

The Third Generation

Chapter One

By Candle Light

A cerulean coated pony with a rainbow-colored mane trotted through the streets of this strange new town, taking in the unfamiliar surrounding and the ponies that resided in it. She was glad to have found some form of civilization after hours of aimless wander, but these ponies looked very strange to her eyes. And the fact that some of them would wave at her, casually calling out her name as they passed, was even stranger. At first she had been too surprised to respond to such calls, but she knew she couldn't avoid interaction much longer. She needed to find out where she was, if she were ever to find a way home.

In the corner of her eye, she saw a lavender unicorn pony leaving a building she surmised from the exterior was a bakery. Their eyes met, and the stranger's eyes lit up; this was as good an opportunity as any.

"Excuse me, darling," spoke the cerulean pony. "My name is Rainbow Dash, and I seem to have gotten myself lost. I was wondering if you could be so kind as to tell me where I am."

The stranger looked at her questioningly, and Rainbow Dash only now noticed her bipedal companion, a small light-purple creature she could not identify, that looked as though it was about to burst out laughing. Which it did. "Good one, Dash! Is this for the theater performance next week, *The Wandering Beauty*? I thought you wanted to be the troll."

"I, for one, think you look gorgeous," said the lavender unicorn, expression softening. Then added, "Did you lose a bet again?"

Rainbow Dash was quite at a loss for words. A theater performance? After a few moments, she managed, "You must be mistaking me for someone else, darlings. I only came to this town just now. Just a few hours ago I was having a tea party with my friends, and then next thing I knew, I was on a field, far from my village. It's a small miracle I even found this place."

The creature and the lavender pony exchanged looks, whereas they eyed Rainbow Dash again. "If she's acting," remarked the creature, "she's freakishly good."

"No Spike, look," the lavender pony pointed a hoof. "She's got no wings! And her cutie mark is different!"

"Hey, you're right!" noted the creature named Spike. Were they referring to the rainbow mark on her flank? A cutie mark? And did she just call him Spike? "Come to think of it, Rainbow Dash would never keep her mane this styled long enough for other ponies to see."

“We’re sorry,” the lavender pony addressed Rainbow Dash. “It’s just that a friend of ours is also called Rainbow Dash, and she looks very... actually, almost identical... to you.”

“Plus, she wouldn’t be caught dead using the word ‘darling’,” remarked Spike.

Rainbow Dash let out a small laugh. “That’s okay, darlings. This certainly explains why people were waving at me. Quite a coincidence, isn’t it.”

“My name is Twilight Sparkle, and this is my assistant Spike,” she introduced. “He’s a baby dragon. As for where you are, this is Ponyville.”

“Ponyville?” gasped Rainbow Dash. “But darling, *I* come from Ponyville, and this looks nothing like it!”

“I’m pretty sure this is the only Ponyville in Equestria though,” said Twilight Sparkle, concern showing on her face.

“Equestria?”

“It’s the name of this land.” She looked positively puzzled now. “You really have no idea where you are?”

“Not a clue, darling,” she told her. “I honestly couldn’t tell you what happened. Everything suddenly went black, and when I regained consciousness, I had this feeling like I was waking up from a long sleep. It took me quite a while for my body to get accustomed to itself.”

“This is getting weirder by the minute,” said Spike. “Maybe we should write to Princess Celestia about this.”

“Oh Spike, we don’t have to bother the Princess for ever little crazy thing that goes on in this town. Maybe she got teleported here from some other country; I read somewhere that long-distance teleportation spells can cause brain damage – even memory loss – if not done properly.”

“Oh my,” said Rainbow Dash, worried, but at the same time somewhat relieved to have found at least a possible explanation. “My head did go for quite the spin, but I do feel fine now.”

“That’s good to hear. At any rate, you should probably come with me to the library. If we can figure out where you woke up, maybe I can trace the spell.”

“So darling of you to lend a helping hand,” said Rainbow Dash. “And if it’s not too much trouble, I would like to meet this friend of yours, the other Rainbow Dash.”

“Sure! If you’d like, we could go see her right now. It’s closer anyway.”

“Much obliged, darling.”

“Rainbow Dash!” the cerulean Pegasus pony vaguely caught from below the cloud she was resting on. “Do you have a minute?”

She stretched her legs and smacked her lips, then jumped off the cloud and glided effortlessly to the ground. “Sure, what can I do for you, Twi—whhoa!”

For all intents and purposes, she might as well have been looking at her long lost twin sister, the only real difference being the mane, which was much curlier and stylized. Both versions of Rainbow Dash only stared, mouth agape. It was the pegasus who broke the silence. “Twilight, why am I looking at myself?”

“I-I do beg your pardon, darling,” said the other, her voice much softer than her own, though now a bit shaky. “But I don’t look anything like you do,” she looked over at Twilight, a frightened expression starting to form on her face, “do I?”

“You kind of do.”

Fright slowly turned to panic. “A mirror! I need a mirror, quickly!”

Twilight looked around. “There’s a pool of water right over there!”

The frightened pony rushed over as quickly as she could, and even from where they stood, the expression of terror consuming her face was plain to see. Then, with a light ‘ooh’, she fainted.

“She certainly doesn’t *act* anything like me,” remarked the pegasus Rainbow Dash. “What’s the story, Twilight?”

“I don’t know. I only met her a few minutes ago, said she’d gotten lost. She says she’s from another Ponyville.”

“But there *is* no other Ponyville in Equestria!”

“That’s what I told her,” said Twilight, her expression one of contemplation. “I think she may have been magically transported here from someplace far away... but I’ve never heard of a transportation spell that changes your physical appearance.”

“Still think we shouldn’t tell the Princess?” asked the baby dragon.

“Spike, I’m sure she has better things to do than solving our mysteries,” Twilight turned him down. “Besides, I have no doubt she has complete faith in my ability to solve it on my own.”

“I sure hope so. Though we won’t get very far until she wakes up.”

“Good point. Let’s get her to the library.”

“You just can’t get around it; she does look an awful lot like you, Rainbow. Y’sure she ain’t a relative o’ yers?”

“Positive! At least, I don’t *think* I have a long lost sibling from outside the Equestrian borders.”

“Come on, girls, give her some space.”

“It’s alright, Twi’, she’s coming to!”

The first thing Rainbow Dash saw when she opened her eyes was the face of an orange pony with freckles and a friendly smile. “Mighty pleased to meet ya, miss Rainbow Dash. Welcome to Ponyville!” Without warning she grabbed her left front hoof and started shaking it. “Applejack’s the name!”

“Oh... charmed,” she managed, getting to her hooves. “Are... are you one of Twilight Sparkle’s friends, darling?”

But instead of a proper response, Applejack looked as though she was trying holding back a giggle. Which she couldn’t for long. “Ah’m a might sorry miss, but Ah never thought Ah’d hear the word ‘darling’ come outta that face.”

“Nor did I!” the wingless Rainbow Dash agreed, the memories what she has seen in the water pool returning. She suddenly felt weak. “Oh, what in the world is going on, darlings? First I’m separated from my village and my friends, and now I look like somebody else!” Panic was starting to seep through her voice. “What if I’m stuck like this forever? What if I never see my friends again?!”

“Hey, at least it could be worse,” offered the pegasus. “Looking like me isn’t so bad.”

“I think what she meant to say,” corrected Twilight, “was that we’ll all help you get to the bottom of this, *and* find your friends.”

“Yeah, I was just about to add that,” the pegasus remarked.

“I am very grateful, darlings,” Rainbow Dash said, allowing herself to calm down a bit. She took another moment to eye her new doppelganger: her mane and tail were indeed dyed in the colors of the rainbow, only horribly unkempt. She then cast a glance at the mirror by the bedside, scrutinizing her own appearance, comparing herself to the other. She had to admit, they looked like identical twins.

Her own mane wasn’t much to look at either, she noted. First thing’s first. “Say Twilight, darling, you don’t happen to have a spare comb you could lend me? If I can’t keep my looks, I at least want to keep my style.”

Applejack gave a small laugh. “Are you sure you aren’t Rarity in disguise?”

“Did you say Rarity?!” Rainbow Dash gasped. “Why, I know someone named Rarity!”

There was a silence as the ponies exchanged looks. “The plot thickens,” Twilight said. “Could you describe her?”

“Well, she’s a younger unicorn, her horn barely grown out yet, with a light pink coat, and – ooh, let’s see if I can remember – a multicolored mane of yellow and orange, and a blue tail. She’s a bit of a silly pony, but nevertheless a gentle little darling.”

“Sure doesn’t sound like our Rarity,” said Twilight. “She’d resent being called ‘silly’. What about your other friends? Could you tell us about them?”

“Well, there’s Pinkie Pie…”

“*We* have a Pinkie Pie!” said Twilight, her eyes widening more by the second.

“What about Sweetie Bell?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Scootaloo?”

“Yes!”

“Cherelee?”

“My gosh, yes!”

“I’m telling you, Twilight, the Princess needs to hear about this,” voiced Spike. “This is beyond weird, and right into creepy.”

“I’m starting to think you’re right,” Twilight admitted. “Still, we don’t know whether or

not this is just a freak coincidence. Do you know anyone called Twilight Sparkle or Applejack? Or Fluttershy?"

"I do not, darling. But what about Sky Wishes? Or Minty?"

"Well, no," said Twilight, who now looked more confused than ever. "See Spike, it's too early to jump to conclusions. First we need to—" but the sentence was cut short by a knock on the front door. "Let me go get that," she excused herself and ran down the stairs.

The moment Twilight was gone, Rainbow Dash soon found her supposed doppelganger's face barely an apple's length away from hers, as she was put to curious scrutiny. She circled around her, viewing her body from every angle. "At least your Cutie Mark is different. And your hair is all spiffed up and stuff."

"But darling, I haven't given it a brush in hours, and now it's all tangled up," she rebutted.

"Yeah, I don't usually brush my hair," admitted the other, earning a gasp from the earth pony. "Seriously, you're Rarity to a tee!"

"Well, I would certainly like to meet this Rarity of yours. Maybe there is a connection."

"She's right there," Applejack pointed with a hoof. Twilight had returned with the new visitor: a snow white unicorn with a twirling purple mane. She instantly knew why the others had likened her with this pony: this was obviously someone who cared about her looks. Right now, however, her mouth was agape, her eyes shifting from one Rainbow Dash to the other.

"T-t-two Rainbow Dashes?" she stammered.

"I'm the real one, by the way," said the blue pegasus with a hoof in the air.

Rarity walked up to them, glancing over at her friend, then to the newcomer, giving her the same scrutiny the pegasus had. Rainbow Dash felt it might be appropriate to introduce herself. "Hello, darling. I'm, uh, Rainbow Dash. So pleased to meet to."

"Likewise!" she returned, not dropping the surprise in her voice. "Twilight, what in Celestia's name is this?"

"We don't know yet. Only that she turned up about an hour ago, doesn't know anything about Equestria, and says she's from another Ponyville where there are other ponies named Rarity and Pinkie Pie, among others we know."

"My stars!" Rarity whispered, her gaze constantly shifting between the two Rainbow

Dashes. “I didn’t know there *was* another Ponyville outside of Equestria. You two simply *must* be related somehow; you are just uncanny! Minus the mane, of course.”

“How could we be?” the winged one protested. “As far as I know, all of my family roots are Equestrian.”

“Well I simply can’t think of any other explanation.” Rarity turned her attention to the earth pony. “However did you get all the way here? Don’t you remember?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t got a clue, darling,” the cerulean pony replied. “One moment I was at home, and the next I was someplace else. And I didn’t use to look like your friend here, I’ll have you know.”

“You didn’t?” spoke the white unicorn, blinking twice. “That’s a piece of magic I’ve never heard of before. Oh, you poor darling!” Her tone changed from shock to sympathy. “This must all be so traumatizing for you. If there is any way at all I can help, don’t you hesitate to ask. We’ll help you set this straight, don’t you worry.”

“Thank you, darling. Your concern means a lot.”

At this point, the other Rainbow Dash was groaning. “If I have to hear the word ‘darling’ one more time…”

“Oh don’t listen to her,” Rarity dismissed. “Now, if you have nowhere else to go, you are more than welcome to stay with me for as long as you need. I have more than enough room in my fashion boutique, no trouble at all.”

Rainbow Dash lit up. “You run a fashion boutique, darling? How lovely; so do I! I can tell from that fabulous mane of yours that you know a thing or two about dressing in style.”

“Why thank you!” Rarity grinned from ear to ear, her voice almost giddy as she spoke. “I daresay we are going to get along just fine, you and I.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said the other Rainbow Dash. “By the way, shouldn’t we tell Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy about this? You know what, I think I’ll go tell Fluttershy right now.” And with that, she pushed opened the window and took off into the sky.

“Oh my,” the remaining Rainbow Dash spoke. “Was it something I said?”

“Nah, she just needs some time to get her head together,” Applejack offered. “Seeing her own splitting image musta spooked her more than she cares to admit.”

“I am so sorry for causing such a stir,” Rainbow Dash apologized. “And I truly do appreciate everyone’s help.”

“Think nothing of it,” assured Twilight Sparkle. “But she’s right; we should probably go introduce you to Pinkie Pie. If nothing else, she’ll be more than happy to throw a cheer-up party for you.”

“Your Pinkie Pie likes to throw parties?” Rainbow Dash felt hope return. “Why, so does mine!”

“Then the sooner you meet her, the better. Come on, everypony!”

No sooner did Sugarcube Corner come into view did the Pink energetic party pony approach them. “There you are!” She looked even more excited than usual. “You’ll never guess what happened! There’s a new pony in town, but not just anypony! She looks just like me, but she’s not me, but she looks so much like me that she *could* be me! And guess what’s more—”

“Slow down, Pinkie,” interrupted Twilight, trying to process the onslaught of words. But before she could, Rainbow Dash spoke up.

“*You’re* Pinkie Pie, darling? Where is she? Where’s the new pony?”

At this, the excitement in Pinkie’s face diminished slightly as she looked curiously at Rainbow Dash. And then it returned in full force. “Ohmygosh, Rainbow Dash too?! This is so incredibly super-duper exciting! I’m gonna have to throw a *double* party now!”

“Just show us to her, Pinkie,” urged Twilight.

An extra hyper Pinkie Pie led them into the bakery. There, by the counter, was another pink pony that – although not quite as uncanny as was the case with Rainbow Dash – had very similar facial features to Pinkie Pie. The biggest difference was her mane: lighter pink and shorter, not to mention a lot less poofy. Her eyes widened as she saw her counterpart with her group of friends. “Look, Pinkie!” said Pinkie Pie, giggling as she said her own name. “These are some of my friends I told you about! And guess what, Rainbow Dash here is a lookalike too! Isn’t that wild?”

Twilight’s gaze fixed on the other Pinkie, then at the ‘real’ Pinkie, and then at Rainbow Dash, whose mouth was agape. “Pinkie Pie?” she spoke quietly. “Is it really you?”

The other Pinkie Pie only stared at Rainbow Dash in utter amazement. Then her whole face shone up. “Rainbow Dash! Yes, it’s me!”

“Oh, *darling!*” they met half way, where they exchanged a hug. “My stars,” her voice was starting to crack, “you have no idea how worried I was! I was starting to think I

would never see you again!”

“There there,” said her pink friend, patting her on the shoulder. Much like the Rainbow Dash, her voice sounded nothing alike her counterpart’s; this Pinkie Pie had a raspier tone, and not quite as energetic. But it didn’t lack kindness. “I was pretty scared myself, to be honest. But this Pinkie Pie here was really nice to me, offered me a place to stay, let me taste all kinds of sweets; she even said she would throw a party for me!”

The two of them let go of each other. “I’m just so happy we found each other, darling. It’s been one crazy event after another.”

“I’d say! What happened to us? None of us look like we used to, and there are people that look just like us! And I don’t remember my hooves being so stiff. How am I supposed to grab things with these?”

“My gosh, you’re right!” Rainbow Dash flapped one of her front hooves in the air, staring at them with concern in her eyes. “This doesn’t feel right at all.”

“Don’t worry, you two,” said Twilight, not sure what they were on about, “we’ll do everything in our power to figure out what’s going on, or my name isn’t Twilight Sparkle!”

“We could, I dunno, ask the one pony who *might* know anything about this stuff,” remarked Spike.

“Fine, Spike,” Twilight gave in. “If we can’t figure this out by tomorrow, we’ll write a letter to the princess, deal?”

“The princess?” asked the alternate Pinkie Pie. “You’re not talking about Princess Rarity, are you?”

“Well, I would hardly call myself a princess, but thank you for saying so.”

“Uh, Rare, Ah don’t think she meant—”

“I know, Applejack; it was a joke.”

“Princess Celestia is the ruler of Equestria,” Twilight explained. “She’s the one raising the sun everyday. You didn’t even know that?”

“I certainly did not,” Rainbow Dash told her with bemusement. “Raising the sun? Sounds more like a Goddess to me.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Twilight said. “She also happens to be my mentor. I’m staying in Ponyville by her decree, studying the magic of friendship.”

“Oh my! I never realized you were such an important pony.”

“It’s nothing to brag about, really,” said Twilight, maintaining her modesty. “But as the princess’ personal student, I promise that you are in good hooves.”

“Great, now that we have that settled,” said the hyper-Pinkie, “I need to get started on the party! Ooh, we’re gonna need double the balloons now. Better get busy.”

“Actually, I was thinking it would be best if we took these two to see Zecora,” suggested Twilight, “and that you and Rainbow Dash came along.”

“But that would give me less time to plan my party!”

“I’ve seen you shoot parties out of a cannon! You don’t need all day for one party.”

“Duh, these are Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash from another dimension! I want this party to be a super fantastically fabulously *amazing* party!”

“We don’t know *where* they’re from,” reminded Twilight. “That’s why we need to see Zecora; she’s traveled far, so she might be able to tell us what lies beyond the Equestrian borders, and if there’s really another Ponyville out there.”

“Don’t ya think these two need some rest, though?” Applejack pointed. “Hay, if Ah were in their horseshoes, Ah sure wouldn’t wanna go off into the Everfree Forest first thing I did. Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“That’s okay, darling,” Rainbow Dash told her. “If this Zecora fellow can help us find home, the sooner the better, I say.”

“Agreed,” said alternate Pinkie Pie. “We can throw the party when we get back. If we both work together, we’ll get it done in no time.”

“A Double Pinkie Pie Party?” contemplated hyper-Pinkie. She smiled contently. “Double the fun! Let’s do it!”

“Do you wanna help out, Rainbow Dash?” asked her pink friend.

“If you don’t mind, darling, I’d rater leave it up to you two.”

“Ah’d love to help out, Twi,” said Applejack, “but Ah got plenty o’ apples that needs sellin’. ‘Sides, Ah’d rather not go into the Everfree if Ah can help it.”

“I very much agree,” Rarity concurred. “And I would very much like to finish my new design this afternoon. I only ever came by to borrow a book on cross-stitching to begin

with.”

“That’s okay, you two, just me will be enough,” offered Twilight. “Now, all we need to do is find Rainbow Dash, and we’re all set.”

“But she’s right here,” the straight maned Pinkie pointed.

“No, darling, she was referring to the other Rainbow Dash.”

“Oh. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that.”

Twilight resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Anyway, we’d better get going. It’s not terribly far, but the forest can be a dangerous place if you don’t know where to go.”

Applejack and Rarity went their separate ways as Twilight led the two newcomers through town, towards Fluttershy’s cottage, where she expected to find her friends. They didn’t need to go quite so far, however, as they spotted the two pegasi in the air halfway. Twilight waved them down.

Fluttershy’s eyes, just like everypony else’s had, widened in surprise. “Oh my, she *does* look like you.”

“So nice to meet you, darling,” the earth pony Rainbow Dash replied. “I’m sure you’ve heard all about me at this point, but let me formally introduce myself. I’m Rainbow Dash.”

“Oh... m-my name is Fluttershy,” the yellow pegasus managed, as though confused as to whether or not to treat her like a stranger.

“Good thing we ran into you, Dash,” said Twilight, “you need to come with us to Zecora’s.”

“What?! But I got weather duties in twenty minutes!”

“Whatever happened to clearing the skies in ten seconds flat? This won’t take long; you want to get to the bottom of this too, right?”

“Of course I do, but I don’t wanna be...” but the rest of her sentence was lost as she then laid eyes on the Pinkie Pies. She gave her head a rough shook, then rubbed her eyes, blinking. “Pinkie Pie? You too?!”

“Uhm, nice to meet you?” the less poofy-maned Pinkie Pie greeted. “I’m... Pinkie Pie?”

“Buh... what is... I don’t even...” the blue pegasus stammered, her eye muscles twitching. She heaved a deep sigh. “You’re right, Twilight. We need to get to the bottom of this. Has anypony else found *their* clone?”

“No, just you and Pinkie,” said Twilight. “You two don’t know any other Fluttershy, do you?” The two doppelgangers shook their heads. “See? I don’t think it’s as simple as somepony going around cloning us. I do hope Zecora has an answer.”

“The Princess might,” suggested the pegasus.

“I know, but she’s our last resort,” Twilight told her, hoping she would be the last one to tell her to contact the princess. “Besides, if there’s anyone who knows her stuff about far away lands, it’s Zecora.”

“Woah, this place sure is spooky,” Rainbow Dash’s pink friend noted. “And it’s the middle of the day!”

“No joke, darling. Twilight Sparkle, are you sure this is the right way?”

“I’m sure. Don’t worry, we won’t stray too far from the road.”

While it did help to reassure her, it certainly didn’t do away with the creeping feeling of unease she felt from these woods. Several instances she had caught something in the corner of her eye and jumped, and each time Twilight had told her to be careful where she looked, in case there was a Cockatrice – a creature that could turn living beings into stone. Eager for something to avert her focus, she decided to start a conversation with the pony walking next to her, which incidentally happened to be her rainbow-maned lookalike. “Say, darling, what did you mean when you said you had ‘weather duty’?”

“Don’t pegasi take care of the weather where you’re from?”

“Until a few months ago, I didn’t know pegasi existed,” Rainbow Dash admitted. “And the weather is handled all by mother nature herself, thank you very much.”

“Seriously? So it’s like one big Everfree over there?”

“Most certainly not, darling! It is a peaceful and welcoming place, utterly unlike where we are now.”

“This is so fascinating,” said Twilight. “Wherever you’re from, it must be far beyond Celestia’s rule... and yet you speak the same language as us. If we could figure this out, it would be a breakthrough in geographical studies!”

“But Twilight,” said the energetic Pinkie Pie, “they look just like me and Rainbow Dash, and they’re from a place called Ponyville that isn’t this Ponyville! They must be from a parallel dimension!”

“That’s ridiculous,” rebutted Twilight, letting out a small laugh, as if trying to convince herself. “Ponies have been trying to prove the existence of other dimensions for centuries, and it’s never been done.”

“Whatever you say, Twilight. But I got a rattling tooth that says otherwise.”

“Oh my, darling, maybe you should go see a dentist.”

“No, that’s just her Pinkie senses,” the other Rainbow Dash replied for her. “Supposedly her body parts twitching and shaking predicts the future. Scary thing is, she’s usually right.”

“That sounds like my Pinkie Squink!” said Pinkie Pie. Her face then lit up. “My Pinkie Squink! That’s it! I’ll think a squink!”

“Oh, that’s right, darling! It’s sure to tell us what to do!”

“A Pinkie what-now?” Twilight inquired.

“First I squish, then I wink, and then I think! I’ll show you!” The group came to a halt, the other four sets of eyes on Pinkie Pie. She began shaking her head to and fro, throwing her hair in every direction, then began hopping around in a circle, until she squished herself down on all four. She rose, shaking her head some more, then closed her eyes. After a few moment of silence, she opened them and gave the group a wink.

The only reply was more silence. Until her counterpart happily burst out, “What a cool dance! I gotta remember that one!”

“No darling, you don’t understand!” said Rainbow Dash. “There’s supposed to be sparkles from her hair, forming a pink cloud that shows us a solution to our problems!”

“This is so strange,” said Pinkie, her face crestfallen. “I *look* different, but I’m still Pinkie Pie, right? Why won’t it work?”

“Strange is right,” said the blue pegasus, looking skeptical. “That’s something you two have in common.”

“Ooh, oh, maybe if I tried it!” The hyperactive party pony began shaking her head in a mimicking motion to the dance, then in an exaggerated motion fell sprawling to the ground, only to repeat the motion, ending with a wink. “Nothing? Oh well.”

“I’ve never heard of any spell like that, much less from an earth pony,” Twilight thought out loud. “Of course, it could be a residual type magic... I’ve read that some places have a higher concentration of magic in the air than others, but nothing that would affect a spell... come on, the sooner we get to Zecora’s the better.”

They didn’t have to walk very far until they arrived at a clearing, in the middle of which was a strange-looking hut seemingly carved out of a tree.

“I suppose I should have asked beforehand,” said Rainbow Dash, “but who *is* this ‘Zecora’?”

“She’s a Zebra, and an herbalist. She knows a lot about, well, everything; if she can’t tell us anything about this situation, no one can.”

“Except maybe the princess.”

“Shush, Spike.”

“A Zebra? I’ve never heard of such creature.”

“She’s not that different from us ponies,” said Twilight. “You’ll see.” She knocked on the door. It opened only moments later and a head popped out that made Rainbow Dash take a step back. Her nuzzle was black, yet the area around her crooked eyes was white, and her black and white mane was standing up straight from her forehead and down. She was wearing golden earrings, as well as three golden rings around her neck.

Like expected, her smile changed to a surprised expression when she set eyes on her and Pinkie Pie. “What is this before my eyes? Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie appear before me twice!”

“That’s kinda why we’re here,” Twilight explained. “These two showed up only a few hours ago, no clue where they were or how they got here.”

“Hmm,” the Zebra said, eyeing the two strangers with the familiar faces. “I think it’s best you come inside. Don’t worry, my friends, I am on your side.”

“Thank you most kindly, darling,” said Rainbow Dash graciously, trying her best to hide her nervousness. While Twilight explained things to the Zebra, Rainbow Dash had a look around the hut; bottles were stocked onto shelves carved into the walls, around which decorative masks had been hung. In the center of the room was a big cauldron hung over a fire, its inside filled with some green bubbly substance.

“Your story to me is quite a riddle. Fetch me that bottle, the one in the middle,” she pointed a hoof at one of the shelves, and then suddenly Twilight’s horn and said bottle were engulfed by a purple aura. It flew off the shelf on its own accord, the aura vanishing

as Zecora grabbed it with her mouth and poured the content into the brew. Rainbow Dash knew she had just witnessed magic, but none of her unicorn friends had ever used it for such everyday purposes. “You’re in luck, I was just preparing a stew; with this potion, it will turn it into a magic brew. But for the spell to work, you both need to share, something of yourselves, perhaps a strand of hair.”

“Beg your pardon, darling?” said Rainbow Dash, taking a step back. “You want me to tear a piece of my hair and put it in this... ‘brew’ of yours?”

“Just a few strands will do. Without it, we cannot complete the brew.”

“But darling, does it have to be my hair?”

“Oh for pony’s sake, just give her the hair!” urged the pegasus Rainbow Dash, and before she could stop her, she took a bite into her mane and pulled off six or so strands. The cerulean earth pony looked at her in shock; the other rolled her eyes and dropped the strands into the cauldron. “Look, I’m sorry, but we don’t have time to worry about our manes right now.”

“But you didn’t have to yank it out like that!” Rainbow Dash eyed her with a hurt look. She was starting to fear this supposed doppelganger was going to prove more disagreeable than she had hoped.

“She’s right, y’know, there’s no need to pull her hair,” Twilight defended. “Here, Pinkie Pie, let me get that for you.” Once again she set her horn aglow, gently pulling three strands of hair out of her friend’s light pink mane, levitating them into the stew. “There. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s this brew for?”

“If what you say is true, then we need to find out, just what these ponies are all about,” the Zebra rhymed, a habit Rainbow Dash found most peculiar, but also rather endearing. “If they come from afar, their life-force is of another kind. We may learn from where they hail, if we have a look into their mind.” The brew then gave off a sudden boom, startling everyone in the room except Zecora. The contents of the cauldron had now adopted a red hue. Zecora shuffled some dirt from the floor onto the fire to put it out. “It appears it is ready for a taste. Now let us hope the potion did not go to waste.”

“We really do appreciate your help, Zecora,” thanked Twilight.

“Think nothing of it, my little pony friends. Now take a sip, before the magic ends.”

“From the cauldron?” asked Pinkie Pie. “It does look awfully hot.”

“It will not burn your tongue, worry not. The potion made sure the brew is no longer hot.”

“If you say so, darling.” Rainbow Dash walked over to the cauldron, glancing down at the red-shining substance inside, and took a sip. On her left, Pinkie Pie did the same. It was a spicy taste, but nothing more than a tickle to the tongue.

She was about to ask what was suppose to happen when Zecora put her front hooves of Rainbow Dash’s and Pinkie Pie’s foreheads, balancing on her hind legs. Her eyes were closed, looking as though she was concentrating hard on something. Almost a minute passed in silence, until Zecora abruptly took a step back, frantically mumbling something in a language Rainbow Dash could not understand. She looked worried, frightened even. “Whatever is the matter, darling?”

“Your life-force is the same as those of Ponyville, but behind the exterior lurks something ill. The Princess must know, to stall we can’t afford, for the energy I sensed is the one of Discord!”

The word did nothing but confuse the newcomer Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie further, even more so as the other ponies gave them looks of utter shock and fright, backing away from them. “B-b-but that can’t be!” stammered Twilight. “We used the Elements of Harmony to lock him away in stone!”

“Discord? Elements of Harmony? What in all things rainbow are you all going on about?”

“Discord is the meanest mean-bean meanie in the world! He turned Ponyville upside down – *and* created cotton candy clouds, which was kind of nice – but then he turned us all against each other!”

“He’s an ancient spirit of chaos,” Twilight told them. “He escaped from his prison not long ago, and it took all we had to turn him back into stone. It almost broke us...”

“Spirit of chaos?!” exclaimed Rainbow Dash. Of all the unnatural things she had endured today, this was by far most shocking. “We’re the spirit of chaos?!” And so for the second time that day, Rainbow Dash fainted.