

The Third Generation

Chapter Five

By Candle Light

The Cutie Mark Crusaders didn't even make it ten pony lengths up the mountain before they decided that Cutie Mark Crusader Mountaineering was old news and a waste of their time, opting instead to go *around* the mountain, toward the small village at its foot. Though it wasn't a long way around, the three fillies somehow managed to get side-tracked more than once along the way. Keeping them focused was harder than Rainbow Dash had though. Eventually, they arrived in a patch of forest, its trail leading through to the village beyond. And who should they meet on the way if not...

"Uh, hi Pinkie," greeted Rainbow Dash.

The village local Pinkie Pie, sitting there alone on a rock, looked their way, and gave them a little smile. "Hi, Rainbow Dash. And you too, kids."

"What are you doing here all by yourself?" asked the pegasus, as it was obvious from the look in her eyes that she wasn't as happy as somepony named Pinkie Pie ought to be.

"Oh, y'know, just thought I needed a good walk," she told her. "Stretch my legs, do some thinking. A lot of thinking, actually. I'm not used to thinking so much."

"Guess I can't blame you," Rainbow Dash said, walking over. "Don't worry, we'll find your friends; I'm sure the Princesses' henchponies are combing every street of every town in Equestria as we speak."

"That's what everyone tells me," she replied. "And I guess you're right. Worrying about it sure won't help. So instead, I've been thinking. Why we're here, what we are, what's gonna happen from here on out..."

"Say, why don't you come with us?" invited Rainbow Dash. "I'm keeping an eye on the kids while they're adventuring; it'll take your mind off things."

"You know what, I think I will," Pinkie Pie agreed. "Y'know, I usually go talk to Rainbow Dash whenever something is bugging me, so I guess you'll do." She laughed a little, and Rainbow Dash did the same, hoping it wouldn't come off as a nervous one; she couldn't recall anypony actually coming to *her* for advice.

"Whatever, let's get going," urged the impatient orange pegasus filly. "This place won't explore itself!"

On the other side of the glade was the town of Unicornia: seven or so houses surrounding

a gazebo in its center. Not much of a town at all, actually, but the Cutie Mark Crusaders were more than happy to run around exploring every nook and cranny of it as ponies on the street came up and greeted Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, to which the pegasus once again had to explain who she wasn't.

"Are you alright, Pinkie Pie?" asked one of the unicorns that Pinkie told her she recognized as Lily Lightly.

"More or less. And you? Rarity hasn't turned up yet, has she?"

"She's not playing hide and seek this time, I'm afraid. All we can do now is to wait, and trust in the Princess."

"That, and round up all the things that's changed around here," said another unicorn. "Like my voice for instance; why's it so dark?"

"Uhh... because you're a colt?" Rainbow Dash ventured.

"A what-now?"

"A male, a guy," she explained. "Are you saying you *weren't* a guy before?"

"I-I don't think so," the unicorn replied, looking really uncomfortable. "My voice was as light as anybody else's. What is a 'guy', exactly?"

"So... were there any colts in your village before?" asked Rainbow Dash. She was sure she had seen at least several back at the hill, but the unicorns all shook their head. "Oh my..."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she brushed it off, not too keen on having to explain nature's purpose for dividing creatures into genders. They'd figure it out eventually. "Don't worry; you'll live."

"As will all of us," added Lily. "There are so many things I don't understand. The Princesses said everything up until now was just an illusion, but other than our looks and Unicornia moving closer to Ponyville, nothing has really changed. Who *was* the spirit of chaos? Why would he even do this?"

"All I know is, he's not very fond of things making sense," Rainbow Dash offered her meager insight. "Could be he just wanted to leave some chaos behind, and you guys just happened to be the first to catch his eyes before the Princesses did him in. But don't worry about it too much; Equestria is an awesome place. Not perfect, but what is?"

“As long as Rarity and the others are found, I don’t care about perfect,” said Lily. “I’ve been thinking that maybe we should set up a search party ourselves. I don’t think anybody has even gone outside the village yet.”

“Hey, Dash!” called Scootaloo, the three fillies apparently having seen everything there is to see in this small village. “Let’s go explore the castle!” She pointed up the mountain, where a big, colorful castle rested, its towers reflecting the colors of the rainbow in the sunlight.

“You can’t just run into a castle without asking,” replied Rainbow Dash.

“Oh, it’s alright,” Lily gave them permission. “Anyone is welcome in the castle. I live there myself; I’ll come with you.”

“Sweet! Race you there!” And the Crusaders were off, sprinting up the mountain road toward the majestic structure at the top.

“It’s beautiful,” commented Fluttershy. “And it smells wonderful.”

Rainbow Dash, Razzaroo and Wysteria had just led the four ponies outsider ponies into a forest that, according to the villagers, had not been there before, although both Rainbow Dash and Wysteria had said that this was without a doubt the place they called Breezie Blossom. It had to be one of the most beautiful places Fluttershy had ever seen. Other than a few meadows around Ponyville, she had never been in a forest this peaceful, so lush, so full of flowers. It was the perfect place to forget about the horror she had felt in Kimono’s cave.

“Breezies, darlings!” called Rainbow Dash. She had told them about the Breezies: tiny flying ponies with antennae that made their homes in flowers and mushrooms. Fluttershy couldn’t wait to meet them. “Are you there? Darlings?”

“Breezies... I’m sure I’ve come across that word somewhere,” Twilight shared. “But where?”

“I can’t believe such ponies even exists,” said Rarity. “Why would ponies need antennae?”

“Why, so they can suck nectar from the flowers, darling,” said Rainbow Dash. “Breezies have a very close bond to nature; that’s why they stay in the forest and not in Ponyville.”

“They sound lovely,” said Fluttershy, almost giddy at the prospect. “Just imagine being able to fly among the flowers, surrounded by all the woodland creatures. I wish I was a Breezie.”

“Don’t we all sometimes, darling. I do wonder where the little darlings have gone. I just hope they are still here.”

“They can’t have been gone for long,” noted Applejack, pointing at one of the bushes. “Ah’ve rounded up enough small flying critters to know when they’ve passed through a bush, and those berries couldn’t have picked themselves.”

“Maybe they’re just frightened,” Wysteria suggested, her voice soft-spoken enough to rival Fluttershy’s. “I know *I* was frightened when it happened. I’m sure we’ll find them if we just keep looking.”

The further in they went, the more colorful the scenery became, and the way the flowers were arranged made it clear that they had been planted there and tended to by hoof. The trail leaned steadily upward, until they appeared into a small glade on top of a hill.

Fluttershy could not believe her eyes. Around the glade were sculptures, carved out from the bushes, resembling all kinds of animals: squirrels, bunnies, giraffes, even animals she had never seen before. Next to one of these, on the ground, lay a tiny carriage with pink wheels and heart-shapes. Twilight hovered it to her face with her magic, eying it wondrously. “This is amazing,” she said. “It’s too well-crafted to be a toy. I didn’t know they used tools.”

“And look at this little seed pouch,” Fluttershy pointed at a small toppled bag of seed. “Looks like they were in the middle of planting these.” She also noticed a small stick that was flattened on one side and sharpened on the other. “And this must be what they used to do it. They’re crafty little things.”

“It all looks mostly the same,” Wysteria noted. “But the trees didn’t used to be so high.”

“I dare say the forest has grown since we last saw it,” said Rainbow Dash. “Fluttershy, darling, would you mind flying up and have a look for us?”

Fluttershy nodded, and started flapping her wings. She rose above the tree-tops, and further still. Rising high enough so she could see the village, she saw the forest extend nearly endlessly to the opposite direction; and further to the right-hoof side, a large field took over, huge boulders scattered all across the plain. She descended, reporting what she had seen.

“Oh, I hope the Breezies didn’t get themselves lost,” said Rainbow Dash.

“I just hope *we* won’t get lost,” said Razzaroo. “With a forest this big, who knows where they ended up.”

“No, Razzaroo, look,” said Wysteria, calling her friend over to an especially thick set of

bushes on the other side of the glade. She came up beside her and peeked through the bushes... only to pop back out with a smile, "Yes yes yes, here it is!" Everypony rushed over and hurdled together, putting their heads through the bush.

Fluttershy's heart skipped a beat. There they were, the tiny Breezie houses, built out of flowers, mushrooms, tree stumps and anything else that grew in the forest. There was even a small bridge over a stream. The miniature village was simply adorable, and filled Fluttershy's heart with warm and fuzzy feelings. But where were the ponies?

"Breezies!" Wysteria called softly. "Are you in here?"

And to their surprise, a flower actually stirred in response; and then noise came from it. Voices! Fluttershy couldn't make out what was being said, but then her entire body tensed when the flower opened up, and the very small head of a pony peeked out. As soon as it saw the much bigger heads, it let out a squeaking noise and hid... only to reappear with two more miniature pony heads. Eventually, one of them spoke up. "W-Wysteria? Is that you?"

"It's me!" she told them. "Come on out, Breezies! There's nothing to be afraid of."

More whispering, this time from all around the houses. Then, Fluttershy's heart nearly stopped as a myriad of tiny ponies flew out from their homes, right toward them. She instinctively withdrew her head and backed away, and the others did the same as the Breezies flew into the glade. They really *did* look just like regular earth ponies, only adorned with said antennae and what resembled moth wings. They circled around Wysteria and Rainbow Dash.

"What's happened?" a yellow one asked, her high pitch voice reminding her of Pinkie Pie. "Why do you look so different? Why do *we* look different? Why are the trees so high? Who are *they*?"

"One question at a time, darlings," Rainbow Dash calmed them down. "It's a long story, really, so you might want to settle down." The Breezies slowed down and came to a stop, hovering in the air. "Thank you. Now, where do I begin."

"Perhaps I should begin by introducing myself."

Fluttershy let out a squeal at the very familiar voice, turning around to see Princess Celestia standing there in the glade. The blue earth dragon stood at her side, giggling. "I see you haven't lost your touch, Your Majesty."

"I didn't *mean* to startle them," she replied playfully. "But many insist on being spooked whenever I show up. The curse of being a Princess, I suppose."

"Oh yes, I know the feeling," agreed Wysteria. "Did you come here to visit the

Breezies?”

“We didn’t expect to see you so soon,” said Twilight Sparkle. “It’s only been an hour.”

“An hour well spent, but more reminiscing will have to wait. Kenbroth believes he has found something out about the Time Capsule spell, and you all need to hear it. Where is Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie?”

“Here I am!” said the pink party pony, instantly appearing beside Fluttershy, making her jump a second time. “What did I miss? Ahh, parasprites! No wait... these are the Breezies!”

“So it’s true,” said Celestia, a hint of emotion dying her tone. “I didn’t know what to believe when you told me.” The fairy-like ponies circled around the Princess, one of them landing on Celestia’s outstretched hoof. “I thought I’d never see you again. Not after Discord drove you all to extinction.”

“Extinction?” said the Breezie. “What a thing to say! Who’s Discord?”

“Come to think of it, where are the others?” asked Wysteria. “This can’t be all of you.”

“We don’t know,” replied another Breezie. “We’ve looked around, but we’re the only ones in Breezie Blossom.”

“I think I know where they are,” said the Earth Dragon, his tone becoming serious. “Or to be more precise, I know where they’re not. I’m very sorry to tell you this, but they never were. Discord was the spirit of chaos, and Breezies were very sensitive to the chaotic magic, and also very susceptible to illusion spells, and as we know, Discord was a master of illusions. This may come as a shock to you, my dears, but he trapped us all in an illusion for a thousand years; my guess is that he designed the spell so that each of you Breezies would appear as many more in the dream world.”

There was a silence, the Breezies no longer circling the Princess or Wysteria, rather floating still in the air. The one on Celestia’s hoof eventually spoke up. “So... all of our friends are gone?” she looked up at the Princess pleadingly.

“Not quite,” said the dragon. “Think back for a moment: did you know all of the Breezies personally?”

“Well... now that you mentioned it,” she then took off from the hoof, looking around at each of her friends, her eyes widening as she did.

“You see?” said the dragon. “You’ll soon find that all of your fellow Breezies were based off of one of you, so now that the spell is broken, only the ‘originals’ remain, so to speak. One might even say they all live on within each of you.”

“I... think I understand,” said the Breezie, the sadness in her voice replaced by a tone of realization.

“Yeah...” agreed another. “It doesn’t *feel* like anyone’s missing. That’s so strange.”

“And now that you’ve returned to Equestria, I will personally see to that no harm befalls you,” promised Celestia. She put her horn right next to one of the Breezies. “Yes, I can sense it; the Elements of Harmony kept you safe all these years, and I suspect they will continue to do so.”

“What Elements of Harmony?” asked the Breezie. “What’s Equestria? Will someone explain things?”

“Soon, my dears,” replied the Princess. “But first I must speak to my students. Where is Rainbow Dash?”

“She’s off playing with the kids,” Rarity told her. “Said something about climbing the mountain.”

Celestia closed her eyes, her horn giving off a faint glow. “Yes, she’s at the other castle.”

“You can find ponies just like that?” asked Twilight.

“Of course, how else did you think I found you so quickly? You Element bearers are especially easy to sense. Let’s go meet her, everypony.”

“Pinkie Pie!” greeted Cheerilee, who turned out to be another splitting image to the similarly named teacher pony from Rainbow Dash’s town, save for the nuance of purple on her coat, the blue and pink mane, and the horn on her head. The earth pony next to her – introduced as Story Belle, a close friend to Pinkie’s, judging from the heartfelt hug they shared – didn’t ring a bell: her coat was light pink, her mane alternating in yellow, pink and purple stripes. Multicolored manes seemed to be common around here. “I’m so happy to see you’re up and about. Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, I think I got it all out of my system,” Pinkie told her. “But I’m still worried. Especially for Minty.”

“I know she’s a very dear friend to you,” said Story Belle.

“The best a pony could ever have.”

The Cutie Mark Crusaders, having none of this sap, spread out to search the circular

room for whatever interesting stuff they could find. Rainbow Dash, on the other hoof, was more interested in the ceiling, a glass dome high above her head. All the sparkly decorations making her head spin.

“And... which Rainbow Dash were you again?” Cheerilee addressed the pegasus.

“Well, darling... actually, nevermind. I’m the cool one.” She stressed her point by flapping her wings.

“Just checking. I thought she might have turned into a pegasus. So I take it you’ve met our own Rainbow Dash. How is she?”

“Fine, as far as I can tell,” she relayed. “She was going on about not being able to pick stuff up with her hooves, but nothing life-threatening.”

“That’s something that has given us all trouble,” said Story Belle. “I can’t even pick up books anymore.”

“I’m not sure how bending the flat of your hooves would even work,” Rainbow Dash admitted, “but you’ll learn to work with your mouth. Unicorns have it good though; they just lift stuff with magic.”

“We can?” said Cheerilee. “That would make things much easier. Thank you for telling me!”

“Hey, where did the kids go?” pointed Pinkie Pie. Sure enough, there were nowhere to be seen around the hall, but Rainbow Dash could hear giggling and talking coming from somewhere. She then noticed a tile on the floor had been opened, which on closer inspection led to stairs leading downward. “Was this always here?” asked Pinkie.

“No,” said Cheerilee. “We found it just awhile ago. Come, I’ll show you. I just hope the kids don’t touch anything.”

“Check it out!” Scootaloo marveled. Unlike the other castle, which only had a room and a boring old library, this one actually had a cellar filled with all kinds of stuff she had never seen before. The room shared its size with the one above, and everything was stacked neatly around the walls, leaving ample space to roam. The place was lit up by the candle lights from a chandelier, giving it the perfect Secret Base feel. Scootaloo liked it. “Hey Sweetie Belle, what do you think this is?”

“I don’t know,” she said, eyeing the statue of a griffin’s claw holding a blue glass orb, “but I don’t think we should be touching anything.”

“I know, but just look at this stuff!” Scootaloo replied excitedly. There was a suit of armor in one of the corner, kind of resembling the ones Celestia’s guard wore, and a big painting of a castle was stacked against a box next to it. Scootaloo decided to check out a drawer that looked like nopony had dusted off for quite a while, but then...

“Kids?” All three adult ponies came down the stairs, and all three Crusaders stopped rummaging. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with you poking around these things,” said one of the unicorns. “Even *we’re* not sure what most of this stuff is.”

Only now did Scootaloo notice that she bore striking similarities to her teacher, and it gave her pause. “Is your name Cheerilee?” she asked.

“Why, yes, how did you...?” she began, but stopped, exchanging looks with Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie. “I have a double too, don’t I.”

“Yeah, kinda,” said Apple Bloom, coming up next to Scootaloo. “She’s our teacher. Not a unicorn, though.”

“I thought I recognized you before on the hill,” remembered Sweetie Belle. “That’s so weird. Only some of you look like ponies from our village. I’ve never seen *you* around.” She pointed at Story Belle.

“The important thing is you’re *not* our teacher,” remarked Scootaloo. “What do you say, Miss? We could help you sort through this stuff, see what’s useful.”

“I have a better idea!” offered Story Belle. “I found this picture book down here.” She walked over to one of the book shelves, pulling one out; only to remember she couldn’t grab it with her hoof, so she let it fall to the floor with a thud. She awkwardly pushed it along the floor, showing it to she children. “I thought it was really fascinating. Wanna hear it?”

“I don’t know...” Scootaloo hesitated. Exploring was way more fun than sitting around listening to somepony talk, but the neat picture on the cover – a big castle on top of a mountain – did pique her interest.

“You know you shouldn’t go poking around other people’s stuff, right?” Pinkie Pie pointed out.

“I know, but...” She decided to seek advice from the, in her eyes, biggest authority in the room, “What do you think, Dash?”

“She’s right, kiddo; this is someone’s basement, not a clubhouse. Even I know messing around with ancient and potentially magical stuff can be dangerous.”

“I thought you said your name was Rainbow Danger Dash!” remarked the orange filly.

“And when Rainbow Danger Dash tells you it’s dangerous, you’d better listen.”

“Sides, Ah could use a break,” voted Apple Bloom. “Ah like hearing stories. Granny Smith tells me stories all the time.”

“Fine,” Scootaloo gave in, sitting herself down on the floor. Her two friends sat down next to her, as did Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash. Story Belle opened the book, turning it to its side so that everypony could see the pictures. On the first page, it depicted a bunch of unicorns on an open field.

*“In our land, long ago, long before the chaos and snow;
there lived tribes of unicorns, friends through blood and magic horns.”*

“Don’t tell me it’s gonna rhyme the whole story!”

“Shhh.”

*“Six they were, and though divided, all with harmony they sided.
Friends in games, drinks and food, never far from happy mood.
Though all folks had all they wanted, with one question they were haunted.”*

She turned the page, and picture of ponies gazing out at sea spread across both pages.

*“This is here, but what is there? For this, the ponies had a flare.
To find out what the unknown held, what other wonders out there dwelled.
What could be across the sea; no one had yet gone to see.”*

She turned the page again; on the first was a picture of big waves on the ocean, and the other depicted a group of ponies gathered around a circle with star shapes drawn on the floor.

*“For in these waters, danger lurked; beasts from which the bravest shirked.
Even if through spells you flew; a magic shroud would hinder you.
But though the ocean would not yield; perhaps if one would magic wield,
one could travel far beyond, reappear beyond the pond.
For this dream to realize, every unicorn so wise,
banded into one group strong, so to travel distance long.”*

The last page had a picture of six castles on it, shining bright in under a starry sky, each a different color.

*“And so was cast by every tribe, spells not easy to describe.
Through their bonds and love for all, a pillar bright, big and tall,
made a bridge across the sea, which ponies quickly crossed with glee.”*

*Nevermore would they return, for everypony shared a yearn,
to see what else out there to see, no one knows where they could be.
But in the castles left behind, friendship's magic you will find.*

The end."

"Wow," said Sweetie Belle. "That's pretty neat."

"Are you kidding?" objected Scootaloo. "There was no action, and *way* too much rhyming."

"Is that what you say to someone who just read you a story?" said Pinkie Pie sternly.

"It's okay, Pinkie," Story Belle assured. "Do you wanna hear another one? There's a bunch more in this book."

"No!"

"I, for one, found it really fascinating," said Cheerilee. "I know this may sound crazy, but—ah!" A bright flash startled her and everypony else in the room, but more startling still was the fact that nine more ponies and a dragon-like creature – along with a bunch of flying small things – were now in the room with them.

"Pardon our intrusion," said Princess Celestia; by her side stood all of Rainbow Dash's friends, plus a few ponies from the village. "I thought this would be quicker than walking."

There was a moment of silence as everypony just stared at the newcomers, and in Scootaloo's case, allowed her heart to calm down. She did *not* expect a crowd to just pop up like that. Even more freaky as the small, butterfly-like ponies now circling over their heads. Scootaloo and Rainbow Dash alike only stared at them incredulously.

"Breezies!" exclaimed the village Pinkie Pie, facing lighting up. "You're okay!"

"Introductions will have to wait; Kenbroth here has discovered something that you all need to hear," said the Princess, as the dragon creature stepped forward.

"Hold on a minute; 'Kenbroth'?" said Pinkie Pie, eyeing the blue dragon with great curiosity. "Is that you, Spike?"

"None other, my dear. And *you're* the Pinkie Pie I've come to know and love. I heard you were quite upset about Minty; I'm glad you're feeling better."

"As good as I'll ever feel."

“No doubt. And you two are... hold on, let me guess... Cheerilee and Sweetie Belle?”

“Story Belle.”

“Ah, right; Belle is such a common name around these parts. In any case, I should probably bring you up to speed; I was the Princesses’ adviser back in the day, before Discord started running wild and created this mess. As such, I have both an inside and outside perspective of this little fantasy world that he created. I confirmed some facts with Celestia, and I do believe I have some answers for you.”

The newcomers settled on the floor next to the Crusaders, and soon all eyes were fixed upon the dragon. “You see, the village I remember from over a thousand years ago looked quite different from how it appears today. Yes, I know what you’re thinking: ‘how could that be? I thought you said it was a time loop!’ There are more factors in play, I’m afraid: a major one being the nature of Discord’s illusion, another being the Elements of Harmony. Mind you, these are only educated guesses, but I believe that Discord’s inclusion of the Elements’ magic into his spell had some unforeseen side effects. They resonated with the illusion he created, shaping the physical reality inside the Time Capsule to match. In other words, this village is a literal case of a dream coming true.”

“I-I don’t believe it,” said Twilight, shaking her head. “What kind of spell could turn abstract thoughts into reality?”

“Only one created by the Elements of Harmony,” answered Celestia. “I find it hard to believe as well, but you saw Rainbow Dash’s shop, didn’t you? All the clothes she had made were there, but how could they be, if she had been asleep for millennium?”

“I thought we had been sleepwalking or something,” said the earth pony Rainbow Dash. “Were we really still for a thousand years, darlings? No wonder I felt so out of shape.”

“It still doesn’t explain why some ponies in this town look like us,” pointed the pegasus counterpart.

“Well, no,” admitted the dragon. “We’ll have to figure that one out as we go.”

“But if the village as we know it was created by magic, how did it look before?” asked the village Pinkie Pie.

“A lot less colorful, for one thing. A rather poor town, actually, but it had its rustic charm.” He stopped prancing, noticing the book on the floor. He picked it up and started flipping the pages. “Ah, yes, a child’s version of *The Legend of Harmony*, an epic created by Fillyam Haykespeare. No, wait, she wrote that tragic love story with the warring families. Anywho, I have reasons to believe this tale is actually based on a true story. In fact, I believe one of the castles mentioned here is actually the one we’re in right now.”

“Seriously?” exclaimed Scootaloo, all of a sudden finding the story much more interesting.

“I *thought* I felt something from these walls,” shared Cheerilee. “A sense of familiarity I can't properly explain.”

“Are you sure about this, Kenbroth?” asked Celestia. “The Legend of Harmony has been a widely studied subject for scholars throughout the ages, and no one has managed to prove the existence of these castles.”

“That’s because they’ve stayed hidden in plain sight,” he explained. “Can you think of no castle with a high amount of magic condensation? Perhaps one you rebuilt from crumbled ruins all those years ago?”

“You don’t mean Canterlot!”

“But I do. Other such castles may already have fallen into ruin, but that doesn’t mean the magic has left. I suspect this was the case with this castle; Discord, for whatever reason, must have recreated it for the illusion. Incidentally, the castle in Ponyville wasn’t there at all before; maybe he just liked to build castles.”

“We still can’t be certain whether or not he even knew it was there, or if it was part of his plan,” said Celestia. “Miss Cheerilee, am I right assuming you’re the caretaker of this castle?”

“Yes, I live here with a few friends.”

“Would it be too much trouble to allow a couple of my mages to stay for a few weeks, so we can study the castle’s magical properties?”

“Not at all. I want to know more about this as much as you do; I’ll be happy to help anyway I can. I’ll talk to Whistle Wishes and Brights Brightly.”

“Thank you, Miss Cheerilee. I’m afraid this is where I’ll take my leave, then; I have much to discuss with Luna. Kenbroth, would you like to come with me and see Canterlot again?”

“As much as that sounds delightful, I think it would be best if I stayed here for the time being, see to that everyone is settled.

“Very well then. As for you, my faithful students, I’ve already talked to the carriers, and they will stand by to take you home whenever you wish.”

“Oh no they won’t,” said the hyper-version Pinkie Pie. “Standing around all day is no fun, so I told them they could go ahead and fly back to Canterlot. So now we have to stay

the night!”

“Pinkie!” complained Rarity. “I have orders to fill tomorrow! You can’t just set the schedule for us. And think of the fillies!”

“Oh, you don’t wanna miss this. Princess, is the thing about the stuff taken care of?”

The Princess smiled. “Yes, Pinkie, the thing and the stuff has been placed as per your request.”

“Then that’s my cue to be off! Be sure to be in town by seven!” And with that, Pinkie Pie ran up the stairs before anypony could object.

“Wow,” said the other Pinkie Pie. “That one gives ‘being Pinkie’ a whole new meaning.”

After their visit to Unicornia, everypony was free to spend the remaining hours of the day however they wanted. The Cutie Mark Crusaders, of course, quickly ran off to do more exploring, this time accompanied by Fluttershy, as Rarity quite insisted that both Rainbow Dashes came with her to the clothes shop so that she could do some measuring. Twilight Sparkle opted to stay in Unicornia with Cheerilee, as she had been asked to teach her and the other unicorns some basic magic.

As for Applejack, she had been wandering the town, taking in the sights, when she had come across some local ponies who were curious about her hat. One topic led to another, and soon she was showing off some of her rope tricks, to which the small crowd was clapping their hooves; trying to, at least, as they didn’t seem to know the concept of stomping them to the ground as a form of cheering.

“That was dazzling!” praised a white pony with a yellow-and-purple-striped mane, her name given as Sunny Daze. “I’ve never seen anyone play with a rope like that before.”

“Ah don’t use it just for play, y’know,” told Applejack. “This baby comes in great handy when you’re rounding up them critters; cows, sheep, pigs, y’know.”

“Actually, we don’t,” she replied. “What’s a cow?”

Applejack blinked. “Y’all never seen a cows?” The six-or-so ponies shook their heads. “But how do you get yer milk?”

“I’ve never given in much thought, really,” said a blue-coated pony with a mane of pink-and-orange; Twinkle Twirl, if she remembered correctly. “We get milk and flour and stuff from the Ponyville storage room.”

“And it replenishes itself?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” replied Sunny Daze. “Dunno how it works; magic, I guess.”

“Oh boy,” sighed Applejack, starting to worry for the future of this village. “I dunno how things were before y’all woke up from that there spell, but here in Equestria, we have to work for our food. Do you have a farm at all?”

“What’s a farm?”

“What exactly do you ponies eat?!”

“Oh, we eat bread, muffins, cakes, all sorts of thing.”

“What about grass, flowers, vegetables; things that you grow?”

“Flowers? Do we eat flowers now?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Yes you do. Ah’ve no doubt the Princesses will provide you with whatever you need for the time bein’, but eventually you’re gonna have to learn to survive on your own production. And since it’s clear none of you have any experience with farmin’, how about I show you the ropes, as it were; help you get started. First, we need to find a good patch o’ fertile land.”

“Aw man, can’t we just eat berries and fruit from now on?” complained Sunny Daze. “There’s a lot of those.”

“Berries and fruits are nice and all, but y’all need more varied meals than that,” countered Applejack. “Ah’m mighty sorry, but unless that unlimited storage room still works – which Ah’ll bet my hat it doesn’t – you’re gonna have to produce yer own wheat, and soon.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said a third pony, Puzzlemint; a white mare with a mane of yellow, pink and blue. “And I suppose it would be rude to turn down your kind offer.”

“Then let’s get dirt huntin’,” said Applejack, pleased with the change in attitude. “Have any of you ponies been outside of town yet?”

“Not very far,” replied Puzzlemint. “There’s a field littered with huge boulders just outside of town.”

“That’s as good a place to start as any. Come along, everypony!”

The band of seven ponies headed off out of town, and not ten minutes later, the field came into view. True enough, boulders the size of houses lay uselessly on the ground,

about ten to twenty pony lengths apart, making for a very strange landscape. The soil beneath their hooves felt soft enough; the field itself definitely had potential. Applejack leaped onto one particularly large rock and gazed out over the irregular landscape. In some places, the rocks were clustered, in others they were far and few between. She soon spotted one such place that looked promising, hopped off the rocks and told the ponies to follow.

Zigzagging between the rocks soon became tiring, and once or twice she had to scale another rock to get their bearing, but soon enough, Applejack had led them to a decently spacious rock-free ground. She walked a few paces, scanning the ground, before digging into the ground with her hooves. She smiled to herself. "Yup, this place is a beaut! We'll be getting them seeds planted in no time."

"Does it have to be so far from town?" asked Twinkle Twirl. "What if we get lost on the way?"

"Once we find a way to move these rocks, we'll think about expanding," said Applejack. "We'll just have to mark the rocks with arrows until then. Now, we won't get far without the proper tools, which unless there's just happen to be some lying around town, Ah reckon we're outta luck 'till morning; but in the meantime, ah'm gonna teach you some o' the basics o' working the fields and sowing. Even if ya don't fancy yerselves work ponies, knowing the know-hows will get ya far on the way. Now listen closely, and get ready to learn something."

It had been hours before Rarity and Rainbow Dash had let the other Rainbow Dash free from the clutches of fashion. As it turned out, the two did share nearly the exact same physical features, all except around the wing area, and thanks to that, Rarity wasn't ready to promise never to rope her into modeling ever again just yet. But it didn't bother her now; she was free to stretch her wings, so she had decided to take a trip around the area. She flew over the castles, a bit over the forest, and eventually ended up over the grand lake. The butterfly-shaped island in the center was especially eye-catching; she thought she might do some exploring on her own.

She touched down on the beach of the isle. The place was actually pretty neat: just a bit in-land was some of the biggest flowers Rainbow Dash had ever seen. Beyond the palm-tree crowns was a waterfall, above which a big natural rainbow could be seen. A few tents dotted the beach, but there didn't seem to be anypony home.

Staying on the ground, she went into the woods, rounding the small pond at the island's center and ascending the slope leading up to the top of the waterfall. This was the most alien forest she had ever seen; not only where the flowers and leaves huge, but pretty much every tree bore fruit, from bananas to pineapples. Stuff you rarely ever saw in Ponyville. The place had a nice smell to it, a freshness that didn't have that mustiness that

the Everfree had. It only took a minute to climb the hill, where she had an excellent view of the back-side of the island.

But her eyes weren't drawn so much to the view as to the present company. A light-blue pegasus pony – the same one that had spoken up during the Princesses' introduction – sat looking out over the pond, and the moment she noticed Rainbow Dash approaching, she let out a squeal and took a few steps back. "Uh, hi," greeted Rainbow Dash, trying to appear as none-threatening as she could.

"H-h-hi," the other pegasus replied, following it up by a whistle. "A-are you Rainbow Dash?" Her voice was high-pitched, and rather quirky. "No wait, you're a pegasus... that's right – fweee – you were with the Princess, the one who *looks* like Rainbow Dash."

"It's a common mistake," said Rainbow Dash dismissively. "What's your name? And what *is* this island?"

"You mean Butterfly Island? This is where the pegasi live, but I'm the only one here right now. I'm Thistle Whistle, by the way."

"So where did they all go?"

"They're in Ponyville. They figured this sort of thing is best handled with everyone in the same place. But I just wanted to go home... so here I am, all alone."

"I see." Rainbow Dash noted the sad look on her face. A face that, in fact, reminded her a lot of Derpy the Mail Mare back in Ponyville. "I'm sure they'll come back eventually. Or you could always fly and meet them."

"I know... but Butterfly Island is the only place that feels familiar anymore. It's home, y'know? It's comforting to know at least something stayed the same – fweee – illusion or not."

"I get what you're saying," said Rainbow Dash. "But being here all alone can't be fun, can it?"

"I know," she repeated. "Part of me wants to go join them, but it's like I'm the only one who's still scared. The only one who hasn't accepted it and moved on... And then there's – fweee – Star Catcher; I feel like I should be out looking for her, but I wouldn't even know where to begin? She's not here, that much is for sure."

"Look, I don't think anypony has 'accepted' anything yet. "Being told that your lives up until now was just a dream, that's not so easy to accept. I know it'd drive *me* nuts."

"Sure they're confused, but I'm *terrified*," Thistle Whistle told her. "They'll probably just tell me to stop worrying. They always do."

“Maybe. But isn’t it better to get it out of your system than to sit here and worry? If they’re really your friends, they’ll take you seriously.”

The gray pegasus whistled. “I know I should, but, well... there are clouds up there. Why do clouds have to move so fast...?”

“You’re scared of clouds?”

“I had a difficult experience with them as a child,” she shared. “Go ahead, laugh.”

“Hey, if that’s all that’s stopping you, I think I can be of assistance,” Rainbow Dash told her, and without giving a hint of warning she took to the air, aiming for the nearest cloud puff. She kicked it hard, vaporizing it, and did the same to the next; and the next, and another after that. She then spun around a larger cloud, using the rotation to send it off toward the other side of the lake. She landed, a smug smile on her face. “What about now?”

The other pegasus only stared, whistling furiously. “H-how did you do that?”

“It’s the pegasi’s job to take care of the weather in Equestria,” she explained. “Destroying clouds is what we do. Maybe you’d like to try it. A friend of mine once said you gotta learn to face your fears.”

“Me? K-k-kicking the clouds?” she stammered, as though she had suggested kicking a dragon. She whistled again. “Do you r-really think I can do it?”

“Sure you can; what’re they gonna do to stop you?” she pepped. “Just give it a good buck, and it’ll be gone.”

“Well...” she looked up at one of the remaining cloud puffs. “...okay... I’ll give it a try.” She took to the air, slowly ascending toward the white fluffy ball of moistness, the look in her eyes that of somepony confronting her worst enemy. Rainbow Dash flew up right beside her, giving her a reassuring smile.

Thistle Whistle was soon hovering right next to it, eying it with a look of both fright and determination. Then, closing her eyes, she spun around and kicked the cloud as hard as she could. When she looked again, and saw that it had been smashed to nothingness, her face beamed. “I-I did it! I – fwееее – I beat a cloud!”

“See, it wasn’t so bad,” said Rainbow Dash. “Now how about we go back to Ponyville.”

“Actually, if it’s okay with you,” said Thistle Whistle, almost looking a bit flustered. “I’d like to smash some more clouds... that is, i-if you would come with.”

“Sure thing. And while we're at it, I'll even show you some of my slick moves. Let me tell you about this awesome group of fliers...”

It was almost seven o'clock, and the village local Pinkie Pie, having listened to Twilight and Cheerilee talk about magic for hours, decided to go for that walk. She felt much better now that she had talked to her friends, but the same question still lingered in her mind. Where is Minty? And Rarity? Minty was prone to getting into trouble, but Rarity was just a child. Last time she got lost, the Breezies had been there to help her, but according to Twilight, the Breezies they had found in Breezie Blossom were the last in the world. She hoped beyond hope that the little unicorn had managed to find a nice village that could take her in. The thought of a child alone in a dark forest or out on a field made her heart ache.

She had walked down the hill from Crystal Rainbow Castle, into a patch of wood along the lake shore. The sun was starting to settle, lending the scenery a really pretty orange glow. After a bit of walking, she heard voices from the woods. “N-no, girls, I really don't think you should go in there.” Pinkie Pie followed the sound, and soon came across its source.

“Come on, Fluttershy,” pleaded Apple Bloom, the three girls standing in front of a cave. “If there's a bear, you'll just teach it to play it nice, right?”

“I'd rather it didn't come to that,” the yellow pegasus pleaded back. “Besides, I don't want to go into any more caves... oh! Hi, Pinkie.”

“Hi, Fluttershy,” she replied. “Wat'cha doing?”

“We wanna go into this cave,” Scootaloo told her. “But Fluttershy thinks it's too dangerous.”

“It does look pretty scary,” agreed Pinkie Pie. “I'm not sure I've even seen this cave before. Isn't there anywhere else you can explore?”

“See girls, even the pony who lives here doesn't think it's a good idea,” said Fluttershy. “Can't we just head back into town?”

“You know what,” said Sweetie Belle, “you're right, Fluttershy. I'm getting kinda tired. I should go find Rarity.”

“Ugh, fine,” Scootaloo surrendered. “Maybe I can find Rainbow Dash!”

“Sides, didn't Pinkie Pie tell us to be in town round seven?” said Apple Bloom as they started walking away from the cave. “Wonder what she's up to. Something crazy, I bet.”

“Yeah, I could never compete with her,” said the local Pinkie Pie, giving a little laugh. “People tell me sometimes that I’m ‘acting Pinkie’, but I don’t pop out of baskets. I don’t see how I could even fit in one of those...”

Before long, they emerged from the forest and into Unicornia village, from which they followed the road toward Ponyville. The sun had already gone down behind the horizon, basking the world in gorgeous dusk. As they walked, Pinkie Pie took the opportunity to ask the yellow pegasus, “So, how do you like *our* Ponyville?”

“I think it’s lovely,” said Fluttershy. “It’s so colorful and homely. I could definitely see myself visiting here more often.”

“You totally should; we love making new friends around here. Plus, we’ll take any excuse we can get to throw a...” Before Pinkie Pie could finish the sentence, there was a loud bang from all over town, and from seemingly every direction at once, an endless rain of streamers, glitter and shining bulbs of light came flying, all of it settling neatly onto the buildings, as though guided by magic. Another boom fired, sending into the air another volley of objects – banners, ribbons, even gemstones – they too landing perfectly as decorations. In the blink of an eye, the entire town had been dressed up for a party.

But there was no time to recover from the initial shock before fireworks started blasting the heavens, creating an absolutely stunning display of glitter. Glitter that, in fact, formed words. Pinkie Pie’s heart almost leaped through her throat, her loud gasp drowned by the blast from the fireworks.

‘Cheer up, Pinkie Pie!’

“Oh my,” said Fluttershy. “Looks like they’re already throwing a party.”

Pinkie Pie stared at the message for a few moments. Who? Why? How? Then suddenly, a red orb of light came into her field of vision, grabbing their attention. It sped off into the streets, and Pinkie knew she was meant to follow. She dashed as quickly as she could after the orb, until the music theater by the castle came into view. It was lit up by innumerable floating lights, and the entire village seemed to be gathered there.

“There she is!” called a high-pitched, excited voice that could only belong to one pony. She walked up to the crowd, and they all came to greet her. The entire street area had been covered by a large mat, enough space for all hundred-or-so ponies gathered there.

From the stage then jumped the second pink party pony, and landed only an inch from Pinkie’s face. “Well? Did you like it? Were you surprised?”

“Very!” replied her double. Surprised was an understatement. “Is this for me? But why? I’m pretty sure my birthday isn’t for a few months.”

“This isn’t a birthday party, silly,” said the hyperactive party pony. “This is a Cheer-Up party! You were *so* sad and *so* worried before, so I thought to myself: how can I make this pony happy again? With a party, of course! But it couldn’t be any old party – I mean, you’re worried about losing a friend, and that’s heavy stuff! – so I asked the Princess to lower the sun a little earlier today, and install party cannons all over the village, so I could throw a *humongous* party to let you know everything’s gonna be alright. Took me all day to get it just right. Did you like it?”

“Like it?” she repeated. She was still having trouble processing what was going on. But seeing all these sparkly decorations, and all of her friends smiling at her, it became increasingly hard not to grin from ear to ear. “I *love* it!” She gave the other Pinkie Pie a big hug. “This is absolutely positively wonderful! I can’t believe you’d do all this just to cheer me up; we only just met yesterday! Thank you so much, Pinkie Pie!” She let the tears out of her system. This time, they were mixed with tears of joy.

“I can’t express how grateful I am, darling,” said the village Rainbow Dash to the hyperactive party-planner. Pinkie Pie had gone so far as to send in a DJ from Canterlot, turning the mat into a dance floor as she wasted no time putting on a Pinkie-brand musical number she liked to call *The Ballad of the Double Ponyville*. More than half the ponies were still dancing to their hearts’ content to the DJ’s rhythmic beats, while the others were mingling, or trying out the refreshments. “I thought nothing could cheer her up after hearing about Minty, but you worked wonders, darling! She couldn’t ask for a better friend... or lookalike.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Pinkie. “I’m just glad you all enjoy it. I was worried for a sec that I’d gotten the colors wrong, or the punch wasn’t goon enough.”

“They both get five stars from Rainbow Dash, darling.”

“Make that ten stars,” said the other Rainbow Dash, coming up beside them. “You really outdid yourself this time, Pinkie. Even Fluttershy’s letting loose; I don’t think I’ve ever seen her dance in public party before. I hope setting the sun early doesn’t cause panic anywhere, but man, this is so worth it! I wish Spike could be here.”

“But I *am* here!” said a most recognizable voice from behind, making the Rainbow Dashes jump. The blue earth dragon giggled. “Of course, I assume you’re talking about the little one back in your town. Did you know he was named after me? The Princess told me as much.”

“But I thought your name was Kenbroth something,” commented the pegasus Rainbow Dash.

“Kenbroth Gilspotten Heathspike, if you please. But I never was fond of that long-winding title, so I invite the commoners to call me simply Spike. Of course, that might cause some confusion now; perhaps I should stick to Kenbroth.”

“We’re used to confusion by now, darling,” said the cerulean earth pony. “To me, you’ll always be our dear friend Spike.”

“And you’ll be the one I think about when I heard the words Rainbow and Dash. And that’s something we must not forget in all this; as much as things has changed, just as much has stayed just the way they were. We’re still us, and we still have our towns, our castles, our friends... just look at how happy everyone is right now. Why, I dare say that in many ways, this is an improvement.”

“That’s a darling way to look at it,” the earth pony Rainbow Dash said. “Though I think I might need some more time to accustom myself to making dresses with my mouth.”

“Rainbow Dash!” called the village Pinkie Pie as she approached the three ponies and the dragon. “You should come dance with us! Fluttershy and Twilight are pulling some crazy moves out there; you’re not gonna let her take the crown as the best dancer in Ponyville, are you?”

“Well, darling, I’ll have to show them a thing or two about dancing in style,” she acknowledged the challenge. “Just as soon as I’ve caught my breath.”

“Thanks again, Pinkie, for throwing this amazing party,” Pinkie told her lookalike. “I haven’t had this much fun since everyone painted the town pink in my honor. It’s really helped taken my mind off of worrying.”

“Your friends will show up, I promise,” replied the counterpart. “Cross my heart, hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye.” At the last word, she actually pulled out a real cupcake and smashed it into her eye.

“Uh, right, thanks,” she played along. “I just wish there was something I could do. Maybe if I tried Squinking again.”

“If only it was that simple, darling.”

“Well, doesn’t hurt to try,” Pinkie said, taking a few steps back from her friends. And so she began shaking her mane back and forth. Back and forth. Then jumping around in a circle, and more back and forth. Rainbow Dash sighed; she had never quite understood Pinkie’s ability to Squink, but it was such a shame to lose it now when she needed it the most.

Or had she? Was that sparks coming out of her hair? Pinkie must have felt it to, because she was shaking faster now, taking higher jumps, and then she squished herself down on

the ground. And as she rose, a miracle happened. A pink puffy cloud rose from her temple, settling over her head. At this point, the music had stopped playing, as every eye was one Pinkie Pie. Rainbow Dash thought she looked more strained than usual, her face flustered.

And then, as she winked, the pink nuance grew more vivid. She kept flailing her mane, and that's when Rainbow Dash noticed a glow from the distant background. It was Crystal Rainbow Castle, engulfed in a multicolored light. Pinkie stilled her head, closing her eyes in concentration, and let the vision flow into the pink mist.

It was shaky, and rather blurry, but she could make out a forest, on a cliff-side. Barely visible in it were two ponies, one small and pink and a slightly bigger, blue one. The big one was pointing a hoof at the small one, and whereas the sound from a Squink would usually be clear as day, the voices she heard sounded like it came from behind a brick wall, and Rainbow Dash had to strain her ears to make out what was being said. "...ed...ind you...reat and Pow...xie is a...ician, not...ysitter! How...out...ful..."

That was all they got before Pinkie Pie fell to the ground in exhaustion, breaking up the pink mist and dimming the light from the castle.

Special thanks to Tess Tesseract for help with editing.