

The Greatest Game III

WHACK-WHACK-WHACK

“There we go, good as new, even if it I am not yet through,” chuckled Zecora as she drove the last nail through her front door. While it certainly was a strong door she had recently discovered that its hinges were not. The local mailpony had brought it to her attention when she barreled through it one day delivering her a letter. It was only a monthly postmark from her mother living in Zebrica but her tendency to mark each one as urgent distressed her. She knew her mom wasn’t *that* old yet.

“Tomorrow I will get new hinges for my door, on a visit to the hardware store,” she mused putting away her hammer. Zecora sat herself by the fireplace sipping the tea she had been brewing, wrapping herself in a blanket. The wind outside was blowing the tree branches around in a peaceful rhythm. The warm savannahs of her childhood bubbled back to her as she drank from her cup. Flowing fields of green grass, tall stoic trees, the scent of distant storms on the balmy horizon...

BANGBANGBANG

She jolted back to her house coughing on her tea. “Who is there knocking outside? Such brash behavior I despise!”

BANGBANGBANGBANG

“You are not welcome in my home, until you tell me from where you roam,” she said rushing for her door locks and tripping in the blanket, rolling to the middle of the room in a bundle.

BANGBANGBANGBANG-SMASH

The door having suffered previous distresses finally gave up its fight and the hinges snapped off completely. The culprits behind this heinous crime against her entryway fell forwards in a jumbled heap onto the floor in front of her. The dust they kicked up obscured most of them, but one of their faces landed right in front of hers on the carpet.

“Hehehe, helloooo Zecora!” said a frazzled looking purple unicorn. “Twilight Sparkle, explain your actions! Your forced entry to my home is a known infraction,” demanded Zecora wiggling out of her blanket.

“Well you see, my friends and I were having some fun earlier with a tea party and we were playing a board game. This board game...we’re having some trouble finishing it and would like you to offer your opinion on it.”

Zecora frowned stepping over to her front door trying to nudge the heavy thing back into place. She stumbled a little when Twilight magically levitated and set it back in the entrance, fixing the hinges as well.

“So if it isn’t too much trouble could you please help us?” pleaded Twilight nervously.

After tapping the hinges to her front door and making a show of tugging it closed Zecora took a moment to glance at the small group of ponies sitting before her. They did look visibly distressed.

“So tell me Twilight of this game, what could I offer on a topic so tame?” she asked cautiously.

Applejack opened up one of Twilights saddlebags, pulling out a rectangular board game. Zecora gasped.

“Why have you never told me you owned this before? This is not something you buy in a store!”

“So you DO recognize this thing? Oh thank *goodness* I was scared I couldn’t get any input on it. Alright then I have some quest-“ Twilight stopped short. Zecora had jumped away to a far corner of her room excitedly digging through a pile of books and other things. She was practically skipping when she returned to Twilight holding an all too familiar brown case in her mouth.

“Tell me where you got *that* Zecora,” asked Twilight, obviously puzzled.

“They all come from the same place, the land that breeds the rest of my race,” she replied with a proud smile “Such a thing is quite rare you see. It’s quite a thrill to own a piece like *Jumanji*,”

The small group of ponies watched apprehensively as Zecora nosed open her copy of the game. Rarity rested her head on Pinkies bouncy hair so she could get a better look at it. There were dice and small lettering on the board, it looked not nearly as old and was more rigid and evenly aligned, paths not even crossing. There was no luminescent jewel in the middle either, just *Jumanji* etched into the center of the board. A short stack of cards sat next to it with some different colored blocks as tokens.

“If you do not know this tradition of mine, which surely I don’t doubt, is an ancient game of history, one that ends with a shout,” remarked Zecora as she tenderly rubbed a spot on the case.

“Look here Zecora, while you may see this as just a silly game we have come to discover that it is much much more,” chimed Rarity as Dash pulled away from the group. She watched as the blue Pegasus sat herself in the far corner of the

room. “This game of yours is just a trite copy of the real thing,”

Zecora burst into throaty laughter “Ponies please, you make my sides hurt! This game is as active as dirt,”

“Is that right?” snorted Applejack pulling open the flaps of their own Jumanji “Look through here yerself and then ya can tell us it’s all a buncha hooey,”

Zecora studied the game her orange acquaintance had revealed before her. She studied it eagerly, marveling at the detail. It was possibly the best iteration of *Jumanji* she had ever seen. The board carried the fine scent of Sequoia and with the careful detail of the spaces and tokens her mother would weep at the craftsmanship and dedication. The only things missing were the stacks of clues that came with every game.

“This is may be the finest copy I’ve seen to date. Such a masterpiece is nearly impossible to replicate,” said Zecora in awe.

“I’m afraid that this is probably, no, definitely not a copy Zecora,” whispered Twilight, glancing over to Dash “We started playing and every turn caused some sort of unnatural event to come to life!”

“Like big –ol bats as bigger than birds!” said Applejack.

“Super huge gigantica long hissy snakes!” chirped Pinkie Pie.

“Absolutely dreadful pony eating foliage,” added Rarity.

“...and some sort of sinking goop as well,” finished Twilight softly.

Zecora looked down at the board game again. It was certainly a pristine copy even though it was dirty. She looked back up to Twilight and her friends; they almost looked sincere.

“Don’t make a fool of me, this game is myth! There is nothing about it I could help you with,” she replied indifferently.

There was a bang over in the corner as Rainbow Dash slammed her hooves against the windowsill.

“Applejack can you...go and talk to Dash for a minute?” requested Twilight politely “I’m going to explain some things to Zecora,”

Applejack nodded and cantered over to Dash. Very calmly, she sat herself down next to her friend.

“Hey there sug’ how ya holding up?” she asked delicately.

“Bad. Just bad Applejack,” muttered Dash looking away.

“I know, things been bad for everypony lately, but we can beat this ya hear? I reckon It’s not tha end o’ the world,”

“It kinda is, Fluttershy’s gone and Zecora JUST said she can’t help us. I’ve known Fluttershy for like, ever and stupid Twilight just *let* her get taken away,” grumbled Dash, leering at Twilight from across the room.

Applejack nudged her in the side “That ain’t very nice. Spike’s gone too

ya remember?”

Rainbow Dash crossed her hooves and swore under her breath. Applejack pretended not to hear and patted Dash on the back.

“I know you and Fluttershy go a long ways back, and losing her is hard on all of us ya hear? We all tried to protect each other when them nasty vines started attackin’ it jus’ weren’t enough I’m afraid...I can tell Rarity’s really hurtin’ too, even though she’s tryin’ her best not to show it.”

Applejack rubbed her friends back. She knew Dash wasn’t one to cry or anything but she was definitely upset from what happened.

“Ya’ll know we’ll get ‘em back when we win right? Says so right on the box clear as day!” she offered.

“*If*,” corrected Dash morosely “*If* we win, you heard Twilight. This is a game that we could lose and if we seriously don’t win...then it’s over. Done. We don’t get them back Applejack. It’s only been four turns and we’ve lost two of us already.”

There was a loud crash from the far side of the room. Everyone looked over to see Pinkie Pie had bounced into a shelf of antique masks and knocked them to the floor. She poked her head out of the pile and grinned, wearing a big oversized laughing mask on her face.

“Just *look* at her AJ. She hasn’t been taking this game seriously since turn one,” she griped motioning to Pinkie, who was now doing a horrible job at cleaning up the mess she made.

“Pinks is *always* like this Dash, an’ right now, she’s gotta better attitude ‘bout it than you do,” Applejack replied sternly “You an’ me Dash, we gotta be strong for our friends. So chin up.”

Dash looked up at wearing a more determined face “Yeah, you’re right. I’m strong. I can do this. I’ll beat this stupid game and get our friends back in record time.”

“GIRLS! We’re going back to the library, let’s get there before nightfall!” piped up Twilight. She tilted her head slightly back; her expedition helmet kept slipping over her eyes.

“I’ve told you all I know, if these wild claims are true. I can only offer my best wishes; and hope the best for you,” said Zecora fearfully. She picked up the small stack of cards within her box and offered them to Twilight. “Take these with you for the rest of your plight; they will surely help ease your friends’ frights.”

“Thank you Zecora, you’ve actually been a great help now that I know more about the games history. With these clues giving us a heads up I think we’ll be better off too. Before I go I have just one more question,” Twilight pulled *Jumanji* back out of her saddlebags and set it down “Could you tell me what that

is? Right there in the upper left corner?”

Zecora took a long hard look at the carved figure scowling on the case. “A figure of those that walked on just two, they roamed these lands long before me and you. Creatures lost to time, hairless and tan, remembered only by name :man.”

Twilight gulped, shoving the case back into her pack “So I assume if...he comes out of the game then I can expect him to be just as dangerous as any other thing so far.”

“In all copys of *Jumanji* this card is left out. It is simply unfair without a doubt,” Zecora looked directly at Twilight, voice filled with dread “It’s always a gamble to have a card dealt, but it’s game over for those who roll the Hunter Van Pelt,”

“Pinkie Pie could you *please* stop bouncing for one moment? Looking at you is making me tiiiiired,” begged Rarity as Pinkie continued to hop around them in a circle. They were huddled together outside waiting for Twilight to finish talking to Zecora. The sun had just slipped behind the mountains painting the sky a vivid orange and red, prompting Rarity to summon some light before the evening set in.

“Oh Rarity you don’t have to brighten the night because we can do it ourselves. A trick I learned is that all you have to do is shut your eyes-super tight and count to five or maybe three but I always count to seven just in case and when they’re shut you open them up and *then you can see in the dark!*”

Applejack rolled her eyes “Yeah Pinkie that’s some real keen advice and all but I’d like a lil’ light anyways. We’re not stumblin’ around the kitchen for midnight snacks out here.”

Pinkie Pie was just launching into a new tirade on the perfect late-night treats when Twilight stepped outside to join them.

“Thank goodness you’re finally here,” breathed Rarity in relief as the light faded from her horn “I swear when this awful situation is concluded I’ll be taking a weeks vacation from work.”

Everypony murmured in agreement, even Applejack giving a fierce nod to the head vowing to spend more time with her friends than in the fields.

“Alright Twilight, what DID we learn from Zecora then?” asked Dash impatiently “Don’t tell me we walked all the way out here for nothing.”

“According to her this game has thousands of years of history to it. The ancient trickster spirits of the her homeland created *Jumanji* as an eternal reminder to the world of the untamed wilds that existed before civilization,” repeated Twilight carefully trying to correctly piece together Zecoras rhyming speech, “It

eventually exited her homeland but not before it passed out of knowledge, like what we saw with her copy tonight. Unfortunately for us there's little she can do to actually help...aside from giving us the list of clues she had."

Twilight passed around each of the small cards to her friends and lit her horn so they could read them. After a few tense seconds Rarity abruptly broke the silence.

"What in good heavens is a 'river horse'? How does a pony exactly 'skirt around one' as well...Pinkie what did the one you get talk about?"

"Mine says something about 'smiling guests from the Nile!' I don't know where that is but it sounds super neat to have something happy happen! What's yours say Dash?"

"It's just about being bitten and getting itchy," complained Dash "It doesn't mean anything to me, what about you AJ?"

"Shoot this one 'ere sounds like it's talking 'bout a stampede. Stayin' put is always a 'blunder' no matter what kinda stampede. I could handle this 'un no sweat," she said proudly thinking back to her town award "What's yours say Twi?"

Twilight sighed and dropped the card to the floor, everypony gathered around to look at the clue Twilight received:

YOU WIN!

"Now that there's a card I'd hold on to," chuckled Applejack with the rest of the group "What do we do next Twi?"

"Keep playing until we win at all costs of course!" said Dash confidently tugging the game out of her pack "Who's turn is in anyways?"

"Our turn Rainbow Dash," answered Rarity sidling over to Applejack "You can roll first if you want Applejack. Like you said I'm 'plum terrible' at these board games."

Applejack looked around cautiously; they had stopped in the middle of the trail on the walk home. The twisted hedge was a few hundred yards ahead and the woods around them still rustled with the sounds of marauding plant life.

"Jus' like before girls, we'll roll a turn, pack up the game and run like a bat outta--"

"Run? That's your plan? Running isn't a plan Applejack running is what you do when a plan FAILS," criticized Dash "AJ you're not even trying to think here."

"Yer not tryin' to think of somethin' yerself missy so if I were you--"

Twilight jumped between the two ponies "Will you two give it a rest!? Applejacks idea is pretty sound considering that I can't safely teleport all five of us

back to my library. Sweet Apple Acres is pretty close to here, we should run there and hold out in her barn,”

“Sounds good to me!” said Pinkie happily, bouncing in the air “Maybe we can stop over to Sugarcube Corner and pick up some snacks for tonight. I made miniature cupcakes that you can eat just like popcorn but I had trouble making the wrappers and then I thought ‘HEY! maybe I don’t need wrappers if they’re so super tiny’ because *sometimes* I even eat THOSE without realizing it and then you don’t even want to hear about when I go to the-”

“NO! PINKIE!” interrupted Rarity as Applejack started shaking the dice “Nopony, especially I, would want to hear about THAT. So let’s get ready to dart out of here while we prepare for the worst.”

With a clack the two dice fell to the game board causing the token to slide forward seven spaces. The luminescent jewel glowed to life as the new message revealed itself:

*They march and eat, march and eat
An entire army beneath your feet*

Immediately before they could react the brush around them exploded as all matter of woodland creatures burst from the treeline and scattered past them.

“Eww gross gross gross!” shrieked Rarity, an opossum brushing past her legs “What is going on here?”

“Beats me Rarity,” said Twilight as small family of squirrels scooted past her “It said something about an army right? Like an army of what?”

“Twi, shine your horn a lil’ brighter for us will ya?” asked Applejack squinting into the woods. She heard an odd rustling and didn’t like it one bit. It chilled her.

Pouring out of the woods were thousands, millions of black bugs of some kind. Tiny jaws gnashing at the air as they spilled en masse on to the pathway. A squirrel jumping out of a tree fell short and landed in their way, instantly covered in the swarm of black insects and in two seconds was picked clean to the bone.

“EVERYPONY OFF THA GROUND NOW!” shouted Applejack looping her lasso around a large overhanging branch. She was hoisting herself up when Rarity jumped and grabbed her round the waist.

“A...little...too...tightly...there...Rarity,” squeaked Applejack as the petrified unicorn desperately clutched her belly.

“Nopony wants to fall into *that* Applejack and that is my completely valid justification so suck it up and don’t you **dare** let me go!” she replied tightening her grip. Rarity watched Rainbow Dash lifting Twilight up in the air by her tail, causing her expedition hat to fall off “If you’re holding Twilight...and I’m over

here where is...”

“PINKIE!” they yelled looking around frantically. The ants below them continued their march tearing apart everything in their path. There was no pink pony anywhere in sight.

“Up here silly heads!” said Pinkie Pie stretching her neck past the branch. Applejack was so shocked she nearly let go the rope in her mouth.

“PINKIE PIE! Don’t ya scare us like that again! Ah was worried sick about ya right there,” scolded Applejack. She would have asked how she got up there so quick in the first place but she knew better to ask Pinkie questions that were impossible to answer.

They remained there wordlessly as the black mass of pests dwindled into smaller and smaller streams until by Rarity’s declaration she could see no more chittering insects rustling out the woods.

“Woweee! Did you see all those buggies on the ground there musta been like a whole million billion zillion ka-JILLION of those things crawling on the ground right there!” said Pinkie hopping down next to Applejack. She watched as the orange pony removed her hat momentarily, gasping for air as she stuffed her lasso back inside.

“Nine-hundred thousand,” said Rarity automatically, the other ponies looked at her in bewilderment “...I think.”

Dash opened her mouth to speak, unceremoniously dropping Twilight to the floor “So what do we do about all those bugs? They’re gonna steamroll the whole town if we don’t stop ‘em!”

“Lucky they weren’t heading to Ponyville,” said Rarity now brushing her mane “Unless they change course but that’s thinking pessimistic and I’m hoping for the best from this point on,”

Twilight put her helmet back on, struggling with it as her horn got caught on the lip “Where were they headed then Rarity?”

“Considering where *we* are, the speed they were going, how many of them there were and the direction they’re headed,” she paled, stopping mid-brush “they should be entering Sweet Apple Acres in twenty minutes,”

“TWEN-TWENTY! Jus’ twenty minutes!?” yelled Applejack in alarm. She reared back and took off towards her farm “Imma comin’ for ya’ll don’t ya worry!”

“Applejack come back! We need to stick together!” called out Twilight.

“You’re gonna hurt yourself AJ wait up!” yelled Dash speeding after her.

“Dearie what about us!? You can’t **leave** us here!” shouted Rarity.

“ELEVEN!” screamed Pinkie Pie doing a double back flip.

Rarity halted in her tracks. Twilight slammed a hoof against her

saddlebags feeling the emptiness inside.

“Pinkie Piiiiiiiiie, tell me you *didn't* just do what I think you did,” said Twilight in a poor attempt at hiding the anger in her voice.

“I’m rolling again because it’s my turn and guess which pony just took the lead too late it’s PINKIE PIE oh yeeeeeaaah!” she said victoriously pumping her hooves in the air.

Rarity grabbed her friend close “We are not even **close** to being ready yet and after all those atrocious murderous bugs you just roll the dice again anyway?!”

Pinkie stared at her vacantly and nodded “You betcha, the sooner I win the better for everyone else!”

Twilight took a deep breath and counted to ten. Zecora and the game *did* promise a return to normality upon completion. Running through it at breakneck speed? Was that actually a good tactic or a bad one? She had no time to dwell on it further as the newest clue bubbled forth within the jade globe:

*They cackle and laugh, but aren't your friend
Keep your wits or meet a bitter end*

“OOOH OOOOH I know exactly what this clue is!” shrieked Pinkie Pie excitedly.

Twilight did a double-take “Really Pinkie? What’s coming out the game?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s-,” she paused, striking an overtly dramatic pose “INSULT COMICS!”

The two unicorns threw a hoof to their foreheads while Pinkie rolled on the ground in stitches at her great joke.

“Twilight we are *not* making good time here. Do you think you can cast your fancy teleportation spell and help us cover some ground?” requested Rarity politely.

“That one’s pretty tricky Rarity. I haven’t done it in a while and three ponies at the same time to the same place is going to be difficult,” responded Twilight pawing at the ground.

“Not impossible?”

“Are you willing to risk your hair and mane?”

“My hair!?” she looked like she had just been slapped in the face “Yes I suppose if we win then it won’t really matter what happens to my wonderful visage in the interim. Let’s go for it!”

Twilight shut her eyes and recited the spell in her head. After a few seconds she opened them back up.

“Pinkie could you please stop laughing for a minute? I am trying to do

something here.”

“I’m not laughing anymore,” said Pinkie cheerfully “I thought it was Rarity laughing for a minute there!”

“I can assure you both I did not utter a single chuckle,” she said flatly.

All three ponies remained quiet as they swiveled their heads around. Faint cackling could be heard all around them. Rarity summoned light from her horn and cast it about the darkness. Three pairs of glowing yellow eyes lit up in the brush around them.

“Twiliiiiight, get us out of heeere,” peeped Rarity, edging closer to her friend. The creatures around them sauntered into the clearing cackling and chuckling. Their fur was a mottled spotty mix of black and grey making them difficult to see against the darkness. Rarity noted their powerful necks leading to their huge toothy maws. These creatures existed to rip and tear and perhaps nothing else.

“Are we going somewhere girls?” asked Pinkie Pie blankly as Rarity dragged her towards them.

“Yes Pinkie we’re getting out of here now I’m pretty sure we need to be as close to each other as possible,” said Rarity as Twilight focused on the spell. The animals were drawing nearer, almost lazily as they gnashed their teeth and snickered maniacally. Obviously unaware of just what kind of unicorn they were dealing with Rarity allowed a slight smile.

“Bye-bye!” she said as the largest turned to pounce at her and suddenly vanished in a flash of light as she felt herself sucked away into nothingness. Pinkie was whooping noisily next to her as the spell transported them to their destination. She tried calling to Pinkie, but her voice was distant in the odd howling wormhole that her lavender friend had cast for them. Almost immediately the unusual ride was over and they blinked back into the real world.

“Hahahaaaaaaa! Rarity you look like you’ve just been to a barbecue. Or maybe you WERE the barbecue!” snorted Pinkie Pie giving Raritys mane a playful tug.

“I am so so so SOOOOOO sorry about that Rarity,” said Twilight sincerely as the speechless unicorn tenderly ran a hoof through her now charred curls and coat. Twilights own hair had come out blackened as well. Pinkie Pie had in some impossible fashion exited the spell completely unscathed.

Rarity stood there shaking a bit. She was trying her best not to scream as the smell of her own burnt hair filled her nostrils. With restraint in her voice she very calmly spoke. “It is o-kay Twilight. I am currently...not being *eaten* and everything is fine,”

Twilight wiped the sweat off her brow in relief, it was time to get her

bearings “Alright, sorry again...where are we?”

“Applejack slow down you’re hard to keep up with!” yelled Dash as she tried keeping pace with her friend. Applejack was running at breakneck speed. Faster even than during the Running of the Leaves.

“No time to talk hun,” belted Applejack not even looking at the blue mare “My kin don’t know what’s comin’ an’ I gotta be there for ‘em. I ain’t having them die on me magicky game rules or not!”

Sweet Apple Acres was just up ahead now. Applejack had made exceptionally good time seeing she didn’t wait around for her three friends. She assumed they were following her in a slower gallop. Having good faith that Twilight wouldn’t stick around the forest was enough reasoning for her.

“Dash! Git in the barn and let the cattle and pigs loose! Tell ‘em to head for Whitetail Woods on the other side of town,” commanded Applejack as she bolted through her front door.

“GRANNY SMITH! BIG MACINTOSH! APPLEBLOOM! All ya’ll wake up and git yer behinds movin’ ‘cause we gotta go!” she hollered running upstairs hitting each bedroom door as she did. She was banging on her brothers door wondering why the other two hadn’t woken up yet when...

“OW!”

Applejack gasped “Sorry big bro,” she apologized as Big Macintosh rubbed his nose “Jus’ that it’s reeeaaal important ya move yer tuckus out this door now and rouse the other two while we go!”

“AJ they ain’t home,” said Macintosh with a yawn “Her teacher Cherrilee took Bloomy and her class upstate fer that camping trip ‘member? Heck sis you even talked to her ‘bout Granny bein’ group mentor.”

Applejack threw a hoof to her head. Of *course* they were on the school trip. How could she have forgotten?

“Do ya hear that? Someones makin’ off with our livestock!” he said in disbelief as he shoved past her to peer out the window. He threw on his harness and dashed downstairs.

“Macintosh I let them cattle out,” said Applejack “Now quit yer yappin’ and follow me outside,”

“Sis you’d better explain yerself. That’s part of our livelihood yer sendin’ out in the dead o’ night,” demanded Big Macintosh as he followed her outside.

“Ya wanna hear the short story or the long one?”

“Will I be gettin’ back to bed anytime soon?”

“Nope,”

“Spin me the longer yarn,”

“Me and my friends got ourselves mixed up in some accursed board game tha’s out to kill us if we don’ keep our heads clear an’ the only way to play is to win so’s we keep playin’ and all sorts of horrible monsters been comin’ out and right now there’s a heapin’ herd of bugs comin’ to the farm an’ they’re set to tear us to pieces so here I am to make sure that don’t happen ya got all that?,”

Big Macintosh frowned, squinting at her little sister “AJ tell me ya hadn’t been at the watering hole downin’ Honey Oaks again,”

“Dagnabbit Macintosh,” she cried “I am *not* drunk. Ya know I’m the most honest pony ‘round these parts.”

“APPLEJAAAACK!”

The two Apple family members turned their head to the shouting and saw her friends running over to greet them. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness ya’ll are okay,” she said, her smile dropped a little as she got a better look at the two unicorns “Mostly okay...what in tarnation happened to you two? Ya’ll catch fire or somethin’ Rarity?”

“Only a little,” she replied brazenly, glancing at Twilight “Where is Rainbow Dash?”

“Above you,” said Dash coasting to a stop on the ground next to them “The bugs are here,”

They flinched at the bad news. Big Macintosh didn’t look that fazed though.

“Alright I’ll go an’ get the bug juice,” he said casually making for the barn.

“All the pesticide in the world couldn’t stop these insects Big Macintosh, we just need move out their way,” said Twilight moving in front of the red stallion “We should be leaving right Dash?”

Rainbow Dash rushed back upwards and scanned the area “Aaaactually, it looks like they aren’t coming over here at all. We’ll be safe Applejack,”

“Ya mean they’re leavin’ us be?” she said hopefully “That’s a relief,”

The blue Pegasus glided back to the ground “Not exactly,”

None of the ponies had to strain their ears to hear the sound of crunching and munching coming from within the orchards.

“Oh sweet mother of mercy they’re gonna eat all our crop!” said Applejack in panic “Shoot...well, at least they ain’t munchin’ on us-”

“INSULT COMICS!” yelled Pinkie Pie pointing to the woods.

Dash looked at her quizzically but before she could say anything Rarity had yanked her out of the sky.

“INTO THE BARN EVERYPONY LET’S GO!” yelled Twilight as she hectically shoved Applejack and her brother into the red building. She magically shut the door and locked it as something slammed itself against the wooden entryway.

“Whas’ goin’ on? What did Pinkie Pie see?” Applejack asked, her voice filled with agitation. Twilight was climbing the ladder up to the barn rafters.

“Pinkie took her turn and some predators came out. Zecora described them for me back in her home,” responded Twilight “They’re called ‘hyena’ and they are very dangerous animals.”

The barn door creaked as the hyena outside continued their onslaught. Tools and other assorted farm equipment fell to the dirt as the wall heaved from the abuse. It was not going to hold much longer. Rarity scurried up the ladder as fast as she could.

Applejack was just climbing up when the barn door splintered and the pack of hyena burst through.

“I’ll hold ‘em off AJ get to safety,” Macintosh said gruffly, digging his hooves into the ground.

“Macintosh git up here NOW!” ordered Applejack as she scrambled up to the rafters.

The larger hyena leapt at him and Big Mac deftly stepped aside. He kicked it fiercely with his powerful hind legs sending the hyena careening into the wall. The other assaulted Macs sides slashing at him with black talons. With a grunt he ducked underneath it and tossed it into through the cattle pen. The gate cracked in two as the dazed hyena rolled back out snarling and yipping as it limped away. The third hyena had been pacing impatiently back and forth during the attack and leapt for Macs throat. It clamped its jaws around his harness, unable to get at his neck. He shook it off. Out the corner of his eyes he spotted the other lunging and caught it in mid-air with a fierce headbutt.

“We gotta help ‘im! They’re gonna tear him to pieces!” cried Applejack. Big Macintoshs coat obscured his cuts but the reddening floor revealed his wounds.

Dash cringed at the pain in Applejacks voice. Seeing her friends’ brother fighting for their lives was maddening. She had to intervene somehow. Anything to give the red stallion an advantage. Or maybe there was another way. Carefully sliding the case out of Twilights pack she opened it up and did some quick counting.

“Applejack no!” cried Twilight as the orange pony jumped down knocking aside a hyena. It was thrown against the far wall, apparently stunned, but it began rolling to its feet. With startling accuracy Applejack had it hogtied. Big Mac had

grabbed the other by the tail with his mouth and swung it against the already bound beast writhing on the floor. They rolled backwards into a shelf of buckets that noisily clanged on their heads.

“YEEEEOW!” roared Macintosh wheeling backwards. The third hyena had leapt onto Macintosh and was digging its jaws into the back of his upper neck.

Applejack leapt up and knocked the hyena off as it ripped a tuft of her brothers orange mane away in its jaws. It rolled, landing upright on its paws spitting and gagging on the hair. Applejack took a stand in front of her big brother. His breathing was becoming more and more labored. She glared at the snarling hyena as she prepared to fight for her life.

They were interrupted. The most peculiar thing raced through the wide open barn door. It was a wispy shimmering purple outline of a pony, hooves floating just above the ground. Applejack, her brother, the rest of the ponies and even the hyena watched in confusion as the ghostly figure exited past them. Twilight was the first to recall what this meant.

“You should get up here AJ!” she rushed, Applejack did a quick 180 and leapt for the ladder while Twilight levitated her brother out of the hyenas reach. There was a smash as the barn door exploded into timbers as the massive green serpent from earlier slithered through after Twilights ghostly double. It’s frantic coiling swallowed up the three hyena still on the ground and they yipped helplessly as the serpent dragged them out the other end of the barn.

“Macintosh! How bad are ya hurt!?! Tell us where they got at ya!” demanded Applejack studying his hide. She ignored the snapping of wood and timber as Twilight magically closed up the barns gaping holes. Rarity leaned over and cast some healing magic on the shallower cuts and scrapes from the fight.

“Your brother is going to need to see a doctor sooner rather than later,” lamented Rarity as blue sparks danced around Macintoshs stomach. There were bite marks and gashes above his collar as well as deeper cuts on his backside. Some of them sealed up and the sparks vanished into his skin. “This is the best I can do for you Macintosh, you don’t have any punctured veins or arteries so I think you will be...ok.”

He nodded thanks and rested his head on the floorboards. Pinkie Pie was consoling him in her own way telling her corny jokes and spinning short silly stories. Rarity would have scolded her a little but he wore a contented smile at Pinkies ramblings. They were still collecting their thoughts when an aggravated cry ran out.

“Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!”

Twilight and Applejack tore away from Macintosh and jumped to Rainbow Dash who was sitting with her hooves against her cheeks, game board

splayed out before her. Twilight frantically studied Dashes face in worry while Applejack looked at the gameboard:

*A sordid action takes center stage
So a cheater will learn to act their age*

“Dash did you go an’ try to cheat when we weren’t lookin?” asked Applejack apprehensively.

“NO! I didn’t cheat. I was just trying to drop the dice so they would both fall on six,” she replied guiltily looking away.

“Uh-uh, well Dash that would be cheatin’,” retorted Applejack bluntly, “an’ now you’re getting punished for it too! Criminy this game doesn’t let a pony catch a break.”

“Whaddy thinks gonna happen to me?” she asked looking around their faces. She hung her head.

“Ya shouldn’t have tried to cheat. We dunno know what could happen right now. This game is plain mean and every turn is unpredictable. Think before you roll like that again before somethin’ else horrible happens,” lectured Applejack motioning to Macintosh, who was chuckling softly at Pinkies jokes.

Twilight and Applejack glanced warily around the room before staring back at Rainbow Dash. After being unable to discern any significant changes to her blue friend Applejack trotted back to her brother muttering under her breath in disappointment.

“I’m sorry Twi. I just want this game over and done with. It sucks and I hate playing it and I want my friends back and I-”

“I *understand* Dash, but you shouldn’t have tried to cheat,” she said putting a hoof over her friends shoulder “This isn’t over yet and we’ve got some more turns to go,”

“Who’s turn is in anyway?” Dash asked, rubbing her foreleg.

Twilight glanced to the board. Spike and Fluttershys token had fallen over, but remained stuck to the last space. It must be Raritys turn. She called the white unicorn over and after a brief exchange of whether or not Applejack should roll again she threw the dice into the board and hastily jumped away. Twilight and Dash peered into the green orb and . . .

“Nothing,” growled Dash after half a minute “Is it broken or something?”

“I don’t think its possible,” said Twilight worriedly “Raritys roll should have worked,”

Dash picked up the dice and threw them into the board. The orb yielded no indication of a rolled turn. Twilight picked them up and started shaking them.

Maybe since they were partners she could still roll...

“Well that was laaAAame,” Dashes eyes widened in surprise. Her voice didn’t usually crack *that* bad. She cleared her throat.

“You okay Dash? Do you feel sick?” asked Twilight curiously.

“I’m good. Really Twilight. I feeEEel fine,”

“Oh my goodness gracious! Rainbow Dash you’re *shrinking!*” shrieked Rarity.

Immediately switching to a standing position she gasped and confirmed that Rarity was right. Ten minutes ago she was eye to eye with Twilight and now she was staring at her jawline. Dash stepped backwards in disbelief.

“Omigosh the games maAAaking me shrink,” she winced, her voice cracking again “I’m super short now!”

“From the sound of it I’d say you’re not only shrinking...” noted Rarity at the speech change “You sound a bit higher pitched too dearie. Perhaps what’s happening to you is...aging in reverse?”

Twilight turned away and giggled a bit. It WAS a befitting punishment and while she felt bad for laughing she couldn’t help herself. She hadn’t laughed all day. Regaining her composure she turned back to the game board and tossed the dice inside rolling a five. The next clue simmered forth:

*A hunter from the wild past
seeks his vengeance at long last*

The color drained from Twilights face. She jumped back in panic and urgently looked for an exit. “We have to get out of here! Anywhere! Now! Hurry! He’s coming!”

“What’s goin’ on? What is it? Who’s comin’ Twi?”

“Van Pelt”

To be concluded...

