

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic The Cutie Mark Clash, Chapter 7

The clearing on the outskirts of Ponyville rang with the chatter of amused fillies. After leaving them to play around a bit, the Great and Powerful Trixie approached the bush she had ducked behind. Trixie took a calming breath - an essential practice for the consummate performer - and stepped out.

What she saw was a scrap heap of totaled toys. The linked hoops were broken apart, the bit-hiding box had its secret compartment torn out, and the deck of cards was so muddied that everything was clubs. The Cutie Mark Crusaders themselves turned around to look at Trixie. All three were huddled under the Great and Powerful Trixie's signature steeped hat in order to be wearing it all at once.

"We don't think we're cut out to be Cutie Mark Crusader stage magicians." Apple Bloom deadpanned.

"Hey! We solved this, didn't we?" Scootaloo held up the puzzle cube. It abruptly shed all of its pieces. "... By taking out the pieces and putting them back in. That counts, right?"

Apple Bloom spoke up again. "Is your next trick gonna be puttin' this stuff back together? Or are they all just one-time deals?"

Trixie finished her gawking to answer the question. "I, ah... These are mere trifles to the Great and Powerful Trixie. Playthings with which to entertain the fillies and colts. Standard supplies in my daily shopping. They are MEANT to be as disposable." Added aside, "Not so easily, though..."

"Oh, okay! I'm not so sure I want my Cutie Mark bein' the Great 'n Powerful Trixie, though..."

"Yeah," Scootaloo concurred, "having a Cutie Mark that looks like you sounds kinda creepy."

After picking her hat off the Crusaders and fitting it on, Trixie opened her mouth to voice dissent to the previous remark... until she actually imagined it. "Okay yes... that does. In either case, what makes the Great and Powerful Trixie so great and powerful lies not in her magic... though it does help. The Great and Powerful Trixie is so great and powerful because she KNOWS she is great and powerful. If I KNOW what I am, there's no other way. It all comes down to one word..."

Apple Bloom thought back to the many lessons taught to her by her sister. "Confidence?"

"What? Oh, no no no. The Great and Powerful Trixie was looking for 'GRANDEUR.'"

The Crusaders stared blankly. Apple Bloom tried to echo, "Grand yore?"

Trixie chuckled, "Grandeur, you silly pony. If you are loud and showy enough, nopony will stop to question your greatness and your power! Ponies appreciate big investments of effort. Any questions?"

Despite the additional explanation, the Crusaders looked as if they needed to start from square one with that concept. They looked around and at each other for any specific things to ask. It was Sweetie Belle who half raised her hoof and then let it down awkwardly.

"Sweetie Belle," Trixie called, "don't be afraid. The Great and Powerful Trixie fields any question, no matter how hard! I'd like to mention at this time that normally ponies must PAY for an opportunity like this!"

"Um... Actually, it's about something else. You seem to get angry whenever we bring this up, but I just want to know..." Sweetie Belle looked up to Trixie and saw the older unicorn lift an eyebrow patiently. "Well... If you're so good at fighting and stuff... What happened that night with the Ursa Minor?"

A hard question indeed. Apple Bloom and Scootaloo's heads swished over to Trixie. Trixie closed her eyes, clearly affected by the question. Since Sweetie Belle was so sincere about wanting to know, Trixie couldn't just write it off as trying to get a reaction out of her. Trixie growled under her breath and lowered her head, obscuring her expression under her hat. After another calming breath, she looked up.

"That night... was perhaps the least proud night in all of the Great and Powerful Trixie's career. I was off my game. I was outmatched and underpowered. And even when everything was against me, I still managed to make myself look even MORE foalish. I have apologized to many towns and cities for the news that seems to precede me wherever I go. Tell me what YOU heard about that night and we'll go from there."

Apple Bloom said amusedly, "I heard Snips and Snails brought the Ursa Minor into Ponyville so you could, uh, vanquish it or somethin'! An' all YOU did was pull out some wimpy parlor tricks that ain't did nothin' but made it madder! An' after Twilight got rid of it, you ran off like the scared filly y'are."

Trixie looked highly unamused by Apple Bloom's choice of words.

"Least, uh, least that's how I HEARD it..."

Trixie held her hoof to her forehead for a few moments. "Tell me, little ones. Have any of you been woken up in the wee hours of the morning before our Princesses even THINK about raising the sun?"

The trio spoke briefly and settled on nods.

"And tell me, how do you FEEL after you've woken up at that time, ESPECIALLY if it's abrupt?"

The fillies considered how to answer that until Scootaloo just spoke up, "Not good."

"Disoriented," Trixie clarified. "Your mind wasn't entirely there and you couldn't pull a complex cognitive function if your life depended on it. And TELL me, does unicorn magic look like it needs focus and concentration to pull off?"

All eyes to Sweetie Belle. The unicorn filly stared ahead at Trixie before realizing everypony else was looking to her for an answer. "Oh! Uh... yeah! I sometimes get in trouble if I interrupt Rarity when she's doing her sewing and singing."

Trixie nodded, "And lastly, what do you feel when THIS suddenly pops up in front of you?"

Trixie conjured a flash of light and when it vanished, an Ursa Minor was staring straight at the Crusaders. The fillies shrieked with terror for the few seconds that Trixie kept the image up. She took a moment to look over the trio, holding each other and shivering.

"Exactly." Trixie muttered. "Let's combine that, shall we? The Great and Powerful Trixie is woken up in the middle of the night to the DREADFUL sight of an Ursa Minor. I couldn't conjure up a witty one-liner, much LESS a fighting technique. So yes... I COULD only think of my, ahem, 'wimpy parlor tricks.' Even though if I made that thunder cloud just a BIT bigger it could have caused some damage... But there you have it. The truth about... THAT night. The events that transpired are of NO FAULT to the Great and Powerful Trixie."

Apple Bloom was ready with another sound bite from her sister. "Maybe if ya didn't make all them false claims the colts wouldn't o' tried seein' it for themselves!"

Just as Trixie would retort, Scootaloo groaned. "Bored now! You guys can continue your debate. I'm gonna find something else to do."

Whatever the rest decided to do, Scootaloo managed to walk her way out of earshot. She looked around. Countryside to her right, Ponyville town limits to her left. She wasn't exactly frustrated with her boredom, just looking around for anything to give her an idea about anything.

"Looking for someone else to hang out with?"

Scootaloo jumped at hearing the voice of someone she didn't see. And the fact she said someONE indicated it wasn't a pony... Scootaloo turned around to look back at the fence

she was JUST facing to see the griffon who addressed her.

"I don't blame you. Hanging around just ponies all the time can get pretty lame."

Not having much experience around griffons, Scootaloo didn't really know what to do, if anything different. All she could do was give stares to the griffon's sharp beak, intimidating plumage, and clawed talons. Despite all those things, Scootaloo definitely knew how to respond to what she just heard. "My friends aren't lame!"

"Then what are you doing all the way out here?"

"Uh... they aren't not-lame ALL the time."

"Yeah, sure. Hey kid, you like flying?"

The bad start just went good. "I LOVE flying! Well, I can't do it myself yet... but when I get old enough, I'm gonna be one of the top fliers in all of Equestria! And I say 'one of the top' because I already know who the best is for all time: Rainbow Dash!"

The griffon lifted a brow. "You know Rainbow Dash too? Great! She's just who I'm looking for. You can take me to her now!"

"Huh? What do you want with Rainbow Dash?"

"That..." the griffon muttered. She smiled and pat Scootaloo roughly, "is none of your business."

Scootaloo flinched at the all-but fond gesture. Something occurred to her. "W... wait a minute... Griffon... Rainbow Dash... You're Gilda!!" Her accusing hoof pointed from Gilda's face to her talons, "And you've got the Hoof of War! I'm not taking you to Rainbow Dash!" She turned to run back to where she left the others. She ran as fast as she could... in place. Gilda's talon had landed on her tail and was keeping her pinned on the spot.

Gilda smirked, "You know when I said you can take me to Rainbow Dash? That wasn't a suggestion."

Gilda said some more things, but Scootaloo was too busy trying to scrape herself out of the griffon's grasp. She pulled against the talon and flapped her wings hard... She couldn't even summon the Hoof of War without the other two Crusaders to complete the gesture.

"All right," Gilda said, "let's get going. We have aYOW!!" A traveling spark forced Gilda's talon up.

Scootaloo wasted no time in running off and finding where some other ponies were

standing. She dove into the other Cutie Mark Crusaders. Meanwhile, Trixie stepped forward and garnered Gilda's attention.

"What do you think you're DOING?" Gilda fumed, "That was between the squirt and ME!"

Trixie scoffed, "The Great and Powerful Trixie is afraid that if you mess with one of her fans, then that means you're also messing with the Great and Powerful Trixie! At least... her COMPETENT fans that can turn a critical eye instead of just throwing an Ursa Minor on her..."

Gilda gave the blue unicorn a sideways look. "The Great and Powerful Trixie, huh?"

"The Great and Powerful Trixie."

"You... have got to be the lamest pony I have ever seen."

Trixie faltered for all of a split second before resuming her majestic stance. "Truly spoken like one who is JEALOUS of the Great and Powerful Trixie."

"Mmm... Nope. I'm pretty sure I'd have dug myself a hole and jumped in it a LONG time ago if I were anything like you."

Trixie lifted her chin to reveal her narrowed eyes to Gilda. "... Are we getting this on or aren't we?"

Gilda chuckled, "Oh... it IS on." The griffon pounded out the Hoof of War on her talons with the gilded claws.

Scotaloo trotted up to the edge of the Hoof of War. "Be careful! She's, like... REALLY fast."

Trixie looked over her shoulder. "Oh, please! 'Careful' is the Great and Powerful Trixie's middle name!"

And in that time, Gilda had crossed over to Trixie's position and grabbed the front of the performer's cape. Gilda tossed Trixie behind her where she thrust her lion legs to deliver a powerful kick that sent Trixie down the opposite way.

Apple Bloom muttered, "Yeah... and the middle name is the one y'hear the LEAST..."

Trixie regained her bearings enough to land on her hooves. She didn't have enough time to brag about it since Gilda was at the pounce already. Trixie rolled out of the way of an attempted shoulder ram. Gilda turned around to meet the end of Trixie's twirl into a hoof strike. Gilda just got over her stun in time for Trixie to fall back low to the ground and

strike out a hind hoof into Gilda's chest. In a mere second Trixie was back on her hooves and let Gilda have it with a follow-up uppercut, pillar of flame included.

Coming up from that, Gilda held her ground, a little warier of Trixie. Trixie likewise bought into the mind games. She fluttered a bit as if responding to assaults that didn't happen.

Trixie exhaled, "Well... I admit, you had the Great and Powerful Trixie going with that first stunt, but now I see you're nothing more than a-

"YOU TALK TOO MUCH!!!"

Gilda once again crossed over to Trixie, gliding on her wings. Trixie nudged over to avoid another shoulder ram, but that wasn't what Gilda was up to. In fact, Trixie dodged right into place for Gilda's clenched Talon to catch her in the stomach. An accompanying gust of wind popped Trixie into the air. Gilda hunkered down for the aerial pounce and took it. She caught up to Trixie's arc and caught the blue pony herself, latching her talons on the caped shoulders. Gilda gave Trixie a glimpse of her hunter's grin. In one motion, Gilda slashed across Trixie with both talons and shoved off. Trixie hit the ground painfully with some torn-off ribbons of her cape and coat floating down to join her.

Trixie noticed the tatter and looked behind her to see the ripped garment. "You...! My...! The Great and Powerful Trixie's...! Great and Powerful cape!! You've crossed the line, griffon!"

On that last word, Trixie swept the ground and sent a fierce spark to Gilda. Gilda looked no less shaken and merely flapped her wings to keep well aloft of the groundling projectile. Gilda watched the spark pass harmlessly under, and then looked at Trixie with a raised brow. Trixie flushed from how little of a threat her technique was and moved in to try to get more close and personal. Gilda did the same from her vantage point off ground level. When they intersected, Trixie tried another firey uppercut. Gilda made a dive with her dominant lion leg out. The two forces met with a big clash. Trixie got nailed with the paw and the flames struck Gilda. Both were sent crashing to the ground because Hoof of War physics can be buggy like that.

Gilda pushed herself up first. Instead of pouncing Trixie again, she got an idea on how to finish this quickly. She supported herself on her lion legs and drew back a dominant talon. "Griffon..." The force of the energy storing in that talon rustled the grass around her. Trixie managed to pull herself up as the energy maxed out. Gilda flashed a wicked grin. "PUNCH!!!"

Trixie yelped and tipped herself over to avoid the clenched talon. The force of the missed punch continued, tore up grass in a straight line, and stopped at a tree. The tree got knocked back, made plenty of cracking sounds, and every bird that was perched in its branches flew out.

"Drat..." Gilda deadpanned.

"I believe now is Great and Powerful Comeback Time!" Trixie struck with her opposite forehoof and went immediately for the lower blow. Trixie continued the combo with two rising rear hoof stikes that popped Gilda up and another two rear hoof strikes while in the air, all finishing with a spike into the ground. Gilda was steaming as she picked herself up again, staring daggers into Trixie. Trixie chuckled and faced away from Gilda. "Now is the point in the Grea and Powerful Comeback Time where you try to undermine it. You see, Cutie Mark Crusaders, KNOWING you're going to win means the only uncertainty is how you free-style it. Take a few hits? Instill a little hope? Make it look good? Or just smear your opponent right away?"

The Crusaders would have been in awe if they weren't too busy shouting and pointing behind Trixie. Gilda had exploded and was now in top tier rage. Normally, the Hoof of War prevents skin breaking and consequent bleeding. Gilda looked like she was ready to see just how far that could go. Trixie clicked her tongue and lifted her blazing hoof. Gilda had reached Trixie's position. A single iota of distance separated her claw from Trixie's flank. At that penultimate moment, Trixie whirled around and unleashed the fury of her flames on the raging griffon.

And then Gilda exploded again.

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

Despite knowing that attack well, the Cutie Mark Crusaders were still slack-jawed at seeing Gilda stopped by it and sent down for good, sporting ash and singes on her feathers. As the Hoof of War faded, it concluded its business by leaving a golden glow where Trixie's clothing had been damaged and leaving the garments in the same condition as before the fight. Trixie compulsively felt through the fabric to make sure it had all been restored. After a sigh of relief, Trixie turned to the fillies. "You see?"

"Oh, I see all right!" Apple Bloom called out sincerely and with an impressed smile. She and the other Crusaders gathered around the Great and Powerful Trixie.

Scotaloo spared a look to Gilda. "I wonder what she wanted with Rainbow Dash, anyway..."

Trixie scoffed, "Not even the Great and Powerful Trixie could read that barren cranium of a mind. Are they enemies?"

"No. Well... Uh... they didn't exactly leave off... She was really mean about it, but... Maybe she wanted to make up or something?"

As they walked off, Trixie cast another look to her fallen opponent. "If THAT is how she

goes about seeking hugs, I do NOT want to see when she has an actual vendetta."

Gilda turned over to see four flanks saying goodbye. She was in no shape to hop up and go after them. She turned over. "Ponies..."

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"... And she totally started out REALLY strong with a bunch of flaming kicks but he got off a bunch of those yellow glowing rush punches and then he got her in a corner and completely WUPPED on her. She faked a few attacks and I was like WHAAA when one of those turned out to NOT be fake and she got it off and she COMBO'D IT INTO AN ULTRA and I was like SO HYPE and she ran away with it but then she got herself into a corner again. She was like hanging by the skin of her teeth and I bet she totally could have won it with a sweep but she tried an uppercut and the Neigh-hon guy just punched her once for the win. TOTAL anti-climax BUT I WAS STILL HYPE!!"

Pinkie Pie was dressed as she had been, plus a set of protective gear to cushion herself from Twilight Sparkle's blows. After popping up to 'get things going where everypony wanted,' Pinkie decided to stick around and aid in Twilight's training as a pony-shaped target. Since Twilight was so focused on her moves, Pinkie talked about any ol' thing. Twilight didn't want to say so, but being able to smack Pinkie around while she was yammering incessantly was almost therapeutic...

"C'moon, Twilight! Jumping jab into ducking low kick into mid punch, low dragon hoof ending off with a metsu hadouhorm! It's so easy-peasy!"

Twilight shook her head, "I can't even comprehend that as a SENTENCE, much less remember all those moves!"

Pinkie thought for a moment. "Yeah. This IS an impractical way to learn combos. I mean, when are you actually going to think back to this in the middle of a fight when you're in a completely different mindset? I guess most ponies would get it done for the achievement of it all. Oh well!" Pinkie tossed off the defensive gear, "There's only ONE real way to get better at fighting, right Twilight?"

The purple unicorn looked up from her book to see Pinkie hunched over in a competitive position. "Uh... oh! You mean... right now? Yeah! This'll make great practice!" She walked closer to Pinkie, looking her over. "Um... I don't mean anything by it, Pinkie Pie... but what's with the getup?"

"Huh?" Pinkie looked down at her pink muscle gi, various leg and hoof pads, and mane slicked down and tied up thin. "Oh, this! Well, I wasn't feeling the whole cupcake-throwing, screen-hopping thing, so I switched characters! I think I might main a few, just to keep my options open."

By now, Twilight learned to take what Pinkie said at face value... just to make everything easier. "Okay... and what's this 'character' like?"

"Oh... you might find 'im STRANGELY familiar, Twi."

"Okay... whenever you're ready."

Pinkie cheered as she stamped out the Hoof of War. She seemed to be continuing a celebratory stance even after the magic had taken root. She crouched low and shouted upbeat things like "Yahoo!" Twilight couldn't be sure, but that sort of behavior didn't count as fighting.

Twilight gave Pinkie a vexed look, "Are you just standing there and taunting?"

Pinkie Pie grinned widely. "Feels good, mane!"

Twilight attempted to defy the mind games. She edged in towards Pinkie and went in for a leaping kick with a hind hoof. In mid-taunt, Pinkie about-faced and trotted a few paces just out of range of Twilight's attack. She immediately followed with another proud hoof pump not a foreleg's length away. Twilight made for a punishing dragon hoof. Unfortunately, Pinkie once again hopped away from the attack. When Twilight came down from the dragon hoof, she was met with Pinkie's grapple. The party pony snapped up the studious unicorn and seemed to hold her over her back in a botched attempt to toss her over her shoulder. Another heave of the forehoof and Pinkie successfully threw Twilight into a hard landing on the ground.

"Thought you could get yourself some of this, Twilight?" Pinkie proceeded to turn around and slap her flank mockingly.

Taking advantage, Twilight pivoted on a hind hoof to make a roundhouse kick with the other hoof. Pinkie responded by jumping. With a shout of "WAHOO!!!" Pinkie leapt over Twilight's head... perhaps far higher than any earth pony should be able to jump, even under the influence of magic. Twilight followed the pinky pony's arc to the landing, after which Pinkie swept underhoof. "Gadouhoof!"

A ball of energy slapped Twilight in the face. It didn't quite have the stopping power or damage of a hadouhorns... but ouch, nonetheless. Pinkie was on to something, though. Being slippery and agile doesn't help much for a pony pinned down by hadouhorns! Twilight gave it a shot. She soon heard Pinkie shout "HERE!"

Opening her eyes from the attack, Twilight saw Pinkie fly straight at her. It was an attack very similar to Twilight's only spinning kick attack, but Pinkie actually struck her hind leg out rather than twirling at her opponent.

"WE!" Pinkie shouted to coincide with the second kick. Twilight had no time to dodge or

block it. "GO!" A third kick sent Twilight back and Pinkie to a landing on the ground. Presumptuously, Pinkie jumped in to attack Twilight who may try lashing straight off the ground. Unfortunately for her, her antics hadn't caused Twilight's judgment to wane.

The purple unicorn stood up in a defensive stance. She took Pinkie's hind hoof strike in stride. Pinkie again goofed by just holding up a block, probably hoping Twilight was going to unleash right there. The gamble paid off for Twilight. She struck a strong forehoof into Pinkie. The pink young mare lost her leg strength and began folding up. Knowing full well how temporary the momentum shift was, Twilight quickly followed with a low kick to keep Pinkie on her feet. Some chained strikes lead to a high forehoof strike that left Pinkie in something of a stagger. That gave Twilight enough of a break to take a cleansing breath before attempting...

"Tatsumaki senpū kyaku!!"

The spinning kick caught Pinkie in every strike and let the party pony taste dirt for once.

"YEAH!!" Spike cheered.

Pinkie was no less deterred. "Nice one, Twilight! YEEAAHHH!"

By now Twilight was onto Pinkie Pie's bait-and-switch taunting. She edged in, seemingly intent on catching Pinkie while she taunted. Pinkie retreated back, and that's when Twilight made a dash in and unleashed the power of the twirling kick yet again. She came down from the kick and let Pinkie have it with a jab-dragon hoof combo. Twilight backed away from Pinkie's recovery and launched a hadouhōrn to disrupt her. Pinkie was up and jumping over the magic burst before it reached her. Pinkie gave Twilight a disrupting shove before nailing a firm hoof strike that floored her.

"Taaaake THIS!" Pinkie hunched down and seemed to gather herself. Twilight picked herself up and braced for any sort of full-on assault. Instead, Pinkie began rolling around everywhere. After every roll she spouted something like "Not for you!" or "Denied!" or just "Yahoo!" Twilight paced around the rolling pony, waiting for when Pinkie would actually attack.

At that rate, it would be quicker to just counterattack before Pinkie got on with it! She lined her sights up with Pinkie and hunched over. She gathered magical energy in her horn. "Metsu... HADOUHORN!" She sent the powerful column of energy at the pink pony.

Pinkie grinned widely. Too widely to not have something up her proverbial sleeve. "TIME FOR THE SHOOOOW!" She sprang onto her feet and waved her forehooves about in a showy yet zen fashion. She leapt at the hadouhōrn blast, narrowly missing the attack by a mere iota of distance. Her leap took her to Twilight, who could only watch with an expression of mounting dread. Pinkie caught Twilight with a stiff forehoof strike

to the face. The assault continued with various strikes and bucks to the gut, chin, sides at all angles. Pinkie finished with a climactic uppercut to Twilight's stomach that sent her into the air.

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

Before Twilight landed, Pinkie spared a hoof pump and showy grin at Spike, her teeth emitting a radiant sparkle.

The scene simmered down as did the Hoof of War magic. Pinkie exhaled and sat herself down on her flank while Spike checked on Twilight. With a flash of teleportation magic, Hayley appeared on the scene. He briefly took a look at Twilight, ensuring she was okay, before looking to Pinkie Pie.

"Brilliant work there... I just wanted to come here - in pony - to tell you that was the most BIZARRE clash I have seen AT LEAST in recent memory. And 'recent memory' spans about the last three Cutie Mark Clashes. You know how big of an accomplishment that is? The previous Cutie Mark Clash had an octopus as a combatant. An octopus!"

Twilight made some noise coming up. It sounded like a groan, or even a growl, but then it became a distinct snort into laughter. None were more perplexed than Hayley.

"You got me!" Twilight gasped between laughs, "How did you even DO half that stuff!?"

"Oh, you know, Twilight... Everypony is THE BEST and being who they are! Take that to heart and you'll be ULTIMATE!"

"... I didn't get any of that. Not like I was expecting to."

"Pardon me for flanking in," Hayley said, "but... you're taking this awfully well, Ms. Sparkle. After all, she did do a load more mocking you than beating you."

"Well... it WAS kinda frustrating when I didn't know what was going on. But in the end I know that Pinkie Pie is just being... well, Pinkie Pie! It's not like she did anything PERSONAL to me! And Besides, I can make it up later, can't I?"

"Hm? Uh, oh! Yes, you can. You're only, ah, two clashes in. Plenty of room to make up. Er, just to make sure, nothing harbored? Between you two? You know, because crossing somepony often doesn't end right there and..."

"Not at all!" Twilight looked serious. "Maybe at another time... but now my friendships are too important to dwell on silly things like that."

"Yeah!" Pinkie hopped to Twilight's side and threw her forelegs around the unicorn, "I LOOOOOOVE Twilight too much!"

Twilight laughed with Pinkie's affections, "See? Nothing to worry about here."

Hayley observed the overt affection taking place in front of him. "Well... ponies with a vendetta certainly wouldn't be doing THAT. I don't think even most siblings would- AGH!" The young stallion jumped when his horn lit up. "Oh. Ha ha, it seems my services are needed elsewhere. I will go tend to my duties while you two continue... that. Right." The scholar excused himself with a flash of teleportation magic.

Twilight looked back. "You can let go now, Pinkie."

"Aww... okie dokie. So what's next for you, Twilight?"

"Hm... Well, now that I have a good grip on this Ansetsuken fighting style, I think I'll head out to see who else I can find! I'll bet everypony has such different clashing styles! None as... heh, unique as yours though, Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie Pie's eyes widened, "I'd be scared if that happened."

"You wouldn't be the only one. Come on, Spike! We have our work cut out for us!"

Pinkie watched Twilight and Spike go, but shortly felt the weight of another pony on her back, and a voice that hissed, "Mine!" into her ear. The voice was vaguely familiar, but since Pinkie knew everybody in Ponyville, being only vaguely familiar freaked her out. Pinkie yelped and flipped the pony over her shoulder. Suddenly, a thrown rock arced over Pinkie's head. In fact, the rock flew through the air as if THAT was what Pinkie just threw. But that was impossible, since Pinkie KNEW she felt and grabbed a foreign foreleg. The rock crashed into the back of Twilight's head.

"OW!!" Twilight snapped. She turned around, looked at the rock, then at a very startled Pinkie Pie who was still posed post-throw. "That was uncalled for, Pinkie Pie! You already WON and I didn't agree to any rematch! Ow, that really hurt... Spike, you have bandages, right...?"

Pinkie felt isolated in her lone island of confusion. Twilight was focused on attending to the bruise, so she didn't hear Pinkie's sputtering of "But I...! It was...! That didn't...! My...!"

A female voice whispered into Pinkie's ear, "Zat vuss a goot prank, non?"

Pinkie looked at the direction of the voice. There was nopony there. Even Twilight and Spike had moved on.

"Dun dun duuuuuun..." Pinkie muttered to herself.

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Hayley reappeared in the Ponyville outskirts, the smell of the Hoof of War faint. Yes, the Hoof of War does have a distinct smell... not that anypony who wasn't trained to smell it would notice right away. He looked around for what could the magic could have summoned him there, then he found it. Rather, Hayley found HIM; the white young stallion rolled out on the ground. It was a sight that Hayley had seen too many times before to give a second glance to. He casually sat upright, horn glowing with magic both recuperating Gallanthad and bringing up images of the clash before. Gallanthad stirred as the Hoof of War magic reinvigorated him.

"Oh, don't be such a filly." Hayley said, noting Gallanthad's slowness to rise. The Hoof of War magic worked much faster than that.

Gallanthad took a few more moments to compose himself and remember what just happened. And then it came back. Luna. Assumptions. Fighting. Luna sincerely unhappy. A vision of monochromatic beauty. Fade to black. Gallanthad rubbed his hoof against his face to wipe the blurriness out of his eyes and as a gesture of disbelief. "I overdid it again..."

That was met with a chuckle from Hayley. "I'll say. You sure are fixated on Abacus, aren't you?"

Abacus? What abacus? Gallanthad caught a glimpse of the images that Hayley was double-checking. He immediately caught something wrong with them. There was a pony in that replay that wasn't there before. Further, that unknown pony was standing exactly where he remembered Luna standing. The wheels in Gallanthad's head turned as he looked at the image and saw Hayley wasn't exactly expectant of a reply.

"Yes... for personal reasons. I'm not exactly comfortable discussing it with just anypony."

"I understand. Well, I don't understand relationships. Not wanting to discuss something. THAT I can talk about. Which SOUNDS funnier than it actually is, doesn't it? Either way, I'm sure you'll have plenty to explain to her about your weakness for zebra mares. THAT I cannot help you with."

"Ha ha... yes..." Gallanthad reached into a pack and pulled out a compass, which he held up flat on his hoof.

Hayley took notice. "Oh? What's that?"

"This? It's... a compass. I like knowing my bearings at all times."

The truth of the matter was he had received that compass from Princess Celestia herself. The needle in the compass was actually a shard from the helmet of Nightmare Moon. The

shard itself held no malicious energy, but it does react to Luna's presence. He turned to face the direction it pointed. The needle tilted slightly. Gallanthad turned with it. The needle tilted to the other side. So did Gallanthad. The needle continued to nudge itself, behavior which eventually got an exasperated raised eyebrow out of Gallanthad.

Hayley looked over Gallanthad's shoulder. "Now that's odd."

Gallanthad kept a stiff poker face about it, but the compass never acted like this before. Even if Luna had been pacing about in her room, the compass would point at a fixed location. No... This was something else. But what else could possibly...?

The needle tapped against the glass of the compass, as if trying to point... up? Gallanthad and Hayley humored the needle and looked up. That humor soon turned to dread.

"Oh dear!" Hayley yelped and backpedaled.

A trio of pegasi descended on the grounded two. They didn't necessarily do anything confrontational, but the dark pigments of their bodies and their sharp, yellow glowing eyes said otherwise. They were also suited up similar to Wonderbolts, but in uniforms that were also of more sinister tones.

Keeping up a stiff front, Gallanthad smoothly put the compass away. "Hello, fellow pegasi." His gilded hoof caught his eye, which sent his gaze over to the gilded hooves of the pegasi. "I see you're also fellow Cutie Mark Clash participants."

The front pegasus grinned widely, "We're the Shadowbolts! And we're gonna make our mark in the Cutie Mark Clash to show that we're the new best thing to happen in Equestrian entertainment! By the way... that's a nice tool you have there. Mind if I take a look at it for a moment?"

Gallanthad lifted an eyebrow. Not even a pretend halo would defile itself perching above these pegasi. "You swoop upon me like that... LOOKING like that... and ask to 'look for a moment' at something of value to me... and expect me to go along with it?"

"Uh..." The Shadowbolt exchanged looks with her teammates. "Yes?"

The underlying hostility of the situation seemed to be mounting with the Shadowbolts getting restless. Obviously, their fascination with Gallanthad's compass wasn't fleeting. Since it reacted to them, they clearly knew what it could do. And if they wanted it from HIM, that means they had other plans in mind.

Gallanthad hissed to Hayley, "Get behind me."

From several yards back, Hayley called, "Already done that!"

"If you were looking to clash, you should have just said so!" The Shadowbolt grinned and stamped out the Hoof of War, allowing her teammates to step out of the way.

Gallanthad scowled at his new opponent. "Have it your way! I'm a guard on a mission and I'm not letting anything stand in my way!" He stood on his hind legs and held his forehooves out.

"He's trying to track down his estranged girlfriend!" Hayley called. Gallanthad nearly stumbled over. "But he does have a weakness for zebra mares! So technically that already stood in his way! But- but I'm sure he won't let anything stand in his way now that he's actually said so!"

"Thank you for that!" Gallanthad called back.

"Don't worry! I'm behind you! Er... a fair distance behind you, but behind you still!"

"THANK YOU, AGAIN!" Gallanthad looked back to the Shadowbolt, "I would have figured you'd try suckerbucking me by now."

The Shadowbolt reeled from the statement, "What? No! What do you take me for?"

"Well now I'd be awkward to answer that honestly."

"Can we just fight now?"

"I already said I'm ready."

"You didn't look it. If you're READY ready, say 'go.'"

"Go."

The Shadowbolt beat her wings and sent a billowing cloud of darkness at Gallanthad. He had been ready to fight, but adequately prepared for THIS. He shielded himself with a foreleg, only to realize that the dark cloud didn't do any actual damage. From inside the cloud, everything looked the same except varying shades of purple and black. He didn't see anypony else beyond the veil, not even a silhouette. The attack came full circle as the Shadowbolt pierced the cloud, taking Gallanthad from the side.

"HOO!" The Shadowbolt's foreleg was caught under Gallanthad's. She gasped at his quick reflexes and couldn't do anything while she was tossed over and slammed onto the ground, followed up with a hind hoof strike. "TAHHH!" The force of the counter caused the dark cloud to dissipate and leave off on an equal battlefield.

The Shadowbolt hesitated. Gallanthad hopped about, shifting his weight between his hind hooves. "Considering surrender already? No... You're much too crafty for that. What are

you-?" He looked behind him to see Hayley had moved closer to the fight, and squeaked a smile upon being looked at. "Oh. You're over here now. Way to go." Back to the Shadowbolt. "And you're still over there! THAT time I was legitimately distracted!"

"I wanted you to be looking at me full-on when I did this." The Shadowbolt then sunk into the ground.

"What!?" Gallanthad yelped.

The Shadowbolt seemed to fall into the ground and transform into a pool of shade where she had been standing. Swiftly, the shadow sped across the Hoof of War right in front of Gallanthad. The guard pony was too caught off-guard to predict, much less counter the Shadowbolt rising out of the shadow with a powerful uppercut that floored him. He quickly picked himself up in a fervor.

"You... are not natural."

Hayley hummed, "Sort of an odd thing to say. If something is POSSIBLE, then how can it not be natural? Even society things like buildings and controlled fire are as natural as beaver dams!"

"Then how would YOU call it!?"

"Ahhh... Unusual. No! Strange. Or perhaps ingenuine? No, no... too condemning. I think- Or maybe I'd WANT that connotation in there? Hm. This is a tricky one. You- you two keep at it while I work on this here."

Gallanthad kept his eyes forward. The Shadowbolt gave him a superior smirk, "Considering surrender already?"

"You... No! I overreacted before and it cost me my charge! Not again! So you can change your form into a mass of shadow! Okay! I can accept that! Necessity calls for it! I still have MY METHODS!"

Gallanthad charged forward on his wings. The Shadowbolt decided to stand there and block the charge. She took the initial hoof strike well, but Gallanthad threw his follow-up hind hoof hard enough to stagger her. He launched a forehoof with an accompanying yell and landed a backhoof strike that caused her to twirl to the ground. She came back up and made it immediately clear that one of her forehooves was no longer a hoof but an axe.

"TROTTS HIMSELF!!" Gallanthad shouted (likely a phrase of surprise) and fell forward onto all hooves. He followed up with a stiff forehoof strike into the joint of the Shadowbolt's foreleg. He paused expectantly. "Oh. You see... that's meant to cause an assailant to drop their weapon. But since your leg IS the weapon..."

The Shadowbolt discarded the axe and stomped her hoof into the ground. The stomp summoned up a torrent of shadow from the ground. Gallanthad made the mistake of assuming it would not be damaging, but it was. The flood of shadow plowed past him in a low arc and fell through back into the ground. The Shadowbolt took the opportunity to rush in, forehooves blazing, and landed several swiped and blows, some including makeshift shadow weaponry, ending with an uppercut that sent Gallanthad spiraling upwards. She ended it again by using her shadow phasing into an uppercut to hit him one more time on his way down.

A testament to his will power, Gallanthad sprang back up. "Monster!" He spat, "I will not fall so easily! And I will deprive you of an opportunity to retort as well!!" He leapt in for an aerial strike.

It was too predictable to not get blocked. The Shadowbolt worked her reflexes and uppercut, an act which Gallanthad was quick enough to throw up a block for. The uppercut turned into a loop for a second ramming charge. Gallanthad didn't have any of that, either. From the block, Gallanthad shoved the Shadowbolt around him to disorient her, and proceeded to slap a series of rapid jabs on her chest before one final shove took her down. He could tell the Shadowbolt was beginning to reach her wit's end, so he flew over to pursue. He reached her position and stuck out a hind hoof to take her down again. Unfortunately, she wing-dashed out of it and hunkered down, ready to punish him with the worst she had.

"SHADOWBOLTS SUPREME!!" The Shadowbolt rushed in, taking advantage of Gallanthad's open stance. She erupted into a rapid series of attacks like before, but much quicker and with more strikes. Gallanthad took every one in a daze, his body nudging around with the flurry. Hayley cringed at the elongated combo while the Shadowbolts on the side were elated.

Amidst the strikes, Gallanthad kept one foreleg firm and poured his strength into it. When the opportunity arose, he thrust an uppercut!

And missed.

The Shadowbolt laughed and rewarded Gallanthad's efforts with three shadow-puddle uppercuts in the a row, the third one sending Gallanthad just about as high as he had sent a certain earlier opponent before.

"ULTRAAAAA!!" One of the Shadowbolts on the side cheered.

While the combatants waited for gravity to bring Gallanthad back, Hayley gave the Hoof of War a magical tug to do a vitality check. The Shadowbolt was barely hanging in there, Gallanthad now much worse so. His remaining strength was but a single thread of magic thick.

Gallanthad picked himself up one hoof at a time. He barely raised them to block a mockingly weak buck from the Shadowbolt. That sliver disappeared, but no K.O. call. Gallanthad was running on applesauce, so to speak. When Gallanthad dropped his hooves, he was anything but deterred.

"JUSTICE HAS ARRIVED!" Gallanthad extended his wings to full and spread them completely horizontally. On a dime, Gallanthad spun in place. The spinning kicked up a torrent that surrounded him. The shadowbolt yelped and threw up her own blocking hooves. Hayley checked the vitals intently. The Shadowbolt's remaining strength was being chipped away by the attack. It was in the red... low.. a sliver... and with the final revolution of Gallanthad's attack, the strike of an iron wing swept the Shadowbolt off her hooves.

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

Gallanthad didn't even try to remain standing after that. He twirled down onto his side, spent. The Shadowbolts looked in shock as their representative in the fight was deposited at the ground in front of them. They scowled at Gallanthad, and then both leapt at him. Unfortunately for them, golden restraints held them in place.

"Can't let you do that, Shadowbolts!" Hayley proclaimed. "You see, the Cutie Mark Clash has a VERY strict 'no tag-backs' rule. And in helping enforce that rule, I can endow myself with the strength of Lady Aremis herself when I perceive such an offense! Now, I know what you're thinking. 'Does he REALLY possess the power of an alicorn?' Well, in all the hype I've never been able to prove it myself. But being as how alicorn magic is the most powerful magic in all of Equestria, you've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do you, punks?"

The Shadowbolts groaned, but eventually picked up their teammate and flew away.

"Ha ha! That's right! Shoo! And think about what you've done! Or were planning on doing! It was all in your eyes! Not that... not that it's so easy to tell since they're just yellow shapes! ... OH! And good match! Yes! Admirable show! You did very well!" Hayley turned around, pale. "Just one more reason to sleep with one eye open, I suppose. Figuratively. Though I've heard there's magic that can let a pony do that..."

"Hey."

Hayley turned to Gallanthad.

"Think you could spare me some more of that healing magic?" The guard asked with a chuckle, "I could really use it."

"My pleasure." Hayley said with flourish as he let the golden light bath over the pegasus. Gallanthad was shortly back on his hooves, stretching out and cracking his joints. "Oh!"

Hayley yelped, "Really shouldn't do that. Your ligaments are going to be so very thin in a few dozen years."

"I'll take the risk." Gallanthad fished around in his bag. "No if... What the...? Where...!? C-come on! No!!"

"Something wrong?"

"My compass!! It's not in here! And... and I don't see it on the ground! Those Shadowbolts must have taken it somewhere in the fight! CONFOUND IT!!"

"I-if it's any consolation, really, just throwing it out there... It WAS just a compass, right? Those things are cheap to come by. I think I even found some novelty ones in town. OH! This might be a smashing opportunity to switch brands! I think- I think somepony was making Cutie Mark Clash compasses! I signed SOME sort of royalty waivers earlier today for some reason."

Gallanthad inhaled deeply. To react too violently to this development might make Hayley suspicious. "Yeah... sounds like fun."

[Chapter 7 matchup sheet](#)