

The Third Generation

Chapter Thirteen

By Candle Light

The straight-maned Pinkie Pie might as well have been looking at a mountain, towering twice the size of the crystal castle. She couldn't decide what frightened her more; its sheer mass, or the crushing magic aura that felt like it might pierce her skin. The red-glowing bearlike behemoth held its gaze on the castle, snarling. Pinkie Pie and her friends took cover by the doorway, as the Element bearers rushed outside, wasting no time.

As though by practiced routine, they lined up on either side of Twilight, and a light started shining from the tiara on her head. The necklaces on the other ponies lit up in unison, and Twilight's eyes became pure glowing whites. Pinkie had to gasp as she once again witnessed these six ponies being engulfed by the magic rainbow light, spreading a soft feeling of delight in place of the Mother Ursa's deadly presence.

But all was broken when the Ursa, with the speed of an arrow, flung its paw at the bearers in an attempt to crush them. The magic of their Elements deflected the limb, making it roar out in agony, but it also broke the spell and sent the ponies flying. A searing pain overtook Pinkie Pie, the magic from the Ursa so intense it felt like it had actually cut through her bone. When she thought of pain, she imagined maybe a paper cut, or a scraped leg – nothing that couldn't be fixed with a simple band-aid, but *this* pain seemed to come from within. She wanted to scream, roll around in agony, anything to make it stop... and then it did. A purple force field had surrounded her, Minty and Rainbow Dash, courtesy of Twilight Sparkle, who was back on her feet. The others were slowly pulling themselves together as well, making their way to her side.

All except Applejack. Twilight realized with an expression of horror that she had been flung closer to the Ursa, and that her necklace lay on the ground next to Twilight. She lit her horn, and a strained expression later, a protective magic bubble appeared around the orange mare. This, of all the worst luck, was when the Ursa recovered from the blow and fixed its gaze on the ponies. But instead of launching another hit, it reached out and picked up the magic bubble with Applejack in it, looking at it curiously.

A look of raw horror took hold of the earth pony's face, as the energy bubble started crackling and sparkling wildly. Twilight was quick to send a stream of magic to mend and reinforce it. Pinkie Pie's heart was pounding as she watched the seemingly hopeless situation play out before her eyes. Without the Elements of Harmony, there was no way of beating this thing, and if the barrier around Applejack broke, there was no doubt she would... she shook her head. There had to be *something* she could do. Anything...!

Her eyes fell on the necklace that the orange mare had been wearing, and an idea struck her. An idea of utter madness, but she knew it would work. She swallowed, steeling her mind, before running head first out the intangible barrier surrounding them. The pain kicked in instantaneously, but she filtered it out, focusing all her energy on getting to the necklace on the ground. The other ponies gave her incredulous looks, but didn't stop her as she grabbed it with both hooves and stuck it on her neck. The pain subsided slightly as she did. "Come on, ponies!" she called. "We don't have much time!"

“Time for what?” Twilight said through strained voice, not taking her concentration off the spell. “Wait, you’re not... you’re not an Element of Harmony! And even if you—uhg!” pain flashed across her face, “even if you were... Pinkie Pie is the element of Laughter, and that’s *Honesty* you’re wearing!”

“There’s no time to argue!” she urged. “Just trust me on this one! We gotta save Applejack!” The ponies exchanged looks, but their expression soon turned serious, as they nodded and got into position. Twilight seemed very skeptical at the idea... but then her eyes widened, as if she suddenly realized something. She gave a quick smile and an approving grunt.

The lavender unicorn severed the connection to Applejack’s bubble, and without wasting a breath, initiated the Elements of Harmony. The pain was gone entirely, replaced by a feeling of euphoria, every sense in her body tingling with pleasure. She was lifted off the ground by an otherworldly energy, and in that moment, she felt a sort of closeness to the other ponies that she had never experienced before, like they were touching each other’s very beings. She felt the love, trust and friendship emanating from the others, as well as their other emotions; the Pegasus Rainbow Dash was confused by this, but also appreciative, and her counterpart Pinkie Pie was *really* amused.

Before the sensation could last, the magic rainbow erupted from their collective mass of harmony, shooting straight for the Mother Ursa. Like last time, it let out an ear-deafening screech, and the magical pressure was gone. The form of the giant beast was warped and distorted before their eyes, until it was wholly disintegrated into particles of magic.

“Pinkie Pie, you’re a genius!” Twilight praised. “If it wasn’t for your quick thinking, we would’ve been done for.” She gave her a tight hug. “You really saved our lives.”

“Yup, especially my sorry flank,” Applejack added. “Ah always seem to get myself roped into trouble.”

“What just happened back there?” Pegasus Rainbow Dash questioned. “How can *Pinkie Pie* be the Element of Honesty? Isn’t that why they look like us in the first place; ‘cause we’re connected through the Elements?”

“I was thinking the same thing, but then it hit me,” Twilight attempted an explanation. “They *look* like us, yes, but they are not our clones; their personalities are completely different, so it’s not that hard to imagine that they do, in fact, represent different Elements of Harmony. It may not be as clear-cut as we first thought... it could be they’re connected to the Harmony within us as a whole, as opposed to the individual Elements...”

“Not the individual Elements, gotcha,” Minty nodded and smiled. “Uh, what’s an Element?”

“The Elements of Harmony are—”

“They’re kinda like the embodiment of love, friendship and all things good,” the straight-maned Pinkie Pie took over. “There are six Elements in all: Laughter, Generosity, Loyalty, Honesty, Kindness and Magic,” as she listed them, she pointed to each of the

corresponding ponies in order: Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Fluttershy and Twilight Sparkle. “It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt in my life! Everything was all bright and happy.”

“Oh, and that rainbow, darlings!” Rainbow Dash added excitedly. “Every time I see it, my heart is set a-flutter.”

“Now I get it,” said Minty. “It’s strange though; I’d have thought the Element of Laughter would be perfect for Pinkie Pie.”

“She might still be,” Twilight elaborated. “Just as there is never only one side to a pony, each of the Elements plays a part in who we are. A long time ago, Princesses Celestia and Luna wielded all of the Elements between just the two of them. All this really means is that there is enough honesty in Pinkie Pie for the Elements to recognize her as a bearer.”

“Well I *do* like to talk to people and help them out,” Pinkie Pie considered. “And I never tell a lie! I guess I *am* pretty honest, huh.”

“So, do you think maybe *I* could be the element of laughter?” asked Minty, giving small laugh as she did. “Or maybe that better suited for Rarity. She’s always giggling at something or other.”

“For all we know, any one of you could fit any one of the Elements,” Twilight guessed. “I’m more worried about what kind of effect it will this have on the piece of Discord within you.”

“Speaking of Discord,” the pegasus Rainbow Dash spoke up, “I’m still curious about the vision we saw.” She turned to face the cerulean earth pony. “What did you mean when you said he was your friend?”

All eyes fell upon the wingless Rainbow Dash, as the issue of the mysterious Squink made itself reminded. “Right...” she began, resigning herself. “When I looked into that Squink, I started to remember things, mostly bits and pieces... was I the only one?” she asked her friends.

“Well, I did have feeling of déjà vu when I saw the village,” Minty told her. “That’s about it.”

“I don’t remember anything either,” said Pinkie Pie. “Was that really our Ponyville?”

“It was, darlings. Like I said, I don’t remember much, but I do remember that it was a much smaller village than what we know today. We were newly settled, actually. As a matter of fact...” her expression tensed, as if she herself was only starting to realize these facts, “I was the Mayor of this village.”

“I could totally see that,” Minty nodded. “You’re always looking out for everybody.”

“That’s not all,” she continued. “I was... I was older. Yes, a senior citizen... only a few years to retirement.” The volume of her voice dropped progressively, as if she was getting lost in thought. Twilight couldn’t blame her; apart from having to sort out the memories of a life she had led a thousand years ago, she wasn’t sure aging was even a concept they knew back in

their world.

“But what about Discord!” pressed her winged counterpart. “How the hay did you become pals with the likes of him?”

“I-I don’t know,” she replied. She coughed, straightening her voice. “All I remember is the affection we all had for him, and...” Twilight could have sworn a bit of color just drained from her face, “and the heartbreak we all felt when he betrayed us.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised there,” the pegasus offered, putting a comforting hoof on her back.

“I-I’m so sorry, darlings,” the earth pony told them, sitting herself down. “It’s just that... it’s so much to take in. I seem to be remembering more and more; images without context, mostly...”

“We understand.” Pinkie Pie gave her a hug. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you, darling,” she told her in a grateful tone. “I’d rather just lie down for awhile.”

“Well *Ah’m* still worried about that last bit o’ the Squink,” Applejack spoke up. “The one where Discord was all laughing and spreading chaos around. That wasn’t a vision of the future, was it?”

“Of course it wasn’t,” said Twilight dismissively. “Divination magic has been proved scientifically impossible by centuries of study. At least, there hasn’t been a single successful attempt of predicting the future... that is, unless you count the Pinkie Senses. What we saw must have been Equestria as it was like during Discord’s rule.”

“No, Twilight,” Pinkie Pie told her, “I’m *sure* it was a vision of the future. My squinks can do that.”

“But that’s impo—” she stopped in mid-sentence, and realized that ‘impossible’ was a moot concept when dealing with Pinkie Pie of any variety. “Right ... so where does that leave us? Could it have been Discord’s plan all along to use your village to plot his return?” Beside her, Fluttershy squeaked, shrinking to half her size.

“So what if he comes back,” said the winged Rainbow Dash confidently. “We’ll just give him a taste of the ol’ rainbow and he’ll be back into stone in a jiffy.”

“I don’t know, Dash, if he *did* have a plan, it’s best to assume that the Elements of Harmony played a part in it,” pointed Twilight. “Whatever the case, we won’t get any closer to an answer until we find Kimono and Star Catcher.”

Pinkie gasped. “That’s right, Star Catcher! She’s far up in the north, hiding in the mountains.”

“Hiding?” Rarity asked. “Whatever for?”

“I don’t know, but she felt very sad and lonely... I don’t know what happened, but we just

have to go to her!”

“And what of Kimono,” spoke Luna, giving everypony a start. She was standing there as though she had been there from the start.

“Whoa, where did *you* come from?” asked Rainbow Dash.

“Kenbroth told me the energy surge surrounding the forest was gone, so I came to fetch you,” she explained. “Though it seems you did not have as much luck recovering Kimono as we would have hoped.”

“I know, it doesn’t make sense,” said Twilight. “*She* asked *me* to come here, and I can’t imagine she would try to lure me into a trap. I mean, how could she have known there would be a Mother Ursa just outside the...” she paused, eyes widening. “Wait here everypony, I’ll just have a last quick look inside the castle.”

Apple Bloom stopped for a moment to stretch her sleepy legs as she let the early morning sun jolt her awake. She wasn’t used to being so tired, but then again, she wasn’t used to staying up all night partying either. More than half the ponies were still asleep; Sweetie Belle had prodded her and Scootaloo awake, and now they were taking a morning stroll.

“It’s too early,” complained Scootaloo. “I don’t think we’ll get out Cutie Marks just by walking around. We’ve tried that.”

“If you had gone to sleep like I did, you wouldn’t have this problem,” pointed Sweetie Belle. “This is the only chance we’re gonna get explore the castle grounds; they’ll probably just send us home once everypony’s awake.”

“C’mon, Scoots, it’ll be fun!” Apple Bloom agreed, considerably more awake than the little pegasus. “Maybe we could sneak into the kitchen. Ah sure could go for some breakfast right about now.”

“As long as they’re not making anything sweet,” commented Sweetie Belle. “I think I’ve had enough sweets to last me a—hey, isn’t that...?”

Looking intently at a couple of butterflies, a silly grin on her face, was the pink filly wearing the face of Sweetie Belle’s sister. As they flew away, she reached out to try to grab them, like a cat would a straw of grass. She failed, and fell flat on her belly, and that’s when she noticed the three fillies watching her.

“Oh!” she let out, getting to her hooves. “Hi guys. Watcha doing?”

“Uhh, hi,” Sweetie Belle replied, an awkward expression on her face. She stepped closer, taking a closer look at her sister’s double. “So... you must be, uh, Rarity?”

“That’s me,” the pink filly confirmed. “How did you know? Oh, right, I look just like that older white unicorn.”

“Yeah, that would be my big sister... sorry for staring. I’m Sweetie Belle, and this is Apple Bloom and Scootaloo.”

“Howdy!” the Apple Bloom greeted. “We were just about to go explore the castle ground some more. It’s not everyday we get to stay at Canterlot, after all. And who knows, we may even stumble over a way to get our Cutie Marks, if we’re lucky.”

“Cutie Marks?” repeated Rarity. “Ohh, you mean these things,” she showed hers to the fillies: a rainbow over a pink heart “Don’t you already have one?”

“No, not yet,” Apple Bloom told her, unable to hide the dejection in her voice. “I know they work differently where you’re from, but here in Equestria, a Cutie Mark represents a pony’s special talent. That’s why the three of us are on a mission, a *crusade*, to try everything we can possibly think of to discover the might be.” The three moved together and shouted in chorus, “We’re *the Cutie Mark Crusaders!*”

“Wow, sounds unicorn fun!” Rarity replied excitedly. “I’ve already got mine, but I don’t know if it’s supposed to represents any talent. I’m not that good at anything, I think.”

“Ah’ve been wondering about that,” said Apple Bloom. “If you ponies get your Cutie Marks just by things you like, does that mean you don’t *have* any talents?”

“Or maybe they are fake Cutie Marks,” offered Scootaloo. “Y’know, ‘cause they lived in fantasy world. And now that they’re free, they can go find their *true* marks!”

“Ah like the way you think,” said Apple Bloom with a smile. “That means all the ponies in that other Ponyville are in the same boat as us! Why, it’s like a whole village of Cutie Mark Crusaders!”

“I dunno, you guys, I kinda like my mark,” Rarity told them. “It’s got a rainbow, and rainbows are born in Unicornia; makes sense to me.”

“But wouldn’t you rather have a mark that represents who *you* are?” asked Sweetie Belle. “Not to be rude or anything, but I’ve seen a bunch of ponies from your village with hearts and rainbows; I can hardly tell them apart.”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

“How about it, Rarity,” said Scootaloo. “How would you like to become an honorary member of the Cutie Mark Crusaders?”

“Oh, okay, sure!” she accepted. “I always love to hang out with new ponies! So, where are we going?”

“Ah have an idea,” Apple Bloom spoke up. “Ah think we’ve seen enough of castle grounds already. We need someplace cooler.”

“Your friend?” Celestia repeated earth pony Rainbow Dash’s words in disbelief. “Discord was your friend?”

“Believe me, Princess darling, this is as much of a shock for me as it is to you. But there is no question, I’m afraid; all six of us grew to love him dearly. So much so that it left us emotionally scarred when he betrayed us...”

“I believe this answers the question of where he was hiding during those last four months before his defeat,” Princess Celestia surmised.

“He was right under our noses all along,” agreed Luna bitterly.

“You can’t really mean to say mean he was *living* with them,” Twilight argued.

“Most likely,” Celestia answered. “Not long after Luna and I discovered the Elements of Harmony, we hunted him down in what we thought would be the final showdown. But my sister and I were inexperienced with the Elements’ powers, and the battle became much more fierce than we wanted it to. The landscape was ravaged and both of us were beaten until there was almost nothing more left to give, but in the end, the Elements gave us the edge we needed to pin him down. Or so we thought... but then he disappeared, and was not seen again in eleven months and seventeen days.”

“The remains of that battle is what you see outside the village today,” Luna told them. “Those boulders were once mountains, torn apart in our struggles. Curious that they remain, though I am thankful that the earth is no longer scorched.”

“Back then, the confusion of the war made it difficult to keep track of all the villages that sprung up now and then,” said Celestia. “Needless to say, we never realized there was a settlement nearby, and neither of us was too keen to return to that place. Not when there was much to be done righting all the wrongs inflicted by the Spirit of Disharmony. In the end, the battle was never recorded for the history books.”

“He was hiding right in our shadow,” commented Luna bitterly. “I admit that it must seem rather embarrassing, in retrospect.”

“But how does someone like Discord just ‘hide’ in a village?” asked the winged Rainbow Dash. “Was he hypnotizing them? Or keeping them hostage?”

“I doubt it,” Celestia shook her head. “If he had the energy to do that, he would have returned much sooner. Discord made a point to never show his true form to the public; only Luna and I knew what he really looked like. It can’t have been the first time he had hidden in plain sight.”

“Okay, fine. So how did you end up defeating him?”

“He simply emerged one day,” said Luna, “and started wreaking random havoc. By then, we had gained complete mastery of the Elements of Harmony, and it wasn’t long before we had him on the run. Say, sister, do you remember our final encounter with him?”

“Most of it. We chased him to the Frozen North, where he surrendered without much of a fight.”

“I remember the exact words that he spoke then,” said Luna. “He was congratulating us on beating him in ‘a fair game of political struggle’, and bringing onto Equestria a new era of peace and prosperity. Down to his last moment, he was mocking us, laughing at us...”

“Yes... I remember now. I never could shake the feeling that he was playing us for fools, luring us there for a purpose.”

“As a matter of fact, Your Highnesses,” Kenbroth the earth dragon spoke up, “I believe he may actually have been. From analyzing the flow of magic from the Canterlot, I’ve been able to determine where in Equestria the other Castles of Legend showed up. As it happens, one of them appeared in the Frozen North. Let’s not forget that even back then, when the castles were nothing more rubble buried under rock and snow, they were still linked through the sleeping magic that held the seal; I’m speculating that he might have used that connection to channel parts of the magic from the Elements the moment you hit him with it, thus providing the magic necessary to finish the Time Capsule spell around Ponyville.”

“And so he managed to preserve a part of himself, hidden in plain sight around a mystery we could not unravel,” Celestia summarized. “It pains me to imagine he used the ponies who trusted him as a friend for his scheme. If only we knew what his plan was.”

“Maybe we have already put a stop to it,” suggested Twilight. “The spell was weakened after his second breakout, wasn’t it? That could not have been part of the plan.”

“Or maybe it was,” Luna countered, “and we have all played right into his hands. I think he saw the... *bitterness* in my heart, and knew that the Elements would eventually change masters.” Luna’s face turned grimmer by each word. “Yes, it makes sense that he knew... which is why he laughed...”

Twilight gasped as a realization struck. “Hold on, ‘changing masters’... Pinkie Pie used Applejack’s element! What if it’s no longer connected to her now?”

“No need to worry, Twilight,” Celestia said. “From what I can sense, the Element of Honesty is still with Applejack. Only, it is *also* with Pinkie Pie.”

“So, uh,” the pink pony with the straight mane offered, “is that bad?”

“Not at all,” the Princess assured her. “But it *is* rather surprising. I didn’t think it was possible for two ponies to share mastery over an Element. Another peculiar side effect of the magical bond you share.”

“If only we knew what more about the magic that Discord put into them,” Kenbroth thought out loud. “I suppose that if I could borrow all of you for a day or two, Rarity included of course, I might be able to find something out, but...” he looked over to the wingless Rainbow Dash, who looked sort of pale, “but I’m getting ahead of myself. You ponies deserve a rest.”

"I agree," said Celestia. "There are other things that requires our attention. Twilight, you mentioned that you found a clue to Kimono's whereabouts."

"Right. It was right by the doorway arch to the inner chamber, a magical recording left there in a hurry as she was fleeing from the Mother Ursa. Just a short spoken message that said: 'Star Catcher is at the Frozen North. I will meet you at the castle there. Bring friends.'"

"Short, but not very specific," noted Luna. "Bring friends? I hope she did not mean for us to bring the whole village."

"I'm assuming she meant all the ponies tainted by Discord," Twilight guessed. "I think she knows about the castles and what they are."

"A fair assumption. We would be wise to act upon this information at earliest convenience." Addressing the other-village ponies, she said, "As I am sure you are aware, we cannot send the element bearers to accompany you, so I will instead assign a troop of royal guards to escort the you to the Frozen North. As for little Rarity," she added, "she is much too young to be traveling to such a place."

"But what if she still wants to meet with me?" asked Twilight. "There's got to be a reason why she asked for me to come to the Everfree Forest."

"We are doing the best we can with the options available to us, Twilight," Luna told her. "You know the Elements are needed here."

"So we gotta sit tight while these three go off on an adventure," the winged Rainbow Dash noted. "Swell."

"Oh don't be like that, Rainbow Dash," countered Rarity. "Trust me, I've been there once before, and you should be happy we don't have to go to that dreadful place. You heard the Princess, we're needed here, in case another Mother Ursa appears."

"I know, but it still makes me antsy."

"Trust me darling, if I could, would switch places with you in a second," her counterpart shared.

"Switch places, eh...?"

"Do not even think it, Rainbow Dash," Luna saw through her.

"Drat."

"Frozen North?" wondered Minty. "Is that like the North Pole, where Santa lives? That could be fun! You guys do have Santa here in Equestria, don't you?"

"Uh, no, that doesn't ring any bell," replied Twilight, much to Minty's apparent dismay. "And I'm afraid won't be much fun at all. It's extremely cold up there."

“We shall tend to the preparations immediately. You are adjourned until you are summoned.”

The splendorous sight of the big city of Canterlot was a lot for the little filly Rarity to take in. With some clever distraction methods from Apple Bloom, she and her new-found friends had been able to sneak past the guards and down into the streets below. There were so many ponies! So much noise! So much to see! It made her all giddy inside.

“Tell me again what we’re doing out here,” Scootaloo complained, less enthusiastic.

“Think about it,” Apple Bloom pepped. “We’ve tried almost everything to get our Cutie Marks back in Ponyville, but this here’s the big city! It’s a whole bunch of untapped potential, I’m tellin’ ya!”

“Well, okay, you might be on to something,” the orange filly agreed. “But if we’re gone for too long, somepony’s bound to come looking for us. There’s no way we’ll have enough time to try everything.”

“I know, but we don’t have to actually *try* anything. Why, if one of us is meant to be a banker, and we pass a really fancy bank, I bet you anything it’ll pop right up!”

“Worth a shot, I guess,” said Scootaloo, convinced for now.

As the group of four moved along the stylish streets, Rarity was too busy being utterly awestruck to listen to the others prattle on. Her travels with Trixie had been strange and wondrous, as had her visit to Canterlot Castle, but this was hooves-down the biggest contrast to her life back in Unicornia she had experienced yet. Almost all the ponies were wearing clothes or other accessories, and the way they walked seemed a lot more graceful and elaborate. The buildings were all funny-looking to her eyes, and much taller than she was used to.

They passed a whole bunch of what Sweetie Belle described to her as ‘boutiques’, where ponies with lots of money came to buy stuff. Trixie had taught her the basic concept of money, but her only experience with any type of store had been the café back in Ponyville, where she had been treated for free. Here there were bakeries, cafés, fashion shops, toy shops, jewelry stores, even boutiques for furniture. One by one, the three fillies went inside each of them, and Rarity could not help but be absolutely fascinated with the number of things that money could buy. Even without money, just going around looking at all the amazing stuff was great fun. Especially when they started having a pillow fight in one of the bed boutiques, which lasted until the store owner came and threw them out.

Not surprisingly, they soon lost track of time. It wasn’t until Rarity realized the sun was much higher now than it was before that she asked, “You don’t suppose we’ve been gone too long, do you? I’d hate to make everyone worry.”

“You’re right; I wouldn’t want Rari—*my sister* to catch me doing this,” Sweetie Belle agreed. “She would freak.”

“I wouldn’t worry; if she’s anything like me, she’ll just laugh when she hears how much fun we’ve had.”

“That’s just it: she’s nothing like you.”

“Uh, girls,” spoke Scootaloo. “Which way did we come from again?”

Come to think of it, Rarity noted, this particular street looked very similar to the one before it, and the one before that. Unlike Unicornia or Ponyville, this town didn’t seem to have any obvious landmarks. They couldn’t even see the castles from where they stood. “Don’t tell me we’re lost,” sighed Apple Bloom.

“It’s okay, we could just ask someone the way,” suggested Rarity.

“Except we don’t want anypony to realize we snuck out without permission, remember?” pointed the white unicorn. “What if they start asking questions? Come on, I’m pretty sure it’s down this road.”

The other three followed Sweetie Belle down one of the streets, where they eventually ran into an open space crowded with ponies. Rarity wondered if there was any some sort of celebration going on, but everyone seemed to be eager to just get from one point to the next, without any clear goal. The four made their way through the crowd, and then down a smaller street, until they came out on another, almost identical road.

“Admit it, we’re lost,” Apple Bloom said.

“No no, I think I know where this is,” replied Sweetie Belle. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s the train station over there. If we just follow this road right there, I think we’ll be able to see the castle.”

“And you know this because...” Scootaloo questioned.

“They showed us a map in school once. Unlike you, I pay attention in class.”

Deciding it would be quicker just to ask someone, Rarity intercepted a couple of regal looking ponies walking by. “Excuse me, do you know the way to the Canterlot Castle?”

“Rarity, wai—!” Sweetie Belle began, but her words were cut short as her face tensed and her eyes shot open, staring at the couple. “Y-y-you two are...”

“Why hello there, little filly,” greeted the one of the ponies, a mare as pink as Rarity was, but with a body more slender than anyone she had ever seen before, and like Celestia and Luna she had both a horn and wings. “Haven’t we seen you before?”

“Have we?” asked Apple Bloom, which earned her a trod from Sweetie Belle. She looked at her quizzically for a moment, then at the stranger, followed by a gasp. “Princess Cadence?!”

“Hey, if it isn’t the little flower girls we had at our wedding,” the stallion next to her spoke up; a white unicorn with a flowing blue mane and tail. A few ponies nearby, Rarity realized, was

starting to take note of the group, whispering and pointing.

“Oh yeah,” agreed the Princess Cadence character. “So good to see you again, girls. What brings you out here?”

“It’s, uh, kind of a long story,” Scootaloo admitted. “We were staying at the castle, and then we kinda snuck out here without permission. And now we’re... kinda lost.”

“Bunch of troublemakers, eh?” The stallion sounded more amused than anything. “That’s perfect then, we were just on our way there. Let’s get moving; I don’t feel very comfortable standing out here where everypony is watching us.”

She was walking down the rock-paved streets, her hips aching slightly. She wasn’t a wrinkled old prune just yet, but age was starting to protest to her busy lifestyle. Nevertheless, it was her duty to oversee the town, especially during these troubled times. She came across a pink pony with a fiery red mane. She asking if she had seen Kimono, to which she replied that yes, she had, and she was doing a bit better today. She decided to make a point to go see her herself, right after she had talked to the farmers about that last plot of fertile ground left around these parts.

And then she was staring up at a ceiling. She scrambled up into sitting position, and realized she was on a bed, somewhere else entirely. But where, and how? Panic was starting to creep into her mind as she frantically looked around for anything that was familiar to her. There was a painting of a castle on the wall, a fancy desk that looked to be made of mahogany, and a rainbow-themed tapestry. Rainbow... *rainbows!*

The cerulean earth pony pressed a hoof against her forehead as everything flooded back to her, and as it did, all that was her life before Discord’s imprisonment was washed back into the unreachable obscurity of her mind. For a short moment, she hadn’t just remembered, she had actually turned back into the pony she used to be... but try as she might, the persona of her past life was slipping further and further out of reach, until she could no longer think of herself as anyone other than Rainbow Dash.

How long had she been asleep? She had only meant to take a short rest, but the recent hullabaloo seemed to have taken it out of her more than she thought. She wasn’t as young as she used to be, after all... but then she realized that she was. A part of her – perhaps a lingering fragment of her former self – couldn’t quite shake the feeling that this wasn’t supposed to be the case, and it gave her a head ache trying to sort it out. She had been oblivious to the very concept of age until only a few hours ago, after all.

She needed something to take her mind off of things; anything at all. She got up from bed and walked out the door. The corridor beyond was empty, lined only with the doors to other rooms. Some of them were opened, so she took a few quick peeks inside, but since no pony seemed to be there, she decided instead to go for a walk until she inevitably ran into someone.

The decor around the castle was absolutely fabulous! Where there weren’t paintings of the most stunning quality, there were murals that depicted things she could not even begin to

decipher, or masterfully carved statuettes aligned by the windows. She looked out one of those windows, and found herself gazing out over the magnificent backdrop that was the land of Equestria. Forests, mountains and field as far as eyes could see. Of course, there were also the giant paw prints where the Mother Ursa had walked, and rubble of crushed mountains to remind the world of the battle. She pulled herself away from the sight and kept walking, determined to find something that would distract her. She needed a break from all this confusion.

Eventually, she came across another door that stood ajar. There was an intersection where the corridor kept going forward and turned to the left, but she decided to let curiosity run its course and peeked into the room. She barely held back a small gasp: it was the Royal Bed Chambers, and Princess Celestia was fast asleep on the bed.

Common sense dictated that she ought to just leave her alone to rest, but her eyes couldn't help but linger on the room for just a little while longer. Now that there was no one else in there, she could see how it would be quite cozy as a bed chamber. There was something humbling about peering into the place where the ruler of the whole country came to relax. She lingered for a few moments longer, before withdrawing her head from the gap... when Celestia in a sudden movement raised her body and said, "Hi, Rainbow Dash. How are you feeling?"

The ensuing surprise was enough to send her stumbling to the floor onto her back. She awkwardly got back on her hooves and presented herself to the Princess. "P-Princess, darling! I'm so sorry, I noticed the door stood ajar, and, well, I guess I was a little curious, and... I'm so sorry that I woke you up."

"Oh, you didn't wake me up," assured the Princess with a calming tone. "I was just resting, but I have to look like I'm asleep, or the doctors will get on my case. I think they've gone away for the time being; would you care to come in for a chat."

"A-are you sure, darling?"

"You have no idea how boring it is to lie here all by myself," the Princess told her. "I feel fine, except my muscles ache whenever I try to move my legs. Please, sit down."

Rainbow Dash was happy to take her up on her offer. She sat down on the bed, next to the Princess. "How are you feeling?" she asked again. "Do you remember anything else?"

It certainly wasn't the distraction she was hoping for, but perhaps getting it all off her chest would work just as well. "Actually, darling, I have. I was just taking a short nap, and by the time I woke up, I could have sworn I was back in my old skin of who I was a thousand years ago. For a moment there, I wasn't sure *who* I was."

"Really?" Celestia's interest perked. "Do you still remember it?"

"Not much, only bits and pieces. My coat was grey, not cerulean, and my mane... it wasn't even a rainbow!" The thought made her cringe a little. "I was the Mayor of a small, newly settled town. And... say, can I ask you something?" The Princess gave her a gentle nod. "When a pony grow old, does her body grow weak and frail, until... until she eventually

dies?”

“Yes,” replied Celestia simply. “It is a fate all ponies must one day face.”

“I thought as much,” Rainbow Dash said in a low voice. “You see, darling, the other me, she... she was older than I am now. Not terribly old, mind you, but old enough that my hips were hurting, and I think I may have commented a lot on how I wouldn’t get any younger... which, ironically, it would seem now that I have.”

“This is remarkable,” Celestia told her. “No magic known to ponykind has ever been able to unlock the secrets of returning youth.”

“To be honest, darling, I’m not quite sure how I’m supposed to feel about it. I have this persistent feeling that this isn’t how it’s supposed to be.”

“I’m not surprised that you feel that way. I don’t think there is a spell in the world that can erase the experience of age. It sticks to your bone, the very depth of your soul. I bet somewhere in your heart, you don’t want to lose that pride of having lived a long, rich life.”

Rainbow Dash contemplated her words for a moment. “I do think that might be part of it,” she admitted. “And also... now that I know what growing old is like, the prospect frightens me. I know that might sound contradictory...”

“Not at all,” said Celestia. “They are both natural feelings that are sure to cross every pony’s mind at one point or another. But consider this: years from now, regardless of whether or not you remember who you used to be, you will have lived a long and wonderful life. And if you do start to remember, that’s two lives for the price of one; it only means you were blessed with incredible longevity. You wouldn’t be the first one; the only living founder of Ponyville turns two hundred and thirty seven this year, and she’s still hanging in there.”

The Princess’ words did help to put her heart somewhat at ease. “Thank you, darling. I suppose it *is* a rather silly concern.”

“Sometimes, it’s those silly concerns that matters the most, and when we need someone to talk to about it.”

“I know, darling. I’ll be sure to have a chat with Minty and Pinkie Pie about this the next time I see them. Do you know where they went?”

“I don’t know about Pinkie Pie, but Minty has been standing right there behind the door for a time now.”

There was a scramble outside, much similar to what Rainbow Dash must have sounded like before, and soon enough, the minty green pony stepped inside. “I-I-I’m sorry, Princess, i-it’s just that I heard you two were talking, so I got curious, and...”

“It’s okay, Minty,” the Princess calmed. “If I didn’t want you to eavesdrop, I would’ve called you in here.”

“Oh,” Minty let out, giving the Princess an awkward smile, accompanied with a laugh. Addressing her friend, she said, “Still, sorry about eavesdropping. Kinda wish I hadn’t; all this stuff about death and aging is making my head hurt. And I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately…”

“We all have, darling,” said Rainbow Dash. “But it’s okay, as long as we’re here for each other.” She moved in and gave Minty a hug, which she returned. “We’ll figure it all out, eventually.”

“Indeed you will,” Celestia agreed. “Take as much time as you need. Now Minty, wasn’t there something you wanted to tell us?”

“Wait, how did you—oh, right!” she seemed to remember. “Princess Luna asked me to come get you. She’s sending the rest of the villagers home.”

“Oh, all right,” acknowledged Rainbow Dash, turning to address the Princess. “Thank you ever so much for this darling little chat, darling.”

“Come visit anytime.”

“You’re a stallion, aren’t you!” spoke the pink filly to the unicorn.

“Sure am,” Shining Armor replied with a small chuckle. “What tipped you off, kiddo?”

“Well, your face is kinda blocky, and your voice is sort of low,” she listed. “Trixie told me about stallions – she’s one of my best friends – and she said there are stallions so that mares can make pony babies. Dunno how *that* works, but it sounds cool!”

The stallion laughed awkwardly. “Did she now?” The Princesses had told him in the letter about how the ponies from this other village were rather ‘new’ to the world, but this was worse than he thought; she didn’t seem quite *that* young. Changing the subject, he decided to introduce himself, “I’m Shining Armor, Captain of the Canterlot Royal Guards. This is my wife, Princess Mi Amore Cadenza.”

“Just Cadence will do,” said the mare. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Rarity, and I’m a Princess too! Rainbow Princess of Unicornia.”

“Wait, you’re a Princess?” Apple Bloom questioned. “As in, the ruler of Unicornia?”

“Well, not ruler exactly,” Rarity explained, “but I’m the one responsible for making all the rainbows this year, until the next Rainbow Celebration.”

“I don’t think we have that in Equestria,” pointed Scootaloo. “At least *I’ve* never heard of it. But if you’re the Princess of Rainbows, does that mean you can control rainbows and stuff?”

“Sure can!” Rarity told them, her face beaming with pride. She stuck her hoof into her mane,

fumbling about until something fell out. The group came to a stop as what looked like a toy wand made a clunking sound against the paved road. “I almost forgot I still had this tied to my hair. You see, with this, I can—” she poked the wand with her hoof, as if expecting it to stick to it, but when she realized it didn’t, she instead picked it up with her mouth. She swung it around in the air for a few moments, but quit when whatever she expected to happen, didn’t happen. Her smile dropped as she lay it down on the ground. “Guess I can’t do the twirls if I can’t hold it properly.... oh who am I kidding. It probably doesn’t even work anymore.” With a sad face, she turned to the others. “Could someone help me tie it back into my hair?”

“Sure kid, I got you covered,” Shining Armor offered. With Rarity’s thick – not to mention messy – mane, it stuck almost by itself, and was almost invisible to the casual observer.

“I’m sorry, Rarity,” Sweetie Belle tried to comfort. “I’m sure you were a great Princess. You don’t need that silly wand.”

“Thanks, but how am I supposed to be a Rainbow Princess without being able to summon Rainbows, or the Rainbow Chariot?” replied Rarity sullenly. “I hope Cheerilee lets me keep it, though. It’s all I got to remind myself of another life... n-not that I haven’t had a blast with you guys, it’s just...”

“We understand,” Apple Bloom told her compassionately, giving her a pet on the back and a sweet smile. Rarity returned it, and the group resumed walking.

“So, Rarity,” Princess Cadence spoke up after a while. “Tell us about your home.”

“You mean Unicornia? It’s a small village beneath this big mountain, with Crystal Rainbow Castle on top; I live there. It’s the most beautiful castle you could ever imagine – much prettier than Canterlot, if you ask me – and then when the sun shines right above it, this huge rainbow appears!” But then, her excited excitement dropped a bit, and her eyes betrayed a hint of sadness. “I wanna go home. This has been really fun and all, but I’ve been away from Unicornia for too long.”

“I bet,” said Shining Armor. “Not to worry though, the way I hear it, they’re supposed to send you guys back home today.”

Rarity seemed happy at the prospect, but before she had the chance to reply, a voice came from further up the street, calling Apple Bloom’s name, and then Scootaloo’s. It was a very familiar one that brought a smile to Shining Armor’s face. “Twilie! Over here!”

In the distance, his lavender-hued sister looked to their direction, and then ran over. “Shining Armor!” Twilight called and, as she came up to them, gave him a hug. “And Cadence too! It’s so good to see you again!” She hugged the Princess as well.

“Too bad it can’t be over a cup of tea; I’m to report directly to Princess Luna the moment I arrive. How’s Princess Celestia?”

“Oh, much better, but you should have seen her before,” Twilight told him. “She was shriveled up like a prune, almost no life left in her...”

“I can’t believe she fought the Mother Ursa. I thought it was just a legend. Looks like things are gonna get ugly fast if we don’t hurry up and find those missing ponies.”

“I know. But don’t push yourself too hard, okay?” Twilight gave him a serious look. “You always push yourself too hard.”

“Oh yeah? Look who’s talking.”

“Touché. And as for *you* four...” she turned to the fillies with a stern expression.

“Let’s not jump the party canon,” her brother cut in. “We, uh, sent a message ahead of time and asked for them to come greet us, didn’t we, honey.”

“Oh, oh yes,” Cadence played along. “We thought it would be nice with some child company as opposed to an overly-serious body guard.”

“Really?” said Twilight, looking a bit flustered. “Guess there’s no harm done then. C’mon, let’s head back to the castle; Luna is getting ready to send the villagers home.”

Ohh, that silly filly, where could she have gone? Cheerilee, along with the rest of the villagers, had been loaded onto six rather large carriages – twenty or so ponies on each – that would take them home, but Rarity and three other fillies seemed to have somehow disappeared from the castle grounds. Twilight Sparkle had gone into the city to find her. Cheerilee had offered to come with her, but had been assured that if they were still within Canterlot City, they could easily be found. Why, oh why did Rarity always have to be such a trouble maker? Hadn’t she learned anything from being lost in the big world twice now?

Finally, the gates to city opened, and a group of three adult ponies and four children came into view, and among them was... “Rarity!” Cheerilee called, jumping off the carriage and ran toward them. Rarity’s face shone up, and started sprinting to meet her. She opened up her front legs for a hug...

But Cheerilee had other plans, staring her straight in the eye and barked, “Do you have *any* idea how worried I’ve been?!”

“Oh, uh, I—”

“*You* may think it’s all fun and games to hide and run away on your little adventures, but have you ever stopped to consider how that makes *me* feel, or *any* of us? Why, when we woke up here in Equestria and you weren’t there,” her tone softened, but the desperation in her voice wasn’t gone, “I thought for a moment that I had lost you. I waited for what felt like the longest days of my life, and when we finally do find you, you have been corrupted by some kind of evil magic! It’s a *miracle* that you managed to go back to your cheery old self... and now you’re senseless enough to run off again without telling me?” At this point, Rarity was beginning to tear up, an expression that Cheerilee wasn’t sure she had ever seen on her face before. She moved closer and put a leg around her. “Please, Rarity, at least let me know before you run off.”

“Please don’t be mad, miss Cheerilee!” a yellow filly – who apparently knew her name – spoke up. “We were the ones who invited her to come with us.”

The little pink filly was sobbing now. “I-I’m sorry,” she breathed. “It’s just that y-you were asleep, a-and I didn’t want to wake you, a-and...” the rest of her sentence became lost in her tears. Cheerilee felt a twinge in her heart; perhaps she had been a little hard on her. After all she had been through, of course she would jump at the opportunity to go have some fun with friends.

She sighed. “Just tell me next time, okay?” she said as calmly as she could. “We don’t know what’s out there, and I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

She nodded, still clinging to her. Gently, she let her go, and lifted her face up with a hoof. “What do you say we go take a seat? It’s time to go home.”

Rarity sniffled. “Okay...”

“And you three,” she addressed her three filly friends, who still looked very spooked up about the whole thing. “Thank you for taking care of my little Rarity.”

“Uh, sure thing,” Apple Bloom replied.

“You’ll come play with us sometime, won’t you?” asked Scootaloo. “That is, if that’s okay with you, miss.”

“It is,” she laughed. “When the Princesses say it’s safe, we will be sure to come visit *your* Ponyville.”

Together, the two ponies walked over to one of the carriages and hopped on board. Not long after they took their seats, Princess Luna came up before them and spoke, “Now then, as little miss Rarity is returned, we will take off shortly. I will accompany you to the village and see to that you are settled, and leave a few overseer guards for any further questions or issues.”

“Wait, aren’t *they* coming?” asked Sunny Daze, pointing towards Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Minty.

“I’m afraid we can’t, darlings,” answered the cerulean earth pony. “We’re needed here, to help the Princesses find Kimono and Star Catcher.”

“Makes sense, I guess. Wish *I* could stay.”

“Well everypony, it’s been nice meeting ya,” said the pegasus counterpart of Rainbow Dash. “We’ll come visit once all this is over!”

“Yeah, and when you do, let’s have another party!” said Toola Roola from another cart.

“You know it!” came the voices of both Pinkie Pies in union.

“Right then,” announced Princess Luna. “If everypony has said their farewell, we shall depart.”

All ponies in the court yard waved as the carriages lifted off the ground, much quicker than an air balloon would. Cheerilee gazed over the city that sprawled before them, white and magnificent, before they sped off towards the horizon. She and Rarity both looked forward to coming home.

“Shining Armor,” Luna acknowledged the presence of Twilight’s brother. “Princess Cadence. I am pleased to see the two of you. We apologize for pulling you away from your relaxation, but I am afraid Equestria is in need of your services.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve had a good month off already,” the Captain of the Guards told her. “Would you fill us in on the situation?”

“Certainly. Let’s walk and talk.”

But they hadn’t walked very far until Kenbroth the earth dragon came running across the grounds. “Princess Luna!” he called. “We have news!”

“Report.”

“I’m afraid we might have to change up our plans,” he explained. “There have been movements of what we believe to be another Mother Ursa in the Frozen North.”

“Another?” repeated Shining Armor. “You can’t mean there’s more than one!”

“This is the third thus far,” spoke Luna grimly. “Kenbroth, you are sure about it.”

“I know my freakishly enormous power surges when I sense them, Your Highness.”

“Then we must act immediately,” She turned around and faced Twilight and her friends. “All of you, come with me. We are in need of your services sooner than expected.”

“This is just great,” complained Rarity, floating a box of essentials onto a carriage. “Here I was hoping we *wouldn’t* have to fling ourselves half-way across the country today.”

“You were the one reminding me how we needed to be ready to deal with Ursa,” pointed the winged Rainbow Dash, dropping a box on her own on. “I’m just glad we get to see some action! Hay, we even get the newest member of the Wonderbolts to escort us!”

“When I’m on duty, I’m nothing more than your everyday royal guard,” the blue-hued stallion replied humbly.

“That doesn’t make it any less awesome! Say, do you think you could put in a good word for

me at the top?”

“To be honest, I would say anypony who’s helped saved Equestria twice and is able to pull off a Sonic Rainboom against gravity is *much* more deserving to be a Wonderbolt than I am. I’m surprised they haven’t scouted you yet.”

“You’re one of Luna’s guards, aren’t you?” asked Twilight as Rainbow Dash returned to packing with an enormous grin.

“Sure am,” he told her. “I usually work at night, but with Princess Celestia being incapacitated, Luna had to arrange the escort. Guess she wanted someone she knows and trusts.”

“I see. Those bat wings... is it true you had to amputate your normal wings and replace them with those?”

“Ampu-what-now?”

“To cut off a limb, Spike.”

“Oh. Ouch.”

The guard laughed. “Yeah, but not to worry; they keep our old wings safe under a preservation spell, for when we need them back. Personally, I like these better. They don’t call me Night Gale at the Wonderbolts for nothing.”

A ways away, Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle were saying goodbye to their big sisters. “Now y’all behave yourselves, ya hear?” Applejack told them. “Stick close to your cousin Braeburn on the train-ride home.”

“And do try to stay out of trouble,” Rarity added. “I heard about your little escapade into the city. I understand the fascination, but you’re much too young to mingle there on your own.” Her little sister only brushed it off with a ‘yeah yeah’.

“Can’t we come with you?” pleaded Scootaloo. “Pleeeease?”

“What did I *just* tell you about being too young?”

“How come *we’re* too young and Spike gets to go. He’s not much older than us!”

“But I’m a dragon,” Spike joined the conversation. “And I’m no stranger to epic adventures. Besides, I have to be there in case we need to send reports to Celestia.”

“There, darlings, that’s the last of them,” reported the wingless Rainbow Dash.

“Excellent, all aboard then,” Princess Luna ordered. The element bearers, Rainbow Dash, Minty, Pinkie Pie and Spike hopped onto the carriage and took their seat among the boxes. Luna positioned herself next to the fillies, Braeburn, Shining Armor and Cadence, and said, “I suppose we ought to count ourselves lucky the Ursa decided to appear where we needed to

go. If all should go well, we can neutralize the threat, find the last missing ponies and have you all back to start mending the seal before the end of the day. Just remember, be swift.”

“And be safe,” added Shining Armor. “I may not be a Princess, but I got some handy spells in my arsenal. We’ll hold fort if they come here.”

“Sun and moon watch over you, my little ponies.”

Hours after the carriage had left Canterlot, they group were now further north than Twilight had ever been before. They had long since passed Appleloosa, and as they flew over the northern wastelands, they had all marveled over the big orange crystal castle that stood out like a lantern in a dark cave. Soon enough, the landscape of rock and dust gave away to the northern Flatlands: a vast expanse of grass that stretched on almost endlessly, until the forest took over at the horizon. Beyond that, she knew, awaited the mountains, and she thanked Celestia – or Luna, in this case – that they had brought plenty of warm clothes and food for the trek. Not that they would probably need it, but one could never be too prepared.

“See Minty, we’ve passed it,” Minty’s version of Pinkie Pie told her, prodding her on the back. The green pony had been staring down on the carriage floor for the majority of the trip over the barren landscape, likely as to not relive the memories of her last visit. She reluctantly looked over the railing, and broke into a huge grin.

“So much green!” she breathed. “It’s like a sea of nothing but green!”

“Not only, I see some specks of animals down there,” pointed Rarity. “Say, is that a moose?”

“Don’t let its peaceful front fool you, the northern Flatlands are actually known to be one of the most dangerous places in Equestria,” Twilight educated them. “It’s the home to a myriad of different predators that could eat a pony whole, or so I hear.”

“Only if you make them angry,” corrected Fluttershy. “Most creatures are perfectly happy eating the grass, which is why it never grows very tall, and the few creatures that *do* eat other animals usually leave ponies alone, unless they’re desperate.”

“Uh, Fluttershy.” The winged Rainbow Dash, pointing at something down below. “Is there an animal that glows?”

“Glow?” Twilight echoed, an uneasy feeling settling in her stomach. Sure enough, among the monotonous shade of green, a blue spark of light was moving around.

“Oh that’s probably just a Crackle Tiger,” answered Fluttershy. “Their bodies have lightning in them, to ward off thunder from the sky.”

“Phew, is that all,” said Twilight Sparkle, relieved. “Call me jumpy, but I thought maybe it was a—”

But then a gigantic pillar of crackling blue lightning shot skyward, only a few pony lengths

from where the carriage. Before Twilight or anypony else could offer anything as to what had just happened, a familiar aura started pressing down on her as though gravity had suddenly doubled, taking her breath away for a second.

Twilight acted upon instinct, putting up a protective barrier around the carriage, and watched in horror as the head of a being seemingly made out of night sky rose from the ground, creating an optical illusion that seemed to send ripples through the fabric of reality itself. It was, however, not the head of a Mother Ursa, but of a deformed being Twilight could not recognize right away. But then, a second pillar of blue lightning appeared a bit away, followed closely by a limb that was neither a paw nor a claw: it was a pincer. Twilight realized in equal measure of fascination and horror that this was a creature of a different constellation: Cancer.

She turned around and gave a quick nod to the girls. They knew what to do. Twilight initiated the spell, and in a moment's notice, the air around them was filled with the magic of harmony. With any luck, they would be able strike before the monster even noticed them.

But history decided to repeat itself as the Cancer, with a display of speed unmatched by the previously encountered Mother Ursa, shot its pincer at them. Only this time, the spell was near-completed and already powerful enough to deflect the projectile limb, exploding it countless into tiny blobs of light. But just as Twilight thought they were safe, there was a stabbing sensation of pain mixed into the bliss, and she realized that the impact of such a powerful mass of cosmic energy must have disrupted the spells in ways she did not anticipate. For a moment, she thought this unsettling feeling would make her throw up.

It all ended with a very short but powerful stab of pain that made her yell out, and the last thing she knew before she passed out was that she was soaring through the skies in an uncontrollable spin, away from the carriage that was falling to the ground.

Special thanks to Tess Tesseract for help with editing.