twilight's door. Forming a path on each side, Ponyvillians lined the streets leading to Ponyville Pond. When Twilight and friends stepped out, a giant swell of applause began at the start of the line. The applause followed the Golden Leafs as they marched toward the arena. Twilight and friends held their heads high and were beaming with pride as they processed through the sea of rabid fans. When Ponyville Pond drew closer, the applause intensified into cheering and hollering. The Golden Leafs all turned around to give a final parting wave to their loyal fans before entering the arena.

The Golden Leafs donned their armor with quiet focus, turning the locker room into a peaceful sanctuary. With plenty of time remaining before hitting the ice, a colt wearing headphones and a battery pack trotted into the room. The colt had a press credential in his mouth that read "EqSPN". Twilight was about to escort the young man out before he yelled back toward the hallway.

"Yeah I found her! We need her now?? Alright, I'll grab her! Hey you're Twilight Sparkle right?"

Twilight snarled back, "Yes. What do you want? My team is trying to prepare for a very crucial game tonig-"

"Good, come with me, you're on the air in two."

Twilight's irritation quickly gave way to bewilderment as she was pushed toward the hallway. Bright lights and cameras crowded around Twilight as she tried to make sense of what was happening. When she snapped out of her small daze, she turned around and smacked into a tower of fur. Shaking her head, Twilight looked up and saw a giant grin staring back down at her. The furry tower was a bear, an older bear with a head of slicked back grey hair. He was holding a microphone and put his arm around Twilight.

"Heya kid! Ready for your first big interview?"

"Uhh, I guess so. No offense, but who are you?"

The production colt from earlier clopped his hooves together to get their attention. He pointed to the cameras and mouthed the words "On air in four...three...two..."

All cameras fixated upon Twilight and a red light illuminated on the center camera to indicate it was rolling.

"Hello hockey fans, I'm Beary Melrose and I am here with Ponyville Golden Leafs captain Twilight Sparkle. So captain, what does your team need to do tonight to put this series away?"

Twilight stammered and began to sweat. "Uhh, we need to come out physical and knock Manehattan off the puck. If we can hit them around, we feel we can control the game."

"A few days ago in practice, Rarity went down with some hoof-related injuries. Any update on her status tonight?"

"Uhh, Rarity elected to give up her starting role to Big Macintosh for tonight."

"How do you feel he will fit in with your lineup and what sort of production are you looking for him to provide?"

Taking a giant gulp, Twilight continued with the interview. "I think he will fit in just fine. He's a hitter and he's solid all around. We're looking for him to provide us with some strong play and maybe generate some offense while staying sharp on the penalty kill."

"Finally, what has this season meant for not only your team but for this city?"

"For the team, this season has been magical. We're just a bunch of friends who were given a team out of the blue and I feel we've done a job well done. Sure we've had our ups and downs but in the end, it's all about friendship and teamwork. As for the city, Ponyville is such a great place to represent. The fans are resilient, loyal, and supportive. Just the other night we were invited to a pep rally and everyone in attendance had an inspiring story to tell about how we've lifted their spirits. It's for them that we're going to come out here and fight tonight."

"Thank you, captain. Good luck out there tonight."

"Thanks, Beary."

Twilight quickly scampered back to the locker room as Beary wrapped up the segment. "That was Golden Leafs captain Twilight Sparkle who will shortly lead her team to the ice for a game three showdown. Now back to tonight's commentators, Gary Horne and Filly Clement. Guys?"

Back from her interview, Twilight stood at the front of the room and was ready to deliver what could possibly be her last pre-game speech. Each of her teammates leaned in to listen intently.

"Tonight, there's no turning back. We are standing at the edge of the cliff. Are we going to let the Rangers push us off? Or are we going to jump back and reclaim our ground? You know, history spoke of a great explorer stallion. When he and his crew reached shore on a new, foreign land, he told his men 'queme los barcos.' In their language at that time, he said 'burn the boats'. They gave themselves no way out. There was going to be no looking back no matter what danger they encountered be it from the wildlife or the inhabitants. That is going to be us tonight. We are going to 'burn the boats' because we will forcibly take what's ours. I said before game one that this was going to be a war. Well tonight, the war will be finished. When the smoke clears, we WILL be the last ones standing. Are we ready to finish this fight?"

"Yeah!"

Twilight stomped both front hooves down on the floor hard. "I SAID ARE WE READY TO FINISH THIS FIGHT?!?"

"YEAH!!" yelled the Golden Leafs as they jumped from their stalls.

"Bring it in. We will fight as a team. We will sweat as a team. We will bleed as a team. We will WIN! AS! A! TEAM! Team on three!"

"One...two...three...**TEAM!**"

Ponyville Pond buzzed and whirred like a well-oiled machine. The tension palpable, the atmosphere electric. Blanketing the seats was another "Blue Out" with each Golden Leafs fan pumping gold-colored pom-poms into the air as the clock ticked down to game time. When the buzzer sounded to bring the teams out onto the ice, the first of many cheering eruptions rang out. Manehattan came out first for introductions and were voraciously jeered and booed. The Rangers proceeded to zip around their end with great quickness and focus. For Ponyville's introductions, the arena was so loud that fillies and mares had to cover their ears. The local heroes were given a fitting welcome from their dedicated fans.

With the lights back up, the arena rocking, and both teams staring a hole through each other, the deciding game was ready to commence. Octavia and Rainbow bumped helmets while awaiting the referee's goalie check. With the clack of the puck on the ice, the elimination game began.

Octavia and Rainbow clashed, kicking and poking at the puck before it finally squirted out toward Manehattan. Hitting immediately came into play as Applejack plowed over Bon Bon after she had passed off to Vinyl Scratch. Vinyl Scratch was rocked herself by an aggressive Fluttershy at the blue line. Rainbow swooped by to take the puck through the neutral zone where she then was flattened by Lyra who was cutting through the center. The crowd's cheers popped louder with each check as Manehattan carried the puck into the Ponyville zone. Lyra dumped the puck into the right corner for Scratch. Fluttershy shoved Scratch into the boards as they tussled for the puck. Octavia came in along with Applejack to claim the puck. Applejack got some shots in on Scratch while Octavia did the same to Fluttershy. The puck squirted out toward Octavia who was rammed into the glass by Big Macintosh. Big Mac grabbed the puck and skipped it ahead to Rainbow who tried to take it into the Manehattan zone by herself. Bon Bon and Trixie were back and sandwiched Rainbow down to the ice to stop her charge.

Two uninterrupted minutes had already melted off the clock as the Rangers controlled the puck back into the Leafs' end. The Rangers moved quickly

now as to avoid the Leafs' crushing hits. Octavia had the puck behind the net and passed it to Lyra on the left boards before Twilight could pressure. Lyra was met by Big Mac who was forcibly imposing his will on the smaller and weaker Lyra. Lyra desperately flung the puck toward the center where it was intercepted by Rainbow. Before Rainbow could head up ice, Trixie closed in to steal the puck back. Scratch got herself open in the backdoor to receive Trixie's pass. With a wide open net in front of her, Scratch flicked the puck on net. Pinkie dove to her left and stuck her stick out in hopes of making a save. The puck catches Pinkie's stick blade and deflects up into the air, eliciting a giant roar from the fans. Fluttershy claimed the puck upon its landing and passed it to Applejack heading up ice.

The Golden Leafs brought the puck in and worked around the boards with the Rangers tightly defending them. Rainbow held the puck in the left corner, fending off Bon Bon. With Big Mac coming in to help, Rainbow kicked the puck to him. Big Mac barreled his way toward the middle but was double teamed. Mac saw Applejack open along the boards and passed to her. Scratch came in to challenge Applejack, leaving Fluttershy open at the point. Applejack shoved the puck to Fluttershy before absorbing a Scratch hit. Fluttershy saw an open lane to the net and fired. Rainbow crashed the crease with Bon Bon right on her. The puck glances off Bon Bon's skate and slips right past the unsuspecting Dr. Whooves into the net. All of Ponyville Pond jumped to their hooves with a roar as the goal light shone like a beacon and the siren sounded.

"PONYVILLE GOOOOAAALLL!! Scored by number 0, FLUTTERSHYYY! Assisted by number 88, AAAAPPLEJAAACK! And number 8, BIIIIIG MAAAACINTOSH!"

The Golden Leafs finished up their celebration and headed for center ice for the faceoff. The Rangers had a meeting at their net before coming toward the center. The "Blue Out" was still buzzing and pumping their pom-poms as play resumed. Rainbow won the draw back to Twilight who fed it right back to Rainbow. Frustrated from the fluke goal, Bon Bon thrust her stick at Rainbow's skates to get at the puck. Rainbow tumbled over and lost the puck, instantly prompting the referee to hold his hoof up and blow the whistle. The arena's buzz ripened back into cheering with Bon Bon heading to the penalty box.

"Manehattan, number 20, two minutes for tripping."

Twilight quickly ran down the power play strategy with her team before the referee called both teams for the faceoff. Octavia won the faceoff back to Trixie who dumped the puck down to Pinkie. Pinkie skated behind to grab the puck and to pass it to Twilight. Twilight tried passing the puck back into the Manehattan zone but it was too hot for Applejack to handle, ending up on Scratch's stick. Scratch fired back down for Pinkie to retrieve again. This time Rainbow tried bringing the puck in. Rainbow broke right down the center hoping to draw the defense in to open up the perimeter for her teammates. With a well-timed poke, Octavia stole the puck from Rainbow and dumped the puck back down again. Precious seconds were slipping away from the Golden Leafs' power play as they tried to establish some offense. This time, Big Mac brought the puck in and whipped the puck around the boards to Applejack. Big Mac parked himself in the crease to screen Dr. Whooves while the Leafs moved the puck around. Big Mac held steady as Trixie tried to push him away. Twilight ripped a shot from the point but it was blocked by a diving Lyra. Pinkie slapped her stick on the ice for the final seconds of the penalty before coming out to get the dumped puck.

"Manehattan returns to full strength."

A "GO LEAFS GO" chant broke out as Applejack tried bringing the puck into the Rangers' zone. Octavia and Scratch double teamed her and Octavia came away with it. Knowing Fluttershy was back, Twilight took a gamble and came up to head Octavia off. Twilight was able to steal the puck and she quickly shoved it forward to Rainbow who flew into the zone and slashed through the center. Instead of deking her way to the net, Rainbow caught the Rangers' defense by surprise by performing a shoulder shake to freeze them and then firing off a slap shot. Dr. Whooves raised his glove hoof but was too slow. The puck clanged the back brace of the net and shot back out, lighting up the lamp and sounding the siren. With the arena exploding with more cheers, Rainbow drifted off to the corner to await her teammates to celebrate the goal.

"PONYVILLE GOOOAAALLL! Scored by number 20, RAAAAINBOW DAAAASH! Assisted by number 42, TWIIIIIGHT SPAAAARKLEEE!"

Dr. Whooves slammed his stick on the crossbar in frustration as the Rangers bent over to catch their breath. The Leafs finished up their celebration and were ready to resume play again. With a pivotal 2-0 lead in the elimination game, the Golden Leafs controlled the puck and let the first period run out. They were ushered off the ice to a standing ovation from their fans, clearly pleased with the first period effort. Twilight led her team back to the locker room to rest for the intermission.

The Golden Leafs were confident about their start but were not ready to let up. Twilight stressed for her team to double their effort and to push for more goals as no lead was safe until the clock reads 0:00. The intermission provided a good breather because fatigue was slowly creeping in from the Rangers' hits. Mostly refreshed and ready for more, the Leafs stepped out for the second period.

The second period got off to a quick start with Manehattan applying full pressure in all areas of the rink. They blitzed on the forecheck, buzzed around the neutral zone, and rotated and maneuvered all over the offensive zone, giving Ponyville a fit and forcing them to give up the puck. When Ponyville did have the puck in the Rangers' end, Rainbow fumbled the puck and had her pocket picked by Octavia. With a wide open rink on the way to Pinkie, Rainbow dove to poke the puck away. Rainbow's stick caught Octavia and tripped her up. The referee's hoof flew up and play stopped when the puck landed at Pinkie. Trixie rushed over to the referee to plead for a penalty shot but nothing doing.

"Ponyville, number 20, two minutes for tripping."

The crowd perked up to cheer on the penalty kill unit. Twilight, Fluttershy, Applejack, and Big Mac gathered at the faceoff circle to discuss the next two minutes. The Rangers came up for the faceoff and play resumed. Octavia won the draw back to Bon Bon who shoveled it over to Trixie. Scratch and Lyra switched wings, cutting through the Leafs' box and mixing the defense up. Now on the left boards, Scratch received the pass and

bringing in both Twilight and Applejack to defend. Scratch quickly passed back to Trixie who already wound up for the one-timer. The puck jumped off Trixie's stick and zoomed in toward the corner. Octavia skated by at just the right moment to screen Pinkie, allowing the puck to pound the net for the power play goal. A groan bellowed out as Trixie jumped toward the boards in celebration. The Rangers smothered her and they cut their deficit to 2-1.

"Manhattan goal, scored by number 4, Trixie, assisted by number 66, Vinyl Scratch, and number 20, Bon Bon."

Rainbow smacked her stick upon exiting the penalty box. The arena atmosphere cooled down to a low murmur as play resumed. Rainbow dug in to rip the faceoff away from Octavia and handed it back to Twilight. Almost immediately, Big Mac fiercely smacked his stick on the ground calling for the puck. Twilight gave it up and Big Mac went to work. Using his amazing strength, Big Macintosh gritted his teeth and plowed right through the center of the Rangers' zone. Bon Bon and Trixie closed on him but they could not force him off stride. Big Mac rumbled to the crease and shot the puck like a cannon right into Dr. Whooves. The Doctor got his glove on the puck but the force drove his hoof into the net. The jolt of the shot made him release the puck, giving Ponyville a quick response to the Rangers' power play goal.

"PONYVILLE GOOOAAALLL!! Scored by number 8, BIIIG MAAAACINTOSHHH! Assisted by number 42, TWILIGHT SPAAAARKLEEE! And number 20, RAAAAINBOW DAAAASHHH!"

Like a spark, the crowd was back into full blown party mode. Applejack hugged her brother as the rest of the team came in to congratulate him for the goal. Trixie hit herself in the helmet with her stick in frustration. The one-goal lead was expanded back to two with three minutes left in the second period. The next faceoff, the Rangers won the faceoff and trampled into the Ponyville end. Trixie reached into her game two bag of tricks and parked herself in front of Pinkie, facing face to face. Trixie waved her stick all about to distract Pinkie as the Rangers scrambled around to generate offense. The Rangers fired off a couple shots but could not get it past Pinkie who fought off Trixie's distraction. The faceoff stayed in the Ponyville

end and was won by the Rangers. Again, Trixie got in Pinkie's face and flailed about. Twilight saw Trixie out from the corner and charged at her with a full head of steam. With a big push, Twilight knocked Trixie to the ice luckily as the puck came to her, so no penalty was called. The crowd cheered Twilight's hit as the Golden Leafs shot the puck out of their end. Octavia and Rainbow were now in a hoof race to the other end, hoping to get an icing call or to prevent it respectively. The final thirty seconds of the period ticked away as the two racers rushed past the Manehattan blue line. With an extra burst of effort, Rainbow cut off Octavia to nab the puck away, negating the icing. Applejack was trailing the play and was now coming in through the middle wide open. Rainbow saw Applejack and passed it quickly. Leafs fans all stood up to watch the play as Applejack received the puck with a slight breakaway. Applejack snapped the puck off but was desperately knocked away by Dr. Whooves at the last second with his blocker. The crowd let out an "Awww" and the second period came to a close.

The Leafs were loudly applauded off the ice again with a 3-1 lead and only ten minutes left until their season can be extended. Smiles were glowing on the Leafs' faces as they stepped off the ice while the Rangers had bitter scowls heading into the intermission.

Twilight kept her troops focused as they entered the locker room. When everyone was settled at their stall, she stood at the front of the room. "Alright everypony, just ten more minutes. TEN more minutes. We were lucky to get a goal back after the Rangers' goal. We can't let up. Now, we know the Rangers and how they are. They're going to be in super desperation mode. Expect to take some unclean lumps from them. No matter what tricks they try to pull, DO NOT let them get under your skin. We need to stay mentally tough and worry about our play. We have this!"

Rainbow stood up and joined Twilight's side. "DARN right we do! Just picture this. The game is over, our fans are yelling their flanks off, and off in the corner, Trixie is crying her eyes out. The Rangers go home while we get to keep playing. Just keep that picture of Trixie's crying loser face in your memory and we'll win this!"

Twilight nodded with a smile. "The key this final period is poise. Hooves in,

poise on three!"

The Leafs jumped out of their seats and merged at the center with their hooves in. "One...two...three...POISE!"

Ponyville Pond roared when the Leafs made it back onto the ice. The blue sea was rolling and the gold pom-poms were pulsating. The Rangers stepped onto the rink to a swell of boos. The clock set to 10:00 and the referee stood at center ice with the puck. With the electricity back in the air, both teams met at the center for the faceoff. Slammed with authority, the puck was in play and the third period was on.

Manehattan won the faceoff and deployed their desperation strategy on offense: firing the puck from all angles and storming the crease for rebounds. Bon Bon had the puck at the blue line and shot with reckless abandon. The puck bounced off Pinkie's chest and landed in the crease where Scratch came in to try to knock it home. Luckily Fluttershy reached it first and slapped the puck away out of danger. The Rangers reset on offense and Lyra ripped a tight angle shot from the side. Pinkie moved over to hug the post but the shot skipped wide to Octavia behind the net. Octavia skated away from Fluttershy and peeled toward the net to fire another shot which Pinkie stopped. Pinkie held on to blow the play dead which was rewarded with a rousing cheer by the hometown crowd.

The ensuing faceoff was won by Rainbow and the Leafs tried to take the puck out of their zone. Manehattan stayed up on the forecheck and forced Rainbow to cough up the puck. Rangers swiftly moved back into the Leafs' zone with intensity in their strides. Bon Bon carried the puck past the blue line and shot again. Lyra and Scratch blitzed the crease and out-powered Twilight and Fluttershy. Pinkie couldn't corral the puck and left the rebound lying off to her side. Lyra dove toward the puck and shoved it in the net. The crowd's buzz died as Lyra was pounced on by her joyous teammates.

"Manehattan goal, scored by number 10, Lyra, assisted by number 20, Bon Bon."

With the game back to a manageable 3-2 deficit, the Rangers began to

unleash their nastiness to turn the momentum. On the faceoff, Octavia collided with Rainbow and gave her a tiny headbutt to win the puck from her. When the puck was in the corner, Lyra fended off Big Mac with some hidden jabs from the butt of her stick. The Leafs tried to suppress their irritation and stayed strong. The Rangers kept slapping the puck from all angles and crashing the crease for rebounds, spraying Pinkie with ice nearly every twenty seconds when she came up with big saves.

When play resumed, the Leafs finally won control of the puck and tried anchoring themselves in the Rangers' end to increase their lead and to melt time away. The puck was in the corner with Applejack and Scratch tussling for control. The scrum moved along the right wing boards close enough for Fluttershy to help out. Despite the two Leafs, Scratch came out with the puck and led the Rangers back on offense. Scratch dumped the puck into the corner for Octavia to swoop in after it. Fluttershy closed in along with Rainbow to fight Octavia for possession. Away from the play, Trixie skated out of position and drifted near Twilight. When the puck squirted out toward Twilight, Trixie snuck up behind her and stuck her front leg out to clip Twilight. The referee didn't see Trixie's slew-hoof and play resumed with the crowd yelling for a penalty. Even though the referee didn't see the dirty move, Fluttershy did. Twilight weakly skated after the puck but her knees were jarring with pain. After a Pinkie save on Lyra to stop play, Fluttershy angrily mumbled under her breath.

"Trixie has been a thorn in our side for far too long. It's time to take out the trash. She won't hurt anyone else ever again!"

Twilight worked her legs out to regain feeling and to continue on. When the referee was ready to drop the puck, Fluttershy looked over to Trixie who had a giant, smug smirk on her face. Octavia won the faceoff back to Bon Bon while Fluttershy locked her sights on Trixie. Unfortunately for Trixie, Bon Bon passed it to her with an angry Fluttershy rumbling forward. When Trixie received the puck, she looked up and her face turned white as a ghost.

"YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR CRIMES AGAINST INTEGRITY AND SPORTSPONYSHIP!"

WHAM! Launching like a loaded missile, Fluttershy and her rage wrecked Trixie to an enormous cheer from the crowd. With the puck flopping at

Trixie's skates, Rainbow glided in and picked it up for a breakaway. Leafs fans jumped up to watch Rainbow come in on Whooves. Rainbow pulled the puck left, then right, then left, then out forward. Whooves leaned forward for the puck, but Rainbow quickly pulled it back in. Rainbow danced around Whooves' leg and pounded the puck into the net. Ponyville Pond's roof blew up from an explosion of cheers as Rainbow flung herself into the glass. The Leafs rushed in to mob her in the corner as the Rangers gathered around their fallen captain.

"PONYVILLE GOOOAAALLL!! Scored by number 20, RAAAAINBOW DAAASHHH!"

Trixie was seeing stars as she gingerly stood up from the hit. Her teammates helped bring her to her hooves as the crowd continued celebrating. With only two minutes left, the Rangers' future was looking bleak. Manehattan called time out to allow Trixie recovery time and to pull Dr. Whooves for an extra attacker with their season on the line. When it was time to resume play, Leafs fans were still standing and broke out a "GO LEAFS GO" chant. Blues, a playoff roster addition, came on for the Rangers as the sixth pony. The faceoff dropped and was won by the Rangers. Octavia brought the puck in and kept Rainbow at bay for her team to set up on offense. Blues went to the front of the crease to screen Pinkie as Octavia passed over to Scratch. Scratch wanted to shoot but Applejack hit the ice to block. Scratch saw Bon Bon open and shoved it over. Bon Bon immediately ripped off a shot and the Rangers crashed the net. The puck hit off Blues' leg and came right to Octavia off to the side of the net. Pinkie tried diving over but Octavia slapped the puck in for a very critical goal with a minute left. Ponyville Pond hushed a little bit as the Rangers' finished off their short celebration.

"Manehattan goal, scored by number 14, Octavia. Assisted by number 20, Bon Bon."

Twilight quickly gathered up her team to calm their nerves and to finish out the final minute. The faceoff set back up at center ice and the crowd perked back up. Octavia won the pivotal faceoff and the Rangers rushed the Leafs' zone in hopes of tying the score up. Octavia dumped the puck into the corner for both Blues and Scratch to scrum for it against Twilight. Applejack

came in to help and the puck jumped back and forth from stick to stick. Finally, Applejack dug in and valiantly pulled the puck out. The Rangers quickly backpeddled as Applejack passed the puck up to Big Macintosh. Big Mac grabbed control and barreled through center ice as three Rangers ganged up on him to cut his stride off. Thirty seconds remained and an empty net was waiting off in the distance. Big Mac battled off the Rangers' force and kept driving at the net. A fourth Ranger jumped in on the big guy but was no use. With a heroic blast, Big Macintosh blasted the puck into the empty net to put away the game for good. The crowd jumped and exploded with a deafening cheer that was heard miles outside the arena. Big Macintosh skated toward his teammates and they collided for a giant celebratory hugging pile at center ice. From the bench, Spike, Rarity, and Sweetie Belle were jumping up and down and trading hugs. On the Rangers' side, they all collapsed to the ice in devastation. They buried their heads into the ice as Ponyville kept going bonkers.

*"PONYVILLE GOOOAAALLL!! Scored by number 8, BIIIIIG
MAAAACINTOSH! Assisted by number 88, AAAAPPLEJAAACK!!"*

Twenty seconds were all that were left on the clock. The Rangers took extra time pulling themselves up to the center circle as a new chant rung out through Ponyville Pond.

"WE WANT CLOUDS-DALE!" *clap clap clap-clap-clap*
"WE WANT CLOUDS-DALE!" *clap clap clap-clap-clap*
"WE WANT CLOUDS-DALE!" *clap clap clap-clap-clap*

Both teams were finally set at center ice with the electricity pumping through the atmosphere. Rainbow won the faceoff to Twilight who retreated back behind Pinkie. The Rangers didn't give chase. The crowd counted down with the clock as the Leafs began to bunch up at their net.
"FIVE...FOUR...THREE...TWO...ONE!"

With the final horn, the series victory celebration began. The Leafs tossed their sticks up into the air and shook their helmets off to bombard Pinkie in net. Spike, Rarity, and Sweetie Belle jumped from the bench to join in as fireworks exploded overhead and streamers fell to the ice. The Rangers were back down on the ice and despairingly came to grips with their season coming to an end. When the Leafs got up from their celebration,

they began to line up at center ice to exchange the traditional hoofshakes after a playoff series has ended. The Rangers, sniffing and pouting from the loss, came up and formed their line. Trixie wanted no part of the tradition and began skating toward the locker room. However, when the rink door toward the hallway opened, Gary Bettpony stood up tall and blocked Trixie's path. He angrily narrowed his eyes and forcefully pointed back toward the ice. Trixie flashed an uneasy, apologetic smile and quickly stumbled back toward the lines with her tail between her legs. The Leafs and Rangers crossed at center ice, exchanging hoofshakes with the arena still rocking. Trixie reluctantly went through the line and cordially congratulated the Leafs. When the shakes were done, the Rangers sadly drifted off the ice while the Leafs skated up to the boards and waved to all their fans. The fans responded in kind and gave their heroes a raucous round of appreciative applause. Leafs fans started trotting for the exits as the team went off for the locker room.

In the locker room, the Leafs popped open bottles of sparkling grape juice and began spraying each other and partying. Music was blasting, laughs were ringing out, and many hugs were shared as the celebration went on into the wee hours of the evening. Not wanting to disrupt the party, Gary Bettpony handed an arena worker a scroll to give to the Leafs. Twilight stepped away from the group and read the message.

Congratulations on your first series win. Your semifinal series against Cloudsdale begins in a week. The semifinals are also a best-of-three with games 1 and 3 in Cloudsdale. Congrats and good luck.

Twilight tucked the scroll away and returned to the party, electing to address the next round with her team later.

The Golden Leafs dodged a bullet and won with their best effort of the season so far. The celebration was well deserved, but their business was far from over. Cloudsdale, a rested, experienced, and poised team, now awaited the Leafs. Ponyville played the Red Wings very tough in the regular season, but will they be able to get over the hump and defeat Cloudsdale in the playoffs?

Three Stars from Manehattan @ Ponyville

** Big Macintosh (PGL)*

*** Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

**** Fluttershy (PGL)*

EHL Playoff Schedule

(4) Ponyville vs. (5) Manehattan

(Ponyville wins 2-1)

Game 1: PONYVILLE 3, Manehattan 2 (OT)

Game 2: MANEHATTAN 4, Ponyville 1

Game 3: PONYVILLE 5, Manehattan 3

Semifinals (Best-of-3)

(1) Cloudsdale vs. (4) Ponyville

Game 1: @ Cloudsdale

Game 2: @ Ponyville

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Cloudsdale

(2) Appleloosa vs. (3) Canterlot

Game 1: @ Appleloosa

Game 2: @ Canterlot

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Appleloosa

Chapter 16

Semifinals: Game 1

Ponyville Pond was alive with lights and echoing sounds. The Ponyville Golden Leafs, fresh off their quarterfinals series victory over the Manehattan Rangers, were hard at work preparing for their next opponent, the Cloudsdale Red Wings. The pounding of the puck on the boards reverberated to the rafters as a faint smell of sweat dissipated into the cold air. Once the Leafs' general practice routine was finished, Twilight rounded up the team to go over strategy.

"Alright team, when we face Cloudsdale, we have a very big task in front of us. Spitfire is the best scorer in the EHL and she's super fast. We're going to pay special attention to her in order to stop her from single-handedly beating us. I want us to double team her to ensure we always have somepony pressuring her. To practice this task, we're all going to chase Rainbow in pairs. Rarity and Applejack will go first, then Fluttershy and I, then Big Macintosh and Spike. Rainbow are you ready?"

"Ready as ever, Twilight!"

"On my whistle, three...two...one..."

TwEEEEEEEEEEet

Rainbow exploded from the starting blocks and was gliding all over the ice while Rarity and Applejack gave chase. After a good minute of chasing, Rarity began to fade, leaving just Applejack to skate after Rainbow.

Eventually, Applejack tired of skating and fell to the ice, leaving Rainbow victorious after three minutes of skating. Twilight gave Rainbow a minute to recover before starting the next wave.

TwEEEEEEEEet

Twilight herself and Fluttershy were next to try hunting down Rainbow. Twilight faded quickly while Fluttershy was able to match Rainbow stride for stride for a decent amount of time. Gaining ground on Rainbow's flank, Fluttershy leaned forward to tag her with her nose but just missed. Fluttershy spun out to the ice as Rainbow skated on. Fluttershy was given a round of helmet pats for her effort by the whole team as Rainbow recovered. Big Macintosh and Spike stepped for their turn.

TwEEEEEEEEet

Rainbow blasted away, leaving Big Mac and Spike in the dust. The two forwards tried skating after her but Rainbow's speed was just too great to catch. The chase drill continued for another six waves, three for Rarity-Applejack and three for Twilight-Fluttershy. By the end, the starters were wasted and sapped of all their strength. The Leafs took a long break to talk a little strategy. Twilight was back in front of the team with her notes.

"Since we know Cloudsdale is a very quick team, Rarity will go back to starting now that her hooves are healed. Big Macintosh, we will still need you for the penalty kill but we'll need Rarity's agility for even strength. Also, Cloudsdale passes the puck a lot. They like to bring the puck into our end instead of dumping it and chasing after it. That's why when we're done with this break, we're going to practice flooding the center zone and preventing them from carrying the puck over the blue line. If we can stop their passes and force them to dump, we have a chance to control the puck."

"Sounds pretty smart to me," said Applejack.

"Oh yes, I'm ready to skate fast! Spitfire and Soarin are going to look like statues next to me!" shouted Rainbow.

"So let's get back to the ice and work some more. Cloudsdale is very smart, calm, and collected. We're going to need to work harder than them to win. Out-hustle and out-power. Let's do it."

"Right!" yelled the Leafs before heading back out onto the ice for practice.

The Leafs' practice resumed and they worked on their defensive strategy. After an hour passed by, the team was spent again and were ready to pack it in. Before exiting the ice, an EHL official poked his head in to drop off a package.

"Hello?? I've brought your winged skates for Cloudsdale! Return these at the end of the series to the Canterlot headquarters okay? Good luck!"

"Thank you!" yelled Twilight from across the rink.

The Leafs skated off and picked up their pair of winged skates on the way to the locker room. Like the previous time, Twilight placed a spell on Fluttershy's skates to give them wings as well because they were adorable and made her happy. Twilight and friends cleaned up and left the arena with confidence in their strategy and satisfaction in their practice effort.

Game day crept up on the Golden Leafs. To allow themselves enough time to get ready for the game, the Leafs met at the treehouse early to put on their winged skates and fly up to Cloudsdale. The flight up to Cloudsdale was easy but soon the atmosphere began to overwhelm them. Nearly every part of the city was turned red in support of the Red Wings. The Red Wings' theme song "Hey Hey Hockeycloud" was blasting in the streets leading up to Foal Louis Arena. Despite it being a few hours before the game, Cloudsdale fans were beginning to bunch up at the arena entrances, anxiously waiting to enter. The Leafs reached the entrance and made it to their locker room. Taking their time and trying to remain calm, Twilight and company dressed and prepared their equipment. When the Leafs were done preparing, there was still nearly an hour before the puck dropped. A bright light emerged from the hallway and drew the Leafs' attention. Trotting into the locker room was an EqSPN technician with a clipboard.

"Uhh, is Rainbow Dash here?"

Rainbow jumped from her stall with a smile. "Yes! I'm here!"

"Great, you're going to be interviewed in five."

Rainbow hopped up and down with glee. "Aww yeah! This beautiful face is going to be on television!"

Twilight and Applejack rolled their eyes while Rarity pouted. "Why won't they interview *me*? I'm the most fabulous pony here. Don't they care about my hoof injury healing?"

Rainbow pranced to the hallway for her interview. Equestria reporter Beary Melrose was there to greet her with the cameras ready to roll. The technician counted down until the red light came to begin rolling.

"Hello hockey fans, I'm Beary Melrose and I'm here with the Ponyville Golden Leafs' game three hero, Rainbow Dash. Now Rainbo-"

"Greetings Equestria! I am Rainbow Dash, the quickest skater in all the EHL! You can rest assured that I will do whatever I can to lead my team to victory and to put on a show for you all!"

Beary stared with confusion at the technician who shrugged back. Beary regained his composure and started asking his question.

"What will be your strategy when it comes to containing the EHL's leading scorer and league MVP, Spitfire?"

Rainbow grabbed the microphone out from Beary's claw. "We're going to try to double team her to make sure she doesn't destroy us. It will be okay though. She may be fast, but I'm faster!"

"Your starting left winger Rarity is back from her injury-"

Off in the background, a loud "THANK YOU!" rang out from Rarity in the locker room.

"-what will she bring to your lineup now that she's healed?"

"Rarity's fine. She'll give us a wicked fast shot on the net. But her shots still aren't as fast as me."

"Finally, how important is it to come out strong early considering Cloudsdale's been sitting at home for almost a week now?"

"It's very important because if we score first, then we take the crowd out of the equation and the Red Wings will have to fight uphill. If anypony knows about fast starts, it's me because I am fast. I will-"

Beary quickly interrupted before Rainbow could ramble off again. "Alright, that's all from Ponyville center Rainbow Dash. Back to the fellas up in the booth. Guys?"

Rainbow growled when she got cut off and stomped back to the locker room.

Once Rainbow was back at her stall, Twilight stood up and walked to the front of the room for the pre-game speech.

"Alright girls. It's a brand new series with new opportunities. Across the rink from us is a team who is very skilled, quick, and poised. It will take a lot of will and a lot of strength to knock them off. Be ready to push your bodies harder than you've ever pushed them before. Our strength will push us through. Also we have to be mentally tough. Mentally tough as in smart and sharp, not emotional. Cloudsdale is very skilled. We need to be alert and know what is going on at all times. One second of hesitation could result in a breakaway for Spitfire or for Soarin. Keep the Wings in front of us and we will come out fine. We have the talent to beat this team. We pushed them to the edge twice in the regular season. They won because we just couldn't finish the job. Now's the time to prove that we can put them away. Win tonight and we head home with a chance to end this thing. Hooves in, alert on three."

The Leafs stood up and met at the center to put a skate in.
"One...two...three...ALERT!"

The minute horn blared over the rink just as the Leafs had their cheer. Twilight turned to lead the team into the hallway and down to the ice surface.

Red Wings fans trotted to their seats for the introductions. When the lights dimmed, a roar rumbled out from the audience. First up were the Golden Leafs' introductions. A spotlight shone over the Leafs' entrance and one by one, the Leafs' starters were announced. The girls skated out to boos and lined up side by side at the blue line. Big Macintosh, Spike, and Sweetie Belle made their way to the bench as fog rolled over the ice. "Hey Hey Hockeycloud" blasted through the speakers along with a video showing the Red Wings' season highlights on the fog, bringing the crowd to their hooves. When the video ended, a giant decorative octopus slowly lowered from the rafters, eyes glowing red and smoke billowing from under its tentacles.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, introducing the regular season champions and Princess' Trophy recipients, YOUR CLOUDSDAAAALEEE REEED WIIIIIIINGSSSS!! Starting at left wing, number 44, GIIIIILDAAA! At center, the regular season MVP and Hart Maremorial Trophy winner, number 13, SPIIIIIITFIIIIIRRRREEEEEE!! At right wing, number 96, SOOOOAAAARIIIINN!! On defense, number question mark-exclamation point, DIIIIITZY DOOOOOO! Also on defense, the captain, number 5, PUUUUCKSSSS!! Starting in goal, number 35, SCOOOOOTALOOOOO!!"

The Red Wings skated out onto the ice to a raucous ovation. Foal Louis Arena was blanketed in red all around. The Leafs remained at the blue line as the Wings blazed around their end of the rink. When the lights came back up, the Wings' playoff reserves, Cloudkicker and Boxxxy, took their seats on the bench. Both the Wings and Leafs finished skating around and stretching, ready for the game to begin. The referee grabbed the puck and made his way to center ice. Rainbow met Spitfire at the dot as their respective teams drifted to their positions behind them. Pinkie Pie and Scootaloo raised their gloves to indicate their readiness. The Cloudsdale crowd stomped their hooves like a drumroll and let out a yell when the puck dropped on game one of the EHL semifinals.

Rainbow beat Spitfire off the draw and kicked it back to Twilight. Immediately Rainbow broke for the Cloudsdale zone. Twilight swiftly zipped a pass right onto Rainbow's stick and the Golden Leafs were on their way. Ditzzy and Pucks skated hard on both sides of Rainbow trying to grab the puck away. Being sandwiched coming up on the crease, Rainbow came to

an abrupt stop, sending Ditzzy and Pucks flying past. Rainbow flicked her stick and sent the puck over Scootaloo's leaping blocker save. The Red Wings crowd was stunned to silence as the Golden Leafs crowded Rainbow to celebrate their quick goal.

"Ponyville goal scored by number 20, Rainbow Dash. Assisted by number 42, Twilight Sparkle."

Only twenty seconds into the game and the Golden Leafs had already taken a 1-0 lead. The teams were back at center ice for the faceoff to which Rainbow won again. The Leafs entered the Cloudsdale zone and did a great job of moving the puck around and taking shots when open. The Red Wings' rustiness from their long layoff was showing as they had trouble taking the puck away from the Leafs' grasp. The Leafs were able to send off five shots in a minute and a half of possession on offense.

Cloudsdale had their first surge of offense when Gilda jumped up to intercept Twilight's pass to Fluttershy along the blue line. Gilda rumbled toward the net with Fluttershy and Twilight chasing behind her. The Cloudsdale crowd jumped up to watch the breakaway attempt. Gilda strode in with strength, choosing not to deke at all. With real estate running out in front of her, Gilda fired a shot on net. Pinkie swung her glove up and plucked the puck out of the air to a groan by the crowd. Instead of covering up, Pinkie dropped the puck and passed it up to Twilight who then hit Applejack in stride who had sneaked behind the Red Wings' defense and had a breakaway herself. Applejack came in as Scootaloo wiggled up to the top of the crease. Applejack tried a deke but lost control of the puck, sending it to the corner. Both teams glided into the Cloudsdale zone and the Leafs had a couple more scoring chances before Scootaloo covered up.

Spitfire won the ensuing faceoff and led the Red Wings' charge into the Leafs' end. The Wings were starting to get their legs back and were shaking off the rust as the period went on. Spitfire was harassed by Rainbow behind the net as she tried weaving and bobbing to get a pass off. Finally she found Gilda on the left wing boards and shoveled it off. As Gilda received the puck, Soarin planted himself at the top of the crease to screen Pinkie. Gilda dodged a hitting attempt by Rarity and passed it to Pucks at the point. With Soarin giving Pinkie a fit, Pucks shot on net. As the puck

came closer, Soarin became a little overzealous with his screening and knocked Pinkie with his rump. The puck pounded the top corner of the net to bring the fans to their hooves. The goal light and siren turned up when the referee charged in to emphatically wave his forelegs across his chest.

"No goal! Goalie interference!"

The cheers soured into boos when the crowd realized that the goal was waved off and the goal light and siren turned off. Soarin skated off to the penalty box in frustration as the referee announced the call.

"Cloudsdale, number 96, two minutes for goalie interference."

The Leafs were about to begin their first power play of the series and kept their starters out for it. Spitfire won the faceoff to Ditzzy who dumped it down ice. Pinkie skated out of the net to play the puck to Fluttershy who was first back. Fluttershy was carrying the puck up but got overwhelmed by Spitfire's forecheck. Fluttershy fired off an errant pass that was controlled by Pucks, leading to another Wings dump on the penalty kill. Pinkie came out again to play the puck, this time to Twilight. Twilight passed to Applejack to bring it into the Wings' zone with a minute left on the power play. Applejack dumped the puck behind the net for Rainbow to grab it. Pressured by Pucks and Spitfire, Rainbow fired the puck back to Applejack along the boards. Applejack then gave it to Fluttershy at the point who went to shoot. Gilda dove for the block, causing Fluttershy to pull the puck back and pass to an open Rarity on the left boards. Rarity was getting challenged by Spitfire and frantically looked for an outlet. Applejack switched positions with Fluttershy and was now at the point slapping her stick. Rarity looked up to see Applejack open and quickly flung the pass over before absorbing a hit. Applejack wound up as the puck came to her and pulled the trigger on the one-timer. The shot was rifled high toward the corner, just out of Scootaloo's reach. With the goal light illuminated and the crowd moaning, Applejack stood up tall and did a hoof pump before her teammates surrounded her.

"Ponyville power play goal, scored by number 88, Applejack, assisted by number 9, Rarity, and number 0, Fluttershy."

Soarin emerged from the box and the Red Wings got into their faceoff

formation. The Leafs made their way to center ice now holding a stunning 2-0 lead over the regular season champions. Spitfire won the faceoff and the Red Wings tried to muster up a goal before the first period came to an end. Pinkie came up with a couple clutch saves to deny the Wings a deficit-cutting goal as the final seconds of the first period ran out. Confused and concerned, the Cloudsdale crowd sat in silence as the teams exited the ice for the locker rooms. The Leafs happily strolled into their room and refreshed for the second period.

The mood inside the locker room was pleasant and ecstatic. The team was somewhat in awe of their 2-0 lead on the mighty Red Wings. Twilight stood before them and tried to smack them back to reality.

"Although we had a GREAT period, we cannot let the Red Wings back in. They've proven that they can easily enter back into a game at any point. We were just able to capitalize on their rust. Let's continue to own the puck because the longer we hold onto it, the less opportunities they have to score. If we get another goal early, we'll definitely have the momentum. Everypony got it? Control the puck and we'll be sitting pretty."

Rarity let out a laugh. "Oh Twilight, we're *a/ways* sitting pretty. Well, maybe I am more often than the rest of you."

Twilight rolled her eyes and then turned to lead the Leafs back to the ice for the next period.

The Golden Leafs were back on the ice first and were greeted by a round of boos. It took a few minutes before the Red Wings hit the ice, appearing that they were given some extra coaching by their captain during the intermission. Now that both teams were ready to go, the faceoff at center ice dropped and was won by Rainbow.

Ponyville's attempt at controlling the puck and owning time of possession started off shaky as the Red Wings skated much faster than they had in the first period. Also the Wings were making a very conscious attempt at hitting the Leafs. Coming out from behind her own net, Twilight passed the puck

to Rainbow along the glass before getting rocked by Soarin. Right when the puck came to Rainbow, she looked up and got absolutely steamrolled by Ditzzy Doo. The hit was jarring enough to spark the crowd for a giant cheer. Off the flattening of Rainbow, Ditzzy grabbed the puck and hit Spitfire in stride launching through the center. Twilight jumped in front of Spitfire to stop her from entering the crease. Spitfire was not deterred as she flicked the puck through her legs behind her to Pucks who was trailing behind. With a clear shot and with Spitfire and Twilight screening the goalie, Pucks rifled the puck to the left post. The puck glanced the pipe and hit the back of the net behind Pinkie for the goal. The crowd jumped up with the goal light flickering and the horn blaring as the Wings finally got on the scoreboard.

*"RED WINGS GOOOOOAAAALLL scored by number 5, PUCKSSS!
Assisted by number 13, SPIIIITFIIIIREEEEE!! And DITZY DOOOOOO!!*

"Hey Hey Hockeycloud" played as the Wings finished up their goal celebration and the Leafs set up at center ice. When play resumed, the Wings won the draw and proceeded to dominate the following two minutes. The Golden Leafs' zone resembled a shooting gallery as the Wings passed, shot, then collected the rebound to set right back up. The Leafs had trouble keeping up with the Wings' quick movements as the rust was all shaken off the Cloudsdale crew. Pinkie came up big with key saves and was exhausted by the end of the Wings' flurry. Pinkie had to cover up and took a while to hand the puck over so she could catch an extra breather. On the faceoff, Spitfire won it back to Ditzzy who held onto it so Gilda could get open near the left circle. Rarity picked up on the play and went over to cover Gilda as the puck came near them. Right as Gilda got the puck, Rarity whacked her stick onto Gilda's, snapping it in half. The referee's hoof immediately went up and the crowd was cheering for the penalty.

"Ponyville, number 9, two minutes for slashing."

Rarity pouted her way to the penalty box and Big Macintosh came in for Fluttershy to help out the penalty kill. Foal Louis Arena was rocking now because the crowd was alive and ready to encourage their Wings to tie the game up. The crucial faceoff on Pinkie's left was won by Rainbow and the Leafs dumped the puck down to Scootaloo. Scootaloo skated behind the net to hold it for Spitfire to collect. Spitfire carried the puck through center

and brought it into the zone herself with a nice deke past Big Macintosh. Twilight and Rainbow closed in on Spitfire and forced her to shoot the puck into the left corner for Gilda to pick up. The Leafs and Wings set up into the respective formations with Gilda holding the puck along the boards. With the Leafs in their box formation, giving the Wings space to move, Gilda fired the puck around the back of the net for Spitfire. Soarin cut to the left faceoff circle and Spitfire threaded the needle on the pass through Big Mac's and Rainbow's legs to him. Pinkie overextended herself to follow the puck and was leaving the whole top half of the net open. Soarin reared back for a shot with Rainbow diving to block. The puck glanced off Rainbow's stick blade, redirecting the shot just high enough to where it grazed the top of the crossbar and into the protective netting above the glass. A loud "Awwwww!" bellowed out from the stands as the Leafs had a big sigh of relief.

Rainbow won the faceoff to Big Macintosh who dumped the puck down to the Wings' end. One last burst up the center for the Wings' power play fell short as Spitfire's pass to Soarin was off the mark and picked up by Twilight. Twilight dumped the puck one last time before Rarity exited the penalty box and Big Mac retreated to the bench. Only twenty seconds remained in the second period and the Wings could not get another shot off. The crowd was mostly silent again with only a couple smatterings of cheers as the period ended and the teams skated off.

"Alright! Ten more minutes and we're up 1-0 going back to Ponyville! Let's get this!" shouted Rainbow.

Twilight shot down Rainbow's remark with her own. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, team. The game isn't over yet. It's not over until the clock reads 0:00. Our lead is only by one. All it takes is one goal by Cloudsdale and this game is up for grabs. We're going to crowd the middle area and force them to dump the puck in. Not only will they have to skate more to get the puck, but it will allow us a chance to get the puck out of our zone more often. We have to pressure them and force them to make bad decisions. If we sit back and let them pile up shots, it's not going to end well. Let's forecheck, force them to dump, and hold on for the win. Pressure on three, team."

The Leafs got together for their usual pump up tactic.

"One...two...three...PRESSURE!"

The Leafs exited the locker room and hit the ice for the third and final period of game one.

"Here we go Red Wings, here we go!" was the prevailing chant among the fans as both teams were back for the third period. Wings and Leafs skated around their ends before the referee called them over for the faceoff. Spitfire and Rainbow met at the dot and went helmet-to-helmet. When the puck dropped, Spitfire dipped under Rainbow and squeezed the puck back to Pucks. The Leafs stayed up in the neutral zone instead of dropping back on defense, hoping to force a Wings turnover. Since they couldn't move into the Leafs' zone, Pucks and the Wings had to dump into the corner and chase after it. The Leafs' strategy was working early as they grabbed the puck from the Wings' dumps and brought it back on offense. As the opening minutes of the period went on, the Leafs could not get the backbreaking goal and the Wings began to figure out the Leafs' forecheck. The Wings passed quicker and switched up their natural positions to confuse the Leafs.

With half the period over, the Wings controlled the puck and had to dump it down into the Leafs' corner. Twilight went over to corral it but Spitfire came in fast to take it away. Rarity and Gilda came over to help win the puck battle as well. After a few minutes of pushing and poking, the puck squirted out from the scrum to the middle of the zone. Rainbow saw an opportunity and sprinted for the puck. Ditzzy dove to poke the puck away from Rainbow's path but missed, leaving Rainbow open for a breakaway. Spitfire got out from the corner and cranked up her speed trying to catch up to Rainbow. With Spitfire hot on her tail, Rainbow tried skating harder as both teams followed. When Rainbow wound up to fire a shot, Spitfire leaned forward and yanked the puck away. Rainbow continued her follow through and fell to the ice. Spitfire bolted the other direction with Fluttershy turning around to stop her from breaking away. Spitfire and Fluttershy were flank-to-flank as they closed in on Pinkie. Just as Spitfire went to make a move, Fluttershy stuck her stick out for the puck and knocked Spitfire to the ice. The crowd erupted with booing as the puck landed on Pinkie's pad for her to cover up. When it looked like the Leafs got away with a break, the referee glided over and pointed his hoof at the net.

"Penalty shot awarded to Cloudsdale!"

Red Wings fans stopped their jeering and were now cheering wildly as the referee skated the puck to the center dot and Spitfire drifted around behind it. The Wings and Leafs gathered at their respective benches and the fans all stood up to watch. With the blow of the whistle, Spitfire began her stride and picked up the puck at center ice. Pinkie came out near the faceoff circles to cut down the angle and backed in as Spitfire got closer. Spitfire moved the puck right then left, then pushed it up closer to Pinkie. Pinkie was now in the crease and came up as Spitfire pulled the puck back. With Pinkie out of the net and on her knees, Spitfire floated the puck up over Pinkie's blocker. Pinkie was thrown off by the shot and got a piece of it when she stood up but in the end, the puck flopped back down to the ice and trickled into the net. Foal Louis Arena erupted as Spitfire skated over toward her teammates at the bench.

*"RED WINGS GOOOOOAAALLL scored by number 13,
SPIIIITFIIIIIREEEE!!*

The game was now tied 2-2 as the Leafs looked on incredulously at what just happened. The Red Wings were still stoic in their demeanor and lined up for the faceoff, ready to take over the game. The Leafs quivered a tiny bit as they took their place. Rainbow won the faceoff but the Leafs quickly turned the puck over with poor passing. Cloudsdale controlled the puck as the electricity returned to the arena atmosphere.

A "LET'S GO WINGS!" chant echoed while the Wings cycled the puck around the Leafs' zone. After a very hard shot on net from Ditzzy, Pinkie gave the puck up to Rainbow who sought to put the team on her back and to reclaim the lead. Rainbow slashed through the neutral zone and tried passing it over to Applejack but missed. Pucks intercepted the puck and pushed it forward to Soarin who now had a 2-on-1 along with Spitfire. Rainbow spun around and got back to defend the break off her own bad pass. The crowd stood up to watch the play unfold hoping for a reason to celebrate again. Soarin passed to Spitfire as they crossed the Ponyville blue line. Rainbow stayed with Soarin, leaving Pinkie to deal with Spitfire. Spitfire aimed a shot right at Pinkie's right pad. The puck bounced off right onto Soarin's stick unbeknownst to Rainbow. Soarin flicked the rebound in,

whipping Foal Louis Arena into a frenzy and sending the Leafs spiraling into despair.

"RED WINGS GOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLL!!! Scored by number 96, SOOOOOOAAAAAAAAARIIIIINNINN!! Assisted by number 13, SPIIIITFIIIIIEEEEE!! And number 5, PUCKSSSSS!!

Soarin was smothered in the corner by the Wings as the arena reached a deafening pitch between the goal siren and the crowd. Rainbow knelt down to the ice and banged her head against it in disappointment. Twilight and the others skated up to her to console her. During the Wings' celebration, an octopus was flung onto the ice which garnered another loud cheer. The Wings' zamboni mule trotted out to pick it up and flung it around his head much to the delight of the Wings faithful. When the revelry died down, Twilight called a timeout to delay the restart of the game. Pinkie came off the ice and Big Macintosh went on as the extra attacker since a minute and change remained in the game.

The referee called both teams over for the faceoff as Foal Louis Arena continued to stand. Spitfire won the faceoff to Ditzzy who immediately tried firing into the open net. The puck skipped wide and Twilight went back to pick it up. Twilight passed up to Applejack who then tried hitting Rainbow cutting through the center. The pass missed and flopped into the corner where Pucks went after it. Big Macintosh charged in and pinned Pucks to the boards while trying to get the puck out. The puck came out to Rarity and she passed it to Twilight at the point. Thirty seconds remained in game one as the Leafs tried to tie up the contest. Twilight wound up for a shot hoping to make a Wing dive but nothing doing. She passed over to Fluttershy who then passed over to Applejack. Big Macintosh parked himself in the crease and towered over the young Scootaloo. All the Leafs needed was to fire on net but the Wings' perimeter defense clogged the shooting lanes and stifled the Leafs' movement. Applejack battled along the glass with Soarin and Spitfire on her. Ten seconds left. Rainbow swooped in and skillfully poked the puck out of the huddle to Fluttershy. Fluttershy ripped off a shot in desperation toward the net. As the puck came in, Big Macintosh shifted over to try to get a stick on it. Wings' fans yelled out the final seconds. "Five...four...three...TWO...ONE..." The puck glanced off Big Mac's stick and landed wide of the net, killing the Leafs' chances to tie game one.

The final horn rung out as the Red Wings met at the net to hug Scootaloo and to celebrate the game one win. Fireworks exploded near the scoreboard and streamers shot out into the crowd. At the other end, the Leafs hung their head in bitter disappointment. Twilight's crew sadly skated off toward their locker room having been defeated by the Red Wings for the third time this season under the same circumstances: blowing an early lead.

Ponyville's locker room was dead silent as the team undressed. Once it appeared that everyone was done, Twilight kept her head up and stood up at the front of the room, remembering what happened last time they lost to the Wings.

"We didn't close it out and get it done. We gave Cloudsdale life and just as we thought, they made the most of it. We're still a good team! We held them off for two periods. We have the power and talent to beat them. We just need to put a full three period effort together. Hold your heads high because if you were to ask anypony on the street before the season started, no one would have imagined that we would be here right now. We are defying expectations by being here and even hanging with Cloudsdale. We can beat them! We have a great opportunity to go back home and tie this series up in front of our fans. All we need is a solid, complete effort and we'll be back here for game three. I'm not going to mope around this time. I believe we can win and I hope you believe as well because if you don't, then you might as well not show up at Ponyville Pond. Let's get home and let's come back here for game three, alright?"

"You got it, Twilight!" said Rainbow who appeared not too beaten up by her game-losing turnover.

Applejack stood up proudly. "I believe in this team! We can do it, y'all! Like Twi said, just need ta' play a full game is all."

"We'll win the next game because I want to use my adorable winged skates again!" squeaked Fluttershy.

Fluttershy's response lightened the mood as everyone laughed at her cute,

yet serious reason.

"Back to Cloudsdale!" shouted Twilight.

"Back to Cloudsdale!" responded the Leaf.

Three Stars for Ponyville @ Cloudsdale

** Spitfire (CRW)*

*** Ditzie Doo (CRW)*

**** Pinkie Pie (PGL)*

EHL Semifinals

(1) Cloudsdale vs. (4) Ponyville

(Cloudsdale leads 1-0)

Game 1: CLOUDSDALE 3, Ponyville 2

Game 2: @ Ponyville

Game 3 (if nec.): @Cloudsdale

(2) Appleloosa vs. (3) Canterlot

(Canterlot leads 1-0)

Game 1: Canterlot 2, APPLELOOSA 1

Game 2: @ Canterlot

Game 3 (if nec.): @ Appleloosa

Chapter 17

Semifinals: Game 2

The Ponyville Golden Leafs were back home in Ponyville awaiting to hit the ice to even up their series with the Cloudsdale Red Wings. Winter was in its final day with spring quickly arriving. Waking up later than usual, Twilight Sparkle drowsily glanced at the calendar to see what day it was. Encircled and in bold, black letters read "WINTER WRAP-UP".

"Oh I completely forgot that winter wrap up is today! Ugh, I'm going to be late!"

Twilight galloped around her bedroom to grab her multi-team leader vest and her Golden Leafs hat and scarf and bolted out the door. When she arrived at town hall, the rest of her teammates were there in their respective vests. The other Ponyvillians were already hard at work helping to clean winter away. Twilight stood with her friends who were being instructed by Mayor Mare.

"It is quite alright. Your team has a very important game coming up. We do not expect you to help us as we learned from the last winter wrap up how to be organized. Really, conserve your strength. You have helped Ponyville enough by lifting the town's spirits and inspiring the ponies to work harder!"

"All right! I'm going back to sleep then," said Rainbow as she began to fly away.

"WAIT!" yelled Twilight, biting Rainbow by the tail to anchor her back to the ground. "That's very thoughtful of you, Mayor, but we have a duty as Ponyvillians to help with the wrap up. We are a part of the community and we would feel awful if we didn't lend our hooves to help."

Applejack trotted up next to Twilight. "Darn tootin'! It just wouldn't be fair to the ponyfolk if we skipped out on them."

"Are you sure? It would mean a lot if you could help, but the town understands if you need to practice," responded the mayor.

Fluttershy interjected, "Oh yes, we would be delighted to help. There are a lot of critters that need to be woken up."

"And there are a lot more birds to build nests for this year," replied Rarity.

The mayor had a relieved look upon her face. "Excellent. I will inform the interim team leaders to expect your help. On the town's behalf, I greatly appreciate your kindness and valor. We will be behind you with one-hundred percent support at the game."

"No problem, Mayor! We'll get this winter wrapped up in no time!" shouted Rainbow who came around to the idea and accepted the challenge.

"Yay! I'll get my skates!" squealed Pinkie.

With that, the Golden Leafs split up to join their usual teams with Twilight overseeing the entire process. The animals were awoken, clouds were pushed away, the ice was melted, birds nested back in the trees, and the farmlands were cleared and sown. Winter gave way to spring and Ponyville was green once again. Despite finishing even quicker than the previous year, the Golden Leafs were exhausted and decided to cancel their brief run-through of game two. The team hit the hay early in order to recuperate for their big day.

Dawn cracked on game day and the sun shone as bright as ever. Even though the town worked exceptionally hard the day before, Ponyville was painted royal blue and gold in honor of their hockey team. Despite the fact

that their team was facing elimination, Ponyvillians maintained confidence and hope that the series would soon be tied. As per the usual, Twilight gathered the team at the treehouse to relax and stay loose before heading for the arena.

When it was time to depart, Twilight had a surprise for her friends.

"I was going to wait to give you all these, but since this might be our last day in the playoffs, I decided it wouldn't hurt. I made them myself!"

Twilight levitated a bag over to her and unveiled its contents. They were pendants with each teammate's cutie mark inside the Golden Leafs' logo. Spike's had a gleaming amethyst stone while Sweetie Belle's had the Cutie Mark Crusader patch. The team admired and adored their gift, even Big Macintosh and Spike who had received more masculine looking necklaces.

"Thank you, darling! This is exquisite!" exclaimed Rarity.

"No kidding! This is awesome!" seconded Rainbow.

Twilight blushed. "It's nothing, really. Just something to commemorate this season and our togetherness as a team."

Applejack proudly put her pendant on. "That's mighty thoughtful of ya, sugarcube."

"Group hug everypony!" yelled Pinkie.

The Golden Leafs gathered in the center of the room to share a giant hug, except Big Mac and Spike who looked on with glowing smiles.

Rainbow trotted to the door and whipped it open. "Now that the mushy stuff is taken care of, let's hit the arena and tie this baby up!"

"Yeah!" responded the others.

Together, the Golden Leafs marched out of the treehouse and proudly strolled down to Ponyville Pond ready to take on their biggest challenge.

A tunnel of screaming fans lined the entranceway to the arena. The Golden Leafs strolled through the fans and gave them all hoof bumps and waves as they passed through. When it was time to enter the building, the Leafs gave one final wave to their loyal supporters. Once the team passed the threshold and were on their way to the locker room, their lightheartedness and warm feelings quickly hardened into serious focus. When they arrived at the locker room, the doors were shut and bolted to dispel any distractions.

Inside, the team went through their dressing ritual, with no one deviating from the usual routine for superstitious reasons. Once ready, Twilight trotted to the front of the room to deliver what could be another final speech of the season.

"Team, great moments are born from great opportunity. And that's what we have here tonight. That is what we've earned here tonight. A game. If we play them ten more times, they might win nine. But not this game. Not tonight. Tonight we skate with them. Tonight we stay with them and we shut them down because we can! Tonight we are the greatest hockey team in all of Equestria. We might not have been born to be hockey players, but we are now and we are here tonight. This is our time. Their time is almost done. It's going to be over soon. I'm tired of losing to the great team the Red Wings are. Forget them. This is our time! Let's go out there and take it! If you aren't going to remember anything I've just said, then only remember this. When you put on this jersey, you represent yourself, your teammates, and this great town. The name on the front is a lot more important than the one on the back. We're taking this thing back to Cloudsdale. Let's go out there and give it everything we've got!"

Instead of jumping up and feeling rah-rah, the intense Leafs sat quietly and focused. Each gave Twilight a small nod to show their reception of her inspiring words. The one-minute horn blared inside the rink area, prompting the team to rise up together and march toward the doors. The Leafs blew past the EqSPN crew, who wanted a pre-game interview, and continued toward the ice. Ponyvillians were roaring from their seats for their team's entrance. Ponyville Pond was making noise for their Golden Leafs and erupted when the door opened releasing the Leafs to the ice. The team bolted around their end of the ice while the Red Wings emerged from their locker room. The wild cheering turned into vicious booing for the opposition

as both teams were now encircling their respective sides.

During warm-ups, a calming sight caught the Leafs' eyes. Seated in the front row adjacent to the Leafs' bench sat their families: Granny Smith with Apple Bloom, the Dashes and Fluttershies (wearing Golden Leafs jerseys), Rarity and Sweetie Belle's parents, the Pies, and Twilight's parents. The Leafs broke concentration to happily acknowledge their families but quickly regained their focus, skating even harder. When the pre-game countdown clock ran out, the lights dimmed and the introductions started drawing another roar from the crowd.

Mr. Cake belted out the starting lineups and charged the crowd up even more. When the lights returned, a rousing "GO LEAFS GO!" chant filled the air. The teams' reserves took their places on the benches while the starters lined up for the opening faceoff. Pinkie and Scootaloo gave their ready signal to the referee who was standing before Spitfire and Rainbow. The puck dropped and the Leafs' elimination game began.

Nerves were visibly high for both squads as the first couple possessions broke down into sloppy passing and turnovers. Cloudsdale was the first team to noticeably control the puck and brought it into the Ponyville zone. Soarin and Applejack were together along the right wing boards battling for the puck. Soarin broke through and passed it to the corner for Spitfire who had Rainbow right on her tail. Those two fought for the puck as Gilda and Rarity came closer to help out. While taking plenty of small jabs in the back, Spitfire kicked the puck back along the boards to Soarin who re-engaged in his battle with Applejack. Applejack poked and prodded away but couldn't grab the puck. Soarin shot the puck back to the corner but was still being held up against the glass by Applejack. As play went on, Soarin tried getting loose but was kept close. The referee looked over, saw Soarin's struggle, and flung his hoof up in the air. Once the Leafs touched the puck, play stopped and the Red Wings were about to enjoy their first power play of the evening.

"Ponyville, number 88, two minutes for holding."

Applejack gave her argument as she drifted into the penalty box. Big Macintosh came off the bench for Rarity before the faceoff dropped to

Pinkie's right. Rainbow won the puck back to Fluttershy who slapped it off the glass. Unfortunately for the Leafs, Ditzzy was hugging the boards and kept the puck in the zone. Ditzzy passed off to Soarin on the right wing who passed it right back to Ditzzy when Big Mac came over to apply pressure. Ditzzy passed over to Pucks at the other point while Soarin broke for the crease. Gilda got separation from Rainbow and was open on the left wing boards. Pucks passed to Gilda who then tried zipping a pass to Soarin at the top of the crease. The Leafs all collapsed in on Soarin, leaving the point open. Soarin was able to flop the puck out to Ditzzy who cranked up a shot. The puck shot off her stick like a laser beam right into the top corner of the net, just above Pinkie's glove. The goal light illuminated and was accompanied by a disappointing groan from the crowd as the Red Wings came together at Ditzzy.

"Red Wings power play goal scored by Ditzzy Doo, assisted by number 96, Soarin, and number 44, Gilda."

Applejack frowned while exiting the penalty box and rejoined her team at center ice. Rarity was back in and Rainbow won the faceoff. The Leafs were eager to go on offense and tie the game in order to get the crowd back into the game. Once in the Red Wings' zone, the Leafs' offensive pressure was meager and quickly broken down due to poor passing. Cloudsdale rushed back up the ice and were back in the Ponyville end. The Leafs stuck with their pony-on-pony defense and tried forcing the Wings to cough the puck up. The Wings countered with quick passes and stout play along the boards, easily fending off the Leafs' prodding and poking. The puck was on the right wing boards with Soarin and Applejack battling again. Applejack was able to come away with the puck but had her pocket picked by a swooping Spitfire. Spitfire cruised down the slot, drawing in the Leafs' defense, before kicking it back out to Pucks at the blue line. As Spitfire left the crease, Soarin came in and reclaimed his post at the top of the crease with Twilight trying to push him away. Pucks saw Rainbow closing in on him and ripped off a shot. Soarin nudged Twilight away just enough to tip his stick up to get a piece of the shot. Soarin's deflection caused the puck to rocket upwards into the top of the net. Pinkie's water bottle popped off, signifying another Red Wings goal. The crowd voiced their displeasure toward the Wings while they celebrated again.

"Red Wings goal, scored by number 96, Soarin, assisted by number 5, Pucks, and number 13, Spitfire."

The Leafs found themselves in an early 0-2 hole and it was about to get worse. When play resumed, the Leafs got into the Cloudsdale zone but were only able to muster up one shot. Cloudsdale grabbed the rebound and were working their way into the Leafs' end. An errant pass by Gilda to Spitfire came to Twilight and she tried passing up to start a rush. Spitfire chased Twilight down and pressured her into flinging the puck up and over the glass, just before the blue line. The crowd was booing again as the referee called a penalty and directed Twilight to the penalty box.

"Ponyville, number 42, two minutes for delay of game."

Twilight shook her head as she went into the box and Big Macintosh was back on for the penalty kill in Rarity's place. Rainbow won the ensuing faceoff and the Leafs dumped the puck down to Scootaloo. The Wings regrouped to form a rush but Rainbow blazed in to cut down the passing lane, dumping the puck back down again. This time, the Wings made it into the zone and set up their power play formation. After a few passes, Gilda had the puck and fired wide of the net, allowing Fluttershy to grab the puck and fling it down the ice once more. Thirty seconds remained on the Wings' power play and fifty seconds remained in the period. Scootaloo came up to pass the puck to Spitfire to lead a final power play series. Spitfire carried the puck in over the blue line and made a beeline for the left wing boards. Rainbow and Big Mac came over to cut her off, leaving Ditzzy an open lane to the net. Spitfire passed right through the two Leafs to Ditzzy who barreled in on net. Fluttershy shifted over to cut her off, but by doing so left her post open for Gilda to sneak in the backdoor. Right when she received the puck, Ditzzy shot off a one-timer. Pinkie made a great kick save but couldn't control the rebound. The puck caromed off Pinkie's pad and landed right onto Gilda's stick. With a quick slap, Gilda put the puck home, expanding the Wings' lead to three.

"Red Wings power play goal, scored by number 44, Gilda. Assisted by Ditzzy Doo, and number 13, Spitfire."

The Leafs' overzealousness of covering Spitfire left them vulnerable and the Wings made them pay. The crowd fell silent, stunned by the first period onslaught by Cloudsdale. The remaining 25 seconds of the period ran out

with little action. Beaming with confidence, the Wings quickly headed off the ice while the Leafs gathered at their bench. The Leafs' families all stood up and were tapping on the glass to show their support but the team continued on their path off the ice.

The mood was tense and on the verge of accusatory in the locker room. The Leafs were dumbfounded as to how they started off so slow and allowed Cloudsdale to take a 3-0 lead. Twilight trotted over to Pinkie to surprise her with a lineup change.

"Sorry Pinkie, but I have no other choice. Sweetie Belle is going in for you for the rest of the game."

"What? Aww come on Twilight, I can turn it around, I promise! I'll bake you a caaaakeeee."

Guilt weighed down on Twilight's heart as she didn't want to pull her friend. Twilight let out a sigh. "We need Sweetie Belle in net. It will force us to focus harder on defense to keep this game from spiraling out of control. I'm sorry, Pinkie."

Pinkie crossed her forelegs and pouted. She started taking off her pads as Twilight went to Sweetie Belle. "Alright Sweetie, we're counting on you to help stop the bleeding. We'll do our best to keep the puck away from you."

"Okay, boss!" squeaked Sweetie Belle with a salute. She proceeded to put on her pads with Rarity's help.

Twilight informed the rest of the team of the change. "Alright team, Sweetie Belle is going in for Pinkie-"

"What?!" shouted Rainbow and Applejack.

"I know, but desperate times call for desperate measures. We need to slow the Wings' roll and try to chip away at their lead. It may look daunting, but all we need is to get one goal to get some momentum back on our side. This game is far from over."

"But Pinkie has been our goalie all year!" exclaimed Rainbow.

"I know, but with Sweetie in net, we'll have no choice but to focus on defense. We're also going to hit more. We let Cloudsdale skate right by us. If we can rattle them, we can force turnovers and get chances. Let's tighten up and hit somepony!"

The team let out a half-hearted "Yeah" as they stood up to go back out on the ice.

Twilight tried to flash a smile but the Leafs trotted right past her.

The second period began with Ponyville Pond resembling a library more than a hockey rink. The fans were unenthused since they weren't given a reason to cheer yet. The Leafs tried applying their strategy on the Wings to attempt to spark something. Soarin carried the puck into the Ponyville zone and was met with a giant Applejack check. The puck came to Spitfire who dumped it into the corner and chased after it. When she arrived there, Rainbow caught up and squeezed her against the glass, creating a little stir from the fans. One well-placed poke check later, Rainbow had control and led a Leafs rush on offense. Rainbow tried taking on the Wings' defense on her own by dancing through the zone. She deked around Ditzzy, dodged a check attempt by Gilda, and went flank-to-flank with Pucks. Rainbow soon ran out of space and drove a shot wide, eliciting an "Oooooooh" from the Leafs faithful. The Wings regrouped and started their charge back on offense. Their rush was stopped short at center ice thanks to a well-timed check on Gilda by Rarity of all ponies. The Leafs were starting to gather up some steam as they truly controlled the puck for the first time in the period.

Applejack dumped the puck behind the net for Rainbow to pick up. Rainbow fended off Pucks to keep play alive, slapping the puck around the boards to Rarity. Gilda came in for a revenge hit but Rarity got the puck off in time to Fluttershy. Fluttershy held the puck since none of her teammates were open. Feeling the pressure from the Wings' defense, Fluttershy tried shooting the puck but whiffed. Spitfire dove in and took the puck away, sprinting off to a breakaway. The crowd stood as Spitfire closed in Sweetie Belle. Sweetie stayed in the net and awaited Spitfire's maneuvers. Spitfire kept the puck steady as she closed in on the crease. Sweetie skated up a

tiny bit to try to cut off some of the angle. Spitfire came in on the left, leaning away from the net. When Sweetie followed her, Spitfire quickly moved the puck right and extended her stick out, as if she was tucking the puck around Sweetie. The puck slid into the net for the Wings' fourth goal of the evening as Spitfire was met by her teammates at the boards. Twilight and the Leafs looked down in disappointment because they were now in a deeper hole.

"Red Wings goal, scored unassisted by number 13, Spitfire."

The crowd woke up but it wasn't for cheering. With a loud swarm of boos ringing out, Twilight skated over to the referee to call timeout. The Leafs met at the bench as Twilight made a second lineup change.

"Sorry Fluttershy but we're going to have Big Macintosh come in for you. It's not because Spitfire took the puck from you. We just need a more physical presence, that's all. You've been a great defensepony and teammate."

With tears starting to well up in her eyes, Fluttershy quietly nodded and took her place on the bench next to Pinkie and Spike. Big Mac lined up with the Leafs for the next faceoff, hoping to provide a spark despite the 4-0 deficit. Rainbow won the faceoff and the Leafs were in the Cloudsdale end. Applejack had the puck on the right wing boards with Soarin nudging her. Big Mac skated in from the point to come to his sister's aid. Big Mac forcefully tore the puck away from Soarin and now held it against the boards. Interested in challenging the stallion, Gilda flew in to battle Big Mac. Gilda gave Big Mac a cross-check in the back, then another, and another, and another, but Big Mac wouldn't have any of it. He rumbled out of Gilda's pressure but she kept him pressed against the glass. Despite being held, Big Mac kept his hooves moving. The referee finally noticed Gilda's hold and was ready to call a penalty. Soarin came in to take the puck away but the whistle blew. The crowd finally gave out a cheer as the referee announced the call.

"Cloudsdale, number 44, two minutes for holding."

Gilda angrily stormed toward the penalty box while both teams lined up for the faceoff next the Scootaloo. Rainbow won the faceoff back to Twilight,

allowing the Leafs to set up their power play formation. The Leafs needed to score on this power play if they wanted to have any shot at coming back. Twilight passed to Rarity, who took the other spot on the point, and then Rarity passed to Big Macintosh on the left wing boards. Rainbow tried slicing down the center but was covered tightly by Spitfire. Big Mac passed back to Rarity with Rainbow continuing her stride to get open. Rarity swung the puck back over to Twilight who held it for a bit. Rainbow hesitated for a moment then blasted to the top of the crease, fooling Spitfire. Twilight fed Rainbow the puck through the Wings' box formation. Rainbow quickly fired on net as she was pushed away by Pucks and Ditzzy. The puck zinged into the top left corner before Scootaloo could even move her blocker. In one second, the mortuary-like silence of Ponyville Pond exploded into a wild yell as the Leafs were finally on the board. Rainbow danced off to the corner and awaited her teammates for the goal celebration.

"PONYVILLE POWER PLAY GOOOOOOAAAALLL!! Scored by number 20, RAAAAAINBOOOOW DAAAAASHHHH!! Assisted by number 42, TWIIIIIGHT SPAAARKLEEEEE!! And number 9, RAAAAARITYYYYY!!"

Gilda exited the box with a slam of her stick against the door. The Red Wings lead was now three with the Leafs looking to chip away even more before the second intermission. Less than a minute remained in the period as the faceoff took place at center ice. Rainbow outhustled Spitfire and kicked the puck back to Big Macintosh. He immediately slung the puck back up to Rainbow who skated right through the Red Wings forwards. Rainbow rumbled her way toward the net with Pucks and Ditzzy trying to poke the puck away. Rainbow wound up to shoot but was knocked over by Pucks at the last second. Falling to the ice, Rainbow fired off an odd shot. The puck fooled Scootaloo, but it clanged off the post. The crowd jumped up at the scoring attempt and let out another "Awww" when it missed. The final seconds of the period ticked away with the score remaining 4-1 in favor of Cloudsdale. With momentum ever so slightly shifting over to the Golden Leafs' side, they were given a hearty round of applause by their fans when they left the playing surface. The Leafs felt better about themselves and held their heads high when they entered the locker room.

Instead of giving new instructions of inspirational words to the team,

Twilight told her crew to freshen up and to then come out into the hallway. Slightly confused, the team complied and found themselves back near the rink. Even though there were only zambonis on the ice, Leafs fans were still making noise. A small section started a "GO LEAFS GO" chant with the rest of the arena joining in. Twilight raised her hoof to the sky.

"Hear that? These fans, our fans, are still cheering for us. Even though we're losing by a lot, they still believe. They have faith. They know we have the talent and ability to come back."

"They are makin' a lot of noise still. That's amazin'," said Applejack in awe.

"Absolutely admirable. They love us, they really love us!" said Rarity in agreement.

"We gotta do everything we can to keep them cheering! We're all in this together!" exclaimed Rainbow.

"Right! We only have ten minutes left. Ten minutes to leave everything out on the ice. Let's give them everything we got. No regrets, no thinking what could have been. If we give one-hundred percent, there will be no uncertainty when it's all over. Let's do it for OUR FANS! FOR PONYVILLE!"

The Leafs all stuck their sticks in the air. "FOR PONYVILLE!"

Refocused with the crowd doing their best to spur them on, the Golden Leafs came out with a strong start to the third period. The Wings could not move the puck and found themselves either on the ice or on the glass from the Leafs' hitting. The Leafs were in the Cloudsdale zone looking to chip away at their 4-1 deficit. Rainbow was challenged by Spitfire behind the net and tried moving along the boards. Seeing Rainbow struggling, Applejack came by and set a pick on Spitfire to spring Rainbow loose. With room to move, Rainbow peeled around the net but was tripped up by Spitfire who reached through Applejack's pick. Rainbow crumpled to the ice, prompting the referee to blow the whistle for a penalty. With momentum inching closer toward the Leafs, the crowd's applause drowned out the ref's announcement.

"Cloudsdale, number 13, two minutes for tripping."

The faceoff was off to Scootaloo's left and won by Soarin. The Wings dumped the puck down for Sweetie to retrieve it and pass up to Rainbow. The Leafs hung back by the blue line and entered when Rainbow sliced down the middle. Rainbow drew in the Wings' box defense, then kicked it out to Big Macintosh who was covering the point. With the Wings' defense drawn in, Applejack found a lane to the net and parked herself in the crease. When Big Macintosh ripped off a shot, Rainbow dodged out from the middle, leaving space for the puck to fly through. Applejack saw the shot the whole way and got her stick on the puck, redirecting it through Scootaloo's five-hole for a very crucial goal. Leafs fans leapt to their hooves with the goal horn bellowing out and the Leafs coming together to celebrate.

"PONYVILLE POWER PLAY GOOOOAAAALLL!!! Scored by number 88, APPLLEEEJAAAACK!! Assisted by number 8, BIIIIIG MAAAACINTOSHHH, and number 20, RAAAAINBOOOOOW DAAAASH!!!"

Seven minutes remained in the game as the teams reset at center ice with a "GO LEAFS GO!" chant echoing to the rafters. This time Cloudsdale won the faceoff and controlled the puck in the Leafs' end, hoping to tack on an insurance goal. The Leafs tried playing physical but the Wings squirmed by with their speed. Spitfire passed to Gilda in the left corner and Gilda tried using her strength on Rarity to get to the net. Rarity couldn't hang on, leaving it up to Big Macintosh to come over and cut the griffon off. Before Gilda was met by Big Macintosh, Soarin snuck behind Twilight and called out to Gilda. Gilda quickly forced the puck over and it landed on Soarin's stick, just out of Twilight's reach. Soarin had to settle the bouncing puck down before shooting, giving Sweetie Belle time to move over. By time Soarin fired away, Sweetie Belle came over the top of it and clamped down, preventing what could have been a devastating Wings goal. The crowd yelled their approval as play was stopped. Sweetie was given plenty of love taps on the pads while the Leafs set up for the faceoff. Rainbow won the draw and the Leafs were back in business.

In the Cloudsdale end, the Leafs played along the boards and were able to hold off the Wings' pressure. Twilight had the puck at the point with both Rainbow and Applejack trying to gain access to the crease. With nowhere

to go, Twilight attempted to shoot. At the last second, Spitfire dove and poked the puck away, knocking it away toward center ice. Twilight and Spitfire were now in a race for the loose puck with the others quickly giving chase. Twilight and Spitfire went flank-to-flank with the puck inches away from them. Spitfire got to the puck first but in a very smart and skillful move, Twilight adjusted and slid her stick behind Spitfire's legs to scoop the puck right out from under her. When Twilight stole the puck away, Rainbow did a 180 and sprinted to the blue line. Twilight zinged over a pass right onto Rainbow's stick, giving her an open path to the net. The crowd jumped up with hope coursing through their veins as Rainbow had herself a breakaway. Rainbow reared her head back for a slap shot, drawing Scootaloo out of the crease. On the follow-through, Rainbow faked the slap shot and swiftly dove to the right, leaving Scootaloo out to dry. With the net now wide open, Rainbow slid the puck in and crashed into the boards. Ponyville Pond erupted once more and the Leafs smothered Rainbow in the corner.

*"PONYVILLE GOOOOOOAAAAALLLL!!! Scored by number 20,
RAAAAAINBOOOOW DAAAAASHH!! Assisted by number 42,
TWIIIIIGHT SPAAAARKLEEE!!"*

The once daunting 4-0 deficit was now 4-3 with four minutes remaining. Among the raucous yelling, a very audible "GO LEAFS GO!" chant stirred back up as the Wings called a timeout to recollect and regroup. When the Wings gathered at their bench to talk, the fans near the glass directed their shouting toward them, hoping to give them hearing troubles. After a few minutes of talking, the referee came over to break up the timeout. The Wings met the Leafs at center ice and play resumed with both teams placing everything on the line.

The puck bounced back and forth over center ice with both teams barreling into the offensive zone then getting denied by the defense. The Wings were more conservative in their approach, holding onto the puck longer and playing keep away as the Leafs tried forechecking and forcing a turnover. The Wings' keep away strategy helped burn two minutes off the clock, leaving just that, two minutes left. Sweetie Belle had just made another crucial save and stopped play. During the stoppage, Twilight quickly gathered her team for a new direction.

"When we hold the puck in the Cloudsdale end, Sweetie, you're going to the bench for Fluttershy. We're going for the extra attacker. Everypony got it? Also Rainbow, this is a VERY important faceoff. You have to win it!"

"Yes sir!"

Rainbow narrowed her eyes and licked her lips before bending in for the draw against Spitfire. When the referee started his motion to drop the puck, she placed her stick right under Spitfire's and won the puck back to Twilight. Twilight passed up to Applejack who crossed center ice. The crowd's yelling picked up when they saw Sweetie Belle scoot toward the bench for Fluttershy. A bit frazzled, Fluttershy nearly tripped while jumping over the bench but she recovered and was in on the Leafs' offensive charge. The Wings came up and challenged the Leafs' puck holder, forcing a long string of passes with no shots. Finally, with an open lane, Big Macintosh ripped a shot from the point. The puck was blocked by one of Pucks' legs, causing him a great deal of pain. The ricochet took the puck out of the zone, heading down toward the empty net. Rainbow blasted off along with Spitfire to chase down the puck with the fans eagerly looking on. With the comeback on the line, Rainbow found an extra gear and boosted herself past the Wings' center, taking the puck away and rushing back on offense. A roar erupted from the crowd when Rainbow retrieved the puck and started up their "GO LEAFS GO!" chant. Rainbow passed to Applejack who dumped it into the corner for Big Macintosh to rumble in and take it. Big Macintosh took on Ditzzy, Soarin, and Gilda while trying to bust open from the corner. Finally, with a giant push, Big Macintosh came out of the corner and passed it to the open point. Twilight wasn't going to make it, so she dropped her stick to yell to Fluttershy.

"FLUTTERSHY, YOU TAKE IT!!"

Running on pure adrenaline and with her nerves pounding on her like a thousand hammers, Fluttershy jumped up to retrieve the pass. Heart bursting and ears ringing, Fluttershy closed her eyes and ripped a shot on net. Scootaloo came over and put her glove up attempting the catch the blazing puck. The puck glanced off the glove and found its way to the back of the net. The roof almost tore off Ponyville Pond as all the fans jumped ten feet up in the air and yelled their lungs out. Fluttershy opened her eyes to see a horde of blue jerseys engulfing her and hugging her down to the ice.

"PONYVILLE GOOOOOOAAAAALLLL!!! SCORED BY NUMBER 0, FLUTTERSHY!! ASSISTED BY NUMBER 8, BIIIIIG MAAAACINTOSH!!!"

The Leafs peeled away from their celebratory pile while the Wings turned stoic and unemotional. Fluttershy took her seat back on the bench and was hugged by Spike and Pinkie while Sweetie Belle shuffled back into the net. Thirty seconds were all that remained and the key now was to not allow a breakdown before time ran out. Luckily, Rainbow won the faceoff again and the Leafs held on for the overtime period. Leafs fans remained standing and wildly yelled when the period horn rang out. The Leafs waved their sticks up in the air as they left the ice to whip up the fans even more. Both teams went off to their respective rooms to freshen up and refuel for sudden death.

No words were spoken during the intermission. Each and every one of the Leafs did what they needed to do to prepare for the new period. Their excitement from the game tying goal dissipated quickly and they refocused greatly. In the other locker room, the Wings followed suit with each player retooling and not saying a peep. Both teams knew what was on the line. For the Wings, a trip to the Celestia Cup Finals hung in front of them, while for the Leafs, their season and all the effort, blood, sweat, and tears they had invested in the season hung in front of them. When the intermission clock wound down to zero and the horn rang, both teams stood up and marched back out onto the ice with quiet intensity.

Not one fan was seated as the Wings and Leafs met at center ice for the faceoff. Ponyville Pond was vibrating from the deafening atmosphere as the referee slammed the puck down to begin overtime. Rainbow bested Spitfire again and won the faceoff back to Big Macintosh. Big Macintosh fired the puck into the corner for Rainbow and Applejack to chase after it. A giant scrum of Leafs and Wings converged at the corner, breaking out into a feisty scrap for puck possession. The puck jostled back and forth from a Wing possessing it to a Leaf possessing it. Finally, the puck squirted out to Rarity who had kept her distance from the pile-up. With only Gilda between her and the net, Rarity quickly fired a shot. The puck beat Scootaloo's

glove but she was bailed out by the post, with an enormous *clang* ringing out. The puck found its way back into the corner scrum where the Wings and Leafs did battle again. Finally, Spitfire used her agility and puck control skills to squeeze out of the Leafs' grasp.

Gary Horne on the call: "Here come the Wings on offense after the Leafs ALMOST put the game away with a post-rattling shot. Spitfire passes to Gilda in front of the bench and she dumps it into the corner. Spitfire charges in and beats Twilight Sparkle to the puck as the Red Wings set up along the perimeter. Spitfire holds off Twilight and passes off to Pucks at the point. Soarin rushes to the front of the net. Here comes Rainbow Dash and Applejack to pressure the Wings' shooter. Pucks and Ditzzy switch points clearing up room for Pucks to fire a shot. The puck bounces off Soarin and is somewhere in the Ponyville crease! Sweetie Belle can't find it! Neither can the Wings and the Leafs! A giant pile is forming in the crease trying to find the puck! The puck finally squirts out and Ditzzy Doo is swooping in **AND SHE SCOOOOOREEEEESS!! THE RED WINGS HAVE SCORED IN OVERTIME TO ADVANCE TO THE CELESTIA CUP FINALS!!** Ditzzy Doo sifted through the scramble for the puck and slammed it home to send Cloudsdale onto the next round!"

The Red Wings tackled Ditzzy Doo into the corner and were celebrating exuberantly while Ponyville Pond stood in complete silence. With one shot, the Leafs' season was demolished. All the time, effort, energy, and dedication spent trying to be a successful hockey team was taken away in one moment. In front of the net, every Leafs player laid flat on the ice, face down. After a minute of letting everything all sink in, the Leafs slowly and tearfully pulled themselves up off the ice surface. Rainbow, Applejack, Big Macintosh, and Spike had quivering, disappointed frowns on their faces. Twilight, Rarity, Sweetie Belle, Fluttershy, and Pinkie were completely distraught as tears flowed down their faces like five running faucets. The crowd snapped out of its silence and was now supporting their team with loud applause. Cloudsdale had already lined up at center ice for the post-series hoofshakes. The Leafs sadly made their way to center ice and began exchanging the traditional pleasantries.

Spitfire was first to greet Rainbow and whispered in her ear, "Keep your heads up. You guys are going to be great."

"Thanks. Good luck," responded Rainbow tersely.

The remainder of the hoofshake line concluded the same way, with Wings players telling the Leafs that their future is bright and the Leafs wishing the Wings good luck in the finals in return. At the end of the line, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle came together to share a giant hug. From the crowd, Apple Bloom pounded on the glass rapidly to show her support for her two friends. The Wings bunched up together one last time to share helmet taps before heading off to their locker room to party.

The Leafs stopped dead in their tracks and looked around the arena with their vision clouded by tears. Ponyville Pond, still at full capacity, rewarded their team with a very boisterous, sustained round of applause for everything the team had done for the season. After hearing the fans' appreciation and seeing their families' warm, loving faces smiling back at them, the Leafs wiped the tears from their eyes and started waving back. The applause grew louder as the team stood along the center ice circle. Together, they all raised their sticks to the sky then slapped them down onto the ice, drawing more applause. Drifting toward their locker room, Twilight and company finally cracked an overwhelmed smile, their tear ducts having dried out. The applause and cheering from the crowd could still be heard down the hallway and into the locker room as Ponyville showed they truly loved their Golden Leafs.

The smell of sweat and the sound of loud sniffing filled the air in the locker room. Many of the girls tried holding it together while they cleaned up but found themselves taking on tears again. When the team was out of their uniforms, Twilight tried to gather up her composure to address her friends.

"I *sniff* just wanted to *sniff* say-

Suddenly, a giant burst of light came from the center of the room. When the light dimmed down, Princess Celestia proudly stood before them with a caring smile on her face. She trotted up to each pony and gave them a consoling nuzzle.

"Fear not Golden Leafs for you have very much to be proud of. You have brought a community together and you gave thousands of ponies hope and courage. The hard work and dedication you exhibited all season was

admirable and inspirational. I am very proud of you all. I was not wrong in granting you a team."

Twilight and friends looked up to the princess with slight smiles and flush cheeks. Twilight trotted up to her mentor and hugged her.

"Thank you, Princess. We're glad we didn't disappoint you."

"You're very welcome. Remember to always give your all and to be the best team you can be. Twilight, I shall be looking forward to your report on teamwork and friendship."

Twilight nodded to her team. "No need Princess. I think we're ready to deliver it now."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Spike, take a letter please!...Oh, right."

Everyone laughed as Twilight blushed in embarrassment. "The Ponyville Golden Leafs learned a variety of very valuable lessons from this season. We learned that when responsibility is thrust upon you, you have to take action and perform to the best of your ability, even if you have to learn about the responsibility first."

Applejack took over the report next. "And that when yer learnin' somethin' new as a team, you have to have patience 'cause not everypony is going to pick it up right away. Also, when you face some rough times or face somepony who isn't followin' the rules, you have to keep yer cool and make the right decisions."

"Yeah, and you have to remember to sit back every once in a while to have fun and enjoying your time with your friends. Sure you can have some friendly competition, but at the end of the day, a real team gets the job done while having fun," continued Rainbow.

"And when somepony or some team is receiving unfair treatment, you must handle the situation with poise and class, not lowering yourself to childish complaints," said Rarity.

Pinkie bounced in front of Rarity to keep the report going. "Also when your friend is hurt, you have to stick up for them and help them out!" Pinkie playfully nudged Fluttershy as she spoke, referring to the Fillydelphia incident.

Fluttershy smiled and then reached over to pat Sweetie Belle on the head. "And if you see somepony else being hurt, you must try to lend a helping hoof because no pony should ever be hurt by others."

Twilight nodded and finished it off. "Finally, when working as a team, there are going to be some rough times where things won't always work out. In those times of trouble, you have to come together to wrinkle out any problems or issues while not letting your emotions get the best of you. Underneath the jerseys, and pads, and skates, we're all still best friends and with our friendship, no problem will ever be too great to handle as long as we care for each other and work together!"

Princess Celestia nodded with a grin. "Very well, Ponyville Golden Leafs. You have clearly demonstrated that you learned many lessons as a team and that those lessons have strengthened the bonds of your friendship. I must go now. Congratulations on your season and good luck next year."

"Thank you, Princess!" yelled the Leafs as she disappeared in another flash of light.

The Cloudsdale Red Wings went on to face the Canterlot Equestriens for the Celestia Cup after Canterlot dispatched the Appleloosa Black Apples in two straight games. The thrilling Celestia Cup Finals came down to a deciding game five where Canterlot did the unthinkable and won in Cloudsdale to capture their all-time leading 25th Celestia Cup. Equestriens' goalie Pony Joe was the Colt Smythe Trophy winner (Finals MVP) after posting two shutouts in the series.

At the EHL Awards Ceremony, the Golden Leafs were in attendance to support Rainbow Dash's winning of the Calder Maremorial Trophy for best rookie. Spitfire received the Hart Maremorial Trophy for league MVP, Sheriff Silverstar received the Norris Maremorial Trophy for best defensepony, and Bloomberg won the Jenneighs Trophy for best goals

against average among goalies.

Epilogue

Back at the EHL offices, Gary Bettpony was closing up the building for the summer. With the Celestia Cup making the rounds in Canterlot and the EHL Draft a month away, it was time for the league to go on a short hiatus. Gary closed his office door and locked it, with the noise of the lock echoing through the hallway. As the Commissioner trotted his way toward the exit, the lights suddenly flicked off.

"That's strange. Is there a power outage?"

Gary pulled a flashlight from his briefcase and turned it on. Right as he was about to leave the building, the main doors were bolted shut and an eerie red glow emanated from the receptionist's desk. Gary saw that the glow was from the telephone. Confused and slightly apprehensive, Commissioner Bettpony answered the phone.

"H-hello? Who is this?"

"Why hellooo Commissioner Bettpony! I certainly know who you are, but I'm quite sure you do not know who I am."

"Who is this?! What are you calling for?"

"What am I calling for? Let me put it this way. Do you remember the lights turning off just now?"

"Did you do that? Turn them back on whoever you are!"

"As soon as I snuffed out the lights, did you feel helpless and confused?"

"Well, yes, but damn it! Show yourself!"

"That little trick is just a very teeny tiny sample of my power. I thrive off causing confusion and making ponies feel terribly helpless. As for showing myself, well just turn around."

Commissioner Bettpony took in a giant gulp and slowly turned around. Towering before him was a very tall, snake-like creature with limbs composed of all sorts of various species. Beside him was a shadowed pony accomplice. With no time to react, Commissioner Bettpony dropped the phone and yelled in absolute horror. In a giant flash of light, the frightened EHL Commissioner was encased in stone. The mysterious figure and his companion laughed boisterously at their overtaking of the EHL's leader.

"The EHL is about to enter a world of chaos. The *great and powerful* world of **Discord**."

Three Stars from Cloudsdale @ Ponyville

* *Ditzy Doo (CRW)*

** *Spitfire (CRW)*

*** *Rainbow Dash (PGL)*

EHL Semifinals (Home Team in CAPS)

(1) Cloudsdale vs. (4) Ponyville

(Cloudsdale wins 2-0)

Game 1: CLOUDSDALE 3, Ponyville 2

Game 2: Cloudsdale 5, PONYVILLE 4 (OT)

(2) Appleloosa vs. (3) Canterlot

(Canterlot wins 2-0)

Game 1: Canterlot 2, APPLELOOSA 1

Game 2: CANTERLOT 4, Appleloosa 2

Celestia Cup Finals (Home Team in CAPS)

(1) Cloudsdale vs. (3) Canterlot

(Canterlot wins 3-2)

Game 1: CLOUDSDALE 5, Canterlot 2

Game 2: Canterlot 3, CLOUDSDALE (2 OT)

Game 3: CANTERLOT 4, Cloudsdale 0

Game 4: Cloudsdale 6, CANTERLOT 3

Game 5: Canterlot 2, CLOUDSDALE 0

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# The End of Equestria Hockey League, Season 1

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Season 2

Chapter 1

A New EHL?

"What is your vision? What is it that you wish to see? Fame? Money? Victory? What is your desire?" asked a sinister voice from the shadows of a room mostly enveloped in darkness. The only source of light was from a lamp that shone above an empty table, gently swaying back and forth. From the other end of the table, a second voice sharply rang out from the ever prevailing blackness.

"I desire victory and valor! I desire the Celestia Cup! I desire seeing Twilight Sparkle and her dumb little friends sink into humiliation and despair!"

The first voice chuckled at the response. "Is that all? Oh no no no, my dear. That is just chump change compared to MY vision. If you are going to receive my help, you're going to have to think bigger. More *chaotic*." Finally stepping into the dim light was the voice's owner: Discord. Discord grabbed the now flickering lamp and shone it right into his accomplice's face. The accomplice was The Great and Powerful Trixie, squinting and rearing back from the blinding glare.

"W-well then, what is YOUR vision?" asked Trixie with a mixture of hesitation and annoyance in her voice.

Discord released the lamp and tilted his head back for a hearty laugh. "Utter destruction. To crumble the foundations of Equestria with Princess Celestia and Princess Luna trapped under the remains. I'm going to use this dinky little hockey league to infiltrate Canterlot and to bring down Celestia's reign. That's my vision. Panic, disorder, chaos. Pegasi and unicorns and earth ponies fighting one another to the bitter end. You and the EHL are going to help me achieve this."

Trixie had an uneasy lump in her throat which she gulped down. "A-and what's in it for me if I help you?"

"First, as a sign of my thanks for releasing me from my stone prison, I will grant you immunity when I take over Equestria. I'll have you know that is a very large concession I'm willing to make. Also, you said you wanted the Celestia Cup right? As the new EHL Commissioner, I can make sure your team receives, shall we say, advantageous benefits? You will still have to play the game. I just can't hand you the Cup. We don't want our cover blown, do we? This plan is going to take time to develop."

Trixie's nervousness simmered down as she daydreamed about her raising the Celestia Cup high over her head, the Manehattan crowd chanting her name "TRIX-IE! TRIX-IE! TRIX-IE!". She also envisioned Twilight and the Golden Leafs lying prostrate on the ice, crying their eyes out over the loss. Blatantly disregarding the welfare of Equestria, Trixie began buying into Discord's plan. "So how are we going to take over the EHL?"

Discord flashed an evil smile and with the snap of his paw made a jeweled box appear. Trixie's eyes widened as the box's contents were revealed: the Elements of Harmony. Discord floated Twilight's tiara over to Trixie and placed it upon her head. Trixie grabbed the tiara and stared into it with incredulous glee. "H-how did you get these?!?"

"It was easy, my dear. Everypony in Equestria is so trusting and optimistic that they stupidly leave everything out in the open for anyone to take. It makes me gag that they believe that everyone is good and selfless. Bleh! We'll show them. As for the Elements, I have a crew of hockey minions that will wear these frilly necklaces and use them to turn the EHL inside-out. They have been instructed to do whatever it takes to hold off Twilight Sparkle and her pesky friends. As long as the Elements hang tightly around their subservient necks, there's no way we can be stopped!"

Discord bellowed out a round of evil laughter as Trixie joined in with her high-pitched squealing. The lamp flickered and began swaying again. Finally, the light was snuffed out and the sinister meeting was adjourned.

"Come on, Twi! We don't wanna be late to our very first EHL Draft!"

"Yeah! We only have one pick! We don't want to lose it because we're not there to make it!"

"Hold on, girls! I just need to grab one more thing!"

Inside her treehouse, Twilight galloped around the room to pick up several sheets of blank paper to pass them off as scouting reports she had filed. With folders and papers swirling about, Twilight levitated her "reports" beside her as she trotted out the door and slammed it shut. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were first to greet her with Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Big Macintosh also waiting. Applejack noticed Twilight's giant pile of papers and let out an overwhelmed whistle.

"Holy apples, Twi'. That there is a lot of paper. I reckon you're holdin' 'bout four trees in that pile."

Twilight proudly raised her head and patted the stack. "These are the, uhh, scouting reports for the 85 potential draft picks we can choose from. I spent all week studying them and listing their strengths and weaknesses."

Rainbow covered her mouth and proceeded to cough. "coughNERDcough." Twilight gave Rainbow a stern look while Pinkie Pie blurted out a laugh.

"Whoever we draft, I hope they're nice," said Fluttershy.

"Don't worry, Fluttershy. I took into account their character and personality as well." As she said this, Twilight gave Big Macintosh an inconspicuous wink and nod, as if they had a secret plan.

Rarity saw Twilight's obvious wink and posed a question. "I don't intend to be rude, but why are coming along with us, Big Macintosh?"

Before Big Mac could respond, Twilight quickly answered for him. "Because he hasn't seen Canterlot yet and we're allowed to bring seven members of personnel to the draft. Isn't that right?" With her back turned to the others, Twilight motioned to Big Macintosh to keep quiet and to play along.

"Eeyup."

Pinkie Pie hopped to the head of the pack and pointed onward toward Canterlot. "Well, that answers that question. Let's go! I can't wait to host a party for our newest teammate!"

Twilight wiped her brow as the Golden Leafs marched to Canterlot to take part in their very first EHL Draft.

All members of the EHL, players, officials, and executives alike, gathered at the Celestia Centre in Canterlot. As more teams arrived with their personnel, a murmur began to grow among the crowd. No one had seen Commissioner Bettpony since he awarded the Canterlot Equestriens the Celestia Cup a month ago. Greeting the teams as they arrived were EHL's vice presidents, Coltin Campbell and Brendan Shaneighan. When asked of Commissioner's Bettpony's recent whereabouts, they could only offer a confused shrug.

The Ponyville Golden Leafs were the last team to stroll into the Celestia Centre. While they trotted down to their designated table, the other EHL teams stood and applauded the Golden Leafs for the valiant effort they showed in their inaugural season. Twilight and friends either blushed or proudly raised their heads as they made their way down the main aisle. The only pony not applauding was Trixie, who instead was cackling softly under her breath for she already knew what was about to unfold next.

Once all six teams and the EHL officials and executives took their seats, a fanfare of trumpets rang out through the arena. Led by the royal guards, Princess Luna slowly strutted down the aisle while levitating the Celestia Cup high in front of her. Everyone bowed before she sat with her fellow Equestriens. Princess Luna hovered the Cup to its stand which was placed beside the podium. Serving as a backdrop on the stage were the six logos of the EHL franchises. Each logo had a large black slate next to it, a nameplate for when that team's draft pick would be announced. Anxious to begin the festivities, the various squeaks and rustling of fidgeting ponies reverberated to the rafters. For each second Commissioner Bettpony did not appear on the stage, the anxious noises grew louder.

Finally, emerging from the side of the stage was a middle-aged, balding

stallion. The murmurs and rustling stopped and were replaced with sighs of relief as Commissioner Bettpony approached the podium. Twilight looked upon the commissioner and saw something that had caught her eye. When she squinted to determine what was throwing her off, she saw that the pony standing before her wasn't a pony at all, but a projection. Immediately, Twilight leapt up onto the Golden Leafs' table and shouted, "IMPOSTER! This isn't Commissioner Bettpony! This is merely just a projection! If you look closely, you can see a faint magical aura around him!"

The Celestia Centre rumbled with more murmurs and loud discussion. Princess Luna rose from her seat and trotted onto the stage to confirm Twilight's suspicion. Just as she reached her hoof out to touch the fake commissioner, the projection burst into flames. The flames danced about in a circle and then were flung onto the stage's backdrop. Quickly burning from the bottom of the stage on upward, the backdrop disintegrated to reveal Discord, standing tall with the petrified Bettpony statue next to him.

While gasps and shrieks erupted from all over the arena, the Golden Leafs immediately jumped onto the stage with Princess Luna to meet Discord head on. With Twilight and friends coiled up to attack before him, Discord kept cool and cracked a wry grin. Holding his paws up in a surrendering pose, he addressed the audience.

"Calm down, everypony. I know what this looks like. Your beloved Commissioner Bettpony is just on a little vacation, that's all. Before he left, he decided to leave me in charge. I'm your new commissioner now."

Twilight sneered, "What are you doing here, Discord? I thought we put you back in your place!"

"Oh, Twilight Sparkle, I'm so glad to see you and your friends again. How have you been since the last time we met? You know, when you messed up my plans for eternal chaos with your silly little fashion accessories!"

"Answer the question, Discord!" yelled Twilight with flames burning in her eyes.

Discord laughed and teleported right next to her. "Now now, there's no need for all this hostility. I'm here for good! For a fresh slate on life. I'm here to make the Equestria Hockey League the best league it can possibly be."

Rainbow Dash flew up to his face with her hooves drawn to fight. "Right, like we're going to believe that! Put 'em up!"

"Come on now, Rainbow Dash. How can this face lie?" said Discord as he tried to make a cute kissy face. Just as Rainbow was about to throw a punch, the arena roof blasted open with intense sunlight beaming down. Princess Celestia landed upon the stage with such force that the foundation shook. Flanked by Luna and the Golden Leafs, she stood before Discord with an intense scowl.

"You have ten seconds to surrender yourself, Discord, or else we shall use the Elements of Harmony against you once more!"

Discord pretended to shake and quiver at the princess' order. "Oh nooooo! Not the Elements of Harmony! Anything but those again! Honestly, Celestia. You're going to strike me down in front of all your loyal subjects when I haven't done a single evil or illegal thing? Go ahead, show Equestria how tyrannical you can be. I'm ready to unjustly be made a statue again despite being completely innocent this time."

Princess Celestia backed down from her threat and now had a concerned look on her face. The Golden Leafs' jaws dropped in shock and Twilight voiced her support. "Don't believe him, princess! He's up to no good! We must stop him now!"

"I'm afraid he's right, Twilight. Until he commits a wrong deed or endangers Equestria, we must allow him to have his rightful chance to be a part of our society," said the princess with a sigh.

"But! He! WHAT?!?" shouted the Golden Leafs in near unison.

"Every creature, no matter pony, buffalo, zebra, or draconequis, deserves another chance. I'm going to keep my eye on you, Discord. One wrong move and you will be encased in stone again in no time." With that statement, Princess Celestia exited the arena to stunned silence.

Discord belted out a boisterous laugh. "You heard the princess, I'm free and clear to be good! Now, if the Ponyville Golden Leafs and Princess Luna would please take their seats back at their tables, we can continue on

with the real reason we're all here today!"

Begrudgingly, the Golden Leafs grumbled and sulked back to their table. Discord teleported to the podium where he now was wearing a suit and glasses and had a stack of papers in front of him. He tapped the microphone to test it, causing a loud feedback squeal that zapped everyone's eardrums.

"Now, before we begin the draft, I have a few new rules to implement this year. First, the EHL playoffs will be shortened to two rounds, where only the top four teams in the league get to make it. In my EHL, you don't automatically get to be in the playoffs, you have to earn it! This isn't some mamby-pamby sissy-wissy league where you get a participation ribbon for just lacing up your skates! Second, there will be times where I will be in attendance at a game. When I am present, there will be some special, shall we say, nuances when you play. You'll never know where I'll show up so be prepared! Lastly, for today, you will draft who I say you can draft! Come on out fellas!"

Discord put his paw up to his mouth to whistle. Fired down from the ceiling was a large cloud of thick, black smoke. The teams closest to the stage began coughing their lungs out and they shielded their eyes for safety. When the smoke cleared, five stallions emerged beside Discord with shimmers of gold sparkling from their necks. When it became apparent what those shimmers of gold were, Twilight and company yelled out in absolute horror.

"THE ELEMENTS OF HARMONY?!?"

Discord chortled at the Golden Leafs' reaction. "Oh, that's what those are? Well, finders keepers, losers weepers!"

Twilight looked back at her friends in a panic. "B-but the Elements were in my book at the treehouse! N-no one else knew they were there!"

Pointing to the stage, Applejack noticed one Element in particular was missing. "There's our five necklaces but where's your crown lookin' thingy, Twi'?"

Discord conjured up a giant gavel to slam on the Golden Leafs' table.

"Silence, Ponyville! Don't make me come down there! Now, with the first pick of the EHL Draft, the Fillydelphia Flyers select...SIDNEIGH CROSBY! He is currently the wielder of the Element of Loyalty and is the best player from my, I mean, this draft class. He can *manipulate* defenses and he can make plays at will. Come meet your new teammate, Fillydelphia!"

Crosby, a medium-sized stallion with a shaggy black mane and small mustache stubble, trotted over and yanked his commemorative Flyers jersey out of Rose's hooves. He placed the bright orange sweater over his head and pranced around the stage like a show-off, already drawing the ire of the handful of EHL fans who were in attendance to observe the draft. Once the Flyers exited the stage, Discord ruffled his papers and was ready for the next pick.

"Now then, with the second pick of the EHL Draft, the Manehattan Rangers select...ALEXCANTER OVECHKIN! The present wielder of the Element of Generosity, he is a very deft player and a fierce competitor. Opponents will feel nothing but *greed* when he displays his vast skill set. Manehattan, get up here!"

With a smug look of satisfaction on her face, Trixie gallantly strolled up onto the stage to present Ovechkin with his Rangers jersey. Ovechkin was a taller stallion with a brown mop of a mane and a wide face. He gave all his new teammates a round of high-hoofs and shook Discord's claw before leaving the stage.

"Next is the Ponyville Golden Leafs. I'll actually be nice and let you decide who you will draft. Hurry up and get up here before we all get bored stiff."

Relieved, yet still annoyed with Discord, Twilight trotted up to the podium with a Golden Leafs jersey draped over her back. "Ahem. With the third pick of the EHL Draft, the Ponyville Golden Leafs have decided to make...BIG MACINTOSH a permanent member of our roster!"

The other Golden Leafs whooped and hollered as Big Macintosh gave Applejack a hug and trotted up to the stage. Twilight presented him with his jersey and was tossed about by his strong hoofshake. While this exchange went on, Discord made gagging motions and noises in the background to display his disgust. Having enough of the pleasantness, he moved in and shooed Twilight and Big Macintosh off the stage so the draft could

continue.

"Thank you Ponyville for that mushfest of a draft pick. Next, with the fourth pick of the EHL Draft, the Canterlot Equestriens select...ANZE KOLTPITAR! As the current holder of the Element of Laughter, Anze boy here loves to *humiliate* his opponents with his brilliant moves and quick hands."

A tall stallion with a bushy, dirty blonde mane, Anze Kolpitar patted Discord on the back while awaiting his new team's presentation. Remaining suspicious of Discord, Princess Luna briskly trotted onto the stage to give Anze his Equestriens jersey. When they went to shake hooves, Anze slipped on a buzzer to give Luna a quick jolt. Anze and Discord howled with laughter while Luna angrily turned to leave the stage.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Discord regained his composure to announce the next pick. "Ahaha! That was priceless! Ahem. With the fifth pick of the EHL Draft, the Appleloosa Black Apples select...ED BELFOAL! This wily veteran currently wields the Element of Honesty. Closely resembling a brick wall between the pipes, Eddie here is as *stubborn* as it comes to allowing goals to the opposing team. Unlike his predecessor, he is a living being who can actually move. I mean, seriously? A tree? Even I, the spirit of chaos, think that is plain silly!"

Ed Belfoal was an older stallion with a short, black mane and a gruff appearance. Sheriff Silverstar presented Belfoal with his Black Apples jersey and tried placing it over Belfoal's head. They tussled a bit before Belfoal grabbed the jersey away and put it on himself. Slightly miffed, Sheriff led his new goalie off the stage.

With only one minion left, Discord threw his papers up into the air, combusting them into neat piles of ash. "Finally, with the final pick of the EHL Draft, the Cloudsdale Red Wings select...ZHAYNO CHARA! Holding onto the Element of Kindness, he is the tallest and largest pony in the entire EHL. His mean streak can only be quenched with bone-rattling hits. His defensive abilities are just as powerful as his *aggression*. You better keep your head up when entering his zone unless you like being decapitated!"

With his gangly appearance and long, wavy black mane, Zhayno Chara

towered above the Red Wings' new captain Spitfire as she gave him his jersey. Possessing amazing strength, Chara forcefully raised Spitfire's hoof in celebration, lifting her high above the stage. He roughly placed her back down before trotting off to join the rest of the Red Wings.

Discord snapped his claw to make the stage disappear. Using his magic, he placed a bright green barrier around the Celestia Cup before Princess Luna could retrieve it. Commissioner Bettpony was also inside the barrier, hovering next to the Cup. With a raise of his claw, Discord crumbled the stone away from the former commissioner. With his body finally free, Gary Bettpony yelled for help while the entire EHL looked on helplessly. In a bright flash of light, Discord trapped Commissioner Bettpony within the trophy. With his yells for help muffled, Gary Bettpony glided along the rim of the Cup, resembling a distorted reflection in the metal sheen.

Discord grabbed the Cup and hovered above the crowd along with his five minions. "This concludes this year's EHL Draft. Before you all leave, you will be given your schedules. Have fun everypony and may the best team win! Hahaha!!"

With a monstrous laugh that echoed to every corner of the arena, Discord and cohorts disappeared in a blinding flash. Worry and uneasiness settled in among the remainder of the EHL. Teammates nervously chatted about their new draft picks, the small contingent of fans on hand began to ponder the sad notion that their favorite team might miss the playoffs under the new format, and the Golden Leafs huddled together to come up with a way to retrieve their stolen Elements.

"What are we going to do? What are we going to dooooo?!?" shouted Rarity as she shook Twilight furiously.

Applejack jumped in to separate Rarity from Twilight. "We'll just hafta get the Elements back by force. When we face one of Discord's henchmen, we'll hafta beat them up so bad, they'll be wantin' to give us our necklaces back!"

"Why don't we just tell Princess Celestia that Discord kidnapped and trapped Commissioner Bettpony? That's a bad deed!" yelled Rainbow Dash.

"But nopony cares about him, that's the problem," responded Twilight, breaking from her deep thought. "I think we'll have to go with Applejack's idea. Since we don't know where these ponies live, the only way we'll see them is on the ice. We must retrieve the Elements at any price! Who knows if Discord has something evil up his sleeve. We need to have the Elements back in our possession to fight if something were to happen!"

"Maybe Discord is telling the truth and he really is changed," squeaked Fluttershy naively.

Rarity leapt in front of Fluttershy to retort. "Didn't you see what he did to Commissioner Bettpony?!? He hasn't changed once bit! Now what do you suppose we do?"

Nervously, Fluttershy stammered and looked up at Rarity. "P-panic?"

Twilight rose up in the middle of the group. "Girls! This is no time to panic! We'll come up with a plan, we'll get the Elements back, and we'll save the commissioner and keep the EHL clean. Until we see signs of an evil scheme, we'll go about business as usual. There's still hockey to be played. Last I checked, we were one round away from going to the Celestia Cup Finals. We have the talent to make it back and then some. By the end of the season, not only will we have the Elements back, we'll be lifting that Cup over our heads!"

Discord's actions and the events of the draft weighing heavily in their minds, the Golden Leafs awkwardly put in a hoof and gave a half-hearted cheer. Returning to her deep thought and plotting, Twilight led the team to the exit to return home. On the way out, Coltin Campbell rushed toward the Leafs to hand them their season schedule. Not wanting to be distracted, Twilight gave Applejack the scroll to read the roadmap to their sophomore season.

Week 1 – Fillydelphia Flyers @ Ponyville Golden Leafs
Week 2 – Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Canterlot Equestriens (Home & Home Special)
Week 3 – Canterlot Equestriens @ Ponyville Golden Leafs (Home & Home Special)
Week 4 – Appleloosa Black Apples @ Ponyville Golden Leafs
Week 5 – Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Cloudsdale Red Wings
Week 6 – Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Manehattan Rangers
Week 7 – Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Fillydelphia Flyers
Week 8 – Cloudsdale Red Wings @ Ponyville Golden Leafs
Week 9 – Manehattan Rangers @ Ponyville Golden Leafs
Week 10 – Ponyville Golden Leafs @ Appleloosa Black Apples

EHL Offseason Transactions

Appleloosa Black Apples – Bloomberg (G) retires from the EHL to be replanted and to recover
Canterlot Equestriens – Hoity Toity (RW) and Photo Finish (D) announce their retirement from the EHL to further their fashion careers, Sign free agent Caesar (D) to complete roster
Cloudsdale Red Wings – Pucks (D) announces his retirement from the EHL after 19 years of playing
Fillydelphia Flyers – Caramella (LW) leaves the EHL to further her dancing career