

The Reaper's Game

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Day One

Chapter 1

Awakening

Manehatten, the big orange. It was often said if you could make it here, you could make it anywhere. And ponies took this advice to heart, traveling from all across Equestria to this fabled city in search of a new start, a new hope, the Equestrian dream. Some came only for a visit, some stayed longer.

It was a hub of activity, the centre of town playing host to so many ponies that carriages were banned, or else risk hitting some pony. There wasn't a time of day where the streets weren't crowded, ponies trotting in all directions, unable to spare time to slow down and smell the roses.

It was in this centre that a certain purple unicorn currently lay, unconscious. The crowds walked around her, forming a gap in the crowd that would be obvious to the casual observer. But there were no casual observers seeking such patterns. And no pony stopped to check if the mare was okay, simply acting as if she wasn't there. With good reason.

Slowly, Twilight Sparkle opened her eyes, eyelids heavy as if waking from a deep sleep. Her head was pounding, and she stared uncomprehendingly into the middle distance.

"Urgh, my head... Spike! Can you get me some coffee?" Twilight looked around, still not seeing the obvious. She began to close her eyes again, still sleepy, and it was now that she noticed something was wrong. Her eyes snapped open, her mind instantly focusing.

"Wha- what am I doing here?" she asked of no one in particular. The crowd continued to ignore her as she stood up, still confused. She looked around. "This is Manehattan isn't it? What was I doing passed out on the pavement? Last thing I remember I was... argh." The headache was back again, bringing an end to that train of thought. Twilight lowered her head, trying to will the pain away. Unsurprisingly it didn't work, although it did lessen in intensity.

With her head down, Twilight noticed something else unusual. She was wearing a sash that went around her neck, behind her front left leg and back around over her back. An extra oddity was the pin that was attached, an unusual design that resembled a pony skull from head on. Trying to angle the sash to better see the pin, Twilight accidentally tapped the pin with her hoof. And a cacophony of voices in her head broke out.

Somewhere not too far away, a pink blur rushed through an alleyway. Every now and then she glanced behind her. "Good, still no sign of them." She burst out of the alleyway, and with a final glance behind her, paused for breath. She pushed her pink mane out of her eyes, scanning the crowd for some familiar face. She wasn't sure why she was here, but the last thing she could remember was that she was with her friends. So if she was here, they must be too. And they'd be confused, disoriented, and worst of all, in danger. The earth pony couldn't bear the thought of losing any of her friends, so she had to find them quickly. Any of them, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity or Fluttershy. They would be able to get through this if they just stuck together. And then maybe they'd give her back.

A sudden magical flare interrupted her thought process. In front of her, a scroll materialised, as if sent by way of dragon magic. The pony stared at it as it began to unroll itself. *No, not now! It's too soon, I haven't found anyone yet!*

Twilight couldn't help herself. She screamed, trying to hear herself over the noise in her head. She tried covering her ears with her hooves, but the

noise continued unhindered. What kind of sound could penetrate a mind without going through the ears?

Thankfully the noise was beginning to lessen, or possibly Twilight was learning to ignore it. She uncovered her ears, but slowly, just in case that was somehow the cause of the voices getting quieter. This wasn't the case, and the sounds reached the level of a background din, not much louder than your usual crowd. But as Twilight looked around, certain words and phrases became clearer.

*I hope my wife is making daffodil soup for dinner tonight...
Oh, how am I going to tell her? I don't even know if she likes other fillies...
Oh my gosh, was that... Sapphire Shores? No wait, that's not right, she's on tour in Canterlot right now...*

Twilight looked around in amazement. *Were those thoughts? Was I hearing pony's thoughts? But how can that be?* Twilight took a deep breath. She just had to think about this rationally. She hadn't been hearing thoughts until she had tapped that pin she was wearing. So what did that mean? Had that pin allowed her to read minds? But how did that work exactly? Surely that kind of power would be concealed in something mystic gemstone, not a small piece of metal.

Another thought came to Twilight. *I've been standing here, freaking out, even screaming, and yet no pony has even turned to look at me.* With her new psychic powers, she quickly looked through some other ponies' minds. *None of them even seem to be registering me. What's going on? Am I invisible?*

As if there weren't enough mysteries to be solved, another one chose that moment to show up. A scroll, like the kind Twilight received from the Princess, appeared out of thin air. But instead of falling to the ground like a normal scroll, this one hovered in the air in front of Twilight and unrolled itself.

"Mission 1: Reach Bits n' Bobs," Twilight read aloud. "You have sixty minutes. Failure will result in erasure. The Reapers. Well what the hay does that mean? Where did this scroll even come from? Magical scroll transmission requires a dragon on at least one end, and a bond between

the ponies contacting each other. You can't just send random scrolls like this!"

Twilight's thought process was derailed but a sudden, sharp pain near her right hoof. She raised it to eye level, trying to find the source of the pain. She was not prepared for what she found. Just above her hoof, as if tattooed there, was a timer. And as she watched, the time ticked down. 59:51, 59:50, 59:49....

It was too much for Twilight. She had to be dreaming. Mind reading, unsolicited scrolls, ticking time tattoos? None of that could possibly exist, could it? This being a dream was the only explanation that made sense. Although Twilight remembered a lesson learned not too long ago, about how just because she couldn't explain something didn't mean it couldn't be....

That thought got no further before Twilight was knocked off her feet. Whatever had hit her had enough force to send her flying a short distance. Thankfully she hit the pavement without receiving any damage. She looked up at whoever it was that had run into her. "Are you okay? I'm sorry I was in your way, but why are you.... Pinkie?"

The pony that had collided with her was the spitting image of Pinkie Pie. Pink coat, balloon cutie mark.... the only difference was her mane. Where Pinkie's mane was fluffy and untamed, this pony's mane lay flat and straight. Still, the resemblance was uncanny.

"Ow... wait a minute. I ran into you? You must be a player then!" The voice even sounded similar. Maybe she was a relative of Pinkie Pie's? The pink pony looked behind her, as if being chased by something. "Great. I had hoped to find one of my friends before this happened, but I guess I have no choice."

"Um, excuse me? You're not making any sense." Yet another way the two were similar. "Player? Before what happened?"

The mare looked confused. "You mean you don't know? Okay, I'll explain. You see..."

A scream pierced the air behind them. The Pinkie Pie look-a-like jumped in the air. "Horse apples! Okay, no time for explanation now then. We need to make a pact, quick!"

"A pact? What do you mean, I don't unders-"

"I said explanations later! Just say I accept! Say it!"

The expression on the pony's face was beginning to scare Twilight. "O-ok. I accept?"

A blinding light emanated from the ground around them. Twilight winced, and had to close her eyes. When she opened them again she looked around for the other pony. She was facing away from Twilight now, crouched in what could ostensibly be called a battle stance.

"What are you-?"

"No time, explanations later. Noise are coming."

Twilight blinked. "Okay, firstly, that statement is grammatically incorrect, noise is a singular word, so it should be noise IS coming, and secondly..."

"I said explanations later! We've got a fight coming for us!"

Before Twilight could raise any further objections, a strange red symbol came hurtling into view. Twilight couldn't figure out what it was, but it almost looked like... a frog's head? As it came closer, the symbol seemed to bulge at the middle and expand, unfolding into... a frog? But this was unlike any frog Twilight had ever seen before. It was half the height of a normal pony, and its legs, instead of being fleshed out seemed to be made out of the symbol that it used to be.

"What- what is that?"

"Noise! And now we fight!"

The frog leapt at Twilight. Just before it made contact, there was another flash, and every other pony on the street seemed to vanish. There were now also three frogs rather than just the one.

"Just when I thought I couldn't get any more confused," muttered Twilight. Behind her, the pink pony was charging at another group of three frogs, lashing out at them with a flurry of hooves. She knocked back the group of frogs and looked back at Twilight.

"Don't just stand there! Fight!"

"But how do I do that?"

"I don't know! What pins do you have?"

"What?" Twilight looked down at the black pin on her sash. To her surprise, another one had now joined it, one that looked like a stylised flame. "I've got one that looks like a flame, but how is that important?"

"That one lets you summon fire! Imagine a line of flames going from you towards the Noise, that should activate it!" The strange pony sidestepped just as a frog jumped at her, narrowly avoiding it, then let loose with another flurry of hooves.

Twilight looked back towards her side of the battlefield just in time for a frog to leap onto her face. Panicking, she somehow managed to imagine the frog catching fire. A spark flared in front of her eyes, and the frog vanished, disintegrating into thin air. Twilight focused more, and a thin column of fire appeared on the ground in front of her. Not entirely certain how she was doing this, she steered the column towards one of the remaining frogs. It tried to jump away, but too late, as it too vanished into nothingness. That left just one frog. Twilight directed the fire towards it, but just before it could engulf the frog, the flames died down.

What's happening? Where's the fire gone? Twilight felt her anxiety levels rise again, and couldn't focus. The frog, sensing an opportunity, leapt at the undefended pony. Twilight closed her eyes, waiting for the blow..... but it never came. Opening her eyes, Twilight saw no frog in sight. She looked behind her to see the pink earth pony also with no enemies in sight.

"Well, that wasn't too bad. I forgot how weak the initial Noise are..." the other pony mumbled, barely audible to Twilight. "Good job over there. Now, the Underground should reassert itself... now."

The scene around them dissolved, and the crowds returned, seemingly from nowhere. Twilight slumped to the ground, heart still racing from the adrenaline. "I don't understand..."

The Pinkie look-a-like came over to her and sat down beside her. "Good, well we're safe for now." She looked at her front-right hoof. "For now anyway. We've still got forty minutes left, so I guess we can do some introductions. My name's Pinkamena Diana Pie. What's yours?"

"Twilight Sparkle." Gears started to turn in Twilight's head. Hadn't Pinkie once told her that her full name was Pinkamena? "Umm... do you normally go by another name? Like, maybe just Pinkie, perchance?"

Pinkamena froze. "No," she eventually managed to say. "That name belongs to somepony else. The question is, how do you know that name? I haven't met you before have I?"

It had to be Pinkie. Twilight was sure of it! "You don't recognise me? It's me, Twilight! We both live in Ponyville? We're best friends? How can you forget me?"

Pinkamena shook her head. "Nope, that can't be right. If you were from Ponyville I'd know, because I know just about every pony in...." She trailed off. "No... that's too much like her..."

Twilight was shocked. How could Pinkie not recognise her? And why was she calling herself by her full name? *I know, I'll just read her mind. I'll bet this is just another Pinkie Pie prank... a really elaborate Pinkie Pie prank...* Twilight focused, shutting out the background noise. But try as she might, she just could read Pinkie's mind. *Did I do something wrong? Has my mind reading stopped? Oh listen to me, only twenty minutes ago I had no idea I could read minds, now I'm acting like I could always do it?*

"You can't scan other Players Twilight." Pinkamena had figured out what she was up to. "Don't know why, but you just can't."

Twilight let out an exasperated sigh. "There you go, you're using words that don't make sense again! I thought you were going to tell me what's going on here? What am I playing?"

"What are you playing? You're playing the Reaper's Game. And if you're playing the Reaper's Game, that can mean only one thing." A rather grim smile appeared on Pinkamena's face.

"You're dead, Twilight Sparkle."

Chapter 2

Exposition

The purple unicorn was lost for words. "Dead? How can we be dead? We're talking, and thinking, and breathing, and those frog things just tried to kill us!"

Pinkamena checked her timer again. Thirty seven minutes. There was still plenty of time to bring her partner up to speed. Besides, there were few things worse than a partner not up to speed. "I'm not going to pretend I understand it, but that's just the way it is. For whatever reason, you and I are dead, and we're here playing this game."

"Game? This is a game? We're dead! How do the words 'dead' and 'game' even fit together in the same sentence?"

"You look like a well read pony, surely you've encountered the story about the Earth Pony who challenged Death to a match of chess for her soul?"

Twilight blinked. "Well yes, but that's just a myth! It can't be true."

"No, but as with all myths, there is an element of truth to it."

"No, this is insane! It's nothing more than an...." Twilight trailed off. "...old pony tale..." She cleared her throat and continued. "Okay, you know what? I believe you."

"Good, that'll make this go faster then. Okay, where do I begin?"

"Well, what about those frog things that attacked us? What was up with that?"

"They were creatures called Noise. The reapers sic them on players to try and stop them from achieving the missions, although now that we've made a pact they won't try and attack us quite like that last set did."

"Reapers? As in more than one?"

Pinkamena sighed. She was clearly going about this the wrong way. "Okay, new plan. Give me ten, maybe fifteen minutes and I'll explain everything. If you still have questions after that, you can ask. Deal?"

Twilight nodded. Taking a deep breath, Pinkamena started her explanation.

"Right, so this is the Reaper's Game, and we're dead. We have seven days of challenges, or missions, and if we survive the seven days, we get a second chance at life. If we don't, we're erased. If we don't complete a mission in the time limit given, we get erased. And as the icing on the cake, we can be erased by Noise. But we have a way to fight back against the noise in the form of those pins we have on our sashes. Each pin unleashes a different psych, a sort of magic. Not every pony can use every psych. If you were to give me your Pyrokinesis pin, I'd be unable to use it.

"To enter this game in the first place you've had to give up what's most valuable to you as an entry fee, to be returned upon your victory. Should you lose, well, you'll have bigger problems.

"Each Player forms a pair with another Player, called a pact. They work together to complete missions and defeat Noise. If one half of a team is erased, the other will follow shortly. So it's in your best interest to make sure I'm every bit as healthy and fit as you are.

"And that pretty much wraps up this chunk of exposition. That covers the basics anyway. Anything you're still confused about?"

"Just two things actually."

Of course there is. I shouldn't have asked. Aloud, Pinkamena said "And they are?"

"Well, you said something earlier about reapers, as in more than one. How is that possible?"

"Oh, that's easy. There's a distinction between reapers and the Reaper. Reapers, the ones we're going to encounter, were once ponies like you or me. They played this game, but when they won they decided to become reapers and help run this game rather than come back to life."

"I see. Last question then. How do you know all this?"

"The better question is how do you not? The reapers normally take a few minutes before the start of a game to explain this. Why haven't they this time?"

"That doesn't answer my question. If they haven't told us this, why do you know it?" Twilight asked.

Pinkamena gave a hollow laugh. "You haven't figured it out? This isn't my first time playing the game."

Once again, Twilight found herself flabbergasted. Pinkie had played this crazy game before? Did that mean she had died before? But how could that be? That's the sort of thing you got told when you were introduced to new ponies. 'Hi, this is Pinkie Pie. She died once before, but she got better.' Then again, it was still possible that this wasn't Pinkie Pie. After all, she didn't recognise Twilight. And Pinkie Pie wasn't the sort of pony to forget any pony.

Pinkamena looked at her timer again. "31:46. Right, since we've used half our time, we'd better get back to the mission. What was it again?"

"Um... Reach Bits n' Bobs. I don't understand though, what is Bits n' Bobs?"

"It's a fashion arcade. All the aspiring fashionistas have set up shop there, hoping that one day that their designs will become popular."

Twilight managed a smile despite the situation. It sounded just like the sort of place Rarity would love. "So, we just need to get there? That sounds easy. Unless it's on the other side of town. Is it? Oh please tell me it isn't on the other side of town."

Pinkamean shook her head. "It isn't on the other side of town. As a matter of fact it's just a short distance that way," she said, gesturing just behind Twilight with her hoof.

"What? You mean we could have finished this mission ages ago? We've been wasting time, let's go!" Twilight cried. She started galloping the way Pinkamena had indicated, and before long she could see a sign looming ahead that read "Bits n' Bobs: Fashion on the go."

"Wait, don't run off yet," Pinkamena yelled from somewhere behind her. "There's something I forgot to mention!"

Twilight turned to look at her partner, but before she could form any words she felt herself hit something. The impact knocked her to the ground, and she lay dazed for a few seconds while Pinkamena caught up to her. She helped Twilight back onto her feet.

"Sorry, forgot to say. Some ways are barred off by invisible walls. Just to make things interesting."

"Barred?" Turning to see what she ran into, Twilight was surprised to see nothing. By all accounts she should have kept running. She tried to continue, but was unable to proceed more than another step before she found herself unable to continue. The air in front of her seemed to shimmer and solidify, blocking her way. "But that's where we need to go! How are we going to complete the mission now?"

Pinkamena didn't seem to be listening, looking around at the crowd. Soon she stopped, and pointed. "You see that pony? The one wearing the red hoodie? Try scanning him." Twilight must have looked confused, because Pinkamena sighed. "Tap the skull pin. That's what lets you read minds, and tap it again to turn it off. Saves a lot of headaches."

Twilight gave the pin a tap with her hoof, and heard all the voices in her head vanish. She realised she'd been scanning, as her partner had called it, all that time. The sudden silence was a bit off putting, and she almost fell to the ground again. She tapped the pin again, and sure enough the voices returned. Glad to understand how the mind reading worked now, she turned her attentions to the hooded pony. She focused, but while she could hear the thoughts of those around him, he remained silent. She tapped her pin again and welcomed the silence.

"I couldn't read his mind?"

Her partner nodded. "There are two types of pony who can't be scanned here: players and reapers. Guess which one he is."

Twilight gasped. "He's a reaper? But he looks just like us."

"I told you, reapers were like us once. Anyway, he's the one who set up this wall. And that means he can take it down again, if we meet his conditions."

"Conditions? What, like a toll guard?"

"Pretty much. But we're not going that way yet. We've got 25 minutes I plan to use them to find my friends." The pink pony turned around and started heading in the opposite direction. Twilight ran to catch up.

"But if we don't clear the mission..."

"If I survive the seven days, that's meaningless if my friends don't as well. So we're gonna find them." She looked over her shoulder at Twilight and sighed. "Don't worry, we'll get the mission done. But my friends come first."

A shrill cry shattered any reply Twilight was trying to come up with. She recognised that scream! So too did Pinkamena it seemed. "Rarity! That's one of my friends! Quickly, this way!" She was off before Twilight could respond. This strange pony knew Rarity? She had to be Pinkie. So why didn't she recognise Twilight? This isn't the time for that, Rarity's in trouble! Twilight dashed towards the source of the cry.

Chapter 3

Camaraderie

Rarity was having just the most horrid day. Oh it had started out okay, after all, she was finally in Manehattan, the centre of the fashion world. But then it had started going downhill. First she had no idea how she had got there, having just woken up, lying on the pavement. Then her mane just refused to be styled properly, looking like an absolute pig sty. Then the scroll had appeared, and this infernal timer had marred her beautiful coat. Still, things were beginning to look up now. She had managed to find Fluttershy, although the poor dear seemed to be frightened to death. She hadn't said a word since they had met up, or if she had Rarity hadn't heard her. She too had a scroll with her though, and it said the same thing as Rarity's.

"So then dear, what do you suppose this all means?" Rarity tried to strike up a conversation with Fluttershy again. "I mean, it's not every day you wake up in Manehattan is it? Unless you're lucky enough to live here I suppose, but then I'm sure that these scrolls aren't usual. What do you suppose they mean?"

Fluttershy opened her mouth. Whatever it was she said was drowned out by a sudden shout just nearby. Rarity swiveled around in time to see some other pony being swarmed by strange floating red symbols. Before her eyes, more and more of the symbols appeared, and seemed to attach to the pony, blocking her from view. Then, after only a few seconds, the symbols dispersed, but where there had been a pony only seconds before, now there was no one. Rarity reflexively took a step back.

"Did that pony just disappear? But she couldn't have, she was an earth pony! Unless those tacky floating symbols had something to do with it." Rarity felt a soft tug at her tail. She turned to find Fluttershy with it in her mouth. Seeing that she had Rarity's attention, she dropped the tail and pointed just to the right. Rarity followed the direction with her gaze, and spotted more of the symbols swarming over other ponies, also disappearing after a short amount of time. A group broke off from their latest victim and started flying towards Rarity and Fluttershy.

"Oh dear. Fluttershy, I think it might be time to run." Rarity turned on the spot and started running. Fluttershy followed on wing. After only a few feet though, Rarity felt her legs get caught under her and she tripped headlong. Fluttershy stopped to help her up, but it was too late. Symbols were approaching from all sides. Rarity used her only weapon left in her arsenal.

Having been an only child for most of her life, Rarity was good at getting what she wanted. Sometimes it required sickening sweetness, other times she got it by whining. But when all else failed, she had one final resort. Her scream, which on a clear day could be heard half a mile away, and had been known to knock birds out of their flight path at its peak. The ultimate weapon. She let loose one now, hoping that their attackers would be deterred. Alas, this was not to be the case, and the things keep coming closer. Rarity kept screaming, now out of hope that someone would notice her and save her.

"Rarity! Fluttershy!" Rarity stopped screaming. She knew that voice! Looking around, she saw Pinkie Pie running towards them. At least she assumed it was Pinkie Pie, although her normally frizzy and uncontrollable mane was now straight, and possibly duller. Pinkie kept shouting. "You two need to make a pact! Hurry or you'll be erased!"

Pact? Erased? What nonsense was Pinkie spouting now? Still, this had been a rather strange day. "What do you mean? How are we supposed to do that!?" She turned to Fluttershy. "Do you have any idea what she's on about?"

Fluttershy started to shake her head, then paused. Slowly she began to nod. Still not saying a word, she carefully placed her forehead against Rarity's or at least as close as she could with Rarity's horn in the way. Before Rarity could ask what she was doing, a pillar of light bloomed out of the ground, surrounding the two friends. Just at that second the symbols reached them, and their surroundings started to melt away.

Twilight could only stand in shock as she saw one after another of the red symbols - Noise symbols, that's what Pinkie said they were - pile onto the spot where Fluttershy and Rarity had been. "No... they can't be.... they've been..." She could feel tears begin to well up.

Pinkamena on the other hand seemed unfazed by what happened. Twilight rounded on her angrily, tears flowing now. "How can you just sit there so calmly?! Our friends just got erased, and we'll never see them again!"

Pinkamena sighed. "No they didn't. They haven't been erased. They made a pact in time. They'll be fighting off the Noise now, and there is literally no way you can lose your first Noise fight if you have a pact."

"They made the pact in time? Then where are they? They've vanished! Doesn't that mean they've been erased?"

"And just when I thought I'd explained everything to you... You don't fight Noise here. They transport you to a different plane, the Noise plane. We can't see my friends anymore because they're fighting in the Noise plane. Make sense?"

Twilight considered this for a while. "So, they're on a different plane of existence than us? But that's really powerful magic! Most unicorns are unable to Plane shift, and yet these Noise things make it happen just like that?"

"I don't know the details, but yeah. Technically we're on a different plane than normal as well, the Underground. The plane we normally exist on is the Real Ground. So I guess if we've already changed planes once, it's a bit easier the second time around."

"Okay, I suppose that makes a sort of sense," Twilight said. She looked back at where Fluttershy and Rarity had vanished. "So we just have to wait and they'll come back?"

"Once they've defeated the noise, yes."

Rarity slowly opened her eyes again. She wished she'd kept them closed. In front of her were three frogs, although they were like no frogs Rarity had ever seen. One of the three jumped at her before she had a chance to do anything. It landed on her head.

"Ah! Get it off, get it off!" she cried out, quickly backing away. The offending frog leapt away, using Rarity's face as a springboard. The force of the leap was greater than Rarity was expecting, and she found herself propelled the opposite way. She hit something behind her, and slumped to the ground, winded, but on the whole unhurt. She staggered back to her feet, and looked behind her to see what she hit. But there was nothing there. It seemed she had just stopped in the middle of the street, as if there was a wall of glass. She reached a hoof out to test this theory, and discovered that she couldn't move it past a certain point. There was no feeling of glass under hoof, just a barrier. Past it, she could see Fluttershy, also confronted by three frogs. The frogs! Rarity wheeled around just in time to see another frog leaping at her.

"Oh no you don't, not this time!" Rarity reached for her magic. She wasn't sure what she could do, magic wasn't her strong point certainly. But she could probably at least halt the frog in its tracks. She focused on the frog. A second before the it could make contact, a pillar of ice, glittering like diamond, speared up from the ground, impaling the frog. The pillar vanished a second afterwards, taking the frog with it. Rarity found herself gasping. Since when could she do that?

She didn't have time to marvel for long though, another frog was leaping towards her. Well, if she could do it once... Once again she focused, and was reward with a pillar of ice spearing the frog. It vanished faster than a pillar of ice had any right to do, not even leaving a puddle of water. Rarity, deciding she had the hang of this, decided to go on the offensive. She focused on the last frog, preparing to duplicate the feat... only to find it wasn't working. She tried again, focusing harder, but still nothing. She began to panic. The last frog sensed its chance, and leapt at the unicorn. Rarity jumped to side before the frog attached, but fumbled her landing, and fell on the ground for the second time that day.

She stumbled back onto her feet, feeling a bit sore from the second tumble. From here she could see Fluttershy, now also down to one frog. She was hovering just above the ground, dodging all the frog's leaps. Forgetting her own battle for the moment, Rarity watched Fluttershy. Suddenly she stopped evading, and closed her eyes. The frog lunged. Rarity was sure the frog would land a hit, but before it even got close, a ring of shadow seemed to surround Fluttershy. Despite it being shadow, the frog landed on this ring, and paused. It didn't leap off again; instead it disintegrated in a

flash of black and white static. Her friend's safety assured, Rarity turned her mind back to her own. But the frog on her side had vanished. Even as Rarity was looking around for it, the world went blurry, and equestrian shapes began to fade into existence. For now, she seemed to be safe.

It was only about a minute before Pinkamena saw Rarity and Fluttershy fading back into existence. She rushed over to them, giving them both a hug. "Oh thank Celestia you two are all right!"

Rarity beamed at her. "Why of course we're okay darling. But what's happened to your hair? It's so straight! I thought your hair didn't straighten, after all it didn't take when we were getting ready for the Gala."

"Oh, yeah. Um, there's a perfectly good reason for that. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Did you two see Rainbow Dash or Applejack anywhere?"

Fluttershy shook her head mutely. Rarity did one better. "Not at all. Why, are they in some sort of trouble?"

"We're all in some sort of trouble Rarity. But I'd sooner explain this once we've found Rainbow Dash and Applejack. I've already said all this once today, I don't want to make it three times."

"If you say so dear, but how do you know they'll be here in Manehattan? I don't even know why we're in Manehattan!"

"That's part of what I need to tell you. Like I say, I'd sooner we found Applejack and Rainbow Dash first." Pinkamena paused to look at her hoof. The timer read 23:57. "Well, we still have plenty of time to try and find them. I'm sure they're both okay, they're resourceful ponies." A shadow of doubt flitted across her face.

"I'm afraid you're not making any sense dear. But if we must find our friends, then the three of us shall not rest until they are found."

Pinkamena managed a smile. It felt like it hurt. "I know we will. Oh, but there's actually four of us. Let me introduce my partner, Twilight Sparkle. She'll be helping us in the coming week."

Rarity managed a small curtsy. "Pleasure to meet you miss Sparkle. My name is Rarity, and my friend back there is Fluttershy. You'll excuse her if she doesn't say much, she's always nervous around new ponies."

Pinkamena opened her mouth to say something else, but was distracted by a tingling sensation on her front hoof. She looked, and discovered the timer had gone. Her eyes widened in shock. "Someone's reached Bits n' Bobs already! But that means that day's about to-"

End Day 1

Day Two

Chapter 4

Strategy

"Rainbow! Are you okay?" Thud. "RAINBOW DASH!" "HOW DARE YOU HURT MY FRIEND!" Crunch. " Fluttershy? Oh Celestia..." "... we can't fight this thing!" "... that thing has just killed-" Crash. "...I'm going down fighting, like the others." Thump. " Spike! ...send a letter to the Princess!"

Darkness. Then everything became light again, and Twilight Sparkle sat bolt upright, gasping for breath. Slowly she remembered where she was. Manehattan. Looking around, she found she was still in the square. Not too far away from her, Pinkie was lying on the pavement, asleep. Right. So this wasn't just a dream. That was her last hope gone. She stood up and looked at the crowd around her. Busy ponies on their way to their busy lives. Living their lives while others fought for their own.

Twilight turned her thoughts away from this topic, and they settled on another one. Rarity and Fluttershy didn't recognise her. But they recognised Pinkie, even looking as different as she did. So why not her? Why had her friends forgotten about her?

The answer came a moment later. Pinkie had said that to play this game you had to sacrifice what you held most dear as an entry fee. And what did Twilight hold most dear? Her friends. And so her friends became her entry fee, or at least their memories of her. Tears threatened to well up in her eyes, but she fought them back. No. She couldn't let the others know. She had to win this game and get her entry fee back. She had to get her life back, her friends back, and her friends' lives back.

Further thoughts on the topic were interrupted by Pinkie. *No, not Pinkie. Pinkamena.* The pink pony was waking up, letting out a stream of

unintelligible noises, her eyes still closed. "-end. Wha-" Her eyes snapped open, taking in her surroundings. "Horse apples. It must be day two then."

"Day two? You mean we've been asleep for an entire day?" Twilight asked aghast. "But how is that possible? We were wide awake just minute ago, and then suddenly we wake up here?"

Pinkamena shrugged. "I don't know how it happens, all I know is that it does." She looked around briefly. "Oh good. Rarity and Fluttershy are just over there. I should probably go explain what's going on. You want to sit through the explanation again?"

"I'll be fine. Actually, wait. Something's been bothering me. You say we're dead? Then why can't I remember how I died?"

"It could be for a few reasons. For example, your memories might be your entry fee-

"No, not my memories," Twilight muttered under her breath.

"-Or you could have died in a traumatic way. Traumatic deaths tend to take a while to come to grips with. But you'll remember eventually." Pinkamena started walking towards Rarity, who was just waking up. She spoke over her shoulder to Twilight. "Still what does it matter? Doesn't make you any less dead."

After filling Rarity and Fluttershy in, a decision had to be reached. Since they hadn't found Rainbow Dash or Applejack yesterday, it was agreed that finding them was an important priority. But there was some debate as to how important.

"If we don't all go back together, there's no point in going back at all!" declared Pinkamena. "So we need to find them first, and focus on the mission later."

Rarity was vocally opposed to this. "How can you be so cruel Pinkie? I agree it would be best if all five of us made it back-" Twilight had to force back tears at this. "-but to say it's all or none? We've still got family to get

back to! Sweetie Belle is probably heartbroken by now, and I know our parents don't have enough time to raise her on their own. And Fluttershy has her animals to look after. We can't get back unless we complete the missions!"

"That's what the other players are for. It doesn't matter which pair completes a mission, so long as it gets cleared. Which leaves us free to search for Applejack and Dash."

"But how do we know they can do it? I'd sooner not leave my life in the hooves of strangers."

"Fine, we put it to a vote then. Which do we focus on? The mission or Dash and AJ? I'm voting our friends, you?"

"The mission of course!" Rarity turned to Fluttershy. "Support me here darling. We've got to do the mission first, right?"

Fluttershy looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook her head. She pointed at Pinkamena.

"Ha! That's two votes for searching for AJ and Dash first. Sorry Rarity, looks like I get my way?"

Rarity fumed. "Oh, but the voting's not over yet. Miss Sparkle still has to cast her vote."

Pinkamena waved a dismissive hoof. "She doesn't get a vote. She has no reason to choose to search for Applejack and Rainbow Dash, so she only has one option."

Twilight didn't like being talked about like she wasn't there, especially by her friends. "Actually I think I do get a vote. And I vote we do both."

"Both?" Rarity and Pinkie echoed the last word.

"Yes, both," Twilight affirmed. "You're forgetting something. We're two pairs, not one quartet. Pinkamena and I have to stay together, and Rarity and Fluttershy have to stay together, but our two groups don't have to stay

together. So one of our groups should try and complete the mission, and the other should try and find our- your friends."

Pinkamena and Rarity looked at each other. "I guess that would work," said Pinkamena. "So we'll look for Applejack and Rainbow Dash."

"And Fluttershy and I can complete the mission," Rarity added.

Twilight shook her head. "Actually I think it should be the other way around." Seeing the confused looks she got, she continued. "Pinkamena told me she'd played this game before, so she'd be best prepared to deal with whatever the Reapers throw at us. And Applejack and Rainbow Dash won't reco- don't know me, and Pinkamena doesn't look like she normally does, so they might be suspicious of us. So Rarity and Fluttershy should try and find them. Besides, being able to fly will be an advantage in looking for them."

Silence. Then Pinkamena sighed. "You make a good point. I hadn't thought of that." She looked back at Rarity. "We'll take care of the mission then. But you have to promise you'll find them."

"I'll do one better than that dear, I Pinkie Pie Swear it." Rarity mimed out the actions as she said the words. "Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye."

A frown flickered across Pinkamena's face, quickly being replaced with a half hearted smile. "Thanks Rarity. I know I can count on you. Oh, and I know this'll sound strange, but try to fight as many noise as you can safely. The more you fight the stronger you'll get, and there might be some point where you'll need to fight anyway."

Rarity nodded. "To be frank, I'm still a bit confused about the fighting. You say the we draw upon magic from these pins?" She indicated the sash she was wearing, identical to the other's except for the pins on it. Rarity had, along with the skull pin, a pin with a column of diamonds that looked a bit like her cutie mark, and one with various gems forming a staggered v-shape.

"Yup. If I had to guess, the first of those will form an ice pillar, and the other will drop rocks or something on your enemies." She then turned to

Fluttershy. "Fluttershy, your ones look like they'll be a barrier that'll protect you from harm while damaging the Noise, and one that creates stationary orbs of water." Fluttershy's pins were one of a butterfly, like the ones on her cutie mark, but black and grey, and a turtle with a light blue shell.

Rarity nodded. "Thank you for letting us know. You take care dear. We'll find Applejack and Rainbow Dash before you know it." With a nod to Twilight, Rarity and Fluttershy were on their way. Just as they vanished from sight, two scrolls appeared in front of Twilight and Pinkamena. The day's mission had arrived.

"Mission 2: Find and erase the Noise in charge of Mr Ed's Theater. You have 180 minutes. Failure will result in erasure. The Reapers." Twilight felt the sharp pain in her hoof again. The timer had returned, ticking down from 180:00. She turned to Pinkamena. "So we just have to defeat some Noise? This won't be a problem, right?"

"I wouldn't say that. The wording of the mission is a clue. 'The Noise in charge?' Sounds like a boss Noise."

"You mean like in a video game?" Twilight hadn't played any video games, believing them to be a waste of time that could be better spent studying. However Spike had talked her into getting a Pon-e Haystation for him, and she'd watched him play in his off hours a bit. So she was familiar with the idea of a boss, an extra powerful enemy that had to be defeated.

"Yes, exactly like in a video game." Pinkamena stared off into the middle distance for a heartbeat, then looked back at Twilight. "It'll be tougher than the Noise we fought yesterday, so we'll need to do some other battles before then."

"Well, alright. I guess I need the experience. Can you just remind me what my other pin does?" Twilight indicated the starburst designed pin set next to the others on her sash.

"It'll shoot magic blasts rapid fire. Not very powerful, but fast. And while I'm on the subject, I guess you want to know about mine?" She indicated her two pins, one decorated with her balloon cutie mark, and the other with a knife embedded in a cupcake. "You've already seen me use the cupcake

one, that's how I do the flurry attack. As for the other one..." She smiled. "Why don't we have a demonstration?"

Pinkamena tapped her skull pin, activating her mind reading. Twilight was confused. How would reading minds help demonstrate battle techniques? She was about to ask, when one of the Noise symbols appeared in front of her. Startled she leapt backwards. Pinkamena's eyes opened. "And now we fight."

The square dissolved around them, taking the passer-bys with it, replacing them with two of the frog Noise. They wasted no time, and one of them already sprung at Twilight. She made a quick sidestep, letting the frog sail harmlessly past. She followed its progress, and spotted Pinkamena on the other half of the battlefield. The pink pony, now holding Twilight's interest, smiled. "This is what my other pin does." She turned, looking at one of the frogs. Suddenly she wasn't standing where she was anymore. Instead she was hovering just above the frog she had been looking at, and crashed down on the Noise. The Noise vanished in a burst of static. She turned back to Twilight. "And that's what it does. Now, eyes front soldier."

Twilight whirled around and narrowly ducked under the other frog's leap. Time for her to try out this new pin did then. She focused, trying to visualise magic bursts firing towards the frog. She was rewarded with a stream of purple sparks firing from her horn roughly towards the frog. About half of them missed their mark, but the rest made contact, causing the frog to vanish in a manner similar to its compatriot. The world rematerialised around the pair of ponies.

"You're better at this than I thought you'd be." Twilight turned to find Pinkamena just behind her. "Have you been in battles before?"

Only against one of Equestria's immortal goddesses, Twilight thought. And an Ursa Minor. Some diamond dogs. A hydra. Huh. I guess I have been in more than a few battles. Aloud she said, "I guess I'm just a natural at this." She looked at the timer on her hoof. 168:34. "Huh. It really doesn't feel like it's been twelve minutes since we got this mission. Feels more like... I don't know. Less than twelve."

"Oh well that's because...." Pinkamena trailed off. Finally she shrugged.
"Okay, I don't know why that is. Maybe time goes faster when we're fighting Noise? Look, I don't know everything."

"Well if we're going to get this mission done, maybe we should start making our way to this Mr Ed's theater, where ever that is." Twilight looked around, trying to figure out what way to go. "Please tell me you know where it is. I'm hopeless at finding my way around without a map."

Pinkamena nodded. "They had me running basically all over this city last time I played. I can still remember where everything is. Mr Ed's Theater is that way." She started walking off, only to stop a few second later. "No, wait.... that way." She turned around and resumed walking. Twilight watched just to make sure she didn't change her mind again, then followed after her.

Chapter 5

Reapers

"Nope sorry, we haven't seen any pony matching either of those descriptions."

"Oh. Sorry to bother you then. We'll be on our way."

That was the third pair they'd asked, and none of them had seen Applejack or Rainbow Dash. Still, it was too soon to give up hope. Fluttershy looked around the crowded square, searching for the spots of silence that indicated a mind unreadable. Since she couldn't help with the questioning, Rarity had her scanning full time to find more pairs. Mostly though, she was distracted by the thoughts of the living ponies.

It was so frustrating Fluttershy could just scream. Here she was, a pony content to go through life with as little attention paid to her as possible, and she finally had it. Complete anonymity. And it turned out it wasn't what she had hoped it would be. Yes, she wanted to hide from the world, but she always thought that would come with the option to speak up if she needed to. Here though, her voice was gone. Even if she wanted to be heard, she couldn't express herself.

"Well it was never going to be easy to find them," Rarity broke in on Fluttershy's thoughts. "Are you sure you don't want to do a quick fly-over to see if you can spot them?"

Well, at least she could still convey yes or no. Fluttershy shook her head. The idea of separating from Rarity, even for a short while, didn't sit well. What if she was attacked and Rarity didn't notice? She couldn't scream for help, and on her own, she was as good as dea- erased. She instead pointed in the direction of the next pair.

"Well, if you insist dear. Who knows, maybe the fourth time's the charm." Rarity starting walking in the direction Fluttershy indicated. Only a few steps later, she tripped. Fluttershy hovered over and helped her up again.

"Thank you Fluttershy. I swear the pavement stones here must be uneven. I've never tripped so much in my life."

The next pair of ponies consisted of a sea-blue unicorn and a pea-green pegasus. "Pardon me!" Rarity called out once they were close enough. "You there! The blue unicorn and green pegasus."

The pair looked around in confusion, finally spotting Rarity and Fluttershy. "More players!" It was the pegasus that spoke. "Oh thank goodness, I was beginning to worry we were the only pair in the game."

Fluttershy's heart sank. If Rarity and her were the first pair they'd seen, it was unlikely that they would know anything about Applejack and Rainbow Dash. She began scanning again. Rarity continued unfazed though.

"Yes yes, we're all in this game. How terrible right? Anyway, I just wanted to know if you'd seen some friends of mine."

The pair looked at each other. "You mean you're just looking for any friends, or certain friends in particular?" the unicorn asked.

"Yes, that's it exactly. Oh, where are my manners? I'm Rarity, and my friend over there is Fluttershy." Fluttershy waved a hoof shyly. "And we're looking for our friends, Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Maybe you've seen them? One's a blue pegasus with a rainbow coloured mane, and the other's an orange earth pony wearing a hat. Oh, and they probably both have no semblance of grooming or grace."

"Well... I don't think we've seen anypony like that. Oh, I'm Sea Breeze, and my partner is Oriens Ventus," said the unicorn.

"Oh..." disappointment tinged Rarity's voice. "Still, no matter, I'm sure we'll find them eventually. Sorry to have bothered you." Rarity began to turn away.

"Wait! Well, we haven't seen any pony that matched those descriptions perfectly," Oriens said. "But there was a blue earth pony with a rainbow mane at Bits n' Bobs yesterday when the mission finished. And she was with another earth pony with a hat, but she sounded rather upper class."

"I suppose it's as good a lead as any we've got. May we inquire if you've seen them today?"

Oriens shook his head. "Not today. Like I said, it was yesterday. But your friend's a pegasus, can't she just fly up and search from the sky?"

"See Fluttershy?" Rarity's tone was victorious. "I'm not the only one who thinks this would be easier if you searched from the sky."

Fluttershy tried to shrink into the ground, shaking her head. She knew it made sense, but there was just too much that could go wrong.

"Guess she's afraid of heights," Sea Breeze snickered. "A pegasus afraid of heights, who knew?"

Surprisingly, it was Oriens who came to Fluttershy's defence first. "It's more common than you'd think Sea Breeze. Those of us who were born or raised away from Cloudsdale are more likely to be, since we've spent more time on the ground, but it's not unheard of for weak flyers to be... reluctant to leave the ground." He turned to Fluttershy. "I'd wager you're one of the latter, would I be right miss? Well, no problem. If it's that big a deal for you to find your friends, I can search for you."

Rarity's eyes went wide. "Really? You'd do that for us? But we've only just met! Why? You're not doing this just to impress us are you?"

Oriens smiled. "Do I really need a reason to help someone?"

"So in other words, yes, he is doing this just to impress you." That statement earned Sea Breeze a glare, which she met with a teasing smile.

"Sometimes I don't know why I put up with you," Oriens muttered under his breath.

"It's all part of my charm. You know you love it."

Rarity coughed. "Is this really important flirting, or were you going to search for our friends?" she asked, trying not to sound too pushy.

"Right, of course. I'll give the square a quick circuit and see if I can spot them. I'll be back before you know it." And he was off, spiraling lazily into the air.

Fluttershy watched him, worried something was going to happen. When she could see him no longer, she went back to scanning the crowd. Rarity went back to conversing with Sea Breeze.

"So, I take it you two knew each other before the game then?" Rarity was asking.

"Oh yes. We've been going out for the last year or so. We're engaged actually." Sea Breeze indicated the ribbon in her mane. "He gave that to me the night he proposed. It was the most wonderful night of my life."

"I see. If it's not too personal, how did you two meet?"

"That's not personal at all. Let's see, it started when-"

A cry ripped through the air. Sea Breeze's eyes widened and her ears stood up in shock. "Ori!" she cried out, and rushed off. Fluttershy and Rarity followed in equal haste. The cry had come from almost the other side of the square, and by the time they had got there it was too late. Oriens' body lay on the ground, his breathing ragged.

"Ori? Ori, it's me, Breeze. Please wake up..." Breeze crouched beside her fiancé, nudging him gently with her horn. It was clear she was holding back tears.

Oriens' eyes fluttered open. "Breeze... Did the fall... hurt?"

"Fall? What are you talking, about, you're the one who fell."

"I mean... your fall.... from heaven to earth...."

Despite the situation, a laugh escaped Breeze's lips, mingled with a sob of relief. "You're not hurt then? You're going to be okay?"

"I wouldn't say that..." Wincing, Oriens lifted his wing, revealing a gash underneath. Blood oozed from the wound, staining his coat red. Breeze looked on aghast.

"Oh my Ori, what happened? Who is responsible for this?"

"Aww, and I was sure I'd finished him off too." Fluttershy jumped at the new voice, and zoomed round behind Rarity. Sea Breeze took a defensive stance over Oriens' body, turning to find the speaker, while Rarity turned as gracefully as she could. Considering Fluttershy was clinging to her, this wasn't very graceful at all.

The speaker was a peach coloured pony, with red highlights running through her otherwise white mane. Just behind her was another pony, this one a dark blue pegasus with a black mane. Both of them were floating a few metres above the ground, despite the peach pony having no wings.

"Sorry, but could you all move out of my way? If I don't erase your coltfriend, then I lose my bet, and I won't get a free bowl of daisy soup! Is that what you want?"

"You made that bet. I didn't. I don't have to keep it," the blue stallion said in a monotone. He touched down a few metres away, folding his wings away. "Finish the job. Erase all of them."

"Aww, but I just want to have some fun! Can't you lighten up, High Tide?" The other pony landed. "But you know, if I erase them all, that'll bring my streak to 12, and then you'll owe me a dandelion salad as well."

"Didn't make that bet. I won't pay up."

Fluttershy realised that these must be Reapers. And not the kind that watched from the sidelines either, the kind that actively hunted players.

Sea Breeze glared at the duo. "You... you're the ones who hurt Ori?"

The peach pony giggled. "Oh no, that was the Noise. But I suppose we're the ones who made the Nosie attack him so... Tide, does that mean we're the one's who hurt him?"

The pegasus shrugged. "Sure. Why not."

Breeze's horn ignited. "You monsters. How can you be so calm about this? You'll pay for what you did to Ori!"

"Ooh, this one has some fight in her! That's what I like to see!" The female Reaper laughed a fillyish laugh. "Come on then, let's play! Maybe you'll be a better playmate than your coltfriend. He was soo boring, barely any endurance. I mean really, what sort of loser goes down after only one itty bitty sneak attack?"

Sea Breeze's nostrils flared. "You are so going down!" She ready herself to charge, but as she tried to leap forward she found herself held back. She glanced down to find Oriens holding her hind leg.

"Breeze, don't do this... you won't survive... and I won't without you either..."

A look of concern passed over Breeze's face. "But if we don't fight she's going to erase us."

"Do you really think we'll allow that to happen?" Rarity spoke up. She stepped between the Reaper and the pair. "Oriens got hurt trying to help us. So this is our fault."

"What? No, it's not your fault!"

Rarity waved a hoof to silence her. "Of course it's our fault. So we shall defeat this mannerless lout for you. Right Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy was already doing all she could to not run away. The only thing that had kept her near Rarity was the knowledge that it was safer than the alternatives. She looked back at Sea Breeze and Oriens, and steeled her resolve. Tentatively, she took her place beside Rarity, opposing the Reapers. The peach Reaper cricked her neck.

"Oh it's been too long since I got to have any real fun!" She grinned a disturbing smile. "Let's see how long you can entertain me." Without any more warning, she charged. Fluttershy closed her eyes, bracing for impact. A second passed. Two seconds. Five seconds and still no impact. Fluttershy peaked out to see the blue Reaper between them and his Partner.

"Tide, what are you doing? Didn't you want me to erase them all?" There was a note of underlying rage in the Reaper's voice, barely detectable.

"We're not allowed to do this. No direct fighting with the Players. Those are the rules."

"But Ti-ide, I just want to play with them a little! Can't we break the rules just this once?"

"Candy Cane." High Tide's voice hadn't changed at all, but his partner seemed to flinch at his words.

"Fine, I'll play by the rules. But you'll owe me a veggie dog as well after this."

"I didn't agree to this bet."

Ignoring him, Candy Cane gave a high-pitched whistle, forcing all present to try and block their ears as best as possible. Within a few seconds, the air around her was thick with Noise symbols. Only these weren't the same as the ones Fluttershy and Rarity dealt with the previous day. These one were all circular, but with four small holes on the sides, giving the eerie impression of eyes. With a stomp of her hoof, Candy Cane sent to symbols flying towards Fluttershy and Rarity, surrounding them. Like the frog Noise symbols before them, they began to expand into three dimensions. They bulged at the middle, changing from a circle to a sphere, while the gaps stayed apparent. They seemed somehow familiar to Fluttershy, although she couldn't quite put her hoof on it. Until a set of wings unfolded from the back of the Noise.

"Mrrrt, brrp."

"Ugh, a parasprite?" Rarity let out a groan of disgust. "How ghastly! They were bad enough last time we dealt with them."

Fluttershy shared her companion's distaste for the creatures, especially since the Noise versions of them had lost their only redeeming quality, their cuteness. The swarm circled the pair, and the Underground began to fade around them, being replaced by the Noise plane battleground. It was now

Fluttershy looked up. If she was able to, she would have screamed. Scores of parasprites blotted the sky, their multicoloured bodies giving the impression that Celestia couldn't decide what colour the sky should be and decided on all of them.

It didn't take long before the Noise made the first move. A group of about ten parasprites broke off from the main swarm, flying on a collision course with Fluttershy. The pegasus activated her shadow barrier a moment before impact, protecting her from the assault. The parasprites made no effort to correct their course, slamming into the barrier, and each disintegrating with a white flash as it made contact.

Fluttershy looked down at the pin powering the barrier. It was glowing brightly, a sign that it would last for a while. Her own defence seen to, Fluttershy looked around to see how Rarity was doing. The unicorn was having a harder time, having to constantly fend off attacks. As Fluttershy watched, a group broke off from the main swarm and rushed Rarity. They didn't get far before an ice pillar pierced through them, erasing all of them, even those that were only brushed by the column. Another group was attacking from the other side, and it too met with the same fate. The next swarm was buried under a sudden rockfall. Despite how well she was doing, Fluttershy could tell Rarity was struggling just to keep them at a horn's length.

Fluttershy turned her attention back to her side of the battle. The swarm had been quiet since she had activated the barrier. The barrier that had just run out. Sensing their opportunity, the swarm surged towards Fluttershy, extending a tendril of parasprites. Fluttershy was disoriented by the sudden loss of her barrier, and was struck by the parasprites. Before she could recover from this attack, another swarm had reached her, and this too struck her. And then another. The assault was relentless, slowly but surely draining Fluttershy of her power. She saw why the parasprites could attack so haphazardly. They couldn't survive a hit, but if they could get in a hit their superior numbers would quickly overwhelm their victim. As was happening to her.

Looking up, Fluttershy could see another element to their strategy. With every blow a parasprite connected, another one spawned in the above swarm, allowing the attacks to come even faster. It was a vicious cycle, and one that she was now trapped in. It was hopeless, she was just too weak.

She had let down Rarity, she had let down Pinkie, she had let down Applejack and Rainbow Dash, she had let down....

Shing. A flash interrupted her thoughts. The barrier pin had recharged. What was she doing? She couldn't let every pony down! Her friends needed her! Drawing on the little energy she had left, she focused on her shadow barrier again, successfully forming it and prevent any further attack. The swarm continued attacking under its own momentum, crashing into the barrier like waves breaking against a rock. Casting a glance behind her, Fluttershy could tell Rarity was having trouble. She had managed to keep them at bay this long, but if they managed to break through... well, Rarity didn't have a barrier to protect her. It would be over in a matter of seconds. They had to end the fight before that could happen.

Fluttershy gingerly stretched her wings, and with a few flaps ascended into the heart of the swarm, her barrier still active. It erased the Parasprites on contact, clearing a path for Fluttershy's flight. She continued to fly through the swarm, erasing swathes of parasprites at once. She checked her pin. It had dulled, now barely emitting any light. It was a sign that it would soon disperse, leaving her one again at the mercy of the swarm until it returned. But Fluttershy forced herself not to panic. She still had her other pin, the one with a turtle on it. If she could just figure out how to work the thing...

She descended again, touching down just as the barrier deactivated. The swarm wasn't far behind, though there was far fewer of them now. Fluttershy tried to remember what Pinkie had told her about the pin.

Oh, what did it do? Was it something to do with water? Balls of water maybe? It was as good a lead as any. She thought back to how she first activated her shadow barrier. She was being attacked by those frogs, and she wished there was something between them and her.... Was that it? Was it imagining things? Oh, if she was a unicorn she just knew she'd have no problem.

The swarm was closer now, and closing in fast. Fluttershy closed her eyes, and imaged a large ball of water between her and the swarm. She opened her eyes again to find no sphere before her, only ravenous parasprites. She tried again, wishing twice as hard as last time. No luck, and the Noise were almost upon her. Belatedly she realised that maybe she was imaging

the size of the orb too big. She tried for what she was sure would be her last time, this time visualising the sphere as only two hoof spans across.

It worked, and the parasprites flew head on into the orb, dissolving into nothingness as they made contact. Stranger, the sphere moved with contact, floating in the direction it was hit. Fluttershy formed another orb, this time right in the middle of the parasprite swarm. A gaping hole appeared in the swarm, the ball having bounced off each parasprite it killed into another grouping. A few more strategically placed orbs and the swarm was almost finished.

A scream interrupted Fluttershy's assault. Looking over, she found she could no longer see Rarity, the unicorn being mobbed by parasprites. And the things were multiplying again, beginning to repopulate the sky almost as quickly as Fluttershy had cleared it. *Rarity!* Fluttershy opened her mouth to scream, but her voice stubbornly stayed missing. An anger built up inside her, the same kind that she had felt the day she had stared down the dragon. The feeling gave her a second wind, and she activated her barrier and flew into the midst of the swarm once again. She was erasing the parasprites as fast as she could, racing the clock. She flew faster than she had flown in her life, desperate to save her friend. She circled the swarm, circling tighter with each pass, trimming the Noise down to a only a score or so. With one final sweep, they too were gone. She looked over at Rarity's side of the field in time to see the last of the matching parasprites dissolve. They had survived. They had won.

As soon as the battleground had been replaced with the Underground once again, Fluttershy rushed to her friend's side to make sure she was okay. Rarity was shakily regaining her footing, but otherwise okay.

"They certainly were a hoofful weren't they? Thank Celestia you managed to finish them before they got me." Fluttershy blushed at the praise.

"They survived? They really survived?" Candy Cane's voice was incredulous. "Well, at least they're not going to be boring, Alright then my little ponies, for our next game-"

"Your streak's broken," High Tide interrupted. "Back to zero. I win the bet."

"What? But you said you didn't make the bet!" A note of rage crept into Candy Cane's voice.

"No. But you did. You owe me a sandwich."

Candy Cane's eye twitched as she regarded Fluttershy and Rarity. "You hear that? You've lost me my bet! I was going to draw this out, but now I think I'll just erase you right now!" She started calling up Noise symbols again. Fluttershy braced herself for another onslaught. Before they were set upon however, High Tide stepped between the pair and Candy Cane again.

"You lost. Sandwich. Now."

"But they... they're.... you.... ARRGGHHH!" Candy stormed off into the sky, muttering curses as she went. Tide spread his wings, preparing to follow her. He turned to Fluttershy and Rarity.

"You fight well. Hope you survive. Later." He took off after his partner. With a few wingbeats, he was beyond the pair's sight. They headed back over to where Oriens was still lying.

"Are you two okay? They didn't try anything while we were fighting those Noise did they?" Rarity radiated concern.

"Not at all. I think they were too busy watching you." With some help from his fiancé, Oriens struggled to his feet. "I guess I'm in your debt now."

"Whyever do you say that? If it weren't for us, you wouldn't have been attacked in the first place. Besides, we would have helped even if you hadn't tried to help." Fluttershy nodded an emphatic yes.

"Be that as it may, you didn't force me to help. And you saved not only my life, but Breeze's as well. I think you'll find we're squarely in your debt."

"Just agree, he won't rest until he finds some way to owe you," interjected Sea Breeze.

"Well he's just going to have to go away disappointed. No pony owes Rarity anything."

There was a silence as the two debtors stared each other down. Finally Oriens cracked, smiling. "Well I guess if you really want things to be even between us, fine. Neither of us owes the other."

"Good. I'm glad you finally saw sense," said Rarity with just a hint of smugness.

"So it's agreed? We're even then?" Oriens smile widened. "Then I suppose if I were to, say, tell you that I managed to spot a rainbow mane roughly north of here before I was attacked, then you'd owe me, right?"

Rarity spluttered in panic. "Now wait a minute..." Fluttershy didn't quite hear the rest of what she had to say, as she leapt at Oriens with her hooves open wide, abruptly ending the hug when she realised she was hurting him. She shuffled away, trying to hide the blush colouring her cheeks.

Oriens grinned through the pain. "So, looks like your friend agrees, the debt is on the other hoof now."

"It certainly is not! We saved not only your life, but your fiancé's life as well, so I think you'll find we're even again. Let it never be said that Rarity owes any pony anything."

"Oh? I thought it was that no pony owes Rarity anything?"

"It goes both ways!"

"Well tell you what. I'm such a nice guy, I'll call it even. But you'll owe me for it."

"How is that any different?"

Fluttershy and Sea Breeze began pushing their respective partners away from each other. Breeze gave Fluttershy a smile. "Sorry about this, and thank you again for saving us. See you some other day maybe?"

Fluttershy nodded, still pushing Rarity away. It didn't take long for Oriens and Breeze to vanish into the crowd. Rarity finally calmed down, and the full impact of what Oriens said sank in.

"Wait, he said he saw a rainbow mane north? Fluttershy, do you know what this means? Rainbow Dash must be that way! Quickly, we must hurry!" She spun around in a hurry, and walked straight into some pony.

"Oww.... watch where you're...." Rarity trailed off as she saw the stallion she had collided with. "....going."

"My apologies ma'am. I wasn't watching where I was going. I am called Gathering Storm, and you are?"

He was handsome, that was for sure. He was slightly taller and more muscular than your standard stallion, which was unusual in a unicorn. He was aptly named as well, as his dark grey coat suggested storm clouds, with a streak of yellow running through his slightly spiked mane, like lightning. He wasn't Fluttershy's type, but she could understand why Rarity was currently lost for words.

"Ra.. Rarity. A pleasure to meet you Mr Storm." Rarity's eyelashes fluttered enough that an onlooker might mistake her for trying to fly. "I must say, it's always a pleasure to meet a gentlecolt like yourself... especially a *handsome* one like you."

"Oh Lady Rarity, you flatter me. I could say the same for you. It's just a shame about your mane though, it's the only thing that really stops you from being a true beauty."

"Well I... Pardon me?" Rarity's brain caught up with her ears. "Are you trying to say just because my mane is messy, that you don't think I'm beautiful? I'll have you know beauty is more than skin deep!"

"Is that what you really believe, or is that just what you'd like to be true? Anyway, I couldn't help but over-see you're helping of that other pair before."

"Oh that? That was nothing, after all, being generous is..."

"Incredibly stupid." Rarity was brought up short again. "Oh my dear Rarity, don't tell me you didn't know? Not everyone who wins the game can come back to life. Usually it's only one pair, or even sometimes only one player."

You in fact just made it less likely that you'll come back to life. Especially since your performance thus far has been rather lacking. That last battle? Your partner is the only reason you won. If she wasn't around, you would have been erased."

"But... wha.... how did you...?" Rarity struggled to form coherent words. "You could see our battle? But how?"

Storm smiled, a smile that made Fluttershy uneasy. "Oh, did I not mention? I'm a reaper. We can watch battles anytime we please."

A Reaper? Fluttershy sprang between Gathering Storm and her friend, an impressive feat considering the narrow gap between them. Storm merely chuckled. "Oh and here you are, the star of the battle. A little song bird who's lost her voice. Is that really what you value most in your life? Well, if something so unimportant is highest on your list of value, than where must things like your friendships lie, hmm? Something to keep in mind."

There was a brief whistling noise. Gathering Storm turned his head to the side as an apple flew past it. "And with that, I must take my leave. Good day to you ladies, and I hope you remember what I said." A bolt of lightning struck Storm, and he was gone. Rarity was still shaken by the encounter.

"Hmmp! The nerve! Who's he to tell us what we should and shouldn't do, right Fluttershy?" Fluttershy nodded her assent. "But that apple... where did it come from?"

A familiar, coltish voice called out from the crowd. "Well it's about time we found you!"

Chapter 6

Barriers

"Conditions met. Wall clear."

The air behind the reaper shimmered briefly. Twilight took a tentative step forward, waiting to meet resistance. Pinkamena however trotted through at a comfortable pace. "Come on Twilight, you heard the mare. The wall's gone."

"Well sorry for still not being used to all this," Twilight complained, quickening her pace to catch up with Pinkamena. "How do those walls even work anyway? I'd say it was an air compression spell used to increase the air pressure so much that it's impassable, but that wouldn't explain the shimmering, and it can't simply be a massive telekinesis gate because those require constant concentration to maintain, and..."

"Shh, did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Oh, something flew over my head. I think it was your magic jargon."

Twilight grinned sheepishly. "Hehe, sorry. I get a bit carried away when it comes to magic."

"It's no biggie. Most of my friends have something like that. Word of advice, don't talk to Rarity about fashion unless you're REALLY interested."

"I'll keep that in mind." *It's so weird having to pretend like this,* thought Twilight. *The hardest part is trying to remember what I'm not meant to know.* Aloud she spoke again. "So are all walls like that? Do we simply have to erase some Noise and we can go through?"

Pinkamena shook her head. "It's often up to the Reaper who put the wall up. Last game some of them had us running back and forth bringing them food because they couldn't leave their posts."

"Really? They used you as a pizza delivery service?"

"On the bright side, most of them weren't that fussy about it. It got to the point we just started carrying some small snacks with us just in case. It helped when we got hungry as well."

The pair walked on in silence for a while, Twilight still mulling over how the walls worked. *Summoning glass? No, they wouldn't want something that can be broken easily. It has to be something magic.* Her thoughts were interrupted when Pinkamena pointed ahead.

"Another wall's coming up. Might be more fighting. You up for it?"

"Huh? Oh yeah..." Twilight paused, unsure of how to put her next thought. "Uh, before we clear the wall, can I have a poke around with my magic a bit? I mean, we still have plenty of time right?"

Pinkamena looked at her hoof. 72:26 "Sure, I guess we've got time. I don't know that it'll help though. The Reapers wouldn't be using these walls if they weren't prepared to deal with ordinary unicorns."

Good thing I'm no ordinary unicorn then, thought Twilight. Pinkamena headed towards the Reaper in charge of the wall to find out the clear conditions, while Twilight moved closer to the wall. Gently she extended a hoof to touch it. Where it touched, the air shimmered and solidified, much like the first wall she ran into. But there was something else, barely perceptible. There was a slight tingling sensation, not unlike a static charge. It was small though, so small that most ponies wouldn't notice it. But to Twilight it signified one thing. The wall was indeed magic.

Well duh Twilight. That much was obvious. Still, that did make it easier to investigate. Twilight took a cautious look around, making sure there were no Reapers watching. Satisfied that there were none, she lowered her horn towards the wall and closed her eyes. It wasn't strictly necessary for a unicorn to close her eyes while doing magic. Indeed it was a mark of skill to be able to perform feats of magic with open eyes. Closing one's eyes however allowed greater focus on the magic, shutting out distractions and allowing a better visualisation of the arcane energies. Twilight sent a small pulse of magic through her horn, a simple exercise learnt by young unicorns

to detect magic. It worked on the same basic principles of echo-location, the pulse would bounce off, and be slightly amplified by, any ethereal forces nearby, and would be attracted back towards the unicorn's horn, here acting as a sort of lightning rod. The received pulse would then provide the user with a depiction of the nearby magic.

The pattern Twilight received made no sense. There were crisscrossing lines of magic, but they seemed to be spread randomly. *But magic has to have order to it!* Twilight thought on this for a moment before mentally correcting herself, *Unicorn magic has to have order to it. Without order, the magic would collapse on itself. There must be something I'm missing here...*

She didn't have a chance to mull on this further as Pinkamena had returned. "Well, convinced that it's beyond your knowledge yet?"

Twilight sighed. "I'm not willing to give up yet, but I don't want to spend too much time on this. So what do we have to do? More Noise?"

"Not this time. This time we've got to get *that* mare," Pinkamena pointed at a nearby unicorn sitting at a cafe table reading. "To talk to *this* mare," she pointed at another unicorn, seated at a table opposite the first one. "Or vice versa. It'll probably be easier the other way around."

"That's... really?" Twilight considered this. "But how? They can't see or hear us, how are we meant to get them to talk to one another?"

"We have ways. You know the skull pins we have? They can work both ways. We can read others' minds', but we can also plant ideas in their heads'."

Twilight looked at the pin on her sash. "These little things can do that? Do we get to keep these after the game? I'd love to study it...."

"Time and a place Twilight. Right now we have a wall to get through."

"Oh, right. Sorry. But if we can do that this should be easy right? We just need to place the idea of going and talking to that mare in her head."

"Not that easy I'm afraid. We can only plant one word. And it's up to them to decide how to interpret it. For example, while one pony might react to the word 'Cold' by putting on a sweater, another might start think she's coming down with a cold."

"That's inconvenient," said Twilight. "So what are we meant to do? I don't think any one word would be enough to make them talk to each other."

"It's just a matter of finding the right word. So first we need to know what they're thinking." Pinkamena tapped her Skull pin to start the mind reading. Twilight followed suit, focusing first on the unicorn reading the book.

Sigh, this is the fifth day we've both been here. Why can't I just work up the courage to talk to her instead of hiding behind this book? She probably hasn't even noticed me...

Twilight withdrew from the mental contact. The idea of using a book for something other than reading was abnormal to her. She also couldn't understand why it was so difficult to just talk to someone. She focused on the other unicorn next, not sure what to expect.

There she is, sitting there reading as always. I should just go talk to her, even just introduce myself. But she's reading, and what if she's one of those mares who hates being interrupted while they're reading? That's not the right hoof to start a relationship on.

Twilight deactivated her pin, shaking her head. Both these ponies wanted to talk to each other, so what was the problem? Why did neither talk to the other? "Well that didn't help at all."

"Au contraire, it helped hugely. We now know they both like each other and want to talk."

"How do they know they like each other?" Twilight asked. They've never even met."

Pinkamena looked at her with a pitying look. "Twilight, you really need to get out more."

Twilight was sure she'd missed something. "What? What do you mean? What?"

"You'll find out when you're older," Pinkamena replied, stifling a giggle. For a moment she almost sounded like her norm- her usual self. "Anyway, I think I know how we can make this work. First we need to get the one with the book to look up."

"Would the word 'up' work then? Or would that be too vague?"

"I have a better idea. Try the word 'look'."

Twilight was surprised. "Me? You want me to plant the word?"

"Sure. You're the unicorn, surely this sort of stuff should be easier for you. It's just like mind reading, but instead you imagine them saying the word."

Nervously, Twilight activated her pin again. She focused on the book reading unicorn once again. *Maybe I should give up. I mean she probably hasn't even noticed me, and it's not like there's anyway I can find out...* Seeing her chance, Twilight thought the single word, *Look*. A puzzled expression passed over the unicorn's face for a moment. *Look... hmm, maybe I can find out if she's noticed me. Maybe if I just take a quick look and see if she's looking at me...* She lowered the book to take a quick glance. The other unicorn flushed and quickly turned her gaze elsewhere. Pinkamena smirked.

"Good, we're halfway there then. Right, now we check on our other friend."

"Actually, since you seem to have this pretty much under control, can I go back and examine that wall some more?" Twilight asked, innocence on her face.

"Really?" Pinkamena looked surprised. "But what is there to find? It's a wall."

"Yes, but I know I can figure this out. I just need a bit more time, and I think I can figure it out." Pinkamena looked doubtful. "It can't hurt, can it? I'll only be just over here, and if you're sure you can do this..."

"Fine, you can go. This shouldn't take long anyway. But once I'm done the wall is coming down, got it? We're not leaving it up just for you to study it."

"I know, and thank you!" Twilight trotted over to the wall again. Once again she lowered her head and sent a search pulse through the wall. The results she got back were no less confusing than the last time either. The leylines composing the wall still had no rhyme or reason to them. Twilight walked beside the wall for a couple of paces, taking up a new position along it, and sent another pulse. There was still no pattern Twilight could discern.

It's like I'm not seeing the big picture here. There has to be some pattern to it... Maybe her magic was too weak to detect the whole of the spell?

Contrary to basic logic, the stronger a spell was, the less magic could be detected. Spells could only be detected through the pulse method because all magic had a degree of inefficiency in it, and magic that should be being focused towards an end ended up escaping, leaving the residual trail. The glow around objects being magicked and unicorn horns was just an extension of this loss of magic, more magic being lost in the form of light.

So, was it possible that the magic used in the wall was simply so focused that next to no magic was lost? If it was it could be almost impossible to detect the whole thing. You'd need powers on par with the princesses themselves to detect it, and while Twilight always secretly believed herself to be close to their level, the gap between Alicorn magic and Unicorn magic was still huge.

Twilight slumped, defeated by the wall. Then suddenly, a bare glimmer of an idea sparked in the back of her mind. *The black skull pins, they allow us to read minds? Even non-unicorns. And they let us see things unseen.* She considered the Noise symbols she had previously seen while the pin was active. *Maybe if I use the pin at the same time as I sent a pulse...*

Once more she tapped the pin. She could feel the now almost familiar sensation of a million voices just outside her range of hearing, the minds of the nearby ponies. Instead of focusing on any one of those though, she kept her attention on the wall. For a fourth time she sent a pulse through the wall. It returned a few seconds later, and Twilight almost fell over in shock. It had worked all right, she had got the whole picture. Literally. Twilight sent a longer pulse this time, to give her more time to confirm what she saw. On their own, the magic leylines made no sense, that was true.

But seen together all at once, they formed a picture of a love heart with two unicorns, their horns touching, in the middle. There were other leylines coming off the main ones that composed the image, forming the barrier part like a fine net. But they all stemmed from this main picture, a picture which itself could be traced back to one line, terminating just behind the Reaper guarding the wall.

"So, you got that thing figured out yet?" Twilight jumped. She whirled around to find Pinkamena behind her.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. Why, were you doing something you shouldn't have?"

"N- no! I mean, not unless figuring out how this wall works is something I shouldn't be doing."

"It probably is. Anyway, just thought you'd like some warning before your test subject vanishes before your eyes."

Twilight was puzzled for a second before she realised what that meant. "So you got them to talk?"

"Yup. When I left them I think they were making plans to meet up for dinner tonight."

"Oh. It's nice to see friendships forming so fast, I guess." Twilight glanced towards the new friends, now chatting animatedly. "So time to move on then?"

"Yup. Just need to get the Reaper to clear the wall. Mr Ed's Theater is just beyond it."

Twilight checked her hoof. 63:00 "We're making good time then? I mean, it shouldn't take us that long to take out a Noise, right?"

"Well no, but we do still have to find it."

Twilight took another look at the wall. "I know I've already asked a lot, but do you mind if I just stay here while the wall goes down? It might give me more insight as to how they work."

"More insight? That sounds like you've figured something out. What aren't you telling me Twilight?"

"Do we really need to have another conversation where you don't understand what I'm saying?" *Instead of the other way round for once.*

Pinkamena laughed, although it sounded forced. "No I suppose not. Okay then, I'll go tell the Reaper we're done. But no more fooling around after this. I don't want to hear 'But auntie Pinkamena, please let me stay here for five more minutes! It's for science!'"

"Deal." With that Pinkamena was off again. Realising she had little time, Twilight quickly returned her focus to the wall. Her skull pin was still active, so she prepared another spell. This time, instead of a pulse, Twilight projected a steady flow of magic through, allowing her to see the picture for as long as she held the spell. She saw a surge of magic start at the line's terminus spread rapidly along the main lines. As the magic passed through, the lines seemed to fade, the magic diffusing into the air. In the space of just a few seconds, the wall had completely vanished.

Chapter 7

Boss

Twilight and Pinkamena headed through into the final area available to them. The streets were lined with various restaurants and cafés, and nested among them was the pairs destination, Mr Ed's Theater. The theater in question was a Manehatten landmark, housing at first the famous variety show hosted by Mr Ed, and now more recently the Late Show with Neighvid Letterhorse. It was also in here that Twilight and Pinkamena had to search to find the target Noise.

"So, that's it right? That's where the Noise will be?" Twilight asked. Pinkamena nodded. "Well let's get in there and defeat it. It shouldn't take long right? We've fought enough of the smaller Noise to increase our power, right?"

"It's won't be that simple. See that guy?" Pinkamena pointed to a burly looking stallion standing in front of the door. "He may not be able to see us, but we're not going to be able to open the door with him still there. We need to get him to move."

"You say that like it's going to be a problem. Can't we just use that idea planting stuff we used to get past that last wall?"

"That... hmm. Actually, yes. Why didn't I think of that? I was going to try and make him think there was a ghost or something around and frighten him off."

"Don't we kinda count as ghosts?"

"Ah, so you had the same idea?"

Twilight resisted an urge to facehoof. "So, do we just need him to move, or do we need him to open the door for us?"

Pinkamena looked thoughtful. "I suppose it's better if we don't attract attention, even if we can't be seen. So if we can get him to open the door, that would be best."

"Got it." Twilight activated her skull pin again and focused immediately on the stallion guarding the door. She felt his thoughts going through her mind. *Ugh, this job is so boring. I don't even know why they need a bouncer for this place. Oh well, I suppose it beats working in the sewers.*

Twilight saw her chance, and implanted a single word into the bouncer's mind. *Toilet.* The thoughts flowed on naturally from his previous musings on the sewers quite nicely. *Man, I could really do with a whiz right now. Eh, no-pony will notice if I nip inside to use the toilet. I'll only be gone a second.*

Twilight deactivated her pin and turned to Pinkamena. "That's done it. He's about to head inside. We should be able to... well, ghost in after him."

"Fantastic, we'll have that Noise erased in no time flat. Quick, he's heading in."

The pair hurried into the theatre's foyer, managing to get in just before the door closed behind them. Twilight looked around. "Right, we're in. Now what? Do we still scan for the Noise?"

Pinkamena shook her head. "Something that big? Nah. We just need to find where it's hiding. It'll probably attack us immediately, so be ready." She looked around as well. "So... any ideas where it might be?"

"What? I thought you'd know!"

"Why would you think that? It's not like they reuse the same missions every game. That would just be lazy and uninspired."

"Great. So we're wandering blind then?" sighed Twilight.

"Come on. It's not like it'll take us that long to search the place."

"Maybe not, but every second we waste brings us a second closer to failing this mission. We can't afford that. We need a better plan."

"Well if you have any ideas I'm all ears."

Twilight considered for a moment. "What did the mission say we had to do again? What were the exact words?"

Pinkamena reached into her mane, which while not as puffy as her normal self, was still able to hide a surprising amount of objects in it. She pulled out the scroll she received at the start of the mission. "Let's see...*Mission 2: Find and erase the Noise in charge of Mr Ed's Theater. You have 180 minutes. Failure will result in erasure. The Reapers.* You think the way they said it is a hint?"

"Well why else would they say it like?" reasoned Twilight. "They could have just 'Erase the Noise here.' So why bother saying 'the Noise in charge' unless it was a clue? And other than telling us it's a boss Noise, it also tells us where we can find it!" She started to talk faster as she explained.

"Charge has many meaning. 'In charge' refers to having a position of power, but 'charge' also refers to electrical energy, which as you know has both negative and positive charge. If something has charge, it has something to do with electricity. And in a theatre like this, the best place to find charge would be the lighting desk, which is also has a certain degree of power associated with it, so it brings out both meaning, so the Noise must be there!"

There was silence. Pinkamena stared hard at Twilight. "I understood maybe one in ten words there, but what you're saying is that the Noise is at the lighting desk?"

"Yes, now come on! If this theatre is anything like the ones in Canterlot, the lighting desk will be on the balcony seats."

The pair rushed to the stairs and began climbing. "What floor will it be on?" Pinkie asked, trailing behind Twilight.

"Ummm.... we'll check 'em all!" yelled back Twilight. They had just made it to the second floor, which was occupied by ponies. Twilight took a brief glance at the group of ponies milling about before taking the next flight. "Not this one, this is probably the way to the main seats."

"You know that, but you don't know where the lighting desk is?"

"Deduced actually. You see...."

"You know what, never mind."

The third and fourth floors both proved fruitless, both leading to balconies overlooking the main stage, but not ones with the lighting desk. On the fourth floor balcony Twilight looked up. There was only one other balcony above them. "It has to be the next floor."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then we keep looking!"

The two of them charged up the stairs. At the top Twilight paused to check her hoof. *42:03 Plenty of time... I hope.* They barreled through the doors leading to the balcony, not caring if the act should surprise anypony nearby. "There's the lighting desk!" Twilight activated her skull pin, scanning for Noise. Up here, where there were only two other ponies, Twilight for once didn't have to blot out a deluge of voices, only two, and both were wondering why the door had just slammed open. But Twilight wasn't interested in them. She was more interested in the large blue symbol making rapid progress towards them. "Pinkie!"

"I see it! That's our target!"

The symbol had reached them, a quartet of teardrop shapes, all pointing to a centre. The arrangement was staggered into two pairs, each roughly

horizontal. From the centre of the symbol, the rest of Noise began to appear. First a long tube expanded, like a balloon, about as thick as a pony, and as long as four of them standing end to end. Below it, six stick like legs grew out. Finally the creature's head appeared, supporting two bulbous eyes and grasping mouthparts. The Noise gave out a shriek.

"A dragonfly?" Twilight shouted to Pinkamena over the shriek. "We can take this, right?"

"Right!" she shouted back.

The dragonfly zipped toward the two, beginning the transition to the Noise plane. The world appeared to brighten, to the point of almost blinding Twilight. As the light faded, she found herself down on the first balcony, looking down at the stage. She spotted Pinkamena on the theatre's stage, the Noise hovering just out of her reach. Twilight looked around for her copy of the Noise to take on, but couldn't see one anywhere.

"Something's wrong, there's only the one Noise," she yelled down to Pinkamena.

"It's a boss Noise, they work differently! The main one is that there's only one of them!"

"So what do I fight?"

"Brrp." Twilight spun to see a small swarm of Parasprite noise hovering behind her.

"Oh."

Pinkamena sprang sideways as the dragonfly rushed past, barely dodging the attack. She focused on her first pin, the one that let her perform the flurry attack. She began her charge. Because of the way her pin worked, she was forced to stay in one place once the actual attack began, which was a weakness on occasion, as was the case now. As she reared onto her hind legs to begin the attack, the dragonfly moved out of the attack's range, leaving her attacking the air. She finished her futile attack just in

time to dodge a sonic blast attack fired from the creature's wings. *Okay, if that attack isn't working, time for plan B!* She focused on the space just above the dragonfly, preparing for the teleport attack that the other pin used. Just as she felt the attack begin, the Noise moved again, faster than anything that size had any right to move, and her attack once again connected with only the air. She tried again, aiming closer to the head of the creature than before. Once again it had moved out of her attack range before the blow could connect. Before she could recover and prepare for another attempt, the Noise rammed her, sending her flying into one of the invisible walls surrounding the stage. She fell to the ground, winded, but still somehow managed to narrowly dodge the follow-up attack, which shredded the offstage curtains behind her.

"Okay, this really isn't working," Pinkamena muttered to herself. She dodged another sonic blast and called up to Twilight. "Twilight! I can't land a hit on this thing!" She jumped to the side, dodging another charge. "I don't think we can win this battle!"

"What?" Twilight yelled back. "You mean we should... hang on!" Pinkamena cast a glance upwards just in time to see a flare shoot up, illuminating the balcony. "That's should keep them away for a while... So if you can't hit it, what do we do?"

"We need to escape! There's no way I can take this thing down with the psyches I've got!" The Noise made another charge, and Pinkamena dodged towards it, rolling underneath the Noise in the narrow space between it and the ground.

"But if we don't take this Noise out we can't beat the mission! We'll be erased!" The glow of the fire had faded, now replaced with a purple flickering.

"We can't beat the Noise, but some pony else might be able to!" She dodged another sonic blast. "But if we keep fighting we're certain to be erased!"

There was silence from the balcony. Even the purple flickering had stopped. Just as Pinkamena started worrying that something had happened, Twilight called out again. "Okay, so we'll run! Is that even possible?"

"Barely! Just leave it to me!" Pinkamena turned her attention away from the balcony almost too late to see the Noise on a direct collision course with her. At the last second she managed to duck, the Noise flying over her head. With a bit of breathing space, she focused now on the prospect of escape.

Being able to escape from Noise battles was not something that was strictly possible by normal conventions. If you were in a battle, it was meant to end only when one side was erased. But Pinkamena was never a normal pony. In life she had been able to do inexplicable things that even she never really understood. During her first Reaper's Game, she discovered that her abilities seemed to be able to do more stuff in the UG. Escaping from battles was an important one, and she never would have made it past her first day without it. She still didn't fully understand how it worked, but she could make it happen on demand. As she did right now.

Around her, everything seemed to stop, as if time had paused. Even she couldn't move, but unlike those around her, she retained awareness. In this strange paused state, she began to concentrate on the idea of escaping. From seemingly nowhere, a hovering rectangle floated before her mind's eye. On it were two words: "Gotta Bounce." She focused her attention on it, and the next thing she knew she was back on the balcony in front of the lighting desk, Twilight Sparkle beside her, looking confused.

"What just happened?" Before Pinkamena could answer, she was interrupted by a shrill cry from behind them. Both ponies whipped around to see the Noise, still in dragonfly form, and it was angry. The pair exchanged glances.

"Run?"

"Run."

They burst through the door, leaving the light techs staring at the door in puzzlement for the second time that day. They raced down the stairs, taking four stairs at a time in their haste. Behind them they could still hear the shriek of the boss pursuing them, thankfully slowed by the narrow passage ways.

"So, care to explain what happened there?" Twilight asked as they made it to the ground floor.

"I would if I knew! It shouldn't be able to chase us like this!" They burst out into the street. Unfortunately, in their haste to escape they weren't watching where they were going, and they collided head first with another pair.

"Watch where you're going!" cried a familiar voice from underneath Twilight. "All this rushing about, it's quite undignified!"

"Rarity?"

"Pinkie?" Rarity struggled out from underneath Twilight. "Oh it is you! And Twilight too. It was Twilight wasn't it? But where's Fluttershy gone?"

Pinkamena felt a weak kick at her ribs. "Oops." She stood up, giving Fluttershy space to breath. "Sorry about that Fluttershy. Anyway, did you manage to find Rainbow Dash and Applejack?"

Rarity beamed. "We certainly did dear! Well, more they found us, but it works out the same in the end. But I notice that you still haven't fulfilled your side of the mission. The clock is still ticking after all."

"The mission?" Pinkamena and Twilight looked at each other. "Umm, it's not just me right? It feels like it's been too quiet for a while now?"

Twilight nodded just as the windows above them shattered, and the dragonfly Noise zoomed into the streets. "Well, as you can see we found our target..."

The dragonfly looked around, searching for them, disorientated by its recent chase. It finally spotted the group of ponies and dived towards them, screeching its horrible scream. Terrified, the ponies huddled together paralysed by the scream. "I guess we're not going to survive this then?" Twilight asked.

Before Pinkamena, or any pony for that matter could frame an answer, they heard another cry cutting through the air. "Like a bolt from the blue, it's time for a flank whopping from me to you!" The Noise swiveled its head slightly, just in time to see what indeed did look like a blue bolt flying towards it at

breakneck pace. Too fast to dodge. It collided with the dragonfly, knocking it into the side of another building. The blue bolt on the other hoof had seeming transferred all it's momentum into the dragonfly, and dropped down to land in front of the terrified ponies. "Heh, it's a wonder you guys managed to survive the first day without me!" Rainbow Dash shook her head. "Good thing I'm here now!"

"And here I was hoping that without your wings you might lose the ego..." another voice muttered, approaching from behind. It was familiar, but at the same time there was something strange about it. Rainbow just smirked.

"Well I'm glad you're still the best applebucker around even with that weird accent."

"I told you! It's the Standard Manehattan accent! I don't know why I'm using it, but I just cannot talk normally!"

The group spun around to see it was indeed Applejack. Pinkamena's jaw dropped. "Applejack? Your voice..."

"Isn't it just wonderful!" Rarity squealed. "Our little farm bumpkin, finally talking like a respectable pony!"

"Excuse me? I always talk like a respectable pony!" Applejack countered.

"Hey Pinkie, what's up with your mane? You're not about to start talking to rocks again are you?"

Any further conversation between the reunited friends was cut short by another scream. The dragonfly had recovered from Rainbow Dash's attack, and now it was madder than ever.

"Ugh, really? That last attack should have finished him off," Rainbow complained. "Fine then, I guess he doesn't know when to quit. Ready AJ?"

"Ready when you are partner." The last word sounded weird without Applejack's usual drawl. The two raced off, leaving Twilight and Pinkamena still staring in shock. Pinkamena was the first to recover.

"Well, at least they're taking this well."

Applejack and Rainbow Dash arrived just as the dragonfly began to take off, presumably with the intent to attack again. "Oh no you don't!" cried Rainbow, and leapt at the Noise, with the intent of dragging it down. She managed to catch hold of one of its legs, causing its ascent to slow considerably. Unnoticed by her, it also caused the streets to melt and reform into a battlefield. Applejack on the other hoof, had noticed.

"Rainbow! Try that attack you did before!"

"Huh? You mean the windy thing? I thought it didn't work when we weren't fighting Noise?"

"What do you think we're doing right now?"

Rainbow stared at Applejack, then back at the dragonfly she was still holding onto. "Oh yeah. Hehe." She let go of the leg, dropping to the ground below. She took a deep breath, and as she did a pin on her sash, with a wavy looking design on it, started to glow. Once she landed, she let out her breath all at once. Inexplicably, a large whirlwind appeared in front of the Noise, buffeting it. The dragonfly screeched in pain as it tried to break free of the whirlwind's grip, but couldn't manage.

Finally, the whirlwind died down, Rainbow Dash having run out of breath. Free, the dragonfly tried to flee before another whirlwind could occur. In doing so it crossed the normally uncrossable barrier between the two halves of the battlefield. Applejack smirked. "Looks like you're in my territory now." If the dragonfly understood this, it made no sign, but began charging towards Applejack. Applejack faced it down, unflinchingly. A pin on her sash, with a lasso design on it, began to glow. A matching glow appeared in the air above her head. At the last second, Applejack jumped aside and a cable of barbed wire shot out from the glowing spot, entangling the Noise and bringing it crashing to the ground. Not wasting any time, Applejack deftly removed her hat, holding it in her teeth, and approached the downed beast. She drew her head back, and brought the hat across the Noise in a slapping motion. As the hat made contact, a cut appeared on the Noise, like the hat was a sword. She slapped the Noise with the hat again, although once again the result was more of a slash.

She continued in this manner for about ten seconds, when the wires holding the dragonfly vanished. It hastily took off into the air again, looking worse for wear. It made it's way back towards Rainbow's side of the field, hurrying in case it was trapped by the barbed wire again. It had almost made it through the division when Applejack managed to fire off another entanglement burst, once again bringing it to the ground, this time on Rainbow's side of the field. The cyan mare was on the opposite side of the field, seemingly waiting for the Noise. Upon seeing it was trapped, Dash began to charge towards it, turning the tables. She quickly became a rainbow blur, and another one of her pins, this one with a emblem reminiscent of her cutie mark on its side, started glowing. She quickly closed the distance between them. A second later she collided with the Noise, creating a loud BOOM! This was finally too much for the Noise, and it flashed once, twice, before vanishing in a burst of static. The battle was over. Applejack checked her hoof to find the timer gone. The mission was complete.

End Day 2

Interlude 1

Prologue

The wind was picking up again. Twilight shivered, chilled by the wind. Normally she could devise a spell to protect her from the wind, but now there were more important things to do with her magic. The fact that she'd almost exhausted her magic for the day was another factor. She looked around at her friends. Rarity, Applejack and Rainbow Dash were all panting, and even Pinkie seemed more subdued than usual. Fluttershy was using this brief respite to collect some berries to help them last.

"So Twi, that was the last of them, yeah?" Dash asked. "I mean, no more monsters will attack tonight?"

Twilight shook her head. "I'm afraid that there'll probably be more. We've got to maintain our guard until daybreak, that's the only time for certain that they'll stop attacking."

It was a red moon tonight, often known as a blood moon among the more superstitious ponies. It was believed to be an ill omen, a sign of bad things to come. And Twilight had to reluctantly agree that this much was true. For whatever reason, on a night with a blood moon, the wild creatures of Equestria became extra hostile, attacking anything on sight. In most cities this wasn't too much of a problem, but in towns that bordered on wild forests such as the Everfree, monster attack was an all too real problem. This meant that Ponyville was under threat this night. Princess Celestia was attending to the defense of Fillydelphia, another town close to the Everfree, but on the opposite side from Ponyville. This meant that the job of protecting Ponyville lay to Twilight and her friends. Twilight didn't anticipate any problems, but just in case she had Spike nearby, ready to send a letter to Princess Celestia if things became too dangerous.

"What I don't understand is why Princess Luna would let the moon cause such problems in the first place," Rarity said. "Can't she do something about it?"

"From what I've heard, the blood moon is caused by a powerful spell, the last one Nightmare Moon managed to cast before she was banished. Princess Luna has tried to find a way to solve the problem, but she's hasn't met with any success yet."

Fluttershy was coming back now, her saddlebags bulging. "I found lots of wild raspberries over there, so hopefully there'll be enough to keep us going." She emptied a small pile of them just in front of Twilight, and then went to do the same for the others.

"Whew! Thank ya kindly Fluttershy," Applejack said as she received her pile. "Ah had a long day of apple bucking today, so between that and them monsters, I'm just about spent. This should be a good pick-me-up though."

Pinkie, still standing guard, started shouting. "Girls, we've got incoming! My knee's gone pinchy, and we know what that means!"

Even though she had a grasp on the more common types of Pinkie Sense, Twilight still couldn't remember what all of them meant. She looked at the others, who'd had more experience with Pinkie and her strange signals.

"Pinchy knee? But... but... that means something scary is about to happen!" Twilight wasn't sure how Fluttershy had managed to get behind her so quickly, but right now that wasn't the important part.

"Something scary?" Pinkie nodded.

"Yup! And whatever it is, it's super big!"

Dash chuckled. "Heh, scary for you maybe. I'm not scared of anything. You know what they say, the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

A roar broke the silence of the night, and the wind intensified ten-fold. Twilight looked around, trying to figure out where the new monster was coming from. There was no movement from the trees on the left or right of

them, except for the wind. The wind which had suddenly picked up? She looked up, and there, blotting out the blood moon, was a wyvern.

A wyvern was among the deadlier creatures in Equestria, although there had been no sightings of them for centuries. A creature as big as a dragon, with a comparable, if not larger wingspan, and two claws armed with sharp talons. In many ways it resembled a cross between the biggest bird you could think of and a dragon, and just as fearsome. Twilight turned to Rainbow Dash.

"Still not scared?" She called out. She tried to keep her tone light, but inside she was terrified. They might need the Princess' help on this one.

Dash tried to smile, but it seemed to flee before the wyvern. "No problem, right? I'll take the fight to this bad boy!" Before anyone could respond, she took off to the skies, charging straight at the wyvern. It wasn't easy, she was fighting the wind caused by the creature's wingbeat, but in just a few more seconds she'd make it.

The wyvern wasn't giving her that kind of time, and swiped at her with one of its powerful claws. The blow connected, and it sent Dash flying back to earth. She was knocked into a tree, and it gave a sickening crack as she slammed into it. She slumped to the ground, her body limp.

"Rainbow! Are you okay?" It was a stupid question to ask really, Twilight could tell she wasn't okay. That crack wasn't just the tree. She turned to Fluttershy. "Fluttershy, you've got to get Dash out of here. Get her to Nurse Redheart, quickly!"

Before Fluttershy could act though, one of the trees branches, loosened by Dash's impact with it, gave a loud snap. It fell, and before than anyone could look away, it landed. On top of Rainbow Dash.

"RAINBOW DASH!" It was impossibily to tell who had just cried out. It seemed every one had at the same time. Fluttershy was the first to break out of the shock.

"HOW DARE YOU!" Now it was her flying towards the wyvern, tears in her eyes, a look of determination on her face. She was going to stare the beast down. "HOW DARE YOU HURT MY FRIEND!"

This seemed to give the wyvern pause, and for a second it seemed it was going to give up. And then reality played its hand, and its hand was filled with sharp talons. The wyvern snatched Fluttershy up, trapping her in its claw. And it started to squeeze. The screams could be heard over the wind, and it was the most awful thing anyone had ever heard. Then, it stopped, and Fluttershy was plummeting to the ground below. She landed in a tangle of limbs, lying limp in a puddle of red.

Pinkie Pie was by her before anyone else could act. She looked down at her friend, tears in her eyes. "Fluttershy? Please tell me that's just berry juice. Please just be berry juice, please just be berry juice, please just be berry juice. Ok, haha, make believe-time is over! Fluttershy? Oh Celestia, oh Celestia, oh Celestia..."

Twilight forced herself to look away from the sight of the pink pony cradling Fluttershy's body, tears flowing freely. She instead caught sight of Applejack, preparing a lasso. "Applejack, no, we can't fight this thing! We need to get Princess Celestia!"

"Consarnit Twi, that *thing* has just killed-" Applejack spat out the word they were all dreading. "-Killed two of our friends! I'm not going to let it get away with that!" She let the lasso fly, snaring the wyvern around the neck. "Now... help me... pull this overgrown chicken... down!"

The lasso was nothing more than a minor nuisance to wyvern. It simply increased its altitude, leaving Applejack dangling off the other end of the rope like a fish on a line. With some effort, it managed to grasp part of the rope with its claws, and started swing Applejack back and forth, building up speed.

"Applejack!" Twilight struggled to make herself heard. "Let go of the rope before things get any worse!"

As if on cue, the wyvern swung Applejack like a conker, knocking into Rarity, sending her flying backwards into a tree with a sharp crack. Applejack hadn't managed to keep her grip on the rope, and she too had gone flying into the tree with Rarity. The tree snapped along its middle, and the top half, after debating which way to fall for a moment, fell on top of the pair of ponies.

Twilight could now barely see for all the tears in her eyes. She managed to make a out a pink blur in the middle of the clearing. She wiped away what tears she could, and managed to focus on Pinkie Pie, shouting to the sky.

"COME DOWN HERE AND FIGHT ME YOU BIG MEANIE!" She turned to Twilight. "Twi, run, get Princess Celestia. But I'm going down fighting, like the others." She returned to yelling at the sky. "GET DOWN HERE SO I CAN MAKE CUPCAKES OUT OF YOU!"

The wyvern graciously accepted the invitation, folding its wings and diving straight at Pinkie. Moments before impact, Pinkie pulled a knife out from somewhere in her mane, and clasped it in her jaws. She leapt, and managed a slash across the wyvern's eye. The creature bellowed in pain, momentarily blinded, and crashed into the ground. Pinkie wasted no time, darting around the wyvern, getting in quick slashes here and there. But it couldn't last, and the beast managed a lucky blow with its powerful tail, smashing Pinkie into the ground. The knife dropped from her grip, as the wyvern smashed her again and again with its tail.

Twilight turned, and began running towards Spike. "Spike! Please tell me you managed to send a letter to the Princess!"

"I tried, Twilight, I did!" Spike's desperation was audible. "But the wind's too strong, it ripped the scroll out of my hands before I could send it!"

"Then get back to the library and send a new one! And hurry! Things look really really bad!"

Spike ran as fast as he could in the direction of the library. Twilight turned back to face the wyvern. Too late to dodge the tree trunk flying towards her.

Day Three

Chapter 8

Competition

For the second time in as many days, Twilight's journey to consciousness was swift and unpleasant. The last thing going through her mind before her awakening was the tree trunk... which was probably accurate on more than one level. Still, that was a memory and not a nightmare, right? It certainly seemed like it could be real... Twilight briefly checked over herself for some evidence that the events of her dream had really occurred. Nothing. Not even so much as a bruise. Still, there had to be other ways to confirm how she died. She could always ask the others. Even if they didn't remember her, the details of their deaths would have to be consistent, right?

Speaking of the others, where are they? Twilight gave a quick glance around, and spotted the other five a short distance away, chatted animatedly between themselves. Once again, Twilight felt a pang of pain at the exclusion, understandable as it was. She missed having friends to confide in, ones who knew her well enough to confide back. All the more reason to win this game.

Rarity had spotted that Twilight was awake, and was motioning with her hoof for her to join them. She trotted over to the others, glad she wasn't being totally excluded. "Good morning everypony. At least I think it's morning..."

"Good morning Twilight," Rarity replied. "I hope you don't think us rude, talking away over here without you, but we've been hearing about what Rainbow Dash and Applejack have been doing over these last two days. Oh, where are my manners, you haven't been introduced yet! This is Applejack and Rainbow Dash. I should mention though, Rainbow usually has wings, and Applejack usually has a simply appalling accent. It seems that's the only good thing to come out of this so far."

"For crying out loud Rarity, I don't have an accent!" Twilight could only tell it was Applejack speaking because she saw her mouth move. "Well, that is I do now, but I normally don't." She turned to Twilight. "Anyhow, pleasure to meet you Twilight. Rarity, Pinkie and Fluttershy seem to like you well enough, and anypony those three like is okay in my books."

Before Twilight could respond, Dash cut in. "Psh, I don't know about that. I mean, she couldn't even handle that Noise yesterday. She's got a lot of proving to do before she's got me convinced."

Applejack managed to give Dash a quick swat with her hat. "Rainbow, behave! That's no way to treat somepony you don't know."

"Quite right! Besides, Twilight has already proved herself as far as I'm concerned," Rarity added. "She managed to keep a calm head and come up with a plan of action yesterday, without which I'm sure all of us wouldn't be here."

"Yeah yeah, whatever." Dash waved a dismissive hoof. "Point is, I'm not buying all this hype. She has to prove she's as good as you say she is."

"Why of all the arrogant-" Twilight held up a hoof.

"It's okay, I see where she's coming from. Arguing isn't going to change her mind, she's too stubborn for that."

Rarity and Applejack exchanged a glance. "Um, begging your pardon Twilight, but how would you know that? You haven't met Rainbow before have you?" Applejack asked.

Too late, Twilight realised her slip. "What? Haha, no, that would be silly!" *Shootshootshoot! How do I cover this up?* "No, it's just I have a friend just like that." *Phew, nice save Twilight. They don't need to know that Dash IS the friend I'm talking about...* "Fiercely competitive, convinced she's the best at everything, and stubborn. But also a good friend to anyone who's earned her respect. So I ask you, Rainbow, what can I do to earn that respect?"

"Heh, you think it's gonna be easy? You've got guts, I'll give you that at least. But as to earning my respect... hmmm...."

"I think we have more important things to worry about right now," Applejack interrupted. "Like what kind of mission they could possibly expect us to do here."

"Speaking of here, where are we?" Twilight asked. In response, Applejack pointed up and behind her. Twilight turned around to see a giant stone pony, hoof raised to sky, holding up a torch. "Is- is that the Statue of Libmarety? But that would mean..."

"Yup. We're cut off from the mainland. We've only got this one island today."

"But what can we do in just one location? I mean, one small location." Twilight turned to Pinkamena, who had thus far stayed quiet. She shrugged.

"It's not like we did everything last time I played. We always had at least two locations to run between." There was a popping noise, and a flash. "But I guess we're about to find out."

Twilight levitated the scroll in front of her, and read from it aloud. "*Mission 3: Survive the Noise attack for 60 minutes. Failure will result in Erasure. The Reapers.*" There was another, smaller flash, and a second scroll appeared to join the first one. Twilight read this one too. "*You have 10 minutes before the timer starts. Prepare yourself.*" She looked at Pinkamena, who shrugged.

"We didn't have anything like this. I have no idea what'll happen. Still, they're just Noise, right? We can take 'em."

"I don't know about that dear," Rarity interrupted. "Fluttershy and I had a dreadful time trying to defeat some Parasprite Noise yesterday. They overwhelmed me, and if not for Fluttershy I wouldn't be here now, I'm sure of it."

"So it won't be as easy as one two three then," said Twilight. "Frankly, I'd be surprised if the Reapers DIDN'T have some sort of twist planned."

"Uh, hello? You guys are missing the obvious here!" Twilight was surprised to here Rainbow speaking up. "The Noise can't attack us unless we let them, right? So we just don't use that skull pin thingy, and we're home free. Easiest mission ever."

"She's got a point you know," Applejack said. "I mean, put like that, how can we lose?"

Pinkamena shook her head. "It won't be that easy. Reapers can force Noise to attack, so that's likely what'll happen."

"That's what happened to us yesterday," Rarity added. "It was a pair of them. They seemed pretty determined to erase us."

"But they can't have that many Reapers, right? And if we see any, we can just run away," Twilight suggested. Pinkie quickly shot down that plan.

"Towards the end of last game they also brought in Noise that attacked on its own accord. They'll probably have some like that as well."

"So what, we've just got to fight it out?" Applejack asked. "Great. We're going to be erasing a lot of Noise then."

"Oh! I've got it!" Everypony turned to face Rainbow. She pointed a hoof at Twilight. "A competition."

Twilight blinked in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"You said you wanted to earn my respect? Well how about this, if you can defeat more Noise than me, maybe you'll be worth my consideration."

Pinkamena grunted in annoyance. "And we thought you had an idea to make the mission easier, not harder. We should be focusing on survival, not these silly games."

There was a silence. "Never thought I'd see the day where Pinkie was against games.... Discord notwithstanding," Rarity said.

"If it was any other time, I wouldn't be," Pinkamena said. "But having the joy of life taken from you tends to have a rather sobering effect."

"That's what was taken from you? Oh, you poor thing," Rarity said.

"Well, that's the easiest way to explain it anyway," Pinkamena said. "But like I said, we don't have time to indulge in these competitions. I want to see us all come out of this alive, and if we start taking unnecessary risks-"

"I'll do it." Everypony turned to look at Twilight, who flushed at the sudden attention. "I mean, we're going to be fighting Noise anyway right? What does it matter if we keep count of how many we've erased?"

"Because, knowing Dash, she'll go out of her way to fight more than she should, putting herself in danger," Pinkamena said.

"You're forgetting something Pinkie," Applejack chipped in. "I can keep an eye on this one, make sure she doesn't do anything rash."

"Heh, you're one to talk. Who was it who refused help last applebuck season again?"

"Girls, please!" Everypony looked at Twilight again. "I trust Applejack enough that she'll keep Rainbow out of trouble, so I don't see the harm."

"Yes!" Rainbow cheered. "Better bring your A game Sparkle, 'cause this Pegasus only has one gear, go!"

Twilight smirked. "Not much of a pegasus without wings though, are you?"

"Eh, details." And before Pinkamena could talk her out of it, Rainbow had dashed off.

"I'd better follow her, keep her out of trouble then," Applejack said. "Later all." She trotted off in pursuit of her friend. Pinkamena rounded on Twilight.

"If either of them come to any harm, I will hold you personally responsible."

"I'm sure they'll be fine." Twilight however wasn't sure how much she believed her own words.

Rarity spoke up. "So, if those two have headed off on their own, should us four stick together? It'd probably be safer."

Twilight shook her head. "Sorry Rarity, but no. I intend to beat Rainbow at this game, and I'm worried that the more of there are, the less fights overall we'll get. Besides, the more fights, the stronger we become, right?"

Pinkamena sighed. "Yes, it's true. We would be best to split up. Just be careful, okay?"

"Darling, I'm working with Fluttershy. It would be hard for me to not be careful." She turned to the yellow pegasus, who couldn't participate in the conversation for obvious reasons. "Come on dear, we'll have a quick look around the island while we're waiting for the battles to begin. I've always wanted to see the Statue of Libmarety."

Pinkamena shot another glare at Twilight, who sighed. "Yes, alright I know. It'll be my fault if they get hurt, right?"

"No. This time it wouldn't be your fault. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"They'll be fine. They're.... they seem like they're the types to keep themselves safe."

"That they are. Well, guess we should prepare. How long do you think we have before the attack starts?"

A pain shot through Twilight's hoof. "By my guess? Not long."

Chapter 9

Lull

"Well I clearly got that detail wrong, and here I was thinking the crown would be bigger...." Rarity muttered to herself, apparently comparing the statue with the dress design she'd made last year. "Well no wonder I couldn't get any outlets here to buy it."

Fluttershy didn't have much choice but to along with Rarity. She couldn't voice any objections, although she knew either way she'd be unlikely to voice them. So while Rarity was being a fashionista first, tourist second, and player last, it was up to Fluttershy to keep an eye out for any incoming Noise. The lack of them so far had been rather worrying. It had already been ten minutes since the timer had started, and she hadn't seen even one group, even with her player pin scanning. It was quiet. Something was up.

Fluttershy tugged on Rarity's tail, getting her attention. "What is it darling? Have the noise started attacking yet?" Fluttershy shook her head, and Rarity turned back to admiring the statue. "Well be sure to let me know when they are. No sense getting my mane further ruffled until I have to." Fluttershy gave another insistent tug. "Fluttershy really, can't I have a minute of peace?" Fluttershy shook her head again, and indicated the time on her hoof. Rarity looked at her own. "Gracious, has it really already been ten minutes? But then why haven't we been attacked yet?" She began trotting off. "Come Fluttershy, something is ahoof, and I intend to find out what it is."

§§§

"Ugggh.... so bored!"

"Would you calm down already? You're making me dizzy with your pacing."

Dash stopped and looked at Applejack. "Calm down? It's been twelve minutes thirty-two seconds since the mission started, and we haven't seen ANY Noise! At this rate, that Twilight's gonna beat me!"

"I think you're freaking out about this too much Dash. After all, if we haven't seen any Noise, how do we know they have?"

"No way, she's fighting all the Noise, I just know it. I can sense it."

"And since when were you little miss psychic?"

Dash tapped the skull pin on her sash. "Since this thing. Argh, if only I had my wings again! I could do a quick fly around and find some Noise!"

"Even if you could, I'm not sure that would be a good idea. Remember Rarity's story about that other pegasus who tried to help them? He got attacked."

"Exactly! I could do a quick fly, and boom! Noise galore."

Applejack facehoofed. "That's not the point. Besides, you can't fight without my help, so unless you were willing to carry me, it wouldn't do you any good."

"Uggghhhh...." Rainbow went back to pacing. AJ sighed.

"Look, if it'll make you feel any better, we can have a look around the rest of the island. Maybe it's just something about this spot?"

"Well it's not likely to make me feel better, but at least it's better than nothing. Let's go."

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"I don't like this. Not one bit."

Twilight looked over her shoulder, still scanning the area. "Neither. Fifteen minutes and no Noise attacks?"

"They're up to something. I can feel it in my bones."

"Is that one of your Pinkie senses?" Twilight asked.

"No, it's just-" Pinkamena started, then her eyes narrowed. "Wait.... how do you know about my Pinkie senses?"

Twilight cursed silently. *I need to stop making those mistakes.* "Oh, Rarity mentioned them in passing. I mean, it doesn't really make much sense. It's hard to believe in."

"What's not to believe? You do magic. What's the difference?" Pinkamena paused. *Those were the same words she said last time we were discussing her Pinkie sense,* Twilight noted. "Anyway, it seems kinda moot, what with the whole being dead and reading minds and stuff."

"I guess I can't really argue with that. Anyway, what do you think is happening? Are they just not attacking this part of the island?"

"No. They're up to something."

"Like trying to catch us off guard?"

Pinkamena thought, then shook her head. "Nah, it has to be something big."

"Well we're not going to figure out what it is just standing here. We should look around."

"Yeah, you're right. Come on, we'll head round-"

Pinkamena was interrupted by a shout from across the way. "Yoo-hoo! Pinkie?" The pair turned to see Rarity and Fluttershy approaching them. "Sorry to be a bother, but Fluttershy and I haven't seen hide nor hair of a Noise since we split up. We were wondering if you'd maybe had more luck than us. Or less luck as the case may be."

"No, we haven't fought any yet either," Twilight answered.

"Hah! You'll have to do better than that if you want to beat me!" Once again Twilight and Pinkamena turned, this time finding Rainbow Dash and Applejack behind them.

"Really? So did you manage to fight some Noise when I wasn't looking, or are you ecksager... eggadyer..." Applejack turned to look at Rarity. "Rarity, what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Exaggerating?" Rarity hazarded.

"That's the one. Thank you." She turned back to Dash. "Are you exaggerating again Rainbow?"

"Me? Since when do I exaggerate?"

"So you've fought some Noise?" Twilight asked excitedly.

"Well... not exactly...."

"So between the six of us, we haven't seen any Noise for over fifteen minutes now," Pinkamena summed up. "Either this is the easiest mission since day one, or we're missing something here."

"Maybe it's just the six of us?" Rarity offered. "The other players could be fighting."

"Guess again," an unfamiliar voice sounded. Twilight found herself turning again, this time seeing.... two ponies she didn't know. "And you are?" Rarity however seemed to recognise them.

"Sea Breeze! Oriens! You're still in the game!"

"Heh, of course. You think I'd get erased without cashing in the favour you owed me?"

"Pardon me, but I think you'll find we're even."

"That's not how I remember it...."

The green unicorn gave a snort, and approached the group, pausing to give Fluttershy a quick hug. "Hi, sorry to interrupt. I'm Sea Breeze and the argumentative one over there is Oriens Ventus, my fiancée." She indicated the pegasus, currently arguing head to head with Rarity over who owed who. "We helped Rarity and Fluttershy yesterday, and in return they saved

us from some reapers. Anyway, Ori and I have been wandering since the mission began, and no-one has had any battles yet. Frankly it's kinda worrying."

"So there's been no Noise," said Applejack "And we're supposed to be worrying about that?"

"Of course! If there's no Noise, how am I going to prove I'm the best Noise hunter!" complained an indignant Dash.

"More like best noise maker," grumbled Applejack under her breath."

"Look, I'm no expert, but there's something off about this situation," Sea Breeze said. "If a mission says there will be a Noise attack, you expect there to be a Noise attack, right?"

Twilight heard Pinkamena muttering something under her breath, but dismissed it as Pinkie being Pinkie. "Right. So there has to be a catch."

"Exactly!" said Breeze. "So what I think we should do is put together a group brainstorming session, get all the players to help, and see if we can't figure this out."

"I like the way you think. It'll be a committee! Oh, but I don't have anything to make a checklist of things we need to cover."

"A checklist?" asked Applejack, confused. "Uh, Twilight, don't we only have one topic?"

"The subtleties of checklist etiquette is lost on you ponies..."

Sea Breeze coughed. "Okay, well if Breeze and I start heading around the island, getting other groups to meet here in say, five minutes, we should get all the pairs."

"Dash and I can go the opposite way, we should get every pony together sooner that way," added in Applejack.

"Perfect! And Fluttershy and Rarity can get any ponies hanging around up by the statue."

Applejack looked at her. "And what will you and Pinkie be doing while we're off rounding everypony up? Just sitting here waiting?"

"Are you kidding? There's so much I need to prepare! Where will I stand? Is my voice amplifying spell working properly?"

Applejack and Sea Breeze exchanged glances. "Those are... uh... quite *interesting* friends you have," said Breeze.

"I swear, I've never seen that pony before in my life."

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Within five minutes, all the players on the island had been rounded up in front of the statue. There were quite a number of them, Pinkamena noted. More than she would have expected for the third day. Still, if she was right, that would change after today. She glanced at her partner, who had somehow managed to conjure a stack of lecture cards from nowhere, and was busy ensuring they were all in the right order. Finally Twilight stepped forward to address the murmuring crowd.

"Good afternoon everypony. My name is Twilight Sparkle. As I'm sure you're all aware, for today's mission we're meant to be fighting off hoards of Noise. However-"

"Hang on, who put you in charge?" cried out on pony in the crowd.

"Well, I'm not in charge per se, I'm just informing everyone about this situation," Twilight replied, not missing a beat. "Anyway, like I was saying..."

"Well if you're not in charge what are we doing here?" asked another pony.

"That's what I'm TRYING to-"

"Yeah, you interrupted the game of Tin Pin Slammer my partner and I were playing!"

"THAT'S NOT IMPORTA-" Twilight broke off. "Tin Pin Slammer? What's that?"

"Oh, its this game you play with your pins, and..."

Sea Breeze, who was standing with Twilight, gave a gentle cough. "I'm not certain that's the main issue here..."

"Oh! Right. Now, if everypony is finished interrupting me?" She paused, just to be sure. No pony spoke up. "Okay, as I was saying, there hasn't be any Noise attack in-

"CHOCOLATE CAKE!"

"PINKIE!" Twilight's response was immediate, and Pinkamena could swear she saw her mane catch fire. She smiled.

"Worth it."

Twilight facehoofed, then turned back to the crowd to explain what they all already knew. Pinkamena looked at the crowd. As expected for Manehattan, unicorns and earth ponies made up most of the crowd, with only the occasional pegasus. She spied Rarity and Fluttershy right at the back, and Applejack and Dash off to one of the sides. They were avoiding the centre of the group, like Pinkamena had told them to. She turned her attention back to Twilight's speech just as she was wrapping up.

"...and so, we decided we should gather all the players and brainstorm what the Reapers are up to with this mission. So, any ideas?"

The crowd was silent for a few moments. Eventually one pony spoke up. "Maybe they're trying to lure us into a false sense of security?"

"But it hasn't worked," another responded. "We're all on tenterhooks waiting for this attack."

"Maybe they're lying about the mission?"

"No, impossible. It's against the rules for them to lie about the main mission, isn't it?"

Twilight turned to Pinkamena. "She's right isn't she? The Reapers can't lie about this?" She responded with a nod.

Another pony in the crowd spoke up. "Let's think about this. The Reapers tell us we're going to be attacked by Noise, and they don't send any. Why does that get them?"

"It gets them.... a group of worried players. A large group of worried players. In one place." There was a sudden silence as the words sank in. But there was no time to react. Without warning, there was snapping of jaws, and a whole swath of ponies in the centre of the group vanished, erased. In their place stood an Ursa Minor Noiseform. It let out a roar, and the remaining ponies started fleeing in terror. Right into more Noise symbols. Pinkamena looked through the remains of the crowd, and managed to spot her friends, still okay.

"Good, I was worried somepony would figure out it was a trap and warn everypony," she said. Twilight spun around, a horrified look on her face.

"You mean you knew this would happen?! Why didn't you tell us?!"

"The more players that make it to the end of the game, the smaller the chances of all five of my friends and me being resurrected. This is just tipping the odds in our favour." Twilight still had the same horrified look on her face. "The other players aren't your friends Twilight, they're your enemies. I suggest you learn that if you want to make it out of this." She spotted a group of Noise heading towards them. "Now look sharp, we've got company."

"But our... your friends! They could have been seriously hurt, or worse!"

"And that's why I told them to stay to the edges of the crowd. Look, they're okay, although I don't see why it should worry you. Now snap out of it, the Noise are almost on us."

Twilight hesitantly took up a battle stance. Pinkamena sighed as she saw Twilight wobble. "Look, focusing on the battling right now. Or on your competition with Rainbow. You won't beat her with your mind on other things."

That seemed to help, as Twilight straightened up after that. just in time for the Noise to begin their assault proper.