

The Third Generation

Chapter Nineteen

by Candle Light

“When we first found him, he was a broken creature. His wings were torn, his face deformed. We were about to bring him back to the village for a proper burial, when we realized that he was still breathing.

“We decided to do what we could to nurse him back to health. It seemed a hopeless undertaking at first, but through our tireless efforts, and what I can only attribute to a miracle – such as it was – his near-fatal wounds began to heal. After only a week, his wings and features were restored. As you can imagine, we were quite taken aback by his strange appearance. I had never seen a creature such as he: a horn and an antler, a claw and a paw... everything about him seemed the very picture of asymmetry. A few days later, he finally regained consciousness. He told us that he was a Draconeus, and that, as far as he knew, he was the last of his kind.

“It seemed that from the moment he opened his eyes, we were destined to become the best of friends. Though he wouldn’t be well enough to get out of bed for another month, our band of friends spent most of that time in his company, talking about the world outside of our village, the fascinating places he had been to, and the war that had taken everything away from him. He had us all fooled... most of all me. Of the six of us, I was by far the most struck by his stories, always asking him for more.

“But for all the questions we asked, he would never tell us about his past. It was clear to us that he had nowhere to go, however, so we offered him to stay in the village. Of course, the other villagers weren’t quite as happy to accept this strange outsider – times being what they were, they had good reason to be wary – so he made a home for himself in a cave at the village outskirts. The six of us would share our food with him, and in return, he would help out with the chores the best he could, plowing the fields or repairing rooftops after storms. But most importantly, we had his friendship. We would often spend nights at his cave, talking and laughing, just having a good time as friends do.

“I was taken with his knowledge, his charisma, his wit... he must have noticed the attention, because more and more, he started to spend time with me alone. We would go on long walks together, or sit atop of the mountains for hours, just talking. Before I knew it... I was in love with him. I remember well the time he invited me to the lakeside, where he gave me my first kiss...

“Naturally, you all thought it strange at first, but it wasn’t long before you gave us your blessings. And for many months to come, we were happy. The villagers gradually started to open up to him, even offered to build us a house of our own, but we decided to stay in the cave. We were made for each other; he quenched my thirst for knowledge, teaching me about magic and so many things about the world... and I taught him about the magic of friendship, and the happiness that could only be had with others. He even made a charm bracelet for me as a token of our love.

“The most painful part to remember is that, for a time, he seemed so sincere. As though he really *wanted* to better himself, and live out the rest of his life quietly by my side.

“But in the end, it was never to be. One fateful night, he gathered the six of us on top of the mountain, where he revealed the truth about who he was. Discord, the god of chaos, the very one responsible for the hardship our land had to endure for so long. He thanked us for hiding him from Celestia and Luna’s eyes while his power recovered, and asked us to join him in his quest, to

conquer Equestria and reshape it in his own image. The village would become the Capital of Chaos, and we would rule the world together...

"We refused. He didn't take it well. He grabbed us in a field of magic, about to crush us all... but he didn't. He just let us go, snatched my charm bracelet and flew away. Leaving us with broken hearts, knowing that in time, Equestria would be engulfed in chaos once more.

"We bore the heavy knowledge for ourselves, never telling the villagers what had really happened. We just waited, dreading that each new day would be the day he would bring eternal chaos to Equestria.

"But he never did. He brought it to us instead. The last thing I remember before waking up near Canterlot a thousand years later was him entering the cave, laying his claw to my head and hissing these exact words: 'Don't ever let it be said I don't love you, my dear. You're about to mean the world to me.'"

The Crystal Carriage flew through the sky as fast as Night Gale's wings could muster, the ponies on board kept safe from the winds by Twilight's barrier spell. Rainbow Dash was at a loss for words. This was a lot to take in, but Kimono, the poor darling... how painful it must have been to tell them this story.

"I'm sorry, everypony," Kimono said softly. "If only I hadn't been so blind. If only I had seen the signs in time..."

"It wasn't your fault," Star Catcher said in a motherly, reassuring tone. "Don't even think it. Discord did what he did because, in the end, power and greed meant more to him than love and friendship. And in the end, he failed because of it. We are all here, together, and he is trapped in stone, alone for all eternity."

"To be honest," Minty said, scratching her head, "I still barely remember anything from that time. But I *am* starting to remember about *us*, and the fun we used to have."

"Yeah," Pinkie Pie agreed with a thoughtful nod. "We... we used to hang out at Rainbow Dash's place a lot, didn't we? It was the biggest house, since she was the mayor and all."

"Biggest house..." repeated little Rarity. She gasped, her eyes becoming big as saucers. "Biggest house! I lived in the biggest house! Rainbow Dash, you were my adoptive mommy!"

"I - I was...?" Rainbow Dash managed, taken aback. But as she peered into those excited little eyes, it all came back to her in a flood of memories and emotions. A filly sitting by her side by the fireplace. A filly jumping on the table and crushing the plates. A filly crying on her shoulder after getting in a fight with the neighbor. "I... I was, wasn't I!" Rainbow Dash pulled Rarity into an embrace. Her daughter! How could she not have realized this before? Tears welled in her eyes. "Oh Rarity, my darling... my dear, dear Rarity."

"This is so exciting," the straight-maned Pinkie Pie said with a grin. "All sorts of things are coming back to me! I think I got into trouble once, and I was taken to the mayor's house. That's where I became friends with Rarity!" She paused, her expression thoughtful once more. "I got into a *lot* of trouble, didn't I."

“Yes, you did,” Star Catcher chuckled. “And that’s why we loved you. You always brought a bit of well-needed spice into our group.”

“Do you remember it too, Star Catcher?” Pinkie asked.

“Yes... when Celestia’s mind melded with mine, I remembered everything.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Cheerilee spoke up. “Me... I’m sorry, but I don’t remember any of this. Nothing concrete anyway... loose emotions more than anything.”

“I think you’re better off,” Star Catcher said firmly. “It doesn’t matter now what Discord did. He is gone now, and we are all together. A new life awaits, with *real* friends that can help us regain what we have lost.”

All six of them nodded in agreement. For the first time since she’d come to Equestria, Rainbow Dash felt that everything was back to the way it should be. They had been through so much, facing the impending doom of a whole country – almost losing each other in the process – but now, finally, things were looking up.

When Wysteria woke up, she found herself looking up at a fancy, domed ceiling.

She shot up, her mind struggling to pull itself together. The villagers! The Mother Ursa! *Right*, she started to remember, *it didn’t actually crush us. It stopped for some reason.* Had *she* done that? No, it couldn’t be... but that wasn’t important right now. What happened to her friends?

She pulled herself into sitting position, and looked around the room. There were several rows of beds, all empty, and only one other pony in the room with her, a brown Earth Pony mare wearing a hat with a red cross on it. Seeing that Wysteria was awake, she walked over. “Morning, moonshine. Are you feeling alright?”

“I guess so,” Wysteria replied quietly. Sure enough, the light of the moon shone through the window, telling her it was still in the middle of the night. “What happened? Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital wing of Canterlot Castle. Don’t worry, your friends are all safe. We had to make an impromptu guest quarter in one of the conference rooms to accommodate you all; they should be sound asleep about now. You ponies had quite a night!”

The relief was too much for Wysteria’s poor body to handle. She slumped back onto the bed, letting her mind play catch-up. She was alive. She was alive. She was...

And yet, she couldn’t bring herself to be happy. She had failed them. Because of her, everyone she held dear had stood on death’s door steps... and yet they all lived. How? Why?! How could the world be so ironic?!

It was too much. She began to sob, and soon, the tears wouldn’t stop coming. She barely even noticed the nurse pony holding her comfortingly; she just kept weeping. She had accepted her fate. Before the end, she had come to terms with the fact that her life was over. But she hadn’t been prepared to live. Live to answer for what she had done. Would they ever forgive her? How could

she face them, having betrayed their trust when it mattered the most?

“There there,” said the nurse. “You just get some rest; you’ll feel all better in the morning.” She lay her down on the bed, and with magic put the bed sheet over her. Wysteria sniffled, but had not the strength to argue. The nurse stayed with her until she calmed down and, eventually, fell back into sleep.

How long had it been, Kenbroth find himself wondering, since he had seen an aurora, especially one as brilliant as this?

He stood atop of a mountain, the nighttime scenery set aglow in part by the sky, in part by the Mother Ursa that stood on the field, unmoving. Twilight Sparkle and her friends had done it. They had mended the first seal, and were likely on their way to repair the rest at this very moment. Now it was only a matter of time before this whole ordeal was over with. He had never been so happy to have his hard work go to waste.

“Master Kenbroth!” came a voice from above. Looking up, he saw an armored pegasus – one of the bat-winged ponies of the Luna’s Night Guards – descending downwards. She landed with a thud in front of him. “Master Kenbroth. Princess Celestia demands your presence immediately.”

Kenbroth sighed. He knew all too well what this was about. “Good job, soldier. No need to report back to the Princess; I’ll be there within the hour.” With that, he leaped off the mountain, diving headfirst into the ground, never losing momentum as he shot himself forward like a bullet. He wasn’t looking forward to the upcoming discussion with the Princess... but then again, everything *did* turn out alright in the end, so perhaps she would go easier on him.

Trixie could not shake the feeling that she was incredibly out of place.

The Crystal Carriage’s first stop was an orange crystal castle in the wasteland. The pony called Minty seemed very reluctant to leave the carriage for some reason, but once her friends had persuaded her to follow them into the castle, they had repeated the ‘Squink’ process from the Frozen North. As silly as that dance looked, it seemed to be doing the trick; even Trixie could feel the energy emitting from the walls as the seal repaired itself. It was unlike anything she had felt before; without the threat of a Mother Ursa trying to knock the castle down, she felt like she could really let all her guards down and lose herself in the sensation. When was the last time she had felt this good? Exiting the castle and boarding the Crystal Carriage, she found herself humming, but stopped when the poofy-maned Pinkie Pie started to hum along. Hopefully nopony else had noticed.

Her good mood only lasted for so long. In fact, it only helped to solidify the feeling of isolation. Trixie was an observer. She didn’t have anything to contribute to any of their conversations, nor was she of any use saving the world. Even Rarity and Cheerilee didn’t seem to pay much attention to her anymore, busy talking to their old friends. Not that she blamed them, but it sent her mind spiraling down paths she usually preferred not to tread. What use *was* she, exactly? She went around boasting how ‘Great and Powerful’ she was, while all she was really good at was parlor tricks. Illusions meant to wow the oblivious. *These* ponies, on the other hoof, had the power of harmony at their hooftips. They had saved Equestria more times than she could count. Where did that leave Trixie...?

...what was she thinking? She had done plenty to help! Without her, Rarity would never have made it back to Ponyville, nor would there had been anyone to take her safely to the Frozen North. Not to mention, she was the only one who had thought to plug the hole between the Mother Ursa and them, giving Twilight Sparkle enough time to...

But it wasn't enough, was it. In the end, Twilight had been the one to save the day, not her. Far from Great and Powerful, Trixie was a commoner caught up in events far greater than she could wrap her head around. As much as she hated to admit it, she would never be like Twilight. *Her* talent was magic itself, taught to her personally by the Princess of the Sun. Trixie's talent was smoke and mirrors, self-taught.

"Trixie?" Little Rarity's voice brought her out of her thoughts. Rarity, apparently bored with the others' conversation, had sat down beside her. "Are you feeling okay? You had this downer look on your face."

"Aren't I always a downer?" replied Trixie, smirking.

"Guess you are," said Rarity with a laugh. Rarity would *always* laugh. She didn't need a reason to; Trixie might as well have told that her she stunk, and she still would've laughed. "Come on, you can talk to me about it."

"I don't think that I can, Rarity," Trixie said, giving her a solemn look. Watching the little unicorn smile at her, like so many times before, filled her heart with a still-unfamiliar warmth. This one, at least, cared about her. Really cared, not just found her amusing because of her silly tricks. Despite herself, Trixie found herself returning the smile. "I'm okay, sweetie, I just have a lot to think about right now."

"Oh, okay." Rarity accepted the excuse. She returned to listen to the others' conversation – Rainbow 'darling' Dash was going on about different types of food in Equestria. Trixie found her attention drifting again, when a thought suddenly hit her.

Did I just call her 'sweetie'?

The sea of harmony and chaos was still. Giant blotches still darkened the giant expanse of energy, but they were slowly being swallowed by harmony. Two castles mended. Soon, Luna would be free of this self-imposed prison.

She could only thank the stars she had made it through these past hours. The energies had raged like a hurricane, bombarding her with in equal measure harmony and chaos, and it had driven her to the brink of insanity. The memories of the time she turned into Nightmare Moon had nearly consumed her, and had it not ceased when it did, there would have been no turning back. The loneliness, the hatred... she had felt it far stronger than her memories had previously allowed. Once she was free, she suspected she would need some time alone to put her spirit to rest.

In the mean time, she could do nothing but to let it sit there, observing the ocean-like seal spreading out before her. Now that the energies were still, those dark blotches seemed no more threatening than the night sky. The 'fish' – pieces of concentrated cosmic energy – were gone, leaving the dark spots clear as a lake's surface. Curious, she focused her magic on one of the dark spots, and peered

inside...

The Princess momentarily lost her grip on the barrier around Canterlot from the shock of what she saw. Far, far below, seemingly at the bottom of the vast sea of energy, was Equestria. But not Equestria as she knew it: the landscape was the same, but though she could not see quite as clearly without Kenbroth there to guide her senses, there was no mistaking the bearlike behemoths that were the Mother Ursa. Whole hordes of them, flocked together in a thick, red band stretching southern end to the northern. With a start – causing the barrier outside to flicker once again – she noticed that a few points shone brighter than other.

The Ursa were converging by where the castles stood in her own Equestria.

Luna could not contain her curiosity: she steeled her mind and sent a sliver of magic down the void, carrying with it her senses. Her body and spirit shook as they were nearly overwhelmed by the strange new world. To her sight, everything was coated in a layer of thick, dark blue with dots of white scattered across the air. To her smell, it reminded of burnt wood, with a sweet after taste. As for sound, all she could hear were incomprehensible noises, like flaring unicorn magic, sped up and listened to through a thick layer of glass. Plants existed here, but their shapes and growing patterns were as different as could be: bushes with thorns big as a pony, entire forest complexes the size of tall grass, and trees that were more often round than long. The creature they called the Mother Ursa, she realized, was the dominant life form in this realm, just like the ponies were in Equestria...

But when the landscape started to bend before her magical eyes, and the sound was starting to hurt, she pulled back the magic into her spirit. Even to Luna, the raw cosmic energy of such density was enough to break her if she weren't careful. Not that it mattered; once the seal had mended, the two worlds would be forever split, never to be beheld again. As happy as she was for Equestria's safety, it saddened her that a whole world of such rich wonders would be lost to them forever.

Three times during their flight did they encounter a Mother Ursa, made quick work of by the Elements of Harmony. And each time, the Elements showed Twilight a glimpse of the world from long ago.

Villages dotting a still-glittering landscape. Crystal castles, having served their purpose and slowly falling apart. Ponies encountering for the first time creatures such as manticores and hydras...

“Hey, girls...” Twilight ventured, the third Ursa being blown to magic smithereens. “Did you *see* something just now?”

“Other than a magic rainbow of doom?” said Applejack. “‘Cus Ah’ve seen *that* many times now.”

“No, I meant like a vision. Glimpses of strange places.” As expected, she was given curious looks. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“Usually, I’d say you were suffering from hallucinations from all the stress,” said Rarity, “but then again, this *is* you we’re talking about, Twilight. Go on, dear.”

“It’s the spirit of the Elements,” Twilight began, thinking how to best describe what she had felt. “It started when we were defending the crystal castles; I was shown bits and pieces of their memories from when the Elements were born. *They* are the seal! The very same seal that Pinkie Pie

accidentally broke with her Squink.”

“Wait, time out!” the pegasus Rainbow Dash cut in. “We’ve been using the Elements left and right these past few days. If it was broken, wouldn’t we have, I dunno, *noticed* somehow?”

“That’s what intrigues me. It’s almost as if the Elements we’ve been using all this time aren’t actually the true source of their powers. Perhaps similar to how pegasus magic works: their magic helps them keep their bodies aloft, but it’s the wings that grant them the power to speed through the air.”

“Whoa... in other words, if could figure out how to use these ‘wings’, we’d be unstoppable! I mean, even moreso than we already are!”

“I’m not so sure about *us*, but I’m starting to think *they* can,” said Twilight, waving a hoof toward their counterparts.

“Come again, darling?” said the other Rainbow Dash.

“Your connection to the seal was the thing that woke up the sleeping magic and broke it in the first place, and it’s through the same connection that you’re able to fix it. In a way, you ponies are more closely connected to the Elements than we are...”

“That sounds amazing!” Minty said excitedly. “Just imagine what this could... uh, what does it mean exactly?”

“That we’ll be able to make rainbows the way you do?” the earth pony Rainbow Dash said hopefully.

“To be honest, I’m not sure exactly *what* it means,” Twilight admitted with a huff of frustration. It was just another piece to the puzzle she just couldn’t quite seem to piece together. It was beginning to drive her crazy. “Maybe Discord planned it this way, hoping that somepony would accidentally break the seal... but what would he have to gain from it? He can’t very well rule over Equestria if all life is gone.”

“Who knows with Discord, really?” Spike joined in. “Destroying the world sounds like a solid villain-motive to me.”

“Maybe in those comic books of yours,” Twilight chuckled. “Real life tends to be a bit more complicated, though. Who’d want to rule over a world that’s...” Twilight trailed off, theories starting to solidify in her head. Maybe Equestria *wasn’t* the goal. She thought back to what the Elements had told her: reality had split, creating a world filled with cosmic energy beyond the seal, from which the Mother Ursa were born. A realm of pure, cosmic energy...

A crazy idea hit the unicorn. “Let me try something.” She doubted that what she was thinking would actually work, but nonetheless she reached into the vast reservoir of magic within her body, concentrating it on the tip of her horn. She then started to absorb cosmic energy from the air around them; although the amounts were nowhere near lethal, especially not this far away from the castles and Ursa, the broken seal had still allowed more than enough to leak into Equestria for her to work with. Bending cosmic energy was considered one of the highest-level magic arts in Canterlot, but like most branches of magic, it had come naturally to Twilight with very little tutoring. Even so, she doubted anypony in Canterlot had ever attempted what she was about to try.

Flaring her horn, she started to compress the magic, reconstructing its magical particles, changing its structure... until it all started to feel very familiar to her. It was the same sensation she had felt the time she had accidentally turned her parents into potted plants, on the day she'd gotten accepted as Celestia's protege.

A sensation eerily similar to Discord's touch.

She expelled the dangerous magic skyward in a display of dark, crackling sparkles. Everypony on the carriage was giving her frightened looks, but she couldn't stop smiling. Applejack was the first to speak. "Uhm, Twi, since when did you start dabbling in the dark arts?"

"Only just now," the unicorn replied, barely containing herself at the excitement of her discovery. "This solves it! Discord was after the cosmic energy!"

There was a confused silence, until Minty remarked to the others, "You think all this magic is making her strange in the head?"

"Yeah, more than usual," Spike replied, nodding.

"Alright, let me break it down for you. What I did just now was refining some cosmic energy, and it turns out that I was able to make chaos magic! The same magic Discord uses to bend reality to his will! There are only trace amounts of it in Equestria, but imagine what would happen if he had an unlimited supply of it!"

"Oh my," Fluttershy seemed to catch on. "He would be unstoppable..."

"Precisely! Why, with that amount of raw material for chaos, he might've been able to free himself before Equestria went under." Twilight's heart fluttered. Not that this was good news, but the fact that they now had a solid theory of what Discord was trying to do gave her a profound sense of accomplishment. "So, cosmic energy and chaos energy are really just different forms of the same thing. I wonder if the Princesses know..."

"No, they don't," Star Catcher spoke up. "Celestia and I share memories through our bond, and as far as she knew, what you just did should be impossible." The white Fluttershy-lookalike seemed downright spooked. "I'm not sure I should be telling you this, but... the transformation of cosmic energy into chaos has been attempted in secret for thousands of years, but not once has there been a recorded case of success."

The jubilation inside Twilight quickly diminished. "You mean... *I* just did on a whim what countless generations of unicorns could not?"

"Had it been anypony else, Ah s'pose Ah'd be surprised by that," Applejack commented, "but Ah'm with Rarity on this one; this is *you* we're talking about."

"Uh, thanks, I guess." Twilight wasn't sure how to take this news; on one hoof, it might simply mean that she had become the most powerful unicorn in Equestria and not even realized it – a concept that made her light-headed – but on the other, she had *summoned chaos!* Like Discord! "Maybe it's because no other unicorn had actually come in contact with him the way we did."

"And yet, he waged war against Equestria a thousand years ago," Kimono pointed out. "He must

have come in contact with thousands of unicorns back then.”

“Right,” Twilight remembered. “Although *they* weren’t Element bearers. Or maybe... say, Kimono...”

“Yes?” answered her counterpart.

Twilight paused. Then she shook her head. The idea was ridiculous. “Nevermind. Whatever the case, this is something Princess Celestia needs to hear about.”

Shining Armor watched by the landing platform as a dark blob of dark against the brilliant aurora pierced the barrier and approached the castle. He didn’t recognize the overly-decorated carriage, but there was no mistaking the ponies who rode on it.

“Twiley, you’re back!” The white stallion came up the carriage as it landed. Twilight jumped off, and the two met halfway in a hug. “Looks like everything turned out A-OK after all, huh. That’s, what, the third time you’ve saved Equestria now?”

“Fourth time,” replied Twilight with a grin. “But don’t give *me* all the credit; this was a group effort, and we couldn’t have done it without our friends from the other Ponyville. Even Trixie helped.”

“No need to be modest, Twilight,” Kimono said, walking up beside her look-alike, causing a rather amusing reaction in Shining Armor. “You were the one who figured out a way to save me.”

“And you were the one who held me down when my magic went out of control,” Star Catcher added as the rest of the group got off the carriage.

“We came up with the plan together, Kimono,” Twilight said. “And it was Princess Celestia who saved Star Catcher. I just helped...”

“Well, Twilight darling,” said Rainbow Dash, “I dare say your ‘help’ might have saved us all.”

“*We* saved us all,” Twilight said, beaming at the group. “And I think *we* have deserved ourselves a good night’s rest. Just as soon as we’re done with the seal in this castle... speaking of which, Shining, what’s with the gray barrier?”

“That’s Princess Luna’s doing,” Shining Armor explained. “She’s down in the crystal chamber, controlling the cosmic energies to protect our city. Turns out the Mother Ursa can’t get past the stuff.”

“Right,” said Twilight, remembering the letter from Celestia. Through all the craziness, she had forgotten all about that. “Guess we’d better get down there and fix the seal.”

“We can’t; Kenbroth isn’t back yet. Princess Celestia says we need to wait for him to pull Luna’s spirit back to her body; otherwise, she’ll be trapped between the castle’s magic and the seal forever. Besides,” he added, “you all look exhausted. Get some sleep first; I’m sure Princess Luna will survive for one more night.”

Shining Armor was right, Twilight realized. *She* didn't mind waiting for Kenbroth to return, but she wasn't so sure about the rest. Especially Little Rarity looked as though she was about to fall asleep then and there. "Some sleep would be nice," Twilight agreed.

"Anyway, rooms have been arranged for all of you in the castle. Unless you'd rather stay at our parents' for the night, Twiley."

"Thanks, but I'd rather not be made a fuss over right now; I'd never get to sleep. Let them know I'm back, though, and that I'll come visit once this is over with."

"I'll be sure to do that. Right this way, then. Oh, and and don't worry about the hole in the castle. We've got everything under control."

"Applejack!" exclaimed the Apple Family in unison as she stepped into the room where her family was staying. She had expected them to be asleep by now, but was glad for the greeting. Scootaloo was there too, sleeping soundly in one of the beds. Sweetie Belle wasn't there, which probably meant she was with her own parents.

"Ah'm back, y'all," she announced. "Ah'm alright... 'cept Ah haven't slept in ages," she added with a yawn. "Can't wait to hit the hay."

"So did you save Equestria?" asked Applebloom excitedly.

"Sure did, sugarcube," Applejack chuckled, giving her sister's hair an affectionate ruffle with her hoof. "Just another day's work when you got one o' *these* on ya." She flexed her Element necklace proudly. "Still got a few rotten apples to clean outta the barrel, but they'll keep 'til tomorrow."

"About time!" said Applebloom. "Not that Ah'm lookin' forward to going back to school... but Ah guess we'll have to wait for them to rebuild it first."

"Rebuild?" Then her mind put two and two together. "Aw dang... Ponyville got smashed, didn't it."

"Sure as apple pie," said Granny solemnly.

Applejack sighed, straightening her hat – an old habit of hers. "Guess there won't be much apple pickin' for a while then. Ah just hope we'll have enough for cider this season."

"Don't ye worry," Granny Smith said comfortingly. "Celestia'll provide for us what we need, and we'll just have to work extra hard next year."

"Guess so. Ah feel a bit bad havin' to rely on her though; she's done so much for us already."

"If the Princess wants her cider, she'll do what she has to. Now enough chit-chatting; your bed is calling on ya."

"Kenbroth Gilspotten Heathspike!"

Celestia's booming voice sent a chill down the earth dragon's spine. He was *so* busted. He had

hoped he would at least been able to sneak into the castle and have a quick nap before she caught him, but somehow she had spotted him the moment he emerged from the ground on the hill outside of Canterlot.

Kenbroth looked up at her imposing form with a sheepish grin, a dark contrast against the glowing aurora backdrop. “G-good evening, Princess. Can I, uh, help you?”

The Princess only stared at him for a moment, but her silence spoke more than words ever could. His heart sank; he had anticipated this sort of reaction – hoped for it, in fact, as it would mean they had lived through the crisis – but that didn’t make it any easier. Finally, Celestia heaved a sigh. “I’m disappointed in you, Kenbroth. Not over the fact that you disregarded my order,s but over your poor judgment that put hundreds of ponies’ lives at risk.”

“B-but I did everything I could,” the earth dragon tried to defend himself. “I did everything in my power to help keep the citizens of Equestria safe, I swear.”

“Caves left with minimum protection,” Celestia told him, raising her voice, “the town of Saddleton completely forgotten – not even so much as a warning of the threat – and your pony friends from the other Ponyville almost trampled by the Mother Ursa. This is what your foolishness has caused.”

Kenbroth’s blood froze. “Is everybody okay?!”

“Yes, Twilight and her friends came through just in time. The villagers are resting in the castle.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Kenbroth’s heart lifted a little, regaining some composure. “Yes, I suppose you’re right to be disappointed; there is no excuse for my sloppiness. But Princess, please believe me when I say I had only the best of intentions at heart. While it’s true everything did turn out well in the end, had we not been so lucky, it would have been the end of pony civilization. Time was of the essence, and I needed those mages to ensure that—”

“I know about your little side project,” Celestia cut in. “Broken Spear told me all about it. I understand your good intentions, Kenbroth, but your priorities were wrong. Your loyalty should have been with *all* the ponies of Equestria, not just Manehattan.”

“With all due respect, your Highness, I rather think it was.” He knew full well he was being insolent, perhaps bordering on treachery, but this was one issue from which he could not back down. “I mean no disrespect, but quite frankly, you were naïve. You gambled your entire country – the future survival of an entire race, I might add – on your own personal trust for your ‘faithful students’ and her friends. Their odds were not in their favor – don’t try to deny it – and yet you made the decision for everyone in Equestria to go down with the ship rather than let go of your precious empire! Leap of faith, indeed.”

The look she gave Kenbroth told him that not only had he gone too far, he had touched a personal nerve. She held his gaze, and though it hurt, he held hers. This was a matter of honor. Finally, the Princess spoke. “Yes, you are right, old friend. I made the call for all the citizens of Equestria, as it was the only way I could think of to save us all. I see now we have very different views on what is truly important; I do not merely wish for ponykind to survive, I want to save their *lives*. All of them. There is an extraordinary difference, as I’m sure the unlucky ponies who weren’t welcome on your ‘ark’ would agree.”

“But Princess, had we pooled our resources to begin with, we would have been able to fit so much

more onto the ark; maybe as many as half of Equestria, animals included. Think, Princess: half of Equestria guaranteed safety, or the fate of all living creatures resting on the success of your student, which is more sensible?"

"No plan that involves leaving half of my citizens to fend for themselves is sensible, Kenbroth," Celestia said, her tone hard but calm. "That is not the pony way. We are a herd, and we stand and fall together."

"Tell that the the aristocrats in Canterlot, or the schoolfillies in Ponyville; I'm sure they would understand," Kenbroth remarked. "See, that's the flaw in your government, Celestia; when push comes to shove, nobody but you – and possibly your sister – has anything to say about it. Had Equestria been a democracy like I suggested for so many years, this wouldn't have—"

"And have representatives squabbling over the right course of action while Equestria falls apart around us?" Celestia sighed. "I suppose this is an issue where we won't see eye to eye."

"Seems that way," replied Kenbroth simply. "No need to tell me what happens next; I know enough of the Equestrian laws to know I'm not welcome in your castle anymore."

Celestia gave him a look of alarm. "Kenbroth, that was a thousand years ago!" The disdain in her voice was replaced with concern. "I had those laws changed not even a century after you disappeared. I would never throw out one of my dearest friends." She put a hoof on his shoulder. "Despite it all, I value your input, and the second opinion you bring. If you feel you have to leave, I will not stop you, but I implore you to reconsider."

Kenbroth couldn't bring himself to answer. Of course he didn't want to leave; where else would he go? For a moment, the weight of his indignation toward the Princess was weighed against his love for her and Luna... but considering that his action *had* almost cost him the lives of his friends in Ponyville... "Alright, Princess, you win this time. I'll stay as your adviser, and forget about this little incident."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Celestia said, actually smiling at him. "Although I'm going to have to ask you not to take matters into your own claws for the time being, and not leave the castle unless Luna or I gives you permission."

Kimono was running through a blurred landscape of vivid colors. Other ponies called out to her as she passed, but she didn't stop for them. They weren't real, anyway. Suddenly, she was on top of a mountain, where a rainbow-themed castle towered over her. She ran around it, guided by a memory from a better time. It was around here somewhere...

She found the place she was looking for. The world was becoming more and more out of focus, but Kimono paid it no mind. She sat down by the castle wall foundation, and closed her eyes. After a moment of silent contemplation, she opened her mouth to speak...

...and woke up.

Sitting up, she looked around the room. Rainbow Dash and Star Catcher, with whom she shared a room, were sound asleep. It was still night outside. Kimono wiped sweat off her brow, her heart still pounding. That dream was based on a real experience, she felt certain... but how? She could only

assume it had been a part of her life inside of Discord's dream world; even though the details continued to elude her, she had the distinct impression that she had somehow awoken from the dream world moments before the Time Capsule spell had broken, and that she had done something of great importance...

Quietly, she lay herself back down on the bed. But after about half an hour of thinking, she gave up on trying to figure it out. Since she was already wide awake, she rose from the bed and carefully, so as to not make a sound, made her way out of the room. She might as well wander around the castle for a bit; if anypony saw her, they would probably mistake her for Twilight anyway.

But as she wandered through the corridors, nopony crossed her path. *Of course*, she realized, *most of them must be out tending to Equestria; we did just save it from a catastrophe.* The solitude suited Kimono just fine. In another life, she might have found the empty castle in the middle of the night frightening; but now, she saw a haunting beauty in it. The eerie way the moonlight cast shadows upon the wall paintings, the statues, the domed ceilings; in a weird sort of way, it gave her comfort. If this was the scariest thing Equestria could throw at her, then she knew she was truly safe at last.

Not until the corridor suddenly ended at the edge of a large hole in the castle did she come to a stop. Ah, yes, this rip in the castle had been made by the Princess when her magic had spun out of control, or so Twilight's brother had told them. From where she stood, she could see almost half the city down below, lights shining through the streets, some ponies still out and about. She wondered fleetingly how much of what she saw had been there a thousand years before, in her era. She found herself regretting the fact that she'd never taken the time to visit when she'd had the chance. How many ponies, other than the Princesses, could claim to know the capital of Equestria from two eras a thousand years apart? A lost opportunity, to be sure.

The same aurora she had seen up north was still shining brightly in the sky, though its colors were slightly diminished by the barrier surrounding the city. It had appeared after the seal had started to mend, and extended all the way to the horizon in either direction, as if covering all of Equestria. Perhaps the aurora *was* the seal, made visible by the sheer amount of energy flowing in and out of it at this very moment. A visible manifestation of the Elements of Harmony.

The Elements of Harmony... suddenly, she was reminded of her dream. Yes... whatever she had done, the Elements had been involved.

That was all her broken memories were going to give her. She sighed, emptying her mind as she gazed over the city of Canterlot. On the horizon, the sun was starting to make its presence known. Birds were starting to wake up, and the air, though a little cool, was unbelievably fresh. Just standing there, listening to the world waking up, was really nice. The world was like a reflection of herself. Because finally, dawn had come to banish her thousand-year nightmare.

And yet, there was still one more thing she needed to do, one more place to visit, before she could truly put it all behind her.

Celestia withdrew her horn from the statue of Discord. She felt woozy, and yet strangely energetic, and angry... but also happy. She wasn't quite sure *what* she felt. She had only attempted communicating with Discord twice since he became a statue, but each attempt had ended the same way: Discord refusing to talk, opting instead to mess with Celestia's head, sending her every emotion into a chaotic frenzy.

He may have been turned to stone, but he was still very much alive, watching every corner of Equestria as he saw fit. It was a frightening concept, one she had decided to keep from the citizens of Equestria. What they didn't know, couldn't hurt them; it had taken Celestia a long time to come to terms with it herself, and eventually learn not to dwell upon it.

She took a few deep breaths, letting her emotions fall back into place. It had been worth a try.

As she turned around, preparing to leave, she unexpectedly came face to face with Kimono, coming up the walkway leading to the statue. Startled, both she and Kimono took a hasty step backwards. "Princess Celestia!" Kimono gasped.

"Kimono, was it?" the Princess said kindly. "Are you feeling better?"

"Y-yes, your Highness, I'm alright now, thank you for asking," Kimono replied with a slight stammer.

"No need to be so formal. I may be Princess, but I'm not above anypony else. Besides, you're a rather important pony yourself."

"Oh, I-I'm sorry, your Hi- I mean, Princess. It's just that, all my life, I saw you as figure of mythology. I never thought I'd be standing in your presence like this..."

"This coming from the pony who snuck into the royal library, posing as my most faithful student?" pointed the Princess. "You know, you *could* have just asked the librarian to call for me."

"I thought about doing that," Kimono admitted, "but I couldn't be sure it wouldn't cause a scene. I couldn't risk drawing attention to myself, letting my friends know I was there..."

"I understand," Celestia nodded. "Let's go back into the castle." She cast a glance toward the statue, remembering what had happened the last time one of his victims got near it. "I don't think it's safe for you to be near this statue."

Kimono just shook her head. "It's alright. I know the danger; I heard from Rainbow Dash what happened to her. But this is something I have to face, or I don't think I will ever be able to move on." She walked closer to the statue, looking up into its face. Her down expression seemed calm and firm, but Celestia could see the turbulent emotions at play in her eyes.

Celestia hesitated. "Discord..." she finally ventured. "He used to be your friend, didn't he?"

"He was more than a friend. He was the love of my life."

Celestia's heart skipped a beat. "You... *loved* him?"

"It's a long story. My friends and I were the ones who saved his life all those years ago, when the war had almost destroyed him. We welcomed him into our village, as one of our own... tell me, Princess, how did he meet his end?"

"My sister and I hunted him down, and the Elements of Harmony did the rest. Through my connection with the Elements, Discord remained bound, until the Elements found new masters in Twilight Sparkle and her friends, about a year ago. The switch severed the connection and

weakened the spell enough for him to escape. But his escape lasted less than a day, before the Element Bearers imprisoned him once more.” Celestia gave a small sigh, and a slight shrug. “He never made any mention of you *or* the Time Capsule.”

“I... see.”

For a moment, Kimono just stared at the statue. Thousands of years of experience had made Celestia adept in understanding pony emotions, but what she saw in Kimono’s eyes still gave her pause. There was a tearless sadness that spoke more than words ever could. Kimono sat down, and Celestia sat down next to her. She didn’t seem to mind. They sat there for a few, long, silent minutes... until eventually, Kimono turned to her and said, “Thank you, Princess. It’s funny, really; to me, it’s not even been a week since I last saw him, but it feels like I’m visiting a long-deceased relative. And now, I feel that I can finally move on.”

The Princess smiled at her. She didn’t have the heart to tell her that Discord was very likely watching her as she was watching him. She wished she knew what he was thinking now. “I’m glad.”

The two of them got up, and walked down the path out of the gardens. “I just hope I can help my friends do the same,” Kimono said. “I’d better return to them, before they wake up and wonder where I went.”

Wysteria got to experience a few blissful moments of nothingness until the bitter memories of reality jolted her awake. She rose heavily from her bed, and was greeted by the nurse. Wysteria looked away, embarrassed, but the other pony didn’t seem bothered with the fact that she had broken down in front of her. She was shown to the bathroom, and given a brush to straighten her mane. She took her time, racking her brain for a good way to apologize to her friends, but each one seemed more meaningless than the last.

“Your friends are in the western conference room,” the nurse told her when she was ready. “It’s just down the corridor to your right, down the stairs and left, until you see a big ruby-embedded door. It’s hard to miss.”

“Thank you,” said Wysteria. Gathering her courage, she added, “and... I’m sorry for last night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the nurse said kindly. “Believe me, you’re hardly the first pony I’ve had ponies crying themselves to sleep. It’s in the job description.”

“Okay then... thank you.” And with that, Wysteria walked out the door.

Even though she had been to the castle before, the sheer size of the place still baffled her. She headed right, then down the stairs – hoping it was the right one, as there were several that went different directions – turning left at the bottom, meeting nopony on the way. She reached the door after only a few minutes.

She took a deep breath. These were her friends. How hard could it be? She put a hoof to the door...

...and stopped. *No!* her mind screamed. She couldn’t face them. Not like this. She turned around and walked away. She needed someplace secluded, someplace to piece her mind back together.

Someplace—

“Wysteria, darling!” She gasped as a group of ponies rounded the corner. Despite her mood, she couldn’t help but smile broadly when she realized who they were.

“Rainbow Dash!” she called back. “Pinkie Pie, Rarity, Minty... even Kimono and Star Catcher! Ohh, I’m so glad you’re safe!”

“Good to see you too, Wysteria,” said Pinkie Pie. “We heard there was an incident, but the Princess told us to ask you about it later. And, well, it’s later. What’s up? Is everypony alright?”

“Well, yes,” Wysteria said. “Everypony is safe and sound.”

“But?” Rainbow Dash urged. “Come now, darling, I know you well enough to tell you’re hiding something. It’s alright, you can tell us.”

“I...” she sighed. There was no getting around it this time...and in her heart, she knew that if she didn’t face it head on, it would chase after her for the rest of her life, and just like the Mother Ursa, she would never be able to escape. She wasn’t sure which felt worse. “I... follow me. I’ll take you to see them... I have something I need to tell them.”

“My darlings!” exclaimed Rainbow Dash as she entered the room, her friends in tow. The excitement was so thick, she could feel it against her skin; there was whooping and celebrating, and everypony wanted to come give them all a hug. Even more so when they realized that their two missing pony friends were with them.

“Star Catcher!” Whistle Wishes called. “You’re okay! And Kimono!”

“Good to have you back, Kimono,” said Razzaroo, hugging the pony. “I almost didn’t recognize you. You look just like that other pony, Twilight Sparkle. Well, minus the horn, I mean.”

“I’m glad to be back,” Kimono replied. “It’s been so long.”

“Yeah, these last few days felt like weeks.”

“More like a thousand years,” Pinkie Pie joked.

The cheer continued for a long while, until the shouting turned to talking. Everypony had questions, and everypony wanted to know if they were okay. Eventually, Rainbow Dash called out to get their attention them. “Darlings!” Eventually, the crowd grew quiet. “Darlings, I’m so relieved to see you are all well, but you simply *must* tell me what happened! What are you all doing here, and not in the village?”

For a moment, nopony spoke. Then, reluctantly, Wysteria stepped forward from behind the door. There were more cheers and cries of joy as she approached, but her solemn expression quickly dampened their enthusiasm, and when she put a hoof in the air for silence, the room grew immediately quiet.

“Well,” she began, “Rarity summoned some kind of magic barrier... and even though it shielded us

from the Ursa, it also brought out our darkest feelings. Anger, hatred, suspicion... if we hadn't gotten out in time, we would have torn ourselves apart..."

"Seriously?" said Rarity, her eyes wide. "That wasn't supposed to happen. I'm—"

"It's not your fault, Rarity. You couldn't have known," Wysteria assured her. "Anyway, I took it upon myself to lead you all to safety, but..." Her face was starting to tremble, as though struggling to keep the tears in check. "It didn't turn out so good this time. I... *I'm so sorry everypony!*"

The villagers just stared at her, dumbfounded, with looks of confusion and worry on their faces. Wysteria, on her end, looked as though she was about to break down crying any second. Sunny Daze was the first to speak up. "Uh, sorry for what, Wysteria? For saving our lives?"

"I never had a plan." She admitted in a small voice, the whole room hanging onto her every word. "I only told you that to keep your spirits up, hoping that I could somehow come up with one before it was too late. But when we found ourselves surrounded by those *things*, on top of a mountain with nowhere to go... I knew that I had let you all down. It was the one moment you needed me the most, and I..." Then, at last, came the tears. The room stood silent as she sobbed; some ponies tried to approach, but she put another hoof up. A few moments later, she had collected herself enough to continue. "I need to know... do you think... do you think you can ever forgive me?"

More silence. Rainbow Dash was just about to open her mouth when Razzaroo stepped forward. "Wysteria, you didn't *try* to lead us to a dead end, did you?"

"Of course not!" Wysteria exclaimed, a look of horror spreading over her face. "I tried my best to save you!"

"And there you have it! You tried your best for our sake, and *that's* what matters. Sure you messed up, but do you think any of *us* could've done any better?"

"But our lives were at stake! There were no do-overs this time! You all could've *died!*"

"And yet, here we are," Sunny Daze took over. "Look, things were crazy to begin with, and if you weren't stressed out by how we all acted inside that barrier, it sure didn't help that I knocked you senseless. Under the circumstances, I for one think you did a pretty good job out there."

"So... you don't hate me?"

"We could never hate you, Wys." It was Minty's turn to speak, putting a hoof on her shoulder. "Actually, I think I know how you feel. Did I ever tell you about the time I first appeared in Equestria? I wandered for days in an empty wasteland, no food or water, and I thought for sure my life was at an end. I never even knew *what* death was before then, but it made me realize just how easily it could come to any of us. And when I was saved from the brink, I wasn't sure *how* to feel. It almost felt like I'd cheated somehow."

"Oh, Minty," Wysteria whispered. "I'm sorry, I never realized..."

"But you know what? If there's one thing I've learned going on the craziest trip of my life with some of the most amazing ponies in Equestria, it's that life is just strange like that. Sometimes, we just have to accept the miracles that are given to us, even when they might seem kinda unfair."

The ponies around them were still for a moment, but then started to smile and nod. Wysteria looked up at her, meeting Minty's eyes... and gave her a hug. She sobbed there for a few moments, before she let go. "Thank you, Minty. Thank you, everypony. I-I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything," Rainbow Dash assured her. "Just continue to do your best. No one can ask more from anypony."

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