

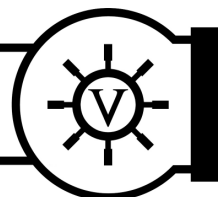
# Hospice

## Cudpug

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**PONY FICTION VAULT**



*Before diving into this, I think some background would be useful. When she was young, she had dreams. Dreams of shining and of making others shine. She made herself and others look beautiful; for that initial interim she held high. When she fell (south of Ponyville, Old Manehattan-land) her dreams became nightmares, seizing her by the hoof and never letting go. She was taken and put into a bed of rust and red crosses. I was one of the few who had the time to give. She wanted me dead but it pained her to see me walk out those sliding doors.*

*Now, I won't pretend I understand. I never will know what she went through for those ten months and two days. She had a constant sting in her side that she claimed she could only numb by sticking her head in the stove. Her nightmares became easier during this time. And I like to think that I did my best in the time that she had to make her comfortable, even when the sting became too painful to breathe.*

*But let it be known that this was all a nightmare that I chose.*

*I wonder if the burden that she left me was worth the memories that we wove.*

## 10 Months, 2 Days

I first met her at the old boutique. It had been restored from a rickety tailoring factory and since made livable. Had you seen it fifty years ago there would be no bedrooms or even a kitchen installed. It had been a place for workers when Ponyville was a small hamlet, converted now into a place of plush luxury. Where she made her softest sleep had once been a room for looming. It was fitting that she would be sleeping in a chamber historically used for the making of fine clothing; purely by coincidence, she too had this penchant for making dresses. She was a fashionable kind, and at once caught my eye when I arrived in town. I was never a local of Ponyville, and, should you have conversed with her, you would scarcely believe that she was. Her tone and conjecture were more fitting of the aristocracy of Canterlot, of whom she sought bravely to emulate. She lived alone in Ponyville to escape from her family, although this was a revelation that took time and investment. To most, she described her presence in Ponyville as a simple stop at a junction, a terminal from which she would embark to greater places in the future. At times she claimed that she wanted to escape, but she was loyal to her homeland and despised being away from there for long periods of time. I never could take what she said without the smallest pinch of salt; she often liked to confuse things when it suited her best. It was a quality that I initially adored, but, like many parts of her, I came to despise.

When we first made contact she was all smiles and fragrance. Her tone was different to that of Ponyville: I had invested in her for this very fact, as it reminded me of the greatest pleasures of back home and my more refined origins commuting between Manehattan and Canterlot. I had no interest in dresses, but had attempted to learn as much as I could about them in order to appeal to the upper-echelons of society. Of course, my knowledge was painfully inadequate, and Rarity corrected me on every account. She always managed to find faults in my fabric-talk. I had asked her all sorts of questions, and she, having wanted a student since infancy, graciously told me everything she knew of the material world. It was a meeting that stuck with me until her walls tightened. It was not until our first conversation reached its end that she gave her name: Rarity, which was just perfect.

I left with no dress, for I had no reason to buy into that culture, only to observe it as one would a fine painting. Our first meeting left a prolonged impression upon me. I felt strangely connected to her, but she had hurried me away when she fell behind on an order. I don't know why I did not return to Old Manehattan that day, and asking me now would yield an entirely different answer than at the time. I would reason now that I stayed in Ponyville another day in order to help her through her troubles – my

recollection of those past months is hazy at best – but at the time I can guarantee that I kept my heart on my hoof just so that I could see her again and attempt to understand why she was so fascinating to me.

I should give some context behind myself, as the part that I play requires it. I had always been the sort to focus on a single goal and pursue it strictly. I lived that sort of life simply because I had nothing to hold me back or to create reservations. I had flown the nest a long time ago, and my siblings were to me infants related by blood rather than bond. I had money, inherited from a favourite Aunt who had once been a wealthy land owner in Trottingham. She had left me the sum in order to spite her sister – my mother – of whom she greatly detested since childhood. It is a long story that I care not to tell; let it be known that it involved my father and, had things worked out differently, I would not be here today. It should furthermore be noted that I, caring more for the wealth of my deceased kin, chose the money over my surviving family, and have been without speaking with them since. I hope that this will explain briefly why I was able to uproot myself and drift into Rarity's world so easily.

Meeting Rarity was not entirely by chance. I had been directed to her by Twilight Sparkle, one of the senior authoritative ponies in Ponyville, despite being from Canterlot originally. I had known Twilight Sparkle since childhood, which should explain where I personally spent part of my life growing up, although as a youngster she was difficult to associate with. She went off to Magic Kindergarten whilst still a filly, and after that I didn't really see her again until by chance arriving in Ponyville years later. This Twilight Sparkle was a much different mare to the one that I remembered; she actually seemed to want to make friends, which was one thing that she always persisted was not necessary and would interfere with her studies. Because of Twilight's new position on friendship, however, I was able to meet with her and we got along well. I also met her friends, all of them bar Rarity in fact, at a small get-together that they were having in celebration of a Ponyville tradition. Rarity had not attended, although her dresses had been on display. That is how I came to learn of the beauty of her art.

Her friends were kind and talented, and always indulging in lessons of friendship, but I cared more about the mysteries of Rarity than watching Rainbow Dash perform aerial tricks. I did my best to learn everything that I could about her from her friends, but they told me that Rarity often isolated herself with her work. She would spend hours, I was told by one pony by the name of Applejack, fiddling away in what she would personally describe as organised chaos, attempting to perfect that which was already perfect. She had a meticulous eye for detail, but one that left her obsessive. Whilst remaining a good friend to those other ponies, Rarity was described as being a comfortable loner, and

combined with her regal beauty this was one of the more captivating features of her form. I resolved to learn more, oblivious as I was to the coming storm.

### **8 Months, 15 Days**

"Keep your eyes closed."

"This is foolish..."

"Just keep them closed..."

I took Rarity by the hoof and guided her from the landing into the bedroom. She usually objected to my little games, but I liked playing them with her anyway; I could tell that she was grateful, even when she was trying to remain as composed as could be. We had been associating for just over a month, but she wasn't yet entirely comfortable around me. Rarity had made it known to me that she wasn't in the position to start a relationship, and that this would remain the case for the foreseeable future. Romance was never my intention with this pony; I merely loved her artistic vision and her creative passion and wished to see them flourish. I wanted to spend time with her learning her ways and methods, but I would describe the infatuation as delicately platonic. Perhaps I foolishly believed that if I invested enough time with her she would change her mind, and that we would one day fall in love. One thing I came to realise about Rarity, though, was that she rarely changed her mind when she gave that stern, wide-eyed look. That particular look was the only way that I could truly guarantee that she was being serious.

"Can I open them yet?" she asked sweetly.

"Open them."

She did, and her heart must have skipped a beat when she saw her name on the front cover of Manehattan's biggest designer magazine, the *Rococo Report*. She gnawed at her bottom lip, but I explained to her the connections that I had spoken with in Manehattan and the positive things that they had said about the dresses that I had sent to them. Rarity became indignant – I should have guessed it would happen – and I had to spend a considerable amount of time calming her down. As it turns out, the particular examples that I had sent off were, in her words, 'horrible'. She could not believe that I had sent her work to great fashion designers without her consent. Doing nice things for Rarity was always a case of walking on egg shells, even when the intention was pure. It was so easy for her to jump from elation to disgust. Her unpredictability at this point was still forgivable: perhaps it was because we were relatively new to communicating on a regular basis, but she tended to let me off and hold fewer grudges at that early stage of contact, and I was more tolerant of her neurotic whims.

I gave her some room to vent. "Would you like me to leave?" I asked, but she shook her head and gazed back towards the magazine. Although there was no image of Rarity – the pony on the front of the magazine was a photographer of some kind – the caption on the front hinted that there was some form of review of 'the next up-and-coming star' within. She beamed up at me quite suddenly and nudged the edition closer.

"Read it to me," she demanded, and I did as she asked, flicking to the correct page that I had bookmarked the moment that I had read the article.

"Ponyville is home to lots of rural charm," I began, "but none is more charming than a small, unassuming building called Carousel Boutique. Within the four walls of this converted loom, one might stumble upon the humble beauty known as Rarity." She liked it especially when I mentioned her name; she had an almost permanent smile on her face as I read the article to her.

"With her dazzling dresses of ornate extravagance," Rarity repeated to herself after I had finished reading. "Those journalists like to use fancy language when describing what is basically just boring old fabric..."

Her low self-esteem was a quality that, just over one month into our situation, I was willing to appease. I used many rehearsed words to make her feel better about herself: telling her that she was talented and beautiful, articulate and special. Of course, none of these were lies, but they were speeches that became common on my lips. She would eventually become immune to these words; it became increasingly difficult to get her to smile. But on that day, when the article was published, she was smiling happily, and even put a hoof on my shoulder in thanks.

"That was most generous of you," she said earnestly, and I knew that I had done something right. I think it was that particular event that made me want to continue doing nice things for Rarity, and it was also the event that made her want me around more often. Although I'd only known her for a month, she had grown to enjoy my company, and after I had presented the article to her she asked me to stay for the rest of the day. I mostly just sat around whilst she worked, occasionally greeting customers who entered her boutique. I naturally inquired with every customer if they had come to see Rarity's things because of the article, but they were as surprised to see it as Rarity had been. Rarity saw that as a negative, but I successfully inverted her thought process on that one: if she was getting customers without the additional advertising, she would undoubtedly get some great publicity once the big fashion names picked up on her.

I sat at the counter most of the day dealing with the financial aspects of her work. She appreciated this, as Rarity was more of a creative entity than a bureaucratic one. She was poor with numbers, but I helped her organise the finances of her store and even pushed a few additional sales by using token phrases:

'Cash-back guarantee'

'No VAT'.

The locals didn't quite understand this jargon – it was more of a big-city kind of pitch – but they happily purchased more of Rarity's fine wears when they thought that they were getting a better deal. In fact, if I recall, Rarity closed the shop an hour or so earlier than normal, because she had more than exceeded her sales quota for the day.

She thanked me for sticking around. Before that, I don't think she'd wondered at all where I had been staying since being in Ponyville. To call Rarity self-absorbed would do her an injustice, but she did enjoy talking about herself more than inquiring into the lives of others. That was just fine with me, as I rarely had anything interesting to say. My life, at that point, revolved around Rarity's career and her whims. I explained to her that I had been staying at a tavern in the middle of the village, near the big fountain that had been nicknamed the Phoenix Feather, as a year or so ago, or so I am told, Princess Celestia's own Phoenix burst into flame beside it. Rarity nodded, glad that I at least had a roof over my head. She asked me a few details about where I was from and what I was doing in Ponyville: it seems strange that after being in town for over a month she only now was asking these questions, but that was how Rarity's mind worked. She did not think of the immediate things; too often she focused on what the future brings.

I bid her farewell and took my leave of the boutique. It was a cold night, but I felt warmed by the belief that I had made Rarity genuinely happy. The trot back to the tavern had never felt so quick as it did that night, until Rarity's world temporarily left my sight.

### **8 Months, 14 Days**

I woke up early that morning. I'd never been one to sleep for particularly long stretches, but I must have been lying in bed staring at the roof since four in the morning. I still cannot recall why I could not sleep very well that night, but I remember leaving the tavern by five and going for a walk around Ponyville. It was still dark. Dark, with vicious clouds above. The Pegasus Sky Patrol would be having a busy day shifting it all – they were naturals at getting up early. I perched on a bench near Carousel Boutique and sat staring into a puddle; the rain the night before had left sporadic patches along the path. I

looked good: wide awake, despite my lack of sleep, and full of colour. Occasionally a pony would pass me on their way to work – usually those working the surrounding farms – and I would greet them with a little wave of the hoof. I was still getting to know these ponies, but they seemed to be a welcoming bunch.

I think I made my way over to Carousel Boutique around half past six. I didn't expect Rarity to be awake, but I tried to open the door anyway. As a matter of fact, the door was unlocked and the familiar bell chimed, signalling my arrival. I didn't see Rarity. Instead there were all sorts of ponies wearing every colour you could possibly imagine, most of them armed with cameras or quills. They were a fashion crew, and they were here for one very clear reason. They barely acknowledged me, although one large stallion did tell me to move several times, as I was apparently blocking the best light in the room no matter where I stood. The ambush were all muttering about Rarity, and how she still had not emerged from her room. I grew a little concerned. I wondered if nerves had gotten to her. You must remember that I felt responsible for everything that happened on that day; it was because of me contacting the Manehattan media that these ponies had come to see Rarity.

I tried to get by and see her, but my way was blocked by enthusiastic ponies. Luckily, they didn't know that Rarity had another entrance into the back-room. I had learned this the past month, and often used it when I wanted to surprise her with my arrival: the bell at the entrance was too much of a give-away. I left the boutique briefly and trotted around the back, entering through the rear. I took the second staircase up to her bedroom and lightly tapped on the door.

"Rarity, is everything okay?" I asked. I knew that she would recognise me. I heard a small voice and then the latch on the door clicked. I butted the door open with my head, using a hind leg to quickly close it after me. Rarity made her way back towards her bed, flopping out pathetically.

"What's wrong?" I asked, remaining still.

She lifted her head slightly to look at me. It was the first time that I had seen her without her mane brushed and curled.

"I am unwell," Rarity said slowly. "I feel nauseous and my head feels as if it is splitting in two. My back hurts, and my hooves are itchy. I cannot breathe... I am having palpitations..."



She was growing steadily more insufferable. I moved to perch next to her on the bed, touching her face softly with my hoof. "This is all nerves, Rarity," I said. "I know you wanted Stardom, and now that it has arrived I can understand that you would be anxious."

Rarity shook her head, her eyes squinting together. "I'm not nervous. I feel genuinely unwell! I have for weeks. I cannot go and greet those ponies..."

I was entirely focused on making her dreams come true. She had spoken to me at length of the power of those dreams, and I felt as if they were slipping. I butted against her horn with the top of my head, lifting her in my hooves and helping her to stand. "Come on, Rarity. This is who you are, and who you were born to be. All of those ponies have come to see your work. I heard ponies from all over Equestria down there. Let's not keep them waiting any longer, huh?"

She sighed. I had convinced her, and she was willing to follow my every word on that occasion without a shadow of doubt. She shooed me out of the room so that she could prepare herself – she had been wearing a pink nightgown when I had entered – and assured me that in five minutes she would be out.

## **2 Months, 6 Days**

"How is Rarity coping?"

"Pass on our best wishes."

"Five minutes of fresh air won't do her any harm."

It was the same deal again. I was staring blankly at Twilight Sparkle, who had that usual look of mock-concern on her face. It was the expression of a pony that had given up. Rarity had not yet adopted it. I sighed and nodded to Twilight, clearing my throat of the usual sickly deposit that gathered whenever she and her friends asked me the same questions.

"Oh, she's doing okay," I said dryly. "The usual. She's still working on that scarf. It's a funny story, actually. She was knitting away at it and one of the staff saw her and commented that it reminded her of one that she bought in Ponyville a couple of years ago. Well, when Rarity told her that it was her who once supplied Ponyville with scarves and so on, she couldn't help but remark how much of a small world it really is. Remember those fuzzy scarves that she used to make?"

Of course Twilight Sparkle remembered. She used to lap those up whenever Winter Wrap-up came by. I'd only been in Ponyville for one of those, a couple of months ago. I remember it being a fun day with the gang; we were all wearing the scarves that Rarity had made for us. She hadn't been able to attend, but when seeing her that evening she'd been incredibly excited that the ponies were enjoying what she had made for them. It was a shame that she didn't work from the boutique now, but anypony would have agreed that it just wasn't practical.

"I'm on my way to see her now," I said. "I'll pass on your wishes, as you say."

"All Rarity needs is a positive attitude," Twilight yapped. "I was doing some reading the other day. I found a great book on homoeopathic remedies for all sorts of ailments. It's surprising how much healthier a pony can become just from having a better outlook. At first I was sceptical, but the book appears to have some credible sources behind it. I'll give you the book at some point."

That was just like Twilight – a textbook junky, but one that really needed to learn to keep her mouth closed. I knew the last thing that Rarity wanted was to read some bullshit book on the power of cosmic energy.

"Thank you. She'll definitely appreciate that."

"Oh, and before I forget: Pinkie Pie is having a party this weekend. We'll be hoping to see you there."

"...I really must be going."

I did not want any part in Pinkie Pie's party. It was cruel how quickly these ponies could shift from discussing intimate issues concerning Rarity to boasting about the upcoming joys of a party. Rarity would not attend, and Twilight Sparkle knew this; the last three or four times that she'd mentioned parties to me, she had conveniently forgotten to mention Rarity. She would not attend, but the mere gesture would be appreciated. I did not like Rarity being ignored and excluded by her friends.

I don't know what time it was when I arrived at my destination. It was irrelevant, really. Rarity was usually asleep nowadays anyway, so a few hours here and there didn't make the slightest bit of difference. I approached the desk and gave my name, although this was just procedure: I knew full-well where Rarity was and by now they were more than familiar with me. They kept an eye on me, as usual, but things had died down since my

big apology. I passed a mirror, although I was now beyond checking my appearance. I probably looked completely awful, but that was okay, because so would Rarity.

I sort of drifted to the door and twisted the knob. Rarity was sleeping soundly. I was glad that her dreams were less hostile than mine of late. I perched on a seat beside the bed and leaned a little closer to her. She was definitely submerged in some alternate realm and looked content to stay there, at least for now. I closed my eyes tightly and sat back in the chair. If I could just catch a little bit of sleep now, she couldn't accuse me later of neglecting her. I feared her waking far too soon, and the usual silence that would fill that crippled room. There was a clicking noise and I opened a single eye, noticing a white-clad stallion whose name I keep forgetting standing in the doorway. He said some shit about the next steps and progress. Our options were minimal, he would come to confess.

## 7 Months, 24 Days

"What are the options?"

"Well, I can go for the black silk or the red."

I preferred her in the black, but I was sure that she would pick the red. It was a gamble, but I pointed a hoof towards the red. She raised an eyebrow and frowned. "I prefer the black," she said, and I rolled my eyes in response. Now that I think about it, she probably did prefer black for a business meeting. The red looked too seductive, especially when she was going out in order to have a conversation with some high-flying noble from Canterlot about placing a bulk-order for her dresses. I was a little worried about her, but in the past month or so she had become a lot more secure around the wealthy and elite. I glanced across the room to her bedside table, noticing that she had chosen not to wear the sapphire tiara.

"When will you be back?" I questioned as she slipped on the black dress. She admired herself in the mirror and muttered a few words about not knowing when she would return, and that I probably shouldn't wait around for her. I asked if she wanted me to open the shop today, but she didn't think it was necessary. "Most of my good stock will be coming with me for the demonstration," she explained. "You would just be selling the concepts. We will open up again in two days."

"Why two?" I questioned. "What's happening tomorrow?"

She finally looked away from her reflection towards me, her lips curling into a pout. "You always forget things," she commented, tutting irritably. "I hate it when you forget things."

I searched my mind for what tomorrow was; was it some form of anniversary, or maybe a party? She kept her gaze fixed on me, her faith in me dying with every second that passed. I rubbed the back of my head nervously and she sighed, using her magic to lift a few dresses into a large bag. "I am glad that you pay attention to the things happening in my life," she huffed, and I exhaled an apology.

"I am going to the Royal Canterlot Hall, remember?" she said after half a minute of silence. "They are playing the *Symphony of Seven Paladins*. I would have invited you, but I am afraid that the tickets are incredibly difficult to get one's hooves on, and I am personally only attending as a guest myself."

I understood. The past month had, for Rarity, been an incredibly busy time. It had all started when she was featured in the *Rococo Report* – which was my doing, it should be noted – during the middle of last month. She had been anxious at first, but her dresses had been well-received and she had been invited days later to all manner of photo shoots. She was travelling a lot more now, and although I did my best to go with her as her personal associate, my uses were already beginning to dwindle. She had a chauffeur to carry her bags for her waiting outside, and when arriving in Canterlot she now had various ponies with which to mingle and discuss high-art. The clientèle that she now kept were far beyond me in class and sophistication, and as a result I already felt alienated from Rarity. I guess that was why making mistakes and having her in a huff with me concerned me so much; seeing less of her was a challenge in itself, but irritating her when we did get the time to interact was even worse. I bowed my head and shuffled my hooves against the carpet.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You've been busy lately. I get mixed up with what you're doing."

"We will open the shop again in two days," Rarity repeated. "I promise. And I will be able to tell you about the Symphony. We can catch up then."

I appreciated her gesture and nodded. She smiled and turned to leave. Her cat, Opalescence, did not seem so appreciative of her owner, however, and hissed at Rarity as she opened the door. Rarity nuzzled her pet and promised that she would return soon, guaranteeing a gift for the feline from Canterlot. This appeased Opal and she began to groom herself in approval. Rarity smiled and left, uttering a quick 'goodbye' before disappearing from sight. She had added that I should behave myself whilst she was away, and I made my own promise at that moment that I would.

With Rarity out of the house, I sat next to Opalescence and smiled down at her weakly. "I guess we both miss Rarity, huh?" I asked, but the cat had no intention of bonding with me and instead moved to claw viciously at her toy mouse. I sighed and looked to the door. It would be a while before Rarity returned, and without the option to open up the shop, I had little to do. I debated over whether or not to go and see Twilight Sparkle and the others, but I was soon distracted by a large book that had been left open on Rarity's work desk. I approached it curiously, folding the corner of the page over so that I did not lose her place. I checked the front cover. *A Guide To Baroque Attire* it read in fancy gold lettering. I turned to the introduction – that alone spanned thirty pages – and set about reading.

## 5 Months, 7 Days

*"Dear Miss Rarity,*

*I am writing to you in order to explain my situation. I have watched you for many months now and have observed your artistic vision with an eager eye. You are truly something special, and all of Canterlot love what you have provided. Manehattan may have caught onto your enterprise first, but Canterlot is where you belong. You should certainly consider becoming a permanent resident.*

*On a more personal note, I have become increasingly interested in you. This may sound forward, especially as you consider me a friend and close associate. But before you refuse my offer, I just wish it to be known that I can make great things happen for you, and that I would hold you in the most lionised esteem known to pony-kind. When you are not here I miss you terribly. It has become increasingly difficult to find time when you are not engaging in business meetings or attending balls and dinner parties. You are certainly the crème de la crème of high-society, and I look forward to when I may see you again.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Me~"*

## 5 Months, 5 Days

Rarity was coming home today. She'd been away on a week-long trip in Manehattan. I would have gone with her, but she personally insisted, for this trip in particular, that I should stay at the shop and run it in her absence. She had left a lot of stock that needed selling, most of it dresses and hats that she was happy with, and had instructed me to sell what I could. She would be happy to know that I had done exactly that, and had sold pretty much everything that she'd asked me to. In fact, because business was so good – Rarity's name was really beginning to become a tourist attraction for Ponyville – I had pulled a few things out of the back-room and sold them as well. One customer had been interested in a floral ball-room gown, and although it hadn't been on Rarity's list of things to sell, I'd known that she had something that fit the bill that she'd made weeks ago and just left in the back to rot. The pony had paid good money for it, and I was excited to see the look on Rarity's face when she saw what I had sold across the week.

The bell of the store chimed and I looked up happily from the desk, half-expecting to see Rarity. Instead it was Twilight Sparkle.

"Wow, the shop is looking empty..." she commented, looking around at all of the bare pony mannequins. I smiled back at her, falling back into my seat. "Yeah, business is really good at the moment."

"Rarity must really appreciate the help that you're giving her," Twilight added. I looked down at the stock list, observing the many ticks beside the listed dresses. Twilight lingered in the doorway for a moment, glancing around the shop floor. "So is Rarity not back yet?"

"Not yet," I replied. "She didn't give a specific time. I think she had some stuff to do in Manehattan before coming home, so I expect she'll be back around lunchtime."

"It's after lunchtime," Twilight said, pointing a hoof towards the big clock. "She must be running late."

I hadn't noticed the time.

"It happens."

Twilight didn't really have any business with me, although she probably had a hundred questions that she would have asked, had we been in a more private situation. She looked around awkwardly. "Well, I guess I'll be off," she said. "How about you and Rarity come and find me when she gets home?"

"If it's not too late," I responded, and Twilight, realising that my mood had turned sour, took her leave around that time. I sighed and checked over the stock list again. I must have read that damn thing enough times to be labelled 'obsessive'. I couldn't shake the feeling that those ticks would erase themselves. A while passed and I decided to head into the kitchen and make myself a sandwich; anything to take my mind off of waiting for Rarity to get back. I began to butter the bread, and then stuck my head in the cupboard to scan for anything that looked edible. I suddenly felt a cold sensation on my flank and instinctively shot up, bashing my head on the interior of the cupboard. I heard a concerned noise and pulled my head back, rubbing it with a hoof the second that I was free. Rarity was standing there, all plastered in colours, looking rather apologetic indeed. I nursed the bump on my head, doing my best to smile rather than wince.

"When did you get back? I didn't hear the bell ring."

"Darling, I took the back entrance," she said with a guilty expression. "I know you like to sneak up on me sometimes. I thought that I would return the favour. I am sorry that you banged your head."

Funnily enough, the pain had completely subsided. I decided to make the sandwich up for her instead, insisting that she sit and tell me all about her trip. She spoke at length as she happily munched on the sandwich, explaining how she had not eaten a proper meal all week. "It has been completely hectic," she explained. "I have barely had the time to sleep, let alone gulp down a meal."

"You need to take better care of yourself," I said. "It's not healthy to keep pushing yourself as hard as you are."

She nodded in agreement, tearing off the crust from the sandwich with her dainty hooves. "Don't worry, I won't be going away again for a while now, so you can lavish me with as much food as you like over the coming weeks... as long as I do not become fat."

You can imagine how happy I was that she wasn't going to be leaving again for a while. "How come?" I asked simply, and she explained that she had sold everything that she had taken with her, and thus needed to make some more dresses before she could even think about going on another trip. Her attention turned to how well I had done the past week; she moved a little closer to me when she mentioned that the shop floor had looked rather empty when she had tiptoed through. "Unless you are hiding my dresses somewhere, I imagine that you had a productive week?"

"You could say that," I smiled. "Everything on the stock list has gone." I paused for a moment. "I guess you'll have to stay even longer now. You need to re-stock the shop before you can worry about making excess dresses to sell elsewhere."

She grinned and nudged the plate to me with a hoof. She had left the crusts perfectly trimmed. "Did anything arrive for me while I was away?" she asked, looking around the kitchen. I shook my head quickly. "No. But Twilight Sparkle did come looking for you about half an hour ago. She wanted to see how your trip went, I think."

"Ah, I see," Rarity said, yawning. "Perhaps I shall visit her tomorrow. I would rather just spend tonight relaxing. I am finding myself more and more tired of late. It was a long trip back from Manehattan, after all. Oh, and you will never believe who I bumped into whilst I was there."

"Who?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Orange. They are Applejack's Uncle and Aunt. Terribly nice ponies, and certainly representative of the upper-class of Manehattan. They wanted to know how The Apple Family are coping. Have you seen Applejack?"



"Earlier in the week I bumped into Applejack in town. She seemed fine."

Rarity appeared relieved to hear this.

Mr. and Mrs. Orange were wealthy aristocrats living in Manehattan. Whilst not residents of Canterlot themselves, they had many strong connections with the Canterlot elite and were no strangers to dressing up fancily. Mr. Orange made his fortune in the textile industry, and he and his wife were major contributors to a large corporation dealing with the exportation of linen and cotton. It was no great surprise that they had had a profound interest in Rarity; they certainly existed within the same sort of occupational spectrum. Rarity told me a little more about how Mr. Orange had met with her during her week stay in Manehattan to discuss helping her dresses sell to a national market. "At the moment I work on a fairly regional level," she explained. "But Mr. Orange has the contacts and the charisma to help me sell my dresses throughout all of Equestria. He says that the northern regions would be particularly interested in what I have to sell, as they don't generally get fashion like mine up there. It's a tragedy, really."

I nodded. Rarity had lost none of her flare, and her confidence seemed greater than ever before. She slipped off of her chair and stretched out her hooves, letting out a louder yawn than I believe I could muster. "I'm going to have a lie-down," she said to me. "Thank you so much for looking after the shop for me this week. I am extremely grateful." Of course, it was absolutely no problem, and I told her this much. She beamed from ear to ear and took her leave of the kitchen, only to poke her head around the door again moments later.

"Are you sure that nothing arrived for me?" she persisted, and I nodded to myself.

"Yeah, nothing. Were you expecting something?"

She left without a word, and a few seconds later I heard the creaking of the wonky floorboard at the top of the stairs. I sighed and prodded my stomach with a hoof. I no longer had an appetite. I lifted the plate and took it over to the dustbin. I flipped open the lid, ready to pour the crusts into the murky depths. My eyes caught five or six strands of torn paper, and I quickly poured the remnants of Rarity's meal over them. I didn't want to see those again. I closed the lid of the bin as fast as I could, almost dropping the plate on the way to the sink.

## 2 Months, 2 Days

I'd avoided Pinkie Pie's party. They'd asked if I'd wanted them to save me a slice of cake, and, to keep up appearances, I'd accepted. I could just throw it away with the countless other pieces and they wouldn't know; my waste disposal had become a pit of lies over the past few months. Somehow, cake didn't taste good any more. Perhaps my opinion on it would be better if every other day Rarity wasn't served the same sickly-sweet gooey mess that dared call itself a cupcake. It wasn't like anything that I'd tasted from the bakery in Ponyville; it was clinical and inauthentic.

I'd been sitting in the bathroom for a long time now. Somepony had left the tap running slightly at the sink, and so every three seconds without fail I would hear the sound of dripping water. I was trying to arrange the frequent sound into a melody in my head. Perhaps if I tapped my hoof against the door I could add a little bit of percussion. Then I'd just need to find a few other make-shift instruments and I could perform my own rendition of the *Symphony of Seven Paladins*. Rarity would no-doubt appreciate that. The urinal cakes could be my audience.

I heard the door open and another pony entered. He didn't stay for long; just washed his hooves and then dried them off on some paper towels. I held my breath until they had left. I remained immobile for a few more seconds; enough to tell that the ignorant bastard had ruined my musical project. I hoisted myself up and approached the sink. He'd twisted the tap tightly to prevent it from dripping.

I made my way back towards Rarity's room, passing a few ponies that were now familiar to me. Well, most of them were; I spotted a couple of new faces. I would have to come up with names for them next time my attention was slipping.

I wanted to call the brown-haired mare Chocolate Cake, because her scent was nauseating.

Rarity was awake, lying on her side and staring into space. When I sat down beside the bed her eyes flickered to me, although she didn't really focus.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"Making music," I responded. "You know, I always wanted to be in a musical troupe when I was younger. I grew up watching the Octavia Quartet, both generations, in fact. Even the latest iteration is pretty good."

"Do you have something for me?" Rarity questioned, sitting up against her pillow weakly.

"Not yet," I said. "I couldn't get in contact with him."

"Why... am I not surprised...?" she muttered under her breath, and I only just managed to avoid barking at her.

"I will do it," I insisted. "Just... be patient. It takes longer than you'd think."

"If it was me... I would have had it done days ago..."

Of course she would have. She could say whatever she wanted and I would have to agree. It was my job as the puppet to just sit there and nod, regardless of who she was putting down. Most of the time it was me. I'd like to say that things were the way that they had been before, but she was still angry with me: I could tell from her continuously bitter tone. No amount of apologies could change that, it seemed.

"Hey, somepony left you some grapes," I said, hinting with a hoof to the stalk. "Did you eat them all by yourself?"

"Don't... call me fat..." she said. "I hate it."

"Well, I mean –"

"Don't... make small-talk. I can't stand it."

So that was that. I just sat there in silence and stared at my hooves. I could have left – it would have been so easy to just get up and go – but I was stuck to that chair as if a magnet was beneath it. The white-clad stallion came in and checked Rarity; for him she sat up and fluttered her eyelashes, and did exactly as he asked. When he left she let out a deep exhale of breath, closing her eyes. "He's lovely..." she mouthed. "A great stallion with a big heart."

I nodded. It seemed to be all that I could do nowadays.

"I want you to do something for me," Rarity suddenly said, gulping in the back of her throat. Her mouth was dry. I offered to help her drink her water, but she didn't want me to treat her like an infant. She clumsily gulped at the water, swallowing it down painfully. "It is Pinkie Pie's party today, is it not?" she asked when she caught her breath.

I nodded, but she seemed to hate that.

"Yeah. Yes, it is. I think..."

"You don't think...you know..." Rarity muttered. "Go to the party. Just go."

"I'd rather be here with you..."

"I would rather you not be here with me," Rarity answered bluntly. "Go... go on and enjoy your party. Leave me alone again like you always do. I don't want you here. Your presence... I hate it." She folded her hooves over each other, turning back against her pillow. I tried to speak, but no words formed. At least nothing that she wanted to respond to, anyway. How long could Rarity keep punishing me for? I didn't deserve what she was putting me through. If I left, she would only hold it against me the next time that I showed my face. And if I didn't go, she would resent me for staying. I sat there, my eyes fixed on her docile form, weighing up the decision in my head. I could see the rim of her pillow growing damp. Tears, probably.

I remained rooted to the spot. In this sort of stalemate position, it was almost impossible to get through.

I don't even recall which of the two of us said the words:

*"Fuck you."*

## 8 Months, 1 Day

"Excuse me?"

"What would you like for your birthday?"

"You cannot just simply ask a lady such a question!"

Rarity was pouting. She wanted a gift for her birthday but she was giving me no clues as to what she desired. I knew that something fashion-orientated would be a good start, but she was the fussiest pony when it came to what to wear. Personally, I never had a problem finding things to wear; I just slipped on what felt most comfortable or practical on a given day. Take today, for instance. The last of the leaves were falling from the trees in golden and brown gusts, and the chill in the air required suitable measures to be taken. So I had vowed to wear a big, thick outfit. What it lacked in aesthetic appeal it more than made up for in warmth. But Rarity refused to wear something like that, and instead made it her mission to represent fashion at every turn. I just wished that every now and then she would take a break from fashion, although I was partly responsible for her recent eccentricities. The article in the *Rococo Report* a couple of weeks ago had made a huge difference to both Rarity's career and her behaviour.

At first she had been swamped by ponies who were eager to swipe interviews with her and take samples of her dresses away with them for evaluation. It wasn't long after that the invitations had started arriving. In the past four days she had received four letters. Because I was working the shop both with her and for her when she was away on these new and exciting business ventures, I had become something of a messenger, collecting together any sort of note, letter or package that arrived for Rarity, and then revealing them when she arrived home. Next week she had a few business meetings lined up, but today she was, as far as I knew, remaining at the shop to work on new designs that had been requested of her. Particularly, one designer from Manehattan had been especially interested in anything incorporating baby-blue sapphires. Rarity had always been a large admirer of these small, milky gemstones, but they were difficult to get one's hooves on. Luckily, Rarity had a swarm of ponies at her command who had gone out to fetch her as many as they could from the surrounding mountains. And although she now had enough to make her dresses, she required time and great concentration in order to actually piece together her works of art.

Her birthday was coming up in a couple of days. It was at the start of the month and I wanted to do something special for it. The last few years for my own birthdays I had celebrated them alone, or perhaps with a few choice friends sitting around twiddling

hooves in boredom. I didn't want Rarity's birthday to be the same sort of situation. I had already contacted Pinkie Pie to bake a cake for the occasion, but had explicitly demanded that the cake not display Rarity's age, for she was conscious of getting older and hated to acknowledge this. For such a young mare, she certainly had a lot of insecurities about her own mortality. No amount of objection from me could change her opinion, sadly, even when I stated that I was noticeably older than she.

It was one of those surprise party things. I had never really liked the concept myself, and, had a pony ever chosen to throw me a surprise party, I can imagine that I would despise the entire ordeal. I hoped that Rarity wouldn't feel the same way: she had said several times that she did not wish for a party and would prefer to just concentrate on getting her orders finished in time for her upcoming meetings, and so I was understandably dubious. The party wasn't even my greatest immediate concern – I needed to find a present for the delightful unicorn, and with only a couple of days left to spare, time was running out. Because Rarity was busy with snipping and sewing and stitching and cross-stitching, I felt that I would be something of a burden to her for the next few hours if I hung about. Under the clever ruse that I was simply going to be getting out of her mane to let her concentrate, I left Carousel Boutique with the intention of finding her the perfect gift.

I took the train to Manehattan. I hadn't been back there for years. I had grown up with my mother and father in Old Manehattan; the poorer district that hid behind the surface of the urbanised tourist spots. I wasn't actually as poor as I am perhaps making out; our home was one of the nicest in the area, and, as I have stated previously, my own poverty was relieved when my rich Aunt passed away, leaving me with a lot of her wealth and inheritance. I had escaped from Manehattan to move into her home in Trottingham for six months after her passing, enjoying the lifestyle of an aristocratic pony until it grew stale. From there I moved on, travelling just about everywhere imaginable outside of Manehattan. That Rarity was now dealing with ponies in my home-city concerned me a little, but thankfully she would not be visiting the slums; these fancy business ponies and fashion designers occupied the rich metropolis rather than the residential back-alleys.

The train was a slow ride, although the trip was not as long as some. I sat behind a moustached pony and his wife. The stallion was complaining about the state of the rail system in Equestria and how, under a previous mayor, the route from Ponyville to Manehattan, and, in fact, all public transport including wagons and balloons in the region, had been far superior. He was no supporter of the current authority in Ponyville, but by his accent I established that he wasn't a local to either of the destinations that this route touched upon. His wife was the silent-looking type, hiding behind waves of purple hair and mane and nodding and tutting whenever her husband required a degree of

confirmation of her involvement as the recipient of his rant. She occasionally let out a sigh, tilting her head further away from her partner and glancing out of the window on the other side of the carriage. When her husband lifted himself and left the carriage for whatever reason, I was glad that my ears could finally recover.

"Excuse me?" a husky voice asked. The mare had turned and poked her head over the seat to stare down at me. At first I expected her to be speaking with somepony else, but I soon realised that the carriage was empty except for the two of us and an elderly couple a fair few seats in front.

"Can I help you?" I asked, clearing my throat. I hadn't expected to be taken by surprise. The pony shook her head. "I am sorry about my husband. He...can get carried away," she said delicately. "He really is good pony, though. You just have to see through his stony exterior."

"That is quite all right," I smiled back at her. She didn't turn back into her seat, instead rising from her chair to sit beside me. I moved closer to the window, trying my best to keep my distance. This was a rather unusual situation.

"Are you heading to Manehattan?" she asked quizzically.

I rolled my tongue, exhaling under my breath. "Yes, Manehattan. Yourself?"

"The plaza district," she nodded, holding a hoof out to me. "I am Clemency. It is nice to meet you." I hesitated for a moment, looking up to see if her husband was around. I couldn't see him, and so shook her by the hoof. "In Manehattan, one kisses the hoof of a lady," she stated, her dark eyes fixing on my own. I laughed nervously, struggling to keep eye contact with her. Although I would like to say that I didn't engage her then, I thought that it would be easier just to play along. And so I introduced myself and kissed her hoof and she smiled sweetly, fluttering black eyelashes that were longer than any that I had before seen. I looked up once again to the doors of the carriage, biting my bottom lip a little too hard.

"Is your husband coming back?" I asked. "I mean, where did he go?"

"Don't worry about him," she said bluntly. "He'll probably be on the back carriage with his pipe. That is usually what 'I need some fresh air' means in his tongue."

I sensed a degree of resentment from this Clemency pony towards her partner. It was a conflict that I did not wish to be a part of. Whatever her reason was for attaching herself to me on this trip – boredom, playfulness, lust – it was a game that I wanted no

involvement in. "I think that you should return to your seat," I said shakily. "Your husband might get the wrong idea."

The female scowled. "Oh, is Clemency no longer allowed to speak to kind strangers on her travels?" she worded, her choice of syntax unusual to my ears. "Is she to be forever bound by the shackles of her oppressive husband?"

Her sudden revelation was the absolute embodiment of why I had wanted to avoid any interaction with this mare. In my experience I have found that when a couple are in a hateful relationship, remaining together for reasons beyond your own comprehension, it is absolutely imperative that you avoid either commenting on their situation or involving yourself in their domestic dispute.

*"He beats me, you know?"*

Well that didn't help. What kind of pony throws their greatest emotional bugbears at a complete stranger? Whilst it tweaked the interests of my compassionate side to hear her troubles, I had made this journey in order to purchase a gift for Rarity, not to play personal psychiatrist to an insecure mess-of-a-mare. The couple sitting at the front of the carriage had turned back to see why she had raised her voice. I waved a little hoof at them awkwardly, which proved enough to make them return to their own business. My eyes fixed on Clemency for a moment. "I am sorry to hear that," I said.

"To hear what?" Clemency asked blankly. I was about to ask her what in Equestria she was doing when I noticed that her husband had entered the carriage once more. He was towering above the both of us, staring down through rounded spectacles at his wife, only giving me a secondary glance.

"Get back into your seat," he growled to his wife. Clemency nodded.

"Darling, this kind pony was just asking for directions. I was just going to point out on a map where he needs to go."

"Where are you going?" he asked me sternly, his eyes narrowing. Clemency lifted herself from the seat and trotted back to her own, curling up on it. This gave her moustache-wearing husband the chance to perform his own interrogation. He repeated his question. It was louder this time.

"I'm looking for a particular shop. A nice shop where I can buy something pretty for a lovely mare back in Ponyville." I thought that I'd slip in the fact that I was only making this trip for Rarity; perhaps he wouldn't think there was something going on between me



and his mare if he believed that I was already in some form of a relationship. He withdrew a pocket watch from his suit and checked the time. "You should pay a visit to the *Glass House*," he said. "If you're looking to buy a gift for a special lady, that is the place to go... providing you have the bits to afford a nice gift."

I recognised the name. "Is that the little thatched store on *Cleveland Street*?"

The pony laughed. "It hasn't been a little thatched store in years! They restored the place and made it extra-modern. It is extremely with-the-times."

"Thank you for the information," I replied. Although I hadn't expected the pony to give me any form of useful feedback, he had actually given me a rather good idea. I saw him place a hoof on the shoulder of his purple-maned mare, staring into her soul. "Yes, yes; the *Glass House*. I bought my precious Clemency here the largest diamond bracelet that money can buy from that place when I proposed to her. It is a pity that the bracelet brings her up in a rash now – it is the nickel in the bonding, do you know? - and as a result she can no longer wear it, isn't it, my dear?" Clemency nodded, putting on the most convincing sad-face that I had ever seen. Her husband smiled, drifting out of his world momentarily to look at me once again.

"Oh yes, the *Glass House* on *Cleveland Street*. Don't you forget it."

"It's okay. I think I've got it. The *Glass House*... *Cleveland Street*. Yeah."

"Good," he said, "and one other thing."

I moved closer to him.

"Talk to my wife again and I will have you punished most brutally."

He sat back in his seat, returning to his conversation with his wife as if our exchange had never happened. As far as I could make out, his anger had moved onto the weather this time of the year, and how Manehattan often had too much snow as Winter approached. I blinked to myself a few times, rather unsure as to what I had just witnessed, and now remembering why I so actively avoided returning to the land of my roots.

#### **4 Months, 12 Days**

"How does it look?"

"Really good."

"What about mine?"

I had handed out the gifts that Rarity had made for the others for Winter Wrap-Up: scarves in different colours that suited them perfectly. Rarity had such a keen eye for design; I could tell that the others admired her work as much as I did. Pinkie Pie was snuggling into her pink-and-white-striped scarf, her boots crunching in the snow with every bouncy step that she took. Rainbow Dash had taken her scarf and zoomed off, having to get ready to direct the Pegasus Sky Patrol, although from what I had gathered she loved the design and fabric. Fluttershy had insisted that some of the cute little bunnies that she would be waking would benefit more than her from a nice warm scarf, but for now she had happily wrapped it around her neck. I would give Twilight her scarf later, as, after last year's Winter Wrap-Up, she had become the head of the organisation behind the event, and thus I had not yet seen her. Applejack, not the most fashion-conscious pony, had made less of a fuss over the scarf itself, and was instead grateful that Rarity had found the time to make a present for them at all. What the present was didn't matter that much to her.

"Any chance that Rarity'll be coming along today?" she asked. I shook my head, shrugging. "She's seeing some ponies in uh... Canterlot, I think. Or maybe Manehattan." I honestly couldn't remember. "Either way, she won't be around to help today, but she sent her best regards. I'll let her know that you all like the scarves when she gets back this evening."

The ponies set to work. I did a little bit of everything helping them out. They all had different roles. The only major issue this year was that Rarity, who usually made the nests for the birds, wasn't present, and thus somepony else needed to thread the little homely designs together. I don't know who did it, but the entire thing went without a hitch, as I am led to believe, and so I can only assume that whoever filled in for Rarity did a good job. It was the things that we got up to after the event itself that I remember the most. The ponies all finished roughly around the same time and I, who usually hurried home to see Rarity, decided on that one occasion to stay out with the others. I doubted that Rarity would mind; she would probably be out so late again that she wouldn't even know that I would be returning late myself.

Rarity hadn't been herself recently. I was doing my best to justify her absence to the others. So far I was doing a pretty good job. Rarity had been staying out rather late the past few weeks. She said that she was meeting with ponies to discuss business, which was not necessarily difficult to believe; but on several occasions now I had been given reason to grow suspicious of her actions. It was small things, like her saying that she was going to meetings to discuss new designs, and then finding that she hadn't taken any concept sketches with her. Six nights ago she had arrived back at the boutique incredibly late – sometime after midnight – and had given me very little explanation as to why. It wasn't

necessarily my duty to force such answers out of her, but I did want to know why she was depriving herself of food and sleep. She had spent hours recently sketching away furiously in her inspiration room, barely letting me see her. She only came out occasionally to eat or to use the rest room. And although this morning she had seemed a little chirpier – she had insisted that tonight I tell her about my day whilst giving me the scarves to pass on to her friends – I couldn't help but worry that she would be pulling another late-night.

I tried to get my mind off of things by spending the evening with the others. We met up with Twilight and hung around Ponyville. As the moon set upon the velveteen sky Ponyville ignited in festive lights for the last time; they would soon be taken down until next year. Pinkie Pie insisted that if one squinted their eyes together, the lights would look like dancing angels. I did as she requested, and found that Pinkie Pie told no lie in her observation. I remember that we all ate supper together on the outskirts of Ponyville, on top of a hill that had now been cleared of snow. There may have even been a meteor shower that night; I remember that it was a particularly picturesque time, and one of my fondest memories in Ponyville. I was saddened when the bunch began to yawn in unison, their busy day having caught up with them. We parted ways sometime in the late evening and I took a slow walk back to Carousel Boutique.

I was now staying with Rarity – it made sense in the grand scheme of things, as spending money on a room at the tavern seemed wasteful, especially as Rarity could just dock rent money from my wages made working in the boutique. I had a key and everything now, and so let myself in upon my return. The boutique was quiet and dark, and I assumed that Rarity had not yet returned. I lit a few candles here and there to shed some light into the room. It was odd, but I noticed muddy hoofprints on the floor. I followed them to the stairs. "Hello?" I called up the stairwell. "Rarity? Are you home?"

A few seconds of silence passed.

"Yes. I am in my room!" a voice upstairs called out of the ether, and I started making my way up. At least she sounded somewhat happy. Her door was half-open, so I slipped into her room and approached her. She was lying down on her bed with her head against the pillow. She rolled over to face me, her big, blue orbs focusing on my own. "Sorry, I didn't hear you at first. I was sleeping."

I looked her up and down and smiled, moving a hoof to rest on her side, which I set about rubbing softly back and forth. She closed her eyes again, smiling. "How was Winter Wrap-up?" she asked in a gentle voice. "Did you enjoy helping? I bet you made yourself incredibly useful. You are a very selfless pony."

"It was fun," I said quietly, moving away from her for a moment to close the door, and then returning to my soft stroking of her relaxed body. "Everypony loved their scarves. The personalised designs were fantastic."

"I am so glad of that..." Rarity simpered. "I worked hard on them."

"How did your meeting go today?"

"It was tiring," she explained. "I came home afterwards and just sort of collapsed on the bed."

"You are pushing yourself, Rarity," I said.

Her body tensed a little. I frowned, stopping my hand from rubbing against her delicate body. "Is everything okay?" I questioned.

"Everything is fine," she mewed. "Just... keep doing that. Please."

So I continued to stroke her side gently. She rolled onto her front so that I could move my hoof up and down the arch of her back, pressing slightly on her spine to relieve the tension. She hadn't expected a massage, but she was getting one anyway, free of charge. I maintained my motions for a little while, slowing down as her body started to relax once again. Her head was buried in the pillow, her horn just peeking out through her mane. I moved closer to her, wrapping her mane around my free hoof, the rich curls coiling perfectly. I had lulled her into a delicate state where she was almost snoozing, her hypnotic position directly created by my own two hooves. It was a tender moment, and one that I will never forget.

"You really must have been sleepy," I said a little while later, looking down to her muddy hooves. It was so unlike her to allow any form of dirt to touch her elegant body. She made a little sleepy noise, and I almost explained to her that she had walked mud into the boutique, although I decided it best to avoid such a revelation; I did not wish to disturb her current position by making her worry about something as peripheral as dirt. "Oh, nothing..." I said contentedly, brushing her back and upper-body with my hooves until she fell into a restful slumber. I stayed the night as a peaceful insider, stroking her gentle form until I fell asleep beside her.

## 1 Month, 1 Day

"Open your eyes."

"What will I see?"

"You'll be free."

Her retinas burned from the sunlight of a typical morning of early Summer. She loved it. She collapsed, but not due to pain. She tumbled into the grass where she remained, lying in the mounds of earthly caress. I fell beside her, lying there with the clouds overhead. She coughed and I worried, but she smiled and shook her head: this wasn't a day for worrying. We didn't get much of a chance to leave that place now; Rarity was weaker by the day, and found it harder to walk long distances. She would need my help to get back onto her hooves, but she didn't want to move any time soon. For the first time in a long while, she was exactly where she wanted to be. The gentle breeze felt good on her pale face; she had recently been deprived of this natural embrace. I turned to face her, the beautiful unicorn who had curled her mane just as I always remembered. She looked every bit the artistic mare that had, in the past half a year, taken the fashion world by storm.

"I am free," she mouthed to me slowly, turning to catch my gaze. "As free as I need to be."

We stayed in that field for the entire day. When the sun retreated behind cloud I threw a blanket over the two of us. We were staying out longer than was generally permitted, but neither of us cared. We had thrown caution to the wind – which today had chosen to keep at bay – and made our way down to the beautiful little glade that became our own. And whilst there, although the statement often seemed foolish to me, time really did seem to wait for us. She loved the closeness and the nature, and seeing the sun without a blind dividing its holy rays. And I was consumed by her happiness, even though she struggled to express it as she once would have. Smiles replaced words, as lying out on her back strained her too much to speak at length. Would you believe it if I said that we were both incredibly happy on that day?

When it came time to return to the alabaster walls I lifted her, supporting her weight – which had significantly decreased this past month, I must say – and guided her like a faithful hound back to where she had to rest. On the way her head nuzzled against my own, not just because she was too weak to lift it herself. Upon stepping through the sliding doors she was taken from me, and I had the usual suspects approach me with warnings and concern. This was the first day that I had not shared their concern for Rarity; for how could the experience that we shared alone in that field be harmful to her?

I wandered into Rarity's room where she was waiting, her hooves stretched out towards me.

"Thank you..." she uttered in the softest of voices as I took my seat beside her. "Everything that you have done for me today... it has been wonderful." I moved my white hoof across her own, linking us together. When she fell asleep – perhaps because of the drugs or frailty – I felt her hoof let go, but only for a minute or less: she jolted awake and gripped tightly once more.

"If I ever let go, please force me to wake."

"*I will...*" I promised, and felt her whole form shake.

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**8 Months, 1 Day (Ibid.)**

"It's freezing..." I complained quietly to myself less than a minute after leaving the train. I had deliberately allowed Clemency and her husband to leave the train before me, as I had no wish of getting into another hostile conversation with the stallion. He had loosely threatened me – it really was quite uncalled for – but it was hardly surprising given the locals of Manehattan. In the richer areas, especially the plaza district that Clemency had mentioned she was heading to, the ponies tended to be arrogant and possessive. I was glad that I would be spending no more time interacting with her and her crazy prison warden. I allowed for them to climb off of the train, both of them using magic to carry their luggage, and was most relieved when they set off in a different direction than myself. I fumbled around with the map that I had brought with me, my clumsy hooves almost tearing it whilst attempting to unfold it. It was one of those impossibly-folded maps that I would never be able to fold back up properly. I made a mental note of the location of *Cleveland Street* in relation to the station, and it was a good job that I did: no sooner had my careless hoof moved from the map had it blown away in the approaching Winter gusts. I watched as my map flew away, destined to become another example of litter in the legendary city. A lot of me didn't really care.

I took a right on *Jutland Lane*, walking along the cobbled road for a good twenty minutes. There were ponies everywhere, most of them absorbed in their own little worlds, marching in regimented units to their workplaces. They seemed to be the usual, up-market Manehattan types; dressed in fancy clothing and caring more about their appearance than the destination. One dress that I noticed reminded me of Rarity, but she carried herself with a degree of grace and humility that was sorely lacking in these ponies. *Falabella Way*, which had once been called *The Old Fjord*, was up ahead, and I patted myself on the back that I had managed to navigate the winding streets of Manehattan correctly. This long, straight road had been built during the very foundation of Manehattan, and had quite a bit of history going for it. Once it was an old mining route; in fact, beneath the road there were still copper and tin mines, although they had long-since been closed down. Manehattan had originally prospered as a mining city, with all manner of raw materials dotted about its geographical landscape. No longer was this the case – most of the mine shafts were now empty husks robbed of their jewels and wealth – but this particular route, which I would continue to call *The Old Fjord* for reasons of nostalgia, remained something of a tourist attraction. It was the longest road in Equestria, so I was informed in my youth, and it remains the only road in Manehattan that meanders through both the modernised area and the slums of Old Manehattan. Of course, I would be turning off before entering those slums.

It was a good fifteen minutes before I saw the sign for *Cleveland Street*. This road had once been a small cul-de-sac for worker amenities: a bakery, a tavern, a small tailor and so on. Now staring down it I could see all manner of modern shops, most of them with big corporate logos hanging above the doors. At least Ponyville still celebrated private enterprise; Manehattan had long since capitalised on big brands. I walked slowly in slight repulsion, for I had preferred when this street had had trees growing along the side of its path. The trees had long been cut down, replaced by ugly black posts with hanging lanterns. I'm sure at night time they would look pretty, but during the day I wanted to smell the aroma of fresh maple leaves, not the cold, lifeless metal of those contraptions. I actually walked by the *Glass House* the first time; I had to ask for directions after wasting nearly an hour trying to locate it, only to find out that it was a good mile-and-a-half back the way that I had come. When I eventually located the building, it was indeed different to how I had remembered it: for one, the 'Family Owned Since \_\_\_\_' sign was nowhere to be seen. Rolling my eyes, I approached the door; it opened by itself, perhaps working on some modern system of proximity.

"Good evening, sir," a refined stallion sang, approaching me before I could even smell what the interior of the shop was like. "How may I help you today?"

I looked at the stallion and raised a frown. "I'm just here to browse your range," I explained. "I remember as a colt that this place had some lovely jewellery."

"Ah, so it is a gift that you are seeking?"

He was a typical salespony. "Yes, a gift," I said, just to move the excruciating process along. "It's for a very close friend."

"Oh, of course it is!" the exuberant stallion beamed. "And is this gift for a lucky mare, yes-yes... or perhaps... a delightfully risqué treat for a special male-friend?"

I did not wish to cause any disturbance in this rather busy jewellers, and so I held my tongue. "It's for a female," I said quickly. "It's her birthday."

Whilst I did not in any way enjoy actually conversing with the insufferable pony, it was his job primarily to sell things. And seeing as my single act of business in being in Manehattan, possibly the worst place in Equestria, was to buy a gift and leave, we had at least a mutual interest in one another's company for the next five or ten minutes. If I explained who I was buying for he could point me in the right direction, vomit out some sales-talk, and then pocket my cash quicker than a thief could steal it from me. He smiled upon hearing that I was buying for a mare.



"Why did sir not say so sooner?" He giggled like a court jester, grabbing me by the hoof and pulling me to a glass cabinet. "This is our *Many-Happy>Returns* range. *MHR*, for short. They are immensely popular throughout the entire year. Can you guess why?"

I scanned the interior of the cabinet. There were golden pocket watches and diamond-encrusted rings; silver-and-emerald necklaces, and unparalleled shiny things. A velvet box of teal earrings, 4-carat, caught my sight, but soon my attention was transfixed by an amulet of pearly white. Before I could voice my unbridled amazement of this wondrous find, the stallion behind me had an idea unarguably more refined. It seems he had deduced the wealth that I do keep, and with that he moved me on to a glass-box twice as deep. Inside were many riches from across all Equestria; but none was more delicate and perfect, than an elegant, sapphire tiara.

"Sir has seen his item of mirth?"

"What's it worth?"

With a hoof he lowered my gaze to the price tag. That was over double what I had intended to pay. He was grinning inanely, convinced that he had sealed the deal. I did hate to play into the game that these ponies played... but the tiara was delightful. Rarity had always loved sapphires, especially of the baby-blue variety, and I knew that the contact that she had currently been commissioned by was looking for anything with that particular gemstone in it. If I gave her the tiara, my reasoning was that she would be able to incorporate it into some greater design. Therefore it wouldn't just be a birthday present; it would be another step in helping her fashion career. I bit my bottom lip, glancing to the stallion.

"Could I see the tiara?" I asked, and he smiled, producing a key and quickly unlocking the glass case. I almost reached for the tiara myself, but he hit my hoof away and withdrew a delicate white cloth from his waistcoat. He lifted the tiara in the cloth as if it was an ancient artefact. "It's beautiful," I commented, and although it was in his job description to agree, I'd like to think that there was genuine conviction in his approving nod.

"What kind of sapphires are they?" I asked.

"Baby-blue sapphires... the finest that money can buy," he responded. "Look at the milky hue; that is the sign of a good baby-blue."

Well, he was a pony that knew more about jewellery and fashion than I did. I couldn't really argue with the quality of the piece. I hoofed a large amount of bits over to him – to

this day, that amount of money was more than I have ever spent on a single item – and he encased the tiara in a lovely ornate box. He claimed that the red ribbon that he had articulately laced the box in was a personal gift from him to me because this was a birthday present, but, having glanced around the shop floor, I could see several other identically-wrapped boxes. Either a lot of ponies were buying for birthdays or this stallion was full of shit.

"Thank you," I said calmly, carefully balancing the box on my back.

"Good day to you, sir," he responded. "Think of the *Glass House* for every occasion. Remember: '*if you are high-class, make sure to buy glass*'."

I had a better slogan featuring the same words with a couple of choice letters removed. He slipped a pamphlet into the pocket of my heavy outfit, which probably served as a catalogue for the entire range. I discarded it the moment that I left the shop, curiously allowing it to blow away into the bustling street when a bin was within walking distance: only twenty or so feet.

### **5 Months, 14 Days**

"Could you be a dear and dispose of something for me before the Third Act begins, please?"

I glanced over to the bin on the corner of the aisle. I'd have to squeeze by six or seven ponies to reach it. It was a good twenty feet away, and I was comfortable in my seat. Then again, I couldn't decline an offer from Rarity. I took her leftovers in my hoof and carefully navigated by the ponies, apologising with every step. I dropped the item into the can and then returned, which caused greater annoyance from the ponies sitting beside us in the audience. Luckily the Third Act had not yet begun, so it wasn't as if I was distracting them from anything. I flopped back down into my chair, getting comfortable once again and glancing across to Rarity.

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "Are you enjoying the performance so far?"

It was the *Symphony of Seven Paladins*, an apparently famous play about a King and his six loyal Knights. In the First Act the King had revealed that he was dying; he had only months left to live, and, lacking any heir or immediate successor, he had to give his Kingdom to one of the six. The First Act had mostly been about character development; getting to know the six Knights and so on. My favourite was Artemis Silver-Vine; whilst the other Knight-ponies all had their own reasons for wishing to rule the Kingdom,

Artemis seemed calm and calculating, and the sort of pony that one could trust. When the King had initially revealed the terrible illness that had befallen him, it was Artemis that vowed to stay with him until the end.

In the Second Act, the Knights had begun to fight one another after the idea of power had consumed them. Even Artemis had shown a degree of weakness, leaving the King's side on several occasions to engage in her own affairs. Still, I imagine in that sort of situation that juggling time for others as well as one's own social life must be an incredibly demanding and difficult affair. The play was apparently a metaphor for political corruption with undercurrents of heretical behaviour, but that was just what one critic in the pamphlet had said: his name had been listed as Rose Thorn, but to me he seemed more like Pretentious Prick.

The Third Act, the final suite of the performance, was apparently going to be about the reconciliation of the King and his Knights. Rarity had already seen the play several times; in the last two months since seeing it for the first time at the Royal Canterlot Hall she had witnessed it on five or six separate occasions. This seemed over-indulgent to me, but I suppose she took more from it than I did: the music and the costumes and so on were very bombastic and precisely where Rarity's tastes now lingered. The most I could do was share the same interests as her; she had finally managed to get me a ticket so that we could go together. I had assumed, quite negatively, that other ponies that Rarity knew would be coming as well, but she had insisted that the two of us go alone. I was rather glad of that.

"Yes, I'm enjoying the performance," I answered happily. I was really just enjoying spending time with Rarity; the play itself involved a little too much of the Royal Canterlot Voice for me, and seemed noticeably lacking in raunchy feats of passion.

"Darling," Rarity said, shaking her head when I mentioned this, "this is a refined play. One needs to observe the language and sophistication of the performance. Uncouth pony behaviour is, and I am rather grateful of this, may I add, excluded."

So I sat through another hour or so of ponies bouncing between rhetoric and lyricism. To the performance's credit, the music was rather beautifully done: orchestrated arrangements that were clearly executed with technical precision. As the play reached its natural conclusion, Rarity nudged me slightly. "This is the conclusion of the play," she breathed into my ear, "listen carefully to Artemis' words to the King during the soliloquy."

*"As the fauna of the realm doth quake beneath thy name,  
And all the flora hath assembled to the same;  
Should arrow fly to pierce thy broadest heart,  
Would'st every-pony rise to depart,  
And should'st thy reign cease to be,  
Your canyon-torn world would rest on me,  
And swear to thou by thy highest charter,  
To die so young,  
To be made a martyr."*

A momentary hush befell the crowd and the lights of the stage dimmed. A rope was given a tug and the curtains were pulled across, which was the signal to the audience that the play had now finished. Some had already known that Artemis' speech was the end of the play, and had barely been able to stop their hooves from clapping at the floor. I joined in clapping my hooves against the carpet when Rarity began, the celebratory atmosphere of the entire situation having driven her to tears. A large stallion beside me joined in with the many ponies who were throwing roses towards the stage, and the talented cast were relishing the attention, the male who was playing the King demonstrating his natural showmanship by catching a rose between his teeth. Ponies began to rise from their seats a minute or two later, but Rarity remained where she was until the final rose was thrown.

"It looks liked you enjoyed that," I said, hinting towards her damp cheeks. "I've never seen you cry like that before."

"It gets to me every time," Rarity said softly. "Do you not believe that there is beauty in language?"

"I think that there's beauty in everything, to an extent," I responded, linking my hoof with her own as we made our way out of the theatre. "It's all a bit above me, I think."

Rarity frowned, nudging me with her hoof. "You have to stop thinking like that," she said. "You simply must be more confident when surrounded by the high-society of Equestria!" I chuckled under my breath, but Rarity wasn't slowing down: rather than heading for the exit we moved off towards a large, ornately-designed door nestled neatly between two pillars of equal decadence in the centre of the building.

"What's this? I questioned, but she hurried me through without responding. Upon entering it was quite obvious where we were: a ballroom that was clearly designed for the most noble performance-watching ponies to gather and discuss what they had just seen. It wasn't really my sort of place; these ponies were all dressed in fancy attire that

overshadowed my own. And yet Rarity remained by my side as various guests approached us, sipping cocktails and laughing about things that I didn't find remotely amusing. I guess that's why they were funny.

"Oh, you simply must meet somepony that I know," Rarity exclaimed after helping herself to a drink from the bar. She pulled on my hoof before I had the chance to get a drink for myself, thrusting me in front of two regal-looking ponies. I had never seen the female before, but I recognised the tall stallion beside her; his natural posture was difficult to forget. It was the pony from the train that I had taken to Manehattan near the beginning of the Winter. I had never caught his name at the time, but he had been there with a mare... what was her name...?

"Rarity, wonderful to see you again!" the stallion chuckled. "And who is your friend here?"

She introduced me, and at the same time told me who I was speaking to. His name was Friesian Cross, or Mr. Cross to most, and he was an incredibly influential member of the Canterlot aristocracy. He owned businesses all over Equestria, including, not surprisingly, in Manehattan. What seemed most curious about his behaviour, though, was that he did not appear to recognise me. Perhaps I just wasn't as capable of making an impression as he was, but as we spoke he carried himself with an air of ignorance to our previous discussion on the train. I squinted my eyes together, assuming that I had made a mistake; however, when he produced a pocket-watch from his waistcoat, I knew for certain that he was the pony from the train – I recognised it as clearly as the day that I had first laid eyes upon it.

"Rarity, what say that you and Florence go and discuss feminine matters, hrrm?" Mr. Cross said after the topic of the conversation shifted to dresses. "I will show this fine fellow around the ballroom."

I did not want Rarity to leave me with this pony, who I deemed to be out of his mind, but I didn't really have time to object; Rarity was swept away by Mr. Cross' mistress, leaving me alone with the stallion. He watched the two women trot away happily together to get some food, still engaged in their conversation, before turning to stare down at me through bushy eyebrows. "So that is the delightful mare that you wished to impress," he said, and for a moment I did not really process his words.

"What do you mean?"

"You wanted a gift for a 'lovely mare' back in Ponyville. This would be over two months ago, but I remember it as if it was yesterday. The pony that you were buying a gift for was Rarity. What a small world this really is."

I stared angrily up at this stallion. I did not like his tone.

"So what is this? Intimidation?" I asked, plucking up the courage from somewhere. "You send off the girls so that you can talk seriously with me?" I stepped back from him. "What is it that you want?"

He fiddled around for something. I was probably expecting him to produce a weapon of some kind, but instead he pulled a small pipe from his pocket, which he placed carefully in his mouth. A steward noticed this action and approached instantly, lighting the pipe and bowing to Mr. Cross. He puffed the pipe relentlessly, clearing his gravelly throat as the smoke took its toll. "You seem to be a little... below... what I would have expected Rarity to associate with. I knew that she had friends in Ponyville, but I would not have expected her to bring somepony of your low-birth to a formal occasion such as this."

He blew a cloud of smoke into my face. I spluttered, withdrawing myself further from his intimidating presence.

"I know you," he resumed. "I recognise the name that Rarity provided. You are the pony that inherited the *Morgans Estate* several years ago."

"How do you know that?" I growled, feeling a resentment in my voice that I had never encountered before.

"Because, my dear boy, that was a prime piece of property that would have been mine, had your Aunt not left the entire area to you."

I looked around for Rarity. She was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the mare who had been with this stallion. What was her name? Florence?

"I think that it would be best for Rarity's professional career if you didn't attend another one of these balls," Mr. Cross resumed. "Wouldn't you agree? Being seen with the likes of you must be terribly damaging to her reputation."

I don't know what came over me at that moment. Perhaps it was because that meeting on the train had never quite left my memory, but the image of this bastard had been eating away at me for longer than I could remember. His wife, or whoever that pony on the

train had been, had spoken of him in disgust and possibly even fear, and now I could see exactly why. I stamped a hoof down and lowered my head, my entire body shaking.

"What about your reputation?" I suddenly announced, my voice growing louder by the syllable. "Who was that mare you were on the train with, huh? Because the mare that you just sent scurrying away sure isn't the same one that I met. The one that said that you *beat her*."

He didn't like that. He puffed his chest out, spitting his pipe from between his lips and gritting his large teeth together. I imagine we had probably amassed something of an audience, given the animosity that now quite clearly existed between us. Had the girls not returned, we probably would have ended up fighting on the ballroom floor; as things happened, Rarity and Florence arrived back at that time, pulling the two of us away from each other.

"What has gotten into you?" I remember Rarity asking me, although I struggled to really focus on her; my attention was entirely directed at Friesian Cross. I didn't really predict what happened next.

"It's... quite all right!" Mr. Cross announced to the audience that had gathered. "It was entirely my fault. I got the wrong end of the stick; you know how it is! We are quite good friends!" That was enough to satisfy the other ponies present, I suppose, and they all resumed whatever they were doing.

"It was wonderful to see you, Rarity," Mr. Cross called to her, now keeping his distance from me. "For now, Florence and I have some mingling to do. You take care!"

I watched him go. It was only then that I focused on Rarity. She did not seem to know quite how to respond to the situation, but for the rest of the party she remained by my side, if a little less inclined to introduce me to ponies that she knew. We didn't see Mr. Cross and the mare that was with him for the rest of the evening; whether they had silently left or were deliberately avoiding us was left for us to guess. Rarity eventually grew tired of the ball, or at least suggested that she wished to leave before it finished. And so we gathered together our things – the hat that Rarity had removed and a warm scarf that she had chosen to wear for the trip home – and took our leave. Upon retreating from the theatre our hooves touched delicate snow that must have fallen during the performance. We walked for a little while without really speaking, until Rarity eventually deemed it necessary to discuss what had happened at the theatre.

"Do you mind explaining to me what you said to Mr. Cross?" she huffed, her pace of walking slowing down.

"What I said?" I coughed. "It was what *he* said!"

"What did he say to you?"

I couldn't just come out and say that he had tried to warn me off spending time with Rarity. He had utterly insulted me as being below Rarity and undeserving of her company, and I guess I feared that if I told her she would start believing it herself. "It doesn't matter," I insisted, shaking my head. "I just can't believe that you assume that it was my fault."

"I have never had a problem with Mr. Cross in the two months that I have known him," Rarity commented. "Tonight for the first time I see him in an absolute rage!"

A little while passed and we continued to walk through the snow. There was little that I could say to her. It wasn't me who had caused the problem. I had nothing to feel guilty about. Upon arriving back at Carousel Boutique, Rarity dropped her keys in the snow whilst fumbling with the lock; she seemed rather distressed. "Don't worry about coming in to help tomorrow," she said to me quickly. My heart sank, and before she could close the door I moved my hoof in the way, preventing her from shutting me out.

"Rarity, that's not fair," I said with a whine. "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. I didn't mean to –"

"I'm going away for a week in two days," she said. "Whilst I was with Florence we bumped into the owner of a large department store. He wants me to go to Manehattan as soon as possible in order to help me make connections in the big city for selling my dresses to a wider market. So, I shall be needing the next two days to make my stock. The shop will remain closed during this time."

I lingered in the doorway for a moment, removing my hoof when I realised that I was still preventing her from entering her own home.

"I am not angry," she said. "I just want to be alone. I have work to do. Whilst I am gone I will be leaving the shop in your hooves. I will explain what I need you to do for me before I go on the trip."

She disappeared into the boutique, closing the door and locking herself in quite hurriedly. I sighed and turned, ready to head back to the tavern near the Phoenix Feather



fountain. I felt wet patches forming on my cheeks, half-believing that they were my own tears; it had, in fact, started to snow again. I caught a flake on my hoof and observed it. Each flake of snow, I had been told as a colt, was unique and special in its own way. I blinked, blowing the flake from my hoof so that it merged with the thousands of others.

All that shit at the party.

Maybe it was *me*.

## 8 Months, 23 Days

"It is you! I thought I recognised that face!"

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice."

This pony was an old friend of mine from my Manehattan days. I was fortunate to still be in contact with several of my childhood associates, many of whom were now employed in rather high-profile positions. This particular pony, who I failed to avoid calling by his first name even now that we were old and formal, had chosen to pursue a career in journalism. Although he had always had an interest in writing as a colt, his dreams had initially been to leave the Manehattan area. And although he did report in various places around Equestria, he was still living in Manehattan to this very day. He was a good fellow; the kind that one could rely on in a difficult position, and the sort of companion that one did not need to speak with on a regular basis in order to know of the unspoken but ever-prevalent friendship that existed. He was beaming from ear-to-ear as he pulled up a chair in front of me; it was amusing that he still had a small pencil behind his left ear and an almost impractically tiny notepad in his breast pocket just in case a particularly newsworthy story jumped out at him during his travels. In spite of this, to me he would always be Gazette; the goofy, go-lucky pony who was never afraid to help out a friend in need.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" he questioned with a prod to my cheek. "You're looking good. A bit on the portly side, but good! You actually look a bit like that fat colt that we used to have a good laugh with. Or at. What was his name now?"

"Hold it right there, Gazette," I said, shaking my head. "You're getting carried away. Didn't my letter tell you that I wanted to discuss business?"

"Business is overrated," Gazette laughed, raising a hoof. A small waitress-mare approached, looking remarkably petite in her apron. Gazette pointed to a particular drink on the menu and the young waitress, who clearly had some mastery over her magic, used her levitating pencil to jot the order down.

"And for you, sir?" she queried, but I wasn't particularly thirsty. She smiled pleasantly and skipped on to the next table to pick up some left-over mugs.

As she bounced away, Gazette couldn't help but turn and watch her go. When he looked back to me, his eyes were sparkling. "She is bloody gorgeous!" he beamed. "That mane! Those eyelashes! That flan—"

"I get the picture," I said, cutting him off. He seemed rather disappointed, crossing his hooves and sulking. I sighed and looked down to a bag resting at the side of my chair. "Can we get onto business now? You can flirt with waitress-ponies after."

"That's just like you," he said mockingly. "But okay, then. If you insist that we should discuss serious comings and goings, then I am all ears. Well, not entirely made up of ears, but you get my point."

"I'm staying in Ponyville," I said, and Gazette looked ready to chip in with another amusing anecdote or question. I silenced him with a rather callous wave of my hoof. "I have met a lovely young mare there."

"Say no more!" Gazette exclaimed, once more jumping back into his fantasy land of dreamboats and petticoats. "Your secret is safe with me! You have a mystery lover in Ponyville! How quaint!"

"She is not a lover, and by the end of today I hope that the mystery aspect to this pony will be removed as well."

"Explain your demands," Gazette said, narrowing his eyes and slipping his pencil into his mouth, ready to jot things down the old-fashioned way. I cleared my throat.

"I have been staying in Ponyville for just over a month. I initially remained for a day or two because I bumped into Twilight Sparkle. I'm not sure if you and her ever met, but that's neither here nor there. The important factor is that I was introduced to a wonderful fashion designer, and I've been keeping a close eye on her for the past month, assessing her work and coming to some form of conclusion about whether or not it is good enough for mainstream, wide-scale distribution."

Gazette allowed the pencil to fall from his mouth. He tapped against it with his hoof, appearing deep in thought. "You realise that fashion is an incredibly difficult area to get into?" he questioned. "I mean, there are fashion designers all over Equestria who think that they have what it takes. Most are just giddy students who think they have some artistic ability but are actually no more talented than the next common-place artist."

"I understand that, but this particular pony is special."

"How so?"

"There is a beauty... no, an art to her dresses."

"Well, I would have to see them before I could make any reasonable judgement over that," Gazette replied, and that was when I lifted the bag by my chair onto the table, allowing him to peer inside. He looked over the three samples that I had brought with me: I had tried to vary the colours and styles as much as possible, although admittedly I knew very little about fashion. I had based my choices simply on what I could sneak out of her boutique without her realising – I wanted her to have no knowledge of this entire situation, just in case things did not go the way that I had planned. However, judging by the comical raising of Gazette's brow, I could tell that he was interested.

"What is her name?" he questioned after inspecting each dress. Although he wasn't a fashion designer, he had spent a lot of time reporting on that particular culture, and, perhaps most importantly, he knew what looked good in front of a camera. "Rarity," I responded, and he smiled.

"Good name. Short and snappy. People will remember it. Also brings in the possibility of alliterative exaggeration."

"Meaning?"

"Rarity's Radiant Rambunctiousness."

"Is that a word?"

He returned the pencil to his mouth and scribbled it down. "It is now."

He observed the dresses once more, getting a feel for each of them. He took his time, appearing surprisingly focused – his drink arrived for him and he barely acknowledged the cute waitress – and it was only when he glanced back towards me that I knew he had come to some form of decision. "So what you're requesting of me," he began, "is that I feature this Rarity in the *Rococo Report* and give her some positive write-up. Really lay on the praise to some of the more influential members of the publication?"

"Do you have the power to do that?"

He slipped the dresses back into the bag in one great movement of his hoof, keeping it on his side of the table this time. "Do I have the power to do that? My dear friend, you give me so little credit. After publishing *Princess Luna: The True Inside Story*, the *Rococo* bunch owe me. Sure, I can do this for you."

I smiled. "What will it cost me?"

"Payment will not be necessary," Gazette replied, winking at me. "If this Rarity girl gets popular then I'll be riding a wave of success as the first journalist to seriously document her." He rustled the bag. "Mind if I hang onto these and show them to my co-workers? They might need some convincing of just how good this girl's work is."

"That's fine."

"So now, the real question remains..." Gazette said, leaning back in his chair and folding his hooves once more. "If I'm to do this, I want you to be honest with me: is this really just some genuine act of kindness – some altruistic vision of selfless compassion – or are you expecting some form of return yourself?"

I paused for a moment, closing my eyes and letting out a deep exhale. "Sometimes, just being there for somepony – giving without the necessity of getting something back – is worth more than money and fame."

"A shame," he said, slipping his novelty notepad back into his outfit. "I will run this by the office tomorrow. If they like what they see, we can probably run the article in the next five days or so. I'd say a week, to be safe."

I owed Gazette once again for his friendship. Although not the easiest pony to approach, he was a genuinely decent pony, and perhaps the only friend that I could always truly rely on. "One last thing, before you go," Gazette spoke up as I rose from my seat. "Do you have any requests for the article itself?"

"Remain suitably objective," I responded resolutely, "and mention her name a lot. She loves it when ponies say it. I imagine she will experience the same elation when ponies write it."

Gazette nodded, making a mental note of my words. He left his seat, rubbing his hooves together, perhaps excited about the prospect of writing the article about Rarity. I watched as he proceeded to approach the waitress, leaning across the counter like some sort of suave Romantic. Although I did not hear their words exchanged, her gracious smile spoke volumes to the content of their discussion. By raising a hoof in the air minutes later, I could infer that he would come to date her, and although his motives were driven by appearance, this shallow behaviour seemed a common-place adherence. I left the café and departed to the train; this would hopefully be the last time that I would visit Manehattan again.

## 7 Months, 30 Days

"Now you need to open your presents!"

"There's no need to rush."

There we all were, gathered around the fireplace in Twilight's library, opening presents. Rarity hadn't expected the surprise birthday party, but she seemed to appreciate having her friends around her. She had been incredibly busy recently travelling around and meeting important ponies. It had become somewhat difficult to find a suitable slot wherein one could actually spend a prolonged period of time with her. And yet, today, on the most celebratory day of the year for her, she wasn't stuck in Manehattan or Canterlot with busy-body ponies; she was here in Ponyville with us, and that was something that I cherished. She was sitting on her rump, her forelegs between her hind, as gifts were handed around the circle. I had decided to save mine until the last, as it was undoubtedly the most expensive and impressive present that she would be receiving. Applejack had gotten her some boots for when out in rainy weather – I predicted that they would be gathering dust in a cupboard somewhere by next month – and Twilight had provided a book. It was a fashion-orientated book, but merely a mass of paper stuck together with words scribbled on it nonetheless. It wasn't something that Rarity could wear, and so I predicted that her appreciation of it would be somewhat diminished.

Pinkie Pie had brought the cake from Sugarcube Corner; no number had been frosted onto the top out of sickly icing, and all that the cake displayed was Rarity's name nestled between two edible confectionery balloons. Pinkie had pulled them off and gulped them down before Rarity could even blow out her candles. "Make a wish, Rarity," Twilight instructed, and Rarity, having spent a fleeting second thinking upon it, extinguished the flames in one great gasp of air. She seemed ready to remove herself from the circle, and so I cleared my throat and pulled out the small parcel that had been resting behind my back the entire time. She took one look at the ornate golden bow and began to squeal in excitement.

"This is from me," I said. "It's not much..."

Well, that was a blatant lie. Had I been living back in Old-Manehattan, the price of that one parcel would be enough to purchase a small property. Still, I wanted to appear as modest as possible, as I personally hated ponies who overtly projected their wealth and expenditure, and did not wish to become a hypocrite unto myself. I nudged the parcel closer to her and she looked at it curiously, moving a hoof to the ribbon. She untangled the golden web and opened the parcel with such grace; the paper was ripped neatly, so that she could dispose of it with as minimal difficulty as possible. Her eyes were now met

by a black box with 'The Glass House' written upon it. She flicked the hinge open, and all of the ponies around the circle leaned in, rather interested in the gift that I had purchased for Rarity.

"I hope you like it..." I gulped.

I wasn't entirely sure what to make of her reaction, in all honesty. She stared at the baby-blue tiara for quite some time, allowing it to rest in the box. Perhaps she did not wish to touch it for fear of getting hoofprints on the finish, but she must have sat there for a good minute staring into the milky gemstones as if lost in a different world. When she eventually snapped back to reality, she looked up at me and mouthed a small compliment. The box was closed moments later and pushed back behind her, to make way for her own revelation.

"A good friend of mine from outside Ponyville has sent me a birthday card," she said, grinning happily and using her magic to lift the envelope from the table, allowing it to rest on the floor in front of her. "It actually arrived a day or two ago, but, seeing as it's a birthday card, it would be simply unheard of to open it early." She seemed rather elated to witness whatever the card said. It was quite surprising to see her tear through the envelope, paper flying off in all directions. She took a deep breath and opened the card, two small little snippets of paper falling between her legs as she did. She gazed at them, and then back to the card, and then finally back towards the items. The card was passed around the circle, and I did my best to get my hooves on it as quickly as possible. I glanced it over several times, absorbing the words to the best of my ability.

*"To my dearest Rarity,*

*I know that you told me not to concern myself, but I simply could not live with myself without providing you with a gift on your birthday. I remember that in passing you mentioned during a discussion recently that you wished to see the upcoming performance of the Symphony of Seven Paladins at the Royal Canterlot Hall, but that acquiring tickets was especially difficult. It just so happens that I have come into the possession of two tickets myself, and I was wondering if you would be kind enough to go with me? It would be a frightful bore without you.*

*Have a wonderful birthday~"*

No name was provided, although there was some form of insignia; perhaps a Canterlot signature of some kind. I did not know what the icon denoted. I had seen the icon several times before, but only when receiving letters at my Aunt's Manor in my younger days.

When I had been living there for my brief six-month stay after her untimely death, many ponies had sent letters to the home. Most of them were concerning matters of finance and land. Perhaps it was the fault of my youth, but after the letters began to flood through the door in mass, I began to allow them to pile up. One of the reasons why I left that place was because so many ponies had seemingly wished to make contact with my Aunt. It was quite saddening, really – couldn't her deceased memory be allowed peace and freedom from external inquiry?

Of the few letters that I did open, some were branded with the same seal that had been printed at the bottom of Rarity's card. I could only assume that it was something to do with some form of administrative power. It hadn't really been my concern until now. What did these ponies want with Rarity? I looked across to her; she was observing the tickets with absolute delight. "You're so lucky, Rarity!" Twilight announced. "I've always wanted to see the *Symphony*. They put it on at some smaller studios, but the card seems to suggest that you'll be watching it at the Royal Canterlot Hall!"

The Royal Canterlot Hall was the biggest and grandest theatre in Equestria. All of the greatest performances and pony-actors and actresses attended, making any production there an exclusive event reserved for the highest-profile ponies. I had not realised that Rarity had already made such influential contacts. It was quite scary how fast things had advanced for Rarity in less than a month. She certainly had not mentioned to me meeting any enormously powerful ponies since the printing of the article in the *Rococo Report*; the most that I had known of were business meetings with designers. I suppose Rarity was entitled to her privacy.

"Who are the tickets from?" I asked against my better judgement.

She looked up at me, nonchalantly waving a hoof. "Oh, just a friend."

"A rather wealthy friend," I commented, although she seemed to be more interested in the tickets than in my words.

The rest of the party went on as usual, although there was a noticeable absence of Rarity. She had retreated to her bedroom after thanking everyone, taking her gifts up with her. The tiara was included, so at least she hadn't entirely written it off. We deduced from her that the performance of the play would be in week's time, giving her plenty of time to prepare, as well as, she informed us, to focus on a meeting that she had arranged with a distributor in Canterlot a day before the play. Once again her schedule was filling up, it seemed. We would have to make the most of having her around for the next few days. I wanted to know who had sent her that card; which pretentious pony that only half-knew



Rarity was doing his best to shut me out. I committed the insignia to memory and did my best to enjoy the remainder of Rarity's special day, but with her head in the clouds she appeared to be a thousand miles away.

### **1 Month, 23 Days**

*"Dear Miss Rarity,*

*We have not seen you of late. We were informed that you have been taken ill. This is most unfortunate and our hooves reach out to you. Please, write us a letter of response when it is appropriate.*

*Mr. Orange."*

• • •

*"Dear Miss Rarity,*

*Your absence has become a source of great sadness to us all. We have not yet received a response from our previous letter. Please, reply as soon as possible. We are all missing you terribly. Get well soon.*

*Mr. Orange."*

• • •

*"Dear Miss Rarity,*

*I personally visited your boutique to see how you are, but I must have missed you. The door was open, but I assume the pony within was one of your workers. He said that he would pass the message onto you that he would let you know that we desperately seek your immediate response. Unfortunately, one week has passed since this event, and we have still not received a letter of response from you. Please, should you read this, make it your top priority to provide some form of explanation for your absence.*

*Mr. Orange."*

• • •

*"Rarity,*

*Where are you? Is it something that I've done? If you are fearful of engaging me on the subject, then I apologise profusely. I thought that our little situation had been put in the past and that we were ready to return to normal, but your behaviour of late has proven otherwise. I ask you with utter sincerity: please, respond to me. I miss you."*

I sat reading over the latest letter once again. There was no name printed this time, but the handwriting appeared similar, as far as I could remember, to the previous letters. This 'situation' that the author spoke of seemed like something that I should shelter Rarity from. She didn't need that kind of stress from this Mr. Orange guy. I scanned the letter once more, my hooves fumbling over the paper, shaking slightly. He missed her. The big, corporate-loving, global-enterprising, married-with-children pony missed Rarity.

I missed her. I missed the Rarity that I had once known: the Rarity who spoke to me without hatred in her voice; the Rarity who didn't pretend to sleep just to avoid looking at me; the Rarity that had once welcomed me inside. My eyes lifted to the clock; it was time to get going. I'd been sitting in the dark far too long as it was. I placed my hooves down on the latest letter and applied weight, pulling both sides and tearing it down the middle. I then tore these two strands of paper in half once again, leaving four neat sections that were mostly indecipherable by themselves. One by one I dropped them into the bin, allowing them to drift into the identical mass within. My eyes caught on the final strand to be disposed of a few words that hadn't been ripped through. I felt nauseated and hurried from the boutique, ready to perform my routine inspection. And as I walked, my mind took to reflecting on Rarity's recent insipid behaviour.

*"Is it something that I've done?"*

You betcha.

#### 4 Months, 11 Days

"Maybe I've done enough."

Perhaps I had already done enough for Rarity, but it was hard for me to stop. The kind gestures were natural in her presence. Last night I had soothed her into a gentle sleep by softly rubbing her back and caressing her mane, which she appreciated immensely. It had been nice just getting some time alone with her without her worrying about orders and quotas to fill. Of course, this business with Mr. Cross and Mr. Orange hadn't helped matters. Rarity had, quite understandably, made as much effort as possible early into her career to meet with the big names. Unfortunately, things had now fallen into a state of contention, as both of these important, powerful ponies had different ideas on how to distribute Rarity's dresses.

It was the opinion of Mr. Cross that Rarity should keep things exclusive to him; that she should move to the big city and create a monopoly within the industry. Mr. Cross wished for Rarity to use her talents to make more than just dresses – he had also hinted at her making jewellery and ornaments with her penchant for crafts – which he would sell through his businesses in Canterlot and Manehattan. *The Glass House* was a prime example of a large and exclusive store that could have ownership over Rarity's trademark. The reasoning, I believe, was that if Canterlot and Manehattan held the legal rights to Rarity's creations, it would attract major business from across all of Equestria to these two cities, which would naturally benefit Mr. Cross' business immensely. It was a draconian stance, but I could understand where the arrogant bastard was coming from; in business, it is natural to attempt to dominate the market, and Mr. Cross was certainly a dominating character.

Mr. Orange, on the other hand, was a pony that I had never met, and I was thankful of this. My one meeting with Mr. Cross had ended in disaster and almost jeopardised my position with Rarity. If Mr. Orange was anything like him, I could stand to be as far away from him as possible. I knew little about Mr. Orange as a pony, only that his involvement in the textile industry had made him and his wife rather wealthy indeed. From what I had deduced, Mr. Orange had little interest in keeping Rarity's dresses exclusive to one market, and instead wished to push them into wholesale. It was Mr. Orange's reasoning, so I had gathered, that if he took the designs and concepts that Rarity created, he could employ others to copy the designs, mass-produce them and sell them all across Equestria. Mr. Cross had made it clear that he was absolutely against replication and wished for

every dress to be hoof-stitched by Rarity; comparatively, Mr. Orange was happy to sell Rarity's dress-concepts by the thousands to a mass-market.

Both had good arguments, but neither affected me. All of this information I had gathered from what Rarity had told me, as well as from a few letters here and there that sadly hadn't made their way into Rarity's hooves (or had arrived slightly later than they should have). I did not appreciate that Rarity was being forced to make such a difficult decision. If it had been up to me, I would have told her to cut off all ties with both ponies; they were playing a game far beyond Rarity's capacity. She was better off when supplying Ponyville alone. I detested the media that had swept down upon her, striking her with greedy corporate talons.

I pulled myself up from the chair beside her bed and approached the window, drawing the curtain across. I looked down below and saw a couple of ponies walking by, although they did not appear to be related to the media. It appeared that today we were being left alone from the mobs of journalists desperate for a story. I glanced across to Rarity; she was lying face-down in her pillow, snoozing softly. I trotted towards her bed and pulled a blanket across her body, which she instinctively tugged closer to herself for warmth. I watched her sleeping for a few moments, allowing various thoughts and feelings to pass through my mind. None of them would I share. To distract myself, I vowed that I would make her breakfast in bed.

I was careful of stepping on the loose floorboard at the top of the stairs, for its groan was penetrating and could easily wake my sleeping Rarity. On the way to the kitchen I spotted a couple of notes and letters that had been posted through the letterbox and dealt with them accordingly. At my destination I set about putting together some food. I cooked some eggs and topped them off with a sprig of parsley, making sure that I placed the garnish on the plate just right, as she was very specific when it came to minor details. I saw a loaf of bread that I could have made myself a sandwich from, but I didn't have the time for such things. I returned to Rarity's room, balancing the plate on my back. She had rolled over since I had been downstairs, and was now facing towards the chair where I would perch. I took my place and watched, moving a hoof to stroke a strand of purple mane from her face. She had that smoky, messy morning-look about her, and proved to be an incredibly attractive sight to my tired eyes.

"Rarity," I spoke. "I made you some food."

She opened an eye slightly, in a state of light sleep but registering my voice. "You didn't have to do that..." she whispered sleepily, but I smiled and nudged the plate onto the bed. She stretched, yawning deeply and propping herself up on the bed, her back resting

against a plush, red pillow. She blinked a couple of times and observed the food, biting her bottom lip.

"Did I mess up on the parsley?" I asked, gulping in the back of my throat.

She shook her head and looked towards me. "No. You got it just right."

This was going to be a good day. I just knew it. She tucked into her food, eating it down incredibly fast. She left nothing on the plate, and her eyes almost seemed to be begging for more. I smiled and took the plate from her, letting it rest on the bedside table. "What are you going to be doing today?" I asked, and she fell back into her pillow, sighing.

"I have some concepts to work on," she said. "In my inspiration room."

I had never been into her inspiration room. It was the only area of the boutique that I was excluded from. I had free navigation of the downstairs and work-floor, and the upstairs areas such as my room, the bathroom and, quite often now, her own room. But that inspiration room was out-of-bounds. She had mentioned it only a few times to me, but she spent most of her free time locked up in there, and it was implied that it was Rarity's private space. "Do you want me to look after the shop?" I questioned. "You had a note posted saying that a shipment of fabric had been put around the back of the boutique."

"Was it the cotton or the wool?"

"The cotton," I said. "And a few rolls of silk should be arriving later."

"Gold?"

"Silver."

"That will suffice," she said, clearing her throat daintily to remove the last traces of sleep.

"It'll be nice," I said softly, allowing a moment of silence to pass us both. "I guess I'll open the store up," I added, and she looked at me with a slight sense of panic.

"Not yet," she said. "Just... wait a little while."

"How come?"

"I like you being here," she explained quickly, perhaps embarrassed by the thought. "Did you stroke my back last night?"

"Sorry about that."

"I liked it," Rarity said in a low voice. "You found the points on my back that relax me."

I guess I didn't have much experience with ponies of the female persuasion, and so her compliment to my hoof-skills was greatly appreciated. In all honesty, I had delivered a fumbling hoof-poke rather than the implied masterful stroke, but if she had enjoyed it I could not fault my own abilities. "Excellent," I said in response, laughing slightly.

"Perhaps you would do me the honour of entering my inspiration room today?" she asked in a husky voice, and my eyes widened. "I could use your opinion on something."

"Are you sure, Rarity?"

"I would not have asked if I was not sure," she said. "Your opinion is always of importance to me."

She seemed certain in her conviction, and I was hardly in a position to object. I waited there for a little while longer until she became aware that I had seen her without her make-up and perfectly-brushed mane. It was one of the very few times that one could witness Rarity without her articulate grooming and pruning. She didn't even request that I leave her room as she prepared herself in front of the mirror, continuing her conversation with me. The topic turned away from dresses to more light-hearted discussion. As she strolled around the room looking for various feminine things I couldn't help but be reminded that her hooves were still muddy. I didn't want to say anything and ruin the mood, but I felt I owed it to her. The prints from downstairs I had cleaned up during the night, but Rarity's hooves were still a little brown from the mud outside.

"Your hooves are muddy," I said under my breath, and she looked down at them. I half-expected her to enter a panic, but aside from noticeable embarrassment she did not seem too distressed.

"Then I shall have a bath before getting dressed," she responded, and I took that as my signal to leave. "I'll go and grab you some towels and leave them outside the bathroom," I said. "I'll be waiting downstairs for you."

"Why not wait in the inspiration room?" she questioned suddenly.

"Are you sure you want me to go in without you?"

"Darling... I would not have asked if I was not sure."

My answer was obvious. I left her room and opened the landing cupboard, locating three towels – one for her body, two for her mane and tail – and folded them neatly outside the bathroom. She crossed me on the landing and smiled up at me with her big, blue orbs of innocence. "I shall see you in there soon," she said happily. "I ask only that you not move anything within the room. It is... organised chaos, but everything has its place in my mind."

"I will not touch a thing," I promised, and she nudged me slightly, entering the bathroom with her towels hovering just in front of her. I turned towards the inspiration room and closed my eyes, my hoof touching the knob. I heard the distant cry of the letterbox snapping shut downstairs, but decided to ignore whatever was being posted through just this once. I had more important things to concern myself with. I twisted the knob and pushed my way into her inspiration room – Rarity's inner-most secret within the old loom.

#### **4 Months, 7 Days**

"I want you with me the entire time."

"The *entire* time?"

Rarity had certainly decided that my uses were once again of maximum importance. It had been a little while since I had felt so useful to her, but over the last few days we had rebuilt some of the walls that had crumbled. Where we were wasn't even really important; it was the simple fact that Rarity had forsaken the idea of taking a free airship trip to Manehattan to take the train with me instead. She had insisted that it just was not fair that I would have to travel without her, and my own trip to Manehattan would now be infinitely more pleasant than it would have been without her company.

I hated Manehattan, and had vowed not to return since the last few trips. But circumstance continued to pull me back towards the city of my birth, and I was now becoming slightly less hostile towards it, as long as we avoided the inertia of the media and the slums. I had informed Rarity that we should avoid these ponies and parts of the city at all costs, and she had agreed; for this trip was not a business meeting, or a large ballroom party, but was instead a simple time of leisure and relaxation. Rarity had contacts that could allow her to travel by airship across most of Equestria now, but she

had personally insisted that a train would be more interesting, especially as I wasn't permitted to use the airship.

"It has been a while since I have been on a train," Rarity remarked as I ordered us a couple of warm drinks from the vendor. "I have been taking carriages or ships recently."

"I spent a lot of my youth on trains," I said, and she nodded.

"You are from Manehattan. The old part of the city, correct?"

"It is best avoided," I said between gulps of my drink. "There's nothing of value there."

"Your birth place," Rarity said simply. "That is important to me."

For the duration of the journey we spoke about things external to the fashion industry. She had been taking a little bit of time off over the last couple of days. After our interesting experience in the inspiration room, we had become quite a lot closer to one another, and she had vowed that she would make some time for the two of us. So far, she had stuck to that promise well; yesterday we had gone for a walk around the lakes surrounding Ponyville, and the day before we had sat around as she attempted to teach me about the history of art and fashion. I didn't really get it, although she had been impressed that I had made an effort to read *A Guide to Baroque Attire* several months ago. I believe it was the gesture that she most enjoyed.

As the train pulled into Manehattan station, Rarity was the first to hurry from the carriage, showing unusual enthusiasm. "Where are we going?" I asked as I did my best to keep up with her. "You said you wanted to come to Manehattan today, but didn't really provide me with a suitable answer as to why. Is something happening today?"

"Just wait and see," she smiled. I shrugged and approached her.

"Would you like me to get a map from the station?" I questioned, but she shook her head – clearly, over the last few months she had gained an in-depth knowledge of Manehattan's complex network of streets.

"Don't leave my side," she mentioned in passing, which got me a little worried about where we were going or what we would be doing. We headed down some streets that I wasn't familiar with, and the sound of music soon began to resonate amongst the busy crowds of the city.



"What is this?" I asked, turning a corner with her as the music grew louder. Before us was a large parade, complete with a delightful marching band who were dressed in red and gold cardinal outfits. The crowds that had gathered around were thick and dense, but she managed to pull me through them to help me gain a better view.

"I used to come and see this parade all the time when I was younger," she said. "My mother and father always brought me and Sweetie Belle here. They still bring her some years, although I rarely have the time to attend."

"Are they here this year?"

"Quite possibly," she nodded. "But it would be near-impossible to find them in this crowd. I did not come to meet with them, at any rate; I came to show you."

This was clearly an important parade for Rarity. I gathered that it was called the *Golden Gown Parade* from what Rarity told me, and that the centrepiece above the marching band was an enormous golden bell that chimed every hour for twelve hours. It was a long parade, but I would have been prepared to stay there the entire time had Rarity wished it. As things turned out, we only remained for an hour or so, during which time I purchased some cotton candy for the both of us. Rarity munched on it happily, licking the sticky remains from her hooves. It was so unlike her, but I guess childhood nostalgia does funny things to ponies. After she had seen all she needed to see of the parade, she took me by the hoof and down a small alleyway where she spotted a little café. "I came here a few weeks ago," she explained to me, and we must have stayed there for a good hour or so, sipping drinks and eating delicious, Manehattan food.

The day drew on and the sky began to dim – Winter Wrap-Up had been less than a week ago, and so it was still the time of year where it grew dark relatively early. We ended up walking down the long street where most of the commercial buildings were, but at night-time, as I had predicted months ago, the lanterns that had replaced the trees of old really were beautiful. We walked between the perfectly regimented aisles of orange lamps, holding hooves to the best of our ability. I would have said we remained with our bodies touching for warmth on this cool night, although perhaps there was an air of romance to the scene.

"I have enjoyed spending this wonderful day with you," she said to me as we walked. "You have experienced a wonderful part of my childhood with me."

"I enjoyed seeing the parade."

"I wish we could have stayed."

"We can go back, if you like," I suggested, but she shook her head, smiling.

"No, it is fine."

"There's always next year, right?" I asked, but she did not respond to such a question.

"I wish to come again to Manehattan soon," she said instead. "I have shown you some of my childhood. I would love to see some of yours."

She spoke, of course, of where I grew up. It was not somewhere that I was remotely interested in returning to, but rejecting a request from Rarity was something that I could not do. After a moment of hesitance I nodded my head, and lowered it down to rest against her horn instead. "If that is something that you wish to see, then yes, we can come again."

And so we stood there in the centre of the street, locked in an embrace to which nothing could compete. The ponies of the city passed us by, and each of them watched us with a tentative eye; but none even registered within our world, as the lights of the city flickered as pearls. I kissed her once on the cheek, and softly again on the horn. Everything was perfect. I do not recall when we eventually returned home and fell asleep, but I do remember that we were together the entire time. It was, as they say, *sublime*.

## **2 Months, 1 Day**

I have no idea what time I woke up. I had ended up going to Pinkie Pie's party last night and catching the evening festivity. Afterwards I had gone out to a bar somewhere. Staying in Rarity's company yesterday would have made me do something that I would later regret. After insisting I leave her be, I had, for once, obliged. I wanted to punish her; by leaving her to think about what she had done by sending me away, she would hopefully realise that without me, she was alone. No other pony even cared about her. She had deliberately avoided telling her family about her sick state of health, and I was in no position to seek them out and inform them. It would betray Rarity's trust, but my main concern was that it would put other ponies in the way. Sharing Rarity had been too difficult in the past. I wasn't going to allow it to happen again.

I almost fell down the stairs. I wasn't going to open the shop today. If anypony wanted to buy something they could go into Manehattan. What was the point in dresses, anyway? Ponies looked nicer when they weren't wearing them. Fashion was a cruel game of ripping off ponies with unnecessary attire. The kitchen was full of the usual stuff that I

couldn't stomach. I really wanted some chocolate cake. But there was no cake in the boutique. Like an idiot I hadn't brought some home with me. Pinkie Pie had asked me so many times to take a slice of cake back with me. Why didn't I? What was possibly going through my head to decline cake of the chocolate variety? Now banana, on the other hand, can disappear from the Cake's menu and I wouldn't even bat an eyelid. I wonder if Mr. Cake knew whilst growing up that, with a name such as his, he would end up running a bakery?

I slipped outside briefly to check if any large packages had been left outside the door. None had, and so I returned to my den and sat behind the desk. I rang the bell a few times to listen to the chime. "Rarity, somepony is here to see you!" I mocked, shouting upstairs even though nopony would hear. "Ding ding... hey there, mind if I buy a thousand dresses from you and work you to the bone so that you stop eating?" I needed to come up with a name for my fictional corporate fat-cat. Maybe Mr. Cross. I did my best to adopt a Mr. Cross tone to my voice. It sounded good enough to me.

"Yes, my dear! I'm this cheating scumbag who has like, fifteen wives and seven-thousand companies across Equestria, and I'm still not happy. I want a piece of Rarity as well, because why the fuck wouldn't I?"

The door opened and I ducked behind the desk. Like an idiot, I'd forgotten to lock the door after coming back inside. Had somepony seen me? If they had noticed me through the window I would curl up in a ball and implode.

"Hello?" a voice called, setting off the bell as he opened the door a little more. "I heard voices from within. Is somepony there?"

I peeked around from behind the desk. The pony wasn't one that I recognised. Green mane... sandy body. I struggled to make out his cutie mark. It was just some round thing. Not considering him to be any sort of threat – he did not look especially important – I stood up from behind the desk and pointed an accusing hoof towards him.

"The shop is closed!" I said. "I'll press charges unless you get off the property!"

"Please, be calm!" the voice returned. "I am just looking for somepony – a Miss Rarity. I believe that she owns this boutique?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Mr. Orange. I am from Manehattan. I would really like to speak with Miss Rarity."

"She isn't home."

"Do you know when she might be returning?"

"No."

"I see. It is just that I have sent numerous letters to this address asking for her to respond and she has not yet replied to a single one. I thought it best to come and see for myself if everything was okay."

"Everything is fine," I growled. "Rarity isn't around at the moment. I don't imagine she'll be at the boutique for a while, so you can stop sending your letters here."

"...Do you have an alternate address by which I can contact her?"

*Shove it up your ass.*

"No, I don't."

"Could you pass a message on for me?"

"Yes."

"Tell her that I miss her, and that I really must speak with her urgently."

"Okay, Mr. Orange. I will pass your message on. Leave it to me."

"Thank you, my good fellow."

"Do you want to write it down in letter format as well?" I questioned. "You seem to like sending letters."

He seemed confused, and shook his head rather quickly. "No, I am sure that your verbal account will suffice." He turned to leave. "You will tell her, won't you?" he asked, and I smiled to myself.

"Of course."

*You can count on me.*

#### 4 Months, 6 Days

It was important that I not mess up this neat little situation that I currently found myself in. It is often far too easy to lose something good in this life due to carelessness, and this was something that I could not risk jeopardising. And so, my next actions would have to be mediated by logical thought and rationality. It was important to look at the facts before judging the scenario that I had stumbled into quite unwittingly. Firstly, Rarity had made it quite clear from the beginning that she had no interest in any form of relationship, and that her life was devoted to her work and, in more recent months, her rapidly increasing popularity. We hadn't had the relationship discussion for months, and I sincerely doubted that anything had changed. Sure, I was getting closer to her – actively inviting me into her otherwise exclusive Inspiration Room and the kiss last night supported this – but Rarity was impulsive and prone to fleeting indulgences. Secondly, I hadn't stayed in Ponyville in order to fall in love and embark on some romantic voyage; I was here to oversee the fashion career of a talented unicorn. I had now potentially jeopardised any credibility that I had once attributed to myself by getting in a little too deep. My own opinion mirrored that of Rarity, that being together would be a rather impossible idea, and that we would be better remaining as co-workers and impersonal associates.

I rolled over and felt my hind leg brush up against something soft. It was Rarity's own rear hooves; she was still sleeping. I avoided moving in the hope of preventing her from waking up. It was nice to let her get her beauty sleep – and, given her natural allure, I could deduce that she had spent much of her life sleeping – and I was in no rush myself to get out. It was imperative that I clear my mind of all thoughts extraneous to Rarity and simply deal with the issue at hand. Romance was never my strong-suit, but last night had indeed seemed romantic to me. I couldn't guarantee that she cared for me as much as I for her, but I could at least remember the *sublimity* of it all. To an extent, anyway; I was never very good at remembering things. I was too much of a worrier to have the mental capacity to remember much. I just remained there in the darkness for a little while, my attention captured by the ticking of Rarity's old grandfather clock.

When she woke up, things were quite unusual, to say the least. She was obviously aware of my presence beside her and felt comfortable with me being there, because she didn't panic or scream when she awoke. She did not remain in bed for long, however, gracefully rising from the passionate sheets mere moments after opening her eyes and facing towards the window, away from me. "Is everything okay?" I remember asking in the smallest of voices, but she didn't hear what I said. She disappeared into her bathroom

and I was left in bed without the faintest idea of when to get out. Was it custom to let the lady leave first? My immediate interest was getting a glass of water, for I was thirsty from exerting myself. With Rarity in the bathroom I had to make do with heading downstairs and using the kitchen sink. I held my head under the streaming water for some time, allowing the refreshing if tasteless liquid to flow down my gullet. I then took a seat at the kitchen table and waited. It wasn't long before I heard the floorboard at the top of the stairs creak. Rarity was then upon me, standing in the doorway in a dressing gown and looking me over studiously.

"The bathroom is vacant," she said, taking a seat at the opposite end of the table from me.

I nodded and looked towards the doorway. "I got my drink, so I'm not sure that I need it."

"Go and wash," she insisted. "Immediately."

As much as I wanted to object I couldn't bring myself to oppose her iron rule. I returned upstairs and used the bathroom for various acts of hygiene. I washed behind my ears and found some pink fluffy device that applied sweet-scented powder to one's face. I hoofed at it and it exploded everywhere but in my eyes. At least I would smell nice for Rarity. After drying myself off I returned to the kitchen sheepishly. Rarity had prepared some breakfast, and nodded to my plate, directing me to sit. She was munching on something herself, although I noticed that my plate had far more food on it than hers. Perhaps she had eaten the rest of it whilst I had been in the bathroom?

"I hope that you are ready to put the capes out today," she said to me. "Red on the left, gold on the right."

"Are we working today?" I queried. She shot me a glare. "I just assumed that we would be having the day off."

"Why?"

I guess I didn't have a suitable response.

"Yesterday was my day off," she said. "This past week I have been frivolous and lazy. I partly blame myself and I somewhat blame you."

"What did I do?" I questioned, wide-eyed and appalled.

"You have been distracting me," she tutted. "Since Winter Wrap-up I have barely designed a single dress. That was six days ago. I cannot afford to waste any more time."

Of the many words I could have used to describe the past week of getting re-acquainted with one another, 'wasted' would not be the one that I would pick. I probably had a tear in my eye, but I remained strong and nodded. "I'm sorry, Rarity," I found myself saying, barely understanding what I was apologising for. "I didn't mean to get in the way of your work."

She looked towards me disdainfully, rolling those big blue eyes and shaking her head. "Oh really, that puppy-dog expression again? You must grow a backbone. It frustrates me to see you without any sense of pride."

If I lacked a backbone, she had performed the surgery.

"Eat your food at once," she added, rising from her chair and walking towards the bin with her plate levitated in front of her. I realised what she was about to do and stuck a hoof out in desperation to stop her, but it was too late. She had opened the kitchen bin.

"No!" I cried. She looked towards me in absolute surprise.

"You aren't going to eat your food?" she asked, and I shook my head.

"...No. I just meant... I should take your plate for you. I am a guest in your home, after all."

"Stop being ridiculous," she muttered, pouring the remains of her food into the bin whilst keeping her eyes fixed on me. "You have babied me for far too long. I am a business pony, and I should not be pampered left-right-and-centre. I must be independent and I must do things without you." She closed the lid of the bin with her magic and I felt my heart return to its regular position. I could relax now. Really, with the amount of discarded paper in there, I should think of a new way of disposing of all of that mess. I would do so from now on. Nothing would distract me; the moment she left the room I would find a new home for those unimportant letters.

"I am going to get dressed properly," she said to me, washing her plate at the sink with a levitated cloth. "When I return we shall put out those capes. I shall need you to move the stands; they are incredibly heavy." She took her leave of the room in order to beautify herself. I watched her go with my breath held, waiting for my signal.

*Creak.*

I approached the bin and removed the lid entirely. It was a screwing mechanism which took a bit of getting used to for many, but having undone it several times before it didn't take me long. Beneath whatever was left of her meal were various other disposables and the occasional piece of torn paper. I dipped a hoof into the mess and pulled out the nearest strand of sticky paper.

*"Why, Rarity,  
your butler did not  
several meetings with  
inherently a bad idea.  
to retain the exclusive  
lines become neutered*

I couldn't even remember what that letter had been about. I dug around for some more and found the next strand dripping in some sort of food-juice.

*I hope that my little conflict  
have heard that you have been  
wanted to let you know  
consumerism is a poor move  
counterfeit goods.  
license your dresses out to me*

Now it was starting to come back to me. I screwed both bits up together and looked around. Disposing of things wasn't that easy when the object designed for such a thing was no longer safe from suspicious eyes. I rummaged around a little more for additional letters, but everything else was too obscured in other rubbish that it wouldn't be possible for Rarity to even identify that they were intended for her. I smiled to myself quite proudly as I tied the top of the bin liner into a neat knot and hoisted it up onto my back. I would be able to leave it out for collection and put a new one in right away. But maybe, just for a while, I would lay low and bide my time before disposing of any more of Mr. Cross' letters. It was just the respectful thing to do.

### **3 Months, 13 Days**

"I respect your privacy."

"For you, I shall show you what you wish to see."

The train to Manehattan was a quick one. The route, as it became more familiar, seemed to go by at a more tolerable pace. It was hardly an effort to go to Manehattan now,



although I still felt the same queasiness in my stomach from the last few times that I had been there. Having Rarity by my side always made that journey easier. Having attended the *Golden Gown Parade* with Rarity on the streets of Manehattan less than a month ago, she had been begging me for the last couple of weeks to bring her back. We had gone through a slight blip a few weeks ago, but it was now in the past and we had overcome our dispute. It really was quite a silly argument, anyway, and it had been pushed to the dark recesses of my mind in exchange for a new concern: finally caving in to her demands.

"I am unfamiliar with the road that we will be taking," she said to me as we disembarked the train. "I have never before walked through Old Manehattan."

"You go down *The Old Fjord*," I explained, walking a little too fast for her to keep up, "but you won't find the road by looking for that name any more."

"Did they change the name of the road?"

"They changed everything."

We were instead looking for *Falabella Way*. I remembered the rough location from when I had come looking for the gift for Rarity. I would have called that trip a complete waste of time, had it not helped me remember the way to where Rarity now wished to visit. So I guess it saved us an hour of wandering in the wrong direction. That was, in turn, one less hour that I would get to spend with Rarity. In Manehattan it was impossible to win. As we walked I was surprised that Rarity wasn't ambushed by ponies desperate for an interview or autograph. Perhaps it was because she had wrapped herself up in a ridiculous amount of layers that they hadn't noticed her; she had not been feeling well for a while, and colour had left her cheeks several weeks ago. I blamed her working too hard; apart from today, she had locked herself away for longer than I had ever before seen, creating endless stacks of dresses and luxuries.

She had decided in her great debate between working for Mr. Orange and working for Mr. Cross to side with the former, the enigmatic business pony that I had no desire to meet and even less desire to talk about extensively. I was glad that Mr. Cross had been shunned; Rarity had decided that getting her dresses out into the public as quickly as possible was worth the decrease in authenticity. Already I had been informed that worker-ponies were emulating and replicating Rarity's style and dresses by using big industrial machinery that would minimise the amount of time and effort put into each product. It was quite outstanding, really. If only I could have seen Mr. Cross' reaction, although thankfully I had not laid eyes on that hateful character for some time. I imagine

he was probably chasing after the next rising fashion star – without any response to his many letters, he would soon forget all about Rarity.

By working for Mr. Orange, the workload was supposedly going to be noticeably less, as she would merely need to send designs for him and his workers to create. This didn't really add up with why she was forcing herself to pool more effort into dress-making than ever before. I could have made assumptions all over the place about why she was behaving as she was, but in the end I could only guarantee that Rarity was the flawed pony that she was, and that if she truly wished to work herself to the bone, I would merely have to be there to catch her when she fell.

This ordeal today, however, was not Rarity's but my own. She wanted to see where I had grown up and the location that I had once called home. I hadn't been back home to my family for more years than I could count. Being away from them had been cathartic; returning would be terrible. I could only assume that Rarity appreciated the effort that I had gone to in agreeing to return to my birthplace, for she was resting against me as we walked, often gripping me tightly by the shoulder or hoof. She seemed oddly clingy today, and I appreciated it very much. Anyway, we found *Falabella Way* after a slow walk. I had been distracted on several occasions by travelling musicians and various things in shop windows on the wealthier part of the route, but she did not seem at all interested today.

"We should go and smash the windows of *The Glass House*," I suggested, but she didn't respond in any meaningful way. I shrugged. I guess there was nothing stopping me from coming back another day and doing that. *Falabella Way* - I still hated that new name – was the only major route that took one from the wealthy area of the city near the train station to the poor wasteland of decaying history, excluding the back-alleys, at least. I wasn't about to take Rarity down one of those, however, as Manehattan was not free from its crime, and I knew what disgusting, depraved individuals lurked in the shadows of this monstrous metropolis. Like a dislocated jaw it consumed the masses and spat them out as criminals, dullards and drones. Rarity tripped and I held my hoof out to help her balance, frowning a little.

"Watch your step," I said. That was just like the bloody Manehattan parishioners. They would spend excessive amounts of money glorifying the financially lucrative plaza districts but they didn't ever bother to invest in repairing the roads as one moved closer to the slums of Old Manehattan. "These roads have always been easy to stumble on. I remember I grazed my hoof once tripping over some discarded mining apparatus."

The blue-shine of the plaza eventually started to become a mottled, disgusting brown. Great buildings had now been replaced by beaten-down, dusty paths and derelict homes. It was really quite amazing how quickly one could walk into Old Manehattan without even realising it; five minutes back the way we had come would suggest an entirely different city to where we now found ourselves. It had always looked like the terrible amputated limb of the city, and time had done no favours to the remnants of the once prosperous mining facilities that had historically occupied these streets. We passed under a collapsing archway and Rarity pointed a hoof towards a tired old sign that read '*Old Manehattan*' and beneath it the date that the city had first been founded. Some child had at some point scribbled a phallus out of the 'L' of 'Old', and I quickly nudged Rarity away in order to shield her eyes from perverse imagery.

"Where did you grow up?" she asked, attentively looking at her hooves to avoid stepping in thick mud off the side of the cobbled paths.

"*Slickstone Warren*," I mouthed. "There were fifteen families living in a small circuit of buildings closely compacted together."

Rarity looked around dubiously. "It all looks the same..."

She wasn't wrong there. Taking her by the hoof I carefully helped her cross the swamp of muck and mess. From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a pony watching us from a window in a nearby building, but when I turned they ducked behind a torn-sheet curtain. Visitors were obviously some form of strange, extraterrestrial sighting in these parts. I couldn't blame them for looking; as a young colt I had always been envious of the wealth of the rich folk of Manehattan. My family had resented one another and their immediate relatives; having a wealthy Aunt had hardly benefited the situation when she had kept her money from my mother and father. But I had always loved Mrs. Morgans and she had adored me, having no children of her own to pass her home to in death. If I had only been born to her and not my birth-mother, things would have been so much easier.

We neared an old turreted building that had been cobbled together originally out of big rustic chunks of grey stone. Sadly, this stone had eroded over time, and some idiotic architect had decided to replace the missing parts with typical terracotta bricks, which made the building appear as some mutilated husk of its former self. There was nothing here that I could show to Rarity as a sign of my childhood. She had been able to dazzle me with infant-amusing festivals and anecdotes of gleeful nostalgia, and in return I could show her only the mismatched machinations of a foolish pony's attempt at rebuilding that which was already beyond repair. The turrets of the building before us had known

that their time was up; why couldn't we have just let them crumble into dust rather than allow them to grow aged and forlorn?

I used the declining building as a judge of where we were. "Do you wish to keep going?" I asked, and she nodded with only the slightest hint of reluctance. She was a braver pony than I, dare I say it. I took her closer by the hoof and kept her pressed up against me, the both of us remaining close to the cobbled wall surrounding the ill-restored structure. Up ahead I noticed a familiar path that branched off in a meandering, nonsensical way. Whoever designed Old Manehattan originally must have been an utterly incompetent pony, whose only merits of design were in erecting the certified *Worst Place in Equestria*. If I found his grave in one of the surrounding cemeteries I would dig it up and claw at his worthless hide.

*Slickstone Warren* was our destination, and it was everything that the name suggested. It had once been one of the core miner's homes when ponies had raped this land for its natural resources. Great pulleys had been used to hoist up copper and carts had then taken the ore to the workhouses deeper into the abstract mess of Old Manehattan. The system had been quick, granting the area the name of 'Slickstone'. As for 'Warren', well, the labyrinthine complex of living holes and shacks dotted around this area made it seem very much like the workers for mere animals furrowing about aimlessly. It was a condescending name for a social group of ponies in need of condescension. We eventually located the sign for the road and found that some of the lettering had been chipped away. It read, simply:

*S L K O N E W A R R N*

This was more than I needed to gain my bearings, for I now recognised exactly where we were. Right near the old graveyard and reasonably close to the sewers. Some ponies were clearly still living around here, and so I warned Rarity of the virulent smell that she would undoubtedly experience in this place. She appreciated my gesture, but further colour had drained from her delicate face, and my heart felt for her. We stopped in front of a nearby lopsided building made of sandy-brown cement. I looked up slowly towards the highest window of the five-storey building and pointed a hoof upwards, accepting defeat.

"Up there. That was my room," I said. She looked upwards and shook her head a little. "It is very high up..."

"Closer to the clouds. A colt could dream back then," I responded, clearing my throat. It was unsettling to be here. What did she want from me, anyway? What sort of demand

was it to see the place that I grew up in? The moment that we saw the 'Old Manehattan' sign she could have assumed that it would be a repulsive and vile place. I wondered how long we would have to stand here ignorant to the locals that might still reside just so that Rarity could get whatever perverse satisfaction she desired from staring vapidly at my childhood shame.

"What have we here?" a churlish voice questioned from nearby, and I turned rather quickly to meet the owner. It was an elderly mare. "Are you lost?" she asked, sniffing the dry air. "You both look like you're from Manehattan."

"What do you want, old crone?" I questioned, moving in front of Rarity before she could even speak. It wasn't for her to engage with this sort of insolence.

"I may be old, yes..." she blathered, "but I know when a pony is looking for something. Yes..."

"We were wondering if the occupant of this building still lives here," Rarity spoke up suddenly, moving out from behind my protective barrier to communicate directly with the haggard pony.

We were not wondering that at all. Bringing her here was one thing, but if she had any idea in her irresponsible mind that I would speak with my parents once again, she was sorely mistaken.

"The owners of that home died over fifteen years ago, ma'am," the mare said, shaking. It seemed like a great strain for her to stand there and converse. "A stallion and a mare... what were their names now?"

"Were there any children?" I found myself asking, stepping closer to her. The old mare seemed surprised and used her remaining brain muscles to fathom an answer.

"Yes... three... a colt and two fillies... they too died of the same illness. It was terrible... it made all of the papers in the big city. They said as a result that they would be cleaning up Old Manehattan... I am waiting for the day..."

My family were no more, it seemed. The relatives that I had left behind were, as this mare had said, two sisters and a brother, all of them younger than me, and my mother and father, both of whom had always been in a sickly state of health.

"Why has nopony moved into the house since?" Rarity questioned, and I looked towards her pleadingly to stop. I did not wish to hear more than what I now knew.

"Things don't work like that around here..." the mare explained. "Folk don't move into Old Manhattan... when we die there's nopony here to take our place. We are just counting time now in the forgotten parts of the city..."

"This is terrible," Rarity commented, coughing in disgust at the desolation of this place. She looked incredibly faint. She should have heeded my warnings of this place. She looked to me for reassurance, but my view was obscured temporarily by tears created by the sand and dust of this humid desert.

I rubbed my eyes with a hoof. "Mare, leave us be," I demanded. She seemed to have more information to impart but I was no position to hear it. "Return to your home and wait for death's quick release..."

I turned away from her and Rarity and galloped. My hooves carried me towards the graveyard that we had passed on the way. I scanned the most recent graves positioned further back in the plot of land. It didn't take long for me to find the names of my kin etched into hard, cold rock. There were only two graves; one for my mother and siblings, and another for my father. They must have chucked the bodies of the mare and her young into the same crypt. My father likely received his own for being a corrupted soul. Rarity caught up minutes later; I heard her panting form behind me and I turned to face her with obvious disdain.

"You saw it," I mouthed. "You wanted to see where I grew up and now you have."

She seemed unsure of what to say, but those big, blue eyes penetrated deep and spoke words louder than any that her mouth could muster.

"I am sorry..." she said in a sullen, neglected state. "I should not have forced you to come here." Her eyes seemed grey.

I could not bring myself to hate Rarity. It was a relief to know that my family memory could plague me no longer. It didn't matter to me how they had died or in what sick state they had been laid to rest; their absence was a blessing. But Rarity looked different; it took me a few foolish moments to realise that she was struggling to breathe. Tears were gathering in the corners of her eyes and her bottom lip was trembling. I stepped closer to her and demanded to know what she was experiencing. I will never forget that day, for it was the instance where she finally caved. I still do not know what caused it, whether it was the ordeal of being surrounded by death, the demand made on her body in catching up with me, or the weight of the world finally crashing down upon her vulnerable form. But in a fleeting moment her eyes rolled back into her skull, her muscles saw fit to spasm

and a single hoof thrust forwards in order to touch me. She was seized by the hoof that day, but not by me. She fell like a leaf to the dense earth. I did all in my power to help her then, and carried her on my back away from the vile lair towards Manehattan. She was not conscious, I could tell, and I believed that the heat and the smell of my old home had finally taken its toll.

Back in civilisation we were surrounded, although I hadn't asked for assistance. Many pony-folk had involved themselves in our private business without invite. One pony announced that he was a doctor and pushed the others aside, helping Rarity from my back and lying her down on the ground. She was a victim to exploratory hooves, although I had been shunned into the background whilst he checked her over. He put his hoof to her head just above her horn. He had none of his tools of the trade, but he was able to determine that she was still breathing easily enough.

"Where did you find her?" he questioned me quickly. "When did she faint?"

"She is fine," I responded, but my medical knowledge was painfully inferior to his own. He began looking around for others and giving commands to various strangers who were willing to help, asking them to run to the nearest hospital in order to get aid. They dashed off, usurping my own job. I attempted to lift Rarity's head with a hoof, but the doctor warned me with his own raised leg.

"Don't move her," he commanded. "What is her name?" The crowd that had gathered were all muttering amongst one another, and I heard some of them saying it; granted they recognised her, for the doctor had taken the clothing from Rarity in order to give her room to breathe. This had given away her identity, and all manner of assumptions were made that day. I knew not how to respond to their disdainful commentary.

When the messengers returned they had with them strong paramedics who helped carefully lift Rarity. "What is happening?" I questioned repeatedly, but I was given anything but a satisfactory answer from the ignorant doctor that had rushed to her side.

"Can you hear me, Rarity?" the doctor questioned. "I'm Doctor Tawleed. You've had a nasty fall and we're going to take you to the hospital to run a few checks. You are in safe hooves."

He was rushing at her side with the paramedic ponies, and I struggled to keep up with them. They were youthful and trained for this sort of work, and soon I was falling behind them. I lost my way to the hospital and had to ask for directions from strangers who laughed at me whilst explaining. I felt fit to burst as I eventually located and squeezed

through the sliding doors of the medical institution, approaching the desk and slamming a hoof down upon it. "Where is Rarity?" I demanded. The secretary looked at me like wide-eyed prey. "She was brought in minutes ago! A unicorn!"

"She was taken to the emergency room," the secretary explained. "I don't know anything more than that, I am afraid."

"What are you being paid for?"

"Sir, you are welcome to stay in the waiting area."

"I must see her!"

"The doctors will be doing all that they can for her," she foolishly announced. "Please, be patient."

Rarity was the patient here, not me. But I did as I was told, not because I wanted to, might I add, but because I did not know what else to do. I took a seat in the waiting area and remained there for some time, my eyes scanning over the other patrons. There were little colts and fillies playing with toys and older ponies barely keeping an eye on them. Two fillies in particular were building a tower out of toy bricks and then knocking it down. They did this more times than I could count. The crashing was insufferable. "Stop..." I muttered under my breath. A mare, presumably the mother, looked up from her magazine and gave me the oddest look imaginable.

"Are those your young?" I asked, pointing a hoof towards the infants. She nodded.

"Tell them to be silent."

"Excuse me?"

"Leave the tower crumbled," I said to the children, turning away from their mother. "Do not rebuild it."

Some stuff happened and the mother left with her kids to try and find out more information about whoever it was that they were waiting for. Eventually my eyes caught sight of the doctor from the scene and I jumped to my feet. He addressed me before I could approach him further. "Hello there," he said smoothly. "My name is Doctor Tawleed." He held a hoof out for me to shake, and I gave him that much in order to obey social formality. "Rarity is fine. She fainted and we're going to run a few tests on her. Right now she is just resting."



"When can she go home?"

"I wouldn't like to say just yet," he responded. "Ponies do not generally faint unless there is something wrong. Fainting is caused by a lack of blood flow and oxygen to the brain. I would not like to send her home until we know that this was a singular occurrence. Perhaps you can help me?"

I found myself agreeing. "Does Rarity faint quite a lot?" he asked.

"I have never seen it before," I said honestly, clearing my throat. "Please, let her come home. She is fine. We were in Old Manehattan and she must have succumbed to the smell and atmosphere."

He appeared to make a mental note of the information. "When can I see her?" I asked, and he looked back towards the doorway that he had come through.

"She is still dizzy," he said, "but you should be able to see her right away."

I thanked him for his time, although he went with me to see her which I found to be a terrible breach of privacy. Rarity was lying in a white-sheeted bed looking pale and weak. Some nurses were standing around her doing various things, although nopony seemed to think that her condition was anything serious. I approached her bedside and moved a hoof to her own; she gripped and smiled up at me. "I am sorry..." she mouthed dryly. "This is really... rather silly of me."

"It's fine," I said. "You have been working so hard recently. This is proof of that."

"Thank you... for showing me your home. I do not regret it..."

She closed her eyes and I looked back to the doctor desperately. He commented that such a thing was normal, and that I should let her rest. Despite sleeping, her grip remained true and I was bound to her bedside. The doctor moved a small chair over to the side of the bed so that I could sit there. I thanked him and stopped him for another moment of his time.

"Excuse me... doctor..."

I had forgotten his name.

"Tawleed."

I paused. "Thank you for helping her. When she fell I panicked. I was useless to help her. I didn't know what to do."

"These things happen," the doctor said. "Most ponies react the same way. It is impossible to always be there for somepony without fail. It is not a bad thing to accept the help of others once in a while. Everypony in this room just wants to help Rarity. She is in safe hooves now, so you can rest easy." He smiled at me and left the room, no doubt to go and play the hero elsewhere.

I watched him go, turning to Rarity and stroking a hoof through her purple locks of mane. "It's okay..." I said to her softly, keeping our link strong.

If we needed the doctor again, all I would need to do was say his name.

*Tumbleweed*, was it?

## 5 Months, 17 Days

He had the building surrounded. I'd barricaded myself in but he had managed to break through my defence. Attempting to conceal myself had made no difference; he was looking for me and would stop at nothing to catch me. I looked around the room for some way of escaping or some elaborate piece of furniture that I could hide behind or underneath, but there was no hope for that. Being utterly vulnerable was the worst part about it; I could not even arm myself with a weapon. I heard a hoof hammering against the door and lowered my head in submission. There was no escaping this time. Light flooded into the room, blocked out in fragments only by a figure standing in the doorway. I caught sight of him from the corner of my eye and shielded my gaze with a hoof. He saw me and remained on the spot for a second, cautiously observing my reaction. Only when he judged that it was safe to approach did he begin his advance, quick hooves driving him towards me.

"Well look who we have here, then!" the voice spoke. He was a messenger for a higher power. I consigned myself to my fate and stared up at him with fearful eyes.

"Gazette. It's been a while."

"Well, you're a hard pony to track down nowadays!"

He took a seat opposite me, perching himself and looking around the café. "Do you come here often?" he asked. "The place looks like a graveyard. Where are the waitresses?"

"I come here to think," I explained, and Gazette chuckled, pointing a hoof towards my head.

"That was always your biggest problem. You think too much."

He noticed that I was drinking from a coffee mug. He sniffed the aroma and realised that it was still hot. "May I?" he asked, and despite my obvious disdain I found myself pushing my mug towards him. He took a sip and pulled a face. "This coffee tastes like a rat's ass. Is it imported or something?" He pushed the mug of coffee back towards my side of the table. "Luckily this meeting won't take a particularly long time. I imagine that it will be a quick transaction and then we can both get on with our days."

"Explain your terms."

"You aren't one to waste time, are you?" Gazette smiled, lifting a briefcase onto the table that had been saddled upon his back. He fumbled with a little dial on the case and entered a few digits to crack the lock. He proceeded to press both hooves against two little clasps either side of the case. It sprang open, although I couldn't see what was inside due to the lid remaining in the way of my vision.

"I'll do most of the talking here," Gazette said. "You just need to sit there and nod your head. Can you do that for me?"

I hated submissively nodding my head, but I found myself doing it anyway. "I can try."

"Good. A lack of objection is always a good thing in business. I'd hate to have to try and haggle with you. Well, that's a lie; you would hate having to haggle with me. I am the Haggle King."

"Just explain to me the situation, Gazette."

Gazette shuffled in his seat, having not quite found the comfortable spot yet. "You seem to think that the news will be bad," he acknowledged. "On the contrary, the news is very good and could see us both nicely for the foreseeable future."

"What do you mean?"

With a confident hoof he turned the case around. Inside were neatly stacked columns of golden bits, held in place by clasps within the briefcase. I couldn't deduce how much was there from a quick glance, but Gazette was more than happy to spell it out to me.

"Ten thousand," he said. "That's the deal that I want to pass on to you."

I looked at the money. My eyes were wide with admiration. I had scarcely seen that many bits in one place before; most of the large amounts of cash that I had ever seen were in the form of cheques. Gazette noticed my interest and smiled, beaming from ear to ear. "I knew that that would attract your attention, you money-grabbing bastard. You've always been one to seize a good opportunity. I guess that's why we're friends, huh?"

"I guess so," I found myself saying, reaching a hoof towards the golden trove. Unfortunately, Gazette noticed my interest and pressed a hoof down on the lid, closing the case with a sudden click.

"I think that I should explain what's going on here first. I'd hate for you to misunderstand the situation, old friend."

His tone was unusual. I sat back in my chair.

"Let me explain how things work in this circuit," Gazette said, finally catching a waiter leaving the kitchen and quickly ordering a drink of his own. "We find these ponies," he continued, "and we make it our duty to... shed light upon them. Your girl, Rarity, was a fine catch indeed. Already she's made us some large stacks of money and caught the attention of some very important ponies. And that's where this little box of treasures comes from." He tapped the top of the suitcase with his hoof temptingly.

"Manehattan is a glorious city," he said. "And in this city there are two great powers at work. One is called Mr. Cross and the other, Mr. Orange. These guys are the whole deal: they run businesses and hire thousands of workers and have more money than they know how to spend. First things first: do either of those names ring a bell?"

I had perhaps heard mention of their names in passing, but I did not have a substantial enough knowledge of them to appear informed. "I don't recall either name," I replied, requiring more information.

"Well that's unfortunate," Gazette replied. "Allow me to elaborate. Mr. Cross doesn't actually live in Manehattan but he's one of those big entrepreneur-mogul types. I could tell you all sorts of stories about him and his personal life – boy, could I tell you some stories – but that's for a different article on a different day. The point is that this guy is an opportunist who wants to make some mad cash. And he's already spotted your girl Rarity and met her."

"He has?" I had never heard mention of this 'Mr. Cross' fellow. I liked to think that Rarity considered me a good friend and associate; why she had kept this information from me was a mystery.

"Oh yeah, lots!" Gazette resumed. "Talk about your forward-thinking guy! He's got hooves in so many pies he could open a bakery."

I did not care for Gazette's jokes; I needed to know more about what this pony had been doing with Rarity.

"Gazette, what do you know about his relationship to Rarity?"

"Nothing that I'm at liberty to say."

"Don't start getting all moral with me," I responded. "Just who is this Mr. Cross to her?"

Gazette seemed hesitant. "It's nothing, buddy," he attempted to reason. "I just think he's got a thing for her, you know? She's an attractive girl. I myself have given it more than just a passing thought. And I'll be damned if you haven't."

"I am purely professional," I retorted, finding that my heart was thumping in my chest. "What makes you think that he's got a thing for her?"

"It's just little things," he conceded, sighing. "I hear he's been treating her to all sorts of fancy things, giving her tickets to operas and shit."

"Operas?" I queried.

"Yeah, let me just check something," Gazette replied, whipping a familiar notepad out of his breast pocket, although now there were fewer clean pages left. "They were seen together on the... well... a little over two months ago, anyway. At some symphony thing."

*"The Symphony of Seven Paladins?"*

"Yeah, that shit," Gazette said. "I always thought those musical things were a WOFT, you know?"

"WOFT?"

"Waste of Fucking Time."

"I happen to want to see that musical," I said, but Gazette shrugged the comment off, clearly interested in returning to business. Still, I was not satisfied. "Tell me... what else has this Cross guy done to Rarity?"

"I'm not his personal secretary!" Gazette replied, his voice sounding more alive than ever. "Why not ask her? You guys are shacking up right now, aren't you?"

That was not true. "We are doing no such thing," I explained. "Your insinuations are foolish and without evidence."

"Whatever man," he replied. "I ain't judging. I don't even care what you do. Being part of a love triangle sounds about as attractive to me as old Red Rose's grandma. Remember her? Damn, she was a troll."

"Gazette!" I shouted, gaining the attention of the other patrons – few as they were – within the café. I cleared my throat and lowered my tone, which soon brought them back

to whatever they were doing. "Can you give me any information about this Cross pony? It's very important that I know as much as possible." I had never met this Mr. Cross, to my knowledge, and it wasn't as if I wished to invade every facet of Rarity's life. I merely wished to know what his interest was in her, and if it was for the best to remain in contact with him.

Gazette sighed once more and flicked through his notepad, shaking his head as he glanced through the pages. Eventually his eyes settled on a particular page and he let out a little gasp. "Oh, yeah! So that Mr. Cross guy has this symbol thing. He signs all of his letters with it and stuff. It's like, a family trademark or something. Here's an image of it that I jotted down about a month ago."

He pushed the notepad towards me. I glanced it over and recognised the symbol upon it. It was an insignia that I had seen on several instances before, and in retrospect I would have considered the additional impact that this revelation had. However, my mind instantly jumped to Rarity's birthday card-letter thing a while back, which had been signed by the very same symbol. It was the card that had contained the two tickets to the Symphony. I was certain that it was the same symbol, which would suggest that Mr. Cross had been in Rarity's life for longer than I had known. I began to wonder just how many of her business meetings had been with this pony who clearly wanted to take advantage of her. Gazette waving a hoof in my face tugged me back to the present situation.

"Um... so can I put the notepad away and get back to business now?" he queried, and as frustrated as I was, I nodded.

"I don't know much about Mr. Cross," Gazette said, perhaps in an attempt to provide me with closure. "I don't care about the emotional tug-of-war that might be going on there or if they're screwing each other or whatever. I'm just the guy who puts the word out on the street, you hearing me?"

I was hearing him. And although he had implied that they had perhaps been engaging one another in perverse behaviour, I would have been kicking a dead tree to have asked him for any more information: clearly, he knew only what he had told me. I did my best to push images of Rarity and this non-identified pony out of my head – in my mind, I envisioned a large stallion with flowing golden locks – and nodded for him to continue.

"Mr. Cross isn't even important in this transaction. This money that I have right here... you see it?" He tapped the case again. "This has *nothing* to do with Mr. Cross. On the contrary, this is Mr. Orange's kind gesture."

"Who is this Mr. Orange?"

"He's another big-shot. A textile manufacturer mainly. He's one of the biggest in Equestria. Him and his wife are in on it together. He's a more honourable guy than Mr. Cross, that's for sure."

"Has he ever met Rarity?"

"Nope, not yet," Gazette responded, and I was inclined to believe him. Although there was a chance that he had only responded as he had to avoid another full-frontal assault of questions from me, it seemed more likely that he was being genuine. After all, how many famous ponies could Rarity have met this early into her career, especially given the amount of time that she had been spending fraternising with this Mr. Cross? I made a mental note to learn more of Mr. Orange at a later date; for now I was just glad that he hadn't attempted to sneak his way into Rarity's personal life.

"He likes her, though," Gazette said. "Her dresses, I mean."

"Has he seen them in the *Rococo Report*?"

"Not exactly," he responded, and I raised an eyebrow. The briefcase caught my attention again.

"Why exactly do you have this money, Gazette?" I asked bluntly. The journalist rubbed the back of his head with a hoof.

"Now don't freak out," he said, "but that day that you gave me the dresses a few months back, I didn't end up taking them all to the office. A few of them I passed on to Mr. Orange. I thought he might appreciate looking at them."

I found myself growing angry. "Why the hell did you do that, Gazette?" I shouted. "I did not give you permission to hand out Rarity's dresses to random ponies! I specifically asked you to print an article about her! That was *it*."

The waiter approached the table out of nowhere and left a mug of something in front of Gazette. He thanked the waiter calmly and took a sip from the drink, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on my own. "You know, that's not exactly true," Gazette said after a few moments, his voice irritatingly calm and matter-of-fact, as if he had the perfect rebuttal. He pulled his notepad out once again and flipped back to the first page. I realised soon after that his meeting with me months ago when we had first discussed



Rarity's future had been the start of a fresh notepad. He scanned the page and settled a hoof upon a particular line, which he began to repeat:

"And he said in response, blah blah blah... *I've been keeping a close eye on her for the past month, assessing her work and coming to some form of conclusion about whether or not it is good enough for mainstream, wide-scale distribution.* Those were your exact words."

I had no sufficient response.

"You made it clear to me," Gazette continued, "that you were interested in speaking to this girl because you wanted to assess her work and see if it was good enough for mainstream distribution. So I am well within my right to contact distributors."

"Did you aid in her meeting Mr. Cross?"

"Yes, I helped arrange her first meeting with Mr. Cross," Gazette responded angrily. "Of course I did. He was one of my first go-to guys. And I also contacted Mr. Orange, because, like it or not, that's how ponies get their work out there. They get professional guys like me to show their shit to the big-leagues." He was now sitting forwards in his chair, demonstrating an aggressive side that I had never witnessed before. "Why do you even care?" he accused. "You were just there to help her get on her way, weren't you? So what is the big problem now that she's meeting these ponies? Mission accomplished: now you can get back on with your life."

Truth be told, had I taken his advice, I don't know what life I would return to. Prior to the few months that I had already spent with Rarity, I didn't remember much, only that I had been drifting without any noteworthy purpose. My eyes once again caught the briefcase of money.

"What is this? What exactly are you doing with this money and what are you trying to buy?"

"Finally!" Gazette admonished. "Business-talk! That's all I wanted from this discussion in the first place. You wanna know why I have this money? I'm a close associate of Mr. Orange. He gave me the money because he thought that I would be the best pony for the job in trying to convince you to take it."

"What am I taking it for? Discovering Rarity?"

"Pretty much."

"Bullshit. He wouldn't give away ten-thousand bits for that. I have done this pony no favours, so drop the act, Gazette. What are you giving me this money for? If anything, Rarity should receive it. Do you want me to give it to her?"

"No!" Gazette responded quickly. "If Mr. Orange wanted to give money to Rarity he could do so easily enough. He has her address and everything."

"How does he have her address, Gazette?"

"A journalist has to make his business somehow," he replied. "Judge me all you want – my conscience is clear. But returning to the money at hand: Mr. Orange is a business-pony. He understands respect for his fellow business-ponies. And, in light of that, although he hasn't specifically told me what to do with the money, I've made an independent decision to use it to... relieve you of your duties."

"What does that even mean?" I asked viciously.

"Well, I've been keeping a few checks on you and Rarity, and by the sounds of it you're getting quite close to that girl. Mr. Orange wants Rarity to remain as professional as possible. Hell, Mr. Cross wants the same. And of course, I need that to happen as well. I need all the publicity about Rarity to be good if I'm going to get a cut in Mr. Orange's upcoming enterprise. So that means that she should avoid any external distractions. It would be good for business."

"Say what you mean, Gazette," I demanded, slamming my hoof down on the table, causing his mug of tea to almost tumble over.

"The money is an attempt to buy you off," he said. "Look, at the end of the day, you've done everything that you needed to do for Rarity. The powers that be have decided that she's going to be a star. And to be a star, she needs to live and act a certain way and associate with the right sort of ponies. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"...So you're telling me that the money is for me to leave Ponyville?"

"Bingo," Gazette said. "Mr. Orange has acknowledged your involvement in all of this and I've made a note of your... possession of Rarity, if we can use such a term."

Possession? Rarity was more than just an item to be distributed amongst these greedy devils. She had a heart and an intelligent mind, and was the greatest pony that I had met and spent time with.

"Mr. Orange is respectful," Gazette continued, his words sounding more like white noise with every syllable. "He doesn't want to take a commodity from you without giving you something in return. Once Rarity moves to Manehattan, everything will run a lot more smoothly and –"

I stood up and turned my back on Gazette. For a second I waited, his words passing me by without impression. I scanned the room for anything that I could use as a weapon: furniture or objects. Anything would work. My eyes settled on a metallic serving tray that had been left on a nearby table. I took a step towards it and lowered my head, picking it up in my teeth. Before I really knew what I was doing, I swung my head around, the tray crashing against the back of Gazette's skull. He fell to the ground, both agony and surprise dominating him, as I towered above, bringing the tray down against him repeatedly.

"Rarity is not a fucking possession!" I shouted. "She's not moving to Manehattan and I'm not going to be bought!"

In one great movement I swept the briefcase from the table with a hoof, watching it clatter over Gazette's sprawling form. He did his best to gather himself up, staring at me with blood-shot, enraged eyes.

"Say what you want, you psycho!" he howled, pointing a hoof around the café. "Everypony here has just seen that!"

I didn't care what they would do. If they found a law enforcer, I would serve my time just to watch that idiotic streak of unwavering confidence disappear from Gazette's face.

"Did this Mr. Orange guy tell you to do this, Gazette?" I growled.

"No... not exactly!" he panted. "He just gave me the money and told me to use it to convince Rarity to move to Manehattan, you know? So I thought –"

"You thought that getting me out of the picture would give her less incentive to stay in Ponyville?"

He rubbed his face down with a hoof. "Yeah... that was the plan, anyway. I mean, when we spoke like, three months ago, you were perfectly cool with this just being about business. What the hell happened to you?"

I lowered my head in shame. "From now on, stay away from Rarity," I found myself saying to the pony that I would have once called friend. "She will make her own choices

about who she does business with. But you..." I pointed my hoof towards him indignantly. "Neither you nor the Manehattan media will make contact again. Do you hear me?"

He lifted his briefcase onto his back and straightened out of his suit. His notepad had fallen to the ground, but before I could confiscate it he had already noticed and placed it clumsily back into his pocket. "Loud and clear, jackass," he said, grunting from a pained limb. I took one last glance around the café – there weren't too many witnesses – and hurried quickly towards the door.

"What am I supposed to do with all of this money?" Gazette shouted after me, but I would not dignify him with another second of my time.

### **1 Month, 14 Days**

I was taking a little trip to Trottingham. Well, not Trottingham, really, but the general area. There was a particularly noticeable building on the outskirts of Trottingham that I was going to pay a visit. I guess my reasoning was that I had become sick and tired of all of the lies. There were too many for me to count. I had so utterly lost count that I struggled now to even remember what was a lie and what was truthful. I had been lying a lot to Rarity recently: I knew that much. Being unable to work at the moment, we had a lot more time to talk to one another, and thus a lot more time to resent one another. She grew bored of my presence easily now and often pushed me out of the room whenever my small-talk became too irritating. I could hardly blame her for that; it was just as irritating for me to attempt to come up with things to speak about with her. Perhaps if she made the effort to approach a topic once in a while we would get on a lot better. But then, what did Rarity possibly have to tell me? Lying on a rusty bed for days on end did not make for riveting conversation.

Perhaps she could tell me more about the doctor that she was so fond of. He was that stallion from Manehattan; just as my luck would have it, he had gained a transfer to the hospice shortly after Rarity had been moved there. I don't know if he had woken up one morning with the intention of stalking Rarity, but like every other idiotic stallion that had ever laid eyes upon her, he just wanted a piece of her. Well I'd gotten there first and placed my flag; she was conquered territory and he was a minor, invading nation that would soon be destroyed. My pathological inability to remember his name was proof that he was utterly insignificant in the grand scheme of things. My focus was now on making Rarity as happy and comfortable as possible.

Well, not my focus at that exact moment, because, as I say, I was on a train heading towards a very specific destination. Looking back on it, I guess I did not have just cause for doing what I intended to do, but then again, I didn't really see the need for just cause when I had abandoned most of my usual inhibitions and restraints. Looking after Rarity, I had a lot of time to think, and when I returned home at night – I spent most of my nights at the boutique and returned to the hospice early in the morning – I had a lot of time to read when repeatedly unable to sleep. Amongst reading over art books, I had located and read over Rarity's birthday letter. I had it in my pocket whilst on the train, although I had already committed it to memory:

*"To my dearest Rarity,*

*I know that you told me not to concern myself, but I simply could not live with myself without providing you with a gift on your birthday. I remember that in passing you mentioned during a discussion recently that you wished to see the upcoming performance of the Symphony of Seven Paladins at the Royal Canterlot Hall, but that acquiring tickets was especially difficult. It just so happens that I have come into the possession of two tickets myself, and I was wondering if you would be kind enough to go with me? It would be a frightful bore without you.*

*Have a wonderful birthday~"*

I had established that the sender of the letter had been none other than Mr. Cross. Having recognised the insignia written at the bottom of the letter, I had approached Rarity on the matter not too long ago and she had explained that it was indeed Mr. Cross who had taken her to see the *Symphony* for the first time, and that around that time she had spent a lot of time with him. We had had a chance to discuss my initial meeting with Mr. Cross on the train many months ago whilst heading to Manehattan to pick up a present for Rarity, and the mare that was with him at the time. Based on my descriptions and the name – Clemency – Rarity did not seem to at all know about this pony. It certainly wasn't his wife, despite the fact that he had called her by that name. His wife's name was Florence, and I had met her briefly after attending the *Symphony* with Rarity months ago. It was definitely a different pony. And whilst I wouldn't normally concern myself with such things, Mr. Cross had in the last couple of months become a nuisance that had to be stopped.

He wasn't the sort of pony that could take 'no' for an answer, and, after finding out that Rarity had been working for Mr. Orange, he was none too pleased. At first there had been letters, which I had disposed of accordingly. A couple landed in Rarity's hooves, but they were so indignant that she hoofed those into the bin herself. My solution to the

predicament had at first jokingly been to smash the windows of *The Glass House*, and Rarity had laughed at this gesture, perhaps not understanding how serious I was. Anyway, Mr. Cross had eventually moved from letters to other means of disgracing Rarity; it was his opinion that if she would not work for him, he would do his best to make sure that her reputation be ruined. Mr. Orange had taken his own measures to try and stop this, but things had turned suitably sour in Manehattan regarding Rarity.

I don't know what had compelled him to do such a thing, but Mr. Cross had decided to write terrible things about Rarity, none of which could be true. Of course, he hadn't risked his own reputation in order to create sensationalist news; he had recruited one of the best bullshitters in the business. I had been utterly appalled when I had read Gazette's name at the bottom of the article regarding Rarity. Having been under the impression that he was working for Mr. Orange mere months ago, I had no idea why he had joined Mr. Cross' side, but I did know that this article was a terrible concoction of some of the worst lies in history. Not only did they incriminate Rarity, but they were also there to disgrace Mr. Orange. I had the article with me as well; I had not left home unprepared. In an attempt to make the trip go faster, I pulled the article out and scanned it. There had been more than one article, but I believe that this had been the first one published and the most ludicrous:

*"Falling Star: Secrets and Lies"*

It was named as such because Rarity was, in Gazette's mind, a star who had fallen from grace. How amusing.

*"Everyone knows her as Rarity, and over the past six or seven months she has been dazzling us with her dresses and designs. Some were naming her the next best thing, whilst others claimed that she invented a brand new form of modelling. But Miss Rarity is no more prodigal than I myself; a mere imposter to a throne that should be reserved for greater artists."*

There was only one mention of me in the article, and I scanned to find it. It was brief but present all the same:

*"How can a pony that is supposed to represent the up-market world of the elite be such a thing when behind the scenes she lives in Ponyville with a ridiculous obsessive who she screws on the side?"*

His language was hurtful and demonising. But that was not the only reference to non-existent love-making within the passage.

*"The most hilarious thing about the business partnership between Mr. Orange and Rarity is that they are clearly having an affair. Whilst both remain tight-lipped, an inside source suggests that Mrs. Orange has left her husband in the wake of this adulterous revelation."* This was, of course, a lie: Mrs. Orange had left Mr. Orange, as far as I had gathered, due to a business disagreement. Rarity did not come into the equation; all she did was make lovely dresses to make the world smile.

The most hurtful part of the article, even more-so than the elaborate sex-life that Rarity did not possibly lead, came later into the passage:

*"I write this article without any bias or personal judgement. A source that I have contacted about his recent business with Miss Rarity, none other than renowned business hot-shot, Mr. Friesian Cross, had this to say: "I did not know that Miss Rarity had it in her, and yet I saw all of the tell-tale signs. She had an affair with Mr. Orange because she thought that it would benefit her business. And hats off to the young lady, because it certainly did; right now her dresses are selling across Equestria like hot-cakes. Unfortunately, the daft mare does not seem to realise that her dresses are being branded as the mark of the whore; already, stocks and shares in Mr. Orange's business are, according to up-to-date statistics, falling immeasurably. I wish her the best of luck in sleeping her way to the top."*

I found it difficult to put into words quite how furious I was upon first reading Mr. Cross' comment in Gazette's article. I could not believe that an old friend of mine would publish such a thing, and that a stallion that was supposed to be kind towards Rarity would say such lies. The alleged affair had broken out just over a week ago, and I had not the heart to tell Rarity about the lies that the outside world were saying about her. Even Mr. Orange had stopped sending letters and had not been to the boutique since the news had leaked; no doubt he wished to avoid giving her the heart-ache that lies can spread.

The train eventually arrived at the platform and I disembarked. This area was familiar to me from quite a long time ago, but it had been a while since I had been here. Something had been plaguing my mind for a while now; something that I had forgotten for months but now had the chance and incentive to resolve. I whistled for a stagecoach and one approached within seconds.

"To the *Morgans Estate*," I said, and they seemed only momentarily hesitant. I gave them directions at any rate, as the *Morgans Estate* was hardly a place that many ponies went to. It had been isolated for quite some time now, through my own actions, and I dreaded to think what cobwebs would await me upon returning. I had always despised spiders. They say that spiders are more afraid of you than you are of them, but to me I will never be able to put a hoof anywhere near a spider.

Some time passed and we arrived at the gates. They were still as I had left them. "Pardon, sir," one of the ponies pulling the coach said. "Mrs. Morgans has been deceased for some time. Folk don't live there no more."

"Thank you for the ride," I responded, hopping off the back of the coach and waiting outside the gate until the cart pulled away behind a mass of trees. The area surrounding the estate had always been overgrown, but now it had become excessively wild with flora. I turned to the gate, stepping in thick weeds as I did, pulling the latch across. I had not worried about locking the gate, for if anypony broke into the *Morgans Estate* while I was absent, I had pretty much given them permission to take anything that I had not already taken with me. The path to the door had been ruined by the growth of plants and ugly pale flowers. The fountain on the outside of the manor had rusted over. How long had it been since I was last here?

I attempted to open the door but it was understandably, and, quite unsurprisingly, still locked. I looked down at the weak slab of stone just in front of the door and lifted it with a hoof; the key was waiting there, exactly where I had left it. I fumbled with it into the lock and forced my way into the house. The door was partially blocked by a large stack of letters – more than a hundred, I wagered – that had been posted during my absence. Leaving the door open to let some light and air into the stuffy, ancient home, I picked up one of the slips of paper from the top of the pile. It was just a random leaflet about nothing in particular, but it was dated more than a year ago. Thankfully, ponies had finally given up trying to send stuff to this home: it didn't often get read whilst I was here; in my absence, there was even less chance of it being opened.

I dropped the leaflet and walked through into the vast dining area. I drifted by the long wooden table into the kitchen, and then around into the study room. From there I fumbled with a golden doorknob and entered the library. It was all exactly as I had left it, only greyer. I opened up the windows and lifted the blinds in as many rooms as I cared to venture through. I did not bother going upstairs, as it always scared me when I was younger to venture up there alone and, as infantile as it may now seem, I was still a little afraid that something ghastly would be lurking up there waiting for me. I returned to the letters and fumbled through them, starting at the bottom of the pile this time. My hoof touched a mottled-brown envelope with a very particular insignia on the back of it. I knew that I recognised that symbol; it had been familiar months ago at Rarity's party, and it was even more familiar now that it was right before me. I pulled out Rarity's birthday letter and put the little insignias up against each other; they were identical, distinguishable only by the fading of the ink in the older of the two. I opened the letter and began to read it. The handwriting was noticeably similar to that in Rarity's birthday message:



*"To the owner of the property,*

*Mrs. Morgans passed away and you have now inherited this property. Congratulations. This is not the first letter that I have sent asking for your response and yet none have been answered. Forgive my rudeness, but if you are reading these letters then your ignorance is outstanding. You are currently in the possession of one of the most sought-after properties in the county of Trottingham. It serves no great purpose to you, other than being a large home, but to me it is a part of heritage and must be preserved. I am willing to purchase this home from you for the tidy sum of one-hundred and fifty-thousand bits."* The letter went on in such a way. I dug a little deeper and found several other letters all written by Friesian Cross. Some were addressed to my Aunt, and, upon realising that she had passed away, had changed their focus to address me, the subsequent owner of the home. I vaguely recalled reading letters like these when I had first inherited the home, although back then they had not concerned me. But it was clear now that the same stallion that had been torturing Rarity of late had also done the same to my Aunt. No doubt her death had been caused by this monster. He had to pay.

I closed up the manor, leaving the key in its rightful place beneath the slab, and left the area, heading back towards the town. In retrospect I should have asked the stagecoach to wait for me but I had overestimated how much time I would be spending there. I had envisioned that all sorts of nostalgia would overtake me, but instead I just felt infuriated and desired revenge against Mr. Cross for everything that he put ponies dear to me through. His list of offences was growing by the day. I recalled that Mr. Cross had properties all over Equestria, but that he did not primarily live in Manehattan despite spending much of his time there. The only other major location around these parts with quick train-access to Manehattan was Trottingham. If Mr. Cross lived here, he would be getting his just desserts sooner than he would think.

I located an information centre by use of stagecoach carriers once more, and this time asked that they remain whilst I went inside. The mare behind the desk was beautiful and gave me a lot of information; I guess she served her purpose well by being both informative and good to look at whilst she provided said knowledge. I had asked about a Mr. Friesian Cross and if he lived around these parts; by adopting my most regal accent I managed to convince her that I was a distant cousin. By naming his wife – Florence – I sealed the deal, and she managed to locate for me where his home was. It was a relatively small manor in comparison to the luxurious homes that he owned in Manehattan, but I guess it wasn't unusual to want a quaint and cosy place to sleep. I had not quite formulated my plan yet, but I knew that it involved going to Mr. Cross' home.

The stagecoach appeared reluctant to take me, but they drove me as far as they wished to go before complaining that it was private land. By the sounds of their fearful voices, one would believe that Mr. Cross ruled Trottingham with an iron hoof, which was, of course, impossible. His manor entered my view after a little while of walking; it was slightly more difficult to find than it perhaps would have been, as the sun was beginning to go down and I was never very good at navigating in the dark. At several points I tripped and landed in the dirt, but I gathered myself back up and continued. His home had a gate like the *Morgans Estate*, but this one was locked with a large padlock. I tapped it with a hoof, but it wasn't about to spring open without some form of key. I looked around the outer wall of the manor and soon located a tree that hugged the stone barricade. I managed to gain a footing in the branches and somehow pulled myself up and over the wall. For a King holed up in his fortress, he sure wasn't very good at resisting invasion.

I dropped down on Mr. Cross' side of the wall, approaching his home. A couple of lights were on within, most likely illuminated by candlelight alone, but I reasoned that either ponies were still awake or that they had fallen asleep recently. I took a deep breath and approached the front door. I knew that it would be locked without even trying to open it, and, after attempting to uproot the stone slab immediately in front of the door, I reasoned that he wasn't hiding a key under there. I guess I was just crazy that day, but I didn't feel like returning to Rarity without something to show for my day. She was probably wondering where I was. If I ever found the courage to tell her what I did that night, she would be incredibly surprised by my behaviour.

There were some little statues nearby. I couldn't make out through the darkness what they were exactly, but they appeared to be pony-shaped and about the size of a stuffed animal. Only, they were made out of thick stone. I lifted one in my hooves clumsily and located a nearby ground-level window. Crashing through would be unwise if it would wake up the ponies within. Then again, I had no other option right now. I hurled the statue at the window and the glass shattered like an infant falling through thin ice at a frozen lake. I gritted my teeth and forced myself against the wall of the manor, holding my breath and closing my eyes tightly. I expected to be found out. There was no way that those within could not have heard the noise. I even picked up another statue, just in case Mr. Cross showed up for me to whack over the head.

But time passed and no pony came to investigate. I wondered if anypony was even home, but the lights from within proved that it was currently occupied. Perhaps Mr. Cross was a heavy sleeper? I approached the window again and used a hoof to cave in further parts of the wounded glass. Smashing Mr. Cross' property was just as fun as I had envisioned. Being careful not to cut myself, I pulled my weight through the gap in the side of the house and fell into Mr. Cross' domain. Shards of glass cut into my hooves, but the

wounds were minor and I was soon able to walk out of them and brush away any remnants of glass that had dug into my body. The room was dark, but I could see a candle and managed to successfully light it with a little pot of attached oil. I balanced the candle on my back and looked around the room. It was just a typical study room. I approached the door and opened it slightly, peeking through the gap. The main hallway was lit by candles on the walls, although it was only a dim light and I couldn't imagine that any pony was around if they hadn't heard the window smashing. I made my way out into the hall and looked to the right; a large door was there, which was clearly the front door. Approaching it, I unbuckled the locks from within. There was every chance that I would need to make a quick getaway from this place.

Mr. Cross' home was undoubtedly beautiful, but before heading up the marble staircase to his bedroom I could not resist having a look around his home. I searched the downstairs and located a living room with a lit fireplace, although the burning of the logs was starting to die down. He was a brave pony indeed, leaving a fire on into the night. He had, however, put up a metallic guard in front of it, to at least prevent spitting embers from burning his home down. I located a wine cabinet and poured myself a quick drink. I then proceeded to leave the drink on the cabinet and instead took the entire bottle with me over to the fireplace. I sat in front of it in order to warm myself upon a comfortable armchair, perching with my legs hanging over the edge. I watched the dancing flames as they ate away at the last few logs. The fireplace hissed as I pulled out Friesian's villainous article, tearing it up into neat strands and throwing them into the flames. They blackened and crisped off almost instantly. I swigged the bottle and observed his birthday letter to Rarity for a moment longer, although it was soon on the fire as well, the thick, tar-like ink leaking into the squealing fire as his words melted away.

"You aren't going to hurt again with your lies," I said to myself as the fire died down. "Your time is up."

## **2 Months, 6 Days (Ibid.)**

"I just need to make sure that you are aware of the situation."

"Yes, I understand."

"Do you truly understand what I am saying to you?"

"At best, Rarity has another month, maybe two."

He looked confused by my reaction. I wasn't panicking or anything. It was so unlike me not to get myself worked up, but I guess I just didn't really believe what he was telling me. Rarity having a couple of months to live? It was the most ridiculous notion. When we had first been told that she was desperately ill, we had struggled to cope with the news. I

was still finding myself becoming enraged every now and then and requiring the need to vent my frustrations. I had done so a couple of days ago, and I still felt bad for what I had put the staff of this place through. But the pony opposite me was different; I did not care for what I put him through. He was obnoxiously forward and projected himself as a pony who could demonstrate false sentimentality at the blink of an eyelid due to years of training in the field. What was his name again?

"We should continue this conversation with Rarity present," he said, hinting towards the door. I nodded and followed him into the room, taking a seat beside Rarity's bed. She had awoken and was propped up against the crisp white pillow, hooves crossed. Most would have thought that she had adopted such a position in order to warm herself, but I knew that it was because she always wished to maintain an air of authority. She wasn't vulnerable.

"Rarity, how are you feeling?" the doctor asked, and Rarity smiled towards him.

"Oh, I cannot complain..." she muttered. "Although this pillow is giving me frightful backache. Would it be possible for me to have an additional pillow?"

He grinned back at her. "Of course. I'll get some more pillows for you." I thought that he would call for the pillows after finishing our conversation. Instead, he left the room instantly after her request had been made, leaving me standing beside Rarity looking like a fool. I reached a hoof out towards the corner of her pillow and squeezed the edge. It was flat; I don't know what they had stuffed inside it, but it certainly wasn't griffin feathers like Rarity's back at her boutique.

"You don't need to make do with these pillows," I said to her. "I'll go home and get your pillow from your room."

Before I could leave, however, the doctor returned with two pillows dangling from his mouth. He placed them carefully into Rarity's lap and she moved forwards to touch them. They certainly appeared to be softer than the wafer-thin pillow that she currently had. I quickly snatched the pillows from her lap and wedged them behind her back. She shuffled and found the most comfortable position, thanking me for my efforts. The doctor smiled towards us both, although in his desperation he managed to catch one of Rarity's hooves in his own.

"It is important that we discuss options," he found the words to say. I sat beside Rarity's bed and he towered there next to her resting form, speaking down to her as if a parent to an expectant foal.

"Rarity, I have looked extensively into the possibility of treatment, but for your condition it would be a time-saver at the very best."

"How much additional time would it grant us?" I interjected, feeling a thick mass developing at the front of my throat.

The doctor sighed and shook his head. "A minimal amount," he explained. "It would be uncomfortable for Rarity and it would not help her state in any meaningful way."

"So what are the options?"

He was a good actor – he seemed genuinely saddened. "We make Rarity as comfortable as we can for the remaining time that she has."

"That is not a list of options!" I shouted, rising from my chair to my maximum height – I was taller than the doctor. "Our 'option' is singular! We wait for the inevitable?"

"I understand that this is tough for you..." he attempted to reason, "but I cannot offer much advice."

"You could start by coming up with a better list of things that we can do!" I challenged. "The treatment will buy us some time! We need to get that started right away, and then we can think about how we're going to fight this-"

"No..." spoke a voice most regal and divine. I looked down to Rarity, who was shaking her head defiantly. "I do not wish to become an automaton to be pumped full of drugs and medicines."

"Rarity..."

"I have come to terms with what will happen," Rarity said, finding courage from somewhere that I could not possibly locate, but would one day wish to find in myself. "I have known of the current state of my health for some time."

"Since you collapsed in Manehattan," I nodded, but she shook her head and stared down at the blanket resting over her body. "No... longer than that."

The doctor seemed interested in Rarity's words. He waited patiently as we had our discussion, evaluating and assessing us and making mental notes by our every word.

"How long?" I mouthed.

"Maybe two months," she said quietly. "A little longer, perhaps."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"I visited a doctor in Manehattan," Rarity said, clearing her throat and finally making eye contact with me. "He told me that treatment for my condition was available, but that I would have been immobile for many months in hospital whilst undergoing said treatment."

I attempted to speak, but Rarity was in no frame of mind to slow down. "I had orders to fill. I was offered the contract between Mr. Orange and Mr. Cross. I could not give up on my career."

I felt the rage growing inside me again, but my anger was substituted through tears. "Of course you could have!" I shouted. "Your career means nothing... nothing means anything if you're dead!"

"That's why I was working so hard!" she shouted back. "I needed to make sure that Mr. Orange had access to all of my designs and methods and that his workers could imitate my style to satisfaction."

"But why, Rarity?" I asked in bewilderment. "Why was all of that so important?"

"Because..." Rarity whispered. "I knew that that was my one shot... and if I am to be remembered in death then I will, without doubt, be remembered for the beautiful dresses that I make."

I was floored by her words. I had known that she had been working herself to the bone recently, and that her career came before everything else, but she spoke as if she had a deadline to meet before death. Her words were sickening, but through no fault of her own; I could not fathom how she had been keeping all of this inside of her for so long.

"You could have waited..." I found myself rationalising. "Mr. Orange. He would have understood –"

"No," she reasoned, her head rocking from side to the side. "Mr. Orange would not have waited. He is a businesspony. For a deal to be made, he needed specific deadlines to be met. I could not burden him by spending months in recovery." She closed her eyes and sat back into the pillow, arching her back into its warm embrace. "In this industry, you only get one chance," she explained under her breath. "Right from the very beginning everypony told me that. All of the ponies that I met in Manehattan were certain of it."

I returned to my own seat. My legs felt weak from Rarity's words.

"It was my dream..." she said to me, lifting a hoof to my face and staring into my eyes with her brave blue orbs. "You knew that my dream was everything to me. And I have now realised my dream. Mr. Orange has everything that he needs from me to see my work become famous across Equestria. I will be shining soon."

"But you won't be there to see the light..." I said, tears welling up in my eyes.

She brushed her hoof across my face and, without any trace of doubt, smiled. "I don't need to be," she said. "I know that I finally made it. That is all that I need in order to die peacefully."

I am not ashamed to say that I wept. I must have appeared as a fool, but I left her bedside and rushed out into the hall, assaulting the nearest wall with my hooves and drenching my face and clothing with tears. I could not begin to visualise Rarity's death, and her own, almost uneventful description of it was too much for me to cope with. Dying peacefully had such a sense of finality to it; I still believed at that time that she could recover. I wasn't there for long before I felt a hoof touch my shoulder. It wasn't a white hoof, and so it did not belong to Rarity. I looked back from the corner of my eye. It was the doctor. And as much as I would have resented his hoof touching me under regular conditions, I appreciated his gesture in that moment and remained there, my head resting against the wall.

"When you are ready, come back inside," the doctor said to me dismissively, although he remained standing there touching me. I took a deep breath and faced him. I must have looked a sight, but he must have seen it all before, for he showed no look of disgust.

"How can Rarity just sit there and talk about herself dying as if it's the most normal thing in the world?" I hissed loudly despite the previous warnings about such a thing. "Why isn't she fighting for survival? How can she just lie back and let this happen?"

The doctor hushed me with his soothing voice. "Listen," he said, and his words seemed to sound less rehearsed than normal. "From what I gathered within the room, Rarity has had months to come to terms with this. It is natural that you would take this as a shock, having only just found out her intentions."

"A shock?" I howled. "This is Rarity's life that we are discussing here! She can't just lay down and die... it can't happen! It doesn't make sense!"

Again, his tone was intended to hush me.

"This is a terrible circumstance," he said. "I understand that watching Rarity in this position is difficult. But you must acknowledge that she is handling this remarkably well."

I dried my eyes with a hoof, watching the doctor through my blurred vision. I did my best to retain my grand voice but my words came out quiet and small. "How is she not scared?" I gulped, my throat aching. The doctor looked back towards Rarity's room and sighed.

"Do you genuinely believe that she is not scared?" he questioned me, and I wasn't entirely sure how to respond. He closed his eyes and let out a deep exhale. "I have been doing this for thirteen years," he continued, "and during that time I have seen many ponies going through the same situation. Some ponies struggle throughout the entire ordeal; during these occasions things are at their very worst. Days go by with hurt and hate filling the room. The months are arduous and those involved end up hating one another. Relations and lovers turn against each other as nopony learns how to cope."

He hinted towards Rarity's door with a subtle nod. "In there is a pony who is terrified, but she does not wish to let that fear conquer her. Would her crying make the situation better? Would her screaming grant you the closure that you need to know that she is suffering?"

I could not find the words to respond.

"Rarity is dying," he said bluntly, his words burrowing into my head, "and there is absolutely nothing that can be done. When I mentioned options do you, I really only provide you with two, and both are in relation to how you handle this."

He pulled his hoof from my shoulder, holding it out in front of himself. "Your options are either to spend whatever time that Rarity has left hating her and causing her to hate you, or you can do your best to let her know that she is loved."

He paused and stared directly at me. Thoughts were spiralling through his mind. At last he settled on a single question: "*You do love her, don't you?*"

I swallowed and growled, and found myself nodding without hesitation.

"Then you need to make sure that Rarity is not alone through this," he spoke. "Don't let her waste away in resentment and agony. Her choice has been made. It is up to you to stand by her choices."



He turned away from me. "Get back in there and help her," he said, his gaze fixed ahead. "She needs you."

He took his leave of us for a while. I checked my reflection in a shiny surface, of which there are many within these sorts of places. I straightened out my clothing and brushed away as many tears as I could before opening the door. I watched her from the doorway. She was lying on her side facing away from me. Her form was small. One of her pillows had fallen to the floor. I sighed and approached the foot of her bed. She sensed my presence and looked back at me, her lips puffed out and her eyes red and bloodshot.

"Have you come to scold me?" she asked, and I shook my head slowly.

"I've come to be with you."

"Are you furious with me?"

"Rarity..." I mouthed, lowering a hoof to pick up the fallen pillow. I moved to the side of the bed and climbed up to lie behind her, lifting her head gently and placing the soft pillow behind her as a cushioned support. I arched my body and wrapped my hooves around her from behind, pulling her close to my chest. I breathed in her hair and her skin and kissed at her face. "I can't be furious..." I said, my voice cracking from the weight. "I just..."

I don't think that words were of importance at that moment. I felt her tense body begin to relax to my presence and I just stayed there with her, holding her tightly and refusing to let go. "*Let me in,*" I whispered into her ear, and despite slight reluctance she nodded in acceptance. "Whatever happens," I said as she began to sob into the nearest pillow, "we're not going to fall apart because of this. Whatever we need to do we'll do. I'll be here the entire time. I promise that you won't wake up without me. You won't be alone. Never alone." My words were spoken quickly through kisses and gasps. She did not object, and just remained there shivering and crying despite my presence. As we lay there random images, most of them unrelated to Rarity's current situation, managed to worm their way into my head. By trying not to think about anything other than Rarity, I found myself doing the exact thing that I vowed not to do. I hated how my mind actively sought to sabotage itself.

The whine of her cry began to subside some time later and I was able to lift myself away from her. I was thirsty and knew that Rarity would be as well when she awoke once more. I moved one of the big pillows to rest against her back in my place so that she would not notice my absence as much. "I'll be back in a minute," I said, planting a soft kiss on her

horn, although I don't know if she heard my words or not. "I'm going to get us something to drink."

I slipped out of the room and looked around for somewhere to get a drink. I managed to find a small café on the interior of the building and ordered a couple of drinks to take with me back to the room. They hoofed two coffees towards me and I turned to leave, forgetting that even in this institution money was required. They pressured me to pay, but I had no bits on me and almost found myself ready to attack them. But a familiar hoof moved beneath my eyes and slipped some coins to the pony that had served me. It was the doctor. "I'll get that," he said. "Don't worry about paying."

He stood there for a moment or two, perhaps awaiting a response. "So how is Rarity feeling?" he asked eventually. "I was about to head back to the room to check in on her."

"She's fine," I nodded. "She's resting right now."

"It's good to get a lot of rest," he said, smiling. "Did you think about what I said?"

I looked him up and down. He really was nothing special. What use was a doctor in Rarity's condition? It was his job to make ponies get better; his inability to even attempt to help Rarity proved that he was useless. "I'm going to be good to Rarity," I found myself saying, leaning a little closer to him, "but through no efforts of yours. I am going to be good to Rarity because she deserves it, and because she is mine to care for. I don't need you to tell me how to look after the pony that I love."

I expected him to respond in a shocked way. I wanted him to feel the power of my words. But he simply blinked and retained the exact same homely expression. "I am sure that you will do everything in your power to help her," he said. "Should things become difficult, don't hesitate to ask."

"Neither of us need your help."

"I think that you should let Rarity speak for herself just this once," he replied, patting me on the shoulder. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have another patient to see."

He pulled away. I watched him go, attempting to find the words to refute his own, but finding myself unable to come up with anything to say. He was a malicious character indeed. I balanced the coffee and returned to Rarity's room, still pondering over what I could have responded to the doctor with. Rarity had awoken during my absence. She was still perfectly capable of using magic, it seemed, as she was levitating a pencil and jotting things down on a notepad. With her sitting up there wasn't a lot of room for me to get

into the bed with her, so I contented myself to sit on the small chair beside her. I watched her scribbling away at the paper, placing the coffee beside her bed. "What are you writing?" I queried, but she didn't respond and I found myself growing concerned. I asked several more times in slightly different forms over the next couple of minutes, but she seemed immersed in her note. When she eventually finished writing she tore the first page from the notepad, folding it several times and levitating it towards me.

"This is a letter," she said. "I need you to send this letter to Mr. Orange immediately. His address can be found in my address book underneath the desk at the boutique. This is a very important message. I really mean it."

I eyed the note for a moment, reaching up to pluck it from her arcane spell. "Don't read it," she made a point of adding. "It really needs to go off right away."

I slipped the note into my breast pocket. "What else?"

"These are some things that I need," she said, tearing the second page from the pad. "Just a few things from home. You have permission to enter the Inspiration Room in order to retrieve items five, seven and thirteen. Everything else you can find in the back-room, the bathroom or my bedroom. Stay in the Inspiration Room only for as long as you must and do not touch anything. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

She tore the third piece of paper from the notepad and slipped it beneath her pillow. I watched her action curiously. "What is that?"

"I'm going to hang onto this one for a little longer," she said. "When the time is right you can read it."

I attempted to question her further, but she had no intention of showing me whatever she had written. Not yet, at least. "Can you send the letter off now and bring me the items on the note?" she questioned instead, and I nodded to assure myself as much as her. "I'll get right on it." She smiled and moved back against the pillows; the same irritating one from before slipped off of the bed, and I bent down to pick it up, placing it neatly behind her head once more. Using her magic she opened the door. I walked towards it slowly, both of the notes held closely to my heart in my breast pocket.

"I'll be back soon," I said to her, stopping for a moment longer.

"I'll bring more pillows with me."

## 1 Month, 14 Days (Ibid.)

I placed the bottle back on the cabinet. I'd had enough to drink. The fire had completely died down now, and so I struggled to make my way around the room without bumping into things. I found myself back in the hallway of Mr. Cross' home, once more at the foot of the marble staircase. Although the building had looked unassuming on the outside, the interior had been decorated with the sort of pomp and decadence that one would come to expect of Mr. Cross. At the top of the staircase was a painted portrait of Mr. Cross himself. Photographs were now the popular image of choice, and so Mr. Cross' insistence on having an archaic painting in his lair seemed curious. My eyes met those of the ghastly painting; small mounted lamps either side of the frame illuminated it eerily and gave me a good view of Mr. Cross, or at least the image of himself that he wished to portray.

The painting itself was exactly what I would have imagined of Mr. Cross and was hardly painted to a realistic ideal. He seemed grander and more welcoming in the image; they had made his eyes wide with hospitality rather than narrow and critical. His moustache stood out as his greatest feature; comically large upon his face and appearing to suck in the rest of his facial features. I could not help but wonder what Mr. Cross would have looked like in the absence of that enormous moustache. I felt tempted to tear that part of the painting out of the image, but I could not find a dagger in my pocket that would allow me to accurately do so. At the bottom of the painting my eyes caught the insignia that Mr. Cross liberally flaunted; it was impossible that he had painted himself, but beside the insignia was a little scribble of a signature. I managed to identify an 'F' and a 'C', and shrugged to myself; he had obviously commissioned somepony to make an inaccurately complimentary image of himself. At the top of the stairs I turned to the left. I had no idea where his bedroom would be, and would now have to stealthily navigate his hallways.

As my hoof met wood at the top of his staircase a floorboard creaked, and I wondered if every staircase suffered from the same whining top step. Nearby I noticed a light flickering; on a little table in the corridor was a small lantern that had been left on with a low-flame burning from a minimal deposit of oil. No doubt it was there in case he needed to navigate during the night, perhaps in order to use the bathroom. I took the lantern in my mouth and approached the nearest door. I opened it with a hoof, but quickly identified that it was indeed the bathroom. I noticed three other doors on this side of the building – going right at the top of the staircase would take me to other rooms – and I approached them one at a time. The first room seemed to be a study of some kind, as I spotted within several bookshelves, a globe and a telescope that was pointing towards the window. A small desk had a map splayed out over it. Red marks had been

made at particular points on the map, although even with the light of the lantern I could not deduce what they were in relation to. The map read '*Manehattan plans*', which would perhaps have meant more to me had I been there to sabotage Mr. Cross' business plans. That was not, however, why I was in his home at that moment.

My eyes drifted to something else of interest within the study. There was an issue of the *Rococo Report*, but it appeared to be a different edition to the one that I had burned in Mr. Cross' fireplace. I saw Rarity's name on the front cover and a caption hinting at a story about her within on the tenth page. I opened the article and squinted to read it. I placed the lantern on the table in front of me, which provided just enough light for me to be able to read the words that had been printed. The article had not been written by Gazette this time, I made a note of immediately, but another pony that went by the name 'Black Burst'. His style read differently to Gazette's as I pooled over the article.

*"Miss Rarity, sources reveal, is currently in hospital undergoing medical treatment. Although her current whereabouts are unknown, in the wake of her collapse in Manehattan sources have indicated that she must be nearby."*

I looked further down the page, bypassing a recap of the current situation that the media regarded Rarity to be in. At least this pony remained more objective than Gazette; he wrote in a more matter-of-fact manner. My eyes paused on a particular sentence.

*"Should Miss Rarity's whereabouts be made known, any news should be delivered immediately either to the Rococo Report or to Mr. Friesian Cross."*

As the article went on, I was able to infer that Mr. Cross had close affiliations with the *Rococo Report*. Whilst his position within the Manehattan media network wasn't familiar to me, he was certainly working alongside them regarding the current Rarity situation. And this proved to be a particularly troublesome revelation, as they were now attempting to find out where she was, no doubt hungry to feed upon any information that she could provide that would incriminate her further. I had promised myself that I would shield Rarity from these lies. I flipped the article back to the title page and noticed that the date was a couple of days ahead. I had remembered that Gazette had mentioned to me that stories were generally run in the *Rococo Report* every week. Perhaps this was an early copy that had not yet been distributed? The last copy that I had picked up from the shop mere days ago had been dated earlier than this. It was probably too late to stop the Manehattan media from releasing this copy and the article, but I could still make Mr. Cross pay for his contribution to it.

I withdrew from the study, taking the lantern in my mouth once again, and approached the next door in a hurry. I opened it as quietly as I could despite my furious state and, to my elation, I heard from within the calm breathing of a living resident. I was beginning to think that nopony was home and that my efforts had been for nought. As I hovered in the doorway, I was now given a choice. I knew that I could turn back, but I could not bring myself to do such a thing. I had come too far now. I left the door open slightly and placed the lantern outside the room, allowing a small slither of light to enter. There was a large double bed in front of me, dressed up fancily with elaborate drapes. I took a deep breath and approached the bed, squinting to make out the sleeping figures.

Only, it was one figure, not two. And as I moved closer, I observed that it was not Mr. Cross, but a sleeping mare. I half expected it to be that mysterious Clemency mare, but she did not have the same style of mane, and nor was said mane the same colour. I could tell that much, even in the dark. On her bedside table were an assortment of items, not least a pair of glasses, but also a brush for one's mane and a necklace.

This mare before me appeared at the time to be Florence Cross. I had met her only once before at the party following the *Symphony of Seven Paladins* that I had attended with Rarity. At the time she had been dressed up in all manner of fancy clothing and make-up, and looked as any pretentious aristocratic type would. But here she seemed different; as she snoozed into the pillow, she seemed utterly at peace and inarguably cute. Her blonde mane had been let out of its bunches, allowing it to flow all over the bed, and she had curled up slightly in her sleep in order to embrace a plush-toy pony between her front hooves. She seemed rather too young, now that I thought about it.

I think my mind was perhaps playing tricks on me. She could not have been that young, and I blamed the lack of light within the room for my assumptions about her. She was definitely alone, and I pulled away from the room, slipping out of the door and searching the remainder of Mr. Cross' house. On the other end of the manor the rooms were almost identical in their positioning, and I managed to find another room that revealed itself as a bedroom. Within I could hear another snoozing form, this one sounding less nubile and innocent. It had to be Mr. Cross. I used the same method of placing the light by the door and sneaking inside.

In this room was another double bed, but again, only one sleeping form. Strangely, it was another female. Her bedside table was noticeably less cluttered than that of my previous find, save for a lamp and a small slip of paper that had been folded in half. I picked the note up carefully in my hoof. Even in the minimal light I was able to read the note after unfolding it, as it had been written in thick, black ink and was not terribly long.

*"Florence,*

*Will be away for two to three weeks in Manehattan. Nothing to worry about, just some business to attend to.*

*Much love,*

*F. C".*

With his wife, at least, he did not use his little insignia, and actually signed using his initials. Now things were beginning to make a little more sense to me. The first pony had not been his wife, but presumably a daughter. I had never heard mention of Mr. Cross' daughter, but then again, I knew very little about his personal life. Mr. Cross, irritatingly, was away in Manehattan, by the sounds of it – I could not tell when the note had been written, but its position at the side of Mrs. Cross' bed led me to assume that it was relatively fresh. Not that it mattered much, now; before there had been daughter in the picture, things had been easier. But now that she was in the house with her mother and Mr. Cross was nowhere to be seen, I could not do anything irrational.

I glanced down. This was certainly his wife – she looked older and seemed much more familiar to me. She was sleeping in a mass of pillows. One of these pillows had fallen off of the bed during her sleep and was on the floor in front of me. I let out a deep sigh and turned to leave, but I was irritated by the presence of the pillow on the floor. It was out of place. I bent down to pick up the pillow in my mouth, placing it down on the bed beside her. I was now comfortable to leave, but the form in the bed before me began to move. My body tensed. She had rolled over, this time facing towards me. Even in the relative darkness I could see, and the shadowy means by which I had invaded her room could not save me when I noticed her eyes open; those dark, black orbs glistened with a liquid-like quality that I will never forget. She was awake, and she had noticed my presence.

"Friesian?" I heard her muffled, disorientated voice question. "Friesian... what are you doing home so soon?"

I began to panic. I could not possibly adopt Mr. Cross' tone, but I could not leave now that she had noticed my intrusion. There was a smashed window downstairs that signified that somepony had broken in. She would know that somepony had been in her home. Desperation consumed me; Florence Cross had sat upright in her bed, fumbling around desperately for the switch for the lamp. My natural instincts kicked in, and I picked up the pillow that I had salvaged from the floor with a hoof. Before I knew what I was doing, I was pressing the pillow down over her head. Her body struggled and she

kicked and flailed, screaming into the material. I pressed down harder, forcing her voice to cut off almost entirely. I grunted. My eyelids tightened. Her vocals were strained and she was coughing and gagging beneath me. Still I continued to hold the pillow in place, pinning her legs down with my superior body weight. And then, after finally giving in, her body tensed against mine and her protesting hooves, that had so wildly been hammering at my back, fell limp.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." I panted more times than I could count, burying my head down against the pillow. I cried into it and gagged, choking myself. I slowly peeled the pillow back and saw her lying there, her dead face contorted but motionless. I ran a hoof across her pale body, up to her locks of fine mane. She looked as tranquil as she had whilst sleeping. I pulled away from her body, the pillow rolling onto the floor once again. I watched it fall and closed my eyes tightly, getting a hold of myself.

There was a dead body in this house now, and his daughter was still alive on the other side of the building. As fragile as I was at that moment, I was capable of rationalising, at least in my mind, what would happen next. She would wake up in the morning and find a smashed window downstairs. She would go into her mother's room and find her deceased corpse. And then an investigation would begin. I don't know how this could be tracked back to me, but there was undoubtedly something that could incriminate me. I couldn't afford for his daughter to find out about this. At least with both of them gone, it would be several weeks before Mr. Cross would return home to find his family dead.

As I hurried from Florence Cross' body towards the first bedroom that I discovered, I began to reason with myself and the situation that I found myself in. As much as I hated what I had done, it was necessary to avoid further conflict. Mr. Cross deserved having his family taken from him. A pony as terrible as him did not deserve love. I had not known Mrs. Cross. By tomorrow I would have forgotten her face. In a week, I would not remember what I had done. By detaching myself from my crime I was able to keep my sanity in check. I entered the daughter's room again and approached her bed. Smothering her mother had been easy enough; I imagined that the same practice would work here. At any rate, it would leave no marks or broken bones, and would make it difficult to establish a cause of death. If it hadn't been for that damned smashed window downstairs, they could easily have both died of natural causes. Or perhaps a gas leak. I had images in my head of burning the house down and blaming it on a freak accident as I found myself staring down at the mare below me.

She hadn't moved. She was as still as the first time, her body clutching that plush toy and her chest gently rising and falling. Her bottom half was beneath the covers, but her top half was on show and beautiful. I licked my dry lips, reaching out for a pillow that wasn't



being used and picking it up, taking a deep exhale of breath. She spluttered a little in her sleep, holding her toy closer as if she knew what I was about to do. I felt my hooves trembling, ready to bring the pillow down over her head in order to suffocate her. My entire body was shaking, my throat beginning to close up with a familiar ache.

"You have to do this..." I reasoned to myself. "It's Mr. Cross' child. She deserves everything coming to her."

But Mr. Cross' child was, for some reason, refusing to die. I could not physically bring the pillow down to kill her. I could only watch her and cry. I stepped back. I could not bring myself to murder her. Whoever this pony was – I didn't even know her name – she wasn't a pony that I could harm. She was too elegant and too innocent. I dropped the pillow and rushed out of the room. I had no idea if I had woken her in the process or not. I closed her door behind me and put my head back against it, staring up and taking a deep breath. I felt a rise in my stomach but managed to keep myself from vomiting.

"What the fuck have I done?" I whispered to myself like a maniac. How could I get out of this situation? There was nothing that I could do to keep this from coming out. It would make all of the headlines and ruin me. I had gotten what I wanted in hurting Mr. Cross, ultimately, although I had never considered what the repercussions of my plan would be. If Mr. Cross had been there that night, I would have killed him, and probably his wife in the process, as she would no doubt have woken up whilst I was butchering her husband. But in becoming a murderer, I was jeopardising everything. I really hadn't been thinking straight that day, and there was no just cause for my actions.

I ended up forming a quick plan. It would hide any evidence of any of this happening and erase this entire ordeal as much as possible. I walked around the house and found every lamp, candle and lantern that I could find. Where there was oil in lanterns I smashed the glass and tipped it out onto the carpets. I found myself pouring oil into the living room, where I noticed the fireplace once again with its metal guard up. An idea entered my brain and I opened the guard, pouring some more oil into the fireplace and, using a pack of matches that sat on the mantelpiece just above the fireplace, I set the logs on fire once again. I could make this entire thing look like a terrible accident that had occurred when Mrs. Florence Cross had foolishly forgotten to close the guard on the fireplace, inadvertently causing her home to burn down during the night.

I left the living room and continued around the house. I started downstairs actually lighting a fire, using some of the matches to set fire to books and anything that I could find that was flammable. The study and the living room went up in flames quickly. I hurried upstairs. Mrs. Cross' room appeared to have plenty of items that easily caught on

fire, although I stayed as far away from her bed as possible. I remained in the home setting fires off wherever I could until they were beyond being put out. I then slammed a hoof against the door of Mr. Cross' daughter's room, turning on my hooves and running downstairs. I passed the painting on the way; it had caught fire and the paint was melting, pooling at the base of the frame. The image that Mr. Cross portrayed to the world was beginning to burn away. I did not observe the painting for long; fire had now consumed the hall, but I had intelligently unlocked the door when I had first entered, and ran through the flames towards the exit. I made my way out into the open air, coughing from the effect of the dark smoke from within.

I did vomit then, although I could not slow down to recover. I ran away from the home and located the wall that I had leapt over in order to enter his estate. There was no tree on my side, but by some miracle I was able to leap high enough and somehow scramble over the wall. I landed in some bushes and rushed to the other side of the path, diving into the foliage opposite the gate of the manor. I watched as the building began to burn noticeably from the outside.

"Come on... come on..." I stuttered to myself, watching the doorway. Terrible thoughts passed through my mind; had I remembered to do my best to wake the girl? I could have done more! I could have opened the door and thrown something – anything – at her. I even felt the inclination to rush back in and save her, but my hooves kept me rooted to the ground. I was in a state of giving up when I noticed movement, and the front door of their manor home did indeed open. The mare was there, appearing as if in her teenage years in the light of the fire behind her, and she was coughing and retching. She gulped in a strained breath and ran back into the building. I assumed that she was mad; she emerged minutes later dragging a pony behind her. It was her mother. She must have left the manor momentarily in order to catch her breath before rushing right back in for her. The blonde mare pulled her further away from the building, closer towards me – so close, in fact, that she was just on the other side of the gate – and there she fell on top of her elder, breathing into her mouth and moaning. She pressed heavy hooves against her mother's chest in a desperate attempt to help her breathe once again, but I knew that she was not going to wake.

As the foundations of the building behind her immolated further, the entire structure began to crack and smash. It was doubtful that there would be any way to tell that I had even broken into the place, now that it was all going up in flames. The mare was still attempting to revive her mother. It was a horrible spectacle to watch, and I found myself looking away in the grim hope that she would stop. But she continued trying to give life back to her mother for longer than I could have counted. Minutes must have rolled into hours as she sobbed against her mother's corpse, unable to let her go. Her death had been

sudden; the living mare had had no time to prepare for it. It was natural that she would take this ordeal as a shock.

I left before finding out what happened next with the young mare. She was alive, and that was enough closure for me. Although Mr. Cross' home was on the outskirts of Trottingham, no doubt a blaze as big as this would be seen from the town and ponies would come flocking soon. They would find a distraught daughter, agonised but alive, and a deceased mother, who had died for all intents and purposes by inhaling too much smoke. Things had really worked out perfectly; I may not have been able to stop Mr. Cross, but I had hit him arguably where it would hurt more. The death of Florence had been a tragedy, but if the newspapers would print that she died in a house fire, I would be willing to believe it. I left the area under the cover of darkness, avoiding the roads to the best of my ability. I could not wait to see the stories in the papers over the next few days.

Mr. Cross would have to prepare himself. As the old saying goes...

*Fight fire with fire.*

#### 4 Months, 23 Days

"Are you sure?"

"I would not have asked if I was not sure."

I did not personally object to living at the boutique with Rarity. On the contrary, it was possibly the most appealing offer that I had ever received. It wasn't that I disliked the tavern near the Phoenix Feather fountain; by all means, it was a nice and comfortable inn that had served me well. The owner of the place was a kindly fellow who, given my extensive patronage, had effectively made concessions to make the place more like a home for me. He had moved me into the biggest room that they had available a couple of months ago – one with an en-suite bathroom – and I was allowed to roam the corridors freely without receiving odd glances. I had befriended his wife and his two young daughters as well, for they were fair and gentle sorts. His wife carried herself in an authoritative way, and at times I believed that she was the owner of the inn, such was her ability to make her husband do various jobs around the establishment. She was approachable to all patrons, although she came to know me by name and was especially friendly towards me. Their two fillies were twins, both of blonde hair and cream-tanned bodies, and they were every bit as adorable as one might imagine.

In comparison, Rarity's boutique was a big step-up. I would have access to my own kitchen and bedroom and would be closer to work, giving me more time in the mornings. More importantly, however, I would be closer to Rarity herself, which was of absolute importance. The bond between Rarity and I was special; no doubt fuelled by our already extensive interaction over the past few months, we had become incredibly close, and asking me to move in with her was the confirmation of that. My efforts in making her happy had achieved fruition. I found myself nodding in natural response to her request.

"I would love to, Rarity."

"You don't know how grateful I am to hear that," she replied. "You can have the spare room. It's small, but it at least has a bed in it. Normally it is used by guests, but you can be my live-in resident."

Things were moving incredibly fast, and as much as I did not wish to mention it, I felt as if soon we would need to be having another one of our 'relationship' talks. They weren't so much conversations as they were suggestions from me consecutively declined by

Rarity. Any pony around town would assume that, by living together, we were an item, but Rarity had always insisted that this was not the case. She had no interest in romance, especially now that her business was really taking off. Time was not something that she possessed.

"Be aware that this is purely a business decision," Rarity said. "If I'm going to be making a lot of dresses I need somepony to run the boutique on a permanent basis. I cannot manage the shop and create at the same time."

I nodded, looking down at my hooves slightly. She must have realised this, as she made the decision to subsequently encourage me. "It will also be rather nice to have company," the unicorn admitted, and this was enough to make me joyous towards the situation once more. She took me into the kitchen and opened a drawer, hoofing around inside for something. She smiled when her hoof eventually touched the sought-after metal object within, producing a key. She dropped it into my eager hooves.

"I get a key?" I questioned with wide eyes.

"I trust you with it. You will need to be able to enter the boutique when I am absent."

"Absent?"

She placed a hoof on my shoulder and looked at me for a few moments. "Do you have much to bring with you?" she asked. Truth be told, I had very few valuables with me in Ponyville. I rarely travelled with much, and this trip in particular had been a relatively empty-hoofed one. I shook my head and she seemed glad of this; Rarity was a rather picky individual, and should I have brought something into her home that she disliked she would have forced me to dispose of it. At least this way I would barely change the idyllic landscape of her home. The only change would be my continuous presence. For whatever reason, she now wanted me to stay closer than ever.

"So how do we proceed?" Rarity questioned.

"I'll go and let the innkeepers know that I'm leaving right away," I explained, and she jumped for joy, demonstrating excitement that one scarcely expected of Rarity. At times she was prone to extreme bouts of elation, and that day especially was one of the few circumstances where Rarity seemed truly happy. I kept to my word and left the boutique, trotting out into the cobbled street. The tavern near the Phoenix Feather fountain had been a terminal from which I would embark to greater places; as I entered I was greeted

by friendly, rosy-cheeked faces. I explained to them Rarity's offer, taking a seat on a barstool.

"So you'll be leaving us soon?" I was asked by the keeper, and his noble wife inquired deeper.

"I'll be moving in at the boutique," I explained. "Rarity wants me to look after the shop for her."

"It'll be good if you're living there," he responded. "Miss Rarity has been looking awfully thin of late. Maybe you can get some colour and food back into her? She'll work herself to death one of these days."

"She has been busy. She has not found time to eat."

"Are you lovers?" inquired his inquisitive wife.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "Yes," I said, "sort of, at least."

"If it's complicated, I'll pressure you no more," she replied, and returned behind the bar, leaving me with the owner. He had a bill to work out; I had amassed quite a debt to this family. It was unfortunate that I had not moved out sooner.

"It's not complicated," I said to myself quietly as he totalled up the debt that I owed. "I know where we are. Rarity just hasn't realised it yet."

"What are you doing?" the keeper questioned me, his eyes setting upon my own with fierce determination. He seemed to be judging me with his unusually cold stare.

I wondered what he meant. "In regards to Rarity?" I questioned dubiously.

He shook his head and pointed a hoof towards a bowl of nuts on the table before me that I had been helping myself to. "Only current patrons can eat the nuts."

He must have been joking with me, but his wife took the nuts away from me all the same. When he showed me the bill it seemed unusually high. But maybe I had worked out my numbers wrong, so I didn't question it. I parted with my money and shook him by the hoof. He thanked me for my extended patronage and asked me to always remember my experience there. I asked to say goodbye to the children, but I was informed that both fillies were currently at school. They promised me that they would pass on my farewell, and I left the tavern in high spirits.

That night Rarity and I celebrated. She shouldn't have been taking time off from her work, but she told me that just this once we could throw caution to the wind and that she would catch up on things later. We ended up in her bedroom on the floor together, lying on our backs and staring up at the ceiling. She had been having a fit of giggles over something that wasn't even that funny; I had mentioned a pony with a ridiculous hat that I had seen on my trip back to the boutique, and apparently it was the funniest source of humour in the world, for Rarity could not stop herself from laughing. It wasn't the usual, refined laughter that she adopted when we were out at events such as the *Symphony of Seven Paladins*. Rather, this laughter resonated with childlike glee, reacquainting her with her younger years. When I commented on this, the conversation turned to her childhood.

"I never felt as if I truly belonged," Rarity explained, lying with her hooves pointing upwards. I turned to the side a little, watching her as she spoke. "I'm not saying that I dislike my family – I love them very much – but I just wished, as a filly, for the independence from them that I now have. Do you think that it is possible to love somepony and yet be without them?"

I thought about her words for a few moments. "I think that love is a feeling of security," I found myself saying. "It's not necessarily explicit. It's just something that you know. It's a conscious state of being aware that somepony genuinely cares for you. In that regard, being apart from somepony that you love doesn't change the way that you feel about them." I paused for a moment. "At least that's what I think."

Still lying on her back, she turned to face me, demonstrating a curious expression. "Do you think that love needs to be said, then?" she questioned. "Or if two ponies are in love, is it not something that is felt rather than spoken?"

She was not blinking.

"I think that's quite possible. Sometimes it's hard to find the words."

"Sometimes the words don't do the feeling justice," she replied, closing her eyes. She remained in that state for a little while. I reached a hoof out to nudge her slightly.

"Um... Rarity?" I queried in a whisper, clearing my throat. She opened a beautiful, blue eye and giggled again.

"I was just thinking," she mouthed, her breath brushing my face. "As a little filly, there was one thing that I always enjoyed doing with my family."

"What did you enjoy?"

"It's something in Manehattan," she said. "I shall keep it a secret for now, but it means a lot to me. It is one of the reasons why I became interested in fashion in the first place." She sniffed a little. "Would you consider going with me?"

As much as I disliked Manehattan, I was willing to return again for Rarity's sake. I had been spending too much time there recently, but fate would transpire to make me return at least one more time. For Rarity, I would walk through fire. I smiled and gave a little nod. "When were you thinking of going?"

"Sometime soon," she said. "I'll let you know and we'll make a day of it."

It was always lovely to arrange things with Rarity. She had such a knack for keeping everything excitingly secretive. It was a great talent of hers. She was very happy indeed that I had agreed to go, especially as she knew that I disliked Manehattan and thus valued my personal sacrifice in returning. She looked back up towards the ceiling and told me more about her family. She loved her mother and father very much, and her little sister certainly looked up to her. And yet, as she spoke, it was clear that she had no intention of seeing them any time soon, and that her presence in Ponyville was her greatest success in escapism. She explained to me how she had told her family that she would be busy for the next few months, and that they would only be able to see her when she had finished. I don't know what she was working on, but finishing it off was definitely at the front of her mind. I deduced from her words that her family were no longer a large part of her life. We had more in common than I would ever have at first perceived.

"Hang on a moment," she said quite suddenly during one of our slower conversations. She was frowning, and I wondered what the problem was. She pointed a hoof towards the ceiling. "There's a horrible spider up there!"

I squinted and noticed the creature; it was somewhat sizeable, fumbling around in its web. Her horn began to glow and a cupboard opened, a broom emerging from it laced in her familiar blue aura. Swiftly it was levitated towards the ceiling where it swept up both the spider and its web. Her mastery of the arcane allowed her to open her bedroom window, and she shook the broom outside to eliminate any trace of the spider. It was then returned to her cupboard, safe and sound.

"I cannot stand spiders," she said, letting out a breathy sigh. "They are a sign of unclean conditions. A home containing spiders is no home of mine."



I admired Rarity's resolve. We spent hours there together, getting up only when nature called. When she returned from the bathroom she was wearing a purple nightgown. "Let me show you to your room," she said, slipping away from the doorway and enticing me to follow. We passed a room on the way that I had been forbidden to enter since meeting her; her fabled Inspiration Room. I knew nothing of what existed within, only that it was out of bounds and her personal haven of reclusion. It was where she spent most of her time creating. She quickly hurried me along to our destination. My room was small but homely, and it was certainly big enough to contain me. "Alas, I lack any nightwear for stallions," she said with a little smirk as I approached the bed. "You'll have to make do without."

She hovered in the doorway for a moment. "I think that you should get some sleep," she said convincingly. "Tomorrow is a busy day."

"What's tomorrow?" I questioned.

"I begin preparations for Winter Wrap-up. I have an entire new line of winter-themed dresses to work on. This is a popular time of the year for fashion. Not to mention that I need to prove to my friends that I do, in fact, still exist by making them something lovely for the occasion." Rarity must have been feeling guilty about neglecting her friends lately. It must have been weeks since she had seen any of them, given the amount of time that she had been spending away from Ponyville.

"Then I guess tomorrow will be our first day of living together," I said, not wishing to dwell on the topic of her friends, and Rarity smiled in response.

"I am very glad that you are here," the beautiful unicorn said. She fell curiously silent and bit her bottom lip. She took a cautious step towards me and, with a modicum of hesitance, put her front hooves on my shoulders. My own hooves curled around her body, probing into her back. She was such a little thing; slight of frame and ever-so thin. It was a fleeting embrace, and she pulled away the moment that I began to squeeze too hard.

"Goodnight," she flustered, disappearing from sight.

She closed the door behind her, and I climbed into bed with misty thoughts. I listened carefully, but heard Rarity's delicate hooves only make their way halfway towards her room; the troubled floorboards of the old loom made secret navigation within difficult. She had stopped. I heard a click and a door shutting. I waited for a few minutes and then pulled myself up, hearing the sound of machines whirring in the back of my ears. I

opened my bedroom door slightly and peered out. The light in Rarity's room was off, but I could see a golden glow through the slit beneath the door of the Inspiration Room. I peered back into my bedroom and checked the clock on the wall; it was approaching two in the morning. But it was not my place to be intrusive, and I returned to my bed, silently reclusive. But as I lay there in the dark, the innkeeper's words met their mark. They hung precariously upon my breath:

*"She'll work herself to death."*

### **1 Month, 9 Days**

"Spend whatever time that Rarity has left hating her and causing her to hate you."

"Do your best to let her know that she is loved."

It's funny how such a simple decision can become complicated by factors beyond our control. I guess you could say that I had wanted Rarity to have a 'clean' death. When we first found out about the monster within, I designed a plan for the both of us. It was to make the last couple of months a time where Rarity would feel comfortable and loved. But I was only half successful, as much as it pains me to admit it. While she undoubtedly knew that I was there for her, there were times where she hated my presence. Too often I found myself shut out of her room, alienated behind a pane of thick glass, as the doctor inspected her body and evaluated her health. Just watching his hooves pressing into her soft form hurt me more than if he was inserting a needle directly into my spine. When he did that to Rarity, the howling was enough to steal sleep from beneath your very eyes. The pain that he unleashed upon her was his own personal medicine, delivered through silver wires until Rarity bled. I thought that he would kill her, such was the extent of his experimentation upon her body. The puncture wounds made her sick to the stomach and she vomited over herself like a poisoned dog. But he would always do his duty and clear the mess from her body before I was allowed back in.

What a delightful situation we now found ourselves in. I had become obsessed with the clock in the hallway just outside of Rarity's room. As odd as my request had apparently been, I had asked for a clock to be put up in our room. Why I had to personally request such a typical device was beyond me. To me, it was the most natural thing in the world to wish to have in one's impending crypt. What else were we doing but counting down time? I'd never really considered the passage of time prior to winding up in that ward, but sitting around for days on end opens up absurd new areas of interest. I had managed to time my own heart beat to the ticking of the clock hands. Each second resulted in a noticeable palpitation. Every minute on the minute I would freeze a moment in time, thinking back upon the minute that had just passed me by. It would usually be a

disappointment, but there was always the hope that the following minute would receive rave reviews.

I don't really believe in time as a concept any more. What is the point in time? It allows one to quantify data – to order specific meeting times, for example – but its actual passage is anything but consistent. Yesterday I went to the bathroom and my trip took me four minutes and fifty-two seconds. I was counting, so I know that to be true. But earlier today when I had been sitting at the foot of Rarity's bed, I had closed my eyes for a moment, maybe two, and time had decided to ramble forwards by almost two hours. Clocks lie. They don't just sit on the wall and tick away without judgement; they observe our greatest insecurities, and when we are at our most vulnerable they slow down in order to make every agonising moment eat away at us like vultures upon carrion. It wasn't that Rarity and I had too little time left; it was that time was punishing us, forcing us to interact when all we wanted was to be buried together.

Any sensible pony requires control of a situation. Control allows us to plan out our days – ironically with the help of a clock – and to bring order to our otherwise chaotic decisions. But in Rarity's position, there was no certainty of anything. The doctor had spoken on several occasions of 'counting down time', but he was utterly unable to give us any degree of control. I could wake up tomorrow to find Rarity cold and stiff. The confusion, to me, stemmed from the inability of these doctors to offer us any degree of closure: if they could not predict when she would die, surely she could live another fifty years? If that was the case, being trapped in this place was the most unnecessary protocol imaginable.

When looking directly at Rarity, I did not see the signs of weakness and corrosion that the doctors spoke of. She was always pale; it was her natural colour. Her lack of muscle strength most likely came about from lying in bed for weeks on end. She had always been thin, bypassing meals in order to work extensively. If they would just allow her to get out of this place, to see the world on a beautiful, blossoming day and to witness the setting of the sun, I knew that it would invigorate her once again with life. Getting her out of there was the only real challenge. Security was strong.

I grew tired, eventually, of standing outside the room. I let myself in, as Rarity no longer had the desire to use her magic. She still could, I must add, she had just chosen not to. I imagine it was because magic is largely unnecessary: ponies of the earth and sky are able to function perfectly fine without the ability to use magic. Inside the room Rarity was lying in bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling. I joined her, expecting there to be something interesting up there. The most I saw was a cobweb.

"Do you want me to wipe the cobweb away?" I asked, walking towards her bed in order to reach up to the ceiling. She shook her head.

"No... I was watching a spider earlier," she responded in a slight voice, "but I can see him no longer."

I took a seat beside her bed, nodding. "Maybe he'll come back out again later."

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" the unicorn questioned me. I looked towards the web again, but saw not even the slightest black smudge of a spider up there.

"I've never really thought about spiders as being beautiful."

"It's the webs..." she said softly. "They are naturally born to make intricate designs that are impossible to mimic. I read once that no two spider webs are the same."

"I read something similar about snowflakes, once," I said. She gave me an odd look and I shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

"Do you think that I was born to make beautiful things?" she asked, and I found myself nodding before her words had even fully processed in my head.

"Yeah, I think you were."

I sat back in the chair, observing the monitor beeping beside her body. Its rhythm was consistent. In comparison to the clock on the wall, at least this device was dependable. Its pacing refused to change due to some omnipotent, perverse whim. I could always count on the monitor as a time-keeping object. Right now, it was *'Rarity's Still Breathing O'clock.'* Rarity didn't say anything else for a little while. I sat there with my hooves crossed, shuffling to find a comfortable spot. It didn't help that these chairs were made of the most irritating, itchy material in existence. Thank goodness that the paper-beds were made of crisper stuff.

"My back is aching."

I leaned forwards, winding the metal dial on the side of her bed in order to lift the upper half. It gradually changed position to arch her back, allowing her to sit up with greater ease. It was, of course, howling like a silver banshee. I identified the problem as rust. Why they would not take better care of their appliances was something that I would have to ask the doctor during his next visiting hour. I could ask him while he next groped at Rarity, desperate to slide a quivering hoof inside of her.

Why is it so hard to find a sign that reads, 'Reserved' that I could just dangle over her head? Ponies desperately wanted to fuck her. Even right now, with her unkempt mane and her vomit-stained sheets, and her blackened lips and sullen eyes, and her pained grimace and her dry throat, and her rigid stare and her filthy, piss-stained hooves, and her stiff limbs and rusted tongue they wanted to mount her and fuck her to death. Fuck her and leave her; animals catering to the ignoble whims of their biological desperations, indulging in their bohemian practices and satisfying their insatiable appetites to continue fucking. And it wasn't just enough to fuck her: they could not resist fucking her up as well. Ripping her apart just to acknowledge their own superiority, and throttling her with promises that could never be kept; consuming her with their Manhattanesque lies and twisting her mind into a sprawling, maggot-infested labyrinth which they would fuck and continue to fuck without warning, mercy or humility.

The doctor entered the room. He approached her and lifted the sheets from her body. "How are you feeling today, Rarity?" he asked; a simple formality that she would still make an effort to oblige despite its redundancy. His hooves pressed around her body and I cursed under my breath. He made noticeable impressions into her white flesh. Her blank body became muddied by his claws. He asked her if she had plans for the day, which was the most ridiculous question in existence. If her plans involved dying in a rusted tomb then I would reply in the affirmative.

"I'm going to bring by a slice of carrot cake later," he said as he probed at her back.

Rarity beamed at the doctor and smiled graciously. "Do you think you could perhaps bring two pieces?" she inquired greedily. "I always hunger for a second slice."

"I may be able to arrange that," he said with a charming laugh. "I'll see what I can do."

Where was good old humourless Chocolate Cake? She just came in, did her duty and left. She was exactly what we needed from a professional. Not this flirtatious prick. I watched as he made gooey eyes all over her for the remainder of their little exchange. When he finished he gave me a tertiary glance, as if to acknowledge that he had invaded our world and touched my possessions. He sauntered from the room, leaving me to pick up the pieces with a clearly distressed Rarity.

"I always like the carrot cake here," she said. "It tastes as if the Cake Family themselves are supplying them."

"What is the deal with that doctor, anyway?" I asked. "I hope that you're aware that he wishes to fu-"

Rarity quickly raised a hoof in objection and squinted her eyes, falling back into her pillow. "We have been over this..." she said in a desperate tone of voice. "Please... refrain from using that sort of language. It is uncouth..."

"I'm sorry," I said, realising my mistake. I should never have told her about the doctor's disgusting desires; she did not need to know about his depravity.

"He's just doing his job..." she said, sitting up in her bed once more. "He has a young colt. He is very much the family stallion, from what I have gathered."

"How do you even know that?"

"He told me," she explained, and I frowned in response.

"What else has he told you?"

"A lot of things..." Rarity sighed. "None of it is important."

"When did he tell you?"

Rarity did not appear to wish to answer me, but after further pressure I managed to get her to confess. "Four or five days ago," she said offhandedly. "You weren't here during the evening, as you said that you had some errands to run, correct?"

*How much did she know?*

"Correct."

"Your errands must have taken quite some time as you did not return during the night. I assumed you slept back at the boutique as you do some days."

"Yes..." I said with a dry throat. "I slept at the boutique."

"During the night I woke up," she continued. "I was in a frightful state. I did not tell you sooner because I feared that it would worry you needlessly. A dream that I had been having scared me enough to force me to wake. Doctor Tawleed must have been passing by; he heard me and entered the room. He comforted me that night."

*The bastard.*

"What did he do?"

"He just held me and told me that it was a nightmare..." Rarity said, sounding like a guilty culprit. "It is so unlike me to have those nightmare things. In fact, I believe that it may have been my first ever. Nevertheless, Doctor Tawleed was professional and succeeded in calming me down. I thought that he was you at first."

"Had I known, I would have come straight here," I insisted, and she obliged me with a nod.

"It was resolved within minutes," she said, "and the doctor and I continued to talk for a while. That's when he told me about his family."

"Didn't he have other patients to see?" I asked angrily.

Rarity shook her gentle head. "He had finished his shift and was heading home when he passed my door."

"When off-duty, it is no longer his job to care for you."

"I do not think that he considers caring for another pony to be a job."

I certainly did not regard looking after Rarity as being a taxing career choice. But this doctor, his name having slipped my mind once more, was a stranger to her once his uniform was off. Inviting himself into her room was despicable.

"We both have a lot in common, so talking to him was easy," Rarity said quite suddenly, catching me off guard. This time, I had not pressured her to tell me more.

"As a youngster he was always a creative pony. He grew up near Ponyville and I sold dresses to his wife on two separate occasions without even realising it. He is a great appreciator of the arts: we had a lengthy discussion about baroque fashion."

"I enjoyed learning about that from your guide," I said excitedly, but she merely nodded and resumed.

"He has been a great admirer of my work for some time. It is funny: he has treated my little sister, Sweetie Belle, before, as well."

I won't go into detail in regards to why Rarity had chosen to avoid telling her family about all of this. It was her decision, and one that I stuck by; a family would complicate things from my perspective. If she was content to be without them, so was I. I barely

listened to her various reasons for why her and the doctor were the perfect couple; she was wrong and he had obviously worked quickly to corrupt her during my absence.

"That night, I also realised that I like carrot cake, which is interesting as I always hated it as a filly." She certainly seemed more lively at that moment than any other in recent memory. It was just a pity that it had been the doctor who had been there during her nightmare; from now on, I would not leave her bedside. If, during the night, she had another terrible dream, I would be there to pick up the pieces. An indeterminate amount of time went by – the clock suggested about an hour and a half – and the doctor showed up once more, a plate balanced on a hoof and a newspaper held in his mouth. The plate had three slices of carrot cake on it, which had caused Rarity's eyes to widen.

"For me?" she mouthed, but the doctor shook his head, dropping the newspaper onto the bed in front of her.

"Two are for you," he said, "the other is for your friend here. He has yet to try it."

They looked towards me in the most idiotic way. I ended up having a bite of the carrot cake and munched it down in front of their approving eyes. They spoke a little bit about his colt – why Rarity inquired about the unknown little pony I have no idea – and, before leaving, he pointed out that he had brought the newspaper so that she would have something to read. However, Rarity was more focused on eating her cake slices, and, upon watching the doctor retreat from the room, I asked if I could read the newspaper first. She seemed happy for me to do that, and I took it into my hooves. There was a printed photograph on the front of a burnt-out husk of a building. The title caption spoke of, 'new revelations at the Cross Manor'. I flipped to the relevant page and began to read the article.

"This is interesting," I commented, and Rarity made a muffled grunt, only partly acknowledging what I was saying. I guess that was for the best. "There's more information on that home that burnt down in Trottingham."

*"Sadness and despair fill the hearts of many in Trottingham. Four days ago the ponies of the town had to hear that their beloved patron, Mrs. Florence Cross, had passed away in a terrible house fire that continued to burn for almost four hours after authorities showed up to put the fire out. Reportedly, the woodland area surrounding the manor also sustained damage. It has been impossible to reach Mr. Friesian Cross, but it is believed that he is currently grieving. There is no word yet in regards to his various business' around the city of Manehattan, although sources are suggesting that Mr. Cross will be taking some time off of work in order to come to terms with his loss."*



"What information is that?" Rarity asked, and I shrugged.

"Just the grieving husband sad about his wife dying so far. It's understandable." I continued to read.

*"Perhaps no pony is taking the news harder, however, than the Cross Family's young daughter, Miss Farleigh Cross, who has been described as 'visibly disturbed'. Much help has been offered to the young mare, but it is clear that this terrible circumstance has affected the lives of many."*

The daughter's name was Farleigh, apparently. I had not been aware of that; the previous article that I had read in regards to the fire had merely referred to her as 'Miss Cross'. I had assumed that they wished to protect her identity to an extent, but apparently this was no longer the case.

*"One concerned fire-fighting stallion who hurried to the scene of the fire reported that, "the flames had gone up so high that we could see them from the town centre. There was an orange blur in the distance and we could smell smoke from a mile away. Me and several others rushed to the manor in the hopes of helping, but while the daughter was safe, the mother was announced dead at the scene before efforts could be made to put out the fire."*

I narrowed my eyes.

*"The cause of death of Mrs. Florence Cross is under speculation. Until further evidence can be gathered, it is believed that she suffocated from the smoke within the home. There is no evidence to suggest that the fire was intentional. But what caused this terrible catastrophe? The head of the fire department in Trottingham gave this statement: "We have narrowed our findings down to suggest that the fire was caused by a stray ember or log in the living room of the Cross Manor. The fireplace guard, a metal barrier that is specially designed to avoid such disasters, is believed to have been left open overnight. An improperly extinguished log or ember reached the carpet and the fire spread quickly." It is furthermore believed that the Cross Family's use of outdated technology, such as oil lamps, allowed for the fire to spread in a way that would have been impossible otherwise, leading officials to suggest that the fire was permeated by the classical antiquity of Mr. Cross' livelihood."*

"Anything else?" Rarity asked.

"It was an accident," I said quickly. "The family didn't properly close the fire guard or something."

"That is saddening..."

*"Currently, there is no word on if the fireplace was left in its unadulterated state by Mrs. Florence Cross or her daughter, as Mr. Cross is believed to have been away that night on a business trip, and his alibi, one Miss A. Clemency, can be accounted for as being with him during the evening of the disaster. Further inquiries will be made and the investigation continues."*

I placed the newspaper down on my lap. "Do you want me to read the article to you?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"No, it sounds frightfully sad. My sympathies are with the family, though."

I flicked through the newspaper again, but it was all depressing stuff. Why did these journalists rarely report on anything positive? I sighed and put my head back against the chair. Rarity finished her carrot cake and placed the plate gently onto her bedside table. Some crumbs had fallen down her chest, but I wiped them away with a considerate hoof. "I think I'm going to get some sleep..." she said, and I gave a little nod.

"You should as well..." she yawned, curling up and turning towards me and the window.

I waited for her to fall asleep. There were two known rhythms in that room; the scraping of the clock and the beeping of the monitor. But there was a third rhythm that disturbed me more; it was the shaking of my hoof against the newspaper. My nerves had become convulsive, and I had to take a few deep inhales to calm myself. I turned back to the necessary page and fixed my eyes upon the article once more, reading the same line repeatedly.

*"There is no evidence to suggest that the fire was intentional."*

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I cast aside the paper and buried my head against her frail body. And while Rarity slept through my greatest admission I gripped tightly onto her outstretched hoof. I could not let go. I feared the worst. For in times of desperation we cater most to our wildest inhibitions, and cave to the chaotic mantra of unknowing. I finally feared the consequence of being without Rarity. Her body was thin and her mane was a mess; her

fragrance less fragrant than I could physically stress. She was a bastardised impersonation of that which I loved. Things would only get harder, I finally understood.

We were on a downward spiral heading further downward.

Red crosses.

Rust.

**Blood.**

**10 Months, 2 Days (Ibid.)**

"It all looks so beautiful."

"Sir, you flatter me too much."

There was no compliment that I could give that would be deemed 'too much' when this unicorn was concerned. Her voice was a comforting symphony to me. It sounds abstract to say that, but the natural rhythm of the world had always proven itself to be of great interest to me. Music, or indeed particular pitches and tones, had forever been a great indicator of how I would come to feel about somepony. An oafish-sounding ruffian-pony would receive little of my time and less of my patience; a savvy-businesspony of a crystalline complexion and voice would leave me feeling cold and resentful. When this unicorn spoke, however, her dialect and diction denoted something incredible to me; it was a voice that one could fall in love with, and a soothing rhythm if ever I heard one.

It must sound ridiculous to the untrained ear that I would spend such a long time fascinating myself with the dalliance of the unicorn's voice. I partially blame my romantic aspirations, and otherwise view my obsessions as having been influenced by the great writer-ponies that had so nibbled away at my own linguistic form. Sentimentality often eluded me quite consciously, and it was nothing short of perplexing that I had crossed such stimulating paths with this delicate mare, especially as my intentions in being within Ponyville had never initially involved this purple-maned object of desire. I still, to this day, ask myself why I had chosen to make it my familiar locale. To rationalize, my main reason for going to Ponyville in the first place was in order to escape pretty much everywhere else. In Equestria, when you want to lose yourself, there are three destinations that one can seek: the outer shanty towns, Manehattan and Ponyville.

Those shanty towns are as unappealing as they sound; the locals are cowpokes and bandits and other unsavoury types. That was a world for country-folk, and certainly not for one as refined as me. I was born in Manehattan, albeit the Cheapside, but it did not take me long to get out of there. To most, I am a Trottingham pony; the sort of pony who stands by his convictions and carries himself with grace and humility. We may not be the most emotional of ponies in Trottingham – our hubris and stiff upper-lip is world-famous – but we make up for our stoicism through our dependability and rugged constitutions. If ever a pony is in need, they go to Trottingham. Which, as I say, is a far more desirable location than the shanty towns of the outer-realm, and one would have to be mad to try and find solitude among the tumbleweed. After all, if one wishes to desert,

going to a deserted place is a rather foolish conception of wit; indeed, it is the equivalent of drawing a red mark on an otherwise blank sheet and asking somepony to locate the irregular spot. Truly, if one wishes to escape, they must go somewhere populated, else they stick out like a sore hoof.

Which brings me to the second location for leaving Equestria behind; Manehattan. For obvious reasons it may seem odd to attempt to escape by going to one of the largest cities in Equestria – Canterlot finds itself in the same situation – and yet, given my previous reasoning, it is, in fact, the *perfect* place to lose oneself. After all, who would find a pony among a crowd of thousands, and what pony would waste their time looking for one in such a tempestuous mass? In Manehattan, one could disappear behind a group of clerk-ponies and stay there out of sight for days, sheltered beneath the incessant waffling that so aptly leaves their serpentine tongues. For, you see, this is why Manehattan is not a place that I would personally choose to escape to, for the population, although vast, are vacuous and prone to thriving upon nature's most illicit inhibitions. Manehattan must be the only city in Equestria where one can speak with the native population for hours on end and actually lose information from the brain; it leaks out, as if their very words make the listener less intelligent by the second. This is no doubt due to their ruthless obsession with gossip.

It is not all bad in Manehattan; of note is an old companion of mine by the name of Gazette who works for a very specific branch of the Manehattan Media – he is a journalist for the *Rococo Report* – that would never print lies and resort to shaming others. They are a satirical paper run by wits, and Gazette had made his name in attacking preconceived notions about the secondary monarch, Princess Luna, disguised as a pornographic series of lithographs but in fact consisting of anything but. It was a humorous article of witticism beyond the common rabble, which is arguably why it had become so popular; so many had stumbled into the obvious pitfall of believing it to be a true account of saucy bedroom-shenanigans. If they had requested a refund, Gazette would likely have made more money and fame by writing a mocking retort about how they should have known better than to sexualise royalty. For him, no story was too risqué and burlesque to print.

Alas, the *Rococo Report* makes up very little of the Manehattanite community, among which are the most lamentable ponies imaginable. Old Manehattan, my unfortunate birthplace, remains a disgusting hovel, abandoned by contemporary regulations for sanitation and not only allowed to stagnate, but actively encouraged to do so through shameful neglect. In its natural state of poverty, those living within its confines are stunted by an understandably myopic world-view, that everything outside of their immediate sphere of influence is in a similar state of disarray, and thus making a

conscious effort to improve conditions would be a worthless exercise. There are no physical barriers between Old Manehattan and the Manehattan published in the papers; the gravity pulling one back into its murky depths is a social constraint rather than a preventative wall. I found the strength to leave; others should as well, or else they should avoid complaining about their dire condition for fear of hypocrisy.

Those of the greater city are no better, for although they have wealth, they have not been educated in how to spend it wisely. When one has money, the correct thing to do is to use it sparingly, when one finds the immediate need. 'Expenditure when necessary' should be the manifesto of the wealthy elite, and yet one cannot walk the streets of Manehattan without being trampled by a portly stallion, an entertainer of many mistresses, who has fallen foul to the meat-market hooves of gluttony, vomiting onto his lady's diamond-encrusted dress due to his over-indulgence. And she, no better, would have thousands of perfumes on hoof to spray herself with to rid her of his repugnant odour, and a cleaning apparatus in her petticoat that could remove any stain within moments. The root cause of it all is, of course, living by excess.

So no, Manehattan is not a place that I could find my escape without wishing to kill myself in the process. Which, naturally, leaves me with only one option: Ponyville, the small hamlet prone to lazy evenings and even lazier nights. Very little is written about Ponyville; the locals are regarded as being neighbourly and inoffensive, yet lacking in refinement. They do not acknowledge fashion in Ponyville; they wear what they can find, and more often than not nothing at all, which is seen as being grossly uncouth to outsiders. The first time that I saw a bare pony in Ponyville I found myself strangely appalled, and yet the bestial side of me wished to know more about their ways and to bask in their celebratory nakedness. Modesty is not a word in the Ponyvillian vocabulary, or, at least, that is what I had come to believe prior to meeting the unicorn standing before me.

She was a lyrical sort and certainly not a typical resident of Ponyville; she seemed to subconsciously emulate the social elite without adhering to their flaws. I found her uniqueness to be spellbinding, especially as she was an inarguable beauty. Although she carried herself with the poise and eloquence of a cultured pony, she had not yet been tainted by the outside world. And that was, hoof on heart, why I likely found myself becoming so interested in her. There is an innate beauty in seeing somepony as wonderful as her having not yet succumbed to realising how wonderful they are. There is a humble innocence to it that is lacking elsewhere. By walking the streets of Manehattan or Canterlot, you could find ponies as beautiful as this one; but beneath the exterior would beat a heart that palpitated only to the rhythm of a bank statement and a flank

that had been mounted by countless stallions. This mare, as far as I could deduce, had not yet been punished in such a way, and I was thankful for this.

The unicorn had a scent, or rather, a fragrance that clung to my body the longer I remained in her presence. It wasn't from a bottle, but rather a natural aroma recalling the sweetness of honey and the nostalgic subtlety of a book-pressed lotus leaf. Her mane had been curled, and yet I saw no curling device in the room, and of greater importance was that she did not stop every minute or two to reflect on her reflection. Rather, her work took priority – I had been told this much from Twilight Sparkle and her friends – and she was the most devoted artisan that I had ever laid eyes upon. A mere glance around her home would unveil secrets of the most wonderful variety: lovely patterned dresses woven with silk and lace; scarves of maroon and earthy greens that would embrace one's neck in a most delightful way; and, most impressively, luxury items of topaz and opal and baby-blue sapphires. I could not contemplate what may have been in the back-room, for the shop floor was already a veritable paradise. To those that would pooh-pooh Ponyville, I say away with them! The fashion in the town, even if it was exclusive to this one location, remained the most regal and ornate that I could have imagined.

Beauty and style, this pony had, and she was blissfully unaware of it. I gave my name and she liked it as much as I would have expected; it was not the sort of title that one would normally hear within Ponyville. I had heard her name from Twilight Sparkle, but I did not consider it to be real until she uttered it herself at the end of our lengthy conversation.

### *Rarity.*

That name changed everything for me. The pony that I would become after having heard it may not have been the same pony that had received it, but I am not afraid to admit that I was changed irreversibly in the wake of that encounter. My escapism became linked to her own; I had sensed a lamentation in her voice that was just dying to break free to a pony who was willing to listen. And although time and investment may have been required to learn of the true intricacies of this pony, the simple fact of the matter was that she was worth committing to. In this life, there is nothing of greater importance than loving those that deserve to be loved. In that moment, within the old converted loom with the creaky floorboard at the top of the stairs, it dawned upon me that it would be a mistake to allow her to become just another face in the crowd. If I had left Ponyville after that chance encounter, I would regret it; for no such unicorn had ever left an impression such as that upon me, and I was of the belief that never would another since.

As changing as beliefs may be, I don't regret the change that she invoked in me.

For a brief few months we were undeniably happy, images of which now comprise my memory.

### **0 Months, 27 Days**

It's difficult to give a fuck when you don't give a fuck, I've found. I was in trouble again with the staff of the hospice, and as much as I would like to say that I cared, I truly didn't. Taking Rarity out into the grassy meadow a few days ago still hadn't blown over; apparently I had deprived her of necessary sustenance and now she was all the weaker for it. For the last couple of days they had been thoroughly reluctant to even let me see her, perceiving me to be some sort of antagonist in Rarity's tragedy, although they really couldn't keep me from showing up at the doors and making my way through to her bedside. The security pony didn't understand what we were going through. Had he ever lost anypony? Had he ever hurt anypony? Sure, he may have thrown a few choice ponies out of that place during his shift, but had he ever, truly, hurt another pony? I did not believe so.

The doctor was back in business, throwing his weight around again until Rarity regained consciousness, during which time he would take his leave of the room, only wishing to associate with her when she was dying and thus when his job demanded it. Her words to me were becoming harder to really make sense of; I'd never seen her this inarticulate and weak. Opening her eyes had become a strain, so much so that the blinds were now permanently closed and the only real light came from the monitor that checked her heart rate. It was still running at a steady pace – a prolonged wire of digital green that encoded her life achievements within a machine.

Rarity could tell that I was still there by my warmth. Her body was always cold now. I think it was probably due to her loss of weight and body fat, but possibly due to the thinning of her blood from the various toxins being pumped into her body. The blankets and sheets within the hospice weren't enough to keep her warm now. Even going to our boutique and finding the biggest wool duvet that I could find hadn't helped; she complained that the cold came from within, and so no amount of layers could help her. She needed warmth inside of her, but she was too fragile to take anything that I could offer.

Mealtimes were a cruel joke, as she lacked the strength to eat without extensive supervision, which she clearly detested as it embarrassed her to be fed like an infant. So quick had her descent into destruction been; not two weeks ago we had been eating carrot cake together and she had spoken of a hungry appetite returning to her. She had been recovering, but now she was worse than ever. Her lips were coated in a crusted layer



of dead skin, the likes of which had cracked and bled. Her body had become so frail that it pained her to sit up in her bed, and the rusted banshee-cry of the mechanism itself was enough to make her whinny in fear. She had a scent, still, but it was a bad one; a grotesque combination of sweat, tears and blood, garnished with whatever fluid passed through her. The greatest offender, however, was her inability to open wide those once-beautiful blue orbs, that had always punctuated her every action and given meaning to her madness. In the dark she could still find the strength to do so, sometimes, but these occasions were becoming less frequent.

I believed that Rarity was sleeping. She was doing that a lot now; a lack of consciousness made the pain go away for a while. I guess having your eyes closed for a long period of time helps in the sleeping process. What's the point in even waking if you're in the dark when you do? But immunity through sleep was only a passive remedy, for nightmares had begun to plague my fair Rarity. She had never been one to experience malicious sleep, but she now awoke in cold sweats that demanded that she weep. And through those tears poured countless fears, none of which could be quantified by her tongue. Her lyricism was failing her. Everything felt wrong.

I decided to get some food and water, for I still had the ability to eat. I had not caught Rarity's infection, and my stomach had resisted the untimely process of corrosion. I sat up, but Rarity's hoof gripped onto mine. She was awake after all, or just responding to base instinct; whatever the cause, I could not leave now.

"I didn't know you were awake," I said.

"...You didn't ask..."

I suppose I didn't ask that time because there would have been nothing to respond with should she have been awake. Asking if somepony is awake requires a follow-up question, but conversation had now become arbitrary and horrible. A question asked without interest in an answer given is a gesture ultimately devoid of value.

"Do you want some water?"

"...Yes..."

I looked around for the jug. It was on the other side of her bed. I attempted to get up to walk around to it, but she refused to let go of my hoof, only gripping tighter.

"If you want some water, you're going to have to let go."

"...Then leave it."

I fell back down into the small chair and felt her hoof relax. There was no danger of her losing me now. I remained with my hoof there for a few minutes, feeling a tickling sensation against the tip. It was the white band around Rarity's hoof; she had been given it the day that she had arrived at the institution. Now it had fallen down her leg and hoof to touch against my own; no doubt her hooves had thinned in harmony with her body and blood, and the band to signify her time here was nearly falling off. The band itself signalled that she was a dying patient, and carried various symbols upon it that formed an exclusive medical identity for her. I also had to wear one of those bands, but only during visiting hours. Mine was slightly different; it had a similar digit code but lacked the impending eulogy above it that read 'Emergency'. I guess I still had some time left before the hospice would claim me.

Time continued to stagnate and I knew that Rarity was asleep, for she was making a disgruntled breathing noise that implied that she was snoring with a painfully parched throat. Still, I could not let go of her hoof for fear of waking her, so I remained there as I was in a static position, becoming part of the furniture that Rarity could use. A while later the door opened and the doctor came in; he performed his usual routine of checking if Rarity was dead or just asleep and then turning to leave after finding out her heart was still in beat. He must have timed his comings and goings with utter consistency, for too often did he enter when Rarity was out of consciousness so that he could slack off from helping her. This time, however, he didn't leave, instead looking towards me.

"You should go home," he said. "It's been two days since you've slept. I think that Rarity will still be here tomorrow."

"You think," I responded fiercely. "You don't know anything."

"I know that her condition is worsening," he replied childishly. He paused for a moment. "You should rest while you can," I heard him say, not quite understanding the meaning of his words.

"What are you talking about?"

He sighed and approached me, pulling up a second chair from against the wall. He sat opposite me, closer than I would have liked. His eyes seemed bloodshot and he did not appear anywhere near as well-kept as he usually did. There was a deranged look in his

eye, as if he had also been avoiding sleep for some time. No doubt he was trying to appear just as worried about Rarity as I was.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said earnestly. "We're just... counting down the days now."

"Days?"

"Days."

Days seemed awfully short! I had not slept in two days, as the doctor had rightfully pointed out, and the time had drifted by without any substantial acknowledgement on my part. Days were short and meaningless; they were for sleeping through and barely recalling!

"You can't be serious," I said bitterly.

The doctor shook his head, looking down to the ground beneath my hooves. "Look at her," he said woefully. "There's not much time left."

"Two weeks ago you said you had no idea how long Rarity had left!" I spat, a familiar lump thrusting against the inside of my throat. "You can't now tell me that our time is almost up! We haven't had time to prepare!"

I saw a trickle of a tear leak down the doctor's cheek. "The hospice is preparation," he said, shaking his head. "It is where all good ponies go to die."

Something odd happened then.

The doctor began to cry.

He cried in a way that I had never associated with stallions. His tears, rather than retreating, openly fell with increasing longevity, smattering against his hooves as he buried his head between them. I did not know how to respond to him, but found myself intoxicated and less judgemental towards him during the ordeal.

"How do you watch your loved one die before you?" he asked me bluntly. It seemed so surreal to have the doctor seeking advice from the patient; I had none of the expensive education that he had received under my belt. I was unsure how to respond to him, but I knew that soon my tears would be falling, answering the desperate rhythm of his own

calling. "I have never felt the loss of a loved one," he continued, "but if I was to lose my young colt or my wife, then I would just..."

"You would cease to function," I said, and I watched as the doctor nodded in time with my words. "You would feel as if nothing else mattered."

"Do you feel that way?" he questioned me. If this was all just some elaborate test, then I was falling for his ignoble module.

"...I do..." I found myself mouthing. "I have no idea what I'm going to do when this is all over. I can't even begin to predict what will happen next."

"Do you think that you'll be able to live with yourself?"

I thought upon his words rather awkwardly, for they carried greater meaning to me than the doctor could have known. I closed my eyes tightly to restrict the visible leak from within. Instead, they sought to drown my sockets. "After this, I don't think what remains will be considered living."

This doctor knew now of my greatest weaknesses. But, like I said, it's difficult – nay, almost impossible – to give a fuck when you just don't. And hell, maybe I deserved somepony to talk to about all of this. Whatever this doctor was going through, he could not entirely relate; and yet, by taking a moment to put myself in his hooves, I felt as if I could see the world from his depressing angle. In his job, he must have seen the death of many; not only those within the hospice who wore bands of burial, but also those in hospitals who may have been getting better, only to fall foul of fortune. Being surrounded by death, one would think, would immunise a pony, and yet, perhaps from time to time, genuine emotion managed to get through. By the looseness of his emotion, this doctor was clearly not of Trottingham; but, as I sat there with him, crying and snivelling before our sleeping Rarity, I could not help but acknowledge that neither was I.

"I've seen ponies die," he said. "Some deserved it, most did not. Seeing you here with Rarity just makes me realise how much you care for her. You have invested, even in the absence of hope."

"There was hope when we met," I insisted to him. "An absence of hope is the source of neglect."

"And you could never neglect her," he replied softly. "I have seen the way that you show her love and respect."

He took a deep breath, drying old tears away with his hooves. "How did the both of you meet?" he questioned me. It was a long time ago that such a life-changing event had transpired, and yet I recalled the memory vividly, as I could with accounts of many of our earlier days together. I did not know why I had chosen to remain engaged in conversation with this doctor, but his presence somehow appeared as less of a threat to me than ever before during that interim.

"Did Rarity not tell you this already?"

"She did," he said, "but her recollection may differ from your own."

The thought that Rarity could feel differently about the grace of our meeting was all but fleeting.

"I was in Ponyville for no real reason, really," I found myself saying. If it was weakness to give in to this stranger, then I was understandably of ill-health that day. "I had no intention of staying but I stumbled upon Rarity by my own volition."

"Did you know any of the locals?"

"Not really," came my admission. "I thought I did, but it turns out that I was incorrect."

"What happened next?"

"Rarity and I spoke at length, I must say. She seemed inspired by my interest in her. She told me about her desires to become famous and her brief flirtations with popularity in the past. As undesirable as some of those attempts had been, she believed things would be different next time; that judgement would be reserved and that the claws of criticism would be put away." I found myself smiling as I spoke of our bonding. "She had great aspirations that she set in rhyme: her motto was a dream of shining and of making others shine. Her generosity floored me."

"Her good nature is, indeed, a rarity."

I put my head back upon the chair and chuckled a little to myself. "She had this order that she needed to fill," I continued. "It was for some local enterprise, nothing at all important, and yet she couldn't bring herself to fall behind on it. She shooed me away as I browsed her collection, purely so that she could devote her time to her calling. She worked to a tight schedule. Time was always so important to her. But before I left, she gave me her name. To me it sounded like a natural marriage with fame."

"You predicted good things for her?"

"I wanted her to realise her potential," I sighed. "But to do that, I've done terrible things. Through my good intentions, I have cheated and lied."

"It is not my place to judge you," the doctor replied. "We've all made mistakes."

"Meeting Rarity was no mistake," I confirmed to myself. "It was my greatest accomplishment. And when I returned to her boutique the second day, and the third and the fourth, she soon realised that we belonged in each other's company. I worked for her, and we became fast friends; I helped introduce her to the ponies that would become her mentors. We moved in together, and we become closer still. And when her health began to show cracks, I did my best to protect her from herself."

I squeezed her hoof, finding the tears returning. I looked to the doctor once again; he had been listening intently to my words and appeared humbled by our tale. But as I began to cry once more, and Rarity's hoof pressed back against my own, I realised that our earliest memory together was a lifetime in the past; a series of perfect visions that were fading fast.

"What will happen?" I found myself asking suddenly, my lip trembling. It was such a stupid question and utterly out of context with our previous discussion, but it was one that I had to ask. "How will she die?"

The doctor rubbed his hoof across his face, drying his bulbous eyes of tears. Perhaps he had realised once again that he was still a professional, and that his duty to other ponies was as an informant rather than an emphatic companion. As pained as he was to explain it, he owed me that much. "You are asking me to describe it?" he questioned, and I nodded slowly.

"You said that the hospice is a place to prepare," I spluttered. "I have spent a long time denying the truth, but very little preparing for it."

He took a deep breath, looking towards Rarity. I wondered if she was still asleep. It would not be right to discuss this with her present. The doctor placed a hoof on her side and whispered her name, but she did not respond to him. He took that as the evidence that he required and spoke, his voice cracking on almost every note.

"Given her condition, Rarity's body will, in the simplest of terms, begin to shut down," he said, sounding as if he was reading from some monotonous list. "Her lungs will seize up,

making breathing difficult. Her heart will ache and strain and fail. Her brain will be unable to communicate with her organs..." He took a deep breath. "Then she'll die."

"Will it be painful?"

"We'll do what we can to help her with the pain," he said. "Medicine and anaesthetic."

"Will she know that it's happening?"

"Yes," he said gravely. "She'll know."

Counting down time to an inevitable conclusion is far more difficult when such an end is described in such graphic terms. I am not afraid to say that I wept then more than ever before and for some time after, and I wanted to vomit, but my stomach was empty and I had nothing to wrretch on. The doctor remained there with me for the entire time, saying nothing but somehow helping me. I guess it was just his presence; having him there somehow made things easier. I sniffed, my hoof still numb from holding tightly onto Rarity. The doctor walked to the other side of the table and poured us both out glasses of water from the larger jug. He manoeuvred a glass into my free hoof and I drank it down, burying my muzzle into the cup until my face almost became stuck inside it. When I finished he poured me out another glass, and then a third, which was enough to quench my thirst.

"You're welcome to go and check on other patients," I said after some time had passed. "I'm looking after Rarity just fine now." My momentary weakness in the company of the doctor was something I could overcome with time.

"Actually, I finished work almost two hours ago," he said, glancing at the watch on his hoof. He had his own band above it, just like Rarity and I. I found myself strangely impressed, although I didn't tell him so; he probably knew it already. He looked back towards Rarity and gave a little smile, standing up from the chair. "Will you be getting any sleep tonight?" he questioned me, but I shook my head.

"Not tonight," I replied. "I can't bring myself to."

He didn't pressure me to sleep. He just nodded in an understanding manner and walked towards the door. "You're both lucky to have one another," he said. "Never forget what she means to you."

"Thank you, doctor," I said to him earnestly for helping a pony in need; from then on I would remember his name as *Tawleed*.

He left the room on his trip home, closing the door softly as he went. I respected him more, for some reason, and yet I still found myself viewing him with scorn; for he had a wife and a colt – a family – and I had a decaying unicorn. When he left, the form beside me stirred. Of everything that Tawleed and I had discussed, she had been a witness to every word.

There was no chance left for Rarity to shine.

Now she would break and rip and tear.

And I'd be the first in line.

#### **4 Months, 11 Days (Ibid.)**

I was alone within the most private of all places. I had always been curious as to what may have existed behind that door, and finally the knowledge was mine for the taking; Rarity had allowed me into her Inspiration Room. She was still cleaning herself up in the bathroom, but I imagined that she would be quick – it was a bold move indeed to let me into the room without supervision, and I did not believe that she would allow me to have free-access to roam for long. For a little while, however, the interior of her world was mine to gaze upon, as long as I restrained myself from touching anything. Thankfully, I had received no warning about looking upon her great trove of treasured possessions, and I found myself doing just that.

It was truly mesmerising how organised chaos could be perceived. To me, the room was the direct antithesis to Rarity's normal argument of cleanliness; here she allowed materials to fall with reckless abandon, pooling in masses on the carpeted flooring. There were machines dotted about in no particular order; some for sewing, others for embroidering, and some devices that were entirely foreign to me. The machines were complicated and used only by those of a dexterous hoof. Comparatively, I knew very little of the textile trade. Quite amusing, given my state of employment for the last half a year or so. Nevertheless, one skill that I did possess – and had, in my mind, always possessed – was the ability to identify a true treasure worth protecting. Rarity's Inspiration Room, although distinctly disorganised, was the sort of haven where she could truly express herself without fear of external judgement, which indeed made it a place of unparalleled significance. I mused as I stood there in appreciative wonder, contemplating if I was the only pony other than herself that had ever entered such a place; and, although I may have been incorrect, it was an assumption that I felt comfort in entertaining.



I did not know where to begin, but found myself approaching a desk that had various charts and papers splayed out upon it. Rarity had been drawing out sketches of her various creations; I did not recognise what I saw as anything that had been available on the shop floor, and thus assumed that it formed part of a special order. There were other items on the desk – a small trinket box; a miniature potted plant – but I was drawn to a letter instead, for it was the only thing on the desk not in a state of disarray. It had been neatly placed in the center. I looked towards the window, as it was darker in that room than I would have assumed during the early morning; there was a blind, but by the looks of things it seemed to have been closed for some time – there was a thin coating of dust upon it – and I had read in the *Guide to Baroque Attire* that dresses could shrink in the sun. It was a bizarre notion, but I thought it best to avoid opening the blinds; for Rarity had clearly kept it shut by her own accord, and to do so would ruin the elusiveness of the room and open it up to external eyes.

Instead, I moved a hoof towards a lamp on the desk. It was an interesting sort of lamp that struck me as being particularly odd, as it was a dated contraption; it was very similar to the devices that had once been present at my estate in Trottingham, but I had replaced after being warned that they were commonly regarded as being a fire hazard. Oil lamps were dangerous, as the substance fuelling them was in itself highly flammable; a poor choice when lighting a flame. It seemed unusual for Rarity to have such an old and unsafe source of light in her most prized room, and I decided it would be best to let her know when the timing was right. Warning her might just one day save her life. It would, certainly, save her dresses from the potential fire that could start.

Having no other option of shedding light on the letter, however, I twisted the fragile dial on the outside of the lamp and allowed the oil to drip. I manoeuvred the filament within and flicked the small switch that created the necessary spark. It took a few attempts, but soon a healthy glow surrounded me, the heat from within pulsing comfortingly. I glanced over the letter: it had been written by Mr. Orange, as the signature at the bottom inferred. I read the first sentence or two, which amounted to a giant formality that provided little revelatory information. Before I had the chance to delve further, however, the knob of the door twisted behind me, and I knew that Rarity would be entering. I stood up to face her, turning towards the delightful mare. She had cleaned herself up – her hooves were no longer muddy – and she had decided to dress up for the occasion. Her dress was a dark-blue act of reserved extravagance; the sort that other ponies could in no way hope to wear without seeming garish, but one that inarguably suited Rarity. She looked at me timidly enough, brushing her front hoof back and forwards against the carpet.

"So... how do you like it?" she questioned me, her voice aching. I struggled to deduce if she was talking about her dress or the room itself. I resigned myself to the latter, looking around the room once again and taking in my immediate surroundings. It was still dark, but upon reflection I could see more of value within that room than upon her entire shop floor down below.

"It's incredible," I answered in wide-eyed envy, doing my best to absorb everything for her sake. She smiled and raised a hoof to the wall, pressing a small button that had eluded me; the room lit up with a series of multi-coloured glass lights dotted about, rendering the oil lamp somewhat obsolete.

"Why not just use the light switch?" she grinned, hinting towards the oil lamp. I chuckled and turned the dial down, extinguishing the flame to the best of my ability. She watched my actions studiously, making sure that I correctly put the flame out. When she was satisfied she penetrated me with her seductive blue orbs. "I am very glad that you like my inspiration room," she said, taking a step towards me. She seemed oddly awkward in how she was carrying herself. "It is important to me that you like it."

"I do," I responded, gulping a little. There was suddenly a different mood between us both; it was as if she was hesitant to ask me something. She shuffled a little closer and I smiled, deciding to make the job easier for her. "Why not show me around?"

Well, she was incredibly elated that I had requested that. She took me by the hoof and pointed out all of the different styles of dress and materials that she had used. It was more than I could possibly understand and retain, but I did my best to nod along with her words and comment when it seemed appropriate to do so. "Using gems in dresses is difficult," she said as she directed my gaze to a special gown laced with emeralds. "It can be difficult to incorporate them into a design without making the finished product look overly garish." I smiled, reaching out to touch the material. She batted my hoof away with her own, scolding me with a shake of her head. "Remember, you aren't to touch anything in here," she warned. "I am most certainly serious." I was concerned that it was something that I had done, but, as usual, she picked up on my sensitivity towards her comment and gave a little sigh. "It is nothing personal," she said, "I just have very specific rules that must be enforced. You know this of me by now."

It was true that I did know of Rarity's rules. She prided herself in the great clarity of such personal laws, and she broke them sparingly. She was to be adored and, at the same time, respected; but, on occasion, it was possible to find frustration in her meticulousness. Of course, it was not a quality that I could come to despise about her; the rules that she followed governed her every conscious movement and shaped the refined pony that she

was. If she would lose her fortitude in enforcing such rules I would fail to give her the immense respect that she deserved; her perfect nature required perfection in every area relating to her.

"I do know it," I said, "and I apologise for breaking the rules."

I would be punished, one day. She spent a great deal of time showing me around the room, and I feared that she would run out of things to say. However, by the time she eventually declared her tour as over, it was lunch time and beyond as my stomach dictated. *She* took a seat at the desk and *I* upon the floor, looking up at her as we continued our conversation.

"You have a lot of designs here that I haven't seen," I said. "Are they prototypes?"

She shook her head, resting it against the back of the chair. "No, but most of them will be in circulation eventually. I am on the verge of signing contracts that prevent me from selling them in Ponyville."

"Who has instigated such contractual obligations?"

"The ponies that want to buy my talent," she said, sighing a little. I watched as her eyes closed, although there was no danger of her falling asleep.

"What's wrong?" I questioned.

"It is this business with Mr. Cross and Mr. Orange," she admitted. "I am struggling to reach a decision pertaining to them both."

"This is about who to work for, right?"

"To work with," she corrected me, raising an indignant hoof. "I would be working with them, not for them."

"I apologise."

"That is indeed the problem," she continued. "I cannot decide. My heart and mind want different things."

I blinked, sitting up a little. "What does your mind keep telling you?"

"To work for Mr. Orange," she mouthed. "It would be better for my career. Mass-production is an integral part of mass-popularity."

"Well, you wanted to be famous, didn't you?" I queried. She took a moment to respond with little more than a nod. "So what's the problem?"

"My heart."

"Your heart is telling you something else?"

"My heart is telling me that it would be a bad idea. My heart beats faster and puts me into a cold sweat when I hear of Mr. Orange's methods. My heart quivers when I think of other ponies replicating my designs. My heart is worried for the future."

I stood and approached her. There was a rule in place in the Inspiration Room, but it was a rule that I was not willing to follow any longer. I reached a hoof out to touch her, stroking it through her mane. She tensed but for a fleeting second, relaxing to my actions almost instantly, allowing me to smoothly brush her back. Given the contented sigh that followed, I deduced that I had successfully found the special point once again that relaxed her.

"What is your heart telling you, Rarity?" I whispered into her ear. She shuddered a little, pulling closer to my touch.

"I am not sure what to do," she spoke. "I am scared that either choice will ultimately be a bad one."

"Fearing the future is natural," I said. "Part of the future is acknowledging the mistakes that we will undoubtedly make. It doesn't matter which you choose, or if you decide to avoid signing any contract whatsoever."

"Why?" she asked, opening a single worried blue eye, watching me intently. I looked down upon her, standing beside her delicate form as the protecting guardian that I would always be.

"You have all the time in the world to make your decision," I explained. "If you make a mistake, it can be undone through time. The only way to succeed is to learn from the mistakes that you make."

"But what if I cannot afford to make this mistake?" she whimpered. "What if I only have one chance?"

I lowered my head to brush against her own. "If that's the case, then the most important thing, Rarity, is to remember the mantra of survival."

"Which is?"

"Life goes on."

A felt a tear roll from her cheek, for it brushed against my own. I gathered it up and used a free hoof to lightly draw circles upon her back. She exhaled deeply, turning towards the letter.

"Mr. Orange is requesting an immediate response," Rarity said. "I have been given a short amount of time to decide what I wish to do."

"Time is irrelevant," I said, glancing at the letter that was causing Rarity so much trouble. "Just this once, why not do what feels natural?"

"What is natural any more?" she questioned quizzically. "The lines have become blurred before me."

I placed a hoof on the letter, applying weight. She watched my actions with curious eyes, eager to see what I would do next. I placed my second hoof upon the letter and pulled them apart slowly, causing a tear to form at the top. She squealed a little, puffing out her bottom lip. "Do you want me to stop?" I asked, but she moved her head from side to side very slowly. I continued to pull both parts of the letter apart until there were two distinct strands. Beneath her desk was a small, otherwise empty bin which I dropped the pieces into. She watched them fall, closing her eyes tightly as they touched the base.

"That gives you a bit longer to think, doesn't it?"

"Yes..." she gulped, clearing her throat of uncleanliness. "He will be angry with me..."

"Anypony who would deprive you of time to evaluate your options and force you into making an incorrect decision doesn't deserve to remain in contact with you."

"What if he sends another?"

"There's nothing stopping you from doing the same thing."

She nodded slightly. "Would you do me a small favour?" she questioned. "Could you turn the lights off, please?"

I approached the door and did as she requested. The room sank into darkness, and she brought the oil lamp to life again to give her the modicum of light that she required from where she was perched. It was a dim glow with a minimal radius, but when I returned to sit at her side, it was wide enough for us both to sit within.

"I prefer working in the dark," she mouthed. "It allows me to think without distraction."

I nodded.

"Life goes on..." she mused to herself, and I frowned a little.

"What did you say?"

"I was just coming to terms with what you said," she explained. "That no matter what happens, life will continue to go on. Ponies come and go, but at the end of it all, life continues its course, even when we ourselves are gone."

"That's right."

"This is an important decision for me," she said, turning to face me with absolute tenacity. Her eyes were penetrating. "I cannot put it off forever. I do not have the time that you have spoken of. I shall be making my choice, and I will be sticking to it."

I felt during that moment that something in Rarity had changed. Rather than her indecisiveness having deceived her, I had the impression put upon me that she had somehow made some form of resolve. Whether it was my words that caused it was difficult to establish, although often it was my voice that gave her own meaning. She had concerned me with her own concerns, but her insistence on denying the sins of procrastination any longer spoke volumes about her state of mind. To follow the heart is entirely wise, for the palpitation of truth is the grandest prize; and had I been the loving force that I claim to be, I would have put her out of her misery. But to give in now was her utmost frustration, for a charmed heart is prone to abortion; to dim the shine would betray the mind, and so to pursue her dream she was hopelessly resigned. Now that every choice in life has its price, her own decision would be her greatest sacrifice.

"I did not yet tell you why I call it my inspiration room," she said, breaking the morose tension that she had created. "It is because within this room I keep anything that inspires me."

"Like what?" I asked matter-of-factly, understanding that there was some revelation that she wished to impart. She paused for a moment and let out a deep breath.

"Things that remind me of happy times," she said. "And a book of ideas like no other." She directed my eyes towards an unassuming tome among many larger, grander books. It was old, but well-read; the pages had been dampened with a faint yellow crust, but the words were of absolute importance. "This book was written many years ago by a relatively unknown pony," she explained, opening the pages and breathing in their spicy musk. "I have used it since I was little, making notes and annotations around the outside of my dreams. The author left blank pages at the back, but I quickly filled them in. Now I write around the borders and edges of the pages. It is where I keep my greatest ideas."

I looked upon a single page of the book, for Rarity was understandably possessive of it. It was, as she had implied, adorned with her own ideas for designs, all of which blew my mind, for none were available to ponies upon any market that I knew of, and each suggestion was the pure product of unadulterated inspiration. Such was the magnitude of what I saw, that she closed the book rather sharply, slotting it away once more. "Mr. Orange may have some sketches," she said softly, "but he will never have the mind that created them, even should I come to work with him. These ideas must stay here forever. And, should I lose sight of them, I entrust them to you." Her faith in me was well-decided, for I imprinted the location of the book on my mind, and said no more about it for a while, as I saw that Rarity was ready to show me more of the secrets of her room, and, at that moment in time, I had not yet understood the significance of the text, for my thoughts were directed towards other things.

She reached a hoof under the desk, using her magic to levitate a key towards her that had been looped around a nail on the wall. It was dark, but her magic kept everything suitably visible. She clicked the key into a deep drawer beneath the desk, opening it and digging her hoof inside. "Here is the issue of the *Rococo Report* that first featured me," she fumbled, "and tickets to the *Symphony of Seven Paladins*."

I had had no idea that she had kept all of these items. It was more than I had in my possession to remind me of her. She smiled when her hoof touched something in particular, bringing out a small box. It was familiar to me; a black casket with '*The Glass House*' written upon it. I had thought that she had entirely forgotten about my gift to her on her birthday. In actuality, it seemed, she had been preserving it here the entire time. "I adore the sapphire tiara," she gulped. "I apologise if I have not shown you my true gratitude. I truly believe that it is too special to be worn. But it inspires me. Knowing that it is here, right beneath my eyes, reminds me of the effort that you went to in purchasing it for me."

I blinked as she opened the box, revealing that it was indeed the tiara that I had bought for her. "Forever it will remain with me here," she said, lifting her hoof to her heart. "Ever

since you bought it for me my work has improved immeasurably, and all of the contacts that I have made have found immense satisfaction in it. I owe that to you."

I was somewhat speechless, for I had feared that my gift had been overshadowed by others. It had been wrong of me to doubt Rarity; she knew what was important and what truly mattered.

"It gets me thinking," she continued. "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here now as I am." My eyes darted towards her, suddenly quite worried. The Rarity before me was beautiful but tired; she retained her natural flare, but she was working beyond her capacity. "I owe you everything to be here now," she said. "I would not change a thing."

And perhaps Rarity was in a state of chaos at that moment, but as she always insisted, chaos could be organised, and her maligned line of work would only be temporary. Everything that had happened was my doing, but it was because of me that Rarity's name was on the map. Ponies from far and wide now knew of her; the current state of affairs was a natural sacrifice that had to be made. "Thank you for spending this time with me," she sighed, but I knew that she was not speaking only of this day; I smiled graciously, for it was no great feat of charity by me that I had made such an investment.

She watched me for a moment too long. She had caught herself off guard and turned to her desk once more. "I have some things to finish," she explained. "Would you be so kind as to open up the shop?" She twisted the dial on the lamp to set the light into rhythm once again.

It may have been a fleeting moment, and the chance of me entering such a place again was scarce. Already I sensed that she wanted me gone, but not out of hatred. I turned to leave, elated that she had treasured memories regarding us both. Should I ever have doubted that she cared for me, I now knew exactly where to look.

"Be careful with that lamp," I said as I approached the door. "Those things can be dangerous when lit. Entire buildings can go up in flame."

"Thank you," she replied dubiously. I turned on the main system of lights, forcing her to turn off the dated contraption. She seemed to oblige this. "In a few days we'll go on our trip together," she smiled as I slipped through the doorway, leaving her Inspiration Room behind. "Just you and me."

Just me and her. As happy as could be.



## 0 Months, 22 Days

"Please... stop crying."

Stop.

If only we could govern our actions in such simple terms. To stop doing something – to cease to engage in a particular practice – is often a lot more difficult than it seems. We become addicted to certain rituals and practices that prevent us from backing out. I had read that this was explained in psychological terms through Models of Investment. When we are neutral towards something, we have the objective ability to either commit or to withdraw. There is no bias one way or the other; and when we encounter others, we can choose to let a meeting last a minute or an hour through conscious decisions that we have control over. If we choose to withdraw, life goes on much as it would in a separate course of actions; further events transpire and other ponies enter our lives. We can choose to associate with them and invest, or, as in the previous example, we can go on without concerning ourselves. However, if we choose to invest, then we move further up upon this Model of Investment. As we ascend higher, our ability to withdraw becomes stunted. It is far more difficult to walk out of something that one has invested greatly in; the consequences are too grave and colossal. Some choose, therefore, to avoid investing, as it prevents the inevitable backlash when investment fails. I had always viewed these types to be callous, but it turns out that *Detachment* and *Wisdom* are not too far apart from each other.

This model can be applied to almost any situation, although it works especially well for relationships where commitment and investment can be measured in how we feel about others. However, this is not to say that it is an exclusively relationship-based model. It is, in many cases, an applied business model as well. If we invest financially, or in terms of time and effort, in a particular business or career choice, then it becomes almost impossible to back out the further in one falls. Helping hooves may be outstretched from time to time in an attempt to help, but those ponies that are unable to stop even when they are urged to do so are proud and unable to accept advice. No matter how much we try and save them, some ponies don't want to be saved. No matter how much it hurts those around them, some ponies continue regardless. They cannot stop, and they never will stop. Not until there is nothing left.

This home is bereft. Every night I follow the same ritual. I go in, I sit, and I walk out. All the while I contemplate where exactly I exist on the Model of Investment. I first thought that I was quite high up, and for a brief while I believed that I had fallen down immeasurably. Recently I was on the rise again, until I walked out. Her words were

spoken with such disdain earlier that day. She had said, "So go," in the fiercest refrain. It was painful to be in there when she was like that. But things had calmed now. The calm before the storm, I perceived it to be. I knew what would happen to Rarity. She was a ghost in a machine with a battery in her leg, impaled on an iron grate of shrapnel disguised as a bed. And I remember that last night vividly, for it was horrific and terrifying, and after it passed she was dead.

It was late, as I saw it, for the street lamps had been switched on. I had checked myself out and torn the band off of my hoof, for it was customary to do so and no longer appropriate for me to stay at the hospice. The machines had scared me away. I had gone back to Ponyville to check on the shop. All was fine as I saw it: no letters and no slices of birthday cake. But it was all so pale and alone. I had walked up the stairway slowly, shivering as I stepped upon the top floorboard. I must have been floating, for the first time to my knowledge it did not howl. I entered the Inspiration Room. It had not been used for some time. I approached the oil lamp, flicking at the dial. It would have been so easy to burn the place to the ground. I caressed it with my hoof until it burst into light, but my better judgement caused me to keep the flame at a reasonable size. I knew exactly where she kept the key, now, and I slipped it into the lock of the desk without trouble. I spent a while in the relative darkness, touching the various items in the drawer. It was a collection of memories. I felt the smoothness of the cover of the *Rococo Report* issue that had started it all. I lifted it to the desk and observed the front cover. There was a faceless being. It was unnerving. I flicked through and settled on the article regarding Rarity.

*"Ponyville is home to lots of rural charm, but none is more charming than a small, unassuming building called Carousel Boutique. Within the four walls of this converted loom, one might stumble upon the humble beauty known as Rarity."*

How outdated this edition now was. How their opinions had changed in less than a year. I continued.

*"Who is Rarity, I hear you ask? Rarity is a generous and loving pony, who embraces friendship as much as fashion. She always has time for her friends, as close sources inform me. She spends much of her free time dressing to impress and fashioning wonderful dresses and scarves for her closest companions. There is no challenge too great for Rarity, and her talents are multi-faceted; she has a love for the arts, enjoying attending festivals and musicals, and is a talented singer. She is also incredibly close to her family, especially her younger sister, who both share a bond that holds no secrets. More-so, however, are her personal creations, with her dazzling dresses of ornate extravagance being utterly without peer. Have you ever heard of the saying that no two snowflakes are alike? If not, I tell you now that it is scientifically proven to be the case, and Miss Rarity's excellent works prove*

*that originality prospers in Ponyville right now; you have honestly seen nothing like what awaits you there. Woven together like an artisan spider fashioning its web, there is a magic at work in these creations that has made Rarity of Ponyville the next big thing. Rarity's Radiant Rambunctiousness – the latter word coined by me; use it and you shall be sued – can be experienced by any pony with any sense of fashion and style. But don't just take my word for it! Go to Ponyville today, immediately, post-haste, and see what I mean. Bring bits; you won't be leaving without ponying up some cash and showering her with it.*

*Miss Rarity's designs on the Gazette-o-meter score an incredible \*\*\*\*\*/\*\*\*\*\* - SMOKING HOT!"*

I turned up the oil lamp a little higher. The days spoken of in the article of many months ago now had faded into obscurity. Gazette's powerful prose had been suitably objective back then; how awful that he now wrote at the behest of one most lamentable. To think that I had purchased a gift for Rarity – the sapphire tiara in the drawer beneath my nose – from that foul Mr. Cross. He was the house that catered to the glass, and whatever sucker had made that tiara, it wasn't Rarity. Just looking at the box with the thick silver lettering made me nauseous, for there was nothing that I despised more than thinking of the stallion behind it. He was suffering, as the newspapers dictated, but he barely knew what suffering was; his daughter would be the one to pay for his crimes, haunted as she was by the ghost of her mare-mother.

There were newer items in the depths of that drawer: trains ticket stubs bound for Manehattan and a little diary, the last entry of which had a large tick drawn inside it beside the comment, '*All the way and back again*'. For the longest time I had been curious about the white stick with the sweet aroma. I still could not pinpoint its relevance, for it was an event that I no longer had any memory of. Rarity had kept these items because, to her, they had a greater meaning. Now that she was without them it pained me, but she had not requested them, even when I had suggested it. She wanted them to stay within the old converted loom, alongside her special book, which she frequently inquired about the safety of. Treasured relics, she had said, were best left in captivity.

I missed her as I fumbled through our memories. Something compelled me to return to the hospice, for even then I knew that that night was significant. I never usually made two trips, but I guess you could say that I felt that something bizarre had overcome me that night. I am not one to believe in the supernatural, but I do now believe in at least minor forces that guide us to be at the right place at the right time. And time that night wanted me to be back at the hospice. It is a difficult notion to comprehend, and I in no way assume the role of divine providence. Neither do I truly believe that a message had

been sent to me by a greater being. It was as if Rarity and I had our rhythm, two beats for two white bands, and that during that night the rhythm was inconsistent. I positioned the items back in the desk drawer, locking it tightly and placing the key back where it belonged. I wrapped myself up and departed for the hospice. I found myself running towards an empty hallway. The night-shift receptionist seemed curious that I had reappeared. She branded me with the white seal of visitation. It was almost entirely blank.

Rarity's room was empty, save for the magic-less unicorn fighting for air.

She was barely awake, but stirred as soon as I entered. "...You came back..." she said, gulping in disbelief. I stood there in the shaking doorway. "Stop crying," she added in an exhausted voice. "Don't... make me... send you away again."

I approached her, I sat, and I wiped my tears away.

I gripped her hoof tightly.

"You can't stop me from being here any more than you can stop me from crying," I stuttered. "We made it this far, Rarity. We can keep going."

She had survived longer than the doctors had predicted. There was no end in sight.

"I... am tired..." she spoke in a whisper, shaking her head slowly. "I am tired of... waking to the sound of dirt. I am asphyxiated by the pain in my throat brought about by suffocation. I... detest the emptiness in my stomach and the numbing of my hooves. I am nothing of what I once was..."

"Rarity –"

"And when... you cry... it makes me follow your example. It... reminds me too vividly of what awaits me. When you cry, your tears become my own... but while you recover, my pain is set in stone. Please... stop crying. For my sake..."

"I can't," I said, trying my best to hold back those despised tears. "I can't stop what comes naturally."

"...Then... you should not be here... for the end."

"I can't stop what comes naturally," I repeated, "and what comes naturally to me is protecting you."

"The only thing... that I need protecting from..." she mouthed, "is you..."

Her words were vengeful.

"I am here... because of you..." she gasped. "I am here because... you said... I should follow my dreams. You promised me the world but gave me... only death."

I shook my head. "I didn't promise you anything!"

"If I had... not taken your advice..."

"You would be a pony with no name."

"I am a... pony with no name."

There were two ponies within that room who knew that I was the one to blame.

"What have... I got to show for anything?" she grunted. "I have... nothing. I have nothing left."

Her pillow was drenched as she tried to sit, staring directly into my eyes with her penetrative imposition. "You... took it all. My life... in Ponyville. My friends and family... my work... it is all gone... and so will you be soon..."

"You don't mean that."

"I... do..." she cried, her body shaking uncontrollably. "You... you have to leave me now."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I... decided... that tonight would be my last..." she wept. "I was... ready to die. You weren't... supposed to come back."

"Rarity!" I shouted. "You can't give up on life!"

"...I have already given up on life... for it has given up on me..." she panted. "I knew... that if I closed my eyes and slept... by the morning I would have found peace. But you... want me to... suffer and prolong my... pain." She was aching to speak such words now. The pain was excruciating, so I had been told by Tawleed, and it was numbed only partially by all of the drugs that he could stuff down her throat.

"I want to prolong your life..." I explained.

"My life is now worthless..." she argued. "You... have to let me go..."

But it was an impossible request. To let go of her hoof was to allow her to die. I could not possibly allow it to happen; I would be murdering the pony that I loved. It was true that I was in love with her, and that I had been for many months; I was here now out of love and adoration, not out of spite and obsession. My bottom lip trembled. She was pulling away from me, weakly making her hoof retreat. I gripped tighter, hurting her. There was no more time to keep my teeth behind my tongue.

"Rarity... I..." I growled with determination, my breath clinging to her face.

"Don't..."

"Rarity!"

"Don't... say it..."

"I lov—"

"Stop!"

Her tears exploded from her weak blue orbs. She wailed and howled, lifting her free hoof up to catch the tears as they fell. "You cannot... say it..." she said aggressively – desperately – with new power in her voice. "Do you think that I do not already know?"

"Rarity..."

"You cannot say it," she repeated, gagging on her words. "It is too hard to hear it and to respond. I cannot do it to myself or to you. I cannot."

She was more frightened than I had ever seen before.

"It isn't fair..." she wept. "It isn't fair for us to end like that. Our story... isn't ever going to be... what you want it to be. There is... no happy ending. And if you... say those words... we have lived... a tragedy."

She moved her hoof up to my face. She touched my cheek softly. Her hooves were numb and weak and thin, but her touch was still her own. I knew that behind it, for the first time since I could remember, was the real Rarity.

"I cannot... tarnish everything... by making it so. As things are now... we are two ponies... who met at a terminal... from which we would embark to greater places. We made one another shine in our own special way. Equestria... may not remember us when I am gone... but you will live on. And I... will die happy, forever in your memory."

"Rarity..."

"That is just how it has to be."

Her hoof touched my mouth. She stopped me from saying any other words. What she had said was a thin veil of sense and reason among a chaotic series of months, and as much as I wished to object, the strength to do so no longer existed within me. I released my firm grip on her hoof, but she kept it there now without force.

"Don't be... sad..." she said. "Don't... dwell on the past. What is done... is done. The past cannot catch up to us now."

"Letting you go is the hardest thing that I will ever have to do," I said. "Everything will be meaningless and empty without you. I can't go back to the boutique knowing that I won't see your face every time I hear the bell ring... or have you sneak around the back and surprise me... or hear the comforting sound of the floorboard at the top of the stairs to tell me that you're awake."

"Darling," she said, her voice fit to break. "You haven't heard those sounds... for months now. Your memories are confused. The present day... has been like this for as long as I can remember."

"Think back," the unicorn whispered. "Are things... really as good as you remember them to be? You recall the best memories... but it was not always so."

Perhaps demonising herself was the only way that she felt that she could ascertain the balance in our relationship once more. Maybe she just wanted to soften the blow.

"Every relationship that comes to an end, no matter what the circumstance, has its reasons," Rarity then spoke, deep in thought. "As much as we may regret the divorce, every decision is made by a benevolent force... and every outcome is mediated by everything before it... and every ending starts a new beginning... I am sure of it."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I learnt it over these past few months," she responded. "Death is not the end... but the natural terminal where we wait to board."

"And what comes after?"

"I don't know," Rarity whispered, closing her eyes for the last time. "But whatever it is, I await it. You'll live on, and so will I. We'll meet again in some shape or form... it's true." She paused. "Because you need me. And I... need you."

*If it could have ended there, I would have captured that moment forever.*

Maybe we would meet again in a new life, under different circumstances. Perhaps our end was the beginning of something else. But as I sat there with her, tracing lines of fortune across her hoof, I found myself wanting nothing more than to go with her. For the future is defined by uncertainty, and this extends to death as much as life. The greatest mystery is what lies beyond the unknown, in territory uncharted by mortal minds. Rarity was my special little pony, the likes of whom I adored and required. But as she lay there in her dying days, my faith in us expired. It had all been a dream; a dream that was crashing apart. And Rarity's pain existed between us both and the slowing of her heart. I tugged at her mane and bit into her skin, and cried my tears of missing her upon her ivory form. I heard the machine channel a beep, and another and one more. She lifted herself very slightly and hinted at her pillow. Beneath it was the note that she had written weeks before. She fell against me in defeat and the note floated to my hoof. Her last breathless words were that I read it just this once. Her body had had enough.

Doctors and nurses eulogized our tale on that day. I will not say that Dr. Tawleed did anything other than his most professional of duties; but his tears were real, and I knew that he loved her fiercely. He spoke a different language to me, one that I could not understand as I watched from the front-lines. It was a language of appliances and tools, medicines and machines. He nailed a mask across her face, which forced air down into her lungs. The machine was fit to explode, its cryptic message accelerating, speeding, racing, repeating. Tawleed continued when the others had given up, pressing her chest and screaming words of frustration; and I joined in, for our combined efforts would be enough to save her.

But the patient died before my eyes, and there's little more that I can say on that. Her hoof refused to let go, even when her white band had forsaken her and fallen to the floor. And when her body fell cold and I lost my mind, and cried inside her beneath the single-note siren-song, her hoof still remained there, reaching out to me, enticing me to a place that I could not yet follow. The terminal was vacant, with hundreds of seats for Rarity



and me. And she would be smiling, always watching from those deep blue orbs, sailing ships with masts so tall.

Young meetings, early in the youth of it all.

*Recovery is an impossible demand. Some things are too important to overcome. Grieving for a loved one is not a stage that we go through, but a channel that carves itself into our hearts and minds. And although this channel can be filled, it never truly caves in. But let it be known that this was all a nightmare that I chose, and the weight of the damage that I carry with me is now the cross that I willingly bear. The day that I had heard the bell chime in the old loom for the first time, I brought it upon myself to face the burdens that we wove. I have been left with these burdens, but none are so grave as to make me regret what the both of us had together inside one another.*

*Love comes in many different forms, but as a beautiful unicorn once told me, true love is best left unsaid; it is the prolonged force that keeps us bound together and grounds our hooves in place. To be devoted to another is not the result of a particular combination of perfumed words, but the state of absolute being that we acquire when we find a commitment worth committing to. To this day, regardless of what I may come to tell you happened next, I never once allowed Rarity to leave my thoughts. When she strayed I feared and prayed, and only when she came back could I think, for her permanent mark on my world had been made with the darkest of ink.*

*Her ink had been used to write me a letter. She had to wait until the very end before I could see it, for it contained information that she would have been unable to approach. I shall say little about it, for it is not for the consumption of any ears other than my own. It revealed what she really thought of me – things that she had told the doctor when I had been absent – and it sought to leave me with the closure that I required during the healing process. It is of absolute importance that the letter was written evidence that Carousel Boutique now belonged to me, as well as everything that she had left behind. I had been chosen as her successor, and the old loom would linger on in my name.*

*Almost ten months had passed since we first met, and losing her was my heaviest-paid debt. But to those that think I was counting down to the death of my beloved, let it be known; to do so would make our narrative into a tragedy, and that was the last thing desired by my Rarity. It took me until the end to understand, but she had had no desire to make our tale a lover's demise. Her intention, out of perfection, was always to remember me for the good inside, and I, in her, saw her beauty amplified. For I was the pony that believed in dreams, and reached a hoof of guidance out to her; and she was the eager artist, desperate to please who never dared stop and fall. Let this be a lesson to all; to categorise ourselves as lovers is a coward's way of describing the weight and brevity of our feelings. We were something beyond a practice, and required one another. Our marriage of existence belied the title of 'lover'.*

*What I am now counting down to – what I was always, truly, waiting for – you may never know, but fruitless optimism decided the date that I set for us. Rarity was never to live to the end, but maybe I foolishly thought that if I went back and re-told the tale of our fortunes, I would have the power to grant her new life and stop what happened. I would have saved her if I could, but no matter what I gave and what actions I took, no investment was great enough to help her. When I tell this story again, I will seek to extend the date once more, for seeing our relationship on a page of increasing words somehow makes it seem as if we were together for a lifetime. But the age that I am now is not too different from that under which I first met her; and that I have already lost knowledge of her fragrance proves that I will forget her.*

*Life is a mystery, and without Rarity, I am left as a wanderer. The date by which I incited from the start may be one that I myself never reach; to set ourselves targets is to overachieve, and this is what took her from me, so I am resigned to believe. Contentment comes from finding order in chaos, wherever it may be; and true love exists without financial necessity. Whatever choices that I now come to make, do not judge me too severely; for I never contended to be anything but a pony with the time to give. For the ethos of life is to love and care, and through devotion and investment our story I share. I leave you now on a final thought, one that I pray you all observe. Rarity would have wanted it; it is what we both deserve.*

*As I once said to an old friend, now a pony with no name:*

*"Sometimes, just being there for somepony – giving without the necessity of getting something back – is worth more than money and fame."*

*Thus ends Hospice.*

*You may now remove your bands.*