

The Third Generation

Chapter Twelve

By Candle Light

“Good morning, Miss Sparkle.”

“Huhh, whu...?”

“Miss Sparkle, it is I,” announced the royal guard. “You asked that I reported back to you in the morning.”

“Oh my gosh!” realized Twilight, scrambling to her hooves. As the party had continued long into the night, she had excused herself in order to spend some time in the library, with the intention of backtracking Kimono’s reading material. When she realized she could no longer keep a steady focus, she had applied a Power Nap spell on herself to get a few hours of sleep. During which time she would have been impossible to wake. “How long have you been waiting, sir?”

“About an hour, Miss Sparkle.”

“I’m so sorry! I should’ve realized you were coming; I was just so focused on getting this done that I—”

“Kimono got off at Ponyville, where she spent a night in your library,” reported the guard. “She then made her way into the Everfree Forest; that was thirteen minutes ago.”

“The Everfree Forest?” Twilight repeated questioningly. “Whatever could she be doing in there? Is she visiting Zecora? Or maybe the ancient castle of the royal pony sisters...”

“Should I attempt to follow her into the woods?”

“No, that’s okay. You’ve done enough; I’ll take it from here. Thank you for your service.” With an acknowledging huff, the guard took flight out one of the windows, which magically opened on his approach.

From what Twilight had managed to gather, with some help from Mrs. Know-It-All, the first book that Kimono had asked for was *Equestrian History*, which she had apparently read through cover to cover by the end of the first day. The second book was one on advanced unicorn magic, and the third one on ancient magic; the same ones that Twilight had looked into when she had read up on the Time Capsule, so it was probably safe to assume that Kimono had figured out what Discord had done to her village.

She was about to reach for the last book she had read when she heard a voice from the first floor. “Miss Twilight Sparkle?”

The unicorn peered down from the railing, and saw another royal guard stand by the doorway. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Princesses Luna and Celestia request your presence in the royal bed chambers,” he reported.

“Thank you; I’ll be right there,” affirmed Twilight, wondering what could be so important that Celestia had to summon her to her sickbed. The guard took his leave, and the unicorn began putting the books in order, but as she did, a bookmark accidentally fell out from one of the books. She sighed dejectedly – she hadn’t noticed it before; what if it marked something important? – and was about to put it back in a random page when she noticed something on the back of the card. Something had been scribbled on it; she couldn’t make out most of it, but one word stood out that she couldn’t mistake. ‘Twilight’.

“Hey, Twi, glad you could make it!” called Applejack, as the lavender unicorn came running through the corridor toward the Princesses’ bed chambers, where all her friends – as well as other-village Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash and Minty – were waiting for her. Luna was with them as well.

“I’m so sorry!” she apologized. “I was in the library, and I used a Power Nap spell, and—”

“Never mind that,” said the Princess dismissively. She grabbed the door’s handle with her magic and opened the door. “Please, enter.”

“C’mon, Rainbow.” Applejack prodded the pegasus, who lay sleeping on the floor next to her. She helped her get to her hooves, as pegasus Rainbow Dash mumbled something about being too early for this.

Princess Celestia looked much better than last time they saw her. She was still bed-ridden, but she looked a lot younger, bearing more resemblance to the Mayor of Ponyville than Granny Smith. “Thank you all for coming,” she told the group. She sounded a bit hoarse, but the energy in her voice had returned. “Luna and Kenbroth were just telling me some alarming news, and I think it’s important that you all hear about it as well.”

“I’m so glad to see you’re feeling better,” Twilight told her teacher. “But it’s only been a day; you should still be resting.”

“Why, what happened?” asked Minty, but then her eyes widened. “Oh no, did the monster get you?”

“Yes, Minty; it turned out to be a little much for me to handle on my own. I’m well aware

I should still be resting, but this takes precedence over my own well-being. For unless we act now, Equestria might still be in grave danger.”

The statement certainly brought the tension up in the room. “You mean as in, Mother Ursa danger?” asked Twilight.

“Worse,” said Luna. “Kenbroth and I were examining the magic flow of the ancient castles down in the crystal chamber. I sensed the crack in the seal, and the power that is seeping out from beyond as we speak. My sister and I agree: the Mother Ursa from yesterday fought was merely the top of the iceberg. It will only be days now before more such creatures will start to appear in great number.”

Gasps erupted among the ponies, and Twilight, utterly speechless, could feel the pit of her stomach beginning to match the coldness of said iceberg. The Mother Ursa was supposed to be a mythical creature comprising of untold cosmic energies, *the* mother of all Ursa. The fact that two of them had appeared throughout Equestrian history was mind boggling enough; how could there be even more? “How many are we talking...?”

“Hundreds.” That simple word was enough to freeze any warm blood left in Twilight’s body. “If not thousands. There is enough cosmic energies beneath that seal to cover the entirety of Equestria, transforming it into a wasteland of magic where only the most magically adept creatures could survive. Indeed,” she added with a small smirk, “it would appear that in this time of crisis, we have unearthed one of Equestria’s oldest secrets.”

“These lands were once part of the Echo,” breathed Twilight, letting this momentous new fact sink in.

“What echo?” the cerulean pegasus asked.

“It’s what we call the great shrouds of cosmic energies at the outer rim of the known world,” she explained. “They say it’s the birthplace of some of the world’s most mythical creatures, including the Ursa. It got its name from a scholar that once described it as an echo of the world’s most ancient history. This is so fascinating! If Equestria used to be a part of the Echo, then the world must’ve been much smaller... but what kind of magic could seal away the Echo itself?”

“The magic of friendship,” replied Luna matter-of-factly. “Or, as it is otherwise referred to, the Elements of Harmony.”

Even Celestia seemed surprised at this. “Are you certain, Luna?”

“There is no mistake about it. The magic I felt when the castles were awakened was identical to that of the elements when they tore my... tore *Nightmare Moon* away. It is entirely possible that the ancients who built the Castles of Legend were the ones responsible for bringing the magic of harmony to these lands to begin with, and by doing

so driving off the Echo.”

“This is stuff for the history books!” Twilight declared enthusiastically. “Can you believe it, girls? We get to partake in the historical find of the century!”

“I would share your enthusiasm, did it not come with the prospect of the ruin of every living thing in Equestria,” Celestia said, sugarcoating nothing. “That is why we must find your missing friends without delay, and with your connection to the ancient castles repair the seal before it is too late.”

“By Squinking, right?” said the other-village Pinkie Pie. “Spike told us all about it.”

“Your Squinks can repair castles?” Minty asked

“It’s a long story.”

“We have also sent word to Shining Armor and Princess Cadence requesting their return to Canterlot immediately,” added the Princess to Twilight. “I hate to interrupt your brother’s honeymoon, but I’m afraid we are going to need our Captain of the Guards to organize the search.”

“I understand,” agreed her faithful student.

“Then you must also understand that all of you must remain at our beck and call until this crisis is over. We won’t know when or where the Mother Ursa will show up, but when they do, we must be ready to send you there at a moment’s notice. You six are the only defense we have against them right now.”

“But surely, we don’t have to sit around her in Canterlot,” suggested Rarity. “With all due respect, Your Highnesses, I’m sure we all have things back home that we would like to set in order.”

“Unless we avert this catastrophe, there won’t be a Carousel Boutique left, Rarity” reminded the Princess of the Night. “Nor will there be a Sweet Apple Acres, or woodland creatures to care for. Your frustration is understandable, but we must ask that you be patient until the two missing ponies are found.”

Two missing ponies? “Wait,” Twilight suddenly remembered. “We found Kimono last night!”

This earned the lavender unicorn many looks of surprise. The other-village Pinkie Pie looked overjoyed. “Explain, Twilight,” said Luna.

“We found her last night. Kimono has been staying here in the Canterlot all along, holing up in the library and pretending to be me. We caught up with her just as she was leaving

the castle, but the moment she saw us, she ran away from us as if in panic. I had a guard follow her, and he reported back to me only a few minutes ago, saying she's entered the Everfree Forest."

"And you didn't think to pursue her yourself, or even tell us about it?"

"Seeing her so frightened, I didn't think it was such a good idea to follow her carelessly. I've been holed up in the library ever since, retracing her reading material to try to figure out what she's up to."

"A very prudent choice, Twilight," commended Celestia. "And I appreciate that you didn't want to ruin the mood for the Ponyvillians, but it wouldn't have hurt to share this bit of insight with Luna or Kenbroth."

"You're right," admitted Twilight, a hint of shame in her voice. As much as she tried to get over it, she was still in the habit of trying to solve every problem on her own, and the Princess knew it. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Alright then, how do we go about this?" Kenbroth spoke up. "We could always send one of the guards to intercept her. Or perhaps someone she would recognize? Either way, we can't leave her out there."

"About that," said Twilight, magically holding up the piece of paper she had stuck in her mane. "I found this in one of the books that Kimono was reading." She moved closer to let Celestia see. "It doesn't look like anything more than scribbling, but look, I think it says 'Twilight' right there. Maybe this is Kimono trying to tell us something."

"Royal Sister Castle. Twilight Come," read Celestia with ease, her eyes widening in surprise. "This looks very similar to your handwriting."

"It does?" asked the unicorn incredulously.

Celestia lit her horn; the glow was faint, but strong enough to open one of the drawers, flip through a heap of parchment and pull one out. She showed it to Twilight, explaining, "This is one of your first letters you wrote me when you were just a foal, even before you became my pupil."

Sure enough, the mouth-writing was no better than the one of the note. Twilight felt her cheeks go red. "I-I didn't know you saved those."

"Why wouldn't I? It was such a sweet little letter; it even came with a cute little drawing of me." Twilight's lavender hue beamed bright red as she held up the picture of a stick figure that barely resembled a pony under the sun for everypony to see. It didn't help that her friends seemed to be very amused by it. "And I think it's evidence enough to assume that Kimono did, in fact, write this note." Celestia hovered the old letter back into the

drawer. “And it sounds like she wants you to meet her at the ancient castle of the royal pony sisters.”

“Then let us go there immediately,” suggested Luna. “From this room, I can transport you directly to the Everfree Forest in a matter of moments.”

“Yes, I think that would be best,” agreed Celestia.

“Come to my side, Twilight Sparkle.” She did as she was told, placing herself next to Luna, who initiated the spell without pause. Twilight felt that sensation of weightlessness as an endless expanse of stars appeared before her eyes.

When the world reappeared, they were still in the sister’s bedchamber.

“We... were bounced back,” uttered Luna, her voice betraying confusion. “It was as if my magic was blocked by some other force. But the only force strong enough to do so would be... oh no!”

“They’ve appeared!” Celestia exclaimed.

“The Ursa?!” asked Twilight.

“Yes, and much sooner than expected. Girls, with Luna, now! She’ll take you to the forest’s outskirts in Ponyville; make your way to the castle as quickly as you can.”

“We’re coming too!” Minty spoke up. “If Kimono’s in danger, we gotta help her, don’t we girls?”

“Quite,” agreed the wingless Rainbow Dash, the corresponding Pinkie Pie nodding in agreement.

“We appreciate the sentiment,” Celestia offered, “but I would recommend that you stayed here, where it’s safe.”

“Not to mention,” Twilight added, “if her panic attack really *was* a reacting to your inner Discord, you might actually be putting her in danger.”

“Although, it might also serve as a reassurance,” pointed the earth dragon. “Just to let her know that her friends care about her. We’ll keep them at a distance, should need be.”

“It’s not my habit to second-guess you, Kenbroth,” the Princess of the Night spoke up, “but would that not put us all at risk? Are you sure it is wise?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it if I thought wasn’t,” said the earth dragon. “Keeping a pony from running to their best friend is hardly the way to deal with these sorts of things. Just

remember, you three: use discretion, and do whatever Twilight tells you.”

If Minty didn't know any better, she would have thought that she and her friends were running through a torn and overgrown version of Breezie Blossom. She had never seen so many different plants and flowers, and definitely never seen them grow so randomly and out-of-place. The spell that brought them here had been disorienting enough – who knew that magic could move people across a whole landscapes like that! – but seeing this ‘Everfree Forest’ made her feel like she had stepped back into a dream.

There was little time to slow down and take a closer look at things; Twilight Sparkle led them along at a brisk pace, urging them forward by reminding them that Kimono was in danger. Minty had a hard time grasping exactly what they were about to face; Pinkie had just described it as a clump of stars in shape of a bear, oozing magic so powerful it prickled her skin. Granted, her knowledge of magic was spotty at best, but the magic she had witnessed so far from these ponies truly boggled any common sense she previously had. She would just have to be ready for anything.

“Oh look!” the hyper-version Pinkie Pie pointed, “it’s those trees that inspired that song!” The pink pony took the time to stop and laugh at the oddly-shaped trees. “Don’t they just look silly now in the daylight?”

“You’re right,” the other pink pony agreed with a giggle. “Almost looks like they’re making funny faces.”

“We don’t have time to take a trip down memory lane,” urged Twilight. “We’re on a rescue mission, remember?”

“Isn’t that the stream where we met the sea serpent over there?” asked Rarity, as the gang trotted closer to the body of water. “I do wonder how he’s doing. Did he ever grow his mustache back?”

“Seeing how the stream is pretty calm, I’d say all his facial hair is where it belongs,” Twilight pointed. “It shouldn’t be far now; let’s pick up the pace.”

And so the nine ponies ran through the forest, dodging branches and cutting through bushes, until they arrived at what looked like a gorge, forcing them to stop. “Please tell me those aren’t the poles that are supposed to hold up the bridge...”

“I’m afraid it is,” the winged Rainbow Dash confirmed, hovering above the gap as she pointed to something at the bottom. Minty drew close enough to peer down at what looked like a pile of rope and planks, but it was hard to make out from this distance.

“Great,” Twilight muttered. “*Now* how do we get across?”

“You forget that the *original* Rainbow Dash got wings. Just sit tight.” The cerulean pegasus sped off down the gorge. Minty could see her pick up the remains of the bridge, and ascend back up with it. She put the wreckage on the ground for all to see. “Looks like it broke in two,” she observed. “We’ll have to make do with the bigger piece, and hope it’s enough. Ew,” she added as she picked up a piece of rope, “these ropes are all soggy and slippery; no wonder they got loose. Do you think you could fix them up with magic?”

“One dry-cleaning spell, coming right up.” Twilight put her horn to the rope, and a magic flash later, the slippery moist was gone. “Come to think of it, Zecora said something about this bridge starting to rot. That was several months ago.”

“Let’s hope it can hold one more trip, ‘cause it’s all we’re gonna get. Unless you want me to fly you over one by one, but that could take a while.”

“You’re right, we need to hurry.”

With quick and nimble hoof-and-mouth work the likes of which Minty had never seen, or even thought possible, Rainbow Dash knit the ropes back around the support poles. She then went to pick up the other end and flew with it across the gap. The bridge was barely long enough to cover the distance, so Twilight Sparkle had to pitch in to magically tie down the ropes to the opposite poles. The hang bridge was now almost perfectly straight. “Well,” the unicorn spoke, “it’ll be safest to go one by one. Guess I’ll go first...”

Careful but not slow, the lavender pony traversed the gap. Minty wasn’t sure whether or not the bridge would hold, but it managed to carry Twilight all the way across. Next was Applejack, then Rarity; one by one they tip-hoofed across – except poofy-maned Pinkie Pie, who happily bounced across without so much as rocking the planks – until it was Minty’s turn. The bridge felt kind of unstable under her hooves, but not enough to make her nervous of falling. She had never been one to be afraid of heights anyway.

About half-way through, however, a thought struck her as she peered down into the abyss, one so powerful she had to stop right there. If she were to actually fall from this height, she would die. She would hit the rocks below so hard, it would knock the life right out of her. How would that even feel? What *was* death? Somewhere in her mind, she knew that death meant ceasing to exist, but the very concept felt so foreign, so far-fetched. And yet, at this very moment, one misstep would let her experience it. The idea hardly even felt real; after all, back in the desert, she had been so sure her life was at an end, and she escaped *that*, didn’t she...?

“What’s the matter, Minty?” called her friend Pinkie Pie. “Don’t be scared; you’re almost there.”

“Oh!” she snapped out of it. “R-right, I’ll be right there.” Within a few moments, she had

reached the other side with the rest of the gang.

“That’s the last one,” commented Applejack. “That means we’ll probably run into one o’ them Ursa anytime now. Stay on your hooves, ladies.”

“It’s too quiet,” Twilight observed. “There’s definitely something here, I can feel it in my horn, but nothing so powerful as a Mother Ursa.”

“Maybe it’s asleep?” suggested the straight-maned Pinkie Pie.

“We can only hope so. Let’s go.”

Trixie dislodged herself from the wagon, glad to let her muscles rest a bit. Finding this place had been more difficult than she had hoped, especially the last bit with all those giant boulders putting up a labyrinth outside of town, but she had finally reached the second Ponyville, where Rarity lived. She left the wagon at the outskirts and set off into town. She was surprised to find that nopony was home yet. She didn’t think this ‘field trip’ of theirs would take so long, but it was just as well; perhaps now, there would be time to set up her show and truly make it a surprise. One they would not soon forget.

She trotted through streets, taking in the gaudy design of the buildings, trying to find a suitable place to put on her spectacular performance. She found a few open stages, but they were either too small or too secluded. After a bit more search, she figured she might as well try looking from where she would have a vantage point. It didn’t take long to find herself by a road winding counter-clockwise up around the mountain.

On the other side was a quaint little cluster of houses, surrounding a plaza with a gazebo at its center. Up ahead, the forest took over, and she recognized the place where she had conversed with the Ponyvillians and Princess Luna. To her left, the castle looked down on her from atop the mountain, adorned by a rainbow that stretched between its tallest towers. She set off toward it, when she heard voices coming from one of the houses.

“...but I don’t think this’ll even fit through the door, Pa.”

“You’re a unicorn, ain’tcha? Just zap it outside!”

And sure enough, next thing she knew, a yellow flash zapped a big grandfather clock into the plaza. A yellow unicorn mare with a light brown mane walked out the door, followed by a dark green earth pony stallion with a white mane. “That’s good, now let’s get it to the rest of the stuff, and...” The stallion stopped talking as he laid his eyes on Trixie. There was an awkward silence as both parties appraised the other. “And how long’ve you been standing there, missy?”

“Long enough,” she replied coolly, appalled by the situation she had found herself in. “Am I to believe you two are pilfering these houses, because no pony is around to stop you.”

The stallion’s expression grew serious. “That’s a pretty serious accusation there, lady. What if I happen to own this place, and just in the mood for a change of scenery?”

“Well well, my apologies then,” Trixie returned sarcastically. “Since you’re obviously from around here, would you mind telling me who lives in that castle over there?”

The question seemed to be putting some pressure on the earth pony. “I, uh, no, I don’t usually concern myself with the royalty here. I’m just a simple citizen, soon to be ex-citizen.”

“Then I suggest you return everything that you stole and gallop out of town,” the magician told the two firmly, adding a threatening flare to her voice. “For starters, there are no earth ponies Unicornia, and second, there is not a pony in town that does not know the name of Princess Rarity.”

A dirty grin spread across the stranger’s face. “So you ain’t so dumb as you look. Then perhaps you’re also smart enough not to mess with a couple of scoundrels like us when we’re desperate for some cash.”

“And *why*, pray tell, do you need it so desperately,” Trixie shot back. “You need food, hm? Allergic to the grass around here? Afraid the water will poison you?”

“You stay out of our business and we’ll stay out of yours,” he rebutted. “Cause I’m willing to bet you ain’t here for any noble business either.”

This pony seriously made her sick. A prime example of why the world wasn’t as peachy as Celestia would have them believe. His mare companion just stood and watched the conversation, contributing only with the occasional nod. “The Great and Powerful Trixie has been accused of many things, but petty thievery is not one of them. Does the words Traveling Performer mean anything to you?”

“Sure does. That’s a whole other level of stealing, if you ask me; you show off with some fancy tricks and ponies are dumb enough to throw their hard-earned money at you.”

That was just about all Trixie could stomach. “I’ll only say it one more time: get your flanks out of town, *now!*”

“Your opinion is noted,” he returned, then turned around to address his companion. “C’mon, sugar, just flash that big thing out of here so that we can get going.”

Words were inadequate at this point. Trixie instead fired a beam of magic – a basic spell

for pushing things – hitting the mare square in the chest, sending her flying across the plaza. Other than illusion spells and those she learned out of necessity for water dosing and poison detection, this was the only practical piece of magic she really knew. Not so effective against an Ursa, but enough to get unsavory ponies out of your mane. She gave the stallion a taste as well, but he was quick enough to jump aside.

“Do you really want this to get violent?” he asked.

“Why not? Might help me vent.”

“Suit yourself. Hun!”

The unicorn mare – which the stallion had not once addressed by name – gave a quick “Yes, Pa,” and then fired a magic beam of her own. It came at her fast, much faster than her own magic. It was all she could do to react instinctively and counter it with her a beam of her own, which fortunately was enough to push it off course. The projectile spell impacted behind her with a loud bang.

Trixie was not prepared for this. These ponies were obviously professional. But she didn’t let it dishearten her; she had dealt with worse hoodlums than these in the past. The key was putting up a convincing charade. A good illusion. “Was that was supposed to scare Trixie? Typical of your kind, think you can do whatever you like just because you know how to talk big and throw some magic around.” As she went off, her mind was racing to think up anything that would work for her illusion to scare them off. The old spinning rock trick might work, or the Falling Abyss number... but then she saw something in the corner of her eye that made her smirk a bit.

“Says the pony who fights a cannon ball with a pea shooter,” the stallion provoked. “How about you put your magic where your mouth is and show us what you got.”

“Works for me!” Trixie lit her horn, aiming her magic at the rainbow atop the castle. The classic rainbow spin, the same one she had used to show up that nosy pegasus last time she had visited the *other* Ponyville; all she needed was a little piece of rainbow for the visual effect, and the hypnotic rotation would do the rest, spinning them around involuntarily. If done well, it would weaken them enough for a few blasts of magic to knock them out.

Only to Trixie’s surprise, her spell ended up pulling the whole rainbow off the castle. This wasn’t like any rainbow she had ever before; it wasn’t liquid, but rather felt like a bed sheet, sturdy and flexible. Guiding it with her mind – more by instinct than anything – she wrapped it around the two ponies, and started spinning them around like a hurricane. She lifted the spinning package off the ground, and before she knew it, it blasted off over the trees, throwing the two thugs off to who knows where.

Before she could even start collecting her thought as to what had just occurred, a streak

of rainbow colors erupted from the crown-shaped top of the gazebo, growing into a rainbow matching the size of the old one, whereas it flew and took its place above the castle. She sat down on the ground, letting a sigh out. She didn't quite know what just happened, but it appeared she had managed to get rid of the thieves.

Her eyes fell on the grandfather clock left standing on the plaza. She guessed it was only to be expected that a low-life or two would try to steal from these ponies if they didn't even bother to lock the doors. Then again, if Rarity was anything to go by, these were ponies that knew no strife, accustomed to a life where hostility simply did not exist. It begged the question: had they been here to witness this, would they have fared any better? Would they have had it in them to stop the robbery? This was an issue she had tried not to think about on her way here, one that made her queasy. Soon enough, they would have to learn about all the nastiness that would inevitably present itself wherever sentient beings lived. What then?

She could not help but contemplate the strangeness of this situation. This was paradise about to be shattered. Trixie could hardly remember the time when she had been able to live such a carefree life. She had to learn very early on the proper way of dealing with other ponies, how to stay ahead of the game and never fall for their fake intentions. Though in reality, she must admit, it hadn't always worked out that way. Foals will be foals, and there had been plenty of times when she would gladly throw herself at any sort of compassion she could find, without considering the consequences. Like a child clinging to her mother for security. And that was the only proper way to describe these villagers: children, foals, newborns to this world.

But then there was Rarity. In a sense, she had been as brutally exposed to the darkest emotions of ponykind as Trixie had, but instead of being pushed farther into the abyss, ponies had been there for her, gone to great lengths to save her from it. To give her a chance to get it all out, to return to her normal cheerful self. A lump was starting to form in Trixie's throat. Perhaps, had she been in Rarity's horse shoes, things would have been different...

How was she now? She had seemed happy enough when she left, but was she still? For a short moment, Trixie was overcome with the urge to see her again, to make sure nothing had broken her spirit, but was quick to catch herself. The whole thing was so absurd, she had to laugh. After all these years, she had actually managed to grown attached to another pony!

She was eternally grateful that nopony was around to see her now, as her face must have looked quite ridiculous. Get the giggles indeed!

The purple crystal castle took them all by surprise. Twilight had heard Minty describing the castle in the desert, but the sight of the majestic towers reflecting the beams of the

morning sun across the forest held a beauty words could not do justice. It took her a full minute before she even noticed the thing that floated crookedly above it.

“Isn’t that the charm bracelet, darlings?!” gasped earth pony Rainbow Dash. “The one we made for Kimono?”

“It is!” agreed straight-maned Pinkie Pie, “but what’s it doing out here?”

“Are you telling us that *you* made this mysterious floating contraption that just happens to be hanging above a mysterious castle in the middle of the Everfree Forest?” the pegasus Rainbow Dash questioned.

“Yup, that’s ours alright,” said Minty with a nod. “It’s a funny story, really; we wanted to make a charm bracelet for Kimono on her birthday, but we got the scale all wrong, so we decided to make a giant version and hang it over the castle outside of town.”

“Was there another castle outside your town?” asked Twilight.

“Yeah, the Friendship Castle, just a short balloon ride from Ponyville. Or was it the Family Castle? I always get those mixed up.”

“No, you were right the first time, darling; that was the castle representing Friendship,” earth pony Rainbow Dash told her. “Back in our, uh, realm, there were seven magic castles, each representing a color of the rainbow and celebrating something different: yellow for happiness, purple for Friendship, blue for Family, green for Kindness, orange for, uh...”

“Music!” finished Pinkie Pie. “And pink for laughter, of course.”

“And the most magnificent castle of all: the Rainbow Castle, darlings!”

Twilight found it absolutely fascinating. The castles were the connections between the world of illusion and Equestria, so it *would* be theoretically possible for an object as large as this one to be transferred over to the outside. Still, the concept of an invisible force changing the fabric of reality was still a frightening one. “It’s all in Spike’s map,” the cerulean earth pony concluded. “Although, it does strikes me as odd that there only seem to be six magical castles in *this* realm, and seven in ours...”

“Uh, girls,” her flying counterpart cut in, “I think we have bigger problems than counting castles. Look at this.”

The nine of them rounded the structure, where the landscape suddenly opened up. For quite a stretch ahead, debris of splintered trees, as though crushed from above, lay haphazardly on the ground. Definitely not the work any denizens of the forest. Fluttershy whimpered, hiding behind Twilight.

Rarity was the first to speak. "What do you say we start looking for Kimono. You know, before it comes back."

"Good idea," Twilight agreed shortly. "Let's hope she's still here. Into the castle, quickly!"

The inner chamber looked just the same as the one Minty had visited in the desert, only purple. And just like that time, the peculiar feeling in her gut was back. With every room, Twilight had been very thorough looking for signs of Kimono before letting the others in, and this one, like all the others, was just as empty. "Well, this certainly appears to be a dead end," Rarity commented. "You would think that when somepony calls you out, they would at least have the courtesy to show up."

"I know," agreed Twilight. "Maybe she sensed us coming, and had to run away..."

"Or maybe them Ursa came knockin' on the door," suggested Applejack. "Maybe she had to run for her life. Woulda been nice if she left some kinda message."

Twilight's face shone up. "That's it! She must've left us a magical recording!" Seeing the confused look on most of the other ponies' faces, she explained, "It's a simple spell for record sound messages into an object. Unicorns use them all the time to keep personal logs, since they can only be activated by the touch of the caster's magical imprint. And since she and I share the same imprint..."

"You know she's not a unicorn, right?" pointed the straight-maned Pinkie Pie.

"I know, but this is a spell that even earth ponies or pegasi can pull off, as long as the object is magical in nature, such as this castle. It was all in the book that Kimono read on ancient pony magic; that has to mean something. Let's spread out and look, and keep your eyes open for anything that glows out of the ordinary."

Minty stuck close to Pinkie Pie as they started searching the chamber. Rarity was working some sort of spell across the floor, while the pegasi were taking a closer look at the ceiling. "Say, Pinkie," Minty struck up a conversation. "This may sound weird, but do you feel strange at all when you're in here? Like a sort of warm, almost tingly feeling?"

"You too, huh," replied Pinkie. "It's probably got something to do with the Discord thingy we got inside of us. Hope it's nothing dangerous."

"So far so good, I guess." As they walked past one of the pillars, Minty came to a halt. "Hey, do you feel something from this wall?"

Pinkie stayed quiet for a moment, concentrating, then replied, “There’s something stuck inside the wall! Hey everypony, over here!”

By the time they were gathered, the object inside the wall started to give off a faint glow. It was blurry at first, but was slowly taking shape. It looked like shards of some sort, light blue in color and glittery. Twilight Sparkle let out a gasp. “It’s... Nightmare Moon!”

“N-n-n-n-nightmare Moon?!” piped Fluttershy, her body sinking to the ground. “B-b-but how? Where?”

“More specifically, this is what’s left of Nightmare Moon after the Elements tore her away from Luna,” Twilight explained. “They must have been absorbed into the castle when it awakened and turned to crystal. I didn’t expect them to still be here.”

“Is that all,” breathed the flying Rainbow Dash. “See, Fluttershy, no need to be nervous.”

“I... guess not,” she replied meekly, looking flustered. “I can be pretty jumpy sometimes.”

“That’s quite alright, darling,” the cerulean earth pony comforted. “We’re all a little on the edge, aren’t we, Pinkie Pie?”

“Oh you bet!” the poofy-maned version agreed. “I’m scared of things all the time. It’s fun! Isn’t it, Pinkie Pie?” But the other Pinkie Pie didn’t reply right away. She just stood there, legs shaky and eyes staring into nothingness. “Uh, Pinkie Pie? Are you in there?”

The reply came in form of her started to shake her mane to and fro in big gestures, which Minty immediately recognized as a Squink. Before anyone could ask why, a sudden electric shock stung through Minty’s body as the entire chamber started glowing brightly. The stinging intensified, almost bordering on pain, as a pink cloud was starting to form in the air above her friend’s head.

Usually when Pinkie Squinked, it would only show a pony or two on a monochrome pink background, or show a blurry image of a place related to the problem she was trying to solve, but this time imagery was crystal clear, showing a landscape as vivid as if they were looking at it through a window.

Giant grasslands, a large pine tree forest, a waterfall; the vision flickered a myriad of different sceneries in and out of existence, until it settled for a snowy mountain, caught in a raging snow storm. A captivating sight that looked anything but hospitable, yet on one of the peaks sat a lone pony. The Squink zoomed in on it; a white pegasus mare, almost camouflaged in the snow. It looked up, revealing a face that was unmistakably one matching the yellow pegasus in the room, a mark on her adorning her forehead.

It was Star Catcher.

Before any of it could sink in, the scenery changed. It showed a homely little village she did not recognize; this time – judging by the shaking image – through the eyes of a pony. The vision sped up tenfold as it walked down the streets of the village, and as it did, Minty had the strangest feeling of Déjà vu. She had been there, she was sure of it... but how could she *possibly* have been there. The pony came to a stop, and a gray earth pony mare came into view. Minty thought she could hear a gasp erupt behind her.

Another scenery change, this time more abrupt; they were now shown the insides of a cave, where six ponies and some other creature were sitting around a magic glow, smiling and laughing. The creature didn't even look like a pony; she didn't know what it looked like, but found its disproportionate limbs and horns rather silly. But then, as per instinct, a name popped into her head. Discord.

The scenery changed again. The other ponies and the cave were gone, and Discord was standing on top of a mountain, laughing to himself as things below started shifting shape, turn upside down and dart across the skies erratically. The sun started spinning, the hills were bouncing, but then Canterlot came into view. Or what used to be Canterlot; it had been transformed into a dark fortress, the faces of ponies in agony carved into its surface. The laughter continued, as the world fell into chaos.

Then it all stopped. The crystal chamber settled down, and all was still.

Rainbow Dash remembered now. At least, she remembered enough to piece together another part of the puzzle. But it only left her more confused

Her winged double was the first to speak up what everyone was thinking. “What just happened?”

“I... I'm sorry, ponies,” the pink pony responsible for the visions spoke up. “I was overcome by this powerful urge, like I just *had* to Squink, or I would go to pieces.”

“Yeah, but... what did we just see?”

Pinkie's eyes widened as she let out a gasp. “Star Catcher! We found Star Catcher! I know where she is; I sensed her. She was so sad and lonely... we just have to go to her!”

“Was this the message Kimono wanted to convey,” Twilight theorized. “But then, why would she ask for *me* to come, and not Pinkie?”

“But what about all of that other stuff,” asked the orange farmer pony. “That was Discord back there! He's not come back, has he?”

“No, that’s not it,” said the cerulean earth pony, drawing all eyes on her. This wasn’t going to be easy to put into words. “The village we saw... that was Ponyville. *Our* Ponyville, from a thousand years ago. And the gray pony on the street, well,” she swallowed, “that was me. As for the cave, that was Pinkie Pie and me, as well as Minty, Rarity, Star Catcher and Kimono... and Discord. He was... he was our friend.”

Just as she had predicted, there was an awkward silence, where all of the ponies stared at her in disbelief, mouth agape. It was, however, interrupted by a loud and very familiar roar, alarmingly close by. The explanations would have to wait. The Mother Ursa was back.

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