

The Third Generation

Chapter Sixteen

By Candle Light

“Nineteen Mother Ursa and counting,” Kenbroth reported to the Princess of the Sun. “We have successfully evacuated twelve towns, moving the citizens into caves protected from the Ursa aura by our mages. The major cities are still safe, fortunately, but I believe one of the monsters might have its sight set on Manehattan.”

Eight hours had passed since the Princess had sent the letter to Twilight Sparkle, and thanks to the nonstop effort of her medical staff – though she was told her sheer willpower had helped speed up the process immensely – she was now well enough to move around, though still plagued by sporadic headaches. She could only manage menial magical tasks, and was in no fit shape to defend a nation. “It would seem that once again, we must leave the fate of Equestria on the saddles of my students.”

“I only wish I could share your confidence, Princess,” Kenbroth offered. “Though I suppose we have little choice but to hope and pray at this point. I have done everything in my power to rally the ponies of Canterlot to Equestria’s aid, but should our time run out...”

“It won’t,” Celestia told Kenbroth with as much certainty as she could muster. “Never forget, these are the wielders of the Elements of Harmony, the ponies that once saved Equestria from eternal night, stopped Discord’s evil rampage, and also played a part in fending off an army of Changelings.”

“Admirable indeed, Your Highness. All I’m saying is that if – and I do mean *if* – the worst should come to pass, we should be prepared with a backup plan.”

“Should that time come, Luna and I will do everything within our might to move each and every living creature out of harm’s way,” the Princess promised. Though in reality, she wasn’t sure what she could accomplish in her current state, a concern that reflected on the earth dragon’s expression. “But remember, Kenbroth, Equestria is our home, the fruit of thousands of years’ worth of history and culture. That is not something so easily replaced.”

“I realize that, Your Highness; I am merely suggesting that we keep the back door open, as it were. I have a few things in mind that—”

“—that would distract our efforts of keeping Equestria safe for as long as is necessary. Think, even if we were to flee, where would we go? What land that hasn’t been claimed by the races would there be left to us to call our own? No, old friend, this is one time where we must stand our ground, for it is not just our lives at stake, but the very balance of peace that we have fought for over a thousand years to build.”

There was a brief silence where Kenbroth looked to be contemplating her words. A moment later, he simply said, “Well, then I only hope our little ponies have it under control.”

“You and I both. But I believe from the bottom of my heart that Twilight Sparkle and her friends will pull through. I share your concern, Kenbroth, but there comes a time in everypony’s life where we are forced to take a leap of faith.”

“Isn’t that the castle over there?” pegasus Rainbow Dash asked excitedly, as the group of ten ponies and a baby dragon gazed across the snow-covered valley. It was faint, but off in the distance on the other side of the valley, through the veil of whirling snow, there was an unmistakable glow of green amongst the landscape of white.

“I believe it is,” Twilight confirmed, a sense of accomplishment filling her chest. It had been just about nine hours since they set off from the northern flatland, and though she knew their remaining time was closing in on them, she felt confident that they had more than enough.

“Look at how green it is!” Minty breathed, much akin to how Rarity would react to a particularly large diamond. “Come on, ponies, we haven’t a minute to lose!”

The gang swiftly found their way down the rather steep cliff-side, taking care not to trip, until the ground panned out into sparse collection of trees. Cold bit into their skin as they walked, and Twilight wished Night Gale had thought to bring some clothes from the crashed carriage. Working their way through the deep snow, Applejack brought up, “Ah sure hope you still know where we’re goin’, Pinkie. Not sure how else we’re gonna find Star Catcher in a place like this.”

“Don’t worry, I know,” the straight maned pink pony assured her. “Well, sorta; it’s kind of a blur, but it’s not that far from the castle. I think.”

“Don’t worry, double of mine,” her counterpart told her cheerfully. “If there’s one thing Pinkie Pies are good at, it’s finding where ponies are hiding!”

“I can attest to that,” Rainbow Dash agreed. “And let’s not forget these babies,” the pegasus flapped her wings. “If push comes to shove, I could just grab Twi let her do some sort of magic search sweep from the sky.”

“We could,” replied the unicorn, “but in this weather, I’d rather avoid it.” She had considered the plan herself, as it was much more solid than relying on a vague premonition, but the other-village Pinkie Pie hadn’t led them astray so far, and they all needed to conserve their strength.

As the journey progressed, the trees became tighter and the taller, and it occurred to Twilight that this place, much like the Everfree Forest, had remained untouched by ponykind, left to fend for itself. Which meant they were likely to be wild animals, not found in other regions of Equestria. With Fluttershy on their side, she wasn’t *too* worried, but there was always the danger that something would catch them off guard.

They found no wild animals, but what they did find gave them pause all the same. A crevice, deeper than she could make out, stretching all the way to the other side of the valley, where a parts of the mountain looked to have been blown clean off in an unnatural shape.

“Whoa Nelly!” Applejack exclaimed, barely saving herself from an unpleasant drop as she backed away from the hole. “Where’d all *this* come from?”

“This wasn’t done by nature,” Twilight deduced. “There is a definite trace of magic in the air.”

“You think the Mother Ursa was here?” Rarity asked. She gasped, adding, “Maybe it’s still in the area!”

“If it was, we would have seen it by now,” Twilight calmed her fears. “Or at least sensed the quake of their foot steps; they’re pretty hard to miss. Although, we probably shouldn’t stick around, in case whatever did this comes back.” Pointing towards the hollowed out mountain, she added, “We should be able to climb without any problems over there.”

If this was indeed the work of an Ursa, Twilight pondered, what could have provoked it to break apart the land? There wasn’t anypony here, and any wild creature with any self preservation instincts would know to stay clear of such monstrosity. Maybe it *wasn’t* an Ursa, but a Cancer, like the one they encountered on the flatland. If that was the case, was it still lurking underneath their hooves? Her mind wandered at the prospect of running into cosmic entities still unknown...

What they encountered instead was a lone unicorn stallion, levitating rubble from the base of the mountain farther up ahead.

Twilight decided to take first initiative. “Hey, you there!” He turned around, obviously not expecting to see an entourage of ponies and a baby dragon walk toward him. “What are you doing all the way up here?”

“Actually, I could ask you the same thing,” the stallion replied, his eyes wide. “What brings Twilight Sparkle herself up to this remote part of the country?”

Twilight eyed the stranger curiously. “Do I... know you?”

“No, but there isn’t a foal alive that doesn’t know the name of the Princess’ personal protege.”

Twilight let out a small laugh. She knew she was famous, but it had never really occurred to her just *how* famous. “We’re headed for the castle further up the mountains,” she told him. “It’s a long story, but the short of it is, we need to go there in order to prevent the destruction of all life in Equestria.”

The stallions first reaction was that of disbelief, but all too quickly, his face turned grim. “I guess it shouldn’t come as a surprise; all sorts of crazy things have been going on lately. This mountain right here? It used to be my home town.”

“Your... home town?” Twilight parroted. “B-but how could there be a town all the way up here?”

“It’s not uncommon to see pony settlements this close to the border. Some prefer the harsh freedom over Celestia’s controlled rule.” The way he spoke of the Princess so casually irked Twilight, but she let it slide. “Not that it matters now. Luckily, no pony was caught up in the blast, but as you can see, our town is gone. That’s why I’m here, hoping to find some food that might’ve survived the blast.”

“Oh, you poor darling,” earth pony Rainbow Dash sympathized. “How did it happen? Was it one of those giant monsters?”

“There was no monster,” he said, bitterness in his voice. “Just a pony.”

The statement almost made Twilight lose her balance where she stood, as her mind sped into overdrive. “A *unicorn* did this?!”

“Not a unicorn, a pegasus. A normal pegasus pony lost on her journey. She didn’t seem to know much about Equestria, so we figured she must be from beyond the border. We offered her food and a place to stay, when a surge of magic went and—”

He paused, his gaze landing on Fluttershy. His eyes shot up and his voice flared. “You!” The yellow pegasus jump in fright. “It was you!” He approached Fluttershy menacingly, leaving her covering in the snow. “How *dare* you show your face here, after—”

“Hey, back off!” the winged Rainbow Dash shouted, pushing him away. “You think *Fluttershy* tore down your village? What the hay is wrong with you?”

The surprise from the sudden outburst must have calmed him down a bit, as the anger in his face melted away. Slowly, he looked around the cerulean pegasus, watching the yellow one’s almost teary face carefully. “No...” he spoke lowly. “You’re not her... are you?”

“Um... sorry?”

“No need to apologize to him, Fluttershy.”

“She’s right,” said the stallion. “I’m sorry, I jumped to conclusions. It’s just that, you look almost identical to that pegasus. Now that I think about it, I think she was more whitish than yellow... and she had a strange mark on her forehead.”

Twilight, Minty and Rainbow Dash all reached the same epiphany. “Star Catcher!”

Pinkie Pie’s face beamed. “She was here?”

“Hold on, so you *do* know this pony!” the stallion asked incredulously.

“But of course, darling, she’s one of our best friends,” earth pony Rainbow Dash told her, but tensed as she realized the implications of the statement. “B-but darling, she wouldn’t harm a fly! I’m sure there’s an explanation for all this.”

“She’s the Element of Magic...!” Twilight realized. It opened up a whole slew of new questions, but it was the only explanation that made sense right now. “As a pegasus, she doesn’t know how to control her powers. She must have fled into the mountains to avoid any more casualties.”

“So that’s why she was so sad,” straight maned Pinkie Pie remembered. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Well, good luck helping your friend, then,” said the stallion, an edge in his voice. “Me, I got things to find in the ruins of my city, and then I gotta go and help some three dozens of ponies left homeless with no food.”

“I... I’m sorry about your village,” Twilight spoke for all of them, “but please understand, it was an accident.”

“I’m sure it was. But that doesn’t change the fact that ponies might starve because of her.” And with those parting words, he walked away toward another part of the cliff-side, and began searching the rubble anew. Leaving Twilight with sensation in her stomach colder than the wind blowing in her mane.

“Big Mac?!” Apple Bloom exclaimed as her family walked through the gates of Canterlot Castle. “Granny? What’re you two doin’ here?”

“Jus’ a lil’ trouble brewin’ down the village,” Granny Smith replied, as the little filly ran to meet her great grandmother. “All o’ Ponyville’s being shipped off into th’ city. Some nice dragon creature told us we could stay here with you in th’ castle.”

Apple Bloom’s stomach knotted. “Is the village okay? Has one of those monsters come near it.”

“Not one,” Granny told her. “Ah tried tellin’ th’ Canterlot folks we’d give ’em a good smackin’ if they tried comin’ close, but they kept goin’ on ‘bout bein’ more than we can handle. Stubborn ol’ young’ins. Th’ orchard ain’t gonna tend to itself, right sonny?”

“I dunno, Granny,” replied Apple Bloom’s big brother, Big Macintosh. “Things’ve been mighty out of sorts lately. Maybe it’s better that we wait it out.”

“Bah, yeh always were such a softy. Why, back in mah prime, Ah woulda gone out there and show them cretin what the Apple Family is made—”

“Madam Granny Smith,” a guard pony interrupted, “Sir Big Macintosh, Miss Apple Bloom, Miss Scootaloo, we have prepared a room for you in the castle; we will tend to your needs there.” Addressing the small white unicorn, he added, “Miss Sweetie Belle, a pony will come along and take you to your parents.”

“Aw, can’t they come here instead?” the white-hued filly pleaded, not wanting to leave her friends.

“It can be discussed later; your family is very worried, and insisted that I—” the guard pony’s words stuck in his throat, his eyes widening to the shape of saucers as he slowly lifted his head upward. Apple Bloom first wondered what was so scary about Sweetie Belle’s parent, but as he began taking steps back, she turned around to see what he was look at.

A Mother Ursa was staring down upon the castle courtyard, like a fiery mountain with a face. Apple Bloom’s heart almost stopped; the gray barrier surrounding the city had allowed the monster to

soundlessly approach the castle close enough for her to make out its nostrils, from which boiling heat blew with every breath. The only reason Apple Bloom didn't scream was because her two friends and her family – as well as the guard – were cramped together in fright.

And yet, the beast did nothing, only stared. Looking at the ponies as though they were fish in an aquarium. But it was enough to send unadulterated fear into Apple Bloom's little heart.

Then it simply walked away. No sound of its gigantic footsteps, no vibration from its massive weight; it was just gone, like a ghost. Apple Bloom, first to snap out of it, ran over to the open castle gate, where she had a view of the great expanse south of Canterlot. The colossal creature, clumsily and bearlike, was walking away from the city.

She breathed a sigh of relief. Only to swallow it as she realized where it was headed. Off in the distance, almost distorted through the Mother Ursa's reality bending presence, was Ponyville. Admittedly, the village had been wrecked time and again in the past, but never like this. Never having to bear witness to every moment from afar. For each step, the surrounding buildings were blown apart: first a huge chunk of the Apple Trees, then the town hall...

When the Ursa was gone, Ponyville was nothing more than rubble. Big Mac and Granny Smith walked up beside her, and more than shock, she felt a pang of appreciation for the fact that they were all safe within the walls of Canterlot. When this was all over, Ponyville could always be rebuilt...

"It's so... *green*," Minty swooned, looking as though she had been given the greatest gift in the world, staring at the marvelous crystal castle as they approached. "I've never seen anything so beautiful!" This was undoubtedly the biggest castle yet, dwarfing the one in the Everfree Forest by a considerable margin, and Twilight's eyes were drawn to the fine details of the towers. Perhaps this had been part of a big city of the ancient pony civilization who created these castles.

Rarity didn't seem any less smitten. "It is, isn't it! If only I could pick off just a tiny piece of that wall, why, I bet I could make the most fabulous—"

"Focus, you two," Applejack snapped them out of their reverie. "So what's the plan, Twi?"

Since Kimono was nowhere to be found, there were only two likely possibilities: either she was waiting for them inside, or she had yet to arrive. In either case, they needed to handle this with utmost caution. "I think it's best that I go in alone. We can't be too careful, or she might run away again. If nothing else, we know that she wanted to meet with me. Don't come in until I tell you it's safe."

"Very well," the wingless Rainbow Dash conceded. "Just... do give her our regards, darling. Let her know we are all here for her."

"I'll do that," Twilight assured her. "I'll be right back."

Even the front gate was disproportionately enormous, and Twilight did not have it in her to pass up examining the detailed carvings around on the door. It wasn't everyday you came across imagery from

a pre-Equestrian era. They depicted ponies, that much she could tell, but they looked quite different from what she was used to seeing on the window paintings in Canterlot. Their faces were carved as triangles, with a single line representing all facial features. The rest seemed defuse and unintelligible; there were a plethora of different runes and signs – some lines she believed represented mountains, and what might have been a sea. As her eyes began to adjust to the patterns, she realized that some of these runes, when viewed in the right way, almost looked like the outlines of a bear.

She was pulled out of her own head when Rainbow Dash called on her, asking if she was going in or not. She pulled herself together; this wasn't the time to be distracted.

Wysteria breathed heavily, tears still running down her cheeks, frantically trying to grasp the situation in her mind. These last few hours had been the the most trying times in her life.

At first, ponies had been listening to her just fine. Since the Canterlot ponies that were suppose to assist them hadn't returned yet, Wysteria had done what she could to keep the villagers happy, helping out with things such as rationing the food that the Princesses had given them, and creating a temporary home for the Breezies in the garden. But then, things had taken a turn for the worse. Some ponies suddenly could not get along with one another, or someone was throwing a fit about menial things like not being able to eat their favorite treats anymore. Others were crying for no obvious reason, and more than once, there were quarrels the likes of which she had never seen before.

And before she knew it, she was lost, screaming at anyone who got too close. She hated them. Had always hated them. For pushing responsibility onto her. For never listening to her. For forcing her into being a princess. It all reached a breaking point when she decided to silence one of the children – one of the only three in Ponyville, not counting Rarity – by hitting her. It was at that moment of sheer guilt and desperation that she regained what little sanity was left in her, long enough to run away, through the barrier and into the field of boulders. There, she cried, letting it all out, unable to understand what she had done as her sense of self slowly came back to her.

There was no doubt in her mind: the magic bubble around the village was the cause. She should have seen the signs; ever since they stepped inside that thing, everypony had been on edge. Whatever sorcery was protecting them, was also eating away at their happiness.

She dreaded having to go back, but what choice did she have? Her friends needed her. *She* needed *them*. She needed to make things right, before they tore each other apart. Thinking about it made her sick to her stomach; she had never felt such fierce emotions before. Yet somehow, it felt strangely familiar... even natural. That scared her the most.

She forced herself to focus on the immediate task, and started moving, mind racing with ideas of how to tackle this dilemma. Perhaps if she could get them to listen long enough to tell them what was going on, they could all make an effort to stay their emotions, hide inside their houses until the danger was past. Though she suspected few would be in the right mind to listen right now; she might have to lure them out of the barrier first. Provided the monster would stay away...

When she reached the edge of the gray bubble, she only stood there for a while, staring into the darkened village beyond. No pony was in sight, which was for the best; she wasn't sure she was ready to face anypony just yet. Nonetheless, she had to act quickly; every minute they stayed in there, the deeper they would sink into despair. With these thoughts in mind, she sighed, and took the plunge back into the barrier.

The effects weren't obvious or immediate; in fact, she felt no different at all. This small realization sparked a glimmer of hope; maybe if they set up camp near the edge of the barrier, and took breaks outside whenever the monster wasn't around, perhaps they could withstand the dark magic's influence until the crisis was over. Not a perfect plan, but it was a start.

As she set off toward the town square, contemplating on what would be the best way to get everypony's attention, she caught sight of an opening in the cliff to her right. Kimono's cave. Chills went down her spine as she remembered her last visit, and how Twilight Sparkle and her friends had said something about Discord's dark presence lurking in there. She hadn't sensed anything at the time, but now, as she eyed the entrance to the cave, she *was* beginning to notice something. The air around the entrance seemed distorted, as if heat waves was coming out of it. Against better judgment, Wysteria approached the mouth of the cave.

There was no heat. On the contrary, she felt an uncomfortable coldness tug at her skin. A drop of sweat dripped from her brow, and she felt from the very core of her being that she didn't want to be there anymore. Through sheer force of will, she overcame the fear long enough to take a few steps backwards, until she passed through the bubble, which cut off the sensation. She sat down, panting, terrible scenario's flowing through her head.

But there was no time to dwell on them; an ear splitting roar that almost made her heart stop echoed across the field. She flung her head around; off in the distance, half obscured by the boulders, was the monster. Though still far away, she knew she that had to get back into safety. She breathed heavily, stumbled back onto her legs, and forced them to carry her back into the village.

A feeling of dread that had nothing to do with the magic influence entered her heart.

Was there no safe place left for them in Equestria?

In the innermost chamber of the castle, ascending a flight of stairs, Twilight found her. The pony they had been chasing all across the country. Twilight Sparkle's split image. Her hue was a darker shade of purple, and the distinct pink stripe in her mane was missing, as was the horn. Her cutie mark appeared to be a set round lamps. She looked weary, like a pony with a fever pushing herself to stay out of bed.

"Twilight Sparkle!" she called, her voice a bit darker than her own. "Thank goodness you're here!" The absurdity of seeing her own split image gave her pause, and she now understood what Rainbow Dash and the others had to go through. Reading her emotions, Kimono continued, "I'm sure this is all very disorienting to you, but I have important things to tell you. First of all, I want to apologize for using your identity back at Canterlot, and running off without giving you more than a vague clue."

Twilight pulled herself together, and asked, "Is it Discord's magic? Is it hurting you?"

"More than you will ever know know," her double confirmed her theory. "Whenever those who share this corruption comes near, it trashes within me. Even now, with a castle that emanates the magic of harmony separating us, their presence makes my stomach want to tear itself apart."

Twilight walked closer, lighting the horn in a preparation for a spell. "May I? I'm only going to check your magic flow."

She nodded, and Twilight put the horn against her chest. Not two seconds later, she drew it back, gasping. Kimono eyed her worriedly. "What did you see?"

Twilight couldn't reply right away. She had expected Kimono's magical pulse to be different from the others', but not this magnitude of chaos! Just like the cave back in the second Ponyville, it was as though Discord was there with her. Choosing her words with care, she relayed this to Kimono.

"Just as I feared," she replied simply. "All I could piece together is that Discord meant to use me and my friends for his grand design, and that I was the center piece."

Twilight could not contain her curiosity. "What happened between you and Discord? Rainbow Dash told me that the six of you used to be friends."

Kimono only looked away, her already pained expression growing darker. A few moments passed before she spoke. "Yes, we were friends. I don't remember how it started, only that it ended in tragedy... which is likely why he choose us as cornerstones for his scheme, his idea of revenge..."

Kimono's confession only sparked more questions in Twilight, but she knew that this wasn't the time to try to jog her memory. Even if she were to remember, such memories weren't so easily shared. Instead, Twilight said, "Well, your *real* friends are outside, waiting for you. They wanted you to know that they are there for you."

This did manage to bring a smile upon Kimono's face. "I'm glad. I was worried they might have their misgivings about me after my little escapade."

"Is there a way to fix this?" Twilight asked. "You called us here for a reason, didn't you?"

"Yes, I do have something in mind, but I need the opinion of a skilled spell caster, and the books describe you as one of the most accomplished unicorns in Equestrian history." Twilight tried not to blush; for the second time that day, she was reminded of her renown. "I have read that there have been instances in the past where unicorn magic has spun out of control, and then been brought down to a stable level through the aid of someone more powerful." Twilight nodded. She was more than familiar with the concept; she had been on the receiving end of it as a foal, in an incident ending with the Princess herself having to step in and save her. "Should it not be possible, then, to apply the same principle to help subdue the magic of chaos within me?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think that will work," she told her, shaking her head. "Chaotic magic doesn't work the way regular Arcane unicorn magic does. Arcane magic comes from the world itself, and is a

near infinite and flexible source of energy, whereas chaotic magic is finite, and cannot be removed from existence the same way.”

“I see,” Kimono acknowledged, surprisingly undeterred. “But what if we were to transfer the chaos, from one magic body to another?”

Twilight thought on it for a moment. It wasn’t impossible; the theory was sound, but there was one catch: the objects on both ends would have to be of the same magic nature, which meant in this case, they would have to find something of pure chaos. Perhaps the Discord statue could work, but that would be risky; if the slight trace of Discord inside of Kimono’s friends was enough to cause her this much hurt, what would happen if she were to go near the god of chaos himself?

Then again, she realized, she had spent three days in the Canterlot library, located only a few buildings away from the garden where Discord was being kept. If the magical properties of *this* castle wasn’t enough to stay Kimono’s pain, then by all account, neither would Canterlot, and yet it was only when her friends had arrived that she had to run away. It wasn’t that Discord’s imprisonment in stone had stilled his aura either; Rainbow Dash had been affected all the same. Perhaps, then, it wasn’t so much chaotic magic in and of itself that caused her the pain, but rather...

She lit up her horn again. “Pardon,” she said, lowering it toward her chest again, this time regulating the spell so that her senses wouldn’t be overwhelmed by the chaos. For a few moments, she remained still, listening, feeling. Remembering. She thought back on the day she and her friends had fought Discord, trying to recall what it had felt like when all the colors had drained from her body, his corruption taking over. As the memories returned, so did the emotions that belonged to them – amplified, she realized, by the chaos within Kimono – and before she knew it, her legs were shaking, and her breathing was growing heavy. She felt a strong urge to cry, or crawl up in a corner, anything but look back on those dark times. But still she looked. She had to, or the answer would forever elude her and there would be no hope for Kimono – and by extension, Equestria.

She pulled away from her chest, sitting down on the floor, feeling probably no better than Kimono did. But she was smiling. “I got it,” she told her, looking up at her perplexed double. “It can be done! Discord’s magic and the thing that’s in you... it’s not the same!”

“What do you mean?”

“To put it simply,” Twilight said, getting to her feet and wiping her eyes, “Discord didn’t just put his own life force into you, but something different, something he created specifically for whatever magic he had in mind.” Twilight’s mind raced, all sorts of possibilities flowing through her head. “For a spell transfer to work, both parts need to be of the same magic nature, and while there is nothing in Equestria that can house pure chaos, there *is* something that can house your particular *type* of chaos.”

Kimono’s eyes widened. “You mean...!”

“Yes, your friends! If we can divide Discord’s magic between the six of you, it would become stable enough that neither of you would come to harm!”

"I know I could count on you, Twilight Sparkle," Kimono said gleefully, her eyes filled with a new found glimmer of hope.

"The only problem is," the unicorn added, letting the reality of the task sink in, "your friends would have to be standing right next to you. I'm no expert in this sort of thing; I know the theory, but it could take minutes to pull off. Maybe if I cast a spell to dull the pain... but that could cause serious side-effects if you don't know what you're doing, which I'm not sure I—"

"That won't be a problem," Kimono interrupted. "I'm sure you have been wondering why I asked you to meet me here, of all places. These castles, you see, are the very embodiment of harmony, and its magic helps soften the pain. This one in particular offers a protection far greater the others. It is the only place where I can meet my friends, if only for a moment."

So she said, but judging from Kimono's heavy breathing and wobbly legs, she wasn't sure how long that moment would be. Of course, Twilight couldn't think of a better option, and it was clear that Kimono had put a great deal of thought into this. The fact that she had gone out of her way to make sure she would be able to meet with her friends meant she must have suspected that this was the only way. Twilight was humbled by the trust her counterpart had shown her, risking everything to put her fate into her hooves. She wasn't about to betray that trust. "Alright.. but I think it's for the best that we concentrate on finding Star Catcher first. Unless we have all six, the spell might become unbalanced. I forgot to tell you this, but Rarity—"

"—is on her way, I know," Kimono finished, earning her a look of bewilderment from Twilight. "And we need all six to mend the seal, after all. Don't worry about me." The unicorn blinked. How could she possibly have known about the seal? Or Rarity, for that matter. Kimono chuckled lightly. "My apologies, I should have explained this to you earlier. Come here, look into this pillar."

Twilight did just that, staring into it intently. Floating colors adorned its center, creating an effect that reminded her of a rainbow, and then she saw it. The reflection was not of this chamber at all. The pieces all crashed into place in Twilight's head. "Of course! The castles are all connected; that's Rainbow Crystal Castle on the other side!" That's how she had talked to Rarity, who must have brought her up to speed about the situation. Although, Twilight reminded herself, that must have been hours ago. Meaning Kimono must have waited her for quite a while already. "Say, just how *did* you get here anyway."

"I knew you would ask. You see, sight and sound is not the only thing that can be transferred through these pillars, but also magic."

Magic? But how would that... oh! "A teleportation spell!" Twilight realized. "It transforms your body into pure energy and... and how the hay did you pull off a teleportation spell when you're not even a unicorn?!"

"I had a little help from a certain somepony," Kimono told her. "Or should I say, a certain somezebra."

"*Zecora* helped you?"

“When I had to flee from the Mother Ursa back in the Everfree Forest, I remembered the stories about a Shaman zebra from the books I read in Canterlot, and that her location had been pointed out on the map in your library.”

It all made sense enough; Shaman magic was a branch still relatively unknown to Twilight. It wasn't surprising that there would be a potion or the sorts that would achieve the same effect as teleportation magic. Twilight gave a raw laugh. “If only I'd known a simple transportation spell could have gotten us here, we could have avoided a whole lot of trouble.”

“No, Twilight Sparkle, you must listen to me: traveling through the connection was a mistake,” Kimono told her with a serious look. “The veil separating Equestria from the cosmic energies beyond has become very fragile, and sending something so big as a pony in energy form was enough to create another tear in the seal. It is because of me that the cosmic energies have been seeping into Equestria as fast as it has lately...”

True, it had been right after their encounter with the Mother Ursa at the Everfree Forest that the beasts had started appearing in droves, which couldn't have been long before Kimono met with Zecora. And yet, if what this was true... “Princess Luna used the cosmic energy from beyond the seal to make a barrier around Canterlot,” Twilight remembered the letter from Celestia, “to protect the city from the Ursa. Princess Celestia said it weakened the seal, speeding up the process.”

Kimono looked troubled, the implications sinking in. “Of all the bad timings... regardless, it doesn't change the fact that, through my recklessness, I cut our time short by a considerable amount. If I hadn't been so impatient, this might not have turned into a race against time...”

“It doesn't matter who's to blame,” told her Twilight gently. “What's important is that we find Star Catcher as fast as we can. Just stay put; we'll bring her back before you know it.”

“I know you can do it. Don't worry, I won't run away this time.”

Despite everything that was going on and all that was at stake, Kenbroth could not help but to enjoy racing through the ground faster than any pegasus, the way only an Earth Dragon could. In an ironic sort of way, he quite enjoyed the task that had landed upon his shoulders, as it meant serving the Princesses and their country again. Though the thousand years of sleep and the years manipulated by Discord's side had passed as though in a dreamlike trance, somewhere in his heart he felt the eternity that had passed since he had last tasted this kind of freedom.

Although perhaps he would have preferred a time when stakes were not quite so high as the undoing of Equestria in its entirety. This wasn't about outsmarting an enemy bent on conquering it, but a force of nature threatening to drown the land in untold magic. It required a different kind of thinking. He was sure that many a pony was going to hold a grudge later for what he was about to do, but in the long run, a little restructuring in the scenery was a small price to pay.

When he emerged to the surface, he was standing at the base of a mountain that blocked the metropolis of Manehattan from the Mother Ursa stomping its way toward it. With nimble feet, he began to climb,

one giant leap at a time, until he stood at the top, surveying the landscape. Everything he needed was within reach.

He put his claw to the ground, and in that moment, he became one with the earth. The fields before him began to quake, and on either side of the mountain, a bulk sprouted from the ground. He worked quickly yet deliberately, gauging the speed of the approaching behemoth. Timing was important. From this distance, the aura was strong enough to make a pony faint, but to an earth dragon, it was nothing more than a mere tingle.

When he was done, the bulks had grown into mountains equal in size to the one he was standing on. Right on schedule, the Ursa took its first step between them, and Kenbroth set the earth in motion. There was a loud crashing sound that must have made every citizen of Manehattan jump, as the earth beneath the Mother Ursa's feet crumbled, unceremoniously dropping it into a pit dug twice as deep as the mountains. The beast roared, trashing its paw as it fell.

Though he could no longer see it, he felt through the earth the beast getting up on its feet. Trapping a being such as the Mother Ursa with mere hole in the ground was impossible, but that wasn't his plan. Before the monster extended a passageway, dug big enough for for it to walk through, leading away from town and off towards the shore a couple of hour's to the north, its walls hardened to withstand the Ursa's crushing aura.

For all that could be said about the Mother Ursa's might, they were simple creatures operating on basic instinct, and would not expend needless energy trying get up where it came; not when there was another path conveniently set up for it. Whether or not it would actually follow the road all the way, or get bored halfway and break free, he couldn't be sure, but at the very least, this would give Kenbroth the time he needed to evacuate Manehattan.

This had been the easy part. He didn't much look forward to the things to come, but he was determined to do his part in saving the citizens of Equestria. Even if it meant going against the Princess' expectations.