

The Cutie Mark Clash

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Chapter 1

The town of Ponyville.

A lovely settlement in the Equestrian country; home to ponies of all shapes, sizes, and walks of life. Life in Ponyville is as complicated as you want it to be. If you want to be a cowpony, rising with the sun and bucking apples, you're free to do so. If you want to be on the cutting edge of fashion and task yourself with clients and deadlines in exchange for profit and esteem, you can be accommodated. The cornerstone of Ponyville life is love, respect, and knowing the value of friendship.

That last characteristic is what forced one Twilight Sparkle to depart her Canterlot home and is what made her stay. She is no less the knowledge-hungry bookworm and on this particularly fine day, has a full itinerary to work through. She departs the Ponyville library, a hollowed-out tree which doubles as her home, followed closely by her baby dragon assistant Spike. She planned for so much that her nighttime assistant Owlowicious is perched on her back for this outing. Spike carries the wagon of supplies while Twilight hovers a quill and parchment at ready in case any new ideas come along. Shortly into the main plaza, she finds herself surrounded by the energetic Cutie Mark Crusaders, always looking to help a pony out and often ending up causing the opposite. Just as Twilight was about to direct their attention elsewhere, a looming shadow passed over the plaza, grabbing the attention of every pony there.

And that is where this story begins.

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The looming shadow was, in fact, not a monster or a demon, but just the shadow cast by an entourage of pegasi. These weren't Celestia's pegasi, and that definitely wasn't Celestia leading the pack, even though it WAS an alicorn. The descending flyers didn't make any movements to show being hostile, but they did convey an air of intimidation with their earthen coats and darkly-colored full suits of armor.

While most of the Ponyville ponies were cautious, including the three fillies that hid behind her, Twilight was narrowing her eyes to look closer at the pegasi. "That emblem on their armor... They're from Clopperfield! And that in the front must be Lady Aremis!"

So much revealed, not much said. The three fillies looked at each other, but it was the owl on Twilight's back that asked, "Who?"

"Lady Aremis?" Twilight repeated, looking as the entourage landed amicably, "She's the current ruler of a far-off land called Clopperfield. Clopperfield... well, they don't have as peaceful a past as a place like Ponyville. Their present isn't looking that good, either. Lady Aremis is an alicorn... one of the very few in all of Equestria that isn't one of the two princesses."

Everypony watched as Lady Aremis approached the center of the plaza, where she was greeted by none other than Ponyville's mayor. Aremis looked like the warrior ruler type: Wine-red coat, silver long mane topped in a helmet, yellow eyes, fierce in appearance and built for battle, almost stallion-like. Her demeanor, however, was all smiles and very diplomatic. The mayor was nodding and gesturing to the stage in the middle of the plaza.

Despite the presence of these newcomers, the stalled ponies eased back into their routines. Over at the apple treats stand, Applejack was watching the entourage mostly because it was something new. Parting his way through the entourage was the only wingless member of the Clopperfield group; a unicorn colt with a steely gray coat, dark blue eyes backed by a magical glow, and a blonde mane thoroughly tied up in braids. In Clopperfield these braids may be proper, but anywhere else they just looked filly-like. In fact, the unicorn was making his apprehensive way straight to Applejack's carriage. He looked around the plaza as he went, humming in confirmation, as if checking to make sure everything was in place like he thought it would. Finally he made his way to the carriage, saying "Ah!" as if it just fell right in front of him.

"Hello, local vendor!" the unicorn greeted. His voice was light, mature, and accented. "My mates and I just flew in - well, my mates were the one who did any actual flying, I just... sat in the carriage and read the entire way. I guess ARRIVED is the better term. Yes. My mates and I just ARRIVED -

that's how it goes - and now they're famished. I can only imagine seeing as how we only stopped once from Clopperfield to here, so..."

Applejack just stared back at the stammering colt, dubious look on her face. "Y'all lookin' to buy somethin'?"

The unicorn's attention snapped back, "Hmm? Oh! Oh, yes. I see you have a good supply with you there and there were no other food vendors in the immediate vicinity, and you know how pegasi can get ornery when malnourished. Ahem... would THIS be enough bits to buy out your stock?"

At that, the unicorn magically lifted a very generous sack full of bits and laid it onto the counter. Any condescending thoughts Applejack felt toward the unicorn was crushed under that pile of money. At least, according to the way her eyes bulged at the sack.

"Are apples sweet!?" she called back, swiped the sack, and dove into the pile of apple-related treats to get them ready for delivery.

"Are apples sweet..." The unicorn echoed, "I THINK they are! Ah! I see why you would ask that! You posed a rhetorical question the answer of which matched your answer to the question I just posed. I suppose a citizen of this town would have picked up on that sooner-" He was stopped when Applejack zipped up to him, laying down the handle to the wheelbarrow containing the enormous pile of apple products that ought to have lasted until closing. "AH! That was fast."

Beaming proudly, Applejack recited, "At Sweet Apple Acres, we pride ourselves on customer satisfaction! Keep that in mind when you're headin' on home," finishing with a courtesy wink.

"Brilliant!" the unicorn concurred, "I'll just- erm, yes." He took hold of the wheelbarrow with his magic and made his way back to the pegasi.

By this time, Aremis has made her way to the stage in the plaza. If taking the stage didn't get most of the plaza's attention back, the reverb when she cleared her throat into a microphone did.

"Greetings, ponies of Ponyville! I am Lady Aremis, sovereign of Clopperfield! I apologize if my entourage alarmed anypony coming in, but I was under the impression that my arrival was known well in advance!"

Off to the side the mayor muttered, "I DID pin up a flyer on the bulletin board..."

Aremis gave a forgiving smirk, "We come as guests and as arbiters. With the consent of your mayor, I am proud to announce the arrival of the first ever Ponyville Cutie Mark Clash!"

A murmur spread throughout the growing crowd. They got the impression that this was something to be excited about, but the word 'clash' didn't sound too friendly. Aremis caught the concerned gaze of the gray unicorn that took his place next to her, but she took the reception in good spirits.

"Let me explain... the Cutie Mark Clash is a friendly competition between combatants. It's for athletic ponies who want to try something a little more... physical."

The ponies murmured again, getting it a little bit more. From above, Rainbow Dash called down, "So you're saying it's like a... FIGHTING tournament?"

All eyes turned to Aremis. She bowed her head a little and then looked back up, "I wanted to avoid saying it like that, but... yes. The Cutie Mark Clash is a fighting tournament. We do employ a certain magic that allows any pony to unleash their hidden potential and avoid serious injury. Champions will earn prize money and the honor of facing the previous Clash's champion. The prize money for winning is... well, I can at least tell you it's a generous amount; even by Clopperfield standards."

The new reception rippling through the crowd was very mixed. For every disgusted pony, there was a mildly interested pony. The outright enthusiastic ponies looked around for anypony else who would out-loud express interest. Aremis looked at the increasingly won-over crowd with satisfaction.

"For all ponies interested, we have set up a booth in the plaza. If you want to sign up or have any other questions, please talk to my scholar, Hayley."

Aremis gestured toward the gray unicorn, who said so low no pony heard, "Helloooo..." With the ponies talking amongst themselves, Aremis made her courtesy bow and took leave of the stage, resting her hooves behind the aforementioned booth. At the moment, the ponies in the plaza were keeping a fair distance, waiting for whoever was first to sign up. Without any pony actually approaching, Hayley turned his head.

"Brilliant speech, Lady. Rousing. You did... sorta, you know, trip over the whole fighting tournament thing. Semantics, I know." At Aremis's gesture, Hayley turned around, straight into strong rose eyes. "AH!"

Rainbow Dash hung in the air, keeping level eyes, looking very businesslike. "All right, let's hear it. When you say 'generous' with the prize money, how generous are we talking?"

Hayley fumbled around in the books, "Well, technically, Lady Aremis was the one to mention the money, so your question ought to have been phrased, when SHE said 'generous' wi- AHA! Here we are... this year's Rules and Stipulations booklet. Freshly quilled. The amount should be... here."

Dash read the page. "Well... that's not bad."

"Oh. Well, those last few zeroes ARE part of the number. Clopperfield punctuation and all that."

Rereading, Dash blurted, "SERIOUSLY!? Hey, Applejack! You should take a look at this! You could buy your grandma like... THREE new hips with this kind of money!"

Applejack stopped folding up her display to look over her shoulder. "Might kind of ya to point that out, Rainbow Dash, and I do think we could use the money... but we're earnin' it the old fashioned way... by buckin' and sellin' apples."

"Fine! More for me, then!" With that, Dash picked up the quill and signed at the top of the list. The crowd swooned at Dash's daring and moved in.

"That sure is bold, even for you." Twilight finally spoke up, walking over, "I thought your thing was racing, not fighting."

"I can see how you'd think that, but let me tell you, growing up in Cloudsdale can get pretty rough at times. I've seen my fair share of throwdowns." With a growl, Dash flexed her dominant front leg, managing to pop up a muscle. Twilight reeled back, not quite sure if pony limbs are supposed to be able to do that.

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Continuing along, Twilight checked items off her list. "Well, that was interesting. Back to the day!"

Spike had kept quiet the entire way over, but he did look back at the plaza since leaving. Finally, the baby dragon had to ask, "What do you mean, 'that was interesting?' Aren't you going to sign up?"

"Sign up...? You mean for that Cutie Mark Clash thing? ME? Fighting!?"

"Yeah! You've got the most powerful magic anypony has ever seen! At least that's what I was told whenever I ask about the day I was hatched."

Twilight faced forward to hide her sheepish grin and blush. "I know you think highly of my magic and I appreciate that you want me to explore what else I can do with it... but I don't think I can bring harm to another pony... even for sport. You saw it; Rainbow Dash was the first one to sign up! I can't even begin to think what would happen if I had to fight her. It... just doesn't seem like something that friends would do. I would NEVER hurt Dash... or Fluttershy, or Rarity, or..."

"PINKIE PIE!!"

"Yeah, Pinkie P-" In the next moment, Twilight heard a primal yell and a sudden flash of pink. "AIEE!!!"

When Twilight felt no impact, she opened her eyes and saw the bottom of a pink hoof directly in front of her eyes. She heard a familiar giggle, then felt the hoof bonk her on the head once and again. "Two for flinching!" Pinkie Pie called out.

"Haha... yeah... So, uh, Pinkie Pie... you've heard about the Cutie Mark Clash, too?"

"Yup! Heard about and joined!"

"Joined? YOU signed up for the Cutie Mark Clash!?"

"How could I not!? The Cutie Mark Clash is only going to be the biggest, most exciting party EVER!!"

"Uh... I don't know if I'd call it a party..."

"Twilight! Think about it! Everybody's going to be there, there's going to be tons of excitement, and Lady Artemis is sending out invitations!" Pinkie Pie very seriously pulled the nearest poster, "Invitations, Twilight! Invitations!! Add in a cake and some streamers and I'd call that a PARTY!!"

"You... have a very broad definition of what you'd call a party, Pinkie Pie..."

Spike added, "And kinda troubling..."

Despite their comments, Pinkie Pie was still talking. "OOH! You have a list! I should make a list of thing I'll need for the Cutie Mark Clash! Okay, I've already mentioned the cake and the streamers, and then I'll need... ooh! Hats! Party hats! And cowpony hats and fezzes! Fezzes are cool! OOHHH! Tambourines! I'll need backups too and I know where I can get some! I'll see you later at the Clash, Twilight!!" And with that, the pink pony bounced off.

Twilight realized that last sentence and called after, "W... what! I'm not GOING to the... Oh, what's the point?"

"I think she makes a good point, Twilight!" Spike spoke up with an opinionated skyward point, "Pinkie Pie knows what's going on and she's setting out to have fun with it! I'm pretty sure Rainbow Dash thinks about it the same way... Well, MOSTLY the same."

Twilight defiantly levitated the handle to the wagon back into Spike's hand. "I'll think about it. Let's just get back to the research for now."

Spike reluctantly held his hand out, "Fine..."

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After making a few stops, Twilight's itinerary brought her to Rarity's shop for one thing or another. At the door, Twilight gave a little knock, only to be met by the other unicorn's sing-song call of "Busy...!"

Despite Rarity's apparent business, her door was left unlocked, so Twilight pushed her way in. "Rarity, it's me. I just want to pick up a... what are you doing?"

Rarity was currently stitching together a very... different sort of outfit. Not her usual glamorous dresses and formal wear, but something much more form-fitting and perhaps not modest enough. Rarity herself turned around from her sketch, "Why, stitching together my Cutie Mark Clash outfit, of course!"

"Your..." Twilight shook her head, "Okay... Rainbow Dash was predictable, Pinkie Pie... well, she's UNpredictable, but Rarity, why are YOU of all ponies joining this thing!?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Rarity asked, magically pulling an eye mask from the model and placing it on her own face, "The Cutie Mark Clash is a VERY big deal to these Clopperfield ponies and I have yet to even GET a client from Clopperfield! So imagine Lady Aremis's face when I, Rarity, dash onto the field of battle, wearing the most glamorous yet practical costume of all the participants! I can only IMAGINE that everypony else will just be going as they are for this event. How drab!"

"But Rarity... do you actually know how to fight?"

"Do I know how to fight? Oh, Twilight, darling, you don't give me enough credit! Every pony knows how to fight, somewhere deep down inside. Just like how every pony has a zodiac stone, or a certain season really brings out their innate charm! And besides...! Well, I shouldn't have to tell you. You're the pony who knows everything about everything, aren't you?"

"Um... what? I'm not following you."

"In that case, you trot yourself back down to the plaza and talk to that handsome scholarly colt. I need my outfit to be PERFECT... Oh, to project my bust in this outfit, or not to...?"

"PROJECT!!" Spike cheered, and then was quickly dragged along. Twilight was out the door before she started wondering what a 'bust' is.

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While Twilight continued to resist the apparent allure of the Cutie Mark Clash, the event was the buzzing topic all over Ponyville and anypony remotely close to it. For instance, Rainbow Dash was just so pumped about it that she had to tell somepony, and found her old friend and confidant Fluttershy to be the best pony to gush to.

"I am SO pumped about it!" Dash repeated for the umpteenth time, not even looking at the birdfeed she was filling, somehow putting in the correct amount to the very grain.

"It sounds like fun," Fluttershy muttered sincerely, while meticulously repositioning a lily pad at the instruction of a very particular frog, "I hope you win."

Dash took her perch on a nearby tree branch, "No doubt! And you know why? I've been looking through my playbook of tricks and I could make at least HALF of them into fighting techniques! I'll be all over the place and take a pony down before they even notice I'm not there any more! Omigosh, and I also saw that there's team battles! What if one of the Wonderbolts joins and then I get to team up with them!? No... wait. That's bad! I need to practice team attacks! Fluttershy! You have to help me practice!"

Fluttershy froze for a moment at the thought, conveniently leaving the lily pad right where the frog wanted it. Fluttershy quickly thought of a change of topic, "Won't it be too small in the arena to pull off such big tricks?"

"Arena? Hah! The Cutie Mark Clash isn't being held in a single place! That would probably be cheaper, but not as fun. Clashes can take place

anywhere two ponies meet up! I could wake up, go to the rainbow factory and BAM! Some pegasus wants to fight!"

"Even in, um... the Sugar Cube Corner?"

"That would be hilarious!"

"Twilight's house?"

"She'd throw a fit! Haha!"

"Even... here?"

"Yeah, sure."

Fluttershy looked all around, "Right... right here?"

"Yes, Fluttershy. I think you get the idea by now."

"That's not it," Fluttershy said upward, "I mean... two ponies could fight here? Where there's delicate ecosystems that could be disrupted, or unwitting little furry creatures that could be caught underhoof? Or... or even used as weaponry?"

Dash turned over from her reclining position, "You worry about some strange things, Fluttershy. But, uh, yeah. I guess that could happen. Though I personally promise you I won't be reaching for any gopher-chuks in the middle of a fight."

"But what about everypony else? They could get so wrapped up in their fights that they don't see a bunny scampering along, or a bird gets caught in the crossfire...!"

Dash landed in front of her friend with a humored smile, "Fluttershy, calm down. Hurting animals isn't going to give extra points, so I don't think anypony will be aiming for them. Just... stop worrying and you'll see."

"Oh... but I have already started! I think I'll go into town and have a word with whoever's in charge."

"Hmh..." Dash followed, thinking off to the side until... "You know... While we're going that way, I have ANOTHER idea of how you can actively keep ponies from harming the wildlife, one or a few at a time."

Looking into Dash's eager grin, Fluttershy lowered her head, "I'm not going to like this idea... but end up going along with it anyway, aren't I?"

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The first day in Cutie Mark Clash sign-ups was very busy. Now that the sun had risen on the second day, there weren't so many ponies lining up to sign on, Hayley noticed. Not that it was such a bad thing, heavens no. Hayley would have been WORRIED if every pony in this nice town were clamoring for a spot in a FIGHTING TOURNAMENT, of all things. Yes, the initial rush of the most interested would do nicely for the Ponyville event.

"...se me? EXCUSE ME, sir!"

"Oh dear!" Hayley yelped, stirred from his thoughts. When his hooves landed, he saw the pony trying to get his attention. "Heh- hello there! Ah! You're the local vendor from the other day! Well, I know your name isn't 'Local Vendor,' I was just trying to get to the point. I'm often told I don't get to the point. It would be funny if right now you said that your name actually IS Local Vendor."

Despite Hayley's rambling, Applejack still managed to make an awkward silence of looking at the other, less articulate pony. "My name's Applejack."

"Ah, not Local Vendor, then. Good, good."

Averting the need to awkwardly stare again, Applejack lifted a hoof, "And you are?"

"I am... Oh! Me. Yes, me. I am... ahem... Hayley. I know, I know, a mare's name, but consider the spelling. H-A-Y-L-E-Y. I believe that extra 'Y' in the middle is what makes is so androgynous. That is, fitting for both genders. Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude by assuming you don't know what androgynous means, it's just that most ponies don't-"

"I just have one question for ya, Hayley, and I'll leave ya be."

"That'll save time, yes." Hayley cleared his throat, "Please ask. Your question."

As if having climbed up a mountain of stairs to ask a wise guru, Applejack sighed, "This here Cutie Mark Clash thing. Does it really help ponies get their Cutie Marks?"

"Hold on, hold on," Hayley immediately said, clenching his eyes shut, "No! I mean... well, no. It does not. The Cutie Mark Clash is named after an event in the life of Trotts Clopperfield himself, who earned his Cutie Mark in the field of battle. I believe it was in the civil war of, hm... I should know this..."

"So it doesn't?"

"So what- Oh, yes. I mean no. Yes to the no. The name is just that. There is no special stimulation towards earning one's Cutie Mark in this tournament. That is, unless your special talent happens to be in fighting. Which isn't too likely since A) This town doesn't seem to be the type and B) I can see plainly from here that you are already in possession of a Cutie Mark. If, ah, that's how you put it. Having a Cutie Mark."

Keeping on track, Applejack sighed, "THAT'S a relief. My sister and her little friends were all on about enterin' this thing to see if they get their Cutie Marks from it. Now I can just go on back and tell her exactly what you said. Well, not EXACTLY what you said, just the important stuff."

Applejack was nearly out of earshot when she heard a passing, "Oh, dear."

The orange pony zipped right back to where she had been previously standing, "What?"

"AH!" Hayley yelped again, "I mean, HAH'lo again! Haha! Well, I was looking at the list of participants and I was wondering, what with the similarity in name, if this sister you're referring to is Apple BLOOM?"

Immediately Applejack said quickly, "Why do you ask?"

Nervousness mounted on Hayley's side. By now she must have known, but her glare forced his hoof forward. "Well, earlier, a little filly and her two

friends came by, asking to join the tournament. And I told them, 'No! Not even two of you combined could join!' And they asked me 'How about all three of us?' And I consulted the manual - this manual right here - And apparently, a group of ponies CAN compete as a single entry if they lack physical strength but make up for it in coordination." Hayley paused. He hadn't been hurt now, so maybe that was a good enough answer. He looked at Applejack, only to have her unchanging expression back. Hayley gulped, "That filly's name was, ahem... Apple Bloom."

"YOU LET MY LIL' SISTER INTO A FIGHTIN' TOURNAMENT!!?"

Rapidly, Hayley whimpered, "I cannot refuse a qualified party if he, she, or they request a slot in the tournament and it is not my place to go against age-old traditions if you have an issue please fill out a complaint which will be sent up to Lady Aremis within an hour!!"

Stiff-lipped, Applejack backed down from Hayley's personal space. "Darn it, Apple Bloom... I thought just this once you could leave trouble be."

As Applejack looked around for any solution to the issue, Hayley exhaled, calming down enough to show genuine concern and guilt. "I'm sorry for what this tournament - and I, by proxy - is causing for your family. Like I said, it's not my place to say what goes. I'm just the scholar. I mean, Apple Bloom told me not to tell you or you'd buck me into next week. Though I AM skeptical of time travel by any means - much more by the force of a buck - I AM willing to wager that the buck in attempting the time travel would still be very painful. So I decided, after looking at all the facts that I would be best off on YOUR good side, the side that I don't believe can actually send me into next week, but WILL harm me greatly in attempting to do so. So in short-"

"Who are you talking to?"

Hayley opened his eyes to see one of the Clopperfield Pegasi in front of him. He grinned sheepishly. "Miss Applejack, of course. I mean, I was under the IMPRESSION that I was still talking with Miss Applejack and should she still be here that is who I would be addressing."

The Pegasus leaned forward and looked at the parchment with the names of the Cutie Mark Clash participants, "You mean THIS Applejack that just signed up?"

"Hm?" Hayley looked to his side and saw that indeed Applejack's name topped the list as the most recent competitor. Hayley then cast a look to his other side to avoid any gazes, "Oh, dear..."

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In just enough time for Hayley to calm down, he stood ready when a young mare unicorn with a purplish gray coat stopped by. She was accompanied by a baby dragon; an odd sight.

"Go on, Twilight," Spike urged, "just ask!"

Twilight rolled her eyes over to Hayley, who bust a grin upon being looked at. "Hi. I'm Twilight Sparkle, and I have a question about the Cutie Mark Clash. Your lady said that you have a way to avoid injury. I want to know more about that."

"Ah! A common question. Not that being common doesn't make it a good question as well, because that question IS very good for a pony who does not know. So common, in fact, that I burned out explaining it and will answer it shortly once I have the proper chapter brought up. Bringing up, bringing, up... Ah! No. No that's meal obligations and your question was not about that. Unless you'd like to know? No, no. You came with a specific- Here!"

Hayley floated the open book in sight, and then lifted what appeared to be a gilded horseshoe.

"You see this? This is the Hoof of War. Again, the Hoof of War. Wearing a pair of these will allow you to summon up a spell also called the Hoof of War. Easy to remember. What the Hoof of War does is, first of all, enhances a pony's fighting ability. Techniques that require years of training or much momentum or energy will be simple under the Hoof of War's effect. Secondly - I think we're on secondly - the Hoof of War detects a pony's position and momentum, and manipulates the gravity and anything else to prevent serious injury. So, say a pegasus decides to get wise and drop you

from on high - NOT pleasant, I can tell you - the Hoof of War will make it so you land in a manner that is most shock-absorbent. So you can't, say, fall on your head - spinal fracture - or if you get knocked out standing, twist your legs in UNHEARD OF directions on the way down. Um, just to reiterate, those are things that can NOT happen in the Hoof of War."

"That's, uh... that's good to know." Twilight said in response, still as apprehensive as when she arrived. She looked at the parchment with all the participant names on it, over to Spike, who nodded encouragingly, back to the parchment, back to Spike, up to Hayley, who shirked away in surprise, unaware that he was any part of this, back to the parchment, then to Pinkie Pie.

Before Twilight could properly react to Pinkie Pie's sudden arrival, the pink pony burst, "Ooh!! You're finally signing up! I signed up and then I wondered, 'Hey, where's Twilight on this list?' and then I realized you hadn't signed up yet and said to the pony next to me 'Well that's strange. Usually Twilight is involved in EVERYTHING that goes on around Ponyville!' and the pony next to me asked 'Who are you?' which is a pretty silly question since I know everybody in town but probably not as much as you because you're involved in everything because you're so main-character-like but lately there's a lot of new ponies visiting which is really exciting and I'll bet you'd meet a lot of them if you joined the Cutie Mark Clash which you're going to anyway because everypony else is here to see you join so I have to ask just 'cause you're so tired of pressure are you signing up for the Cutie Mark Clash now? Are ya are ya are ya?"

True to what Pinky was saying (if you could catch all that), the rest of Twilight's friends weren't far behind, approaching expectantly.

"You have to admit," Rarity spoke up, "the six of us HAVE become a package deal for the town in the past year. In fact, I've likened each of us to components of the perfect dress ensemble!"

In turn, Applejack said, "I wasn't keen on joinin', but it'll help me keep track of Apple Bloom throughout the whole nonsense. I might as well have some fun."

The floor turned to Rainbow Dash. "Let me put it this way, Twilight. This is an event that even FLUTTERSHY signed up for. You can't NOT chicken

out on something that even FLUTTERSHY is willing to do. Uh... no offense, Fluttershy."

"Oh, none taken," Fluttershy said with a smile, "If it weren't for the animals, I wouldn't have joined. Chickens are adorable creatures, anyway, so if you didn't join, you'd still be okay with me." Fluttershy received light kicks from at least three back hooves, "But it would still be better if you DID join."

Looking over her friends - her trusted, loved friends - Twilight groaned as her reluctance waned. Finally she sighed, "Fine... I'll do it." She magically picked up the quill and signed amid the vocal approval of her friends. "You know... I wouldn't have done this for ANYpony else."

Hayley looked the signature over, "And... it's done! Awe-inspiring, truly. You know, back in Clopperfield, the value of friendship is seen a clichéd thing... hokey to a fault. Seeing you ponies play it straight makes ME want to run out and make a friend! Not- not right NOW, mind you. But the thought is there!"

After a few more pleasantries, the six friends took their leave to move onto other tasks in their days. Hayley watched them go, then as soon as they were out of earshot, saw Lady Aremis emerge from the back of the booth.

"Were those the six ponies we've heard so much about?" Aremis asked.

Hayley, gestured with a nudge of his head, "I can't be entire sure, but I am PRETTY sure those are the ponies."

Aremis hummed thoughtfully, "If they end up treating our tournament like they did the Grand Galloping Gala, things are about to get interesting. I'd go so far as to call it the best Cutie Mark Clash ever."

"Oh, oh, I see what you did there. Actually... actually I don't. No. I lost it."

Disregarding her scholar, Aremis kept her eyes trained, especially on Twilight. Her mouth curved into a grin.

Chapter 2

The Ponyville plaza was buzzing with activity on the day following the announcement of the Cutie Mark Clash. The posters around town reminded all participants to report back for mandatory instructions. Among the crowd was the town's more infamous trio of fillies, the proclaimed Cutie Mark Crusaders, all sharing a blank flank - and thus not knowing their true talents - in common. As soon as they heard of the Cutie Mark Clash, they had rushed off to conspire to join before really understanding what they were getting into. After being told, they weren't discouraged any.

There was Apple Bloom, youngest in the Apple family with a rebellious streak, despite (and fueled by) her bigger sister Applejack's overprotection. Sweetie Belle, Rarity's younger sister, was most often at the back of the group but no less an important part, and Scootaloo, well, her family never really comes up in conversation. She's a pegasus who idolizes Rainbow Dash, a feeling which appears to be recognized and appreciated by the other pony.

Sweetie Belle was as eager to try the next thing as the other two, but certainly thought everything through more than the others. "So how do we know when we're about to get our Cutie Marks?" she asked, "I don't know if I want my Cutie Mark to be in fighting..."

Apple Bloom slowed her trot next to Sweetie Belle, "That's not how it works. The way I figure it, the fightin' will BRING OUT the special talent. So if, uh... say we win a fight, and I start dancin' 'cause I'm happy. I start bustin' moves I didn't even know I had, then suddenly I've got a Cutie Mark!"

Apple Bloom opened her eyes after pantomiming her Cutie Mark-winning dance, and checked her flank just in case. Nothing.

Applejack walked by, "Just as long as y'all stay in my sight, you can do all the singin' and dancin' you want."

The Cutie Mark Crusaders all flashed innocent smiles at the older pony. "Of course, Sis..." Apple Bloom said through her teeth. She then turned to the other two in a huddle. "The first chance we get..."

The other two nodded solemnly.

Meanwhile, on the stage, Hayley was managing his notes and his wits to speak to the crowd. "All right, everybody huddle close. This microphone can only be so loud. Well, not- not THAT close. I'm assuming you enjoy having the ability to hear. But- well, all that empty space- NO! I like the empty space. Love it. Now, then... Everypony look this way. AH! All at once. That was eerie."

For a few seconds, every pony looked at the lone unicorn on stage. Slowly, his book and a pair of Hooves of War floated onstage, as if forgetting their cue. Every head in the plaza turned with them. Once they were positioned at a leg's length, Hayley cleared his throat.

"You all brought your Hooves of War with you, right? Wasn't necessary, but it's good just to get a feel. In order to properly equip a Hoof of War, lay it on the ground like how a horseshoe goes if it were attached to your real hooves. Like so. Now, gently - GENTLY - press down on the Hoof of War, thinking about wearing it. The thought is what counts - literally. Just to warn- yes, you who just gasped. And you three as well. The Hoof will sorta MELD into your own hoof and turn the coat around your hoof golden."

The ponies in the crowd began doing that, giving 'ooh's and 'ahh's at their now-gilded hooves. In particular, Rarity held her hoof up, examining its shine in the sun. "This... is... BRILLIANT. Oh, but I'll need to make a new dress..."

Pinkie Pie looked over to Rainbow Dash, "Hey Dashie! How much cooler would you say you look with those on?"

Dash scrutinized her hooves, "I'd say about... 44% cooler."

Pinkie Pie's jaw dropped, "That's not how it goes!!"

"How WHAT goes? Who are YOU to say how much cooler I think I am?"

"Okay, okay, are you paying attention? This is the important part!" Hayley commanded the attention again, "THIS is how you apply the Hoof of War's magic. If you try anything without the Hoof of War active, it will not count. In fact, the Hoof of War will REFUSE to go along if there is any premeditated damage that was NOT incurred during a previous clash. First, clop down on the ground with your left hoof. LEFT. Left to prevent accidental use of the Hoof of War when gesturing conversationally. Clopperfield IS a dominantly right-hooved country, so bear with us. Then, you LIFT your left hoof, and clop down with your right hoof."

There was a slight whoosh as the crowd did as told at nearly the same time. Hayley took notice.

"Ha! It's like a big game of Simon Says, isn't it? Hahaha... But- but seriously, you're all doing very well. Lastly, lift your right hoof so that both are off the ground momentarily, and sorta- I guess- sorta STOMP with both hooves equidistant from your middle. Not strictly equidistant. Ahh, see, you there. With the, uh, the orange mane. Your right hoof a little to the left. Your- your left. Yes! Like that. Perform those three steps in rapid succession, and you'll have yourselves a Hoof of War."

After a moment of digesting the information, the ground rumbled as a bunch of eager colts scuffled up the streets trying to summon the Hoof of War.

"Aha! See, we KNEW you'd try that as soon as you knew about it. That's why Lady Aremis has a hold on the Hoof of War's power until tomorrow morning. This way, we can properly kick off the Cutie Mark Clash without anybody jumping the fence, so to speak. After all, many of our competitors have yet to even arrive. Thank you, and, um... prepare well! Or something."

With Hayley's departing the stage and reassuming his position at the booth, the crowd dispersed to go on with their days.

"Many of our competitors?" Twilight echoed, "How can ponies not be here yet if the Cutie Mark Clash is BASED here?"

Rainbow Dash positioned herself between Twilight and the booth, "Well, let's take a look!"

The group walked over to the booth where the list of participants was kept. "Okay," Twilight said with a shrug in her eyes, "but I don't see how many more can enter. Not many ponies around here would want to enter, and Ponyville isn't that biiiWHAT THE!?"

Formerly a modest parchment, the Cutie Mark Clash attendance sheet now stretched across a banquet table. Even though the size was due now to the fact that pictures now accompanied each name, there still were many more names than probably accounted for ponies in Ponyville.

"Who ARE half these ponies!?" Twilight snapped.

Hayley exhaled, having been all too ready to rest his vocal chords, "That is a good question! One of the questions I have actually received proper instruction on how to answer! Ahem, you see, Twilight Sparkle, this is the Ponyville Cutie Mark Clash in location only. We've held Cutie Mark Clashes all over Equestria! Fillydelphia, Manehattan, um, even Canterlot! Though I personally have yet to preside over a Canterlot Cutie Mark Clash. The last one was so long ago. Something about injuries and cost of medical attention or another thing. Anyway, the point is that just because the Cutie Mark Clash is being held here, doesn't mean that only Ponyvillians are allowed to enter. Is it... is it 'Ponyvillians?' Or... 'Ponyvillites?' Or... 'PonyvillANS.' Heh. Almost sounds like the name of an antagonist. Pony villians! ... And... I see you are giving me that look which means what I just said was peculiar in one or more ways, which is not good, so please direction your attention to the attendance sheet."

As instructed, the four more local ponies turned their gazes over to the tall scroll, looking at the various names and pictures. They stared with particular scrutiny at the unfamiliar pictures.

Hayley continued, much calmer now that no eyes were on him, "Believe it or not, and I am inclined to believe that you all fall under the 'not' category, just saying, the Cutie Mark Clash is quite popular in most of Equestria! Many ponies are into fighting for sport and travel to participate in the Cutie Mark Clash wherever it is held. Um... ah! Over there! That's one of the Cutie Mark Clash's mainstays right over there!"

The ponies turned and looked in the café's direction and could instantly pinpoint which pony Hayley was referring to. Standing at one of the tables

was a grown stallion, burgundy in coat and burly in build. His visible hooves were horseshoed normally over his Hooves of War and he wore a camouflage tank-top with matching cargo pants. In contrast to the surly demeanor he held in his eyes, his mane was awfully showy, normal up to the neck, but on top of his head it was all gelled straight up and ending on a flat top almost like a haystack. His tail was cropped and some pony could barely make out the glimmer of tags around his neck.

Rainbow Dash turned a little pale, "THAT is who you're expecting us to fight!?"

"Technically," Hayley answered, "only ONE of you will be facing him when the time comes. All alone. Against him. You may help each other, but in morale only. It... I believe it counts for a lot."

"I hear music!" Pinkie Pie suddenly chirped.

"So do I..." Twilight added, squinting, "I think he has an iPony on him."

With a point forward, Pinkie Pie claimed, "It totally goes with what he's doing!"

The statement drew some odd looks. Rainbow Dash flew forward a bit to get a better look, then just turned around. "Pinkie Pie... he's just eating a petal sandwich."

"AND THE MUSIC TOTALLY GOES WITH IT!!"

Fluttershy occupied herself looking for the stallion in the attendance sheet, when Hayley took notice and spoke up again. "THAT is Gil, an accomplished fighter from Mareica. That is, MARE-ica. As, as in female adults with -ica at the end. Oh, I'm sure you know Mareica. But I thought I'd give you all a thorough introduction. Just in case. Probably didn't. But it's been said."

When they all looked back, Gil wasn't there any more. Twilight started to ask, "Where did he-?" when suddenly the music got louder, "Where's that coming from NOW!?"

They all turned to see Gil turn the corner of the gate out of the café and begin trotting towards where they stood. Pinkie Pie couldn't help but reiterate, "The music even goes with him walking towards us menacingly! He's good."

Gil stopped in front of them, looking them over. He gave a courtesy nod to Hayley, then looked to the other four again. His eyes stopped. "You're Rainbow Dash?"

"Uh," Dash said, caught at being addressed, but gaining her composure, "No. The OTHER pony with the multi-colored mane and tail is Rainbow Dash!"

Pinkie started, "There's ANOTHER pony with ra-!?" but was quickly shushed.

Gil smirked, "You've got spunk. I expected as much from the pony who's rumored to have pulled off a real Sonic Rainboom."

"RUMORED!?" Dash replied, "Let me put that rumor to rest. AS BEING TRUE! Wait... they're talking about me in Mareica?"

"Not all over the place. Let's just say a little birdie told me."

At that turn of phrase, Fluttershy said, "Oh, little birdies talk in Mareica? I would very much like to see that."

"One at a time," Dash said back, "can't you see this guy is fronting me?"

Gil popped a laugh, "I only ask because my signature technique is something I like to call the Sonic Boom!"

"Hah! My Sonic Boom is better than your Sonic Boom! 'Cause it's a Sonic RAINboom! It literally has more to offer in the name alone!"

"That's what I'd like to figure out."

Dash took that in stride, then the implication hit her. "Wait... tomorrow!? Right out the gate!?"

"No, I'm going to be a little more patient with you." Gil began a walk around Rainbow Dash at a conversational speed, "I was in the Marican army for a long time. When you're in the army, you internalize a lot about the art of combat. Most important is knowing your opponent. See how they move, what techniques they employ. I have a feeling you're going to be my most interesting opponent... so I want to observe you, know about your battle style... what makes you tick."

"Ooh!" Pinkie Pie zipped right beside Gil, "I know... An alarm clock!!"

Not more than a moment's stare at the grinning pink pony was lost before Gil took it in surprising stride and looked back at Dash, "I'll be seeing you later... in the Hoof of War."

With that, Gil turned from them and started a walk off to his next location of interest. The group was left with their own thoughts regarding the weight of what was just promised. Despite the inevitable clash, Pinkie had to gesture to Gil's retreating figure, "Okay, you can't tell me that the music doesn't go with THAT."

It really did.

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Each pony prepared for the Cutie Mark Clash in their own ways that night. Twilight flew through book after book on the art of combat using unicorn magic, Rarity took painstaking measures to ensure that the fringes on her outfit were the exact pigment of the gold on her hooves. Rainbow Dash dragged Fluttershy out to practice team moves, and Pinkie Pie geared up with a party hat, then wore a party hat on top of that just to be absolutely sure.

Applejack, however, just stayed in the barnhouse and took it easy. She was a rough'n tumbler since birth, so she knew she had what it took. The fillies, however... Applejack walked through the house and peeked in on the Cutie Mark Crusaders as they planned their moves and chatted the night away in their sleepover. Another pony sauntered over, and Applejack moved away to let her Granny Smith take her own pick and emit a quiet laugh. "Oh come, dear. The little ones see it as a bit of fun."

Applejack sighed, "I don't know how Rarity can be so okay with this. I know she gets into her work, but she cares about her sister just as much as I care about Apple Bloom. Am I the only one who looks at this Cutie Mark Clash and doesn't see all cheerbright?"

"I'm sure that isn't the case, sugarcube." Granny Smith knew that Applejack couldn't help but smile when called that. That was probably why Applejack herself adopted that as a pet name for her friends. "From what Apple Bloom tells me, those Clopperfield ponies have everything under control. And besides... it's not often this sort of thing comes along. Why, if I were sixty years younger..."

Applejack grinned softly and chuckled, "That would be a sight, Granny Smith..."

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Despite all the worrying, Applejack's internal clock lead her to a good night's sleep. In the morning, she woke up and saw from the lack of sun in the sky that the rooster hasn't crowed yet and nopony else would be up by now.

Well, no point trying to go back to sleep now. Applejack pushed open the door to her room and began her rounds around the farmhouse, making sure everything was in place when she and the fillies left for the Cutie Mark Clash. Speaking of the fillies, waking them for a little earlier breakfast wouldn't hurt anypony.

Applejack walked up to Apple Bloom's door and knocked. "Rise and shine, fillies! There's ain't no sun out yet, so you'll have to do both until it's ready."

Unsurprisingly, there was no response.

Applejack tried again, "I don't know when you other two get up in the mornin', but Apple Bloom I know YOU'RE up by now."

Still silent. Too silent...

Applejack pressed her ear to the door, "Apple Bloom?"

Fed up, Applejack pushed her way into the room and gasped at what she saw. No fillies, window open, tied-up bed sheets leading out, and upon looking out the window, the bush directly underneath was dented as if it absorbed the impact of three falling fillies.

"APPLE BLOOOOM!!" the orange pony called into the young morning. She pulled her head back in, and her worry turned to anger. "HORSE APPLES!!" she swore.

And at that moment, there was a knock at the door.

Despite all evidence, Applejack still hopped downstairs and pushed the door open. "Apple Bloom!"

The door opened up to reveal a modest gathering of her extended family. They ignored the incorrect address. "Well howdy there, Cousin Applejack," the pony at the front greeted, "We're all ready to take over while y'all have fun at that Cutie Mark Clash thing."

Applejack's expression lifted into gracious confusion, "Th... That's mighty kind of y'all! I really appreciate the help! Pardon if I look like I don't, 'cause I didn't know any of y'all'd be comin'!" Intending to say this aside, Applejack added, "Though I don't know why Granny Smith would call y'all down without tellin' me... especially since she's still got Big Macintosh."

Applejack stared into space with a hoof to her chin in thought, not seeing the rest of her kin look around at each other awkwardly. Finally another pony spoke up. "But Cousin Applejack... Big Macintosh was the one who sent out for us!"

Applejack heard this with a start. She looked into the shifting eyes of her family and immediately knew that what she just heard was the honest truth. As soon as she accepted that, Applejack's face scrunched a little into a disapproving glare at nopony in particular. Wheels turning in her head, Applejack responded, "Is that so...?"

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On the other side of the Sweet Apple Acres, Big Macintosh was well on his way down the path to Ponyville, passing under the rooster who had a

minute until his call. The red draft horse was almost to the exiting gate when he heard the expected clopping and yells from behind.

"Now hold on there, big brother!" Came Applejack's call before she came to a halt some distance away. She caught her breath, "You're gettin' all mixed up in all this Cutie Mark Clash nonsense, too!?"

Big Macintosh turned his head to look back at his sister, "Eyup."

Applejack stomped the ground and leaned in, "But... why!? I TOLD you that I was enterin' to keep an eye on Apple Bloom and her friends... and now they're gone to who-knows-where and now I'm on edge and don't feel like arguin'! If this is about that prize money, then you can just turn back now 'cause we aint' fixin' our problems like that." Realizing how antagonistic she was being, Applejack calmed down and sighed, "Big Macintosh... is just ain't LIKE you to walk out on your duties like this."

Big Macintosh looked forward, away from his sister again, now that she had a point. After steeling himself, he said back, "I want to go."

That spoiled Applejack's sisterly compassion somewhat. "Want!? Big Macintosh, we can't always GET what we want! And- and I know you're not the type to want everything in the world all the time. I'm sorry, but having us BOTH in the Cutie Mark Clash is excessive and as long as Apple Bloom is in danger, I ain't backin' out, and THAT is how it is. So when we get back to the Sweet Apple Acres, you're going to tell everypony there that you're awful sorry for wastin' their time and git-"

At that point in Applejack's ramblings, she turned to Big Macintosh who had turned his entire body around. She first expected him to walk past her back to the farm, but noticed he scratched at the dirt with his hooves, then purposefully laid his left hoof down.

Applejack's face flushed through a series of surprised and sad emotions, settling on miffed. "Big Macintosh... you'd better be foolin'."

Saying nothing, Big Macintosh kept his confrontational stance, lifting the left hoof and laying down his right.

"Not even explainin' yourself," Applejack muttered, "Just walkin' off by your lonesome, wantin' your own GRAND OL' destiny... So much that you're willin' to clash with your own sister over it?"

Still wordlessly, Big Macintosh returned his sister's glare, then let down his hooves. When they landed, a shadow formed on the spot that grew around the two Apple siblings, eventually creating a horseshoe that surrounded them like a fighting ring, and then faded into the ground after its presence was known.

Applejack leaned into her battle stance, eyes narrowed sharply, grimacing, legs shaking with nerves and rage. "You... stubborn..."

This entire time, the calling rooster had been perched safely behind the show. He was, however, still frightened to bring any attention to himself. The two siblings in front of him were ready to clash at any moment, just waiting for some signal. And to the rooster's dismay, the tip of the sun began to peak over the hills. Forgetting the situation, the rooster reared back to call in the day. Remembering the situation, the rooster froze in place. Keeping his call in caused his body to shiver. The call welled up in his stomach, expanded his chest, and managed to puff his beak out before he threw his wings over it to keep it inside. That proved to only delay the inevitable as immediately after, the rooster belted out the loudest "COCKADOODLEDOO!" he had ever called. The fatigue of such a strong call caused the rooster to lose his footing and fall to the tall grass below.

The sun's rise and the rooster's call were all Applejack and Big Macintosh needed to signal the start of their clash. The two siblings took off from their places, leaving large dirt clouds in their wake. They charged at each other in what promises to be a very strong start to the Ponyville Cutie Mark Clash!

As they closed in on each other, Big Macintosh reared up on his hind legs and spread out his forelegs. That whole 'making himself bigger' thing worked when they were young'uns, but now Applejack just saw him as a hard-faller. She could headbutt hard, but Big Macintosh was too thick and sturdy to topple over at full power. He counted on her trying, but she went for something else. As Big Macintosh went for a belly-flop tackle, Applejack pumped her legs for a slide between his. Narrowly she avoided the fall and let Big Macintosh fall over to deal the first damage to himself. She then

nimbly hopped back and landed on her brother's back, digging her hooves in with a powerful stomp. To complete the attack, Applejack grabbed off one of her lassos and managed to hook it in Big Macintosh's mouth and pull up.

Unfortunately, it didn't quite work when Big Macintosh was an unwilling steed. Big Macintosh let the lasso pull his head back, then all at once heaved his head down, pulling Applejack off with it effortlessly. While the filly flailed her way to the ground, Big Macintosh pushed himself up and chased after her falling form. Applejack hit the ground, and picked herself up just in time for Big Macintosh to stop in front of her, pivot on one of his front hooves, and swing his body around it, slamming the thick of his flank into the side of her face. He watched the blow roll her across the ground and kick up dirt. Just like before, Applejack planted a front hoof on the ground to pick herself back up.

Applejack didn't underestimate her ability to take a hit, but she KNEW that the flank strike always knocked her out cold. This Hoof of War magic is really potent... What else did Hayley say? Abilities were also enhanced? Applejack looked across the fence at a close apple tree and bucked it. A single apple fell, which Applejack then bucked straight at her approaching brother. Big Macintosh saw the apple and didn't think much of it, until it hit him with enough force to throw him flat on his back. While he got up, Applejack saw her advantage and began a series of apple bucking straight at him.

A few of the apples hit their mark, but Big Macintosh learned how to weave, jump, or duck the majority of them. He reared back on his hind legs to avoid a pair, then slammed them down, creating a tremor. Applejack wobbled in place, giving Big Macintosh his opening for a full tackle. However, Applejack's ability to improvise kicked in. Taking a lasso in her mouth, he roped an apple, twirled out of the way of the tackle, swung the roped apple in a circle with it coming down directly on Big Macintosh's head. Applejack took that moment to distance herself a little more. She sensed he was not out yet.

There was a brief break for them both to catch their breath, and then it was back to it. This time, Big Macintosh took initiative, giving a might leap, elbows forward. Not quick enough to dodge, Applejack just threw her hooves up and blocked the incoming attack. Big Macintosh took a few more

swipes with his front hooves, keeping his sister on the defensive. She met his hooves directly on, both on their hind legs, pushing against each other. Big Macintosh had strength and height, but Applejack's will managed to allow her a push that sent Big Macintosh reeling. The critical stun allowed Applejack a few front hoof swipes that connected well with Big Macintosh's face and neck. She kept a good rhythm, but slipped eventually, allowing Big Macintosh to just leap forward for a quick headbutt into her chest. Applejack exhaled hard, then landed on her hooves, trying for a quick counter to whatever Big Macintosh would follow up with.

Big Macintosh leaned back, raised his front hooves to his collar, and loosened the vices. "I reckon we're done here." He hit the ground and met Applejack's headbutt with his own, the two forces colliding at a standstill. However, his loosened collar kept its forward momentum and slipped off, right over his head, right over Applejack's head, around her neck, and to the ground. Despite the fact that Big Macintosh seemed to carry on just fine with it on, Applejack realized at that moment that his collar was EXTREMELY heavy, and that there was no way to quickly pull herself out of it. After realizing that, she realized Big Macintosh took his position facing away and lifting his hind legs in prime bucking position.

"Aw, no..." Applejack gasped, "Aw HAY no...!!!"

"Eyup," Big Macintosh said back.

Like a spring loaded all the way, Big Macintosh's hind legs bucked out in a fraction of a second, smashing his exposed hooves into Applejack's face. The younger Apple bucked straight out of the collar into a tree. The collar was popped into the air by the momentum, fell around Big Macintosh's neck, and snapped its vices back in automatically.

"K.O.!!!" Shouted a voice conjured by the Hoof of War's magic.

Applejack fell from where she hit the tree with an "Ugh!" After that, the Hoof of War faded from the field like a rustling wind. Despite not having broken or even sprained anything, Applejack was still on the edge of consciousness, covered in scuff-marks, and trembling with pain and fatigue. "Suh..." She gasped, coughing over her own words, "So... it comes all out... dunnit..."

While Applejack struggled to speak, Big Macintosh picked up her hat and slowly walked to where she lay.

"Thought we had an agreement... Big Macintosh... We both quit the fussin'... and mellow out... for Apple Bloom's sake. Really... had me goin'... Thought you changed... But you're STILL... nothin' more than... than a stubborn FOAL..."

That said, Applejack resigned to staying limp and gasping while her brother reached her position and placed the hat back on her head. However, she didn't pass on the opportunity to shoot him a nasty look. Big Macintosh looked down at her with an expression lamenting no more than her current physical condition. Finally, with his head still close to hers, he spoke softly.

"I mellowed out. You didn't change none."

Applejack gasped and looked at her brother, appalled. Having said all he needed, Big Macintosh turned and continued the way he had been going. That didn't stop Applejack's tongue.

"Now wait a... That just ain't true! Big Macintosh, that ain't true so you take it back! Big Macintosh! BIG MACINTOSH! YOU GET RIGHT BACK HERE! ... Stubborn... blamed... FOAL! ... You know what... you keep walkin', Big Macintosh! See if I ever let you take one step into Sweet Apple Acres... EVER AGAIN!! You hear me!?"

Big Macintosh's retreating form shrunk in Applejack's blurring vision until the red shape was gone from the road. All glared and cursed out, Applejack felt passing out NOW wasn't such a bad idea since there wasn't any pony around to see. With another "Ugh..." Applejack drifted off.

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Suddenly, Applejack found herself in... Twilight's house? And she wasn't even in a bed or anything... she was just suddenly standing in the middle of the house with her five best friends doing something or other. She looked at the nearest pony. "Twilight?"

"Huh?" Twilight looked up from her book for all of a few moments. "Oh. Applejack."

Applejack tilted her head away, "That was a mighty flat greetin'. There something you want to tell me, sugarcube?"

"Oh. Well. Good news is I feel MUCH better after deciding not to put up with your strong-headed nonsense any more." In the background, Spike chuckled.

"Wh... what!?"

"Oh yeah!" Rainbow Dash call from up high, "Very strong-headed, very nonsense. I thought you were a rival or something, but I realized you just annoy me."

"Sticklerrr!" Pinkie sang.

Rarity haughtily checked her hoof, "A mess of a pony, really."

"Reckless..." Fluttershy could barely stammer.

Overwhelmed, Applejack backed up, "Wh... why... why didn't none of you tell me these things? I... what did I do to..."

"Applejack."

"I know, I know..."

"Applejack!"

"Just let me-!"

"APPLEJACK!"

"NAAUH!" Applejack snapped awake in bed. Her bed. Surrounded by her family. "A dream..."

"You were stirring and kicking so violently..." Granny Smith whispered, "It must have been a terrible dream..."

"I'm fine now, Granny Smith..." It was true to say she felt a lot better after the clash, but the dream left her shaken, not to mention all those nasty things she said before passing out left a bitter taste in her mouth.

One of Applejack's young cousins spoke up, "Well, that's all thanks to Hayford over there!"

Applejack furrowed her brow at the mention, and then heard the unforgettable voice.

"Actually, that's HayLEY. Like in... ahhhhh... well, I have no examples off the top of my head, but just take my word that it's a LEE sound."

"You found me out there...?" Applejack asked.

"Naturally! Well, not that you needed to know until now, but the Hoof of War magic is being tracked by Lady Aremis and, by proxy, myself. We see every clash that happens to verify the results. The magic also enables me to teleport myself to the location of the clash in case medical attention is needed. Which it was. In this case. You're welcome. Not- not in an arrogant way! Just, ah, heading you off because I REALLY felt like welcoming you at that moment."

The Apple family was exchanging looks at Hayley's unique train of thought. Applejack, used to it, leaned back into the bed. "Thank you kindly, Haley... I mean it. You're good at what you do."

"Oh! Thank you. I mean... you're- well. That is... you don't preside over a few Cutie Mark Clashes without learning healing magic. By necessity. Ohhh, the necessity... Anyway. I've done what I needed to do, you are safe with your family, I think I'll be going. If, ah, if this loss has discouraged you, please remove the Hooves of War and return them to the Cutie Mark Clash booth in the Ponyville plaza at your convenience."

"I ain't backin' out, Hayley."

"Which I knew you wouldn't! Notice the IF in that sentence. IF! I'm just saying what's obligated of me. Diplomatic relations. You know. ... Right. Leaving. Get well soon!"

Hayley backed his way out and onto other things. There was a moment where nopony knew what to do or say, so one of the extended family lifted a hoof, "All right, everypony. Cousin Applejack's lookin' fine and there's still more apples to pick. She only needs Granny Smith now."

The family headed out to their various chores, leaving Applejack and her elder. The former was still looking around the room, restless. Granny Smith hummed, "I'm worried about Apple Bloom too, dear... but she's with her little friends and I'm sure everypony will be looking out for them, wherever they wander off to... Is there anything you need, sugarcube?"

Contemplating things like asking to be snuck out, or just bolting out at that moment, Applejack ended up falling right back onto her pillow. "... Rest." She answered and turned away.

Knowing well Applejack's temperament when unable to act, Granny Smith gave a little smile to herself and walked off to some other activity. If not for the soreness and fatigue, Applejack never would have drifted off to sleep with all on her mind.

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Later in the day, Twilight woke with a start, having fallen asleep with her face in a book about roundhouse kicks. Spike in tow, she ran through town into the plaza where the ever-representing Hayley was wrapping an initiation to the Cutie Mark Clash.

"Lady Aremis. What a mare, right? Now, then... a few ground rules. First: Spread out. Clashes can happen anywhere, so we suggest looking for your own clashing grounds. Two fights going on near each other are just begging for a little interference. That is, unless you're looking for a tag battle of sorts, in which case BOTH members of the challenging team must activate the Hoof of War at the same time. No need for perfect timing... unless you're going for intimidation. I know I'D be intimidated. Without further ado, I announce the first Ponyville Cutie Mark Clash... OFFICIALLY BEGUN!"

"Twilight, behind you!"

The helpful pony's cry was lost in Twilight as she turned around and met a ball of light that slapped itself on her face, doing no real damage, but causing her to see stars and shake her head. When she opened her eyes again, she didn't believe she was in Ponyville any more.

"Sloppy as ever, o fiercest of rivals!" A voice boomed, "I think I'll have you run around a bit in the penalty zone for that!"

Twilight saw herself on a flat, dark-purple plane with brighter purple crystalline structures all around. The sky was an abstract baby blue filled with five-pointed stars that you'd more expect on a wallpaper rather than in the sky. Topping the sky was a pale bright blue moon.

"Wh... Where am I!?" Twilight demanded to the voice, "What did you do!?"

The voice chuckled, "Perhaps you should worry more about THEM, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight turned around and found she wasn't alone. She was in a relatively open area, and it was full of shadowy pony-like creatures with sharp eyes that were only pairs of bright yellow lights. As if that weren't bad enough, a gnashing sound alerted Twilight that one of them *was right on her back*.

"AHHH!!" Twilight yelped and quickly tossed the creature off. At this, the other creatures began to approach. Taking the once-spoken advice of her mentor, Twilight ducked into the nearest path between the crystal structures and ran.

Some of the creatures ran after, keeping a good pace behind. Everywhere, around every corner, were more of the creatures. Some were even just passing by, not even noticing Twilight until she ran past or even into them. Finally she emerged into another open area where there was a structure bigger than the rest, with a bright, inviting entrance. Having filled up on too much weirdness, Twilight just ran into the structure.

And all at once, she was back in Ponyville.

Rather, she appeared to be in a circus tent of some sort that was erupting in applause. A gate slammed shut behind her, prompting her to notice she was in a fenced-off area, like a pen...

Or an arena.

"How did you like my dazzling charm, Twilight Sparkle?" the voice boomed again, "The only thing that changed was how you saw the world. There were no creatures... just a confused little filly running around like a madmare."

Twilight rolled her eyes in thought, "So that was... magic? All those things were the other ponies? So then that one that was on me... Spike!!"

"I'm okay..." Spike said, approaching the edge of the arena, holding an ice pack to his head, "At least I know it wasn't ME you thought you were bucking. Ouch..."

The voice chuckled, "Tsk tsk, Twilight Sparkle. For a mage of your... ahem, prestige, I expected more."

"That was a cheap shot!" Twilight responded, looking around, "I wasn't expecting anything! I wasn't even... expecting to EXPECT anything! Aren't fighters supposed to look each other in the eye when activating the Hoof of War? Because I KNOW this is about the Cutie Mark Clash!"

"The Cutie Mark Clash..." the voice mused, pausing to let magical fireworks light up the air at the top of the tent, painting pictures of ponies clashing, and Lady Aremis, "The traditional test of wits of Clopperfield! An event which crowns champions, paves the future for the bold and the skilled... and has a more dark, insidious effect..."

The fireworks swirled in and out to depict two ponies, orange and red, arguing and eventually striking each other.

"The true colors of all ponies who participate are shown. All resentment, insecurity, and locked-away malice are laid bare under the Cutie Mark Clash's flag. Friends against friends, family against family... relationships tested... and broken."

As the crowd looked aghast, but still rapt with attention, Twilight didn't have any of it. "Will you just come down here and FIGHT already!? Where are you!? WHO are you!?"

The voice chuckled, "What you lack in preparedness, Twilight Sparkle, you make up for in getting straight to the point. Who am I, you may ask?"

Suddenly next to Spike, Pinkie Pie urgently raised a hoof. "Ooh, ooh! I know! I KNOW! Even though I wasn't around that episode I STILL KNOW!"

"Why, only the newest champion to grace the Cutie Mark Clash! And today, you will all marvel at the glory of this champion, beginning her ascent to Cutie Mark Clash stardom with this very clash!"

A pair of spotlights illuminated a curtain behind a balcony. Twilight lifted a hoof in anticipation.

"For you see, this is a grudge match long in the making!"

Twilight put her hoof back down and pouted.

"For far too long, Twilight Sparkle has been regarded at the top mage in all of Equestria, a 'fact' which is simply not true. Behind these curtains stands the TRUE most powerful unicorn in all the land! In all of ALL the all the lands! But this speech has tarried long enough. Prepare to have your perceptions of unicorns, magic, and the entire WORLD challenged..."

The curtains tugged a little.

"... By the Great..."

"Uh ohhh...!" Pinkie muttered.

"... and Powerful..."

"Oh, no!" Spike gasped.

The curtains opened. There was nopony behind it. Everypony had a moment to look in confusion before fireworks popped directly behind Twilight, causing the purple pony to jump and retreat away.

"TRIXIE!!"

The crowd erupted in cheer again. Twilight saw Trixie, as boisterous as ever, basking in the glory of her showy magic. The crowd definitely seems to have forgotten that Trixie left them running away like a coward, which was good since nopony deserved a coward's welcome. To keep the act, however...

Trixie landed back on her hooves and looked at Twilight, "Surprised to see me again, Twilight Sparkle?"

Twilight shook the spectacle out of her head, "Well... yeah! You left Ponyville so quickly that one time that I never got a chance to talk to you personally! I also thought you might have been hurt, but you look just fine now. After the whole Ursa Minor thing, I thought I could talk to you while you're not feeling so great and powerful to discuss why you act so grand. But then you left, so I thought you'd never come back... but now you're here!"

What followed was a silence nopony could have imagined. The only sounds in the tent were the fizzling of the last fireworks. Trixie looked back at Twilight incredulously. Nopony expected that reaction. However, Trixie found her inner 'great and powerful'ness again. "Your attempts at confusing the Great and Powerful Trixie will do you no good, Twilight Sparkle! In fact, they only make you look like a greater foal than you have already proven! Regardless, your craftiness will catch the me off-guard no more. Prepare yourself, Twilight Sparkle!"

Trixie stamped down the gestures, stopping her hooves at Twilight's shrill yell.

"NO!" Twilight shouted, "You... put that away! Or something. I'm not getting swept up in this until you take some time to CALM DOWN and let us talk this out before everypony gets the wrong idea!"

Trixie was quicker to the wit trigger this time, "Are those conditions for victory? If you manage to achieve a K.O. in this fight, the Great and Powerful Trixie will agree to... ahem, 'sit down and talk.' If, however, the Great and Powerful Trixie knocks YOU out, Twilight Sparkle... then YOU will JOIN the Great and Powerful Trixie as her assistant!"

"That's... WHAT!?"

"Why, it's the only thing missing from the Great and Powerful Trixie's performances. A stunningly beautiful assistant to hold the hat from which the Great and Powerful Trixie pulls a rabbit from... or be bolted to the table, putting COMPLETE faith in the Great and Powerful Trixie to throw knives and not hit her... or to just be there for the viewing pleasure of all the colts and fillies - the Great and Powerful Trixie does not judge - during intermissions."

"I can't...! Wait. You find me 'stunningly beautiful?'"

Trixie paused mid-flourish. "Anything is possible with magic, dear."

Twilight growled at that, but then sighed. "Fine. If that's the only way to get to you, I will NOT lose!"

"Fantastic!" Trixie called with a grin, successfully summoning the Hoof of War. "In fact... the Great and Powerful Trixie will give you a sporting chance. Hit me with your best shot, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight gave a brief look, and then closed her eyes in concentration. Magic swirled about her horn, but not enough to give Trixie any need for concern. Twilight hadn't charged long until she gave a shout of "HADOUHORN!!" and a ball of energy shot forward from her horn.

"Wha-!?" Trixie gasped, and looked in time to see the energy smack her in the face, causing her to twirl around and fall over.

"WHOA!" shouted Spike from the side, "You pulled it off on the first try!"

Twilight said to the rising Trixie, "I spent all of last night researching combat moves, and I always saw references to something called the 'hadouhorn,' so I looked it up. Apparently, it's a fairly standard move used by combat unicorns in the ancient-"

"HADOUHORN!"

A ball of energy came from Trixie's position and plowed Twilight down.

"Foal!" Trixie spat, "I've known how to use a hadouhorn since before I could SPELL MY NAME! Can you even do fierce?"

Trixie launched another hadouhorn at Twilight, who countered with her own. The two unicorns began a volley of hadouhorns, which everypony in the crowd whipped their heads back and forth to keep track of.

Pinkie groaned, "If I knew all they were going to do was spam fireballs, I would have skipped on this match to watch Lyra and Bon-Bon going at it."

After a few more rounds of hadouhorns, Twilight realized that this was a battle of attrition and the more experienced Trixie would eventually come out on top. Thus, Twilight took it upon herself to swerve away from one hadouhorn and make a dash to get at Trixie with a physical strike. Trixie kept the hadouhorns coming, but Twilight was now jumping them like a pro, much to the joy of the crowd as they cheered her on. One more jump and she'd close the gap to get a kick in. Trixie looked frustrated, until...

"Dragon HOOOF!!"

Trixie rose with unprecedented speed, a frontal hoof forward, and connected the hoof to Twilight's gut. Trixie landed smoothly, and Twilight landed on her side.

"Is the hadouhorn ALL you know, Twilight Sparkle? What kind of rival to the Great and Powerful Trixie ARE you? You looked up but ONE technique from the Ansetsuken style! There is much... MUCH more to it than that. Are you getting back up, my future assistant?"

At that final remark, Twilight popped herself back up and stared Trixie down. Trixie sent another hadouhorn, which Twilight dodged and used the action to cover a lunge.

"Dragon hoof!"

This time, the hoof caught Twilight directly under the chin and popped her up and back down to the floor. The crowd gave a collective "Ooohhh...!"

"You must defeat my dragon hoof to stand a chance!" Trixie lectured.

Twilight picked herself up handily, "Challenge accepted..."

Employing the same successful tactic, Trixie sent down another hadouhorns. This time, Twilight backed up a little before predictably making the jump over it towards Trixie. Like before, Trixie sent up her dragon hoof. However...

Everybody saw it in slow motion. The dragon hoof came up to meet Twilight, but only grazed the front of the studious pony's bangs. Trixie yelped in surprise, then struck a look over to Twilight who landed from her jump, only on her front hooves, keeping the back ones in the air. When Trixie came down far enough from her dragon hoof, Twilight bucked her legs to full extent, giving Trixie a fierce kick to the other side of the arena.

While the crowd cheered, Trixie picked herself up with indignation, "How DARE you front the Great and Powerful Tr-UCK!"

Upon turning back around, Trixie found Twilight pursued closely and rammed an elbow into her chest. This was followed up with a sweep to Trixie's front hooves, a headbutt into her cheek, and a vigorous "DRAGON HOOOF!" as she felt Twilight's front hoof collide with her chin, sending her upward. On the way down, she surreally heard another "Dragon hoof...!" and felt the strike on her back this time on the way down.

"How are you DOING that!?" Spike shouted over the crowd.

"I'M IMPROVISING!!" Twilight shouted back, half out of panic.

"N... NOVICE!" Trixie howled back. Twilight was in the middle of looking away from Spike to notice the ropes snaking their way to her hooves. Twilight didn't look down, so she was completely unaware when the ropes formed nooses, took hold, and held Twilight in the air. Twilight shouted in protest, but that only fueled Trixie's triumph. Without regard for owners, Trixie sent every object in the tent at Twilight; apples, hats, tin cans, one unfortunate pony's pair of glasses, and a few barrels. When the barrage was done, the ropes carried Twilight over to Trixie's horn, which was billowing with energy. "Now you shall feel the true might... of the Great... and Powerful... TRIXIE!!" At that last word, the energy in Trixie's horn reached a critical point and burst, creating a blinding light with twinkling fallout.

The tent was silent with focus on the grounded Twilight. Trixie's eyes and ears scanned around, knowing what to listen for... and it didn't come. Sure enough, Twilight stirred. "Once and for all!!" Trixie called, breaking into a run for Twilight's defeat. She was already preparing a dragon hoof when Twilight flipped over.

"I'm more sturdy than that!" Twilight announced, "Metsu... HADOUHORN!!" Twilight sent out a hadouhorn that was at least twice in size and intensity as the ones seen thus far. Trixie, too far in her dragon horn to put up a defense, was hit full in the gut with the stronger concentration of energy. The ball grinded into her stomach, pulsing, until it ran out of momentum and fizzled with a final pulse of pressure into Trixie's stomach. The tables turned as now Trixie was sent to the floor.

However, Trixie didn't take her time getting back up. She was quickly back on her hooves. "Well done, Twilight Sparkle! Learning the dragon hoof from observation and then pulling off a more powerful hadouhorn must have been DRAINING, hasn't it?"

True enough, Twilight was having a hard enough time maintaining her balance. How could Trixie has all that stamina left!?

"That's enough for now," Trixie said dismissively.

"I'm still up!" Twilight shouted back.

"Hm, yes. The Great and Powerful Trixie..." Everypony hung on what threat or surprise attack Trixie had in store, "...concedes."

"WHAT!?" Twilight shouted.

"WHAT!?" Spike shouted.

"WHAT!?" the entire tent shouted.

Trixie chuckled, "Not due to a sense of defeat, mind you. The Great and Powerful Trixie NEVER admits defeat in the long run. I just want you to think on what happened today, Twilight Sparkle. You put in SO much effort, and look at what you have to show for it... Your opponent is still up and

looking very healthy. Curious, isn't it? Hayworth, if you could come out and recite the rule we discussed..."

"HayLEY is what you're looking for..." A spotlight revealed Hayley on the balcony. "AH! Spotlight. Stage fright. Not being helped. Right, imagine everypony in their... Now why would I do that? The rule! Here it is... 'At any time, a pony may declare a rematch on a previously fought opponent.' Oh, that IS relevant!"

"Do you see, Twilight Sparkle? The Great and Powerful Trixie is ALLOWING you this moment of complacent calm. You may have the upper hand when pacifying big dumb beasts, but it is I who rule the world of magical combat! Enjoy this technical victory as you would a plump, tasty apple, Twilight Sparkle, but be warned that same apple is actually a time bomb! A time bomb that will explode in your face when you least expect it. The Great and Powerful Trixie bids you... adieu."

Trixie tossed down a concealing smoke bomb that hid Trixie's exit. When it cleared, it revealed the open flaps of the tent with Trixie running off in the distance, leaving the crowd to mill out and Twilight's friends to rush in to see if she's okay.

Hayley, still on the balcony, looked at the scene with a heavy expression. He then looked around his surroundings. "I notice there's no ladder or stairs leading down from this balcony..."

Chapter 3

While Twilight Sparkle was getting herself together on the other side of Ponyville, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were poised outside DJ PON-3's Rave Palace.

"Oh... I don't do well in loud places..." Fluttershy moaned.

"Well we're not here to listen to music... we're here because of HIM." Rainbow Dash struck a hoof at Gil, the warrior they met yesterday, as he walked into the building.

Fluttershy tilted her head, "Is he a fun-loving pony under all that grit? He would get along really well with Pinkie Pie."

"I don't know. He's always rocking that iPony. Maybe he likes music! All I know is he said he's going to be watching me... So I'm going to one him up! I'm going to watch him watching me!"

"Oooohhh... I wonder if he's watching you watching him watching you?"

"Uh... then I'll watch him watch me watching him watching me!" The two pegasi stared at each other trying to comprehend what was just said. Eventually Dash got behind Fluttershy and pushed. "Just follow him."

Inside the Rave Palace, everything was bustling like normal, despite the day being relatively young. Gil was looking around, occasionally looking at his equipped Hoof of War.

"He must be looking for an opponent," Fluttershy said aside, "if you can't find anypony, the Hoof of War can find one for you." When noticing Dash's quizzical look, she hid herself behind the pillar more, "That was, um... part of the tutorial. "

Gil looked around before walking up to the bar. "Hey," he called the barkeep, "is this what Ponyville ponies do all day?"

The barkeep shook his head, "Oh, no. This is a special occasion. Ms. Vinyl Scratch, AKA DJ PON-3, is holding a farewell event before she departs to participate in the Cutie Mark Clash."

Gill double-took, "The Cutie Mark Clash?" He briefly took a look at his Hoof of War before noticing the music and lights died down... save the spotlight on him and the music emanating from his iPony. The DJ, who he had disregarded until now, was looking straight at him.

Gil walked out onto the dance floor with the lights and the attention all on him. He made to turn down the volume on his iPony, but Scratch lifted her hoof then nudged it up. Going along with it, Gil turned his iPony up, allowing his theme to fill the Rave Palace. Scratch bobbed her head with it for a few moments, then flipped and pushed some things on her soundboard. The result was some added beats and pitch changes that gave the theme more bounce. The other ponies in the rave palace responded well to it. Gil, however, gave a competitive scoff and flicked his iPony to a different rendition of the theme. This one was at a much higher tempo, already worthy of a rave.

Scratch was up to the challenge. She upped the tempo of her own beats and threw in a high violin note accentuate the song. The crowd threw that remix to Scratch as well. Gil flicked the theme over to a more instrumental, horn-based theme. Scratch popped a laugh and responded with a synthesized 8-bit background rhythm. The music battle went on until Scratch clopped on her table for a guitarist to come up. Together, Scratch and the mare on guitar composed a mellow guitar riff version of the theme.

After the rendition played out, Scratch leapt over the mixing table, parting the crowd, and pounded out the gestures to summon the Hoof of War. Gil leaned into his battle stance, all business.

They held their positions for a while, building tension. Gil's theme emanated, not from the iPony but beating from the Rave Castle's speakers. When it started, Scratch broke into an aggressive charge on Gil. Gil held his position, but not without purpose. When Scratch bore near, he reared onto his hind legs for a brief moment.

"Sonic boom!!"

With that shout, Gil crossed his front legs across his chest fast enough to whip up a blast of wind heading at the aggressor. Scratch adopted a stance, also on her hind legs, one front hoof holding her headphones, the other struck out fashionably. The outward hoof stopped the sonic boom in its place.

"That was IT!?" Rainbow Dash couldn't help but blurt out over the crowd.

Scratch closed the distance and threw a few aggressive hooves, forcing Gil further into his defensive position. She ended her flurry with a sweep, but Gil already braced himself for it. In response he pivoted and threw a back hoof, but Scratch kept up her fair share of the defensive game as well. The kick forced her back, but Gil's kick still caused a delay to recover. Scratch took advantage of it by picking up a pair of records and swiping the air in front of her. The force of the gesture and a little bit of unicorn magic generated sound waves that pounded Gil and shoved him back.

Gil picked himself up and anticipated Scratch's follow-up assault. He rose with a front hoof strike. Scratch saw this coming and adopted her stance again, taking the glancing blow.

"Flash kick!!"

Gil came off his jab, landing on his front hooves and immediately using them to propel his back legs forward and up. His right rear hoof caught Scratch in the stomach with enough force to generate another gust of wind. Scratch was sent flying into the air and Gil completed a back flip. Scratch got up just in time to take a sonic boom to the face without blocking. It stood her up and caused her to stagger back a bit. Gil came in with a sweep, but Scratch recovered enough to improvise. She quickly grabbed her headphones, planted them on Gil's head, and cranked up a dial that blasted reverb into Gil's ears so loud that everypony on the dance floor cringed. Naturally, Gil screamed though it and keeled over.

Despite the competition, Dash couldn't help but think aloud, "Is she allowed to do that?"

Fluttershy answered, "Only if she maintains the hold for no more than three seconds."

Dash spared another look, "What are you, Twilight?"

Gil still managed to get back up and stare his opponent down. She was still shuffling and bobbing to the music. Exactly with the rhythm, in fact... Gil narrowed his eyes and beat a run forward. Scratch stopped shuffling in preparation. Just as the music reached a crescendo, Gil stopped immediately. Scratch, however, moved forward with her counter, bringing forward the ranged sound waves. Gil saw his chance and leapt over the waves, which represented themselves as magical wisps of light. Gil turned in the air and came down on Scratch with a back hoof to her neck. He landed, immediately launching into a few jabs and a lunging headbutt into her chest.

When Scratch recovered from the headbutt, she made to lash out, but didn't check to see what the stallion was doing. She paid for it with another flash kick to the floor. Upon getting up, she hunkered to defend. Gil swung around her, locked his hooves around her waist, and hoist her backwards to let gravity do the damage on the slam down. Surely, she wouldn't get outplayed on the next rise up. At least, that's if Gil would let her try.

Gil reared up and freed his front hooves. "Soooooonic..." Scratch was barely up and had to time to fully dodge, "HURRICANE!!" Gil crossed his front legs viciously, stirring up a disc of wind that was several times larger than the sonic booms he had thrown before. This disc rotated in one place, lashing at Scratch instead of moving for one hard hit. Scratch defended against the attack, but her stamina after the assault was too low. She tried to keep on her hooves, but they wobbled under the fatigue and the pressure. A particularly thick bar of wind rotated around and struck Scratch, lifting her off the ground and knocking her lungs empty.

"K.O.!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

The remaining wind whipped around, dying out. It was still enough to sweep the drinks off the bar, which caused a collective "Awww..." from the patrons. The drinks returned, shuffled in order. "Ooh!" the patrons cooed at their unexpected changes in order.

The music died down like a halted record player. Gil approached his felled opponent under the gaze of all in the Rave Castle. He stopped when

Scratch lifted her head and shook vigorously. All were waiting on bated breath for either of them to say something.

"Personally," Gil broke the ice, "I prefer to fight to my own rhythm." He then stuck out a hoof to help Scratch back up.

Scratch considered it for a moment, but quickly broke out her characteristic smile and reached for the helping hoof. The ponies in the Rave Castle gave a good-natured cheer, the music started up again, and all continued as normal. Gil found his way back to a far wall where he'd be out of the way.

"The mares at the end of the counter have bought you this." The bartender pushed a raddish-tini and indicated a group of waving, winking mares.

Gil nodded to the mares in recognition, and then pulled out some bits. "Tell them that it's on me, now. A soldier doesn't drink while on duty." He excused himself with a salute. That is, until Scratch pulled him away to share her remixes of his theme onto his iPony.

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"I've so got this!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed as she and Fluttershy exited the Rave Castle, "The only thing I was worried about was this sonic boom thing he has, and it's just a bunch of wind. WIND! I didn't win the Best Flyer's Competition by getting pushed around by every stream and current going my way!"

"That's because you won by dumb luck, Rainbow CRAAASH!"

"Who-!?" Dash looked forward and saw two of her Cloudsdale 'rivals,' Hoops and Billy, "Oh... YOU guys. What are YOU two doing here?"

"The better question is... What are THOSE doing on YOUR hooves?"

Dash lifted her gilded hoof, "The Hoof of War? I'm part of the Cutie Mark Clash! Bet'cha never heard of it." She then saw the two other pegasi lifted their own gilded hooves. "Oh..." In a reaction nopony saw coming, Dash's face scrunched, then she burst into laughter. "I've beaten you cloudbrains at everything you've challenged me to... EVERYTHING! What makes you guys think that's gonna change NOW?"

Hoops scowled, "That's 'cause it's always racing! And everypony knows that fillies have an advantage in racing! But this ain't racing; we're FIGHTING! And if there's anything colts are better at, it's fighting! Come on... we'll take on you AND Klutzershy!"

"Fine! Bring it!" Dash reared up. She looked over to Fluttershy... who joined the ring of ponies giving space. "Fluttershy, what are you doing!?"

Fluttershy smiled, "Oh, I don't want to be in the way when your partner arrives. I didn't know you had another friend whose name also ended in 'shy.'"

Dash slapped a hoof on her forehead, then pointed it at Fluttershy, "They were talking about you!"

"They were? Oh..." Realization snuck up on Fluttershy. "Oh...!" In a yellow-pink flash, she was hidden behind the nearest object.

The two antagonizing pegasi shared a laugh, which caused Rainbow Dash's face to light up in embarrassment. She chuckled nervously, then flew herself to where Fluttershy was hiding. "Fluttershy, no! You HAVE to do this for me! Do you see the way everypony is looking at you? At ME?"

Fluttershy stuttered, "Y... you fight them! We're in the middle of town and there's no cute little animals that can be hurt here!"

Dash groaned as if her brain were about to burst. "PUH-LEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAASSSSSSSSSE!!!" Dash sat on the ground and held her hooves over her bowed head, "I promise I'll be right next to you the entire time and take every hit and we practiced all yesterday WHY WOULD WE PRACTICE ALL YESTERDAY IF YOU AREN'T GOING TO FI-I-IIIIIGHT!?

Fluttershy looked at her begging friend, trying to keep her quivering lip in check. She then looked to the two bullies, who dragged their hooves on the ground in anticipation. At that, Fluttershy squeaked and hid her face from sight again.

Dash opened an eye and saw Fluttershy cowering. The sight of the shivering yellow pegasus overrode Dash's pride. She sighed and placed a hoof on Fluttershy's head, "Fluttershy... this is about asserting yourself. If you can't stand up when there's nothing at stake, how are you going to build up enough courage when it actually matters? You're not going out there alone." At that last statement, Dash turned Fluttershy's head and forced her gaze into Fluttershy's cyan own. "You won't be alone."

It took a few moments of moist eye contact until Fluttershy looked away in thought, then looked back. "Do you PROMISE that you'll be there the entire time? And that you won't let anything happen to me?"

"I promise, Fluttershy. You believe in me, don't you?"

"Well... yes..."

"And I believe in you! So following that logic, should YOU believe in you?"

"Um..." In lieu of a proper answer, Fluttershy just held a front hoof out.

Dash sighed, took the hoof in her own two, and flew backwards to drag Fluttershy out into the circle. Fluttershy looked up, to which the Hoops snarled and stomped. Fluttershy squealed again and stayed on the ground with her hooves over her eyes. The bullies laughed.

"How about you two stop being such hoof-prints and get on with it!?" Dash snapped.

The bullying pegasi got serious and looked at their hooves. They tried a time and again to get the motions down, finally getting them right the third time to summon the Hoof of War for a team match. As soon as it faded, the antagonists jettisoned forward.

"Time to crash, Rainbow!!"

If Fluttershy's eyes were open she would have a heart attack. An idea popped into Dash's head.

"Love Hurts!!"

Fluttershy's ears perked at those two words. The words combined in a way that equaled an action; an action that had been painted on Fluttershy's mind over the past 24 hours of rigorous training that stuck in her mind purely by how arduous it was.

Rainbow Dash flew up expecting to see Fluttershy with her, then being surprised to see that Fluttershy actually WAS up in the air with her! Below, Hoops and Billy stopped short of ramming into each other where the two young mares used to be. They looked up and saw their opponents reach a breaking point and veering off, curving their flight paths until they were pointed directly at them. Dash and Fluttershy dove at angles, coming into hard kicks that slammed the two young colts together. Dash left a rainbow trail while Fluttershy left a trail of sparkles that resembled butterflies. Together, the trails formed the shape of a heart. Hoops and Billy sunk to the ground.

Fluttershy shook her head and looked at the results. "O... oh, my goodness... what did I just do??"

"That was AWESOME!" Dash cheered, "You pulled that off WAY better than in practice! I'll bet it's that Hoof of War magic making you a better flyer!"

Fluttershy took a moment to look at how swiftly her wings were beating to keep her aloft. "Maybe..."

Hoops and Billy picked themselves up quickly. "So you want to take it to the air, huh!?" They pushed off to where Dash and Fluttershy held up.

"Crazy Eight!"

At Dash's call, Fluttershy flew away from the approaching bullies while Dash flew at them. Billy was ready to intercept Dash, but was confused when Dash flew right by him.

"Keep your eyes on Klutz!" Hoops ordered.

The bullies stood together, Billy eyeing Fluttershy and Hoops... well, everypony was pretty sure that whatever eyes were under his hair were trained on Dash. Dash circled around to Hoops's front while Fluttershy

circled around to Billy's front. The bullies readied themselves, then in a moment that can only be understood in slow motion, Dash and Fluttershy both performed barrels rolls, positioning them at the backs of the opposite bullies they were targeting before. Hoops and Billy could barely catch on before they were both headbutted in the back and sent falling.

Fluttershy groaned, "Ow..." and lifted her hooves to her head.

"Uh oh," Dash snapped back into the moment, "are you okay?"

"Actually..." Fluttershy checked her hooves, then gave as reassuring a grin as she could muster, "I AM okay..."

Dash laughed, "See? We've got thiRHF!!" she was cut off when Hoops came from below with a light-speed tackle. Fluttershy gasped at the sight of it, then her intuition told her to move just as Billy swooped up to attempt the same.

Billy stopped himself in mid-air, indulged in a cruel smirk, and dove back down at Fluttershy. The way she could so easily avoid his tackle clearly showed that he was toying with her.

Meanwhile, Hoops charged ahead, pushing Dash back and keeping his front legs to either side, preventing her from rolling out of his tackle. Dash adjusted enough to shout to him, "What is your PROBLEM!?"

"Let's see Klutzershy do anything without YOU there holding her hoof!"

Dash wanted to put up a tough front, but that was the truth. She cast a look to where her timid friend was doing all she could to just keep from being attacked.

Fluttershy was putting in the effort to avoid the dives, but it was still obvious that Billy was just making her flinch repeatedly.

Billy hung over, "Don't like it? Forefit!"

That thought kept Fluttershy in place with her front legs folded defensively. She didn't think too long before replying, "And... leave Rainbow Dash to

both of you? No... This is really important to her! So I'm doing my best no matter how much you... Aren't there?"

Fluttershy looked to where Billy had been, and unfortunately wasn't heeding the calls and warnings from the crowd on the ground. She felt her hooves get clamped down on. She meeped and looked down.

"Too late!" Billy managed to approach Fluttershy from below. He grabbed Fluttershy's back legs with his front and pinned them to his shoulders. "You like the ground so much?" With a powerful beat of his wings, Billy lifted up and turn himself with Fluttershy upside down. To add to it, Billy began to spiral on the way down. "HERE YOU GO!!" Billy let go and dropped Fluttershy into the middle of the initial circle, crashing into the stone on the thick of her upper back.

The crowd groaned an aghast, "Ohhhh...!"

Rainbow Dash heard it. "Fluttershy...? FLUTTERSHY!!" No thought went into how quickly Dash was able to break out of Hoops's hold. Getting tackled so far took a lot out of her, though. She tried flying back as fast as she could until she appeared to get an idea. "Hey, feather-brain! You want me? Gimme your best shot!"

"Givin' it up, Rainbow Crash?" Hoops didn't wait for an answer. Instead he began beating his wings stronger than before, whipping up powerful winds that tossed Dash around until they formed a shape of a basketball around her. Hoops took in his hooves this basketball of wind, Dash flailing around inside, and heaved it away, destined for a harsh landing on the ground.

Meanwhile, Fluttershy's hooves managed to find their way to a firm stance on the ground. The way her legs wobbled, however, undermined that. In front of her, Billy stood and beamed intimidation her way. He dragged at the ground, ready to finish things. That is, until Dash's screaming punched through the air and announced her return. A general "What the...?" Passed through the crowd.

"PENDULUM ROCKS!"

Fluttershy lifted off, invoking her pegasus heritage now more than ever. Though her limbs seemed to be overworked, her wings were still powerful

and graceful. The aerial stunt that Dash just called out helped the determination as well. Fluttershy stopped in the air at the height Dash was flying. When Dash reached her position, Fluttershy beat her wings against the wind basketball, bursting it, and caught her friend, turning with the momentum. Just like a pendulum, the two pegasi held in the air and Dash was swung back down in an arc. With that little momentum, Dash gave one last beat of her wings and plowed into the unsuspecting bullies who had just regrouped.

What followed was a tense staredown. Both sides were sufficiently worn down and using the time to get some sense back before this clash would conclude. Finally, Hoops pushed off the ground, prompting Billy to follow. They spread their wings and made for a final push.

Rainbow Dash reared back in preparation. "Let's give 'em the Flutterdash!!" She took off in her own low flight, this time kicking up enough speed to leave behind her signature rainbow trail. The other team looked for a confrontation, but soon found themselves in the middle of a circle that Dash raced around them. In fact, her circles sped up to the point that her rainbow looked like a solid object. She sped up more enough that there appeared to be more than one of her. Finally Dash reached a critical speed that created a rainbow vortex around the other team.

"Right... Flutterdash!" Fluttershy beat her wings again to take to the sky, going up higher and higher.

At about this time, another pair of pegasi were stirring up their own attention. Strolling into Ponyville as if they did it everyday were two members of the famed acrobatic group the Wonderbolts. Naturally, they garnered a lot of attention and fanfare.

"Here we are," said Soarin, a white young stallion with a wind-swept blue mane, "Ponyville. It doesn't... LOOK like the fighting kind of town."

"It isn't," concurred Spitfire, the orange young mare with an orange-red mane styled suiting her name, "it's a... 'nice' place."

"You've been here before?"

"Yeah, like once or twice. Ponyville's kinda boring... in a good way. You don't need to duck out of sight to just get some peace and quiet. I'm just as surprised there's a Cutie Mark Clash here."

"It doesn't seem so boring right now."

Spitfire noticed a bunch of the surrounding ponies looking up in the sky at a distance, including Soarin. So she looked and quickly found what was so interesting. A yellow pegasus with a striking pink mane was flying straight up purposefully. Not bad, Spitfire had to admit. The height gain was above average, but she was putting in too much effort with her wings and not letting herself get carried enough. Once the pegasus reached a good height, she tipped over and dove straight down. This wasn't expected, according to the swoon of nearby ponies.

Soarin tensed, "Should we do something?"

"I don't know. This could be a Ponyville thing I'm not aware of." Looking back at Soarin, she spied his gilded hooves exposed through the rolled-up sleeves of the Wonderbolts uniform. "Maybe she's part of the tournament."

"A delicate-looking pony like that?"

Spitfire smirked, "That's what the Commander said when he first saw me." She noted Soarin relaxing a bit, then saw the yellow pegasus start a corkscrew dive. Definitely not something you see every day, even in Cloudsdale. The rate she was spinning and diving, combined with her displayed novice skills, made even Spitfire look tense as the Pegasus's dive took her below the town's skyline.

Shortly after the pegasus disappeared, there was a loud boom followed by a ring of kicked-up wind that rustled through the town. A magical voiced bellowed, "K.O.!!!" followed by cheers at the site of the action.

"Whoa!!" Soarin yelped, "She came down hard enough to knock out somepony!"

"I've got to see this..." Spitfire mused to herself, prompting Soarin to follow her.

At the scene of the fight, Hoops and Billy were undeniably out cold and being helped by some Cutie Mark Clash medical ponies. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy were converged upon by the impressed crowd, stumbling around less out of fatigue and more out of dizziness from their finishing attack.

Failing to keep her rolling eyes in check, Dash landed her front hooves on the shoulders of the nearest yellow pony with a pink mane. "Fluttershy, that was AWESOME!"

The pegasus that Dash picked quickly grinned empathetically and said, "Hehe... I'm Parasol."

"Oh. Sorry." Dash turned around and grabbed the next yellow pegasus. "Fluttershy, that was AWESOME!"

The pegasus hugged Dash, then said a chipper "Nope!"

"Aw, come-" Dash shook her head and looked to the third Fluttershy in her vision. "Are YOU Fluttershy?"

"Umm..." said the pony.

"Fluttershy, that was AWESOME! I can't believe you pulled off the Flutterdash so perfectly! Especially that last part. OH WOW was that epic! Thank you sooooo much for this!"

"Oh... it was nothing, really. I just wanted to help. I'm sure you have better moves that work with other partners."

"No way! Flutterdash is the best!"

"Oh, well..." Fluttershy looked away to blush. Or at least she figured she was looking away. "Yay..." She muttered before she and Dash sunk to the ground, the latter beginning to snore.

"Aww..." Hayley said, looking at the two ponies close enough to be cuddling. "Don't see much of that in Clopperfield. I could make a cookie out of that. Though that excessive fatigue DOES worry me. Not supposed to happen. I suppose it's only natural when one goes through a strenuous

activity, and that rainbow one definitely LOOKS the type for reckless abandon... but no. No no, not taking any risks. Into the infirmary with you." He summoned up a gurney, which scooped the two ponies up, and wheeled them in to a nearby tent.

He was almost inside when a tap on his flank startled him.

"DAH!! Not- not now! The complications of Hoof of War magic require urgent attention. Well... there actually haven't BEEN any complications to date, but we are not taking any chances. If you wish to visit, you can come back later."

Immediately the tent was set upon by nurses.

"You never told us this!"

"We want to help!"

"What are the signs?"

Hayley watched awkwardly as most of the nurses piled in. "That's... that's all right... I can handle it my... Ohh, fine..."

Locked outside the tent, Spitfire and Soarin shared a look. Soarin muttered, "Well, THAT'S a bummer."

"Come on," Spitfire sighed, "We'll get another opportunity later. We're not going to keep our sponsors by waiting around here. Especially after what happened at the Gala..."

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Meanwhile, some distance from Ponyville, a lone red horse walked the outskirts. Even though he knew he was in the right by sticking up for himself, Big Macintosh just couldn't shake his remorse for having treated his sister the way he did, no matter what the reason. Thus, before engaging in any more fighting, he took a cleansing walk.

He reckoned it would be a brief one.

His travels brought him to the edge of the Everfree forest. Though the forest was a dangerous place, looking at it from outside brought a strange sense of calm. It wasn't as if something would jump out, he always said. Something like those bright yellow eyes piercing directly into his soul.

And then the cloaked figure jumped from the shadows of the forest and blocked Big Macintosh's path. A deep female voice chanted, "Prove to me your future isn't a wash... accept my challenge, Big Macintosh!" She wasted no time in stamping out the Hoof of War.

Surveying the cloaked figure standing ready to fight, Big Macintosh sighed a reluctant but accepting, "Ehyup..." and readied himself.

The fight begun, the cloaked figure took the initiative and launched forward. Big Macintosh kept his eyes on her trajectory, and then lost it when the figure closed the gap in an instant and swiftly kicked him across the face. He instinctively backed up and opened his eyes to nothing. He found himself struck from his left flank hard enough to topple his back legs and the rest of him with them. He hit the dirt road hard and looked up for the cloaked figure's aerial strike to hit him while he was down. Right before she landed, he held his hooves out to intercept her attack. Using the momentum, Big Macintosh tossed the cloaked figure the other way. Unfortunately for him, she landed on her hooves neatly by the time he picked himself up.

The cloaked figure, despite her aggression before, held her ground now. The glowing eyes narrowed and she said, "You are feeling stressed, this is true... a calm mind will be of help to you."

That WAS true. Big Macintosh knew that he hadn't entirely walked the encounter with his sister out of his system. Over the years, he didn't let a lot get to him. He and everypony around him has been better off that way. Applejack sure enjoyed testing that out. No... he couldn't dwell on her. She handled thing her way, he in his own. He took in a shuddering breath, but let it out calmly. He opened his eyes to the cloaked figure who had been kind enough to wait this out. After establishing eye contact, she leapt up like before and vanished like before. This time, however, Big Macintosh's ear perked at the sound of her coming down to his right. Literally bucking in the dark, Big Macintosh lifted his right rear leg and kicked it out. He felt it impact the cloaked figure and heard her grunt of pain.

She came at him a few times more, each time with him dodging out or landing a counter strike before she could finish her maneuver. When she landed in front of him, he braced himself firmly. When she tackled into him, he took the hit in stride without losing footing. In response, he tackled back, impacting the figure's chest and front legs. Caught by this action, she keeled over a bit. Big Macintosh wasted no time in turning himself around and getting a quick buck off to send all of her to the ground.

The figure picked herself up quickly, considering what she was just put through. Her visible dark grey mouth curved into a smirk. "I see you have conquered your mind's din. Now our match can truly begin!"

That didn't sound good at all. The figure leapt, this time producing a few segments of a pole, stacking them, and landing with a single hoof on the stack. She kept her balance perfectly. Big Macintosh was too busy staring to notice that the segments all slid into each other to form an actual single pole. The figure flipped, grabbing up the pole and aiming it to come down on the other's head. Big Macintosh sidestepped the attack, sparing a crucial second to look at it. He looked up to see the figure come at him and bring her hooves to strike him on either side of this head, dazing him. She stepped back purposefully.

"The elements are at my call!!!" She shouted. Rather than flank Big Macintosh, she charged at him with a super-quick run that more resembled a single movement. Big Macintosh shook the daze out of his head soon enough to notice the reckless charge and held his hooves up. The cloaked figure did not count on this and rammed head-first into the block. This charge was aimed at a soft flank, not hard hooves. "... That is all." She quipped and stumbled back.

Big Macintosh considered how to take advantage of this. He reckoned he'd let it down easy with his flank strike. At an opportune time in the figure's stumbling, he slammed a hoof down, pivoted across it, and swung his back forward. It crashed into the figure like a fur-coated brick wall, completely lifting her off her hooves.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War called.

The Hoof of War faded and Big Macintosh breathed a relieved sigh. He walked over to the cloaked figure. When he got close, she picked herself up again.

"You have proven yourself, as asked. You are capable of your given task."

"Now hold on," Big Macintosh replied, "you were all on about the future before. You fight me, and in the middle of it give me advice that let me win. And now you're talking about fate or something like that. You mind telling me what's going on?"

"I will inform you of my aim. But first..." The cloak was peeled back, revealing a black-and-dark gray Mohawk mane attached to the like-wise monochromatic zebra head. Despite the glowing yellow eyes under the hood, those eyes were now turquoise. "Zecora is my name."

The reveal brought a warm smile to Big Macintosh's face. "You're that zebra that Apple Bloom visits every so often. She talks about you plenty. We appreciate you having her visit and taking her mind off of Cutie Marks for a spell... and also keeping her out of our manes for that long, too."

Zecora finished folding up her cloak and placing it in a rucksack, and then looked at Big Macintosh with a nostalgic chuckle. "Apple Bloom is a well-meaning foal... Like any other, she just has a restless soul. I do apologize for all the pain. I shall explain..." She lead a walk to nowhere in particular. "I almost never knew about this tournament until I received a letter informing me of the event. I thought this to be a curious case since I don't even get mail in the first place. For some reason, the Cutie Mark Clash felt troubling. I felt something more insidious bubbling. I thought it was nothing, but I had to be sure. I conjured up a brew to see into the future. I do not know what will transpire, but the outcome could be dire. Since drinking the broth, I have had many visions outlining many ponies' missions."

"And how do you reckon a humble apple-bucker like me fits into all this?"

"You play a significant part by virtue of your selfless heart. I am unsure what you must do, but surely you have felt destiny's pull, too?"

Big Macintosh's head snapped up and forward at the mention of destiny. "That darn feeling is what got me into this mess in the first place."

"I see. So it is a mystery. Whether your destiny is set or must be crafted, I am afraid that you have been... drafted."

Big Macintosh took a moment to lift one of his front hooves and look at the gilded lining around the outside, as if it would provide an answer to what was going on. He put it down and kept walking, sighing a resigning, "Eh... yup."

Chapter 4

While Ponyville was in the throes of clashing, the three fillies known as the Cutie Mark Crusaders were combing the outskirts for their first official match. They walked about the paths with the town to one side and the open country to the other. They looked around for any sign of an opponent, occasionally lifting their forelegs to check on the magic that made their hooves golden.

Scootaloo stopped, checked her hoof, frowned, and shook it all about. "Are you SURE these things are working?"

"Of course they are," said Apple Bloom, ever chipper, "Our opponent just knows it's US comin' after 'em."

The pegasus continued to shake her hoof and try listening to it. Sweetie Belle spoke up, "You're pretty brave, Apple Bloom."

Not seeing a 'but' after that, Apple Bloom grinned widely. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well... You're afraid of your sister, right?"

Scootaloo looked back to the other two. She wanted to hear this.

"Afraid?" Apple Bloom echoed, "I... I wouldn't call it 'afraid.' Naw... Sister Applejack can get scary, but that don't mean I GET afraid! I'd more call it... uh... bein' cautious! Yeah! Ain't nothin' wrong with knowin' how to, uh... lick your battles!"

Scootaloo had to interject, "Don't you mean 'PICK your battles?'"

Apple Bloom thought on that. "Ohhhhhh! PICK your battles! That makes MUCH more sense! Like pickin' apples! I thought that sayin' was comparin' fightin' to a salt lick and I wasn't gettin' it."

Sweetie Belle cleared her throat to regain attention. "So you're CAUTIOUS around Applejack."

"Yeah! Why are you askin' that all of a sudden?"

"Well... I was just thinking how the Cutie Mark Clash isn't all fillies. There's lots of big strong ponies out there competing. All of them probably just as strong as Applejack. Maybe stronger!" Sweetie Belle took no notice of Apple Bloom's shaken expression in response. "I know I feel safer with you two if something like that doesn't bother you."

Normally rolling in laughter by now, Scootaloo was off-put looking at Apple Bloom's expression. This wasn't how she saw her rival in strong-headedness. "Of course you should!" she said quickly to take Sweetie Belle's gaze away from Apple Bloom. "We have each other! We're like the Wonderbolts! It's like Rainbow Dash says... alone we're awesome enough, but together there's nothing we can't do!"

"... Except find our cutie marks."

"Uh... yeah. That's why we spend all day trying to find them!"

The wheels in Sweetie Belle's head turned. "That makes sense!"

The three of them shared smiles, including Apple Bloom who regained her composure. That little pep talk was just as much if not more for her. On cue as the moment settled, the Hooves of War gave little glows. The fillies looked at their hooves as they summoned beams of light that pointed ahead. It was a much more convincing glow, one that the Crusaders followed eagerly. Apple Bloom stopped early at what she saw past the bush. Scootaloo jumped after and bumped her head into the earth filly's blank flank. Sweetie Belle also jumped out of the brush, but not from the same place. She stopped at seeing her halted comrades.

Scootaloo shook her head out and was able to say an interrupted "What-?" before Apple Bloom motioned for silence and pointed a hoof at what was ahead of them, mumbling.

"Stupid pony magic! I can't just walk into that pony town! Now show me what I want to see... or else!!"

The creature was much larger than the Crusaders, definitely not a pony. It spoke with a high, gravelly voice.

"What IS that!?" Scootaloo whispered aside.

"I dunno..." Apple Bloom whispered back, "we weren't able to get our cutie marks as Cutie Mark Crusader zoologists, remember?"

Sweetie Belle gulped, "I think that's a Diamond Dog. Dirty, inconsiderate mutts that sling horrendous insults and don't know beauty if it bucked them in the face! ... At least that's what Rarity told me."

Apple Bloom's face lit up with memory. "Oh, I remember now! Applejack called 'em a bunch o' dumb animals! And look! He's got one o' those Hooves of War on 'im!"

True enough, the Diamond Dog's clawed hands were golden, as if wearing a glove. He shook his paw, prompting it to point him somewhere. "Don't point at ME!"

The Crusaders exchanged a look and gave a determined nod. "So how does this Hoof of War work again?" Apple Bloom mused, randomly pacing her front hooves.

Scootaloo looked down at her own hooves. "I know we've gotta do it in some order..."

"Oh!" said Sweetie Belle in turn, "I remember now! That funny-talking pony said that I step first, then Apple Bloom, and then Scootaloo in the center! I remember it because I'm the one who goes first."

It was something. As Sweetie Belle remembered, they stood side to side. Sweetie Belle pressed down, then Apple Bloom, then Scootaloo with some stylistic flourish. The Hoof of War appeared, the shape of it passing under the three fillies, and expanded as far as the Diamond Dog.

The Diamond Dog, who the Hoof of War and the forces above reveal his name to be Rover, looked at the magic passing under him and how his own accessory reacted.

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS CUTIE MARK CLASHERS!!!"

"What-?" Rover turned around just a little too late to do anything about the pile of ponies that assaulted him. Apple Bloom got to work unleashing some improvised martial arts on his head. Scootaloo handled jumping hard on his stomach, and Sweetie Belle looked away as she more or less shoved at the Diamond Dog's legs. Rover boiled with annoyed rage until he struck his limbs out. "EEEEEEENOUGH!!!"

The action was enough to toss Scootaloo off and force Apple Bloom to avoid the fitful gesture and join the other two. The Cutie Mark Crusaders stood closely together as Rover loomed over them.

"So you ponies want a fight, do ya? This is something I should have done to that other whining pony all that time back! HYAAH!"

Rover balled his paws together and swung them. The fillies screamed and bolted off the spot, letting the attack smack painfully into the ground. Rover examined his hand, and then let another yell.

Apple Bloom turned around. "Cruaders! While he's stunned!"

The trio turned and charged at the howling Diamond Dog. All at once, they leapt for a combined headbutt. Their attack connected, but only pushed Rover back. Rover quickly swiped, grabbing Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo in his paws.

"Let GO!" Scootaloo shouted. Sweetie Belle just settled on a high-pitched scream.

"Girls!!" Apple Bloom shouted back, watching their flailing in the grasps of the laughing Diamond Dog. She then put on her serious face. Her friends were in serious trouble. Despite the fact that she was avoiding her sister, Apple Bloom knew that Applejack would just run right up and buck that dog in this situation.

Apple Bloom ran at the dog, and as her resolve became clear, she found herself running faster, smoother. At about the time the Diamond Dog proclaimed they'd be working in the diamond mines until they were wrinkly old mares, Apple Bloom leapt and struck a hind hoof out. This was an

attack she attempted to pull off during her solo crusading days and that didn't turn out like she would have hoped. Right now, it HAD to work. She couldn't fathom wanting something THIS much and not pulling it off.

Apple Bloom's hoof struck the Diamond Dog in the chest. Rover emit a mighty gasp at the sudden hard impact. The kick sent Rover to the ground, letting go of the fillies in his paws. They both landed on their hooves well enough, though Sweetie Belle jumped over to Apple Bloom and threw her forelegs around the earth filly, giving a traumatized sob.

"E... Easy there, Sweetie Belle..."

Scootaloo spared a look at the downed Rover before addressing her comrades. "We haven't been working as a team, you two. Rainbow Dash told me that it's obvious when ponies aren't working as a team. They're just out there flying at the same time without any real coordination. We've got to work as, like, ONE."

Apple Bloom concurred, "If ya got any ideas, I'll go along with 'em. We also gotta use this Hoof of War stuff, too. Didja see that kick!? Uh, Sweetie Belle... If ya wanna sit this out, we won't think o' ya any less."

Sweetie Belle broke the terrified hug and sniffed. "If... If I'm with you two... I should be okay."

Rover picked himself off the ground. "Urgh... lucky shot!"

The Cutie Mark Crusaders turned to the Diamond Dog, a new unity in their expressions. Scootaloo, taking point at the time, called out, "Let's get 'im!"

Abilities and communication enhanced by the Hoof of War magic, the Cutie Mark Crusaders took a leaping approach to the assault on the Diamond Dog. Apple Bloom's jump took her the closest and made the first strike. Rover stumbled from the attack and was wide open to Sweetie Belle's twirling kick to his legs. Apple Bloom struck out again, headbutting Rover's gut, allowing Scootaloo the honors of the final hit in the combo. "Scootercut!" she called out with excessive flair, striking a forehoof into Rover's chin and reacquainting his back with the ground.

On landing, Scootaloo turned to her friends, "Did you SEE how far up I jumped to do that!? I wanna try something else! Get ready to grab on!"

The other two eager fillies watched their orange friend trot up to a tree, jump against it at a height, and push off on it. Scootaloo has really only used her wings in making gestures, and maybe it affected her scooter-riding ability. She spread them in her way when imitating all the pegasi she always saw in the air. This time, some outside force stiffened her wings into a professional gliding position. This force maintained that position even against wind resistance that such a young and inexperienced pegasus just didn't have the wing strength to work with. As a result, Scootaloo came off her kick from the tree gliding back.

Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle smiled widely at their friend's success, and then remembered that she had a plan to go along with it. They both worked their enhanced legs to jump and grab a front hoof each. They glided at the Diamond Dog, some planned team attack in mind.

Rover had a different idea in mind. He dug a clawed paw into the dirt at his feet. Eyes narrowed, he waited for the Cutie Mark Crusaders to enter a certain range. Once they were in, Rover slashed up from the ground. The force of the slash tore up a whole wave of hard earth that intercepted and slammed the Crusaders onto the ground.

The fillies had to take a moment to regain their bearing and cough out whatever dirt particles still filled the air around them. "What was THAT?" Apple Bloom had to ask aloud.

This was followed shortly by Sweetie Belle asking, "Where is HE?" The trio looked to see the Diamond Dog no longer where he had been standing. That spot was now occupied by a Diamond Dog-sized sinkhole.

A general "Uh oh" passed through the Crusaders. They scanned the ground for any sign of where the dog was digging. The earth swelled beneath them. There wasn't enough time to get out of the way before Rover burst through to the surface and struck with his element of surprise. He continued this tactic, digging under ground, sometimes leaving a trail of upturned earth as a distraction, and getting off an attack before retreating underground and starting over.

Rover did well to keep the fillies in a frustrated panic. At hearing the other two wishing they could see where the Diamond Dog would come up, Sweetie Belle remembered something that her sister would occasionally bring up: Her ability to find gems through the ground. If the Hoof of War could make Apple Bloom buck and Scootaloo glide... Sweetie Belle screwed her eyes shut and willed the magic to work. Just like before, the Hoof of War obliged. Since the Diamond Dog wore a bunch of gems, spotting him underground wasn't too difficult. Sweetie Belle got her friends' attentions and gestured at where the Diamond Dog was to pop up.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders got in place to prepare for the Diamond Dog's arrival. Sweetie Belle jumped on Apple Bloom's shoulders and Scootaloo on Sweetie Belle's. Rover burst through the ground, expecting to shock the trio again. Instead, they were ready. Apple Bloom called out, "Let's show this creep the super power of TEAM WORK!" prompting Scootaloo to lift them off the ground and charge the Diamond Dog spinning. The Crusaders assaulted the dog as a column of spinning kicks; kicks which sped up as Scootaloo got more and more swept up in the awesomeness of keeping aloft. The other two fillies began to get dizzy, but Scootaloo just wanted to go faster and embrace the dizziness. It got so fast that Rover got sucked into the spinning kicks and spun around with them. Finally, the attack got so fast that it turned into a tall multi-colored blur. Rover was ejected from the attack face-first into a nearby tree.

"K.O.!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

The spinning finally got too much for even Scootaloo. She stopped feeding into it and just let the momentum wear itself out. When everything settled down, the fillies were collapsed in a pile for a few moments. When they picked themselves up, they were buzzing.

"That was the coolest thing we've ever done EVER!!" Apple Bloom exclaimed.

"I felt like a real pegasus!" Scootaloo agreed.

"I actually used magic!" said a mellower Sweetie Belle.

The trio excitedly checked their own flanks. No cutie marks. "Aww..."

The Cutie Mark Crusaders hung their heads that the fun was over. That is, until Apple Bloom spoke up.

"We'll just find somepony else to clash with! I can just FEEL my cutie mark tryin' to appear!"

"Yeah!!" The other two unisoned.

And thus, the Crusaders ran off to cause more destruction... not that much different from a normal day.

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In Ponyville itself, Sweetie Belle's big sister Rarity was enjoying flaunting her new Cutie Mark Clash outfit for all it was worth. She was turning a lot of heads, and that's what she wanted. She strolled through the town leisurely, holding her head up high to exude an air of confidence and little more.

Rarity's outfit was a provocative one. At least it WOULD have been if ponies normally wore clothes. Her earlier decision whether to project her bust or not went strongly in support of it. Her attire started with a white bustier. This was connected by metal rings to a series of weaving thick belt-like threads that ended in a pair of flaps covering her flank. These flaps had long fringes that swayed with her movements. Her legs were adorned in leg-bands with long boots. Most striking was the facemask wrapped around her head but designed in a way that let her luxurious mane out unhampered. The part of it surrounding her eyes was shaped loosely like her cutie mark with the eyeholes curved for a more intimidating appearance. Everything was outlined and more with studded gems.

This appearance stopped many in their tracks and caused many a colt to lose sight of where he was going and walk into something. Pinkie Pie was bouncing the other way, tra-la-la-ing her way through town. She shortly tip-hooved her way back to Rarity's side, jaw dropped.

"WOW, Rarity!! If there ever were a pony more ready to party than me, you are IT!"

Rarity smile in her own dignified way and lifted a hoof to her chest, "Why thank you, Pinkie Pie. I dare say I add a much-needed element of... REFINEMENT to this event, don't you?"

Pinkie Pie rolled her eyes in thought. "Considering what your costume is a reference to, that's debatable."

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing!"

"If you MUST know, I was researching different styles of dress at the time the Cutie Mark Clash was announced. After the announcement, I looked through the book I rented for any sort of combat fashion, and I found... Lucha Libre!" Rarity accompanied the name by striking a grappler's pose.

Pinkie responded with an involved "Ooh!"

"I know, right? I researched Lucha Libre and found it to be a VERY viable and unexpected fighting style. And the FASHION! Oh my word, is it glamorous! Masks, fringes, boots, ooohhhhhh...! When I'm rich and famous, I want to start a line! Ahem, I've even given myself a luchadora name. I am... La Rareza!"

"Is it okay if I still call you Rarity?"

"Of course it is, dear."

"Well... guess we have to fight, now!"

"I gu- wait, what?"

"Come on, Rarity! That's what THEY want!" Pinkie Pie pointed with a hoof. Plenty of ponies had stopped and began watching intently.

"Well... I guess it WAS rather conspicuous of us to just stop and stand around talking like we're making a big deal about it."

"Ooh! Let's make a show of it!" Pinkie put on her best 'tough' voice, "Hey, you! Watch where you're walkin', see?"

Rarity looked around at the gathering crowd. "Pinkie Pie... everypony in town knows we're friends."

"Oh, yeah! We'll make it a friendly fight!"

"It already IS- Oh, never mind. Will you do the honors?"

Pinkie Pie licked her lips with concentration as she stamped out the gestures for the Hoof of War. When the magic passed through the area, that ensured the rest of the nearby ponies joined in the crowd. She then hunkered down, as if ready to fight. She then leaned forward and took a step and jabbed at nothing with a hoof. She then took a step back, hunched, leaned forward, and stepped again with another jab.

Rarity watched this, perplexed. "Pinkie Pie... what are you doing?"

Pinkie Pie repeated the motions again. "I'm testing my moveset, silly! And what's the first thing you try when you're seeing what kind of moveset you've got? Quarter-circle forward and punch! Maybe I don't have one, lemme just..."

On the next motions, instead of a jab, Pinkie suddenly produces a cupcake from out of nowhere and tossed it. It only traveled about a body's length before coming to a splat on the ground.

"Ooh! A projectile attack! It seems to be physics-based, too? I wonder..."

This time, Pinkie was quicker with the motions. She threw another cupcake, this time overhoof. It traveled higher and farther, falling short of Rarity again.

"That was the mid punch version! I can guess what comes next! Down! Right! FIERCE!"

Pinkie threw another cupcake, underhoofed. This one traveled high in the air but covered the least distance between her and Rarity.

"Aw, I guess I won't be using that one most often. It's good for anti-air, though!" She took a moment to see the three cupcakes on the ground in

front of her, seemingly conjured up from nowhere. Pinkie looked at her hooves, astonished. "I can end world hunger...!"

Not quite sure what to make of what just happened, Rarity cut into it asking, "Are you quite done doing your... your Pinkie Pie thing over there?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, Rarity! I think I've got the hang of it now!"

"In that case, here comes... La Rareza!"

Pinkie Pie, who still seemed to be trying to figure out her moves. "Um... If you're a grappler type, then I'm going to spam! CUPCAKES!" She heaved one of her aerodynamic confections and it hit its target straight in the masked face. Contrary what getting hit with a cupcake normally feels like, the impact was enough to send Rarity twirling to the ground. Pinkie Pie cautiously bit into one of her conjured projectiles. "Wow! They're not even stale!"

Rarity quickly flipped around and stood up. She carefully wiped frosting from her mask. At the sight of frosting on her hoof, she gave an aghast cry that could have passed for a laugh. "My... my MASK! I just made this and already I need to wash it! No more Ms. Nice Mare... It. Is. ON!"

Pinkie Pie giggled, "Eee! You said it!" Disregarding her friends indignation, Pinkie Pie lobbed another cupcake.

Rarity stared the cupcake down, then at the last moment, dodged spectacularly. The crowd swooned. That included Pinkie Pie, who quickly remembered that she was in this fight. She lobbed more cupcakes. Rarity went from dodging them in place to incorporating the dodges into her approach. She zig-zagged around them, ducked them, jumped them, and tried another jump but was caught by Pinkie's surprise fierce cupcake. The white young mare edgily removed the pastry from her outfit and stared Pinkie Pie down. She could move in more, but she had something else in mind.

On Pinkie's next cupcake, Rarity leapt at it. It was a grand leap with a showmare's flair, forelegs spread wide. Rarity's leap caused her to rotate around the cupcake and aim her jump straight at where Pinkie Pie stood.

"Uh oh..." Pinkie Pie muttered in what few seconds she had before her friend came to a land, plowing the pink pony down with the force of her upper body. Pinkie laid on her ouchies while Rarity looked around for anything to jump off of.

"You there," Rarity said to a group of ponies, "would you be so kind as to provide me with some ropes?" In a flash of action, two colts wrapped ropes around a nearby streetlight. "Hm... that will do."

Rarity jumped onto the ropes, landing her rear hooves on the bottom rope and her forehooves on the top rope, and propelled off of them towards a landing on Pinkie Pie. Pinkie noticed the descent in time to emit a startled "EEP!" and roll out of the way. Rarity came down on hard, paved ground... painfully.

"Ooh..." Pinkie groaned, "You okay, Rarity?"

Rarity responded with a quick sweep to Pinkie's legs. The sweep caused Pinkie to sway. The party pony came out of the sway with a swipe to attempt surprise, but Rarity was one step ahead. She jumped over the swipe, forward-flipped, and landed with her hind legs around Pinkie's head. Pinkie mumbled something, but it was muffled and wouldn't have affected anything. Applying a little bit of magic for momentum, Rarity flipped to the side and tossed Pinkie with her legs as a combined force.

When Pinkie Pie stood herself back up, she smirked, "Ooh! Then I'll have to do this... Pinkie Pie style!"

Pinkie Pie backed up a bit, then leapt out of sight. Rarity kept track of where Pinkie Pie could be going, but was then pounced by the pink pony from above. Everypony in the vicinity was startled at the sudden action. No pony even saw Pinkie jump out of the crowd...

Rarity jumped up, a new sort of adrenaline pumping through her system. "WHERE DID YOU-!?"

Pinkie giggled, "It works as long as I go off-screen! Actually, it's even simpler in here since the words just need to say that it happens."

"Off... what? Pinkie Pie, you're saying those things again." Rarity looked to Pinkie, only to see she wasn't there again. "OH NO!" Rarity whirled around as if expecting Pinkie Pie to be coming at her from behind, which was impossible. And it was exactly what Pinkie Pie was doing. Rarity barely dodged out of the way of the incoming kick.

Pinkie Pie landed from her attack. "You're learning!"

Exactly WHAT Rarity was learning was anypony's guess. Pinkie Pie tried the attack a few more times, hitting some, missing others. When Pinkie came from the sky again, Rarity leapt back and launched her counter. She got on her hind hooves and grabbed Pinkie, forcing her on hers. Rarity slipped behind Pinkie, forehoof on Pinkie's forehead, and pulled Pinkie back into a submission move. It was only for a moment, used as a straight up attack. The attack generated a distinct cracking sound.

"Ooh!" Pinkie chirped, "That felt good!"

Not done with this throw combo, Rarity worked her forelegs and magic to flip Pinkie upside down, and slam the party pony into the ground on her upper back.

Pinkie grimaced, "That... not so much."

Rarity finished off with a backflip right onto Pinkie Pie's stomach. Let it be known, Pinkie thought to herself, that even the most weight conscious pony is still a pony... and having one fall on you REALLY HURTS.

It took a bit for Pinkie to pick herself back up. Rarity certainly looked jaded, but enthusiastic. "Want some more, darling?"

Pinkie snorted, "I was about to ask YOU the same thing! Except for maybe minus the 'darling.' Unless I was going to imitate you when saying 'darling,' which I could totally use if I wanted to get you angry or something 'cause nopony likes being mocked! I'd be scared of the pony who enjoyed getting mo- PSYCHE!!" Pinkie twirled out of Rarity's next grapple attempt and slapped Rarity on the back. Rarity fell forward, shook her head, and then took notice of the firecracker that had been tagged on her back.

The firecracker popped, creating a nice ball of smoke that enveloped Rarity and left her covered in soot. Rarity grumbled her way back onto her hooves... looking down to see another firecracker tagged onto her chest.

And then Rarity exploded again.

Pinkie Pie looked elated that her plan had worked, but then adopted a very serious face and looked what appeared to everypony else as to her left. "Kids, don't try this at home. We are all highly-trained ponies who have years of experience with martial arts and explosives. We are also using protective measures such as the Hoof of War, which is the only reason we even WANT to do these things in the first place. Lastly, we are not real. Yet. In real life, problems are solved through communication and respect. If you don't know what those words mean, ask your parents! Tell them Pinkie Pie told you! Leave the wacky fighting antics to the cartoon ponies. But I've digressed enough... back to your regularly scheduled fan fiction."

The second explosion left Rarity on the ground for longer. When she got the wind back in her, Rarity planted one hoof at a time and worked all four to stand firmly. Her firm stance was impeded with Pinkie lounging on her back.

"You've really gotta be careful when I do things Pinkie Pie style, Rarity." The pink pony hopped back and prepared a cupcake.

"In that case, let me show you what happens when I do it up... Rarity style!!" Without even looking, Rarity detected a display table behind her. She brought it forward with her magic and had it ram into Pinkie Pie's midsection, knocking the wind out of the latter. Pinkie Pie was propped up on the column-like table. "Let's spruce you up... shall we?"

Rarity conjured up fabric and tools from wherever they were in the vicinity and began to wrap Pinkie Pie up like one of her ponyequins at the boutique. The fabric was cut, sew, styled, and studded with gems all very tightly and uncomfortably. The gems in particular struck Pinkie hard when they attached themselves to the dress. By the end of it, Pinkie was adorned in her gala dress, hat and all.

"You should see what it looks like," Rarity muttered, placing her horn close to Pinkie Pie, "when the gems LIGHT UP!" Rarity zapped the dress, the

gems conducting the damaging magic and coursing it through Pinkie Pie's body. The energy culminated in a burst that sent Pinkie Pie flying out of the dress.

"K.O.!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

The excitement left Pinkie Pie on the ground, dazed, and Rarity admiring the dress she made. She looked off at a certain group of fillies casting the most dazzled look at the dress. Rarity grinned and laid the dress over one of them. It was clearly too big, but the ear-to-ear smiles that the filly and her friends wore at being given the dress were enough to melt any heart.

Rarity approached Pinkie Pie carefully. Even though the fight was over, there was no telling what the pony would do or say. She defied expectations by doing some expected: Talking excitedly.

"That was super-de-dooperly special AWESOME-RIFFIC! I was all like RAAAWR and you were all like AH-HA! And I went WHOOSH-WHOOSH PEWPEWPEW and you were all WHOOOAAAA-!"

Pinkie's raving was cut short when Rarity took a hoof in her own two to help the former up. Rarity grinned, "I guess fashion bests partying this time, dear."

Pinkie grinned widely. "This time!" she concurred, then helped herself up.

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Meanwhile, an unlikely pair explored in much more dangerous territory, but with purpose. At least, that's what Zecora insisted. She took Big Macintosh back into the Everfree Forest, down a path she knew to be at least a little safer than the surrounding woodland. Their hooves created crinkling sounds on the ever-present foliage, which takes all blame off of Big Macintosh when he couldn't hear a twig snap in the distance. Zecora lifted herself tall, trying to listen.

Big Macintosh cast his gaze around. "Something after us?"

Zecora kept her position. "This is not fear. The one we must protect is near."

"... We're protecting somepony, now?"

Since Zecora didn't respond, Big Macintosh figured he might as well listen out. He stood completely still and lifted his ears for any sign of anypony else in the forest. Eventually, he could hear it. Snapping twigs, the crunch of leaves and rustling through foliage. It wasn't just one set of hoof-falls, either.

"Our charge is in need!" Zecora called, reaching into her saddlebag, "Take one end and follow my lead!" She produced a rope which she laid between them. Big Macintosh did as told and grabbed his end. Zecora then walked barely off the path and kept her rope low. The red horse knew what she was up to and hid into the trees himself, rope kept to the leaf-strewn ground. The sounds of running got closer. Because of how they need to hide, neither of them could see who was coming. They could hear a voice, though.

"At... at least have the decency to face me one at a time, you... you uncouth rascallions!"

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow at hearing that, wondering if that was too archaic to say, even for stuffy Canterlot ponies. Regardless, he kept on his guard. Finally, he heard the hoof-falls coming down the path and very quickly right by where he waited. He felt a tug on the rope and obliged with his own. Now in plain sight, Big Macintosh saw two ponies caught in the trap. One was a younger mare with a blonde coat and the second was an elder young mare with an auburn coat. They were dressed in identical navy blue skintight uniforms with likely colored sailor hats, and wearing ties.

Zecora leapt out to survey the catch as well. She looked for a moment, and then snapped her head back up. "I heard four... there's one more!"

They both disregarded the downed pursuers and ran down the path where the other two went. They burst from the thick of the woods into an open clearing. The last antagonist pony looked much like the other two except her uniform and hat were a teal color with a yellow tie and a faded yellow coat topped with a blonde mane pulled back into two long braids. Last and certainly not least, Zecora and Big Mac got a look at the pony that this big fuss was all about.

Zecora's eyes widened. "What I am seeing drops my jaw... is that the princess Luna!?"

Standing opposite her pursuer was indeed the long-lost Princess Luna. One half of the highest authorities in all of Equestria. The midnight pony was once the most feared creature in all of Equestria... but that was history long played out. She was sent to the moon for a thousand years, returned, was cleansed of her evil... and then went on to go practically missing for yet another year. She wasn't even present at the Grand Galloping Gala, an event which surely would have benefit from a second princess's company.

And now here she was, in the middle of the Everfree Forest, being chased around by some agents (for the lack of a better word). Anypony would have called such a thing crazy if it weren't happening right at that very moment.

"You want me!?" Luna raised her forehooves. If one were to look closely, they'd notice the glow of gold under Luna's slippers. "You've got me!!" Luna stamped out the Hoof of War, taking the agent into the magic with her.

The agent didn't seem daunted at the idea of fighting a princess. In fact, the agent displayed no emotion at all. She clearly was dead set on her mission, signified by the fact that as soon as the fight was declared, she charged into Luna. The agent lifted herself and propelled her hind hooves forward in a spiraling motion. "Spiral arrow!"

Despite being on edge, Luna had expected the agent to SOMEWHAT respect the severity of what she had gotten herself into. Instead, the agent got the first attack, ramming Luna's legs and causing the alicorn to get swept on her side.

Big Macintosh snorted, full of intent. He was stilled by Zecora's hoof. "Easy, Big Macintosh. I have a feeling we only need to watch."

"That's as slant a rhyme as you can get." Big Macintosh muttered with a grin at Zecora's nonplussed reaction.

Back with Luna, she picked herself up and prepared for the assault. She reared up on her hind legs, preparing a strike. Despite the ease with which a pony could be swept on just two legs, the agent's bodyblow didn't register

anything on Luna. Luna followed through with her attack, giving her wings a mighty beat and sending a wall of lunar energy at the agent. The attack rammed into the agent and punched out every iota of energy in the agent's body. Before the agent could finish keeling over, Luna followed her attack up with a spinning kick. She kept herself aloft with her wings and kicked the agent back several times. Luna landed from the kick but wouldn't allow the agent that luxury. This time she brought up a forehoof, catching the agent in the stomach and sending her several stories high. Every strike in this combo radiated with splashes of lunar energy that dissipated shortly after.

The agent, ever persistent, got right back up with another flurry of strikes. Luna saw them coming and brought out her wing to block. If the combo had landed, it would have caused some damage. Without thinking about consequences, the agent went ahead and finished it off with another spiral arrow. The attack forced the agent on the ground, forcing her to take precious second to pick herself back up.

Luna took advantage of that time. She picked the agent up for her, took a step with a hind leg, and then drove her opposite forehoof into the agent's chest. The agent was floored, and then flipped back up. Luna had already taken to the air. The agent could only watch at the princess landed with both hooves on her shoulders, pick her off, and flip in the air for a throw back to the ground. Luna sensed the nearing end of the agent's energy and rushed in to finish the fight.

The agent had other plans. Soon as Luna risked as attack, the agent flipped, grabbing onto Luna's upper body. The agent quickly snapped Luna's head back and let the muscle resistance deal the pain. Taking advantage of the stun, the agent rolled over Luna's back and flipped the princess over, rolling again on her back and giving one of Luna's forelegs a debilitating pull. Working fast, the agent flipped around on Luna's back to get into a new position, forelegs looped under Luna's with the hooves on the back of Luna's head. The agent magnified the discomfort by giving the hold a firm pull that has left many a pony out cold for hours.

The agent rolled off of the floored Luna, assessing for successful capture. Luna picked herself up almost casually.

"You call that apprehending me!?" The agent prepared to receive Luna again, but nothing could have prepared anypony for the swift glide the Luna

employed to close the distance. Luna held the agent in place with her forehooves, but then let wisps of lunar energy do that for her. She stood back, gathering her wits. "Gaze into my darkness...!" To compliment that call, all went dark. The sun could still break through the canopy in this clearing, but Luna's incoming skill sucked all the light out of the immediate area. There was only an occasional burst of light and the sound of strikes being delivered inponyly fast. When Luna willed the darkness to lift, the agent was on the ground, unmoving. Luna herself had her back turned to the foe and cast a very discriminating glare. Apparently even the Hoof of War knew well enough that this fight was over and didn't need to announce it.

Big Macintosh took his turn halting Zecora when she took a step to approach. "I don't like that look she's giving..."

"Her frustrations were spent in the duel. She is powerful, but she is not cruel."

"I hope not..."

Steadily, the zebra let herself out into plain sight. "Your aggression need not extend." She steeled herself to not flinch when Luna's gaze turned on her. "We are friends."

Luna took a moment of glaring and heavy breathing, looking back and forth between the two that presented themselves to her in a peaceful manner. The princess's expression softened. She exhaled and shook her head. "I... Pardon me. I have only just ventured out of Canterlot and I'm set upon by... I don't know WHO these ponies are."

"It is a worrisome thing, that is true. But rest assured we are here to help you."

At first, Luna seemed curious at Zecora's way of speaking, but the wheels in her head turned and her expression lifted... almost to the lengths of being called hopeful. "You're... Zecora!"

Zecora raised her eyebrows at the sudden statement. "It is as you claim. Zecora is my name."

Luna looked to the other. "And you're Big Macintosh! You look exactly how I imagined! Oh, wow! I didn't expect to see so many familiar ponies so soon! Ohh, I wish Twilight would write about you two more!"

The other two shared an understandably perplexed expression. Zecora approached Luna with a personable smile. "Do not take my words as doubt, but... what are you talking about?"

Luna grinned sheepishly. "Oh. Yes. You wouldn't... Well, you both know Twilight Sparkle, right? And how she's my sister's student? As part of that, she sends letters up to Canterlot detailing all the lessons in friendship she learns. To help better understand those lessons, Twilight sends up a letter summarizing the events that lead her to that lesson. So far I have, um... 26! She even went back and wrote summarizations of the days before she was given the assignment just to fill in the blanks."

There wasn't a look incredulous enough for Zecora and Big Macintosh to give that would express how this all was so... well, 'unexpected' is on the far mild side.

"I'd have to say that the seventh letter is my favorite because everypony's personality really comes out! My favorite letter to READ, though, is definitely number 11. I could re-read the lyrics to Winter Wrap Up all day! Um, Zecora... there's one thing I've been wondering. That dance that Pinkie Pie does trying imitate you... do you really dance like that?"

Zecora gave a nostalgic chuckle, "I saw her performance by chance. How do you know the appearance of that dance?"

"Celestia always reads the letters aloud to me first before leaving them with me. She always demonstrates things for me if I ask! I still remember laughing so hard when she poked herself trying to do the Pinkie Pie swear..."

The image of Celestia dancing, and then poking herself in the eye was overpowering. Big Macintosh cut into it with a straightforward, "Where have you been?"

Caught beating around the issue, Luna paused. "Up in Canterlot... doing my princess duties, and... catching up with a thousand years of Equestrian development."

"... And of all things, the one that made you take a break from all that is this here fighting tournament?"

Luna thought on that for a moment. "Yes! It... sounds like fun!"

Zecora hummed. "If nothing is amiss, how do you explain this?" She gestured at the fallen agent.

Who, as it turned out, was no longer there.

Very genuinely, Luna stammered, "I... I don't know about that one! As soon as I came down from Canterlot, they were after me. I had to duck into this forest, but you saw how that turned out. I'm still adjusting to my new life here and my abilities as princess are still just returning to me. Maybe they thought they could use me... or ransom me!"

Judging by their looks, Zecora and Big Macintosh didn't go for it much.

Luna sighed, "Okay... I have a reason for being here. But... but I can't tell you right now! I just need to stay hidden and find Twilight Sparkle! If anypony can help me, it's her."

"Where Twilight could be, there is no telling... I haven't even properly visited her dwelling."

Big Macintosh looked at the zebra, "Applejack's friend Twilight? She lives in the Ponyville library, I hear."

"Ooh! Applejack!" Luna burst. "How is she??"

The image of Applejack left in a bruised heap and yelling him off ran through Big Macintosh's mind. The fillylike glee in Luna's eyes told him to lie. "She's fine."

"This may indicate a plot to hatch," Zecora said, examining something left of the ground. It must have come off the agent during one of Luna's attacks. "It says 'Shadohoof' on this patch."

A collective gasp resonated through the three of them and they hung on that revelation. Shortly after, Big Macintosh asked, "What's Shadohoof?"

Luna shrugged.

Chapter 5

The last train out of Appleloosa was bound for Ponyville. The front passenger car alone was reserved for all the pony folk who were interested in competing in the Cutie Mark Clash or sticking around to watch. Other than that, the train was at its normal light load. Business ponies, tourists, cargo, and a particular pony who kept himself well hidden under a hat, sunglasses, and a cloak all the way up over his nose. The pony looked around at the rest of the passengers in his car, and then took another look at a letter. He slipped the letter back under the wires of an unopened package and ducked out to go further back into the train.

The pony passed through car after car, making for the rearmost passenger cars. Getting a seat in there normally requires a reservation, though ponies wanting alone time sneak in anyway. On this instance, there were no such ponies. The cloaked pony casually walked through, checking each bunk. He shook his head, his body language deeming his situation ridiculous. He passed by another cloaked pony with a ten gallon hat and sunglasses, casually greeting, "Howdy."

"Hello," the other pony said politely. They walked by each other, and then paused. "Braeburn?" the other said, shedding her disguise to reveal that she was not a pony at all. She was, in fact, a young buffalo that the citizens of Appleloosa knew as Little Strongheart.

"Sure is," Braeburn replied, removing his own cloak and sunglasses, leaving only his vest and hat. "Now, was there any reason to get me on this train just to tell me what's going on with the buffalo?"

Strongheart looked surprised, "... Get you...? But I'm here because of this...!" She presented her own matching letter and package.

Braeburn looked just as surprised, if not even more so. "Now what the hay is going on here? I KNOW I didn't get the wrong package because the letter is addressed to me and tells me that I'll get an answer for what's been going on recently. But you know, while we're here and you can't avoid me any more, you can STILL tell me what's going on with the buffalo."

Strongheart shifted her gaze. Braeburn wasn't being scrutinizing or even displaying the harshest tone of voice. He was genuinely looking for answers from a buffalo who had become a close friend over the past few months. Strongheart swallowed her pride and sighed, "We, the buffalo, have been trying to take care of it ourselves. We treasure our friendships and our alliances very closely. To have one of our own betray that trust and have our friends believe that we are not committed is unforgivable."

Braeburn tapped his chin, "I thought as much. But Little Strongheart, you have to understand. The Appleloosans just got used to sleeping well at night knowing that we made peace with the buffalo. And now for a week, we're right back to sleeping with one eye open. Seeing a buffalo over the wreck of our buildings just doesn't help things."

"I know!!"

Braeburn reeled back at Strongheart's burst. She wasn't a manipulative buffalo, especially not to a friend. That's why her frustrated tears washed away any suspicion or animosity Braeburn could have harbored. He looked at the letter again. "I figured that the worst of it was some of the buffalo didn't agree to the treaty and formed their own group. The buffalo we saw had a cape and some hat."

"That's the same as what our scouts saw. I just don't know how I can help the situation by being far away from my homeland..."

"Let's just hope that whoever wrote these isn't pulling our hind legs..."

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When the sun rose on the next day, Braeburn and Strongheart opened their packages as the letters instructed. The packages contained pairs of gilded horseshoes that the letter called Hooves of War. Strongheart's Hooves of War were even smaller to fit her hoof size.

"Fighting, huh...?" Braeburn muttered as he prepared to equip his Hooves of War, "This might sound strange for a pony to say, but I'm not even that good at horsing around, much less fighting."

Strongheart examined her decorated hoof. "I admire your dedication to peace... But what if a confrontation is the only option?"

Braeburn knew better than to question that line of thought. The buffalo have been fighting for their rights, their possessions, and their turf for generations. It was in their blood. Thus, he gave an honest answer. "I know a few things. I've had to hold back a few ponies who've had one too many. But I dunno, Little Strongheart. I have yet to even hear about an individual too evil to sit down and talk with."

They both thought on that. With no more conversation, they could now hear a chopping sound getting closer to the train. The two shot looks out the window where they could only see the shadow of something flying over the train. The chopping sound was now very loud to be heard over the clanging of the train. Braeburn and Strongheart were startled to hear hoofsteps on the roof directly above them. The hoofsteps altered between careful and most definitely a fight. The two in the car shared a nervous look. The situation demanded a look. Braeburn was the closest to the exit, so he ventured a look.

Braeburn walked onto the space between cars and had to hold a hoof to his head to keep his hat on. With one forehoof occupied, he carefully climbed the ladder to the roof of the railway car.

Closest to Braeburn was a stallion dressed in camouflage clothing and boots with a tall, flat-topped blonde mane. Facing this stallion was a new figure. This figure stood tall as a large buffalo. The buffalo could be distinguished by his face alone; pure white eyes that somehow still held malice and a sinister smile wide with the glee of others' miseries. Beyond that, the buffalo wore a black cape held on by two large white shoulder pads. Perched on the buffalo's head was a peaked cap bearing some organization symbol as a silver decoration.

"Bison!!" Gil shouted over the train. The helicopter had long since failed to keep up. "What are YOU doing taking a train?"

The buffalo, who seemed to be called Bison, chuckled coldly, "Are trains not the most cultured way to travel? I would have thought you'd appreciate my refinement!"

Gil scowled, "You don't care about things like that! Now I know Appleloosa was just a distraction! What do you want with Ponyville!?"

"Why, to participate in the Cutie Mark Clash, of course! I haven't missed out on the fun yet..."

"That's because you always have some plan. What is it!?"

"I'm insulted..." Bison chuckled again and reared up, supporting himself on only his rear legs while he folded his forelegs across his chest.

Braeburn gasped a little at that sight. It was so familiar, and he knew exactly why. He ducked down and hissed to Strongheart, "That's him! That's the buffalo I saw every time!"

Strongheart's ears pressed against her skull, her scorn apparent at just the thought. Braeburn carefully poked his eyes over the edge of the roof again. He noticed they were both silent, but only because Bison seemed to be looking at something else. Braeburn broke into a cold sweat when he realized Bison was looking at him.

"What?" Gil turned around and also saw Braeburn. "NO! GET AWAY!"

It was too late. Bison landed with a stomp on the edge of the roof. This somehow popped Braeburn off the ladder and allowed Bison to dig his hoof under Braeburn's chin. Bison turned back to Gil, hostage in possession.

Bison chuckled, "Now where were we...?"

Gil growled again, mind racing. Suddenly, Bison was rammed from behind. He dropped Braeburn and landed on his side. Gil leapt forward for a knockout strike, but only managed to strike a dent into the train's roof. Gil whirled around and backed up as Strongheart and Braeburn moved forward to his sides.

Gil looked at them. "Stay back, civilians! This isn't your fight!"

Braeburn narrowed his eyes forward, "Now that's where you're mistaken."

Strongheart seemed off-set by Braeburn's bravado, but she nonetheless concurred, "This buffalo has done much wrong by us both."

Bison's grin widened, "I'll destroy all three of you!!" He quickly stamped out the Hoof of War, which to Gil's chagrin, encompassed Strongheart and Braeburn as well.

Gil decided to head off any damage to the other two by taking the offense. While Gil took Bison's attention, Strongheart quickly turned to Braeburn.

"Are you sure about this? Not a few minutes ago, you were..."

"I... I'm sure, Little Strongheart. When he had me, I felt something... something scary. Something I thought I'd feel with the buffalo, but I didn't. And this is even worse than I could have imagined. I don't like the idea of fighting, but that pony needs all the help he can get."

For Braeburn of all ponies to say something like that, this buffalo had to be utterly irredeemable in his ways. He and Strongheart exchanged mutual looks, just in time for Gil to be tossed at their hooves.

Braeburn lowered himself, "Are you okay!?"

Gil lifted his head, ever alert.

"All three of you can perish!!" Bison called over the train and took off in a run. A purple energy billowed around him and became strong enough to lift and propel him all on its own. "Psycho Crusher!!"

Bison plowed through his three opponents, sending Gil back again and the other two to either side. Braeburn was lucky to come to a stop before the edge of the roof while Strongheart had to scramble her hooves to find solid standing. She could only watch as Bison strolled to Braeburn.

"A passive-hoof, are you? Ha ha ha... POWER solves everything. Words only provide the ILLUSION of progress! Your methods should infuriate me... but they make you into the bug you are, destined to be a smear under my hoof."

Braeburn stiffened his lip, keeping a tough front for Bison. "It's ponies, buffalo, whoever that think like that which get forgotten by history. Your oversimplified views are only gonna get you done in. And when that happens, not a single soul will remember who you are or what you stand for!" He swiftly threw a chop with one hoof, which got blocked and caught. Braeburn struggled against it, then just tried again with the other hoof. Bison caught that one too. Down to his last option, Braeburn thrust his head forward. Bison didn't have any counter for that and took the headbutt full-on. Braeburn used the stagger to quickly duck out and get near another ally.

This was exactly what Bison counted on. He lifted himself off his hooves using that same purple energy and came to a landing straight on Braeburn's back. Braeburn grunted with the sudden impact and fell on his stomach, legs splayed. Bison leapt from that position, narrowly missing Strongheart's attempted charge. In midair, Bison thrust out his forehooves and manipulated his fall to strike Strongheart back. When he landed, he surveyed the two in a heap.

"Sonic BOOM!"

A disc of wind slapped Bison's back, forcing him to keel over a bit before turning around to meet Gil's assault. Figuring Gil to keep it up, Bison went straight for his own counter, kicking his rear legs and sliding forward, forehooves out prepared for the sweep. Gil on to this plan and hunkered down to low-block the attack. Bison growled at his failed attack. With the bite taken out of the strike, Gil made for his own counter.

"Here we go!" Gil called, hunkering again. "ONE!" He flipped, connecting a flash kick into Bison's chin. "TWO!" Gil flipped again, this time catching Bison's stomach and sending him into the air. Gil surveyed Bison's flight and planned for trajectory. When Bison was low enough, "STRIKE!!" Gil flipped to make for the hardest of the three flash kicks, aided by gravity.

Bison took his down time, but was up fairly quickly. Warriors forged in the heat of battle and experienced with the Hoof of War know how to take a hit as long as it doesn't knock out the reserves of their energy. He stared Gil down, that wide smile no less deterred.

"Sonic boom!"

Bison's mindgame had worked. Gil threw the projectile, which Bison used his psycho energy to teleport behind. Gil's eyes widened at the sudden proximity.

"Scream in pain!" Bison swiped his hoof under his chin in an intimidating gesture. He then saw Guile's back flips with his own forward flips, kicking down on Gil's head and back. Not done yet, Bison propelled himself with another Psycho Crusher, this time carrying Gil into the air. "This place shall become your GRAVE!" Bison gave a mighty shove, sending Gil onto the roof. Bison then dropped himself and landed on Gil, hind hooves crushing the Mareican soldier. The force was so great that it tore into the roof and dropped Gil into the train car's interior, Bison's pressure still hard on him.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

"NO!!" shouted Strongheart and Braeburn in unison. They jumped through the hole to rejoin the fight.

Bison stepped aside to look at the two still in front of him. "Hah! Come to talk at me into submission?"

Braeburn narrowed his eyes at Bison, then closed them and took a cleansing breath. With a shout, he thrust his forehooves up, returned them to center, and then leapt forward. Through the force of his attack he glided over to Bison, a forehoof struck out and engulfed in flame. Bison could barely eke out a "WHAT?" before Braeburn's attack smacked him across the face and down on his side.

Even with his determination to take Bison down, Braeburn didn't expect to be able to cause that kind of damage. He looked at this hoof and the magic he tapped as signified by the glittering edges. He drew his hoof back in a pump of determination and looked back at Bison.

"Impressive!" Bison barked, "Your commitment to so-called justice actually has some yield! Now how far does it go!? Psycho Crusher!!"

Bison kicked off with his psycho energy at Braeburn. Braeburn had another idea, kicking off in a leaping cartwheel with his just hind legs, bringing a hind hoof onto Bison's head and sending the buffalo into the bunks. Bison

smashed through the fallen furniture barely in time to see Braeburn stomp a forehoof down and send a shockwave that tore up the carpet as it went. Unfortunately, Bison counted on this.

"The end has come...!" Bison declared. He swiftly leapt over the roving projectile and directly in front of Braeburn. The force of the stomp ruptured the floor beneath Braeburn and popped him into Bison's grasp. Bison held Braeburn like he did before. "Keel before my psycho power..." Bison switched forehooves and struck Braeburn in the stomach. The strike itself wasn't the attack. Psycho energy welled up where the hoof met Braeburn's stomach. The energy burst, some of it seeping through Braeburn's body out his back.

"K.O.!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

"Fall!" Bison let Braeburn down, letting him follow orders and keel over before completely losing footing and hitting the ground. "Such weakness..." With two out of three down, Bison looked to Strongheart, who was occupied staring at Braeburn with a paled expression.

"What... what did you do to him?"

"You will beg for it when I am done with you!!" Bison charged forward with an old-fashioned stampede charge, aiming to bring a quick conclusion to the fight. He struck Strongheart, but she dug her hooves in and pushed back. The sight would be absurd to a spectator, but indeed this smaller buffalo was keeping the large adult buffalo back with her strength.

Suddenly, the train lurched. Bison lost his ground and stumbled back. Strongheart saw an opportunity.

"My family...!" she invoked and stomped the floor of the car. The stomp rippled and brought Bison to the floor. He looked up for Strongheart's approach and saw not only her but what appeared to be her entire herd. All at once they started a powerful stampede straight for him. When the front lines of the stampede reached him, he only felt the impact of Strongheart's charge, but it was at a stampede strength. The illusion of the herd faded, leaving only Strongheart and her concentrated attack.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War announced definitively.

"NOOOOOO...!!!" Bison screamed all the way down to the floor.

Strongheart kept standing despite the Hoof of War's confirmation and leave. She sighed in relief and leapt to Braeburn's side. "Braeburn, it's over. Braeburn. Get up! Braeburn!!"

On the other side, Gil recuperated as part of the Hoof of War's magic. He quickly stood himself up and made to detain Bison. Instead, a glow surrounded the villain and lifted him up.

"What!?" Gil shouted.

Bison chuckled, albeit weaker than normal. "This is merely unicorn magic. Surely you've heard of it. It levitates the cannon train from Tokyoat to Horseaka. It levitates my desk, where I ride the saddle of the world. It even levitates... me...!" On that dramatic note, the magic pulled Bison through the hole in the roof and kept him in place while the train moved on and left him behind. "Farewell for now!"

"No...!" Gil gasped. He shoved open the door to the space between cars and could only watch out in the open as Bison's figure retreated into the distance along with the unicorn agent that made his escape possible. Gil breathed heavily with frustration, then struck a hoof in the air and shouted with rage that could summon flames...

"BISOOOOOON!!!"

Once the train made a turn about its path and Bison's escape was secure, Gil took a calming breath and noticed for the first time that the dusty west had given way to greener fields. He looked out the side and saw that the train was not far from Ponyville. He had just departed from the town after getting the call about Bison and leaving by helicopter. It looked like he was going back to being an unassuming tournament fighter until he got more intel...

A stressed shouting shook Gil from his thoughts. He re-entered the car to see Strongheart trying to shake Braeburn from his unconsciousness. "Darn it..." Gil muttered.

Strongheart thrust a harsh look up at Gil, "What did that buffalo do to Braeburn!? Who was that!? Who are YOU!?"

Gil decided to answer those questions the least worrying first. "My name is Gil. I'm a Major in the Mareican Air Force." He saluted to Strongheart, a gesture which was not entirely reciprocated or understood at first. "At least... I am, on and off. I work with a global agency to halt the ambitions of a crime syndicate called Shadohoof. They specialize in causing discord in order to seize control of what's left. There is much blood on their hooves..."

Stongheart noticed that at that mention, Gil habitually turned around one of the tags around his neck. One of them, the one he was probably giving attention to, wasn't his. Gil shortly realized he was trailing off and continued.

"That buffalo is Bison Bison, and he's a buffalo in appearance only. Whatever ties he had to the world as we know it he abandoned long ago. Now he's the leader of Shadohoof, and thinks only about power. He wields the power of psycho energy... the likes of which no science understands yet. The effects of psycho energy poisoning could be as benign as just losing consciousness."

"And the worst?"

The look of melancholy on Gil's face said enough. "I'd rather you focus on getting him proper medical attention. I don't know how soon I can get my stationed medical team to our location, though..."

Strongheart looked to the door to the next car. "There are nurses on board this train."

"No. We have to leave this train without being seen. Everything you just saw and heard is confidential. I'm only telling you this much because you got yourself involved."

Fitting the limp Braeburn onto her back for transportation, Strongheart glared back. "We were involved the moment he first disrupted the peace between the buffalo and the Appleloosans."

"So you told me... When the train stops, we're getting off undetected. A wrecked car with a hole in the roof and a stallion down isn't exactly inconspicuous."

On cue, some commotion was heard from the next car over. Gil frowned in thought.

"... Or we'll just jump off now. We already passed the town limit and now the train is just coming in to station."

Whoever was on the other side of the door to the car knocked.

"Go!"

Spurred, Strongheart leapt from the space between cars, followed by Gil. Since the train was slowing to its stop, Braveheart didn't have too much trouble keeping the landing stable.

Strongheart looked to Gil as he again folded his wings away and tucked in his tank top. "Thank you, Gil."

Gil made to acknowledge the thanks, but then looked straight ahead. Not in a particularly fearful way, just very incredulously. Strongheart turned around to look. In front of them, standing EXACTLY where she'd need to be, was Pinkie Pie.

"D... Dances Without Shame?" Strongheart stammered. This assumedly was a given name for Pinkie Pie by the buffalo.

The name didn't seem to affect Pinkie Pie at all. "What you just did was REALLY AWESOME! I mean WOW, that's like something you'd see in movies or TV shows! I didn't know you were a pegasus, Mr. Gil! Wait, is Gil your first name or your last name? I'll bet it's your first name and ponies just ASSUME that it's your last name so they can give you a more normal first name like, like Harry!" Pinkie had more to say, but it was lost on just how surreal it was to see anypony by the train tracks this far away from the main town.

Gil shook his head. "How are... what are you doing in a place like this!?"

"Walking my alligator, duh!" A quick look to Pinkie's side indeed revealed her poker-faced alligator pet on a leash. "Uh oh... what happened to Braeburn?"

Strongheart and Gil looked apprehensive, then turned away to briefly discuss something. Strongheart turned back around. "Dan- I mean... Pinkie Pie... May I ask for your cooperation?"

-

The Suarcube Corner was enjoying another day of moderate business. Perhaps above average because of the excitement the Cutie Mark Clash was stirring up. At this particular moment, there weren't many ponies, thankfully none in front of the door which Pinkie Pie swung open purposefully.

"I'm going to need half a dozen CCs, stat!!" The party pony called out.

Mr. and Mrs. Cake exchanged a look. Mr. Cake had to ask, "CCs?"

Pinkie narrowed her eyes with determination, "Cupcakes."

-

Without questions or clarifications on either side, Pinkie shoved the encountered trio into her room above the Sugarcube Corner and told them to wait a few moments. Gil was about to voice his doubt that any of this would help Braeburn, but he observed Strongheart's bedside manner and decided that at least she had faith that this would work. Upon looking away, he came eye-to-eye with Gummy standing on a table. The toothless alligator's large, purple eyes were cryptic in what intellect they could be hiding. Gil maintained a stare, trying to get at any semblance of awareness from the pet.

That moment was interrupted when Pinkie barged in balancing a tray on her head. "They're fiiiiiiiiished!"

All gathered around Braeburn as Pinkie set the tray down. Gil took a moment to notice how the cupcakes were decorated. "Are these... biohazard symbols?"

"Yessir! They're what I like to call 'Atomic Cupcakes!' As in 'the nuclear option.' Open wide, Braeburn!"

Pinkie pulled Braeburn's jaw down, placed an atomic cupcake in his mouth, and pushed it back into place. She playfully manipulated his jaw to chew up the cupcake and swallow it. For the first few seconds, nothing happened. But then...

"HAAAHHHYEEEEEE!!!"

Braeburn popped out of the bed as if struck by lightning, performed several degrees of somersaults in mid-air, and then fell back in. His lead lolled over to the side and he lazily opened his eyes. "Did... did anypony get the number on that buffalo that hit me?"

"Braeburn!!" Strongheart leapt over and rubbed her forehead to Braeburn's merrily.

"Whoa now..." Braeburn said with a weak smile, "You're acting like I nearly died."

Pinkie hoof-pumped at her success and Gil grinned. That was one life Shadohoof wouldn't have so easily. By curiosity, he didn't so quickly forget the way Braeburn reacted to the cupcake and inspected one himself. "How much sugar is IN these things?"

Pinkie paused in place, trying to conjure an answer. She had a thought. "Wait... Are you part of the ponice?"

"Er... no."

"Then I don't need to answer that!"

The fact that Gil was willing to accept that as an answer worried him. "Look, can you keep it a secret that we were here like this? There's a lot at stake that requires keeping this secret."

"Hmmm..." Pinkie tapped her chin and rolled her eyes in thought. "Okey dokey lokey! I'll just get to washing this tray and you all just continue

planning whatever it is you've got cooking! I always WANTED my place to be a base of operations!"

As Pinkie Pie bounced to the stairs, Gil was still unsure. "You're not even curious about what's going on?"

"Nope! I'm just glad Braeburn is okay. I give it until you're in focus again when he'll be back up and bucking!" At that, Pinkie hopped down the stair and began washing and singing. "First you've got to get the right amount of water. If no crumbs lift right off, you've got to make it hotter...!"

For the lack of anything better to say, Gill muttered "That truly is one unpredictable pony..."

-

Speaking of apples and earth ponies, the long-recuperating Applejack finally found her way back to town in search of her sister. She didn't really even bother to call her name.

"Oh... 'COURSE she wouldn't be in town. That's too obvious. But surely SOMEpony has seen the three of 'em..."

After asking a few random ponies to no avail, Applejack was surprised to pass by a pair of costumed pegasi. Heh. They looked just like those Wonderbolts that Rainbow Dash looks up to so much.

On the other end, those pegasi who actually ARE the Wonderbolts passed by just as normally... except for when Soarin' double-took at the sight of Applejack. He thought a moment, and then quickly hopped over in front of Applejack. "Pie!!"

Applejack understandably reared back at the imposition. "I beg your pardon?"

Soarin' inspected Applejack further. "Why do you remind me of pie...? And it's such a STRONG reminder. Normally I look at a baker or cashier and I get it mildly. But when I look at YOU, it's just a big blast of it! Do you make pie? Like... GREAT pie?"

Spitfire narrowed her eyes in disapproval of Soarin's conduct.

Stuck between pride and still awkward from the suddenness, Applejack just grinned. "You betcher bottom bit I make good pies! ... Look. While we're talkin' and all, have any o' y'all Wonderbolts seen a group of three fillies callin' themselves the Cutie Mark Crusaders?"

"Soarin'..." Spitfire cautioned, unheeded.

"Fillies, huh?" Soarin' thought. "No, can't say I've seen anything like that around. Sorry."

"Soarin'."

Applejack sighed, "That's just fine. I don't suppose you high-flyin' pegasi can do anything about findin' 'em?"

"SOARIN'!"

"WHAT?" Soarin' yelled, taking the time to look around and see that sufficiently enough ponies had stopped to see who this regular pony is that could command a Wonderbolt's attention for so long. "...Oh."

The way Soarin' initially interrogated Applejack about her baking prowess gave the impression of something more confrontational going on. Spitfire leaned to the side, "You know... we HAVE been on the lookout for our first fight of this tournament."

Applejack put two and two together. "Aw, no. I ain't doin' ANY MORE of that fightin' until I find my sister, y'hear me? Y'all itchin' to throw down, you can just have at each other for all I care."

The two Wonderbolts exchanged a look. Spitfire snickered, "The two of us FIGHT? That's what our sponsors would call a PR disaster. We Wonderbolts are a confirmed team all the way through."

"Well that's just-" Realization hit Applejack. "Now hold on a hay-balin' minute... You two are ACTUAL members of them Wonderbolts?"

Soarin' grinned, "Well, yeah! You don't think we're just playing dress-up, do you?"

"Well, uh... mainly keepin' to myself and my business don't give me all the time in Equestria to keep up on every lil' thing."

There was some snickering and disbelieving murmurs passing through the crowd at Applejack's unknowing.

Applejack looked to the side, "Now you just... cut that out! All that's goin' on is talkin'! Right now all I want is to find my sister and I'm getting' no closer just standin' around. Sorry to waste your time."

When Applejack made to leave, Spitfire asked, "So you're backing out?"

Though Spitfire asked just for confirmation, the "Oooooohhhhhh..." passing through the crowd gave that question a much more condescending tone.

Applejack turned around. "Look here... I've been beat up once before and it wasn't too pleasant. I ain't losin' again even IF y'all jumped me." The crowd riled again, causing all three of the center ponies to give a start. "Will y'all QUIT sensationalizin' simple bits of conversation!? Thank you."

"Well..." Spitfire chuckled, "We ARE Wonderbolts. Being fast and strong is what we do. You can't blame them for getting riled up like that when you're clearly the underdog."

The crowd, all knowing Applejack too well, didn't need to add anything to that statement. They merely swished their heads over to her, wide-eyed.

"Now hold on there, Miss...?"

"Spitfire."

"Miss Spitfire. My name's Applejack. Ahem, y'all may be fancy-shmancy celebrated athletes and all that, but I hold my own pretty good, too. Them apples don't just fall down 'cause I tell 'em to!"

All heads back to Spitfire.

"Hm... All bad starts aside, now you've got me curious."

All heads back to Applejack. Spitfire's tone of friendly competition wasn't lost on her.

"... All right. Fine! Gosh, this feels just like any time Rainbow Dash wants to challenge me at somethin'. She really WOULD fit right in with your group!"

Unfortunately, Spitfire only heard up to the agreement before stamping out the Hoof of War. Since Applejack was a little preoccupied the first time she clashed, she watched the shadow of the magic pass under and root itself. "Well would ya look at that..." Spitfire wasn't looking at it. She was too busy going for the first strike. Applejack looked up barely just in time to flatten herself to the ground. "Quicker'n a dinner bell, ain'tcha?"

Spitfire turned around in midair after having overshot Applejack's location. "Yeah! I heard this Hoof of War magic is potent stuff, but this is the first time I've actually used it. I bet I could kick up some mean flames if I wanted to!"

"Hoof o' War, huh..."

"By the way, I'm keeping this."

"Huh?" It took this long for Applejack to realize that her signature Stetson was no longer perched on top of her blonde mane. Instead it was held good and well in Spitfire's possession as she flipped it onto her own head. "N-now that's just poor sportsmaanship! Takin' somethin' that's important to your opponent and just plain don't belong to you! You give that back!"

"Or what?" Spitfire adjusted the hat, "You'll hurt me? Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing now?"

That statement segued into Spitfire's descent to strike the first blow in the clash. Applejack was no foal; she knew she was in an imbalanced situation. However, she knew that for all their flying around, pegasi had to get in close at SOME point to get ahead in a fight. The window for using that was small, but darn it she was going to use it. Spitfire came in for a speedy strike. Applejack tried to calculate whether to dodge, block it, take a hit to give a hit, and then she saw it. Spitfire's burt sienna eyes widened and

softened with the realization she was overshooting again. Applejack leapt backwards and let Spitfire hit the ground on the spot, landing hard on her hooves to avoid an outright crash.

Applejack took advantage of the confusion. She struck a dominant hoof out to blind side, followed up with a headbutt into Spitfire's chest, then whipped around for the quick buck. Spitfire was knocked back. In a curious change of pace, the Hoof of War reacted to the move by materializing a stopping wall of magic behind Spitfire. When Spitfire hit it, the collision caused a ripple of golden magic to briefly appear. Spitfire rebounded off the wall, coming down to Applejack's position again. At a loss for what to do other than what may come to her by instinct, Applejack stomped the ground with both forehooves. The stomp kicked up a force that first collided with Spitfire to stop her fall. A second stomp send Spitfire airborne again, this time destined for the ground.

Applejack didn't look at Spitfire's fall. She instead saw her hat leave Spitfire's head and glide direct to her own. Applejack stood proudly, letting the hat fall back in its rightful place.

At least it would have if Spitfire hadn't composed herself and recovered in time to snatch it just before it touched even a hair. "Hey!"

Spitfire secured the hat on her head again. "Not bad, Applejack! You've got some moves. Now here's some of mine..." She went for another dive at Applejack.

After a history of dodging Rainbow Dash's attempted flinch-inducing rushes, Applejack was well aware how to read a pegasus's incoming angle. She judged that Spitfire was coming in directly at her, looking a lot more confident. Suddenly, Spitfire's angle upturned just a little. She was coming in... just above? She already HAS the hat, so this must be some sort of confusion tactic. As expected, Applejack ducked and that let Spitfire go straight over. Applejack then turned around to see what Spitfire was up to... and saw nothing. She did, however, hear an expectant swoon from the crowd. Just what was that Wonderbolt up t-?

And then Spitfire came to a harsh landing on Applejack's back. The crowd's earlier expectation culminated in a short impressed cheer. In reality, Spitfire looped-the-loop right in Applejack's blind zone and ended the loop coming

straight from above. Applejack exhaled heavily; Spitfire on her back, stomach on the ground. And that was just step one. Applejack felt Spitfire's hooves on either side, lifting her off the ground. Then Spitfire just heaved Applejack into the air. Normally something a pegasus couldn't hope to achieve, but the Hoof of War made anything possible. Spitfire leapt to intercept Applejack in the air and grab her again.

"Aaaaaand... fall!"

Spitfire turned upside down and let the technique roll full circle, looping again and crashing into the ground, letting Applejack take the impact. Applejack uncurled on her back, getting her wind back as well as her will. Thankfully for that, Spitfire took a moment to appeal to the crowd with a nod of the hat.

"That just ain't right..." Applejack muttered. She flipped onto her hooves to start it up again. Spitfire took notice.

As Applejack charged, they both examined each others' movements for any sign of their plans of attack. Sure, Spitfire could just take flight, but to actually score a hit required setting her opponent up. Judging seemed to be out of the question, so Spitfire went with the sure thing. She took to the air... exactly what Applejack wanted.

The farmer pony gave a mighty leap and met Spitfire in the air, connecting with a pair hind hooves thrust forward. Spitfire was caught in a stun and could only do so much to keep herself aloft. Applejack followed up with a mid-air flip also landing a hit with both hind hooves, ending off with an elbow strike that sent Spitfire crashing to the ground.

Applejack wasn't in the mood to fool around like Spitfire. She figured putting up a good fight was showing off enough. At that very moment, she just wanted her hat back. She made a grab for the hat, only for Spitfire to lunge out of the way. She turned around and dug at the ground confrontationally. Apparently, the showmareship was over. Spitfire made this abundantly clear by lifting her hooves, and making a dash so fast that she was a blur until she crossed over to the other side of Applejack, hitting Applejack on the way through.

Applejack scrambled up. "T... tarnation!?" Spitfire was in hiding... or staying in Applejack's blind spot always. Applejack looked around so fast she almost appeared to be chasing her tail.

Spitfire ended the suspense and came down from the sky. She employed the same blitz attack to start her assault, landing and lashing out with some jabs going into a buck. On that buck, she didn't hit Applejack but felt something wrap around her hoof. Applejack used her lasso around Spitfire's hoof to too as hard as she could. Spitfire landed from the throw and blitzed Applejack again, using the knock in the air to blitz again, knocking Applejack to the ground. She landed to rest her wings a little, and then took to the air to use that advantage until the fight was won. And then the lasso tightened around her midsection.

Applejack gave the rope a mighty pull. "Git on over here!!"

Spitfire emitted a guttural meep as she was pulled out of the air. It was so sudden that she couldn't put up enough wing power to resist. Applejack stood ready and when Spitfire fell close enough, delivered an uppercut into Spitfire's gut. The Wonderbolt sailed into the air, hit the ground, and then stood back up instinctively. However, it was clear from the way she was swaying that this was over.

"FINISH HER!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

"Uh... okay." Applejack walked up to Spitfire. "Now I know I have this down..." she took a few steps forward and back, ducked, took another step forward... and ended up just throwing a jab. It bonked Spitfire on the head, sending her down for the count. Applejack frowned. "Aw, horse apples!"

"APPLEJACK WINS..." the musical voiced announced.

"Phew..." Applejack sighed. "Now THAT was a workout! Thank ya kindly, Miss Spitfire. Now if you excuse me, Apple Bloom won't just walk right up to me... though that'd be nice, for once."

Applejack turned to leave, but was immediately set upon. "WAIT!" A flash of varying shades of blue caused Applejack to about-face directly in front of the recovering Spitfire. Soarin' stood between them. "I'm letting neither of

you leave until you make nice! This whole thing isn't personal and I'm not letting it get personal! You're nice! And YOU'RE nice! Two nice ponies!"

Applejack and Spitfire avoided each others' gazes for a bit. They looked at each other, putting on tough fronts. At the same time, those fronts softened and weary smiles cracked. "Oh, all right then." Applejack muttered, holding a hoof out.

"Yeah, fine..." said Spitfire with the smile. She knocked her hoof against Applejack's in a show of good will. The crowd reacted positively to that. "And I'll even throw in if we hear anything about Apple Bloom, we'll be sure to tell you."

Shortly, Applejack was back to strolling the streets as if nothing had happened. She was a little tussled, but feeling pretty darn good. She was a little worried that being celebrities and all, that the Wonderbolts would be petty and arrogant. After meeting a pair, she had no reservations letting Rainbow Dash pour her heart and soul into joining their ranks.

"Rainbow Dash!" Applejack yelped with a start, "I should put in a good word!"

She whirled around to see the two athletic ponies had already flown off somewhere.

-

Meanwhile, Princess Luna was enjoying the company of the zebra and draft horse she recently befriended. They walked the path to Ponyville in a cautious manner. On one hoof, they were far away from where the 'Shadohoof' agents had last seen Luna. On the other, they could still be anywhere. Luna was constantly checking her winged purple back at first. To defuse tension, Big Macintosh asked her about what she seemed most excited about; letters from Twilight Sparkle. Luna's eyes lit up and she immediately forgot about everything else.

Big Macintosh and Zecora quickly learned that Luna had invested a LOT of time in those letters. They practically were her life. It seemed unbecoming of a mature mare to pour so much time into these ponies, but it made her happy and she assured them that it didn't interfere with her moon duties.

With all the speculation about Luna's emotional health, they were just happy in turn to see Luna so happy.

"... And I was kind of disappointed that Twilight only got fifth place. But I realized it was realistic since she isn't the most athletic pony and she wasn't exactly trying to win. So in hindsight, fifth place is really good! That's the sort of thing that makes modern Equestrian society so well developed and three dimension- oh my!"

The three of them looked ahead and saw a pegasus seemingly collapsed on top of a rock. The pegasus was gray in coat with a long, straight faded blonde mane. On her flank was a cutie mark of several bubbles and by her side a cylindrical mail bag.

Luna marched up to the pegasus. "Oh, dear! The poor pony looks absolutely ravished! Is this the sort of thing that follows in the wake of a Cutie Mark Clash?"

Big Macintosh was about to raise an objection, but then he looked again and indeed saw the gilded hooves on the pegasus.

Zecora leaned in and examined the pegasus closer. "Do not weep. She is merely asleep."

"WAS asleep." The other three snapped their gazes to the pegasus, who turned over. Her eyes were closed as if defiantly trying to go back to sleep, but she could still look in the general direction of the voices. "I've been... EVERYWHERE remotely connected to Ponyville. Canterlot and back, various places in the country, UNDERGROUND, aaallll the way to Appleloosa, and... and... well, some places that I can't disclose to layponies."

The other three shared a knowing smile. Zecora replied, "Perhaps you should watch what you say. You are in the presence of a pony who is anything but 'lay.'"

"... Huh?" The pegasus turned over and Luna stood in front of her to give her a surprise. The pegasus opened her eyes. Her eyes were big, yellow, and crossed to the top and bottom extremities.

"AH!!" both Luna and the pegasus yelped. The pegasus leapt onto her hooves while Luna took a step back. Both pairs of wings flared up in surprise.

"Y... you shouldn't make such faces when meeting somepony for the first time!" Luna griped.

"Faces?" The pegasus griped back. "You were up in mine! And-and you're a princess!!"

"I AM a Prin- Oh...! You're... Yes, you're the mailmare that delivered my invitation to the Cutie Mark Clash! You returned my acceptance and got me registered so quickly!"

The pegasus beamed upward proudly at that. "That's right! And I did! I was in such a hurry, I couldn't introduce myself. I'm Ditzzy Doo. My friends sometimes call me 'Derpy Hooves' because of, well... you know."

Some smiles were had. Big Macintosh came to a realization. "Ditzzy... I mailed out a letter to my extended family. Right after that, I saw you flying out of the place. Did you deliver that one too?"

Ditzzy busted another grin and titled her head. "Maaaaaaybe."

Zecora took her turn. "These coincidences are falling too well into line. Did you also deliver an invitation to that mailbox of mine?"

This was beginning to resemble an interrogation. Ditzzy held a hoof to her chin and looked up to think. "I, uh... Everfree Forest, right? I know my way through the Everfree Forest! That's how I, um... got this!" She lifted a foreleg and showed off a wound neatly wrapped up. "Don't worry. I have first aid!"

Ditzzy held up the foreleg, as if trying to draw attention to it rather than the fact she was the indirect reason they were all standing there at that very moment. Ditzzy grinned wider and began sweating, a prayer for a distraction playing through her head.

"LUNA!!!"

The four were startled and looked around for the source of the booming male voice that addressed the moon princess. Luna knew exactly where to look. The other three quickly looked in the same direction.

"Oh, no...!" Luna muttered.

-

Suddenly, Hayley appeared on a stage.

"Oh, hello! I hope I'm not interrupting anything, because I know how awful it can be when you're trying to get through something and all of a sudden OH HELLO some busypony starts yammering about nothing. Ha ha... Ahem, it has come to my attention that some - or many - of you are not entirely clear on the rules of the Cutie Mark Clash."

A chart with a spreadsheet of competitors lowered itself. Hayley lifted a pointer to it.

"There are actually multiple phases to the Cutie Mark Clash. First is the free-range phase in which all competitors can be anywhere at any time... though remaining in or around the focal point - that is, Ponyville - is recommended. Not entirely sure how many fights you're going to get in Fillydelphia when this clearly is labeled as the PONYVILLE Cutie Mark Clash, but I digress. The goal here is to engage NO LESS than six opponents. Each victory is a merit, each loss is a demerit. Standard procedure. Only competitors with a positive merit count will proceed to the next phase, MEANING a total merit count of zero - three wins, three losses - will not be sufficient. See, we only accept the most ambitious of participants. If any participant has trouble finding opponents or wishes to remain both with less than six opponents and in the tournament, we will take it upon ourselves to... ahem, ENHANCE the opponent-finding process."

A new chart lowered itself with several icons of ponies in various numbers.

"Team battles. In standard team battles where both sides are equal or similar in number, the results are based purely on the winning team. One side wins, each competitor earns a merit for each opponent on the losing team. In the case of one competitor versus many, the rules are different.

The count is instead in personal knockouts. One knockout earns a merit, no matter who deals it to whom. Should the one competitor be the first and only knockout, they get a demerit and the competitor who dealt the finishing blow earns a merit. A real strain on friendship there. If the one competitor takes out two of the opposite team and is knocked out by the third, that's two merits for the loner, one demerit for each of the two, and one merit for the victor. Let me establish now that someponies must be MAD to engage in the latter sort of fight in the first place. That sort of thing can only be instigated by the lone competitor in the first place, so there isn't exactly any ganging-up allowed."

The next chart was actually a map of Clopperfield with a diagram of Clopperfield Castle.

"Once we have our final roster of positive-merit fighters, we fly them all over to Clopperfield where the REAL elimination tournament begins! Schedules matches, a big arena, presided over by Lady Aremis... all a very big deal. It starts with team fights, moving on to the finalists who fight solo in brackets until we have a crowned champion. After that, said champion is given the privilege... nay, the HONOR of one last match for grand champion! Of course this means facing off against the Cutie Mark Clash's current reigning grand champion, who is none other than...! Ah-ah! Thought I was going to give away a spoiler, did you? You'll just have to sit tight and keep watching! Or... if you're competing, climb to the top and see for yourself! If you have any further questions, I will be lurking in the booth. And to answer your first question, NO, I do NOT have anything better to do. Scientifically proven."

Hayley took his leave. The stage fell silent. And then Hayley poked his head back in.

"Is- was that all right? Did I explain everything thoroughly enough? Because I know... somepony is going to march right up and ask me something fairly obvious but since I didn't cover it I'm going to have to give him the satisfaction. Her. Or her. Might be a her. Either way, I don't know if I'll be able to handle that."

The audience that Hayley addressed consisted solely of his sovereign, Lady Aremis. She smiled warmly, "That was perfect, Hayley."

"Okay, good. If you say so, then it- it SHALL BE. Ha ha... using a deeper voice... for emphasis. I mean, major conflict between what I think and what you just said, but... Well, you're not Lady because you flattered your scholars. That is, I'm not implying I know how you became Lady. Even though I do know because I've been following Clopperfield politics all my life. All my knowing life. I wasn't following it as a tiny colt. Wouldn't be surprised if I had been, though. Um... but I digress."

Chapter 6

In a wide-open, unoccupied part of Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle stood opposite her faithful assistant Spike. She stood ready, a technique rolling about in her head. She mouthed the words to herself and her hind legs twitched in anticipation. She consulted a book several dozen times before finally letting it rest and shooting a determined look forward. Spike got the signal and simulated an aggressive charge.

"RAAAGH! I'm attacking you!"

Twilight stood her ground. Her horn glowed with a levitation magic. She lifted off, her body vertical and her legs held close except for an attacking hind leg. "Tastumaki senpuu kyaaaACK!!" Twilight completed a single revolution before hitting the ground on her side. She shook her head and picked herself up, adding a huffy exhale. "If I can JUST get it down by myself, it should be real easy when in the Hoof of War. After hearing about all the strange ways ponies are fighting, I want to get back in there and do some studying! But only after I brush up on this Ansetsuken stuff."

Spike leaned over to take another look at the book. "I know what you're saying... but it still sounds to me like you're asking for pound cake."

"Hold the story!" came a shout. Pinkie Pie leapt in and adjusted what seemed to be thin air directly to her left. She was dressed in a pink muscle gi and her mane was slicked down and tied up oddly thin

Twilight exchanged a look with Spike. "Pinkie Pie, what are you do-?"

"A favor!" Pinkie Pie said back. She thought for a moment, "Um... Twilight. Have you ever read a novel and it has a BIG OL' cliffhanger between chapters? Or even BOOKS?"

"Um... yeah. I've had that happen. That's why I research series ahead of time or pick one that are-"

"Then you'll appreciate when I'm about to do riiiiight... now!"

-

Luna, Zecora, Big Macintosh, and Ditzzy Doo looked up to the sky to see a white pegasus as he hurtled at them at a blistering speed. He slammed into the ground in front of them and raised his head purposefully. He glared at all that were not Luna.

"G-Gallanthad!?" Luna stammered in disbelief.

At closer inspection, Galanthad indeed was a white pegasus with a short mane in a regal blue color. His turquoise eyes scanned and judged every pony and non-pony in sight. His cutie mark was that of a golden shield. He spoke in the no-nonsense manner of a guard, was heroic all the same.

"Worry not, Princess! I will free you from the clutches of these... these VILLAINS."

"They are no-!"

"ALL RIGHT! Which one of you is the ringleader to this operation!? Is it...!? No, accusing the zebra first won't look good on the report even if I'm right. And picking on the wall-eyed one is just asking for indictments- YOU!" Gallanthad thrust an accusing hoof at Big Macintosh. "I knew AS SOON as I spied you from miles away that you were a bad apple! You're RED..."

Big Macintosh reeled back slightly. "Ain't that discriminating against red ponies?"

Gallanthad's eyes bulged with that realization. He quickly composed himself. "You are in no place to judge ME, miscreant!!"

At that point, Luna noticed that the accusing hoof was gilded. "Gallanthad, don-!"

But it was too late. Gallanthad quickly stamped out the Hoof of War. The magic rooted itself and as it spread, pushed away the alicorn, pegasus, and zebra not involved in the called fight. Gallanthad wasted no time in charging for the first attack. "Have at you!!"

Gallanthad spread his wings, letting the passing wind propel him faster. Big Macintosh stood ready and parried when Gallanthad passed by. In that same movement, Big Macintosh stopped Gallanthad with one hooked foreleg and secured a grip on the pegasus with the other. Completing the motion of the parry, Big Macintosh held Gallanthad like a bipedal farmworker would lug around a bale of hay. Also in giving the 'bale of hay' treatment, Big Macintosh just dropped Gallanthad and let the ground do the damage.

"That ought to calm you down."

Gallanthad swerved onto his hooves. He spared a moment to snap the stiffness out of his neck. "I am calm, my friend in the strictly figurative sense. In all my training as a royal guard, I've been taught to know my enemy. Well, that charge was all I need to know you. Now I can... UNLEASH." The white pegasus leapt onto his hind hooves and maintained a martial arts stance. He held one foreleg close and the other extended between himself and Big Macintosh.

The draft horse naturally was cautious of the new stance. He kept leaned back mostly out of a sense of awkwardness, especially since his opponent kept emitting a low "Huooooaaahhh..." sound like out of some typical martial arts story.

Finally, Gallanthad beat his wings to jump high and come down for a kick with a hind hoof out. Big Macintosh, used to aggressive aerial strikes, backed up enough so that Gallanthad would strike the ground. Like clockwork, Big Macintosh then whipped around for the buck. As he half-expected, he didn't feel his buck hit. As he didn't expect so much, he felt Gallanthad's hoof strike him in the back of the head.

"Wah-TAHHH!!!" Gallanthad shouted. He completed his planned movements by jumping to Big Macintosh's side and thrusting a forehoof back. The draft horse was sent face-first into the dirt. The spectators groaned at the sight. As Big Macintosh planted his hooves firmly, Gallanthad remarked, "Just so you know, I am not passing judgment on you based on your combat prowess. Everypony has fallen for that the first time and you won't be the last."

Big Macintosh struck during Gallanthad's gloating; a simple charge into the guard's chest. Gallanthad stayed aloft to keep out of reach, which wasn't easy since the 'Big' in Big Macintosh's name was well earned. Gallanthad had to beat his wings to dodge away from a swipe. The dodge brought Gallanthad to a sliding halt on the ground. Judging from Big Macintosh's fervor, he was very keen on forcing his way into gaining the upper hoof. Gallanthad then took to using his wing-dash ability to slide around out of Big Macintosh's reach. When Big Macintosh paused his assault, that's when Gallanthad wing-dashed in.

Gallanthad began with a hind hoof strike that knocked Big Macintosh off his feet. With a guard's precision, Gallanthad followed up with a leap and a spinning strike that spiked Big Macintosh right back to the ground. Big Macintosh only barely got back on his feet before Gallanthad wing-dashed right into him and grabbed him between his hooves, starting on a more rapid form of punishment.

Luna's emotions finished cycling from uncomfortable to worried to shocked to angry. "Gallanthad, you are going to stop this RIGHT NOW...!" She charged toward the fighting ponies, only for the Hoof of War to bring up a wall and repel her with a static discharge. Had Luna been expecting it and tried to break through with all her power, she could have done it. Not this time, though.

In the middle of his grapple strikes, Gallanthad paused. Big Macintosh looked all too glad for the lull. Gallanthad looked to his princess. "Stop this...?" He echoed, "You're... standing up for this lot? Luna, in all her wisdom... How could I have been so short-sighted! This must be..."

Luna smiled. The protective pony was finally getting it that these were her FRIENDS that he was accusing.

Gallanthad finished his sentence. "... Stockholm syndrome! ConFOUND it!! Is it not enough to seize the princess that you must alter her MIND and her EMOTIONS as well!?"

Luna's face fell. A mixture of frustration and worry. Mostly worry.

"I'll show you what happens when hooligans disrespect MY charge!" Gallanthad began with a wing-dash forward into a splits on his hind legs.

The splits-kick doubled Big Macintosh back and allowed Gallanthad to pursue into the aerial spinning strike. With a wing-dash into the ground, Gallanthad could repeat those actions and did a few times. When he reached the edge of the Hoof of War, he used a hind hoof strike combined with a gust of wind to pop Big Macintosh into the air, not far. In the short time it took for Big Macintosh to reach the height of the pop, Gallanthad waited below. He leaned on his hind legs. They shook with the effort of storing energy. When Big Macintosh fell level with Gallanthad, the pegasus unleashed the attack. He performed a mighty backflip, slamming a hind hoof into Big Macintosh at vehicular speed.

"K.O.!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

Big Macintosh trailed smoke in the meteoric rise from the attack. The other three tilted their heads up to watch, then back down to see Gallanthad turned to them. "Your move, creeps!"

Luna sighed, "You've had your fun, Gallanthad. I am with this group because they are nice and they'll help me with what I need to do!"

"No can do, Luna. The orders from Princess Celestia are very clear: If you show any signs of irregular and/or inconsistent behavior, to keep you to your room until she can deal with it. Compared to the previous year, I'd say you're acting PRE-TTY inconsistent. The PERFECT time for some ne'er do-well ponies and non-ponies to take advantage of one of Equestria's princesses!"

"Will you STOP calling my FRIENDS bad!? If you don't stop being excessive, I will MAKE you!"

"Excessive?" Gallanthad echoed, expressing sincere doubt.

As that moment, Big Macintosh finally hit the ground from his flight. The Hoof of War took its leave.

Ditzy Doo fluttered over to Big Macintosh. "Don't worry! I have first aid!"

Gallanthad looked back to Luna. "Oh. You mean the 'normal' definition of excessive. Speaking of which, I AM prepared to do whatever it takes, even if you oppose me."

The two shared a tense staredown. The power of the night was already flaring up around Luna. The Hoof of War passed underneath Gallanthad... but it wasn't Luna.

Zecora stepped between them. "If you are looking for a fight, you may as well do it right. You took Big Macintosh by surprise before, but that element isn't yours any more!"

Luna was aghast, "Zecora... no!"

Zecora took her place in the Hoof of War opposite Gallanthad. "I know what I am doing. This time... I shall do the s-"

"Hey!" All eyes to Gallanthad. "The... the evil enchantress... The one that Luna read about all those times... Confound it I did not account for this! N-no matter! My conviction for justice shall win over your craft and bewitching looks!"

Zecora gave a confrontational snort. "You brand us as crooks, yet you so quickly- What was that about my looks?"

Gallanthad stammered, "It's not a compliment if your beauty is fact! And you misuse it! AND THAT'S BESIDE THE POINT because you can't distract me either way!"

Zecora looked incredulous at this sudden quirkiness. She lifted her eyes, a plan in mind. "You say you're not at a rise, but your racing pulse says otherwise."

"... I will not be subjected to psychological warfare! Much less fall for it. Have at you!" Gallanthad reared back into his battle stance. He quickly found he wasn't the only one.

Across the Hoof of War, Zecora took her own stance, meditating while standing vertically on one hoof. Her eyes were closed serenely in contrast to how one in a clash should act. "You are not going to accomplish much all the way over there. Come and take your first shot... if you dare."

Gallanthad growled, "Standard takedown maneuvers should be enough for you!" He beat his wings to charge at Zecora.

Zecora leapt over Gallanthad's charge and used her mid-air rush to dodge out of Gallanthad's pursuit. Gallanthad wing-dashed into a splits sweep, but Zecora was all too ready with a hop and a switch of her standing hoof. Gallanthad attempted a kick in a forward somersault, only for Zecora to leap clear over him and land facing him, still on one hoof.

"Confound it!!" Gallanthad shouted, "I was expecting punishment for each missed strike! Why weren't you countering me!?"

Zecora grinned. "If I gave you that satisfaction, you wouldn't be so confused by my actions."

"C... confused!? How did you know!? My mind is an open BOOK to you, isn't it!?"

Ditzy, who was tugging at a bandage on Big Macintosh's leg, spoke up. "Yer did jusht ashk her why she wush doing what she wush doing."

"I... didn't mean... You... You're already in there, aren't you!?"

Zecora beamed down at the pegasus, "Sadly, it is true."

"You're using me in your rhymes now!! My individuality is compromised!" Gallanthad pressed his hooves to the sides of his head. "Wait! That must mean if I get hurt, then you do as well!" To test this out, Gallanthad socked himself across the jaw. He shook his head out and looked at Zecora, who looked just fine if not a little vexed at his behavior. "No... You have a contingency for that. Confound it!"

Aside, in a low volume, a woken Big Macintosh muttered, "Now that's just overreacting..." He then cringed as Ditzy adjusted a splint.

Ditzy grinned awkwardly. "This works better if you don't move your anything."

Back to the clash, Gallanthad stood up. "I must do something that not even I would predict I would do!" He looked around for anything that would give

him a spur-the-moment idea. All he could find was a pebble at his hooves. Like the respectable royal guard he was, he grabbed the pebble between his hooves and tossed it.

Despite Zecora's earlier ability to predict attacks, she sure made no effort to avoid getting hit by the pebble. She shook her head from the small strike.

Gallanthad gasped, "THE SPELL IS BROKEN!!" He flew over to where Zecora wobbled on her single leg. She saw Gallanthad approach without actually seeing enough to know what he'd do. Gallanthad managed to pause in mid-flight. A glimmer from his hoof was all the tell he gave before he gave his wings a mighty beat strong enough to strike by Zecora in an instant while leaving a trail of blue silhouettes behind him. Caught up in his upper hoof, Gallanthad turned to the stunned Zecora to deliver some jabs and stand on one hind hoof to deliver a series of kicks with the other. He finished on both hind hooves with a powerful dominant hoof strike that sent Zecora a few yards, backed with a cry of "WHAI-TAHHH!"

Zecora rolled across the ground at varying degrees until her tumbling left her vertically balancing on the top of her head... and then falling on her stomach. She picked herself up. "You think that this fight has only just been engaged... but all you have done is fed into my rage!"

Gallanthad scoffed, "I'm over that now. Your hold on me is no more!"

Zecora in turn responded with her own scoff. "Do not claim victory just yet. Lest you forget..."

In the time it took for Gallanthad to fly over, Zecora had pulled out her cloak and flung it over her head. The yellow eyes that filtered through the shade of the cloak pierced straight at Gallanthad. He lost his focus when going in for a strike and was easily evaded.

Zecora sang lowly, "I'm an evil enchantress..." Gallanthad struck forward with a series of jabs and kicks, but Zecora weaved through them. "... and I do evil dances..."

Off on the side, Ditzzy looked up from her work to give a curious stare. Big Macintosh craned his neck and lifted an eyebrow. Luna, on the other hoof, knew exactly what Zecora was up to and was practically vibrating with glee.

"If you look into my eyes..." Zecora grabbed Gallanthad's face and forced him to look into the yellow shapes. His fearful and defiant eyes softened. "I will put you in trances... And what would I do...?" She produced a vial from her bag and threw it to the ground at Gallanthad's hooves. Purple smoke obscured him, and then cleared again to show in inside a boiling cauldron. "I'll mix up an evil brew!" She grabbed a hold of her meditation pole and used it to swirl the broth and knock Gallanthad around in the cauldron a bit.

Luna couldn't help but clop her hooves together and emit a little squeal.

"And I'll gobble you up! In a big tasty stew!" Zecora left the cauldron as it continued to swirl and bubble and gather a violent storm. "So... watch out!!"

The cauldron's din reached a breaking point. The mixture inside erupted and spewed out like a volcano. Gallanthad was right in the thick of it.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War Bellowed.

The magic faded, and so did the cauldron and its contents. What didn't get so quickly undone was Gallanthad's unconsciousness. Zecora stuffed her cloak away. "Hurry! While he is down, we must flee!"

Luna was shaken out of her fanfilly daze. "Oh... yes! I'm sorry, Gallanthad..." She sprinted in the getaway direction.

Big Macintosh forced himself and to trot after as well. Ditzzy paused in place, unsure for a few moments. She finally called after, "W... wait!"

When the group managed to find an area concealed by trees, they finally breathed a collective sigh of relief. Big Macintosh arrived third, the sight of him causing a start in Luna. More of his body was covered in bandages than not.

Luna gestured, "Are... you really hurt that much?"

Big Macintosh looked around at himself. "Not really."

Ditzy entered the area. "You can't be too careful when it comes to treating injury! I learned that the... ahem, the hard way." Right then, most of the bandages and splints fell straight off the draft horse in a big pile. "Aww..."

Big Macintosh was more focused on Luna. "Are we going to get more of that coming our way? I don't know how much more of that treatment a pony can take."

Luna looked to the ground. "I... I'm so sorry that had to happen to you, Big Macintosh... I didn't think... he'd go after me, much less actually find me! I thought I concealed my leave of the castle very well..."

By now the group had it figured out that Luna wasn't supposed to be on her own without supervision. This was the first she actually said anything about it. There was a moment of silence before Zecora broke it.

"Gallanthad mentioned you having strange behavior. I think it's about time you told us more."

A sigh escaped Luna's lips before anything else. She turned to walk out of hiding and on the dirt road towards Ponyville. The rest followed. "I... I'm not sure how to put this. I am SO sure of myself... that I'm right about why I'm out here. But... but just in case... I think I may be crazy after all."

She spared a look to the others. Big Macintosh tilted his head encouragingly. Ditzy smiled as sincerely as she could. Zecora took the front row with Luna.

"From doubt you should be free. We'll hear your story."

-

But enough about that. The Great and Powerful Trixie was lost in her thoughts. She needed something new in order to truly trounce and humble that Twilight Sparkle. Everywhere she went, every mention of her name was followed by Twilight's like a shadow. A shadow that heckled its caster and played coy whenever said caster turned to look at it.

How? How could that amateur without a single ounce of showmareship in her blood have mastered so much of the fabled Ansetsuken fighting style

just by READING about it? It is an age-old combat style that the Great and Powerful Trixie learned to keep herself safe on the road. Oh, if only those backwards Ponyville ponies could see her just ONCE defending herself from a pack of Diamond Dogs or pickponies.

It was an old style... so old and outdated. An old mare's fighting style! And now that Twilight Sparkle has been saddled with it and is practicing it as if doing so would give her an edge! YES! THAT was what the Great and Powerful Trixie had planned for all along! Even if she herself didn't know that's what she was going for! True genius! All she needed was a new fighting style... Something fresh and more refined. In fact, compared to this new fighting style, Ansetuken was just yesterday's news. Sure, she kept at it because it was consistent and she knew no other way... but the new fighting style was just better. It was about time she was honest with herself and switched.

In all her wandering, the Great and Powerful Trixie hadn't been too aware of her surroundings. She was brought back to Equestria by the sound of rustling bushes. The outskirts of Ponyville sure had a lot of these open spaces and convenient patches of trees and bushes. The rustling was accompanied by the cries of two opposing sides... though it sounded like more than two ponies. And judging by the cries, the encounter was very one-sided... brutally so.

The rustling and the cries died down. It was so silent that the Great and Powerful Trixie's ears rang. And then all at once...

"DESTROYED!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

The Great and Powerful Trixie had to step to the side to avoid the mint-coated pony that was flung out of the bushes. Said pony crashed into a fence and plopped onto the ground on her flank. She leaned against the fence in a position that bipedal creatures would call sitting upright. Shortly, a cream-coated earth pony ran out from the bush. She clearly wasn't the one who did the attacking since she looked so worried and proceeded to take a towel in her teeth and fan off her unicorn friend.

The unicorn of the white-striped mane groaned in agony and opened her eyes. "There's freaking THREE OF THEM!!!"

The bushes rustled again as the 'three' approached in pursuit. The earth pony's face paled. She grabbed her friend in her hooves, heaved her onto her back, and ran away at a speed only terror could fuel. That left the Great and Powerful Trixie all alone, facing the rustling bushes. The sounds from behind were grunts and snorts, mixed in with... fillyish giggling? The Great and Powerful Trixie considered throwing down a smoke bomb and running away. After all, nopony can discredit her greatness and power if she isn't seen running away in the first place...

No! Why should she run! These 'three' should be running! The Great and Powerful Trixie has new tricks up her sleeve and if they should try anything funny, she'll get Great and Powerful on their flanks!

The rustling became violent. The snorts and giggling was its loudest. Trixie could see individual shapes between the leaves. She quickly lifted her hat, wiped her brow, placed the hat back. From the bushes, the destroyers of that other unicorn...

Three fillies. They burst through the bush acting on top of the world. There was one pony of each type. The orange pegasus was keeping aloft with her wings. The white unicorn's horn glowed with an abundance of magic. The earth pony with the pale olive coat stood dominantly, snorting and digging at the ground. Together they carried themselves with a primitive arrogance. Their expressions were of violent, indiscriminant superiority.

Then all at once, the Hoof of War took its leave with their battle done. Scootaloo's little wings could no longer support her. Sweetie Belle's horn dimmed to its normal pigment, and Apple Bloom slumped over from the loss of raw strength.

"No no no no no nonononono!!" Scootaloo stammered desperately, "I just got a taste of real flying! I CAN'T GO BACK TO THE GROUND!!"

Apple Bloom looked around. "Where'd Bon-Bon go!? We need somepony else to clash with RIGHT NOW!" Her eyes fell on Trixie, who backed up a little. "THERE'S SOMEPONY ELSE!"

The Crusaders were all too quick in getting side-by-side to stamp out the Hoof of War. The Great and Powerful Trixie began doubting her decision to stand and fight; but only in the most impressive way that a pony could

doubt. Scootallo flapped her wings until the Hoof of War magic allowed her to lift off. Sweetie Belle's horn once again glowed with magic.

"Yay!" Sweetie Belle cheered airily. In celebration, her horn shot a beam of destructive magic that narrowly missed the caped young mare in front of her.

I'm going to die, the Great and Powerful Trixie thought to herself.

"LET'S GET 'ER!!" Apple Bloom called out and led the charge. The other two followed swiftly.

Yes. Dead. The Great and Powerful Trixie gulped. If she were going out, she would go out as she always does: With a BANG. In the face of death, represented by three fillies shrieking a shrill battle cry, the Great and Powerful Trixie stood tall. Her horn glowed, but not in anything directed at the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Instead, the magic focused into generating a flame on Trixie's upright hoof. Having so many fireworks and sparklers in her acts made Trixie a natural with pyrotechnics. Combining it with her magic was just as natural.

The Great and Powerful Trixie looked to her attackers, and then thrust her hoof at the ground in a sweeping motion. The flame left her hoof and traveled the ground as a giant spark. This spark hovered above the grass and tore its way to the Crusaders. Apple Bloom didn't bother trying to get out of the way and paid for it. The spark rammed into her and burst, taking the other two with her. Judging by their unhappy shouts, the attack hit. The Great and Powerful Trixie raised her chin. She might have a chance after all!

And then one of Sweetie Belle's beams pierced the smoke. It took all of the Great and Powerful Trixie's cunning and reflexes to emit a high-pitched EEP!! and duck under the beam, hooves on head. When Trixie opened her eyes, she saw the Crusaders on their way to her. She leapt to her feet, but they were close enough now. Apple Bloom stomped her front hooves and ruptures the ground beneath Trixie, sending her back down. Apple Bloom dove under Trixie and delivered a buck right into her stomach. Trixie was sent into the air where Scootaloo could dive under and come up again.

"Scootercut!!"

The pegasus's hoof caught Trixie under the chin and sent her flipping to the ground. Trixie groaned and stood herself up, seeing Sweetie Belle be herself, smiling the most malicious smile she had ever seen... and she'd looked into mirrors plenty! Shuffling to either side alerted Trixie that the other two Crusaders were behind her. The three of them surrounded her at perfectly even triangulated points.

"Is this even allowed...?" Trixie muttered.

With more cries, the Crusaders closed in on Trixie. Once again, the flames circled around her. She heaved her forelegs up and twirled. She spun and leapt with the flames forming a barrier around her. The Crusaders ran into this barrier and all three were knocked back by the spinning uppercut attack. They gathered together and formed a little discussion that broke in a few moments. Sweetie Belle took center point. She raised a forehoof and magically lifted Apple Bloom. As Trixie pondered how funny it would be if she ended up just throwing the earth filly, that's exactly what happened.

Apple Bloom was tossed straight at Trixie and headbutt her. Trixie was dazed and couldn't move to block the follow-up filly when Scootaloo was magically thrown at her and went for a crippling strike to her forelegs. Trixie managed to take the hit and stay standing... for better and for worse. Sweetie Belle sent her fellow Crusaders for a string of hits.

Trixie instinctively dodged one attack once and moved in for the comeback. She leapt over the second filly and landed within a foreleg's reach of Sweetie Belle. Sweetie Belle seemed to instinctively throw up a barrier of magic. The barrier blocked Trixie's jab coming down and took the standing chop she delivered after. The barrier kept Sweetie Belle from taking the hit herself, but the effort it took to keep it up drained her energy enough that it might as well have hit. Was it even a barrier? Was it even from the filly? With how impractical it was, the magic seemed more like a box-shaped area where Trixie could land hits since aiming for a little filly was difficult enough.

The Crusaders had fallen back to Sweetie Belle's side, but were caught by the effects of the hit-box. Trixie finished her combination with a hind leg followed by a kick with the opposite hind leg. The Crusaders were sent up. In the heat of the rush, Trixie had one more trick. She sprinted in and

caught the trio in her forehooves, holding them high. The flames snaked up Trixie's forelegs and gathered at the Crusaders. The flames burst, sending the Crusaders crashing and covered in soot.

Apple Bloom was the first up. She glared at the Great and Powerful Trixie like the legitimate threat she presented. When the other two were up, Apple Bloom looked to them and merely called to them, "TEAMWORK!!" They immediately understood. Sweetie Belle jumped on Apple Bloom's back and Scootaloo on Sweetie Belle's. Together they formed the pillar of kicks that had taken them this far.

The Great and Powerful Trixie backed away from the Crusaders. She frowned with determination and lifted a hoof. The flames swirled in coils around her body. "You little fillies pack an impressive fight... You have a good future ahead of you. But you'll never..." The flames snaked up her foreleg and gathered over the hoof. "... have the show-stopping power..." The gathered energy formed a pillar of flame that pulsated and rippled. "... OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL TRIXIE!!!" She gave a climactic swipe of her forehoof. The flames exploded in front of her and swept the Cutie Mark Crusaders in its might. The Crusaders' formation was broken and the three fillies sent flying.

"K.O.!!!" the Hoof of War bellowed.

The Cutie Mark Crusaders were sent to the ground and spent. The Great and Powerful Trixie stood for a few moments, breathing heavily from all the effort she just put in. Her hind legs wobbled and she fell on her flank. Trixie lifted her forehooves and felt her own face to make sure that she was still alive and not a ghost or something.

Spurred awake by the Hoof of War's magic, the Cutie Mark Crusaders moaned and picked themselves up. Trixie would have to put a rain check on that whole 'still not dead' thing. Just as quickly, Trixie saw that the fillies were now 'normal.' They weren't growling and cackling and their eyes were soft with restored innocence.

Apple Bloom shook her head out. "Well... THAT was kinda scary..."

Scootaloo flapped her wings a few times and willingly folded them up. "Yeah... we sorta got carried away."

Sweetie Belle groaned with effort to make her horn display any magic. It didn't. She looked to her friends. "Sorta? More like 'totally.'"

Apple Bloom brushed herself off, from her head to her flank. At her flank, she came to a sudden realization and cleared it off. The other two realized it and did the same. Blank flanks. The three of them sighed.

"I'm kinda glad that my Cutie Mark didn't appear after I got my blank flank kicked... or when I was being a complete nutso." Scootaloo looked in front to see Trixie. "Hey lady! Thanks! I think."

Trixie huffed. "I do have a name, little one. And that name is..." She ran up to higher ground and stood on her hind hooves like the showmare she was, "The Great and Powerful Trixie!"

The Cutie Mark Crusaders just stared. Sweetie Belle at least showed a little appreciation.

"Well... imagine there's fireworks here and here, sparklers all up here, and a flaming hoof about... here. And you get the idea."

The fillies stared more. Apple Bloom tapped her chin. "Great 'n Powerful Trixie... now why does that ring a bell?"

Sweetie Belle bit her lip. "Me too! It's on the tip of my tongue!" To illustrate, she opened her mouth with her tongue stuck out. The other Crusaders examined the tongue, as if it held the answer.

The Great and Powerful Trixie held a falsely modest hoof to her chest. "Of course you've heard of me. I am only the most talented and powerful unicorn in all of Equestria! Not to mention the land's top performer. Would you three like to see a trick?"

"WOULD we?" The three fillies responded.

For a while, The Great and Powerful Trixie regaled the Cutie Mark Crusaders with her bare-bones school-assembly program of tricks. Fireworks, making shapes in the air with her magic, and fashioning tree branches into the shape of animals. The Crusaders were so starstruck that

she even tipped off her hat and reached into it. Her hoof pulled a temperamental rabbit from the hat.

"Ooohhh..." The Crusaders swooned.

The Great and Powerful Trixie pushed the rabbit back into the hat and then lifted her hoof back out to reveal a perplexed owl. The owl was sent back and Trixie then pulled out a toothless alligator. The alligator had time to blink its eyes individually before Trixie sent it back to where it came from.

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo were impressed in a very general sense, but the Great and Powerful Trixie saw an even deeper admiration in Sweetie Belle's glistening eyes. Suddenly, Sweetie Belle's face mellowed with a sudden realization. "The Great Blunderful Trixie!"

Everypony else paused. That was a strange thing to say. Trixie, having had her fair share of attempted heckling, chuckled. "No, that's 'Great and Powerful Trixie.' You know what an antonym is, don't you, sweetie?"

Sweetie Belle gasped, "You know my name!?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said it! Sweetie Belle! Well... the Sweetie part. But you knew it! How did you know...?"

"Because... I am the Great and Powerful Trixie! But please, do tell me where you heard that... phrase."

Sweetie Belle thought for a moment. "Oh! Rarity said it a bunch of times one night. I think she was mad about something... and then laughing about it. That was you!"

Trixie opened her mouth to say something back, but Apple Bloom was quicker. "Hey yeah! Applejack told me to stay away from some big-mouth unicorn named Trixie 'cause she's a bad influence. And the day after that Applejack was so happy 'cause Trixie ended up being a big ol' dud." Apple Bloom looked at Trixie. "Uh... at least, that's what my sister said."

Trixie's lip stiffened in the fact of all these things said about her. No doubt these ponies were the ones around during that... INCIDENT. She looked from filly to filly trying to think of something to counteract what their sisters said. Suddenly, her eyes widened. She asked down. "Wait a moment. Did you two say 'Rarity' and 'Applejack?'"

Apple Bloom spoke up. "Yeah! They're our sisters!"

Scootaloo added, "I don't really have a sister... but Rainbow Dash is all I need!"

"R... Rainbow Dash?" Trixie echoed. From the way her eyes darted from place to place, she was thinking fast. Her heart was racing and her disposition breaking. The Crusaders exchanged confused looks. Finally, Trixie regained her composure. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has an AMAZING idea for you three! You say you want all the help you can get earning your Cutie Marks? Here's an idea... Cutie Mark Crusaders stage magicians!"

The three fillies completely forgot what their sisters and idols had said and beamed up at Trixie.

"Here you all are! Take some of the Great and Powerful Trixie's equipment and practice! You can take turns being the Great and Powerful Trixie and the other two can be the assistants. I will... be RIGHT back!"

Trixie dropped her equipment and shoved her hat onto Sweetie Belle's head. The fillies gathered around the 'equipment.' There was all sorts of neat stuff like rings that could snap together and separate, one of those multicolored puzzle cubes, a box that somepony could make a bit disappear and reappear in... None of those harmful fireworks or anything like that.

Apple Bloom and Scootaloo dug into the toys. Sweetie Belle took a moment to look off as where Trixie ducked into the convenient bushes. She thought on that for a moment until her attention was brought to an origami fortune teller.

Chapter 7

The clearing on the outskirts of Ponyville rang with the chatter of amused fillies. After leaving them to play around a bit, the Great and Powerful Trixie approached the bush she had ducked behind. Trixie took a calming breath - an essential practice for the consummate performer - and stepped out.

What she saw was a scrap heap of totaled toys. The linked hoops were broken apart, the bit-hiding box had its secret compartment torn out, and the deck of cards was so muddied that everything was clubs. The Cutie Mark Crusaders themselves turned around to look at Trixie. All three were huddled under the Great and Powerful Trixie's signature steeped hat in order to be wearing it all at once.

"We don't think we're cut out to be Cutie Mark Crusader stage magicians." Apple Bloom deadpanned.

"Hey! We solved this, didn't we?" Scootaloo held up the puzzle cube. It abruptly shed all of its pieces. "... By taking out the pieces and putting them back in. That counts, right?"

Apple Bloom spoke up again. "Is your next trick gonna be puttin' this stuff back together? Or are they all just one-time deals?"

Trixie finished her gawking to answer the question. "I, ah... These are mere trifles to the Great and Powerful Trixie. Playthings with which to entertain the fillies and colts. Standard supplies in my daily shopping. They are MEANT to be as disposable." Added aside, "Not so easily, though..."

"Oh, okay! I'm not so sure I want my Cutie Mark bein' the Great 'n Powerful Trixie, though..."

"Yeah," Scootaloo concurred, "having a Cutie Mark that looks like you sounds kinda creepy."

After picking her hat off the Crusaders and fitting it on, Trixie opened her mouth to voice dissent to the previous remark... until she actually imagined

it. "Okay yes... that does. In either case, what makes the Great and Powerful Trixie so great and powerful lies not in her magic... though it does help. The Great and Powerful Trixie is so great and powerful because she KNOWS she is great and powerful. If I KNOW what I am, there's no other way. It all comes down to one word..."

Apple Bloom thought back to the many lessons taught to her by her sister. "Confidence?"

"What? Oh, no no no. The Great and Powerful Trixie was looking for 'GRANDEUR.'"

The Crusaders stared blankly. Apple Bloom tried to echo, "Grand yore?"

Trixie chuckled, "Grandeur, you silly pony. If you are loud and showy enough, nopony will stop to question your greatness and your power! Ponies appreciate big investments of effort. Any questions?"

Despite the additional explanation, the Crusaders looked as if they needed to start from square one with that concept. They looked around and at each other for any specific things to ask. It was Sweetie Belle who half raised her hoof and then let it down awkwardly.

"Sweetie Belle," Trixie called, "don't be afraid. The Great and Powerful Trixie fields any question, no matter how hard! I'd like to mention at this time that normally ponies must PAY for an opportunity like this!"

"Um... Actually, it's about something else. You seem to get angry whenever we bring this up, but I just want to know..." Sweetie Belle looked up to Trixie and saw the older unicorn lift an eyebrow patiently. "Well... If you're so good at fighting and stuff... What happened that night with the Ursa Minor?"

A hard question indeed. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo's heads swished over to Trixie. Trixie closed her eyes, clearly affected by the question. Since Sweetie Belle was so sincere about wanting to know, Trixie couldn't just write it off as trying to get a reaction out of her. Trixie growled under her breath and lowered her head, obscuring her expression under her hat. After another calming breath, she looked up.

"That night... was perhaps the least proud night in all of the Great and Powerful Trixie's career. I was off my game. I was outmatched and underpowered. And even when everything was against me, I still managed to make myself look even MORE foolish. I have apologized to many towns and cities for the news that seems to precede me wherever I go. Tell me what YOU heard about that night and we'll go from there."

Apple Bloom said amusedly, "I heard Snips and Snails brought the Ursa Minor into Ponyville so you could, uh, vanquish it or somethin'! An' all YOU did was pull out some wimpy parlor tricks that ain't did nothin' but made it madder! An' after Twilight got rid of it, you ran off like the scared filly y'are."

Trixie looked highly unamused by Apple Bloom's choice of words.

"Least, uh, least that's how I HEARD it..."

Trixie held her hoof to her forehead for a few moments. "Tell me, little ones. Have any of you been woken up in the wee hours of the morning before our Princesses even THINK about raising the sun?"

The trio spoke briefly and settled on nods.

"And tell me, how do you FEEL after you've woken up at that time, ESPECIALLY if it's abrupt?"

The fillies considered how to answer that until Scootaloo just spoke up, "Not good."

"Disoriented," Trixie clarified. "Your mind wasn't entirely there and you couldn't pull a complex cognitive function if your life depended on it. And TELL me, does unicorn magic look like it needs focus and concentration to pull off?"

All eyes to Sweetie Belle. The unicorn filly stared ahead at Trixie before realizing everypony else was looking to her for an answer. "Oh! Uh... yeah! I sometimes get in trouble if I interrupt Rarity when she's doing her sewing and singing."

Trixie nodded, "And lastly, what do you feel when THIS suddenly pops up in front of you?"

Trixie conjured a flash of light and when it vanished, an Ursa Minor was staring straight at the Crusaders. The fillies shrieked with terror for the few seconds that Trixie kept the image up. She took a moment to look over the trio, holding each other and shivering.

"Exactly." Trixie muttered. "Let's combine that, shall we? The Great and Powerful Trixie is woken up in the middle of the night to the DREADFUL sight of an Ursa Minor. I couldn't conjure up a witty one-liner, much LESS a fighting technique. So yes... I COULD only think of my, ahem, 'wimpy parlor tricks.' Even though if I made that thunder cloud just a BIT bigger it could have caused some damage... But there you have it. The truth about... THAT night. The events that transpired are of NO FAULT to the Great and Powerful Trixie."

Apple Bloom was ready with another sound bite from her sister. "Maybe if ya didn't make all them false claims the colts wouldn't o' tried seein' it for themselves!"

Just as Trixie would retort, Scootaloo groaned. "Bored now! You guys can continue your debate. I'm gonna find something else to do."

Whatever the rest decided to do, Scootaloo managed to walk her way out of earshot. She looked around. Countryside to her right, Ponyville town limits to her left. She wasn't exactly frustrated with her boredom, just looking around for anything to give her an idea about anything.

"Looking for someone else to hang out with?"

Scootaloo jumped at hearing the voice of someone she didn't see. And the fact she said someONE indicated it wasn't a pony... Scootaloo turned around to look back at the fence she was JUST facing to see the griffon who addressed her.

"I don't blame you. Hanging around just ponies all the time can get pretty lame."

Not having much experience around griffons, Scootaloo didn't really know what to do, if anything different. All she could do was give stares to the griffon's sharp beak, intimidating plumage, and clawed talons. Despite all

those things, Scootaloo definitely knew how to respond to what she just heard. "My friends aren't lame!"

"Then what are you doing all the way out here?"

"Uh... they aren't not-lame ALL the time."

"Yeah, sure. Hey kid, you like flying?"

The bad start just went good. "I LOVE flying! Well, I can't do it myself yet... but when I get old enough, I'm gonna be one of the top fliers in all of Equestria! And I say 'one of the top' because I already know who the best is for all time: Rainbow Dash!"

The griffon lifted a brow. "You know Rainbow Dash too? Great! She's just who I'm looking for. You can take me to her now!"

"Huh? What do you want with Rainbow Dash?"

"That..." the griffon muttered. She smiled and pat Scootaloo roughly, "is none of your business."

Scootaloo flinched at the all-but fond gesture. Something occurred to her. "W... wait a minute... Griffon... Rainbow Dash... You're Gilda!!" Her accusing hoof pointed from Gilda's face to her talons, "And you've got the Hoof of War! I'm not taking you to Rainbow Dash!" She turned to run back to where she left the others. She ran as fast as she could... in place. Gilda's talon had landed on her tail and was keeping her pinned on the spot.

Gilda smirked, "You know when I said you can take me to Rainbow Dash? That wasn't a suggestion."

Gilda said some more things, but Scootaloo was too busy trying to scrape herself out of the griffon's grasp. She pulled against the talon and flapped her wings hard... She couldn't even summon the Hoof of War without the other two Crusaders to complete the gesture.

"All right," Gilda said, "let's get going. We have aYOW!!" A traveling spark forced Gilda's talon up.

Scootaloo wasted no time in running off and finding where some other ponies were standing. She dove into the other Cutie Mark Crusaders. Meanwhile, Trixie stepped forward and garnered Gilda's attention.

"What do you think you're DOING?" Gilda fumed, "That was between the squirt and ME!"

Trixie scoffed, "The Great and Powerful Trixie is afraid that if you mess with one of her fans, then that means you're also messing with the Great and Powerful Trixie! At least... her COMPETENT fans that can turn a critical eye instead of just throwing an Ursa Minor on her..."

Gilda gave the blue unicorn a sideways look. "The Great and Powerful Trixie, huh?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie."

"You... have got to be the lamest pony I have ever seen."

Trixie faltered for all of a split second before resuming her majestic stance. "Truly spoken like one who is JEALOUS of the Great and Powerful Trixie."

"Mmm... Nope. I'm pretty sure I'd have dug myself a hole and jumped in it a LONG time ago if I were anything like you."

Trixie lifted her chin to reveal her narrowed eyes to Gilda. "... Are we getting this on or aren't we?"

Gilda chuckled, "Oh... it IS on." The griffon pounded out the Hoof of War on her talons with the gilded claws.

Scootaloo trotted up to the edge of the Hoof of War. "Be careful! She's, like... REALLY fast."

Trixie looked over her shoulder. "Oh, please! 'Careful' is the Great and Powerful Trixie's middle name!"

And in that time, Gilda had crossed over to Trixie's position and grabbed the front of the performer's cape. Gilda tossed Trixie behind her where she

thrust her lion legs to deliver a powerful kick that sent Trixie down the opposite way.

Apple Bloom muttered, "Yeah... and the middle name is the one y'hear the LEAST..."

Trixie regained her bearings enough to land on her hooves. She didn't have enough time to brag about it since Gilda was at the pounce already. Trixie rolled out of the way of an attempted shoulder ram. Gilda turned around to meet the end of Trixie's twirl into a hoof strike. Gilda just got over her stun in time for Trixie to fall back low to the ground and strike out a hind hoof into Gilda's chest. In a mere second Trixie was back on her hooves and let Gilda have it with a follow-up uppercut, pillar of flame included.

Coming up from that, Gilda held her ground, a little warier of Trixie. Trixie likewise bought into the mind games. She fluttered a bit as if responding to assaults that didn't happen.

Trixie exhaled, "Well... I admit, you had the Great and Powerful Trixie going with that first stunt, but now I see you're nothing more than a-"

"YOU TALK TOO MUCH!!"

Gilda once again crossed over to Trixie, gliding on her wings. Trixie nudged over to avoid another shoulder ram, but that wasn't what Gilda was up to. In fact, Trixie dodged right into place for Gilda's clenched Talon to catch her in the stomach. An accompanying gust of wind popped Trixie into the air. Gilda hunkered down for the aerial pounce and took it. She caught up to Trixie's arc and caught the blue pony herself, latching her talons on the caped shoulders. Gilda gave Trixie a glimpse of her hunter's grin. In one motion, Gilda slashed across Trixie with both talons and shoved off. Trixie hit the ground painfully with some torn-off ribbons of her cape and coat floating down to join her.

Trixie noticed the tatter and looked behind her to see the ripped garment. "You...! My...! The Great and Powerful Trixie's...! Great and Powerful cape!! You've crossed the line, griffon!"

On that last word, Trixie swept the ground and sent a fierce spark to Gilda. Gilda looked no less shaken and merely flapped her wings to keep

well aloft of the groundling projectile. Gilda watched the spark pass harmlessly under, and then looked at Trixie with a raised brow. Trixie flushed from how little of a threat her technique was and moved in to try to get more close and personal. Gilda did the same from her vantage point off ground level. When they intersected, Trixie tried another fiery uppercut. Gilda made a dive with her dominant lion leg out. The two forces met with a big clash. Trixie got nailed with the paw and the flames struck Gilda. Both were sent crashing to the ground because Hoof of War physics can be buggy like that.

Gilda pushed herself up first. Instead of pouncing Trixie again, she got an idea on how to finish this quickly. She supported herself on her lion legs and drew back a dominant talon. "Griffon..." The force of the energy storing in that talon rustled the grass around her. Trixie managed to pull herself up as the energy maxed out. Gilda flashed a wicked grin. "PUNCH!!!"

Trixie yelped and tipped herself over to avoid the clenched talon. The force of the missed punch continued, tore up grass in a straight line, and stopped at a tree. The tree got knocked back, made plenty of cracking sounds, and every bird that was perched in its branches flew out.

"Drat..." Gilda deadpanned.

"I believe now is Great and Powerful Comeback Time!" Trixie struck with her opposite forehoof and went immediately for the lower blow. Trixie continued the combo with two rising rear hoof stikes that popped Gilda up and another two rear hoof strikes while in the air, all finishing with a spike into the ground. Gilda was steaming as she picked herself up again, staring daggers into Trixie. Trixie chuckled and faced away from Gilda. "Now is the point in the Grea and Powerful Comeback Time where you try to undermine it. You see, Cutie Mark Crusaders, KNOWING you're going to win means the only uncertainty is how you free-style it. Take a few hits? Instill a little hope? Make it look good? Or just smear your opponent right away?"

The Crusaders would have been in awe if they weren't too busy shouting and pointing behind Trixie. Gilda had exploded and was now in top tier rage. Normally, the Hoof of War prevents skin breaking and consequent bleeding. Gilda looked like she was ready to see just how far that could go. Trixie clicked her tongue and lifted her blazing hoof. Gilda had reached

Trixie's position. A single iota of distance separated her claw from Trixie's flank. At that penultimate moment, Trixie whirled around and unleashed the fury of her flames on the raging griffon.

And then Gilda exploded again.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

Despite knowing that attack well, the Cutie Mark Crusaders were still slack-jawed at seeing Gilda stopped by it and sent down for good, sporting ash and singes on her feathers. As the Hoof of War faded, it concluded its business by leaving a golden glow where Trixie's clothing had been damaged and leaving the garments in the same condition as before the fight. Trixie compulsively felt through the fabric to make sure it had all been restored. After a sigh of relief, Trixie turned to the fillies. "You see?"

"Oh, I see all right!" Apple Bloom called out sincerely and with an impressed smile. She and the other Crusaders gathered around the Great and Powerful Trixie.

Scootaloo spared a look to Gilda. "I wonder what she wanted with Rainbow Dash, anyway..."

Trixie scoffed, "Not even the Great and Powerful Trixie could read that barren cranium of a mind. Are they enemies?"

"No. Well... Uh... they didn't exactly leave off... She was really mean about it, but... Maybe she wanted to make up or something?"

As they walked off, Trixie cast another look to her fallen opponent. "If THAT is how she goes about seeking hugs, I do NOT want to see when she has an actual vendetta."

Gilda turned over to see four flanks saying goodbye. She was in no shape to hop up and go after them. She turned over. "Ponies..."

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"... And she totally started out REALLY strong with a bunch of flaming kicks but he got off a bunch of those yellow glowing rush punches and then he

got her in a corner and completely WUPPED on her. She faked a few attacks and I was like WHAAA when one of those turned out to NOT be fake and she got it off and she COMBO'D IT INTO AN ULTRA and I was like SO HYPE and she ran away with it but then she got herself into a corner again. She was like hanging by the skin of her teeth and I bet she totally could have won it with a sweep but she tried an uppercut and the Neigh-hon guy just punched her once for the win. TOTAL anti-climax BUT I WAS STILL HYPE!!"

Pinkie Pie was dressed as she had been, plus a set of protective gear to cushion herself from Twilight Sparkle's blows. After popping up to 'get things going where everypony wanted,' Pinkie decided to stick around and aid in Twilight's training as a pony-shaped target. Since Twilight was so focused on her moves, Pinkie talked about any ol' thing. Twilight didn't want to say so, but being able to smack Pinkie around while she was yammering incessantly was almost therapeutic...

"C'moon, Twilight! Jumping jab into ducking low kick into mid punch, low dragon hoof ending off with a metsu hadouhorn! It's so easy-peasy!"

Twilight shook her head, "I can't even comprehend that as a SENTENCE, much less remember all those moves!"

Pinkie thought for a moment. "Yeah. This IS an impractical way to learn combos. I mean, when are you actually going to think back to this in the middle of a fight when you're in a completely different mindset? I guess most ponies would get it done for the achievement of it all. Oh well!" Pinkie tossed off the defensive gear, "There's only ONE real way to get better at fighting, right Twilight?"

The purple unicorn looked up from her book to see Pinkie hunched over in a competitive position. "Uh... oh! You mean... right now? Yeah! This'll make great practice!" She walked closer to Pinkie, looking her over. "Um... I don't mean anything by it, Pinkie Pie... but what's with the getup?"

"Huh?" Pinkie looked down at her pink muscle gi, various leg and hoof pads, and mane slicked down and tied up thin. "Oh, this! Well, I wasn't feeling the whole cupcake-throwing, screen-hopping thing, so I switched characters! I think I might main a few, just to keep my options open."

By now, Twilight learned to take what Pinkie said at face value... just to make everything easier. "Okay... and what's this 'character' like?"

"Oh... you might find 'im STRANGELY familiar, Twi."

"Okay... whenever you're ready."

Pinkie cheered as she stamped out the Hoof of War. She seemed to be continuing a celebratory stance even after the magic had taken root. She crouched low and shouted upbeat things like "Yahoo!" Twilight couldn't be sure, but that sort of behavior didn't count as fighting.

Twilight gave Pinkie a vexed look, "Are you just standing there and taunting?"

Pinkie Pie grinned widely. "Feels good, mane!"

Twilight attempted to defy the mind games. She edged in towards Pinkie and went in for a leaping kick with a hind hoof. In mid-taunt, Pinkie about-faced and trotted a few paces just out of range of Twilight's attack. She immediately followed with another proud hoof pump not a foreleg's length away. Twilight made for a punishing dragon hoof. Unfortunately, Pinkie once again hopped away from the attack. When Twilight came down from the dragon hoof, she was met with Pinkie's grapple. The party pony snapped up the studious unicorn and seemed to hold her over her back in a botched attempt to toss her over her shoulder. Another heave of the forehoof and Pinkie successfully threw Twilight into a hard landing on the ground.

"Thought you could get yourself some of this, Twilight?" Pinkie proceeded to turn around and slap her flank mockingly.

Taking advantage, Twilight pivoted on a hind hoof to make a roundhouse kick with the other hoof. Pinkie responded by jumping. With a shout of "WAHOO!!" Pinkie leapt over Twilight's head... perhaps far higher than any earth pony should be able to jump, even under the influence of magic. Twilight followed the pinky pony's arc to the landing, after which Pinkie swept underhoof. "Gadouhoof!"

A ball of energy slapped Twilight in the face. It didn't quite have the stopping power or damage of a hadouhorns... but ouch, nonetheless. Pinkie was on to something, though. Being slippery and agile doesn't help much for a pony pinned down by hadouhorns! Twilight gave it a shot. She soon heard Pinkie shout "HERE!"

Opening her eyes from the attack, Twilight saw Pinkie fly straight at her. It was an attack very similar to Twilight's only spinning kick attack, but Pinkie actually struck her hind leg out rather than twirling at her opponent.

"WE!" Pinkie shouted to coincide with the second kick. Twilight had no time to dodge or block it. "GO!" A third kick sent Twilight back and Pinkie to a landing on the ground. Presumptuously, Pinkie jumped in to attack Twilight who may try lashing straight off the ground. Unfortunately for her, her antics hadn't caused Twilight's judgment to wane.

The purple unicorn stood up in a defensive stance. She took Pinkie's hind hoof strike in stride. Pinkie again goofed by just holding up a block, probably hoping Twilight was going to unleash right there. The gamble paid off for Twilight. She struck a strong forehoof into Pinkie. The pink young mare lost her leg strength and began folding up. Knowing full well how temporary the momentum shift was, Twilight quickly followed with a low kick to keep Pinkie on her feet. Some chained strikes lead to a high forehoof strike that left Pinkie in something of a stagger. That gave Twilight enough of a break to take a cleansing breath before attempting...

"Tatsumaki senpuu kyaku!!"

The spinning kick caught Pinkie in every strike and let the party pony taste dirt for once.

"YEAH!!" Spike cheered.

Pinkie was no less deterred. "Nice one, Twilight! YEEAAHHH!"

By now Twilight was onto Pinkie Pie's bait-and-switch taunting. She edged in, seemingly intent on catching Pinkie while she taunted. Pinkie retreated back, and that's when Twilight made a dash in and unleashed the power of the twirling kick yet again. She came down from the kick and let Pinkie have it with a jab-dragon hoof combo. Twilight backed away from Pinkie's

recovery and launched a hadouhorn to disrupt her. Pinkie was up and jumping over the magic burst before it reached her. Pinkie gave Twilight a disrupting shove before nailing a firm hoof strike that floored her.

"Taaaake THIS!" Pinkie hunched down and seemed to gather herself. Twilight picked herself up and braced for any sort of full-on assault. Instead, Pinkie began rolling around everywhere. After every roll she spouted something like "Not for you!" or "Denied!" or just "Yahoo!" Twilight paced around the rolling pony, waiting for when Pinkie would actually attack.

At that rate, it would be quicker to just counterattack before Pinkie got on with it! She lined her sights up with Pinkie and hunched over. She gathered magical energy in her horn. "Metsu... HADOUHORN!" She sent the powerful column of energy at the pink pony.

Pinkie grinned widely. Too widely to not have something up her proverbial sleeve. "TIME FOR THE SHOOOOW!" She sprang onto her feet and waved her forehooves about in a showy yet zen fashion. She leapt at the hadouhorn blast, narrowly missing the attack by a mere iota of distance. Her leap took her to Twilight, who could only watch with an expression of mounting dread. Pinkie caught Twilight with a stiff forehoof strike to the face. The assault continued with various strikes and bucks to the gut, chin, sides at all angles. Pinkie finished with a climactic uppercut to Twilight's stomach that sent her into the air.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

Before Twilight landed, Pinkie spared a hoof pump and showy grin at Spike, her teeth emitting a radiant sparkle.

The scene simmered down as did the Hoof of War magic. Pinkie exhaled and sat herself down on her flank while Spike checked on Twilight. With a flash of teleportation magic, Hayley appeared on the scene. He briefly took a look at Twilight, ensuring she was okay, before looking to Pinkie Pie.

"Brilliant work there... I just wanted to come here - in pony - to tell you that was the most BIZARRE clash I have seen AT LEAST in recent memory. And 'recent memory' spans about the last three Cutie Mark Clashes. You

know how big of an accomplishment that is? The previous Cutie Mark Clash had an octopus as a combatant. An octopus!"

Twilight made some noise coming up. It sounded like a groan, or even a growl, but then it became a distinct snort into laughter. None were more perplexed than Hayley.

"You got me!" Twilight gasped between laughs, "How did you even DO half that stuff!?"

"Oh, you know, Twilight... Everypony is THE BEST and being who they are! Take that to heart and you'll be ULTIMATE!"

"... I didn't get any of that. Not like I was expecting to."

"Pardon me for flanking in," Hayley said, "but... you're taking this awfully well, Ms. Sparkle. After all, she did do a load more mocking you than beating you."

"Well... it WAS kinda frustrating when I didn't know what was going on. But in the end I know that Pinkie Pie is just being... well, Pinkie Pie! It's not like she did anything PERSONAL to me! And Besides, I can make it up later, can't I?"

"Hm? Uh, oh! Yes, you can. You're only, ah, two clashes in. Plenty of room to make up. Er, just to make sure, nothing harbored? Between you two? You know, because crossing somepony often doesn't end right there and..."

"Not at all!" Twilight looked serious. "Maybe at another time... but now my friendships are too important to dwell on silly things like that."

"Yeah!" Pinkie hopped to Twilight's side and threw her forelegs around the unicorn, "I LOOOOOOVE Twilight too much!"

Twilight laughed with Pinkie's affections, "See? Nothing to worry about here."

Hayley observed the overt affection taking place in front of him. "Well... ponies with a vendetta certainly wouldn't be doing THAT. I don't think even

most siblings would- AGH!" The young stallion jumped when his horn lit up. "Oh. Ha ha, it seems my services are needed elsewhere. I will go tend to my duties while you two continue... that. Right." The scholar excused himself with a flash of teleportation magic.

Twilight looked back. "You can let go now, Pinkie."

"Aww... okie dokie. So what's next for you, Twilight?"

"Hm... Well, now that I have a good grip on this Ansetsuken fighting style, I think I'll head out to see who else I can find! I'll bet everypony has such different clashing styles! None as... heh, unique as yours though, Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie Pie's eyes widened, "I'd be scared if that happened."

"You wouldn't be the only one. Come on, Spike! We have our work cut out for us!"

Pinkie watched Twilight and Spike go, but shortly felt the weight of another pony on her back, and a voice that hissed, "Mine!" into her ear. The voice was vaguely familiar, but since Pinkie knew everybody in Ponyville, being only vaguely familiar freaked her out. Pinkie yelped and flipped the pony over her shoulder. Suddenly, a thrown rock arced over Pinkie's head. In fact, the rock flew through the air as if THAT was what Pinkie just threw. But that was impossible, since Pinkie KNEW she felt and grabbed a foreign foreleg. The rock crashed into the back of Twilight's head.

"OW!!" Twilight snapped. She turned around, looked at the rock, then at a very startled Pinkie Pie who was still posed post-throw. "That was uncalled for, Pinkie Pie! You already WON and I didn't agree to any rematch! Ow, that really hurt... Spike, you have bandages, right...?"

Pinkie felt isolated in her lone island of confusion. Twilight was focused on attending to the bruise, so she didn't hear Pinkie's sputtering of "But I...! It was...! That didn't...! My...!"

A female voice whispered into Pinkie's ear, "Zat vuss a goot prank, non?"

Pinkie looked at the direction of the voice. There was nopony there. Even Twilight and Spike had moved on.

"Dun dun duuuuun..." Pinkie muttered to herself.

-

Hayley reappeared in the Ponyville outskirts, the smell of the Hoof of War faint. Yes, the Hoof of War does have a distinct smell... not that anypony who wasn't trained to smell it would notice right away. He looked around for what could the magic could have summoned him there, then he found it. Rather, Hayley found HIM; the white young stallion rolled out on the ground. It was a sight that Hayley had seen too many times before to give a second glance to. He casually sat upright, horn glowing with magic both recuperating Gallanthad and bringing up images of the clash before. Gallanthad stirred as the Hoof of War magic reinvigorated him.

"Oh, don't be such a filly." Hayley said, noting Gallanthad's slowness to rise. The Hoof of War magic worked much faster than that.

Gallanthad took a few more moments to compose himself and remember what just happened. And then it came back. Luna. Assumptions. Fighting. Luna sincerely unhappy. A vision of monochromatic beauty. Fade to black. Gallanthad rubbed his hoof against his face to wipe the blurriness out of his eyes and as a gesture of disbelief. "I overdid it again..."

That was met with a chuckle from Hayley. "I'll say. You sure are fixated on Abacus, aren't you?"

Abacus? What abacus? Gallanthad caught a glimpse of the images that Hayley was double-checking. He immediately caught something wrong with them. There was a pony in that replay that wasn't there before. Further, that unknown pony was standing exactly where he remembered Luna standing. The wheels in Gallanthad's head turned as he looked at the image and saw Hayley wasn't exactly expectant of a reply.

"Yes... for personal reasons. I'm not exactly comfortable discussing it with just anypony."

"I understand. Well, I don't understand relationships. Not wanting to discuss something. THAT I can talk about. Which SOUNDS funnier than it actually is, doesn't it? Either way, I'm sure you'll have plenty to explain to her about your weakness for zebra mares. THAT I cannot help you with."

"Ha ha... yes..." Gallanthad reached into a pack and pulled out a compass, which he held up flat on his hoof.

Hayley took notice. "Oh? What's that?"

"This? It's... a compass. I like knowing my bearings at all times."

The truth of the matter was he had received that compass from Princess Celestia herself. The needle in the compass was actually a shard from the helmet of Nightmare Moon. The shard itself held no malicious energy, but it does react to Luna's presence. He turned to face the direction it pointed. The needle tilted slightly. Gallanthad turned with it. The needle tilted to the other side. So did Gallanthad. The needle continued to nudge itself, behavior which eventually got an exasperated raised eyebrow out of Gallanthad.

Hayley looked over Gallanthad's shoulder. "Now that's odd."

Gallanthad kept a stiff poker face about it, but the compass never acted like this before. Even if Luna had been pacing about in her room, the compass would point at a fixed location. No... This was something else. But what else could possibly...?

The needle tapped against the glass of the compass, as if trying to point... up? Gallanthad and Hayley humored the needle and looked up. That humor soon turned to dread.

"Oh dear!" Hayley yelped and backpedaled.

A trio of pegasi descended on the grounded two. They didn't necessarily do anything confrontational, but the dark pigments of their bodies and their sharp, yellow glowing eyes said otherwise. They were also suited up similar to Wonderbolts, but in uniforms that were also of more sinister tones.

Keeping up a stiff front, Gallanthad smoothly put the compass away. "Hello, fellow pegasi." His gilded hoof caught his eye, which sent his gaze over to the gilded hooves of the pegasi. "I see you're also fellow Cutie Mark Clash participants."

The front pegasus grinned widely, "We're the Shadowbolts! And we're gonna make our mark in the Cutie Mark Clash to show that we're the new best thing to happen in Equestrian entertainment! By the way... that's a nice tool you have there. Mind if I take a look at it for a moment?"

Gallanthad lifted an eyebrow. Not even a pretend halo would defile itself perching above these pegasi. "You swoop upon me like that... LOOKING like that... and ask to 'look for a moment' at something of value to me... and expect me to go along with it?"

"Uh..." The Shadowbolt exchanged looks with her teammates. "Yes?"

The underlying hostility of the situation seemed to be mounting with the Shadowbolts getting restless. Obviously, their fascination with Gallanthad's compass wasn't fleeting. Since it reacted to them, they clearly knew what it could do. And if they wanted it from HIM, that means they had other plans in mind.

Gallanthad hissed to Hayley, "Get behind me."

From several yards back, Hayley called, "Already done that!"

"If you were looking to clash, you should have just said so!" The Shadowbolt grinned and stamped out the Hoof of War, allowing her teammates to step out of the way.

Gallanthad scowled at his new opponent. "Have it your way! I'm a guard on a mission and I'm not letting anything stand in my way!" He stood on his hind legs and held his forehooves out.

"He's trying to track down his estranged girlfriend!" Hayley called. Gallanthad nearly stumbled over. "But he does have a weakness for zebra mares! So technically that already stood in his way! But- but I'm sure he won't let anything stand in his way now that he's actually said so!"

"Thank you for that!" Gallanthad called back.

"Don't worry! I'm behind you! Er... a fair distance behind you, but behind you still!"

"THANK YOU, AGAIN!" Gallanthad looked back to the Shadowbolt, "I would have figured you'd try suckerbucking me by now."

The Shadowbolt reeled from the statement, "What? No! What do you take me for?"

"Well now I'd be awkward to answer that honestly."

"Can we just fight now?"

"I already said I'm ready."

"You didn't look it. If you're READY ready, say 'go.'"

"Go."

The Shadowbolt beat her wings and sent a billowing cloud of darkness at Gallanthad. He had been ready to fight, but adequately prepared for THIS. He shielded himself with a foreleg, only to realize that the dark cloud didn't do any actual damage. From inside the cloud, everything looked the same except varying shades of purple and black. He didn't see anypony else beyond the veil, not even a silhouette. The attack came full circle as the Shadowbolt pierced the cloud, taking Gallanthad from the side.

"HOO!" The Shadowbolt's foreleg was caught under Gallanthad's. She gasped at his quick reflexes and couldn't do anything while she was tossed over and slammed onto the ground, followed up with a hind hoof strike. "TAHHH!" The force of the counter caused the dark cloud to dissipate and leave off on an equal battlefield.

The Shadowbolt hesitated. Gallanthad hopped about, shifting his weight between his hind hooves. "Considering surrender already? No... You're much too crafty for that. What are you-?" He looked behind him to see Hayley had moved closer to the fight, and squeaked a smile upon being

looked at. "Oh. You're over here now. Way to go." Back to the Shadowbolt. "And you're still over there! THAT time I was legitimately distracted!"

"I wanted you to be looking at me full-on when I did this." The Shadowbolt then sunk into the ground.

"What!?" Gallanthad yelped.

The Shadowbolt seemed to fall into the ground and transform into a pool of shade where she had been standing. Swiftly, the shadow sped across the Hoof of War right in front of Gallanthad. The guard pony was too caught off-guard to predict, much less counter the Shadowbolt rising out of the shadow with a powerful uppercut that floored him. He quickly picked himself up in a fervor.

"You... are not natural."

Hayley hummed, "Sort of an odd thing to say. If something is POSSIBLE, then how can it not be natural? Even society things like buildings and controlled fire are as natural as beaver dams!"

"Then how would YOU call it!?"

"Ahhh... Unusual. No! Strange. Or perhaps ingenuine? No, no... too condemning. I think- Or maybe I'd WANT that connotation in there? Hm. This is a tricky one. You- you two keep at it while I work on this here."

Gallanthad kept his eyes forward. The Shadowbolt gave him a superior smirk, "Considering surrender already?"

"You... No! I overreacted before and it cost me my charge! Not again! So you can change your form into a mass of shadow! Okay! I can accept that! Necessity calls for it! I still have MY METHODS!"

Gallanthad charged forward on his wings. The Shadowbolt decided to stand there and block the charge. She took the initial hoof strike well, but Gallanthad threw his follow-up hind hoof hard enough to stagger her. He launched a forehoof with an accompanying yell and landed a backhoof strike that caused her to twirl to the ground. She came back up and made it

immediately clear that one of her forehooves was no longer a hoof but an axe.

"TROTTS HIMSELF!!" Gallanthad shouted (likely a phrase of surprise) and fell forward onto all hooves. He followed up with a stiff forehoof strike into the joint of the Shadowbolt's foreleg. He paused expectantly. "Oh. You see... that's meant to cause an assailant to drop their weapon. But since your leg IS the weapon..."

The Shadowbolt discarded the axe and stomped her hoof into the ground. The stomp summoned up a torrent of shadow from the ground. Gallanthad made the mistake of assuming it would not be damaging, but it was. The flood of shadow plowed past him in a low arc and fell through back into the ground. The Shadowbolt took the opportunity to rush in, forehooves blazing, and landed several swiped and blows, some including makeshift shadow weaponry, ending with an uppercut that sent Gallanthad spiraling upwards. She ended it again by using her shadow phasing into an uppercut to hit him one more time on his way down.

A testament to his will power, Gallanthad sprang back up. "Monster!" He spat, "I will not fall so easily! And I will deprive you of an opportunity to retort as well!!" He leapt in for an aerial strike.

It was too predictable to not get blocked. The Shadowbolt worked her reflexes and uppercut, an act which Gallanthad was quick enough to throw up a block for. The uppercut turned into a loop for a second ramming charge. Gallanthad didn't have any of that, either. From the block, Gallanthad shoved the Shadowbolt around him to disorient her, and proceeded to slap a series of rapid jabs on her chest before one final shove took her down. He could tell the Shadowbolt was beginning to reach her wit's end, so he flew over to pursue. He reached her position and stuck out a hind hoof to take her down again. Unfortunately, she wing-dashed out of it and hunkered down, ready to punish him with the worst she had.

"SHADOWBOLTS SUPREME!!" The Shadowbolt rushed in, taking advantage of Gallanthad's open stance. She erupted into a rapid series of attacks like before, but much quicker and with more strikes. Gallanthad took every one in a daze, his body nudging around with the flurry. Hayley cringed at the elongated combo while the Shadowbolts on the side were elated.

Amidst the strikes, Gallanthad kept one foreleg firm and poured his strength into it. When the opportunity arose, he thrust an uppercut!

And missed.

The Shadowbolt laughed and rewarded Gallanthad's efforts with three shadow-puddle uppercuts in the a row, the third one sending Gallanthad just about as high as he had sent a certain earlier opponent before.

"ULTRA AAAA!!" One of the Shadowbolts on the side cheered.

While the combatants waited for gravity to bring Gallanthad back, Hayley gave the Hoof of War a magical tug to do a vitality check. The Shadowbolt was barely hanging in there, Gallanthad now much worse so. His remaining strength was but a single thread of magic thick.

Gallanthad picked himself up one hoof at a time. He barely raised them to block a mockingly weak buck from the Shadowbolt. That sliver disappeared, but no K.O. call. Gallanthad was running on applesauce, so to speak. When Gallanthad dropped his hooves, he was anything but deterred.

"JUSTICE HAS ARRIVED!" Gallanthad extended his wings to full and spread them completely horizontally. On a dime, Gallanthad spun in place. The spinning kicked up a torrent that surrounded him. The shadowbolt yelped and threw up her own blocking hooves. Hayley checked the vitals intently. The Shadowbolt's remaining strength was being chipped away by the attack. It was in the red... low.. a sliver... and with the final revolution of Gallanthad's attack, the strike of an iron wing swept the Shadowbolt off her hooves.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

Gallanthad didn't even try to remain standing after that. He twirled down onto his side, spent. The Shadowbolts looked in shock as their representative in the fight was deposited at the ground in front of them. They scowled at Gallanthad, and then both leapt at him. Unfortunately for them, golden restraints held them in place.

"Can't let you do that, Shadowbolts!" Hayley proclaimed. "You see, the Cutie Mark Clash has a VERY strict 'no tag-backs' rule. And in helping enforce that rule, I can endow myself with the strength of Lady Artemis herself when I perceive such an offense! Now, I know what you're thinking. 'Does he REALLY possess the power of an alicorn?' Well, in all the hype I've never been able to prove it myself. But being as how alicorn magic is the most powerful magic in all of Equestria, you've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do you, punks?"

The Shadowbolts groaned, but eventually picked up their teammate and flew away.

"Ha ha! That's right! Shoo! And think about what you've done! Or were planning on doing! It was all in your eyes! Not that... not that it's so easy to tell since they're just yellow shapes! ... OH! And good match! Yes! Admirable show! You did very well!" Hayley turned around, pale. "Just one more reason to sleep with one eye open, I suppose. Figuratively. Though I've heard there's magic that can let a pony do that..."

"Hey."

Hayley turned to Gallanthad.

"Think you could spare me some more of that healing magic?" The guard asked with a chuckle, "I could really use it."

"My pleasure." Hayley said with flourish as he let the golden light bath over the pegasus. Gallanthad was shortly back on his hooves, stretching out and cracking his joints. "Oh!" Hayley yelped, "Really shouldn't do that. Your ligaments are going to be so very thin in a few dozen years."

"I'll take the risk." Gallanthad fished around in his bag. "No if... What the...? Where...!? C-come on! No!!"

"Something wrong?"

"My compass!! It's not in here! And... and I don't see it on the ground! Those Shadowbolts must have taken it somewhere in the fight! CONFOUND IT!!"

"I-if it's any consolation, really, just throwing it out there... It WAS just a compass, right? Those things are cheap to come by. I think I even found some novelty ones in town. OH! This might be a smashing opportunity to switch brands! I think- I think somepony was making Cutie Mark Clash compasses! I signed SOME sort of royalty waivers earlier today for some reason."

Gallanthad inhaled deeply. To react too violently to this development might make Hayley suspicious. "Yeah... sounds like fun."

Chapter 8

Cutting a trail from the Everfree Forest, Luna's unusual convoy, including the de facto newest member Ditzzy Doo, took a roundabout route to Ponyville. They were careful not to cross paths with Shadohoof members OR the royal guard. As part of her story, Luna stressed how she needed to keep a low profile.

Big Macintosh added for clarity, "And you said your made-up name is Abacus?"

Luna averted her gaze, "Ahem... yes. When I gave Ms. Doo my application, I just looked around for the nearest thing in my room for a name. I can't be too cautious... so I cast a spell on my Hooves of War to change my appearance to most ponies."

Zecora lifted her head, "We all could see you for what you were, because you judged us of good character?"

"I think so... Maybe I knew that I'd need help finding a specific pony."

Ditzzy twirled in front of Luna, "Twilight Sparkle's place, right? The Books and Branches Library! I know exactly where that place is!"

Luna said eagerly, "How can you be so sure?"

Ditzzy concluded her twirling and lifted an eyebrow. "I'm a mailmare."

"Oh..." Luna blushed slightly. "That would... yes."

On the other half of the group, Zecora noticed Big Macintosh being forlorn. He was softspoken, but not antisocial. "I had yet to see you with such a frown. Big Macintosh, what has you so down?"

Big Macintosh had been holding it in and didn't need to pause to collect his thoughts. "You were right when you said I felt something; some inescapable need to be somewhere and do something. I honestly have

never felt anything like it before and wouldn't be surprised if I never felt it again the rest of my life. I thought that knowing what was going on would make me feel better about what I had to do to get this far. I know it's serious and you have my word I'll do all I can... but it just didn't make me feel better."

By now, Ditzzy and Luna had been listening. Ditzzy asked apprehensively, "What did you have to do?"

Big Macintosh sighed, "I ain't proud of it. My sister stood in the way and I... I had to clash with her in order to get past."

"Applejack...?" Luna gasped, "But... but I always looked forward to your family dynamic in Twilight's letters! Oh... I never intended for you two to fight!"

"It ain't your fault." Big Macintosh replied firmly, "No pony's to blame here. There's something else I feel bad about... I knew for years we had it coming in the first place. It was only a matter of time."

Zecora lifted a supportive hoof, "If this issue holds some clout, at least I will let you have it out."

Big Macintosh looked to the other three to see encouraging smiles, especially on Luna. He looked ahead, preparing to tell his story, when what he saw ahead made his face fall all the way. "Now who in the hay do you suppose they are?"

The group looked ahead and up to see the Shadowbolts close in on them. The lead Shadowbolt checked her recently-acquired compass and lead the dark pegasus trio to a landing in front of Luna.

The lead Shadowbolt frowned and held the compass out, as if trying to get it pointed at somewhere other than Luna. "That can't be right!"

Another Shadowbolt chimed in, "Maybe she tagged this one with her energy or something to throw us off!"

"May we help you...?" Big Macintosh flanked in.

The Shadowbolt took notice of all the not-Luna in the area. "We're taking that pony until we get answers!" She indicated Luna. Luna's gaze was fixed on the compass with an expression of familiarity. She quickly snapped her head up at being addressed.

"Now for what would you go on and do that for?"

"We're looking for our master... the one who summoned us, Princess Luna! For her to entrust that OTHER pony over there with her energy signature means she must be important. Now if you'll excuse us..."

The Shadowbolt made to walk around Big Macintosh. The draft horse strafed to stay in her way. The Shadowbolt stepped forward the other way, but Big Macintosh cut her off again.

The Shadowbolt cackled, "You don't know what you're dealing with!"

Big Macintosh narrowed his eyes and saw Zecora walk up to his side. He responded, "I could say the same about you."

Ditzy rubbed her bandaged foreleg with her opposite hoof and addressed Luna. "If you're the third, this can be over quick!"

Luna whispered, "I can't! If I fight, I'll give myself away...!"

"Oh... Then I will-!"

"Rematch NOT accepted." The lead Shadowbolt pre-empted smoothly.

"Rematch...?" Went through the other three's minds. They looked to Ditzy, who held her determined pose for an anticlimactic moment and returned to staying on the side.

Zecora kept things on track. "I'd say it's enough fair that we fight in pairs."

At that admission, the lead Shadowbolt stamped out the Hoof of War. Once the magic took hold, everypony and non noticed something very distinct about the matchup. Big Macintosh finally vocalized.

"Ain't one of you gonna step out and let this start?"

The identical two Shadowbolts grinned widely. Their leader merely smirked, "Now why would they do that when you agreed to a match with all three of us? At least... you didn't object."

"Now there's just too much wrong with all this here!"

"ACTUALLY...!"

All heads turned to Hayley.

"AH! Why do ponies keep DOING that...!? Anyway, I knew I forgot some things. You know, from the last time. Hello again, by the way. Hope you're well. Right. Organizations and groups CAN represent themselves as a single entrant. You can say they pool their wins and losses. They earn merits - and demerits - at an accelerated rate. They can even participate in team battles to risk their eligibility for the second round. And, ah... yes. You DID agree to fight the Shadowbolts and since SHE laid down the Hoof of War, she made the terms which you raised no objections against. The downside to being hasty, I suppose. Not that- not that I'd ever imply that you are a hasty pony in general. Just that, ah, in THIS case, you seem to be particularly out of sorts. And you staring at me like that doesn't help convince me to the contrary."

"However, since you NOW raise an objection, as arbiter I can allow you a set period of time in which to add a third to your side."

Big Macintosh said quickly, "How long do we have?"

"About ten seconds."

The eyes of the quartet to one of Hayley's sides bulged. They discussed in a hush.

"That is... ten seconds of MY counting. Not as of when you objected. Far more than ten second have passed since then. I count slow, though. So maybe you DO get more than the standard definition of ten seconds. If I paused for as long as I spent enunciating the number, is that MORE or even LESS than what you'd call-?"

"START COUNTING." Demanded the Shadowbolt leader.

"Er. Right."

It was a quick ten seconds. The pressure made it feel like longer, without all the luxury. Hayley clopped at the ground with each count.

"Five... four..."

Instead of Hayley, a synthetic voice buzzed, "Three..."

Everypony and non looked around. Hayley muttered, "I can assure you my VOICE does not sound like that even to ME."

"Two... one... Let's rock."

Upbeat techno music, smoke, and neon lights filled the area despite the lack of any such equipment anywhere nearby. From the smoke emerged a young mare unicorn. White of coat and with a stylish mane of two shades of blue.

Hayley lifted a brow. "Is that...?"

"DJ PON-3!!!" Luna squealed. For just that moment, she indulged in enjoying seeing another pony she had only seen in letter form and the occasional photo brought her way. Luna had only seen one mention in Twilight's letters, but that was enough to know of the DJ unicorn's awesomeness.

"I don't suppose you'd come here with that flashy entrance and just be asking for directions, yes?" Hayley saw Vinyl Scratch's nod. "Smashing! Then go ahead and just make hoof contact with one of the stacked-against team and we'll be set!"

Scratch swiftly knocked hooves with Zecora. The action sprayed Hoof of War magic about and let Scratch into the clash.

Right then, Hayley's horn sparked. "AH!! And what timing. My attention is required elsewhere. I trust you ALL to be on your best behavior, yes? Though... 'best' considering what your about to do wouldn't be considered

good behavior at all by regular standards. Unless you're out in the wild where that sort of thing is necessary to live. Ah... I DOUBT this falls under any of those categories, so best behavior! Considering!" The unicorn scholar teleported himself away.

Following that, the opposing sides looked back to each other. The Shadowbolt leader was shooting a grin while Big Macintosh and Zecora looked ready to throw down. Business-like, Scratch reached for her iPony. Everypony and non watched her crank the device and search for a song. When she placed it back in its hilt, the iPony emanated a battle theme that was fast-paced with a touch of melancholy.

[DJ Pon-3's playlist]

[Start!](#)

That was as good a signal as any. The Shadowbolts took to the sky as an organized unit and craned up every other head.

Zecora shook her head to stop gaping. "Cooperative effort is their strength, it would seem. To survive we too must work as a team!" She and Big Macintosh spared a look to Scratch, who stood in place and nodded with her music. "I am debating if my thoughts she's actually ruminating."

Scratch held up a hoof, signaling to wait. All she got were incredulous looks. The music hit a certain early crescendo. In response, the Shadowbolts halted their circling and dove to attack. Scratch's heads-up was well heeded. She and Zecora split ways. The two wingsmanes acted upon their orders and followed them. The lead Shadowbolt kept on course for Big Macintosh, whose thrown-up hooves were well able to block the reckless charge. He attempted to follow up with a counter, but the lead Shadowbolt kept herself aloft.

The other two were crafty in their own way. They kept it much more close and personal with Zecora and Scratch. They also kept an eye on each other, for when either of the opposite opponents wasn't paying attention, they could easily speed over to deliver a quick sucker-buck.

Things were kept at a standstill until Zecora saw Scratch turn her iPony again. It didn't seem to do anything, but careful listening revealed it: a looping cymbal beat that blended into the song very well. After that little

adjustment, Scratch began fighting her opponent back well with a seemingly unpredictable series of jabs and pounces. Zecora remembered watching the adult zebras in her home land use music to communicate, but nothing so direct.

Zecora closed her eyes and harkened back to those days. When she opened them, she saw the Shadowbolt rushing in, trying to take advantage of whatever she was doing. Her instinct was to move out of the way early, but the metronome under the song was too mellow, building up to something. No... it wasn't a dodge. Zecora steeled herself, gathering a barrier from the Hoof of War. Her gamble paid off when the Shadowbolt only had a mere kick with a hind hoof to show for his ambition. Zecora took the hit without stumbling. In the moment, she grabbed her cloak out and swept up with it. The garment took a more solid form in the golden magic and its hit was enough to knock the wind out of the Shadowbolt. She deprived him of the luxury of hitting the ground just yet. Her cloak took a drill shape around her forehoof and propelled her for a strike on the Shadowbolt that took him well down.

The Shadowbolt on Scratch saw his teammate go down and tossed all pretenses of fair play. He kept Scratch at bay by spinning several kicks. Once the DJ pony was well away, he pestered her with blasts of dark wind from his wings beats. The dark wind wasn't something easily ignored, but Scratch wasn't sweating it at all. She swiftly slid under one wave projectile and seemed to punch the air towards the second. The gesture generated her own projectile of acute, crescent-shaped air. The Air Scratch twirled into the Shadowbolts's dark wind, canceling both out. Quickly, Scratch sent another one before the Shadowbolt could try his luck again and ended up slapping the dark pegasus with her attack.

A smart pony would expect the Shadowbolt to switch up tactics at this point. That's why the Shadowbolt did the unexpected: He stuck with the projectile spam. That allowed Scratch all the freedom in the world to leap forward and twist her body around the projectile. The dodge lead into a roundhouse kick with a follow-up buck straight into the Shadowbolt's stomach.

"BEHIND YOU!!"

Scratch whirled around, but didn't see anypony. Zecora also looked in that direction. However, it was not Scratch that Big Macintosh had been trying to warn. Zecora turned around too little too late to receive the Shadowbolt leader's hind hooves into her face. The Shadowbolt that had been on Zecora before leapt into action. The leader's last kick twirled Zecora around right as the wingmane could reach her and give a wind-blasted uppercut. He kept aloft and sent a gust of dark wind down. The Shadowbolt leader who initiated the attack rushed to Zecora's other side and sent her own gust. The two attacks collided into Zecora, concluding their team attack.

Big Macintosh reached the scene and managed to ram the thick of his foreleg into the wingmane. The leader still managed to get airborne and keep out of his grasp... still. Scratch took that opportunity to nudge Zecora.

Zecora groaned urgently and shook her head. "I am all right... and more than still able to fight!"

Even above the music, the flapping of the third wingmane coming in for a surprise attack was easy to detect. Scratch gestured at her iPony, then turned to the wingmane. The wingmane went into another uppercut. Scratch took it, tossing her head back. This caused her headphones to fly off her head and land around the other wingmane's ears. Without wasting a moment, Zecora grabbed off Scratch's iPony and turned it up as instructed. The headphones erupted in reverb, leaving the wingmane dazzled. Zecora put the iPony back and leapt past Scratch to where the confused first wingmane was about to attack Scratch again. Zecora's leap into action was enough to take his attention away.

The wingmane sent off a dark wind. Zecora grabbed out her cloak and acted on her combat epiphany. The cloak swept down, attacking the projectile directly. The projectile warped and changed direction. It hit the Shadowbolt, thus securing his attention away from Scratch.

Scratch moved in to take advantage of her dazed foe. She galloped up to him and used his shoulders as a platform to propel herself into the air. On her way down she flipped backwards and let her hind hooves buck hard into the Shadowbolt.

"Down!" The Hoof of War announced.

The Shadowbolt hitting the ground for the count garnered a lot of attention. The leader scowled and made to help her other wingmane tip the scales. Her flight was interrupted with a painful twinge. She scowled again at Big Macintosh, who managed to grab her tail in his teeth.

"Seen my own sister catch her friend like this too many times not to pick up on it myself."

Zecora and the wingmane took it one-on-one while everypony else was distracted. They came to basic jabs and blows, but it was all over when the Shadowbolt went for a sweep

Zecora reared herself up, "The elements are at my call!!" She rushed the Shadowbolt while he was open. She swiped by him several times, knocking him back and forth with her strikes. She stopped behind him and stomped the ground, generating a radius of electricity that kept him rooted to the spot. "And by their might, you shall fall!!" Zecora took off in a regular gallop. Along the way, she picked up an aura of billowing flame around her. At this point, the Shadowbolt could have been just stunned in place by the sheer impossibility of what he was seeing. The flaming charge connected.

"Down!" The Hoof of War announced.

By this time, the Shaowbolt leader had well freed herself from Big Macintosh's grasp and was in the middle of punishing his insolence. Zecora and Scratch watched, trying to find a good opening. The numbers may be off, but they were aware that this last pegasus wasn't to be trifled with.

Zecora asked aside to Scratch, "What was that you previously used to give yourself an aerial boost...?"

The Shadowbolt leader held high over Big Macintosh, surveying her work. Doubtless he could take much more before retiring. After his wild-card brute strength was dealt with, she could fly circles around the other two with superior techniques.

Speak of the devils, Zecora and Scratch galloped straight to Big Macintosh's aid. The Shadowbolt leader crossed her forelegs and looked at the ground-dwelling ponies and zebra.

Zecora shot a look up, "You think staying unreachable is fair when you have the advantage of the air?"

The Shadowbolt laughed, "You'd rather I clip my wings or something?"

"That idea is rather swell. Come! Let us propel!" At Zecora's mark, Scratch leapt on her back. "And send this apparition straight to-!"

Luna gasped, "Zecora!"

"... straight to a place where she'll be hearing bells." Zecora finished awkwardly.

The Shadowbolt wasn't entirely impressed. "Not bad. Maybe one of you will be able to touch the bottom of my hoof if you stretch out far enough!"

She didn't have much time to laugh. Big Macintosh jumped on Scratch's back, applying pressure to both her and the zebra below. Scratch visibly grimaced and Zecora yelped a swear in her native tongue. With a final push of his hind legs, Big Macintosh had leapt up to the Shadowbolt's height. She made to go higher, but it was already too late.

Big Macintosh held up a strong foreleg. He swiftly stronglegged the Shadowbolt and pulled her into a headlock. He kept the momentum, spinning the both of them around. He was in a good place about it, but she couldn't control her mounting vertigo. Defying physics by the grace of the Hoof of War, Big Macintosh spun the Shadowbolt around a bit more. He tossed her up with a flip and caught her again, this time facing out and upside down. There was no other place to go but down, and of course they were spinning. The Shadowbolt took all the impact for two in her shoulders.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

As if snapping out of a trance, Big Macintosh backed away from the downed Shadowbolt in a daze. He looked around at all the agape jaws. He didn't exactly body slam the Shadowbolt with all the love and tolerance in the world. The draft horse shook his head, "So I guess we, uh, ought to make another quick escape?"

Zecora sighed, waving the ache out of one of her hooves. "You are right. We must head out of sight."

Ditzy came up beside her. "Don't worry! I have first aid!"

The now-quintet made their way a distance from the Shadowbolts. Going straight to town would have made them too easy to track, so they circled the town like before. Along the way, Luna held an interesting conversation with Scratch, posing yes-or-no questions or getting answers in the form of song quotes. It was nice to converse with somepony with such a positive zest for once.

However, that didn't distract from the hushed conversation of the other three. It was too hushed for any smart pony's tastes. Finally, Big Macintosh walked faster to catch up. "I ain't in the habit of talking behind anypony's flank. We all just settled on agreeing that you did NOT summon those Shadowbolt ponies. But sometimes, the discussion just ain't over until you hear it from the pony's mouth. Did you summon those Shadowbolts?"

Luna seemed to take the question personally at first. Her face burned with indignation and her eyes puffed up. She thought something over in her head and let it all out. She looked back up to the other four.

"I... I know I'm not the cleanest pony in all of Equestria. After all, I was the most feared creature in the land for a thousand years. However, I am telling you the truth right now. No. I have never knowingly summoned those pegasi."

For a moment things looked like they would get more tense. However, Big Macintosh just nodded and turned back ahead. "And that's that."

Ditzy hovered into action, "We're not gonna see much of them now anyway. Not when they don't have this!" She pulled from her mailbag the compass that had been used to seek Luna out. She saw the astonishment of the others. "It's wrong to steal... But I don't think they were the rightful owners in the first place."

"No! No, you did good! I'm... I'm a princess and I say you did good! It was okay this once."

Zecora flanked in, "I appreciate a good jubilation, but I believe Big Macintosh still owes an explanation."

Everypony and non looked at Big Macintosh. He squeezed his eyes shut in exasperation, but looked back. "All right. I'll tell you. I suppose getting this off my chest can only help us in the long trot."

The rest prepared to listen intently as they all walked.

-

Back in town, yet another ad hoc group sauntered through. Gil and his new friends from the west walked through, eyes peeled for anything suspicious. At the moment, the most suspicious thing was them. They garnered a lot of looks; a Mareican soldier, a young buffalo, and a cowpony.

"So... what do they look like?" Braeburn asked again for comprehension.

Gil answered, "Shadohoof agents look like any other pony from the outside... but don't be fooled. Bison has long since stripped them of their individuality. They're so saturated in his dark methods that no amount of emotion can bring them back. I think my stallions have been able to rehabilitate one or a few, but that's after a long process. Normally it's hard to pick them out of a crowd, but I don't see very many ponies wearing clothing here... You'll know the agents by their dark clothing."

Strongheart gestured, "Like them?"

The other two snapped their heads over and saw, making their way into an alleyway, a pair of ponies that fit the description. They looked almost like twins, but with differently colored manes. The manes were mostly hidden under their unusual hats, but the way they moved and looked about certainly wasn't common.

"Yes!" Gil hissed. He made to intercept them, but found himself cut off by the fight-seeking crowd. Additionally, he had to make himself inconspicuous when the agents almost looked his way. "Darn it... this crowd! We need a distraction so we can go around and catch them off-guard..."

The three of them were at a loss. Braeburn's ears picked up a conversation.

"... C'mon. It's not you're attacking anypony out of the blue, here. We're respecting another country's culture!"

"I- I know... but when I tell the audience that I love them, I really MEAN it! I can't imagine using my skills for something like... like THAT!"

"I know what you mean, but it isn't like that. You've already shown you're a better sport than most other ponies. Just give it a try!"

"Maybe..."

Braeburn looked as the Shadohoof agents were being more cautious and getting away. The overzealous crowd didn't help much. No amount of 'excuse me pardon me' would get them there fast enough or with enough cover. He heard the conversation get close to him until they passed right by him. Quicker than he even registered the thought, Braeburn jumped in front of the pair he was listening to.

"I CHALLENGE YOU!!!"

Everypony and non stopped right where they were. The 'you' echoed in the street. Braeburn found himself pointing as a young stallion pegasus in a blue Wonderbolts uniform. His young mare squadmate looked at the both of them, intrigued. Soarin' wore a very indicted expression. Braeburn's expression was no less wide-eyed, conveying he just now understood what he was getting himself into.

Soarin' muttered, "Well... that simplifies matters."

Braeburn urgently looked back at Gil and Strongheart and nudged his head toward the alleyway. They nodded back and made for their roundabout route. Braeburn turned back to his matter at hand. He had no idea how fickle this crowd was. "Yup, I'm... I'm rarin' to go! Let's see what you... uh, got!" This was met with many cheers, along with what the majority female crowd was saying.

"Two COLTS are going at it...?"

"I've been waiting for this!"

"I hope they start wrestling!"

"BITE HIM HARD!"

"How soon until that uniform comes off...?"

Both in the Hoof of War weren't entirely comfortable. Soarin', eyes big and moist, looked at his squadmate. "Spitfire, this is making me insecure..."

Spitfire raised a brow, "Really? The mares leer at you all the time!"

"Yeah, but... I don't actually HEAR any of it over the roar of the crowd... Great. Now that's what I'm going to hear when I perform, now."

Braeburn looked over the crowd and saw the top of Gil's hair as the soldier made his way to the alleyway. He said slowly while not looking at his tentative opponent, "Uh... c'mon, now. We're about this all wrong. Some friendly competition between ponies is all this is! I ain't taking anything personally!"

Soarin' appeared to soften to the idea after a few moments thinking.

"Here's to keepin' it clean, partner?" Braeburn proposed, holding his hoof out.

"Keeping it clean." Soarin' responded, meeting Braeburn's hoof with his own.

The Hoof of War was stamped out and the crowd was riveted, especially the mares.

[DJ Pon-3's playlist]

[Start!](#)

The Appleloosan and the athlete paused for some cleansing breaths, preparing themselves to engage in something outside their expertise. Keeping crowd attention was all-important, so Braeburn took it upon

himself to throw the first attack. He drew from his first fight and propelled himself forward, a forehoof extended. Soarin' was surprised by the attack and beat his wings back and to take himself aloft. This was a common Wonderbolt trick to avoid collisions when there is an accident or miscommunication during a routine. Soarin' stayed off the ground and lashed out with some strikes from all four hooves. Suddenly, those lessons in synchronized cloud-swimming came in handy.

Braeburn backed away from the assault. In reality, he was leading the center of focus further away from the alleyway. One alarmed peek allowed him to see the faintest silhouette of a struggle. Strongheart and Gil must have engaged those agents! In that case, he had to take the fight FAR away. He saw one of Soarin's kicks and made like he was too open to truly defend against it. He tossed his head back, letting his hat fly off.

"My hat!!" Braeburn called out in a poor actor's monotone. He about-faced and ran after the article.

Soarin' lifted a brow and followed after. Conveniently, there was a dinner theater being set up in the particular plaza that Braeburn was leading everypony. It was a complete stage performance, set up to look like a saloon. At the moment it was unattended, so Braeburn's hat let itself float right onto the edge of the stage. In his rush to get to his hat, Braeburn hopped over a prop crate. However, he underestimated the crate's hollowness and weight. When he leapfrogged over it, it ended up flying back... straight into Soarin'. Soarin' yelped and took the flying crate head-on and fell to the ground.

"Oh... so THAT'S how it's going to be!?" Soarin' called over. He swiftly regained his air and charged forward.

Braeburn picked his hat off and pulled it back on securely. He then whirled around to meet Soarin's charge. He didn't quite see the blue pegasus coming. That was because by that time, Soarin' had flown to the wooden column to Braeburn's side, caught it, and swung around. Soarin's swing came around to him kicking Braeburn right off the stage and into the tables where the audience was supposed to stand. The Appleloosan picked himself up in time to see Soarin' come in for a follow-up strike. Braeburn stood tall against the rush. He responded with his own outstretched hoof, backed by enough momentum to generate an aura of flame.

Hoof met hoof, generating a vicious golden feedback. No pony in the area expected the ensuing explosion of light. When it cleared, the combatants rubbed their hooves over their eyes and noticed something. Rather, a lack of something. Their hooves no longer bore the Hoof of War. They both looked at each hoof and came up with only one hind hoof still bearing the magic.

"Now THIS is a development," said Hayley, the ever-vigilant arbiter, "Such a head-on collision - well, HOOOF-on, I suppose - causes the Hoof of War to become unstable and lose its grip. That is, except for the portion of magic that prevents significant injury. Normally we'd be well on top of this, but why go through effort if you can just waive it as a feature, right?"

As he spoke, one of the wayward Hooves of War popped back into sight on top of a table.

"See that? That Hoof of War can go to either one of you! Alone it doesn't do anything, but get all three of your loose Hooves and your super abilities return with a vengeance! Like I said... looking into what causes it, but the result is FASCINATING, isn't it?"

Braeburn and Soarin' exchanged looks, and then focused on the Hoof. Flying straight for the hoof allowed Soarin' to reach and stomp down on it, taking the magic back into him. Braeburn groaned at the development, but looked around for the possible appearance of the next Hoof anyway.

"Oh!" Hayley called out again, "By the way, the Hooves may hide themselves in surrounding containers! Did I mention that it's possible to remove loose Hooves by doing enough damage? And! And the fact that loose hooves sometimes hide themselves in containers such as barrels? More information is never bad, right? Well, unless the information causes negative feedback that results in long-term effects. Well, in THIS case the information can only help! I hope."

Everypony looked from Hayley back to the fight at hand, including Soarin'. The only pony not so rapt was Braeburn, and that was because he was already charging into Soarin' with a flipping kick. Soarin' could only give a yelp before Braeburn's hoof came down on his back. Soarin' was sent

down and the acquired Hoof went loose again. Braeburn was on top of it quickly and now was up the one Hoof.

At a loss for what to do, Soarin' summoned up a nearby prop crate with a gust from his wings and sent it at Braeburn. Braeburn put up a defensive foreleg to take the hollow prop. It broke around him, but he heard the telltale twinkling of a loose Hoof of War. He looked intently at it, completely missing the second prop crate Soarin' tossed over. Braeburn was sent back and Soarin' clopped onto the Hoof.

With one Hoof to go, but not apparent, the two combatants had the same idea to go for each others' Hooves while the last one took its time arriving. They came to physical blows, trying to land something enough to shake their Hooves loose. Braeburn ducked behind the saloon counter and bucked a bunch of display fruits and vegetables. Soarin' weaved out of their way and made to counter attack. He anticipated Braeburn's dodge and lead the attack to hit Braeburn square on. Braeburn hit the wall of the stage and his Hoof was knocked loose.

Braeburn groaned on his way up, but took a look out the set widow. He saw Gil and Strongheart exiting the alleyway, looking well in one piece. He spared a relieved sigh at the sight. That was a short-lived relief when he heard another smash and the audience riling. Braeburn looked back just in time to see Soarin' stomp in the last Hoof of War.

"Horse apples." Braeburn squeaked.

Soarin' took off into the air as the combined magic of the Hooves of War swirled around him, culminating in the appearance of a mechanical suit of armor. Most of the jaws in the area dropped. Hayley was too busy noting the events with a quill and parchment to display his awe.

Without announcing any attack, Soarin' kept in the air. He balled himself up briefly, also causing the swirling magic to gather behind his back. With enough magic gathered, Soarin' gave a mighty beat of his wings. The magic manifested in a swarm of missile-shaped gusts of wind. They spread from behind Soarin's back and homed in on Braeburn. The latter only got a few steps in before the missiles cut him off and pounded him with explosions. How wind could generate explosions was beyond anypony's guess, but it sure looked cool.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

After everything settled, Soarin's armor vanished and the three empowered Hooves of War split off, leaving Soarin' with his own while Braeburn got his own back.

Spitfire walked up to her wingmane's side. "That was... different. Nothing like my fight."

"Oh, yes." Hayley mumbled, putting the parchment away. "Over the years, the Hoof of War has been known to, ah, 'toss it up,' so to speak. Not that this has been officially proven or anything, but we hypothesize that the magic actually is sentient and gets bored. Like I said, unproven. The thought that something is actually AWARE that it controls your every moment is creepy, anyway."

Leading off from that, Braeburn was up and looking fine enough. "Whoo... I was hammered more than a railroad!"

Out of habit, Soarin' rubbed the back of his head, "Yeah... sorry about that."

"No need for that! We had some fun, didn't we?"

"I guess so." The two of them looked around, "I feel bad for whoever had this stage set up, though..."

The Wonderbolts departed from the scene amicably, leaving Braeburn to rendezvous with his group.

"That was pretty rough," Gil pointed out.

"Really? You two seem fine to me!"

"I meant what happened with you."

"Oh. Well... the point was to make a distraction, right? You all looked ready to go, so I just, you know, threw it to get back on track."

"Really...?" Strongheart echoed, "That's kind of too bad. I would have liked to see you pull a win out of that."

"Wha... seriously?"

They both paused. The wheels in Braeburn's head turned and Strongheart saw it in his eyes. She briefly considered what he must have been thinking about and was alarmed by what she thought he could be thinking.

Gil cleared his throat loudly, "We didn't learn too much, but it's significant. Braeburn, we intercepted this message from the agents before they could slip away. It seems like Shadohoof is targeting five ponies specifically from and around the Ponyville area."

"I think there were six," Strongheart added, "but maybe one of them has already been dealt with? I saw something about that in the message."

"Dealt with?" Braeburn repeated, "Exactly what are they doing to these ponies to 'deal' with them?"

Gil quickly replied, "It didn't say. We were lucky to get even this much. Let's split up. Word is bound to travel and we'll be less conspicuous alone. The moment you see something, give us a call."

As they split, Braeburn looked at a badge-sized communicator on his vest collar. "This Mareican technology is beyond me..."

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Not a few blocks over, apples weren't far away. Applejack resumed her search of the Cutie Mark Crusaders, asking every pony she came across to no yield. She looked in every alley, into every crowd, and up to every balcony since those three were unpredictable. She didn't find any fillies, but found another potential lead.

At the same time, Rainbow Dash was lounging on a roof taking in the crowd. Her next opponent had to be a step up from her last ones. Not very difficult considering, but she had to be discriminating nonetheless. She had no partner at this time since Fluttershy split off to go where the animals were and needed protecting. Fine by her. Though Fluttershy earned the

Rainbow Dash stamp of approval in that first fight, she knew better than to trust Fluttershy to be consistent when it came to confrontations and fighting. Nothing against her, of course.

"Rainbow Dash!"

Dash perked at the familiar voice. Jackpot. More specifically, Applejackpot.

"I know you're probably busy with the clashin' and all, but have you seen Apple Bloom and her friends? Them fillies are playing their best game of hide 'n seek for sure."

"Uhhhh..." Quick! How could she turn this in her favor? Suddenly, an idea. "Yeah! I saw them! But it, uh, was so long ago all I can tell you is where they went from here. Probably not going to be of any help." The bait was set.

"That don't matter none!" Applejack called back up, "It's somethin'! Where'd they go!?"

Dash could just feel the catch tugging at her hook. "I don't know, Applejack. My memory's kinda fuzzy."

Applejack sighed, "C'mon now, Rainbow Dash. I ain't in the mood for no games. Can ya just tell me?"

"I'll tell you," Dash dropped from the ceiling in front of Applejack, "if you clash with me!"

"What-!? Aw, confound this tournament! It drives ponies to be fight-crazy is what it does!!"

"Aw, come on, Applejack! I know we BOTH have always wanted to settle things like this and we have a perfect opportunity here!"

"Ugh... Listen here, Rainbow Dash. If I do this, do ya PROMISE to tell me what you know, win or lose?"

Dash caught the loophole instantly. "Absolutely! Everything I've seen AND heard!.

"All right then. But know right now that you've given me a darn fine reason to make this a quick round!"

"Sorry, but it doesn't count if you throw it for me."

"That ain't what I- Oh, you're getting' it now."

The ever impatient Applejack took it upon herself to stamp out the Hoof of War. A fortunate-feeling crowd stopped to watch; many of them knew one or both of the ponies and their rivalry.

[DJ Pon-3's playlist]

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Dash stood tall, stealing a look at her Hooves of War, "So, should I make the first move of yo-"

Applejack had just about lunged at Dash in that time and nearly closed her forearms around the pegasus had she not noticed in time to leap out of the grasp. Applejack barely had any time to curse under her breath before Dash zoomed back in and answered with her own Hooves around the earth pony. "Nearly got me that time! Let's see how I do!" She tossed herself into multiple speedy backflips, ending one of them by letting Applejack go to hard landing on the ground. "Aww yeah!"

Having dealt with too much speed-related dizziness in from Dash in the past, Applejack was able to get back up and adjusted pretty quickly. At least in time to see Dash come at her again. Dash went low with a spinning strike that popped Applejack off the ground. Dash pursued, leaving a light trail, and made a stylistic twirl that grinded Applejack against her wings and hooves. Dash lost the momentum for the twirl and made to continue the assault. However, Applejack got a lucky hoof in and dunked the rainbow-maned pony into the ground.

Dash beat her wings to get back on her hooves and did not anticipate Applejack landing hard on the ground, shaking it for a sweep. Dash fell down and Applejack followed up, just like with her previous pegasus opponent. Dash managed to catch herself mid-air and come for a landing on her hooves away from Applejack. They shared a stare-down, each

making little twitches and fake-outs. This time Dash's impatience won out and she flew above the ground at her opponent. Applejack made to intercept Dash with a buck but found Dash on a course for past her, not at her. Applejack's buck was expertly dodge, as was Dash's counter attack.

When Applejack managed to land a few swift jabs, Dash turned tail and put several bodies of distance. Not one to keep still, especially in a fight, Dash took off straight in the air as is propelled by a spring. Applejack was vigilant for any shenanigans. Dash stopped herself on a dime in the air, struck out a hind hoof and shot down even faster than she rose. Applejack backed up and watched Dash hit the ground with enough recklessness. The earth pony's follow-up buck hit only air as Dash once again stole away. This time, she turned right back around. Applejack was only coming down from her buck when the loyal one reached her with a hard headbutt. Applejack kept on her hooves and turned to face the direction Dash came in. That turned out to be a bad idea since Dash was already gone. The moment later, Dash came in with two jabs as a single-hooved back that left Applejack in the same stun.

Dash repeated this a few times, using her speed to disorient Applejack and get off a few hits, and it was working since Applejack was reacting slower each time. Dash hovered above her dazed friend, "I'm too faaaaaast...!" She taunted before flying off again.

However, Applejack got fed up. However she saw it coming, Applejack turned to face Dash and struck her own head forward to meet Dash's headbutt. The two heads collided very painfully on both sides. Both ponies backed up, dazed. Applejack's stronger head allowed her to snap out of it quicker. She went in for the attack, jabbing Rainbow Dash back and forth again and again while the spectral pony was still trying to screw her brain back in after the headbutt. Dash's body felt as light as her head when Applejack bucked her in the air for a combo of kicks leading to yet another dunk on the ground.

Something snapped back into place and Dash took off into the air again. Lesson still learned from the last fight, Applejack had her lasso out well early to keep her friend from getting too far. "Not on MY watch, Rainbow! Now git on over here!!"

Applejack tugged at the rope to counteract Dash's wing beats. Dash was sent toward Applejack at the speed of the pull. This time, the receiving party wasn't spiraling out of control. The sheer will not to fall for one of Applejack's ploys caused Rainbow Dash to let herself get roped in and at the last moment beat her wings to maintain a distance. Applejack expected Dash to be in range and went forward with an uppercut anyway. The surprise evasion made Applejack's uppercut at nothing and clumsily flip over. This caused the rope to whip around and tangle Applejack up good and well. Dash wasn't too far to get caught in it and joined her friend in the mess.

The two whirled around into various positions trying to escape the rope - Totem pole, figure skaters, dancers on their hind hooves, forming the letter W - and eventually managed to flail themselves out of it. That mostly only worked out for Applejack since Dash still had the loop of the lasso around her waist. Applejack gave a tug at it just to make Dash resist it and use energy in this battle of attrition.

During this tug, Dash caught sight of something - Gil. He was passing by, but he took notice of who was participating in this fight and stopped to take a glance. Going for a leaping attack, Applejack jumped into Rainbow Dash. This was her chance! She could end this fight right now and show that Mareican what a Sonic Rainboom was all about!

"It's no old mare's tale!!" Dash proclaimed, and gave a mighty leap into flight, intercepting Applejack and taking the farmer up with her. The crowd gave a swoon as Rainbow Dash climbed higher into the sky, pushing Applejack up with her. She pushed Applejack off, leaving the orange pony suspended, and then came back at another angle, down at the ground. Pulling off a Sonic Rainboom, especially with a passenger, required much more space and less weight. With the Hoof of War, however, Dash KNEW she could do it with this space and take a silly pony along for the ride. Already the wind was beginning to crack in resistance.

Applejack took note immediately. "Aw, no... Aw HAY no...!" She pulled at her rope desperately, riding it up from Dash's upper flank. The follicles barely touched Dash's wings. Applejack could hear a distinct whistling and saw Dash's face rippling from the speed. The rope was now scratching over Dash's midsection. Applejack grunted with effort and gave the rope a

climactic pull. It pulled over Dash's extended wings, pressing them to her side the wrong way.

"WHAT-!?" Dash yelped, noticing the wind tunnel effect fading from her descent and looking to see her pinned wings. She wasn't flying downwards any more - she was just plain FALLING.

In the pegasus's surprise, Applejack managed to pull herself up and press her hooves into Rainbow Dash's back. This attack just very abruptly swapped receiving ends.

"YEEEEEE-HAWWWWWWWWWWW!!!" Applejack triumphantly howled toward the horizon.

The pair of ponies shot like a missile into the ground. At that speed and with pressed wings for no stability, Dash couldn't reverse this position. That's why... she had to... use all her wing strength... to slip out of the rope...!

With a snap, the rope gave away and Dash got her wings back. "YES!!!"

And then she hit the ground.

"K.O.!!!" The Hoof of War bellowed.

The dust settled, leaving the image of Dash buried in the very dent she made in the paved road and Applejack standing on top of her, broken rope in mouth and with no more scuff marks than she had left the ground with. The orange pony quickly hopped off her friend to coincide with the crowd offering their congratulations and condolences while dispersing.

"Y'all faster'n even I thought, Rainbow Dash. But it looks like I'm getting' by just fine on my Apple family ingenuity! Uh... Rainbow Dash? Y'okay there?"

Dash hesitated a moment and looked around. She looked where Gil was and caught his gaze for all of a moment. The Mareican stallion kept an unreadable, analytical face and turned away to his duties.

"Yeah..." Dash muttered in response, "I just... HATE losing... And you embarrassed me in front of my rival in sonic... ness."

"Shucks, sugarcube. Somepony had to win, and that pony ended up bein' me. Anyway, I don't mean to make light o'ya or anything, but it's time to make good on your terms. Fess up, girl."

Dash got over herself enough to pick herself up. She grinned sheepishly. "Everything I know, right? Well... Uh... You already know everything I know."

Applejack heard that. She gave a start and then narrowed her eyes and said slowly, "I beg your pardon, Rainbow Dash?"

Dash reeled slightly from the scrutiny. She eventually threw her hooves up. "Okay, okay! I just wanted to face off with you! It's not like you lost THAT much time on this fight!"

"You... You LIED to me...? About something that I CLEARLY find very important!?" Applejack's expression hardened from disappointment to anger. "You... you selfish... FOAL! Why would you-!? URRRGH! NOTHIN' good came outta this fillyish stunt you just pulled! NOTHIN'! This is a downright SHAMEFUL thing you've done right here, Rainbow Dash! I have a right mind to keep on poundin' you 'til you straighten the hay up!!"

Dash looked up at her friend through horrified, watery eyes. "Applejack, what is WRONG with you!!?"

Those words cut through Applejack's rage. The farm pony's emerald eyes softened and she got a good look at her friend's face, contorted into sadness by her words. Applejack then looked around at all the wide-eyed and slack-jawed spectators, each of which avoided her gaze. She looked at the ground at her feet, in thought. Finally, she looked back up at Dash.

"Can I... Can I speak with you, Rainbow Dash? Candidly... in private?" She lead the way anyway.

Rainbow Dash sighed in relief. At least her good friend was back. Remorseful, but back. The two young mares walked up to a juice stand and threw up their bits for drinks. Applejack downed hers in one gulp.

"I- I'm sorry for shoutin' at ya. I really am. I... I guess there's somethin' I need off my chest before I get any more involved in this fightin' nonsense."

Dash just nodded. She wasn't exactly in her element when it came to all that venting stuff, but she sure knew what it meant to stick it out for and listen to a friend in need.

Applejack took another cleansing breath before looking at Dash. "You know my brother, Big Macintosh, right?"

"Uhhh, yeah. Big guy, wears that thing. Kinda mellow."

Applejack chuckled, "Funny you should mention how calm he is all the time."

Meanwhile, far away, that very same Big Macintosh was into his own story to his own group of friends.

"I wasn't always so 'let things be.' In fact, you could call me rightly rowdy."

The rest swooned just at the thought. Zecora piped up, "I must confess, I never would have guessed!"

"I was just a normal colt, really. Runnin' around, being the big mane. Making friends, grossing out the fillies, having something to prove all the time. I guess I didn't really get so rough 'n tumble until... oh, when my sister Applejack came along."

Applejack explained, "Our parents are always out expandin' the Apple family business. Ain't no time to come back to where it all started. Sure, there's reunions 'n such and the occasional visit, but most o' the time it's just me, Granny Smith, and Big Macintosh. Granny Smith ran things well enough with some help until Big Macintosh was old enough to help out. When I became of age to help around the farm, that's when things went sour."

Big Macintosh looked aside, "I didn't like it much. Helping Granny Smith was MY thing and I wasn't going to let some filly nose in on what I already had a grasp on. Mind you... I was a silly lil' colt at the time. I know much better now, but back then it tore me apart. That's why I tried nudging Applejack out of everything."

"I didn't like that one bit," said Applejack after putting down her second cup, "and I asked Big Macintosh why he would say that sort of thing. He never told me. He just said it's 'cause I was a filly. And Rainbow Dash, nopony tells me what I can't do because I'm a filly when I darn well KNOW fillies can do it too."

"So," Big Macintosh muttered with a sigh, "we started fighting."

"And fightin'..."

"And fighting..."

"And fightin'. We would argue over the smallest things, just for the sake of comin' out on top. Granny Smith could barely stand it. That's why she made a rule for us. Whenever we got into one of our fights, after it was over, we'd have ourselves a big ol' hug."

Having heard the same thing from Big Macintosh, Luna emitted a charmed, "Awww..."

"Ehyup... Applejack and I got along pretty well when we weren't power-struggling. We were in an okay place for a while. Then one day Mom 'n Pop came right back for another visit... and they had another addition to the family with 'em."

"Apple Bloom!" Luna surmised with a big grin.

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow, both at the Princess's knowledge and fanaticism. "Yup. And let me tell you, I wouldn't be a very good big brother if I didn't say she was the most adorable thing I ever did lay eyes on."

Applejack gave a nostalgic sigh, "Havin' Apple Bloom around the farm took all the bite outta everyday life. Don't know what it was, but I guess havin' a lil' filly 'round the place who was all smiles and didn't wish nothin' harsh on nopony just had an effect on us."

"Late one night, though... Applejack 'n I were up and the lack of sleep got to us. We found SOMETHING to argue over. We hadn't been at it for a while and I guess it was boiling over so a lot came out, and loud, too. We were

interrupted by a crying. We looked over at the top of the stairs and there was Apple Bloom, eavesdropping."

Applejack laid down her third drink, "I ain't NEVER seen a lil' filly so traumatized in all my life. In hindsight, I don't blame 'er. We made so much nice for her and gave her a lovin' home to grow up in. Suddenly, 'er two bigger siblings which she adores and looks up to goin' at it like they don't care for each other? That ain't right."

Big Macintosh continued to his rapt (and moist-eyed) audience, "So we brightened right up. We made a night of it until Apple Bloom was back to smiling and being tuckered out. But we didn't forget that look on her face, and we could only imagine how she'd react to seeing repeat offenses. So we came to an agreement. We were both big ponies by then. It was almost time for us to buck up and start taking more responsibility for the farm and the orchard. That night was a wake-up call for the both of us to put aside our paper-thin differences and act the part. We both promised to cut back on the strong-headedness and work together more than we already do."

"An' you've seen how much Big Macintosh has changed," Applejack muttered with a wave of a hoof, "Well, I suppose you wouldn't see the change, but you see what he's like now. And then... y'look at me."

Rainbow Dash furrowed her brow, "What ABOUT you?"

Applejack's lip trembled trying to get the words out. "I didn't change none! I... I THOUGHT I did my part, but that was just Big Macintosh calmin' down for the both of us! I've been as strong-headed as I've always been... probably been getting worse this entire time!"

Dash gulped her mouth full of juice. "Wait, wait. Stop right there. All this time you've been trying to be NICER?"

"I KNOW!" Applejack yelled, exasperated. She slumped onto the counter.

Dash expected to have to think about what to say next, but strangely found the words as they came. "I don't know about that, Applejack. Sure, your strong head can get you in trouble a lot, but you're always telling us about how never backing down saves your farm from a lot of raw deals!"

"... Rainbow Dash, you actually LISTEN to those stories?"

"Uhhhhh... Not the WHOLE thing. Just pretty much what I said there."

"That's STILL way more than I expected!"

"Well then there you go! You're not... uh, whatever it is you're worrying about. You're just being YOU. What made you think there's anything wrong with yourself?"

"Well... Big Macintosh himself brought it up that I hadn't changed since that day. And it's true. We had a big ol' falling-out this morning an' I said a lot of stuff I didn't mean. And then just now..."

"Okay. Don't you think it's possible HE also said things he didn't mean?"

"U... um... I guess so. I don't want to think of him any bad way, 'cause... Hoo boy, I have a lot to think about. Ya know, I didn't think you could be so deep, Rainbow Dash."

Dash rubbed her temple, "Neither did I. But the things you were worried about were so... CRAZY that I couldn't help myself!"

Applejack gave her loyal friend a grin, "Thanks for hearin' me out, Rainbow Dash. You're a good friend."

"No problem. Hey, if I ever DO see any of the fillies, I'm taking it straight to you."

While those two friends parted well enough, Big Macintosh was still answering for his actions. Mostly to Luna, who was the most invested.

The princess interrogated, "How could you SAY that to her?"

"It's the truth, you know... I just didn't mean to say it like that. I was in a bad place. I'll make it up to her next time I see her..."

"So you CAN be pushed to a limit... how complex..."

Averse to being analyzed, Big Macintosh picked himself back up. "So are we finding Twilight or aren't we?"

"Let us go straight to town," Zecora concurred, "it's not long until the sun goes down."

The group of five picked themselves up and head back on the trail. Zecora would have objected to Scratch's travel music (on the grounds of it being too conspicuous), but Luna took a liking to it.