



# Elements of Gaming

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# Chapter 1

## Halo Reach

“So...” queried Applejack, curiously peering down at the white, rectangular box and the four oddly-shaped... button... things that lay on the floor before her. “What did’ja say this thingamajigger here was again, Twi’?”

“I uh... I honestly have no idea what it’s supposed to do,” said Twilight Sparkle, shrugging her shoulders as she fixed her orange-coated friend with a nonplussed look. She was just as curious about the box as the rest of her six friends were.

“The mail parcel from Canterlot’s new science and electronics division had labelled it as an... ‘Ecks Box Three Sixty’, whatever *that* is. Apparently, the letter enclosed in the parcel was written by Princess Celestia herself; this device here is a new prototype developed by the Canterlot University of Electrical Engineering, and *they* want *us* to test it out.”

“I dunno, Twilight.” Rainbow Dash commented, arching an eyebrow as she cautiously toed one of the small button things before picking one up and examining it closely. “I can’t even begin to figure out how the hay these things work. I mean, there are so many buttons! How are we supposed to know which one does what?”

“Well Rainbow Dash, that’s where this comes in!” Proclaimed Twilight, magically levitating a rectangular green case over into the middle of the group. “This is what the researchers called a ‘video game’. They said it’s some sort of entertainment device that is only compatible with the, uh... box.”

“Ooh, GAMES? I love games!!!” Said Pinkie Pie, immediately perking up the very moment Twilight uttered the word “game.” “Well, what are we waiting for? What’s it say?”

The pink earth pony practically shot forward and grabbed the small green case out of the air, peering intently down on that cover, before her eyes

slanted downwards in confusion. "Hay...low... Reech? What the hay is a Haylow Reech?"

"Gimme that, Pinkie," snapped Twilight, quickly snatching the case out of Pinkie's hands. "First off, it's spelt Halo. H-A-L-O. Secondly, we're here on official orders from the Princess herself. We must do our duty to the absolute utmost of our ability."

"Well, ah dunno, Twi'..." Applejack began uncertainly. "Ah mean, it's flatterin' an' all, bein' hoofpicked by the Princess herself, but ah'm mighty unsure on how we're gonna go about this. This thing even have a 'struction manual er sumthin'?"

"Well, let's take a look inside, shall we?" Said Twilight, gently prying open the case to reveal a disc and instruction manual within. However, a few seconds of browsing through the pages of the tiny little book revealed little about how to operate the box - it seemed that the instructions within the manual were meant for whatever content that was hidden within the disc.

"So uh... we're playing as these guys then?" Rainbow Dash asked, gesturing towards the five armored ponies who adorned the top of the disc, each one striding hoof-to-hoof upon a lone hill, a breaking dawn framing the outlines of their suits.

"They look kinda cool! Well, not as cool as me, but then again, nopony's cooler than me!" Proclaimed the rainbow-maned pegasus. "Still, I think we might have something pretty cool goin' on here, Twilight! Let's get it started!"

"All right, then it's settled! We'll get the game started and play it, and I'll record all our findings and report them to Princess Celestia!" Twilight beamed proudly as her horn sparked, and the disc began to float out of its casing, slowly moving towards the larger, white box that awaited in the corner... and then stopping there, as though confused.

"So... how do we put this disc inside again?" She asked, clearly stumped. She looked at the rest of her friends for any prompts or suggestions, but they all either shrugged, or gave her nonplussed looks, clearly not knowing any more than she did.

“Uhm, guys...?” A soft voice spoke up from the corner of the room, and Twilight looked over to see Fluttershy and her butler, Angel Bunny, trying to get themselves heard over the discussion the rest of them were having.

The yellow pegasus pony was standing over the parcel the Princess had mailed to Twilight, reading what looked like a book, with the words “User Instruction Manual” printed on the cover in large, block letters.

“I think you might want to give this a read first.”

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The half-hour that passed by was less than fruitful - apparently, the instruction manual dictated that a television set was necessary in order to use the box. In addition to that, it seemed that the box required a plethora of wires and plugs to match corresponding outlets on Twilight’s TV set, otherwise it would not work.

It was all very confusing for those who were not technically inclined. Naturally, Twilight had to figure out everything herself as the rest of her friends gathered in her basement laboratory where her television was. Predictably, her friends either ended up watching her intently, or did nothing but laze around. Not surprisingly, Rainbow Dash fell asleep no more than ten seconds in.

“All right, that should do it!” Twilight said with an air of satisfaction as she finally reared her head back up. The last few wires that needed to be connected were in place, and the box was just about ready to work.

“Now, we should just press this button right here...” As she depressed a button adorned with a symbol that the manual stated represented the “on” switch. Almost immediately, a soft, satisfying *ding* came from the box, a small green dot coming to life where Twilight’s hoof had been only moments ago.

“Girls... I’d say we have power!” Twilight exclaimed, clearly overjoyed by the prospect of getting the Princess’s newest device to work.

“Well come on, whaddya waiting for!?” Rainbow Dash exclaimed as she excitedly rushed forward, grabbing one of the devices that the manual had called a “controller” up from the floor.

Twilight couldn’t help but chuckle at her friend’s inability to sit still. “Hold on a second, Dash. I still need to place the disc inside the box... There we go!”

The unicorn’s horn lit up once more as a purple aura flared to life around both the box. Slowly, a tray began to extend outward, obviously meant to be some sort of receptacle for the game.

As soon as Twilight had inserted the disc, the tray receded back into the box, leaving the six gathered ponies to watch in wonder as the television screen turned a crisp, clear white.

Shortly after, a wisp of green began to encircle a lone silver globule that appeared on-screen. Merging with the aforementioned sphere, the green wisp etched a large, stylized “X” onto its surface, clearly some form of logo.

As the words “Xbox 360” materialized on the bottom of the screen with a low, futuristic hum before the display eventually faded to black, quite a few of the ponies assembled couldn’t help but let out a rather long “oooooh” of amazement.

Rarity gave a low, appreciative *hmmm*, watching the display intently. “Elegant, yet simple... excellent use of colors and form... not to mention a perfect mixture of showiness and elegance. My my my, these ponies know a thing or two about how to impress.”

“Shhhh! It’s starting!” Pinkie Pie suddenly shushed the white unicorn as the screen went dark, leaving the six mares staring at the screen in captivated wonder. Several odd, light-blue lines began to silently pop up on the screen, arranging themselves in strange, symmetrical patterns, before disappearing.

Rainbow Dash gave a rather odd stare at the vanished display, obviously disappointed. “Well, that wasn’t what I was-”

And that’s when the [heavy orchestral score](#) boomed right out of Twilight’s basement-mounted surround-sound speakers. Fluttershy, not expecting the

sudden sound at all, gave a startled squeak and almost darted to hide behind Rarity who was next to her, but the movement died halfway as her eyes widened in awe of the images that came to life on the screen next.

The only pony in the room whose eyes had opened wider than Fluttershy's was Twilight Sparkle - in fact, not only were her eyes as large as saucers, her jaw was hanging open as she watched the images of deep space appear on the screen.

Nebulae, asteroid fields, and ringed gas giants faded on and off the screen in rapid succession. From what she knew about astronomy, there were a few technical details here and there that were slightly off, but technical details be hooved, *those images were beautiful.*

The orchestral score echoing grandly in the background slowly built up to a crescendo, and though it seemed physically impossible, Twilight's eyes grew even larger than saucers as the panoramic view of the gas giant slowly moved aside.

Now visible was a bird's-eye view of a beautiful blue-green planet that resembled Equestria, yet with a few key differences. For one, Equestria didn't possess such a majestic northern aurora, and neither did it have such vast expanses of sea in-between the landmasses.

Yet this much Twilight knew - whatever that planet was, it was obviously a central figure in the game they were playing.

Dimming briefly, the planet they were gazing at was replaced on screen by yet another image, this time of a beautiful, yet somehow gloomy scene: a mountainous region riddled with the green of pastures, a darkened, grey sky hanging over it as a light rain fell. Across the centre of the screen, the words "[Halo Reach](#)" were hanging in highly stylized font.

As it was, the ponies sat staring at the screen, waiting for something else to happen, yet for several silent moments, nothing did.

"Umm, are we s'posed ta do sumthin'?" Applejack asked tentatively, obviously quite lost, but nonetheless still enraptured with what she was faced with.

“Isn’t it kinda obvious, silly?” Pinkie Pie said as though it was the plainest thing in the world, and her hoof pointed up to a line of text just below the title, words that were in a font so much smaller than the title that nopony else had managed to spot them. “It says ‘Start Solo Campaign’!”

“Huh? It does?” Twilight looked closer, and noted with some embarrassment that yes indeed, it did say ‘Press Start to begin’ in a tiny little line below the main title. “Oh, heheh, I guess I kinda missed it. Rainbow Dash, you’re the one with the controller right now, so if you’d be so kind?”

The cyan pegasus gave an excited grin. “My pleasure, Twilight.” Lifting up the controller she held in her hooves, Rainbow Dash took a few seconds to locate the Start button, but once she did, the image on the screen abruptly changed again as she depressed it, changing to another bird’s eye view of the planet they had all seen just a few seconds ago.

Overlaid over the image however were a series of words stacked on top of one another, obviously a menu of some sorts, with the topmost word highlighted by a translucent white bar.

Curious, Rainbow Dash gave the stick on the left of the controller she held an experimental downward push, and the white bar moved downwards once, now highlighting the second word instead of the first.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this!” The pegasus exclaimed proudly with a wide beam, and she quickly scanned over each of the words on the menu once before settling on the topmost one again. “Hey Twilight, that manual say anything about how we can select these things?”

“Umm... It’s right there on the bottom of the screen, Dash...” Fluttershy pointed out quietly as Dash squinted at the screen where her friend’s hoof was pointing, and then the blue pegasus gave a slightly sheepish smile. “It says ‘A’ to Select.”

“Oh! Ah, heheheh, yeah, I knew that!” Rainbow Dash said flippantly as she looked over the menu of selections once more. “Let’s see, ‘Campaign’, ‘Matchmaking’, ‘Firefight’, ‘Options’... I think I’ll go with the campaign, obviously the one placed first on the menu is the most important!”



"Can't say I disagree with that." Twilight said with a concurring nod, while Applejack and Rarity simply shrugged and opted to watch their friend give her first video game her very first shot.

Rainbow Dash gave the green 'A' button on her controller a confident push, and then another menu came up - this time with only four words, with the symbol of a shield and a knife next to it and a brief paragraph of descriptive text.

Rarity leaned closer and examined the words on the screen - apparently it had started out highlighting the second word, 'Normal', while the one above it read 'Easy', and below it was 'Heroic', followed by 'Legendary'.

*"Face firm resistance from competent, determined enemies, but burn through enough ammo and you will eventually triumph."* The white unicorn read off the screen, evidently some sort of descriptive text for 'Normal'. The top of the screen had a large label reading "Difficulty Selection"; perhaps this was where you selected how hard or easy you wanted the game to be, if the words she saw on the screen were any indication.

"Rainbow, could you be a dear and let us have a look at the other options?" Rarity said sweetly, her eyes burning with curiosity from within. "I'd like to see how they describe somepony who's... *heroic*."

"Uh huh. Ah'm wonderin' mahself, how does somepony describe somepony who's legendary without somehow referring to Princess Celestia?" Applejack wondered half-jokingly.

Rainbow Dash complied, and the ponies' eyes widened incredulously as they read the descriptions.

*"Laugh as helpless victims flee in terror from their inevitable slaughter. The game basically plays itself."* Twilight read off the screen, her eyebrow arching sardonically as she read the descriptor text for Easy mode, the symbol on the screen changing to display only the shield, the knife disappearing from sight. "Well, that doesn't sound too exciting... Or very noteworthy."

*"Hmm... Fight against formidable foes that will truly test your skill and wits; this is the way Halo is meant to be played."* Sounds more to me like the way

a hero ought to be!" said Rarity, a slightly dreamy air to her voice. As Rainbow Dash placed the selector over Heroic mode, the single knife reappeared along with a second, identical one, crossing themselves over the shield on the screen.

"Whoa there, nelly. Dash, ah'm not likin' that look on your face." Applejack said nervously as Rainbow Dash placed the selector over the final choice - the rainbow-maned pegasus had a fervent, almost maniacal grin on her face, obviously relishing the challenge she was being presented with.

Over the two crossed knives and the shield on the screen, an unrecognizable, alien skull had appeared to overshadow them, obviously to symbolize just how deadly the choice was - as though the descriptor text wasn't enough.

*"Tremble as teeming hordes of invincible alien monsters punish the slightest error with instant death... again and again."* Rainbow Dash read off the screen in a single, excited breath, her grin not fading at all. In fact, it only seemed to grow wider. "Is that a challenge? If so, I'm takin' it!"

There was only a small, nervous "Eep!" from behind Pinkie Pie, as Fluttershy watched timidly from behind the pink earth pony. The description of Legendary mode sounded so scary, she couldn't imagine why Rainbow Dash would want to go through with it.

"I dunno, Rainbow Dash..." Twilight said uncertainly. "That looks to me like the *hardest* difficulty setting that the game has, and this is your very first try! You're sure you don't want to pick something a little easier?"

"Oh, please!" Proclaimed Rainbow Dash, laughing off Twilight's warnings and promptly proceeding to mash the A button. "How bad could it be? You're forgetting that I'm the coolest, fastest pony in all Ponyville! I can handle a little game like this no matter what the difficulty!"

"If you say so, Dash..."

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"Oh, COME ON! I totally hit that guy like at least a billion times, why didn't he die!?"

"Well, *that* one did get you good."

"I *know*, Twilight... Just lemme try this again... OH, YOU SON OF A...!"

"... Yeowch, nelly, that had ta hurt sumthin' fierce..."

"Ya don't say, AJ? This is a lot harder than it looks! ... FOR CELESTIA'S SAKE, NOT AGAIN!"

"... Dashie, you're SURE you don't want to switch to something easier? It's been two hours and you've barely made it halfway past the second stage! Oh, look out for that one! He's got a... oh, nevermind, you just died again!"

"Thank you, Pinkie Pie, I kinda realized that..." Rainbow Dash ground out from behind clenched teeth as the game restarted itself from the last checkpoint, her in-avatar having just died to a diminutive enemy that had seen fit to suddenly charge her, brandishing two brightly glowing blue spheres right incinerating them both in a huge explosion.

"Hey Dashie," said Pinkie Pie, tapping Rainbow Dash on her shoulder. "Ya think I could give it a whirl?"

"Ugh," groaned the pegasus, clearly fed up with loss after loss the game dished out at her for what she estimated had to be at least the hundredth time. "Yeah sure, why not. It's not as if anything's gonna be different."

With a loud and resounding "YAY," Pinkie Pie grabbed the controller out of Dash's hoofs and started mashing away at the buttons, causing her character to leap all over the screen in a wild frenzy, shooting at nothing in particular and coming dangerously close to a few stray explosions.

In what could only be described as an utter miracle, Pinkie Pie's jumping spree prevented her from getting killed by any enemy fire whatsoever. Or, well, at least up till the point she bounded off a cliff to her rather quick demise... and a resounding outburst of laughter from Rainbow Dash.

"OH, CELESTIA HELP ME... I- *wheeze* I can't stop- *pfft*- LAUGHING!" Bellowed Rainbow Dash, who then proceeded to burst into a resounding

cry of “BAAA-HA-HAAAA” for the umpteenth time, practically rolling on the floor in stitches.

Admittedly, Twilight was quite amused by Pinkie Pie’s antics, and she had joined Rainbow Dash in her hysterics on the basement’s wooden floor, while even Rarity had a hoof pressed to her mouth, desperately trying to hold her laughter in even as her body shook with repressed guffaws.

“Aww, phooey, this ain’t fun anymore!” The pink earth pony pouted as she stuck her hoof out with the controller, obviously not wanting to play any longer. “Somepony else give it a try! I wanna see how you guys play!”

“Hmm... well, ah’m kinda curious on how this thingamajig here works. Give ‘er here, Pinkie Pie.” Applejack stated, taking the proffered controller from her friend as she gave the device a brief once-over, trying to figure out which button did what.

Five minutes later, the orange earth pony was hurling curse words that most of them hadn’t known even existed up to this point. From what everypony could tell over the din, she was quite stuck trying to get a large, armored creature to turn around and reveal its weak spot. The fact that her enemy was repeatedly crushing her in-game avatar’s virtual skull with what appeared to be a large, gray shield wasn’t quite helping either.

“THIS CONARNED SON OF A \*\*\*\*\* KEEPS SMASHING HIS SHIELD OVER MAH HEAD EVERY TIME AH TRY TO GO AROUND HIM. CELESTIA \*\*\*\*\* THIS LOUSY PIECE A’ \*\*\*\*\*.” Applejack yelled, a vein throbbing furiously over her temple as her hoofs gripping the controller shook with barely controlled rage. Barely.

The rest of her friends were staring at her with wide eyes, Fluttershy and Twilight inching away slowly from the fuming earth pony. Rainbow Dash though was holding in a mirthful chuckle, but her eyes betrayed the smug smile she was hiding. “Told ya it’s harder than it looks, AJ!”

“OH, SHUT YER YAP, RAINBOW.” Said the raging pony, nearly screaming. “I KNOW HOW HARD IT- OH TO THE MOON WITH THIS!!!”

Applejack, totally fed up with her lack of progress, angrily shoved the controller into Twilight's hooves. "The hay with this, Twi! I give up! You give it a try, you're the one Princess Celestia gave it to anyway!"

"Wow, geez, Applejack," Said Twilight, giving her friend an amused smile before relieving Applejack of the burden of the controller. "You've really gotta relax there. It's just a game!"

The sardonic glance that Applejack gave her quite frankly said otherwise, but Twilight simply shrugged sagely and calmly set about trying to overcome the giant mook that had Applejack stuck so.

"A-ha! I knew I was missing something!" The lavender unicorn proclaimed proudly as she ran right past it instead of engaging it directly, and was rewarded with the sight of a much, MUCH bigger gun than the one she was holding right now. Twilight quickly picked up the gun and spun her character around, placing the giant mook right in her sights.

"Gotcha!" She snickered playfully in a manner that was reminiscent of a certain monarch, and then pulled the trigger on her controller.

The resulting fireball-like object that spat out of her new gun's barrel streaked forward like a missile, blasting forward and slamming right into the giant mook's face. The resulting detonation yielded a massive conflagration that had every pony in the room either wincing in mock pain or going *woooah* in awe. When the smoke cleared, the armored creature was lying in a crumpled heap on the floor, obviously dead.

"And *that*, girls, is how you do it." Twilight stated with a satisfied air, much to Applejack's chagrin. She certainly hadn't considered trying *that*, distracted as she was with her stubborn attempts to overcome the large, armored creature with only what she had.

The rest of the level progressed fairly well - Twilight would always approach every situation she came across slowly, analyzing it thoroughly before moving in for the kill. Soon enough, it became clear that there was an obvious pattern to every battle she approached - the lavender unicorn was obviously following some sort of carefully calculated procedure devised by watching her friends play through the game.

It was all well and good until she reached what seemed to be the end of the level - her in-game avatar was advancing up a series of floors alongside its compatriots, when all of a sudden a barrage of green blasts of energy streaked out of *nowhere*, and completely vaporised her character and its allies right where they stood.

“... What in the Princess's name just happened?” Twilight gaped, staring numbly at the screen, her jaw hanging open for just a brief moment before she shook her head back into focus. “No, there's got to be a strategy for this one here, there must be something that I missed...”

Yet, much to her gathered friends' endless amusement, it seemed whatever the purple unicorn tried was doomed to failure. Even the slightest movement out of cover was instantly punished with a barrage of green energy blasts from whatever was aiming at her - they came so fast and so furiously that Twilight didn't have any time to even look at what was shooting at her.

“What... What is this?!” hissed the lavender unicorn from between clenched teeth, her jaw clenching as her heart rate began to quicken, her eyes narrowing in frustration. “How am I supposed to even FORMULATE a strategy if I don't know who my enemy is?!”

As the deaths began to rack up alongside Twilight's failed attempts, she began to grow more and more frustrated at her apparent lack of ability to get around whatever was in her way.

“This... is... impossible...” said Twilight, her voice half-strangled by her growing rage. As her left eye began to twitch madly, her mane came to life with white-hot flames of anger and mad rage. “I did EVERYTHING RIGHT. I'D RATHER FIGHT NIGHTMARE MOON FOR A THOUSAND YEARS THAN DEAL WITH THIS SH-”

“Ah think I know what ta do, sugarcube. Lemme take it from here.” Applejack said as soothingly as she could, deciding not to point out how her friend's anger was almost as bad as hers, but it still felt like a giant burden being lifted off Twilight's shoulders as the unicorn passed the controller back to her friend.

Watching Applejack play this particular part of the level gave Twilight some sudden insight - Applejack had immediately hit a button that made her character break out into a gallop the moment she moved, in contrast to Twilight's slow and cautious peeking out from behind cover.

In this case however, it proved to be what saved her. Applejack's galloping had her moving fast enough that she was leaving the green blasts of energy in her wake, and by the time she got to the next floor, they managed to get a look at what had managed to kill Twilight several times over - it was a gold-armored alien, brandishing a weapon just about as large as a pony on its shoulder.

"Get him, AJ! Get him!" Rainbow Dash yelled excitedly as Applejack charged her character forward, firing her weapon madly. However, instead of returning fire, the alien instead ran away in a surprising burst of speed, disappearing around the corner and sending Applejack's fire flying wide.

"Consarnit, I almost had 'im!" The orange earth pony swore, and sent her character sprinting forward again in an attempt to catch up... only to find herself losing control of her in-game character as what appeared to be nothing more than a shimmer wrenched her character backwards and drove two small, shimmering blades deep into its spine.

"WHAT THE HAY!?" Applejack exploded. "WHERE IN EQUESTRIA DID THAT DAGNABBER COME FROM!?"

The very moment the game had respawned her, Applejack began recklessly charging again, sprinting forward... and then the very same shimmer appeared in front of her, cutting her down in a barrage of bright bolts that sent her character crumpling to the floor, dead.

"Ah, come on! Ah can't even see the darned fella! How am ah s'pposed tah fight him!?"

A soft, polite cough from beside her shook her out of her concentration, and Applejack glanced at Rarity, who had her hoof extended politely. "If I may, Applejack, I think I might be able to help you with this. No offence to your eh... 'wit', but I spotted those shimmers long before they even got close to you. I just thought you'd have seen them as well, so I didn't think to point them out."

Applejack gave the white unicorn an almost skeptical glance, almost hesitating to hand the controller over. Rarity, getting her hooves dirty with this sort of thing? It was quite the laughable notion.

Still... she knew her friend had an eye for detail that anypony else in the room could not even hope to match. Perhaps she *could* help her get past this apparently insurmountable obstacle.

“All righ’, Rarity. Ya got an eye for detail, so maybe you can help us get past this here part.” Applejack handed over the controller, and Rarity accepted it with her usual poise and grace, turning to face the screen with the same kind of focused expression that she always wore whenever she was doing extremely delicate work on her dress designs.

What happened next made almost everypony assembled have their jaw drop in utter amazement. It seemed as though Rarity was blessed with a form of precognition that allowed her to know just where the shimmers would appear even before anypony could even begin to try spotting their presence.

The white unicorn would turn to face what looked like an empty patch on the screen devoid of enemies, before letting loose with a barrage of fire that would be rewarded with the crumpled corpse of a grey-armored alien. None of them even managed to come within five feet of her character before being cut down mercilessly by Rarity’s keen eyes and ensuing hail of bullets.

“Well, I do believe that’s all of them!” The white unicorn proclaimed proudly as her character cut down what seemed to be the last of the hidden aliens, and she handed the controller back to a slack-jawed Applejack, giggling. “Oh, really, Applejack, do close your mouth, you’ll attract flies like that! Oh, wait! There’s one more!”

Before anypony could react, Rarity snapped her character’s targeting cursor just a teensy bit to the right and let out a blast from her weapon - there was a cry of pain as another one of the invisible aliens abruptly materialized in a crumpled heap at her avatar’s feet.



“There! Now *that’s* the last of them!” As she offered the controller back to her friend, Rarity couldn’t help but let out a giggle as Applejack continuously blurted gibberish as she attempted to fix her jaw back in place.

“... Ah don’t even know how y’all did that, Rarity, but ah’m not about to ask.” Applejack muttered, finally working her jaw back into place and unexpectedly pushing the controller back to Rarity. “Ah’m mighty impressed with how ya got past those fellas. Ah’d like ta see how ya play the rest’a this here level.”

Looking nervously at the controller she was being offered, Rarity gave an apprehensive grin and a giggle. “Eheheheh, I don’t know, Applejack, but... if you insist!”

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The white unicorn’s progress on the rest of the level was a visual spectacle to watch, at least on-screen. Rarity’s expression of intense focus only seemed to deepen with every failed attempt she made, a stark contrast to what had happened with Twilight and Applejack’s increasingly frayed nerves.

The next floor that her character ascended to had her facing the gold-armored alien that had killed Twilight so many times over, but this time it had its back to a sheer drop where the floor ended in blasted wreckage, and it was flanked on both sides by several of its more diminutive subordinates.

The ensuing chaos was spectacular. Brightly glowing orbs and green blasts of energy flew left and right with Rarity right in the thick of it. Yet, with impossible skill and grace, she avoided each and every one of them, practically threading the needle with every maneuver.

As expected of her, the unicorn ended it off with a grand flourish, hurling what the game called a ‘plasma grenade’ at the gold-armored alien. The brightly glowing sphere landed directly on the alien’s helmet, where it immediately latched on with a loud *BEEP!* and a steadily growing whine.

The alien immediately stopped in its tracks, letting out a loud roar of panic right before a second plasma grenade landed right next to the first. Upon seeing this, Rainbow Dash immediately erupted in laughter right before the alien vanished in a huge, blue-white explosion that finally signified the end of the level.

“Oh man, did you SEE that alien!” The rainbow-maned pegasus howled in laughter, practically on the floor in stitches. “I could practically hear him squeal! Oh man, this is the best game ever!”

“I must admit, Twilight, this... game device that Princess Celestia sent you is quite possibly the most fun I’ve had in a very long time!” Rarity said, an excited smile stretching from ear to ear across her face.

“Glad to know you guys are having fun with this, I’ll have to remember to include this in my report to the Princess!” Remarked Twilight, already making the mental notes in her head on what exactly to write in her regular letters to her mentor.

“Hey, wait a minute! We’ve still got one more pony here who ain’t given it a try yet.” Applejack suddenly said. “Fluttershy here ain’t even so much as touched the controller!”

“Oh, no, that’s quite all right, everyone... I don’t really...” The meek pegasus murmured shyly as every pair of eyes in the room turned to look at her, squeaking a little bit under her friends’ combined gazes. “I mean, it’s just that...”

“Aww, c’mon, Fluttershy!” Pinkie Pie said encouragingly as she gently nudged her friend from behind, prompting her to pick up the controller. “Just give it a try! Remember the hop, skip and a jump? It’s just as easy!”

“Yeah, c’mon, Fluttershy!” Rainbow Dash said with a grin, obviously wanting to see this too. “I wanna see how you handle it!”

“Well, umm, all right then, I suppose I can give it a shot...” Fluttershy muttered quietly as she meekly took up the controller in her hooves, giving the screen an look of quiet uncertainty. The next level was already underway, and her character’s avatar was climbing along a rocky cliffside

with another armored pony, the night sky casting a foreboding veil of darkness over the two.

Moments later after exchanging a few words, the two armored ponies had split up, and Fluttershy's avatar had leapt down the cliffside, descending in a controlled slide down the rocks while her companion stayed atop on the cliff overlooking the area. Just as her character reached the end of its slide down the cliff face, control was returned to her, and Fluttershy almost immediately began moving.

Unlike Applejack's reckless charging forward or Pinkie Pie's random jumping, Fluttershy lowered her character into a low crouch, sneaking forward quietly in an attempt to draw as little attention to herself as possible.

Just as she had taken a few steps forward, the voice of her character's companion suddenly came on over the speakers, his voice muffled by the distinctive crackle of speakers.

*"Elite spotted up ahead. Take him out. Quietly."*

The excitement and tension in the room was almost tangible. Nearly everypony held their breath as they watched Fluttershy creep up the grassy knoll, the silhouette of an armored alien similar to the ones Rarity had killed in such numbers in the level before appearing in the moonlight.

Just as Fluttershy's avatar was right behind the alien, the camera abruptly shifted to a third person view as the armored pony suddenly pounced upon the alien, driving a large, serrated knife right into its collarbone before viciously yanking it out in a crude gutting motion, sending gouts of purplish blood spurting into the air.

The alien fell to the ground silently, and the gathered ponies stared wide-eyed, before turning to look at Fluttershy, who had an equally shocked expression on her face.

"I... uhhh... I didn't know that would happen, I swear!" Squeaked the yellow pegasus, having dropped the controller in horror, apparently mortified by what she had just done. "I read the manual and it said that the Right

Bumper was for melee attacks, so I thought maybe I could just quietly, umm... 'put him to sleep' from behind, but I wasn't intending to kill him!"

"Fluttershy..." Rainbow Dash began slowly, a grin slowly forming on her face. "I had no idea we could even do that in the game, but you just made this whole experience twenty percent cooler for me!"

"Umm... really?" Fluttershy said hopefully, eliciting an excited nod from Rainbow Dash.

"Uh huh! Go on, keep playing! I wanna see how this turns out."

"Well, all right, if that's what you want, Dash..." said the yellow pegasus, slowly picking up the controller once again.

As her movements grew surer and steadier by the minute, her friends gradually edged closer and closer towards the screen, staring transfixed as Fluttershy continued to move her character through the level.

Soon enough, they came to a point where her avatar was on the edge of a cliff, overlooking a small clearing where several enemies the game referred to as "Grunts" were obviously taking a nap, while a few more were idly strolling around.

Her avatar already had its sniper rifle out, and they watched as Fluttershy slowly moved her admittedly tiny aiming cursor to rest on one of the aliens who was idly strolling about.

Rainbow Dash squinted skeptically at the screen, quite unable to understand how they expected Fluttershy to hit anything with an aiming cursor *that* small. Surely there was some way they could make either the targets or the cursor larger, right? The rifle that Fluttershy's character held had something mounted on it that looked like some sort of telescope, maybe she could zoom in or something?

Yet before Rainbow Dash could even open her mouth to make said suggestion, the impossible happened right before her eyes.

In an unnatural display of speed, precision, and coordination, Fluttershy twitched her character's reticule around in four abrupt jerks, firing her sniper rifle in rapid succession until the magazine clicked empty.

Four times she fired her sniper rifle without zooming in with her scope, and four times she scored perfect headshots as four alien bodies slumped dead against the ground.

There was the sound of three sets of jaws hitting the floor in rapid succession. Twilight Sparkle, Applejack and Rainbow Dash could only watch with their mouths agape as Fluttershy's character reloaded the sniper rifle and then fired four more times, scoring yet another four unbelievably accurate headshots in record time without even using the rifle's scope.

"What... how... But I... That can't..." Rainbow Dash could only splutter incoherently, unable to believe what she had just witnessed.

"Sweet mother o' mercy..." gawked Applejack, completely slack-jawed once again by Fluttershy's mind-blowing display of skill. As for Twilight, the lavender unicorn was staring at her normally timid friend, only to find an expression that was frighteningly similar to The Stare plastered on Fluttershy's face, the full force of it directed right at the TV screen.

Even as they watched, Fluttershy proceeded to breeze through the rest of the level, performing flawless headshots on every enemy she came across - even when her sniper rifle ran out of bullets, she simply switched to her character's pistol and continued executing headshots like they were as easy as second nature.

Even if they had energy shields like the large, armored aliens carried, she always managed to disable them with perfectly placed grenades or barrages of plasma fire before executing them with a flawless slug to the skull.

All in all, it was like watching a *machine* play, and within ten minutes, barring the cutscenes, she had cleared the entire level, *without dying a single time*.

Twilight was so completely bowled over by what she had just seen that she could barely even form a coherent sentence.

“F-Fluttershy, how in Equestria are you *doing* that!?”

Not taking her eyes off the screen for one moment, Fluttershy took a slow and deep breath, preparing herself for a long tirade of words ahead.

“First off, it’s easy to see the enemy formations are structured in a rather rudimentary fashion. Seeing as the smaller ones provide support fire for the larger command unit, it’s plainly obvious if you remove the leader from the equation first, everything else will more or less be easier to deal with.”

“Secondly, it’s obvious the trajectory of each bullet fired varies only slightly with each shot if you’re using this particular weapon, so with minor directional adjustments, it’s a simple matter to deal out maximum damage in record time.”

“Last off, if you look carefully, each enemy moves in a rather predictable fashion. They usually move forwards in a direct charge, but if they decide to move from side to side, it’s a simple matter of anticipating movement and adjusting your character’s orientation for maximum effect.”

A sudden realization of what she had just said dawning upon her, Fluttershy quickly hit the “start” button to pause the game and stare sheepishly at her friends.

“I mean... uh... it’s as good as anypony’s guess, really.”

“No, no, Fluttershy, you’re not getting me.” Twilight said insistently. “That aiming, that coordination... No pony here even *remotely* has the capability to do what you just did! You just cleared an *entire level* in TEN MINUTES without dying AT ALL! *How* are you *doing* that?”

If anything, Twilight’s manic questions were only serving to make Fluttershy even more flustered, and her face turned crimson, shrinking back even further into her mane.

“Well, I don’t know, really...” She muttered quietly, barely audible. “It’s... it’s like they were moving in slow motion...”

*“How slow?”*

“Uhm... slow enough...?”

“But ah still don’ get it, Fluttershy!” Applejack insisted, still clearly gobsmacked. “Ah mean, I know mah reflexes are decent an’ all, but that stuff ya pulled was just... Wow! Ya gotta tell us how ya did it, sugarcube!”

“Yeah, I still don’t believe it!” Rainbow Dash added, nodding her head vigorously. “I mean, come on Fluttershy, even you’ve gotta see that! That was WAY more than just twenty percent cooler, that was like... TEN TIMES twenty percent cooler!”

“Uhm, well, it’s just that, you know, with the way you guys were playing...”

“What’s wrong with our play style?” Twilight asked quizzically, jumping at the chance to find out what flaws there were in her strategy.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with it, Fluttershy? I need to find out how I can beat those levels in ten minutes flat!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed, eager to find out Fluttershy’s secret as well.

“Uhm, well, you see, I’m not saying that your play styles are bad, it’s just that, well, they could be a teeny, tiny little bit more efficient...”

“Like how so?” Applejack came up in front of her to join Twilight and Rainbow Dash in their little ‘interrogation’, and Fluttershy found herself quailing under the combined gazes of her three friends. “C’mon Fluttershy, you know you can tell us!”

“Oh, all right, since you really want to know...!” The yellow pegasus pony drew in yet another long, deep breath, preparing to lecture her friends.

“Twilight, your strategies are too rigid, they allow no flexibility for changing situations. Once you have a plan, you stick to it throughout the entire way from start to finish, but that leaves you vulnerable the moment there’s an unexpected change in the battlefield, which happens all the time. Also, you can’t always just formulate and implement a plan sometimes, there are some occasions where you just have to wing it and improvise.”

“Rainbow Dash, you have a good grasp of the basics, but your reflexes are off. You’re constantly moving straight and turning around as though you’re flying in the air rather than circle-strafting like you have your hooves on the ground. Your aiming clearly calls for a lot of practice, seeing as you emptied three magazines at a single grunt and managed to hit it no more than a few times. Barring that, you toss grenades far too often!”

“Applejack, you have a tendency to keep charging into firefights even when you clearly stand no chance head to head against your opponents. It may save you sometimes when you have to react quickly, but even when your shields are down you don’t make any attempt to move back into cover to recover, you just keep fighting until you die even when it’s clear you’re fighting a losing battle.”

“Pinkie Pie, you were shooting in random directions and jumped off a cliff. I think that’s all I need to say.”

“And Rarity, while your performance was significantly better than all four of them combined, I have to say that you have a weakness for choosing the flashiest methods of doing things, even when there are more efficient, pragmatic ways to go about it. I think there were far too many explosions in that last part of the level you were playing, and there were a few times where you ended up jumping onto your own grenade.”

At that reminder, Rarity flushed a deep crimson, realizing that Fluttershy was right. There had indeed been a couple of her deaths caused by none other than her own ill-thrown grenades.

“Uhm, but, well, you know, you can always play however you like it, no need to take my word for it...” Fluttershy almost immediately backed down once she had finished, blushing furiously as she hid her face as best she could behind her mane.

The rest of her gathered friends were still gathered around her in a semicircle, staring at her with eyes wide as saucers, rendered utterly speechless by the startling new revelations of their timid little friend.

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*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Today, I learned that no matter what, you should never judge a book by its cover. Even the most unassuming of ponies can reveal talents that you would never have suspected they ever had.*

*Today, my friends have taught me that if you take a good look beneath a mask of quiet, simple modesty, something truly remarkable may lie in wait.*

*p.s. I have sent you a video log of the first test session we held today. Fluttershy's portion is especially interesting! I eagerly await the next game you'll be sending us!*

*Ever Your Faithful Student,  
Twilight Sparkle*

# Chapter 2

## Gears of War

*My Dearest, Most Faithful Student*

*It pleases me to hear that you and your friends are having such a wonderful time with the University of Electrical Engineering's newest invention, and learning many great lessons about friendship along the way. As such, I have deemed fit to send you any and all of the school's prototypes once they have finished what the development teams call 'beta testing.'*

*Think of it as 'privileged access' to both the console and copies before they are released to the Equestrian public.*

*I am enclosing their next finished product with this letter for your friends' perusal. If the box art is anything to go by, it seems to be quite similar to the previous one that you had been sent alongside the Xbox 360 - I do believe your friends Rainbow Dash and Applejack in particular will enjoy this one. Do send them my warmest regards.*

*Your mentor,  
Princess Celestia*

Twilight looked up from the letter she was reading to the other box that she was holding in her hoof, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, this *does* look pretty grim..." said the purple unicorn with a hint of skepticism, giving Spike a sidelong glance. "I don't see why Dash or Applejack *wouldn't* enjoy this."

Next to her, her number one assistant had his eyes deeply rooted to the box. He seemed more than a little intrigued as he stroked his chin rather thoughtfully at the image of four huge, armored stallions adorning the front cover. Armed to the teeth, rippling with muscles... and was that one in the front carrying a *chainsaw* or a *gun*?

“*Gears of War*, huh?” The young dragon remarked, biting back a snicker. “If that doesn’t scream ‘flank-kicking’ awesome’, I don’t know what does. How much d’ya wanna bet Rainbow Dash and Applejack will be all over this like Pinkie on Cupcakes?”

“Reaaaaaaaal smooth, Spike.” drawled Twilight, her voice literally oozing with sarcasm at every single word.

Regardless, she smiled it off and prompted him to hop on. “C’mon, number one assistant. We’ve got a game to play.”

A hop, skip and a jump later, Spike was on Twilight’s back as the duo headed to their destination: the rolling orchards of Sweet Apple Acres.

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“Geahs of War?” Said Applejack, reading the title off the box. Her eyebrow gave an arch but came up short at hiding the anticipatory glimmer twinkling in her eyes - somehow, she just couldn’t stop staring at the stallions adorning the box’s cover.

“Man, them engineers over at that fancy University sure got some imagination, don’t they Twi’?”

As a graduate of the Canterlot University for Magical Arts, Twilight had quite a number of run-ins with the undergraduates of the University of Electrical Engineering. Calling them “eccentric” would be like saying Fluttershy was louder than Photo Finish by a mile.

“Well, you *could* say they’re a very... erm... *inspired* bunch of ponies.” She replied, shrugging her shoulders and giving Applejack a rather sheepish grin that almost looked like it was plastered on.

Applejack raised an eyebrow at Twilight’s reaction, but ultimately decided that prodding the issue any further might not be the best course of action.

“So uh, who’s joinin’ us fer this here testin’ session, Twilight?”

“Well, I invited Rarity and Fluttershy, but apparently Rarity has a massive order to fill for Hoity Toity that’s due at the Canterlot Fashion Expo

tomorrow afternoon. Fluttershy can't come either because apparently she's babysitting Opalescence to keep Rarity's outfits scratch-free."

"And the rest...?"

"Rainbow's taking off from the weather patrol today, so she'll definitely be joining us to play. Pinkie Pie was supposed to fill an order of sweet-and-sour cupcakes, but since it's not urgent, Mr. and Ms. Cake decided to give her the day off to join us."

Applejack was, to say the least, skeptical. "Pinkie Pie? Ya sure 'bout her Twi? Ah mean, she's don't quite look like the type that might take too nice to this sorta game."

"I never turn away a friend who's offered to help, Applejack. She's welcome to leave anytime she feels uncomfortable, though."

"Well... if ya say so. But ah won't say 'ah told ya so' if ah have to say 'ah told ya so', sugarcube."

Before Twilight could utter a word in response, a rainbow-colored streak soared down from the clouds above, impacting the ground between the two ponies with the force of a tiny explosion and kicking up a sizable dust cloud.

Coughing as she waved aside the offending dirt, Twilight squinted through the dust cloud to find Rainbow Dash mounted atop Applejack in a rather awkward position.

"Oops! Heheh..." Rainbow Dash giggled sheepishly as she shot to her feet quicker than a speeding bullet, leaving a slightly battered Applejack to pick herself up from the dirt. "'Scuse me, Applejack?"

"Darnit Rainbow, ain't you had enough of droppin' in on Ponies like that?!" Yelled a visibly annoyed Applejack.

"Oh 'cmon Applejack, what's the point of havin' wings if you're not gonna use 'em!"

“Ya could darn well learn how to use ‘em right! Just look at what ya did to Twilight an’ Spike over there.”

Looking over confusedly, Rainbow Dash couldn’t help but give a little grin and look down at her hooves when she realized just how dust-caked her two friends were.

“Heheh... Sorry guys.”

Twilight, despite the immense amount of dirt and dust caking her face, seemed rather unfazed, if a little peeved.

“That’s... quite alright, Rainbow Dash.” The lavender unicorn muttered, wiping off what dust she could with a hoof. “C’mon, let’s not waste any more time and get started on the testing session.”

Realizing something was amiss, Applejack tapped her best friend on the shoulder. “Hey uh... Twi’, ah thought ya said Pinkie was joinin’ us fer this here testin’ session.”

“Oh yes, I told her to go ahead and wait for us at my laboratory. She lives closer to me than most of you do, so I thought it’d be more convenient for her to-”

Whizzing past Twilight with a gust of wind that whipped her friend’s coiffure sideways, Rainbow Dash was already well on her way to her friend’s underground lab.

“Time’s a wastin’ guys! Race ya, Applejack!”

“OH NO ya didn’t just do that, Rainbow!” Yelled Applejack as she took off at breakneck speed, trying to catch up to the blue-coated pegasus before she got too far ahead.

“Oh my... here we go again,” snickered Twilight, smiling to herself before she set off after her two best friends.

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Rainbow Dash and Applejack's immediate reactions upon seeing the game's introduction were to go wide-eyed with excitement - the logo saying "Epic Games" only served to heighten their anticipation.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man, oh man, oh man, ohman, ohman!" Rainbow Dash rattled on excitedly, practically shaking in her seat. "This is gonna be the most awesomest awesome game in the history of awesome ever!"

"Hey guys! What's up?" A familiar sugary high-pitched voice floated into the lab, and suddenly Rainbow Dash and Applejack found Pinkie Pie's face sandwiched between their shoulders, her eyes staring widely at the screen.

"Oooooooooohhh... That's a LOT of red!" Squealed the pink earth pony, staring transfixed at the main screen's blood-red tinge as a [short, melancholy tune](#) began to play from the basement's speakers.

"By golly, she's right." Applejack mused, arching an eyebrow at the game's questionable aesthetic design. "That looks an awful lot like blood? Just what in tarnation kinda game is this anyway?"

"Uhh... the box's details refer to it as a 'Third-person shooter', whatever that means." Twilight said uncertainly, the video game's box suspended in the air before her by her horn's magic.

"But gosh, I never really noticed the pictures on the other side... they're awfully violent and bloody. I mean, you gotta have a little suspension of disbelief when you're playing a game, but this looks a little more graphic than I care to stomach."

"Bah, I can handle a little blood no problem!" Proclaimed Rainbow Dash with great bravado. "I've seen like, tons of blood! More blood than you can even imagine!"

"Are you *suuuure*, Dashie?" Pinkie Pie said in a suddenly low, sinister voice, a creepy grin creeping over her face. "I'd like to take *you* up on that claim..."

"Eh...heheheheh..." Applejack laughed nervously, inching away from the pink earth pony next to her as the former began to lean in uncomfortably

close to Rainbow Dash. “Well, why don’t we all just get started here, yeah? Time’s a’ wastin’!”

Before anypony could react, Applejack had snatched up both her controller and Rainbow Dash’s, and had selected split-screen co-op, heading straight to normal difficulty this time - she didn’t need to risk bursting another blood vessel in her brain from the stress of repeatedly dying thanks to a harder-than-normal difficulty.

She quickly handed the controller back to Rainbow Dash, who was now visibly edging away from Pinkie Pie with a nervous grin.

“Well, Pinkie Pie, you’re uh, about to uh.. find out... *for Celestia’s sake, Pinkie, stop doing that! You’re creeping me out!*”

Abruptly, the pink earth pony lost the slasher smile that was making her look like a deranged serial killer, and she burst out into peals of laughter, flopping onto her back while pointing a hoof at Rainbow Dash.

“Aw c’mon Dashie, I’m just playin’!” Pinkie said in between bursts of laughter as she struggled to regain control of herself, giving her friend a jovial hug. “Man, you really lose it easily, don’tcha Dashie?”

“Only around you, I do...” Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath before turning her attention back onto the screen before her.

Soon enough, the introductory cutscene began to play, and as the story of the game unfurled, the ponies watched in awed horror as a cold, detached voice narrated the history of the ponies of Sera.

Unlike the idyllic land of Equestria, the denizens of the fictional world before them were ponies beleaguered by endless war. The surface of their planet was nothing save for bloodied ashes and ghost towns as demonic creatures called the Locust emerged from the depths of the earth to cut a bloody swathe through all who stood in their way.

Whether it was the pegasi, unicorn or even simple earth ponies, every single stallion, mare and foal fell to the bloody onslaught that burned countless cities and sunk hundreds more, their deaths displayed in a plethora of blood and viscera that seemed almost too brutal to be real.

As the voice narrated the war's final days, it spoke of a horrific final solution to put an end to the Locust rampage: they would rather burn their lands to the ground than let the Locust have them.

Without warning, colossal orange beams of rippling energy descended from the sky, igniting the pony-built cities with enormous explosions, and reducing them to burnt-out, withered husks, mere shadows of their former selves.

"Oh, Celestia... This... this is horrible!" Twilight had her forehooves covering her mouth in horror as the introduction played out before her.

This was completely unlike Halo Reach before it; while the former had been beautiful and majestic, if somewhat melancholy, Twilight Sparkle found herself completely taken aback by the sheer horror and brutality of what Gears of War presented them with.

"Oh, those Locust buzzards are going to *pay*!" Rainbow Dash said through gritted teeth, her hooves twitching on her controller, already itching to deliver some lead-filled death to the ones responsible for all the bloodshed laid out before her.

Applejack was watching the visual display before her with eyes as wide as saucers as she turned to Twilight. "Twi', ah stand by what ah said earlier, them engineers over at the university have one HAY of an imagination!"

"... Are the Locust related to Parasprites?" Pinkie Pie absently wondered, attracting odd looks from her friends.

"I... don't think so, Pinkie." Twilight answered. "At least the Parasprites didn't go about murdering and slaughtering everything they came across!"

"Oh, I can't wait to get my hooves on those darned Locust!" Rainbow Dash practically ground out, already ready and raring to go, her eyes utterly focused on the screen.

As the introduction faded to black, and the first level started, all the gathered ponies immediately had their eyes riveted on the screen, waiting for what would happen next.



At first Twilight thought there was something wrong with the video feed, as the words “**Ashes (4 Days after E-Day)**” appeared on the screen but the image remained dark. Barely anything was visible, when suddenly a grey, scampering silhouette flitted across the screen.

The maddened gibbering of several rabid animals suddenly burst out from the speakers, and Twilight started before realizing it was part of the game - thank Celestia Fluttershy wasn't here. The poor pegasus would've probably just suffered from a heart attack!

Paneling downwards, the screen revealed nothing but an impenetrable darkness, save for a single slit of light through what appeared to be a door to the outside world.

As the sound of heavy gunfire and the sickening squelch of blood drew closer, the room flooded with searing light as a heavily armored pony kicked down the door.

*“What are you doing here?”* Muttered a gruff voice from within the rank depths of what appeared to be a prison cell - obviously not the pony who was standing in the light.

*“Getting you out!”* Though the pony's face was barely visible in the darkness, his level, calm voice immediately marked him as a friendly. *“Here, put this on. You'll need it.”*

The stallion threw a large bag into the cell, cocking his head towards it. Panning towards the inmate, armor that had long not seen battle gave a creaking rustle as it was thrown over the shoulders of a bulky stallion, once more called into service.

*“You could get into a looooot of trouble for doin' this.”* As the stallion finally stepped forward into the light, everypony could finally see his face.

Sporting a countenance scarred by the horrors of war, his eyes were dark and beady with the cold, calculated effectiveness of a seasoned killer. Sporting a do-rag that covered his mane as his heavily muscled body tensed and rippled beneath his armor, he was clearly no stranger to conflict.

“Whoa...” Rainbow Dash’s jaw had gone slack upon seeing the stallion in the light, and Applejack could’ve sworn that the cyan pegasus was practically drooling at the sight of his muscles.

*“Not anymore. Things have changed. We better go.”* The second soldierpony stated, a hint of urgency in his voice.

“Aww, he’s so sweet, such a great guy!” Pinkie Pie gushed. “He’s breaking his friend out of prison!”

“Um, Pinkie Pie, I don’t think that’s how it works...” Twilight laughed.

*“What about the other prisoners?”* The first stallion asked, pausing for a moment as he stepped out of his cell. *“We can’t just leave them here.”*

*“They’re gone. Hoofman pardoned everybody.”*

*“Is that right?”* The resentful sarcasm in the stallion’s voice couldn’t have been plainer than the blood staining his cell’s wall.

*“Darn right he did. Welcome back to the army, soldier.”* The second stallion’s tone was meant to be welcoming and comforting, but it failed to instill any of said feelings in his comrade. If anything, it did just the opposite.

*“Shit.”*

Rainbow Dash barked out a laugh, slapping her thigh. “Oh, I like this stallion’s style already!”

As control was finally returned to them, Applejack and Rainbow Dash moved their characters forward, and an option eventually presented itself on screen in the form of a two-way choice.

*“All right, we’ve got two options.”* As the ponies spoke to one another, the ponies assembled could make out two names. Apparently the inmate was an earth pony by the name of “Marcus”, while his friend was a pegasus by the name of “Dominic.”

*"We can go back the way I came, through the guards' quarters: it's gonna take some time, but it's safe. Or we can go through the prison blocks and get right into the fight. Your choice."*

Brooding over the choice a little, Applejack weighed her options. "Whaddya' think Rainbow, maybe we should like, y'know, git ourselves a hang of this here game before-"

"What are ya, SCARED?" sneered Rainbow Dash, forcibly yanking Applejack's controller out from between her hooves and slamming down on the left trigger. "Of course we're headed straight into the fight!"

*"Let's take the prison blocks. I'm ready to kick some flank."* Marcus said once Rainbow Dash had slammed her hoof down on the left trigger, and the cyan pegasus let out a loud whoop.

"Yeah! Kick some flank, baby!"

Yet in spite of her admirable enthusiasm, the next thirty minutes were spent in a haze of rage, virtual blood, and multiple deaths as Rainbow Dash's bravado and haste ended up backfiring on her yet again.

"How the hay do you aim this darned thing!?" Applejack almost yelled as she blind-fired again and again at a Locust not more than five metres in front of her, failing to hit her enemy not more than a few times. She had thought that Gears of War was similar enough to Halo Reach that the control schemes would be rather similar, but she could not have been more wrong.

"Left trigger! Left trigger!" Yelled Pinkie Pie from behind them, her face buried in the instruction manual. "Honestly Dashie, you should've known better than to force Applejack along without going through the tutorial first! Everypony knows you gotta crawl before you can gallop!"

"I'm... Kinda... Busy now, Pinkie Pie!" Dash ground out from behind clenched teeth yet again as the three Locust drones in front of her started raining bullets on her once again.

The pegasus yanked the analog stick left and right as she mashed the right trigger in a wild frenzy, but her character somehow couldn't move any

faster than a slow waddle as her shots kept soaring overhead, missing time and time again.

Meanwhile, the Locust seemed to have no problem hitting her at all - if anything, it seemed as though they were having the time of their lives, shooting at fish in a barrel.

"What in Celestia's name is this! We were moving way faster in Halo Reach!" Moaned Rainbow Dash in frustration as Dom collapsed to the floor again. Applejack immediately sent Marcus sprinting over through the open to revive him, but was rewarded by a relentless hail of bullets that ended up sending him to the floor as well.

"You guys gotta take cover! It says here on the manual, 'Press 'A' to take cover!'" As Pinkie Pie's voice rang insistently in their heads, the two deigned to heed her advice rather than argue.

"Gimme that manual!" grumbled Rainbow Dash, her mane frazzled and her face contorted by a frown as she rudely snatched the manual out of Pinkie Pie's hooves.

"Blah Blah Blah, Press A to cover...blah blah blah Directional-Pad to swap... yadda yadda yadda... Left Trigger to aim, Press B to melee... All right, I got it! NOW it's time to kick some flank!"

"Hold on ya'll, lemme get a look at this here first..." With a deft snatch, Applejack stole the manual out from Rainbow Dash's hooves before the pegasus could once more callously toss it aside.

"Aw gosh darnit Rainbow, you've gone an' skipped over the whole section on reloadin' this here weapon! Says here we're supposed to wait until this here bar reaches a clear zone to reload proper."

"Reload Shmeeload!" said Rainbow Dash, brushing aside her friend's advice and ploughing headfirst into battle yet again. "I'll reload when I'm out of bullets!"

Thankfully, Dash had at least deigned to take cover and aim this time, her shots actually somewhat hitting the Locust as they charged in coverless and vulnerable.

“OH YEAH!” Bellowed Rainbow Dash, giving an ecstatic whoop that mirrored her own avatar’s victory cry as the Locust began to die in droves. “See that? That’s what happens when you’ve got Ponyville’s number one flier on your side! You Locust are SO in for a flank-kickin’!”

As the two friends moved forward, a veritable warzone greeted them as the two soldierponies found themselves engaged on all fronts by a swarm of Locust, the game’s intense, booming orchestral soundtrack pounding a [steady, heart-pounding rhythm](#) as they fought.

“Quick, find someplace ta hide, Dash!” Yelled Applejack, quickly sliding Marcus into a crouching stance behind a piece of loose rubble as gunfire soared over her head.

Unfortunately, Rainbow Dash wasn’t nearly as lucky. Three shots hit her head on as she failed to react in time to Applejack’s warning.

“Ah, horseapples!” Dash cursed as she blindly sprayed gunfire from the hip, sending Dominic into a frenzied backpedal as he emptied his magazine in the general direction of whatever Locust soldiers she could see.

“Dashie! You’re wasting your bullet thingies! You won’t be able to-”

Dash cut Pinkie Pie off mid-sentence. “It’s all right, Pinkie, just gimme a second and I’ve got this!”

As the gun clicked empty, the game automatically started reloading Dash’s weapon. As the reload bar appeared right below her weapon’s portrait indicator, she knew she just had to time a second press just at the right... holy horseapples, that white region was SMALL!!!

“Whoa whoa wait wait wait no no NO!!!” Rainbow Dash cried out in grief as her attempt at an active reload failed, her second press of the Right Bumper flying way off the mark, and Dominic began smacking his magazine in frustration, desperately attempting to clear the jam in his rifle.

With no fire to keep the Locust off-balance, shot after shot slammed again and again into Dash’s character, sending him spiralling to the floor in defeat once again.

In the meantime, Applejack was hanging back behind cover, smartly popping up only every now and then as the Locust revealed themselves, peppering them from afar with bursts of fire that came within inches of their heads.

“YOU COULD HELP ME UP HERE, AJ,” yelled Rainbow Dash over the steadily quickening thrum of her character’s heartbeat. Indeed, Dom was visibly panicking as the pool of blood surrounding him grew larger inch by inch. *“Somepony... help!”*

“Well if ya hadn’t-

“Yeah, yeah I know, so get your flank over here and help me before I bleed out!”

“Ah can’t! If ah go out there, the Locust will get me too! Then we’re gonna have tah restart all over again!”

“Better than sitting there and letting me bleed out, right!?” Rainbow Dash hollered. “Throw a grenade or something!”

Growling, Applejack immediately hit ‘up’ on her D-pad before arcing her vision skyward and hitting the right trigger, blindly tossing a grenade in the general direction of the Locust soldiers. But she didn’t even wait to see the results of her toss. Instead, her hoof immediately hit ‘A’, and Marcus hurled himself over the piece of rubble he had been taking cover behind, coming up right next to the downed Dominic.

“Don’t worry Rainbow, ah gotcha!” Applejack exclaimed fervently as she mashed on ‘X’ in a panic the moment the prompt appeared on screen. Marcus immediately lowered himself to a crouch, yanking Dominic to his feet, and the encroaching red completely disappeared from Rainbow Dash’s side of the screen.

“All right, RD’s back in the action!” Rainbow Dash whooped triumphantly as Dominic got back onto his feet. Almost instantly, she hit ‘A’, and Dominic smoothly slid himself down behind another piece of cover right in front of Marcus, while Applejack sent Marcus hurtling back to where he came from in a mantle maneuver over the rubble.

Coming back up to where she was before, Applejack steadied her aim once more, popping Marcus back up out of cover to rain fire upon the Locust again... only to find Rainbow Dash's avatar right smack in front of hers, blocking off her line of fire.

"Arh, consarnit Rainbow, yer blockin' mah shots!" Applejack tried to move Marcus to the side to shift around Rainbow Dash, but Dominic seemed to mirror her movements perfectly, almost as though she was *intentionally* preventing her from taking any shots at all.

"Sorry, can't hear ya!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed ecstatically, too caught up in the rush of battle to even register what Applejack was saying. "Busy killing Locust!"

"AH SAID-"

*"Would you kindly get the buck out of the way please!?"* Marcus suddenly shouted.

It was enough of a surprise that Rainbow Dash's hoof went slack, releasing the left trigger and sending Dominic ducking back down under cover. The two players stared at the screen for several moments, before Applejack hit the pause button and burst into laughter.

"Ahahahaha!!! Oh man, that was priceless! Them engineers sure think'a everythin', don't they? It's almost as if they know someone like you's gonna be playin', Rainbow!" The orange earth pony was practically in stitches as she tried to catch her breath amidst her laughter.

"Yeah, yeah, keep rubbing it in, AJ..." Rainbow Dash scowled as she quickly reached over and hit the Start button again, unpauseing the game and throwing the duo back into the thick of the fray. "C'mon, we've got some flank to kick!"

The remainder of the level progressed rather well, seeing that Rainbow Dash and Applejack were finally learning from their mistakes and playing the game properly.

Yet for all their improvement, the two ponies were both rushers in every sense of the word, Rainbow Dash had a propensity for charging ahead of Applejack, while her blond-maned friend had the rather bad habit of always trying to settle every battle up close and personal with the butt of her rifle.

That didn't stop Applejack from killing any less Locust than Rainbow Dash, though.

"YEE-HAW! Get along, lil' doggies!" Applejack crowed, the satisfying "cha-click" of her fifth successful active reload music to her ears. Soon enough, she was cutting down Locust like there was no tomorrow, quickly catching up with Rainbow Dash's body count.

The cyan pegasus, despite her successes with her rather straightforward strategy of charging forward and killing as many Locust as she could, was somewhat dampened by every failed active reload she attempted whenever her magazine ran dry.

"Aww c'mon, why can't I get this darned thing down?" Rainbow Dash groaned as Dominic began smacking his magazine again, attempting to get his gun to work. "Arghhh! The hay with this!"

In a little hissy fit rather out of character for the normally overconfident pegasus, Rainbow Dash threw Dominic over the piece of rubble he had been hiding behind, and began charging him in the general direction of the last Locust alive in the courtyard.

The Locust drone barely had time to react before Rainbow Dash's avatar was right up in its face. As soon as the cyan pegasus's character had reached her mark, she began mashing away at the 'B' button, smashing the drone's face in repeatedly with the butt of her rifle in a maddened frenzy, sending her enemy face-forward into the dirt.

"AHA! Take THAT, you stinkin' Locust!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed in triumph as the screen faded to black, and the subsequent cutscene began playing.

*"Delta, there's something moving below ground, over!"*

*"I see it too... what are we lookin' at?"*



*“Hay if I know...”*

*“Marcus! We’ve gotta get to the Raven, now!”*

As the gathered mares watched, the two soldierponies sprinted across the courtyard’s exit to the awaiting helicopter... when the very ground they once stood on *came apart*.

Roaring like a maddened Ursa Major, a gigantic armored spider burst forth from the ground, roaring at the two as they scrambled on board the helicopter.

In an attempt to drag the two to their death, the spider lashed out, attempting to impale the helicopter upon its humongous claws, but the strikes went wide and the two ponies made their escape, leaving the enraged beast far behind them.

“Woo!” Exclaimed Rainbow Dash, dizzy with excitement as she high-hoofed Applejack on a job well done. “We kicked serious flank on that one!”

“Ooh, Ooh, Ooh! Can I have a turn next, Dashie?” Asked Pinkie Pie, bounding up and down over her two friends as she eagerly awaited her turn at the game.

“Eh, I think I’ve saved the world enough for now. You play next, Pinkie Pie!” Said Rainbow Dash, passing the controller over to her over-excited companion.

“AIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII-right!” Yelled Pinkie Pie, giving a backflip and landing right smack in Rainbow Dash’s seat.

Soon enough, the next level was underway. Dropping both Marcus and Dom in a courtyard, Applejack and Pinkie Pie found their location was under siege as Locust rained bullets all around their position.

Fairly experienced by now, Applejack immediately threw herself behind cover as the first salvo of bullets flew over her head.

“Pinkie!” She yelled, “find some cover ‘fore ya become filled with more holes than swiss cheese faster than y’all know it!”

Surprisingly, Pinkie had turned out to be a rather competent player, quickly ducking behind an aqueduct as she narrowly missed getting hit by a few stray projectiles.

Applejack immediately popped Marcus up out of cover to give Pinkie some support. Yet much to her shock, unlike the previous rifle she had been holding, this one neglected short bursts of fire like her previous rifle, and instead opted for a steady stream of red-hot death.

After a moment, a steely grin spread over her face, and then she held down the left trigger, sighting down on the leftmost Locust she could see, before pressing her hoof down on the right trigger, and not letting go.

“SAY HELLO TO MAH LIL’ FRIEND!” Applejack yelled out enthusiastically as she stitched her fire over the Locust line one by one, felling her foes in short, systematic order. Bullets from the Locust line slammed into Marcus in response, sending small bursts of blood flying from his body and causing a crimson cog to appear in the centre of Applejack’s screen.

The orange mare ignored this however, and kept on firing, her eyes steeled in determination. Only the repeated ‘*cha-click!*’ sound that she heard every time she was about to run out of ammunition gave her any warning, and she quickly ducked Marcus back behind cover just as his magazine ran dry.

Soon enough, Applejack had managed to whittle the crowd down to little more than a single locust, cowering behind a lone section of wall in front of the orange mare.

“Pinkie! This one’s all yers! Go get ‘im!”

“Okie Dokie Lokie!” Came Pinkie Pie’s confident cry of affirmation as she narrowed her own character into a roadie run, charging straight for the last enemy standing.

As she reached her foe, Pinkie vaguely recalling something in her book about a “melee attack,” which frankly sounded quite tasty and felt like it would go well with some vanilla. Not fully knowing what she was about to

do, Pinkie Pie held down the “B” button and watched with eager anticipation for what would happen next.

What she had NOT expected to hear, however, was a low, guttural roar as the contraption affixed to the bottom of her rifle came to shocking life, its blades revving in mechanical fury as they gnashed together with an almost sickening, metallic whine.

**GRRRRNNNG-GRNG-GRNG-GRNG-GRRRRRRNNNGGG!!!!**

And then in a flash, Pinkie’s character immediately bore down on the hunched Locust with his full weight, shoving the front end of his weapon into the pale creature’s torso, the chainsaw roaring.

**GGGGGGRRRRRRNNNNRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRGGG  
GHHHHHH!!!!**

The chainsaw’s spinning blades ripped right through flesh and sinew like a hot knife through butter, sending a fountain of blood flying everywhere. Some of it even splattered right over the camera’s viewpoint, and at the end of the *terribly* messy ordeal, the Locust had toppled to the floor in two messily severed halves.

With a sickening, wet *splat!*, blood splattered all over the floor, the camera’s view, and Pinkie Pie’s character.

Throughout the entire display, Pinkie Pie’s eyes had remained glued to what was happening on-screen, her mouth utterly agape at the sheer display of brutality.

*“Ugh, that smells bad. What are these guys made of, shit?”* Pinkie Pie’s character muttered as the blood slowly disappeared from the camera’s view, but not from his body or the ground around him.

Twilight felt as though she was going to lose it right then and there. The purple-maned unicorn hurriedly excused both herself and her faithful assistant to the nearby restroom, which was quickly accompanied by loud sounds of lunch being forced back up an unwilling gullet.

Applejack's face had gone a color of similar shade of sickly green as the earth pony set her controller aside and rushed for the bathroom with with her front hoof over her mouth, clearly struggling to hold back the bile that was threatening to spill over.

Dash, equally sickened by this display, tried to reach the bathroom ahead of Applejack but was too late. The door slammed shut in her face as she was forced to stay outside with her vomit slowly forcing its way out of her stomach and into her throat. It took almost all of her willpower to hold the slowly mounting wave of nausea back.

"Guys! *Blurgh*- let me- *Oogh*- in! Please!" She begged, her eyes watering with the effort now.

"Hey Dashie..." came a low, menacing voice from behind the Rainbow-maned Pegasus. "Why don't you come over here and finish this part with me, *hmmmmmmmm*?"

"*Bleugh*- No thanks, Pinkie... I'd much rather... *Urk*- take a break right about now..."

"Awww, c'mon Dashie..." said Pinkie Pie, her voice sounding much closer now. Dash could almost swear she felt something hot around her neck...

As Dash's eyes darted side to side in nervousness, she suddenly felt the light touch of two hooves descend upon her wings. "Best friends stick together *forever, right?*"

"S-stop it, Pinkie..." Dash couldn't stop her voice from quavering this time, barely able to hold back the tide of rising bile. Normally she was brave and overconfident, but Celestia darn it, Pinkie was creeping the hay out of her like this! "You're... *ulp, oh Celestia!*"

"Dashie, Dashie, Dashie... don't you wanna- *HEY!*" Pinkie Pie gave a shout of surprise as she soon found herself being showered by a brownish, stinky liquid that stuck to her mane, slowly running off her hair with the gooey stickiness of fresh maple syrup.

"Ewwwww, Dashie! What did you do *that* for!" Pinkie whined and pouted in protest, abruptly backing off. "I was only joking!"

“What’s going on out here?” Came Twilight’s voice as she dragged herself out of the toilet, a still groggy Applejack at her side.

“Dashie here thought it would be a good idea to show me what she ate for lunch!” Moaned Pinkie Pie, still trying to wipe her mane free of whatever it was Rainbow Dash had just retched all over her.

“Serves you right for trying to scare me!” Rainbow Dash gasped as she dry heaved one more time before shoving her way past Twilight and Applejack and into the bathroom, followed by the sound of more forced retching as Rainbow Dash tried to empty the remaining contents of her now-vacant stomach.

“Um, girls, I think we’d better call it a day here... I don’t think I can stomach any more of this...” Twilight said weakly as she quickly trotted over to the console before hitting the power button, abruptly shutting it off.

“Aww, but we were just getting to the good part!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, much to the chagrin and ticked-off stare of an otherwise sickened Twilight Sparkle. “Can I at least stay over to play the rest of it? Huh, Twilight? Can I can I can I?”

“Ugh...” The lavender unicorn felt her hoof pressing into her forehead in exasperation, dearly hoping she wouldn’t regret what she would say next.

“All right, fine. But keep the volume on the TV down, please; I would like to still be able to sleep peacefully at night.”

Still, she wondered whether she would even be able to get any sleep at all - the visceral images of the scene she had just witnessed would be sure to replay themselves over and over again in her dreams for this night and surely the next.

“YAAAAAYYYY!!!” Pinkie Pie exclaimed, clearly overjoyed, and before anypony could protest, she had already started up the Xbox 360 again, continuing on from where they had left off with nary a pause, this time on Single Player.

“Oh, boy... c’mon, girls. Let’s get out of here. I don’t think I can watch any more of this... especially if she revs that thing up again!” Twilight quickly trotted out of her basement, Rainbow Dash and Applejack quickly following in tow after they bade Pinkie Pie a few brief farewells.

Not that the pink earth pony even heard them to begin with - she was too fixated on the screen, already eagerly revving up her chainsaw bayonet for its next kill.

---

Twilight tossed and turned about in her bed, trying to ignore the ticking clock that now read 2:03am. She had been trying her best to get to sleep for the past several hours, but apparently Pinkie Pie had forgotten her instructions to turn the volume down, because she could still hear the distinct rat-tat-tat-tat of machine guns firing through her basement floor, and the even more horrifying sound of that... that barbaric contraption!

Each time she heard that sound, images of that scene where Pinkie’s character had so brutally eviscerated the Locust drone would flood her mind, prompting an even fresher wave of nausea as she would then fight to keep her dinner down, shutting her eyes tightly in an attempt to dispel the images.

*Ugh... I’m never going to get any sleep at this rate if Pinkie keeps playing that game!* Twilight thought frustratedly to herself as she threw her pillow over her ears to shut the sound out, but failed to do so.

Just as she was on the verge of simply throwing herself out of bed to go downstairs and tell Pinkie it was time to stop playing, the noises abruptly stopped, and the light from downstairs went out.

*Huh... well, I guess I might be getting some sleep after all!* The lavender unicorn thought to herself, satisfied, and turned over in her bed, finally letting a peaceful smile settle over her features. Peace and quiet had come at last...

*Creaaaakkk...*

Twilight froze, her eyes snapping open, wide in horror. Her eyes darted to the left, in the direction of the door, but she dared not even move a muscle. As the door slowly creaked open, she heard hoofsteps gradually draw ever-closer to her bed, the blood-curdling thump of each one growing louder and louder by the second.

Just as the hoofsteps were right behind her, they suddenly stopped, and Twilight simply just lay there, frozen in terror - she dared not even breathe, or even let out the slightest squeak of terror no matter how badly she wanted to.

“Hey, Twiliiiiight...” Rang a familiar voice, echoing from the inky darkness behind her. While every bone in her body begged her not to, the lavender unicorn found herself turning around, to face whatever awaited her.

When she saw it, her pupils shrank to the size of pinpricks; her eyes widening with gut-wrenching terror.

Right behind her, silhouetted in the moonlight, stood Pinkie Pie... but not the Pinkie that Twilight knew and cherished as the best of friends.

Her eyes were hollow and empty, dotted only by pupils even tinier than Twilight’s own. In place of her normally warm, cheery smile was a deranged, nigh-bloodthirsty grin that literally made Twilight’s heart skip a beat... or two.

“I think the chainsaw bayonet on the Lancer is a pretty interesting invention!” Pinkie said in an extremely creepy, strangled voice that sent every hair on Twilight’s body standing ramrod straight. “Y’know, I think it’d be pretty popular if I invented it, but I first need some test subjects... FOR MY PROTOTYPE.”

Pinkie Pie reached over to pull the ignition cord on the contraption she held in her hoof, and almost immediately it gave a mighty roar as it shuddered to life.

Twilight Sparkle’s terrified scream rang throughout the entire library that night, followed by peals of high, deranged laughter that echoed for yards throughout.

---

“Man, Twilight, you’re no fun!” Pinkie Pie groaned through the mass of bandages that covered her head as she walked through the streets of Ponyville the next morning, to which the worn-out, sleep-deprived unicorn walking next to her groaned.

“Pinkie, you ambushed me in the middle of the night, made me think you’d decided to go completely loco on us, and that you were going to kill me! Did you think I was going to do anything *less* than smash you over the head with a crowbar in self-defence? You even had that prank item that sounded just like a chainsaw, for Celestia’s sake! I thought I was going to *die!!!*” Twilight ranted, her eyes wide and bloodshot from the lack of sleep. “If I were Gilda, I’d have *murdered* you for that prank! Please, for the sake of all that is good and holy, don’t do that to me again!”

“All right, all right, geez!” Pinkie Pie relented, giving her friend a comforting hug and a pat on the shoulder as she apologized. “I’m sorry about last night, all right? If anything... you should be wishing that Applejack and Dashie were there too! Oh Celestia, that would’ve been the best prank ever! I wish I could’ve seen the looks on their faces, your expression was priceless, Twilight!”

The pink earth pony burst out into peals of laughter again, practically rolling on the ground in stitches, and Twilight simply shook her head, exasperated. If anything, she decided not to point out the fact that if Applejack and Rainbow Dash had been there, Pinkie Pie would’ve probably ended up with a lot more than just a bloody bump on her head.

Some things about Pinkie Pie just never changed.

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Back in the royal palace, Princess Celestia allowed herself a impish grin as she twirled a small piece of parchment with her right hoof.

By right, Twilight SHOULD have received this note alongside her testing copy, but due to otherwise... mysterious circumstances, it had somehow not been included in the packaging.

Emblazoned in enormous red text and further bolded for posterity, was a simple warning notice.

**WARNING.**

THIS GAME HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED WITH THE "FILTER MATURE CONTENT" OPTION AS OF THIS BUILD, AND AS THUS, IS CONSIDERED TO HAVE VIOLENT IMAGERY THAT IS NOT SUITABLE FOR PONIES OF ALL AGES.

IF YOU SO DESIRE, YOU MAY REQUEST FOR A MORE COMPLETE BUILD COPY AT A LATER DATE, OR ANOTHER TITLE TO TEST.

THANK YOU ONCE AGAIN FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE.  
THE CANTERLOT UNIVERSITY OF ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING.

Giggling to herself, Celestia set aside her mirth and focused on the newest package that had just arrived on her desk from the Canterlot University of Computer Science.

Enclosed with an official letter from the University's school board, a sleek, black package had been shipped under priority order to the royal palace.

Celestia had not bothered to look inside yet, but enclosed with said package was a rectangular, metallic container that bore a picture of a maneless, bearded Pony on the front cover, extending an inviting hoof forward.

While his face may not have been wholly visible, his twin orbs could still be seen. Framed inside the black depths of his eyes were two, seemingly suspended crystal lattices that shimmered with an unearthly green.

In his outstretched hoof, eerily beautiful, yet subtly haunting crystals pulsed with a fluorescent emerald glow. They may have looked like any other piece of raw jewelry, but something about them just felt alien enough to be disturbingly unnatural. If one looked closely enough, it would seem as if they were actually *growing*.

If anything, this new game would be *just* the thing that her dear student would enjoy so much, and sending it to her tomorrow would at least make up for the heart attack she'd probably given the poor filly today by sending her Gears of War *without* the mature content filter.

With a warm smile, the royal monarch stamped her personal seal upon the letter she had addressed to Twilight Sparkle with the package, and awaited the coming of a new day.

# Chapter 3

## Tiberium Wars

Twilight Sparkle yawned tiredly as she trudged back to her home library in the town of Ponyville. Last night had been a figurative hell - after Pinkie Pie had scared the living daylights out of her in the dead of night with a slasher smile and a prop chainsaw, the lavender unicorn had been utterly unable to sleep despite Pinkie Pie's subsequent assurances that it had all been in the spirit of 'good' humor.

Eyebags heavy under her eyes and eyelids fluttering weakly, desperately trying to stay open, Twilight gave the door to her home a tired tug before virtually collapsing at her doorstep in a heap, moaning tiredly.

"Spike? Spiiiiiiike?" She called out in her typical manner, and as faithfully as ever, her number one assistant was already there to help her up.

"Whoa, Twilight!" Spike exclaimed in shock as he came to answer the door, only to find his closest friend collapsed at the doorstep in an exhausted heap. "What in blazes happened to you!?"

"Fatigue did." The violet unicorn answered in a mutter as Spike helped her back onto her hooves, and staggered forward back into the welcoming comfort of her home. "Get me some tea, will you Spike? I've got a massive headache that needs soothing..."

"Got it! One pot of- *urp*-"

"What is it, Spike?" Twilight asked, "another letter from the Princess?"

"No, it's- *mmph*- something- *oogh*- big!"

Before Spike could say anything else, the infant dragon belched forth a massive column of green fire much larger than the normally tiny wisps he was accustomed to, resulting in a long and rather disgusting sound.

“Spike! I know this is your royal duty, but for heaven’s sake, show some decorum! Where are your-”

Before Twilight could finish her sentence, the massive green column of flame coagulated into a roiling sphere of fire above her head, somehow suspending itself in mid-air.

“Uhhm, Spike? *What* is tha-

In a flash of green light, the sphere dispelled itself and revealed a large and rather heavy-looking black box within. Hovering almost comically over Twilight’s head for a few seconds, gravity soon decided it was time to put that joke to an end.

With a loud, resounding crash, and a muffled “*OOF*” from the purple unicorn, the box came down hard on Twilight’s midsection and pinned her to the floor.

Craning her neck up from the floor, Twilight affixed her faithful assistant with a gaze that anypony could swear would otherwise cut through concrete walls.

“Ugh... did you PLAN this, Spike?”

Spike put on a facade of mock surprise, and gave Twilight an utterly mock look of consternation.

“Twilight! I’m shocked that you would think I’d ever do such a thing on purpose!”

“UGH!” Twilight moaned, and motioned for her assistant, “then stop giving me that face and come over here and GET THIS THING OFF ME!”

“Wow... gettin’ a little huffy there, aren’t we, Twilight?”

“Har de har har, Spike” she countered, clearly not in the mood for jokes.

Spike quickly moved to Twilight’s side, giving the heavy-looking box a lift and practically staggering backwards as he wobbled unsteadily under its weight.

"Whoa, wh-whoa! Man, Twilight, this thing is heavy!" Remarked the baby dragon as he carefully set the box down on the floor, not wanting to risk any damage in case its contents were fragile.

"You don't say, Spike?" Muttered the lavender unicorn as she stepped closer to the box, her curiosity overpowering the fatigue that weighed down so heavily on her bones.

"Hmm... I wonder what this thing is, and why the Princess would've sent it to me. Looks pretty similar to the Xbox... just bigger and heavier!"

"Oh, hold up!" said Spike, giving his stomach a grab as another wave of gas hit him, forcing him to cover his mouth with a claw.

"I-I think I feel another one... **HURGHPPP.**"

Without warning, another belch of green flame escaped from the dragon's mouth, but this time much, much smaller - the typical wisp of flame that preceded a letter from the Princess, and sure enough, the wisp coalesced right before Twilight, unfurling to reveal a thin, rectangular box that glistened with a chromatic sheen.

Attached to the front box by a simple wax seal was a tiny letter. As Twilight peered closer, she could make out the the ornate seal of the royal palace... and her mentor's signature penmanship.

*My Dearest, Most Faithful Student*

*I do hope you've very much enjoyed the latest title put together by the very talented engineers over here at the Canterlot University for Electrical Engineering.*

Twilight gave her eyes a short rub. "If exhaustion is any sign of enjoyment... I'm at Pinkie Pie's greatest party ever."

Turning her eyes back to the Princess's letter, Twilight read on.

*It is my pleasure to inform you that as of today, you will be receiving another prototype, this time from the esteemed Canterlot University for*

*Computer Science. They would like to seek both you and your friends for aid in the testing of this new device. I believe they had dubbed it the “personalized computation and calculation terminal,” or “personal computer” for short.*

*You will find, enclosed with this letter yet another game, this time crafted by development teams hand-picked by the school’s teaching board and approved by none other than myself. They would be very much grateful if you were to extend them a much-needed helping hoof in testing their latest prototype.*

*p.s. I think you will find this title very much to your liking.*

*Your Mentor  
Princess Celestia*

Peering down at the box, Twilight gave it a rather apprehensive look, recalling her experience with another game that had “War” in the title.

“Command and Conquer... Tiberium... Wars? If this is anything like Gears of War... Pinkie Pie’s not coming within three feet of this, I swear to Celestia. What do you think, Spike?”

Unsurprisingly, the baby dragon had already unceremoniously shorn the black box wide open with his claws, and was now wading knee-deep in Styrofoam bubbles as he messily sifted through its contents.

“I don’t know ‘bout the game, but if it’s anything, this thing here sure looks different from anything that’s even like the Xbox... I mean, it looks way huger, but it actually comes with its own screen!”

“Hmmm...” Twilight mused to herself, turning the box over and looking at the screenshots adorning the back of the cover with a critical eye.

“Well... seems pretty tame... I’m not seeing any blood... just... a very impersonal bird’s-eye view of lots of ponies. Well, if it isn’t as in-your-face as Gears of War was, I think this might be just fine. Spike, help me plug this ‘Personal Computer’ in! We’ve got some testing to do!”

--

Much to her consternation, Twilight had found that this... “Personal Computer” was far more trouble to set up than she had imagined it would have been. Between the peripherals and the mass of entangled wires... the purple unicorn couldn’t make heads or tails out of the machine that was fast becoming the bane of her existence.

She didn’t have the foggiest idea of which hole she was supposed to plug which jack into, and she had to go through the arduous process of trial and error as she tried to fit square pegs into round holes and round pegs into square holes.

After what she expected as the tenth hour since setting out to what should have been a short and easy assembly, Twilight looked at the black box sitting above her desk, a messy mass of wires trailing behind it into various plugs strewn about beneath it as the screen sat serenely atop the table, its blank screen almost daring her to turn it on.

“Okay... I did everything I could to follow the manual that came with this thing; if it doesn’t work, then I’m a parasprite.”

Almost apprehensive, the lavender unicorn looked at what the manual had called a ‘CPU’ and gave its power button a tentative push - abruptly, lights on the CPU sprang to life as it began to emit a soft whirr, and Twilight’s heart leapt with joy at the prospect of her first successful assembly.

“Oh my goodness... it’s working! Spike! It’s working!!!” The unicorn practically squealed in excitement as she quickly turned on the monitor as well.

Her heart sank faster than a flaming unicorn falling from Cloudsdale when the monitor’s power light turned green, but nothing appeared.

Almost immediately, her right eye started twitching, and her normally straight mane started fraying at the ends.

“What- No- I- Wuh- uh- Wha...?!”

“Uh.. Twilight, we haven’t plugged it in yet?” Came Spike’s voice as he tried to prevent Twilight from having another major breakdown. “Look! There’s a wire loose!”

“A wire loose? Oh my gosh! Quick Spike, plug it in before we blow up Ponyville or something!” Twilight rushed in a panic, grabbing the wire from Spike’s hand before the infant reptile could react.

Sweat pouring from her brow as she dove underneath the device, Twilight swam through the ocean of wires and jammed the wire into the first plug she saw, praying nothing would go wrong.

By some miracle of the sun and stars above, it was exactly the right plug she needed, out of the few still unoccupied ones. She heard a faint buzzing from the desk above her, and she quickly clambered out from under it, frantically checking the monitor to see what had changed.

In the center of the screen, a lone window pane came into focus. Slowly, it began to divide itself and split apart into four sections before each coming to a halt, hovering individually in their respective positions as each segment morphed into a different, individual color.

As the smaller panes began to take on hues of red, blue, green and yellow, the words “Ponysoft Windows: XE Filly Edition”

Ecstatic, Twilight bounded up and down her lab in a dizzying display of jubilation, which to anypony who might have seen her, would appear as if she had dosed herself on one too many teaspoons of sugar.

Squealing “YES YES YES YES YES YES YES” like she did back when she was first accepted as Princess Celestia’s personal student, Twilight bounded up and down across her personal study before eventually settling down, thoroughly exhausted.

“I think... *wheeze*- I think I’m going... *haaaack*- to bed now, Spike. Be a dear and help me get this game all set up, would you?”

Spike snapped to attention and gave a quick salute. “You can count on me, Twilight!”



As the unicorn mare trotted off to bed, Spike gave the PC a challenging grin, and walked up to it, the box for Tiberium Wars in his hand.

Opening the case, Spike prised out the game's disc and gave it a little twirl. "Sweeeeeeeeeeeeeet! If I'm lucky, I'll get to play this one before Twilight or any of the others do!"

Giving the instruction manual a quick flip and tossing the game in the disc drive, Spike sat himself right in front of the screen, eagerly awaiting his very own shot at one of these games.

No sooner had Spike popped the disc inside, a slow whirring came from the device, making him pray he didn't something wrong.

As soon as the whirring stopped, Spike extended a trembling claw towards the machine, only to quickly draw it back with a loud “AAH!” as a bright and chirpy voice suddenly blasted itself from the speakers Twilight had hooked up earlier.

*“Welcome to InstallShield Unicorn! To proceed with the setup of the game, please select your installation options!”*

Spike's eyes bugged out at the window of options that suddenly appeared on the screen at that, realizing that he had absolutely no idea what to do here, lest he accidentally blow up the computer if he chose the wrong option or something, and that his hopes of playing anything at all before Twilight and the others had been dashed completely.

**"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"**

...

With the first rays of Celestia's dawn seeping in through the cracks in Twilight's window, the purple-maned unicorn dragged herself out of bed and gave her stiff limbs a good morning stretch.

After running through her daily morning rituals, giving her mane a good brush before brushing her teeth, she stepped out of the bathroom, ready to take on a new day.

“Spike?” She called out, stepping out of her bedroom and into her study, wondering how the installation had gone while she was asleep. “Spike? How’d everything go-”

The purple unicorn stopped dead in her tracks. She had expected to find Spike sleeping on the couch at most, but what she did not expect was to find her faithful assistant slumped over her desk, his eyes bloodshot and drool pouring out of his mouth in a steady stream.

Sighing, Twilight trotted forward and waved a hoof in front of her assistant’s face - no response. The baby dragon was out like a light.

*Hmm... This called for desperate measures,* Twilight thought to herself.

“SPIIIIIIIIIKE!” She bellowed, “Rarity’s calling for you, she needs you to help her dig for jewels agaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaain!”

“HUH WHA-?” Spike suddenly shot up in his seat, ramrod straight, his eyes still half-shut from the lack of sleep. That didn’t discourage him any, however - in fact, in spite of it, he immediately clambered out of the chair in a near-drunken flurry of movement, slurring and staggering his way out of the room.

Hoisting a claw overhead in an overly dramatic fashion, Spike gave a loud cry and attempted to charge forward.

“HOLD ON, RARITY, I’M COMI- *\*thunk\**”

And just like that, the baby dragon fell flat on his face as sleep finally took him, a gentle snore echoing from his lips.

“Heheh, still the same old Spike...” Twilight chuckled as she nudged Spike onto her back before depositing him on the nearby couch, nuzzling the baby dragon affectionately. “Sleep tight, Spike. Thanks for helping me out.”

Turning back to the PC behind her, Twilight hoped all had gone well, if not it meant another day agonizing over this infernal contraption.

Luckily for her, the game had 'installed' itself, whatever that meant, successfully, the screen now flashing a message stating that "Tiberium Wars" was ready to play.

"All right! Now, to see who to invite over for our testing session first..." Twilight began mulling to herself, pondering her decisions.

Rarity and Fluttershy were the first to come to mind, seeing that they had missed yesterday's testing session, and they had at least some form of catching up to do.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash would probably still be a little apprehensive after the plethora of blood and gore that was Gears of War, but they would probably be willing to come over once Rarity and Fluttershy gave them a heads-up that Tiberium Wars was A-Okay. As for Pinkie Pie...

Twilight winced at the memories of the prank the night before, and decided to inform the pink earth pony only after she had ascertained for a fact that this game wouldn't be giving her any more nightmares.

"But before any of that," Twilight thought to herself, "It's about time I put on some tea."

--

As the purple-maned unicorn slowly sipped on Zecora's exquisite blend of foreign herbs and tea leaves, a knock on the door told her that her invitations had been answered.

Casting an elementary "open" spell, Twilight gave the front door a gentle outward push to reveal both Rarity and Fluttershy standing in the doorway.

"Twilight! Darling!" Cooed Rarity, "terribly sorry we couldn't make it for the previous session, what with the Fashion Expo and all."

"That's quite all right, Rarity," Twilight reassured. "I'm just glad you could be here to help me out this time."

"But of course, Twilight," whispered Fluttershy in her ever-quiet voice. "What are friends for?"

Laughing, the lavender mare guided her friends over to where she had installed the PC, and was pleased to find Tiberium Wars already up and running, the main menu awaiting her selection amidst a series of low, baritone notes that played a [haunting, melancholic melody](#).

“Tiberium... *Wars*?” Rarity read the title off the screen with some trepidation, her expression somewhat creased in worry. “Oh dear, Twilight, this wouldn’t happen to be anything like that horrible ‘Gears of War’ game that you received the day before, did you? I’ve heard such terrible stories from Rainbow Dash!”

“Oh, not at all, Rarity! In fact, I’ve taken a good, long look at the box art and the manual, and I assure you, this game is one hundred percent free of blood and gore!” Twilight proudly declared, settling herself into the seat at her desk and facing the screen.

“In fact, from what I’ve seen from the manual, it seems to me like playing this is more like a... very elaborate game of chess. With a lot more types of pieces than you could shake a stick at.”

“Chess? Oh heavens, Twilight, why didn’t you say so sooner! I’m glad that whoever made this game had some sense to develop something that suits my more cultured, refined tastes.”

Twilight smiled at her friend’s reply. She expected Rarity’s apprehension, given that the upper-class fashionista was loathe to anything that was otherwise... graphically offensive in nature. Thankfully nothing a little quick thinking and few elaborate metaphors here and there couldn’t otherwise fix, despite being a little underhanded.

“Well, what in Equestria are you waiting for, Twilight! Go on, get this game started!” With a rather forceful nudge from her right flank, Rarity sent Twilight spiraling right smack into her deskchair.

Giving head a quick shake to right herself, Twilight moved the computer’s mouse around to set the cursor on the campaign option on the menu. Almost immediately, a side-menu appeared, prompting her to choose between two options, the ‘EDI Campaign’ or the ‘NOD Campaign’.

The purple unicorn had already read through the manual before her two friends had arrived - from the brief summary she had read on the backstory of the game's world, it was apparent that EDI were the good guys, while NOD were the bad guys. She doubted the in-game world was quite as simple as that, but she'd have to actually play the game to otherwise find out.

She didn't pause much before immediately selecting the EDI Campaign. Soon after making her choice, the screen abruptly went dark before a silver icon of a pegasus, swooping downwards with outstretched forehooves appeared before her.

Once that came into focus, a silver, almost chromatic ring emblazoned itself around the pegasus, forming an emblem of sorts that began to slowly rotate, revealing a stunningly detailed 3-D model complete with the finest of touches.

*"Fillydelphia uplink successful."*

*"Welcome back, Commander."*

--

After sitting through cutscene over cutscene discussing the war between the EDI and NOD, the rumors of NOD being on the rise again, plus a few other minor things she didn't quite catch, Twilight was thrown headfirst into her first mission in the derelict warzone of the North Coltalina Badlands, her instructions to reactivate the nearby abandoned EDI outpost and investigate NOD activity in the region.

At first the screen she was looking at displayed nothing but a desolate landscape blank of all life, save for a bird's eye view of a deserted road and several half-destroyed buildings. As she looked around awkwardly, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do, a steady, reassuring voice boomed from the speakers, identifying himself as the Training Officer.

"Greetings Commander Sparkle, this is EDI battle command, here to get you up to speed with some of the ground operations on this mission."

Twilight blushed a little, somehow being called “Commander” was quite flattering for the otherwise reserved unicorn.

As she watched, two flying contraptions dragged along by Pegasi pilots flew on screen, coming to a stop at the centre of her view before slowly descending to a steady landing, disgorging from their metallic bellies two groups of uniformed ponies carrying rifles.

*“Establishing video uplink...”*

The robotic voice from the earlier introductory cutscene suddenly spoke, and a video transmission flared to life in the upper-right corner of Twilight’s screen, displaying one of the mares that had participated in the briefing earlier.

“Commander, we need you to locate the old EDI outpost, and investigate-”

“HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEY GUYS!” Came Pinkie Pie’s shrill cry, as she burst through the door to Twilight’s study with a slightly winded Rainbow Dash and Applejack in tow.

“Awww, the hay? You guys started without us!” Rainbow Dash put on a look of mock hurt as she quickly trotted forward, coming up behind Twilight and jamming her head over the unicorn’s shoulder at the screen.

“Oooooooh.” The cyan pegasus practically cooed. “Celestia sent you something new? Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I was... uh... checking whether it was blood-free! Yes, that’s it! Blood-free! What with that little incident with Gears of War and everything...”

Thankfully, Rainbow Dash was never a pony that took a lot of convincing to win over. Despite Twilight’s rather plastic smile and shifty eyes, Dash merely gave her a quick shrug of the shoulders and proceeded to glue her eyes to the screen.

“Oooooooh, what’s this one about, what’s this one about!” she rattled, clearly excited at the prospect of a new game.

“Well, it’s a...”

“Ooh, ooh! Who’re those little guys, are they on my side? What do I do with ‘em?!”

“RAINBOW DASH!” Yelled Twilight Sparkle, “you need to give some respect to personal space! Now, as I was saying, this is a ‘real-time strategy game’, courtesy of the Canterlot University of Computer Science. It’s a very important job, and we must-”

“Yeah yeah, now just hand me the manual over there and we can get down to some good ol’ fashioned flank-kickin’!”

Twilight couldn’t help but sigh. At least she was starting to learn how to read the manual!

--

At Rainbow Dash’s persistent pestering, Twilight had finally deigned to let her take the reigns for a match, but on the condition that she not mar her campaign progress with her antics.

“I’m saving my campaign progress to write in a report to Princess Celestia, Rainbow,” Twilight had told her boisterous friend. “I’m sorry but I won’t let your antics mess up the contents of my section of the report! Here, the manual indicated a one-time scenario battle called Skirmish mode, you can have one round on that one.”

“Aw, sweet! Thanks, Twilight!” Upon this, Rainbow Dash practically shoved Twilight out of the way and placed herself in her seat, jamming her hoof on the mouse buttons several times to select the Skirmish option.

“Rainbow,” Rarity chided, “I do believe you only have to press the button once...?”

“Nah! Everypony knows the more you press a button, the faster it works! Didn’t you go to elementary fillyschool, Rarity?”

Every fiber of Rarity’s being screamed at her to retort, but every time she opened her mouth to say something, she found herself immediately closing it before having the chance to even say anything. Somehow, she got the

feeling that the rainbow-maned pegasus didn't quite subscribe to what most ponies called "common sense."

Looking around the various bars and options that were present, and having no patience for any of the different options she was presented with in the skirmish menu, Rainbow Dash simply set *everything* to Random, an action to which Twilight looked at her with very shocked eyes.

"Rainbow! You do realize that you've just set the AI's difficulty to Random as well, right? You could get saddled with the hardest kind of opponent for all you know!" Twilight warned, trying to spare her friend another bout of pent-up rage, but Rainbow Dash would have none of it.

"Who cares! That just means that when I kick its flank, it'll go down so hard it'll be tasting dirt for weeks!" The cyan pegasus proclaimed proudly as she hit the Start button, and eagerly awaited to see who she would be up against.

The confident look on her face slid off so fast Twilight could swear it literally melted.

As the screen flashed the words "**Unfair Advantage**," "**NOD Brutal Steamroller**" and "**EDI Brutal Steamroller**" in front of the cyan pegasus, Applejack rolled over in a fit of rapturous laughter. The names sounded threatening enough that the orange mare didn't even need to read the manual to realize that Rainbow Dash had been saddled with one of the hardest possible difficulties of the game.

"Wow... Ah can't imagine a worse selection fer yer first match, Rainbow." Applejack said as she wiped tears of mirth off her face, still clutching her stomach as she laughed her flank off. "Yer right bucked, sister, that you are!"

"W-well? So what!" Rainbow Dash quickly tried to salvage what was left of her bravado before she lost all face in front of her friends. "Steamroller Shmeemroller! That thing sounds slow as heck! When you're as fast as I am, nothing even comes close!"



“Well, if you say so, Rainbow.” Quipped Twilight, trying not to point out what had happened the last time Rainbow Dash’s bravado sent her spiraling into loss after loss at the hands of savage alien warriors.

“Oooh! Look guys, it’s starting! It’s starting!” Yelled Pinkie Pie as she bounded up and down on the spot, her hoof pointing ecstatically at the screen.

As the map came into view, Dash was presented with a bird’s eye view of a rolling green field marked on two ends by shimmering blue crystals protruding out of a fissure in the earth.

Moving her mouse over the purple, hive-like structure in the middle of her point of view, Dash gave it a quick click as it came to life with a pulse of violet light and a low, throbbing hum.

“Scrin Drone Platform, huh...” muttered the Cyan Pegasus, giving the screen a rather inquisitive look before breaking into one of her usual ear-to-ear grins that just screamed “overconfidence.” “Time to kick this little platform into overdrive!”

Almost every pony assembled immediately took to plastering their face with a well-placed hoof. They didn’t think Rainbow Dash would even *try* saying something that corny.

Immediately selecting the icon for the reactor, Dash quickly set about constructing her base. Following up with a Extractor and Foundry, Dash rubbed her hooves together in gleeful anticipation of her impending ‘greatness.’

The cyan pegasus was quick to set up all the basics - her reading of the manual along with the helpful hints that appeared over each item in the production tabs helped her find her bearings easily, and soon enough, she had at least one of each basic structure up and running.

With a Portal for infantry, a Nerve Centre for upgrading her units, a Warp Sphere to produce vehicles and a Gravity Stabilizer for her air force, her base was soon taking shape.

“Hmm...” Rainbow Dash muttered as she found herself drawn to the newest section of the production tab that had appeared the moment she threw down the Gravity Stabilizer. The icon on the tab displayed what appeared to be a streamlined, vaguely oval chariot in flight.

She'd just found the aircraft production tab.

“Stormriders?” Rainbow Dash read the name and description off the screen, and she immediately began rapidly clicking on its icon fervently, attempting to pump out as many of the fast-attack aircraft as fast as possible. “Oh yeah! The faster it is, the cooler it is!”

Much to her annoyance, she soon found that she could only build at most, four Stormriders for every Gravity Stabilizer she had on the map.

“Aww, c'mon, can't I build more of these things?” The rainbow-maned pegasus moaned to herself in disappointment... before an idea occurred to her just seconds later.

About a minute later, she had another four Gravity Stabilizers thrown down right next to her first, and she was literally hammering away at the Stormrider production tab.

After a solid fifteen minutes of building nothing but Gravity Stabilizers, Rainbow Dash had exhausted the majority of her resources on building nothing but Stormrider after Stormrider. At the very least, she had assembled a rather sizeable amount of them.

“Whew... finally done!” Said Rainbow Dash, giving out a little wheeze of effort, “That's Thirty-Two, count 'em, Thirty-two Stormriders! No pony's getting past this!”

“Uh... Rainbow...” Twilight piped up, “You haven't actually fought anyone yet. Don't you think it'd be more prudent for you to...”

“Ah, whatever! I bet they're just too scared to come anywhere near these babies!” Proclaimed the Rainbow-maned Pegasus in her usual, overconfident tone.

Almost as if in response to her statement, a robotic voice delivered a message over the speakers.

*“Enemy unit sighted.”*

“Perfect!” Rainbow Dash was practically rubbing her hooves together in glee, and she quickly selected all of her Stormriders before commanding them to attack the small force of rifle-bearing ponies that appeared on the edge of her map.

As her Stormriders bore down on the diminutive squad, they made quick work of the ponies by unloading a barrage of pale-purple lasers that tore through their formation in the blink of an eye, sending them falling to the ground in droves.

“OH YEAH!” Dash exclaimed, spurred on by her triumph, “That’s what you get for messin’ with the fastest flier in all of Equestria! Steamroller my flank, hah!”

No sooner had she finished cheering did the same robotic voice repeat itself.

*“Enemy unit sighted.”*

Glancing back at her screen, Rainbow Dash saw that her base was now coming under assault from a much larger fighting force. Granted, it was still small, but this time, they were far more well-equipped. Pony-driven vehicles called “Predator Tanks” and four pegasi-flown chariots called “Orcas” took up support formations behind a massive contraption manned by no less than four full-grown stallions.

Sporting two massive forward guns and armor that looked nigh-impregnable, Dash couldn’t help but wonder if she could actually face down this... “Mammoth Tank.”

The cyan pegasus shook her head in fierce defiance, refusing to be intimidated by the large vehicle, no matter how powerful it looked.

“You’re going down, chump!” Rainbow Dash exclaimed defiantly as she ordered all her Stormriders to converge upon the Mammoth Tank, and they

attacked all at once. Following her orders to the letter, her thirty-two Stormriders immediately swarmed the massive enemy vehicle, their plasma weapons blazing bolts of light.

Confident that her enemy would soon wither and collapse under such an intense assault, Rainbow Dash began to sit back and relax... until she saw just how little damage her Stormriders were actually causing the tank, their attacks only serving to slowly chip away at its massive health bar.

*Whoa... holy- that thing is tough!* The pegasus thought to herself in a mild panic, and she found herself beginning to worry slightly as the Mammoth Tank managed to shoot down three of her Stormriders before being destroyed itself. If any more of those showed up, she wasn't sure how long her Stormriders would last.

Sadly, her relief at the tank's destruction was only short-lived, as she realized that she had neglected to defend her base while at it, and one of her Gravity Stabilizers was dangerously close to being destroyed, the group of Predator Tanks and Orcas pummeling it with explosive shells and missiles.

"Aww, come on, the hay is this!?" Rainbow Dash groaned in exasperation as she quickly ordered her Stormriders to double back, but she wasn't fast enough - just as her air force reached her base again, the first Gravity Stabilizer fell.

"*Aw Hayseed!*" She swore even as her Stormriders laid waste to the group of tanks and Orcas - she was still a little peeved by the fact she was going to have to build that structure all over again. "Ah well, at least it couldn't get any worse-"

*"Enemy unit sighted."*

"Aw, what now wha-"

Dash's pupils shrank faster than Twilight or any of her friends had ever seen them.

Up ahead where the previous EDI attack force had come from, another, much more menacing one had appeared as well, this time comprised of no less than *six* Mammoth Tanks.

“Whoa, nelly,” Applejack commented, wide-eyed at the opposition Rainbow Dash was facing and trying to stifle a smug grin. “Ee-yup, sister, yer right bucked.”

“Wh-what’re you talking about, Applejack,” countered Rainbow Dash, trying as hard as she could to prevent anypony from seeing the actual sense of dread she was feeling. “I can deal with these chumps in no ti-”

*“Our base is under attack!”*

Rainbow Dash turned to face the screen, incredulous.

“Under attack? What do you mean my base is under... attack...”

The look of bravado that adorned her features only a few moments ago slid off her face faster than butter on a frying pan.

With a silent “*thrum*,” no fewer than twenty armored chariots appeared out of thin air. Driven by pegasi adorned in ominous black armor, the chariots wasted no time in encircling Dash’s base like a ravenous swarm of obsidian vultures, ready to swoop in for the kill.

Maintaining a brief formation over her stabilizers, the chariots proceeded to lay waste to almost the entirety of her base by dropping searing balls of energy that detonated into fiery conflagrations, consuming her structures and reducing them to smoking piles of ash that collapsed in on themselves.

“What... what in the hay just happened?” Rainbow Dash muttered weakly as she watched no less than *all* of her Gravity Stabilizers collapse, while her Reactors, Portals and Warp Spheres had been all but incinerated by the assault of those invisible chariots.

Stunned from her massive losses, Dash unwittingly left her Stormriders without direction, the remaining few immediately converging upon the column of Mammoth Tanks still advancing upon the smoldering wreckage of her base.

As the normally-overconfident pegasus watched bleakly, her Stormriders were slowly blown out of the sky one by one, as the Mammoth Tanks retaliated against their aerial assault with a barrage of missiles from their side pods.

By the time the slow war of attrition was over, the Mammoth advance had been stopped in its tracks, but at dear cost - Rainbow Dash's Stormriders had been all but decimated, and she was left with only three badly damaged ones still hovering weakly about, their airframes blackened and charred.

"Well..." She chuckled weakly as she ordered her Stormriders back to her base, thanking Celestia that her Drone Platform was still intact, and beginning to build another Gravity Stabilizer to at least repair her damaged Stormriders and build new ones. "I guess that wasn't too bad. Now, to just get my forces back..."

*"Insufficient funds."*

Dash's jaw immediately went slack from horror, her cursor flitting about her base in a panic. Where was her Extractor! Where had all her money disappeared to?!

The smoldering pile of ruins that burned right next to her base's Tiberium field was all she needed to see. In one fell swoop, the enemy had crippled both her base's production, strength *and* economy. There was practically no way she could possibly recover from this.

Almost as though to add insult to injury, the robotic voice again sounded off a warning as Rainbow Dash struggled to regain her bearings.

*"Enemy unit sighted."*

"Hayfeathers! What in Celestia's name is it this-"

Before the already-exasperated pegasus could even finish cursing, a titanic formation of enormous, metallic walkers appeared from literal thin air, decloaking with the same "*thrum*" that signaled the end of her base only moments earlier.

Shaped like unicorns, but standing hundreds of feet higher than any possibly could, the monolithic walkers surrounded the smouldering remnants of her base in a silent formation.

Almost as if they were bowing their heads in a sign of mock reverence, the gigantic walkers lowered their horns towards the charred drone platform, pulsing red energy running up and down the lengths of the massive protrusion.

“time...”

As the final word escaped Dash’s lips, a cascade of crimson energy beams then rained down upon her Drone Platform and perforated it from stem to stern, tearing entire chunks of metal and machinery from the structure as what was once the heart of her base came crashing down in a flaming pile of charred, worthless scrap.

*“Mission Failed.”* The robotic voice from the speakers proclaimed Dash’s loss without so much as a trace of emotion, prompting Twilight to nudge her friend, who was apparently still staring at the charred, half-destroyed emblem of her faction that had begun spinning on the screen, dumbstruck by her loss.

“I... I *lost*...” Rainbow Dash whispered hoarsely, and Applejack placed a hoof on her friend’s shoulder.

“Aw, it’s all right, Sugarcube, ya can’t win ‘em all.”

“I... *hate* losing.” Muttered the Cyan pegasus, apparently still sore over her defeat.

“Tah be fair, sugarcube, ya *did* get saddled with the hardest difficulty on yer firs’ try. C’mon, lemme some other pony give it a try.”

Grudgingly, Dash forced herself out of Twilight’s desk seat as the game reverted to the skirmish select screen.

“Well, Rainbow, darling,” chimed Rarity, her voice carrying the usual ‘flashier-than-thou’ tone that had somewhat become her namesake, “you tried your best, but this is a *lady’s* game.”

Still a little sore from her loss, Rainbow Dash couldn’t help but let her eye twitch a little in annoyance.

“... and that is why / shall be the one to take the helm from here.”

Soon, Rarity found herself in her friend’s place, this time on the same map, but against two opponents the game identified as “**Normal NOD Balanced**” and “**Normal EDI Balanced**”

Rarity had personally opted to play as the Scrin. Unlike Dash, who had a penchant for running blind into her own follies, Rarity prized flair and beauty over all things. To her, the graceful contours, abstract architecture and soft, bioluminescent glow present in every Scrin structure left her utterly captivated.

The first half of her game was spent pretty much the same way as Rainbow Dash’s...with a few key differences, of course. Thankfully enough, Rarity didn’t spend every single bit of Tiberium she mined on building airfield after airfield like her cyan friend had so foolishly done.

Indeed, thanks to years of experience with the seamstress’ art, Rarity had learnt a great many things - such as the importance of precision and the value of speed, but in all her years, no lesson learnt was ever as important as her one cardinal rule.

Attention to detail.

Within minutes, not only had Rarity gotten a fully functional Tech Center up and running, her base came together in immaculate precision that made Rainbow Dash’s own base look like a messy pile of haystacks.

Portals were lined up in neat rows alongside gravity stabilizers positioned for perfect structural symphony with the drone platform. Her sizable collection of refineries were expertly positioned for maximum aesthetic effectiveness as they perfectly mirrored her warp spheres, nerve center and technology center.



In what could be described as her signature “final touch,” Rarity had even positioned numerous Storm Columns around her base in perfect symmetrical arrangement. Each one was so neatly placed that it was like watching Rarity sew a dress made out of... ominous alien lightning.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” muttered Rarity, utterly satisfied at her progress so far. Clicking on her Warp Spheres, she quickly found the button responsible for Annihilator Tripods, and within moments had three queued up for production.

*“Enemy unit sighted.”*

“How rude!” The white mare scrolled up to where the warning had come from, and found another meagre force of NOD militiaponies and a couple of their rocket squads heading towards her base. “Oh... I do say, this looks too easy!”

More focused on how her base was coming together, Rarity neglected to pay close attention to anything else, much like the time she had unwittingly let Sweetie Belle make off with her gold silk.

From out of the corner of her eye, Rarity suddenly caught the sight of several squads of jumpsuit-clad ponies rushing towards her towers. She had no idea why the enemy would willingly throw ponies at her, so she gave a simple shrug of her shoulders and started trying to figure out where her signal transmitter would go. It would certainly look good behind her Drone Platform...

*“Our base is under attack!”*

As the alarm blared its way into her ears, Rarity frantically searched her base for the cause of whatever would have the GALL to even think of besmirching her masterpiece.

As she found the cause of her woes, her eyes widened and her pupils shrunk in shock. Throwing themselves at her frontal storm column, those ponies were actually blowing both themselves and her storm column into next week.

The once gleaming, spotless coating that adorned the column was beginning to show signs of extreme battle damage as it started to char and blacken in several places. As it began to fall apart in several places, fire streaking across the length of the structure, Rarity was beginning to show signs of genuine worry as sweat poured off her brow.

Unable to withstand the onslaught, the frontal storm column exploded into a fiery conflagration of loose bits and pieces as it could take no more damage from both the fanatics. Just like that, Rarity's crown jewel ceased to be.

Behind her, Rainbow Dash erupted into peals of uncontrollable laughter.

"BAAAAAAAAA-HA-HA-HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! Oh, that's rich, Rarity! All that work for nothing but a big flaming ball of junk! Oh, oh this is just *too* good!"

As her Storm Column's remains crashed to the ground in flames, Rarity's mouth hung agape from the shock of losing her prized structure.

At that moment, something inside her snapped, her eyes narrowing to thin slits of pure anger. There was no crime worse than the massacre of art and beauty. No punishment *great* enough for defilers of magnificence.

The opponents were dead already, they just didn't know it.

"OH. IT. IS. ON!"

Diverting her attention back to her Gravity Stabilizers, Rarity jammed her mouse button down on the production tab for the biggest, most expensive unit she could find: The Planetary Assault Carrier.

Hammering away at the tab like a pony possessed, Rarity couldn't care less if she lost every single bit she'd spent harvesting, it would be all worth it teaching these opponents of hers that they had just made the biggest mistake of their virtual lives.

As the bit count finally clicked zero, Rarity brought every last one of her forces to bear in a mighty column of thirty-two gigantic starships that tore their way out the front door and right into enemy lines, their streaks of plasma shearing their way through obsidian armor and hardened metal.

Decimating virtually everything that lay before them, Rarity's army reduced structure after structure to useless heaps of flaming slag. Every single formation that tried to rally together in defiance of the nigh-unstoppable force was crushed brutally underhoof, swarms of fighters making short work of even the hardest units.

The battle was becoming completely one-sided. No sooner had the carriers appeared on the battlefield had the tide completely turned in Rarity's favor, entire armies crumpling in utter loss. Now, her mighty airforce ruled the skies, bearing down on the last vestiges of the NOD and EDI bases as the purple-maned unicorn's virtual opponents stood defenseless before Rarity's anger, personified in her merciless aerial armada.

Needless to say, it was over in an instant. Detaching from Rarity's carriers, swarms of smaller fighters came together in a swarm not unlike the parasprite plague that tore through Ponyville only a while ago, raining hellfire from the skies above.

As structure after structure fell to the ground in useless slag heaps as bright purple bolts of energy rained from the skies, victory was now but a simple matter of time.

Soon enough, the last EDI structure finally buckled under the unicorn's unrelenting punishment. As it crashed to the ground in a massive gout of fire, the insectoid Scrin logo flashed across the center of the screen with the words "**Victory**" emblazoned right across the center.

*"You are Victorious."*

As the cold, robotic voice signaled her victory with a resounding proclamation of triumph, a [sinister orchestral theme](#) playing in the background, Rarity crossed her hoofs in a mixture of supremacy and scorn.

"Hmph, Pitiful." She snorted, clearly still incensed at the foals who dared interfere with her works of sheer *art*.

While every other pony cheered for Rarity's victory, Rainbow Dash instead opted to say nothing, preferring instead to look away and mutter something

that sounded like it landed somewhere between “whatever” and “lucky break.”

“Oooh! Oooh! Rarity!” Pinkie Pie was waving a hoof excitedly from behind her, trying to get her attention. “Could I give it a whirl next? I wanna try! I wanna try!”

“Settle down there, Pinkie Pie.” said Twilight, trying to rein in her hyperactive friend and praying she wouldn’t break anything in the process. “Just please, try not to break anything.”

“YIPPEEEEE!!!” The pink mare whooped in delight as she quickly bumped Rarity off the chair, immediately proceeding to make her selections on the Skirmish menu... choices that were starting to look startlingly familiar to Twilight.

“Wait, Pinkie, no, don’t set everything to Rando-!”

Before Twilight could even finish her sentence, Pinkie Pie had already hit the Start button, and then the screen displayed the words “**Pipeline Problems**”, “**EDI Easy Guerilla**” and “**EDI Hard Turtle**”.

“Huh... well, that’s not too bad.”

“Oh, come on!” Rainbow Dash yelled in frustration, jabbing a hoof at the screen. “That’s a load of manure! I get two Brutal Steamrollers, and she gets one Easy and one Hard!?”

“That’s the whole point of the selection being *random*, my dear.” Rarity pointed out with a hoof, poking Rainbow Dash in the side. “It’s based on *luck*, while you were very *unlucky*, that’s all it is.”

Rainbow Dash muttered something inaudible as she turned away from Rarity, fixing her eyes on the screen as Pinkie Pie’s match began.

After building two refineries, Pinkie did nothing but pour all her resources into building five giant “Hoofs of NOD” to pump out militiaponies, much to the surprise of everypony assembled, even Dash, who had done nothing but build Stormriders.

*“Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!” “Fighters form up!”*

Five minutes into the battle, Pinkie’s screen was full of nothing but a grey swarm of militiaponies, and her hoofs of NOD were pumping out more by the second.

“Um... Pinkie Pie? Don’t you think you ought to... diversify?” Twilight pointed, albeit with a bit of uncertainty in her voice.

Patting the lavender unicorn on the back, Pinkie gave her a look of utter disbelief, as though what she was doing fell within the realms of common sense.

“Twilight, Twilight, Twilight... don’t you know the more ponies you bring to a party...”

Craning her head back to her production queue, a devilish grin spread across Pinkie’s face faster than wildfire.

“THE BIGGER YOUR PARTY IS!”

Jamming her hoof down on the mouse button, Pinkie Pie ordered her Hoofs of NOD to pump out a staggering SIXTY additional militiapony squads. EACH.

“Now, time to bring this party to the EDI!” The earth pony whooped as she selected *all* of the militiapony squads on the map right then, and ordered them forward towards the other side of the map *at the same time*.

It was then that Twilight had the feeling that something was horribly wrong. Rather than the smooth, flowing animations that usually accompanied the movements on the screen, everything now moved choppily, jerking around in sudden movements.

“Sooooo sloooooooooooooooooow” Pinkie Pie drawled in a clearly bored tone, before shrugging and continuing to order her mind-blowingly massive horde across the battlefield, the sheer numbers of her forces covering her entire point-of-view.

As her Hoofs of NOD continued to pump out even *more* militiaponies at a staggering rate, the choppiness of the display simply began to increase, until to the gathered ponies, it seemed as though they were watching a slide show.

Suddenly, Twilight's PC started to spark and sputter, black smoke rising out of the vents in greater gouts with every additional militiapony squad that joined Pinkie Pie's ranks.

"Pinkie!" yelled Twilight.

The pink earth pony apparently had not heard her, as she continued to pump out squad after squad. Twilight's PC was almost whining in metallic pain by now.

"PINKIEEEEE!" bellowed the lavender Unicorn, fearing what might happen if she let Pinkie carry on like this.

"Yes, Twilight?" came Pinkie's innocent response, blissfully unaware of the column of billowing smoke rising from the device.

Hastily shoving Pinkie out of the desk seat, Twilight quickly brought up the start menu and frantically muddled around for anything that looked like a stop button.

Jamming her hoof down on the "quit game" function, Twilight immediately aborted the game in case Pinkie's "party" blew up the PC, melted the disc, burnt her library to the ground and caused widespread panic throughout Ponyville.

"*Haaaaah...* made it!" Wheezed Twilight, relieved she had just averted what might have been the worst disaster in Ponyville's history as her PC immediately stopped issuing smoke, and the high-pitched whining issuing from the machine slowly died down.

"Awww, you're no fun at all, Twilight! Why'd you have to ruin my party?" Pinkie Pie pouted at Twilight as the lavender unicorn sighed in relief.

Twilight immediately affixed the pink earth pony with a gaze that looked like it would cut through solid diamond. Withering under her best friend's stare, Pinkie immediately clamped her hoofs over her mouth.

Turning her attention back to the smoking device, Twilight breathed a sigh of quiet relief to herself, thanking the alicorns above that her library was not a smoking ruin.

The thing is, Twilight was expecting a working device with a smoking, yet albeit functional display. What she did NOT expect was a blue screen marked only by a string of words containing technical jargon she could only pray she understood.

### **PONYSOFT WINDOWS**

**A FATAL EXCEPTION FU HAS OCCURRED AT A0GH:FFFFFFFF  
THE CURRENT APPLICATION WILL NOW BE TERMINATED**

**PRESS ANY KEY TO TERMINATE THE CURRENT APPLICATION  
PLEASE PRESS CTRL-ALT-DEL TO RESTART  
YOU WILL LOSE ALL UNSAVED DATA IN ALL APPLICATIONS**

A deathly silence fell over the library.

"Twilight... ya' okay there sugarcube?"

"Twilight, darling, are you alright?"

The purple-maned unicorn had reached the end of her tether. She rarely got angry, but sometimes, her short fuse tended to get the better of her more virtuous nature.

"Girls..." Twilight said in an oddly strangled voice, trembling with barely contained rage. Already the edges of her mane were beginning to smoke and spark, and Pinkie Pie was edging cautiously away from her, laughing nervously. "I'd appreciate it a lot if you left Pinkie Pie and I alone for a moment. *Please.*"

It was said the fire that erupted in the Ponyville Library was seen as far as Canterlot that day. The mayor declined to comment on what manner of destructive force could do such a thing.

--

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*This week, my dear friend Pinkie Pie learnt the value of self-restraint. Often in a Pony's life, they will make several decisions that, due sometimes in part to over-zealousness, can sometimes... adversely affect those around them.*

*Everypony has shortcomings, but it is in our nature to be the better mare, and see past the cloud of anger that may sometimes take control of us.*

*Sometimes, taking a deep breath and counting to ten is wiser than taking none at all.*

*p.s. Could I humbly ask for another copy of "Mares, Magic and Mineralogy? I'm still reconstructing the library.*

*Ever your faithful student,  
Twilight Sparkle*



# Chapter 3.5

## Tetris

"Twilight?" Spike called apprehensively. "Are you alright?"

The only answer was a grunt from the other side of the door. Twilight was in no mood to answer. Eyes bloodshot, mane mangled, and looking overall like Applejack had last Applebuck Season, Twilight had cleaned the library like a pony possessed, moving almost mechanically as she crammed books clumsily into random spots.

Spike's attempts at communication during this period had earned him a withering glare, one the baby dragon felt almost actually cut through his scales.

The moment the last book was stuffed into the shelf, she stormed past Spike and Owlicious, rounded the stairs and stormed straight into her room, slamming the door behind her.

But even a comfortable bed and soft pillow granted Twilight no reprieve. Her attempts to fall asleep had plunged her into a nightmare. In it, she stood frozen while a living wave slowly made its way towards her, a virtual wall of crazed-looking Pinkie Pies crawling towards her at an agonizing pace, plumes of thick smoke billowing from the chainsaws they (somehow) held in their hooves.

Twilight pulled a pillow over her head, sighing deeply... she couldn't keep this up... she was going insane!

"Twilight, please come out of there!" Spike's voice rang through the door.

"Go away."

Spike's voice came again. "Twilight, you have to come out, the Princess is at the door!"

"Yeah, very funny. Nice try, Spike."

"No, seriously, Twilight! The Princess is here and she wants to talk to you...!" Spike sounded almost urgent at this point: when did he become such a good liar...?

Twilight leaned upward, glaring at the door. "I'M NOT HERE RIGHT NOW, SPIKE! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

A deathly silence fell over the library for a second, and then a new voice: wise and patient, a hint of kind understanding. "Well, that's unfortunate. I was looking forward to seeing her and she's not here right now. Perhaps you ask her to send me a message when she 'gets back'?"

Twilight leapt out of bed, hurtling across the room, the 'open' spell she cast nearly ripping the door off its hinges. She took a split second glance around the room, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach.

"P-p-princess Celestia!"

The white Alicorn watched in mild amusement as her student began babbling, desperately trying to apologize. Sensing her student's distress, she held out a hoof to calm Twilight, soothing her. With her mentor's serene presence at hand, the lavender unicorn gradually fell silent.

"I apologize if I've caught you at a bad time, Twilight. You seem very stressed out right now."

"*Stressed?*" Twilight's voice cracked at the word. "I'm... I'm fine! Just... needed to finish some things in my room... got caught up in my work, that's all."

Celestia gave a knowing smile. "Twilight Sparkle, I've been around a long time, and I know when somepony's stressed... AND when somepony's lying to me."

Twilight nodded automatically, trying to fight the tears springing to her eyes. Celestia stepped forward, wiping her student's tears away with a gentle hoof. "It's alright, Twilight. You've done a great job so far. Now... I have a suggestion for you."

Twilight looked up at her mentor. "Anything, Princess."

Celestia looked back at something draped over her back: a brown saddlebag that Twilight just noticed was there. Celestia's horn glowed and the bag opened, a small box extracting itself from its depths. "I have here a game I *personally* think you'll like. It's brand new piece from the University of Technological Innovation, and I would like you to test it. However..." She held up a hoof before Twilight had a chance to speak. "I suggest you play this game alone."

"A-alone?" Twilight was stunned: of all the suggestions she expected the Princess to make, ignoring her friends was not on the top of the list. "But what about..."

"Your friends? You seem to need a bit of time apart from them right now, if I'm not mistaken. Yes, I know I never stop talking about 'The Magic of Friendship'." She added with a self-mocking smile. "But magic can be physically and mentally draining, am I correct?"

Twilight nodded. "Yes... friendship and the ability to connect with others is extremely important. But it's still inherently stressful, and everypony needs *some* solitude every once in a while so that they can rejuvenate themselves. That way they can be a better friend once they've had some time alone to relax. Is that right, Princess?"

"Exactly! You're learning fast as ever, Twilight. So then, take a day or two off and take some time for yourself. If your friends stop by, just tell them you're busy: they'll understand. Now..." Celestia turned and headed toward the door.

"I hate to cut this conversation short, but I have a few things to do on my end. It's a little harder for royalty to ask for a mental health day...I look forward to hearing from you again soon, Twilight: I actually had the privilege to observe the creative process for this game and I'd love to hear what the finished product is like. But, erm..." She turned back to look at Twilight. "No rush."

And with that, she was gone.

Twilight stood, momentarily flabbergasted by her mentor's personal visit. Most of the time she had time to prepare to welcome figures of royalty and near-fanatical reverence by millions. Needless to say, the entire experience was... a little jarring, to say the least.

Snapping out of her reverie, Twilight turned her attention back to the small, brown parcel that lay in her hoofs. It looked like every other one she had received from the Princess, but something about it just seemed so subtly different- the slight contours, the smaller frame... this was unlike anything she had received before.

Gently peeling the wrapping off with her magic, Twilight at first spied a peek of emerald green underneath the paper, and as the rest of the package unfurled, she found herself faced with what looked like a *very* tiny, simplified version of the console that now rested in her basement.

*"Gamecolt... Color?"* Twilight couldn't help but let a small bit of intrigue slip into her voice as she read the name off of the label adorning the device's screen. The whole thing certainly looked simple enough, seeing as the squarish screen only took up half the front side.

The lower half was even more sparse - if that was at all possible, comprising nothing more than a simplified D-pad that adorned the device's lower left side, flanked by two buttons that simply read 'A' and 'B,' nothing more.

In fact, had she not looked, she could have sworn the two miniscule 'start' and 'select' buttons at the bottom of the device were rice grains somepony might have dropped in the packaging.

"Well, this has to be good in some way, it does come with the Princess's recommendation anyway..."

Giving the device in her hoofs a few quick twirls, Twilight was quick to find both a power button and a battery holder. Much simpler than that horrible jumble of wires that passed for an entertainment device.

"Well, at least I won't have to worry about any more wires..." she chortled, having enough of those infernal things to last a lifetime.

Calmly setting both the Gamecolt on her bedside table, Twilight casually levitated the now-torn packaging over to the nearest bin. As she dumped the remains of the parcel inside, a rather solid '*clack*' made her pause in her hoofsteps.

Doubling back to the bin, Twilight began sifting through her trash to find the source of the noise. Sifting through loose papers, frayed quills and what *looked* like a month-old serving of quiche, she finally located the source of the noise.

Fishing out a small, gray box, Twilight gave it a quick dustoff and short glance, reading the label that covered its front side.

"... *Tetris*, huh?" The purple unicorn read the title off the label, eyeing it rather critically. The picture that adorned the cartridge looked pretty simple, being simply a bunch of colored blocks in different shapes, but as she rummaged around the remains of the parcel, she saw nothing that even looked remotely like a manual.

*Now why would Princess Celestia send me a game without including its manual?* Twilight thought to herself, thoroughly puzzled.

Glancing over to the Gamecolt, an idea crossed the purple-maned unicorn's ever-inquisitive mind. Could it possibly be...?

Levitating the Gamecolt over, Twilight looked over the device once more. As expected, the diminutive gray square looked a perfect match for the back-end slot.

With a gentle slide, the gray square slid seamlessly into the GameColt, a small, almost imperceptible '*click*' echoing as the two became locked as a pair.

Flicking the Gamecolt's power switch, she was rewarded with a satisfying *ding!* as the words "*Gamecolt Color*" flashed across the device's diminutive screen in a rainbow of colors. Seconds after the screen went blank, the title of the game "*Tetris*" appeared on the screen, its edges decorated only sparsely by a few simple, colored blocks of various shapes, similar to those adorning the picture on the front of the gray square.

To call the menu simple would have been a severe overstatement. With the sole option available to her being 'Start Game', Twilight figured she had nothing to lose and pressed her hoof down on the 'A' button.

After the past few titles she had settled in with, Twilight was fully prepared for a burst of light, some deafening introduction, or perhaps at worst another gory display of Celestia-knows-what.

The minute her hoof let go of the button, Twilight found herself cringing behind a shaking hoof, expecting nothing less than the worst.

Yet much to her surprise, all she got was a simple beep. There were no flashy displays of graphical splendour, no ground-thumping orchestral themes, and certainly no nausea-inducing fountains of gore and blood.

All she saw on the screen was a very empty-looking box, and a bunch of words and numbers outside of the box that made absolutely no sense to her.

If anything, the simplicity of it all was a very refreshing change - one that the exhausted unicorn welcomed with very open hooves.

"Now then... let's see here," murmured Twilight, reading off whatever little bits of text she found onscreen.

"Lines... Level... Score... wait, lines? What lines?"

Almost as if on cue, a black square, seemingly composed of four smaller hollow, white squares, structured to resemble a window pane, appeared at the top of the screen, beginning a slow but steady descent downwards.

"Ah-! Wh-What did I do? Is it supposed to do this?!"

Taken completely off-guard, Twilight fumbled with the device in her hooves, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do. In her panic, her hoof accidentally hit the "down" button on the directional pad, sending the block into a rapid descent towards the bottom of the box, where it remained.

Almost immediately, another block appeared at the top of the screen, this time vaguely shaped like an "L", descending at the same languid pace its predecessor had.

Realizing she might have just made a mistake, the purple unicorn forced herself to calm down, recognizing the need for her to take things slowly and figure out the controls by trial and error. Rushing through things in misguided attempts to do them right like Rainbow Dash wasn't going to help her any.

"Okay now, let's see here..." her eyes narrowed in deep concentration, Twilight poured her considerable intellect into deciphering the, as she called it, "music of the blocks."

Logic told her that the directional pad would be for... well, directional use, making it quite limited. It was only natural for the studious bookworm that the best course of action would be to use the twin buttons, since they would probably have a gameplay feature that she could otherwise use.

Much to her glee, Twilight found the 'A' button rotated blocks in a specific, clockwise direction. Rotating the 'L' block downwards, it gave a very satisfying "beep" as it locked into place as soon as it hit the bottom of the screen whilst another, similar block appeared at the top of the screen.

She was going to like this one. That she was.

---

"Twilight, are you in there?" asked Pinkie Pie, trepidation apparent in her unusually subdued tone. The pink earth pony couldn't help but feel a little guilty after the whole "Great Fire of Ponyville" incident, and had taken it upon herself to see how a good three days of solitude was treating her.

"Twilight, Dear, are you feeling any better?" Rarity had, of course, caught news of Pinkie's visit through the ever-present gossip grapevine. She insisted both Fluttershy and herself come along "in Twilight's best interests," which was, subtly, a really nice way of implying that another pony-made disaster would be one too many for Ponyville to afford.

"Uhm, Twilight? Are... are you home?" Fluttershy called out quietly, barely audible. But even as they called out for their friend, there was no response.

If anything, the silence of the library was starting to seem... oppressive.

Squeaking nervously, the yellow pegasus started to back away from the library slowly, but Rarity pressed forward, determined to find out just what their purple-maned friend had been up to these past few days.

“Twilight, it’s been days now. We hope you’re still not upset, dear!” The concern apparent in her unusually mothering tone, Rarity rapped on the purple unicorn’s door a few more times in worry.

When there was no answer to the door, the white unicorn’s brow only creased further in consternation, and she knocked several more times. “Twilight, dear, please come out! We’re very worried about you!”

“You... you think she’s still angry at me about what happened?” Pinkie Pie’s lip quivered as her voice cracked ever so slightly, and her distinctly puffy mane began to deflate, straightening around the edges.

“I don’t think so, Pinkie dear,” Rarity quickly placed a comforting hoof on her friend’s shoulder. “Our darling Twilight isn’t one to hold a grudge. Still, it is rather odd that she hasn’t even come out of the library for three days straight!”

Just as Rarity raised her hoof to rap of the door yet again, it creaked open ever so slightly.

“Twilight?” echoed the three ponies, their voices mingling together as one.

“Hey guys,” came the ever-recognizable voice of Spike, “here to see Twilight?”

“Just a friendly checkup, Spike. I do hope the poor dear is feeling even the tiniest bit better...” Rarity’s voice trailed off the last few words of her sentence. She felt so sorry for her friend.

Looking into the the white unicorn’s dejected eyes, Spike couldn’t help but feel a pang of heartache as he felt invisible chords tighten around his chest. The one thing he could never resist, even more-so than gemstones, was Rarity. Seeing her so dejected was literal torture for his poor soul.



“Well, Twilight’s definitely feeling better...” muttered the baby dragon. It was subtle, but hesitance in his voice was apparent. Pinkie and Fluttershy may not have noticed, but Rarity had seen one too many soaps to be anything but observant about this.

“Spike... It would mean so much to me if you could help us.” she pleaded, putting on the most “pitiful” look she could muster, even throwing in a good bat of her eyelashes for safety’s sake.

The baby dragon could swear the look in Rarity’s eyes would have made a hydra throw itself off a cliff, had she so willed it. Spike never stood a chance.

“I.. I don’t know, that’s the thing!” He blurted, “I... I know she’s on an important assignment from Princess Celestia, but she swore that she wouldn’t leave her seat until that score bar refused to go any higher!”

“Score... bar?” murmured Fluttershy, now confused.

It was then that the three gathered ponies heard something coming from the library’s interior that they had failed to notice before - it was the sound of beeps going off in varied intervals, each with a subtly different tone.

None of them had ever heard any sound like that before. Naturally, Pinkie Pie stepped forward to push open the door, her curiosity quite piqued.

“Ooh, sounds like another one of those video games that Princess Celestia sent Twilight!” The pink mare cried out excitedly, before quickly sobering up the moment she recalled just how much of the purple unicorn’s grief she had been responsible for.

Her grin, however, remained just as hopeful as before. “Um, can we go in to take a look, Spike?”

The young dragon shrugged, not seeing any problem with it. “Well, she did say she didn’t want to be disturbed, but I guess so long as you don’t startle her or something, it should be fine. I swear, ever since she picked up that thing, it’s like she’s been in a trance! She doesn’t even stop to eat or drink until she finishes one round, and even after that it’s right onto the next one!”

Upon hearing this, Fluttershy's eyes widened, her mouth dropping open in shock and concern for her friend.

"Oh my! Th-that's terrible! Is... is she all right?"

"Actually... she's fine." said Spike, holding the door open to let the three in.

"It's just a little... weird - she's spent quite some time cooped up by herself, but as far as I can tell, she's taking just enough care of herself just so she can continue playing that game."

"Oh my," Rarity had a hoof to her mouth at that, quite surprised at her purple-maned friend's sudden bout of fervor regarding a simple game, even if it *was* sent to her by the Princess.

"If it has Twilight cooped up in the library for three days straight, it must be *quite* the game!"

Then again, judging from how seriously she took her role as the Princess's protege, Rarity could envision Twilight taking to *anything* set to her by Princess Celestia with the fervor of a madpony.

Closing the door after Fluttershy, the last to enter, Spike led the three further into the library.

Ascending the steps leading to Twilight's room, the beeps only continued to grow in volume and frequency - it seemed as though whatever it was that Twilight was playing, it was speeding up so rapidly it made Rainbow Dash's buccaneer blaze seem slow in comparison.

As the three mares stepped into Twilight's room proper, they beheld... something unexpected. Twilight, for all intents and purposes, was the same hale, fit, and healthy pony they knew, bent over at her study desk as she usually would be this time of day.

Yet instead of poring over some dusty tome, official scroll or memoir of Princess Celestia as they usually found her doing, she was focused, nay, literally glued to a small, strange object that she held in both her hooves.

Pinkie Pie was the first at Twilight's shoulder, looking over it at the screen of the device she held, but the lavender unicorn didn't even so much acknowledge her presence - she was far too engrossed on what was going on the screen.

Rarity and Fluttershy were next, peering over Twilight's other shoulder, mouths dropping wide as they beheld something that defied all conventional laws of sense.

Twilight's hooves were zipping around in rapid-fire twitches so incredibly fast, calling them a blur would be a grave injustice.

In response, the colored blocks appearing on top of the device's screen were snapping downwards into place at the bottom, whizzing past at speeds even Rarity admitted was impossible for her to even try to follow.

But it was not just how fast the pieces were being placed at the bottom that was mind-blowing - it was how *perfectly* they were being placed, given the speed at which Twilight was throwing them down.

The blocks came in all shapes and sizes, ranging from long four-block 'I's to shorter ones shaped like 'T's and 'L's. Pinkie and Rarity were having a hard time even wrapping their heads around the combinations possible.

Yet no matter the shape or size, Twilight's manipulation of the pieces was nothing short of *artistic*. Few other words would do it justice when every single move gave birth to *perfect* order.

Every time she managed to completely fill up the box on her screen horizontally, every block within that complete row would vanish, leaving more space for more blocks to descend. Twilight's level of skill at this was unbelievable - Rarity could deduce the rules of the game from watching, but she figured at the most she could only clear one or two rows at once. Twilight, on the other hoof, was clearing *four at a time!*

As everypony assembled watched in awe, Twilight left no block misplaced. Not even a single unsightly blank was left in between as each block came together like pieces in a grand puzzle.

It was a marriage of grace and precision so simply profound that Rarity, self-professed patron of the cultured and artistic, could not help but stare mesmerized.

With everypony content to watch in awed silence, the minutes passed by, the game never relenting as it continued to speed up and up and up, pace quickening to the point that even the normally over-hyper Pinkie Pie could do little to follow what was happening on screen.

Soon, the minutes turned to hours- even the increase in speed was beginning to take its toll on Twilight as slowly, bit by bit, the lavender unicorn began to make mistakes. Blank blocks were starting to show as Twilight left them in between pieces, her concentration wavering as time began taking a slow toll on her beleaguered mind.

Realizing she was slipping, Twilight blinked herself back to the game, answering once more with her rapid-fire hoof-twitches as she threw blocks left and right with a master's eye.

Before anypony knew it, the blank areas were gone, and Twilight's perfectly-formed block of pieces once again dominated the screen.

The end came as abruptly as the blocks appeared. Just as the score bar on the screen hit "999999", the entire box suddenly cleared out, and credits began to roll in simple, 8-bit text, congratulating the player on accomplishing a truly monumental feat.

But it still wasn't over.

*More* blocks began to descend from the top of the box, but the moment Twilight threw them down to the bottom of the screen, they *turned invisible*. Rarity almost fainted right there and then, but as if it weren't unbelievable enough already, there was the distinctive *beep!* of *four rows being cleared at once*.

From behind Pinkie Pie's rear, there was the sound of masonry hitting the floor, and when Fluttershy sneaked a glance, she saw a neat little pile of bricks gathered behind her pink-maned friend.

“Phew! It’s *FINALLY* over!” breathed Twilight, letting her hooves go limp as the credits finished rolling. No sooner had she actually *spoken* for the first time in uncounted hours, the lavender unicorn craned her neck around for a nice stretch... only to behold the very awed expressions of three very familiar ponies.

“BWAAAAHHHHHH!!!! How long have you guys been standing there?!”

Her friends could do nothing but stammer with their eyes wide, jaws slack in disbelief. Rarity had leveled a trembling right hoof straight at her friend, apparently unable to find her tongue.

“T-T-Twi...”

“What? Is it something in my mane? Is Sugarcube corner on fire? Another Baked Bads Incident? Did Ditzzy Doo bring back some parasprites? Is Princess Celestia here?!”

“T-T-T-Twilight...”

The lavender unicorn was beginning to get worried now. Just how many hours had she burnt on Princess Celestia’s Gamecolt? She knew she had spent some time on it, but surely it couldn’t have been that bad.

Quickly glancing around for a calendar, her eyes widened in shock as she realized just how much time she had actually spent.

“Oh my goodness... I’ve been playing for three whole days!” she gasped, the shock of what she had done clearly registering across her face. Turning about to face her friends, a look of sadness marred her normally cheery features.

“I-I’m sorry, everypony... I must have had you so worried!”

“Y-Y-Y-You....”

“I know,” responded the unicorn, a hint of dejection in her voice. “I-I must have looked as if I was ignoring my best friends... but it wasn’t meant to look that way! Honest!”

“YOU WERE AMAZING, TWILIGHT!” Came the simultaneous, booming shout. Throwing themselves at their best friend, all three ponies proceeded to give of them a now-perplexed Twilight Sparkle one very tight, bone-crunching hug.

Trapped in the embrace of some of her best friends, Twilight couldn’t help but blink a little in confusion, barely wheezing out a single phrase as she struggled for breath.

“Wait, whaaa-?”

--

“I’m really, *really* sorry I left you guys alone out there for so long! Oh gosh, you must’ve been worried sick about me!”

“I’ve already told you, Twilight, dear, don’t worry about it!” Rarity cooed soothingly as she walked with her friend back to the library, after the massive party at Sugarcube corner that Pinkie Pie had decided to throw on the spot after Twilight had finally finished her game. “We’re all just glad you’re fine, even after all those days in the library!”

Apparently the pink earth pony had called the party a “Congratulations Twilight On Finally Beating Tetris” party, and had thrown the whole thing together with shocking speed, as was her usual *modus operandi*.

Twilight didn’t even want to know how Pinkie even managed to do it, but she had managed to drag in the rest of her friends into it, and now the purple-maned unicorn was walking back to her library alongside Applejack and Rainbow Dash too, along with Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie, the pink earth pony still bouncing hyperactively from the aftermath of the party.

“Man, you should’ve seen Twilight playing that game!” Pinkie Pie was currently gushing out excitedly to Rainbow Dash, as she recounted the lavender unicorn’s amazing prowess at Tetris to the rainbow-maned pegasus. “When I first saw her playing, she was *whoosh! Zoom! Bam!* All over the place! And up in my head I was like  
\*GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASSSSP\* but we didn’t even make a sound because it was just so super-duper-incredibly awesome! She was so fast, she was almost as fast as you, Dashie!”

Rainbow Dash shook her head, that same old smirk right back on her face. "Alright, Pinkie, you had me going right up until that LAST part." She turned back to Twilight, shaking her head in disbelief. "But man, Twilight, you've GOT to give me a shot at that game!"

Twilight nodded. "I'd be glad to lend it to you, Rainbow Dash... I've already pretty much beaten it and... ow... I think my hooves need a break anyway."

Fluttershy had noticed that Twilight seemed to be favoring her front hooves.. "T-twilight, you're not hurt, are you?"

"No, no!" Twilight gave the pegasus a reassuring smile. "Just a... just a little sore." She worked one of her hooves in a circle; an ominous popping noise emanated from her wrist.

"I didn't notice how tired my hooves were getting until after I was done playing..."

"So it's settled!" Rainbow hadn't seemed to even notice, so focused she was on psyching herself up. "I'm not gonna sleep until I beat Twilight's high score!"

"You... er... can't." Applejack piped up. "Twilight hit the score cap: it don't go higher than 9s across th' board."

"Oh." Rainbow looked disappointed for all of two seconds... right before she perked up again. "Then I'll hit the cap in TWO days! Beat her best time instead of her best score!" She exclaimed, earning an eye-roll from Applejack and Rarity.

"Well, we're here." Twilight approached the door to the library, opening it with her magic. "I'll grab the Gamecolt for you, Rainbow. Thanks again for that great party, Pinkie... now, I'll need just one second, and..." She vanished into the darkened hallway, headed off to her study to grab the Gamecolt.

Dash rubbed her hooves together eagerly. "Oh man, I can't wait to bust Twilight's best time...!"

Rarity shot her a piercing glare. "Rainbow Dash, I'm surprised at you! I thought you would know better than to steal somepony's thunder when they've accomplished something great. Remember how that feels?"

Rainbow paused, then shrugged. "Hey, she said I could go for it! Besides, records are there to be broken, right?"

Rarity sighed. Rainbow could be so... difficult sometimes. "Well, It's highly unlikely that you'll get the chance to rub it in her face or anything, so perhaps I'm worrying over nothing."

"Oh yeah, I'm not gonna break a friendship over a game or anything. I'll make sure that I stay modest - HEY!"

Rarity hid her snickers behind a hoof as Rainbow fumed. "It's a game about making lines out of blocks, how hard could it possibly be?! It doesn't matter HOW fast they come down, I'll keep up with them no problem!"

The sound of rapid hoofsteps caused them to glance toward the darkened library hallway, and Rainbow gestured regally toward Twilight's rapidly approaching silhouette.

"Here she comes now: Tetris won't know what hit it! Bring it on!"

And that was when Twilight suddenly burst through the door, panting. She looked... terrified, to say the least. "Girls, come quick! Hurry!"

Pinkie Pie blinked. "What's going on?" She asked, an edge of concern in her voice.

"It's Spike! He's hurt!"

--

Indeed he was. The tiny purple dragon lay twitching on the ground, clutching his stomach and gasping. Twilight was immediately at his side, cradling the young dragon in her hooves. "Spike, what's wrong? What happened?"



Spike pointed a trembling finger at something over her shoulder, letting out a feeble rasp before passing out. Twilight looked over her shoulder, following where Spike had pointed. Her eyes bulged.

“Oh my...”

What looked like an electric guitar lay in the corner. A microphone stood mounted on a tripod. Pinkie Pie nearly tripped over what could only be described as a drum set lying in the middle of the dark hallway. In pride of place, there lay a small, familiar-shaped package with a letter tied to it.

Rainbow looked from one instrument to the other, jaw hanging open. “What... what in Equestria *IS* all this?”

Rarity looked just as stunned. “No, he couldn’t have... Spike couldn’t have coughed all this up at ONCE!” She looked over at the dragon curled on the floor; unconscious, though he didn’t seem to be in any pain. “Oh, the poor thing must be exhausted!” She placed a gentle hoof on his forehead.

“...And of course he’s out cold.” Twilight thought with a small smirk.

Suddenly she recoiled; Pinkie had nearly shoved the scroll attached to the box up her nose. “What does it say?! It’s a new game, isn’t it?!” She was bouncing in place in unbridled excitement. “Read it read it read it!”

Twilight levitated the parchment out of Pinkie’s hooves, gently pushing her away as she unfurled the scroll. Her friends were hanging over her shoulder in an instant as she began to read.

*My Dearest, Most Faithful Student,*

*I am pleased to hear that you are feeling better after that hiatus you took, and so proud of your great accomplishment. The teams who worked on Tetris boasted of its difficulty, and from what they showed me of it, their claims seemed far from hyperbolic. So again, congratulations.*

*I must apologize as well for the sudden influx of devices that Spike must have coughed up: the students seemed very zealous about this latest game, and they sent all of the devices through the pipeline before I had a chance to stop them. I do hope that Spike is alright.*

*More importantly, Twilight, the University of Electrical Engineering has also given me some very exciting news! They claim that we are on the threshold of something great; that in a matter of a few months, they will be able to market the Xbox and its games to all of Equestria.*

*Taking into account your previous reports, I foresee this has a chance to be a great thing for the nation of Equestria. In the meantime, I do hope you will enjoy assessing their newest title, which I believe is called "Rock Band."*

*From what I've heard, this is a 'rhythm game,' where the central focus appears to be music. I do sincerely hope you and your friends will be able to enjoy it together.*

*Your mentor,  
Princess Celestia*

*p.s. If at all possible, could you perhaps send the Gamecolt to me? I wish to try my hoof at Tetris.*

Twilight finished reading, looking back up at her friends. Her eyes stopped on Rainbow Dash. The pegasus' mouth was working, and her brow was furrowed. "Rainbow..."

"Yeah, I know. She's the princess and everything... I'll buy Tetris when it comes out or something."

Her voice was... incredibly bitter. Twilight looked quickly back at the parchment.

"I actually *don't* know where to go from here, Rainbow...I mean, if the princess asked for the Gamecolt I should give it to her, no question. But on the other hoof, I promised it to you first..."

Suddenly a small smirk formed on Twilight's face. "And besides..."

"Besides what, Twilight?" Fluttershy asked nervously.

Twilight chuckled. "Besides... if I give Princess Celestia Tetris...the sun would never rise again."

# Chapter 4

## Rock Band

In all Equestria, few adore Princess Celestia more than Twilight Sparkle, personal student, protege and to some, admirer of the solar monarch.

Truly, there were very few times Twilight ever questioned anything the Princess sent her way, even when it seemed that the things she asked of her student were utterly baffling to the impressionable young unicorn.

With all her heart, she had always placed the utmost faith in her Princess; the entire Nightmare Moon incident served only to reaffirm her belief in her mentor's inscrutable wisdom.

Yet sometimes, despite all the trust she placed in Princess Celestia, she found herself questioning whatever ran through her mentor's ageless mind.

Needless to say, the numerous instruments scattered in front of her did little to help her unravel that mystery. Finding her eyes scrunched in thought, Twilight could only ponder just what manner of machine her beloved Princess Celestia had seen fit to send up Spike's digestive system.

"Ya shure Princess Celestia sent you the right thing here, Twi? Ah don't know nothin' 'bout them fancy musics y'all like over in Canterlot - ah mean, we got gitahs over at the farm, but we like our acoustics the way they are."

"Of course it's the right thing, Applejack." Twilight replied confidently, stepping forward to appraise the numerous instruments before her. "Princess Celestia would never send me anything she didn't intend for me to receive! Still... I wonder what exactly all of this is supposed to do..."

"Well, we play 'em, duh!" In Pinkie Pie's mind, the most obvious thing to do when faced with instruments of any sort was to play, *loud*. Slinging one of the guitars over her neck, Pinkie proceeded to launch straight into one of her impromptu routines.

Soon enough, she was bounding up and down Twilight's library yelling "da-na-na-na" over and over, hooves flailing about as she playfully "strummed" the guitar.

"Whoa now, settle down there, girl." Came Applejack's immediate intervention, still apprehensive about anything to do with Pinkie Pie and sensitive electronic equipment. She knew all too well what happened the last time.

"C'mon guys, what pony wouldn't want to hear my signature rock ballad?" inquired the ever-impatient Rainbow Dash. "...If I could figure out *how* to play my signature rock ballad."

"Rainbow..." Applejack deadpanned. "you couldn't play tha' harmonica, much less a gitah, I'm 'ssumin."

Rainbow gave a little snort. "Oh c'mon, Applejack, ya gotta learn to fly before you can flap, did you and Rarity *both* miss out on elementary fillyschool?"

Twilight paused, wondering whether to correct Rainbow on her rather horrific butchering of an old pegasi proverb. Her scholar's mind winning out, she raised a hoof to begin explaining the finer points of the cultural significance of pegasi philosophers and their tenets of wisdom.

Sensing her friend's dilemma, Rarity quickly intervened, shaking her head furiously to indicate the universal "Rainbow Dash and sense don't mix" sign, pleading with Twilight not to get embroiled in a battle of exposition.

"Regardless, Rainbow Dash," the lavender unicorn began, thankfully taking heed to Rarity's warning, "I think you'd better take it a little slower on this one - and at least try not to jump into the hardest difficulty straight on, will you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I've learned my lesson." Rainbow Dash waved her friend off casually. "Ain't gonna stop me from kickin' any less flank, though."

"Rainbow," Twilight interjected, hoping to nip Rainbow's over-zealousness in the bud, "we need to figure out *how* any of this works before we kick anything, alright?"

“I believe we can help with that.”

Craning her head around to the source of the noise, Twilight, Rainbow Dash and Applejack found Rarity and Fluttershy deep in concentration, pouring over a small paper booklet that they deduced, had to be another one of those ‘manual’ things- if the freshly opened box was any indicator.

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The manual’s instructions were, thankfully, idiot-proof for the better part. Dotted with helpful diagrams and clear instructions, even a certain lazy-eyed pegasus would have been able to make heads or tails of it.

For that reason, the minute Rainbow Dash volunteered to set it up, they thought even somepony of her... haphazard disposition would have little trouble with anything.

As time passed, and what was originally supposed to be a quick, simple endeavor devolved into a mish-mash of wires and a very frustrated pegasus.

No pony knew how it had all gone so very...badly, to say the least. The connector cables were right side-wrong, the receivers strewn about, and Twilight swore the cyan pegasus had almost broken one of them by trying to plug it in! Thankfully that was a disaster quickly avoided, with the lavender mare quickly wrenching the device out from Dash’s callous hooves.

Taking the reigns from her technically-challenged friend, Twilight’s masterful supervision saw a complete turnover in no time at all. Soon, Twilight’s taskmaster skills saw the electric guitars, drums and microphone made fully functional, connected and working; even then it was still quite the challenge, considering the mess of wires Rainbow Dash had managed to create.

“Well,” Twilight panted, “I think, *whew*- we did it! Now it’s just a simple manner of putting in the disc and-”

At speeds that would have made even the Wonderbolts jealous, Pinkie Pie zipped past Twilight, disc apparently in mouth as she jammed her hoof down on the 'ON' switch, prodding it faster and faster as if to goad the machine into speeding up.

"Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeoncomeon!!!" The pink earth pony chattered excitedly as she bounded up and down, over and over on the same spot at breakneck pace. To anypony not otherwise acquainted with Ponyville's resident party artiste, they would think her dosed up on one too many teaspoons of sugar.

"Pinkie," yelled an incredulous Twilight Sparkle, "we haven't even read the manual! WHAT do you think you're-"

Flickering to life, the TV screen blazed a startling white, the stylized text "**Harmonix**" spelt out clearly before the now intrigued ponies, eyes riveted to the screen, expecting a vibrant kaleidoscope of color to burst out on screen any second.

Instead, all they got was a simple fade to black as the introductory logo slowly phased off-screen, eliciting a couple of surprised looks from the ponies assembled. Even Rarity, normally always prim and proper, had a rather incredulous look plastered across her features.

"That's... it? My word, you don't suppose they're getting lazy, do you?"

"Sure looks that way, Imma willin' ta bet."

"WHAT THE HAY WAS THAT?!"

Cringing from her rainbow-maned friend's passionate outburst, Twilight turned to reassure her friends that Princess Celestia "knew what she was doing."

Or at least, that's what she told herself.

Yet, before she could say a word, the screen came to life once more, vibrant colors taking the place of a once dull screen that panned out to reveal a desolate desert highway, slowly focusing in on a lone chariot barreling down the road at breakneck speed.

Straining their eyes to get a better view, everypony assembled, even the normally reserved Fluttershy, literally glued their eyes to the screen in anticipation. Soon, two stallions and a mare emerged from the speeding chariot, still in the middle of *speeding down a highway*.

It didn't take long for each jaw in the room hit the floor with a resounding 'THUD' as one by one, the four ponies began to *play a rock song*.

*On the chariot.*

*While speeding down the highway.*

*Demolishing their way through a ghost town.*

*With MUSIC.*

"So... AWESOMEEEEEEEEE." Came the characteristic squeal of the Rainbow-maned pegasus as she brought her hooves up to her cheeks, squeezing them together to form an expression that Twilight could swear her mother pulled on her one too many times in her fillyhood years.

Soon, the cutscene came to a close, leaving the cyan pegasus even more excited than before, if that was even possible. Rubbing her hooves together in anticipation, her usual 'go-time' grin stretched from ear to ear as her eyes blazed in steely determination.

"Oh man Oh man Oh man, I can't wait to rock somepony's socks off!"

If Twilight didn't know better, she would have sworn the game actually responded to Rainbow Dash's hyperactive display, the image on screen changing in time with her words to present them with what they could only assume was another main menu.

The familiar row of options that read '**Solo**', '**Multiplayer**', '**Options**', among many others, adorned the screen, overlapping what appeared to be a black-and-white video of a pony screaming into a mic on a stage, belting out lyrics to a cheering, adoring audience.

Rainbow Dash was practically jittering with anticipation now. Pinkie Pie even more so, her inner bard literally begging for a chance to stretch it's lyrical muscles.

"C'mon, Twilight, what're you waiting for?! Let's get this show on the road!"

"That's the thing, Rainbow, I don't think-"

Apparently either hearing nothing or *choosing* to hear nothing that came out of Twilight's mouth, Rainbow Dash snatched up a guitar and haphazardly swung it over her shoulder, raising her right hoof to play the most awesome rock ballad to ever grace the ears of Ponyville's denizens - only to realize she hadn't the foggiest idea *how*.

"Uh... Twilight..."

"One step ahead of you."

Grabbing another guitar off the floor, Twilight quickly thumbed the small switch-like extension that lay in place of the strings and promptly selected '**Multiplayer**' before tossing the guitar back to Rainbow Dash.

"Awww sweet, now I can finally-"

"Whoa there Nelly," came Applejack's firm tone, the one she usually only broke out to stop a certain over-impulsive pegasus from doing anything she might regret. "I reckon y'all better leave any singin' here to me. Get some experience on that there gitah o' yers."

"Now wait just a hay-pickin' second there! I-"

"Rainbow..." this time the voice unmistakably carrying Twilight's trademark nagging tone, "it's about time you let somepony else get first try, don't you think so?"

Rainbow Dash raised a hoof in in protest, only to be met by Twilight's piercing gaze as her friend's normally warm, caring eyes narrowed to snake-thin slits that Dash could swear literally made her blood curdle for a second or two.



Needless to say, she quickly lowered whatever hoof she raised.

“...I think Applejack deserves a turn.”

“That’s very noble of you, Rainbow. I’m very proud.”

“Yeah yeah, proud shmoud...” muttered the cyan pegasus, sulking off to find another instrument and a manual to read.

“Right, lessee here...” Applejack squinted at the screen as she scrolled through the game’s setlist, trying to at least find a song that the one she could at least try to sing. Playing a little bit of guitar was all fine and dandy, surely her time on the farm would help a bit... but lyrics, especially those of a song she didn’t know from heads or tails was a little too much.

Sifting her way through the setlist, Applejack was about to call it quits halfway through after seeing song after song that sounded positively alien to her.

That’s when she saw it. She almost missed it, but a familiar title managed to catch her eye; one she swore she couldn’t mistake. Doubling back at breakneck speed, she flicked through song after song until her eyes came to rest on a very familiar title, one the orange mare couldn’t help but jump for joy at.

“Sweet Celestia! They’ve got Colts N’ Roses on here!” Applejack cried out in joy, jamming her hoof down on the select button as she quickly got on her hind legs, grabbing the microphone stand with her free hooves. “Ahm no singer, that’s fo’ sure, but boy howdy, Imma gon’ give this mah best shot!”

“Colts N’ Roses? Oh man, if there’s one pony in this room cool enough to play lead guitar on one of *Slash*’s classics, it’s gotta be me!” Sulkiness completely forgotten, Rainbow Dash sprung up on her hind legs with renewed vigor, assuming a classic rock n’ roll stance as she spaced her hooves apart with the trained precision of a rabid fanfilly.

“Let’s... ROCK!”

“YAAAAAAYY! I call dibs on drums!” Not wasting a second, Pinkie Pie leapt right behind the drumset and immediately proceeded to hammer away at the pads with two drumsticks she mysteriously procured from thin air. No pony, least of all Twilight, even tried pointing out they weren’t playing yet.

“Lessee here... one, two, three...” Counting off her hooves, Rainbow Dash realized something was off. “Hey, wait, we still need one more! Wanna give it a shot, Twilight?”

“Umm... I’d actually like to give it a try... if you’d be so kind...” Fluttershy gave her usual, modest smile as she slowly stepped forward to gently sling the second guitar’s strap around her neck. Rearing up on her hind legs like her other two friends, she found herself nervously fidgeting around with her controller’s buttons, seemingly lost.

The rest was, thankfully, hassle-free for the better part. The only ‘hiccup’ was Rainbow Dash actually choosing to start off on Normal difficulty, at which everypony almost dropped whatever it was they were holding to rub their eyes in disbelief.

Soon enough, everypony had selected their settings, and the song was right about to start, with Applejack on vocals, Rainbow Dash on lead guitar, Fluttershy handling the bass right next to Pinkie Pie, who seemed utterly content with hammering away at her drums like a pony possessed.

As Rarity and Twilight watched with rapt attention, the screen came to stunning life as four ponies, gathered on stage, faced a cheering crowd of hundred of adoring fans.

Almost immediately, four display bars, clearly matched to each of the four ponies, locking in place on-screen, obscuring much of the pomp and fanfare. Clearly, it was to serve only as a backdrop - the real challenge was yet to come.

The tension in the air was almost palpable as everypony fixed their gaze intently on those bars, waiting for the inevitable. Even Pinkie Pie, however impossible it may have seemed, actually quietened down. True, the pink pony was still bouncing about in her seat excitedly, but it was a unbelievably rare sight to see her doing little else.

Silence filled the air, hanging over the four as a silent precursor to a slow but steady approach. Gradually, the characteristic sound of two tapping drumsticks echoed soundly through the room.

*Tik. Tik. Tik-tik-tik-tik.*

Then the first notes descended from Rainbow Dash's bar.

*Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum, Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum,  
Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum, Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum,  
Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum, Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum,  
Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum, Da-da-da-dum, da-dum da-dum*

It was a [steady, catchy rhythm](#), and Twilight found herself subconsciously tapping her hoof in time with the beat as Rainbow Dash actually managed to hit all the right notes in the right places.

Surprisingly, the rainbow-maned pegasus and her attraction to all things rock was paying off! She hit note after note with almost rhythmic grace with natural ease, swaying perfectly in time with the music.

As her cyan pegasus friend hit the last note of her first verse, it was Fluttershy's turn to shine as her bassline came into the mix, closely followed by Pinkie Pie's drums. As the two hit each note with almost perfect timing, Twilight and Rarity couldn't help but stare dumbstruck for a while. Granted, they were playing on Normal, but seeing as it was only their first try, this was by no means any small feat.

Soon, Rainbow Dash's opening solo died down, gradually coming to an end as the ever-flashy pegasus finished off her solo with an textbook rocker's shred, her strumming hoof pointing right in the air before bowing off to make way for Applejack's opening verse.

*"She's got a smile that it seems to me,  
Reminds me of foalhood memories,  
Where everything was as fresh as the bright blue sky"*

The blonde-maned farmpony was no stranger to music. Often, she'd pour her heart and soul into a nice country ballad after a hard day's apple-

bucking. If anything, all the times she'd spent strumming on the Apple family's old acoustic while she sang to one very fascinated Applebloom filled every last word with every ounce of spirit she had.

Yet her only gripe, loathe to admit it as she was, rested on her trademark southernpony accent- it was a truth she did not like to admit, but she swallowed that bitter pill and carried on singing. Vocals were her responsibility, and the Apple family never shied away from their responsibilities.

*"Now and then when ah see her face,  
She takes me away to that special place,  
And if ah stare too long,  
Ah'd probably break down and cry..."*

Turning around with a hopeful grin, Applejack expected Rarity to be rolling on the floor in mock pain at the sound of her accent, but what she did *not* expect was a warm, supportive smile from the purple-maned unicorn. She could almost swear Rarity was actually *rocking* to the beat of the song as she motioned for Applejack to continue playing.

Her spirits lifted by such an unexpected show of support, the orange mare turned back to face the screen, and continued to sing.

*"Whoaaa, oh, oh, sweet foal o' mine,  
Whoaaa, oh, oh, oh, sweet love of mine."*

Fluttershy certainly looked like she was enjoying herself - the normally quiet, unassuming pegasus was bobbing in time to the rhythm, steadily swaying forward and backward amidst the bass's low, steady notes.

In contrast, Rainbow Dash had assumed a wide power stance across the floor, whipping her rainbow-tinted mane around in a frenzy as she threw her head in all directions, belting out a steady rhythm on her guitar.

Pinkie Pie, now furiously pounding away at the drumpads with a vengeance, complemented her cyan friend perfectly. Together, the two ponies were a natural stage duo, all the life and personality they injected into the song almost made the atmosphere feel alive with sheer *energy*.

*“She's got eyes of the bluest skies, as if they thought of rain  
Ah hate to look into those eyes, and see an ounce of pain  
Her mane reminds me of a warm safe place, where as a foal ah'd hide  
And pray for the thunder and the rain to quietly pass me byyyy!”*

*Whoaaa, oh, oh,  
Sweet foal o' mine  
Wooooo, whoaaa, oh, oh, oh,  
Sweet love of mine!”*

It was truly a spectacle to behold. Even Twilight and Rarity, ponies who were quick to dismiss this *particular* genre found themselves completely immersed in whole experience, moving in time with the music as it thundered through the library's speakers.

Watching the song came to life as each of their friends put their soul into every last note, key and drumbeat, Twilight and Rarity couldn't help but let a smile of pure joy stretch from ear to ear.

Truly, seeing such a piece come together, given life through the combined efforts of each and every one of their friends felt almost... *magical*.

Rainbow Dash's guitar rhythms, Applejack's vocals, Fluttershy's stable bass background, and Pinkie Pie's steady drum beats... it all made Twilight want to be a part of it even more than she already did, and she already wanted that *quite* badly!

*“Wooooo, whoaaa, oh, yea-eah!  
Whoaaa, oh, oh, oh  
Sweet foal o' mine!”*

*Ooooh, whoa, oh-oh oh-oh oh-oh!  
Sweet love o' mine!”*

Just as Applejack finished off her segment, Rainbow Dash leapt right into it, her notes following hot on the heels of the farmpony's vocals.

The cyan pegasus erupted into her first true guitar solo, answering to a barrage of notes that descended upon her from her note chart as it suddenly turned blue.

Throughout the entire course of the song, Rainbow Dash had been hitting white glowing notes that she had read were called “Energy Phrases”. Apparently, hitting those phrases gathered energy she could use to double her score for a time, something the game called “Overdrive”, should she put it to use.

Of course, to Rainbow Dash, awesomeness was an *art*. So far, she had not seen fit to unleash a truly mind-blowing performance yet. The time was simply not ripe...

Until now.

Taking centre stage over Applejack’s in-game persona, Rainbow Dash’s avatar gave her guitar one mighty tug as she jerked it upwards, entering the spotlight as her note chart lit up like a christmas tree from entering Overdrive. Inch by inch, the rainbow-maned pegasus found her score climbing ever higher, leaving a couple of her bandmates in the proverbial dust.

Granted, Rainbow Dash actually missed a couple of them here and there, no thanks to the sheer speed those notes seemed to possess, but by the end of it her performance was great enough that her bar displayed she had hit about 96% of them, followed by a resounding cry of “*Awesome Solo!*” from an unseen announcer.

“OH YEAH!!!” The speed-loving pegasus whooped in delight as she continued strumming chords as they came, but they did nothing to dampen her elation. “WHO ROCKS?!”

The rest of the song was rather subdued in the immediate aftermath of Dash’s solo, probably to give everypony a breather after that very intense performance. As Applejack lowered her vocals to a near whisper, the once dizzying flurry of notes slowed to little more than a trickle at a time.

*“Where do we go  
Where do we go now?  
Where do we go...”*

Giving Rainbow Dash a hooves-up to acknowledge her friend's job on the solo, the pegasus answered with a grin and a riff, the notes timed perfectly with the end of Applejack's line.

Mere seconds later, the song skyrocketed into a crescendo, sending Rainbow Dash into a shredding frenzy as she hit notes left and right. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy followed suit, keeping in time with Dash's guitar riffs as they executed note after note with near-flawless precision and speed.

*"Sweet foaaal, sweet foaaaall of miiine...."* Applejack finally finished off the song, leading off to Rainbow Dash's final echoing riff. As if on cue, an explosive finishing animation lit up the screen with sparks as the note charts disappeared, the in-game band bowing to the crowd, as legions of adoring fans whistled and screamed for an encore.

Apparently, the four of them had done quite well, if the scores on-screen were any indication. Netting at least four out of five possible stars on the song, everypony had managed at least ninety percent of their notes. Being the lead guitarist, Rainbow Dash's name was first in the row displayed on-screen, a title proudly emblazoned with the words *'Solo Legend'* right beneath it.

"Hoo yeah!" The rainbow-maned filly crowed triumphantly as she pumped a hoof into the air. "Who's the solo legend? *I'M* the solo legend!"

"Yeah, yeah, keep tootin' yer own horn, missy." Said Applejack, throwing her pompous friend a slightly satirical grin before looking over the rest of the titles. Apparently, she had gotten the title *'Most Energy'*, her notes percentage at a modest 91% compared to Fluttershy's 98%, or Rainbow Dash's 94%.

The yellow pegasus, on the other hand, had received the title *'Authentic Strumming.'* Seeing that she was the bassist, Applejack and Rainbow Dash could only assume she must have had *some* theoretical knowledge of how to play the instrument. Then again, nopony ever saw Fluttershy so much as play a simple castanet, let alone a bass guitar.

As her eyes drifted over to Pinkie's score, Applejack swore her eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets, even rubbing them a few times to make sure what she was seeing on screen wasn't some kind of illusion.

“A... a *hundred percent*, Pinkie Pie!?” The farmpony spluttered out as she looked over to where her fellow earth pony was sitting. She swore her eyes were deceiving her, but instead of whooping around in joy like everypony expected her to, Pinkie Pie looked positively *bored*.

“Oh come on, this is way too slow! It’s gotta be much, much much much much faster than this!” The pink earth pony gestured at the screen in irritation, apparently still dissatisfied despite the big, fat **100%** and her title that proudly displayed the word ‘*Flawless*’.

Rainbow Dash raised an eyebrow in surprise. Knowing Pinkie Pie, it probably wasn’t more than another random tirade that the earth pony had earned great renown for. Then again, given the fact that her pink-maned friend played her song from start to finish without a *single* flaw, Dash couldn’t help but feel a trickle of doubt seep through.

Dash quickly dismissed the thought, partially thanks to her own minuscule attention span, and quickly returned her attention the the awaiting setlist.

“Alright, it’s MY turn now!” proclaimed the boisterious cyan pegasus, quickly thumbing her way through the setlist with the fervor of a rabid fanfilly, rifling through track after track as her eyes darted over each one with phenomenal speed.

Almost immediately, she paused; her eyes ground to a halt as she slowly thumbed her way up the setlist, finally coming to rest on a lone track. Twilight had only ever seen Dash’s eyes go THAT wide once, and it had taken the Wonderbolts to do that.

“Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!” Whooped Rainbow Dash, jumping off her hind legs to do a quick double airflip. “Can you believe it, they have *Pegasus* on this thing! Th... This is better than awesome! This game just got SUPER-AWESOME!”

Twilight and Rarity were, needless to say, more than a little surprised. They’d never seen their flier fanatic of a friend flip out over something other than a chance to “hang” with the Wonderbolts.



“Beg pardon, Rainbow Dash, but do me a favor and enlighten everypony not so... illuminated. Who or what is this... Pegasus you speak of?”

With blinding speed, Rainbow Dash whipped around until she was eye-level with the fashion diva. “WHO’S PEGASUS? You’re kidding me, right? They’re only the most rockin’ band to ever tear up Equestria!”

“You guys really need to get out more.” Sighed Pinkie Pie, shaking her head as though Twilight and Rarity had just asked a question that even a filly-school student would know the answer to.

“Well, ah’m no fan of these Pegasus fellas here, so I guess I’ll sit this here one out, Rainbow.”

In response, the cyan pegasus could only shrug her shoulders, half-sorry that her orange friend would pass up on a chance to perform such a righteous tune.

Then again, she wasn’t about to let just anypony here belt out a song by the legendary *Pegasus*! This song called for some direct intervention, Rainbow Dash style.

Sauntering over to the mike, the rainbow-maned pegasus slung her guitar over her shoulders and reared up, throwing out her chest in confidence as she jammed her hoof over the select button.

As the game quickly changed to show the difficulty select screen, a mischievous grin spread over Rainbow’s face.

“Let’s kick it up a notch!” She yelled, quickly jamming her hoof over the guitar as she assumed a cliched stage pose, her right hoof held up high over her now slumping head as her rainbow mane fell forward, completely obscuring her eyes, before she slammed her hoof down on the strum bar and the guitar’s select button, sealing her choice of Hard difficulty for both her guitar *and* vocals.

“Stop right there, Rainbow Dash!” Came Twilight’s voice, this time a bit more forceful than usual. “If you’re going to take on *both* the vocals and the guitar on at the same time, *somepony*’s gotta be there to bail you out if you fail the song. I’m going to direct this personally.”

As she stood up, Twilight's eyes immediately fell on Pinkie's drumset; needless to say, Pinkie Pie's danger sense lit up like another one of Princess Celestia's over-the-top royal parades. Leaping to shield her drumset like a mother would her foal in danger, her eyes almost begged Twilight to stay away.

Left with only the bass to choose from, Twilight looked over to Fluttershy, who immediately unslung the guitar from her neck, politely handing it to the lavender unicorn.

"It'd be my pleasure." Replied the yellow pegasus, quietly bowing out of the way to let Twilight assume her position as bassist. "I just hope I didn't do too badly..."

"Don't be silly, Fluttershy!" Came the unicorn's firm assertion. "I just need to make sure that Rainbow here doesn't run herself into another proverbial mess."

Twilight flashed an impish grin at her boisterous friend, and Rainbow Dash's cheeks flushed a colorful shade of red as she turned her snout up, trying to maintain some sense of dignity.

"Yeah yeah, we'll see who bails who out, Miss smarty-pants. Now stop talking and start rockin'!"

"WHOOOOO! YEAH! Normal mode is too easy for me, so I'll be joining Dashie on Hard Mode!" A delighted Pinkie Pie gave a high-pitched squeal as she smacked her drumpads to confirm her difficulty selection as well, eliciting a rather shocked look from the level-headed Twilight Sparkle.

"Are you serious, Pinkie?" The lavender unicorn raised an eyebrow before giving a resigned sigh and selecting Normal difficulty for her bassist. "Well, *somepony's* gotta keep a level head here. I'll stay on Normal and bail you out in case any of you fail the song."

With everypony's cards in play, the stage was set for Rainbow Dash's shot at rocker 'stardom.' Before anypony knew it, the loading screen came up before rapidly being replaced by the very familiar stage of four ponies facing down a roaring crowd of adulating fans.

Just like before, the ponies on stage were waving and gesturing at the fans to turn it up a notch, bringing the crowd's screams to a fever pitch as the four note charts made their appearances on the screen.

"This is gonna be... so AWESOME!!!!!!" squealed the overexcited Rainbow Dash, eyes wide with anticipation like a textbook fanfilly as she jittered excitedly in place. After a few seconds, the familiar *tik* of the drumsticks made themselves heard of the speakers, signalling the start of the song.

*Tik. Tik. Tik-tik-tik-tik.*

Abruptly, the sound of tambourines came over the speakers, bringing with them Twilight's first notes in a slow, steady rhythm. Being on Normal difficulty, the lavender mare had little trouble hitting all of them with little error, speling out a lively beat that set the backdrop for the rest of the song.

*Dum dum dum, dum dum, dum-dum-dum-dum*

Rainbow Dash perked up, her eyes flashing as she immediately caught on to the rhythm. Clearing her throat in an almost comical manner, she began tapping her right hoof in time with the sonorous bass beats.

*Dum dum dum, dum dum, dum-dum-dum-dum*

*Dum dum dum, dum dum, dum-dum-dum-dum*

*Dum-dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum dum dum*

Hitting her second verse, Twilight's bass notes soon found a companion in Pinkie Pie's drumbeats, the earth pony's steady thumps beating out a rhythm in perfect synchrony with Twilight's low, baritone strums.

As the duo kept the rhythm for another verse, Pinkie Pie ended off her drumbeats with a double whammy, hitting two of the same drumpads in perfect synchrony. As she bowed out and extended a hoof to the cyan pegasus waiting in the wings, Rainbow Dash gave her a quick nod - it was her time to shine!

Right on cue, Rainbow Dash immediately picked up from where the Pinkie left by unleashing an intense, massive riffing of guitar chords that perfectly echoed the ending of Twilight's bass verse.

*DA-NA-NA, NA-NA, NA-NA NA NA!!!*

*"A-go!!!"*

As Rainbow Dash practically screamed into the mic, the oncoming flood of notes began disappearing as everypony played in complete unison, belting out a highly electrified, powerful version of the bass verse that Twilight played at the beginning of the song.

*DA DA DA, DA DA, DA-DA-DA-DA  
DA DA DA, DA DA, DA-DA-DA-DA  
DA DA DA, DA DA, DA-DA-DA-DA  
DA-NA-NA, NA-NA, NA-NA NA NA!!!*

*"Well so one two three take my hoof and come with me, because you look so fine, that I really wanna make you mine!"* Yelling into the mic, Rainbow Dash erupted into a lyrical frenzy as the music came to a brief pause. Shattering the temporary lull, she resumed her role on the guitar; every single chord barreling towards her was simply hit in stride, never once fazing her.

*DA DA DA, DA DA, DA-DA-DA-DA!*

*"I say ya look so fine that I really wanna make you mine!"*

*DA DA DA, DA DA, DA-DA-DA-DA!*

*"Oh four five six, c'mon, and get ya kicks, now ya don't need the money when ya look like that, do ya honey?"*

*DA DA DA, DA DA, DA-DA-DA-DA  
DA-NA-NA, NA-NA, NA-NA NA NA!!!*

*"Big black boots..."* Rainbow Dash was in full rock mode now - nothing could stop her rhythm. Not errors, not missed notes, not even failing the

song in front of her friends would have stopped the spirit of her inner rockstar as she moved in time with the very essence of the music.

*“Long brown hair...”*

*“She’s so sweet with her... GET BACK STARE!!!”*

Not even paying heed to the fact that she had already missed a significant number of notes on *both* her guitar and vocals, nothing was going to bring the enraptured pegasus out of her rocker’s trance- she was having way too much fun to even think of letting that bother her.

Saving her best for last, Rainbow Dash gave her guitar controller her mightiest buck yet, jerking the device upwards as her character spiraled right into Overdrive mode. Soon enough, even her guitarist’s progress bar, which had come at least halfway towards failing the song, was neck and neck with the rest of her teammates.

*“Well I could see! You home with me!”* The cyan pegasus then whooped into the mic, igniting her singer’s Overdrive mode and thrusting the lead star of the band right back in the spotlight, rocking both the virtual stage *and* the imaginary one in Twilight’s basement as she whipped her mane back and forth in excitement. *“But you were with aaanother maaaaaaaare, yeah!”*

*“I know we ain’t got! Much to say! Before I let you get awaaaaaaaaay, yeah!”*

Abruptly launching into another barrage of chords, Rainbow Dash finished off the brief verse with a grand, exaggerated flourish. Leaning in close to the mike, she let her sweat-slicked mane fall over her eyes as she utter the next few words in a smoky, seductive murmur that nopony ever expected from the tomboyish athlete.

*“I said uh, are you gonna be my filly?”*

In a flash, the music returned in full force, snapping the four ponies out of their Dash-induced stupor. Pinkie Pie hammered away at her drums like a madpony while Dash resumed shredding chords on her guitar with such fervor they made Twilight, who was standing next to them rather stiffly, look

extremely awkward in comparison; the lavender unicorn was so focused on hitting her bass notes right that she did *nothing else*.

The song's following verse and chorus played out the exact same way - Rainbow Dash completely stole the show from the rest of the band with her killer riffs; even if she had missed several notes here and there and went off key more than once.

Nopony could call Rainbow Dash's playing perfect, but the sheer *passion* that pulsed through her voice left even Applejack and Rarity in rapturous applause. Fluttershy, of course, was cheering for her pegasus friend, but as always, she scarcely managed little more than a timid "yay."

As for the guitar solo... saying Rainbow Dash *slaughtered* it would be a sizable understatement - it was as though she *knew* the song by heart! Then again, given how much of a rabid fanfilly she was about her favorite rock band, it had to be kind of expected.

*"Ahhhhhhhhh I could see! You home with me!  
But you were with aaanother maaaaaaaare, yeah!  
I know we ain't got! Much to say!  
Before I let you get awaaaaaaaay, yeah!"*

*"Uh, be my filly! Be my filly! Are you gonna be my, FILLYYYYYYYYYYYYYY, yeaahhhhhh..."* At last, the music died down, the guitar's electric notes dying a slow, distorted death as they faded off the screen, making way for each pony's individual score.

When the final tallies came up, glances full of worry and concern were cast over the cyan pegasus, hoping that Rainbow Dash wouldn't fall into a slump after seeing her score. These ponies were her rock idols, and everypony knew just how far Dash took idol worship sometimes.

Deep down, the exhilarated pegasus could care less.

*"Eighty-ish percent on each? Ah, who cares, that was the most fun I've ever had in my life!!!"* The aspiring Wonderbolt let out a final, raucous whoop as she reared onto her hind legs, right before she collapsed onto her rump, panting and gasping for air.

Letting gravity take over, Dash fell wings-first onto the floor, letting out a long wheeze as she allowed a brief, calming silence to fall over the room as she tried to catch her breath, adrenaline still pulsing through her veins. Slowly, she let her limbs hang loose as her breath came back to her in short rasps.

In the blink of an eye, Dash's silence was broken by an ear-splitting whine. One she knew all too well.

"SO SLOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW" came the high-pitched voice of the ever-hyper Pinkie Pie, apparently once again completely dissatisfied by the game's already breakneck pace.

Sitting up, Rainbow Dash glanced over at Pinkie Pie's score, quickly rubbing her eyes just to make sure she wasn't seeing a few extra zeros.

"Pinkie," exclaimed the rainbow-maned pegasus, her eyes wide with incredulous shock, "you got a - *hundred - per - cent!* On Hard mode! How are you still not happy?!"

"It's toooo sloooooooooooooow, Dashie!" griped the pink earth pony, "It's like they're going slow on purpose! It's like they NEVER SAW ME COMING!"

Darting forward to snatch the guitar out of her cyan friend's hooves, Pinkie Pie started flicking through the setlist like a pony possessed; even Rainbow Dash's shrill cry of "what the hay!" falling on completely deaf ears.

Pinkie's frown deepened as she took split second pauses for each song, quickly dismissing each one with a shrill "too slow!" or "too boring!"

Burning her way through the setlist, Pinkie's rapid-fire song selection showed no signs of slowing down one bit. Soon enough, Rainbow Dash and Applejack were taking bets on whether Pinkie Pie would even find a song "fast" enough for her.

As she neared the end of the sizable tracklist, the pink earth pony was almost ready to throw in the towel and give up. Just as she was about ready to hand the guitar back to the pegasus, a very special something caught the corner of her eye that almost flash-froze her guitar hoof, lighting her eyes ablaze with the fire of excitement.

Slowly, but surely, her formerly annoyed expression melted off to make way for a smile that almost literally stretched from ear to ear as she landed right smack on the setlist's very last piece.

As everypony listened in stunned silence to the preview, their eyes slowly widened in shock, jaws loosening as their mouths started to hang agape.

"Oh... my..." Fluttershy's voice, soft as always, was almost lost in the din that filled the room.

The music that emanated from the speakers was so fast, so complex, so completely and utterly righteous...Pinkie's eyes were actually watering in awe. This was a song written for someone like her. This was a worthy test of her skills.

THIS was her jam.

"OH YEAH!!!" The pink earth pony slammed her hoof down on the select button, and Twilight's jaw extended from merely hanging agape to actually hitting the floor as Pinkie Pie selected the very last song under the "Nightmare Songs" section, and proceeded to pick *Expert* difficulty for both her guitarist *and* her vocalist.

The pink earth pony stood there for several seconds, still waiting for something to happen, before turning to the rest, who were still sitting there and watching her with their mouths agape.

"What are you silly mcsillysons sitting there waiting for?" Pinkie Pie gushed as she bounded over to Applejack and nudged the orange mare over to the drumsets, before looking over expectantly at Rainbow Dash and Twilight. "Well??"

At that, Twilight immediately unslung the guitar from her neck and quickly shoved it in Rainbow Dash's direction, still staring incredulously at the pink earth pony as though she had sprouted a second *and* third head.

After a moment, the cyan pegasus noticed the instrument that had been so suddenly offered in her direction, and she quickly reared back, eyeing the



instrument nervously before she darted her gaze to the television set, where that infernal song was *still* playing its insanely blistering tune.

“Ehhh heheheh...” Rainbow Dash was normally a lover of the fast and the furious, but this...this was *pushing* it. The song SOUNDED incredible, sure. It was the kind of song she would have gushed over if she had heard it on the radio or at a concert.

But now, faced with this unfamiliar tune with its complex, chaotic rhythm and breakneck pace, Rainbow began feeling an all-too-familiar twinge of fear.

“Well...” The normally overconfident pegasus gave a nervous swallow, and stepped forward, taking the guitar controller from Twilight, mustering all the bravado she could still summon in the face of such a savage tune. “Never let it be said that Rainbow Dash was ever one to back down from a challenge! I’ll beat this song all right!!! ... Although I guess it couldn’t hurt to play on Normal on this one...”

“Ain’t no shame in that, Rainbow.” Applejack reassured her cyan-coated friend as she took a seat behind the drumset, before selecting Normal difficulty as well. “Ya ain’t gonna be alone on this one. ‘Sides, it’s just a game. Ain’t like the fate of Equestria’s hangin’ on it, right?”

“Yeah.” Rainbow nodded, trying to keep the plastic grin on her face. “As long as we don’t plan to use our hooves for the next few days... right?”

“Shush!” Pinkie Pie suddenly hushed the gathered ponies as she jabbed a hoof excitedly at the screen, bouncing in place with anticipation. “It’s startiiiiing!!!”

As the four ponies made their appearance on stage, greeting their legion of adoring fans, once again the four note charts made their appearance, but instead of excitement, there was only tension, and in the case of Rainbow Dash and Applejack, dread filling the air.

In fact, the only one who even seemed remotely excited was Pinkie Pie, but then again, the party-goer was always excited about *everything*.

Whatever was coming their way, it was bound to be one moon of a manure-storm.

Almost as if to warm up, Pinkie Pie started strumming away at her guitar, tapping away at her fret buttons in some unidentifiable pattern, sometimes even using *both* hooves instead of just one, and it was just in time - the familiar *tik* of the drumsticks once again sounded from the speakers, and she readied herself just in time for the first of the notes to descend.

*Tik tik tik-tik-tik...*

[illegible]

It was chaos. Down came a stream of notes that moved so *quickly* that none of the gathered ponies would have even *dreamed* of having been able to hit it at all. A merciless, confusing barrage, too fast to keep up with, notes everywhere, *all the five fret buttons*... Even Rainbow Dash gave up trying to follow after a matter of seconds.

Yet somehow, in defiance of what seemed at all ponily possible, Pinkie Pie refused to falter, hitting every note with *perfect timing*. Her brow was furrowed now, sure, this much would take the wind out of anypony, but Pinkie never missed a beat.

From the moment she strummed the first guitar note, Pinkie Pie's right hoof immediately shot up to her fret buttons, where she started pressing them with the same infernal pattern that she had been using to warm up just before.

Twilight had read in the manual something about hammer-ons and pull-offs: notes that didn't need any strumming in order to be played. Made enough sense, Twilight had read enough about acoustic theory to understand the benefit of salvaging the vibrations of the strings for multiple notes... but this... an opening solo composed of *nothing* but hammer-ons and pull-offs was just madness!

“My... my *word!* Pinkie Pie, exactly how in Equestria are y-?” Rarity stammered to a halt as a yellow hoof came up inches from her face. Fluttershy shook her head ever so slightly, eyes riveted on her friends

performances. Rarity got the picture and sat back, silently trying to wrap her brain around what she was witnessing.

“They’re... hammer-ons!” Pinkie Pie ground out from behind clenched teeth just as her opening solo of hammer-ons and pull-offs erupted into a sliding stream of notes that sent everypony cross-eyed simply just trying to follow it... and then the *real* riffing began.

Rainbow Dash had been having an easy time right up until then. Compared to Pinkie Pie’s blistering barrage on Expert, her bassist had been having a relatively tame time on Normal... right up until the last three notes she had hit simultaneously with Pinkie Pie’s sliding stream.

And then the pegasus let out a barely restrained squeak of terror as *another* barrage of notes comparable to Pinkie Pie’s suddenly descended, upon *her* note chart!

In a frenzied panic, she began jamming away at her fret buttons as fast as she could in an attempt to keep up, but it was just too fast - she missed more than half of the notes as they streaked right over her head, and she *still* had no idea how the hay Pinkie Pie was doing all that!

Applejack was hardly faring any better. The farmpony’s teeth were grinding together as she haphazardly hammered away at the drumpads in an attempt to keep pace with the torrential beat that descended upon her like a tidal wave, but her efforts were in vain. She just couldn’t... keep... up!

Her progress bar, right alongside Rainbow Dash’s, slowly began their inexorable decent to the bottom, right where they were on the verge of failing the song, when abruptly they were saved by Pinkie Pie, who finally ended off the blistering opening solo with an unbelievable series of pull-offs that signalled the end of the breakneck pace - and the very beginning of the lyrics.

“On a cold winter morning! In the **time** before the **liiiight!**” Pinkie yelled into the mic, slamming down chords in perfect timing with the words she placed the heaviest emphasis on. “In the **flames** of death’s eternal reign, we **ride to - wards the fiiiight!**”

And then the barrages resumed, drowning out Rainbow Dash's scream of terror. Applejack continued struggling to hit the unstoppable tsunami of drumbeats, but there was *no stopping Pinkie Pie*.

*"When the darkness is falling down, and the times are tough or riiiiight!  
The sound of evil laughter falls around the world toniiiiight!  
Fighting hard, fighting on for the steel, through the wastelands evermore!  
The scattered souls will feel the hell, but it's wasted on the shores!"*

There was no denying it. The hyperactive party-goer was *blowing away* the song the way the Elements of Harmony had blown away Nightmare Moon... *and was Pinkie Pie elbow strumming!?*

*"On the blackest plains in hell's domain, we watch them as they gooooo!"*

Even as they watched, the pink earth pony was practically hollering into the mic as she pulled off an incredible series of consecutive hammer-ons and pull-offs that would have put any self-respecting guitarist to shame.

*"Through the fire and pain, now once again we knooooowwww!!!!*

*So now we're flying, we're free! We're free before the thunderstorm!  
On towards the wilderness, our quest carries on!!!  
Far beyond the sundown, far beyond the moonlight!  
Deep inside our hearts and all our soooooouuuuuuuulls!!*

*So far awaaaaaay, we wait for the daaaaaaaay!  
For our lives are so wasted and gooooooone!  
We feel the paaaaaiiiin of a lifetime lost in a thousand days!  
Through the fire and the flames we carry on!"*

To say that Pinkie Pie was single-hoofedly keeping the band on its feet would have been a sore understatement. Rainbow Dash and Applejack had both come close to failing the song numerous times with every single barrage of notes that came their way.

Yet each and every time, Pinkie Pie would save them from falling into the proverbial gutter with a well-timed surge of Overdrive, bringing their progress bars flying back up neck-to-neck with her own, where she *stayed, right at the very top*.

“WHAT THE HAY IS THIS?!” Screamed a panicked Rainbow Dash as another unstoppable stream of notes descended upon her, and she tried her very best to keep up, still strumming away madly as she hammered away at her fret buttons, barely managing to keep her progress bar from falling any further.

“Oh, silly Dashie... *this is just the greatest song in Equestria, that's what it is!*” Pinkie Pie whooped excitedly as there finally came a brief lull in the music, allowing Rainbow Dash and Applejack to finally take a breather... right before the next barrage came.

“Aww HAY NAW!!!” Applejack groaned as the music started up again, her aching hooves hammering away at the drumpads with her drumsticks in a panicked rush.

*“As the red day is dawning! And the lightning cracks the sky!  
They raise their hooves to the heavens above, with resentment in their eyes!  
Running back through the midmorning light, there's a burning in my heart!  
We're banished from the time in a fallen land, to a life beyond the stars!*

*In your darkest dreams, see to believe our destiny this time!  
And endlessly we'll all be free toniiiiight!*

*And on the wings of a dream, so far beyond reality!  
All alone in desperation, now the time has coooooome!  
Lost inside you'll never find, lost within my own mind!  
Day after day this misery must go oooooonnnnnnn!*

*So far awaaaaaay, we wait for the daaaaaaaay!  
For our lives are so wasted and gooooooone!  
We feel the paaaaaiiiin of a lifetime lost in a thousand days!  
Through the fire and the flames we carry on!”*

After flawlessly answering a barrage of notes that would have made the musicians at the Grand Galloping Gala look like an elementary school marching band, Pinkie Pie finally breathed a huge sigh of relief as the music came to yet another lull; the hyper-active partygoer seemed actually mildly *tired* for once.

The pink earth pony was shaking her strumming hoof sorely while giving her other one several good rotations, trying to get the kinks out of her wrists - and just in time too. Right as she readied herself once more, the next few notes came down on her.

*DUNNN DUN!*

*“Wha-o-o!” DUNDUN! “Whao-o-oh!”*

*DUNNN DUN!*

[illegible]

*DUNNN DUN!*

*“Wha-o-o!”*

Yet another huge barrage of *nothing* but hammer-ons and pull-offs swooped down upon Pinkie Pie's note chart like an angry griffin, and at this point in time Twilight Sparkle was convinced that Pinkie Pie was somehow channeling Dragon Force's lead guitarist.

Other than that, there was no other way in Equestria she could have possibly been pulling off those impossible hammer-ons and pull-offs with such inpony speed and precision!

Rarity had already long given up on trying to follow the impossibly complex sequence of notes - Pinkie Pie was just... beyond understanding.

However she was doing it, the white-coated unicorn had long since dismissed the notion of the pink earth pony actually *missing* a note, given how flawlessly she seemed to be performing right now.

*DUNDUN! “Whao-o-oh!”*

*DUNNN DUN!*

*"Whao-o-oh-*  
*ooooooooohhhhh!"DUNN-*

“WHAT THE-!?” Rainbow Dash suddenly shouted as the music suddenly went crazy - literally!

The unintelligible cacophony of sound that blared out of the speakers in tune with the... the *onslaught* of notes that suddenly assaulted her note chart, Rainbow Dash could hardly even believe she was being faced with a guitar solo here; and it was a guitar solo that was sending her character into a rapidly descending spiral towards failing the song!

“OH MY CELESTIA-” The cyan pegasus cried out mournfully as her avatar finally could no longer take any more missed notes, and the on-screen pony flung his guitar onto the stage before kicking at it frustratedly as a huge red X appeared on the screen, crossing him out from the band as the crowd jeered and booed at him.

“Don’t worry Dashie, I’ll save you!” Pinkie Pie suddenly cried as she jerked her guitar upwards, and abruptly the screen lit up like a gold bar as Dash’s avatar shrugged and picked up his guitar again, beaming as though nothing had gone wrong before resuming shredding away at chords like his life depended on it.

The inpony guitar solo that they were faced with... there was just no describing it.

An endless barrage, an *onslaught* of notes from all five fret bars, it was nearly a miracle that Rainbow Dash and Applejack could even go for a few bars without coming dangerously close to failing the song again. Pinkie Pie, on the other hoof...

*She was unstoppable.*

Every single note that come down on her note chart was flawlessly answered, her strumming hoof alternating between the strum bar and her fret buttons with shocking swiftness - so swiftly that even when she made just *one* mistake, *one* slip-up that cost her the note streak that she had been so close to building up to a whopping **3000**, she recovered so quickly

that almost nopony noticed she had even made a mistake at all, and she was back to the x4 score multiplier before Fluttershy had even blinked.

*“So now we stand with their blood on our hoooooooooves!”* Pinkie Pie sang as the insane guitar solo finally came to a blistering finish, allowing an exhausted Rainbow Dash and Applejack a much-needed break. *“We fought so hard now, have we understooooooooood?”*

*“I’ll break the seal of this curse if I possibly can!  
For freedom of every mare!*

*So far awaaaaaay, we wait for the daaaaaaaay!  
For our lives are so wasted and goooooone!  
We feel the paaaaaiiiin of a lifetime lost in a thousand days!  
Through the fire and the flames we carry on!”*

Several barrages of notes later, the song finally came to a blistering, mind-blowing end, and by then, Rainbow Dash and Applejack’s hooves had all gone numb from all the strumming and smacking of the drumpads - both mares immediately flopped down limply onto the floor, panting and thoroughly exhausted.

“We- *wheeze*- we did it!- *wheeze wheeze*-we actually made it...!”

“We- *haaaaack*- we’re *never* doin’ that song again, partner.”

Utterly exhausted, the two rivals slumped to the floor, near-unconscious from the mental strain. The world around them swimming as their now-tired brains failed to even notice their pink-maned friend’s whoops and jumps of pure, unbridled satisfaction.

Twilight wasn’t sure it was even possible for her jaw to even drop that low.

“OHHHHHHHHHHH YEAH! NOW *THAT’S* WHAT I CALL A JAM!” Came the ecstatic whoops and shouts of the barely-winded earth pony, who, against all odds, had defeated what had seemed sheer impossibility without so much as *breaking a sweat*.



With the shouts and yells from the in-game audience dying down as the screen faded to black, the characteristic sound of scoreboards sliding into place snapped the sugar-dosed pony back to reality.

Now Twilight was SURE her jaw couldn't drop *that* low.

"Pinkie... how did you... I mean... but... it shouldn't be physically possible..."

"Oh. my. word. Pinkie... how..."

Able to manage little more than incoherent babble, the two unicorns stood shock-still at the numbers before their eyes. Surely, there had to be some manner of mistake- perhaps the game was broken, or something!

"Ugh..." groaned Rainbow Dash, still relatively groggy but somehow managing enough strength to push herself up on her haunches. "What's goin' on here..."

Her friends could manage no response, able to accomplish little more than point a shaking hoof as they gestured to the TV screen in stunned disbelief.

"Oh c'mon guys," said the pegasus, twirling her hoof about as she rolled both her eyes upward. "You're blowing things outta proportion..."

Giving herself a sort of half-hearted chuckle, the cyan pegasus tried to dismiss her friends' dumbstruck looks as pure and simple exaggeration. Surely, no matter how well she saw Pinkie Pie perform, nopony could even hope to manage anything close to a good score on that.

"Uh... Rainbow..." came the voice of an apparently shell-shocked Applejack. Twilight tended to blow things out of proportion, but Applejack was a different kettle of fish altogether.

"Oh c'mon, not you too, Apple..." glancing at the screen, all traces of disbelief falling off the rainbow-maned pegasus's face as her pupils shrunk to pinpricks.

"...Jack..."

It seemed unbelievable, but Pinkie Pie had somehow, against all manner of easily understood modern magic, managed to hit *99% of every single note* that had come her way, her score now easily more than even the mathematically inclined Twilight Sparkle could even think of counting to.

Looking at her own score, Rainbow Dash immediately flushed a deep shade of crimson as she buried her flushed face in her wings. Almost steaming from the embarrassment of her paltry 40% that, alongside Applejack's modest 50%, the otherwise rambunctious pegasus felt like digging herself all the way to the center of Equestria.

Pinkie, on the other hand, was on cloud nine after finally playing something worth her mettle, her search for the ultimate jam now satisfied. Turning to the ponies assembled, her gaze fell on Fluttershy, who immediately took an instinctive step back.

"C'mon, Fluttershy!" Squealed the jittery earth pony, still in high spirits despite conquering a song that had utterly wiped out almost all of her teammates. "We've had our fun, so now you've gotta show us your stuff!"

"Oh no, really... it's fine. I..."

Fluttershy paused mid-sentence, the rest of her timid reply catching halfway through her throat as she found herself yet again face-to-face with Pinkie's notoriously irresistible puppy-dog eyes. The ever-unassuming pegasus had lost count of how many times she'd told herself not to fall for Pinkie's trademark ploy; soon she would have to start keeping track of how many times she'd failed to actually resist.

Letting out a sigh, Fluttershy knew this battle was lost.

"...Okay."

"WHOOPEE!" Came Pinkie's trademark squeal of excitement, apparently re-energized, no matter how physically impossible that was, by the prospect of hearing Fluttershy sing.

Tossing her yellow-coated friend the microphone, Fluttershy gave a quick squeal as she quickly jumped to catch the device, barely managing to avoid turning it into a very important piece of royally-sanctioned scrap metal.

Twilight, on the other hand, hit the floor with a resounding '*thud*,' half-unconscious from the shock.

"Twilight-!" Gaspd Fluttershy, quickly rushing over to the purple unicorn to make sure she was alright.

"Don' worry 'bout me, Fluttashy...." mumbled the groggy unicorn, "just a little shocked s' all."

"Well, if you say so..." whispered the pink-maned pegasus. She couldn't help but worry for Twilight's mental health whenever anything involving her friend's beloved mentor came into play. That last party she threw wracked the poor unicorn's nerves so badly...

Turning her attention back to the TV, Fluttershy hesitantly thumbed her way through the setlist, alternating her attention between selecting a song and glancing over her shoulder to check on Twilight, the lavender mare's eyes apparently still spinning from the shock.

No easy task either, seeing as how asking Fluttershy, probably Ponyville's quietest denizen, to choose a song from a game entitled "Rock Band" was pretty much tantamount to asking Applejack to speak proper Manehattanite.

Unsurprisingly, everypony immediately set up ramrod straight upon realizing that the quiet, timid pegasus had actually *found a song*. Even Twilight had seemingly lost all traces of her headache, now staring at the screen with her full attention.

"Hotel... Coltlifornia?" Queried Pinkie Pie, raising an eyebrow in complete bewilderment.

"Ah know that song! Land sakes! They've got the Gryphons on here!" Applejack wore a wide smile at the sight of the band name. Pinkie blinked.

"The who now?"

“Ya mean to tell me ya ain’t never heard of The Gryphons, Pinkie? They’re almost legends when you’re talkin’ ‘bout some good ol’ down-home country music! Momma and Poppa used to listen to ‘em all the time on the radio!”

“Hellooooo... Rock Farm?” drawled the pink pony, apparently stating a fact only Applejack seemed to get.

“Oh yeah, y’all are them Amish types, ain’t ya? No radio or nuthin’... must’ve been pretty gray over on that there farm, Pinkie.”

“My parents weren’t all that big on music in general anyway...said it took up time we could’ve spent working. We had psalms, though... and that’s... pretty much it.”

Pinkie shifted uncomfortably; clearly those were bad memories for her.

Taking the hint, Applejack quickly backed up and shut her mouth. Being a farmer in the southern parts was a pretty serious thing, and fewer took their duties more seriously than the Amish ponies. In comparison to them, the Apple family’s harvesting would be a luxurious vacation.

Quickly turning her attention back to the game, Applejack tried to lighten the mood by volunteering to take up her old guitar position, shunting into place right alongside Fluttershy.

“Well, seein’ as you’ve here’s been on those drums all day long, Pinkie, I think ya deserve a breather! Somepony else wanna gives this here game a try? Twi’, Rarity, y’all good?”

Casting quick glances each other, the two unicorns furrowed their eyebrows for a second before quickly giving each other a brief shrug of the shoulders and stepping forward towards the TV.

Looking over the instruments assembled, Twilight made a beeline right for the bass as she immediately assumed Fluttershy’s former position, slinging the controller over her neck as she reared up on her hind legs to position herself. Rarity, on the other hand, instead opted to try Pinkie Pie’s drumset, apparently still quite impressed by her friend’s unbelievable performance.

“Huh... didn’t think this’d be your kind of game, Rarity. I thought you hated Rock and Roll.” Rainbow asked the white unicorn, who had picked up the drumsticks and was giving them a few experimental flicks.

“I do. Even so, I hardly see that a reason for me to sit out of a perfectly interesting experience. The preview didn’t sound *too* intense, either.” Rarity said airily. “I suppose I could give these ‘Gryphons’ a shot.”

Rainbow decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth, electing instead to shrug and sit back on the couch next to Pinkie, giving a groan of relief as her exhausted body sunk into the cushion.

“Man, you look BUSHED, Dashie!” Pinkie said as she looked her friend over. “Now **THAT** was a rock song, right? Those Dragon Force guys are something else!” Her eyes had adopted a dreamy sort of look. “I wonder if there’s any other songs by them I could play...”

It was only her exhaustion that kept Rainbow Dash from leaping off the couch and screaming out the front door.

Quickly averting her gaze from Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash watched in mild interest as Fluttershy slowly thumbed her way through what now appeared to be the difficulty selection, her hoof trembling as she tried to hesitantly thumb her way between ‘Normal’ and ‘Easy.’

As much as Fluttershy was one of her best friends, the cyan pegasus couldn’t help but apply her hoof directly to her face, letting out a short sigh of exasperation.

Five minutes of flipping between the two easiest choices on the menu, Fluttershy’s trembling hoof came to rest on the modest ‘normal’ difficulty as she slowly, hesitantly locked in her choice.

Quickly following suit, Twilight, Applejack and Rarity confirmed their difficulties as one, smiling warmly at the trembling yellow pegasus to let her know that her friends were behind her on this, every step of the way.

“Ummm... all right... I guess I can... give it a shot...” Fluttershy murmured almost inaudibly as she gave the screen a nervous look, where the four ponies were once more gathered on the stage, this time having set up in a

much quieter, homely venue not unlike a jazz bar, with a smaller but no less supportive crowd who were applauding the bowing ponies on stage.

Slowly, as the notes came down on Applejack's guitar and Twilight's bass, they formed a [melancholy tune](#), a melody reminiscent of days gone by; a song of silent solitude that would not have been out of place had they been travelling down a long, winding desert road, all by their lonesomes.

Applejack was slowly rocking to the tune as she masterfully plucked away at the strum bar of her guitar, and even Fluttershy was slowly beginning to loosen up, the yellow pegasus's body beginning to sway slightly as well as she gave a shy smile, determined to give her very best shot for her virtual audience.

And as Rarity drummed out her first two beats of the song, Ponyville's shyest, sweetest resident began to sing the softest, most beautiful lullaby that had ever graced their ears.

*"On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair...  
The warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air.  
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light.  
My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim, I had to stop for the night..."*

*There she stood in the doorway, I heard the mission bell.  
And I was thinking to myself, this could be heaven, or this could be hell...  
Then she lit up a candle, and she showed me the way.  
There were voices down the corridor, I thought I heard them say..."*

At that, the music began to pick up slightly in volume, and Applejack began to strum ever so slightly harder, her innate love for country rock bringing out the little bit of soul she needed to make playing the song completely worth her while.

Twilight and Rarity were playing out their own smooth, mellow beats, satisfied smiles on their faces, but they served merely as the most wonderful backdrop to the highlight of the song - Fluttershy's singing.

There was no doubt about it - *this was her show.*

*“Welcome to the Hotel Coltlifornia...”* Fluttershy’s voice was soft and velvet-smooth, dainty yet rich beyond compare. Even as Rainbow Dash continued to listen, the exhausted pegasus had to fight the temptation to fall asleep right there and then, so soothing was her friend’s melody.

*“Such a lovely place, such a lovely face...  
Plenty of room at the Hotel Coltlifornia.  
Any time of year, you can find it here...”*

*“Her mind is Tiffany-twisted, she got the Mercedez Bends.  
She got a lot of pretty, pretty colts, that she calls friends.  
How they dance in the courtyard, sweeeeet summer sweat.  
Some dance remember... some dance to forget...”*

*“So I called up the captain, ‘Please bring me my wine’, and he said  
We haven’t had that spirit here since 1969.  
And still those voices are calling from faaar awaaay,  
Wake you up in the middle of night, just hear them say...”*

*“Welcome to the Hotel Coltlifornia...  
Such a lovely place, such a lovely face...  
Livin it up at the Hotel Coltlifornia,  
What a nice surprise, we’re your alibis...”*

The music came to a sudden stop for just a beat, right before it resumed - and it was just enough to snap Rainbow Dash out of her fatigued stupor. Shaking her head, the cyan pegasus continued watching Fluttershy’s performance, in awe of her yellow friend’s masterful symphony of words and emotion.

*“Mirrors on the ceiling, the pink champagne on ice, and she said  
‘We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.’  
In the master’s chambers, they gathered for their feast.  
They stab it with their steely knives, but they just can’t kill the beast...”*

With a brief, rapid series of beats from Rarity’s drums, Fluttershy, now completely submerged in the song, poured forth every fiber of her being into the melody. All else seemed to fade into silence as everypony in the room fixed their eyes on Fluttershy, their ears held captive by what could be described as... ‘Da Magics.’

*"Last thing I remembered, I was running for the door  
I had to find the passage back to the place I was before...  
'Relax', said the night mare, 'We are programmed to receive.'  
'You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave...'*

As the vocals ended, Applejack went straight into a guitar solo that captured all of the attention that had been once been on Fluttershy, the yellow pegasus quickly darting out of the limelight to make way for her orange-coated friend.

Having had plenty of experience on her farmstead with her acoustic guitar, Applejack strummed away at the notes that descended upon her perfectly. Hotel Coltlifornia was a slow, relaxing song, the polar opposite of the metallic nightmare that Pinkie Pie had them playing earlier, and the farmpony had loved to listen to country rock ever since she had been a little filly.

The orange farmpony's soul completely in tune with the music, she finally played the final few chords that marked the end of the song, and let out a long, satisfied sigh as she unslung the guitar from around her neck, inspecting the scores that soon appeared on the screen.

Applejack, 97%. Rarity, 92%. Twilight, 95%. Fluttershy...wait, *huh?*

Applejack stared at the dismal 13%. How...how in the name of Celestia did THAT happen?!?

"Oh...oh no..."

Fluttershy's lip was trembling, her face flushed with embarrassment. "I pulled everypony down, didn't I..."

Applejack blinked a few times, thinking maybe the score was just some strange trick of the light, or...or...Fluttershy sang like an ANGEL, how could her score be so *low*?

"H-hand that mike over, sugarcube...this ain't right..."



Applejack grabbed the microphone from Fluttershy's outstretched hoof, immediately giving it a few experimental taps with her hoof.

"There's gotta be some sort 'a testin'-mode for this thing...look under options or sumthin', Fluttershy."

Twilight had unslung the guitar from her neck, staring over at the two with a concerned look on her face. "You don't think it's broken, do you? It was working just fine before..."

Applejack managed a shrug. Fluttershy had found nothing under options, instead electing to select a random song from the list. Applejack raised the microphone to her mouth as the first words appeared.

*"Ya could have beeeeen all Ah wanted, but you weren't hoooooneeeest, now get in th' ground..."*

To her surprise, the microphone worked, pulling some decent scores before she paused and handed it over to Fluttershy.

"Ah don't get it...if it gave me some scores for *mah* singing, I don't see how it couldn't have for *yours*..."

"Perhaps it's just a temperamental device?" Rarity suggested.

Applejack's brow was furrowed in thought. "Yeah, it's that, or..." She turned to face Fluttershy, who jumped and nearly dropped the mike again.

"Fluttershy, try singin' the rest o' that there song."

"O-okay..." Fluttershy said in her ever-small voice. Raising the microphone again with trembling hooves, she hit the pause button again.

*"...you choked off the suuurest of favors...but if you really loved me, you would have endured my woorld..."*

Immediately, Fluttershy's score began dropping. And now that everypony attended wasn't mesmerized by her singing, they could see the reason.

The tiny input arrow at the side of Fluttershy's bar had planted itself resolutely at the bottom, quivering ever so slightly with each of Fluttershy's

words. Beautiful as the pegasus' voice was, the microphone wasn't picking it up, the notes sailing right over her head.

*"H-hang on to the glory at my...right...hoo-"*

WHAM! Fluttershy jumped and squeaked. A massive red **X** had slammed down on the screen as her bar hit zero, the crowd booing as the singer stormed off the stage. Applejack leveled a hoof at the screen, a look of satisfaction on her face.

"Yeah, see, that there's th' problem! 'S not that ya can't *sing*, yer jest too quiet fer the mike ta pick ya up, Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy's humiliated expression slowly faded, though she still looked somewhat confused. "I-I was singing at the top of my lungs..."

"She was...trust me..." Rainbow Dash piped up from the back of the room.

Twilight decided to ignore her, instead choosing to unsling the guitar from around her neck and hand it back to Fluttershy.

"Chin up, Fluttershy! I think you did just fine." reassured the purple unicorn, flashing her quiet friend a warm, heartfelt smile. "I think you'd like your old position back, though."

"Thank you... Twilight..." mumbled the yellow pegasus, a brief smile flashing across her face as she handed her friend back the microphone.

"But who's gonna siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!" Groaned Pinkie Pie, her high-pitched whine almost causing Twilight and Applejack to recoil from the volume.

Turning her head towards Twilight, the lavender unicorn immediately sensed Pinkie's intent, quickly shaking her head to hopefully deter her "persuasive" friend from forcing her into the vocal spotlight.

"No thanks, Pinkie Pie."

Turning her head towards the rest of her friends, the pink earth pony found herself with the same response, try after try.

“Already had mah turn, sugarcube.”

“Yeaaaaah... I think I’m gonna take a nap right here.”

“Sorry, Pinkie...”

“I wouldn’t mind, dearest.”

“ARGH!” Yelled Pinkie, tearing at her puffy pink mane in exasperation.

“Why doesn’t anypony- wait, what?”

“I *said*, I wouldn’t mind giving it a try, if that’s what you’re asking of me.” Pinkie swore she almost dropped her drumsticks when she recognized that ever-refined tone.

“R-Rarity?” She stammered, almost in shock.

“Oh close your mouth darling, you’ll attract flies with all the drool that’s spilling out.” Chuckled the purple-maned fashionista as she gave her elegant coiffure a sideways toss.

Quickly trotting forward to lightly snatch the mic out from a stunned Twilight Sparkle, Rarity could only raise her hoof to cover her mouth as she gave a chuckle, slightly amused at the reactions she was getting.

“Honestly, Twilight. It’s not like all I do is design! Music is carrot soup for the soul, is it not?”

As the purple unicorn slowly bobbed her head in response, eyeing her friend apprehensively, Rarity raised her right hoof to her mouth, barely stifling another chuckle.

“Now, let’s see here...”

Hastily thumbing her way through the selection, Rarity furrowed her eyebrows in minor irritation. Surely the title “rock band” wasn’t literal in meaning; surely there were a few songs more suited to her... alternative palette.

“Surely there must be more than just-”

Pausing right in her tracks, the ever-refined fashionista found her eyes glued to the screen, gaze riveted on one track.

One song.

One name.

One *artist*.

“Oh my stars...” stammered Rarity, her normally ladylike voice actually faltering for a single, fleeting second. “Th-They p-put *Pony Gaga* on this! Can you believe it?!”

“Uh, beg pahdon, Rarity,” interjected Applejack,” but who in the hay’re you talkin’ ‘bout?”

Rounding on her friend with lightning speed, Rarity stared deep into the orange mare’s eyes, affixing her friend with a terrifying, icy gaze that everypony swore could make even the most stout-heart of stallions cringe like a whimpering filly.

“Who... is *Pony Gaga*?! Oh, I suppose you’ll be asking who *PRINCESS CELESTIA* is next!” Yelled the white unicorn, clearly outraged.

“Sheesh, Rarity,” mumbled Applejack, massaging her ears. “Nuthin’ more than a simple question.”

“It’s alright, Applejack,” intervened Twilight, deftly stepping between the two mares. “Pony Gaga is just another one of Canterlot’s most highly regarded alternative music performances. I’m sure you’ve heard of Sapphire Shores?”

“Well, yeah...” Said the orange mare, “didn’t Rarity go jewel-pickin’ for some fancy-shmancy costume before?”

“*Five sets*, thank you very much!” snorted the designer, obviously taking offense. “Which would have been a daunting enough task even without those...ruffians spiriting me away!”

“What Applejack MEANT to say,” asserted Twilight, “was that we’ve all heard about Sapphire Shores one way or another. Pony Gaga is about the only other performer held in equally high esteem as the legendary ‘Pony of Pop.’ I hear, she even performs for the Princess’s Summer Sun Celebrations every now and then.”

“Oh... I know about her too,” mumbled Fluttershy. “Photo Finish would go on and on about her concerts or something. They really do look like the same pony, if you think about it...”

“Nonsense, Fluttershy,” interrupted Rarity. “That’s just conjecture! You wouldn’t be the first to come up with such a notion, though. I swear, those Manehattan tabloids are utterly pretentious when it comes to celebrities.”

Making a sharp turn on her back hooves, Rarity returned her full attention to the screen before her, promptly locking in her choice as she jammed her hoof down on the ‘A’ button.

Glancing back at her friends, she gave a quick yell. “Well, come on now! There’s no lollygagging about when you’re on a quest to emulate aural *perfection*.”

Before the rest knew it, the four-pony band of musicians had appeared on screen again, this time on the stage of a *massive* concert hall, with thousands upon thousands of spectators screaming and yelling for their idols.

Making their oh-so-familiar appearances, the note charts snaked into place as the starting beat of the song began thumping its way out of the speakers.

Only this time, instead of the familiar, soft *tik* of drumsticks, a heavy, reverberating bass resonated throughout the room, thundering through everypony as it shook them to their core.

Rarity found herself completely taken away by the rhythm and beat of the music. As the lyrics started and the bass beats of the song resonated through every fibre of her being, the fashionista found her inner dancing queen begin to emerge, in all its stage-dominating glory.

*"I wanna hold 'em like they do in Texas Plays,  
Fold 'em let 'em hit me, raise it, baby stay with me, I love it  
Luck and intuition play the cards with spades to start,  
And after he's been hooked, I'll play the one that's on his heart!"*

Rarity was belting the lyrics out in a stunning rendition of Pony Gaga's vocals - and the dance moves that she was pulling off, the way her body was waving, her hips were swaying; it was more than enough to send any hot-blooded male pony into a tizzy.

Right at that moment, Twilight was grateful that Spike was not in the basement, otherwise the place would have immediately turned into an impromptu steam bath.

*"Whoa, oh-oh oh oh, whoa-oh-oh oh oh-oh  
I'll get him hot, show him what I got  
Whoa, oh-oh oh oh, whoa-oh-oh oh oh-oh  
I'll get him hot, show him what I got..."*

Abruptly, the music picked up in volume *and* beat, and though it hardly seemed possible, Rarity's dance moves just got even *saucier*, and *more intense*.

*"Can't read my! Can't read my!  
No he can't read my, poker face! (She's got to love nobody)  
Can't read my! Can't read my!  
No he can't read my, poker face! (She's got to love nobody)  
P-p-p-poker face, p-p-poker face (Mum mum mum mah,)  
P-p-p-poker face, p-p-poker face (Mum mum mum mah,)"*

*I wanna roll with him, a hard pair we will be (whoo!)  
A little gambling is fun when you're with me.  
Prussian roulette is not the same without a gun,  
And baby, when it's love if it's not rough, it isn't fun!"*

If anypony had been missing any notes of theirs, it went completely unnoticed - all attention was on Rarity as the white unicorn continued belting out dance moves like she had been *born* on the dance floor.

It was almost a sheer miracle that none of the ponies who were actually playing the instruments failed the song at all, given the fact that they were *heavily* distracted by the dancing unicorn right in the very centre of the proverbial spotlight.

*"I won't tell you that I love you  
Kiss or hug you  
Cause I'm bluffin' with my muffin  
I'm not lying I'm just stunnin' with my love-glue-gunning  
Just like a chick in the casino  
Take your bank before I pay you out  
I promise this, promise this  
Check this hoof cause I'm marvelous*

*Can't read my! Can't read my!  
No he can't read my, poker face! (She's got to love nobody)  
Can't read my! Can't read my!  
No he can't read my, poker face! (She's got to love nobody)"*

Repeating the chorus again in a stunning replication of Pony Gaga's routine for the song, Rarity ended off her entire dance in a grand finishing pose that was, most certainly, "da magicks."

In the wake of the band finishing up the song on screen, the ponies gathered burst into racuous applause as Rarity placed herself back down on all four hooves.

Disheveled, panting and gasping for breath, Rarity couldn't begin to imagine a time she'd felt so messy... so untidy... so *unfabulous*... and enjoyed every last moment of it.

"My word, Twilight..." Came the strained wheeze of the frazzled fashionista, "*that...* was most certainly something else!"

"I hear you, Rarity." Twilight said, working her wrists in a circle. "My hooves feel like they're gonna fall off, but I'm having a blast over here. Out of all the games we've been sent, I've been really enjoying THIS one in particular."

True to form Pinkie's exited bouncing hadn't shown any signs of slowing down throughout all of this. "Come on! Let's do another one!"

"Hey, Twilight, your dinner's ready! Made some for the others too if they want some!"

Twilight ran to the stairs, staring at the dragon standing at the top of the stairs. "Wait a minute. Did you just say *dinner*?" She turned back to Rarity, who was standing by the microphone trying to get her mane back under control. "Rarity, what time is it?"

Rarity gave a quick tap to the dashboard key on the microphone, a small white box popping up in the center of the screen.

"Goodness! It's almost eight at night!"

"WHA-?" Twilight ran to the screen, staring at the tiny clock at the corner of the box. "Holy...we've been here all day!"

"Sakes alive...this game's plumb dangerous, 'ain't it." Applejack couldn't hide the awe in her voice. "We gotta make sure we keep track 'a time next time we pop this thing in."

Twilight gave a cavernous yawn. "We'd better call it a night, girls. Wanna eat over? Spike said there's plenty for everypony up there."

"Whaaaaaaat?" Pinkie groaned. "We can't stop now! We're on a roll!"

Twilight furrowed her brow. On one hoof, it had been over four hours since they first started playing Rock Band, she was starving, and it was late. High time they stopped, right? On the other hoof...

"Well...I guess *one more song* couldn't hurt..."

"WOOHOO!" Pinkie grabbed the mic in her typical never-ending frenzy of energy, a total contrast to the other five ponies who were already starting to show a few signs of fatigue, despite all the fun they had been having so far.

Rainbow Dash felt her stomach begin to tie itself into knots. In her mind's eye she could already see Pinkie's gaze lighting up as she discovered yet another Dragonforce song hidden in the tracks, this one even more blistering than the last metallic nightmare...



Except that the preview that came off the speakers was actually *pretty* catchy - in fact, the heavy bass beats seemed a lot more at home on a pop song like the Pony Gaga song they had just been playing, yet somehow this lively, upbeat song too had ended up on what they had thought to be a game just for rock songs alone.

“Hey, this here song actually ain’t all that bad!” Applejack remarked as she rocked slightly to the beat of the preview.

“OHHH YESSS!!! I think we’ve found our last song, girls! No pony does a jam better than Kitey Berry!” Exclaimed Pinkie Pie right before she hammered her hoof down on the controller’s ‘A’ button, confirming her selection and difficulty - no surprise that she picked the vocals on Expert, but thankfully, this time, *no pony* had an objection to her song selection.

After all, the preview itself had sounded tame enough, how hard could it possibly be?

Eager to wrap up the session and finally get on with some much-needed dinner, Twilight took up the guitar controllers along with Fluttershy, while Rarity took the the drums again, holding the tip of one daintily to her lips as she awaited the start of the song.

For the final time tonight, the four ponies made their appearance on the on-screen stage, greeting their loyal fans with aplomb as they got ready to play in a concert hall comparable to the one they had last.

Impressive as the environment was, Twilight barely registered any of it - the rumbling that was beginning to manifest in her gut belied just how *hungry* she was!

It would be pretty nice if this song would quickly wrap itself up and they could get on to some *dinner!*

There was another loud rumble as the four note charts made their expected appearance, and Rainbow Dash grinned sheepishly before letting out a short “Oops.”

Yep, they definitely had to wrap it up quickly!

So anxious was the lavender unicorn to get the last song over with so they could begin eating that she almost missed the first few notes as they came down on her note chart - picking herself back up in a near panic, she barely managed to hit them, right as the lyrics began and Pinkie Pie's lit up from within with proverbial stars.

*"Ooooh, this is my JAM!"*

*There... is a place! Where the grass is what's for dinner!*

*Charmed, fun and wild! There must be something in the water!*

*Sippin' rainbow juice, talkin' Elements of Harmony!*

*Our bronies hang out too, cos they know we're awesome fillies!"*

"C'mon, everypony!" The pink earth pony suddenly cried out as she came right up next to Rainbow Dash, the mic right between their mouths, and the pegasus shrugged - what the hay, no harm in a little fun, right?

*"You could travel the woo-ooorld..."* Ponyville's fastest flier sang along with the town's resident party-pony as the song continued on its way, not caring much whether she was off-tune or not. *"But no one can groove like the girls with the hooves!"*

*"Once you party with ponies,*

*You'll be seein' Rainbooms!*

*O-oh o-oh o-ooh!"*

*"E-ques-tria Girls, we're kind of magical!*

*Boots on hooves, bikinis on top!*

*Furry coats so cute, we'll blow your miii-ind!*

*O-oh o-oh o-ooh!!"*

Everypony gathered in the room had suddenly burst out into song once the chorus had come around - everypony knew the most famous song in all of Equestria, and they had to remember at least how the chorus went. Heck, even Fluttershy was joining in the vocals, even though her voice could barely be heard over the rest of their singing.

*"E-ques-tria Girls, we're pony-fabulous!*

*Fast, fine, fierce, we trot till we drop!*

*Cutie marks represent, now put your hooves up!  
O-oh o-oh o-oh!!*

*“Break it down, DJ PON-3!”* Pinkie rapped right into the mic as the chorus finally wrapped up, the song breaking into an outro after an admittedly short amount of time. *“These are the ponies I love the most, I wish you could all be Equestria Girls!”*

The music’s once-feverish rhythm now quietly drawing to a close, the last few, steady beats died off into the distance as everypony’s in-game avatars took their places for one final bow amidst hordes of raucous fans, chanting over and over for an encore.

Panting, and slightly out of breath, Twilight Sparkle gave a little wheeze as she flopped on her hindquarters in exhaustion. Sweat pouring from her brow, the disheveled unicorn couldn’t even bother looking at the score as she leaned back for some much needed respite as a single thought swam through her now hazy mind.

*That. Was. Awesome.*

It didn’t take long for five pony hindquarters to hit the floor with one loud, resounding ‘thump’, the lavender unicorn allowing herself a brief smile as she came to the realization she wasn’t the only pony thoroughly tuckered out.

“My word, Twilight... that was quite the... ‘jam,’ as you would call it, I suppose.”

“Fer once, Rarity, I agree wit’cha.”

“So... Awesomeeeeeeeee...”

“BEST PARTY EVER!”

“It was...nice.”

Trying to collect her thoughts, Twilight vaguely seemed to recall something about dinner and Spike telling her to come down for it. Shaking her head, she glanced around and tried to rally her friends for dinner.

“C’mon everypony,” mumbled the obviously-tired unicorn. “We’ve got a-yaaaaaaawn- dinner... that needs eating...”

As a symphony of snores hit her right smack in the face, Twilight gave her head another shake and stared at her now-comatose friends, some happily snoring away as they lay collapsed all over Twilight’s floor, hoofs strewn everywhere as drool spilt out from Rainbow Dash’s gaping mouth.

Her own eyelids now feeling as though they weighed just as much as the sun itself, Twilight could only shrug her shoulders in humble loss, mumbling something quietly to herself.

“Well... If ya can’t beat ‘em...”

With a loud ‘*thump*,’ Twilight fell hoofs-over-backward as she lay on her floor, slipping happily off into a blissful rest.

“Join ‘em...”

--

Downstairs, a frustrated baby dragon continued rap his claws against the elegant wooden table, brows furrowed in annoyance as he tried waiting patiently for a certain purple unicorn and her five friends to show up and *eat something*.

“HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO FINISH THIS ALL BY MYSEEEEEEEEEEEELF?!”

--

*Dearest Princess Celestia,*

*My friends and I have had a wonderful time with the Xbox 360 over the past few months. We’ve fought in wars and commanded troops, solved puzzles, and played for crowds of thousands, all without leaving our home.*

*We have gone on adventures most ponies only dream of, and I am sure with the games that we will see from the University in the future, everypony will have the chance to go on even more.*

*Therefore, as the unofficial Head Beta Tester for the University of Canterlot, and consort and apprentice of her majesty Princess Celestia, I declare the Xbox 360 to be a resounding success!*

*Your faithful student,  
Twilight Sparkle*

# Chapter 5:

## Marvel vs. Capcom 3

The Carousel Boutique is known throughout Ponyville for many things. Oft times, it is known to play host to celebrity, fashion mogul and diva alike; other times, it is known throughout the humble settlement as a simple service center for the common, everyday pony looking for a simple button sewing.

Few who've lived in Ponyville can claim to have not heard of the boutique; after all, patronage from the likes of Sapphire Shores and Hoity Toity only served to propel the boutique right into the center of Canterlot's legendary fashion spotlight.

Yet through all the patrons, fame and reviews the store has managed to garner for itself over the years, citizens of Ponyville remember the store not for the dresses it sells... but for the Pony who makes them.

To Rarity, despite all years, bits and fame that have come the boutique's way, it has always stayed true to one mission: spreading fabulosity to those in need, no matter what the deed.

From the simplest button sew to the most fabulous gala gown, never once has anypony knocked on the doors of the boutique and found themselves turned aside.

The only downside... was that Rarity sometimes found herself biting off a little more than she could chew.

This... was one of those times.

Taking a deep breath and composing herself, Rarity raised a twitching hoof and knocked three times on Twilight's door.

---

*My faithful student Twilight,*

*I must apologize: it was not my intention to give you faulty information. Indeed, I didn't know about this change of plans until just this morning.*

*The Xbox project has been delayed. The University has just contacted me to let me know the projected release date has been set forward a number of months. In that time period, there will be no new games for you to review either. I apologize for this, truly.*

*However, this cloud has a silver lining: a very grand one, in fact. You see, the University is, in their own words, "on the verge of monumental technological innovation". Apparently, they plan to set up a system within the Xbox that will allow Ponies to play games remotely: to put that in perspective, one could play certain games with a Manehattanite without ever leaving Ponyville! It is the development of this latest innovation that has slowed the development of the Xbox, but I personally believe it is well worth it: its ability to connect ponies from all over Equestria and forge friendships could be unprecedented!*

*As a token of appreciation for all the time you have put into aiding this project, and a small apology of their own, the University has sent you one final game to hold you over before the lull. They assure me its one of their best, and a bit of a preview of things to come: many of the unfamiliar characters in it will star in their own games soon enough.*

*I hope you and your friends enjoy it.*

*Your mentor,  
Princess Celestia*

---

Twirling the as-of-yet unopened package in her hooves, Twilight couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at what she was reading- such an endeavor wouldn't just be a monumental leap forward in her studies of the magic of friendship, but promised a whole new way for everypony out there to discover that magic for themselves!

Why, ponies from as far as Canterlot could find friends in Ponyville, or even Cloudsdale! Twilight's imagination couldn't help but run wild with the

possibilities this new innovation promised, the lavender unicorn almost losing herself in thought.

*'knock-knock'*

"A visitor?" queried Twilight, snapping out of her reverie as a small smile flickered across her features; perhaps somepony was actually here to borrow a book!

Opening the door with a simple "pull" spell, Twilight but on her best librarian's smile, bouncing slightly at the prospect of introducing a pony to the magic of reading.

"Can I help-"

Not even able to finish her sentence, Twilight found herself stumbling back into the library as a clearly disheveled, red-eyed Rarity burst through the doors, her normally immaculate coiffure fraying in numerous places as her breaths came in short, quick gasps.

Normally, Twilight's first instinct would have been to ask just what in Equestria had turned her normally prim-and-proper friend into the absolute epitome of all things undesirable, but just as she opened her mouth to ask, she quickly closed it as a shrill, high pitched, all-too-familliar cry broke the library's peaceful silence.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADER GAME TESTIN' SESSION AT TWILIGHT'S! YAY!"

Glancing down at her friend, Twilight merely asked: "Crusader trouble?"

Looking back up at her friend, Rarity's bloodshot eyes strained to open as the fashionista felt the weight of a thousand sleepless nights threaten to close them once again.

"Please, Twilight, I beg of you..." she whispered, "...*forgive me.*"

---

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"It was my fault!" Rarity blurted after taking a sip from the cup that she levitated with clear difficulty. Clearly exhausted, the normally elegant fashionista collapsed into a chair in Twilight's private study as soon as she reached it, the tea her lavender friend so graciously provided easing her nerves just a little.

Twilight leaned forward tentatively, testing the water. "Your fault? What happened, Rarity?"

Rarity took a deep breath. "I...I couldn't help it!" She wailed. "That infernal Dragonforce song has been stuck in my head ever since we played Rock Band together!"

"I... don't quite follow."

"You see, I... I was humming it while I was filling out another one of Hoity Toity's orders... helps pass the time and all... when Sweetie Belle overheard me!"

"...Oh." was all Twilight could manage.

"After that..." Rarity shuddered, suppressing a small chill, "she kept asking me what I was singing. That wasn't such a big problem, mind you. It's perfectly normal for a filly her age to be curious... but I had to open my big mouth and mention the games Princess Celestia sent you!"

"Oh..." came Twilight's reply, same as before.

"The minute I mentioned the words 'game' and 'Princess Celestia' in the same sentence, Sweetie Belle somehow put two and two together and decided this was an even better way to get a cutie mark than tree-sap tapping...whatever that means!"

"...Oh." was all Twilight could once again muster.

Rarity furrowed her brows, apparently more than a little annoyed at her lavender friend's monosyllabic responses.

"I'm *truuuuuly* sorry if my tale is boring you, darling." Drawled the tired unicorn, her mane somewhat straighter now but still clearly fraying in some parts.

Realizing her mistake, Twilight quickly shook her head in a effort to assuage her friend's apparent annoyance, apologizing vehemently as she tried to assure Rarity she meant nothing of the sort.

"Oh, heavens no! I'm so, so sorry, Rarity, I-"

Sighing to herself, Rarity waved a hoof in front of Twilight, waving off her friend's concern.

"No, no, Twilight... think nothing of it. It's not even your fault anyway, dear."

"It's just... when Sweetie Belle thinks anything can get her a cutie mark, Apple Bloom and Scootaloo won't be far behind! I haven't gotten any sleep in days thanks to those three fillies out there pestering me about those games the Princess sends to you! I'm surprised I actually managed to finish Hoity Toity's order with those three robbing the boutique of whatever semblance of peace it had left!"

Sensing her friend's apparent distress, Twilight gently extended Rarity a comforting hoof around the tired unicorn's shoulders.

"Rarity..."

"I... I had no choice, Twilight, I told them you'd let them play!"

Twilight immediately froze, her pupils contracting to pinpricks as sweat began pouring down the back of her neck.

"Y-You what?"

"They wouldn't stop pestering me, Twilight! You have to understand... I haven't slept in entire days, poor Opalescence stays cooped up in the attic all day to avoid the screaming, the boutique is a complete mess, my fabric's everywhere... and that's the good part!"

"S-so that means..."

“I’m sorry, Twilight, I truly am! Please believe me... I had no choice!”

Peering out of her study, Twilight spied the three over-active, energetic fillies tearing up a storm up and down the entire length of her library. She had been on the receiving end of the Crusaders and their rambunctious adventures once before; it took her weeks to even get half the library back into shape.

“Whaddya y’all think this here game’s gonna be like? If Princess Celestia sent it, there’s no way we’ll come outta this without our cutie marks!”

“I bet it’s something elegant, and royal! After all, it *is* Princess Celestia we’re talking about here!”

“Nah, I heard from Rainbow Dash that these were wicked awesome games where you get to fight aliens and sing wicked rock ballads!”

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADER ROYAL GAME TESTERS, YAY!”

Twilight nearly fainted right on the spot.

---

As she silently trod down the wooden stairs leading to the main library, Twilight Sparkle found herself in the middle of a dilemma quite unlike any other.

On one hoof, she could always tell the Cutie Mark Crusaders that these “games” were in fact assignments from Princess Celestia herself, special tasks meant to be kept completely secret from anyone but the Elements of Harmony.

That, of course, would mean sending the three right back to Rarity, and furthermore there was no telling just how the Crusaders themselves would react. For all the lavender mare knew, she might end up flat-out crushing the poor dears’ spirits.

On the other, Twilight could let them stay, but that would also mean endangering not only the library’s precious tomes and royal requisitions

from Canterlot's official archives, but potentially sever every single thread that tethered Twilight to the realm of sanity.

"No!" Thought the purple-maned unicorn; she had to be firm and put both of her hoofs down. True, it would probably leave the crusaders in a slump for a few hours, but Twilight was confident that the three would pick themselves up and find another way to go questing for their cutie marks, saving both her books and her sanity in the process - it was the perfect plan!

Stepping off the spiral staircase and into the main library, Twilight glanced around for the crusaders; surely those three fillies would've been easy to spot, given their tendency to leave a trail of destruction wherever they lay hoof.

"That's odd... they were here a second a- oof!"

No sooner had she stepped off the staircase did Twilight Sparkle find herself tackled to the floor by three hyperactive streaks of yellow, orange and white, her head spinning as she tried to find the source of whatever just knocked the wind right out of her chest.

"TWILIGHT! YER FINALLY HERE!"

"I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE ALL THE WICKED STUFF THE PRINCESS'S SENT YOU!"

"THANKS FOR LETTING US PLAY, TWILIGHT!"

Gasping as she tried to recover from the Crusaders' surprise tackle, Twilight gently eased the three fillies off her stomach as she hauled herself upright, still trying to at least maintain a semblance of decorum around the over-energetic three.

Putting on her best poker face, Twilight turned to face the three fillies with as much resolve as she could muster.

"Girls, I know how much you three want to get your cutie marks, but..."

If it was one thing the Cutie Mark Crusaders developed in their time together, it was a little something that the three young fillies liked to call the “shoo sensor.” It was a precious sixth sense that allowed the crusaders to detect when adults, older sisters and older brothers were about to clamp down on their cutie mark quest.

Right now, that same sensor had just thrown itself into overdrive.

Of course, no way were the Cutie Mark Crusaders going to let a little complication like that stand in the way of their all-too important quest for cutie mark discovery. Thankfully, Apple Bloom had taught their fellow Crusaders how to pull the very same “puppy-dog eyes” trick she successfully used on Twilight when she first set foot in Sweet Apple Acres.

If the lavender mare couldn’t resist the puppy-dog eyes trick from *one* filly, she certainly couldn’t stand against the combined might of three simultaneous pairs.

“Well, girls- I... you see-”

Twilight couldn’t falter now - if she didn’t put her hoof down, she risked every last bit of sanity she had. She *had* to do this!

Then Apple Bloom started sniffing.

“Girls... please...”

Twilight could feel every last bit of resolve she had left falling apart. Could she really stand to come between these three innocent young fillies and their quest to discover their special talents?

“*NO!*” Twilight chided herself mentally. The first step was to be firm, but fair. She had to set these fillies an example of proper conduct!

“B-But these here games could really help us find our cutie marks, Twilight.” whimpered Apple Bloom, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

With a heavy sigh, Twilight felt that last bit of resolve wash away like a sandcastle in high tide.

“...Fine.” she breathed, slapping a hoof right over the middle of her face.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!” came the ear-piercing cry of three overjoyed, hyperactive fillies.

“Oh Celestia...” whispered the purple-maned mare as she covered her ears with both hooves. “What have I done?”

---

It didn’t take long for the princess’s prized student to show the three over-eager fillies to the library’s basement. Here, Twilight maintained a small laboratory with only the most advanced devices that she had received upon imperial requisition from the royal palace itself.

Literally bouncing down the stairs, the very moment Twilight opened the doors to the basement did the three rambunctious fillies literally throw themselves inside, a loud ‘*clang*’ ringing from within the basement as the fillies collided with something seemingly solid... and valuable.

Her eye twitching ever so slightly, Twilight flipped the basement’s light switch to assess the damage done. Unbelievably, the three fillies had actually managed to succeed in *not* knocking over any valuable pieces of equipment or injuring themselves in the short time it had taken Twilight to flip a simple light switch.

Sprawled in a tangled heap right next to the same brainwave monitor that once attempted to fathom Pinkie’s unfathomable ‘Pinkie Sense,’ the three fillies gave a loud moan as they attempted to shake off their dizziness.

Bounding right back up, the three indomitable fillies began gazing around Twilight’s basement laboratory in wonderment, zipping around as they examined each and every one of her precious devices in the hopes of locating their prize.

“MAYBE IT’S THIS HERE DOOHICKEY?” Yelled Apple Bloom, staring through one of Twilight’s beaker decanters.

“OOH, OR MAYBE THIS ONE!” Came Sweetie Belle’s high-pitched squeal, the little filly prodding her hoof against a sparking tesla coil, tiny arcs of electricity jumping across her coat.

“I BET IT’S THIS WICKED THINGAMAJIG OVER HERE!” Shouted Scootaloo, zipping all over Twilight’s mega-screen display as she carefully examined every part, probing every inch with her hooves.

“GIRLS!”

That got their attention. The crusaders stopped in their tracks, turning to face Twilight. The purple unicorn let out a slow breath, holding up a hoof as a preemptive measure to keep the Crusaders from interrupting.

“Now...” She began, looking around to the three curious fillies staring back at her. “Before we even think about letting you use this thing, I want to lay down some ground rules. This is delicate equipment we’re dealing with: Princess Celestia herself gave it to me. I am very, VERY fond of it.” She fixed them with the hardest gaze she could without scaring them. “I want you to be VERY careful with it, alright? I want you to promise, okay?”

Looking back at the lavender unicorn with the most innocent expression they could muster, the Crusaders responded as one.

“Yes, Twilight.”

“Good!” The lavender mare nodded with a satisfied smile, and turned around to the small pile of video game boxes that had been stacked neatly next to her console. “Now... which game should I let you three fillies play...”

“Ooh! Ooh! Twilight! Twilight! Maybe ya can let us play this one here!” Twilight heard Apple Bloom’s voice calling out from behind her, and the unicorn spun around in a panic, dreading to think what the Apple family’s youngest might have accidentally gotten her hooves on...

Only to see her bounding up and down in the air, with the latest, unopened box Twilight had received from Princess Celestia clutched in her hoof.

“Oh, well.. that’s actually-”

Before Twilight could even finish her sentence, Apple Bloom had torn off the package's brown wrapping and hastily tossed it aside, holding the game's box before her in a look of reverent admiration, her eyes seemingly sparkling with wonderment as she gazed upon the box's cover art.

"Whooooooooa..." was all the little filly could manage as she gazed upon the box, utterly captivated by the image adorning the simple, otherwise unassuming, box.

Sprawled across the front cover, set against a background of darkest black, numerous mares and stallions stood embroiled in battle, some standing hoof-to-hoof whilst others simply overlooked the battle from their lofty perch.

Clad in red and gold-tinted armor, battle-worn fighter gear, military uniforms and elaborate gold-blue-tinted costumes, the mares and stallions on the front cover seemed to be locked in mortal combat with one another as hoof stood poised to meet hoof in a battle of epic proportions.

As energy crackled across the hooves of some, others were simply content to wield guns and claws as they held each other at gunpoint, frozen in time as they waited for either one to make the first move.

Overlooking the battle, a stallion, face utterly obscured by his cold, unfeeling mask, stood next to what looked to be his gold-maned counterpart, his eyes utterly obscured by black sunglasses as his stoic expression betrayed a cold, Machiavellian ruthlessness.

"Marevel versus Coltcom THREE?!" Apple Bloom cried out in unrestrained excitement, resuming her energetic bouncing about. "They can't mean Marevel COMICS?!"

"Marevel...comics?" Inquired Twilight Sparkle, "I think I've heard that name before..."

"*MAREVEL*, Twilight! Ah thought everypony knew who they were!"

"Yeah!" piped up Scootaloo, "They're the ponies behind Captain Equestria, the Amazing X-Ponies, Iron Colt, Doctor Strangehoof, Spider-Mare... I'm surprised they're not in Canterlot's bookstores!"



At Scootaloo's words, fuzzy memories surfaced in Twilight's mind as she remembered spending her days at the Canterlot central bookstore, searching out textbooks for her first year at Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns....

There was always a certain area of the bookstore that seemed to be a little more alive than the others; fillies and colts fresh out of winter holidays clamoring around as they whooped and squealed, literally jumping for joy as they lay their hoofs on fresh, stapler-bound paper booklets.

Twilight had never bothered to look closely at them, but she swore she had seen the word "MAREVEL" stamped across the front in big, white letters framed against a bright-red background at least once.

"Oh, they're pretty popular in Canterlot, I'd imagine..." replied Twilight, unable to stop a small grin from flickering across her lips as the three fillies unearthed warm, comfortable memories of her time in the sprawling metropolis.

"So that just leaves one question..." Sweetie Belle stared at the cover. "Who's Coltcom?"

"Search me." Scootaloo leaned over her friend's shoulder as she looked down at the cover closely. "You think they're some other comic company?"

"Ah've never seen half of these characters...Ah mean, there's Wolverine right there...that's Iron Colt... Ah'm pretty sure that's Doctor Doom there in the background...but who is that next to him? Th' Pony in the shades?"

"Funny you should ask, actually." Twilight interjected. "You see, girls, the Princess told me in a letter this game is a kind of preview. The characters under the Coltcom roster are supposed to appear in their own games soon."

"Whoaaa..." Scootaloo breathed. "You mean we get to see these characters before they even EXIST?! That's so AWESOME!" She spun to face Twilight. "What are we waiting for, Twilight? Pop it in! Pop it in!"

"All right, all right, Scootaloo, patience!" Twilight told the little filly sternly as she magically levitated the disc over to her console as she pushed the

power button. "I've just gotta put this little thing in here, press this button to open the tray... and-"

"TWILIGHT! ARE YOU THERE?!" Came the uncharacteristically loud, shrill voice of a certain baby dragon, causing the lavender unicorn to almost jump out of her skin as she very nearly sent Princess Celestia's latest game crashing to the floor.

Quickly catching both herself and the disc, Twilight gently eased the disc into the console tray as she breathed a sigh of relief to herself.

Gently massaging her ears, Twilight turned her head upwards, only to see her number one assistant looking right back at her with a sheepish look on his face.

"Spike... you don't have to yell." Chided the lavender mare as she put on a look of mock irritation.

"Sorry 'bout that, Twilight, but the new library shipment from Canterlot's coming in today! They're waiting by the town hall for your inspection!"

Slapping a hoof across her face, a sudden realization dawned on Twilight.

"That's right...! They're supposed to deliver the latest edition of *Solar Cycles and Moon Dunes*! Oh horseapples, how could I have forgotten!"

Quickly turning to the three young fillies under her charge, Twilight quickly shot them the most "serious" look she could muster under such pressing circumstances. Unfortunately, it only made her look as if she ate a rather bad set of apples for breakfast.

"Listen girls, I have to run for a short while, so I'll have to leave you here for a quick bit. I trust that the three of you know better than to touch somepony else's property without permission, so please refrain from touching anything but the console over there, alright? Actually..." She added as an afterthought, "Don't touch the Xbox. Wait until I get back. It's a really important machine, and I can't risk something happening to it. I'll be back in about...I don't know...ten minutes." She looked down at the box. "There should be a manual in there on how to play. How about you read over that until I get back? That sound good?"

“Okay, Twilight!” echoed the fillies in unison.

Something deep in her was just nagging away at Twilight’s better sense of judgement, something telling her she was basically pronouncing the death sentence of all that she knew and cherished within her basement.

“Well.. okay then!” declared the lavender unicorn, casting shifty glances behind her back as she slowly, hesitantly trotted out of the library basement.

As the door clicked shut, and Twilight’s footsteps faded off into the distance, the three Crusaders broke into three of the widest grins you could ever slap on anypony’s face.

---

“Punch...kick...block...got it!” Scootaloo glanced over the manual before looking back at her fellow Crusaders.

“Alright, here’s the skinny: basically we build a team of three characters. We’re tossed into an arena with three other characters, and we have to beat them up.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s EASY!”

Scootaloo put the manual down. “That could be a problem, though. We have to EARN our cutie marks. EARNING something isn’t supposed to be easy.”

Apple Bloom frowned. “So what do we do?”

Picking up the manual, Apple Bloom gave the booklet a quick flip-through, eyes poring over each and every page before finally resting on one, lone section..“It says here that we can do somethin’ called special moves... and hyper combos! Maybe these’ll help us get our cutie marks!”

Scootaloo ran to her friend's side. "Perfect! One of these moves are bound to land us a cutie mark... we just gotta see what!"

Sweetie Belle looked somewhat skeptical. "I dunno, guys..." She mused. "My sister said these games are really hard to get the hang of. Maybe we should try a training mission, or start on an easier difficulty to get the hang of what a combo even *is* in the first place."

Scootaloo had picked up the controller, looking back at the unicorn with a condescending expression on her face. "Come *on*, Sweetie Belle!" She held the controller up so that it was plain to see, pointing at the buttons one at a time.

"Puuuuuuuunch....kiiiiiiiick...bloooooooooock...juuuuuuuuuump...duuuuuuuu ck! Easy!" drawled Scootaloo, sounding very much like somepony trying out a very horrible impression of the local mailmare, Derpy Hooves. That or their teacher Cheerilee trying to walk Twist through a math problem for the umpteenth time...

Sweetie Belle crossed her arms. "What about swiiiiiiiiitch? "

Scootaloo's smirk wavered. "Switch?"

Sweetie Belle rolled her eyes. "We got teams of THREE characters, Scoots! One of the big parts of the game is switching them on the fly!"

Scootaloo put the controller down. "Wait, we can DO that?"

"Yeah! Look, tap these left and right buttons here to use something called an 'Assist.' They say if you hold these buttons, or bumpers as they seem to call them, you'll switch the character you're using!" Sweetie Belle pushed the manual under her friend's nose. "See? It also says if you press both of them, you can use a super-powerful combination attack!"

Scootaloo blinked. "Oh, so THAT'S what those buttons do! They were so out of the way, I didn't think they were that important..."

"Hey girls..." Apple Bloom piped up, pointing her hoof at an old, ornate clock hanging off one of the basement's walls. "It's been ovah two hours

since Twilight and Spike've been gone. Y'think something might've happened to 'em?"

"Nah," replied Scootaloo, "they're probably just running late, or-"

Pausing mid-sentence, a maniacal grin spread across the young filly's face, her eyes narrowing to slits as her brain's cogs started turning, hatching a scheme.

"...Or they could be wrapped up in some very important, super-special business from Canterlot! You girls heard Twilight; it's an official shipment from the royal library itself. As her official game testers for the day, it's our royal duty to see this session through!"

"Ah dunno, Scootaloo..." muttered Apple Bloom. "Twilight said not to touch that there box...."

Scootaloo immediately furrowed her brow in thought. True, the lavender mare had given the three of them specific instructions not to touch the Xbox...

"...but she didn't say anything about those 'controllers' over there!" mused the orange pegasus, as she spied three oddly shaped devices lying on the floor right next to the console.

Looking at each other, Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle raised their eyebrows in unison.

"Well, Scootaloo's got a point..." muttered Sweetie Belle.

"Yeah... ah mean, Twilight could be gone for another two hours for all we know!" concurred Apple Bloom, nodding her head.

"Then what're we waiting for!" Whooped Scootaloo, grabbing one of the controllers off the floor and grasping it firmly in her hooves. "Let's get this show on the road!"

Striking a dramatic pose, Scootaloo held the controller high above her head as she reared up on her hind legs putting her free hoof on her hip as she puffed out her little chest with as much gusto as she could muster.

“...So uh, now what do we do?”

Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom couldn't help but smack their hooves across their face. Hard.

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Thankfully, figuring out the controller was a fairly easy task for the crusaders, given that nothing exploded or burnt itself in the process, though Scootaloo very nearly yanked out an analog stick in frustration at some point.

Making sure to distance their friend from the controller, a little tinkering from Sweetie Belle and a smidgen of guesswork from Apple Bloom quickly saw the crusaders successfully getting the controller up and running- not a hard task to do either, since it soon dawned on the two that perhaps pressing the large button in the center was most likely the answer to their problems.

Controller in hand, the Crusaders turned their attention to the screen, their eyes riveted to a large, floating square in the middle of the screen that seemed to house a much larger version of the game box's art.

“So now whadda we do?” Asked Apple Bloom, scratching her strawberry mane in confusion.

“Hmmmm,” mused Sweetie Belle, “Well it says right here to “Press the ‘A’ Button to play game... but where's the ‘A’ button?”

“Ah don't see no ‘A’ button on this here thingamajigger,” replied Apple Bloom, scrunching her eyes in concentration as she scanned Twilight's console for any sign of an ‘A’ button.

“Uh, girls...” said Scootaloo, motioning to the controller in hoof, “there's an ‘A’ button right here?”

Staring at Scootaloo for a few seconds, the two fillies could only hang their heads slightly as they gave their orange-maned friend a look of slight embarrassment.

“...Oh.”

Jamming her hoof down on the ‘A’ button, Scootaloo gazed in excitement as the screen gradually faded to black, her friends soon joining her as they riveted their eyes to the screen, eyes sparkling as they gazed up in wonder at the now-pitch-black screen.

After a few short seconds of silence, a single image slowly faded into existence, steadily emerging from the background.

Tinted gold with clear blue-and-white outlines, the word “COLTCOM” grew brighter and brighter against the pitch-black screen. Rumbling forth from Twilight’s speakers, a loud, high-pitched voice heralded its arrival with a resounding proclamation.

“COLTCOM PRESENTS...”

Fading off back into the darkness, the Coltcom logo soon made way for a solid red rectangle that emerged from the dark background, growing brighter and brighter by the second. Soon enough, a single, bold word, tinted purest white, could be made out as it came into view against the piercing-red shape.

[“MAREVEL COMICS.”](#)

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As the final scene snapped to black, the three fillies could only sit in muted amazement, staring slack-jawed into the screen with wonder. Their eyes, now the size of saucers, literally sparkled with admiration and awe as the Crusaders struggled to snap themselves back to reality..

“That...”

“Was...”

“AWEEEEEEESOME!” Came the sharp cry of the three fillies, their voices barely able to restrain the bubbling excitement now pumping through their veins.

“Did’ja see Iron Colt’s moves?! He was all *wooooooosh*- then *zap, bam, pew!* Ah thought he was gonna lose to that vampire-mare-lady-thing fer a second there, but nopony one-ups the amazing Iron Colt!”

“Yeah!” Interjected Sweetie Belle. “Did you guys see how they made the entire thing? It was like reading a comic book, but without even needing to turn a single page! And forget IRON COLT, what was that guy THINKING, going up against Hulk with a HANDGUN?”

“Ooh, ooh! Don’t forget the end, when Wolverine and that other karate... fighter pony had that epic showdown right on top of those huge Manehattan skyscrapers! I’ve never seen anypony give Wolvie a run for his money like he did!”

“But that wasn’t nothin’ compared to tha big surprise, Scootaloo!” Said Apple Bloom, the strawberry-maned filly now almost jittery with anticipation. “Ah’m not really big on Doctor Strangehoof, but slap me silly if ah didn’t just see the Dread Dormammu right then and there! He’s gotta be the big villain or somethin’!”

“Well,” interrupted Sweetie Belle, causing both the yellow earth pony and orange pegasus to turn their heads, “no point just standing around there guessing, right?”

Gesturing to the screen where the words “press any button to continue” flashed underneath a larger version of the game’s logo, the little unicorn filly picked up the controller and promptly pressed the ‘A’ button.

As if on cue, the three fillies were once again greeted by yet another voice echoing forth from Twilight’s speakers, this one definitely deeper and far more serious than the one they heard before...

“MAREVEL VERSUS COLTCOM THREE: FATE OF TWO WORLDS.”

Immediately, the screen shifted views to reveal what looked like a small menu of sorts, flanked by an image of the yellow-and-blue clad stallion known as ‘Wolverine’. Reared up on his hind legs, the stallion bore down on the same fighterpony he had been duelling before, claws unsheathed and ready to bring the pain.



Blaring out from the background, playing over Twilight's basement speakers, was the most [upbeat, bass-heavy techno beat](#) that ever graced the three fillies' ears, and the three crusaders were now literally buzzing with excitement right where they sat.

Looking over the options, Apple Bloom's eyes immediately fell on the first of the choices, simply titled 'Offline.'

"Ooh! Sweetie Belle! Try that there option; it looks like it could get us straight into the action!"

Looking back at her yellow-coated friend, Sweetie Belle raised an eyebrow in concern. "I dunno, Apple Bloom... shouldn't we like, try something else to get us ready *before* we go and jump straight into the game itself?"

"Nah!" said Scootaloo, swiping the controller out of her friend's hooves and mashing the 'A' button. "Everypony knows you gotta fall before you can fly! You really should pay more attention in Ms. Cheerilee's Pegasi Proverbs class, Sweetie Belle."

"Actually, Scootaloo, I don't think-"

"Hold on, Sweetie Belle-" interrupted Apple Bloom, "there's more!"

Indeed, no sooner had Scootaloo hammered down on the 'A' button did the scenery once again abruptly shift, the screen seemingly whooshing forward grandly as it revealed another set of options for the crusaders to consider. Meanwhile, framed in the background, a character easily recognizable to the crusaders as 'Deadpool' duelled with a smug, silver-maned stallion clad in a stylish red leather trenchcoat.

"Arcade... Versus... Training.... wuh?" Was all Scootaloo could manage, left eyebrow raised in confusion.

"Training sounds like a great, *safe* idea, don't you think?" Piped up Sweetie Belle.

"C'mon, Sweetie Belle..." said Apple Bloom, "who knows when Twilight an' Spike'll pop in on us!"

“Well...” mumbled Sweetie Belle in response, “I guess that’s kinda true...”

Quickly darting forward to snatch the controller out of Scootaloo’s hooves, Apple Bloom quickly jammed down on the ‘A’ button once again.

“Hey!” Yelled the orange pegasus. “I was using that!”

“Y’should’ve thought of that before ya decided to forget what was in the manual!” Teased Apple Bloom, sticking out her tongue at her orange-coated friend.

“Why you-” was all Scootaloo could manage, right before the very same voice from mere moments before thundered once more throughout the basement, as the music ramped up to become somehow even *more* [upbeat and techno-heavy](#).

“WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF MAREVEL VS. COLTCOM 3! THE GREATEST SUPERHEROES ARE ALL HERE! LAY CLAIM TO YOUR GLORIOUS VICTORY!”

The selection screen was now gone, replaced instead by a futuristic-looking grid flanked on both sides by lone, three-dimensional rectangles, the words “MAREVEL VS. COLTCOM 3: Fate of Two Worlds” clearly etched into the sides.

Positioned directly below the grid, large, bold letters clearly spelt out the words “HERO SELECT” as similar, equally imposing words spelt out “TIME: ∞” right above the grid’s very top, overlooking numerous portraits of various characters framed within .

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...” was all the three awestruck fillies could manage.

“That’s a...” Sweetie Bell stammered. “That’s a lot of characters...”

“I’m up first!!!” Scootaloo proclaimed suddenly as she took advantage of the momentary lull to snatch the controller right out of Apple Bloom’s hooves, much to her friend’s chagrin.

“Hey, give that back!” The red-maned little filly protested as she reached for it, but Scootaloo quickly jerked it out of reach, sticking her tongue out at Apple Bloom in a retort before focusing back on the screen.

“All right, let’s see who we have here... Oh geez, who the hay are *these* guys?” The pegasus filly scratched at her head confusedly as she realized her cursor was going over mostly *Coltcom* characters - she recognized only a few from Marevel, but now only unfamiliar names graced her vision, even as she jammed the analog stick in different directions.

“C. Hydra”, a crimson-maned mare clad in a crisp business suit and orange-tinted glasses; “Zero”, a robotic-looking pony encased in red armor with a wild mane that was as long as it was blonde; “Chris”, a musclebound stallion wearing olive military fatigues and armed to the teeth... and who was this “Wesker” fellow in the shades and decked out in nothing but *black*?

Black trenchcoat, black shades, everything about him was *black*... except for his albino-white coat and neatly-slicked, platinum-blond mane.

“I don’t know any of these guys!” Scootaloo finally gave up in exasperation as she threw up her hooves and handed the controller out, realizing she was getting nowhere fast. “Somepony else pick a character!”

“Told ya you should’ve let me have it first!” Apple Bloom said with an air of satisfaction as she took the controller back from the impulsive pegasus, before spinning her selector through the massive list of superheroes on her own, trying to find one that called out to her in particular.

“Hmm... Spencer... Spider-Pony... X-23... Felicia... Ooh, this ‘Ryu’ pony looks pretty interesting! He actually gave Wovie a run for his money!”

Glancing over the character select grid another time, Apple Bloom’s furrowed her eyebrows in concentration, slowly thumbing the analog sticks as she steadily switched between characters, an occasional “hmm” escaping from the young filly’s lips as she stared long and hard at the screen.

“...Ah’ve got it!” Proclaimed the little filly in a burst of inspiration. “I’ll use this here ‘Ryu’ pony, Captain Equestria just ‘cause he’s awesome... and round it off with Spider-Pony here!”

“Awww c’mon,” moaned Scootaloo. “Not a single X-Pony? That’s just bad taste.”

“The Avengers would swing rings ‘round the X-Ponies!” Retorted Apple Bloom, “sides, it’s *mah* team, and ah’m gonna decide who’s on it!”

Moving her analog stick over to the pony called ‘Ryu,’ Apple Bloom tapped her hoof down on the ‘A’ button and locked in her choice, his portrait giving a brief flash as the stoic, steely-eyed fighter-pony took up his position on Apple Bloom’s side of the screen, accompanied by another, smaller menu.

“Assists...?” Mouthed Apple Bloom, flipping her way through the menu as she looked over the choices within. “Shor... yuken? Hado... ken? What’s with all them fancy-shmancy names? What’s even one of these here “assists” again anyway!”

“Oh, oh!” said Sweetie Belle, hoof raised high in the air as though answering a classroom question. “I remember! The manual said they were moves your teammates used to help out your character! I guess you’ve gotta pick one to go on.”

“Oh yeaaaaah,” drawled the strawberry-maned filly, remembering the manual’s words now. “Guess ah’ll go with this here “Hadoken” thingy; it sounds mighty awesome if ya ask me!”

Eager to fill the next two spots on her team, Apple Bloom quickly selected Spider-Mare and Captain Equestria mere moments later, giving them both the “Shield Slash” and “Web-Ball” assists respectively.

As Spider-Mare took his place as Apple Bloom’s final fighter, the scene shifted once more to another menu of sorts, this time with only four options.

“Difficulty level, eh?” smirked Scootaloo. “Let’s crank this baby up a notch!”

Darting over to Apple Bloom, the orange pegasus stealthily flipped the analog stick to the side, cracking a small, devilish grin as she silently

tapped the 'A' button the moment she saw the simple, unassuming 'Normal' setting make way for the far more ominous "Hard."

"Hey!" Yelled Apple Bloom, "I was gonna play on normal!"

"You snooze you lose!" Triumphantlly declared Scootaloo, turning her attention back to the game. "C'mon now, the fight's starting!"

Shooting her orange-coated friend a sour look, Apple Bloom whipped her eyes back to the screen and narrowed them in concentration, faint silhouettes taking their place opposite her own three fighters as the announcer's voice once more echoed forth.

"LET YOUR HOOVES DO THE TALKING!"

As the silhouettes faded into existence, Apple Bloom's eyes widened as she beheld her very first opponents.

At the very forefront of the screen, facing down the stoic Ryu, a stallion that was all-too-familiar to the young comic buffs levitated himself in mid-air. Clad in a skintight red costume with a long purple cape flowing down his back, an intimidating crimson metal helmet encased his head as a look of sheer indignation streaked his features.

Apple Bloom felt as if she would pass out from fear as she realized just who she was looking at. "Celestia above...it's MAGNETO!" She managed to stammer, her voice tight with sheer terror.

Taking up position behind the Master of Magnetism, a heavily-armored stallion with an elaborate green cape and unfeeling, metallic mask stepped forth from the shadows, rearing up on his hind legs to cross his two front hooves in a look of complete and utter superiority as he threw a light, sneering laugh at the legendary hero, Captain Equestria.

"D-D-DOCTOR DOOM!" Squeaked Sweetie Belle, rushing to hide behind Scootaloo at the sight of the Fantastic Four's armored nemesis.

Emerging as the last linchpin in the opposing team, another pony, only this time far more imposing, emerged from the inky black silhouette, revealing a massive body encased in a metallic suit, visage enshrouded completely in

flames, his... *its* immolated countenance consisting of nothing but the outline of a pony's bare skull.

"T-T-The DREAD DORMAMMU!!" Stuttered an absolutely terrified Scootaloo as she cringed backwards in fear, her face rapidly paling as she realized that her team was up against the three most dastardly villains Equestria had ever known - AT THE SAME TIME!

"Darn it Apple Bloom, I *told* you we should've picked an X-Pony! Magneto's gonna tear us to shreds!" Scootaloo babbled, gesturing towards the television at the now-paused screen.

"A fat lotta good they'll do 'gainst DORMAMMU!" The red-maned filly retorted, fear tingeing her voice. "*No*pony ever gone up 'gainst tha Dread Wun tha' didn't come out with tha stuffin' beat outta 'em!"

"Which is why you picked Captain Equestria to go against him, right?" Scootaloo's voice was thick with sarcasm.

"HEY! *No*pony ever beaten Cap'n' Equestria before! Not even Doctor Doom!"

"You think Captain Equestria can stop the *Dread One*? He couldn't stop a sniper round, what makes you think he can face an extradimensional sorcerer!?!"

Apple Bloom froze, then her face twisted into a glare. "*WHAT did you jest say?*"

Scootaloo crossed her arms. "Civil War, *remember?* A hunk of lead was able to bring down Captain Equestria, what makes you think Dormammu will have a harder ti-urkk!"

In a display of uncharacteristic rage, Apple Bloom had tackled Scootaloo forward, sending both fillies tumbling to the ground. Scootaloo lay on her back, eyes wide with shock as she stared up at her friend.

"*NOPONY TALKS 'BOUT THE CAP'N LIKE THAT!*" Applebloom cried.

"ENOUGH!"

The two fillies on the ground looked up at their friend, stunned. Sweetie Belle was glaring down at them both as a mother would a pair of overly rambunctious children. Apple Bloom stepped off of Scootaloo, who climbed to her feet as well.

“S-sorry ‘bout that, Scoots.” Applebloom said quietly. “Ah don’t know what come over me back there...”

“S-sure...no problem.” Scootaloo gasped, still staring at Sweetie Belle. The unicorn was shaking her head, looking completely and unabashedly disappointed.

“[Shame on you](#).” She said, glaring back and forth between the two. “*Both of you!* We’ve been given an opportunity to get our cutie marks that will never come again, and you want to waste it cowering and fighting like spoiled *children?!?*”

“We...we are children, Sweetie-mmph!” Scootaloo found Applebloom’s hoof slapped over her mouth.

“Shush, she’s on a roll!” Applebloom hissed.

It was doubtful Sweetie had even heard her friends, so wrapped up she was in her little speech. “You call yourself Crusaders?” She proclaimed, loud enough for everypony to hear. “We made a promise to each other to try everything to get our cutie marks! A challenge like this, facing down three of the vilest villains that Marevel has ever known is SURE to get us our marks!

As her friends hung their heads in shame, Sweetie Belle continued on.

“I know they’re really dangerous and scary! But you’re too scared to even try?! The Cutie Mark Crusaders are never scared! We never back down from a challenge, no matter how dangerous!”

Sweetie Belle had faced the screen, squaring her shoulders and puffing out her little chest in defiance of the wicked entities that awaited her just beyond. “...But if you two are too chicken.../’LL fight them myself!”

Grabbing the controller in her hooves, Sweetie Belle fixed the TV with a steely glare.

“Sweetie Belle, DON’T!” Scootaloo shouted. “You’ll get pulped by these guys!”

“Ya can’t win this one, Sweetie! Y’all gotta know when to fold ‘em!” yelled Applebloom.

Sweetie Belle took a deep breath. “I know I may not come out of this one... but if I fail here... I want to have failed as a Cutie Mark Crusader. I want to have failed knowing I FOUGHT for my cutie mark!” She turned to face the other Crusaders, failing to hide a trembling lip.

“Applebloom... Scootaloo... I may not come out of this one. If I don’t, I want you to know... you were the best friends I ever had.” She whispered dramatically.

Scootaloo rolled her eyes. “Oh brother...” she muttered. It seemed that Rarity’s histrionics were beginning to rub off on her younger sister.

Thankfully, Sweetie Belle didn’t notice, turning back to the screen, grim resolve on her face.

“Alright, you dastardly fiends! Feel the wrath of Sweetie Belle: CUTIE MARK CRUSADER DEFENDER OF JUSTICE! YAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!!!”

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“No, Sweetie Belle, watch out for his-” yelled Apple Bloom over the din of Twilight’s speakers as she tried to warn her friend of the incoming danger.

For what seemed to be the umpteenth time since the mere 99-second game had started, Sweetie Belle found her character careening towards the air as an enormous beam of crackling, purple energy slammed into Captain Equestria.

Already over the course of a mere 20 seconds, despite the valiant fight that Sweetie Belle had put up, she had already lost two out of her three teammates: Ryu falling to Dormammu’s barrage of infernal magic shortly



after Spider-Pony had been knocked out of commission by the merciless might of Doctor Doom.

“No! It’s alright! I’ve still got-”

Abruptly, a ring of light surrounded Sweetie Belle’s opponent as Magneto raised his hooves, darkening the entire screen save for the image of the crimson-clad stallion... soon, the image of Magneto himself took up the *entire* screen as he raised his right hoof in the air, menacing purple lightning crackling across its surface.

“*MAGNETIC...*” The supervillain began to proclaim in his grand, regal voice, and Sweetie Belle paled, shaking her head vigorously.

“Oh no, no, no, NO, NO! NOOOO!!!”

“*SHOCKWAVE!!!*”

Slamming his hoof into the ground, titanic columns of brilliant purple energy burst forth, thundering towards the hapless Captain Equestria with terrifying speed as the costumed avenger was sent hurtling the entire length of the screen, the brutal onslaught giving no quarter whatsoever.

“Oooh...” winced Scootaloo, “at least it can’t get any worse-”

Almost as if on Scootaloo’s cue, the Master of Magnetism leapt off-screen to make way for the arrival of the sinister, armored form of none other than Doctor Doom himself, the ruthless dictator’s robotic voice thundering through the entire basement.

“THIS CHARADE IS OVER!”

Rearing up on his hind legs, the Doctor crossed his front hooves across his chest, his armored limbs now sparking with brilliant, arcing bolts of blazing yellow energy as he prepared to bring down the hammer upon his hapless quarry’s head.

“MU-HA-HA-HAAAAAAA!”

Bursting forth from his hooves, blinding pulses of searing yellow energy collided with the still-hapless form of the valiant Captain Equestria, the hero still, somehow, miraculously alive even in the face of all this punishment.

"It's alright, guys!" Defiantly proclaimed Sweetie Belle, still confident she could somehow save the day. "The Captain's still in this, which means we've still got a shot!"

In a once-in-a-lifetime moment, almost quite like the very fates pit themselves against Sweetie Belle, Doctor Doom leapt off screen only to make way for the Dread Dormammu himself, clearly here to finish the job his compatriots had started, his voice carrying with it an air of grim finality as he pronounced the final word.

"BURN TO CINDERS..."

Rearing up on his own two hind legs, much like Doctor Doom before him, the infernal lord of the Dark Dimension extended his two front legs forward as he summoned massive plumes of flame into his outstretched hooves, concentrating them into a tightly packed sphere of roiling fire that almost resembled a miniature sun.

"CHAOTIC FLAME!"

Clapping his hooves together, the malevolent Pony of the Dark Dimension collapsed the roiling orb of flame in on itself, sending forth a massive, merciless conflagration of bright-orange fire that consumed Captain Equestria whole, utterly devastating the Equestrian hero as he finally crumpled in defeat, the valiant stallion's pained cry of loss echoing throughout the room.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

As the last member of Sweetie Belle's once three-pony team crashed to the floor in defeat, time itself seemed to slow as the Captain spiralled to the floor, remnants of the inferno still licking at his costume as faint, orange-red flames danced across his now comatose form.

"YOU LOSE!" Came the resounding proclamation from the announcer, bursting forth from the speakers as the final verdict came to pass.

Now standing triumphant over his defeated foe, the malevolent, flaming visage of the Pony of the Dark Dimension began to twist in mad glee, a bone-chilling laugh issuing forth from his mouth as he summoned a miniature replica of Equestria into an outstretched hoof, crushing it with ease.

[“THIS PLANET IS MINE, AND NOW IT WILL DIE!”](#)

Sweetie Belle’s hooves had gone slack, the controller hanging limp. The little filly’s expression was one of utter defeat and disappointment, as she glumly handed the controller back to Apple Bloom, her head hung low.

“I have failed Equestria, my fellow Crusaders... I am not worthy.” Sweetie Belle muttered despondently.

“Aww, don’t be like that, Sweetie Belle! Ya didja best!” The Apple family’s youngest patted her friend’s shoulder encouragingly as she relieved the white filly of the burden of the controller. “Ya put up a great fight even the Avengers would’a been proud of!”

“Yeah! Try again, Sweetie Belle!” Scootaloo piped up, eager to throw in her own two bits. “You were using *Apple Bloom*’s team after all, you should try using your own!”

Her little statement earned her a scathing glare from Apple Bloom, but it went unnoticed as Sweetie Belle perked up, her spirits rising in thanks to her friends’ encouragement.

“You know what, you’re right!” Rarity’s younger sister proclaimed proudly as she hit the start button right before the countdown timer for Game Over could begin to move, and [the screen started to flutter backwards like pages being rapidly turned](#), until they were faced with the [character selection screen](#) again, the massive grid of character portraits facing them and awaiting their selection.

“I’m going to form my own team, and beat Magneto, and Doctor Doom, and Dormammu, all by myself!”

Quickly thumbing her way through the selection grid, Sweetie Belle's eyes came to rest on the portrait of a grinning, almost feline sort of pony, her mane tinged cyan blue with streaks of white as unmistakably diminutive *cat ears* protruded from within her mane.

"Ooh! How about this pony over here, guys?" squeaked Sweetie Belle, excitement in her voice. "She really looks different from the standard old heroes we see every day... could be just the pony I'm looking for to switch things up a little!"

Looking apprehensively at one another, then turning to their friend, Apple Bloom and Scootaloo tried desperately to hide the skepticism in their voice.

"Well..." drawled Apple Bloom, carefully weighing her words before saying something she might end up regretting, "I'm sure she's definitely not like any of them other characters

"Y-Yeah!" piped up Scootaloo, "Definitely... unique."

"It's settled, then!" Proclaimed Sweetie Belle, grinning in the face of the monumental odds before her, "I'm gonna make this team the best bunch of superheroes that Equestria's ever gonna see!"

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"Sweeite Belle! Don't call in your second-"

Despite her two friends protesting in unison, their words seemed only to fall on deaf ears as Sweeite Belle proceeded to jam her hoof down on the left bumper button for what must have been the umpteenth time since the start of her match. Truth be told, she WAS doing better than she had before: she had managed to hold her own against Magneto and Doom this time, putting a sizable dent in each of their health bars. Her fighting style just seemed a little...awkward this time around.

In response to the pressed button, a diminutive pony piloting a massive, green robot adorned with a massive skull's emblem appeared on-screen to spew forth a small gout of flame from a well-concealed compartment, valiantly assisting the rather strange feline-pony crossbreed that Sweetie Belle currently controlled.

In spite of her valiant attempts at resistance, the massive, hulking form of the Pony of the Dark Dimension merely laughed in her face as he calmly held out a single hoof, calling forth a massive shield of living flame to dissipate the meagre assault.

Clasping his hooves together, the infernal visage of the dimensional conqueror twisted into a sadistic, bone chilling smile that heralded his response to the pitiful ponies who dared raise even a single hoof against his might.

The very second Dormammu's hooves collided, the very fabric of existence itself seemed to come apart as a massive, gaping rift came into being right before the infernal pony's towering form, the dark magics at work ensnaring both of Sweetie Belle's hapless team members as the malevolent Pony of the Dark Dimension once more prepared to incinerate all those before him.

"BURN TO CINDERS..."

"Stop me," cringed Apple Bloom, unable to watch her friend get brutally crushed underhoof by one of the most vile entities to ever live. "Ah can't watch this."

"CHAOTIC FLAME!"

The same roaring inferno that claimed Captain Equestria mere moments before spewed forth yet again, utterly engulfing both ponies on screen.

Slowly, but surely, the massive conflagration of flame forced both ponies backwards as the searing heat consumed whatever fight they had left, eventually sending them crashing to the ground with a shrill cry of utter defeat.

"YAAAH!"

"... *WHAT WAS THAT!?*" Sweetie Belle nearly shouted as her eyes bugged out and her jaw flopped open, while her brain still struggled to process the fact that she had simultaneously lost *two* of her team members in the blink of an eye.

“Focus, Sweetie Belle!” Scootaloo urgently reminded her, and the unicorn filly shook her head, quickly refocusing on the fight. It was still all right, she could still turn this around - she still had one remaining team member left...!

As Sweetie Belle steadied herself, the last mare of her team, a svelte, almost lithe pegasus with oddly-shaped, almost bat-like wings leapt onto the field, blowing the Dread Dormammu a playful kiss as she beckoned the maleficent pony to face her.

“Get him, Morrigan!” Sweetie Belle yelled as she mashed her hoof on the forward button, sending the succubus pony dashing forward to close the distance...

... right in time to meet Dormammu’s flaming hoof, as the Lord of the Dark Dimension viciously countered her assault before it had even begun. An unrelenting barrage of attacks slammed right into Morrigan, knocking her off-balance as Dormammu mercilessly brought the pain, the combo chopping off at least half of her life bar before finally stopping.

“Careful, Sweetie Belle!” Apple Bloom cried out in concern as Dormammu began advancing again, but the white filly quickly had Morrigan jumping backwards, quickly backing away from the approaching Dread One.

“Relax, Apple Bloom, I’ve got thi-”

“MAGNETO!” Boomed the thunderous voice of the dimension-conquering pony as he stepped off screen, the grand, regal figure of the Master of Magnetism taking his place with a lightning-fast kick to the side of the succubus-pony’s face as he sent her spiraling backwards, right to the very end of the screen.

Quickly reassuming his usual, refined posture, the helmeted form of the X-Ponies’ greatest nemesis slowly levitated off the ground; a powerful magnetic field silently pulsating underneath his hooves with a steady “*thrum*.” Wounded he may have been, Magneto’s skill hadn’t wavered one bit; in fact, he seemed to be putting up even *more* of a fight.

“Sweetie!” yelled Apple Bloom, gesturing to Magneto’s diminished health bar, “He’s injured! You’ve got him now!”

Her face screwed up in concentration, Sweetie Belle gave her analog stick a quick press upwards as she commanded her last and final fighter to leap in for an attack on the seemingly hapless Master of Magnetism.

In that very moment, time itself seemed to freeze as the smug, sneering visage of the supervillain slowly turned upwards, brilliant purple-white energy coursing over his body in miniature arcs of lightning as orbs of energy began to form in his hooves.

“HYPER GRAV!”

Waving his hooves forward, the orbs of energy immediately darted towards Morrigan and wrenched her from mid-air, shackling themselves around her limbs as they dragged her, helpless, before the Master of Magnetism.

As her two friends winced, Sweetie Belle began twisting the controller’s analog sticks in a maddened fury to free her character from the clutches of the sparking orbs of energy that kept her at the supervillain’s mercy.

Try as she might, the pulsing orbs of energy anchored Sweetie Belle’s character in place as the Master of Magnetism reared up on his hind legs, making a grand, sweeping gesture with his front hooves as they crackled with dark, purple energy.

“GRAVITY SQUEEZE!”

Clasping his hooves together, the helmeted supervillain forcefully wrenched the hapless Morrigan from her bonds, encasing her in a massive, pulsing sphere of inky-purple energy as massive, arcing bolts of brilliant purple lightning darted about the sphere.

Holding his right hoof forward, the Master of Magnetism cackled gleefully as he called forth his immense powers to bind the hapless Morrigan within a massive metallic prison, his hooves now violently ablaze with blinding purple energy that arced gracefully around his mane and tail.

All that remained was the final, crushing verdict.

“YOU ARE DEFEATED!”

Stamping his hoof on the ground, the sphere immediately imploded on itself, sending massive shockwaves of magnetic force out in every direction as both arcs of deadly purple lightning and razor-sharp metal shards scattered outwards, claiming the last member of Sweetie Belle's team as the sultry succubus-pony crashed to the ground in complete, utter defeat.

"NOT AGAIN!" Yelled Sweetie Belle, stamping her free hoof on the ground in utter frustration. "There's no way we can beat them all! There's no way just one crusader's gonna stand a chance against the three deadliest villains Equestria's ever known!"

"Ya did better, though." Applebloom said comfortingly. "Ya almost had Magneto and Doom, and it was really jest bad timin' ya lost that Felicia and Tron."

Sweetie Belle stared dejectedly at the screen for a moment before she sighed heavily, and passed the controller to Scootaloo.

"Your turn, Scootaloo." She muttered. "I don't think I'm cut out for this game."

Gingerly extending a hoof to take the controller from Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo's eyes immediately lit up with the characteristic twinkle of an idea.

"...Wait a second, Sweetie Belle... you said there's no way one lone crusader could possibly beat these guys, right?"

"Well... yeah, but I don't see what that's got to do with anything-"

"So why don't we fight 'em together, Cutie Mark Crusader style!" Declared the orange pegasus, flaring out her wings proudly.

"...That's a great idea and all, Scootaloo," interjected Apple Bloom, "but only one pony can play this here game at once."

"No, you don't get it, Apple Bloom," said Scootaloo, shaking her head. "What I'm saying is why bother letting one pony play as all *three* characters... when each of us can play as *one*!"



Dumbstruck at Scootaloo's suggestion, Applebloom merely gazed blankly at her friend. Slowly, but surely, a look of comprehension began to dawn across Apple Bloom's face as she realized that... was actually a really good idea!

"That... that's actually an awesome idea, Scootaloo! We could be the Cutie Mark Crusader superhero team!"

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADER SUPERHERO TEAM, YEAAAAH!!!" The three fillies leapt into the air, smacking their hooves together in a high-hoof, their expressions already growing joyous as they realized that perhaps, just maybe, they could finally get a shot at getting their cutie marks right *here*.

Quickly turning their attention back to the character select grid, the three fillies gathered in a tight huddle about the screen, eagerly discussing the battle strategy that maybe, just maybe... would finally earn them the coveted prize they had always longed for... their very own cutie marks.

"So who should ah pick? Maybe I should give Capn' Equestria another shot, seeing as how I-"

"Nah, bad choice. Dormammu wiped the *floor* with him that time. Sweetie Belle actually did much better with that... Ryu guy, so maybe you should give him a shot."

"... Ah guess it *couldn't* hurt ta try somethin' new... but what about yerself, Sweetie Belle? Decided on a character yet?"

"I'm going to use that Felicia! She's the only reason I even managed to put up a fair fight against Magneto of all ponies!"

"What 'bout you, Scootaloo? Who're ya gonna use fer this here fight?"

Furrowing her eyebrows in contemplation, the orange pegasus filly sent her selection cursor flitting about the giant grid of character portraits, trying to find one that suited her tastes... and after several moments, came to rest on a silver-maned stallion, clad in a stylish leather trenchcoat that just screamed "cool" - just the kind of pony she liked, the pony most like Rainbow Dash!

“I’m gonna use this fellow right here!” Scootaloo exclaimed proudly as she selected the stallion named ‘Dante.’

“All right!” whooped Apple Bloom, punching her hoof into the air, “Let’s hit it, kick it, save Equestria and earn ourselves our cutie marks! Everypony with me!?”

“YEAH!” replied both Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, raising their own hooves into the air for a Crusader-style high-hoof.

As the three fillies locked in their selections with a slightly trembling hoof, the grid disappeared once more, making way for the imposing forms of the three iconic supervillains, ready to yet again strike down all those who dared oppose their will.

Booming through the speakers, the announcer’s ever-thunderous voice shook the entire room as he prepared to pronounce the start of the match.

[“WHO WILL COME OUT ON TOP?”](#)

Shifting to an arena that stood high over the towering skyline of Manehattan, throngs upon throngs of rabid reporter-ponies scrambled across a precariously thin walkway that spanned two monolithic skyscrapers, eager to see good and evil clash in a battle to end all others.

Taking his position at the very front of the Crusaders’ three-pony team, the stylish, silver-maned stallion known only as ‘Dante’ seemed utterly uninterested in all the attention he was getting. Rather, he seemed to be... utterly *bored* as he turned to slowly face his opponents, a sly, smug grin plastered across his face.

*“So, you gonna fight or what?”*

Levitating down to match his opponent, the Master of Magnetism descended in a shield of shimmering purple, lightly waving both his hooves to quickly dispel his crackling forcefield as he lowered his steely gaze to face the overconfident stallion before him.

[“Learn now, why they call me the Master of Magnetism!”](#)

With a final, parting phrase, the announcer's voice thundered through the speakers, signaling both fighters that it was time for the battle to begin.

*"GET READY TO BRAWL... FIGHT!"*

As the announcer's final word faded off into the distance, Scootaloo immediately leapt into action, thumbing her analog stick upwards as she sent Dante flying straight for the helmeted villain.

Mashing the 'A' button, Dante withdrew an enormous sword from his back, positioning it overhead as he bore down on Magneto with his full weight, a blood red streak encasing the blade as it careened towards the villain's seemingly helpless head.

*"FORCEFIELD!"*

Calling forth his shield, the Master of Magnetism stopped Scootaloo's attack in mid air, slamming his hoof into the ground as an enormous pillar of electromagnetic energy burst forth, sending Dante spiraling headfirst into the air.

"Scootaloo!" yelled both Sweetie Belle and Apple Bloom simultaneously, worried for their best friend.

"It's not over yet!" Yelled a defiant Scootaloo, mashing the 'A' button again to send Dante into yet another downward smash, praying that this time, her attack would actually connect.

To her surprise, and to both Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle's glee, the attack actually collided with the side of the villainous pony's helmet, sending the stallion crashing to the floor as Scootaloo stared, temporarily shell-shocked by what she had just done.

"Scootaloo!" yelled Apple Bloom, snapping her friend out of the daze she had just sent herself into. "Press something... anything!"

"Oh! Uh... Right!" Snapping herself out of her trance, Scootaloo quickly mashed the 'B' button on sight, hoping she didn't just blow her one big chance at putting down the Master of Magnetism.

In response, the silver-maned stallion stood up on his hind legs and pulled out two enormous pistols, firing downwards to blast the X-Ponies' arch-nemesis right off the ground.

"I've got you now!"

Now praying for the best, Scootaloo mashed down on the 'B' button again, breathing a heavy sigh of relief as Dante whipped out his sword yet again, this time spinning it in a blinding-fast flurry to send the already-dazed Master of Magnetism flying straight through the air.

"Scootaloo, jump! JUMP!" came the shrill yell of her two friends, gesturing madly at the screen and literally screaming for the orange pegasus not to let this golden opportunity slip out from under her hooves.

"Relax guys, I got this, I got this!" shot back Scootaloo as she angled her analog stick upwards, sending Dante leaping into the air right on the hooves of the supervillain.

Truth be told, Scootaloo actually had no idea what she was doing; she was simply hitting buttons willy-nilly and hoping... no, praying that she didn't mess something up big-time.

Quickly jamming her hooves on the 'X' and 'Y' buttons, Scootaloo commandeered Dante to make two fast, sweeping cuts with his enormous sword, further staggering the Master of Magnetism as he tumbled, helpless, through the air.

Sweat now poring down the orange pegasus's brow, she quickly began twisting her analog stick in a frenzied flurry as she mashed the 'B' button yet again, silently hoping to Celestia she didn't just make a royal doozy of a mistake.

Instead, Dante procured two dual-hooved swords out of nowhere, grasping them firmly in his hooves as he spun them wildly around his body, creating a massive wheel of flame that dragged both himself and the white-maned Master of Magnetism downwards, careening towards the floor at breakneck speed.

As his hooves touched the ground, the inferno of flame sent Magneto reeling backwards while Dante landed gracefully on his hind legs, quickly brandishing two guns from within his coat as the screen slowly darkened, this time focusing on the silver-maned stallion's face as he spun his weapons forward, bringing them to bear on the battered supervillain's form.

*"Keepin' it stylish! Yahoo!"*

Scootaloo could only watch in muted wonder, an awestruck smile on her face as her on-screen character proceeded to unleash a barrage of blazing bullets upon the supervillain, decimating his health bar as the stylish red-cloaked stallion spun madly, whirling the guns around his body in a fluid, graceful dance that left the three young fillies completely mesmerized.

*"Jackpot!"* Dante suddenly stated as he spun around on his hind legs, right before pointing his two handguns forward again, and unleashing a final, simultaneous blast forward into the still-airborne Magneto, sending the supervillain spinning backwards as they slammed into him like a pair of twin, crashing anvils.

*"NNNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO...!!!"*

Time slowed down for a second as the once-proud Magneto toppled over backwards into the ground, unconscious, the announcer's voice booming over the speakers to proclaim his defeat.

*"DOWN!"*

Scootaloo pumped a hoof in triumph. "YES! I am LOVING this Dante guy!"

*"SCOOT, WATCH IT!"*

Applebloom's warning came too late, though, as [Doctor Doom came flying from the right side of the screen](#), planting a flurry of punches and kicks into Dante. Scootaloo grit her teeth and raised her guard, thankfully fending off most of the assault.

"Sweetie Belle, you take this one!" Yelled the orange pegasus as she held down the left bumper for a second before tossing the controller to her unicorn friend.

Bowing out of the battlefield, Dante called out the name of his teammate while Sweetie Belle deftly snatched the controller out mid-air, promptly proceeding to wildly mash away at its buttons once the feline-pony hybrid known as Felicia pounced on-screen.

Slamming right into Doctor Doom and sending the archvillain spinning into the air, Felicia took her spot centre stage as Dante leapt off-screen. By some miracle of Celestia, Sweetie Belle's frantic button presses, as sloppy as they seemed, sent Felicia leaping into a frenzy of action that caught the airborne Doctor in an obscenely lucky string of blows that would have otherwise required a master's hand.

With the onslaught sending the armored dictator reeling backwards, Sweetie Belle began hammering down on her controller like a pony possessed, twisting sticks left-and-right as she mashed her hoof down on all four buttons.

Almost instantly, the screen darkened to zoom in on Felicia, the hybrid cat-pony now reared up on her hind legs and spun forward at blinding speed, her entire body now enveloped in a blazing white ball that barreled headfirst towards the defenseless Doctor Doom.

Claw met metal in a typhoon of cuts and swipes as the blazing white ball that was Felicia collided with the hapless form of the armored supervillain, a fury of slashes and tears gouging out massive chunks of Doctor Doom's health bar before finally draining it completely, sending the vile dictator flying backwards with a cry of defeat.

*"FAILURE IS BENEATH DOOOOOOOOOOOM!"*

*"DOWN!"*

"I...I did it...I DID IT!" Proclaimed an overjoyed Sweetie Belle, overcome with elation at her seemingly impossible victory. "I BEAT DOCTOR DOOM!"

"NOW'S NOT THA' TIME, SWEETIE BELLE!" Yelled Apple Bloom, trying to get herself heard amidst the raucous whoops and cheers of her best friend, "THERE'S STILL ONE MORE-"

At Apple Bloom's words, the hulking, armored form of the [Pony of the Dark Dimension](#) sent a vicious backhoof to Felicia's face, sending the cat-pony literally flying out of the screen as the flame-headed conqueror turned his full attention to whatever fighters remained, his visage ablaze with anger at the downfall of his two compatriots.

Leaping on screen to replace the out-of-commission Felicia, the stoic, battle-worn fighterpony Apple Bloom instantly recognized as that 'Ryu' character assumed a battle-ready stance against the malevolent mystical pony, ready to pit his hooves against the evil entity's dark magic.

"TOSS IT HERE, SWEETIE BELLE! I'VE GOT A SCORE TA SETTLE!"

Deftly throwing the controller over to her strawberry-maned friend, Sweetie Belle fixed Apple Bloom with a steely, steadfast gaze, letting her best friend know that even if her fellow crusaders couldn't be there to help her fight, they'd be there for her in spirit.

Snatching the controller out of mid-air, Apple Bloom proceeded to fix her eyes on the screen before her, muttering a few words to herself as she prepared to engage one of Marevel's most dastardly villains in a showdown for the ages.

"Alright. Now the manual says the basic combo's X., Y, B then A, so that means..."

Tapping her analog stick forward twice, Apple Bloom commanded Ryu to dash forward, getting up close and personal with the Dread Dormammu before he could call forth any of the utterly devastating attacks he had at his vast magical disposal.

With careful timing, Apple Bloom gingerly pressed down on the buttons marked 'X,' 'Y,' 'B,' and sent a flurry of punches and kicks straight into the flaming visage of the Dread Dormammu, knocking him backwards in wide-eyed shock as she prepared one last, final surprise for her foe.

"TAKE THIS!" Declared the little filly in her proudest voice as she twirled her analog stick in a quarter-circle forward motion, simultaneously hitting not one, but two attack buttons together with careful, calculated precision.

Almost on command, the entire screen once again faded to nothing but black as the camera cut straight to a close-up of Ryu, the normally unassuming fighterpony now calling forth a massive ball of brilliant blue roiling energy together in his front hooves, ready to put an end to the fight.

*“SHINKUU...”*

Bellowing out his final attack, the once calm-looking stallion unleashed an immense, burning *column* of searing blue energy right at the armored, extra-dimensional pony, pushing him backwards with the sheer, unrivalled *force* of the blast.

*“HADOOOOOOKEEEEEEEEN!”*

“YEAH! HYPER COMBO IN YER FACE!” Applebloom whooped. “HOW’D Y’ALL LIKE *THAT* ONE, DUMB-MAMMU?”

Scotaloo stared at Applebloom like she had just grown another head. “*Dumb-mammu*, Applebloom?” She asked, her expression incredulous.

Applebloom looked away, an embarrassed blush on her face. “Not one of mah better ones, huh...?”

“Look out!” Sweetie Belle squeaked. “Dumb-mammu’s still moving!”

Indeed he was. The Pony of the Dark Dimension was already back up, and one of his forehooves was blazing with fiery-red energy as he called out the Power of the Creator.

“Aw, hayseed!” Apple Bloom cursed as she began jamming her analog stick in a quarter-circle forward motion, mashing away at the ‘B’ button as Ryu thrust his forelegs forward multiple times, sending forth several blazing balls of azure energy.

Too slow. Dormammu abruptly called out “*Power of the Destructor!*” as his *other* forehoof suddenly became alight with sapphire flames, and before Apple Bloom could even react, the massive metal villain had already leapt over the several Hadokens she had thrown his way, landing right before



Ryu and towering over the martial artist, *both* his forehooves blazing with magical fire.

*“Meteor Storm!”*

“APPLEBLOOM, GUAAAAAAAAAARD!!!!” Scootaloo yelled in a panic, but her warning came too late. The miniature swarm of meteors thundered from the sky, slamming into Ryu as the fighter-pony screamed in pain, his life bar dipping to dangerously low levels as Dormammu’s spell finally took its toll on him.

“NO!” Apple Bloom snarled as she began mashing away at *all* of the controller’s buttons, desperate to do something, *anything*, if it could just salvage the situation! “Ah ain’t come this far ta lose to a giant hunk’a meta-”

Without even realizing it, her left hoof came down on the controller’s left trigger, and had Apple Bloom known specifically what it did, she would have been thanking Celestia that her team had a Level 3 Hyper Bar ready.

The moment she depressed the left trigger, Dante and Felicia suddenly leapt on-screen, taking positions next to Ryu. Rings of light emanated from *all three of them*, the screen briefly fading to black before displaying the *entire team* assembled - Dante already had twirled out both his pistols, pointing them forward, while Felicia had curled up into a pony-sized ball of spinning fur and claws, and Ryu himself had reared up onto his hind legs, planting one of them solidly behind as he wound himself up, ready to unleash a spinning hurricane of death.

Everything seemed to stand still for just a moment, the three fillies staring wide-eyed in wonder at the screen at the assembled team of heroes...

... and then the storm was unleashed.

The legendary Dormammu never had a prayer. A simultaneous barrage of bullets, claw slashes, and a punishing hurricane of kicks slammed into the Pony of the Dark Dimension in an unrelenting assault, decimating what was left of his health bar and sending him careening backwards into the ground with an inarticulate scream.

*“Crossover Combination K.O.! YOU WIN!”*

Ryu stood triumphant as his allies vanished from the screen, crossing his hooves and looking thoughtfully into the distance.

*“I feel at peace now...”*

“WE... WE DID IT!” Came the ear-piercing scream of the three fillies as they punched the air in unison, the sheer euphoria of their victory leading them to start bounding all about the basement, leaping about in joy.

“Didja see what ah did back there!?” Apple Bloom whooped in a heady rush. “That was *awesome!*”

“I know, *right?*” Squealed Scootaloo, pressing her front hooves across her cheeks in an odd sort of imitation of her idol’s “awesome” face. “We kicked SO much flank back there!”

“Oh, Oh!” Squeaked Sweetie Belle, “remember when we did that three-on-one attack? *Dumb-mammu* never stood a chance!”

“Speakin a’ three-on-one...” mused Apple Bloom, pointing a hoof in the air as though she had just remembered something of monumental importance.

Glancing over at her flank, Apple Bloom watched with bated breath as she awaited the emergence of her long-sought prize... the one thing the Cutie Mark Crusaders had always longed, searched, and quested across all of Ponyville: their very own Cutie Marks.

As she waited, waited, and waited some more, a downcast frown slowly creased its way across the little filly’s face as her flank remained, as always, blank.

Turning her head to her two best friends, Apple Bloom’s smile once more turned upwards as she thought that maybe, just maybe, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle had gotten theirs; only to be met with equally sombre expressions as the young filly realized that they too, remained blank-flanked.

“Awww... still no Cutie Mark!” Scootaloo groaned in exasperation as she turned to look at the screen, throwing up her front hooves in frustration. “We just beat the three deadliest villains to ever set hoof in Equestria, and we don’t even get a Cutie Mark for it! What’s the point?!”

“You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you three fillies earned something far greater than just a Cutie Mark.”

Freezing mid-sentence, the orange filly slowly craned her neck upwards to behold the all-too familiar sight of Twilight Sparkle, standing at the top of the basement’s staircase as she fixed the three fillies with a steady stare, one the three could not quite tell if it was filled with anger, joy, rage or some combination of the above three.

“T-Twilight!” stammered Apple Bloom, “w-when did’ya get back?”

“Oh, about fifteen minutes ago, give or take.” Smiled the lavender unicorn as she began trotting downstairs, Spike in tow.

“We-we didn’t touch anything, Twilight!” Came the timid squeak of Sweetie Belle. “We were just- I mean we were... It was-”

Letting a small giggle slip out the corner of her mouth, Twilight turned to the three, frightened fillies and fixed them with a look of calm, clear compassion.

“It’s *all right*, girls.” Reassured Twilight, stroking their heads with a single hoof. “I’m just glad my basement’s not on fire and Princess Celestia’s console is still in one piece.” She shrugged. “I suppose I shouldn’t really be mad at you for using the console: I lost track of time after I promised to be here to supervise you, and I kept you waiting for so long. It would’ve been unfair to expect you not to play. So, I’m sorry.”

“But... but we didn’t get anything out of it, Twilight.” moaned Apple Bloom, “we tried and tried and tried, but we still ain’t got no Cutie Marks to show fer it.”

“Apple Bloom... Sweetie.... Scootaloo, do you want to know something?”

“What?” responded the three fillies in unison, their voices coming together in a chorus that couldn’t help but bring a warm smile to Twilight’s lips.

“I think... you three have something that’s far, far more important than just a simple Cutie Mark. You three fillies have a very special friendship that’s almost, I dare say... magical.”

“It’s this friendship that makes what you three fillies have more special than any Cutie Mark could ever hope to explain. It’s why you three will never find yourself without a shoulder to lean on, or a mane to cry into, and...”

Cocking her head over to the console, Twilight gave a sideways glance at the victory screen that still lingered, testament to whatever the three fillies before her were capable of, so long as they had each other.

“...It’s why you three will always, and I mean *a/ways*, be together.”

“Awww... that was so swee-” was all Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle could finish saying before Scootaloo broke the silence with yet another inappropriately-timed comment.

“Yeah, yeah, any sappier than this and I feel like half my teeth’re gonna fall right outta my mouth! I mean, c’mon, we just beat three of Marevel’s greatest villains at the same time and all we’ve got to show for it are blank flanks?! I’m happy for us an’ all, Twilight, but this is getting us nowhere!”

Taken off guard by Scootaloo’s... ‘outburst,’ Twilight merely raised her left eyebrow and eyed the filly with a look of vague skepticism, only to quickly shake her head and let a short giggle escape her lips.

“Maybe some other time, alright girls? I don’t know if you haven’t noticed, but it’s already getting *very* dark outside... maybe you’d like to stay here for the night?”

No sooner did Twilight speak those words did a small, impish grin cross Scootaloo’s face, a brief glint of mischief sparkling in her eyes as she quickly put on her best poker face.

“Of course, Twilight! We’d be *delighted* to.”

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“Ya shure this here’s a good idea, Scootaloo? I mean, sneakin’ outta Fluttershy’s house is one thing, but sneakin’ into Twilight’s basement? Ain’t that like breakin’ an’ enterin’?”

Rolling her eyes at Apple Bloom, Scootaloo sighed and began explaining the situation to her friend for what seemed to her, the umpteenth time.

“It’s not breaking and entering if we’re already inside the house! Now shhh! We don’t want to wake Spike or Twilight up.” Scootaloo turned her attention back to the door in front of her, creaking it open as carefully as she could. Her friends held their breath, expecting at any moment a loud creak to bring Twilight or her dragon assistant running to the scene. But by some grace of Celestia, Scootaloo managed to get the door wide enough for the three of them to squeeze downstairs.

“Alright, we’re in.”

The three fillies closed in on their prize: the Xbox 360 sat before them, waiting for them to turn it on and claim their cutie marks.

Scootaloo’s mischievous grin stretched from ear to ear. “Perfect.” She said. “We got the Xbox, its games, and an entire night to try them all! I’m sure ONE of them will net us our marks!”

Applebloom tried to suppress the nervous feeling that was racing down her spine. “If ya say so...”

Scootaloo had run up to the modest pile of games next to the console. “So where do we begin? Aw man, all these games look so cool!”

“Maybe we should give Marevel vs Colcom another go! We were mighty good at it before, Ah bet we can pull off some sorta challenge that can get us our cutie marks!”

“Ahem...” The two of them looked back to see Sweetie Bell step forward. “Actually, I remember a game that we might be good at.”

Scootaloo gave a strange look. “What’s that?”

"My big sister talked about it. Basically you build a base in order to make troops and send them all over a map to destroy the enemy's base. She said it was kind of like chess, and she really liked it!"

Applebloom pulled a face. "Ah *stink* at chess..." Scootaloo looked more optimistic.

"A game where you're a military commander, huh? That's awesome!" Her eyes gazed into the distance: in her mind she could see herself standing resolutely before a crowd of saluting soldiers. A general was pinning medal after medal on her chest to celebrate her accomplishments in the line of duty, and she wore a cutie mark proudly on her flank...

"...aloo...Scootaloo...! HEY!"

The pegasus shook herself back to reality. The soldiers were gone, replaced by her friends, who were giving her funny looks.

"Ya still with us, Scoots?" Applebloom quipped.

Scootaloo turned back to the games, looking them up and down and trying to ignore the heat rising in her face. "Kind of tired..." She muttered. "So what's this game called, Sweetie Belle?"

Sweetie Belle shrugged. "I don't remember the name, actually. I know it had something to do with WAR...Tyr...Tai...**something** War."

"Found it!" Scootaloo held a game proudly aloft. "This what you're talking about, Sweetie Belle?"

The unicorn took one look at the cover of the game in front of her and suppressed a chill. "I don't...think so..."

Scootaloo looked at the game cover. "It's gotta be: it's the only game Twilight has with "War" in the title. Besides, this game just looks AWESOME!" She yanked the case open, carefully removed the disk, and replaced the Marvel vs Capcom one as she had seen Twilight do.

Applebloom gazed nervously at the start-up screen. "If ya say so, Scoots."

“Should we turn the volume down, Scootaloo?” Sweetie Belle wondered.  
“We don’t want to wake Twilight up...”

Scootaloo shrugged, gazing at the metal logo that had just appeared on-screen. “We’re in the basement, she’s upstairs. She’s not gonna hear us.”

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**GRRRNNNG-GRNG-GRNG-GRNG-GRRRRRNNNGG!!**  
**GGRRRRRAAAAARRRGGGHHHHH!**

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRGHHH!!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!”

---

Twilight sat bolt upright in bed with a gasp. It was that *sound* again...that horrible, gut-turning grinding of metal that had given her nightmares not so long before, followed by three simultaneous, high-pitched screams of terror.

“GIRLS?!”

Spike had sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Guuh...whuzz goin’ on...”

“No time, hop on!”

Bolting out of bed, Twilight tossed her number-one assistant up on her back as she galloped down the stairs to her basement at breakneck speed, silently whispering prayers to Celestia that the Cutie Mark Crusaders hadn’t found... *that game*.

Throwing open the basement's door with her magic, Twilight frantically galloped down the stairs, her heart hammering in her chest as she prayed that she wouldn't find what she feared she would...

... only to behold a trio of twitching, traumatized fillies lying before the television, their horrified expressions vacant and blank as their pupils contracted to mere pinpoints.

"So... so much blood..." Apple Bloom muttered weakly as the image of Marcus Fenix stood on the screen, the bayonet of his Lancer assault rifle coated and slick with crimson Locust fluids as he towered over the devastated remains of his latest opponent.

"The horror... the horror!" Sweetie Belle let out a high-pitched moan as she clutched at her head with her hooves, trying to dispel the gore-filled images that had been seared into her brain.

"CANNOT... UNSEE..." A twitching Scootaloo muttered incoherently, the controller laying on the basement floor right before her limp forehooves, her young, innocent mind completely traumatized by sights that nopony could have possibly prepared her for. "TOO MUCH... BLOOD..."

Slamming a forehoof into her forehead in exasperation, Twilight Sparkle moved forward to switch off the Xbox 360, the image darkening to black as she cut the power to the television as well, before moving to collect the three twitching, traumatized fillies from their prone positions on the floor.

"C'mon girls, let's get you out of here and get you into bed. Sweet Celestia, I'm going to have a hard time explaining this one to Rarity..."

---

*'knock-knock'*

"Coooooming!" came Rarity's sing-song voice as she gracefully trotted over to the front door of the Carousel Boutique, fresh and re-invigorated after Twilight had so gracefully offered to take the Crusaders off her hooves for one night.



“Welcome to Carousel Boutique, where every garment is chic, unique, and manifi-”

Instead of a pony with a garment in need, or a show-stopping mare with a craving for gems on her threads, Rarity instead beheld the rather dreadful sight of a panting, exhausted Twilight Sparkle with three shivering fillies slung across her back, each cuddled in a cringing fetal position and attempting to suck on their hooves... to no avail.

“Rarity... I’m so sorry...” The lavender mare whispered, “... *I tried my best.*”

The immaculately groomed fashionista could only heave a heavy, tired sigh; somehow, she had the feeling it was going to be a very, very long night.

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*Dearest Princess Celestia,*

*Thank you so much for the game that you have sent. Though I can hardly profess myself to be a comic buff, it was extremely entertaining, and I look forward to seeing the Coltcom characters shine in their own games soon.*

*Today I did not so much LEARN something about friendship as I was reminded of one of its most important traits: teamwork. As teamwork helped me and my friends defeat Nightmare Moon two years ago, three of your youngest subjects were able to conquer seemingly impossible odds today by working together. By helping your friends and letting them help you, all sorts of feats become possible.*

*On a different note, I learned that I need to hide any violent/gory games I have well away when fillies come over to play: they can and will get their hooves on them otherwise. The results are NOT pretty. (Actually I may just give my copy of Gears of War to Pinkie Pie when she gets her own console, I know I’m never going to play it again...)*

*Ever your faithful student,  
Twilight Sparkle*

# Chapter 6

## Command and Conquer: Generals

“Aaaaand, done!” came the proud declaration of Twilight Sparkle, the quill she had been so carefully levitating coming to a rest on her study desk as she glanced over her notes with pinpoint precision, looking out for miscalculations or misinterpretations.

“Spike, Spike! Come down here! I think I’ve finally found the answer!”

Barrelling down the stairs at breakneck speed, carting a wagonload of books behind him, the purple-scaled diminutive dragon rushed down the library’s central spiral staircase, answering Twilight’s call.

“What is it, Twilight?” The young assistant puffed as he reached the bottom of the staircase, panting and sweating. “What did you find?”

“I think I’ve finally found a way to determine just how much sugar is required to concoct the perfect shortcake!” Proclaimed the lavender mare, her chest puffed out in pride. “You see, Pinkie asked me to try one of my... ‘science thingies’ on the shortcakes over at Sugarcube corner. I think I’ve just found the perfect ratio to-”

Before she could even finish, Twilight was interrupted by a short gag from her faithful assistant, the baby dragon’s response catching in his throat as he grasped his cramping stomach with both hands.

“What is it, Spike?” asked Twilight. “Is it a letter from the Princess? Another assignment? Can you tell?”

With a short gag, Spike’s tiny, characteristic wisp of green dragon’s flame erupted forth from his gullet, and shot forth into the air before coalescing into that familiar, bound scroll that Twilight had come to know and love as letters from her ever-wise mentor.

“Ooh! It’s a letter from the Princess! Maybe that special request I sent in for tickets to the Solar Sun Symposium finally got through! Canterlot ticketing sure knows how to take its time...”

Gently levitating the scroll, Twilight slowly undid the royal seal that bound the Princess’s letter, unfurling the note to see just what important task the Princess had deigned to entrust her prized pupil with.

---

*My Dearest, Most Faithful Student*

*I have two wonderful pieces of news for you today, both of which you and your friends will be absolutely delighted to hear.*

*First off, the Canterlot University for Electrical Engineering plans to go public with the Xbox 360 roughly within the span of the next few weeks or so; it appears a heating issue (whatever that may mean) has arisen in several models of the device.*

*Still, the university is determined to release the console, and will ensure you and your friends receive complimentary copies for both this delay and all your faithful assistance.*

*Now, onto the second order of news. If you remember, the Canterlot University for Computer Science had also previously sent you what they call a ‘PC’. Cutting a long story short, the University plans on going public with this in a while as well, probably to satisfy the all-too-common ‘rivalry’ between our illustrious higher learners.*

*As thus, they will be sending over not one, but two copies of yet another game, two ‘PCs’ and something called a ‘Point-to-Point Communicator’ for use by both you and your friends.*

*Given the wonderful feedback I have received from both Universities, I am confident your advice will be just the sort of aid they need.*

*Your Mentor,  
Princess Celestia*

---

“Sending over?” mumbled Twilight, poring over the Princess’s letter. “They couldn’t possibly mean that...”

As Twilight quickly turned over to face Spike, the baby dragon doubled over in yet another wave of nausea as he felt something massive force its way out his flame glands and right into his gullet.

Unable to hold back the rising gout of flame, Spike loosed forth a massive belch as he spewed forth an enormous globule of fire, easily double the size of the first ‘PC’ he had ever coughed up.

Coalescing over Twilight’s head, the gout of flame suspended itself in mid-air for a short time, condensed into a ball of shimmering light...

“*Hayseed...*” Twilight squeaked.

**CRASH!**

Spike cringed, leaning down to meet Twilight at eye level. “Why’d you just stand there? You had plenty of time to dodge, or you could have caught it with your magic, or...”

“Just get this thing off of me, please.”

---

It was to Twilight’s huge relief that the PCs she had been sent were no different in model or make than the one she had been previously sent - by sheer virtue of memory, she could perfectly recall just what she needed to do to assemble them, and had taken mere minutes instead of agonizing hours... right after she had spent some time disconnecting the half-slugged piece of machinery on her desk that Pinkie Pie had nearly overloaded.

Spike in the meantime was in the bedroom, resting within his basket and recovering from the sheer strain of burping up the huge device that was nearly half again his size, leaving Twilight alone to her devices.

“Phew... now that *that’s* done...” The lavender mare muttered to herself as she levitated the two disc casings before her. “Let’s see here...”

Unlike the eerie, unsettling crystals and effervescent aura of green that adorned the previous box, the current image sprawled across the cover was that of a massive, floating metallic platform that housed thousands of armored pegasi, each one fleeing the platform in a maddened, frantic blitz as a massive, blue-tinged column of light tore an enormous, gaping gash right through the center of the carrier.

“Command and Conquer... Generals?” Twilight’s face split into a huge grin. “COMMAND AND CONQUER! Oh, you’re the BEST, Princess!” She turned to face the computer again. “As long as Pinkie Pie doesn’t find out about this, I have a feeling this is going to be a very good day...”

Right on cue, a pink-streaked bolt of supersonic pony careened right through Twilight’s front door, crashing into the lavender unicorn and sending book after book crashing to the ground in heaps.

“Ugh... What in Equestria-?” was all Twilight Sparkle could manage, right before her face collided with a massive cloud of bubbling pink energy.

“Ya got a new game, didn’t ‘cha Twilight?” came the all-too-familiar sugar-fueled squeal. “Didn’t ‘cha, Didn’t ‘cha? Hmmm? Hmmmmm?!”

Stunned by her friend’s sudden arrival, Twilight could only stare at Pinkie Pie in silence, her right eye twitching slightly in horror.

“P-Pinkie?” stammered the unicorn, frozen with shock. “H-How’d you- I mean... It’s not- I don’t have a new game!”

“Silly Twilight,” chuckled Pinkie, waving a hoof lazily in the air as she giggled, “A triple knee-twitch, double floppy ears and one full-body shake means that Princess Celestia just sent you one of those new game thingies! Can I see it? Huh Huh Huh?!”

“Wait a second,” came Rainbow Dash’s all-too familiar voice from the space above the two, a frown creasing her face as she read the title. “It’s a Command & Conquer title. We want NOTHING to do with this, *alright*, Pinks?”

“Oh don’t be silly, Rainbow,” came the ever-refined voice of a certain resident fashionista, “You should never write something off before even

*trying* it. Although... I do think your reaction isn't exactly unwarranted though." Rarity could barely suppress a snigger as the blue pegasus's wings bristled with irritation at her last, oh-so-smug statement.

"Well excuse me for living, Rarity." Rainbow grumbled.

"Taint no use bein' a sore loser, Rainbow," perked up a voice from behind the immaculately groomed designer, a brown earth pony and yellow pegasus trotting through the library's front door and making their way towards Twilight. "You were just real unlucky is all. Then again, you sure are unlucky most of the time."

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up, Applejack. Let's all make fun of Rainbow Dash and completely ignore the fact that this series is directly responsible for the Great Fire of Ponyville!"

Twilight couldn't help but feel blood flush her cheeks at that. She was still a little embarrassed about the whole 'natural disaster' bit that appeared in the local paper.

"Jokes aside, ladies," said Twilight, shaking off her embarrassment as best she could, "the princess is counting on us to help the university make this project a success. Hopefully we'll get out of this one without another disaster."

Shooting a quick glare at Pinkie, the lavender mare stared her friend down with eyes that could pierce boulders.

"Am I *clear*, Pinkie?"

Stifling a snort, the pink earth pony merely tilted her head and gave Twilight a look of vague comprehension and an enigmatic grin.

"Okey dokey loki!"

Heaving a deep sigh, Twilight hung her head in defeat as she trotted back over to the game. "Guess that's the best response I could've gotten anyway."

“Command and Conquer Generals!” Rainbow Dash said in a mock-deep voice, gazing at nothing in particular and holding hoof out in front of her. “It BURNS with the epic-ness of combat! It’s so incredible that your face might just melt from looking upon it! This game is so awesome, your computer WILL NOT be able to handle it!”

“*Thank you*, Rainbow Dash.” Twilight’s attempt to sound stern horribly betrayed by the chuckle that escaped her as she jammed both discs right into the new PCs. “Now all we need to do is wait for it, and-”

“Welcome to Installshield Unicorn! Please choose how you would like to install this game.”

Twilight Sparkle’s shoulders hunched, her expression wry. “Oh... right... this.”

---

Daunting as the installation process seemed at first glance, it wasn’t long before the purple-maned mare found herself faced with the coveted ‘*Play Game*’ option, all six of her friends hanging over her shoulders and watching with bated breath as Twilight prepared to push the button.

The second Twilight’s hoof left the mouse, the screen immediately faded to black as all signs of activity on the screen ceased, leaving the six ponies looking at one another with looks of confusion plastered across their faces.

“I didn’t touch anything, Twilight, I swear.” Pinkie Pie quickly declared.

“Maybe this here’s like that Rock Band game, or something...” muttered Applejack, her hooves crossed in thought. “Maybe y’all just gotta-”

Before the orange earth pony could finish her sentence, a pulsing sphere of pure white came to life on the screen, two simple letters engraved within a platinum circle, two simple words flaring up in brilliant color right beneath the circle.

“*EA GAMES! Challenge everything...*”

Thundering forth from Twilight's speakers, the resounding voice elicited a small "eep" from Fluttershy as the timid yellow pegasus darted underneath Twilight's nearest desk, bones chattering in fright.

As quickly as it had come, the sphere winked off-screen as the ponies assembled once more found themselves faced with nothing but a blank screen and very, very awkward silence.

"Definitely like Rock Band..." Rainbow Dash muttered wryly to herself as she sighed internally, and waited for a few seconds, counting it down. *And three... two... one...*

Right on cue, yet another image faded from black on the screen, the Generals logo visible at the upper right corner - the scene visible on the screen showed an idyllic, sandy beach, its shores lapped at by the azure blue waters of the ocean.

It would have been postcard-perfect; had it not been for the presence of several dozen armed ponies running along the beach, their ranks being blasted apart by explosive volleys from a steel, armored platform that was bristling with barrels, floating in the midst of the sea some distance from the shore.

It took only a curious click from Twilight, and the image suddenly darkened slightly, a series of buttons flashing their way into sight below the Generals logo on the screen, immediately identifying itself as the menu.

However, unlike the grim, still menu of the Tiberium Wars game, this menu was the complete opposite.

The screen was nothing but a frenzy of movement: a battle was raging between unknown armies, with tanks blasting away at charging units, missiles and bullets exploding everywhere as a [heavy rock theme](#) blared in the background.

"Ooooooh..." Pinkie Pie's expression was one of awe, her eyes ensnared by the screen and enraptured by the action. "Prettyyyy..."

Twilight could only give her pink-furred friend a cautious glance, and then began slowly edging the keyboard and the mouse closer to herself like a



protective mother defending her child. "Let's... not get too excited here, Pinkie..."

Knowing what awaited her if she clicked on the Campaign option, Twilight smartly chose the option that stated "Multiplayer", remembering what her mentor had mentioned in the letter about the 'point-to-point' communicator - while Princess Celestia hadn't been big on any explanations, Twilight had enough common sense up there to figure out it had something to do with linking the two PCs together so they could play together.

Though her curiosity regarding just *what* made that device tick, and how exactly it worked, was burning away at the back of her head, a persistent nagging that wouldn't go away, Twilight bit down on her inquisitive nature and focused on the task at hand. She could figure out just how the communicator worked all she wanted later - right now, she had some game testing to do.

The point-to-point communicator, luckily for Twilight, had already come pre-assembled with convenient instructions printed onto an accompanying pamphlet, such as what went where, and what all the fancy blinking lights meant.

The instructions were literally Rainbow Dash-proof, and within moments, the studious bookworm had both the other PC running its very own copy of Generals while simultaneously connecting to her own, seamlessly intertwined by the magic of science.

"There, all done!" proudly declared the lavender unicorn as she gave both her hooves a quick dustoff, looking over each station twice to make sure everything was absolutely perfect.

"So uh, I guess that since we've got two of these here thingies, that there communicator doohickey's supposed ta-"

"Absolutely right, Applejack!" interjected Twilight, cutting off the orange earth pony mid-sentence. "We'll be playing against one another this time. It'll be a blast!"

"I don't know, Twilight, darling." came Rarity's airy tone, "Competition tends to bring out the very worst in ponies, as our two good friends over there have oh-so clearly shown."

Flipping her elegantly-styled mane over to a clueless Rainbow Dash and Applejack, the pegasus and Earth Pony could only glance at each other in bewilderment finally realizing just who Rarity was referring to, causing both their cheeks to flush red with embarrassment.

"Hey!" yelled Rainbow Dash, "that Iron Pony competition was a one-off!"

"I'm sure, dear," replied rarity, raising a hoof to stifle a giggle. "I'm completely sure it was."

"Ooooookay," interjected Twilight, stepping in between the two, "I think we should get started, so who'd like to go first?"

"Oooh! Oooh! Me! Me! Pick me! Pick me, Twilight, pickmepickmepickmepickme!!!" Pinkie Pie suddenly erupted into an excited flurry of movement, hopping about in place and waving a hoof in the air frantically.

Twilight took one look at her partygoer friend, one glance at the rest of her gathered posse, and slapped a hoof to her forehead as she realized that nopony else even looked as remotely interested as Pinkie Pie was in giving Generals a shot.

"Fine..." The lavender mare sighed with a resigned expression, and gestured at the second unoccupied PC with a hoof. "It's all yours, Pinkie."

"Whoooooopee!" yelled Pinkie as she did an overhead flip, somehow miraculously landing right in front of the PC without breaking anything. "Let's see what party I can throw *this time!*"

"A-*hem!*" came a quick, sharp cough from Twilight, shooting a razor-sharp glare at the jittery earth pony to remind her just what happened the last time she tried throwing one of those.

"I meaaaaaan... uh..." drawled Pinkie, quickly backpedaling to save her flank. "Let's how I can... help Princess Celestia this time!"

Twilight raised an eyebrow at how fast her friend had spat those last few words out... but then again, probing Pinkie's mind would probably be tantamount to solving a 64-sided rubix's cube. Heaving a sigh, the lavender unicorn simply turned back to her own screen to assess her options.

The top half of the screen had greeted her with eight slots, the first of which was occupied by her name, shaded out in a solid purple that was the very same hue as her coat, and a selection bar under 'Factions' that simply read "Lunar Republic." Right next to that was the selection bar for Teams, but right now her selection simply read 'None', given the fact that she hadn't even so much as tweaked a single option yet.

Pinkie Pie's name had taken up the slot right below hers, her name shaded out in a shocking pink just like her fur, and seemed to have already chosen her faction with surprising speed - Twilight had just enough time to see Pinkie's own faction selection shift from "Solar Empire" to "Lunar Republic Nuke General".

The eight slots below her however, were greyed out, even though they read 'Open', but Twilight took one glance at the map selection and knew that this map had only been designed with two players in mind - it wasn't going to be taking any more contenders any time soon.

"Lunar Republic and Solar Empire?" Rainbow Dash muttered as she glanced over Pinkie Pie's shoulder at her PC's screen, her expression skeptical. "That sounds way too much like Princess Celestia and Princess Luna!"

"Well, actually, it is!" Rarity's voice had a small edge of surprise to it as she levitated the Generals manual in front of her, quickly reading up on the game's backstory and the three factions that were supposedly embroiled in fictional battle within the game's world itself.

"The creators designed the three factions in mind with both Princess Luna and Princess Celestia as artistic inspiration... oh, sweet Celestia, Discord's on this. And he's leading this... *'Equestrian Liberation Army'*."

The rest of her gathered friends continued chattering away from behind her as they took turns peering at the manual, but it was all just background

noise to Twilight - she was far too busy considering her options on what faction she had to choose for the match.

The first choice on the list was the Solar Empire - the faction that had been based on Equestria's beloved monarch, the descriptive text of the Solar Empire stated that it favored the use of shock and awe, overwhelming force and the most sophisticated sciences and magics to crush their enemies into the proverbial dust.

Right on the other hoof, there was the Lunar Republic. The faction based upon Equestria's *other*, lesser known Princess, the Lunar Republic, though less refined than its solar counterpart, favored the use of raw, destructive power and great numbers to overcome their opponents.

And lastly, the one whose inspiration that Twilight would never forget, the faction inspired by Discord, was the Equestrian Liberation Army, or 'ELA' as the selector on the screen stated. True to the monstrous spirit who had inspired it, the ELA was a faction that favored sneakiness and underhanded tactics to subvert and eliminate their adversaries.

All in all it was quite difficult for Twilight, the mare who wanted to learn and experience *everything*, to make a choice here, and yet even between the three main factions that were there for her to choose from, each faction had another *three* sub-generals for her to pick.

All in all there were a whopping total of *twelve* choices available to her, and the purple unicorn's head began to swim from the sheer number of possibilities at her hoof tips.

"Come oooooon Twilight!" A high-pitched whine next to her suddenly snapped her out of her reverie, "You've gotta chooooooose!"

"Oh- right, sorry about that, girls."

Thumbing her mouse over the plethora of choices before her, Twilight's eyes roamed over option after option, general after general; the purple unicorn's head swam with idea after idea as she struggled to find her *ideal* outcome.

Then, she saw it. The very moment it flickered past her eyes, the bookworm knew she had found exactly who she needed.

Framed against a simple background of numerous azure beams crashing down from the heavens above, a blond-maned pony dressed in an immaculate blue uniform adorned with countless badges and medals affixed Twilight with a steely glare from her sky-blue orbs, almost calling to the lavender mare to pick her.

“General Solar Fury, Super-Weapons General of the Solar Empire...” read Twilight, her jaw slightly agape in awe of the lone mare framed right over her screen.

Trotting over to her friend, Rarity cast a single eye over Twilight’s screen, carefully reading off every single one of the General’s strengths and weaknesses.

“My my my, not a single tank?” Chided Rarity, her voice laced with skepticism. “Are you absolutely sure this is... good for you, Twilight?”

“Definitely.” Twilight answered without a second thought. She *knew* that this General was just who she needed to win this match. “With just one thing to focus on, hunkering down and defending my base while I keep building these superweapons, it should be easy to focus on just that one thing to do! As for when they *do* get set up...”

There was an almost evil glint in the unicorn’s eye as she rubbed her hooves together in anticipation, and she eagerly hit the “Ready” button, itching just about as much as Pinkie Pie was to get the match started.

Almost immediately, the screen faded to black; a sprawling plain materialized before Twilight as she no longer found herself assaulted by the constant hammer of explosion after explosion, countless ponies running headlong across a beachhead as they hurtled onwards to their doom.

Instead, before the studious bookworm stood a simple, lone building, a small revolving dish in a constant spin overhead while a lone armored stallion, a massive plow-like contraption attached to his back, [waited silently close by.](#)

Having read the manual and already formulated a strategy, Twilight knew exactly what to do. The moment she was able, her cursor immediately darted over to the armored stallion, whom she knew was responsible for base construction, and ordered him to lay down several structures in rapid succession.

The first to go up was a series of Solar Fusion Reactors - Twilight knew that as a Superweapon General, her trump card was one that required gratuitous amounts of power, and she would need *lots* of them to ensure that they would be in working order once they were set up. Not even content to build several in succession, she clicked on the 'Control Rods' upgrade as well the moment she was able, not even caring how low her bit counter was dipping as her Power Bar began climbing up and up.

The second to go up was her Barracks, straightaway queueing up several of her basic infantry units, something the game called 'Solar Empire Rangers', just for basic defence.

A few moments later, a Supply Centre had then been erected next to her Barracks, and that was soon spewing out armored chariots that swooped down on the large pile of crates that were situated near her base, hauling them back to the Supply Centre with surprising swiftness and sending the number on her bits counter soaring back upwards like Rainbow Dash attempting another Sonic Rainboom.

The last few structures to be assembled were several missile defense installations that the game called "EMP Patriots", specialized defenses Twilight knew would come be perfect for her fight against the rambunctious Pinkie Pie.

Utterly absorbed in her own world, Twilight didn't even bother to cast a sidelong glance at Pinkie as she slowly began to expand both her resource lines to outlying "Gem Refineries" that only served to supplement her existing supply chain.

The moment her Strategy Centre went up, a resounding alarm suddenly blared out from her PC's speakers, while a red triangle zoomed in on the minimap, where a large cluster of pink dots were closing in on the trio of purple pinpricks that represented her EMP patriots.

“The hay!? Pinkie, how could you be that fast!” Twilight cried out in surprise as she clicked on her Barracks and immediately mashed the button on the creation tab, [ordering it to pump out as many more Rangers and Missile Defenders as she could to prepare her defenses](#). As the progress bar rose and her bit counter fell, Twilight stole a glance over at Pinkie’s approaching forces.

“Lunar Republic Nuke General, duh!” Pinkie Pie replied in her usual offbeat manner, a lopsided grin on her face even as her army trundled forward with the intent to crush Twilight’s base beneath its iron treads. “General Blinding Light has got the fastest tanks around that make the biggest booms! And everypony knows that the bigger the boom, the louder the party!”

While it wasn’t nearly as large as the nightmarishly huge, computer-wrecking force that she had created in Tiberium Wars, Pinkie had amassed a sizable army of massive, treaded contraptions the manual had only identified as “Battlemaster Tanks.”

With terrifying force, the massive machines shook the very earth before them as they barreled towards Twilight’s base; smaller, more nimble ponies clad in cyan blue uniforms chose instead to run in a loose formation behind the massive contraptions, avoiding what might happen if they were so unfortunate as to come between the tank and its quarry.

“What in all of Ponyville-” was all Twilight could manage as she brought her own forces to bear, sending a relatively large army of her own to the front lines. Mostly comprised of stallions clad in pristine white armor from head to hoof, these ponies bore the emblem of Princess Celestia on their epaulets with the greatest of pride.

“These Solar Empire Rangers should keep Pinkie busy while I get my cannons set up...” Twilight muttered, the unicorn doing her best to keep her head cool as she slowly lined up her Particle Cannons for production.

Quickly surveying the battlefield, Twilight could see that Pinkie’s forces were, thankfully, vulnerable to her EMP defenses, the pink earth pony’s massive tanks grinding to a halt as the pulses of azure magic brought them to a standstill, her infantry unable to advance beyond the Solar Empire Rangers and their unrelenting wall of fire.

Within moments, Pinkie's Battlemasters had been reduced to so much scrap metal, each one detonating in a fiery conflagration that consumed everything around it, and her infantry battalions were writhing on the ground in pain, Twilight's Rangers standing triumphant over them and punching their hooves in the air in a gesture of dominance.

"Awww, you got me that time, Twilight!"

Wiping the sweat off her brow, Twilight turned to face Pinkie and offer her friend a gentle hoofshake in respect of a battle well fought.

"...but this party's not over yet!"

Snapping her head back to the monitor's screen at breakneck speed, Twilight could only gape in horror as ten utterly massive cannons took positions right around the perimeter of her base, before solidly planting themselves into the ground with four monolithic support columns, slowly aligning their fearsome ordnance towards Twilight's hapless defenses.

"Party Poppers, show 'em what 'cha got!"

On cue, all ten cannons each dislodged a massive shell from the length of their gigantic cannons, a miniature sun erupting from the barrel as the ordnance hurtled through the air, falling from the sky like crashing anvils upon the line of EMP Patriots.

Smashing headfirst into the hapless Patriots, the shells detonated with thunderous force and blinding light, miniature suns and mushroom clouds rising from blackened earth as Twilight's EMP patriots were utterly blown to dust by the sheer force of the explosion, and any unfortunate rangers close enough to the radius were instantly disintegrated right where they stood.

"Oh, Sweet Celestia..." was all Twilight could manage as she slowly cupped her mouth with her hooves, her horror mounting. Stars above, the game hadn't even been going on for more than ten minutes and she was already getting the stuffing pounded out of her base - how in the hay was she going to turn *this* around?

*"Particle Cannon Ready."*



“Wha-?! I- oh, right!” sputtered the lavender mare as she quickly brought her Particle Cannon array online, immediately requisitioning one to blow the stuffing out of Pinkie’s artillery while simultaneously bringing the rest of her array to life, their azure lances of energy spearing the sky as they found their mark right where Twilight planned: Pinkie’s base.

Rearing up on her hind legs, her normally straight mane frazzled and fraying at the edges, Twilight threw her head back and gave an utterly maniacal laugh as her particle cannons rained brilliant blue destruction over Pinkie’s entire base, reducing once-proud buildings to monstrous slag heaps as the cannons cut through fortified metal like a hot knife through cupcakes.

“IN THE PRINCESS’S NAME, YOUR EARTH SHALL BURN! BURN I SAY! BUUUUUUURN!”

Cackling wildly, Twilight seemed lost in the euphoria of the moment as she traced column after column of light all over Pinkie’s base, her laughter only growing wilder and wilder in pitch as Fluttershy gave a small “eep” in fright, almost positive she even heard lightning strike a few times.

“Uh, Twilight,” deadpanned Applejack, tapping her friend on the shoulder and snapping her out of her trance, “It’s just a game?”

“Oh... right.” muttered Twilight, her cheeks flushed red with embarrassment as she returned to face the screen.

In the aftermath of Twilight’s berserked rush of Particle beams, Pinkie Pie’s base lay in utter ruin, her structures nothing but smoldering husks, completely destroyed and inoperable. As Rarity and Fluttershy watched Twilight’s screen over her shoulder, they realized that by all rights, the game should have been over then - but it wasn’t.

The smoldering remains of Pinkie Pie’s base soon faded to dust, leaving a blank spot of ground where it used to stand, but the game still progressed. Twilight’s Chinooks were still harvesting supplies, her dozers were still hard at work throwing up more EMP Patriots to replace the ones decimated by Pinkie Pie’s Nuke Cannons, and there was not a single pink dot left in sight on the minimap.

So if Pinkie's base had been so utterly wiped out, then just *what* was going on here?

The answer came within seconds - just as Twilight spent her last bit from her reserves in throwing up one last EMP Patriot, there was a chorus of voices that suddenly issued from her speakers, all repeating one phrase over and over again... a single, lone phrase that froze Twilight's blood where it ran.

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

*"Nuclear Missile detected."*

If Twilight's jaw could've hit the floor, it probably would've done so right then and there. Her pupils literally shrank in shock as she saw tiny little pinpricks of pink suddenly appear one by one *all over* the map, scattered like a bad pimple outbreak.

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeeey Twilight," came her friend's voice, echoing from the other side of her PC. Normally, Twilight would've tried to focus, but Pinkie's cheery tone prompted the lavender mare to look over and see what might have been the most unsettling, mischievous grin ever to cross Pinkie's face.

"I upgraded my party poppers! I hope you like these new, suuuuuuuuper-sized ones!"

“Oh, sweet Celestia-” was all Twilight could barely whisper to herself as she gaped at Pinkie’s monstrous arsenal of nukes. Had her Particle Cannons been fully charged, she *might* have had a chance at winning... but they were all currently spent and recharging, and Twilight was on her last legs.

The second Pinkie’s timers hit the dreaded ‘0:00’ mark, the pink earth pony gave a small giggle, moved her mouse a few inches over Twilight’s base...

...[and let the missiles fly.](#)

To call it a spectacular conflagration would have been like saying Celestia’s sun was bright. Pinkie Pie’s nuclear missiles crashed down upon Twilight’s base from the heavens in a devastating rain, much like how her own particle beams had descended from on high mere minutes ago.

Every missile that detonated let loose a gargantuan fireball, followed by a mushroom cloud that made the ones thrown up by the Nuke Cannon’s shells look like mere pinpricks in comparison. All over the screen, fireballs and mushroom clouds were rising up into the air, engulfing Twilight’s base in smoke and fire.

Her structures didn’t last even a second. The first missile to land instantly shaved off more than half of each of their health bars - the second one to land completely decimated them, reducing them to charred, blasted out husks.

Within moments, her entire base, and all her accompanying forces, lay in smoldering ruin, their broken and charred bodies littering the ground... the ground whereupon Pinkie Pie had etched a crude smiley face with the impact craters of her nukes.

From Pinkie Pie’s computer there could be heard a raucous series of cheers, and a proud statement of *“You are victorious!”* coming from the pink earth pony’s side of the table.

Everypony assembled could only stare wide-eyed in wonder at what just transpired before their very eyes. Even the normally reserved Rarity was stammering incoherently before Twilight’s screen, trying as best she could to form actual words.

Twilight, on the other hand, could only stare in muted silence at her screen, utterly dumbstruck by her complete inability to counter Pinkie's offensive, despite the fact she had calculated every single move to the *absolute letter*.

"I-Impossible..." was all she could manage to stammer out.

"Twilight, darling," assured Rarity, putting a gentle hoof over her friend's back, "I assure you, sometimes the best laid plans-"

"No, no, no, no, NO!" came the lavender unicorn's defiant declaration. "The plan *should've* worked! There's no reason I should've lost unless..."

Pausing for a brief moment, the light of inspiration flickered briefly in Twilight's eyes as the studious bookworm felt like she'd just uncovered the secret to life, the universe and, almost certainly, everything.

"...unless I wasn't planning properly!" declared the now-inspired unicorn with a triumphant gesture, pointing her hoof skyward in jubilation. "This new plan's going to be absolutely foolproof!"

Darting off to her desk, Twilight dove right into a spare copy of "Probability: A Unicorn's Best Friend" and began furiously etching out graphs and formula, the quill almost a blur as the unicorn cranked out theory after theory in an effort to deduce her "impossible" loss.

"Ohhhh boy," sighed Applejack, planting a hoof right over her face, "ah think we just stuck Twi over there to her books fer another whole few hours or so, ah reckn'."

"Awwwwwwwwwww," moaned Pinkie, slouching in front of her screen. "It's no fun if there's nopony to play with!"

Darting her eyes about the room, it almost seemed as if Pinkie was somehow scanning each and everypony present, causing some to flinch and some to quiver before her somewhat unsettling gaze.

"Ah-ha!" whooped Pinkie, pointing her hoof right at a certain utterly bored, rainbow-maned pegasus. "Why don't you give it a try, Dashie?"

Drifting lazily through the air, rainbow-tinged mane draped over her shut eyelids, Rainbow Dash almost collided into a nearby bookshelf as Pinkie's shrill cry rudely roused her from a well-enjoyed slumber.

"Ohhhh no," came Rainbow Dash's vehement protests, "I remember what happened the last time I tried one of those things; you can't fool *this* pegasus twice!"

"C'mon Dashie," begged Pinkie, bounding up and down in circles around the cyan pegasus, pleading with her over and over to take her spot.

"Please please please please please please please please pleaseeeeeeeeeeease."

"Nuh-uh, no way! I'm not getting my flank trounced again by some unstoppable 'AI'! I ain't coming within even ten feet of that game!"

"... Actually, sugarcube, why don't you and ah take a shot at it togetha, then?" Applejack suddenly suggested out of nowhere, and Rainbow Dash looked over to see a rather intrigued expression on the orange mare's face. The apple farmer was regarding the PC with a curious look, as though itching to give it a try herself. "It'd be just like Gears of War! Ah didn't even get a chance to play the last Command & Conquer, no thanks to Pinkie."

"That's... not that bad an idea, actually!" Rainbow Dash muttered after a moment, her eyebrow raised as her lips quirked upwards in a little smile. As catastrophic as their first few attempts at Gears of War had been, once they had learned the ropes of the game, (and gotten over its considerable gore factor) it had been immense fun playing it together with her athletic rival.

Perhaps this time, that fun factor would make up for the fact that she'd probably get her flank kicked so spectacularly she wouldn't be able to show her face in public for a few days.

"All right, Applejack," The cyan pegasus said with a grin that plainly said 'Challenge Accepted'. "You're on!"

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!" shrieked Pinkie, doing cartwheels all over the library's ceiling, confetti trailing in her wake.

“How in Equestria is she...” questioned Rarity, right eyebrow arched in disbelief as Pinkie continued defying all conventional laws of time and space.

“Don’t try, Rarity,” Applejack muttered as she sidled into the chair formerly occupied by Twilight Sparkle, already running through the steps of setting up the next match - because frankly, it was all very idiot-proof. “Remember what happened the last time Twilight tried to figure it out?”

“Oh, right...” she muttered, pushing all conventional understanding of ‘Pinkie Physics’ out of her mind with a simple wave of her hoof. “I’d... not want that, thank you very much.”

“Hey, Applejack,” yelled Rainbow Dash from over across her monitor, “you finished stallin’ yet?!”

“Hold yer horses, Rainbow,” came the orange mare’s ever-calm reply, “why dont’cha spend some of yer time thinkin’ before you go chargin’ in like ya always do.”

“Hey!” protested the tomboyish pegasus, blood flushing her normally overconfident features a deep red, “I read the manual... sometimes.”

“A few times too few, if ya ask me.” Applejack snickered as she browsed through the available selection of Generals, trying to make her pick. Twilight’s match with Pinkie had already shown her what *not* to pick; Applejack was a pony who very much preferred getting her hooves down in the dirt, right in the thick of things.

The Nuke and Superweapon Generals, Blinding Light and Solar Fury, however, seemed to be the types who were content to sit back and, as the expression went, ‘turtle up’, attacking their enemies from afar.

To the apple farmer, though, such a strategy simply screamed *boring*. Instead, she scrolled right through the menu, searching through for something that called out to her... and found it right where she least expected it.

“Lunar Republic Tank General, huh?” Applejack said to herself in a thoughtful murmur under her breath. Right in front of her, the screen

showed her the image of a male stallion, his powerful frame and straight, angular jaw only accentuated by the rigid square of his freshly pressed uniform.

Whoever he was, General Iron Hoof sure looked like one mean, tough buzzard who could take a hay of a beating.

From what she'd read in the manual, those large, unwieldy contraptions were actually the mainstay of the ground forces. Strong, tough, reliable, and designed for getting right into the thick of things... the more the farmpony thought about it, the more she realized General Iron Hoof was exactly just the kind of General that suited her playstyle.

There wasn't a shred of hesitation behind her movements as she immediately confirmed her selection, and hit the 'Ready' button, twisting her hooves about the wrist and cracking them.

Whichever faction or General Rainbow Dash had picked against her, Applejack was determined to give her rival the best fight she would ever get.

"May the best pony win, Rainbow Dash!" The farmpony declared as she raised a hoof outwards, and just as she expected, her rival met it solidly with her own in a hoofbump, setting the match in motion.

Just as it did before with Twilight and Pinkie, the screen went black the moment she hit "Ready", materializing into a sprawling desert plain that covered the entire screen.

"Alright," muttered Applejack, squinting her eyes as she focused on her lone Command Center, "Lessee how this here thing works."

Quickly selecting her dozer, Applejack invested a sizable portion of bits in a complex chain of supply lines much like the system of harvesting the Apple family used for Sweet Apple Acres, her trucks making a beeline straight for the surrounding supply depots as her already massive bit counter continued to spike like a parasprite outbreak.

“Now let’s see here,” drawled the orange earth pony, stretching out each of her words as she carefully directed her mouse button to the icon entitled ‘War Factory.’

“Hoo boy,” came Applejack’s characteristic southern cheer, “This here baby’s just what ah need tah get this here ball rollin’!”

Within moments, the orange pony had thrown up not just one, but *two* Lunar Republic War Factories, side by side, and Battlemaster Tanks were rolling out at a pace that would have made the Parasprite outbreak of Ponyville look like a minor incursion.

*‘With an army this size, ain’t no way ah’m gonna lose ta Rainbow Dash!’* Applejack thought to herself, hooves nearly twitching in anticipation as she steadily churned out tank after tank, eventually progressing to an utterly monstrous contraption called the ‘Emperor Overlord,’ a massive treaded beast that looked like it could simply crush *other* lesser tanks right beneath its sheer weight, so massive was it that it required no less than *six* fully-armored stallions to pilot the entire machine.

By the time five minutes had elapsed, Applejack had amassed a considerable army of a whopping *thirty-four* Battlemasters, with ten Emperor Overlords broadcasting waves of propaganda all over her entire army, reinforcing the rear guard. Looking over the contingent her War Factories had assembled, the humble farmpony could feel just the slightest twinge of pride stirring in her chest as she sent them rolling out in a massive, treaded storm of metal.

Peering over her monitor, Applejack could see sweat pouring off her winged friend’s brow as the rainbow-maned pegasus seemed utterly focused on a certain... *something*. Normally, Rainbow Dash wouldn’t sit still even if her life depended upon it, but whatever it was, if it could anchor Rainbow Dash to her seat for little over ten seconds, it was definitely worth worrying about.

The question, then, was this: just *what* had the cyan pegasus’ attention captured so thoroughly?

The answer came within seconds - just as the last of Applejack’s tanks cleared the entrance to her base, out of nowhere came a sudden storm of



[flying chariots that streaked on-screen](#), raining fireballs upon her armor - fireballs that *homed in* on her tanks, and demolished them utterly, reducing them to flaming scrap.

“What in tarnation-!?” Applejack’s eyes widened in shock as she realized that no less than *a quarter* of her Battlemasters had been wiped out, and she had lost *three* of her Emperor Overlords within that *single* salvo from the flying chariots. Just what trick did Rainbow Dash have up her sleeve!?

“HA! Suck on that, Iron Hoof! General Ace Wing’s King Raptor Chariots rule the skies!” The cyan pegasus suddenly whooped from the other side of Applejack’s computer, punching a hoof into the air... right as yet *another* wave of King Raptors flew over Applejack’s tank formation, sending scores more of her Battlemaster Tanks and another Emperor Overlord to the scrap heap in flaming balls of warped steel.

“Oh, hay naw ya don’t, Rainbow Dash!” The farmpony snarled defiantly, and she immediately selected all her remaining Emperor Overlords - all remaining six of them - and hit the button that would hopefully be her one remaining hope against Dash’s horrific air power.

“*Gatling Cannon is ready.*” A slow, baritone voice rumbled mere seconds later as twin rotating barrels suddenly appeared atop each of her Overlords, just as they began to cluster together - and none too soon.

From the pitch black areas of her map came yet one more wave of King Raptors, but if Rainbow Dash had been expecting an easy kill, her flying chariots got anything but.

The Gatling Cannons that had oh-so-suddenly been installed on Applejack’s Emperor Overlord immediately turned in the direction of the incoming aircraft, bringing their massive multi-barreled housings to bear as they began to spin ominously...

... right as they unleashed a blistering barrage of bullets that ripped through the air like a wall of shredders.

Rainbow Dash’s King Raptors never had a prayer. Tougher and stronger than regular Raptors as they were, they were still no match for the combined might of six Gatling Cannons ripping into them all at once. The

six Gatling Cannons opened fire simultaneously, and the cyan pegasus's airborne chariots flew right into the meat grinder, whereupon they were instantly blown out of the sky, crashing unceremoniously to the ground below them.

"Hah! Now how do ya like *them* apples, eh Rainbow?" Applejack crowed triumphantly as she directed what was left of her tank column, wounded but undefeated, to continue its advance towards where she knew Rainbow Dash's base lay. She still had six Emperor Overlords and about ten Battlemasters left - perhaps she could still turn this around!

"Awww, c'mon! I spent Celestia knows how many thousands of bits on those things!" Complained Rainbow Dash as she watched what was left of her King Raptors make their spectacular crash landings, but if anything, the pegasus seemed to regard it as more of an annoyance than a devastating loss.

And it was that lack of consternation that began to get Applejack very, very scared for her tanks, and what it boded for her forces.

"Oh well... let's see how you like these, Applejack!"

"How ah like wha...?" Applejack's look of confusion began to morph into horror as she realized that four of her Battlemasters had suddenly, mysteriously burst into flame... and then she saw the distinctive triangular, jet-black outlines of four Solar Empire Stealth Fighter Chariots retreating from her tank column, their jet-trails already far out of range of even her Overlords' Gatling Cannons.

"Oh fah Celestia's sake, ya've gotta be kiddin' me!" Realizing now that her tanks were on a race against the clock, for Rainbow Dash's aircraft still needed to repair and rearm themselves at an airfield before they could streak right back out to assault her forces once again, Applejack ordered her tanks to double forward, pushing them as fast as she could. If she could catch Dash's fighters while they were still in the midst of rearmament, she might still stand a chance!

"Let's see how ya like it when I take the fight ta you, Rainbow!"

Rolling forth into Rainbow Dash's base, Applejack's tanks met little in the way of resistance save for a few Solar Empire Rangers, easily crushed underhoof by Applejack's monstrous tank column as they bore down on a lone, hapless airfield, seemingly unoccupied.

"This here is Rainbow's base?" mumbled Applejack, raising a hoof to her temple in curiosity, "...looks a mite lonesome to me, maybe she's gone an' spent all of them bits again."

"Ah well, ain't no skin off mah flank!" declared the earth pony as she ordered each and every one of her mighty tank force to obliterate the airfield off the face of Equestria, massive cannons erupting with gouts of flame as they hurled shell after shell at Rainbow Dash's hapless structure, metal twisting and burning as it fell apart under an unrelenting onslaught of steel and fire.

"How'd ya like *them* apples, Rainbow!" smirked Applejack, almost confident that if the rest of Dash's base was like this, she'd have that oh-so-overconfident pegasus strung up by the wings in no time.

"Not as much as you'll like these!"

Fading into existence with the symphony of a sweeping desert wind, a cloud of menacing, pitch-black contraptions, each piloted by a single, uniformed pegasus, took up positions around Applejack's invading force, giant metallic rotors whipping as they hovered, stock still, before the shellshocked earth pony.

"Sweet Celestia... !"

A pair of frantic clicks of the mouse sent Applejack's tanks into a retreat, splitting formation and bolting in every direction as rocket after rocket rained from the sky in a deluge of explosive power. Even as the Overlords turned their Gatling Cannons on the Comanches, they were just too many. For every Comanche Applejack's Overlords blew out of the sky, there seemed to be two more to take its place.

Fireball after fireball erupted from the hapless Overlords as their bulk took the worst of the barrage, metal twisting and contorting as explosions tore

along their sides, reducing the once-mighty Overlords to heaping piles of flaming slag.

“This ain’t over yet, Rainbow!” bellowed Applejack in defiance, “I’ve still got me a base, and we’re gonna-”

Her sentence woefully cut short by the deafening roar of chariots soaring overhead, Applejack’s show of defiance withered before the utterly dominating figure of an enormous metal superchariot pulled by no less than *twenty* pegasi circling her base.

Creaking ominously, three truly *massive* sidecannons emerged from the superchariot’s starboard, slowly beginning to level themselves to hammer away at Applejack’s fragile structures with massive, thunderous spheres of explosive magical energy, monolithic explosions and massive plumes of consuming flame engulfing Applejack’s hapless war factories in a spectacular show of aerial punishment.

The apple farmer slumped in her seat, staring blankly ahead as her factories were pounded into dust, unable to form any words. Whatever hope she had at restoring her tank columns crumbled as her war factories were literally pounded into the dust, their metal frames and masonry breaking out in flames and fragmented rubble before exploding entirely, vanishing without a trace.

“What in Equestria...” Shaking her head vigorously, Applejack tightly refocused herself, trying to get her head back in the game. Okay, her War Factories were down, but she still had a considerable amount of bits in her reserves! All she had to do was throw them up again, and within no time she’d have another battalion of tanks ready to go!

This time she’d be ready for Rainbow Dash - this time, she wasn’t going to lose!

Throwing her dozers to work as quickly as she could, her two demolished War Factories were soon replaced by *four* pristine, freshly constructed ones, but the efficiency and speed she demanded her new force to be assembled with came at a cost, putting a sizable dent in her bit reserves.

“Twenty thousand... fifteen thousand... ten thousand...” Applejack muttered to herself as she tried to keep track of just how much she had left in her coffers, even as she queued up rows after rows of Battlemaster tanks and Emperor Overlords to replace the ones Rainbow Dash had massacred with her Stealth Comanches.

It was with a frustrated groan that she realized her bit counter was falling a lot faster than it was rising - with her supply depots running low, she wouldn't be able to keep up a sustained fight. Once her tank force was assembled, it would be now or never.

One shot with everything she had, and that would decide the match. If that wasn't enough to defeat Rainbow Dash, nothing she could muster would be able to do anything.

“Well, at least Dash's not gonna pull the same trick on me twice!”

Rainbow Dash, however, had other things in mind. With a once-in-a-lifetime timing, the deathly calm in the skies shattered into a violent cacophony of soaring metal as four blindingly fast chariots, each tinted the finest silver, made a beeline straight for Applejack's war factories, a typhoon of dust trailing in their wake as their speed easily took them beyond the sound barrier.

“Feel the wrath of my Auroras!” Rainbow Dash's voice suddenly came from the other side of the table, and Applejack felt the small feeling of dread in her stomach open up into a wide, yawning pit.

Once the silver-tinted chariots reached their quarry, massive hatches located underside began to creak open as they released their payload - a single, sleek missile each that streaked soundlessly towards her War Factories... right before they detonated in massive, earthshaking explosions.

Two of her War Factories immediately crumbled, while the other two burst into flames, dangerously close to being destroyed, but still standing. The four silver chariots, mysteriously slowing down abruptly, were immediately cut down by the Gatling Cannons Applejack had mounted atop her Overlords, but the damage had been done - her projected tank force strength had been cut in half.

“Consarnit, Rainbow!” yelled Applejack over her monitor, shaking an angry hoof at the cyan pegasus. “Enough foolin’ around, ya hear!”

“Oh I hear you,” came Rainbow Dash’s somewhat unnerving reply, one that made Applejack actually reconsider goading the rainbow-maned pegasus forward. “I hear you loud and clear, Applejack.”

It was a move she dearly regretted. The very moment Rainbow Dash’s reply had left her lips, out nowhere came an utter *monster* of a superchariot, one that put even the first one to shame. The first one that had pounded her first two War Factories into dust had been pulled along by twenty pegasi - this one was being tugged along by the combined efforts of *thirty-six*.

“Sweet mother’a mercy... what *is* that monster?”

Her answer came a few seconds later - even as her Overlords turned their Gatling Cannons upon it and ripped into the Superchariot with everything they had, the bullets merely glanced off the sleek, stainless black armor of the massive Superchariot, the metallic beast’s armor barely showing any signs of battle damage as it soared overhead, ominous obsidian armor blotting out the light of Celestia’s sun.

Unlike the spectre gunchariot’s three sidemounted cannons, this particular Superchariot simply disengaged a simple underside hatch, metal creaking as it made way for what could only be a truly massive payload.

Like fire from the sky, Rainbow Dash’s superchariot unleashed an unforgiving tempest of roiling spheres of crackling magical energy, tinged blinding cyan-white as they hammered the earth beneath them, carpeting the ground and reducing whatever Overlords Applejack had left to smouldering pieces of iron, charred and useless scrap.

“And that’s why they call it a *carpet* bomb!” Rainbow Dash whooped triumphantly from the other side of the table as her hoof punched into the air again. “Carpeting enemy bases with fiery goodness!”

“Oh, Celestia above, ah can’t watch this...” Applejack simply gave up the ghost, throwing her hooves into the air futilely as her forehead thunked on

the desk in front of her. It seemed that for every move she made, Rainbow Dash had the perfect counter for it - she just couldn't outmaneuver or outsmart her!

"Awww c'mon, Applejack," Goaded Rainbow Dash, trying her best to suppress her laughter, eyes watering with effort. "I haven't shown you the icing on the cupcake yet!"

"Icing on the what now?" Was all Applejack could mutter. In her eyes, she had long given up the ghost.

Weakly raising her head to face the screen, she saw yet *another* one of those monster superchariots pass right over her base, releasing just a single, pulsing sphere of magical energy that dwarfed every other with *impunity*, a size befitting the Mother Of All Bombs.

The farmpony could only watch with mild disinterest as the sphere detonated in a massive conflagration of magical fire, almost instantly reducing more than half her buildings to burning rubble, the scarlet cloud of heat and flame rising into the air like an imposing colossus of destruction.

When the smoke and fire cleared, all that remained standing was Applejack's Command Centre, beaten and blackened but still intact. With only half of its life bar left, Applejack figured she could still at least *try* to put up a bit more of a fight - she had just a thousand bits left, just enough for another dozer.

But just as she clicked on her Command Centre, about to queue up her last dozer for production, Rainbow Dash came down with the curtain call, a joyous whoop that could come only with the appearance of a certain group of pegasi...

"Now for the grand finale!" The aspiring Wonderbolt raised her hoof high in the air before making a swooping gesture towards her mouse, bringing both her hooves down on a single button. "Triple A-10 Wonderbolt Strike!!!"

"*What!?*" Applejack exclaimed disbelievingly, turning to stare at her screen with an incredulous look on her face...

... Just in time to watch the three distinctive, jumpsuit-clad shapes streak onto the screen, their trademark ultramarine-blue jumpsuits easily recognizable by pegasus or earth pony alike.

...Except that this time they weren't wearing just their jumpsuits.

In place of their calling card, the three pegasi instead donned armored *exoskeletons*, metallic frames simply just *bristling* with gun barrels and missiles, blazing with fire as they lay waste into her Command Centre with everything they had, passing overhead in a strafing run that left her last remaining structure a smoking ruin, crumbling to the ground in defeat.

"I... WON!" screamed Rainbow Dash, punching both her hooves in the air before doing a double barrel roll over her monitor, squealing in delight. "I WON...WITH THE WONDERBOLTS!"

Applejack, on the other hand, looked as though somepony had just clocked her sideways with a sledgehammer to her brain; unable to even stammer out words as her mouth hung open wide.

Her eyes, now the size of saucer plates, could only stare at the blackened ruins of her base, a charred, crumbling monument of the lunar republic's emblem superimposed itself over her screen, a tragic reminder of her defeat at the hands of her cyan rival.

"Now now, Applejack," came Rainbow's Dash's victorious gloat, wings flapping nonchalantly as she bobbed overhead, reclining on thin air. "You can't win 'em all, right?"

Before Applejack could even raise a hoof in protest, the rainbow-maned pegasus simply let out another one of her trademark laughs as she flew out of reach, wings flapping lazily as she pumped her hooves in the air, muttering some manner of victory song.

"Why that no good gloatin'-" muttered Applejack as she grit her teeth in annoyance, folding her hooves together in exasperation. "She just got lucky, that's all."



Surveying the scene before her, Rarity couldn't help but permit a sly grin slowly work its way across her lips, her eyebrows raised in gleeful thought as her brain's cogs slowly cranked out an idea.

"Oh Applejack," beckoned the marshmallow-white unicorn, her voice almost sing-song in pitch, "why don't you let somepony else play around with Rainbow Dash for a while, hmmm?"

"Oh c'mon, Rarity," yelled Applejack, frustration evident in her voice. "Twilight's over there with her fancy-shmancy mathematics books, Pinkie's already had her turn, Dash over there'd never play 'gainst you after that last time with Tiberium Wars and Fluttershy-"

Applejack paused, realization crashing into her mind like an out-of-control sledgehammer. Soon, her eyes narrowed to slits; her mouth curled upwards in a slow, almost creeping smile that would've done Equestria's most dastardly villains proud.

"Oh Fluttershy, " called Applejack in the best falsetto she could muster, "Ah think it's time ya gave it a try, sugarcube."

Squeaking in surprise, Fluttershy tried darting behind the nearest chair to hide herself from Applejack's gaze, shying as far away as possible from the game as she could.

"C'mon, Fluttershy," soothed Applejack as she trotted over to the timid yellow pegasus, dragging the trembling filly out from behind her furniture shield and over to the PC. "It's just Rainbow Dash! Ain't like she's gonna grow sum huge set'a fangs and eat you all right up, is she?"

Unfortunately to Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash looked *exactly* like that. The cyan pegasus was eyeing her with an anticipatory grin that bordered on predatory - or at least that was how it looked like to Fluttershy - and her wings had visibly flared outwards in excitement.

"Yeah, Applejack's right, Fluttershy!" Rainbow Dash drawled in an utterly unconvincing attempt to placate her timid pegasus friend, obviously still smug over her victory over her rival. "You know I'd *never* do anything to hurt you! C'mon, give it a try! Let's get the match started!"

Fluttershy had the expression of a condemned mare, but the gentle pegasus swallowed audibly before letting out the tiniest of whispers, visibly steeling herself.

"I... I guess I *could* give it a try..." Rainbow Dash barely even heard her friend's agreement, but when she did, the cyan speedster's joy was nearly palpable as she punched a hoof in the air, almost flipping around in place as she took to the air with an excited flap of her wings.

"Aww *yeah!!!*" The Wonderbolt aspirant whooped as she settled back into her chair, already selecting the Solar Empire's Air Force General and locking in her choice. "Don't worry, Fluttershy, I'll make sure to keep this as painless as possible!"

The tiny little "Eeep!" coming from Fluttershy's side of the table was all the acknowledgement she got, but Rainbow Dash ignored it, already utterly focused on her own screen as the match began, concentrating on throwing up her airfields as quickly as she could.

This was going to be a *very* interesting match indeed...

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"Oh, come on, seriously! Where the *hay* is her base! I've already scoured every single darned inch of this Celestia-forsaken map!"

"Whassamatter, Rainbow?" chuckled Applejack, tears in the earth pony's eyes as she tried to contain herself from rolling about the floor in a cacophony of laughter. "Havin' a little trouble with those eyes a' yers? Maybe that ELA Stealth General Prince Blind Eye is a little too much for ya!"

"Why you no-good, little..." came the disgruntled huff of the cyan pegasus as yet another flight of King Raptors returned for repairs, their once pristine armor now charred and flaming at the edges, pegasi straining to merely glide back to safety as yet another unseen onslaught threatened to rip them to shreds. "Just you wait! I'm gonna find Fluttershy's base even if it takes me the entire day!"

Clicking furiously on her dozer, the hot-headed pegasus flicked her eyes over her building menu, trying to find something that would aid her in the

battle against Fluttershy's unseen army, her timid friend's shyness even *more* of a pain that it usually was.

"Lemme see here... airfield... nah, already have eight of those... got me a strategy center, got me some of those neat 'war factories' and some..."

Scrolling over structure after structure, the pegasus filed away and discarded option after option as she furtively searched for *something* that could help her out... and just as she felt that she was nearing the end of her rope, her eye caught onto something that she had nearly missed just a second before.

"Hang on a sec... what's this?" The rainbow-maned filly muttered to herself as she leaned in closer to the screen, her eyes narrowing as she squinted at the description... right before they widened in joy as she realized this was *exactly* what she needed!

"Ah geez, how the hay could I have been so *stupid?*" Rainbow Dash nearly smacked a hoof into her forehead in frustration, and then got to work throwing up her Detention Camp, the building on her construction menu that she had glazed her mouse cursor over no more than *five* times in a row in her haste to find a solution.

"All right, Fluttershy - prepare to get served!"

With a timid squeal, the yellow pegasus could only whimper in fright as she cowered behind her screen, hooves trembling as she awaited the coming of her feisty friend's onslaught.

"Now... let's see where you're *hiding!*"

Jamming her hooves down on her mouse buttons, Rainbow Dash's Detention Camps cut a swathe through the all-consuming fog of war blanketing the map, penetrating even the shroud of Fluttershy's stealth technologies to reveal the targets beneath.

"Gotcha now!"

Marshalling her massive airforce, Rainbow Dash's King Raptor flights barreled off her runways and into the skies as the massive, gray-armored

chariots blotted out the very sun, making a beeline straight for their quarry as they tore right through Fluttershy's base with terrifying ease.

"Awwwwwww *yeah!*" whooped the cyan pegasus, doing a mid-air backflip as her confidence returned in full force, ready for another shot at Fluttershy's base.

The poor pegasus's buildings never had a prayer. Dash's carpet bombs blasted through her fragile, makeshift structures with horrifying power as sphere after sphere of thunderous magical energy crashed into each one, tearing Fluttershy's base to shreds as spectre and carpet bomb alike ravaged all that stood before them.

"Ohhhh yeah! The Rainbow *cannot* be stopped!" Rainbow Dash whooped as she did a double hoof-pump, ecstatic over her second consecutive victory at a game type that she completely *sucked* at. Quite frankly, to be doing so well at something period, the pegasus was already giddy with excitement and euphoria. "All right, who's next!? I'm ready to take on *anypony* right now!"

"Are you *sure*, Rainbow Dash?" Came a silken voice from behind the pegasus that froze her hot-blooded confidence right in her very veins. Slowly craning her head around, the cyan pegasus came face to face with Rarity's smug visage, the unicorn eyeing her with a smirk and a knowing look, almost *begging* her to take on the challenge of besting her at the game. "Would you care to, perhaps, try to settle a match with, oh, I don't know... somepony of... *higher* caliber?"

Rainbow Dash had recalled enough of Rarity's performance at Tiberium Wars that she *knew* just how terrifying the unicorn was at the game, compared to her own crude tactics of little more than brute aerial force. Next to Rarity's own fast, crisp, and fluid ability to micromanage and command her forces, Rainbow Dash's handling of her own troops seemed positively brutish and child-like in simplicity. Between the two ponies, there was just no doubt as to who was the better commander.

Any other day, the young, brash pegasus would have smartly turned down the challenge, knowing just when she was out of her depth. But after two consecutive victories, one over Applejack no less, Rainbow Dash's

confidence was riding on a high so great not even a denouncement from Celestia herself could have brought her down.

Be her opponent Rarity or not, she was going to *win* this!

“You know what, Rarity,” Answered the cyan pegasus, a hint of excitement in her voice as the fire of confidence blazed in her chest, spurring her onwards. “You’ve got yourself a challenge!”

“Good show, Darling!” Applauded the refined unicorn, gingerly clapping her hooves together in a rather unnerving show of support. “What say we... add a little spice to this otherwise unbearably *dull* battle of wits now, hmmm?”

“Oh, I *love* fun things!” came the cyan pegasus’s quick response, which only caused the slight grin on Rarity’s lips to spread even wider, the unicorn’s eyes narrowing to dastardly slits that would’ve done Nightmare Moon proud. “What’cha propose we bet on, then?”

“Ohh, I wouldn’t force you into a wager without prices of equal value! What do *you* propose I do if I lose this match? Name your price, and I shall name mine!”

“Hmmm...” mumbled the rainbow-maned pegasus, scratching her brow in thought for all of ten seconds. “If I win... you’ve got to join Applejack for an entire season of Applebucking... *without* any of your fancy-shmancy magic.”

For even the tiniest of seconds, Rarity couldn’t help but find her air of regality shattering around her as the ever-composed unicorn took two steps back, right eye twitching uncontrollably as the very *thought* of getting down and dirty in the Sweet Apple Acres orchard chilled her to the bone.

And then she remembered just *who* she was, and just *who* she was fighting against, and her air of regality instantly restored itself, the white-coated unicorn standing tall and confident once more of her chances of victory.

“Very well then, Rainbow,” replied Rarity in her usual pseudo-manehattenite, “Then I hereby dictate that if victory falls into my hooves, you will help me model my next high fashion line for the Canterlot summer expo - all *one hundred* of those ‘frou-frou’ dresses you love oh-so-much.”

Even with her overconfidence, Rainbow Dash couldn't help but take an involuntary step back as cold shivers ran throughout her entire body, remembering the last time Rarity used her as a living pincushion for just *one* of those dresses.

"Well... all right then!" Rainbow Dash nearly regretted the words the moment they spilled out of her mouth, for they came with an inexplicable sense of dread and foreboding, but there was no taking them back now. Steeling herself for what lay ahead, Rainbow Dash prepared herself for what would probably be the most intense Generals match of her life.

The players were committed, and the stage was set. There would be no backing out now.

"Let's hit it!"

"Oh, we most certainly *shall*."

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There were very few times that Rainbow Dash felt like she was completely out of her depth with what she was doing.

One time had been when she first attended junior speedsters flight camp; running the Cloudsdale standard obstacle course was pretty much the second stupidest thing she'd ever done in her life - and she even had the sprained wingbone to show for it. The second time had been when she had her panic attack right before the Young Fliers Competition, when she began to doubt her ability to perform even her very own signature move, the Sonic Rainboom.

But even that - even the accident that had earned her the ever-famous moniker of 'Rainbow Crash', or even the depths of fear she had experienced during the Young Fliers' Competition, could barely compare to what she was getting herself into now.

Gritting her teeth in defiance as sweat beaded on her forehead, Rainbow Dash quickly selected her second-last remaining flight of King Raptors from their airfield, and ordered them towards the column of tanks that were rolling towards her base, blasting away at the Patriots she had constructed

at her perimeter and utterly disintegrating them with high-powered beams of magical energy.

“Come on... come on...” Panic literally dripped off Rainbow Dash’s voice as the pegasus muttered under her breath at breakneck speed, egging on her four King Raptors as they streaked off her Airfield’s runways, barrelling towards Rarity’s slow but massive column of ‘Laser Crusaders.’

Yet before they had even come close to unleashing their devastating payloads on the armour column, the smaller chariots at the flanks of Rarity’s forces suddenly turned their barrels in the direction of Rainbow Dash’s incoming Raptors, crimson beams of arcane fire lancing forward and piercing through the armor of her aerial chariots.

Two of her King Raptors were immediately reduced to scrap, but the remaining two managed to get close enough to release several of their missiles. Her heart soaring with hope, Rainbow Dash watched the screen intently with a hopeful grin, scarcely daring to even begin dreaming that she might have a chance at turning the attack around.

But not even the missiles stood a chance. From the smaller chariots, the ‘Avengers’ as the game called them, a pinpoint barrage of scarlet energy lanced forward, burning away the King Raptors’ missiles before they had even come close to reaching their targets.

By now, Rainbow Dash had lost several flights of King Raptors, Auroras, and Stealth Comanches to the sheer number of Avengers Rarity had constructed. Even her Stealth Fighters, normally untouchable by most means, stood little chance as the Avengers’ cutting lasers bisected the sleek black chariots from front to flank, each downed chariot costing the cyan pegasus bit after bit as she found herself hard-pressed to find the supplies needed just to keep her expensive air force running.

And now, five minutes into the match, Rarity already had her backed into a corner, her air force running on its last legs, her supply reserves exhausted and dry, and her base defenses crumbling.

“One last chance, Rainbow Dash.” Rarity’s voice came from the other side of the table in an almost sing-song manner. By Celestia, the cyan pegasus could have sworn, the fashionista was *enjoying* this! “Your aircraft can’t

possibly win against General Pin Point's laser technology. Yield the match to me now, and I'll lighten the workload to just *fifty* dresses instead of the full hundred!"

"*Never!!!*" Rainbow Dash snarled defiantly as she tried to queue up more King Raptors for production, only to realize that the production button had been greyed out - she was out of supplies. Growling, the pegasus selected her last remaining flight of King Raptors, and sent them out to their deaths in a final gesture of fighting spirit. "Fifty dresses is already fifty too many! I'll never surrender!!!"

"Tut tut... Such a pity..." Rarity tutted, and then her Avengers advanced forward, their crimson beams burning Rainbow Dash's final flight of King Raptors right out of the air, leaving their charred husks to tumble to the ground beneath. "Pride goeth before the fall, my dear Rainbow Dash. You *really* should have quit while you were ahead."

"Oh yeah?!" Bellowed the cyan pegasus in defiance of her fate, "I've still got these babies!"

Soaring overhead, Rainbow Dash summoned forth her last resort as *two* of her massive obsidian superchariots soared overhead, bottom hatches disengaging with an ominous '*thunk*' as they prepared to unleash the payloads that had sent both Applejack and Fluttershy's bases packing with their tails between their proverbial legs, careening to the depths of defeat.

"My my my," said Rarity, her voice laced with feigned surprise. "Whatever *shall* I do?"

Turning their barrels to the sky, Rarity's Avengers unleashed a blazing storm of destructive energy, the sky ablaze with the tinge of crimson as beam after beam of cutting lasers bisected the obsidian beasts from wingtip to wingtip; the very armor that had once withstood even a literal hailstorm of gunfire burning to cinders as the superchariots crashed to the ground, useless.

"I... but I... what... how...?" Rainbow Dash struggled to make her mouth even work as Rarity's tank column proceeded to lay waste to her base, demolishing her structures in short order as the last vestiges of resistance crumbled, leaving nothing standing, and the unicorn victorious.



"It's simple, Rainbow Dash, darling," Rarity's satisfied voice came from the table as the white-coated unicorn walked around and set a hoof on Rainbow's shoulder, leaning in to whisper dramatically in her ear. "'May the best pony win'... And indeed, the best pony won. Besides, it wouldn't have done for you to be walking around with an overinflated head thinking you were Celestia's gift to Generals, you beat only Applejack and Fluttershy! Naturally, I had to step in before you began to get any other bright ideas."

Whatever reply Rainbow Dash might have come up with was completely lost in the haze of shock and denial that clouded the pegasus's mind. Turning away blankly from the screen, Rainbow Dash got off the chair numbly, her jaw still hanging agape at just how utterly she had been *trowned* by the fashionista.

"Uh, Rarity?" Applejack leaned in to whisper into her friend's ear as Rainbow Dash slowly trotted over to the nearby couch, flopping lifelessly into the pillows as she gave the ceiling a blank, listless stare. "Ah think ya broke her."

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"Hold still, Rainbow Dash," muttered Rarity, ribbon and pincushion in hand as the fashionista hemmed away at one of her latest creations. "Otherwise I miiiight just stick this needle someplace it isn't supposed to go."

"Are we... *ugh*... done yet?!" moaned the cyan pegasus as she struggled to lift her wings, eager to free herself from the crushing grip of Rarity's frilly corset

"Done yet? Oh good heavens, no!" mocked Rarity in her best sing-song voice. "The Canterlot summer expo calls for no less than a collection of *one hundred* of my best designs!"

Gritting her teeth with all the self-control she could muster, Rainbow Dash strained with all her might as she squeezed the next few words out of her mouth.

"...Do I even want to ask which one this is, *Rarity*?"

“Oh, darling, you shouldn’t be so impatient! After all, you’ve barely finished prototype number ten!”

If there was ever a record for ‘Loudest scream in Ponyville,’ that day, Rainbow Dash would’ve set the Equestrian record, for life.

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“And if I deploy a sub-base to send infantry due southeast toward the...then that should...YES!” Twilight’s quill, worn down to the nub by this point, sketched out the final detail of her strategy with a grand flourish. The unicorn dropped the quill and turned back to the computers, a huge grin on her face. “Alright, Pinkie! I call a rematch, and THIS time I’m going to...to...”

Her smile faded as her eyes roved the room.

“Where is everypony?”

# Chapter 7

## Burnout Revenge

At a single glance, life in Ponyville was the same as it had ever been. The town square bustled with movement, ponies intent on going here or there. Overhead, clouds of lightest gray pranced about Celestia's brilliant sphere, casting light shadows over the populace below; Rainbow Dash had slept in again.

As Fillies and colts filed in and out of Sugarcube Corner, ready for their after-school sugar fix, Applejack had just unpacked her cart, preparing to market her wares to those who desired them. At first glance, it was all in all business as usual.

At first glance.

While the old elements of Ponyville life were still present, something new and strange had entered into the lives of its inhabitants in the past few months. Suddenly there was something new to talk about after school, a new hobby for ponies of all ages to try and master. A new store had opened on Stirrup Street, for the sole purpose of hawking this new sensation to anypony who wished to try their hoof at it.

Video games had made their debut, and just as Princess Celestia predicted, they had taken Equestria by storm.

Classmates who had never spoken to each other before found themselves engrossed in conversations with each other about the one-in-a-million headshot they pulled in the last second of a Halo Reach match, or the epic shotgun spree they had made in Gears of War. Young schoolfillies had begun going out of their way to find odd-jobs around their neighborhood, anxiously scrimping and saving for the latest hit game.

There was no denying it: video games had changed Equestria forever.

That's not to say that it was all sunshine and daises. As with anything, this new medium presented a few problems. A few of the older citizens had

shown a distrust of these strange devices and their uncanny, almost hypnotic power over their children. Cheerilee in particular showed distaste for them: some of her students had begun to miss assignments, and their hushed, incessant chatter in class about 'Covenant' and 'Geth' had begun to seriously grate on the schoolteacher's nerves.

'I suppose it's just something that comes with the package,' thought Twilight Sparkle.

The unicorn was walking briskly down Mane Street, trying to make up for lost time. As was a bit of a bad habit, she had lost track of time at the book store browsing for the latest book of mystical secrets, and had forgotten she was meeting Rainbow Dash that day.

'I hope I haven't kept her waiting.' Twilight took a turn onto Stirrup Street, her destination coming into view.

'GameHoof' was a relatively small, unassuming looking shop, but it was utterly alive with activity. Ponies of all ages filed in and out of it, gleefully skipping in to claim their prizes and rushing out again, eager to play them. Twilight maneuvered her way through the crowd, squeezed past a pair of teenage pegasi and entered the building.

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"That'll be 100 bits, Madame Octavia. I hope you enjoy it!"

The gangly unicorn sitting behind the counter levitated a sack of bits into the cash register beside him, nudging an encased game toward his customer. Twilight caught quick glimpse of the cover: *Eternal Sonata*, an unfamiliar title to her.

The dignified earth pony gave a short nod as she placed the game in her saddlebag, then turned and walked out the door, giving Twilight a second brief nod in greeting as she passed her in the doorway.

The lavender mare returned the greeting out of courtesy, and quickly stepped inside the shop, glancing around for the one she had come here to meet.

It wasn't very hard, in all honesty - the shop wasn't that large, the shelves weren't that tall, and even if both those things had been present, it would have been quite hard to miss the rainbow-colored mane that screamed out for attention wherever a certain cyan pegasus went.

It took Twilight just a second to spot what she was looking for, and once she found it, she quickly cantered over to the rainbow streak of colors that was weaving through the shelves of the store, seemingly searching for something.

"Come on... they said they had it!" She was muttering to herself.

"What are you looking for?"

Rainbow Dash looked up, a grin splitting her face at the sight of her friend. "*There* you are! I was wondering if you'd forgotten!"

Twilight shrugged, a sheepish look on her face. "Lost track of time at the bookstore, sorry..." She stepped up next to Rainbow Dash, staring at the numerous, colorful cases that lined the shelves, passing by dozens of new, unfamiliar titles that she didn't recognise, like *Dance Central*, *Mass Effect*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. "So what are you looking for?"

"There's this awesome game I heard about from Dumb-Bell." Rainbow Dash said, turning her attention back to the shelf. "It's called Burnout: it's a racing simulator where you try to knock your opponents off the track! He said I'd be really good at it! I can't disagree: I mean, I'm top of the world when it comes to racing!"

Twilight bit back her response: she barely remembered a Dumb-Bell from her brief visit to Cloudsdale for the Best Young Fliers Competition. Something told her that the idea of Rainbow Dash being good at a game revolving around crashing wasn't exactly a compliment. On the other hoof, it was admittedly an interesting idea.

"Burnout...Burnout...here it is! Oh...*yikes*..." Rainbow drew a hissing breath in through her teeth as she looked at the pricetag. "60 bits..." She turned to the unicorn behind the desk. "Yo, Encode! Any used copies of Burnout: Revenge?"

The unicorn turned back to a tiny PC monitor on his desk, his horn glowing as he punched in a few commands. "Lemme check...yeaaaah, we do! About...30 bits!"

Rainbow pumped a hoof triumphantly. "Yes! I'll take it!" She tossed the case back on the shelf, flying back to the counter, pulling out a bag of bits as Encode levitated a case to her. It was identical to the one Rainbow had found: a pair of chariots barreled toward them, while a hapless third chariot, no doubt a victim of the other's reckless driving, had been tossed high into the air, flecks of chrome and vehicle parts flying in every direction.

"Awesome..." Rainbow whispered, before spinning to face Twilight, practically bouncing with excitement "Let's get the others! The sooner I can pop this baby in, the better!"

"Hold your horses there, Rainbow Dash," quipped the lavender unicorn, extending a hoof forward stop the bounding pegasus right in her tracks, her expression utterly deadpan. "Surely you haven't forgotten where your... enthusiasm's landed you before, right?"

"Oh c'mon, Twilight..." moaned the jittery pegasus as she waved her right hoof lazily in mid-air. "This game's all about racing! The speed, the adrenaline, the wind in your mane! There's no way it wasn't meant for me!"

Turning to the counter, Twilight summoned forth a small levitation spell, procuring a small leather pouch from within the folds of her mane and quickly proceeding to empty a literal mountain of bit coins right over the Gamehoof counter.

"I'll be the judge of that, Rainbow." declared Twilight as she turned to face the light brown salespony behind the pristine glass counter. "Now... Encode was it? I'll take one copy of this... 'Burnout Revenge' game. As you can see, I've already made full payment for my purchase, and-"

In place of his usual salespony poker face, Encode's once-bright smile had literally slid off his face as his jaw hung slack, his eyes wide as he babbled incoherently before Twilight's monolithic column of coins, the mountain of money stretching as high as the ceiling.

“What?” came Twilight’s reply, the ever-studious unicorn completely oblivious to the literal money mine lying right before her hooves. “Did I pay too little?”

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“It’s not *that* funny, Rainbow...” Twilight grumbled, shooting an annoyed glance over to Rainbow Dash, who was wiping a tear of mirth away. “I was in a rush and I grabbed my bottomless bank-pouch instead of my wallet by mistake. Anypony could have done it.”

“Suuure, Twilight. Sounds like the egghead needs to practice her counting a bit!” giggled Rainbow Dash. Twilight’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, yeah, keep up the sass, Rainbow...anyway, we’re here.” Twilight swung the library door open and stepped inside. “I’ll call up the others: go ahead and set the Xbox up. But don’t start playing without us!”

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“Come on, come on, everypony!” Rainbow Dash was practically bouncing on the sofa as the other five filed into the room. “I’ve been waiting over 15 minutes to pop this thing in!”

“And you can wait thirty seconds more, Rainbow Dash.” Rarity said calmly. “We were nice enough to wait for you whenever we had a game that we wanted to play. It’ll be good for you to learn some patience, you know.”

“I know, I know!” Rainbow Dash groaned as she fidgeted uncomfortably, bobbing about in her seat, but for the life of her she just couldn’t sit still - she just *had* to get her hooves on some of that racing!

Even as she watched her friends amble slowly into the room, rainbow-maned filly already had a controller in her hands, so excited that she could practically *taste* the game just waiting to be played. Her hooves, itchy with anticipation, anxiously pressed down on buttons at random and wiggled the analog stick around, eager to get started, to get *moving*.

The [heavy rock track](#) that blared from the TV speakers, and the images of a chariot zooming down the street at screen-shaking speeds didn’t help Rainbow Dash contain her excitement at all.

By the time everyone had settled down, Rainbow Dash immediately hit the A button in rapid succession, twisting her analog stick here and there, and before anypony knew it, they were suddenly at the Multiplayer menu, waiting for the Start button on the second controller to get pressed so they could get the race underway.

“All right, who wants to get their flank kicked on the racetrack first?” The cyan pegasus asked eagerly, her gaze already flitting about, roving over her friends who were staring at her like she’d grown a third head.

“Geez, Rainbow, ya really gotta settle down.” Applejack remarked sedately as she picked up a controller, and settled down on the couch next to her athletic rival. “Ya remember what happened ‘tween you an’ Rarity ‘bout three weeks back? Don’t count yer victories before ya win ‘em.”

“AJ, this is *RACING*! Rarity may be top when it comes to that Command and Conquer stuff but this is what I *live for*!” Rainbow Dash laughed it off with an excited smile, still jittery with anticipation over the upcoming race.

“All the same, maybe we should check single-player first.” Twilight suggested. “We can check a few of those modes before we jump right in. If we’re gonna get humiliated in a game, Rainbow, we may as well see the rules.”

Rainbow Dash shrugged. “Sure, whatever. No skin off my flank.”

“Good idea, Twi.” Applejack nodded. “That “Traffic Attack” thing sounds pretty cool.”

“Ooh! I wanna see that Burning Lap thingy!” Pinkie squealed.

Rainbow was clicking her way through the World Tour menu, selecting “Harmless” as her rank. “All in due time. For now, I’ll settle with a nice...raaace...” Her eyes narrowed.

“Where’s the normal racing? What is this? Traffic Attack? Crash Mode? That’s all I can DO?!? If Encode gypped me...!”



“Rainbow, RELAX!” Twilight said hurriedly: the last thing she needed was Rainbow Dash zooming off to yell at the guys at Gamehoof. “You need to work your way up to those! See?” She teleported to the TV with a popping noise, pointing at the bright red splotch with a lock insignia on the corner of an icon next to the red ‘Dock Fight’ option. “Once you get some medals, you’ll probably unlock them.”

Rainbow Dash stared critically at the screen, finally relenting with a shrug and clicking on ‘Dock Fight’.

“Works for me.”

The instant she did so, the screen went pitch black, before being replaced by a sight that made Rainbow sit up straight.

A rock guitar riff boomed through the room as the words ‘Motor City’ appeared on the screen in broken white letters, emitting what looked like the steam from beneath a chariot’s tires as they spun in place. A background of metal flowed by behind what looked like tire tracks: tall skyscrapers, a low parking garage, a long freeway with blinking lights overhead...

And then as soon as it began, it was over, and a quick loading screen later, the six friends were looking at a new menu.

**‘CRASH’**, it proclaimed at the top.

**‘Crash as many vehicles as you can!’**

**Crashes grow your Crashbreaker bar.**

**Explosions increase the score multiplier.**

**Crashbreakers are armed!’**

Below the rules was the scoring: 1,000,000 bits worth of damage for Bronze, 3,000,000 for the Silver, and a whopping 5,500,000 bits for the gold.

Rarity stared in horror as she began to process what the mode actually entailed. “*THAT’S* Crash Mode? You get points for causing a horrific pileup? For discernible PURPOSE?! That’s utterly BARBARIC!”

Rainbow Dash leaned over the back of the couch, shooting a smirk at the revolted white unicorn. “And yet you have no problem ordering troops around to kill each other?”

Rarity tossed her mane. “Humph, I should think I DO have a problem! But at least war has some METHOD behind the madness!”

Rainbow rolled her eyes. “Uh huh, yeah. I’m starting now, if anypony wants to leave.”

Rarity scowled for a second, before letting out a ‘humph’, and sitting down on the furthest chair away from the TV.

Rainbow didn’t pay her a second glance. A tap of the ‘A’ button had sent the camera panning down a long road. True to the map’s name they were on a dock, with chariots of all shapes and sizes driving to and fro at the t-section near the end. As the camera gave one last look at the small parking section just beyond it, it whipped back to a single chariot sitting at the start of the long road.

The camera revolved around a beat up, black junker of a chariot: the Stock C170 MID. Beside this automotive disaster was its stats: Crashbreaker Force 4, Medium Weight, and 170 Boost Speed.

“Uugh...” Rarity stared at the chariot, pulling a face. “If you insist on wrecking something, Rainbow Dash, you may just want to go with that. It’s halfway to the junkyard already!”

Rainbow Dash looked critically at the chariot before hitting the ‘A’ button again. “Whatever. I’m just looking forward to WRECKING something!”

The chariot was in full view now, the words ‘Press ‘A’ to start’ hovering above it in yellow letters, awaiting the command to unleash its destructive power on the traffic below.

A command that Rainbow was all too eager to give. With a borderline-sadistic smile, she punched the 'A' button one final time.

'GET READY!'

The chariot spun its wheels with the screech of rubber on pavement, throwing up clouds of smoke as the engine wound up noisily. There was a loud 'BOOM!' as twin jets of blue fire erupted from the back of the vehicle, and the chariot went barrelling down the road, closing the gap in a matter of seconds...

Fluttershy dove under a chair, covering her head...

CRAAAAAAAAAAASH!

The chaos that ensued would have made Discord hang up his title in shame. The music stopped as Rainbow Dash's chariot impacted with a big rig with a horrible twisting of metal, one that mingled with Rarity's horrified scream. The big rig slid into the opposite lane, knocking a second chariot, a small red one, clean off the road. The room was filled with the screeching of rubber, as chariot after chariot slammed into each other with a series of loud crashes and explosions, a domino effect of absolute mayhem.

Twilight watched in awe as the damage counter skyrocketed. 110,000 bits, 114,000, 120,000...the numbers flicked past faster than Twilight could keep up.

A yellow sign appeared on the screen, indicating an arrow pointing up, with two silver stars next to it. 'GOOD!' the sign proclaimed, before vanishing to be replaced by a bronze tire next to the words "BRONZE METAL AWARDED!"

Trying to keep up with the madness onscreen was sensory overload, and Twilight was glad she had chosen to sit down. Suddenly, the crashes seemed to muffle as the camera zoomed in on the wreckage of Rainbow's chariot.

'TAP B!'

Rainbow blinked. "Wait, huh?"

Pinkie was bouncing in her seat. "Rainbow! Press B! Press B!"

Rainbow shifted her grip on the controller, hammering the B button as hard as she could.

'KABOOM!'

The chariot was tossed high into the air as flames erupted from underneath it, the force of the blast sending wreckage flying in every direction.

"WHOOAAA!" Whooped Rainbow Dash, pumping a hoof in the air. "AWW YEAAAAAAAH!"

The game seemed to share her enthusiasm, a sign proclaiming 'AWESOME!' appearing on the screen with 4 stars beneath it, followed by a silver tire.

Upward the score bar rose, 4,475,000 bits worth of damage now...

"Come on, come on! GOLD! I'm so close...!" Rainbow was on the edge of her seat, gritting her teeth in anticipation.

But the flow of traffic seemed to be slowing, the score bar not rising quite as fast now. The crashes were further and further apart, and Fluttershy had poked her head out from under her chair to take a tentative peak.

Rainbow slumped. "Ahh, ponyfeathers! I was so close!"

Pinkie pointed at the screen with a trembling hoof. "Rainbow, look!"

Rainbow took one glance at the prompt on the screen before tapping the 'B' button as fast as she could...

'KABOOM!'

Fluttershy retreated back under the chair as the chariot exploded a second time, sending the score flying up to 7,638,225 bits!

“YES!” Rainbow flew into the air, pulling a series of barrel rolls. “GOLD, BABY!”

Silence fell over the room. A timer had appeared on the top of the screen, counting down from 5 in big red numbers and a series of soft beeps. As soon as it hit zero, the camera panned out, revealing the full extent of Rainbow’s handiwork.

“Land sakes...!” Applejack murmured as she stared at the wrecks of the once-shiny chariots littering the road. Tires, chrome and bumpers were scattered everywhere, as a symphony of horns and alarms blared in the background. At the bottom of the screen, the total damage, a whopping 7,638,225 bits was displayed proudly.

Fluttershy poked her head out again slowly. “I...is it over?”

Rainbow was trembling with barely-suppressed excitement. “That...was the most AWESOME thing I have ever seen!” She whipped around to look at her friends, her expression absolutely ecstatic. “Did you SEE that pileup?!? All those tankers and minivans just slamming into each other...and then when my chariot *exploded*! And then, and then it exploded AGAIN!” She took a huge breath. “I...I gotta lie down for a second.”

And with that, she flopped unceremoniously in a chair, dead to the world.

Fluttershy crawled out from under the chair, looking at the unconscious blue Pegasus. “She got up at 4 in the morning to clear out the clouds...”

Twilight was next to speak, a questioning hoof gesturing right at the screen.

“Just *what* in Equestria was *that* all about?”

“That, Twilight Sparkle?” Rarity pointed at the screen. “THAT was utterly uncouth, pointless destruction! Small wonder Rainbow gravitates towards it.”

“Hey, don’t knock it ‘till ya try it, Rarity.” Applejack approached the controller, picking it up. “Sides, that was jest one mode. I wanna see what Traffic Attack is like.”

Rarity turned to Applejack, who had taken a seat on the couch. "Applejack, you TOO?"

Applejack turned to the fashionista, a wry expression on her face. "Well...yeah. Don't know why Y'ALL sound so surprised."

Rarity rolled her eyes. Applejack had hit the 'A' button, and the screen had changed to display the results: Rainbow Dash had achieved an 'Awesome' rating and Gold metal: a second tap of the button showed that the rating and metal combined to make a 'Perfect' five stars, which were subtracted from the 20 stars needed for Dash to unlock the next rank.

'Well,' thought Applejack. 'Those stars ain't gonna earn themselves.'

But the awards weren't done yet. Another press of the button showed that Rainbow Dash had earned a trophy for blowing up 25 vehicles. At length the screen changed back to the World Tour menu, ready to receive Applejack's challenge.

"Awrighty. We've seen Motor City, so let's give Sunshine Keys a go!"

Applejack clicked on the image of the idyllic seaside resort town, revealing a new event menu: this one's only option was Traffic Attack.

"Woeee!" whooped Applejack. "Here I am wantin' to try Traffic Attack first, and I'm gettin' mah chance right off the bat!"

Upon selection, however, Applejack's smile wavered.

"So... Which one do ah go with?" She asked, turning back to her friends as she flicked back and forth between the two chariots on the select menu: the sleek blue Factory M-Type ST, and the fancy crimson Factory R160 ST.

Twilight shrugged. "Either/or, AJ. They're pretty much the same barring physical design."

"WHICH can make all the difference, if I may add!" Rarity piped up from the back of the room. Applejack ignored her, electing to go with the R160. A quick preview of Sunshine Keys played, similar to the Motor City one. One loading screen later, and the Traffic Attack rules were displayed.

## **'TRAFFIC ATTACK**

**Check traffic to beat the Score Targets!**

**Win Gold and earn an Awesome Rating to boost your Revenge Rank!**

Applejack nodded. "Bash into traffic, trah to git 500,000 bits worth 'o damage. Easy enough. Awright, let's get started!"

The music changed as she started the challenge, the crimson chariot now cruising down the road to a new song, this one faster paced then the one before. Rainbow Dash sat up, all the exhaustion gone from her face.

"Hey: Aponyliptica! This game's got some good artists!" She said, before flopping back down again.

Applejack paid no heed. Her eyes narrowed as her hoof clamped down all the way on the right trigger and the engine revved up...

Fluttershy realized what was about to happen and retreated back beneath the chair.

'Get ready...GO!'

As soon as she had control, Applejack swung the thumbstick into the other lane, right into the path of the nearest oncoming chariot...

**CRASH!**

"HUH?" Applejack babbled as both chariots crumpled like a pieces of paper. "Wha...Ah HIT that darned thing, what's goin' on?!?"

Twilight looked up from the manual. "You can't check oncoming traffic, AJ: you have to hit them from behind or you'll wipe out."

Applejack had focused back on the screen: she was back in control again, but she had lost about five of her forty seconds to that mistake. "NOW ya tell me! Awright, let's try this again..."

‘THUD! THUDTHATHUDTHUDTHUD...’

AJ’s face lit up as she banged into the back of a series of chariots, sending them skidding all over the road as her score bar rose. Her time was going up too: it seemed to be capped at 20 seconds, but as Applejack continued to barrel down the road, leaving a trail of totaled chariots in her wake, the time was rising faster than it could drop, flicking rapidly between 20 and 19.

“YEEEHAW! GET ALONG, LIL’ DOGGIES!” Applejack cheered over the banging of metal on metal as she gained a Bronze medal and her rating rose to ‘Good’.

“Applejack, hit the boost!” Pinkie shouted. “A, A, A!”

It took Applejack a second to figure out how to hit both trigger and button on the same side with one hoof simultaneously, but she finally pulled off a strange hold with her elbow that seemed to work: jets of blue flame roared from the back of the chariot, sending it roaring forward at twice the speed, other chariots flying in every direction.

118,000 bits, 120,000 bits...Nothing could stand in the way of Applejack’s charge: her score counter was rising with every wrecked chariot, some flying into the opposite lane and taking out some of the oncoming traffic as well, earning her what the game called ‘Trick Shots’, with bonus points that gave her a Silver medal in a matter of a few seconds.

The only thing Twilight noticed was that Applejack seemed to have a bit of trouble with was, well...turning. The farmpony had clamped resolutely down on the gas and boost, and she smashed into the walls on the sharp turns a number of times. These little hiccups were quickly made up for: Applejack went right back to bashing chariots and bringing her timer up to maximum.

“Aaaaand...GOLD!” AJ cheered. “Woo!”

Just in time, too: the chariots had been fewer and farther between, and Applejack’s timer was at 5...4...3...2...1...

BOOM! Applejack’s vehicle exploded, flipping over and spinning out.

Her total: 952,775 bits



“WOOOOOEEEEEE!!!” The orange earth pony crowed triumphantly as she pumped a hoof in the air. “Awesome, Gold, a new event an’ high score! Rainbow, ya might need ta pick up tha pace if ya wanna keep up with me!”

“Am I, now...?”

Rainbow sat up, tilting her head back and forth with a series of pops. She locked eyes with Applejack, a smirk on her face.

“So you’re good at knocking lines of defenseless chariots everywhere. But let’s see how you do when the chariots knock back!”

Applejack tossed the controller to Rainbow, picking up a second one from the floor. “Yer fixin’ ta race, then?”

The fact Rainbow Dash missed the controller didn’t seem to register with her. She picked it up, as Applejack punched the center button on hers and turned it on. “That, and break that tie we had back in the fall, AJ!”

Twilight looked back and forth between the two: gone were the two normal friends that she knew. In their place were a pair of archrivals, aching to test their mettle against each other once and for all.

“Uh, girls...?” Twilight began. “Let’s not get carried away...”

Her voice trailed off as she watched Rainbow Dash select Xbox Live Quick Match from the menu, and Applejack almost immediately hit the start button on her controller before the on-screen prompt to do so had even begun to appear, already selecting and signing in with her profile.

It was a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it affair - Applejack and Rainbow Dash were both so eager to get the race on that Twilight had glanced away for just a second, and when she looked back, the screen had suddenly split in two, the rear of a cyan-colored racing chariot dominating the upper half of the screen while another similar, orange-painted one took its place at the lower half... and flanking Dash’s cyan speedchariot was a small, grayed-out box filled to the top with eight names.

A few of them seemed familiar, Rainbow Dash immediately recognizing three names in particular that had dogged her in every multiplayer racing game she had ever played. She honestly had no idea when Dumb-Bell, Score, and Hoops were going to learn their lessons, but Celestia be darned, she'd teach *Dumb3ll*, *h1gh-Sc0re*, and *l00pin\_h00ps* a lesson in racing their one-track minds would *never* forget.

"Seriously?" hoofpalmed Applejack, the orange-coated farmpony tilting her head backwards in incredulity. "What in the sam hill name is *Muffin\_Master*?"

"Not much better than *AppleSt0rm*, AJ," Rainbow Dash sniggered. "I ain't gonna be the only one to tell you how corny that name is!"

The orange earth pony let out a little huff of annoyance, but decided not to reply on how Rainbow Dash's own Gamertag was hardly any better - instead, she opted to eye her list of opponents more critically, taking note of the order of the list, and just who she was up against...

1. *Leeroy\_Wingkins*
2. *Dumb3ll*
3. *Muffin\_Master*
4. *Taste\_the\_Rainbow*
5. *AppleSt0rm*
6. *h1gh-Sc0re*
7. *l00pin\_h00ps*
8. *Scoots\_Haagen\_Daaz*

"Hey wait a second!" Rainbow Dash's eyes almost bugged out as she read the last name, and she almost burst out laughing right there and then. "I think that's Scootaloo!"

"Just a minute..." said Rarity, getting up from her spot in the back. "...I thought Scootaloo was going over to help Sweetie Belle get... some... studying..."

Rarity narrowed her eyes, her lips elongating in an expressionless look of pure deadpan as the horrible, horrible truth behind her sister's constant failing grades in "Ponies and Math 101" came to light.

“Oh Girls....” sang Rarity in her usual uppercrust tone. “Do go on without me, would you please? I do believe I’ve got... *problems* to take care of. *Three very hyperactive problems.*”

Spitting out her last few words, Applejack and Rainbow Dash could only wince as the door slammed shut with a resounding ‘*THUD*’ behind the fuming unicorn, the rage minced in her last few words echoing ominously throughout the room.

“Oh boy...” breathed Rainbow Dash, breaking the uneasy silence. “Hope that pipsqueak comes out of this one alive.”

“Doubt it.” chuckled Applejack, trying to stifle her laughter. “Rarity’s worse than Discord on a bad day, if ya know what ah mean.”

“Hey, it’s starting!” Rainbow hissed suddenly. The screen had been split across the middle and the two chariots were barreling down the road of Motor City, the camera shifting to show every angle of the shiny vehicles, their engines steadily escalating from a low, throaty purr, right up to a high, ear-splitting roar as the countdown timer to the start of the race steadily dropped to zero.

*GET READY...GO!*

As soon as she had control, Applejack swung her analog stick toward Rainbow Dash, intent on sandwiching her against the wall. The agile pegasus had other ideas, turning in a way that Applejack slid past her, struggling to get her chariot straight before it hit the wall itself.

*TASTE\_THE\_RAINBOW TOOK THE LEAD!*

“Too slow, Apple Snack! SEE YOU AT THE FINISH LI-”

*Thud-Crack!*

The camera shifted again, showing Rainbow Dash’s Chariot slam into a nearby pillar, the vehicle crumpling into scrap as the screen gained a tint of red, proclaiming “TAKEN OUT!” in the corner. A second later, the camera swung to the culprit.

Rainbow Dash blanched, her expression souring as though she had just swallowed a lemon whole. "What the-?!?"

*'Muffin\_Master?!? MUFFIN\_MASTER took me out?!?'*

The chariot was highlighted with a red arrow: a jet black vehicle with a green tinted windshield, lined with what appeared to be *bullet holes*. The entirely screen suddenly took on a bloody-red hue, and the words "*New Revenge Rival!*" appeared, imposing themselves over the image of the bullet-ridden chariot. A second later, Rainbow Dash had respawned, her chariot reappearing on the road, and the blue pegasus was fuming with rage.

Almost as if mocking her, the earlier statement that had just proclaimed her triumph at taking the leading position of the race now instead pasted itself over the screen in large, red block letters, this time displaying something that soured Rainbow's throat and left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth.

*MUFFIN\_MASTER TOOK THE LEAD!*

"Oh, so that's how you wanna play it, *huh?*" She seethed. "FINE! LET'S FIGHT DIRTY, THEN!"

She slammed down on the gas as hard as she could with a war cry, plowing through a line of traffic - a checked minivan plowed right into *100pin\_h00ps* and instantly took him out, sending the wrecked remains of his chariot flying - and she violently wrestled her way past *Dumb3ll* in her rush to catch the pony who had DARED to take her out.

In an almost laughable display of resistance, *Dumb3ll* attempted to boost his chariot into the side of her own to shunt her aside, and Rainbow Dash let out a contemptuous snort right before she swung her chariot as hard as she could. The impact left her hapless opponent spinning out of control and smashing into the roadrails.

*DUMB3LL CRASHED!*

"So long, sucker!" The cyan speedster crowed out triumphantly as the rest of the speeding chariots zipped past the crumpled remains of Dumb-bell's chariot, leaving her childhood nemesis in the dust, the satisfying

confirmation of his loss soon declaring itself all over Rainbow Dash's screen.

*DUMB3LL IS IN LAST PLACE!*

The way to her Revenge Rival finally clear, Rainbow hit the boost, closing the distance between her and her quarry in a matter of seconds. The azure pegasus rear ended the bullet-ridden vehicle, and her heart soared in triumph as she sent it fishtailing for a few seconds, tires screeching loudly... right before it straightened out as though nothing had happened.

Rainbow gritted her teeth, electing to try to slip past her foe instead, but *Muffin\_Master* had other plans. The jet black chariot began cutting the pegasus off at every attempt, and Rainbow Dash was practically spitting with frustration at this point.

"Come on! *Lemme by*, you stupid fo-ooooaaaAAHHHH!"

*BANG!*

Rainbow Dash's declaration disappeared in a choked scream as *Muffin\_Master* slid to the side, a subtle, graceful movement that would have left Rarity transfixed. As it were, it left Rainbow Dash hammering on the brakes too late as her chariot hit a metal beam.

"Later, slowpoke!" Applejack whooped as her chariot sped by the wreckage, leaving Rainbow Dash spluttering incoherently in outrage.

"Why... why that little-!!!" The cyan pegasus was nearly in a fit of indignation by now, and she shook her head vehemently, her jaw locking in place as her eyes narrowed and her grip on the controller tightened. "*Nopony* crashes Rainbow Dash *TWICE* and gets away with it!!!"

The moment she respawned, her hoof immediately hammered down on both the right trigger and the A button, sending her chariot streaking forward as azure jets of flame erupted from its exhaust pipes.

Blasting forward fast enough that her tires left behind skid marks on the road, the incensed pegasus angled her chariot right for the one who had dared slight her pride so, totally ignoring Applejack in the process.

To the orange earth pony's shock, her chariot got suddenly slammed and sent spinning to the side as a cyan blur rushed its way past her, and she was left struggling to recover her wits as *Leeroy\_Wingkins* zipped past her as well, capitalizing on her moment of weakness.

"OUT OF MY WAAAAAAAAY!"

Rainbow Dash was howling like a madpony as she boosted as fast as she could, grinding her teeth in her focus to get back in the standings. Everypony was so transfixed by the spectacle of Rainbow Dash's rabid fervor that no one noticed at all when *Scoots\_Haagen\_Daaz*, who had been at fourth place at the time, suddenly disappeared from the racers' list altogether, a large **DISCONNECTED** label plastering itself over the space where her name had used to be.

The track had become a blur: even after her boost bar had been cut by a *half* through the two crashes, she had still managed to bring her chariot up to top speed, and was roaring down the road so fast, Twilight could only wonder how she could even see where she was going.

Turn coming up, coming up on *Muffin\_Master* again... the lavender unicorn could only guess what was about to happen, bracing herself for Rainbow Dash's inevitable stream of expletives.

As soon as she was in striking distance, Rainbow found *Muffin\_Master's* chariot mashed up against her own, throwing up sparks and flecks of chrome. It was a high-speed vehicular swordfight, with the two racers desperately trying to overpower each other. Suddenly, Rainbow pulled away, unexpectedly cutting the boost.

"EAT TRUCK!" She shouted, before slamming on the nitro again and ramming *Muffin\_Master* with all the force her chariot could muster.

It was the final straw that broke the chariot's frame. Unable to get itself under control, *Muffin\_Master's* bullet-ridden vehicle finally crumpled into wreckage, slammed violently against an oncoming big-rig by Rainbow Dash's enraged blow.

As the camera's view of Rainbow Dash's half of the screen turned to follow the brief, final flight of the remains of *Muffin\_Master's* vehicle for just a few seconds, the bitter taste in Rainbow Dash's mouth soon gave way to the sweet, satisfying flavor of well-deserved payback as the words *Score Settled!* stamped onto the screen right next to her ex-Revenge Rival's wreckage, the screen taking on an approving green hue.

*TASTE\_THE\_RAINBOW TOOK THE LEAD!*

"WHO'S RAINBOW CRASH NOW, SUCKERS!?" The cyan pegasus whooped loudly in triumph as the wreckage of *Muffin\_Master's* vehicle vanished behind her, the way ahead of her now clear as she zoomed ahead to reclaim her rightful place at the head of the racing pack of chariots.

"Not so fast, Rainbow Dash!" A familiar Southern accent suddenly cut through the dizzy haze of giddy triumph the Pegasus was riding on, and all of a sudden an orange chariot came up from behind her. Applejack looked over to Rainbow Dash.

"Now that that *Muffin\_Master* fella's out of the way, whadda ya say we get the REAL race started!?"

Rainbow grinned. "Way ahead of you, AJ. See you at the finish line!"

"Ah don't THINK so!"

The sound of clashing chrome filled the room as the two rivals bashed their vehicles off each other, wrestling for first place as they roared down the road. They were in their element: the masters of racing had left the moppets behind, and now they were alone on the road, dueling to settle their score once and for all. It was just Applejack and Rainbow Dash, nopony else.

So imagine Rainbow Dash's surprise as her chariot was suddenly crushed out of nowhere, not by Applejack, not by a wide or shallow turn, but a *huge hunk of bullet-ridden metal that slammed down on her from above, flipping her high into the air.*

**VERTICAL TAKEDOWN!** Proclaimed the screen, shifting to show the black chariot, wheels spinning as it seemed to hang triumphantly in the air, designated once more as Rainbow Dash's Revenge Rival.

"Oooh..." Pinkie cringed. "That's GOTTA hurt..."

"Whoa! What in tarnation...?" Applejack sputtered as she swerved to avoid Rainbow's wreckage, the mangled remains of her rival's crushed chariot crashing by her, missing her by inches.

"*M-MUFFIN\_MASTER?!? WHERE DID...HOW?!?*" Rainbow Dash shrieked. "How did she catch up with us?!? How did she get ABOVE us?!?"

"Ferget about that, RD! TAKE 'ER DOWN, WE'RE ALMOST TO THE FINISH LINE!"

The two rivals' efforts to take down this unexpected threat became increasingly frantic - every second that passed by, the finish line drew exponentially closer, and *Muffin\_Master*, Nightmare Moon curse her to the moon, was *still subverting their every effort to take her out!*

"Sakes alive, who IS this guy?!?" Applejack nearly screamed in frustration as she swerved her chariot right into *Muffin\_Master's* own battered chassis, trading generous amounts of paint, but the darned chariot just refused to *budge!* "Ah've NEVER seen anypony drive lahk this!"

"Just *focus*, Applejack!" Rainbow Dash herself had her jaw locked in concentration, teeth grinding together as her narrowed eyes focused utterly on the screen, completely tuned out from everything else around her. "Just...a few more... seconds..."

The finish line was already zooming closer to them with every passing second... Rainbow Dash's heart soared in triumph as she saw her chariot finally gain a slight edge over *Muffin\_Master's* own jet-black vehicle, and she pressed on forward for the lead, angling in to cut off her mysterious opponent from in front...

Right in time for her to realize that *Muffin\_Master wasn't boosting!* It was a trap!



“Wait...oh...NO!”

*Muffin\_Master* suddenly hit the boost and slammed right into the side of her chariot, turning her careful angling into a wild swerve that sent her flying right into the path of an oncoming semi - a semi that Applejack hadn't even seen coming down her lane, and without warning, smashed right into her own vehicle and turned it into a mangled mess that was left smoking on the road alongside Rainbow Dash's own crashed chariot.

**DOUBLE TAKEDOWN!**

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!” Rainbow Dash let out a strangled scream, her hooves going up to her mane and her eyes opening up even wider than saucers.

As the two rivals were left behind in the dust and *Muffin\_Master* zipped ahead to cross the finish line, followed closely by *Leeroy\_Wingkins*. Applejack and Rainbow Dash simply just stared at the screen and let their jaws hang, utterly speechless.

Words wouldn't have done justice to the shock and surprise at the swiftness with which their defeat had come, and numb hooves worked their controllers to finish the last few metres of the race with half-hearted enthusiasm before dropping them entirely to the floor.

Applejack was the first to recover her wits, shaking her head in disbelief as Rainbow Dash continued to stare blankly ahead, unable to conceive the inconceivable fact she had just been so closely *beaten*, out of *nowhere*, by a *complete stranger*.

“*What* in tarnation just happened back there?”

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“Mommy, you were AMAZING! How did you learn to drive like that?”

Ditzy Doo gave her daughter a smile. “Neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow, nor traffic can keep a Mailmare from her appointed rounds. It pays to know how to...MAKE faster routes for yourself.

“Then Mommy?” Dinky Doo asked the wall-eyed Pegasus who was giving the television set before her a completely focused, one-eyed stare, her other lazy eye drifting off and looking at some other distant point elsewhere. “Who were those two other ponies you were racing with at the end? It felt like we knew them from somewhere...”

Fixing her daughter with her one free eye, Ponyville’s resident mailmare could only give a mild shrug of her shoulders, a blank look etched across the Pegasus’s face as she gently placed the controller on the table. Upside-down.

“Mommy wishes she knew, darling. Mommy wishes.”

Giving her wings a gentle flap, the gray-coated pegasus floated over to the nearby kitchen, a gently wafting aroma of freshly baked goods enticing the mailmare forward.

“But for now...”

Gently prying open the oven door, Ditzzy Doo couldn’t help but drool before the baker’s dozen that lay before her: all thirteen of sugarcube corner’s last batch of fresh dandelion and daisy muffins, straight off the cart.

“Muuuuuuffins....”

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*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Today Rainbow Dash and I learned an important, and truth be told, humbling lesson. We learned that there's ALWAYS gonna be a bigger fish out there. While it's great to try to be Number One, it is important to remember that nopony is unbeatable, and if you let your pride get the better of you, defeat can come from unexpected places, so it's very important to keep yourself from getting a little too swollen in the head.*

*Your Faithful Subject,*

*Applejack*

# Chapter 8

## The Darkness

At first glance, anypony would think of the humble, idyllic town of Ponyville as one of Equestria's quietest and most peaceful places to live; normally, they wouldn't be wrong.

Indeed, compared to the city streets of Manehattan, or the bustling weather factories of Cloudsdale, Ponyville would probably have a name for itself as a bastion of solitude, a place where anypony who's anypony could just kick back, relax, and have a nice daffodil sandwich.

That is - until precisely noontime, five days a week.

Much unlike its neighbors Cloudsdale and Trottingham, Ponyville was one of the first few places to receive the unprecedented honor of hosting the "Grand GameHoof Gala Opening," hosted by none other than Equestria's royal monarch, Princess Celestia herself.

No pony would have ever suspected the small, countryside town to have ever played host to something of such scale and magnitude- truly, the only other places to have been host to said event were few in number; namely Canterlot and Manehattan.

Yet, to the quiet, reserved pegasus making her way down the well-trodden path of Stirrup Street, that much came as little surprise; after all, she'd been there when the sensation that came to be known as 'Gaming' first spread like wild fire all over Equestria - perhaps even before.

"Oooh..." came a soft, demure moan from the yellow pegasus, her wings flapping gently in the pre-noon breeze as she paced back and forth outside the glass-paned GameHoof, the staff inside carefully eyeing her with a hint of trepidation. "Where could Pinkie be...! It's about noon, and she said she'd be here before the-"

Before she could even finish, Fluttershy stopped short as the noonday bell chimed, the deep, resounding gong of the brass bell that hung over Ponyville

Elementary School signaling the start of what every little filly and colt ever looked forward to.

The end of class.

Soon enough, the ground began to rumble, pebbles vibrating as the earth itself gave way to a force mightier than few forces in all of Ponydom could ever equal: schoolfoals with an allowance.

Barreling down Stirrup Street, a gigantic column of colors zoomed towards Fluttershy, the demure pegasus barely having any time to even squeak as the army of schoolfoals knocked her off her hooves, sweeping the yellow pegasus right along through the GameHoof doors.

Once inside, the veritable horde of schoolfoals went their separate ways, groups thronging shelf after shelf as they clamored over one another to eagerly snatch away at copies of 'Call of Cutie: Modern Warmare 3,' apparently one of the latest in a very, very long, long line of sensations.

Fluttershy, on the other hand, found herself sprawled across the floor, eyeballs literally spinning in her head as she slowly tried to crane her neck upwards, hooves going straight to her temples as she tried to stop the room from spinning.

At least, right up to the point a certain sugar-dosed earth pony decided it was about time to show up for their appointment.

"HEEEEEEEEEEEY THERE, FLUTTERSHY!" came the characteristic high-pitched party squeal of Ponyville's resident party maniac, the pink earth pony standing wide-eyed over the still-dazed pegasus, examining her friend with a vaguely quizzical look. "Is there something on the ceiling? OOH, OOH, IS IT CANDY?!"

Her heart almost literally skipping a beat, Fluttershy gave a squeal of fright; her dainty wings sending her darting straight for the ceiling before she could even think twice.

Grasping the nearest overhead lamplight for dear life, Fluttershy held on for dear life as the timid yellow pegasus tried to calm herself down, teeth chattering as her entire body tittered with nerve-wracking shock.

“Aw c’mon, Fluttershy,” rang the ever-familiar tone of a certain sugar-dosed earth pony, now standing completely upside-down in direct defiance of all laws of gravity as she dangled right next to her timid friend, legs seemingly glued to the ceiling. “It’s just me, your Auntie Pinkie Pie!”

“Oh, Pinkie! Thank goodness it’s you...” was all the meek little pegasus could muster as she breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Please don’t scare me like that, if you would be so-”

“There’s no time for that!” Pinkie Pie’s voice practically shrilled in her ear as a pair of pink hooves grabbed her shoulders before forcibly pulling her down, and despite her iron grip on the ceiling lamp Fluttershy found herself standing back on all four trembling legs on the floor before she had even blinked. “WE’VE GOT GAMES TO BUY!!!”

Clamping down hard on Fluttershy’s tail with her mouth, Pinkie yanked the still-reeling pegasus and barreled straight for the Gamehoof counter, Fluttershy’s little “eep” of fright barely registering with the sugar-infused earth pony.

“HIIIIIIIIII!” screeched Pinkie as she bent hoof-first over the glass counter, giving the gray-coated salespony what might have been the biggest shock of his mortal life as he immediately found himself face-to-face with the grinning visage of an impossibly wide-eyed earth pony, her saucer-like orbs practically staring through him.

Barely able to utter even a scream of surprise, the gray-coated salespony immediately began backpedaling at breakneck speed on all fours, tripping over a few unopened boxes and crashing flank-first into the nearest shelf; a literal shower of boxes entitled ‘Battlefilly 3’ almost burying him where he sat.

Even in her near-permanent state of Equestria’s greatest sugar-high, Pinkie Pie couldn’t help but wince in pain as she witnessed the entire shelf collapse all over the unsuspecting salespony; a small “ooh” escaping her lips as the last few copies of Brink teetered off the shelf and right onto the poor salespony’s head.

“What in Nightmare Moon’s name is going on in my store!”

Thundering forth from the back end of the counter, a voice not much unlike the booming echo of a *certain* princess of the night barreled forth like an invisible steamroller, halting even the normally sugar-hyper Pinkie Pie right where she stood.

Throwing open a lone white door right next to the front desk, a disheveled and clearly grumpy pegasus scanned the store for cause of all his worries; his eyes horribly worn and bloodshot from countless hours of paperwork. If anypony had bothered to look closer, they probably would've also noticed the shiny gold nametag reading 'store manager' dangling over the edge of his clearly over-worn uniform.

No sooner had his eyes fallen on the now-unconscious sales staffpony did the gray-maned pegasus turn his withering gaze to Pinkie Pie, his bloodshot eyes narrowing to threatening slits as he hovered over to the now stock-still earth pony.

"H...hi, Moneybags." Pinkie managed probably her first ever forced smile.

"THIS IS THE THIRD TIME THIS WEEK!" bellowed the pegasus, clearly reaching the end of his tether as his pupils started narrowing to pinpricks. "JUST... JUST TAKE YOUR ORDER AND GO. NOW."

Reaching over the glass counter, the pegasus fished out two pint-sized brown paper bags and unceremoniously hurled them at both Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie, the latter somehow managing to catch both in her open mouth by executing a double-backflip even the Wonderbolts themselves would've whistled for.

"Here's yours, Fluttershy!" yelled Pinkie Pie as she tossed one of the small brown packages over to her timid friend, eliciting a small yelp of fright as the dainty yellow pegasus darted for the package; barely making it in time to catch it with her outstretched front hooves.

"NOW OUT! OUT! OUUUUUUT!" bellowed the frazzled store manager as he hastily shoved both Pinkie and Fluttershy out the front door, giving both an extra push with his hooves to make sure they were at least a good ten meters out before darting back in and slamming the front door with a very audible '*THUD*,' muttering something about hooligans and pink demons.

Pinkie got to her hooves, frowning at the door. "I'll never get how that grumpypants got into the *entertainment* business. Oh well!" The smile was back on her face in a snap.

"Sorry I can't stay and chat, Fluttershy, but I gotta be back at Sugarcube Corner for a little delivery before I can get down to *this* baby right here! I heard this one almost didn't make the shelves 'cause the ponies working on it almost scared themselves to death!"

Holding the paper bag overhead as though it were a solid gold sculpture of Celestia herself, Fluttershy could almost swear she saw her pink-maned friend's eyes literally sparkle with anticipation as she longingly eyed the game within; her smile *actually* stretching from ear to ear.

"...Buuuuut of course there's no way that kinda stuff is true," sputtered Pinkie Pie, the earth pony waving her hooves wildly in an attempt to form the "no" sign, sweating a little as she tried to backpedal away from whatever she'd just brought up. "That's just silly talk, is all."

Shooting a quick glance at her right hoof, Pinkie let out a quick gasp of shock and surprise as she began looking around for the nearest street exit before quickly darting through Hoofington Avenue and straight into Ponyville market square.

"SorryFluttershynotimegottadelivercupcakesenjoythegamebyeeee!"

Alone outside the GameHoof entrance, Fluttershy could only eye the dust cloud Pinkie had left in her wake with a vaguely quizzical look, right eyebrow raised in faint wonderment as she tried calling after the speeding pink blur that was once Pinkie Pie.

"...But we don't even wear watches."

---

Comfortable silence greeted Fluttershy as she stepped through the humble oak doorway that preceded entry into her humble abode, and she softly deposited the brown paper bag that she had collected from GameHoof down on the sofa, looking around her home.

“Angel?” The soft-spoken pegasus called out. “I’m home!”

In a flash of white, Fluttershy found her paper bag zipping out of her outstretched hooves and straight onto the couch, a manic blur of pristine white fur tearing away at the dull brown packaging, sending bits and pieces of paper flying all over the once-clear living room.

“Oh, Angel...” murmured Fluttershy, a smile still plastered over her face despite the raging storm of paper now flying about her living room. “I appreciate the help, but I hope I didn’t disturb-”

A vehement shake of Angel Bunny’s head suddenly stopped her in her tracks, and the questioning expression on her beloved pet’s face prompted her to take a closer look at the casing he was holding up in his paw... a casing that looked *nothing* like the one which she had pre-ordered.

“The... Darkness...? Oh... oh my.” Fluttershy began to shake her head slowly, rubbing her eyes several times over to make sure she wasn’t seeing things; much less the ones adorning the casing’s front side.

Instead of a subtle background of luminescent green crystals, or flashy, over-the-top explosions as a towering beam of light split ocean-borne platforms from stem to stern, the cover of the box was bathed in a single, dull shade of ebon black.

Utterly devoid of color, faint slivers of haunting yellow light bled forth from the two lone words near the top of the casing, seemingly engraved into the consuming blackness by a gryphon’s jagged claws.

Yet, in the midst of the swirling darkness, the blackened silhouette of a single earth pony stood alone amidst the onset of the consuming night; paying it no heed as a wry, razor thin smile creased his lips.

Crisply dressed in a simple, black leather jacket and gray undersuit; his jet-black mane neatly slicked to the sides of his head, the lone earth pony crossed both forehooves over his chest in a show of mock superiority, clutching two silver-tinted pistols to his chest as his eyes blazed aglow with the same haunting yellow light that bled from the jagged words above.



Dancing about his hooves, strange impish creatures clamored about in reverence to their master as two sinister, snake-like creatures reared their burning eyes overhead, row after row of jagged, razor-sharp teeth lining their mouths as they gleefully danced about, swaying in time with three thorned, scythe-like tendrils creeping slowly upwards, seemingly borne from the darkness itself.

"This... this isn't what I asked for!" Fluttershy slowly began to shake her head, her hooves trembling as the ramifications of what she had just obtained hit her with full force. "I... I think I might have taken Pinkie's game by mistake!"

The magenta earth pony's words slowly began to creep back into Fluttershy's mind, hauntingly reminding the timid little pegasus of the game's nature. What was it about it that Pinkie had said about it again?

*"... I heard this one almost didn't make the shelves 'cause the ponies working on it almost scared themselves to death..."*

Letting out a terrified squeak, Fluttershy immediately dropped the casing, flitting upstairs with all the speed of a hummingbird and leaping right into bed, hugging the covers tight around her, eyes scrunched up tight in terror.

"Oh no... oh no...! What am I going to do? What am I going to do! Ohhh, Pinkie's probably having the time of her life with my copy of The Sims now..."

Bounding over to his owner's side, Angel Bunny pointed his front paw at the game's ominous cover, then quickly pointing both towards the general direction of Fluttershy's TV.

"Oh no, no no no no no!" came Fluttershy's vehement protests, the dainty pegasus shaking her head from side to side. "Doing s-something like that would just..."

The smack on her head was completely unprecedented, and Angel Bunny was giving her a totally disapproving look that simply screamed of exasperation, almost as though he wanted to scream out at her *"For Celestia's sake, have some guts, will you! I wanna see something interesting!"*

“Ohhh... All right.” Fluttershy finally relented, unable to resist any request (or demand) that her beloved Angel Bunny made. “If it makes you happy, I’d be willing to do it...”

The rabbit’s expression almost instantly changed from one of irritation to that of satisfaction, as though he’d just gotten the Christmas present of the year, and he bounded out of Fluttershy’s room, game casing in hand as he tapped his foot impatiently, waiting for his owner to set up the console.

It was with much trepidation that Fluttershy stepped out of her room, hesitantly approaching the ominous game casing that Angel Bunny held in his hands, and starting up the Xbox 360 with trembling hooves that hardly wanted anything to do with that game, but just couldn’t deny her Angel Bunny’s request.

This... this was going to be a very, very hard day ahead indeed.

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*“I remember the night of my twenty-first birthday... that was the FIRST time I died.”*

Fluttershy’s attempt to put the controller down and rush off to Pinkie’s was stopped by a carrot to the head and a glare from Angel. Fluttershy slumped in her chair, sighing deeply. That was NOT the first thing she wanted to hear when going into a game! Here she was, getting up early and getting all her chores done, looking forward to a nice, quiet game of The Sims. Now she was being browbeat by a bunny rabbit into playing a game that was, for all intents and purposes, the absolute antithesis of what she was looking for!

*“Estacado...Hello, ESTACADO! Come on, wake up, sunshine!”*

Something was fading into view on the screen at the sound of the voice, thick with a coltfather accent. Fluttershy squinted to try to make it out. A pair of...hooves? Yeah, hooves. There was a flash of bright light, and Fluttershy, or whoever she was playing as had sat up in a top-down convertible chariot, cruising down a Manehattan freeway towards a tunnel, staring at his hooves.

The reddish Earth Pony in the passenger seat had turned to face her, smirking behind his thin moustache. *"Come on, whassa matta with you, ya weenie, huh?! Get one little tap from a nightclub bouncer and you go to SLEEP on me over here?"*

The driver, a gray Pegasus turned to glare at the Earth Pony. *"Hey, I already told 'ya, he don't look so good."* He turned back to the road. *"That guy was a gorilla. Ugly, too..."*

It was then that Fluttershy realized something. Something that, in spite of herself, made her feel a little bit more at ease. "It's an...it's just like Halo." She murmured. A game where she saw through the eyes of her character, like the futuristic shooter she had picked up on so quickly. Though she was still unnerved to a great degree by the idea of playing a game called "The Darkness", the fact it was similar to a game she had played before (a game that she had been VERY good at, she remembered with a flicker of pride) untied the knot in her stomach ever so slightly.

The ponies in the car continued to talk: evidently something very, very bad had happened, something that somepony named 'Paulie' would not be pleased about. If the chatter between the driver and his passenger up front was anything to go by, Paulie was not somepony you'd want to get mad.

And throughout this entire conversation, the Pegasus in the driver's seat was DRIVING LIKE AN ABSOLUTE MANIAC!

Weaving in between trucks and chariots, crossing the yellow line multiple times, and getting angry honks of the horn from the drivers around him, Fluttershy could SWEAR that she had stepped out of a First-Person Shooter and straight into Burnout.

The two had changed topics, apparently in the midst of discussing something about 'disposing' of some foreman down at a nearby construction site. Now *this*, *THIS* is where she drew the line!

Fluttershy threw the controller down on her sofa with an uncharacteristic huff of exasperation. Driving like madponies, talking about killing an innocent foreman... and THESE were supposed to be the GOOD GUYS?! She didn't care if Angel ignored her for a month, Fluttershy was NOT about to demean herself by playing this...THING!

She stood up, ready to march up to the console, eject the horrible disk and head to Sugarcube Corner. Angel, on the other hand, would have none of it. He was in front of the console with a few quick hops, spreading his little arms and glaring at Fluttershy.

“Angel Bunny, I can’t play this game! It’s horrible!” Fluttershy protested. “Please, Pinkie is probably wondering what happened to her game, I need to...!”

Angel shook his head, reaching behind him and pulling the case from nowhere, pointing at the cover with a single unwavering paw.

Fluttershy mouthed silently in protest, before sighing and sitting back down, picking up the controller.

*“Hey...we got company.”*

The Earth Pony in the passenger seat took one look behind them, and his eyes went wide.

*“DRIVE, DRIVE!”*

The engine roared loudly, and the chariot shot forward. Fluttershy gripped the controller as she heard a new sound: sirens. The Pegasus in the driver’s seat had thrown away what little finesse he had during the opening, and was literally smashing cars out of the way as his Earth Pony friend laughed raucously.

*“LUNA, Graymane, you’re gonna KILL US! HAHAAAAHA!”*

*“I told you they was comin’.”* growled Graymane, hunched in his seat. *“I heard the sirens. Didn’t I say I heard the sirens, Shallow Grave?”*

Shallow Grave had turned around in his seat, muttering something about Graymane hearing sirens in his sleep. He tossed Jackie a shotgun, telling him to lock and load. Really, Fluttershy wasn’t paying attention. This was madness. These ponies were criminals. Scum. Murderers. And now they were about to get into a high speed gunfight with Royal Guards. WHAT did Pinkie SEE in these ponies?!

*“Ohhh, buck MEEEEEEEEEEEE!!”*

Fluttershy watched, horrified, as a Guard chariot smashed into the side of their vehicle, sending Shallow Grave off balance, leaning dangerously out the side. And a semi was coming up, right...

*THWACK!*

Even Angel flinched; the semi had cracked against Grave’s head with a wet crunch. Immediately, the Earth Pony went limp.

*“Grave!”* shrieked Graymane. *“Oh, HORSEAPPLES! J-Jackie...JACKIE, you gotta get up here! Take Grave’s place, I can’t lose this guy!”*

Fluttershy watched as her character climbed over the seat, shoving Shallow Grave’s body the rest of the way out of the chariot with a hoof before sitting down and raising the shotgun. *An utter disrespect for the dead.* Thought Fluttershy. *Sure, it’s not like these ponies are ALREADY detestable.*

To be fair, it may not have been entirely disrespect: a well placed shot by Graymane had sent a chariot spinning out of control. *“Scratch one more of Manehattan’s finest. That was for my buddy Shallow Grave, flank-wipe!”*

The chariot roared along the tunnel, taking a 90 degree turn into an abandoned section. Fluttershy breathed a sigh. It looked like they’d lost the Guards...

*THUD!*

Fluttershy squeaked as something hard hit the car: an Earth Pony in a green outfit and hard hat had slammed up onto the hood of their chariot, his face mashed against the windshield. Fluttershy reacted without thinking, squeezing the right trigger and blasting him off of the chariot with a scream.

Now more workers were appearing, and they were...shooting? Fluttershy sat up as she realized that the workponies had pulled out hoofguns and began blasting away at them!

Roaring down a tunnel, tires screeching in protest, past a group of armed 'workponies', through a scaffolding, and suddenly they were airborne. Graymane had time for a choked scream as the chariot turned sideways, before everything went dark with a crash.

Fluttershy forced herself to breathe, before turning back to Angel, forcing a smile on her face. "T...there we go, Angel Bunny. They crashed: the game's ove-"

Angel shot her another glare. Fluttershy turned slowly back to the screen, as the blackness slowly dissolved like torn paper, leaving thin black letters framed over a pure white background. Letters that formed the words "The Darkness" before fading like ink in water.

"Celestia help me..."

---

*"Hey...where are you"*

For a brief moment, all Fluttershy could see was the dull gray of solid concrete, her screen wobbling violently as her character, this seemingly inconspicuous earth pony called "Jackie," struggled to get back on his hooves, vision blurred and hazy as he ran his hooves over his arms, checking for any damage.

*"Oh, Celestia... it HURTS!"* shrieked a voice from behind the wreckage of their chariot.

Pressing the left thumbstick, Fluttershy ran behind the chariot to find Graymane sprawled on the ground. Her stomach did a flip as she ran her eyes over the wounded pegasus: a wing lay two feet away from him in a pool of blood, and something white and pointed was sticking out of his left hind leg. A prompt appeared on the screen, indicating to Fluttershy that she could help him by pressing A.

*"Ah Celestia, I think they clipped me somethin' good that time,"* mouthed the white-coated pegasus as he limped towards a nearby lamp, a steady trickle of blood leaking from yet another gaping flesh wound in his right wing, an charred piece of shrapnel embedded in the appendage.

*"Listen, Jackie, it's not safe fer you ta be here..."* came the pain-wracked moan of the white-coated pegasus as he tried to settle himself down, desperately tending to his wounds.

*"Take that door and you'll be in the nearest Manehattan construction site. You an' I both know that yer uncle's not gonna be one ta' let ya go that easy, so I've gotcha a little somethin' right here."*

Reaching a hoof into his now-charred business suit, the white-maned pegasus pulled out two intricately carved pistols, their pitch-black shade of dusk dimly reflecting the faint light overhead, gleaming in the sheen.

*"Some twenty-first birthday, eh, kid?"*

*"Thanks, Graymane..."* Jackie's low, husky voice seemed to echo through the encroaching blackness; eerily calm despite only narrowly evading death's gaping maw.

Silently bearing witness to all this, Fluttershy couldn't help but clasp her hooves to her mouth as she felt a pang of sorrow in her heart for this helpless earth pony, abandoned by fate to a seemingly inescapable end.

"Th- That's horrible, Angel!" choked the visibly moved pegasus as she felt a pang of sorrow for the condemned earth pony, her heart visibly pained by his ordeal. "How could *anypony* DO such a thing!"

In response, the dainty white rabbit could only shake his head in faint exasperation, rolling his eyes and pointing his left paw at the screen, a frown creasing his lips as he tried to make his owner remember she still *had a game to play*.

"Huh? Oh- right! Sorry about that, Angel..." murmured Fluttershy as she turned her attention back to the screen in front of her, Graymane's two pistols now grasped firmly in Jackie's forehooves as the earthpony reared back on both hind legs, slowly turning to face the door forward.

Gently nudging her left analog stick forward, Fluttershy commanded Jackie to slowly make his way towards the door, slowly edging the ever-calm earth pony forward until the door finally creaked open, revealing nothing save a gray, dimly-lit hallway adorned with little more than a lone, rusty ladder, a few stacked boxes and a bunch of used two-by-fours.

“D-Do I really have to go this way?” squeaked the frightened pegasus as she turned to her white-coated companion, a look of utter pleading in her eyes.

Turning his head sideways, Angel shot Fluttershy an icy stare that quickly silenced whatever plea the visibly chilled pegasus was attempting to muster, a nearly inaudible squeak of terror escaping her lips as she once more commanded Jackie to walk forth, down the lone hallway.

Contrary to her expectations, the dimly lit hallway was little more than that: a simple, dull hallway filled with little more than basic construction supplies, heavy machinery and a small load-lifter that looked ready to fall apart at the bolts.

Gently pushing her stick forward with a little more force, Fluttershy commanded Jackie to break into a light run forward, leaping straight into the load lifter and hitting the rust-worn “up” button, slowly bringing the antiquated load-lifter to life with an audible, ear-splitting ‘*creak*.’

Beginning its laborious ascent, the aged load lifter bore Jackie upwards with speeds that would have made even the slowest turtle look like Rainbow Dash on her best day; thin streams of light slowly filtering in and out of gaps in the platform as it slowly rose to ceiling height.

“***Jackie...***”

Borne from the inky blackness of the night itself, a voice utterly devoid of emotion, heart and harmony roiled forth, bearing an infernal power that crushed all light before it, staining Jackie’s vision with an otherworldly grey.

The very moment she heard that infernal sound, Fluttershy threw herself backwards, toppling over the chair with a shriek. The moment she hit the floor, the terrified pegasus scrambled to her hooves, tearing as fast as she could to the door.

Something small and furry hit her in the small of her back, sending her sprawling. A second later, the case was shoved into her face, a small furry paw pointing at the cover. Fluttershy felt her forehead hit the ground, sighing in defeat.



No sooner had it come did the voice once again fade into the aether, disappearing from hearing and mind as the rusted load-lifter finally creaked into place, Fluttershy picked up the controller, gently edging Jackie out of the aged machine and into yet another dull, gray room filled with box upon box of construction supplies.

*“So I says to him-”*

Sensing danger, the timid pegasus commanded Jackie to crouch low with a simple press of her thumbstick, edging the earth pony around a central support pillar as she tried to follow the source of the noise, gently craning Jackie’s head over a bunch of loose boxes to get a quick look ahead.

*“Oh, right, well that’s very generous of-”*

Pausing mid-sentence, two pegasi, each dressed in inconspicuous worker wear, craned their heads around in suspicion as they sensed they were not alone, wings gently beating off the ground as they flew overhead to check out the pile of wooden two-by-fours near the central support pillar.

It was just a few seconds later when they rounded round the corner where Fluttershy was hiding, and the moment they caught sight of her, the first one let out a shout of alarm, reaching down to his belt and drawing his piece...

Except that he never got a chance to.

Time immediately slowed down. For Fluttershy, everything seemed to crawl agonizingly slow as the pegasi’s movements reduced themselves to a sluggish creep. Everything she saw came in painfully sharp detail; everything she heard was registered with crystal clear clarity. Her senses stretched beyond what she thought even possible, the pegasus found her hooves reacting with almost robotic efficiency.

The laser pointers indicating where her guns were aiming almost seemed to be moving on their own as they positioned themselves neatly above the foremost pegasus’s head, and with a single twitch of her right forehoof, sent a round spinning right through his cranium.

The pegasus toppled like a ton of bricks, collapsing to the floor below him with a heavy *thud!*, and before his partner could even react, Fluttershy had already whipped her targeting lasers around, bringing Jackie's weapons to bear on him.

Another twitch, another *bang!*, and another pegasi corpse crumpled limply to the floor, a neat, bloody hole drilled right through his head.

For a while, nothing but the sound of a ringing silence permeated the empty living room, the remnants of the gunshots fading into the distance as the game regained some semblance of silence.

That is, until Angel Bunny's carrot hit the floor with a soft '*THUD.*'

---

"...and that'll be fourteen bits, Ms. Lyra!" chirped the ever-carefree Pinkie as she dropped off a small box of six cupcakes into the lime-green unicorn's awaiting hooves, gleefully receiving exactly fourteen gold coins in return.

"Thanks, Pinkie!" came the gleeful reply of the town's resident lyre virtuoso, her eyes almost sparkling with delight. "Bon-Bon just loves cupcakes, so I figured it's about time I give her a little surprise!"

"Oh, no problem at all, Ms. Lyra!" chirped Pinkie, merrily tossing the bits into her pouch. "In fact, I just picked up a little surprise for myself at the local GameHoof, and-"

Shredding off the brown paper packaging, Pinkie could've sworn her heart literally skipped a beat as her once-puffy mane literally deflated in the blink of an eye, becoming limp and lifeless as the once-energetic earth pony stood rooted to the spot, eyes wide with fear.

In place of the game she had been expecting, a lone copy of some game apparently titled 'The Sims' lay right before her hooves, the utterly un-threatening cover art filled from top to bottom with gleeful, carefree ponies waving up at her from within the cover of the game that, very clearly, *was not hers.*

***Was. Not. Hers.***

The ramifications of what had just transpired slammed into Pinkie like a proverbial freight train, and though it seemed even physically impossible, her already-widened eyes grew even larger as she realized just what this meant.

Sweet Celestia... could Fluttershy have already...

Dashing off towards the western edge of Ponyville at breakneck speed, Pinkie Pie prayed silently to the Princess of the Sun that somehow, just somehow, she hadn't just consigned Fluttershy to an eternity of sleepless nights.

---

***“YOU WRONGED ME, JACKIE.”***

***“YOU BETRAYED MY GIFT.”***

Snarling forth, the same infernal, vile-spawned voice that Fluttershy had now come to associate with her ever-constant companion, this... monstrosity known only as “The Darkness,” boiled with barely-suppressed anger and rage as it slowly wrenched the once-unconscious Jackie back to the realm of the living.

...On hindsight, “living” might not have been the best of words to use.

Though Jackie's vision may have stained with haze and blur, Fluttershy could still make out the vague outline of a near-skeletal pegasus silently beating his wings as he... it, fluttered down what appeared to be... a trench of sorts, dimly lit by three faint, orange lamps spread along the length of an old, termite-eaten wood support.

*“Uuuugh...”*

Slowly, the rest of Jackie's vision came into focus, the hazy murk clouding the earth pony's eyes slowly fading as Fluttershy began to make out the vague outline of Jackie's lower body, his leather jacket beaten and dusty in a few places, but otherwise no worse for the wear.

***BANG.***

Whipping her eyes upward, Fluttershy could only narrow her eyes in barely-contained anger as she watched that very same pegasus, adorned in military regalia of purest black, sadistically twirl a small pistol in his hooves.

Craning downwards with the sickening sound of bone grinding against bone, the skeletal pegasus gave a utterly malicious snarl of pleasure, staring deep into the tear-stained eyes of an innocent unicorn, his amber mane slick with ash and rainfall.

Heaving in time with the peals of thunder from the hellish, ashen sky above, the lone pony of war could barely choke back sobs as he wept into his navy-blue uniform, gasping through the tears.

*“N-no... no, no! Have mercy! C... Celestia help me... p-please! PLEASE HAVE MERCY! PLEASE!”*

Slowly levelling the weapon with the innocent unicorn’s horn, the grotesque form of the undead pegasus began snapping his neck back and forth, hoof tightening around the trigger in a slow, agonizing press, almost as if to savour the grim vicissitude of the moment.

**BANG.**

Crumpling backwards to the floor, blood trickled from the unicorn’s head in a slow, steady stream, horn visibly smashed from the slug’s massive impact. His eyes, hollow and void, stared blankly upwards into the ashen skies, tears mingling with crimson as they flowed freely down his mud-stained cheeks.

**“YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE.”**

Hoisting himself upright, Jackie raised both hooves to shield himself from the oncoming thunder of a massive explosion tearing through the trench before him, fire and ash nipping at his clothes as the skeletal pegasus calmly fluttered through the inferno, not even fazed by the roaring heat and flame.

Narrowing her eyes, Fluttershy commanded Jackie to break into a quick run forward, time once dilating to a near-standstill for the yellow pegasus as

the world around her seemed to fade into a distant blur, hairline cracks tinted orange appearing at the edges of her vision.

To the yellow pegasus, all that remained clear before her was the unsuspecting pegasus, blissfully unaware of his approaching doom as Fluttershy's concentration deepened *even further*, the world around her and Jackie literally grinding to a complete halt as she fired two shots right into the pegasus's wings, clipping him from the air and sending him straight to the charred earth with a horrific, snarling scream.

"THIS IS FOR JENNY!" yelled Fluttershy in an uncharacteristic show of anger, bringing Jackie right up close and personal with the skeletal pegasus, immediately clamping both hooves down on her right and left triggers.

In response to Fluttershy's command, Jackie immediately brought his left leg down with bone-crushing force, smashing his leather loafers straight into the lower jaw of the demonic pegasus, eliciting a very audible *crack* as the bone shattered completely.

Whipping out Graymane's pistols, Jackie pointed both straight into the lifeless orbs of the undead monstrosity that dared pass itself off as one of the living, ramming both muzzles straight into the hollow eyeholes and pulling both triggers, popping the demonic pony's head like a rotten grape.

No longer a threat, the lifeless corpse of the undead pegasus lay motionless on the ashen trench, his wings slowly ceasing all movement as the all-too-familiar prompt flashed at the bottom of the screen.

**"Press A to Devour Heart"**

"AND THIS IS FOR GRAYMANE!" The pegasus yelled again, her hoof unhesitatingly landing down on the A button without a second thought.

Immediately, the darkness itself seemed to contort at Jackie's beck and call, coalescing into a formless, writhing mass of jagged tentacles flanked by two snapping, infernal vipers; maws lined with row after row of jagged, hellish fangs that looked more than sufficient to tear anypony in two.

Snaking forward on their master's command, the left choose to keep silent vigil over Jackie's head while the other, more savage twin instead chose to tear through the rotten, undead corpse, wrenching out the blackened, withered heart and gobbling it up in a shower of visceral gore and stained blood.

"I don't care who or what you are! NOPONY HURTS MY FRIENDS! NOPONY!"

Sliding down the infernal viper's throat, the bio-luminescent lights adorning the sides of the two hell-spawned snakes immediately shifted to a bright tinge of crimson red, sending the two adders into a literal frenzy as they began snapping at thin air, baring their teeth in raucous glee at Jackie, jaws snapping dangerously close but taking great care not to harm their master.

At the top of the screen, three words slowly faded into existence right below the emblem of a lone, jagged tentacle, fading almost as quickly as it appeared.

**"DEMON ARM ACQUIRED"**

"Demon... Arm?" queried Fluttershy, a little puzzled by this sudden turn of events; by now, she'd grown so used to the use of Jackie's demonic vipers it was a little surprising to gain *another* new power.

Venturing further down the trench, explosion after explosion tore down the length of the aged embattlement as dust and ash flew in all directions, one particularly large tremor sending a veritable landslide of rubble crashing straight into the trench, sending Jackie stumbling backwards and blocking any further progress.

To any other pony, this would have probably been quite the setback, and probably one they wouldn't see an immediate answer to; Fluttershy, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes to slits and sent forth Jackie's newest power.

In response, the inky blackness at the earth pony's feet swirled and bubbled, contorting like freshly made taffy before spawning forth an *enormous*, serrated tendril; the black appendage tearing through the rubble before them like it was little more than a cloud of dust.

Sensing the disturbance, yet another otherworld pony, this time apparently a unicorn, poked his head out from an adjoining room, horn immediately glowing a sickly green as he summoned forth an aged, wooden rifle.

He never stood a chance.

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Galloping along the garden path to Fluttershy's humble abode, sweat poured down Pinkie Pie's brow as the earth pony's heart hammered away in her chest, worry and fear at the very forefront of her mind.

Upon reaching the entrance to Fluttershy's home, Pinkie threw open the mahogany door and barreled straight for her friend's living room, searching frantically for the innocent, and hopefully unscarred pegasus.

"FLUTTERSHY?! IT'S ME, PINKIE! I BROUGHT YOUR-"

Whatever train of thought barreling through her mind instantly derailing like Ditzzy Doo on her mailing rounds, Pinkie Pie could only watch in mute amazement as her jaw literally hit the floor, speechless at what transpired before her very eyes.

Her eyes narrowed to wire-thin slits, Fluttershy's hooves literally danced about her controller as the normally sweet, demure look on her face was replaced by one of unwavering concentration; the usual smile on her lips replaced by a stoic frown that belied stone-hardened purpose, willing to do *whatever* it took to reach the end.

On-screen, terrified screams and wails of blood-curdling terror echoed throughout the room as pony after pony ran screaming, sobbing and begging for their lives as blackened tendrils of purest night eviscerated all who stood in Fluttershy's way, her ravenous serpentine minions tearing into corpse after corpse and popping still-beating hearts with a sickening *squelch*.

"FLUTTERSHY!" yelled Pinkie, snapping the yellow pegasus out of her reverie and back to the reality of Ponyville.

“Huh? Pinkie? I-” was all the yellow pegasus could manage as she brought a lone hoof to her forehead, shaking off some mild dizziness. “I didn’t quite see you there... sorry if I caused you any trouble...”

Shaking her head from side to side, the pink earth pony immediately darted over to Fluttershy and put a hoof to her best friend’s forehead.

“A-are you sure you’re alright? No fevers, chills, no strange twitchy-twitches or anything like that?”

Sighing, Fluttershy’s smile once more returned to her face, gently brushing Pinkie’s hoof off her forehead.

“It’s alright, Pinkie.” breathed the yellow pegasus, her voice back to normal. “I-I’m just a little tired, that’s all. Could I please have my copy of The Sims... if you don’t mind, that is.”

“Oh- right!” said Pinkie, perking up as she rummaged around in her delivery pouch for Fluttershy’s game, gently taking it out and handing it over to the pegasus. “I hope that you can, y’know... forgive me?”

“Oh Pinkie, don’t be silly!” exhorted the yellow pegasus, fluttering over to the Xbox and gently ejecting the disc. “No harm done whatsoever!”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Pinkie Pie trotted over to her floating friend and gently took the case for The Darkness in her hooves, putting it right back in her delivery pouch.

“Well then in that case,” perked up Pinkie Pie, her mane now back to its regular, puffy self. “I’ll get down to this baby sometime tomorrow... it was pretty tiring running all over Ponyville covering for this week’s cupcake rush.”

“Oh...” murmured Fluttershy, gently floating over to the door to help Pinkie Pie take her leave. “Well don’t let me stop you on any account, so why don’t you run along and get some much-needed rest, Pinkie.”

“Thanks, Fluttershy!” yelled Pinkie as she trotted out the door and out along the garden path. “Hope you enjoy that ‘Sims’ game of yours!”



“Oh, no worries!” yelled Fluttershy in response, a tiny smile flickering across her face. “I think I’m going to enjoy this one *a lot*.”

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Nightfall.

By this hour, everypony in Ponyville would have, under normal circumstances, tucked themselves away under the safety of their covers, snuggling warmly up to their pillows and plushies as they eagerly awaited the rising of Celestia’s sun for the coming of a new day.

Well, *almost* everypony, at least.

Humming silently to herself, Fluttershy gently pried open her bedroom doorway with an almost inaudible *creak*, gently trotting down the stairwell to her living room and stopping just shy of her lone television set.

“Hmm Hmmm, Hmmm Hmmm...” came the yellow pegasus’s sweet, almost hypnotic lullaby as she slowly lifted her copy of *The Sims* off the sofa, gently prying it open and fluttering over to her TV, switching it on with one gentle push of a button.

She looked down at the disk inside, and a warm smile spread across her face.

Nudging her 360’s eject button with a simple tap of her hooves, Fluttershy slowly placed the disc inside and quietly edged the tray back inside, soundlessly floating over to her couch as she picked up her trusty controller, flopping into her pillows with a subdued ‘*bamf*,’ still humming silently to herself.

Soon, the television began to dim as the shroud of night completely enveloped Fluttershy’s living room, her TV slowly flickering back to life as the all-too familiar face of one Jackie Estacado came into view, standing alone amidst the darkness.

Flickering above, a lone spotlight kept silent vigil over the night, illuminating little more than Jackie’s hollow, hardened eyes.

Slowly, surely, both Jackie and Fluttershy began to grin; lips curling upward in thin, wry smiles as the encroaching darkness boiled with malice, writhing and snapping to the faint echoes of silent melodies.

"Lucky, lucky pony."

"Haven't you guessed, Jackie?"

"You are The Darkness."

"You can do anything..."

"And *they*'ll pay the price."