

## **The Third Generation**

### **Chapter Ten**

*By Candle Light*

“Thanks, Twilight,” Pinkie Pie breathed, trying her best to calm her pounding heart. She had watched in horror as Rainbow Dash, face distorted in fear and anger, had stormed off, and if Twilight hadn’t been quick to set up a force field around Pinkie, she would have done the same. She had a hard time defining what she had just felt: words such as anger, indignation and hatred came to mind, all of which made her feel sick to the stomach. As the group moved itself away from the Sculpture Garden at a brisk pace, Pinkie Pie willed herself to speak. “What just happened back there?”

“You tell us!” replied Sunny Daze. “It looked like you were about to hurl, and Rainbow Dash just took off shouting at us. What’s her problem?”

“It wasn’t her,” Pinkie Pie tried to explain. “It was the statue. The moment I looked at that thing, I got these horrible feelings... like I was angry at everyone, and that I would never be happy again...”

“I felt it too,” shared the filly Rarity, walking next to the protective bubble. “Not as bad as before, but still that depressing feeling, hopeless feeling...”

“Perhaps being so close to Discord’s physical body somehow resonated with the taint that is inside of you,” speculated Luna.

“Intriguing,” said Kenbroth. “Troubling, yes, but intriguing. What you just described, was it simply the dark magic tampering with your mood, or could it have been... no, I suppose it’s too soon to tell.”

“Whatever it was,” said Twilight Sparkle, “we can’t just leave Rainbow Dash like this!”

“Yeah, we just have to find her!” agreed Pinkie. “She could be anywhere, crying her heart out...”

“Yes, but we can’t have all of you running around an unfamiliar city,” pointed Kenbroth. “I think it would be best that you Ponyvillians stay within the castle bounds for now, while I set up a search party.”

“No need for that, big guy,” the winged Rainbow Dash told him. “She can’t have gone far; it’ll be faster if I have a look from above.” With a couple of fierce flaps she took to the air. “You ponies wait here. If anypony can find Rainbow Dash, it’s Rainbow Dash.” And so she was off before anyone could say otherwise.

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Rainbow Dash ran, as fast as her earth pony legs would allow, just aware enough of her surroundings not to bump into things on the way. For all she knew, she could have run back into the castle, or somewhere else entirely; all that mattered was to get away. Away from that horrible monster, away from the shame of having lashed out at her friends. But was it really a monster? Was there really no truth in what she had felt? Somewhere in her heart, she knew that the world was wrong, corrupt, evil... but she also knew these feelings weren't her own. Or were they? She couldn't think straight, only run.

Eventually, her mind began to clear, at least so much that she could tell she was surrounded by buildings and ponies. Everyone was staring at her, which wasn't surprising, as she was turning her head around like a mad pony, hyperventilating furiously. Unsure of where to go, she sprang into the first alleyway she saw. Thankfully, at this point, the unsettling feeling was starting to wane, and she was starting to regain some sense of self.

Still dizzy, she stumbled back into the street. The sun was starting to set now, casting an orangey glow over the white city landscape. A sight that helped to calm Rainbow Dash's mind, at least a bit. She sat herself down on the side walk, shaking top to hoof, ignoring the passersby as she allowed her nerves to calm down... until they were jolted back to life by a voice calling her name.

"Ah, Rainbow Dash, I presume!" The voice was unfamiliar, but friendly. "The trainer of the Wonderbolts herself, or so your friend speaks of you." Rainbow Dash lifted her head to observe the stranger: a snow white unicorn with a monocle and a small, fancy mustache. "I know she was exaggerating, of course, but after seeing you pull off a Sonic Rainboom in a vertical uplift at the Royal Wedding, I'm surprised they haven't... oh my." He paused to take a closer look at her. "You look rather down, my friend."

"I-I..." Rainbow Dash started, but her voice must not have reached further than her own ears.

"Also, you seem to have misplaced your wings... actually, upon closer inspection, your Cutie Mark is different. Forgive me, my lady, I seem to have mistaken you for somepony else. Though I must say you bear a striking semblance to miss Rainbow Dash. Are you perhaps a relative of hers?"

Rainbow Dash tried once again to speak, very lowly. "Actually, darling, I... you see..." but that was how far she got before realizing she had nothing to say, no excuses to give. Or anything to give an excuse to.

"Oh, how very rude of me," the unicorn added. "I should of course introduce myself before asking such personal questions. My name is Fancy Pants."

Maybe it was his tone of voice. Maybe it was his kind face, or maybe it was air of grace; whatever the reason, Rainbow Dash gave into the toll on her heart and slumped down to

the ground, letting the tears flow freely.

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Fancy Pants levitated his cup of tea to his mouth and took an elegant sip, before looking over to Rainbow Dash. “Do take a sip, dear; this tea is quite a delight.”

Rainbow Dash nodded slightly, assessed her slightly bigger tea cup, and bent to pick it up. She was still rather clumsy working with her mouth, spilling just a little, but still... “Oh my, this *is* a delight.”

“Ah, so you do speak,” noted Fancy Pants. “I was afraid our conversation was going to be rather one-sided.”

Rainbow Dash felt her face go red. She had not meant to burst out crying, much less to a complete stranger, and certainly not in front of a crowd. And yet, he’d been kind enough to invite her to a café so that they could talk in peace. “I-I’m so sorry, darling. It’s just that... well,” she searched for the words, “I was touched by something dreadful... some dark magic...”

“Dark magic?” repeated the unicorn. “But I thought spells that influences negative emotions were banned hundreds of years ago by Celestia’s decree.”

“Well, it wasn’t unicorn magic, rather...” She knew she would have to explain everything to him, but where to start? “I... I don’t suppose you’ve heard of someone named ‘Discord’?”

“Why yes, of course,” said Fancy Pants with a nod. “I don’t suppose there is anypony in Equestria who *hasn’t* heard of... hold on.” His expression then turned from surprise to realization. “But of course! How did I not make the connection! You must be from that village that was recently discovered, the one hidden away by Discord’s magic! The one supposedly filled with ponies that looks just like us. Then you must be indeed be Rainbow Dash.”

“Why yes, darling, I am,” she nodded. “I know it may be hard to believe, but Discord enchanted my village and surrounded it in a time loop for a thousand years.”

“So I read in the news paper,” confirmed Fancy Pants. “Quite a predicament, I would imagine.”

“You have no idea, darling! Imagine being told everything you knew was a dream, losing half your bodily functions, your friends gone missing, and then you learn that one of them almost starved to death!” She realized her volume had risen progressively, and some ponies were watching them closer now. A little quieter, she continued, “You’re right, darling, it hasn’t been easy. And to top it off, it seems that Discord left me and my friends

with a piece of his magic within each of us.”

“Is that a fact?” said Fancy Pants, looking very surprised.

“I went to see the statue,” she went on, “and it felt like another being had crept into my mind, affecting my every emotion.... I was angry and disappointed at everything...”

“That does sound like what Discord would have felt in his final hour,” said Fancy Pants. “And I suspect leaving his magic behind is more than mere happenstance. Perhaps he planned to use you in some way for his return.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too,” agreed Rainbow Dash. “All of us are trying our hardest to find the truth behind all this, but every time we figure something out, more questions only come from it.”

“Did perhaps that awful roar a while back have something to do with any of this?” Fancy Pants inquired.

“Oh darling,” she sighed, “where do I even begin?”

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The winged Rainbow Dash was sure she had seen a flash of cerulean flash by somewhere around here, but by the time she touched the ground, the street was empty of anypony except a few passersby. Her counterpart had been here, no doubt about it, but where did she go?

She was just about to round a corner when a voice called out to her. “Hey Rainbow Dash,” she turned to see one of those Canterlot snob ponies, a gray mare with a slender body much like the princesses, “I hope you’re feeling better now. You made quite a spectacle of yourself back there.”

“What spectacle?”

“Oh come now, Rainbow Dash, I can imagine the most promising young flier in all of Equestria wouldn’t care to admit wailing like a foal in public, especially since it just *happened* to bring the attention of one of the Canterlot Elites, but I know what I saw. So did the paparazzi, I’m sure. Can’t wait for tomorrow’s news paper.”

The pegasus felt her gut go cold and her cheek grow hot. Her counterpart had broken down crying? And now everypony would think *she* did it? “Now listen here, missy,” she walked up to her and looked her straight in the eye. “You obviously don’t even *read* the news paper, or you’d know there’s a village of *lookalikes* that’s popped up south of the Everfree Forest. You may have noticed the one you saw didn’t have any wings?”

To Rainbow Dash's credit, she seemed to have put the mare on the spot. "D-don't be silly, of course I read that, but do you honestly expect me to believe—"

"Whatever!" She was getting tired of talking to this pony. "Just tell me where she went!"

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"By Star Swirl's beard!" gasped Fancy Pants. He looked around the café, almost nervously, to see if anyone had listened in on the conversation. Which, it seemed, they had. The table closest to them made no attempt to hide their interest, and one pony conveniently got up and left. "Canterlot can't seem to catch a break, can it. First the Changeling invitation, and now a Mother Ursa..."

"Changeling invasion, darling?"

"Something that happened about a month ago," he explained. "A bunch of nasty insect-like creatures almost tore Canterlot to pieces."

"I just can't believe the things that happen here in Equestria," said Rainbow Dash with a sigh in her voice. "Where I come from, making sure the rainbows were done on time was the biggest of our worries, but we've never had any creatures trying to destroy the whole town."

"Yes, well, you know what they say: whatever doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. It's true that we are forced to live through the return of some ancient evil or another every so often, but for the most part, Princess Celestia has done a marvelous job bringing peace and prosperity to the land."

"I hope you're right, darling. I just want to go back to living a peaceful life among my friends, making hats and dresses, going on adventures, having parties every week..."

"Parties, eh? Well, I know one certain Ponyvillian who would meet your fancy."

"Oh, trust me darling, we have already met."

Both of them jumped as the door to the café slammed open. "Rainbow Dash!" called the pegasus at the door, as cerulean as the one sitting by the table and with a rainbow mane to match. "Thank *Celestia* I found you."

"Ah, the original article, or however I should put it," commented Fancy Pants.

"Oh, it's you," the pegasus replied, earning herself some strange looks from the onlookers. "I heard you took care of my pal here. Thanks a bunch. Are you feeling better, Rainbow Dash?"

“Oh, I...” she began, feeling a bit flustered by the scene. “Yes, darling, I think I’ve managed to calm down.”

“Everypony is worried sick! Well, Pinkie Pie is, anyway. Come on, let’s go back to the castle.”

“Of course, darling.” As she got up from her seat, she gave the stallion a last appreciative look. “Thank you so much for everything, Fancy Pants, darling.”

“My pleasure,” he replied. “I seem to run into the most interesting sorts when I’m out grocery shopping. If you should ever need me, don’t be a stranger. I’m not very hard to find.”

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“Ouch,” commented the winged Rainbow Dash as the earth pony version recounted her experience. She could totally relate; the memories of what she had done to her friends under Discord’s influence were still fresh in her mind. “Don’t worry, we’ll make sure you don’t have to go anywhere near that statue ever again. I don’t get why they even keep it around; wouldn’t it be easier to just throw it to the bottom of the ocean or something?”

“I seem to remember Princess Luna saying something about keeping it for safe-keep,” said the earth pony.

“For all the good it did,” reminded the pegasus. “Can’t they at least cut him up into small pieces or something, make it harder for him to get back on his feet?”

“That’s a terrible thing to say!” her counterpart rebutted, but then seemed to realize what she was saying. “I mean... yes.” She looked downright appalled with herself. “Oh darling, it’s like a part of me is still thinking like Discord...”

“Oh, uh, okay then; we don’t need to talk about him anymore. So... how about that Minty? She’s gonna be here soon, right?”

The sentiment seemed to cheer the earth pony up just a bit. “Oh Minty, my darling... how I want to see you again...”

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The cerulean earth pony barely took a step into beyond the castle gate before she felt hooves wrap around her neck, her vision obscured by her friend’s pink mane. “Are you okay, Rainbow Dash? I was so worried! We were *all* worried!”

“I’m okay, Pinkie Pie, darling,” she assured her. Her concern truly touched her deeply. But then, realization struck. “What about yourself? Did the statue do anything to you and

Rarity?”

“It did, but then Twilight put up this bubble-thingy around me, and I couldn’t sense it anymore,” Pinkie Pie explained as she let go of her friend. “Rarity seemed to be fine though.”

“I’m glad,” said Rainbow Dash. “Now I just need to apologize to everyone for lashing out at them.”

“It’s okay,” Pinkie Pie assured, “we all know it wasn’t your fault.”

“Speaking of everyone,” the winged Rainbow Dash cut in, “where *is* everyone?”

“They all went back into the castle. Spike – the little one – says he’s working on getting us our own place, but we’ll have to stay put until then.”

“Right, let’s not keep them waiting then,” said the earth pony. She glanced at the walkway that led to the sculpture gardens; maybe it was her paranoid mind playing tricks on her, but she almost thought she could sense something in that direction, much like one would sense thunder in the air.

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“I know it’s getting late,” Kenbroth told the group walking behind him, consisting of the other village versions of Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie and Rarity, as they made their way down the stairs that would take them to the crystal chamber beneath Canterlot, “but I’d much rather we get the answers we need sooner than later. I do appreciate your help.”

“But of course, darling,” agreed Rainbow Dash. “We want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do.”

“Sure,” said the filly Rarity, “but what exactly are we gonna do?”

“Just a few experiments,” told Kenbroth. “Nothing too tedious, I assure you.”

The group reached the bottom of the stairs. Rainbow Dash found herself mesmerized by the butterflies. What were they doing so deep beneath the ground? “It’s just through here.” They passed through a rather narrow rocky passageway, and soon arrived at a beautifully decorated door, which Kenbroth pushed open with ease.

The chamber beyond, Rainbow Dash realized, was very similar to that of their own castle back in Ponyville and Unicornia, except everything here was made purely out of yellowish crystal. Pinkie Pie let out a sound of amazement. “Wow... I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Neither have I, darling,” said Rainbow Dash. “How do you suppose it ended up all the way down here?”

“My guess is that when the castles were awakened,” Kenbroth explained, “it was supposed to reappear where Canterlot Castle now stands, but because of all the protection spells and enchantments put up by the Princesses, it was pushed underground. Speaking of the Princesses, Princess Luna said she would be joining us shortly, as soon as she’s setting the sun and the moon in proper orbit.”

“She can do that all by herself?” asked Pinkie Pie incredulously.

“They aren’t the rulers of Equestria for nothing. In any case, let’s begin, shall we. First, I must ask you, does being here in this chamber make you feel weird at all?”

“Well, yeah, this place is pretty weird,” Rarity pointed. “It’s like my house, but made out of glass or something.”

“I meant on the inside,” Kenbroth clarified. “A gut feeling, if you will, something that resonates with your very being.”

“Y’know what,” said Pinkie Pie, “this is gonna sound weird, but I kinda do feel something. Like a prickling feeling in my stomach.”

“Now that you mention it, darling,” agreed Rainbow Dash. She hadn’t thought about it until they she brought it up, but it felt almost unsettling, like there was something knocking on her belly from the inside.

“As I thought. Now, stand over here, Pinkie,” he led her to one of the pillars, and put one of his claws on it. He closed his eyes for a moment, assuming a look of concentration. A few moments later he nodded to himself, and said to Pinkie, “Now Squink!”

“Uh, okay.” The pink pony began doing her signature moves: shaking her mane back and forth, and then squished down on all fours, winking as she straightened herself. But for all shaking and winking, no tell-tale sparks appeared.

Pinkie came to a stop. “Well, I do feel *something*, but it doesn’t feel anything like a proper Squink.”

“‘Something’ is indeed right, my dear,” Kenbroth told her. “There was definitely a stir in the magical structure of the castle just now. But this is very peculiar indeed... Rainbow Dash, now I want you to try it.”

“Me?” repeated the rainbow-maned pony. “B-but darling, I thought only Pinkie Pie could perform a Pinkie Squink. And my hair will get all ruffled.”



“That’s a sacrifice you’ll have to make,” Kenbroth told her matter-of-factly. “I’m sure Daffy would be more than happy to do your do when we get back.”

“Well, alright,” she agreed reluctantly. Having watched Pinkie Pie do it innumerable times, she knew the motions well enough, but this would be the first time doing it herself. Her mane flew about uncomfortably as she rocked her head – this was harder than it looked! – then she lowered her body in a squish. She rose to her full height, winking as she did.

Just like Pinkie Pie had said, she felt something inside, a weird sort of tingling in her skin. More than that, she felt ridiculous. Spike, however, had a look of triumph on his face. “Eureka!” he exclaimed. “I think I’ve figured it out! Of course, this raises a few other questions, but still!”

“Still what?” asked Rarity.

“I’ll explain soon enough; now I want you, Pinkie Pie, to go Squink over there, and Rainbow Dash over by that pillar. Rarity, you’ll stay and Squink right here.”

Confused but obedient, the three ponies took their positions. Kenbroth walked over to the center of the room and sat himself down. “You may begin.”

“Wait, how do I do this?” asked Rarity. “Do I just wave my hair around?”

“Come to think of it, I don’t think you’ve ever seen me Squink before,” said Pinkie Pie. “It’s okay, I’ll show you how.”

While Pinkie Pie taught the little one the moves, Rainbow Dash was working her body by the opposite pillar, feeling increasingly uncomfortable as sweat ran down her chin. She remembered that she hadn’t had a bath since they left this morning, and made a mental note to ask for one when they were done. After a while, Spike directed her go Squink by another pillar, and then by a wall.

Just when she was about to ask what the point of this silliness was, Spike called them all to her. “Thank you, my dears. I’m sorry if this seems like a pointless exercise routine, but this is all giving me some excellent results. For example, young Rarity, it seems you’re not quite getting the hang of the movements.”

“I’m trying,” replied the filly. “It’s just not clicking! I keep tripping by the squishing part.”

“But I still felt the castle’s magic stir just the same,” Kenbroth told her. “It would seem what matter isn’t so much *what* you do, but that your heart is in the right place. Now, if I could just ask you to do one more thing.”

“Making progress, I see.”

Princess Luna walked through the door, setting her gaze on the dragon. “Ah, Princess!” said Kenbroth delightedly. “Just bear with me for another minute, I’ll give a full report soon. Actually,” he added, “I think would be quicker if you watched the flow of magic yourself.” Noticing the three very confused sets of eyes, he cleared his throat. “Now then, I want the three of you to stand right here and Squink at the same time.”

The three of them walked over and started shaking their bodies to and fro. It was rather out-of-sync, with Rarity tripping a few times, and Rainbow Dash was starting to feel dizzy from flailing her head around so much. After what seemed like minutes, the earth dragon gestured them to stop.

“By the stars,” gasped Luna, removing her horn from the pillar, surprise on her face. “If what I’m thinking is correct...”

“...then we can reseal the ancient magic and return peace to Equestria!” finished Kenbroth.

“By Squinking?” asked Pinkie Pie incredulously.

“Yes, in fact, by Squinking. You see, as I mentioned before, all ponies from your Ponyville are connected, spiritually if you will, to the very special magic energies residing in the castles of legend. As we saw with Pinkie Pie accidentally releasing the seal, this is especially true for you unfortunate ponies that carry Discord’s magic within. With you three squinking together just now, there was a considerable shift in the magic structure, like the seal was trying to repair itself.”

“Should we keep Squinking until the seal is fixed, then?” suggested Rainbow Dash.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple. With the three of you alone it would likely take weeks, or even months of non-stop Squinking. What we need is all six of you together for one, big Squink.”

“So, once we find our friends, all we have to do is visit all the castles and have a Squinking party!” Pinkie Pie recapped. “And ta-daah, Equestria is safe!”

“But darling, the Mother Ursa was defeated. Isn’t it safe already?”

“Like my sister told you, we cannot afford to assume,” Luna told her. “We would do well to prepare for the worst, lest we are caught off-guard by another such monster from the abyss.”

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Minty could find only one word that would do justice what she was looking at. Her eyes were wide as saucers, her mouth hanging agape. “Wow.”

Maybe it was because had she had secretly been dreading spending another night out in these lands, or maybe it was her love for all things flying, but seeing a gilded carriage descending before them, carried by two chalk white pegasus ponies in shining armor, nearly brought a tear to her eyes. They came to a stop right before the group, where one of the guards spoke up in a dark, almost intimidating voice. “Are you Miss Minty?”

“What? Oh, uh, yeah, that’s me.”

“We have received orders from Her Majesty Princess Luna to bring you to Canterlot Castle,” they explained in a reciting tone. “We were told to await you in Appleloosa, but when we saw you from the air, we thought we could spare you the travel.”

“You mean it?” said Minty enthusiastically. The sooner she could get back to her friends, the better. “Oh thank you thank you thank you!” She gave the guard a big hug, to which it didn’t move a muscle. “You have *no* idea how much I want to get out of this place.” She added a little laugh. “So what are we waiting for?”

“Nothing at all, I’d wager” spoke Braeburn. “We could sure use the lift ourselves. Would you mind dropping us off at—”

“This carriage is one-way only: back to Canterlot.”

“Aw shucks,” Braeburn let out. “Well, Ah don’t wanna leave Minty hanging with a couple o’ strangers – no offense – and Ah’ve been meaning to give my cousins a visit anyhow.” He turned to his traveling companions. “Would you guys mind terribly if Ah took them up on their offer?”

“Hay, more food for us,” replied Brittle.

“Halt!” the other guard cut in. “Our orders were for miss Minty, no one else.”

“Come on, can’t he come?” asked Minty. If she could help it, she really *didn’t* want to be left alone with strangers. “I mean, he kinda rescued me from certain death, and the Princess told him to bring me to Canterlot himself, so—”

“Fine, he can come,” the guards agreed simply, not even moving a facial muscle. “Hop on-board, then.” Minty wasted no time jumping onto the carriage, which was fitted with a cushioned seat easily big enough for the two of them. Once she and Braeburn were seated – and before they could even wave goodbye to Brittle and Coffee Pot – the carriage lifted itself into the air seemingly by magic.

Minty remained breathless as she watched the landscape become smaller and smaller,

spreading itself out as far as eye could see, painted in the orange glow of the nearly set sun. Not entirely unlike the glow from the castle they had visited.

As the scenery flew by beneath, Minty's mind couldn't help but wander. What would've happened if she'd started walking any other direction than the one she did. She would have ended up just as lost and thirsty, but with no one to bring her back from the brink. The thought made her queasy, so much that she had to close her eyes and lay down on the floor, willing her mind to think about something else. Fortunately, there was a lot to think about: the Castle, the roar they had heard, Braeburn and his friends... her friends waiting for her in Canterlot...

This alone made her open her eyes and look back up, towards the darkened green hills that were starting to become visible over the horizon.

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"Check it out," said Sunny Daze in awe. Spike the baby dragon had led the Ponyville crowd to the Canterlot Ballroom, where he had directed a couple of guards to prepare sleeping mattresses and pillows for everypony. "This would make a wicked place for a party!"

"As a matter of fact, it would," Twilight Sparkle agreed with a laugh.

"Not many ponies get the privilege to use this establishment," grown-up Rarity told them. "Much less for a bed room."

"Yeah, what's up with that; it's not time for bed yet," remarked Sunny Daze. "I wanna go explore the castle some more!"

"I don't know," said Twilight, "I don't think Princess Luna would appreciate us snooping around where we're not welcome."

"What about the Collage?" suggested Spike. "I've talked to the guards, and they say you're all free to go anywhere you like, except into the city or the castle, or the sculpture gardens."

"See, this dragon knows what I'm talking about." Sunny Daze gave him an approving smile and rubbed him on the head.

"You know what, that's not a bad idea," realized Twilight. "I've been meaning to visit the Royal Library anyway. Though I'm not sure we could fit everypony in there."

"I think most ponies here are pretty much ready to tuck it," pointed Sunny Daze, gazing over the crowd, many of which had already crept under their blankets. "But hey, if we're going to the library, we should totally invite Story Belle. Hey, Story!" she called, catching

the attention of a certain pink pony with a mane that – as was the norm with these ponies – was multicolored, with stripes of yellow, red, purple and blue. She came trotting over to them. “Wanna come with us to see the library with me and Twilight?”

“You have a library?” she replied excitedly. “Of course I would like to see it! If it’s anything like the rest of Canterlot, I can hardly wait!”

“And this coming from the pony who owns a windmill full of books,” remarked Sunny. “That Cutie Mark isn’t just for show.” Sure enough, Story Belles cutie mark depicted a story book beneath a windmill, connected by a rainbow.

“Trust me, you’re in for a surprise,” promised Twilight. “Anypony else want to come along?” she added, addressing the two of her friends that were within earshot, which was Rarity and Fluttershy.

“Why, I certainly would,” the white unicorn agreed. “I do love visiting the Royal Library whenever I get the chance. How about it, Fluttershy?”

“Actually, if you don’t mind, I would rather stay here,” said the yellow pegasus. “The Breezies were telling me this fascinating story about these earth ponies who wanted to fly.”

“Suit yourself then,” Rarity acknowledged. “And seeing as Applejack was abducted by Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash is horsing around over there,” indeed, in one of the corners, a bunch of ponies were engaged in an epic pillow fight, “I’d say we’re good to go.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Sunny Daze. “Let’s go, everypony!” As they left the room and stepped into the cool evening air, she added with a giggle, “‘Everypony’. I love it.”

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The school building, as always, was opened to its students around the clock, and no guard thought to hinder Twilight as she and her friends stepped into the main building of Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. They passed through a big entrance chamber – stairways decorating every wall and corner – and into a hallway that was lit up by floating magical orbs.

“Is this one of those ‘schools’ you guys were talking about?” asked Sunny Daze.

“Well, yes, and no,” said Twilight. She led the group around a bend, then down a staircase, through another hallway with windows giving a view over an inner garden. “This institute is for the especially gifted unicorn, recognized by Princess Celestia herself. Not to sound like I’m bragging...”

“Come now, darling,” said Rarity, “as the Princess’s personal star pupil, you’re most certainly entitled to a certain measure of bragging.”

“Is there school for earth ponies too?” asked Sunny.

“Well, no, since earth ponies can’t do magic,” explained Twilight. “At least not in the same sense. Earth ponies are known for their superior strength and close connection to the earth, and are sometimes capable of incredible feats that seem almost impossible by scientific standards. I learned that the hard way from Pinkie.”

The group came to a stop by one particularly big door. “Here we are. Don’t worry, there are books in here of interest to unicorns, earth ponies and pegasi alike.” Twilight lit her horn and grabbed on to the door itself, pushing it open.

What met them inside was enough for Story Belle to drop her jaw in amazement. Lit from a giant chandelier high, high above their heads, bright enough to rival daylight, the rounded room held rows upon rows of bookshelves lined along the walls. A staircase led up to a second floor, and a third floor, and beyond. The books never seemed to end.

“And I thought *your* library was impressive,” breathed Sunny Daze. “They must have *everything* in here.”

“Well, almost everything,” Twilight told them. “The Princess says there are still plenty of books they don’t have, but for the most part, everything on any subject I’ve ever studied is right here. And this is only the library; over at the Canterlot Archives is where we store the ancient and most valuable texts.”

“This is so overwhelming!” Story Belle managed. “Have you read *all* of this, Miss Twilight?”

“Not even close. I would certainly like to do so one day, but with so much knowledge, I’m not sure anypony could absorb it all in one mortal lifetime?”

“You certainly could have fooled me,” came an elderly pony’s voice from ahead. A mare of purple coat and a mane of blue and yellow walked up to the four of them. “So, even when you moved to Ponyville, you still take time to visit your old fort.”

“Good evening, Mrs. Know-It-All,” Twilight greeted the mare, which Story Belle guessed to be the librarian. “I’m afraid I’m not here to stay; I was just showing a few friends around. Have you heard of the new village that showed up a few days ago?”

“Only what I read in the news paper,” she told them. “So these two are ponies from this ‘other Ponyville’, is what you’re saying?”

“How do you do,” greeted Story Belle. “My name is Story Belle.”

“And I’m Sunny Daze!”

“Sunny Daze, eh? I believe my grandkid in Ponyville has a friend with that name. You do rather resemble her... would you be her ‘counterpart’ then?”

“She might be,” said Twilight, “but I’m still puzzled by the fact that grown-up have counterparts that are just children.”

“Still out to solve every mystery in the world, eh Twilight,” remarked Mrs. Know-It-All. “Just don’t work yourself too hard. You’ve been at it for days now; I think you deserve a break.”

“I could sure use it; things have been pretty crazy... wait,” Twilight gave her an odd look, “how do you know what I’ve been up to?”

“Whatever do you mean, Twilight?” said the librarian questioningly. “You’ve been staying in the library for the past three days.”

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“I don’t know about you,” the straight-maned Pinkie Pie told Rainbow Dash as they walked through the castle grounds, led by Kenbroth, “but I’m just about ready to get some shut-eye.”

“I’m doing no such thing until I’ve had myself a good bath or shower,” replied her rainbow-maned friend. “I do hope the Canterlot ponies took that into consideration when they said they’d accommodate us.”

“A bath would be nice,” agreed Kenbroth. “Come to think of it, I haven’t had one since I woke up here in Equestria.”

“Just as long as you don’t wait another thousand years,” said Pinkie Pie with a giggle, remembering the time she and Wysteria found her under a pile of mud beneath the castle in Ponyville.

“Gosh, don’t remind me. ‘Years and years to create this smell and slime,’ what *was* I thinking? Granted, we earth dragons do enjoy a layer of grime on our scales, but a thousand years under a pile of mud would make *me* nauseous. Poor Daffy.” Then he added with a sigh, “And poor Wysteria. The things I put her through...”

“Guys!” came a voice from behind. There was the other Pinkie Pie – the local Equestrian one – followed by Applejack. “Thank Celestia we found you! Come with me, quick! It’s an emergency.”

“Why, what’s the matter?”

“Yeah, Pinkie,” remarked Applejack. “Why don’t you tell us instead of running off like a mad pony? Didn’t you want me to show you how to make those Apple Family pies?”

“No time for that now; come with me everypony, and dragon!” No more words were spoken as she ran off, and the three ponies and dragon, exchanging confused looks, had no choice but to follow.

Pinkie Pie led them to a large building, almost the size of Ponyville castle, where the crowd of ponies from their village could be seen inside. She knocked open the door fiercely and announced, “Attention, everypony!” whereas she wasted no time hopping onto one of the tables. All the ponies in the room, many of who looked getting ready to go to sleep, only looked at her with flabbergasted expressions. “It has come to my attention that the royal guards have picked up Minty, and are on their way as we speak!”

Gasps as smiles filled the room. “Are you sure, darling?” Rainbow Dash said, voicing their enthusiasm.

“Absoposilutely! And you know what that means. We only have about one hour and fifty-seven minutes to get the Welcome Home party ready. No time for sleeping, girls, we got cookies to bake, bakeries to cook and shakes to make!”

“Just remember what Princess Luna said about not spending too much on this,” Kenbroth reminded. “Like I said, it’s just a tea party.”

“The biggest tea party *ever!*” corrected Pinkie Pie. “We need tea, teacakes, cupcakes, teacupcakes. And milk, and sugar cubes!”

“I’m with Pinkie!” Razzaroo said as she hopped up on the table beside her. “We can sleep later; this is for Minty!”

“Right on!” the pegasus Rainbow Dash flew up on her opposite side, “If we’re doing a tea party, then let’s tea party Ponyville style!”

If anyone objected, it could not be heard over the cheers. As the curly-maned Pinkie Pie began shouting orders to ponies, the other Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash took a moment to savor the fact that they were finally going to see Minty again, tears welling up in their eyes.

But then Rainbow Dash let out a gasp. “Oh dear, this isn’t good!”

“How can you say that? This is absolutely definitely positively wonderful!”

“Yes darling, but I meant the present! The one Rarity and I was going to make.”



“Oh.”

“If we start on it now, we might make it on time,” Rainbow Dash thought out loud, “but I don’t see Rarity anywhere. You stay here while I have a look around outside.”

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“Wait,” said Twilight Sparkle, unsure if she had heard Mrs. Know-It-All right. “No I haven’t. I’ve been in Ponyville all along. Both of them.”

“She’s right,” Rarity agreed. “I’ve been with her this whole time.”

“Well, all I know is that someone who looks exactly like you has been putting up fort here in the library, asking me for all sorts of books concerning Equestrian history and geography, among other things.”

Twilight racked her brain trying to come up with an explanation to how she could possibly have been in the same place twice. Had her future self been messing around with ancient time travel magic again? But then another, more obvious answer dawned upon her. “Are you sure she was even a unicorn?”

“I would assume so. Although, she was wearing a hat, so I didn’t actually see the horn.”

This confirmed her suspicions. But she needed to be sure. “Did the Register pick up my name?”

“Indeed it did,” said the Librarian as she, guessing Twilight’s intentions, walked over to the counter, looking up at a big rune-covered pillar behind it. “I never bothered checking it more than once, however; if what you’re suggesting is indeed the case…”

Mrs. Know-It-All put her horn against the pillar, triggering its activation. While she did, Story Belle took the opportunity to ask, “What is this ‘Register’?”

“Like the name suggests, it’s a pony registration device,” Twilight explained. “Whenever somepony enters or leaves Canterlot Castle, a force field picks up on their personal magical imprint – their ‘aura’ if you will – adding or removing their name in this magical registry.”

“My word!” exclaimed the librarian. “It has never once shown false information in all my years, but according to this, there are now two Twilight Sparkles within the Canterlot walls.”

“But no two ponies have the same magical imprint,” Rarity pointed out the obvious. “How could it possibly—oh!” Her eyes told Twilight that she understood.

“‘Oh’ what?” asked Sunny Daze. “What does it mean?”

“It means,” explained Twilight, her heart starting to accelerate, “that Kimono is somewhere in Canterlot.”

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Rainbow Dash only now realized that running off by herself probably wasn’t such a good idea. She hadn’t even bothered to ask if anyone knew where Rarity went. The moon and the stars were starting to provide light in the sun’s stead, but it didn’t stop her from getting lost among the many compounds of the castle ground. All she knew was which way *not* to go; the direction of the sculpture garden still gave off a menacing presence. She thought to herself that maybe she ought to ask one of the guards for directions...

Fortunately however, before she had the chance, she spotted a group of ponies led by Twilight Sparkle rushing out of one of the buildings. Rainbow Dash called out to grab their attention; to her delight, Rarity was among them. So were Story Belle and Sunny Daze. “Thank goodness, Rarity darling, I was just looking for you!”

“Really? Whatever for?”

“More importantly,” Twilight cut in, “Rainbow Dash, did you see me run by?”

“Of course I didn’t; you’re standing right here.”

“We just discovered that Kimono is somewhere within the castle ground!” Twilight explained hurriedly. “She’s supposed to be heading this direction.”

“She is?” she exclaimed, a broad smile spreading across her face. “That’s wonderful, darling!”

“Yeah, but it’s strange too,” said Twilight. “According to the librarian, she has been holed up in the library in secret ever since you all appeared in Equestria. And if she’s heading this way, that would take her to the gate leading out of the castle. Let’s hurry.”

The group of five ran across the castle ground, Twilight leading the way, until the main gate came into view. Rainbow Dash thought she saw a figure under the flames of the lanterns by the gate, talking to one of the guards.

There was no mistaking it, even from a distance, the exact likeness of Twilight Sparkle, save for the hat on her head and the lack of the pink stripe in her mane, could not be mistaken.

“Kimono?” Twilight called out. “Is that you?”

It caught her attention alright, but not the way they were expecting. The moment she turned around to meet their gaze, her expression shifted to that of fright, and her legs started to wobble. “Kimono, darling?” Rainbow Dash called. “It’s us, your friend from Ponyville! It’s me, Rainbow Dash!”

But the supposed Kimono only let out a neighing noise, before desperately working her legs to shuffle herself out the gate. Out of sight, they heard the sounds of her hooves echo through the air, telling them she was running away from the castle as fast as her legs would carry her.

Rainbow Dash wasn’t sure if she was imagining it or not, but she thought she heard a shout in Kimono’s voice saying, ‘I’m sorry!’

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Twilight’s plans to tell everypony about their strange encounter was thwarted as she entered the ballroom, and was met not with ponies crawling into their beds, but ponies hurriedly scurrying about, putting up decorations, unpacking boxes of teas, and otherwise doing what Pinkie Pie ordered them to do. When said party pony spotted the team, her face shone up and she bounced over to them. “Oh my gosh, girls, have you heard? Minty is already on her way, so we’re setting up the party right now!”

“Oh!” reacted Twilight. Seeing her excited face, along with the excited faces of everypony in the room, made her think twice about dropping the news about Kimono. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“But darling, we just saw—”

“...saw the beautiful moon outside,” Twilight finished her sentence, putting up a hoof in front of her. “Luna sure knows her stuff.”

Satisfied with the answer, Pinkie Pie hopped away and resumed organizing the party. The moment she was out of ear-shot, Twilight turned to address her four companions. “I don’t think we should mention Kimono just yet. It would only ruin the mood for Minty’s celebration.”

“But darling, we can’t just leave her,” objected Rainbow Dash.

“You saw how panicked she was,” pointed Twilight. “For whatever reason, she was very desperate of getting away from us. I’ll have one of Luna’s guards follow her, see where she’s headed.”

“Maybe she was under Discord’s influence,” suggested Sunny Daze. “Y’know, like Rainbow Dash.”

“Maybe,” agreed Twilight. “But she looked fine just before she saw us. Maybe the piece of Discord in her reacted to the piece inside of Rainbow Dash...?”

“But that never happened to me and Pinkie Pie, or Rarity,” reminded Rainbow Dash.

“I know, it doesn’t make sense. And that’s why we need to know more before we approach her. Right now, we need to focus on giving Minty the welcome she deserves.”

“Right you are, darling,” agreed Rainbow Dash with a smile. Then let out a gasp. “Speaking of which, Rarity darling, we have to finish you-know what before she arrives!”

“Whatever do you—oh yes!” she seemed to realize. “You’re right! Let’s not waste a moment then. Twilight was kind enough to let me use her old dormitory for the night, so I think we can work there in peace.”

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The party was coming along swimmingly. Under the lead – and the occasional song – of Pinkie Pie, and with a helping hoof from Twilight, all the decorations were soon put into place. Tables had been set up along the walls, on which some extraordinary baked goods, usually reserved for events like the Grand Galloping Gala, had been placed by courtesy of some of the greatest chefs in Canterlot. The other Pinkie Pie, on her end, was determined not to mess up like last time she tried to organize a tea party, and was going around double-checking that there was enough of every flavor of every tea.

“You know,” said Kenbroth, watching her work. “When I suggested a tea party, I didn’t mean for it to be taken literally.”

“I know,” she replied with a giggle. “But it *is* more fun this way. Come to think of it, this is the third party we’ve thrown since we came to Equestria.”

“I suppose ponies of all ages likes to party,” said Kenbroth.

“Hey, Pinkie Pie!” the pony with the same name came up to them. “Come with me, quick.”

She didn’t have much choice in the matter, as she was dragged off with surprising force, coming to a stop by the doorway, where earth pony Rainbow Dash was waiting. “Minty is coming!” the curly-maned Pinkie Pie announced excitedly.

“Right now?” her counterpart asked. “How do you know?”

“Twitchy tail and tingling eye lashes: a friend is dropping from the sky!” she replied. “And since you two are her best friends, I thought you should go meet her. Come with me!”

“Don’t mind if we do, darling,” said Rainbow Dash, following her out the door. “I can’t wait to see my darling Minty again.”

The three of them made their way through the grounds, to an unremarkable spot near the wall. There she pointed to the sky, and sure enough, a silhouette was making its way down toward them. “There, it’s them!”

The straight-maned Pinkie Pie felt her heart beating faster. After all this time worrying about Minty, and after hearing what had happened to her, it felt almost unreal to finally see her again. Any number of things could have gone wrong: what if she hadn’t been found in the desert? What if she had been attacked by some vicious animal? She shook those thoughts out of her head: Minty was alright, that’s all that mattered. The hows and whys could wait.

Two armored ponies, levitating a carriage behind them, set down softly on the ground. On it rode two figures, clearly visible in the moonlight; one of them with an unmistakable shade of minty green.

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In other circumstances, Minty might have been surprised to see there were two Pinkie Pies. She might even have thought it strange that both her friends looked totally different from how she remembered them. But her heart was too busy swelling up in happiness and producing tears of joy. With no doubt in her mind which Pinkie Pie was hers, she flung herself at her at such force that toppled them both to the ground.

“Pinkie Pie!” she cried. “It’s really you! I’ve missed you so much!”

Not letting go of the embrace, Pinkie lifted her head so they were in eye contact. Even with her looks changed, she could see it in her eyes, the way her face moved, that this was none other than Pinkie Pie she knew and loved. “I’ve missed you too, Minty,” she said. “I thought we’d never see you again.”

“Me too...” she sniffed. They held the embrace for a moment longer, before she looked up to see Rainbow Dash’s smiling face.

“Minty, darling,” she spoke through a cracked voice. Nothing else needed to be said; Minty pulled her into the hug, so that the three of them could appreciate the fact that they were finally together again. So that Minty could appreciate the fact that she was alive.

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