

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic The Cutie Mark Clash, Chapter 8

Cutting a trail from the Everfree Forest, Luna's unusual convoy, including the de facto newest member Ditzzy Doo, took a roundabout route to Ponyville. They were careful not to cross paths with Shadohoof members OR the royal guard. As part of her story, Luna stressed how she needed to keep a low profile.

Big Macintosh added for clarity, "And you said your made-up name is Abacus?"

Luna averted her gaze, "Ahem... yes. When I gave Ms. Doo my application, I just looked around for the nearest thing in my room for a name. I can't be too cautious... so I cast a spell on my Hooves of War to change my appearance to most ponies."

Zecora lifted her head, "We all could see you for what you were, because you judged us of good character?"

"I think so... Maybe I knew that I'd need help finding a specific pony."

Ditzzy twirled in front of Luna, "Twilight Sparkle's place, right? The Books and Branches Library! I know exactly where that place is!"

Luna said eagerly, "How can you be so sure?"

Ditzzy concluded her twirling and lifted an eyebrow. "I'm a mailmare."

"Oh..." Luna blushed slightly. "That would... yes."

On the other half of the group, Zecora noticed Big Macintosh being forlorn. He was softspoken, but not antisocial. "I had yet to see you with such a frown. Big Macintosh, what has you so down?"

Big Macintosh had been holding it in and didn't need to pause to collect his thoughts. "You were right when you said I felt something; some inescapable need to be somewhere and do something. I honestly have never felt anything like it before and wouldn't be surprised if I never felt it again the rest of my life. I thought that knowing what was going on would make me feel better about what I had to do to get this far. I know it's serious and you have my word I'll do all I can... but it just didn't make me feel better."

By now, Ditzzy and Luna had been listening. Ditzzy asked apprehensively, "What did you have to do?"

Big Macintosh sighed, "I ain't proud of it. My sister stood in the way and I... I had to clash with her in order to get past."

"Applejack...?" Luna gasped, "But... but I always looked forward to your family dynamic in Twilight's letters! Oh... I never intended for you two to fight!"

"It ain't your fault." Big Macintosh replied firmly, "No pony's to blame here. "There's something else I feel bad about... I knew for years we had it coming in the first place. It was only a matter of time."

Zecora lifted a supportive hoof, "If this issue holds some clout, at least I will let you have it out."

Big Macintosh looked to the other three to see encouraging smiles, especially on Luna. He looked ahead, preparing to tell his story, when what he saw ahead made his face fall all the way. "Now who in the hay do you suppose they are?"

The group looked ahead and up to see the Shadowbolts close in on them. The lead Shadowbolt checked her recently-acquired compass and lead the dark pegasus trio to a landing in front of Luna.

The lead Shadowbolt frowned and held the compass out, as if trying to get it pointed at somewhere other than Luna. "That can't be right!"

Another Shadowbolt chimed in, "Maybe she tagged this one with her energy or something to throw us off!"

"May we help you...?" Big Macintosh flanked in.

The Shadowbolt took notice of all the not-Luna in the area. "We're taking that pony until we get answers!" She indicated Luna. Luna's gaze was fixed on the compass with an expression of familiarity. She quickly snapped her head up at being addressed.

"Now for what would you go on and do that for?"

"We're looking for our master... the one who summoned us, Princess Luna! For her to entrust that OTHER pony over there with her energy signature means she must be important. Now if you'll excuse us..."

The Shadowbolt made to walk around Big Macintosh. The draft horse strafed to stay in her way. The Shadowbolt stepped forward the other way, but Big Macintosh cut her off again.

The Shadowbolt cackled, "You don't know what you're dealing with!"

Big Macintosh narrowed his eyes and saw Zecora walk up to his side. He responded, "I could say the same about you."

Ditzy rubbed her bandaged foreleg with her opposite hoof and addressed Luna. "If you're the third, this can be over quick!"

Luna whispered, "I can't! If I fight, I'll give myself away...!"

"Oh... Then I will-!"

"Rematch NOT accepted." The lead Shadowbolt pre-empted smoothly.

"Rematch...?" Went through the other three's minds. They looked to Ditzy, who held her determined pose for an anticlimactic moment and returned to staying on the side.

Zecora kept things on track. "I'd say it's enough fair that we fight in pairs."

At that admission, the lead Shadowbolt stamped out the Hoof of War. Once the magic took hold, everypony and non noticed something very distinct about the matchup. Big Macintosh finally vocalized.

"Ain't one of you gonna step out and let this start?"

The identical two Shadowbolts grinned widely. Their leader merely smirked, "Now why would they do that when you agreed to a match with all three of us? At least... you didn't object."

"Now there's just too much wrong with all this here!"

"ACTUALLY...!"

All heads turned to Hayley.

"AH! Why do ponies keep DOING that...!? Anyway, I knew I forgot some things. You know, from the last time. Hello again, by the way. Hope you're well. Right. Organizations and groups CAN represent themselves as a single entrant. You can say they pool their wins and losses. They earn merits - and demerits - at an accelerated rate. They can even participate in team battles to risk their eligibility for the second round. And, ah... yes. You DID agree to fight the Shadowbolts and since SHE laid down the Hoof of War, she made the terms which you raised no objections against. The downside to being hasty, I suppose. Not that- not that I'd ever imply that you are a hasty pony in general. Just that, ah, in THIS case, you seem to be particularly out of sorts. And you staring at me like that doesn't help convince me to the contrary."

"However, since you NOW raise an objection, as arbiter I can allow you a set period of time in which to add a third to your side."

Big Macintosh said quickly, "How long do we have?"

"About ten seconds."

The eyes of the quartet to one of Hayley's sides bulged. They discussed in a hush.

"That is... ten seconds of MY counting. Not as of when you objected. Far more than ten second have passed since then. I count slow, though. So maybe you DO get more than the standard definition of ten seconds. If I paused for as long as I spent enunciating the number, is that MORE or even LESS than what you'd call-?"

"START COUNTING." Demanded the Shadowbolt leader.

"Er. Right."

It was a quick ten seconds. The pressure made it feel like longer, without all the luxury. Hayley clopped at the ground with each count.

"Five... four..."

Instead of Hayley, a synthetic voice buzzed, "Three..."

Everypony and non looked around. Hayley muttered, "I can assure you my VOICE does not sound like that even to ME."

"Two... one... Let's rock."

Upbeat techno music, smoke, and neon lights filled the area despite the lack of any such equipment anywhere nearby. From the smoke emerged a young mare unicorn. White of coat and with a stylish mane of two shades of blue.

Hayley lifted a brow. "Is that...?"

"DJ PON-3!!!" Luna squealed. For just that moment, she indulged in enjoying seeing another pony she had only seen in letter form and the occasional photo brought her way. Luna had only seen one mention in Twilight's letters, but that was enough to know of the DJ unicorn's awesomeness.

"I don't suppose you'd come here with that flashy entrance and just be asking for directions, yes?" Hayley saw Vinyl Scratch's nod. "Smashing! Then go ahead and just make hoof contact with one of the stacked-against team and we'll be set!"

Scratch swiftly knocked hooves with Zecora. The action sprayed Hoof of War magic about and let Scratch into the clash.

Right then, Hayley's horn sparked. "AH!! And what timing. My attention is required

elsewhere. I trust you ALL to be on your best behavior, yes? Though... 'best' considering what your about to do wouldn't be considered good behavior at all by regular standards. Unless you're out in the wild where that sort of thing is necessary to live. Ah... I DOUBT this falls under any of those categories, so best behavior! Considering!" The unicorn scholar teleported himself away.

Following that, the opposing sides looked back to each other. The Shadowbolt leader was shooting a grin while Big Macintosh and Zecora looked ready to throw down. Business-like, Scratch reached for her iPony. Everypony and non watched her crank the device and search for a song. When she placed it back in its hilt, the iPony emanated a battle theme that was fast-paced with a touch of melancholy.

[DJ Pon-3's playlist]

[Start!](#)

That was as good a signal as any. The Shadowbolts took to the sky as an organized unit and craned up every other head.

Zecora shook her head to stop gaping. "Cooperative effort is their strength, it would seem. To survive we too must work as a team!" She and Big Macintosh spared a look to Scratch, who stood in place and nodded with her music. "I am debating if my thoughts she's actually ruminating."

Scratch held up a hoof, signaling to wait. All she got were incredulous looks. The music hit a certain early crescendo. In response, the Shadowbolts halted their circling and dove to attack. Scratch's heads-up was well heeded. She and Zecora split ways. The two wingsmanes acted upon their orders and followed them. The lead Shadowbolt kept on course for Big Macintosh, whose thrown-up hooves were well able to block the reckless charge. He attempted to follow up with a counter, but the lead Shadowbolt kept herself aloft.

The other two were crafty in their own way. They kept it much more close and personal with Zecora and Scratch. They also kept an eye on each other, for when either of the opposite opponents wasn't paying attention, they could easily speed over to deliver a quick sucker-buck.

Things were kept at a standstill until Zecora saw Scratch turn her iPony again. It didn't seem to do anything, but careful listening revealed it: a looping cymbal beat that blended into the song very well. After that little adjustment, Scratch began fighting her opponent back well with a seemingly unpredictable series of jabs and pounces. Zecora remembered watching the adult zebras in her home land use music to communicate, but nothing so direct.

Zecora closed her eyes and harkened back to those days. When she opened them, she saw the Shadowbolt rushing in, trying to take advantage of whatever she was doing. Her

instinct was to move out of the way early, but the metronome under the song was too mellow, building up to something. No... it wasn't a dodge. Zecora steeled herself, gathering a barrier from the Hoof of War. Her gamble paid off when the Shadowbolt only had a mere kick with a hind hoof to show for his ambition. Zecora took the hit without stumbling. In the moment, she grabbed her cloak out and swept up with it. The garment took a more solid form in the golden magic and its hit was enough to knock the wind out of the Shadowbolt. She deprived him of the luxury of hitting the ground just yet. Her cloak took a drill shape around her forehoof and propelled her for a strike on the Shadowbolt that took him well down.

The Shadowbolt on Scratch saw his teammate go down and tossed all pretenses of fair play. He kept Scratch at bay by spinning several kicks. Once the DJ pony was well away, he pestered her with blasts of dark wind from his wings beats. The dark wind wasn't something easily ignored, but Scratch wasn't sweating it at all. She swiftly slid under one wave projectile and seemed to punch the air towards the second. The gesture generated her own projectile of acute, crescent-shaped air. The Air Scratch twirled into the Shadowbolts's dark wind, canceling both out. Quickly, Scratch sent another one before the Shadowbolt could try his luck again and ended up slapping the dark pegasus with her attack.

A smart pony would expect the Shadowbolt to switch up tactics at this point. That's why the Shadowbolt did the unexpected: He stuck with the projectile spam. That allowed Scratch all the freedom in the world to leap forward and twist her body around the projectile. The dodge lead into a roundhouse kick with a follow-up buck straight into the Shadowbolt's stomach.

"BEHIND YOU!!!"

Scratch whirled around, but didn't see anypony. Zecora also looked in that direction. However, it was not Scratch that Big Macintosh had been trying to warn. Zecora turned around too little too late to receive the Shadowbolt leader's hind hooves into her face. The Shadowbolt that had been on Zecora before leapt into action. The leader's last kick twirled Zecora around right as the wingmane could reach her and give a wind-blasted uppercut. He kept aloft and sent a gust of dark wind down. The Shadowbolt leader who initiated the attack rushed to Zecora's other side and sent her own gust. The two attacks collided into Zecora, concluding their team attack.

Big Macintosh reached the scene and managed to ram the thick of his foreleg into the wingmane. The leader still managed to get airborne and keep out of his grasp... still. Scratch took that opportunity to nudge Zecora.

Zecora groaned urgently and shook her head. "I am all right... and more than still able to fight!"

Even above the music, the flapping of the third wingmane coming in for a surprise attack

was easy to detect. Scratch gestured at her iPony, then turned to the wingmane. The wingmane went into another uppercut. Scratch took it, tossing her head back. This caused her headphones to fly off her head and land around the other wingmane's ears. Without wasting a moment, Zecora grabbed off Scratch's iPony and turned it up as instructed. The headphones erupted in reverb, leaving the wingmane dazzled. Zecora put the iPony back and leapt past Scratch to where the confused first wingmane was about to attack Scratch again. Zecora's leap into action was enough to take his attention away.

The wingmane sent off a dark wind. Zecora grabbed out her cloak and acted on her combat epiphany. The cloak swept down, attacking the projectile directly. The projectile warped and changed direction. It hit the Shadowbolt, thus securing his attention away from Scratch.

Scratch moved in to take advantage of her dazed foe. She galloped up to him and used his shoulders as a platform to propel herself into the air. On her way down she flipped backwards and let her hind hooves buck hard into the Shadowbolt.

"Down!" The Hoof of War announced.

The Shadowbolt hitting the ground for the count garnered a lot of attention. The leader scowled and made to help her other wingmane tip the scales. Her flight was interrupted with a painful twinge. She scowled again at Big Macintosh, who managed to grab her tail in his teeth.

"Seen my own sister catch her friend like this too many times not to pick up on it myself."

Zecora and the wingmane took it one-on-one while everypony else was distracted. They came to basic jabs and blows, but it was all over when the Shadowbolt went for a sweep

Zecora reared herself up, "The elements are at my call!!!" She rushed the Shadowbolt while he was open. She swiped by him several times, knocking him back and forth with her strikes. She stopped behind him and stomped the ground, generating a radius of electricity that kept him rooted to the spot. "And by their might, you shall fall!!!" Zecora took off in a regular gallop. Along the way, she picked up an aura of billowing flame around her. At this point, the Shadowbolt could have been just stunned in place by the sheer impossibility of what he was seeing. The flaming charge connected.

"Down!" The Hoof of War announced.

By this time, the Shaowbolt leader had well freed herself from Big Macintosh's grasp and was in the middle of punishing his insolence. Zecora and Scratch watched, trying to find a good opening. The numbers may be off, but they were aware that this last pegasus wasn't to be trifled with.

Zecora asked aside to Scratch, "What was that you previously used to give yourself an aerial boost...?"

The Shadowbolt leader held high over Big Macintosh, surveying her work. Doubtless he could take much more before retiring. After his wild-card brute strength was dealt with, she could fly circles around the other two with superior techniques.

Speak of the devils, Zecora and Scratch galloped straight to Big Macintosh's aid. The Shadowbolt leader crossed her forelegs and looked at the ground-dwelling ponies and zebra.

Zecora shot a look up, "You think staying unreachable is fair when you have the advantage of the air?"

The Shadowbolt laughed, "You'd rather I clip my wings or something?"

"That idea is rather swell. Come! Let us propel!" At Zecora's mark, Scratch leapt on her back. "And send this apparition straight to-!"

Luna gasped, "Zecora!"

"... straight to a place where she'll be hearing bells." Zecora finished awkwardly.

The Shadowbolt wasn't entirely impressed. "Not bad. Maybe one of you will be able to touch the bottom of my hoof if you stretch out far enough!"

She didn't have much time to laugh. Big Macintosh jumped on Scratch's back, applying pressure to both her and the zebra below. Scratch visibly grimaced and Zecora yelped a swear in her native tongue. With a final push of his hind legs, Big Macintosh had leapt up to the Shadowbolt's height. She made to go higher, but it was already too late.

Big Macintosh held up a strong foreleg. He swiftly stronglegged the Shadowbolt and pulled her into a headlock. He kept the momentum, spinning the both of them around. He was in a good place about it, but she couldn't control her mounting vertigo. Defying physics by the grace of the Hoof of War, Big Macintosh spun the Shadowbolt around a bit more. He tossed her up with a flip and caught her again, this time facing out and upside down. There was no other place to go but down, and of course they were spinning. The Shadowbolt took all the impact for two in her shoulders.

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

As if snapping out of a trance, Big Macintosh backed away from the downed Shadowbolt in a daze. He looked around at all the agape jaws. He didn't exactly body slam the Shadowbolt with all the love and tolerance in the world. The draft horse shook his head, "So I guess we, uh, ought to make another quick escape?"

Zecora sighed, waving the ache out of one of her hooves. "You are right. We must head out of sight."

Ditzzy came up beside her. "Don't worry! I have first aid!"

The now-quintet made their way a distance from the Shadowbolts. Going straight to town would have made them too easy to track, so they circled the town like before. Along the way, Luna held an interesting conversation with Scratch, posing yes-or-no questions or getting answers in the form of song quotes. It was nice to converse with somepony with such a positive zest for once.

However, that didn't distract from the hushed conversation of the other three. It was too hushed for any smart pony's tastes. Finally, Big Macintosh walked faster to catch up. "I ain't in the habit of talking behind anypony's flank. We all just settled on agreeing that you did NOT summon those Shadowbolt ponies. But sometimes, the discussion just ain't over until you hear it from the pony's mouth. Did you summon those Shadowbolts?"

Luna seemed to take the question personally at first. Her face burned with indignation and her eyes puffed up. She thought something over in her head and let it all out. She looked back up to the other four.

"I... I know I'm not the cleanest pony in all of Equestria. After all, I was the most feared creature in the land for a thousand years. However, I am telling you the truth right now. No. I have never knowingly summoned those pegasi."

For a moment things looked like they would get more tense. However, Big Macintosh just nodded and turned back ahead. "And that's that."

Ditzzy hovered into action, "We're not gonna see much of them now anyway. Not when they don't have this!" She pulled from her mailbag the compass that had been used to seek Luna out. She saw the astonishment of the others. "It's wrong to steal... But I don't think they were the rightful owners in the first place."

"No! No, you did good! I'm... I'm a princess and I say you did good! It was okay this once."

Zecora flanked in, "I appreciate a good jubilation, but I believe Big Macintosh still owes an explanation."

Everypony and non looked at Big Macintosh. He squeezed his eyes shut in exasperation, but looked back. "All right. I'll tell you. I suppose getting this off my chest can only help us in the long trot."

The rest prepared to listen intently as they all walked.

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Back in town, yet another ad hoc group sauntered through. Gil and his new friends from the west walked through, eyes peeled for anything suspicious. At the moment, the most suspicious thing was them. They garnered a lot of looks; a Mareican soldier, a young buffalo, and a cowpony.

"So... what do they look like?" Braeburn asked again for comprehension.

Gil answered, "Shadohoof agents look like any other pony from the outside... but don't be fooled. Bison has long since stripped them of their individuality. They're so saturated in his dark methods that no amount of emotion can bring them back. I think my stallions have been able to rehabilitate one or a few, but that's after a long process. Normally it's hard to pick them out of a crowd, but I don't see very many ponies wearing clothing here... You'll know the agents by their dark clothing."

Strongheart gestured, "Like them?"

The other two snapped their heads over and saw, making their way into an alleyway, a pair of ponies that fit the description. They looked almost like twins, but with differently colored manes. The manes were mostly hidden under their unusual hats, but the way they moved and looked about certainly wasn't common.

"Yes!" Gil hissed. He made to intercept them, but found himself cut off by the fight-seeking crowd. Additionally, he had to make himself inconspicuous when the agents almost looked his way. "Darn it... this crowd! We need a distraction so we can go around and catch them off-guard..."

The three of them were at a loss. Braeburn's ears picked up a conversation.

"... C'mon. It's not you're attacking anypony out of the blue, here. We're respecting another country's culture!"

"I- I know... but when I tell the audience that I love them, I really MEAN it! I can't imagine using my skills for something like... like THAT!"

"I know what you mean, but it isn't like that. You've already shown you're a better sport than most other ponies. Just give it a try!"

"Maybe..."

Braeburn looked as the Shadohoof agents were being more cautious and getting away. The overzealous crowd didn't help much. No amount of 'excuse me pardon me' would get them there fast enough or with enough cover. He heard the conversation get close to him

until they passed right by him. Quicker than he even registered the thought, Braeburn jumped in front of the pair he was listening to.

"I CHALLENGE YOU!!!"

Everypony and non stopped right where they were. The 'you' echoed in the street. Braeburn found himself pointing as a young stallion pegasus in a blue Wonderbolts uniform. His young mare squadmate looked at the both of them, intrigued. Soarin' wore a very indicted expression. Braeburn's expression was no less wide-eyed, conveying he just now understood what he was getting himself into.

Soarin' muttered, "Well... that simplifies matters."

Braeburn urgently looked back at Gil and Strongheart and nudged his head toward the alleyway. They nodded back and made for their roundabout route. Braeburn turned back to his matter at hand. He had no idea how fickle this crowd was. "Yup, I'm... I'm rarin' to go! Let's see what you... uh, got!" This was met with many cheers, along with what the majority female crowd was saying.

"Two COLTS are going at it...?"

"I've been waiting for this!"

"I hope they start wrestling!"

"BITE HIM HARD!"

"How soon until that uniform comes off...?"

Both in the Hoof of War weren't entirely comfortable. Soarin', eyes big and moist, looked at his squadmate. "Spitfire, this is making me insecure..."

Spitfire raised a brow, "Really? The mares leer at you all the time!"

"Yeah, but... I don't actually HEAR any of it over the roar of the crowd... Great. Now that's what I'm going to hear when I perform, now."

Braeburn looked over the crowd and saw the top of Gil's hair as the soldier made his way to the alleyway. He said slowly while not looking at his tentative opponent, "Uh... c'mon, now. We're about this all wrong. Some friendly competition between ponies is all this is! I ain't taking anything personally!"

Soarin' appeared to soften to the idea after a few moments thinking.

"Here's to keepin' it clean, partner?" Braeburn proposed, holding his hoof out.

"Keeping it clean." Soarin' responded, meeting Braeburn's hoof with his own.

The Hoof of War was stamped out and the crowd was riveted, especially the mares.

[DJ Pon-3's playlist]

[Start!](#)

The Appleloosan and the athlete paused for some cleansing breaths, preparing themselves to engage in something outside their expertise. Keeping crowd attention was all-important, so Braeburn took it upon himself to throw the first attack. He drew from his first fight and propelled himself forward, a forehoof extended. Soarin' was surprised by the attack and beat his wings back and to take himself aloft. This was a common Wonderbolt trick to avoid collisions when there is an accident or miscommunication during a routine. Soarin' stayed off the ground and lashed out with some strikes from all four hooves. Suddenly, those lessons in synchronized cloud-swimming came in handy.

Braeburn backed away from the assault. In reality, he was leading the center of focus further away from the alleyway. One alarmed peek allowed him to see the faintest silhouette of a struggle. Strongheart and Gil must have engaged those agents! In that case, he had to take the fight FAR away. He saw one of Soarin's kicks and made like he was too open to truly defend against it. He tossed his head back, letting his hat fly off.

"My hat!!!" Braeburn called out in a poor actor's monotone. He about-faced and ran after the article.

Soarin' lifted a brow and followed after. Conveniently, there was a dinner theater being set up in the particular plaza that Braeburn was leading everypony. It was a complete stage performance, set up to look like a saloon. At the moment it was unattended, so Braeburn's hat let itself float right onto the edge of the stage. In his rush to get to his hat, Braeburn hopped over a prop crate. However, he underestimated the crate's hollowness and weight. When he leapfrogged over it, it ended up flying back... straight into Soarin'. Soarin' yelped and took the flying crate head-on and fell to the ground.

"Oh... so THAT'S how it's going to be!?" Soarin' called over. He swiftly regained his air and charged forward.

Braeburn picked his hat off and pulled it back on securely. He then whirled around to meet Soarin's charge. He didn't quite see the blue pegasus coming. That was because by that time, Soarin' had flown to the wooden column to Braeburn's side, caught it, and swung around. Soarin's swing came around to him kicking Braeburn right off the stage and into the tables where the audience was supposed to stand. The Appleloosan picked himself up in time to see Soarin' come in for a follow-up strike. Braeburn stood tall against the rush. He responded with his own outstretched hoof, backed by enough momentum to generate an aura of flame.

Hoof met hoof, generating a vicious golden feedback. No pony in the area expected the ensuing explosion of light. When it cleared, the combatants rubbed their hooves over their eyes and noticed something. Rather, a lack of something. Their hooves no longer bore the Hoof of War. They both looked at each hoof and came up with only one hind hoof still bearing the magic.

"Now THIS is a development," said Hayley, the ever-vigilant arbiter, "Such a head-on collision - well, HOOOF-on, I suppose - causes the Hoof of War to become unstable and lose its grip. That is, except for the portion of magic that prevents significant injury. Normally we'd be well on top of this, but why go through effort if you can just waive it as a feature, right?"

As he spoke, one of the wayward Hooves of War popped back into sight on top of a table.

"See that? That Hoof of War can go to either one of you! Alone it doesn't do anything, but get all three of your loose Hooves and your super abilities return with a vengeance! Like I said... looking into what causes it, but the result is FASCINATING, isn't it?"

Braeburn and Soarin' exchanged looks, and then focused on the Hoof. Flying straight for the hoof allowed Soarin' to reach and stomp down on it, taking the magic back into him. Braeburn groaned at the development, but looked around for the possible appearance of the next Hoof anyway.

"Oh!" Hayley called out again, "By the way, the Hooves may hide themselves in surrounding containers! Did I mention that it's possible to remove loose Hooves by doing enough damage? And! And the fact that loose hooves sometimes hide themselves in containers such as barrels? More information is never bad, right? Well, unless the information causes negative feedback that results in long-term effects. Well, in THIS case the information can only help! I hope."

Everypony looked from Hayley back to the fight at hand, including Soarin'. The only pony not so rapt was Braeburn, and that was because he was already charging into Soarin' with a flipping kick. Soarin' could only give a yelp before Braeburn's hoof came down on his back. Soarin' was sent down and the acquired Hoof went loose again. Braeburn was on top of it quickly and now was up the one Hoof.

At a loss for what to do, Soarin' summoned up a nearby prop crate with a gust from his wings and sent it at Braeburn. Braeburn put up a defensive foreleg to take the hollow prop. It broke around him, but he heard the telltale twinkling of a loose Hoof of War. He looked intently at it, completely missing the second prop crate Soarin' tossed over. Braeburn was sent back and Soarin' clopped onto the Hoof.

With one Hoof to go, but not apparent, the two combatants had the same idea to go for each others' Hooves while the last one took its time arriving. They came to physical

blows, trying to land something enough to shake their Hooves loose. Braeburn ducked behind the saloon counter and bucked a bunch of display fruits and vegetables. Soarin' weaved out of their way and made to counter attack. He anticipated Braeburn's dodge and lead the attack to hit Braeburn square on. Braeburn hit the wall of the stage and his Hoof was knocked loose.

Braeburn groaned on his way up, but took a look out the set widow. He saw Gil and Strongheart exiting the alleyway, looking well in one piece. He spared a relieved sigh at the sight. That was a short-lived relief when he heard another smash and the audience riling. Braeburn looked back just in time to see Soarin' stomp in the last Hoof of War.

"Horse apples." Braeburn squeaked.

Soarin' took off into the air as the combined magic of the Hooves of War swirled around him, culminating in the appearance of a mechanical suit of armor. Most of the jaws in the area dropped. Hayley was too busy noting the events with a quill and parchment to display his awe.

Without announcing any attack, Soarin' kept in the air. He balled himself up briefly, also causing the swirling magic to gather behind his back. With enough magic gathered, Soarin' gave a mighty beat of his wings. The magic manifested in a swarm of missile-shaped gusts of wind. They spread from behind Soarin's back and homed in on Braeburn. The latter only got a few steps in before the missiles cut him off and pounded him with explosions. How wind could generate explosions was beyond anypony's guess, but it sure looked cool.

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

After everything settled, Soarin's armor vanished and the three empowered Hooves of War split off, leaving Soarin' with his own while Braeburn got his own back.

Spitfire walked up to her wingman's side. "That was... different. Nothing like my fight."

"Oh, yes." Hayley mumbled, putting the parchment away. "Over the years, the Hoof of War has been known to, ah, 'toss it up,' so to speak. Not that this has been officially proven or anything, but we hypothesize that the magic actually is sentient and gets bored. Like I said, unproven. The thought that something is actually AWARE that it controls your every moment is creepy, anyway."

Leading off from that, Braeburn was up and looking fine enough. "Whoo... I was hammered more than a railroad!"

Out of habit, Soarin' rubbed the back of his head, "Yeah... sorry about that."

"No need for that! We had some fun, didn't we?"

"I guess so." The two of them looked around, "I feel bad for whoever had this stage set up, though..."

The Wonderbolts departed from the scene amicably, leaving Braeburn to rendezvous with his group.

"That was pretty rough," Gil pointed out.

"Really? You two seem fine to me!"

"I meant what happened with you."

"Oh. Well... the point was to make a distraction, right? You all looked ready to go, so I just, you know, threw it to get back on track."

"Really...?" Strongheart echoed, "That's kind of too bad. I would have liked to see you pull a win out of that."

"Wha... seriously?"

They both paused. The wheels in Braeburn's head turned and Strongheart saw it in his eyes. She briefly considered what he must have been thinking about and was alarmed by what she thought he could be thinking.

Gil cleared his throat loudly, "We didn't learn too much, but it's significant. Braeburn, we intercepted this message from the agents before they could slip away. It seems like Shadohoof is targeting five ponies specifically from and around the Ponyville area."

"I think there were six," Strongheart added, "but maybe one of them has already been dealt with? I saw something about that in the message."

"Dealt with?" Braeburn repeated, "Exactly what are they doing to these ponies to 'deal' with them?"

Gil quickly replied, "It didn't say. We were lucky to get even this much. Let's split up. Word is bound to travel and we'll be less conspicuous alone. The moment you see something, give us a call."

As they split, Braeburn looked at a badge-sized communicator on his vest collar. "This Mareican technology is beyond me..."

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Not a few blocks over, apples weren't far away. Applejack resumed her search of the

Cutie Mark Crusaders, asking every pony she came across to no yield. She looked in every alley, into every crowd, and up to every balcony since those three were unpredictable. She didn't find any fillies, but found another potential lead.

At the same time, Rainbow Dash was lounging on a roof taking in the crowd. Her next opponent had to be a step up from her last ones. Not very difficult considering, but she had to be discriminating nonetheless. She had no partner at this time since Fluttershy split off to go where the animals were and needed protecting. Fine by her. Though Fluttershy earned the Rainbow Dash stamp of approval in that first fight, she knew better than to trust Fluttershy to be consistent when it came to confrontations and fighting. Nothing against her, of course.

"Rainbow Dash!"

Dash perked at the familiar voice. Jackpot. More specifically, Applejackpot.

"I know you're probably busy with the clashin' and all, but have you seen Apple Bloom and her friends? Them fillies are playing their best game of hide 'n seek for sure."

"Uhhhh..." Quick! How could she turn this in her favor? Suddenly, an idea. "Yeah! I saw them! But it, uh, was so long ago all I can tell you is where they went from here. Probably not going to be of any help." The bait was set.

"That don't matter none!" Applejack called back up, "It's somethin'! Where'd they go!?"

Dash could just feel the catch tugging at her hook. "I don't know, Applejack. My memory's kinda fuzzy."

Applejack sighed, "C'mon now, Rainbow Dash. I ain't in the mood for no games. Can ya just tell me?"

"I'll tell you," Dash dropped from the ceiling in front of Applejack, "if you clash with me!"

"What-!? Aw, confound this tournament! It drives ponies to be fight-crazy is what it does!!"

"Aw, come on, Applejack! I know we BOTH have always wanted to settle things like this and we have a perfect opportunity here!"

"Ugh... Listen here, Rainbow Dash. If I do this, do ya PROMISE to tell me what you know, win or lose?"

Dash caught the loophole instantly. "Absolutely! Everything I've seen AND heard!.

"All right then. But know right now that you've given me a darn fine reason to make this a quick round!"

"Sorry, but it doesn't count if you throw it for me."

"That ain't what I- Oh, you're getting' it now."

The ever impatient Applejack took it upon herself to stamp out the Hoof of War. A fortunate-feeling crowd stopped to watch; many of them knew one or both of the ponies and their rivalry.

[DJ Pon-3's playlist]

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Dash stood tall, stealing a look at her Hooves of War, "So, should I make the first move of yo-"

Applejack had just about lunged at Dash in that time and nearly closed her forearms around the pegasus had she not noticed in time to leap out of the grasp. Applejack barely had any time to curse under her breath before Dash zoomed back in and answered with her own Hooves around the earth pony. "Nearly got me that time! Let's see how I do!" She tossed herself into multiple speedy backflips, ending one of them by letting Applejack go to hard landing on the ground. "Aww yeah!"

Having dealt with too much speed-related dizziness in from Dash in the past, Applejack was able to get back up and adjusted pretty quickly. At least in time to see Dash come at her again. Dash went low with a spinning strike that popped Applejack off the ground. Dash pursued, leaving a light trail, and made a stylistic twirl that grinded Applejack against her wings and hooves. Dash lost the momentum for the twirl and made to continue the assault. However, Applejack got a lucky hoof in and dunked the rainbow-maned pony into the ground.

Dash beat her wings to get back on her hooves and did not anticipate Applejack landing hard on the ground, shaking it for a sweep. Dash fell down and Applejack followed up, just like with her previous pegasus opponent. Dash managed to catch herself mid-air and come for a landing on her hooves away from Applejack. They shared a stare-down, each making little twitches and fake-outs. This time Dash's impatience won out and she flew above the ground at her opponent. Applejack made to intercept Dash with a buck but found Dash on a course for past her, not at her. Applejack's buck was expertly dodge, as was Dash's counter attack.

When Applejack managed to land a few swift jabs, Dash turned tail and put several bodies of distance. Not one to keep still, especially in a fight, Dash took off straight in the air as is propelled by a spring. Applejack was vigilant for any shenanigans. Dash stopped herself on a dime in the air, struck out a hind hoof and shot down even faster than she

rose. Applejack backed up and watched Dash hit the ground with enough recklessness. The earth pony's follow-up buck hit only air as Dash once again stole away. This time, she turned right back around. Applejack was only coming down from her buck when the loyal one reached her with a hard headbutt. Applejack kept on her hooves and turned to face the direction Dash came in. That turned out to be a bad idea since Dash was already gone. The moment later, Dash came in with two jabs as a single-hooved back that left Applejack in the same stun.

Dash repeated this a few times, using her speed to disorient Applejack and get off a few hits, and it was working since Applejack was reacting slower each time. Dash hovered above her dazed friend, "I'm too faaaaaast...!" She taunted before flying off again.

However, Applejack got fed up. However she saw it coming, Applejack turned to face Dash and struck her own head forward to meet Dash's headbutt. The two heads collided very painfully on both sides. Both ponies backed up, dazed. Applejack's stronger head allowed her to snap out of it quicker. She went in for the attack, jabbing Rainbow Dash back and forth again and again while the spectral pony was still trying to screw her brain back in after the headbutt. Dash's body felt as light as her head when Applejack bucked her in the air for a combo of kicks leading to yet another dunk on the ground.

Something snapped back into place and Dash took off into the air again. Lesson still learned from the last fight, Applejack had her lasso out well early to keep her friend from getting too far. "Not on MY watch, Rainbow! Now git on over here!!!"

Applejack tugged at the rope to counteract Dash's wing beats. Dash was sent toward Applejack at the speed of the pull. This time, the receiving party wasn't spiraling out of control. The sheer will not to fall for one of Applejack's ploys caused Rainbow Dash to let herself get roped in and at the last moment beat her wings to maintain a distance. Applejack expected Dash to be in range and went forward with an uppercut anyway. The surprise evasion made Applejack uppercut at nothing and clumsily flip over. This caused the rope to whip around and tangle Applejack up good and well. Dash wasn't too far to get caught in it and joined her friend in the mess.

The two whirled around into various positions trying to escape the rope - Totem pole, figure skaters, dancers on their hind hooves, forming the letter W - and eventually managed to flail themselves out of it. That mostly only worked out for Applejack since Dash still had the loop of the lasso around her waist. Applejack gave a tug at it just to make Dash resist it and use energy in this battle of attrition.

During this tug, Dash caught sight of something - Gil. He was passing by, but he took notice of who was participating in this fight and stopped to take a glance. Going for a leaping attack, Applejack jumped into Rainbow Dash. This was her chance! She could end this fight right now and show that Mareican what a Sonic Rainboom was all about!

"It's no old mare's tale!!" Dash proclaimed, and gave a mighty leap into flight,

intercepting Applejack and taking the farmer up with her. The crowd gave a swoon as Rainbow Dash climbed higher into the sky, pushing Applejack up with her. She pushed Applejack off, leaving the orange pony suspended, and then came back at another angle, down at the ground. Pulling off a Sonic Rainboom, especially with a passenger, required much more space and less weight. With the Hoof of War, however, Dash KNEW she could do it with this space and take a silly pony along for the ride. Already the wind was beginning to crack in resistance.

Applejack took note immediately. "Aw, no... Aw HAY no...!" She pulled at her rope desperately, riding it up from Dash's upper flank. The follicles barely touched Dash's wings. Applejack could hear a distinct whistling and saw Dash's face rippling from the speed. The rope was now scratching over Dash's midsection. Applejack grunted with effort and gave the rope a climactic pull. It pulled over Dash's extended wings, pressing them to her side the wrong way.

"WHAT-!?" Dash yelped, noticing the wind tunnel effect fading from her descent and looking to see her pinned wings. She wasn't flying downwards any more - she was just plain FALLING.

In the pegasus's surprise, Applejack managed to pull herself up and press her hooves into Rainbow Dash's back. This attack just very abruptly swapped receiving ends.

"YEEEEEE-HAWWWWWWWWWWW!!!" Applejack triumphantly howled toward the horizon.

The pair of ponies shot like a missile into the ground. At that speed and with pressed wings for no stability, Dash couldn't reverse this position. That's why... she had to... use all her wing strength... to slip out of the rope...!

With a snap, the rope gave away and Dash got her wings back. "YES!!!"

And then she hit the ground.

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

The dust settled, leaving the image of Dash buried in the very dent she made in the paved road and Applejack standing on top of her, broken rope in mouth and with no more scuff marks than she had left the ground with. The orange pony quickly hopped off her friend to coincide with the crowd offering their congratulations and condolences while dispersing.

"Y'all faster'n even I thought, Rainbow Dash. But it looks like I'm getting' by just fine on my Apple family ingenuity! Uh... Rainbow Dash? Y'okay there?"

Dash hesitated a moment and looked around. She looked where Gil was and caught his

gaze for all of a moment. The Mareican stallion kept an unreadable, analytical face and turned away to his duties.

"Yeah..." Dash muttered in response, "I just... HATE losing... And you embarrassed me in front of my rival in sonic... ness."

"Shucks, sugarcube. Somepony had to win, and that pony ended up bein' me. Anyway, I don't mean to make light o'ya or anything, but it's time to make good on your terms. Fess up, girl."

Dash got over herself enough to pick herself up. She grinned sheepishly. "Everything I know, right? Well... Uh... You already know everything I know."

Applejack heard that. She gave a start and then narrowed her eyes and said slowly, "I beg your pardon, Rainbow Dash?"

Dash reeled slightly from the scrutiny. She eventually threw her hooves up. "Okay, okay! I just wanted to face off with you! It's not like you lost THAT much time on this fight!"

"You... You LIED to me...? About something that I CLEARLY find very important!?" Applejack's expression hardened from disappointment to anger. "You... you selfish... FOAL! Why would you-!? URRRGH! NOTHIN' good came outta this fillyish stunt you just pulled! NOTHIN'! This is a downright SHAMEFUL thing you've done right here, Rainbow Dash! I have a right mind to keep on poundin' you 'til you straighten the hay up!!"

Dash looked up at her friend through horrified, watery eyes. "Applejack, what is WRONG with you!?"

Those words cut through Applejack's rage. The farm pony's emerald eyes softened and she got a good look at her friend's face, contorted into sadness by her words. Applejack then looked around at all the wide-eyed and slack-jawed spectators, each of which avoided her gaze. She looked at the ground at her feet, in thought. Finally, she looked back up at Dash.

"Can I... Can I speak with you, Rainbow Dash? Candidly... in private?" She lead the way anyway.

Rainbow Dash sighed in relief. At least her good friend was back. Remorseful, but back. The two young mares walked up to a juice stand and threw up their bits for drinks. Applejack downed hers in one gulp.

"I- I'm sorry for shoutin' at ya. I really am. I... I guess there's somethin' I need off my chest before I get any more involved in this fightin' nonsense."

Dash just nodded. She wasn't exactly in her element when it came to all that venting stuff, but she sure knew what it meant to stick it out for and listen to a friend in need.

Applejack took another cleansing breath before looking at Dash. "You know my brother, Big Macintosh, right?"

"Uhhh, yeah. Big guy, wears that thing. Kinda mellow."

Applejack chuckled, "Funny you should mention how calm he is all the time."

Meanwhile, far away, that very same Big Macintosh was into his own story to his own group of friends.

"I wasn't always so 'let things be.' In fact, you could call me rightly rowdy."

The rest swooned just at the thought. Zecora piped up, "I must confess, I never would have guessed!"

"I was just a normal colt, really. Runnin' around, being the big mane. Making friends, grossing out the fillies, having something to prove all the time. I guess I didn't really get so rough 'n tumble until... oh, when my sister Applejack came along."

Applejack explained, "Our parents are always out expandin' the Apple family business. Ain't no time to come back to where it all started. Sure, there's reunions 'n such and the occasional visit, but most o' the time it's just me, Granny Smith, and Big Macintosh. Granny Smith ran things well enough with some help until Big Macintosh was old enough to help out. When I became of age to help around the farm, that's when things went sour."

Big Macintosh looked aside, "I didn't like it much. Helping Granny Smith was MY thing and I wasn't going to let some filly nose in on what I already had a grasp on. Mind you... I was a silly lil' colt at the time. I know much better now, but back then it tore me apart. That's why I tried nudging Applejack out of everything."

"I didn't like that one bit," said Applejack after putting down her second cup, "and I asked Big Macintosh why he would say that sort of thing. He never told me. He just said it's 'cause I was a filly. And Rainbow Dash, nopony tells me what I can't do because I'm a filly when I darn well KNOW fillies can do it too."

"So," Big Macintosh muttered with a sigh, "we started fighting."

"And fightin'..."

"And fighting..."

"And fightin'. We would argue over the smallest things, just for the sake of comin' out on top. Granny Smith could barely stand it. That's why she made a rule for us. Whenever we got into one of our fights, after it was over, we'd have ourselves a big ol' hug."

Having heard the same thing from Big Macintosh, Luna emitted a charmed, "Awww..."

"Ehyup... Applejack and I got along pretty well when we weren't power-struggling. We were in an okay place for a while. Then one day Mom 'n Pop came right back for another visit... and they had another addition to the family with 'em."

"Apple Bloom!" Luna surmised with a big grin.

Big Macintosh raised an eyebrow, both at the Princess's knowledge and fanaticism. "Yup. And let me tell you, I wouldn't be a very good big brother if I didn't say she was the most adorable thing I ever did lay eyes on."

Applejack gave a nostalgic sigh, "Havin' Apple Bloom around the farm took all the bite outta everyday life. Don't know what it was, but I guess havin' a lil' filly 'round the place who was all smiles and didn't wish nothin' harsh on no pony just had an effect on us."

"Late one night, though... Applejack 'n I were up and the lack of sleep got to us. We found SOMETHING to argue over. We hadn't been at it for a while and I guess it was boiling over so a lot came out, and loud, too. We were interrupted by a crying. We looked over at the top of the stairs and there was Apple Bloom, eavesdropping."

Applejack laid down her third drink, "I ain't NEVER seen a lil' filly so traumatized in all my life. In hindsight, I don't blame 'er. We made so much nice for her and gave her a lovin' home to grow up in. Suddenly, 'er two bigger siblings which she adores and looks up to goin' at it like they don't care for each other? That ain't right."

Big Macintosh continued to his rapt (and moist-eyed) audience, "So we brightened right up. We made a night of it until Apple Bloom was back to smiling and being tucked out. But we didn't forget that look on her face, and we could only imagine how she'd react to seeing repeat offenses. So we came to an agreement. We were both big ponies by then. It was almost time for us to buck up and start taking more responsibility for the farm and the orchard. That night was a wake-up call for the both of us to put aside our paper-thin differences and act the part. We both promised to cut back on the strong-headedness and work together more than we already do."

"An' you've seen how much Big Macintosh has changed," Applejack muttered with a wave of a hoof, "Well, I suppose you wouldn't see the change, but you see what he's like now. And then... y'look at me."

Rainbow Dash furrowed her brow, "What ABOUT you?"

Applejack's lip trembled trying to get the words out. "I didn't change none! I... I THOUGHT I did my part, but that was just Big Macintosh calmin' down for the both of us! I've been as strong-headed as I've always been... probably been getting worse this entire time!"

Dash gulped her mouth full of juice. "Wait, wait. Stop right there. All this time you've been trying to be NICER?"

"I KNOW!" Applejack yelled, exasperated. She slumped onto the counter.

Dash expected to have to think about what to say next, but strangely found the words as they came. "I don't know about that, Applejack. Sure, your strong head can get you in trouble a lot, but you're always telling us about how never backing down saves your farm from a lot of raw deals!"

"... Rainbow Dash, you actually LISTEN to those stories?"

"Uhhhhh... Not the WHOLE thing. Just pretty much what I said there."

"That's STILL way more than I expected!"

"Well then there you go! You're not... uh, whatever it is you're worrying about. You're just being YOU. What made you think there's anything wrong with yourself?"

"Well... Big Macintosh himself brought it up that I hadn't changed since that day. And it's true. We had a big ol' falling-out this morning an' I said a lot of stuff I didn't mean. And then just now..."

"Okay. Don't you think it's possible HE also said things he didn't mean?"

"U... um... I guess so. I don't want to think of him any bad way, 'cause... Hoo boy, I have a lot to think about. Ya know, I didn't think you could be so deep, Rainbow Dash."

Dash rubbed her temple, "Neither did I. But the things you were worried about were so... CRAZY that I couldn't help myself!"

Applejack gave her loyal friend a grin, "Thanks for hearin' me out, Rainbow Dash. You're a good friend."

"No problem. Hey, if I ever DO see any of the fillies, I'm taking it straight to you."

While those two friends parted well enough, Big Macintosh was still answering for his actions. Mostly to Luna, who was the most invested.

The princess interrogated, "How could you SAY that to her?"

"It's the truth, you know... I just didn't mean to say it like that. I was in a bad place. I'll make it up to her next time I see her..."

"So you CAN be pushed to a limit... how complex..."

Averse to being analyzed, Big Macintosh picked himself back up. "So are we finding Twilight or aren't we?"

"Let us go straight to town," Zecora concurred, "it's not long until the sun goes down."

The group of five picked themselves up and head back on the trail. Zecora would have objected to Scratch's travel music (on the grounds of it being too conspicuous), but Luna took a liking to it.

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[Matchup sheet!](#)