My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
The Cute Mark Clash, Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Normally rolling in laughter by now, Scootaloo was off-put looking at Apple Bloom's

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

"... Except find our cutie marks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What IS that!?" Scootaloo whispered aside.

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

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

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

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

The Crusaders exchanged a look and gave a determined nod. "So how does this Hoof of

War work again?" Apple Bloom mused, randomly pacing her front hooves.

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

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

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

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

"CUTIE MARK CRUSADERS CUTIE MARK CLASHERS!!!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Girls!!" Apple Bloom shouted back, watching their flailing in the grasps of the laughing Diamond Dog. She then put on her serious face. Her friends were in serious trouble.

Despite the fact that she was avoiding her sister, Apple Bloom knew that Applejack would just run right up and buck that dog in this situation.

Apple Bloom ran at the dog, and as her resolve became clear, she found herself running faster, smoother. At about the time the Diamond Dog proclaimed they'd be working in the diamond mines until they were wrinkly old mares, Apple Bloom leapt and struck a hind hoof out. This was an attack she attempted to pull off during her solo crusading days and that didn't turn out like she would have hoped. Right now, it HAD to work. She couldn't fathom wanting something THIS much and not pulling it off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Cutie Mark Crusaders got in place to prepare for the Diamond Dog's arrival. Sweetie Belle jumped on Apple Bloom's shoulders and Scootaloo on Sweetie Belle's. Rover burst

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah!!" The other two unisoned.

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

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

Rarity's outfit was a provocative one. At least it WOULD have been if ponies normally wore clothes. Her earlier decision whether to project her bust or not went strongly in

support of it. Her attire started with a white bustier. This was connected by metal rings to a series of weaving thick belt-like threads that ended in a pair of flaps covering her flank. These flaps had long fringes that swayed with her movements. Her legs were adorned in leg-bands with long boots. Most striking was the facemask wrapped around her head but designed in a way that let her luxurious mane out unhampered. The part of it surrounding her eyes was shaped loosely like her cutie mark with the eyeholes curved for a more intimidating appearance. Everything was outlined and more with studded gems.

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

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

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

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

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing!"

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

Pinkie responded with an involved "Ooh!"

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

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

"Of course it is, dear."

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

"I gu- wait, what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

from nowhere. Pinkie looked at her hooves, astonished. "I can end world hunger...!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rarity jumped onto the ropes, landing her rear hooves on the bottom rope and her

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

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

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

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

Pinkie Pie backed up a bit, then leapt out of sight. Rarity kept track of where Pinkie Pie could be going, but was then pounced by the pink pony from above. Everypony in the vicinity was startled at the sudden action. Nopony even saw Pinkie jump out of the crowd...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then Rarity exploded again.

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

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

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

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

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

"You should see what it looks like," Rarity muttered, placing her horn close to Pinkie Pie, "when the gems LIGHT UP!" Rarity zapped the dress, the gems conducting the damaging magic and coursing it through Pinkie Pie's body. The energy culminated in a burst that sent Pinkie Pie flying out of the dress.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now here she was, in the middle of the Everfree Forest, being chased around by some agents (for the lack of a better word). Anypony would have called such a thing

crazy if it weren't happening right at that very moment.

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

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

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

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

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

Back with Luna, she picked herself up and prepared for the assault. She reared up on her hind legs, preparing a strike. Despite the ease with which a pony could be swept on just two legs, the agent's bodyblow didn't register anything on Luna. Luna followed through with her attack, giving her wings a mighty beat and sending a wall of lunar energy at the agent. The attack rammed into the agent and punched out every iota of energy in the agent's body. Before the agent could finish keeling over, Luna followed her attack up with a spinning kick. She kept herself aloft with her wings and kicked the agent back several times. Luna landed from the kick but wouldn't allow the agent that luxury. This time she brought up a forehoof, catching the agent in the stomach and sending her several stories high. Every strike in this combo radiated with splashes of lunar energy that dissipated shortly after.

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

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

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

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

"You call that apprehending me!?" The agent prepared to receive Luna again, but nothing could have prepared anypony for the swift glide the Luna employed to close the distance. Luna held the agent in place with her forehooves, but then let wisps of lunar energy do that for her. She stood back, gathering her wits. "Gaze into my darkness...!" To compliment that call, all went dark. The sun could still break through the canopy in this clearing, but Luna's incoming skill sucked all the light out of the immediate area. There was only an occasional burst of light and the sound of strikes being delivered inponyly fast. When Luna willed the darkness to lift, the agent was on the ground, unmoving. Luna herself had her back turned to the foe and cast a very discriminating glare. Apparently even the Hoof of War knew well enough that this fight was over and didn't need to announce it.

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

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

"I hope not..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luna shrugged.